

Kurgans of the Eastern Kugitang Piedmonts. Preliminary Report on Excavations in Seasons 2015–2017

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ABSTRACT

In its three field seasons between 2015 and 2017 the Czech-Uzbekistani archaeological mission has focused on the area of the eastern Kugitang piedmonts, especially the Paskhurt Valley (southern Uzbekistan) in order to examine its historical cultural development. As one of the simultaneous activities, excavations of various selected kurgans and kurgan-like features, which were newly detected in the area have been undertaken. Special attention was paid to the connection between kurgans and settlement sites nearby, particularly those of the Yaz I period (Early Iron Age Period, late 2nd millennium BC). Three kurgans of the Yaz I period have been uncovered, however their purpose was not identified with a sepulchral use, but rather with a ritual one. Besides the excavation of – in local terms – larger kurgans at the site of Kayrit 1, lesser simple stone structures were also excavated.

KEYWORDS

Kurgans; Yaz I Culture; Central Asia; Bactria.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2014 the Czech-Uzbekistani archaeological mission has focused on research on the historical cultural landscape in the northern part of the Paskhurt Valley in the eastern part of the Kugitang foothills (Sherabad District, southern Uzbekistan; **Fig. 1**). Besides a considerable number of settlement sites (STANČO 2016) almost 400 various simple stone structures have also been discovered and documented. Up to 2017, 122 of them were preliminarily classified as kurgans, i.e. burial mounds made of stones or soil commonly associated with nomadic peoples inhabiting the Eurasian steppe zone.¹ These structures, occurring isolated or in clusters of five to fifteen features, were examined predominantly by non-destructive methods; three of them were, however, excavated in the seasons 2014–2016. The very first of these kurgans was uncovered in the hinterland of the village of Kayrit in 2014; its excavation was the main goal of the season (STANČO *et al.* 2014). In the seasons 2015 and 2016 two other kurgans were excavated. These excavations were undertaken as subsidiary activities taking place simultaneously to the dig of the newly discovered early Iron Age site of Burgut Kurgan (KYSELA *et al.* 2017) in the close vicinity of which the studied structures were situated. Subsequent to these activities and starting in the 2017 season (HAVLÍK – STANČO – HAVLÍKOVÁ 2017) an initiated research subproject focused specifically on the complex research of these structures in terms of both surface survey and excavation of selected features. This report presents the prelim-

1 In the case of the studied structures, no connection with sepulchral use has been detected. A more correct term than 'kurgan' could be 'kurgan-like feature'. However, in this report we use for sake of simplicity the term 'kurgan'.

inary results of the excavations of the kurgans and a few other features uncovered by the Czech-Uzbekistani archaeological mission in the seasons 2015, 2016 and 2017 at the sites of Kayrit 1, Kayrit 3 and Zarabag-West.

Based on their spatial proximity to settlements of the Yaz I period (2nd half of the second millennium BC) an initial hypothesis was formulated, that the examined kurgans may belong to the same period. This hypothesis was confirmed in the case of some of the excavated structures (see below). The dating of other kurgans in the studied area (i.e. in the vicinity of the nowadays villages of Kayrit, Zarabag, Kampyrtepa and Karabag) as well as the function of these features, however, still remain unclear.

Despite several surveys undertaken in the region by various expeditions preceding the research of the Czech-Uzbekistani team, these features were left unmentioned. Those expeditions usually focused on the detection and excavation of isolated sites such as Dabil Kurgan or Gish Tepa regardless of their environs and minor sites in their surroundings (RTVELADZE 1974; MOKROBORODOV 2007; SOLOVYEV 2013). Since 2014, the Czech-Uzbekistani archaeological mission led by L. Stančo and Sh. Shaydullaev has researched the area in a new way paying attention to the historical landscape as a whole, including lesser sites and other anthropogenic features (STANČO 2016; AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2016; AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2017).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main aim of the ongoing project is to evaluate data on the newly detected kurgan clusters and to combine them with the results of other parallel research in order to reveal the cultural development of the studied micro-region and the relations between the kurgans and other features within the landscape, especially in the context of local Yaz I culture. Mapping, description and spatial analysis of the structures is the main aspect of the non-destructive part of the project (for details see HAVLÍK – STANČO – HAVLÍKOVÁ 2017). However, considering the current state of research only excavations of selected structures can clarify the issues of the dating and purpose of these kurgans in the research area.

The features to be excavated were selected based on their different characteristics (size, shape, construction, position in the landscape etc.) in order to deduce the nature of corresponding structure type. All features were uncovered using standard excavation methods and documented by both drawing and photography. Photogrammetries and 3D-models were made to highlight and better understand construction details as well as for a better final presentation of the results. In all possible cases we took soil samples in order to enable a flotation and phosphate test.²

RESEARCH AREA

The research area (**Fig. 1**) is situated in the steppe belt of the eastern Kugitang piedmont, in the north-western part of the Sherabad District (Surkhandarya Province, Uzbekistan), to the north of Paskhurt village, i.e. in the vicinity of the present-day villages of Kayrit, Karabag, Zarabag and Kampyrtepa. The local steppe landscape is characterized by a semi-arid continental climate with great differences in temperature both between summer and winter and day and night, however small oases offer fertile well-watered land. The humdrum steppe surface is often disrupted by

2 For the majority of these analyses, the results were not yet available during redaction of this document.

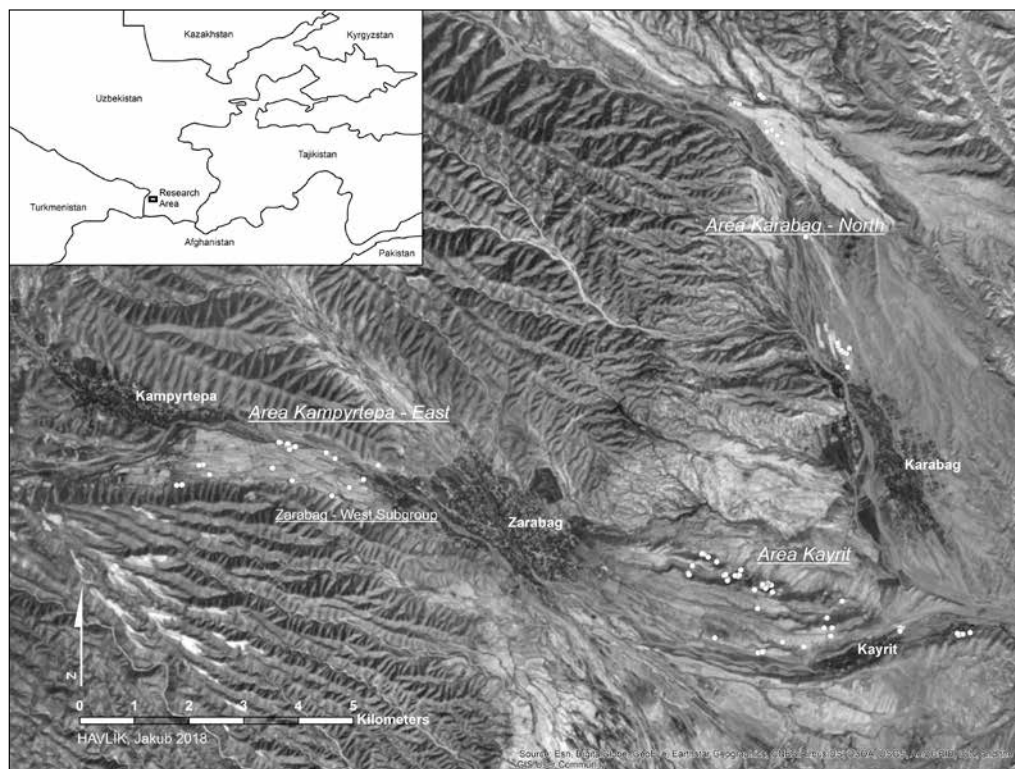


Fig. 1: Distribution of kurgans in the research area including kurgan clusters not mentioned in the text.



Fig. 2: Distribution of kurgans in the area of Kayrit; clusters Kayrit 1, 3 and 4.

dry river beds of seasonal streams. Flat plateaus between these are of particular interest to our mission. The altitude of the research area reaches 800–1,200 m.a.s.l. Its natural western border forms the Kugitang mountain range with its highest peak being Airi Baba (3,139 m.a.s.l.).

KURGANS EXCAVATED WITHIN THE CLUSTER OF KAYRIT 1

The cluster Kayrit 1 (**Fig. 2**) is situated on a flat plateau over the dry river bed of Shalkan rising roughly westwards in the direction of Zarabag and the Kugitang mountains. The plateau disrupted only by several seasonal gullies is delimited by the valley of Shalkan to the south and the wide valley between the villages of Zarabag and Karabag to the north. Sixteen kurgans are in most cases sparsely distributed on the plateau over an area of ca. 195 ha standing individually or forming small groups without any obvious pattern. On the same plateau, in close proximity to the studied features, there are also the Yaz I period sites of Burgut Kurgan (Kayrit III), Kayrit IV, and Kayrit Tepa (Kayrit VI), as well as the Kushan-Sasanian period site of Kayrit IIa (STANČO 2016, 83). The studied structures can be divided into two categories; ten of them are of larger dimensions (d. 8–12 m, height ca. 0.5 m) and six are smaller (d. 2–3 m, height up to 0.35 m). Representatives of both types were examined by excavations.

KURGAN K_01_007

This – in local terms – larger kurgan (9.4×9.8 m, h. 1.4 m; **Figs. 3–4**) is situated on a flat plateau over a dry river bed approximately 850 meters to the west of Kayrit Tepa, within view of neighbouring kurgans K_01_006 to the east and K_01_017 to the south-west.



Fig. 3: Kurgan K_01_007 before excavations (photo by H. Havlíková).

The almost circular structure seemed to be well preserved except for the gradual descent on the southern side and the noticeable circular (ca. 2×2 m) depression in the central part, later confirmed as secondary disruption. The whole construction (K_01_007_002) was made of carefully laid unworked stones (d. up to 30 cm), as was observable specifically on the northern side of the kurgan (Fig. 5).

The excavation started with the clearing of the topsoil and the photographical documentation of the structure. We carefully removed the construction covering the pit (K_01_007_006) filled with stones (K_01_007_005) in the central part, just beneath the mentioned depression. There was no sign of any inner construction – such as a circle or another feature – within the kurgan, which is a compact mound lying on the original historical surface of the terrain (K_01_007_004). The historical surface level beneath the kurgan was disrupted by a roughly oblong northwest-southwest oriented pit. The pit was narrowing stepwise towards the bottom, measured 1.8×1.9 m in the top part and 1.1×0.7 m at the bottom and at its deepest point was ca. 1.5 m deep, measured from the bottom of the mound. The filling of the pit (K_01_007_005) seemed to be composed of stones originally used in the construction of the kurgan.

In the eastern part of the structure – among the stones – was found a considerable number of tiny bone fragments. Preliminary analysis by the anthropologist R. L. Kinaston suggests that these remains could be of both animal and human origin. In the filling of the pit, there were found eleven sherds belonging to three vessels (Fig. 21:1–2) dated by Sh. Shaydullaev to the 12th century AD.

The presented data suggest that the examined kurgan was affected by a secondary intervention, probably by medieval grave robbers, who likely dug the pit beneath the kurgan as well. This digging may have destroyed the original contexts, although no traces of any archaeologically noticeable phenomena such as burial etc. were found beneath the rest of the mound. Also, the pit in the subsoil maintains throughout its depth the same slightly irregular and progressively narrowing contour and at one point suddenly stops without any change of its shape. The situation illustrates exemplarily the state of mind of a treasure hunter starting his pit generously, then focalising in order to save energy and finally giving up in frustration after having dug through a meter and a half of hard natural subsoil without a single find. Therefore, it is also possible, that originally there was no burial or other feature at all.

As to the actual function of the mound intended by its creators, the most plausible interpretation seems to be that of a 'cenotaph-kurgan' (e.g. LITVINSKY 1972; KROLL 2000) or another ritual rather than a practical purpose.

The kurgan K_01_007 is in its size and structure very similar to kurgans K_01_001, K_01_006, K_01_015 and K_01_017,³ and it is highly probable that these features belong mutually to each other in terms of space and chronology. The kurgan K_01_001 located ca. 940 m away was excavated by Stančo in 2014 (STANČO *et al.* 2014). The results of the excavation, however, were basically the same and gave us no better clue for dating the kurgan group. In the filling of the pit, there was ceramic material probably belonging to the Sapalli period (1st half of 2nd millennium BC) or to its tradition, but also pottery and iron implements dated to the Middle Ages (most likely 12th century), and a whetstone of low chronological sensitivity (STANČO *et al.* 2014, 34). Constructions of this sort and size are otherwise characteristic of Central Asian kurgans of nomadic tribes dated between the end of the first millennium BC and the beginning of the Common Era (e.g. LITVINSKIY 1972, tab. 72–73; MANDELSHTAM 1975, fig. 21; LITVINSKIY 1986, Abb. 12–13).

3 Kurgans K_01_002, K_01_003 and K_01_004 (HAVLÍK – STANČO – HAVLÍKOVÁ 2017, 164–166) seem to be similar in size and shape too. All these features were, however, recently disrupted, and thus it is impossible to compare them properly with others.

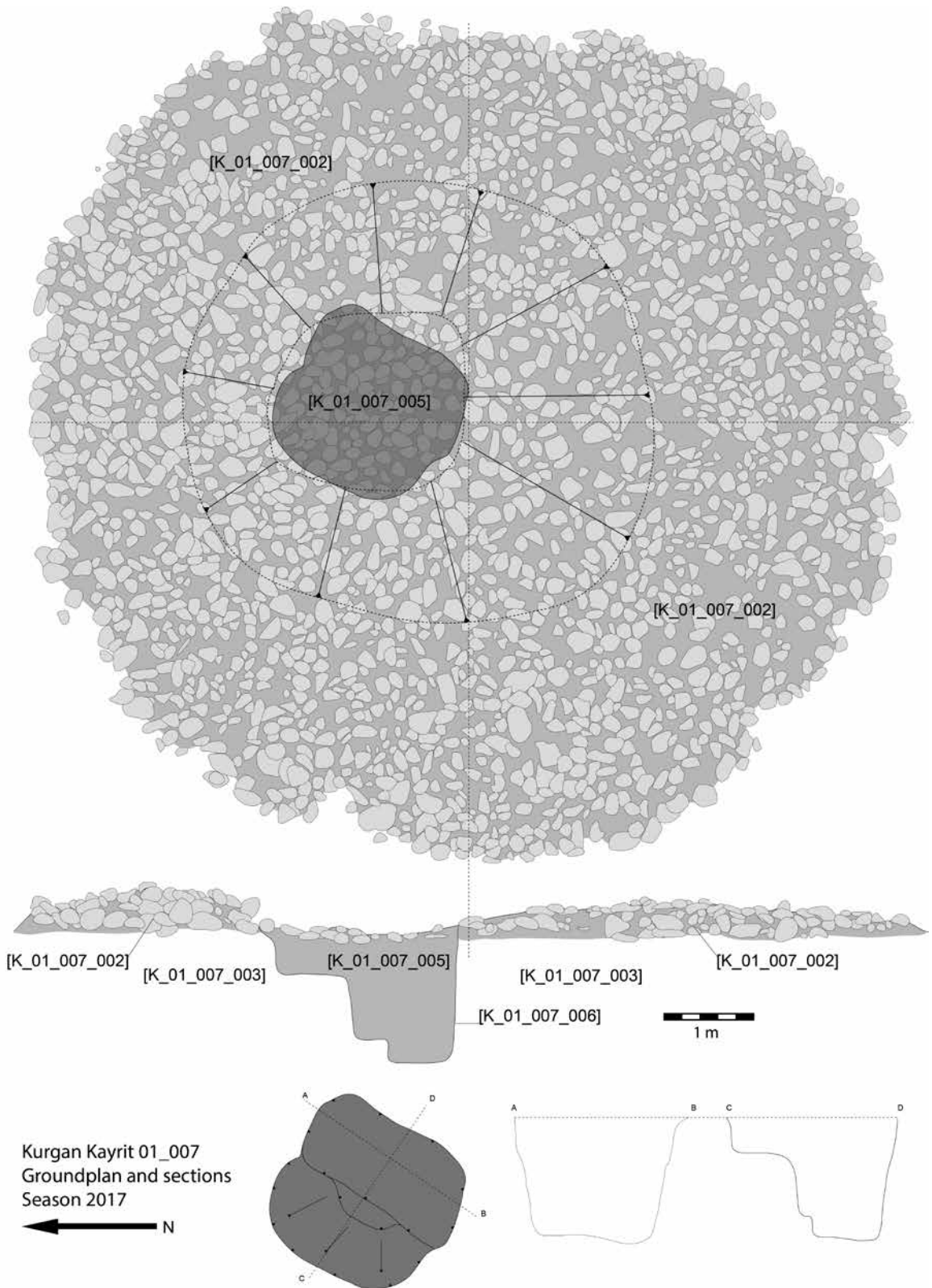


Fig. 4: Kurgan K_01_007, ground plan and sections (drawing by T. Votroubeková, H. Havlíková and J. Havlík).



Fig. 5: Kurgan K_01_007 during excavations (SW part of the mound already removed). View from the north (photo by H. Havlíková).

KURGAN K_01_008

The kurgan K_01_008 (**Fig. 6**) lies in the immediate vicinity (a dozen meters) of the Yaz I settlement of Burgut Kurgan excavated by the Czech-Uzbekistani team in 2015–2017. The excavation of the kurgan which took place in 2016 was meant to gain basic information on the kurgan itself but also to clarify the issue of its potential (chronological? functional?) relation to the settlement.

The kurgan was oval with the longer axis oriented NW–SE and its dimensions before excavation were 6.8×6.9 m. After removing the surface layer K01_008_001 it became clear that the upper construction (K01_008_002) is of heterogeneous structure – whereas in the northwestern half the mound body was made up of small size thickly packed stones, they were much rarer in the southern and eastern half where they were mixed with a much greater amount of earth. In the center of the southern part, the stones were missing completely, and a crater seemed to gape there apparently entirely devoid of stones. Although resembling the secondary interventions identified in other kurgans (cf. above), this surface void did not leave traces such as cuts on the level of the original ground surface. Either it is a later treasure hunter pit abandoned at the right moment, or this void means that already during the kurgan construction there were no stones here. The following will show that either of these interpretations – or a combination of both – are possible.

Most of the upper construction K01_008_002 was carefully removed without the identification of any remarkable features within it. Cleaning of the area beyond the north-eastern perimeter of the kurgan, however, brought to light an area irregularly paved with patches of small size stones K01_008_003. Spread among these stones were sherds (**Fig. 23:1–4**) dated by Sh. Shaydullaev preliminarily to the Yaz I period, recalling the situation excavated the previous year in K01_016 (cf. below). Beneath this level a series of tiny holes was detected (K01_008_005/006; K01_008_007/008; K01_008_009/010; K01_008_013/014) very similar to each other in terms of size and character (d. 20–40 cm, depth about 10 cm). Their identification

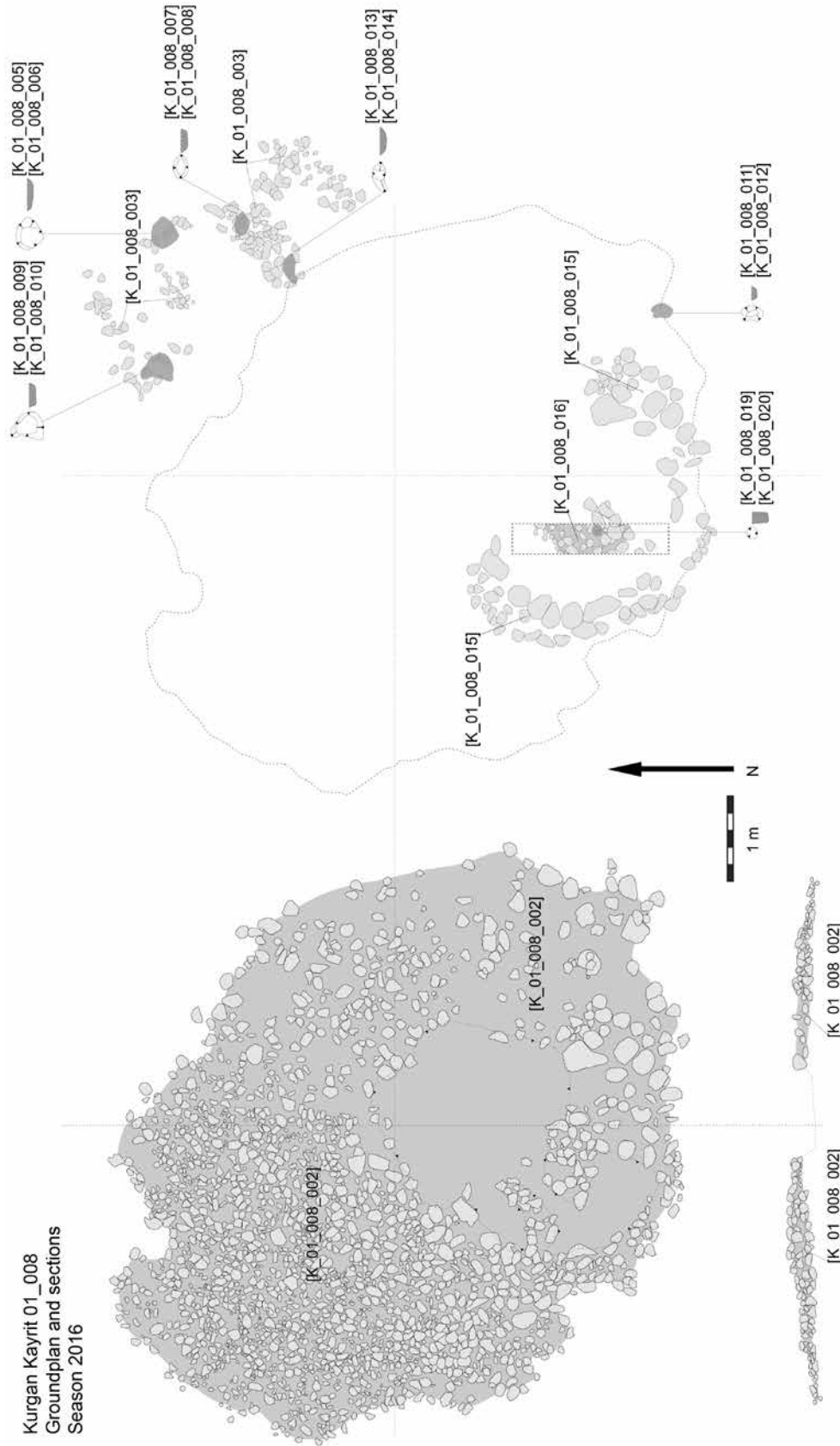


Fig. 6: Kurgan K_01_008, ground plan and sections. In the dashed rectangle are shown layers on a lower stratigraphic level (drawing by T. Votrubecková, P. Cejnarová and J. Havlík).

was facilitated by the fact that they were all filled-in with identical light grey powdery ashy earth. Alerted by this discovery we proceeded with extreme caution in the excavation of the rest of the kurgan. Only a single similar structure was, however, detected under the actual mound – it was the pit Ko1_008_011/012 at its very southern margin, in this case without the ashy fill.

After removing the loose stones, a clear structure showed in the southern part of the kurgan – a circle of medium size stones Ko1_008_015 (**Fig. 7**; d. 3.5 m, stones d. up to 40 cm). A small concentration of stones (Ko1_008_016) protruding in the middle of this circle was soon recognized as the peak of a stone heap rather than the top of a hole infill. In order to keep track of the complex situation, we cut the area in half in a north-south direction. Ko1_008_016 was found to be a miniature mound (ca. 120 cm in diameter, 40 cm high) heaped up on a level of stones Ko1_008_018 covering in its center yet another small hole (Ko1_008_019/020) similar in size and form to those identified further north but filled in only with a few small stones⁴ (**Fig. 8**). Some large size Yaz I sherds were collected on this level.⁵

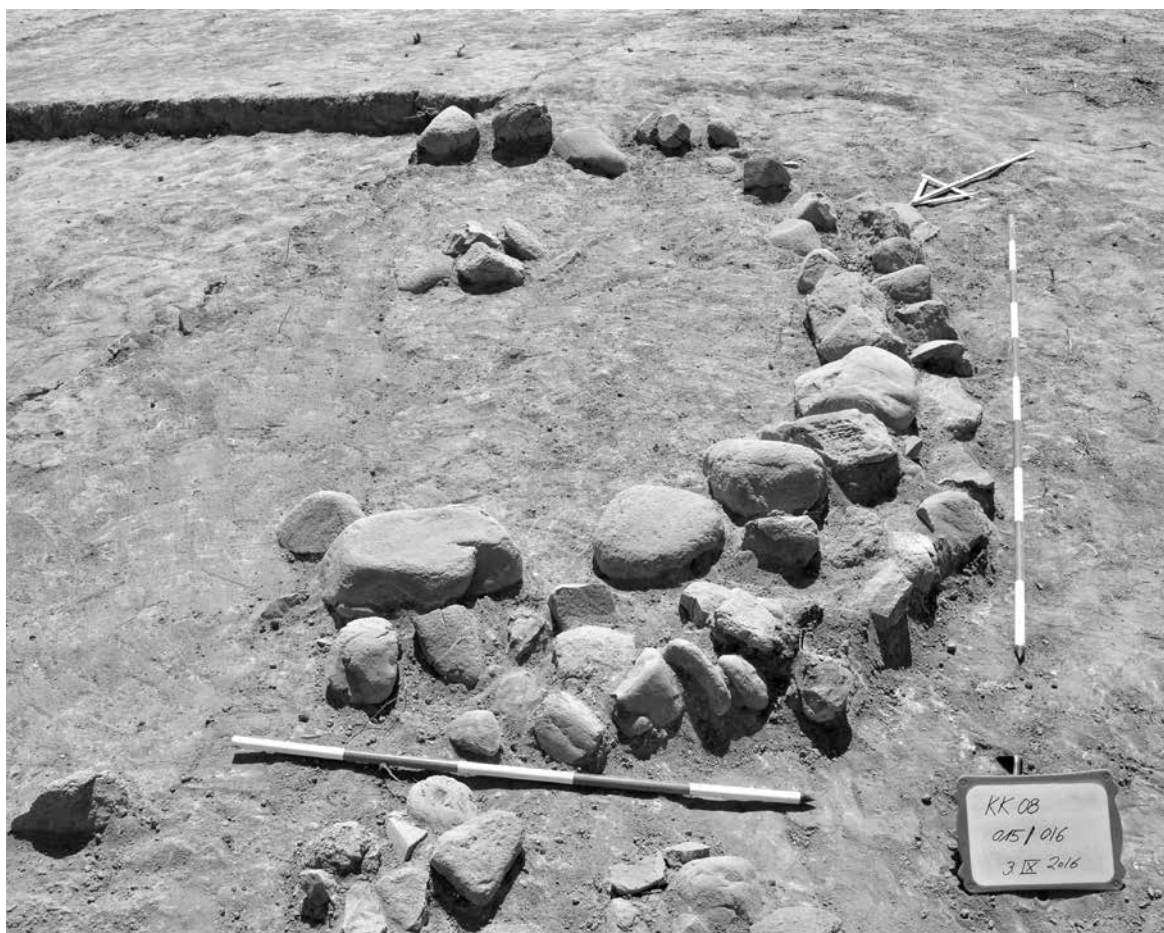


Fig. 7: Kurgan K_01_008, stone circle Ko1_008_015 (photo by J. Kysela).

⁴ The fills of all the excavated holes were sieved and preserved for further analyses.

⁵ In total, within this kurgan, there has been collected more than 120 pottery sherds of multiple vessels dated preliminarily to the Yaz I period. Some of them are decorated with red brown monochrome paint, on a few sherds occurs textile imprints, one sherd is incised (see **Figs. 22–23**).

This was apparently the earliest structure in the area. Several loose medium size stones (K01_008_021) on the same level suggest that already this small mound could have been hypothetically circumscribed inside a stone circle of which only a little remained. Only when this small mound was buried by wind-driven deposits, was its position marked on the surface by the stone circle K01_008_015 and only subsequently the greater mound K01_008_002 was heaped up around and north of this structure. The relation of the series of small holes covered by stone paving north-east of the kurgan to the rest of the uncovered structures is uncertain and we cannot be sure whether they are contemporary with the horizon of the small mound, with that of the stone circle or with the mound which ultimately covered all of these.

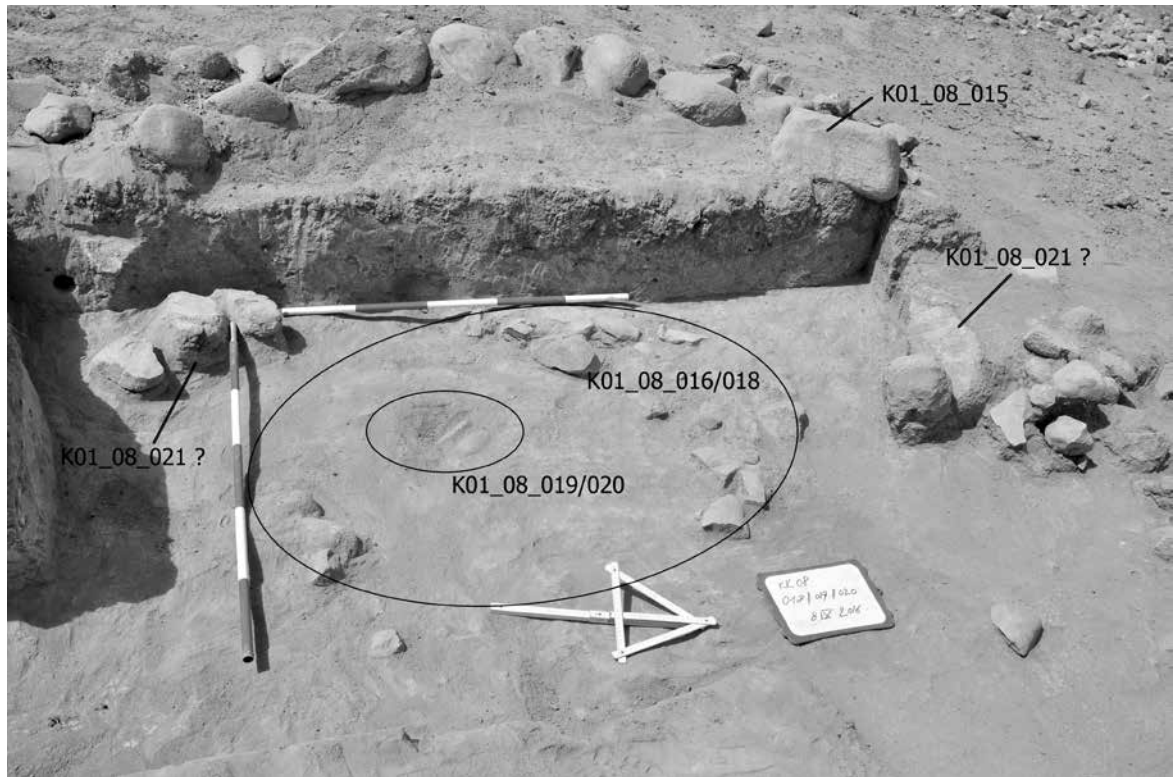


Fig. 8: Kurgan K_01_008, layers beneath the upper construction (photo by J. Kysela).

KURGAN K_01_014

This kurgan (**Fig. 9**) is placed on the edge of the plateau not far (ca. 380 m) from Burgut Kurgan in the settlement's view. It was excavated in 2017 concurrently to the excavations at Burgut Kurgan.

This smaller kurgan of a rather oblong shape was well preserved and did not indicate any disruption. After cleaning, however, the construction (K01_014_002; 6.10×4.50 m, h. 0.45 m) proved to be of a more irregular shape with many stones having fallen off the mound. Between the stones were found a few sherds of medieval pottery. Other reportedly medieval sherds⁶

⁶ In total eighteen body sherds belonging to three vessels have been found in the stone structure; the sherds were dated to the 12th century by Sh. Shaydullaev.

were found also beneath the stones of the outer part of the construction, which may indicate some secondary activities related to the mound, though not intentional disruptions, as in the case of K_01_007.

On closer examination of the cleaned construction surface, an inner ring (K01_014_004) became visible within the construction, which probably delimited the original extent of the kurgan, or it may suggest its earlier phase. This feature was only partly detected in the construction (**Figs. 9–10**).

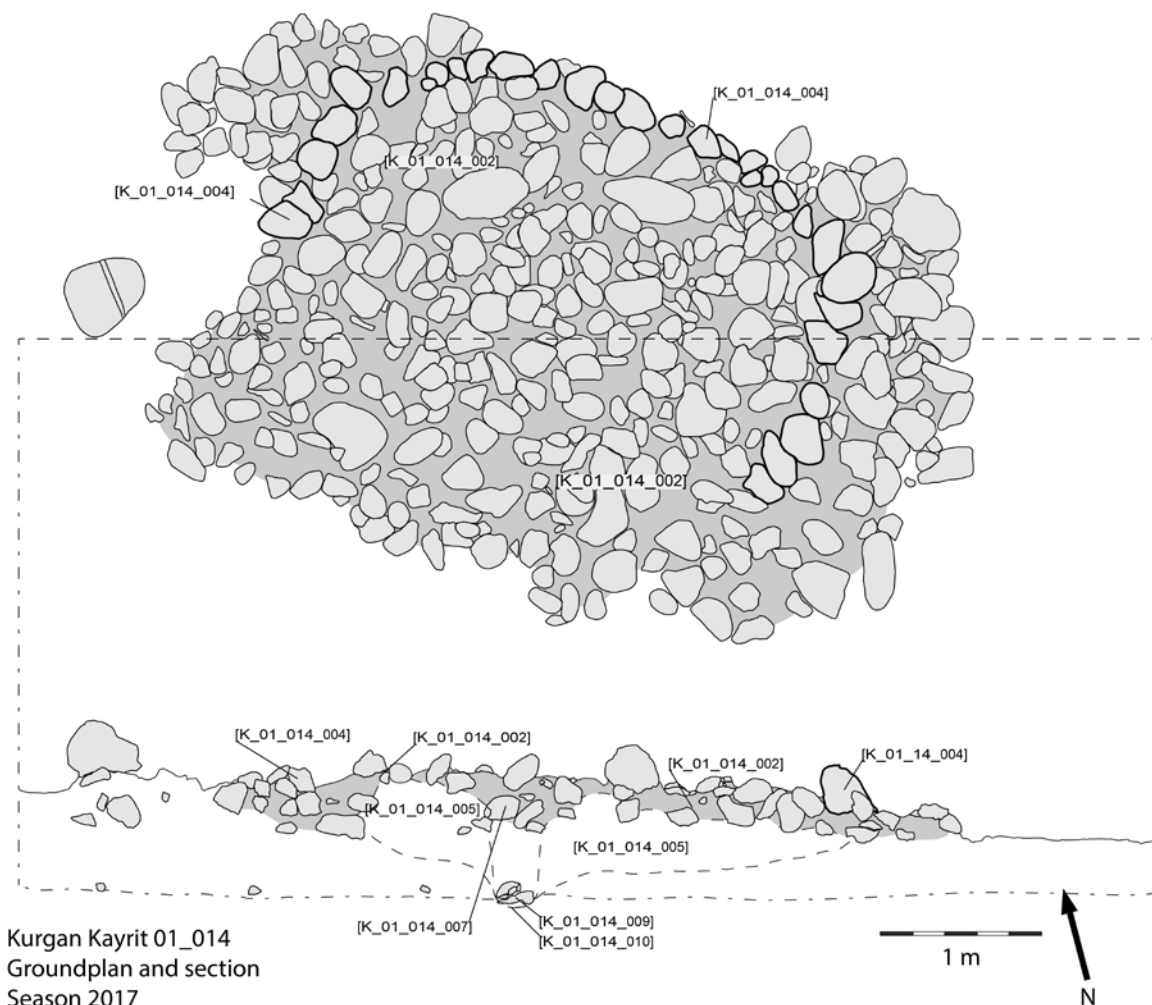


Fig. 9: Kurgan K_01_014, ground plan and section (drawing by T. Votroubeková, P. Cejnarová and J. Havlík).

It was worth paying attention to a boulder on the north-western edge of the kurgan, or more precisely besides it. This stone of local origin (h. 49 cm, l. 23–42 cm, w. 15–24 cm; **Fig. 11**) carries signs of simple carving: the two transversal parallel lines run around the central part of the stone, as if engraved by the friction of a drawn string. The exact function of these grooves is still being investigated and the precise relation between the worked stone and the kurgan remains unclear. The reading of this object as a kurgan-marker cannot be ruled out.

Beneath the stone construction we uncovered an interesting situation: It seems that the stone construction of the kurgan was built over a small earthen mound (K01_014_005) which

itself was partly recessed into the ground and appears to have been delimited on the sides by the stone ring K01_014_004. The earthen mound K01_014_005 is on the top disturbed by a stone and soil layer K01_014_007. In the deepest part of K01_014_005, in the approximate centre of the kurgan, there was found a small circular pit (K01_014_010, d. 20 cm, depth 10 cm; **Fig. 12**) filled with stones (K01_014_009).



Fig. 10: Kurgan K_01_014, inner ring K01_014_004 and layer K01_014_007 in central part (photo by T. Votroubeková).

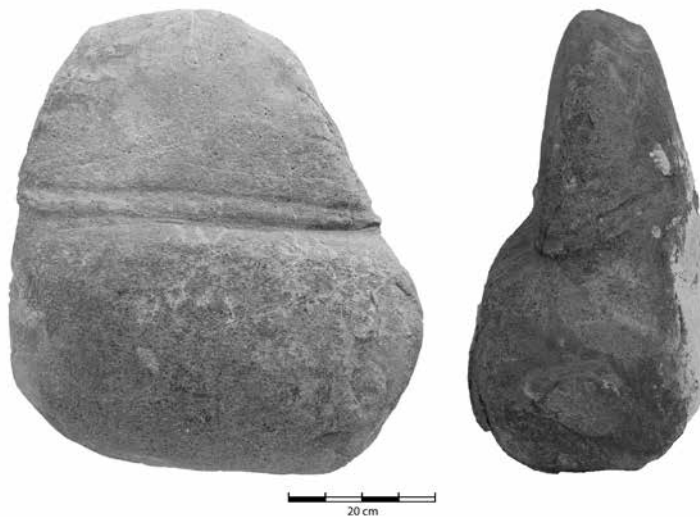


Fig. 11: Carved boulder from the north-western edge of the kurgan K_01_014 (photo by T. Votroubeková).



Fig. 12: The pit Ko1_014_010 (down) and the northern part of the stone ring Ko1_014_004 (photo by J. Kysela).

Within Ko1_014_005, in its south-eastern part, ca. 15 cm under the bottom level of the construction Ko1_014_002, there was uncovered a cluster of pottery consisting of fifteen sherds (fourteen body sherds, one base sherd; see **Fig. 21:3**) belonging to one vessel dated by Sh. Shaydullaev to the Yaz I period. The base sherd could be classified as a type B-3 of Lhuillier's typology (LHULLIER 2013, pl. 68), a similar shape is however also popular for the Chust culture of Ferghana (ZADNEPROVSKIY 1997, fig. 36).

KURGAN K_01_016

This rather small kurgan of irregular oval shape (3×2 m, h. 0.5 m; longer axis orientation NE-SW; **Fig. 13**) was excavated in 2015. It is isolated on an elevation overlooking a minor gully in the central part of the plateau, ca. 470 m to the south-west of Burgut Kurgan and 230 m to the north of the Yaz I site of Kayrit IV and in visual contact with both of these sites. It is of a simple low construction (Ko1_016_002) made of large stones and soil placed on the original terrain level (Ko1_016_003). In its northern part there are visible signs of destruction (Ko1_016_006).

Neither artefacts nor other archaeological material have been found beneath the construction; however, outside the mound close to its south-eastern edge a shallow oval-shaped pit of badly recognizable delimitation was identified at a depth of 25 cm under the level of terrain (Ko1_016_005, filling Ko1_016_004; d. ca. 50×40 cm; depth 10 cm). It was filled in with soil, several rather flat stones forming a sort of paving (**Fig. 13**; dashed rectangle), and 39 pottery sherds. The pottery assemblage consists of 37 handmade pottery sherds including diagnostic ones (**Pl. 5/1**) cooking pots with raised rim type G-1 (LHULLIER 2013, pl. 69) and two wheel-

-made body sherds. The whole assemblage was dated by J. Lhuillier to the Yaz I period and it is very similar to the pottery of Burgut Kurgan (LHULLIER 2016, 119). Although the filling of the pit did not contain any ashy soil, apart from this trait, however, this situation bears very obvious similarity in terms of appearance and position of the pits to that identified in the kurgan Kayrit 01_008. Sieving of the fill of the pit gave us no other information concerning the purpose of the feature; however, the deposition of the pottery on the stone 'pavement' near the kurgan suggests a so far unknown ritual. This ritual (sacrifice or purification?) could be related to the ritual practised probably also in the case of the kurgan K_01_008.

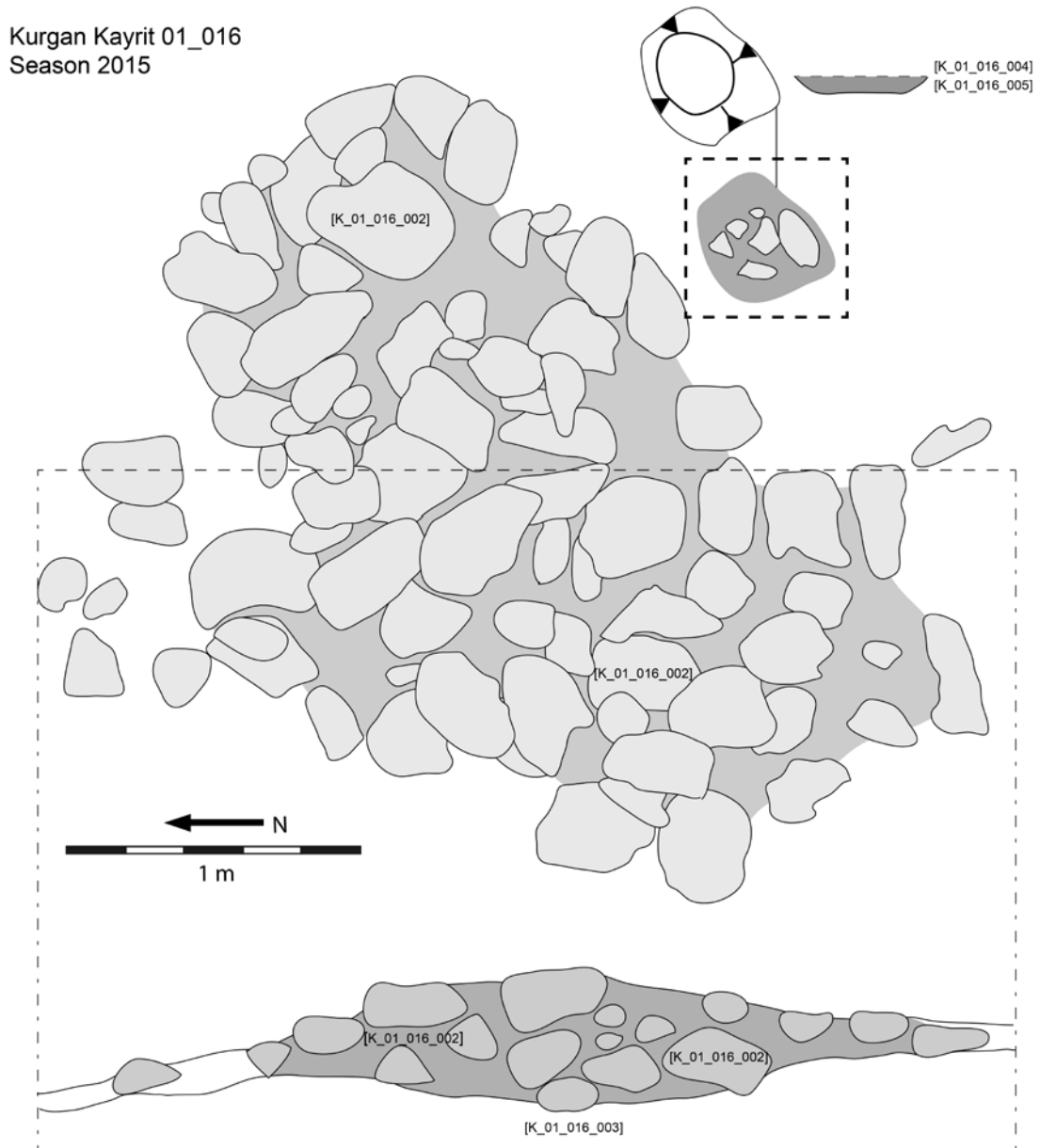


Fig. 13: Kurgan K_01_016, ground plan and section. In the dashed rectangle are shown layers on a lower stratigraphic level (drawing by J. Souček and J. Havlík).

KURGANS EXCAVATED AT THE SITE OF KAYRIT 3

In order to examine the kurgan-like features of the smallest dimensions, we simultaneously excavated three neighbouring kurgans (K_03_003, K_03_007 and K_03_010) belonging to a single kurgan line in the cluster Kayrit 3 (**Fig. 2**). This cluster is situated on the slope of the plateau on which the site of Burgut Kurgan and the cluster Kayrit 1 are situated in close proximity. Therefore, the question of the relation between the settlement and these kurgans arises.

Cluster Kayrit 3, similarly to the neighbouring cluster Kayrit 4 (HAVLÍK - STANČO - HAVLÍKOVÁ 2017, 167) consists of a significant number of small irregularly shaped kurgans made of large stones. Following the terrain contours these densely distributed kurgans form lines resembling, in the case of Kayrit 3, the letter Y oriented northeast-southwest, while some stand isolated. In consideration of their similarity, the three excavated kurgans are presented together.

The mounds of the three kurgans (**Figs. 14-17**) are small and low (d. about 2 m, h. 20-30 cm). The shape is rather irregular, but mostly compact. In the case of K_03_003 and K_03_007, removing of the low mound revealed hardly identifiable pits filled in with soil and stones. These pits situated in the central part of the mounds were considerably large in comparison with the mound itself (K_03_003: 100×100 cm, depth 62 cm; K_03_007: 120×90-96 cm, depth 54 cm). In the case of K_03_010 under the low mound in the narrow pit-like layer (K_03_010_008) there was situated a single large stone (50×54×72 cm). K_03_010_008 could have been intentionally dug out, but could also have been caused by water flowing around the stone. No pottery or other archaeological material was found neither in the constructions nor within the fillings of the pits. The issue of natural or anthropogenic origins of these features is still to be tested, however, according to geologist Lenka Lisá,⁷ their natural origin is in most cases improbable. Concerning the small-sized features belonging not only to cluster Kayrit 3, but also Kayrit 2 or Kayrit 4, a relevant interpretation is suggested by an ethnological parallel of the so-called *obo* (*ovoo*), i.e. a predominantly small, simple stone-made mound, usually with a wooden stick or pole in the central part. These features, typically associated with Turkic peoples, are known from Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Siberia. The purpose of the *obo* may be both ritual (ancestor veneration, nature worship, geomancy) and practical (marker of orientation or delimitation of space) (cf. HUMPREY 1996, 22, 148; ABAYEVA 1992, 74-75; FRACHETTI 2009, 147-148). In the valley of the Yelangash River (Altai Republic, Russian Federation) these features occur occasionally in close relation to petroglyphs predominantly of the early Turkic period (OKLADNIKOVA 1986), while the features of Kayrit 2, Kayrit 3 and Kayrit 4 are situated in close vicinity and sometimes even in visual contact with some of the newly detected petroglyphs to the west of Zarabag (AUGUSTINOVÁ - STANČO 2017), which offers another remarkable parallel between the small-sized kurgans of the Kayrit area and the *obo* mounds.

7 Personal communication, 6th September 2018.

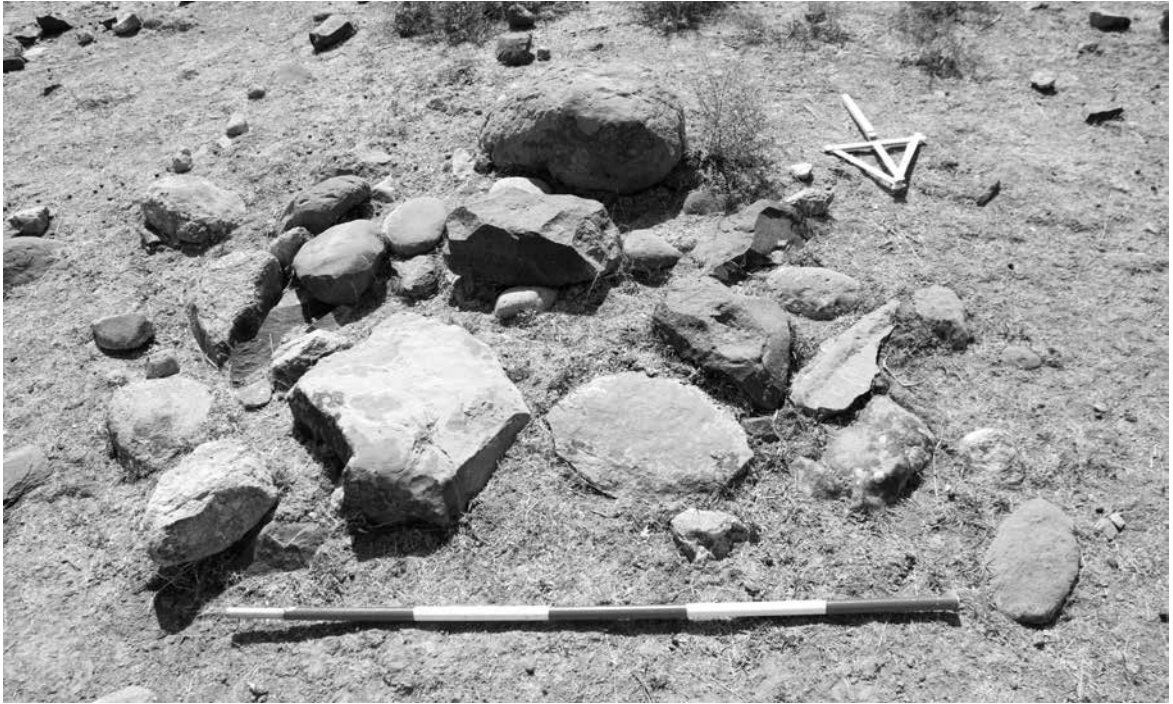


Fig. 14: Kurgan K_03_007 before excavations (photo by H. Havlíková).

Kurgan Kayrit 03_003
Groundplan and section
Season 2017

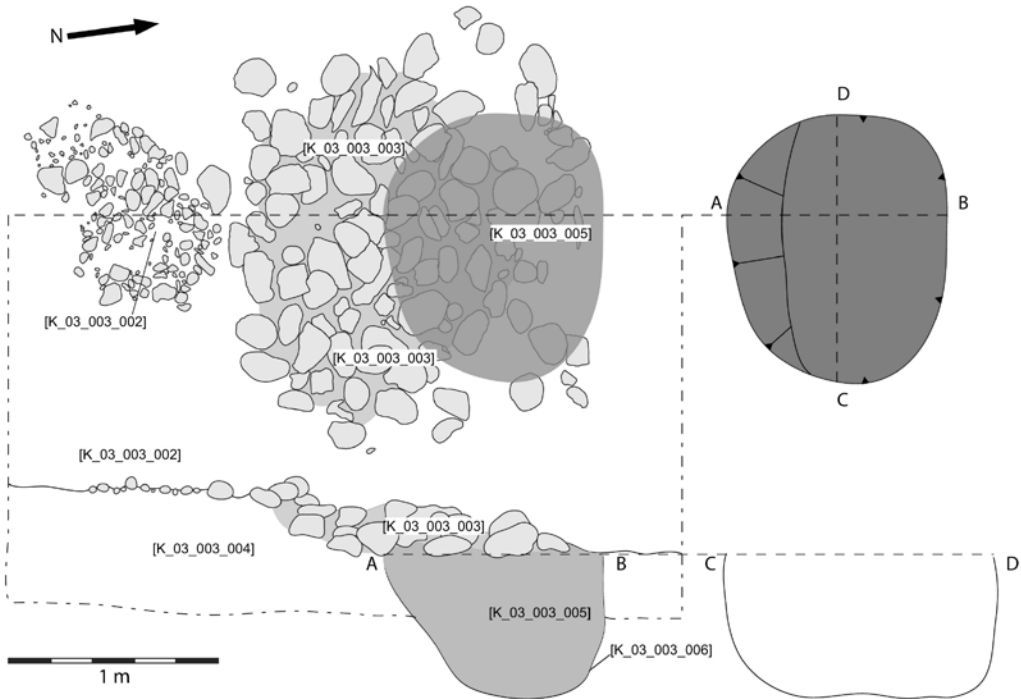


Fig. 15: Kurgan K_03_003, ground plan and sections (drawing by T. Votroubeková and J. Havlík).

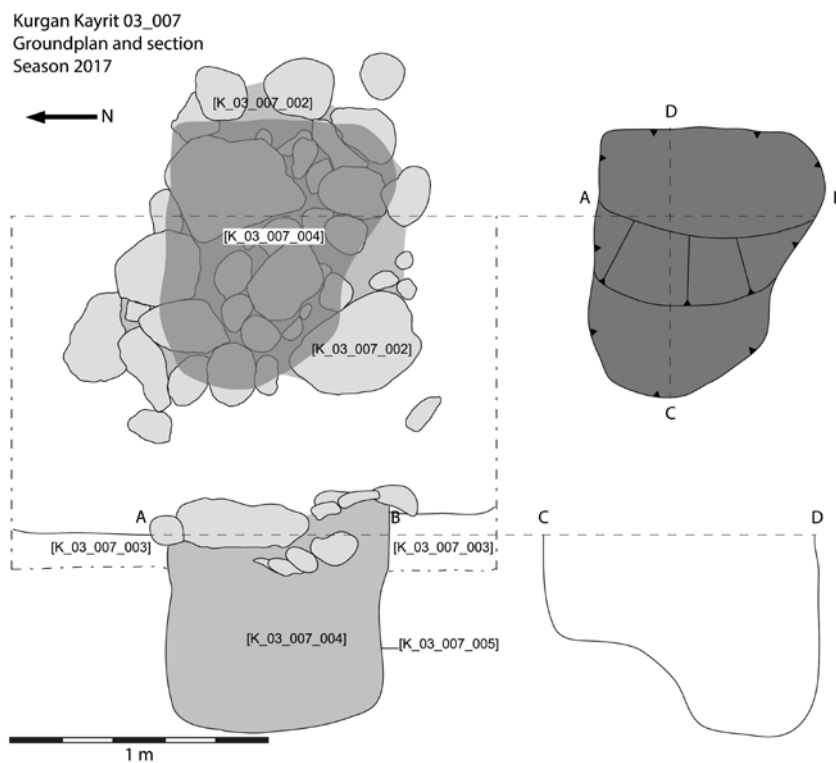


Fig. 16: Kurgan K_03_007, ground plan and sections (drawing by T. Votroubeková and J. Havlík).

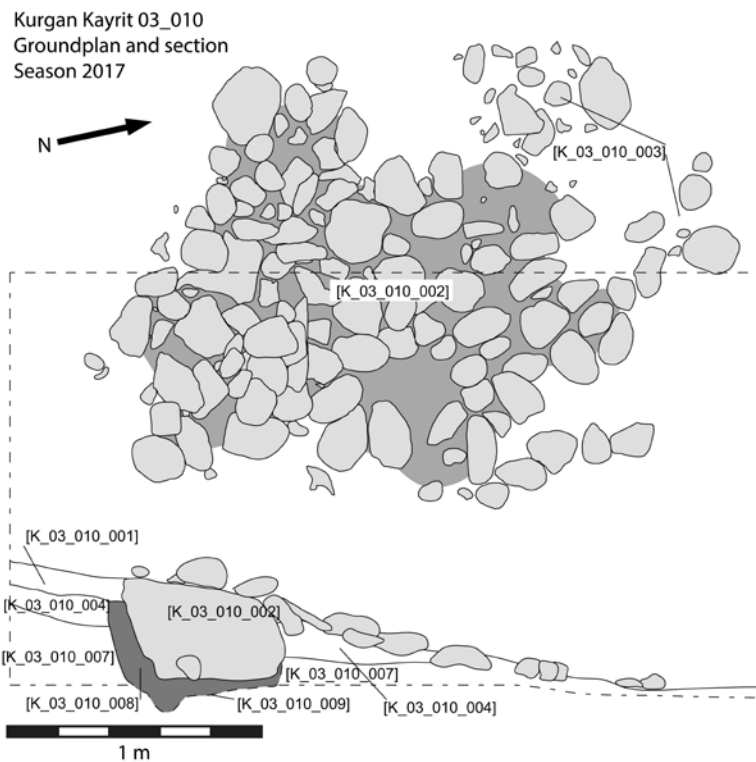


Fig. 17: Kurgan K_03_010, ground plan and section (drawing by T. Votroubeková and J. Havlík).

FEATURES EXCAVATED WITHIN THE SUBGROUP ZARABAG WEST

On the slopes over the plain stretching in an east-western direction between the villages of Kampyrtepa and Zarabag, a very numerous group of small irregular stone structures (average d. 1.85 m), not regarded as kurgans, was also studied during the season 2016 and 2017 (HAVLÍK – STANČO – HAVLÍKOVÁ 2017, 173) and subject to a test excavation in 2017. In total, 243 kurgan-like features are densely distributed over fifteen tongue-shaped ridges that gently descend into the plain from the south (**Fig. 18**). Two stone circles were detected on two of these ridges (ZAW_01_017; 6.1×5.8 m and ZAW_02_019; 4.3×4.1 m). One of the circles, ZAW_01_017, and two well preserved kurgan-like features, ZAW_01_003 and ZAW_01_007, were also examined by trial excavations.

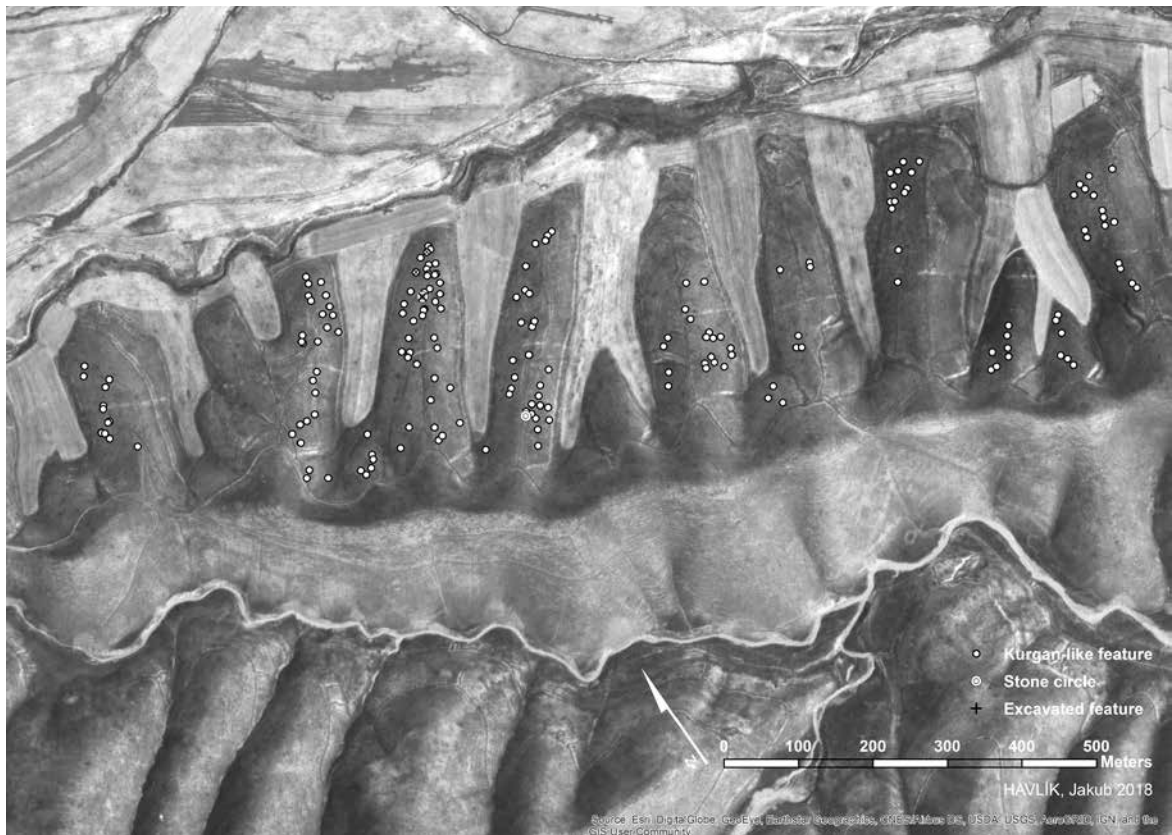


Fig. 18: Distribution of kurgan-like features in the central part of the Zarabag – West subgroup.

Concerning the stone ring, the excavation uncovered only a simple continuous circle made of unworked stones laid directly on the surface; no other features or archaeological material were detected. A different situation was discovered in the case of the kurgan-like features ZAW_01_007 (3.2×3.3 m, h. 0.4 m) and ZAW_01_003 (2.0×2.1 m, h. 0.3 m). Beneath both of these simple stone structures were revealed similar shallow oval pits (1×1 m, 1×0.4 m, h. 0.2 m; **Figs. 19–20**) containing no pottery or other archaeologically noticeable material. These pits could hypothetically be postholes, in which poles were originally lodged. Following this suggestion, these features could again recall the *obo* with a pole in the middle of the construction (see above). In addition, stone circles are quite common features functionally interconnected with the *obo* mounds mentioned above (OKLADNIKOVA 1986, 81). Nevertheless – according

to geologist Lenka Lisá⁸ - in view of position of the stone structures and their orientation (north-western orientation is prevailing), there is also possibility that these features are not of anthropogenic origin, but more likely, they were formed by natural phenomenon called *frost sorting*, which causes segregation of coarser (i.e. stones) and finer particles within the soil (FRENCH 2007, 146-147).



Fig. 19: Kurgan-like feature ZAW_01_003; mound cleared of topsoil (photo by J. Kysela).

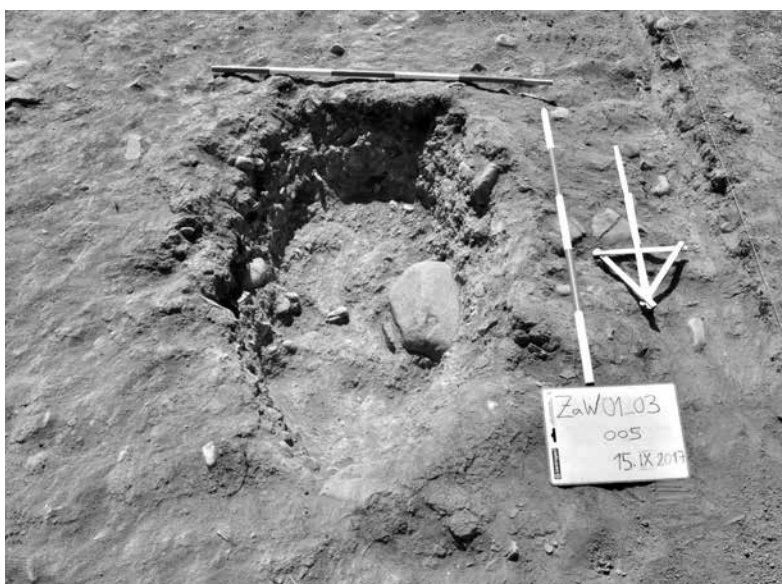


Fig. 20: Kurgan-like feature ZAW_01_003; shallow pit beneath the mound (photo by J. Kysela).

8 Personal communication, 6th September 2018.

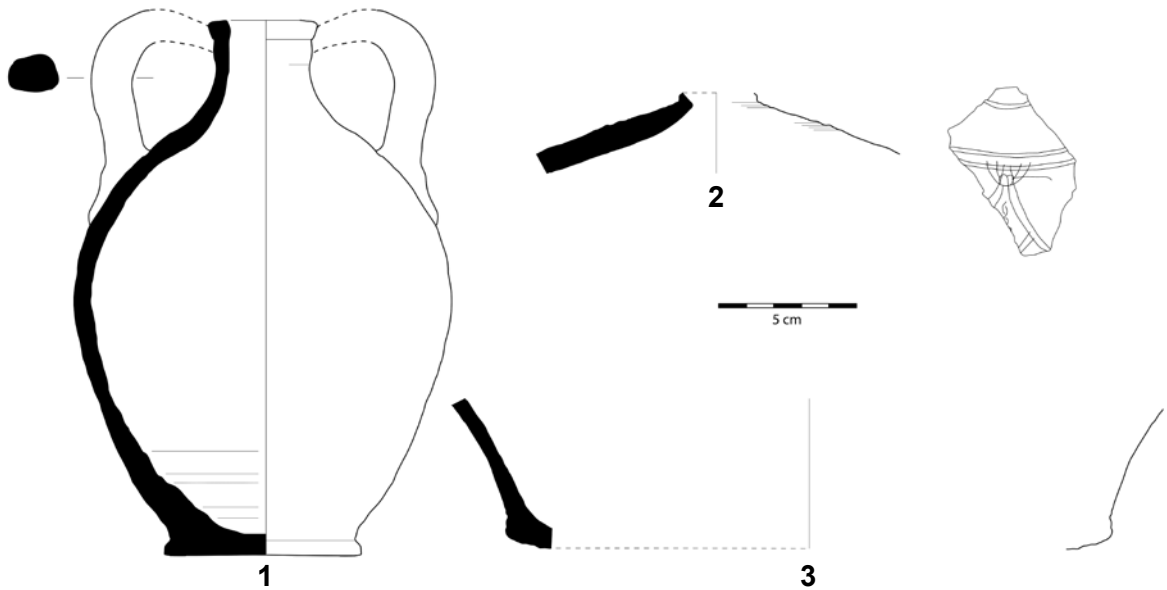


Fig. 21: Diagnostic pottery fragments of kurgan K_01_007 (No. 1-2) and K_01_014 (No. 3) (drawings by H. Havlíková).

CONCLUSIONS

The recent surface surveys in the eastern Kugitang foothills produced with a considerable amount of data not only in terms of settlement archaeology, but also in terms of other phenomena, especially concerning kurgans or kurgan-like features spread around the landscape. These features clearly form an integral part of the local landscape, and a better understanding of their origin and purpose should thus considerably contribute to our knowledge of the cultural development in the piedmont steppe of northern Bactria. Even if the current state of research does not allow for any generalization of this phenomenon yet, there are some tentative and provisional conclusions that may form a basis for future research.

As for the group of larger regularly circular shaped kurgans, which are well represented in the research area (in this report represented by kurgan K_01_007 and by the earlier excavated kurgan K_01_001), their dating and relation to a particular culture remains – because of a lack of chronological clues is still to be clarified. Their position within the cluster of Yaz I settlement sites (with no other-period settlement at hand) can be merely accidental. Both these kurgans had most likely been robbed in historical times, and material, which could clear up the question of the purpose and dating – if there was such a one – have not been preserved. The interpretation of these kurgans as cenotaphs is one of the very likely solutions, although hard to prove using the available data.

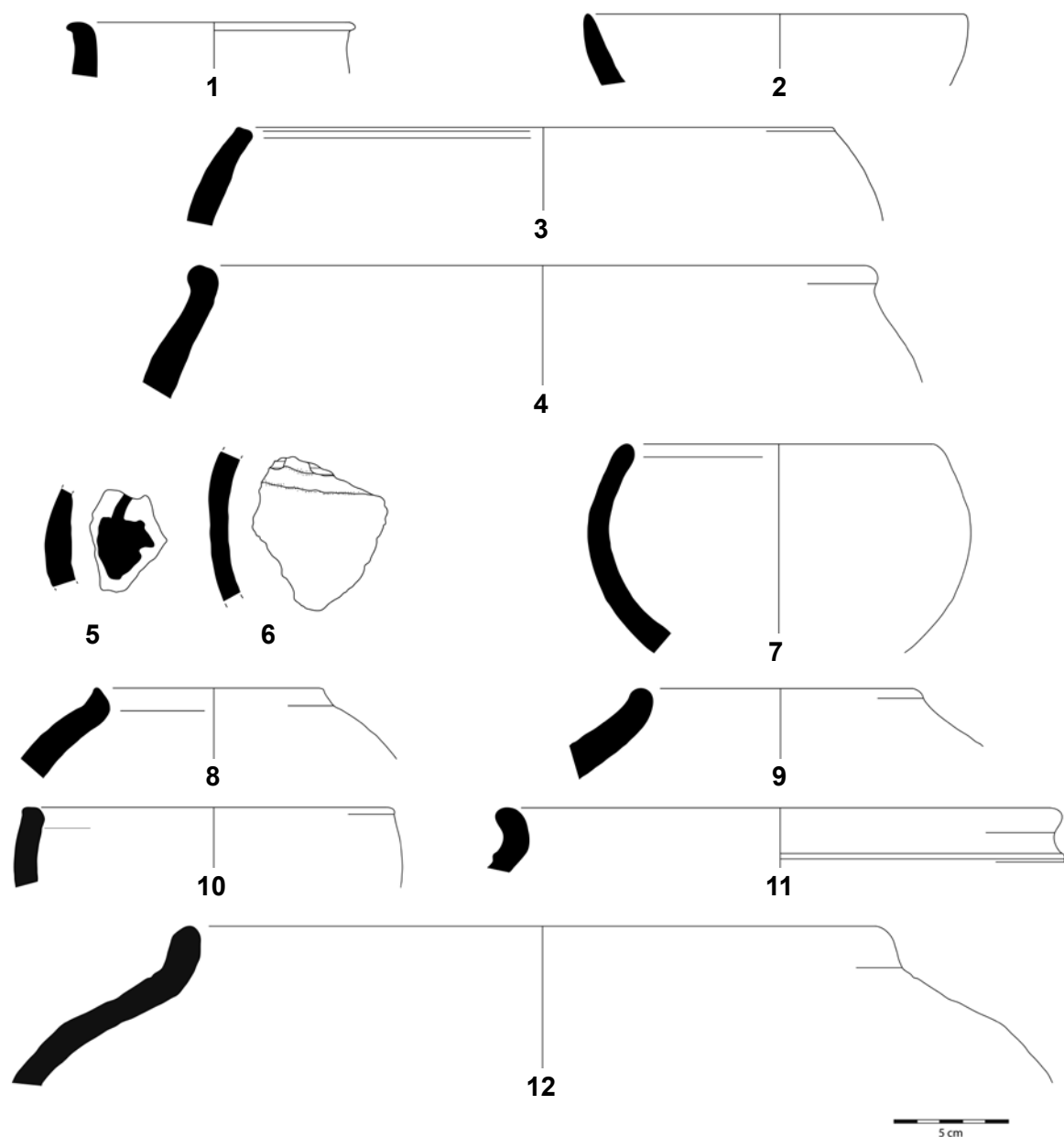


Fig. 22: Diagnostic pottery fragments of kurgan K_01_008. No. 1-5; sherds from surface layer K_01_008_001. No. 6-12; sherds from the upper construction K_01_008_002 (drawings by P. Cejnarová, H. Havlíková, and G. Palmeri).

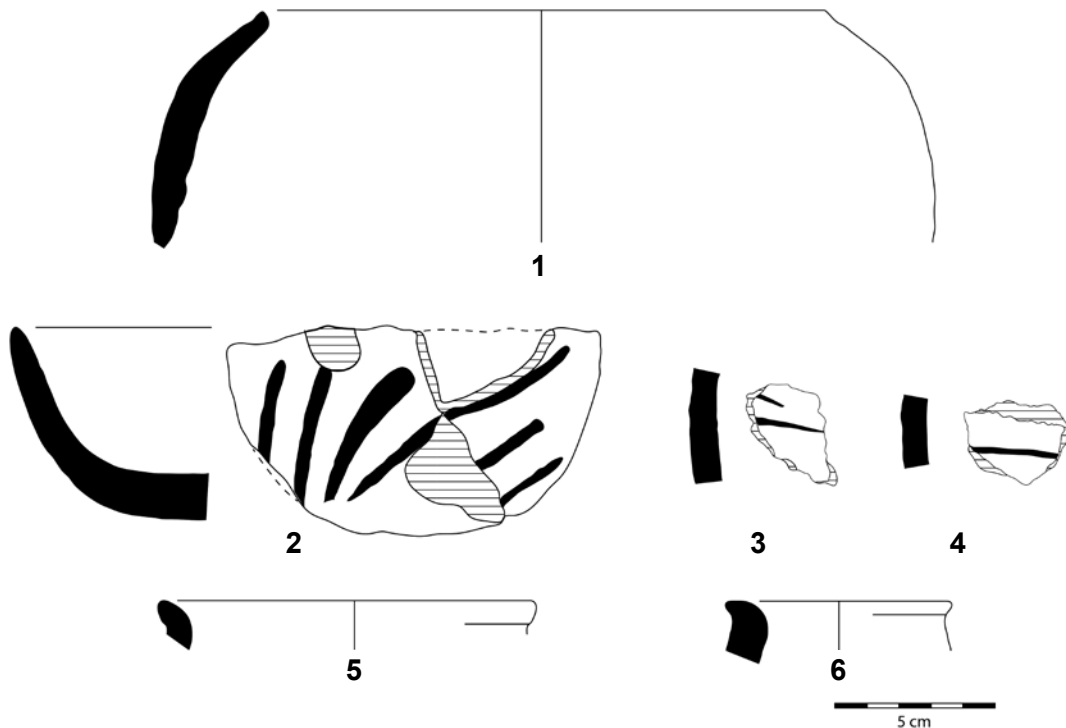


Fig. 23: Diagnostic pottery fragments of kurgan K_01_008. No. 1-4, layer K_01_008_003. No. 5, layer K_01_008_016. No. 6, layer K_01_008 (drawings by Petra Cejnarová, H. Havlíková, and G. Palmeri).

A different situation has been detected in the case of the three kurgans situated within view of Burgut Kurgan. Concerning these features (K_01_008, K_01_014 and K_01_016), a certain relation with Yaz I culture has been proved by the presence of the respective pottery assemblages. Differences from the other kurgans in the cluster of Kayrit 1 can be however also observed in their shape, which is more irregular (oval or oblong), and in the inner constructions (in the case of K_01_008 and K_01_014); shaped as lesser mounds and stone rings. The small pits covered by simple stone paving are also remarkable (in the case of K_01_008 and K_01_016) occurring in the central part of kurgans and/or beyond the edge of the mound, and also intentionally (?) deposited pottery sherds. The purpose of all these objects placed within and besides the kurgans remains unclear. The absence of bones or other human skeletal remains indicates that the purpose is not (at least primarily) connected with sepulchral use, so common for the kurgans of Eurasia. The collected evidence may, however, suggest rather a ritual (purification? sacrifice? veneration?) than a utilitarian function of these features, apparently tied with the surrounding settlement of Yaz I culture. The unique presence of a stratigraphically non-overlaid cluster of Yaz I sites and their connection to mounds of the same period, of which analogies are still not known to us, make it potentially possible to newly evaluate the local Early Iron Age in the context of its landscape. The currently available data are by no means sufficient to let us draw a general picture of the complex society of the given period. Additional excavations in order to gain more comparable data are therefore necessary.

The typological diversity of the kurgan-like features in the research area is further supplemented by a huge number of minor stone structures. A few selected examples, which were excavated as a trial (cluster Kayrit 3, subgroup Zarabag - West), brought us no clear clues

neither for their dating nor purpose. The above discussed resemblance to obo mounds calls for additional comparative study and searching for both archaeological and ethnographical analogies. Of particular note, however, is the wide variety of different stone structures in the northern Paskhurt Valley as a whole but also within the individual clusters as has been shown in the case of Kayrit 1. Research of the forthcoming field season (2018) will thus be focused on collecting data in the adjacent valleys of the Kugitang foothills, where comparable kurgan clusters have been detected by the Czech-Uzbekistani team. This will hopefully allow us to gain a better understanding of the complex studied phenomena.

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Pl. 5/1: Selected pottery sherds from the filling of the pit Ko1_016_005 (photo by Johana Tlustá).