

THE METAL AGES AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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**A CEREMONIAL SADDLE FROM ALTYNKAZGAN,
MANGYSHLAK PENINSULA, KAZAKHSTAN**

An unusual saddle found in a stone enclosure at Altynkazgan on the Mangyshlak Peninsula, Kazakhstan, is described. Its parts include silver plaques with figures of animals and birds, and small details of garniture. The figures were punched from the inside, apparently on a template made from wooden planks, and their details were modeled with a special tool. On the basis of parallels from the Volga region, Transurals, and Northern Caucasus, a Xiongnu-type saddle manufactured in the 5th century AD is reconstructed. A semantic and cultural interpretation of zoomorphic images is suggested. Though they have no exact parallels, their style is typical of golden ornaments of the Xiongnu Age. The Altynkazgan find demonstrates that high-quality saddles were already manufactured during the Xiongnu epoch, being prototypical of those made by Old Turks.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Mangyshlak, Xiongnu, Late Sarmatians, saddles.

Introduction

The cult and burial complex Altynkazgan is located on the Mangyshlak Peninsula on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, in the valley between the chalk scarp of Northern Aktau and the Western Karatau Mountains within the Tobekudyk, Uryzhol, and Kulaat highlands (Fig. 1). The major part of the peninsula is occupied by saline desert, with areas of dried sparse vegetation. The relief has been formed by a number of processes related to the growth of the Karatau Mountains, elevation of the western part of the Turanian Plate, and erosion wave action of the paleo-Caspian Sea. Swale areas have shallow-channel depressions.

The Altynkazgan site was discovered in spring 2010 owing to F. Akhmadullin, a resident of the Aktau city, who found ancient artifacts that he gave to archaeologist

A.E. Astafyev. Visiting the location of discovery, archaeologists identified a large complex of the remains of aboveground stone structures, in an area of over 120 ha. Unfortunately, the social and economic situation in the region discouraged the conducting of archaeological studies; so it was not until 2014 that the authors of this article managed to excavate several objects in the territory of the site, including the stone enclosure, inside which Akhmadullin found the silver plaques of a saddle.

**Description
of the site and the course of excavations**

Archaeological sites (eight complexes) are located on the ridge-like prominences. Two branches of an ancient

caravan track, that are well visible on the satellite map, go through the eastern sector of the complex. Detailed examination of the locality has identified stone structures of five basic types: stone enclosures composed of several rows of vertically dug-in slabs or with the walls built up using flagstones; “sacrificial-altar” structures made up of rounded, trapezoidal, horseshoe-shaped, or tetragonal flagstones; slabby loose rock-fills and arc-shaped spreads (sometimes, two-row ones); high mounds with rock-dirt fills; and flat mounds with rock fills. The dimensions of enclosures are from 4×4 to 34×24 m*.

The enclosure (object No. 15) where the silver saddle-plaques were found is in the central part of the site (Fig. 2). The rectangular-plan enclosure has dimensions of 15.5×1.0 m; its longitudinal axis is oriented along a N–S line, with a small eastward deviation due to magnetic variation (Fig. 3). Before excavations, the contours of slabs in a vertical orientation and rock-and-dirt ridges were discernible. During excavations, it was ascertained that the walls of the enclosure were made with the two-row masonry technique: aleurolite sandstone slabs were dug in to a depth of 10–15 cm, and rose above the ancient surface-level by 40–50 cm. The width of the enclosure walls is 0.8–1.2 m. Through passages are arranged in the northern and southern walls along the central axis.

The remaining parts of the horizontal flagstone backfill lie on the soil layer of 20–25 cm in thickness rather than on the bedrock base, so it is believed that the inter-masonry space of the walls was filled with soil. It is likely that the longitudinal walls were strengthened using a one- or two-layer flagstone deck. The height of the northern and southern walls was at least 1 m. Once all slabby wrecks near the northeastern corner of the enclosure were removed, a dromos spot was identified on the outside of the northern wall, after excavation of which a catacomb burial was discovered (Fig. 3, 6). The following objects were found at the bottom of the burial chamber: the skeleton of a young girl, the skeleton of a 1-year-old child, an iron single-edged knife, a four-sided bead made of dark blue glass, six ceramic vessels, a censer with the remains of wood coal, a wire (lead-tin bronze) earring in the form of a helix-shaped symbol, and an aleurolite sub-triangular plate without traces of working.

Two molded pot-shaped vessels dug-in vertically in the bedrock-base to 8–10 cm were exposed in the



Fig. 1. Location of the Altynkazgan site.

northwestern sector of the enclosed space at the level of the ancient surface. An accumulation of more than 400 fragments (easel and molded ceramics) of six or seven vessels, mainly large ones, was identified in the northeastern sector at the level of the ancient surface (to a greater extent, 7–10 cm above the ancient horizon). The sherds are relatively thin-walled, with a reddish outer surface, possibly engobed (Fig. 3, B).

Description of the saddle and the saddle-fittings

Upon removal of the internal filling of the enclosure space, the contours of a narrow oblong pit (a child's grave?) of late origin and remains of the pit, where Akhmadullin found the saddle parts, were identified. The pit was located 1.5 m from the western wall of enclosure. During excavations, it was ascertained that the saddle-fragments lay at a depth of approximately 70 cm from the present-day surface. Cleaning of the uneven pit walls has identified only bedrock layers; consequently, this was not a burial. Examination of the spoil heap has revealed small silver parts of the saddle trappings and small fragments of plaques, three silver bells, two metal parts of the whip-handle, and pieces of rotten wooden plates indicative of the presence of the remains of a saddle having a rigid wooden frame just at this location. The saddle is represented by silver plaques with copper edging of the saddlebows and shelves. According to R.S. Minasyan (a researcher at the State Hermitage and a leading expert

*Preservation of the visible parts of masonry structures is different even within a single complex. This is related to both natural destruction of stone slabs, and manmade impact in modern times. Therefore, in many cases the architecture of the objects can be only determined after archaeological excavations. More detailed description of the Altynkazgan burial and commemorative complex is beyond the scope of this article; this topic will be expanded in a separate publication currently being prepared.

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