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TRADITION OF BURIAL OF HORSES IN EARLY IRON AGE CEMETERIES OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Early Iron Age nomads in Kazakhstan buried horses alongside humans, reflecting the horse’s profound social and spiritual significance. Despite numerous excavations documenting this practice, understanding of its regional variations and evolution remains limited. *Goals and objectives.* This study aims to reveal the distribution and development of horse burial rituals across different regions of Early Iron Age Kazakhstan. It examines the Northern/Central, Eastern (including Jetisu), and Southern/Western regions, comparing the technical characteristics and decorative motifs of horse harnesses interred in graves. *Results.* Clear regional patterns emerge. In Northern and Central Kazakhstan (Tasmola culture), horse interments were predominantly symbolic often limited to a horse’s head or a few harness pieces accompanying the human burial. Eastern Kazakhstan and Jetisu (Saka cultures) featured more elaborate rites, including complete horse skeletons (sometimes several in one kurgan) buried with lavish gold-adorned harness sets. Southern and Western Kazakhstan yielded fewer and more modest cases (partial horse remains or only harness items) yet confirm that the custom was present there as well. These findings reveal a trajectory from simpler, symbolic offerings in peripheral or early contexts to increasingly opulent horse burials among elite groups over time. *Conclusions.* The tradition of horse burials in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan though regionally varied consistently reflects the horse’s dual role as a status symbol and as a sacred guide to the afterlife. The most esteemed individuals were accompanied by richly ornamented horses, mirroring a broader steppe-wide belief in horses as indispensable companions in both life and death.

Keywords: Horse burial tradition, Early Iron Age, Kazakhstan, kurgan, horse equipment

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ЕРТЕ ТЕМІР ДӘУІРІ ҚАЗАҚСТАН АУМАҒЫНДАҒЫ ҚОРЫМДАРДА АТПЕН ЖЕРЛЕУ ДӘСТҮРІ

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Аңдатпа. *Kіріспе.* Қазақстандағы ерте темір дәуірінің көшпелілері адамдарды жылқыларымен бірге жерлеген, бұл жылқының қоғамдағы және рухани өмірдегі ерекше маңызын көрсетеді. Бұл дәстүрді құжаттайтын көптеген қазбаларға қарамастан, оның аймақтық ерекшеліктері мен дамуы толық түсіндірілмеген. *Мақсаты мен міндеттері.* Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты – ерте темір дәуіріндегі Қазақстанның әртүрлі аймақтарындағы атпен жерлеу рәсімдерінің таралуы мен дамуын анықтау. Зерттеу Солтүстік/Орталық, Шығыс (Жетісуды қоса), сондай-ақ Оңтүстік/Батыс аймақтарын қамтып, қорымдардағы ат әбзелдерінің техникалық ерекшеліктері мен сәндік мотивтерін салыстырады. *Нәтижелер.* Айқын аймақтық үлгілер байқалады. Солтүстік және Орталық Қазақстанда (Тасмола мәдениеті) атпен жерлеулер көбіне символдық сипатта болып, адам жерлеуіне жылқының басы немесе бірнеше әбзел бөлігі ғана қосылған. Шығыс Қазақстан мен Жетісуда (Сақ мәдениеті) рәсімдер анағұрлым күрделі, кейде бір қорғанда бірнеше толық жылқы қаңқасы алтынмен әшекейленген әбзелдерімен бірге жерленген. Оңтүстік және Батыс Қазақстанда бұл дәстүр сирек және қарапайым түрде көрінеді (жартылай жылқы қалдықтары немесе тек әбзелдер), бірақ мұнда да әдеттің бар екендігі дәлелденген. Бұл деректер шеткері немесе ертеректегі жағдайларда қарапайым, символдық құрбандықтардан уақыт өте келе элита арасындағы сәнді атпен жерлеулерге дейінгі дамуды көрсетеді. *Қорытынды.* Ерте Темір дәуіріндегі Қазақстандағы атпен жерлеу дәстүрі аймақтық тұрғыдан әртүрлі болғанымен, жылқының мәртебе нышаны және о дүниеге жетелейтін қасиетті серік ретіндегі қосарлы рөлін тұрақты түрде көрсетеді. Ең құрметті адамдар бай әшекейленген жылқыларымен бірге жерленіп, жылқының өмір мен өлімде ажырамас серік екендігіне деген далалық кең ауқымды сенімді айқын бейнелейді.

Түйін сөздер: Ат жерлеу дәстүрі, ерте темір дәуірі, Қазақстан, қорған, ат әбзелдері

Алғыс. Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің «Қазақ халқының жабайы табиғаттағы «тірі ескерткіш» пен биоалуандылықты сақтауға қарым-қатынасын этно-антропозоология, құқықтық этнология тұрғысынан зерттеу» тақырыбындағы гранттық қаржыландыру жобасын жүзеге асыру аясында орындалды (жеке тіркеу нөмірі: AP26199955).

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ТРАДИЦИЯ ЗАХОРОНЕНИЯ ЛОШАДЕЙ В МОГИЛЬНИКАХ КАЗАХСТАНА РАННЕГО ЖЕЛЕЗНОГО ВЕКА

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Кочевники раннего железного века в Казахстане хоронили людей вместе с лошадьми, что отражает особое социальное и духовное значение лошади. Несмотря на многочисленные раскопки, фиксирующие эту традицию, её региональные особенности и эволюция остаются недостаточно изученными. *Цель и задачи исследования.* Цель исследования – выявить распространение и развитие обрядов захоронения лошадей в различных регионах Казахстана раннего железного века. Исследование охватывает Северный/Центральный, Восточный (включая Жетысу), а также Южный/Западный регионы, сравнивая технические характеристики и декоративные мотивы конской упряжи, найденной в погребениях. *Результаты.* Выявлены чёткие региональные различия. В Северном и Центральном Казахстане (культура Тасмола) захоронения лошадей носили преимущественно символический характер, часто ограничиваясь головой лошади или несколькими элементами упряжи, сопровождавшими человеческое погребение. В Восточном Казахстане и Жетысу (культуры сакского времени) ритуалы были более сложными: иногда в одном кургане находили несколько полных скелетов лошадей, погребённых вместе с богато украшенной золотом упряжью. В Южном и Западном Казахстане традиция встречается реже и в более скромной форме (частичные останки лошадей или только предметы упряжи), однако её наличие также подтверждено. Эти данные отражают развитие от простых, символических жертвоприношений в периферийных или ранних контекстах до всё более пышных захоронений лошадей среди элитных групп. *Выводы.* Традиция захоронения лошадей в Казахстане раннего железного века, несмотря на региональные различия, последовательно отражает двойную роль лошади – как символа статуса и как священного проводника в загробный мир. Наиболее почитаемые личности были погребены вместе с богато украшенными лошадьми, что отражает широкое степное представление о лошади как незаменимом спутнике в жизни и после смерти.

Ключевые слова: Традиция захоронения лошадей, ранний железный век, Казахстан, курган, конское снаряжение

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Introduction

The Early Iron Age nomadic equestrian cultures that emerged across the Eurasian steppes are known for their profound relationship with horses, which formed a significant component of their material culture. During this period, the horse transcended its role as a means of transportation and warfare, becoming central to symbols of social prestige and power. Particularly in Kazakhstan, the practice of burying horses alongside humans in graves vividly reflects the ritual and spiritual dimensions of this relationship. Archaeological findings demonstrate that horse burials were integral to the funerary customs of early nomadic societies, playing a significant role in conceptions of the afterlife. Indeed, ritual horse interments found in Altai, Tasmola, and Berel kurgans suggest that horses were perceived as spiritual beings responsible for guiding souls to the afterlife. For instance, the 17 ornately adorned horse remains preserved intact in Berel Kurgan through artificial freezing strikingly underscore the sacred and ceremonial importance of horses.

Graves containing horse burials yield artifacts indicative of the elite nomadic class, serving as status symbols. Items such as golden or bronze bits, bronze ornaments, harness components, and horse remains found in these graves symbolize both the deceased's social position and the horse's role as a guide in the journey to the afterlife. Thus, horses were viewed not merely as mounts, but as sacred entities transporting their owner's status into the next world. Similarly, in ancient Turkic and steppe beliefs, the horse was considered a spiritual animal, often sacrificed without shedding blood (by strangulation), highlighting its sacred dimension (Çoruhlu, 2018: 162). This historical and cultural continuity emphasizes the horse's central role in social rituals dating back to the Early Iron Age.

The tradition of horse burial in Kazakhstan has long attracted the interest of archaeologists. Beginning in the mid-20th century, Soviet archaeologists such as A.A. Iyessen (1953), M.P. Gryaznov (1950; 1980), and M.K. Kadyrbayev (1966), along with Kazakh researchers like Z.S. Samashev (2006; 2011; 2014), conducted numerous kurgan excavations documenting horse burial practices. Although these studies have clarified aspects of regional and chronological variations, many questions remain unanswered. Comprehensive evaluations are particularly needed concerning the chronological distribution, regional variations, and underlying belief systems related to horse burials.

The present study is an attempt to address this need and is fundamentally based on findings from previous research. This article, drawing upon those studies, specifically focuses on horse burial practices in graves, grave typologies, and the iconographic analysis of harness equipment. The aim of the study is to reveal the distribution and development of horse burial rituals observed throughout the Early Iron Age in different regions of Kazakhstan (North-Central, East-Jetisu, South-West); and to comparatively evaluate the technical-typological features and decorative motifs of the horse harnesses deposited in graves during these rituals.

As a method, a multifaceted analysis of archaeological data has been adopted. Excavation reports of kurgans belonging to different regions and cultures were examined in depth; typological classification of finds, correlation with chronological data, and iconographic interpretation were conducted together. For example, by analyzing the morphology of harness components (types of bits and cheekpieces, rein parts, etc.), material composition (bone, bronze, iron), and their decorative motifs, regional traditions were identified. In this way, the study goes beyond the functional dimension of material finds and enables interpretations regarding the social hierarchy, aesthetic values, and belief systems of the societies to which they belonged.

In subsequent sections, the article first addresses the cultural and economic significance of horses in the Early Iron Age Kazakh steppes. It then analyzes archaeological finds from horse burials across Kazakhstan within a regional and chronological framework, comparing practices in the North/Central, East/Jetisu, and South/West regions. Thirdly, it compares the Kazakh examples with similar horse burial traditions across Eurasia, exploring the broader context within steppe culture. The final section synthesizes the findings and provides conclusions along with recommendations for future research.

Materials and methods

This study is based on a comprehensive analysis of archaeological data collected from Early Iron Age burial sites across different regions of Kazakhstan, including Northern and Central Kazakhstan (Tasmola culture), Eastern Kazakhstan (Berel, Eleke Sazy, Shilikty), Southern Kazakhstan (Uygarak, Tagisken), and Western Kazakhstan (Kyryk-Oba 2). The selection of sites was determined by the availability of well-documented excavation reports, stratigraphic observations, and artifact inventories related to horse burials. The chronological framework spans from the 9th/8th to the 3rd century BC, covering the entire Early Iron Age period. The research employed a multidisciplinary approach combining typological, spatial, and comparative analyses.

- **Typological Analysis of Material Culture:** The study focused on horse-related artifacts, including bits, cheekpieces (psalia), saddles, harness fittings, and decorative elements. These items were classified according to their morphology, manufacturing techniques, and decorative styles. Metal objects were further assessed based on alloy composition and technological features described in excavation reports. Bone and wooden components, where preserved, were examined for traces of use-wear, carving patterns, and symbolic ornamentation.

- **Zooarchaeological Examination of Horse Remains:** Osteological data from excavated horse skeletons were analyzed to determine species, age, sex, and physical characteristics. These parameters helped to identify whether selected horses were prime individuals, indicative of ritual selection processes. In cases where full skeletons were absent, isolated bones (such as skulls or limbs) were studied to understand their ritual placement within the burial structure.

- **Spatial and Contextual Analysis of Burials:** The positioning of horses and associated artifacts in relation to the human burial was documented using site plans and stratigraphic data. Special attention was given to burial chamber architecture, side compartments, and symbolic placements of horse elements. The spatial arrangement was interpreted to infer ritual practices, ceremonial sequences, and the social hierarchy represented in the funerary context.

- **Iconographic and Symbolic Interpretation:** Decorative motifs on harness ornaments were analyzed within the framework of Scythian animal-style art. Comparative iconographic studies were conducted to explore symbolic meanings and their connections to beliefs about the afterlife and the role of horses in spiritual cosmology.

The methodology relied primarily on published excavation reports, museum collections, and the author's critical synthesis of data from fieldwork and scholarly literature. By integrating artifact typology, osteology, burial context, and iconographic analysis, the study provides a holistic reconstruction of the horse burial tradition in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan and its significance within the broader Eurasian steppe cultural landscape.

Discussion

Within the framework of the findings and comparisons presented above, several key aspects of the horse burial tradition in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan become clear. First, from a chronological perspective, this tradition appears to have taken root in the Late Bronze Age and gradually institutionalized throughout the Iron Age. While traces of horse sacrifice in the Late Bronze Age (for example, in the Andronovo-Begazy culture) are still rare and ambiguous, from the 8th–7th centuries BCE onward they become more distinct, reaching their peak between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE. During this period, advances in metallurgy and increasing social complexity contributed directly to the elaboration of horse burial rites. For instance, as societies transitioned from bronze to iron, the harness components placed in graves evolved accordingly bronze fittings gave way to iron bits, and the widespread use of bronze decorations signaled those technological innovations had become integrated into ritual practices. While early examples reflect simpler and fewer horse sacrifices, the later periods show an increase in both the number of horses and the opulence of their decorations, indicating the growing theatrical and political significance of funerary ceremonies. This evolution corresponds to the consolidation of aristocratic power in nomadic societies and the transformation of funerals into public displays of authority.

Secondly, in terms of regional variation, it becomes clear that the tradition of horse burial manifested with differing intensity and forms across various geographical parts of Kazakhstan. In the Tasmola culture of Central and Northern Kazakhstan, horse burials were mostly symbolic limited in number and often represented by partial remains. In contrast, this practice reached its peak in the elite Saka kurgans of Eastern Kazakhstan, where numerous horses were buried in full harness. In the southern and western regions, although the tradition continued into later centuries, it underwent some transformation with the decline of Scythian/Saka influence and the rise of the Sarmatians. In these areas, horses were typically represented not by full burials, but through parts of their bodies or through harness elements. These differences may be partially explained by environmental conditions. In the mountainous and cold regions of Eastern Kazakhstan, the frozen soil allowed the preservation of organic materials, possibly encouraging the deliberate burial of entire horses turning this dramatic ritual into a form of cultural “*signpost*”. In contrast, the warmer climate of the steppe interior would have led to rapid decomposition of organic matter, prompting more practical and symbolic approaches, such as burying only the horse’s skull. Moreover, the eastern Saka societies, due to their interactions with neighboring Chinese and Persian civilizations, may have enjoyed increased wealth and resources, enabling them to conduct large-scale sacrificial ceremonies. On the other hand, the Tasmola culture in the central steppes likely had more limited economic means, leading to more restrained horse sacrifices. While such explanations remain speculative, the geographic distribution of the finds strongly suggests this possibility.

Thirdly, it is important to focus on the religious and social motivations underlying the horse burial tradition. The evidence clearly shows that horses were not buried merely for their economic value; rather, their placement, orientation, associated objects, and decorative elements within the grave were arranged with deliberate care. For example, in the kurgans of Central Kazakhstan, horse skulls are consistently placed along the eastern edge of the grave likely a reflection of symbolic belief, perhaps tied to the idea that the horse’s spirit would journey to the afterlife in the direction of the rising sun. The selection of horses was also not random but followed specific criteria. As seen in the examples of Nurtay and Berel, strong, adult male horses were deliberately chosen (Tkachev, 2002: 136–138), indicating a belief that the sacrificed animal had to be one of the “*best*”, both physically and symbolically. From a social standpoint, horse burials served as a form of public display during funeral ceremonies. The sacrifice and burial of multiple horses in a high-profile funeral likely functioned as a ritual emphasizing the power and status of the deceased leader, and perhaps as a means of legitimizing the authority of their successors. In this sense, the horse burial tradition was not solely an expression of spiritual belief but also a political discourse. The symbolism of power and wealth became concentrated within the funerary context, transforming the burial into a stage for projecting elite authority.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the contributions of studying the horse burial tradition to the field of archaeology. This tradition, as it leaves both biological (faunal) and cultural traces in the archaeological record, provides an ideal basis for interdisciplinary research. On the one hand, osteological and genetic analyses of horse bones offer insights into the breeds of ancient horses, their levels of domestication, diet, and mobility. Indeed, DNA analyses of the Berel and Pazyryk horses have shown that these animals likely belonged to a local landrace and that there was no significant importation of horses from outside regions (Rubinson, Linduff, 2023: 5–6). This suggests that early nomadic societies followed a principle of self-sufficiency in horse breeding. On the other hand, by examining the manufacturing techniques (such as casting, inlay, gilding) and stylistic features of horse harnesses, it becomes possible to trace networks of interaction between different cultural centers. For example, the distribution of bronze bit types in Kazakhstan offers an opportunity to track the diffusion of technology between Central Asia and the Caucasus; or stylistic comparisons of gold applique artwork reveal the communication between workshops of Scythian, Saka, and Sarmatian centers. In this regard, the horse burial tradition also provides clues about historical connections.

In general, the horse burial tradition in Early Iron Age steppe societies can be regarded as the most extreme expression of the human-animal relationship. Humans, seeing the horse as their most valuable possession, chose to bury it alongside themselves, unwilling to part even after

death – thereby also conveying social messages. Within this tradition, a profound spirituality (the sanctity attributed to the horse) is intertwined with conspicuous display (the exhibition of wealth and power). The ritual of horse sacrifice served both as a component of religious belief and as an instrument of political authority. The archaeological findings from the Kazakh steppes confirm this multi-layered phenomenon.

Results

Horse Culture in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan

The nomadic societies of Early Iron Age Kazakhstan (part of the Scythian-Saka world) built their economy and military power on the horse. By the 9th–8th centuries BCE, mounted cavalry had replaced chariots, giving these steppe communities greater mobility and making horse ownership a key marker of wealth and status. Beyond their practical value, horses held profound ritual significance. Classical accounts describe how a deceased nomadic king would be accompanied in burial by his sacrificed horses (Herodotus, 2006: 71–72), indicating the belief that horses escorted their masters into the afterlife. Archaeology corroborates this: early nomadic kurgans as far apart as Tuva and Kazakhstan (9th–7th centuries BCE) contain horse remains, a practice later seen in the Altai Pazyryk tombs as well (Rubinson, Linduff, 2023: 2). Steppe mythologies regarded the horse as a sacred intermediary between worlds; for example, Turkic ritual required that a funeral horse be strangled without shedding blood to preserve its purity (Çoruhlu, 2018: 163). The prominence of the horse also drove technological innovation. By the Iron Age, artisans across the steppes were producing sophisticated bronze and iron bits, cheekpieces, and other tack, greatly improving riding control (Khinayatyuly, 2004: 183). These items themselves became status symbols and are frequently found as grave goods. In sum, the horse was central to early Kazakh nomadic life economically, socially, and spiritually and this centrality is vividly reflected in the tradition of horse burials.

1. *Horse Burials in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan*

The practice of burying horses alongside humans was observed throughout Kazakhstan from the 9th/8th to 3rd centuries BCE, with regional variations. Distinct traditions have been identified in the northern and central steppes, the eastern mountainous areas (Altai and Jetisu), and the southern and western peripheries of the steppe (see Map 1 for the locations of major sites). Below, we outline the evidence from each region in turn.

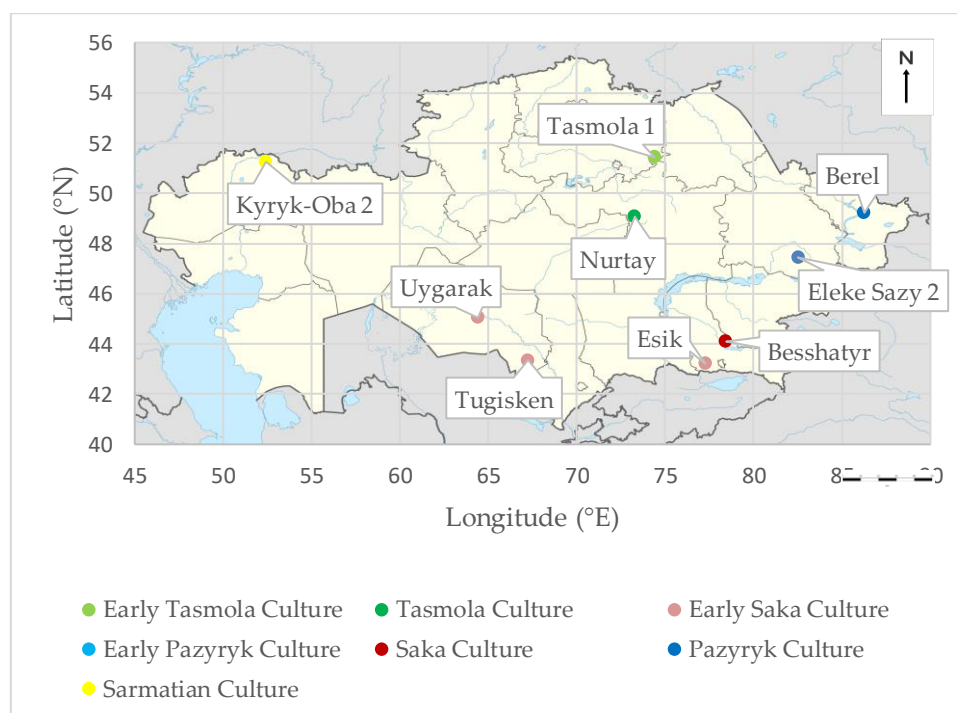


Fig. 1 – Horse Burial Graves in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan

2.1. Northern and Central Kazakhstan (Tasmola Culture Kurgans): The Early Iron Age Tasmola culture (7th–5th centuries BCE), centered in the Saryarka steppe, is characterized by “*mustached*” kurgans large mounds with stone extensions where a human burial lies in the center and a horse offering is placed nearby. In these burials, horse remains typically appear in a symbolic or partial manner rather than as whole animals. Often only select parts (a horse’s head, leg, or a few bones) or specific horse-related items (bits and other harness components) were interred to represent the horse. For example, at the Nurtay cemetery (Central Kazakhstan, 7th–6th centuries BCE), many graves contained a horse’s skull on the eastern side of the human skeleton, accompanied by bronze cheekpieces. These cheekpieces were expertly cast, featuring geometric motifs; most are double-ringed bit types with small perforations for attaching straps, reflecting high craftsmanship (Tkachev, 1999: 22–29). Typological analysis of Tasmola bronze bridle sets shows a limited number of standardized bit designs used across the culture (Kadyrbayev, 1966: 303). Occasionally, higher-status burials included more elaborate horse offerings. For instance, one grave contained a richly adorned harness set (gold-plated cheekpieces, bronze animal-style appliquéés, and bells) along with seven horse skulls. Even in this case no full horse body was present the emphasis on skulls and ornate bridles suggests a symbolic sacrifice of multiple horses. In other instances, horse bones (skulls or limbs) appear to have been scattered in the upper layers of a tomb during post-burial ceremonies, indicating that horse sacrifice could continue as a commemorative rite after the primary interment. Overall, horse burial in Northern and Central Kazakhstan was predominantly symbolic. Typically only one horse (or its head) was dedicated per grave, accompanied by finely made bronze bits and cheekpieces (sometimes with gold ornamentation). This practice may reflect a balance between the desire to honor the deceased with horses and the economic cost of sacrificing herd animals. Compared to the eastern regions, Tasmola horse burials were modest in scale, but they firmly establish the horse’s role as a sacred funerary offering in the steppe tradition.

2.2. Eastern Kazakhstan and Jetisu (Horse burials in Elite Saka Kurgans): Eastern Kazakhstan, particularly the Altai foothills (Tarbagatai and Zaysan regions), and the Jetisu area of southeastern Kazakhstan host richly furnished Saka-period kurgans that exhibit the most elaborate horse burials in the region. Thanks to permafrost in some high-altitude sites, organic remains are preserved, revealing spectacular funerary rituals in which entire horses (often multiple) were interred with the deceased and adorned with opulent trappings. The Berel Valley in Eastern Kazakhstan offers a prime example: a 4th–3rd century BCE “*princely*” kurgan contained two human burials accompanied by 13 horse skeletons preserved in frozen condition (Samashev, 2006: 35). Each horse was caparisoned with extraordinary luxury: wooden masks with horn-shaped protuberances, gilded and felt-decorated breastplates, and complete harness sets with bronze-silver alloy bits and even stirrups (Samashev, 2011: 12). These ornamented horses were essentially ritual effigies, prepared to follow their master into the afterlife. Berel is not an isolated case other Altai sites like Eleke Sazy produced similar finds. One kurgan at Eleke Sazy yielded two horse skeletons along with several hundred gold harness ornaments (Toleubaev et al., 2020: 172), including gold-plated plaques with griffon and deer motifs and finely crafted metal bits closely paralleling the Berel assemblage. Some Eastern Kazakh burials also show evidence of secondary horse offerings after the main interment: at the Karakaba-1 kurgan, for instance, disarticulated horse bones were found scattered in the mound’s fill (Samashev et al., 2014: 207), suggesting additional ritual deposits. The sheer number of horses in these graves is noteworthy major kurgans at Berel contained 10 to 17 horses, comparable to the multi-horse burials of the Pazyryk culture in neighboring Siberia (Rubinson, Linduff, 2023: 3–4). This suggests that the scale of horse sacrifice was directly proportional to the status of the deceased. The lavish Altai horse graves also share artistic features with neighboring traditions: for example, the iconic gold deer plaques from early Sarmatian sites like Filippovka in the Urals have close analogues in the Saka animal-style decorations of Eastern Kazakhstan (Yablonskiy, 2013).

In the Jetisu region, similar practices prevailed, though sometimes at a smaller scale. The Besshatyr necropolis (Ili Valley, 6th–5th centuries BCE) contains massive Saka royal mounds. Although many were looted, some yielded horse bones and bridle pieces inside the tombs, and dozens of stone altars encircling the mounds held burnt animal bone fragments evidence of ritual sacrifices

(Akishev, Kushaev, 1963). Another famous site is the Issyk kurgan (5th–4th centuries BCE), where the tomb of the “*Golden Man*” did not preserve horse remains in situ, but did contain ornate gold horse tack (including a gilded bridle and a decorated saddle covering) as grave goods (Nurmukhanbetov, 2017: 252). This implies a horse was symbolically present, perhaps buried just outside the chamber or represented by the lavish equipment. As in Eastern Kazakhstan, Jetisu horse burials feature high-quality harness sets adorned with gold and bronze plaques crafted in the Scytho-Siberian animal style (Viazmitina, 1963: 158). It was once conjectured that the variety of horse ornamentation in certain graves (e.g., different mask styles in Berel) meant the horses came from multiple clans or allies; however, DNA analysis has shown that all the Berel horses belonged to the same local herd (Keyser-Tracqui et al., 2005: 203). This finding suggests that the sacrificed horses were likely the personal steeds of the deceased rather than tribute from others.

2.3. Southern and Western Kazakhstan (Saka-Sarmatian interaction zone): In the southern reaches of Kazakhstan (the Aral Sea vicinity) and the western steppes near the Ural River, evidence of horse burial is more limited, yet it shows that the custom extended to these peripheral regions. At sites like Uygarak and Tugisken (7th–6th centuries BCE) in the south, archaeologists found horse-related remains such as bronze bits, a horse tooth, and scattered bones associated with human graves (Vishnevskaya, Itina, 1971: 200–204). Although it is unclear whether whole horses were interred, these finds demonstrate that horses figured in the funerary rituals of southern Saka groups. In Western Kazakhstan, which by the 4th century BCE fell under early Sarmatian influence, horse burials were likewise present but often only in symbolic form. Sarmatian graves typically include only select horse parts or equipment rather than entire horse carcasses (Smirnov, 1964). The limited excavations in western sites align with this pattern: for example, at the elite Kyryk-Oba 2 cemetery, warriors were buried with horse skulls or bones placed beside them, accompanied by rich harness items like bronze cheekpieces, gold-plated bridle ornaments, and carved bone saddle pieces (Gutsalov, 2007: 75–81). The Sarmatian nobility thus maintained the tradition of indicating the horse in burials, even if the animal itself was not always whole. Notably, they continued the artistic traditions of their Scythian-Saka predecessors for instance, adorning horse gear with large gold deer plaques of the type known from the Filippovka kurgans underscoring the enduring prestige of the horse in their culture (Gutsalov, 2007: 75–81). In summary, the southern and western parts of Kazakhstan exhibit fewer and generally simpler horse-burial deposits than the heartland regions. This may reflect both the lesser intensity of archaeological research in those areas and genuine differences in ritual practice. Nevertheless, the custom of including horses (or their substitutes) in burials is attested in all corners of the Kazakh steppe. Whether through the interment of an entire horse, the placement of a skull or limb bone, or even just the burial of the horse’s bridle, the underlying intent was the same: to equip the deceased for the afterlife with their horse as an essential companion. These regional patterns are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – The Tradition of Horse Burial in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan: Regional and Chronological Distribution

Area	Cemeteries	Historical Period	Horse Burial Type	Harness Features
North/Central Kazakhstan	Nurtay, Tasmola	7th–5th century BCE.	Symbolic (head/bone)	Bronze bits, cheekpieces, geometric ornaments
East Kazakhstan	Berel, Eleke Sazy	5th–3rd century BCE.	Multiple full burial	Gold-plated masks, griffin/deer motif decorations
Jetisu	Besshatyr, Esik	6th–4th century BC.	Symbolic + full burial	Gold ornaments, saddle cloths, stone circle monuments
South Kazakhstan	Tugisken, Uygarak	7th–6th century BCE.	Partial burial	Bronze bits, horse tooth
West Kazakhstan	Kyryk-Oba 2	4th–2nd century BCE.	Symbolic (harness)	Bronze bits, saddle

3. *The Horse Burial Tradition in Early Iron Age Eurasia*

The horse burial tradition examined in detail through the case of Kazakhstan is, in fact, a regional reflection of a widespread ritual observed throughout the Eurasian steppes during the Early Iron Age. Throughout the first millennium BCE, numerous steppe societies from the Scythians in the northern Black Sea region to the Saka in Central Asia, the Pazyryk culture in Siberia and the Altai Mountains, and the Huns in Inner Asia sent their leaders and nobles to the afterlife accompanied by their horses. This broad geographic distribution demonstrates how critical the horse was to early nomadic societies and indicates that the burial tradition stemmed from a shared set of beliefs and social structures.

The earliest known archaeological examples of the horse burial tradition in the Eurasian steppes date back to the late 2nd millennium BCE and are found in the graves of the Sintashta Culture in the southern Ural region. In several Late Bronze Age kurgans attributed to the Sintashta culture, archaeologists have uncovered two-wheeled war chariots along with the skeletons of horses harnessed to them (Gening et al., 1992). This discovery suggests that the practice of sacrificing horses and burying them alongside their owners predates the Iron Age. However, with the onset of the Iron Age, this tradition increased in frequency and gained richer symbolic content (Koryakova, Yepimakhov, 2010: 96). By the 9th–7th centuries BCE, during the earliest phases of Scythian or early nomadic culture stretching from the eastern Black Sea to the Altai Mountains, abundant evidence of horse burial traditions appears. One of the most remarkable examples is the Arzhan I kurgan, located in what is now the Tuva Republic. Dated to around 800 BCE, this monumental burial complex includes over 100 satellite graves. While horse remains were limited in the central elite tomb of Arzhan I, several of the surrounding graves yielded horse bones and harness components (Gryaznov, 1980: 25). These findings indicate that even in the early Scythian period, horse sacrifice was an integral part of funerary ceremonies.

The most striking evidence, however, comes from the Scythian-Siberian cultural group dated to the 7th–3rd centuries BCE. On the western edge of this cultural sphere, within the territories of the Scythian kingdom north of the Black Sea, archaeological evidence of horse burials has been partially found. Excavations of certain “*royal kurgans*” in the Ukrainian steppes such as Oleksandropol, Chertomlyk, and Solokha, all dated to the 4th century BCE have revealed multiple horse skeletons and harness components located outside or near the burial chambers (Brashinskiy, 1979: 61–83). In particular, the discovery of two bridled horse skeletons at the entrance of the burial chamber in the Chertomlyk kurgan (in the Dnieper region) recalls the ancient accounts that describe horses being stationed at the grave entrance as part of the funerary rite (Alekseev et al., 1991). However, horse burials were not as widespread in the Pontic Scythian region as they were in Central Asia and the Altai. Scythian aristocrats typically sacrificed their horses and placed their belongings in the grave, but in many cases, the horses themselves were burned during external funeral ceremonies or buried separately. Nevertheless, horse harnesses are found in nearly every rich burial in the region, and the artistic decoration on these items serves as clear evidence that horses were symbols of status in Scythian society.

When we turn to the Altai Mountains and the Sayan region, we observe the apex of the horse burial tradition. The Pazyryk Culture, which flourished there between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE, is renowned for its extraordinarily well-preserved kurgans thanks in part to the region’s freezing climate (Gryaznov, 1950). Many Pazyryk kurgans contain the remains of five to fifteen horses sacrificed and buried alongside the deceased leader. The Berel kurgans previously discussed can in fact be considered an extension of the Pazyryk culture within the borders of present-day Kazakhstan. In Pazyryk Kurgan 1, ten horse skeletons were found, while Kurgans 2 and 4 each yielded fourteen, and Kurgan 5 revealed nine horse burials (Vitt, 1952: 163). In this respect, the Altai-Pazyryk burial practices closely parallel those of Eastern Kazakhstan. The Pazyryk horses were likewise adorned with lavish harnesses and decorative masks, and some had notches cut into their ears in specific patterns. While some researchers have interpreted these ear cuts as indicators that the horses came from different owners or clans, others argue the opposite that all the horses belonged to the same individual and that the cuts symbolized each horse’s distinct role in life (e.g., one being a warhorse,

another used for ceremonial purposes). In any case, the Pazyryk and similar Altai kurgans contain the richest archaeological inventories related to the horse burial tradition, offering valuable insight into the social and political structures of early nomadic societies. For instance, recent isotopic and DNA analyses have shown that the horses buried at Pazyryk and Berel were genetically related to local herds, meaning they were not brought in as external gifts (Librado et al., 2016: 423). This finding suggests that the horses sacrificed were most likely sourced from within the community, and that the act of sacrifice may have symbolized not only a display of a leader’s power, but also a collective offering made by the community.

At the eastern edge of the Eurasian steppes in the inner regions of Central Asia and Mongolia the tradition of horse burial continued in various forms. In some aristocratic graves of the Hun Empire, which emerged from the 3rd century BCE onward, evidence of horse sacrifice has been identified. For example, in several Hun kurgans in Mongolia, archaeologists have found pits along the edges of the burial mounds containing rows of horse skulls (Polosmak, 2001). This indicates that horses were also sacrificed during the Hun period and made part of the burial architecture. However, in Hun society, horse burial practices appear to have remained at a more symbolic level compared to the Scythian-Saka traditions. Typically, only one or two horse heads were included in the burial, while the rest of the horse remains may have been placed in a separate offering pit.

Considering all these comparisons, it can be concluded that the tradition of horse burial was present across most Eurasian steppe societies during the Early Iron Age and was maintained through mutual influence and adaptation. This tradition reflects a clear cultural continuity: in the west, the Scythians and their successors the Sarmatians, and in the east, the Saka and Hun groups continued to honor the horse in burial rituals albeit under different names and regional expressions. Despite minor variations, the underlying belief appears to have been shared: the horse was regarded as the nomadic person’s most loyal companion both in life and in the afterlife. Therefore, it was seen as essential not to abandon it in death. As a result of this belief, the more developed the social hierarchy, the more horses were dedicated to the deceased. Royal graves might include 10–15 horses, those of lower-ranking warriors perhaps one horse or just a horse head, while graves of the poor often contained no horse remains at all. In this way, the number of horses in a grave served as a symbol of the deceased’s status. Likewise, the richness of the decorations on the horses also served as a clear indicator of social rank.

The widespread diffusion of the horse burial tradition across Eurasia also reflects intersocietal communication and cultural exchange among steppe communities. For example, the “*animal style*” motifs seen on horse masks in the Altai region closely resemble those found on Scythian gold artifacts from the Black Sea area. Similarly, the golden deer motifs of Filippovka appear in both Scythian and Saka art. This suggests that the symbolic meanings attributed to horse burial were largely shared across these cultures. Deer or antler motifs may have associated the horse with celestial beings, while griffons or predatory bird figures could have symbolized the horse’s protective spirit. In any case, the horse burial tradition emerges as a unifying cultural element across the Eurasian steppes, underscoring a common set of values and beliefs among early nomadic societies.

Conclusion

The tradition of horse burials in the cemeteries of the Kazakh steppe during the Early Iron Age is a remarkable practice that combines both the material and spiritual dimensions of nomadic steppe life. The findings presented in this study demonstrate that the horse held a central place in the funerary rituals of nomadic societies, and that this tradition evolved and diversified over time. Chronologically, it is understood that horse burial practices progressed from simple symbolic offerings to elaborate ceremonial displays during the period extending from the 9th/8th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE. Regionally, while the Tasmola culture of Central Kazakhstan is characterized by modest practices such as placing a horse’s head or a few harness elements in a grave, centers like Berel in Eastern Kazakhstan exhibit grandiose ceremonies where multiple fully equipped horses were interred in a single grave. The southern and western regions of Kazakhstan, on the other hand, display more limited versions of this burial tradition, positioned between these two extremes.

The study of this tradition provides valuable insights into the social hierarchy, economic structure, and belief systems of early nomadic societies. The number and quality of horses reflect the status of the deceased; the choices made regarding the sex and physical characteristics of the horses included in the graves reveal that the sacrificial ritual was carried out in a deliberate and carefully planned manner. The technical craftsmanship and artistic richness of the harness equipment not only demonstrate these societies' technological skills and appreciation for art, but also served as a medium of symbolic communication. Gold and bronze ornaments adorned with animal-style motifs conveyed messages about the identity of the horse and, by extension, its owner: concepts such as power, wealth, and cosmic guardianship were expressed through the language of these motifs.

The findings of this article, extending beyond the specific context of Kazakhstan, contribute to broader studies on the cultural history of nomadic societies across the Eurasian steppes. Since the tradition of horse burials is a shared heritage among the peoples of the Eurasian steppes, comparing the findings from Kazakhstan with similar materials from across Eurasia helps unravel networks of intercultural interaction. The comparisons presented in this study also demonstrate that distinct regions of the Scythian-Saka world such as the Altai, the Kazakh steppes, the Black Sea steppes, and the Southern Urals exhibit clear parallels in both belief systems and artistic styles. This suggests that Early Iron Age nomads may have possessed a more integrated cultural structure than previously assumed.

In conclusion, the tradition of horse burials in Early Iron Age Kazakhstan demonstrates the indispensable place of the horse in these societies and its significance that transcends death. The horse was believed to accompany its owner not only in this world but also in the afterlife; for this reason, the most valuable horses were adorned in the most splendid manner and laid to rest alongside their owners in their eternal resting places. This tradition reflects both the spiritual depth and the social display aspects of nomadic culture in a richly layered phenomenon.

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