Mausoleums of the Karachays and Balkarians ancestors

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the stone buildings “Keshene”, which were built for the burial of the noble feudal families’ members, individual princes and nobles. These historical and architectural monuments were located in the mountainous zone of the North Caucasus and belong to the late Middle Ages. The issues concerning the distribution area of the mausoleums of Karachay and Balkar as well as their typology are discussed in the article.

Introduction

Among the architectural monuments of the North Caucasus, a special place is occupied by the stone ground tombs, which usually have the appearance of a small house, sometimes one side of which is directed into the mountain [1].

Stone tombs often occupied significant areas, representing the whole “towns of the dead” (Figure 1). It should be noted that the mausoleums in Karachay and Balkar have very different forms, even within the same necropolis. But all the crypts are made in the same building style.

Usually the crypt tombs were located on the slopes above the settlement. The location on a hill of such burials allowed people to see them from anywhere in the village.

In Karachay and the Balkaria gorges, many elevated crypts (keshene), which are subjugated by the surrounding landscape with their monumentality, have survived, so it seems as if they were created not by man, but by nature itself.

Both in Balkaria and in Karachay, stone burial grounds, rectangular, round, polygonal in plan, with a sharp top, a height of up to six meters, were closed around. Only on the south side there is a small hole [2].

Judging by the existing literary information and preserved crypts, a large cluster of them was once observed in Upper Balkaria and Upper Chegem. In other points - in Bezengi, Baksan and Karachay there were fewer.
Figure 1. The complex of tombs in El-Tybyu, the village of Upper Chegem.

If we consider the distribution in the ground crypts form, then it should be noted that round in plan crypts exist in more eastern regions - near the villages of Upper Balkaria and Tashly-Tala, polyhedral - in Verkhny-Chegem and Upper Balkaria, in the remaining points they are mostly rectangular.

By architecture, the Balkar and Karachay stone mausoleums adjoin the terrestrial crypts and sanctuaries that are very widespread in the North Caucasus, in particular in Ossetia, Chechnya and Ingushetia.

The earliest mausoleums called “keshene” are called “Christian”, despite the fact that they are undoubtedly the result of the influences most diverse cultures’ overlapping.

Design Features
In fact, the ground tombs are represented by only three main types in their architectural forms: rectangular in plan with a gable roof, round plan with a hemispherical top and multifaceted with a pyramidal-tented ceiling [3].

The simplest type of “keshene” is a rectangular stone construction with a gable slab (Figure 2), composed of partially processed and carefully adjusted to each other massive sand stones in a calcareous binder. The mausoleum walls tomb on both sides are additionally covered with durable plaster. A hole in the shape of a rectangle was left in the front wall. There are also the two-story crypts of this type, some have windows in the walls side. High gable roofs are obtained by gradually shifting the masonry rows in each row to the center.

As for the stone buildings “keshene” of rectangular shapes, they are obviously more ancient than the octagonal ones. Nowadays, there are 8 such tombs in Balkaria: 5 tombs in the Fardyk necropolis in Upper Chegem, 1 in Upper Balkaria, 1 at the Dzhaboevs’ castle in the Bezengi gorg, 1 - the Kamgut mausoleum on the outskirts of Tyrnyauz in the Baksan gorg in Karachay, three crypts near the Cart jurt village.

Among the oldest rectangular tombs in terms of Karachay-Balkar “Keshene” is the mausoleum of Prince Kamgut Krymshamkhalov located on the right bank of the Baksan River near the El-Jurt village. The relatively large structure, Kamgut-keshene, has a height of more than 6 m, a width of 4 m. The height of the preserved walls reaches 3 m 70 cm. The wall thickness ranges from 65 cm - 75 cm. There is a small arched window in the south - western part of the stone tomb at a height of 1 m 50 cm from the ground. The height of the window is 1 m, the width is 78 cm. There is also a window at a height of 1 m 78 cm from the ground on the north side of Kamgut-keshene, which narrows the upward and expands the outside window with a height 63 cm.
Figure 2. A rectangular crypt with a pointed roof village El - Tube.

As for the decor, the deer images were made inside the ground tomb and the handprints from the outside near the window.

Much less often in Karachay and Balkarthere are the core-like mausoleums with a round base and conical top. The round-planned mausoleums are composed of large and poorly processed stones in a calcareous binder solution. The walls of the mausoleum are narrowing upward more and more, the dome was erected by a flaming of stones (i.e., using the false arch technique). During the dome construction, the craftsmen strove to maintain the clear proportional relationships of it with the walls.

There are only two tombs of this type in Balkaria. One of them is located in the Tashly-Tala village (Figure 3), the other in Upper Balkaria (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Round crypt in the Tashly – Tala village.
The Tashly-Tala crypt of the XIV-XV centuries has an ovoid shape in plan with a domed overlap, the walls from the base smoothly pass to the top. The total height is 5.3 m. The wall thickness is 1.3 m. The circumference of the crypt at the base is 13.5 m. On the south side there is a small window - an arch-shaped entrance. The mausoleum is composed of the well-crafted stones, in a strong lime mortar.

The crypt construction in the Mukhol village is round in plan, the inner diameter is 2.9 m, the thickness of the walls at the base is 0.70 cm, the total height is 6.05 m. At the height of 0.78 m from the floor, on the east side, the window is arched, the entrance width at the base is 0.6 m, the height is the same.

Here, the evolution of constructive forms is clearly felt. With a round base, the walls do not smoothly pass to the top, and to a height of 2, 15 m rise almost vertically. At this level there is an overlap of flat slabs, and on the outside surface starts with a narrow protruding cornice. The mausoleum ends with a kind of dome in the high conical cap form, 3.9 m high. This difference in height of the vertical parts of the walls and the roof gives it a somewhat squat shape.

The mausoleum is built of the well-crafted stones, on a durable mortar. The walls are covered with good lime plaster.

The circular mausoleums in Tashly-Tala and Upper Balkaria showed no signs of the formwork use. The core-shaped mausoleums with a round base and conical top required great professionalism in the construction. This type of tombs is very rare in the Caucasus.

These ancient buildings, preserved on the territory of Karachay and Balkaria, are distinguished with the composition originality and high building art.

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**Figure 4.** Round crypt in the Muhol village.

The crypts multifaceted with a pyramidal-tented overlap (Figure 5) are distinguished by the fact that they are multifaceted in plan and their roof represents a multifaceted pyramid completed by a large castle stone - a phallic cone: this element is a kind of patriarchy symbol. The height of the whole castle stone reaches 0.4-0.5 m.

According to the description of a number of scholars and folklorists, the stone’ “upper part” also indicates that men of the genus to which this mausoleum belongs are still alive, although no one has been buried in this mausoleum for a long time.
In the southern faces of each crypt there are arched-shaped manhole windows. Their width is 0.5 m, 0.52 m, 0.55 m, the height is about the same. They were intended for single and group (up to 3) burials.

The crypt is hexagonal in the base, the roof is represented by the hexagonal pyramid, the crypt is octagonal in the base, the roof is represented by the octagonal pyramid.

The stones of the mausoleums were so fitted one to another that between them there is practically no place for backing between them.

According to the observations of L. G. Nechaeva, gable and pyramidal-tented ceilings of tombs were erected using the wooden formwork templates [4].

The crypts multifaceted in plan with a pyramidal-tented overlap are made very carefully. Strictly designed architectural lines; the dimensions of the faces, the height of the walls and roofs are in certain proportions, the rectangular “keshene” look exclusively monumental and are perceived much larger than their absolute sizes. The plaster was perfectly preserved in these crypts, apparently, the lime mortar for them was prepared especially carefully.

Archaeologist Miziev I.M. speaking of the land tombs of Balkaria, considers them as princely mausoleums and considers their appearance “a material reflection of the social stratification of society”. Bijiev Kh.Kh., also believed that the emergence of crypts should obviously be associated with social processes taking place in Karachay society - the separation of large feudal families and clans from the general population that buried the dead in the soil graves aristocracy started erecting the special tombs, crypts. A certain role in this was played, apparently, by the leaders’ cult.

Thus, the stone structures “keshene” of Karachay and Balkar represent the elite buildings for the dead souls of the Karachay –Balkarian nobility representatives.

**Figure 5.** The multifaceted mausoleum in the El - Tube village.

Having originated on the Karachay and Balkaria territory, the shapes of polygonal tombs also had some influence on the architecture of the neighboring regions (with the exception of Upper Svanetiya, where, due to social reasons, mausoleums were not built at all) [5].

In Balkaria there are nine tombs of the third type: 3 in the Upper Balkaria, 4 in the Upper Chegem necropolis Fardyq, 1 in the Bulungu village in the Chegem gorge, 1 keshene in the Kashhatau village (not preserved).

All the tombs were erected on a durable mortar of raw or rough stones. The stones intended for the construction of the opening-manhole entrance, as well as the visors protruding outward or the corner stones at the base of the tombs and flat slabs, representing one of the structural details of the overlap, are noticeably better processed [6].

All types of ground crypts in the front wall have an entrance window - a hole located at a height of about one meter from the ground. The crypts’ height ranges from 3-4 to 5-6 meters. The inlet is almost
always arranged in a semicircular arch and less often represents a rectangle. There were no niches, shelves and fixtures inside the crypts.

All grave structures are oriented from the East to the West [7]. In all cases, the technique of the so-called false arch was used, i.e. the erection of walls by the method of stone filling in such a way that the body of the structure is gradually narrowed to the top, and then goes into a hemispherical, gable or pyramidal-tent roof.

In rectangular mosaics with a gable slope, and polyhedral with a pyramidal-tented mausoleum, the upper part of the structure was erected using the false arch technique by about two-thirds or three-quarters of the total height of the ceiling, so the craftsmen sought to maintain the clear proportional relationships of it with the walls. Then flat stone slabs (from 2-3 to 9-10) were horizontally installed on it, on top of which deaf masonry was installed, which was the top of the ceiling.

A prominent feature is a protruding cornice, laid out of slate plates around the entire perimeter from the outside of the walls. Wider slate slabs completely cover the interior of small crypts, forming a kind of attic space [10].

**Timeline of the elevated crypts**

Travelers, local historians and archaeologists spoke quite controversially about the time of these cultural monuments’ creation. Semenov L.P. and Jessen A.A. dated them to the 14-15th centuries., Miller V.F. – to the 12-14th centuries., Uvarova – to the 16-17th centuries., Markovin V.I. – to the16-17 centuries. Makalatiya S.I. dates the crypt constructions of Khevsuretiya back to the 17-18th centuries. A. Yesen considered the15th century to be the time of the rectangular crypts with a gable roof appearance in Karachay and Balkar, Kuznetsov V.A. defines this time as the 8 – 12th centuries.

G. Kokiev subsidized the 12th-13th centuries as the time of the formation of the crypts rectangular in plan with gable overlapping in Ossetia, referring to the fact that they look like ancient Christian chapels and churches. Alekseev E.P. holds the same opinion in relation to the Karachay Balkaria crypts. Approximately the same point of view was expressed by AA Jessen, who wrote that “the most ancient crypt constructions (Kabardino-Balkaria) are obviously rectangular, originally reproducing the type of Christian chapel, but constructed until the beginning of the 18th century” [8].

The crypts of Balkaria, many-sided with a pyramid-hipped ceiling, as a product of the Islam occupation belong to the 17-18th centuries [8].

Ancient hemispherical round-planed crypts appeared no later than the 15th century (crypt near the village of Tashly-Tal) and they existed until the 17-18th centuries (crypt in the Mukhol village).

**Summary**

Mausoleums are of great interest for the folk architecture comprehension. These ancient structures in the mountains keep many secrets.

The analyzed fortification monuments indicate a rather high level of building skills of their creators [9].

The main strength of the impression from the crypt constructions of Balkaria and Karachay lies in the simplicity of their structural forms, in the integrity of the silhouette and nakedness of the expressive means used [10].

It should be noted that the aesthetic effect of all funerary structures is determined not by piling up the details, but by the volume composition, the contrast of the opening spot with the light plastered field of the wall, and the skillful setting of the structure among the landscape [11].

There are many versions about the purpose of these crypts. The most reasonable is the burial of the noble feudal families’ members, individual princes and nobles, one or no more than three people were buried in them.

It should be noted that in the territory of Karachay and Balkaria, almost all the mausoleums bear the name of their princes and their families.
Based on the above-mentioned, it follows that the temple-tower-crypt architecture of the Karachay-Balkarian people has the specific features and do not repeat the architectural traditions of certain peoples. We see how almost any type of the ground tombs is only a complication of the previous one.

Terrestrial tombs-keshene of the 10-18th century are the material monuments of the history and culture of Karachays and Balkars.

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