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## Investigation of the burial mounds of early nomads of the Irtysh river region of Semey

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**Keywords:** Irtysh region of Semey, archaeological research, early Iron Age, burial ground, funeral rite, radiocarbon dating

**Түйін сөздер:** Семейдің Ертіс маңы, археологиялық зерттеу, ерте темір дәуірі, қорым, жерлеу рәсімі, радиокөміртектік мерзімдеу

**Ключевые слова:** Семейское Прииртышье, археологические исследования, ранний железный век, могильник, погребальный обряд, радиоуглеродное датирование

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The article introduces materials of monuments studied in the Semeytau and Kokentau mountain ranges. During the period 2014–2018, the research team has unearthed 13 burial mounds, distributed across six burial grounds and groups of burial mounds. The accompanying artifacts comprise iron rods (pins?) and the tail vertebrae of a ram. In three cases (Karatobe burial ground, mounds no. 2 and 3; Karasu-Ushatobe burial ground, mound 1), necklaces crafted from semiprecious stones have been discovered. Armament items are represented by a set of bone and one bronze arrowheads. In general, the ground and inside burial mounds find analogies in the materials of the Kulazhorga type (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) within the Upper Irtysh region, as well as in burial mounds from the early stage (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC) of the Wusun archaeological culture in the Ile River valley. It is worth noting the proximity of the design features of the burial structures and the subject complex of most of the described mounds with the monuments of Saryarka, first of all, the greatest parallels can be traced among the materials of the monuments of the Karamola type. According to the results of radiocarbon analysis, the objects studied date back to the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC.

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### **Семейдің Ертіс маңы ерте көшпелілерінің обаларын зерттеу**

Мақалада Семейтау және Көкентаудың жотала-рында зерттелген ескерткіштердің материалдары берілген. 2014–2018 жж. аралығында алты қорым мен обалар тобынан 13 оба зерттелді. Ілеспе материалдары темір түтікшелер (түйреуіш?) және қойдың құйымшағынан тұрады. Үш жағдайда (Қаратөбе қорымы, № 2 және 3 оба; Қарасу-Үштөбе қорымы № 1 оба) жартылай бағалы тастардан жасалған әшекей бұйымдар табылды. Қару-жарақтары сүйектен жасалған жиынтық және бір қола жебенің ұшы. Жалпы, обалардың жер үсті және қабірішілік құрылыстарының ұқсастықтары Іле өзені бойындағы ежелгі үйсін мәдениетінің ерте кезеңі (б.д.д. III–II ғғ.) обаларынан және Жоғарғы Ертіс бойының құлажорға типті ескерткіштер (б.д.д. III ғ. – б.д. I ғ.) материалдарынан табылады. Сипатталып отырған обалардың көпшілігінің заттай кешені мен жерлеу құрылысының конструкциялық ерекшеліктерінің Сарыарқа ескерткіштерімен жақындығын, әсіресе қарамола типіндегі кешендер материалдары ішінде көбірек кездесетінін атап өту керек. Радиокөміртектік талдау нәтижесі бойынша зерттелген нысандар б.д.д. V–III ғғ. мерзімделеді.

**Қаржыландыру көзі:** Мақала ҚР ҒЖБМ Ғылым комитетінің 2023–2025 жж. гранттық қаржыландыруы шеңберінде, ЖТН АР19678440 жобасы аясында даярланды.

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### **Исследование курганов ранних кочевников Семейского Прииртышья**

В статье представлены материалы памятников, исследованных в горных массивах Семейтау и Кокентау. За период 2014–2018 гг. на шести могильниках и курганных группах было исследовано 13 курганов. Материалы сопроводительного инвентаря представляют собой железные стержни (булавки?) и хвостовые позвонки барана. В трёх случаях (мог. Каратөбе, кург. № 2, 3; мог. Карасу-Уштобе, кург. № 1) обнаружены ожерелья из полудрагоценных камней. Предметы вооружения представлены набором костяных и одним бронзовым наконечниками стрел. В целом, аналогии наземным и внутримогильным сооружениям курганов находят аналогии в материалах памятников кулажоргинского типа (III в. до н.э. – I в. н.э.) Верхнего Прииртышья и в курганах раннего этапа (III–II вв. до н.э.) культуры древних усуней долины р. Иле. Стоит отметить близость конструктивных особенностей погребальных сооружений и предметного комплекса большинства описываемых курганов с памятниками Сарыарки, прежде всего, наибольшие параллели прослеживаются среди материалов комплексов карамолинского типа. По результатам радиоуглеродного анализа исследованные объекты датируются V–III вв. до н.э.

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## **1 Introduction (Aitkali A., Zhuniskhanov A., Rakhmankulov E.)**

From an archaeological perspective, the designated region represents an unexplored area, making it a compelling focal point for concentrated archaeological investigations. In 2014–2015, we conducted a comprehensive exploration of archaeological sites within the administrative district of Semey. The primary objective of this research endeavor was to identify and conduct preliminary analyses of archaeological sites spanning various historical periods, with the intention of defining their principal characteristics. The selection of the Semeytau and Kokentau mountain ranges as the designated exploration route was based on their close proximity and the common cultural elements exhibited by early nomadic civilizations, thereby forming a cohesive historical and cultural entity.

The first written evidence concerning these areas was obtained in 1903, as a result of data collection by the Semipalatinsk Regional Statistical Committee [Konshin 1903: 3–32]. In N. Konshin’s article



“On the monuments of antiquity of the Semipalatinsk region”, which is a summary of the information received by the Committee, there are only a few meager lines about these places [Коншин 1903: 5]. It was pointed out that there are many mounds and circles of stones in the Semeytau tracts, and in the Kokentau mountains, there are some inscriptions on the rocks. The same information is duplicated in the book “Archaeological Map of Kazakhstan”, published in 1960 [АКК 1960: 361].

Without a doubt, comprehensive archaeological investigations in these regions have showcased a wealth of historical monuments spanning from the Bronze Age to the More recent historical periods. Prior publications hold valuable insights regarding the findings from research on the ancient burial site and settlement of Koken, which dates back to the Bronze Age [Айткали және т. б. 2017; Doumani and Rahmankulov 2018; Доумани и др. 2020; Doumani and etc. 2021]. In addition, the areas under consideration include large settlements and burial grounds of the Bronze Age, the early Iron Age, production workshops and about a dozen caves with rock carvings [Илиуф 2012: 29–35]. Currently, around the Semeytau and Kokentau mountain ranges, seven mounds with “moustache” have been recorded, but this number can be increased, since only two thirds of the territory around the mountain ranges has been studied by exploration. All of them, with the exception of two, were found around the Semeytau mountain range [Айткали и др. 2019]. In structure, all of them, with the exception of one (Semeytau burial ground), are of the same type, the complexes consist of two small mounds in diameter not exceeding 15 m, located along the east-west line, their arc-shaped short paths branched off from the eastern embankments. The structure was different from the others, it had one large embankment with a diameter of up to 30 m, with a deep funnel in the center, about 2 m high, with long stone ridges and ends in the form of small fences.

Among the monuments of the early Middle Ages, the sanctuary from the ancient Turkic period stands out, which includes a rectangular mound, a moat, a shaft and stone statues dug in on the eastern side. Despite centuries of weathering by winds and blizzards, the facial features of the statues, which presumably represent the ancient inhabitants, remain clearly visible

Thus, the archaeological work conducted has revealed unique material evidence characterizing the culture of the ancient population in this area for the first time.

## **2 Materials and methods of research**

### **2.1 Methods of research**

The construction features of the burial structures, as well as the subject complex of the studied monuments were analyzed using traditional methods of archaeological research. Definitions of anthropological material were made in the research laboratory of Paleoanthropological study of the Margulan Institute of Archaeology by the Candidate of Historical Sciences E. Kitov. Radiocarbon dating of the samples was carried out at the Vilnius Radiocarbon Mass spectrometry Laboratory (Vilnius, Lithuania) (Table 1). The results of the analysis of seeds from mound no. 2 of the Karatobe burial ground were carried out at the National Center of Biotechnology (Astana). Zh. Kalieva, a researcher at the Margulan Institute of Archaeology, conducted a technical analysis of a vessel found in the aforementioned mound.

### **2.2 Characteristics of sources**

To date, a total of 13 burial mounds from a coeval period across six different burial sites and mound groups have been excavated. Burial mounds have been excavated on the burial grounds area: Karatobe – 4, Kotyrkora – 2, Semeytau – 1, Kotyrbulak – 1, Suykbulak – 3, Karasu-Ushtobe – 2 (fig. 1). We will briefly describe the most significant details of the funeral rite and the architecture of burial structures.

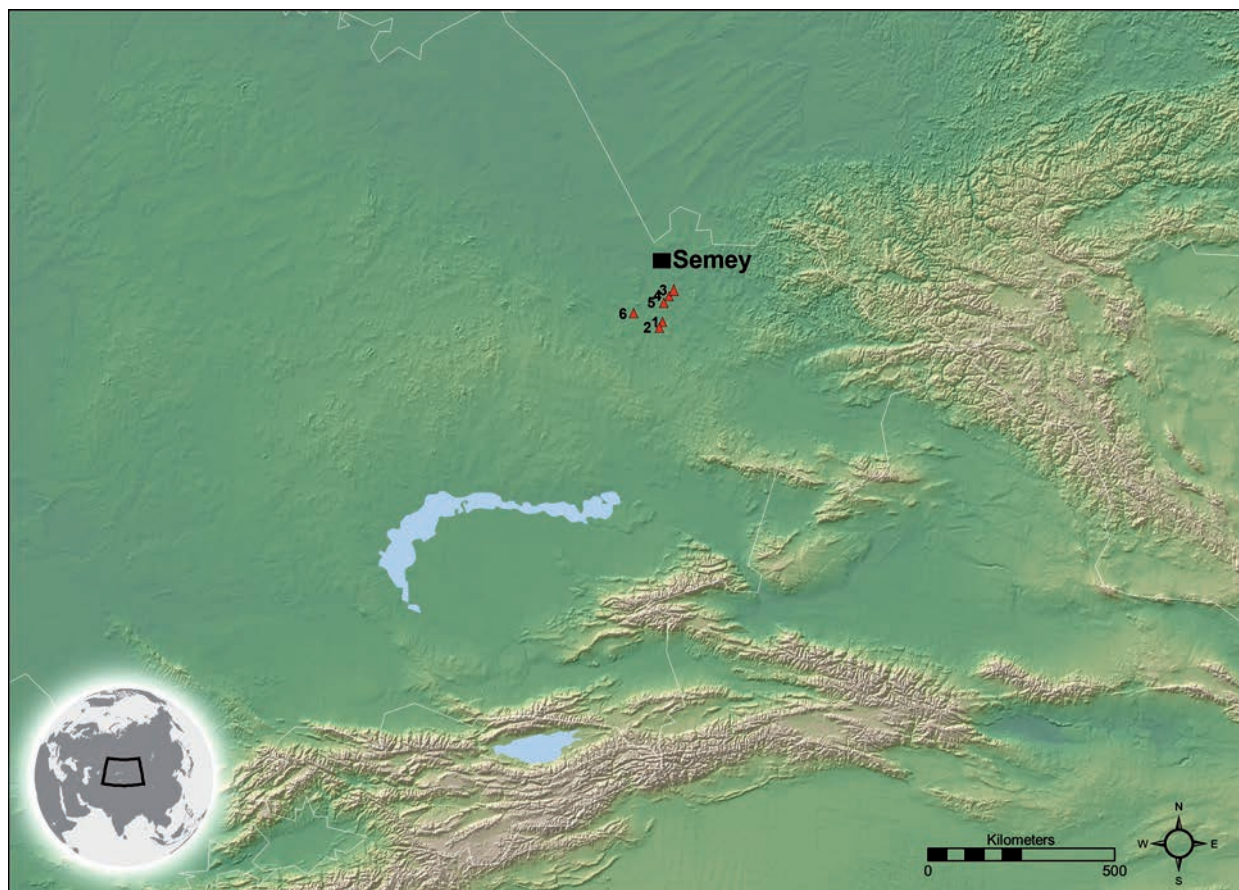


Fig. 1. Location of the sites mentioned in the text: 1 – Karatobe; 2 – Kotyrkora;  
3 – Semeytau; 4 – Kotyrbulak; 5 – Suykbulak; 6 – Karasu-Ushgabe

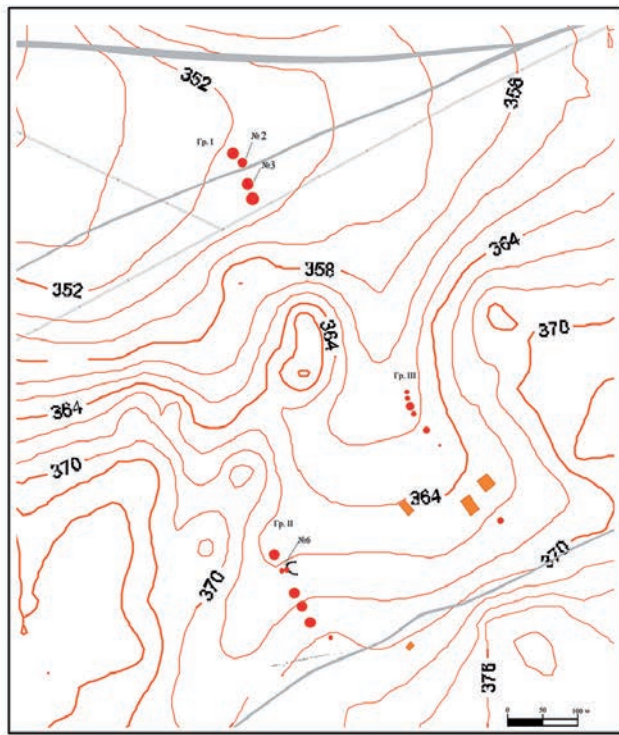
1-сур. Мақалада айтылған ескерткіштердің орналасуы: 1 – Қаратөбе; 2 – Қотырқора;  
3 – Семейтау; 4 – Қотырбұлақ; 5 – Суықбұлақ; 6 – Қарасу-Үштөбе

Рис. 1. Локализация памятников, упоминаемых в статье: 1 – Каратөбе; 2 – Котырқора;  
3 – Семейтау; 4 – Котырбұлақ; 5 – Суықбұлақ; 6 – Карасу-Уштөбе

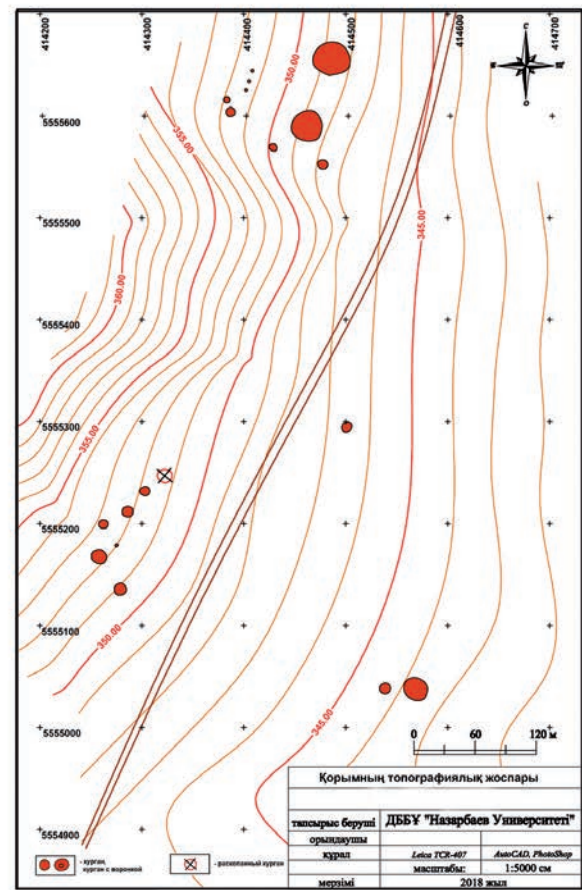
*The Karatobe burial ground* (fig. 2, 1). It is localized at the foot of the northwestern tip of Mount Kokentau. Archaeological work on the burial ground was carried out in 2014–2015 and 2018. In total, there are 17 burial mounds elongated in the meridional direction in three groups of the burial ground. Four burial structures were uncovered, including one mound with “mustache”. Of these, three mounds (k. no. 2, 3, 6), with undisturbed burials, gave a very peculiar material [Айтқали және т. б. 2014].

A distinctive feature of the burial mounds of the Karatobe burial ground is that all of them had two-row stone rings with entrances on the eastern side at some distance from the embankment. The mounds, composed of soil mixed with stones, appear square when viewed from above and have a flattened shape in cross-section. Ground structures in the form of stone fences are located under the embankments. In the center of the fences, grave pits have been cleared, oriented with a long axis in the east-west direction. In one case, the inter-grave structures are represented by a stone box, while in others they are represented





1



2



3

Fig. 2. Topographic plans of the burial grounds: 1 – Karatobe; 2 – Karasu-Ushtobe; 3 – Suykbulak  
 2-сур. Қорымдардың топографиялық жоспарлары: 1 – Қаратөбе; 2 – Қарасу-Үштөбе; 3 – Суықбұлақ  
 Рис. 2. Топографические планы могильников: 1 – Каратөбе; 2 – Карасу-Уштөбе; 3 – Суыкбулак

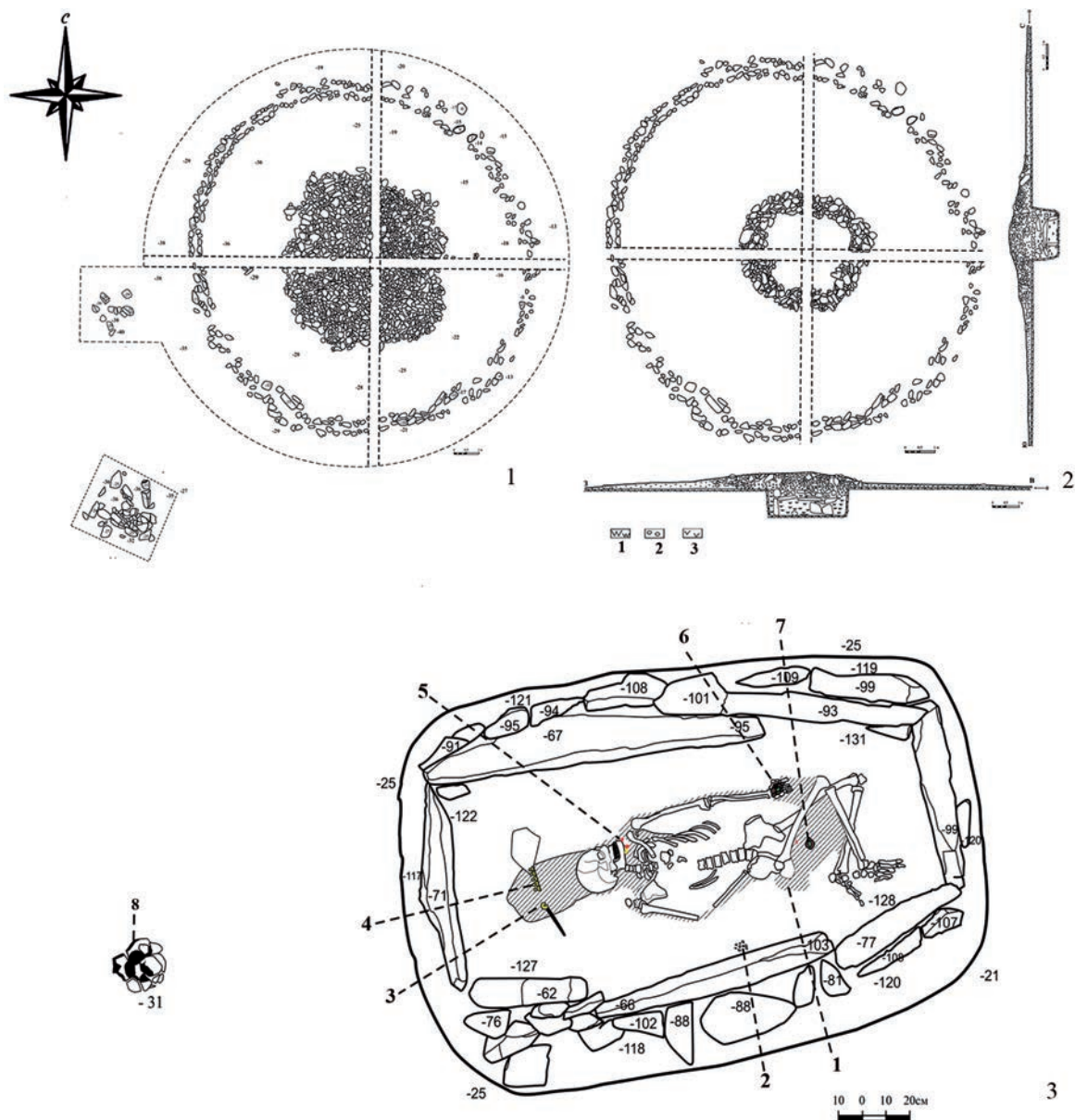


Fig. 3. The Karatobe burial ground, burial mound no. 2: 1 – plan of the grave structure after removing the turf; 2 – plan of the grave structure after clearing and sections; 3 – plan of the grave pit after clearing (1 – tissue fragments (?); 2 – seeds; 3 – pin (iron); 4 – headdress patch (gold); 5 – necklace; 6 – bronze ring; 7 – bead and craft made of bronze). Performed by Galymzhan Kiyasbek

3-сур. Қаратөбе қорымы, № 2 оба: 1 – шым қабатынан тазаланған кейінгі қабір үсті құрылысының жоспары; 2 – тазаланғаннан кейінгі қабір үсті құрылысының жоспары және қималары; 3 – тазаланғаннан кейінгі қабір шұңқырының жоспары (1 – мата қалдығы (?); 2 – дән; 3 – түйреуіш (темір); 4 – бас киімнің жапсырмасы (алтын); 5 – алқа; 6 – қоладан жасалған сақина; 7 – қоладан жасалған ұсақ моншақ). Орындаған: Ғалымжан Қиясбек

Рис. 3. Могильник Каратобе, курган № 2: 1 – план надмогильного сооружения после снятия дерна; 2 – план надмогильного сооружения после расчистки и разрезы; 3 – план могильной ямы после расчистки (1 – фрагменты ткани (?); 2 – семена; 3 – булавка (железо); 4 – нашивка головного убора (золото); 5 – ожерелье; 6 – бронзовое кольцо; 7 – бусинка и поделка из бронзы). Исполнитель: Галымжан Киясбек

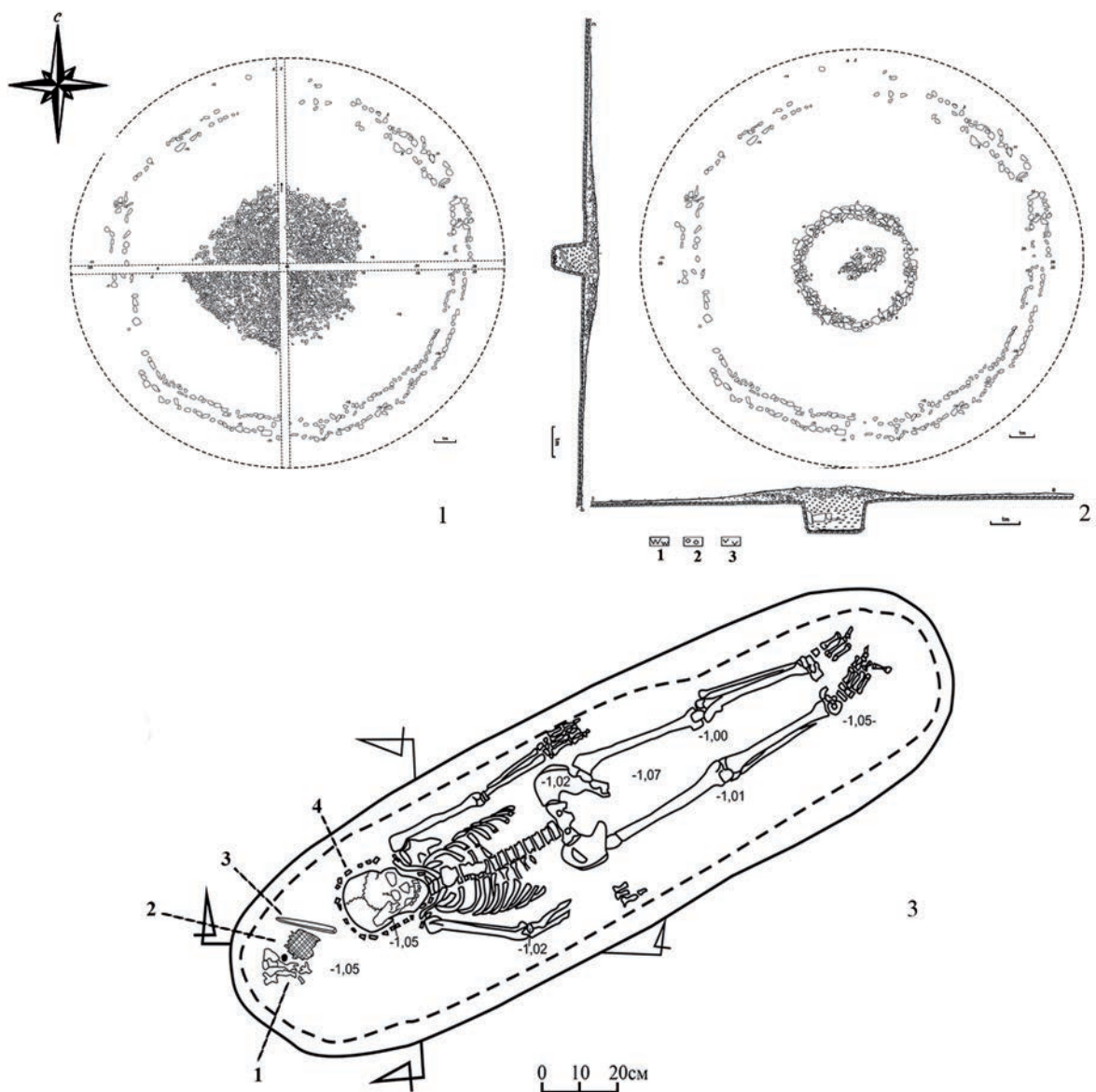


Fig. 4. The Karatobe burial ground, burial mound no. 3: 1 – plan of the burial structure after removing the turf; 2 – plan of the grave structure after clearing and sections; 3 – plan of the grave pit after clearing (1 – caudal vertebrae (small cattle); 2 – ash; 3 – pin (iron); 4 – beads made of semi-precious stones).

Performed by Galymzhan Kiyasbek

4-сур. Қаратөбе қорымы, № 3 оба: 1 – шым қабатынан тазаланғаннан кейінгі қабір үсті құрылысының жоспары; 2 – тазаланғаннан кейінгі қабір үсті құрылысының жоспары және қималары; 3 – тазаланғаннан кейінгі қабір шұңқырының жоспары (1 – құйымшақ (ұсақ мал); 2 – күл; 3 – түйреуіш (темір); 4 – жартылай бағалы тастардан жасалған моншақ). Орындаған Ғалымжан Қиясбек

Рис. 4. Могильник Каратобе, курган № 3: 1 – план надмогильного сооружения после снятия дерна; 2 – план надмогильного сооружения после расчистки и разрезы; 3 – план могильной ямы после расчистки (1 – хвостовые позвонки (МРС); 2 – зола; 3 – булавка (железо); 4 – бусинки из полудрагоценных камней).

Исполнитель Ғалымжан Қиясбек



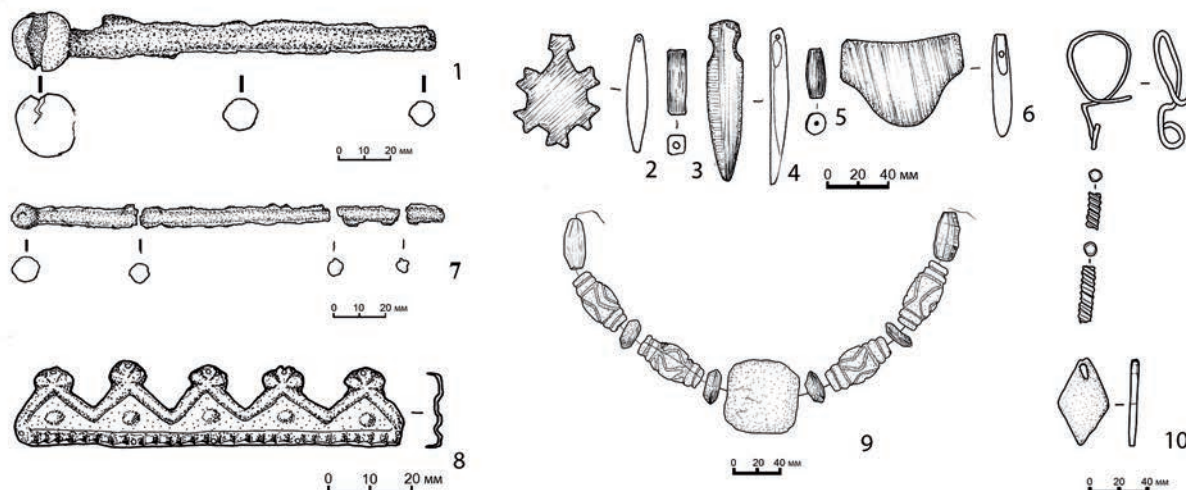


Fig. 5. The Karatobe burial ground. Utensils set: 1, 8-10 – burial mound no. 2; 2-7 – burial mound no. 3.  
Performed by Erbolat Rahmankulov

5-сур. Қаратөбе қорымы. Заттар кешені: 1, 8-10 – № 2 оба; 2-7 – № 3 оба. Орындаған: Ерболат Рахманқұлов  
Рис. 5. Могильник Каратөбе. Вещевой комплекс: 1, 8-10 – курган № 2; 2-7 – курган № 3.  
Исполнитель: Ерболат Рахманкулов

by a dirt pit with a fence of vertically placed slabs. The deceased were laid on their backs with their heads facing west or southwest.

In the burial mound no. 2, in a rich burial (fig. 3), in a stone box, a fragment of a headdress in the form of a gold plate with a combined geometric and floral ornament, a gold earring complete with two gold threads with corrugations and a rhombic shape with a turquoise pendant, an iron pin with a golden spherical top, and a necklace was cleared on the cervical vertebrae of the vertebral column made of stones (4 carnelian, 2 paste, 1 chalk (?) and gilding (4 pieces) with a diamond-shaped ornament (fig. 5, 1, 8-10).

The eight-shaped gold earring from mound no. 2, apparently, belongs to the category of late earrings (fig. 5, 10) – not earlier than the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (Table 1, 1). The patch of the headdress (fig. 7.2). Decorative style distinct from the animal motifs commonly found in the Saka period.

A ceramic vessel was found just below the modern surface of the earth, in the western part of the grave pit. The vessel was burned presumably in a fire, as evidenced by the mottled color of the surface. The color in the fracture is light brown, dark gray in some places. The vessel is spherical in shape (?) the upper part is missing; the bottom is wide flattened. Hollow body construction: the bottom is made of one a single flat piece, The rim are built up from the outside.

The outer surface is smoothed with a hard wooden tool, while the inner surface is hand-smoothed. The results of the technological analysis of ceramics showed that the vessel was not intended for everyday use and was made for a funeral rite.

In addition, the seeds of the plant were found in a stone box. The results of the conducted studies show that the seeds of unknown origin that were obtained belong to the Knotgrass (*Polygonum aviculare* L.). However, the results of the radiocarbon analysis of the seeds showed a later date (Table 1, 2).



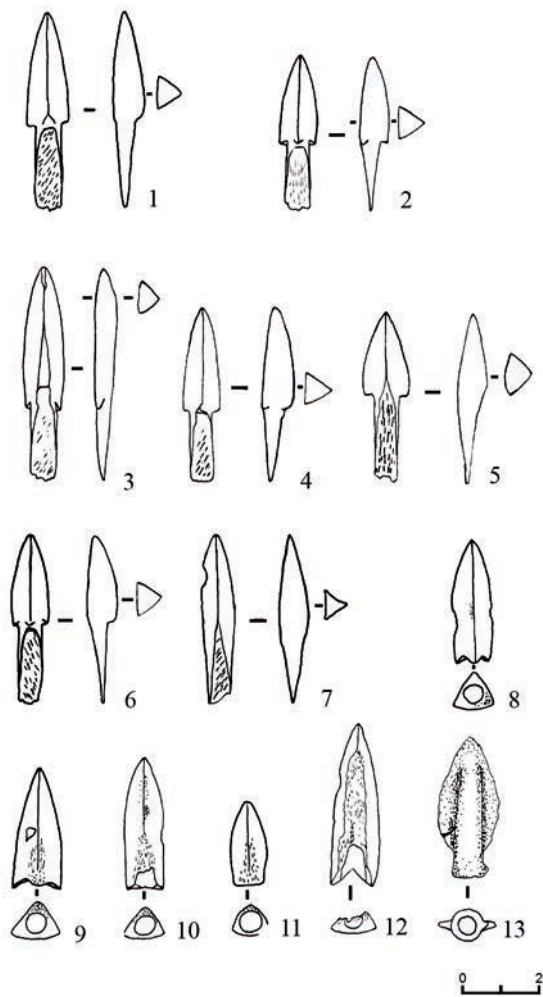


Fig. 6. The Suykbulak burial ground. Burial mound no. 8.  
Arrowheads: 1–12 – bone; 13 – bronze.  
Performed by Erbolat Rahmankulov

6-сур. Суықбұлақ қорымы, № 8 оба. Жебе ұштары:  
1–12 – сүйек; 13 – қола.  
Орындаған: Ерболат Рахманқұлов

Рис. 6. Могильник Суыкбулак, курган № 8.  
Наконечники стрел: 1–12 – кость; 13 – бронза.  
Исполнитель: Ерболат Рахманкулов

*The Suykbulak burial ground* (fig. 2, 3). Archaeological work on the burial ground was carried out in 2015. There are 15 burial structures on the burial ground area, forming three separate groups, elongated in the meridional direction. There were opened three burial mounds (no. 3, 8, 14), but only one gave the material – mound no. 8. The embankment of the latter was demolished by heavy machinery, as a result, it was not possible to fix all the details of the ground structure. The burial mound is built of stone with

In mound no. 3 (fig. 4), a large number of beads (32 pieces) (fig. 7, 1) made of multicolored semi-precious stones (agate, carnelian), as well as an iron pin were found around the head of the buried individual (fig. 4; 5, 2-9).

*The Kotyrkora burial ground.* Archaeological work on the burial ground was carried out in 2014. The burial ground encompasses more than 30 objects of different times aligned in a north-south direction. The mounds of the examined burial mounds no. 1 and 2 are initially sub-circular in shape, however, after clearing the upper layer, they are sub-square in plan view. The mounds of both burial mounds are composed of soil, only the upper layer, the shell, consists of stones. A ground structure in the form of a stone fence is fixed under the embankments [Айтқали 2015]. In the center of the fence, grave pits were excavated, oriented with a long axis in the east-west direction. The tombstone structures are represented by a stone box and a dirt pit with a fence of vertically placed slabs, the buried individuals are placed on their backs with their heads on the east and southeast. The accompanying inventory is limited, consisting of an iron knife and an iron rod (pin).

*The Kotyrbulak burial mound group.* Archaeological work on the burial ground was carried out in 2015 [Айтқали и др. 2016: 27]. The mounds of the burial mound no. 1 are composed of soil mixed with stones, subquadrate in plan view. At some distance from the embankment, a two-row stone ring was traced and on the eastern side with an entrance of designated large stones. Unfortunately, the burial structure of the mound was destroyed, the accompanying inventory was missing due to the actions of looters. Judging by the remains, the buried individual was laid on his back with his head on the west.



an equal proportion of soil. The diameter of the mound is 8 m, height – 0.5 m. Outside the embankment, at some distance, a double ring arrangement of larger stones with a designated entrance on the eastern side was traced. In the center of the burial mound, a grave pit, oriented in the north-west-southeast direction, was identified in the center of the burial mound. The burial structure of the mound was destroyed. Bone triangular and petiolate arrowheads with a hidden bolster were found in the filling (fig. 6). Additionally, a bronze tip with a bolster-shaped, two-bladed, and oblong feather shape was also discovered [Айткали и др. 2016: 32].

*The Karasu-Ushtobe burial ground* (fig. 2, 2). Archaeological work on the burial ground was carried out in 2015. In total, there are 5 burial mounds on the area of the burial field, elongated in the meridional direction. Two burial mounds (no. 1, 2) were excavated [Айткали и др. 2018: 124; 2021: 124–129]. The mounds of both burial mounds are rounded in plan, in section they are of a flattened shape. In the profile of the mounds, closer to the foot, a stone belt was traced. The tombstone structures consist of ring fences with a domed upper ceiling. In the center of the fence there are grave pits oriented in the direction of east-west with small deviations. Judging by the remains, the deceased individuals were placed on their backs, arms along the body and oriented with their heads to west with slight deviations. A bead, identical to a larger one found in mound no. 3 of the Karatobe burial ground, was discovered in one of the burial mounds.

The anthropological material of the tombs of Kotyrbulak, Kotyrkora and Karatobe is characterized. The skulls from different burial grounds have poor preservation, it was not possible to make a comparative analysis of them. However, it is noted that the skulls are not homogeneous, but at the same time they exhibit some degree of variation within the anthropological features typical of the early Iron Age region.

### 3 Discussion and results

Despite the fact that most of the mounds were looted, the extracted materials complement our ideas about the architecture of the mounds, as well as the funeral rites of the ancient population of the territory under consideration.

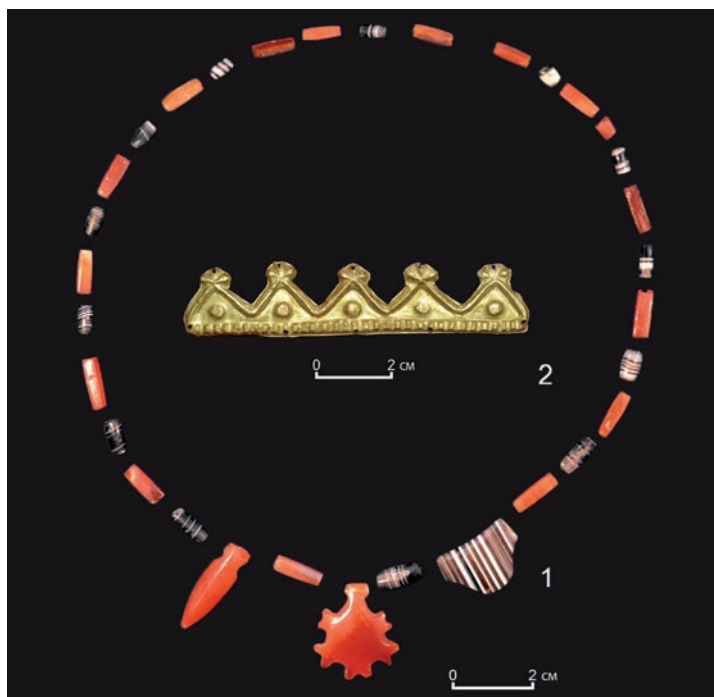


Fig. 7. The Karatobe burial ground. Accessory:

- 1 – a necklace from burial mound no. 2;
  - 2 – a gold plate of a headdress from burial mound no. 1.
- Performed by Erbolat Rahmankulov

7-сур. Қаратөбе қорымы. Әшекейлер:

- 1 – № 2 обадан шыққан алқа;
  - 2 – № 1 обадан табылған бас киімнің алтын жапсырмасы.
- Орындаған: Ерболат Рахманқұлов

Рис. 7. Могильник Каратобе. Украшения:

- 1 – ожерелье из кургана № 2;
  - 2 – золотая пластина головного убора из кургана № 1.
- Исполнитель Ерболат Рахманкулов



Some minor differences between the burial structures of individual burial grounds have been recorded. The features were expressed in the size and burial structures within the mounds. Despite this, most likely, the evidence suggests that these burial structures were likely built by a single ancient ethnic group that lived in this territory. In favor of this, at the level of the ancient horizon, the burial mounds had stone fences, in the center of which there were pits with the same latitudinal direction and a similar arrangement of inter-grave structures with fences of oblong slabs placed across the grave pits. Among the items of the accompanying inventory, iron rods (pins) and tail vertebrae of a ram were often found together with the deceased. In addition, in three cases (burial ground Karatobe, burial mounds no. 2, 3; burial ground Karasu-Ushtobe, burial mound no. 1) necklaces adorned with colored stones were discovered. Weapons are represented by a set of bones and one bronze arrowhead.

In general, analogies to terrestrial and inter-grave structures of mounds can be found in geographically closely located monuments of the Kulazhorga type (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) of the Upper Irtysh region and in the mounds of the early stage (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC) of the Wusun archaeological culture of the Ili River valley. [Черников 1975: 135–148; Акишев, Кушаев 1963: 194–202]. It is worth noting the proximity of the construction features of the burial structures and the subject complex of most of the described mounds with the monuments of Saryarka, first of all, the greatest parallels are observed with the so-called monuments of the Karamola type [Бейсенов 2014].

#### 4 Conclusion

Given the limited and fragmented availability of materials at our disposal, it would be premature to draw definitive conclusions regarding ethnic and cultural affiliations of the examined monuments. However, in light of recent findings in Central Kazakhstan, the chronology of mound construction, as determined during the first half of the first millennium BC, has been established. The obtained radiocarbon dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC corroborate this deduction. To fully comprehend the dynamics that transpired in the eastern region of Saryarka, additional comprehensive investigations are imperative for the archaeological sites situated within the Kokentau and Semeytau mountain ranges.

The analysis of burial items found in the studied mounds indicates their close proximity to the previously mentioned monuments of Saryarka, the Upper Irtysh region and the Ile River valley.

The presented anthropological material within the tombs of Kotyrbulak, Kotyrkor and Karatobe reveal that the skulls originating from the burials are not homogeneous, however they do not go beyond the scale of the region represented by the groups of the Early Iron Age.

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