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ON THE ORIGIN OF THE CASPIAN CULTURE

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The territory of Lower Volga occupies a special place in studying the cultural genesis of Eastern Europe. Prominent cultures of the Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age were formed there and played an important role in the formation of the Volga-Ural hearth of cultural genesis. Equally important is the problem of the origin of the Caspian culture, with which researchers associate the beginning of the spread of cattle breeding and the emergence of the first copper products in the Volga steppe. *Methods and discussion.* The researchers expressed quite similar views on this issue. The process of Caspian culture origin in the Lower Volga region was considered as autochthonous with the participation of northern components. The substrate basis was the Oryol culture, and the superstrate was the societies of the Volga region forest-steppe. The comprehensive analysis of Volga steppe materials allows offering an alternative view of the Caspian culture genesis. The appearance of several features (collar-like thickening, a combed stamp, the technique of increased spin, producing economy, the dominance of quartzite raw materials for the manufacture of tools, the technique of forced squeezing in the receipt of logs, the emergence of producing farming in the form of cattle breeding, etc.) is associated not with the northern forest-steppe and forest-steppe, but with western components. The comparative analysis of radiocarbon dates of the forest-steppe and steppe Volga, Northern Caspian Sea and Don area supports this version. The chronological priority is fixed for materials of the Don area and Azov region. It is in these areas that the leading features characteristic of the Caspian culture appeared earlier. *Results.* The earlier complexes of the Caspian culture were formed in the Northern Caspian about 5700 BC. Later its penetration into the Lower and forest-steppe Volga Basin was recorded.

Key words: Lower Volga, Neolithic, Oryol culture, Caspian culture, Tentexor type, quartzite industry, collar ceramics.

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О ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИИ ПРИКАСПИЙСКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Территория Нижнего Поволжья занимает особое место в изучении культурогенеза Восточной Европы. Здесь сформировались яркие культуры энеолита и раннего бронзового века, которые сыграли важную роль в сложении волго-уральского очага культурогенеза. Не менее значима проблема происхождения прикаспийской культуры, с которой исследователи связывают начало распространения в степном Поволжье скотоводства и фиксируют первые медные изделия. *Методы и дискуссия.* По данному вопросу высказывались достаточно сходные точки зрения. Процесс происхождения прикаспийской культуры в Нижнем Поволжье рассматривался исследователями как автохтонный при участии северных компонентов. Субстратной основой являлась орловская культура, а суперстратом выступали социумы лесостепного Поволжья. Всесторонний анализ материалов степного Поволжья позволяет предложить альтернативную точку зрения на генезис прикаспийской культуры. Появление ряда существенных признаков (воротничок на внешней стороне сосуда, гребенчатый штамп для орнаментации посуды, доминирование кварцитового сырья для изготовления орудий труда, техника усиленного отжима при получении заготовок, производящее хозяйство в виде скотоводства и др.) связано не с северными лесостепными и лесными, а с западными компонентами. В пользу этой версии свидетельствует сравнительный анализ радиоуглеродных дат лесостепного и степного Поволжья, Северного Прикаспия и Подонья. Хронологический приоритет фиксируется для материалов Подонья и Приазовья. Именно в этих областях раньше появляются ведущие признаки, характерные для прикаспийской культуры. *Результаты.* Наиболее ранние комплексы прикаспийской культуры складывались в Северном Прикаспии около 5700 лет до н. э. В дальнейшем фиксируется ее проникновение в степное и лесостепное Поволжье.

Ключевые слова: Нижнее Поволжье, неолит, орловская культура, прикаспийская культура, тентексорский тип, кварцитовая индустрия, воротничковая керамика.

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Introduction. The interest of researchers in the study of the archaeological cultures genesis is attributed to the undoubted scientific relevance of the issue for any territory. One of them is the Lower Volga region, which includes the semi-desert Northern Caspian region and the steppe Volga region. According to experts, this region is of paramount importance for the development of solutions for problems of cultural genesis. Researchers state the emergence of cattle breeding for the Eneolithic [3; 27]. They attribute the Caspian culture in the Lower Volga region to this period. Despite the limited range of sources in the early 1980s, the question of its genesis was legitimately put on the agenda. The process represented an interaction of the steppe Seroglazovskaya and forest-steppe Middle Volga Neolithic cultures [2, pp. 19–21]. A special publication and a chapter in the monograph by A.I. Yudina are dedicated to the origins of the formation of the Eneolithic in the steppe Volga region in which the author comprehensively substantiates the autochthonous version: the

Caspian culture is formed on the basis of the local Oryol and foreign forest-steppe Neolithic cultures [30, pp. 97–104; 31, pp. 69–73]. N.L. Morgunova considers the mechanism of formation of the Caspian culture as a result of the synthesis of the Oryol and Samara cultures [22, p. 46]. In a preliminary plan, a version of the western component in its genesis was expressed [9, pp. 57–62]. It should also be noted that a number of controversial provisions of the autochthonous concept were criticized by V.V. Stavitsky in a review of the monograph by N.L. Morgunova [26].

Methods and discussion. When developing an autochthonous version of the appearance of the Eneolithic Caspian culture, researchers operate with the corresponding features of artifacts. Firstly, this is a collar thickening on the outer side of the vessel rim. Its appearance is convergent from Late Neolithic rims with an influx on the inside of the vessel [28, p. 32]. However, without denying the possibility of this option, a number of observations should be made. A similar model of the appearance of collar rims was recorded only for the ceramic

complexes of the Lower Don culture by N.S. Kotova [18, pp. 26–27]. A similar transformation of inside influxes into external collars does not occur on the materials of the Azov-Dnieper and Samara cultures. If this process is inherent in the Lower Volga region, then why did not a similar change take place in the Kama and Koshkino cultures, where vessels are characterized by influxes on the inner side? Is such a technological chain realistic from the point of view of the specialists studying directly the technology of ceramic making? As an evidence of the autochthonous nature of this innovation, experts cite as an argument the presence of a rim with a collar, and the ornament is applied using the retreating pin technique [16, p. 321; 30, p. 94]. But there is another interpretation, according to which the singularity of a rim of this type in layer 2A of the Varfolomeevskaya site may indicate episodic contacts with foreigners that did not affect the qualitative change in the local culture [25, p. 20]. There is a similar situation with the same rim sample from the upper layer of the Dzhangar settlement in the North-Western Caspian region, which was found there together with shards of the Neolithic and Eneolithic times. This may indicate the interaction of their carriers, that is, synchronicity rather than continuity. There is a similar picture with a single find of a rim at the Zhekalgan site in the Northern Caspian region [1, pp. 68–70]. The nature of this phenomenon is reminiscent of the Cherkassky type of ceramics of the Middle Don region, which appeared as a result of the interaction of the local Middle Don Neolithic culture and the new Lower Don Eneolithic culture. Moreover, the fact of the coexistence of Oryol and Caspian ceramics at the Varfolomeevskaya site is also recognized by A.I. Yudin [29, p. 216], which contradicts the unambiguous statement about their genetic continuity.

Secondly, this is the change of the system from prick to the comb ornamentation of the Neolithic ceramics, which goes back to the forest-steppe Middle Volga or Samara cultures. In order to analyze this aspect, it is necessary to clarify the chronological positions of these complexes. There are dates on collar ceramics for the burial ground near the village Syezzheye of the Samara culture: 6580 ± 100 BP (5674–5338 cal BC) and 5890 ± 90 BP (4989–4544 cal BC) [9, p. 138].

The first date was obtained for a vessel, which is identical not only in typology, but also in technology to the ceramics of the Caspian culture [6, pp. 200–201]. And the second vessel, according to typology, is a hybrid of the Caspian and Middle Volga cultures, which is also recorded at the level of technology. In such a situation, there is an option to consider not the penetration of the carriers of the Samara culture to the south, but, on the contrary, the advance of representatives of the Caspian culture to the north into the forest-steppe Volga region. This is confirmed by the date for the site of the Caspian culture Burovaya 41 – 6790 ± 80 BP (5870–5550 cal BC) [10, p. 192]. As for the appearance of the comb stamp ornamentation in the forest-steppe Volga region, today the earliest dates for the Middle Volga Neolithic ceramics decorated with a long comb stamp are known from the Lebyazhinka IV site: 5420 ± 80 BP (4446–4046 cal BC) and 5360 ± 90 BP (4350–3988 cal BC) and Lesnoye Nikolskoye 3: 5400 ± 90 BP (4446–3997 cal BC) [8, pp. 62–63]. The source of borrowing this ornament could be the Kama ceramics from the Ziarat site (6110 ± 80 BP – 5290–4810 cal BC; 6323 ± 43 BP – 5463–5214 cal BC) or Podlesnoye III site (6110 ± 80 BP – 5290–4810 cal BC) [9, Table 1]. It turns out that comb ceramics in the Middle Volga culture could appear as a result of the influence of the Caspian culture, but not vice versa. There are dates for the Kurpezhe-moll site are 6050 ± 80 BP (5212–4782 cal BC), and for the Caspian sites of the steppe Volga region 5806 ± 26 BP (4724–4557 cal BC) [20, p. 22].

Since the discovery of the Caspian culture, experts record the predominance of quartzite raw materials in its stone tools [21]. If we turn to the Caspian sites with rather homogeneous complexes [12, pp. 219–221], then the dominant quartzite raw material suggests two explanations: either the sources of flint dried up at the end of the Neolithic, which is unlikely, or a population that did not know these sources came to this territory. The second explanation is more acceptable for two reasons. First, in the complexes of the Caspian culture, flint products are although represented by an insignificant percentage, but the raw material itself differs from the Oryol and Tentexor ones. Secondly, in addition to raw materials in the Caspian materials, the blanks for obtaining tools are dramatically changing: they are obtained using

the technique of forced pressing, the origins of which cannot be traced in the previous time. One cannot but pay attention to one more essential detail. The Caspian industry is characterized not only by massive products, but also by inserts on knife-like rectangular plates, which are not characteristic of the Late Neolithic complexes of the territory of interest. There are no trapezia with a planed back in the Caspian complexes, which are so characteristic of Tentexor and Late Oryol materials [4; 27].

The similarity of the technology of making their ceramics can be considered as one of the arguments in favor of the continuity of the bearers of the Oryol and Caspian cultures [5]. Without denying this, one should nevertheless note the opinion of experts in the field of technical and technological analysis of ancient ceramics that this method works mainly to distinguish between cultural traditions.

Another sign of the Caspian Eneolithic traditions formation on the materials of the Varfolomeevskaya site A.I. Yudin counts bone figurines of animals (horses) found in layer 2A [30, pp. 99–104]. However, this layer belongs to the final period of the existence of the Neolithic Oryol culture. The discovery of a bone figurine at the Razdorskaya site also belongs to the pre-Mariupol time, which was found in the second layer of this monument, where collars have not yet appeared on the rims of the vessels, and pricked motifs predominated in the ornamentation of vessels [13]. No such figurines were found on the Caspian sites of the steppe zone; therefore, their appearance in the Varfolomeevskaya layer 2A is in no way connected with the formation of the traditions of the Caspian culture.

If we take an autochthonous position about the transition from the Neolithic to the Caspian culture, then its nature implies that the emergence of a producing economy was the result of the activities of the Tentexor or Oryol population. However, two points contradict this. First, no reliably domesticated species were identified at Late Neolithic sites [24, pp. 9–10]. As for the “pure” complexes of the Samara culture, the bones of domestic animals have not been found in its materials yet [17]. The appearance of the domestic sheep cannot be associated with the activities of the bearers of the Oryol or Middle Volga cultures. According to archaeozoologists,

this animal does not occur in the wild either in the steppe or forest-steppe Volga region.

As for the innovations that appeared in the materials of the Lower Volga region, attention should be paid to a number of complexes. Thus, a group of ceramics is distinguished at the Kombakte site, in addition to the Khvalynsk and Caspian complexes, which does not have a collar thickening on the outer side of the rim, but is ornamented with horizontal rows of tightly set medium-toothed stamp imprints [20]. The search for analogies leads not to the north, but to the west. These are vessels of the period 1a of the Azov-Dnieper culture [18, p. 187, Fig. 63, 1] and of the first period of the Lower Don culture [13; 14; 18, p. 195, Fig. 71, 45, 48; 72, 1–2]. At the same time, the early radiocarbon dates of the 1st period of the Azov-Dnieper culture obtained from the bone from the Chapaevka settlement 7030 ± 70 BP (6022–5752 cal BC), 6910 ± 60 BP (5972–5674 cal BC) and from the 5th Vasilievsky burial ground 6810 ± 90 BP (5896–5556 cal BC), 6835 ± 60 BP (5843–5629 cal BC) and dates of the early stage of the Lower Don culture from the Mariupol burial ground 6645 ± 70 BP (5700–5477 cal BC) and from the settlement of Razdolnoye 6550 ± 80 BP (5633–5362 cal BC) [18, pp. 95, 97, Table 1, 3] correspond to the earliest dates of the Caspian culture and materials from the Syezzheye burial ground.

It is noteworthy that similar pottery is also represented in the upper layer of the Dzhangar settlement. Moreover, the author of the excavations draws attention to the fact that it differs from the crockery with pricks also by technology [16, p. 321]. It is very important that the technique of forced pressing and tools made on massive blanks are already characteristic of the stone industry of these complexes at this stage [13; 14; 18, p. 187, Fig. 63, 2, 4–10, 14; p. 195, Fig. 71, 51–52]. The insert technique also inherent to them. No less interesting is the collection of the Zhe-kalgan I site, where specific vessels were found, in addition to typical Tentexor ceramics. There is an influx on the inner side of the rim, and the surface is ornamented with a toothed stamp [15, p. 12, Fig. 2, 2]. The percentage of quartzite products is increasing. In other words, this is evidence of the interaction of the local Neolithic and newcomers. The time of these contacts can be determined by the date – 6566 ± 120 BP (5711–5316 cal BC) [23]. This value is much older than

the age of the comb system of ornamentation in the forest-steppe. Researchers note that quartzite raw materials are used earlier than in the Caspian time, and more massively in the Don region in comparison with the Volga region [25, p. 25]. In the western regions the collar design of the rim is recorded both in the Azov-Dnieper and in the Lower Don cultures of 6800 BP (5700 BC) [18]. This is somewhat earlier than the time of the Burovaya 41 site in the Northern Caspian region. The systemic combination of collars and rows of a walking comb, framed by dashes, is quite clearly manifested at the second stage of the Lower Don culture [13, p. 91, Fig. 5] and is recorded at 6700–6200 BP (5600–5100 BC) [18]. This time is similar to the age of the Burovaya 41 site, where quartzite objects were found on massive blanks. It should also be borne in mind that the system of ornamentation of the Caspian monuments of the Volga steppe, which is characterized by the predominance of compositions in the prick technique of execution, is synchronized with the existence of the second stage of the Azov-Dnieper antiquities, and their appearance here may be associated with the second wave of migration of the population from the Dnieper-Donskoy interfluvium. N.S. Kotova also notes the presence of Western influence in the materials of the Oryol, Caspian and Samara cultures, which is reflected in certain forms of ceramics (bowls with a rib, a bowl with protrusions on the rim) and decorative elements (ribbon and roller ornament) [19, p. 65].

Regarding the production economy, it can be stated that in the regions west of the Volga region, it appears already in the Neolithic [18, p. 114], while in the Northern Caspian region, sheep bones were found at the Kurpezha-molla site of the Caspian culture [7] around 6100 BP (5000 BC), and at Oroshayemoye I – 5800 BP [11] (4650 BC). Until now, there are no known monuments of the Caspian type in the steppe Volga region older than 5800 BP (4650 BC). It is these radiocarbon data that make it possible to additionally link the process of the emergence of the Caspian culture not on the territory of the steppe Volga region, but in the Northern Caspian region.

Results. Thus, the processes associated with the penetration of certain groups of bearers of the Lower Don and Azov-Dnieper cultures into this territory from the Dnieper-Don interfluvium at the first stage of their development are traced in

the Northern Caspian region during the period 6700–6500 BP (5600–5450 BC). There are signs of their interaction with the societies of the local Neolithic culture (Tentexor). Subsequent impulses lead to the formation of the entire set of features of the Caspian culture.

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