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A Group of Large Kurgans in the Suusamyr Valley, Kyrgyzstan

We introduce recently discovered large kurgans of the Saka period in the Suusamyr valley, northern Kyrgyzstan. There are two cemeteries with large mounds, each of which is surrounded by ditches, stone enclosures, and ramparts. Apparently, each kurgan and the constructions around it form a whole burial complex. The kurgans are rounded in plan view, 30–73 m in diameter. Some were possibly square in plan view. West of them, there is a line of enclosures, most of which consist of eight boulders. In terms of nature and form of the constructions around kurgans, the burial complexes fall into six types, each of which is described in detail. Parallels are found among Early Iron Age cemeteries in the Tian Shan, Semirechye, central and eastern Kazakhstan. Common and distinctive features of the Suusamyr group are listed. On the basis of the comparative analysis, the group dates to 800/700–200 BC. We conclude that the kurgans were destined for the Saka elite, and were constructed over several generations. The materials of the study allow us to state that the alpine Suusamyr valley, which is hard to access, was a key political and/or cult center of the Tian Shan in the Saka period.

Keywords: Tian Shan, Suusamyr valley, Early Iron Age, large kurgans, eight-stone enclosures.

Introduction

The high-mountainous Suusamyr valley is one of the areas of Kyrgyzstan poorly studied archaeologically. It is located south of the Kyrgyz Ridge and east of the Talas Ridge, at a height of over 2000 m above sea level. The climate of the valley differs from that of the neighboring valleys: it is colder in winter and much cooler in summer. The valley is crossed by a dense network of rivers and streams, the Suusamyr River being the largest (Sovetskiy soyuz, 1976: 148).

In 1953, A. Kibirov discovered over 300 kurgans and a fortified settlement in the south and southeast of the valley

(1955: 126–136). In the course of research, 15 ordinary kurgans were excavated and two exploratory pits were made in the area of the settlement. On the basis of the data obtained, the kurgans were attributed to various historical periods—from the Wusun period to the Late Middle Ages. In addition to ordinary mounds in the southeastern part of the Suusamyr valley, Kibirov discovered six groups of large kurgans up to 6–7 m high, which he attributed to the Wusun (Ibid.: 127).

In 2019, the Kyrgyz-Romanian archaeological team of specialists from the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University and the National Museum of Banat (Romania) surveyed

the Suusamyр valley as a part of the research project aimed at exploring the local archaeological sites. Twenty-nine archaeological features, including over a thousand objects (kurgans and enclosures) were identified and mapped in the southeastern part of the valley. The results of the work on mapping and processing the geoinformation data obtained have been published (Saraşan et al., 2020).

This article presents new evidence on large kurgans of the Early Iron Age in the Suusamyр valley, describes its burial grounds, large burial mounds, and the adjacent area, provides typology of the objects under discussion, and identifies their parallels in the complexes from other regions.

Cemeteries with large kurgans

Large kurgans from the Early Iron Age of Eurasia are sophisticated burial and memorial complexes consisting of single or multiple burials under the mound and a variety of related structures around them, including underground ones (Gass, 2011, 2012; Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder, 2017; Nagler, 2017; Mozolevsky, Polin, 2005). Thanks to interdisciplinary studies of large kurgans scattered over the vast region of Eurasia from Tuva in the east to the Northern Black Sea region in the west, it was possible to establish not only specific features of individual large kurgans (or groups of kurgans), but also layouts of cemeteries, shapes and structures of burial mounds, and locations of various accompanying structures around them. Reconstruction of these burial and memorial complexes, interpretation of every detail and identification of regional features will be the objectives of forthcoming research. Today, the task of collecting and systematizing all available data seems to be more relevant. In this regard, large kurgans discovered in the Suusamyр valley are of interest.

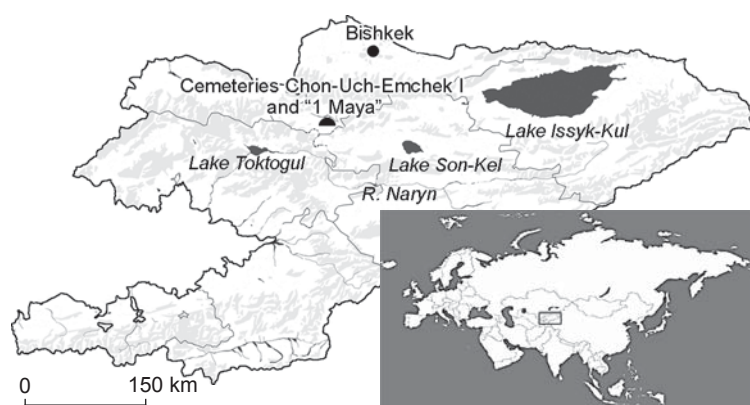


Fig. 1. Location of the Chon-Uch-Emchek I and “1 Maya” cemeteries in the Suusamyр valley (Kyrgyzstan).

Two cemeteries have been found in the southeastern part of the Suusamyр valley, on a flat hill between the valleys of the Chon-Uch-Emchek and Kichi-Uch-Emchek Rivers (Fig. 1). These include kurgans with a diameter of 30–73 m and height of over 2 m, designated as large, and kurgans with diameters of 4–9 and 10–28 m, designated as ordinary and medium-sized respectively.

The “1 Maya” cemetery consists of twenty kurgans and 102 stone enclosures of various sizes. Six kurgans with diameters of 37–73 m can be described as large; nine kurgans with diameters of 18–26 m as medium-sized; and five kurgans with diameters of 4–8 m as ordinary.

The kurgans constitute four chain-like groups, 160–300 m apart, stretched along the N-S line. A chain of large kurgans is located in the eastern part of the cemetery, and chain of medium-sized kurgans runs parallel to that chain in the western part. All kurgans show traces of looting. Ramparts and stone placements have survived around large kurgans (Fig. 2). On the western side of the kurgans, there are chains of stone rings made of eight boulders, usually stretched similarly to kurgans along the N-S line.

The *Chon-Uch-Emchek I cemetery* is located 1 km south-southeast of the southern outskirts of the village of 1 Maya. There are 89 stone-and-soil kurgans and 154 stone enclosures at that cemetery. Seven kurgans with diameters of 31–65 m can be described as large, 35 kurgans with diameters of 10–30 m as medium-sized, and the remaining 47 kurgans with diameters of 4–9 m as ordinary. The kurgans constitute four chain-like groups at a distance of about 3 km from each other, stretched along the NNE-SSW line. All the kurgans have depressions and craters—traces of looting. Four large kurgans of that cemetery are surrounded by ditches, square or rounded in plan view, located at a distance of 10–30 m from the kurgan’s bottom (Fig. 2). The medium-sized kurgans are encircled by double ring-shaped enclosures located 3.6–20 m from the kurgan’s bottom. The ditches and ring-shaped enclosures have passages on their eastern and western sides. Rows of enclosures made of eight stones and stretching along the N-S line are observed to the west of the large and medium-sized kurgans.

Types of large kurgans

Large and medium-sized kurgans differ in terms of form and nature of the constructions that surround them. They can be divided into the following types: kurgan on a square platform surrounded by double rectangular stone enclosure; kurgan encircled by double stone ring; kurgan encircled by double stone ring, with a vertically set stone in the



Fig. 2. Aerial photographs of large kurgans and the adjacent areas at Chon-Uch-Emchek I and “1 Maya”.

southern and northern sides of the outer ring; kurgan surrounded by rectangular ditch; kurgan surrounded by ring-shaped ditch; and kurgan encircled by double rampart (Fig. 3).

1. Kurgan on a square platform surrounded by double rectangular stone enclosure (Fig. 3, 1) is represented by one object (kurgan 3) at the “1 Maya” cemetery. This kurgan is 71 m in diameter and 8.7 m in height; it has a stone-and-soil mound, subcircular in plan view and truncated-cone-shaped in cross-section, with a large robbers’ crater in the center (Fig. 4, 1). The base of the kurgan is surrounded by a band of black pebbles 2.5–3.5 m wide, with 1.5–2.0 m long gaps (Fig. 4, 2). The mound was made over a square stone-and-soil platform oriented to the cardinal points with its sides. The length of the platform’s sides is 74–75 m; the height is 0.1–0.4 m. Placement of large stones survived in some areas along the edges of the platform.

This kurgan is surrounded by a double stone enclosure, rectangular in plan view. The enclosure, just like the platform under the mound, is oriented to the cardinal points with its sides. The space between the inner and outer enclosures is empty; no traces of stone flooring have been found. A passage 3.8 m wide is in the middle of the western wall of the double enclosure; it is not clearly identified, owing to the destruction of stonework in the eastern wall. The width of the double enclosure is 2.3–2.4 m; the distance from the base of the kurgan to the middle of the sides of the inner enclosure is 33–35 m; the length of the sides of the outer enclosure is about 140 m.

Two partially destroyed enclosures, each made of eight stones, were found 2.5–8.0 m east of the northeastern corner of the double enclosure. The diameters of the enclosures are 2.5 and 3.6 m.

The burial and memorial complex described above is not the only one of its kind in Kyrgyzstan. Identical structures have been found at the Zhapryk burial ground in the Inner Tian Shan (Tashbaeva, 2011: 101, fig. 16, 18), where two (out of three) large kurgans rest on rectangular stone-and-soil platforms surrounded by double rectangular stone enclosures, with passages in

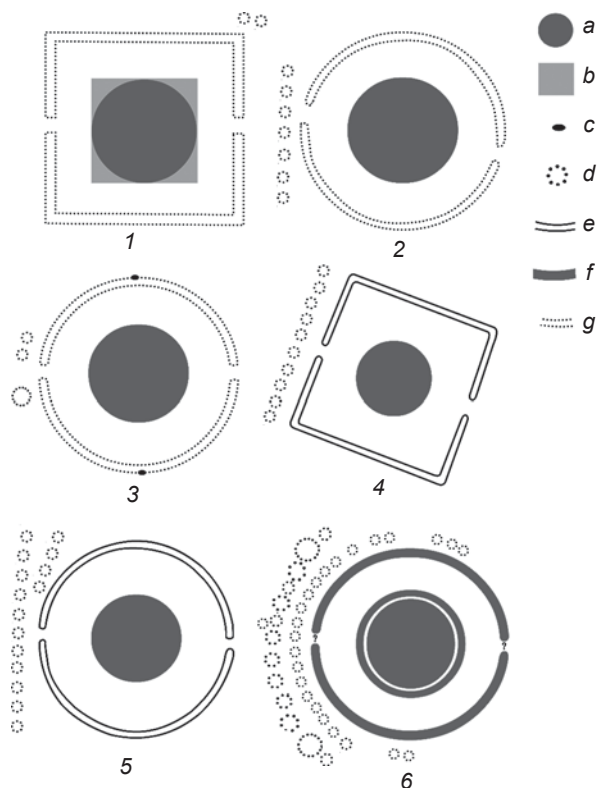


Fig. 3. Schematic representations of types of large kurgan at Chon-Uch-Emchek I and “1 Maya”.

1 – kurgan on square platform surrounded by double rectangular stone enclosure; 2 – kurgan encircled by double stone ring; 3 – kurgan encircled by double stone ring, with a vertically set stone in the southern and northern sides; 4 – kurgan surrounded by rectangular ditch; 5 – kurgan surrounded by ring-shaped ditch; 6 – kurgan encircled by double rampart.

a – kurgan mound; b – stone-and-soil platform; c – vertically standing stone; d – stone enclosure; e – ditch; f – rampart; g – stone placement.

the middle of the eastern and western walls. Chains of enclosures made of eight stones are most often located to the west, and in one case, to the east of the kurgans. According to topography, layout, and some external features, these kurgans were attributed to the Saka period (Ibid.: 101).

Among numerous large kurgans of the southeastern Semirechye, we were unable to find a complete parallel to the Suusamyr kurgan under consideration. On this territory, there are dozens of kurgans comparable only in some respects with the Suusamyr one. For example, 16 kurgans with double stone rectangular (square) enclosures, with passages on the eastern and western sides, have been found at a number of cemeteries in Semirechye (Gass, 2011: 60; Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder,

2017: 223). However, unlike the Suusamyr kurgan, they had different forms of mounds and did not have a platform and enclosures of eight stones. It is difficult to explain the reasons for these differences. At this stage of research, it can be concluded that all these structures belonged to related tribes living in the Saka period.

2. Kurgan encircled by a double stone ring (see Fig. 2, 3; 3, 2). Kurgans of this type were most numerous in the complexes under consideration, amounting to one large

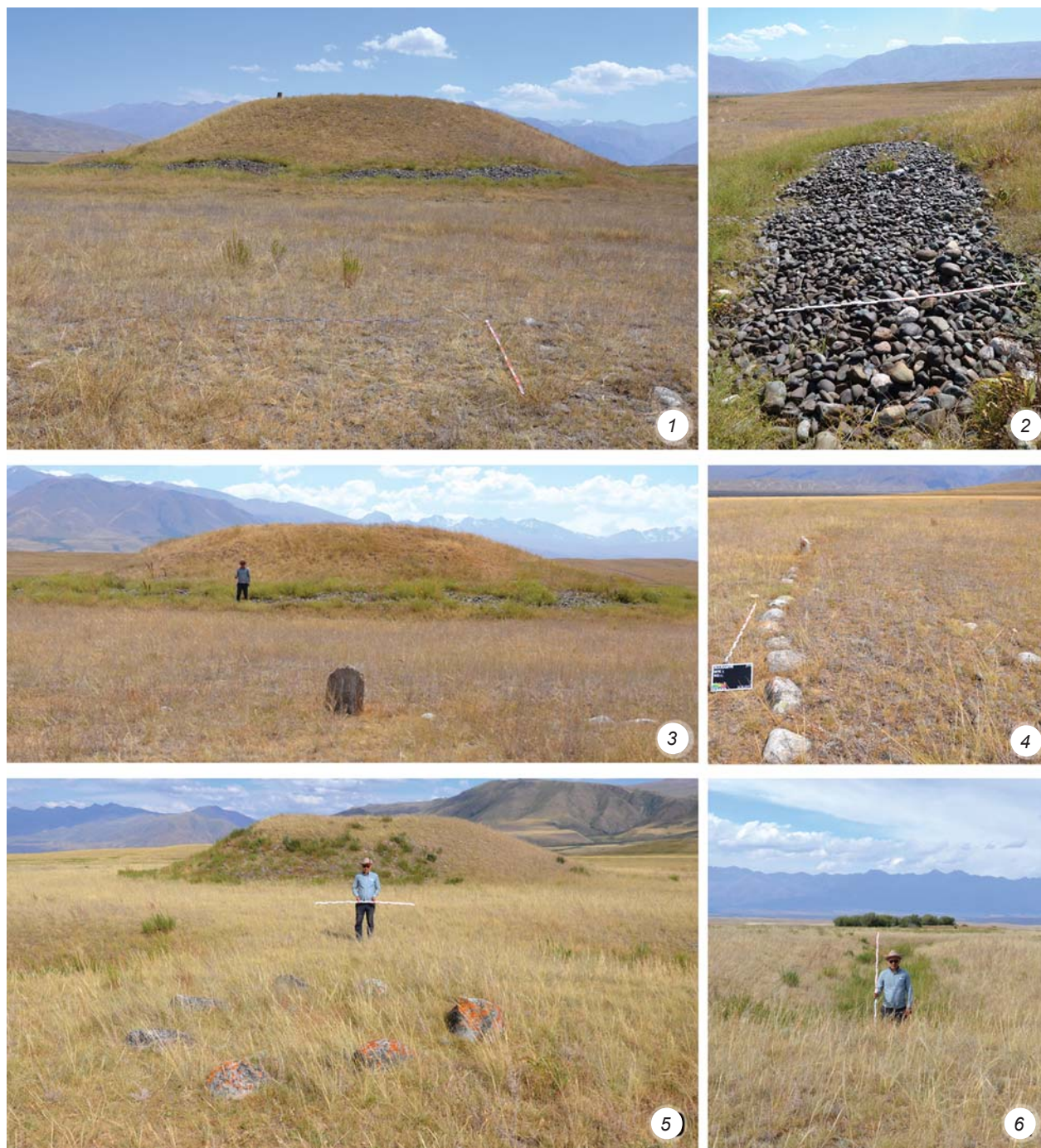


Fig. 4. Large kurgans and associated structures around them.

and 22 medium-sized. All medium-sized kurgans were surrounded only by the double stone ring. Particularly indicative is kurgan 30 at the Chon-Uch-Emchek I cemetery. It is 37 m in diameter, 3.5 m in height, and has a truncated-cone-shaped stone-and-soil mound, subcircular in plan view, with an extensive robbers' crater in the center. Sodded stones, apparently belonging to the stone shell of the kurgan, are visible on the surface. The southern slope of the mound is less steep than other sides. At a distance of 17–20 m from the base, the kurgan is surrounded by a double ring stone enclosure 1.0–1.1 m wide. The enclosure's walls are made of medium-sized stones set on their edges. Passages are slightly visible on the eastern and western sides. Six enclosures 2.5–3.0 m in diameter, each made of eight stones, were found 40 m west of this kurgan. The enclosures form a chain stretched along the N-S line.

The results of archaeological research in the Tian Shan and Semirechye indicate that kurgans surrounded by double stone rings were more common than kurgans of other types. All surviving medium-sized kurgans at the two cemeteries under consideration were surrounded exclusively by double stone rings. In the Tian Shan, in addition to one large kurgan at the "1 Maya" burial ground, the type under discussion included a large kurgan at the Zhapyryk cemetery (Tashbaeva, 2011: 101, fig. 16, 17). At least five more large and medium-sized kurgans surrounded by similar stone structures have been found in the Kochkor valley and Ketmen-Tobo depression (Ibid.: 38; Kibirov, 1959: 74). In the southeastern Semirechye, a total of about twenty kurgans surrounded by double stone rings are known at nine cemeteries (Gass, 2011: 60; 2012: 470; Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder, 2017: 219). When some of the rings were excavated and unearthed, it was discovered that the spaces between the inner and outer rings were paved with rubble and stones. It is unknown whether such pavement was present between the stone rings of the Suusamyr kurgans, since excavation and unearthing have not yet been carried out. It should be mentioned that there are also cases when the spaces between the rings around large kurgans were empty, which were established, for example, at the Katartobe cemetery in the eastern Semirechye (Chotbaev, Ongar, 2014).

3. Kurgan surrounded by a double stone ring; in the outer ring, strictly along the N-S line, one stone is placed in a vertical position at each of two sides (see Fig. 3, 3). This type is represented by one object (kurgan 13) at "1 Maya". In all its structural elements, it is similar to kurgans of the previous type, yet differs by the presence of two vertically set stones in the northern and southern zones of the outer ring. Kurgan 13 (52.3 m in diameter and 7.3 m high) is a soil mound rounded in plan view and truncated-cone-shaped in cross-section; it has a large robbers' crater in the center (see Fig. 4, 3). Sodded stones

that might be remains of the stone shell are visible in some places on the surface of the kurgan. A band of mostly black pebbles 2.0–4.5 m wide runs around the kurgan bottom. Individual accumulations of black and dark blue pebbles are visible above the black stone band on the western and southwestern slopes of the mound.

The kurgan is surrounded by a double stone enclosure 2.3–2.6 m wide; this is located 20–22 m from its bottom. The space between the inner and outer enclosures is empty; stone flooring is not visible on the surface of the earth. A passage 4.0–4.3 m wide is present on the eastern and western sides of the double ring. Vertically set stones 0.7 m high are observed in the southern and northern zones of the outer enclosure (Fig. 4, 4). The remains of a stone ring-shaped enclosure 5.5 m in diameter were found 55–60 m west of kurgan 13. Twenty-six wall stones are visible on the surface. Two enclosures, each of eight stones and with a diameter of 3 m, are located 5–8 m to the north of the wall.

There are no exact parallels to kurgan 13 among the known complexes in the Tian Shan and Semirechye. Obviously, it is structurally and therefore semantically close to kurgans of the previous type, which are quite common. However, the presence of stones set vertically along the N-S line distinguishes that kurgan from the total mass of similar kurgans, and makes it possible to consider it unique.

4. Kurgans surrounded by a square ditch (see Fig. 2, 2; 3, 4). These are two kurgans (9 and 31) at the Chon-Uch-Emchek I cemetery. Kurgan 31 is 41.4 m in diameter and 5.5 m in height; it has a truncated-cone-shaped stone-and-soil mound, subcircular in plan view, with a large robbers' crater in the center (Fig. 4, 5). The southern slope of the kurgan is steeper than the other sides. Sodded stones that could have belonged to the stone shell are visible on the surface of the mound. The kurgan is surrounded by a ditch rectangular in plan view; its sides are oriented to the cardinal points. The ditch has a passage about 6 m wide on its eastern and western sides (see Fig. 4, 6). The distance from the base of the kurgan to the ditch is 18–20 m. The length of the ditch's sides is about 90 m; the ditch's width is about 6 m; its depth is 1.0–1.3 m. Along the western ditch running around kurgan 31, seventeen enclosures made of eight stones and measuring 2–3 m in diameter are stretched in a chain about 120 m long, along the N-S line.

As far as we can see in the literature, large kurgans surrounded by rectangular ditches are quite rare. With the exception of two kurgans in the Suusamyr valley, similar structures are unknown both in the Tian Shan or Semirechye, although it is possible that they will be discovered in the future. According to the presently available archaeological evidence, during the Saka period, kurgans surrounded by rectangular ditches were built much less frequently than those encircled by ring-shaped

ditches. This also applies to large Scythian kurgans in the Northern Black Sea region; only in one case had the ditch a “square layout untypical of the Scythian period” (Mozolevsky, Polin, 2005: 295).

5. Kurgans surrounded by a ring-shaped ditch (see Fig. 2, 1; 3, 5) are represented by three objects (10, 12, 17) at the Chon-Uch-Emchek I burial ground. The largest of them, kurgan 10, is quite noteworthy. It is 65.8 m in diameter and 8 m in height, has the appearance of a truncated-cone-shaped mound of stone and soil, subcircular in plan view, and a large robbers' crater in the center. The base of this kurgan is encircled by a band of pebbles of dark, blue, and white tones 2–3 m wide. The kurgan is surrounded by a ring-shaped ditch 8 m wide and about 2 m deep, located 30 m from the base. On the eastern and western sides, the ditch has causeway passages 4.0 and 4.5 m wide.

Two rows of enclosures, each made of eight stones and oriented along the N-S line, are located at a distance of 40–300 m west of kurgan 10, near the outer edge of the ditch. The short row consists of ten objects and is located to the northwest of the mound, while the long row consists of about 75 enclosures 2.0–3.3 m in diameter (see Fig. 2, 1; 3, 5).

Ring-shaped ditches have often been found around large kurgans. A total of nineteen large kurgans with ditches round in plan view were found at five cemeteries in the southeastern Semirechye (Gass, 2012: 471; Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder, 2017: 226). In most cases, these ditches are continuous; they have no causeway passages, as opposed to the ditches around the Suusamyr kurgans. Large kurgans of the Tasmola and Shilikty cultures of the Early Saka period in Central and East Kazakhstan are also surrounded by ring-shaped ditches, indicating the popularity of this design in time and space (Beisenov, 2015; Toleubaev, 2018: 59).

6. Kurgan surrounded by a double rampart (see Fig. 3, 6). This is kurgan 2 at the “1 Maya” cemetery. It is 73.8 m in diameter, 8.5 m in height, and has a truncated-cone-shaped soil mound, rounded in plan view, and a large robbers' crater in the center. A band of predominantly dark-colored pebbles 1.5–7.0 m wide has survived around the base of the mound. Individual clusters of pebbles of blue and white colors were found on the slope of the mound above the dark-colored band. A stone-and-soil rampart 3.0–3.3 m wide runs around the kurgan, at a distance of 4.8–5.0 m from its base. A second stone-and-soil rampart 2.8–3.0 m wide and up to 0.1 m high was found 25 m from the first rampart. Like the first one, it encircles the kurgan. Owing to the weak manifestation of the rampart on the present-day surface, it is not possible to establish any signs of a possible passage in it. The distance from the second rampart to the base of the kurgan is 30–32 m. In some locations, placement of stones has survived along the edges of the outer rampart.

Stone ring-shaped enclosures forming two irregular chains were found along the western half of the outer rampart (see Fig. 3, 6). Most of the enclosures are built of eight boulders. The first chain, located close to the rampart, consists of enclosures with a diameter of 1.5–1.8 m; the second chain, located to the west of it, mainly includes enclosures with a diameter of 2.5–3.5 m. Large enclosures with diameters of 7.5–8.0 m, built of 30–32 stones, are at the southern and northern ends of the second chain. Two more chains of enclosures, each made of eight stones and stretched along the E-W line, were built to the south of the kurgan, along the outer rampart.

Eighty-seven enclosures were found around kurgan 2. Sixty-four of them were made of eight stones each, and the remaining 23 enclosures were made of a larger number of stones. With the exception of two, they are located south of kurgan 2, and are stretched along NNW-SSE line.

As an accompanying structural element around a large kurgan, ramparts occur at a number of the Saka cemeteries in the southeastern Semirechye (Gass, 2012: 473). However, the rampart is not double there, as is the case with the Suusamyr kurgan under consideration. Ramparts in the immediate vicinity of the kurgan bottom's were detected around nine kurgans at two cemeteries. Six objects have a ditch along with a rampart around the kurgan. Kurgan 7 at the Turgen cemetery is surrounded by a stone rampart located, similarly to the second outer rampart in the Suusamyr kurgan, at some distance from the edge of the mound (*Ibid.*). Taking into account the nearby stone enclosures associated with it and the absence of other identical kurgans, the Suusamyr kurgan can be considered unique.

There is no information in the literature about the presence of a passage in the ramparts at the Semirechye burial grounds. It is reliably known that the rampart located 4–7 m from the base of two kurgans at the Besshatyr cemetery had a passage (Akishev, Kushaev, 1963: 30, fig. 7). There are two passages on the eastern and western sides in the ramparts around large Scythian kurgans (Mozolevsky, Polin, 2005: 298). This makes it possible to assume the presence of two passages in the rampart around kurgan 2 at the “1 Maya” cemetery (they are not clearly visible on the present-day surface). This is indirectly confirmed by the presence of passages in all ditches and stone rings around the Suusamyr large and medium-sized kurgans.

The presence of stone enclosures to the west of the kurgans is typical for the burial mounds of all types at “1 Maya” and Chon-Uch-Emchek I. The vast majority (over 250) are rounded enclosures 1.3–4.0 m in diameter, made of eight stones spaced apart from each other (see Fig. 4, 5). Several stone enclosures, rounded or subrectangular in plan view, were made of more than eight stones placed next to each other. The chains of 2–87 stone enclosures are oriented along the N-S line.

In the Tian Shan, enclosures of eight stones have been previously studied in the valley of Lake Son-Kul, as well as in the Naryn and At-Bashi valleys (Sher, 1964; Tabaldiev, 2011: 36–47; Tashbaeva, 2011: 101). Large kurgans at the Zhapyryk cemetery are of the greatest interest among these: according to a set of external features, including the presence and location of enclosures, they completely correspond to the kurgans from the Suusamyr valley.

Notably, according to external features, large kurgans at the southeastern Semirechye cemeteries completely or partially coincide with large kurgans in the Suusamyr valley, but have no enclosures of eight stones. Kurgans with enclosures are known from the Early Scythian and Scythian cemeteries in Central and East Kazakhstan (Toleubaev, 2018: 21; Beisenov, 2014, 2015). Medium-sized and large kurgans with enclosures in these complexes are often surrounded by stone rings and ditches. All these coincidences are hardly accidental.

Conclusions

Thirteen large kurgans that were discovered at two cemeteries in the Suusamyr valley may be divided into six types, according to the shape and building-technique of the surrounding structures. The structures are double stone placements, ditch, and rampart. These are square (rectangular) or rounded in plan view. The kurgans are truncated-conical or hemispherical in cross-section. The former shape is typical of large kurgans; the latter, mainly of medium-sized kurgans. In plan view, kurgans are rounded or subcircular. Kurgans square in plan view have not been clearly identified. As is known, they have often been found at the cemeteries in the southeastern Semirechye (Gass, 2011: 60). Scholars established the following pattern: if a large kurgan was square, the structure surrounding it (stone placement, ditch, and rampart) had the same shape (Gass, 2012: 471; Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder, 2017: 223). The link between the shape of the kurgan and the structure around it at the sites in the Suusamyr valley has not been detected clearly. However, it should be kept in mind that the original shape of almost all large and medium-sized kurgans in the region under consideration has been damaged by robbers, which is clear by large craters in their center. In such cases, advanced research methods make it possible to establish the original shape of the deformed kurgans. For example, thanks to geophysical surveys, it has been discovered that one of the seemingly round kurgans at the Zhoan-Tobe cemetery in the southeastern Semirechye, was originally square (Parzinger, Gass, Fassbinder, 2017: 222–223). Therefore, at this stage of research, we can not exclude that large kurgans of the Suusamyr valley surrounded

by square (rectangular) ditches and stone enclosures had had a square (rectangular) plan view.

The parallels presented make it possible to attribute the Suusamyr large kurgans and related structures to the 8th (7th)–3rd centuries BC. The date can be established with better precision after excavating the sites and analyzing the finds. It is quite clear that such sophisticated burial and memorial complexes were created to honor the representatives of the upper stratum of the Saka society. The accumulation of thirteen large kurgans at two cemeteries located 4 km apart suggests that they were built by several generations. All this indicates that in the Saka period, the Suusamyr valley was one of the important political and/or cult centers in the Tian Shan.

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