Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the Central Asia

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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 (Altyan-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 Chorczm). 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.

Altyan-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 Altyndelpe settlement has drastically increased by
the end of the 4th beginning of the 3rd mill. B.C., when the foundation for the sub-
sequent 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 fertuity 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 gen-
erations. 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 Altyndelpe
civilisation reached its climax. The city
center was formed by a temple assemblage
with a magnificent stepped pinnacle resemble-
ing the Sumerian zigzurats. The assemblage
included a priest's tomb which contained
ritual objects, including golden bull's and
wolf's heads. There are bronze and silver
scals; they are either, cross-shaped, or repre-
sent animal figures- panther, goat, eagle,
fantastic three-headed dragon. There existed
close links with the Harappan civilisation
of the Indus valley. Excavations have pro-
duced 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 pro-
vinces of which are situated within the
southern regions of the present-day Uzbe-
kistan, and Tadjikistan, was the place of origin
and an important center of the Kushana
state. Zar-tepe, situated near the modern town-
ship, 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, prob-
ably 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 down-
fall 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 col-
umns was situated in the middle of the
town. A block of dwellings stretched along
a main thoroughfare followed up at a dis-
tance 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 inter-
preted 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 Kush-
ana 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
(Zarstepe, 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.)
Altin-depe, a temple (a second half of the III millenium B.C.)

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.
Plate No. 3

Aeient Nepal

(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 Pendikent is situated at the outscirts of the modern town of the same name (Tadjik SSR). It was the eastermost 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 Pendikent 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 workshops, 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 cemetry. 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 compliated 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 Pendikent, carved gems containing representations of mythological creatures are of particular interest.

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