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## **PANTHEON ROLE OF THE MAUSOLEUM OF KHOJA AHMED YASAWI**

**Abstract.** In the article, the authors analyzed the pantheon function of the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and tried to determine its place in the funeral rites of the Kazakh people. On the basis of ethnographic materials, in combination with archaeological materials, he tried to reveal the ways, reasons for the temporary preservation of corpses, such as “put in trust”, which are found in the nomadic society, including the Kazakh people, and the connection of this ritual with the nomadic worldview. In addition, he closely revealed the essence of the burial of Kings by early nomads in large pantheons and the burial of Khans, bi-sheshens (lawyers) and batyrs of the Kazakh people in the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan.

**Keywords:** burial in trust, pantheon, shipment of corpses, saka pantheons, Saint, put on the shelf.

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### **Қожа Ахмет Ясауи кесенесінің пантеондық қызметі**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада автор Қожа Ахмет Ясауи кесенесінің пантеондық қызметін талдап, оның қазақ халқының жерлеу ғұрпында алатын орнын айқындауға тырысты. Этнографиялық материалдар негізінде, археологиялық материалдармен сабақтастыра отырып көшпелілер қоғамында, оның ішінде қазақ халқында кездесетін «аманатқа қою» сияқты мәйітті уақытша сақтаудың жолдарын, себептерін, бұл ғұрыптың көшпелілер дүниетанымымен байланысын ашуға талпынған. Сонымен қатар, ерте көшпелілердің патшаларды ірі пантеондарға жерлеуі мен қазақ халқының хандарын, би-шешендерін, батырларын Түркістандағы Қожа Ахмет Ясауи кесенесіне жерлеуінің мәнін сабақтастыра ашып көрсеткен.

**Түйін сөздер:** аманатқа жерлеу, пантеон, өлікті жөнелту, сақ пантеондары, әулие, сөреге қою.

**Ризашылық:** Мақала ҚР ҒЖБМ Ғылым комитетінің қолдауымен AP22682866 «XVIII-XX ғғ. қазақ халқындағы мәйітті уақытша (аманатқа) жерлеу ғұрпы» тақырыбы бойынша жас ғалымдарды гранттық қаржыландыру шеңберінде орындалды.

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## **Introduction**

The architecture of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum, as well as its place among sacred sites, has been thoroughly studied in the works of various authors from the Tsarist period up to the present day. The earliest studies date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century [Bekchurin, 1866: 210-217.], [Lerh, 1870: 39], [Masson, 1930: 28]. In addition, the works of the

staff of the National Historical-cultural Museum-Reserve Aziret Sultan should also be noted [Tuiakbaeva, 1989: 176], [Qoja Ahmet ..., 2013], [Muminov et al., 2013: 208]. However, the pantheonic significance of the mausoleum remains one of the topics that has not yet been sufficiently explored.

The term “pantheon” comes from Ancient Greek and means “a temple dedicated to all gods or a collective of all the gods of a particular religion, as well

as a monument or building for honoring national heroes”. Its second meaning refers to a burial site of saints, kings, or distinguished individuals. The cult of saints (kiye) and the practice of visiting their burial places are widespread throughout the Islamic world. The purpose of burial near a saint is rooted in the belief that on the Day of Judgment, the saint’s blessing (sharapat) will reach the deceased.

Muslims, relying on verse 154 of Surah Al-Baqarah in the Holy Qur’an - “Never say that those martyred in the cause of Allah are dead – in fact, they are alive! But you do not perceive it.” – as well as on the Prophetic hadiths, believe that saints do not die; they remain spiritually alive, intercede for the living, convey prayers and supplications to Allah, and will act as intercessors on the Day of Judgment.

In the Holy Qur’an and the hadith literature, the terms *walī* and *awliyā’* refer to Allah’s beloved servants, His close ones, His friends. The expression “*Awliyā’ Allāh*” (the friends of Allah) appears frequently in Qur’anic verses. One such verse states: “There will certainly be no fear for the close servants of Allah, nor will they grieve...” [Halifa Altai, 1991, 10:62]

If we focus on the definition of the word *äulie* (saint), it refers to a person renowned among the people for exceptional piety and devoutness, for healing abilities that bring remedy, for possessing miraculous qualities, and for providing spiritual guidance to the community. The word *aulie* is the plural form of the Arabic term *walī* and in Kazakh it conveys the meaning of “holy” or “sacred.” In the Qur’an, this word appears in the sense of a protector or helper in reference to Allah and the Prophet. In the hadiths, it is used in the sense of nearness – that is, *Walī Allāh* means someone close to Allah, a friend of Allah, a person endowed with divine grace. [Aulie, 2017: 463-466].

A saint is a sacred, holy person who, according to religious belief, is able to influence the fate of the living. The concept of sainthood, which is widespread in contemporary religions, originates from the ancestor worship practiced by early human communities. It represents one of the elements that transitioned from polytheism (belief in many gods) to monotheism (belief in one God). The veneration of saints became widely developed in both Islam and Christianity [Islam, 1995: 25].

As in other Central Asian countries, the Kazakh people also have figures regarded as saints. Great importance was placed on giving the deceased a proper farewell on their final journey. Following

the wishes (*amanat*) of the departed, Kazakhs would bury their khans, biys, and batyrs in pantheons such as the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Aziret Sultan) Mausoleum.

### Materials and methods

The material base of the article consists of three main groups of sources: 1) Written sources – works by domestic and foreign researchers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, archival documents of the Russian colonial administration, as well as ethnographic and historical studies; 2) Oral sources – ethnographic interviews collected by the author and accounts from local communities concerning the practices of *amanatqa qoyu* (temporary burial), *sórege qoyu* (placing the body on a funeral shelf), and the tradition of transporting the deceased to Turkistan for burial; 3) Field materials – data gathered by the author during expedition-based research.

A descriptive method was widely employed in the course of the study. Through this method, the formation of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum, its architectural and historical stages, the scope of its pantheonic function, and the ethnographic manifestations of *amanatqa qoyu* and body-preservation rituals were described in a systematic manner.

The historical-genetic and historical-comparative methods made it possible to examine the pantheonic significance of the mausoleum within a broad historical context. Continuities between the ancestor cult in nomadic Turkic society, pantheonic structures of the Saka–Scythian period, the burial practices of the Pazyryk culture, and later Kazakh traditions were analyzed. The burial practices in Turkistan were also compared with the Islamic cult of sainthood and Sufi worldview.

The method of survivals was used to identify the persistence of ancient ritual traditions in later Kazakh society, such as *amanatqa qoyu* (temporary burial), storing the body on a *sóre* (funeral shelf), and preparing the body using special techniques to preserve it for extended periods. This method helped explain how ancient customs continued while undergoing transformation in new historical circumstances.

Additionally, the source-critical method was applied. The conditional list of 239 individuals buried in the mausoleum, as provided in the official registry of the Aziret Sultan Museum-Reserve, documents from the 1884 Tsarist prohibition on burials, ethnographic compilations, and historical sources were analyzed through scholarly scrutiny and formed the factual basis of the study.

The integrated use of these methods made it possible to comprehensively reveal the pantheonic function of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum from historical-ethnographic, spiritual-ideological, and social perspectives.

### Analysis and results

Not only the Kazakh people but the entire Turkic world regard Khoja Ahmed Yasawi as a saint, and since the construction of his mausoleum by Amir Temir, hundreds of individuals have been buried near the saint. After the death of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, his disciples began to be buried beside him. According to data provided by the staff of the Aziret Sultan National Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve, 239 individuals have been buried there to date [azretsultan.kz, accessed 25.07.2025]. Of course, this is a provisional list, and the actual number of those interred in the mausoleum is not limited to it. As new information becomes available, this list is continually updated. Determining the exact number of esteemed individuals buried in the mausoleum is not possible today.

Before transporting a body from distant places for burial, people would perform *amanat qoyu* during seasons unsuitable for moving the deceased. *Amanat qoyu* is a traditional funeral practice involving the temporary burial of a body. In nomadic and semi-nomadic societies, during times of warfare, when those martyred in battle could not be buried due to time constraints, or when distinguished individuals died far from their homeland, the custom of temporarily burying them as *amanat* was followed. Likewise, if severe weather conditions made it impossible to commit the deceased to the earth, the body would be placed as *amanat*.

For this, the deceased would be buried while reciting “*Amanat, amanat, amanat*” three times, and later the body would be transported to the ancestral cemetery in their homeland [Amanatqa qoiu, 2017: 219].

One form of *amanat* burial practiced in Central Kazakhstan is *sórelep jerleu* – placing the deceased on an elevated funeral shelf. If a dying person expressed a final wish (*amanat*) about where they wished to be buried, and if they passed away during winter, their body would be kept on a *sóre* until spring. Since it was difficult to transport the bodies of *töre* nobles and *biys* from the Saryarka region to Turkistan during the harsh winter, they were preserved on tall wooden shelves, wrapped in leather.

Among the figures who were placed on a *sóre* before being taken to Turkistan for burial are Qazybek bi, Bogenbai batyr, Olzhabai batyr, Anet baba, and Mamai batyr.

Qazybek bi passed away in the wintering grounds of the Suyindik clan, in the area of modern Bayanaul district, in a place called Muryntal located in the foothills of the Dalba Mountains. That location later became known as “Qazybek’s sore stone.” His son Bekbolat erected a yurt at the place where his father died and kept Qazybek bi’s body enclosed and preserved there for four months. When the snow melted, Bekbolat transported his father’s remains to Turkistan and buried him in the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum [Qaz dauysty ..., 2011: 215–216].

Bogenbai batyr passed away in old age after falling ill. To bury him in the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mosque in Turkistan, his body was ritually prepared, wrapped in leather, and kept on a *sóre* throughout the winter. In the spring of 1776, by the decree of Ablai Khan, the esteemed figures of the community – led by his son Turanally and Aitbai Atkeltiruly – secured the hero’s remains onto a camel and transported them to Turkistan, where he was buried in the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum. The place where Bogenbai batyr’s body was kept is still known today in the Ereymentau region as “Bogenbai’s *sóre*” [Qazaqtyñ qamal qorğany, accessed 25.07.2025].

Olzhabai batyr and Edige bi, who lived during the era of Qazybek bi, were also temporarily buried on the outer side of the Ereymentau Mountains and later, in the summer, transported to Turkistan for reburial. These places are now known as Olzhabai’s *sóre* and Edige’s *sóre*.

Änet baba passed away in a place called Qoshqarata in the Karatau region. His remains were taken to Turkistan by Kokenai batyr.

Likewise, when Mamai batyr died in the Shyngystau region, Kengirbai bi ordered that his internal organs be buried near the Horde foothills, after which the body was wrapped in leather and transported to Turkistan for interment.

A group of about forty notable men – including Mamai’s eldest son Zhiensora batyr, his youngest son Zholbarys, Myrza batyr, the Jumagul family descendants, as well as the Zhoken lineage led by Ozhar batyr – undertook the journey to deliver the remains of the famous hero to Turkistan [Zhanbolatuly, 2004: 36–37].

The list of individuals temporarily buried as *amanat* is not limited to these examples. This topic still requires comprehensive further research.

In the work “Nauryz: Revived Customs and Traditions” the authors write that among the Kazakhs there were numerous methods for preserving a body for an extended period – such as pouring honey over it, covering it with juniper, or placing it in a leather coffin. After ensuring that the body would not decompose, it would be placed in a special yurt, or on a tall wooden shelf, or tightly wrapped in leather and suspended between the trunks of two parallel-grown trees until the time came to transport it over long distances.

In this work, the authors state that all notable figures who were taken to ancient Turkistan for burial near Aziret Sultan underwent this process of “amanatqa qoyu” at some stage [Nauryz: zhangyrgan salt-dasturler, 1991: 122].

Just like their Saka ancestors – who buried their kings in large kurgans – the Kazakh people attached great importance to sending the deceased on their final journey and performing all the rituals associated with it. Bidding farewell to the departed, mourning in black until the first anniversary, and holding funeral feasts (as) can be considered traditions inherited from our Saka forebears.

The Saka and Scythians practiced burying their dead only during specific seasons of the year – at the beginning of summer or in autumn. This custom is clearly reflected in the Karasuk, Tagar, and Pazyryk cultures. Numerous archaeological sources also demonstrate that this tradition continued among the early Turkic peoples.

This tradition is closely connected with natural conditions and the economic cycle of nomadic life. We propose the view that when a person died in winter, the frozen ground made burial impossible, so the body was kept until spring – “placed as amanat”. In this practice, the internal organs were removed, the body was stored on a sóre, and when the ground thawed in spring, it was buried in a designated place.

By “designated place,” we refer to pantheons – burial grounds reserved for individuals of high social status within that society. Such locations were typically chosen near rivers, on open plains with gentle rises, or on elevated ridges that were immediately visible when approaching the landscape. In addition, proximity to specific natural resources was important: nearby mountains with shale stone, riverbeds with smooth cobblestones, areas where pine trees grew, and grass-covered clay soils suitable for constructing turf-based architectural elements.

We believe it would be an oversimplification to draw direct parallels or force comparisons between the large pantheons of the Saka period and the later

Kazakh custom of burying individuals near wintering grounds (qystau). In the Saka worldview, burial near a winter camp did not occupy a central place. Large pantheons were deliberately constructed on wide open plateaus, riverbanks, or other locations where suitable building materials for ancient structures were readily available. This, in our view, was the main determining factor.

The custom of burying people near qystau sites appears to have emerged in much later historical periods. Long-term archaeological research shows that ordinary burials were generally prohibited near major kurgans. Even the smaller burial mounds found near large kurgans contain remains interred with the burial equipment typical of elite individuals, indicating that these areas were reserved for high-status members of society.

In this regard, the practice of burying relatives in clan cemeteries or near qystau (wintering grounds) is also a nomadic tradition. As S. I. Rudenko noted, “Early Pazyryk groups usually buried their relatives near their winter camps. By burying their kin near the qystau, the Pazyryk people marked the land they inhabited. This tradition survived for centuries, and later Kazakhs and Kyrgyz continued to bury their deceased relatives only near the qystau” [Rudenko, 1952: 9].

However, we emphasize that the key element here is not necessarily the act of conducting a burial precisely near the winter camp. What matters most is the presence of a designated pantheon. Our research on complex archaeological sites such as Shilikti, Besoba, Qyryqoba, Karakemer, and others demonstrates that these areas contain not only burial structures but also ritual constructions. This suggests that these places were regarded as highly significant sacred spaces in their time.

For this reason, it is possible that even livestock were not allowed to graze near these sacred ancestral burial grounds. We may further hypothesize that such pantheons were protected by special military detachments.

Since early spring and the beginning of winter were times when people were physically weakened and more likely to pass away, there arose a need to preserve the body for a certain period. This need was primarily due to the frozen ground and severe weather conditions, which made immediate burial impossible. It can be assumed that the large communal farewell ceremonies required gathering people from afar, which was feasible only during the summer months. Therefore, if a person died in other seasons, the body was preserved until summer through

temporary burial (*amanatqa jerleu*) or by placing it on a funeral shelf (*sorege qoiu*).

Regarding the question of when burials inside the mausoleum ceased, archival evidence indicates that interment within the mausoleum was officially stopped in 1884.

The head of the Turkistan uyezd, Colonel Chebotarev, submitted a report to the head of the Syrdarya region and to the Governor-General of Turkistan, stating that the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum (*Aziret Sultan*) is an extremely sacred site for the local Muslim population. He explained that distinguished individuals – *biys*, *batyrs*, wealthy nobles, and other notable figures – from all parts of the Turkistan area, and even from neighboring khanates and the Siberian region, were brought there for burial. He also noted that interment inside the mausoleum was carried out with the permission of the descendants of *Aziret Sultan* and upon payment to them.

Chebotarev reported that the interior of the mausoleum had become filled with graves and decomposing bodies, and that an unpleasant odor was spreading within the mosque. Citing these conditions, he requested that burials inside the mausoleum be prohibited.

After this report reached Tashkent, a response was issued from the office of the Governor-General on March 9, bearing a resolution. The resolution stated: “Burials inside the mausoleum are to be prohibited; a written acknowledgment of this order must be obtained from the administrators of the mausoleum.” [When and How Burial Practices Were Stopped, accessed 25.07.2025].

Thus, based on this document, we know that beginning in 1884, the practice of burying individuals inside the Turkistan mausoleum was abruptly halted. However, burials outside the mausoleum continued. From this event, we can infer that notable figures who passed away after 1884 and were said in oral tradition to have been “brought to Turkistan for burial” were interred not inside, but outside the mausoleum. It also appears that, after this prohibition, the transportation of bodies from very distant regions largely came to an end.

Furthermore, this decree was issued not only because of the “unpleasant odor” reported inside the mausoleum, but also with the clear intent of severing the spiritual ties between Turkistan and the Turkic peoples – from *Saryarka* to *Kokand* and *Bukhara* – who traditionally stayed overnight and performed rites at the shrine of *Aziret Sultan*. This decree also diminished the influence of the Turkistan *khos*

over the *Arqa* (Northern) Kazakhs, who would annually visit Turkistan to bury their distinguished men, hold memorial feasts, and perform pilgrimage at the tombs.

Through this order of the Tsarist administration, spiritual connections gradually weakened and ultimately ceased – leading us to this conclusion.

## Conclusion

In summary, the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum holds exceptional significance as a pantheon. The burial of Kazakh khans, *biys*, and *batyrs* in one sacred place serves as clear evidence of this role.

Built during the era of Amir Temir, the mausoleum is not merely the resting place of a single saint. It became a national pantheon where many prominent Kazakh khans, sultans, *biys*, and warriors found their eternal rest.

The tradition of burial near a saint is closely linked to the Islamic belief that divine blessing (*sharapat*) can reach the deceased. In the case of the Yasawi Mausoleum, this belief harmonized with the traditions of the Turkic-Muslim steppe society, acquiring deep political and spiritual meaning.

Burying high-status individuals near the mausoleum became a widespread practice. The bodies of khans and *batyrs* who died far from Turkistan were preserved using special methods and later transported to be laid to rest in the sacred soil of the *Aziret Sultan* complex. Burial in such an honored location represented the highest respect for the deceased and reflected the hope of benefiting from the saint’s intercession on the Day of Judgment.

Thus, for several centuries, the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum functioned as a pantheon symbolizing the spiritual unity of the entire Kazakh steppe. In this sacred place, khans who cared for national unity, *batyrs* who defended the homeland, and *biys* who stood for justice were buried side by side – creating a shared national heritage for future generations.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this tradition was curtailed by external authority. In 1884, by order of the Tsarist government, the burial of new individuals inside the mausoleum was prohibited. Although sanitary concerns were cited as the official reason, it is evident that the deeper motive was to sever the spiritual ties centered around Turkistan. Nevertheless, by that time, the burial of many notable figures within the mausoleum complex had already firmly established its role as a pantheon.



Today, the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum – inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List – is not only a cultural and historical monument of the Kazakh people but also an enduring testament to its former pantheonic function and a symbol of the nation's spiritual unity. As revealed through this research, the pantheonic significance of the mauso-

leum represents a complex phenomenon at the intersection of ancestral traditions, the cult of saints, and the history of statehood among the Kazakh people. This topic still requires comprehensive scholarly investigation, for understanding the pantheonic role of this sacred site allows for a deeper appreciation of our spiritual worldview and historical memory.

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