

The Fellowship of the Ring



Burial Mounds of the Katanda Valley



Key words: Gorny Altai, Pazyryk culture, Afanasyevskaya culture, mound, Katanda-3

Mounds and stone rings, circular ditches and cromlechs (i.e., megalithic religious structures in the form of stone circles) appeared in the vast expanses of Eurasian steppes and foothills in the Early Bronze Age. This tradition persisted until the Middle Ages, uniting different cultures and peoples under the common principle of constructing a ringed space around the graves of fellow tribespeople

Archaeological expeditions are always unpredictable, and it goes beyond their results. After traveling with her husband, an archaeologist, Agatha Christie wrote: "All digging is a gamble <...>. Luck is the predominant factor." Not only the outcome is unpredictable but life itself: What will it be like? What will the camp and the team be like? In the summer of 2020, we, the South Altai Team of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS, managed to escape the world of COVID-19 masks into the wilderness of the Altai Mountains to conduct excavations near the Katanda Kurgan, a well-known burial site of the Pazyryk culture. The mound we excavated turned out to be more than 2000 years older...

Our archaeological team came to the Katanda Valley (Ust'-Koksa region, Altai Republic) primarily because of a large Pazyryk burial mound. It was excavated back in 1865 by Academician V. V. Radlov and explored in 1954 by an Hermitage expedition led by A. A. Gavrilova.

Nevertheless, even today, this mound remains one of the most enigmatic burial sites of the *Pazyryk culture*.^{*} The 1954 excavations shed much light on the mound's design, but the structure itself had been in poor condition by the time when the works began. The burial, first dug open by looters and then by Radlov, who followed in their footsteps, had stood uncovered for nearly a century, and almost everything that could have remained within had either disappeared or turned to dust. Nevertheless, the 1954 expedition determined the dimensions and design of the mound and burial chambers (inner and outer); moreover, they discovered, in the northern section of the pit, a burial of 22 horses, which Academician Radlov had overlooked. All these finds led to the conclusion that the Katanda Kurgan was a typical burial site of the Pazyryk culture. But is it really that typical?

The Katanda Kurgan is famous for being the first studied burial site of a Scythian-period population in the Altai Mountains, featuring a so-called *frozen burial*. When Radlov's expedition – with great difficulty, lighting fires and thawing the ground, – unearthed one-third of this mound's burial chamber, having mistaken a looter's passage for the boundaries of the burial pit, they discovered two wooden beds, standing side by side at the bottom of a log structure. On these beds lay the skeletons of two individuals, who were buried without any belongings, their heads to the west. The skeletons, as the report noted, “were completely decayed, and they crumbled to dust upon touch” (Radlov, 1989, p. 448). Therefore, it will never be possible to determine the sex, age, and anthropological type of the deceased.

^{*} The historical period of the Scythian era in Altai is called the Pazyryk culture after the Pazyryk burial mounds, which were studied in 1929 by Mikhail P. Gryaznov and in 1947–1949 by Sergei I. Rudenko



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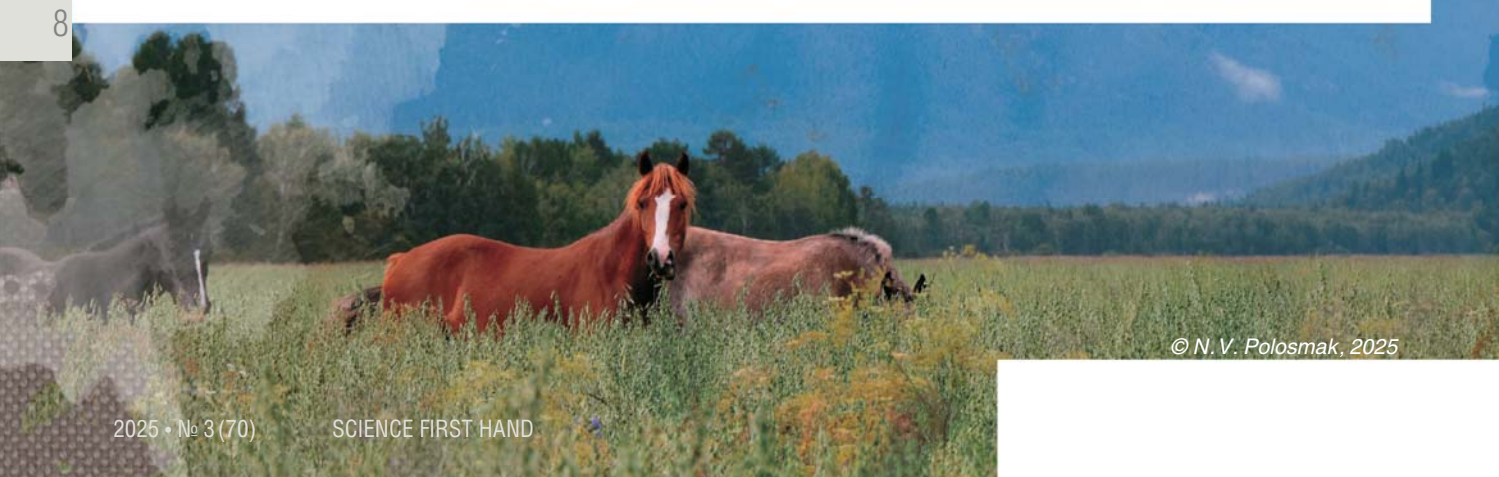
The well-preserved burial beds, one of which had “copper hoops” on its legs, were left in the grave, and by 1954 no trace of them had remained (Gavrilova, 1956). But Radlov did take away something very unusual: “On the western log, there lay a leather bundle, covered in a hard crust of ice about three inches thick. I ordered the log to be cut out and removed from the pit along with the ice. When the ice melted, the bundle turned out to be a tailcoat-like garment made of sable fur, covered with silk, with a trim of leather and small gold pieces along the edge... A little below the crossbeams, among the birch bark and inside a piece of ice, we found a rolled-up garment made of ermine fur, dyed green and red, with buttons and small gold plates as decoration, with long, narrow sleeves and a high collar.



Ak-Alakha-3 mound 1 with an ice-filled burial chamber that contained a larch log with the mummy of a woman, now known as the Altai Princess.
Photo by G. Gerster

The Pazyryk culture is an Iron Age archaeological culture (sixth to third centuries BC) whose bearers inhabited adjacent territories in the present-day Russia (Altai Mountains), Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. In the 1990s, an expedition from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS discovered on the Ukok Plateau “frozen” (i. e., ice-filled) graves of Pazyryk nobility, dating from the late fourth to early third centuries BC (Polosmak, 1994, 2001; Molodin, 2001). Unlike the well-known “royal” mounds (Rudenko, 1953, 1964), the ancient Ukok burials were undisturbed by looters and had almost maintained their

original form. Ancient ice thickness allowed the survival of all the objects made of organic materials (wood, leather, textiles, etc.) as well as the embalmed human bodies. In 1995, an intact “frozen” burial was discovered on Ukok, which contained the mummy of a noblewoman, who became widely known as the Altai Princess. The “frozen” graves are a rare phenomenon in archaeology, owing their existence to the unique combination of natural conditions and the Pazyryk cultural traditions. They allowed archaeologists to obtain unique information about the life, customs, and beliefs of this ancient people



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only shows the high status of the deceased, who must have had spacious dwellings. It is also possible that the deceased of the Katanda Kurgan were buried on their own beds. One simply might not have had enough time or opportunity to make burial logs for them as the process of making such logs requires time, skill, and seasoned wood.

It is also unusual that this large mound of the Pazyryk nobility stands alone in the Katanda Valley, not surrounded by burial mounds of the fellow tribespeople. However, when it was erected, the valley had born traces of its former inhabitants – the surrounding pastures had contained burials of their former owners.

The burial mound that caught our attention is located on the right bank of the Upper Katanda River, in a valley marked by Radlov as the third cemetery. This burial field is currently referred to as Katanda 3. Pazyryk culture burial mounds are known to be arranged in chains in a meridional direction. The mound we selected for excavation was the second one in a chain stretching north to south and consisting of six surviving, albeit clearly disturbed, mounds. This chain started with a large Pazyryk mound, over 40 meters in diameter. Its stone structure was almost completely dismantled by the Turks, who placed their graves close to this giant and used the stones that the Pazyryk people had brought there long before them to build their own smaller mounds. This was, of course, easier and quicker than carrying the stones from the riverbed since the building material was literally at hand. The boulders of the large Pazyryk burial mound were enough to build ten Turkic ones. One can still clearly see the spoil heaps of these early medieval burial structures, excavated

By the year 2020, at the Katanda 2 archaeological site, located near the village of Katanda between the Malaya and Bolshaya Katanda rivers, archaeologists excavated, in addition to the Bolshoi Katanda Kurgan of the Pazyryk culture, 12 other mounds dating back to the 7th-8th centuries. Nine of these were studied in 1865 by Academician Radlov and two more by Rudenko in 1924. In 1954, here worked the Katanda Team of the Hermitage's Altai Expedition, which excavated five more burial mounds, of which only one undisturbed mound dated to this period.

It should be noted that in 1984, archaeologists excavated yet another burial field, 7–8 km northwest of Katanda on the right bank of the Upper Katanda River (marked previously by Radlov as Katanda 3). Here they studied three small burial mounds of the Pazyryk culture, which had been destroyed during reclamation works and plundered in ancient times (Mamadakov, 1995)

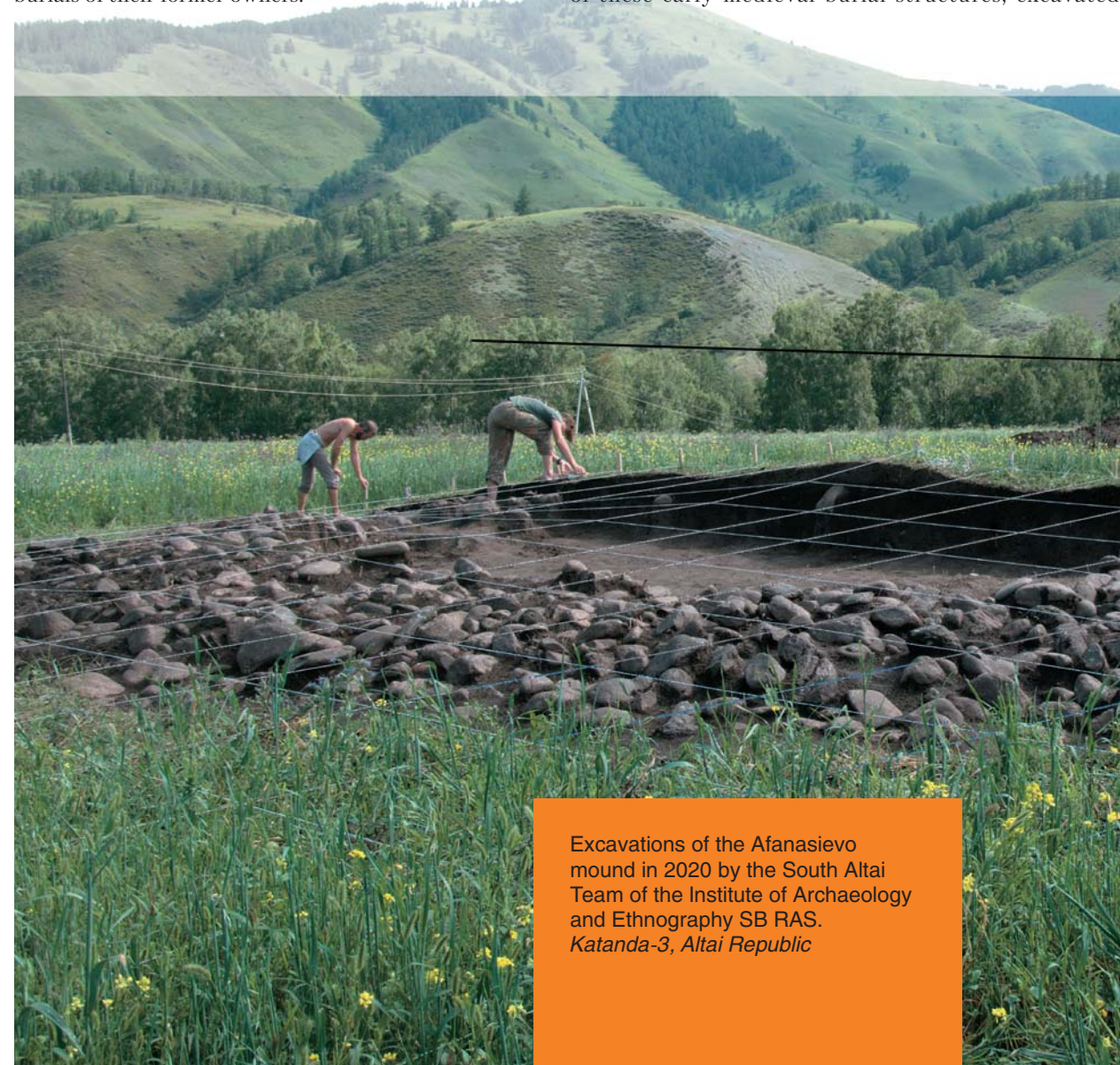
There was also an ermine breastplate and a silk ribbon with attached images of horses and fabulous beasts carved from wood” (*Ibid.*, p. 448). But why were these garments not on the buried people? Perhaps, it was looters who took them off the mummified bodies but, for some reason, forgot to take them away? But why then did the skeletons look undisturbed?

Judging by the description, these so-called *Katanda tailcoat* and *Katanda caftan* (the first Pazyryk clothes to be discovered) were found in very good condition. They were on display for a long time at the State Historical Museum in Moscow, but time and inadequate restoration methods have taken their toll on these unique pieces. They are now in storage and are undergoing further restoration, which, we hope, will save these priceless garments, which remain of paramount importance for studying the history of costume of ancient peoples in Central Asia.

An unusual thing about this burial is that the deceased were accompanied by 22 horses – more than in any royal Pazyryk mound we know – even though the Katanda Kurgan itself is not particularly large (40 m in diameter and just over 2 m in height). Furthermore, researchers found, together with the horses, fragments of three ceramic vessels, two of which had an original shape and elegant applied ornamentation. In Pazyryk burials, however, vessels usually stand next to the deceased.

Yet another exception is the use of beds instead of burial logs, which are common to all the excavated mounds of the Pazyryk nobility. A table similar to the beds of the Katanda Kurgan was discovered in the burial chamber of only one mound, i.e., the First Tuekta mound in Central Altai (Rudenko, 1960). In this mound, the deceased lay in a burial log and the bed-like table stood next to the western wall of the structure. A suggestion was put forth that it was a “postmortem table” used for manipulations to mummify the body of the deceased (Mylnikov and Stepanova, 2016).

But the key to the mystery lies, apparently, in the Katanda Kurgan. Judging by Radlov's reports and drawings, the mound did contain beds. As we know, some common Pazyryk people were buried on simple wooden beds 50 cm or more high. One of the most recent finds of this kind is wooden beds in Verkh-Kaldzhin 2 and Ak-Alakha 5 mounds on the Ukok Plateau. All these beds were made using the same principle; i.e., planks were placed tightly on a legged wooden frame. The beds in the royal mounds were higher and of better quality, but this fact



Excavations of the Afanasievo mound in 2020 by the South Altai Team of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS. Katanda-3, Altai Republic



in 1984 by Yuri T. Mamadakov. Whether the Turks looted the central grave or it remained intact is still unknown. However, the presence of the large Pazyryk burial mound at the beginning of the chain gave us hope that we had chosen for our excavations a mound that also belonged to the Pazyryk culture.

Covered in ochre, head to the west...

Today, all the valley of the Katanda River, in the upper reaches of the Katun River, has been put to economic use. There used to be functioning drainage canals here, lined with concrete slabs; the canals are still in good condition but have long been abandoned. Now, most of the land is under forage crops, and all that remains is used for haymaking. The fields are being cleared of stones; the land is being plowed. Due to these agricultural activities, many previously known archaeological sites simply disappear.

The mound we excavated in 2020 was heavily turfed so that the stones were barely visible. There was no depression at the center, which could have indicated

looting. Having cleared off the stonework, we revealed a robust structure, i.e., a ring approximately 2.5–3.5 m wide, composed of boulders and riverbed pebbles. The ring was not flat; it was rather an embankment gradually rising toward the center. It is possible to visualize how one could have built this structure. First, one dug a grave, over which, after burying the deceased, one erected an embankment (approximately 11 m in diameter) using the excavated soil and earth and then laid a ring of smooth stones around the perimeter. While clearing the eastern part of the stone ring, we discovered fragments of Afanasievo culture pottery between the stones, and, in the western part, we found animal bones.

The burial pit was marked by a very old marmot burrow, which the animal had dug directly into the grave. Archaeologists know that marmots, gophers, and other burrowing animals often disturb ancient burials, causing no less harm than two-legged looters: the animals sneak small objects into their burrows and destroy the integrity of the skeletons. Mounds provide a very convenient habitat for these animals, as the disturbed soil in the graves is always softer. In our case, the marmot walked over the skull



The first burial of the Afanasievo culture was excavated by Radlov on the Ursul River, in the Ongudai region of the Altai Mountains, back in 1865. If we take this date as the starting point of studying this culture, then we should admit that more than 150 years have passed since its discovery. During this time, archaeologists have discovered and studied a lot of sites, most of which are concentrated in the Altai Mountains and the Minusinsk Basin (Yenisei River basin). Afanasievo burials are also found in western Tyva and northwestern Mongolia, while individual sites and finds have been discovered in Xinjiang, China; in eastern Kazakhstan; and in eastern Uzbekistan. A recent radiocarbon analysis, which has dated the Afanasievo sites of the Altai Mountains to 3100–2900 BC and the Minusinsk sites to 3000–2500 BC, suggests that the Afanasievo people arrived in the Altai Mountains earlier than in the Minusinsk Basin (Polyakov, 2020)

with partly preserved remains of organic objects (birch bark vessels and a wooden ladle, staff, or rod) that the Afanasievo people placed in their burials (Savinov, 1994).

Two ceramic vessels were discovered along the southern wall of the grave. One of them, ornamented and ovoid in shape, was placed at chest level and crushed. The second one, a bright red, round-bottomed pot, stood next to the right hand of the deceased. It was unadorned but had visible traces of vertical smoothing with a comb stamp. This vessel appeared completely intact, but its integrity was deceptive – the ceramic was so fragile that it crumbled before our eyes, its shape being maintained only by the clay filling its interior.

A very important find was a small, thick-walled clay vessel on a round base, which was discovered within the stone ring. Its exterior was decorated with deeply indented diagonal lines, giving it the appearance of a Mediterranean shell. This kind of items, called incense burners, are rarely found in Afanasievo burials and mounds of the Altai Mountains – they are more common among the Afanasievo

of the deceased to remove the facial part, which it took to the pelvic area, and dislocated the toes. Also, a copper earring – a one-and-a-half-turn hoop – was discovered outside the stonework.

The deceased lay on the back, head to the west, slumped on the right side, with the knees bent. According to Mikhail P. Gryaznov, this position of the skeleton is due to the practice of burying the deceased on their backs with their knees bent – a posture assumed by a body that had been in a sitting position for some time before the burial.

The skull, ribcage, and leg bones of the deceased were stained burgundy-red. This may indicate that either the body was covered with ochre or that the ochre got to the bones from dyed clothing. Coalescing ochre spots were observed near the skeleton's bones, along the northern wall of the burial pit, marking the locations where some missing objects had likely lain. We can infer the latter from finds in the Afanasievo burials of Ukok, i.e., the only burial site





people of the Yenisei region. These objects are believed to have been used for burning aromatic plants (Vadetskaya, 1986). However, we found no definitive traces to draw conclusions about their use. Our cup, aside from the handle, which was broken off in ancient times, appears completely new. Such objects are usually considered either professional, implying the priestly functions of the deceased, or prestigious, indicating a high social status of the individual.

The latter consideration is further supported by some unusual features of the mound. The stone ring itself, which complements the natural soil embankment above the grave, is a fundamental structure that required considerable labor. The grave contained items rarely found in Afanasievo burials, i.e., the round-bottomed vessel and the incense burner. Furthermore, a small ring of large boulders and pebbles, likely ritualistic, was added to the northeast of the main stone ring. It was here, among the stones, that we discovered the incense burner;

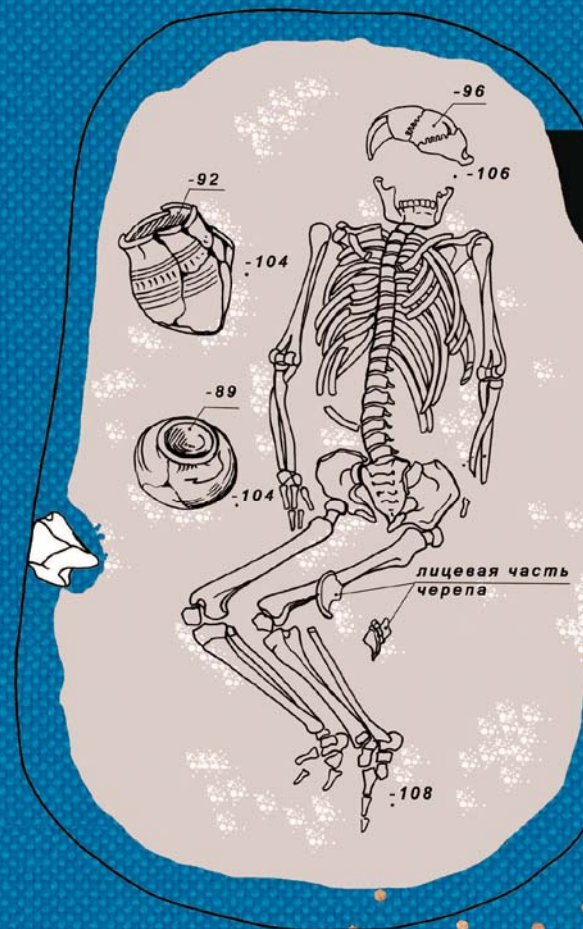
the small ovoid unadorned vessel, too, lay buried at the center of that ring.

Who they were and where they came from

The small number of finds in the burial is typical of the Afanasievo culture, whose graves stand out for the scarcity of grave goods. Meanwhile, the next-in-time *Karakol culture* of the Bronze Age in the Altai Mountains, despite the paucity of excavated sites, strikes one's imagination by its extraordinary art: colorful paintings and fine engravings on stone slabs that were used to build burial chambers – fantastical images, suggesting a wealth of mythological conceptions. However, when studying the more ancient Afanasievo culture, we find either no trace of art at all or very inexpressive samples.

But was it really so? How did the Afanasievo people of Altai manifest themselves? It would be wrong to say

On page 19



Male burial at Katanda 3 mound 32. At the center of the excavated burial pit, one can see remains of a wooden grave cover

Burial layout. Drawing by E. Shumakova

Burrowing animals such as gophers and marmots often break in and disturb ancient burials, causing no less harm than two-legged plunderers



AT THE BURIAL MOUND OF AFANASY KONSTANTINOVICH

There are still places where crystal cold rivers are flowing over rocks and stones; where dense forests with flowering thickets are full of berries, mushrooms, and birds; where wolves and sheep roam the mountains, and one calls his horse Prince... This horse belonged to the owner of the apiary where we stayed. Alexey invited us to pitch our tents in his hayfield, which made our life much easier since it had some of the infrastructure we would have spent much time to arrange. A little effort – and the camp looked as if it had been there for quite some time. Drinking water from the river, a wooden table under the apple trees, an old house where one could hide from thunderstorms and heat waves, a shower cabin made of planks and using the same river water, a fireplace with a pot hanging over it... We lived at the apiary, with bees working busily around us. They were in the midst of the honey harvest, their hives humming. The very independent gophers were busy too, stockpiling supplies for the winter. And so was our host. We, too, became part of this communal work process. Our day split into two work periods – before and after lunch – and time was running by at an incredible speed.

Seven people are quite a small group for digging a burial mound about 16 m in diameter. The hot summer forced us to be at the excavation site by 8 a.m. The clatter of wheelbarrows and shovels scared away the gophers, who had numerous burrows

in the mound, but they would endure till the last moment, living among the cleared stones. We rented from the owner for a month a piece of the field where the mound was located. The field was planted with oats, which had ripened while we were excavating. Up until our departure, we spent most of our day in the oat thickets, until one began to mow them.

But the main thing, of course, was the mound. Any excavation is always an intrigue. It is a story – with a beginning, a climax, and a resolution. We had not done any preliminary geophysical research because we were planning to excavate this site anyway. The Katanda Valley is full of mysteries; we did not choose this mound simply by chance. It was exciting for us to see what this mountain steppe looked like when the Pazyryk people erected their enormous burial mound here: What did they see? Why did they choose this place to live?

The mound we were studying appeared to be made of earth, but it turned out that the earth concealed a massive ring-shaped stone structure. I am still haunted by the thought that every single stone in our mound – from a large boulder only a strong man could lift to small pebbles a kid could carry – had only been touched by those who had brought them from the riverbed. Five thousand years have passed, and now we, who are destroying ancient structures in search of knowledge, are again holding these stones in our hands.

When it became clear that the mound belonged to the fascinating, little-studied Afanasievo culture of the Early Bronze Age, we, of course, immediately named the buried person Afanasy. And the youngest member of our expedition, Arisha Luchanskaya, who had been accompanied by her cat Klyaksa, called him Afanasy Konstantinovich.

Afanasy Konstantinovich, 35 years old, was a tall, powerful, and handsome man with even white teeth. His skeleton showed no signs of pathology; judging by his leg bones, he spent a lot of time walking and running in the mountains. The Afanasievo population had not yet adapted horses for riding, so Afanasy herded sheep and went hunting and fishing on foot. That's why he had very toned legs and a healthy spine, unlike the Pazyryk people, whose spines were devastated by horseback riding. "What sort of a 'pandemic' could have killed him in the prime of his life?" we wondered, reflecting on the global agenda of those days.

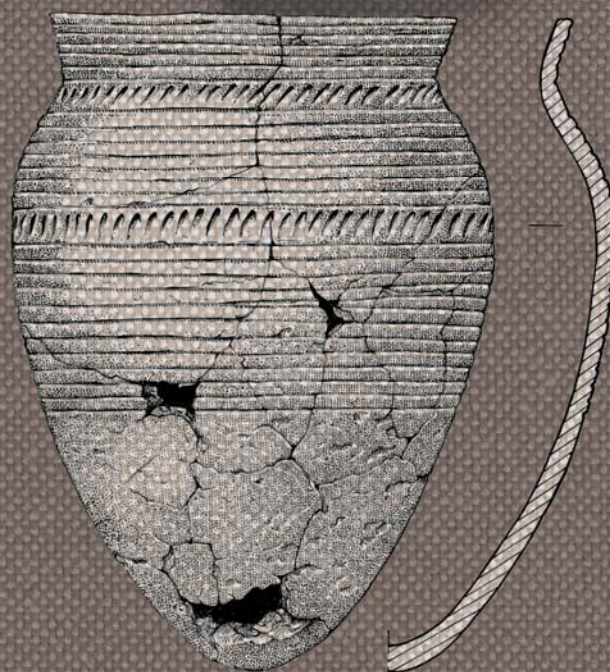
Of course, he was buried with great honors. The stone structure itself shows that one spared neither time nor effort to build it. Alas, time had destroyed everything that was dear to Afanasy, everything that accompanied him to the next world. It was only the incorruptible vessels that had remained. What were they filled with? What kind of aqua vitae was poured into the sharp-bottomed pot? The vessel split into pieces under the weight of the soil that filled the grave; its unknown contents had long since leaked out, but there is still a chance that we will find out, as our research opportunities continue to expand. Of course, Afanasy's fellow tribe wished him continued life in the realms where he had gone. The bones of his skeleton and skull are red with ochre, and red has always symbolized blood, the most essential substance of life. Some unknown ritual was performed at the burial, which required a small, intricate cup containing something very important... Large fragments of several vessels were found among the stones of the ring. "They drank and shattered them," Arisha commented, cleaning up the fragments. We had nothing to object.

Every mound is someone's life. The value of that life is undeniable. When you study burials and hold the finds in your hands, you realize how respectful the Afanasievo people were of their fellow tribespeople. After all, it was summer, and they had to look after the cattle; they had to gather berries, herbs, and roots; they had to prepare for a harsh and long winter. But the sparse population of this mountain valley was preoccupied with a sophisticated funeral rite, "wasting" precious days. They must have believed that food alone was insufficient for survival unless those who had passed away could help them in times of need. Where do such beliefs come from? Only from love for one's relatives and friends, from the desire to believe they are immortal and maintain a connection that cannot be broken.



We were looking at Afanasy, carefully laid at the bottom of a spacious burial pit. No decorations, no garments, no other belongings – just his skeleton... The Afanasievo people did not burden themselves with unnecessary possessions, and the items they made were light and ephemeral: birch bark containers, fur and leather clothing, wooden handicrafts. They used only native metals: a little gold, silver, copper, and meteoric iron.

So they passed away light-handed, just like they used to run through the mountains. But they did leave a mark in human history and culture in the form of ringed spaces around stone mounds, which became a characteristic feature of Central Asian steppes and foothills with the arrival of the Afanasievo people. Their stone steles, too, are still lying unnoticed somewhere. One cannot take everything along to the next world, and in this world, one cannot find everything at once...



The ovoid vessel was crushed and restored in the laboratory. Its lower third is unadorned while its upper third is marked with horizontal lines. Under the rim and along the widest part of the body, the vessel is decorated with two rows of flat-stamped impressions. *Drawing by E. Shumakova*



This small, thick-walled clay vessel of unknown purpose was discovered within a small stone ring attached to the main one on the northeast. Such items are commonly called incense burners. *Drawing by E. Shumakova*

that there are no traces left of their rich spiritual life. The burial rite itself testifies to sophisticated mythological and religious beliefs. The chief piece of evidence is the structures placed over the graves, which first appeared in Altai only with the arrival of the Afanasievo people. A circle or ring of stones became the main delimiter of sacred space separating the world of the living from that of the dead. It was a protective sign safeguarding the buried ones from hostile forces – an otherworldly space encapsulated in a circle. The circle was also an embodiment of motion; after all, the wheel, the heavenly bodies, and nomadic dwellings, all of them were round in shape...

The Afanasievo people were primarily herders. Judging by bone material from their settlement complexes and, to some extent, burial structures, they kept small and large cattle, primarily sheep and goats, and also horses (Shulga, 2012). The latter likely played a minor role as the Afanasievo people did not use them for riding. It was oxen that became the first draft animals capable of covering vast distances.

Here the question arises: Wherefrom did these tall Caucasoids, who left the first burial mounds, arrive in Altai around 3000 BC with their herds of sheep, goats, cows, and horses? According to the most widespread point of view, recently confirmed by paleogenetic analysis, the Afanasievo culture is close in several characteristics to the so-called

ancient *Yamnaya cultural and historical entity*, which existed in the fourth to third millennia BC in the Eastern European steppes. Apart from the similar anthropological type, the typical common features include: erecting above-ground burial structures, with the space around the grave being delimited in a circle by either a stone ring or a ditch; burying the deceased in rectangular or oval pits on their backs with their legs bent upwards; filling the burials with ochre; using vessel of similar shapes.

Unsurprisingly, many researchers attribute the emergence of people of a different anthropological type among the autochthonous population of the Sayan Altai and Mongolia in the Early Bronze Age with migration from the Eastern European steppes (Teploukhov, 1927; Kiselev, 1949; Alekseev, 1961; Gryaznov, 1968; Vadetskaya, 1980; Merpert, 1982; et al.). However, other opinions exist too. Thus, some scholars believe that the Yamnaya cultural and historical entity and the Afanasievo culture arose as a result of a migration process from a common center related to the civilizations of the Middle East (Khlopin, 1969; Kiryushin, 1991; et al.). There is yet another point of view. According

A bright red, round-bottomed pot stood next to the right hand of the deceased but was so fragile that it crumbled before our eyes. We had to remove it from the burial together with soil

Representatives of the Yamnaya cultural and historical entity occupied a territory extending from the Southern Urals in the east to the Dniester River in the west, from the Ciscaucasia in the south to the Middle Volga region in the north. Paleogenetic analysis showed that the Afanasievo people and the Yamnaya tribes of the Volga–Urals region and Kalmykia are genetically homogeneous, forming a compact, unified cluster of “Bronze Age steppe people” (Haak *et al.*, 2015; Mathieson *et al.*, 2015).

Among modern peoples, the Kalasha, an isolated group that has been living for centuries in the mountain valleys of the southern Hindu Kush in what is now Pakistan, were found to be genetically close to representatives of the Yamnaya culture (Ayub *et al.*, 2015). Thus, they are descendants of some of the earliest migrants to the Indian subcontinent from West Asia. Accordingly, the Kalasha should also be genetically close to representatives of the Afanasievo culture. This small people is considered to be the last pagans of the Hindu Kush as they have preserved their ancient cults and beliefs (Jettmar, 1986), and their physical type and appearance may reveal what the Afanasievo people might have looked like. Like the Afanasievo people, the Kalasha are herders, with sheep and goats prevailing in their herds, and they do not breed horses





Tentative pictorial layer of the Afanasievo art: 1–2, ceramics from the Minusinsk Basin; 3–8, petroglyphs of Altai, Minusinsk, and Mongolia. Adapted from: (Savinov, 2013, p. 22, Fig. 3; the figure is based on (Esin, 2010)). Drawing by E. Shumakova

to Vyacheslav I. Molodin (2002), the Afanasievo culture originated in Central Asia and developed in the northern part of Tyva and Mongolia. These points of view virtually cover all possible scenarios but none of them has yet gained full recognition.



Egyptian trace

The apparent scarcity of iconic art objects attributed to the Afanasievo culture seems to be only a misunderstanding that has not been cleared yet. Such a significant culture, which, according to scholars who studied it, “stands at the origins of such fundamental elements of productive economy as cattle breeding and metallurgy in South Siberia” and which brought new funerary traditions and, consequently, new worldviews to this region, must have left expressive evidence of its presence. In addition to the burials, there must be other imperishable traces of these unusual people in Central Asia and Altai. And one should look for them not only in the burials but in the very space that became home to these herders, hunters, and anglers.

Modern graffiti on the wall of a house in the Rumbur Valley (southern Hindu Kush), home to the Kalasha people, who are genetically related to the Yamnaya and, possibly, Afanasievo cultures.
© Muhammad Zeeshan

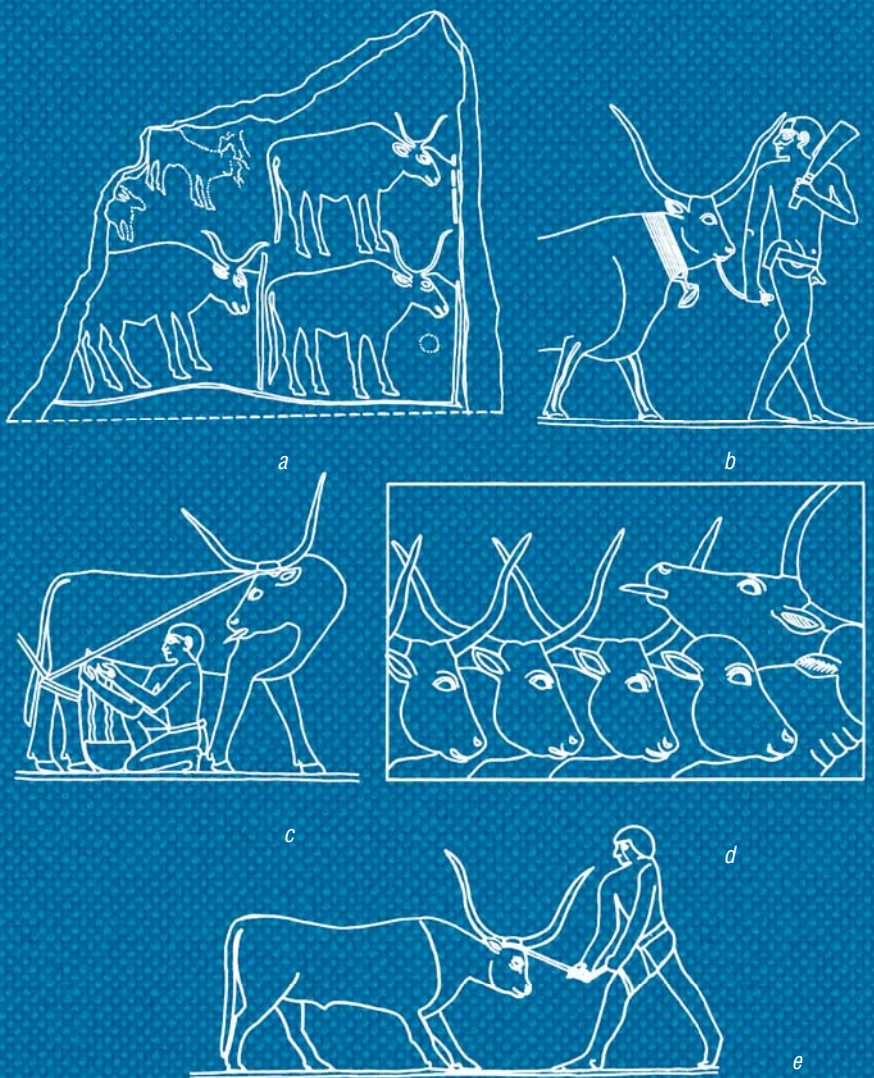
It is known that the petroglyphic heritage of the Altai Mountains is extremely rich and diverse but no one has yet succeeded in identifying an Afanasievo layer within it. Such an attempt was made with rock art materials of the Minusinsk Basin (Esin, 2010) but it was only an attempt – and not very convincing one. We still know nothing about etroglyphs of that era. However, there is one unique object that may be linked to this culture.

This is a stone slab with “astorishingly artistic relief images” of animals, which was discovered by chance in 1978 near the village of Ozernoe (in the Ongudai region of the Altai Republic). Neither its purpose, nor its plot, nor its composition, not to mention its execution and overall impression, are in any way compatible to anything we have come across in the Altai Mountains or throughout South Siberia. All its analogues (the closest one you can see at the famous Kalbak-Tash, essentially the largest collection of Siberian petroglyphs from the Neolithic to the Old Turkic era) are highly speculative and, at best, can only indicate imitation by representatives of another culture.

Since the slab is so unique, its attribution remains questionable. The discoverers of this ancient art piece – Molodin and Aina P. Pogozheva – attribute it to the Karakol culture of the Bronze Age.

This slab was discovered by chance in 1978 near the village of Ozernoe (Ongudai region, Altai Republic). The slab had been plowed out by a tractor, and the driver could not pinpoint the exact location





Oxen with lyre-shaped horns on the Ozernoe stele and on Egyptian bas-reliefs and tomb paintings dated to the times of the Old Kingdom:

- (a) Oxen depicted on the stele found near the village of Ozernoe in the Altai Mountains.
- (b) Relief depicting a peasant leading an ox to sacrifice. The Old Kingdom, 5th Dynasty, circa 2494–2345 BC.
- (c) Milking scene. Relief from the Kagemni mastaba (tomb in the form of a truncated pyramid) at Saqqara. The Old Kingdom, 6th Dynasty.
- (d) Driving a herd across a river. Relief detail of the Kagemni mastaba. The Old Kingdom, 6th Dynasty.
- (e) Taming wild bulls. Relief detail of the Ptahhotep mastaba at Saqqara. The Old Kingdom, 5th Dynasty.

Adapted from: (Mikhailovsky, 1973; Pomerantseva, 2012). Drawing by E. Shumakova

According to Elena A. Miklashevich, another petroglyph researcher, the Ozernoe stele bears no stylistic resemblance to images of either the Karakol or the contemporaneous *Okunev culture* of the Early Metal Age. However, they “fit well into a series of ox images recorded in the rock art of Altai, Tyva, and Mongolia.” (This is a highly controversial statement.) The researcher suggests calling this style *Tengin* (after a lake of the same name) but remains uncertain about its chronological position with respect to the said Bronze Age cultures (Miklashevich, 2006).

The stele’s purpose is not known either. Most likely it was a vertical memorial stone. But where and why was it erected? This question remains unanswered. Yet the stele remains unique, completely at odds with the rock art traditions of South Siberia and Central Asia. There are even problems with identifying the animal species depicted on it. Apart from the oxen carved at its top, the other ungulates defy precise classification. Even zoologists have failed to resolve this issue – not due to a lack of professionalism but because that they were looking for animals that used to or still inhabit the Altai Mountains or Siberia. As a result, one of the animals was identified as a reindeer, while the long-horned ungulates were identified as *para-Alcelaphinae* antelopes, which once inhabited this area but subsequently became extinct.

Apparently, the oxen on the upper frieze – the most expressive characters on the stele – should have suggested to experts that they had to look for the prototypes of the depicted animals in a different region, far away from Altai. The depictions of these oxen are entirely Egyptian in style; one can find similar animals on both bas-reliefs and tomb paintings from the Old Kingdom onwards. The manner of depiction, i. e., the lyre-shaped horns from the front, appeared precisely then and there. Most importantly, the

Unlike the European cow, zebu cattle trace their origin to the Indian, rather than Eurasian, subspecies of the aurochs. Today, these cattle are bred in the Indian subcontinent and in Africa

oxen themselves, with their long, curved horns, were representatives of a type of cattle still widespread in the Indian subcontinent and throughout Africa. These are the famous *zebu*. The “ancient Egyptian” oxen resembled these animals, particularly in the contours of their muzzles, although this breed had almost none of the hump so prominent in many modern zebu.

Paleozoologists have established that approximately 4000 years ago, Indian zebu appeared at all the civilization loci, where they interbred with the local cattle. Furthermore, ancient Egyptians developed several cattle breeds from zebu. During the Old Kingdom, the most important breed was the long-horned one, whose representatives had unusually long horns, curved like a lyre or, less commonly, a crescent. These are the very same oxen as the ones depicted on Egyptian reliefs and, as we can reasonably assume, on the stele discovered near the village of Ozernoe.

The other animals, depicted on the two lower friezes, should also be considered in the context of the Egyptian tradition. It is known that apart from domestic animals (primarily oxen, but also sheep and goats), the herds of Egyptian nobles also included wild ruminants of various species. “These were taken either by the lasso or the greyhounds in the desert or mountains, and were brought up together with the cattle; thus in all the pictures of the Old Empire we meet with the antelope and the ibex amongst the oxen; the *maud*’ also, with its long, sword-like horns, the graceful *gahs*, and the *nudu*, the *shes*, with its lyre-shaped horns, and the noble ibex, the *n’eafu*. They are always reckoned with the cattle; like the oxen, the animals when full grown are described as ‘young cattle,’ they are also tied up to pegs and fattened with dough after the same process as that carried out with oxen” (Erman, 1894, pp. 441–442). Thus, it is these wild animals, whose species we are unlikely to ever identify precisely, that obviously appear on the two lower tiers of the stele. Taken together with the oxen, they could symbolize a herd.

As for the lines dividing the rows of the rightward walking animals, they represent the Earth’s surface. According to Boris V. Rauschenbach (1980), “this line acquires meaning only in a system of orthogonal projections as a lateral projection of the Earth’s surface,” and it is depicted in ancient Egyptian art as a straight horizontal line. While one can find a few exceptional cases of horizontal rows



of animal images in the rock art of South Siberia, one has never found any cases of dividing these rows with such lines. The animals on the Ozernoe stele are not simply divided into three tiers; they are tied to the earth they walk on, which is also consistent with the artistic traditions of the Old Kingdom of Egypt and is different from anything we know in Siberia and Central Asia.

But how could these images and traditions, even the technique itself, have possibly appeared in Altai? Here we revisit again the question of the origins of the Afanasievo culture. As noted above, there are three points of view on this problem. According to the first two, bearers of the Afanasievo culture are the only people who could have brought Middle Eastern traditions to Altai roughly 5000 years ago as a result of direct contacts with representatives of ancient Eastern civilizations at the beginning of their migration path.

The fate of the Afanasievo people in Altai remains unknown, as are many other things associated with them. Based on the results of an anthropological and a more recent, paleogenetic study of the Afanasievo population, experts conclude that “bearers of the Afanasievo culture did not contribute to the anthropological composition of the ancient population of the Altai Mountains” (Chikisheva et al., 2007, p. 140). In this case, we are talking about the Karakol culture of the High Bronze Age (from the first half to the middle of the second millennium BC), which followed after the Afanasievo culture, and about the Pazyryk culture – both



of them existed in the same territories where the Afanasievo people had once lived.

However, the idea that the Afanasievo tribes were reproductively isolated from the local populations has recently been challenged. Evidence has emerged that the paleoanthropological material of the Afanasievo culture of the Altai Mountains contains a local, autochthonous component, which researchers associate with the anthropological environment of the Neolithic and Aeneolithic periods. However, sites dated to this period are rare, and anthropological material has been discovered so far in two Altai caves only. Nevertheless, these data suggest a possible relationship between the local and migrant populations (Chikisheva, 2010). The anthropologist's point of view on the interaction between the migrants and local tribes is supported in part by archaeological material as the Neolithic ceramics of the Altai Mountains has common features with the Afanasievo pottery (Kiryushin, 2002).

But if this is true, why is the contribution of the Afanasievo people to the anthropological composition of the ancient Altai population so elusive? This question remains unanswered. Perhaps, a future researcher will discover an "Afanasievo trace" among the Bronze Age and Scythian populations, but this time at the genetic level. Nevertheless, the Afanasievo culture is a crucial chapter in the ancient history of not only the Altai Mountains but the entire Central Asian region, and this chapter has yet been written only to a half.

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