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The Xiongnu and their (possible) descendants: combining evidence from linguistics and genetics

The origin of the early nomadic groups in the Eastern steppe–e.g., the Xiongnu, their neighbors, such as the Xianbei, and their possible descendants–has attracted much attention from scholars since the late 19th century onwards (e.g., Shiratori 1900). These groups are mainly known due to occasional external written sources ("Barbarians" of Old Chinese chronicles), while their ethnic and linguistic affiliation is subject to a long-standing controversy. In this talk, we will address the problem by bringing together historical linguistic observations and recent progress in population genetics.

Based on fragmentary evidence on the language of the Xiongnu as well as cultural reconstruction and general historic considerations, a widespread historical linguistic viewpoint associates at least part of the Xiongnu with the speakers of the Proto-Turkic–or, in some versions, Proto-Bulgharic–language (Basin 1948; Dybo 2007; Janhunen 2009; Shimunek et al. 2015). The alternative interpretations, including the Yeniseian, Eastern Iranian, and Uralic hypotheses, do not necessarily contradict the Turkic affiliation in view of the assumed multi-ethnicity of the Xiongnu confederation. A recent publication reported genomes of three Xiongnu individuals whose genetic profiles are disparate (Damgaard et al. 2018). In this study, we are screening ancient skeletal samples from dozens of Xiongnu individuals to grasp the genetic diversity within Xiongnu. The set of interdisciplinary evidence allows to test the hypothesis that the emergence of the nomads in the Central Asian region was underlaid by an early admixture of eastern versus western linguistic and genetic components.

Another approach to the Xiongnu problem relates to their possible connections with the early medieval nomadic groups in Eastern and Southern Europe, including the European Hun and later groups, such as the Avar. The historical linguistic mainstream considers these groups as Turkic (Bulgharic)-speaking, although some alternative proposals have also been made (cf., e.g., Khelimski's 2000 proposal on the Tungusic affiliation of the Avars). To genetically investigate Turkic- or Tungusic-origin of the Avar, we aim at producing genome-wide data of Avar elite individuals and comparing their genetic profiles to present-day Turkic and Tungusic speaking populations.

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