



Prehistory

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Rediscovering the Past

For a long time Afghanistan has been famous for the large Buddhas in Bamiyan and the Islamic monuments in Jam, Balkh and Ghazni that attracted 19th-century travellers and explorers. During the past 60 years, however, new discoveries brought to light a rich cultural heritage, spectacular and enigmatic alike, which opened new perspectives and established Afghanistan's prime role in a cultural landscape that encompassed large regions interconnected through trade and political networks since the 4th millennium BCE (Map 1).

Archaeological exploration directed by a systematic approach began with the foundation of the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA) in 1922. Some three decades later further international teams and much individual research work followed: an American Mission directed by Walter Fairservis (1949), Italian projects headed by Giuseppe Tucci, Umberto Scerrato and Maurizio Taddei (1956), Soviet Union teams in the late 1960s (Victor Sarianidi), German research led by Klaus Fischer (Sistan, 1950s) and Werner Herberg (Ghur, 1975), the British Institute of Afghan Studies' excavations at Kandahar (David Whitehouse; Stuart Swiny, 1974–1978), and many others.¹

The discoveries of the first Bronze Age sites around Kandahar by Jean-Marie Casal, followed by further evidence from Sistan and the northern region pushed back the early history of man far beyond the Buddhist, Hellenistic and Achaemenid eras. Yet, while surveys and soundings were carried out in Hilmand and other provinces, the main focus of excavations remained rather on the later periods: the Hellenistic and Buddhist through Islamic eras, connected with famous sites such as Ai Khanoum, Begram, Surkh Khotal, Hadda, Ghazni, and Lashkari Bazar. Larger Bronze Age excavations were limited to 4th- and

¹ For earlier reconnaissances see Allchin/Hammond 1978. - Srivastava 1996.

3rd-millennium sites near Kandahar, notably Mundigak, and to Shortughai, a late 3rd-millennium site located near the lapis lazuli mines in Badakhshan, which became famous through its links with the Indus Civilisation, and smaller soundings in other regions.²

Yet, hardly any other region has been explored on such a large scale and as intensively as northern Afghanistan. Following the chance find of the famous Fullol treasury by a farmer in 1966, now dated to the later 3rd millennium BCE, the Russian Academy of Science team, headed by Victor Sarianidi, took up work there in 1968. During ten seasons they discovered not only the Bactrian gold of Tillya Tepe, but also large Bronze Age site agglomerations in the river-oasis systems south of the Amu Darya (Dashly, Daulatabad).³ These sites were intrinsically linked with the contemporaneous discoveries made just across the river and further west in the Merv Oasis, where the large site of Gonur is located. Their results were supplemented by French teams who carried out regional surveys with a particular focus on water management.⁴ This trans-regional research soon brought to light a new Bronze Age culture, designated as the Oxus Civilisation or, later, the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC)⁵, cross-cutting modern boundaries and widening the horizons of prehistoric landscapes. This surge of archaeological fieldwork was accompanied by the appearance of a large number of antiquities from illegal excavations in Bactria that flooded the antique market after 1974 and put northern Afghanistan into international focus.⁶

These discoveries and an intensive scientific dialogue, particularly between French and Russian scholars working in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan, brought forward a number of important publications and triggered a wide interest, resulting in a number of synoptic studies in the late 1970s.⁷ In

² Casal 1961. - Dales 1972. - Dupree 1963; Dupree 1972. - Fairservis 1961. - Fischer et al. 1974-76. - Francfort 1989. For 19th- and early 20th-century explorers, esp. G. P. Tate and A. Stein, and for a detailed list of fieldwork by site resp. year see Ball/Gardin 1982 and Srivastava 1996.

³ Sarianidi 1985a; Sarianidi 1986; plus many publications by him and his colleagues in Russian. See also e.g. Hiebert 1994, Kaniuth 2006 and Teufer 2006.

⁴ Lyonnet 1997.

⁵ Hiebert 1994.

⁶ Sarianidi 1986, 13-15. - Pottier 1984.

⁷ To quote just a few: Allchin/Hammond 1978. - Fairservis 1978. - Kohl 1981; Kohl 1984. - French-Soviet Colloquium Proceedings 1985 (L'Archéologie de la Bactriane Ancienne) and 1988 (L'Asie Centrale et ses rapports avec les civilisations orientales ses origines à l'âge du fer). - Ligabue/Salvatori 1989. - Sarianidi 1986. The sites are meticulously recorded and mapped by Ball/Gardin 1982, while Srivastava 1996 has compiled a source book useful for its commented bibliography. Most recent publications with updated references are Ball 2008, Knobloch 2002, and the various editions of the exhibition catalogues of the Bactrian Treasures (see e.g. Cambon/Jarrige 2007). The most recent overview of French projects in Central Asia is available in Bendezu-Sarmiento 2013. I am most grateful to Julio Bendezu-Sarmiento for presenting me this publication. Further references are provided in the catalogue of objects.

concert with increasing research in the neighbouring countries, from eastern Iran through Central Asia, Pakistan, India and along the Arabian Peninsula, a fascinating overall picture emerged of entangled, complex prehistoric cultures and civilisations with magnificent sites and monuments, and an unbelievably rich cultural heritage. Nowadays crosscut by political borders, these cultures were dynamic entities in ancient times, linked through shifting networks and changing cultural styles.

Yet, in comparison with e.g. Iran, Central Asia, the Gulf region, and even Baluchistan, knowledge about prehistoric cultural patterns and understanding of developmental processes in and beyond Afghanistan are, apart from Bactria, still limited. One major reason is that since 1978 western as well as Russian research has come to a halt due to political circumstances. In a way, this situation remains unchanged until today. Except for some regions and a short period of time, mainly 2002–2007, international archaeological fieldwork is still difficult.⁸

Prehistory in Brief

First traces of human life known from northern Afghanistan, date to at least the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic (c. 30,000 BCE and older).⁹ With the emergence of the first food-producing cultures in the Kopet Dag, southern Iran, and western Pakistan during the Neolithic Period (from c. 7000 BCE), more sites became known also from Afghanistan, mostly from the northern Hindukush region. In the 4th millennium BCE, irrigated agriculture of wheat and barley and animal husbandry fostered the growth of villages and the expansion of settled life throughout the wider region; around 3000 BCE first cities emerged in Iranian Sistan (Shahr-e Sokhta) and in Baluchistan. Afghan Sistan, and the copper rich desert Gardan Reg have great archaeological potential, but fieldwork was restricted to minor surveys and soundings.¹⁰

The largest and most complex site from this time in Afghanistan is Mundigak, located near Kandahar.¹¹ Explored for ten seasons and with seven main periods of occupation, a substantial amount of data came to light which facilitated the developments of typological and chronological sequences and established Mundigak as a cross-regional type site. The finds mirror the growth of the site from a small village to a town from c. 3500 to 2300 BCE. The site is known for its craft workshops and an elaborate pottery production. While the older vessels were handmade, in Period III the potter's wheel is used and the vessels are beautifully painted. Bronze adzes, terracotta figurines, stamp seals and beads betray a high artistic quality. In Period IV (c. 2700 BCE), the inhabited area reached its largest extent.

⁸ The only ongoing large-scale project takes place at Mes Ainak. Work in Bamiyan has been on and off during the past few years, and is eventually about to restart in Balkh after a few difficult years. Ghazni, Jam and most of the other provinces are more or less off-limits beyond the urban centres, since 2006 also Herat province.

⁹ See Ranov et al. 1992. – Allchin/Hammond 1978. – Derevyanko/Lü Zen-E 1992.

¹⁰ Dales 1972. – Fairservis 1975, 111–134. – Weisgerber 2004 on mining.

¹¹ Casal 1961. For nearby Deh Morasi Ghundai see Dupree 1963; for Said Qala Ghundai see Shaffer 1978.

Large monumental buildings were constructed on top of the mounds, adorned with buttresses and half-columns on Mound A, which also had an enclosure wall. Among the numerous finds are again many alabaster vessels and copper objects as well as a calcite head of a male.

Semi-precious stones from various sources found in bead workshops depict the movements of goods and technologies along with the people. Lapis lazuli, turquoise, and agate, marine shells, and metals – gold, silver, copper and tin – were transported over long distances from their sources to the centres of production. Other items were in demand because of their refined technology, such as etched and fragile fired steatite beads. With close cultural links to Sistan, especially the urban site of Shahr-e Sokhta, where e.g. alabaster vessels were produced, and to Baluchistan, Mundigak was an important part of the so-called Indo-Iranian borderland networks (Map 2). As with many other sites in the region, a gradual disintegration and a change in style was noted some time after 2300 BCE, in Period V, ending Mundigak's prehistoric occupation.

This development is noteworthy, since at the same time important changes took place in adjacent regions. After 2600 BCE a vast urban civilisation emerged in the alluvial plain of the Indus Valley. Raw materials for the production of utilitarian and prestigious items were in great demand by the elites. To optimise the supply with rare commodities, such as metal, stone, wood, precious stones, shell, and ivory, the resource-poor civilisation established direct trade networks, connecting western India via Magan (Oman) and the Persian Gulf with Mesopotamia. Yet, overland trade through peddlers and migrating herdsmen certainly continued as well. The Indo-Iranian borderlands were an important source of metal ores, steatite, and lapis lazuli. Outposts, such as Shortughai near its sources at Sar-e Sang or on the routes to Mesopotamia, were established to ensure the flow of goods. Along with the people travelled technologies and crafts as well as decorative styles, symbolic values and ideas related to various aspects of life and death.

In Iran, in addition to the Hilmand region and its capital Shahr-e Sokhta, the Jiroft Civilisation, discovered only recently,



Map 1 Archaeological map of Afghanistan (U. Franke/Th. Urban 2015)

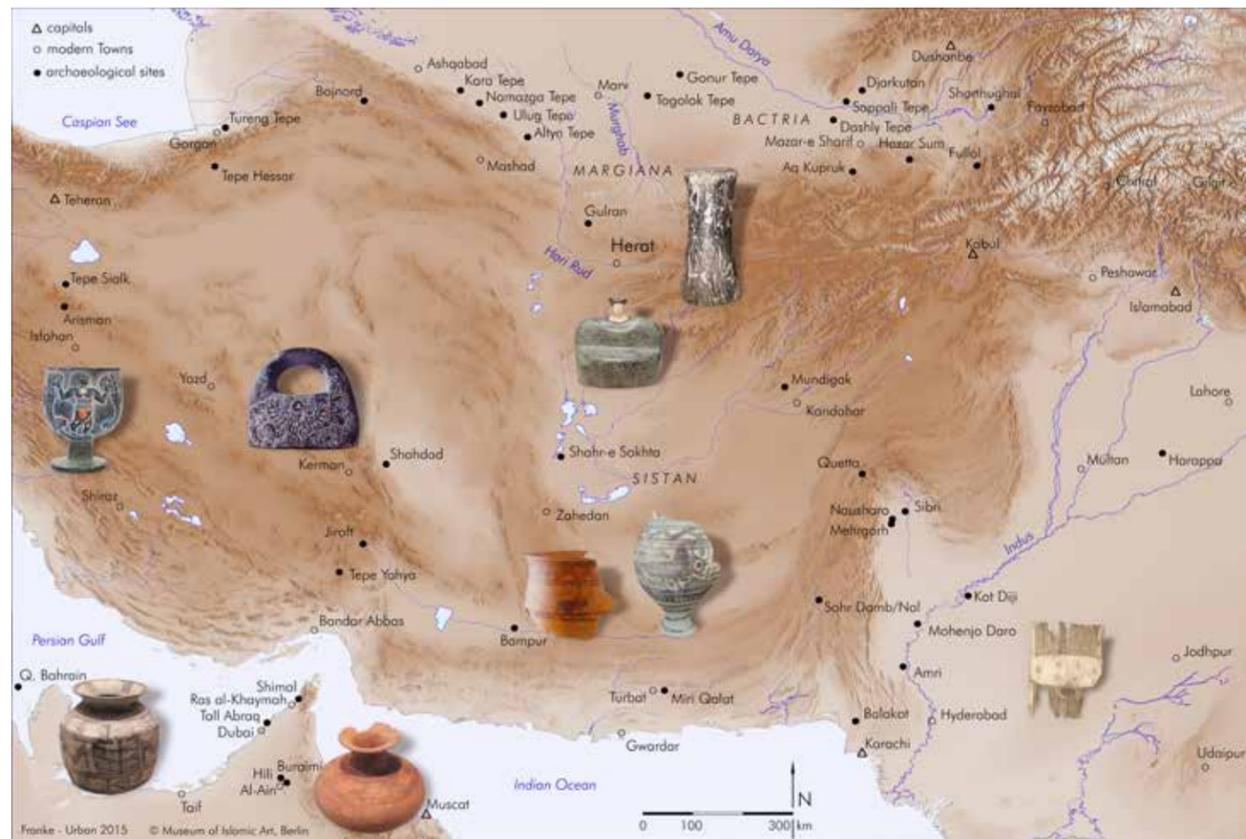
developed into an important entity during the later 3rd millennium BCE. Large sites with monumental buildings and innumerable tombs provide a glimpse into its past grandeur. Most spectacular are inlaid chlorite vessels with a particular figurative imagery, which opens up a magical world of its own. Some of these vessels found their ways to Mesopotamia and even Central Asia. Shahdad, another large centre located in the Kerman basin, was also part of this late 3rd-millennium cultural interaction zone. The grave goods and house furnishings, particularly alabaster and metal vessels, human statues and ornaments, are stylistically close to the assemblages known throughout the region, despite local and regional characteristics. After 2300 BCE, the Umm an-Nar culture from the southern Persian Gulf was also part of this network (Map 2).

As mentioned above, another civilisation emerged in the Murghab Delta around 2300 BCE and, most likely somewhat later, in Bactria. Today, many sites have been excavated in

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tadjikistan, and in the riverine plains of northern Afghanistan. Sites such as Gonur, Togolok, Dashly, Sapalli, and Djarkutan display monumental architecture, extraordinary in plan and design, an intriguing material culture and exceptional artefacts, giving a glimpse into a fantastic world of creatures and imagination, and mirroring a wealthy, highly developed society, which is at eye-level with other urban civilisations. Yet, despite close similarities, both regions, i.e. the Margiana and Bactria, have their distinctive features and styles, visible e.g. in the glyptic art. The BMAC was part of the cultural network linking this region with the foothills of the Kopet Dag, Baluchistan, southeastern Iran and the northern Arabian Peninsula, until it was transformed around 1700 BCE.

Prehistoric Herat?

Which role did the Herat region play in this cultural landscape? The assumption that just like its northern neighbours also Herat occupies its place on the prehistoric map does not appear farfetched. The Hari Rud Oasis provides favourable living conditions. Fed by several springs, tributaries from the mountains in the north and east, and the melting snow in spring, the river is perennial and hence Herat's source of life. It provides water for people, animals and plants, which grow in abundance on fertile alluvial deposits that accumulated over thousands of years. The oasis stands in



Map 2 Archaeological map of the Indo-Iranian borderlands during the later 3rd millennium BCE (U. Franke/Th. Urban 2015)

strong contrast to the gravel plains and sand deserts that surround it in the north, west, and south. For this very reason, Herat was an important post on the northern routes connecting the western world with India, Central Asia, and China.

Herat, however, has remained outside the focus of the research described above. Archaeological exploration was limited to a visit of the French archaeologists Marc Le Berre and Jean-Claude Gardin in 1952, but their finds and unpublished notes were lost during the civil war.¹² In the 1960s and 1970s many scholars visited Herat, but they rather focussed on architecture from the Islamic era. Irina Kruglikova and Victor Sarianidi, who visited the Herat region in 1976 in search of prehistoric remains, documented five sites, but were not encouraged to return.¹³ The dearth of early settlements was by and large confirmed by the survey conducted by the German-Afghan Archaeological Mission in Herat Province between 2004 and 2006.¹⁴ However, one BMAC site was discovered close to the border with Turkmenistan, proving for the first time its extension into this area. Yet, the limited extent of the survey in this vast and difficult terrain has to be pointed out. Certainly further evidence from this region can be expected

¹² Occasional references can be found in the catalogue of sites by Ball and Gardin (1982).

¹³ Kruglikova/Sarianidi 1976. - Kruglikova 2005.

¹⁴ Franke 2008; the full report is in press, see Franke/Urban 2016.

for the future, considering that recently a site was discovered still further west, near Bojnord in Iran.¹⁵

This view is strongly supported by the unexpected wealth of objects dating to the later 3rd millennium BCE in the collection of the National Museum Herat. Many objects had been kept by the museum for a long time, but one larger¹⁶ and some smaller collections were handed over to the museum in the past five years, or were confiscated. Although their provenance remains unknown, information from the local antique dealers and police points to the northern Herat province as place of origin. It is not possible to exclude a provenance from neighbouring Badghis, while an origin from Balkh is unlikely considering the routes of transportation.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Mike Teufer for this information; see also Simpson 2012, 30.

¹⁶ Registered with 010.x.xx or 89.xxx numbers.



Fig. 1 Hoe with shaft hole (HNM 010.06.27)



Fig. 3 Dagger, corroded (HNM 05.03.86g)



Fig. 2 Adze head with shaft hole (HNM 02.18.86m, cat. no. Pr1)

Prehistoric Objects

Metal

The collections in the museum contain quite a number of metal (copper alloy) artefacts, mostly weapons. The majority of objects are cast or hammered adzes and blades from knives, daggers and spears. One unusual piece is a 17 cm long, 6 cm broad and up to 2.5 cm thick hoe with shaft hole. The edges of the heavy piece are not pointed, but worn at the front (Fig. 1).¹⁷ Four adzes with a shaft hole for the handle belong to a type ('haches-herminette'), which is not the most typical form, but appears in Bactria (in Sapalli, for example), in Iran (Tepe Hissar, Shahdad), the Indus Valley (Mohenjo Daro) and in the west.¹⁸ The blades are flat, not very sharp and show few traces of wear, an indication that they were hardly used in daily life (Fig. 2). Long straight daggers and leaf-shaped blades are more characteristic types (Fig. 3).¹⁹ They occur throughout the region at the end of the 3rd and during the early

¹⁷ Pottier 1984, 23 Pl. XIII, shows two similar pieces with pointed edges. Quoting from the study of Deshayes (1960) she refers to comparable objects from Susa.

¹⁸ Pr1-4. Pottier 1984, 22 Pl. XII,86; 87. References to all objects are provided in the catalogue.

¹⁹ Pr5; 6; 7-9.

2nd millennium BCE. Leaf-shaped blades with straight or twisted shafts are quite typical for the Indus valley, but were widely distributed in the region during the second half of the 3rd millennium.²⁰ Other types are spatulas and 'choppers' with rectangular blades.²¹

Among the undecorated metal vessels in the museum is a hammered and very well finished pot with concave sides and a narrow base (Fig. 4). Based on evidence found from Susa to Sapalli Tepe it can be dated to the late 3rd millennium BCE.

Undecorated mirrors are difficult to date due to their long period of usage. Two of four specimen have tangs or flat handles, the two others are plain (Figs. 5; 6). Comparative objects are known for both types, numerous mirrors without features were found in burials in Sapalli Tepe. The examples quoted by Kai Kaniuth (2006, 70) have a wide distribution, from the Kopet Dag through Baluchistan to Makran; they date to the later 3rd and early 2nd millennium BCE.²²

The collection also comprises one fork (Fig. 7). Its handle is twisted and the tops of the two teeth are bent. Comparable pieces are known from tombs in Bactria, their function is elusive.²³ Quite peculiar are also small hollow, slightly curved objects with a frayed end. At first glance they look like dress ornaments; their position near the deceased's chest in – predominantly male – tombs, however, and the small spikes attached to their interior support the view that they adorned small ceremonial maces.²⁴ The five tanged arrowheads are quite long and neatly cast, their tang is rather short (Pr21a-e). While this type is well attested, four other arrowheads have an unusually broad and rounded

²⁰ Pr10-13.

²¹ Pr14; 15.

²² Pr17a, b; 18a, b. Kaniuth 2006, 70 Type A-2-1.

²³ Pottier 1984, 25 Pl. XV,103. She quotes parallels from Ur.

²⁴ Pr19; 20. Kaniuth 2006, 92-93.



Fig. 4 Vessel, hammered
(HNM 05.03.86m, cat. no. Pr16)



Fig. 8 Compartmented seal with swan (?)
(HNM 02.22.86l, cat. no. Pr24)



Fig. 10 Alabaster vessel
(HNM 012.11.02, cat. no. Pr37)



Fig. 11 Alabaster vessels (cat. nos. Pr42; 40; 32; 31; 27; 30; 29)



Figs. 5; 6 Plain mirrors
(HNM 05.03.86a; b, cat. nos. Pr18a; b)



Fig. 9 Chlorite seal with snake
(HNM 88.088, cat. no. Pr25)



Fig. 7 Twisted fork
(HNM 05.01.86t)



Fig. 12 Alabaster vessel
(HNM 03.32.86e, cat. no. Pr40)

because some objects still contained traces of a white powder, red ochre or antimony. Attached bent legs, however, are unusual for this period, thus, considering their long duration, the date of Pr23a is tentative and could also be much later.

One copper compartment seal with an openwork handle at the back belongs to a well-known type widely distributed at the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. It shows a swan with its head turned backwards, no traces of the inlay are left (Fig. 8).²⁵

Stone

In the prehistoric stone collection is also one greyish chlorite seal with a pierced knob and an entwined snake and crescent motif (Pr25, Fig. 9). To the same geographical and chronological context belongs the fragment of a pedestal from a composite chlorite statue (Pr26). The piece shows the typical decoration of these female statues which are known mainly from the Margiana and Bactria, but can stylistically also be compared to depictions on seals, stone basins, standards, and toreutics from southern Iran (Shahdad), Elam and Mesopotamia.²⁶ Most of the c. 50 figures known so far are female; the few male statues are presented in a different posture, mostly standing. The former have become known as 'Bactrian princesses' or 'goddesses' due to their elaborate features.

A group of calcite and alabaster vessels represents another popular commodity used during the 3rd millennium BCE and afterwards in the same region and far beyond, in Egypt (Pr27–59).²⁷ Manufacture is attested at Shahr-e Sokhta and Mundigak²⁸, but their wide distribution suggests further workshops elsewhere. The vessels are neatly carved, drilled and smoothed. The light that shines through their thin walls enhances the translucent texture of the stone with its whitish veins. Especially elegant are high or

head. No comparative objects have been found, their date and origin remain unknown (Pr22a–d).

Small copper/bronze flacons, often found with pins still inside, are a very common type (Pr23a, b). Like their chlorite counterparts (Fig. 23), they are considered to be cosmetic utensils, not only in view of their shape, but also

²⁵ Pr24, see catalogue for further discussion and references.

²⁶ There is a vast literature on this topic, see for example Ligabue/Salvatori 1989, Pls. 32; 89; 106–113. – Amiet 1986, 200–204 Figs. 149; 202. – Sarianidi 1986, 146–151. – Potts 1994, Fig. 33 (Gudea statue); 38 (Standard of Ur).

²⁷ Casanova/Piran 2012.

²⁸ Ciarla 1979. For their occurrences in Mesopotamia and Iran see Potts 1994, 217–275, with references to seminal earlier studies.