

**ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE SAKA TRIBES IN  
THE ARAL SEA REGION AND KHOREZM DURING THE EARLY IRON AGE**

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**Аннотация**

В статье рассматриваются хозяйственная деятельность и социально-экономическая структура сакских племён, населявших Приаралье и Хорезм в раннем железном веке. На основе археологических материалов, данных о поселениях и курганных могильниках, а также письменных источников анализируются формы кочевого, полукочевого и оседлого скотоводства. Раскрываются особенности использования пастбищ в районах Сарыкамыш, Давдона, Дарьелика и древнего русла Узбоя, а также сезонная мобильность сакских общин.

**Ключевые слова**

ранний железный век, Приаралье, Хорезм, саки, скотоводство, пастбищное хозяйство, социальная структура, военная демократия, Авеста.

**Abstract**

This article examines the economic activities and social structure of the Saka tribes inhabiting the Aral Sea region and Khorezm during the Early Iron Age. Based on archaeological evidence from settlements, burial mounds, and written sources, the study analyzes nomadic, semi-nomadic, and sedentary forms of pastoralism. Particular attention is paid to the seasonal use of pastures in the Sarykamysh, Davdon, Daryalyk, and ancient Uzboy river basin areas, as well as the territorial organization of Saka communities.

**Keywords**

Early Iron Age, Aral Sea region, Khorezm, Saka tribes, pastoralism, pasture economy, social structure, military democracy, Avesta.

**Introduction**

The Aral Sea region and Khorezm have long been one of the key historical and cultural centres of Central Asia. The social and economic processes that took place here during the Bronze and Early Iron Ages played a significant role in the development of the region's civilisation. In particular, in the 7th–6th centuries BCE, the economic activities, social structure, and cultural traditions of the Saka tribes inhabiting these territories constituted an important stage in the history of the Aral Sea region. The Saka's nomadic, semi-nomadic, and partially sedentary forms of economy were organically linked to the natural-geographical environment.

In the Early Iron Age, the development of animal husbandry as the leading sector, the system of seasonal pasture use, the strengthening of clan-tribal structures, and the emergence of elements of military democracy had a powerful impact on societal progress.

**Literature Review**

Archaeological and historical sources play a crucial role in studying the economic activities and social structure of the Saka tribes in the Aral Sea region and Khorezm during the Early Iron Age. Vaynberg (1991, 1992) and Yusupov (1981), based on archaeological research, highlight nomadic animal husbandry in the Sarykamysh region, Davdon, and Uzboi pastures. Kuzmina (1997) analyses the ecological foundations of nomadism in the Eurasian steppes. Livshits (1963) and the Avesta (Yasna, 1980) describe the social structure – family, clan, tribe – and reveal elements of military democracy. Sazonova (1978) provides an ethnographic comparison of traditional economic forms. These works form the basis for a comprehensive analysis and prove the cultural-geographical interconnectedness of Saka society.

### **Methodological Foundations**

In the research process, the principles of historicity and objectivity were of primary importance. The economic activities and social structure of the Saka tribes were analysed in organic connection with the stages of historical development and the natural-geographical environment.

The study employed a complex approach using historical-comparative, archaeological, historical-ethnographic, and palaeogeographical methods. Data from written sources were comparatively analysed with archaeological evidence, and the obtained results served to scientifically illuminate the social and economic life of the Saka tribes in the Aral Sea region and Khorezm during the Early Iron Age.

### **Analysis**

At the beginning of the Early Iron Age, the Saka tribes occupied the Aral Sea territories. The Saka living in the Lower Syr Darya basin (in the eastern Aral Sea lands) were nomadic, whereas the Saka settled in the Sarykamysh basin – formed by the Davdon and Daryolyk channels of the Amu Darya in the western part of the Khorezm oasis – were semi-sedentary (semi-nomadic) and sedentary herders, with agriculture serving as an auxiliary sector. Their culture has been studied based on data from burial mounds such as Sakar-Chaga, and settlements like Quysisoy 2, Yassikir, and Kangha.

No settlements dating to the 7th–6th centuries BCE have been found in the eastern part of the Khorezm oasis, in the Akcha Darya delta, which was extensively developed during the Bronze Age. It is known that during the Bronze Age, canals were drawn from the branches of the Akcha Darya, and settlements were located around small fields, with animal husbandry developing more broadly than crop farming.

In the Early Iron Age, the economic and cultural landscape changed significantly. In the Davdon oasis of the Sarykamysh region, settlements and burial mounds were located on high ridges, with no traces of ancient irrigation structures – canals or ditches – found around them. The population raised cattle, sheep, and goats; horse breeding also occupied a major place in the herders' economy [1, pp.123–142].

Alongside this, the pastures along the banks of the middle part of the ancient Uzboi channel, which flowed from Lake Sarykamysh via the Amu Darya, began to be seasonally utilised by nomadic herders from the 7th century BCE. Their burial mounds have been identified on ridges such as Khonali and Yolqim [7, pp.142–143].

A distinctive social and economic structure developed in the life of the Sarykamysh Saka. Lands used for developing animal husbandry formed ethnic territories where tribes settled or migrated seasonally. In this regard, the pastures around the Daryolyk, Davdon, and Uzboi channels served as sources for livestock grazing [2].

In the social and economic relations of herding communities, principles of organising animal husbandry – such as seasonal division of pastures and defining pasture boundaries – were of great importance. Studying the implementation of these tasks in ancient times, and reconstructing the history of animal husbandry, requires researchers to turn to archaeological and ethnographic data, as well as palaeogeographical conditions.

According to historical and ethnographic data, steppe-adapted animal husbandry primarily developed in nomadic and semi-nomadic (semi-sedentary) forms, as such an economic sector required less labour and provided more abundant fodder for livestock. On this basis, camels and hardy sheep were raised, adapted to moving from place to place in desert dune areas; in contrast, horses were grazed along riverbanks in reed thickets or enclosures and additionally fed with grain and alfalfa [5, pp.54–56].

Based on the topography of Early Iron Age sites in the deserts of the Sarykamysch basin, it can be estimated that an area of approximately  $180 \times 120$  km was suitable for livestock grazing; along the Sarykamysch shores (excluding the inner Kyzylkum desert), this figure reached  $250 \times 150$  km (appendix). We can assume that these territories were used by nomadic and semi-nomadic Saka communities in different seasons for grazing livestock and migration purposes.

It is known that, starting from the Bronze Age, large patriarchal families emerged in Eurasian steppe communities, including those of herders in the Aral Sea region. This was facilitated by the development of productive forces, the acquisition of surplus products, the advancement of productive animal husbandry, the expansion of exchange opportunities, and socio-economic factors [6, pp.38–40].

### **Results**

Archaeological materials and early written sources testify that, by the 7th century BCE, the economic position of large patriarchal (father-son) families had grown within the social structure of herders. The societal structure of this period is described in the Avesta. In the Yasna section of the Avesta, family, clan, and tribe are mentioned, and within the social composition of communities, priests, warriors, herders, and craftsmen are distinguished [8, p. 64].

According to the source, the family – “nmana” – formed the initial (lowest) layer of societal structure, with several related large families uniting into clan communities – “vis”. A clan included at least 15 large families and served as the foundation of society. Clan communities formed the tribe – “zantu”. The territory inhabited by the tribe was called “shoytra” [4, pp.139–144]. This social structure developed significantly among steppe pastoralist communities with the emergence of nomadic animal husbandry [3, pp.81–94]. In the works of ancient Greek historians, the concept of “ethnos” – people – was not applied to steppe herding tribes such as the Sauromatians, Dahae, Sakas, and Massagetae; their settlement areas were not associated with specific names, and only the tribal ethnonyms were mentioned. For example, this is vividly expressed in Herodotus’s statement: “the Massagetae are a valiant tribe,” and in Strabo’s work: “the Massagetae and Sakas have their own names.”

Initially, the tribe functioned as a social union, and the territory spread by its constituent clans was perceived by herders as their own homeland. Pastures belonged to clan-tribal communities and were distributed among them. Attitudes toward private property and the social relations based on it corresponded to kinship ties within families and clans, reinforcing the relationships among members of the production union during the production process.

The production of labour tools and other items from bronze, and later from iron, played a significant role in the life and economy of herders in the Khorezm oasis and the Aral Sea region in general. It should be noted that, similar to other regions of Central Asia, iron was considered a precious metal in the craftsmanship of Aral Sea communities starting from the stage of iron processing, and it was initially used for jewellery as well. An iron bracelet was found in the Uygarak burial mound alongside bronze and silver bracelets. Two iron bracelets were recovered from the Sakar-Chaga burial mound. These finds confirm the aforementioned points.

The spread of iron tools increased labour productivity. During the Bronze Age in the Khorezm oasis, labour tools and household items were produced by herder-craftsmen in domestic settings. In the 7th–6th centuries BCE, specialised craftsmen – blacksmiths – emerged who worked with iron.

Iron was used not only for labour tools but also for weapons and armour. Iron implements made it easier to work with stone, bone, leather, and wood. As a result, blacksmithing became a specialised profession.

Among the grave goods from Saka burial mounds, there are various weapons and items made of bronze and iron, as well as horse equipment (bronze buckles and phalerae). Bronze

phalerae decorated the bridles of horse harnesses. These phalerae are works of art, adorned with depictions of birds of prey and leopards. Such items were widely distributed among Eurasian steppe herders during the Early Iron Age. The images were executed in the animal style characteristic of nomadic art.

According to L. T. Yablonsky, the social system of the 7th–6th century BCE Sakas of Khorezm consisted of warriors, cavalrymen, priests and priestesses, and ordinary representatives of clan communities.

Among the finds from Early Iron Age graves studied in the eastern Aral Sea region, items related to ritual beliefs found in Saka women’s burials stand out for their significance. They testify to the high social status and position of women in Saka and Massagetae communities, as well as the preservation of matriarchal remnants.

### **Conclusion.**

The Saka-Massagetae female leaders – “queen-rulers” Tomyris and Zarina – known from the works of Herodotus and Ctesias, are primarily portrayed by Greek historians as military commanders. Accordingly, they mastered military affairs and the art of bravery alongside men and were skilled in combat techniques.

Furthermore, based on evidence that priestesses in Babylonia and Assyria often bore the name “Tamaris,” it has been proposed that Queen Tomyris was not only the military leader of the Massagetae but also their chief priestess.

Of course, it is quite possible that in the 7th century BCE in the Khorezm oasis, the tribal leader also performed the duties of chief priest, as members of clans and tribes regarded their leader as a person who brought safety, prosperity, military success, and abundance to the communities – in short, someone beneficial.

At the same time, it is possible to assume the emergence of a separate layer of religious servants – priests. By the Early Iron Age, among the Sakas of Khorezm, reverence for ancestral spirits and worship of natural forces, the sun, and fire began to gain importance. Under conditions of military democracy, the tribal deity combined attributes of war, the sun, the sky, and the clan founders – ancestral spirits. Special rituals associated with the Avesta were performed alongside these beliefs. Priests were knowledgeable about clan traditions and customs and served to disseminate positive knowledge among kin.

The Avesta values the labour of herders and provides information about the valour of warrior-cavalrymen and their weapons and armour. In Saka society, the production of weapons and armour occupied a prominent place. Weapons, armour, and horse equipment were manufactured in specialised craft workshops. Written sources discuss the combat formations of the Sakas and Massagetae, including cavalry forces and infantry warriors; their military core consisted of mounted archers, who used spears, battle axes, and daggers in battle.

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