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Julio Bendezu-Sarmiento

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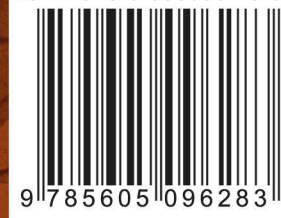
**CULTURES AND
CIVILIZATIONS OF CENTRAL ASIA
FROM THE NEOLITHIC TO THE MIDDLE AGES**

Proceedings of an international conference dedicated to the 120th anniversary of Aleksandr M. Belenitskii, 95th anniversary of Vadim M. Masson and 100th anniversary of Yurii A. Zadneprovskii

St. Petersburg, November 5–8, 2024

These collected proceedings include the most recent studies by researchers from Russia and near and far abroad countries on the archaeology, history and culture of the ancient and medieval peoples of Central Asia and adjacent territories. A special place (Part 1) is occupied by publications on the scientific heritage of the remarkable personalities whose jubilees are celebrated

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КУЛЬТУРЫ И ЦИВИЛИЗАЦИИ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ ОТ НЕОЛИТА ДО СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЬЯ

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ОТ НЕОЛИТА
ДО СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЬЯ**



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95-летию В. М. Массона
и 100-летию Ю. А. Заднепровского
Санкт-Петербург, 5-8 ноября 2024 г.



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INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE



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St. Petersburg, November 5–8, 2024

Edited by

Valerii P. Nikonorov and Evgenii O. Stoianov



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Книга предназначена как для специалистов в области исторических наук, так и для студентов и всех интересующихся далеким прошлым Центральной Евразии.

The proceedings of an International scientific conference dedicated to the jubilee dates of the outstanding Russian archaeologists — Aleksandr M. Belenitskii (1904–1993), Vadim M. Masson (1929–2010) and Yurii A. Zadneprovskii (1924–1999) — contain the most recent studies by their colleagues from Russia and near and far abroad countries on the archaeology, history and culture of the ancient and medieval peoples of Central Asia and adjacent territories. A special place (Part 1) is occupied by publications on the scientific heritage of the jubilees' celebrants are solemnized.

The book is intended not only for specialists in the field of historical sciences, but also for students and all those who are interested in the remote past of Central Eurasia.

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The Protohistoric period in Central Asia and the importance of research at Ulug-Depe (Turkmenistan)

Julio Bendezu-Sarmiento¹

Annotation. *The Franco-Turkmen Archaeological Mission (MAFTUR) has been working on Ulug-Depe, 170 km east of Ashgabat, since 2001. Ulug-Depe covers an area of about 17 ha and has more than 30 m high. It is the site with the deepest stratigraphy Central Asia: from the Late Chalcolithic to the Parthian time. The author summarizes the preliminary results of the archaeological investigation of the site and traces the dynamics of its development in the historical periods named above.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, Bronze Age, Ulug-Depe*

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From the earliest times, southern Turkmenistan has played a key role in the development of sedentary cultures. Here, we can distinguish two main cultural complexes. Firstly, the Bactriana-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) or Oxus Civilization, which extended over the Margiana, the delta region of the Murghab river in Turkmenistan, and over ancient Bactria (mainly between the north of present-day Afghanistan and the south of Uzbekistan). This complex, dated to around 2200–1700 BC, represents the apogee of an urban culture distributed in «oases» around a key site, Gonur Depe.

The second Turkmen ensemble concerns Namazga Culture, which occupies the central and eastern foothills of the Kopet Dagh plain and where it is possible to trace an uninterrupted cultural dynamic from at least the Neolithic period (6th millennium) right up to the historical period.

During the Bronze Age (late 3rd — mid 2nd millennium BC), these two closely-linked complexes were characterised by the presence of large settlements in which specialised crafts (ceramic production, metallurgy, stonework, etc.) reached a high technological level. The presence of public monuments (palaces, the high terraces used for worship at Ulug-Depe and Altyn Depe), major collective works (irrigation) and evidence of long-distance trade relations complete the picture of these proto-urban societies.

This brilliant period was followed, around 1700–1500 BC, by what is known as the “urbanisation crisis”, which at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC saw considerable changes in the economy, settlement patterns, architecture and material culture of these regions. Exogenous elements appear in the cultural assemblages of the Final Bronze Age. The arrival of the Iron Age in this region of Central Asia is then discernible with the Yaz I culture (around 1500 BC) in Margiana and the Kopet Dagh foothills, but also throughout southern Central Asia. This period reflects an ideological upheaval, which is reflected in the almost total disappearance of burials (Sine Sepulchro culture). They were rapidly replaced by the practice of disinterring bodies in the open air, in secondary burials. Several individuals bearing witness to these practices have been discovered in the Early and Middle Iron Age (Yaz I–II) layers at Ulug-Depe. A connection is sometimes established between these new practices and the emergence of beliefs and prescriptions linked to the spread of Mazdeism, supposedly influenced by the precepts of Zoroaster.

It is in the context of these intercultural and interregional relations that the Franco-Turkmen Archaeological Mission (Mission archéologique franco-turkmène — MAFTUR) has been working since 2001 on the site of Ulug-Depe located in the south-west of the country, 170 km east of the capital Ashgabat.

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The work on this site is part of a dynamic of research into regional cultural characterisation, the issues of which were defined by Turkmen and Soviet archaeologists on the basis of the neighbouring sites of Jeitun, Ilghynli-Depe, Namazga-Depe and Altyn-Depe, from the Neolithic to the Final Bronze Age. In the current scientific context, Ulug-Depe is a major site in Central Asia, due to its very long stratigraphy (the longest in Central Asia), its surface area of around 17 ha and its height of over 30 m. It is also the only site in Central Asia where all the periods mentioned above can be documented.

Excavation of the older levels of the site has enabled us to carry out a complete re-examination and excavation of domestic dwellings from the Chalcolithic (Namazga III) and Early and Middle Bronze Age of the Namazga IV and V types. The oldest level we reached dates from the Late Chalcolithic (4000–3500 BC). The architecture is characterised by a number of successive construction phases, as well as by the cramped nature of the rooms uncovered, combined with features (toadstools, fireplaces, jars, burials) and floors covered with high-quality ceramics painted with geometric motifs, typical of this period.

Strangely enough, the Early Bronze Age (Namazga IV) is much less well known in southern Central Asia than the Chalcolithic, mainly because, on large sites, its remains are covered by those of later periods. However, wherever they are attested, they represent the most powerful layers, as at Ulug-Depe, where they are over 7.5 m thick. The ceramics are characterised by their finesse, the precision of their geometric decoration and the richness of their colours, continuing the tradition of the preceding Chalcolithic period.

The Middle Bronze Age (Namazga V) was the proto-urban phase of the Oxus Civilisation, a proto-state society comparable to those of the Mesopotamian and Elamite worlds, but without the use of writing. At Ulug-Depe, this period was observed mainly in the northern part of the site. Excavation of a residential area on the north-western edge of the site showed that the houses had been built on the plumb line of the walls — some of which had been ruined — from the previous period. In fact, this district was limited to the north by the town's perimeter wall and could not be extended in any way, as the narrow streets and modest dwellings retained the previous north-east/south-west axis. This superposition, with no change in plan or orientation, is one of the key features of Ulug depé during the Namazga IV and V phases of the Bronze Age. In addition, a poorly preserved massive structure was discovered on the north-eastern slope of the site. This was a horizontal terrace built of compact adobe blocks, 10 m long, 9 m wide and at least 4 m high. These high terraces, interpreted as «cultic», are still dated to the 3rd millennium and associated with rich burials. The site at Ulug-Depe does not seem to have been exempt from this rule, since on the northern part of the terrace an extremely disturbed burial site was discovered, caused not only by water running down the slope but also by one or more ancient plunderers. Inside, the very poorly preserved remains of two adults were discovered. One female was wearing a belt of small white limestone beads. In the looted pit, a connected hand belonging to the second individual was associated with limestone beads that probably formed a bracelet. Other gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian and agate beads were scattered around. There were also 15 ceramic vases, one of them painted and probably from Baluchistan, and 8 alabaster vases, exceptional objects of great prestige. Some of the material in this tomb was imported from the Iranian plateau and the Indus. It was at the height of the Oxus civilisation that trade with neighbouring regions (the Indian subcontinent, the entire Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia and the Gulf regions) reached its greatest amplitude. The high terrace, but above all the tomb of Ulug-Depe, helps to shed light on these international exchanges.

The material culture of this period testifies to perfect mastery in ceramic production, which became more standardised and was marked by the disappearance of painted decoration, the processing of alloys of several metals (gold, silver, copper, lead or tin) and the working of soft and semi-precious stones (lapis lazuli, carnelian, steatite, alabaster).

During the Final Bronze Age, around 1700–1500 BC, the BMAC disappeared socio-politically and culturally, for a variety of reasons that are not yet fully understood. It was in this deep current of change that the cultures of the Early Iron Age emerged around 1500 BC. Why and how are still the subject of lively debate among specialists, but what seems certain is that the disappearance of the proto-urban Oxus civilisation can be traced back to a combination of socio-economic, migratory and perhaps climatic phenomena. This period is well documented in the north-eastern part of the depé, where several domestic installations have been excavated, including some very fine examples of modelled and painted ceramics with monochrome geometric decoration.

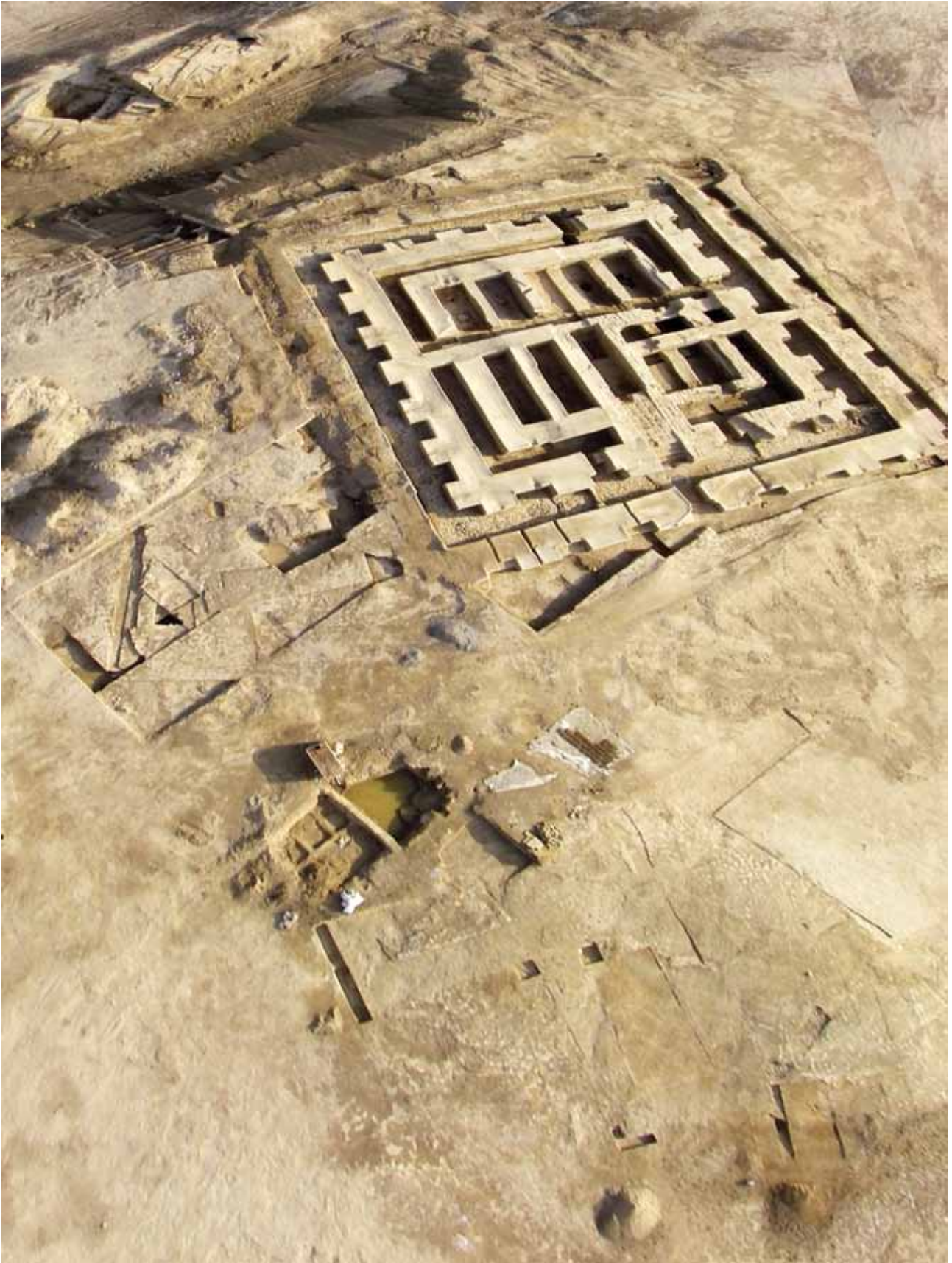


Fig 1. The citadel of Ulug-Depe (photo: MAFTUR)
Рис. 1. Цитадель Улуг-депе (фото: MAFTUR)

Finally, at the summit of the site, our exploration focused on the excavation of the early Middle Iron Age citadel (pre-Achaemenid period, Yaz II, c. 1100–1000 to 600 BC), about which very little is known in this region of Central Asia. This fortified settlement, like the lower town that it dominates to the east, has not been occupied since the Middle Iron Age. The cultural characteristics of the pre-Achaemenid period and the political organisation of the indigenous rulers in this region and beyond therefore need to be precisely defined. Thanks to a geophysical survey of around 10 ha of the site, it has been possible to reconstruct the buried structures, including several monumental and domestic buildings, as well as sections of the surrounding wall and a road network associated with the ancient gates. All of these structures, dating from the Middle Iron Age (Yaz II), have since been excavated, revealing very poorly-preserved monuments that were often later reoccupied by a Helleno-Parthian population, as evidenced by the ceramic material discovered during our work.

The citadel (**fig. 1**), built in part on a powerful platform, is a building measuring 40 m on each side with a facade decorated with redans and defensive arches. Inside, several corridors, the outermost of which was paved with pebbles, linked the rooms on the lower level. These were oblong storage areas with benches on which medium-sized ceramic containers had been placed. Other, larger storage jars had been buried in the centre of these rooms.

A staircase faced the main access door to the south-west of the citadel and led directly to a second level, of which only traces of the walls, which had fallen after a very destructive fire, and of the solid wood roof were uncovered during our work.

During our field excavation campaign in autumn 2019, two large buildings, one of which has the same architecture and dimensions as the citadel, were discovered to the north-east of the site. These discoveries support our idea of the regional political and economic importance that Ulug-Depe may have played, as evidenced by its size and geographical position.

Протоисторический период в Центральной Азии и значение исследований на Улуг-депе

Х. Бендесу-Сармьенто²

Аннотация. Франко-туркменская археологическая миссия (MAFTUR) с 2001 г. ведет работы на Улуг-депе в 170 км к востоку от Ашхабада. Улуг-депе занимает площадь около 17 га и представляет собой искусственный холм более 30 м высотой. Это памятник с самой протяженной в Центральной Азии стратиграфической колонкой: от позднего энеолита до парфянского времени. Автор суммирует предварительные итоги археологического изучения памятника и прослеживает динамику его развития в указанный исторический промежуток.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, бронзовый век, Улуг-депе

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