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Assemgul Kassenova

THE STONE-CUTTING TRADITION OF SARYARKA AND THE CULTURAL CONTINUITY OF STONE SCULPTURES*

This article presents a detailed analysis of a complex of stone sculptures dating to the Early Iron Age discovered in the Saryarka region. The morphological and iconographic features of the sculptures are described using newly obtained archaeological data, while the context of their placement and the cultural and chronological scope of the finds are also clarified. Two main groups have been identified according to the manner in which the stone statues were installed: sculptures directly associated with funerary monuments, and those used for ritual purposes. The results of radiocarbon dating and typological studies date these sculptures to the 8th—5th centuries BCE. This artistic style is distinguished by simplicity, symbolic precision, and the presence of iconographic details such as the "topknot" (kaz. *aidar*). It is further noted that the tradition of stone carving originated in the Late Bronze Age and continued into the Kipchak period. The research highlights the continuity of the artistic tradition that developed in the Saryarka within the Tasmola cultural horizon (8th—5th centuries BCE) as a distinctive regional phenomenon, identifying stone carving as an indigenous cultural trend. The stone sculptures of Saryarka, characteristic of the Saka period, represent not only an element of funerary rites but also a complex cultural and ideological phenomenon that reflects the social structure, religious worldview, and artistic ideals of early society.

Key words: Saryarka, Early Iron Age, 8th—5th centuries BCE, kurgan, stone sculptures.

About the authors: Kassenova Assemgul, PhD (History), Margulan Institute of Archaeology.

Contact information: 050010, Kazakhstan, Almaty, 44 Dostyk Ave., Margulan Institute of Archaeology, e-mail: asema_94@mail.ru.

А.Д. Касенова

КАМНЕРЕЗНАЯ ТРАДИЦИЯ САРЫАРКИ И КУЛЬТУРНАЯ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТЬ КАМЕННЫХ ИЗВАЯНИЙ

В статье представлен подробный анализ комплекса каменных скульптур, относящихся к эпохе раннего железного века, которые были обнаружены в регионе Сарыарка. Рассмотрены морфологические и иконографические особенности скульптур на основе новых археологических данных, изучен контекст их расположения и определён культурно-хронологический масштаб находок. В зависимости от характера установки каменных статуй выделены две основные группы: каменные изваяния, непосредственно связанные с погребальными памятниками, и скульптуры, использованные в ритуальных целях. Результаты радиоуглеродного и типологического исследования позволяют датировать эти скульптуры в интервале VIII—V вв. до н.э. Для изобразительного стиля этого периода характерны простота, символическая точность и наличие иконографических деталей типа «шишки» (айдар). Резьба по камню находит свое начало с эпохи поздней бронзы и продолжаются до кипчакского периода. Устойчивость художественной традиции, сложившейся в Сарыарке в рамках тасмолинской культуры (VIII—V вв. до н.э.), оцениваются в рамках исследования как региональная особенность. Это даёт возможность выявить резьбу по камню как автохтонную культурную тенденцию. Каменные скульптуры Сарыарки, характерные для сакской эпохи, представляют собой не только элемент погребальных обрядов, но и являются комплексным

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культурно-идеологическим феноменом, отражающим социальную структуру, религиозное мировоззрение и художественные идеалы раннего общества.

Ключевые слова: Сарыарка, ранний железный век, VIII—V вв. до н.э., курган, каменные изваяния.

Сведения об авторах: Касенова Асемгуль Дауреновна, PhD, Институт археологии имени А.Х. Маргулана.

Контактная информация: 050010, Казахстан, г. Алматы, пр. Достык, 44, Институт археологии имени А.Х. Маргулана, e-mail: asema_94@mail.ru.

Introduction

The phenomenon of anthropomorphic stone sculptures represents one of the most remarkable archaeological and artistic heritages of ancient and medieval nomadic cultures in the Eurasian steppe. These figurative monuments are a distinctive cultural phenomenon that embodies the worldview and ideological principles of early societies. The significance of stone sculptures is reflected not only in their specific representational forms but also in their functional role in the organization of sacred space, and in the system of funerary and ritual ceremonies.

The territory of modern Kazakhstan is one of the regions located in the western part of the Asian steppes of the Great Eurasian Steppe Belt. Within this area, unique monumental stone sculptures characteristic of various periods of the Early Iron Age have been preserved. These include deer stones, as well as anthropomorphic stone sculptures of the Saka and Sarmatian eras. Stone sculptures of the Saka era are widespread in the Saryarka region, that is, in the area of the Tasmola culture. This group of stone monuments began to attract scholarly attention in the second half of the twentieth century. The first scientific data on stone sculptures in the Ulytau region appeared in the studies conducted by the Central Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition under the leadership of A.Kh. Margulan in the middle of the 20th century. In subsequent years, research in this field was continued by L.N. Yermolenko, Zh. Kurmankulov, A.Z. Beisenov, A.D. Kassenova and other scholars, who introduced newly discovered monuments into academic circulation. As a result of field research carried out over the past decade, the spatial structure, morphological typology, and cultural-chronological framework of the stone sculptures have been further refined, and most of them dated to the Early Saka period (8th—5th centuries BCE) (Yermolenko et al. 2015: 30—31).

Research methodology

A comprehensive approach combining general scientific, historical and specialized archaeological methods was employed in this research. In the study of stone sculptures from the Early Iron Age in the Saryarka region, general scientific methods such as analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction were applied. In addition, the comparative-historical method, widely used in historical research, was utilized to identify the stages in the study of these sculptures and to analyze the viewpoints of researchers on specific issues.

Among the specialized scientific methods characteristic of archaeological research, the comparative-typological method made it possible to attribute monuments that had been described during the initial phase of Saryarka sculpture studies but had not yet been culturally or chronologically defined. Furthermore, radiocarbon dating was used to refine the chronological framework of the monuments. By applying these methodological approaches, the author conducted a comprehensive analysis of the spatial distribution of stone sculptures characteristic of the Early Iron Age in Saryarka, examined their associations with kurgans and other ritual structures, and sought to identify underlying patterns in their spatial organization.

Material description

The stone sculptures of the Saka era are classified into three types according to the degree of representation of the human figure: half-figure sculptures and bust-length, and anthropomorphic steles. The half-figure sculptures are the most detailed, and may depict arms, details of the naked body, weapons, and other features. The arms, bent at the elbows, are depicted in two typical positions: 1) one hand on the chest and the other near the abdomen; 2) both hands located at the waist. Some stone sculptures also depict body parts such as the phallus, shoulder blades, the spinal line, and buttocks. Models of weapons (chekan, dagger) are shown hanging from the belt. Their arrangement follows a fixed pattern: the chekan and dagger are on the right side, with the handle directed downward, while the dagger is shown on the front side of the sculpture — on the left or in the middle — with the handle turned to the right. Most of the half-figure stone sculptures of the Saka period depict armed people, that is, warriors.

The half-figure stone sculptures from the Saryarka region, dated to the Saka era, share certain similarities with the Scythian sculptures of the North Caucasus and the North Black Sea region. For example, in the Scythian stone sculptures dated to the (7th) 6th—5th centuries BCE, the depiction of bare body parts and the profile contour of the head, as well as the positioning of the hands, correspond closely (Yermolenko et al. 2016a). Despite these common iconographic features with the Scythian sculptures, the stone sculptures characteristic of the Saka era possess distinctive features their own. In particular, unlike the Scythian models, a bow and rhyton are not depicted inside the quiver. In general, only a chekan is shown as a short-handled striking weapon in the armory, while in the Scythian stone sculptures, along with cleavers, axe and battleaxes are also found. The daggers depicted on the Saryarka stone sculptures have horn-shaped tips.

In addition to the visual similarities, Scythian and Saka stone sculptures also share common features in their installation methods. V.S. Olkhovskiy, analyzing the Scythian sculptures, noted that they “have an undoubted connection with the kurgans” and that “the vast majority of the stone sculptures were originally installed on the top of the kurgan” (Olkhovskiy, Yevdokimov 1994: 45). This conclusion regarding their association with kurgans may also apply to many stone sculptures of the Saka era, and it is not limited solely to half-figure examples. Moreover, apart from the kurgans of the Early Iron Age — which vary in size from 6 to 30 m in diameter and from 0.4 to 3 m in height — some Saryarka stone sculptures have also been identified in the “moustached” kurgans.

When depicting bust-length stone sculptures and anthropomorphic steles, their facial features, as well as protruding parts resembling a “knot” or a oseledets, are represented (Yermolenko et al. 2025). Although such sculptures were often installed individually, in some cases they were also used as stone blocks within the construction of burial mounds.

Discussion

Stone sculptures from the Saryarka region, dated to the Early Iron Age, are located near simple kurgans and so-called “moustached” kurgans. Archaeological data, based on the peculiarities of their placement, distinguishes two main groups: those installed in direct association with burial traditions and those used for ritual or ceremonial purposes. This classification indicates that stone sculptures were not only an integral part of funerary ritual, but also served as markers of sacred space, fulfilling social and ideological functions.

Stone sculptures associated with funerary structures

In general, the majority of half-figure stone sculptures were found in their original position (in situ). Among them, a completely preserved example discovered in the 2nd kurgan of *the Kosoba* burial ground occupies a special place. This sculpture belongs to a funerary monument and was placed inside a simple kurgan. The site is located in the territory of the Karkaraly district of the

Karaganda region, 4 km northeast of the Toktar village and 3 km southeast of the Zharly village. Archaeological excavations were carried out at kurgan No. 2 during the 2013 field season. The stone sculpture identified in kurgan No. 2 of the Kosoba burial ground was recorded in the southeastern sector of the mound during excavation (Beisenov 2016: 16). The stone measures 2.2 m in length, 0.6 m in width, and 0.35 m in thickness. The head of the stone statue is shaped like a helmet; the face is concave, while the nape is depicted as convex. A single-loop torc is shown around the neck. On the back of the statue, traces of shoulder lines and a groove along the spine are visible. Despite the absence of a mustache and other gender-specific features, it can be confidently concluded that the statue represents a male figure. This assumption is supported by the depiction of the *torc* combined with stylized shoulder lines and the spinal groove — motifs also found in some Scythian, particularly North Caucasian, sculptural compositions representing warriors (Olkhovskiy, Yevdokimov 1994). A mustache is not always depicted on Scythian warrior stone sculptures of, and appears only rarely in the sculptures of the Saka era.

According to A.Z. Beisenov, the stone sculpture may originally have been placed in the central of the kurgan, above a grave with a dromos, or along the edge of the mound (Beisenov 2014: 12—14). Based on radiocarbon analysis, kurgan No. 2 is dates to the end of the 7th—5th centuries BCE. Drawing on the assemblage of finds uncovered during the excavation, A.Z. Beisenov suggested that “a prominent woman who performed sacred cultic functions may have been buried here” (Beisenov 2014: 16). In this regard, the fact of installing a male stone statue above a female grave requires additional interpretation.

The Begazy burial ground is located on the right bank of the Karatal River near the village of Begazy, in the Aktogay district, on the northern edge of the burial ground. The mound has a diameter of approximately 6 m and a height of 0.35 m. During the excavation, a stone sculpture was discovered in the eastern part of the kurgan, lying face down. It was positioned along a west–southwest to east–northeast axis, with its head facing east. When the half-figure stone sculpture was created, the original stone block of rectangular cross-section underwent only minimal processing (Beisenov, Yermolenko 2014: fig. 2). The eyes and nose are rendered in a manner typical of Saka era stone sculptures: the eyes, represented by incised grooves, merge into a “bar-shaped” nose, while the “smiling” mouth is indicated by an arched line. Only the right hand is clearly visible on the stone statue, which is bent towards the chest. A bone pin was also found in the looted grave. Since similar items have been discovered in a number of monuments belonging to the Tasmola culture and the Asian area of the Scythian-Siberian world, A.Z. Beisenov dated the kurgan to the 7th—5th centuries BCE (Beisenov, Yermolenko 2014: 36).

The Kyzylzhartas-2 burial ground is located 10 km northeast of the Taldy village, in the Shet district of the Karaganda region, on the left bank of the Taldynura River. The burial ground consists of two large kurgans arranged in a west-south-west—east-north-east direction. During the excavation of the eastern sector of kurgan No. 1, three stone ssculptures were found beneath the mound, and another sculpture was discovered in the dromos. Of these, three sculptures (Nos. 1, 2, and 4) depict male figures, while sculpture No. 3 likely represents a female figure. Three of the four sculptures were reused as “building material,” serving as blocks within the stone constructions of the crepis or dromos. According to A.Z. Beisenov, the four sculptures found in kurgan No. 1 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground are associated with commemorative rituals performed by ancient communities inhabiting the Taldynura valley . These rituals may have been conducted prior to the burial itself. At the present stage of research, the kurgan No. 1 of the Kyzylzhartas burial ground is dated to the 7th—5th centuries BCE (Beisenov 2021a: fig. 9).

The next stone sculpture associated with the burial structures is *the Baidaly* monument, discovered in the Osakarovka district of the Karaganda region. During restoration work, it was determined that this stone sculpture had been used as a building material for the wall of a stone mausoleum dating to the 19th century. Although the Baidaly stone sculpture was found near the mausoleum, its original location remains unknown. (Beisenov 2016: 16). The sculpture was carved from a flat granite block of irregular shape. Its dimensions are 0.92 × 0.11—0.14 × 0.16—0.33 m. The head is depicted on the tapered end

of the stone, while the facial features are arranged along a slanting and narrow ridge in the lower third of the monolith. The Baidaly stone bears a mustache, as well as protruding element on the top resembling a "knot" (diameter 6 cm, preserved height 1 cm) (Beisenov, Yermolenko 2014: 38). A.Z. Beisenov and L.N. Yermolenko proposed dating this stone sculture with the «knot» — shaped attribute to the 7th—5th centuries BCE (Yermolenko et al. 2015: 30—31.)

A stone sculpture discovered near the 2nd kurgan of the Zhangabyl burial group, located on the right bank of the Zhangabyl River, 3 km from the Tortkara Mausoleum on the Ulytau ridge, has attracted particular scholarly interest. The history of its study goes back several decades. In 1951, A.Kh. Margulan and L.R. Kyzlasov introduced this stone sculpture into scientific circulation, classifying it as a monuments of medieval nomads (Margulan 1951: 31; Kyzlasov 1951: 62). A few years later, D.G. Savinov described the sculpture as an anthropomorphic "deer stone" (Savinov 1989). Later researchers determined that this anthropomorphic stone sculpture actually dates back to the Saka era and was originally reworked from deer stone (Yermolenko et al. 2016b). The presence of a mask, a dagger, a sign depicting a man, and a chekanallow us to attribute this monument to the Saka period (Olkhovskiy, Yevdokimov 1994: 59, 60). The Zhangabyl stone sculpture was recorded on the southern side of the kurgan. In the burial pit, the skeleton of a man lying on his back, with his legs bent and his head oriented to the northwest, was discovered. The stone statue may be associated with the burial site, and it was D.G. Savinov who first proposed attributing this grave to the Early Iron Age (Savinov 1989: 152—153).

The Aibas Darasy 3 burial ground is located 3.7 km southwest of the Aybas Darasy wintering ground in the Ulytau district of the Karaganda region, in the valley of the left bank of the dried-up Aybas River. The burial ground extends in a northeast—southwest direction. The largest kurgan, featuring a stone statue (construction No. 6) is situated on elevated ground in the central part of the burial ground. The half-figure stone statue is depicted with its hands positioned close to the body (Yermolenko, Kurmankulov 2015: fig. 2). In addition to the hands, details that can be interpreted as a dagger and a phallus are clearly visible. The stone statue, with its head broken off, was installed at the center of the kurgan, its front side facing southwest. Traces of a stone circle were also identified with the kurgan. A poorly preserved human skeleton, with its head oriented southwest, was discovered in a grave pit approximately 1.8 m deep. Beneath the human bones, black, decomposed remains of bedding material were observed. Bones of small animals were also found in the grave. According to radiocarbon analysis, the burial site was dated from the first quarter of the 8th century to the end of the 5th century BCE (Yermolenko, Kurmankulov 2015: 31). The probable connection between the stone statue and the burial structure is suggested by the fact that the statue was installed directly above the grave. Furthermore, the identical southwest orientation of both the statue's front face and the head of the buried individual reinforces this conclusion.

Stone statues used for ritual purposes

The next main group of stone sculptures, classified according to their placement and function, includes examples used for ritual purposes. *The Taldy* burial ground is located 50 km southeast of the city of Karkaraly, on the left bank of the Taldy River. The burial complex consists of a chain of seven large kurgans (No. 1—7). A stone statue was discovered from the seventh kurgan. The statue, carved from granite, measures 0.92 × 0.20 × 0.25 m. Large oval-shaped ears are depicted on both sides of the head. The facial features are clearly modeled: the eyes and nose were executed in the same manner as those on the stone statue found at the Begazy burial ground. Based on the material data, including burial rites and presence of arrowheads, the Taldy burial ground is dates to the 7th—6th centuries BCE. This chronology is supported by radiocarbon analyses of bone artifacts recovered from kurgans Nos. 2 and 5 (Beisenov, Yermolenko 2014: 37).

Another stone statue was found in the burial pit of *the Aralkol kurgan* (depth 40—70 cm), located on the watershed between the Bala Zhezdy and Ulken Zhezdy rivers. The statue, carved from pinkish fine-grained granite, measures 114 × 29 × 22 cm. Fracture traces are visible in the

middle and lower parts of the sculpture. The details of the image were executed using the counter-relief technique. In profile, the front of the head is flat, and the back is voluminous. On both sides of the head, the ears are represented as arc-shaped grooves, and on the top, a protrusion in the form of a "knot" is depicted. This feature is characteristic of stone sculptures from the Early Iron Age of the Saryarka region. Similar traits are observed in examples from the Baidaly and Taldy-2 burial grounds. Accordingly, the stone statue from the Aralkol kurgan is dated to the 7th—5th centuries BCE and attributed to the Tasmola culture (Amirov, Umitkaliyev 2022: 351—352).

In the *Sartogan settlement* of the Terisakkan rural district of the Ulytau district, approximently 3 km north-northwest of the Zhantel steppe camp, half-figure stone statues were discovered near a large kurgan surrounded by a ditch (Yermolenko, Kurmankulov 2011: fig. 1: 4). Based on external characteristics, this kurgan also dates to the Early Iron Age. Both statues are fragmentary: the first is missing its head and pedestal, while the second lacks its upper portion above the waist. (Yermolenko, Kurmankulov 2012: 86).

The Karatal complex is located 20 km northwest of the Ulytau ridge, on a flat area bordered by the channels of the Karatal and Jetiqyz rivers and low mountains ranges. Three separate kurgans — Karatal-2—4, as well as two kurgans — Karatal-5 and Karatal-6 — were identified here. An anthropomorphic stone statue depicting a human figure up to the waist was recorded 6 m southeast of the the largest kurgan, lying on the ground in its present condition. The statue's dimensions are: total length — 178 cm, width — 25 cm, shoulder width and below the waist — 48 cm, side profile thickness — 22 cm. The figure is depicted in full-face outline, with broad, straight shoulders, a "shoveled" (inward-tilting) head, and a slightly narrowed waist. Due to its poor state of preservation, several parts of the sculpture are indistinct. The upper portion of the head is damaged by a large horizontal fracture, although traces of the eyes, nose, and mouth, indicated by shallow grooves, remain visible. The arms are slightly bent at the elbows, but the palms are not depicted (Kassenova et al. 2023: 111—117). Radiocarbon analysis of a statue found in the Karatal stone statue determined that it dates to the 7th—6th centuries BCE.

The next group of Saka-period sculptures is associated with "mustached" kurgans (so-called because of the lateral extensions resembling mustaches). It is now well established that such stone sculptures were used for ritual purposes. One example was discovered at the Aumagan burial ground, located 33 km south of the village of Besoba and 23 km northwest of the village of Zhanatogan, in a valley adjacent to the northern slope of Mount Karashoky. The burial complex consists of a "mustached" kurgan group and two mounds aligned along the "mustache" extensions. On the northwestern edge of the site, a mud-brick mausoleum was discovered, with a stone sculpture recorded nearby — 83 m away from the main burial structure.

The statue is carved from medium- to coarse-grained porphyry granite and measures 89 × 30 cm. The head of the sculpture is completely worked on all sides, rounded in form, and flat on the surface. The facial features are rendered as a semi-oval shape, bordered by a carefully carved rim 0.8—1.1 cm wide and about 0.8 cm deep (Beisenov 2021b). According to the results of modern research, the stone sculptures are dated to a wide range, that is, to the entire period of the Tasmola culture. The latest example is dated to the 8th—5th centuries BCE (Beisenov 2015; Beisenov et al. 2016).

The following stone statue was discovered in the Ashutasty-2 burial ground located in the Arkalyk district of Kostanay region (Beisenov et al. 2015: 17; Jumabekova, Bazarbayeva 2022). The "mustachioed" tomb on which the statue is located belongs to the largest tomb of the burial ground and was recorded in a lying position from the southern chain, its dimensions are 84 × 14 × 26 cm. The head is separated from three sides by a groove line that defines the neck. The upper part of the head is depicted in full-face as a rounded shape, and the face is divided into two by a nasal groove. A conditionally carved stone statue, or rather an anthropomorphic stele, was discovered among the stone piles in the northern chain of this tomb. In terms of its schematic and laconic style of depiction, the statue found in the Ashutasty-2 burial ground is close to the statue found in tomb No. 2 of the Begazy burial ground.

During Kurmankulov's research in 1993, the following stone sculpture was discovered in the *Zhinishke* River valley, depicting half-figured sculptures of the "mustache" kurgan type from the eastern side of the kurgan. In 2017, this statue was again documented by L.N. Yermolenko and supplemented its scientific description. The face of the statue is voluminous, and a small protrusion (knot) with a diameter of about 4 cm and a height of 1 cm is depicted on the top (Bobrov et al. 2018: 109).

Appendix 1. **New data related to the location of sculptures in the Saryarka region, dated to the Early Iron Age**

No.	Monument name, location	Number	Location	Type	Installation features
1	Kosoba, 4 km northeast of Toktar village, 3 km southeast of Zharly village	1	Simple Kurgan	Burial place	Inside the kurgan
2	Begazy, on the right bank of the Karatal River near the village of Begazy	1	Simple Kurgan	Burial place	Inside the plague
3	Baidaly, Osakarovka district	1	Simple Kurgan	Burial place	Outside the kurgan
4	Aibas Darasy 3, 3.7 km southwest of Aibas Darasy wintering ground	1	Simple Kurgan	Burial place	Outside the kurgan
5	Taldy, 50 km east of Karkaraly city	1	Simple Kurgan	Ritual	Inside the kurgan
6	The watershed of the Aralkol, Bala Zhezdy and Ulken Zhezdy rivers	1	Simple Kurgan	Ritual	Inside the kurgan
7	Kyzylzhartas, 10 km northeast of the village of Taldy, on the left bank of the Taldynura River	4	Simple Kurgan	Ritual	Inside the kurgan
8	Sartogan, about 3 km from Zhantel field camp	2	Simple Kurgan	Ritual	Outside the kurgan
9	Karatal, 20 km northwest of the Ulytau ridge	1	Simple Kurgan	Ritual	Outside the kurgan
10	Aumagan, 33 km east of Besoba village, 23 km northwest of Janatogan village	1	"Mustached" Kurgan	Ritual	Outside the plague
11	2 Ashutasy, Kostanay region, Arkalyk district	1	"Mustached" Kurgan	Ritual	Outside the kurgan
12	Zhinishke, along the Zhinishke River	1	"Mustached" Kurgan	Ritual	Outside the kurgan

Result

According to A.Kh. Margulan, the art of depicting people and animals on stone in the Saryarka region originated in the Bronze Age. The earliest examples were carved from soft mineral stones such as pagodite and agalmatolite and were represented in geometrically stylized forms (Tesiktas, Itmuryndy, Kalmaktas, Koishoky). This geometric style derived from the artistic traditions of the Andronovo and Begazy-Dandybai cultures. Over time, these forms became more complex and acquired anthropomorphic features, as indicated by the schematic representation of facial details and body proportions. Margulan regarded these scenes as the artistic foundation for the stone sculptures of the Early Saka period. He also emphasized that the art of stone carving developed on a local cultural and ideological basis, without external influence (Margulan 1979: 296).

The formation of the theory of the evolutionary-cultural development of stone sculpture in Saryarka indicates a continuous development: from simple talismans and symbolic forms of the Bronze Age, to anthropomorphic steles, deer stones and stone statues of the Early Iron Age, and further to monumental stone sculptures of the Turkic and Kipchak periods.

The scientific concept proposed by A.Kh. Margulan in the 20th century is also supported by 21st century researchers and is being supplemented with new data. Among them, the works of S.A. Yarygin and S.K. Sakenov extensively consider the typology and cultural and chronological development of stone steles and slab stones. Monuments directly related to burial structures in the Zerendy and Burabay regions include the stela found in enclosure No. 23 in the Kyzyl-Tobe burial ground, the stela in the Ulkensor burial ground, and the anthropomorphic slab in the Aydarly burial ground. These objects demonstrate the continuity of the ritual tradition that continued from the Bronze Age to the Hun-Sarmatian period. Among them, the stela from the Kyzyl-Tobe burial ground represents one of the oldest examples in the region, that is, it is dated to the Fedorov culture. Analogous examples have been identified in East Kazakhstan (Yermolayeva 2012: 21, 40—45), the South Urals, and the Minusinsk Basin (Sotnikova 2019). Two steles were also found near ritual structures at the Tazhigul and Kenotkel burial grounds, and one in the village of Abylaikhan. In their external features, they resemble the "koytas"-type sculptures widely distributed in Central Kazakhstan. These monuments are similar to the stela from the Nazar-3 settlement, which dates to the Early Iron Age and represents a continuation of the Begazy-Dandybai cultural tradition (Beisenov 2016: 17—22). The stone statue found at the Ulkensor settlement belongs to the type characteristic of the Early Saka period. Similar slab-like sculptures have also been identified in elite burial complexes in Central Kazakhstan, such as Taldy-2 and Nurken-2. It has been observed that these slabs were originally placed vertically and were deliberately knocked down during the construction of the burial mound—a practice that reflects genetic continuity with Bronze Age traditions (Yarygin, Sakenov 2024).

During the medieval period, the Turkic and Kipchak eras, the art of stone carving reached its highest level of development. As noted by L.N. Yermolenko and Zh. Kurmankulov, tone sculptures of this time not only served as figurative symbols but also became key elements in complex cult structures of the "enclosure–stone statue–balbal" type (Kassenova 2019). To date, more than 100 stone sculptures from the Turkic period and 73 from the Kipchak period have been recorded. Some depict distinct anthropological features, while others represent abstract symbols. The sculptures of this era show increasingly realistic depictions, detailed clothing and weaponry, and rich decorative motifs.

Among them, A.Kh. Margulan classified female sculptures of the Kipchak period into three typological groups:

1. **Girl-stone** — a depiction of a young girl depicted without a headdress;
2. **Woman-stone** — an image of a young woman wearing a pointed headdress;
3. **Old woman-stone** — anexample depicting an elderly woman (Margulan 1966).

The results of current research indicate that the development of stone sculpture in the Saryarka region — represented by 357 identified examples — was a long-term, autochthonous, and culturally coherent evolutionary process.

Conclusion

At present, about forty stone sculptures of the Saka period have been identified within the Saryarka region. Since the topic of stone sculpture was not studied separately during the 1940s—1950s, all sculptures discovered at that time were conditionally attributed to the "ancient Turkic and Kipchak periods." Later typological and iconographic analyses, however, have shown that a significant number of them belong to the Early Iron Age. Stone sculptures of this period are characterized by stylistic simplicity and symbolic clarity. Most have been found in the Karaganda and Ulytau regions, with the majority associated with burial structures, while others are linked to ritual or ceremonial contexts. These findings confirm that the stone sculptures performed ritual functions and defined sacred spaces.

According to radiocarbon dating and comparative typological studies, the stone sculptures of the Saryarka region date to the **8th—5th centuries BCE**. The "knot" or "crest"-shaped protrusion observed on some examples is regarded as a stable iconographic element typical of the figurative tradition of the early Saka period.

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