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TOMB OF SAKA PRINCES DISCOVERED IN THE SAYANS, SIBERIA

The Sayans are high mountains situated in the centre of Asia. They border on the Altay in the southwest, on the Minussinsk steppe in the north and west, and stretch as far east as Lake Baikal. Their southern spurs touch the dry steppes of Tuva and Mongolia. The presence of small hollows with lush meadows and abundant water sources was favourable for humans who lived there in various epochs.

In the very beginning of the 1st millennium BC, militant tribes of nomads, whom the Greeks called Scythians, and the Persians called Saka, made their first appearance in the Eurasian steppes. The Scythian culture is well known from numerous rich mounds of the nobles in the northern Pontic area. For a long time, all the views of the Scythian culture were connected with this region, while the culture of the Asian nomads was largely overlooked and regarded as a remote and backward periphery of the "brilliant" Scythian world, despite the fact that already Herodotus, "Father of History", wrote that Scythians had arrived from somewhere deep inside Asia.

Indeed, recent excavations have yielded new data and prompted us to take a new look on the formation of the Scythian type cultures in Asian steppes and to begin to understand the sources and routes of the evolution of nomadism as the leading economical system in many steppe peoples over the last three millennia. Number one among these discoveries is Arzhan, the famous "King's Mound" investigated by M.P.Gryaznov and M.Kh.Mannay-Ool in the Uyuk Hollow high up in the Western Sayans (fig.1). This was a huge stone construction, cylindrical in shape, about 120 m in diameter and up to 4 m in height. Under an impressive mass of stones, an intricate wooden construction was found, consisting of seventy large frameworks. In the central framework, the "king" and the "queen" were buried together with six "king's" horses and his eight associates; in other frameworks there were seven more persons and about 160 mounting horses in full harness. Unfortunately, the tomb was partly looted many centuries ago, but the preserved remains of clothing, golden and silver ornaments, bronze weapons, and numerous pieces of harness demonstrate that a top-ranking person had been buried there, probably a chief of a large tribal union. Using all available archaeological indicators, as well as the results of the dendrochronological and radiocarbon analyses, Arzhan was dated to the 8th century BC (Gryaznov 1980, p.54; Gryaznov 1984; Marsadolov 1985, p.10). This is the earliest Scythian type mound of such status in the Eurasian steppes, which is a weighty argument in favour of the Central Asiatic origin of the Scythians. L.R.Kyzlasov suggested that the "king" buried

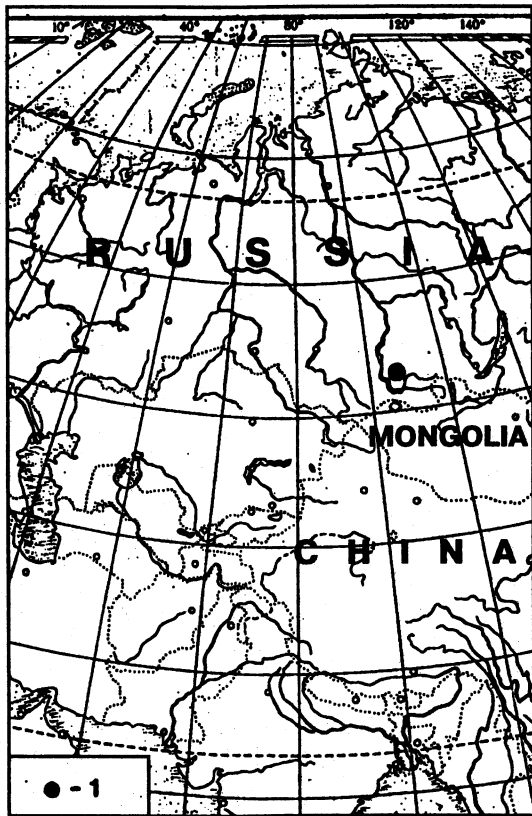


Fig.1: The map of disposition of archaeological site "Teplaya" in Usinsk Valley, Western Sayan.

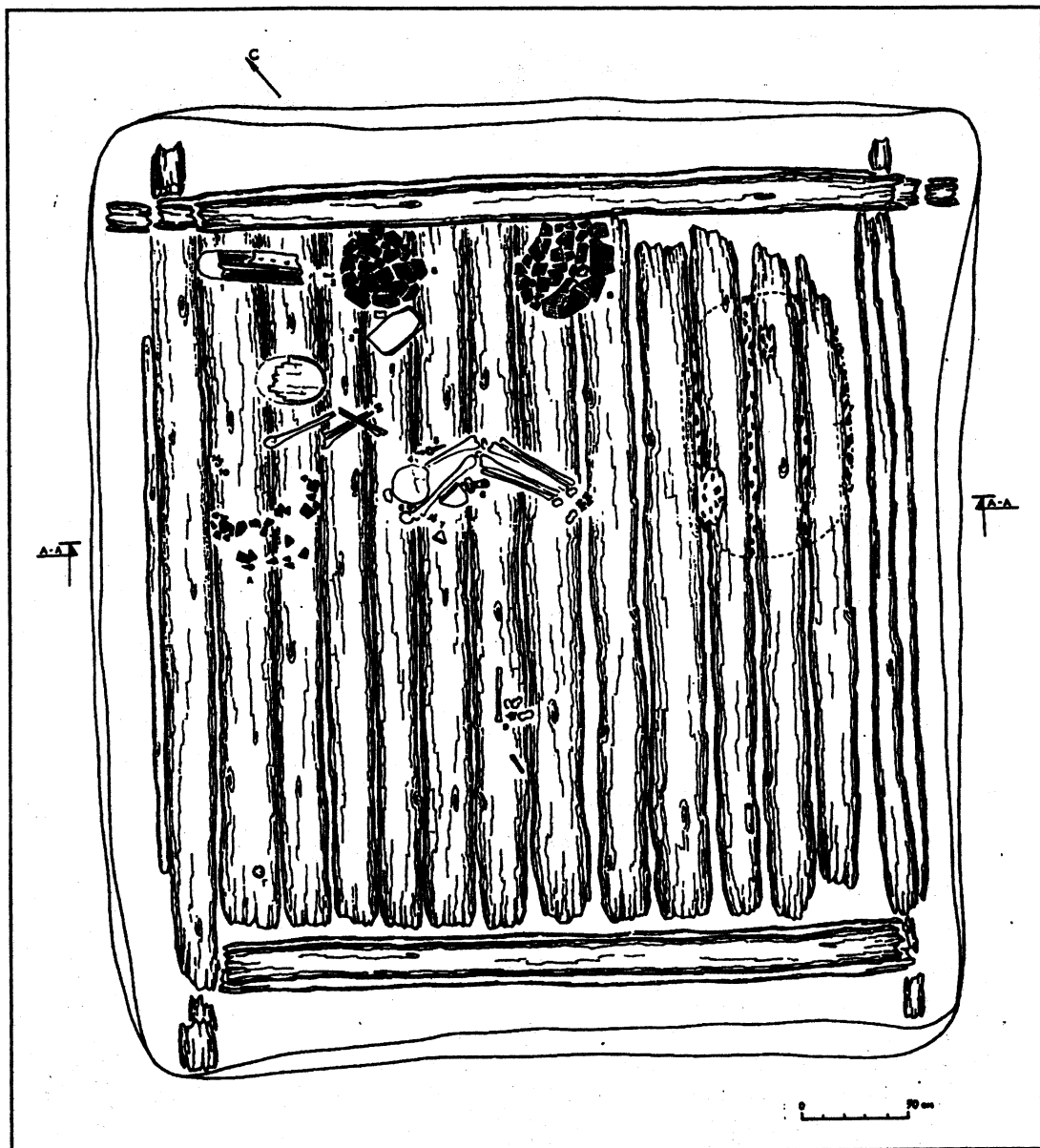


Fig.2: The plan of botton of the mound 2, cemetery "Teplaya".

in Arzhan was a Saka man from Kazakhstan (Kyzlasov 1977, pp.69-89). Similarity between the two regions in certain cultural elements is observed in later periods as well. Specifically, the varieties of the animal style seen in Tasmola and Aldybel' cultures are close to each other (Grach 1980, p.78), and the same is true of some features of the burial rite (Bokovenko 1986, p.46-48). However, new expressive complexes were needed to provide a conclusive proof of the Sakan attribution of Central Asiatic burials.

With this objective in mind, the present author has for more than ten years been surveying the Usa Hollow in the Sayans, close to Arzhan (fig.1). One of the ordinary assemblages discovered here was Badanka IV, which is synchronous with Arzhan (Bokovenko 1986a, p. 20). Only in 1993 did it become possible to launch excavations of a large stone mound in the Teplaya (Warm) River mouth. Excavations were prompted by the fact that the mound was being ploughed up every year.

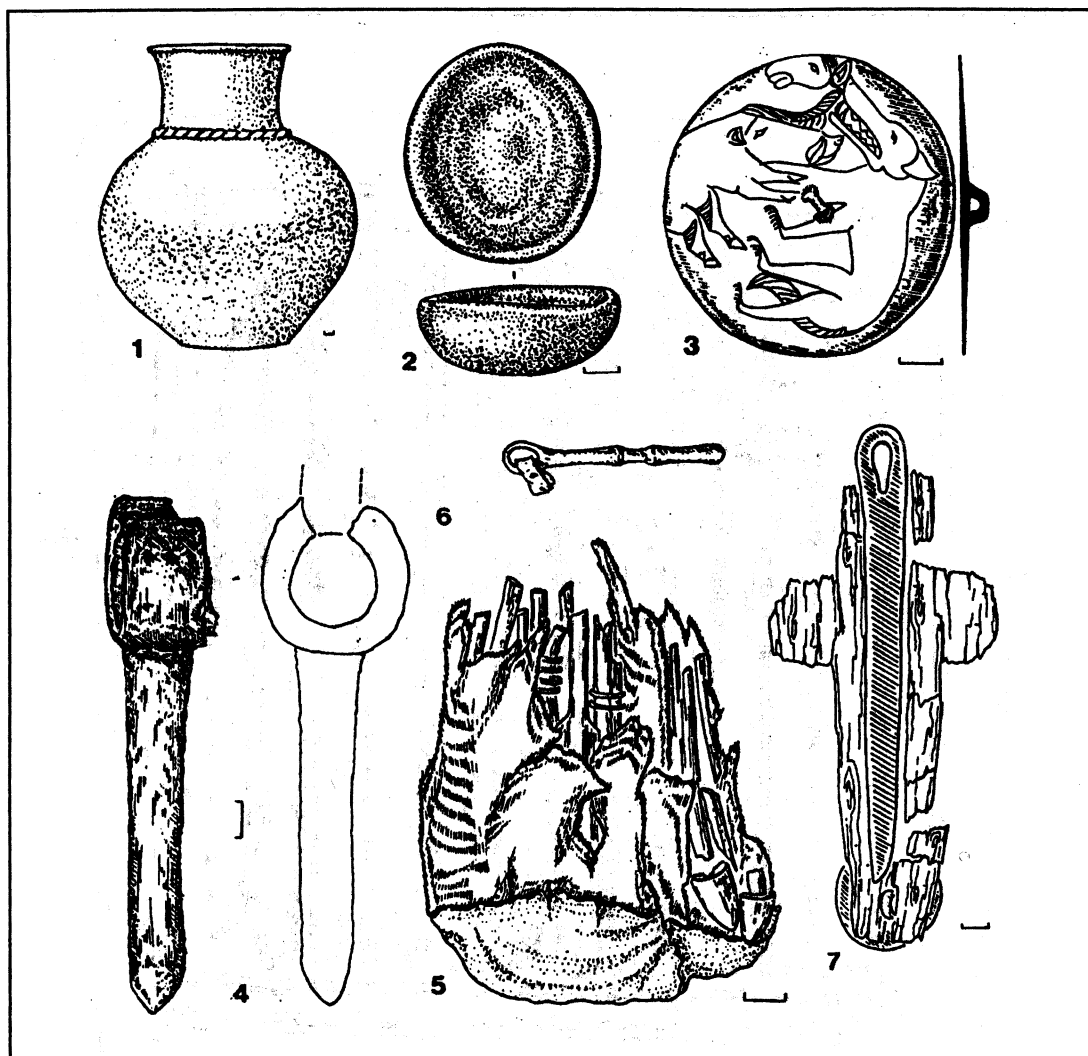


Fig.3: The things from mound 2: 1 — the vessel; 2 — the stone cup; 3 — the bronze mirror with engraving representations of animals; 4 — iron battle axe; 5 — remains of quiver; 6 — the bronze fastening; 7 — iron knife in wooden scabbard.

The diameter of the preserved ring of stones round the mound is 30 to 35 m, and the height of the mound is about 1.5 m. In its centre, there is a large squarish grave in which, at the depth of 3.4 m, a wooden framework was found, 3.6 m by 4 m, which had a floor and was covered by several layers of beams and birch bark. From the middle of the pit downwards, a vertical beam was traced, its lower end reaching the roof of the framework. This beam was apparently an element of the wooden construction. In the same place, remains of a wooden spade were found. The roof was partly moved aside, and the grave was looted many centuries ago. However, the northern part of the grave was left intact, making it evident that two nobles were buried (fig. 2).

Remains of an adult man, undisturbed, provide a possibility of reconstructing the posture of the buried persons, who were placed on their left sides, probably one behind another, their heads being oriented towards the northwest (fig.2). Near the man's head, a representation of a Siberian goat (ibex) was found, made of a golden sheet and shaped on a wooden template (fig. 4: 4). In the region of the waist, several artifacts were found: an iron pickaxe (fig. 3: 4), a knife in a wooden sheath (fig. 3: 7), a golden pin (fig. 4: 5), a small golden plate shaped like a soaring eagle (it was

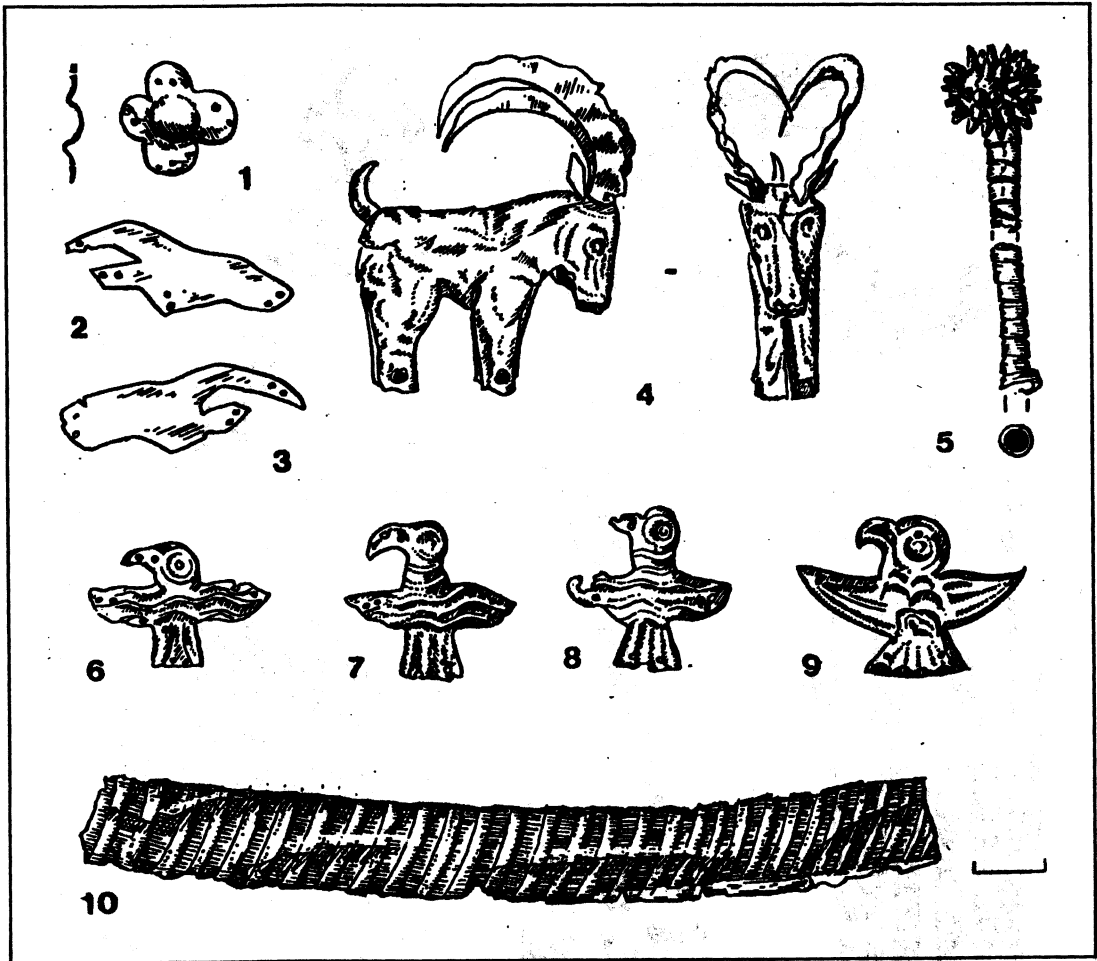


Fig.4: The golden things from mound 2: 1-3,6-9 — plaques; 4 — pole-top on the head attire; 5 — golden pin with iron basis; 10 — golden envelope of hand of the whip.

sewn to the clothing)(fig. 4: 9). Several similar plates shaped like eagles and heads of goats, as well as round ones with four petals, were found in the western corner amidst the heap of bones in the looters' pit, along with small turquoise beads and a golden plate with which the handle of a lash was decorated (fig. 4: 1-3, 6-8, 10). The looters probably lost the golden plates here when making a hasty escape from the place. Also, a bronze disk-shaped mirror was found on which figures of a boar and a wolf with a horse's head between them were engraved in a brilliant masterly manner (fig. 3: 3). In the northern corner of the grave and along its northeastern wall, a quiver was placed which contained a complete set of arrows with bronze, bone, and wooden heads (only the lower part has been preserved) (fig. 3: 5), as well as two jugs whose necks were decorated with cord impressions (both were smashed) (fig. 3: 1), and one more vessel at the northwestern wall. In the western corner, a small stone cup was found (fig. 3: 2). After the floor had been removed, it turned out that prior to its construction a heavy "purifying" fire burnt in the eastern part of the pit (fig. 2).

All the available data (a large stone mound encircled by stones, a deep grave, a huge wooden framework, prestigious golden artifacts, as well as the position of the mound, which dominates the landscape) indicate that the buried persons were nobles of a princely rank.

Only the central grave has been excavated, and the flank burials, usually situated around the main grave, are to be surveyed in the forthcoming season.

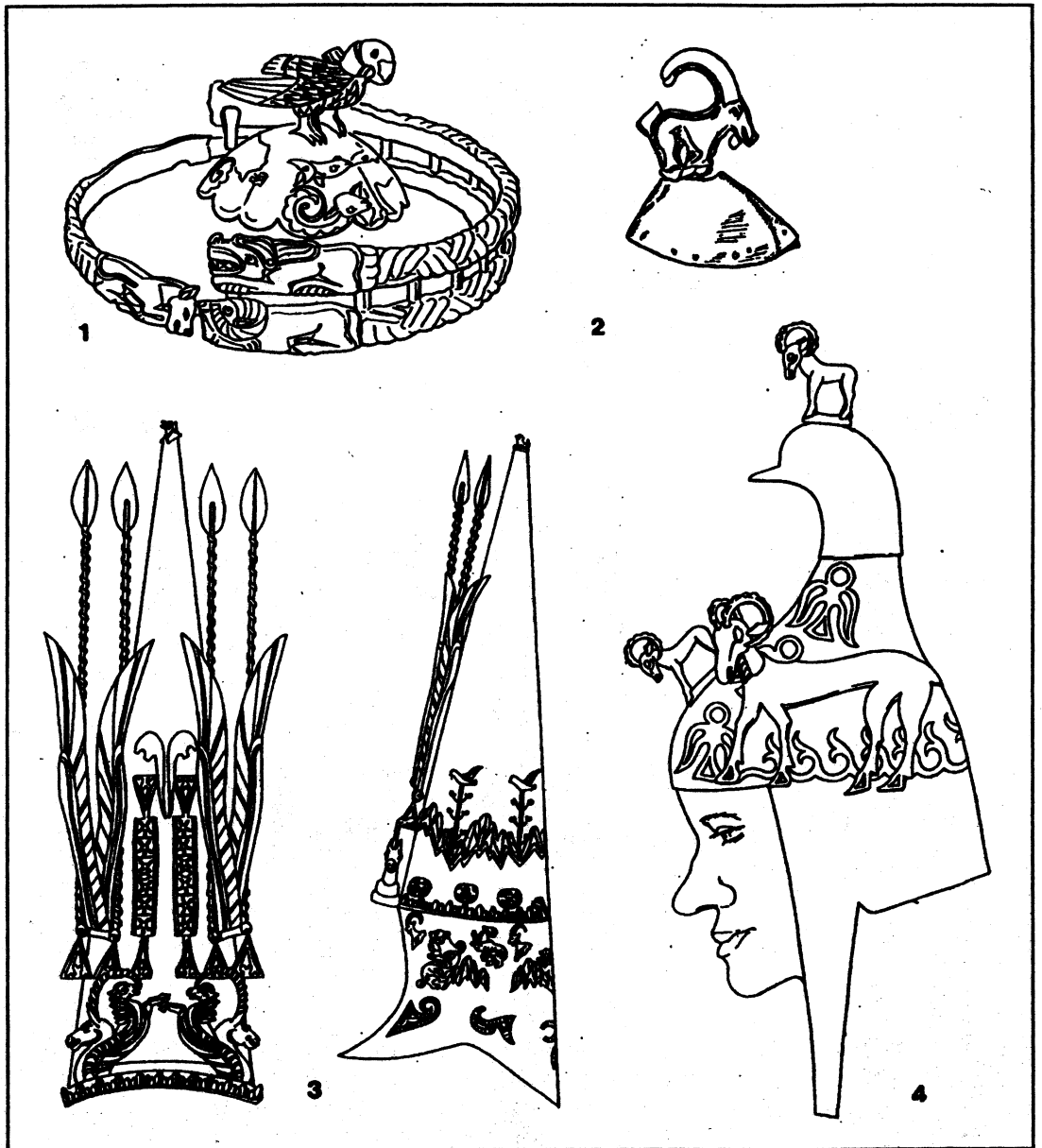


Fig.5: The head attires from mounds of Saka: 1 — Inner Mongolia, Chine; 2 — Tuva; 3 — Issyk, Kazakhstan; 4 — Ak-Alacha, Altay.

The burial rite and the grave goods are characteristic of the Sagly stage of the Uyuk Culture and may be tentatively dated to 500-300 BC. Wooden frameworks of a similar design, the posture and the orientation of the buried people, as well as the grave goods (ceramics, weapons, and elements of costume) are typical features of exactly that stage (Grach 1980, figs.6, 16, 21, 49 a.o.). Very similar adornments were found by S.A.Teploukhov in 1929 in Mound 126 of Turan IV, located in the adjacent Uyuk Hollow (Mannay-Ool 1970, fig.22), and in graves of the Scythian period in Aymyrylg and Suglug-Khem, Tuva (Mandelshtam 1992, tab.77-78; Semenov 1994) (fig. 5: 2). The same themes, but rendered in wood in a masterly fashion, are predominant in burial assemblages of Yustyd, Ulandryk, Tashanta, and Ak-Alakha, Highland Altai (Kubarev 1987, 1991;

Polos'mak 1991, fig.14; Polos'mak 1994, fig. 38) and attest to the significance of the goat and eagle images in the headdress of the Pazyryk time (fig. 5: 4). The presence of these representations in the headdress of the famous "golden man" from a king's mound in Issyk, Kazakhstan (Akishev K. 1978, figs.62, 63; Akishev A. 1984, tabl.1) (fig. 5: 3), and in the golden headdress from Khaidin Aymak, Inner Mongolia of China (Wang Binghua 1985, 1987; Debaine-Francfort 1988) (fig. 5: 3) demonstrate that over the entire Scythian period, the Sako-Massagetan world extended as far east as China and the Yenisey.

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