

The Sarmatian 'horseback-riding' burial tradition: examples from West Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT – *The West Kazakhstan region, with its strategic location linking Asia to Europe, has many pasture areas and rivers. These natural factors provided an appropriate environment for human life and contributed to the development of animal husbandry. Throughout history, a great number of horse-mounted nomadic tribes lived in this region. One of these tribes, the Sarmatians, lived in the Iron Age. The Sarmatians were nomadic horsemen and like other steppe tribes were a part of the kurgan culture. Kurgans have an important place with regard to demonstrating the burial traditions of the Sarmatians. In kurgan excavations in west Kazakhstan a large number of horseback-riding burials – in which the deceased is positioned as if riding a horse – were found and these are the main subject of our study. Although archaeologists have attributed horseback-riding burials to the Sarmatians, they have not yet made a comment on the meaning of these burials in their belief system. In this study the meaning of these burials will be discussed and related to the belief system by comparing the horseback-riding burials in west Kazakhstan to burials which actually include horses in the Altai region.*

KEY WORDS – *West Kazakhstan; Sarmatians; 'horseback-riding'; Steppe Culture*

Tradicija pokopov v položaju jezdeca pri Sarmatih: primer iz zahodnega Kazahstana

IZVLEČEK – *Zahodni Kazahstan ima strateško lego med Azijo in Evropo ter velike površine pašnikov in rek. Ti naravni pogoji so zagotavljali primerno okolje za življenje ljudi in prispevali k razvoju živinoreje. Skozi zgodovino je na tem območju živelo večje število nomadskih plemen s konji. Eno izmed teh je bilo tudi železnodobno pleme Sarmatov. Le-ti so bili nomadski konjeniki in so bili, tako kot druga stepska plemena, del kurganske kulture. Kurgani imajo pomembno vlogo pri sarmatskih načinih pokopa. Pri izkopavanju kurganov v zahodnem Kazahstanu so odkrili večje število skeletnih pokopov v položaju jezdeca – kar pomeni, da je bil pokojnik v grob položen v drži, kot bi jahal konja – in ti pokopi so glavna tema naše študije. Čeprav so arheologi Sarmatom pripisali pokope v položaju jezdeca, do sedaj še pojasnili pomena teh pokopov v njihovem sistemu verovanja. V tej študiji razpravljamo o pomenu teh pokopov in jih navezujemo na sistem verovanja, in sicer s pomočjo primerjave med pokopi v položaju jezdeca iz zahodnega Kazahstana s pokopi, ki dejansko vključujejo pokope konjev na območju Altaja.*

KLJUČNE BESEDE – *zahodni Kazahstan; Sarmati; 'pokop v položaju jezdeca'; stepna kultura*

Introduction

Although the west Kazakhstan region, surrounded by the Ural Mountains to the north, the Aral Sea to the south, and the Caspian Sea to the southwest, has a continental climate, the coasts of the Caspian Sea in particular have a mild climate. The city of Oral on the north-western end has many rivers and pastures while the states like Aтираu and Mangistau located in its west are covered with desert sands and plateaus. The Yaik River (Jayıq/Zhayyq), one of the important rivers of the region, originates in the west of the Urals, passes into Oral and Aтираu and ends in the Caspian Sea. All these geographical features contributed to the development of animal husbandry in the Iron Age just as they do today. Archaeologists suggest that Sarmatians lived on the banks of the Yaik River, in a region with high humidity and lending itself to animal husbandry. Sarmatian kurgans excavated in and around the Yaik River prove this suggestion. These kurgans shed light on how Sarmatians perceived the concept of death.

The concept of death, one of the important elements of human life, has been interpreted differently throughout time by cultural environments which have different beliefs (*Bahar 2013.267*). Many cultures, however, accept living as a form of existence for this life, and death as something that leads to an afterlife. Therefore, in prehistoric ages it was often believed that death was not the end of life (*Durmus 2004.17*). In this belief system the dead person might have been buried in a certain position in order that the spirit of the deceased could pass to the afterlife¹.

It might be suggested that in antiquity a culture's lifestyle had a direct influence on the positioning of the dead in a certain way. In West Kazakhstan, where animal husbandry was coming into prominence, as well as in other steppe regions, it is clearly seen that some of the dead were buried in a horseback-riding position, with the body arranged as if sitting on or riding a horse. In the literature this practice is termed a horseback-riding burial. The kurgan areas excavated in West Kazakhstan contain a large number of these burials and although archaeologists usually attribute them to Sarmatians, they have not yet made a comment on the meaning of these burials in the context of the Sarmatian belief system.

This study aims to interpret the meaning of horseback-riding burials in the belief system, and furthermore claims that this practice should not be attributed to the Sarmatians alone, taking into account their expansion areas. In accordance, after giving information about Sarmatians, the practice of the kurgan and of the horseback-riding burial will be defined. Graves thought to be the earliest examples of horseback-riding burials will be discussed. In addition to this, the horseback-riding burials in West Kazakhstan and others in neighbouring regions will be discussed under different titles. Thus, the importance of the horseback-riding burials will be emphasized and their expansion area on the map will be indicated. Finally, the steppe culture will be examined and burials containing actual horses will be compared with the horseback-riding burials in order to understand the meaning of this practice in the Sarmatian' belief system.

The Sarmatians

Although the name 'Sarmatian' appears in the accounts of Ancient Greek historians such as Eudoxus, Pseudo-Skylax, Heraclides Ponticus, Theophrastus and Strabo, in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC (*Smirnov 1989.154*), many scholars have claimed that the name 'Sauromatian', as mentioned by Herodotus, corresponds to the true Sarmatians. Herodotus recounts in his mythical narration that the Sarmatians arose from marriages between Amazons and Scythians (*Herodotos 1973.58, 110*). Aside from these myths narrations, archaeologists suggest that this group might have emerged from late Bronze Age cultures, like the Andronovo culture around West Urals and Srubna culture around the Volga (*Sulimirskii 2008.37; Joldasbayulu 2010.32*). Furthermore, they suggest that the Sarmatian culture came into existence in the 4th century BC when certain peoples migrated from the east, joined the Sarmatians around the Aral Sea (*Smirnov 1989.169*), and that from the beginning of the 3rd century BC Sarmatian communities began to spread from West Urals to the northern Black Sea and Eastern Europe. They then maintained their existence in these areas until facing pressure from the Huns and Goths (*Durmus 2012.51, 120*). In light of such information it is clear that the earliest phase of the Sarmatians was the Sauromatian tribe living in West Urals, and they were later named the Sarmatians.

¹ For instance, in the Bronze Age the deceased are usually buried in the hocker position. Archaeologists suggest that the hocker position represented a foetal-like positioning where the arms embrace the lower limbs and that the deceased were consciously buried in this way, symbolising birth to the afterlife.

Ilhami Durmus (2012.131) says the following about the Sarmatians: *"It is obvious that the social characteristic of the Sarmatians is based on the horse-mounted nomads. They maintained their lives in accordance with the nomadic lifestyle. They rode horses, shot arrows, and threw spears on horseback. Their women also had the same lifestyle. Even a girl, according to the custom, could not get married unless she had killed an enemy. They were strictly attached to their customs. If a girl had not killed an enemy yet, she stayed unmarried and lived in this way. As nomadic horse peoples, they lived in four or six-wheeled carriages with two or three rooms. Oxen pulled the carriages. Women and children lived in the carriages while men accompanied them on horseback. The Sarmatians raised horses, fed on cooked meat, and drank mare's milk. In particular they castrated horses to be fat. Although the horses were small they were fast."*

The information mentioned above indicates that Sarmatians were a horse-mounted nomadic tribe. As will be discussed in detail below, in their daily activities they bore witness to the speed, strength, and human-like behaviours of their horses, which thus began to take a place in their spiritual life. Therefore, in some burials the dead were placed into the ground in positions that symbolically imitated a horseback rider. This practice will be described below in more detail.

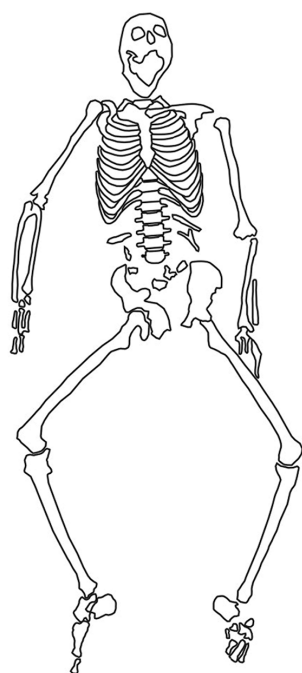


Fig. 1. A horseback-riding position with the deceased arranged as if sitting on or riding a horse (Kushaev, Jelezchikov 1976.4).

The definition of the horseback-riding burial practice

In this practice, the deceased – lying on his back – was positioned with knees splayed, as if riding a horse, into a pit of a suitable size (Fig. 1). After the deceased was placed in this position, grave goods were deposited and a burial mound was heaped over the grave. The burial mound was 30 or 40m in diameter, and could be up to 1m in height. In the literature these large-scale graves are called kurgans (Choruhlu 2002.56).

Kurgan

In the steppe culture a 'kurgan' (Fig. 2) is a typical burial structure with a mound heaped over the grave (Gursay 2019.142; Baykuzu 2005.2). The term kurgan is a word of Turkish origin and derives from the verb '*korumak*' which means a fortress or stronghold (Ogel 1971.5). According to Vasily Barthold's research, the word kurgan in Russian was borrowed from the Kipchak language. The German definition of a 'kurgan' in a linguistic manual belonging from the 14th century (Codex Cumanicus), preserved in Venice, is "*en gihoft grab*", which means a mound or barrow heaped over the grave (Choruhlu 2016.23). These burial mounds are known as 'tumuli' in ancient western sources (Tarhan 2002.598). Kurgan burials are found in the riverside areas such as Ya-

yık, Elek, Sagız, and Jem in West Kazakhstan. Many of these kurgans were excavated by Kazakh and Russian archaeologists, and during the excavations a good deal of horseback-riding burials were unearthed. Before examining the archaeological data, we shall look at what is probably the earliest example of this practice.

The earliest examples of horseback-riding burials

In graves belonging to the cultural environments of Afanasevo (Stepanova 2008.91) and Yamna (Sinyuk 1996.63), which are dated back to the beginning of the 3rd century BC or earlier, skeletons in a position as if astride a horse (with the legs in a rhombus shape) have been unearthed. The skeletons positioned in this way might be the earliest examples of the burial practice at issue. Although in both graves

the legs of skeletons were in the same position, the archaeologists still did not define them as in the 'horseback-riding' position. Furthermore the archaeologists also suggested that before rigor mortis had begun on the deceased's body, the knees might have been brought to an upright position and later they may have spread by themselves. Contrary to this statement, if the deceased's legs were consciously placed in graves making a rhombus shape, then it might be suggested that the Bronze Age burial practices were maintained uninterrupted by the Sarmatians and other tribes.

Horseback-riding burials in West Kazakhstan

In West Kazakhstan many kurgans have horseback-riding burials. Among these are kurgan 5 from Derkul burial site (*Rikov 1927*), kurgan 7 and grave No. 8 from Barbastau 3 burial site (*Kushaev, Jelezchikov 1973.28*), kurgan 23 from Barbastau 5 burial site (*Kushaev, Jelezchikov 1974.18*), kurgan 7 and grave No. 3 from Karasu 1 burial site (*Kushaev, Jelezchikov 1976.11*), kurgan 4 from Kos Oba burial site (*Jelezchikov 1998.11*), and kurgan 7 from Sakril 3 burial site (*Kushaev, Kokebaeva 1980.30*).

Excavators have attributed these burials to the Sarmatians. In the literature it is suggested that Sarmatians first lived in the West Urals region and later spread to the North Black Sea region. However, when considering the archaeological data it is clearly seen that the practice of horseback-riding burial is not only found in these regions, but also in a wide area from the Altai Mountains in the east to the Fergana Valley in the south, as well as South Kazakhstan, with the Sarmatians not living in these areas. Consequently, based on this information, it is incorrect to attribute this practice to the Sarmatians alone.

The horseback-riding burials outside West Kazakhstan

Mentioning the examples which were found outside of West Kazakhstan unavoidably necessitates making a comparison of these to the similar ones found in other regions. In this regard we can make a comparison between the near and distant environments. In this study the near environment involves the other regions of Kazakhstan, while the distant envi-



Fig. 2. A kurgan before the excavation (Issyk burial site) (Samashv et al. 2004.16).

ronment involves those regions outside the modern political boundaries of Kazakhstan.

The examples from the near regions

Some examples from the near regions that must be mentioned are the burial sites in Balandı 4 in Kyzylorda Region (*Vainberg, Levina 1993.37*) and in Kaytpas 1 in the West Kazakhstan region (*Baytanaev 2012.176*). It is notable that in the Balandı 4 burial containing seven skeletons one of the skeletons was buried in a horseback-riding position. The situation that all skeletons were found on the same ground level indicates that the deceased were buried simultaneously and that they might have been from the same ethnic group. Within this framework, the question arises as to why only one of them was buried in a horseback-riding position, even though all the burials are both contemporary and belong to the same ethnic group. As an answer for this question it might be suggested that only those individuals following a certain belief system within the same ethnic group were buried in the horseback-riding position. It should be noted here that archaeologists consider the Balandı 4 burial in the cultural environment of Shirik Rabat, and attribute the Shirik Rabat culture to the Saka Apasiak culture. This culture flourished as a parallel to the Sarmatian culture in the region where the Syr Darya flows down. In other words, it is contemporary with the Sarmatian culture (*Vainberg, Levina 1993.5*).

Another example of horseback-riding burials was unearthed in kurgan 2 from Kaytpas 1 burial site in South Kazakhstan. This burial differs from the Balandı example because it contains a single burial. The round, golden plate found in this burial depicting sea creatures draws particular attention because it is strange to find in this region. Apart from this object, some conical and barrel-type vessels were also

found in the same grave. The excavator has not yet made a statement about which tribe he believes this grave belongs to, although he has stated that these vessels resemble the Soğdiana finds (*Baytanaev 2012.176*).

The examples from the distant regions

Outside the political boundaries the horseback-riding burials were also found in some burial sites such as Yagunya in the Tagar culture (*Martynov 1979.16*), Krillovka 3 around the Ob River (*Mogilnikov 1997.19*), and Vorukhe in the west of the Fergana Valley (*Davidovich, Litvinskii 1955.28*). The Tagar culture, which was developed by the Saka people, was surrounded by the Sayan Mountains to the east and by the Altai Mountains to the west and included the steppes of the Minusinsk-Khakas Basin. Therefore, the Tagar culture was less influenced by other cultures and developed from the local traditions that emerged in the Bronze Age (*Bokovenko 2002.518*).

Aleksey Martinov (*1979.52*) stated that the triangular bronze arrowheads found in the cultural circle of the Tagar culture resemble the Sarmatian arrowheads belonging to the 5th and 4th centuries. Apart from this Elena Abramova Davidovich and Boris Anatol'evich Litvinskii (*1955.67*) associated the Vorukhe burial site with the Saka-Wusun culture and drew attention to the similarities of its burial structure, burial custom and material finds to those found in the cultural circle of the Sarmatian culture. They also dated this burial site to the 1st century AD. Horseback-riding burials were found in the western burial sites. Among these the Novochoerkask site around the Don River (*Maksimenko 1983.33*) and the Nikoloevka around the Dniester River (*Melyukova 1971.48*) are included. In the Novochoerkask the deceased was placed in a simple grave on an organic base (an artificial bed), and the grave goods included the front foot of a horse, a bone-handled knife, a golden plate depicting a human face, and an amphora belonging to the Hellenistic Age. In terms of grave goods this burial, which is attributed to the Sauromatians (*i.e.* the Sarmatians) is dated to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC (*Maksimenko 1983.33*). In a deviation grave in Nikoloevka, however, a horseback-riding burial was identified. According to the excavator, in this burial an amphora, a black-glaze kantharos, imported wares shaped like a kylix, jugs of Thracian origin, and Scythian-type weapons were found. This burial was attributed to the Scythians and dated to the 4th and 3th centuries BC (*Melyukova 1971.48*). This indicates that horseback-riding burials are

likely to be found in both Sarmatian and Scythian graves.

Finally, when relating the horseback-riding burials to a belief system, it should be noted that there has not yet been any interpretation of this in the literature. However, in the following section we try to interpret the meaning of horseback-riding burials in the Sarmatian belief system by relating the steppe culture to burials which actually include horses in the Altai region.

The steppe culture

Pre-modern humans maintained their lives by utilizing the basic natural resources of their inhabited environments, such as what they could obtain from the forest, animal husbandry, and agriculture. Because the earliest cultures in antiquity created their genuine identity ('özlülük') in the circumstances of their inhabited region, the tribes living in forests developed a 'parasitic' culture (hunting and collecting), inhabitants of cultivable land developed a 'peasant' culture (farming), and the steppe people developed a 'shepherd' culture. The steppe culture differed from that of the other nomadic peoples, because the lifestyle of the desert nomads is different from that of the steppe nomads. The key animals in the desert culture is the camel, while in the steppe culture it is the horse. Therefore, in the steppes a 'horse-based culture', which is the highest level of nomadic culture, developed.

The steppe region stretching between the Altai Mountains and the north coasts of the Black Sea was the centre of the horse-based culture (*Durmus 2002.15*). In brief, the communities living in this area used horses to perform many activities, such as carrying loads, hunting, providing nutrition, waging war and so on. When performing all these activities the nomads took advantage of the speed, strength, and human-like behaviours of horses. The horse thus began to take a place in their spiritual life. Moreover, because they believed that only a horse could take them to the afterlife they began to bury the deceased in graves with a horse.

Horse burials

A horse has an important place in the burial customs of the steppe culture. The kurgans in the Altai region, in particular, represent the custom of burying the deceased with horses to a significant degree. The archaeological data shows that a whole horse

or a certain body part of it was buried with the deceased, and archaeologists suggest that this is because the ancient people believed that a horse could take them to the afterlife (*Lipets 1979.204*).

In the boundaries of Kazakhstan the earliest data about using a horse for a ritual purpose was found in the Botai settlement belonging to the Eneolithic Age. In this settlement after the deceased were buried beneath houses they were surrounded by the heads of horses (*Kozibaev 1996.97*). In the earliest periods the burials in Kazakhstan, the Altai, and Yenisei River Basin contained a certain body part of a horse or related equipment, but by the time of the 5th and 3rd centuries BC the deceased was buried with a whole horse.

The burial sites in and around the Altai Mountains, such as Pazırık, Bashadar, Katanda (*Choruhlu 2002.54*) and Berel (Fig. 3), are good examples of this custom. Because it is located in the Kazakhstan region, the burial site in Berel is discussed in detail below.

The Berel burial site is located near the Berel village in the Katun-Karagay district in East Kazakhstan Province. The excavations in this site are today conducted by Zainolla Samashev and his excavation team. Kurgan 11 in Berel, excavated between 1998 and 1999, has a particularly important place with regard to demonstrating the custom of burying the dead with a horse and the material culture of that period. Inside the kurgan covered by a stone mound, which is 34m in diameter and 1.70m in height, a deep and large burial chamber was unearthed. In the wooden frame placed in the southern edge of the grave a trough-like coffin engraved into a wood block was placed. The archaeologists claim that after two individuals, a male and a female, were put in the coffin, the kurgan was covered with wood and that gold-plated bronze statues of a griffin were also nailed to the four sides of this wood. Unfortunately, because the grave was plundered by grave robbers the skeletons were poorly preserved. In the northern half of the grave, however, 13 untouched horse remains in two lines, six on the top and seven at the bottom, were found. Along with the horses a large number of carved wooden decorations showing various animals, including deer, mountain sheep, sphinx and griffin, were found. All these artefacts might have been specially prepared for the ceremony associated with burial. Samashev and his team attributed the custom of burying the horses with their owner to the belief in an afterlife (*Samashev et al. 1999.61*). In Berel a horse was buried in a corner of

the grave, and this tradition can be seen in almost every kurgan in the area.

Even today in Kazakhstan there is still the burial custom of cutting off the tail of the horse the deceased rode while he was alive. The Kazakhs call this practice *tulday*. The horse of a hero is his closest partner, and thus a horse losing its owner is like a woman losing her husband, and so the Kazakhs symbolize this through the cutting off of the horse's tail. After this, no one can ride the horse for a year, until the time the yearly food allowance of the deceased has expired. After a year the horse is sacrificed to the deceased and then its meat is eaten and finally its skull is placed on the grave of the dead (*Besetaev 2011.215*).

Discussion and conclusions

In conclusion, from the earliest periods until today, sacrificing a horse as part of the burial ritual is a common custom within steppe culture. However, as is indicated above, sometimes a horse was buried and sometimes only a certain body part of the horse or some related equipment were buried. It is likely that this can be attributed to the inequality of possessions among nomads. In antiquity, nomads con-



Fig. 3. A view of a horse burial (kurgan 72 in Berel burial site) (Samashev 2012.35).

sidered horse herds a symbol of wealth, and often demonstrated this wealth in burials. Therefore, low-income families might have buried a certain body part of the horse or its equipment to represent it rather than burying a whole horse. It is appropriate here to quote the Kazakh proverb “*ölüm bardıñ malın şaşadı, joqtıñ artın aşadı*”, which means “*death causes the rich to lose his property and makes the poor take off his skirt*”. However, horse burials, whether using the head of the horse or another part of its body, might be considered as a symbolic companion of the dead in order to accompany him in the afterlife, as in Berel, Pazırık, Bashadar and Katanda.

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