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## Prospects for the Practical Value of the Integrated Development of Poor Titanium-Zirconium Placers and Weathering Crusts in Kazakhstan

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## Перспективы практического значения комплексного освоения бедных титан-циркониевых россыпей и кор выветривания Казахстана

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titanium, zirconium, rare earth elements, placers, weathering crust, ilmenite, ore occurrences, reserves, mineral, rutile, formation, endogenous, impurities.

On the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan there is a significant number of identified deposits related to weathering crusts and titanium-ilmenite placers, bearing industrial mineralization of rare and rare-earth elements. Deposits of placers and weathering crusts, formed as a result of bedrocks denudation in coastal and continental sedimentation conditions, form the basis of the mineral resource base of titanium-zirconium ores in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Titanium-zirconium deposits of placers and weathering crusts usually have low average contents of the main useful components (rutile, ilmenite, and zircon), while containing associated mineralization of valuable rare and rare-earth elements.

Various aspects of the complex development of poor titanium-zirconium placers, which are currently of no practical importance, are considered. Associated useful components of titanium-zirconium placers are usually represented by rare and rare-earth elements, which are of practical importance in high-tech industries. The study of associated useful components in titanium-zirconium placers will allow considering the possibility of profitable exploitation and assessing the prospects for strengthening of their mineral resource base. As a result of the review, analysis and assessment of known titanium-zirconium placers on the territory of Kazakhstan, the most promising ore occurrences have been identified, which may be of practical importance in their integrated development: Karaotkel deposit – increased contents of rare and rare earth elements in placer ores can be considered not only as a source of monomineral concentrates of ilmenite, zircon, quartz and quartzite, mica and feldspar ceramic raw materials, but also as a source of rare and rare-earth elements; The Kundybal, Zayachye and Druzhba ore occurrences have the potential for the integrated development of titanium-zirconium placers with rare and rare-earth elements. The selected objects deserve prospecting and appraisal work with technical and economic studies of the possibility of their integrated development.

### Ключевые слова:

титан, цирконий, редкоземельные элементы, россыпи, коры выветривания, ильменит, рудопроявления, запасы, минерал, рутил, свита, эндогенные, примеси.

На территории Республики Казахстан имеется значительное количество выявленных месторождений, относящихся к корам выветривания и титан-ильменитовым россыпям, несущих промышленную минерализацию редких и редкоземельных элементов. Месторождения россыпей и кор выветривания, образованные в результате денудации коренных пород в прибрежно-морских и континентальных условиях осадконакопления, составляют основу минерально-сырьевой базы титан-циркониевых руд в Республике Казахстан. Титан-циркониевые месторождения россыпей и кор выветривания, обычно имеют низкие средние содержания основных полезных компонентов (рутил, ильменит и циркон), при этом содержат попутную минерализацию ценных редких и редкоземельных элементов.

Рассматриваются различные аспекты комплексного освоения бедных титан-циркониевых россыпей, которые в настоящее время не имеют практического значения. Попутные полезные компоненты титан-циркониевых россыпей обычно представлены редкими и редкоземельными элементами, которые имеют практическое значение в высокотехнологических отраслях промышленности. Изучение попутных полезных компонентов в титан-циркониевых россыпях позволит рассмотреть возможность рентабельной эксплуатации и оценить перспективы укрепления их минерально-сырьевой базы. В результате обзора, анализа и оценки известных титан-циркониевых россыпей на территории Казахстана выделены наиболее перспективные рудопроявления, которые могут иметь практическое значение при их комплексном освоении: месторождение Карагаттель – повышенные содержания редких и редкоземельных элементов в россыпных рудах можно рассматривать не только в качестве источника мономинеральных концентратов ильменита, циркона, кварца и кварцита, слюды и полевошпатового керамического сырья, но также в качестве источника редких и редкоземельных элементов; рудопроявления Кундабай, Заячье и Дружба имеют потенциал комплексного освоения титан-циркониевых россыпей с редкими и редкоземельными элементами. Выделенные объекты заслуживают проведения поисково-оценочных работ с технико-экономическими исследованиями возможности комплексного освоения.

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## Introduction

Placers are clusters of loose or coherent fragmented material that bears valuable minerals in the form of grains, debris or aggregates. They evolve as a result of denudation of bedrocks, mainly endogenous deposits, mineralized rock, redeposits of weathering crusts and sedimentary formations with elevated concentrations of valuable minerals (Table).

Titanium-zirconium placers are polymineral placers with the main useful components of titanium (ilmenite, rutile, leucoxene) and zirconium (zircon, baddeleyite), with associated useful components that may be represented by rare and rare earth elements.

The demands of today's scientific and technological progress imply sustainable growth in production and consumption of titanium, zirconium, rare and rare earth elements. Thanks to their properties of being corrosion-resistant, heat-proof and light, titanium and its alloys are used in various industrial branches such as machine engineering, instrument manufacturing, aircraft and military industry, space technology, medicine, and household appliance industry. Zircon and its alloys are applied in nuclear energy sector, doping, pyrotechnics, as superconductors and acid-resistant construction materials, in medicine and household appliance industry. Rare and rare earth elements are widely used in atomic power engineering, radioelectronics, aircraft and rocket engineering, machine and instrument building.

In Kazakhstan, numerous titanium-zirconium placers are not exploited due to the absence of their practical significance and economic feasibility. In terms of their formation conditions, they are mainly represented by coastal and continental (alluvial, alluvial-deluvial, alluvial-proluvial and eluvial) placers. The study of associated rare and rare earth useful components in poor titanium-zirconium placers will enable estimation of the prospects of their complex exploitation and strengthen their mineral resource base.

This article presents the results of a review, analysis and assessment of the titanium-zirconium ore occurrences of Kazakhstan. The research was conducted for the purpose of estimating the prospects of expanding exploitation to placers relatively poor in titanium and zirconium with associated mineralization of rare and rare earth elements.

Based on the quoted findings, we distinguished the most feasible titanium-zirconium placers for complex exploitation with associated rare and rare earth elements, and presented recommendations for their further study [1–24].

## Description of promising Titanium-Zirconium Placers with Associated Rare and Rare Earth Elements

Below is a brief geological description of ore occurrences / deposits with a potential of economically feasible complex exploitation.

Properties of the main minerals in titanium-zirconium placer deposits with associated valuable impurities

Name	Main useful component	Content, %	Valuable impurities in minerals	Density, g/cm <sup>3</sup>
Rutile	TiO <sub>2</sub>	88.6–98.2	Sc, Nb, Ta	4.2–4.3
Ilmenite	TiO <sub>2</sub>	34.4–68.2	Sc, Nb, Ta, V, TR	3.7–4.8
Leucoxene	TiO <sub>2</sub>	55.3–97.0	Sc, TR, Nb, Ta	3.3–4.1
Zircon	ZrO <sub>2</sub>	60.0–67.0	Hf, Th, Sc, Y, TR	4.5–4.7
Baddeleyite	ZrO <sub>2</sub>	95.0–99.0	Hf, TR, Th	5.4–6.2

The Kundybay ore occurrence is located in the Zhetygarinsky district of the Kostanayskaya region in the Republic of Kazakhstan and is characterized as Mesozoic weathering crust [4, 25, 26].

The ore mineralized zone spans along the west endocontact of the Shevchenkovsky serpentine rock mass and is basically a near N-S extended band of 21×2 km. The mineralized zone is represented by coulsonite-ilmenite and leucoxene-rutile ores that form the elongated stratified ore bodies with the thickness of 2 to 40 m. Ore bodies are deposited at the depth of 5–20 m and represented by loose argillo-arenaceous mass (95 %) with rare rock debris up to 10 cm in size and up to 5 % in content.

The geological structure around the ore occurrence comprises (bottom up) the following: pre-Cambrian crystalline rock; well preserved Mesozoic weathering crust 10–70 m thick with pronounced kaolin profile; Paleogene-Neogene clays and loam soils 2–10 m thick.

Rare earth elements in the weathering crust are embedded in clay (kaolinite and halloysite) in the ion-occluded form and make their own minerals; churchite, neodymium-churchite, yttric rhabdophanite, neodymium-bastnasite. The main ore-bearing mineral is yttrium hydrophosphate, churchite (with the content from 0.3 to 56.0 kg/m<sup>3</sup>). The total of rare earth oxides in lean ores ranges from 150 to 300 g/m<sup>3</sup> (on average 2 kg). In rare earth elements Y equals 54 %. The spectrum of the remaining 46 % of lanthanoids taken as 100 % can be expressed the following way: La – 6.6 %, Ce – 11.2 %, Pr – 1.2 %, Nd – 15.2 % (the total of light lanthanoids makes for 34.3 %), Sm – 4.6 %, Eu – 2.0 %, Gd – 11.8 %, Tb – 2.0 %, Dy – 15.4 %, Ho – 3.6 % (the total of transient rare earth elements stands at 39.0 %), Er – 12.2 %, Tm – 1.9 %, Yb – 11.3 %, Lu – 1.2 % (the total of heavy rare earth elements is 26.7 %).

The Zayachye ore occurrence is located in the Akmolinskaya region in Kazakhstan (Fig. 1, a) and attributed to marginal-marine placer deposits [25–27].

The total area of the deposit is about 70 km<sup>2</sup>. The average content of ilmenite is 25 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, rutile and leucoxene (combined), 11.1 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, zirconium, 11.9 kg/m<sup>3</sup>. The main ore bodies are embedded in thin-grain well-washed silica sands of the Chegan Eocene suite overlaid by the sand-clay deposits of the Chiliktin Oligocene suite. The lower part of the pay bench is represented by fine-grain glauconite-quartz sands with interlayers of Eocene coarse-grained sands. The Paleozoic basement lies at the depth of 10–35 m and consists of Jurassic terrigenous carbonaceous stratum.

The technological research that involved gravity recovery of sands resulted in obtaining some bulk concentrate. Its content was upgraded to industrial selective concentrates including that with zircon ZrO<sub>2</sub> – 54.1 %. The content of Sc and Hf oxides in zircon is on average 183 g/t and 1.0 % (or 1.2 %), respectively.

The Druzhba ore occurrence is found in the Pavlodarskaya region, Kazakhstan, and is attributed to the Druzhba stratum of middle-upper Eocene (Fig. 1, b) [25–34].

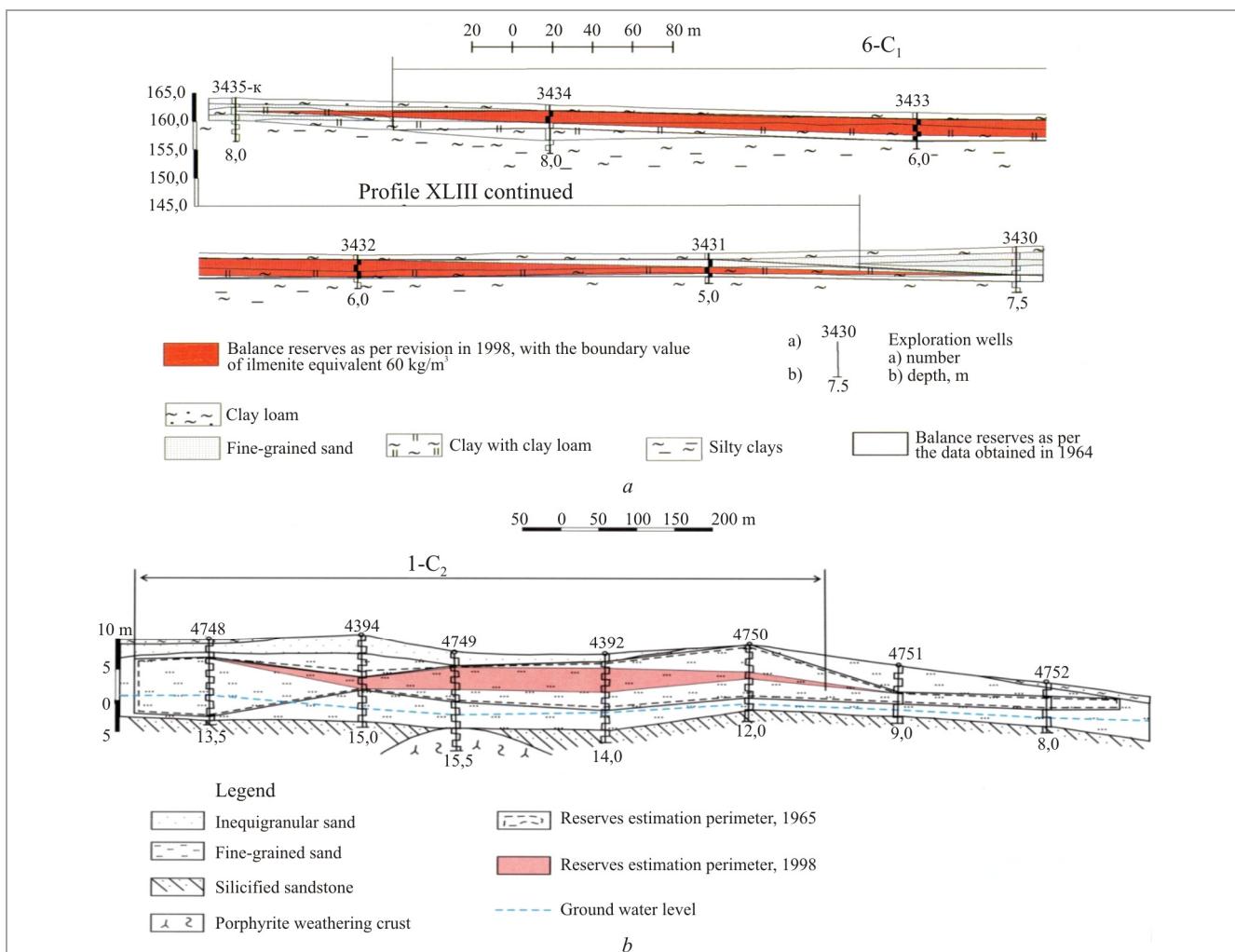


Fig. 1. Geologic cross section: *a* – along the XLIII profile of the Zayachye deposit; *b* – along the III profile of the Druzhba deposit [25]

The placer is marked by four sections (Sections A and B, Eastern and Southern), the mineral content is ilmenite-zircon-rutile. The average content of ilmenite is 14.8 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, rutile and leucoxene (combined), 20.4 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, zirconium, 11.4 kg/m<sup>3</sup>.

The cross section through the stratum starts with sand-gravel deposits of the alluvial facies along the relics of pre-historic river valleys washed away in the crystalline rock of the Paleozoic basement. Above is the coarse-grained gravelite, the lower part is often made up of clay sands interspersed with coarse-grained or sometimes gravel sand of offshore facies. The cross-section of the stratum is completed with titanium-bearing fine-grained (0.25–0.063 mm) sands with a small amount (3 %) of unevenly distributed clay material. The total stratum thickness varies from 10 to 35 m. Pay sands are covered by Oligocene lignitic polymict sand and gravel deposits, neogenic clays of the Aral suite, and sandy loams of the Quaternary period.

The technological research by means of gravity recovery resulted in obtaining the bulk concentrate with the extraction of 74.04–81.28 % TiO<sub>2</sub> and 93.09–95.72 % ZrO<sub>2</sub>. It was upgraded to saleable concentrates: ilmenite with the content of TiO<sub>2</sub> at 48.01–48.55 % (extraction of 15.31–17.37 %); zircon with ZrO<sub>2</sub> at 61.92–64.09 % (extraction of 84.58–84.88 %); rutile-leucoxene product with TiO<sub>2</sub> at 75.8–84.7 %. Associated components were not included in the research.

The Karaotkel deposit is located in the Kokpektinsky district of the East-Kazakhstan region in Kazakhstan, 10 km to the west of the operational Satpayevskoye field and attributed to river valleys cut through the

Mesozoic weathering crust and Paleogene alluvial gravel-sand-clay deposits [25–38].

The deposit is crustal and alluvial but its main value is in the alluvial placers of the Paleogene valleys. The thickness of ore bodies ranges from 4 to 7 m. The average content of ilmenite is 28 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, combined rutile and leucoxene, 6.3 kg/m<sup>3</sup>, zircon, 6.2 kg/m<sup>3</sup>. The low content of ore-bearing minerals is made up for by the high quality of concentrates that contain next to zero harmful impurities of phosphorus and chrome. The negative factor is the high content of clay material in the ore-bearing sands (50–75 %) that hinders the use of the gravity recovery method.

The area around the deposit is characterized by rock in three structural layers of different ages [39–45]: 1) crystallite basement made up of the Bukon and Maytyubinsk suites of middle-upper Carboniferous, cut through by granitoid and gabbroid intrusive rock of the Karaotkel rock mass; 2) sand-clay formations of the Upper Cretaceous weathering crust along the intrusive and sedimentary-metamorphic Paleozoic rock; 3) continental sand-clay loose deposits of Paleogene, Neogene, and Quaternary periods in the deluvial-proluvial, alluvial, and lacustrine facies.

The field contains three generic and geological-industrial alluvial ores: 1) ore-hosting weathering crusts along the intrusive rock; 2) ore-hosting alluvial deposits of the Paleocene Sevirozaysanskaya suite; 3) lacustrine deposits in the base of the Sarybulakskaya Oligocene suite overlaid by the brown-red clays of the Pavlodarskaya suite of Middle Miocene.

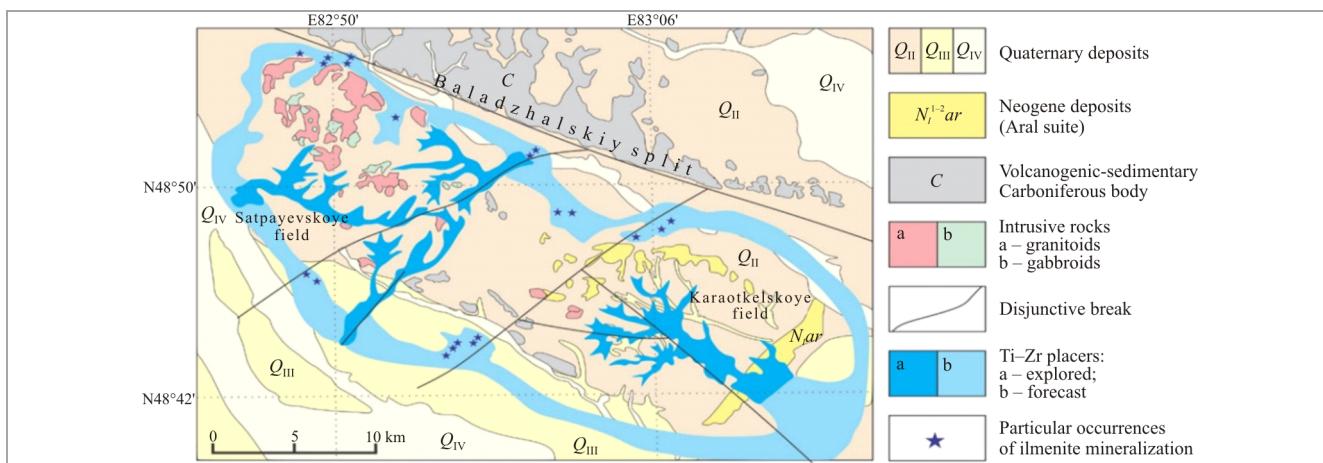


Fig. 2. Schematic forecast metallogenetic map of the Karaotkel-Preobrazhenskaya forecast area using materials [40, 43]

The placers of the Karaotkel and Satpayevskoye fields circle the Karaotkel-Preobrazhenskaya intrusion with a series of radial-type valleys that were found to contain 18 Ti-Zr-mineralization occurrences (Fig. 2).

The following results were obtained in the technological research: ilmenite concentrate with Sc up to 55 %, Y – up to 40 %, and Nb – up to 5 %; zirconium concentrate with Zr up to 78.7 %. After the rough concentrates were upgraded, the content of  $TiO_2$  was 60.53 %; extraction stood at up to 87.7 %. After metallurgical treatment, the titanium slag was found to have high concentrations of  $Nb_2O_5$  up to 0.167 %,  $Sc_2O_3$  – up to 0.168 %,  $TiO_2$  – up to 0.104 %.

In terms of deposits, the reserves of  $TiO_2$  stand at 3,170 thousand tons, including  $Nb_2O_5$  – 12.0 thousand tons (0.199 %);  $Ta_2O_5$  – 0.57 thousand tons (0.0096 %);  $Sc_2O_3$  – 0.27 thousand tons (0.0045 %), and  $V_2O_5$  – 2.82 thousand tons (0.047 %); as for zircon, the reserves of  $ZrO_2$  stand at 592.0 thousand tons (with the content of zircon in ore at 6.0 %), including  $HfO_2$  – 8.5 thousand tons (0.95 %) and  $Y_2O_3$  – 1.79 thousand tons (0.20 %).

### Conclusion

It is recommended that the Kundybay, Zayachye, and Druzhba ore occurrences should undergo prospecting and evaluation operations in order to determine the economic

feasibility of complex exploitation of titanium-zirconium placers with associated rare and rare earth valuable components.

Elevated contents of rare and rare earth elements in the alluvial ores of the Karaotkel deposit make it possible to assume that the field may be viewed not only as a source of mono-mineral concentrates of ilmenite, zircon, quartz and quartzite, mica, and feldspathic ceramic raw materials, but also as a supply of rare and rare earth elements (where monazite and zircon may act as the main concentrating minerals as isomorphic impurities).

The Karaotkel-Preobrazhenskaya forecast area is on the southeast side of the Preobrazhensky intrusive rock mass, with a broad source area (around 120  $km^2$ ) characterized by a branched network of valleys on the Paleozoic basement containing favorable geological-geomorphological conditions for titanium-zirconium placers with associated rare and rare earth elements. The forecast area is suggested for complex prospecting geologic exploration to determine placers rich in titanium and zirconium, as well as rare and rare earth valuable components.

Overall, the titanium-zirconium placers of Kazakhstan that are relatively low in the main valuable components but high in associated rare and rare earth elements have practical potential after undergoing some comprehensive estimation of their geological and economic feasibility.

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