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Grave Matters: Nomads, Mobility, and Health in the Golden Horde

The focus of this presentation is on the pastoral nomads of the Lower Volga region—the denizens of the core territory of the Golden Horde. These highly mobile communities were the backbone and the defensive shield of that nomadic empire: they lived in the steppe in close proximity with the animals that they raised (horses, sheep, and cattle); there, they practiced their military skills, hunted for game, and engaged in long distance trade activities (in fur, silk, and slaves). Historical sources that report on the matters of the Golden Horde are predictably court-centered as they tend to ignore the grass-root equestrian steppe population. The only way to gather information and understand the lifestyles of those resilient nomads is to study archaeological evidence derived from graves, such as skeletal remains of humans and animals. Fortunately, an ever-growing array of scientific techniques which are designed to analyze osteological remains for health-related issues—such as diet, pathologies, stress, traumas, genetic predispositions to disease, and traces of plague—are promising. In this paper, I will provide a general overview of the results achieved in the course of several archaeological studies of the Golden Horde nomads from that region (in modern-day Russia) and address some prospects of potential research. In particular I will emphasize the interconnection between nomadic health and mobility in the Golden Horde and evaluate its impact on the wider world, in which this nomadic empire was a key player.