

ISSN 2587-6112
e-ISSN 2618-9488

Археология евразийских степей

№ 6 2025



АРХЕОЛОГИЯ ЕВРАЗИЙСКИХ СТЕПЕЙ
№ 6 2025

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Журнал основан в мае 2017 г.

Свидетельство о регистрации СМИ ПИ № ФС77–79080
от 28 августа 2020 г. выдано Роскомнадзором

Адрес редакции, издателя:

420012, г. Казань, ул. Бутлерова, 30

Телефон: (843)236-55-42

Адрес учредителя:

420111, г. Казань, ул. Баумана, 20

E-mail: archeosteps@gmail.com

<https://www.evrastep.ru>

Индекс ПП754, электронный каталог печатных изданий

«Почта России»

Выходит 6 раз в год

Подготовка и издание журнала осуществлены в рамках Государственной программы Республики Татарстан «Сохранение национальной идентичности татарского народа»

Учредитель: Академия наук Республики Татарстан

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ISSN 2587-6112
e-ISSN 2618-9488

ARKHEOLOGIIA EVRAZIISKIKH STEPPEI
ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EURASIAN STEPPES
No 6 2025

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The preparation and publication of the journal were carried out within the framework of the State program of the Republic of Tatarstan "Preservation of the National Identity of the Tatar People"

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УДК 902/903

<https://doi.org/10.24852/2587-6112.2025.6.307.321>

A RELIEF IMAGE OF A HUMAN FACE AND A PETROGLYPH IN THE SANDYKTAU MOUNTAINS (NORTHERN KAZAKHSTAN)¹

© 2025. Ye. Abil, S. Yarygin, S. Sakenov, K. Abdrakhmanov

The article publishes the research materials of the complex discovered in the Sandyktau Mountains in 2024. The monument consists of two objects - a stone stele with a petroglyph and a granite outcrop, on the vertical wall of which there is a relief image of a human face. In the study of the face and the stele, the method of tracology was used. A wide range of historical and comparative analysis made it possible to compare the object under study with complexes already known in science. The stele has traces of hewing along the edges. The image is carved in the upper part and is a schematic figure of a deer with two long horns extending beyond the body. The relief of a human face is carefully worked out, all the details are clearly visible - large eyes, a long straight nose, lips. The frontal part is beveled. Unambiguous conclusions about the chronology can only be made in relation to the stele, which, by analogy in the monuments of the Bronze Age, is dated to the 2nd millennium BC. The question of their relationship with the relief and the chronology of the latter remains open.

Keywords: archaeology, Northern Kazakhstan, Bronze Age, stele, petroglyph, relief of a face.

СКАЛА С РЕЛЬЕФНЫМ ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕМ ЛИЦА И СТЕЛА С ПЕТРОГЛИФОМ В ГОРАХ САНДЫКТАУ (СЕВЕРНЫЙ КАЗАХСТАН)²

Е. Абил, С. Ярыгин, С. Сакенов, К. Абдрахманов

В статье публикуются материалы исследований комплекса, обнаруженного в горах Сандыктау в 2024 году. Памятник состоит из двух объектов – каменной стелы с петроглифом и гранитного останца, на вертикальной стенке которого имеется рельефное изображение человеческого лица. Стела высотой имеет следы подтески по граням. Изображение выбито в верхней части и представляет собой схематичную фигуру оленя с двумя длинными рогами, уходящими за корпус тела. Рельеф человеческого лица тщательно проработан, четко видны все детали – крупные глаза, длинный прямой нос, губы. Лобная часть скошенная. Однозначные выводы о хронологии можно сделать только в отношении стелы, которая по аналогиям в памятниках бронзового века датируется II тыс. до н.э. Вопрос их соотношения с рельефом и хронология последнего остаются открытыми.

Ключевые слова: археология, Северный Казахстан, Сандыктау, стела, петроглиф, рельеф, изображение лица, искусство, бронзовый век.

Introduction

In archaeological science, there is a set of methodological tools for studying mass types of monuments, as well as for the category of finds encountered in large quantities. For example, the decor of archaeological objects is one of the most important cultural diagnostic features, so its study is always given special attention. Such studies can be carried out based on serial categories of finds, such as ceramics, tools, metal objects.

Less developed is the methodology for studying objects and artifacts of an individual nature. For the study of unique objects, no uniform principles of analysis have been developed due to the lack of representative samples. Such unique objects include the boulder with a relief image of a face considered in this work. The study was carried out in several stages – field recording, and subsequent data analysis. In the first case, attention was paid to the technique of execution

¹ The work was carried out with the financial support of the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the research topic is “History of Northern Kazakhstan from ancient times to modern times” (IRN BR21882225).

² Работа выполнена при финансовой поддержке Комитета науки Министерства науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан, тема исследования - “История Северного Казахстана с древнейших времен до современности” (IRN BR21882225).



Fig. 1. Map of monuments: 1 – complex with a boulder and stele Sandyktau; 2, 3 – steles of the megalithic complex Taskamal; 4 – stele at the burial ground Kenotkel XVIII; 5 – stele at the burial ground Tazhegul; 6 – stele in the burial fence No. 23 of the burial ground Kyzyltobe (the map was created based on data from the website: <https://www.cyclosm.org/#map=5/49.233/427.535/cyclosm>)

Рис. 1. Карта памятников: 1. Комплекс с валуном и стелой Сандыктау; 2-3. Стелы мегалитического комплекса Таскамал; 4. Стела на могильнике Кеноткель XVIII; 5. Стела на могильнике Тажегул; 6. Стела в погребении ограды № 23 могильника Кызылтобе (карта создана на основе данных сайта -<https://www.cyclosm.org/#map=5/49.233/427.535/cyclosm>)

and morphology – the hierarchical structure of the pictorial components. In the second case, the methodological basis of the research was the search for analogies to individual elements of the entire complex – relief and stone stele. A wide geographic and chronological range of analogies of both typological and visual nature is considered. The completeness and stable connection of the image of the face with the stone boulder, the presence of the stele suggest an increased symbolic value of the complex for its creators, while a certain semantic independence of its individual elements is observed.

In the 2024 field season, a new archaeological complex was discovered in the Sandyktau

district of the Akmola region of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It consists of two objects: a rock with a relief image of a face and a stele with a petroglyph. The object is located 408 m to the east of the village of Balkashino, 780 m to the east of the Zhabai River bed and 80 m to the north of its tributary Kabany Klyuch, at the foot of a ridge that is part of the Sandyktau mountain-forest massif (626 m) (Fig. 1).

The region where the complex was discovered is part of the Kokshetau Upland of Northern Kazakhstan. This area is a unique combination of forest and steppe landscapes with rich biomes. The territory of the district is a plain, penetrated from north to south by parallel ridges, the main

ones of which are Sandyktau and Zhaksy-Tukty. The mountains are formed from granites of the Devonian and Silurian periods. The slopes are heavily indented as a result of tectonic cracks, granite crushing, and denudation. The Zhylandy Ridge is located in the north-northwest of the district. The Zhabai River, a right tributary of the Ishim, flows through the district. The river is 196 km long. The soils are chernozem and dark chestnut. The soil and vegetation cover of the district is represented by steppes and forests. Depending on the relief and underlying rocks, the soil complexes and plant associations are extremely variegated and diverse.

To the north of the Zhabai River, there are forb-cereal steppes on southern chernozems with a large number of solonetz soils in depressions and skeletal soils on hills. The entire western part of the district is occupied by cereal steppes on dark chestnut soils. Pine and pine-birch forests occupy about 70,8 thousand hectares and are located mainly in its northern part. The climate of the region is sharply continental with severe winters with little snow and dry hot summers. The natural fauna includes more than 40 species of mammals, more than a hundred species of birds, several species of reptiles and amphibians and about 20 species of fish.

In the Balkashino area, developed deposits of the Sharyk suite of the Upper Proterozoic have been recorded. Lower Ordovician deposits are noted; Upper Pliocene deposits are the Bitekei and Muzbel layers. The Cambrian intrusive complex is distinguished. Among the granitoids of the Middle Devonian intrusive complex there are leucocratic granites of the first phase and alaskites of the second, as well as additional intrusions of the first and second generations (Baysholanov, 2017). The diversity of flora and fauna influenced the historical development of the region and its settlement by people, as evidenced by a variety of archaeological sites.

In 2009, the Collection of Monuments of Akmola Region in Sandyktau District included 51 archaeological monuments. These archaeological sites are concentrated in the valleys of the Zhabai and Sarkyrama rivers, as well as along the banks of the Atyzhok, Zhylandy, Zhekebuyak and Konyr rivers. The largest number are single burial mounds and cemeteries of the early Iron Age, settlements of the Bronze Age. Other monuments include Neolithic sites and settlements, Eneolithic sites, the early Iron Age settlement of Novoselovka

II, and a settlement of the Middle Ages – kystau. The burial grounds date from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages, the largest of which is the Chaika burial ground (172 burials) (Zaybert, Kamalova, 2009). In 2023, archaeological studies of a settlement, two burial grounds and mine workings of the Bronze Age were conducted in the area. The newly discovered monument belongs to a new type and can be considered a cult object. Only a few monuments have been discovered on the territory of the Kokshetau Upland that can be clearly associated with ritual practices: the ruins of the Taskamal megalithic complex, the steles of the Kenotkel XVIII burial ground, the cromlechs and steles of the Tazhegul burial ground, and ritual structures at the Kyzyltobe burial ground (Yarygin et al., 2024, p. 11–12) (Fig. 1).

Methods

The complex near the village of Balkashino was photographed using GNSS (global navigation satellite systems) with the following equipment: a portable GPS navigator Garmin Etrex 10, a quadcopter DJI Mini 2. A stage-by-stage photo recording of the monument was carried out. Dimensions were taken, the object was described, data were collected for subsequent photogrammetry of the object, reconstruction and modeling. In the study of the relief of the face and stele, traceological methods were used, thanks to which traces of a tool on the face, stages of processing, the boundaries of the image of the animal on the stele and its main elements were identified. The engraved image was recorded using a non-contact method to avoid additional loads on the fragile structure of the natural material. A reconnaissance survey was carried out around the complex, including a walking tour of the area, as a result of which the boundaries of the monument, topographical position, and landscape features of the area were determined. In the discussion part of the article, standard historical methods were used, including comparative historical analysis, which made it possible to identify common and specific features in the nature of the monument.

Description of the monument

The object with the facial image is located on the eastern edge of a wide meadow, on the border with the forest. It is an isolated rock at the southern end of a wide strip of massive rock outcrops that go in an arc in the form of large boulders and groups of pancake-like monoliths (Fig. 2).

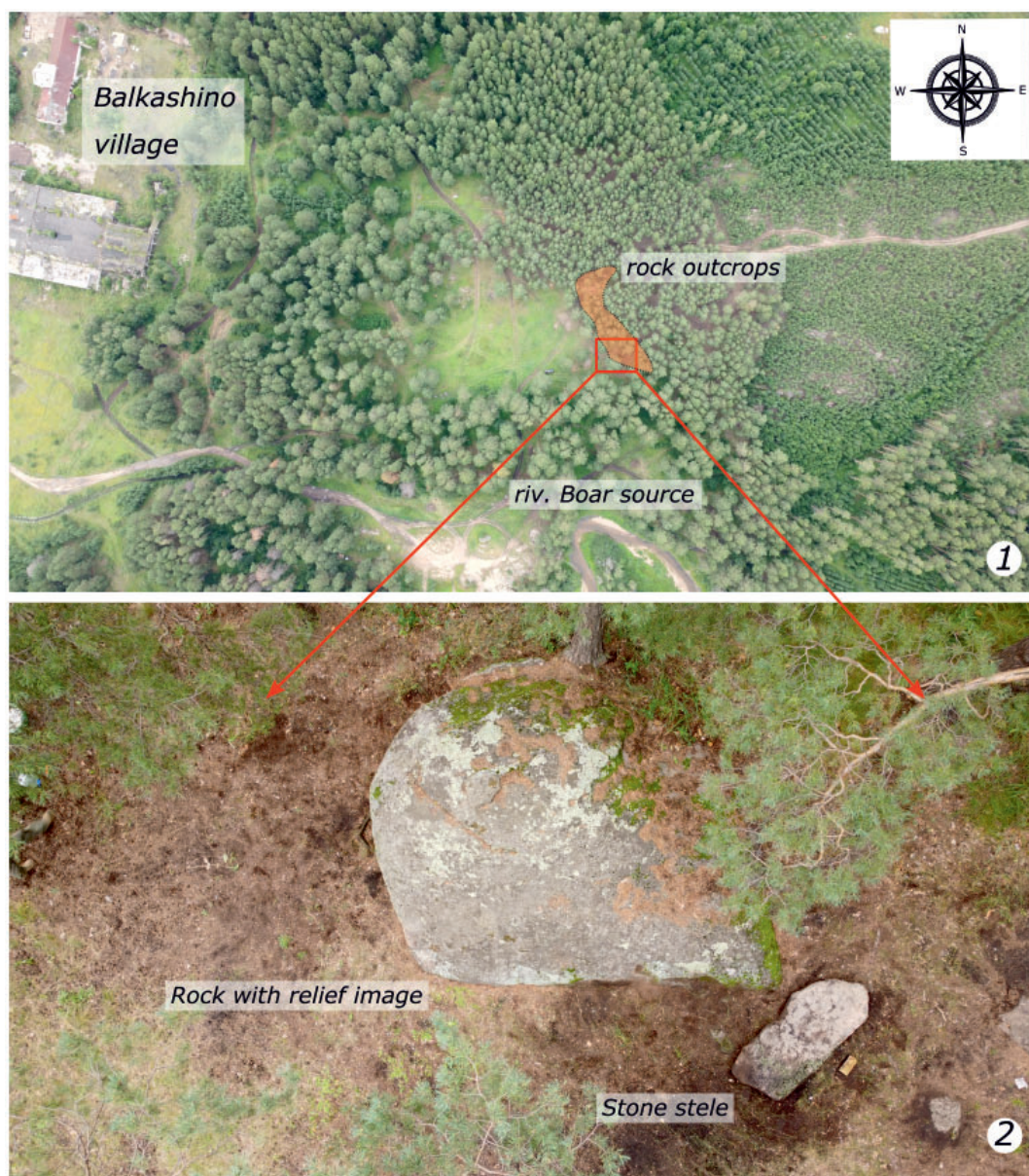


Fig. 2. Location of the rock with the image of a face and the stele:

1 – general plan of the area; 2 – boulder with relief and fallen stele

Рис. 2. Месторасположение валуна с изображением лица и стелы:

1 – общий план местности; 2 – валун с рельефом и поваленная стела

The granite boulder in plan has the shape of an irregular trapezoid with rounded outlines. The southern and western sides are aligned. In section, it is hemispherical with an elongated eastern edge. Dimensions 3×5 m, height 1,15 m. The rock material of the boulder is leucocratic granite with a high content of light-colored or colorless minerals (feldspars, quartz, feldspathoids). The image of a face is carved into the upper part of the western vertical smooth wall of the stone (Fig. 3).

The height of the face from the chin to the sloping forehead is 27 cm, the width along the

protruding cheekbones is 21 cm. The facial features are clearly visible in the image: eyes, nose, brow ridges, lips, chin. The outlines of the eyebrows and nose are T-shaped. The relief of the drawing is achieved by deep knocking along the contour of the face. The maximum 2-centimeter width of the formed edging and 2-centimeter depth are recorded on the left side of the face. On the right side at the same level there is a wide chip 14×15 cm with traces of undercutting and leveling. The walls of the edging are smooth, vertical. On the left side of the face along the



Fig. 3. Rock with a relief image of a face: 1 – western side; 2 – northern side; 3 – southern side; 4 – upper part
Рис. 3. Валун с рельефным изображением лица: 1 – западная сторона; 2 – северная сторона;
 3 – южная сторона; 4 – верхняя часть

inside, barely noticeable notches and chips are revealed.

The eyes are large, 6×2,5 cm in size, slightly convex, with a border about 4 mm wide and about 2 mm deep; they are not located on the same axis – the right one is slightly raised. A slightly round pupil can be seen on the left eye. The nose is fairly straight, 3 cm wide at the bridge, 4 cm at the base, 7,5 cm long, and about 1 cm high at its maximum. The tip of the nose is chipped. The distance from the edge of the nose to the lips is 1 cm.

The lips are full, slightly open, and naturally shaped. The philtrum of the upper lip is clearly visible. The labial commissure is covered with moss. The total height is 4 cm, the width is 5 cm. The upper lip is about 1.6 cm high, the lower lip is 2.1 cm. The distance from the lower lip to the chin is 6 cm. The chin is wide and rounded, with a 2 x 4 cm depression at its lower part. The forehead is sloping, the superciliary arches (especially above the right eye) are clearly visible. The height of the sloping forehead is 5 cm. On the face, slightly protruding cheekbones of a rounded shape with

a diameter of about 6–7 cm are visible; they are raised towards the upper part of the image (Fig. 4).

The wall of the rock with the image of a face shows traces of its processing, probably intended for better visual highlighting of the relief (Fig. 5). In addition to the deep outline around the relief, three more stages of impact on the stone are observed. On the right and left sides of the groove framing the relief, traces of chips are clearly visible; the right one is elongated, wider at the groove and gradually narrows to the right, located in the upper part of the wall of the stone. It has traces of subsequent processing in the form of hewing. The left chip is elongated along the groove and has an uneven torn edge. The chips were formed as a result of unsuccessful processing when creating the groove. In the first case, the break was quite wide, therefore, in order not to lose the artistic form of the composition, it was processed. The second chip is shallow, goes along the edge of the groove, so it was left unchanged.

The wall of the rock with the image of a face shows traces of its processing, probably

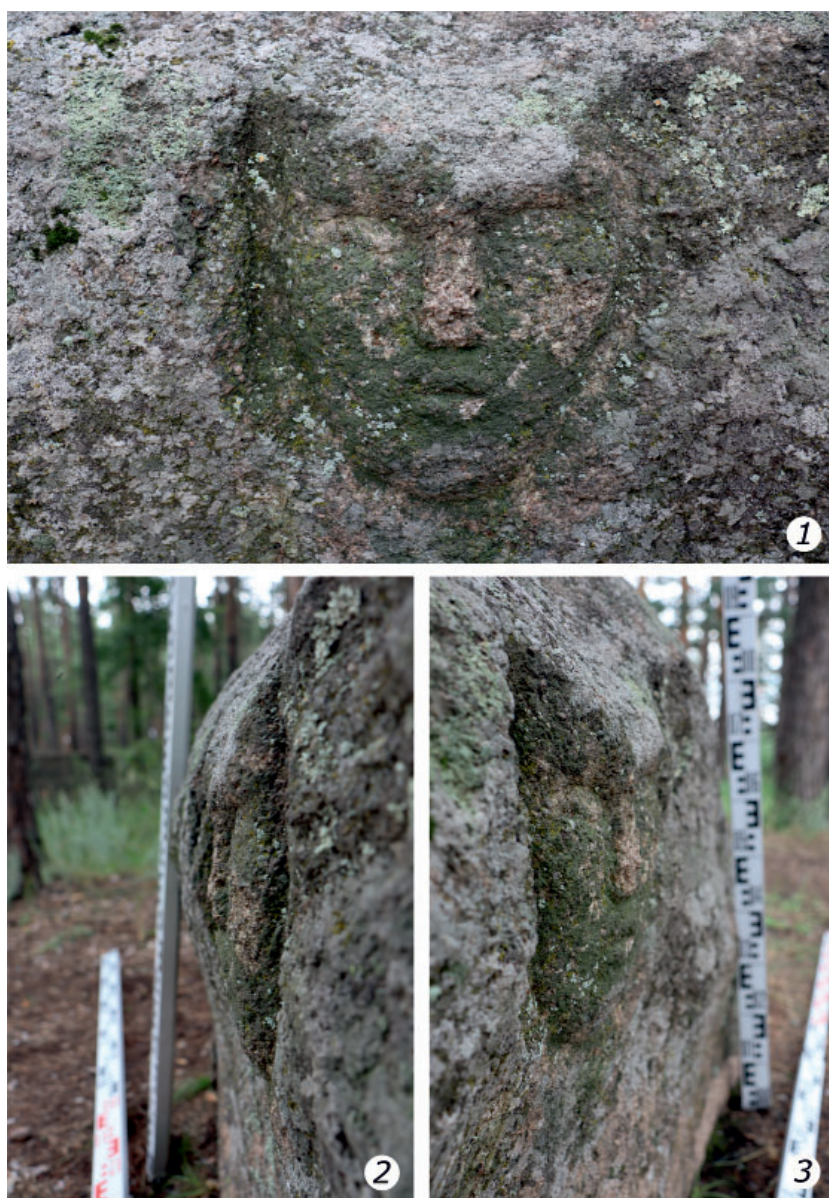


Fig. 4. Relief image of a human face: 1 – frontal view; 2 – view from the south; 3 – view from the north.

Рис. 4. Рельефное изображение лица человека: 1 – вид анфас; 2 – вид с южной стороны; 3 – вид с северной стороны

intended for better visual highlighting of the relief (Fig. 5). In addition to the deep outline around the relief, three more stages of impact on the stone are observed. On the right and left sides of the groove framing the relief, traces of chips are clearly visible; the right one is elongated, wider at the groove and gradually narrows to the right, located in the upper part of the wall of the stone. It has traces of subsequent processing in the form of hewing. The left chip is elongated along the groove and has an uneven torn edge. The chips were formed as a result of unsuccessful processing when creating the groove. In the first case, the break was quite wide, therefore, in order

not to lose the artistic form of the composition, it was processed. The second chip is shallow, goes along the edge of the groove, so it was left unchanged.

The rock was not chosen by chance, since it is the only one on the entire rock outcrop that has a vertical, flat surface. It is important to note that it is oriented towards the eastern sector.

As a result of the inspection of the area, a stone stele was discovered 1 meter to the south of the boulder (Fig. 6). Its lower wide part was sunk into the ground by 5 cm, covered with pine needles and household waste. Traces of a recent fire were recorded on its surface. After

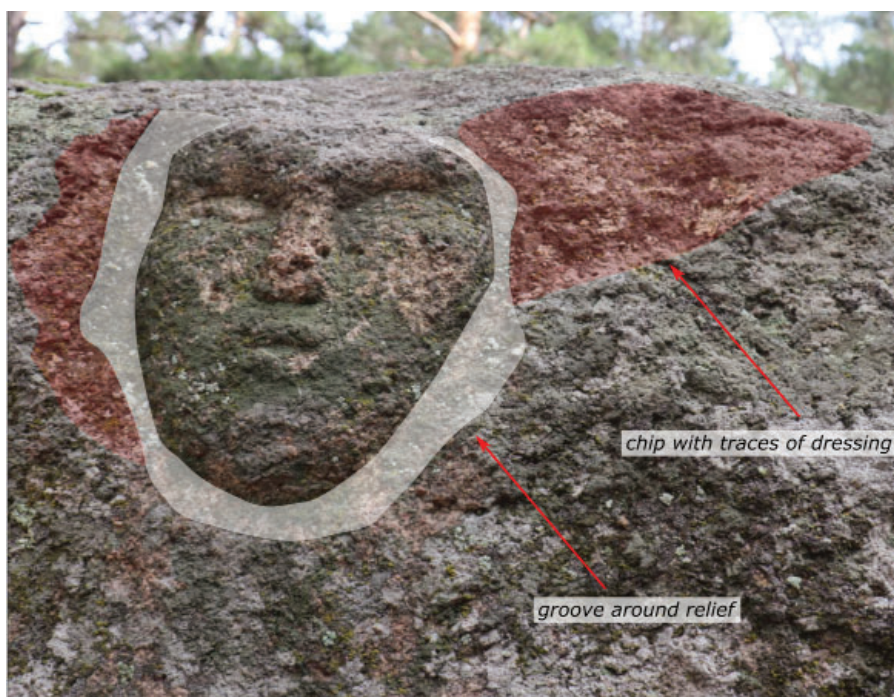


Fig. 5. Traces of processing around the face image
Рис. 5. Следы обработки вокруг лицевого изображения

cleaning and extraction, its shape and size were determined.

The object was a processed granite slab (Fig. 6). Height 2,3 m, width 0,8; 0,7; 0,75 m, thickness 0,3–0,15 m. Traces of processing are visible on the surface. The upper part is hewn on both sides and rounded near the top, weakly profiled shoulders are noticeable along the edges. Along the center of the narrow edge of the stele there is a wide chip with traces of dressing, which visually divides the slab into two parts. On the opposite side, a similar design element is barely outlined, its width is 0,5 m, depth 0.1 m. The lower part of the stele is not processed, it is better preserved; in this part it is clearly visible that the slab was dug in to a depth of 0,4 to 0,5 m.

A poorly preserved petroglyph of a deer was found in the upper part of the stele. It is made with a wide and deep carving. The overall dimensions are about 0,4×0,4 m. The depth of the carving is 1–2 cm, the width is 2,5–3 cm. The body and two legs of the deer are depicted quite schematically - in the form of brackets. The head is large, the long muzzle is clearly visible. Two differently designed branches of antlers go back from the head. The upper one is shown as an arc, at the end there is an element in the form of a hook. The lower one is damaged, but three separate branches can be seen. Below on the surface of the

stele, other carvings are visible, but the degree of their preservation prevents a clear attribution.

Next to the base of the stele and closer to the boulder with the facial image, a second boulder measuring 0,3×0,5 m was cleared, which served as a support for fixing the first in a vertical position.

The stele lay with the image of a deer upward, the base to the east. Judging by the position of the supporting stone, the stele was installed with its wide part along the west-east axis. Based on its position on the ground, we can conclude that the base was directly opposite the orientation of the face - towards the sunrise. However, it was probably turned over after the fall, since in the fixed state it was significantly deviated from the axis of the main direction when it fell. Therefore, initially the petroglyph of a deer and the facial image were oriented in the same direction.

Discussion

The chronology of the complex, its synchronicity and the relationship of its constituent objects raise questions. First, it is worth paying attention to the stele and the image carved on it, since the questions of their chronology are more unambiguous and less debatable.

Several monuments have been recorded on the territory of the Kokshetau Upland to date, which include two small stone steles from the

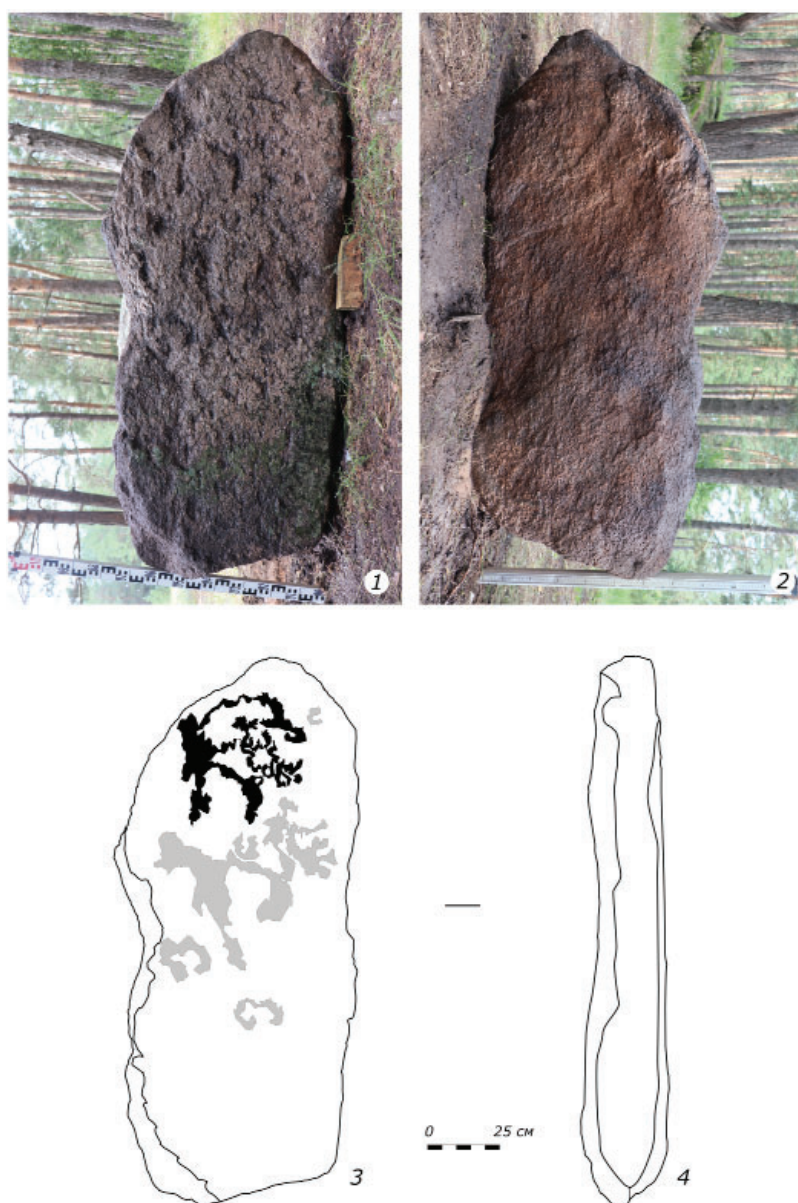


Fig. 6. Stone stele with an image: 1 – front side; 2 – back side; 3 – drawing of the front side with the image of a deer at the top; 4 – profile of the stele

Рис. 6. Каменная стела с изображением: 1 – лицевая сторона; 2 – задняя сторона; 3 – прорисовка лицевой стороны с изображением оленя в верхней части; 4 – профиль стелы

Taskamal megalithic complex, two steles near the Bronze Age burial and memorial structures at the Kenotkel XVIII and Tazhygul burial grounds; one stele is placed in a Bronze Age burial at the Kyzyltobe burial ground (Fig. 7). The slabs found in the region can be classified as fairly standard *koytas*, common in Central Kazakhstan during the Late Bronze Age and shaped like pillars with a beveled top (Margulan, 1998, p. 331–350; Beisenov, Varfolomeev, 2008).

Steles dating to an earlier period demonstrate fairly similar shapes. Similar monoliths were

recorded in the Kyzylshoky group on the Nurtai River, at the northeastern foot of Mount Korpetai, 3 km northwest of the village of Kanattas (Fig. 8: 1). The group is a stone alley about 250 m long. The largest menhirs are installed at the ends of the line. These are huge, rough blocks of stone (marl) of flat outline, slightly hewn into a sub-triangular shape and installed with their tops up. Their parameters are almost identical: height 3.5–4 m, width of the base of the triangle 2.8–3 m, thickness 60–80 cm (Margulan, 1998, 332–335, Fig. 167).



Fig. 7. Steles and sculptures of the Bronze Age and early Iron Age: 1, 2 – steles from the megalithic complex Taskamal; 3 – stele at the burial grounds of Kenotkel XVIII; 4 – stele at the burial ground of Tazhegul; 5 – stele from a burial in the fence of the burial ground Kyzyltobe

Рис. 7. Стелы и изваяния эпохи бронзы и раннего железного века: 1-2 – стелы из мегалитического комплекса Таскамал; 3 – стела на могильниках Кеноткель XVIII; 4 – стела на могильнике Тажегул; 5 – стела из погребения в ограде могильника Кызылтобе

Steles of similar shapes with weak processing and almost natural forms are found in Altai in the Karakol culture of the Bronze Age, for example, steles from Kalbak-Tash I on the right bank of the Chuya River. In one case, on the Nizhniy Inegen River, in addition to drawings, a relief image of a human face was found on the side face of a stele (Kubarev, 2009, 238, 245, Fig. 171, 184). This stele and some others have various petroglyphs on their wide edges, most often these are figures of animals, people and various symbols. The silhouettes of goats, which are shown with large

heads on a fairly schematic body with two legs (Fig. 8: 2, 3), attract attention. The iconography is quite close to the petroglyph of a deer on the stele from Balkashino.

Territorially closer analogies to the deer figure are known from the Bronze Age materials and in the transitional to the early Iron Age sites of the Burabay district of the Akmola region and Pavlodar region.

The drawing of a deer on the inner wall of the box from fence No. 50 of the Kyzyltobe burial ground of the Fyodorovka and Sargara period

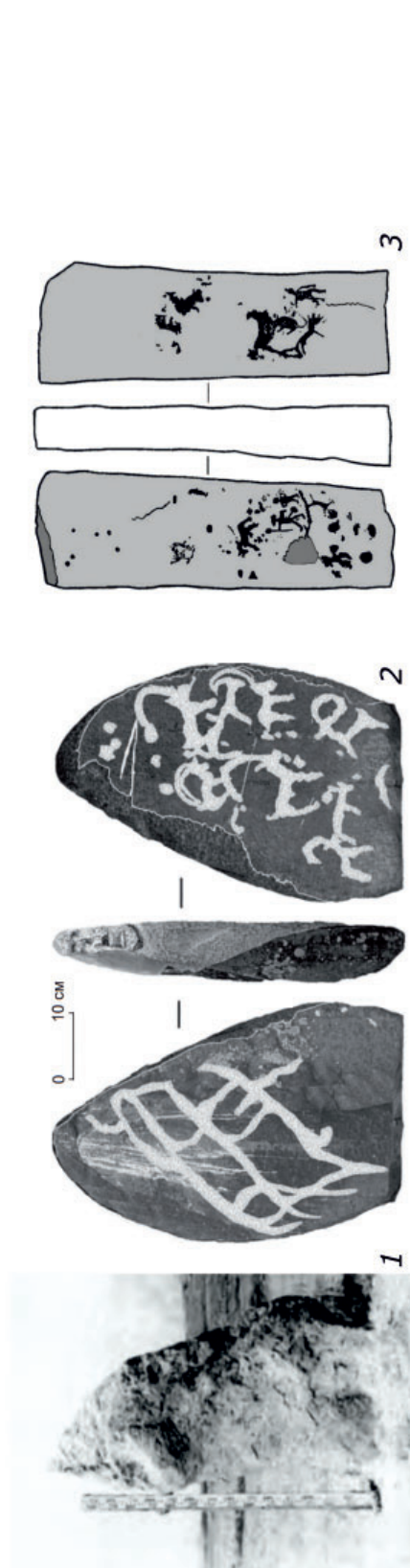


Fig. 8. 1 – stele from the Kyzylshokly group; 2 – stele with a mask and drawings from the valley of the Nizhniy Inegen River (Altai) (after Kubarev, 2009); 3 – stele with drawings from Kalbak-Tash I (Altai) (after Kubarev, 2009).

Рис. 8. 1 – стела из группы Кзылшоқы; 2 – стела с личиной и рисунками из долины реки Нижний Инегень (Алтай) (по: Кубарев, 2009); 3 – стела с рисунками из Калбак-Таш I (Алтай) (по: Кубарев, 2009)

in the Burabay district can be attributed to the same tradition as the petroglyph on the stele. The monument is of interest due to its unambiguous ritual purpose. It is a stone square fence, in the center of which there was a box made of massive granite slabs. The box was installed in a pre-dug rectangular pit measuring 1,75×1,4 m and 1.4 m deep. It was constructed from two long granite slabs measuring 1,65×1,6×0,2 m and two small end slabs measuring approximately 1,6×1,0×0,15 m. A hole was made in the large slab, forming an opening with a diameter of 0.9 m at the junction of the covering slabs. The dimensions of the covering slabs were 1,45×1,40×0,2 and 2,5×0,6×0,5 m. There was no burial; a round red granite boulder covered with white chalk powder was found at the bottom of the box. Radiocarbon dating of materials from adjacent enclosures yields the following dates: Enclosure No. 9: 1742–1542 BC; Enclosure No. 13: 1732–1533 BC; Enclosure No. 23: 1861–1565 BC; Enclosure No. 29: 1881–1641 BC (Yarygin et al., 2024, 12).

The same group of drawings is joined by the image of a goat on the stele from the Toraigyr complex studied in 2002 and 2008 (Peresvetov, 2010). The monument is located 500 m to the east of the eastern shore of the lake, to the north of the mountain-forest massif of Bayanaul. The object consists of 12 stone mounds of the early Iron Age, stretched in two chains from the southwest to the northeast (the southern part of the complex) and from the south to the north (the northern part). The complex includes cult objects: burial mounds with "whiskers" and stone steles. An inspection of the complex in 2024 showed that five steles can be attributed to the *koytas* type of the Late Bronze Age, but such forms are not typical of the Begazy-Dandybay culture and are found in the final part of the Late Bronze Age or in the transitional period to the Early Iron Age. The sixth stele belongs to the deer stone type; on its surface it has an image of galloping deer and an incomplete image of a tiger with an ornamented body. Such steles and the petroglyph style became widespread in the eastern regions of Central Asia at the turn of the 2nd–1st millennia BC.

Steles are divided into three types: 1) columnar: a) round in cross-section (2); b) square in cross-section (1); 2) rectangular in cross-section with a highlighted upper part with an image of rings, and in one case - with a drawing of a quiver, a goat

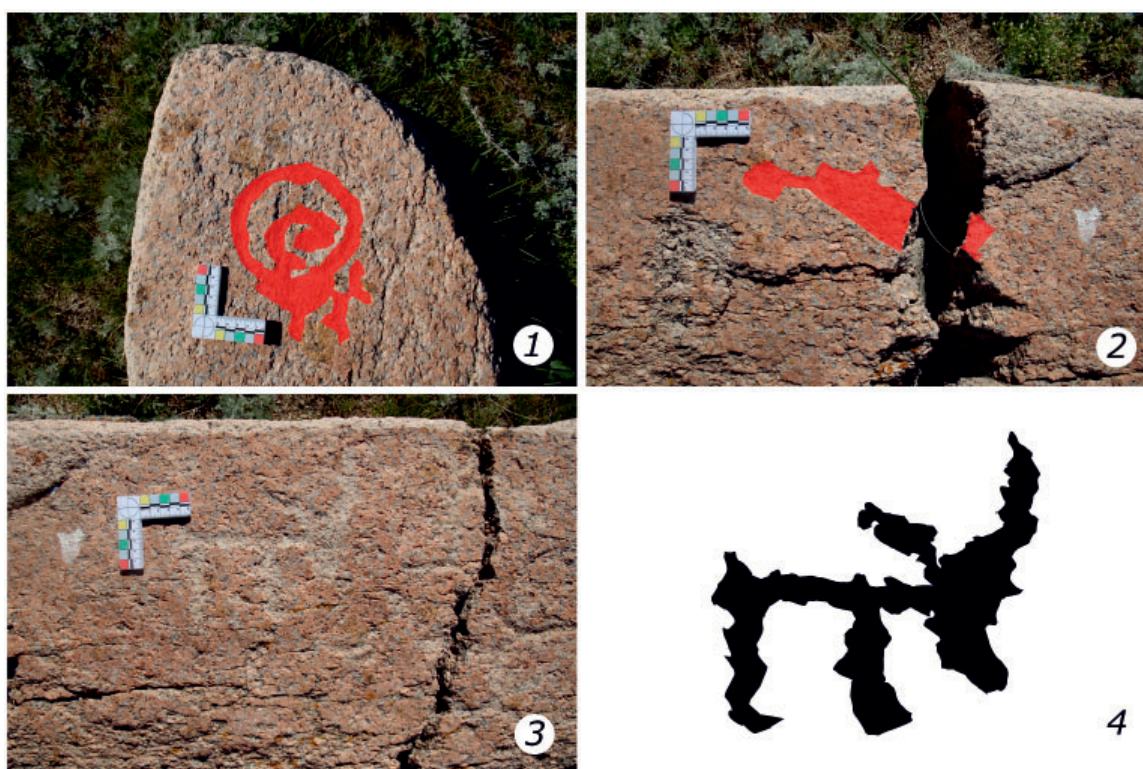


Fig. 9. Stele with images from the Toraigyr complex: 1 – upper part of the stele; 2 – petroglyph of a goat; 3 – petroglyph of a scabbard or quiver; 4 – drawing of a petroglyph of a goat

Рис. 9. Стела с изображениями из комплекса Торайгыр: 1 – верхняя часть стелы; 2 – петроглиф козла; 3 – петроглиф ножен или колчана; 4 – прорисовка петроглифа козла

(deer?) and other animals (2); 3) a flat slab with drawings of deer in the Transbaikal-Mongolian style and a tiger (1). Of interest is the stele with a vertical image of a goat. The figure has a simple U-shaped body, two legs, a large triangular head, from which large horns extend (Fig. 9).

Comparing the three figures from Balkashino, Burabay and Bayanaul, it can be noted that the first, in terms of style, occupies an intermediate position between the second and third. This may also indicate chronology. Fence No. 50 is dated to a time no later than the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, and the stele from Toraigyr dates back to the turn of the 2nd-1st millennia BC. Thus, the stele, which is part of the complex near the village of Balkashino, can be confidently dated to the period from the Eneolithic to the Late Bronze Age. The lower date is indirectly confirmed by monuments located along the Zhabai River, downstream, 2,2 km south of the Sandyktau mountain range (Fig. 10).

In 2023, archaeological work was carried out in the region at the Sandyktau settlement, Sandyktau 2 and 3 burial grounds. Reconnaissance surveys in their vicinity revealed copper workings. The studied sites have an internal structural

connection, demonstrating the development of the local territory by ancient groups. At the Sandyktau settlement, 22 pits from household and farm buildings were recorded. The pits are organized into four linear structures oriented along the northwest – southeast axis. The largest pits are located in the northern part of the settlement. The size of the site is 130×325 sq. m. (Sakenov et al., 2024).

Throughout the area of the settlement, numerous fragments of ceramic vessels and other remains of the life of the ancient population are found on the modern surface. Fragments of Alekseev-Sargara ceramics are recorded everywhere in the cultural layer, which determine the cultural affiliation and chronology of the site. Slag and parts of copper products were found in this layer – by-products of copper smelting, as well as animal bones. A 12×12 m excavation was made at pit No. 8. As a result of the excavations, an ancient furnace was discovered. The presence of two pools for secondary ore processing and ore workings located 1 km east of Sandyktau indicates that its inhabitants were associated with copper mining and smelting (Sakenov et al., 2024). Radiocarbon dates obtained at the

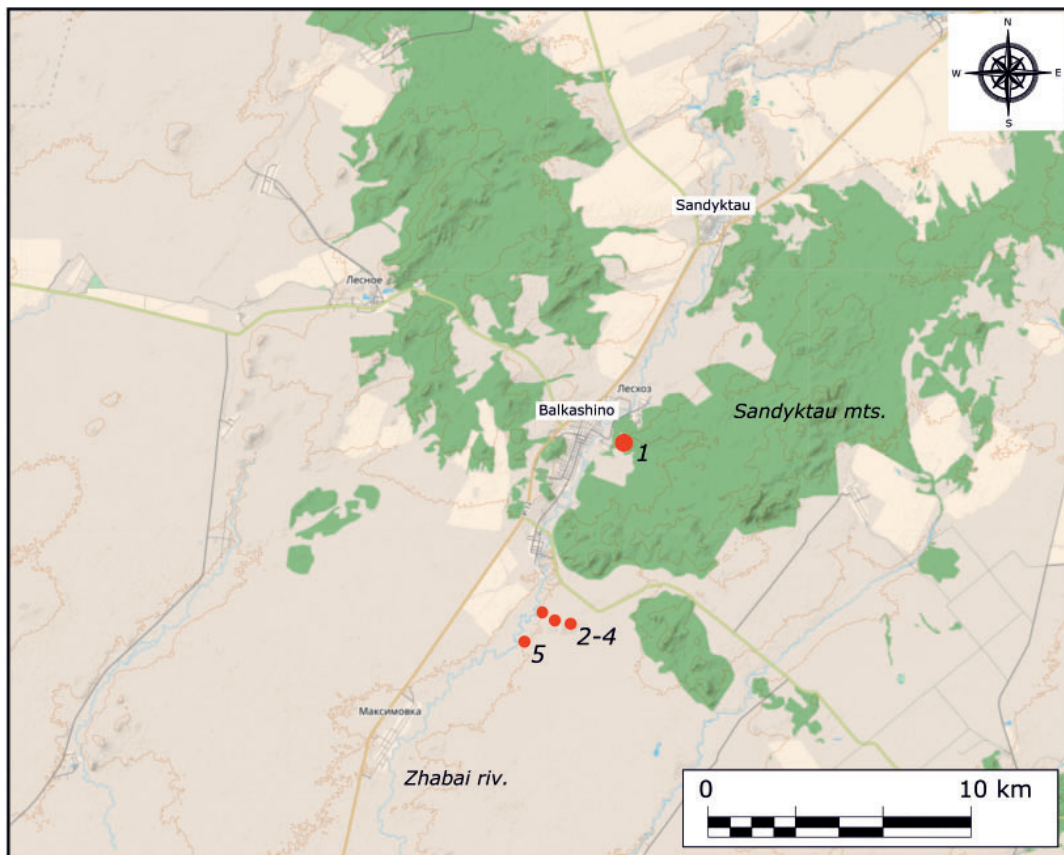


Fig. 10. Location of Bronze Age sites in the Sanddyktau Mountains: 1 – Balkashino complex; 2 – Sanddyktau settlement; 3 – Sanddyktau 2 burial ground; 4 – mine workings; 5 – Sanddyktau 3 burial ground (the map was created based on data from the website: <https://www.cyclosm.org/#map=5/49.233/427.535/cyclosm>)

Рис. 10. Месторасположение памятников бронзового века в горах Сандыктау: 1 – комплекс Балкашино; 2 – поселение Сандыктау; 3 – могильник Сандыктау 2; 4 – горные выработки; 5 – могильник Сандыктау 3 (карта создана на основе данных сайта - <https://www.cyclosm.org/#map=5/49.233/427.535/cyclosm>)

CHRONO Centre Queens University Belfast (Northern Ireland) allow us to date the settlement and burial ground of Sanddyktau 2 closer to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, and the ground burial ground of Sanddyktau 3 to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. In this case, the stele can be dated within the same chronological framework of the beginning – second half of the 2nd millennium BC and be associated with the cult practice of ancient miners who settled in the foothills of Sanddyktau in the Late Bronze Age.

There are no direct analogues of the face on the boulder in the territory of Northern Kazakhstan, however, in a number of monuments of the region and more broadly – Central Asia there are items and objects with images of faces of a similar type. In the Akmola region, the tradition of making statuary monuments, facial sculptures, anthropomorphic figurines or images of a face on individual objects dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. A small collection of anthropomorphic

figurines discovered by chance in Northern Kazakhstan dates back to the time from the Eneolithic to the Bronze Age. The list includes three figurines: two from the Kostanay region – figurines No. 48 and 50 (Kostanay Regional History Museum, Republic of Kazakhstan), one from the Akmola region – No. 49 (State Hermitage Museum, Russian Federation). The same list can include a figurine with a broken upper part from excavation 21 of the Eneolithic settlement of Botai. All figurines are depicted in a standard sitting position, arms bent at the elbows and directed parallel to the front. Shown are large eyes, feet, fists, a large, triangular nose, the tip of which is raised upward. Two figurines have round caps, similar to the headdress of the character from the top of the dagger from Rostovka (Novozhenov, 2015, 315, Fig. 1).

Another group of images from Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan is associated with small sculpture. It includes two clay sculptural heads,



Fig. 11. Facial images on masks and sculptures in the Bronze and Early Iron Age cultures: 1 – a mask from the Pyshminsky treasure (after Borodovsky & Oborin, 2020); 2 – a mask from the Xiaohe burial ground (after Molodin, 2019); 3 – an image of a face on a stele near the Nizhny Inegen River (after Kubarev, 2009); 4 – an anthropomorphic sculpture of the Early Iron Age, discovered near the city of Stepnogorsk (photo by S.A. Yarygin); 5 – Anthropomorphic pestle of the 15th-16th centuries BC, National Museum of Kazakhstan; 6 – Medieval female stone sculpture (after Margulan, 2003, Fig. 21.2); 7 – Grooved stone with the image of a human face from a neolithic settlement near Lake Akkol. Turgay Steppe, Kazakhstan (after Margulan, 2008, Fig. 200)

Рис. 11. Лицевые изображения на масках и изваяниях в культурах бронзового и раннего железного века: 1 – личина из Пышминского клада (по: Бородовский, Оборин, 2020); 2 – маска из могильника Сяохэ (по: Молодин, 2019); 3 – изображение лица на стеле у реки Нижний Инеген (по Кубареву, 2009); 4 – изображение лица на стеле у р. Нижний Инегень (по: Кубарев В.Д., 2009); 5 – антропоморфное изваяние раннего железного века, обнаруженное у г. Степногорска (автор фото С.А. Ярыгин); 5 – антропоморфный пестик XV–XVI вв. до н.э., Национальный музей Казахстана; 6 – средневековая женская каменная скульптура (по Маргулану, 2003, рис. 21.2); 7 – рифленый камень с изображением человеческого лица из неолитического поселения близ озера Акколь. Тургайская степь, Казахстан (по Маргулану, 2008, рис. 200)

a bronze miniature head of a person (kept in the museum of the city of Zaisan), a stone pestle from the banks of the Nura River, seven stone staffs from the foothills of Altai.

This series demonstrates different artistic techniques of manufacture. For example,

the staff from Eastern Kazakhstan combines anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. The Irsky staff in its top forms two human heads with well-detailed details – large round eyes, hooked noses and clearly rendered ear details. The sculpture of the human head has a round cap decorated

along the lower edge with a carved triangular ornament, detailed facial features: eyes, hair, ears, mouth, large triangular nose (Novozhenov, 2015, 318-320, Fig. 6; Kyzlasov, 1956; Samashev & Zhumabekova, 1993; Zakharov, 2023). Both groups of objects are polymorphic and represent items of status and cult purposes. According to researchers, they are reduced copies of stone anthropomorphic steles. The reason for their use is related to the mobile type of economy and living conditions. In the case of stationary habitation, ancient communities erected monumental steles (Novozhenov, 2015, p. 320).

A similar type of facial image is the plate mask with a relief composite nose from the complex of bronze Seima-Turbino objects discovered in the Tyumen region, in the lower reaches of the Pyshma River (Russia) (Borodovsky & Oborin 2020). The list of analogies includes wooden masks of the Xiaohe culture from Xinjiang (Molodin, 2019) and the above-mentioned face on the stele from the Altai territory (Fig. 11: 1–3).

In addition to the relief from Balkashino, on the territory of the Kokshetau Upland, there is another relief image in the form of a cow or a bull as part of the Taskamal megalithic complex, which dates back to the 3rd–2nd millennia BC (Yarygin et al., 2024). In the northwestern region of Kazakhstan, a significant number of so-called grooved stones have been collected, including those with images of human faces. For example, a grooved stone found in a neolithic settlement near Lake Akkol – in shape and style it is similar to our object under study, with the difference that it is presented in miniature size (Fig. 11: 7). Similar stones are found with or without images on monuments whose chronology covers the 4th–3rd

millennia BC. In the region under study, stone rods and pestles with images of human faces were found, for example, an anthropomorphic pestle, a random find, stored in the National Museum of Kazakhstan, dated to the Bronze Age (Fig. 11: 5).

The tradition of creating three-dimensional images of faces continued in Northern Kazakhstan in the early Iron Age and the Middle Ages. These include a statuary monument discovered in the vicinity of the city of Stepnogorsk (Fig. 11: 4). Following identical sculptures from Central Kazakhstan, it is dated within the 7th–5th centuries BC (Beisenov & Ermolenko, 2014). Rare statuary monuments associated with Turkic-speaking nomads in the region are dated to the Middle Ages.

Conclusions

Modern archaeological research in the territory of the Kokshetau Upland shows a wide variety of monuments that testify to different aspects of the life of the ancient population of the region. The list includes numerous burial grounds, burial mounds, sites, settlements, and mine workings. The results of the 2024 work make it possible to include objects of religious significance in it. These certainly include a huge boulder with a human face imprinted on it, located on a leveled area to the east of the village of Balkashino. Apparently, the image is associated with the activities of groups that settled in the 2nd millennium BC along the Zhabai and Sarkyrama rivers. The boulder with the image of a face, as well as the stele, most likely indicate a place where ancient inhabitants performed memorial and religious rites. The relief of the face can be dated in a much wider range than the stele – from the Eneolithic to the early Middle Ages.

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Статья поступила в журнал 08.06.2025 г.
Статья принята к публикации 28.10.2025 г.
Авторы внесли равноценный вклад в работу