

## Article

# The Sakas' Tribes of The Aral Region, Khorezm, and Regional Relations

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**Abstract:** The Aral Sea region, historically pivotal in Central Asia, was a cultural crossroads due to its geopolitical and economic significance. This study investigates the economic systems, ethnic formations, and cultural legacies of the nomadic tribes that inhabited this area from the Bronze to the early Iron Age. Archaeological evidence, including burial mounds like Northern and Southern Tagisken, reveals significant socio-economic transformations in the 9th–7th centuries BCE. These changes involved the evolution from semi-nomadic to fully nomadic pastoralism, influenced by innovations such as seasonal grazing, transportation advances, and water extraction techniques. Ethnographically, the early nomadic tribes, including the Saka, exhibited cultural affinities with the Andronovo and Srubnaya cultures, as well as connections to southern civilizations. Anthropological analyses reveal a mixed Europoid-Mongoloid ancestry, reflecting migrations from the Altai. Burial practices, as seen in the Uygarak and Sakarchaga sites, underscore shared traditions within the "Scytho-Siberian" cultural sphere, blending cremation and inhumation rituals. Artistic and material culture, including bronze ornaments and animal motifs, highlight a shared "Scythian-Siberian" artistic style with religious and social significance. The findings emphasize the region's role in the development of nomadic pastoralism and its cultural interrelations across Central Asia. Recent studies build on foundational works by scholars such as S.P. Tolstov and O.A. Vishnevskaya, providing deeper insights into the Saka tribes' ethnogenesis, material culture, and burial customs. These discoveries affirm the Aral Sea region's importance in understanding the broader historical and cultural dynamics of the Eurasian steppe during the early Iron Age.

**Keywords:** Amirobod Culture, Nomadic Pastoralism, Northern Tagisken Burial Sites, Early Scythian Tribes, Eastern Aral Sea, Material Culture, Andronovo Culture, Eurasian Steppes

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## 1. Introduction

In ancient times, the Aral Sea region was one of the key parts of the historical and geographical area of Central Asia. Due to its geopolitical and economic significance, this region became a crossroads for various ethnic groups and cultures. Particularly during the centuries BCE, the economy, culture, and lifestyle of the nomadic tribes inhabiting this area aroused considerable interest among researchers.

The ancient nomadic tribes of the Aral Sea region were distinguished not only by the diversity of their economic activities but also by their unique socio-cultural formations. The main objective of this study is to explore the economic system, ethnic formation, and cultural heritage of these ancient nomadic tribes. The study encompasses the following tasks: gathering historical and archaeological data, analyzing monuments in the region, evaluating existing theories, and developing new perspectives.

A number of prominent scholars have conducted research on the Aral Sea region and the surrounding nomadic tribes. Notably, S.P. Tolstov, in his work *The History of*

Ancient Peoples of Central Asia, highlighted this area as an important center of ancient civilizations.

Modern research also places significant emphasis on this topic. However, certain scientific viewpoints on this subject remain contradictory, necessitating a re-examination of specific issues.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is based on archaeological, anthropological, and historical sources. A comparative-analytical approach serves as the primary method, allowing for the analysis of monuments in the Aral Sea region in comparison with ancient cultures in other areas. For example, a comparison with the Andronovo and Srubnaya cultures helps identify both connections and differences.

### A. Analysis

In the 10th–8th centuries BCE, during the final stages of the Bronze Age, the clan communities of the Amirobod culture in the southern Aral Sea region continued earlier cultural traditions, such as constructing semi-subterranean buildings with wooden posts and reed roofs and producing handmade pottery. At the same time, in the eastern Aral Sea region, archaeological investigations of the Northern Tagisken burial mounds, located on the banks of the ancient Inkardarya channel of the Lower Syr Darya and dating to the 9th–8th centuries BCE, revealed evidence of burials of clan elders and leaders of nomadic tribes. Based on the archaeological data, it has been suggested that significant social changes occurred within local communities [1].

These developments were linked to innovations in the economy and lifestyle of nomadic tribes across the Eurasian steppes. The increase in livestock herds and the periodic nature of this process gave rise to the practice of grazing domestic animals in distant pastures. Initially, certain groups of shepherds specialized in grazing livestock, maintaining ties with their sedentary relatives, as a combined farming-pastoral system was employed [2].

As pastures became more distant, the organizational structure of pastoral economies evolved, requiring seasonal grazing and the migration of family-clan communities along with their herds. This led to the emergence of semi-nomadic and later fully nomadic pastoralism [3].

The use of pack and riding animals, as well as carts drawn by horses, camels, and oxen, facilitated the exploration of vast steppe territories. These transportation innovations reduced the time required for migrations and enabled the development of economic connections with populations in new areas.

Researchers note that in the steppe regions of Central Asia, the Southern Urals, and Kazakhstan during the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE, the organizational structure of pastoral economies began to change, with pastures distributed according to the seasons. During this time, herders not only utilized natural water sources but also extracted water from wells dug with bronze tools, drawing it up with ropes. In the spring, shepherds would leave their villages with their herds, migrating across pastures until late autumn before returning annually to their winter settlements.

This lifestyle was based on the principles of semi-nomadic pastoralism, while fully nomadic pastoralism involved year-round migrations and placed greater emphasis on raising small livestock [4].

The term "early nomads" is applied to pastoral tribes inhabiting the Eurasian steppe regions. Their history and culture, studied through archaeological materials, are dated to the early 8th–7th centuries BCE [5]. ancient written sources refer to them as scythians, savromatians (sarmatians), dahae, sakas, and massagetae.

The nomadic tribes inhabiting the steppes of Central Asia were referred to as the Saka in ancient Persian sources, and in the works of Greek historians, these tribes were

sometimes mentioned under the same ethnonym. However, the term “Scythian” was more frequently used, or the names of specific tribes were provided.

For example, in Herodotus’ work, the following information is found: “The Saka (a Scythian tribe). The Persians called all Scythians the Saka.” According to the Greek historian, the nomadic Scythians living in the vast steppes stretching to the northern shores of the Black Sea had previously resided in Asia but were displaced from their lands due to wars with the Massagetae [6]. This implies that the Scythians were ethnically and culturally close to the Saka-Massagetae.

Archaeological evidence shows that by the late 8th century BCE and early 7th century BCE, numerous nomadic pastoral tribes described collectively by Herodotus and other Greek authors as “Scythians” inhabited the vast steppes of Eurasia, stretching from the northern shores of the Black Sea to southern Siberia. These tribes were characterized not only by ethnic kinship but also by a shared lifestyle, economy, material culture, visual arts, military traditions, customs, and beliefs.

The early Saka tribes of the Aral Sea region were an integral part of this ethno-cultural unity. Archaeological sites dating back to the early Iron Age, such as the Uygarak and Southern Tagisken burial mounds (7th-5th centuries BCE) in the ancient Inkardarya basin of the Lower Syr Darya, as well as the Sakarchaga burial mounds along the Sarikamish coast (7th-5th centuries BCE), have been extensively studied.

The numerous weapons and artifacts unearthed during these studies have allowed for a more comprehensive description of the material culture of the early Saka. These findings provide insights into the art, beliefs, customs, historical-cultural, and ethnic connections of the nomadic tribes [7].

### 3. Results

The The Khorezm Archaeological Expedition members interpreted the ethnic and cultural roots of the early Saka tribes of the Eastern Aral Sea region based on artifacts and findings from the Northern Tagisken burial mounds [8]. S.P. Tolstov identified two cultural components in the Northern Tagisken materials.

According to the researcher, the first component, particularly evident in hand-made pottery and its decorations, reflects the ceramic traditions of the Andronovo culture. The second component, on the other hand, includes pottery crafted on a potter's wheel and adobe-built tombs, showcasing the cultural traditions of highly developed southern civilizations.

M.A. Itina noted that the use of adobe in construction first appeared in Central Asia through the architecture of the Tagisken burial mounds, significantly influenced by the Bactrian civilization.

O.A. Vishnevskaya and M.A. Itina linked the spread of the Saka in the Eastern Aral Sea region to the migrations of the nomadic Sarmatians who inhabited the steppe regions between the Don River and the Lower Volga [9]. In Herodotus’ work, the Sarmatians are referred to as “Savromatians,” who had taken over territories neighboring the Scythians.

Anthropological studies of human remains from Saka burial sites such as Uygarak and Southern Tagisken revealed that the buried individuals belonged to a mixed Europoid-Mongoloid race. According to anthropologist T.A. Trofimova, representatives of the Mongoloid race migrated to the Eastern Aral Sea region from the Altai [10].

Anthropological analyses, based on the study of 14 male and 7 female skulls, provide valuable information, indicating the westward migration of distinct ethnic groups of Mongoloid origin during the early Iron Age.

In scholarly literature, the nomadic pastoral tribes of the early Iron Age spread across the Eurasian steppes are geographically and conditionally associated with the “Scytho-Siberian world.” They are considered descendants of the Bronze Age Srubnaya and Andronovo cultures.

Based on paleoanthropological and material culture characteristics, the early Saka tribes have been categorized into groups from Central Asia and Kazakhstan [11].

Additionally, research conducted in Central and Eastern Kazakhstan, the Aral Sea region, the Tien Shan, and the slopes of the Pamir Mountains has identified distinctive features in the material culture of the Saka tribes in various regions. For example, the early Saka's ethno-cultural predecessors in the Eastern Aral Sea region were initially associated with the Andronovo-Tozabogob culture and the southern civilizations of the region (based on the materials from Northern Tagisken). Later, signs of the Dandybay-Begazy culture, which spread during the late Bronze Age in the steppes of Kazakhstan, were also identified.

#### 4. Discussion

In the western part of the Khorezm oasis, in the Davdon canal area of the Amu Darya along the Sarikamish coast, early Saka burial mounds such as the Sakarchaga burial sites and pastoralist settlements like Quyisoy and Qanha have been discovered. The remains of semi-dugouts, fully subterranean dwellings, and above-ground hut-like structures were studied, which served as the residences of the pastoralists [12].

Preliminary investigations at Quyisoy have proposed the introduction of the term "Quyisoy culture" into academia. This has led to suggestions that a distinct ethnic group's culture developed around the Sarikamish region starting from the 7th century BCE.

B.I. Vainberg suggested that during the early Iron Age, the Sarikamish region was settled by a new group of inhabitants—pastoralists—who adapted the fertile lowlands around the Sarikamish region for semi-nomadic or sedentary pastoralism and dry farming [13].

It was also concluded that the Quyisoy culture was closely related to the Saka culture in its overall appearance and archaeological characteristics [12]. However, B.I. Vainberg's later works presented contradictory and insufficiently substantiated ideas.

According to these findings, during the Median campaigns in Iran, the Saks living in the Khorezm oasis forcibly relocated sedentary pastoralists, known as "Khwarazmians," residing in the foothill oases of the country, to the western part of the Khorezm oasis near the Sarykamysh region, forming the so-called "Quyisoylik" community [14]. Notably, B.I. Vainberg did not consider other alternatives regarding this issue.

For instance, the ethnic groups referred to as "Quyisoyliks" might plausibly be descendants of the tribes that created the Amirobod culture or indigenous residents of the Khorezm oasis. Notably, these groups coexisted with the Saks living in the Sarykamysh area during the 7th–6th centuries BCE. M.A. Itina concluded that the Quyisoy culture reflects elements of Sak material culture.

Meanwhile, L.T. Yablonsky argued that there is no archaeological evidence to support the idea that the Quyisoyliks were relocated from Iran.

In our opinion, artifacts such as handmade pottery, bronze arrowheads, and the predominant use of semi-underground and hut-like dwellings from the Qanha and Quyisoy 2 settlements suggest that the local population engaged in pastoralism [15]. Another critical aspect of this period is that during the late 8th to early 7th century BCE, conditions in the eastern part of the Khorezm oasis became unsuitable for permanent settlement and economic development due to the cessation of water flow in the right-bank Akcha-Darya channel of the Amu Darya. At this time, the Amu Darya flowed through the Davdon and Uzboy channels into the Caspian Sea, prompting pastoral tribes to occupy the fertile lowlands around Sarykamysh and Upper Uzboy.

These tribes, often referred to as "Saks-Khwarazmians," are documented in the literature. By the late 8th to early 7th century BCE, nomadic pastoralist sites associated with early Saks (burial mounds and settlements) began appearing across the steppe regions of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In the Khorezm region, the spread of Saks in the Davdon

channel area of the Amu Darya is dated to the 7th century BCE, contemporaneous with the Saks migrating within the ancient Inkar-Darya basin of the Lower Syr Darya.

In the 21st century, new studies have further explored the archaeology of the Sak tribes and the history and ethnogenesis of pastoralism in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins. These investigations have built on the foundational work of scholars such as S.P. Tolstov, M.A. Itina, O.A. Vishnevskaya, L.M. Levina, B.I. Vainberg, D. Durdiev, K. Yusupov, L.T. Yablonsky, and V.N. Yagodin, who made significant contributions to understanding the culture of nomadic pastoralist tribes in the Aral Sea steppes. Research has also examined the military and defensive systems linked to the Sak tribes and the Khorezm oasis.

Such studies emphasize the importance of the topic, using existing scientific perspectives and conclusions to develop new frameworks and address understudied aspects. Investigating anthropological materials alongside the material culture and burial customs of Eastern and Southern Aral Sea Saks is crucial to understanding their origins and ethnogenesis.

The cremation practices observed in Sak burial mounds in the Aral Sea region demonstrate clear influences from the burial traditions of steppe pastoralists belonging to the Andronovo culture. For instance, some graves in the Southern Tagisken and Uygarak burial mounds in the Lower Syr Darya basin contained cremated remains, while others featured bodies placed in rectangular pits, dressed in footwear and clothing. Notably, these graves were not filled with soil but instead covered with branches, reeds, and straw [16].

The burial structures in the Sakarchaga hills near the Davdon channel of the Sarykamysk region closely resemble those of Uygarak. At Sakarchaga, cremation practices were documented alongside burials where bodies were laid on reed mats within the graves. This practice parallels the funeral rites described by Herodotus for the Scythians: "A large rectangular pit is dug into the ground. The deceased is laid on a reed mat at the bottom, and the grave is covered with wooden beams, brushwood, and branches." In some larger graves in the Aral Sea region, small pits were identified beneath the main burial chamber, where wooden posts were placed, and the graves were covered with reeds and timber, resembling "houses for the deceased."

The shared funeral traditions of nomadic pastoralists are also reflected in the burial goods. Artifacts such as handmade pottery, tools, household items, weapons, and horse equipment have been extensively documented in Sak burial mounds. Research by O.A. Vishnevskaya and M.A. Itina associated the spread of Saks in the Eastern Aral Sea region with the migrations of the Sarmatians. O.A. Vishnevskaya elaborated on these connections, highlighting similarities between burial practices, including the use of reed mats, cremation, and grave furnishings among Sarmatians in the southern Urals and Saks in the Aral Sea region.

K.F. Smirnov attributed these similarities to tribal unity between the Sarmatians and Saks, which allowed mutual access to each other's territories.

This cultural exchange is evident in their material culture, including dwellings, household items, weapons, artistic expressions, and beliefs [17].

Finally, it is worth noting that bronze horseshoe-shaped plaques and ornaments discovered in nomadic burial mounds constitute a distinct category of artifacts.

They include depictions of predatory birds and animals (deer, tigers, leopards, wild boars) and are interpreted in the field of art history as being connected to the "Scythian-Siberian" animal style of decorative art. In the visual art of the Scythians-Saks, particular emphasis is placed on themes of tigers and leopards attacking herbivorous deer. According to researchers, these themes served religious and magical functions and also reflected the social structure of nomadic communities, signifying the emergence of leaders with social importance [18], [19], [20].



## 5. Conclusion

The pastoralist tribes of the Khorezm oasis, particularly those associated with the so-called Quoysoy and Sakarchaga cultures, exemplify the shared heritage of nomadic civilizations. The evidence, including domestic animal bones and material artifacts, highlights similarities between these groups, supporting the classification of their culture under the unified term "Sarykamysh Saks culture." This culture reflects a transition toward semi-nomadic and semi-sedentary lifestyles, marked by the herding of large livestock and evolving pastoral practices. The early Sak tribes of the Aral Sea region, belonging to a mixed Europoid-Mongoloid race, inherited and adapted the traditions of Bronze Age pastoralists. Their material and spiritual culture, alongside burial rituals, demonstrates continuity with the Andronovo culture, influenced by its role in Central Asian ethno-cultural transformations during the early Iron Age.

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