

RESEARCH ARTICLE	Study about the Sacral Traditions in the burial customs of the Middle Kura basin inhabitants in the Bronze Age	
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Abstract		
The study of the spiritual culture of ancient societies is perhaps the most complex and controversial field of archaeology. Sacral objects found in residential places, chapels, other religious buildings, and grave monuments are attributes born from the religious outlook of the inhabitants. Such artifacts are invaluable facts for the study of primitive religious beliefs and rituals. As it is known, the ideas of the ancient people about the surrounding world, their religious outlook, various religious rules, restrictions and regulations that outwardly regulate their lives were concentrated under religious views as a whole. During the Bronze Age, the inhabitants who mastered the vast territories of the South Caucasus, while penetrating the new territories, adapted to the ecological and geographical conditions not only physically, but also from a spiritual point of view. They combined the customs and beliefs of the new territories with their own spiritual world. The reflection of the spiritual world is clearly manifested in the artifacts. It was a set of religious laws, rules and customs that accompanied the life of ancient people, starting from images and symbols with religious-ritual motifs on pottery vessels of various contents and shapes, metal samples, etc., to sacral objects found in grave monuments and places of worship.		
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Introduction

Burial customs, which have been formed since the earliest periods of history and are increasingly manifested in people's lives in connection with various rituals and ceremonies, have become an integral part of religious worldview and spiritual culture during the period of primitive society. Mainly starting from the New Stone Age (Neolithic), various burial

customs and funeral ceremonies derived from them were formed among people in ancient Azerbaijan. These burial customs reflected the primitive religious ideas of the ancient inhabitants. Burial customs from the Stone Age to the adoption of heavenly religions are studied as a result of ethnoarchaeological research collected during archaeological excavations in grave monuments [29]. One of the areas where burial customs are most widely studied from an ethnoarchaeological point of view is the western region of Azerbaijan - the middle Kura basin. A large number of necropolises belonging to the Chalcolithic, Bronze, Early Iron and Antique periods have been discovered in this area, and a considerable number of facts have been collected in these necropolises for the study of burial customs. Ethnoarchaeological materials obtained from the necropolises of Soyugbulag, Zayamchay, Tovuzchay, Hasansu, Narimankend, Gazgulu, etc., and the burial mounds of Jeyrachol, Shamkirchay, Gazanbulag, Mahmudlu, Kechili, etc. formed the main material base of our research.

Reflection of astral beliefs in burial customs

Some of the burial customs of the ancient inhabitants of the Middle Kura basin are related to astral beliefs. Astral beliefs are associated with the worship of celestial objects by primitive people - the Sun, the Moon, stars, etc. According to the English archaeologist G. Childe, who studied the burial customs of the Ancient East, the basis of the burial customs of this period was astral visions. Thus, primitive people "sprinkle red ocher on the body of the deceased, bury him in a bent or semi-bent position on his side, regardless of the direction. At that time, the equipment placed in the grave with the deceased was not rich, and sometimes food was not placed in the graves. This was explained by the belief that the soul of the deceased supposedly participated in feeding with the living" [1, p. 94]. Belief in the Sun and the symbol of the Sun occupied a central place in the ideological worldviews of the tribes of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Azerbaijan. Graves sprinkled with ocher (red paint) have been found in the necropolises of Zayamchay, Hasansu, Narimankend and Tovuzchay [2; 3; 4; 5]. Ocher is characterized by fire, heat and belief in the Sun. Sun worship was widespread among all the peoples of the ancient world. According to their belief, evil spirits were afraid of fire and ocher, which was considered a symbol of the Sun and fire. Even people who saw belief in fire as one with astral belief, accepted fire as a symbol of the Sun and depicted it in the shape of a cross [6, pp. 272-273, 276; 7, pp. 53-58; 8, pp. 19-20]. The ancient inhabitants of the middle Kura basin, who considered ocher to be a symbol of the color of the Sun and the Sun itself, sprinkled red ocher on the body or grave of the deceased to indicate that his soul was eternal (like the Sun). In the earthen grave No. 76 of the Tovuzchay necropolis, traces of red ochre were found on the leg and calf bones of the skeleton [3, pp. 57-58]. Traces of ochre were clearly visible on the soil under the skull of a child skeleton found in the stone-covered grave No. 3 of the Gazgulu necropolis [9, pp. 9-10]. Such signs were also observed in the Narimankend necropolis in the Yevlakh region. Traces of red ochre were clearly visible on most of the graves discovered here [2].

Painting the dead body red (pouring ocher on top) and other purposes, the features of using red paint in funeral ceremonies have also been observed during the study of ancient grave monuments in Azerbaijan. In grave No. 5 of the Eneolithic period in Kultepe I, the dead body was completely painted [10, p. 43]. In one of the excavated mounds in the Ganjachay region, the skull of a skeleton with a head painted yellow, and in a mound near Goygol, a skeleton with red-painted pelvic bones was discovered [11, p. 74]. All the bones of the skeleton found in mound No. 16 east of Gillikdag were red [11, p. 74]. Even the walls of the central grave of mound No. 1, studied by Y.I. Hummel near Goygol, were painted with red ocher. Therefore, it was not possible to determine the boundaries of the grave [12, p. 10]. The discovery of ochre remains in the excavations of the Stone Age camps of Gobustan, the presence of red-painted images among the rock paintings, the discovery of red-painted vessel samples from Bronze Age settlements and tombs, and the use of red ochre in burial customs prove that ochre was widely included in the daily life of the ancient Gobustans [13, p. 42]. In short, the use of ochre occupied a very wide place in the burial customs of the ancient Eastern peoples [14, p. 62-63]. All this confirms that the belief of ancient people in ochre was a primitive magical attitude, and this attitude reflected the most ancient astral belief - belief in the Sun.

Ancient forms of economic life, cultural ties with neighboring peoples, their mutual influence on each other, and disrupted social relations are reflected in the consciousness of the people in one form or another and are also manifested in religious relations [7, p. 3]. Strabo wrote on the basis of his research that Albanians living in the Caucasus worshiped the Sun instead of gods [6]. There are images of the Sun symbol on some vessels found in the tombs of necropolises in the western region of Azerbaijan, which indicates that the agricultural and cattle-breeding population of the area worshiped the Sun in ancient times. Considering the important role of the Sun in heating agriculture, we see that this belief is not accidental. There are many real and symbolic images found in the graves reflecting religious beliefs

about the Sun. Such images are widespread both in Azerbaijan and in different regions of the world. There are different opinions in the scientific literature about the semantics of vessels with the Sun symbol on them and these symbols as a whole [8]. According to some researchers, primitive people, who depicted the Sun, a symbol of fire, with its rays, perceived it as a celestial fire [8, pp. 19-20]. N.A. Museyibli, in his research on Gamigaya, provided detailed information about the Sun symbols and divided them into some types. He considers the circle and wheel-shaped images with a cross as one of the most schematic symbols of the Sun. The researcher notes that these images arose from the need to express the “movement” of the Sun in the sky [8, pp. 20-21]. According to primitive images, people who understood the Sun as an astral object moving “rotating” and “rolling” in the sky, reflected it in a circular form in their images [6, pp. 272-273; 7, pp. 53-58; 8, pp. 19-21].



Figure 1. Bronze Age earthen tombs (No. 1 and 2) in Ağıldere

There is no doubt that crescent-shaped signs are also related to astral beliefs. Moon worship was one of the widespread beliefs among the tribes living in Azerbaijan in ancient times. Examples reflecting moon worship were not uncommon in the necropolises of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The top cover of some graves consisted of a crescent-shaped arrangement of river stones [4]. The top cover of graves No. 110, 111 and 112 of the Zayamchay necropolis partially resembled a crescent. In the earthen grave No. 95, the vessels inside the chamber were arranged in a crescent shape [4, pp. 96-98]. The top cover of the stone-covered grave No. 119 was completely crescent-shaped [4, pp. 125-127]. The top cover of the stone-covered graves No. 79 and 80 in the Tovuzchay necropolis was completely crescent-shaped [3]. The third stone arrangement of the stone-covered grave No. 5 of the Gazgulu necropolis was also crescent-shaped. The mouth of the crescent, consisting of stones buried vertically, was towards the south [9, p. 11-12]. In general, grave covers with this shape were rarely encountered in Bronze Age grave monuments in the Caucasus [4]. In addition to the grave monuments we mentioned in the western region of Azerbaijan, a crescent made of yellow clay was found in the lower

horizon of the First Bronze Age mound in the Dashkesan region [15, p. 15], and crescent-shaped stone arrangements were found in the mounds belonging to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC in the Sheki region [16, p. 99-100]. During the excavation of the Kūdurlu mound No. 2 in Sheki, a crescent-shaped upper cover consisting of stones was found, the stone arrangement of which was destroyed at one end and was relatively sparse [16, p. 292, fig. XXXII, 2].

The worship of the Sun, the Moon, and other celestial bodies by the tribes settled in Azerbaijan since the early Bronze Age is evidenced by the remains of temples discovered in the settlements of Santepe, Babadervish, and Sarvantepe in the Gazakh region, hearth devices, wheel-and-spindle patterns, clay vessels found in many burial mounds and tombs, as well as artistic bronze products, etc., and the depictions of the Sun on samples. Schematic hunting scenes and the Sun swastika are reflected on some ceramic samples found in the tombs of the Goygol region in particular. There are also many legends about the Sun, the Moon, and other celestial bodies in Azerbaijani mythology [17, pp. 35-39]. In these legends and myths, the Sun and the Moon are always expressed as symbols of fertility and fertility. The ancient inhabitants of Azerbaijan believed in the afterlife, that is, that a person would continue his life in the next world after death, and in this regard, they buried the deceased in the grave along with the necessary things. However, this belief in the afterlife was primitive and manifested itself in a form specific to the worldview of those people [14]. Along with ordinary patterns, signs with astral meaning are also found on archaeological materials from the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages. Astral mythological plots include the Moon, the Sun, stars, and constellations. Astral mythical deities from this period were sometimes depicted in the form of animals [18, p. 78]. Sun images are depicted on artistic bronze products created by the tribes of the Khojaly-Gadabay culture in the form of a circle, spiral, wheel-like model, and swastika [18, p. 83]. B.B. Piotrovsky notes that the ancient tribes of the South Caucasus symbolized the Sun with these signs. Zoomorphic materials depicting birds and snakes were also found in the graves of the Tovuzchay, Zayamchay and Gazgulu necropolises. These are bird figures and snake images on pendants and bracelets. In grave No. 106 of the Zayamchay necropolis, two small bronze pendant figures resembling peacocks were discovered near the skull of the skeleton near the head of a child's corpse placed in a chamber [4, p. 108-109]. A.A.Ivanovsky mostly describes this type of bird figures found in various grave monuments of Gadabay, as well as other archaeological monuments of Azerbaijan, as pigeons [19, p. 48], while others write that they are geese or ducks. B.B. Piotrovsky notes that the bird symbol is associated with astral beliefs in all religions and is associated with the divinity of the Sun [20, p. 45].

Zoomorphism and zoolatry. Animal motifs in religious beliefs

Some of the sacred traditions found in the religious worldview of the ancient inhabitants of the Middle Kura basin were closely related to primitive totemism. In general, animal motifs and zoomorphic elements occupy an exceptional place in the mythology of all peoples of the ancient world. This is undoubtedly due to the important role that the animal world played in the life of primitive people, in their initial periods of evolution. It is for these reasons that many animals took a place in the life of ancient tribes as a totem. Totemistic ideas allowed to connect the human collective with nature and determined general norms of behavior for this collective [21, p. 78]. Primitive people usually depicted their totem ancestors as specific types of animals or special zooanthropomorphic creatures, depending on the era [18, p. 78]. In some mythical figurative paintings, fantastic-fantastic animal images and creatures were created as a result of the combination of separate elements of various animals. Religious customs and burial rules formed in connection with the sacrifice of animals, their burial in graves next to people, as well as the worship of animal figures, create certain ideas about the mythological significance of animals in the Bronze Age [18, p. 78].

In Azerbaijan, traces of the custom of burying animals along with people have been found in some grave monuments dating back to the Chalcolithic-Bronze periods. Of course, this has nothing to do with totemism. The custom of burying animals is characterized as a burial custom that occupied a special place in the religious worldview of the ancient inhabitants of Azerbaijan in the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages.

Among the mounds made of stone-mixed soil, mound No. 107, excavated by Y.I. Hummel, is very interesting in terms of its burial custom. In the simple earthen grave found under this mound, a horseman was buried with his horse. The fact that proves this burial custom was the discovery of horse bones in the grave along with human bones [12; 22, p. 136]. It should be noted that this burial custom was widespread throughout the Caucasus at the end of the 2nd millennium BC. Such a burial custom is also a fact that shows the existence and development of social stratification. According to some researchers, burial with a horse is an expression of a symbol of power and strength. Along with the horse bones found under mound No. 107, which is not very high, horse armor ornaments and a bronze saber axe of a horseman were discovered and taken [22, p. 118]. Graves or burial mounds with such burial customs have also been

found in Azerbaijan in the Ganjachay basin, Mughan, Mingachevir, Khankendi [18; 22], and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

Burial with a horse The custom was also found in a stone box grave under a destroyed earthen mound near the village of Chardagli in the Zayamchay basin of the Shamkir region. According to Y.A. Pakhomov, more than three human skeletons and the bones of a horse were found in this grave [22, p. 56].

The discovery of animal bones in graves is related to the richness of the burial ceremony in that grave. These animals were most likely killed and placed in the grave and served to “feed” the deceased in the afterlife. However, the discovery of bones of horses, dogs, deer, camels, etc. in some graves indicates the presence of totemistic and mythical religious concepts in the burial custom.



Figure 2. Tovuzchay Necropolis I. Interesting burial custom in stone-covered grave No. 76

In the III-II millennia BC, the worship of the snake as a totem was widespread in the ancient territories of Azerbaijan. The appearance of hanging ornaments depicting snakes in the graves of the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages in the Zayamchay, Tovuzchay, Hasansu and Gazgulu necropolises was associated with such a belief [23, p. 40-41]. A group of archaeologists, based on ethnographic data, considered the images of snakes on ancient vessels to be a symbol of protection from evil forces. According to some, medicinal herbs were stored in such vessels [18, p. 120]. V. Aliyev, who agrees more with the second opinion, notes, based on this fact, that primitive medicine existed in Azerbaijan in the Late Bronze Age [24, p. 65].

T.I. Golubkina notes that perhaps clay vessels made in the shape of animal heads were made for ritual and ceremonial purposes, and some were also made as children's toys [18, p. 120-121]. The researcher shows that all zoomorphic pottery samples found in Mingachevir were made by hand. The drawing of various images of birds and animals on the vessels is related to the religious beliefs of ancient people. According to them, these images did not allow evil spirits to enter the vessel into which liquid was poured. Thus, animals were considered the guardians of the vessel [18, p. 120].

Zoomorphic materials depicting birds and snakes have also been found in the graves of the Tovuzchay, Zayamchay, and Hasansu necropolises [3; 4]. These are bird figures and snake images on pendants and bracelets. Snake images are most often found on bracelets, earrings, chest and breast pendants, which were elegant female ornaments of the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages, bronze belts, which were male clothing ornaments, ceramic products, and also on rock paintings. These images, of course, have various symbolic meanings. According to ancient religious beliefs, the snake, which is a protective force, is also a symbol of intelligence, cunning, and especially female cunning [18, p. 90]. The widespread spread of images related to belief in snakes in Azerbaijan since the Bronze Age and especially their survival in our folklore to this day shows that in ancient times snakes were treated in this area as a symbol of wisdom and a male symbol, as well as forces of good and evil [25, p. 468-469].

The predominant animals in cattle breeding are proven by animal figures made of various materials, in addition to osteological remains [7]. It is known that most of the clay figures found in Kultepe belong to large cattle. T. Bunyadov notes that nomadic and semi-nomadic forms of cattle breeding were of great importance in the increase in the number of cattle breeding, especially small-horned animals, in Azerbaijan [21, p. 24]. The development of sheep breeding and its being an important source of income for the cattle-breeding population also significantly increased their religious belief in it. The drawings and figures of small-horned animals on this or that object confirm our idea [21, p. 41]. Archaeological materials prove that sheep worship was widespread among the Caucasian peoples, who had a greater number of small-horned animals. A sheep figure was depicted on the handles of two jugs found in Mingachevir dating back to the Early Iron Age.

Several bull-headed clay figures have also been found in the upper reaches of the Agstafachay, Shamkirchay and Zayamchay rivers, and in stone box graves in the Gadabay region. One of such figures was found by AA Ivanovsky in the upper reaches of the Zayam river, in stone box No. 66 [22]. This animal-headed (bull-headed) figure made of red clay differs from the figures found in Samtavr, Trialeti in Georgia and Alacahöyük in Turkey. The figure found in Turkey is covered with red paint, which distinguishes it from the others [26, p. 45]. However, despite these differences, all bull-headed figures have a triangle drawn on their foreheads. If we consider that the goat figure found in grave No. 60 of the Zayamchay necropolis is also decorated with such triangles, then we can conclude that these triangular lines carry certain religious signs [4]. In general, bull-headed figures made of metal and clay are very widespread in the Caucasus and Near Asia, which is undoubtedly related to ancient religious beliefs. Although they were not found in the form of osteological remains in funeral ceremonies, many material examples related to the lion or tiger in the religious ideas of the ancient inhabitants of Azerbaijan have been analyzed. Lion images, which are mainly found on bronze belts, are a symbol of power and authority, but also reflect the worship of the sun. Archaeological materials in this context are also found in our medieval monuments. The presence of a disk-shaped sun image on the head of a lion figure found in the village of Boradigah, Masalli region, once again confirms the above-mentioned ideas [18, p. 92].

Dog burial customs and dog cult also occupy an important place in the religious worldview of the ancient inhabitants of Azerbaijan. The emergence of religious ideas about dogs is associated with the Chalcolithic period [27, p. 5]. Graves in which dogs were buried with humans were found in the Eneolithic layer of Kultepe I. In Azerbaijan, the remains of dog-related rituals and ceremonies were found in the monuments of the Leylatepe culture in the Agstafa region. In this area, figures of dog heads made of bone and clay were discovered from the settlements of Boyuk Kesik I and Poylu II, dating back to the first half of the 4th millennium BC [27, p. 5-6]. During archaeological excavations in earthen graves No. 10, 53 and 54 of the Tovuzchay necropolis, it was determined that dogs were buried with humans [3]. While studying the burial customs of the necropolis, N.A. Museyibli notes that the burial of a dog in both male and female graves indicates that the cult of the dog occupied an important place in the beliefs of the large social group - the tribe or clan to which this necropolis belonged. The fact that dogs were buried together with humans proves that they were highly respected. The essence of such a burial custom is that both humans and dogs, along with the equipment placed in the grave, reflect real life, and in the afterlife, this equipment will be needed by both humans and dogs [27, pp. 10-11].

Among the ancient inhabitants of Azerbaijan, totemistic religious ideas and worldviews, which were characteristic mainly of the period when the subsistence economy was widespread, were able to spread to some extent, although not in a classical form, in terms of their essence and the sacred nature of the form of belief. When classifying the most ancient forms of religion, SA Tokarev, who characterized totemism as the most ancient form, showed that the false beliefs about the kinship between man and totem eventually led to situations such as harming the totem, killing it, and prohibiting eating its meat [28]. Totemism, which was an integral part of the subsistence economy, is already disappearing in the course of the production economy, and it can be said that in Azerbaijan, in the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages, totemistic religious ideas can only retain minor elements. A change in content occurs in totemistic religious ideas. It is for these reasons that totemism in the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages could not have been related to rituals related to cattle breeding and hunting. The burial of animals in graves alongside humans is completely different from totemistic religious thought, and is focused on a set of concepts such as belief in the afterlife and "nourishment" in that world.

Conclusion

Archaeological research conducted in the middle Kura basin, one of the main regions where Bronze Age cultures were widespread, shows that various burial customs were widespread among the population settled here. The study of burial customs and ceremonies based on the excavation of grave monuments allows us to obtain comprehensive information about the religious worldview, social relations, spiritual cultures, and cultural and economic relations of the ancient inhabitants of the mentioned basin. As in all areas, the ancient inhabitants of the middle Kura basin had various funeral ceremonies corresponding to their social, economic status and ideological views. The people of the Bronze Age preserved sacred traditions arising from life and everyday life, as well as from the set of religious ideas, and manifested them in funeral customs. Since funeral ceremonies are related to the ideology of society, the structure of the graves and the condition of the skeletons are valuable relics for studying the religious beliefs and views of the buried individuals, and the equipment placed in the graves are valuable relics for studying the socio-economic and cultural level of the people who lived during this period.

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