
THE ELITE SARMATIAN WOMAN'S BURIAL

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the study of a burial ground located in the area of Zholayshagyl (Kazakhstan). The authors describe the findings of excavations conducted in 2006 and conclude, based on their analysis, that this burial ground was the tomb of a woman, a representative of the Sarmatians. An in-depth study of the burial ground is carried out, and in particular, the clothes of the woman and her jewellery are investigated. The article also analyses data on the resettlement of the Sarmatians in Kazakhstan, and the characteristics of their life and burial culture, in particular.

Keywords: warrior woman, gold necklace, sword, pike, totem

1. Introduction

In 2006, Atyrau State University conducted an excavation in the wind-blown burial grounds of the Zholayshagyl sandstone located within 3.5 km north of the village of Karabau in the Kyzylkoga region. The object was a Sarmatian sand-peak grave. The Zholayshagyl sandstone has an area of 300x200 m and a height of 3x5 m, located from north to south. After the locals found some gold products here after a strong wind, the Atyrau archaeological expedition conducting research on the medieval settlement of Korgansh decided to carry out urgent excavations within the area of Zholayshagyl.

The diameter of the burial ground is 1.5 m, and the thickness of sand is 20 cm. It is located on the southern wind-blown platform. Some human remains were found on the surface. In the northeast of the burial ground, there was a black jug. For that matter, we assume that the head of the burial ground was directed in this way. A number of things made of iron, gold and stone were found here, including a two-handed amphora and ceramic jugs. But it is assumed that they had been moved from the initial place. All the things found in the Zholayshagyl burial ground allow us to conclude that some woman was buried here.

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In Sarmatian society, women held a special place. Women from privileged families sometimes occupied head positions. Stone sacrifice attributes were mostly placed in the graves of women. Sarmatian stone items were well processed and used during religious ceremonies as movable altars. At the time of the Sarmatians, the role of woman was dominant, and women enjoyed an advantage in society [1].

Starting with the 20th century E.H. Minns [2] and M. Rostovtzeff [3] identify the Amazons with the Sauromatians/Sarmatians and with matriarchal or gynaeocratic society.

V.I. Mordvintseva and N. V. Khabarova [4] believe that the presence of weapons in such graves does not necessarily entail the existence of warrior women (the so-called *Amazons*) amid those societies. There are other activities which make use of weapons, such as one's own protection, or hunting. Also, certain funerary rituals could have required the deposition of weaponry in graves, irrespective of the deceased's gender or profession, for example weapons used as substitutes for ritual purpose or to show the social status of the deceased.

The Greek sources of that time contain written data on Saka women. The Greek writer Kiyauts described them as follows: "Saka women are the most courageous; during difficult battles they can join men in the fight against the enemy". A. Alexander wrote: "I know some Massagetae and Saka women, who shoot arrows no worse than men" [5].

2. Features of the Zholaushagyl female burial ground - the most important archaeological discoveries

The woman found in the Zholaushagyl burial ground was most likely the leader of the whole tribe. In spite of the fact that only half of the riches of the burial ground are left, one can guess that she was buried with high solemnity. The found articles and household items made of gold and precious stones as well as different types of weapons indicate the highest position of this woman in society.

The fact that the woman leader was buried here can be evidenced by the deposition of weaponry as well as the image of griffins, looking at each other, on a gold chain found in the sand-peak grave. The griffin was a totem for the Sarmatians. They believed that by perpetuating birds of prey, such as eagles and golden eagles, they could acquire strength, vigilance and speed. It was also thought that the image of a bird of prey was the worship of the world power of the sun. The ancient Indo-Iranian peoples believed that the gods of the Sun and fire, Surya and Agni, were depicted as birds [6]. The images of birds were attached to the clothes and household items of the Sarmatians, because the image of an eagle was considered to be a talisman.

Two griffins (*samruks*) were depicted on the chain found in the Zholaushagyl burial ground. There were 5 small pendants. The length of the chain is 30 cm. Earlier, only single images of a bird were usually found [7].

The image of a bird was traditional for articles made of gold, bone, iron, copper, stone, wood, etc. Such drawings were found on household items, weapons and religious articles. For example, eagles and golden eagles were depicted on the handle of a sabre. On household items, dishes, clothes, articles made of gold and other valuable metals, a bird was depicted in a stylized form. Mainly the head of a bird was depicted. Such objects were found in almost all the Sarmatian and Sauromatian monuments (Figure 1). The handle of the metal stick found on the Don was in the shape of a bird [8].



Figure 1. Gold necklace from the excavations of the Sarmatian burial in Kazakhstan [9].

The bone hanger found in the village of Pozharnaya Balka in the Poltava region contains the image of a bird's beak [10]. The double-headed bronze barrette found in a burial ground near the Chechen-Ingush city of Gudermes is framed with the image of a bird and a predator [11]. A griffon-buckle with the image of a bird's beak was found in the Southern Cisurals [12].

The image of a bird was an ancient tradition of the Sarmatians. The images of both a bird and a predator together can also be found. The images of a moose and a bird on bone plates rendered a special touch. A lot of them were found on the territory of the Cherkassy region (Kamensky district, Zhabotino village); this barrow belongs to the Sarmatian era [13]. The Scythian monuments also had a number of historical items depicting birds of prey [14]. The images of

a griffin guarding the grave were located on the surface of the tomb of the golden man in the Berelsky barrow in East Kazakhstan [15].

In the nomadic mythology, the image of a samruk was widespread. The folk tale 'Yer tostik' tells us about a huge bird called Karakus. This bird is considered very honest and faithful, but it is also cautious and farsighted. For all Turkic peoples, the griffin (samruk) is a symbol of protection, like a tumar-amulet, a protecting angel. It was believed that with its strength and vigilance this bird always protected the Sarmatians and the Kazakhs from any misfortunes and troubles. In the Kazakh folklore, the falcon and golden eagle have always been symbols of freedom and warfare; the swan is a symbol of love and purity. The crow, cuckoo and owl are described as a sign of misfortune, betrayal [16].

Two samruks depicted on the gold chain from the Zholayshagyl burial ground were meant to protect the owner in the after world [17]. The shiny black ceramic vase found here is 8 cm high, of high quality and made with a special tool. The two-handed amphora painted in red (engobe) was apparently brought from the outside, thanks to trade. Such ceramic dishes were made in the colonies on the shores of the Black and Mediterranean Seas in Greece and Rome [18].

The clothes of the Sarmatian queen have hundreds of small beads. Their size and volume are different, and they are made of different materials, namely stone, crystals and bone. The dark brown, prune-shaped cornelian bead draws the eye because of its beauty. It is known that back at the time the cornelian was taken from the bottom of the Indian Sea. The Sarmatians brought various jewelleries to their motherland through trade [19, 20].

Sand-peak (or dune) burial grounds are located only in Western Kazakhstan; they are very peculiar in their structure. Their peculiarity is that 'dune burials' were made by the Sarmatians only in the sands of Taisoygan, Buirek, Sarykamys and Naryn in the 8th century BC. In sandstones there are a lot of dwellings and graves of the tribes that existed in the Bronze Age during the time of the Andronovo culture. There are several features of these burial grounds.

The first feature is that there are no barrows above sand burial grounds (dune burials). Even if there were, they would have long been levelled. Secondly, it is unknown how the burials were buried. Sand burial grounds could not keep their shape. The surviving dune burials mostly lie wind-blown on the surface of the earth. Thirdly, according to the burial customs, there is no specific information about how the belongings should be located. Remains and things are scattered everywhere. Therefore, the discoveries of sand burial grounds are mainly related to the conversion of sand or random excavations.

In the 1970s-80s of the Soviet period, in connection with the development of animal husbandry, different kinds of plants, including salt trees, began to be destroyed. This led to sand migration and the emergence of sandstones. During a strong wind the graves opened. Due to the fact that the burials were made in the sands, it was difficult to rob them. The Sarmatians were sure of the eternity of their lives, therefore, personal belongings were buried along with the dead. Sand (dune) burial grounds are extremely valuable for Archaeology.

Western Kazakhstan was inhabited by the Sauromatian-Sarmatian tribes, related to the Sako-Scythian tribes. The so-called Samara-Ural tribes similar in culture and ethnics lived in the Caspian Basin, along the banks of the rivers Wil, Zhem, Zhaiyk and Sagiz, in the 6th-4th centuries BC. They lived on the territory of the Atyrau region and in the western region of Kazakhstan [21]. The location of the tribes and their comparison with written information is still a controversial issue. The centre of the monuments of Western Kazakhstan is the Northern Caspian region. Greco-Roman historians wrote about the tribes of the Aorses and Raxolonians in the 1st century BC [8, p. 54]. There is evidence that this group of monuments belongs to the Issedon tribes [22].

The culture of the ancient people of Northern and Western Kazakhstan, who lived in the Iron Age, can be reproduced by studying their burials. The barrows between the rivers Yedil and Zhaiyk (Volga and Ural) are located on the banks of the Big and Small Rivers, as well as near the lake Kamys-Samar. In the steppes of Zhaiyk-Caspian, they are mainly located along the banks of the rivers Yelek, Shaga and Utva, near the junction of the rivers Yelek and Kobda, as well as on the left bank of the river Zhaiyk. In the steppes of Aktobe, the main number of barrows were found on the upstream flow of the rivers Yelek, Or, Kobda and Zhem [23]. There are earthen hills around the barrows of Western Kazakhstan and the Northern Caspian, encircled by holes. Barrows are widespread in the northern regions, where the steppe zones are continued in forest fields. On the barrows of the Iron Age located here, the graves are small. The most ancient of them (7th-6th centuries BC) have no special earthen hills [24]. The ordinary Sauromatians were buried in ancient barrows, which were called 'entrance burials'. There was also a tradition of the burial of several people in one burial ground at a time, which prevailed mainly in the west and north of Kazakhstan. Hills with a diameter of 50–60 m and a height of 3–4 m were sometimes built over the graves of the rich [25]. At one time, the Sauromatians lived in forest and water regions and left behind thousands of dune burial grounds. Many Sarmatian dwellings and barrows are preserved in Western Kazakhstan. We hope that further work will be carried out on the study and discovery of new monuments.

The burial ground 'Sarmatian Warrior-Woman', located on Zholayshagyl, is a valuable piece of information about the history and life of the Sarmatians [26]. At one time, the Sarmatian state occupied a very high political and social position and had a developed unique culture. The Sarmatians lived in the Caspian Basin and along the banks of the rivers Yedil, Zhaiyk, Oiyl, Sagyz, and Zhem, had trade and political relations with other tribes that lived in these areas, and established strong ties with neighbouring states. Art and culture were well developed in their land. Their culture was transmitted through trade, during hostilities, and during migration to the states of Eurasia and the Black Sea. In the 7th-3rd century BC, the Sarmatians lived on a large territory, and then became one of the tribes and peoples living in Kazakhstan.

Famous monuments located in the western and northern regions of Kazakhstan belong to two historical periods: 7th-5th and 4th-2nd centuries BC. The former are conventionally united by the name of the monuments of the Sauromatian culture, and the latter refer to the Sarmatians [27]. In Archaeology, the monuments of the 4th-2nd centuries BC are also called by the name of the primary excavation sites 'Prohorovo monuments' [1]. The emergence of ancient tribes that were part of the confederation of the Sauromatians living in the 7th-4th centuries BC in the west and northwest of Kazakhstan is connected with the Andronovo basis.

In the Bronze Age in the west of Kazakhstan and the surrounding areas, there were two similar cultures. The Sauromatians had a tradition of burning a corpse, covering the surface of the grave with a stone and a fence [23, p. 341-342]. The burial grounds of Syntas and Besoba can serve as an example of such a tradition. A military commander was buried in a shallow grave in the centre with all his clothes, tools, daggers, arrows, etc. His charges were buried not deep underground [28].

High wooden tents, covered with straw and earth, were built on top of the buried. The ancient inhabitants of Western Kazakhstan worshiped fire, which is also characteristic of the Andronovo era. Many ways of burning corpses were used. On a clean site they burned fire and put corpses on hot lava. Sometimes they burned fire just above the corpse. However, more often corpses were buried right along with hot ashes. In some cases, the tradition of burning was replaced by leaving coal ashes near the deceased [29]. As a symbol of purification (associated with the worship of fire), sulphur, chalk, pieces of gypsum, and shells were left in the graves. The red, yellow and white colours were sacred for the Sauromatians [8, p. 19].

The found stone tables for sacrifices as well as other objects are closely related to the worship of Earth and fire. Usually they were found on the graves of very rich women. The Sauromatian articles made of stone for the sacrifice to fire were original. Basically they were made on two, three and four legs and attached to pedestals. Apparently, these tables were used as movable altars for religious services. In the Southern Cisurals, this is indicative the dominant role of women [1].

The Sauromatians-Sarmatians used censers. These are ceramic vessels that have holes on each side. They were used for burning various odorous petals, leaves of plants, etc. Sarmatian women used dishes made of ceramics for cosmetics. The difference in the material culture of the tribes that lived between the rivers Yedil and Zhaiyk and the inhabitants of Central Kazakhstan was manifested in the fact that among the former ceramic products were very common. The most ancient ceramic products (7th-6th centuries BC) looked like ordinary dishes and resembled the Andronovo-cut-down dishes with a flat bottom. During this period, the dishes were decorated with a 'pearl' ornament and wavy, jagged, flat lines.

3. Conclusions

Archaeological research has shown that the Kyzylkoga district contains a series of sand-peak barrows and burial grounds. As a result of excavations and research carried out by local archaeologists, it was revealed that the objects found in the barrow belong to the 5th-4th centuries BC. The unique Zholayshagyl burial ground belongs to the 2nd-1st centuries BC.

The data obtained from excavations in the Zholayshagyl region are unique, since they were carried out for the first time and can give impetus to new research and discoveries in the history and culture of Kazakhstan. These data can also be an addition to new studies in the field of Sarmatian culture, regional burial rites, as well as gender historical research.

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