



# An Unusual Khotanese Terracotta Head from the Sherabad Oasis

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a newly found terracotta head from the Sherabad District, southern Uzbekistan. Its probable origin in the eastern Turkestan region of Khotan as well as its iconographic peculiarities and their interpretation is discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Terracotta; clay figurine; Bactria; Tokharistan; Khotan; Babatepa; Late Antiquity.

*Prof. Jan Bouzek, our honoree, has always been and still is busy searching for connections and relations between cultural phenomena from seemingly distant times and places. He is famous for his ability to see things in a broader context, which is one of the qualities he has taught us. This – let us say – holistic approach to archaeology is made possible only by his enormous erudition and phenomenal memory. Since prof. Bouzek has many times dealt with various issues on the edge of the so-called Classical World, the present author decided to dedicate a short study to such a peripheral – seen from a classical archaeology point of view – subject, connected with recent field work of the research team of the Institute of Classical Archaeology, Charles University in Prague.*

At the turn of August and September 2009, the Czech-Uzbekistani archaeological expedition headed by the present author conducted an archaeological surface survey in the Sherabad Oasis, southern Uzbekistan, with the aim of mapping archaeological sites in the region and to document their current condition in the first step and to reconstruct historical settlement patterns and their dynamics in the second. The survey included surface collection of artefacts on already known archaeological sites, but also on newly discovered ones (DANIELISOVÁ *et al.* 2010; STANČO – TUŠLOVÁ eds. *in print*). On 6/9/2009 the work was also carried out at – and around – the site of Babatepa on the south-eastern edge of the village of the same name (formerly Istora), located 7.5km north-east of Sherabad (Pl. 8/1 bottom). The group of morphological features apparent on the surface consists here of the main mound (uzb. tepa), called Babatepa<sup>1</sup>, which has not been examined by destructive archaeological methods yet, and several smaller ones, of which Chopantepa and a nameless tepa were fully excavated in the first half of the 1980s by the Soviet scholar N.V. Nemtseva (1989, 132–168). These selected parts of the vast multicultural settlement were dated by her to the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD respectively (NEMTSEVA 1989, 162). In the surrounding terrain, at least four more elevated mounds can be distinguished that have not been archaeologically investigated yet

1 The site is listed in RTVELADZE 1974, 77, as B-30; in STANČO *et al.* 2016 (*in print*) and DANIELISOVÁ *et al.* 2010, 78 it is marked as no. 027; see also PARFYONOV *unpublished*, 168–169; STRIDE 2005 (Uz-SD-149); RTVELADZE – KHAKIMOV 1973, 19.



(DANIELISOVÁ *et al.* 2010, 79, nos. 028–031). Several mounds lying on the northern margin of the complex have been significantly affected by recent house constructions of the present day rapidly expanding village.

The importance of this area and potential for further investigation of its individual parts is also demonstrated by an assemblage of ceramic vessels discovered by a local farmer in 2007. He found a big storage jar (called locally “khum”) which was filled with 23 almost intact ceramic vessels dated back to the Great Kushan period. Among them, there was a plate with red slip, simple jugs, jugs of the oenochoid type, a pot with two handles and eight simple wheel-made lamps. This find enables us to give a precise chronology of the cluster of sites around Babatepa.

Another interesting object that we had been brought by a local peasant during the survey, was a fragment of a terracotta figurine (Fig. 1:1; Pl. 8/2), representing a male head with a distinctive hairstyle, including also a top-knot of hair, and elongated ear lobes.

The Babatepa figurine was found by the local peasant, reportedly at the foot of the western slope of the southern part of the main mound (the Babatepa itself, see Pl. 8/1 bottom). Further investigation led us to the information that the remaining part of this figure was once kept at the local primary school. We were not able to verify if this was still the case. After studying and documenting the head, the fragment was passed on to the care of the Archaeological Museum in Termez.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE HEAD

The preserved head height is 4.9cm and width 3.7cm, the thickness is 3cm. The frontal and side parts of the head are carefully shaped unlike the back side. There we can see only the line of the lower end of the hair and the top knot, while the rest of the back is flat/unworked or damaged (especially the left ear and neck). The facial part is undamaged, only the nose is worn or even intentionally smoothed. The features described above suggest that the piece was made from a single mould, and the rear part was cut off with a knife (Pl. 8/2:2).

If we look closely at the facial part, we can see small, slightly inclined eyes (from the bridge of the nose the line of the eyes rises towards the temples). The short nose is worn smooth and flattened in its lower part. The mouth is narrow and its width slightly exceeds the width of the nose. The lips, however, especially the upper one, are massive. The chin does not protrude forward, it falls rather vertically, retreats and connects to the neck, as does the whole jaw, so the whole could act as if the head is sunk between the shoulders of the depicted person. The setting of the eyes, the nose and the mouth close together results in a broad area of non-modelled cheeks just slightly rounded from the front to the side view. The auricles are consequently quite significantly detached from the other features of the face. The ear lobes are markedly elongated. The left ear is much better preserved than the right one (Pl. 8/2:3–4).

Among the facial features the hairstyle especially appears as a unique concept. In our case, the hair is combed forward and down, creating a parting in the middle, and strands of hair cover a substantial portion of the forehead. There is a bare round space between the two halves, into which the hairstyle above the forehead is divided.

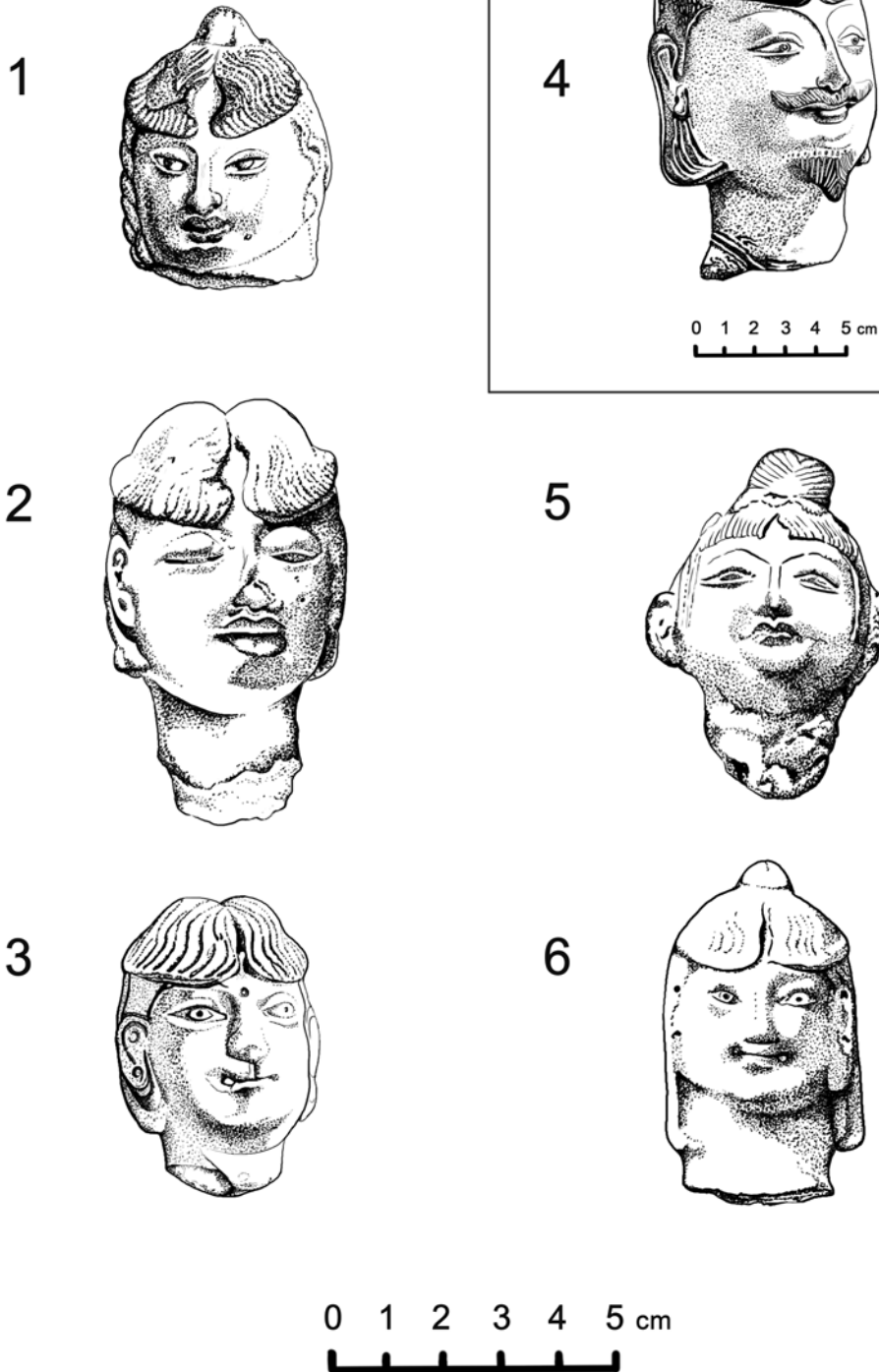


Fig. 1: Heads of clay figurines made in Khotan found at: 1. Babatepa, 2. Penjikent, 3.-6. Yotkan (Khotan). Drawings by P. Kazakova after ZEYMAL ed. 1985, 201, no. 503 (2), after British Museum online database (3-5), and after Etnografiska museet in Stockholm database (6).

## ANALOGIES AND PLACE OF ORIGIN

Let us turn to the close analogies of this very unusual – at least in the area in question – clay figurine. It seems to be in particular the hairstyle, which makes this object unique and differentiates it from other figurines found in the area (MESHKERIS 1989).<sup>2</sup> We can, however, find a very similar – almost identical – hairstyle, used on the clay head from the Sogdian city-site of Penjikent (Fig. 1:2), located in the upper Zeravshan valley (northwestern Tajikistan). This object (h. 7.3 cm, w. 4.3 cm) was identified (with a question mark) as the head of a doll (BELENICKIY *et al.* 1983, 205, ris. 5; ZEYMAL ed. 1985, 201, no. 503). The rear part of the head is again carefully smoothed. As already stated, the hairstyle is identical to that of the Babatepa head. The eyes, however, are treated in a somewhat different way, especially the pronounced eyelids look much heavier than those of the Babatepa head. The head from Penjikent was dated to the first quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. AD in accordance with its find context. This date, however, is to be understood as the date *ante quem* and does not help us much with the dating of our find (see below). What is even more remarkable, Khotan in eastern Turkestan was proposed as the place of origin of this item (BELENICKIY *et al.* 1983, 205; ZEYMAL ed. 1985, 201). I accept this attribution, since there are obvious stylistic and iconographic similarities between the Penjikent clay head and some of the Khotanese products. Concerning the Babatepa figurine, there are direct analogies for a general treatment of the hairstyle among Khotanese finds; for example among the Yotkan finds brought by Stein and Hoernle to the British Museum at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. we may find images with a similar hairstyle and a general treatment (inv. Nr. 1902,1220.306; 1902,1220.194; 1902,1220 (Fig. 1:3–5). Both BM pieces (nos. 306 and 194) were interpreted as male heads ([www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)). Especially the elaborate male head in Fig. 1:4 deserves our attention. Its hairstyle is almost identical to those of the figurines from Babatepa and Penjikent in its upper part. It shows, however, longer locks of hair at the neck behind the ears, resembling in this respect a head in the Etnografiska museet in Stockholm (no. 1903. 11. 260). The last mentioned example (Fig. 1:6) was described as “a female head” by Montell (1936, 179). What is even more remarkable, the face of a figurine from the BM (Fig. 1:4) is adorned with a goatee and a moustache. These iconographic peculiarities make it different from other similar heads,<sup>3</sup> and what is more important, they do not leave much doubt concerning the sex of the depicted person. The typical hairstyle of the head in Fig. 1:4 combined with the distinctive male features lead us to presume that the Babatepa head represents a male rather than a female person.

A significant group of Yotkan clay figurines, however, differs substantially from the Babatepa and Penjikent pieces in the rendering of the rather schematic facial details, such as incised dots in the corners of the mouth (Fig. 1:3 and 1:6); but sometimes also incised dots in the cheeks, nostrils, eye corners, and chin (cf. BM pieces nos. 1902,1220.293<sup>4</sup>, 296).

Unfortunately, the find context of the Yotkan finds is mostly unknown, thus we have to judge them very carefully, especially if the genuineness of some (or many?) of them has recently been questioned.<sup>5</sup> In conclusion, we may assume that the Babatepa figurine was

2 The most comprehensive overview of Sogdian terracotta does not contain any similar type of human depiction.

3 The moustache, unlike the pointed beard, is not that unusual, see head from the collections of Sven Hedin, cf. MONTELL 1936, Pl. XI:1.

4 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=261767&partId=1&people=31343&peoA=31343-3-7&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=261767&partId=1&people=31343&peoA=31343-3-7&page=2).

5 Some of the objects from Khotan in the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg, previously connected with ancient Yotkan, have been recognised recently as products of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. F. Grenet, personal communication, 2013.



produced in the Khotan area and found its way to Sherabad Oasis as a result of intensifying contacts between Tokharistan and Sogdiana, i.e. between the so-called western Turkestan and the oases of eastern Turkestan.

## DATING

Since the above mentioned dating of the Penjikent clay head to the 8<sup>th</sup> c. AD may be understood as the date of deposition of the given item, and the Babatepa figurine lacks its find context, we must rely on the dating of the Khotanese clay figurines themselves. Dyakonova and Sorokin (1960, 37), while analysing the archaeological, stylistic, and iconographic aspects of the Khotanese clay figurines in Hermitage museum, accepted the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD as the period of origin of most of the Yotkan terracotta production. Even if their work *Khotanskije drevnosti* was published more than 50 years ago, no new relevant dating proposals have appeared since then. The dating of the relevant objects in other world collections<sup>6</sup> used to be determined rather traditionally. Based on this, we could accept the assumption that the Babatepa figurine originated roughly in the Kushan period in accordance with the dating of the Yotkan finds. The issue is not that simple, however, and there are also arguments – even if indirect – for later dating (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. AD), especially the dating of find places and of periods of most intensive religious and trade contacts between the two regions. Moreover, we must not forget that all of the Yotkan finds lack precise stratigraphy,<sup>7</sup> which would support the above mentioned absolute dating. These arguments are dealt with below.

## INTERPRETATION

As already noted above, the ear lobes of the Babatepa head are markedly stretched, resembling one of the distinguishing *lakshanas* of Buddha, characteristics that distinguish him from ordinary people. However, another typical Buddha feature, the *ūrṇā* (the dot on the forehead), is not visible above the bridge of the nose. Although there is a certain similarity to the Buddha image, one can find also substantial differences. Let us examine first the traditional hair treatment of the early anthropomorphic image of Buddha, as it had developed in Gandharan art and as it later reached ancient Bactria. Usually, the hairstyle looks like the hair from the front of the head is combed up and back in undulating strands and tied in a bun, the so-called *uṣṇīṣa*. This basic scheme has a number of variants, differing in the degree of naturalism and quality of modelling. One can find very detailed elaborate strands of hair in the finely drawn waves (more common in stone sculpture) on the one hand, and on the other hand schematically marked arcs, representing curls often found on stucco heads. It is therefore obvious that the Babatepa head is by no means similar in hair treatment to the Gandharan mainstream. Still, the principal Buddha features enable one to speculate about interpreting the item as his image. Doing so, we may try to reconstruct the whole figure of the presumed Buddha. The

The situation on the spot and practice of local treasure seekers, digging extensively since the 1860s, was well described by Stein (1904, 237-245).

6 Besides the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, rich collections of terracotta from Yotkan/Khotan are housed in The British Museum (objects acquired by A. Stein and others), the Musée Guimet in Paris has a collection brought by the De Rhins expedition of the 1890s as well as in the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm, where a collection of Sven Hedin is exhibited and stored.

7 See description of the site and antiquities by Stein (1907, 256-269).



missing parts of the figure – body and limbs – can in principle be reconstructed in two ways: as a sitting or a standing figure. The above given description of the head, which looks as if it were sunk between the shoulders, points rather to a depiction of a seated figure. This position (*asana*) of the Buddha, called *padmasana* combined with hands in the *dhyana-mudra* position, occurs, after all, in Bactria more frequently (ABDULLAEV 1997/1998; ABDULLAEV 2015, 86–95, Figs. 54–63).

The unworked rear part of the figurine produced from the mould suggests that the object was leant against a wall in a small home cult place either in a Buddhist temple, a stupa, or possibly mounted on a wall of similar spaces. Taking into account the dimensions of this object, it is rather a type of small votive object than the main iconic image.

The research on both of the above mentioned architectural complexes around Babatepa did not bring to light any Buddhist monuments. The function of the excavated structures is primarily residential and secondarily economic, not religious. It is noteworthy, however, that one of the clay figurines from Babatepa dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. AD was previously interpreted as an ascetic (ABDULLAEV *et al.* 1991, 12, no. 362). Moreover, during our surface survey at the main mound of Babatepa, we found part of platform build of fired bricks. The bricks measure 60 × 60 × 4 cm, which is an unusually large size. This platform can be very preliminarily interpreted as part of a religious structure. Even if we accept this hypothesis, there is absolutely no indication that the structure served to worship Buddha.

## DISCUSSION

In the following paragraphs, I will try to answer the following questions: What kind of relations contributed to the import of Khotanese terracotta to Tokharistan? At what time could it have happened? In general, it is difficult to prove archaeologically the expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia during the rule of the Greeks in Bactria, although some researchers argue in this way.<sup>8</sup> Buddhist monk, and perhaps also lay, communities north of the Hindu Kush can be attested with certainty in the height of power of the Kushan Empire, i.e. in the time of Kanishka rule and later (STAVISKIY 1998, 156), but most probably already even in the first century AD.<sup>9</sup>

The spread of Buddhist communities north of the Hindukush mountains is likely in a time of peace and security, or even in a period of direct or indirect support of the ruling class, which may be expected only after the Kushans took control of the vast area from Bactria to the Ganges Valley and the ways for religious ideas or missionaries to the north were opened. This could hardly have happened earlier than the rule of Kujula Kadphises (30–80 AD), which would be a good fit with the dates of the beginning of the Buddhist monasteries on the outskirts of Termez. The growing and rich city – as Termez/Tarmita in the Kushan period certainly was – represented exactly the appropriate type of settlement which could sustain large communities of Buddhist monks. The communities may be supported mainly by lay adherents

8 The hypothesis about the spread of Buddhism to Bactria in the Greco-Bactrian period is based upon the iconography of the Greco-Bactrian coins. Some of them used symbols that may be connected with Buddhist symbols (chakra, stupa). T. Mkrtychev admits that individual Buddhist missionaries reached Bactria in the 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC (MKRTYCHEV 2002, 16).

9 The dating of Fayaztepa, monasteries of Karatepe, Zurmala stupa, Airtam complex, and the temple outside the walls of the Dal'verzintepa are traditionally dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (see esp. STAVISKI 1993–1994, 114–116), or to the end of the first century (for example Kara-Tepe, cf. MKRTYCHEV 1993/1994). According to T. Annaev, who has recently reopened the research of the site Fayaztepa, its origin dates back to the turn of the era, or shortly after, personal communication 09/2006.



residing in a populous city in the neighbourhood, as it is known also for example in Taxila, Purushapura or Butkara. For the earlier Greco-Bactrian Termez – a small fortified station on the crossing of the Oxus – something like this cannot even be expected. A further spread of the Buddhist faith to the countryside is well attested by the local sanctuaries or small temples in various centres of northern Bactria/Tokharistan of the Kushan and Kushan-Sasanian periods.<sup>10</sup> Mkrtychev speaks of at least 20 Buddhist sites in Bactria – Tokharistan dating to the 1<sup>st</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> c. AD (MKRTYCHEV 2007, 475). Unfortunately, Fa-xian, travelling from China to India, took the short way across Karakorum directly to northern Pakistan and thus did not visit Tokharistan in the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD. His observations might have been quite valuable. About a century later, his successor Song Yun before turning south to India, entered at least eastern Tokharistan and noted that *‘the majority of them are unbelievers. Most of them worship false gods’* (SONG YUN 186). This contradicts Xuanzang’s observations in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> c. AD. Termez alone is said to host more than ten Buddhist monasteries with about 1000 monks (XUANZANG I). Judging from the spatial distribution of Buddhist shrines and monasteries in the Tokharistan area north of the Oxus and from their chronological classification, it seems to be clear that there were two principal periods, when the Buddhist communities flourished here: the first wave of the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD (Karatepa, Fayaztepa, Ushturmullo and Ayrtam) and the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> c. AD respectively (Chingiztepa, Zartepa, Karatepa and Dal’verzintepa) was clearly linked with the coming of monks from India, while the second wave of the 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> c. AD (Kalai-Kafirnigan, Khishttepa, Ajinatepa, Ak Beshim, Kuva and Krasnaya Rechka) might have been related with the reverse migration of the religion from eastern Turkestan and China.

The Buddhist monasteries at Khotan belonged predominantly to the Hinayana school until ca. 270–400 AD, in which period Mahayana became dominant (DE LA VAISSIÈRE 2010, 86). Fa-xian reports in the early 5<sup>th</sup> c. about Khotan in the following summarizing description: *‘Yu-Teen [Khotan] is a pleasant and prosperous kingdom, with a numerous and flourishing population. The inhabitants all profess our Law, and join together in its religious music for their enjoyment. The monks amount to several myriads, most of whom are students of the Mahayana’* (FA-XIAN III). According to this account, one of the main monasteries had been built for 80 years before the arrival of the Fa-xian group of pilgrims, i.e. during the reign of three kings. Moreover, the local king supported monasteries and also Buddhist religious festivals, including a procession of images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas made of gold and silver. The Buddhist religious dominance in the area is further attested by Song Yun, travelling through Khotan in 518 AD (SONG YUN 179–181). The other Chinese travelling monk, the famous Xuanzang, reports in about 645 AD that *‘they greatly esteem the law of Buddha. There are about a hundred sangharamas with some 5000 followers, who all study the doctrine of the Great Vehicle’* (XUANZANG XII). Therefore, Buddhist iconography must be taken into account as the first option for the interpretation.

The majority of Khotan terracotta figurines in world collections is dated back to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD. If we accepted this dating also for the Babatepa head, we would already have an interesting example of mutual relations between Tokharistan and eastern Turkestan in the Great Kushan period. The Penjikent figurine and its find context, on the other hand, suggest a rather later dating (5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> c. AD), which is a good fit with the trends of the given period: increasing trade and religious contacts, mediated not only by Chinese Buddhist monks, but also by Sogdian traders.

<sup>10</sup> See Abdullaev (2015, 36, fig. 3) for the distribution map of small terracotta figurines or plaques with a depiction of Buddha or Bodhisattva in northern Bactria/Tokharistan.



## CONCLUSION

While analysing a newly found clay head from Babatepa, southern Uzbekistan, we tried to interpret it as an unusual depiction of Buddha, executed in the typical Khotanese style. This assumption is based mainly on the prolonged earlobes as one of the Buddha's lakshanas and also on the hairstyle with the typical top-knot of Buddha. Since we have no direct analogies for such an interpretation, we cannot exclude other readings of the given image, including the possibility that it is a depiction of a donor or a Buddhist layman. Anyway, the Buddhist context of the item is highly likely taking into account the dominant religion in Khotan as well as in northern Bactria/Tokharistan in the Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. Dating of the figurine remains uncertain with two almost equally probable options: the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD and the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. AD. The Early Medieval date (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c.) seems the more probable.

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Pl. 8/1: Map of Central Asia showing places mentioned in the text (top). Babatepa and its environs with marked archaeological sites and find spot of the clay head (bottom). Satellite image in the background is provided by DigitalGlobe and GeoEye companies as base map in the ArcGIS software. Maps by the author.



Pl. 8/2: Clay head from Babatepa. 1. Frontal view, 2. Rear view, 3. View from right, 4. View from left.  
Photo by A. Danielisová.