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PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH INTO THE SITES OF THE XIANBEI PERIOD IN THE KAZAKH ALTAI

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the preliminary results of the study of the materials obtained during the excavations on the territory of the Kazakh Altai archaeological complex of the Xianbei period at the Berel burial ground. After the fall of the Hunnic Empire, the nomadic association of Xianbei, known from Chinese written sources, had a huge influence on the appearance of the archaeological cultures of Altai. For the first time in Altai, archaeological material concerning this polyethnic community was obtained in the last quarter of the last century. However, for a long time, archaeologists could not identify the Xianbei site from other numerous excavated archaeological sites. For the purpose of detailed cultural and chronological identification, Chinese materials were used, which made it possible to bring the problem of identifying Xianbei sites to a qualitatively new level. On the territory of the Kazakh Altai, the period of intensive study of the Xianbei circle of sites began in 2015, when a series of new funeral and memorial structures was opened. These studies allowed not only expanding the boundaries of this community and, but also putting forward the thesis about the large-scale penetration of the Xianbei in the 3rd–4th centuries AD into the territory under consideration.

Key words: Kazakhstan, Kazakh Altai, Berel burial ground, Xianbei period, funeral and memorial objects

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ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ИТОГИ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ПАМЯТНИКОВ СЯНЬБИЙСКОГО ВРЕМЕНИ В КАЗАХСКОМ АЛТАЕ

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Резюме. Статья посвящена предварительным результатам изучения материалов, полученных в ходе раскопок на территории Казахского Алтая археологического комплекса сяньбийского времени на могильнике Берел. Как известно, после падения Хуннуской империи огромное влияние на облик археологических культур Алтая оказало кочевое объединение Сяньби, известное по китайским письменным источникам. Впервые на Алтае археологический материал относительно этой полиэтнической общности был получен в последней четверти прошлого столетия. Однако долгое время археологи не могли определить памятники, принадлежащие собственно сяньбийским племенам, из числа многих раскопанных археологических объектов. С целью детальной культурно-хронологической идентификации привлекались китайские материалы, позволившие вывести проблему отождествления сяньбийских памятников на качественно новый уровень. На территории Казахского Алтая период интенсивного изучения сяньбийского круга памятников начался с 2015 г., когда была открыта серия новых погребально-поминальных сооружений. Эти исследования позволили не только расширить границы данной общности, но и выдвинуть тезис о масштабном проникновении сяньбийцев в III–IV вв. н.э. на рассматриваемую территорию.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, Казахский Алтай, могильник Берел, сяньбийское время, погребально-поминальные объекты

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Introduction

Presented in article materials belong to one of the most understudied periods in archaeology of Central Asia — Xianbei period. Our research allowed not only finding evidence of the presence of the Xianbei layer in the territory of Kazakhstan, but also helped to expand borders of this community. Archaeological work of recent years shows that this association of nomadic tribes in the first half of the 1st millennium AD penetrated into the upper reaches of the Bukhtarma River and settled partially in the southwestern periphery of the Altai.

Practically from the moment of the first scientific researche, since 1998, within the barrow space of the elite sites of Berel burial ground we documented Xianbei burial and memorial objects. Initially, they were dated to the Early Turkic periods, but later it turned out that they correlate with the circle of burials of the Xianbei time (Samashev, Kariev, Erbolatov, 2019).

Taking into account the fact that in the domestic scientific developments until now there was no such concept and direction of the search, we for the first time initiated investigations by wide areas at the Berel burial ground. At the same time, there was a need for a more thorough analysis of earlier (pre-2015) research materials, which were attributed to the Early Medieval epoch, for chronological and ethnocultural attribution (Samashev, 2011).

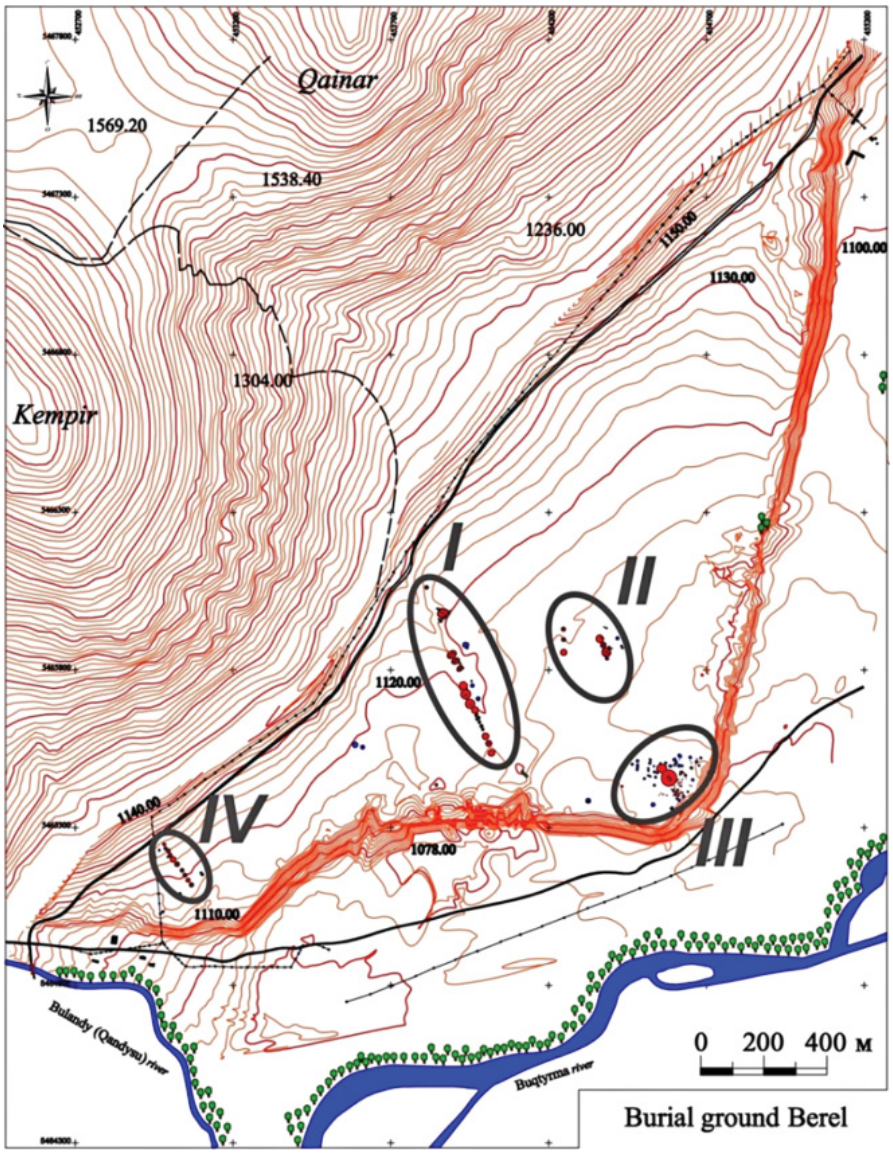

Fig. 1. Berel. Topoplan with the designation of the main groups of funerary and memorial sites

Рис. 1. Берел. Топоплан с обозначением основных групп погребально-поминальных объектов

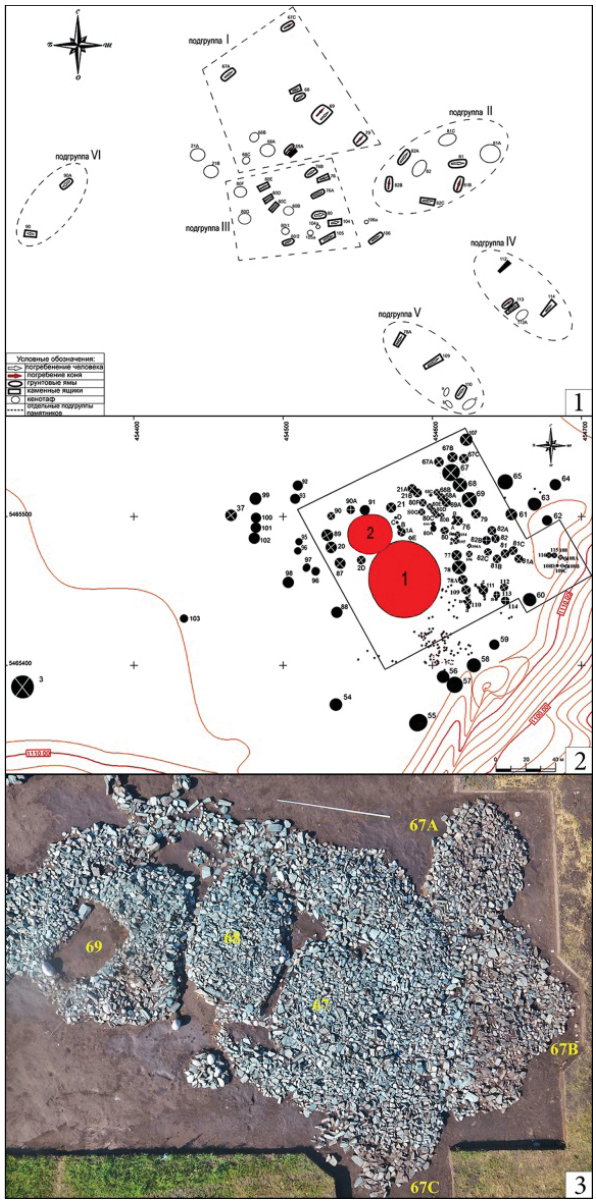

Fig. 2. Berel: 1 — schematic plan with the designation of the main groups of funerary and memorial monuments; 2 — the plan of the third group of monuments, where the bulk of the objects of the Xianbeian period are concentrated; 3 — mounds of funerary and memorial objects of the Xianbeian time

Рис. 2. Берел: 1 — схематический план с обозначением основных групп погребально-поминальных объектов; 2 — план третьей группы памятников, где сконцентрирована основная масса объектов сяньбийского периода; 3 — насыпи погребально-поминальных объектов сяньбийского времени

It is known that a number of burials of that time in Altai, in particular, the Berel cemetery was united by A. A. Gavrilova (1965, p. 54–57) into the Berel grave type and dated it to the 4th –5th centuries AD. A stable rite of burial with a horse and predominantly latitudinal (eastward) orientation of the buried are distinguishing features of these graves. It should be pointed out that on the basis of finds of three-fingered arrowheads with horny tips-whistles and also of bone girth buckles with a rounded upper part, the Berel complex was close to the Early Turkic time, and the absence of the stirrup in the burials was the ground for its homogenization (Savinov, 1984, p. 29–30). Now the question of ethno-cultural attribution of Berel graves is still open.

As it has already been said, the bulk of the funeral and burial sites of the Xianbei time of Berel, identified to date, is situated around two "king" barrows (№1 and №2) of the Pazyryk time, at the tip of the third terrace above the floodplain of the Bukhtarma river (Fig. 1, 2.-*1*). According to preliminary calculations, because of archaeological works on the burial ground, a total of 55 objects was uncovered by a continuous excavation. From them 35 burials, 20 ritual excarnations which by characteristic elements of ceremonialism and accompanying inventory, are related to the Xianbei time. It should be noted that due to the limited scope of the publication in the article presented materials only some investigated objects. In general, the obtained archaeological sources provide an opportunity to identify features of similarity and difference of the studied objects to restore certain aspects of the development of material and spiritual culture of the ancient population of the southwestern Altai historical period under study.

Materials and interpretation of the materials

The tradition of compact placement of funerary objects within separate groups probably reflects their chronological proximity and is characteristic of many Altai burial grounds of Xianbei time (Tishkin, Matrenin, Shmidt, 2018). In general, spatial organization in the form of dense concentration of structures on the territory of the cemetery, arrangement of objects in close rows is a feature which is recorded in synchronous monuments of Mongolia, Transbaikalia, Tessin culture of Khakassia, Kokel and Ulug-Khem culture of Tuva (Fig. 2.-*2*).

Near-burial objects are represented by ritual layouts, often oval and less often rounded, circular ground structures with ground filling of inner space. Necropolis gravestones are represented by sub-square, sub-circular, oval, rectangular-shaped stone outcrops in one or three layers (Fig. 2.-*3*). Under the embankments, ground structures of rectangular, sub-square, oval shape are documented (Fig. 3.-*1*). The latter predominate and are oriented with long axis in east-west direction. In the centre of the above-ground structures, there was usually one oval or rectangular pit, long axis oriented also in latitudinal direction with different deviations.

Burial chambers mainly without additional intra-burial structures, simple shallow ground pits, stone boxes with and without overlapping, imitation stone slab boxes, occasional remnants of wooden wall lining, in one case in a wooden pit (c. 108 A) were documented most often. The presence of a deep under-floor cavity has only been recorded in one case, under the embankment of Site 13A.

Burials of people are made on a rite of single inhumation, only in one of barrows there was a pair burial (k. 68). The buried persons most often lay stretched out on their backs, sometimes with their knees slightly bent on their sides with their legs outstretched, rarely slightly bent. In barrow 76, the corpse was placed on the right side. The heads of the buried per-

sons are usually oriented in the eastern sector with slight deviations, most often to the north. However, in three barrows the buried were oriented in the opposite direction in the western (k. 2D, 90 A) and north-western (k. 90) directions. Probably, the coexistence of several traditions in the orientation of the burials indicates the interaction of several ethno-cultural groups within a single association.

Fig. 3. Berel: 1 — fences of funerary and memorial objects of the Xianbeian time;
2 — burial 113; 3 –burial 108A

Рис. 3. Берел: 1 — ограды погребально-поминальных объектов сяньбийского времени;
2 — ограда 113; 3 — ограда 108А

Fig. 4. Berel. Burial 69. Paired burial of people accompanied by two horses

Рис. 4. Берел. Ограда 69. Парное погребение людей в сопровождении двух лошадей

Fig. 5. Berel. The subject complex of burials of the Xianbeian time: 1, 2, 5, 6, 9 – burial 81; 3, 7 – burial 108A; 4 – burial 21; 8 – burial 109; 10–15 – bone tubes from burials of the Xianbeian time; 16–20 – decorations from the burials of the Xianbeian period (16 – burial 109; 17, 19, 20 – burial 81; 18 – burial 68)

Рис. 5. Берел. Предметный комплекс погребений сяньбийского времени: 1, 2, 5, 6, 9 – ограда 81; 3, 7 – ограда 108А; 4 – ограда 21; 8 – ограда 109; 10–15 – костяные трубочки из погребений сяньбийского времени; 16–20 – украшения из погребений сяньбийского времени (16 – ограда 109; 17, 19, 20 – ограда 81; 18 – ограда 68)

In the six burials (k. 69, 69A, 81 B, 108, 108A, 113) of the necropolis, there was an accompanying burial of a high horse, laid down at the same level, on top, behind the northern wall to the right of the man (Fig. 3.-*2, 3*). The direction of the head of the riding horses coincided with the orientation of the buried people (Fig. 4). The tradition of inhumation with a horse in Altai has its origins in the Scythian-Saxon time and may be connected with the heritage of the Pazyryk culture. There is no consensus among scholars as to the identity of horse burials. However, most researchers tend to think they were left by the Tele tribes, or by the early Turks themselves.

About 20 cenotaphs have been identified in the necropolis. Separate ritual structures with the horse carcass were found in 5 cases (k. 21, 82B, 79, 76A, 67C). Thus, under fence No. 21 the presence of a deep undermining was established. Among the bones of two horses a fragment of a mirror of Han time made of various metal alloy and ornamented with so-called pointed ribbon, spiral and other motives was found (Fig. 5.-*4*). The Chinese mirrors give precise chronological reference points but at the same time they are known to have been in use for a very long time. For example the fragment of the mirror in the Hermitage with the same ornamental motifs is dated by the 3rd century BC (Lubo-Lesnichenko, 1975, p. 38, fig. 3). In terms of metal composition (copper-tin-lead alloy) and ornamental motifs let us mention a fragment of a Chinese mirror from barrow No. 52 from the Yaloman II site in the Altai Mountains, which is dated to the 2nd-1st centuries BC (Tishkin, Khavrin, 2006, p. 82–84; Tishkin, Seregin, 2011, p. 44). It is possible that Berel specimen is a late copy of the Hun mirror.

As a whole new sources obtained during field works find direct analogies in materials from the sites in Transbaikalia, Southern Siberia and neighboring Altai territories. Some finds have analogies only in Transbaikalia and may indicate foreign cultural components within the Berel burial ground, not related to the autochthonous population. From this it becomes clear to what extent an anthropological study of the bone remains from the burials is relevant.

Anthropological series with descriptions of craniological, osteometric, paleopathological, morphological features, as well as sex and age determinations have been carried out by anthropologists (Kitov and Kitova, 2018, pp. 233–268). The series originating from the burials adjoining the barrows of the Pazyryk culture can be divided into two main groups. Apparently the representatives of the first group are descendants of the Saks of Eastern Kazakhstan. They are characterized by a short and broad, high skull, wide and high face, medium broad, high nasal bones, strongly projecting in profile, and flattening or tending to flattening on horizontal levels. The other group — does not form any unity, and, characterizing the involvement of the South Siberian, Mongolian and Baikal populations in the general eastward migration flow to the Altai territory".

Along with the anthropological material, in spite of the general similarity of the objects of the material complex, the heterogeneity of the ethnical composition of the burial site is shown by the specificity of the funerary constructions and the burial rites. More specifically, the orientation of the buried, the facts of the interment in a simple earth pit, in a stone box, in a wooden pit, accompanied by a horse, either separately, or next to or above a man.

The Chinese written sources briefly describe the burial rites and beliefs of the Xianbei. They state that the Xianbei like Wuhuan buried in coffins, together with the dead they burnt their personal belongings and their horse. Many similarities between Xianbei and other Cen-

tral Asian nomads can be seen. For example, the Xianbei people sacrificed to the sky various animals bulls, rams and dogs to rivers, earth, some heavenly bodies, and also to dead chiefs in the eastern temple (Dashkovsky and Meikshan, 2014, p. 31–32). The souls of dead relatives, according to their beliefs, were sent to Chishan mountain (Kryukov et al., 1983, p. 62).

It is difficult to judge about *social stratification* of the society of the Xianbei era based on the materials of the Berel burial ground. Analysis of the materials of the studied sites showed that burial rites were a secondary indicator of the social significance of the burials. The main criterion for determining the social status of the buried was the accompanying items, which could be used as a basis for determining the degree of social significance. In its turn, the socially significant object complex consisted of weapons, human equipment, ammunition of a riding horse, tools and household items (Fig. 5.-*1–15*). Thus, all the studied objects of the Berel necropolis can be divided into three conventional categories: uninventory, with scarce inventory and conditionally rich.

It is known from written sources that in the 2nd century AD the Xianbei had noble and less noble families. From the biography of the Xianbei chief Kebinen, it is clear that the origin was of great importance. Sources say that Kebinen came from a lowly, lowly clan. Besides, starting from Tangshihuai, all rulers (dazhen) passed power by inheritance (Kichanov, 2010, p. 70). Among the investigated monuments of Berel, dated to the period of Xianbei dynasty, the sites 81 and 109 are remarkable for the richness of accompanying artifacts, where women are buried, probably belonging to the elite of the society.

Fence 81 is situated 30 m to the north of the large Berel barrow. Prior to excavation it was a small raised mound, insignificantly prominent in the surrounding landscape. A female burial was found in a simple earth pit, beneath a stone lining, on the back, with the head oriented to the east. The accompanying inventory is represented by an interesting set of costume decorations: a silver plate embossed all round, a diadem, silver wire earrings with inserted stones, beads of coloured stones, gold neck pendants, a cosmetic brush, large discs of limestone material, a comb, amulets of predator's teeth and silver discs with embossments, etc. (Fig. 5.-*16–20*).

Fence 109 had a rectangular ground structure at its base. A shallow grave pit with a stone box at the bottom was revealed in the centre of the fence. The construction is made of stone slabs, set on the rib, the box narrowed towards the feet of the buried person. The inventory is represented by an oval gold pendant richly decorated with grains and with an inlay of a red stone (a type of garnet?), fragments of a headdress in the form of remains of organics, silver plates and patches. In addition, bronze bracelets on both hands, a cowrie shell, an animal fang twisted into silver wire, paste beads and other articles of iron were found (Fig. 5.-*8*).

From the fence's object complex 109, interesting from cultural-chronological point of view, is an article executed in polychrome style (Fig. 5.-*16*). This find can be attributed to the early stage of polychrome style development, the initial centre of which is probably associated with the Northern Chinese-Mongolian region (Samashev, 2021, p. 76).

Armament complex. When solving the problems of relative dating and ethnocultural attribution of the sites of the Xianbei period, of particular importance is the analysis of armament and warfare in the context of funerary-memorial ritualism and the totality of other categories of material culture objects, which come from the Berel funerary-memorial sites of the considered cultural-chronological horizon.

It is known from written sources and archaeological materials that with the help of a more advanced complex of battle media in the 1st c. AD Xyanbi were able to defeat the Hunnu and create their own nomadic union. The Chinese chroniclers, emphasizing the superiority of the Xianbei in the complex of weapons, stressed that their "weapons are sharper and horses are faster than those of the Huns" (Bichurin, 1950, p. 157).

In the areas adjacent to the Kazakh Altai, in the excavated burial sites of the Xianbei was found a considerable quantity of protective armament, weaponry of distant and close combat. The analysis of the whole complex showed that, unlike the Huns, the Xianbei had more developed melee weapons (Soenov, 2017) and especially high level of defensive means reached. Besides, lightly armed Xianbei riders used smaller bows with reinforced kibiti shoulders with shoulder pads to increase their range. Another distinguishing feature of Xianbei archers is that they most often used double-bladed and flat iron arrowheads. The latter were inferior to Hunns' arrows in accuracy, but were more effective in flying speed at short distances (Nikonorov and Khudyakov, 2004, p. 140; Bobrov and Khudyakov, 2005; Gorbunov, 2005).

A modest but interesting set of weapons for lightly armed equestrian warriors engaged in offensive ranged and close combat was developed from Berel fencing. Among the weapons we should note two three-blade petiolate and one long iron arrowhead from 40A fence (Fig. 7.-*2, 4, 5*).

Another long-shaped arrowhead was found accidentally in the area of the Berel burial ground. Both spearheads are typologically close, but they differ in details: the upper tier of the specimen from the excavation No. 40A is short, and the other is excessively long, and the parameters of the lower tiers correspond to this. The second arrowhead has a very short bottom tier, which could be used as a stabilizer. This type of arrowheads can be attributed to the category of the armour-piercing ones, they are intended for shooting at the long distance and must be calculated for the accuracy of hitting the target (Khudyakov, 2005, p. 23).

The end pieces on the bow were found in most of the burial sites of the Xianbei, so let us mention only some of them (Fig. 6.-*1, 2*). The most expressive category of findings from two Berel fences (69A, 81B) should be considered two sets of long and narrow bow-shaped bone plates with arched notches, which belong to the Hunnish type, therefore they are important cultural-chronological and ethnic indicators. One iron arrowhead with a flat triangular-rhombic feather comes from enclosure 81.

In terms of reconstruction of peculiarities of the Xianbei ceremonial practice, some interest is caused by the fact that in fence 81B the bow is located in a separate horse burial, without a man, and in fence 69A — on top of the stone box, under the ceiling. Also noteworthy is the fact that the bone plates on the bow in the grave pit were placed in accordance with the "part instead of whole" principle. Thus, in enclosure 81B, there was no second endpiece, and in another enclosure only one endpiece of the bow was overlaid. On the inner side of one of the end-plates there is a black stain, presumably from varnish. It is known that Xianbeians of Northern Wei dynasty (Toba, IV–V centuries) practiced covering bows with black lacquer (Bobrov, Khudyakov, 2005, p. 109).

Among materials attributed by different authors to the Xianbei period there are also short end plates on the bow. Similar overlays are also known among Berel materials (Samashev, 2011, p. 107). Based on the analysis of the totality of the material complex, we originally attributed

them to Early Turkic time. There are wide median overlays and narrow short ones, with trapezoidal broadened ends, which come from the same 81B fence. An interesting set of weapons, consisting of three bone and one iron arrowhead, was found in fence 90 (Fig. 6.-*3*; 7.-*1–8*).

Fig. 6. Bere:. 1 — the lining of the bow from the burials of the Xianbeian time; 2 — overlays on the bow with slotted lines; 3 — burial 90

Рис. 6. Берел: 1 — накладки на лук из погребений сяньбийского времени; 2 — накладки на лук с прорезными линиями; 3 — ограда 90

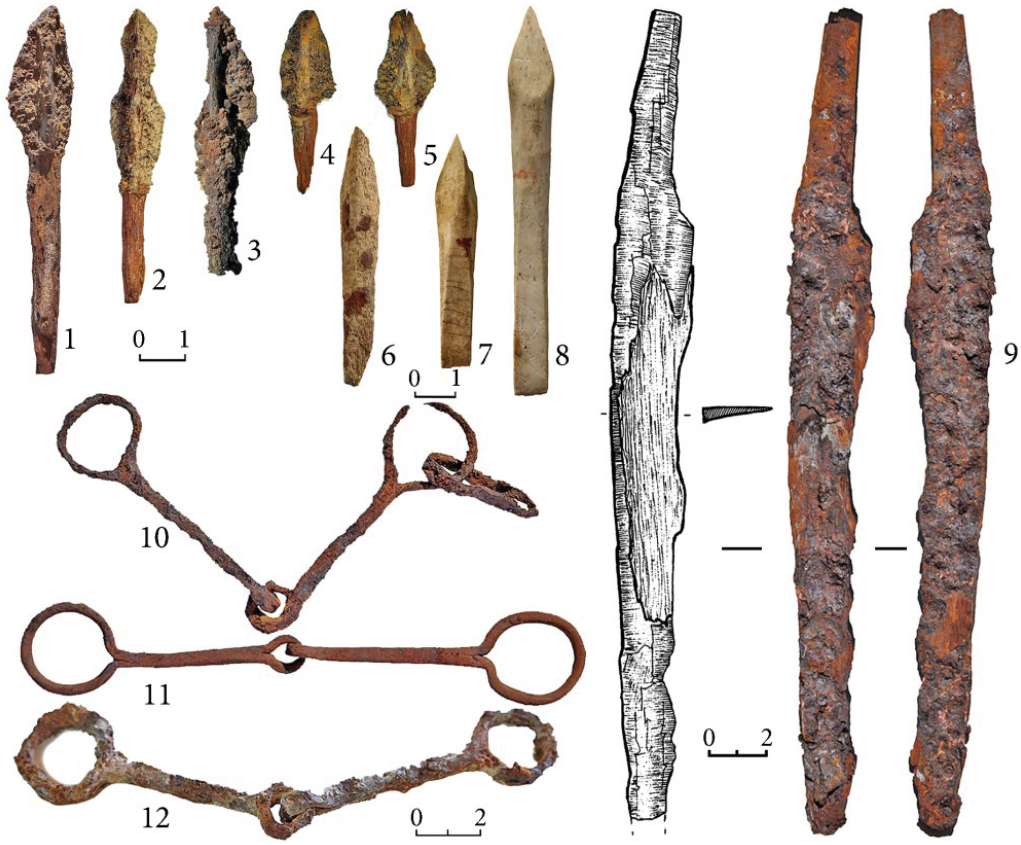

Fig. 7. Berel. Arrowheads from burials of the Xianbeian period: 1, 6–8 — burial 90; 2, 4, 5 — burial 40A; 3 — burial 81. An iron dagger: 9 — burial 82A. Bits from the burials of the Xianbeian time: 10 — burial 82B; 11 — burial 21; 12 — burial 67C

Рис. 7. Берел. Наконечники стрел из погребений сяньбийского времени: 1, 6–8 — ограда 90; 2, 4, 5 — ограда 40А; 3 — ограда 81. Железный кинжал: 9 — ограда 82А. Удила из погребений сяньбийского времени: 10 — ограда 82В; 11 — ограда 21; 12 — ограда 67С

Besides weapons of remote combat we should mention the find of a massive iron single-bladed "dagger-knife" at the waist of a man buried in an elongated position, with his head to the east, in a shallow ground grave pit within a rounded stone setting 82A, the initial structure of which, like at all other monuments of the period under study, was based on a stone fence. The tip of the dagger is broken off, the broad back of the weapon is slightly curved towards the blade, the hilt is noticeably oblique (Fig. 7.-9). The length of the weapon is about 30 cm, the hilt is 6–7 cm long and 2–3 cm wide. There was also a small iron knife beside the man's skeleton.

Among the Berel findings of V.V. Radlov's finds include bone plates on a bow, iron arrowheads, armour plates, as well as two broadswords, one with a ring-shaped tip and a clearly marked crossguard, while the other is represented in fragments. The enumerated types

of weapons testify that the population of the investigated time used some types of protective armament and, naturally, that heavy-armed elite units were part of their cavalry (Khudyakov, 2005, p. 50, fig. XII; Gorbunov, 2005, p. 200–223). It is also clear that lightly armed cavalry was the main nucleus of the Xianbei troops throughout their history. Other similar finds are known in Altai region, which researchers connect with the influence of Xianbei on the development of armament and military affairs of the local population (Soenov, 2017, p. 149).

Items of horse equipment. The achievements of the Xianbei in the field of military affairs were adopted and modernised by medieval ethnic groups, including the Juan-Juan and the Turks. The area where for the first time appeared a saddle with a rigid frame, one sided sling and stirrups for mounting a heavily armed rider, is associated by some scientists with the contact areas between the Xianbei and Korea and China (Khudyakov and Yu Su-Hua, 2005, p. 59).

In the context of development of military activities and generally the culture of nomadic peoples of the Middle Ages some items of horse equipment, originating from Berel horse trappings, should also be noted. For example, in the grave hole of fence 67A a massive bone buckle (7,1×3,4–4,2 cm, thickness 0,3–0,7 cm) was found next to a buried adult obviously belonging to a cinch belt, which by its shape and the presence of a fixed tongue on the outer arch and two cross slits for fastening the corresponding belt ends obviously has an archaic appearance characteristic of the previous Pazyryk time.

At the same time, the very staking-fence 67A, closely adjoining the main system of structurally identical "Xianbei" sites, by the time of erection (and by the method of burial) clearly gravitates to the latter. Another, category of equestrian equipment — iron shod bridles originate from several enclosures. The bridles from a single horse burial in fence 82B (Fig. 7.-*10*) belong to the classical type of two rectangular in cross-section links, connected by hook-shaped bent ends.

The ring-shaped end of one link has an oblong, thin, rectangular in cross-section with rounded corners and a loop for attaching the reins. Other well-preserved bridles with similar characteristics, but without additional rims on the ring-shaped ends of the links, were found among the stones of the fence structure, which did not contain a grave pit (Fig. 7.-*11*). Iron bridles with ringed ends were also found in fence 67C (Fig. 7.-*12*). Note that wrought-iron bridles of similar design are known in Altai, among the materials from the Verkh-Uymon burials (Soenov, 2000, fig. 7.8 and 10.6).

Conclusion

The chronological arrangement of the materials from the Berel plots-figures, as a whole, fit in the extended framework of the so-called "Great Migration" epoch (the 2nd century BC — 5th century AD). The latter is confirmed by the dates of radiocarbon analysis of the bone from the burial 68 (Fig. 8). It is also necessary to take into account the possible influence on the formation of ethno-cultural aspect of the Kazakh Altai population of various contacts and interactions with the carriers of synchronous cultures from the Altai mountain system and the Southern Siberia (Tashtyk, Kokpash, Bulan-Koba and others) and of course with the events in the ancient Chinese kingdoms. For example, the Han dynasty (206 BC — 220 AD), the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD), the Jin dynasty (265–316 AD) and further, up to the Tang dynasty, which, as many believe, had Syanbi origin.

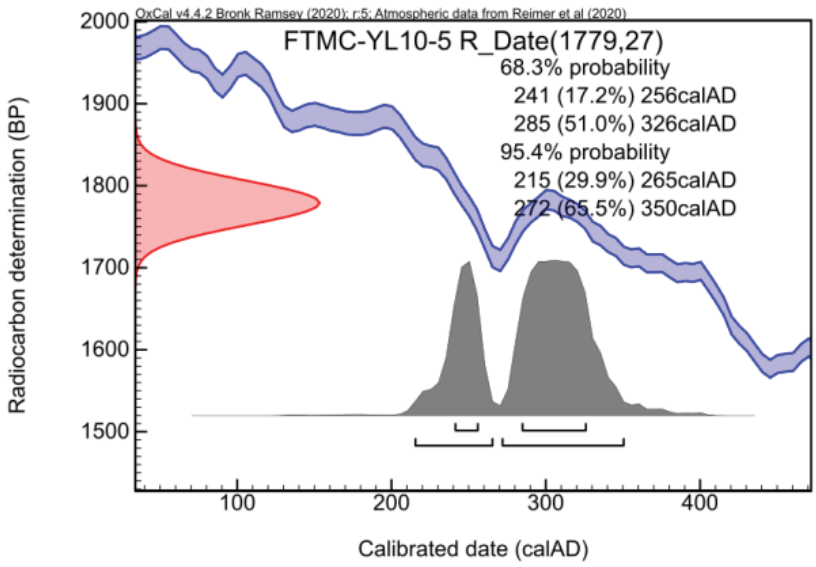

Fig. 8. Berel. Burial 68. Results of radiocarbon analysis

Рис. 8. Берел. Ограда 68. Результаты радиокарбонного анализа

The considered cultural-chronological horizons in the future need to be substantiated and argued more deeply, using a set of the newest archaeological, anthropological data, written and other sources, as well as to develop clear criteria for their delineation. This procedure requires a search for new archaeological evidence.

For the moment, materials of excavation are at a stage of comprehension, more firm substantiation of all that is said is a matter of the nearest time. Currently, the materials of Berel necropolis available to us, allow raising the question of distinguishing an intermediate between the Hun and Old Turkic periods — the Xianbei cultural and chronological horizon.

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