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Y. S. Senyurt ¹, B.E. Satayeva *²

¹Prof. Dr, Faculty of Literature Department of Archaeology, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University,
Ankara, Turkey,

e-mail: yucel.senyurt@hbv.edu.tr,

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7364-311X>

² PhD student, Faculty of Literature, Department of Archaeology,
Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Turkey, Ankara,

e-mail: satayeva.botakoz@org.hbv.edu.tr,

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-7087>

REFLECTIONS OF FOLK BELIEFS IN KURGAN AND TUMULUS TRADITIONS

Abstract

This study explores the cultural and spiritual landscape of the Turkic world, examining monumental burial architecture from the kurgans of Central Asia to the tumuli of Anatolia. The traditional view of death as the final stage of the life cycle, following birth and marriage, is predicated on the idea that it is not an end in itself, but rather a liminal threshold into a secondary existence. It is evident that these monumental structures transcend their function as mere graves. It can be argued that they serve as “ontological seals” and “civilizational title deeds”, which document the transformation of a geography into a homeland.

The research utilises archaeological evidence and folkloric data to elucidate the eschatological continuity inherent in Turkic burial traditions. This continuity can be traced from the Neolithic period through the Scythian, Hun, and Göktürk periods, eventually evolving into the “türbe” and “kümbet” architecture of the Islamic era. In this study, the key ritual components are analysed as reflections of social hierarchy and the belief in the soul’s eternal journey. These components include the sanctification of space (ritual topography), the metaphysical “sealing” of tombs to guard against the unknown, and the inclusion of grave goods (horses, weapons, and furniture). The present paper demonstrates that kurgans and tumuli are vibrant time capsules that preserve the collective memory, social structures and enduring identity of the Eurasian steppe civilisations by bridging the geographical and temporal gap between Kazakhstan and Turkey.

Key words: Death, Burial, Kurgan, Tumulus, Belief in the Afterlife, Folk Beliefs, Traditions, Cultural Identity.

С.Ю. Шенюрт¹, Б.Е. Сатаева²

¹ Археология ғылымдарының докторы, профессоры, Әдебиет факультеті,
археология кафедрасы, Анкара Хаджы Байрам Вели Университеті, Түркия, Анкара
e-mail: yucel.senyurt@hbv.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7364-311X>

² PhD докторант, Әдебиет факультеті, археология кафедрасы,
Анкара Хаджы Байрам Вели Университеті, Түркия, Анкара
e-mail: satayeva.botakoz@ogr.hbv.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-7087>

ҚОРҒАН ЖӘНЕ ТҮМҮЛУС ДӘСТҮРЛЕРІНДЕГІ ХАЛЫҚТЫҚ НАНЫМ-СЕНІМДЕРДІҢ КӨРІНІСТЕРІ

Аңдатпа

Бұл зерттеу түркі әлемінің мәдени және рухани кеңістігін қарастыра отырып, Орталық Азиядағы қорғандардан Анадолыдағы түмүлүстерге дейінгі монументалды жерлеу архитектурасын талдайды. Өлімнің өмірлік циклдің соңғы кезеңі ретінде қабылдануы — туылу мен некеден кейінгі саты — оның түпкілікті аяқталуы емес, керісінше өзге бір болмысқа өтудің шекті кезеңі (лиминалды шекара) екендігі туралы түсінікке негізделеді. Осы тұрғыда бұл монументалды құрылыстардың тек қарапайым жерлеу орындары шеңберінен асып түсетіні айқын. Олар географиялық кеңістіктің отанға айналуын айғақтайтын “онтологиялық мөрлер» және «өркениеттік иелік құжаттары» ретінде қарастырылуы мүмкін.

Зерттеу археологиялық деректер мен фольклорлық материалдарды пайдалана отырып, түркі жерлеу дәстүрлеріне тән эсхатологиялық сабақтастықты айқындайды. Бұл сабақтастық неолит дәуірінен бастап сақ, ғұн және көк түрік кезеңдері арқылы жалғасып, ислам дәуіріндегі түрбе мен күмбез архитектурасына ұласқан. Жұмыста негізгі ритуалдық компоненттер әлеуметтік иерархия мен жанның мәңгілік сапарына деген сенімнің көрінісі ретінде талданады. Олардың қатарына кеңістікті қасиеттендіру (ритуалдық топография), белгісіздіктен қорғау мақсатындағы қабірлерді метафизикалық “мөрлеу”, сондай-ақ қабірге қойылатын заттар (жылқы, қару-жарақ және тұрмыстық бұйымдар) жатады. Зерттеу қорғандар мен түмүлүстердің Еуразия даласы өркениеттерінің ұжымдық жадын, әлеуметтік құрылымдарын және тұрақты мәдени бірегейлігін сақтайтын, Қазақстан мен Түркия арасындағы географиялық әрі уақыттық кеңістікті байланыстыратын ерекше “уақыт капсулалары” екенін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Өлім, Жерлеу, Қорған, Түмүлүс, О дүниеге сенім, Халықтық наным-сенімдер, Дәстүрлер, Мәдени бірегейлік.

С.Ю. Шенюрт¹, Б.Е. Сатаева²

¹ Доктор археологических наук, профессор, Факультет литературы, кафедра археологии,
Университет Анкара Хаджи Байрам Вели, Турция, Анкара,
e-mail: yucel.senyurt@hbv.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7364-311X>

² Докторант PhD, Факультет литературы, кафедра археологии,
Университет Хаджи Байрам Вели, Турция, Анкара,
e-mail: satayeva.botakoz@ogr.hbv.edu.tr
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-7087>

ОТРАЖЕНИЕ НАРОДНЫХ ВЕРОВАНИЙ В ТРАДИЦИЯХ КУРГАНОВ И ТУМУЛУСОВ

Аннотация

Настоящее исследование посвящено анализу культурного и духовного ландшафта тюркского мира через призму монументальной погребальной архитектуры - от курганов Центральной Азии до тумулусов Анатолии. Традиционное восприятие смерти как завершающего этапа жизненного цикла, следующего за рождением и браком, основано на представлении о том, что она является не окончанием, а лиминальным порогом, ведущим к иной форме существования. Очевидно, что данные монументальные сооружения выходят далеко за рамки своей функции простых захоронений. Их можно интерпретировать как «онтологические печати» и «цивилизационные акты владения», фиксирующие процесс превращения географического пространства в родину.

В исследовании используются археологические данные и фольклорные материалы для выявления эсхатологической преемственности, присущей тюркским погребальным традициям. Данная преемственность прослеживается от неолитической эпохи через скифский, гуннский и гёктюркский периоды, трансформируясь в архитектурные формы тюрбе и кюмет исламского времени. В работе ключевые ритуальные компоненты анализируются как отражение социальной иерархии и веры в вечное путешествие души. К ним относятся сакрализация пространства (ритуальная топография), метафизическое «запечатывание» погребений с целью защиты от неизвестного, а также включение погребального инвентаря (лошади, оружие и предметы обихода). Настоящее исследование демонстрирует, что курганы и тумулусы представляют собой своеобразные «живые капсулы времени», сохраняющие коллективную память, социальные структуры и устойчивую идентичность цивилизаций Евразийских степей, соединяя географическое и временное пространство между Казахстаном и Турцией.

Ключевые слова: Смерть, Погребение, Курган, Тумулус, Вера в загробную жизнь, Народные верования, Традиции, Культурная идентичность.

Introduction. The ontological trajectory of human existence, characterised by liminal thresholds such as birth and marriage, culminates in death. This is not conceptualised as a terminal rupture, but rather as a transformative passage into a metaphysical continuum. Within this theoretical framework, death is conceptualised as a liminal condition that serves as a mediating entity between the material and immaterial realms. This conceptualisation gives rise to the necessity for ritualised responses that are profoundly embedded within the fabric of cosmological thought systems. In their attempts to interpret and regulate this transition, societies have developed complex mortuary practices and

constructed monumental funerary landscapes that embody their religious, symbolic, and ideological orientations.

Turkic cosmology, grounded in a dualistic understanding of life force (can) and soul (ruh), posits the immortality and mobility of the soul beyond corporeal existence. This ontological distinction has profoundly shaped the sacralisation of burial spaces, transforming graves into ritually charged loci of memory, presence, and continuity. In this sense, mortuary architecture transcends its functional dimension, emerging as a form of symbolic spatiality through which metaphysical beliefs are materialised and perpetuated.

Across the Eurasian steppe, the most monumental expression of this ideological and ritual framework is found in kurgans, while in the Anatolian context it manifests as tumuli. These structures function not solely as burial mounds, but as integral components of a more extensive mortuary landscape, which encodes social hierarchy, political authority, and cosmological order. As markers of territoriality that endure, they function as civilizational inscriptions, which may be conceptualised as ontological claims over space. In this way, they materialise the transformation of landscape into homeland. From the Neolithic period through to the Scythian, Hunnic, Göktürk, and Phrygian cultural horizons, these monuments have functioned as conduits of long-term cultural memory and structural continuity.

The ritual practices associated with kurgans and tumuli – encompassing ancestor veneration, offerings, commemorative feasting, and protective sealing mechanisms – constitute a dynamic repertoire of symbolic actions that articulate both reverence for the dead and anxiety towards the unknown. These practices not only mirror but actively reproduce social structures, belief systems, and collective identities. This deeply rooted mortuary tradition underwent processes of transformation and adaptation over time, ultimately giving rise to the türbe and kümbet architectural forms within the Turkic-Islamic cultural sphere. This demonstrates remarkable continuity of ritual logic and symbolic expression.

The present study seeks to critically engage with the interplay between archaeology, folklore and belief systems by examining the folk narratives and ritual practices surrounding kurgans and tumuli within the Kazakhstan-Turkey axis. The integration of material evidence with intangible cultural frameworks is intended to elucidate the role of these funerary monuments as agents of cultural continuity, identity formation, and civilizational memory within the broader context of Eurasian archaeological discourse.

Method and Materials. The present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach with the objective of decoding the symbolic universe and folk belief systems underlying the ancient funerary architecture of kurgans and tumuli across Eurasia. The research framework has been constructed through an integrated methodological design and a diverse corpus of materials, which are structured as follows:

1. The Scope of Materials

The primary material focus of the study consists of monumental burial structures located within two strategic cores of the Turkic cultural geography. Anatolia and Kazakhstan. In this context, Phrygian-period monuments such as Tumulus MM at Gordion, the tumuli in the vicinity of Ankara, and proto-Turkic kurgans of the Central Asian steppes – exemplified by sites such as Pazyryk - constitute the principal archaeological dataset.

In addition to this material corpus, epigraphic sources such as the Orkhon Inscriptions, historical accounts including Chinese chronicles, and oral traditions such as the Epic of Köroğlu are incorporated as textual evidence. Furthermore, ethnographic data preserved within the cultural landscapes of the Kazakh steppes provide an additional layer of interpretive depth, enabling a comprehensive synthesis of archaeological, written, and folkloric materials.

2. Comparative Analytical Method

The study employs a comparative (comparative-historical) analytical framework in order to examine burial mound traditions across the Kazakhstan–Turkey axis. The analysis investigates both structural and ritual dimensions, and spans a diachronic trajectory from the Neolithic period through the Hunnic, Göktürk, and Phrygian cultural horizons. This study focuses on architectural components, including burial chambers, crepis, and dromos, as well as funerary practices, such as horse sacrifice, the deposition of grave goods, and tomb-sealing mechanisms. This approach enables the systematic evaluation of both convergences and regionally specific variations.

3. Interdisciplinary Synthesis and Eschatological Perspective

In this context, the importance of ritual status representations over political or historical claims is recognised, as is the fact that political messages are conveyed through rituals [1, p. 637]. Within this interpretive framework, Turkic eschatological beliefs, grounded in the distinction between “life force” (can) and “soul” (ruh), are examined from an anthropological perspective. This is complemented by a diachronic analysis tracing the transformation of kurgan architecture into the “kümbet” and “türbe” forms of the Turkic-Islamic period. This reveals patterns of cultural continuity and symbolic persistence.

4. Conceptual Framework

The data obtained throughout the research are systematically categorized under key thematic axes, including “territorialization” (homeland formation), “social hierarchy,” “metaphysical protection,” and “collective memory,” and are subjected to qualitative analysis. Through this conceptual structuring, the study establishes a theoretical foundation for interpreting kurgans and tumuli as “ontological seals” inscribed upon the landscape-material expressions of cultural identity, spatial claim, and civilizational continuity.

Results.

Following comprehensive research and archaeological excavations, it has been determined that the kurgan and tumulus structures in Anatolia and Kazakhstan – two strategic centres of the Eurasian geography – exhibit magnificent monumentality and architectural diversity. The data obtained demonstrate that these monumental tombs are not merely physical structures, but also function as complex ritual topography centres.

1. Architectural Components and Monumental Scales

Field studies have revealed that tumulus architecture comprises fundamental components, such as the crepis (preventing the dispersion of piled earth), the dromos (providing access to the burial chamber), the forecourt, and the primary burial area. It has been established that graves from the Early and Middle Phrygian phases lacked elements such as the standardized dromos and antechamber found in later periods and were sealed in an irreversible manner following the burial process. The findings reveal that Tumulus MM at Gordion is particularly noteworthy as one of the most magnificent monumental tombs of the ancient Near East. Its height is recorded as 53 metres and its approximate diameter as 300 metres. Excavations in the Ankara region have yielded a substantial body of documentation pertaining to the structure that has been designated as the “Master's Tomb”. The Şefin Mezari monument stands at a height of 10 metres and boasts a diameter of 40 metres. The cross-shaped ditch system at its centre is a distinctive feature.

2. A Consideration of the Interior of Graves and Associated Eschatological Data

In the interior organisation of monumental tombs, a rich assemblage of artefacts reflecting the deceased's social hierarchy has been identified. Chemical analyses of Bronze Age vessels unearthed in Tumulus MM have provided scientific corroboration of the hypothesis that the ancient Phrygians consumed spiced meat stew accompanied by beer, wine, and a fermented mixed drink containing honey during funeral rituals. Furthermore, the presence of bronze fibulae, large cauldrons, and meticulously crafted wooden furniture in burial chambers has been identified as an indicator of the economic power of the noble class.

3. Anthropological Discoveries and Burial Customs

Research conducted on the Atasu period in Central Kazakhstan has revealed that the deceased were typically interred in a flexed (hocker) (fetal) posture, with their heads positioned towards the west or southwest. This particular burial form is widely considered to be associated with the belief in rebirth. The presence of ash accumulations and burning traces on kurgan floors suggests that burial rituals were accompanied by elaborate religious ceremonies. The stone enclosures observed on the graves are hypothesised to have served a sealing function, possibly driven by beliefs concerning the afterlife.

4. Animal Sacrifice and Mummification Traces

The horse burial tradition, identified particularly in royal kurgans, constitutes one of the most striking findings of ritualistic richness. In Pazyryk kurgans, approximately one-third of the grave area was allocated to horse burial, and these animals were positioned as spiritual vehicles serving the owner in the afterlife. Furthermore, the existence of a profound mummification tradition (tahnid) has been documented through archaeological data. This involved the preservation of the skin alongside the skeleton to protect the body in the harsh climate of the steppe.

Discussion.

Throughout history, societies have employed a variety of mechanisms to transmit their past to future generations. Among these traditions, the construction of burial monuments is one of the most enduring and significant. It is asserted that Graves serve as the most critical architectural forms, which narrate the lived experiences, customs, traditions, and belief systems of the geography in which they are located. It is further posited that they thereby function as material inscriptions of history itself. An examination of the Turkish people's past reveals continuities of this culture stretching back to the Neolithic period. It is evident that architectural structures, whether above or below ground, yield invaluable insights into the historical evolution of diverse societies, including those of nomadic communities. Kurgans and tumuli, constructed as burial monuments for the rulers of ancient societies, emerge as key indicators of the lifeways, cultures, and civilisations of nomadic groups.

The territories of Anatolia and Kazakhstan represent two pivotal geographical and cultural centres embodying the ancient funerary architecture tradition of Eurasia. In both regions, structures designated as ‘burial mounds’, ‘tumuli’ or ‘kurgans’ are evaluated not merely as graves but as monumental architectural forms that materialize religious, social, and ideological memory across diachronic temporalities.

The term ‘tumulus’ is etymologically derived from the Latin ‘tumulus’, which in turn originates from the root ‘tumeo’ (to bulge/swell). This suggests that the term conveys not merely a funerary designation, but also a topographical definition emphasising the artificial elevation's morphological character. This etymological trajectory is paralleled across linguistic traditions. The English equivalents ‘burial mound’ and ‘barrow’, and the German ‘Grabhügel’, similarly encode the topographic essence of the artificial hill. In Ancient Greek, the concept was articulated as ‘τύμβος (týmbos)’, thus affirming the pan-European conceptualization of this funerary architecture [2, p. 1].

Concurrent with this etymological convergence, the term ‘kurgan’ is indisputably of Turkish origin, deriving from the verbal stems ‘kur/kor’ (‘to construct’ and ‘to protect’). The term ‘kur(u)gan’ is understood to denote a ‘monumentalized grave’ whereas ‘kor(u)gan’ is interpreted as signifying ‘protected’ or ‘fortified’. It is therefore argued that the kurgan transcends its utilitarian function of safeguarding the deceased and funerary goods, attaining profound monumental ontology that embodies territorial sovereignty.

The Turkish Language Association (TDK) has provided the following systematic definition of ‘kurgan’. The term may refer to: An artificial hillock constructed through soil accumulation over ancient graves, A fortification structure. A hill-shaped grave or tumulus [3, p. 1259].

In Turkey, burial monuments known as tumuli, and in Kazakhstan as kurgans, are funerary structures formed by the piling of earth and stone over a wooden burial chamber or pit grave. The term ‘kurgan’ is employed in the sense of protecting the grave, akin to the Turkish verb ‘to guard’.

In the domain of archaeology, however, the term is employed to denote the mound created by the accumulation of soil or stone in a broad, circular shape over a grave or burial chamber.

The construction of kurgans is known to have occurred during the Neolithic, Bronze, Iron, Classical, and Medieval periods. This tradition of creating artificial mounds has been employed by numerous peoples across the Caucasus, Balkans, and Central Asia since the third millennium BCE. In Anatolia, the tumulus tradition became widespread from the first millennium BCE onwards, and it endured through the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This burial form was first developed by the Phrygians from Thrace and Macedonia, and was employed in the construction of monumental tombs for kings.

Kurgans and tumuli are archetypal architectural-archaeological formations that mediate the diachronic continuum between past and present. They function as intergenerational bridges encoding critical psycho-social indices of ancient Eurasian societies. These monumental structures are instrumental in the construction of culture and civilisation through semiotic inscriptions on their material substrate, operating simultaneously as:

The following discussion will examine ontological seals that are used to mark territorial appropriation and homeland transformation (*vatanlasma*). The documentation of spatial legitimisation is evident in civilizational title deeds. Time capsules have been utilised as a means of preserving collective memory and social stratification.

The liminal thresholds that mediate the boundary between mortal existence and afterlife are of particular significance in this field. M. Artamonov's seminal work, *Sokrovišcha Sakov* (The Treasures of the Saka), is of particular significance, containing highly significant data concerning the ritual and sociological foundations of kurgan culture in the Eurasian steppes. The present study demonstrates that kurgans function not solely as burial monuments, but also as concrete indicators of how societies have appropriated their geographical landscapes.

Consequently, these funerary monuments emerge not merely as burial containers, but as polysemous cultural artefacts embodying the cosmological, political, and metaphysical dimensions of Eurasian steppe and Anatolian civilisations - from Pazyryk kurgans to Phrygian tumuli. The etymological convergence between “tumulus” and “kurgan” - both emphasizing artificial elevation and protective function - affirms a pan-Eurasian conceptualization of funerary architecture that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries while maintaining distinct regional ontologies

Table 1. Comparative Architectural, Ritual, and Eschatological Features of Eurasian Kurgan and Tumulus Traditions

Criterion	Central Asian Kurgan (Saka-Hun-Göktürk)	Anatolian Tumulus (Early-Middle Phrygian)
Monument Type	Subterranean burial mound (kurgan)	Monumental earthen/stone tumulus
Location/Region	Kazakhstan and Inner Eurasian steppes	Anatolian plateau (Gordion, Ankara)
Historical Period / Culture	Saka, Scythian, Hun, Göktürk	Early and Middle Phrygian
Architectural Components	Timber/stone-lined burial chambers, artificial mound, enclosure systems, yurt-like spatial logic	Wooden burial chamber, massive mound, krepis (retaining wall), dromos (access passage, later phases), palace-like interior design.
Scale (Exemplars)	Pazyryk: subterranean chambers lined with timber logs, horse burials in northern sector (occupying 1/3 of tomb)	Tumulus MM (Gordion), 53 m height, 300 m diameter, no dromos in Early Phrygian Ankara “Chief's Tomb” 10 m height, 40 m diameter;

		cross-shaped ditch at center
Ritual Practices	Horse sacrifice, mummification (tahnid), funerary feasting, carpets lining the chamber	Consumption of spiced meat stew, beer, and wine, single interment; permanent sealing post-ceremony
Grave Goods	Horses, weapons (swords), textiles, carpets, wooden/leather artifacts, often gold-rich assemblages	Wooden furniture, bronze fibulae, large bronze cauldrons, marked absence of gold and silver
Body Orientation & Posture	Flexed (hocker/fetal) position, heads oriented west/southwest/northwest, East–West axial alignment	Single interment, chamber designed as palace room, no repeated reopening
Eschatological Beliefs (Inferred)	Belief in resurrection, horses as spiritual vehicles, rebirth via fetal posture, soul’s journey to the spirit realm	Continuity of earthly comforts in afterlife, tomb as eternal palace dwelling, immortal soul (ruh)
Sealing & Metaphysical Function	Permanent sealing, stone enclosures, necrophobic anxiety (prevention of deceased’s return)	Irreversible sealing post-ceremony, graves as sacred, non-reopenable spaces for eternal rest
Ritual Topography	Integration with sacred natural elements (“land-water” cosmology)	Monumental dominance over landscape, territorial marking (“civilizational title deed”)
Cultural Continuity	Evolution into Turkic-Islamic forms (kümbet, türbe), persistence of shamanistic motifs	Architectural and symbolic continuity into later Anatolian-Islamic funerary traditions

The tumuli in Turkey provide crucial evidence regarding the migration of the Turks into Anatolia and the region's historical development. Those found in Thrace, the Black Sea region and Central Anatolia, in particular, demonstrate that the Turkish presence in Anatolia is ancient and deeply rooted. These monuments are a valuable resource for archaeological research and play a significant role in safeguarding the Turk’s cultural heritage in Anatolia. It is equally important to emphasise the connection between these tumuli and the history and cultures of Eurasian nomadic communities. These monumental tombs provide insight into migration routes, cultural interactions and the development of civilisations. Accordingly, tumuli in Turkey are of great historical, cultural, archaeological, tourist and national identity significance. Preserving, studying and transmitting these monuments to future generations is vital for protecting our national identity and cultural heritage.

Essential architectural elements within the broader tumulus tradition include the krepis, which prevents the mound from dispersing, and the dromos, which provides access to the burial chamber. Other key features are the forecourt, the porch, the antechamber and the burial chamber itself, which constitutes the primary interment area. Although the construction of monumental tumuli declined following the collapse of the Phrygian state, the tradition continued uninterrupted through the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman periods. This burial practice remained particularly widespread in Central Anatolia and the surrounding area well into the Roman period.

In Anatolia, tumuli have been identified as monumental structures primarily built for nobles and wealthy families. Rather than saving on labour, these tombs were equipped with elaborate exterior façades and secure burial chambers to symbolise the power and authority of the deceased and their lineage. Tumuli function like subterranean palaces, ensuring the eternal rest of the deceased and demarcating this sacred space from the outside world with the earthen mound that caps them [4, p. 12]. Tumuli are not just burial monuments, but also represent permanence in the landscape and the cult of the ancestors. They were also regarded as memorials that perpetuate the memory of their

owners' power [4, p. 46]. Within the Phrygian belief system, rituals performed on or around these monumental hills signify reverence for ancestors and demonstrate prestige.

The most distinctive feature of tumulus architecture in the early and middle Phrygian periods is the absence of architectural components such as the dromos, krepis, antechamber, forecourt or porch, which became standardised in the later Lydian and Hellenistic periods. Indeed, no preliminary arrangement or entrance architecture facilitating access to the burial space has been identified in Early Phrygian funerary structures; the tombs were designed for single interment and, following the burial ceremony, were permanently closed and sealed [2, p. 11]. This architectural preference indicates that Phrygian society viewed graves as sacred, irreversible and non-reopenable.

Archaeological evidence shows that the Ankara tumuli are remarkable for their size and scale. One of the northern tumuli, documented by Ernest Chantre in 1898 and known as the ‘‘Chief's Tomb’’ (or tombeau du Chef), is said to be approximately 10 metres high and 40 metres in diameter. Furthermore, the largest tumulus features a cross-shaped ditch at its centre, through which access to the burial chamber was gained via a pit located at the midpoint of the ditch [5, p. 25]. These findings reveal that Phrygian tumuli are not merely mounded hills, as they appear on the surface, but possess a complex internal spatial organisation. Phrygian tumuli are monumentalised versions of the Balkan tradition of earthen mound construction, rendering noble status visible within the landscape.

Tumulus MM, located in Gordion, is recognised as one of the most magnificent monuments of ancient Near Eastern archaeology. It was excavated in 1957 under the direction of Rodney S. Young. The social information derived from the scientific analysis of its contents makes it an unparalleled source for understanding Phrygian culture. Tumulus MM is the most tangible embodiment of the beliefs of the Phrygian aristocracy concerning the afterlife. According to Phrygian belief, the grave is a space in which the soul of the deceased continues to exist with the same comforts enjoyed during life, consequently, the burial chamber was designed to resemble a palace room. ‘‘In Tumuli MM and P, the strong impression is that the burial chambers were arranged to closely resemble the palace rooms occupied by the deceased during their lives, and that everything needed by their souls in the afterlife was included here’’ [6, p. 259].

The Phrygian funerary tradition exhibits both similarities and striking differences compared to other regions of Anatolia. The Phrygians employed the tradition of constructing a ‘‘wooden burial chamber’’ for elite individuals and covering it with a stone mound, a practice reserved exclusively for the privileged class [6, p. 263]. Wood was a central material, ritually configured as the means of passage to the afterlife. Measuring ‘‘53 metres in height and 300 metres in diameter’’, Tumulus MM is the largest tumulus at Gordion and the second largest in Anatolia after the Alyattes Tumulus at Bin Tepe [6, p. 191]. These dimensions transform the structure into a symbolic expression of power and prestige. Unlike Lydian or Persian tombs, Tumulus MM conspicuously lacks ‘‘gold and silver’’. Instead, the Phrygians demonstrated their wealth through bronze works and masterfully crafted wooden furniture [6, p. 264]. Although Phrygian customs exhibit ‘‘orientalising’’ influences from neighbouring cultures, such as Assyrian and Urartian, the architecture of the wooden burial chamber establishes a distinctive Anatolian identity [6, p. 263].



Figure 1. General view of MM Tumulus (Midas Tomb)
URL: <https://kulturenvanteri.com/yer/midas-tumulusu/> (accessed 12.06.2026) [7].

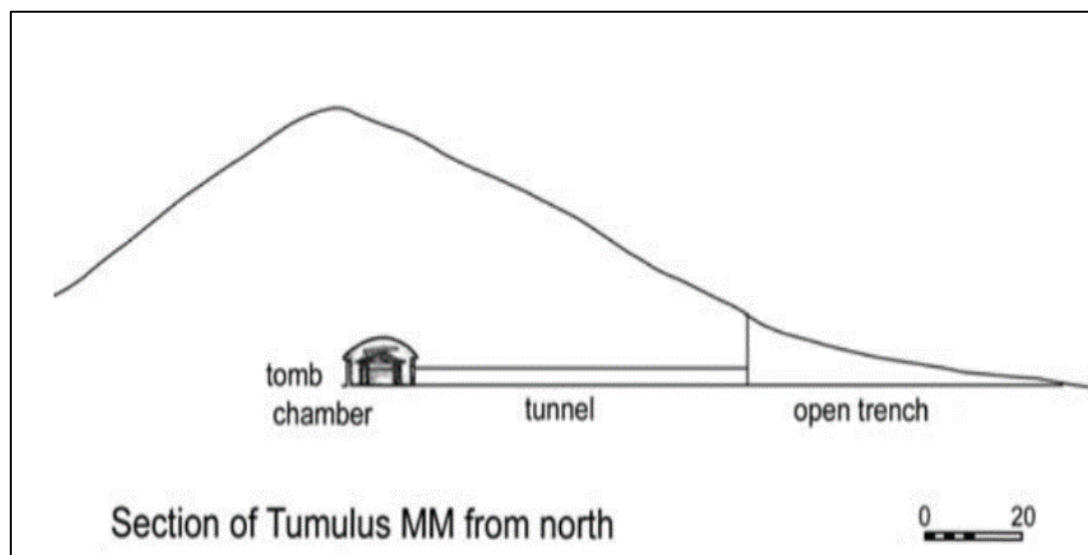


Figure 2. Drawing of MM 'Midas' Tumulus from the north, showing the trench opened during the 1957 excavations together with the tunnel. Plate 51 [6, p. 83].

The grave goods in Phrygian burial monuments have been shown to reveal the deceased's social status and afterlife beliefs. The presence of bronze fibulae, cauldrons and wooden furniture in a given context is often indicative of the affluence of the nobility. The practice of interring horses in certain tumuli has been observed to align with Central Asian kurgan traditions, thereby offering insight into the potential interactions between Phrygians and Scythians.

It has been observed that analogous practices are evident in the “Pazırık” and “Berel” kurgans. Pazırık (87% horse burials, 5th–4th century BCE) and Berel Kurgan 11 (13 mummified horses, 4th–3rd century BCE) demonstrate horse sacrifice as status markers and spiritual guides for the afterlife, reflecting shared Eurasian nomadic aristocratic traditions.

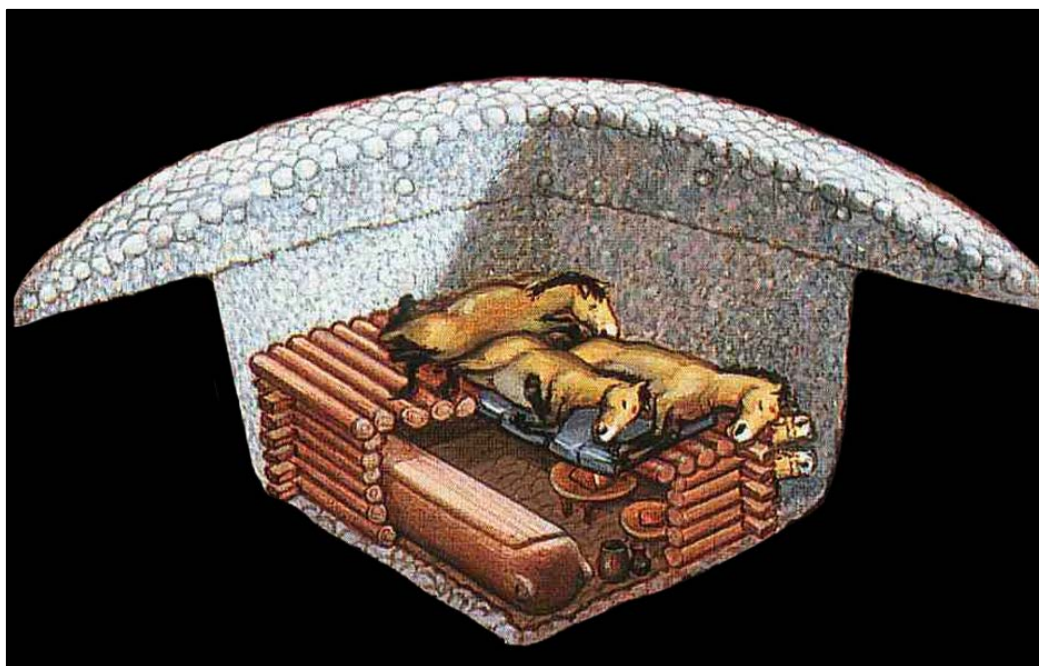


Figure 3. Reconstruction of The Lady Kurgan of the Pazyryk culture, buried with a horse. Figure 3 [8, p. 115].

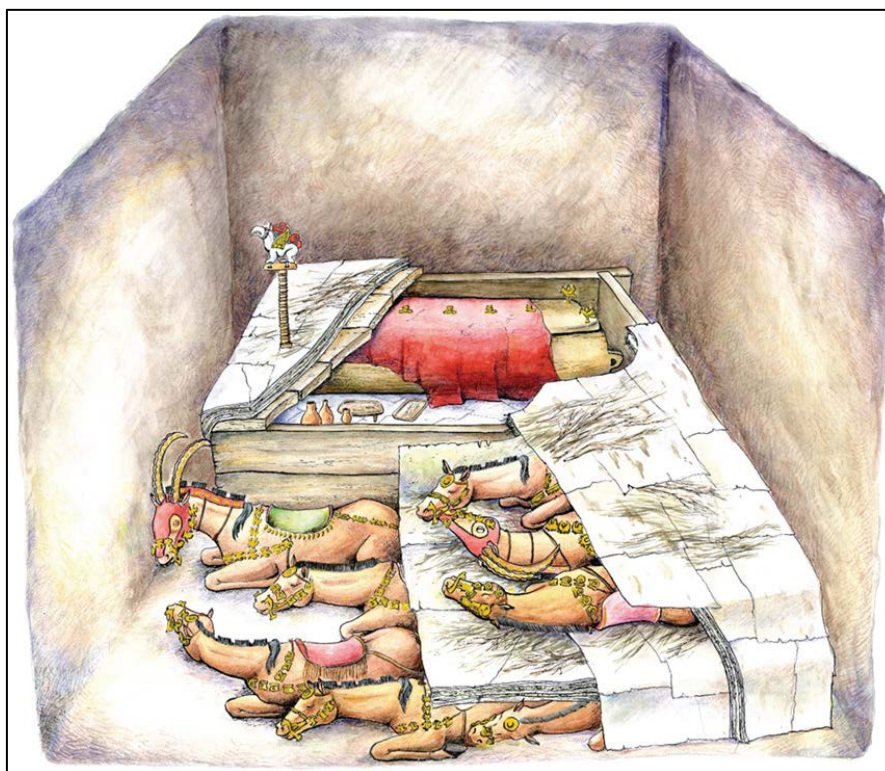


Figure 4. Restitution of Kurgan 11 at Berel, buried with a horse. Image 3 [9, p. 781].

Tumuli and kurgans are similar in that they are both artificial mounds containing an internal burial chamber made of wood or stone, which is covered by a roofed or flat structure. During the Migration Period, various tribes and cultures used kurgans, adapting them to their own funerary traditions and rituals. They continued to be used throughout the medieval period, though they evolved into simpler structures in later eras. Kurgan culture is widespread across Central Asia and Eastern Europe. They are a significant source of information for archaeologists, providing essential knowledge regarding the beliefs, customs, and social structures of their respective periods. Tumuli are not just burial structures, but also represent the sacred connection between life and death, functioning as ritual monuments and centres of worship dedicated to ancestors. In this context, it is understood that "ritual status representations are more important than political or historical claims" and "political messages are expressed in ritual terms" [1, p. 637]. Therefore, the deceased individual is immortalised "more by their symbolic and ritual status than by their political capacity" [1, p. 637].

In his pioneering Pazyryk research (1970), Rudenko explains how kurgans embody nomadic folk beliefs and cosmological worldviews. The tomb architecture was deliberately designed to replicate winter dwellings and furnished with carpets and tables, embodying the belief that earthly comforts continue into the afterlife. The discovery of embalmed bodies, including one bearing tattoos, attests to mummification practices and body marking as expressions of sacred identity. Meanwhile, intact horse burials positioned outside the tombs underscore the significance of animal worship in funerary rituals. The decorative nature of the tomb artefacts reflects the artistic sophistication of the Early Nomads, as well as the symbolic elevation of artistic objects within mortuary contexts. The exceptional preservation of fragile materials such as wood, fabric, and leather enabled a thorough analysis of the burial goods and their ritual functions. Together, these findings demonstrate that kurgans serve as physical representations of cosmological beliefs, ritual practices and folk traditions related to death and the afterlife [10].

Traces of combustion and remains of sacrificial animals found at the bases of kurgans, along with ash deposits, “demonstrate that burial rituals were accompanied by complex religious ceremonies” [11, pp. 128–132].

The stone enclosures surrounding kurgans serve as physical boundaries and metaphysical protective barriers. The construction of enclosures around graves, for example, is associated with a fear of death. Due to their fear of the deceased, tribal members performed a series of rituals but remained anxious that the dead might emerge from the grave and disturb them. To prevent this, they “sealed” the grave [12, p. 133]. Necrophobic anxiety, or the fear of the dead, has persisted from antiquity to the present day.



Figure 5. View from the excavation of The Lady Kurgan of the Pazyryk culture. [8, p. 114].

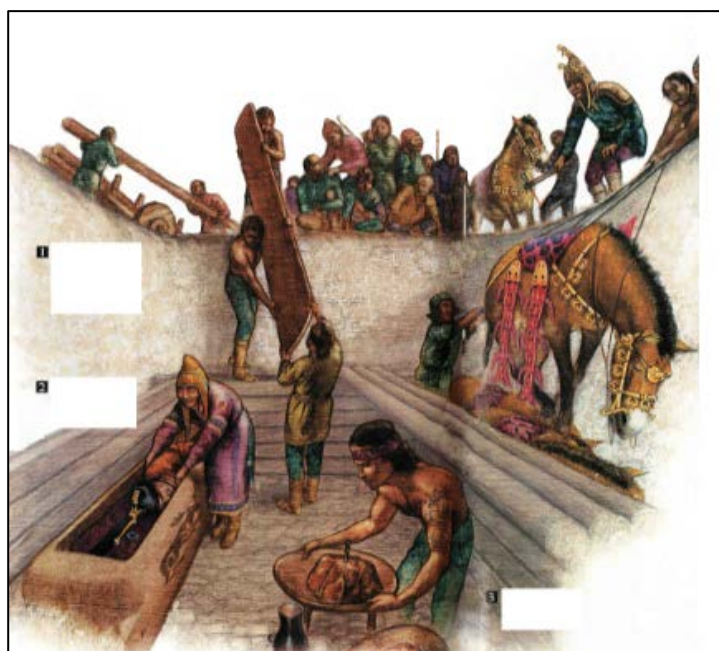


Figure 6. Reconstruction of the burial ceremony of the Kurgan. Figure 1 [8, p. 114].

The kurgan structures associated with the Saka, Sarmatian, and ancient Turkic communities in Kazakhstan constitute “a powerful stratum that developed continuously from the Bronze Age” thereby forming the architectural identity of the region [13, p. 11]. According to Bajenov's (2004) study, this traditional monumental architecture began to develop at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, serving as the cornerstone of cultural continuity spanning centuries [13, p. 4]. In particular, the migration of communities such as the “Old Turks” incorporated distinctive Central Asian elements into this architectural style [13, p. 8].

In both regions, the burial mound tradition seeks to establish a symbolic linkage between natural topography and the sacred dimensions of the cosmos. Within this framework, “the majority of graves are positioned along an east-west axis”, with the eastern direction being regarded as the orientation of rebirth and immortality [14, pp. 77-93].

The kurgan is an early Turkic funerary monument that integrates subterranean and superstructural architectural elements. The subterranean chamber was conceived as a dwelling space to prepare the deceased for the afterlife. The burial pit was typically lined with wooden or stone slabs and covered with timber logs, evoking the appearance of a yurts “traditional nomadic dwellings” and thereby symbolising belief in existence after death. The deposition of personal belongings, food, and beverages within the graves reflects Turkic eschatological beliefs and funerary rituals [15, p. 301; 16, p. 432; 17, p. 240; 18, p. 78; 19, pp. 69-72].

The diversity of practices concerning the dead is a distinctive feature of the ancient Turks. The deceased was sometimes buried in the earth, at other times burned and left exposed, or burned and then buried in the earth, and occasionally even hung upon a tree. “The ancient Turks, for example, the Göktürks, awaited the leaf-falling season, or the renewal of tree foliage, for the burial ceremony; they piled earth over the graves of their elders to construct kurgans (mounds). This practice was also observed among Iranian-originating mounted peoples. Along the steppe route extending from the Chinese borders to Hungary, these kurgans are arranged in a sequential manner. Stone-carved representations, known as balbal', of the enemies slain by the heroic deceased during their lifetime were erected at the grave (kurgan)” [20, p. 27].

“Evidence from kurgans dating from 3000 BCE indicates that burial ceremonies were typically organised in one of three forms: interment, cremation or exposure of the body. Burial in the earth was the most widespread practice. A substantial corpus of historical and archaeological research has been dedicated to the investigation of numerous Turkic tribes, including the Göktürk, Kyrgyz, Oghuz, Hun, and Uygur. This research, complemented by occasional references to burial ceremonies in the oral folk culture products of these societies, has provided substantial evidence to support the hypothesis that the fundamental burial method employed in these communities was earth burial” [21, p. 64].

“As posited by the Shamanistic Oghuz Turks, the prevailing belief is that the world is permeated by a spiritually infused essence. It is evident that mountains, forests, lakes and other natural features are all living entities. These sacralized entities are generally characterized as “land-water beings” and among the most significant of these beings is the mountain” [21, p. 67].

Consequently, throughout history in Turkic culture, mountains, forests, trees, and watersides - imbued with sanctity - were utilised as burial locations. “Another form of burial practice employed in ancient Turkic communities was the abandonment or exposure of the body. In this tradition, the body is placed in a tomb where it remains until decomposition, often positioned on trees or on stakes driven into the ground. Following the occurrence of decomposition, the bones are either buried or burned, as is the case in certain Turkic communities, where the preservation of bones is considered essential for rebirth in the afterlife. The act of abandoning or exposing a corpse to the elements can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of distancing oneself from the deceased and their associated spiritual influences. This practice is believed to facilitate a psychological release from the influence of malevolent spirits that are often attributed with causing death. The transfer of the deceased to a distant environment, far from their home and the region where their relatives reside, appears, in a sense, as a practice aimed at

disorienting the soul of the deceased, ensuring that the household and kinfolk are no longer disturbed” [21, p. 70]. It is hypothesised that the contemporary practice in Kyrgyzstan of keeping the deceased's tomb outside the house for at least three days constitutes a continuation of this belief system.

The burial traditions and ritual practices of ancient periods in Central Kazakhstan underwent transformation over time, evolving into a more distinct inhumation (burial) tradition during the Atasu phase. According to the sources, “for the Atasu period, the burial ritual is characteristic, while cremation is observed only rarely” [22, p. 16]. During this period, the positioning of the deceased within the graves symbolises their position at the threshold between life and death. Typically, “the dead were placed in a flexed position (hocker), laid on their left or right sides, with their heads facing west, and sometimes southwest or northwest”, positioned in graves as realms of eternity [22, p. 70]. This burial form, which bears a resemblance to the foetal position within the mother's womb, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the belief in rebirth after being returned to the earth in steppe culture.

A fundamental tenet of societies is the belief that the grave is not merely a place for protecting the dead but also the deceased's home in the afterlife. This belief is evidenced by examination of burial traditions. This world of assumptions is integral to the functioning of societies, insofar as it provides them with a sense of cultural identity and selfhood. The Turks have considered death not as an end but as a transition to a different world since very ancient periods. As a requirement of this belief system, it is asserted that “just as in one of the Turkmenistan variants of the Kōroğlu story, Kōroğlu is protected and born by the earth (grave, soil), similarly various Turkic communities believing in life after death have perceived the “grave” as “the place where the body is protected' and as the 'home/palace' where they will pass into their second life” [23, p. 39].

Consequently, “burial chambers were carefully furnished like dwellings used during life, with walls covered in felt blankets and floors carpeted” [23, p. 130]. The geographical regions of Turkestan and Anatolia are replete with such burial structures from prehistoric periods to the present day. These monuments are of particular significance as they act as crucial touchstones, revealing humanity's perspectives on the afterlife.

The ritual richness within kurgans has been demonstrated to be directly correlated with the status of the interred individual. The tradition of horse burial, particularly evident in the kurgans of rulers and nobility, represents the most striking element of these rituals. The horse was regarded as the most faithful companion, serving the owner in the afterlife as a spiritual vehicle to transport them to the realm of spirits. In monumental structures such as the Pazyryk kurgans, “the placement of horse burials in a section allocated on the northern side, occupying one-third of the tomb, emerges as an unalterable rule” [23, p. 130]. The preservation of the body in the harsh climate of the steppe was of vital importance for the belief in resurrection, thereby engendering a profound tradition of “mummification” (tahnid) in Turkic culture. “In the process of mummification, there was a concerted effort to preserve both the skeleton and the skin. The skull was perforated post-mortem, and the intestines and soft tissues were removed, while the skin was placed directly upon the skull and bones” [20, p. 389]. These practices were based on the belief that the soul would return, and aimed to maintain the integrity of the body. In this context, it becomes evident that burial structures such as kurgans and tumuli were perceived not merely as spaces for storing and protecting the body, but as sacred places where the nomadic soul would embark on its journey to eternity.

It is asserted that these structures evolved over time and formed the origin of the kümbete and türbe architecture of the Turkic-Islamic period. Çoruhlu indeed states that the origin of conical / pyramidal and tomb architecture with domed architecture is to be found in kurgans. It has been asserted that the design of the “Tercan Mama Hatun Kümbet represents the westernmost and latest example of the kurgan schema, which emerged in Inner Asia, extending to Anatolian Turkish Architecture” [23, p. 461]. This circumstance elucidates how Turkic culture has demonstrated continuity from the past to the present and how the burial traditions embedded in beliefs extend to a remarkably profound historical past.

“As stated in Chinese sources, the Göktürks cremated their dead. Furthermore, analysis of burial remnants has revealed that the Huns in Hungary also practised cremation. A tent had been erected as a catafalque, with a sacrifice of horses and sheep taking place around it. Following several rounds of equestrian activity within the confines of the tent, the horse was slaughtered and incinerated along with other possessions. Following the burial of the ashes, sacrifices were slaughtered, and the slashing of faces was employed as a sign of mourning. The soul, assuming the form of a bird, took flight. The phrase “*şahin oldu*” (became a falcon) in ancient texts is a pertinent example of this phenomenon” [20, p. 28]. The tradition of interring the deceased with their weaponry and equine equipment, in addition to the ritual sacrifice of their horse, has its origins in the Huns. This practice is underpinned by the belief in an afterlife and the concept of collective existence in that realm. The concepts of the soul and of an afterlife represent some of the most fundamental elements common to all religions. The designation of heaven as “*uçmak*” (to fly) in ancient Turks, as well as the expression “*uçmağa vardı*” (he went flying), are used to describe the soul flying like a bird and ascending to the sky. In the context of totemism, the belief that the soul is eternal is not upheld; rather, the ancient Turks subscribed to the doctrine that souls are immortal and that the universe itself is imbued with a soul. Consequently, offerings were made and sacrifices were offered to the spirits of their ancestors” [24, p. 58].

The Shaman Religion is predicated on the belief in the existence of a celestial realm of light in the sky, a terrestrial realm, and a subterranean realm of darkness. The celestial realm is a realm of light consisting of 17 layers. In this realm, there are manifestations of beauty, virtue, and benevolence. The ruler of this realm is God Kayra Han (Ülgen), the Creator of all beings.

On Earth, there exist humans, other living creatures, and angels. These celestial beings are believed to be emissaries of divine benevolence, dispatched by the Almighty to the earthly realm. It is evident that the existence of malevolent spirits and demons is not exclusive to the celestial realm; they are also present on Earth, having been dispatched from the underworld. The underworld is a realm of darkness consisting of seven or four layers. The ruler of this realm is a devil or monster named Erlik.

“According to this religion, good spirits who die in the world take the form of a bird and ascend to the spiritual realm in the sky, that is, to *uçmak* (heaven), according to their degrees of goodness. Furthermore, these malevolent entities have been observed to assume the form of animals such as scorpions, snakes and other creatures that inhabit the underworld. According to the degree of their malevolence, these spirits are believed to ascend to Erlik’s realm of darkness” [24, p. 58].

It is generally accepted that within the Turkic communities inhabiting the Turkestan region, there has been a historical coexistence and interpenetration of Shamanism and Islam. In contemporary society, numerous behavioural patterns that would previously have been classified as superstitious still exhibit traces of ritualised practices that are inextricably linked to the corresponding belief systems. “Among the Kazakhs, although the majority of the practices observed in death ceremonies are not of Islamic origin, the traditions of the Ancient Turks are preserved with remarkable vitality. In certain instances, the deceased's weaponry and equestrian accoutrements are interred alongside the body, suggesting a link between the horse's demise and the individual's death. In the context of the funeral feast, subsequent to the consumption of meat, the bones were incinerated on the grave. In certain tribes of the Great and Orta Orda, it was customary for affluent individuals to be wrapped in animal skins and suspended on trees during the winter months. Subsequently, in the springtime, these individuals were brought forth and interred in proximity to the sepulchre of a revered figure. The Kazakhs, in a similar manner to their matrimonial rites, also held feasts during burial ceremonies, with guests contributing to the construction of the deceased's grave. For affluent chiefs whose burial grounds attracted multitudes, a sepulchre reminiscent of a clay fortress was erected. These sepulchres were distinguished by the presence of towers, and on occasion, domes. In more modest graves, earth or stones were piled in mountainous locations. A pole was erected at the head of the grave, to which a black cloth was tied. Following the completion of the monument, the sequence proceeded to the feast. The commemoration of the first anniversary of death was also a practice adopted by the Kazakhs from a Muslim tradition.

This commemoration was performed by the powerful ones according to the Kazakh manner. Following the recital of a prayer, a white horse was ritually slaughtered in honour of the deceased, and its meat was consumed alongside meals prepared earlier in the day” [25, pp. 286-287].

Among the Turkic peoples who embraced Islam, the most significant traces of shamanism were the early dervishes' ability to transform into the form of an animal or bird. For instance, the term “Geyikli Baba” (Deer-dwelling Father) is employed. These dervishes were distinguished by their expertise in equestrianism, often riding deer adorned with antlers. According to the research of Ögel and Köprülü, these dervishes were not merely religious or magical figures, they were leaders who settled tens of thousands of Turks who joined them.

The original and ancient Shaman costumes were garments that were created through the mimicking of the forms of birds or animals. The shaman, attired in this garment, sought to demonstrate his ability to assume the form of the bird, representing both his own ancestor and the ability to do so at will. This transformation is termed “metamorphosis” in the domain of mythology research. However, it is noteworthy that the Turks employed the expression “(Donuna girmek-to enter the garment/form)” as an equivalent term. For instance, Ahmet Yesevi adopted the guise of a crane, HACI Bektaş Veli assumed the form of a dove, and Abdal Musa took on the appearance of a deer” [25, pp. 293-294]. In essence, the practice of shamanism cannot be categorised as a religion; rather, it constitutes a compendium of beliefs. The predominant belief among Turks is Tek Tengri, which is defined as the concept of a singular deity (Allah). This phenomenon is clearly evidenced in the Orkhon Inscriptions. A nation that believed that the child of man lived between the bitter earth and the blue sky, a nation possessing the Khan who was the ruler of the world beneath the celestial dome, believed that all of these created beings also had a Creator. The necessity of believing in a single God can be said to be a manifestation of the Turkish nation's understanding of order and unity, which has continued since the earliest periods of history, and their mode of perceiving the universe. The importance attributed to graves by Turks can be attributed to their belief in an afterlife, a concept that has been held since ancient times. Among the Turks, who led a nomadic existence, graves constituted the most significant legacy to be bequeathed to future generations. The term (kurgans) is used to denote monumental tombs belonging to important persons, and these are often referred to as (Graves with stones erected at their head). These kurgans can be regarded as title deeds that stamp the Turk's seal upon the geography.

Conclusion. Within the Turkish conception of civilisation, death is not regarded as a physiological terminus. Instead, it is seen as a metaphysical threshold of the ontological cycle that begins with birth and wedding, and a portal opening to a new phase of existence. The kurgans and tumuli examined within the scope of this study, transcending the mere function of burial sites, constitute the most concrete spatialised manifestations of this conception of the “threshold”. These monumental structures, extending from the boundless steppes of Eurasia to the ancient landscapes of Anatolia, function as “time capsules” that inscribe the Turkish nation's historical, religious and social memory onto stone and soil.

The research findings demonstrate that the mound burial tradition, exhibiting continuity across the Kazakhstan-Turkey axis, functions as an “ontological seal” and “civilizational title deed” that elevates the geography in which it is constructed from an ordinary parcel of land into a “homeland” (vatan). The creation of artificial hills by the accumulation of earth upon graves serves to underscore the sacred spatial bond between the living and the dead, thereby sanctifying the geographical landscape in accordance with reverence for ancestors and eschatological beliefs.

The synthesis of archaeological data with folkloric findings has revealed that burial rituals (e.g. horse sacrifice, grave offerings, sealing) are not merely religious practices, but also serve as a form of documentation of the social hierarchies and ideological identities of societies. The monumentalisation of the Central Asian kurgan tradition through grand structures such as Tumulus MM in Anatolia, and

the evolution of this heritage over time to form the genetic codes of Turkic-Islamic türbe and kümbet architecture, constitutes the most striking evidence of cultural continuity.

In essence, every archaeological and folkloric investigation conducted on kurgans and tumuli provides invaluable insights into the origins of Turkish cultural identity. The preservation and investigation of these structures is not merely the satisfaction of technical curiosity concerning the past; it is also a vital responsibility for the transmission of national identity and Eurasian cultural heritage to future generations. Despite the potential for shifts in belief systems, the millennia-old unshakeable continuity of the sanctity attributed to the deceased, the grave, and the homeland serves to reinforce the distinctive and resilient character of Turkish culture on a universal scale.

Throughout history, humanity has exhibited a persistent belief in God. The belief in spirits and the afterlife, in conjunction with the conception of leaving the inhabited geography as a homeland to future generations, has motivated societies to construct graves such as kurgans and tumuli, thereby giving rise to certain burial practices and rituals of respect. While these behavioural patterns exhibit variations across different cultures, the perspective towards death and the deceased, the practices undertaken, modes of commemorating the dead, perceptions of eternity, understandings of keeping the dead alive, and the beliefs of societies are cultural elements that reveal their customs and value judgements. Consequently, the structures materialised following death and the subsequent practices facilitate our comprehension of the religious perception of the period in which societies lived. This encompasses beliefs inherited from preceding eras, modes of consumption, the economy, politics, hierarchical order, customs, and culture. In terms of continuity in beliefs and their reflections upon our present day, it is held that the increase of studies investigating and evaluating both the tangible and intangible dimensions of grave construction, burial, and commemoration traditions from Turkestan to Anatolia will be extremely beneficial for the interpretation of cultural continuity and transformations.

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Ботхолдин¹ Қ.С., Әзімхан Б.Ү. ²

¹Алматы технологиялық университеті, сеньор-лектор, Алматы, Қазақстан Республикасы
e-mail: Ksb56@mail.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9796-7610>

²Алматы технологиялық университеті, философия докторы PhD, сеньор-лектор,
Алматы, Қазақстан Республикасы
e-mail: Malikov_bakytjan@mail.ru

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8669-6913>

КІШІ ЖҮЗДЕГІ СҰЛТАН-БАСҚАРУШЫЛАР ИНСТИТУТЫНЫҢ ҚАЛЫПТАСУЫ ЖӘНЕ ҚЫЗМЕТІ (1824-1869)

Аннотация

Мақалада 1824-1869 жылдар аралығында Кіші жүз аумағында қалыптасқан сұлтан-басқарушылар институтының пайда болу алғышарттары, құқықтық негіздері және қызметтік ерекшеліктері жан-жақты қарастырылады. Зерттеу Ресей империясының отарлық басқару жүйесін енгізу үдерісіндегі хандық биліктің жойылуы мен оның орнына енгізілген жаңа әкімшілік құрылымдардың мәнін ашуға бағытталған. Сондай-ақ зерттеуде Ресей империясының отарлық басқару саясаты жағдайында қазақ сұлтандарына әскери шендердің берілу тәртібі, олардың сатылы түрде өсуі, мұрагерлік сипат алуы және империялық дворяндық құрамға ену үдерісі архивтік деректер негізінде қарастырылады. Автор Кіші жүздегі әкімшілік-территориялық бөліністің жүзеге асырылуын, сұлтан-басқарушылардың әлеуметтік мәртебесін, материалдық қамтамасыз етілуін, әскери атақтары мен билік символдарының маңызын архивтік деректер негізінде талдайды. Сонымен қатар, сұлтан-басқарушылардың әкімшілік, сот және саяси қызметі, олардың Орынбор әкімшілігімен өзара байланысы мен патша үкіметінің тапсырмаларын орындаудағы рөлі айқындалады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде сұлтан-басқарушылар институтының қазақ қоғамындағы дәстүрлі билік жүйесінің трансформациясына, әлеуметтік жіктелуге және халық пен билік арасындағы қатынастардың өзгеруіне елеулі ықпал еткені тұжырымдалады. Мақала Қазақстанның XIX ғасырдағы отарлық кезең тарихын зерттеуге және сұлтан-басқарушылар институтына қатысты архивтік материалдарды ғылыми айналымға енгізуге үлес қосады.

Кілт сөздер: Кіші жүз, сұлтан-басқарушылар институты, Ресей империясы, жарғы, хандық билік, әкімшілік-аумақтық басқару, шекаралық комиссия, билік символдары.