

Aral-Caspian Region the Contact Area of the Early Iron Age Cultures and Civilizations (The analysis of the archaeological sites investigated as a part of the "Cultural Heritage" National Program)

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Abstract. In this article the archaeological sites of the early Iron Age of the Aral-Caspian region studied as a part of the "Cultural Heritage" national program of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in the context of some integration and migration processes within the marked area in the times of the early nomads are analyzed. All of these aspects are considered in a view of the diverse contacts of the local cultures and the advanced civilizations of Central Asia, Middle East and the Eurasian continent as a whole, during the indicated historical period.

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Introduction

The "Cultural Heritage" national program was developed in 2003, and was intended to establish a holistic system of studying the great cultural heritage of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The program was launched in 2004 and designed for two years. Afterwards two phases of the program were developed: from 2007 till 2009 and from 2009 till 2011 [1]. During the implementation of the program an enormous number of the archaeological sites of all the historical eras almost all over Kazakhstan were studied [1], including within the Aral-Caspian region, which is very important from the perspectives of the cultural and civilizational contacts. The Aral-Caspian region geographically includes the territory between the Aral and Caspian seas, the Caspian and Aral steppes and a considerable part of Western Kazakhstan. Over the last years this ambiguous region has attracted the close attention of scientists of different fields: the humanities and social, natural, engineering sciences. It is naturally due to the special role of the Aral-Caspian region as the recognized and important centre of the ethnocultural, ethnogenetic, historical and political processes on the Eurasian continent, the current research traditions, as well as, of course, a special geopolitical importance of the region, where the large-scale oil and gas field development is carried out. The targeted academic, academic and research interest in the region has been long since expressed by the historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, architects, sociologists, economists, geographers, biologists, ecologists and others. In this case the development of the historical and cultural issues of the Aral-Caspian region with its richest ethnopolitical history, numerous unique archaeological sites and the special traditional culture of nomadic breeders, is particularly important and

fundamental. It is quite obvious, that the statement and solution of the complex historical, cultural and collateral problems of the Aral-Caspian region require its extensive discussion and consolidation of the activity of the scientists from different countries [2]. As a part of the "Cultural Heritage" program, along with the sites of the other historical periods two statuesque landmarks of the early Iron Age - the Kyzyluiyk sanctuary of the Sarmatian culture on Ustiurt and the Saka ancient settlement Chirik-Rabat in the Aral sea region were investigated in this region.

Main part

Studying the antiquities of the Aral-Caspian region of the early Iron Age is the pressing task of the contemporary archaeology while solving the issues of the ethno- and culture genesis. In this case, a special attention should be paid to the funerary and religious sites, which contain a large amount of the ethno-determinative and ethno-differentiative information. One of the most important historic landmarks of the Aral-Caspian region of the early Iron Age is the sanctuary of the Sarmatian culture - Kyzyluiyk, which is located on the Northern Ustyurt, in the section of the Khorezm-Edil caravan route. The preliminary date of constructing the sanctuary is the 4th century B.C. - 2nd century A.D. [3]. The Kyzyluyik sanctuary - is a formidable "closed" religious centre, where the divine services were celebrated and the gods were worshipped. One could realize which gods the sanctuaries raised up on Ustyurt were devotedto, while exploring the structure of the main religious buildings and the sites outside the church, including stone statues. The anthropomorphic statues were mainly located to the south or to the east of the circular religious building,

while forming small rows and groups: moreover, they had been always faced the west or the north, towards the sunset - to the mythical "dead country". According to the then existing beliefs, through the magical rites a priest "restored" the world order, disturbed by a human death or a disaster.

The features of the architectural techniques of the Kyzyluyik sanctuary were exposed: the main religious building - is a key element of the complex; the anthropomorphic statues and altars were "linked" to such complexes in particular. The plan of the building is based on the regular circle or two concentric circles. A well shaft and an entry alcove opened into the inner "yard" of the religious building of the Kyzyluyik sanctuary. The building diameter was 1 meter, the thickness of the ring-wall was 6.5-7 m and the inside diameter was 7 m. The building height was 10-12 m. The Kyzyluyik sanctuaries - are the advanced form and the technique of constructing the stone complex buildings on the basis of the arisen religious beliefs. The start time of constructing the Ustyurt religious complexes is dated from the 5th century B.C. In the early Iron Age, the Aral-Caspian region was some kind of a natural "bridge" connecting the steppes of the Trans-Volga region, the Southern Cisurals and Northern Kazakhstan with the areas of the ancient civilizations on the territory of modern Turkmenistan and Eastern Iran. In the 2nd century B.C. - early A.D. was the golden age of the Sarmatian culture of the Aral-Caspian region and the increase in the military and political activity. One could preliminarily identify two centres of the Sarmatian ethnopolitical associations within the Aral-Caspian intermarum, indicated by the mighty sanctuaries with the statues of armed warriors of the Baite type in the south and the Kyzyluyik one in the north [4]. For a long time, this area had remained a blank spot, the absence of the active industrial activity in the contemporary history ensured a unique safety for the Ustyurt landmarks of all ages, of course, if they were not ravaged. The investigation of the Sarmatian and Massagetic sanctuaries - Baite 1-3, Teren, Karamunke, Konay, etc. - revealed many aspects of the world outlook and religious beliefs of the early nomads, who lived in the steppes between the Aral and Caspian seas [5].

The Kyzyluyik sanctuary is the most mighty stone stepped building of a circular plan in the territory of Kazakhstan dated from the middle - end of the I millennium B.C. [6].

The other equally important landmark of the early Iron Age in the Aral-Caspian region, investigated as a part of the "Cultural Heritage" program is - the ancient settlement Chirik-Rabat in the Aral sea region. The ancient settlement occupies the entire area of a natural hill with the dimensions of

850x600 m strengthened by a heavy fortification system. At the bottom of the hill a trench with a width of 40 m in some places and a depth of up to 4.5 m is dug, an outer rampart is constructed out of the trench excavations. The extant height of it is 3 m, the width at the bottom is up to 8-10 m. The findings of the Chirik-Rabat investigated sites indicate a high social level of the residents of the ancient settlement and villages, which were headed by a king and the military aristocracy. The society was divided into several hierarchical categories. According to the enormous burial mounds, at the upper stage there were royal personages followed by priesthood and military aristocracy, one of which graves was investigated in 2005. The lowest stage was occupied by the rest members of the society, who settled in numerous undefended settlements near the ancient settlement Chirik-Rabat. The studies of the material culture of the Chirik-Rabat circle tribes demonstrated, that the region was developed in a close contact with the tribes of Middle East, the civilization of the Mediterranean sea and Egypt [7].

Conclusions

The Aral-Caspian historical and cultural region, which geographically includes the territory of the flat country Turan, the Caspian lowlands and the southernmost tip of the Ural Mountains, has been long regarded by experts as the most important centre of the ethnogenetic and ethnocultural processes in Eurasia [8; 9]. In the geopolitical context the coupling position had been anciently typical for the region, which, along with neighbouring Saryarka was surrounded and even "wedged" into the large historical and cultural areas: Central Asia, the Altai-Sayan Highlands, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe [8]. The continental ties, which connected these regions, with Asia and Europe took place here. In its northern part the Aral-Caspian region eventually becomes an integral part of the largest historical and cultural space - the Great Steppe Belt. In general, the region under consideration is presented as the most important cultural and genetic centre, which is associated with the historical destiny of many ancient people [10], the people of the Middle Ages and the New Age: the Sarmatians, the Saka, the Massagetae, the Dahi-Parthians, the Alans, the Magyars-Hungarians, the Oghuz-Seljuks, the Kipchaks, the Kazakhs, the Turkmens, the Bashkirs, and others. The area, which is associated with the development of cattle breeding in the temperate zone, due to the occurrence of the potential centres of the horse and sheep domestication on the northern and southern borderlands; the rise and the fall of the largest ethnopolitical associations, states - the confederal

union of the Sarmatians tribes, Massagetian Turan, the state of the Oghuz Yabgu, the Nogai Horde [9].

The cultural and historical diversity of this steppe (desert-steppe) area, which from the ancient times had been developed by breeders, originally turned out to be similar to its general geographic specifics. The substrate factors played a primary role in the ethno- and culture genesis of this specific region not by an accident; its permanent importance was to a large extent due to the inter-ara-caspiyan ecocultural niche [2] (historical Mangyshlak). As a result of these natural and historical conditions for almost three millennia the huge territory of the Aral-Caspian arid steppe was essentially a classical country of nomadism - which probably was the most evident and the largest one in Eurasia [6]. And it was here, where in most cases all the conquests of nomads - the Sarmatians, the Saka, the Huns, etc. began, as this area had the coupling position between Middle East, the Caucasus and Europe. In addition, this region played an important role as the intersection of trade routes. All the aforesaid is reflected in the archaeological sites. Even its brief overview shows, that the Aral-Caspian region was a cultural and civilizational contact area over much of the Eurasian continent, both in the early Iron Age, and, of course, in other previous and subsequent historical eras.

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