

HORSE AND HORSE-RELATED EQUIPMENT IN OKS CIVILIZATION

Jalilov Doston Muhiddin ugli

Doctoral student of Termez State University

djalilov367@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes the occurrence of horses and horse-related equipment characteristic of nomadic pastoral communities from the Eurasian steppes within the territory of the Oxus civilization. The study examines how these objects were incorporated into cultural life and elucidates their functional and symbolic significance. Additionally, the article demonstrates the role of this phenomenon in the process of cultural interactions between the southern oases and the northern steppes.

Keywords: Jarkutan, Gonur Cemetery, Dashli, Suvliq, horse burial, Swat Cemetery, headless interment.

At the end of the 3rd millennium BC and the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, the southward migration processes of nomadic pastoral communities formed in the Eurasian steppes intensified. Archaeological and anthropological research indicates that one of the main directions of these movements was through the territory of Turan towards the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau. In the dynamics of these migratory processes, a significant role was played by the rapid introduction of horses into economic and military life, as well as the emergence of horse-drawn wagons.

In particular, the development of rounded wheeled cart technology served as one of the main factors driving these movements. Rounded chariots were first identified in artifacts belonging to the Sintashta culture and are considered the earliest war chariots driven by horses. The transmission of this technology to the south is reflected in the models of rounded wheeled carts discovered in the territory of the Oxus civilization, specifically at the Gonur-depe archaeological site. These findings confirm the complex and multi-layered nature of cultural and technological exchange between the steppe regions and the southern oases at the end of the Bronze Age [3].

Typically, the presence of horses and associated equipment in archaeological complexes is interpreted by researchers as one of the cultural and traditional markers of the Aryans. This is primarily attributed to the horse's role in socio-spiritual life, its contribution to the development of military technologies and transportation, as well as its central position in the lifestyle of nomadic groups. Consequently, the occurrence of horse-related equipment, horse imagery, or equine remains in archaeological materials from various regions is often regarded as a significant indicator of connections with steppe cultures. One of the most crucial pieces of evidence demonstrating the ritual importance of horses within the Oxus civilization is a unique discovery recorded in the Gonur-depe necropolis. The identification of a foal's body among the burials at this site, interred in a curled position but lacking a skull, indicates the complexity of ritual practices. The fact that the horse's body was buried in a manner similar to human graves, coupled with the absence of its head, may suggest ritual sacrifice, symbolic separation, or other concepts within the religious beliefs of that era. Such a finding demonstrates that in the Oxus civilization, horses were recognized not only as domestic animals but also as creatures of distinct religious and ideological significance. Furthermore, it holds special scientific value as a unique archaeological evidence of cultural, technological, and religious ties with steppe pastoral societies. A similar burial condition has also been identified in the Swat Valley of Pakistan [6].

Most of the earliest fragments of horse bits were made from red deer antlers, and some were made from rib bones. The hypothesis that initially the bones of small animals were used as bits has not been confirmed by material evidence. Only the characteristic technical, artistic, and stylistic features of bronze casting from the Karasuk period, reminiscent of "bone prototypes," are present in bronze bits [9]. In Bronze Age assemblages from Hungary and China, a fragment of a horn bit has been clearly documented [1, 2, 8].

A particularly striking category of the material culture of the Petrovka population consists of bone-made cheek pieces. They are found in archaeological sites across a vast territory of the Ural-Kazakh steppes, from Central Kazakhstan to the Southern Urals [7]. In the Irtysh settlements and burial grounds of Petropavlovsk alone, 13 specimens were discovered. G.B. Zdanovich classified them into three types according to their shape: rectangular, round (disc-shaped), and segmental. Most of these artifacts feature spikes [5].

In the Zarchakhalifa settlement in the Zarafshan River basin, a bridle bit and cheek-piece with a zoomorphic head, characteristic of Eurasian steppe cultures, were discovered [4].

The appearance of horses and related items in the Oxus civilization firstly shows the influence of steppe pastoralists on the cultural and social class system. Secondly, the horse-related tradition in burial elements entered the burial practices of the Oxus civilization as a new phenomenon. Thirdly, the horse was introduced for the first time in the social worldview of the inhabitants of the Oxus civilization.

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