ISSN: 1814-6961 (print)
ISSN: 2788-9718 (online)

Отан тарихы
Отечественная история
History of the Homeland

Үш айда бір рет шығатын ғылыми журнал
2025. № 28 (3)

EDITORIAL TEAM

Published in the Kazakhstan
Otan tarikhy
Has been issued as a journal
since 1998
ISSN: 1814-6961 (Print)
ISSN: 2788-9718 (Online)
2025. Vol. 28. Is. 3. Pp. 617-637
Journal homepage:
https://otan.history.iie.kz

ҒТАХР / МРНТИ / IRSTI 03.41.91
https://doi.org/10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_3_617-637

THE TRADITION OF CONTINUITY IN STATE STANDARDS AND WEAPONRY AMONG THE SAKA, XIONGNU, AND TURKS

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Abstract. The article examines the socio-political organization and military system of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia — the Saka, Huns, and Turks — within the framework of military democracy. It highlights the continuity of standards, weaponry, and symbolic attributes of power, from totems and sacralized rulers to the visual systems of steppe states. *Introduction.* The history of Eurasian nomads reflects a synthesis of military force, symbolic authority, and spiritual beliefs. People’s assemblies, the cult of rulers, the military aristocracy, and rituals shaped stable institutions of statehood. Standards and arms embodied cosmological principles, endowing governance and war with sacred meaning. *Purpose and Objectives.* The study aims to trace the continuity in the symbolism of standards and weaponry among the Saka, Huns, and Turks, and to assess their role in state formation. Specific objectives include analyzing military democracy, sacralization of power, the decimal military system, and the symbolic role of arms and standards as visual codes of identity. *Materials and Methods.* An interdisciplinary approach is applied, combining archaeological, historical, iconographic, and semiotic analysis. Comparative-historical and structural-functional methods are integrated with cultural-anthropological perspectives. Archaeological finds, texts, ethnographic parallels, and iconographic sources allow reconstruction of hierarchy, rituals, and power symbols. *Results.* Continuity in weapons, tactics, and standards is evident. The horse, saddle, and stirrup ensured strategic mobility. Standards (*tuğ*) functioned as sacred emblems uniting warriors and legitimizing authority. Weapons, including cultic swords and spears, had both practical and symbolic significance. Visual motives — eagles, lions, griffins — carried sacral meaning, reinforcing identity and cohesion. *Conclusions.* Military democracy and the symbolism of power among the Saka, Huns, and Turks formed a shared steppe model rooted in military organization, sacralized rulership, and visual continuity. These elements shaped collective memory, cultural identity, and the philosophy of power. Further study of sacralized arms and standards is vital for understanding nomadic statehood in Eurasia.

Key words: Tamgas, Turks, Huns, Saka, military standards, symbolism of power, totems, sacralization, steppe states

Acknowledgements. The work was carried out within the framework of program-targeted funding of the Committee of Culture of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the 2023–2025, IRN of the Project BR22082478.
For citation: Sapashev O.S., Samashev S.K. Tradition of Continuity in State Standards and Weaponry of the Saka, Xiongnu, and Turks // Otan tarihy. 2025. Vol. 28. № 3. Pp. 617-637. [in English].
DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_3_617-637

САҚТАР, ҒҰНДАР МЕН ТҮРІКТЕРДІҢ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК ШТАНДАРТТАРЫ МЕН ҚАРУ-ЖАРАҚТАРЫНДАҒЫ ДӘСТҮР САБАҚТАСТЫҒЫ

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Аннотация. Бұл мақала Орталық Азияның сақ, ғұн және түрік халықтарының әлеуметтік-саяси ұйымы мен әскери құрылымын әскери-демократиялық жүйе тұрғысынан талдауға арналған. Негізгі назар – мемлекеттік ту-штандарттардағы, қару-жарақтағы және билік атрибуттарындағы дәстүр сабақтастығына, тотемдер мен билеушілерді киелеуден бастап, көшпелі мемлекеттердің визуалды жүйесіне дейін бағытталған. *Кіріспе.* Еуразия даласы қоғамдарының тарихы әскери қуат, билік рәміздері және рухани нанымдардың ерекше тоғысын көрсетеді. Халық жиналысы, көсем культі, әскери аристократия және салт-жоралғылар мемлекет институттарының тұрақты негізін құрады. Штандарттар, қару-жарақ пен билік белгілері ғарыштық және мифопоэтикалық дүниетанымды бейнелеп, мемлекеттік құрылым мен әскери ұйымға киелі мән берді. *Мақсат пен міндеттер.* Зерттеудің мақсаты – сақтар, ғұндар және түріктердегі қару-жарақ пен штандарттар символикасындағы дәстүр сабақтастығын анықтап, олардың мемлекеттіліктің қалыптасуындағы рөлін ашу. Міндеттерге әскери демократияны, биліктің сакрализациясын, ондық әскери жүйені және қару мен штандарттардың рәміздік қызметін талдау кіреді. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Жұмыста археологиялық, тарихи, иконографиялық және семиотикалық талдау үйлестірілген. Салыстырмалы-тарихи және құрылымдық-функционалдық тәсілдер этнографиялық параллельдермен толықтырылады. *Нәтижелер.* Көшпелі қоғамдардың әскери тактикасы мен қаруланыуында дәстүр жалғастығы айқындалды. Жылқы, ер-тоқым мен үзеңгі жылжымалы әскердің негізін құрады. «Ту» штандарттары жауынгерлерді біріктіретін әрі билікті киелейтін нышан болды. Қасиетті қарулар – қылыш, найзалар – тек тұрмыстық емес, рәміздік мәнге ие еді. Қыран, арыстан, грифон бейнелері қоғамды топтастыратын сакралды белгілерге айналды. *Қорытынды.* Әскери демократия мен билік рәміздері сақтар, ғұндар мен түріктердің ортақ мемлекеттік моделін құрап, тарихи жад пен мәдени сәйкестікті бекітті. Зерттеу қару мен штандарттарды сакрализациялаудың Еуразия көшпелі мемлекеттерін жан-жақты түсінудегі маңызын атап өтеді.

Түйін сөздер: Таңбалар, түркілер, ғұндар, сақтар, әскери ту-штандарттар, билік нышандары, тотемдер, киелендіру, дала мемлекеттері
Алғыс. Жұмыс Қазақстан Республикасы Мәдениет және ақпарат министрлігі Мәдениет комитетінің 2023–2025 жылдарға арналған бағдарламалық-нысаналы қаржыландыруы бойынша жасалған, жобаның ЖТН-і № BR22082478.
Дәйексөз үшін: Сапашев О.С., Самашев С.К. Сақтар, ғұндар мен түріктердің мемлекеттік ту-штандарттары мен қару-жарақтарындағы дәстүр сабақтастығы // Отан тарихы. 2025. Т. 28. № 3. 617-637-б. [Ағыл.]. DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_3_617-637

ТРАДИЦИЯ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТИ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫХ ШТАНДАРТОВ И ВООРУЖЕНИЙ САКОВ, ГУННОВ И ТЮРКОВ

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию социально-политической организации и военного устройства кочевых народов Центральной Азии – саков, гуннов и тюрков – через призму военно-демократического строя. В центре внимания – преемственность государственных штандартов, вооружений и символических атрибутов власти, от тотемов и сакрализации правителей до развития визуальной системы степных государств. *Введение.* История кочевых обществ Евразийской степи демонстрирует уникальное сочетание военной мощи, символики власти и духовных представлений. Народное собрание, культ вождя, военная аристократия и ритуальная практика сформировали устойчивые институты степных государств. Штандарты, вооружение и атрибуты власти отражали космологические и мифопоэтические основания, придавая сакральный смысл государственности и военной организации. *Цель и задачи.* Основная цель исследования – выявить традиции преемственности в символике штандартов и вооружений саков, гуннов и тюрков и их значение для становления государственности. Автор ставит задачи проанализировать военную демократию, сакрализацию власти, развитие десятичной системы военной организации и символическое значение оружия и штандартов как визуальных кодов идентичности и власти. *Материалы и методы.* В работе применяются междисциплинарный и системный подходы, включающие археологический, исторический, иконографический и философско-семиотический анализ. Используются сравнительно-исторический метод, структурно-функциональный анализ и культурно-антропологический подход. Базой служат археологические находки, письменные источники, этнографические параллели и иконографические материалы, что позволяет реконструировать социальную стратификацию, ритуальные практики и символику власти. *Результаты.* Исследование выявляет преемственность вооружения, военных тактик и штандартов кочевых обществ. Лошадь, седло и стремя стали ключевыми элементами мобильной армии. Штандарты «ту» выступали сакральными символами, объединяющими воинов и сакрализующими власть. Символика оружия, включая мечи и копья культового назначения, выполняла не только утилитарные, но и знаковые функции. Показано, что визуальные знаки – орлы, львы, грифоны – имели сакральное значение, формировали коллективное сознание и сплачивали общество. *Выводы.* Военная демократия и символика власти у саков, гуннов и тюрков представляют собой общую модель степных государств, основанную на военной организации, сакрализации правителя и преемственности визуально-коммуникативных практик. Эти элементы формировали историческую память, культурную идентичность и философию власти номадов. Статья подчеркивает значимость дальнейшего изучения сакрализации вооружений и штандартов для комплексного понимания феномена кочевых государств Евразии.

Ключевые слова: Тамги, тюрки, гунны, саки, военные штандарты, символика власти, тотемы, сакрализация, степные государства

Благодарность. Работа выполнена в рамках программно-целевого финансирования Комитета культуры Министерства культуры и информации Республики Казахстан на 2023–2025 гг., ИРН проекта № BR22082478.

Для цитирования: Сапашев О.С., Самашев С.К. Традиция преемственности государственных штандартов и вооружений саков, гуннов и тюрков // Отан тарихы. 2025. Т. 28. № 3. С. 617-637. [на англ.]. DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_3_617-637

Introduction. The history of ancient nomadic peoples of Central Asia, such as the Huns, Scythians (Sakas), and Turks, is replete with vivid examples of military prowess, cultural development, and complex governance systems. These peoples left a rich legacy, particularly in the realms of weaponry and the organization of their societies and states based on military democracy. This form of governance, characteristic of early nomadic societies, placed the military elite at the forefront of leadership. Authority in such societies was grounded in personal valor, the prestige of the leader (king), and decisions made by military assemblies (councils of elders or nobility). This system preceded the emergence of subsequent centralized states in the Eurasian space.

In traditional historiography, nomadic state formations are often considered ephemeral. However, a comparison of the duration of centralized nomadic states with that of sedentary societies reveals that their lifespans were nearly equivalent. Moreover, nomadic societies often exhibited greater consolidation than their sedentary counterparts. The military history of nomadic peoples in ancient and medieval times held not only pan-Eurasian but also global significance [Zhumadil, 2014: 3].

The universalism in conceptualizing the king as the center of the world in archaic societies illustrates the development of the concept of kingship. This idea was later reinforced by the monarchical state apparatus. In military-democratic, early-state societies, the ideology of investiture is characterized by "mythological absolutism" and often undergoes minimal changes at the level of corresponding texts and attributes when transitioning into a state system; societal institutions "matured" to align with this ideology [Akishev, 1984: 70].

The social structure of the Saka tribes, based on military democracy, elevated the role of ordinary community members and diminished the aristocracy's monopoly on military affairs. Economically more advanced than their sedentary agricultural and pastoral neighbors, even ordinary Saka warriors played a significant role in addressing political issues. The foundation for this participation was the people's assembly. The communal structure granted all full-fledged community members the right to periodically convene to discuss internal and external state matters. This political system can be described as direct democracy, as community members directly participated in decision-making without intermediaries. This system was termed military democracy because only armed men – warriors – were considered full-fledged community members. Some sources also mention women warriors, and despite the patriarchal structure of Saka society, women enjoyed significant rights. They participated in wars alongside men and could even serve as supreme leaders.

Saka society was not homogeneous in composition. The main population consisted of warriors and community members. A defining feature of the political system of this period was the deification and sacralization of power. At the head of the tribal union stood the king, who wielded considerable authority, deciding matters of war and peace, sending and receiving envoys, forming alliances, leading armies, and regulating relations between tribes. The tribal union leader – the king – allocated pastures and other lands for migration among clans and tribes, establishing the order of their use. Additionally, the king ensured that armed conflicts between clans and tribes were avoided or led unified forces during military campaigns.

Scholars have not reached a consensus regarding the organizational structure of Saka society. Written sources provide limited information about the groups within Saka society based on their property status, occupations, or roles. However, it is known that the royal authority relied on the military-tribal aristocracy, followed by priests who served religious cults and beliefs. The bulk of the population consisted of ordinary warriors-community members (farmers and pastoralists). Impoverished community members also formed the infantry during wartime. Thus, during the Saka era, the nomadic peoples of the Great Steppe developed distinctive features, characterized by their military-democratic structure, setting them apart from other Eastern societies, which typically included bureaucrats characteristic of agricultural civilizations.

The Issyk World Tree [fig. 1] likely symbolized the tribal structure of the tribal union led by the supreme leader and possibly a four-tiered age-based structure. It likely represented an idealized model of society for the mythopoetic consciousness, which may not have fully reflected the nuances of the social development of this particular Saka group [Akishev, 1984: 103].

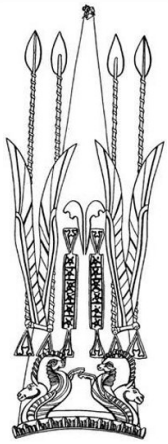

Figure 1. The World Tree in the headdress of the Golden Man

Thus, the military-democratic system served as a transitional form between primitive tribal societies and early state formations. It was characterized by the prominent role of the military elite, the election of leaders, and elements of collective governance. This form of governance was typical for nomadic societies, such as the Sakas, Huns, and Turks, during the early stages of their political development.

Historical reconstruction of the process of class formation and the specifics of the Huns' social structure is challenging due to the scarcity of sources. Archaeological evidence for nomadic pastoralists is generally less abundant than for sedentary agriculturalists [Pershits, 1973: 45].

Around 201 BCE, the tribal unions of the Uyuk culture in Tuva, the Pazyryk culture in Altai, and the Dinlin (Tagar) state were defeated by the armies of the Hunnic shanyu Maodun, originating from Central Asia. These forces captured not only the entire Sayan-Altai highlands but also Transbaikalia. This conquest was driven by economic motives. The powerful Hunnic state in Central Asia, which was transitioning toward feudalization, urgently required sources of polymetallic ore and provisions to supply its armies [Kyzlasov, 1989: 33].

The Huns, a nomadic people existing in the 4th–5th centuries CE, exerted significant influence on the historical processes of both Europe and Asia. The social structure of Hunnic society is primarily determined through the analysis of: a) archaeological material, b) accounts by Chinese chroniclers, and c) the nature of interactions between the Huns and China. Available evidence suggests that the social structure of the Huns varied across different regions, with class stratification occurring more rapidly among the southern Huns. The tribal confederation of the Huns long retained a developed clan-based system, which served as the foundation (as a historically established form) for labor cooperation in: a) the organization of nomadic economy, b) military organization, and c) governance systems [Bernstam, 1951: 214].

The question of the origin of the European Huns and their connection to the Asian Xiongnu remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate: "There is no consensus regarding the origin of the ethnonym 'Hun.' The earliest theory in chronological order, concerning the origins of the Xiongnu and Huns, largely adhered to ethnographic classification and considered historical facts in assessing the relationship between these two peoples. While it correctly and reasonably identified the Xiongnu and Huns as the same people, its identification of them with the Mongols relied on evidence that does not withstand scrutiny and demonstrated a fundamentally incorrect understanding of the distribution of tribes and peoples in Central Asia in their historical sequence. Nevertheless, to validate this theory, new evidence and materials are required, and most contemporary researchers do not support the Mongolism theory" [Inostrantsev, 1926: 50].

As early as the first millennium BCE, in the territories of Central and parts of Northern Asia, particularly in the Minusinsk Basin and the Altai, the earliest nomadic pastoralist societies emerged. The process of forming the preconditions for the first major social division of labor, involving the separation of pastoralist tribes from the broader mass of "barbarians," can be traced through archaeological evidence across a vast territory [Bernstam, 1951: 21].

The Central Asian steppes and foothills, from the Yinshan Mountains to Dzungaria and from the Altai to the Gobi, served as the primary zone of ethnogenetic activity in Eurasia. In these regions, large nomadic tribal confederations and early state formations emerged, including, in addition to the Xiongnu (Huns), the Xianbei (2nd–4th centuries CE), Rouran (5th century CE), Turkic Khaganates (6th–8th centuries CE), Türgesh (7th–8th centuries CE), Uyghurs (7th–8th centuries CE), Kimaks, Kipchaks (9th–11th centuries CE), and others. Continuous raids and expansion by nomadic tribes, primarily in western and northwestern

directions, led to destabilization in the Eurasian steppes throughout the first millennium and the first half of the second millennium CE. For instance, the expansion of the Great Turkic Khaganate, formed by the unification of the Gaogyu and Tele tribes under the Ashina clan, extended westward to the Caspian Sea, displacing the Avars and Bulgars from the Aral Sea region to southeastern Europe. The expansion of the Magyar and Kimak-Kipchak confederations in Western Siberia and the Southern Urals, as well as the Pechenegs and Torks (Oghuz) in the Aral Sea region, altered the ethnic composition of the southern Russian and Danubian steppes. Relative stabilization occurred during the existence of the Kipchak Confederation (Desht-i-Kipchak) from the 12th to early 13th centuries, when ethnocultural leveling of the nomadic population occurred from the Irtysh to the Danube [Botalov, 2019: 17].

As summarized earlier, the social and political structures of the Sakas, Xiongnu (Huns), and Turks share numerous common features shaped by the nomadic way of life and the traditions of steppe empires. This functionality is linked to the characteristics of nomadic military life, where visual symbols served as critical means of communication and identification in the context of limited written traditions or underdeveloped signaling systems. Thus, the shared features in the social structure, governance, and military art of steppe states, which exhibit not only cultural but also genetic continuity, are well-founded. For example, all three peoples based their authority on military strength and the prestige of clan nobility. A council of nobility or military leaders participated in governance (a prototype of the later kurultai). The clan-tribal society was organized by clans and tribes, with clan affiliation determining status and access to power. The hierarchy of the military elite was also significant, as power in all these peoples belonged to a military aristocracy tracing its lineage to prominent ancestors. The institution of the "bek" (among the Turks) or clan elder (among the Sakas and Huns) held particular importance. Additionally, in all these states, the ruler – Kagan or Shanyu – was a sacral figure, as the worldview of the Sakas, Huns, and Turks imbued the supreme ruler's authority with sacred significance. Such legitimacy was often affirmed through divine origin or spiritual approval.

The foundations of military organization in the nomadic societies of the Central Asian historical-cultural region began to take shape during the developed and late Bronze Age. Based on depictions of warriors in petroglyphs and finds of bronze weapons in archaeological sites of ancient cultures in Transbaikalia and Mongolia, warrior units armed with spears and daggers emerged during this period, and some individual protective equipment began to be used [Grishin, 1981: 179]. The armament complex of ancient nomads further developed during the early Iron Age, when the nomadic tribes of the Sayan-Altai and Central Asia mastered horseback riding and established cavalry units [Kocheev, 1999: 74–76].

The military-administrative decimal system of organizing the army and population, with the earliest evidence of its use in the nomadic world of Central Asia dating to the Xiongnu-Xianbei period, continued to be employed by many nomadic confederations throughout the medieval era [Khudyakov, 2015: 112]. The decimal system (divisions into 10, 100, 1,000, and 10,000) is observed among the Huns and Turks and has roots among Iranic-speaking nomads, including the Sakas. Under the influence of the Huns, the multi-ethnic population of Southern Siberia began to be organized according to a military-territorial principle: into tens, hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands. Each subdivision was led by corresponding military commanders in a hierarchical structure. This military-administrative system, essential in the context of constant warfare, facilitated the elimination of clan-based remnants, the establishment of a class society, and the development of early feudal relations [Kyzlasov, 1989: 38].

In the Xiongnu military empire, the Asian decimal system of dividing the army and population into wings and smaller subdivisions was fully developed. According to this system, all adult male Xiongnu were assigned to specific military units. The army was divided into left and right wings, led by zhuki-princes or xian-wangs. Each wing was further divided into two parts, one led by a xian-wang and the other by a luli-wang. These four senior commanders, drawn from the closest relatives of the shanyu (his brothers or sons), constituted the "four horns." Further subdivisions were led by zhichzhu-wangs, wenyuti-wangs, and zhanczjan-wangs, forming the "six horns" from among the shanyu's close relatives. Appointments to these positions were based on close male-line kinship with the ruling shanyu, belonging to the Siluandi ruling clan. Representatives of three other aristocratic clans could hold lower positions in the Xiongnu bureaucratic hierarchy [Khudyakov, 2015: 108].

Over the past thirty years, the study of the military affairs of ancient and medieval populations of Siberia, Central Asia, and Eurasia as a whole has become a key focus in historical and archaeological research. The social structure, governance systems, and armament, including the military art of peoples inhabiting Southern and Western Siberia and Central Asia during the early and developed Bronze Age, have been thoroughly investigated. The military organization of nomads during the Scythian period, particularly in

the Minusinsk Basin, Mountainous, and Steppe Altai, has been studied. Significant attention has been devoted to analyzing the armament complexes and warfare tactics of nomads during the Xiongnu period, as well as the peoples of the early and developed medieval periods within the Central Asian historical-cultural region.

Various armament complexes have been analyzed, classified, and introduced into scholarly discourse, and typical features of the military art of the Xiongnu, ancient Turkic tribes, Uyghurs, Yenisei Kyrgyz, Kimaks, Khitans, Mongols, and other nomadic peoples and cultures of Southern Siberia and Central Asia have been reconstructed. The armament of medieval peoples in the taiga regions of Western Siberia, as well as the military practices of the Mohe and Jurchens of the Far East, have also been studied. In recent years, increased attention has been given to the military affairs of Central Asian nomads in the late medieval period. Modern scientific methods, armor reconstruction, and analysis of offensive and defensive equipment have been actively employed to determine the functional characteristics of hand-held throwing and protective armament.

The study of the history of military art and armament of nomadic peoples remains highly uneven. While the military history of ethnocultural communities such as the Scythians, Turks of the Khaganate era, and Mongols during the time of Chinggis Khan began to attract scholarly attention from the mid-20th century, other stages of the evolutionary development of nomadic armament remain either completely unstudied or insufficiently explored to the present day. Among the least developed areas is the study of the armament of nomads in Southern Siberia and Central Asia during the late medieval period.

The lack of a systematized, comprehensive, and robust source base significantly hinders the development of general theoretical concepts within historical science regarding the evolution of nomadic defensive armament in the observable historical period. It is particularly important to note that most researchers associate the culmination of the independent development of nomadic armament and military art as a unique historical phenomenon with this very period.

The late medieval period represents a particularly significant stage in the history of the peoples of Central Asia, attracting interest from both specialists studying the political history of ethnic groups in the eastern part of the Eurasian steppe and researchers focused on the military aspects of the historical development of this region.

Materials and Methods of Research on Nomadic Societies. The methodological foundation of this study is built upon the works of predecessors who conducted systematic analyses of the armament and state standards of nomadic societies, tracing their development toward a synergistic paradigm. In recent studies, nomadic culture has been reconsidered not as an archaic form of society but as a distinct economic and cultural type that evolved in alignment with global historical processes, exhibiting its own specific characteristics. This research employs a systemic approach grounded in the dialectical principle of the interconnectedness of parts and the whole, as well as the interaction of elements within the system itself. This approach views the objects of study as dynamic, self-evolving structures in a state of continuous transformation. The practical application of the systemic approach is realized through structural-component analysis, which relies on the comparison and interpretation of results obtained using various methodological tools. In the context of archaeological materials, this methodology is implemented by perceiving burial rites and each archaeological complex as a holistic, structured, and functionally ordered system of interrelated components, each contributing to the reconstruction of the culture as a whole.

Within the framework of the systemic approach, rational elements of the evolutionist paradigm – such as the concepts of variability and inheritance of cultural traits – were incorporated, alongside aspects of the diffusionist approach related to cultural borrowing, interethnic contacts, and cultural synthesis. These theoretical frameworks enabled the tracing of transformations in social structures, forms of armament, ritual practices, and other aspects of the material culture of nomads over a long-term historical perspective.

The research actively utilized general scientific and specialized historical methods of inquiry. These include comparative-historical and chronological methods, as well as historical-genetic and retrospective approaches employed in historiographical analysis. For the interpretation of archaeological data, a range of methods traditionally used in archaeology was applied: planigraphic analysis of burial-memorial complexes, morphological and typological methods, and statistical processing of quantitative data derived from archaeological sources. This approach ensured a high degree of reliability in reconstructing ritual and social practices.

In classifying archaeological material and reconstructing the social structure of the population associated with the Turkic culture of the Sayan-Altai region, the study relied on principles and categorical frameworks developed in the works of domestic and foreign researchers. These methodological guidelines

facilitated the interpretation of archaeological data within the context of complex processes of social stratification and cultural dynamics.

The theoretical basis for sociological analysis was the concept of a multilayered societal structure, encompassing horizontal dimensions (age-gender, familial-marital, and kinship ties) and vertical dimensions (socio-economic, professional, political, and status hierarchies) [Sorokin, 1992]. A key methodological premise was the concept of the "objectification" of social status, according to which an individual's societal position was preserved after death, reflected in the nature and elements of burial rites [Vasyutin, Kradin, Tishkin, 2005]. Thus, burials serve not only as ritual acts but also as critical sources of information about social structure, ideology, perceptions of status, and power in medieval nomadic societies.

This methodological foundation is complemented by a cultural-anthropological approach, which allows archaeological complexes to be viewed not only as evidence of material culture but also as reflections of symbolic, ideological, and mental frameworks inherent to the society. This enhances the interdisciplinary nature of the research and opens new perspectives for studying early medieval Turkic communities.

Since the mid-19th century, the application of both the formation and civilization approaches to the study of nomadic peoples' history has failed to provide definitive answers to key questions regarding nomadism. Moreover, the traditional opposition between these approaches in historiography has, in practice, resulted in parallel evolutions of perspectives among proponents of formation theory and advocates of the civilization concept, ultimately leading to similar conclusions. This is easily explained: despite focusing on different aspects of society (socio-political relations or socio-cultural characteristics), both approaches based their models of societal development on the evolution of agricultural peoples. The concepts of "formation" and "civilization" were defined from the perspective of Western European thought [Zhumadil, 2014: 17].

Common Elements and Motifs in the Armament and State Standards of Sakas, Huns, and Turks. The Hunnic conquest interrupted the historical development of local South Siberian ethnic groups, leading to complex transformations in the ethnic composition of the population, as well as changes in the social and economic structures of local societies, fostering new societal and ethnic relationships. Ancient Chinese sources first mention the Turkic-speaking Gyan-gun (Yenisei Kyrgyz) tribe, which, in the 2nd–1st centuries BCE, migrated from the Great Lakes Basin northward through the Sayan Range into the Khakas-Minusinsk Basin. Interaction between the Turkic-speaking Gyan-gun and the Dinlin, who, based on toponymic evidence, spoke partly Ugric and partly South Samoyedic dialects, began during this period. Archaeological data indicate this process is marked by the emergence of the Shurmak culture (2nd century BCE–5th century CE) in the Upper Yenisei and the Tashtyk culture (1st century BCE–5th century CE) in the basins of the Middle Yenisei, Abakan, and Chulym, including the Yam and Kiya river basins [Kyzlasov, 1989: 33].

The study of cultural continuity, as well as the structure and organization of statehood among nomadic ethnic groups and cultures of the Central Asian historical-cultural region, remains fragmented and uneven. This is largely due to the insufficient study or inaccessibility of archaeological materials and museum collections from neighboring countries.

Scholars suggest that among the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, a tribal or clan name often extended to an entire people, encompassing a collection of tribes and clans. The armies of the Sakas, Huns, and Turks were primarily organized for offensive operations. On the battlefield, they effectively employed various military tactics, refined and passed down through centuries. The combat tools and armament used by the Sakas, Huns, and ancient Turks played a crucial role in their heroic exploits and successes. Undoubtedly, the horse was the most significant asset among these three peoples. The invention of the stirrup enabled the Huns and Turks to achieve success in military campaigns and establish dominance over numerous peoples. The horse was pivotal to their victories due to its maneuverability and ability to swiftly break through enemy ranks during battles.

Particularly striking in this regard are stone scepters topped with horse heads [fig. 2], which belonged to members of the tribal ruling aristocracy and were likely used during significant ceremonies or rituals associated with important societal events. Their origins are linked to complex processes of societal development and beliefs about deities, totems, and the direction of economic activities.

Figure 2. Stone staff with a horse-head finial, East Kazakhstan

The use of horses as riding animals and the production of iron weapons and equipment significantly enhanced the strength of ancient armies, enabling them to become dominant and well-organized forces. This culture, which ascribed sacred significance to horses in the political and social life of steppe states and elevated iron and blacksmithing—expressed in their epics and oaths—to an equally sacred status, gave rise to a worldview and lifestyle markedly distinct from other communities. In addition to blacksmithing, which was practiced by the Sakas, Huns, and Turks, their martial capabilities were significantly strengthened. Thus, as the creation and defense of a state born in thought relied on military prowess, the speed of the horse and the striking power of iron were combined to form mobile and dynamic armies. In this regard, the armies of steppe peoples differed from those of other regions in their military composition, organization, combat techniques, and tactics. Thanks to swift cavalry and rapid raids, steppe warriors easily conquered both neighboring and distant lands. The ability of warriors to "suddenly appear like a hurricane and disappear like birds," as noted in ancient sources starting with the Sakas, was directly tied to the advantages provided by the horse.

One critical element of equestrian equipment is the saddle. The saddle's function in a cavalry army was multifaceted, extending far beyond mere rider comfort. In a military context, the saddle played a critical role in ensuring rider stability and fixation. It securely held the rider on the horse's back, particularly during maneuvers, accelerations, sharp turns, and close combat. A rigid frame with high pommels allowed the rider to maintain a stable position even during collisions with opponents or when using heavy weaponry (spears, sabers, bows). For transferring force from the rider to the weapon in combat, particularly when striking with a spear or saber, the saddle served as a point of support, enabling the rider to deliver force through their torso and legs without losing balance. This was especially crucial for heavy cavalry, where the effectiveness of a strike directly depended on the stability of the rider's position. The saddle also reduced strain on the horse. Advanced saddle designs, particularly from the Xiongnu period onward, facilitated a more even distribution of the rider's and equipment's weight across the horse's back, reducing pressure on the animal's spine, minimizing the risk of injury, and enabling horses to endure long marches and intense combat conditions.

The refinement of saddles by nomads enhanced rider mobility and maneuverability, allowing the rider to shift in different directions, lean back, dismount quickly, and remount with ease. This significantly increased the flexibility and tactical capabilities of steppe cavalry, especially in close combat and rapid pursuits. The integration of stirrups into the saddle played a monumental role in nomadic armies. The saddle enabled effective use of stirrups, which revolutionized cavalry combat tactics for the Huns and Turks. With the introduction of stirrups, riders gained an additional point of support, further securing their position in the saddle and enabling the use of two-handed weapons, as well as effective slashing and thrusting strikes. A rider in a high, robust saddle appeared more imposing than a foot soldier, amplifying the demoralizing impact of steppe cavalry charges on opponents.

Thus, the saddle in cavalry served not merely an auxiliary but a strategic function, providing the technical, tactical, and physiological conditions for the effective deployment of mounted warriors in battle. However, we cannot make such claims about advanced saddles in the Scythian period, as archaeological evidence does not confirm the existence of structured or framed saddles among the Altai Scythians, at least. Their saddles [fig. 3] typically consisted of two soft cushions filled with wool and hair, connected by a leather strap running along the horse's spine. The edges, oriented toward the horse's neck and hindquarters, were thickened and decorated with elegant arches and paired carved plates made of wood or horn. Such saddles were secured with a girth, as well as chest and tail straps. However, this design only minimally

reduced the pressure of the rider's and equipment's weight on the horse's back, failing to provide sufficient stability or reliable support for the rider during collisions or counterstrikes, unlike those of the Huns and Turks.

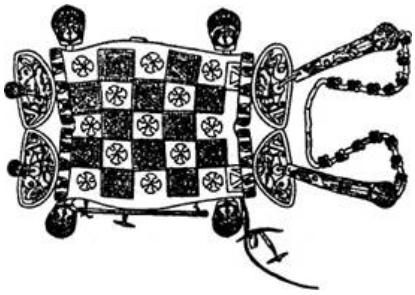

Figure 3. Saddle from Kurgan No. 5, Pazyryk, 5th century BC

At the turn of the eras (1st century BCE–1st century CE), framed saddle constructions emerged, consisting of two narrow arches connected by several crossbars. The functional purpose of these frames remains a subject of scholarly debate. According to one hypothesis, these frames served as the load-bearing component of pack saddles; according to another, the wooden crossbars were placed inside leather cushions, forming an internal support for soft saddles. In any case, these lattice structures can be regarded as direct precursors to rigid framed saddles.

At the next stage of evolution, the cushions were replaced by two wooden planks placed along the sides of the horse's body, connected at the ends by wide, arched pommels, which likely evolved from the decorative wooden overlays of Scythian saddles. These pommels rested directly on the horse's back, with minimal spacing to avoid restricting the animal's mobility. Such saddles provided secure rider fixation, offering stable support and, to some extent, serving a protective function against strikes from edged weapons. Similar constructions are documented in archaeological materials from Korea and Japan from the 4th–6th centuries, suggesting their possible local origin in this region. The advantages of such saddles are evident: first, they ensured a high and stable riding position; second, they allowed effective use of long weapons, particularly spears, without the risk of losing balance or falling. However, mounting such a saddle while wearing long, armored clothing was challenging, leading to the development of a special pad on the left side—a precursor to the stirrup. One of the earliest attempts to classify ancient Turkic saddles was made by A.A. Gavrilova, who identified two types of Kudyrge saddles from the 6th–7th centuries: "male" saddles with high, arched front pommels, sometimes adorned with bone ornamental overlays, and "female" saddles with low front pommels and overlays [Gavrilova, 1965: 85].

In the 6th century, the construction of the saddle frame underwent significant improvements [fig. 4]. The longitudinal boards connecting the saddle bows were extended in length, and the bows themselves were mounted on a wooden platform with a characteristic central protrusion. This innovation enabled a more even distribution of the rider's weight across the saddle's surface, thereby reducing pressure on the animal's spine. The raised edges of the platform allowed for the attachment of stirrups in front of the pommel, eliminating the earlier practice of securing them by looping a connecting rope over the saddle. Subsequently, the cantle was angled relative to the horizontal plane and, like the pommel, was crafted from a solid wooden block. These modifications allowed the rider to shift their body freely in various directions, lean backward, dismount rapidly, and remount with equal speed, significantly enhancing cavalry mobility. Archaeological and historical-cultural evidence suggests that this saddle design emerged at the interface of nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, specifically in the contact zone between pastoralist and agricultural cultures of Northern China, from where it spread widely.

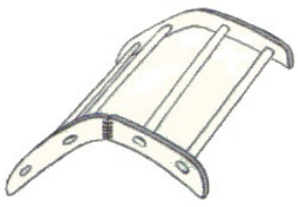

Figure 4. Construction of an ancient Turkic saddle

In the same region, stirrups are believed to have been invented. R.Sh. Dzharilgasinova hypothesized that stirrups originated in the Koguryo state in the 4th century CE [Dzharilgasinova, 1972: 112]. Initially, stirrups consisted of paired wooden footrests, bent from a single wooden rod and reinforced with iron or copper plates. It soon became evident that the wooden core was unnecessary, leading to the production of stirrups from flat iron sheets. However, this design proved uncomfortable, as the narrow metal plate caused injury to the rider's foot. Consequently, the lower part of the stirrup – the footrest – was modified into a flattened, broadened shape. Eventually, stirrups were forged entirely from metal rods.

During the early Saka period, substantial lance heads with narrow, leaf-shaped blades and conical sockets appeared. These typically featured a raised midrib extending to the tip. One or two holes at the base of the socket facilitated attachment to the shaft. Such lances, equally suitable for infantry and cavalry, remained in use until at least the 5th century BCE [Ivanov, 2007: 58].

The formation of powerful steppe states and organized polities likely occurred through the unification of tribes under a centralized authority. Dating back approximately 1,000 years before the time of Tuman, around 200 BCE, we arrive at circa 1200 BCE. This period marks the widespread adoption of iron and the use of horses as riding animals, as evidenced by archaeological findings. Notably, by 1400 BCE, the western Altai Mountains were a significant center for large-scale iron production [Kafesoğlu, 1989: 212].

L.R. Kyzlasov notes that the earliest forged iron tools and weapons appeared in Southern Siberia between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, yet iron did not fully supplant bronze for another 300 years. The products of established bronze-smelting craftsmanship continued to find widespread use, coexisting with the initial output of iron smelters and blacksmiths. Metallurgy, supported by advanced mining that supplied not only non-ferrous and precious metal ores but also iron ore, emerged as an independent craft.

Observations on the significance of weaponry in early medieval Turkic societies of Central Asia are documented in the works of Russian researchers. A.D. Grach suggested that the rarity of bladed weapons and lances in nomadic burials may reflect ritual prohibitions against placing such items in graves. V.A. Mogilnikov argued that this scarcity was not only due to ritual practices but also the high value of swords, which were placed only in the burials of the most elite warriors. Detailed studies of the distribution of weaponry in funerary and memorial complexes of early medieval Turks in the Altai were conducted by V.V. Gorbunov.

Yu.S. Khudiakov's research and the analysis of weaponry from Xianbei archaeological sites in northeastern China provide insights into the Xianbei military complex. The Xianbei armament was relatively advanced and diverse for its time. While their bows and arrows were typologically less varied than those of the Xiongnu, Xianbei armored cavalry surpassed the Xiongnu in close-combat weaponry and protective equipment. It is likely that Xianbei forces included units of heavily armored cavalry [Khudiakov, 2000: 41].

Throughout the early medieval period, Turkic peoples exhibited progressive development in both ranged and close-combat weaponry, as well as protective equipment for warriors and their horses. The evolution of military practices led to increased typological diversity in the armaments used within Turkic military culture.

The bow held primary importance among steppe warriors' weapons. Archaeological evidence indicates that arrowheads were crafted from bronze, iron, bone, or stone. Steppe warriors developed various arrow types, including whistling and poisoned arrows. Bows typically featured a straight or inwardly curved body with short, curved limbs attached at both ends, often made from beech with tendons used for bowstrings. Swords, used in close combat, were also significant, alongside daggers (kamas). Lances were another critical component of their arsenal. Warriors employed protective gear, including armor, helmets, and shields. Their primary tactic was ranged attack, firing arrows from a distance to minimize losses.

Among the Western Turks and Türgesh, bows and arrows were the dominant weapons, enabling effective long-range engagement. Their arsenal included composite bows of various types, distinguished by the number and placement of bone or horn reinforcements that strengthened the weapon's structure [fig. 5].

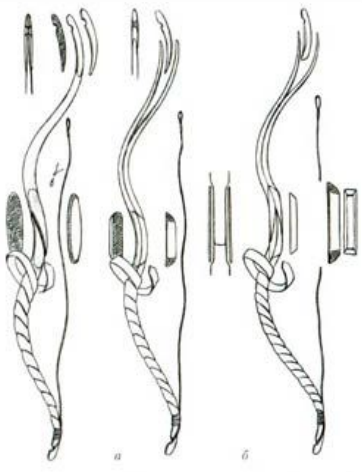

Figure 5. Types of ancient Turkic bows

The bows of the early Turkic period were somewhat inferior in shoulder span to those of the preceding Xiongnu-Sarmatian period but surpassed them in rate of fire and ease of use, particularly in the context of highly maneuverable mounted combat characteristic of Turkic military tradition. Turkic bows were designed to effectively engage enemies equipped with advanced protective armor, as these groups primarily conducted warfare against the armies of sedentary agricultural states in Central Asia and Iran, which were known for their sophisticated individual defense systems.

Turkic archers possessed a diverse array of arrows tailored for various purposes. Arrowheads varied from two-, three-, to four-bladed designs, with fletching exhibiting different cross-sectional shapes, including flat, triangular, quadrangular, or rounded profiles [fig. 6]. Arrowheads were typically attached via tang insertion, ensuring a secure connection to the shaft.

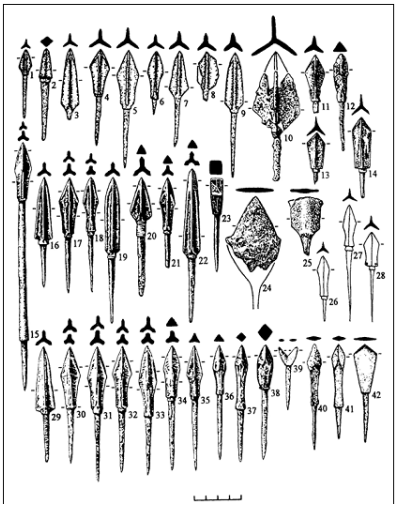

Figure 6. Types of Turkic arrowheads

By the second half of the first millennium CE, three-bladed fletched arrows were the most prevalent and widely used due to their stabilizing function, which induced rotation during flight, enhancing accuracy and penetrating power. Additionally, bone whistles were often affixed to the shaft immediately behind the arrowhead, producing a piercing sound during flight, likely serving both psychological and signaling purposes.

Contemporary studies suggest that three-bladed arrows exhibited superior aeroballistic characteristics. Their use, documented from the Xiongnu period through the late medieval era, underscores the durability and effectiveness of this technological tradition in Turkic military practices.

Archaeological excavations in the Tian Shan and Semirechye regions, particularly at Turkic burials with horse interments, have revealed a variety of bone reinforcements used in bow construction. These include lateral reinforcements attached to the bow's limbs to enhance durability and central reinforcements strengthening the bow's core. Significant advancements were made in the production technologies of bows,

arrows, bladed weapons, and individual metal protective gear. Notable progress was also observed in cavalry and horse equipment, with the widespread adoption of rigid-frame saddles and stirrups, which provided greater rider stability and expanded tactical capabilities in close and hand-to-hand combat.

A pivotal development was the emergence of heavily armored cavalry units within the armies of early Turkic and other nomadic communities, establishing these as distinct structural components of Central Asian nomadic forces. Alongside traditional loose-formation attacks, heavy cavalry increasingly employed assaults in close-knit battle formations, reflecting heightened organization and discipline in Turkic military operations.

To effectively counter enemies in both ranged and close combat, warriors of the Western Turks and Türgesh utilized various types of individual metal protection [fig. 7]. Even before the formation of the First Turkic Khaganate, while residing in the Altai Mountains, the Turks equipped their warriors with reliable metal breastplates. Following the establishment of the unified Turkic Khaganate, elite units of the khagan's guard — heavily armored cavalry clad in metal lamellar armor, known as "fuli" or "buri" (wolves) — emerged as a prominent feature [Bichurin, 1950: 229].

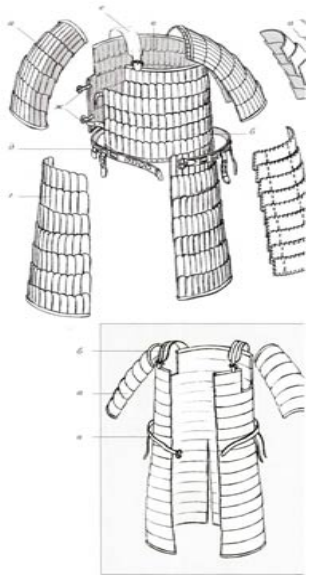

Figure 7. Ancient Turkic composite armor

Recent studies have cataloged and analyzed finds of ranged and close-combat weaponry and protective equipment of Western Turkic and Türgesh warriors [Kozhomberdiev and Khudiakov, 1990: 48–52]. Significant quantities of such artifacts have been uncovered in recent excavations of Western Turkic cultural sites in the Kochkor Valley of the Tian Shan [Tabaldiev, 1996: 43–50].

The distribution of weaponry in early medieval Turkic burial sites serves as a reliable indicator of warrior interments. The spatial arrangement of weapons within grave complexes typically mirrors their use in daily and military life, suggesting that burial rituals reflected socially significant aspects of the deceased's identity, including status and occupation.

Analysis of archaeological data from Turkic burial sites in Central Asia indicates that, beyond age and gender, the distribution of specific weapon types was influenced by their social and symbolic significance. Bladed weapons, battle axes, lances, and protective gear (armor, shields, helmets) served not only utilitarian purposes but also functioned as markers of social status, affiliation with the military elite, and possibly ethno-social differentiation within nomadic society.

Comparative sources, including written records, iconographic materials, and ethnographic parallels, highlight the critical role of weaponry in the symbolic capital of nomads. The presence of specific weapons in burials could signify the deceased's membership in the military aristocracy, participation in campaigns and battles, or connection to the sacred sphere, as weapons were often perceived as carriers of power, protecting the deceased's soul in the afterlife.

These findings have been complemented by modeling the social structure of early medieval Turkic society, revealing a complex and hierarchical organization with multiple elite groups. Some groups were centered around military specialization, while others fulfilled administrative, diplomatic, or sacred-ritual

functions. Thus, weaponry served not only as a symbol of personal status but also as a reflection of power structures, social stratification, and ideological worldviews within nomadic culture.

These results underscore the value of further studying weaponry as a key element in Turkic nomads' conceptions of power, social hierarchy, warfare, and the sacred. A comprehensive approach to analyzing weaponry – integrating archaeological, anthropological, historical-cultural, and religious perspectives – offers significant potential for deepening our understanding of both the material and spiritual culture of early medieval Eurasian nomads.

Symbols and Attributes of Power in Eurasian Nomadic Cultures

The earliest symbols and attributes of power emerged during the Late Stone Age, manifesting as staffs and scepters of various configurations, often adorned with zoomorphic figures as finials. In the territory of modern Kazakhstan, several stone scepter heads from the Copper-Stone Age have been documented, primarily in the western and northwestern regions. These artifacts symbolized the divine origin of tribal leaders' authority, their consolidating role within the tribal elite, their special mission in societal functions, and their organizational role in sustaining the community. On the later stages of the Stone Age and into subsequent periods, priests, endowed with religious-ideological functions, also possessed variants of such attributes [fig. 8].

Figure 8. Burial of an Eneolithic chieftain-priest and finials of tribal leaders' staffs, Western Kazakhstan

Military and state standards across the steppe empires of the Eurasian space share common motifs and elements, reflecting their formation within a shared geographical and cultural context, as well as genetic and ideological connections. These commonalities stem from the sacralization of the environment, nature, and animals. Consequently, standards frequently featured stylized depictions of eagles, lions, bulls, and occasionally dragons or other mythological and real animals, symbolizing strength, authority, and divine origin or protection. Bright, contrasting colors – red, black, white, and yellow – were employed to enhance visual impact and symbolic significance. Standards were typically crafted from fabrics, embellished with metal, embroidery, or appliqués, underscoring the status and military might of the bearers. The shared motifs of steppe empire standards reflect a universal symbolism of power and divine patronage, characteristic of nomadic cultures that reinforced their authority through visual signs. Structurally, standards consisted of vertical banners affixed to poles, often adorned with tassels, fringes, or metal ornaments. Metallic elements, such as finials, plaques, or reinforcements, enhanced durability and visual appeal, indicating the technological knowledge, artistic skill, and cultural appreciation of aesthetics and symbolism in military contexts, while also reflecting shared cultural and religious values.

A notable example of statehood symbols is a genre composition on a golden plaque from an investiture belt, discovered at a temple site associated with the cremation of a khagan at Eleke Sazy. This depicts a crowned khagan seated on a zoomorphic throne in a canonical ruler's pose [fig. 9].

Figure 9. Depiction of an ancient Turkic Khagan on the throne, Eleke Sazy

The imagery and symbols on standards reflect beliefs in spirits and deities protecting the army and people. Standards could serve sacred functions tied to cults of nature, patron spirits, or ancestors. The symbolism and ritual use of military standards demonstrate the profound interrelation between religious beliefs and the martial culture of Eurasian nomads, ensuring cohesion and elevating the collective spirit of the army. For the Saka, Huns, and Turks, standards served not only as tactical instruments of identification and regulation but also as sacred attributes of authority and divine sanction. They functioned as a visual-communicative code that unified troops, reinforced morale, and legitimized power through sacralized imagery. Despite stylistic and iconographic variations, these standards consistently embodied universal features of the nomadic military tradition, rooted in symbolic expression, ritual practice, and the belief in supernatural protection. In this capacity, they transcended their utilitarian role, symbolizing unity, divine guardianship, and the sanctity of political and military authority.

In the later stages of Stone Age societal development, the rising prominence of the military class and war leaders, endowed with specific authority, was accompanied by corresponding martial attributes and ideological justifications of military power. In such contexts, certain weapons, beyond their destructive capabilities, began to serve symbolic and emblematic functions. The history of Eurasian peoples provides numerous examples where specific weapons became tribal or state symbols. For instance, the cult of the sword dedicated to the war god Ares among the Scythians involved specialized temples where ritual mysteries were performed periodically, serving as an essential condition for maintaining ideological stability and harmony within the state. One such symbol of the warrior caste or societal stratum during the Neolithic period is a bone dagger (crafted from a bull's hind leg) with flint inserts, discovered in 1950 at the Ust-Narym settlement on the Irtysh River [fig. 10]. This dagger, lacking a handle and likely unsuitable for combat, primarily symbolized martial authority and may have been used in exceptional cases for ritual sacrifices during the Neolithic period.

Figure 10. Bone dagger with flint blades, Ust-Narym, East Kazakhstan

Among ancient weaponry, the throwing spear (lance) held symbolic significance, serving as an attribute of military and public authority for distinguished warriors and war leaders. Some examples were adorned with animal or bird figurines. One such specimen was found in the Kostanay region of Kazakhstan [fig. 11]. It is believed that these artifacts could have been fitted with horsehair tufts, banners, or standards.

Figure 11. Bronze spearhead of cultic purpose

The motifs, ornaments, and symbols reflect cultural and military commonalities, as well as the distinct perceptions of symbolism among the nomadic peoples discussed here. Notably, among the Saka, Huns, and Turks, standards served not only as battle markers but also as carriers of sacred symbols connecting the army to spiritual forces. For nomads, visual signs held sacred significance, as evidenced by depictions of animals on standards. All Eurasian steppe states utilized standards as visual codes to enhance morale and provide spiritual support, as confirmed by finds featuring animal imagery, mythological creatures, and symbols of

power, underscoring their sacred function. The use of animal motifs – an archetypal feature linking these cultures – is particularly evident. For instance, the griffin among the Saka was associated with higher powers and divine intervention, as corroborated by archaeological discoveries.

To develop a unified methodological and methodical framework for reconstructing social structures, worldviews, and mental characteristics of nomadic societies, it is essential to integrate philosophical methods with high heuristic potential alongside general historical and scientific approaches. These methods, including dialectical, structural-semiotic, phenomenological, structural-functional, and hermeneutic approaches, facilitate the exploration of the mythopoetic and ideological dimensions of state standards and symbols. General philosophical principles of analysis, aimed at identifying patterns of interconnection and mutual influence among symbolic forms and standards, ensure the integrity and internal dynamics of the historical-cultural continuity among the Saka, Huns, and Turks. Research data confirm the multi-layered and hierarchical nature of the social organization of these cultures at various stages of their historical development. Nomadic society and statehood represent a complex, structured system wherein social roles, statuses, and functions correlate with the cultural, legal, and economic foundations of steppe states. Any culture is viewed as a system of interconnected elements with both functional significance and semantic weight, forming stable structures reproduced in symbolism, mythology, rituals, and language.

Religious behavior among nomads served as a mechanism for ordering reality, where the sacred and profane were closely intertwined. This principle presupposes the presence of archetypal images within the deep structure of individual and collective consciousness. These archetypes manifest in symbolic forms of thought, mythopoetic language, ritual practices, and cultural memory, shaping enduring mental models of behavior and worldview, reflected in the symbolism of nomadic statehood. This perspective emphasizes the correlation between internal motivations, goals, beliefs, and the external activities of social actors. Following the concepts of M. Eliade and other scholars, religious experience is regarded as a distinct form of existential presence that forms the structural basis for behavior, symbolic communication, and ritual actions [Eliade, 1999: 406–411]. Comparative mythology reveals that the mythological systems of Indo-European and Eurasian peoples contain numerous archaic narratives (mythologems) with stable structural features and analogous symbolism. These elements of mythological thought reflect universal archetypes transmitted and transformed over centuries, retaining significance for reconstructing mental worldviews. Thus, the methodological framework for studying sacred symbolism requires an interdisciplinary approach, combining philosophical, sociological, religious, psychological, cultural, and archaeological analytical tools to enable a comprehensive study of past social and mental structures and the reconstruction of a holistic picture of traditional societal worldviews.

The technology of nomadic banner production utilized materials such as leather, fabric, and metal, along with metal ornaments. These standards, decorations, and finials enhanced durability and visual impact, underscoring the owner's status. Constructive solutions were driven not only by functionality but also by the owner's status, as evidenced by archaeological finds and reconstructions. The Turks employed mixed materials, metal ornaments, and embroidery, indicating advanced artistic traditions.

Symbols and attributes of power hold paramount importance in the political history of any people or state, expressing the will of rulers, executive authority, and the aspirations of the populace. These symbols have deep historical roots extending back centuries. The forms of symbols and attributes undergo significant changes in accordance with the ideological and political directives of ruling clans, tribes, state formations, sociopolitical groups, and other factors, including traditions, customs, and myths, which both influence and become integrated into these symbols. Religious symbols also play a significant role in regulating relationships within sociocultural formations across historical diachrony.

Numerous materials attest to the high degree of militarization in the Pazyryk society, evidenced by a significant proportion of weapons or their imitations in male burials, various injuries, and a notable number of cenotaphs, which increased during significant global historical events. Virtually the entire male population could be mobilized for military action when necessary. However, a clear trend emerged toward the formation of a distinct group of professional warriors constituting the leader's "retinue" or "serving" force [Dashkovsky, 2002: 214].

The archaeological cultures of Eastern Kazakhstan in the second half to late first millennium BCE – Pazyryk, Kulazhurgin, and possibly others – developed based on the early Scythian cultural complex established in the early first millennium BCE. Notable monuments include the Kurty, Maiemer, Zevakino, Izmailovka, Kuruk, and Kogaly burial grounds, alongside numerous chance finds, petroglyphs, and other artifacts. Many items from these necropolises have long been used in historical-cultural reconstructions and are part of the global cultural heritage.

The military standards of the Huns, Saka, and Turks share characteristic features, including their functional role in identification, cohesion, and sacred protection of the army; visual symbolism through animal imagery, bright colors, and mythological motifs; and constructive features such as materials, decorative techniques, and metal elements, reflecting technological levels and status. These shared traits indicate similar functions and symbolism in the military standards of Eurasian nomadic peoples, as corroborated by leading specialists in archaeology and historical anthropology.

Military standards played a significant role in the political life of states as personal or state symbols. The most notable and reliable material in Kazakhstan, serving as the finial of a royal standard, originates from Berels Kurgan No. 11 [fig. 12].

Figure 12. Finial of the royal standard, Berel

This is further supported by the discovery of a wooden sculpture of a tiger-griffin among items scattered by looters in a burial chamber. This sculptural depiction of a mythical polymorphic creature – a tiger-griffin – symbolized the supreme ruler of the people inhabiting this territory in the 4th century BCE and was revered as a sacred relic. The combination of griffin and tiger imagery is not coincidental, as the griffin, a totemic and revered animal associated with soaring above, dominated the art and worldview of the Altai peoples during this period.

Herodotus, dubbed the “father of history,” provided semi-legendary accounts of tribes interacting with the northern Black Sea Scythians and more distant groups. Many of his accounts were derived from travelers’ reports, such as Aristeas, son of Caistrobius from Proconnesus, who relayed tales of griffin tribes living in cold lands among high mountains, where snowflakes resembled bird feathers. These tribes mined gold, while their neighbors, the Arimaspians (Greek for “one-eyed”), frequently raided to steal it. Sources also mention the Issedones, Argippaeans, and other tribes neighboring the griffins (Herodotus, Book IV). Scholars have variously located these tribes on the Urals, Altai, or further east, with most favoring the Altai hypothesis. This study supports the view that these ancient accounts, albeit distorted, reflect real events in the Altai and adjacent territories during the mid to late first millennium BCE among tribes with similar economic-cultural profiles and worldviews. This is reinforced by typological parallels in Chinese written sources. The text *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* (“Biography of Mu Tianzi”), discovered in 280 BCE, describes the legendary journey of Zhou Muwang northwest from his state. Crossing the Kunlun Mountains (initially the Altai, later reassigned to another region), he followed the Hei Shui (Black River) to the vicinity of the mysterious “Yao Chi” (Paradise Lake), where he encountered clouds of feathers and countless bird flocks [Sun Peiliang, 1985: 8; Wang Zhilai, 1986: 54]. If Herodotus’ skepticism about informants’ comparisons of snowflakes to bird feathers in the lands of the northern Scythian neighbors – Arimaspians, “gold-guarding griffins,” and other Altai tribes – stems from rumors of prolonged winters and heavy snowfalls, the accounts of actual bird feathers near water bodies may have been misinterpreted by ancient authors due to stereotypes about northern “barbarians.”

Another Chinese source from the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, *Shanhaijing*, describes a northern “one-eyed” country, “Yimu Guo” (Yimu: one eye; Guo: state), aligning typologically with Aristeas’ account of the Arimaspians. Greek myths about the bald Argippaeans resonate with the Chinese text *Zhuangzi*, covering events from the 4th–2nd centuries BCE in the “bald” state of “Qiongfa Guo” (Qiong: poor, bald; Fa: hair; Guo: state) northwest of China. These Greco-Chinese mythological parallels may share a common origin. Some Chinese scholars identify *Mu Tianzi Zhuan*’s geographical terms – Kunlun, Yao Chi, and Hei Shui – with the Altai Mountains, Lake Zaysan, and the Black Irtysh River, respectively (Sun Peiliang, 1985: 8; Ma Yong, Wang Binghua, 1990: 13), though Lake Markakol or the Ili River and Lake Balkhash are less likely

alternatives. These accounts potentially expand the southern boundaries of the tribes creating this cultural phenomenon.

As new historical-archaeological sources are analyzed, it becomes increasingly evident that Eurasian peoples, including Turkic ethnic groups, possessed a distinct system of property and state symbols, with banners forming a critical component. Despite the fragmentary survival of this system, comprehensive analysis of written and iconographic sources enables substantiated conclusions about the key stages of state standard evolution among medieval ancestors.

Standards fulfilled multiple significant functions, primarily as religious symbols protecting armed forces in battle, embodying divine essence, and endowing rulers and armies with sacred power. Losing a standard in battle equated to defeat, signaling retreat or the death of a commander. Various banners and small flags held both sacred and tactical significance, aiding army management during battles by allowing commanders to assess unit positions and respond to changing conditions. Toppling an enemy's banner signified the cessation of organized resistance, while banners marked the commander's headquarters and served as rallying points post-battle [fig. 13].

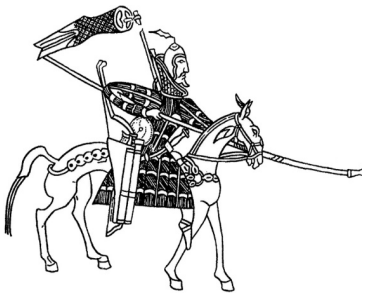

Figure 13. Depiction of a Turkic warrior on frescoes

The earliest banner types characteristic of Eurasian steppe nomadic cultures trace back to the Sarmatian era, possibly borrowed from Central Asian traditions under ancient Chinese military influence. Societal development relies on stable symbols and attributes reflecting social structure and values, embodying spiritual culture, worldviews, customs, and traditions shaped by economic, political, cultural, and religious factors.

Civilizational progress involves global changes impacting material and ideological foundations, accompanied by transformations in symbols, norms, values, cultural codes, and social behavior. In the context of continuity, studying the symbolism and standards of the ancient Turkic period as expressions of political power, ethnic identity, and ideological foundations is critical. Scholars often highlight the wolf – a sacred animal reflecting the divine origin of the Ashina clan, symbolizing strength, courage, and protection – as a key Turkic symbol. Tamgas, clan signs, served identification, proprietary, and sacred functions, applied to weapons, banners, household items, and livestock. Turkic military standards, ancient symbols of power, typically consisted of a pole adorned with a spear or metal finial, attached with horse tails, ribbons, or fabric panels. The number of tails indicated a leader's rank, accompanying the ruler as an essential emblem of authority. These symbols were integral to military hierarchy and sacred Turkic beliefs, linked to the patronage of heavenly forces – Tengri – and ancestral spirits.

The evolution of symbolic space is inseparable from societal historical movement, reflecting adaptation to new challenges. In the context of globalization, digitization, and cultural diffusion, symbols gain heightened significance as tools for identity, consolidation, and historical memory, serving as both cultural heritage and instruments for shaping the future. Studying ancient Turkic symbolism enables modern society to maintain connections to its roots and reflect on enduring categories of power, honor, and community through historical cultural codes.

The symbolic space of Turkic standards, viewed in the context of prior societies, reveals the origins, continuity, and symbolic weight of these emblems within nomadic worldviews. In a modern perspective, state symbols and standards serve as mental codes of nomadic peoples and their statehood. Analyzing their role in social and cultural organization highlights the emphasis on the "tuğ" standard and totemic symbols, reflecting their connection to the broader evolution of symbolic systems amid historical and civilizational transformations. The tuğ was not merely a visual marker of power but a sacred symbol carrying Tengri's blessing. Its presence in battles or assemblies (Kurultai) signified the legitimacy of decisions and divine consent, accompanying rulers, marking military camps, and serving as a protective talisman. Sources

indicate that the tuğ was used not only by Turks but also by other Central Asian nomads, though the Turks imbued it with a structured, hierarchical, and sacred significance. The tuğ became an archetype of Eastern authority, symbolizing state continuity, vertical power, and military standards – "bayraks" [fig. 14].

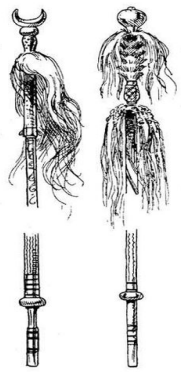

Figure 14. One of the standards of the ancient Turks

The symbolic space plays a pivotal role in societal historical development, reflecting social organization, worldviews, collective identity, power legitimation, and cultural memory. This is particularly evident in Eurasian nomadic cultures, especially the ancient Turks, whose symbolic system integrated spiritual, military, and sacred meanings from preceding states. Each clan and tribe had its tamga – a clan sign serving distinction, ownership, and sacred connection to ancestral spirits. Tamgas were primarily applied to state standards, weapons, yurts, horse gear, seals, tombstones, and livestock, reinforcing clan affiliation and social status. Turkic symbolism, rooted in mythology and worldview, shaped their cultural and ideological identity.

Throughout their historical development, symbols and standards have undergone transformations in both form and meaning. Civilizational processes – such as the disintegration of empires, religious reforms, or cultural exchanges – have consistently been accompanied by changes in the sign-symbolic system. Among the Turks, these transformations are particularly evident during the collapse of their empire and the emergence of successor khanates, as well as during the period of Islamization and the transition to a sedentary lifestyle. Despite these changes, traditional symbols, such as the *tuğ* (banner), various types of *bayraks* (flags), and clan *tamgas*, retained their significance, adapting to new forms: clan signs evolved into heraldic emblems, wolf imagery became military insignia, and standards were incorporated into religious or dynastic protocols [fig. 15].

Figure 15. Turkic flags depicted in miniatures

In the modern context, the symbolism of the ancient Turks continues to serve as an element of national identity. In Turkic-speaking countries (e.g., Kazakhstan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan), motifs rooted in Tengrism are reinterpreted as tools for cultural self-representation and historical legitimation. Thus, Turkic symbols and standards remain an integral part of their socio-political, cultural, and spiritual systems. Within the sign-symbolic space of ancient Turkic society, these elements reflected not only power relations and tribal structures but also sacred meanings that ensured communal unity and stability. The evolution of these symbols amid historical transformations demonstrates their flexibility, resilience, and ability to adapt to new ideological and cultural conditions while maintaining ties to the deep archetypes of steppe civilization.

A comprehensive analysis of the social organization, statehood, military structure, and symbolic systems of the Saka, Xiongnu, and Turks reveals a profound historical, cultural, and political continuity

among these nomadic cultures. Their social institutions, military practices, and sign-symbolic spaces were shaped by the nomadic lifestyle, environmental conditions, and the necessity for constant mobility, resulting in shared structural and functional characteristics.

The military-democratic structure of Saka society, which included popular assemblies and the participation of armed community members in decision-making, reflects early forms of direct democracy. Notably, even women held political and military rights, distinguishing Saka society from the typical Eastern civilizations characterized by rigid bureaucracy and social stratification. The power structure comprised a sacralized ruler, a military aristocracy, a priesthood, and a free population of farmers and pastoralists, as corroborated by both written and archaeological sources.

The development of weaponry and tactics among the Saka, Xiongnu, and Turks follows a unified trajectory in the evolution of Central Asian nomadic military practices. Archaeological finds highlight not only the functional but also the symbolic roles of weapons and equipment, linked to social stratification, rituals, and mythology. Horses, central to nomadic life and military superiority, along with artifacts such as stone scepters topped with horse heads, served as markers of sacred and status-related significance within the culture.

Standards, or *tuğ*, held particular importance in both military and spiritual contexts. Their construction, color symbolism, and zoomorphic motifs signified the high status of their bearer, expressed divinely sanctioned authority, and served as visual codes uniting warriors and the community. Elements such as the number of horse tails, metal ornaments, and depictions of mythological animals carried profound sacred meanings, affirming the ruler's connection to the deity Tengri and ancestral spirits.

The symbols and standards of the Turks and other Eurasian nomadic peoples formed a distinctive sign system, intertwining power, warfare, and sacred space within a unified worldview and ritual context. These signs were integral to the social structure, fulfilling functions of identity, legitimation, and mobilization.

Contemporary research, grounded in interdisciplinary approaches – archaeological, historical-cultural, semiotic, and philosophical – enables the reconstruction of the complex, multi-layered system of symbols and power in nomadic societies. The symbolism of standards, tamgas, and animal motifs serves as a key element of the mental code of these societies, through which they expressed their identity, sacred worldview, and concepts of power. Standards, as "material codes of sacred authority," were not merely battle banners but reflections of the holistic philosophy of steppe civilization. Their study provides deeper insight into the internal mechanisms of political organization, religious beliefs, and cultural continuity among the Saka, Xiongnu, and Turks. These signs serve as vivid markers of the civilizational unity of Eurasian nomadic societies, demonstrating the resilience of their structures, symbols, and ideological orientations, carried through centuries and reflected in the cultural memory of modern peoples.

The analyzed material convincingly demonstrates that the socio-political organization, military systems, and rich symbolism, including standards and sign-symbolic spaces, are key to understanding the historical and cultural heritage of Central Asian nomadic societies. The military-democratic structure of Saka society fostered a unique political model, with significant roles for ordinary community members, including women warriors, in decision-making and military activities. This reflects a high degree of civic engagement and social participation, distinguishing it from the hierarchical structures of sedentary Eastern civilizations.

Over recent decades, research has focused on the military organization and weaponry of nomadic peoples, including the Scythians, Xiongnu, Turks, Uyghurs, and Kyrgyz. Archaeological and historical-ethnographic data have enabled the reconstruction of nomadic societal structures, identifying key features of military practices, social stratification, and the sacred aspects of power, expressed through battle standards and symbols. The *tuğ* holds a prominent place as a symbol of authority, legitimacy, and connection to divine forces. Its significance transcends utilitarian military functions, becoming a sacred object imbued with religious and political roles. Analysis of standards, ornaments, totemic imagery, and symbolism (griffins, wolves, eagles, bulls, and mythological creatures) reveals their universal role as elements of ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and expressions of state hierarchy.

Philosophical and structural-semiotic approaches to studying the standards and signs of Turkic and other nomadic societies uncover their profound symbolic weight. These elements are not merely markers of power or rank but reflections of a mythopoetic worldview, spiritual value systems, and cosmological concepts of order, sanctity, and justice. The wolf, as the sacred animal of the Ashina clan, and the use of tamgas as legal and identificational signs, are particularly significant.

Conclusions. In conclusion, a comprehensive examination of social organization, weaponry, sacred signs, and the philosophy of symbols confirms that Central Asian nomadic peoples possessed a highly organized system of power, a multi-layered social hierarchy, a profound spiritual tradition, and a deliberate

symbolic culture. These elements ensured the stability and continuity of nomadic statehoods while enabling adaptation to civilizational challenges without compromising identity. The evolution of the sign-symbolic space of the Saka, Xiongnu, and Turks not only reflects their historical development but also serves as a vital source for understanding broader processes of cultural transformation in Eurasia. In the context of modern globalization and cultural diffusion, engaging with these symbols and forms of collective memory remains a relevant means of preserving identity, spiritual heritage, and historical self-awareness.

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СОДЕРЖАНИЕ
ОТАН ТАРИХЫ № 28 (3). 2025

Редакцияның мекен-жайы:
050100, Қазақстан Республикасы, Алматы қ., Шевченко көшесі, 28
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Журнал Қазақстан Республикасының Ақпарат және қоғамдық келісім министрлігінде
1998 ж. 9 наурызда тіркеліп, N 158-ж куәлігіне ие болды.