

doi:10.17746/1563-0110.2024.52.2.084-091

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## **New Data on Armed Conflicts in the Altai During the Rouran Period: The Choburak I Cemetery**

*This study focuses on a burial at a Rouran period cemetery, Choburak I, in the Chumal'sky District, Republic of Altai, where altogether twelve burials were excavated by an expedition from the Altai State University. In kurgan 34a, a burial of a 30–35-year-old male with a horse was excavated. The burial goods included weapons, items of horse harness, utensils and domestic artifacts. The head of the buried individual had been replaced by the cranium of a ram, and certain postcranial bones revealed multiple injuries inflicted by a cutting weapon. The burial is attributed to the Dàlián tradition, associated with the Bulan-Koba culture. The analysis of the burial goods and a radiocarbon estimate suggest that the burial dates to the middle or second half of the 4th century AD. Injuries testify to armed conflicts, in which males had taken part, and support the belief that violence in the Altai was high during the Rouran period. The case is interpreted as one of decapitation. Given the parallels in adjacent regions, it can be hypothesized that the head of a ram had been used as a basis for a mask. Apparently, this peculiar custom was associated with the ritual in which the missing bodily part was replaced in specific cases of violent death.*

**Keywords:** *Burial, Rouran period, Altai, armed conflicts, injuries, ritual practice.*

### **Introduction**

The intensity of armed conflicts significantly increased after the collapse of the Xianbei state in Central Asia in the second half of the 3rd century AD and the aggravated struggle for military and political leadership in this vast region in the 4th–5th centuries. A reflection of these processes in the Altai is multiple injuries on the bones of the deceased people with no traces of healing (chopped, cut, and puncture wounds, decapitation, scalping, cutting off limbs), which have been observed during excavations at burial sites of the Bulan-Koba culture. Interpretation of evidence of armed violence (Tur, Matrenin, Soenov,

2018; Seregin, Demin et al., 2022; and others), demonstrating the increased level of social tension in the region, shows the importance of further research to specify the nature of the clashes between different groups of the Bulan-Koba population and identify the possible participation of foreign groups therein. It should be recognized that such research, which is of great importance for reconstructing the processes of ethnic and cultural interaction, depends significantly on enrichment of high-quality anthropological evidence. This article presents and analyzes new data on armed conflicts in the Altai during the Rouran period, obtained from the excavations of burial mounds at the Choburak I site. Moreover,

interpretation of this unusual new evidence requires addressing some aspects of the history of the nomads of that period associated with their specific material and spiritual culture.

### Description of sources

The burial and memorial complex of Choburak I is located south of the village of Yelanda, in the Chemalsky District, Republic of Altai (Fig. 1). A small necropolis, consisting of 12 graves under burial mounds, was fully explored at that site during the works of the expedition from the Altai State University (Seregin, Tishkin et al., 2022). These objects, practically invisible on the modern surface, were compactly located in the northern part of the site next to the earlier burial mounds of the Chalcolithic and Early Scythian period, and not far from the Turkic enclosures. The most unusual among the studied burials, which belonged to the Bulan-Koba archaeological culture, was a burial in kurgan 34a.

This object was the last in a row of four mounds over the burials of males of different ages. A flat stone placement, measuring  $4.2 \times 3.9$  m and reaching 0.4 m high, consisted of fragments of torn stone and pebble boulders. Larger boulders were along its outer contour, forming a suboval crepidoma oriented with its longitudinal axis along NW–SE (Fig. 2, *a*). The grave pit, measuring 4.13 m long and 1.2–1.6 m wide, filled with pebbles and stones of various sizes, was within the boundaries of this stone placement. The walls of the pit narrowed significantly as its depth increased. Accordingly, at the level of the bottom, its length was 3.1 m and width was 0.95–1.13 m.

In the northwestern part of the grave, at a depth of 0.9 m from the ancient level, there was an undisturbed burial of a male 30–35 years of age, placed on his back, with his legs stretched out and his arms slightly bent at the elbows (Fig. 2, *b*). The skull and first five cervical vertebrae were missing. The skull of a young ram (identified by N.A. Plasteeva from the Institute of Plant and Animal Ecology of the SB RAS) was discovered in the place of the head of the deceased. The ram's skull was set on a base and thus imitated a single whole with the postcranial human skeleton (Fig. 3, *a, b*). The buried person was accompanied by abundant burial goods. On the left side of the skeleton, there was a composite bow, with the surviving seven horn onlays on the upper (near the shoulder), central (in the projection



Fig. 1. Location of the Choburak I site.



of the pelvis), and lower (in the thigh area) parts of the wooden core (Fig. 4, 1–7). A compact cluster of iron arrowheads (at least 10 items) was discovered near the left humerus (Fig. 4, 8–16, 19). Some of these were equipped with bone whistles (Fig. 4, 22). An iron quiver hook was also found there (Fig. 4, 17). Fragments of two short-bladed iron knives of different sizes (Fig. 4, 20, 21), a part of an awl (Fig. 4, 18), an iron clasp in the form of a twisted 8-shaped link, as well as intact and destroyed iron plates, which might have been the parts of the sheath, were found on the right side during the examination of the pelvic bones. An iron round-bottomed cauldron surviving in large fragments (see Fig. 3, *c*) was in the area of the knee joints.

The buried person was accompanied by the burial of a riding horse, placed on the left side, with strongly bent limbs and oriented with its head to the northwest. The horse skeleton was located “at the feet” of the deceased male and covered almost half of his skeleton (see Fig. 2, *b*). Iron bits (Fig. 5, 1) were in the horse's jaws, and iron bridle parts were near the skull (Fig. 5, 2–5, 7, 9, 11). Fragments of horn edging from the cantle were found on the spine (Fig. 5, 8). An iron item—plate with a loop fastening (Fig. 5, 6)—lay next to them among the ribs. The horn girth buckle, with the surviving movable prong (Fig. 5, 10, 12), was a little lower. A clasp, also made of horn, was found under the horse's pelvic bones (Fig. 5, 13).

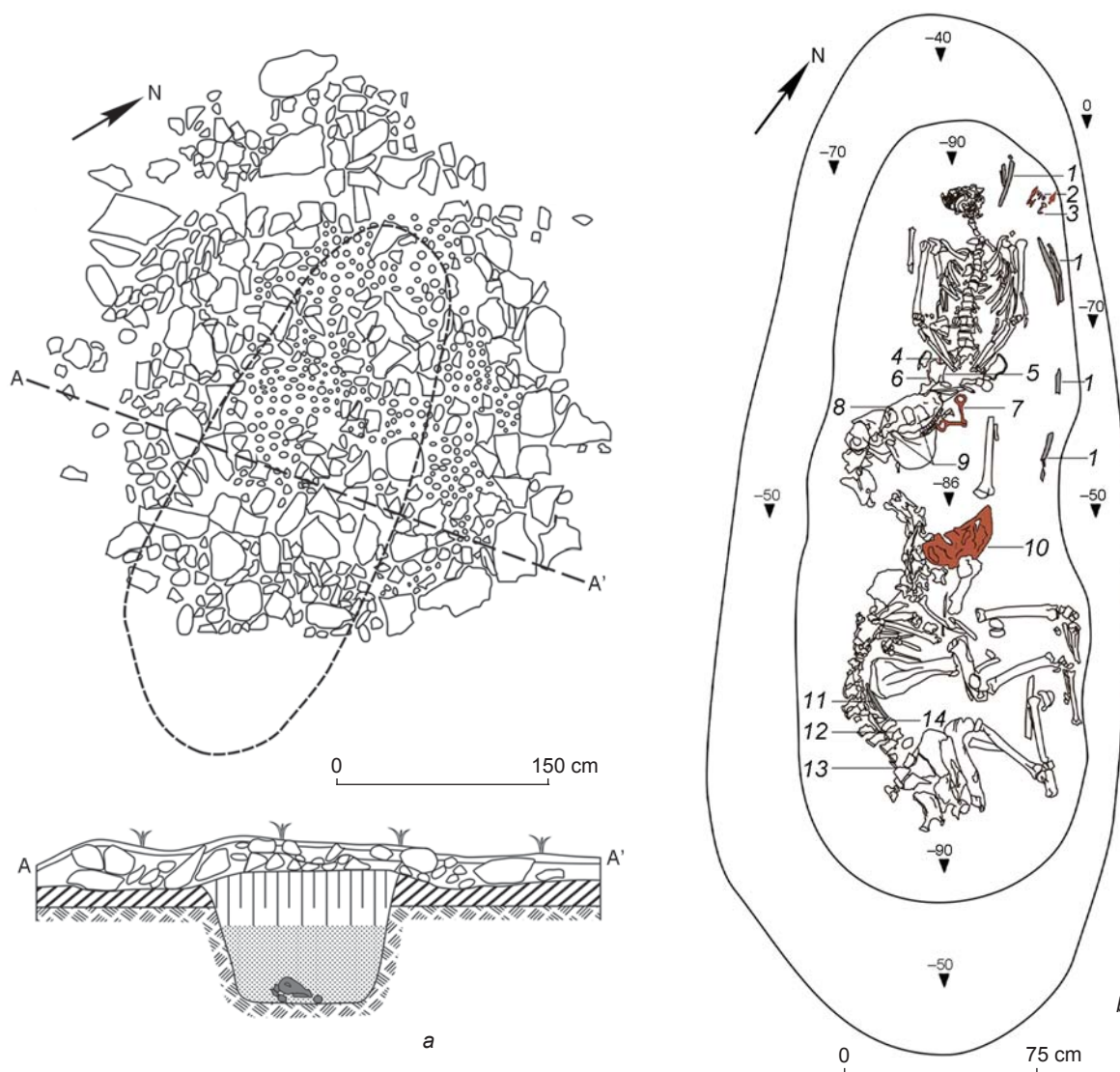


Fig. 2. Kurgan 34a at the Choburak I cemetery.

*a* – plan view and cross-section of the burial structure; *b* – plan view of the male burial with horse.

1 – bow onlays; 2 – arrowheads; 3 – quiver hook; 4 – short-bladed knives; 5 – belt set; 6 – awl; 7 – bit; 8 – bridle buckle; 9 – bridle elements; 10 – cauldron; 11 – saddle edge; 12 – girth buckle; 13 – clasp; 14 – element of horse harness.

Notably, the same-type cut and chopped traumatic injuries were observed on some bones of the postcranial skeleton (Fig. 6). Three of these were located on the anterior and lateral surfaces of the femurs, two in the upper part of the pubis, and two more on the T10 and T11 vertebral bodies. In all cases, there were no traces of healing. There could have been more traumatic injuries, but because of severe taphonomic destruction of some skeletal elements, especially the ribs and vertebral processes, the possibilities of identifying them were very limited.

### Analysis of evidence

Distinctive elements of funerary rite, revealed by excavations of kurgan 34a at Choburak I (location of objects in rows, small mound, suboval crepidoma, shallow grave-pit, individual inhumation on the back, orientation of the deceased to the western sector, the accompanying burial of a horse “on top” of the deceased), make it possible to attribute this burial to the Dàlián funerary tradition of the Bulan-Koba archaeological culture (Seregin, Matrenin, 2016: 161–162).



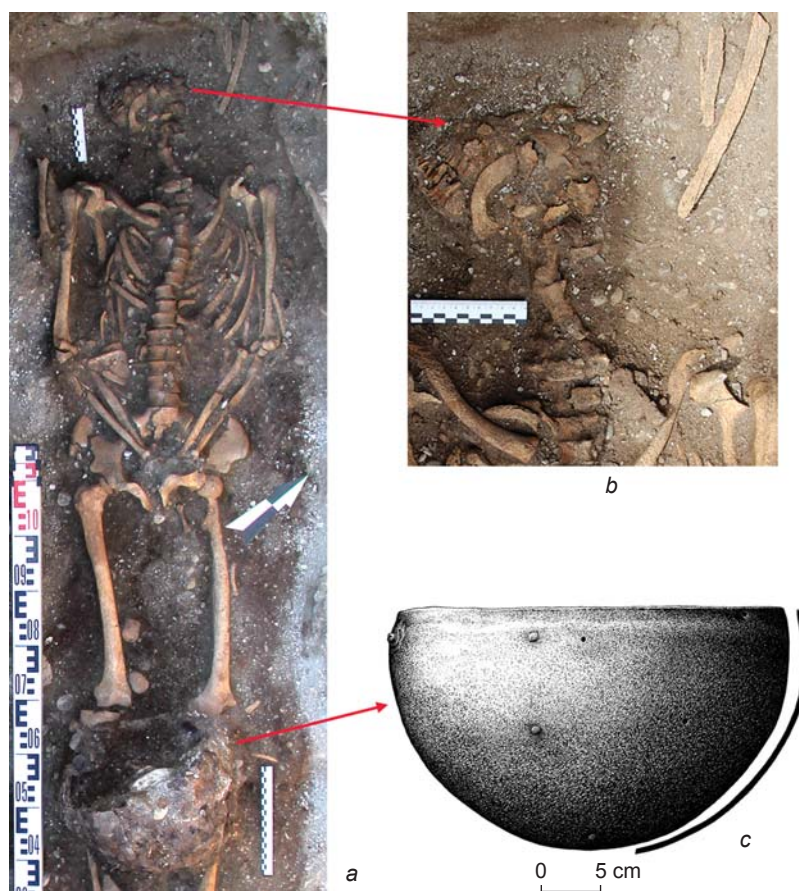


Fig. 3. Burial in kurgan 34a.

*a* – view of the human burial after studying the accompanying horse burial; *b* – ram's skull combined with the postcranial human skeleton; *c* – reconstruction of the iron cauldron.

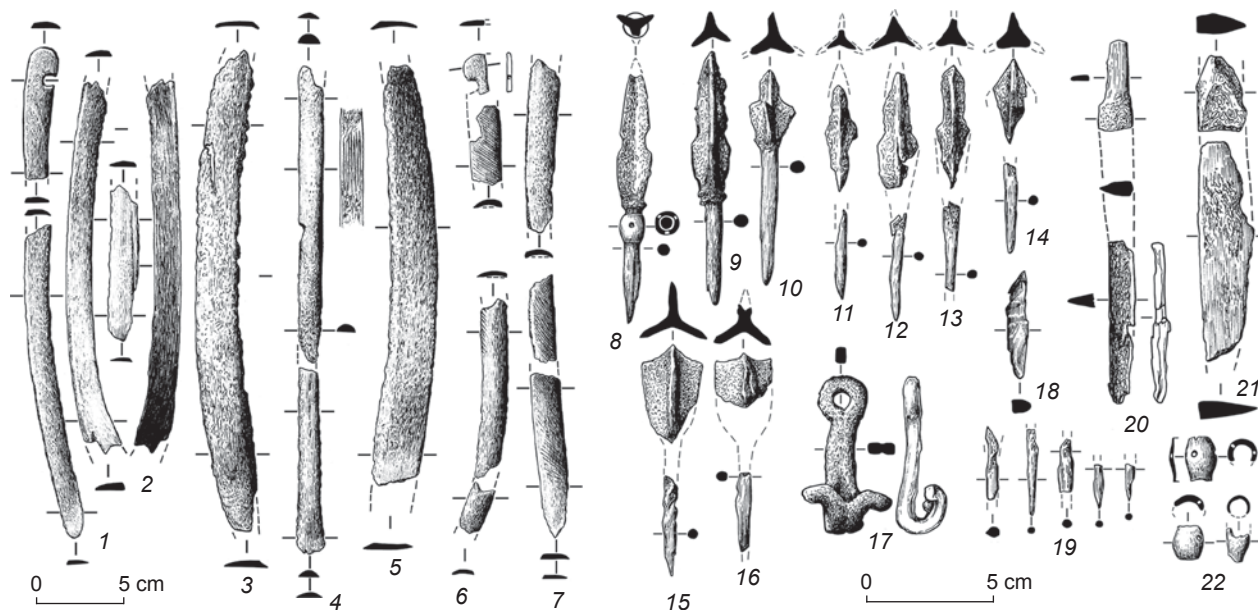


Fig. 4. Weaponry, military equipment, and tools from the burial.

1–7 – bow onlays; 8–16 – arrowheads; 17 – hook-clasp; 18 – awl; 19 – fragments of arrowhead tangs; 20, 21 – knives; 22 – whistles.  
1–7, 22 – bone, horn; 8–21 – iron.



Fig. 5. Riding horse harness from the burial.

1 – bit; 2–5, 7, 9, 11 – bridle elements; 6 – fastening; 8 – saddle edging; 10 – girth buckle; 12 – prong of this buckle; 13 – clasp. 1–7, 9, 11 – iron; 8, 10, 12, 13 – bone, horn.

The burial goods consisted of various categories of items (see Fig. 4, 5), including chronologically informative finds, such as tiered arrowheads of the Southern Siberian tradition (see Fig. 4, 8, 9, 12–13) and a cauldron (see Fig. 3, c), which were dated to not earlier than the 3rd century AD; a girth buckle with a movable prong (see Fig. 5, 10), a quiver hook with a V-shaped transverse bar (see Fig. 4, 17), and saddle edging (see Fig. 5, 8), typical of the sites of the 4th to early 6th century AD; bits with 8-shaped loops (see Fig. 5, 1) and hemispherical bridle plates with pin fastening (see Fig. 5, 7, 9), similar to the items dated to the second half of the 4th–5th centuries AD (Kyzlasov, 1969: Fig. 21, 9; Hudiakov, 1991: Fig. 30, 5; Raskopki..., 1997: Fig. 17–19, 22–25; Soenov, 1998: Fig. 1; Tishkin, Matrenin, Schmidt, 2018: 49, 52–53, 64, 115–117, pl. 30, 5, 7, 9; and others). A quadrangular arrowhead was quite unusual (see Fig. 4, 16). It was reminiscent of Early Turkic broadheads of the second half of the

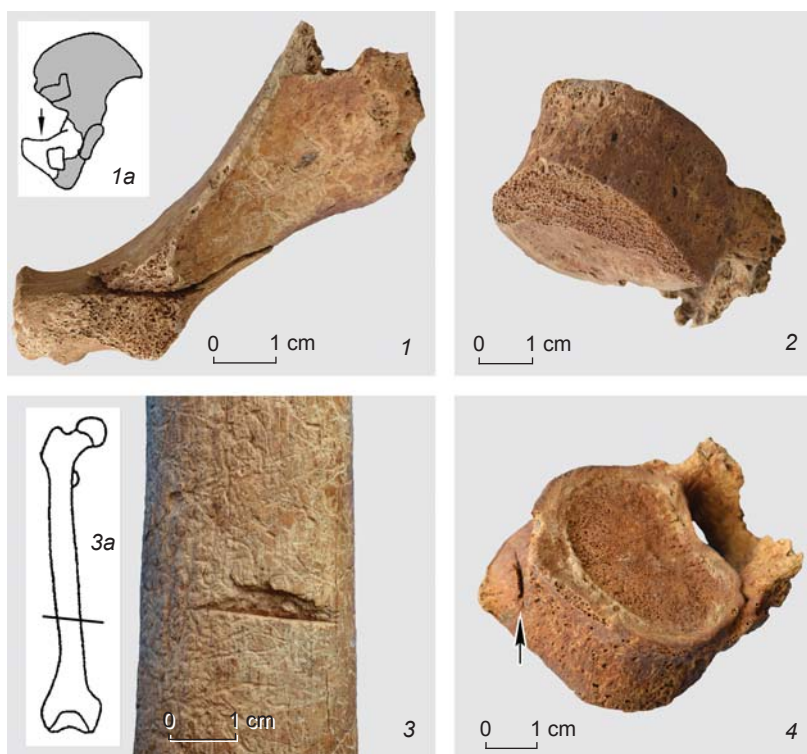


Fig. 6. Traumatic injuries on the bones of the male skeleton.

1 – on the left pubic bone, top view (1a – location of the injury, drawing); 2 – on the lower surface of the T10 vertebral body; 3 – on the anterior surface of the right femur (3a – location of the injury, drawing); 4 – on the anterior surface of the T11 vertebral body.



### Results of radiocarbon dating of the samples

Lab. code	Sample	AMS-date, BP	Calibrated date (2 $\sigma$ ), AD
UBA-40778	Human bone	1681 $\pm$ 23	328–415
UBA-40779	Horse bone	1734 $\pm$ 25	244–381
UBA-45474	Ram bone	1703 $\pm$ 21	257–397

5th to the first half of the 7th century AD (Gorbunov, 2006: 39, fig. 26, 3, 7, 8). The remaining categories of items had a wider period of existence within the 2nd–5th centuries AD. The general appearance of the burial goods allowed us to date kurgan 34a to the mid–second half of the 4th century AD. This conclusion does not contradict the results of the radiocarbon analysis (see *Table*) carried out in the <sup>14</sup>CHRONO Center for Climate, the Environment, and Chronology (Belfast, Northern Ireland; analyst S.V. Svyatko).

Numerous cut and chopped injuries on the bones of the postcranial skeleton suggest that the male buried in kurgan 34a became a victim of armed violence. Judging by the locations of these injuries, these were caused by sword blows from the front. Unfortunately, the C6 and C7 vertebrae were poorly preserved, so it is unknown whether they had any traces of mechanical impact associated with beheading. In addition to the burial under discussion, two more burials of men with injuries inflicted by long-bladed weapons were examined at Choburak I. This evidence indicates participation of the male part of the local group of nomads, who left this small cemetery, in armed conflicts.

### Discussion

Decapitation, recorded in the burial in kurgan 34a, is of the greatest interest. By now, single burials of beheaded males belonging to the population of the Bulan-Koba culture of the Altai have been reliably documented during excavations at the Airydash-1, Verkh-Uimon, and Stepushka sites (Soenov, 2017: 117–120; Tishkin, Matrenin, Schmidt, 2018: 27, fig. 26; 28, 1; Tur, Matrenin, Soenov, 2018: 134–138). This evidence demonstrates not only a relatively high tension between individual groups of the Altai nomads in the 4th–5th centuries AD and probable conflicts with foreign groups, but also special military rituals (Tur, Matrenin, Soenov, 2018: 134–136). In this context, it should be emphasized that the beheading of a defeated enemy not only implied

intimidation of the living relatives, but also had a deep sacred meaning, apparently associated with deprivation of the deceased of a full-fledged body as a condition for transition to the afterlife. The cruelty of the decapitation ritual was most likely practiced mainly in relation to the population of a foreign culture, which was not included in clan ties.

Outside the Altai, a fairly high percentage of burials of beheaded people of different sexes, who died in military clashes, were found in Tuva during excavations of cemeteries of the 2nd–4th centuries AD (Weinstein, 1970: Fig. 110; Dyakonova, 1970: Fig. 75, 79, 121; Murphy, 2003: 86–87; and others). For example, five cases of decapitation were identified in the evidence from the Aimyrlyg XXXI site. In two cases (one female and one male), the body was buried with a severed head. In three other cases (one female and two males), the skull was missing (Murphy, 2003: 86–87). Moreover, a large number of skeletons from that site had multiple cut and chopped injuries caused by a sword. Several cases of decapitation were found during the study of anthropological evidence from the Tunnug-1 site of the Kokel culture (Milella et al., 2021).

Considering the fragmentary information about the worldview of the Bulan-Koba people, interpretation of this distinctive ritual of replacing a person's head with a ram's is very problematic, and any conclusions are only tentative. However, some evidence suggests that such manipulations were not isolated instances in the ritual practice of the Altai-Sayan population in the late 1st millennium BC to the first half of the 1st millennium AD. A possibly similar situation occurred at the Tunnug-1 site mentioned above. One of the females (skeleton 67) was buried without her head; an iron knife and a sheep vertebra lay in place of the missing skull (Ibid.). The results of studying a clay mask from a burial of the Tes culture at the Shestakovo necropolis (Kemerovo Region, excavations by A.I. Martynov), using computed X-ray tomography at the Institute of Nuclear Physics SB RAS, were even more revealing. The analysis has shown that a "portrait of a man" was sculpted on the ram's (sheep's) skull (Polosmak, 2010: 84–85).

That study also contains numerous testimonies on the important role of sheep in the beliefs of carriers of many cultures in different chronological periods (Ibid.: 85–88).

Turning to interpretation of the evidence from kurgan 34a at Choburak I, note that the ram's head, together with a part of its neck, was "connected" to the torso of a person, imitating a single whole. This extreme manipulation with the body of the deceased was clearly caused by the circumstances of violent death. As one of the hypotheses, we may assume that the ram's head in this case was used as a basis for making a mask that replaced the lost human head. The absence of traces of such an item in the burial might have resulted from the poor preservation of organic materials, which is also typical of other objects at the cemetery. It seems possible to view such a procedure as an example of implementing forced partial mannequinization of a person for performing the valid rite of passage of the deceased to the afterlife.

## Conclusions

The burial of a beheaded male in kurgan 34a at the Choburak I cemetery was done by the carriers of the Dàlián funerary tradition of the Bulan-Koba culture of the Altai. The appearance of the things found in the burial makes it possible to date it to the middle–second half of the 4th century AD, which agrees with the results of radiocarbon analysis of bone samples from the grave.

Most of the cut and chopped injuries without traces of healing, which were found on the postcranial skeleton of a deceased person, were made with a sword. The evidence of trauma demonstrates involvement of the population which left the Choburak I necropolis in conflicts using bladed weaponry, and a high level of armed violence in the Altai during the Rouran period. However, there is insufficient evidence to reconstruct the nature of these clashes in more detail and solve the problem of the possible participation of foreign groups in the conflicts. The evidence on replacing the human head with the ram's head, discovered in the burial, is also quite fragmentary. There are reasons to assume a ritual of replacing a lost body part, possibly due to the circumstances of a violent death. Expanding the existing corpus of sources, primarily through targeted excavations of archaeological sites, will make it possible to study

various aspects of the military history of the nomads of the Altai and adjacent territories in the late 1st millennium BC to first half of the 1st millennium AD in more detail, and to understand better the understudied worldview of this population, which is reflected in ritual practices.

## Acknowledgment

This study was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (Project No. 20-78-10037).

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*Received November 22, 2022.*

*Received in revised form March 7, 2023.*