

Graves of Saints on the Mountains of the Southern Urals: Traditional Beliefs and Modern Perception

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This article examines the historical development of the cult of sacred mountains on the basis of field materials gathered by the authors during archaeological and ethnographic research on Mount Awliya Tau in Kugarchinsky District, Bashkortostan in 2023, and on the works of contemporary researchers devoted to orolatriy (veneration of mountains) in the Southern Urals.

The research used a synergistic approach, integrating archaeological, ethnographic, and social media data with geoinformation mapping. The results reveal similar patterns and trends in the formation and development of sacred spaces associated with some mountain tops. Awliya Tau's significance extends beyond traditional Muslim pilgrimage and tourism; it's also integrated into contemporary religious and psychological practices, etc.

KEYWORDS: Awliya Tau, cult of mountains, cult of saints, archaeology, ethnography, Southern Urals

Članek preučuje zgodovinski razvoj kulta svetih gora na podlagi terenskega gradiva, ki so ga avtorji zbrali med arheološkimi in etnografskimi raziskavami gore Awliya Tau v okrožju Kugarchinsky v Baškortostanu leta 2023, ter na podlagi del sodobnih raziskovalcev, posvečenih orolatriji (čaščenju gora) v Južnem Uralu. Raziskava je uporabila sinergijski pristop, ki je združeval arheološko, etnografsko gradivo in podatke z družbenih omrežij z geoinformacijskim kartiranjem.

Rezultati razkrivajo podobne vzorce in trende pri oblikovanju ter razvoju svetih prostorov, povezanih z določenimi gorskimi vrhovi. Pomen gore Awliya Tau presega tradicionalno muslimansko romanje in turizem; vključena je tudi v sodobne verske in psihološke prakse.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Awliya Tau, kult gora, kult svetnikov, arheologija, etnografija, Južni Ural

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Russian society, where religion profoundly influences many aspects of human life, studying its practices and institutions remains highly relevant. Researchers are particularly drawn to cult sites and sacred places, which are associated not only with the revival of once-forgotten traditions of veneration and worship, but also with active engagement in contemporary socio-cultural and ritual practices.

In this regard, special attention should be paid to the study of the territory of the Southern Urals, a significant part of which is located within the modern administrative borders of the Republic of Bashkortostan (hereinafter RB). Due to its geographical location and unique historical and ethnic development, the region is considered a special ethno-cultural zone. The formation of the Bashkir people unfolded over a long period of time, and after their integration into the Russian state in the mid-16th century, there was an active resettlement of various national and religious groups. The on-going ethno-cultural processes and interactions in the region have given rise to distinct ethno-confessional stereotypes, many of which are associated with sacred objects and places of worship.

In the Southern Urals, rich in mountain ranges, ridges and hilly plains, the cult of mountains remains an important element of religious belief. It is manifested in various ways among the peoples of the region. The cult is often closely associated with the custom of burying people on hills and mountain tops, and the traces of these burials are recorded today in the form of archaeological sites, and are perceived by local residents as sacred objects.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the South Ural Old Believers worshiped the graves of holy elders on the slopes of Mount Yurma (Kusinsky District, Chelyabinsk region). The Mari people of Bashkortostan, most of whom adhere to their ethnic religion ("Mari paganism"), continue to venerate the summit of Shukyn Kuryk. According to legend, this is the burial site of Kuryk Kugyza, a celebrated defender of the Mari people (Kaltasinsky District, RB).

The Tatar and Bashkir populations of the Republic of Bashkortostan, who traditionally practice Islam, especially venerate the mountains of Aush Tau (Uchalinsky District) and Toratau (Ishimbaysky District). These peaks house the graves of saints – known as Awliya (also spelt aulia or wali, meaning "patron" or "saint" in Arabic) – who are revered by Muslims. While Tatars mostly associate the concept of Awliya with people revered as saints, in Bashkir tradition – as observed by A.K. Idiatullov – it has a broader meaning and often implies holy mountains, springs, etc. (Idiatullov, 2018: 91).

Over many years of expeditions made to different regions of the Southern Urals, the authors have studied mountains and hills where stone mounds or formations were recorded, which the local (primarily Bashkir) population refers to as Әүлиә тауы (Awliya Tau, Mountain of a Saint) and Изгеләр тауы (Izgelar Tau, Mountain of Saints). According to the residents of nearby settlements, legendary *batyrs* (folk heroes) and revered saints of Awliya are believed to be buried there. People visit the graves to honour them, request help, healing and receive blessings. Notably, in the local perception, the summit and the tombs upon it are often regarded as a single sacred space.

According to the researchers, the cult of holy mountains, Awliya Tau, was formed in the Southern Urals due to the influence of Islam on the local ancient traditions that revered mountain tops and hills as sacred sites for worshipping host spirits and the supreme deity. As a result, these sacred places were transformed and reinterpreted as Muslim shrines, with mountains housing the graves of saints (Awliya) becoming particularly revered. They are known as Awliya Tau (Suleymanova, 2005: 16–18; Absalyamova, Aminev, Mannapov, Migranova, 2019: 64; Shaikhislamova, 2014: 1483) and are found in many areas of Bashkortostan.

Nowadays, such sites have become popular destinations for religious tourism, attracting pilgrims, casual travellers and people specializing in spiritual practices, training programmes etc.

The Awliya Tau located in Kugarchinsky District, Bashkortostan, is a striking example of these processes. Its summit is home to a number of cult objects as well as elements that the authors had not encountered before – pieces of plastic bags tied to tree branches and the iron fences of graves, scraps of signal tape, children's toys left by visitors and notes with affirmations – positive statements written in the form of short phrases.

Despite its regional and wider popularity as a place of worship and pilgrimage, Awliya Tau has yet to be the subject of a dedicated study. At the same time, studies of the formation and development of sacred spaces associated with individual mountain tops allow us to identify local features of ethno-cultural traditions and also provide a retrospective analysis of their development within the socio-cultural fabric of certain regions (Dugarov, 2005; Karataev, 2021; Absalyamova, 2022).

The purpose of the work is to study the beliefs and religious practices of the South Ural population, which are associated with the cult of sacred mountains based on the materials discovered on the summit of Awliya Tau.

To achieve the study's purpose, the following objectives were formulated:

- to describe the physical condition of the sacred mountain of Awliya Tau and the places of worship located on it;
- to identify and characterize the complex of religious rituals and spiritual practices carried out on the specified mountain top;
- to conduct a retrospective study of the formation of the sacred site being studied and determine its socio-cultural significance for the local population, the district, and the region.

SOURCES. METHODS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article is based on field materials obtained in the course of a complex archaeological and ethnographic expedition to the territory of Kugarchinsky District, Bashkortostan Republic in September 2023.

Given that modern scientific research depends on well-organised processes, interdisciplinary data analysis, cutting-edge methods and continuous theoretical and methodological advancements, a synergetic approach was adopted to address the issue.

As part of the expedition, an archaeological field study of the summit of Awliya Tau was carried out. It involved an examination of tombstone structures and stone layouts, along with video recording, photography and documentation of their current condition, with signs of sacralisation identified separately.

Additionally, ethnographic methods were employed by interviewing local residents to gather primary information. Non-ethnographic research methods were also used to analyse online photo and video resources and study posts tagged “Awliya Tau Kugarchinsky District”.

It is important to note that netnography – a term combining “net” (network) and “nography” (ethnography) – is a specialised approach for studying virtual spaces through online communications, which has been introduced into academic discourse by Dr. Robert V. Kozinets relatively recently (Kozinets, 2020). Although this technique is still considered innovative in Russia, its application in the study of religious rituals, pilgrimages, places of worship and holy places allows us to obtain more comprehensive data (Yavnaya, 2023).

Systematic and historical methods were employed to study the formation and development of the sacred space of Awliya Tau. The systematic method enables us to consider the mountain and the cult objects located on it as a historical, archaeological, religious and mythological complex, to which a system of specific traditions and rituals is attached. Meanwhile, the historical method makes it possible to trace the development of the sacred space’s organisational structure and its integration into the contemporary socio-cultural context of the South Ural region.

Considering that the formation of individual sacred spaces is influenced by many factors, including landscape and natural geography, we also used the method of geoinformation mapping to compare the site under study with other Muslim places of worship that share similar form and content.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SITE

Awliya Tau is located between the Russian village of Kuzminovka and the Bashkir villages Ibragimovo and 1st Tupchanovo in Kugarchinsky District, Bashkortostan (Fig. 1). The citizens of the Bashkir villages believe this place to be sacred. At the foot of the mountain – an important feature of the local landscape – flows the Bolshoy Ik River, fed by the Malyi Ik and Karachayelga tributaries. According to local informants, during the Soviet era the mountain was called Berekme Tau (“the mountain that connects”), while its current name is relatively recent. It is also known as Topsan. Nearby, a route used by tourists from the Mrakovo settlement leads to the Muradymovsky Gorge, with Awliya Tau on the way.

The dome-shaped mountain rises 474 m above sea level with relatively gentle slopes, most of which are covered with woodland, except for the south-eastern part. Despite its isolated location, its south and south-west adjoin the spurs of the Urals. The rounded, partially wooded summit, is home to cult objects and can be reached by a path that leads up from the foot of its eastern side near the village of 1st Tupchanovo. The intensity of visitation to the site can be indirectly inferred from the depth of its surface depression, which reaches up to 12 cm below the surrounding area.

Not so long ago, the mountain had a guardian, Alimgulov Minnulla Galimyanovich, a resident of the village of 1st Tupchanovo. Before he died in December 2012, people made a short video about him (*Secrets of the mountain of Awliya Tau*). Everything he knew about the mountain he had learnt from his grandfather who used to take him there when he was a child. With time, M.G. Alimgulov climbed the mountain with people willing to see it and he told them the history of the place, taught them how to pray, etc.

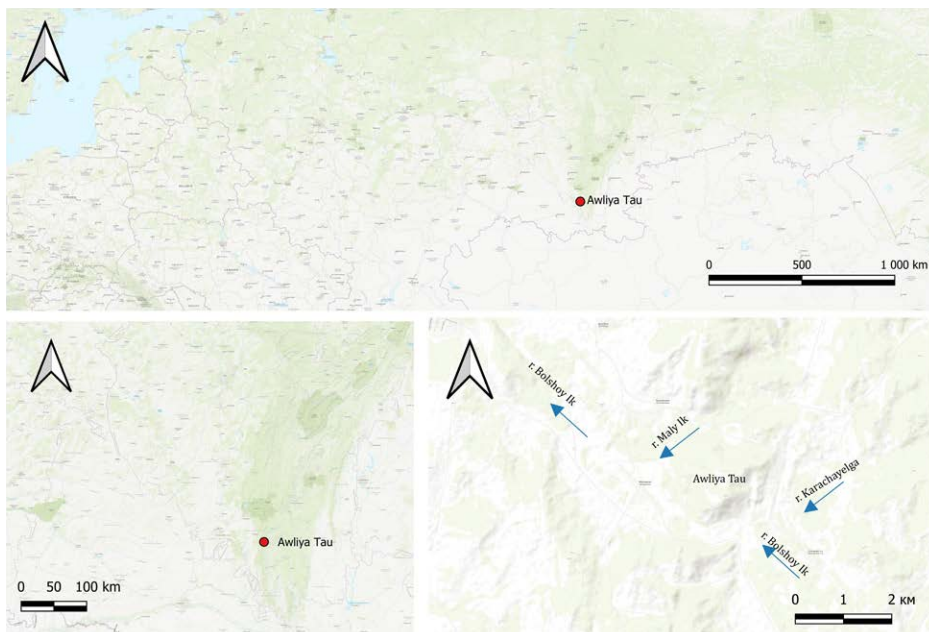


Figure 1: The location of Mt. Awliya Tau.

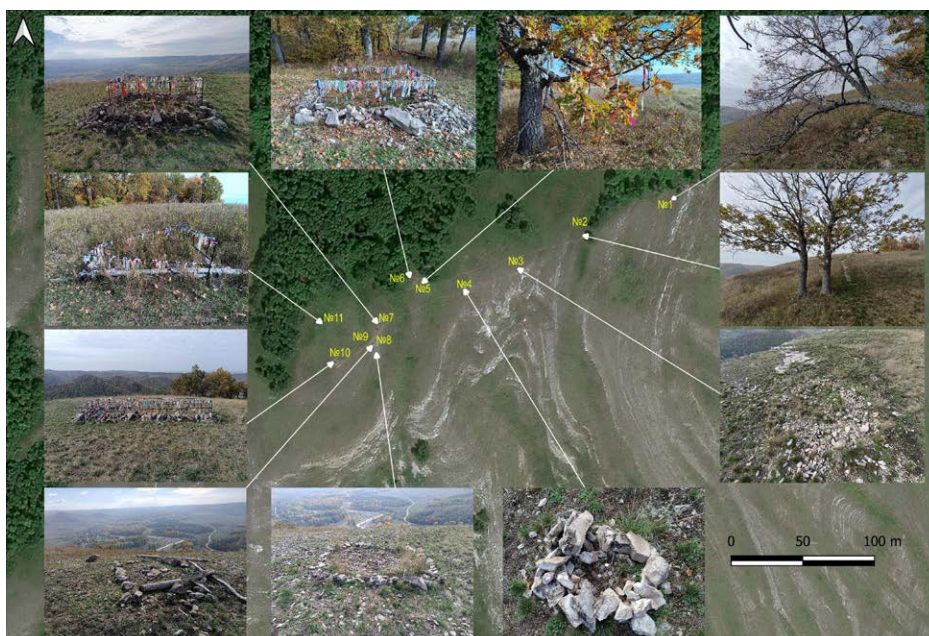


Figure 2: Plan of the location of religious objects on Mt. Awliya Tau: 1–2, 5 – trees with decorated branches; 3–4, 8–9 – stone layouts; 6–7, 10–11 – graves of Awliya.

There is a belief that his knowledge may have been passed down by the well-known religious leader and healer Shamigula Khalfa (Shamigula Badretdinovich Bikbaev, 1876–1957), a native of the village of Saitkulovo (Absalyam) in the same district, whose burial place is venerated as sacred.

CULT OBJECTS

The cult complex of Awliya Tau may be divided into two key components: the natural (landscape) element, including the mountain's summit, and the anthropogenic (man-made) element. The latter can be further subdivided into groups of individual elements: 1) trees decorated with ribbons; 2) stone layouts; 3) wooden structures; 4) graves of saints.

All these objects, located near or on the summit of the mountain, have been numbered consecutively and marked on the map (Fig. 2). Most of them are concentrated at the summit of Awliya Tau on an irregularly oval-shaped platform that is bordered by forest to the west, north-west, north and north-north-east, by relatively steep slopes to the south-east, south and south-west and by gentler slopes to the east.

Three objects from the first group are trees with decorated branches, positioned along the path that leads from the foot of the mountain to its summit.

The first tree (Fig. 2-1) is located approximately 300 m from the starting point of the ascent. The trail passes beneath a low tree trunk, whose end nearly touches the ground, forming a natural "arch". A number of ribbons, handkerchiefs and scraps of yellow-black signal tape are tied to its branches. According to informants, this unusually curved trunk is like an entrance to the sacred space of the mountain.

Ascending several dozen metres, the trail passes by two solitary trees (Fig. 2-2). It runs beneath their branches, which are adorned with ribbons, fragments of fabric and plastic bags. The trail then splits: one of the paths goes to the forest, on the edge of which there is another tree with numerous colourful ribbons (Fig. 2-5). The second path passes by four stone layouts – two in the upper part and two at the summit – and then leads to the site where the graves of the saints are located.

The study first dealt with the objects located along the trail leading to the edge of the forest. On the way to it, on the left side, there was a contour stone layout, an oval structure measuring 2.7 m by 3.2 m, composed of a single row of small and medium-sized stones with smooth, rounded edges (Fig. 2-3). Among the stones, rusty and patina-covered coins in denominations of 50 kopecks, 1 ruble and 2 rubles, dating from 1998 to 2012, were found.

Further along the path, on the right side, there was a second contour stone layout composed of medium and large stones (in two rows in some places), which was round in shape and between 0.8 m and 0.7 m in diameter (Fig. 2-4). Inside the circle, there was a pile of clean, oxide-free coins in denominations of 50 kopecks and 1, 2, 5 and 10 rubles, dating from 2005 to 2023.

The next two stone layouts, located to the left of the path, were situated near each other at the summit, closer to the south-eastern edge of the site.

The third stone layout, a square structure measuring 2 square metres, consists of large boulders and is integrated with a natural rock outcrop (Fig. 2-8). At the centre, a large stone is surrounded by small and medium-sized rock fragments. On its surface and nearby, coins were found (some covered in rust) in denominations of 50 kopecks, 1, 2, 5 and 10 rubles, dated between 1997 and 2023. Also, near the large stone, there was an open half-litre jar of honey, a log and two poles, one of which had a plastic lamp with a solar battery attached to its end.

About 2 m to the south-west of the previous site lies the fourth square stone layout (Fig. 2-9), measuring 2.2 by 2 metres and made of large stones. Within this structure, a circular stone layout was recorded. At this location, a broken metal women's hairpin and a chain with beads were found. Also, coins of various denominations – 50 kopecks, 1, 2 and 10 rubles, dated from 1997 to 2019 – were scattered around the inner perimeter, some showing deep rust while others were free of oxidation.

According to informants, these structures have been repeatedly reconstructed. For example, a few years ago, the site of the third square stone layout (Fig. 2-8) featured a layout measuring about 1.5 by 2 m, lined with stones of different sizes, with the same central boulder. Meanwhile, at the fourth layout (Fig. 2-9), a structure consisting of four poles decorated with numerous ribbons had been erected. One pole stood in the middle and was lined with numerous stones, while the other three leaned against it and were fastened together with a ribbon on top. According to some informants, there used to be a grave of a saint enclosed by a wooden fence on this site, a description of which will be given below.

A construction of logs and poles was found closer to the forest, connected to the trunks of two dead trees. One of the trees was decorated with ribbons, while the second had a log, a pole and part of an iron fence from the grave leaning against it, all adorned with ribbons. Nearby, two more poles and a triangular-shaped stone lay on the ground, with two small stones, a tasbih rosary with black round beads, several 2-ruble coins and one 10-ruble coin, dated between 2019 and 2023 placed on them.

It is worth noting that this particular construction was obviously included in the cult complex at a later stage and may have originally served as a place for storing unnecessary things. Nevertheless, the construction and the wooden pole stuck into the ground near the first grave – also adorned with ribbons and even a sock – was allocated to a separate group.

The last group of religious sites consists of the graves of saints.

The first of them (Fig. 2-6) is located on the edge of the forest near a tree with branches adorned with ribbons. The grave is lined along its perimeter with large and medium-sized stones, forming a rectangle measuring 3 by 2 metres, oriented along the north-west – south-east axis. It is enclosed on three sides by a metal fence, adorned with multi-coloured ribbons of different lengths, pieces of signal tape, handkerchiefs, etc. Some women's jewellery, a bracelet with beads, and an elastic hairband were also attached to the fence. The missing section of the fence on the northwest side was located near a construction made of logs and poles. Among the stones, two stand out: one, over a metre long, was notably large, while the other had an unusual bluish hue and was tied with a pink ribbon. Coins in denominations of 50 kopecks, 1, 2, 5 and 10 rubles, issued between 1998 and 2023, were scattered all around, most of them inside the stone layout.

The second grave, measuring 2 by 3 metres and square-shaped, stretches along the west-southwest to east-northeast axis (Fig. 2-7). It is located 40 m south-west of the first grave. It is surrounded by large and medium-sized stones and enclosed on all four sides by a metal fence. Inside, there is another oval-shaped stone layout, along the inner space of which coins were recorded, including some with traces of deep rust in denominations of 1 and 2 rubles, issued between 2006 and 2019. Like the previous grave, the fence is decorated with numerous ribbons, handkerchiefs, plastic bags, etc.

A note with affirmations was also found there. These are positive statements written in the form of short phrases, which will be discussed later.

The third grave (Fig. 2-10) is located about 40 metres south-west of the second. Similar to the previous graves, it is lined with stones around the perimeter and enclosed on four sides with a metal fence. However, it stands out due to its larger dimensions of 3 by 5 metres. Inside the stone layout, which is oriented along a long axis from the north-northwest to south-southeast, there is an oval-shaped stone layout. Coins of 50 kopecks, 1, 2 and 10 rubles, issued between 1998 and 2019 were recorded all around, with the highest concentration observed in the south-eastern half of the grave. A small black stone with a regular rounded shape was also found there.

The fence was decorated with numerous ribbons, handkerchiefs, plastic bags, etc. Among the stones, various objects were found, including candy wrappers, two toys – a money lamb and a dinosaur, a 50-ruble banknote, as well as two notes with affirmations.

The fourth grave (Fig. 2-11) is located in isolation at the edge of the forest, among dense bushes and grass, 42 m to the west of the second grave and 36 m north-northwest of the third. It is bordered on three sides by a wooden construction made of cross-laid logs and planks, the upper parts of which are adorned with faded pieces of fabric and ribbons. A metal fence is installed above the wooden construction, to which relatively few ribbons are tied, most of them sun-bleached, and only two fragments of signal tape. Unlike the others, this grave looks abandoned: the metal fence is broken and only a few coins were recorded on the planks in denominations of 2, 5 and 10 rubles, one issued in 1997 and the others between 2007 and 2022.

According to a legend passed down among the local population, a Bashkir leader and his family fiercely resisted the Tatar-Mongols trying to conquer the Bashkir lands. The family – including grandfather, grandmother, daughter-in-law and child – was buried on the mountain. To serve as both a warning and a means of intimidation, a Mongol military leader forbade burial in the ground, threatening brutal reprisals in case of violation of this order.

After the enemies had departed, the surviving Bashkirs decided that if the dead could not be buried on the plain, they could be buried on a mountain top. Years passed and over time people noticed that on the holidays of Uraza and Kurban-Bayram (Eid and Eid al-Adha), lights appeared on the mountain where the graves were located. They were associated with a blessing from Allah. Gradually, the local population came to believe that the mountain top was a holy place with miraculous powers that helped liberate people from sins and heal various diseases. People began to visit the mountain not only from the surrounding settlements and villages, but also from all over Bashkortostan and the adjacent regions of Russia and other countries including Kazakhstan and Egypt.

RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The traditions observed at Awliya Tau and in many areas of Bashkortostan, such as tying pieces of cloth and ribbons of different shapes, colours and sizes to the fences surrounding saints' graves, the branches of nearby trees or poles, leaving coins and jewellery as sacrifices, and making piles and pyramids of stones on mountain tops, have deep roots and are the manifestation of orolatriy – the veneration of mountains (Garustovich, 2011).

Many pilgrims tie ribbons and pieces of cloth as a sign of repentance and as a request for their wishes to be fulfilled. However, this is the first time the authors have observed yellow-black signal tape and plastic bags on the mountain. According to informants, this practice has appeared relatively recently and was introduced by tourists who visit Awliya Tau on the way to the Muradymovsky Gorge Nature Park.

According to the data posted in different years on the “Official Portal of the Republic of Bashkortostan”, the Park was visited by 17,500 people in 2018, 20,200 in 2019, 26,500 in 2020, 32,300 in 2021, 46,800 in 2022 and about 48,000 in 2023 (*Official portal*).

It is worth mentioning that local residents react strongly against the site's growing popularity and many of them express dissatisfaction with tourists, whose number is increasing every year. In their opinion, they litter the holy mountain with rubbish. Some members of the Muslim population believe that visiting graves, even those of saints, and seeking favours from the deceased is a sin or shirk (polytheism, paganism) and should be stopped.

According to the local tradition, everyone who ascends the mountain takes a stone with them as a symbol of their sins (the heavier the sin, the bigger the stone). Pilgrims put the stones and their fragments on the indicated graves or stone embankments and pray to the saints buried there. Some of them perform a circumambulation of the graves.

During the study, new objects left by some pilgrims and tourists were recorded that had not previously been encountered at other sacred sites in Bashkortostan. They included toys and notes with affirmations – positively worded statements intended as autosuggestions to change one's usual way of thinking and shape the desired future.

The concept of affirmation appeared in Western culture in the first half of the 20th century as part of training programmes that fall under the broader category of “self-help” (self-improvement, self-guided improvement). In Russia, this concept gained popularity primarily through the works of American writer Louise Hay, one of the promoters of affirmation practices. Self-help practices are widely used in popular psychology (neuro-linguistic programming, hypnosis, associative priming, etc.), as well as in mystical philosophical movements, such as New Thought and New Age (Shelestyuk, Galuschak, 2019: 110–111).

A total of three such notes (one poorly preserved) were left by women among the stones on the second (one note) and third graves (two notes). All of them were written in Russian and as projective statements in the present tense: all the authors affirm that they are successful, healthy, have fulfilling (comfortable) jobs, their own apartments and the opportunity to travel, etc. In general, their main content shows that the authors prioritise material comforts, family well-being, etc. Obviously, their small number does not allow

for broad conclusions, but it does indicate that the cult of the sacred mountain is being integrated into the modern socio-cultural environment.

It is worth noting that similar processes – the inclusion of mountain tops with the graves of saints in ritual practices by representatives of new religious movements and trends – have been recorded by the authors in many districts of the Republic of Bashkortostan and adjacent regions.

FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRED SPACE

There is almost no information about when people started treating Awliya Tau as a place of religious worship. In order to avoid conflicts with the local citizens, it was decided to carry out an archaeological survey without digging test pits or cleaning up the outcrop. An inspection of the sacred site showed that there is only one grave at the summit with a faintly visible earth embankment, roughly two metres in diameter. At its peak stood a wooden fence. Such mounds on mountain or hilltops are characteristic of burials from the Late Middle Ages and the early modern period in the Southern Urals (Fig. 2-11). Considering that archaeological materials from the Early Iron Age and the Middle Ages have been identified on many mountain tops of the Southern Urals – Kurmantau (Gafuriysky District, RB), Toratau (Ishimbaisky District, RB), Aush Tau (Uchalinsky District, RB), etc., this evidence testifies to the manifestation of the cult of mountains (Ovsyannikov, Kotov, Rafikova, Savelev, Garustovich, Ruslanov, 2022: 375–380). It is most likely that the Awliya Tau has held an important place in the religious beliefs of the local population since the Middle Ages.

With Islam spreading in the Southern Urals, pagan beliefs and rituals began to change. In Bashkir tradition, orolatory, closely related to the cult of ancestors (manifested by the construction of burial complexes on mountain tops), gradually transformed into the cult of sacred mountains (Ovsyannikov, Kotov, Rafikova, Savelev, Garustovich, Ruslanov, 2022: 391–394). Apparently, these processes also had some effect on the mountain, as proven by the above-mentioned legend about the Mongols.

Given the dominant location of Awliya Tau in the area and the fact that every Bashkir clan had its own sacred mountain (Shirgazin, 2010), it is highly likely that by the early 20th century, the top of Awliya Tau played a key role in the sacred topography of the inhabitants of the villages of Ibragimovo and 1st Tupchanovo.

In the Soviet years, despite the fact that local residents climbed the mountain to celebrate the First of May (Spring and Labour Day) and the Ninth of May (Victory Day), Awliya Tau still had a cult significance in the national consciousness.

During an interview with A.G. Salikhov, a philologist and native of the Kugarchinsky District, it was found that Shamigula Khalfa, a famous religious leader who passed away in 1957, climbed to the top of Awliya Tau for prayer shortly before his death. A.G. Salikhov learnt of this from informants who noted that Shamigula Khalfa's age meant he could not climb the mountain himself, so he had been carried there on a cart by several elderly women who did not feel any burden thanks to the spiritual elder's miraculous power.

According to the researcher Z.G. Aminev who visited Awliya Tau in 1989, people from Kugarchinsky and other nearby areas came to pray at the saint's grave.

The processes of national cultural revival and re-Islamisation at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in Russia and Bashkortostan led to a widespread increase in people's interest in traditional beliefs, sacred sites and holy places, etc.

In light of these events, interest in Awliya Tau has increased. Obviously, M.G. Alimgulov, the guardian of the mountain, also played an important role: not only did he accompany those who came to the mountain, but he also told legends associated with it, contributing to its popularisation.

According to Z.G. Aminev, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, there was only one grave on the mountain top. Pilgrims came, read prayers from the Koran, made various sacrifices in the form of pieces of cloth and coins, and left stones next to the grave, eventually forming a stone mound (Aminev, 2008: 10–11). It probably served as a basis for the second grave of Awliya, as A.G. Salikhov already recorded two graves in 2008.

After a few years, the number of graves probably increased to three. The first and the second graves were recorded in video footage dated November 2013, which was posted on the website of Kugarchinsky District's Department of Culture. Another grave with a bench next to it was located at the site where we recorded stone layouts Nos. 3 and 4. All of them were surrounded by wooden fences made of logs and poles, to which ribbons and pieces of cloth had been tied (*Secrets of the mountain of Awliya Tau*, 2024).

According to informants, by the early 2020s, the latest and largest grave appeared, confirmed by photos posted online (*The Holy Mountain Awliya*, 2024). At the same time, at the initiative of a resident of 1st Tupchanovo, iron fences were installed to replace the wooden ones.

As for the above-mentioned tombstone structure above the current third and fourth stone layouts, after the wooden fence had been removed, an iron one was put in its place. However, after some time the old dismantled fence was moved to another place, which we marked as grave No. 4.

By studying the location of the mountain and fences using satellite images and topographic maps, certain patterns were observed. For example, three fences are almost exactly aligned along the north-eastern to south-western axis. Perhaps, they were intentionally oriented in the direction of the Kaaba. The Bolshoy Ik River curves around the mountain from the south and west, while the Maly Ik River curves around it from the north and flows into the Bolshoy Ik at the north-western foot of the mountain. Meanwhile, the Karachayelga River flows along the eastern foot of the mountain, at the heart of the panoramic view of the surrounding area as seen from the fences. In this regard, geoinformation methods and the HeyWhatsThat resource were used to determine what is visible from Mount Awliya Tau. The results were compared with those obtained from other famous Muslim sacred sites, including the sacred mountains of Aush Tau and Narys Tau, as well as the mausoleums of Turakhan, Hussein-Bek and Bandebike.

To implement the above task, the HeyWhatsThat resource was used. It displays all areas visible from a particular point on a hill or summit, covering a full 360 degree radius. The system not only automatically identifies areas of visibility, but also marks them in red on the map, making it possible to determine the territory visible from the specified location.

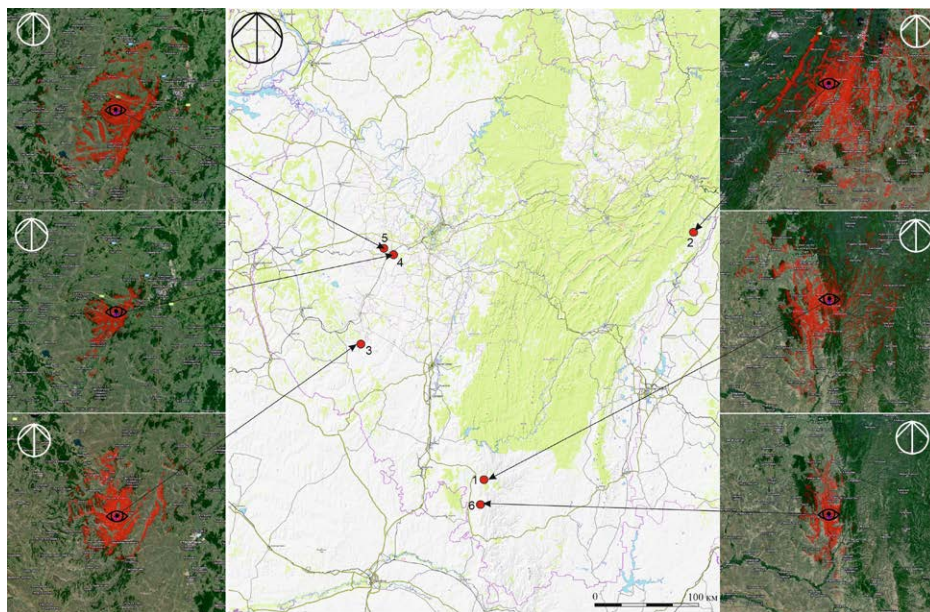


Figure 3: The main directions of visibility zones from the cult objects are: 1) Mt. Awliya Tau, 2) Mt. Aush Tau, 3) Mt. Narys Tau, 4) Khusain-Bek mausoleum, 5) Turakhan mausoleum, and 6) Bendebike mausoleum.

Mount Awliya Tau (altitude 474 m) offers spectacular panoramic views of the surrounding area, especially towards the south-east in the direction of the Muradymovsky Gorge, which is visited by large numbers of tourists. From the graves, the south-west and south are most visible (Fig. 3-1).

Mount Aush Tau is located in the Uchalinsky District of the RB (altitude 645 m). The entire surrounding area is visible from the stone layout on its summit. However, the area of greatest visibility is towards the south (Fig. 3-2).

Mount Narys Tau is located in the Miyakinsky District (altitude 200 m). As in the previous cases, the entire surrounding area is visible from the grave of the saints, and the visibility zone detected by the resource is almost evenly distributed around the mountain top (Fig. 3-3).

The mausoleum of Hussein-Bek is located in the Chishminsky District (altitude 111 m). The visibility area identified at the site is oriented along a north-east – south-west axis and has a subtriangular shape, with the outer side extending significantly to the south-west (Fig. 3-4).

The mausoleum of Turakhan is also located in the Chishminsky District (altitude 189 m). From the site of the mausoleum, the area of greatest visibility extends predominantly towards the south (Fig. 3-5).

Similarly to the mountain of Awliya Tau, the mausoleum of Bendebike is located in the Kugarchinsky District (altitude 214 m). From the mausoleum, the zone of greatest visibility stretches along the north – south axis, i.e., it extends to the north and the south (Fig. 3-6).

Thus, comparing the visibility zones from Mount Awliya Tau with other significant Muslim shrines in the region, it has been found that despite their differences and the large distances between them, they share a common feature – a panoramic view of the surrounding area and greatest visibility towards the south, possibly aligning with the direction of the Kaaba.

CONCLUSION

The conducted research has shown that Awliya Tau is a sophisticated cult complex consisting of two main components: the natural landscape, including the mountain summit, and anthropogenic (man-made) features represented by cult objects such as graves of saints, stone layouts, wooden structures and trees adorned with ribbons.

A comprehensive study of beliefs and religious practices associated with Awliya Tau reveals three main layers of religious and cultural stereotypes: pre-Islamic, associated with orolatri, Islamic, associated with the veneration of Muslim sacred places, and contemporary, represented by psychological and esoteric spiritual practices.

It should be noted that the term esotericism in this article is considered in line with E. G. Balagushkin's ideas, encompassing a wide range of spiritually oriented teachings. This includes the promotion of occult mystical knowledge, neo-pagan religions and various forms of psycho-spiritual practices, including alternative medicine (Balagushkin, 2002: 248).

The analysis of available sources and literature suggests that for the population living in the area, Awliya Tau has been a sacred site since at least the Middle Ages. The beliefs and religious practices associated with it are a mixture of two cults – the cult of the mountain and the cult of saints. These traditions, rooted in older belief systems, have evolved through mutual influence and have successfully adapted to the modern socio-cultural environment.

The data obtained in this research generally correlate with the results of archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic studies of orolatri in the Southern Urals, both in general and concerning individual mountain tops. Together, they help identify recurring patterns and tendencies in the formation and development of sacred spaces associated with the mountains. These have become integral not only to the general Muslim pilgrimage and tourist culture of the South Ural region, but have also been included into the ritual practices of new religious movements. They are even visited by people practicing esotericism, popular psychology, etc.

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МОГИЛЫ СВЯТЫХ НА ВЕРШИНАХ ГОР ЮЖНОГО УРАЛА: ТРАДИЦИОННЫЕ ВЕРОВАНИЯ И СОВРЕМЕННОЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЕ

В статье на основе полевых материалов, собранных авторами в ходе археолого-этнографического изучения горы Аулия тау в Кугарчинском районе Республики Башкортостан в 2023 г. и работ современных исследователей, посвященным вопросам оролатрии на Южном Урале, рассматривается ретроспективное развития культа Священной горы.

При проведении исследования использовался синергетический подход, базирующийся на сопряжении имеющихся археологических и этнографических

данных, а также материалов полученных с помощью методов нетнографии в социальной сети Интернет.

При изучении горы и расположенных на ней культовых объектов применялись археологические и этнографические методы; для анализа формирования и развития приуроченного к ней сакрального пространства использовались системный и исторический методы, а также метод геоинформационного картографирования.

На основе имеющихся источников и литературы был не только рассмотрен процесс трансформации культа гор, тесно связанного с культом предков, под влиянием ислама в культ священной горы – Аулия тау, но и представлены происходящие изменения религиозных представлений о ее сакральности и значении в современной социокультурной среде.

Полученные результаты коррелируют с уже имеющимися материалами, свидетельствуют о сходстве закономерностей и тенденций формирования и развития сакральных пространств, приуроченных к отдельным горным вершинам. Выявленные на горе разновременные культовые проявления говорят о том, что Аулия тау является частью общемусульманской, паломнической и туристической культуры Южноуральского региона. В тоже время они указывают на ее включение в ритуальную практику новых религиозных движений, психологических практик и т.д.

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