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A BELT SET FROM AN "ELITE" FEMALE BURIAL OF THE EARLY TURKIC PERIOD IN THE NORTHERN FOOTHILLS OF THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS

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Abstract. This article is aimed at the publication, analysis, and interpretation of an original belt set discovered during the excavation of one of the objects at the Gorny-10 necropolis. This site, located in the Krasnogorsk District of the Altai Krai, was partially investigated by expeditions from Altai State University and the "Nasledie" Research and Production Centre in 2000–2002. Grave 60, which contained the burial of a young woman, was distinguished by a representative accompanying inventory, including various categories of riding horse equipment, costume details and jewellery, household items, and tools. An important part of the material assemblage was a belt set consisting of numerous elements made of non-ferrous metal. This set included both items with similarities in known series of finds from the sites in adjacent territories (a buckle with a heraldic shield, plaque overlays — rounded with smooth hemispherical and flat bodies, heraldic "horned", cross-shaped and "four-balled", also cast and stamped belt ends with spoon-shaped outlines), as well as a pair of unique rectangular openwork overlays with zoomorphic decor. Documented information on the localization features of these items allowed for a reconstruction of the appearance of the belt set. Its dating has been established within the second half of the 6th to the first half of the 7th centuries AD, which is confirmed by the radiocarbon analysis results of three samples. Taking into account the prestige and sacral significance of the original belt set, as well as the extremely "rich" composition of the rest of the accompanying goods, it can be concluded that the woman buried in grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis had a high social status during her lifetime and was a representative of the local elite of cattle breeders in the northern foothills of the Altai in the Early Turkic period.

Keywords: belt set, early Turkic period, necropolis, "elite" burial, chronology, reconstruction

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НАБОРНЫЙ ПОЯС ИЗ «ЭЛИТНОГО» ЖЕНСКОГО ПОГРЕБЕНИЯ РАННЕТЮРКСКОГО ВРЕМЕНИ В СЕВЕРНЫХ ПРЕДГОРЬЯХ АЛТАЯ

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**Автор, ответственный за переписку*

Резюме. Статья посвящена публикации, анализу и интерпретации оригинального наборного пояса, обнаруженного в ходе раскопок одного из объектов некрополя Горный-10. Данный памятник, расположенный в Красногорском районе Алтайского края, частично исследован экспедициями Алтайского государственного университета и НПЦ «Наследие» в 2000–2002 гг. Могила 60, в которой была захоронена молодая женщина, отличалась представительным сопроводительным инвентарем, включавшим разнообразные категории снаряжения верхового коня, детали костюма и украшения, бытовые изделия и орудия труда. Важной частью предметного комплекса был наборный пояс, состоявший из многочисленных элементов, изготовленных из цветного металла. Данный комплект включал как изделия, имеющие аналогии в известных сериях находок из памятников на сопредельных территориях (пряжка с геральдическим щитком, бляхи-накладки — округлые с гладким полусферическим и плоским корпусом, геральдическая «рогатая», крестовидная, «четырехшариковая», литой и штампованный наконечники ремней с язычковидным абрисом), так и пару уникальных четырехугольных ажурных накладок с зооморфным декором. Документированные сведения об особенностях локализации обозначенных предметов позволили представить реконструкцию внешнего облика наборного пояса. Его датировка установлена в рамках 2-й половины VI — 1-й половины VII в. н.э., что подтверждают полученные результаты радиоуглеродного анализа трех образцов. Принимая во внимание престижность и сакральную значимость оригинального наборного пояса, а также чрезвычайно «богатый» состав остального сопроводительного инвентаря, можно сделать вывод, что женщина, похороненная в могиле 60 некрополя Горный-10, имела при жизни высокий социальный статус и являлась представительницей местной элиты скотоводов северных предгорий Алтая раннетюркского времени.

Ключевые слова: наборный пояс, раннетюркский период, некрополь, «элитное» погребение, хронология, реконструкция

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Introduction

During the period of existence of the First Turkic Khaganate, many populations of Eurasia used different types of belt sets equipped with specific metal belt fittings of both Central Asian and local origin. One of the regions whose archaeological materials are very illustrative in terms of demonstrating such interpenetration of several traditions is Western Siberia.

Despite the long period of research into complexes in this territory, the study of this element of material culture remains quite fragmentary. This is primarily due to the limited volume of material sources from the second half of the 6th to the first half of the 7th centuries AD, as well as the small number of preserved sets of items sufficient for reliable reconstruction.

Using Altai materials, the problem of studying belt sets from the period of the First Turkic Khaganate has traditionally been considered by specialists in the context of interpreting finds from the Kudyrge necropolis, involving objects and graphic images from Central Asia (Raspopova, 1980, p. 87–99; Mogilnikov, 1981, Fig. 23; Arzhantseva, 1987, p. 97–114; Dobzhansky, 1990, Tab. XXV.-1, 2; Torgoev, 2011, Fig. 3–5; etc.). The results of the analysis of belt fittings from the beginning of the early medieval period are quite important, including conclusions on the reconstruction of the appearance of belts made based on materials from sites of the Upper Ob and Relka cultures (Belikova, Pletneva, 1983, p. 39, 92; Fig. 73.-7; Borodovsky, 1988, p. 37–44; Dobzhansky, 1990, Tab. XXXI.-4, 5; XXXII.-2–4; Troitskaya, 1996, p. 154–161; Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, Fig. 25.-42, 43; etc.). Informative data on the features of the sets of the period under consideration were obtained during fieldwork in the Lower Ob region (Kardash, Slesarenko, Rodin, 2021, p. 38, 42, 43, 47, 49, 50, 53–55, 58–61). A series of publications presents some possibilities for the analysis of belt sets from sites of the beginning of the Early Middle Ages investigated in the Altai forest-steppe (Savinov, Novikov, Roslyakov, 2008, p. 25–26; Tishkin, Gorbunov, Frolov, 2018; Grushin et al., 2020; etc.).

A review of available material sources shows that the belt sets of the population of Western Siberia during the time of existence of the First Turkic Khaganate were characterized by a significant variety of buckles, plaques, and ends, as well as an absence of a general standard in the design of sets and the presence of local traditions. Judging by known archaeological sources of this period, belt sets could be part of the costume not only of men, but also of women and children buried with "rich" accompanying grave goods, emphasizing their extraordinary social status within specific communities (Borodovsky, 2018; Seregin, Stepanova, 2023). One example of such a situation is the extremely rare for the beginning of the Early Middle Ages case of recording a belt set quite representative in its composition of elements in an "elite" female burial investigated at the Gorny-10 necropolis in the northern foothills of the Altai.

Characteristics of the Sources

The Gorny-10 necropolis is located in the Krasnogorsk District of the Altai Krai, on a promontory on the right bank of the Isha River, 1,3 km west-northwest of the mouth of the Karaguzh River (Fig. 1). In 2000–2002, during the work of expeditions from Altai State University and the "Nasledie" Research and Production Centre under the leadership of

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M. T. Abdulganeev and N. F. Stepanova, 75 pit graves from the beginning of the Early Middle Ages were uncovered on the territory of the complex. The excavated objects contained burials following the rite of single inhumation, predominantly with numerous accompanying grave goods, demonstrating the time of the functioning of the site within broad chronological framework of the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD (Seregin, Stepanova, 2023; Seregin, Matrenin, Stepanova, 2025; Seregin, Tishin, Stepanova, 2022; etc.). Metal parts of belt sets, represented by various functional and decorative items, were found in more than a third of the burials. Among the series of investigated objects, a burial of a young woman (grave 60) excavated in 2002 stood out, representing the most distinguished complex of the Gorny-10 necropolis in terms of the composition of accompanying inventory.



Fig. 1. Location of the Gorny-10 necropolis

Рис. 1. Расположение некрополя Горный-10

Grave 60 was identified at a depth of 0,7 m from the modern surface (0,1 m from the level of the bedrock) by its infill, consisting of dark grey loam. It was established that the pit had a sub-rectangular shape in plan with rounded corners, with dimensions of 2,25×0,7 m, vertical walls, and orientated along north-northwest — south-southeast. At the bottom of the grave, at a depth of 1,2 m, an undisturbed skeleton of a 20–23-year-old woman was cleared (determinations by Dr. S.S. Tur), which laid stretched on her back with her head to the north-northwest (Fig. 2.-*1*). Her arms were straight, and the hands lay on the pelvic bones. The woman's head was found detached: the first two cervical vertebrae were found to the left of the skull, above the left shoulder. The kneecaps were also detached, placed near the eastern wall opposite the knees and near the western wall in the projection of the upper head of the right femur. Judging by the recorded state, the inhumation was of a secondary nature.

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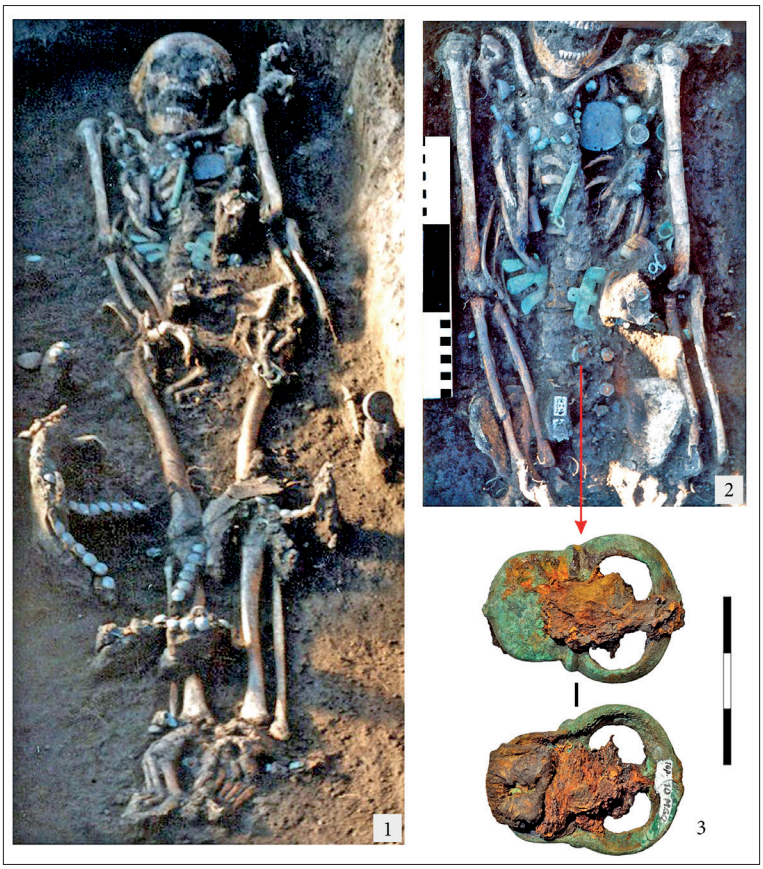


Fig. 2. Gorny-10 necropolis, grave 60:
1 — burial after cleansing; 2 — arrangement of individual elements of the plated belt in the grave; 3 — belt buckle

Рис. 2. Некрополь Горный-10, могила 60:
1 — захоронение после зачистки; 2 — расположение отдельных элементов наборного пояса в могиле; 3 — поясная пряжка

The burial contained numerous and very rare elements of a belt set made of non-ferrous metal. Successive clearing, while keeping in place all objects identified before and after the removal of the human bones, allowed for the documentation of the following order of placement of the belt fittings. Fragments of a leather belt with a bronze movable-tongue buckle and a solid heraldic shield were preserved on the left half of the skeleton in the abdomen projection (Fig. 2.-*3*; 3.-*1*). The belt buckle lay on a lumbar vertebra and was oriented with the frame to the left. Attached to the belt were 19 smooth bronze round plaque overlays with studs (Fig. 3.-*2–20*), most of which decorated the belt from the back. Under the radius of the left forearm was a plaque of heraldic appearance with a "horned" upper part (Fig. 3.-*22*; 4.-*4*). Near the elbow joint of the left arm, a cross-shaped plaque overlay with four studs (Fig. 3.-*23*; 4.-*5*) was found, lying with its back surface upwards. On the right wing of the pelvis, near the vertebrae, were two rectangular openwork plaque overlays

with a zoomorphic subject (Fig. 3.-*24, 25*; 4.-*1, 2*). Also associated with the belt was a figured "four-balled" overlay (Fig. 3.-*21*; 4.-*3*), which was fixed to the belt from the back. Among the belt fittings, two spoon-shaped ends were identified: a cast one with a convex body and "internal" studs (Fig. 3.-*26*; 4.-*6*) under the right elbow; and a stamped one with an embossed pattern (Fig. 3.-*27*; 4.-*7*) near the left wing of the pelvis. The latter items were apparently attached to hanging straps fastened to the belt on different sides. Taking into account the observed localization features of the metal fittings, it can be concluded that the belt set was the belt set was placed in the burial in an unfastened state and laid over the body of the deceased, on the left half of the body.

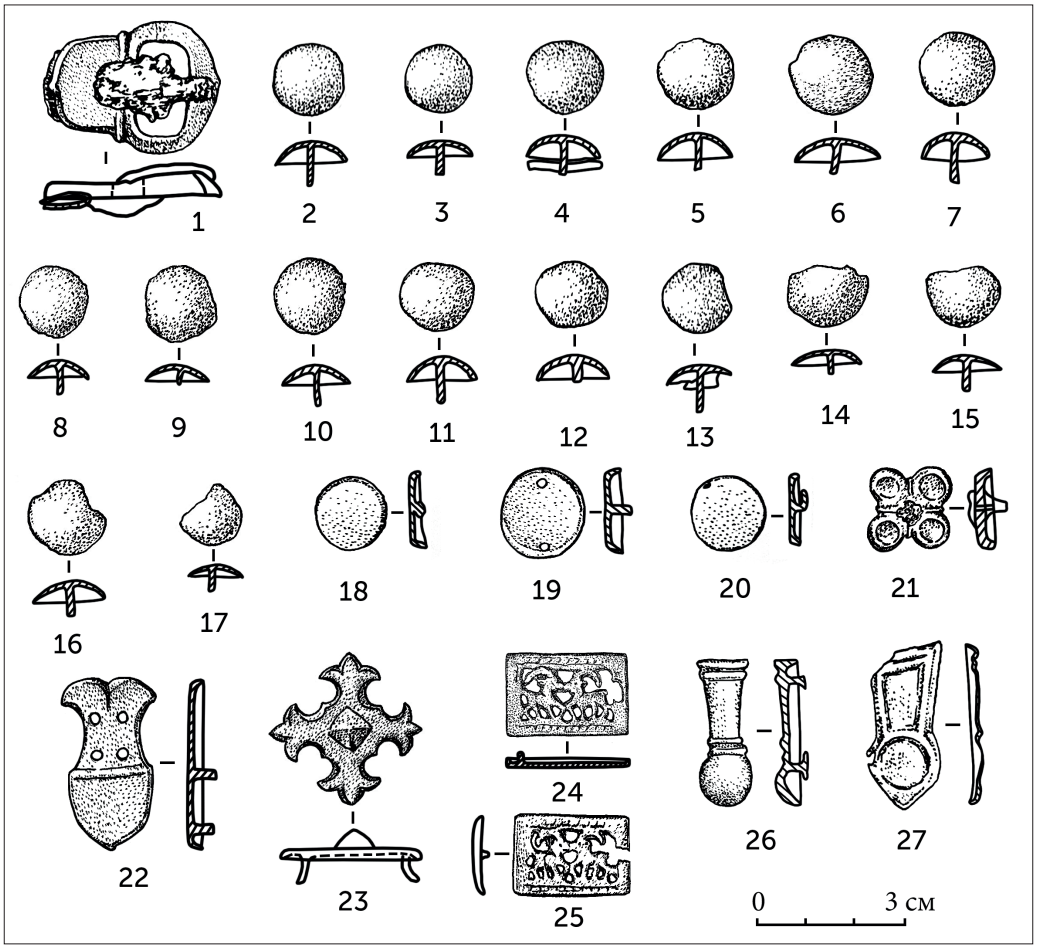


Fig. 3. Elements of the belt set from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis:
1 — buckle; 2–25 — plate overlays; 26, 27 — belt tips
(1, 21 — non-ferrous metal, iron; 2–20, 22–27 — non-ferrous metal)

Рис. 3. Элементы наборного пояса из могилы 60 некрополя Горный-10:
1 — пряжка; 2–25 — бляхи-накладки; 26, 27 — наконечники ремней
(1, 21 — цветной металл, железо; 2–20, 22–27 — цветной металл)

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Fig. 4. Elements of the belt set from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis

Рис. 4. Элементы наборного пояса из могилы 60 некрополя Горный-10

The rest of the grave goods from the burial were represented by various categories of riding horse equipment (bits, a stirrup, several dozen plaque overlays of different types and three ends from the bridle, bone overlays on the saddle pommel, including some with ornamentation, a girth buckle), costume details and jewellery (a necklace of ten beads, two signet rings and three rings, a pair of large pendants, bronze tubes forming a necklace with a pendant, nine bell-pendants, two pseudo-buckles, and twelve plaques from shoes), household items, and tools (two awls with bone handles, a bronze disc, bone parts of a whip handle).

Analysis of Materials

The belt set from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis is characterised by the presence of various fittings important for clarifying the date of the set. An important part of it is a cast bronze buckle with a movable tongue, an oval frame, and a fixed shield of heraldic appearance in the form of a rectangular-oval figure with a pointed end (Fig. 2.-*3*; 3.-*1*). In the established practice of studying materials from Eurasian archaeological sites of the Middle Ages, such items belong predominantly to the second half of the 6th — first half of the 7th centuries AD or to the 7th century AD (Ambroz, 1989, Fig. 25.-13; 37.-1–3; Bogachev, 1992, Fig. 27–28). Analogies to this specimen have been recorded in complexes of different regions: in Altai (Gavrilova, 1965, Tab. XV.-3; XVIII.-4, 5, 23) and the Altai forest-steppe (Savinov, Novikov, Roslyakov, 2008, Tab. VI.-16), in the Novosibirsk (Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, p. 50, Fig. 25.-8, 19) and Tomsk (Chindina, 1977, p. 75; Fig. 5.-11; 33.-17) Ob regions, in the Kuznetsk

Depression (Ilyushin, 1999, Fig. 16.-17), Southern Urals (Bogachev, 1992, Fig. 28), Northern Kama region (Goldina R.D., Perevozchikova, Goldina E.V., 2018, Tab. 362.-10, 11, 13; 433.-53; 434.-68, 69), etc. This buckle is a borrowed item for Altai and the northern foothills, as it has no local basis for development in the form of samples of "pre-heraldic" shapes (Bogachev, 2010, p. 158). The appearance of such items in the northern foothills of the Altai, in our view, is associated with the arrival of new groups of nomads, probably Turks of the First Khaganate period or related tribes who took part in conquest campaigns against the peoples of Central Asia. Taking into account known material sources, it seems possible to date this buckle within the second half of the 6th — third quarter of the 7th centuries AD.

An illustrative category of finds from grave 60 are the bronze round plaque overlays with a hemispherical body and solid studs, represented by 16 specimens of varying preservation (Fig. 3.-*2–17*). These items, despite the universality of their shape, have a very limited circle of early analogies in complexes of the Altai-Sayan region of the second half of the 6th — first half of the 7th centuries AD (Gavrilova, 1965, p. 23; Vainshtein, 1966, Tab. IX.-2; Gorbunova, 2010, p. 64–65, Fig. 31; etc.). Such decorations could have been formed on the basis of similar plaques with an insert pin used in the second half of the 4th-5th centuries AD by nomads of Northern China, the population of the Bulan-Koby Culture of Altai, and tribes of the Upper Ob as a decorative element of horse equipment straps (Gryaznov, 1956, Tab. XXXII.-20; Bobrov, Vasyutin A.S., Vasyutin S.A., 2003, Fig. 13.-61–70; Matrenin, Tishkin, 2016, p. 221, 224; etc.). Plaques analogous to those found in the Gorny-10 necropolis are recorded in the Altai forest-steppe, Kuznetsk Depression, Tomsk Ob region, and Baikal region in sites dating to the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD (Belikova, Pletneva, 1983, Fig. 73.-7; Kovalevskaya, 1990, Fig. 3.-12; Ilyushin, 1999, Fig. рис. 27.-8, 12, 16, 17, 19; 42.-13–15; 36.-15–17; 50.-12–15; Gorbunov, Rudometov, 2003, p. 54, Fig. 1.-28; Savinov, Novikov, Roslyakov, 2008, Fig. 13.-5; Dashibalov, 2011, Fig. 95.-17). Late samples of these are known among the population of the Minusinsk Depression of the last centuries of the 1st millennium AD (Savinov, Pavlov, Pauls, 1988, p. 100–102, Fig. 8.-1).

The issues of the origins and dating of the three round plaque overlays with a flat body and "internal" studs (Fig. 3.-*18–20*) seem debatable, demonstrating the existence of different, including mutually exclusive, points of view (Kovalevskaya, 1990, p. 42, 43, Fig. 3.-1–5; Gorbunova, 2003, Fig. 5.-5–7). The current state of the analysis of known material sources provides grounds for asserting that in Altai they had no local basis for formation and appeared in the designated region in a ready-made form no earlier than the mid-6th century AD. It is important to emphasize that such plaques, used exclusively for decorating the bridle (Gavrilova, 1965, Tab. XV.-9; Gorbunova, 2010, Fig. 32.-1, 5), are not known in the material culture of the Turks after the mid-7th century AD. Similar belt decorations in other regions of Western Siberia from the beginning of the Early Middle Ages come predominantly from sites of the late 6th-7th centuries AD (Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, p. 57, Fig. 26.-17, 30; Ilyushin, 1999, Fig. 18.-9; Gorbunov, Rudometov, 2003, p. 54; Fig. 1.-16–20, 24, 27, 28; etc.), although they are also found in later complexes of the second half of the 8th — first half of the 10th centuries AD (Savinov, 1998, Tab. III, IX; Gorbunov, 2009, p. 124, 126; etc.). Belt decorations close in shape are known in materials from Central Asia: in Sogdia on images from the Penjikent frescoes, belonging to a period no earlier than the 5th — early 6th centuries AD and no later than the

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8th century AD, as well as in the Afrasiab paintings of the second half of the 7th century AD (Raspopova, 1980, p. 98, 102, Fig. 71; Arzhantseva, 1987, p. 103–104). Taking into account the presented data, as well as the chronology of other objects of the Gorny-10 necropolis with similar items, the round plaque overlays with a flat body for the northern foothills of Altai are dated within the second half of the 6th — second third of the 7th centuries AD.

A quite informative piece is the solid-cast two-part plaque, which has a "horned" weakly profiled upper half and a shield-shaped lower part with slightly concave sides (Fig. 3.-*22*; 4.-*4*). "Horned" plaques are considered as an illustrative element of sets of the classic heraldic style, which was formed in the expanses of Eurasia by the mid-second half of the 6th century AD and became widely distributed in the 7th century AD (Bogachev, 1992, p. 155, Fig. 27, 28; 2010, p. 158). The appearance of such items in Altai, which have no local prototypes, is apparently associated with the arrival of a new population group in this region. Currently, these processes are most clearly reflected by materials from the well-known Kudyrge necropolis (Gavrilova, 1965), dating to the period no earlier than the last quarter of the 6th century AD. The genesis of plaques with the described morphological features was possibly associated with the development of earlier openwork items with symmetrical semi-volute curls (Azbelev, 2012, p. 100–104), close to those from the belts of the Tashtyk Culture of the Middle Yenisei, the Burkhotuy Culture of Transbaikalia, and among the Goguryeo of Korea (Aseev, Kirillov, Kovychev, 1984, Tab. XXVI.-2; Azbelev, 2009, Fig. 5.-1–3; 6.-1, 2). In this context, it is important to mention the contacts of the population of the Minusinsk Depression with the "early Turks" of Central Asia, as well as the assumption formulated by P.P. Azbelev (2012, p. 101) about the genesis of the constituent elements of heraldry in the "Central Asian or East Turkestan steppes of the pre-Turkic era, most likely in polyethnic and multicultural environment with the dominance of nomadic traditions."

Two-part overlays similar to the plaque from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis became widespread in Central Asia, Siberia, Southern Urals, Kama region, Northern Caucasus, and other regions (Ambroz, 1971, Fig. 12.-28; 1973, p. 288, Fig. 1.-21, 22; Kovalevskaya, 1972, p. 107, 114, Fig. 3.-39–41; 2000, p. 169, Fig. XVIII.-9; Mogilnikov, 1981, Fig. 19.-35; 23.-5; Goldina, 1985, p. 261, Tab. LIV.-7; Bogachev, 1992, Fig. 28; Levina, 1996, Fig. 132.-28; Troitskaya, 1996, p. 155, Fig. 1.-8; Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, p. 55–56; Fig. 26.-36, 37; Savinov, Novikov, Roslyakov, 2008, Tab. XI.-8; Senotrusova, 2016, Fig. 2.-7; Grushin et al., 2020, Fig. 3.-21; Kardash, Slesarenko, Rodin, 2021, Fig. 2.29.-1–4; Zelenkov, 2022, Fig. 72.-50; Belyavskaya, 2023, Fig. 69.-44). Based upon known materials, such items were attached to the main belt at the joint with a hanging strap (Levina, 1996, Fig. 136, 137; Torgoev, 2011, Fig. 5.-***A***–***C***). According to modern concepts formed in the process of studying illustrative series of dated belt fittings from the Volga-Ural region, such specimens belong to the first half — middle of the 7th century AD (Gavritukhin, Ivanov, 1999, p. 108; Belyavskaya, 2023, p. 234). Geographically closest analogies to the plaques from the considered object of the Gorny-10 necropolis are recorded in the Altai forest-steppe in burial complexes of the second half of the 6th-7th century AD (Savinov, Novikov, Roslyakov, 2008, Tab. XI.-8; Grushin et al., 2020, Fig. 3.-21).

The belt set from grave 60 included two rectangular openwork plaque overlays depicting a pair of mountain goats (Fig. 3.-*24, 25*; 4.-*1, 2*). These unique specimens with a zoomorphic

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subject are stylistically close to items of artistic metal found in sites of the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD from Central Asia, Altai, and the Salair region (Gavrilova, 1965, Tab. XXIV.-12; Raspopova, 1980, p. 97–98; Fig. 68.-5; Torgoev, 2011, Fig. 5.-***E***; Grushin et al., 2020, Fig. 3.-23).

Among the samples of belt fittings known in Altai and the south of Western Siberia in the second half of the 6th — early 8th centuries AD is a plaque with a "four-balled" body (Fig. 3.-*21*; 4.-*3*) (Gavrilova, 1965, p. 25, 26; Tab. XII.-2; XXIV.-4; Kovalevskaya, 1990, Fig. 3.-32, 33, 35; Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, p. 55, Fig. 26.-18, 23; Kubarev, 2005, p. 53, Fig. 14.-18–21). The cross-shaped plaque from grave 60 (Fig. 3.-*23*; 4.-*5*) is typologically comparable to iron specimens from the 7th-century AD complex in the Novosibirsk Ob region (Troitskaya, 1996, Fig. 1.-5, 6).

A metal belt end with a convex spoon-shaped body and "internal" studs (Fig. 3.-*26*; 4.-*6*) has analogies in Altai among headstall decorations of riding horses of the second half of the 6th — first half of the 7th centuries AD from the Kudyrge necropolis (Gavrilova, 1965, Tab. XIV.-8). Several such samples are known from unpublished materials of the Turkic culture from the Shibe-II burial ground (excavations by Yu.T. Mamadakov), as well as from a burial at the Ozen-Ola-Belig site, dating to the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD (Vainshtein, 1966, Tab. IX.-2). A derivative of these items is the stamped end with a spoon-shaped outline and embossed decor (Fig. 3.-*27*; 4.-*7*). Similar objects were found in the forest-steppe Tobol region in the mid-7th — early 8th century AD complex, whose materials may reflect the penetration of new groups of Asian nomads into the Tobol-Ishim interfluve (Matveeva, 2016, p. 157, 190–191; Fig. 69.-19, 20).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the metal parts of the belt set from the undisturbed burial of a young woman from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis allows for the highlighting of general and unique features of their design, as well as for making a series of conclusions about their date and possible origin. A comparison of this set with known early medieval materials from different parts of Central, Middle, and North Asia provides grounds for determining the most likely time of its manufacture within the second half of the 6th — first half of the 7th centuries AD. This conclusion is confirmed by the radiocarbon analysis of three samples from grave 60[14].

The examined materials confirm the validity of the opinion regarding the relatively short period of existence of heraldic-style plaque overlays in the territory of Siberia, synchronized with the broadly understood period of the First Turkic Khaganate (Azbelev, 1993, p. 92). The obtained material sources convincingly demonstrate the appearance of such fittings in the northern foothills of Altai in the second half of the 6th century AD, and furthermore suggest that the process of "heraldry" penetrating the region occurred rapidly and was associated with the arrival of a new population group familiar with the material culture of the early Turks.

[14] The results of radiocarbon dating of a representative series of samples from the Gorny-10 necropolis, which require detailed discussion and interpretation, are planned to be presented in a special article.

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From the composition of the decorative belt parts, the set from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis represents an original modification of the so-called "round-plaque" belt sets, which were the main type during the existence of the First Turkic Khaganate and the belt set wasserved as one of the markers of the elite culture associated with the Ashina clan (Azbelev, 2009, p. 38). Similar belts, besides by the Turks, were worn in the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD by the elite of the nomads of Central Asia and East Turkestan (Azbelev, 2010, p. 300–301). The appearance of "round-plaque" belts in the south of Western Siberia can be considered in the context of the influence of this fashion, as confirmed by finds from the Upper Ob in the Yurt-Akbalyk-8 complex (mound 23, burial 1), dated by Chinese coins no earlier than the 580s AD, and more likely to the first half of the 7th century AD (Troitskaya, Novikov, 1998, p. 57; Fig. 25.-42). Chronologically, these belts precede the unrelated sets equipped with geometric and portal plaques of a general Turkic appearance, which came into mass use in Eurasia from the late 7th — early 8th centuries AD.

It is important to emphasize that the analyzed belt set with round hemispherical plaque overlays reflects a fairly rare practice of using such items for decorating belts, not known from the Migration Period either in Altai or Siberia in general. From published early medieval archaeological materials, only two belt sets with plaques of the considered appearance are known — in the Relka Culture of the Tomsk Ob region and among the Turks of the Minusinsk Depression (Belikova, Pletneva, 1983, p. 39, 92, Fig. 73.-7; Savinov, Pavlov, Pauls, 1988, Fig. 8.-1; Dobzhansky, 1990, Tab. XXXI.-1, 4).

Based upon the recorded location of the functional and decorative belt fittings, the belt set from grave 60 was equipped with a movable-tongue buckle with a solid heraldic shield, in which, given its placement, the free end of the belt was inserted into the frame from left to right for fastening. The front right part of the belt was decorated with two rectangular openwork plaque overlays depicting mountain goats. Round plaque overlays with a hemispherical (16 pcs) and flat (3 pcs) body with "internal" studs were fixed to the belt predominantly from the back. The remaining plaques are represented by cross-shaped and heraldic "horned" specimens fixed from the side, as well as a "four-balled" overlay attached from the back. Straps with spoon-shaped ends were suspended from the belt on the left and right sides. Documented information on the localization features of the designated items can be used for graphic reconstruction of this set (Fig. 5).

Material sources obtained during the excavations of grave 60 of the Gorny-10 complex provide an opportunity for a series of conclusions related to the social interpretation of this object. Firstly, it should be noted that, during the early medieval period, among the peoples of Western Siberia, belt sets were predominantly part of the male costume complex. Belt sets also had a fairly clear gender attribution as a "male item" in the culture of the nomads of Central and Middle Asia. The existence of this norm is clearly demonstrated by materials of Turkic burial complexes in the Altai-Sayan region, in which only two female burials with such items are reliably known, marking a high status of the individuals, and in one case, probably also demonstrating a ritual of transferring a male belt to a previously deceased owner (Gavrilova, 1965, p. 61). Facts of placing belt sets in fairly "rich" burials of women and children are documented in the burial rite of the Upper Ob population of the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD (Borodovsky, 1988, p. 37–40; Troitskaya, Borodovsky, 1990, p. 149–162; Grushin et al., 2020, p. 130).

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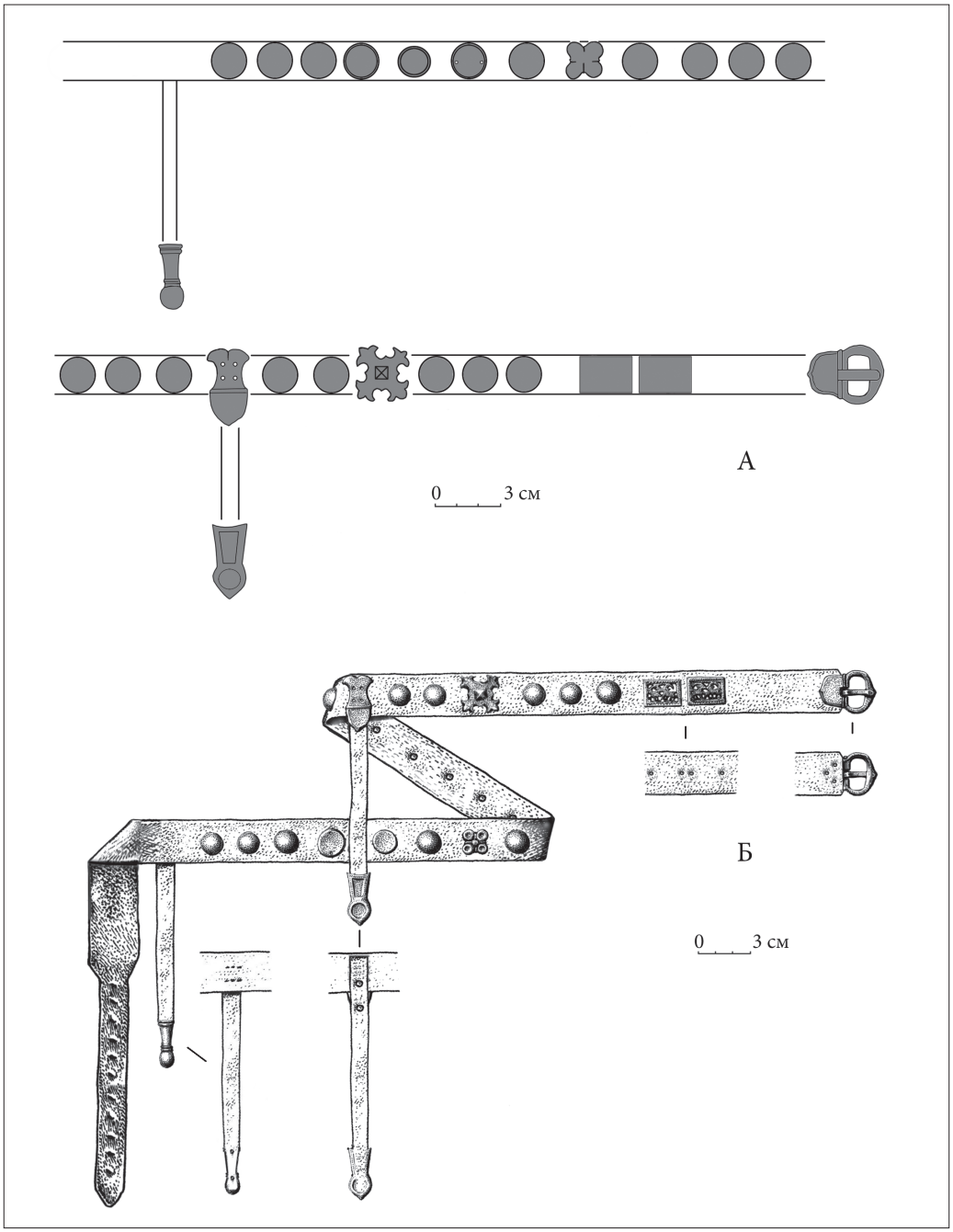


Fig. 5. Belt set from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis:
A — scheme of the arrangement of metal fittings; B — graphic reconstruction of the external appearance

Рис. 5. Наборный пояс из могилы 60 некрополя Горный-10:
А — схема размещения металлических гарнитур; Б — графическая реконструкция внешнего вида

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Within 25 female burials investigated at the Gorny-10 necropolis, belt sets were identified in the accompanying inventory of only five individuals, which definitely emphasises the known significance of this element of material culture as an indicator of a relatively high status during the life of the deceased. A reflection of the prestige of the belt set, which acted as a kind of social "passport" for its owner in many early medieval societies, is the discovery of rare fittings made of non-ferrous and precious metal in a number of objects, primarily highly artistic and fashionable items (Raspopova, 1980, p. 97; Dobzhansky, 1990, p. 73, 77–79; Seregin, 2013, p. 85, 99–100, 103, 104). Within the analyzed burial complex, all known cases of presence of heraldic-style metal fittings occur in burials of individuals of different sexes and ages who had a fairly high social and economic status during their lives. Among the recorded belt sets in the female and male burials of the Gorny-10 necropolis, the analyzed set, according to the qualitative and quantitative composition of the preserved elements, was the most festively decorated and rare. Taking into account this observation, as well as considering the very saturated accompanying material complex, consisting of various horse equipment, rare jewellery, household items, and tools, it can be assumed that the woman buried in grave 60 was a representative of the local elite of cattle breeders in the northern foothills of Altai of the Early Turkic period.

Conclusion

The belt set discovered in the burial of a young woman from grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis is represented by an original set of belt fittings made of non-ferrous metal, which have analogies in known series of equipment (a buckle with a heraldic shield, plaque overlays — rounded with a smooth hemispherical and flat body, heraldic "horned," cross-shaped, "four-balled", cast and stamped belt ends with a spoon — shaped outline). Along with such well-known items, the belt included a pair of unique rectangular openwork overlays with zoomorphic decor. Documented information on the localization features of the items allowed for a reconstruction of the appearance of the set. Based on the composition of the decorative elements, this set is a modification of the so-called "round-plaque" belts, which were the main type during the period of the First Turkic Khaganate. The analysis of the metal parts, involving comparative material finds from the early medieval archaeological sites in different regions of Eastern Eurasia, allowed for the determination of the most likely time of manufacture of the belt set from grave 60 within the second half of the 6th — first half of the 7th centuries AD.

This conclusion is confirmed by the results of radiocarbon dating of three samples. The presented data convincingly demonstrate the appearance of "heraldry" in the northern foothills of Altai as early as the second half of the 6th century AD, which synchronizes with the existence of the First Turkic Khaganate, and furthermore provides grounds for considering that the process of penetration of items of this style into the region was associated with the arrival of a new population group that was part of this ethno-political union. Taking into account the prestige and sacral significance of the original belt set, as well as the extremely "rich" composition of the rest of the grave goods, it can be concluded that the woman buried in grave 60 of the Gorny-10 necropolis was of a high social status during her lifetime and was

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a representative of the local elite of cattle breeders in the northern foothills of the Altai in the Early Turkic period.

Overall, the presented material sources expand the established ideas about the development of the equipment complex of the populations of the south of Western Siberia in the context of intercultural interaction with the nomads of the Central Asian region in the third quarter of the 1st millennium AD and demonstrate the prospects for further comprehensive studies of belt sets as a source for the history of Altai tribes at the beginning of the Early Middle Ages.

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