

Some issues in the study of medieval belt sets worn by Turkic warriors

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ABSTRACT

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This article presents a comprehensive analysis of belt accessories worn by Turkic warriors of the Eurasian steppes between the 5th and 15th centuries. Based on a synthesis of archaeological materials discovered across several cultural and historical regions, including the Altai, Kazakhstan, the Volga–Ural region, the Caspian region, and the North Caucasus, the study examines the principal typological, structural, and ornamental characteristics of warrior belt sets. It seeks to systematize the main morphological types of buckles, plaques, pendants, and other belt components, identifying five chronologically related horizons in the development of these assemblages. Particular attention is devoted to issues of ethnocultural attribution and to cross-cultural influences among Turkic, Chinese, Sogdian, and Iranian-Caucasian craft traditions. Furthermore, the social semantics of belts are analyzed, enabling the reconstruction of social stratification and symbolic functions within Turkic warrior society. The study reveals the social-status semantics of belts as markers of authority, affiliation with the military elite, and clan identity. The work aims to establish a unified scientific basis for subsequent metallographic, typological-statistical, and source studies. The research aims to compile and scientifically analyze materials relating to the belt sets of Turkic warriors of the 5th–15th centuries in order to identify the principal typological groups, chronological horizons, and social-status functions, as well as to examine cross-cultural influences reflected in specific belt elements. Several methodological approaches were employed. Technological analysis was used to determine metal thickness, casting characteristics, tool marks, and the application of various metalworking techniques, including cloisonné enamel,

embossing, inlay and granulation, characteristic of particular regional craft centers, as well as indicators of external influence such as casting, stamping, embossing, cloisonné enamel, and inlay. The comparative-historical method enabled the comparison of Turkic toreutics with Chinese analogues, Sogdian belt sets, and Iranian and Caucasian specimens, thereby clarifying the origin and chronology of relief metalworking techniques and revealing cultural contacts and degrees of intercultural influence. Semiotic analysis of ornamentation examined the symbolism of animal styles, heraldic motifs, and mythological imagery in belt elements, allowing reconstruction of the ideological and status attributes of the owner. The empirical basis of the study includes ethnographic data, archaeological reports, and fundamental works by leading researchers. The analysis demonstrates that the belt performed multiple functions: it served as an element of a warrior's clothing and armour and, in certain cultures, also functioned as a talisman.

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Ортағасырлық түркі жауынгерлері белбеу жиынтығын зерттеудің кейбір мәселелері

Аннотация. Мақала V-XV ғғ. Еуразия дала кеңістігіндегі түркі жауынгерлерінің белдік фурнитурасын кешенді талдауға арналған. Алтай, Қазақстан, Еділ-Жайық, Каспий маңы, Солтүстік Кавказ сияқты тарихи-мәдени ареалдар бойынша қолданыстағы (ашық деректер) археологиялық материалдарды жалпылау негізінде түркі жауынгерлерінің белдік жиынтықтарының негізгі типологиялық, конструктивтік және ою сипаттамалары қарастырылады. Мақалада тоғалардың, айылбастардың, белдік бөлшектерінің негізгі морфологиялық түрлерін жүйелеуге әрекет жасалды. Белдік жиынтықтары дамуының бес хронологиялық өзара байланысты көкжиектері де анықталды. Жұмыс барысында түркі, қытай, соғды, Иран-Кавказ қолөнер дәстүрлері мен түркі жауынгерлері арасында әлеуметтік стратификация мен символдық

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функцияларды қайта құруға мүмкіндік берген белбеулердің әлеуметтік семантикасы арасындағы этномәдени атрибуция, кросс-мәдени ықпал мәселелеріне ерекше назар аударылды. Зерттеу жұмысы белбеулердің әлеуметтік-мәртебелік семантикасы биліктің маркерлері ретінде, сонымен қатар әскери элита мен рулық сәйкестікті анықтайды. Аталған жұмыс металл, типологиялық-статистикалық және деректанулық зерттеулер үшін бірыңғай ғылыми қор құруға бағытталған. Жұмыстың негізгі мақсаты – V-XV ғғ. түркі жауынгерлері белдік жиынтықтары бойынша материалдарды ғылыми талдау және кешендік біріктіру, сонымен қатар негізгі типологиялық топтарды, хронологиялық көкжиектерді, әлеуметтік-дәрежелік функцияларды айқындау және белбеу жиынтығы элементтерінің кросс-мәдени ықпалын зерделеу. Зерттеу жұмысы барысында келесі әдістер қолданылды: *технологиялық талдау* металл қалыңдығын, құю техникасын, құралдардың іздерін, өзге аймақтық қолөнер орталықтары әдістерінің (мысалы, эмальдау, соғу, безендіру, зерлеу және т.б.) қолданылуын анықтауға көмектеседі және құю, штамптау, соғу, эмальдау, безендірудегі «импорттық» әсерді зерделейді; *тарихи-салыстырмалы әдіс* түркілердің металл бұйымдарын қытай баламаларымен, соғдылық белбеу жиынтықтарымен, ирандық және кавказдық үлгілермен салыстыруға көмектесіп, мәдени байланыстар мен өзге мәдениеттің ықпал ету деңгейі негізінде бұйымдардың шығу тегін, металдан жасалған көркемдік бұйымдардың хронологиясын нақтылауға септігін тигізеді; ою-өрнектің *семиотикалық әдісі* аң стилін, геральдикалық сарындарды, белбеу жиынтықтары элементтерінің ұлттық мифологиялық бейнелерін, оның иесінің дәрежелік және идеологиялық сипатын зерттеуге септігін тигізді және өзге де әдістер қолданылды. Зерттеу жұмысы барысында эмпирикалық материал ретінде этнографиялық мәліметтер, археологиялық есептер, белгілі зерттеушілердің іргелі ғылыми жұмыстары пайдаланылды. Ғылыми-зерттеу жұмысының қорытындысы бойынша, белдіктің әртүрлі қызметті қамтығаны, соның ішінде жауынгердің киім-кешегі мен қару-жарағының атрибуты, ал кейбір мәдениеттерде тұмар ретінде қарастырылғаны белгілі болды.

Кілт сөздер: түркі жауынгерлері, белбеу гарнитурасы, тоға, айылбас, белбеу жиынтықтары, типология, хронология, ою-өрнек семиотикасы, Еуразия даласы, түріктану.

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Некоторые вопросы изучения средневековой поясной гарнитуры тюркских воинов

Аннотация. Статья посвящена комплексному анализу поясной гарнитуры тюркских воинов, бытовавшей на пространстве евразийских степей в V-XV вв. На основе обобщения некоторых открытых археологических материалов по локальным культурно-историческим ареалам (Алтай, Казахстан, Волго-Урал, Прикаспий, Северный Кавказ) рассматриваются основные типологические, конструктивные и орнаментальные характеристики поясных наборов тюркских воинов. В статье предпринята попытка систематизации основных морфологических типов пряжек, блях, подвесок и ремённых деталей, выделены пять хронологически связанных горизонтов развития поясных наборов. Особое внимание уделено вопросам этнокультурной атрибуции, кросс-культурных влияний между тюркскими, китайскими, согдийскими, ирано-кавказскими ремесленными традициями и социальной семантики поясов, позволивших реконструировать социальную стратификацию и символические функции в среде тюркских воинов. Исследование выявляет социально-статусную семантику поясов как маркеров власти, а также принадлежность к военной элите и родовой идентичности. Работа направлена на создание единой научной базы для последующих металлографических, типолого-статистических и источниковедческих исследований. Целью исследования является комплексное объединение и научный анализ материалов по поясной гарнитуре тюркских воинов V-XV вв. в плане выявления основных типологических групп, хронологических горизонтов, социально-статусных функций, а также анализ кросс-культурных влияний тех или иных элементов поясного набора. В процессе изучения были применены следующие методы: технологический анализ позволяет выявлять толщину металла, характер литья, следы инструментов, применение различных техник (например, перегородчатая эмаль, чеканка, инкрустация, зернь и др.), характерных для тех или иных региональных ремесленных центров и «импортные» влияния – литье, штамповка, чеканка, перегородчатая эмаль, инкрустация; сравнительно-исторический метод помогает сопоставлению тюркских предметов торевтики с китайскими аналогами, согдийскими ремёнными наборами, иранскими и кавказскими образцами, что позволяет уточнить происхождение и хронологию ручной рельефной обработки художественных изделий из металла, выявляя культурные контакты и степень влияния другой культуры; семиотический анализ орнамента позволил изучать символику звериного стиля, геральдических мотивов, национальных мифологических образов элементов поясной гарнитуры, раскрывая идеологическую и статусную составляющую ее владельца и другие методы. Эмпирическим материалом для исследования послужили этнографические данные, археологические отчеты, фундаментальные научные работы видных исследователей. В результате изучения данного вопроса можно констатировать, что функционал пояса различен, поскольку использовался как атрибут одежды и вооружения воина, а в некоторых культурах выполнял функцию оберега.

Ключевые слова: тюркские воины, поясная гарнитура, пряжки, бляхи, поясные наборы, типология, хронология, семиотика орнамента, Евразийская степь, тюркология.

Introduction

The study of belt accessories worn by Turkic warriors in the 5th–15th centuries constitutes an important area of research within Eurasian archaeology and historical anthropology. The belt functioned not only as an element of a nomad's military and everyday equipment, but also a significant marker of social identity, status, ritual beliefs, and affiliation with a particular cultural tradition. In this regard, the belt set represents one of the most informative and representative archaeological complexes, closely connected with the military-political history, social structure, and artistic development of Turkic societies (Figure 1).

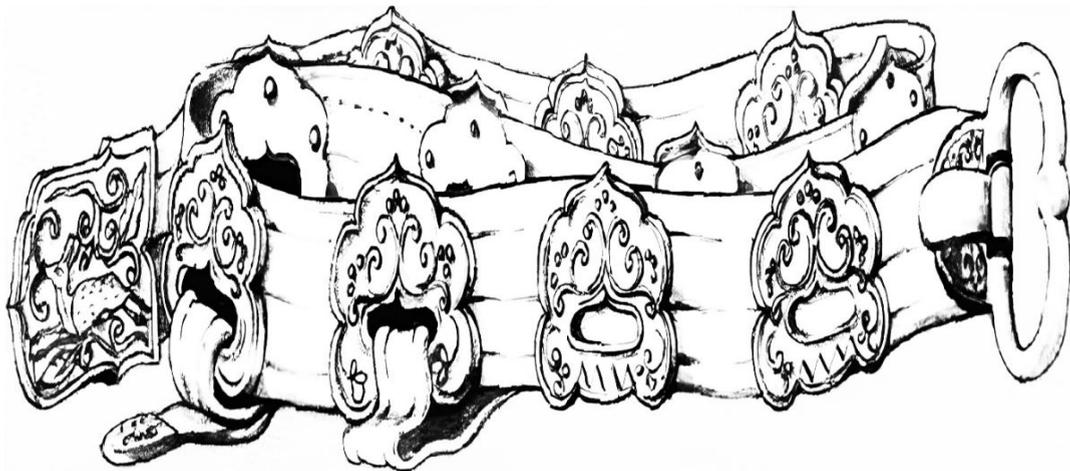


Fig. 1. Ancient Turkic belt. Reconstruction based on materials from the Uzuntal burial ground (Mountain Altai). Excavations by D. G. Savinov (Solovev, 2003).

1-сур. Ежелгі түркі белбеуі. Ұзынтал (Таулы Алтай) қорымы материалдары негізінде қалпына келтіру. Д. Г. Савиновтың қазбалары (Соловьев, 2003).

Рис. 1. Древнетюркский пояс. Реконструкция по материалам могильника Узунтал (Горный Алтай). Раскопки Д. Г. Савинова (Соловьев, 2003).

Unlike weapons, which are primarily utilitarian, belt sets possess complex symbolic meanings and are characterized by rich decorative designs reflecting the prestige of the owner and membership in a particular social group.

Despite the large amount of published archaeological material relating to the cultures of the early Turks, Uyghurs, Kimaks, Kipchaks, and the Golden Horde, no comprehensive study has yet synthesized data from different regions or proposed a unified typology of belt sets. Instead, a considerable number of studies focus instead on individual sites or specific cultural-historical regions, including the Altai, Eastern Kazakhstan, Zhetysu, the Volga-Ural region, and the North Caucasus (Figure 2).

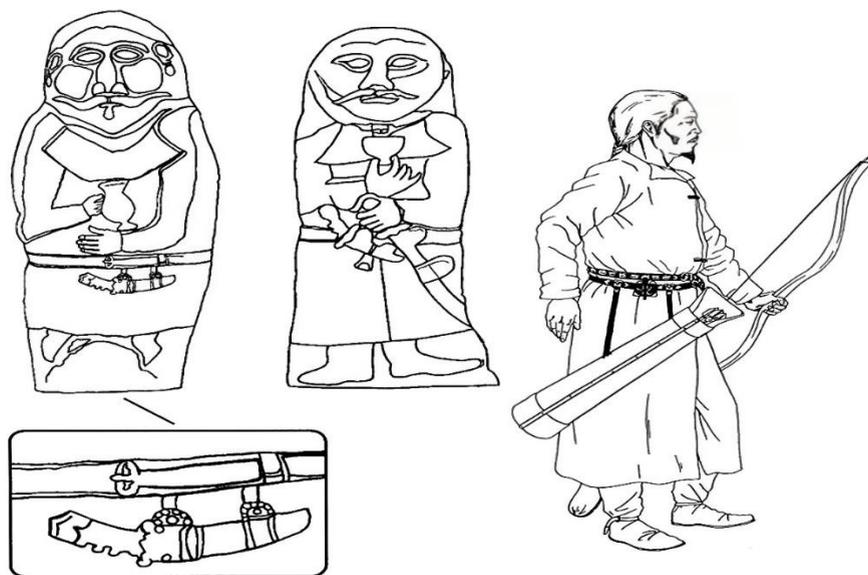


Fig. 2. Turkic belts of the 6th–8th centuries: 1–2 – statues with belts without decorative plaques and knee-length daggers (1 – Kazakhstan; 2 – Xinjiang); 3 – assembled and arrow belts, drawing by D.V. Pozdnyakov (Kubarev, 2005).

2-сур. VI-VIII ғасырлардағы түркі белбеулері: 1-2 белдікте айылбастары жоқ және иінді қанжарлары бар мүсіндер (1-Қазақстан; 2-Шыңжаң); 3 – жиынтық және ату белдіктері, Д. В. Поздняковтың суреті (Кубарев, 2005).

Рис. 2. Тюркские пояса VI-VIII вв.: 1-2 - статуи с поясами без наборных бляшек и с коленчатыми кинжалами (1 – Казахстан; 2 – Синьцзян); 3 – наборной и стрелковый пояса, рисунок Д.В. Позднякова (Кубарев, 2005).

However, interregional comparisons have not yet been conducted to a sufficient extent, and data concerning mutual influences, cross-border exchange, and typological evolution remain fragmentary. The need for systematization is also due to the fact that modern archaeological methods – including semiotic analysis, cultural-chronological modelling, metallurgical analysis, and digital visualization – allow a reassessment of the historical development of belt sets. These approaches make it possible to refine chronology, identify regional technological centers, reconstruct cultural contacts, and examine the functional and social aspects of belt use. Taken together, this enables a reconsideration of the role of belt sets in the development of Turkic culture as part of a complex historical process. According to researchers in Turkic archaeology (Golden, 1992), belt fittings constituted an integral element of the visual code of the elite and their retinues; their ornamentation and design reflected social values, military ideals, and cross-cultural influences.

Most of the studied belt sets derive from burial mounds. Consequently, belt assemblages formed part of the funerary rituals, allowing reconstruction of the social status of the deceased as well as the functional and symbolic significance of the objects (Margulan, 1966). The predominance of belts in male burials indicates the importance of this element as a clear marker of male maturity and military status (Figure 3).

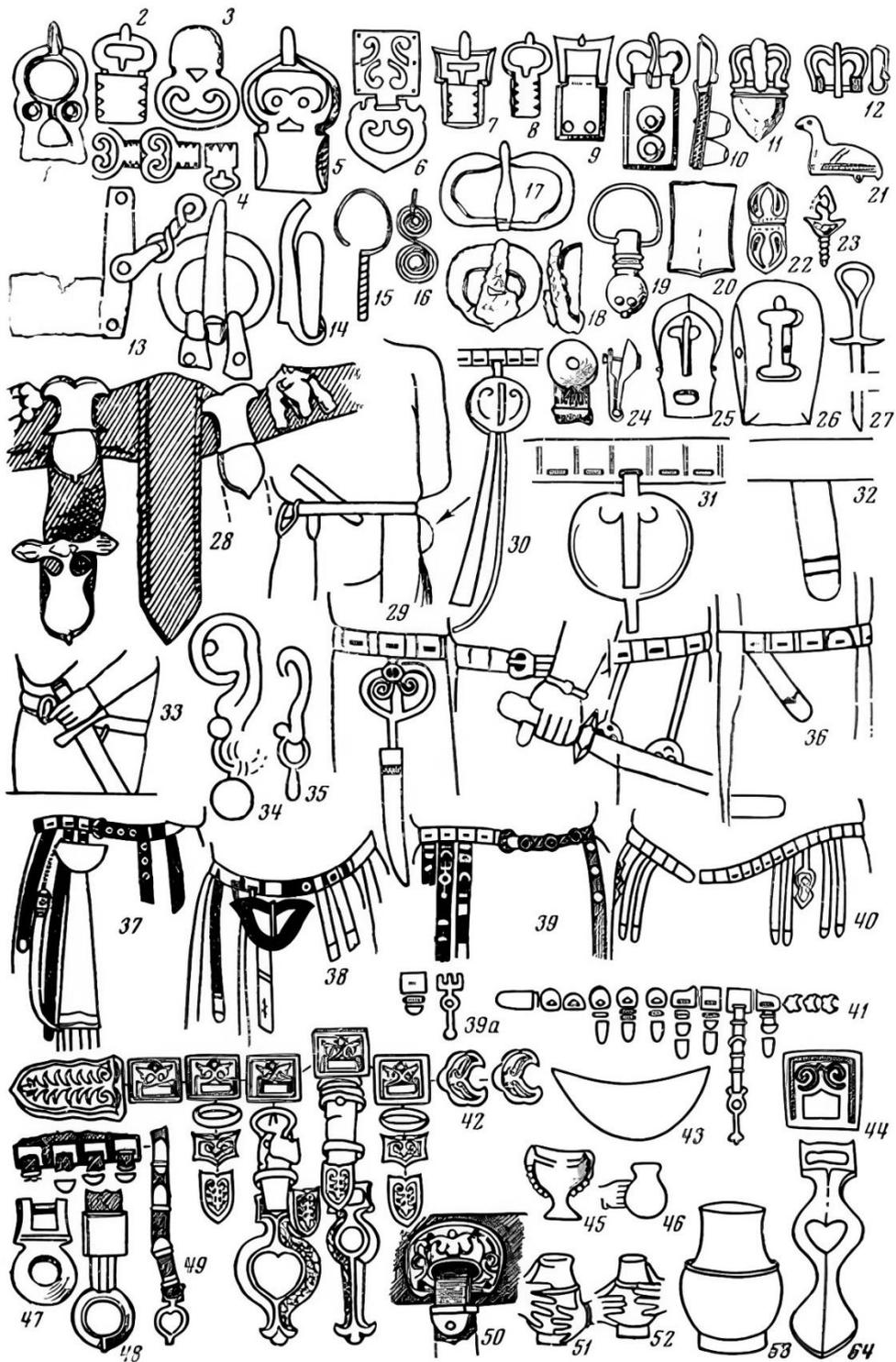


Fig. 3. Antiquities of Southern Siberia and their analogues (Ambroz, 1971).

3-сур. Оңтүстік Сібірдің ежелгі дәуір бұйымдары және олардың баламалары (Амброз, 1971).

Рис. 3. Древности Южной Сибири и их аналогии (Амброз, 1971).

Despite the significant number of publications devoted to local materials, a comprehensive reconstruction of the evolution of Turkic belt sets across the Eurasian steppe has not yet been sufficiently systematized. This article aims to address this gap by establishing a coherent typology, analyzing cultural influences, and identifying chronological horizons.

The **aim of this study** is to compile and systematically analyze materials on relating to the belt sets of Turkic warriors of the 5th-15th centuries in order to identify their principal typological groups, chronological horizons, and social-status functions, as well as to examine the cross-cultural influences reflected in specific belt elements.

Materials and research methods

The methodological framework is based on the interdisciplinary integration of archaeological, historical-comparative, cultural, and semiotic methods.

1. Formal typological analysis made it possible to examine the characteristics of buckles, plaques, pendants, and fasteners; to identify stable types; and to trace their evolution through the analysis of structural details such as buckle frames, fastening methods, plaques, and pendants, as well as through the application of typologies for chronological attribution (Kovalevskaya, 1979; Dobzhansky, 1990, 1991; Sakhyanov and Teterin, 2014).

2. Technological analysis enabled identification of metal thickness, casting characteristics, tool marks, and the use of various techniques (e.g., cloisonné enamel, embossing, inlay, granulation) characteristic of particular regional craft centers, as well as indicators of external influence, including casting, stamping, embossing, cloisonné enamel, and inlay (Samashev, 2023).

3. The comparative-historical method allowed comparison of Turkic toreutics with Chinese analogues, Sogdian belt sets, and Iranian and Caucasian specimens, thereby clarifying the origin and chronology of relief metalworking techniques and revealing cultural contacts and degrees of intercultural influence.

4. Semiotic analysis of ornamentation enabled to study the symbolism of animal styles, heraldic motifs, and mythological imagery in belt sets, revealing the ideological and status-related attributes of their owners (Khudyakov, 1997).

5. Contextual analysis of burial complexes facilitated the study of the placement of belts within graves, the composition of associated grave goods, and the social characteristics of the deceased, thereby facilitating the interpretation of the functions of the assemblages (Ermolayeva, 2010).

It should be noted that a key element of the study was the morphological analysis of the principal components of the belt set, including buckles of various types, central and side plates, distributed plaques, belt dividers, pendants, terminal fittings, and fasteners. The analysis of shapes, proportions, decorative motifs, and manufacturing techniques made it possible to systematize the artifacts and compare them within a broad chronological framework.

The study employed a typological method based on the identification of stable groups according to structural, technological, and artistic characteristics. On this basis, five major historical and chronological horizons in the development of belt sets were distinguished, correlating with stages in the political history of the Turkic peoples (see Table 1. Chronological horizons of the typology of medieval Turkic belt sets):

Table 1. Chronological horizons of the typology of medieval Turkic belt sets

1-кесте. Ортағасырлық түркі белдік жиынтықтары типологиясының хронологиясы

Таблица 1. Хронологические горизонты типологии средневековых тюркских поясных комплексов.

Chronological horizon	Dating	Characteristic features
Early Turkic	5-7 cc.	Bronze cast plaque, animal style
Turkic	7-8 cc.	The emergence of silver and gilded sets, heraldic compositions, and the development of complex buckles
Uyghur	8-10 cc.	The spread of enamel, Chinese decorative motifs, and fine engraving
Kipchak	10-13 cc.	Increase in the number of pendants, characteristic heart-shaped and rhombic buckles, regional differences in craft centers
Golden Horde	13-15 cc.	Mass production of silver sets, standardization of forms, distribution throughout the steppe

Historical-comparative analysis played an important role in this research, allowing comparison of materials from Turkic archaeology with analogues from the Chinese, Sogdian, Iranian, and Caucasian regions. These territories were key nodes in the trade and cultural connections linking the Great Steppe with both East and West, a fact reflected in the ornamentation, technology, stylistic features, and functional diversity of belt sets.

Cultural-chronological modelling was employed to reconstruct the diffusion of technologies and artistic motifs and to refine the dating of the most complex types of belt-set decoration.

Semiotic analysis was proved particularly significant as ornamental elements carry pronounced symbolic meaning. Images of predators, birds, heraldic figures, and abstract motifs expressed Turkic concepts of authority, sacredness, protection, tribal identity, and social hierarchy.

The study was based on a wide range of sources, including archaeological materials from burial complexes of the early and late Middle Ages, depictions of belts on medieval stone sculptures, ethnographic materials, and reconstructions based on excavation evidence.

Research background

In general, the study of belt sets among Turkic tribes has a long historiographical tradition dating back to the mid-20th century, but research activity has intensified during the past two decades. Among major scholars, the works of Margulan and his co-authors (1966) laid the foundations for the study of ancient craft traditions in Central Kazakhstan and provided insight into the manufacture of small functional metal objects, jewellery, and weapons. A. Bisembayev (2003) discussed belt buckles discovered in the Karasu and Shalkar burial grounds. F. Arslanova (2013), in her research on Kimak burial monuments, devoted considerable attention to belt analysis and functional interpretation. More recent excavation data from Eastern Kazakhstan (Samashev, 2023) have further refined the structural and decorative typology of belt sets from the early Saka and early Turkic periods.

Particularly valuable are the materials from excavations in Zhetysu published in the serial collections of the Institute of Archaeology of the Republic of Kazakhstan (*Archaeological Research in Kazakhstan* / IA RK Reports, issues 1-6, 2000-2015), which include regional finds of belt sets. Collective research conducted by Kazakh archaeologists in Eastern Kazakhstan and the Altai – published in excavation reports and collections, articles on sites such as Berel and Akzhaul – has also made significant contribution to the study of Turkic warrior belt sets.

An equally significant contribution to the study of Turkic belt sets was made by Russian scholars. V.B. Kovalevskaya (1979) produced the first systematic typology of Eurasian belt sets of the 4th-9th centuries based on both qualitative characteristics (material, function, manufacturing technique, size, ornamentation) and quantitative indicators (frequency and combinations of features within individual objects and chronological and geographical complexes). A.K. Ambroz carried out long-term systematization work aimed at establishing the chronology of Turkic burial complexes, including the analysis of belt assemblages. V.N. Dobzhansky (1990, 1991) developed a fundamental study of the formal and typological features of belt sets of early and late nomads, defining their cultural characteristics in terms of chronology, developmental dynamics, social ranking, functional-semantic attribution, and the symbolic-communicative role of belt sets among Turkic warriors.

Yu.S. Khudyakov (1997) authored a monograph on the weapons and equipment of nomads that included analytical conclusions on the typology and functions of Turkic military equipment. V.D. Kubarev (2005) investigated the culture of the early Turks on the basis of burial complexes in the Altai Mountains containing depictions of composite belts from the Turkic period. A.V. Komar (2005) examined the rank semantics of belt sets among Eastern European nomads of the 7th–early 8th centuries. Numerous other studies have further expanded the source base and interpretative approaches to this topic.

Analysis

The belt, as an element of clothing and armour, has long attracted scholarly attention, as it constituted an integral part of the attire and military equipment of the Turkic peoples. Belt fittings clearly reflect historical and cultural processes, functioning as both cultural markers and chronological indicators that preserve information about specific historical periods. Craftsmen attached great importance to every detail of the belt, as it served to identify its owner.

An item such as a belt is multifaceted and can be studied from at least three perspectives. First, a belt can be studied as part of a complete set, which is particularly important for belts depicted in artistic representations, since this approach establishes a connection with archeological materials. Second, a belt can be studied as an essential part of armor and military equipment. From this perspective, studying belts forms a part of the broader analysis of weaponry and plays an important role in addressing issues, such as the belt system when comparative studies of nomadic and Iranian arms. Third, belts can be interpreted as symbols and markers of social hierarchy (Arzhanetsova, 1987). In the militarized societies of the nomadic Scythians, combat belts held particular significance, with surviving examples preserved in the form of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and horn fittings. Evidence from reindeer stones suggests that, as early as the initial formation of early Scythian culture in the 8th century BC, belts in the Sayan–Altai region were essential attributes of warriors, whether horsemen or charioteers (Shulga, 2008).

Most studies on this topic are local in nature, focusing on specific sites or regional groups. The scientific literature employs various terms to describe the division of objects into groups, such as classification, typology, and systematics (Dobzhansky, 1990). The absence of uniform criteria for modeling chronology and typology complicates the comparison of materials from different regions. Therefore, it is important to develop a comprehensive model that integrates data from the entire area where Turkic cultures are distributed within the framework of the present study. To this end, we have developed a research plan that covers the following aspects:

1. Study and typological analysis of belt set construction and elements.
2. Determining the chronological horizons of the spread of belt sets as historical sources of Turkic material culture.
3. Identifying regional centers for producing small metalwork items with distinctive features.
4. Identifying aspects of the social significance of belt sets worn by Turkic warriors.
5. Identification of the ornamental semantics of belt sets.
6. Identification of cross-cultural connections and the import of artistic traditions.

From the 5th to the 13th century, Turkic states controlled vast territories and became significant players in the Middle Ages, actively interacting with nearby and distant cultures. Their craft traditions were shaped by various cultural centers, such as China, Sogdiana, Iran, and the Caucasus. These centers developed during the medieval heyday of the transcontinental trade route, the Great Silk Road. Our study reflects this circumstance in the variety of buckle shapes, ornamentation, and structural and decorative features of belt pendants in Turkic society. These pendants became part of diplomatic gifts, trade exchanges, and interethnic interactions, significantly expanding their historical significance.

Main structural elements: buckles, badges, pendants:

Buckles:

The evolution of buckles reflects changes in ideological and craft traditions. From the 5th to 7th centuries – simple bronze frame buckles; From the 7th to 8th centuries – heart-shaped and shield-shaped buckles; From the 8th to 10th centuries – enamel and Chinese decorative motifs (Golden, 1992). From the 10th to 13th centuries – shapes were standardized in the Kimak-Kypchak era; From the 13th to 15th centuries – silver buckles were mass produced in the Golden Horde (The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia, 2008).

Central and distributed plaques:

Plaques played a role in establishing social status: the elite used silver, gilding, and complex designs. Rich sets included dozens of distributed plaques, as confirmed by excavations in Zhetysay and Eastern Kazakhstan (Samashev, 2023). Initially, the central plaque served as a status symbol, hence the extensive decorative attention given to it, including animal styles, scenes of animals fighting, and heraldic motifs. In the late Turkic period, plaques became more one-dimensional and standardized. The number of distributed plaques reflected not only functionality, but also the owner's social status. In elite assemblages, dozens of small plaques cover entire belts.

Plaques depicting animals were also worn on belt straps to enhance the item's apotropaic function (Kilunovskaya, Semenov et al., 2021).

Pendants and additional elements:

The widespread use of hanging straps on composite belts dates back to ancient Turkic culture. During this period, they were threaded through slots in overlay plates and decorated

with metal plaques, tips, or buckles to which belt accessories were attached (Jewelry of the Peoples of Siberia).

The most common items were scabbards, flints, wallets, and decorative pendants. Their number peaked during the Kimako-Kypchak era, which is associated with a change in military status ideology. The technique used to make pendants indicates the existence of local craft centers (Khudyakov, 1997).

Chronological Horizons and Regional Production Centers:

Based on an analysis of published materials, the following periods can be identified:

1. Early Turkic Period (5th–7th centuries): cast bronze items and animal-style simple buckles. Main centers: Southern and Eastern Kazakhstan (Otrar, Shilikta Valley, and Zhetysu, respectively); Altai; and Mongolia.

2. Second Khaganate Period (7th–8th centuries): Appearance of silver and gilded sets and heraldic compositions; development of complex buckles.

3. Uyghur Period (8th–10th centuries): Spread of enamel, Chinese decorative motifs, and fine engraving.

4. Kypchak Period (10th–13th centuries): Standardization of forms, increase in the number of pendants, and characteristic heart-shaped and rhombic buckles. Regional differences between craft centers.

5. The Golden Horde (13th–15th centuries): Mass production of silver sets and standardization of forms, spread throughout the Great Steppe.

Interestingly, master casters who produced torques were located at connecting points, such as road intersections or along trade routes. This pattern of workshop location can also be assumed to have been characteristic of Southern Siberia and Central Asia (Kubarev, 2005).

Ornamental semantics:

Animal style. Animal imagery depicting predators, ungulates fighting reflects ancient Saka traditions (Margulan, 1966), as well as ideas about power, strength, and magical protection. This tradition dates back to the early Scythian period and was preserved by the early Turks. Images of predators, ungulates, and griffins on belt sets symbolized their owners' strength, protection, and power. Images of birds were also popular. However, qualities such as strength, endurance, speed, ruthlessness, and vigilance, etc. were embodied in various objects. Accordingly, the Scythian-Siberian animal style is dominated by representations of panthers, lions, lynxes, wolves, and griffins, which are frequently depicted in scenes of combat with one another or herbivorous animals. (Dobzhansky, 1990).

Heraldic motifs. Turkic belts of the 7th–8th centuries feature family crests, tamgas, and symbols of authority. The genesis and widespread distribution of these belts dates back to the second half of the 6th century. The earliest examples appeared in the North Caucasus and Crimea and subsequently spread rapidly across the steppe zone of Eurasia (Dobzhansky, 1990). These symbols formed the integral part of the culture, carrying deep symbolic meaning and indicating affiliation with a particular clan.

Eastern influences. Uyghur craftsmen widely used enamel and images of dragons, phoenixes, and cloud motifs due to cultural contact with China (Golden, 1992).

Sogdian-Iranian-Caucasian elements. The craft centers of Zhetysu were characterized by floral ornamentation, grapevines, and "pearl" outlines.

Social status function:

The nobility used elite silver and gilded sets. Druzhina warriors used more affordable, ornamented sets. Simple stamped elements were used by ordinary soldiers (Khudyakov, 1997). Youth belts reflected initiation rituals (Samashev, 2024). Belts served as important indicators of a warrior's position within the military and administrative hierarchy and were awarded for military merit. The belt can be considered a kind of social "passport," indicating the status of its owner, which is often more significant than the clothing itself. Additionally, due to their distinctive design elements, belt types can serve as an independent category for chronological dating (Kubarev, 2005).

While ethnographic data on the social status function of belts is interesting, this kind of information is not very informative and does not reveal the subject's full essence. Such information is basically recorded in the folklore and myths of different peoples and in written sources.

The Shahnameh recounts that belts served not only a military function but also as special clothing for rulers. For instance, during the reign of Menuchehr, the Shahnameh states:

"... And much more did the caravan carry:

Armour for battles and daring amusements,

Spears, bows, arrows, and maces,

As well as a crown and a seal of carnelian,

A turquoise throne and a lord's belt (Firdausi, 1957).

The golden belt is often mentioned in the epic as royal attire or a gift for warriors and subjects. When presented as a gift, the belt was accompanied by other symbols of authority. Additionally, when the author uses the expression "warrior girded," he implies readiness for battle.

According to the renowned ethnographer O. Zhanibekov, Kazakh men's outer garments were not fastened; therefore, a belt played an essential role in traditional clothing. The oldest type of Kazakh belt is the *kise-belbeu*. Unlike other types of belts, such as the *beldik*, the *kise-belbeu* had decorative leather pendants, known as *okchantai*, firmly attached to the straps. These pendants resembled antique powder flasks and scabbards, known as *kyn*. The belt was also decorated with metal plaques (Zhanibekov, 1996). Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the belt was an integral part of Kazakh men's clothing and that its ornamentation possessed aesthetic and symbolic significance.

According to the ethnographer D. Khatran, "In addition to its direct practical purpose, the belt performs a number of other functions." For example, in folk beliefs, it is perceived as a carrier of magical power in the surrounding space, capable of protecting against the curses of evil spirits. It is a tool that connects and disconnects, separating one from another world. According to ancient beliefs, there are three worlds (spaces): Those in the upper world gird their heads, those in the lower world gird their feet, and those between these two worlds gird their waists. Thus, according to the traditional worldview, the belt is a distinctive sign for humans.

According to Kazakh custom, since ancient times, a father would present a belt to his son upon reaching the age of 10-13. This tradition symbolized the boy's transition into adulthood. Among Turkic-Mongolian peoples, the belt was regarded as particularly sacred and significant

object. Therefore, it was carefully crafted, richly decorated and treated with special respect. For a man, the belt functioned as important marker of identity and social status, symbolizing support and strength.

In traditional belief it was considered inauspicious for a man to appear without a belt. In everyday life, outer garments are expected to be worn together with a belt and appearing without one was regarded as improper (Heritage of the Great Steppe, 2018).

Results

Based on the material studied a comprehensive typology of buckles, plaques, and pendants was established, and five chronological horizons of Turkic belt set development were identified: Early Turkic, Turkic, Uyghur, Kipchak, and Golden Horde. During the study, regional craft centers were identified: Zhetysu, Altai (eastern Kazakhstan), and Altai, as well as cross-cultural influences from China, Sogdiana, and the Caucasus. The analysis further confirmed social status semantics of the decorative elements of Turkic warriors' belt sets.

An examination of epic works, written sources, and ethnographic data, demonstrates that belts have possessed multiple symbolic and practical functions that were strictly observed by their owners. For centuries, belts were believed to possess protective and magical properties. Meanwhile, the military aristocracy has attached great importance to their martial function, which corresponded to the owner's social status.

As an element of Turkic warrior attire, the belt was of great importance and fulfilled several functions. First, it had a utilitarian function: the main purpose was to secure clothing and suspend various weapons. This function was closely related to the practical requirements of everyday life. Depictions on balbals and stone stelae show belts with suspended weapons, indicating the significant role of belts in the attire and status of Turkic warriors. Thus, the belt can be considered one of the key elements of warriors' attire and also was regarded as a significant gift among the aristocracy.

Second, the belt performed an apotropaic function through its metal decorations. In the worldview of Turkic peoples, the belt represented a protective circle and talisman, connecting the three worlds. The belt was understood as a complex symbol reflecting the connection between humans, nature, the cosmos, society, and identity. The waist was believed to be the source of strength and vital energy, so belts were adorned with talismanic symbols such as the heads of wolves, predators, griffins, family crests, and solar symbols.

Third, belts fulfilled a social function, indicating the owner's status. For men, the belt served as a marker of identity through which family affiliation, social rank, and wealth could be recognized. The placement of plaques on the belt indicated the owner's social status. Belts belonging to the elite were adorned with gold and precious stones.

Thus, the belt was an important element of a Turkic warrior's clothing, serving several functions.



*Fig. 4. Lightly armed Turkic warrior (Mountain Altai). Reconstruction (Solovev, 2003).
4-сур. Жеңіл қаруланған түркі жауынгері (Таулы Алтай). Қайта жаңғырту (Соловьев, 2003).
Рис. 4. Легковооруженный тюркский воин (Горный Алтай). Реконструкция (Соловьев, 2003).*



Fig. 5. Heavily armed Turkic warrior (Mountain Altai). Reconstruction (Solovev, 2003).

5-сур. Ауыр қаруланған түркі жауынгері (Таулы Алтай). Қайта жаңғырту (Соловьев, 2003).

Рис. 5. Тяжеловооруженный тюркский воин (Горный Алтай). Реконструкция (Соловьев, 2003).

Conclusion

The belt sets of Turkic warriors is an essential part of their material culture. It reflects the functional requirements of everyday life, but also worldview of society, as well as its ideology, social structure, and cultural interactions with neighboring civilizations. The reconstructed typology and chronology of belt sets provide a basis for further metallographic, semiotic, and comparative studies.

The cultural context in which belts were used is distinctive, and belts are primarily functioned as accessories, decorative elements and components of military equipments. Archaeologists often find belts in burial structures, which requires studying materials from burial complexes dating back to ancient times. As historical sources, belts are evidence of a specific period that requires more detailed study.

In analyzing their semantics, the study proceeds from the thesis that belts were evidence of their owner's social and military rank, symbolizing authority and wealth. Since ancient times, belts have also been believed to have magical properties and have been used as amulets.

However, during the period of the formation of military democracy, the symbolic role of belts underwent transformations. From that time on, belts' functions can be divided into two categories.

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