

SOCIAL AND HUMANITIES SCIENCE: RESEARCH, THEORY

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Editors

Asst. Prof. Dr. Şükrü ÜNAR
Dr. Senem KARAGÖZ



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CHAPTER 7

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION ON THE KURGANS OF TURKIC PERIOD AT ELEKE SAZY VALLEY

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Introduction

Eleke Sazy Valley is in Tarbagatai district of the Eastern Kazakhstan region at Republic of Kazakhstan. Recent research and studies by a team of Kazakh archaeologists under direction of Prof. Zainolla Samashev prove that Eleke Sazy valley has more than 300 kurgans. These kurgans are dated to a wide period between Late Bronze Age and Medieval Age (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 8; Kutlu, 2020a: 245; Kutlu, 2021: 57-58). This article based on the author's observations and participation of the archaeological excavations at Eleke Sazy in summer of 2019.



Photo 1: Eleke Sazy Valley (M. Kutlu, 2019)

Besides that, a Turkic burial-memorial complex is also uncovered at Eleke Sazy during the archaeological surveys and excavations (Photo. 2). The ancient

Turkic burial-memorial complex is located on the right bank of the Kargyba Stream, in the first group of burials, on the eastern part of Eleke Sazy burial ground (Samashev et al., 2016:134-136; Samashev et al., 2020: 35). The memorial complex consists of two main parts - a stone tomb and a ceremonial passageway. The stone tomb (bark) is square in plan and 30 x 30 m in dimensions. The ceremonial passageway is rectangular in plan and 14 x 36 m in dimensions. It is adjacent to the stone tomb and connected by a through labyrinth like corridor of the tomb. Both parts of the burial complex have independent fences in the form of rectangular stone-earth embankments (Samashev et al., 2020: 36-37). A granite Turkic statue in a typical Kagan's pose when legs crossed, left hand resting on a knee, right hand holding a ritual vessel was discovered in the tomb (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 27; Kutlu, 2020b: 265). Even though the general layout of the complex is similar with the memorial complexes of Turkic Khaganate located in Mongolia, there are no row of "balbal" called stone pillars in the east of the complex identified (Samashev et al., 2020: 37).



Photo 2: The Turkic Burial-Memorial Complex at Eleke Sazy (Akhmedov et al., 2019: 26)

1. The Kurgans of Turkic Period at Eleke Sazy

There are more than 60 structures of funeral and memorial purposes placed around the Turkic burial-memorial complex (Photo. 2 & 3). Possibly, some of them are directly related to the complex (Samashev et al., 2020: 37). Some of the Turkic period kurgans are also located around the burial-memorial complex. This praxis can be indication of dynastic or family kinship between the

burials. Similar praxis is also evident at Berel Kurgans (Kutlu & Kutlu, 2020: 175). Recent years at Eleke Sazy, eight kurgans belong to Turkic period were excavated. For example, four kurgans (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 27-31) in 2019, one kurgan (Samashev et al., 2020: 38-40) in 2020 and three kurgans (Aitkali, 2021b) were excavated in 2021.



Photo 3: Turkic kurgans around the burial-memorial complex (M. Kutlu, 2019)



Photo 4: A children's burial of the Turkic period (Akhmedov et al., 2019: 28)

A plundered children's burial, placed directly to the earthen pit in dimensions of 1.80 x1.30 m, in depth of 0.70 m; it was uncovered under the north-eastern wall of the fence (Photo. 4). A clay vessel, seashells, and a silver figurine of a *senmurv* or *simurgh*, a mythologic dog headed gryphon-like creature (Photo. 5), but with broken tail was found in the burial (Akhmetov et al., 2019, 29; Aitkali, 2021: 54).



Photo 5: The figure of “Senmurv” (Akhmedov et al., 2019: 29)

It is possible to observe depictions of *senmurvs* (Harper, 1961: 95-101; Comperati, 2006: 189-204) as well as various interpretations of this image in ancient Turkic art, they indicate the relatively exact dates of the construction of one or another monument of the early medieval era. The given mixed creature was widespread in the Sassanian art, during the 6th-7th centuries AD and especially, in the Sogdian depictions (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 29).

One of the earliest depictions of mixed creatures in Sasanian art dating back to 5th-6th century is on the rock reliefs of the great iwan of the Taq-i Bustan

palace located close to Kermanshah, Western Iran (Comperati, 2016: 75-76). Those figures were defined by K. Trevor as simurghs but the figure of simurgh is always associated with a bird in when it comes to Iranian art and literature (Compareti, 2015, 36-44). The iconography of the figure was widespread image, applied on textiles, metal vessels, murals, and other means of Sasanian art.

Symbolic interpretations of the figure with a dog's head and a bird's wings are depicted on dresses of some Ambassadors on Paintings of Afrasiab' Palace dating to 7th century AD. Furthermore, the eastern walls of the northern hall of Temple 2 at Panjikent have painted of a super-natural creature defined by some authors as simurgh as well (Azarpay, 1975: 168-177). However, the damaged figurine from Eleke Sazy is a stylized interpretation of the mixed creature defined as senmurv, it has some local elements and different from Sasanian counterparts. The figure has a feline-like paw and a bird's wing, yet the head of super-natural creature can hardly be defined as dog head with swinging tongue and open jaws. The silver figurine has significance for giving some clues about dating of the kurgan to around the 7th century.

An inlet burial of the ancient Turkic time, which was made in a shallow, rectangular pit, was recorded during examination of Big Earthen Kurgan placed in the sixth group of kurgans of the Eleke Sazy monuments. Turkic kurgan was formed closer to the main edge along the west-east line of the Big Kurgan of Scythian time. The skeleton (Photo. 6) was placed on its left side, face was oriented to the southeast while the head was oriented to the northeast. The arms were bent at the elbows (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 30). Researchers unearthed a tool made of tubular bone, small iron buckles (Photo. 7) and bone bow pads (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 30).



Photo 6: A burial of the ancient Turkic time, made in the embankment of the burial-memorial complex (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 30).



Photo 7: Bone findings or artifacts (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 30).

The Kazakh research team also excavated two more objects of the ancient Turkic period with rectangular fences located at the second group of kurgans at Eleke Sazy Valley. Unfortunately, the structures didn't contain any items or human remains (Photo. 8 & 9).



Photo 8: One of the excavated Turkic Kurgans at Eleke Sazy (Akhmetov et al., 2019: 31).



Photo 9: One of the excavated Turkic Kurgans at Eleke Sazy (Akhmetov, et all, 2019, 30).



Photo 10: One of the Turkic Kurgans at Eleke Sazy (M. Kutlu, 2019)

During the excavations of 2020 researchers examined, a stone-covered kurgan of oval-like shape measured as 8.18 x 8.63 m and located 8.00 m South of the burial-memorial complex (Photo. 10 & 11). After the opening of stone cover, a fence of a rectangular shape with dimensions of 7.10 x 6.60 m made of stone

rows was unearthed. In the middle part of the fence, stone slabs placed with a slight slope in the middle were detected. The rectangular corners of the fence were oriented to the cardinal points. The walls of the fence were composed of three to six layers of flat slabs. All four corners of the fence had additional masonry and were much higher, presumably up to 1.00 m above the walls (Samashev et al., 2020: 38-39).



Photo 11: One of the Turkic Kurgans at Eleke Sazy (Samashev et al., 2020: 38)



Photo 12: An iron buckle (Samashev, et all, 2020, 39)

Unfortunately, the burial was destroyed by robbers but scattered fragments of the remains of the deceased were found in a shallow grave pit. Fragments of the tubular bones and limbs of a horse were revealed at the outer part of the kurgan. The fragments of bones are possibly remains of an animal sacrificed for the ritual of hanging the skin of a horse on a pole, which was widespread among the ancient Turks. An iron buckle (Photo 12) with a movable tongue was also found here (Samashev et al., 2020: 39).

Another excavated rectangular stone fence was attached to the mentioned kurgan and has dimensions of 2.10 x 1.20 m. Disturbed remains of an adolescent were found within the fence two or three-layers masonry of which were preserved (Photo. 13). A skeleton's head was oriented to the east with a slight deviation to the south. Adornment such as three silver rings, an iron knife, eight-shaped iron bits, beads of glass and white stone, a belt buckle with a movable tongue as well as a ring-shaped silver piece discovered during excavations clearly points at female gender of the buried (Samashev et al., 2020: 39-40).



Photo 13: The skeleton with the findings (three silver rings, an iron knife, eight-shaped iron bits, beads of glass and white stone, a belt buckle)
(Samashev et al., 2020: 40)

As part of East Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition, a team of Kazakh archaeologists has excavated three kurgans dated to Turkic period at Eleke Sazy Valley in summer of 2021. There were no uncovered artefacts or findings at two

kurgans that were looted completely. A preserved excavated kurgan was 5 m of south of the ditch of the burial-memorial complex. It was coated with dense vegetation and had sub-rectangular stone cover. A human and a horse remains were placed in the earthen pit in the centre of the quadrangular fence of stone slabs which was under the stone cover. Burial pit was also covered with stone slabs, a damaged horse skeleton remains were placed at 0,30 m in depth while a human skeleton was placed a little deeper. Both a horse and a human placed on his/her back were oriented to the east. Some of the finds consist of a metal belt buckle, iron knife, iron arrowhead as well as many small metal objects decorating belt (Aitkali, 2021b).

Evaluation and Conclusion

Recent studies on the Kurgans of Turkic Period in Central Asia have revealed new remarkable results. On the other hand, still much more excavations and research are needed to reach outstanding findings and knowledge. In short, the kurgans of Turkic Period at Eastern Kazakhstan have examined in two groups: “Berel type” kurgans (Samashev, 2011: 103-114) and the Kurgans with beard or mustache (Aitkali, 2021a: 38-45). In comparison, the kurgans of Turkic period at Eleke Sazy can be defined as “Berel type” because of the similarities in architectural features, findings, and funeral rites.

In addition to that the kurgans of Turkic period at Eleke Sazy, reflect the main characteristics of Turkic period from the aspects of burial customs including architectural features, material culture, practice of horse burial and the orientation of bodies. For instance, the kurgans of Turkic period at Eleke Sazy have many similarities with the kurgans of Turkic period kurgans at Berel burial ground. Like as Berel Kurgans, having burials between Iron Age to Medieval Age, the kurgans of Eleke Sazy also prove that “cultural continuity” have been evident in funeral rites from Iron Age to Medieval Periods (Kutlu & Kutlu, 2021: 772-798).

In last three years, eight kurgans of Turkic period at Eleke Sazy are excavated but most of them are robbed completely and the archaeological findings are very limited to make comprehensive statements. We hope to uncover much more findings from the excavations of the coming years at Eleke Sazy Valley. I have special thanks to Prof. Zainolla Samashev, Leila Kutlu and the Team of East Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition.

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