

PAPER

## STUDY OF SAKA MONUMENTS IN THE LOWER SYRDARYA AND AMUDARYA BASINS

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the results of the study of cultural monuments of the Saka tribes of the Early Iron Age located in the lower basins of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers. The research, based on archaeological excavations, findings, and written sources, examines the lifestyle, religious beliefs, craftsmanship, and burial rituals of the Saka tribes who lived in these regions. Particular attention is given to significant archaeological sites such as Tozabog'yoq, Chirik-Rabat, Koktepa, and others, which provide insights into the socio-economic life of Saka society. The article also briefly outlines the history of research on these monuments, highlighting the scientific studies carried out since the second half of the 20th century. This study contributes to uncovering important aspects of the ancient Saka civilization on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan.

**Key words:** Djomboy, Tegisken, Yaksart, Eastern Aral Sea region, Bobishmulla, Burials, Brick, Adobe, Ceramic items, Uyg'arak

### Introduction

The Aral Sea region has long been one of the key centers of Central Asian civilization. Throughout various historical periods, numerous tribes with rich cultures and vibrant social lives have inhabited this area. Among them were the Saka (Scythian) tribes, who lived during the early Iron Age in the first millennium BCE. Particularly in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya basins, archaeological sites provide valuable insights into the socio-economic life, customs, religious beliefs, and burial practices of these tribes. These areas, located to the south and southeast of the Aral Sea, were once favorable in terms of natural and climatic conditions, making them an ideal environment for nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralist peoples. Through the detailed study of material and cultural remains left by the Saka, it is possible to reconstruct their way of life, military practices, external relations, and anthropological features.

Notable archaeological monuments such as Tozabag'yop, Chirik-Rabat, Koktepe, Djomboy, and Tegisken illustrate the complexity and uniqueness of this culture. Among the findings at these sites are fortification walls, remnants of temples, burial structures, ceramic vessels, weapons, and ornaments — all of which attest to the high level of Saka culture. The systematic

scientific study of these monuments in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya regions began in the mid-20th century. Archaeological expeditions conducted by scholars from Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries have uncovered and published numerous historical sources.

These research efforts have revealed not only the presence of Saka tribes in the Aral Sea region, but also their wide-ranging regional influence. Therefore, this article focuses on the study of Saka monuments located in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya basins, their historical and cultural significance, and the archaeological research conducted in this field.

### Literature Review

Scientific research on the study of Saka monuments located in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya basins became increasingly active from the second half of the 20th century. One of the earliest major projects in this field was carried out by the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition under the leadership of archaeologists A.N. Bernshtam and S.P. Tolstov. They conducted systematic studies of ancient settlements and necropolises along the lower course of the Amudarya River. In particular, the data

collected from the sites of Chirik-Rabat, Tozabagyop, and Koktepe provided crucial evidence regarding the culture of the Saka tribes in this region. S.P. Tolstov's work "Ancient Khorezm" (1948) remains one of the most significant scholarly sources in this field, offering detailed information on the ancient inhabitants of the Aral Sea region, their economy, architecture, and social structure.

The study paid special attention to the Chirik-Rabat site, which was evaluated as the earliest large necropolis belonging to the Saka period. In subsequent years, researchers such as V.A. Ranov, G.A. Pugachenkova, L.M. Levina, A. Itina, and others conducted in-depth analyses of archaeological monuments in the Aral region. Notably, G.A. Pugachenkova's work on early Iron Age cultures in Central Asia played a key role in understanding the architectural and artisanal traditions characteristic of the Saka period.

In recent years, Uzbek scholars — including A.S. Islomov, R. Suleymanov, D. Berdimuradov, and others — have introduced new approaches to the field. Their research, employing modern archaeological methods, has led to the discovery and study of new sites. These works shed light on the socio-economic life of the Saka tribes, their cultural connections, and anthropological distinctiveness. In addition, foreign researchers such as E.E. Kuzmina and G.S. Smirnova have contributed comparative studies on Saka beliefs, cultural practices, and funerary rites. These studies provide valuable insights into the Saka populations of the Aral region in connection with other nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe.

## Discussion and Results

In the works of Greco-Roman authors, the Syrdarya (known as the Yaxartes) is described as the frontier of nomadic territories. It is noted that neighboring the Khorezm oasis were the Apasiak and Sakauraka tribes, and that Spitamenes, the leader of the Sogdians, retreated toward the steppes from Alexander the Great's army. These accounts became one of the motivations for the initiation of archaeological research in the Syrdarya basin in 1946, as the history and culture of the Saka remained largely unexplored. The lower Syrdarya region, which joins the Aral Sea from the east, consists of a vast plain. This plain stretches approximately 400 km in width and extends 200–250 km along the meridional line.

It is bordered by the modern Syrdarya channel in the north and northeast, and by the Kyzylkum Desert in the south. In geographical studies, this area is referred to as the "Eastern Aral Sea region." [3] The formation of this plain is linked to the ancient courses of the Syrdarya River, which changed its flow over time and discharged into the Aral Sea. The region contains remnants of ancient river systems such as Inkardarya, Jonidarya, Kuvandarya, and Eskidaryoliq, which originated south of present-day Kyzylorda. The favorable geographical environment of Eastern Aral — warm and dry climate, abundance of fresh water — has long provided ideal living conditions for human habitation.

These factors greatly influenced the economy, lifestyle, and material culture of the ancient populations in the lower Syrdarya and played a significant role in the development of historical processes. The ancient city ruins and archaeological sites in Eastern Aral and central Syrdarya were first described from a historical-geographical perspective in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Khorezm archaeological expedition, which began in 1946, carried out research (intermittently) until 1992. [8]

As a result, numerous sites dating to the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, and the Classical period were discovered. According to S.P. Tolstov, the Chirik-Rabat site was the center of the Apasiak tribal confederation. Around the same time, the site of Bobishmulla — located 40 km northeast of Chirik-Rabat — was also investigated. It consisted of a rectangular inner fortress (1 hectare) and surrounding city ruins covering about 2 hectares. Tolstov suggested that this fortified town likely served as the

center of one of the Apasiak tribes and as the residence of a tribal leader. Archaeologists studied 40 burial structures belonging to the Chirik-Rabat culture. These included mausoleums built of mudbrick, most of which had circular plans, while two were rectangular. Eighteen of these were excavated. The findings of S.P. Tolstov and B.I. Vainberg were later analyzed and supplemented by R. Suleymanov, who provided important commentary. [6]

The people of the Chirik-Rabat culture led a sedentary or semi-sedentary lifestyle and had knowledge of artificial irrigation. Their settlements were constructed from mudbrick and were located near fortified sites. A large group of Saka monuments was identified in the Jetiosor oasis, adjacent to the Eskidaryoliq riverbed of the Syrdarya. [2] This area is situated north of the Inkardarya and Jonidarya branches, southwest of present-day Zhosaly. Archaeological research in Jetiosor was carried out in 1948–1949, 1951 (by S.P. Tolstov, Yu.A. Rapoport, M.A. Orlova, and T.A. Zhdanko), and from 1973 to 1991 under the leadership of L.M. Levina. The geography, topography, and archaeological significance of Jetiosor were first described by Tolstov.

He noted that the oasis bordered the Zhosaly steppe to the north and gradually transformed into sandy dunes in the west along the Kuvandarya's riverbed. All discovered monuments in the area are closely connected with the main channel of the Eskidaryoliq and its tributaries, indicating that settlements were located near riverbanks. Excavations in the Uygarak burial mounds revealed various grave goods — household items, pottery, weapons, and jewelry — reflecting beliefs about the afterlife. Clay vessels were found in both male and female burials, typically placed near the head or feet. Some graves also contained remains of sacrificial animals, especially parts of sheep such as vertebrae, ribs, and skulls. [7]

As a result of archaeological research in the lower Syrdarya region, previously unknown Saka sites were discovered and studied. A particularly unexpected finding in the field of archaeology was the discovery and investigation of Late Bronze Age burial complexes at Northern Tagisken. In contrast to other areas across the Eurasian steppe — such as the Southern Urals, Central and Northern Kazakhstan, and Western Siberia — no similar mudbrick structures with complex architecture had been identified before. Through the study of the Chirik-Rabat and Jetiosor cultures by the Khorezm expedition, it became clear that by the mid-1st millennium BCE, the Saka had begun using mudbrick and pakhsa (rammed clay) as construction materials. The remains of large urban settlements with defensive walls, towers, and arrow slits from the Jetiosor culture confirm this development. [1]

Although animal husbandry remained important in the life of the lower Syrdarya communities, the majority of the population was not fully nomadic. Archaeological findings revealed that they were semi-sedentary pastoralist-agricultural groups. These cultural innovations mark the second phase in Saka history, dating to the 5th–3rd centuries BCE. Material artifacts recovered from the Uygarak burial mounds are key to reconstructing the history and culture of the Saka tribes during this period. Taking these findings into account, S.P. Tolstov highlighted the defining features of the Eastern Aral Saka culture and proposed that the Saka-Massagetae had economic and cultural connections with the Scythians, Sarmatians, and ancient pastoralist communities of Kazakhstan and Siberia. He also established the link between the Saka and Khorezmian cultural spheres. [5]

## Conclusion

As a result of archaeological excavations conducted in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya basins, it has been established that the Aral Sea region was historically one of the important cultural and social centers of the Saka tribes. In particular,

significant information about the lifestyle, religious beliefs, burial practices, and economic activities of the tribes that once inhabited this region has been gathered through the study of key archaeological sites such as Chirik-Rabat, Tozabagyop, Koktepe, Jetiosor, Uygarak, and Bobishmulla. Research indicates that from the mid-1st millennium BCE, the Saka began transitioning to a sedentary and semi-sedentary way of life. They constructed fortified dwellings, defensive structures, and burial complexes using mudbrick and rammed clay (pakhsa).

This transformation demonstrates that the Saka were not only nomadic pastoralists, but also a people with an increasingly developed socio-economic system. Their art, which often features depictions of animals, as well as their elaborate burial rituals and altared graves, reflect a complex and profound religious-philosophical worldview. Thanks to the work of the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition and subsequent scholarly efforts, these monuments have been thoroughly studied, geospatially mapped, and systematized from an archaeological perspective.

This has laid an essential foundation not only for understanding the history of Uzbekistan, but also for appreciating the broader cultural heritage of Central Asia. In general, the in-depth study of Saka culture in the lower Syrdarya and Amudarya basins holds not only archaeological and historical significance, but also immense scientific and spiritual value for shaping contemporary cultural consciousness.

### Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar ro'yxati

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