

THE METAL AGES AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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**METAL DETAILS OF MONGOLIAN AGE BELT-SETS  
FROM THE ANGARA TAIGA**

*Belt-sets with saber clip-plates and other metal details had appeared during the time of the Mongolian Empire and eventually spread across Eurasia. Items of six such sets, manufactured of nonferrous metals, were found at Prospikhinskaya Shivera IV on the lower Angara. The chemical composition of the alloys indicates several casting techniques. The Angara belts testify to cultural contacts in high medieval northern Eurasia.*

**Keywords:** Angara, High Middle Ages, cultural contacts, belt-sets, X-ray fluorescence analysis, alloy composition.

**Introduction**

The lower Angara basin represents a great part of the southern taiga zone in Middle Siberia, which is the best studied archaeological area in this vast territory. The recently obtained data enable the recognition of the lower Angara as a region of historical processes of northern Eurasia that took place throughout the Middle Ages. Imported goods recovered from a number of sites support the assumption that the Angara tribes were engaged in complex cultural contacts with distant regions. One such site is the high medieval burial ground of Prospikhinskaya Shivera IV, where a significant quantity of imported goods was discovered, indicating contacts between the indigenous Angara people and the populations of the western, southwestern and southern regions (Senotrusova, 2013: 20).

Belt-decoration sets with clip-plates, which were spread over Eurasia during the Mongolian expansion, are noteworthy (Kramarovsky, 2000, 2008; Tabaldiev, 2011: 176; and others). Traditional “agsarga” belts, together with the flat and wide arrowheads, “Mongolian” bow, question-mark earrings, and other things, clearly indicate the Mongolian age of the archaeological assemblage. M.G. Kramarovsky concluded that the belt-set of this type was ultimately formed by the Chingizid period. Its main features are large saber clip-plates with loops, two-part buckles, small onlays (lunulae) placed close together, a large subrectangular belt-tip, and the absence of hanging straps and onlays with slits (Kramarovsky, 2002: 69). The belt was an important object in the life of a Mongolian warrior, marking his valor and social status. Occurrence of the belt-sets typical of the Mongolian Empire period in the southern taiga zone of Siberia

testifies to the involvement of various populations of this zone in the life of the huge empire.

### Description of the belt-sets

Currently, seven belt-sets of the Mongolian period have been recorded in the lower Angara region. Six belt-sets have been found in the Prospikhinskaya Shivera IV burial ground, and one set was reported from the burial site at the Chadobets River\*. Items of belt-sets from the said burial ground have been analyzed using the X-ray fluorescence spectrometer ALPHA SERIES (model Alpha-2000, USA) and the certified technique (Tishkin, Khavrin, 2006: 144–146; Gorbunova, Tishkin, Khavrin, 2009: 103–106; Tishkin, Seregin, 2011: 61–65; and others). Investigations have been carried out at the Chair of Archaeology, Ethnography and Museology of the Altai State University, under the supervision of one of the authors. The obtained results allow the issue of the place of the belts' manufacture to be raised, and also provide additional information on their dispersal in Siberia. Descriptions of each belt-set, including identifications of metal alloy compositions, are provided below.

**Belt I (from burial 6).** The set includes 13 metal items that were irregularly dispersed over the burial. The grave-pit revealed fragments of calcined human bones; the age of the deceased was estimated at 18–24 years (Senotrusova, Mandryka, Poshekhonova, 2014: Table 1). The belt-set includes clip-plates ( $n = 3$ ; two of which have a loop), a belt-tip, onlays ( $n = 3$ ), and a buckle with a metal prong (Fig. 1, I). All items bear geometric ornament in the form of circles with depressed centers. The belt was likely about 2.2 cm wide. Some items show signs of burning that might have affected the surface metal layer, analyzed using an X-Ray fluorescence spectrometer.

The main part of the buckle and the belt-tip were cast of multicomponent brass (Table 1) with a high lead content. The three clip-plates and small onlays were made of a similar alloy. The majority of these items contain an abnormally large proportion of iron. The chemical composition of the alloy of one of the clip-plates with a loop shows the presence of silver (3.14 %).

The ornament pattern in the form of circles with depressed centers is typical of Jurchen decorative bronze rings of the 12–13 centuries (Shavkunov, 1990: Table 49, 12, 13). A similar design has been recorded on the belt of the Mongolian period from grave 2 at Chasovennaya Gora. The clip-plates and onlays of this belt were made of agalmatolite (Gavrilova, 1965: Fig. 13, 17).

**Belt II (from burial 7).** The burial revealed two belt-sets belonging to two persons. Calcined bone fragments

of an adult man and an adolescent, whose sex was not identified, were discovered (Senotrusova, Mandryka, Poshekhonova, 2014: Table 1).

The set of belt II comprises 14 items including clip-plates ( $n = 3$ ), a belt-tip, small cordiform onlays ( $n = 7$ ), and a buckle with a metal prong (Fig. 1, II). The belt's width was approximately 2.2–2.4 cm. Two clip-plates with loops and cordiform onlays show a representation of the main composition: "Fallow deer (roe deer?) under the branched tree". The clip-plate without loop exhibits the image of a curled feline predator (?) framed with a floral ornament. A four-petal flower is clearly visible in the upper part. The tip-plate shows the images of a deer (elk?) and a large predator (bear?) in a decorative frame. A floral motif also decorates the belt-buckle.

The detailed results of the X-ray fluorescence analysis of this belt-set have been published elsewhere (Mandryka, Senotrusova, Tishkin, 2010). Here we present only a brief summary. All the items in this set were cast of bronze (copper-lead-tin alloy with minor admixtures of iron, and traces of silver and other elements); no coating with precious metals was recorded. All the items were made using a single technique and likely in one and the same workshop (Ibid.: 36).

Belt decorative elements bearing the image of "Fallow deer under the branched tree" represent comparatively rare artifacts in Eurasia, but they mark the introduction of particular features of the Mongolian culture into other regions (Kramarovskiy, 2000). Artifacts bearing such images have been reported from northern Lower Volga, northern Caucasus, and elsewhere. The richest belt-decoration set was revealed at the Tash-Bashat burial ground in the northeastern part of Central Asia. Many sets were made of gold and silver, and are attributed to festive hunting belt-sets (Kramarovskiy, 2002: 56). The belts with such decorations were in use for a comparatively short period of time, ranging from the 1240–1270s till the mid-14th century (Ibid.: 65). The composition originated in the Far East, and had analogues in the Jurchen and Khitan toreutics (Shavkunov, 1990: Table 41, 3), from where it was borrowed by Mongols.

**Belt III (from burial 7).** The belt-set comprises 11 items, including bi-metal buckle, clip-plates ( $n = 3$ ), small onlays ( $n = 4$ ), and a belt-tip (Fig. 1, III). The belt was probably 2.0–2.2 cm wide. The belt-set items were decorated with smooth rolls-ridges. Some of them show traces of burning.

Practically all the main pieces of the decorative set were cast in multicomponent brass with a high proportion of lead (Table 2). Most probably they were manufactured as a single set in the same workshop.

Interestingly, four belt-keepers were also recovered in the burial. Two plain belt-keepers were initially attributed to belt II (with the fallow deer representations); another two belt-keepers with smooth sharp-edged rolls were

\*Two more Angara belt-sets with saber clip-plates come from looting excavations.

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