

Saryarka during the Early Iron Age

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According to Herodotus, the margins of the world near the “griffins which watched over the gold” were inhabited by the single-eyed Arimaspi. Once they displaced their neighbors the Issedones who in turn moved into the Scythian lands. Reconstruction of ethnic map of the Scythian epoch has been attracting scientists for around two centuries. They proposed various variants of ethnic geography of the tribes mentioned in the “Scythian Story” of Herodotus. In the second half of the 20th century based on antique and ancient Persian sources and archaeological discoveries historians accepted the theory of the Issedones’ localisation in the territory of Central Kazakhstan [1, p. 134—135; 2, p. 308]. Another concept states that Central Kazakhstan might be a native land of the Arimaspi. Their name means “those who have steppe horses” in northern Persian languages. Kazakh archaeologist K. Akishev supposed that the word “Arimaspi” meant “Aryans riding horseback”. In this case, the ethnonym “Arimaspi” is much suitable for the tribes who lived in Central Kazakhstan in the Early Iron Age. This is evidenced by strong cult of horse and rider demonstrated by archaeological material of steppe Saryarka.

Archaeologists proposed the conditional name for those tribes from Saryarka – Tasmolians. Tasmola archaeological culture was named so in accordance with the place of the most significant discoveries of their culture in the burial site Tasmola near the Shiderty River. Tasmolians inhabited this area three thousand years ago, in the 8th-3rd centuries BC. They were contemporaries of the Scythians, Saka, Savromats and Satmatians. These militant nomadic confederations created the threat to Asian civilizations and managed to resist powerful armies of ancient Persian emperors Darius I, Cyrus II, who conquered a half of the world, and Greek units of Alexander the Great.

During the earliest period of their history (7th-6th centuries BC) the Tasmolians lived in the territory reaching outside the borders of Saryarka. In the West their lands included the areas of the Southern Ural and the eastern border went along the Irtysh River. The territory was expanded till the edges of forest-steppe zone of Western Siberia in the North and till Balkhash Lake in the South. According to results of work of archaeologists from Altai a culture, similar to Tasmola, was found in the Dzhunghar area. During its existence Tasmolians had the same centre – the territory of Saryarka.

Barrows are those objects which were studied better than others. This type of archaeological monuments is one of sources of modern knowledge on the Saka epoch of Central Kazakhstan. Chronologically, burial monuments are divided into two ethno-cultural periods, which are the 7th-3rd centuries BC and the 3rd (2nd) – 1st centuries BC. Monuments of the first period are combined into the Tasmolian archaeological culture [2]. Monuments of the second period are conditionally called “monuments of the Korgantas type” [3].

Archaeologists often find weapons in men's graves. Quivers with arrows, iron knife or, sometimes, iron dagger are common attributes. Various accessories such as eye rings, beads are placed into women's graves. Frequently, scientists find bone or bronze studs. A group of grave sites of priestesses stands out. In this case bronze mirrors and bone bottles with paints were placed near belt. As a rule, these items lay in leather "women bags". Priestesses' graves always have stone altars which was used for mixing paints or burning oil. Stone altar is a plate oval or round object which is made of sandstone. An interesting woman's grave was discovered near the Shiderty River, Karamurun area. A bone stud was put into her nasal septum. As a whole, the Tasmola burial places give a clear ethnographic snapshot of life.

Apart from barrows of middle size, archaeologists discover huge burial mounds which belonged to noble people. Their diameter is 30-60 m, and height reaches 2-6 m. An enormous barrow is situated in the territory of Astana. It has been preserved due to the fact that in the middle of the 20th century a Muslim cemetery was opened there. Excavation in that place was began by the Ishim archaeological expedition in 2007. In Kuygenzhar area, within the borders of the city, scientists discovered "royal" necropolis which consisted of several big barrows. One of them was excavated. It had a diameter of 42 m and height of 2.5 m. The mound was surrounded by a ditch. It was robbed in ancient times. However, scientists found interesting material on construction and architecture of royal barrows of the Tasmola culture.

It is known that steppe barrows of Eurasia are complicated architectural constructions which reflect religious views of ancient nomads. The structure of such mounds is a symbol of the Universe. It embodies mythological concept of world creation. Building a burial monument is a long lasting, multi-phased and regulated process which involved significant number of people.

We can image this process. Thousands of people with woven baskets on their shoulders. The baskets are full of wet clay. People go up from floodplain of the Ishim River to a barrow. As mound grows, with the aim not to destroy ground blocks people deliver load by special "roads". Probably, the roads were covered by planks or reeds. Growing burial construction is a beautiful view. Artificial barrow, which was made of yellow and blue blocks, is raising on the background of blue sky and yellow steppe. Thus, range of colours coincides the natural paint of the landscape. Finishing phase of the construction is covering the mound with clay and reinforcing sides of barrow by stone blocks.

Tribes of the Early Iron Age had their own settlement in the territory of Saryarka. They were discovered near the Chaglinka River not far from the village of Kenotkel and close to the Selety River in the Taskora area. More than 20 sites were found in the Karkaraly Mountains. They seemed to be winter sites, according to their location.

The topography: settlement are situated near banks of the steppe rivers and places which were protected from wind. Such topography is common for the steppe zone of Kazakhstan beginning from the end of the Bronze Age. Turning to settlements of the Iron Age the topography depends on surrounding landscape. According to published data, in mountain areas sites are located not far from water springs on terraced slopes of mountains.

References:

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