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### CORGANTAS, CARAMOLA, TASMOLA. TO THE QUESTION OF THE CULTURAL SITUATION IN CENTRAL KAZAKHSTAN IN THE LATE SAK PERIOD

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**Abstract.** The proposed review covers the data on three groups of burial sites of the late Saka period, studied in the territory of Central Kazakhstan. The Korgantas burials are interpreted as the descendants of immigrants from the distant eastern regions of Central Asia (Ordos, Mongolia), who could have arrived in Central Kazakhstan through the Altai Mountains or directly through Xinjiang. The sites of the Karamola type, representing a cultural formation of the Saka type, unlike Korgantas, spread to the extreme eastern and southern peripheries of the region in question. The bulk of this type of burials is located in the territory lying to the east of Central Kazakhstan, which is determined in the area of the vicinity of the Chingiztau Range. It is likely that the Karamola burials represent a new, as yet allocated archaeological culture, the population of which had close contacts with Zhetysu and the steppe Altai. The author believes that additional materials are needed to finally resolve this issue. The third group of sites differs from both previous ones in terms of burial rite. In particular, mound 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground, being a site of the elite of the late Saka period, contains a number of features indicating the preservation of some aspects of the traditions of earlier mounds of Central Kazakhstan. A number of other heavily robbed, difficult to date sites are associated with this group and require separate analysis.

**Keywords:** Central Kazakhstan, late Saka period, Korgantas type, Karamola type, burial rite, radiocarbon dates

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## КОРГАНТАС, КАРАМОЛА, ТАСМОЛА. К ВОПРОСУ О КУЛЬТУРНОЙ СИТУАЦИИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОМ КАЗАХСТАНЕ В ПОЗДНЕСАКСКОЕ ВРЕМЯ

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**Резюме.** В предлагаемом обзоре кратко освещаются данные о трех группах погребальных памятников позднесакского времени, исследованных на территории Центрального Казахстана. Коргантасские погребения, по мнению автора, как и ряда других исследователей, трактуются как погребения потомков выходцев из далеких восточных регионов Центральной Азии (Ордос, Монголия), которые могли прибыть в Центральный Казахстан через Горный Алтай или же напрямую через Синьцзянь. Памятники карамолинского типа, представляя собой культурное образование сакского типа, в отличие от Коргантаса, распространились в крайних восточных и южных перифериях рассматриваемого региона. Основная масса этого типа погребений находится на территории, лежащей к востоку от Центрального Казахстана, которая определяется в ареале окрестностей Чингизтауского хребта. Вероятно, карамолинские погребения представляют новую, еще не выделенную археологическую культуру, население которой имело тесные контакты с Жетысу и степным Алтаем. Автор полагает, что для окончательного решения этого вопроса необходимы дополнительные материалы. Третья группа памятников в плане погребального обряда отличается от обеих предыдущих. В особенности курган №2 могильника Кызылжарта, который, являясь памятником элиты позднесакского времени, содержит ряд черт, указывающих на сохранение некоторых сторон традиций более ранних курганов Центрального Казахстана. Некоторое количество других сильно ограбленных, труднодатируемых памятников связано с этой группой и требует отдельного анализа.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральный Казахстан, позднесакский период, коргантасский тип, карамолинский тип, погребальный обряд, радиоуглеродные даты

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According to modern archaeological data, the Tasmola archaeological culture of Central Kazakhstan, which developed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and flourished in the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, remains in many ways a cultural formation of the Early Saka era. Archaeological materials, coupled with radiocarbon dates (Beisenov et al., 2016; Beisenov, 2018), suggest that by the beginning of the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC the number of Tasmola culture sites clear-

ly decreases. At the present stage, the archaeological appearance of the Middle Saka period in Central Kazakhstan is not clearly and comprehensively traced, which is due to the insufficient volume of materials related to the period of the end of the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

Currently, archaeological data is being accumulated from sites of the final stage of the Saka era in Central Kazakhstan, dating back to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. Here, too, we cannot talk about numerous sites, but, nevertheless, the available data in some sense allow us to outline some features of the culture of the late Saka period of this region.

The proposed publication provides a brief overview of data on the late Saka period, the totality of which allows us to see the existence of several groups of sites on the territory of Central Kazakhstan that have differences between them.

**Korgantas type burials.** Five of the mounds of this group were first excavated by Mir Kadyrbaev in the mid-1960s, but remained unpublished (Kadyrbaev, 1969). These sites were first identified by the author in 1995 based on 21 burials (Beisenov, 1995). This review uses data from 47 burials excavated at 21 locations in Central Kazakhstan. The main part of them was studied by the author of this review. Questions concerning the history of the study of these sites, the main features of the burial rite, items, as well as a bibliographic summary were given in the publications of researchers (Beisenov, Kozhakov, 1993; Beisenov, Duisenbay, 2015; Beisenov, 2017; Shul'ga D.P., Shul'ga P.I., 2017).

The above-ground part of the korgantas type burials differs sharply from the burial structures of the Saka cultures of both Central and all of Kazakhstan in its small size and flattened appearance. This is how they are easily distinguished from the hemispherical burial mounds of the Saka type, the surface of which is usually covered with a dense layer of stones. None of the excavated burials has an above-ground part, the diameter or length of which would exceed 10–12 m, and the height would reach at least 1 m. People were buried in shallow graves, with their heads facing east or northeast. As we know, in the Saka traditions, the western, northwestern, and rarely southwestern orientation was preferable. But, perhaps, the most important feature of the burial rite of the korgantas population is that in the eastern corner of the grave, behind the head of the deceased, there is a special ritual space in the form of a pit containing skulls and leg bones of domestic animals. A horse or ram shoulder blade with a rib placed across the body of a deceased person, on the chest, sometimes in the pelvic or thigh area, has the same stable character (Beisenov, 2017, Fig. 1.-1–3).

In the course of new studies, burials of the korgantas type were discovered in the cultural layer of three settlements of the Early Saka period. These are 5 burials out of the indicated number: 2 of them, one each, were found in the settlements of Kyzylsuir-2, Shiderty-2 and 3 — in the settlement of Abylay (Fig. 1). Judging by the orientation of the deceased, the head ritual sector and the animal's shoulder blade placed on the human body, these burials do not differ from the rest of the mass. It is noteworthy that even in the case of burying their relatives in the area of abandoned Saka settlements, people adhered to their stable burial traditions.

The first radiocarbon analyses performed in 2014 in the <sup>14</sup>C Chronology Laboratory of Queen's University Belfast, UK, on bone samples from 4 burials (Beisenov et al., 2016) allowed dating the korgantas burials within the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. Archaeological materials, including weapons and other finds, do not go beyond this period (Beisenov,

2017, Fig. 1.-4–12). In 2023–2024, 2 new dates were obtained in the Vilnius laboratory, Lithuania. The results of the new analyses (Table 1) confirmed the validity of the indicated date.

It is possible that some of the sites appeared in Central Kazakhstan slightly earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, but not much (Beisenov, Duisenbay, 2015).



Fig. 1. A burial of the Korgantas type in the area of the Abylay settlement. Excavations 2022

Рис. 1. Погребение коргантасского типа на площади поселения Абылай. Раскопки 2022 г.

All researchers who paid attention to the burials of the Korgantas type of Central Kazakhstan expressed opinions about the origin of this group from the distant eastern regions of Central Asia — Ordos, Mongolia, Transbaikalia. These hypotheses of researchers, as well as possible routes of arrival of the Korgantas population to the territory of Central Kazakhstan were

specially shown in the publications of P.I. and D.P. Shulga (Shulga P.I., 2015; Shul'ga D.P., Shul'ga P.I., 2017). At present, the issues of the origin of the burial rite of the Korgantas population, as well as the dating of these burials in Central Kazakhstan within the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC do not raise objections from researchers.

*Tab. 1*

**New AMS dates from bone samples from Korgantas burials. “Vilnius Radiocarbon” <sup>14</sup>C Dating Laboratory, Vilnius, Lithuania. 2023–2024. Ox Cal v4.4.4 Bronk Ramsey (2021); r: 5; Atmospheric data from Reimer et al. (2020)**

*Таблица 1*

**Новые АМС даты из костных образцов из коргантас погребений. Лаборатория <sup>14</sup>C датирования «Vilnius Radiocarbon», Вильнюс, Литва. 2023–2024 гг. Programme Ox Cal v4.4.4 Bronk Ramsey (2021); r: 5; Atmospheric data from Reimer et al. (2020)**

Lab number	kurgans	<sup>14</sup> C BP	Calibrated date (1 σ, 68.3)	Calibrated date (2 σ, 95.4)
FTMC-EU78-12	Kyzylzhartas, mound No. 3	2241±28	Cal BC 381–352 (20,2%) 287–228 (43,4%) 219–221 (4,7%)	Cal BC 389–346 (26,1%) 317–204 (69,4%)
FTMC-QW89-39	Serekhty-2, Kurgan 4	2186±31	Cal BC 353–286 (42,7%) 228–176 (25,6%)	Cal BC 371–153 (95,4%)

Researchers have suggested certain specific regions as the initial territory of the burial rite of the Korgantas population, but I like the opinion of P.I. Shulga, who unites these “eastern regions” with one term — “eastern historical and cultural community” (Beisenov, 2017, p. 107). It was there, in the cultural environment of this community, that such a feature of the burial rite as head altars with skulls of domestic animals appeared in the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The first, therefore earlier burials of the Korgantas type spread in Tuva, but more in the Altai Mountains, in the period of the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Soenov, Ebel, 1998; Kushakova, Chugunov, 2010; Shulga, 2015).

In the nature of such a conservative rite of the Korgantas population, one interesting detail draws attention to itself. On the ground structures, also sometimes in the grave of the Korgantas burials excavated in Central Kazakhstan, we find small stone altars, flat, without legs. This is an innovation, noticeable in the burials of Central Kazakhstan. Such stone altars were very characteristic of the culture of the Saka population of Central Kazakhstan, as well as of its other regions. These finds indicate a connection with the late groups of the Tasmola population, who mixed with the newcomers.

We find korgantas burials in the cultural layer of the settlements of the Tasmola population. These facts clearly indicate that by the arrival of the korgantas groups, these settlements had already been abandoned by their inhabitants (Beisenov, 2022, p. 128). This conclusion does not contradict the previously expressed thoughts that the main line of development of the Tasmola culture probably ended in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Beisenov, 2018).

The Korgantas population consisted of individuals with mixed physical features of both the Indo-European and Mongoloid races. This idea was first expressed by paleoanthropologist Ainagul Ismagulova, who studied the first series of skulls from the Korgantas burials of Central Kazakhstan (Ismagulova, Beisenov, 2006). New data on the craniology of Korgantas individuals confirmed this conclusion (Kitov, Beisenov, 2015).

Thus, the burials of the Korgantas type of the late Saka period of Central Kazakhstan were left by a group of people whose origins were connected with the eastern historical and cultural community. These groups from the Ordos or neighboring regions by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC come to the territory of Tuva and the Altai Mountains. A few of their sites were discovered in Xinjiang.

The Korgantas groups arrived in Central Kazakhstan in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, either through the Altai Mountains or directly through Xinjiang. It is noteworthy that the burials of Central Kazakhstan do not contain items typical of distant eastern regions, such as those associated with Northern China. No vessels or their fragments were found in any burial. Korgantas burials have been studied in small quantities, and no special search for them has been conducted anywhere. This is, moreover, a very difficult task, given that the actual korgantas burial grounds have not been discovered anywhere, neither in Sayan-Altai nor in Central Kazakhstan, and these burials are located alone or in 2–3 near the kurgans of early periods.

Considering the movements of the ancient tribes “Rong” and “Di” in the vast expanses north of China, I.V. Pyankov brings up an interesting idea about the connections of the Tasmola culture of Central Kazakhstan with these peoples (the idea is shown in the publication: Pyankov, 2015). As the author believes, the Turkic-speaking Dinlins, who advanced to the western territories by the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, created their Western group, which can be identified with the population of the Tasmola culture of Central Kazakhstan (Pyankov, 2015, pp. 239, 241). The opinions of researchers about the spread of ancient tribes, which are usually based on brief information from written sources, are very difficult to connect with certain archaeological cultures. This is a common situation. Nevertheless, this hypothesis about the advancement of the Western Dinlins has a right to exist. In particular, it would be promising to consider it also in the context of materials of the Korgantas type of sites.

Unlike the Korgantas sites, the following two groups of burials, in terms of their origin, are associated with the cultural formations of the Saka tribes who lived on the territory of Kazakhstan.

**Karamola type burials** are found in the extreme eastern and southern areas of Central Kazakhstan. In 2013, on the remote eastern outskirts of the Karaganda region, a burial ground was explored in the Karamola Valley, where 5 mounds were excavated. The materials of the kurgans, including radiocarbon dates, were published (Beisenov, 2014). A study of the materials of these sites, dated to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC, showed that these kurgans are not typical for the main territory of Central Kazakhstan and they are most likely distributed in their mass a little further east, in the territory of the neighboring Abay region.

The Karamola kurgans have a very obvious Saka type (Fig. 2): the same hemispherical shape, round outline, height and diameters, respectively characterizing small and larger structures. The larger mounds have a ditch, the graves are stretched along the west-east line.

In the review of the available materials on the cultural groups of the late Saka period, identified in Central Kazakhstan, with regard to the burials of the Karamoly type, one detail of the burial rite is of particular interest. This is the western sector of the grave, where at the western wall, behind the head of the deceased, a free space is left for food on the way to the after-life (Beisenov, 2014, Fig. 2.-5, 6).

The Karamola burial ground are not the only sites in Central Kazakhstan that demonstrate the ritual detail that interests us. The Karamola type of burial also includes the kurgans of the Tasaral-3 burial ground (Beisenov et al., 2016; Beisenov, Shashenov, 2019). This burial ground is located in the southern outskirts of the Karaganda region, in the Northern Balkhash region.



*Fig. 2. Kurgans 3 (1) and 4 (2) of the Karamola burial ground*

*Рис. 2. Курганы №3 (1) и 4 (2) могильника Карамола*

Based on archaeological and radiocarbon data, the kurgans of the Tasaral-3 burial ground are dated to the period between the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Publications devot-

ed to the materials of Tasaral-3 have already put forward a hypothesis that these mounds are earlier sites of the Karamola type (Beisenov et al., 2016, p. 261; Beisenov, Shashenov, 2019, p. 25). The specified detail of the ritual is present in the Tasaral kurgans, and this allows us to assume that the western sector for food on the way to the afterlife in burials of the Karamola type appears at least in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. However, even earlier, when analyzing the excavation materials of the Karamolay mounds, I assumed that sites of this type could be dated to an earlier period (Beisenov, 2014, p. 77).

Another thought expressed at that time (Beisenov, Duisenbay, 2015, p. 77) concerns the materials of Mir Kadyrbaev's excavations in the southern part of the Abay region, south of the Chingiztau ridge, in a number of valleys located near such places as Kotanemel, Bakanas (Kadyrbaev, 1969). In M. Kadyrbaev's brief report for 1969, in the text describing the burial mounds, since there were no photos or other illustrations, I saw a clear similarity between many sites and Karamola burials.

Here, in the materials of my predecessor Mir Kadyrbaev, which he combined in a section called "The Sites of the North-Eastern Balkhash", the greatest interest is aroused by the Kayraktas burial ground, located, according to the researcher's description, 40 km northwest of Mount Kotanemel. In general, it should be noted that all the sites united in this section of M. Kadyrbaev's report are located on the territory of Shubartau district of Abay region. At present, this district is included in Ayagoz district. That part of Karaganda region, where the Karamola burial ground was studied, borders precisely on the lands of Shubartau district. Thus, we are talking about sites that are territorially adjacent to Karamola.

In the Kayraktas burial ground, which consists of 12 burial mounds, 8 were excavated. In burial mound 1, a bronze buckle with juxtaposed heads of mountain goats (tauteke), an iron dagger 32 cm long were found, and M. Kadyrbaev dated this burial to the period of the 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Kadyrbaev, 1969, pp. 20, 82).

He attributed all the other 7 burial mounds to a later period. In particular, he considered burial mound 6, based on the burial rite, to be characteristic of the "second stage of the Tasmola culture" (Kadyrbaev, 1969, p. 22).

The remaining 6 burial mounds of the Kayraktas burial ground form a single group, which M.K. Kadyrbaev compared with the Usun burial mounds of Zhetysu on the basis of the burial rite and ceramic vessels and was inclined to date to the 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. During this period, according to the researcher, the strip of territory of Northern Balkhash was a zone of lively contacts between the Usun tribes of Zhetysu and the descendants of the Tasmola population (Kadyrbaev, 1969, p. 84).

What did he see in the 6 burial mounds of Kayraktas? In addition to 2 round-bottomed vessels, in form really close to the Zhetysu late Saka and Usun vessels, these were the same details of the burial rite, which is typical for Karamol burials. In graves oriented along the latitudinal line, people were buried with their heads to the west. In the western sector of the grave, behind the head of the deceased, they left free space to place a vessel, a ram's rump and an iron knife. This is the rite he considered Usun, which then, as now, is quite consistent with archaeological materials and the conclusions of researchers.

Let us pay attention to the mound 4 of this burial ground. It had a diameter of 10 m and a height of 1.2 m. The grave, oriented along the latitudinal line, was covered with slabs and had



dimensions of 2.7×1.1, a depth of 1 m. At the bottom of it lay a human skeleton, which was placed with its head to the west. “The western part of the grave was left free, approximately one third of it”. Here were a ram’s sacrum, an iron knife, and also a round-bottomed pot “with a spherical body and a low neck”, which, as M. Kadyrbaev noted, is close in shape to Zhetysu Saka-Usun dishes. Fragments of a bronze hairpin, round in cross-section, were found behind the skull. The skeleton belonged to an elderly person. Apparently, based on the discovery of the hairpin, as an item for a woman’s hairstyle, M. Kadyrbaev believed that an old woman was buried here.

In 2013, I discovered a part of a human skeleton from mound 4 of the Kayraktas burial ground in the collections of the A.Kh. Margulan Institute of Archaeology. In 2015, during a series of radiocarbon analyses of Central Kazakhstan sites in the laboratory of Queen’s University Belfast, UK, one date was obtained from a bone sample from Kayraktas (Table 2). Based on this result, kurgan 4 of the Kayraktas burial ground, studied in 1968 by Mir Kadyrbayev, is dated to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC.

*Tab. 2*

**New AMS dates from bone samples from Kairaktas and Serekhty burial grounds.  
<sup>14</sup>C Chronology Laboratories, Queen’s University Belfast, UK, 2015, and Vilnius  
 Radiocarbon, Vilnius, Lithuania, 2024**

*Таблица 2*

**Новые АМС даты из костных образцов из могильников Кайрактас и Серекты.  
 Лаборатории <sup>14</sup>С хронологии Королевского университета Белфаста,  
 Великобритания, 2015 г., и «Vilnius Radiocarbon», Вильнюс, Литва, 2024 г.**

Lab number	kurgans	<sup>14</sup> C BP	Calibrated date, (1 σ, 68.3)	Calibrated date (2 σ, 95.4)
UBA-28354	Kayraktas kurgan 4	2295±30	Cal BC 400–364 (1.000)	Cal BC 405— 355 (0.790) 289–233 (0.210)
FTMC-SF12-22	Serekhty kurgan 2	2188±29	Cal BC 353–285 (44,4%) 229–195 (19,9%) 186–178 (4,0%)	Cal BC 366–164 (95,4%)

In the Wusun burials of Zhetysu, people were buried with their heads to the west, and behind the person’s head, in a specially left space, they placed vessels with drinks and a piece of meat — usually a ram’s rump, often with an iron knife for cutting this dish. Such a picture is often found in unrobbed graves (Akishev, Kushaev, 1963, Fig. 9, 10, 19, 23, 24).

In 1991, in Northern Balkhash, in the south of Karaganda region, Joldasbek Kurmankulov studied the kurgans of the Saga-1 burial ground. In these burials, we again see the rite under consideration, i.e. vessels, a ram’s rump with an iron knife, which are placed behind the head of the deceased. Based on a comparison with the materials of the Kalkan-1, Utegen-1 and Utegen-2 burial grounds, which belong to the second stage of the Zhetysu Usun culture, J. Kurmankulov dated the kurgans from Saga-1 to the period of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC — 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Kurmankulov, 2001).

The earliest period of the Wusun culture of Zhetysu is defined within the period of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC (Akishev, Kushaev, 1963). Based on the materials of Karamola, Tasaral-3 and Kayraktas, we see that the “Wusun rite” of placing a vessel and food for the journey to the afterlife at the head of the grave, considered in our review, appears in the territories lying north of Zhetysu, several centuries earlier — at least not later than the 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

In the famous Issyk kurgan, which belongs to the sites of the Zhetysu late Saka culture and was dated by K. Akishev to the 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, then by A.A. Akishev to the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC (Akishev K.A., 1978; Akishev A.K., 1984, numerous vessels were placed at the head of the grave (Akishev, 1978, p. 14, Fig. 5). Probably, the “Wusun rite” we are considering already existed earlier among the Zhetysu late Saka population.

Many issues related to the sites of the late Saka and Usuns in the territory of Zhetysu require a special and large-scale new analysis at the level of modern development of archaeological science. Such issues, including the need to adjust and revise the dates of many sites, have already been addressed in the works of researchers (Shulga, 2003, pp. 60–61; Kubarev, Shulga, 2007, p. 70; Beisenov, 2014, p. 76; Beisenov et al., 2016, p. 261; Beisenov, Shashenov, 2019, p. 26; Amirov, 2017, pp. 128–129).

The question of the Karamol type of burials and the presence of the “Usun rite” in them remains. Did this rite and this type of burials in general appear in the territories north of Zhetysu independently and earlier, if we take into account the 5<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC as the lower limit of their existence, or did the burial tradition we are considering first appear among the late Saka tribes of Zhetysu?

In recent years, publications by Kazakh researchers have appeared on the issues of contacts between the population of Tarbagatai, Northern Zhetysu and Altai (a summary of sites and opinions are shown in the publication: Dzhumabekova et al., 2022). In such works, no significant place has yet been given to the sites of the Chingiztau Range, which primarily interest us in determining the main area of the Karamola group. With regard to the sites of the entire Saka era, it is the circumference of the Chingiztau Range that now remains a “blank spot”, with the exception of isolated sites.

In kurgans of the Kamensk culture burial ground Lokot-4, located in the steppe Altai (Altai Krai in the Russian Federation), 37 graves were found. In the arrangement of the graves, its head part was of particular importance, where food for the journey to the afterlife was placed. According to P.I. Shulga, the length of this special space, if we consider the distance from the skull of the deceased to the wall of the grave, is 40–90 cm. In 11 cases, these were the tail vertebrae or sacrum of a ram. In 24 graves here, in this space, there were also ceramic vessels. High headdresses were also placed here (Shulga, 2003, pp. 48–49). The burial mounds of the Lokot-4 burial ground are dated to the mid-5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Shulga, 2003, p. 111). These mounds are characterized by graves, the length of which sometimes reaches up to 3–4 m. The increase in the length of the grave is explained by the presence of free space at the head. Long graves are also characteristic of Karamola burials, they are also known among the Zhetysu Usuns.

In grave 1 of kurgan 9 from Lokot-4, a burial of an aristocrat in a “golden robe” was found, similar to the famous Issyk mound in Kazakhstan. Noting the “distance of 1000 km” separating these sites, Shulga P.I., nevertheless, emphasizes their “striking similarity” (Shulga, 2003, p. 120). I see that the “Wusun rite” discussed above appears here, in the Lokot-4 graves, having overcome such a great distance.

We do not see this detail of the ritual in the burials of the Pazyryk culture of the Altai Mountains. In the Pazyryk graves there is also free space behind the head of the deceased. They are intended for headdresses, but not for food for the journey to the afterlife. Cases when ritual food is found in this space are rare, and they are associated, as researchers write, with foreign

cultural influence (Kubarev, Shulga, 2007, p. 12). As can be seen, the foreign cultural influence in the Pazyryk graves must again be connected with the “Wusun rite”.

Most likely, the answers will be found in the course of future studies of Karamolin type sites. P.I. Shulga rightly noted the poor study of sites that are located on this 1000-kilometer section dividing Issyk and Lokot-4. I will add now that we should talk about the poor study of sites on the territory of the Abay region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, primarily in the area of the Chingiztau ridge.

The work currently being carried out jointly with U. Umitkaliev on some materials from the burial mounds of Tokai, Baimagul and Molbulak, located near the Chingiztau ridge, supports my statements regarding the Karamol type of burials. The materials from these burials are planned to be published in the near future in collaboration with colleagues who took part in the excavations. Long graves were also found in these sites, at the head of which are vessels, animal sacrum, and an iron knife. The burial in kurgan 5 of the Baimagul burial ground is dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC based on radiocarbon analysis (UBA-23675, Belfast, UK).

Another group of kurgans from the Abay region should be mentioned. Near the Kokentau and Semeytau mountains, 13 burials were studied in six kurgans. As the authors of the materials emphasize, these sites are most similar to the Karamola burials (Aitkali, Zhuniskhanov, Rakhmankulov, 2023).

As can be seen from the named locations of the sites, the Karamola burials form a single community, localized in a wide area around the Chingiztau ridge. In all likelihood, this is a new archaeological culture that has not been yet allocated, but is recognizable by its main features. It can be expected that its sites chronologically fit into the framework of the period of the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. For a final solution to this issue, it is necessary to expand the source base, including the introduction of new materials from recently excavated burial grounds into scientific circulation. Thus, we are talking about a new hypothesis of the author, put forward on the basis of the first part of the excavation and exploration data.

It is precisely with the burials of this community that we must connect the spread of the above-mentioned “Usun rite”, mentioned by Mir Kadyrbaev in his analysis of the materials of the Kayraktas burial ground back in 1969.

Perhaps, in all cases of discovery of the “Usun rite” by archaeologists on Tarbagatai, Chingiztau, Irtysh, we should keep in mind the issue of Karamola burials. The sites near Mount Semeytau clearly show the routes of the spread of the Karamola population towards the Irtysh and, probably, further. Here it is appropriate to mention the probable close ties of this population with the tribes of the Kamensk culture of the Altai plains (Lokot-4, etc.). Among the sites of the Kulazhurga type (Samashev, 1987), one group of burials, which has graves with the western orientation of the deceased, is traditionally associated with the Usuns of Zhetysu. In all likelihood, there is a clear connection with the new community under consideration.

Karamola burials with ritual food at the head of the grave appeared much earlier than the early group of Wusun sites of Zhetysu. In relation to their main area, they seem to have occupied a large and unified territory, surrounding the Chingiztau Mountains on all sides. This situation excludes the role and significance of any single cultural penetrations from outside and inclines us to think about the large-scale nature of the process.



Fig. 3. Kyzylzhartas burial ground. Kurgan 2 during excavations (1), stone sculpture (2), fragment of an iron vessel (3) and gold jewelry (4–10)

Рис. 3. Могильник Кызылжартас. Курган №2 в ходе раскопок (1), каменное изваяние (2), фрагмент железного сосуда (3) и золотые украшения (4–10)

During five exploration routes to Chingiztau, undertaken jointly with U. Umitkaliev in 2004, 2012, 2013, 2018, 2019, I had a chance to see many burial mounds. The most striking

of kurgans in terms of planigraphy have a large ring fence located at a distance of 2–5 m from the edge of the mound. In the case of the arrangement of the mounds in the form of a chain, such larger structures occupy a central position. Such mounds, enclosed in a large round fence, remind me of the sites of the Karamola burial ground (Beisenov, 2014, Fig. 1) and Tasaral-3 (Beisenov, Shashenov, 2019, Fig. 3), located in the Karaganda region, where exactly this type of burial structures were excavated. Close to them are Baimagul, Tokai and others, excavated in the vicinity of Chingiztau. The same planigraphic feature is found in the studied sites of Semeytau and Kokentau (Aitkali, Zhuniskhanov, Rakhmankulov, Fig. 3.-1, 2; 4.-1, 2).

It should be assumed that burial mounds with a large outer fence probably constitute the main type of sites of the expected new culture in the territory of Chingiztau. Separately, we can say about ritual structures in the form of small stone rings located on the area of the Karamola burial grounds. Such structures, indicating the preservation of the traditions of the early Saka tribes of Kazakhstan, are on the territory of the studied burial grounds (Karamola, Tasaral-3), many of them happened to be seen during the search routes in Chingiztau.

As for the relationship with the late Saka tribes of Zhetysu and the general nature of the contacts of the Karamola population with this region, this issue will await its solution. The Zhetysu region in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, apparently, truly connects with the vast steppe areas lying to the north of it, which leads to the creation of a new image of the cultural and economic development of ancient Kazakhstan. In archaeological terms, Zhetysu is an extremely important region and we have already discussed the issue of the need for a new and significant correction of many aspects of the sites of the late Saka and Wusun periods. At present, no special evidence is required that this work should be supported by the results of a large series of radiocarbon data.

On the eastern outskirts of Central Kazakhstan, Karamola burials will still be discovered, and they are probably also on the southern periphery of this region. The issues of chronology, burial rites in general, the peculiarities of the distribution of sites, relationships with adjacent regions and other aspects of this topic, hopefully, will be resolved in the course of the work of future researchers of the Saka antiquities of Kazakhstan.

**The third group** includes the sites that differ from the two considered above. The main sites here are kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground (Fig. 3), burials in kurgans 1 and 2 of the Serekty burial ground, dating back to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC, as well as a number of heavily plundered and difficult to date burials.

This group of kurgans, like the second, differs sharply from the korgantas burials considered above. This group differs from the karamola sites in the burial rite, in particular, the fact that the tradition of arranging a head space for ritual food in the graves is not evident here. In the Kyzylzhartas mound, the grave is heavily plundered, but in the two mounds of Serekty, the remains of clay pots are at the feet. This shows that in such kurgans, in the design of the graves and the position of the deceased, the traditions of the Saka population of earlier stages are preserved.

The materials of the kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground are currently in print, and publications are being prepared for two burials from Serekty. An important site among this group is the kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground, which belongs to the burials of the elite of one of the communities among the tribes of the late Saka period of Central Kazakhstan.

This kurgan, which was only recently studied and is not associated with the burials of the Korgantas and Karamola types, opens up a certain perspective for the search for and study of the sites of the late Sakas of this region.

Such kurgans, built for the burial of representatives of the elite strata of society, show the preservation to some extent of old traditions of the structure of society, where there are social groups ranked according to their traditional way of life.

At the same time, such sites allow us to expect the discovery of burials of ordinary people in the future. This was somehow supported by burial mounds 1 and 2 on Serekty, excavated after the study of Kyzylzhartas, in 2023. This becomes clearer if we take into account the following fact. In the vast territory of Central Kazakhstan in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, the number of burial mounds clearly decreases and the author has already raised the question that the issue of sites of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, continuing the Saka tradition, should be considered separately (Beisenov, 2018).

The main features of the burial mound 2 from Kyzylzhartas will be briefly shown here. Its diameter is 34 m, the height is 1.4–2 m. The embankment is surrounded by a ditch (Fig. 3), the diameter of which is 50 m. As excavations have shown, on the northern side the width of the ditch at the top is 3 m, the width of the bottom is 0.9 m and the depth is 0.6 m. In the south, the following dimensions were obtained respectively: 3.8 m, 0.95 m and 1.35 m. In the south-eastern sector, a section of the ditch 14 m long is filled with stones, the thickness of this layer is 1 m. In the northern and southern peripheries, behind the ditch, there is one ritual ring, which were characteristic of the sites of the early Saka period. The base of the embankment along the entire circumference is reinforced with a round fence, which served as a support (crepida), known even in earlier sites of the region.

The base of the embankment is a rounded rampart made of stone and earth. In the nearby mound 1, which dates back to the early Saka period (Beisenov, 2023), there was also a rampart, but it consisted only of earth (Beisenov, 2021). Here, however, it consists of two connections: initially, an internal stone rampart was built, which seemed to resemble some kind of wall about 1.5 m high, then an earthen part was added to this structure on the outside.

A 1.65 m long menhir and a very roughly made stone statue were found under the embankment (Fig. 3.-2). The statue complements the existing series on Central Kazakhstan. Currently, the number of stones associated with the territory of the Tasmola cultural tradition is approaching 30, taking into account the find under consideration. Four of them were previously found in the same burial ground, in mound 1 (Beisenov, 2021). The anthropomorph from kurgan 2 is of a rough appearance, made of gray granite. Traces of processing are recorded starting from the head, the right side is especially smoothed along the entire length of the granite piece. The ears, nose, and mouth are not shown. Both eyes are highlighted by rectangular depressions: the right one is shown by a pit measuring 3×4.5 cm, with a depth of 0.5 cm. The left eye measures 3.5×3.5 cm, with a depth of 0.8 cm. The distance between the eyes is 2.3 cm. The base of the stone is beveled downwards to the left.

The grave is shifted from the center to the west. This was already encountered in the early burial mounds of the Tasmola culture. Its long axis is oriented along the SW-NE line, and its dimensions at the top are 3.5×2 m. At a depth of 2.4 m, the pit narrows and at the bottom, at a depth of 3.12 m, its dimensions are 3.1×1.35 m. The shape of the grave is sub-rectangular with

rounded corners. The over-grave structure, typical of the burial mounds of the Saka period in Central Kazakhstan, is completely destroyed. Apparently, it was a simple layout of 3–4 layers of slabs, and had the same shape as the grave. The grave was heavily robbed in ancient times.

The accompanying inventory included remains of iron objects, of which two fragments of a vessel (Fig. 3.-3) and a knife were particularly significant, as well as gold ornaments (Fig. 3.-4–10), fragments of ceramics and one small bronze bracket. All of the listed objects were found in disarray in the lower part of the grave, starting from a depth of 2.9 m.

A metallographic study of one rim of an iron vessel has now been completed (Fig. 3.-3), and publication of these data is planned for the near future. As it turned out, the iron vessel is made of a 2 mm thick sheet prepared from a bloom. Below the rim there is an ornament in the form of a horizontal strip of yellow color. The substance from which the yellow “paint” was prepared was determined to be brown limestone — limonite.

In the filling of the grave 57 gold items were found, divided into seven types:

- 1) decoration in the form of a moon, attached to the base with four holes, dimensions 3×3.3 cm, 1 pc. (Fig. 3.-4);
- 2) ring cage, diameter 1.5 cm, 1 pc. (Fig. 3.-5);
- 3) four-ray (cross-shaped) patch, fragmented, with one hole on each ray, dimensions of the surviving part are about 1.9×2.9 cm, 2 pcs. (Fig. 3.-6);
- 4) three-lobed patches, dimensions 1.2×1.4 cm, 3 pcs. (Fig. 3.-7);
- 5) hemispherical plaque, base diameter 0.7 cm, height 0.3 cm, 4 pcs. (Fig. 3.-8);
- 6) corrugated miniature tube, length 0.7 cm, diameter 0.4 cm, 31 pcs. (Fig. 3.-9);
- 7) miniature tube with a smooth surface, length 0.7 cm, diameter 0.3 cm, 2 pcs. (Fig. 3.-10).

In addition, 13 more items are presented in the form of broken rays from cross-shaped overlays. The decorations are made of gold leaf, a favorite material of Saka jewelers.

The gold finds from burial mound 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground should be linked to the materials from the late Saka period sites of Kazakhstan and neighboring regions, which had intensive ethnocultural contacts with the Saka world in ancient times.

Of interest are the numerous finds of gold jewelry, similar to items from Kyzylzhartas, in the sites of the Chirikrabort culture of the Eastern Aral Sea region. Among these materials there are the same small beads, ribbed and smooth, as well as hemispherical plaques, decoration in the form of a lunula (Utubaev, Akkalieva, 2024).

Speaking about the Chirikrabort analogies, it is necessary to note the materials of the burial mound 1 of the Baykara burial ground, studied in Northern Kazakhstan (Partzinger et al., 2003). In the robbed burial of the 2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, let into the burial mound of the Saka period, objects were found that have direct analogies with the finds from Kyzylzhartas. These are the same gold fluted and smooth tubes, a lunula, hemispherical plaques (Partzinger et al., 2003, Fig. 66, 71, 72; Table 16.-1–27; 17.-1–22; 19.-1–36; 20.-1–36; 22.-7). Having cited a number of analogies (Parzinger et al., 2003, p. 213–217) to these finds from an elite burial of the Sarmatian period, the researchers emphasize the Aral direction of the connections, pointing to numerous decorations found in the sites of the Chirikrabort culture. The closeness of fragments of pottery vessels is especially noted (Parzinger et al., 2003, p. 213, Table 21.-20–23).

In examining the materials of the Late Saka kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground, the data of the Issyk kurgan, studied by K.A. Akishev (Akishev K.A., 1978; Akishev A.A., 1984),

and such sites as the Lokot-4a (Shulga 2003), Bugry (Tishkin, 2012; Chugunov, 2017) burial grounds are of great importance.

The materials of the named sites, as well as those of the Chirikrabort culture, help to clarify a number of features of the kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground. This concerns both the question of the date of the latter and the supposed status of the buried person, associated with such a striking phenomenon as the golden attire of the ruling elite, elite warriors among the ancient steppe pastoralists.

The materials of the named sites, as well as of the Chirikrabort culture, help to clarify a number of features of the kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground. This concerns both the question of the date of the latter and the supposed status of the buried, associated with such a striking phenomenon as the golden clothing of the representatives of the ruling elite, elite warriors among the ancient steppe cattle breeders. The materials of these sites do not yet contradict the broad dating of the kurgan 2 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground within the 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC.

Outside the three examined groups of the late Saka period of Central Kazakhstan, there remain isolated sites that can be dated, for example, to the Sarmatian type. One of the important tasks will be to clarify the question of the sites of the second stage of the Tasmola culture, which Mir Kadyrbayev wrote about in his time. A small number of burial mounds of this stage are located in the same area of the Shiderty River, where he actually discovered a compact group of sites of this culture. Now the late sites of the Shiderty group require separate analysis. In addition, my task was to examine the data on these three groups that existed on the territory of Central Kazakhstan, but an attempt at any broad interpretation of the situation that led to an obvious decrease in sites of the late stage of the Saka culture would require equally broad reasoning. It can only be briefly noted that the reduction in sites is associated with the gradual departure of the population, the beginning of which was probably laid in the early Saka period. Apparently, the main direction of movement of the Tasmola population of Central Kazakhstan was the south, Zhetysu and, possibly, later, Syrdarya.

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