

DOI: 10.17746/1563-0110.2016.44.4.122-130

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## Burials Dating to the Migration Period in Western Siberia\*

*Traditions and innovations in 4th–5th century AD burials in the northern forest-steppe and sub-taiga areas of the Tobol valley (Kozlov Mys-2, Revda-5, Ustyug-1, and Ipkul) are described. The burial rite reveals cultural heterogeneity. The mounds, the northerly orientation of bodies, the use of horsemeat in the funeral feast, and the addition of sand and grog to ceramic paste are elements inherited from the earlier Sargat culture. Features such as secondary cremation, inhumation with a horse placed on the roof of the grave perpendicular to the human body, wrapping the bodies in carpets, skins, and felt mats, as well as delayed burials, have no roots in local Early Iron Age traditions. The addition of burnt bones to the ceramic paste, new types of vessels such as pitchers and mugs, and heavy circular deformation of the head—all these elements were introduced by migrants from Southwestern Central Asia, as evidenced by parallels with the Aral Sea area, the steppe part of the Irtysh basin, the Southern Urals, the Tien-Shan piedmont, apparently indicating immigration of isolated groups of nomads of proto-Bulgarian and Xiongnu origin. The emergence of flat cemeteries with rows of graves arranged along the latitudinal line, the use of boats as coffins, the stamp decoration of pottery, and bowls are features introduced by immigrants associated with the Karym culture of the forest parts of the Tobol and Irtysh basins.*

**Keywords:** *Early Middle Ages, Migration Period, burial rite, migrations.*

### Introduction

Despite over half a century of study, burial sites of the Early Middle Ages from the forest-steppe zone of the western part of Western Siberia, which can be attributed to the Bakal culture (Salnikov, 1956: 211–214; Viktorova, Morozov, 1993: 178; Maslyuzhenko, 2005: 172), are still extremely rare (Rafikova, 2011: 97). The Bakal population in this area replaced a powerful social and economic entity of the Early Iron Age with nearly a thousand

years of history (Mogilnikov, 1992), possibly even an early state, created by the carriers of the Sargat culture (Matveyeva, 2000: 301). In the first centuries AD, this sophisticated and hierarchically organized society with a diversified economy began to rapidly disintegrate turning into a mosaic of nomadic communities, which have left relatively poor burials and short-time settlements. Archaeological materials of the initial stage of the Bakal culture (4th century AD) (Matveyeva, 2012b: 84) reveal a specific combination of cattle breeding with a high share of horses in the herd, mobile dwellings, which would leave only hearths and pits at the settlements, and very crude pottery (Matveyeva, Berlina, Rafikova, 2008: 157, 176). In the Early Middle Ages, the culture became simplified, and property differences became leveled, as is revealed by the reduction of imported goods along

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\*Supported by the Russian Foundation for the Humanities, Project No. 12-01-00329, “Migrations in the Forest-Steppe and Sub-Taiga Areas of Trans-Urals in the Migration Period, and Formation of Early Medieval Communities of the Urals and Western Siberia”.

the northern branches of the Silk Road and the cessation of constructing large burial mounds (Matveyeva, 1997). We may also see social disintegration in the decrease of population, which manifested itself in ten times fewer sites of the Bakal culture as compared to the previous culture (Rafikova, 2011: 98).

The causes of this transformation are believed to be, first, the impact of the nomads from the Hun hordes, who invaded the forest-steppe region coming from the Aral Sea region or the Southern Urals (Botalov, Gutsalov, 2000: 180), as well as the influence of northern taiga migrants, the carriers of the Karym culture, who came from the Lower Ob region (Chernetsov, 1957). A second cause could have been a change in the environment, with increased moisture and the spread of wild grass meadowlands and birch groves (Ryabogina, Ivanov, 2013: 138; Matveyeva, Ryabogina, 2014: 314), which might have created conditions for the influx of the nomads as well as social tensions. Next, we shall analyze the mechanism behind these transformations, traditions, and innovations in the burial rite of the Bakal culture, and the origins of migrations.

The sources for this period are the burial grounds of Kozlov Mys-2 (83 burials) (Matveyeva, 2012c), Ustyug-1 (30 burials) (Matveyeva, 2012a), Revda-5\* (13 burials), and Ipkul (9 burials) (Chikunova, 2011) (Fig. 1). Single-layered settlements are not known for this period (Rafikova, 2011: 99). The above-mentioned burial grounds were used from the late 3rd to the early 5th centuries AD. Having clarified the chronology of finds from these sites, we propose dating the group of mounds 25, 26, 28, 29, 35, and 40 at the Ustyug-1 burial ground, mounds 1, 4, and 5 at the Ipkul burial ground, and burials 12a, 20, 22, 47, and 56 at the Kozlov Mys-2 burial ground to the late 3rd–mid 4th centuries AD. Burials from mounds 13 and 14 at the Ustyug-1 burial ground (Fig. 2) and burials 21, 25, 45, 54, and 70 at the Kozlov Mys-2 burial ground belong to the 4th century AD. Judging by the material complex, we date burials 2, 5, 7, 29, 36, 48, 51, and 91 at the burial ground of Kozlov Mys-2 to the 5th century AD (Matveyeva, Zelenkov, Chikunova, 2014).

### Discussion

All the burial grounds are located consistently on lake or river capes with terraces of bedrock, jutting well into the flood plain. Burial sites show the combination of traditions of flat burials and mound burials; graves form unified rows regardless of the presence or absence of

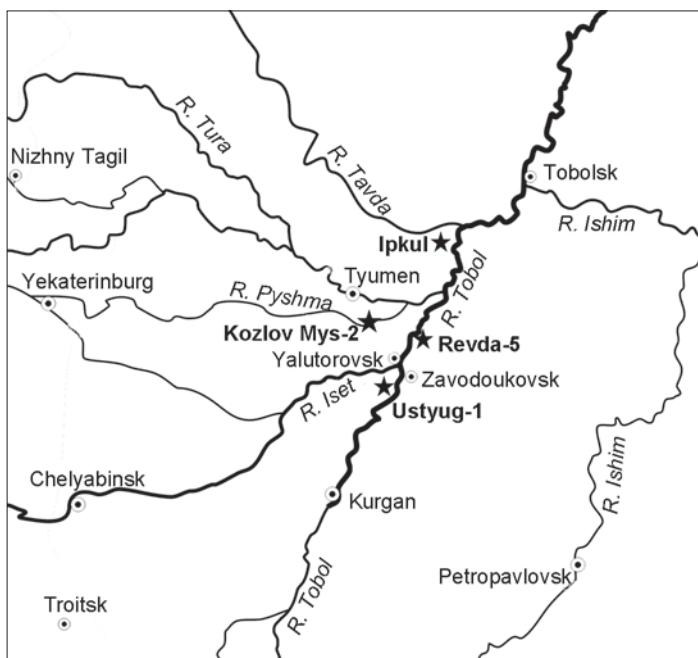


Fig. 1. Arrangement of burial grounds of the Migration Period in the Trans-Urals region.

mounds above them; ditches are absent. Chains of burial mounds with a diameter of 4–10 m are usually stretched across the terrace: quite densely at its tip, and more sparsely in other parts of the burial ground. The mounds more remote from the tip are located relatively high on the ground and are larger in size.

The analysis of micro-topography of the excavated surface at the Ustyug-1 and Revda-5 burial grounds using instrumentation data has revealed that mounds 10–15 cm high were made above “moundless” burials (usually they are not visible to the eye). The corpses were placed in graves in the extended position on the back with their arms at the sides of the body, although some were buried in a crouched position, and in the position of a rider. All burial pits are of an elongated oval shape, measuring  $2.0\text{--}2.5 \times 0.7\text{--}1.1$  m; their depth is mostly 0.3–0.9 m from the native surface.

Brown remains at the bottom of pits indicate the use of organic beddings and coffins. Thus, burial 3 in mound 35 at Ustyug-1 contained the imprints of birch-bark boxes; burial 2 in mound 25 contained mats made of thin twigs of reed or other plants, while in burial 2 in mound 40 at Ustyug-1 and burial 3 in mound 13 at Revda-5, the corpses were buried wrapped in felt mats and skins. A log structure and half of a boat were found at the burial ground of Kozlov Mys-2. The corpses were swaddled or tied. A pillow was placed under the head, or a raised end of the pit was made for the head. Grave goods and food were placed at the head. Double and communal burials have been found along with the predominantly single burials.

\*Excavated in 2014 by the author of this article.

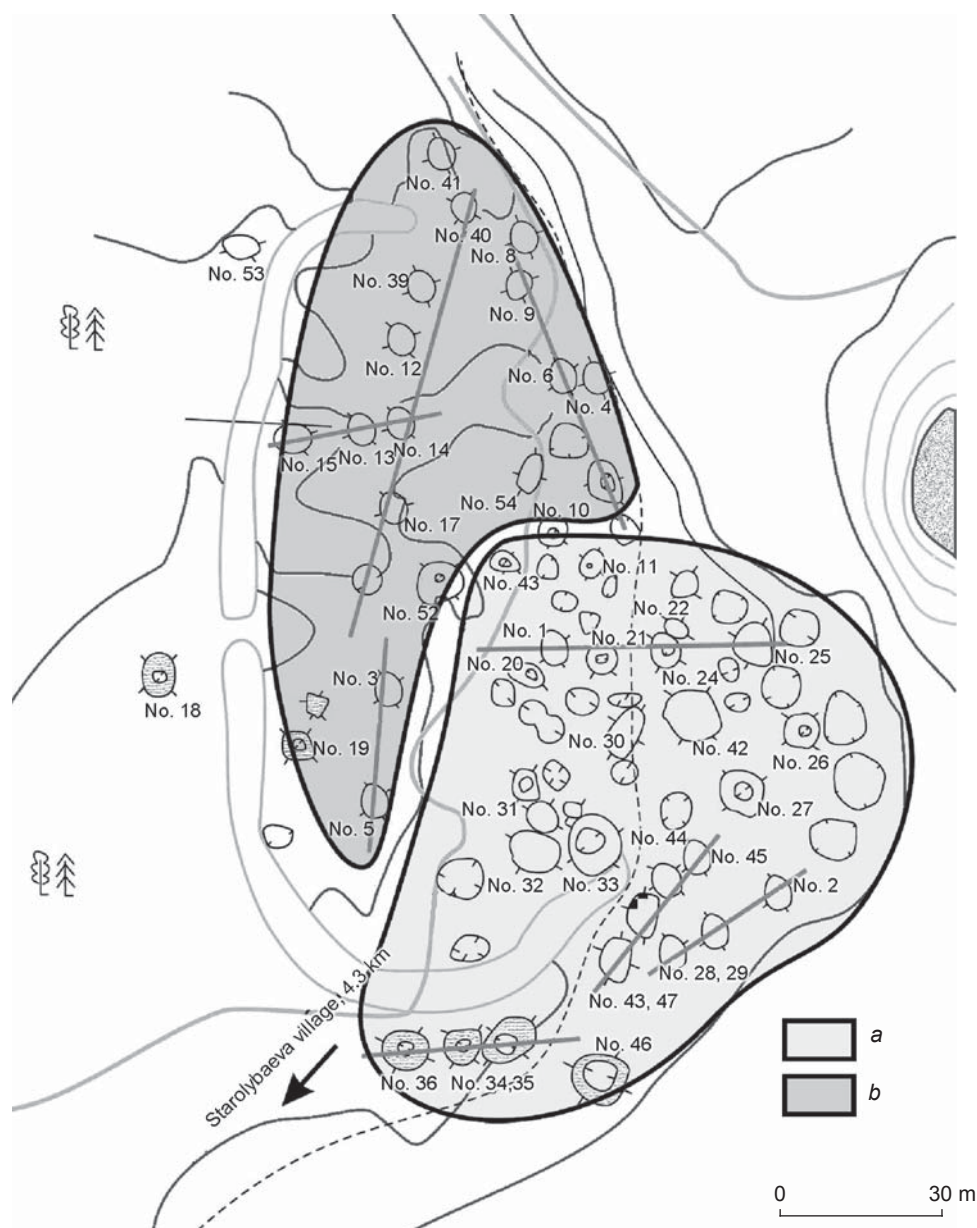


Fig. 2. Plan of the Ustyug-1 burial ground.

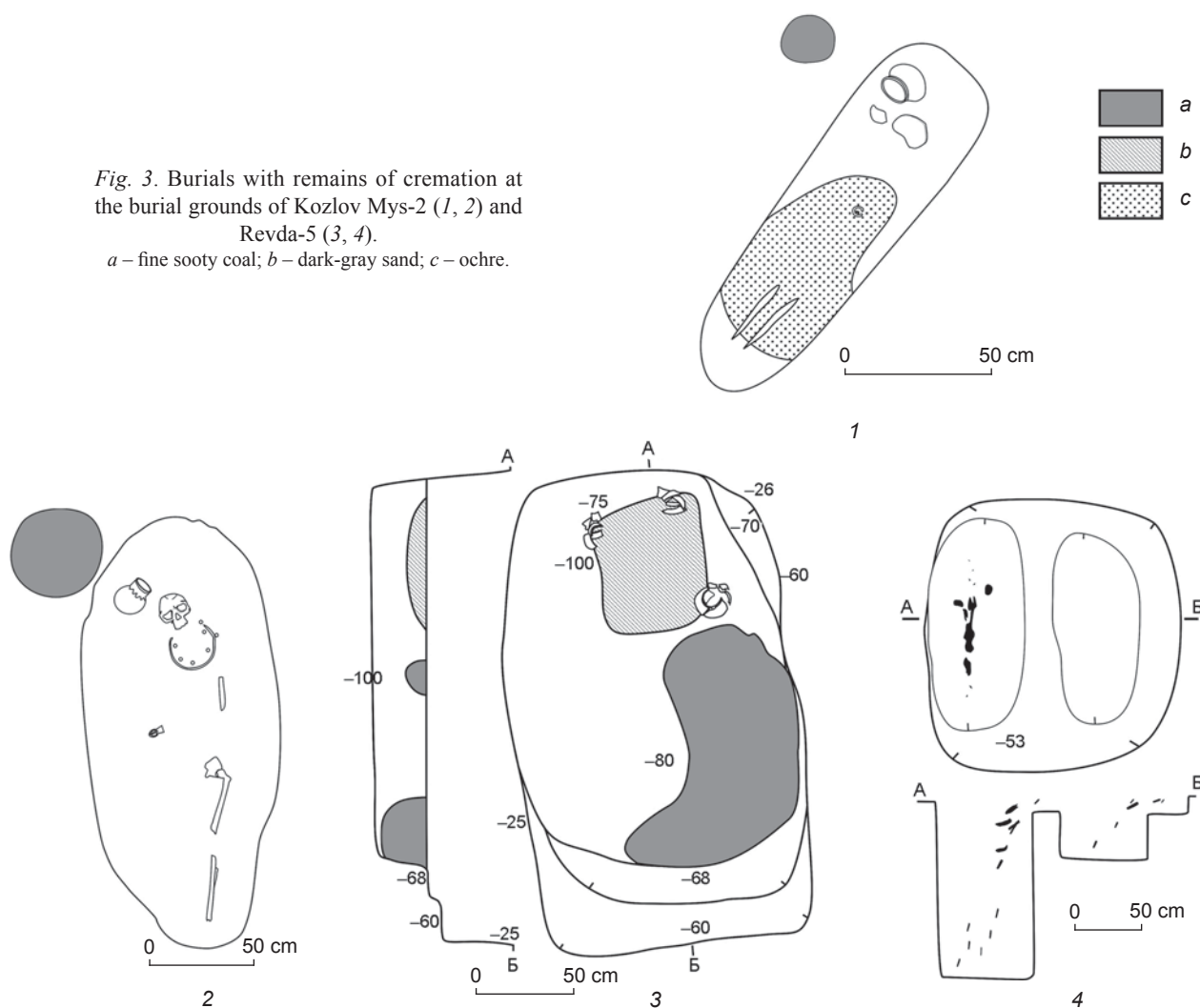
*a* – burial mounds of the late 3rd–early 4th century AD; *b* – burial mounds of the 4th century AD.

Judging by the age and sex of the dead, a single burial mound was not a family complex, which more likely was a chain of adjacent mounds stretched in the same line (Matveyeva, Poshekhonova, 2013).

Traces of funeral feasts have been discovered near the graves or on the covering of the graves. They are represented by intact vessels, broken pottery in the filling, as well as by accumulation of teeth and hooves of horses and leg bones of small cattle located at the edge of the pit at the level of the ancient surface. Meat of large animals was placed as food for the deceased; bones of canines have also been found.

At the burial ground of Kozlov Mys-2, cremation traces of some organic remains were discovered at the bottom of burial pits next to the skeletons. These were lenses 40–50 cm in diameter composed of a thick layer (about 40 cm) of sooty coals and calcined remains from fire, which were found in one corner of the pit. Such fire-pits also occur at the foot of the grave and on the ancient horizon. In Revda-5, the remains of cremation together with vessels placed in the northern end of the pits were located in standard graves, in the same rows with inhumations (Fig. 3). We assume that the cremation was secondary, accompanied by ritual actions, in which

Fig. 3. Burials with remains of cremation at the burial grounds of Kozlov Mys-2 (1, 2) and Revda-5 (3, 4).  
a – fine sooty coal; b – dark-gray sand; c – ochre.



the remains of the fire were collected in a birch-bark box or bag and were placed into the grave before its filling. The emergence of cremation is considered to be a manifestation of foreign ethnic and cultural impact in the Migration Period (Gening, 1959: 182).

Two cenotaphs and two burials with horses have been found in Ustyug-1 (Fig. 4, 5). In contrast to early Turkic traditions, the animal in this case was placed not in the same grave with the rider, but above the grave pit, in a separate recess perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the human burial. Thus, we may tentatively suggest that this innovation might have been brought by migrants from the Southern Urals or Kazakhstan (Klyashtorny, Savinov, 1994: 63) belonging to the Avar or Bulgarian environment. The arrangement of graves in rows, their northwestern orientation, and the presence of Southwestern Central Asian pottery of the same shapes as metal vessels at the present burial grounds is also similar to the Avar burial grounds in Hungary (Erdély, 1986: 324, 326). The present Western Siberian burials also show some similarities to the

Early Bulgarian burial customs, which have been identified at the sites of the Novinki circle, such as, for example, the Netailovka and Krasnogorovka burial grounds (Aksenov, 1995: 11). The parallels include the presence of horse skulls in the mounds, the arrangement of graves in rows, swaddling of corpses, and placement of horses in pits, which were made above human burials (Bagautdinov, Bogachev, Zubov, 1998: 50, 53). Even a distinctive burial with two coffins, placed side-by-side on the bottom of the pit (see Fig. 4), has a planigraphic parallel in burial 2 of mound 13 at the Novinki burial ground (Ibid.: 61).

Interestingly, there were no weapons at all and very few tools in the graves. Some bone arrowheads and a bridle have been found. The largest number of adornments came from children's and adolescents' graves, where adornments might have played the role of amulets and were placed separately in small wooden or birch-bark boxes. The quartzite pebbles, which were placed in a grave at the Kozlov Mys-2, might also have had some symbolic importance.



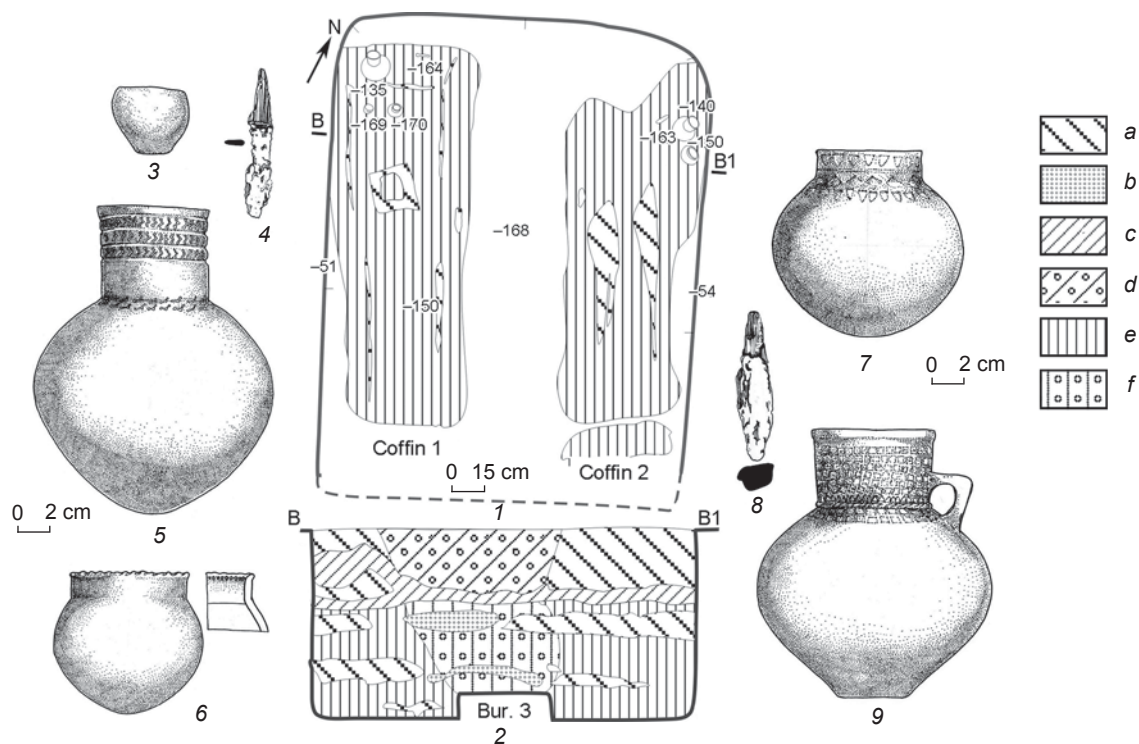


Fig. 4. Cenotaph (1, 2) and items from it (3–9). Ustyug-1, mound 35, burial 3.

a – gray sandy loam; b – yellow loam, refuse; c – dark-gray sandy loam; d – dark-gray mixed sand; e – brown sand; f – light-brown mixed sand.

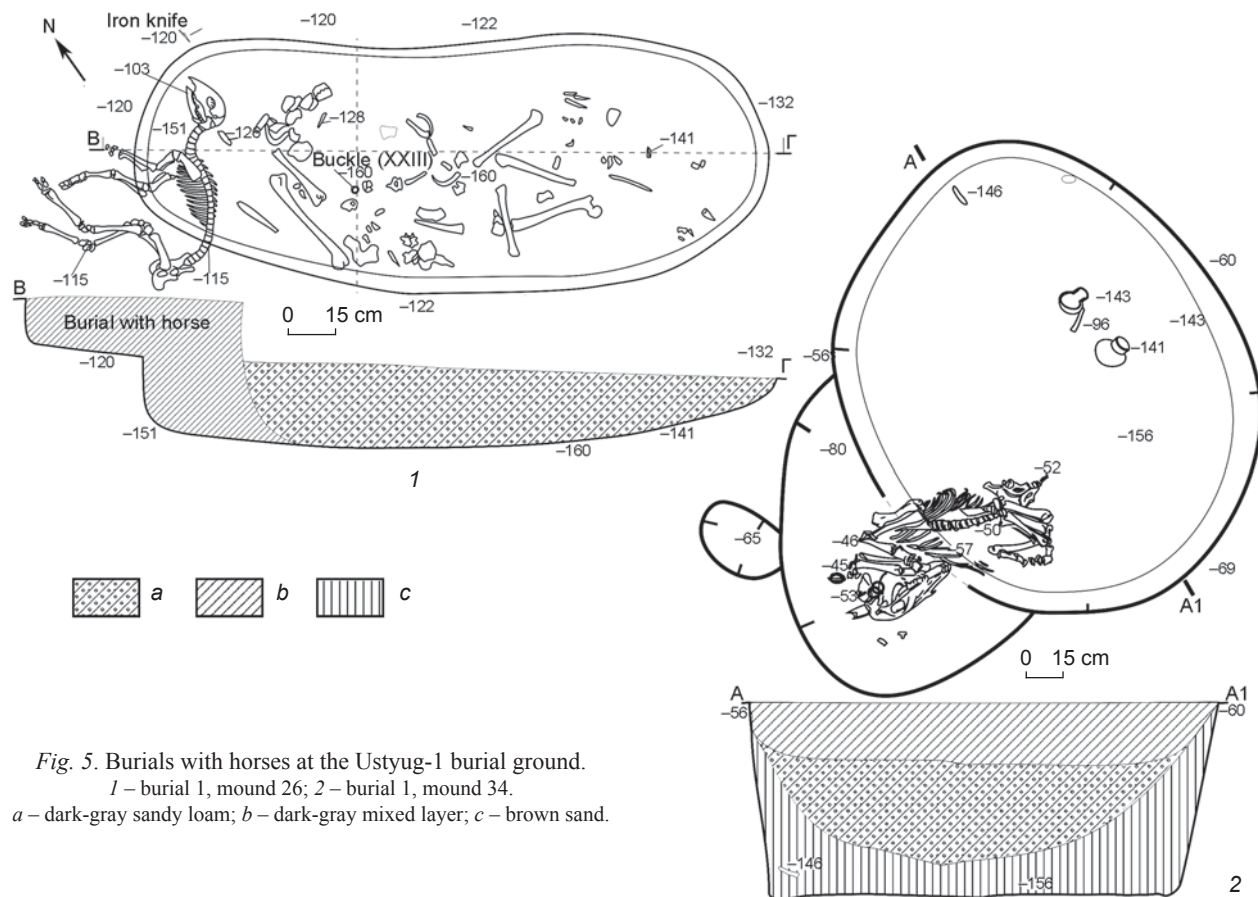


Fig. 5. Burials with horses at the Ustyug-1 burial ground.

1 – burial 1, mound 26; 2 – burial 1, mound 34.

a – dark-gray sandy loam; b – dark-gray mixed layer; c – brown sand.

At all the burial grounds under consideration, burials do not form any significant groups as far as a specific type of pottery is concerned; diverse types of dishware have been frequently found in a single burial. According to its composition, the Bakal pottery can be considered oversanded, and it is four-partite according to its structural features. Some vessels are polished, but the majority of crude vessels were smoothed with woodchips or the fingers (Fig. 6). Typical decoration motifs include the “herringbone” pattern made with a comb stamp, chased grids, lines composed of pits, pinpoints, pinches, or nail imprints (Matveyeva, Kobeleva, 2013). The Bakal complex exhibits continuity with the Sargat pottery of the Tobol-Irtysh region. This is particularly clear from the materials of the southern taiga burial grounds of Ipkul and Kozlov Mys-2, where objects of Sargat appearance have been discovered. Yet, generally only a part of shapes and decoration motifs were adopted (Matveyeva, 2012c: Fig. 10, 3, 6). Some parallels to low pots are found among the main types of Mazunino pottery. However, the composition of clay and decoration significantly differ in the Urals and the Trans-Urals (Ostanina, 1997: 100, tabl. 30, fig. 50).

Pitchers and small thin-walled pots, sometimes with handles, represent the pottery of the “Kushnarenkovo” type. Its clay compound had many ingredients and, in addition to fine sand, contained burnt bone, which made the vessels thin and light. The dishware had a three-partite structure. The vessels were carefully smoothed and burnished. Ornamental decoration was made with a metal ornamenting tool, figured stamp, or teeth of a small predator only on the neck and shoulders with small, dense rows of horizontal lines, zigzags, and grids. On the basis of specific leaners and vessel shapes, as well as ornamenting tools, which do not find parallels in the preceding and synchronous sites of the Tobol-Ishim region, we consider this group of dishware to be imported. However, it includes mugs and pitchers made of oversanded clay without the addition of bone, which might have been made locally as an imitation of the imported pottery.

We can conclude that pitcher-like and bowl-like shapes, borrowed from some southern migrants (such shapes were extremely rare in the Sargat period), had already become a part of the local dishware of the Migration Period, along with the methods of their modeling. In addition, the Sargat technological heritage is manifested in pottery production of the forest-steppe population of the Early Middle Ages. Notably, carriers of the Bakal culture did not adapt figurative stamped

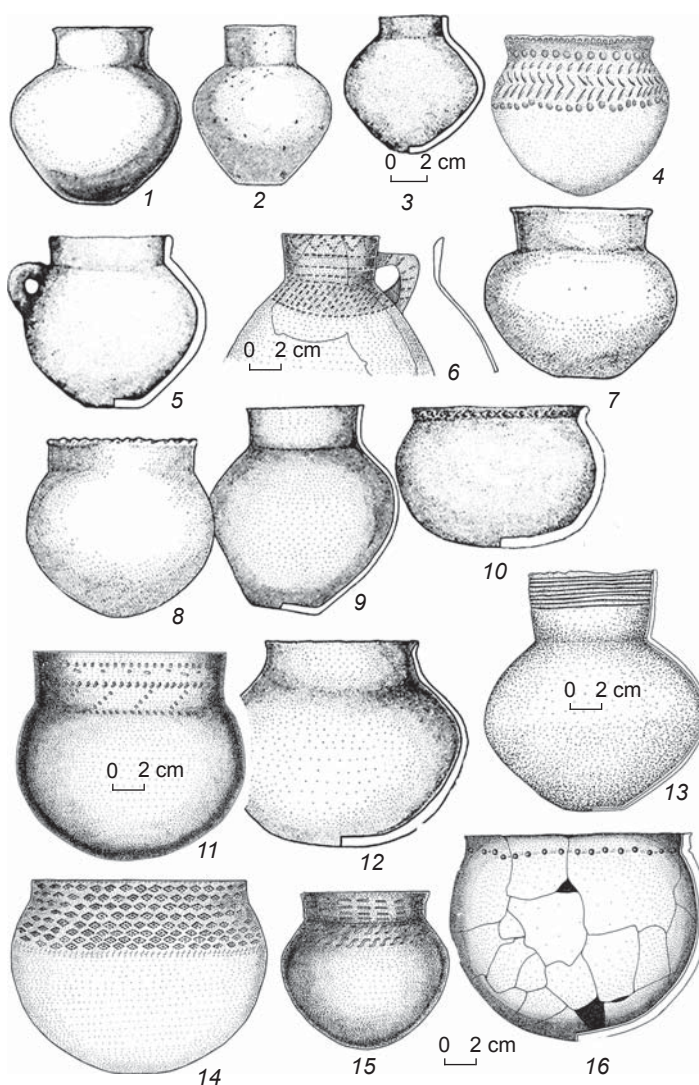


Fig. 6. Pottery from the burial grounds of Ustyug-1 (1–5, 7–10, 12) and Revda-5 (6, 11, 13–16).

1–3, 5–7, 9, 12, 13 – “Kushnarenkovo” type; 4, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16 – Bakal type; 14 – Karym type.

motifs. Such decoration is present on the traditional Karym vessels from Revda-5 (Fig. 6, 14) and Kozlov Mys-2 (Matveyeva, 2012c: 74, fig. 57) dated to the second half of the 4th–early 5th century AD. But in a highly modified form they were only occasionally found in the earlier pottery complex of Ustyug-1 located 100 km to the south. It seems that either there were several taiga Karym migration waves, which could have been short-term, associated with the 4th century, or the migrant population was mostly concentrated on the border between the taiga and the forest-steppe.

The similarity of the sites under consideration with the later Bobrovka mound cemetery on the Irtysh River is noteworthy. The Bobrovka pottery complex contains 16 % of the Bakal vessels along with Potchevash pitchers, wooden bowls, and profiled jars typical of



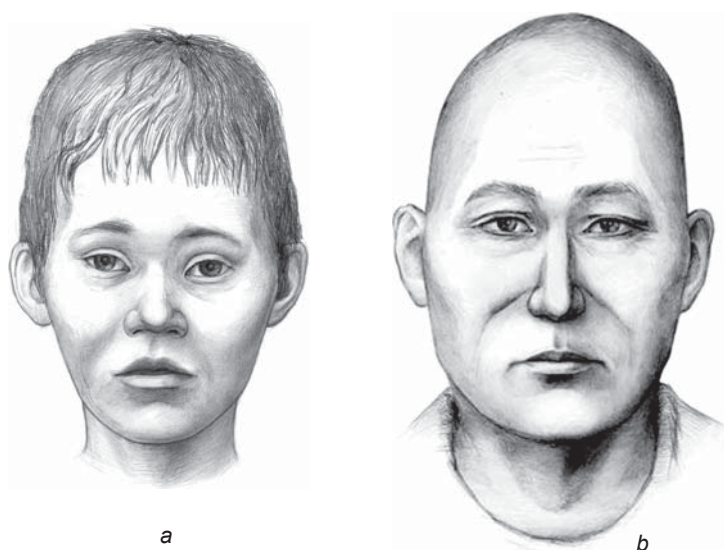


Fig. 7. Reconstruction by E.A. Alekseyeva (2013) of the face on the basis of the skull of a child 8–10 years of age (a) and a male 30–40 years of age (b) from burial 1, mound 1 at the Ustyug-1 burial ground.

the settled population of Southern Kazakhstan. At the Bobrovka burial ground, like at our sites, corpses were buried in graves, tree trunk coffins, and pieces of felt, but the orientation of the graves was to the south-west. The occurrence of skulls, leg bones, and hooves of horses near the burial pits has been determined, and such sacrificial complexes have also been found in burial mounds with cremation (Arslanova, 1980: 79, 82, 86), which occurs in two versions: as a burial of burnt bones, and as ashy or carbonaceous spots, in thickness similar to those described above. We can also find a parallel to an interesting detail (placement of fur-animal bones into a vessel) at the Bobrovka burial ground: in mound 3, the mandibles of a fox, a ferret, and a saiga were placed in a vessel (*Ibid.*: 85).

At the Ust-Tara VII burial ground in the Irtysh region, we can see similar sizes of burial mounds and graves, their northerly orientation, the circular deformation of heads of the buried persons, and horse sacrifice (Skandakov, Danchenko, 1999: 167). However, there were ditches made around the mounds, and log fences; dishware was placed not only at the head, but also at the feet of the dead persons; fire was used in a different way: birch-bark and wooden coffins were only partially burned (Danchenko, 2008: 49). Parallel arrangement of burials under the mound and traces of cremation in small pits were found at one of the earliest Potchevash burial grounds of Okunevo-3. It has been suggested that the similarities resulted from the common Sargat substrate in the areas compared (Mogilnikov, 1987: 186–187). In the early group of burials at the Birska burial ground, which was dated to the 3rd–early 5th centuries AD (Vasyutkin, 1971: 98), the same narrow shallow pits with steep walls

also occur; corpses were placed in coffins; the variety of adornments is poor. At the Birska burial ground, all manners of arranging pottery (at the head, in the filling of the pits, and next to the graves) have been found (Mazhitov, 1968: 12, 22, 25). The accumulation of objects at the head can be compared with the “sacrificial complexes” of things laid next to the buried, typical of the Mazunino culture (Ostanina, 1997: 31).

There are some parallels in the burial practices with the sites of the Hunno-Sarmatian period in the South Ural steppes, although these parallels are quite scant: the meridional orientation and the placement of the head and limbs of the horse at the side of the grave (Botalov, Gutsalov, 2000: 152, 154); these graves have no shaft and chamber burials, stepped burials, nor specific Xiongnu types of grave goods.

An important feature of the population of the Migration Period in the Trans-Urals was deformation of the head, which was carried out using a circular bandage without flat pads. As a result, the forehead would become sloped upwards; the parietal ridge would become prominent, and the entire skull elongated (Fig. 7). This type of deformation can be considered to be Sarmatian; it came to the forest-steppes of Western Siberia from the southwest in the Early Iron Age (Zolotareva, 1957: 250). Anthropologists note the traces of animal bites on a large part of skeletons from the burial grounds of Ustyug-1 and Revda-5, which may indicate the preservation of corpses in the settlements in the winter period (delayed burials), or even the tradition of exhibiting the corpses.

In addition, many of the buried show skull and limb damages from beating; one woman had her spine broken below the sternum; a number of individuals had damages of bone tissue, the loss of teeth occurring during the lifetime, and other consequences of social conflicts and malnutrition. We can find parallels to deformation of the head and a pathological condition of the skeletons, including a number of wounds, at Ust-Tara VII, a site with a Karym appearance; however, at this location females clearly prevail among the buried (Skandakov, Danchenko, 1999: 161–163). The demographic picture indicates multiple outbursts of aggression among the forest-steppe population of that time (Matveyeva, Poshekhonova, 2013).

## Conclusions

The materials from the burial grounds of Ustyug-1, Ipkul, Kozlov Mys-2, and Revda-5 show that the burial rite of the emerging Bakal culture combined a few traditions

surviving from the Early Iron Age with innovations caused by the fusion of heterogeneous cultural elements of the migrant groups. Some of the burial practices such as arrangement of the graves in rows or cremation, were later lost. The materials of these burial grounds manifest some common traits with the Karayakupovo, Mazunino, and Kushnarenkovo complexes, indicating the participation of the same groups in the cultural genesis of the Trans-Ural and Ural regions. The forest-steppe heritage was not that significant, and comprised barrow mounds, orientation of corpses to the north, and the use of horses in the ritual. The taiga impact was limited to the arrangement of graves in rows, confinement of burials to headland forms of terrain, and the use of boats as containers for the corpses; the Southwestern Central Asian influence can be seen in new forms of pottery, and the emergence of burials with horses and cremation elements. There is a considerable similarity to the Ural Mazunino and Kharino complexes in terms of grave goods and methods of their placement.

It is difficult to establish the origins of the borrowing, since the situation contributed to rapid changes in cultural stereotypes. When comparing the technological methods of pottery used by the population of the forest-steppe and steppe Trans-Urals, we have found a common element at the sites of Solyony Dol, Druzhnoye, Magnitny, and Ustyug-1: an innovation in producing clay material with the addition of burnt bones, as well as new forms of mugs, pitchers, and vases. This similarity can be explained by the wave of migrants who were coming in the 3rd century AD from a single center, which might have been located at the foothills of the Tian Shan (Matveyeva, Kobeleva, 2014). However, in addition to that migration, several more migrations from the middle and lower basin of the Syr Darya took place in the Southern Urals in the 3rd–4th centuries AD. These migrations were associated with different forms of burial structures and various forms of pottery (pitchers, censers, cauldrons, or frying pans). The reduced influence of the last migration was also manifested in the forest-steppe region in the form of the specific decoration of the Bakal dishware—coarse incising of the rim resulting in a wavy edge (see Fig. 6, 8).

We cannot yet answer with certainty the question of whether the materials from the burial sites of Ustyug-1, Ipkul, Kozlov Mys-2, and Revda-5 reveal a Xiongnu influence or the early penetration of the Turkic-speaking nomads into the Western Siberian forest-steppe region. Some scholars attribute the appearance of the proto-Bulgars in Eastern Europe to the 3rd–5th centuries AD, already regarding them as a part of the Hun hordes, while other scholars view the proto-Bulgars as the Huns who remained in the Aral Sea region and created new political associations (Bagautdinov, Bogachev, Zubov, 1998: 171; Smagulov, Pavlenko, 1998: 149). Therefore, the penetration of the proto-Bulgars into the Trans-Urals might have been occurring in the period when the burial

grounds under study emerged. Based on still scarce data on the burials with horses, we cannot definitively say who exactly, the Avars or the proto-Bulgars, appeared in the Trans-Urals in the 4th–5th centuries AD, but the penetration of the steppe population was undoubtedly taking place. Moreover, the penetration of the units from the post-Hunnic Hephthalite and Kidarite milieu far into the north is probable.

The mass distribution of circular deformation of heads in the Trans-Urals (Matveyeva, Poshekhonova, 2013), as well as the Caucasoid outlook of the population buried in the region (Alekseyeva, 2013), also seem to confirm the conjoint and early appearance of the Hunnic and Turkic elements of culture far into the forest-steppe zone, to the north of the main migration routes of these groups of nomads.

Burial sites from the initial stage of the Medieval period in the western part of Western Siberia are original in their heterogeneity, caused by the brevity of the transition period from the Early Iron Age to the Middle Ages, and by the complexity of resulting cultural formations.

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Received November 11, 2014.

Received in revised form January 1, 2015.