Journal of Posthumanism
2025
Volume: 5, No: 9, pp. 112–120
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
posthumanism.co.uk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i9.3297

Archeological Research in 2023 in the Kogaly Valley of Southeast Kazakhstan

Dosbol Baigunakov[1]

Abstract

This article examines archeological excavations carried out in 2023 by a team from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in the Kogaly Valley of southeast Kazakhstan. The relief of the Kogaly valley is favorable to kurgan complexes. Local ancient residents adhered to a system of "vertical" nomadism: they moved into the highlands in the spring, and returned to the lowlands in the fall. Among these picturesque valleys, they conducted burials, which continue to fascinate researchers. The Kogaly (or Kugaly) valley is known for its concentration of royal kurgans dating to the early Iron Age. Unfortunately, the large royal kurgans in the central part of the valley were extensively looted, destroying these monuments as a historical and archeological source. As a result, specialists bypassed the region for a long time. Kurgans of commoners can also be found in the valley. Such kurgans are smaller in size, although they are frequent sources of individual finds valuable to the researcher. Two kurgans dating to the early Iron Age were excavated near the village of Bostan in 2023. The external appearance of these kurgans and the design of objects and materials found within allows us to date them to the early Iron Age and determine their identity as funeral complexes for commoners.

Keywords: *Southeast Kazakhstan, Zhetysu, Kogaly, Relief, Plain, Archeology, Kurgan, Commoners.*

Introduction

During the early Iron Age the territory of Zhetysu (southeast Kazakhstan) was settled by numerous Saka peoples. By this time the Saka had spread throughout Central Asia, becoming the leading political force. In conquering vast territories, previously unsettled by Bronze Age peoples, the Saka came into close contract with the classical civilizations of Central Asia (Artamonov, 1974: 30-45). These multifaceted contacts ranged from active trade links to the participation of Saka contingents in the military and political activities of the Achaemenid Empire. Simultaneously, the Saka pursued an active military policy to the south – in China. The study of these contacts of the Saka with neighboring peoples is one of the most important means of understanding historical events in China, Siberia, and other regions (Pogrebova, Raevsky, 1992: 16-22).

Saka involvement in the foreign policy arena grew in the middle of the first millennium BCE. At this time, the early Saka culture existed in the Central Asian steppes. In recent years, researchers have deeply examined its origin and formation, developing different hypotheses. Some researchers consider the early Saka culture to have primarily developed locally (autochthonous hypothesis), while others connect the formation of the early Saka culture with the appearance and consolidation of new peoples from the east in the Central Asian steppe (migratory hypothesis). The latter version regarding the origins of the early Saka culture is becoming more accepted among scholars. The exact timeline of the development of the middle

[1] Department of History, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 050040 Almaty, Kazakhstan, Email: dosbol_bs@mail.ru

Saka culture is a matter of debate as well. To an extent, the ethno-historical reconstruction of this culture depends on the answer to this question (Klein 1988:14-21). For this reason, clarifying the upper temporal boundary of the existence of the early Saka culture in Zhetysu region is equally vital.

In our opinion, the question of the economic links of the Saka of Zhetysu with neighboring settled centers remains insufficiently studied. Several aspects of these relationships have been examined in the works of researchers, but they mainly touched on questions of separate categories of imports or the role of Saka culture in commerce with nomads of the neighboring steppes. Also relevant and under-studied are questions of the social history of the Saka, despite the fact that funeral monuments of the early Saka period offer researchers a rather impressive array of material.

The Zhetysu region, the location of the Kogaly valley, was not chosen for research by accident. This territory, over a long period, was the contact zone for nomads. These contacts were rather close during the early Iron Age. On the other hand, this area, the site of mixing of different groups and nomadic unification, left its mark on the entire Saka culture of these territories. As shown by research, the development of Saka culture here at different stages was distinguished by some originality. So, for example, late Saka culture of this region long preserved elements of the previous middle Saka culture. Recently, several researchers have suggested the survival of the early Saka culture in this region until the 2nd century BCE. Researchers often incorrectly date late and early Saka monuments. Recent research of Saka antiquity has clarified that Saka culture in this region is also distinguished by some unusual characteristics, which can be explained by chronological and ethnocultural factors, among others.

Research Methods

The principles of scientific objectivity and historism form the methodological basis for this research. The principle of objectivity makes a through accounting and analysis of the entirety of data about the Saka a research priority. The principle of historism emphasizes the examination of the development and dynamics of past events, taking into account concrete historical conditions.

Work on this article drew on both general scientific and specific methods of contemporary historical and archeological sciences, including the descriptive, typological, and comparative methods, among others.

During the excavation process at the Bostan burial ground traditional methods of field archeological research were used, including visual investigation, topographic identification of monuments, marking of exploratory and research excavations, stratigraphic excavation, and description of the objects revealed.

The external characteristics of the monuments were recorded with the assistance of a topographic survey using GPS navigators to reconstruct the layout of the burial ground. The spatial location of kurgans was determined through their sizes, preservation, shapes and particularities of construction.

The process of excavation was conducted by hand with obligatory isolation of stratigraphic layers and identification of stratigraphy in sections. Methods of cleaning and step-by-step identification of stone and gravel elements of graveside structures were used in researching their internal construction. Funeral pits were researched step-by-step with detailed photographic

recording of every layer and all objects found.

Background

It should be noted that, as revealed by recent research, early Iron Age monuments were found at Kaspan, Bostan, and other sites. Thus, it can be concluded that Saka peoples inhabited the region during the first millennium BCE. Undoubtedly, their roots trace back to the Bronze Age. Possibly, aside from pasturing, they engaged in cattle-raising and hoe-farming.

The cultural development of the Saka peoples reached its apogee during the Iron Age. Both banks of the mountain rivers of the Kogaly valley are a cornucopia of monuments of these peoples. The so-called royal kurgans are especially distinguished. Among these are a series of Saka kurgans measuring 20-30 meters tall and 90-130 meters in diameter. Unfortunately, many royal kurgans were looted in antiquity. Aside from the remains of some gold articles, nothing was found within them. This epoch, holding a reputation as one of the origins of the Kazakh national character and rendering an immense influence on the development of Kazakh society, is considered a continuation of the development of the Saka peoples, who once lived in Zhetysu. Archeological study of the territory of Zhetysu and the Kogaly valley has a rather lengthy history. The first data about the presence of kurgan monuments in the region were recorded in the 19th century in the works of researchers V.V. Radlov, N.N. Pantusov, and M.V. Florinsky, who described separate kurgan groups (Baypakov, Taymagambetov, 2006: 13-19). They were the first to report the existence of the archeological monuments of the Kogaly valley.

Under Soviet rule during the 20th century, archeological expeditions were organized in the region through the efforts of local archeologists. The Semirechye archeological expedition, led by K.A. Akishev, worked in the region for several years. B. Nurmukhambetov, G.A. Kushaev, and other archeologists conducted large-scale research of kurgan burial grounds (Akishev, Kushaev, 1963: 8-21). The labors of archeologists were published in the form of monographs and separate articles, which also described the archeological complexes of the Saka culture.

Nonetheless, the study of the Kogaly valley and Zhetysu has reached new heights during the post-independence period, thanks to the work of several archeological expeditions.

But it should be noted that the Kogaly valley itself and the adjacent territories were only investigated comparatively recently. In 2009, archeological surveys by the expedition of the Margulan Institute of Archeology, led by A. Z. Beysenov, identified numerous kurgans within the natural boundaries of the Kogaly and Kaspan (Beysenov, Duisenbai, Kitov, Kulkova, 2018: 139-154). In subsequent years (2012-2018) research continued with excavations of individual sites and their carbon dating (Beysenov, Kreshioli, Dzhumabekova, Bazarbaeva, Barinova, 2017: 99-104). These efforts are the foundational research conducted in the Kogaly valley. For several years, archeologists have been working systematically in the Kogaly valley.

Beyond these field surveys, the Saka kurgans of Zhetysu have been studied with the methods of terrain analysis and GIS technology. Special attention was devoted to the study of spatial organization and placement of kurgan groupings in the Kogaly valley, allowing for the clarification of the peculiarities of their layout and connection with the terrain and natural surroundings of the region (Antonov, Goryachev, Khismatullin, 2022: 127-147).

During the field seasons of 2023 and 2024 the archeological team of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University conducted excavations of four sites, part of Group IV of the Kogaly kurgans – the Bostan burial ground, located near the village of the same name. The Bostan burial ground

includes 58 kurgan mounds, stretching along the right bank of the Karabulak river (a tributary of the Terisakkan river) on a north-south axis from the Karabulak gorge to the R-125 highway (Torebai akyn).

This monument is one of the few surviving, since most analogous small and medium-sized kurgan burial grounds within the Kogaly valley have been plowed under.

Concluding this historiographical review, it should be noted that, despite the already rather lengthy and fruitful study of Saka antiquities, many questions connected with the study of Saka culture have not been definitively answered to this day. Many questions pertaining to chronology, and the reasons for and processes of replacement of one culture by another, with its ethnic attribution, in part with changes in the makeup of the Saka peoples at the boundary of different historical periods, remain disputed (especially controversial is the question of the lower boundary of the late Saka stage era). Some important aspects have not yet been thoroughly studied, such as the social history of the Saka. The question of the local peculiarities of the Saka culture in different areas of Zhetysu is also insufficiently researched.

Geography

A relief map is necessary for the study of the arrangement of the burial grounds on the surveyed territory, considering contemporary site formation processes. Nine types of relief were defined within the surveyed territory. The relief of the upper basin of the Karabulak river is upland, intensively broken with relative heights ranging from 500 to 2000 meters. Lower to the valley of the Terisakkan river, the relief transitions to lowland, also broken with relative heights ranging from 200 to 500 meters. The band of the alluvial fan from 1 to 7 km in width encircles the lowlands. The relief further transitions into weakly broken depositional plain with relative heights up to 20 meters, which on its north side borders a broken depositional plain with relative heights of more than 20 meters. The Karabulak river, in addition to several major seasonal watercourses, created high floodplains or fluvial terraces, which separate the meridional alluvial fan and accumulative depositional plain. The burial grounds are located on the alluvial plain, depositional plain, and fluvial terraces. The lithology of the basal layer includes loam, sandy loam, pebbles, conglomerates, sand, and sandstone.

In general, the burial grounds are situated on land that is uncultivated, possibly due to alluvial-deluvial deposits, including boulders and pebbles, and regular flooding of the river valley during spring floods, testified to by the eroded furrows of seasonal watercourses. Strangely, the natural morphometric conditions of the site allowed for the preservation of historical monuments to the present day (Valeev, Aitkul, Sabdenova, Baygunakov, Perzashkevich, 2025: 67-69). However, it can be assumed that the burial grounds were also located on the river plains between valleys, which were destroyed by plowing. Among those lost was a site containing 23 burials, located in the neighboring Barshabulak river valley, whose mounds were practically destroyed by plowing. Different types of relief influence land usage. For example, in river valleys human activity is restricted by livestock watering holes. The foothill plains, relatively flat lands, are used in dryland and irrigation farming.

The susceptibility of river valleys and adjacent territories to the erosion influence of flowing water and deposit of clastic material restricts the human usage of these territories. Such territories include mountain slopes, alluvial fans, and fluvial terraces, broken by a thick network of ravines and gullies, carved by the action of permanent and seasonal watercourses. Evidently, the geomorphological situation of these territories enabled the preservation of archeological

monuments. However, even here, as research has demonstrated, the substantial destructive influence of processes of modern site formation is present. Kurgans, located in river valleys and adjacent territories, have found themselves in the risk zone. Changes of the regional climate are especially manifested by fluctuations in temperature and the intensity and quantity of precipitation in Central Asia (Fallah et al., 2024). Consequently, precipitation conditions are changing, mudflows have become more frequent, erosion and the transportation and accumulation of clastic materials are occurring. As a result of the strengthening of the dynamic of site formation processes, the floodplain is widening with new contours being formed by linear erosion, eroding the foundations of the mounds of burial grounds, carrying material, which furthers their collapse. At present some kurgans are situated within the potential erosion and denudation zone. Thus, those kurgans that have survived to the present day are collapsing under the influence of exogenous processes.

Discussion

In Kazakhstan, burial grounds of the early Iron Age and Middle Ages are the most numerous archeological monuments. These monuments are often destroyed by agriculture, while those lying on city grounds fall victim to the construction of industrial enterprises and residential complexes. The problem of the protection of these monuments is connected not only with practice and legislation in the sphere of protection of historical and cultural heritage, but also with the necessity of a scientific paradigm shift and obsolete stereotypes in archeology itself. Specialists have long noted, that a kurgan is an earthen embankment over a grave, built in the form of a pyramid or truncated cone (Medvedev, 2004: 23-29). The most famous kurgans on Kazakh territory date to the early Iron Age, and archeologists have found the richest interments precisely within these. Usually, Saka kurgans have a stone “shirt”, that is, their summit was compressed by stones, and sometimes even the entire mound was covered by cobblestones. Cubic meters of earth were poured not at once, but in several stages. Nearby funerary feasts were held in honor of anniversaries and other occasions. All community members participated in kurgan construction. Participation in the construction of royal kurgans was considered especially honorable.

Surveying the burial grounds, it can be seen that an extensive and rather deep characteristic funnel lies in the center of each mound from the Kogaly valley. There are similar funnels on the tops of all the mounds. Today, every mound has a funnel. Usually, the funnel at the top of the mound indicates that it was looted for buried jewelry by grave robbers in antiquity. Therefore, there is very little opportunity to find any valuables within, because almost all the mounds were looted almost immediately after their construction.

In the late Middle Ages residents used Saka royal kurgans as landmarks. They were often used in wartime. In the steppes kurgans partially served as a notification system: bonfires on the heights of kurgans were visible for many kilometers.

Detailed descriptions of the excavation of two kurgans, numbered 10 and 13, researched in the course of field work during 2023, are provided below. These objects were chosen for excavation due to their arrangement, size, state of preservation and representativeness for reconstruction of the peculiarities of funeral ceremonies of the population of the Kogaly valley during the early Iron Age epoch.

Kurgan No. 10, with a diameter of 5.5 meters and a height of 0.3 meters, was partially collapsed by floodwaters from the northwest side. The surface of the object was covered by vegetation and

separately projecting stones. An accumulation of large stones in the central part is likely connected with ancient robberies.

After defining the center of the object, an excavation with a width of 3 m along the east-west axis was made. During the work, fragments of human bone and stone constructions of grave markers were recorded. The largest of the stones measured 35x18x25 cm. Further excavation to a depth of 25 cm revealed human bone fragments, including a lower jaw, leg bones, parts of a skull, teeth, vertebrae, and phalanges of the fingers. On the northern wall of the funeral pit fragments of iron wares with a length of 11 cm and a width of 1.5 cm were exposed. The continental layer was reached at a depth of 1.2 m. The funeral pit was 1.6x0.9 m in size.

Kurgan No. 13 is a circular stone and earthen mound, with a diameter of 6 m and a height of .25 m. On the eastern outskirts of the mound large flat stones with a size of 85x35x20 cm were recorded. The object is located 130 m from the Karabulak river, on the edge of the road.

After determination of the center of the kurgan along the east-west axis, a stratigraphic boundary was delineated with a width of 40 cm. The upper turf layer with a capacity of up to 10 cm was removed by hand. During the work, the structure of the stone mound revealed itself. In the southern sector signs of destruction of the central part of the structure were observed, likely as a result of interference by robbers.

During the cleaning of the northern and southern sectors grave marker stones were found, the largest measuring 80x50x25 cm, of the same composition found near the mound. The limit of the funeral pit was delineated at a depth of 40 cm. In the process of excavation, disordered human bone fragments (ribs, vertebra, and digits of fingers) were found at a depth of 20 cm inside the funeral pit. The continental layer was reached at a depth of 1.2 m. The funeral pit was 2.2x1.2 m in size.

The Saka kurgans are a historical wellspring. Historical and mythological research shows that the Saka believed that gods dwelled on the mountain heights, therefore, it is not surprising, that kurgans extended along the foothills. In antiquity, the entire territory of the Kogaly valley was the spiritual and scared center of the entire Saka world. The Saka buried their leaders and glorious warriors here, thanks to which royal kurgans appeared. This process extended over a thousand years, if the oldest burial grounds are dated to the 8th century BCE, and the most recent to the 3rd century BCE.

For the Saka, the kurgan was a unique model of the world, an intermediary between the heavens and the underworld. Priests performed religious rites and conducted their rituals on the heights of kurgans. The Saka worshipped the supreme god Mithra, personified by the Sun or the winged horse Pyrak.

Researching the aforementioned kurgans, and also classical literature, together with the works of contemporary authors, the following conclusion can be drawn: analysis of archeological materials allows us to highlight the local particularities of Saka culture of different regions of Kazakhstan. It is likely that, at the time of the burials, a gradual consolidation of the old and new populations, and the reformulation of the Saka ethnopolitical union, combining the remains of the old Bronze Age epoch cultures, were in progress. Archeological data establishes that the roots of the Saka should be looked for in early Saka antiquities and in the beginning of the late Bronze epoch. The analysis of different classical traditions showed that the Saka confirmed their dominance in the first half of the early Iron Age. Since it the site of several dozen royal kurgans, it can be determined that the Kogaly valley was also one of the centers of the Zhetysu Saka. It

is justified to culturally correlate the Wusun burials with those of the Saka since their goods are of the same types shared by peoples with common cultural traditions, although the orientation of their funeral and accompanying goods differs. Especially during the transitional period from the 6th to 3rd centuries BCE, the Saka nobility most likely established links with neighboring communities of southeast Kazakhstan, such as Karatal, Issyk and others; archeological data reveals the gradual movement and expansion of the Saka through the entire territory of Zhetysu in the beginning of the early Iron Age.

Conclusion

The degree of reliability of the study is based on a set of verifiable evidence from written and archaeological sources. The main results of the study were obtained using modern methods of analyzing narrative and archaeological sources. They do not contradict the basic provisions and principles of national archeology.

The growing number of excavated Saka monuments makes it possible to clarify several issues related to the ethnopolitical, social, and economic development of the early Saka tribes that inhabited the steppes of Kazakhstan.

The latest chronological findings indicate that several innovations appear in the Saka culture of the Kazakh steppes, both in funeral rites and in grave goods. These innovations identified in the Saka culture reveal western origins: the closest analogues of many goods are found in the monuments of Central Asia, and earlier prototypes are known in the antiquities of the northern part of the Eurasian steppes. The emergence of new separate and rare features in the Saka culture was sudden, lending support to the migratory hypothesis of Saka cultural formation. However, the autochthonous nature of many goods should not be ignored. The formation of the Saka culture appears to have been a complex process. In different areas of the territory under examination it took its own course and was characterized by its distinctiveness.

Unfortunately, researchers have yet to conduct a comprehensive study of Saka ceramics, the results of which could clarify many questions of Saka history, mainly related to the direction of cultural and economic contacts between the Saka peoples and their neighbors. This problem seems to be very relevant and is deserving of attention as the subject of a special study in the near future.

Another of the pressing problems of Saka archaeology is the clarification of the social structure of Saka society. On the one hand, the richest burials of the Saka nomadic nobility, and on the other hand, the ordinary, sometimes almost uninventoried burials of ordinary nomads, testify to the far-reaching social and property differentiation among the Sakas of that time. In addition to the aforementioned issues, it is very relevant and promising to study the dynamics of the transition from the early Saka culture to the middle Saka culture, as well as to the late Saka culture in different regions of Kazakhstan and to identify the specifics of Saka monuments in each region.

From this short essay, it becomes clear, that the Zhetysu region, together with the Kogaly valley, have a rich history, famous school of arts, and unique and traditional culture. The discovered finds and construction of the kurgans testify to the lives of the ordinary residents of the Kogaly valley. The studied kurgans belong to commoners. The kurgans of commoners, by comparison with others, are very small and have scant funeral materials. Nonetheless, they also reveal interesting information about the Saka culture of Zhetysu.

After the conclusion of the excavations, the above-named kurgans were preserved, that is, they were returned to their original state. After restoration, the finds will enhance museum collections, and recovered materials will help researchers find out more about the culture of the Saka people residing in the Kogaly valley.

Acknowledgements

This article was prepared within the framework of grant-funded project AP19680046 “Saka monuments of southeast Zhetysu (according to the relics of the Kogaly valley)”. The project was initiated by Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor A.T. Toleubaev (1953-2023). The research team expresses its indebtedness to him.

We are grateful to all project members (S. Shakenov, A. Yergabylov, A. Yessenamanova et al.).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest.

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