

THE METAL AGES AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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THE BURIAL RITE OF THE EARLY SCYTHIAN NOMADS OF TUVA (BASED ON THE BAI-DAG I CEMETERY)*

Excavations at the Bai-Dag I cemetery, the Eerbek River valley, Tuva, have revealed a burial rite typical of the Aldy-Bel culture, Early Scythian period. Above-ground and underground structures, principal features of the burial rite, and burial goods are described with regard to sex and age. Basic trends in the evolution of early nomadic funerary ritualism in Tuva are reconstructed.

Keywords: *Tuva, Early Scythian period, early nomads, burial rite, Aldy-Bel culture.*

Introduction

In 2011, researchers from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS participating in the Russian Geographical Society salvage project “Kuragino–Kyzyl Railway” developed a program of archaeological and environmental studies in the respective area. Within the framework of this project, during the field season of 2011, two teams from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography excavated the burial grounds of Ak-

Dag I, Khendei-Aksy, Bai-Dag I and VI located in the valley of the Eerbek River – a small right tributary of the Yenisei. Bai-Dag I is the largest cemetery in this group. This site was discovered in 2009 by the Tuvan expedition from the Institute for the History of Material Culture RAS (St. Petersburg) led by V.A. Semenov. The site was named after the mountain located on the right bank of the Eerbek (Semenov, 2009: 53–54). Seven burial mounds (kurgans) were excavated, some of which contained several burials. Kurgan 5 seemingly represents a ritual construction, since no burials were found inside. Materials recovered from Bai-Dag I yield important information on the funerary ritualism of the Early Scythian period in Tuva. Archaeological sites of this period are insufficiently studied, and new findings are important to the reconstruction of Early Iron Age chronology and the population history of southern Siberia. Excavations at

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Bai-Dag I are also relevant to understanding the use of Scythian mounds during later periods, as demonstrated by an intrusive burial associated with the Kokel culture and a Xiongnu–Xianpi “hoard” of iron weapons (Hidiakov et al., 2011).

Results and discussion

In Tuvan Early Scythian burial grounds, kurgans are normally arranged in rows on gently sloping hillsides. A similar kurgan arrangement can be observed at Bai-Dag I. Kurgans 3, 6, and 7 are set equidistant from each

other and form a row stretching northwest–southeast on a gentle slope of a hill on the right bank of the Eerbek River. Kurgans 1, 2, 4, and 5 standing at various distances from each other surround kurgan 3. These mounds may have been the first of two new lines which were to run parallel to the main line.

The kurgans were erected on relatively flat turfed areas covering rock exposures in some places. They are flat, round or oval, made of fragments of sandstone slabs and debris, and markedly eroded. Some have circular enclosures made of horizontally placed stones (Fig. 1). In some cases, tilted, standing, sandstone slabs surround the structure. Near kurgan 1, the enclosure was erected along



a



b

Fig. 1. Circular enclosures of kurgans 1 (a) and 2 (b).

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