

ABSTRACT

of the dissertation by Kairat Abaevich Zhambulatov submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the specialty “6D020800 – Archaeology and Ethnology” on the topic:

“Culture of the population of Western Kazakhstan in the II–IV centuries AD (based on the materials of funerary monuments)”

General characteristics of the work

The dissertation presents the results of the collection, processing, and analysis of archaeological material from Late Sarmatian sites located in Western Kazakhstan and on the Ustyurt Plateau. Both neighboring regions contain a significant number of excavated sites, the integrated study of which allows for a better understanding of the historical fate of the population inhabiting these territories. The chronological framework of the research covers a relatively short period – from the second half of the 2nd century to the mid-4th century BCE – a time when unified burial traditions were established in the steppe and a standardized set of grave goods emerged, marking the cultural identity of the population.

Relevance of the research topic

Late Sarmatian sites of Western Kazakhstan have been examined to varying extents in the works of G.A. Kushayev, S.G. Botalov and S.Yu. Gutsalov, S.A. Tribunsky [Tribunsky. 2003], V.Yu. Malashev, and in several publications by M.G. Moshkova. Archaeological sites on the Ustyurt Plateau have been partially addressed in the works of V.N. Yagodin, as well as in publications by E.P. The importance and significance of these works cannot be overstated: they introduced new sources and provided analyses that enhanced our understanding of the Late Sarmatian cultural phenomenon and laid the groundwork for future studies.

However, in recent decades, a substantial number of new sources have emerged. Prominent monuments of the warrior elite have been investigated in the West Kazakhstan Region. A comprehensive research campaign was conducted in the Aktope Region, including the excavation of original cult-burial structures (by A.A. Bisembaev and K.A. Zhambulatov). For the first time, unique and previously unparalleled Late Sarmatian monuments have been discovered in Mangystau (excavations by A.E. Astafyev and E.S. Bogdanov). A considerable set of burials originates from the Ustyurt Plateau (excavations by V.N. Yagodin, E.P. Kitov, and K.A. Zhambulatov). For the first time, the full body of currently available data on cult-burial monuments has been compiled, including dumbbell-shaped, “II”-shaped, “E”-shaped, ring-shaped structures, and ritual mounds.

Accordingly, the introduction of these new archaeological materials into scholarly discourse, along with their systematic processing and analysis, is both timely and necessary, as it offers an opportunity to reassess certain aspects of Late Sarmatian archaeology from a fresh perspective.

The object of the research is archaeological sites and material culture of the population of Late Sarmatian period (2nd–4th centuries BCE).

The subject of the research is constituted by the archaeological materials related to the Late Sarmatian population, including individual sub-kurgan burials, simple inhumations in soil, catacomb-type graves, and associated funerary inventories. A significant contribution to the identification of cultural characteristics is made by the inclusion of a distinct category of sites—cult-burial and cult-ritual structures—widely represented within the territory of Western Kazakhstan.

Source Base

The primary sources of this study are excavation materials from burial grounds located in the West Kazakhstan, Aktobe, and Mangystau regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as the Republic of Karakalpakstan (Republic of Uzbekistan). These materials are primarily drawn from excavation reports authored by G.I. Bagrikov, G.A. Kushayev, G.K. Kokebaeva, B.F. Zhelezchikov, M.G. Moshkova, V.A. Kriger, N.M. Malov, V.A. Ivanov, S.Yu. Gutsalov, G.V. Makarevich, V.V. Rodionov, A.A. Bisembaev, V.V. Tkachev, and Ya.A. Lukpanova, preserved in the archival collection of the Margulan Institute of Archaeology (CS MSHE RK). In addition, the study makes use of select published materials and field data from the personal archives of V.N. Yagodin and A.E. Astafyev.

The statistical corpus was further supplemented by the author's own excavations at the Gunzheli I burial ground (expedition headed by E.P. Kitov) and the Akbulak complex (expedition co-led by A.A. Bisembayev and K.A. Zhambulatov) in the Aktobe Region. In total, the analyzed sample includes 340 individual features from 55 burial complexes, more than half of which remain unpublished.

The aim of the dissertation is to identify and characterize the cultural features of the population of Western Kazakhstan during the 2nd–4th centuries BCE, primarily based on the analysis of burial complexes, with additional reference to cult-burial and cult-ritual structures.

This aim is achieved through the resolution of the following research objectives:

- to examine the physical and geographical conditions of the region;
- to identify the specific features of the topography and planigraphy of burial grounds within the designated territorial zones;
- to collect, systematize, and synthesize a large and fragmented body of material on burial structures preserved in archives and published in academic periodicals, followed by analysis according to the defined local-territorial zones;
- to investigate the localization, spatial layout, typology, and functional designation of cult-burial and cult-ritual structures in Western Kazakhstan and the Ustyurt Plateau;
- to analyze categories of funerary inventories, determine their typology and chronological classification;
- to reveal the particularities of the emergence and development of Late Sarmatian archaeological culture within the selected local zones.

Main provisions for defense

– The analysis of the physical and geographical conditions of Western Kazakhstan has made it possible to delineate four local-territorial zones within the study: “the Right Bank of the Zhaiyk River”, “Southern Trans-Ural Region”, the Ustyurt Plateau, and Mangystau. Each of these zones exhibits distinct manifestations of Late Sarmatian sites, shaped by regional environmental and cultural characteristics.

– Based on a representative statistical sample of approximately 340 burial and cult-burial features, a comprehensive analysis of the funerary rite has been conducted. This includes examination of the external features of kurgan structures, the sub-kurgan space, grave pit morphology, and the positioning of the deceased, with attention to both regional variation and broader cultural patterns across the entire area of distribution.

– It has been established that the cult-burial structures characteristic of the Late Sarmatian population are, for the most part, concentrated in the Southern Trans-Ural region, where they serve as specific cultural markers defining Late Sarmatian complexes. Furthermore, cartographic analysis of these structures reveals that their typological diversity is observed exclusively in the territory of the Aktobe Region, suggesting the exceptional role of this area in the formation and development of Late Sarmatian culture.

– The “II”-shaped and “E”-shaped cult-burial structures may have functioned as closed complexes endowed with the properties of familial or clan temples, intended for memorial and ritual ceremonies. In contrast, ring-shaped cult structures were likely used for offerings at the level of an extended kin group, with the aim of securing favorable ancestral blessings that reflected the collective interests of the community.

– The thoroughly examined set of grave goods demonstrates, on one hand, a high degree of standardization and unification in the funerary inventories of ordinary and warrior burials; on the other hand, elite burials—such as those from kurgans 1 and 2 of the Lebedevka cemetery—exhibit marked heterogeneity and originality. These include nearly exclusive assemblages of diplomatic gifts of North Pontic origin.

– Ceramic vessels, serving as distinctive markers of trade and economic exchange, clearly illustrate regional interactions with agricultural and craft-producing centers. The southern periphery of the “Southern Trans-Ural” burial grounds maintained close ties with Khorezm, while in the northern sector both Khorezmian and North Caucasian vessels are recorded. In the “Right Bank of the Zhaiyk River” zone, only handmade North Caucasian pottery and its local imitations are encountered.

– The diagnostic set of features characterizing the Late Sarmatian population reveals that a coherent and unified cultural form manifests exclusively in the Southern Trans-Ural region. In contact zones with neighboring cultural traditions, the Late Sarmatian population was subject to external influences, which are reflected in the “purity” and variability of funerary elements.

– The funerary practices of the Late Sarmatian population in Mangystau differ from those in other regions, particularly through the use of “T”-shaped catacomb burials that retain certain diagnostic features of Late Sarmatian tradition. However,

current data do not permit this to be confidently classified as a distinct regional variant within the broader framework of Late Sarmatian culture.

- The abrupt appearance of the Late Sarmatians in the steppes of Western Kazakhstan, followed by their equally sudden disappearance after only one and a half to two centuries of occupation, may tentatively be explained by cyclical climatic changes—specifically, periods of increased humidity (humidization)—to which nomadic populations responded acutely.

- The presence of Late Sarmatian monuments in the steppes of Western Kazakhstan does not extend beyond the late 3rd century BCE. However, materials from the Ustyurt region indicate that the Late Sarmatian tradition persisted there until the mid-4th century BCE.

The chronological framework of the study covers the period from the 2nd to the 4th century BCE. The lower chronological boundary corresponds to the emergence and spread of cultural features characteristic of the Late Sarmatian period in the territory of Western Kazakhstan.

The geographical scope of the dissertation encompasses Late Sarmatian sites that are administratively confined within the modern boundaries of Western Kazakhstan, including the West Kazakhstan, Aktobe, Atyrau, and Mangystau regions. In addition, the statistical analysis incorporates a corpus of sources derived from the excavations conducted by V.N. Yagodin on the Ustyurt Plateau (Republic of Karakalpakstan, Republic of Uzbekistan).

The methodology and methods employed in the present research are determined by the formulated aim and objectives. The methodological framework is based on general principles and approaches of scientific inquiry, with a structural and logical organization of the research process, oriented toward the inclusion of necessary components for scientific modeling. Central to this modeling is the formulation of the object and subject of research, followed by the consistent implementation of tasks.

As a discipline studying the development of human societies in the past, archaeology relies on general historical methods and principles, all of which were adhered to in the present work. These include the principle of historicism, methods of periodization, comparative analysis, typological classification, as well as the systemic approach and objectivity.

Scientific Novelty

- For the first time in domestic scholarship, a systematic analysis of the corpus of archaeological sources related to Late Sarmatian sites has been undertaken;

- The integration of the physical and geographical characteristics of Western Kazakhstan with the specific features of archaeological sites—such as topography, planigraphy, presence of cult-burial structures, and elements of the funerary rite—has made it possible to distinguish four local zones: the “Right Bank of the Zhaiyk River”, the “Southern Trans-Ural Region”, Mangystau, and the Ustyurt Plateau, each examined independently;

- All currently available data on Late Sarmatian burial sites concentrated within the territory of Western Kazakhstan have been collected, processed, and analyzed, accounting for a total of 218 sites;

- For the first time, the full range of data on Late Sarmatian burial sites from the Ustyurt Plateau—amounting to 122 features—has been comprehensively analyzed, allowing for the integration of this region into the general system of Late Sarmatian antiquities;

- The total statistical sample comprises 340 features, providing a representative dataset suitable for a comprehensive study;

- It has been determined that Late Sarmatian complexes in the Southern Trans-Ural region are characterized by the presence of earthen structures of various forms (e.g., “II”-shaped, dumbbell-shaped, etc.), which serve as chronological and ethnocultural markers;

- It has also been established that dumbbell-shaped structures typical of Late Sarmatian sites, along with kurgans exhibiting characteristic funerary rites, are recorded along the Turgay, Tobol, and Ishim Rivers. Targeted research in these areas may, in the future, reveal the cultural significance and function of these monuments.

Practical Significance

The results of the research can be applied in the development of specialized academic courses, synthetic works on history and archaeology, educational and methodological manuals, as well as in the curation and exhibition of museum collections.

Research Dissemination and Publications

During the course of study and preparation of the dissertation, the author published three articles in peer-reviewed journals indexed in the Web of Science citation database (2019, 2023, 2024), four articles in journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in the Sphere of Education and Science (2017, 2018, 2019, 2022), and co-authored one monograph.

Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of the dissertation is determined by the stated research objectives and includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references, a list of archival materials, a catalog of sites, and illustrative materials.