



## **THE OCCURRENCE OF STEPPE NOMADIC BURIAL PRACTICES IN THE MONUMENTS OF THE OXUS CIVILIZATION**

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### **Abstract:**

This article addresses the occurrence of burial forms characteristic of steppe pastoralists found in the monuments of the Oxus civilization. The research analyzes archaeological sites in southern Turkmenistan, northern Afghanistan, and southern Uzbekistan, particularly cemeteries at settlements such as Gonur, Togolok, Dashli, Sapalli and Jarkutan, Molali and Bustan. The findings reveal that in the Oxus civilization territory, alongside burial rites typical of traditional agricultural societies, there were also indicators associated with steppe pastoralists – Eurasian nomads, including skeletal positioning, burial rituals, and additional artifacts (horse bones, weapons, pottery). This situation demonstrates that during the Bronze Age, processes of cultural interaction and integration were intense in the Oxus civilization regions. The article scientifically elucidates the ethnocultural influence of steppe pastoralists on the formation of the Oxus culture.

**Keywords:** Oxus civilization, steppe pastoralists, burial rituals, archaeological sites, Sapalli culture, Bactria-Margiana archaeological complex, Andronovo culture, ethnocultural influence, cemetery types, Bronze Age.

**INTRODUCTION.** The Oxus civilization is one of the major agrarian-cultural complexes that encompassed the territories of southern Turkmenistan, northern Afghanistan, and southern Uzbekistan in the 3rd-2nd millennia BC. This civilization was distinguished by its advanced irrigated agriculture, craftsmanship, urban planning, and religious centers. Concurrently, archaeological research has revealed the presence of burial forms characteristic of steppe pastoralists at several Oxus civilization sites – such as Gonur, Togolok, Dashli, Sapalli, Jarkutan, and Molali – which has attracted particular scholarly attention.

These findings, specifically the interment of skeletons in a crouched position, horse burials, and the inclusion of weapons, bronze items, and ceremonial vessels in graves, indicate that the Oxus civilization society comprised not only agricultural or urban populations but also social groups closely associated with steppe pastoralists. This, in turn, confirms the existence of active cultural and ethnic connections between the nomadic cultures that developed in the Eurasian steppes and the Oxus civilization.

This research aims to analyze the nature and significance of burial forms characteristic of steppe pastoralists found at Oxus civilization sites, the reasons for their occurrence, and their role in the processes of cultural interaction. This approach provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the ancient

ethnocultural integration processes that took place in the territories of the Oxus civilization.

**LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY.** As a result of archaeological research conducted by V.M. Masson [12] and I.S. Masimov [11] in southern Turkmenistan, A.A. Askarov [6], N.A. Avanesova [1; 2; 18], and B. Lyonet [19] in southern Uzbekistan, V.I. Sarianidi [15] in northern Afghanistan, and A.M. Mendelstam [10, c. 135] and L.T. Pyankova [14] in southern Tajikistan, elements associated with northern steppe pastoralists were identified in the burial practices and rituals of the Oxus civilization. In examining this topic, methods such as archaeological analysis, typological-descriptive approach, and cultural-historical method were employed.

**RESULTS.** In the territory of Turkmenistan, burial forms such as catacomb graves and cremation have been identified. A case related to cremation in the Margiana region was recorded at Tohirboy 3 [6, c. 49]. In Southern Turkmenistan, the first catacomb burial was discovered in the Parhai II cemetery of the Sumbar culture [3, c. 99-100]. Typically, the presence of a horse and related implements in archaeological complexes is recognized as one of the defining features of Aryan culture. Among the Gonur necropolis, the body of a foal was found, curled up like a human corpse, only without a skull [19, c. 37]. Two



similar horse graves were also found in the Swat cemetery in northern Pakistan.

A.A. Askarov notes several steppe components in the Sapalli sites he studied [4]. These are, primarily, burial innovations, in which graves with traces of corpse burning appear in common necropolises [6, c. 49] and stone cists.

In Northern Bactria, the tradition of burying ram bones with young men and youths, characteristic of steppe pastoralists, was studied by A.A. Askarov in the first two stages of the Sapalli culture [6, c. 47]. More than 1000 burials of the ancient agricultural culture from the Bronze Age have been discovered in the territory of Northern Bactria. However, the use of fire as an integral part of the burial ceremony was not recorded, with the exception of two cases of cremation (Jarkutan-32 and Bustan-16). Traces of cremation were found in the Jarkutan IV cemetery, in one case in the Bustan 3 cemetery, and in two cases in the Bustan 6 cemetery [6, c. 49; 10, c. 96-108]. Analyzing the burial monuments of the Andronovo culture in the Minusinsk steppes, M.D. Khlobystina notes that the cremation ceremony was carried out in the event of the death of persons who held a high position in society [17, c. 56]. In the burial grounds of the Sapalli culture, the cremation of corpses apparently was not carried out within the burial grounds, since the traces of cremation were found here in the form of a dark red, decaying accumulation "on a brick pillow." They contained burial vessels without traces of burning. Evidently, the burning of the corpse was carried out somewhere in a special area, and only the ashes of the deceased were placed in the grave [4, c. 163].

In the burial complexes of the settled and pastoral population of ancient Bactria during the Bronze Age, the rite of corpse burning was found for the first time and corresponds to the last quarter of the 2nd millennium BC, i.e., in the burial complexes of the Molali stage of the Sapalli culture and in the early Tulhar cemetery, whose chronological range indeed corresponds to the last quarter of the 2nd millennium BC. There is reason to believe that such a burial rite is mainly characteristic of the culture of the steppe tribes. Thus, in various regions of northern Kyrgyzstan, in the Talas and Chu valleys, in the Central Tien Shan and Ketmen-Tyuba, stone-walled burial grounds were studied where cremations were carried out. The Burmachap cemetery in the Arpa mountain valley of the Central Tien Shan deserves special attention, where burnt skeletal remains, a richly decorated cauldron, bronze bracelets, and beads were found in one of the graves [7, c. 20].

In 1979-1981, A.A. Askarov studied one of the hills of the Jarkutan settlement, where a large area of residential housing was found. In the southern part of the settlement, two stone cists made of vertically arranged slabs were found; the length of each cist is more than 4 m; they are covered with stone slabs; the width of the stone cists is 70 cm, the depth is 50 cm. Cleaning the cists revealed that they were filled with a loose layer containing a large amount of human bones, ash, charcoal, and small pieces of ceramics. No traces of bodies were found at the bottom of the cists. If we consider the small fragments of bones calcined with charcoal and ash when filling the cists without loosening, then these are evidence of corpse burning. Additionally, the presence of stone cists, not characteristic of the Sapalli culture, is noteworthy, which represent a distinct burial rite. Burial in stone cists is widespread in the Andronovo and Karasuk cultures of Southern Siberia [8]. Stone architecture differs from the brick structures of the agricultural tribes of Bactria. On the other hand, stone architecture is very widespread among the steppe tribes of central Kazakhstan [20].

In the Tajikistan part of Northern Bactria, syncretic cultures emerged through the integration of two-rooted steppe pastoralists and the Sapalli culture. This process has been well-studied in the examples of the Tulkhar, Babashov fortress, Bishkent, and Vakhsh cultures located in Southern Tajikistan [10, c. 135; 2, c. 63; 19, p. 74]. In the settled complexes of ancient Bactria, imported artifacts belonging to the desert bronze culture complexes of northern Central Asia are found. For instance, a bronze bracelet of the Tazabagyab type was discovered in one of the graves from the Kuzalli stage of the Jarkutan cemetery. Similarly, in the Tandiryul cemetery (a cenotaph of the Molali stage of the Sapalli culture), a single cauldron belonged to the Andronovo type, while another bronze bell-shaped earring was also of the Andronovo type. In both graves, the main part of the burial complex consists of pots, vases, and bowls made on a potter's wheel, which characterize the Molali stage of the Sapalli culture [4, c. 164].

The millennia-old tradition of burying the deceased under the floors of residential buildings, practiced by the settled agricultural cultures of the Middle East, ceased in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. In Jarkutan, the necropolis was relocated to a specially designated area outside the city. The primary reason for this phenomenon was, first and foremost, an internal factor such as the socio-economic structure of society. The influence of the traditions and spiritual



views of the steppe culture tribes also played a significant role as an external factor [5, c. 191].

The influence of steppe cultures such as Tazabagyab, Andronovo, Srubnaya, Vakhsh, and Bishkent was also an important factor in distinguishing the necropolis from settlements of settled agricultural cultures. In these cultures, cemeteries were located separately from living areas. This was due to their nomadic lifestyle and the lack of permanent residences. Economic pragmatism shaped specific spiritual views in society [5, c. 191].

N.A. Avanesova, based on the excavations of the Bustan IV cemetery, noted that burials were carried out in underground chambers or catacombs, as well as in oval or rectangular pits. All external graves were marked with stone linings, which should be considered as the use of steppe traditions. Inhumation and cremation rituals, particularly the cremation process, were associated with a special sacred center that included cremation rooms, reusable fire extinguishing areas, and altars. Based on detailed field observations, N.A. Avanesova believes that these can be functionally divided into an altar for offerings, an altar for ritual dishes, and an altar-shrine. In fact, nothing similar is known either in the south or in the Eurasian steppes, and using various traditions, especially the specific role of fire in burial rites, a new and very precise ritual was created [13, c. 277].

At the Bustan VI burial site, along with the established norms of the Sapalli culture, new forms of ritual are noted, in which the dominant steppe influence can be observed [1, c. 6].

L.T. Pyankova notes an unusually large number of cenotaphs in the burial grounds of the Vakhsh culture. In the Jarkutan burial ground, representing the settled Sapalli culture adjacent to Vakhsh, the proportion of cenotaphs gradually increased from 2% to 12% [13, c. 282].

E.E. Kuzmina, having studied the migration of Andronovo communities to the south, noted that in the Bronze Age, the Andronovo anthropological type was studied in the burial grounds of Tandir-yul, Kangur-Tut, Teguzak, and Dasht-Kazi in the territory of Tajikistan [9; 21; 20].

In the 14th-13th centuries BC, in the south of Central Asia and adjacent territories, agricultural burial rites were characterized by two features: the cremation of bodies and the use of stones arranged in the form of a swastika. These elements were alien to local customs [13, c. 272].

**DEBATE.** The Oxus civilization is characterized by the continuous adoption of innovative practices regarding

the treatment of the deceased. Innovative processes include burying the deceased in jugs, the occurrence of incomplete or arranged skeletal bones, the presence of various animal bones (mostly sheep) in place of human skeletons, the placement of clay statues instead of corpses, the observation of ash remains in graves, and the construction of crematoriums for burning the deceased in cemeteries. Notably, the cremation ritual is found only in the cemetery complexes of pastoral populations, and its appearance in settled complexes indicates strengthened ethnocultural and familial ties between the northern steppe pastoral tribes and the southern settled farmers.

In the Turkmenistan part of the Oxus civilization, the burial rites of steppe pastoralists maintained their distinctiveness, while in the Sapalli culture of Bactria, the population with these two forms of economy achieved harmony in their burial rites. The situation in the Tajikistan part of Bactria, however, led to the emergence of new cultures.

**CONCLUSION.** In conclusion, it can be said that during the 2nd millennium BC, as a result of the mass migration of steppe pastoralists to the south, they exerted a significant influence on the material world of the Oxus civilization. This influence manifested particularly in the burial rites of the Oxus civilization, such as the adoption of cremation practices associated with steppe herders and the relocation of cemeteries outside of settlements.

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