

The Pashkhurt area (south Uzbekistan) in the middle of the 1st millennium BC: Recent Russian-Uzbek archaeological works

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of recent archaeological work – surveys and excavations of the 4th–3rd century BC settlement of Gisht Tepa as well as a number of other sites. It recapitulates the historical and archaeological situation in the Pashkhurt foothill basin – a very promising area for researchers of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic period of Central Asia.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia; Pashkhurt area; Achaemenid period; Hellenistic period; Gisht Tepa.

The study of Central Asia is one of the focal points of modern Russian archaeology. Considering this fact, as well as the presence of traditional deep ties between the scientific communities of Russia and of the Central Asian states, there is a lot of joint work in the region. The article deals with only a small proportion of the total number of joint archaeological research projects that have taken place in recent years, namely those which have been carried out since the beginning of the 21st century by various Russian-Uzbek archaeological teams in the south of modern Uzbekistan. Although a number of significant archaeological sites – from the world-famous complex of stone rock art to the well-preserved Late Medieval sites – have been discovered and studied in this unique area over the years, in this article we will focus our chronological framework on the sites of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods (6th–3rd centuries BC) – in many ways a key time in the history of Central Asia.

THE PASHKHURT AREA

The Pashkhurt foothill basin is a geographically isolated territory in the foothills of the South-Western Hissar mountain range, near the junction of the borders of three modern States (Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan). It is in the largest modern settlement, the village (*kishlak*) of Pashkhurt, Sherabad district, Uzbekistan, that we can localise the centre of this zone. This hilly region (the altitudes range from 700 to 1300 meters above sea level, except for the southern part and the Kugitang ridge delimiting the valley from the west with its highest point at 3139 m.a.s.l.) was only moderately affected by modern economic activities, which is important for archaeological research. This valley with an area of approximately 20–50 km² is nowadays only sparsely populated. The main water source of the area is the small mountain river Dabil Say (called Ulanbulak Say further downstream), though the area is also rich in a large number of springs (**Fig. 1**).

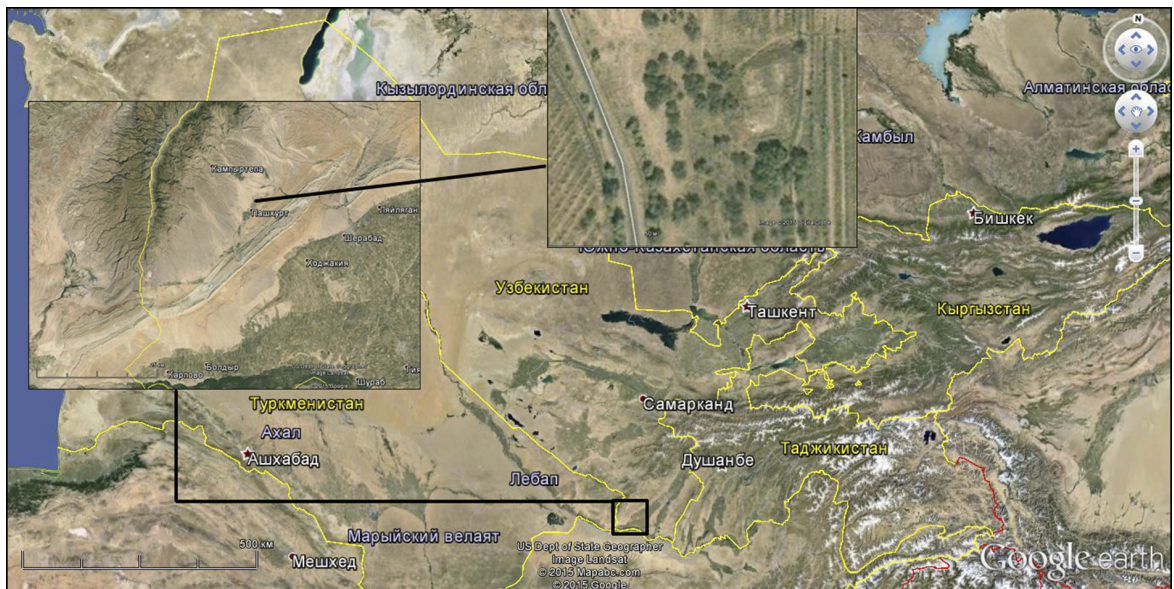


Fig. 1: The Pashkhurt area and Gisht Tepa. Google Earth snapshots.

The area was first described in the fifth volume of the Materials for statistics of Turkestan in 1878, when the Russian military under the leadership of the famous admirer of Asian antiquities, Colonel N. A. Maev, explored the mountainous regions of the then Bukhara Emirate (МАЕВ 1879). In the 1920s–1930s the territory was explored so as to document the ancient mountain mines, however, for a long time, the discovery of archaeological sites in the foothills of Kugitang was a matter of chance, which led to only occasional visits of archaeologists.¹

The first excavations in the area were carried out in 1964 on a site in the *kishlak* of Kampyr Tepa by the Uzbek Fine Arts Institute expedition led by G. A. Pugachenkova. In the stratigraphic trench excavated on the settlement, layers of the Kushan period were revealed containing coins of the kings Kanishka and Vasudeva (PUGACHENKOVA 1967, 74–88). Case studies relating to the search for mines and slag fields were carried out in the 1960s by a group of geologists and archaeologists under the leadership of E. B. Pruger. Small surveys of Stone Age finds took place in 1971, when U. I. Islamov discovered three spots with a Stone Age industry in the southern part of the valley (Kattikamish 1–2 and Goz). The first systematic research in the area of Pashkhurt village was carried out in the course of large-scale exploratory surveys of Southern Uzbekistan conducted in the late 1960s – early 1970s by E. V. Rtveladze. Several archaeological sites were discovered, but at that time information about them was only limited to short notes; the only exceptions are the (still somewhat incomplete) information on the major archaeological site of Dabil Kurgan stretching from the mid-1st Millennium BC to the 19th century AD –, and a mention of the remains of several medieval sites (Kyrkkyz-ata in the *kishlak* of Goz, the Tepas in *kishlaks* of Qarabagh, Kampyr Tepa, and Maydan, cf.; RTVELADZE – KHAKIMOV 1973, 16–17, 22–23; RTVELADZE 1975, 265; ARSHAVSKAYA *et al.* 1982, 117, 133, 134). Later on, the area was visited several times by various archaeological groups (BOBOKHOJAEV *et al.* 1990; STRIDE 2004). The first stages of studies in the Pashkhurt area are presented in detail in a review article published by E.V. Rtveladze in 2013 (RTVELADZE 2013).

¹ The result of one such visit was the discovery and study of the rock art complex known by the name of Zarautsay, which is located in the Northwestern part of the territory (ROGINSKAYA 1950; FORMOZOV 1966).

THE RECENT INVESTIGATIONS OF THE AREA. TOKHARISTAN EXPEDITION AND OTHERS

The first stationary work in the research area began in the early 2000s, led by the archaeologists from the State Museum of Oriental Art (Moscow) as part of the Tocharistan archaeological expedition under the direction of E. V. Rtveladze. The main works were carried out at the site of Dabil Kurgan. For several years, thick layers were investigated with material that illustrates the history of the area over the last 2,500 years; also, an Early Medieval necropolis was excavated in the foothill of the settlement (see e.g., BOLELOV 2004a; 2004b; ILYASOV 2009). In addition, archaeological and ethnographical surveys were sometimes carried out in combination with small-scale excavations (Maydan Kurgan, Kampyr Tepa). A number of previously unknown sites were discovered including Gisht Tepa. In 2004–2005, Late Bronze Age material was identified in the given area for the first time. Initially comprising a group of vessels from a burial ground on the Eastern outskirts of Pashkhurt (МОКРОБОРОВОДОВ 2006), and then a unique settlement called Tillya Bulak. Excavations of the latter were originally conducted by Russian archaeologists and in 2007–2010 by group of archaeologists from the University of Munich (BOLELOV 2009; KAINUTH *et al.* 2009). Also, since the 2010s, a Czech-Uzbek project has focused on a systematic archaeological survey of western part of the modern Sherabad district of Uzbekistan (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2017; STANČO *et al.* 2017). As a follow up, joint Czech-Uzbek-French and Uzbek-French teams led excavations at some of the newly detected settlements (STANČO *et al.* 2016; KYSELA – AUGUSTINOVÁ – KINASTON 2018; LHUILLIER 2021).

In 2013–2014, the work of Russian archaeologists in the Pashkhurt area was resumed. A separate group of the Central Asian expedition of the Institute of archaeology RAS (as part of the Tokharistan expedition) carried out extensive archaeological surveys in the area of the modern settlements of Pashkhurt, Goz, Zarabag, in the areas of Tandabulak, Sur'makhona, and Kuk-Chinor. In this area, several previously unknown sites (mostly dating from the first centuries BC and the Middle Ages) were documented, supplementing the database of the already known sites (DVURECHESKAYA *et al.* 2014). One of the newly discovered sites dated to the Late Bronze Age – Goz Kala – was excavated in 2014 (RUKAVISHNIKOVA *et al.* 2015). At the same time, a group of archaeologists from Yelets University carried out small excavations of the layers belonging to the first Millennium AD at Dabil Kurgan (SOLOVYEV 2013).

Thus, the data collected in Pashkhurt and its surroundings attest to the almost continuous habitation for more than four thousand years. It naturally had its ebbs and flows due to the rather difficult history of Central Asia. After the rapid development of this zone in the Late Bronze Age and settlement of the periphery of the valley in the early stages of the Yaz period (AUGUSTINOVÁ 2018) came the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods whose development in the area will be described in detail below.

The evidence of the Achaemenid period is not plentiful in the research zone. The first finds of this phase were recognized by E. V. Rtveladze in the material collected from the surface of Dabil Kurgan and – reportedly – among the finds from Gilyampush Tepa in Karabag (RTVELADZE 2013, 15). The latest, still unconfirmed, similar finds come from the Czech-Uzbek surveys in the vicinity of Zarabag (Kosh Tepa 2) (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2017, 143). Achaemenid period layers were identified in 2002–2003 in the stratigraphic section at Dabil Kurgan, but these remain as yet unpublished. The leader of these excavations, S. B. Bolelov, kindly allowed the present author to refer to some of these results, for which I am very grateful.



Fig. 2: Dabil Kurgan. View from the north.

Dabil Kurgan is located in the centre of the modern village of Pashkhurt, on the left bank of the Dabil Say. At the beginning of the excavations, the site was a large ‘tepa’ measuring at its base 130–160 × 360 m, reaching a height of up to 20 m (**Fig. 2**). A sounding was carried out in the western part of the site. To sum up the results of the excavations, we can note the following: a more than 1 m thick pakhsa platform was identified at a depth of 9.2 m from the modern ground surface (more than 15 m below from the reference point of the site). It was apparently built on virgin soil with post holes. Adjacent to this platform was a pakhsa wall with a width of 2.25 m and an occupation level covered with a 45 cm thick layer, which is itself overlaid by another 30 cm thick layer with charcoal and ash, and in turn this is covered by almost a meter (88 cm) thick layer of dense loess. Probably contemporary with these layers were the remains of two parallel walls built from mud-bricks measuring 58–60 × 30 × 15–16 cm, identified above the platform and the clay layer in the other part of the trench, and also covered by a 30 cm thick layer of dense loess. These layers yielded small but quite informative ceramic assemblages. The fragments of large vessels with characteristic carination close to the bottom are worth particular attention, as well as fragments of high cylindrical-conical cups, rims of vessels with a cuff-shaped profile, and fragments of handmade cauldrons. This material was dated by S. B. Bolelov to the 5th and the first half of the 4th century BC. The author of the excavations at Dabil Kurgan specifically pointed out the absence of layers with finds of the late 4th–early 3rd century BC above these ‘Achaemenid’ layers. The next layer is a deposit containing material of the Greco-Bactrian period (including a coin of the Greco-Bactrian king Heliocles) and the remains of the firing chamber of a ceramic kiln with fragments of the late 3rd–early 2nd century BC (BOLELOV 2004a).

Overall, the finds of a post-Achaemenid date are extremely rare in the region. Apart from an unconfirmed testimony of E.V. Rtveladze on the find of presumably Hellenistic ceramics



Fig. 3: Sites of the middle of the 1st millennium BC in Pashkhurt. Base - Google Earth snapshot. View from the north.



Fig. 4: Gisht Tepa. View from the south-east.

on Maydan Kurgan and the latest data on possible extremely rare findings from Czech-Uzbek surveys (Kizilbay 3), the only site in Pashkhurt valley which produced finds of this period is Gisht Tepa.²

² Archaeological material from the beginning of the 3rd century BC are available from the 2017 sounding at Iskandar Tepa (near Loylagan; STANČO 2018; STANČO *et al.* 2020) and from the excavation of

GISHT TEPA

In 2004, a new archaeological site called Gisht Tapa (also known as Bazar Tapa or Ish Tapa) was discovered 1.2 km north-east of Dabil Kurgan (Fig. 3) at the entrance to Pashkhurt. The tepa is low (height 1.5–2 m) and rectangular in plan (40 × 30 m) (Fig. 4). The present author excavated the site for five seasons (2004–2006, 2013–2014), but the campaigns were short each time, consequently only about one third of the site has been unearthed (MOKROBORODOV 2007). However, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions.

According to the surface finds and the first test trenches, the site was dated to the 4th century BC. The most characteristic traits of the pottery include a rim with a cuff-shaped profile and the *khumcha* with an offset base part, manufactured by coiling.

Further excavations have established that the cultural layers of the site (with a total thickness of 2.8 m) can be distinguished into three successive construction horizons, following each other without signs of a hiatus between them. In all the three construction horizons the perimeter of Gisht Tapa was surrounded by a terraced outer wall. The thickness of the main wall – very crudely built of massive pakhsa blocks with a non-standardized format and with varying seam width – comes to 1.4 m. The entrance to the complex was situated on the south side. The inner development of the site is characterized by frequent rearrangements and repairs, mostly minor thick pakhsa walls. It was only in the third horizon that walls built from mud-bricks were ascertained. The bricks in the lower rows measured 45 × 35 × 10 cm and 46 × 35 × 11 cm, while the upper part of this wall was built of square bricks with the format of 45 × 45 × 10–12 cm. The excavation further identified numerous household pits, a yard, half-basements, *khums* dug into the floor, and fireplace spots (Fig. 5).

The Gisht Tapa ceramic assemblages are characterised by a high proportion of handmade ceramic (50 %), and numerous fragments without soot. A large number of gypsum fragments was recorded. Pottery of the first phase (Fig. 6) includes hemispherical bowls (Fig. 6:1–3), wide-necked bowls-cups (Fig. 6:4), jugs and pots with emphasized rims and narrow necks (Fig. 6:5–8), *khums* with massive rims and an indentation in the lower part (Fig. 6:9–10, 13), fragments of cylindrical-conical vessels with distinctly offset bottoms (Fig. 6:11–12). As far as the decoration of the ceramics is concerned, the wheel-made vessels from the early layers of Gisht Tapa are characterized by the use of various techniques, such as bleaching, painting, and imprinted decoration (made by finger into wet clay). Considering the dating of the first settlement horizon, besides purely stratigraphic criteria, it should be stressed that the studied pottery assemblage revealed many features characteristic of Late Achaemenid ware. Several elements, however, suggest that the complex is rather post-Achaemenid.

The material culture of the second and the third phase are almost identical. Among the finds (Fig. 7), there are small wheel-made vessels – cups, bowls, and dishes with a variety of rim profiles and hemispherical (sometimes flattened-hemispherical) forms (Fig. 7:1–8). There are also many pots with a spherical body and rims of various shapes (Fig. 7:9–16), flat bases of vessels and bases with discoid stands (Fig. 7:17–20). Ceramic with red slip appears. The shapes of handmade vessels (Fig. 7:21–30) are often similar to those made on a potter's wheel. Direct parallels of ceramic ware with such characteristics are available in the horizons of Kampyr Tapa I (BOLELOV 2001, 17–18, fig. 5) and Termez I (PIDAEV 1991, 212–218, 221–222, fig. 1; SVERCHKOV 2006, 106–107), which are dated to the first half of the 3rd century BC.

Uzundara (DVURECHESKAYA 2018) both located near to our zone, but outside the actual Pashkhurt area.



Fig. 5: Gishttepa. Planigraphy of stages 1-3.

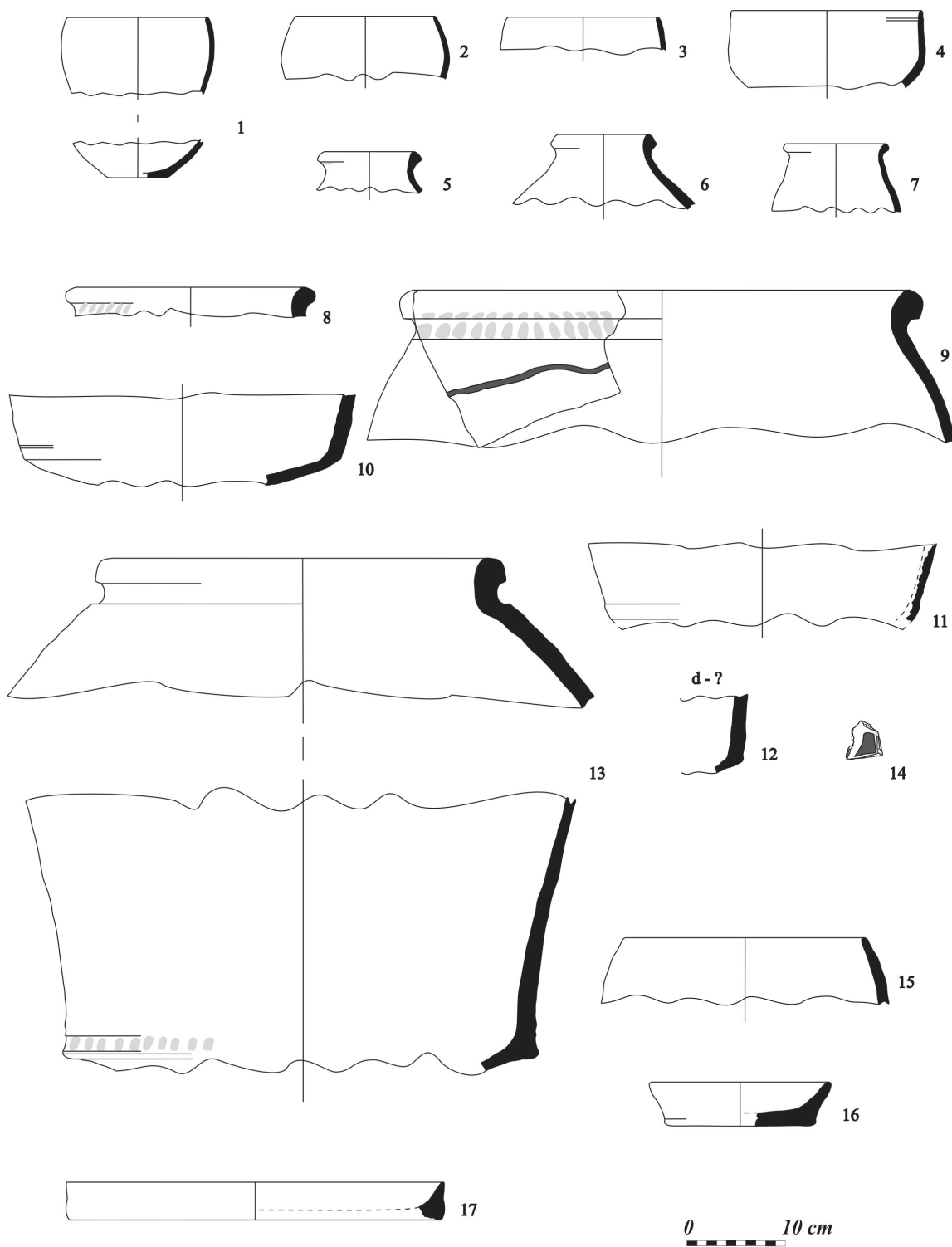


Fig. 6: Ceramic assemblage of Gisht Tepa, phase 1.

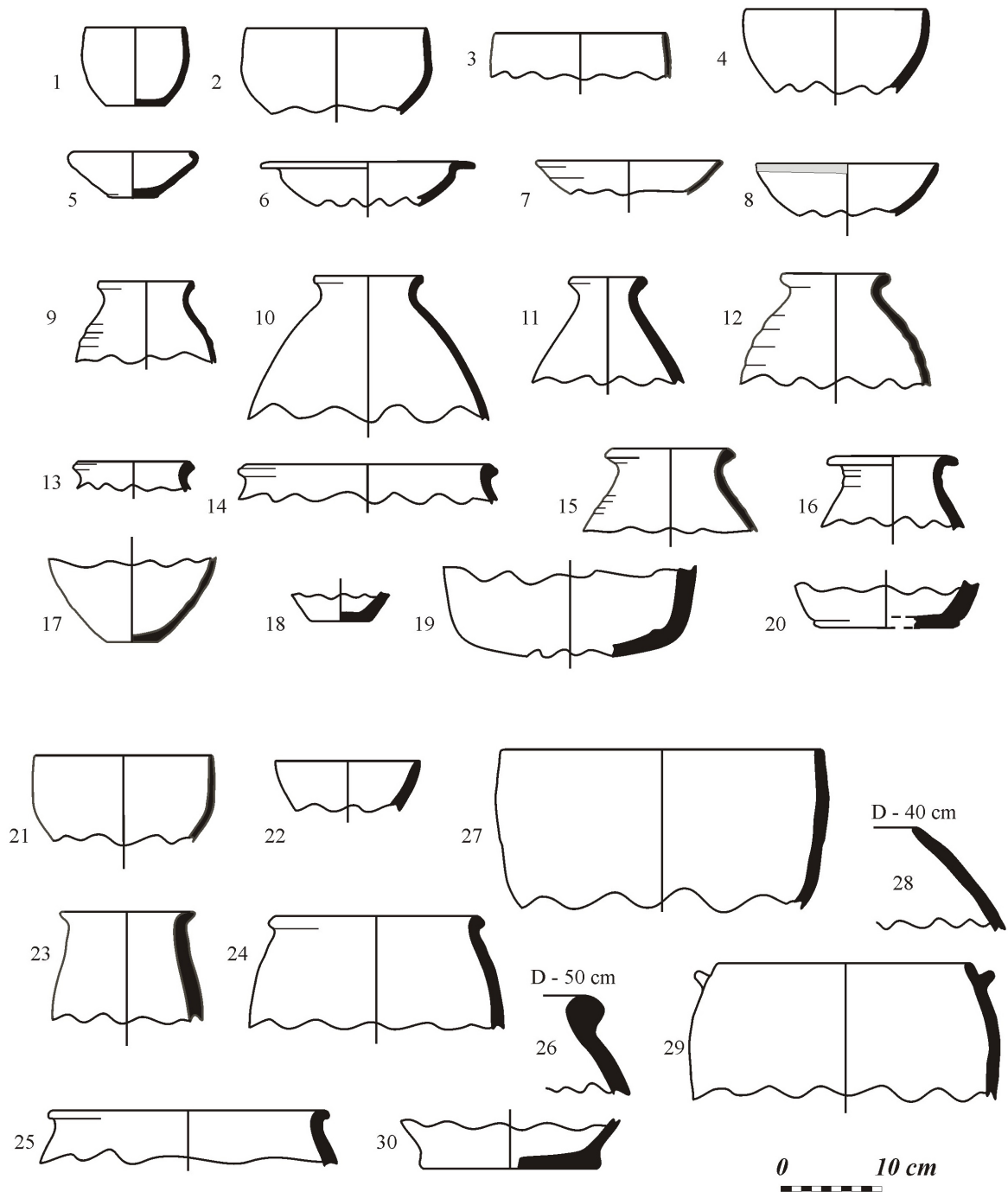


Fig. 7: Typical vessel forms of the ceramic assemblages of Gisht Tapa phase 2 and 3.

Gisht Tapa also yielded some exciting small finds (**Fig. 8-9**) even though metal and coins have not been found. We can mention here a very interesting 'kettlebell-shaped' massive (25×25 cm, weight 11.5 kg) stone weight with a handle (**Fig. 8:2**). A decorated pendant made of marble limestone from the layers of phase 2 is a transversely drilled disk with a diameter of 19 mm, height 8 mm, and a hole diameter of 3 mm. It is well preserved with only minor chips on the edge. It is engraved with a poorly visible image of a goat with a pair of horns

sharply bent to the right, on the other side there is an even more schematic image of an animal resembling a dog, oriented in the other direction (**Fig. 8:1**). In form and detail, the object is similar to the so-called ‘seal-amulets’ of the Bronze Age of Central Asia (e.g. SARIANIDI 1976; 1998).³ As analogies to our pendant we can point to similar finds from roughly contemporary sites – for example, the stone amulet-pendant of the 4th–3rd century BC, discovered during excavations at the settlement of Capyr-Kala in Turkmenistan (PILIPKO 1990, 67–69, fig. 4:7).



Fig. 8: Gisht Tepa. Stone objects.

³ However, the small number of seal imprints, known from the sites of Central Asia and dated to the studied period, as well as the characteristics of the artefact including its material (its relative softness) and the technique of applying images (executed quite thin and relatively shallow) make us refrain from categorical statements and interpretations, hence we call the item ‘a pendant’. The author is not the first to express doubts about the functional purpose of such objects (see, for example, ANTONOVA 2000, 187; FRANKFOR 1997. Even V.I. Sarianidi himself cautiously labelled the category ‘seals-amulets’; SARIANIDI 1976, 43).

A fragment of a slightly burnt terracotta anthropomorphic figure (its dimensions are 65×35×24 mm) was found in one of the pits of the phase 1. It was made of a greenish clay fired very softly; there is a slight corrugation on the front side – perhaps the remnants of the attempts to depict the folds of a robe (**Fig. 9:1**). Considering the date proposed for the early period of Gisht Tepa (late 4th century BC), this find appears to be one of the earliest proofs of the revival of the terracotta plastic art tradition in the region at this time (see DVURECHESKAYA 2016). A baked clay figure in the form of a horse protome was found in one of the pits of phase 2 (**Fig. 9:2**). A similar figure was found the following season in the very same layer, though in this case it was certainly a handle of a small wheel-made vessel (**Fig. 9:3**). The zoomorphic vessel handles are known from later Central Asian complexes: the image is close to Iranian prototypes, but the shape of the vessel is atypical for local ceramics (PUGACHENKOVA 1979; ILYASOV 2000).

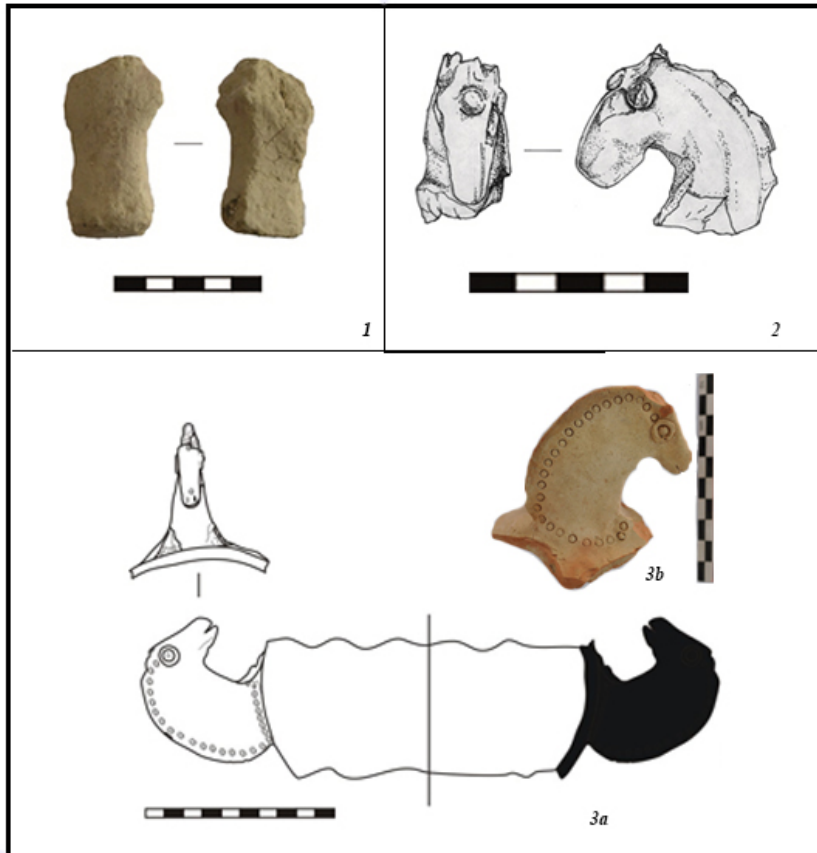


Fig. 9: Terracotta objects from Gisht Tepa.

CONCLUSION

The data obtained during the first studies of Gisht Tepa (that is, first of all, differences in the ceramic assemblages of the individual phases, planigraphy, and architectural features, rather than characteristics of earlier objects and unusual finds), indicate structural changes in the material culture of the region during the period under review. In other words, they illustrate the transformation of the traditional culture called Hellenization. But was this process exclusively positive for the region? The number of sites with early Hellenistic material in the

south of the modern territory of Uzbekistan is lower in comparison with Achaemenid period sites. It decreases at least five times, changing at the same time their prevalent type – now they are mostly small heavily fortified sites⁴ (though not in the case of Gisht Tepa, the function of which is probably rather commercial and residential). But this process happened, it is recorded archaeologically and should be studied further. Thanks to the limited development of modern agricultural activities, Pashkhurt area is characterised by the presence of archaeological sites of many periods – including those which have so far been only poorly studied – in an exceptionally good state of preservation. Nevertheless, it can still hardly be considered to have been thoroughly researched and is therefore a very promising territory for specialists interested in current issues of Central Asia Antiquity.

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4 For comparison, see, for example Мокробородов 2017.

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