Graves and Rituals in the Central Asian Steppes in the First Millennium BC

The first millennium BC was a period of nomadic domination of several important Iranian tribes. They were called ‘Scythians’ by the Greeks and ‘Saka’ by the Persians, collective names for very different tribes. Their heritage consists of graves and burial objects (Moškova 1992). The economic structure was relatively uniform from the Carpathes to East Mongolia, being nomadic with secondary agrarian sectors in river valleys and mountain regions. The graves and their contents differ according to regions and times. There are also local differences which depend upon the natural conditions: the wooden steppes and a part of the mountains offered enough material for building houses and for grave installations. In the steppes, the latter were generally dug into the earth or covered by earthen barrows. The tribes in the periphery of the Greek world resorted to tombs built in stone. In the mountains of the western regions caves were dug for burials, while in the eastern oases brick-built tombs were constructed.

Three social levels are recognisable on the basis of the size of the tombs and the offerings. Several differences in rituals are likely, but we practically have no texts on tribal beliefs. From several cemeteries cremation is known to have been practised, and tools have been found. Food as burial offering may be interpreted as supply for the journey to the other world or as offering for the underworld powers. Secondary burials may be understood as additions to the main burials or can be later additions. In some regions horses, sheep, and more seldom camels, are found in the tombs as well. Chariots are rare. The dominant factor are Central Asian traditions enriched by northern and East-Asian features.

The regional groups have been studied in different ways, and especially in the areas east of the Altai they are less known than those west of the Yenisei. In the Altai we found several groups of wooden burial buildings. The largest one is the Arzhan tomb, a circular structure (fig. 1) built with the wood of 6000 larch trees near the Uyuk lake (Grjaznov 1984). Its diameter is 110 m, and it includes a stone wall 30 m thick. The tomb is a ritualised rendering of
1. Arzhan kurgan, interior
2-3. White Lake near Arzhan
4. Pine-trees stone
5. Samalagataj
6. Turan second stela
7. Schematic plan of Arzhan kurgan
8. Arzhan kurgan, chamber 1
9. Arzhan kurgan, logs and beams of chamber 1

Fig. 1 – Tuva early nomads. Reindeer stone (top). (After Moškova 1992: pl. 71).
the round towns of the Bronze Age of Central Asia like Sintashtta (Gening et al. 1992). Seven rings with about seventy rooms surrounded a double burial square chamber; the innermost square measured 4 × 4 m, the outer one 8 × 8 m. The mausoleum seems to have remained intact until when road construction works began, the bulldozers broke the stone walls, the enclosed water flew off, and the tumulus was plundered. The excavators could find only poor remains. The largest complex included 187 horses, some with saddles and bridles, interred in seven rooms together with some herdsmen. In the central tomb were left poor fragments of two burials, and in the outer burial chamber eight men were interred, apparently staff members of the buried chief. The kurgan was surrounded by about 300 fireplaces preserving bones of a horse, cattle, and sheep. It seems that 300 horses were slaughtered in the funerary ritual. Until our times the kurgan has been venerated by yearly horse races. Similar kurgans were discovered in the north-eastern regions of China like Guinugu in Xinjiang (Debaine-Francfort 1988).

The dates of the great kurgan of Arzhan are disputed, as they seem to belong either to the eighth or early seventh century BC. The small group of copper and bronze weapons and decorative features are traceable to the East Sakian animal style. The majority of the tombs in the Altai mountains are earlier and date back to the sixth-third century BC. They are famous because they have preserved wood carvings and textiles. In some graves even tattoos in animal style were found (Rudenko 1958; 1970). The earliest one seems to be the tumulus at Bashadar (II), a barrow with a diameter of 58 m, famous for its sarcophagus with wood carvings displaying a row of walking tigers marching above wild sheep and elks, and for a fine fragment of a saddlecloth.

The five kurgans of Pazyrk (fig. 2) and the tumuli of Berel’ and Shibe are some centuries later. Special circumstances preserved a great amount of carvings and carpets of wool and felt, again in connection with horses. The large decorated felt from Grave V seems to have belonged to a burial yurt. Graves with wooden chambers at Justy, Ulandryk, Sajlugem, and in other sites (Kubarev 1987; 1991; 1992) were not plundered because no one expected to find gold or silver hoards; the wooden equipment, lost in the steppes, was preserved there.

Among the later groups, the tombs of Kokel are dated between the second century BC and the first century AD (Kenk 1984; 1986) and were identified as Hunno-Sarmatian. Five large and eighteen smaller kurgans with nine burials and twenty-four single graves and shaft graves were discovered on a plateau, a few of them being cenotaphs. Men were buried with their weapons, and women with mirrors and wooden casts (for jewellery?). In five cases the scull was not in the burial. Bows were found in 64 tombs, one of which in a woman’s grave. In twenty other graves there were models of bows together with wooden models of swords and daggers. Besides some ceramics the graves
contained cauldrons, some of them being terracotta copies. In Kokel’ no find showed animal-style decoration.

In the region east of the Altai there are the ‘Hunnic’ cemeteries from Noin Ula, Sosnova Pad, Darsun, and other sites as well (Rudenko 1969). In the tombs of Noin Ula the chiefs of the Xiongnu were buried in rectangular chambers with well-preserved silk, wool, or felt textiles. The tombs do not
contain any offering of horse or human beings, but preserved some examples of Bactrian and Chinese textiles as well as examples of late animal style.

In the Yenisei valley several cemeteries of the Tagar culture have come to light (Kiselev 1951; Členova 1967). One of the largest tombs is the kurgan at Salbyk, a chamber grave 25 m long going back to the fifth-fourth century BC (fig. 3). Besides it there were smaller graves, some of wood and others built of stone slabs and there were also cemeteries like those at Kulun, Issyk-Kul, Tepey, Turan II and Barsachinka. In the middle Yenisei valley stone cists in square form dated to the Tes period, e.g. to the second century BC - first century AD are attested.

A group of early migrants from the Karasuk culture of Mongolia erected a group of mausolea at Tagiskien from the seventh through the fourth centuries BC (fig. 4; Itina and Yablonskij 1997), in the Syr Darya region, as testified by ceramics. They are built in bricks and preserve the form of yurts, being the earliest domed tombs of Central Asia. The southern cemetery at Tagiskien has given more evidence about the fact that these brick monuments are actual ‘yurts’. The deceased was laid in a real tent which was burnt down and covered later on with an earthen barrow. Similar yurt graves existed at Sakarcha in Khorezmia (Yablonskij 1996).

The yurt graves were preserved by the Sakian tribes down to the second century BC – for example with the mausoleum of Balandy 2, which is a prototype of later Islamic mausolea (fig. 5; Tolstov 1961: 161-63). The ‘transmitters’ were former nomads who established themselves as a ruling élite in the oasis cultures of Central Asia, as is shown by the brick mausolea of Chirik-Rabat east of the Aral Lake (fig. 6; Tolstov 1961: 144-52; Vaynberg and Levina 1993). They have a square or round building inside an earthen tumulus.

Babish-Mulla II, a square building on a terrace (fig. 7; Tolstov 1961: 166-67) divided by two corridors crossing each other in the centre of a domed room also appears as a ritualisation of a big tent. It was erected in the second century BC (Moškova 1992: pl. 8).

The tombs of Uygarak (fig. 8) near the river Inkar Darya dating from the eighth-seventh century BC (Litvinskij 1984) carried on the Bronze Age traditions of square and rectangular graves below tumuli and graves on the ground covered by tumuli as well. The latter may have been laid in wintertime, when it was difficult to excavate a pit, even if religious reasons should not be excluded. In females’ graves transportable altars made of stone were occasionally found.

In the region of Semirech’e and in the Tian Shan existed different types of graves. Houses with walls made of logs were built at Besshatyr (fig. 9; Akišev and Kušaev 1963: 25-87), later covered with stones. In one case a sort of catacomb dug into the ground was discovered. Graves near Ketmen-tube (Moškova 1992: pl. 32) had wooden chambers, in most cases underground
1. Northern wall of larger kurgan
2. Plan of larger kurgan
3-5. Larger kurgan, sections of crypt and dromos
6. Larger kurgan, plan of crypt

Fig. 3 – Wooden burial house at Salbyk, Tagar culture. (After Moškova 1992: pl. 91).
tombs like those at Kenkol in the Altai. Flat pit graves dominated in the seventh and fifth centuries BC in the Tian Shan and in the Ili valley. The Ferghana valley had catacomb graves with long *dromoi*. Grave towers with a domed hall inside are of Old Turkish origin.

Scythian barrows on the valleys and plateaux of Pamir from the fifth-third centuries BC were rectangular and covered graves-cum-pits-oven cenotaphs. Stone cists were rare (Litvinskij 1984: 16-72).

The steppes of Kazakhstan were entirely covered with graves. The tomb of Chilikta of the sixth-fifth centuries BC (Černikov 1965) consisted of a wooden burial house covered by stones. The giant tumulus at Issyk (Akišev 1978) was plundered and destroyed, and only an additional grave in a wooden burial chamber could be excavated. The corpse of a young man was found, covered with golden ornaments in the most refined animal style. The normal
Fig. 5 – Balandy 2, Saka brick mausoleum, 'yurt' type, third-second century BC. (After Tolstov 1961: fig. 101).
Fig. 6 – Chirik-Rabat, tomb with square building in a barrow, third-second century BC. (After Tolstov 1961: fig. 71).
members of the tribes to whom he belonged were buried in stone cists under stone tumuli. The monumental graves at Tasmola in the Balkhash region (stone tumuli with ‘ears’, i.e. long swinging walls up to 80 m long), dating to the seventh-third century BC, remain unexplained to this day (Moškova 1992:  

Fig. 7 – Babish-Mulla 2, Saka tomb in form of a reception ‘tent’ (?), third-second century BC. (After Tolstov 1961: fig. 92).
fig. 51). About thirty groups of tombs at Berkkara near the oasis of Tashkent have round barrows and round or square stone settings on each side up to 100 m long.\(^1\)

Another feature of the funerary equipment showing eastern influences in the steppes and in the Altai mountains are the ‘stag stones’, so called because they are often decorated with images of a stag in the typical animal style (Novgorodova 1980: 129f, pl. 95-115; Moškova 1992: pl. 62, Altai; pl. 104, Baikal). The majority of the stag-stones known until now come from Mongo-

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\(^1\) An extremely rich cemetery of Saka times was found at Tillja Tepe (Sarianidi 1985) in northern Afghanistan. The contents of six graves were brought to Kabul, while a seventh one was plundered at the beginning of the war. The objects, formerly in the Kabul National Museum, could not be traced during the last ten years. The graves were in the form of flat pits, and the deceased persons were buried in wooden coffins. The post quem is given by a *soldier* of Tiberius of AD 15-21. The enormously rich grave finds consisted of Saka, Bactrian, Indian, Chinese, and Iranian artefacts. The Saka material connects the local ruling group with the Alans in the West and with the Altai area, where similar features had been observed in graves of the fourth-third centuries BC, this being the reason why they are recalled here.
Fig. 9 – Tasmol culture burials, Kazakhstan. (After Moškova 1992: pl. 51).
lia and the region of the Baikal Lake east of the Altai. They were erected near or on tumuli, and represented slain enemies like the *balbals* in Turkish times. They bear pictures of weapons, ornaments, girdles and other things, and do not include any iconic representation. They differ from the West Scythian grave sculptures, which consist of rough statues with heads and articulated arms and legs. One of them depicts a war chariot, though in warfare the nomads of the first millennium BC preferred riding, if we are right in dating hundreds of rock pictures of chariots from Central Asia to the second millennium BC. Until now there is no record of chariots in the graves of the first millennium, several ones having been found in tombs of the Bronze Age.

Other items which point to nomadic migrations through the steppes to the West ant South can be found in the graves among the weapons, the jewellery, and the ceramics. Mention can be made, for instance, of the appearance of the short sword which is found as far to the west as the Rhine Valley, of their pickaxe discovered even in a grave in Anatolia, of the chape with the scrolled animal, of the riding dress as represented on the Achaemenid reliefs, of the reflex bow, and, in general, of the animal style as can be traced back to the fourth millennium BC in Mongolia.

The existence of ossuaries in the ruins of Kalay-Gyr 1 (room 10) is peculiar. They are dated to late Achaemenid times and could be a Persian feature, not a nomadic one (Tolstov 1961:115-17). There are four-legs ossuaries, round ones in the shape of a house, cist-like ones, and others. The question of their dating is much debated. They can be dated two or three centuries earlier than the Achaemenid period, while the use of ossuaries in Koy-Krylgan Kala seems to begin in the fourth century BC (ibid.: 132-38), and were not in use among the tribes of the steppes.

The nomads seem to have buried their dead as there is no evidence until now of cremation or secondary interments. However, the pits vary – rectangular, square or oblong – and we ignore the reasons of these differences. The same is true for the barrows, whose form are square, oblong or round. The erection of burial houses points to the existence of log houses at least in winter camps, and the burial chambers in wood or stone may have had the same meaning. The fact that other tribes used the yurt as a grave instead of a wooden house, and then monumentalised it building it with bricks, is possibly due to an eastern influence or a migration of yurt dwellers to the Central Asian regions. The Arzhan kurgan and the other graves of this type seem to indicate that the deceased was a *cakrawartin*, a ruler of the world. It kept the tradition of the ritual centres of the Bronze Age and was a prototype of the Buddhist *stūpa*.

The rich decoration in the animal style of the grave reflected also rituals, as can be surmised from the additional grave of a young man containing rich golden ornaments in the Issyk kurgan. The young man had to accompany his chieftain in a special role, possibly that of a deity like Mithra (?). In this form of art, animals symbolise religious concepts, although we do not know for
what or whom they stand. Nor we know if the wealth of grave hoards like that of Tüllja-Tepe (see n. 1) was especially meant for the underworld or closely depicted the daily life of the tribal chiefs (a thing which does not exclude the former interpretation). The use of wooden substitutes in the Altai graves may indicate that in daily life the originals were used, and that, at the same time, the objects were considered necessary also in the other world. That the nomads believed in a second life after death cannot be doubted, although we have no detailed information about their beliefs.

REFERENCES