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Coin finds in the archaeological sites of Sary-Arka

I. Kazmadiyarova[a], **J. Ouellet**[b]
[a]*Margulan Institute of Archaeolog, l-Farabi Kazakh National University Almaty, Kazakhstan*
[b]*Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands*
[a]*inkarkaz@gmail.com*

Abstract. The finds of coins at the archaeological sites of Sary-Arka represent a unique phenomenon that is important for understanding the socio-economic and cultural history of the steppe region of Kazakhstan. Due to the predominance of barter and poorly systematized monetary circulation, coins are rare in this region, which gives the finds special value for scientific analysis. Coins are of particular interest because they show a functional transformation from an economic tool to a ritual symbol. The purpose of this article is to systematize coin finds from archaeological sites of Akmola, Karaganda, Pavlodar, North Kazakhstan and Ulytau regions, as well as their interpretation as elements of monetary circulation and ritual practices. The work uses standard methods of working with sources and scientific publications, including analysis and synthesis. These methods allowed us to identify the chronological, geographical and political features of the distribution of coins. An analysis of 60 coins found in archaeological sites has shown that the most common are the mints of the Uzbek and Zhanibek khans; the main mints are Sarai and Khorezm. Isolated finds of coins of the Timurids and the Bukhara Khanate indicate the preservation of cultural ties in the region in a later period. The discovery of Chagatai coins in burial complexes indicates that the ritual use of coins was not limited to the Golden Horde coinage. The purpose of the study is to trace the development of monetary circulation during the heyday of the Golden Horde and determine the role of coins in the barter system. For the first time, the article presents a consolidated collection of Sary-Arka coin finds recorded in the scientific literature. The results of the study allow us to conclude that the coins in the territories of Sary-Arka did not perform a mass economic function, which confirms the weak development of monetary circulation in conditions of the predominance of barter. At the same time, their regular discovery in funeral complexes, often in strictly defined positions, in the hands of the deceased, under the skull, indicates the transformation of coins into ritual objects. Thus, the coin lost its original economic function and acquired symbolic significance, becoming part of the funeral ritual. This reflects the syncretic nature of the cultural development of the region, in which elements of centralized statehood, such as the Golden Horde coin system, were adapted to the conditions of nomadic culture and integrated into traditional beliefs associated with the afterlife.

Keywords: Sary-Arka; archaeology; numismatics; coins; monetary circulation; mint center; barter trade; burial rite

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Монетные находки в археологических памятниках Сары-Арки

И. Казмадиярова[a], Дж. Уэллет[b]

[a]*Институт археологии имени А.Х. Маргулана, КазНУ им. Аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан*

[b]*Университет Лейдена, Лейден, Нидерланды*

Аннотация. Находки монет на археологических памятниках Сары-Арки представляют собой уникальное явление, которое имеет важное значение для понимания социально-экономической и культурной истории степного региона Казахстана. Вследствие преобладания меновой торговли и слабо систематизированного денежного обращения монеты являются редкостью для данного региона, что придает находкам особую ценность для научного анализа. Монеты представляют особый интерес, поскольку в них прослеживается функциональная трансформация от экономического средства к ритуальному символу. Цель данной статьи – систематизация монетных находок с археологических памятников Акмолинской, Карагандинской, Павлодарской, Северо-Казахстанской областей и области Ұлытау, а также их интерпретация как элементов денежного обращения и ритуальных практик. В работе использованы стандартные методы работы с источниками и научными публикациями, включая анализ и синтез. Эти методы позволили выявить хронологические, географические и политические особенности распространения монет. Проведенный анализ 60 монетных находок показал, что наиболее распространенными являются чеканы ханов Узбека и Жанибека; основными монетными дворами – Сарай и Хорезм. Единичные находки монет тимуридов и Бухарского ханства свидетельствуют о сохранении культурных связей региона в более поздний период. Обнаружение чагатайских монет в погребальных комплексах свидетельствуют о том, что ритуальное использование монет не ограничивалось золотоордынскими чеканами. Задача исследования – проследить развитие денежного обращения в период расцвета Золотой Орды и определить роль монет в системе меновой торговли. В статье впервые представлена сводная коллекция монетных находок Сары-Арки, зафиксированных в научной литературе. Результаты исследования позволяют сделать вывод, что монеты на территориях Сары-Арки не выполняли массовой экономической функции, что подтверждает слабое развитие денежного обращения в условиях преобладания меновой торговли. Вместе с тем их регулярное обнаружение в погребальных комплексах, зачастую в строго определённых позициях (в руках умершего, под черепом) свидетельствует о трансформации монет в ритуальные предметы. Таким образом, монета утратила свою изначальную экономическую функцию и приобрела символическое значение, становясь частью погребальной обрядности. Это отражает синкретичный характер культурного развития региона, в котором элементы централизованной государственности, такие, как монетная система Золотой Орды, адаптировались в условиях кочевой культуры и встраивались в традиционные верования, связанные с загробным миром.

Ключевые слова: Сары-Арка; археология; нумизматика; монеты; денежное обращение; монетный двор; меновая торговля; погребальный обряд

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Сарыарқаның археологиялық ескерткіштерінен табылған теңгелер

І. Қазмадиярова[a], **Дж. Уэллет**[b]

[a]*Ә.Х. Марғұлан ат. археология институты, Әл-Фараби ат. Қазақ Ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан*

[b]*Лейден университеті, Лейден, Нидерланд*

Андатпа. Сарыарқа археологиялық ескерткіштерінен табылған теңгелер Қазақстанның далалық аймағының әлеуметтік-экономикалық және мәдени тарихын түсіну үшін маңызы зор ерекше құбылыс болып табылады. Бұл аймақта басымдыққа ие болған айырбас саудаға негізделген және нашар жүйеленген ақша айналымы әсерінен теңгелер Сарыарқа аймағында сирек кездеседі, сондықтан табылған теңгелерге ғылыми талдау жүргізу ерекше құндылық қосады. Ескерткіштерде табылған теңгелер өзінің экономикалық құрал ретіндегі қызметінен салттық белгіге дейінгі функционалдық трансформациясымен ерекше қызығушылық тудырады. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты – Ақмола, Қарағанды, Павлодар, Солтүстік Қазақстан және Ұлытау облыстарының археологиялық ескерткіштерінен табылған теңгелерді жүйелеу және оларды ақша айналым мен салттық тәжірибелердің белгелері ретінде түсіндіру. Зерттеуде талдау және жинақтау әдістерін қамтитын дереккөздер мен ғылыми әдебиетпен жұмыс істеудің стандартты әдістері қолданылды. Бұл әдістер теңгелердің таралуының хронологиялық, географиялық және саяси ерекшеліктерін анықтауға мүмкіндік берді. Талдау Сарыарқаның археологиялық ескерткіштерінен табылған 60 теңгелерге жүргізілді. Талдау нәтижесінде ең кең таралған Өзбек хан мен Жәнібек ханның соғылған тиындары екені белгілі болды, ал теңгелерді соғылған негізгі жие кездесетін теңге сарайлары – Сарай мен Хорезм қалалары. Әмір Темір әулеті мен Бұхар хандығына тиесілі жекелеген тиындар бұл өңірдің кейінгі кезеңдерде де мәдени байланыстарын сақтағанын көрсетеді. Шағатайлық теңгелердің жерлеу кешендерінен табылуы салттық мақсатта қолданылған тиындар тек Алтын Орда теңгелерімен ғана шектелмегенін дәлелдейді. Зерттеу мақсаты – Алтын Орда дәуіріндегі ақша айналымның даму барысын зерделеу және теңгелердің айырбас сауда жүйесіндегі рөлін анықтау. Бұл мақалада Сарыарқа аумағында ғылыми әдебиеттерде тіркелген теңге табылымдарының жинақталған топтамасы алғаш рет ұсынылып отыр. Зерттеу нәтижелері Сарыарқа аумағындағы табылған теңгелердің кеңінен экономикалық қызмет атқармағанын, сонымен қатар, айырбас саудаға негізделген жағдайларда ақша айналымының нашар дамуын көрсетеді. Алайда, олардың жерлеу кешендерінде, жиі өлген адамның қолында немесе бас сүйегінің астында сияқты нақты орындарда табылуы тиындардың

салттық заттарға айналуын көрсетеді. Осылайша, тиын өзінің бастапқы экономикалық қызметін жоғалтып, жерлеу дәстүрі салтының бір бөлігіне айналып, белгілік мағына қабылдады. Бұл Алтын Орданың ақша айналымының жүйесі сияқты орталықтандырылған мемлекеттіліктің элементтері көшпелі мәдениетке бейімделіп, кейінгі әлемге байланысты дәстүрлі нанымдарға енген аймақтың мәдени дамуының синкреттік сипатын көрсетеді.
Түйін сөздер: Сары-Арқа; археология; нумизматика; теңгелер; ақша айналымы; теңге сарайы; айырбас сауда; жерлеу рәсімдері

Introduction

Archaeological sites dating from the Stone Age to the Medieval period have been preserved across the territory of Sary-Arka. The artifacts discovered during archaeological research in this area are diverse. However, numismatic material is encountered much less frequently. Due to the sustained development of barter trade, monetary circulation in Sary-Arka remained largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, the systematic discovery of stray coin finds and archaeological artifacts suggests the possible existence of some form of monetary circulation.

The first mention of coins in Saryarka appears in the writings of the Arab geographer al-Idrisi, who visited the land of the Kimaks in the 12th century. In his book Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq, al-Idrisi wrote: "The Kimaks use copper coins" (History of Kazakhstan in Arabic Sources 2010:115). This suggests that copper coins were minted in the region during the period of the Kimak Khaganate, though they likely did not enjoy widespread use.

The second stage of widespread distribution and use of coins, based on the studied materials, can be assumed to have occurred during the period of power and flourishing of the Golden Horde, when coins minted in the central cities of the Golden Horde were distributed throughout the entire territory of the Golden Horde.

In this context, our study aims to examine the geography of coin distribution, chronology, and the transformation of their function. The relevance of this research lies in the lack of comprehensive studies on coins found in the Sary-Arka region, as well as the need to reconsider the role of coinage in nomadic societies.

Despite their small metal form, coins carry significant historical information. Through their inscriptions – if the mint, issuer, and date are preserved – a coin can convey the political situation, the degree of centralization, traditions, and religious beliefs.

The object of this article is coins discovered at archaeological sites in Sary-Arka. The subject of the analysis is their ritual and cultural function within the funerary practices of nomadic communities.

Drawing upon both historical sources and archaeological evidence, this article aims to uncover the complex roles coins played in the life and death of nomadic communities in Sary-Arka during the Golden Horde period.

Methods and Materials

This study examines coin finds from the 13th to 15th centuries unearthed at burial sites across Karaganda, Pavlodar, Akmola, and North Kazakhstan regions. The research materials consist of more than 60 coins, documented in archaeological reports (1949-2020), supplemented

with published studies and the author's contextual analysis. The research question examines whether the role of coins in these burials indicates a shift from economic tools to sacred ritual items. The hypothesis posits that coins had largely lost their transactional value by this period and were reinterpreted as symbols of status and belief.

The research proceeded in several stages: classification of coins (by mint, ruler, and date), contextual analysis of their placement within graves (e.g., in the mouth, by the head, or by the hands), and comparative analysis with burial customs in neighbouring regions. The methodology combines numismatic, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches. Its novelty lies in treating coins not solely as economic artifacts but as elements of symbolic and ritual culture, reflecting intercultural influence, especially from sedentary and Islamic traditions.

Historical background

The Sary-Arka steppe, situated in central Kazakhstan, has been continuously inhabited since antiquity by nomadic and semi-nomadic populations whose economies revolved around pastoralism, mobility, and regional barter exchange. Archaeological evidence from the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, particularly from cultures such as the Begazy-Dandybai and Tasmola, demonstrates a sophisticated system of animal husbandry, metallurgy, and seasonal migration patterns that allowed these societies to thrive in the challenging steppe environment (Bendezu-Sarmiento 2021: 479-503). Settlements were typically small and impermanent, with material wealth concentrated in livestock, weapons, and prestige items, rather than in durable infrastructure or currency.

By the first millennium BCE, the region had become a key cultural corridor, connecting the Saka and later Sarmatian groups to neighbouring polities in Central Asia and the forest-steppe zones of southern Russia. However, even as these interactions intensified through warfare and diplomacy, the steppe populations retained a decentralized socio-political structure and an economy grounded in mobility and resource sharing, rather than fixed markets or coinage (Akishev & Kushaev 1963).

Pastoral nomadism in Sary-Arka operated through flexible kin-based alliances and seasonal transhumance, with social prestige tied to herding wealth and martial prowess. Trade occurred primarily through barter, often involving livestock, dairy products, hides, and crafted goods exchanged for textiles, metalwork, or grain from neighbouring settled regions. As scholars such as Khazanov (Khazanov 1994) have noted, nomadic societies typically engaged with monetized economies on the periphery, selectively adopting goods but rarely integrating coinage into everyday transactions.

By the early medieval period (7th-11th centuries), Turkic-speaking groups such as the Kypchaks had become dominant in the Sary-Arka region. While they maintained contact with Islamic and Chinese states, they continued to operate within a non-monetary framework. Written sources, such as the Hudud al-'Alam (10th century) and Gardizi's Zayn al-Akhbar (11thcentury), describe the economic life of steppe societies as being reliant on livestock and tribute rather than markets or minted currencies. Coin finds from this pre-Mongol period are virtually absent from archaeological records in central Kazakhstan, reinforcing the argument that coins did not serve any systemic economic function in the region prior to the 13th century.

Thus, before the Mongol conquest, Sary-Arka remained outside the institutional and economic

infrastructure of minted currency, despite its position between important trading civilizations. This background is essential for understanding the cultural and symbolic impact of coinage once it appeared, primarily as a result of political shifts under the Golden Horde.

The arrival of the Mongols in Central Asia in the early 13th century catalyzed a profound transformation in political structures, long-distance trade, and material culture across the Eurasian steppe. Following the fragmentation of the Mongol Empire, the Ulus of Jochi, commonly known as the Golden Horde, emerged as a dominant power in the western steppe. Under the rule of Batu Khan and his successors, the Horde consolidated vast territories, extending from the Irtysh River in the east to the Lower Volga and the Black Sea steppes in the west, including all of Central and much of Northern Kazakhstan (Allsen 2001: 41).

Crucially, the Golden Horde integrated sophisticated administrative and economic practices inherited from sedentary Islamic states, particularly the Khwarazmian and Seljuk models. One of the key instruments of governance and commerce was the introduction of a standardized monetary system. Dirhams (silver coins) and fulūs (copper coins) were minted in cities such as Sarai al-Mahrusa (the capital of the Horde), Khwarizm, Bulghar, and Bukhara. These coins were inscribed in Arabic and often bore the name of the ruling khan alongside Islamic declarations of legitimacy, such as the shahada and invocations of the caliph's authority (Davidovich 1992).

The adoption of Islamic-style coinage served multiple purposes: it facilitated the collection of taxation and tribute, supported interregional trade across the Silk Road, and reinforced the khan's legitimacy through both religious and political symbolism. Golden Horde coins have been found in significant quantities in major urban centers, caravanserais, and trading hubs across Eurasia, from Crimea to Transoxiana, attesting to their role in the commercial networks of the 13th and 14th centuries (Fedorov-Davydov 2002).

However, the diffusion of coinage into peripheral or semi-nomadic regions such as Sary-Arka was more limited and occurred in a distinct context. Here, coins did not enter into regular economic use, as the prevailing nomadic lifestyle did not require a fixed medium of exchange. Instead, coins arrived through tribute, diplomatic gifts, or as components of elite exchange, gradually acquiring new symbolic meanings. Their presence in Sary-Arka, while originating from a monetized imperial center, was filtered through local ritual and ideological systems.

By the mid-14th century, coins from the reigns of prominent Jochid rulers, including Khan Uzbek (r. 1313–1341) and Janibek Khan (r. 1342-1357), began to appear in the archaeological record of Sary-Arka, not in marketplaces or settlements, but in elite burials. These finds, often in the form of silver dirhams placed in the mouths or near the heads of the deceased, mark a profound shift in the cultural function of coinage. Rather than circulating as currency, these coins were repurposed as grave goods imbued with symbolic and perhaps spiritual significance.

This transition from transactional to ritual use reflects broader patterns of material transformation noted in studies of imperial frontiers and cultural contact zones. As Dietler (Dietler 2010: 75) and Gell (Gell 1998: 18) argue, objects that move across cultural boundaries often undergo recontextualization, becoming tokens of identity, cosmology, or status rather than economic artifacts. In Sary-Arka, coins became part of a funerary language, a material expression of hybridity where nomadic mortuary traditions intersected with the Islamicized, urban culture of the Golden Horde.

Thus, the introduction of coinage to Sary-Arka during the Golden Horde period was not a case of full monetary integration, but rather a selective and symbolic adoption. Coins retained their form and imperial iconography, but their function was radically reinterpreted within

local contexts. This phenomenon offers a unique insight into how nomadic societies navigated imperial influence and transformed external economic instruments into culturally resonant symbols of power, piety, and remembrance.

Literature Review

The earliest coins in Sary-Arka were discovered during excavations of the Zhartas burial mound group in 1949, which is attributed to the Late Nomadic period. The site is located 46 km west of Karaganda, near the mouth of the Sokur River, a tributary of the Nura. In the fifth mound, a small silk pouch containing three silver coins was discovered near the left hand of the deceased. These coins were minted in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Termez during the reign of the Jochid Khans. According to Margulan (Margulan 1959: 266), the names of the rulers had been intentionally erased, a practice attributed by Masson to the coinage under Tarmashirin Khan; the coin's dates are 1326, 1327, and 1331.

Margulan interpreted these coins as indicators of monetary circulation, suggesting that their presence reflects the emergence of craft exchange and trade in the region. A significant find was later made in 1961 at the Tasmola-4 burial mound in the Tasmola tract, 50 km northwest of Ekibastuz. Two coins were discovered: one minted by Khan Togtagu (710 AH / 1310 CE) and another by Khan Uzbek (720 AH / 1320 CE). One was found in the mouth of the deceased, the other between the fingers. Kadyrbaev and Burnasheva regarded these as evidence of active monetary use and close economic ties with urban centers in Central Asia and the Volga region during the Golden Horde era. They also noted the widespread custom across Central Asia, China, and East Turkestan of placing coins in the mouth of the deceased, a practice they believed evolved from earlier traditions of putting food in the mouth for the afterlife (Kadyrbaev & Burnasheva 1970: 52).

Coin finds continued during the modern period. In 1998, during excavations near the mausoleum of Zhoshy Khan, a 15th-century Bukhara coin was uncovered[1]. In the Auliekol necropolis (60 km northwest of Ekibastuz), 39 silver Jochid coins were found, mainly from the reigns of Uzbek and Janibek. These were recovered from graves, tombstones, and within the mouths of the deceased (Petrov and Smagulov 2018: 2).

Later discoveries include coins from three other sites. In the Zhanibek Mausoleum (Korgalzhyn District, Akmola Region), ten coins were found near the head of one burial and three within the mouth of another individual. An additional coin was discovered at the Zhoshy Khan complex, embedded in the earthen structure's northwestern area. At the medieval necropolis of Kyzyloba (Ualikhanov District, North Kazakhstan), four coins were discovered near the pelvic bones and the right femur during excavations in 2019-2020 (Petrov et al. 2021: 134).

Results

Based on numismatic material presented in the studies by Margulan (Margulan 1959), Masson (Masson 1959), Kadyrbaev&Burnasheva (Kadyrbaev & Burnasheva 1970), Petrov, Smagulov (Petrov & Smagulov 2018), Petrov, Smagulov, Kasenalin, and Esen (Petrov et al. 2021), two analytical tables have been compiled: Table 1: Distribution of Coins in Burial Monuments of Saryarka (13th–15th centuries) and Table 2: Position of Coins in Burials.

Table 1 is based on key findings such as the location and year of discovery, minting year,

mint, and the ruler's name. A total of 62 coins were found across six archaeological sites: Nura, Tasmola, Zhoshy Khan Complex, Auliekol, Janibek Mausoleum, and Kyzyloba. These coins allow for the determination of geographical, political, and chronological characteristics of their distribution.

Geographically, the coins reflect a wide territorial spread across Saryarka. The most significant number of coins – 39, or nearly 63% of the total – was discovered in the Auliekol necropolis, indicating its high social significance and elite status (Fig.1).

Chronologically, most of the coins date to the 14th century (AH 710–764, corresponding to CE 1310–1362), which aligns with the peak and subsequent decline of the Golden Horde. The most represented reigns are those of Khans Uzbek (AH 710–740 / CE 1310–1340), Janibek (AH 740–760 / CE 1340–1360), and Berdibek/Khizr (AH 758–764 / CE 1357–1362). It is likely that during the reigns of Uzbek Khan and Janibek Khan, intensive cultural and political ties were established between the region and the central cities of the Golden Horde, as evidenced by the wide range of minting locations such as Sarai al-Mahrusa, Sarai al-Jadid, Khwarezm, Bulgar al-Mahrusa, Gulistan, and Azak. Coins minted in Khwarezm and Sarai dominate the findings, pointing to a centralized monetary system within the Golden Horde.

An analysis of Table 1 shows that the names of the rulers on most coins belong to the House of Jochi, except three coins from the Zhartas burial ground, minted under Tarmashirin and associated with the Chagatai Ulus.

Coins minted in Samarkand and Bukhara serve as evidence of the continued connections between Sary-Arka and Central Asia in the post-Golden Horde period.

The illegibility of some coins may be attributed to corrosion, burial-related damage, or, as Margulan noted (Margulan 1959: 259), deliberate removal of the ruler's name. This suggests a potential intentional devaluation of the coin as an economic instrument and its transformation into a ritual object.

The concentration of Golden Horde coins in burials, the diversity of mints and ruler names, all indicate that these coins served ritualistic and status-related purposes after spreading from the central cities of the Golden Horde. Coin findings in Sary-Arka provide evidence of a centralized system within the Golden Horde and economic integration between nomadic and sedentary societies. This integration did not become part of the nomadic economy but instead took on a religious function.

The analysis of coin placement in burials reveals a ritual practice involving the use of coins during interment, indicating a transformation of their function – from a means of payment to a ritual element within the burial inventory. The discovered coins were recorded in four leading positions: near the gravestones (34 specimens), near the head (10 specimens), inside the oral cavity (5 specimens), and near the hands and pelvic bones (8 specimens).



4 – Auliekol, 5 Janibek Mausoleum, 6 – Kyzyloba. (Compiled by the authors based on: Margulan 1959; Kadyrbaev&Burnasheva 1970; Petrov&Smagulov 2018; Petrov et al. 2021).

Discussion

Since ancient times, the territory of Sary Arka has been inhabited by nomadic tribes whose economies were based mainly on barter. This system underwent a brief shift with the rise of the Golden Horde, which introduced a more structured form of monetary circulation. The Golden Horde controlled a vast territory stretching west of the Irtysh River, including northern Semirechye, all of Central, Northern, and Western Kazakhstan, extending to the Lower Volga region and beyond – "to the limit where the hooves of Mongolian horses reached" (History of Kazakhstan 1996: 445).

Coins discovered in the Sary-Arka region date predominantly to the 13th–14th centuries and are mainly attributed to the coinage of Golden Horde rulers. The chronological concentration and geographical distribution of these coins suggest that they were minted during the peak of the Golden Horde's power. Their presence indicates a relatively advanced stage of monetary circulation in this period. These coins reached Sary-Arka, where monetary exchange had previously been limited, through the expansion of the Horde's economic and political influence.

Following the decline of the Golden Horde, however, coins lost their function as a medium of exchange and began to serve ritual purposes. They were incorporated into burial practices as decorative or symbolic objects. The positioning of coins – in the mouth, near the hands, or by the head of the deceased – suggests their cultic significance. Drawing parallels with burial practices in Central Asia, China, and East Turkestan, scholars propose that coins may have served as "provisions for the soul" in the afterlife (Kadyrbayev and Burnasheva 1970). Some coins with perforations were likely used as amulets or as elements of body adornment.

Margulan links these burial rituals with the emergence of class distinctions and the early

commodification of money (Margulan 1959: 259).

Jochid coins found in burials are not limited to the Sary-Arka region but are also present in western Kazakhstan. Of particular significance for this study are the coin finds from the Mokrinsky I burial ground, located in the Zhanakala (Zhangalinsky) District of West Kazakhstan Region. During archaeological excavations in 2008, twenty silver coins dating to the Jochid period were discovered in five burials. This finding extends the known geographical distribution of coins in burial contexts. The Jochid coins were placed in typical ritual positions similar to those observed at archaeological sites in Sary-Arka: on the right hand, near the left elbow, beneath the skull, at the temple, and directly in the mouth of the deceased (Pachkalov 2009: 276).

The placement of coins in the mouth and near the hands is likely rooted in religious beliefs. Ethnographer Oshanov, based on oral accounts, argues that placing coins in the mouth of the deceased is not a traditional nomadic practice, but rather a custom introduced from sedentary cultures. In contrast, nomads traditionally equipped the dead for the afterlife with weapons and a horse.

Oshanov notes that leaving coins at a gravesite – either on the tombstone or within the burial – is a relatively recent innovation influenced by Islamic traditions. Coins were often left for the mullah who conducted the funeral or for the person reciting the Quran. Today, similar customs persist, with coins or money wrapped in cloth and left at gravesites. A passerby may take the coin after offering a prayer for the deceased.

Oshanov also emphasizes that perforated coins were valued not as currency, but for their material, often silver or light metals. Silver, believed to have purifying properties, was commonly used in daily life. For instance, newborns were bathed in water containing silver coins on their 40th day. Among Kazakhs, silver was historically more valued than gold, which explains the continued ritual use of coins even during the Soviet period.

A renewed phase of monetary circulation occurred under the rule of Abulkhair Khan. According to Tarikhi Abulkhairkhani by Kukhistani, Abulkhair Khan took control of the Ordu Bazaar, capital of Deshti-Kipchak, and had coins minted in his name alongside the recital of the khutbah (Kukhistani 1969: 155). However, Davidovich cautions against taking such statements at face value. She argues that rhetorical mentions of coinage and khutbah do not necessarily imply actual minting: “if the sources emphasize that the coins were minted on behalf of such and such a person, this does not mean that the coins were minted” (Davidovich 1992: 127-128).

Given that most coins in Sary-Arka are found in burial contexts, it is essential to consider Blackburn’s observation that coins discovered in graves cannot be relied upon to accurately reconstruct historical monetary systems or chronologies, as they may have entered the burial long after their period of circulation (Blackburn 2005: 13).

Conclusion

Based on the available evidence, it can be concluded that coin circulation in Sary-Arka reached its peak during the Golden Horde period, when structured monetary practices briefly penetrated this traditionally barter-based nomadic region. The introduction of minted coins from centers such as Sarai, Bukhara, and Khwarizm marked a significant but short-lived phase of monetization, linked to the broader administrative and economic systems of the Jochid Ulus.

However, as the political cohesion and economic infrastructure of the Golden Horde

fragmented, coins in Sary-Arka lost their transactional function. Instead, they assumed symbolic and sacred roles, particularly within elite funerary contexts. By the time they were incorporated into burial inventories, placed in the mouth, beside the head, or near tombstones, coins were no longer markers of commerce but objects of ritual, linked to beliefs about the afterlife and influenced by sedentary Islamic traditions.

This article has surveyed over 60 coin finds across key archaeological sites in Karaganda, Pavlodar, Akmola, and North Kazakhstan, spanning the 13th to 15th centuries. Through numismatic classification, contextual burial analysis, and comparative ethnographic research, it demonstrates that these coins were not instruments of daily economic exchange but rather functioned as ritual tokens, status symbols, or cultural imports.

The study draws upon early Soviet-era excavations (Margulan, Kadyrbaev, Masson), modern fieldwork (Petrov, Smagulov, Yesen), and theoretical perspectives from material culture and ritual economy. It contributes to the growing body of literature that challenges economic determinism in archaeological numismatics, highlighting the importance of viewing artifacts within their full cultural and symbolic context.

Thus, the presence of coins in the region should be understood less as evidence of a widespread monetary economy and more as indicators of intercultural exchange, symbolic communication, and the emergence of social hierarchies. The coin finds of Sary-Arka are therefore invaluable not only for the field of numismatics but also for broader archaeological and ethnographic interpretations of ritual, identity, and cultural transformation in medieval Central Asia.

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Appendix

Table 1 – Distribution of coins from Burial Sites in Sary-Arka (13th –15th centuries)

(Compiled by the authors based on: Margulan 1959; Kadyrbaev&Burnasheva 1970; Petrov&Smagulov 2018; Petrov et al. 2021).

Place of discovery	Year of discovery	Quantity	Chronology (the year of the Hijra)	Minting Center	Ruler
Nura	1949	1	727	Samarkand	Tarmashirin
Nura	1949	1	726	Bukhara	Tarmashirin
Nura	1949	1	730	Termez	Tarmashirin
Tasmola	1961	1	710	Sarai-al-Mahrusa	Togtagu
Tasmola	1961	1	the end of the 20th year of the 14th century	Sarai-Berke	Uzbek
Zhoshy Khan Complex	1998	1	15th century	Bukhara Coin	

Auliekol	2015	1	731-733	Bulgar-al-Mahrusa	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	722	Sarai-al-Mahrusa	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	2	746-478	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	750	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	2	706	Khwarizm	Toktubek
Auliekol	2015	2	Missing	Khwarizm	Toktubek
Auliekol	2015	1	717	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	71(...)	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	733	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	743	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	743	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	5	744	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	747	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	750	Gulistan	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	Missing	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	759	Khwarizm	Berdibek
Auliekol	2015	1	75(8-9)	Khwarizm	Berdibek
Auliekol	2015	1	760	Khwarizm	Berdibek
Auliekol	2015	1	(76)1	Khwarizm	Kulpa
Auliekol	2015	1	707	Khwarizm	Toktubek
Auliekol	2015	1	70(6/7?)	Khwarizm	Toktubek
Auliekol	2015	1	718	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	731	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	1	7(…)7	Khwarizm	Uzbek
Auliekol	2015	3	745	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	Missing	Khwarizm	Janibek
Auliekol	2015	1	758	Khwarizm	Khizr
Auliekol	2015	3	762	Khwarizm	Khizr
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	2	710	Sarai-al-Mahrusa	Toktogu
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	714-721	Sarai	Uzbek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	740	Sarai	Uzbek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	(737-740)	Sarai	Uzbek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	7(45-49)	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek

Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	(747-748)	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	753	Gulistan	Janibek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	Unclear	Gulistan	Nowruz Khan
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	764	Azak	Abdullah Khan
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	(74)7	Sarai al-Jadid	Janibek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	752	Gulistan	Janibek
Janibek Mausoleum	2020	1	761	Gulistan	Khizr
Zhoshy Khan Complex	2020	1	785	Samarkand	Amir Timur
Kyzyloba	2019-2020	1	(714-721)	(Sarai)	Uzbek
Kyzyloba	2019-2020	1	734	(Sarai)	Uzbek
Kyzyloba	2019-2020	1	737	(Sarai)	Uzbek
Kyzyloba	2019-2020	1	734-737	(Sarai)	Uzbek

Table 2 – Position of coins in burials

(Compiled by the authors based on: Margulan 1959; Kadyrbaev&Burnasheva 1970; Petrov&Smagulov 2018; Petrov et al. 2021)

	In the oral cavity	Near the arms and pelvic bones	Next to the head	On the tombstone
Number	5	8	10	34

Notes

1. Information about the Bukhara coin. Archive of the A.Kh. Margulan Institute of Archaeology. F.11, in.39, d.479.

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Information about authors

Inkar T. Kazmadiyarova – Researcher, Margulan Institute of Archaeology, doctoral student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Dostyk av. 44, 050010, Almaty, Kazakhstan, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0319-0108, inkarkaz@gmail.com

Jonathan Ouellet – Doctoral Student, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands, Van Steenis Gebouw, Einsteinweg 2, 2333 CC Leiden, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5394-4987, j.m.ouellet@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Авторлар туралы мәліметтер

Іңкәр Тұрсынғалиқызы Қазмадиярова – ғылыми қызметкер, Ә.Х. Марғұлан атындағы Археология институты, докторант, Әл-Фараби атындағы ҚазҰУ. 050001, Достық даңғ., 44, 050010, Алматы, Қазақстан, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0319-0108, inkarkaz@gmail.com
Джонатан Уэллет – докторант, Лейден университеті, Нидерланд, Ғимарат Ван Стеениса, Эйнштейнвег 2, 2333 CC, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5394-4987, j.m.ouellet@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Сведения об авторах

Инкар Турсунгалиевна Казмадиярова – научный сотрудник, Институт археологии им. А.Х. Маргулана, докторант КазНУ им. аль-Фараби, пр. Достык, 44, 050001 Алматы, Казахстан, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0319-0108, inkarkaz@gmail.com
Джонатан Уэллет – докторант, Лейденский университет, Нидерланды. Здание Ван Стеениса, Эйнштейнвег 2, 2333 CC. https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5394-4987, j.m.ouellet@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Contributions by authors

I. Kazmadiyarova – developed the concept of the article, carried out the collection and analysis of archaeological and numismatic data. Prepared the sections: “Introduction”, “Methods and Materials”, “Literature Review”, “Results”, “Discussion”, “Conclusion”.
J. Ouellet – made a significant contribution to the development of the article’s idea, justification of its structure and formation of the concept. Prepared the sections: “Historical Background”, “Discussion”, “Conclusion”.

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