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# A Millennium of History

The Iron Age in southern Central Asia (2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Millennia BC).  
Proceedings of the conference held in Berlin (June 23–25, 2014).  
Dedicated to the memory of Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi.

Edited by Johanna Lhuillier, Nikolaus Boroffka



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Vordergrund – Keramik aus Ulug-depe, Photo J.-P. Loison, MAFTur  
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# A Millennium of History. The Iron Age in southern Central Asia (2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Millennia BC). Proceedings of the conference held in Berlin (June 23-25, 2014). Dedicated to the memory of Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi.

## Introduction

Nikolaus Boroffka, Johanna Lhuillier

The conference “A Millennium of History” was conceived by the editors towards the end of Dr. Lhuillier’s research stay as a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation. At the same time the passing away of the renowned archaeologist Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi, one of the pioneers in the Iron Age archaeology of Central Asia, in 2013 gave reason to dedicate the conference proceedings to his memory.

Although the Iron Age was identified over a hundred years ago, named in 1908 as “Culture IV” of the southern mound at Anau by H. Schmidt,<sup>1</sup> research on the pre-Hellenistic Iron Age of Central Asia has remained in the shadow of the more intensely studied, and more spectacular, preceding Bronze Age, and of the following Hellenistic period, where especially the written accounts of Alexander the Great’s campaign in Central Asia have for long and continuously attracted the attention of scientists.

New impulses were again provided by the publication of results from the excavations at Yaz Depe in the Murghab Delta of Turkmenistan, where three phases of the Iron Age were proposed, named Yaz I, Yaz II and Yaz III.<sup>2</sup> The discussion on their origin, genetic interconnection, chronology, and, especially, ethnic attribution did not cease, unfortunately frequently without any concrete archaeological data. While the Yaz I period, characterized mainly by handmade and sometimes painted pottery, chronologically clearly lay after the Bactro-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC),<sup>3</sup> which was

originally dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC, the Yaz III period was correlated with the Achaemenid time, i.e. beginning with the conquest of large parts of Central Asia under Cyrus II (the Great) around 539 BC up to the successful campaigns of Alexander the Great in 329 and 328 BC. Thus Yaz I was dated to the early 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium BC and Yaz II filled the period up to the integration of southern Central Asia (Provinces of Bactria, Gandhara, Khorezmia and Sogdia) into the Persian Empire, i.e. roughly the entire 7<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC.<sup>4</sup>

Major new collections of data were provided, among others, by the excavations at Ulug Depe in the Kopet Dagh foreland of southern Turkmenistan,<sup>5</sup> and others Turkmen sites (see Chapter 2 by A. Kurbanov, in this volume), Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan,<sup>6</sup> and Kuchuk Tepa in southern Uzbekistan,<sup>7</sup> although these did not solve the problems mentioned above in any unanimously accepted way,<sup>8</sup> leading V. I. Sarianidi to describe the Iron Age in 2007 as “*one of the intriguing mysteries of Central Asian archaeology*”.<sup>9</sup>

In 2009, in connection with the exhibition “Alexander der Grosse und die Öffnung der Welt. Asiens Kulturen im Wandel”,<sup>10</sup> a confer-

1990; Hiebert 1994; Francfort 2009). For further points of view see, for example, Götzelt 1996; Luneau 2014; Teufer 2015, each with further literature. The Sapalli culture is a term used for the local variant in southern Uzbekistan.

<sup>4</sup> Массон 1959, 29-34.

<sup>5</sup> Сарианиди 1968; Сарианиди 1969; Сарианиди 1971; Сарианиди 1972. For a more recent overview see Lecomte 2013; Lhuillier et al. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Sarianidi 1985; Сарианиди 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Аскарлов/Альбаум 1979; Шайдуллаев 2000; Šajdullaev 2002.

<sup>8</sup> For overviews of research history and the present stage of research see Сверчков/Бороффа 2008; Boroffka/Sverchkov 2013; Lhuillier 2013; Сверчков/Бороффа 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Sarianidi 2007, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Hansen et al. 2009. The exhibition was further shown in Leoben (Hansen et al. 2010a) and Madrid (Hansen et al. 2010b).

<sup>1</sup> Schmidt 1908, 183-186. Schmidt dated this layer to the period between 1000 and 500 BC, mainly on account of a three-edged arrowhead and a few iron fragments found in clear context. Given the very initial stage of archaeological research in Central Asia his dating is remarkably correct viewed from today.

<sup>2</sup> Массон 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Besides this name the period is, with slightly varying understanding of the material culture, also known as Namazga V-VI or the Oxus Civilisation (Francfort 1981, 174; Сарианиди

ence was organized, in which international participants presented and discussed new research and present problems of Antiquity in Central Asia.<sup>11</sup> One thing which became clear to all participants was the general neglect and lack of modern studies on the Iron Age preceding the conquest of Central Asia by Alexander the Great.

Two years later a first conference, dedicated to problems concerning Iron Age pottery, was organised in 2011 in Warsaw. The proceedings appeared in 2013<sup>12</sup> and introduced new information on the typology and chronology of pottery shapes, which is one reason why pottery does not play a major role in the Conference held in Berlin. At the Warsaw conference it was also proposed to continue a series of meetings, in order to discuss the problems of the Iron Age in Central Asia mentioned above. The Berlin conference should also be seen in this context, bringing together experienced and younger scholars in an effort of international collaboration.

The Iron Age of southern Central Asia, here understood as the period between the end of the BMAC and the conquest of the region by Alexander the Great, may thus most conveniently be considered as the Yaz I-III period, corresponding to the Early, Middle, and Late Iron Age.<sup>13</sup>

The hand-made painted pottery culture of the Early Iron Age (Yaz I period) shows very clear and significant changes against the preceding BMAC:

- proto-urban sites with monumental buildings are no longer constructed,
- wheel-thrown pottery is either absent, or present only in a minor percentage compared to hand-made wares, sometimes painted,
- long distance trade is archaeologically no longer clearly visible,
- highly skilled stone and metal crafting is very reduced or even absent,
- symbolic objects are very rare,
- the iconography is no longer significantly present in the archaeological record,
- standardised funerary practices, expressed in varied forms in the frame of cemeteries that may comprise several thousand burials are no longer known.

<sup>11</sup> Lindström et al. 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Wagner 2013.

<sup>13</sup> The term “period” does not necessarily denote a uniform “culture” over the whole of southern Central Asia, but is here used in the sense of a time period. Nonetheless, close parallels in material culture may be observed, even if regional variation also exists. For a recent synthesis on the confusing use of different terms referring to periods, cultures, and archaeological complexes in the scientific literature on the Central Asia Iron Age, see Lhuillier in print.

The changes in this cultural phenomenon, spread from northern Iran in the west (see Chapter 5 by A. Vahdati, in this volume) up to the Ferghana Valley and the borders of China in the east,<sup>14</sup> appear radical at first glance. In how far the changes were caused by influences or migrations from the steppes of the north is still a matter of debate (See Chapter 3 by B. Cerasetti, L. M. Rouse and I. De Nigris, and Chapter 4 by J. Lhuillier, J. Bendezu-Sarmiento and S. Mustafakulov, both in this volume).<sup>15</sup> However, some form of monumental buildings may still have been constructed, such as the platforms at Kuchuk Tepa<sup>16</sup> or Maidatepa (Bandikhan I),<sup>17</sup> in southern Uzbekistan, and as may be the case at Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan<sup>18</sup> (see Chapter 7 by J. Lhuillier, in this volume). Irrigation agriculture was still practiced during the Yaz I period, as has been documented recently (see Chapter 9 by N. Buławka, and Chapter 11 by L. Stančo, both in this volume). Wheel-thrown pottery, partly of BMAC tradition, is still present,<sup>19</sup> with around 18% of the assemblage at Majdatepa,<sup>20</sup> as also appears to be the case at Dashli-30 in Turkmenistan (see Chapter 6 by V. Pilipko, in this volume). Very few long distance contacts are documented, although by no means as spectacular as in the BMAC, e.g. by ornaments made from ocean shells found at Majdatepa.<sup>21</sup> Very few artistic objects are known, such as the remarkable stone head from a nameless mound on the territory of the “Karl Marx” kolkhoz near Mirshade,<sup>22</sup> while the abstract clay anthropomorphic statuettes from Majdatepa are still unique.<sup>23</sup> Burials of this period are still practically unknown in southern Central Asia, although some funerary activity - involving atypical burials, excarnation and handling of defleshed bones - does appear to have taken place<sup>24</sup> (see Chapter 4 by J. Lhuillier, J. Bendezu-Sarmiento and S. Mustafakulov, Chapter 16 by K. Abdullaev, both in this volume; graves mentioned in Chapter 6 by V. Pilipko should also be reinterpreted in the light of these most recent studies). The dating of the Yaz I period to the entire second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC today appears clear.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lhuillier 2013; Boroffka/Sverchkov in print.

<sup>15</sup> See also Lhuillier 2013; Luneau 2014; Lhuillier 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Аскарлов/Альбаум 1979; Шайдуллаев 2000; Šajdullaev 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Сагдуллаев 1976, 33-34, Fig. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Сариниди 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Lhuillier 2013b, 122-124, Pl. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Свечков/Бороффка 2007, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Boroffka/Sverchkov in print, Fig. 9,1.

<sup>22</sup> Пугаченкова 1973, 78-79, Fig. 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Boroffka 2009, 138-139 Fig. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Teufer 2013; Bendezu-Sarmiento/Lhuillier 2013, each with further literature; Bendezu-Sarmiento/Lhuillier 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Свечков/Бороффка 2007 (p. 132, Radiocarbon dating by J. Görsdorf); Boroffka/Sverchkov 2013, Fig. 11; Lhuillier 2013, 207-213, Fig. 74-75; Boroffka/Sverchkov in print.

The following Middle Iron Age (Yaz II period) sees a return to wheel-thrown pottery dominating (see Chapter 8 by K. Adbullaev, in this volume).<sup>26</sup> At Ulug Depe the impressive monumental fortress on the top of the mound is built at this time,<sup>27</sup> and clay sealings document some kind of administration and possibly trade.<sup>28</sup> Apparently the first fire temples also date back to this time (see Chapter 18 by M. Wagner, in this volume), while some unclear rituals involving a stork were performed at Ulug Depe and maybe also at Koktepe.<sup>29</sup> However, at least for the moment, we still do not know very much about many of the other aspects of life listed above and especially information on burials is still reduced.<sup>30</sup>

Although we know from written sources that Central Asia was conquered and incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire around the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC (corresponding to the Late Iron Age, or Yaz III period), the effects of this political change on the region remain elusive. On the one hand, in the pottery a continuous evolution from the preceding Yaz II period is observed,<sup>31</sup> the feeble renewal of glyptics may be traced back to the pre-Achaemenid period,<sup>32</sup> and the architecture also follows local traditions (e.g. Chapter 12 by Wu Xin and Chapter 13 by J. Annaev, both in this volume). Even the construction and layout of fire-temples, which seem to appear for the first time, may date back to the Yaz II period, considering the complex at Topaz Gala (see Chapter 18 by M. Wagner, in this volume), although they probably become firmly established only in the Achaemenid (Yaz III) period (see Chapter 19 by V. Mokroborodov, in this volume).<sup>33</sup> The lack of standardized burials persists, even though funerary activity of varied form exists, in the continuity of practices that appeared at the beginning of the Iron Age (see Chapter 17 by J. Bendezu Sarmiento, Ph. Marquis, J. Lhuillier and H. Monchot, in this volume). On the other hand recent analysis of settlement structures (see Chapter 12 by Wu Xin and Chapter 10 by Ph. Marquis, both in this volume)

and a fresh look at the texts (see Chapter 14 by W. Henkelman and Chapter 15 by C. Rapin, both in this volume) indicate that Bactria and Sogdia were fully integrated, and the people from here, at least when of any acceptable social standing, were treated in the same way as other citizens of the Achaemenid Empire.

The conquest of large parts of Central Asia by Alexander the Great brought significant changes, documented both in written sources and in archaeological finds. The exposure of the dead to wild animals (birds or dogs) is forbidden by Alexander and burials are indeed again documented archaeologically, although funerary research for the early Hellenistic period is still insufficient.<sup>34</sup> In architecture at least fortification technology changes, as has been recognised some time ago.<sup>35</sup> Although perhaps not immediately and not simultaneously everywhere, the material culture, and especially the pottery, demonstrates completely new technologies and shapes. Composite vessels made by joining a model-shaped bottom to a wheel-finished top (“cylinder-conical vessels” of Yaz II and Yaz III tradition) disappear fairly quickly, and generally a Greek determined repertoire of shapes becomes standard. This, presumably, was also connected to different food and ways of eating, since the new ceramic set is dominated by what is known as “fish-plates”, while plates and bowls had practically been absent in the previous periods. Alexander the Great's conquest thus marks a decisive and lasting break in the cultural history of Central Asia, and was therefore chosen as the late time-limit for the Berlin conference.

In conclusion, although recent research has improved our knowledge of the pre-Hellenistic Iron Age in southern Central Asia considerably, not least illustrated by the contributions collected in the present volume, much further research is still needed. This is perhaps especially well shown by Ph. Marquis in Chapter 10, where the great potential for archaeological and historical research in newly accessible Afghanistan, the southern part of Central Asia is presented.

We think that with the new research presented here, various impulses are given and useful paths for future research are opened.

<sup>26</sup> Сверчков/Бороффа 2008; Boroffka/Sverchkov 2013; Lhuillier et al. 2013; Сверчков/Бороффа 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Сариниди 1968; Сариниди 1969; Сариниди 1971; Сариниди 1972. For a more recent overview see Lecomte 2013; Lhuillier et al. 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Lecomte 2004; Wu/Lecomte 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Lecomte/Mashkour 2013.

<sup>30</sup> The only discoveries (atypical burials) with a well-established stratigraphy related to this period were found at Ulug-depe, see Lhuillier et al. 2015, 86-87, Fig. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Сверчков/Бороффа 2008; Boroffka/Sverchkov 2013; Lhuillier et al. 2013; Сверчков/Бороффа 2016; Lhuillier in print.

<sup>32</sup> Francfort 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Achaemenid sanctuaries may have existed in southern Uzbekistan at Pachmak-Tepe (Пидаев 1974), Sangir-tepe and maybe also Koktepe (Атаходжаев et al. 2014; Rapin/Khasanov 2016, 71-77), although in the two latter cases the publications still leave open questions.

<sup>34</sup> Teufer 2013, with further literature.

<sup>35</sup> Francfort 1979.

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