

doi:10.17746/1563-0110.2024.52.1.099-108

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## Cultural Horizons at the Uyelgi Cemetery Mound 11, Southeastern Urals

*The article outlines the findings from excavations at Uyelgi mound 11, the most informative one at the cemetery. Its lower horizon revealed a burial demonstrating features highly indicative of the nomadic culture of the Southern Urals. The upper horizon contained two burials belonging to the Srostki culture, characterized by certain artifacts of the “Hungarian” (Carpathian) type, evidencing the return of some South Uralic groups from the west at the time when the Srostki people migrated in the opposite direction from Eastern Kazakhstan and the Altai. This conclusion is supported by findings from the Aktobe cemetery, where typically “Hungarian” ornaments of horse harness co-occur with a belt set with floral decoration following the Srostki tradition of the Altai. Inside the mound and on the platform under it, fragments of five clay vessels were found, most of which are decorated with comb-and-cord patterns of the post-Bakal, Nevolino, and Petrogrom-Yudina type, associated with the East Uralic and West Siberian Ugrians. In terms of spatial structure, stratigraphy, and typology, then, the Uyelgi mound 11 demonstrates at least four cultural horizons: South Uralic, “Hungarian” (Carpathian), Altaic (Srostki), and Ugriic (East Uralic and West Siberian), jointly mirroring complex ethnic processes in the region between 800–1000 AD.*

**Keywords:** *Middle Ages, Southeastern Urals, cultural horizons, burials, belt set, Hungarian-style items.*

### Introduction

The Uyelgi cemetery was found in 2009 thanks to timely information from prospecting workers, on the interlake terrace of the Uyelgi and Saigyrly lakes, 7 km north of the village of Kunashak, Chelyabinsk Region (Fig. 1). The site is located on the high slopes of the hills formed by the uplift of the Ural peneplain. Initially, up to 30 mounds

were visually recorded over its main area (120 × 130 m), although some mounds were noted 30–250 m away from it (Fig. 2, I).

Stationary excavations began in 2010. The site was excavated continuously throughout the area, since the mounds were located quite close to one another. Signs of extension of the mounds and ground fences were identified. The items of burial goods were scattered over



Fig. 1. Location of the Uyelgi and Aktyuba cemeteries.

a large area, owing to the looting of mounds in ancient times. It was also revealed that mounds (ground fences) were recurrently constructed over one another. As a result, the total number of excavated mounds increased every year. Under the covers, typically in the form of attached soil (humus) fences or mounds (according to the

data of A.S. Yakimov, a Leading Researcher at the Earth Cryosphere Institute, SB RAS), there were from two to ten or more grave pits. In the course of the excavation campaign of 2010–2021, 21 mounds and up to 150 burials were uncovered. The chronological range of the burial complexes is 200–250 years within the late 8th to 10th centuries AD.

### Results of the study of mound 11

The materials from mound 11 excavated during 2018, 2019, and 2021 contain an array of information. The mound is located in the central part of the Uyelgi cemetery, in the saddle between two hills. It is a low (up to 0.45 m) oval mound ( $8.3 \times 12.5$  m) oriented along the NE–SW line. A small altar (up to  $0.9 \times 1.1$  m) containing the remains of horse skulls (one skull?) and teeth was found at a depth of 0.12–0.18 m from the surface in the western part of the mound. Three meters to the south and northeast from the altar, at a depth of 0.2 m from the surface, there were lenses of the calcined ground measuring  $1.5 \times 0.5$  m and  $0.5 \times 0.8$  m. During the unearthing of the mound, in various parts of the platform

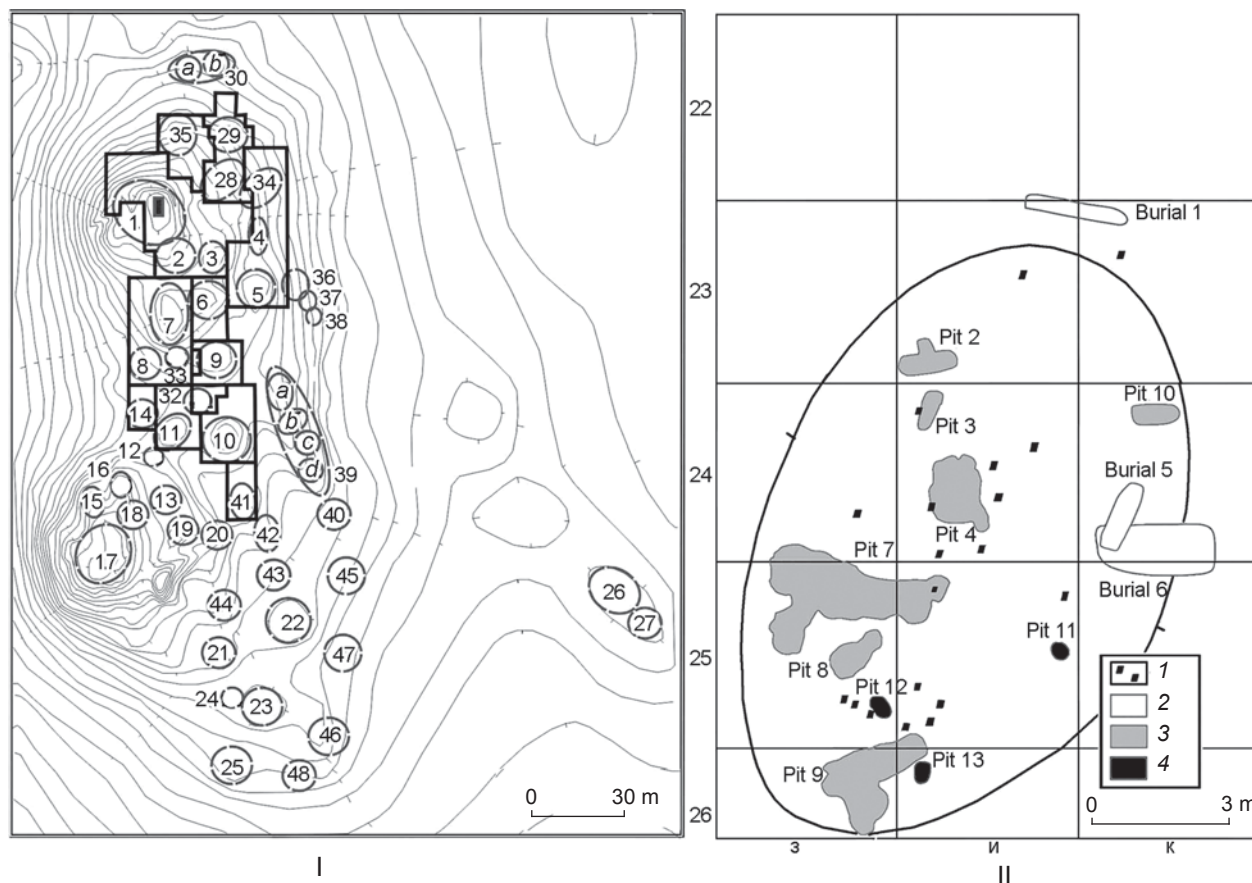


Fig. 2. Location of the mounds and excavation areas of 2009–2021 at Uyelgi (I), and map of mound 11 (II).

1 – finds from the mound and the platform under it; 2 – intact burial; 3 – looted burial; 4 – pit.

under it, decoration sets from horse bridles and belts, sewn-on plaques, a ring, and numerous potsherds were found. A special group of artifacts includes the items in the so-called Hungarian (Carpathian) style: round bimetallic plaques decorated with four-petaled motifs, a hemispherical protrusion in the center, and a border of alternating ovals and circles ( $n=4$ ); trapezoidal plates

with floral patterns ( $n=12$ ); a plate with images of birds and a pendant ring; a plate with a cross-shaped ornament and an a lotus-shaped ending; a plaque with an imitation of an eyelet in the upper part and a sophisticated floral pattern; silver sewn-on plates; a harness strap divider; a pendant with a loop and three protrusions; and a fragment of a ring with a chalcedony insert (Fig. 3, I).



Fig. 3. Artifacts (I) and graphical reconstruction of pottery (II) from mound 11 and the platform under it.  
1–5, 10–12, 15–17, 19 – silver; 6–9, 18, 20, 21, 23–26 – gold-plated silver; 13, 14 – silver, stone; 22 – silver, leather; 27–29 – iron.



Under the mound, 13 pits were cleared, three of which (No. 1, 5, and 6) were unlooted burials (see Fig. 2, II).

The other pits (No. 2–4 and 7–13) of various sizes have been classified as follows: the largest are No. 4, 7, and 9 ( $2\text{--}4 \times 1.0\text{--}1.5$  m); the medium-sized are No. 2, 8 ( $1.0 \times 0.7$  m); and the small pits are No. 3, 10–13 ( $0.5\text{--}0.9 \times 0.3\text{--}0.4$  m). Because of the heavy looting, it is difficult to identify the graves accurately. The outlines of burials and their historical and cultural features can be tentatively determined by the established spatial distribution of artifacts inside the mound and on the platform under it. Artifacts were found mainly in sq. 3–II/24–25 in the area of large pits 4, 7, and 9. The largest amount of metal ornaments in the “Hungarian” style was discovered in sq. II/25 and in the baulk of line 24–25. This suggests that they were thrown out of the burial in pit 9.

The spatial distribution of potsherds from the mound is noteworthy. Seven fragments of a Kara-Yakupovo vessel and five fragments of the Petrogrom-Yudina vessel with cord pattern were found in the northern part of the

mound (sq. II/24). Most likely, these potsherds come from burial pit 4. Three separate fragments of the Bakal and Petrogrom-Yudina ceramics were discovered in sq. II/25, closer to grave pit 9 (see Fig. 3, II).

*Burial 1* is located on the northeastern periphery of the mound; its shallow (15–17 cm) pit,  $7.7 \times 1.6$  m, is oriented along the WNW–ESE line (Fig. 4, I). An adult male was buried in an extended supine position, with his head to the west-northwest. His face was turned to the north. Five iron arrowheads were found close to the bones of the right hand (Fig. 4, II, 6); just below them there was a belt tip, heart-shaped plates with skin remains, and a strap divider (Fig. 4, II, 2). The assemblage also contains remains of wood. These indicate the presence of a quiver in the burial goods. Close to the hips of the deceased, there was a belt tip, several heart-shaped plates with skin remains and fragments of wood, a strap divider, and a buckle, all located horizontally. Another strap divider (from which a line of small heart-shaped plates extended) and a massive buckle were found between the

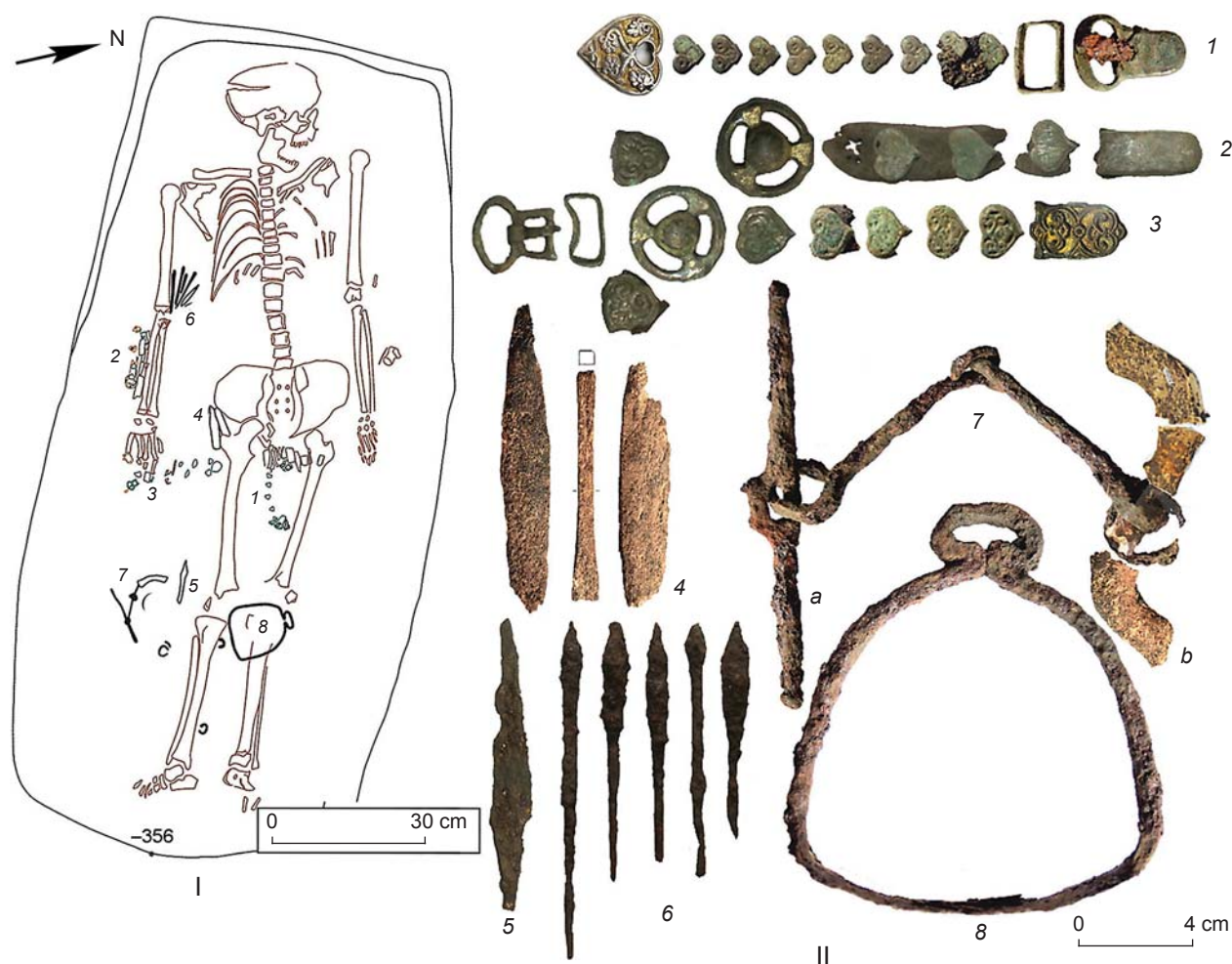


Fig. 4. Plan of burial 1 (I) and the finds therefrom (II).

1 – belt set for a bag; 2, 3 – archers' belts 4 – onlays on bow; 5 – knife; 6 – arrowheads; 7 – bits; 8 – stirrup.

1–3 – bronze, silver, leather; 4, 7, b – bone; 5, 6, 7, a, 8 – iron.

thigh bones. These finds are probably the remains of an archer's belt (Fig. 4, II, 2, 3). Near the right hip joint, bone bow-onlays were discovered—two flat frontal pieces and one lateral piece. On the left tibia, there was a stirrup. A knife was found at the right femur, and a bit with a straight iron cheek-piece and a broken slightly curved bone one were located at some distance from the knife (Fig. 4, II, 4, 5, 7, 8). Parallels to the found artifacts occur in the Srostki tradition of the Altai and Eastern Kazakhstan (Mogilnikov, 2002: Fig. 41, 2–4; 47, 1, 7, 13, 25; 48, 7, 10, 16; 91, 1, 2; 116, 6; 171, 7; Arslanova, 2013: Fig. 4, 5; photo 14, 20–24, 29–31).

Burial 5 was made in a shallow (12–15 cm in the northern and central parts, and up to 20 cm in the southern part) pit, 1.2 × 1.7 m, oriented along the NNE–SSW line. The buried individual was laid with his head to the SSW (Fig. 5, I, II). The skull was crushed. The remains of wood decay (apparently from a coffin) were recorded on the right side of the ribs and on the bones of the right leg.

Under the mandible, a bone spoon was located (Fig. 5, III, 4). At the interior side of the right humerus, arrowheads were found. At the left side of the hip joint, there were two flat median bone bow-onlays; and close to the radius, a heavily corroded iron item, probably a knife, was noted (Fig. 5, III, 1–3). A tip plate, apparently decorating a waist belt, was found between the femurs (Fig. 5, III, 5), and a bone buckle from a saddle-girth belt, between the tibias (Fig. 5, III, 6). On the left side of the pelvic bone, there was a bone plate. An iron stirrup with a flat footrest and a ringed bit were found close to the right tibia, to the right of the deceased (Fig. 5, III, 7, 8).

In terms of cultural and typological characteristics (shallow pit, skeleton orientation, presence of bone parts of a bow, stirrup), this burial belongs to the Srostki tradition. However, several elements are original: a bone spoon and tip plate with a zoomorphic pattern (Fig. 5, III, 4, 5). It depicts, most likely, a simurgh. All currently known finds with zoomorphic images are

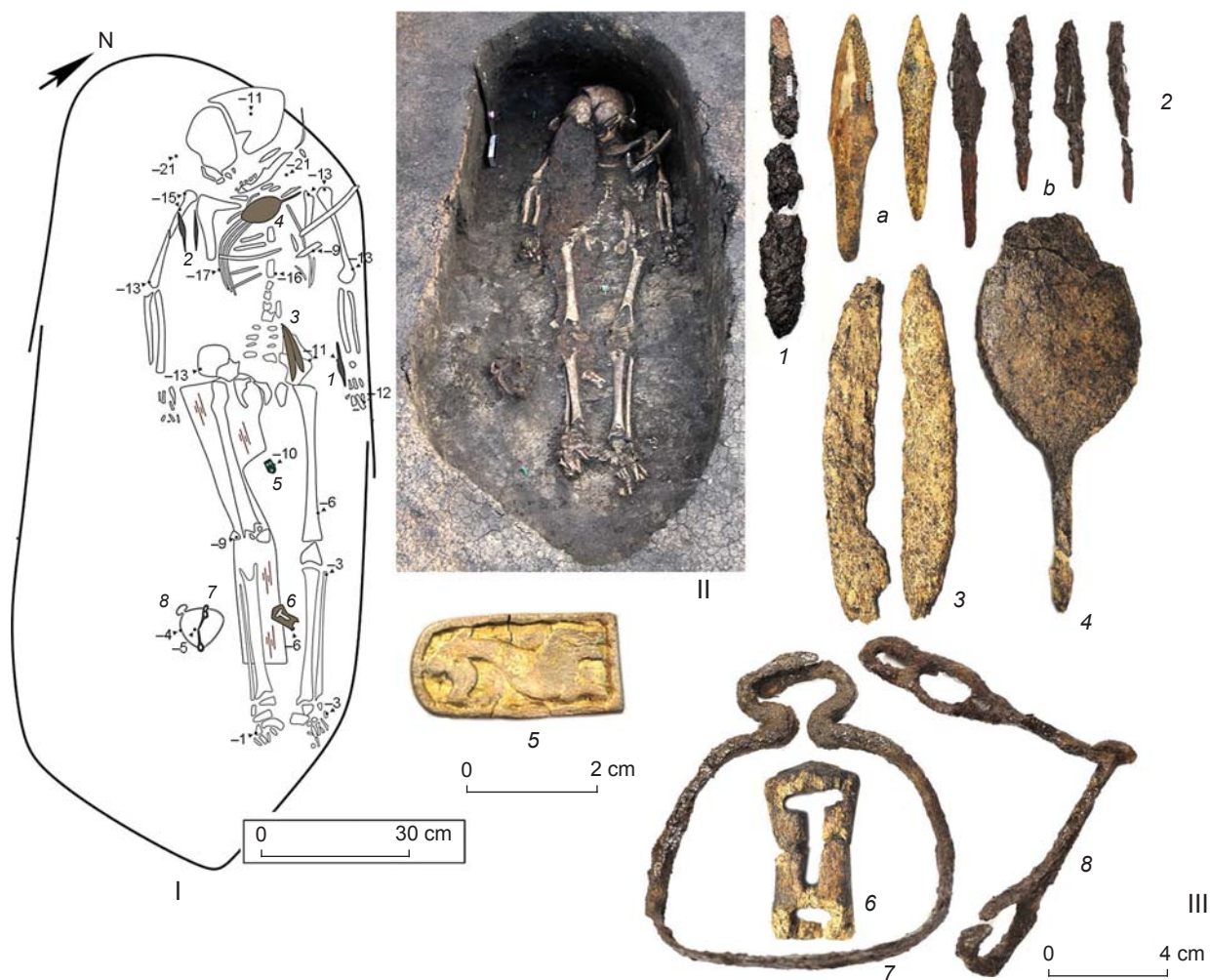


Fig. 5. Plan (I) and general view (II) of burial 5; the finds therefrom (III).

1 – knife; 2 – arrowheads; 3 – onlays on bow; 4 – spoon; 5 – belt tip; 6 – buckle; 7 – stirrup; 8 – bits.

1, 2, b, 7, 8 – iron; 2, a, 3, 4, 6 – bone; 5 – gold-plated silver.

summarized in A.V. Komar's publication; he emphasizes their connection with Sasanian and East Iranian toreutics (Komar, 2018: 126–131).

*Burial 6* was made at a level of  $-75$  cm and oriented along the W–E line; its dimensions are  $1.1 \times 2.8$  m. The grave pit was filled with dense clay and fine rock debris, which suggests that it was deliberately compacted in order to avoid looting. This assumption is confirmed by the presence of an ancient looter's pit (almost along the entire contour of the grave), which never reached the depth of the burial itself. An adult male was buried in an extended supine position, with his head turned to the left, to the west. The body was placed in a subrectangular wooden coffin, whose remains preserved the outlines and some parts of the cover (Fig. 6, I, II). A broadsword with a straight guard, a pommel, and a scabbard bracket (Fig. 6, III, 2) lay on the right side, along the humerus, radius, and femur; an iron dagger in a silver scabbard (Fig. 6, III, 1) was located on the left side, along the arm bones. Close to the right arm, twelve iron double-bladed and tetrahedral arrowheads, a quiver hook, a belt buckle, six-petaled plaques, and bronze bridle strap dividers with the remains of straps decorated with clips and figured plates were found (Fig. 6, III, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11), which indicates the presence of a quiver in the burial goods. A belt, which consisted of a series of rectangular plates with a cutout at the bottom, lay crosswise above the pelvis bones; part of the belt, consisting of heart-shaped plates, was located along the left radius; parts of the belt made of small similar plates were located to the right and left of the pelvis. The belt's tip plate lay between the thigh bones. Solitary fragments of straps with plates were found between the knee joints and at the exterior side of the left tibia (Fig. 6, III, 13–16). Just above the skull, thin plates with wooden remains, probably the remains of a saddle pommel (Fig. 6, III, 12), a bell, and a silver earring (Fig. 6, III, 6, 9) were discovered. A ring with an amber insert was located on phalanx of the little finger of the left hand (Fig. 6, III, 5). A ceramic round-bottomed vessel of the Kushnarenkovo type (Fig. 6, III, 10) and bone from a sacrificial animal (a horse) were found close to the lower bones of the left leg.

This burial shows typical features of the cultural traditions of nomads of the 9th century in the Southern Urals. The closest parallels are the Bekeshevo, Khusainovo, Yamashi-Tau burial mounds (Mazhitov, 1981: 30–132; 1993: 131–134).

### Study results

The relative chronology of the described complexes can be traced both in evident different features of the burial goods and in the derived radiocarbon dates. For burial 5 ( $1220 \pm 30$  BP), two ranges of calibrated dates

were obtained, of which the date of 771–888 BP can be considered the most probable. Burial 6 ( $1195 \pm 30$  BP) seems to be almost synchronous according to the calibrated dates: 771–895 BP. The authors believe that the earliest and the latest dates, falling in the 8th and 10th centuries, should be discarded owing to their low reliability and inconsistency with the typology of the recovered artifacts.

The currently available radiocarbon dates for the cemetery (including the part excavated in the early 2010s) indicate the period of the last quarter of the 8th to the first quarter of the 11th century (Grudochko et al., 2018). These dates can be quite confidently grouped into the early (last quarter of the 8th to the early 10th century, mainly the entire 9th century) and late (10th to the first quarter of the 11th century) sets. Radiocarbon dates and the typology of the grave goods suggest the turn of the 8th–9th centuries as the most probable time of construction of mound 11. The younger horizon of burials 1 and 5 has yielded artifacts of the Srostki type; the parallels are available in the East Kazakhstan and Altai complexes dating to 800–1000 AD.

The items of a belt set from the mound and the platform under it, representing the so-called Hungarian (Carpathian) style, are of particular interest. The closest parallels to round plaques with symmetrical petal-shaped motifs and a hemispherical protrusion in the center (see Fig. 3, I, 20, 21, 24) were established among the items of the Redikor hoard (Volga region) and the artifacts from the Carpathian Basin (Komar, 2018: 365, fig. 49, 3; Révész, 1996: 229, 244, 245, 315, 318, 385, 386; A honfoglaló magyarság..., 1996: 154, 182–183, 233, 238, 357).

A fragment of the belt set, consisting of a polymetallic buckle and two plates (see Fig. 3, I, 7, 8, 18), is noteworthy in this group of items. These bear a slightly different floral ornamentation of discs, in the form of leaves and curls, and a border decorated with a chain of oval protrusions. A similar pattern has been recorded on the belt set from burial 556 at Kryukovsko-Kuzhnovsky cemetery (Tambov Region) (Ivanov, 1952: Pl. XXXIV; Komar, 2018: 366, fig. 50); solitary similar artifacts have also been reported from the Carpathian Basin (A honfoglaló magyarság..., 1996: 204, 238), which makes it possible to attribute this set to the Magyar antiquities as well.

The fact of the stylistic, typological, and technological similarity between the Uyelgi finds and the items in the “Hungarian” style had been noticed in the early years of research at the site. However, these items originated mainly from looted graves; this did not provide reliable grounds to identify the ways in which such artifacts ended up in the burials of the Uyelgi and Sineglazovo cemeteries.

In the fall of 2021, a new medieval site at Aktobe was discovered in the course of rescue archaeological



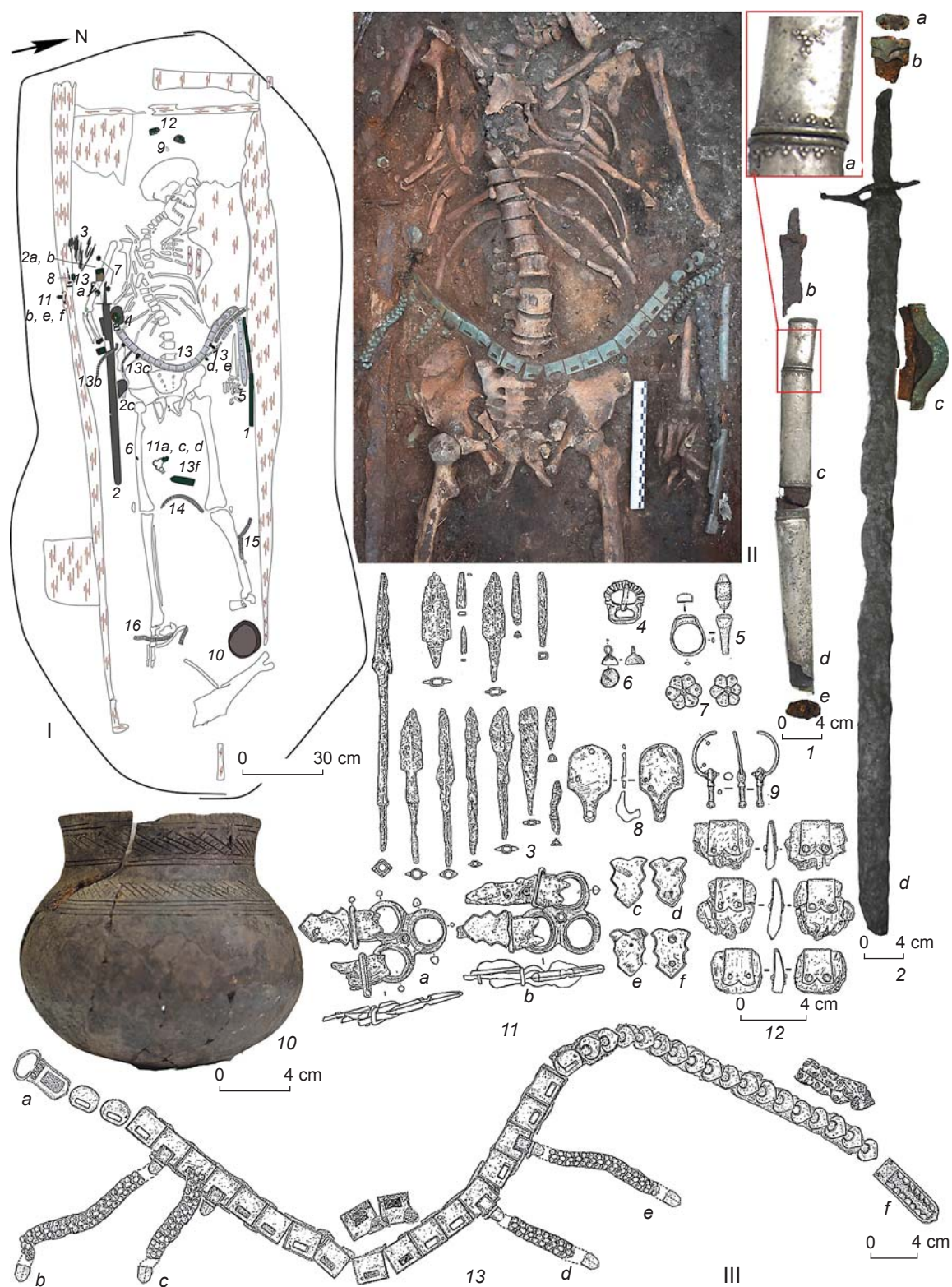


Fig. 6. Plan (I) and close-up (II) of burial 6; the finds therefrom (III).

1 – dagger and its elements; 2 – broadsword and its elements; 3 – arrowheads; 4 – buckle; 5 – finger-ring; 6 – bell; 7 – six-petaled plates; 8 – quiver hook; 9 – earring; 10 – vessel; 11 – strap dividers of archer's belt, and its plates; 12 – saddle pommel brackets; 13 – belt (reconstruction); 14–16 – separate straps with plates (their composition is similar to the hanging straps of the main belt 13, b–e).  
 I, a – silver; 1, b, 2, d, e, 3 – iron; 1, c – silver, iron; 2, a, 4, 6–9, 11, c–f – non-ferrous metal; 2, b, c – non-ferrous metal, wood; 5 – silver, stone; 10 – ceramics; 11, a, b, 12, 13 – non-ferrous metal, leather.



survey. The site is located 25 km southeast of the Uyelgi cemetery. These sites are likely contemporaneous and belong to the same culture. During the excavations, two disturbed burials were discovered. One burial (male) yielded a part of the harness set: a fragment of a saddle,

a stirrup, and richly decorated crupper belts (Fig. 7). The plaques ( $n=21$ ) and strap dividers ( $n=2$ ) are made of silver, with gold plating, in an exclusive “Hungarian” style: a border in the form of alternating ovals and circles, each oval containing four “pearls”, a hemispherical protrusion



Fig. 7. Aktobe burial complex.

I – plan; II – burial view; III – burial goods: 1, 25–27, 34–36 – silver, gold, leather; 2–23, 28–33 – silver, gold; 24 – silver; 37 – wood; 38 – iron.



in the center, framed by a chain of “pearls”, from which three or four petals/buds extend (Botalov et al., 2021) (Fig. 7, III, 2–22, 34–36). The large cast heart-shaped petals/buds bear images in the form of the Latin letter V, with its upper ends rounded downwards, and an arc (in some cases, double) limiting the upper part. This image is executed by a technique other than casting, and is possibly an element of decoration or tamga.

This set, along with the Uyelgi and Sineglazovo artifacts, suggests the targeted entry of such complexes into the Southeastern Urals in the 10th century. The “Hungarian” historical and cultural stratum apparently arose here owing to the arrival of a group of nomads from the Southern Urals who earlier had direct contacts with a related population of the Carpathian Basin. Some burials at the Bayanovo cemetery in the Perm Region (Fodor, 2015: 121–128) likely represent the similar process.

The Aktobe burial also yielded a belt set of silver items, consisting of a buckle with a movable rectangular tongue, six heart-shaped plates with holes, and three arched plates (with a hole in one) (Fig. 7, 24–33). These items, with one exception, are gold plated and decorated with floral patterns. As in the case of the Uyelgi finds, these items demonstrate the Srostki style typical of the Eastern Kazakhstan and Altai sites. Thus, the Aktobe artifacts clearly illustrate the combination or counter penetration of two cultural traditions: western (Carpathian) and eastern (Altai-Kazakhstan).

It should be noted that the ceramic complex found in Uyelgi mound 11 and on the platform under it demonstrates a specific ethnic-cultural process. The found potsherds represent five vessels: three crushed vessels and two ornamented fragments of neck (see Fig. 3, II). Three potsherds show corded ornamentation characteristic of pottery of the forest-steppe and forest Petrogrom-Yudina stratum (Gushchina, Botalov, 2016: 406–407, fig. 41, 42; p. 482–483, fig. 3). Two other vessels show similarities in shape and decoration patterns to the post-Bakal and Kara-Yakup pottery of the Eastern Urals. These ceramic traditions are associated with the East Uralic and West Siberian Ugriic population, and mark the presence of one more cultural group in the collection from this mound.

## Conclusions

The study of the Uyelgi cemetery mound 11 has shown that burial 6 discovered in the low horizon demonstrates the cultural and typological features of the nomads of the Southern Urals, while burials 1 and 5 in the upper layer refer to the Altai (Srostki) historical and cultural tradition that produced items in the so-called Hungarian style. This observation makes it possible to infer: the back migration of some groups of the South Uralic population from the west co-occurred with the counter migration from Eastern

Kazakhstan and Altai. This assumption is supported by the materials from the Aktobe cemetery, which include both the items of a “Hungarian” (Carpathian) appearance and the plates and a belt buckle of the “Srostki” style. Hence, the materials of Uyelgi mound 11 demonstrate at least four historical and cultural strata: South Uralic, Hungarian (Carpathian), Altaic (Srostki), and Ugriic (East Uralic/West Siberian). This combination reflects the ethnic-cultural processes that took place in the region from the late 8th to the 10th century.

The preliminary systematization of items (usually belt sets) from surface collections (up to 300 spec.) and materials from excavations of the first years made it possible to identify five stylistic cultural groups: 1) South Uralic, 2) Ural-Kazakhstan, 3) “Hungarian”, 4) East Kazakhstan, Altaic, and 5) Ugriic. The relevant descriptions and illustrations have been published elsewhere (Botalov, Grudochko, 2011; Grudochko, Botalov, 2013; Botalov, 2018). These initial observations were later largely confirmed by the results of excavations. Despite the total looting of the cemetery—up to 85–90 %, probably in ancient times—thanks to the technique of continuous excavation, it was possible to correlate the materials from the looted graves with the artifacts thrown out.

## Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to their fellow associates who provided invaluable assistance in the discovery and subsequent long-term study of the Uyelgi burial complex: O.Y. Belov, E.S. Botalova, V.M. Gavrish, G.P. Gusev, S.O. Istomin, S.V. Markov, S.A. Khanov, and L.D. Yurechko.

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*Received April 21, 2022.*

*Received in revised form September 21, 2022.*