



## Catacomb Burial Structures of The Tashkent Oasis

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**Abstract.** The catacomb graves of the Tashkent oasis are ancient burial traditions dating back to the antique and early medieval periods, widely found in Tashkent and its surrounding areas. These graves consist of long underground corridors and burial chambers, reflecting the religious beliefs and burial customs of the population of that era. Alongside the buried individuals, various luxurious items, pottery, tools, and food products were also found in these graves, enriching our knowledge of the culture and lifestyle of that time. The catacomb graves are of great significance for archaeological research, offering an opportunity to study the ancient history and cultural heritage of the Tashkent oasis.

**Keywords.** Catacomb, Graves, Culture, Archaeology, Rituals, Medieval, Antique, Bronze, Qovunchi, Burial

Ancient burial rituals have always been associated with the various beliefs, customs, and religions of each people and culture. These rituals reflected the views of the people of that era regarding death and the afterlife. Burial ceremonies held one of the most important places in almost all societies around the world. There are numerous and diverse procedures involved in performing burial rites and customs. Any set of burial traditions can be based on the dominant feature of the attitude towards the deceased. Burial ceremonies have always been a compulsory element of both the material and spiritual culture of ancient and modern societies. Rituals associated with burial have been known since the Paleolithic period, and our ancestors paid special attention to death and the ceremonies connected to it from ancient times [1]. In this regard, great importance was placed on interpreting and understanding the concept of life after death. Moral norms and specific rituals were developed based on these beliefs. Over time, burial ceremonies took on traditional forms and became established customs, evolving into a fundamental principle. The items placed with the deceased in ancient rituals were symbolic objects buried alongside the individuals. These objects provide insights into the deceased's social status, profession, and beliefs. Grave goods included personal items such as jewelry, weapons, and household tools, reflecting the belief that the deceased would continue to use them in the afterlife.

**Food and drinks:** Meals and drinks were also placed with the deceased to satisfy their nutritional needs in the afterlife.

**Religious symbols and images:** Various religious symbols, paintings, and statues were placed in the graves to assist the deceased on their spiritual journey.

Many ancient societies believed in an afterlife, and burial ceremonies were based on this belief. The Egyptians practiced mummification to preserve the body, as they believed the body would be needed in the future life. Similarly, in ancient Turkic graves, weapons or even horses were buried alongside the deceased.



Ancient burial ceremonies were often conducted with grandeur. According to customs, regardless of nationality or culture, each ceremony had a specific meaning. For instance, washing the body, dressing it, offering food, and determining the burial site were essential rituals.

In the study of ancient cemeteries, archaeology and ethnography have always complemented each other. One of the main concepts in these disciplines is the customs related to burial ceremonies and the religious beliefs associated with them. These concepts are vast, and sometimes, they seem limitless [2]. Ethnography primarily presents its views through the study and analysis of field observations. Archaeology, on the other hand, provides insights into burial rituals by thoroughly investigating graves, analyzing their structure, the condition of skeletons, and material findings within the graves.

In the Tashkent oasis region, there are more than eight hundred sites dating to the late Bronze Age, early Iron Age, Antiquity, and the medieval period. The Tashkent oasis is one of Uzbekistan's largest historical and cultural regions.

The earliest catacomb graves were geographically widespread, found in various regions such as Central Asia, the Near East, Europe, and South America. Their shapes and construction styles varied across different periods and cultures.

A significant portion of the burial sites from the Antiquity period in the Tashkent oasis consists of catacomb-type burial structures. These types of graves can be found in many regions of our country, particularly in the Uchtepa and Ghulbo burial sites in the Jizzakh region, in the burial sites of the Kogoy-Qorabuloq culture in the Fergana Valley [3], and in the central and western Sogdian regions such as Akjartepa [4], Sazagon [5], Ohalik [6], Hazora [7], Saghanok, Uchtepa [8], Qayraghoch, Khoja-Baqirgon [9]. These burial mounds also appear in numerous archaeological sites in the Tashkent oasis, including the "Nikiforov lands" [10], Angren [11], Ohangaron [12], Piskent [13], Kindiktepa [14], Kavardon [15], Yangiyul [16], Bustonliq [17], and Parkent [18] districts.

In the burial rituals of the Bronze Age Zamonbobo and Sapalli cultures, we can observe that graves with chambered niches were widespread. Later, in Central Asia, during the early Iron Age, graves with chambered niches began to decline in the last quarter of the first millennium. However, starting from the Antiquity period, catacomb-style graves became widely popular [19]. S. S. Sorokin sharply criticized the claim that the spread of catacomb graves in Central Asia was linked to the Huns, calling it "completely incorrect and inconsistent with historical processes." He emphasized that the catacomb grave style was typical for the indigenous population of Central Asia [20]. However, like many other archaeologists, he mistakenly interpreted graves with chambered niches as catacomb graves, leading to numerous errors in his conclusions.

Such misunderstandings continue to persist among Russian archaeologists to this day. Russian archaeologist Y. G. Kutimov, in his PhD dissertation titled "The Origins and Spread of Catacomb-Type Graves in Central Asia (Based on Bronze Age Graves)," interpreted the burial structures of the Sapalli and Zamonbobo sites as catacomb graves [21]. Unfortunately, Russian colleague-archaeologists continue to repeat the mistakes in terminology made in Soviet archaeology, without thoroughly studying the internal structures of catacomb-type graves. In fact, the majority of these burial structures consist of chambered niche graves.

Y. A. Zadneprovskiy, in contrast to S. S. Sorokin's views, argued in his own studies on Fergana's catacomb and chambered niche graves that "new burial structures—catacomb graves—emerged in the Fergana Valley in the 3rd–2nd centuries BC. Archaeological and anthropological materials



suggest that catacomb graves were introduced from outside," linking the origin of catacomb graves to the Yuezhi [22]. On the other hand, B. A. Litvinsky stated that catacomb graves have local roots and are not related to the entry of the Huns or Yuezhi into Central Asia but spread rapidly due to material and cultural connections with the Sarmatians [23].

A. Askarov emphasized that the migration of the Sarmatians and their movement southward led to the emergence of catacomb graves in the burial practices of the nomadic and settled tribes of the Qovunchi culture in the mid-Syr Darya basin starting from the 3rd–2nd centuries BC [24].

What caused the appearance of catacomb-type graves in the Qovunchi culture today? Was it the migration of tribes speaking different languages? The need to protect grave goods from treasure hunters? Or perhaps the establishment of private property in society? Finding answers to these questions remains a subject for future research.

The positioning of catacomb graves in Central Asian regions relative to the dromos (entrance corridor), their length, orientation, the side from which the burial chamber (lahad) was accessed, the presence or absence of stairs at the edge of the ayvon (porch), and the various ways the entrance to the chamber was sealed (using soil, clay, stones, etc.) have led to the identification of over 12 different types [25].

In the Tashkent oasis, catacomb graves, based on the land's relief, were accessed horizontally at a slope of 70–80 degrees into the burial chamber. Special corridors (dromos) allowed entry from the most convenient direction. There are two types of dromos: the first type is found in the Kavardon [26] burial mounds. These dromos are typically found in flat terrains. The entrance pit to the dromos was rectangular in shape, measuring 2.45x1.40 m, 1.70x1.60 m, and had a depth of 3.10–3.40 m. The dromos led to the burial chamber, and from a height of 80 cm, steps led down into the burial chamber. The height of the dromos was 55–75 cm, with a width of around 70 cm. In the second case, the relief of the land was taken into account when digging the dromos. In hilly or sloping areas, the dromos directly sloped into the burial chamber. The dimensions of such dromos were approximately 60x80 cm, and they did not use stairs. The lengths of the dromos varied from 3 to 15 meters. In the Tashkent oasis, we can see that the type of long-dromos catacomb graves, such as those at the Kenkol burial sites, were widespread. The entrance to the dromos was sealed with soil, clay, stones, or other materials.

The interior structure of the burial chambers varied, with some being oval or egg-shaped, while others were rectangular. The walls were very smooth, and the ceilings were often constructed in a dome-like shape. The size of the burial chambers differed depending on the number of bodies to be buried. A chamber for one person measured approximately 2x0.9 meters. Chambers for two to five people measured up to 2.70x3 to 3.50 meters. The construction of the burial mounds took into account the geographical conditions and the terrain's relief. As a result, graves were located 2 to 5 meters deep from the surface. Bodies were buried individually, in pairs, or sometimes in groups of up to five or six. Both single-use and multiple-use graves were found. The deceased were typically laid on their backs in a straight position, sometimes with legs bent, or in a crouched position with the knees facing either side. The heads of the deceased were generally oriented toward the north and northeast. The bodies were mostly buried in northern and eastern directions, though occasionally they were oriented southward.

Some scholars associate the burial orientations during antiquity with processes involving the influx of numerous pastoralists [27]. Occasionally, disorderly placements of bodies in graves can also be

observed during burial ceremonies. The positioning of the deceased in the grave may be linked to religious beliefs as well as the relief of the land. In burial chambers, reeds or small gravel were sometimes placed under the lower part of the bodies, and occasionally stones were placed under the head and hands. The practice of placing a stone under the head has continued since the Bronze Age. This can be seen at the Qorabuloq site in the Fergana Valley [28] and the Ertosh-Dulana burial mounds in the Ohangaron Valley [29]. In some graves, there is also a tradition of placing wood under the bodies or burying them in wooden coffins. To provide comfort and honor to the deceased, various items were placed under their bodies, showing respect during burial. Around the deceased in the burial chambers, various ceramic items, jewelry, weapons, food, seals, spindle whorls, and other objects were placed. Religious beliefs and concepts about the afterlife formed unique ideas in the minds of people, which were reflected in their burial rituals.

The primary purpose of the earliest catacomb graves was to protect the bodies of the deceased and prepare them for the afterlife. When constructing catacomb graves, various items related to the deceased's life, such as food, weapons, and religious symbols, were placed inside.

Catacomb graves held religious and cultural significance for ancient people, reflecting their belief in the afterlife. In some cultures, it was believed that the connection between the deceased's spirit and their family members could be maintained through the catacomb graves.

For archaeologists, catacomb graves serve as an important source for studying ancient societies. These graves provide valuable insights into burial ceremonies, religious beliefs, social structures, and the daily life of ancient cultures.

The earliest catacomb graves provide a wealth of information about people's views on death and the afterlife, as well as their customs and beliefs. They hold a significant place in human history and are of great importance in archaeological research. Starting from antiquity, catacomb-style graves became widespread in the construction of burial sites in the Tashkent oasis. These types of graves can be found throughout the region, from the lowest plains to the higher mountainous areas. Most of the findings from these graves are known in science under the name "Qovunchi culture." The emergence and spread of the "Qovunchi culture" to other regions are directly related to the Tashkent oasis.

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