

Objective of the project. The aim of the planned project is to acquire, present, and interpret new data for the better understanding of a number of still unresolved issues connected with the development of the Early Scythian culture in Tuva. The acquisition of archaeological sources from Early Iron Age sites (primarily from the 9th-6th centuries BC) in the Uyk River valley in northern Tuva by means of excavations is a research objective in itself, as it is in line with the nature of archaeology as a discipline. The next stage will include laboratory analyses (i.a. isotope, radiocarbon, paleobotanical), and the resulting data will be analysed in detail and compared with other sources gathered through literature search. Next, the results will inform deliberations about crucial issues connected with 'early nomadic' culture of Central Asia, namely: 1) biological origin and migrations, 2) reconstruction of social relations, 3) settlement patterns and economy, 4) cultural connections and their nature.

Research carried out within the frameworks of the project. The project envisages conducting excavations aimed at investigating burial rites and settlement patterns of the Aldy-Bel culture population in the Early Scythian Period. The research will be carried out in the Tuva Republic (Central Asian part of the Russian Federation) in the Turan-Uyk Valley, which is known as the Siberian "Valley of Kings" due to the abundance and monumental character of sepulchral sites. The excavations will be preceded by geomagnetic survey which will allow us to choose the most promising places for the digs. The planned research will encompass the Chinge-Tei-1 barrow from the 7th-6th century BC, which has been explored by K.V. Chugunov (from Petersburg) since 2008. The agreement with K.V. Chugunov creates an opportunity to explore, within the frameworks of this grant project, a part of the ditch surrounding the barrow, in which human bones (possibly sacrifices) and deposits of bronze objects have previously been found. In addition, there are plans to comprehensively investigate one of smaller barrows in the vicinity of Chinge-Tei-1, situated in a 'chain' of barrows unusually arranged across the valley rather than along it. Our research hypothesis posits a connection between the small barrow and the elite burial of Chinge-Tei-1. Furthermore, the research will also encompass Early Scythian Period settlement sites, which have been identified by the Hermitage Museum expedition in the Uyk River valley, to the north of the mentioned barrows and at the foot of the mountain range closing the valley from the north. The excavations will most likely be conducted in Zhelvak-5 site, and other sites will be surveyed with geomagnetic methods and test trenches (Zhelvak 3, Sandankin). The materials recovered during the research will be analysed using both typical archaeological methods (typological analysis, comparison with other Central Asian sites) and laboratory analyses. Chronology will be determined by the typological method supplemented with radiocarbon age determinations, with 20 samples planned to be analysed. The exploration will involve attempts at collecting paleobotanical material (plant macroremains). Along with paleoclimatic data (with the working hypothesis positing the rise in ecosystem's bioproductivity between the 9th and 7th century), the analyses can be expected to shed some light on paleodiet. The analysis of carbon and nitrogen isotopes in human bones will serve the same goal, that is to say the reconstruction of diet, and therefore also the affluence of the deceased individuals and indirectly the economic model and lifestyle. Strontium isotopes, on the other hand, allow for conclusions to be made about mobility. It will probably be possible to determine whether particular individuals were buried in the place of their origin, or were they migrants. The whole of the sources collected by the project will become subject of scientific reflection; in this context, my stay in Petersburg should prove highly beneficial, since it will grant me access to rich library collections and contact with the most renowned specialists in Scythian studies.

Reasons for choosing the research topic. The fundamental reason behind the decision to launch a research in the Turan-Uyk valley is a fascination with cultures of the Scythian type and enormous research potential of that territory. The origins of the Scythian cultural model should be sought in Central Asia, in the Altai and Sayan Mountains of South Siberia (which means also in Tuva). Transformations which took place there in the beginnings of the Early Iron Age (that is to say in the Early Scythian Period, 9th-6th century BC) changed the image of the Great Steppe for many centuries to come. Within what is known as "early nomadic" culture, a model of cultural behaviours developed, which later became typical of steppe communities for several centuries, until the collapse of Scythian groups in the 3rd/2nd century BC. Many of these elements remained present in the culture of pastoral tribes as late as Post-Medieval times. The most significant discoveries, which shed light on the genesis of the Scythian cultural model, were made exactly in the Turan-Uyk Valley (Arzhan Valley, "Valley of Kings"), a place where the project research is planned. The valley still hides many fascinating and diversified sources (and which are threatened by looters): princely barrows, burials of common people, ritual places, and settlement sites. Compared with our great predecessors (such as M.P. Griaznow and M.H. Mannaj-Ool, the discoverers of Arzhan-1), in the 21st century we have the benefit of increasingly advanced natural science methods which can be applied in our research. Thus, one cannot but arrive at the conclusion that it would be difficult to find a better place or more promising sites for studies on the early stage of the "Scytho-Siberian" cultures development.