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L'ORIENT EST SON JARDIN

HOMMAGE À RÉMY BOUCHARLAT

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CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE ACHAEMENID PERIOD IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The present contribution examines some recent archaeological discoveries in order to bring some elements towards the identification of the Achaemenid occupation period in the Central Asian provinces of the empire. It comes back on the chronology of the Middle and Late Iron Age, aiming to clarify the sometimes improper use of the label “Achaemenid” in Central Asia. To do so, we present the results of some recent work on the Yaz II-III pottery assemblage, in correlation with stratigraphic excavations, leading to the identification of some typo-morphological criteria allowing identifying the Late Iron Age/”Achaemenid” levels. A reassessment of the recent excavations shows a territorial reorganization before the arrival of the Achaemenids, since the Middle Iron Age. While the religious architecture shows evidence of a continuous evolution since the beginning of the Iron Age, the buildings properly attributed to the Achaemenid occupation period are limited to some fortified constructions (Cheshme-Shafa, Kyzyl Tepa, Bactrian circular sites). Altogether, these data reflect the appearance of some socio-political entities since the Middle Iron Age, which evolve by their own under the Persian Achaemenid control, whose traces are visible through the military control over the territory.

Keywords: Achaemenid, architecture, Bactria, Central Asia, Iron Age, pottery, Yaz.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the Late Iron Age (ca. 540 BCE), Cyrus II the Great conquered Central Asia and integrated it into the Achaemenid Empire, a domination clearly attested by some inscriptions in Iran.¹ Some parchments and accounting wooden sticks have been recently discovered in northern Afghanistan, shedding a new light on the Achaemenid administration and the military control in the satrapy of Bactria on the eve of the Hellenistic conquest (Shaked 2004; Naveh & Shaked 2012; Hyland 2013), as do the Elamite tablets from Old Kandahar for southern Afghanistan, the satrapy of Arachosia (Fisher & Stolper 2015). However, the Achaemenid presence remains barely noticeable in Central Asia, which can be interpreted as a strategy of the Achaemenid power, since its control usually does not necessitate the replacement of the pre-existing structures (Briant 2002; Khatchadourian 2012). Both the settlement pattern and the material culture reveal a great continuity with the preceding period, and the excavations of Achaemenid sites and typical Achaemenid artefacts are still very limited, allowing a better characterization of the Achaemenid occupation. All these elements were well highlighted by Briant (1984), Lyonnet (1990), Genito (1998), Francfort (2005), and Rapin (in print), while Mokroborodov (2015) documented the history of research on this period in Central Asia and listed the main sites. Most of the problems underlined in these papers are still accurate: lack of publication dedicated to this period, inequality of the archaeological data due to the hugeness of the territory, scarcity of Achaemenid index fossils and textual sources, material uniformity leading to difficulty in identifying Achaemenid sites, and

¹ The core area of the Central Asian provinces of the Empire corresponds to Bactria, an area formed by the northern part of Afghanistan to which can be added south-western Tajikistan and southern Uzbekistan. Other areas submitted to the Achaemenid control include Sogdiana, Parthia, Aria, Hyrcania, and Chorasmia. However, the borders of the Achaemenid satrapies in Central Asia are still not clearly defined, especially because they were subjected to changing contacts with the neighbouring nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes of the steppes zone. Thus, Chorasmia was integrated into the Empire during the 6th century BCE, but the Achaemenid control was already weakened during the 5th century, leading to the formation of the Antique — so-called Kangju — period (Helms et al. 2002: 7-9; Minardi 2015; Tolstov 1948: 13-26).

Achaemenid layers covered by later levels which makes the excavations difficult. This paper will not develop these points once more but intends to focus on the archaeological data — especially those gathered in the past ten years — in order to identify the period of the Achaemenid domination, rather than the Achaemenid presence itself.

A GLIMPSE ON CONFUSING CENTRAL ASIAN CHRONOLOGY

First, it is necessary to come back to the chronology of Central Asia, since the use of inadequate denominations largely contributes to the confusion. Three groups of terms are commonly used to speak about the end of the second and the first millennia BCE, a period that corresponds to the Iron Age.

It has been divided into three phases by V. M. Masson, whose work at Yaz-depe has been used until today as the reference for Central Asian Iron Age. Based on the stratigraphy and on the material culture, he identified three stages he named Yaz I, Yaz II, and Yaz III (Masson 1959: 29-34, 48). The Yaz III material assemblage largely extends the Yaz II material assemblage, from which it differs only by some minor morphological variants of the ceramics, like the orientation of the wall and the shape of lip of some vessels (Masson 1959: 41), making the purely material identification of these two assemblages extremely difficult. The method of excavation by *jarus*, i.e. some 50cm thick artificial layers (Masson 1959: fig. 8, 10), makes the stratigraphy and the distinction between Yaz II and Yaz III even more confusing.

The date V. M. Masson attributed to these stages was comprised between 900 BCE and 350 BCE (Yaz I: 900-650; Yaz II: 650-450; Yaz III: 450-350). Even if a small part of Central Asian specialists still follows this chronology, most people (including V. M. Masson himself in his latest works, see Masson 2000) now agree on another, lower chronology, where these stages are comprised between the mid-second millennium BCE and the conquest of Central Asia by Alexander the Great. This new chronology is based on a refined stratigraphy, a better dating of the Bronze Age sites, and on numerous radiocarbon dates from various sites (see Lhuillier 2013: 208 for the Yaz I period; Lecomte 2013 for the Yaz II period). However, the radiocarbon dates are very scarce for the Yaz III period, and when they exist, they do not exactly match with the study of the material assemblages and the dendrochronological data (like for the Hellenistic period), a problem likely due to the “reservoir effect” — already noticed for marine and lacustrine waters — that may be accentuated in the mountainous areas by irrigation with water from the glaciers (see Heussner & Boroffka 2013: 182-184; Sverchkov et al. 2013: 63-67).

This chrono-stratigraphical sequence is used as the basis for the chronological periodization of the Iron Age, thus divided into the Early Iron Age (corresponding to the Yaz I phase, ca. 1500/1400-1000 BCE), the Middle Iron Age (corresponding to the Yaz II phase, ca. 1000-540 BCE), and the Late Iron Age (corresponding to the Yaz III phase, ca. 550-330 BCE).

While this periodization was at first based mainly on the material culture, a cultural value was gradually added, based on the main archaeological cultures of each period (the Handmade painted ware cultures for the Early Iron Age) or on the historical knowledge, the Late Iron Age being thus associated to the Achaemenid domination of Central Asia. In between, the Middle Iron Age is simply qualified of pre-Achaemenid. Yet, the material culture of the Yaz II and Yaz III periods is almost identical and the division is based first on the fact that the Achaemenids should have been in Central Asia approximatively during the Late Iron Age, although the political and administrative change does not correspond to any material transition. Sometimes, this confusion leads wrongly to the automatic labelling as “Achaemenid” of sites displaying Yaz II-Yaz III pottery, without any distinction from the material assemblage. Furthermore, the scarcity of Achaemenid elements from Iran, except the court production, has not allowed any accurate comparison until now. Indeed, as R. Boucharlat noticed “*dans le pays où l’on attend des traces évidentes et nombreuses de la présence achéménide ou même seulement des activités humaines pendant la période de l’empire perse, la moisson paraîtra maigre, décevante pour ceux qui travaillent loin de partie centrale de l’empire et qui en espéraient une riche documentation*” (Boucharlat 2005: 221).

After this short review it is easy to understand the discrepancy between the Yaz sequence, based on the material culture and which refers to cultural features — often themselves subject to discussions —, and a periodization which sometimes refers only to the chronology and sometimes is based mainly on historical data. These chronologies match only for the older phase, and the total correspondence of the Yaz III period with the Achaemenid period is far from being certain, even though there is no way in the current state of research to avoid this problem. We will thus preferably refer in this paper to the terms Yaz III when we will be speaking about the material culture, and to the Late Iron Age or the Achaemenid period when it will be about the chronology itself and when it is possible to identify some elements related to the Persian presence.

IDENTIFYING THE ACHAEMENID OCCUPATION PERIOD THROUGH THE LOCAL MATERIAL CULTURE

In this context identifying the material landmarks of the Achaemenid occupation period remains a challenge. Since the beginning of the Iron Age, Central Asia is characterized by the lack of any prestige goods, a fact probably linked with the replacement of burials by excarnation of the corpses. Until the Hellenistic period, mostly utilitarian objects are thus to be found, with the noticeable exception of some treasures including some Achaemenid artefacts (a list has been exhaustively made by Francfort 2005) like the treasures of the Oxus, Mir Zakah II, and Takht-e Sangin (Dalton 1964; Catalogue 2002; Litvinskij & Pichikjan 2000). Glyptic of the Late Iron Age, although scarce, reveals a Persian stylistic influence but it does not differ from the local tradition that appeared during the Middle Iron Age (Francfort 2013). We can nevertheless get some informative elements if we turn to the everyday artefacts, in particular the ceramics. Indeed, in this context it constitutes not only the majority of the archaeological data available, but it is also a good tracer of the cultural and socio-economic transformations of Central Asia. We have to consider both the Yaz II and the Yaz III periods together, since the distinction between the ceramic assemblages of these two periods is difficult, an approach that can give some first answers regarding the chronology and the organization of the society since the pre-Achaemenid period.

At the regional scale, if we consider all the territory associated with Yaz II-Yaz III pottery, some common features appear that can be considered as good chronological indicators. Recent work on the Yaz II period in northern Bactria (Sverchkov & Boroffka 2008; 2016) and in the Kopet Dagh area (Lhuillier *et al.* 2013; 2015) allowed a better identification of the typical shapes, and conversely should help identify the Yaz III shapes.

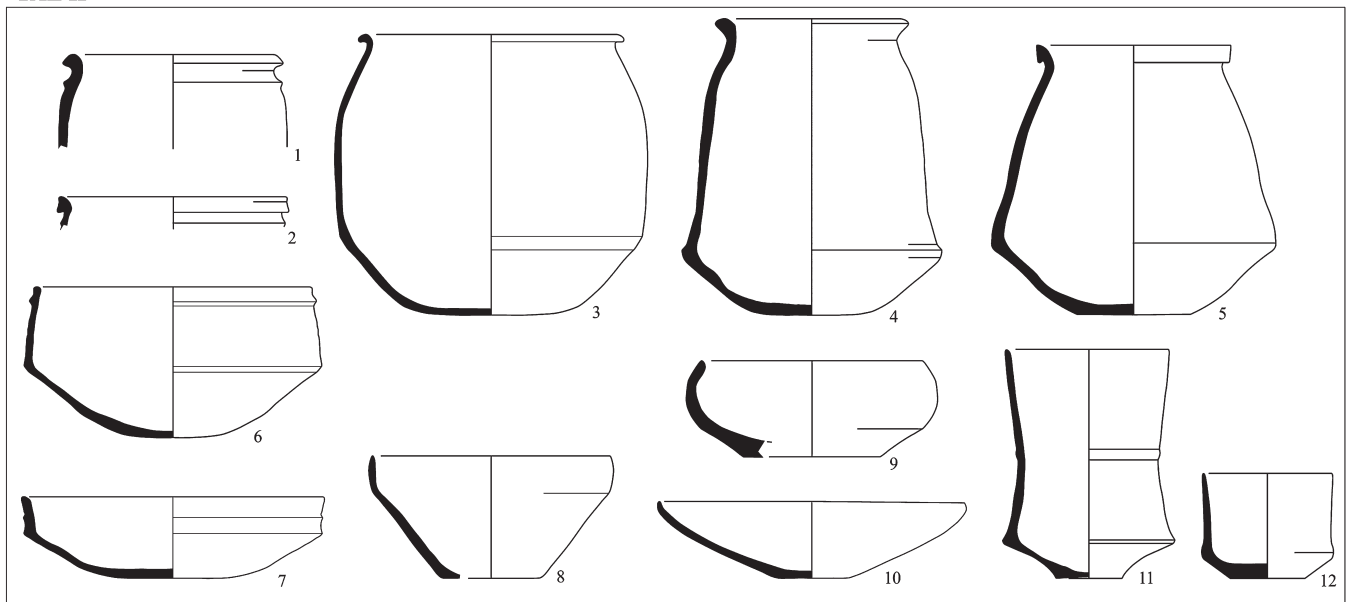
At Ulug-depe in the Kopet Dagh Piedmont, two ceramic complexes are attached to two successive stratigraphic phases. The Yaz IIA complex is characterized mainly by globular beak- or hook-rimmed jars, sometimes with a simple banded-rim (*manzhet*-rim). The cylindro-conical beakers are usually small with a low carination. They become larger during the Yaz IIB stage. The globular beak-rimmed jars are still present, together with jars with vertical walls and banded-rim, with more diverse lips. In general, the shapes are becoming more diverse. According to L. Sverchkov and N. Boroffka, the beak- or hook-rimmed jars are also characteristic of stage Yaz IIA at Bektepa, Kuchuk-tepe, Kyzylcha 6, and in the Denau area in northern Bactria, as well as Tillja II in southern Bactria, or El'ken III or Garry-Kjariz I in the foothills of Kopet Dagh. In all these regions, the Yaz IIB complex is mainly defined by the appearance of vertical banded-rimmed jars. Similarly, A. Askarov, V. Aminov and U. Rakhmanov (1978: 54-55) and Sh. Shajdullaev (2000: 89-96) observe very few banded-rims in the earliest stages of Kuchuk-tepe, in northern Bactria, corresponding to the Yaz II period. From the following stage on, corresponding approximately to the second part of the Yaz II period, there is a larger variety of banded rims. A similar pattern is observed in Margiana (Cattani & Genito 1998: 76).

To conclude (Fig. 1), at the regional scale, jars with a banded-rim appear during the second stage of the Yaz II period but become more abundant in the Yaz III complex. They have usually vertical walls and there is a large variety of banded-rims. Their moulded base is joined to the wall by a bevelled and sometimes prominent joint (Fig. 1, 13-14). Beak-rimmed jars are characteristic of the Yaz II period (Fig. 1, 1-4), while small jars with everted, rounded lips are characteristic of the Yaz III period (Lyonnet 1997: 108-109). Some

medium-sized jars have a massive everted, rounded or triangular rim (Fig. 1, 15). The cylindro-conical beakers have higher walls and a prominent, angular carination (Fig. 1, 23). Based on the identification of these shapes, some sites like Obishirtepa (Mokrobodov & Wu 2014: 89-91), Kyzyl-Tepe (Sverchkov *et al.* 2013), Gazimullah-Tepe and Kindyk-Tepe (Boroffka 2009) could recently be attributed with more precision to the Yaz III period.

It is clear that the overall impression of homogeneity in the Yaz II-Yaz III complexes masks less noticeable differences that constitute the only useable information concerning the confusing chronology of the Central Asian Iron Age and in particular the Achaemenid period. We hope that a thorough, though tedious, analysis of the pottery from the “Yaz II-III” sites can allow discriminating the Yaz III occupation in the future and thus identify the Late Iron Age sites and the Achaemenid occupation period.

YAZ II



YAZ III

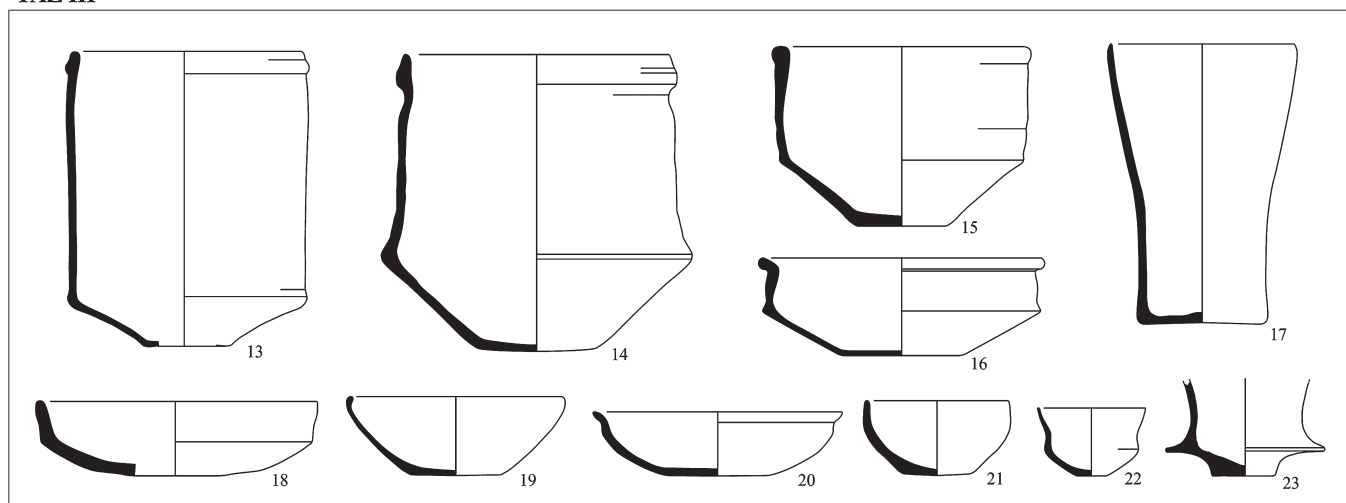


Fig. 1: Representative ceramics shapes during the Yaz II and the Yaz III periods (Yaz II: 1-2, 4, 9, 11. Bactra, Bala Hissar; 3, 6-8, 10. Ulug-depe; 5. Yaz-depe; 12. Bektepa – Yaz III: 13, 15-20, 22. Yaz-depe; 14, 21. Kindyktepa; 23. Bactra, Rempart Nord).

RELIGIOUS LIFE AND FUNERARY PRACTICES

Similarly, during the Achaemenid period, religious life bears witness to local evolutions of processes that started at the beginning of the Iron Age. Indeed, in the mid-second millennium BCE, a major social and ideological upheaval leads to the replacement of burials by excarnation, and thus to the disappearance of graves. No religious structures have been identified yet during this period — with the likely exception of the central room of the “citadel” of Tillja-Tepe (Sarianidi 1989) —, and the first ones, linked to Mazdeism or Zoroastrianism, appear with the Middle Iron Age.

Excarnation left very few traces in Iron Age Central Asia, since the bones were usually not collected. The first ossuaries appeared during the 5th-4th c. BCE in Chorasmia, and only later in other Central Asian areas (Grenet 1989: 560). However, some scattered bones can be found in occupation layers and some of the bones were sometimes collected — with a memorial purpose or simply as refuse — in reused storage pits, often together with some animal bones (Bendezu-Sarmiento & Lhuillier 2015a). Rarely, some body parts or complete skeletons can be found, evidence of scarce burials contemporaneous to excarnation which remains the main practice (Bendezu-Sarmiento & Lhuillier 2015b). But since few sites or levels of sites precisely attributed to the Achaemenid period have been excavated, it remains extremely difficult to correlate some of these discoveries precisely to the Late Iron Age, rather than to the Middle Iron Age.

Among the few well dated discoveries, let us first mention Bactra, where some human bones have been discovered at Tepe Zargaran in layers buried immediately under the Hellenistic levels, and thus likely attributed to the end of the Achaemenid period (Besenval, Marquis & Fouache 2009: 1021; Bendezu Sarmiento, Marquis & Lhuillier in print). They were found together with animal bones, and they were still partly in anatomical connexion. This discovery highlights the dubious comments Onesicritus made about Bactria at the time of the Hellenistic conquest and reported by Strabo (Geography, XI.11.3), “*that while the land outside the walls of the metropolis of the Bactrians looks clean, yet most of the land inside the walls is full of human bones; but that Alexander broke up the custom*” (see Boyce & Grenet 1991: 6-8 for further comments on this section).

Other discoveries have been made in southern Uzbekistan. A. Sagdullaev reports the discovery of some human bones at Kyzyl-Tepa, and of a human skull near the neighbouring manor of Kyzylcha 1 (Sagdullaev 1990: 34). The new dating of the settlement (Sverchkov et al. 2013) allows us to consider, though with caution, these discoveries as related to the Late Iron Age. At Talashkan-Tepe, three graves have been found in one tower of the last occupation level, attributed to the Late Iron Age (Shajdullaev 2000: 52). However, two of them are dug into the wall of the tower, allowing a later date for these burials. At Kuchuk-Tepe a grave is attributed to the Kuchuk IV phase, thanks to two bronze arrowheads (Askarov & Al’baum 1979: 11, pl. 25, 1-2), which corresponds to the Late Iron Age, but the stratigraphy indicates it was dug after the site was abandoned, which also makes the date dubious. Lastly, a human skull was discovered in a pit attributed to the Achaemenid period at Sangir-tepe in Sogdiana (Rapin & Khasanov 2013: 51).

This strong continuity in the funerary practices is paralleled by an evolution of the religious structures. Since the Middle Iron Age, open air rites were performed on mudbrick terraces like those found at Pachmak-Tepe (Pidaev 1974: 33-35) and Pshak-Tepe (Askarov 1982), while the first temples appeared.

At Koktepe, a fortified courtyard of the Middle Iron Age is replaced during the Late Iron Age by a high terrace 40m on each side and bordered by semi-circular towers. On the western side, a stairs led to the top. Traces of a foundation ritual consist of a fireplace and a group of eight oval pits, filled either with sand or with pebbles (Rapin 2007: 36-38).

The recent discovery of an altar at Cheshme-Shafa (fig. 2, 1) may also indicate the continuation of open air rituals during the Achaemenid period, though this structure, interpreted as a fire altar, has not yet been totally studied. Located on a hill overlooking the lower town, it is a high stepped monolithic structure with a large flared foot that was buried in the floor; a circular cavity is dug at the centre of the upper flat surface (Besenval & Marquis 2008: 987-988).

In the Tejen delta (Serakhs oasis), corresponding to Aria, the temple of Topaz Gala depe (Fig. 2, 2) is the oldest known yet for the Iron Age, dated to the Yaz II period (Wagner 2014). The rectangular building is

comprised of four rooms: three small rooms in the eastern part of the building, and a larger one in the western part. A fireplace stands in its centre, bordered by some transverse walls, and some storage jars have been found that were used to collect ashes. The peripheral wall may have been reinforced by semi-circular towers, one of which has been identified.

Among the temples attributed to the Achaemenid period, one is located at Sangir-tepe (Fig. 2, 3) in Sogdiana. It is built on the top of a platform, outside the fortified area (Rapin 2007: 39; Rapin & Khasanov 2013: 50-51, fig. 2, 2). A gentle slope led to a central courtyard which opened on the north to a central room and on both sides on two long lateral rooms. In the main room, a fireplace is interpreted as a fire altar. A series of pits have been filled respectively with sand, pebbles, ashes and animal bones, supposedly used for rituals of foundation. Later, during the Achaemenid period, the temple has been replaced by a terrace for open air cult. Here also, some pits were dug, one containing a human skull and the others ceramics.

In Bactria, the temple of Kindyk-Tepe (Fig. 2, 4) is attributed to the end of the Achaemenid period (Boroffka 2009: 138-141; see also Mokroborodov, in print, for a corrected version of the plan). An entrance at the north-east led through a corridor to a large rectangular room, whose centre was occupied by a fireplace

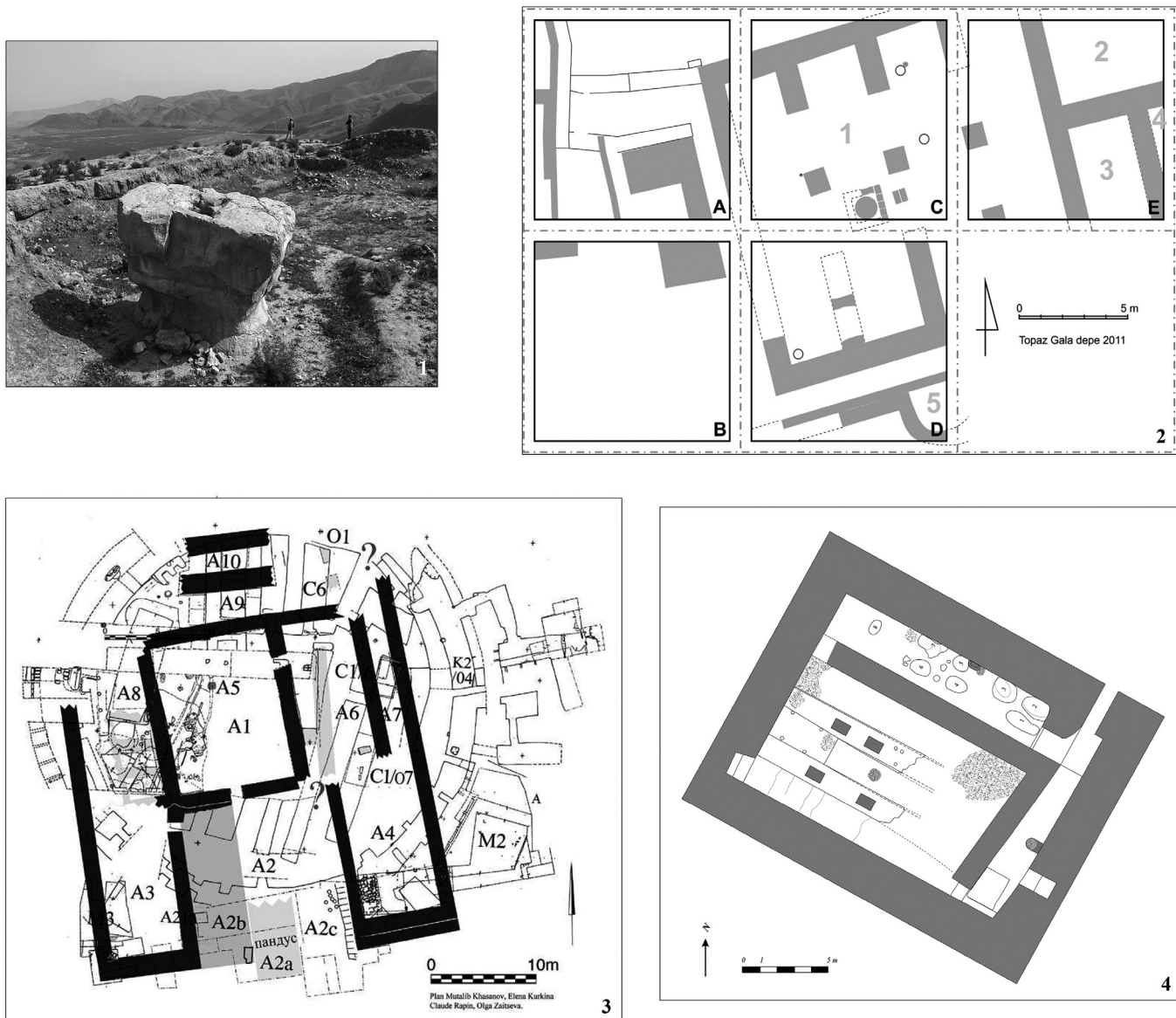


Fig. 2: Late Iron Age religious structures: 1. Cheshme-Shafa (photo DAFA); 2. Topaz Gala Depe (after Wagner 2014: fig. 4); 3. Sangir-tepe (after Rapin & Khasanov 2013: fig. 2); 4. Kindyk-tepe (after Mokroborodov in print: fig. 6).

bordered by four columns, interpreted as an altar. Two more fireplaces were located in north-western and north-eastern corners, while a gentle slope was found on the southern side. North of the building, communicating with this room, a narrow room contained eight round or oval pits filled respectively with white sand, pottery, slags, water, and ashes and charcoals. By the time of its abandonment at the end of the fourth century BCE, the temple was purposely filled with tamped down soil, which may be interpreted as a desecration process.

As R. Boucharlat recently observed, numerous structures have improperly been labelled “fire temples” in Central Asia, starting during the Bronze Age, but saving ashes is a “*convincing argument*” to identify a fire temple (Boucharlat 2014: 10). Indeed, while the aforementioned temples differ very much by their architecture and planning, some common points include the central role of fire in the rituals performed and the collecting of symbolic elements (ashes mainly, but also pebbles, among others). Ashes are apparently stored first in reused jars (Middle Iron Age) and later in pits (Late Iron Age), in relation either to foundation rituals or to rituals performed in the temple itself. These rituals, as far as can be deduced from the limited data, seem to be related to Zoroastrianism. Indeed, it seems to have been common in Central Asia since at least the middle of the 6th century BCE (Grenet 2005). The recently discovered parchments from Bactria (Naveh & Shaked 2012) testify that Zoroastrian beliefs were widespread in the area at the end of the Achaemenid period, and the golden votive plates discovered in the Oxus and Mir Zakah 2 treasures depict some Zoroastrian worshippers performing rituals, wearing mouth cloths, and holding the *barsom*.

A REORGANISATION OF THE TERRITORY BEFORE THE ACHAEMENID PERIOD

In this process of gradual evolution, some territorial changes can be more precisely related to the end of the Early Iron Age. A simple look at the map of Central Asia during this period compared to that of Middle and Late Iron Age sites (compare for example Francfort 2005: fig. 1, and Lhuillier 2013: pl. I) shows that the northern part of the occupied territory is not overlapping, indicating a territorial restructuring during the Middle Iron Age well prior to the arrival of the Achaemenids. Considering the territorial and socio-economic organisation of Central Asia during this period is necessary in order to understand the transformations of the Achaemenid period.

Indeed, in the northern part, corresponding to Sogdiana, Chach, and Fergana, the Yaz I culture evolves to some much localized cultures which have no common point with the Yaz II-Yaz III complexes. Recent work at Koktepe in Sogdiana helped to shed a new light on this period by identifying a specific handmade pottery, known as pinkish burnished ware (Lyonnet 2013: 264-266), due to its pink to dark purple colour, which includes both high quality bowls and cups as well as coarse storage jars and cooking pots. Those with lugs can be paralleled with the Saka culture cooking pots, which probably indicates an influence of the northern Central Asian cultures, underlining the intermediate position of Sogdiana. This ceramic is also used after the Achaemenid conquest, since it sometimes reproduces the wheel-made pottery (Lyonnet 2013: 265) that was introduced in Sogdiana during the end of the Middle Iron Age. More or less at the same time, two platforms are erected, and the city reaches about 100ha surrounded by a fortification wall (Rapin & Isamidinov 2013: 128). It is difficult to correlate this change to the Achaemenid conquest since some pottery shapes have analogies already among the Yaz IIB complex (Lhuillier, in print). Contrariwise, the construction of the irrigation networks in the area, which was previously attributed to the Achaemenids, could also have happened much later since it seems to result from successive local initiatives and is not necessarily linked to a centralized power (Stride *et al.* 2009).

In Chorasmia, numerous fortified sites are erected between the 7th/6th and the 4th centuries BCE, replacing the settlements of the Tazabag'jab and then Amirabad cultures, with their tight cultural links to the Andronovo culture of the Bronze Age in the steppes. They are usually interpreted as fortresses built by an urban polity on the border with steppes populations, though Neagus Cleary (2013) recently questioned this territorial division in favour of greater mobility in Chorasmia itself. These sites are usually bordered by a double fortification wall with internal galleries, circular towers, and a barbican entrance (see Neagus-Cleary 2013: fig. 2 for a

complete list of the sites). Pottery shapes from these sites can be paralleled with the Yaz II-Yaz III pottery, although they have often a red slip (Tolstov & Vorob'eva 1959). Some Achaemenid artefacts have been discovered on sites dated to the following period (4th-2nd centuries BCE), especially a plaster cast of a griffin's head in the Persepolitan style and a rhyton with a protome of a horse from Kalaly-Gyr 1. Other Achaemenid or Achaemenid-like objects have been found further in kurgans of the Altai, also attributed to the period following the Achaemenid empire itself (Francfort 2007), testifying in both those regions to a late diffusion of the Achaemenid cultural influences among the local elites.

In the southern part of Central Asia, the settled area remains the same as during the Early Iron Age, and some large construction works start at the beginning of the Middle Iron Age. Very few settlements of this period have been excavated but the ongoing excavation at Ulug-depe in Turkmenistan challenges the hypothesis of the Achaemenids as organizers of large-scale constructions. There, an urban settlement has been occupied between the 11th and the 7th centuries BCE (Lecomte 2013). Covering almost 6ha, it is made of two parts, an upper town with large buildings located on both sides of the main street, and a lower town, and it was surrounded by fortification walls. The upper part is dominated by a citadel 40m long on each side, where goods were stored; the discovery of sealings and bullae indicate that their management was centralized and controlled by a limited number of people (Lecomte 2004; Wu & Lecomte 2012). The lower town contains small buildings, probably houses, which are located along a network of parallel and perpendicular streets, testifying to a town planning prior to the building of the city. According to O. Lecomte, the closest analogies for the citadel are to be found in Iran, during the "Median" period. However, this architecture is associated with typical Middle Iron Age (Yaz II) ceramics, and thus was erected before the "Median" period, which is consistent with the radiocarbon dates. The discovery of two *tankards* in a deposit under one doorstep of the citadel led O. Lecomte to abandon the hypothesis of a final occupation of the citadel during the Achaemenid period, contrariwise to what the team previously thought (Boucharlat et al. 2005), since their closest analogies are to be found in the Sialk necropolis A (Lecomte 2013: 174-175). Quite surprisingly, the settlement seems to have been abandoned during the end of the Middle Iron Age, a fact that cannot yet be correlated to the Achaemenid conquest, though we can raise the question. Only a few potsherds can be compared to types labelled as Achaemenid in Iran, including some tulip bowls and some plates with horizontal lips going outwards, usually discovered in the levels following the abandonment of the Middle Iron Age city and not related to any architectural remains (Lhuillier, work in progress), a fact that can nevertheless confirm the observations made by Cattenat and Gardin (1977: 243) on the Kopet Dagh area as a zone of co-occurrence of Iranian and Central Asian pottery types.

The association of Yaz II pottery with a particular type of architecture underlines the existence of localized sub-groups inside the larger areas which share the Yaz II-Yaz III complexes; the detailed comparison of the pottery from different synchronous sites seems to confirm this hypothesis (Lhuillier, in print). We believe the existence of such an urban settlement like Ulug-depe, the centralisation of the goods in the citadel, the singularity of the material culture in the northernmost areas, the existence of minor local and regional variations into the Yaz II and Yaz III pottery complexes, and at the same time the individuality of this Central Asian pottery complex evolving continuously from the Yaz II complex to the Yaz III complex, are some strong arguments to support the hypothesis of a territory controlled by some autonomous — but interacting — socio-political and cultural entities (polities?) during the pre-Achaemenid period and that are still active during the Achaemenid period.

THE ACHAEMENID CONTROL OVER TERRITORY

The Achaemenid conquest is not directly visible in the stratigraphy of Central Asian sites but if we draw a parallel between Koktepe and Ulug-depe we can observe some changing processes of material diffusion likely linked to the evolution of the cultural influences. The Achaemenid control over the Central Asian territory is more directly attested at a group of sites used as military fortresses and maybe also as socio-political centres, by a local and/or Persian authority.

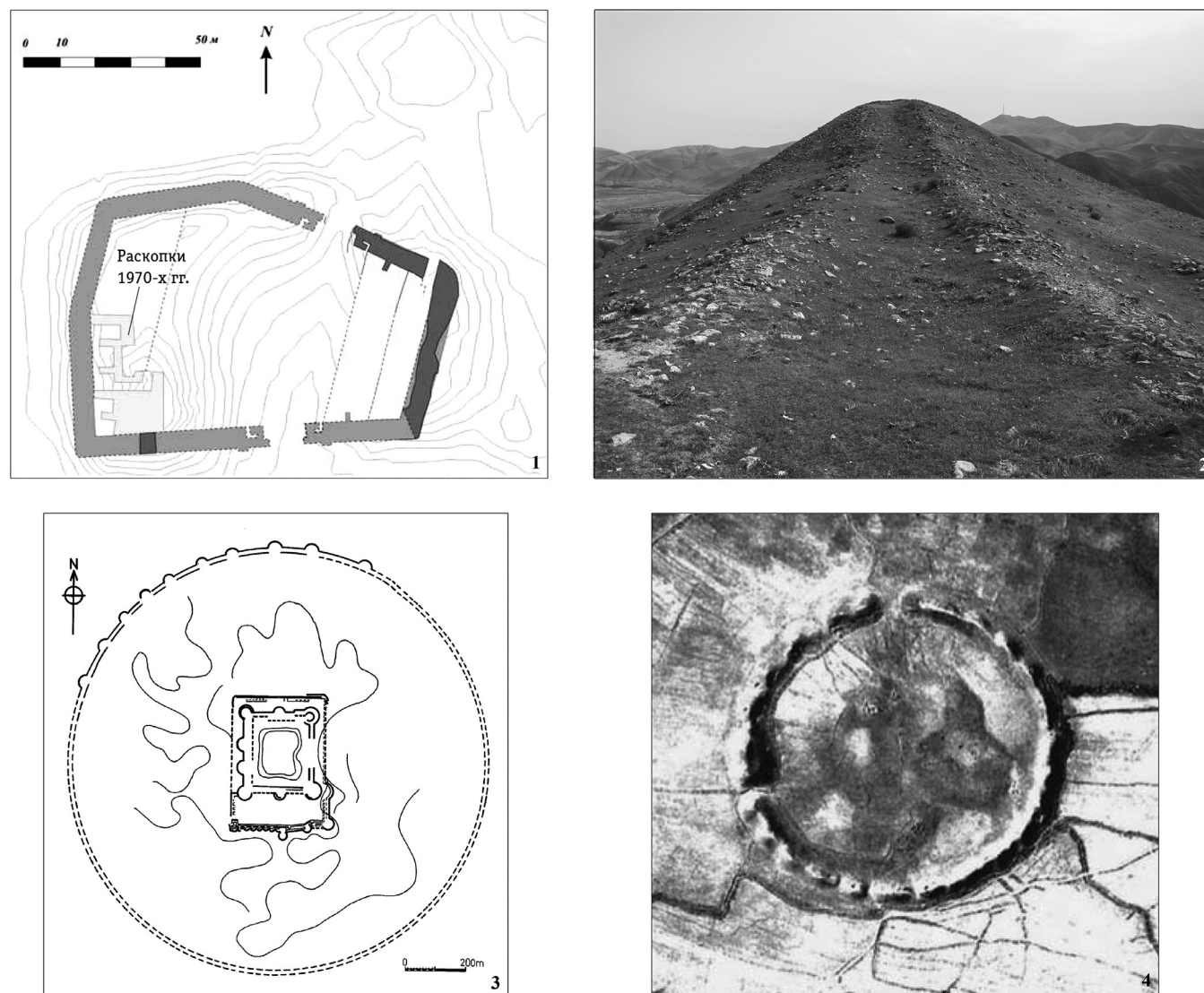


Fig. 3: Late Iron Age fortified sites: 1. Kyzyl-Tepe (after Sverchkov et al. 2013: fig. 22);
 2. Cheshme-Shafa (photo DAFA); 3. Altyn-Dilyar (after Kruglikova 2005: fig. 31, 2);
 4. Site in the Bargah Dasht (after Besenval & Marquis 2008: fig. 10).

The ongoing excavations at Kyzyl-Tepa in southern Uzbekistan reveal that its citadel was erected during the Achaemenid period, a date based mainly on ceramics (Sverchkov et al. 2013), contradicting the results of previous work (Sagdullaev 1987). This building, the largest known nowadays in northern Bactria,² is erected on the top of two natural hills; it is roughly a hexagonal building surrounded by a fortification wall and comprising a large courtyard bordered in the south-western part by some rooms (Fig. 3, 1). At the end of the Achaemenid period and during the Hellenistic period, it was replaced by a fortified lower town. Kyzyl-Tepa is surrounded by a group of thirteen small settlements, called “manors” (Sagdullaev 1987), a pattern of “centre-satellite” interpreted as a form of centralized management of the landscape and as a way to control the territory (Wu, in print). By its monumentality, its location in a core area of the Achaemenid Central Asian provinces and on the roads to other pre-Achaemenid/Achaemenid settlements of northern Bactria, Kyzyl-Tepa appears a major military, administrative and socio-political centre.

² Southern Uzbekistan, together with south-western Tajikistan — in the area comprised between the Bajsun Mounds and the Vakhsh River —, is considered by many authors as part of the northern part of Bactria, but some consider it belongs to Sogdia (see for example Rapin 2013).

On the other side of the Amu-Darya, two major sites controlled southern Bactria. First of all, Bactra is known to be the capital of the Achaemenid satrapy of Bactria. However, the site was founded earlier and ongoing research on the ceramics shows that the area of the Bala Hissar was occupied since the Early Iron Age. It is nevertheless during the Achaemenid period that the settled area extends, reaching the Tepe Zargaran, where no earlier occupation is attested yet (Lhuillier, work in progress for the DAFA; see Maxwell-Jones 2015 for a presentation of the main shapes of Bactra, but with a problem of chronological division between Yaz II and III, the ceramics being treated as a whole). These Achaemenid levels have not yet been excavated on a large area. At least in its northern part (Rempart Nord), the fortification wall seems to be built at the same period.

The largest site of the area, Cheshme-Shafa, is located 20 km southwards (Besenval & Marquis 2008: 982-988; Besenval, Marquis & Fouache 2009: 1026-1030). Even if we cannot yet exclude the hypothesis that the site was settled since the pre-Achaemenid period, it is during the Achaemenid period that it became a major urban site. This large settlement is comprised of three main areas on both sides of the Bactra River: a lower town, located along the meanders of the river; an upper part on the right bank of the river, called Kafir Qal'a; and the Kuh-i Albruz, a hill on the left bank of the river. The lower town has only been partly excavated but a recent magnetic survey revealed some large buildings (S. Gondet, work in progress for the DAFA), which cannot be precisely dated without excavation. The fortification has been better studied and it appears as double fortification walls, with galleries in the centre made up of successive rooms. Ceramics from this area seems to belong to the Yaz III complex (J. Lhuillier, work in progress for the DAFA). Recent excavations by the DAFA led to the discovery of iron spear heads and clay swing bullets, confirming the military use of the fortress. Furthermore, an important fire preceded the abandonment of the lower town, maybe related to a military action. In the Kafir Qal'a, the double wall, which also contains an internal gallery, is built with mudbrick on the top of a stone glacis and includes some round towers (Fig. 3, 2). In the Kuh-i Albruz, similar double walls have been identified but not yet excavated. The use of these fortifications is common in Central Asia at sites attributed to the pre-Achaemenid/Achaemenid periods, and is attested in Bactria at Kutlug-Tepe and At-Chapar (Sarianidi 1977: 117-121, figs. 55-57). The extent of these fortifications lines, and the location of Cheshme-Shafa at a natural stronghold at crossing points as well as being on the road from the south to Bactra make it a key site for the Achaemenid administration to control its borders.

Cheshme-Shafa was certainly the most impressive fortified site in the area, but it was not the only one. Indeed, the survey led by the DAFA in the Balkh oasis revealed the presence of a series of circular fortified structures with semi-circular towers (fig. 3, 3-4), like one in Bargah Dasht (Besenval & Marquis 2008: fig. 10), similar to Altin Dilyar Tepe 1 (Kruglikova 2005: 244-245, fig. 31, 2). This network of strongholds is correlated to an irrigation network between the Amu-Daria and Altin Dilyar, including newly built canals and what has been identified as an aqueduct, while some Bronze Age irrigation networks are still used (Fouache et al. 2012: 3423, 3425). However, the dating of these sites has been made on the basis of some Yaz II-III pottery, and it is thus difficult to confirm that they were built precisely during the Achaemenid period. This kind of circular fortresses, with double fortification walls and semi-circular towers, is very similar to a building discovered at Kohna Qala "Ville Ronde" close to Ai Khanoum in eastern Bactria, which was occupied before the Hellenistic period (Gardin 1998: 42, pl. IXb). Another similar site is Talashkan-Tepe in northern Bactria, which was built during the Late Iron Age according to the ceramics (attributed to the Kuchuk III-IV, i.e. Yaz III period) (Shajdullaev 2000: 50-67). These comparisons on both sides of the Amu-Darya could indicate that some circular fortified sites — acting as fortresses but also maybe hosting others activities — are built during the Achaemenid period in the satrapy of Bactria, providing a geographical coverage in order to integrate it into the core of the Empire.

The control of the border areas was likely of importance too, though no similar fortified structures have yet been identified. Sogdians and/or Sakas are represented fighting the Persians on various seals, which for some of them likely depict historical events reported in written sources, especially the rebellions of Bactrians supported by Sogdians and Sakas (Wu 2010). In Sogdiana, as we already noticed, the expansion of Koktepe settlement and the erection of the fortification wall cannot be attributed directly to the Achaemenid period, due to some problems of correlation between the stratigraphy and the material complex (Rapin & Isamiddinov

2013: 122-123). At the neighbouring site of Afrasiab, the large fortification wall is generally considered to have been built during the Achaemenid period, but according to the pottery that has been discovered in a foundation pit, it could also have been during the end of the Middle Iron Age (Grenet & Rakhmanov 2007), although the wall appears to have been restored and maintained during the Late Iron Age. Most of the remains of this period are still to be excavated at Afrasiab, buried deeply under later levels (Rapin & Isamiddinov 2013: 115-116).

CONCLUSION

Some recent discoveries confirm the reality of the Achaemenid power in Central Asia, but they are always limited to fortuitous findings (Aramaic texts, and treasures of the Oxus and Mir Zakah 2), or to monumental architectural remains, the understanding of which depends on the extent of the excavations, unfortunately still often limited, and on the good dating of the material culture, the only way to avoid the confusion between Middle and Late Iron Age. It is still difficult to identify structures directly linked to the Persians, especially since some recent works challenged the Achaemenid attribution of some large construction works. This is the case for the development of urban settlements, which actually started earlier as stated by the case of Ulug-depe; while the development of the irrigation networks started in many cases during the Bronze Age (Francfort & Lecomte 2002), or can result from a later, slow evolution (Stride et al. 2009). The Late Iron Age seems mainly characterized by some gradual evolutions: of the mortuary and religious practices, the pottery, and the glyptic. In the current state of research, the Persian presence itself is visible only through some fortresses likely hosting some military contingents and acting as administrative centres, located on some strategic points to control the territory. Following Cattenat and Gardin (1977), Askarov and Al'baum (1979), and Lyonnet (1990), we consider that these elements indicate the autonomous development of the local society, a part of which acted as a relay to the political and administrative Achaemenid power, under the Persian rule.

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