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Author(s): Y. A. Zadneprovsky

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EARLY URBAN DEVELOPMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA*

By Y. A. Zadneprovsky

St. Petersburg

INTRODUCTION

Significant data have been gathered on the subject of early urbanism in Central Asia. However, archaeological studies of the development of urbanism in different regions and periods remain scarce. Furthermore, large-scale excavations at sites such as Sapalli-tepe and Pendzhikent are rare (cf. Askarov 1973) and it is impossible to construct a reliable typological framework for features such as urban planning or even major features within towns. Recent studies of early urban development have tended to focus upon external features. These stem from the pioneering work of Shishkin (1940) who wrote: "Recognition of the typology of settlements on the basis of their external features should be regarded as one of the immediate tasks of archaeology, since, in our opinion, here we have to deal with some as yet vague differences of chronological, cultural or ethnic nature." The first attempt to implement this focused on the Ferghana valley.

Seven types of settlement were distinguished here on the basis of socio-economic characteristics which were compared with available Chinese historical sources (Zadneprovsky 1954, 1985).

Subsequently, there was a revival of archaeological attention on the problems of early urbanisation within Central Asia, with particular emphasis on major chronological developments (e.g. Masson 1978). Masson (1976) distinguished two basic stages in urban development within this region, namely from the late third–mid first millennia B.C. and third–fourth centuries A.D. However, five more detailed phases have been outlined by Litvinsky and Sedov (1983), i.e. "proto-towns" followed by major developments within the late second–first third of the first millennium B.C. six–fourth centuries B.C., fourth–second centuries B.C. and first century B.C.–third/fourth centuries A.D. Askarov, Buryakov, Kvirveliia and Radililovsky (1988) have proposed three stages for the regions of Bactria–Tokharistan, commencing in the third–second millennia

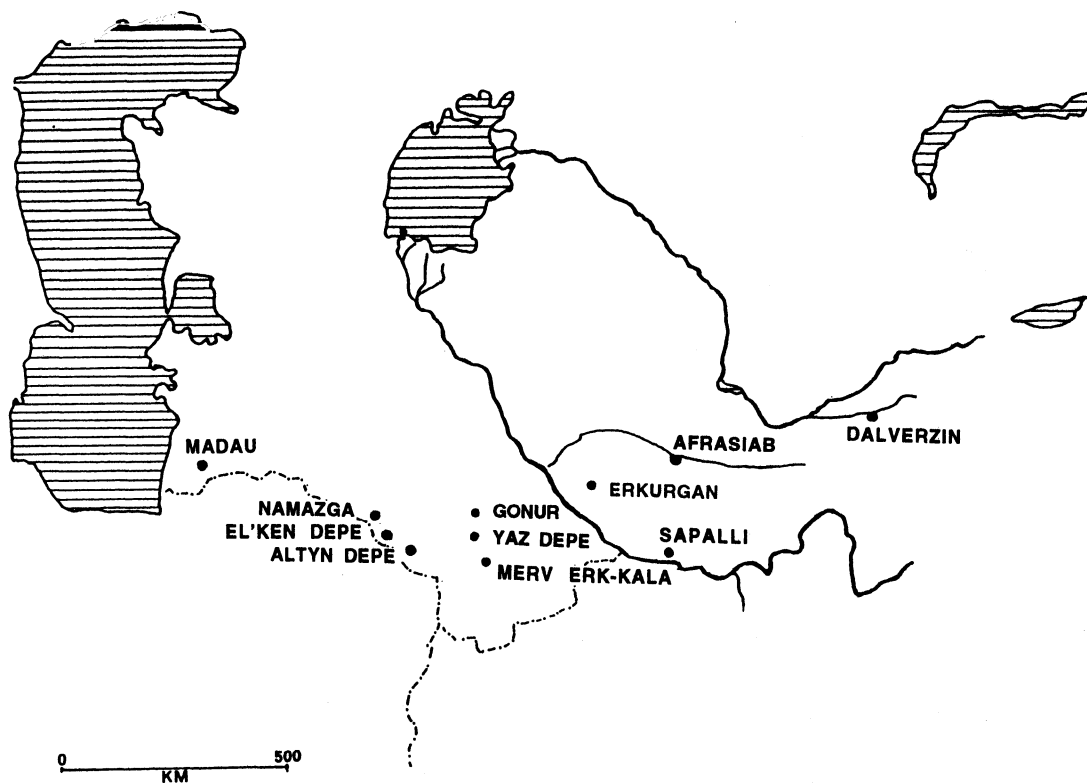


Fig. 1. Map of Central Asia showing major sites mentioned.

("ancient") and continuing during the first half of the first millennium B.C. ("archaic") and fourth century B.C.–fourth century A.D. ("antique"). A different chronological scheme has been advanced by Rtveldze (1986). Given the contradictions between these different schemes, the following alternative hypothesis is proposed.

THE ORIGINS OF URBANISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

The first truly urban settlements in Central Asia appeared at the end of the third millennium B.C. or Aeneolithic period (Fig. 1). These comprised "proto-towns" such as Altyn-depe (Fig. 2) and Namazga-depe (Fig. 3) in southern Turkmenistan, covering 26 and 70 hectares respectively (cf. Kohl 1984). These large circular-plan settlements with well-developed inner complexes survived for up to three millennia. Masson (1981: 129) has stressed the inter-relationship of these foundations with early

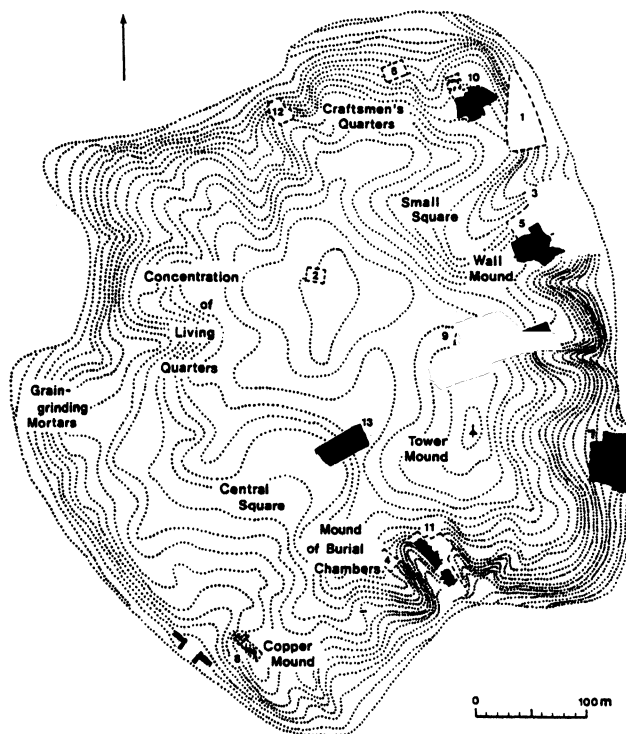


Fig. 2. Altyn-depe: plan of the mound and extent of excavations.

urban developments in the Ancient Near East: the "Altyn-depe civilization was a natural constituent of the entire Ancient East cultural area. It is characterised by the use of Mesopotamian cultural standards and close links with the ancient Indian Harappan civilization." These towns hence may be regarded as an alien tradition to Central Asia. Gradually both Altyn-depe and Namazga-depe fell

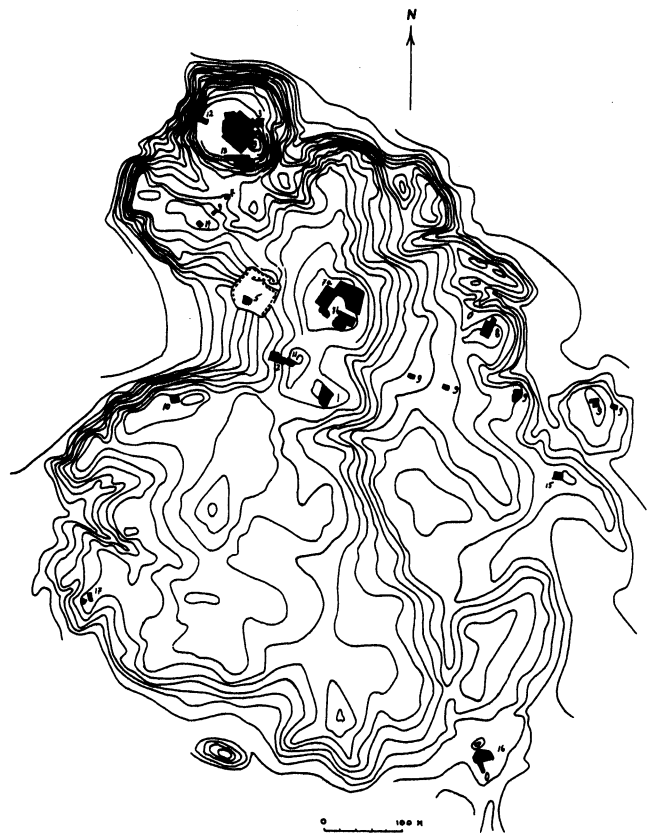


Fig. 3. Namazga-depe: plan of the mound and extent of excavations.

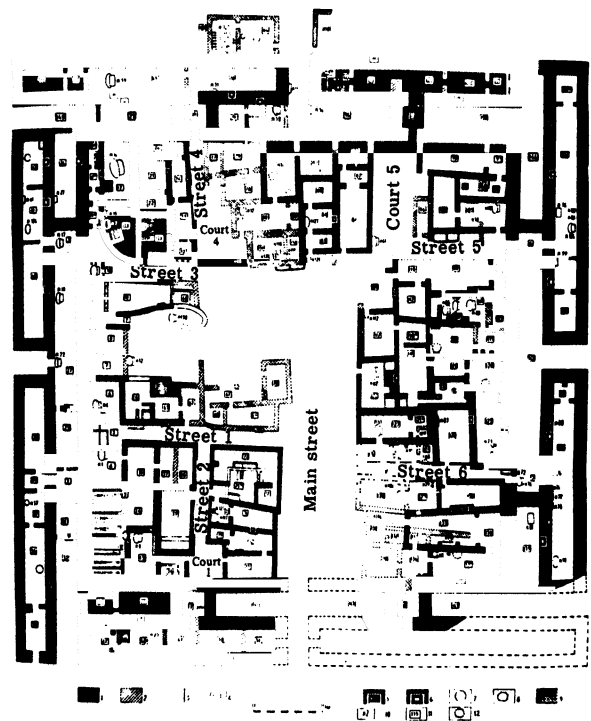


Fig. 4. Sapalli-tepe: plan of the excavated complex.

THE EARLY IRON AGE

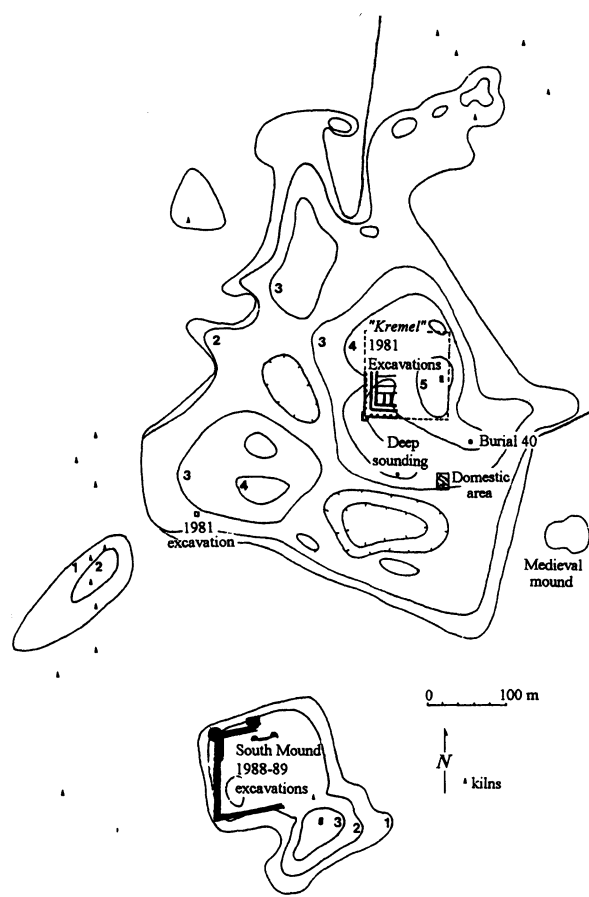


Fig. 5. Gonur-depe: plan of the mounds and extent of excavations in 1989.

into decay and the populations dwindled during the second millennium (Namazga V and the end of Namazga VI respectively). Masson presumed that this population then shifted either to the lower Murghab delta (Merv oasis, later known as Margiana) or to Bactria, thus directly stimulating local cultures, such as those at Sapalli-tepe (Fig. 4), Djarkutan and Dashli in those regions (cf. Kohl 1984: 151–71; Masson 1992). However, the situation now appears to be more complex. Within the Namazga oasis, for instance, settlements at Vyshka, El'ken-depe and Tekkem-depe flourished during the Namazga VI period although none can be classed as urban foundations. The sole exception is the site of Gonur-depe (Fig. 5), in the lower Murghab, which covers an area of up to 50 hectares comprising a sprawling extramural area of occupation with a "craftsmen's quarter" surrounding a central fortified complex (Sarianidi 1990). However, despite continuity in architectural and ceramic traditions, there does not appear to be continuous development in terms of urban planning.

The Early Iron Age, broadly dating from the twelfth/eleventh century—first third of the first millennium B.C., is characterised by the appearance of a number of new towns. These include El'ken-depe II (northern Parthia), Madau-depe and Izat-Kuli (Dehistan), Yaz-depe I (Margiana) and Dal'verzin (Ferghana). The most important of these sites is El'ken-depe (Maruschenko 1959). This site covers an area 14.5 hectares and comprises a 20 metre high fortified central citadel (1.5 hectares) with a fortified lower town. The excavated citadel sequence indicates thick deposits of Namazga VI date (El'ken I), plus some Namazga V sherds, followed by periods termed El'ken II (6.8 metres thick) and El'ken III (2.5 metres thick); the last of these dates to the sixth–fourth centuries B.C. judging by the ceramic types. Outside the settlement are a number of small mounds thought to represent farmsteads. Despite its smaller size, the basic layout of El'ken-depe appears to be more developed than that of the earlier town at Altyn-depe. Its plan was further elaborated during El'ken III, i.e. the Achaemenid period, when a walled suburb covering 3 hectares was added to the western part of the town, the outer town walls were reconstructed and towers added.

A second large Early Iron Age settlement existed at Yaz-depe (Masson 1959). This covered an area of 16 hectares with a citadel and nearby mounds measuring up to 4 metres in height. The citadel included remains of a monumental building placed on the summit of an 8-metre high brick platform but no traces of fortifications were found during the excavations. A larger settlement of the same period was founded at the site of Dal'verzin in the Ferghana valley (Zadneprovsky 1962). Covering an area comparable to Altyn-depe, this oval town was divided into a citadel (2 hectares), main settlement (18 hectares) and a walled enclosure on the eastern edge (5 hectares). This division is presumed to reflect social differentiation and ranking within the society. Finally, immense settlements dating from the Early Iron Age exist in Dakhistan (Dehistan), namely Madau-depe, Izat-Kuli and Tangsikal'dzha. The last of these covers an area of 130 hectares. Each comprises a central fortified citadel surrounded by a scattering of irregular large mounds (Masson 1956; cf. Kohl 1984: 200–8). The evident lack of any planning in the layout of these settlements contrasts markedly with towns further east.

Importantly, the first three Early Iron Age settlements mentioned above (i.e. El'ken-depe, Yaz-depe, Dal'verzin) are each characterised by a citadel. Furthermore, two also possess defensive walls. Clearly, these settlements should be regarded as approximately contemporaneous administrative and cultural

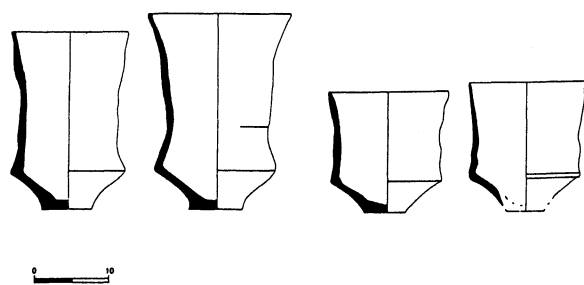


Fig. 6. "Cylindrical-conical vessels" (after Vogelsang 1992: 270, fig. 14).

centres. The presence of these features distinguish these sites from those of earlier periods and constitute, in the writer's opinion, the earliest towns in Central Asia. The pre-Achaemenid date of these foundations is also significant but possible connections with the Medes further west remain hypothetical.

TOWNS OF THE SIXTH-FOURTH CENTURIES B.C.

Continuity between these Early Iron Age and Achaemenid levels is evident at El'ken-depe, Yaz-depe and, less certainly, Kzyl-depe. The reported discovery of small quantities of pre-Achaemenid ceramics at Merv (Erk-Kala), Erkgurgan (southern Sogdia) and Eilatan (Ferghana) further suggests that later Iron Age towns may have been founded on the sites of small pre-existing settlements.

The site of Erk-Kala is the oldest part of Merv. During the Achaemenid period, judging by the YuTAKE excavations, Merv was a significant town with a fortified oval settlement between 12–20 hectares in area and surrounded by extramural occupation in the area later known as Gyaur-Kala. The total occupied area within the Achaemenid period has been estimated to be approximately 90 hectares (Usmanova, Filanovich and Koshelenko 1985). Characteristic ceramics of this period are so-called "cylindrical-conical ceramic vessels" (Fig. 6), i.e. heavily carinated beakers and other forms (Usmanova 1992; cf. Vogelsang 1992: 268–70). Deposits dating from the sixth–fourth centuries B.C. are widespread at the massive site of Afrasiab, possibly totalling 219 hectares in area (Shishkina, Suleimanov and Koshelenko 1985). This site—identified as Maracanda, the historical centre of Sogdia—was fortified and possessed a small citadel. If the estimated size of the site is correct, it is likely that the fortifications enclosed livestock as well as settlement, as in the case of Old Kandahar and other sites (cf. Vogelsang 1992: 288–9). "Cylindrical-conical ceramic vessels" similar to those from Merv/Erk-Kala characterise this period, referred to as Afrasiab I. A

third substantial site of this period is that of Erkgurgan, trapezoidal in plan, covering an area of up to 40 hectares and surrounded by defensive walls; initially, it does not appear to have had a citadel (Shishkina, Suleimanov and Koshelenko 1985). This important site has been identified as the town of Basileia, the second capital of Sogdia.

The site of Eilatan in eastern Ferghana is a quadrangular settlement enclosed within a double line of fortifications. The inner settlement, covering an area of 20 hectares, was surrounded by a wall with frequent towers, one of which has been excavated. However, the larger outer enclosure may have been used to contain livestock rather than permanent settlement. The wheel-thrown ceramics from this seventh–fourth century B.C. site differ considerably from those of other large towns (Zadneprovsky 1985). Finally, Kyuzeli-Gyr in Khorezmia is a large walled site of the sixth–fourth centuries B.C. It is sub-triangular in plan, stretches for a length of approximately a kilometre and covers an area of 18 hectares. The settlement was surrounded by a wall with semi-circular towers; narrow corridor-like rooms are located inside the walls. A citadel comprising a forty-room and courtyard complex is located in the south-west part of the site. Two cult-rooms and traces of copper-smelting, iron production, ceramics and turquoise-working were also found. "Cylindrical-conical ceramic vessels" are represented at both these towns. According to Itina (1984), "this is really one of the earliest towns of Khorezm".

In summary, the large settlements considered above differ in their shape and size. The scarcity of available archaeological data allow only a sketchy outline to be drawn of towns belonging to the Achaemenid period. Major characteristics are their large size, well-developed fortifications (including towers), composite planning and the use of citadels, monumental construction (temples, palaces) and the development of trades and industries. Their appearance throughout Central Asia suggests a significant expansion of urbanism evidently paralleled by developments in Bactria (cf. Vogelsang 1992: 278). However, the number of large settlements remains small and there are only isolated towns within each region.

TOWNS FROM THE THIRD CENTURY B.C. TO FOURTH/FIFTH CENTURIES A.D.

This period should be regarded as a single entity. The major settlements of this period, together with aspects of their planning, construction techniques, fortifications and vernacular architecture, all developed over a lengthy period of time. This was a period when urbanism flourished in Central Asia. Bactria

became known as “the land of a thousand towns” and even the comparatively small region of Ferghana boasted seventy towns. Comparison of data from Ferghana and northern Bactria indicates that between twenty-two and twenty-five towns existed in each region (Rtveladze 1974; Stavisky 1977). Within Bactria, two particularly large towns belonging to this period are Termez and Shahr-i Nau, each covering an area of over a hundred hectares although the density of settlement across these areas remains uncertain. Within the Tashkent area, towns appear to be fewer in number, totalling thirteen, although the site of Kanka covers the even larger area of 150 hectares (Buryakov 1982). Approximately ten large settlements can be provisionally identified within northern Parthia (Pilipko and Koshelenko 1985). The largest of these are New Nisa and Bezymyannaya Krepost (“Nameless Fortress” near Geok-tepe) covering areas of 18–21 hectares respectively.

Finally, Chinese historical sources throw important additional light on the study of early towns in Central Asia. Amongst these, the statement by Chang-kien (c. 125 B.C.) that in An-si [i.e. Parthia] “towns are the same as in Ta-yuan [i.e. Ferghana] An-si has several hundreds of large and small towns” is the most significant (Bichurin 1950: 151). In Ferghana itself there are approximately seventy towns of varying size this contrasting with the comparatively small number of ten known from northern Parthia. The reason for this discrepancy is uncertain.

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