

# Burial mounds of Scythian elites in the Eurasian steppe: New discoveries

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*Abstract:* This article is dedicated to the phenomena called ‘kurgans’, the monumental burial mounds of riding nomads of the Scythian period. Kurgans were first investigated in southern Ukraine and southern Russia, the core area of Scythian tribes according to Herodotus. East of the Ural Mountains, however, the kurgans are less known, as only very few of these monumental burial mounds have been decently excavated. In the last 20 years, however, several Russian–German projects under the author’s leadership have been dedicated to a better understanding of monumental kurgans in the steppe belt of Eurasia—Kazakhstan, southern Siberia, the Ural region and the northern Caucasus—contributing an enormous amount of new information about the complexity of these burial monuments. It has become clear that these elite burial monuments are not only important for rich funerary goods but also for the complex structure of the kurgans themselves, which only can be fully understood if they are considered as rituals which became architecture.

*Keywords:* Eurasia, steppe belt, Scythians, kurgans, monumentality, elites, riding nomads.

The relics of ancient rider-nomads of the 8th–3rd centuries BC, the older Iron Age, hold a special position in the study of the cultural development of the Eurasian steppe belt, for in them a clear social stratification can be recognised for the first time in the history of this area. The power and rank of individual members of the ruling class are manifested above all in their burial customs and monumental grave structures, as well as in the incredibly rich grave goods. These innumerable golden objects and valuable imported goods leave no question about the high standing accorded these elites by their communities. This phenomenon appeared first during the Scythian period; there were no true forerunners in preceding Bronze Age cultures in this area.

## SCYTHIAN ROYAL GRAVES IN THE NORTH PONTIC STEPPE

Royal graves of the Scythians first became known in the steppe area north of the Black Sea.

Since the late 19th century, archaeological research in this area has been engaged in excavating dozens of magnificently furnished large grave mounds, known as 'kurgans'. Although many kurgans were plundered in antiquity and in later times, exceptional objects buried with the deceased and discovered again and again are indicative of the presence of resplendent graves. Quite often the earth heaped up to build a kurgan reaches a height of 12–15 m, for which reason such mounds can be seen as an enormous communal achievement: a large number of people had to be assembled, organised for work, and provided with accommodation and food.

The kurgans were built on the grass sod of the steppe, and most were stabilised with an additional stone circle at the base. The slopes were often finished with mud packing and a stone mantle. It is estimated that in Chertomlyk on the Lower Dnieper River, one of the largest kurgans, the grass sod had to be cut over a surface area of more than 75 ha in circumference in preparation for construction. This also relays an impression of the actual aim of kurgan structures: the prince symbolically took his pasture with him into death, or into life after death. The pasture was thus a personal possession of the prince, just like his personal objects, followers and horses (Rolle 1979, Grakov 1980: 60 ff., Rolle *et al.* 1998: 28 ff.).

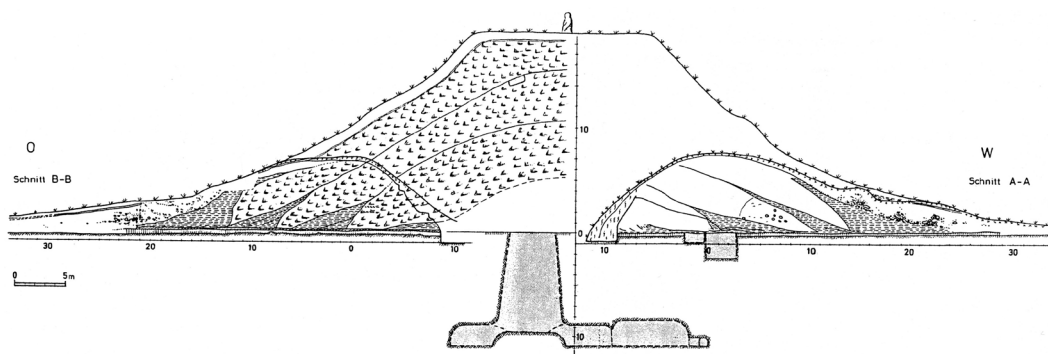
The Scythians in the northern Black Sea region buried their dead in catacombs underneath the kurgans, which could be entered through a passageway—a *dromos*. In large kurgans this could be very complex and varied. Not infrequently, the *dromos* led to a catacomb that was 10 to 18 m deep and connected to further side chambers in which components of the grave furnishings, graves of the followers or horses were deposited.

The grave chambers of these exceptionally large kurgans seldom corresponded entirely with one another with regard to their structure and arrangement. In the famous kurgan at Solokha, which was almost 18 m in height, the main grave was in the centre, and had been plundered over the course of time. To the right and left of the entrance shaft were two catacombs: in one were the remains of the deceased, clothed in a garment ornamented with sewn-on gold platelets; in the other were some of the funerary furnishings, including bronze cauldrons, gold-covered wood cups, silver *kylikes* (wine cups) and Greek amphorae. A further, even more intricately built, catacomb, located in the southwest of this kurgan, had not been robbed. A long passage ran from the entry shaft towards the north to the grave chamber, which was 'guarded' by two youthful warriors. On the north wall of this main chamber, in a side niche just before the royal interment, was a further warrior, equipped with a sword, spears and

quiver (*goryt*), perhaps the arms bearer or bodyguard of the royal interred. This person, buried in a side niche in the east, was laid to rest with all of the status symbols of a Scythian leader: a golden neckring, golden bracelets, a gold-sheathed *akinakes* (dagger), a sceptre shaft in the right hand, numerous decorated gold platelets sewn onto the clothing, bronze and silver tableware, Greek drinking vessels and much more. Another side chamber contained even more wine amphorae (Grakov 1980: 57 ff.).

The heaped earthen construction of the kurgan in Chertomlyk had similar dimensions to the mound in Solokha. Both are dated to the 4th century BC. In the centre of this kurgan was an entry shaft that led 10 m downwards (Figure 1), onto which clover-leaf-shaped, elongated rounded catacombs opened in all four corners. In the southeast were wine amphorae and a bronze cauldron and garments decorated with gold platelets; in the northeast were six more amphorae and a skeleton with a quiver and clothes garnished with gold appliqués. Two skeletons lay next to each other in the southwest catacomb (probably servants or guards), their clothing and weapons likewise decorated with gold. Finally, in the northwest was the skeleton of a female (probably the wife of the king), whose garment was studded with sheet-gold bearing figural decoration. Although the interments had been plundered, numerous gold objects remained behind, among them the gold appliqués on the clothing, the golden sheath of a quiver displaying a scene from the Achilles myth, and two swords with golden hilts. Three further pits containing a total of eleven horses with gold and silver bridles were discovered to the west of the main chamber (Grakov 1980: 60 ff.; Rolle *et al.* 1998: 28 ff.).

Large kurgans with large grave inventories rich in gold objects are no rarity in the lower Dnieper region and may be deemed characteristic of the Scythian elite in this area. Such monuments include the Tolstaya Mogila, Soboleva Mogila, Babina Mogila,



**Figure 1.** Reconstruction of the kurgan at Chertomlyk, combining historical drawings and results of modern excavations (Rolle *et al.* 1998).

and the Oguz kurgans, as well as complexes in Aleksandropol, Melgunov, Ryzhanovka and many more places. All date mainly to the 4th century BC (Rolle 1979; Grakov 1980: 53 ff.; Mozolevskiy & Polin. 2005). These royal Scythian kurgans, listed here as representative of many others, demonstrate, on the one hand, that in all parts of the Eurasian steppe the leading class of rider-nomads received special treatment upon their death, while, on the other hand, the particularities of grave construction and funerary equipment could follow quite different traditions. The status of the ruling class was likely the same everywhere, yet the symbols that expressed this status differed considerably in the various regions. This is underlined by the results of the research projects that we began in the late 1990s in various parts of southern Siberia; these were especially concerned with the architecture of these monuments.

### **THE GREAT KURGAN OF BAIKARA IN NORTHERN KAZAKHSTAN**

This kurgan is located in the north Kazakhstan steppe, far to the east of the Ural Mountains. It stood in the middle of an expansive Scythian cemetery of kurgans. As the excavation results show, this complex was not a real kurgan but, far more, a sanctuary, in which a complex ritual had taken place, leaving behind archaeologically discernible traces (Parzinger *et al.* 2003).

The erection of the Baikara kurgan in the 5th/4th century began with the preparation of the surface for the later mound (phase 1). An approximately circular ditch was dug that surrounded an area cleared of steppe grass and topsoil, and with the subsurface clay exposed everywhere. An entrance in the southeast led from above to the kurgan's interior. It extended into a *dromos*, which led downwards like a ramp, then ran for a few metres as an underground, tunnel-like, passage only large enough to crawl through, and finally to two steps at the end, near the centre of the mound and the former earthen surface. There the passage was adjoined to a short plank walkway that ended in front of 27 stone net-weights in the centre of the mound's original surface. The weights were from a fishing net that had been deposited there. To the north of the weights was a rather shallow oval pit, laid out with bast mats. Eleven postholes were found in the western half of the kurgan's surface. Apparently eleven wooden posts had been positioned there, onto which perhaps objects had been attached that were of significance for cultic activities (Parzinger *et al.* 2013: 12 ff.).

At a later time the dromos and the pits were filled and closed, and the wooden posts in the west removed (phase 2). The complex had now fulfilled its purpose. Finally, the entire inner surface of the kurgan was covered with several layers of birch bark, giving it a yellowish-white appearance. This surface was surrounded by a stone

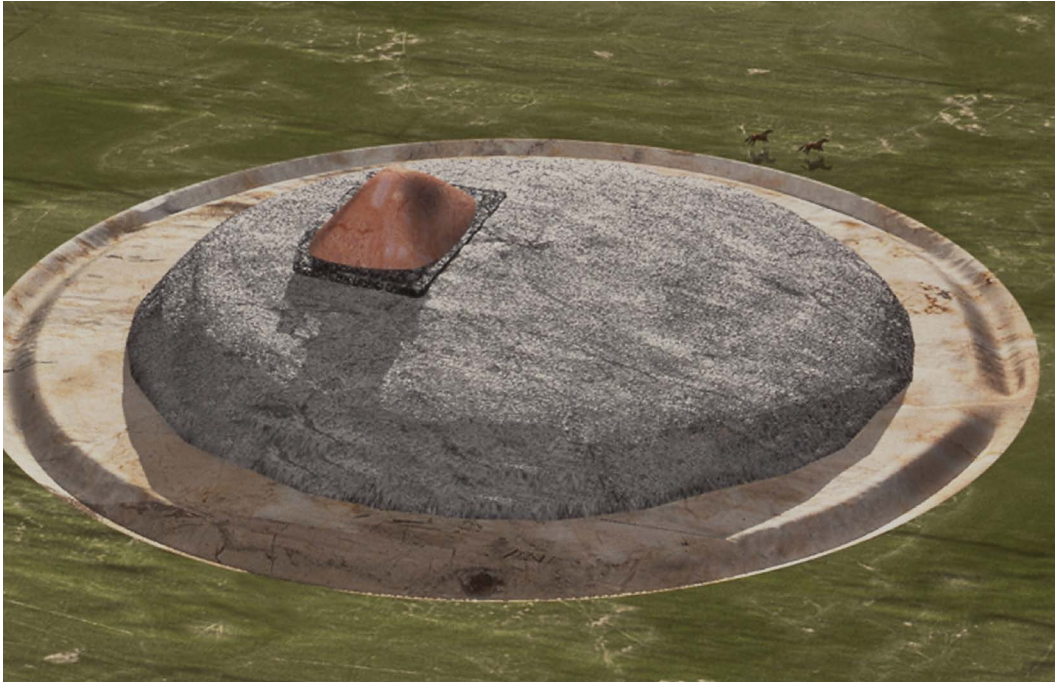
wall, which opened in the southeast, where the passage through the circular ditch was also located (Parzinger *et al.* 2013: 36 ff.).

The erection of the actual kurgan likely followed directly at this time (phase 3). The structure consisted of grass sod and was covered with a massive layer of clay, upon which a stone mantle was laid, whose edges adjoined the stone wall. Thereby, the kurgan was not a wholly symmetrical complex: it was somewhat higher and steeper in the west half than in the east half. Hence, the east side was better suited for ascending the kurgan, which, in turn, underscores that access to the kurgan must have occurred from this direction. It is noteworthy that there were cavities and hollow spaces in the interior of the kurgan. Three passages—a larger one from the south and two somewhat narrower ones from the north—led to the centre of the mound and were passable only in a crouched position. They must have originally joined in a central room; however, this space was completely destroyed by a later Sarmatian grave shaft. The passages were built of a post framework together with wattle on the walls and ceiling and with birch bark on the ground (Parzinger *et al.* 2003: 50 ff.).

When the passageways and the central room were no longer of significance, the supporting posts were removed, causing them to collapse; the depressions that gradually appeared on the surface of the kurgan were evened out (phase 4). The kurgan regained its original form, yet with a somewhat higher and steeper half in the west (Figure 2, see over). Directly west of the mound's centre, a stone platform, almost rectangular in form, was erected, which served as the basis for a structure built of a reddish, fired clay–sand mixture. Possibly, this conical form was meant to be like that found in the two smaller pits of phase 1. It can be assumed, perhaps, that cultic activities were performed in the surroundings of this stone platform with its reddish conical crown. Yet, due to later disturbance and restructuring of this area in Sarmatian times, no remains have been preserved (Parzinger *et al.* 2003: 36 ff.).

With phase 4, the Scythian-period form of this kurgan, which is dated to the 5th/4th century BC, was complete. The temporal interval between phases 1 and 4 was probably quite brief, but it cannot be determined precisely. The fact that the individual phases in the building work related to one another and therefore stood in conjunction supports the argument that they were planned as such from the very beginning and that lengthy intervals between the phases were unlikely.

Accordingly, we can conclude that at the very beginning of kurgan construction a burial ceremony was enacted with a dromos and symbolic grave pit, which were then closed off, before the actual building of the kurgan commenced. The kurgan had three passages and one central room in the interior, which had no practical function and can only be understood as part of cult ceremonies, but which can no longer be reconstructed. In the final phase 4 of the kurgan, the stone platform and conical mound upon it, the latter of a reddish clay–sand mixture, were visible from afar in the green



**Figure 2.** Baikara, Phase 4 (Parzinger *et al.* 2003).

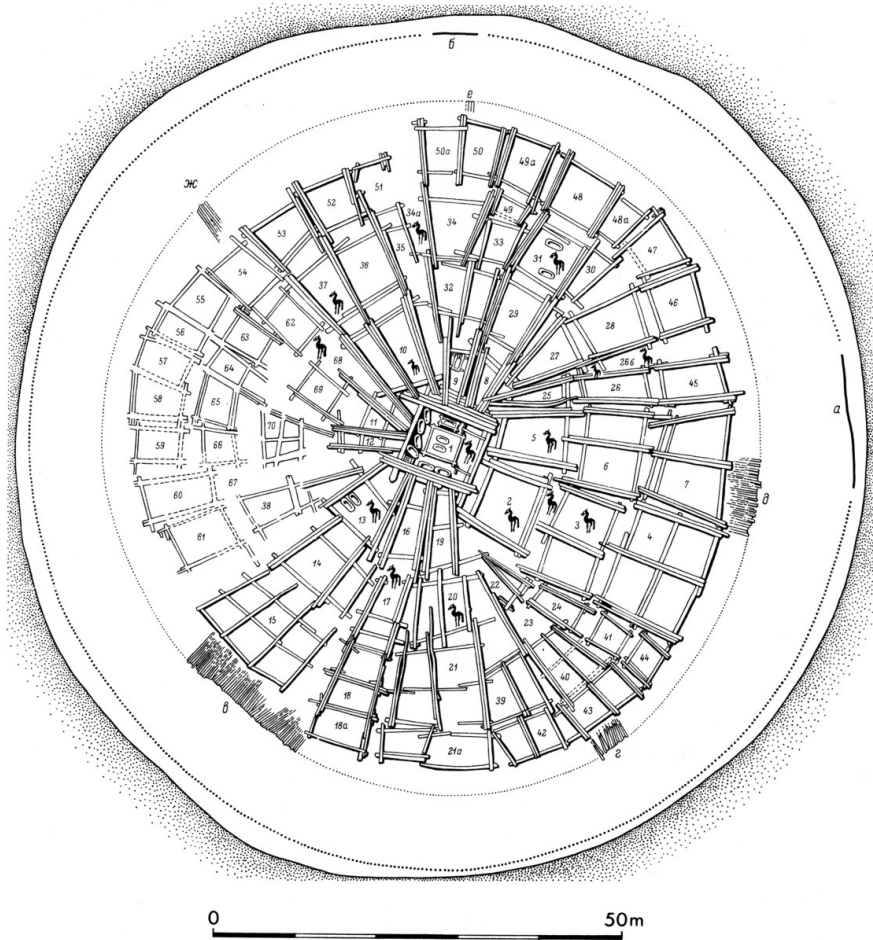
steppe, as described by Herodotus. He wrote of mounds in honour of the war god, on which an iron short sword stood upon a platform made of twigs, which symbolised this deity. Herodotus further emphasised the asymmetrical form of the mounds: one side was easier to access. This corresponds with the sanctuary of Baikara. Even though Herodotus' description cannot explain the find context at Baikara, unique among kurgans of Scythian times, it does show that such complexes could have played an important role not only in funerary ceremonies but also as sanctuaries.

### **THE ROYAL MOUND OF ARZHAN IN TUVA**

These observations, which were indeed new, made it necessary to investigate large kurgans in other sub-regions of southern Siberia in order to learn more about their architectural development, attendant rituals and related symbolism. It was decided to study the kurgans in Tuva, the most southeasterly area in Siberia to be reached by rider-nomads bearing a marked Scythian material culture. The core questions were: at what point in time and under what influences did groups of rider-nomads with their characteristic way of life and economic forms, their new techniques in warfare, special artistic forms of expression and hitherto unknown social differentiation, as displayed

in their monumental grave mounds, appear? Within the Eurasian steppe belt we can trace this process of change, which substantially reformed Bronze Age traditions that had developed over centuries, at the earliest in Tuva on the upper course of the river Yenissei. The cemetery of Arzhan is located in northern Tuva, one of the largest and most important cemeteries in southern Siberia, with countless monumental grave mounds.

The first large kurgan there, Arzhan 1, was excavated by M. P. Griaznov in the 1970s. This monumental burial complex comprised a platform built of stone, almost 100 m in diameter and only 3–5 m in height. Revealed underneath this platform was a wooden construction (Figure 3), still unique today, which consisted of numerous rectangular to slightly trapezoidal chambers arranged radially in several rows around the centre. The timber grave chamber in the centre was surrounded by eight wooden



**Figure 3.** Arzhan 1, reconstruction of the looted kurgan (Griaznov 1984).

coffins, which evidently contained the interred entourage, which upon the death of the ruler was slain and placed with him in the grave, as described by Herodotus in his writings about the Black Sea Scythians. Buried in various chambers grouped around the central grave were more than 200 horses, which likewise counted as possessions of the royal pair or were sacrificed during the burial ceremony in their honour (Griaznov 1984).

The burial place for the prince and his wife in the centre of the kurgan was found in an almost completely plundered state. Nevertheless, indications of splendid furnishings were discovered: remnants of marvellous garments made of sable fur, various coloured woollen textiles as clothes, bags and belts, and also gold jewellery, hundreds of gold appliqués sewn onto the clothing and a myriad of turquoise inlays that likely originally enhanced massive gold objects that were taken when the grave was plundered. Of special note are the remaining bits of weaponry: bronze daggers and arrowheads made of bronze and bone, whose forms directly follow in the tradition of Late Bronze Age forerunners and which must therefore stem from the very beginning of the Scythian period. This is supported by the observation that the handle ends of the daggers already bear ornamentation in the so-called animal style. For example, one representation is of a boar in 'tip-toe' gait, a motif that is characteristic of the very beginning of the Scytho-Siberian animal style, whose earliest phase is recorded only in southern Siberia (Griaznov 1984). Dendrochronological analyses on the beams in the grave chamber enable a reliable dating of Arzhan 1 kurgan to the end of the 9th and early-8th century BC.

Research on this burial place thus brought forth the hitherto oldest, firmly dated, early Scythian material known in the Eurasian steppe. Tuva and bordering parts of southern Siberia are therefore likely to have played a decisive role in the emergence of the material culture of the rider-nomads of the older Iron Age. All of the features that characterise Scythian culture farther west emerged here first. This applies to the material culture and the typical animal style, as well as to the burial customs typifying special treatment of the ruling class, the erection of monumental kurgans, the practice of family members and attendants following the leader into death, and the splendid grave inventories of gold and other prestigious objects.

Members of this rider-nomad ruling class were buried in Arzhan over a longer time span; perhaps the beginnings of dynasties even developed there. It is noteworthy, for example, that among the hundreds of grave mounds only four kurgans were built with stone platforms, each at a distance of 3–4 km from one another and arranged in a line from west to east. Kurgan Arzhan 1, farthest to the west, is the oldest mound, while Arzhan 2 kurgan in the far east was the last mound to be erected and apparently the youngest, dated to the close of the 7th century BC.

During the excavation of Arzhan 2 kurgan, between 2000 and 2003, we did not find the grave of the royal ruler in the centre but, instead, on the northwest periphery



of the mound (burial 5). The fill and the stone covering of the  $5 \times 5$  m large shaft were found in an undisturbed state, already signalling an untouched grave (Figure 4). At a depth of about 4 m the beam cover of the grave chamber came to light. It was in an undisturbed state as well; only the end in the south had collapsed slightly, due to the weight of the fill. Exposure of the chamber showed that under the first beam cover was a second beam cover, built of even sturdier trunks, which lay transversely to the upper ones. Inside the outer chamber was a further inner chamber. Very little earth lay in the area of the head and chest. The four interior walls of the inner chamber were originally draped with coloured textiles, of which only sparse remnants were still preserved. Upon the carefully finished wooden floor lay a double burial: a male in the northeast and a female in the southwest. Originally the floor was covered with a black felt carpet. The bones of the interred were not very well preserved. The heads of both the deceased had shifted backwards at an angle; evidently they had originally been laid upon cushions, which had long since decomposed (Čugunov *et al.* 2003, 2006, Parzinger 2006: 613).

The man wore a massive neckring of gold, which was decorated all round in the animal style. Soldered to the widened square-view side of the ring were countless small figures of panthers. The upper garment, presumably a cloak with a short upright



**Figure 4.** Arzhan 2, elite grave 5 after the first cleaning.

collar, was ornamented with thousands of small panther figures. They were sewn onto the chest and back of the garment as well as the sleeves in curvilinear arrangement, thereby rendering the impression of a winged-like ornament. Although the man's leggings were not preserved, he obviously wore long trousers made of felt or leather, decorated with thousands of tiny golden beads (diameter ca. 1 mm). The trouser ends were inserted in knee-high boots that ended in broad gold cuffs. Behind and underneath the man's head were five flat animal figures made of gold with drop-like enamel inlays (four winged horses and one stag), which were fastened to his hat. His weaponry comprised an iron dagger, worn on the right hip. Restoration of the dagger revealed that its handle and blade were decorated with remarkable gold inlays that represented animal figures (tigers, panthers and ungulates). The dagger was attached with a cord to a belt; the belt and the cord also bore numerous ornaments of cast gold with the animal-style decoration.

Next to the left-hand side of the interred body lay a golden quiver (Figure 5). The wooden arrowshafts were painted in alternating blue and red bands. The severely corroded three-winged arrowheads were made of iron, and—as revealed during restoration—traces of gold can be recognised and they were decorated with animal images. The carrying straps of the quiver were likewise rich in gold mountings. Finally, the remains of the bow were found underneath the quiver. Between the quiver and the northeast chamber wall lay an iron battle pickaxe with a wooden shaft. The shaft was almost completely covered with spiral gold incrustations. Deposited to the left of the man's head and above the quiver was a small round bronze mirror (Čugunov *et al.* 2003, 2006, Parzinger 2006: 613).

The grave furnishings of the woman also included a bronze mirror, placed to the left of the head. It was somewhat larger than the man's mirror and had an organic handle decorated with gold. In the area of her head, as part of a headdress, three gold plates



**Figure 5.** Arzhan 2, detail from the northeastern corner of grave 5 with the man's weaponry.

were found, in openwork and decorated in animal style. The same designs are seen in a pair of gold pins, two masterpieces: the shafts are completely decorated in animal style and crowned, in one case, with an exquisitely worked figure of an animal and, in the other, with a stylised winged creature. The woman's upper garment resembled that of the man, with thousands of small panther figures arranged to form a winged-like ornament. Unlike the man's upper garment (with cast gold panther figures), chased gold panther figures were sewn onto the woman's garment. Lying in the chest area were innumerable beads made of garnet, malachite, gold and paste, and, in addition, two gold earrings with granulation. The lower clothing of the woman was not preserved, only a few beads were present that indicate a skirt that likely reached over the knees. Thousands of millimetre-sized gold beads were concentrated in the area of the feet together with two gold bands with granulation and enamel inlays, which suggest boots made of leather or felt. Like the man, the woman had an iron dagger, worn on the right hip. Its blade was incrustated with gold, and its handle was of solid gold with representations of animals (panthers). Suspended from the woman's belt on a finely worked fox-tail chain was a gold, miniature cauldron, also with animal-style decoration. To the right and above the woman, near the west chamber corner was a wooden cup with a golden handle, the woman's golden comb with wooden teeth, and her gold pectoral decorated in animal style; several leather sacks held the remains of food that had originally been packed in them (Čugunov *et al.* 2003, 2006).

The royal grave in Arzhan 2 kurgan, with almost 9000 objects, ca. 5600 of which are made of gold, is one of the richest grave inventories found in Siberia and in the Eurasian steppe as a whole. The double burial of the man and woman contained, aside from thousands of golden panthers attached to clothing, gold-ornamented hats and boots, a gold neckring, a golden pectoral, gilded weapons and much more. Many of these objects may be considered masterpieces of the early animal-style art. Yet, these pieces are especially interesting, because they do not display any influences from other cultural spheres outside this region. Indeed, they represent local creations from the early Scythian period in Tuva (Čugunov *et al.* 2003, 2006).

Furthermore, Arzhan 2 kurgan yielded numerous graves of the Scythian period, which can be viewed as those of the violently slain followers and attendants of the ruler (so-called '*Totenfolge*'), as well as one grave with fourteen horses. Moreover, located in the centre of the kurgan were two graves that were completely empty. To their south was a rectangular sacrificial fireplace encircled by stones, and standing in its vicinity were two extremely schematic warrior stelae (so-called '*deer-stones* or '*Hirschsteine*'). The southeast periphery of the kurgan also has a gallery made of stone slabs that display different representations (animals, parts of armament, a chariot, etc). Doubtless the kurgan was not solely a place for burial, but also a place of cult, a sanctuary, in which the interment of the royal pair and the violent slaying of

their followers, in connection with different cultic activities, were ‘staged’ (Čugunov *et al.* 2003, 2006).

### **THE LARGE KURGAN OF BARSUCHIY LOG IN KHAKASSIA**

Following the Yenisei River downstream from its source in Tuva and crossing the western Sayan Mountains to the north, we reach a totally different kind of landscape—the Minusinsk Basin, most of which today belongs to Khakassia with a small part in the Krasnoyarsk region. Throughout time the fertile valleys and plains in this region, with their relatively mild climate, have been densely settled. During the Scythian period the concentration of population in the area is especially noticeable, as attested by the thousands of ‘corner kurgans’ of the Tagar culture (8th–3rd century BC). Whether with or without a heaped earthen mound, with or without graves of the upper class or of ordinary people, these burial grounds consistently display stone slabs and tall stone stelae in the corners and along the sides.

Our knowledge of the Tagar culture in the Minusinsk Basin is based primarily on graves. Evidently, the monumental kurgans, in which members of the upper class were interred, were not erected until the late Tagar culture (5th–3rd century BC). In the preceding centuries—that is during the early Scythian period—they are found in Tuva adjoining to the south, but as far as represented in the present state of research they are absent from the Minusinsk Basin. The rulers of this region were buried in the expansive necropolis of Salbyk, a steppe landscape on the left banks of the Yenisei River and north of Abakan, the present-day capital of Khakassia. Located in this landscape are the largest kurgans in the entire Minusinsk Basin—more than a dozen monumental mounds made of sods and with a square ground plan, and enclosed by megalithic-like stone settings consisting of horizontal slabs alternating with standing stones and large stelae of several metres’ height.

One of the large kurgans in Salbyk was excavated in the 1950s; the grave, however, had been robbed. Underneath the corners of the monumental stone enclosure a human ‘foundation deposit’ was discovered: the bones of adults and children. Sunken into the ground in the western half of the kurgan was a beamed chamber with a pyramidal wooden roof structure as a cover, which had evidently been accessible for further burials over a longer timespan—a tunnel-like passage led from the west through the sod kurgan to the chamber. It was later brought to collapse, when the grave chamber was permanently sealed. Unfortunately, due to insufficient documentation, few details are known about the kurgan’s structure. The total plunder of the grave chamber thwarts closer insight into the burial equipment of a royal grave in the Minusinsk Basin.

In order to fill the gaps in research on this important region of finds in southern Siberia, a project was undertaken in 2004, dedicated to the comprehensive study of the Barsuchiy Log kurgan, located 35 km north of Abakan and not far from Salbyk. Although excavations have been conducted in the Minusinsk Basin for almost 300 years, this was the first time that one of the monumental burial complexes of the Tagar culture of the Scythian period was investigated with modern excavation and documentation materials. The Barsuchiy Log kurgan, still ca. 10 m in height, is a peculiarity among Eurasian large kurgans due to its pyramidal shape. In addition, it has a ca.  $55 \times 55$  m large enclosure with an entrance in the east, built of massive stone slabs, a characteristic feature of the Tagar culture in this region. Investigations revealed that the kurgan was built of grass sod, as was likely the case with the large mound in Salbyk. However, the outer mantle of the Barsuchiy Log kurgan consisted of orange-red clay blocks; thus, it was visible from afar in the steppe as a red pyramid (Figure 6).

However, before this pyramid was built, two wall-like platforms were erected upon the original surface of grass sod with an access (*dromos*) to the grave chamber in between. This dromos was built of massive larch beams insulated with birch bark. Due to its excellent state of preservation, many building details can be documented. The passage led from the west to the grave chamber, likewise built with massive beams



**Figure 6.** Barsuchiy Log, sections through the kurgan.



**Figure 7.** Barsuchiy Log, the intentionally burnt burial chamber.

and covered with birch bark. The chamber was ca.  $7 \times 7$  m in area and almost 5 m deep in the west half of the kurgan's inner surface. After the deceased had been laid upon the floor of the grave pit, at a depth of more than 4 m, the wood grave chamber was set alight (Figure 7) and allowed to collapse into the pit. After that the actual kurgan was constructed.

The construction of the kurgan was not accomplished in one course of building work, but—similar to the kurgan in Baikara—in several stages. Accordingly, in the west half of the complex the two aforementioned platforms were first built on both sides of the dromos, while from the east, at about the same height, a stone pavement led to the grave chamber. Several wooden columns, 6 m in height, were set up north of the construction, their bases initially inserted in colossal birch drums like column bases. After the cultic rituals connected with the installation in Barsuchiy Log had ended, the wooden columns were dismantled, laid next to their bases and together with the entire kurgan covered with red clay blocks in a single phase of work.

All of the large kurgans in the steppe north of Abakan between Salbyk and Barsuchiy Log display huge, funnel-shaped, looting pits west of the mound's centre.

Through investigations in Salbyk and Barsuchiy Log, we know that the burials were located precisely in this area. The grave robbers knew this as well, and they undertook enormous earth-moving activities. This extreme effort is actually quite unusual for looting activities in recent centuries and perhaps Barsuchiy Log provides an explanation for this: the grave place in Barsuchiy Log was completely ravaged, numerous skeletal components were missing, and the few that remained were scattered about in disorder. At the end of this destruction, the robbers deposited the head of a dog in the pit, dating into the 1st century BC (on the basis of radiocarbon dates) and therefore belonging to a period immediately after the Tagar culture. This deposition of dogs or their heads in plundered Tagar burials can be deemed characteristic of the Tes culture, which came after Tagar culture, and which is linked with the Hsiung-nu. In any case, the Tes people represent another population group that entered the Minusinsk Basin from the southeast from 200 BC. Evidently, the pillage of these large kurgans occurred at a considerably earlier time than was previously thought. Several factors suggest that the intent of these new intruding groups was to open and rob the royal graves of earlier rulers in the region and, in the sense of a *damnatio memoriae*, to desecrate the graves, and with that to break the sacred power of the former lords before the eyes of their people and then implant their own. When so much energy is invested in the destruction of kurgans and the annihilation of their significance, then this underscores all the more impressively the profound meaning that these burial monuments must have had for the population who built them.

### **ROYAL KURGANS OF THE SAKA AND THE SAUROMATIANS**

Another important province for finds of Scythian rider-nomads in the Eurasian steppe belt is the steppe region west of the Altai Mountains, which extends as far as the Irtysh River. One extraordinary grave, rich in gold furnishings, is known from this region: the royal grave of Issyk, located ca. 50 km east of Almaty, in the southeast of Kazakhstan, in an area ascribed to the Saka. The earthen mound of this kurgan reaches 60 m in diameter and 6 m in height. Located underneath was the central burial, which had been completely looted, but next to it was a further grave complex that had remained undisturbed. This was the grave of a Sakan prince dated to the end of the 6th/early-5th century BC. In the north a young man of Europoid type had been laid to rest in a rectangular chamber built of carefully carpentered larch beams. He lay in an extended supine position, as is typical for nearly all Scythian graves found between the Dniester and Yenissei rivers. The south and west part of the chamber was furnished with tables and trays made of wood, as well as vessels and various containers made of wood, bronze, silver and clay. The deceased wore a tall, pointed head covering,



**Figure 8.** Reconstruction of the so-called Golden Man from Issyk.



a kaftan-like sleeved jacket, trousers and half-length boots. All of the clothes were apparently made of red felt and adorned with ca. 4000 platelets of gold with figural motifs. Even his weapons (dagger and sword) were incrustated with gold, which led to his epithet: ‘the golden man of Issyk’ (Figure 8) (Akišev 1978).

Further investigations of the Sakan period in the so-called ‘Seven Rivers Country’ in southeast Kazakhstan were conducted within the framework of the Berlin Excellence Cluster TOPOI between 2008 and 2011. Investigators here were concerned with the distribution of kurgan cemeteries in steppe landscapes, which generally were not settled in the Late Bronze Age until the beginning of the 1st millennium BC. With the change to a more humid and cooler climate came a change in the vegetation cover, and so a steppe vegetation gradually emerged that was excellently suited for stock-raising. At the same time, the intensive use of steppe areas by Sakan rider-nomads can be noted; among other things they left behind their cemeteries in this vast landscape. The positioning and distribution of these burial places obviously imply a division and marking of the area. In addition, the structure of the cemeteries is quite regional—solely local regularities are recognisable. The kurgans are consistently arranged in rows (Figure 9); although it has also been noticed that in the area east of Almaty one kurgan in each row is built in rectangular form, whereas all the others are round.

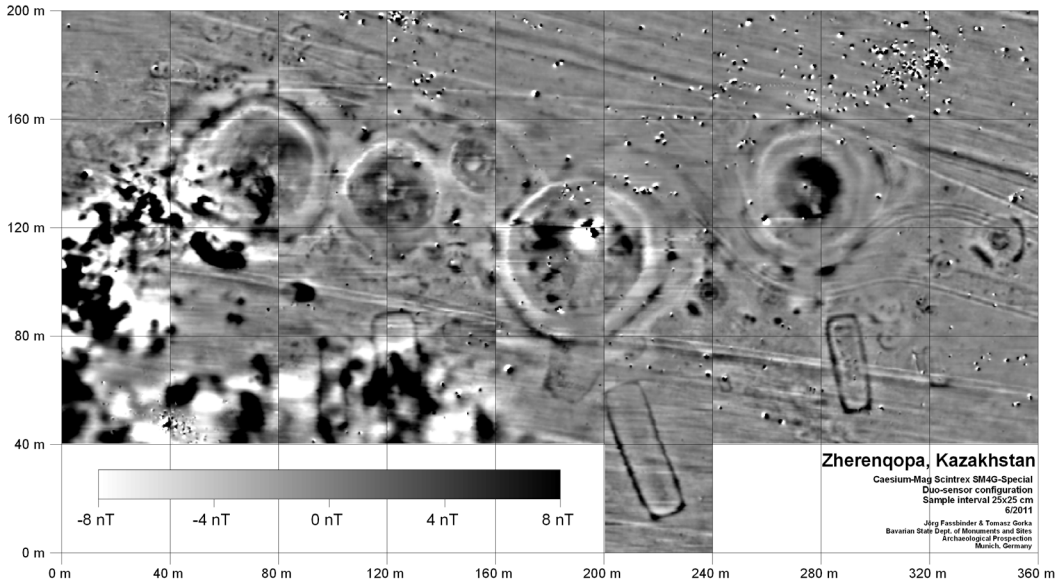


**Figure 9.** Monumental elite kurgans from Semirechye in southeastern Kazakhstan.

The largest grave mounds there reach truly monumental dimensions; they are always surrounded by a wall-like or street-like enclosure, which apparently marked a sacred sphere around the kurgans in which ritual pits and further burials were found (Gass 2014, 2016, Parzinger 2014).

Other groups of rider-nomads settled farther in the northwest, south of the Ural Mountains. Written sources mention the presence of the Sauromatians there, who were related to the Scythians and had a comparable way of life and similar economic forms and social structure. Located there as well are a considerable number of large kurgans. Among them is the royal burial of Filippovka, near the flow of the Ilek River into the Ural River. It is dated to the time of transition from the Sauromatian to early Sarmatian period, and was without question the burial place of a tribal prince. This burial is assigned to the 4th century BC and is therefore coeval with most of the royal graves of the Black Sea Scythians farther west. In Filippova a long, narrow dromos with a step leads to a spacious round grave pit, in which an apparently tent-like wooden construction was originally erected over the grave. Although the burial had been plundered, excavations brought to light a rich grave inventory: sword and dagger made of iron with a golden handle and gold-incrusted blade, golden straps of a horse bridle, gold and silver vessels, many theriomorphic gold appliquéés for wooden vessels, stag figures in gold sheet over a wooden core, and much more. The representations of stags, predatory animals, birds of prey and riders deviate slightly in their style from those on Scythian works in the northern Black Sea area. The latter were essentially marked to a large degree by motifs in Greek art and iconography (Oro 2001). In addition, there were massive gold and silver vessels, clearly of Achaemenid provenance, which probably reached Sauromatian territory in the north via the Khorezm region south of the Aral Sea, which was already part of the Persian Empire.

The kurgan cemeteries in the Sauromatian territory also display a defined construction, in that all of the mounds are consistently ordered in rows. With the aid of geophysical prospecting methods, we wanted to learn more about the structure of the kurgans' immediate surroundings. During work at the cemetery of Tört Oba, in the area of Aktiube in outermost northwest Kazakhstan, we came across numerous Sauromatian and also older Bronze Age graves, which were not recognisable on the surface, as well as pits, presumably of cultic use (Parzinger *et al.* 2015). Of particular note were the elongated, narrow rectangular ditch squares, which extended in front of the kurgans towards the southeast (Figure 10). They measured up to 50 m in length and 20 m in width. Excavations revealed that these ditches were completely filled with horse bones (partly calcined). This provided evidence that they must have been places of cult activities in association with the kurgans. These ditch squares were connected with extensive offerings of horses, made in honour of the deceased at the relevant kurgan.



**Figure 10.** Geophysical prospecting in Tört Oba, Aktiube province, south of the Ural mountains.

## SCYTHIAN KURGANS IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

Opposite the north Black Sea area and the regions east of the Ural Mountains as far as southern Siberia, the steppe areas north of the Great Caucasus, between the Sea of Azov in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east, are, on the whole, still uninvestigated with regard to cultural relationships during the Scythian period. The number of large kurgans and extensive fields of burial mounds of that time is remarkably large and thus the potential for their investigation is of great significance. Nonetheless, this vast sphere is a blank area on the archaeological map of monuments of Scythian rider-nomads. Geomagnetic surveys have attested numerous find complexes in the surroundings, especially of larger kurgans, which should be investigated archaeologically more closely (Figure 11, see over) (Fassbinder *et al.* 2015, Parzinger *et al.* 2016). Excavations there in the late 19th century were carried out solely in the area east of Stavropol, in the Sultan (Bryk) kurgan. This site was situated upon a high plateau and dominated the entire surrounding landscape. However, the published reports provide little useful information; apparently the grave chamber had been plundered. Yet we do know that the kurgan was built of quality ashlar masonry, otherwise known only among the kurgans in the eastern Crimea (Kerch) that showed strong Greek influence. Under the Sultan (Bryk) kurgan was a passage hewn into the natural clay subsoil, which could be passed only by bending double, and which divided into two passages farther along. Both of these passages ended approximately underneath the centre of the kurgan.

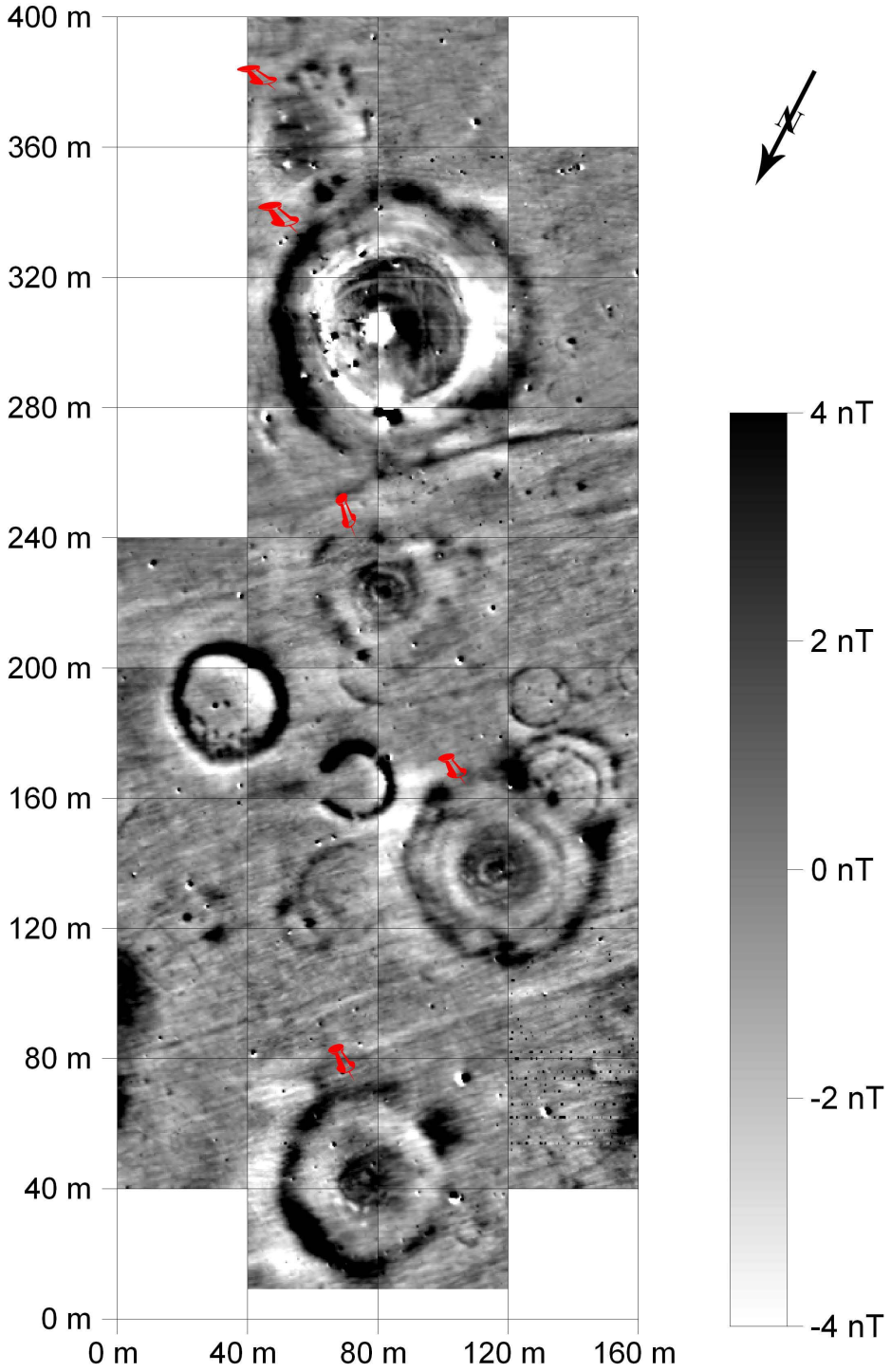
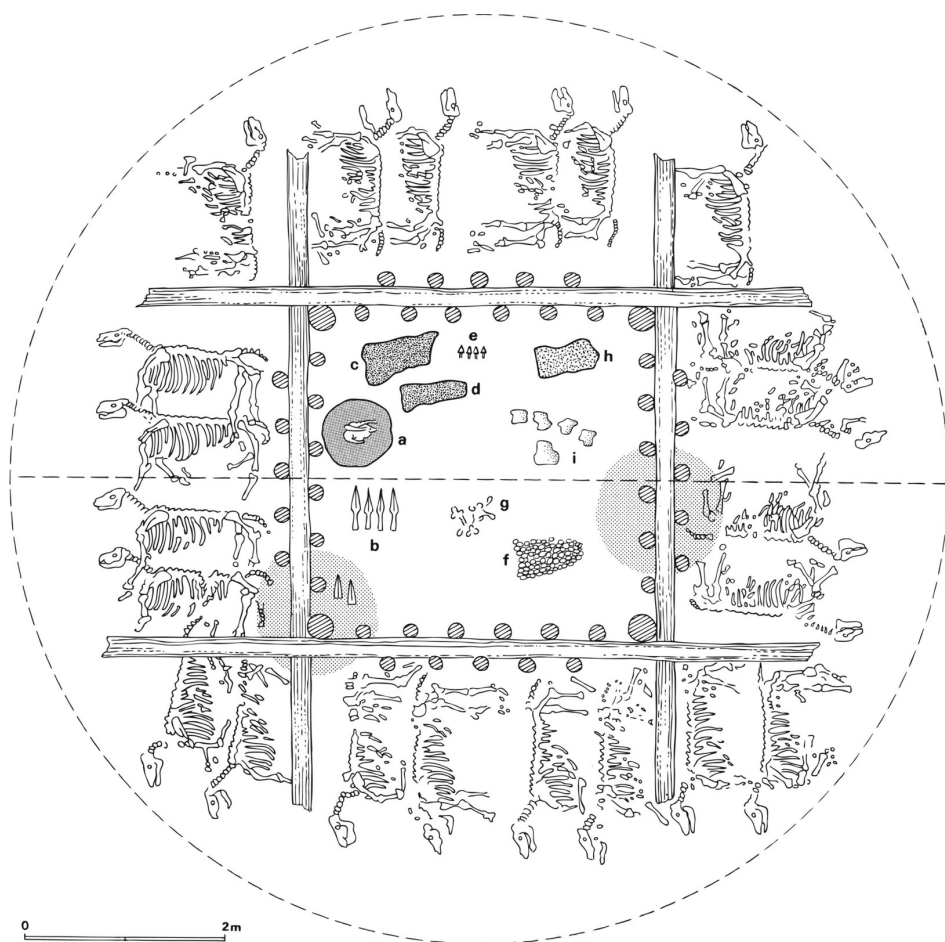


Figure 11. Geophysical prospecting around kurgans at Vinogradnyi in the northern Caucasus.

Clearly they did not lead to the grave itself, but ended underneath the grave chamber. This unusual situation brings to mind the three passageways that led into the grass-sod kurgan in Baikara in northern Kazakhstan. There too, practical reasons for these structures are lacking. The situation might have served ritual purposes, although given the lack of significant find contexts, we cannot go into more detail.

Comparably more is known about the Kuban region farther west in the Caucasus foreland than the area of Stavropol. Excavations were conducted in the Kuban region in the late-19th century and also repeatedly in the 20th century. Among the most famous kurgans investigated are those in Kelermes, Kostromskaya, Maikop and Ul (Grakov 1980: 104 ff., Galanina 1997). The central grave shaft underneath the monumental kurgan in Kelermes and in Kostromskaya was built over by a construction of wooden posts, resembling a hut. Around the grave pit, arranged in a row on two sides or on all four sides, were up to 24 horses lying on their sides (Figure 12). Many gold



**Figure 12.** Plan of the burial chamber from Kelermes, excavations in late 19th century (Galanina 1997).

objects dated to early Scythian times in Kelermes show distinct parallels with the treasure of Ziwiye, northwest Iran. Both find complexes date to the 7th century BC. Moreover, objects made of sheet gold with figural decoration from Ziwiye and Kelermes possess motifs adapted from the Assyrian–Median artistic sphere and integrated in the animal style. The Old Oriental heritage is no longer recognisable in this form in the animal-style works of later Scythian times (Ghirshman 1979).

The mounds of the 4th century BC in Ul are not particularly high and are located at a short distance from Kelermes. Burials were apparently re-enacted, for the mound held wooden grave structures and an unusually rich grave inventory consisting of gold, silver and bronze vessels, imported Greek ceramics, gold jewellery and much more, but no remains of the deceased were present. Perhaps here we have a symbolic grave (cenotaph) for a leader of a Scythian–Maitian group in the Kuban area, who fell in battle in a foreign land, and whose corpse could not be brought back for burial (Parzinger 2004: 119).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the sometimes considerable differences in structure and design of monumental large kurgans in various cultural spheres of the Eurasian steppe between the Dnieper in the west and the upper Yenissei in the east, certain basic principles are apparent: underneath the monumental mounds, erected with an enormous effort of labour, are subterranean grave chambers with luxurious furnishings. As described by Herodotus (IV 71), a Scythian prince had to be accompanied to the grave by his wife, his attendants, his horses, his weaponry, his jewellery and his costly clothes, as well as his most important and valuable possessions. Thereby, gold objects played a special role.

Funerary customs were of profound importance for the Scythians, particularly when the ruling class was concerned. This is demonstrated by excavation find contexts and also by a story told by Herodotus, relating to the campaign of Darius. When the Persian king invaded Scythian territory (starting from the lower Danube), the Scythian army withdrew constantly, devastating the land behind and always avoiding battle, yet not surrendering. It thus forced the enemy into a tiresome pursuit. The Scythian King Idanthyros declared that he would be prepared to fight if the Persians approached the burial places of the ancestors and threatened to destroy them. The tombs of the Scythian kings were located—according to Herodotus—in the landscape of Gerrhos (Herodotus IV 71), through which the Borysthenes (Dnieper River) flowed. Indeed, many richly furnished Scythian large kurgans are known in the lower Dnieper region, which was the background to this story.

Since the first opening of Scythian ‘kings’ kurgans’ in the north Pontic steppes in the 19th century, we have known that rider-nomads of the earlier Iron Age of the 1st millennium BC went to considerable effort to demonstrate the high status of their leaders, even after their death. Monumental burial complexes and legendary luxurious grave furnishings played a central role. Despite—or perhaps due to—the magnificent grave gifts, research on the kurgan structures themselves has not had proper attention until now. Recent excavations at selected sites in northern Kazakhstan (Baikara), Tuva (Arzhan) and the Minusinsk Basin (Barsuchiy Log), augmented by geophysical surveys and supplementary excavations in the surroundings of kurgans in southeast Kazakhstan, in the southern Urals and in the northern Caucasus, have contributed new insights and at the same time broadened our knowledge about funerary customs of the Scythian elites in the Eurasian steppe.

This research has shown that the raising of the mounds proceeded in stages, each connected with cultic and ritual activities. These activities were firm components of the performance of a royal Scythian burial, and were full of symbolism that we are only now beginning to understand. The diligent investigation of the kurgans of Baikara, Arzhan und Barsuchiy Log had made us vividly aware that there were considerable differences between the areas of the Eurasian steppe ruled by individual rider-nomads. There was, however, a common idea, probably connecting together various religious beliefs, as already shown by the animal-style decorations and other details in kurgan construction. However, in their local transformation these ideas were marked differently, and local traditions are perceptible. This became particularly noticeable in our surveys in southeast Kazakhstan, in the southern Urals and in northern Caucasus, which were focused exclusively on the structure of cemeteries and cultic complexes located in the immediate vicinity of large kurgans, without investigating the individual mounds, as the find contexts from kurgan surroundings hold a high information value for interpreting the burial structures themselves.

The finding that in Arzhan the royal burial in a large kurgan is still preserved has fundamentally changed our picture of the treatment of the deceased rider-nomad elites in southern Siberia. It was hitherto assumed that furnishings rich in gold did not characterise graves of the elites, but Arzhan shows that we must reckon with magnificent burials farther east in the Eurasian steppe belt, not at all inferior to those in the north Pontic regions. Without doubt, Arzhan is only the tip of the iceberg! That 300 years of excavation activities had to elapse before research benefited from a discovery like that in Arzhan is unquestionably due to the extensive looting, especially of large kurgans. Yet the find contexts in Barsuchiy Log have taught us that this was not only a result of modern plunder, but apparently to an even stronger degree part of a historical–political development, which occurred towards the end of the Scythian period in the steppe. New groups intruded into areas held until then by Scythian

rider-nomads, where they encountered tribes with a marked social structure and a firmly established elite. The deceased members of the ruling class were honoured and commemorated in their monumental burial complexes even after death, which is demonstrated in many sites. If the new rulers wished to put an end to the continuing power of earlier elites, the ravage and despoil of their burial complexes was an effective means, as shown by the extraordinary finds from Barsuchiy Log. The gold found there was not robbed because of its material value but because of its enduring symbolical significance.

*Note on the author:* Professor Dr. Hermann Parzinger, former Director and later President of the German Archaeological Institute and actual President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Organisation in Berlin, Corresponding Member of the British Academy and of other German and international Academies of Sciences, dedicated the last two decades to the investigation of Scythian monumental kurgans throughout the Eurasian steppe belt. Among his most important publications are: *Die Skythen* (C. H. Beck, Munich, 2004) and *Die frühen Völker Eurasiens. Vom Neolithikum bis zu Mittelalter* (C. H. Beck, Munich, 2006), offering a broad overview on the prehistory of Eurasia.

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