

UDC/ЭОЖ/УДК 902.904 (574)
CICSTI/FTAMP/MPHTI 03.41.91DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69567/3007-0236.2025.3.302.308>

The Embodiment of Fertility Symbolism in Ceramics: From the Study of Pazyryk Vessels¹

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Keywords: archeology; Pazyryk culture; Berel; ceramic vessel; symbol; decor

Тірек сөздер: археология; Пазырық мәдениеті; Берел; керамикалық ыдыс; символ; декор

Ключевые слова: археология; па-
тура; Берел; зырыкская культура; Берел; кера-
мический сосуд; символ; декор

High in the mountains of Eastern Qazaqstan, where the borders of four countries — Qazaqstan, China, Mongolia, and Russia — converge, the Berel burial ground is located in a picturesque valley. The site is composed of burial mounds dating back to the Early Iron Age (4th–3rd centuries BC). The necropolis has a history spanning more than a thousand years, remaining active during the Hunno-Sarmatian and Old Turkic periods. Study of the site began in the second half of the 19th century, and this year marks its 160th anniversary. This article, for the first time in Russian historiography, presents an analysis of the decoration of a ceramic vessel dating back to the 4th–3rd centuries BC from Mound No. 10 at the Berel burial ground. To date, no parallels have been found for this unique find, either in Qazaqstan or abroad. The extraordinary nature of this item lies in its unique decoration, which is believed to be associated with the cult of a female deity and fertility. In general, the issues of studying the ceramics of the Berel burial ground deserve a separate interdisciplinary study.

Source of funding: The publication was carried out within the framework of granted financing of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Qazaqstan, project IRN BR20280993

For citation: Jumabekova Gulnara S., Bazarbayeva Galiya A., 2025. The Embodiment of Fertility Symbolism in Ceramics: From the Study of Pazyryk Vessels. *Qazaq Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 302–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69567/3007-0236.2025.3.302.308>

Қыш ыдыстағы «көбею» символдары: Пазырық мәдениеті ыдыстарын зерттеу тәжірибесінен

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Қазақстанның шығысындағы биік таулы өлкеде, Қазақстан, Қытай, Моңғолия мен Ресей шекаралары тоқайласатын кең алқапта Берел қорымы жатыр. Қорымның түпнегізі ерте темір ғасырындағы (б. з. д. IV–III ғасырлар) қорғандардан құралады. Қорымның ғұн-сармат және ежелгі түрік дәуірінен бері жалғасқан мың жылдан асатын тарихы бар. Бұл тарихи ескерткішті зерттеу ісі XIX ғасырдың екінші жартысында басталып, биыл 160 жылға толып отыр. Мақалада отандық тарихнамада алғаш рет Берел қорымының №2 қорғанынан алынған, IV–III ғасырлардан қалған қыш ыдыс өрнектеріне талдау жасалған. Қазіргі уақытта осынау ғажап олжаға ұқсас бұйым Қазақстанда да, Қазақстаннан сырт жерлерде де табыла қойған жоқ. Ыдыстың айрықша ерекшелігі де өзіне ғана тән өрнектерінде болып тұр. Оны әйел-құдай, көбею ғұрпымен байланыстырады. Жалпы алғанда Берел қорымының қыштары өз алдына жеке зерттеу нысаны болуға лайық.

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Қаржыландыру көзі: Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі Ғылым комитеті ЖТН BR20280993 жобасының аясында әзірленді.

Сілтеме үшін: Жұмабекова Г.С., Базарбаева Ғ.А. Қыш ыдыстағы «көбею» символдары: Пазырық мәдениеті ыдыстарын зерттеу тәжірибесінен. *Qazaq Historical Review*. 2025. Т. 3. № 3. С. 302–308 (ағылшынша). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69567/3007-0236.2025.3.302.308>

Воплощение символики плодородия в керамике: из опыта исследования сосуда пазырыкской культуры

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Высоко в горах на крайнем востоке нашей страны, где сходятся границы четырех государств – Казахстана, Китая, Монголии и России, в живописной долине расположен могильник Берел. Основу памятника составляют курганы раннего железного века (IV–III вв. до н.э.). История некрополя насчитывает более чем тысячелетнюю историю – он продолжал функционировать и в гунно-сарматскую и древнетюркскую эпохи. Изучение памятника началось во второй половине XIX в. и в этом году отмечается юбилейная дата – 160 лет. В статье впервые в отечественной историографии представлен анализ декора керамического сосуда IV–III вв. до н.э. из кургана № 10 могильника Берел. В настоящее время этой уникальной находке пока не удалось выявить аналогии ни в Казахстане, ни за его пределами. Экстраординарность предмета заключается в своеобразном декоре. Предполагается связать его с культом женского божества, плодородия. В целом вопросы изучения керамики могильника Берел претендуют на отдельное междисциплинарное исследование.

Источник финансирования: Работа выполнена в рамках программы фундаментальных научных исследований Комитета науки Министерства науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан на 2023–2025 гг., ИРН BR20280993.

Для цитирования: Джумабекова Г.С., Базарбаева Г.А. Воплощение символики плодородия в керамике: из опыта исследования сосуда пазырыкской культуры. *Qazaq Historical Review*. 2025. Т. 3. № 3. С. 302–308 (на англ. яз.). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69567/3007-0236.2025.3.302.308>

Introduction

During the 2005 field season at the Berel burial ground in the Qazaq Altai, the East Qazqstan Archaeological Expedition of the Alkey Margulan Institute of Archaeology investigated Mound No. 10, which contained a permafrost lens (Expedition Leader: Zainolla Samashev, Excavation Director: Gulnara Dzhumabekova). It is worth noting that this is one of the largest archaeological sites. Ritual elements recorded here include a wooden frame, an accompanying burial of ten horses in ritual attire, executed in the traditions of the Scythian-Siberian animal style and featuring highly artistic woodwork, and other items. Full details of the burial mound are available in the book *"Berel"* [Samashev 2011: 60–63]. The purpose of this article is to analyze the decoration of a ceramic vessel from Mound No. 10 at the Berel burial ground. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that Russian historiography has so far been limited in its study of the decorative aspects of Early Iron Age ceramics. In general, given the particular material culture of the Saka period, it can be noted that, in addition to clay, leather, wood, and other organic materials were used to make vessels.

It should be noted that, 20 years after the excavations, it has not yet been possible to identify any complete parallels to the vessel under analysis. This study presents the results of a brief analysis of this unique find.

Material Characteristics

In Zainolla Samashev's description, the analyzed vessel is characterized as a large, tall, narrow-necked red clay jug, decorated with mastoid appliqués arranged in four vertical rows

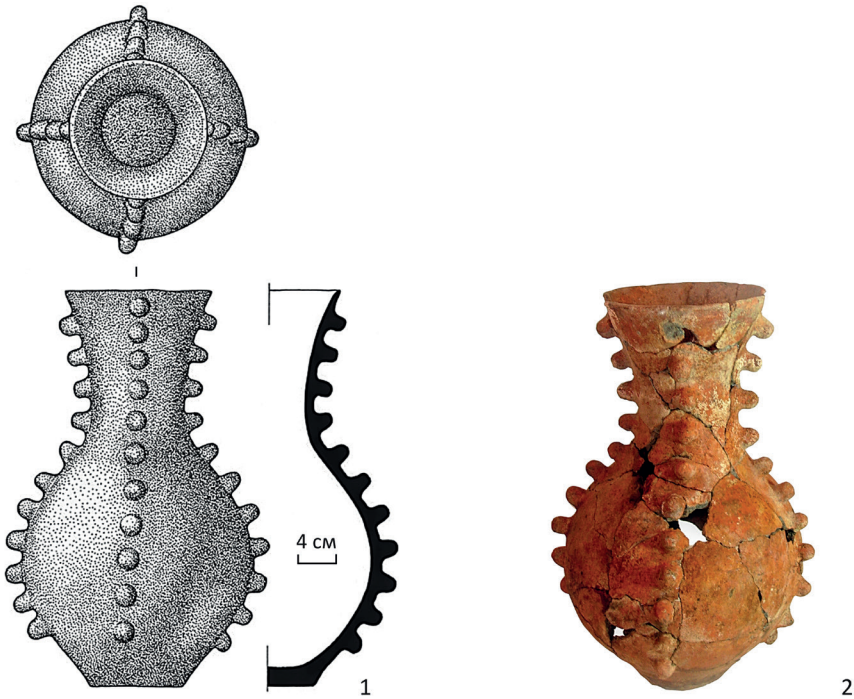


Fig. 1. Ceramic vessel. Berel burial ground, mound no. 10 [Samashev 2011]. We thank Mikhail Antonov for assistance in preparing the illustration.

1-сур. Қыш ыдыс. Берел қорымы, № 10 қорған [Самашев 2011]. Иллюстрацияны әзірлеуге көмегі үшін Михаил Антоновқа рақмет

Рис. 1. Керамический сосуд. Могильник Берел, курган № 10 [Самашев 2011]. Благодарим Михаила Антонова за помощь в подготовке иллюстрации



[Samashev 2011: 138, Fig. 336]. These appliqués are arranged symmetrically across the entire height of the vessel, with 11 in each row (Fig. 1).

A ceramic study² by Zhanargul Kaliyeva revealed that the vessel was painted with red mineral paint. The pearls measure 2.0–2.5 x 1.0–1.5 cm, with a distance of 2.0–2.5 cm between them. There are 44 appliqués in total. Their surface, as well as the rim, retained traces of a silver coating (possibly tin, like other elements of the object complex) [Kaliyeva 2019: 75].

A group of ceramic objects with appliqués stands out among the vessels from the Berel burial ground (mounds nos. 4, 10, 41, 73). These are recorded as remnants of gray adhesive and remnants of foil-like bands. The silvery-white metal bands are presumably made of tin, possibly mixed with gold or silver, and were applied to the rims and necks of the ceramic vessels [Kaliyeva 2019].

Results

The projections on the jug from the Berel burial ground can be viewed from two perspectives: as a symbol of the feminine principle (mammillary attachments) and as a vessel as a "form capable of containing something," and in this respect, it is associated with the bodies of living beings, buildings, and other objects [Antonova 1986: 39].

² We thank ceramologists Zhanargul Qaliyeva and Irina Shevnina for their consultations.

It should be noted that in the culture of primitive farmers, and in archaic cultures in general, a vessel is an element of the household, associated with the sphere of women's activity and associated with feminine symbolism.

Examples of a ritual vessel in the shape of a female breast, mentioned by Apuleius, and a vessel from the Cretan Mycenaean culture from Mochlos, demonstrate the connection between the milk vessel and the female body. They were likely intended for milk libations, and the image of a woman was associated with a milk vessel and a water vessel. In this case, the vessel's decoration had a specific meaning, serving not aesthetic purposes, but rather its intended use in specific conditions [Antonova 1986: 46, 52].

A unique tradition developed in nomadic culture: the use of vessels not decorated in the form of animals, but rather represented by the animals themselves (or parts thereof), as a distinctive type of vessel. For example, dried animal stomachs were used as waterskins; the dish *bas-qaryn*, made with a ram's stomach, meat, and head, is well-known; the dressed stomach of a calf, sheep, or kid; a ram's or horse's stomach, after special processing and preparation, was used for storing butter; and various other foods. Leather utensils, including leather cauldrons, were used for cooking with small stones heated over a fire [Shmanov 2019]. Vessels made of leather and animal skins were decorated with ornaments, the predominant motif being the *qoshqar müyiz* (Qazaq: *қошқар мүйіз*; *qoshqar/қошқар* meaning 'ram', *müyiz/мүйіз* – 'horn'), symbolizing wealth, well-being and fertility.

The *qumyra* (Qazaq: *құмыра*) — a clay jug among the Qazaqs — was used to store water and dairy drinks (milk, *ayran*, *shubat*). The vessel from the Berel burial ground, dating back to the time when the foundations of nomadic culture, which would develop in subsequent centuries, were formed, could also symbolize prosperity and be used in rituals involving the libation of milk. The mammillary moldings on the ceramic jug combined these two concepts, understanding the vessel's place in culture (a symbol of the feminine principle, prosperity, and a form associated with a living being). Indeed, according to Elena Antonova, every object of primitive or archaic culture represented part of the mythological picture of the world, occupying a strictly defined place within it [Antonova 1986: 38].

The second aspect is that the appliquéés on the vessel indirectly demonstrate the presence of ideas recorded for the Scythians—about the supreme goddess of the entire Tabiti tribe. In general, the cult of a female deity, the goddess of the "royal" hearth, the patroness of the hearth of each family or clan, is reconstructed for the Scythian-Saka world [Artamonov 1961; Chugunov 2018]. Natalia Polosmak emphasizes the role of the female shaman, sorceress, and keeper of the hearth in the society of nomads of the Pazyryk culture [Polosmak 2001: 274–286].

Here, the following observation is important: mammillary appliquéés evoke associations with spiral curls — the cone-shaped ends of women's bracelets (and earrings), widespread in Eurasia during the Bronze Age. There are several theories regarding the meaning of this sign-symbol — the spiral. Two spirals may represent a ram (ram's horns) or a schematic drawing of a plant. These have been known since the Stone Age. The Bronze Age spiral can be traced back to the image of a ram's head with horns. The connection between the ram and solar symbols — the swastika-spiral — is known in the ornamentation of North Caucasian peoples [Spiral].

Concentric circles, crosses, and swastikas, found like spirals in the decoration of Bronze Age objects, are interpreted as patterns reflecting solar symbolism. The ram, in turn, personified fertility. In the beliefs of some cultures, the ram could be considered one of the hypostases of the sun, personifying fertility [Polidovich et al. 2015: 29; Golan 1994: 62–64]. Logically, for vessels, this decorative option also leads to fertility symbolism, which surprisingly corresponds with the mammillary appliquéés. It is appropriate to note here that in monuments of the Kura-Araxes culture, for example, a double spiral and round appliquéés, sometimes in pairs, were

depicted on large vessels that served as food receptacles. According to some researchers, this depiction represents a woman's breast, and here the vessel is associated with the woman's body [Antonova 1986: 44].

Discussion

Various types of vessels were placed in the Pazyryk culture burial mounds (to which the main part of the Berel necropolis belongs): wooden table-like dishes, ceramic vessels, vessels made of animal horn (of yak, teke, or argali), various types of wood, and leather. There are various opinions regarding the purpose of the food placed in these vessels: they were "food for the journey," offerings to ancestors (deceased relatives), or to the supreme deity(ies) before whom the deceased would appear. The decoration of the ceramic vessels varied: moldings, leather appliqué, painting, and carved ornamentation, which may be due to their purpose [Polosmak 2001: 189, 195].

The tradition of decorating ceramic vessels with mamillary moldings, as well as the production of anthropomorphic vessels in the form of women, dates back to ancient times, as evidenced by well-known examples. Among them are a statue of the many-breasted Artemis from the city of Ephesus, vessels from the island of Crete, and ritual vessels from the Trypillians depicting women holding a cup raised to the sky.

The theme of the Great Mother, a progenitor, was prominent in the agricultural cultures of Europe and the Middle East over a long period of time—from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age—and this was reflected in ceramics. Researchers note that one of the important motifs in ornamentation and sculpture is the female breast. The Trypillian culture is characterized by cups that a group of naked women raise to the sky. Four massive breasts were placed on each side of the vessels.

The image of the Great Mother — the goddess of fertility and abundance — conveyed through the depiction or modeling of female breasts or nipples has been identified in ceramics discovered in Caucasian Albania. The motifs of the Great Mother, the goddess of fertility and abundance, are intertwined with the image of a divine serpent [Akhundov 1986].

The image of a female mother-progenitor already existed among Paleolithic hunters, and later, with the transition to agriculture, a complex set of primitive cosmic beliefs developed, and the cult of Mother Earth and universal fertility acquired great significance. Female figurines have been discovered among small terracotta sculptures dating back to the Early Eneolithic. The earliest of these depicted standing women with prominent slender waists and full breasts. The widespread use of such figurines was driven by the religious beliefs of ancient farmers [Masson 1971].

A female deity likely predominated in the pantheon of Paleolithic and Neolithic populations. The Great Goddess was considered the primary deity in the beliefs of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians.

Mamma-shaped appliqués on ceramic vessels are known from Begazy-Dandybay culture sites in Qazaqstan [Varfolomeyev 2007]. Characteristic motifs, presumably, included mamillary appliqués (six instances), a checkerboard or herringbone (vertical) arrangement of shaded parallelograms, and semicircular and "tick"-shaped impressions on Begazy-Dandybay ceramics [Bobrov 2002].

Thus, we have come to the polysemy of such a symbol as a spiral curl, possibly associated with mamillary appliqués. The semantic meaning of the three-dimensional spiral curl apparently changed over the centuries in relation to economic activity — from the leading role of agriculture to the era of early nomads. The appliqués on the vessel could have been associated with the prominent role of women among the population of the Scythian-Saka period and were intended

for dairy products. Is it possible that mammillary appliquéés could be perceived as a variant or equivalent of the conical spiral curl at a certain stage in the development of pastoral culture?

Conclusion

Pazyryk vessels were likely used to hold dairy drinks and milk, at least in jugs. The use of tin in the decoration of a vessel from the Berel burial ground, which also lends elegance and a certain value to the vessel, may indicate a connection with dairy products. Natalia Polosmak points out, for example, that Tibetans carved their vessels from wood and decorated them with silver (according to Nikolai Przhhevalsky) [Polosmak 2001: 200]. The plundered burial in Mound No. 10 of the Berel burial ground does not allow us to determine who was buried there. The presence of a ceramic jug and a wooden table on carved legs with an iron knife and ram's tail vertebrae as accompanying objects suggests that the deceased was provided with a dairy product and a piece of meat. Considering the symbolism of the ceramic jug, it is possible that they were intended as an offering to deceased ancestors or to the supreme deities before whom the deceased will appear.

Contribution of the Authors

Gulnara S. Dzhumabekova: conceptualization, fieldwork, research methodology.

Galia A. Bazarbaeva: editing and reviewing the manuscript, preparing illustrations, and corresponding with the editors.

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Disclosure of conflict of interest information. The author claims no conflict of interest / Мүдделер қақтығысы туралы ақпаратты ашу. Автор мүдделер қақтығысының жоқтығын мәлімдейді / Раскрытие информации о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов

Information about the article / Мақала туралы ақпарат / Информация о статье

Entered the editorial office / Редакцияға түсті / Поступила в редакцию: 14.07.2025

Approved by reviewers / Рецензенттер мақұлдаған / Одобрено рецензентами: 04.08.2025

Accepted for publication / Жариялауға қабылданды / Принята к публикации: 29.08.2025

