

# The Study Of The Material And Spiritual Culture Of The Early Saka Tribes Of The Aral Sea Region In World Historiography: A Theoretical And Methodological Analysis

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**Abstract:** This article provides a theoretical and methodological analysis of the study of the material and spiritual culture of the early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region—an integral and strategic component of the Eurasian steppe civilization—in world historiography. The research examines the decline of certain long-standing scientific paradigms regarding nomadic tribes, alongside the specific socio-economic adaptation, economic types, and social structure of Saka society. Based on the archaeological data from key regional sites such as Uygarak, Southern and Northern Tagisken, and Sakarchaga, the paper comparatively analyzes diverse scientific hypotheses concerning the genesis of the Sakas, their unique burial practices, and the origins of their visual arts. Furthermore, focusing on the Kuysay culture of the Sarykamysh region, it elucidates theoretical approaches regarding localized Saka groups and their cultural-technological interactions with southern sedentary agricultural oases.

**Keywords:** Early Sakas, Aral Sea region, Eurasian steppe civilization, historiography, burial rite, Kuysay culture, anthropology, cultural integration.

**Аннотация:** В данной статье представлен теоретико-методологический анализ изучения материальной и духовной культуры ранних сакских племен Приаралья – неотъемлемой и стратегически важной части евразийской степной цивилизации – в мировой историографии. В исследовании рассматриваются кризис некоторых долгое время доминировавших в науке взглядов на кочевые племена, а также особенности социально-экономической адаптации, типов хозяйствования и социальной структуры сакского общества. На основе материалов таких опорных памятников региона, как Уйгарак, Южный и Северный Тагискен, Сакарчага, проводится сравнительный анализ различных научных гипотез относительно генезиса саков, специфики их погребальных обрядов и происхождения изобразительного искусства. Кроме того, на примере куйсайской культуры Присарыкамышья освещаются теоретические подходы к изучению локальных групп сакских племен и их культурно-технологических связей с южными оседло-земледельческими оазисами.

**Ключевые слова:** Ранние саки, Приаралье, евразийская степная цивилизация, историография, погребальный обряд, куйсайская культура, антропология, культурная интеграция.

## INTRODUCTION

In world historiography and archaeological science, the reinterpretation of the history of nomadic empires and tribal confederations formed in the Eurasian steppe expanses during the Early Iron Age, based on new theoretical and methodological criteria, has become one of the central directions of contemporary research. The study of the material and spiritual culture of the early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region, which is considered a strategic and geopolitical crossroads of these global civilizational processes, is of particular relevance. Modern historical science recognizes the Saka-Scythian world as the primary creators of the “Steppe Civilization”, characterized by a complex, socially stratified structure, transcontinental economic and cultural ties, a unique architecture, and a philosophical-mythological system [1].

Due to its specific hydrographic and ecological conditions, the Aral Sea region served as a global ethno cultural space where both nomadic steppe traditions and the culture of southern sedentary agricultural oases clashed and integrated with one another [2]. Therefore, analyzing the culture of the early Sakas in this region from a theoretical and methodological perspective regarding its place and significance within the system of

world civilization-rather than merely limiting it to the description of local archaeological artifacts-stands as one of the most pressing tasks facing modern historical science.

By the first quarter of the XXI century, the advancement of historical source studies and archaeological research methods, driven by digital technologies and new paleoanthropological analyses, necessitated the revision of fundamental theories previously introduced to science. Specifically, these include:

Conducting a comparative analysis of the concepts proposed by scholars such as M.P. Gryaznov and E.E. Kuzmina regarding the phenomenon of “early nomads”, using the materials of local Aral Sea monuments such as Uygarak, Southern and Northern Tagisken, and Sakarchaga [3, 1];

Clarifying the regularities of formation and the mixed, semi-sedentary pastoral and agricultural economic-cultural types of Saka tribes adapted to the ecological environment, drawing on the example of the Kuysay culture in the micro-oases of the Sarykamysh region [4].

Consequently, studying the ethno genesis, social stratification, and spiritual views of the early Saka communities of the Aral Sea region within the context of world historiography-based on burial rites and zoomorphic combat compositions-not only illuminates the obscure pages of the region's ancient history but also constitutes a fundamental necessity for theoretically substantiating the foundation of the subsequent statehood and civilizational development of the peoples of Central Asia.

#### **Literature review.**

The history of studying the material and spiritual culture of the early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region is inextricably linked with the formation of several conceptual directions and scientific schools in world historiography.

In the late XIX and the first half of the XX century, M.I. Rostovtsev, in his fundamental works, interpreted the Scythian-Saka world as an “equestrian warrior civilization” detached from a sedentary lifestyle, whose existence was limited solely to the acquisition of new pastures and military campaigns [5]. Within the framework of this approach, M.I. Rostovtsev and G. Borovka considered Scythian culture to be the sole “standard”, evaluating Saka culture merely as its peripheral and derivative branch expanding from the west [6]. M.P. Gryaznov [7] and S.I. Rudenko [8] also attempted to theoretically substantiate nomadism as a “purely nomadic” civilization independent of agriculture, drawing on examples from the Altai and the Eurasian steppes. Meanwhile, Western Orientalist schools associated the concept of “civilization” exclusively with urbanization, thereby classifying the Sakas as a stagnant “barbarian” stratum devoid of dynamics [9].

Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, the research conducted by the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (KAEE) led by S.P. Tolstov fundamentally transformed these views. The discovery of cities with monumental defensive structures, such as Chirik-Rabat and Babish-Mulla, alongside the remnants of ancient irrigation networks, proved the harmonious integration of pastoralism and agriculture among the Sakas [10]. S.P. Tolstov and M.A. Itina demonstrated a symbiosis between the pottery traditions of the Late Bronze Age Andronovo culture and the advanced architectural traditions of southern sedentary civilizations within the Northern Tagisken monuments [11]. Furthermore, O.A. Vishnevskaya's research based on the Uygarak materials confirmed that the early Saka culture of the Aral Sea region followed a unique evolutionary path independent of western (Scythian) influences and was chronologically older than them [12].

Conceptual Debates and New Approaches. In the subsequent period of research, the internal potential of nomadic societies came to the fore. K.A. Akishev [13] and L.T. Yablonskiy [14] substantiated that the monumental architecture and social stratification of the Sakas were not results of external influences, but rather the product of the internal intellectual and economic potential of the nomadic environment itself.

At the contemporary stage, the military arts, ethno genesis, and the role of the Aral Sea Sakas within the regional defense system are being systematically analyzed based on new methodological criteria by researchers such as B. Satimov [15].

#### **Research Methodology.**

By utilizing methodological principles such as historicity, objectivity, and a systemic approach, this article provides a scholarly analysis of the cultural heritage of the early Saka tribes from a historical perspective, based on historiographical analysis and contemporary scientific viewpoints.

#### **Analysis and results.**

The study of the Early Iron Age monuments of the region indicates that a fundamental transformation of economic, social, and cultural systems occurred in the vast Eurasian steppes during the late VIII to the early

VII centuries BC. In contemporary historiography, this period is characterized as the stage of the establishment of a stratified society and a new type of civilization [3]. According to E.E. Kuzmina's concept, this civilization was formed based on three interconnected priority directions: an extensive form of economic management, a military-hierarchical model of social structure, and pan-nomadic cultural and spiritual values [1].

The hydrographic features of the Aral Sea region determined the adaptation strategies of the early Saka tribes to the ecological environment. Research has revealed that during the VIII–VII centuries BC, the cessation of water flow in the Aqchadarya channel on the right bank of the Amu Darya worsened ecological conditions. As a result, the main part of the population flux migrated through the Davdan and Uzboy channels of the river to the fertile lands around the Sarykamysch delta and the Upper Uzboy, actively developing these areas [16].

An analysis of the archaeological materials indicates that a single, uniform economic model did not exist in the Aral Sea region. The absolute absence of stationary residential remnants within the territory of the Uygarak and Southern Tagisken burial mounds demonstrates that the Saka communities in this particular area were highly mobile, engaged in extensive nomadic pastoralism, and utilized light transportable shelters such as yurts and tents [10]. Conversely, the settlements of Kuysay and Qanxa, which testify to a sedentary lifestyle of the population, were discovered in the Sarykamysch region and the Davdon basin. The identification of semi-dugouts and light-frame surface house remnants, as well as signs of rain-fed (dryland) agriculture at these sites, indicates that the population practiced a semi-sedentary mixed economy [4].

For a long time, the dominant view in Scythian studies was that all cultural and technological innovations spread exclusively from the West to the East—namely, from the Black Sea Scythians to the Central Asian Sakas [5]. However, systematic excavations conducted in the second half of the XX century at the Aral Sea sites of Uygarak and Southern Tagisken threw this scholarly view into doubt. The chronological and typological analysis of archaeological artifacts demonstrated that the oldest bronze arrowheads and weapon types found in the Aral Sea region were formed chronologically earlier than the Black Sea finds [12]. It has been confirmed in science that the earliest prototypes of certain types of ancient bronze swords and complex arrowheads emerged precisely among the Aral Sea Sakas [17]. This proves that the local artistic and mythological traditions of Central Asia and Southern Siberia served as the fundamental basis for the genesis of "animal style" art, and that cultural exchange was not a unidirectional process; on the contrary, the Aral Sea region was a major ethnocultural crossroads where western and eastern cultural currents converged.

Regarding the factors behind the formation of early Saka culture, a serious conceptual debate exists between two major schools of thought in historiography. Based on the monumental mud-brick architecture of the Northern Tagisken mausoleums, Academician S.P. Tolstov and M.A. Itina put forward the idea that southern sedentary civilizations, particularly Bactrian cultural-technological influences, played a decisive role in this process [2; 17]. In contrast, researchers such as K.A. Akishev and L.T. Yablonskiy sharply criticized this "southern influence" theory, substantiating that the monumental architecture and social stratification within Saka society were developed independently—not by external master architects, but as a result of the internal intellectual and economic potential of the nomadic environment itself, as well as the internal needs of the social elite (military commanders) [13; 14]. Modern approaches show that these two views are not mutually exclusive: possessing their own internal evolutionary basis, the Aral Sea Sakas were an open and dynamic society capable of successfully adopting the achievements of neighboring sedentary oases.

The scientific view advanced by B.I. Vaynberg—suggesting that during the Saka campaigns into Media, they forcibly relocated the sedentary pastoral population from that region to the shores of Sarykamysch, and that this contingent formed the basis of the Kuysay culture—has also provoked serious objections [4]. Relying on anthropological and artifactual analyses, L.T. Yablonskiy notes the complete absence of any reliable archaeological evidence to confirm this [14]. Under the transport and military conditions of that era, forcibly relocating a population over such a vast distance was far from historical reality; thus, the Kuysay culture is a semi-sedentary branch of the Saka ethnocultural unity that developed on a local ethnic foundation [18].

The spiritual worldview of the Aral Sea Sakas is clearly reflected in their complex burial rites. In the Uygarak, Southern Tagisken, and Sakarchaga burial mounds, alongside the practice of cremation, a tradition is observed where the deceased was laid in their clothes upon a reed mat at the bottom of the grave. The tops of the graves were not filled with earth but were covered with wooden logs, brushwood, and mats [2]. This archaeological picture completely harmonizes with the written data of the ancient historian Herodotus regarding Scythian burial rituals [19]. The examples of the "Scythian-Siberian animal style" reflected on horse harnesses and

weapons-specifically zoomorphic combat compositions depicting predators mauling herbivorous animals—did not merely perform a religious-magical function, but rather served as a symbol of power and socio-political prestige for the professional military nobility that emerged within the nomadic confederations [20].

The anthropologist T.A. Trofimova, who studied the craniological materials of the early Aral Sea Sakas, determined that the population belonged to a mixed Europoid-Mongoloid racial type [21]. This scientifically confirms that demographic shifts from the east—the Altai and the internal regions of Central Asia—toward the west took place as early as the Early Iron Age. However, a peculiar scholarly paradox was identified during the research: Mongoloid racial traits are manifested much more clearly and dominantly in female skulls compared to male ones [14]. This phenomenon, which remains controversial in historical science, can be explained either by intertribal exogamy traditions within Saka society (taking brides from eastern Mongoloid tribes) or by the subregional migration processes of certain ethnic groups.

### **Conclusion.**

A theoretical and methodological analysis of the study of the material and spiritual culture of the early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region in world historiography allows for the following conclusions:

A single, uniform economic system did not exist among the Aral Sea Sakas. Adapting to the specific hydrographic and ecological conditions, the Sakas of the region formed two distinct economic-cultural types: a highly mobile, extensive nomadic pastoralism in the Eastern Aral Sea region, and a semi-sedentary, mixed type harmonized with agriculture in the Southwestern Aral Sea region (as exemplified by the Kuysay culture). The hypothesis regarding a “unidirectional Scythian expansion” has collapsed. The chronological antiquity of the weapon types and elements of the “animal style” discovered at the Uygarak and Tagisken monuments proves that this culture possessed its own internal evolutionary foundation. At the same time, the Sakas constituted an open society capable of successfully adopting the innovations and architectural traditions of the southern sedentary agricultural oases (Bactria, Media).

The monumental “houses of the dead” identified in burial rites, along with the zoomorphic combat compositions in the “animal style”, visually confirm the emergence of a professional military nobility stratum within Saka society and underscore their high socio-political and ideological status.

The mixed Europoid-Mongoloid racial type identified in craniological materials, coupled with the predominance of Mongoloid traits primarily in female skulls, indicates that the Aral Sea region served as a center for complex intertribal integration and transregional demographic movements as early as the Early Iron Age.

In general, the culture of the early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region was not a random accumulation of scattered groups, but rather a complex and dynamic system that developed through the inheritance of Late Bronze Age traditions in the region. It served as a solid foundation for the subsequent civilizational and statehood development of the peoples of Central Asia.

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