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MUGHANA SITES IN THE KOK-TASH AREA OF ALA-BUKA DISTRICT: A HISTORICAL-ARCHAEOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION AND ORAL HISTORY

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Abstract

Stone structures of the “mugkhana” type that are widely distributed in the Kok-Tash area of Ala-Buka District, Jalal-Abad Region, constitute a distinctive layer of the local tangible cultural heritage. Based on field observations, this article characterizes the distribution area of these mugkhanas, their architectural and construction features, compositional planning, and current state of preservation. In addition, using the oral history method, the study systematizes local residents’ recollections, terminological explanations, and folk interpretations concerning the functions of these structures. A comparative analysis of archaeological indicators and ethnographic data makes it possible to substantiate the chronology of the mugkhanas and their potential association with burial practices, road checkpoints, or functions of sacral marking. The findings provide an evidence-based scholarly rationale for strengthening the inventorying, documentation, and protection of heritage sites in the region.

Keywords: Mughana, Ala-Buka District, oral history, Kara Khitai, funerary monuments, stone constructions

МУГХАНЫ В МЕСТНОСТИ КӨК-ТАШ АЛА-БУКИНСКОГО РАЙОНА: ИСТОРИКО-АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКА И УСТНАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

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Аннотация

Каменные сооружения типа «мугхана», широко распространённые в местности Көк-Таш Ала-Букинского района Джалал-Абадской области, представляют собой особый пласт местного материального культурного наследия. В статье на основе полевых наблюдений характеризуются ареал распространения мугханы, их архитектурно-строительные особенности, композиционная планировка и состояние сохранности.

Также с использованием метода устной истории систематизируются воспоминания местных жителей, терминологические объяснения и народные интерпретации функций этих сооружений. Сравнительный анализ археологических признаков и этнографических данных позволяет обосновать хронологию мугхан и их возможную связь с погребальными традициями, дорожными контрольными пунктами или сакральными обозначениями. Результаты исследования предлагают научную основу для инвентаризации, документирования и усиления мер по охране объектов наследия в регионе.

Ключевые слова: мугхана, Ала-Букинский район, устная история, кара-китай, погребальные памятники, каменные сооружения

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Introduction

In the south-western region of Kyrgyzstan—particularly on the western flank of the Chatkal Range and in the Kok-Tash area of Ala-Buka District—ancient round (like dome) stone structures are frequently encountered. In local usage, these structures are referred to as mugkhana; their bases are reported to have an average diameter of 8–12 m and a height of approximately 4–5 m. Although scholarly debates exist regarding their origin, function, and chronology, it should be noted that the number of dedicated, comprehensive studies of mugkhanas within Kyrgyzstan remains limited.

From a terminological perspective, the designations mugkhana and mughona are reported to be used among Kyrgyz communities in the form mug tash (“mug stone”), while among Uzbek and Tajik populations in the northern part of the Fergana Valley they occur as mughona and khona-i-mug (“house of the mug”). It is also noted that the name has folk-historical explanations that link it to the mugs, who are popularly associated with fire worship and sun veneration. As one of the notable recent discoveries, a radiocarbon analysis (2017) conducted on human skeletal remains recovered from inside a mugkhana yielded a result of 292 ± 20 years, opening the possibility of relating it to the 3rd century CE. Consequently, interpreting the Kok-Tash mugkhanas not only through historical and archaeological indicators but also through oral-history materials helps to elucidate the structures functions, local perceptions, and conservation issues in greater depth—thereby confirming the relevance of this study.

Research Methods

Data collection and analysis in this article were carried out using the following approaches: Field observation and inventory (archaeological and planimetric recording). The main empirical basis of the study consisted of identifying the spatial distribution of mugkhanas in the K k-Tash area, registering the sites, assessing their state of preservation, and describing their general morphological characteristics (shape, building materials, and composition). Observations on the location of mugkhanas in different landscape settings—valley floors, slopes, watersheds, rocky outcrops, and plains—also help to interpret the possible functions of these structures.

Comparative-historical and interregional comparison. Information on the distribution of mugkhanas across the Chatkal–Fergana area, variations in their names, and explanations such as mughona and khona-i-mug was compared in order to determine the position of the Kok-Tash sites within the broader regional typology. Oral history method (interviews and recording local recollections). Recollections obtained from local informants—particularly residents such as the elder Daurbek from Bulak-Bashy village—were documented in the form of transcripts and field notes and then analyzed by grouping them into thematic blocks. These materials included folk names (e.g., “the house of the Kara-Khitai”) and functional interpretations (accounts relating to burials, nomadic movements, and the practice of interring objects together with the deceased).

As a result, combining these methods makes it possible to interpret the mugkhanas of the Kok-Tash area comprehensively—not only as historical and archaeological sites, but also as components of the cultural landscape that carry significance within local collective memory (oral history).

Discussion

First, it is necessary to clarify explanations concerning the etymology of mugkhana and its historical origins. The designation is attested in several regional ethno-linguistic variants: among local Kyrgyz it is used as mug tash, while in Uzbek and Tajik communities in the northern Fergana area it occurs as mughona and khona-i-mug. In these contexts, the component mug is associated with the Persian terms mag / mobed (a Zoroastrian priest), whereas khona/khana conveys the meaning of “house” or “dwelling.” This linguistic evidence indicates that interpreting mugkhanas as “the house of the mugs” has identifiable historical roots. This interpretation is further supported by the assumption that the Fergana area may have preserved pre-Islamic cult practices. At the same time, the study notes that the term mugkhana has been used to describe different kinds of structures: some are circular, others rectangular, and some may include multi-chamber burial complexes. This situation calls for a clearer scholarly and typological definition—in other words, whether mugkhana denotes a single, coherent type of monument, or whether it functions as a folk label applied to several distinct categories of sites remains a key issue for discussion [5].

Distribution and landscape setting. Materials collected from local informants indicate that mugkhanas are widespread across the Chatkal–Kassansay–Kök-Tash area and that their placement within the landscape is highly variable. For example, they occur on valley floors, in the lower parts of slopes, on low ridges, along watersheds, on rocky outcrops, and on plains. They may appear singly or in clusters of 4–5, and in some locations they form large concentrations of 20–50 structures. Such broad distribution strengthens the view that the function of mugkhanas may not have been limited to burial practices alone. Some sites may also have served as sacred markers, route-oriented landmarks, or communal memorial “landscape points” [7, 172].

Construction features and functional interpretation. The recorded structural characteristics—such as a circular plan, carefully fitted masonry, an internal chamber, an entrance opening, and a passageway—indicate that mugkhanas were purpose-built for a specific function. In particular, it is noted that entrance openings are often oriented toward the south and that an inner semi-spherical chamber is present. In light of these observations, the article’s main interpretive line—understanding mugkhanas as funerary structures—appears methodologically well grounded.

In the Fergana Valley and the adjacent regions, the term mughona refers to an orderly arrangement of ancient burial structures dating back to earlier centuries. These domed constructions feature a rectangular opening on the side and are built of roughly worked stones laid without mortar. Mughonas are circular, reaching up to 8 m in diameter; their walls are nearly 2 m thick, and their external height ranges from about 3 to 3.5 m.



Photo 1. Mugkhanas in Bulak-Bashy Village, Kok-Tash Rural Municipality.



Photo 2. Side view of a mugkhana in Bulak-Bashy Village, Kok-Tash Rural Municipality.

In the valley on the southern slopes of the Chatkal Range examined in this study, mugkhanas were found in particularly large numbers in the village of Kök-Tash, Ala-Buka District. When we began investigating the complex, we first collected information from local history enthusiasts. According to Daurbek aksakal, a 73-year-old resident of Bulak-Bashy village in the Kök-Tash rural municipality, a people known as the Kara-Khitai once lived in this area. They built stone mugkhanas in locations suitable for grazing livestock and near spring sources. Today, local residents refer to these structures as “the house of the Kara-Khitai.” He also noted that these people were said to be tall and to have rapidly growing fingernails, and that they lived together in large groups. If one of them passed away, they reportedly placed the body in the mugkhana in which they had been living and then built a new mugkhana for subsequent habitation. He further stated that they buried valuable possessions and household vessels together with the deceased. According to this account, because they practiced shamanism, they were believed to take their personal belongings with them into the next world [AFM, 2].

In the 1950s, the mugkhanas were investigated by M.E. Voronets [2] and V.Sprishevskii [7], and their materials were later described by B.A. Litvinskii [4]. A.Ashirov [1] provides a brief historiography of research on these stone structures and notes that published accounts do not present a uniform characterization of mugkhanas. In some works they are referred to as kurgans, whereas in others they are compared to mausoleums of northern Central Asia or even to yurts.

Views also differ regarding who built these structures. Some interpretations attribute them to the mugs (magi)—fire worshippers, astrologers, or ritual specialists—while others link them to mythical “mountain-dwelling” tribes. The same sources indicate that the label mugkhana has been applied to heterogeneous monuments: alongside small round structures, there are also rectangular buildings in plan. The rectangular examples, in particular, have a narrow passage leading inside and often contain collective and multi-layer burials. It was precisely this type that constituted the main excavation focus of M.E. Voronets [2] and V.Sprishevskii [7. 171-175]. Thus, according to the informant’s account, mugkhanas were perceived as “houses” and referred to as “the house of the Kara-Khitai”: when a person died, the body was placed in that mugkhana, after which a new mugkhana was built for continued living. Here, the “house” metaphor may reflect a folk conceptualization of the burial place—a sacralized space understood as a “house of the dead.” The same narrative also reports that utensils and

other items were interred together with the deceased. This element should be treated as a hypothesis requiring archaeological verification through stratigraphic analysis, the study of associated finds, and an assessment of burial practices.



3 Photo. General view of the Mughonas (Bulak-Bashy village, Kok-Tash ayil okmotu)

The chronology problem: 1st–3rd centuries CE or the medieval period?

The study identifies two levels of chronological indicators. On the one hand, mugkhanas are presented in general terms as “medieval” in local informants’ accounts. On the other hand, based on archaeological research, it has been suggested that they may be linked to the 3rd century CE. By bringing these lines of evidence into dialogue, the article proposes the hypothesis that at least some mugkhanas in K k-Tash may date to the 1st–3rd centuries CE.

This discrepancy is highlighted as a fundamental issue in the discussion, while it is also emphasized that dedicated studies of mugkhanas remain scarce. Therefore, at the present stage it would be premature to draw a definitive conclusion that “all mugkhanas are medieval” or, conversely, that “all of them belong to an earlier period.” The appropriate methodological approach is to divide the sites into typological groups and to expand the dating basis for each group separately—through archaeological excavations supported by associated finds, comparative architectural parallels, and well-documented assemblages.

Integrating oral history and archaeology. The main strength of oral history lies in its ability to document local memory—specifically, the names used for mugkhanas, the logic of their placement near pastures and springs, and ethno-historical narratives about the “Kara-Khitai.” However, in scholarly discussion such evidence should not substitute for empirical archaeological proof; rather, it should be treated as a source that helps generate and orient hypotheses.

For example, Daurbek aksakal’s personal account that he and his younger brother “tried digging” at one of the sites—after which they reburied what they had disturbed and recited Qur’anic prayers (bagyshtroo)—as well as his note that the interior space measures about 6.25

m², clearly indicates that these monuments require systematic archaeological excavation [3, 80]. Bulak-Bashy village is also referred to as Kuzurumsay (Kurum-say). The toponym Kuzurumsay is explained locally as meaning “stony,” “scree-covered,” or “rubble-filled.” This interpretation corresponds to the ethnonym “Kurum” mentioned in scholarly research. It is therefore difficult to doubt that the name became established in connection with the high concentration of mugkhanas attributed in local narratives to the Kara-Khitai (Black China).

Issues of preservation and management. The construction technique of mugkhanas appears to have been designed for durability under varying climatic conditions, with masonry arranged to prevent rainwater penetration. Their entrances are commonly oriented toward the south or east (toward sunrise). According to local narratives, the number of mugkhanas associated with the Kara-Khitai was once very large in this area. Over time, however, as the local population increased, many structures were damaged, lost their original form, and in some cases were replaced by livestock-related outbuildings and sheds.

Only a small number have survived, mainly on the mountain slopes above the village. In this context, the initiative—raised by local [AFM, 2] activists—to fence off and protect these sites is a commendable step toward safeguarding the historical monument [AFM, 1].



4 Photo: Mughona with mouth facing south



5 Photo: Mughona with its mouth facing east

Conclusion

Mugkhanas in the Kök-Tash area are widely distributed across the Chatkal–Kassansay–Kök-Tash zone and occur in diverse landscape settings; in some places they form clusters of up to 20–50 structures. This pattern supports viewing mugkhanas not merely as “cemeteries,” but as an important component of the cultural landscape. Their construction characteristics—large flat stone blocks, a passage leading to an internal chamber, a semi-spherical chamber, carefully fitted wall masonry, and entrance openings that are often oriented toward the south—indicate that mugkhanas were deliberately organized in accordance with a specific

function. At the same time, descriptions grouped under the labels mugkhana/mughona indicate that these terms have been applied to heterogeneous monuments—both circular and rectangular structures, some of which may include multi-chamber burial complexes—thereby underscoring the need for a clearer typological definition of the term. Earlier studies likewise used mugkhana to refer to different kinds of constructions and suggested that the rectangular variants, in particular, may contain collective and multi-layer burials.

With regard to chronology, the most reliable empirical basis identified is the 2017 radiocarbon result (292 ± 20 years, with a possible attribution to the 3rd century CE), which underscores the particular importance of this method for establishing the age of mugkhanas (Mezgin I.A., Pak N.T., Ivleva E.A., Filippov A.). However, the limited number of targeted studies of mugkhanas in Kyrgyzstan and the restricted material base indicate that it is still premature to propose a single, unified dating framework. Therefore, the next stage of research should classify the monuments into typological groups and expand the dating basis for each type separately through associated assemblages, comparative architectural parallels, and systematic archaeological excavations.

Oral-history materials—including the local name “the house of the Kara-Khitai,” the logic of building near pastures and springs, and narratives about burial and the interment of objects with the deceased—have revealed how mugkhanas are represented in local collective memory. However, in scholarly discussion these data should not be treated as direct proof; rather, they should be used as a hypothesis-refining, guiding source and integrated with archaeological verification. From a practical standpoint, given that some mugkhanas are at risk of being dismantled or repurposed for хозяйственный (economic) needs, it is necessary to strengthen measures for inventorying, documentation, and protection—including the installation of informational and warning signs, fencing of vulnerable sites, and community-based monitoring in cooperation with local residents. As emphasized in the article, such steps will help preserve the region’s tangible cultural heritage and create the conditions for future systematic archaeological research.

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