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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT THE TASTAK CEMETERY IN 2023 (Abai region, Urzhar district)

The article introduces for the first time the results of archaeological research at the Tastak cemetery in the field season of 2023, located in the southern foothills of the Tarbagatai Range. The mentioned region in archaeological terms is a little-studied region. In the process of field stationary works, reconnaissance of the area was carried out and a topographic plan of the cemetery was taken. Two kurgans (no. 7 and no. 11) were investigated during this period. According to the planographic arrangement of the sites, the structure of the overmound and intra-mound construction, as well as the position and orientation of the burials corresponds to the classical Saka period. Some constructive features of the structure were revealed: stone shell, grave fence. The noted constructive features of the construction can be connected with ancient migration processes in this period. In the course of comparative-typological analysis, which includes a versatile characterisation of the archaeological source, identification of dated analogies, as well as  $^{14}\text{C}$  radiocarbon AMS dating, the investigated sites are generally placed in the IV century BC. Despite the fact that the burials were looted earlier, the materials we obtained during the study of the site will certainly make a great contribution to the study of material and spiritual culture of the Saka tribes of East Kazakhstan.

**Key words:** East Kazakhstan, Tarbagatai Ridge, Tastak, cemetery, Early Iron Age, kurgans.

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## Тастақ қорымындағы 2023 жылғы археологиялық зерттеулер (Абай облысы Үржар ауданы)

Мақалада алғаш рет 2023 ж. жазғы маусымда Тарбағатай жотасының күнгейінде орналасқан Тастақ қорымындағы археологиялық зерттеулердің қорытындылары ғылыми айналымға еніп отыр. Аталмыш аймақ археологиялық тұрғыдан аз зерттелген аудандардың қатарына жатады. Далалық стационарлық жұмыстар барысында жергілікті аймақты барлау жұмыстары жүргізіліп, қорымның топографиялық жоспары түсірілді. Сонымен бірге, екі обаға қазба жұмыстары жүргізіліп зерттелді (№ 7 және № 11). Ескерткіштердің топографиялық орналасуы, қабір үсті және қабірішілік құрылыстың құрылымы, сондай-ақ жерленген мәйіттің орналасуы мен бағыты классикалық сақ кезеңіне сәйкес келеді. Зерттелген обалардың кейбір құрылымдық ерекшеліктері анықталды: тас қабаты, қабір үсті қоршауы. Аталған құрылымдық ерекшеліктер осы кезеңдегі ежелгі көші-қон процестерімен байланысты болуы мүмкін. Археологиялық деректердің жан-жақты сипатамасы мен мерзімделген аналогиялар тізбегін анықтайтын салыстырмалы-типологиялық әдіспен қатар,  $^{14}\text{C}$  радиокөміртекті AMS сараптамасы барысында зерттелген ескерткіштер б.з.д. IV ғ. мерзімделеді. Обалардың тоналып кеткендігіне қарамастан, ескерткішті зерттеу барысында алынған материалдар Шығыс Қазақстанның сақ тайпаларының материалдық және рухани мәдениетін зерттеуге үлкен үлес қосатыны сөзсіз.

**Түйін сөздер:** Шығыс Қазақстан, Тарбағатай жотасы, Тастақ, қорым, ерте темір дәуірі, обалар.

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**Археологические исследования на могильнике Тастак в 2023 г.  
(Абайская область, Уржарский район)**

В статье впервые вводятся в научный оборот результаты археологических исследований на могильнике Тастак в полевом сезоне 2023 г., расположенный в южных предгорьях Тарбагатайского хребта. Отмеченный регион в археологическом плане является малоизученным регионом. В процессе полевых стационарных работ были проведены рекогносцировка местности, отснят топографический план могильника. В указанный период были исследованы два кургана (№ 7 и № 11). По планиграфическому расположению памятников, структуре надмогильного и внутримогильного сооружения, а также положение и ориентация погребенных соответствует классическому сакскому периоду. Выявлены некоторые конструктивные особенности сооружения: каменный панцирь, надмогильная ограда. Отмеченные конструктивные особенности сооружения могут быть связаны с древними миграционными процессами в этот период. В ходе сопоставительно-типологического анализа, которая включает в себя разностороннюю характеристику археологического источника, выявления датированных аналогий, а также  $^{14}\text{C}$  радиоуглеродного AMS датирования исследованные памятники в целом укладываются в IV в. до н.э. Несмотря на то, что погребения разграблены ранее, полученные нами в ходе исследования памятника материалы, безусловно, внесет большой вклад в изучение материальной и духовной культуры сакских племен Восточного Казахстана.

**Ключевые слова:** Восточный Казахстан, Тарбагатайский хребет, Тастак, могильник, ранний железный век, курганы.

## Introduction

The territory we are considering coincides administratively with the Urzhar district of the present-day Abai region, that is, the southern and southwestern slopes of the Tarbagatai range, the upper reaches of the Karakol, Urzhar, Katynsu rivers and their tributaries. The southern spurs of the Tarbagatai Range have long played a special role in the development of various cultural societies. In the epoch of early nomads, the territory of East Kazakhstan was a contact zone linking material and spiritual cultural features between the populations of neighbouring regions – Sayan-Altai, Saryarka and Zhetysu. The study of such sub-regions is a very important topical task for the resolution of general and specific questions concerning the formation, establishment and development of Saka cultures in the Eurasian belt. The main objective of the study is to determine the cultural and chronological affiliation of the studied sites. Among the specific objectives are the versatile characterisation of the archaeological source and the identification of dated analogies.

The southern slopes of the Tarbagatai Ridge, as noted above, in historiographical terms is a little-studied region. The first information belongs to the geologist V.A. Obruchev (1932: 200), after repeated visits to “Frontier Dzungaria”, the author notes that this region is practically unexplored, and escaped the attention of scientists-travellers. One of the first

researchers of archaeological sites in this area was S.S. Chernikov (1951: 145, Fig. 46). During the survey of the region in 1949 he found many sites of kurgan type. In 1963, 1964 and 1966, G.A. Kushaev (1968: 100-105) carried out exploration and excavation works in the area. In 2013, the Tasaryk kurgan with a female burial of the IV-III century BC. was discovered and investigated in this region during the construction of a motorway. The study of the site was led by B.A. Baitanaev (2019) and T. Smagulov (Altynbekov, 2018). The next systematic research of the region was carried out in 2015-2017 under the direction of G.K. Omarov. In addition to exploration works, the funerary monuments of Bukpan, Ortabulak and Ushbulak cemeteries were excavated in the region (Omarov et al., 2016: 189-198; 2018: 45-51).

It should be noted that many kurgan monuments in this region have been destroyed. Favourable climatic conditions influenced the successful development of agriculture in this region since Soviet times, which influenced the annual increase in the ploughed area.

## Material and research methods

Archaeological sites are considered, first of all, as a result of human activity conditioned by a number of external factors (the role of geographical environment, migrations, traditions in culture and historical processes). The methodology of specific

research includes, first of all, traditional archaeological methods of study: excavations and reconnaissance, including mapping, study of topography and layout of complexes, stratigraphic observations, classification of material complexes, method of dated analogies, formal-typological analysis, elements and techniques of statistics, retrospective method.

In order to determine the cultural and chronological aspects, comparative-typological analysis of the studied objects was applied in the course of the study, also the results of  $^{14}\text{C}$  radiocarbon AMS dating were obtained in the laboratory of the Centre of Physical Sciences and Technologies in Vilnius (Lithuania).

### Main part and discussion

In 2023 the archaeological expedition of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University under the leadership of R.S. Zhumatayev investigated the Early Iron Age burial mounds no. 7 and no. 11 of the Tastak cemetery, located in the southwestern foothills of Tarbagatai, 8 km northwest of the village of Urzhar, along the Urzhar-Barkytbel road, on the right bank of the Urzhar River (Fig. 1). In the northern part of the cemetery is the wintering ground of Akshoky.

The cemetery is a flat area with multiple irrigation canals. In the middle of the cemetery there is a dry bed of the Karasu River. The southern part is covered with dense bushes. The cemetery contains a total of 7 kurgans divided into two groups. The kurgans are arranged in a chain mainly along the north-west-south-east axis. There are eight kurgans in the first group and three in the second. The largest of them are located in the first group (Fig. 2).

Kurgan no. 1 is the largest on the territory of the cemetery, located remotely from kurgans no. 2, 3, 4. The height is 2.5 m, the diameter of the mound is 44 m, the diameter with the ring is 105 m. The ground part consists mainly of an earth mound, with an admixture of pelletized stones. No other structures were recorded around the kurgans. Around the kurgan there is a stone ring consisting of two rows of stones, about 1 m wide. The distance of the stone ring from the base of the kurgan is about 30 meters. There are gaps on the east and west sides, i.e. a kind of "entrance and exit". The similar type of stone structures around the kurgans is found in the Early Iron Age kurgans of East Kazakhstan and Zhetysu. In the western part of the kurgan at a distance of 40 m from the base of the kurgan in two places there is a stone lining, possibly a sacrificial fence of a ritual nature. In the upper part of the kurgan there is an

inlet burial (?), stretched along the line of axis west-east, measuring  $1 \times 2$  meters.

Kurgan no. 6 it is 1.3 m high, rounded in plan, with a diameter of 20 m. Round in plan, it is located in the northern part of the cemetery. It should be noted that the northern part of the cemetery has been heavily ploughed in the course of agricultural works. Along the chain of kurgans from the north-eastern part of the first group there is a dry bed and a dirt road.

Kurgan no. 7 is relatively small in size, 0.3 m high, and 7 m in diameter and rounded in plan. The site is located to the north of Kurgan no. 6. An excavation has been laid for this site.

Kurgan no. 8 closes the chain of kurgans of the first group. The northern and central part of the kurgan is completely destroyed. The mound in the southern part of the structure is partially preserved. The soil and stones from the mound were taken, apparently, for construction work.

There are no mounds in kurgans no. 2 to no. 5 belonging to the first group, and they are characterized by the remains of stone structures. Most likely, the mounds were destroyed during the digging of irrigation canals.

The second group of the cemetery has three kurgans. Kurgans no. 9, no. 10, no. 11 are rounded in plan and characterized by a small embankment.

Kurgans no. 9 is about 1.4 m high and 18 m in diameter. The fill of the kurgans is covered with dense shrub vegetation. The monument is located to the south, relatively far away from the next two.

Kurgans 10 and 11 are almost identical in size. They are rounded in plan, 1 m high each, and 12 m in diameter. An excavation was laid on site no. 11.

In general, two groups of kurgans were selected in the cemetery, among them stone mounds predominate.

In the field season we selected objects no. 7 and no. 11. Pre-excavation photo fixation was carried out. The sites are small mounds consisting of pebble stones and soil. The surface of the kurgans is covered with small shrubs and steppe vegetation.

Kurgan no. 7 is a rounded in plan shape mound located in the first kurgans group in the northern part of the cemetery. The ground structure is 7 m in diameter and 0.3 m high (Fig. 3, 1-2). The excavation work left a 0.2 m wide bank orientated along a north-south axis. After the removal of the humus layer, stripping of the above-ground stone mound of the kurgan revealed slumped pelletized mound stones along the edges. The central part of the stone shell rose from the main mound. The diameter of the central structure was 3.5 m. Apparently, dur-

ing the construction of the kurgan, the embankment was built in several stages. First, the central part was erected, and then the edges of the kurgan were filled in. In the course of clearing in the central part and deepening to the continental layer in the south-eastern part of the kurgan, a horse limb bone was recorded.

In the process of clearing the central part of the kurgan, a grave spot was revealed, measuring 2.2×1.2 m, orientated along the west-east axis line, with slight deviations. At a depth of 0.3 m in the western and central parts of the gravel pit, scattered bones of the buried person were recorded. The gravel pit was a mound of rolled stones and soil. At a depth of 1 m in the north-western part of the gravel pit, chaotically scattered bones of the buried person (bones of arms, legs, pelvis, dorsal and cervical vertebrae, etc.) were found. The gravel pit had been looted earlier. Burial equipment was missing. After cleaning and fixation, the site was rehabilitated.

Kurgan no. 11 is rounded in plan and is a small hillock, 12 m in diameter and 1 m high. During the excavation, an edge was left along the west-east axis. Visually, before the excavation, the structure was predominantly composed of soil, with pelletized stones at the base.

During the clearance in the central part a grave stone ring, rounded in plan, 4.8 m in diameter and 0.4 m thick, was recorded. In some parts the stones are missing. In profile, the kurgan embankment has a so-called stone jacket of rolled stones (Fig. 4, 1). The central part of the grave mound is relatively solid, consisting of loam and stones, apparently constructed immediately after the gravel pit was filled. It was covered with a stone shell, which eventually slid down to the edges of the kurgan, forming a stone jacket. In the central part of the grave structure, the gravel pit is recorded in places. The clearance revealed a gravel pit measuring 2.2×1 m in the central part of the grave ring, orientated along the west-east axis. The gravel pit is a stone rubble fill with loamy soil. In the process of deepening at a depth of 0.8 m, the skeleton of the buried person was found in anatomical position (Fig. 4, 2). However, the skull, hands and feet were missing. The buried person was lying in an elongated position on his back with his head to the west. Only the lower part of the jaw was preserved from the skull. Based on the teeth of the lower jaw, it can be assumed that the buried person was elderly, as there was almost no tooth enamel in the functional parts of the teeth. During the scraping process, a 10×10 cm ashy stain was recorded in the upper right part of the head. In the right part of the

forearm, a foil pendant of conical shape was found. The upper part has a through hole. The pendant itself is about 1 cm high and has horizontal stripes made by embossing (Fig. 5). Probably, the whole inventory could have served as a pendant ornament in the form of a bell imitation. No other items of any kind were found.

This type of jewellery is found at the sites of Eleke Sazy IV, in kurgan no. 7 (Toleubayev et al. 2021: 159-160) and Akzhailau, in kurgan No. 1 (Samashev et al. 2023: 22, fig. 10, 1-108) in East Kazakhstan.

It should be noted that the discovered pendants are very similar to conical earrings of the Early Saka time in terms of the method of manufacture and shape (Beisenov 2014: 122, figs. 1-2; Omarov et al. 2020: 151, fig. 5). This testifies to the established tradition of making items of armour, horse gear and jewellery by ancient craftsmen.

After sampling and collection of skeletal bone remains, the site was reclaimed. In order to determine the age of the monument, 14C date of FTMC-TX15-1 (2188±29) of kurgan no. 7 and FTMC-TX15-2 (2260±29) of kurgan no. 11 of Tastak cemetery was obtained. Taking into account the peaks in the graphs, the results obtained for 1δ (68.3%) and 2δ (95.4%) can be narrowed down to 350-320 BC (Fig. 6) and 380-360 BC (Fig. 7). Thus, the studied sites are dated to the Saka time, that is, the IV century BC.

## Conclusion

The similarity of the Early Iron Age material culture with neighbouring cultures is primarily due to close trade links (Tairov, 2017: 109). In addition, migration processes played an important role in the formation of the Saka cultural identity in this territory. The movement of nomadic tribes took place in several stages, with different intensity and direction. These processes significantly influenced the formation and development of cultural communities in the Saka era in the Altai, Tyva and Minusinsk Basin (Tairov, 2017: 35-36). The cultures of Xinjiang and Northern China play a significant role in the development of the Saka culture of Eastern and Central Kazakhstan (Shulga, 2010: 23).

In the light of this topic, the spread of Kazakh Saka cultural impulses to these regions, where they did not represent an integral complex, is of particular interest. At this historical stage, the territory of present-day East Kazakhstan was a kind of centre and, as mentioned above, a contact zone in the formation of cultures of the early Saka period.

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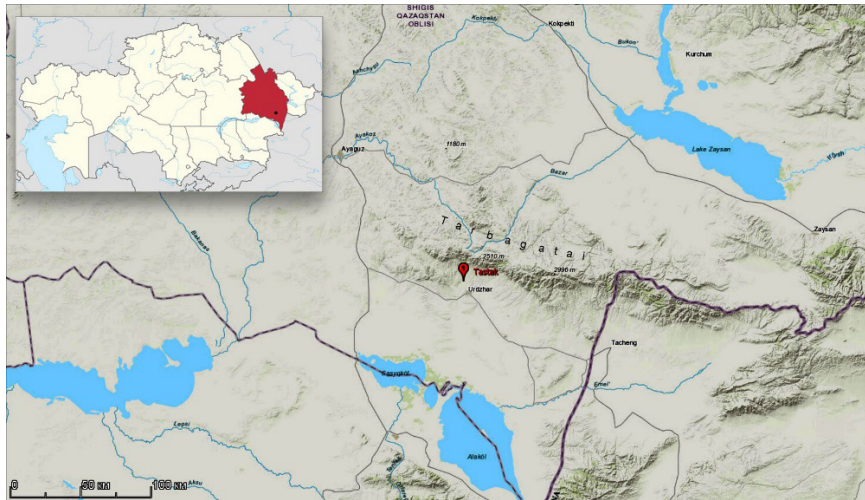


Figure 1 – Location of the Tastak cemetery on the map

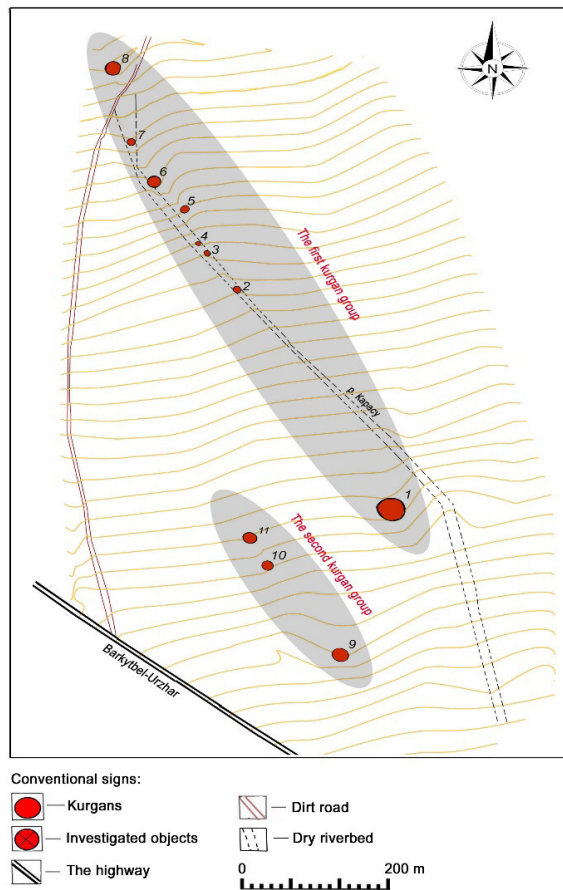


Figure 2 – Topographic plan of the site

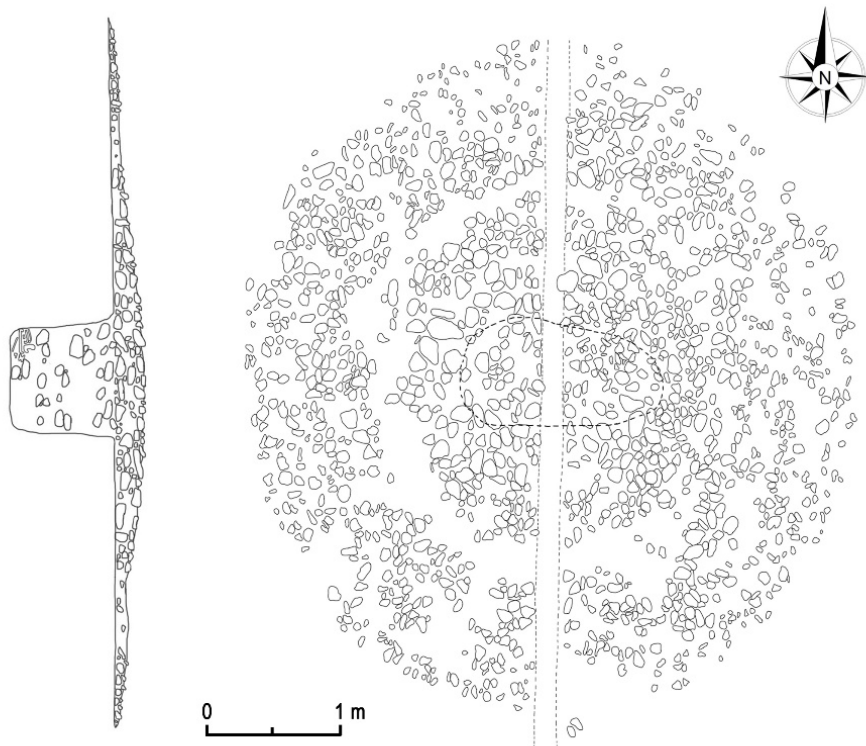


Figure 3 – Plan and section of kurgan no. 7 of the Tastak cemetery

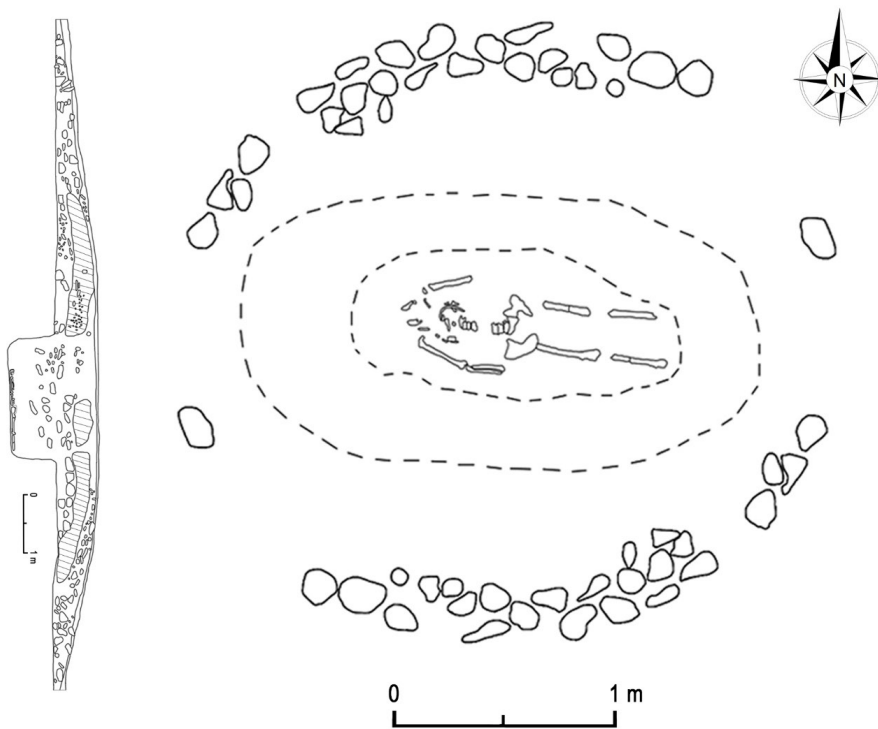


Figure 4 – Plan and section of kurgan no. 11 of the Tastak cemetery

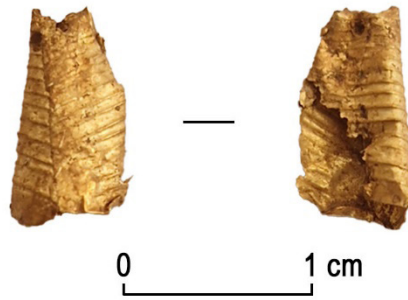


Figure 5 – Pendant decoration

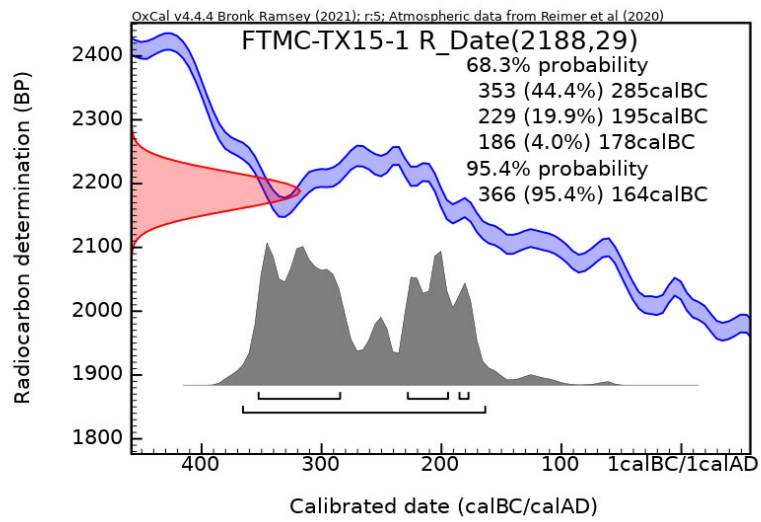


Figure 6 – Results of radiocarbon dating of a sample from kurgan no. 7

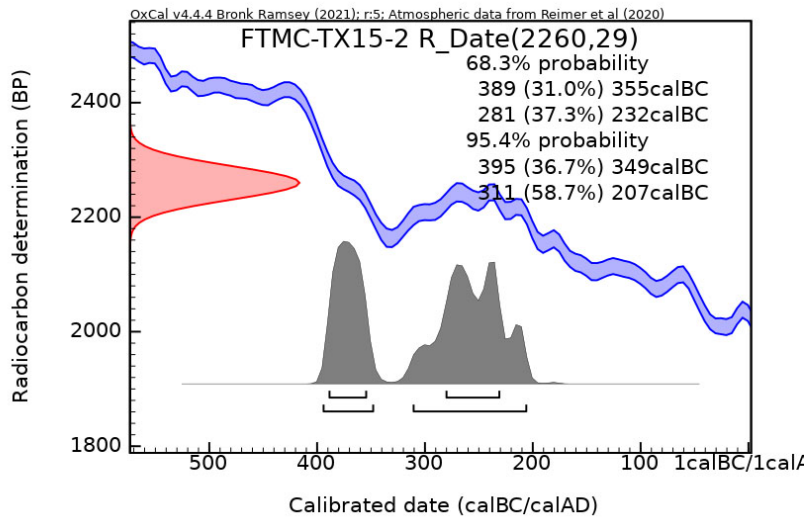


Figure 7 – Results of radiocarbon dating of a sample from kurgan no. 11



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