

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROSPECTION IN THE NORTH-WESTERN CASPIAN REGION

ABSTRACT

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Till today the Bronze and Iron Age Cultures of the area of interest were investigated using only the data of burials. Thousands of the burial mounds - kurgans have been excavated, the materials have been published and explored. The issues of the burial rite, dating back, social organisation, economy system and way of life of the ancient population have been mostly cleared. At the same time the numerous settlements that, due to the small portions and the absence or very thin cultural layers were traditionally considered as seasonal settlements of cattle breeders, remain virtually unexplored. The paper is devoted the first results of the archaeological settlement survey in the North-Western Caspian. The aerial photography, digital maps were used for the searching of the settlements in the steppe, and for finding the conformity to natural laws of the distribution burial mounds groups and living places in different landscape environment.

Currently, archaeological evidence for the Bronze Age of the Eurasian Steppe between the Carpathians and the Urals is represented mostly by burial mounds - kurgans. The quantity of these kurgans, which have been excavated during many years, is very large, and comes down to many thousands. The grave goods uncovered from those kurgans are very numerous, well preserved, and often undisturbed. Many of them are objects of decorative art and often are made of silver and gold. Some burial mounds have large sizes, and provide a nice possibility for reconstructions. The settlements in the steppe are not as attractive as the kurgans. Very seldom do they possess an intact cultural layer; most often the cultural layer is destroyed, and the finds are not so valuable, as those in the kurgans. Traditionally, in Russian archaeology the steppe settlements are considered to be a defective archaeological source with a little potential for valuable scientific information. They are considered as such when compared with the settlements from other geographical regions, where the sites possess thick cultural layers, remains of dwellings and other numerous finds. On the basis of very superficial investigations, and without any special analysis, many steppe settlements were interpreted as seasonal nomadic camps. In many important works and monographs archaeological material from settlements was neglected: sometimes only listed, but not analyzed and interpreted. As a result, the questions pertaining to chronology, social organisation, economic system and way of life of ancient populations of the steppe have been addressed mostly on the basis of the data derived exclusively from the burials. According to this tradition, which is still predominant in Russian archaeology, the Bronze Age inhabitants of the steppe between the Black Sea and the Urals should be interpreted as nomadic cattle breeders similar to those of the Early Iron Age.

The investigations of some leading scholars were concerned with the problem of the origin of the nomadism in the Eurasian Steppe between Black Sea and Urals, who used the evidence from the Bronze Age archaeological sites. This discussion still continues for over fifty years. It was initiated by F. Hanchar in his famous book "Das Pferd in Prähistorischer Zeit" published in 1955, in which he had

come to a conclusion that "the open steppe from the Pont to the Caspian sea" was settled by the first nomads in this region. Hanchar called that part of the steppe "open" because the eastern part of the East European Steppe is not restricted by the mountains, as is its western portion skirted by the Carpathians. Hanchar suggested that the first nomads appeared in the Late Bronze Age and ascribed them to the Srubnaya Culture. Later this idea was developed theoretically by V. Shilov, N. Merpert in their fundamental works. They have extended the chronological marker for the beginning of the nomadism to the Early and Middle Bronze Age - to the corresponding Yamnaya and Catacomb Cultures (Merpert 1974, Shilov 1964, 1975, 1975a, 1985).

However, there is a serious problem with this long-accepted model of socio-economic organization of the ancient steppe populations. This problem is rooted in the tradition of interpreting ancient societies only on the bases of the burial material and living behind the materials from the so-called seasonal settlements and small habitation places.

As a matter of fact, the number of the steppe settlements is not so scarce. According to S. Pustovalov (1994), there are 245 habitation places in the Black Sea area. Out of these, 7 settlements in the Southern Bug region and 11 in the Lower Dnepr region have substantial cultural layers; and 91 settlement sites have no cultural layers. The thickness of these cultural layers varies up to 0.2 m and the area up to 100 m² (Pustovalov 1994:86-104). V. Shilov has defined approximately 200 settlement sites in the Lower Volga, which mostly contained traces of light dwellings, ash, and numerous fragments of ceramic and animal bones (Shilov 1985:27).

The hypothesis of the emergence of nomadism during the Bronze Age was considered especially applicable to one part of the East European Steppe - the right bank of the Lower Volga. This region was noted by F. Hanchar as the driest part of the "open steppe" with the prevalence of the semi-desert landscapes. This region, namely the North-West Caspian or the Volga-Manych Steppe, by and large belongs to the modern Republic of Kalmykia in Russian Federation.

The investigations conducted so far have neglected factors that are closely related to the environmental characteristics of the steppe land. The Mesolithic and Neolithic settlements in the steppe seldom have any cultural layers, and they are also represented by small sites. For example, out of the few dozens of the Neolithic sites, which have been investigated on the territory of the Republic of Kalmykia, only three settlements have substantial cultural layer (Kolzov 1988:4, 12-14). Not a single Mesolithic site with a cultural layer has been identified there so far (Sinizyn 1933, Minaeva 1955:46-53, Praslov 1971:102-107, Malov 1989:25-37, Kolzov 1982:100-107). The Stone Age population of the Mesolithic and Neolithic Periods has never been considered as that having a nomadic way of live. I think this is a problem that has to do with the preservation of the cultural layers there. The steppe landscape is characterized by the slow soil formation properties, which include the scarcity of grass growth and strong wind erosion. In the pre-industrial times for the population, which inhabited the steppe with its scarcity of natural resources (water-grass), the most reasonable kind of settlement was a small village, containing only a few houses, the so-called "hutor" (russ). Because of such factors, the state of the preservation of such cultural layers is affected. Hence methods of field archaeology and criteria for their interpretation must be different from those used in other geographical areas (for example forest zones).

This year an archaeological Prospection project has been organized, which for the first time aimed specifically at finding settlements and occupation sites of the Bronze and Early Iron Age Periods on the territory of the Kalmyk Republic (75,9 thousands sq.km). The region of interest included three types of landscape, those from the Caspian Lowland, Ergeni Hills, and Kuma-Manych Lowland. The Ergeni Hills are the young part of the East European Plain, which are extended from North to South and are complicated by a hollow-ravines network. The hollows are extended in the lateral directions and are closely connected with the underground water system.

The Caspian Lowland is slopping from the North-West to the East-South. The elevation marks are + 12-15 to the -27 m. In the northern part of the Caspian Lowland there are few systems of valleys. The largest of them are extended along the Sarpa Lake chain. The rest of the Caspian Lowland has a regular system of limans, which are the traces of small lakes remaining from the last regression of the Caspian Sea. All these limans and limanart lowlands contain fresh water. Usually the size of the limans ranges from 0,5 to 1 km in width, and up to 3 km in length (Tashniniva 2000:12-29).

The Kuma-Manych Lowland is the valley of three rivers - the West Manych, East Manych and Kuma. The Kuma-Manych Depression is extended from North-West to South-East. The width of the Lowland is varied from 2=3 km to 30 km. The biggest salt lake there is Manych-Gudilo (Tashninova 2000:12-29).

Our expedition conducted the archaeological prospection in the first two zones-the Ergeni Hills and the Caspian Lowland. The first question was where we should start our survey. We

began to carefully investigate the maps (from 1:100,000 till 1:25,000). We have looked the space Landsat photos in searching some traces of the ancient settlements. The traces of the settlements which were leaved by population during second world war we could see very clear, but nothing more ancient. We paid attention to places where the water springs and steppe lakes or rivers were. From them we have chosen a few places, where nearby the numerous burial mounds groups of the Bronze Age were excavated. These micro regions were carefully investigated with using of the hundreds of the aerial photos, modern digital maps such as soil, water and erosion maps and two old maps, dating back last century (Using of the Land map and Water map). We tried to find the conformity to natural laws of the distribution of the burials and living places in different landscape environment. So we have learnt a lot before the beginning of the survey.

During field work we have found the rests of the four settlements, two sites with the re-deposited (due to the wind erosion) layer and numerous sites with ceramics. It is possible to distinguish three localization types. The first type of the settlement localization is characteristic of the Ergeni Hills. The sites were found on the northern bank of a small river at the bottom of the ravine, extended in the latitudinal direction. The second type is characteristic of the Sarpa Lake chain. Three settlements were found on the western shore of the Khanata Lake, and two sites on the western shore of the Tsagan-Nur Lake, which extended in longitude direction.

The last, third type, is characteristic of the Caspian Lowland, and located near by the small limans or lakes, which are spread here as a spots. So we found that the distribution of the settlement types reflects the peculiarities of the geographical distribution of the water systems meanwhile the burial mounds groups mostly follow the elevated places and hills. This result is natural and not really new. Other thing is more important, however-all our settlements are located very close to the modern water-level. They were settled within the modern ecoton zone (botanical term) - the narrow zone in which vegetation is special and differs from the surrounding flora (Otchir-Goriaeva 2002:attachment 4, Ulanova 2002: 136-140). This shows that climate and other geographic conditions, such as availability of fresh water resources, have not changed so much from those times.

There is also another peculiarity of the geographic distribution of these ancient settlements. They are located also in the proximity to the modern villages. It appears that the places suitable for settlement were not so numerous at the steppe. Maybe the best ancient settlements were destroyed by modern villages, which as a rule cover a large territory.

At the Ergeni Hills, we investigated two deep ravines-both are located near the Russian agricultural villages. The first one, Bulgun Sala, was just a few kilometres away from the capital of the Republic - Elista. Elista is located in the next deep ravine and was found by the Russian colonists in 19th century too.

The second ravine located in the central part of Ergeni contained a small river Shar Elsin. Here we found two sites with

some prehistoric ceramics. Both are located not so far from the villages which were found during the second half of the 19th century.

In the southern part of Ergeni, we have investigated a large hill called Hamur with the highest point of 213m. This hill contained numerous burial mounds and numerous springs on the hill slope. During 1937, two Stone Age settlements had been identified there, on the top of the hill, but now we could not find any traces of them-during the last 60 years their traces have disappeared. The location of these Neolithic settlements, however, suggest that during the Neolithic Period the water level was higher than now (Sinizyn 1937:15).

In the southern part of the Caspian Lowland we found numerous places with ceramics. One site was probably a destroyed grave. Two sites were settlements with the destroyed cultural layers. The settlement near the dried lake of Beloe Ozero has contained ceramics of the Catacomb Culture of the Bronze Age, and the settlement near the village of Artezian contained some prehistoric and medieval ceramics.

At the west coast of the Lake Zahanata, we found two settlements which were located very close to each other, with about 997 m between them. We made soundings at both sites (Fig.1).

The northern settlement can be dated back to the Late Bronze Age Culture - the Srubnaya one, and the second site - to the Middle Bronze Age - the Catacomb Culture. Both sites have cultural layers (15-40 cm) with ceramic and animal bones. For northern settlement it was possible to identify the animal bones as sheep, horse, cow and pig (wild?) bones (Otchir-Goriaeva 2002:attachment 2). A third settlement was found about one kilometre to the South, but it was partially destroyed by the tillage. On the surface we recorded two charcoals, a lot of ceramics, and some stone tools. These date back to the Srubnaya Culture. A fourth settlement at the lake Hanata, was located further to the south, but unfortunately, it was utterly destroyed during the construction of a dam. We have found numerous fragments of ceramics and stone tools, as well as burned animal bones. It should be outlined that these archaeological settlements are located on the place where before second world war the kalmyk sedentary village was placed.

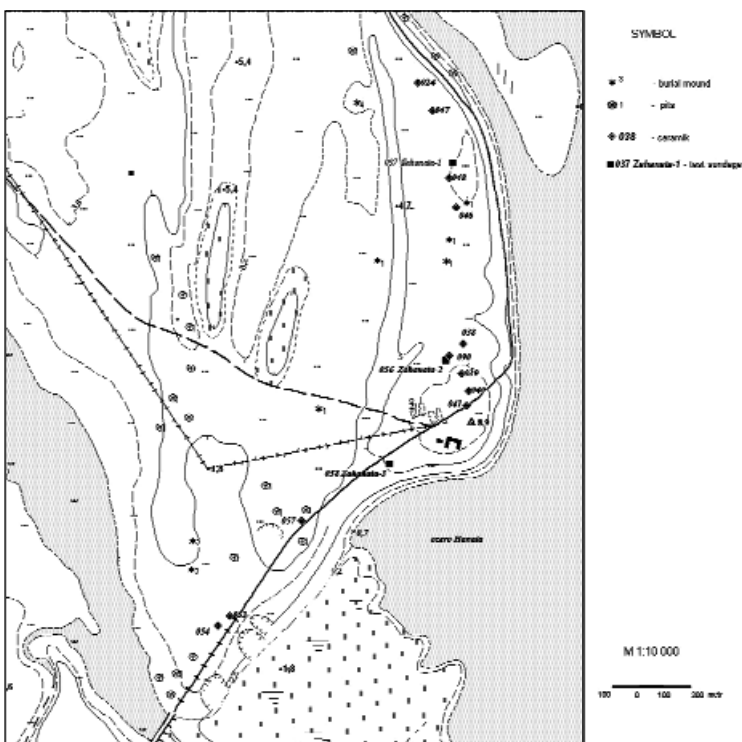


Figure 1 Zahanata

The problem of underestimation and undervalue of the settlement-sites in this region, their treatment as a defective archaeological source, and their interpretation as seasonal camps, is not only a problem of academic research. This is also a problem of the defunct Heritage Management. From 1929 until 1979 (for 24 seasons) 828 burial mounds-kurgans were excavated in the territory of the Kalmyk Republic. These produced 2630 graves (Tsutshin 1985). During the following 18 seasons (1980-1998 years) 470 kurgans more had been excavated which produced 1229 additional graves (Otchir-Goriaeva 2003). By and large, these were uncovered during various rescue excavations. During this time, however, only one settlement site had been excavated (belonging to the Neolithic Period) - settlement "Djangan (Kolzov 1988).

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