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**INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ÉTUDES SUR L'ASIE CENTRALE
ФРАНЦУЗСКИЙ ИНСТИТУТ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ
FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES**

WORKING PAPER N° 23

The Eastern frontiers of the Sasanian empire: case study in Southern Turkmenistan

Les frontières orientales de l'empire Sassanide : étude de cas au sud du Turkménistan

Keywords: Late Antique Central Asia, Sasanids, Hephthalites, Iranian Huns.

Mots clés: Antiquité tardive en Asie centrale, Sasanides, Hephthalites, Huns iraniens.

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1. Research question

The Late Antique and early Middle Ages are a poorly studied period in the history of Turkmenistan. Processes connected with changes in the social and economic relations during that time led to the collapse of the large states and the break-up of established links. The previously powerful Parthian empire with famous central sites such as Nisa in Turkmenistan was destroyed by the Sasanians at the beginning of the 3rd century AD. Later the Sasanians extended its territory further east and in other directions.

The Sasanian Empire (224/226–651 AD) (**fig. 1**) was one of the most extensive and powerful pre-Islamic empires. It was divided into four principal regions. One of them was called Khorasan, which incorporated part of the southern Turkmenistan. The position of its eastern frontier was dependent on the Sasanian military fortunes: at its height the extent included the towns of Balkh and Bukhara.



Fig. 1. Map of the Sasanian Empire (224/226 – 651 AD).

It is difficult to determine whether the western part of this piedmont zone was part of Khorasan, while for the East, it seems clear that the oasis zone demarcates Sasanian territory. It is also certain that regions south of the Kopetdag such as the district of Gorgan on the shores of the Caspian Sea were within the “northern possession” and were part of the province of Khorasan.¹

Throughout most of the Sasanian reign, however, the north-eastern edge of the empire lay in Southern Turkmenistan, notably around the ancient city of Merv (Mary velayat (province) of Turkmenistan) and in the Abiverd area (Ahal velayat of Turkmenistan). These two regions have the highest concentration of Sasanian sites in Turkmenistan (**fig. 2**).



Fig. 2. Administrative divisions of Turkmenistan.

2. Previous research

The first information about the Sasanian sites in Southern Turkmenistan we can find in works of A. Komarov, a Russian general who was in the 1880s head of the Transcaspien province of Russian empire. He was interested in archaeology and therefore he organized excavations in Anau, Merv, Nisa, Khivabad, and Khosrov-kala. In 1890 V. Žukovskij studied the architecture of Merv.² In 1904 an archaeological team under the direction of R. Pumpelly (Carnegie Institution Washington, DC) excavated sites in South Turkmenistan.³

In 1946 the South-Turkmenistanian archaeological complex expedition (*YuTAKE*) was established for studying sites in southern Turkmenistan from prehistoric to medieval times. The

¹ Gyselen 1989: *La géographie administrative de l'Empire Sassanide: Les témoignages sigillographiques*. Paris.

² Žukovskij 1894: *Drevnosti Zakaspijskogo kraâ. Razvaliny Starogo Merva*. St. Peterburg.

³ Pumpelly 1908: *Explorations in Turkestan*, vol. 1, Washington.

main focus of YuTAKE was systematic excavations in Merv which became one of the pillars of the Sasanian rule in the East. In 1947 it studied some Sasanian sites in southern and western parts of Turkmenistan.⁴ Work was continued in the 1950s by S. Ershov⁵ in the Bairam-Ali necropolis with ossuary burials, and by D. Durdyev worked in the middle of 1950s in Kone Kaka and Kishman-depe.⁶ In 1966-67 YuTAKE studied Sasanian sites in the Mary oasis.⁷

From the 1970s on, YuTAKE was no longer active. Some Sasanian sites were studied by G. Koshelenko, G. Gutlyev, A. Burhanov⁸ and O. Orazov⁹ in the 1970s; A. Gubaev, G. Koshelenko and S. Novikov¹⁰ attempted to map the archaeological sites in the Merv oasis in the 1980s. This work was continued in the frame of a joint Turkmen-Italian project from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s. As a result of this project a book was published as the archaeological map of sites from all historical periods in the Murghab delta.¹¹ It should be noted that a British archaeological team in Mary region studied all sequences of the history of Merv, including the Sasanian period.¹²

The one Sasanian site which was studied in South Turkmenistan is Akdepe, which is situated by the rail station of Artyk on the Central Asian railway in the Kaka region of South Turkmenistan. (**fig. 3**). It was excavated in 1963–1978 by A. Gubaev.¹³ Remains of an ancient settlement cover an area of about 40 ha. The mound of Akdepe occupies its northern part. There are traces of walls encircling the mound, the area within these walls being approximately up to 10 ha. The mound of Akdepe contains the remains of several successively erected fortified buildings, the earliest of them of Late Parthian date, and the last of the Late Sasanian period. The

⁴ Masson 1951: *Ūjno-Turkmenistanskaâ arheologiĉeskaâ kompleksnaâ ěkpeditsiâ (ŪTAKÈ) 1947 g.*, in: M.E. Masson (ed.), *Trudy Ūjno-Turkmenistanskoj arheologiĉeskoj kompleksnoj ěkpeditsii 2*, Ašhabad, 7-72.

⁵ Eršov 1959: *Nekotorye itogi arheologiĉeskogo izuĉeniâ nekropolâ s ossuarnym zahoroneniâmi v rajone gor. Bayram-Ali (raskopki 1954-1956 gg.)*, *Trudy Instituta istorii, arheologii i ětnografii Akademii Nauk Turkmenskoj SSR 5*, Ašhabad, 160-204.

⁶ Durdyev 1959a: *Itogi polevyh rabot sektora arheologii Instituta IAIÈ AN TSSR*, *Trudy Instituta istorii, arheologii i ětnografii Akademii Nauk Turkmenskoj SSR 5*, Ašhabad, 7-14; Durdyev 1959b: *Gorodiše starogo Kišmana. Otĉet o raskopkah 1956-1957 gg.*, *Trudy Instituta istorii, arheologii i ětnografii Akademii Nauk Turkmenskoj SSR 5*, Ašhabad, 136-159.

⁷ Pilipko 1980: *Razvedovatelnoe izuĉenie Varryk-depe v okrestnostâh Starogo Merva*, in: M.E. Masson (ed.), *Trudy Ūjno-Turkmenistanskoj arheologiĉeskoj kompleksnoj ěkpeditsii 17*, Ašhabad, 38-46.

⁸ Gutlyev, Burkhanov 1979: *Novyj pamâtnik sasanidskoj epohi v Pendinskom oazise. Pamâtniki Turkmenistana 1*, 16-18.

⁹ Orazov 1973: *Arheologiĉeskie i arhitekturnye pamâtniki Serahskogo oazisa*, Ašhabad.

¹⁰ Gubaev, Košelenko, Novikov 1990: *Ob arheologiĉeskih issledovaniâh v Mervskom oazise*, *Vestnik drevnej istorii 3*, 117-127.

¹¹ Gubaev, Koshelenko, Tosi 1998: *The archaeological map of the Murghab delta. Preliminary reports 1990-95*. Roma.

¹² Herrmann, Kurbansakhatov, Simpson 1999: *The International Merv Project. Preliminary Report on the Seventh Season (1998)*. Iran 37, 1-24; Herrmann, Kurbansakhatov, Simpson 2000: *The International Merv Project. Preliminary Report on the Eighth Season (1999)*. Iran 38. 1-31; Puschnigg 2006: *Ceramics of the Merv Oasis: recycling the city*. University College London. Institute of Archaeology publications.

¹³ Gubaev 1967: *Novyj pamâtnik sasanidskogo vremeni v Ūjnom Turkmenistane*, *Sovetskaâ arheologiâ 1*, 262–266; Gubaev 1971b: *Zamok Ak-depe i ego raskopki*. in: V.M. Masson (ed.), *Materialnaâ kul'tura Turkmenistana*, Ašhabad, 112–135; Gubaev 1972: *Novye raskopki zamka Ak-depe u Artyka*, *Karakumskie drevnosti 4*, 88–95; Gubaev 1977: *Novye rezultaty raskopok v zamke Ak-depe sasanidskogo vremeni*, *Karakumskie drevnosti 6*, 49–60.

active life of the settlement also dates to between the 2nd and the 7th centuries AD. In all, over 100 Sasanian clay bullae (**fig. 4**) dating to the late 6th century/first half of the 7th century AD have been found in the remains of a fortified building at Akdepe that forms the upper strata of the mound;¹⁴ coins have also been found.¹⁵ Analyse of large clay vessels (*khum*) found in Ahal province was made by V.Yu. Vdovin.¹⁶



Fig. 3. Akdepe.

In the second half of the 1980s, V. Pilipko worked briefly around the city of Ashgabat in Paryz-depe, Karaul-depe, and Govduz-depe, in all of which he found Sasanian layers. In 1900 – 1992, V. Pilipko also studied the late antique and early medieval sites in Ahal province.¹⁷



Fig. 4. Bullaes from Akdepe.

¹⁴ Gubaev, Lelekov 1970: Bully sasanidskogo perioda iz Ak-depe, *Karakumskie drevnosti* 2, 105–107; Gubaev 1971a: Sasanidskie bully iz zamka Akdepe (Predvaritel'naâ publikatsiâ). *Èpigrafika Vostoka* 20, 46–49; Gubaev, Loginov, Nikitin 1996: Sasanian Bullae from the Excavations of Ak-Depe by the Station of Artyk. *Iran* 34. 55-59.

¹⁵ Gubaev, Loginov, Nikitin 1993: Coin Finds from the Excavations of Ak-Depe by the Station of Artyk. *Iran* 31. 71–74.

¹⁶ Vdovin 1984: Humy Ūjnogo Turkmenistan parfânskogo i sasanidskogo vremeni (Parfieny i Apavarktikeny), in: V.M. Masson (ed.), *Problemy arheologii Turkmenistana*, Ašhabad, 80–95.

¹⁷ Pilipko 2012: Istorîâ arheologiçeskogo izuçeniâ rannesrednevekovyh pamâtnikov Ahala, in: M.G. Abramzon (ed.), *Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury* 4, Pamâti B.A. Litvinskogo, Moskva-Magnitogorsk-Novosibirsk, 304–311.

Otherwise, the most intensely studied Sasanian site in Turkmenistan is Gyaur-kala,¹⁸ while Chilburdzh (**fig. 5**) and Geobekli-depe were rather superficially investigated. In all cases walls were built above Parthian ones. In the Sasanian sites of the 3rd – 4th centuries many terracotta figurines of female goddesses were found.¹⁹ Coins give us the main information about Sasanian presence. The Sasanian coins' findings in the territory of Central Asia from the 19th century till the 1970s were analyzed by M.E. Masson.²⁰ Merv was one the centres where coins were minted. Beginning with Ardashir I Merv minted bronze coins. During the reign of Shapur I the minting of golden and silver dinars began.²¹ The mint in Merv was active also under the next Sasanian kings. It is interesting that in the time of Varakhran V half of his coins were minted in Merv. Maybe this was connected with his wars against the Hephthalites and Merv was the main base for Sasanian army.

Also in the 1960s were found two Buddhist manuscripts written in Brahmi and dated the Sasanian period, one not far from Bayram-Ali during agricultural works with the copper coins of Khusrov I Anushirvan (531-579) minted in 549 and a broken small stone statuette of Buddha and another one during the archaeological works a Buddhist stupa in Gyaur-kala. Both manuscripts were inside of big vases, especially ones from Gyaur-kala which became famous as – the Merv vase.²²



Fig. 5. Chilburdzh.

¹⁸ Filanovič 1974: Gâur-Kala, in: M.E. Masson (ed.), *Trudy Ūjno-Turkmenistanskoj arheologičeskoj kompleksnoj èkpeditsii 15*, Ašhabad, 15–139.

¹⁹ Filanovič 1989: *Istoriko-kul'turnye arheologičeskie tablitsy po gorodišču Gyaurkala v Starom Merve*, in: V.M. Masson (ed.), *Trudy Ūjno-Turkmenistanskoj arheologičeskoj kompleksnoj èkpeditsii 19*, Ašhabad, 62-121.

²⁰ Masson 1974: *Rasprostranenie monetnyh nahodok čekana dinastii Sasanidov (224-651 gg.) na territorii sovetskih respublik Srednej Azii*, in: M.E. Masson (ed.), *Trudy Ūjno-Turkmenistanskoj arheologičeskoj kompleksnoj èkpeditsii 15*, Ašhabad, 140-154.

²¹ Loginov, Nikitin 1993a: Sasanian coins of the third century from Merv. *Mesopotamia XXVIII*. 225-246; Loginov, Nikitin 1993b: Coins of Shapur II from Merv. *Mesopotamia 28*, 247-269.

²² Košelenko 1966: Unikal'naâ vaza iz Merva, *Vestnik drevnej istorii 1*, 92-105.

The Polish archaeological expedition in Turkmenistan (beginning in 1997) discovered a fire temple at Mele Hairam. The site is located ca. 15 km east of Serakhs. Although built of sun-dried brick, the temple of Mele Hairam is one of the best preserved ancient structures of this type. Numerous well-preserved objects found in the rooms of the temple building are extremely important in the reconstruction of the history of ancient fire temples. The comparative study of architectural components of the temple and of the material collected during the excavation allows us to assume that Atash Bahram, or “victorious fire”, was worshiped in the temple at Mele Hairam from the 2nd to the 5th century AD.²³

3. Archaeological survey data

Recently, I have carried out an archaeological survey in Southern Turkmenistan, notably around the ancient city of Merv (Mary welayat (province) of Turkmenistan) and in the Abiverd area (Ahal welayat of Turkmenistan). The goals were settlement survey of Sasanian sites along this crucial north-eastern boundary zone and attempt to find diachronic (e.g., settlement hierarchy before Sasanian arrival vs. after) and comparative differences (e.g., Sasanian settlement patterns in the two regions of Turkmenistan).

For the systematic and detailed survey, I had at my disposal two sources that were of substantial help: first, a preliminary list of archaeological sites in the Abiverd and Merv regions, which allowed me to obtain a general impression of where to expect particularly dense clusters of sites; and, second, the register of sites stemming from the Soviet era, which contains more information than the preliminary list.

While these two documents constitute an important foundation for my research, they cannot replace systematic survey work. And there are problems with them: they were made in the Soviet era, and most of the sites are listed with one site size for all periods, rather than being differentiated according to phase of occupation; furthermore, period attributions are chronologically crude, making distinctions only between dynasties – such as Parthian, Sasanian – rather than relying on detailed topographic maps and surface distributions of time-sensitive items such as coins and pottery types for dating purposes.

During the project, archaeological artefacts were analysed, with particular attention being paid to ceramics as indicators of changes in production. Beyond diagnostic pottery, other artefacts with restricted chronological distributions were collected. Following this analytical step, it was possible to date sites and parts of sites within the Sasanian periods.

Within the survey in the Abiverd and Merv regions, we have identified and recorded around 190 sites (130 in Mary province and 60 in Ahal province). The GPS locations were obtained for all surveyed sites. For each site, general observations on architecture (if present), vegetation, and other characteristics were made.

All the identified sites can be divided into three groups:

1. Parthian-Sasanian sites (3rd century BC to the 7th century AD)

²³ Kaim 2002: Un temple du feu sasanide découvert à Mele Hairam. Turkménistan méridional, *Iranica Antiqua* 31, 215-230; Kaim 2004: Ancient fire temples in the light of discovery at Mele Hairam. *Iranica Antiqua* XXXIX. 323-337.

2. Sasanian sites (3rd century to 7th century AD)
3. Sasanian-Islamic sites (3rd century to 16th century AD).²⁴

4. Conclusion

The preliminary results presented here emphasise sites and their periodisation based mostly on ceramics. It is possible that more multi-period occupations will be identified when the all collected material has been further evaluated. It is clear that these two main regions (Abiverd and Merv), being in the Sasanian period in northern parts of Khorasan, have the highest concentration of Sasanian sites in Turkmenistan, one of the four principal regions of the empire.

Another problem of this research is the rapid destruction of sites. There were approximately 500 sites of Sasanian times known in South Turkmenistan in the 1980s. Unfortunately, in the 1990s, many sites were destroyed, as mounds were used as agricultural manure. Although many archaeological expeditions were active in the country in Soviet times, no coherent map of archaeological sites was ever prepared. So we do not have any catalogue of sites at present. This raises some problems for researchers. With final results of the survey in Abiverd and Merv regions it is intended to prepare the first detailed catalogue of the main Sasanian sites in Turkmenistan with exact coordinates, type, dimension and description of each site. Such a catalogue will be very useful to guide future researchers, and to make sure that even sites that may be destroyed are at least documented.

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