

Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the Central Asia

-V. M. Masson

-V. I. Raspopova

Archaeological investigation carried out in the Central Asia during the Soviet period have brought to light a number of archaeological sites and archaeological cultures, due to which a new picture has emerged as to the contribution of local people to the development of the world civilisation. It has been proved that the initial human settlement of the Central Asia goes back to at least 800-500 thousand years before present (sites in the Uzboi River valley and in the Kopet-Dagh Mountains). The efflorescence of Early Agricultural civilisations in the South Turkmenia occurred in the course of 6th-4th millennia B. C. On this basis a local civilisation of the Ancient Near Eastern type (Altyn-depe) has emerged during the 3rd mill. B.C. The second stage of the efflorescence of ancient cultures in that area has occurred during the time span ranging from 3rd century B.C. to 4th century A. D., when there developed several centers of urban type civilisations which cultures combined ancient traditions and achievements of Hellenism (Bactria, Parthia

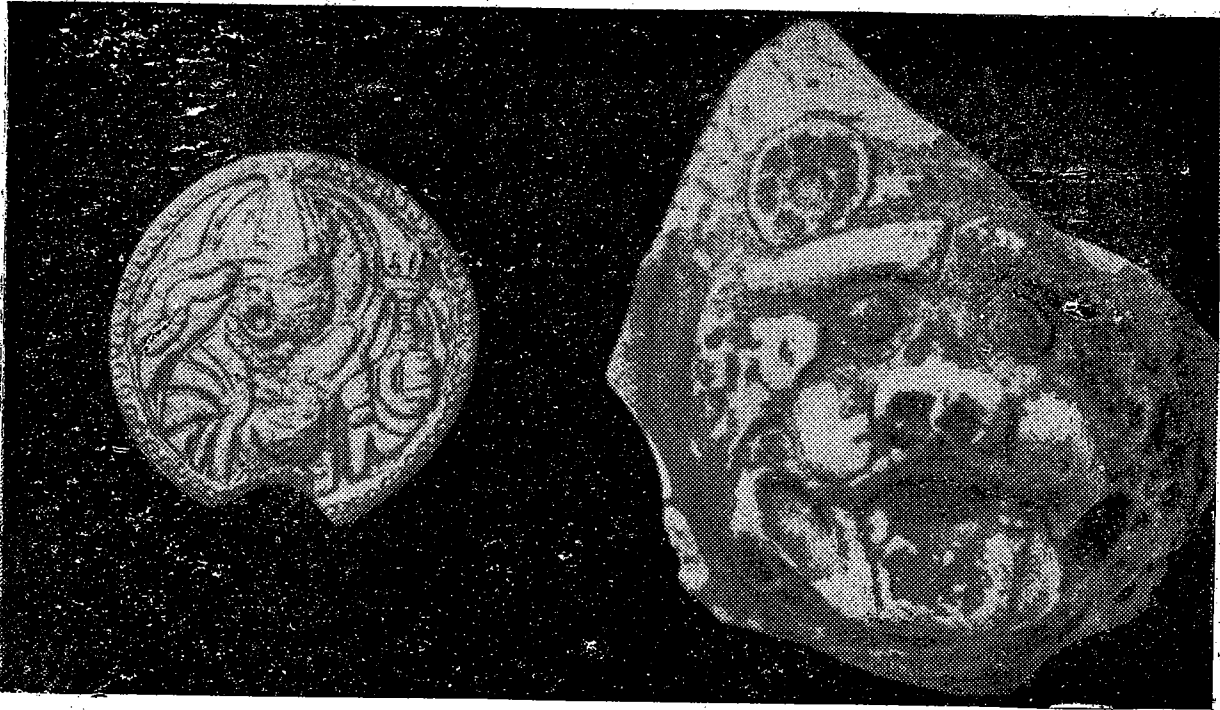
Margiana, neighbouring Choresm). At last, the third stage coincides with the Middle Ages. The outstanding sites of that time in Bukhara and in Samarkand are well known. Nonetheless, the excavations have unveiled the Sogdian culture of 6th-8th centuries A. D., which was the basis of the subsequent development. The Department of Central Asia and Caucasus of the Leningrad Branch of the Institut of Archaeology, Academy of Sciences of the USSR in collaboration with the Academies of Sciences of Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, Tadjikistan and Kirghizia carries out systematic investigations of key-sites belonging to all three epochs

Altyn-depe dwelling site is situated near the village of Miana in Southern Turkmenia; now it is a huge hill its size reaching 25 ha. The magnitude of archaeological deposits there is about 30 meters. The earliest houses of prehistoric farmers have been built there during the 5th mill. B. C. The consequent deposits reflect a gradual evolution of a communal settlement into a center of a

protourban type. The size of the Altyn-depe settlement has drastically increased by the end of the 4th beginning of the 3rd mill. B. C., when the foundation for the subsequent urbanisation was laid. At that time the site was surrounded by a mud-brick wall with rectangular towers. Beautiful painted pottery, impressive terracotta figurines representing feminine fertility goddess were manufactured. The middle of the 3rd mill. B. C. marks a considerable technological progress; the potter's wheel is in full use. A marginal section of settlement excavated beyond the outer wall displays small temples of rectangular planning with sacral hearths in the central rooms, which were successfully constructed in the life-time of several generations. Collective tombs in form of oval-shaped mud-brick constructions with vault ceiling were situated nearby. The main gates of the city at that time were flanked by two pillions decorated by pilasters. By the end of the 3rd mill. B.C. the Altyn-depe civilisation reached its climax. The city center was formed by a temple assemblage with a magnificent stepped pinnacle resembling the Sumerian ziggurats. The assemblage included a priest's tomb which contained ritual objects, including golden bull's and wolf's heads. There are bronze and silver seals; they are either, cross-shaped, or represent animal figures- panther, goat, eagle, fantastic three-headed dragon. There existed close links with the Harappan civilisation of the Indus valley. Excavations have produced Harappan ivory goods, and a seal with an inscription made in a Protoindian script.

A synthesis of various traditions is clearly expressed in the culture of the comparatively poorly studied state of the Ancient World, that of Kushana (1st-4th

centuries A.D.). Bactria, the northern provinces of which are situated within the southern regions of the present-day Uzbekistan, and Tadjikistan, was the place of origin and an important center of the Kushana state. Zar-tepe, situated near the modern township, of Anghor 20 kms south of Termez, was a typical Kushana site. The town featuring a clear square planning, was founded on the eve of the emergence of the Kushana state, probably during the 1st century B. C. The town-surrounded by defence walls with semioval mud-brick towers reflected all the stages of the progress and the subsequent gradual downfall of the Kushana empire. The uppermost layers of the town dating back to the 4th beginning of the 5th cen. A. D. are studied on a large scale. A palace containing several official rooms decorated by numerous columns was situated in the middle of the town. A block of dwellings stretched along a main thoroughfare followed up at a distance of 120 m was excavated on a large area. Some of the households flanking the street formed clusters comprising 5 to 8 rooms intended for living and for various economic activities. The standard of living of town-dwellers was sufficiently high. Excavations revealed more than 300 Kushana coins, high quality pottery decorated by reliefs depicting among other motifs, lion heads, a bronze medalion with a bust of Huvishka, a Kushana ruler. Various bone objects usually interpreted as styles (ancient writing implements) are often ornamented by tips in shape of human hand or horse head. The last element denotes long standing traditions of the Kushana state, founded by nomadic tribes having conquered settled oases of the Bactriana during the 2nd cen. B.C. The spread of the Buddhist sites reveals existence of cultural kings with India. The Buddhist sanctuary



(Zar-tepe, a living block, stick on a jar, the bronze medallion with the depiction of the king Huvishka (IV-the middle of the V century B. C.)

Plate No. 2



Altin-jepe, a temple (a second half of the III millenium B.C.)

Ancient Nepal



Zar-tepe, A living block, a clay bull (IV-the middle of the V century B.C.)



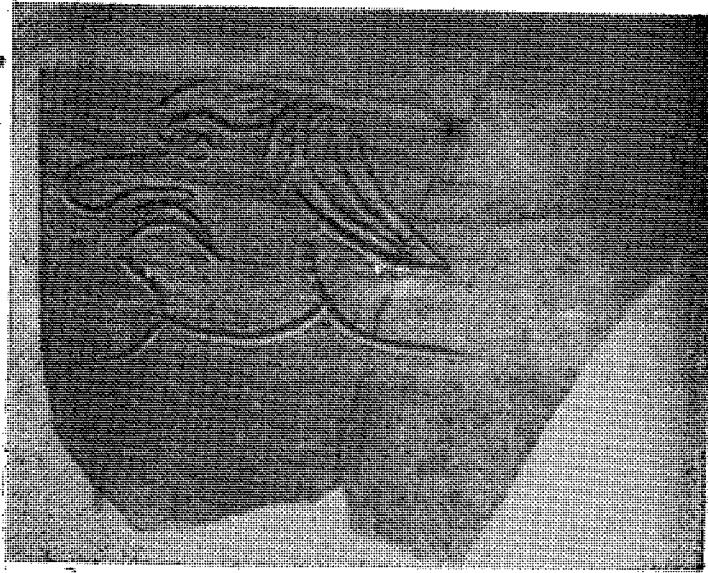
Altin-depe, a bronze zoomorphic seal (the beginning of the II millenium B.C.)



Pendjikent. A chalcedony seal with the depiction of a man-bull.



(Zar-tepe, a living block, the Buddha Head of alabaster with gilding (IV-the middle of the V century B. C.)



Pendjikent. A man depiction scratched on the body of a clay vessel before baking. (The first quarter of VIII century A.D.)



Pendjikent. A stone weight (The first quarter of the VIII century A. D.)

containing a gilded clay statue of Buddha was unearthed at Zarfepe. Clay and alabaster Kushana sculpture equally reveals links with Indian and Hellenistic traditions.

The ancient township of Pendjikent is situated at the outskirts of the modern town of the same name (Tadjik SSR). It was the easternmost city of the Sogdians from 5th to 8th cent. A.D. Objects of monumental art, wall-painting in the first place, are of universal renown. No less important are other discoveries providing multifaceted characteristics of the Sogdians, a people which spoke one of the Eastern-Iranian dialects. New investigations of the Pendjikent focused on 6th-8th cen. A.D., a period of time poorly recorded in written sources, which finished in the Arabian conquest. Among the investigated town structures one may quote: city walls, streets, bazaars with their stores and work-shops, water supplies, multi-roomed two and even three-storied houses of wealthy people, small, but also two-storied houses of common city-dwellers, two temples, a citadel with a ruler's palace,

suburban villas, a cemetery. 40% of the intra-wall area (its entire surface being about 13.5 ha) which has been studied, revealed a high standard of the urban culture. Monumental buildings with vaults and complicated wooden ceilings were made either of unbaked clay or of mud-bricks. Streets with uninterrupted houses walls resembled corridors; narrow lanes were often covered by vaults above which upper stores with store and living-rooms were situated. Wall-painting decorated not only palaces and temples, but numerous private houses as well. High quality painting represent divinities, scenes of every-day life, mythological scenes, illustrates literary works. The Sogdian painting with its refined mannerism is a direct predecessor of the medieval miniature of the East. Among the findings one may quote inscriptions in the Sogdian language. The vessels carried signs denoting volume. Inscriptions in Syrian and Arabic languages were also found. Among the artistic objects found at Pendjikent, carved gems containing representations of mythological creatures are of particular interest.

LENINGRAD, 1983