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# The Oxus Route toward the South

## *Persian Legacy and Hellenistic Innovations in Central Asia*

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### Abstract

In this contribution, in view of the striking evidence from the site of Akchakhan-kala which is casting a completely new light on the archaeology of the Chorasmian polity and the Central Asian region, I explore relations between Ancient Chorasmia and its neighbouring regions to the south, in particular Bactriana. I will try to argue that the oft-referred to favoured political relations of Chorasmia with the Arsacid empire, considering all the evidence now at our disposal, have been misjudged. The material culture of Ancient Chorasmia, throughout the history of the region, clearly shows the existence of a privileged, albeit not exclusive, exchange route toward the region to its south. Chorasmia has always been, since its birth in the 6th century BC, a bridge from the sedentary world toward the steppes and a polity with a distinctive culture that the scarcity of written sources has often deprived of historical individuality and speciously relegated to the periphery of modern western historiography, in the shadow of the better-known superregional powers that established control over Asia and Iran.

### Keywords

Ancient Chorasmia – Central Asia – figurative arts – artistic legacy – transmission of iconography – Achaemenid Persia – Bactriana – Eastern Hellenism – Kushans

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## 1 Introduction

The Amu-Darya, one of the major rivers of Central Asia, was known to the ancient western geographers as the Oxus. Originating in Afghanistan from the confluence of the Vakhsh and Panj (or Pyandzh) streams, the river Amu empties into the Aral Sea, crossing in all its length the Turan Plain where it forms the natural boundary between the Kara-kum and the Kyzyl-kum deserts and, along its middle reaches, the political frontier between the modern nations of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The river, emptying into the Aral Sea and, with secondary branches, into the lake Sarykamjsh (or Sarykamysh) forms a vast delta, an “oasis” completely surrounded by wastelands (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> In the 6th century BC, on the southern part of this delta (the “Southern Pre-Aral”), the polity of Ancient Chorasmia emerged. It started its development, in all likelihood, first on the western (or left) bank of the Amu-Darya and then extending its territory toward the east and north-east, on the Akcha-Darya basin south of the Sultan-uiz-dag range (today’s Karakalpakstan), and toward the southeast (today’s Khorezm).<sup>2</sup>

The Oxus/Amu-Darya was the fundamental physical element that supported the growth of the Chorasmian society. It was also a natural connection that facilitated exchanges of goods, ideas and people along its course, a link between the history of Chorasmia – the polity with the most advanced position toward the northern steppes in Central Asia – and Bactriana – the polity which played a central role in the history of Central Asia probably at the centre of a stately entity already before the conquests of Cyrus.<sup>3</sup>

If we follow the course of the Amu-Darya upstream from the marshlands immediately south of the Aral, we will traverse all the Chorasmian territory up to the end of its fertile lands at the border of the desert. Here, south of the Chorasmian (and Khorezmian) city of Khazarasp,<sup>4</sup> after approximately 300 km, we will enter those territories once corresponding with Sogdiana (first the Bukhara’s area) and Bactriana. The Amu-Darya thus physically connected the geographically secluded “oasis” of Ancient Chorasmia with those

1 All drawings and photos by Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia (КАЕ) unless otherwise specified.

2 Minardi 2015a, 61-81; a topic discussed and clarified in Minardi forthcoming 2018a and in need of further archaeological validation.

3 Ctesias of Cnidus *apud* Diodorus Siculus (in particular vi. 1-8); *apud* Photius (*Bibl.* 72 p. 36a9-37a25). On the archaeological data, conveniently see Leriche 2007 with references (including the fundamental Gardin 1998).

4 Corresponding with one of the southernmost ancient sites of “South Chorasmia”, north of the now lost sanctuary of Elkharas; Khorezm is the name of a modern Uzbek province that corresponds, together with Karakalpakstan and the Daşoguz District of Turkmenistan, with the territory of Ancient Chorasmia.



FIGURE 1 The Chorasmanian “oasis” on the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya.

other southern parts of Central Asia (Bactriana and indirectly Margiana)<sup>5</sup> that earlier than the 6th century BC had seen the birth (and collapse) of complex societies.

The river appears to have transcended its role of “hydrographic axis” and, in fact, was deemed sacred by the inhabitants living in those lands – Chorasmia, Sogdiana and Bactriana<sup>6</sup> – who depended on its waters for agriculture and thus their economy. In Chorasmia Wakhsh was the celestial personification and guardian of the river Oxus, as it was Oaxsho in the Kushan world. The deified river Oxus was object of popular faith both in Chorasmian and Bactriana.<sup>7</sup>

5 Caravans in the Middle Ages and modern times connected Merv to Khiva through Bukhara in about 17 days (e.g. Burnaby 1876, 424; Burnes 1834, 324). Likely this situation mirrors the ancient one. On Spitamenes and his crossing of the desert north of Samarkand as recorded by Strabo XI. 8. 1 “belonging to the tribe of the Massagetae and the Sacae are also the Attasii and the Chorasmii, to whom Spitamenes fled from the country of the Bactriani and the Sogdiani”, see discussion in Minardi 2015a, 38-43 with literature.

6 Grenet 2002; 2015, 219; Francfort 2012.

7 Theophoric names related to Wakhsh/the Oxus are attested in Chorasmia (Minardi 2016a, 183-185 with references; Betts *et alii* 2016b, note 64), as well as in Bactriana (Naveh & Shaked no. C1, 174-185; Ai Khanoum: Rapin & Grenet 1983; Takht-i Sangin: Litvinskii & Pichikyan 1995; 2000, 312-324; see also Boyce & Grenet 1991, 179-180; Kampyr-tepe: Rtveladze 2002).

Takht-i Sangin was a temple consecrated to the Oxus<sup>8</sup> and likely the clay high-relief of a *ketos* from Akchakhan-kala, part of a larger composition, was ideologically connected with the river.<sup>9</sup> The ideal and material connection that this river provided among the Eastern Iranians is thus of significance.

The pre-Chorasmian “Southern pre-Aral” was, until the establishment of the Achaemenid control in Central Asia, a marginal area from the purview of urban/proto-urban development. Then Chorasmia formed during the course of the 6th century BC under the impulse of the Persians, very likely through a Central Asian agent which might very well have been Bactriana.<sup>10</sup> Archaeological evidence shows that in this first stage of the long Chorasmian history (Antique 1 period), in parallel with the emergence of monumental architecture necessary to control a territory now furrowed by great canalization works, a local variant of Yaz-III ceramic typology was developed and adopted in the region.<sup>11</sup> However, some of the lands south of the Aral Sea were likely already known as Chorasmia, or at least partially inhabited by a population that identified itself as “Chorasmian”, before the birth of any complex political entity.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly before 519 BC, Darius, “king by the favour of Aura Mazda”, declared himself to be in control of a vast kingdom ranging from Greece to India, including the Chorasmian “nation” (Old Persian *dahyu/dahyāva*). Although scant, the literary sources suggest that the Chorasmians likely shared the destiny of the rest of Central Asia, falling under Persian power already at the time of Cyrus.<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, the Chorasmians are among the “nations” that according to the Achaemenids were part of their empire since Darius’ time up to its end, and Chorasmia is so recorded in all the Persian royal inscriptions with a list of subjected countries.<sup>14</sup> Some of these lists, as for instance those

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On the Bactrian inscriptions from Takht-i Sangin mentioning the deified Oxus, see also Rougemont 2012b, 13, 15; Ivantchik 2011; 2013. Theophoric names do not always correspond to the religion of those who used them, but in our case (and in particular in the Chorasmian one where Zoroastrianism appears to have been the main belief till the transition to Islam) they nonetheless underline the existence of specific theonyms.

8 See Grenet 2015, 229; Francfort 2012 considers the main cult statue of the Temple with Indented Niches of Ai Khanoum a representation in a feminine form, of the Oxus (see Martinez-Sève in this volume).

9 Minardi 2016a.

10 As argued in Minardi 2015a. On Bactriana’s administration under the Achaemenids, see Shaked 2004; Naveh & Shaked 2012; on Bactriana’s documents in Greek language and on their relation to the Achaemenid administration system, see Rougemont 2012a.

11 For a closer scrutiny of this evidence, see Minardi forthcoming 2018a with references.

12 The first mention known of Chorasmian is in *Yasht* 10 of the Avesta (for further details see Minardi 2015a, 11-13).

13 Minardi 2015a, 8-11.

14 Minardi 2015a, 13-20 with references.

incised on the four rock-cut tombs of the Persian kings at the site of Naqsh-e Rostam, have a visual match with the bas-relief depictions of the bearers of the king's throne on their façades.<sup>15</sup> Among these throne-bearers, all distinguished by “ethnic attributes” (as perceived by the Persians), the Chorasmian “allegory” is represented as a Scythian/*Sakā*, equipped with a short sword, a standard *akinakes*.<sup>16</sup>

In Tomb II (the better preserved one),<sup>17</sup> the representation of the Chorasmian differs from that of the Sogdian (likewise represented as a steppe dweller) and the *Sakā haumavargā* only by the presence of a sort of small crown-like element on its earflap hood (fig. 2, left). An analogous element surmounts the hood of a similarly dressed figure incised on a votive gold plaque from the “Oxus Treasure” (fig. 2, right).<sup>18</sup> This datum hints at the presence of Chorasmian *ex-voto* among the specimens belonging to the hoard, thus supporting the argument for a tangible connection of the northern polity with its south through the river.<sup>19</sup> But, contrary to what was assumed by S.P. Tolstov and reiterated in the works of the other members of “Khorezm Expedition” (KhAEE),<sup>20</sup> Chorasmia under the Achaemenids was very unlikely a satrapal seat. The Persians exercised their control over the Oxus delta “indirectly”, ostensibly through a Central Asian intermediary such as the satrapy of Bactriana (that, according to later sources also had control over the neighbouring Sogdiana).

While the specific conditions of the Achaemenid socio-political influence in Chorasmia are still difficult to specify, the process of acculturation that the polity underwent has been reasonably similar to that which surfaced in other communities at the fringes of the Achaemenid empire: it starts with the involvement at a local level of the indigenous elite in the administration apparatus, followed by a process of emulation at different social strata of the

15 Schmidt 1970, fig. 43 with descriptive table; Rapin in this volume.

16 In the Achaemenid representations *Sakās*, Scythians, Sogdians and Chorasmians share a common way of dressing which is of steppic type. This includes their hoods, although with slight variations used to distinguish the “nations” from each other. The *akinakes* – also called “Median dagger” – that they carry is a piece of equipment shared with other “nations” at the service of the empire including the Median. For further details, see Minardi in Betts *et alii* 2016b, 133-134.

17 This detail is not visible in Schmidt 1970.

18 British Museum No. 123983; cf. also No. 123986.

19 The “Oxus Treasure” was probably found at Takht-i Kuwad (Tajikistan), a site at the junction of the rivers Vakhsh and Panj. It is close to but distinct from the site of Takht-i Sangin (also known as “The Temple of the Oxus”).

20 Written sources do not give any hint of the existence of a Chorasmian satrap, and there is no evidence at all to support such a supposition.

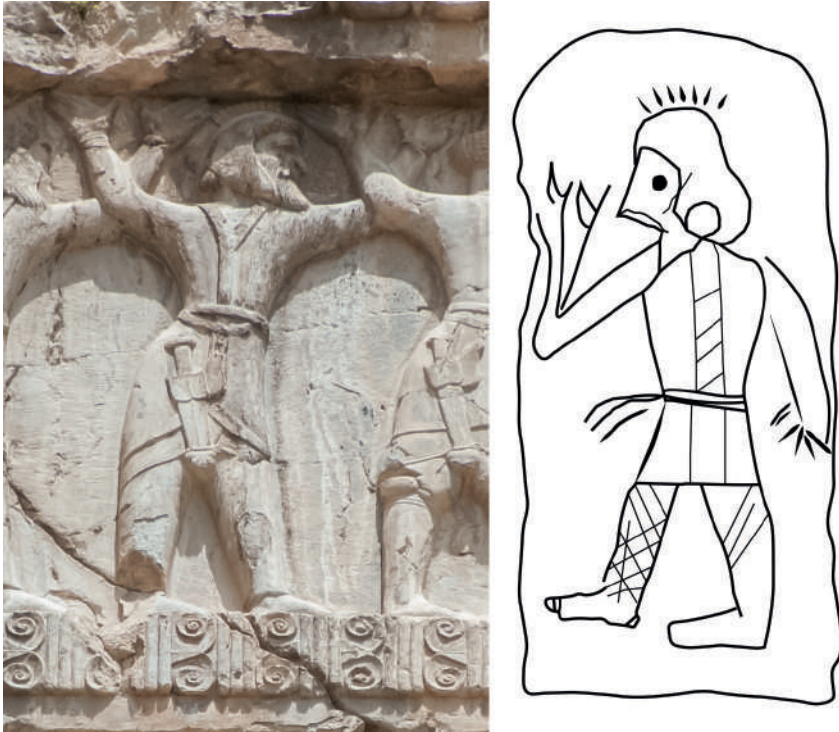


FIGURE 2 Left: Naqsh-i Rustam, Tomb II: detail of the Chorasmian throne bearer (author's photo); right: outline of a votive gold plaque from the Oxus Treasure showing a man in "Sakā" attire carrying flowers (?) (author's sketch after museum photo).

"central" hegemonic ruling class.<sup>21</sup> It is known that the Chorasmians served in the Achaemenid army<sup>22</sup> and that the Chorasmian elite adopted Achaemenid consuetudes and relative *paraphernalia* which reflected the material culture and social structure of the entire polity.<sup>23</sup>

The sources recording the events following the defeat of Darius III point to the fact that the political relation between the Chorasmians and the Persian empire, and in particular the cooperation with their closest neighbours, Bactrians and Sogdians, continued also after the defeat of the last of the

21 On the archaeological evidence for these processes, see for instance Dusinberre 2003 (Sardis) and Petrie *et alii* 2008 (Pakistan). For Chorasmia, see Minardi 2016c.

22 Minardi 2015a, 9-10; 22-29; Lurje in this volume.

23 Minardi 2015a, 80-81; 2016c.

Achaemenids.<sup>24</sup> This is exemplified by the episodes recorded in the western literary sources narrating the last resistance of Bessus, satrap of Bactriana, and that of the Sogdian leader Spitamenes against Alexander:<sup>25</sup> as Spitamenes betrayed Bessus, eventually he was likewise betrayed by his former allies, the kindred Chorasmians and Dahae.<sup>26</sup> After their deception, the Chorasmians sent a delegation to submit to Alexander when he was in Sogdiana. At the head of the delegation was a Chorasmian king, Pharasmanes, mentioned for the first and only time by western sources.<sup>27</sup> Pharasmanes invited Alexander to campaign in the north against its closest enemies but the Macedon was not interested and set off for India. So the Greeks never reached Chorasmia which, for them already a geographical indefinite land, was since then left outside the ancient western historiography (along with the Aral), all the more because neither the Seleucid power afterwards (and Hellenism) apparently collided directly with the polity.<sup>28</sup>

This Eastern Iranian country thus avoided a direct contact with the Hellenistic civilization and continued to develop its own culture at a fair distance from Asiatic Hellenism. Nevertheless, as we shall see, eventually Chorasmia gradually partook of the vast Eastern-Hellenistic milieu developed in Asia. This is the historical context that makes of Chorasmia a remarkable country in order to study the interactions between different cultures, and the consequent elaboration and assimilation of artistic, religious and social elements through culture contact.

The early periods of the Chorasmian history are still in need of further investigation and it is certain that archaeology has still much to say concerning the history of this part of Asia. For the 1st millennium BC, the site of Akchakhan-kala and the striking archaeological evidence it has yielded in recent years will be discussed in this contribution in order to cast a new light on the "Oxus connection" between the central (both geographically and historically) Bactriana and the marginal (geographically but not historically for what it is today becoming apparent) Ancient Chorasmia. The connection between Chorasmia and the regions at its south was clearly not exclusive, but it is here assumed it certainly was a favoured one that much contributed to the cultural enrichment of the polity through time. In particular, since the 2nd century AD (inevitability through Sogdiana and Bactriana) Chorasmia reached and established

24 At present, there is no evidence to sustain the idea of a complete emancipation of the Chorasmian territory from Persian control before the end of the Achaemenids.

25 On Spitamenes and Bessus, see Briant 1984; 1996, 768-770.

26 Minardi 2015a, 37-47 with literature.

27 Arr. IV. 15. 4 (*basileus*), also recorded by Curtius (VIII. 1. 8) as Phrataphernes (*qui Chorasmis praerat*).

28 At present, a direct intervention of the Seleucids in Chorasmia has to be excluded.

relations with northern India under the Kushans, which developed beyond the existence of their empire up to Late Antiquity.<sup>29</sup>

The archaeological evidence considered in the following discussion includes material published in recent years in several easily accessible articles by the members of the KAE, including the writer of this contribution. In order to avoid repetitions, I will not reiterate a full description of the archaeological evidence from Akchakhan-kala and other Chorasmian sites but only the information necessary for the logical development of the argument of this paper.

## 2 The Arts of Ancient Chorasmia. Achaemenid Legacy, Central Asia and Hellenism: the Case of Akchakhan-kala

### 2.1 *The Royal Seat of Akchakhan-kala*

Akchakhan-kala was a Chorasmian dynastic, ceremonial and probably administrative seat of a lineage of regional lords of Zoroastrian faith.<sup>30</sup> Founded at the end of the 3rd/early 2nd century BC on the right bank of the Oxus, on the dry Akcha-Darya, and deserted already in the early 2nd century AD<sup>31</sup>, it has become in recent years a fundamental source of first hand data on the history of Ancient Chorasmia, on its religious and social structures and on its arts, thanks to the archaeological work of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE).<sup>32</sup> A series of radiocarbon dates show that the beginning of the site's main stage (Stage 3) falls into the period between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD.<sup>33</sup>

Akchakhan-kala is an approximately 40-hectare fortified site encircled by two walls, the rectangular Upper and Lower enclosures. Within the former, accessible through monumental gates opening in its south and east sides,<sup>34</sup> there are three discrete areas of monumental architecture: the Ceremonial Complex (Area 10), the Central Monument (Area 07) and an additional fortified area, the South-West Enclosure, which saw a post-abandonment reoccupation

29 According to Rapin (1996) commerce between Bactriana and India started in the 1st century BC. On Chorasmia and India, see Minardi 2013; Minardi forthcoming 2018b.

30 Betts *et alii* 2009; 2015; 2016b; Minardi & Khozhaniyazov 2015; Minardi 2016b; Minardi forthcoming 2018b.

31 Betts *et alii* 2009; 2015; 2016b; Minardi forthcoming 2018b.

32 The Karakalpak-Australian Expedition is led by Alison Betts (Sydney) and Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov (Nukus).

33 Betts *et alii* 2009; 2016b. Akchakhan-kala Stage 3 corresponds with the beginning of the Chorasmian Antique 3 period (Minardi 2015a, 103).

34 On the fortification system of Akchakhan-kala, see Helms *et alii* 2001; 2002; Betts *et alii* 2009.



(Area 11). The remnant areas of the *gorodishche* (ancient fortified centre) are probably largely empty, although yet unexplored and still covered by sand dunes.

During Stage 3, the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala was an architectonic ensemble dominated by a main parallelogram-shaped edifice, the Central Building, and by other accessory structures adjacent to its perimeter. A particularly dense group of constructions is located on its western side (fig. 3, “western area”) where portions of halls with columns were discovered. The Central Building is characterized by a military-like appearance for the presence of round towers on its corners and along its external walls.<sup>35</sup> The main monumental access to the complex is through a gate open on its southern side,<sup>36</sup> whilst others are located on the western and eastern flanks.<sup>37</sup> A narrow corridor surrounds the whole building. The edifice, at present, has been excavated by the КАЕ for less than 30% of its total surface.<sup>38</sup> The unearthed parts of the interior revealed a large columned hall (the “main hypostyle hall”) opened on its north side onto a courtyard<sup>39</sup> and a space defined by the presence of a fire altar, the *sancta sanctorum* of the complex, in which very likely the regnal fire of the Akchakhan-kala king was lit (*infra*). Recently a new anaxial passage which connects the south gate and the main columned hall has been identified (fig. 3).

The second most investigated area of Akchakhan-kala is Area 07, the Central Monument,<sup>40</sup> thus called because of the structure rising at the centre of the Upper Enclosure of the site. The Central Monument, built in Stage 3, is a mud brick substructured terrace accessible by a massive ramp on its south side (fig. 4) with, on the side opposite the north side, below the terrace, other

35 The Central Building had embrasures open in its southern and northern walls in Stage 2 which were obliterated by additional structures (reinforcement of walls and towers) in Stage 3.

36 The gate is preceded by two small (c. 6 × 8 m), albeit tall (not less than 5 m), rectangular structures symmetrically placed in front of each other. Both structures have only one inner chamber opened on the side toward the passage that goes to the south gate of the Central Building. The western structure, fully excavated by the author of this paper in 2010, revealed a badly preserved hearth located at the centre of its western wall, with, at its side, an upside-down khoum found filled with layers of ash. A platform of mud bricks constituted a sort of threshold in front of the hearth inside the perimeter of the chamber.

37 The “east gate” and its flanking towers, as shown in fig. 3, were identified from a surface clearance of terrain but not fully excavated. This is also the case of the interior passage north of the south gate. The access and inner circulation of the Ceremonial Complex is discussed *infra*.

38 C. 530 sq. m on a total of c. 1856 sq. m within its walls.

39 Minardi *et alii* 2017.

40 Minardi & Khozhaniyazov 2015; Minardi 2016b.

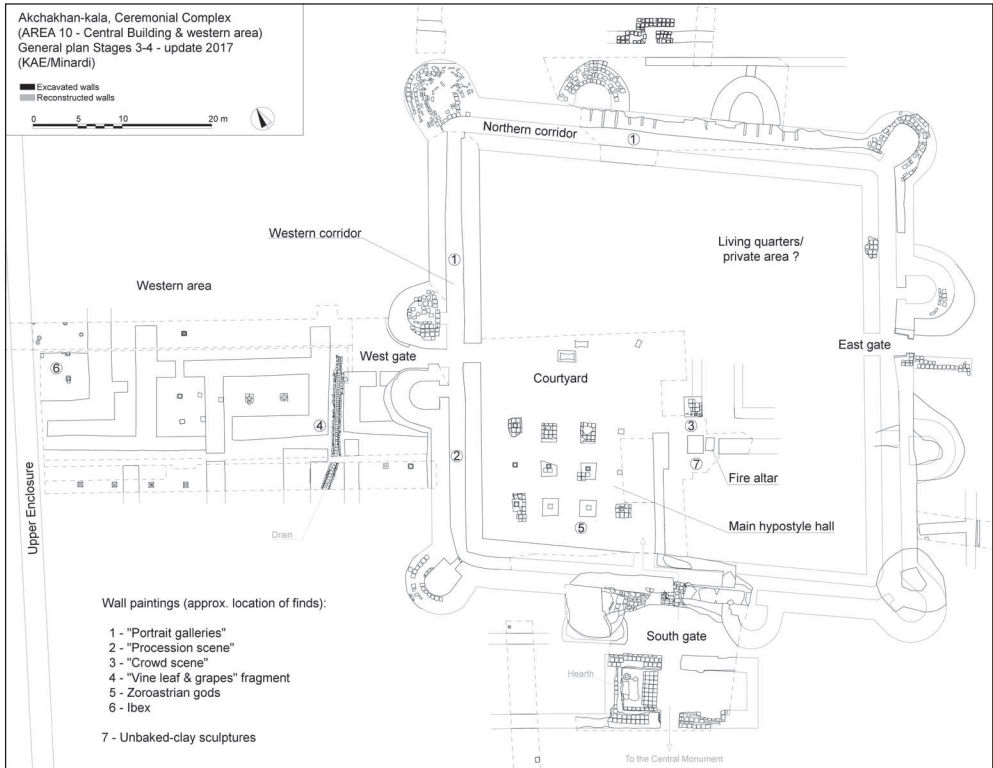


FIGURE 3 Plan of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala (Area 10 - update 2017).

accessory spaces, including a small assembly hall (fig. 4, "room with steps") of a type unique in Central Asia.<sup>41</sup> The Central Monument was as an integral part of the architectonic programme required by the ruling class of Akchakhan-kala developed for ceremonial practices and propaganda purposes.<sup>42</sup> This particular Chorasmian building has its roots in the architectural solution first experimented in the polity at Kyuzeli-g'yr in the 6th century BC, reflecting concepts related to kingship and ritual praxis likely inherited from the Achaemenid world.<sup>43</sup>

41 Discussed and illustrated in Minardi & Khozhaniyazov 2015.

42 For further details, see Minardi 2016b; for some further considerations on the society of Ancient Chorasmia, Minardi 2016c.

43 For further details, see Minardi & Khozhaniyazov 2015; Minardi 2016b. The altars with steps of the first Chorasmian *gorodishche* Kyuzeli-g'yr were raised in front of the palace courtyards which were furnished with seats and almost certainly used for assemblies to assist to rituals involving the use of fire (Vishnevskaya & Rapoport 1997). The form of Zoroastrianism (including the sacred concept of kingship) attested in Chorasmia is very

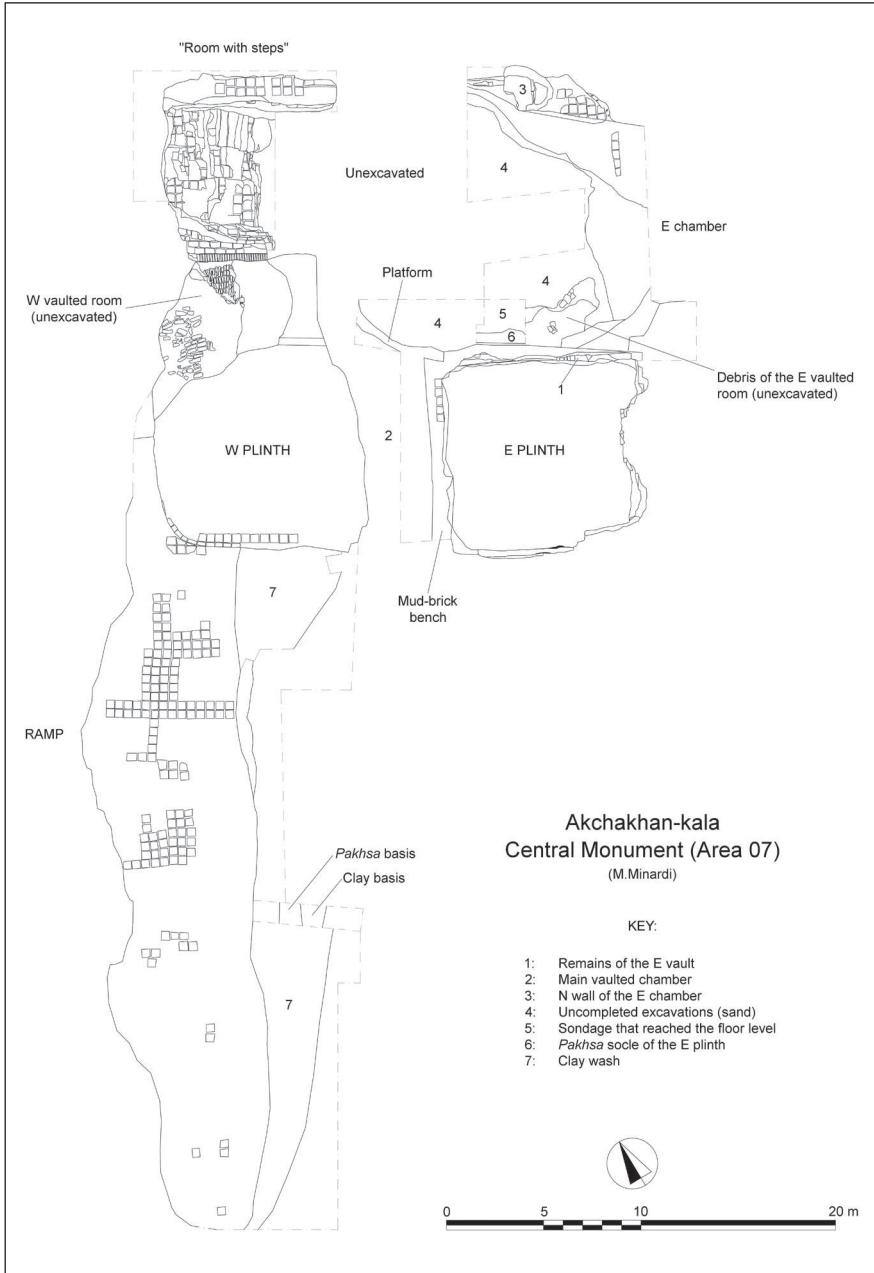


FIGURE 4 Plan of the Central Monument of Akchakhan-kala (Area 07).

In this context the whole site of Akchakhan-kala assumes a main ceremonial aspect. It might be inferred that the regnal fire of the king preserved in the altar area in the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex (fig. 3, “fire altar”) was carried outside the complex with a procession when necessary.<sup>44</sup> This may have followed a path passing through the main hypostyle hall (in front of a colossal depiction of Zoroastrian gods – *infra*), exiting this space and accessing first the courtyard, then the southern section of the western corridor (with a procession scene of men and horses painted on its eastern face), thereafter entering the southern corridor and from there going toward the Central Monument across the south gate. The light of the fire in the narrow and dark corridors of the complex would have cast a strong light on the rich decoration of these spaces. The south gate was also more directly accessible from the end wall of the hypostyle hall, which could have been an everyday passage to enter and exit the complex on this side.

In Stage 3, the spaces of the Ceremonial Complex were extensively decorated. Wall paintings (fig. 3, nos. 1-6) have been found in the perimetral corridor of the Central Building (the “portrait gallery” with framed busts in the northern corridor and northern section of the western corridor, and the “procession scene” of animals and men in the southern portion of the western corridor),<sup>45</sup> in the main hypostyle hall (the three colossal Zoroastrian deities and other fragments),<sup>46</sup> in the altar area (the “crowd scene”),<sup>47</sup> and in some rooms of the western area (e.g. the red ibex).<sup>48</sup> The altar area was additionally decorated with unbaked clay modelled sculptures (henceforth clay sculptures).<sup>49</sup> A local kind of gypsum plaster (*alabaster*) was used to make “stucco” decorations (fig. 5), which were, at least in the case of the main hypostyle hall, also covered with gold leaf (fig. 6).<sup>50</sup> A noticeable quantity of bronze nails of various sizes found during the excavations of the main hypostyle hall may indicate that this plaster decoration was likely profuse. The finds of small fragments of bronze *laminae*, on the other hand, shows certainly that wooden furniture

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likely the one systemised by the Zoroastrian priests under the royal patronage of the Achaemenids and spread “all over the Zoroastrian parts of the empire” (De Jong 2008).

44 On the interpretation of this altar as the regnal fire of the king of Akchakhan-kala, see Minardi 2016b, 136 with notes and references; Minardi forthcoming 2018b.

45 Kidd *et alii* 2008; Yagodin *et alii* 2009; Kidd 2012; Kidd in this volume.

46 Betts *et alii* 2015; 2016b; Kidd *et alii* 2008.

47 Kidd *et alii* 2008, 84, figs. 10 and 11 (tracing of the full fragment and picture of a detail); Kidd 2011, 244, fig. 3 (tracing).

48 Minardi *et alii* forthcoming 2018.

49 Minardi 2016a – further discussed *infra*.

50 Fragment illustrated in: Kidd & Betts 2010, 674, fig. 16; gilding on stucco is attested at Ai Khanoum (Bernard 1969, 344; Francfort 1984, 109).



FIGURE 5 Fragments of gypsum plaster from the main columned hall of the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala.

supplied the spaces of the Central Building, together with braziers which left reddened shadows on the clay floors of the building. The only piece of furniture found almost in situ, broken and charred, is one of the ivory props of the fire altar of the complex.<sup>51</sup> Considering the fact that the Ceremonial Complex was abandoned and deliberately despoiled in the 2nd century AD, most likely to mine its materials to furnish the new royal centre of Toprak-kala (*infra*), these decorative elements are just a vestige of the richly decorative apparatus once contained in the construction.

The southern wall of the main hypostyle hall of the Central Buildings was decorated with wall paintings depicting at least three anthropomorphic figures of colossal dimensions recognized as Zoroastrian deities, found in fragments during the excavation and at present under restoration. These three figures, notwithstanding some different individualizing characteristics, share a common Achaemenid-inspired iconography which has been already recently

51 Described and illustrated in: Kidd 2011, 249-254; Minardi 2015a, 107 and 109; 194, fig. 27; Betts *et alii* 2016b.

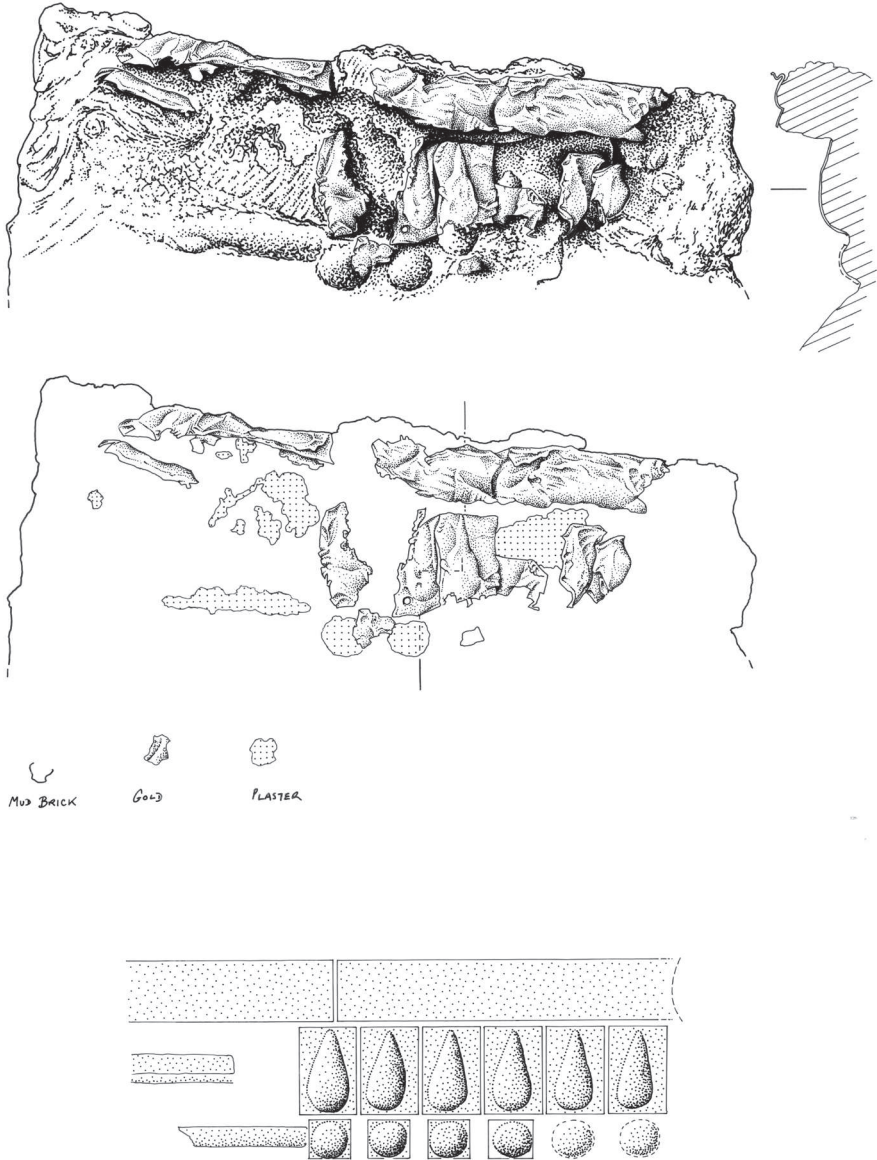


FIGURE 6 Fragment of a gilded gypsum plaster cornice from the main columned hall of the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex of Ackahakhan-kala, measuring c. 8.1 × 2.3 cm (after Kidd & Betts 2010, fig. 16).

discussed in two articles authored by the members and collaborators of the KAE.<sup>52</sup>

For present purposes, it is important to remark that, thanks to this discovery, it is now impossible to hesitate in considering the ceremonial and religious Zoroastrian quality of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala and, more generally, of the whole site.<sup>53</sup> The three so-far identified deities, who are at least 6 metres tall, each have different attributes and are differentiated by minute details painted on their costumes and features (fig. 7).

The first deity discovered has been identified with the Avestan god Sraosha (Middle Persian Srōsh – fig. 7, left). The god's garment has a central band decorated with a series of frames in which are represented therianthropic opposing figures (cocks with human heads and arms) holding in their hands the *barsom* and wearing on their mouths the *padām*. They symbolize Zoroastrian priests (henceforth “bird-priests”).<sup>54</sup> The god wears a *corona muralis* of western origin – here already subject to an Asiatic reinterpretation – with high towers characterized by the presence of pointed embrasures, dentils and probably topped with horned battlements.<sup>55</sup> The god also wears a torque decorated with complex drawings of boats and representing the crossing of waters – and perhaps, more specifically, showing the navigation necessary to reach the *dakhma* of Chil'p'yk.<sup>56</sup> Srōsh also has an *akinakes* strapped to his

52 For a detailed description, see Betts *et alii* 2015; 2016b.

53 Minardi & Khozhaniyazov 2015; Minardi 2016b. On the archaeological evidence related to Zoroastrianism in Chorasmia, see also Minardi & Amirov 2017.

54 “*Le chant du coq, héraut de l'aurore, annonce au monde la fin de la malfaisance des puissances pernicieuses, et met un terme aux terreurs nocturnes des hommes. Le passage le plus étendu de l'Avesta qui soit consacré à l'oiseau Parôdarsh, enseigne comment [awaken by Srōsh] au troisième tiers de la nuit il appelle les mazdéens pieux à la prière et au travail et il les exhorte à ne pas céder au démon de l'indolence paresseuse et du sommeil lascif, mais à se lever pour offrir le sacrifice matinal au Feu domestique*” (Cumont 1942).

55 Minardi in Betts *et alii* 2016b; additional cfs.: Chorasmian architectonic ossuary likely representing a *dakhma* (Rapoport 1971, 59, fig. 14; discussed in Minardi & Amirov 2017 – without lid probably once with battlements); depiction of a Central Asian temple incised on a gold plaque held at the Miho Museum and likely (Francfort 2012, 123, fig. 16) from Mir Zakah, a hoard connected with the Oxus; depiction of a temple on a Kushan fabric (Marshak & Grenet 2006). In Chorasmia several other architectonic ossuaries are known (e.g. Rapoport 1971, 63, fig. 20), some of them tower-like. They might be related to Srōsh's mural crown (cf. Kujruk-tobe wooden panel with goddess wearing a crown with battlements and holding a likewise shaped ossuary – Grenet 2016, 211).

56 The boats are manned by two persons, and a third individual, where it is possible to distinguish his traces, is squatting on the boat at its centre. This character might be the depiction of the soul of the dead transported toward the *dakhma*, very likely – in the historical context of Chorasmia and Akchakhan-kala – of Chil'p'yk (a “tower of silence” built probably in the 1st century AD – on this monument, Minardi & Amirov 2017). On

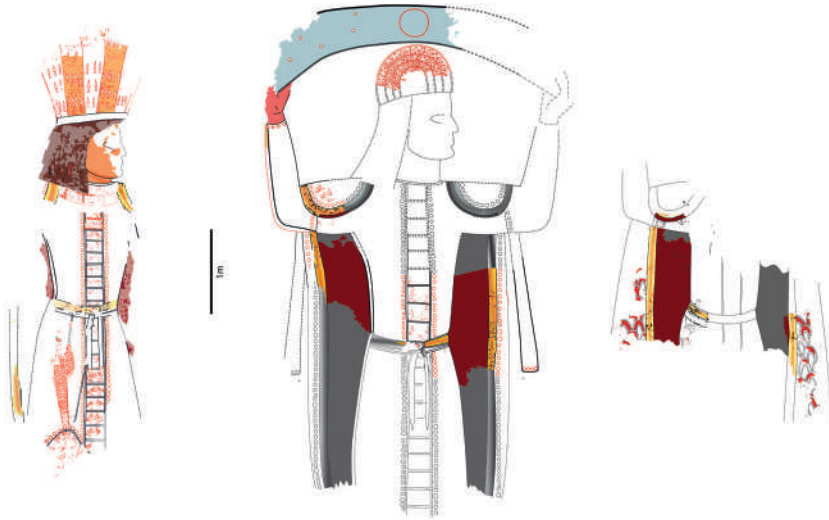


FIGURE 7 Interim reconstruction of the three colossal Chorasmanian Avestan gods.

leg and his trousers are decorated with long-legged birds (as in a votive gold plaque from the Oxus Treasure). His sword is ornamented with a floral motif pattern of Near-Eastern origin and its shape perfectly fits with those specimens represented in Achaemenid bas-reliefs.

The second god painted immediately at his right side (fig. 7, centre) differs, although his representation follows the same compositional scheme of Srōsh: a body seen frontally with head in profile. He sustains a canopy of sky derived from the Greek and Roman motif of the *velificatio* with circles representing heavenly bodies, and he wears a tiara decorated with the same floral motif that adorns Srōsh's *akinakes*. His dress, covered by a *kandys* thrown round his shoulders, has at its centre, and similar to the first god, a band of framed panels with at their interiors more complex scenes than the motif of the two opposing "bird-priests". Always moving to the right, looking south (fig. 7, right), we have a third colossal anthropomorphic image. Although at present this specimen is the most lacunose of the group, it illustrates important details such as

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this regard it is noteworthy to remark that among the Khorezm Uzbeks, "boatmen" were considered among the lower and most dishonourable professions associated with pollution (Snezarev 2003, 127-139, in particular on the "boatmen", 128). Chil'p'yk rises at c. 500 m to the north of the Amu-Darya. In antiquity the *dakhma*, bounded to the north and north-west by the Kyzyl-kum and to the east by the Sultan-uiz-dag range, was easily accessible only from the river. Srōsh is the deity mentioned in the Avesta in connection with prayers for safe crossing of waters. He is also the guardian of the soul during the three days after death, the psychopomp par excellence (Grenet 1986, 106).



the recurrence of the stripe of leopard fur trim of the gods' *kandys*<sup>57</sup> and belts, and a characteristic miniature drawing of a (male) gazelle that decorates what seems to be his sword. Another clear attribute of the third god is the mountain motif embroidering the lining of his *kandys* (while the other two are of a plain purple colour).<sup>58</sup> According to F. Grenet, the god might be a goddess, Spenta Ārmaiti.<sup>59</sup>

By its very nature, the mural art of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala was certainly made in loco and is by definition Chorasmian. However, as I have already discussed elsewhere, the fragments of a modelled *ketos* found in the altar area serve as clear evidence of the presence of non-Chorasmian artists working at the site. These artists were using a precise artistic form by virtue of the models they knew and their workshop expertise. The *ketos*, very likely part of a larger composition, is in fact a plastered and painted modelled clay high-relief with stylistic and iconographic elements which are plainly Greek.<sup>60</sup> The existence of travelling artisans and artists (thence of models and their transmission) is a generally well known instance for Central Asia and this is confirmed in Chorasmia by the Akchakhan-kala's *ketos*.<sup>61</sup> Even for some remains of wall paintings from Old Nisa, Antonio Invernizzi has recently pondered the possibility that a painter from the "Central Asian Greekdom" worked at the Tower Building of the site.<sup>62</sup>

What I am arguing here is that not only the *ketos* but also the wall paintings of Akchakhan-kala are in part very likely the work of non-Chorasmian artisans or that non-Chorasmian skilled craftsmen instructed the local artificers. The fact that foreign craftsmen worked in Chorasmia, or that new techniques were introduced in the polity from abroad (this seems to be the case – *infra*), does not undermine the idea that this art is genuinely Chorasmian, as for instance Persian is the art of Persepolis where Greek artisans also worked, and the art of Italy at the end of the Republican period and the first two centuries of the

57 In addition to the comparison of this fur trimming with two gold Zoroastrian statuettes from the Oxus Treasure (British Museum no. 123903 – Betts *et alii* 2015, 1387-1391, with fig. 14), a close comparison can be seen in the depiction of a seated man in the procession scene of the Karaburun tomb II (North Lycia) having a leopard-fur trimmed *kandys* (Summerer 2010, 183, fig. 41).

58 Cf. fragment of Elamite wall painting with a very similar mountain motif (Alvarez-Mon 2005, fig. 7 a-c).

59 Grenet in Betts *et alii* 2015, 1395.

60 Minardi 2016a.

61 Minardi 2015b with references.

62 Invernizzi 2011a, 200-201, fig. 14 (relative to a wall painting depicting a man in a three-quarter view with remains of a Greek epigraph, from the Tower Building).

imperial age – where artists from Alexandria, Athens and Syria very likely operated – is Roman. Art is not ethnic.

As I will try to argue, the example of Akchakhan-kala is helping to fill a gap in our knowledge regarding the artistic *koiné* of Central Asia and Northwest India around the 1st century BC/1st century AD, particularly concerning its largely lost painted production. Notwithstanding the relative distance from the Hellenistic culture that Ancient Chorasmia preserved up to the 2nd century AD, at Akchakhan-kala an important Chorasmian customer with an abundance of means, no less than a king, wanted to decorate his seat by consciously partaking of the cultural milieu of his times with all the symbols of prestige – including art – and related elitist ideology (a case not dissimilar to the citadel of the Arsacid kings at Nisa although in a different context). Therefore, he hired the best artisans available including foreigners who, inevitably at that time, had an Eastern-Hellenistic background or were at least knowledgeable of its techniques and iconographies.

The resolve of the Chorasmian elite to partake of the prestige devices used by its external peers is clear, for instance, observing the prestige columned spaces of the Chorasmian main and lesser centres. In the polity, columned halls developed only since the Antique 1 period.<sup>63</sup> This happened in the path of a tradition that may be connected with early examples of columned halls of northwestern Iran where, it is assumed that, regarding Achaemenid architecture, this type of hall with official purposes had its origins. Since their first use in Chorasmia columns, even simple poles or poles set on a stone base, marked elite spaces also of the lesser aristocracy. It is only in the 3rd century BC that a more complex shape of stone column base was developed in the polity, composed of a three-stepped plinth surmounted by a bell-shaped torus. This phenomenon is likely due to a local adaptation or interpretation of the Central Asian column bases with stepped plinths and rounded tori of the early Eastern Hellenistic period which had Near-Eastern archetypes and were also sporadically employed in Achaemenid Persia.<sup>64</sup> Such column bases were recorded at Ai Khanoum, Takht-i Sangin, Old Nisa and Khalchayan, to cite the best-known examples.<sup>65</sup>

The fragment of an ivory rhyton found during the excavations of Area 10 illustrates another case of a use of a prestige feature belonging to an Eastern Hellenistic milieu (which corresponded to the rest of Central Asia and Iran

63 As in Kyuzeli-g'yr and Dingil'dzhe. For further details, see Minardi *et alii* 2017.

64 Minardi *et alii* 2017.

65 Minardi *et alii* 2017.

at that time).<sup>66</sup> The imported rhyton, likewise the charred prop of the fire altar, was made of ivory and decorated with acanthus leaves which leaves no doubt to its origin.<sup>67</sup> This is the first luxury rhyton discovered in Chorasmia, a typology known in its less precious ceramic version since the Antique 2 period.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps in Chorasmia Achaemenid-style rhyta were previously used, but there is no evidence in this regard. Achaemenid luxury vessels, however – as shown by the finding of a silver phiale which was manufactured in some centre of the Achaemenid empire in the 4th century BC – were used in Chorasmia by its elite,<sup>69</sup> and likewise later toreutics of Hellenistic taste.<sup>70</sup>

## 2.2 *The Relevance of Chorasmian Art*

Notwithstanding the almost certain presence of foreigners involved in the decoration of the Akchakhan-kala's Ceremonial Complex, the parallel presence of local artisans, besides being logical and for reasons related to style, seems to be confirmed by the painted epigraphs which accompany the "portrait" gallery. These inscriptions are written with black ink in the Chorasmian language and Aramaic script with a "rather elaborate, perhaps ornate" calligraphic style.<sup>71</sup>

The artistic creation represented by the Akchakhan-kala's Zoroastrian gods might also be considered as the result of a local and original elaboration of ancient stimuli (elements of an Achaemenid legacy?) with the contribution of new artistic inputs. In consequence, we might consider that some indigenous – yet unknown – models and/or some source of local tradition was at the basis of their visual conception and representation: these gods are not only the expression of a Chorasmian art but they probably are a Chorasmian creation (see Grenet in this volume). The artisans at work on these sacred – not cultic – images followed precise instructions and the involvement of natives is certain. A similar occurrence of different "hands" working in Chorasmia is discernible in observing the subsequent (since the 2nd century AD)

66 On the adoption of Hellenistic forms in Asia and their meaning, see Filigenzi 2012.

67 An Eastern-Hellenistic environment. For further details, see Minardi 2016c.

68 Minardi 2015a, 90-91.

69 Livshits 2003; Minardi 2016c, 282-283.

70 Livshits 2004; Minardi 2015a, 108; on this bowl with ducks and dolphins, see also Treister 2012, 89-90.

71 Betts – Lurje pers. com. Although a *scriba* is not forcibly a painter, the monumentality of these epigraphs points toward the idea that they were executed by artisans perhaps under supervision. The origin of the Chorasmian Aramaic script (deriving from the "Imperial Aramaic") is still unclear for lack of data. The most ancient Chorasmian epigraph of this language discovered dates according to Livshits in the 3rd/2nd century BC (Livshits 2003, 169; Livshits in Vainberg 2004, 188).

unbaked clay and painted production of the “High Palace” of Toprak-kala. Here, in a similar context, i.e., a royal seat, some features of the art expressed have substantial and evident Gandhāran art influences,<sup>72</sup> in contrast with other components that are easily discernible as local (*infra*).

The evidence from Akchakhan-kala and Toprak-kala is undoubtedly very important considering the repercussions on the broader context of the history of art of Asia: it records, for the period comprising the 1st century BC through the 2nd century AD, abundant documentation on the production of wall paintings and clay sculptures contrary to contemporary contexts of Central Asia and Northwest India where evidence of this kind is scant. The corpus of wall paintings of Akchakhan-kala is the larger for its epoch in Asia. This production is Chorasmian but, at the same time, it witnesses a broader tradition which was partially shared and that was already established within an Eastern Hellenistic milieu to which Chorasmia participated at different levels in different periods.

In those Asiatic regions where the Hellenistic form was adopted (to simplify, Central Asia under the Graeco-Bactrians and the Kushans; Seleucid and Parthian Iran), the remains of wall paintings and clay sculptures before and during the period contemporary with the Chorasmian evidence discussed is in fact not copious. However, the evidence from Ai Khanoum, Old Nisa, Takht-i Sangin, and also Khalchayan (while Dil’berdzhin seems late) is eloquent in this regard.<sup>73</sup> Surkh Kotal also gave few fragments of “stucco” sculptures.<sup>74</sup>

The modelled *ketos* unearthed at Akchakhan-kala is “more Greek” than the almost contemporary clay sculptures of Khalchayan, a fact that points toward a pre-Kushan Bactrian tradition. Later – during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD –

72 As first noted by Tolstov (1964) and further discussed in Minardi forthcoming 2018b.

73 On the mural art of Central Asia and India with their relative problems, conveniently see Filigenzi 2006b; Lo Muzio 1999; 2008; 2014; Francfort 2014 with references. At present, the evidence on the mural art of Central Asia and Northwest India in antiquity is very scant. For Gandhāra, according to Taddei (1994), this is due to preservation issues related to the tempera technique adopted for these works; a different point of view is expressed by Lo Muzio who suggests that “we have reasons enough to give up regretting the loss of Gandhāran murals dating to the first centuries of the current era, i.e. the period of the flourishing of stone sculpture in the area. It is perhaps time to take into serious consideration that there is no archaeological ground for assuming that the thriving production of Buddhist stone reliefs was paralleled by a not-less rich tradition of mural painting, now completely lost” (Lo Muzio 2012, 319; see also 2014, 132). The same could have been said for Central Asia (sites such as Ai Khanoum gave very limited evidence, see Bernard *et alii* 1980; and Khalchayan, for which only a few fragments are illustrated in Pugachenkova 1971, figs. 5-8) without the discovery of the extraordinary corpus of Akchakhan-kala.

74 Le Berre & Fussman 1983, pl. 70.

when coroplasters with an expertise very close to that apparently developed not much earlier in Gandhāra were active at Toprak-kala, the evidence relative to coroplastics in Gandhāra is meagre, and the highest peak of the stucco and clay production of these areas is, to date, later than stone carving.<sup>75</sup> If in Toprak-kala, as I believe, a strong Gandhāran influence (or just “Bactrian” in Kushan time?) is clear in the 2nd century AD, the knowledge regarding modelling clay in such style and technique would necessarily have existed (and been transmitted) where these certainly un-Chorasmian artistic forms originated, thus confirming that in Central Asia the tradition has never ceased to exist.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, the wall paintings and clay sculptures of “remote” Chorasmia can help in the reconstruction of the history of the arts of Central Asia where, probably accidentally, we have large lacunae which archaeology has still the potential to fill.<sup>77</sup>

### 2.3 *Style and Iconography of the Chorasmian Paintings*

The “portraits” of Akchakhan-kala recovered in the northern corridor and in the northern section of the western corridor of the Central Building (fig. 3, no. 1) are slightly less than life-size busts viewed frontally but with faces in full profile (fig. 8). They certainly had a symbolic value within the context of the Ceremonial Complex. Their decorative purpose, on the other hand, is indicated by their configuration within adjoining frames distributed in multiple registers adapted to the spaces in which they were set (fig. 8)<sup>78</sup> and by their being stereotyped drawings differentiated only by some alteration of their attributes, such as the stripes of their caftans (of different styles and colours), the headgear/diadems (if any), the presence or absence of earrings, the zoomorphic terminal of the torques (many *ketos*-shaped) and the number of spirals of the latter.

The busts were seemingly all sketched before painting, as indicated by the presence of reddish-brown underdrawings visible beneath the thick black contour lines<sup>79</sup> which, in association with a flat rendering of the white faces given by the unpainted gypsum background, characterize their painting style. This

75 On this, see Taddei 1993; 1999.

76 As inferred already by Rowland in 1971/72; as more recently noted by Bollati (2005) considering the Hellenistic clay sculpture of Old Nisa (on this, see also Bollati 2008); *infra* on the stylistic affinities between some clay modelled specimens of Toprak-kala and Khalchayan.

77 Something similar – to consider the wider context of this clay artistic production – was suggested by Taddei already in 1980 (Taddei 1980, 148).

78 Yagodin *et alii* 2009.

79 Yagodin *et alii* 2009, 10.



FIGURE 8 Examples of “portraits” from the western corridor of the Central Building, south cluster near the west gate, detail (after Yagodin *et alii* 2009, fig. 6).

“sinopia”,<sup>80</sup> painted once the gypsum had already dried, is also clearly visible in the wall painting fragment with the human figure viewed in a three-quarter position with a vine leaf, tendrils and grapes in the background. By contrast, a different technique is used to paint the ibex discovered in the western area

80 Term to be used with due caution, see Allag & Barbet 1972. This is an ancient technique: a similar underdrawing has been noted on the surviving wall paintings from Til Barsip (Parrot 1961).

of the Ceremonial Complex: for the depiction of this animal, a preparatory outline was incised into the plaster with a pointed tool and then paint was applied with a brush following the incisions.<sup>81</sup> It might be possible to see in these the guidelines used by the painter to transfer a model from a cartoon onto the wall, a hypothesis which would contribute to explaining the Achaemenid-inspired iconography of the painting.

To complete the decoration of the Ceremonial Complex, another painting method, freehand, seems to have been used to draw the minor ornamental elements. Thereby the “portraits”, as well as the whole visual programme painted on the walls of Akchakhan-kala, followed a two-step process: the sketching and delimitation of the decorative programme with a definition of its main spaces, followed by a refinement and execution of the minor ornamentations.

If not for the discovery of other fragments of wall painting in which a different artistic approach and concept is evident, we would have said that the Akchakhan-kala “portraits” were the expression of a Chorasmian style far from the Asiatic Hellenistic milieu already existent (and formed) in the contemporary neighbouring areas south of Chorasmia. This different artistic approach is shown by some fully painted fragments – such as the men of the “crowd scene” (fig. 9),<sup>82</sup> the details of the neck and the eye of the god Srōsh (the head is very fragmentary – fig. 10 A),<sup>83</sup> the hands of the second god (fig. 10 C) and another fragment showing a hand grasping an object (fig. 10 B)<sup>84</sup> – that show the use of colour tones to render volume and skin surfaces, making evident that the flat uncoloured rendering of the “portraits” (similar to that of the bodies of the Zoroastrian deities) was the fruit of a deliberate choice.

Thus, at least in its craftsmanship, the Chorasmian art of Akchakhan-kala appears already mature and not as an *ex nihilo* creation conceived by the artisans and artists working at the site. This is indicated by the presence of different painting styles deliberately selected for different parts of a single composition or by the different painting styles chosen for different elements belonging to the general decoration of the Ceremonial Complex as a whole. And it is also indicated by the other various decorative features of the complex which are manufactured with the employment of an array of different techniques, implying a vast knowledge and skills (e.g. “stucco”, gilding and modelled clay).

81 Minardi *et alii* forthcoming 2018, 308.

82 As already noted in Kidd 2011.

83 I would like to thank Mélodie Bonnat for having shared these details with me.

84 Kidd 2011, 258, fig. 14.



FIGURE 9 Wall painting fragment with “crowd scene” from the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala.

The three main “drafting” methods (“sinopia”, incision and freehand) used by the artisans and the artists involved in the decorative effort at the Ceremonial Complex confirm this assumption, as well as the different types of iconographic schemes employed at Akchakhan-kala as exemplified by human figures on a three-quarter, profile and/or overlapped view. Apparently the only kind of representation of human visages that is completely absent at Akchakhan-kala is the frontal one. Moreover, the use of colour tones to indicate volume in painting clearly is not a technique native to Chorasmia and the wall painting technique itself seems to arrive in Chorasmia not before the Antique 2 period – thus not before the late 3rd/2nd century BC.<sup>85</sup>

It has also been noted that to implement the tonal shading in the face of Srōsh the artificers used a different kind of procedure – different from the dry technique used for his body and those of the other deities, the “portraits”

85 Minardi 2015a, 104-105; 111-113. Considering the available archaeological data, hence the chronology of the surviving fragments of wall painting from Ancient Chorasmia, the technique can hardly be considered as originating in the country before this *terminus*. Evidence from Achaemenid Persia is limited to few fragments excavated at Susa (Boucharlat 2010). On the pre-Achaemenid wall painting tradition, see Ebeling 1971; Nunn 1988; Tomabechi 1983a; 1983b; 1986; Moorey 1994, 35-36, 324-325; Albenda 2005.



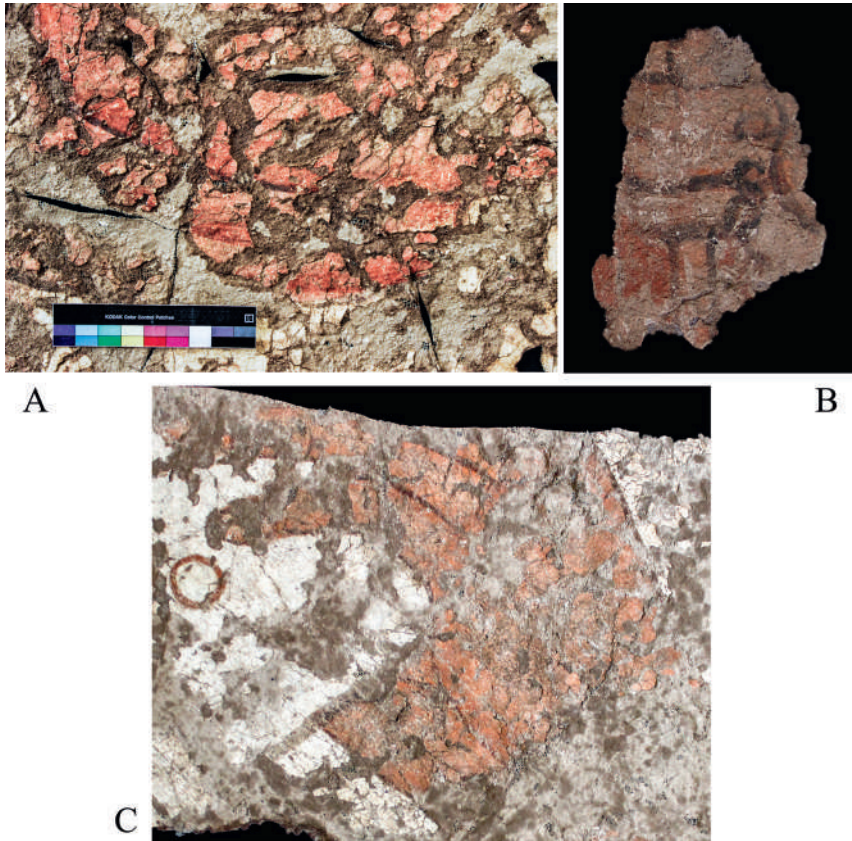


FIGURE 10 Examples of shading in the wall paintings of Akchakhan-kala (fragments under restoration). A: detail of Srōsh's neck (colours are saturated for readability); C: right hand possibly of the second colossal god; B: hand holding an object.

and the ibex<sup>86</sup> – that exploits a still humid lime plaster base (or diluted plaster mixed with the pigment before its application).<sup>87</sup> Hence two techniques

86 At Akchakhan-kala the wall paintings are worked on a thin gypsum preparation (Kidd *et alii* 2008, 83-86). The mineral pigments are generally mixed with a vegetable binder (*ibidem*; Betts *et alii* 2016b, 125) as in tempera. A black contour line was added after the painting of the images (as already noted in Kidd *et alii* 2008, 83) except, obviously, for the uncoloured the “portraits”.

87 Betts *et alii* 2016b, 125. Analyses on the pigments of the “crowd scene” fragment should be done in order to establish whether the same “wet” technique occurs in this fragment. Cf. Kuh-i Khwaja, where “colours in tempera were applied while the plaster was still fresh so that they were absorbed by it” (Faccenna 1981, note 3). The iconographic similarities between the fragment of Kuh-i Khwaja and the Chorasmian “crowd scene” have been already discussed in Kidd 2011, 245-245 (with conclusions different from those advanced

related to two different styles were used in the same paintings (head/face and body). This datum again underlines the fact that the artisans working at Akchakhan-kala had a complex technical background and that their work was not the fruit of an extemporaneous experimentation. Besides, if we consider the style and iconography of the modelled *ketos* from the altar area – with details painted using the same palette of the wall paintings – this complexity and the (Asiatic) Hellenistic component of the workshop operating at Akchakhan-kala becomes evident.

Thus, the artistic and decorative language discovered at the main Chorasmanian centre of Akchakhan-kala certainly had a previous history of development about which unfortunately we still do not know much. However, it is clear that this development first occurred outside the polity (in the Achaemenid world and in Hellenistic Asia) and that it was adopted and elaborated within its borders afterwards, perhaps in different moments before and after the Hellenization of Asia, a process that still needs to be understood in its complex stratification. This is a fundamental issue considering the absence of relevant painting material pre-dating Akchakhan-kala.<sup>88</sup> The most ancient evidence relative to wall paintings (undocumented fragments)<sup>89</sup> and clay sculptures (as indicated by only one small-sized gypsum mould in shape of gryphon's head)<sup>90</sup> in Chorasmia is perhaps the evidence from Kalalĭ-gŷr 1 on the west bank of the Oxus, dating to, however, not before the early 3rd century BC.<sup>91</sup> We also have some documented evidence from the site of Elkharas (dating to not before the late 3rd/2nd century BC),<sup>92</sup> a sanctuary which was located in Southern Chorasmia, at the gates of the polity bordering the desert. The few fragments of wall paintings recovered at Elkharas are not figurative, whilst

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here). On this “pre-Sasanian” fragment of wall painting and its conventions shared with an Eastern-Hellenistic milieu, see Filigenzi 2006a. To note that a “tempera on fresco or mezzo fresco” technique is also used at Butkara GSt. 4.

88 Antique 2 Chorasmian material is scant on this respect. For a survey of the wall painting evidence of Ancient Chorasmia, see Kidd *et alii* 2008 with references; pictures of the fragmentary wall paintings from Kalalĭ-gŷr 2 are now published in Kovaleva 2013, figs. 11 and 13. On the excavation of this latter site, Väinberg 2004.

89 Room no. 8 of the palace (Rapoport & Lapirov-Skablo 1963, 147, note 32; see also Rapoport 1987).

90 Minardi 2015a, fig. 25 a.

91 Minardi 2015a, 101.

92 As argued in Minardi 2015a, 104-106. On the excavations of Elkharas, see Itina 1991; Levina 2001.

fragments of clay bas-reliefs depict at least one female figure seen frontally.<sup>93</sup> It is interesting to note that a kind of “sinopia” was used in some of the paintings of this site<sup>94</sup> and that some of the fragments show the use of diluted pigment to render tones as in Akchakhan-kala.<sup>95</sup>

Before the Akchakhan-kala’s discoveries, the outstanding decorative apparatus of the “High Palace” of Toprak-kala (and to a lesser degree of the “Northern Complex” of the same site)<sup>96</sup> seemed an almost isolated case of a sudden Chorasmian production of wall paintings and clay sculptures appearing already codified in the 2nd century AD and heavily influenced by Eastern-Hellenistic forms.<sup>97</sup> Now we know that this is incorrect and that the isolation of Chorasmia was relative and mostly apparent due to an initial “marginalization” from the spread and influence of the Hellenistic civilization in Asia. It is finally possible to start reconstructing the trajectory of the historical development of the Chorasmian arts within the context of Central Asia in which it developed and to which it in turn contributed to the development of (e.g., the earliest anthropomorphic representation of Avestan gods, the earliest representation of the Zoroastrian “bird-priest”, the earliest clay sculpture of *ketos*, the earliest ivory prop of “Sasanian” fire altar – so far known in Asia).

Apart from the technical and stylistic considerations regarding painting techniques and colour rendering, the elements of Hellenistic origin in the iconography of the Akchakhan-kala decorative apparatus, though clear, are not dominating. The above-mentioned painting fragments such as the one depicting a vine leaf, tendrils, grapes and a human figure viewed on a three-quarter position,<sup>98</sup> the two-dimensional image with overlapping figures of the

93 Itina 1991, 104-107, figs. 32-35 and 270-276 with figs. 1 and 2 - wall paintings, fig. 3 - painted fragments of clay sculptures (*i.e.* appendix on the wall paintings and sculptures of Elkharas by V.M. Sokolovskii).

94 Itina 1991, 273.

95 *Ibidem*. Not much can be said about the style of these paintings from the available drawings. At Elkharas a green colour was used, which is absent in the paintings of Akchakhan-kala.

96 For the “High Palace”, the main reference is Rapoport & Nerazik 1984; on the “Northern Complex”, located north of the latter, see Rapoport 1993.

97 Tolstov 1964; Vorob’eva 1978. This is partially true because Eastern-Hellenistic features are much stronger at Toprak-kala compared to Akchakhan-kala. Now we know, thanks to Akchakhan-kala, that this “influence” grew within the polity earlier and more gradually up to its thriving at Toprak-kala.

98 Fragment illustrated in Kidd *et alii* 2008, 85, figs. 12 and 13; Kidd 2011, 258, fig. 12; Minardi 2016c 280, fig. 16 (colour picture). Kidd (2011, 257) already noted that the three-quarter view of the human figure is a Hellenistic scheme. She affirmed (*ibidem*) that the closest comparison of this Chorasmian specimen is with the vine-scroll decoration of a rhyton from Parthian Nisa (that is formally Greek – cf. *infra* note 155; see also Invernizzi 2010, 92).

“crowd scene”<sup>99</sup> and some of the iconographic elements in the colossal Zoroastrian gods,<sup>100</sup> point toward this direction, *i.e.*, the most Hellenised milieu of Central Asia closer to Chorasmia. Even the framed “portraits” disposed in rows and columns are, in my opinion, a local elaboration of the figured panels of western origin that we can still appreciate, for instance, in the early Gandhāran sculpture of Butkara I and that, according to Anna Filigenzi, are an echo of a lost pictorial interior decorative fashion.<sup>101</sup> But on the iconographic side, most of the elements observable in the depictions of the Chorasmian Zoroastrian deities belong to an Achaemenid legacy: the representation of the deities’ bodies is based on a convention exemplified, for instance, by representations of human figures on the bas-reliefs of Persepolis when similarly represented in a “false profile”. The raised arms of two of the Chorasmian gods also followed an Achaemenid-era iconography, not to mention the *akikanes* with its suspension system, the belts and the other garments such as the empty-sleeve leopard fur-trimmed *kandys*.

To summarize, the Akchakhan-kala Zoroastrian deities show a stratification of iconographic elements with a dominant “archaic” character – of Persian origin – along with exceptional “western features”<sup>102</sup> accompanied by newly elaborated visual elements such as the “bird-priest”.<sup>103</sup> The “western features” are assimilated within the composition already formally reinterpreted (e.g. the *corona muralis* with horned battlements, “eastern” embrasures and a peculiar double coloration) or adapted (the *velificatio* – transformed in a canopy of heaven and added to a Persian throne-bearer like representation) so that we might assume that these Hellenistic elements were at Akchakhan-kala already filtered by a Central Asiatic environment.<sup>104</sup> These new features were

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But the vine-scroll motif (and its variations) is broadly Hellenistic. A more pertinent comparison, observing the treatment of the vine leaves, is with a Hellenistic gypsum roundel from Begram (Hackin 1954, fig. 281, no. 129) very likely cast from an Alexandrine *emblema* dating between the 3rd and the 1st century BC (Minardi 2015b with references) and, as regards the medium, with a fragment of wall painting from Khalchayan (Pugachenkova 1971, fig. 7). The Chorasmian fragment under discussion does not necessarily belong to the remnants of a Bacchic or Bacchic-inspired scene.

99 On this scheme, see Filigenzi 2006a.

100 Minardi in Betts *et alii* 2016b.

101 Filigenzi 2006a. Some of the frames of the Akchakhan-kala’s “portraits” develop around (or represent) architectonic elements and vary in size (fig. 8).

102 Demonstrated and discussed in Betts *et alii* 2015; 2016b.

103 The possibility that this motif was first elaborated in Chorasmia must be seriously considered (Betts *et alii* 2016b, 184).

104 For the mural crown of Srōsh the closest comparison is with a *tyche nagara-devatā* from Butkara I, on a stone relief dating in the second half of the 1st century AD-2nd century AD (illustrated in Bussagli 1996, 203, fig. 2; on the stylistic groups of Butkara I, see Faccenna

evidently used as a vehicle for certain new messages or, more likely, were better apt to express with new visual means certain functions of the gods (of which earlier depictions are unknown). As mentioned above, the artists at work in Akchakhan-kala were quite likely led by the precise demands of their customers and they approached their work selecting among their techniques and skills those they deemed more appropriate to create something original.

An example of the knowledge of Hellenistic-derived composition schemes of the artisans working at Akchakhan-kala can be seen in the drawings on Srōsh's necklace where boats decorated with zoomorphic figureheads are represented. In particular, an almost complete one (fig. 11) shows two oarsmen, one at the stern and the other in the bow of the boat, transporting a third seated individual. The men's labour (the scene is less than 15 cm wide) is illustrated with a quick sketch: their right arms are raised and bent, and the left ones, toward the lower part of their bodies, hold a long oar which features a diagonal composition. The same thing occurs in the central panel of the god's necklace again with representation of boats.<sup>105</sup> This iconographic scheme, here adopted for a figure of 5 cm of height, is certainly not Persian and is a reminder of the offensive stance of some personages (pigmies and sailors) in Nilotic Alexandrine scenes (and in their Roman copies).<sup>106</sup>

Not without difficulty may we try to explain the significance of the strong predominant archaic Achaemenid traits resilient in the Chorasmian deities and in other elements present at Akchakhan-kala. Not only is the structure of the bodies of these colossal figures Achaemenid, iconographically speaking, but also their main features such as the *akinakes* with its specific suspension system and shape are almost identical to representation of "Achaemenid

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*et alii* 2003; Filigenzi 2006b – with literature; on the mural crown and the *tyche*, see also Minardi 2013); the motif of the *velificatio* associated with an Iranian god appears on a coin of Kanishka with a representation of the wind god Anemos/Oado (as already noted in Betts *et alii* 2015 with references) and the iconography of the *velificatio* is recurrent on Gandhāran reliefs (e.g. Pugachenkova, 1979 fig. 174). These specific *comparanda* are almost contemporary with the evidence from Akchakhan-kala, seemingly later. These earlier attestations of the *corona muralis* and the *velificatio* in Chorasmia – of plainly western origin, where they are the first Hellenistic elements in the arts of this Eastern Iranian polity – are evidently accidental. Tyche (with turreted crown) is recurrent in the 1st century BC numismatic of the Indo-Scythians (e.g. Maues and Azilises – Gnoli 1963; Mac Dowall 2007b). Perhaps the dating of Akchakhan-kala Stage 3 can be set closer to the 1st century AD (beginning of?) than the 1st century BC.

105 Betts *et alii* 2016b, figs. 6, 14 and 23.

106 E.g. Versluys 2002, 171, no. 79 (sailor); 139, no. 59, fig. 79 (pigmy). It also reminds, less closely, depictions of Charon on his boat on Attic white-ground *lekythoi*.

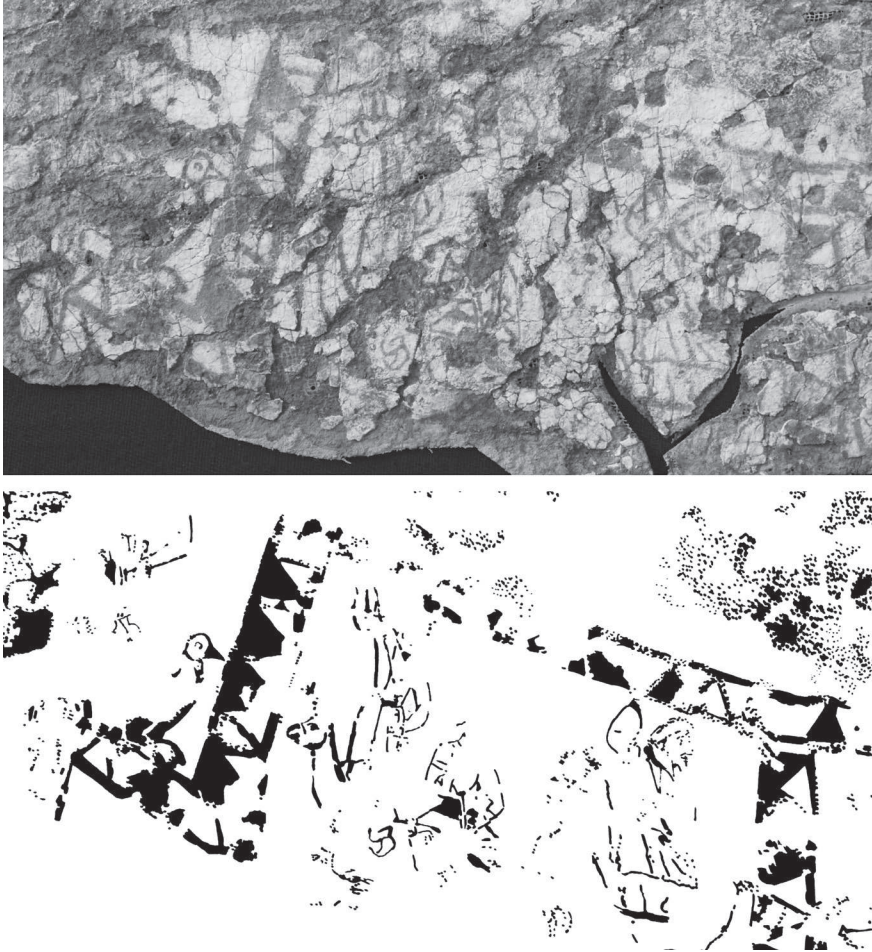


FIGURE 11 Detail of Srōsh's necklace: boats decorated with zoomorphic figureheads (original and tracing). The boat on the right transports a passenger (seated) and has two crew members / oarsmen.

specimens, their *kandys* thrown on their shoulders and the torque of Srōsh,<sup>107</sup> are eloquent in this regard. Similarly, the wall painting of a red ibex from the western area (fig. 12) – which does not depict an animal native to the area – appears as a 1st century BC/1st century AD Chorasmanian illustration of an “Achaemenid object”, a fact that proves (besides what is inferred *supra* regarding its drawing technique) the existence of models, hence the transmission and

107 Kidd in Betts *et alii* 2016b with references.



FIGURE 12 The painted ibex from the western area of the Ceremonial Complex after restoration.

selection of iconography operated by artisans.<sup>108</sup> A much smaller representation of a gazelle on the *akinakes* (?) of the third deity (fig. 13) – with its more organic lively appearance in stark contrast to the static stance of the larger and fully painted red ibex – seems to confirm this assumption.<sup>109</sup>

In Chorasmia we are probably witnessing the results, and the persistence, of an artistic development initially stirred by the Achaemenids since the establishment of their political power in Central Asia and over the polity. In the country this initial stimulus appears to develop independently without being sharply remodelled by the contributions of Hellenism until the 2nd century AD. For this reason, it is still manifestly detectable at Akchakhan-kala. Hence, in

<sup>108</sup> Minardi *et alii* forthcoming 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. gazelle incised on an Indian ivory plaque from Begram (Tissot 2006, 160).



FIGURE 13 Detail of the painted miniature gazelle on the third colossal god, probably decorating its sword (the animal's head is 1.5 cm large).

this respect, the visual arts of Chorasmia might express a certain continuity characteristic of a region that had received a strong initial imprint from the Persian empire. A similar imprint might have existed in other parts of Central Asia where, due to the direct collision with the Hellenistic culture brought by the armies of Alexander and of its subsequent Eastern developments, it was progressively lost.<sup>110</sup>

In order to support this working hypothesis, and to demonstrate the existence (or the absence) of this artistic continuity, new discoveries and additional data are necessary in order to fill the huge gap currently existent in the art of Chorasmia between the 6th century BC and the beginning of our era. On the

110 On the autochthon artistic expression of Bactriana, and Central Asia, and its persevering and development under the Achaemenids and after the contact with Hellenism, see Francfort 2013; on the pre-Greek traditions in the architecture of Ai Khanoum, see Bernard 1976; 1990.



other hand, considering that evidence regarding mural paintings in Ancient Chorasmia at present hardly date earlier than the late 3rd century BC, we may consider the hypothesis that some of the Chorasmian “archaic” iconographic traits witnessed at Akchakhan-kala, could have been “transferred” there along with the mural painting technique from some Central Asian (or Iranian) ateliers with a still, at least partially, persistent pre-Hellenistic tradition with its models. But we have no data in this regard. In any case, the fragmentary mural paintings and the more abundant surviving painted clay sculpture of Khalchayan, which are chronologically close if not contemporary to Akchakhan-kala (c. mid-1st century AD),<sup>111</sup> do not show any of these “archaic” traits but rather some other, different points of contact with the Chorasmian material (*infra*). This circumstance demonstrates the particular “archaism” of the Chorasmian gods and the probability that they were an original Chorasmian creation of which the origin is yet to be ascertained. In Chorasmia, Achaemenid iconographic models used to depict men (e.g. the “throne-bearers”) are instead used to represent divinities. Ahura Mazdā is the sole divine being represented in Achaemenid Persia and his “partial anthropomorphic” iconography follows a different scheme with a “true” profile.<sup>112</sup> Thus, we may consider the hypothesis that the anthropomorphization of the Chorasmian divinities might have been also a Hellenistic-influenced innovation.

The surviving elephant ivory *trapezophoros* of the Akchakhan-kala fire altar can be seen under the same perspective. It shows close similarities to Achaemenid baldaquins and throne legs as represented in the reliefs of Achaemenid Persia, but it has acanthus leaves on its back and it used to have a fantastic animal protome on its frontal part. The prop is certainly imported from an Asiatic Hellenised environment with a tradition of ivory carving: its origin might well be, not by chance, Bactriana.<sup>113</sup>

On the steppic elements of the culture expressed at Akchakhan-kala not much can be added to what is already published by Alison Betts and Fiona

111 The site has been variously dated between the 1st century BC to the 1st/2nd century AD (Pugachenkova 1966; Grenet 2000; 2012; Mac Dowall 2007a; Mode 2013; Francfort 2011; 2014; see also Mac Dowall 2003).

112 Another Greek-influenced representation of Ahura-Mazdā is probably to be found on coins from Cilicia (Minardi in Betts *et alii* 2016b, 132 with references).

113 The closest comparison known is an ivory prop from Nisa that according to Bernard (1970) has the same Bactrian provenience. The two Chorasmian thrones represented within cartoons of the tunic of the second (or central) god, perhaps simplified, are nonetheless quite different (Betts *et alii* 2015, 1378, fig. 6; here fig. 15).

Kidd in 2010.<sup>114</sup> The Chorasmians – as the Kushans<sup>115</sup> – had a distant semi-nomadic cultural background. Additionally, they were, for economic reasons (trade of furs, slaves, wood, horses etc., all elements that do not leave a clear archaeological trace) as well as political reasons (the highly fortified agricultural territory of the polity hint on this), in continuous contact with the geographically close world of the Eurasian steppes. However, as regards figurative arts, at Akchakhan-kala there is nothing that recalls the abstraction of the contemporary art of the Asiatic steppes or the inventive versatility of the steppic elements found at Tillya-tepe:<sup>116</sup> in this regard, Ancient Chorasmian art, as the expression of its elite, is formally (and diachronically) fully indebted to its south.

Likewise, at the Arsacid court of Old Nisa – the court of the once *Sakā Dahae* – where contacts with Hellenism were much stronger, similarly the “steppic” element in its art is essentially absent.<sup>117</sup>

### 3 The Message of the Akchakhan-kala Art

Akchakhan-kala was a Chorasmian Ceremonial Centre of Zoroastrian character and the seat of a ruling elite thereby of its court and likely administrators. Epigraphic evidence confirms that the site was the seat of a ruler with dynastic ambitions.<sup>118</sup>

Except for the Ceremonial Complex, it is unlikely people lived permanently within other parts of the site.<sup>119</sup> The Ceremonial Complex and the Central

114 Kidd & Betts 2010.

115 On the nomadic element in Kushan society, see Grenet 2012. As mentioned above, however, the Chorasmian had a different historical trajectory and had settled south of the Aral at least since the 6th century BC.

116 On Tillya-tepe, see Boardman 2003; Francfort 2011; see also Olbrycht 2016 with literature.

117 The formal language of the Arsacid art of Old Nisa – not its architecture which has link with Bactriana (Invernizzi 2014a; see also Lippolis 2009) – is “essentially Greek” (Lippolis 2014); “*le opere d'arte rinvenute a Nisa possono essere definite per lo più opera di mani greche o comunque di artigiani e artisti formati alle scuole ellenistiche d'Asia che tale tradizione hanno perfettamente e originalmente assimilato*” (Invernizzi 1996). The Scythian art of the west differs, for obvious reasons. On the art at the court of the Arsacids, see also Invernizzi 2001. See also Invernizzi 1998 on a single silver disk from the Square House with “steppic traits”.

118 Epigraphs unpublished but read by V.A. Livshits and P.B. Lurje (Yagodin 2013, 281; Betts *et alii* 2015, 1372).

119 In the Akchakhan-kala area farmsteads are attested in the area surrounding the Lower Enclosure, not at its interior. The enclosure was likely used in case of necessity to shelter people and livestock. It may also be inferred that delimiting/enclosing spaces had in

Monument were manifestly places in which socio-political events took place involving, in the first place, the ruling dynasty, the local elite and secondly, very likely surpassing a regional level (as indicated by the archaeological evidence here discussed), a series of peers of the lord of Akchakhan-kala.

If parts of the Ceremonial Complex certainly had a private character or, as in the case of its main columned hall a controlled access, the Central Monument was instead an open-air public monument intended for the display of ceremonies performed in front of a large audience. The ample and very likely empty space within the Upper Enclosure of Akchakhan-kala, mostly unexplored but certainly at a lower level compared to the artificially super-elevated areas 10 and 7, was possibly the assembling place for the lay population of the surrounding countryside gathered to attend the public ceremonies performed on top of the terrace of the building, while, as seen, for the elite a special small hall with seats was prepared. The Central Monument was very likely the only structure visible from outside the ramparts of Akchakhan-kala. The Central Building was connected to the Central Monument probably by a processional way departing from the main south gate of the first (fig. 3, “south gate”). Ancient Chorasmia was a country strongly linked under the ideological point of view with its past as shown by the system expressed by its culture (architecture, arts and crafts, indigenous era). This is also confirmed by the records of the Muslim scholar al-Bīrunī.<sup>120</sup>

The Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex had three points of access, the south, west and east gates, while its north side was closed. The south gate seems its most prominent access: the entryway delimited by two rectangular tower-like structures mirroring each other opened onto the path, allowed the access to the building through a door flanked by towers. Viewed from the south, the Ceremonial Complex appeared even more monumental, due to the fact that it was artificially elevated. The gate gave access to the southern corridor (unexcavated) which, while blocked toward the east, had a not-in-axis doorway to access the main columned hall. To enter the courtyard of the main hypostyle hall of the Central Building was necessary otherwise to walk along the south section of the western corridor, where the “procession” scene with horses and men was placed (fig. 3, no. 2). The “procession” goes exactly northward in the direction of access given by the west gate.

The west gate was sheltered by two flanking towers and it opened in the western complex. The east gate (identified in 2015 thanks to surface cleanings)

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Chorasmia a ritual connotation (on the Zoroastrian religion and the concept of space, see Choksy 2003).

120 Minardi 2013; 2015a, 116-118 with literature.

was similar but it appears more like a postern apparently secluded by a wall departing between the two perimetral towers of this side. It is probable that the most private areas of the Ceremonial Complex, *i.e.* its living quarters, were located in its northeast part, inaccessible from the north but instead from the smaller and most secured east gate. From these quarters, we may argue, it was possible for the lord of Akchakhan-kala to enter the altar area of the building and thus its columned hall and courtyard at ease.

Much still needs to be explored within the building, but it appears that the perimetral corridor, decorated mainly with the “portraits” in its northern section and in the north segment of the western one, was a long indirect, and apparently, secondary passage if considered in relation to the accesses, inner circulation and general layout of the building. It has a width of *c.* 1.8 m and it was clearly not intended for the passage of a multitude of people.<sup>121</sup> The most important part of the corridor accessible from the main south gate is still unexcavated. The adjacent south section of the western corridor is decorated not by chance with the procession scene.

Although those parts of the corridors with galleries of “portraits” might have been a secondary ambulatory space, the importance of the images there displayed is undeniable. Their association with monumental epigraphs confirms that they were certainly used to transmit a precise message. Although the compositional scheme of the “portraits” (*i.e.* busts represented within frames on different registers) is decorative, these images were, in this context, certainly imbued with symbolism.

The white complexion of the busts does not seem a decisive factor regarding the identification of their gender.<sup>122</sup> The presence of earrings on most of the “portraits” may also be pointed to in favour of sex identification, but again this does not seem decisive. The main accents on the Chorasmian “portraits”

<sup>121</sup> As already noted in Kidd *et alii* 2012; Yagodin 2013, 280.

<sup>122</sup> At Akchakhan-kala, the use of white is not exclusive: Srōsh and the second colossal god (*infra* on his identification), the “crowd scene” personages and a fragmentary hand grasping an object (Kidd 2011, fig. 14 – here fig. 10 B) are, for instance, red-rendered with tones of red. The human figure in the “vine leaf and grapes” fragment has a white complexion (*i.e.* the background colour as in the “portraits”). To establish a colour/gender connection at Akchakhan-kala is at present impossible. To note that the wall painting fragment with depiction of an archer from Koï-Krÿlgan-kala has a red-coloured skin (Tolstov & Vainberg 1967, 215, fig. 80) and that later at Toprak-kala a man with halo (Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, 199, fig. 83) has white skin while most of the clay sculptures of the “High Palace” have again a red complexion. The use of red colour for the skin of clay sculptures is common in Central Asia (Ai Khanoum, Bernard 1967, 319; Takht-i Sangin, Litvinskii & Pichikyan 1981, where is indicated as “brown”; Old Nisa, e.g. Bollati 2008, 173, 180).

are the ears (which are fully red), on the big black eyes underlined by elaborated black eyelashes and elongated eyebrows and on the small, albeit red, mouth – *i.e.* emphasizing the senses of sight and hearing. It is possible that the complexions of these figures were left uncoloured (white) in order to accentuate these important features and not for gender characterization.

As already noted elsewhere,<sup>123</sup> in the approximately contemporary or slightly later site of Khalchayan some of the modelled and painted female clay heads of the reliefs of the palace show chromatic choices and stylistic characteristics that are very close to those employed at Akchakhan-kala (fig. 14). The same applies, for instance, in its erotes.<sup>124</sup> In addition, as the clay sculptures are preserved, some other female figures have a red (or pink) skin tone while males have all red-coloured faces.<sup>125</sup> The god Srōsh has red skin, he is beardless and we cannot ascertain whether he had moustaches. It is true that facial hair is not an essential element for males in the Greek and culturally Greek-influenced world (including ancient Iran) around the beginning of our era, but moustaches or beard or both are common for men in the Iranian milieu (e.g. Khalchayan). In Chorasmia, the first numismatic portraits of kings have no facial hair because these are known to have derived from the Graeco-Bactrian iconography<sup>126</sup> but in Akchakhan-kala there are bearded males: the enthroned king(s) and priests represented on the “cartoons” of the dress of the second colossal god discovered (fig. 15). Thus, albeit not certain, the “portraits” may represent female individuals (and perhaps the neutrality of their sex was consciously implemented).

On the gender issue raised by the glabrous “portraits” of Akchakhan-kala<sup>127</sup> I would consider the possibility that they all belong to females, and that they might represent the multitude (“many hundreds, many thousands, many tens of thousands”, *Yt.* 13.65) of the *fravashis* protective spirits of Zoroastrianism, “beings who inhabit the upper air and are powerful to aid and protect those who worship them” and who help Ahura Mazdā to maintain the order of the

123 Minardi 2015a, 112.

124 The bodies and faces of these erotes are painted in a delicate raspberry-pink colour. On their faces the colour is used to produce shadows (“over the eyes, on the sides of the nose, on the contour of the face”). The eyes are circled in black with a thick line that is elongated to the temples. Wide lines express the eyebrows and eyelids and their black pupils while two red lines underline the full chin (Pugachenkova 1971, 28).

125 Pugachenkova 1971, 19-80. The *putti* with a pinkish complexion are an exception on this regard (*idem*, 23).

126 As noted by Masson in 1966. Later emissions however show a royal portrait without facial hair. But they do not belong to the epoch here discussed.

127 Kidd & Betts 2010, 657-666; Kidd *et alii* 2012, 107-108; Yagodin 2013, 275.



FIGURE 14 Khalchayan, unbaked-clay modelled female head with painted details (after Pugachenkova 1971, fig. 21).

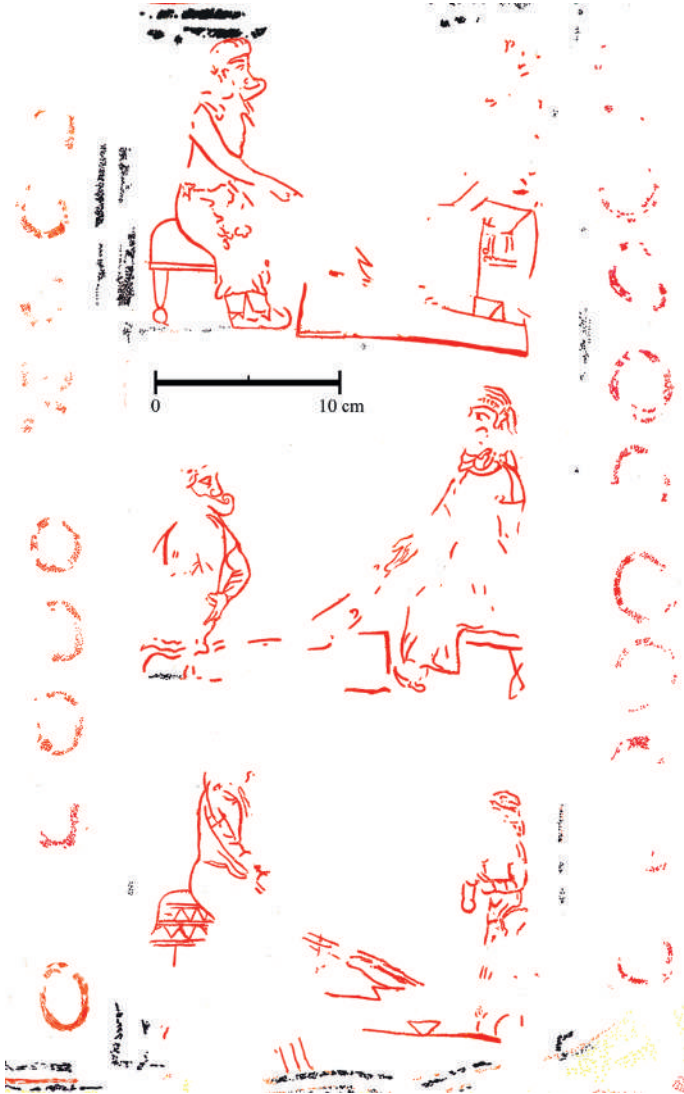


FIGURE 15 Detail of the tracing of the drawings decorating the central band of the dress of the second colossal god showing ceremonial scenes with enthroned kings.

world.<sup>128</sup> If this hypothesis is correct, it is imaginable that, once translated, the epigraphs painted on the walls of the corridors mentioning a royal figure will be decisive in this regard and may invoke the protections of the *fravashis* on the royal family of Akchakhan-kala.

This interpretative attempt differs from the hypothesis recently advanced by Frantz Grenet on the identification with the ensemble of *fravashis* of the central deity of the current known triad holding the heavens in their function of pillar of the sky.<sup>129</sup> This figure, with raised hands, holds the celestial vault in which different rayless heavenly bodies are represented as red circles on blue background. I do not believe that the central disk expresses the sun at the zenith due to the presence of smaller circles which clearly are intended as stars.<sup>130</sup> Hence the larger disk should also be another star in this symbolic depiction which has to connote the god according to some distinguishable features related to his functions (as in the case of Srōsh). The smaller stars are assembled in two distinctive groups that very likely suggest a precise configuration: three of them are disposed in a triangular formation, while the other two are separated and aligned in diagonal.

Considering that all the minute details in these Chorasmian religious representations are thorough, the arrangement of the stars in the canopy of heaven was likely not unintentional so that they might indicate the *canis maior* and the *canis minor* constellations, hence identify with Sirius the main and central astral symbol depicted above the deity's head. In ancient Iran, Sirius (the dog-star) is associated with Tishtrya, god of the rain star.<sup>131</sup> Certainly the lacunose state of the "veil" prevent us from arguing with confidence on this point, but the identification of this god with the Avestan Tishtrya might be considered as another plausible working hypothesis (and perhaps on the left we would

128 Boyce 2000. Kidd (2012) considers the "portraits" as a gallery of "royal ancestors". Yagodin (2013) considered the "portraits" as a gallery of Chorasmian kings represented according to a hierarchic order given by their type of crown; Grenet (in Betts *et alii* 2015, 1392) considers the portraits "*certainement des rois ou des membres du clan royal*". Cf. Boyce 2000: "interpreting the *fravašis* as by origin spirits of the heroic dead appears to offer the most satisfactory solution". On this and on the historical development of the *fravaši* religious concept, see Gnoli 1990.

129 Betts *et alii* 2015, 1392.

130 Planets did not play any cosmological role in Avestan uranography (Panaino 2015). "The possible connection of the word *tīrō*°, the first member of the compound *tīrō.nakaḡβa* (a masculine proper name in *Yāšt* 13.126 [...]) with the name of the western Iranian god of the planet Mercury (Tīriya, etc.) remains a matter of discussion" (ibidem).

131 Boyce 1975, 74-78; Panaino 1990; 1995; 2005 with references. The worship of this Avestan god was introduced in Central Asia probably by the Achaemenids (Panaino 1995, 67-70). On its known representations, conveniently see Shenkar 2014, 149-151.





FIGURE 16 Left: royal figure (with halo and Nike) on the recto of a Chorasmian coin (detail after Cribb 2007, fig. 134); Right: detail of the head of one of the enthroned kings depicted on the second colossal god's dress (author's reconstruction).

have another pattern of circles representing the Pleiads). Moreover, the small cartoons illustrated on the central band of the god's dress – as the “bird-priests” who helped in the identification of the first god with Srōsh – represent very likely a seated Chorasmian king (fig. 16) participating in some ritual (he wears the *padām*) involving the use/distribution of the waters: the king(s) is shown with an extended arm and opened hand from which a line whirls toward different subjects, one likely standing on a boat (fig. 15, upper scene).<sup>132</sup>

Tishtrya is the *yazata* who struggles with Apaosha for the possession and the liberation of the waters contained in the cosmic ocean Vourukasha (the source of the rain, toward which he flies “as swiftly as the arrow darted through the heavenly space”)<sup>133</sup> and here we may infer that, metaphorically, the Chorasmian king(s) is represented in the act of giving access to the waters to his subjects for diverse purposes, the main one was certainly agriculture. It is well known that the control of the water resources was decisive in Central Asia and that this was handled by its rulers: the most interesting source on this

132 The other two scenes illustrated in fig. 15 show likewise an enthroned king extending his arm toward a priest (mid cartoon) and toward a smaller standing character advancing with some offering (an *akinakes*? Lower cartoon).

133 *Yasht* VIII, 4.6 (transl. Darmesteter 1898).

regard is Herodotus (III. 117) who records how the Achaemenids also dominated (and taxed) populations exerting a royal control on the water flows of their Central Asian dominions.<sup>134</sup> Chorasmian theophoric names also confirm the presence of the deity's theonym in the country.<sup>135</sup>

The centrality of the hypostyle hall of the Ceremonial Complex, already indicated by its columns (in Chorasmia this is not seen in vernacular architecture), is then accentuated and underlined by the presence of an Avestan pantheon, although the most sacred area of the complex was very likely the adjacent main altar area (fig. 3, "fire altar"). From this partially excavated zone we have already obtained very important data such as the above-mentioned clay sculpture of a *ketos* and traces of the presence of other high reliefs. The actual altar set in this space was furnished with ivory props similar to those that will later appear for the first time on Ardashir's I coins showing a fire altar.

The fire altar was shielded and protected as it was purposely fit in a narrow space. Thus, this part of the main building was assuredly private, and probably the whole complex, except perhaps for the columned hall, was not intended for public ceremonies or displays if not within the circle of the ruling classes of Akchakhan-kala and their peers. Administrators, people living in the Ceremonial Complex (in the western area?) and visitors from the outside such as ambassadors, lesser lords or peers from other centres and "vassals", must have had different approaches to the structures and to the reading of its decoration and so its message. The Central Monument (Area 07) was in this regard the necessary implement for the royal propaganda at a different and broader level. Within an Eastern Iranian, superficially Hellenised cultural context, the solutions found by the Chorasmian architects to realize the functional spaces to put forth the message of the elite remains quite original. Similarly original are the solutions adopted in the representation of the Zoroastrian gods that exemplify the ideation and adaptation of the artistic and artisanal means of the time operated by the Chorasmian elite in the 1st century AD.

134 For further details and sources, see Briant 1996, 427-429; see also Minardi 2015a, 28.

135 Livshits in Väinberg 2004, 191 with references to epigraphic material from Koi-Krylgan-kala, Khumbuz-tepe, Mizdakhkan, Kalaly-g'yr 2 (idem 193); see also Livshits 2003 (uncertain reading), Ivantchik & Lurje 2013, 286-287 with reference to epigraphs from outside Chorasmia (Chiryk-rabat) and Chorasmia (same sites mentioned by Livshits 2003 with the addition of Tok-kala), and Lurje in this volume. Al-Birunī records as the name of the 4th month and the 13th day of the Chorasmian calendar "*Jyry i.e. /tsīri/*" (Ivantchik & Lurje 2013, 287; see also Livshits 1968; Panaino 1990).

#### 4 Further Developments and Cultural Contributions from the South: a Note on Toprak-kala

It still may appear only hypothetical to define Akchakhan-kala as a dynastic sanctuary, albeit this is probably the case: there are epigraphs mentioning kings and their heirs but actually we do not yet have any main pictorial documentation of them. In any case, we know that perhaps the same ruling group of Akchakhan-kala decided, in the course of the 2nd century AD, to transfer its seat to a new site, Toprak-kala, founded only about 14 km to the north-east of Akchakhan-kala. Toprak-kala seems a dynastic centre similar to those of Kushan Central Asia.<sup>136</sup>

Toprak-kala, a densely built and regularly planned *gorodishche*<sup>137</sup> dominated by the “High Palace” (fig. 17) – a monumental structure richly decorated with clay sculptures and wall paintings – was built during the abandonment of Akchakhan-kala and marks the apex of the Chorasmanian Antique 3 period material culture. Akchakhan-kala was systematically despoiled and deserted, probably as a result of environmental and political reasons in the course of the 2nd century AD (early/first half of the century)<sup>138</sup> whilst the palace of Toprak-kala was built. This chronology is based on data recently obtained by the KAE that validate those relative to the absolute chronology of the palace of Toprak-kala gathered by the “Khorezm Expedition”.<sup>139</sup>

136 The “dynastic sanctuaries” of the Kushans considered as places of worship “*consacrés aux dieux qui protégeaient la famille royale, représentée par les ancêtres masculins de l’empereur dont le temple contaient le portraits*” (Fussman *apud* Gnoli 2009).

137 Nerazik & Rapoport 1981.

138 Minardi forthcoming 2018a.

139 Besides a ceramic typology that has now a *terminus post quem* in the mid-1st century BC (probably about the turn of the millennium) and the chronological datum relative to the abandonment of Akchakhan-kala in the 2nd century AD, the absolute chronology of the palace is based on the following elements gathered by the KhAEE: the Kushan copper coins found in its premises, some administrative documents bearing dates of a local era (*i.e.* the Chorasmanian Era – see Minardi 2013; Lurje in this volume), Roman imports (mainly glass beakers), and the style of its clay sculptures (here discussed). All of these elements have unfortunately too wide a timespan. In relation to the chronology of the palace, the most interesting evidence comes from its northeast bastion: a copper coin of Kanishka I (first year of reign assumed as 127 AD) was found in the space between the façade of the western side of this structure and some “additional cladding” (Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, 209). A copper coin of Vasudeva I (191-c. 230 AD) was found instead within a context of bricks “carelessly laid” to fill a gap between the basement of the tower and the external fortification wall of the *gorodishche* (*ibidem*, with note 22). Thus, the coin of Kanishka appears to be a *terminus post quem* for some restoration occurring on the external surface of the palace, while the coin of Vasudeva might indicate likewise a *terminus post quem* for the erection/addition of the enclosure wall of the site (or of some consolidation/

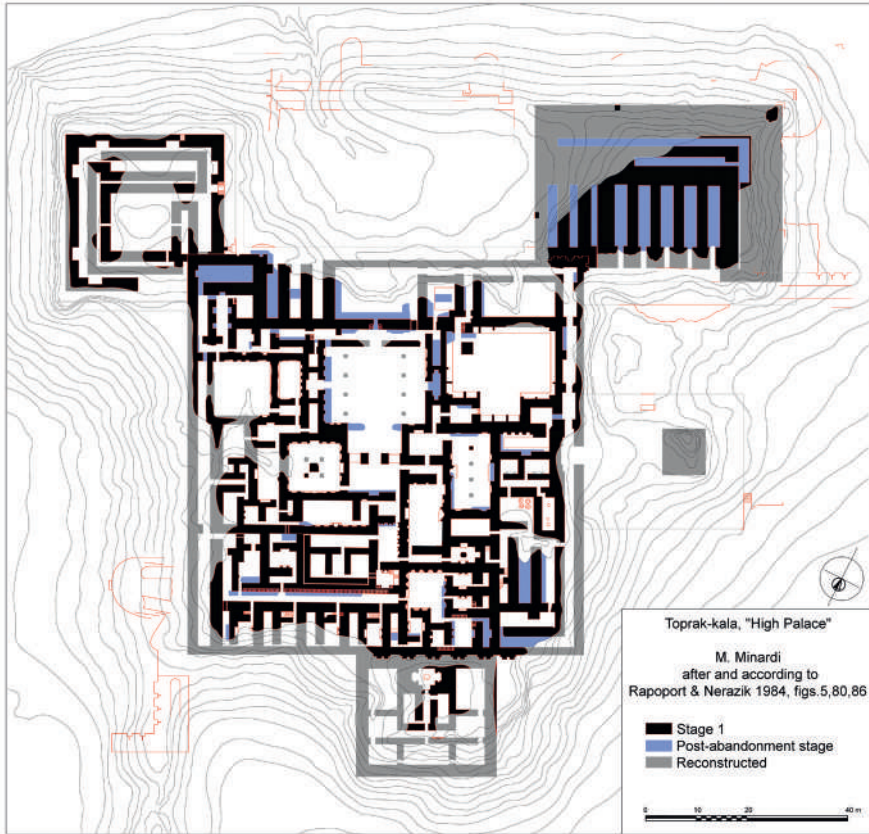


FIGURE 17 Plan of the High Palace of Toprak-kala (author's drawing after Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, figs. 5, 80 and 86).

The cultural continuity of the two centres, their close proximity, and the fact that Akchakhan-kala was despoiled without signs of destruction, allows us to consider the idea that the ruling dynasty of Akchakhan-kala, after having enlarged and decorated the Ceremonial Complex, eventually required a new and more “modern” seat and a different kind of settlement pattern. It is important to remark that in Chorasmia the abandonment of palaces seems a norm probably related to beliefs that are at present difficult to ascertain.

What is certain is that some of the specimens of clay modelled sculpture of Toprak-kala, manufactured probably in the early 2nd century AD, show artistic

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renovation work not better comprehensible). The palace ceased its original functions at the end of the 3rd century AD (Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, pp. 17-18) so its decoration is chronologically well delimited.

ties with contemporary Gandhāran types (fig. 18).<sup>140</sup> As in the case of the *ketos* of Akchakhan-kala, by their very nature clay sculptures must be prepared in loco, so it is again possible to consider the likely hypothesis that foreign artists worked in Chorasmia, together with local artisans. Additionally, it is evident that some clay specimens from the palace are similar to the those produced at Khalchayan (fig. 19 – the style is a match) and some other decorative elements may be defined as properly belonging to a “Kushan repertoire”, including a mould for human feet in boots (fig. 20).<sup>141</sup>

The ties of this Chorasmian production with (in this case Kushan) Bactriana, as well as the transmission of iconographies and artistic subjects in/through workshops, are also hinted at by two heads of “warriors” found in the “High Palace”, one made of “stucco” (mould-made) the other modelled in clay (fig. 21, C and B).<sup>142</sup> The warriors, both with red-painted faces, wear helmets with cheek-pieces and non-functional visors clearly modelled after the Attic helmet type. These heads wearing a helmet are clearly not of Chorasmian origin but rather Greek and echo the numismatic portrait of Seleucus I Nicator (r. 312–281 BC) issued by the mint of Susa<sup>143</sup> (and of the enigmatic Sophytos),<sup>144</sup> an iconography present in a well-known Hellenistic marble head held in the Louvre (traditionally attributed to Seleucus), among the clay sculptures of Old Nisa<sup>145</sup> and still attested centuries later in Afghanistan

140 I.e. the rendering of the drapery, always considering the different medium which in the Chorasmian case is not stone. On the iconographic side, the first fragmentary clay sculpture illustrated in fig. 18 shows a scheme quite close to that of the goddess Nana as she appears on the numismatic emissions of Kanishka I.

141 The feet of the dignitaries which were visible on the wall painting fragment from the High Palace of Toprak-kala (fig. 19 left) overlap as in the Kushan fabric published by Marshak & Grenet depicting Huvishka (Marshak & Grenet 2006). Lo Muzio (2014, 130) ascribed the first attestation of this convention in the mid-3rd century AD.

142 The “stucco” head was found in room 75 (Tolstov 1958, 212-213; Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, 154) and it had traces of red paint on the face, black on the hair and blue and black on the helmet; the clay head in the “Hall of Kings” (idem, 127) had red paint on the face and traces of green on the helmet. The style of the latter is sensibly more distant from Hellenism.

143 On this emission, conveniently see Hoover 2002.

144 On the silver emissions of this ruler north of the Hindu Kush, see Bopearachchi 1996 with older literature; Bernard *et alii* 2004; the most recent attempt to interpret this figure is in Coloru 2009, 129-141 with references. According to Coloru Sophytos was active in Bactriana c. 315-305 BC.

145 Pilipko 1991; 2002. These heads were clearly made in series with the aid of a mould and finished by hand. Cf. mid-1st century AD helmeted head from Khalchayan (Pugachenkova 1971, 67; 1979, 100, fig. 116) from a similar model, modified and more distant in style from Hellenism.

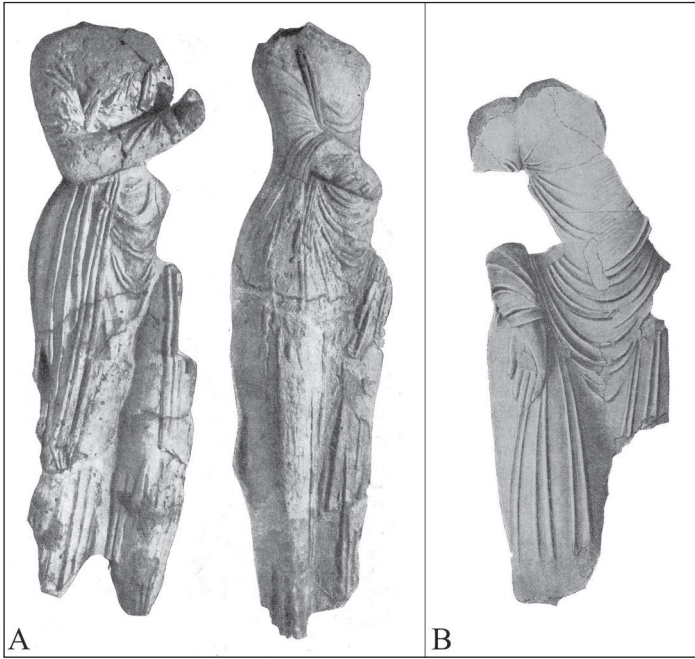


FIGURE 18 Toprak-kala, unbaked-clay modelled high-reliefs from the “High Palace” (A: after Tolstov 1962, fig. 124; B: drawing, after Tolstov 1948, fig. 55).



FIGURE 19 Unbaked-clay modelled sculptures. Left: Khalchayan, palace, c. mid-1st century AD (after Pugachenkova 1979, fig. 109); Right: Toprak-kala, “Hall of Dancing Masks” of the “High Palace”, 2nd century AD (after Rapoport and Nerazik 1984, fig. 38, the original picture is reversed).

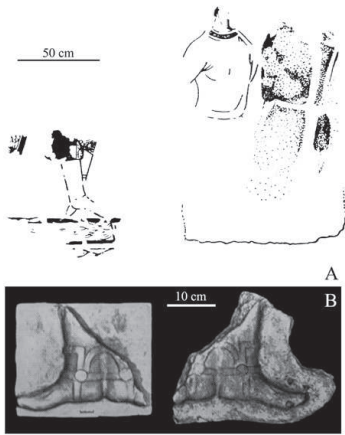


FIGURE 20

Toprak-kala, "High Palace". A: two fragments of wall painting (drawings, detail after Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, fig. 27, nos. 3-4); B: gypsum mould with modern cast (after Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, fig. 84, nos. 6-7).

(fig. 21, A and D) a datum that seems to confirm the origin and the continuity of the use of ancient models south of Chorasmia.<sup>146</sup>

Therefore, it is possible to be more precise and infer that some of the artificers at work in Chorasmia, first at Akchakhan-kala and later at Toprak-kala, had the technical and cultural background that originated in the Graeco-Bactrian area and afterwards developed in Central Asia/Northwest India under the Kushans.

Toprak-kala expresses the willingness of the Chorasmian ruling class to better partake of the consuetudes and habits of the oligarchies living in the territories controlled at the time of its construction by the Kushans. This aspiration is already present at Akchakhan-kala where, however, it was still incipient. The ruler of Akchakhan-kala who enhanced the Ceremonial Complex and began its Stage 3, was linked to a Central Asian tradition still far from the Asiatic Hellenistic components already developed and used in the other polities of Central Asia and northern India. These Eastern-Hellenistic elements finally fully enter the artistic language of Chorasmia and are adopted in the decoration of the palace of Toprak-kala. At Toprak-kala and Akchakhan-kala, we witness the same attitude of the local elite toward an artistic "exotic" language which is embraced as an element of prestige. But when Toprak-kala was built, the Kushan empire was dominating Asia and the Chorasmian lords evidently wanted to further demonstrate their prestige in relation to the other Central Asian elites, showing their status to their peers and also sending a message of legitimation to the population.

<sup>146</sup> On this see Minardi 2015b with references. Cheek-plates belonging to a Hellenistic helmet were discovered at Takh-i Sangin (Litvinskii 2001, Pls. 100-101).



FIGURE 21 “Warriors” wearing a helmet of Attic type. A and D: stucco heads from Afghanistan, Bagh Gai and Tepe Kafariha (after Tissot 2006, p. 425); B and C: Toprak-kala, “High Palace” (after Rapoport 2000, pl. 38 and Abdullaev *et alii* 1991, fig. 343).

## 5 The Connection with the South and Chronological Issues

To summarize, it seems at present that the major stimulus to the arts and crafts of Ancient Chorasmia has come diachronically “from the south”, *i.e.* from that



part of Central Asia centred on the region of Bactriana. Bactriana had possibly been a centre of power before becoming a satrapy of the Achaemenids with jurisdiction over Chorasmia and Sogdiana. Later, after slipping away from Seleucid control, it became the core of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms and eventually of the Kushan empire and of their vast superregional dominion.

To affirm that this was Chorasmia's favoured route of exchanges does not deny the existence of further contemporary relations with the Parthians (and their equally vast empire which included Margiana and Aria in the east)<sup>147</sup> and with the steppes. The Aparnii, according to the few written records available, including epigraphic evidence, were Dahae *Sakā* originally akin to the Chorasmians<sup>148</sup> but once they moved from their ancestral lands and entered into the Seleucid empire, they started to develop a different culture in close and early contact with (Seleucid and Eastern) Hellenism. At Old Nisa what the Parthians had created was dissimilar to what it is possible to observe in Ancient Chorasmia although determined by similar socio-political conditions and cultural background.

The Arsacids founded an empire that stretched into Central Asia that had connections with Bactriana and beyond, toward the east along the "Silk Road", on terrestrial and maritime ways. But Parthian coins and Parthian imports such as ceramic vessels or small items are virtually absent in Chorasmia,<sup>149</sup> where the first coins struck are inspired by the Graeco-Bactrians without links to Parthia.<sup>150</sup> The first numismatic emissions of Chorasmia derive in fact from a Graeco-Bactrian model of Eucratides (as Sogdiana albeit emitted by a nomadic chief),<sup>151</sup> and afterward models were mutated from Parthian and Kushan specimens (Sinisi in this volume).

The polity of Ancient Chorasmia, characterized by an agricultural and fortified landscape, seems to have always kept a certain regional dimension (especially before the 2nd century AD), with a population firmly established and

147 See also Rtveladze 2011 on a possible Parthian control of parts of Bactriana along the Oxus valley. On the Chorasmian-Parthian connections, see Kidd 2011.

148 The Dahae were probably originally neighbours with the same Eastern Iranian culture.

149 According to Väinberg's catalogue (1977, 176, pl. xxx1) only two Indo-Parthian coins have been found in Chorasmia (Sanabares I?). Interesting to note that even more specimens, three, come from the Bosphorus area (Phanagoria, Sauromates I, Kotys II – idem, 176-177). Few probable Parthian ceramic imports were found at Kalaly-g'yr 2 (Väinberg 2004, 142 – also considered in Minardi 2015a, 93).

150 On the relation between Parthian and Chorasmian numismatics, see Väinberg 1977, 85-87. According to Väinberg (*ibidem*) the Chorasmian numismatic evidence does not show any "indisputable evidence regarding political contacts between Chorasmia and Parthia".

151 On Sogdiana and the nomads, see Rapin 2007; Rapin & Isamididov 2013. See also Lyonnet 2001; Martinez-Sève 2003.

settled in the Oxus' delta: the Chorasmians in the course of their pre-Islamic history did not mobilise toward new lands already occupied by sedentary populations in the south, as numerous times happened for several other populations in Central Asia.<sup>152</sup> But, on the other hand, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Chorasmian elites always participated in the cultural environment of their Central Asian peers.

Moreover, the absence in the polity of a strong Hellenistic "impact", the fact that the southern Aral area was not conquered, colonized and visited by neither the Greeks and nor by the Seleucids, left the Chorasmian society free to develop more independently up to a manifest cultural integration in the super-regional system developed by the Kushans. Thus the Chorasmian evidence from Akchakhan-kala and Toprak-kala have global chronological and art history implications.

The Akchakhan-kala wall paintings are not only the vaster corpus so far known of Central Asia, but also the most ancient one on such scale. Moreover, the deities depicted in the hypostyle hall of Akchakhan-kala are the first known anthropomorphic representations of Zoroastrian gods (apart from Ahura-Mazdā, *supra*) although their characteristics do not find a perfect match with the descriptions contained in the Avesta. The very existence of such a corpus of wall paintings, manufactured with different painting techniques (and different hands), with a vast iconographic programme and even consciously adopting different styles (e.g. the more naturalistic elements as opposed to the static "archaic" images) shows that this craft was well-developed at the turn of the 1st millennium AD, not only in Chorasmia, but also in those Central Asiatic centres which had closer contacts with Hellenism. Likewise the unbaked clay modelled *ketos* from the site confirms, for an early period, the existence of travelling teams of artisans and craftsmen with a complex technical background and it witnesses the exchanges that occurred amongst the various centres of Central Asia.

The clay sculptures of Toprak-kala were modelled in the 2nd century AD. This material has a style and an iconography both related to a local Chorasmian tradition and, clearly, ties to a Gandhāran one (according to the evidence available). Wall paintings at the palace of Toprak-kala, moreover, vehicle a message

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152 But Chorasmian soldiers served under the Achaemenids as far as Egypt (Cowley 1923, 15-18) and they likely were part of other armies as mercenaries. They probably extended their influence on the Syr-Darya delta (see for example Väinberg & Levina 1993, 85) and the embassy of Pharasmanes to Alexander shows that they had some designs on their steppic neighbours.

which is “Kushan”, with themes and a precise iconography taken from other centres of the elite of the Kushan milieu.<sup>153</sup>

Considering the lack of data concerning the clay and painting production for the rest of Central Asia in the same period, the Toprak-kala evidence points out that this production should have existed also in the Kushan area, in continuity with the past although without many vestiges left. In my view, we therefore lack abundance of evidence from Bactriana for an archaeological accident (except for Khalchayan) where probably, at least in the case of unbaked clay sculpture, this technique was developed – as apparently everywhere else including the Iranian plateau – under a Hellenistic stimulus.<sup>154</sup>

The excavations of Ai Khanoum, and at the temple of Takht-i Sangin, demonstrated that all the Hellenistic techniques adapted and adopted at Akchakhan-kala (and before at Elkharas in Southern Chorasmian) had there their antecedents,<sup>155</sup> antecedents that are attested as well at Old Nisa, where the dynastic art of the Arsacids rulers was formally Greek.<sup>156</sup> In Arsacid Parthia, in a territory before belonging to the Seleucids,<sup>157</sup> local artisans with an “Hellenistic formation” were hired to decorate a royal citadel and products made by “Greeks of Central Asia” were also brought to Nisa.<sup>158</sup> The Parthians (Dahae) used to inhabit an area not far from “Left Bank” Chorasmia, but, as the semi-nomadic Yueh-chih/Yuezhi – the future Kushans<sup>159</sup> – they migrated, invading territories with a long and complex cultural tradition and adapted to a new socio-political reality.<sup>160</sup> The Chorasmians, on the other hand, developed their culture in the region where they had originated and it seems that

153 At Toprak-kala musicians, garlands etc. decorated the halls of the palace. On these widespread themes (an on their origin) see Invernizzi 1991; Lo Muzio 1995.

154 As observed in Minardi 2015a pp. 106-107; on the techniques used at Toprak-kala, see Vorob'eva 1952.

155 *Supra*.

156 In the citadel of Nisa “Greek art [...] merely lends the forms to the expression of Iranian thought, just as the architectural decoration covers oriental structures” (Invernizzi 201b; see also Invernizzi 2014b).

157 For discussion of the relation and the transition from Seleucid to Arsacid power, see Martinez-Sève 2014; on the early Arsacids and their nomadic traits, Boyce 1994; Hauser 2005; 2006. On Arsacid art, see Invernizzi 1996; 2001; 2005; 2010; 2011a; 2011b.

158 “The craftsmen [of the ivory rhyta] must have been Greeks of Asia, and more specifically of Central Asia, perhaps of Parthia herself” (Invernizzi 201b, 665); on the Nisean rhyta, see also Bernard (1985; 1991) who considered these items possibly Bactrian; Lippolis (2014) considers the idea of having at the Arsacid court “a plurality of artists acting on the court’s commission” active “for a long period of time, apparently lasting at least until 1st century AD”.

159 On the Yuezhi, see Grenet 2006, Rapin 2007 with references.

160 On this, see Olbrycht 2003; see also Invernizzi 2001.

they afterwards expanded in the whole Oxus delta area (in the Bronze and early Iron ages) in those areas lacking social complexity. Albeit the similar cultural roots, the historical context and cultural development of Chorasmia and Parthia is dissimilar, as well as their artistic expressions. Chorasmia, outside the boundaries of the Hellenised world, was less stimulated by this civilization, and when eventually its art was amply Hellenised, the kind of Hellenism adopted was the one inherited and developed in Asia and used in Kushan's times.

Before, at Akchakhan-kala – as well as at Kalalȳ-ḡyr 2<sup>161</sup> – those elements which can be considered as originating outside Chorasmia and are Hellenistic-derived have links, as I tried to show, mainly with Central Asia, not excluding obviously the possibility of contacts with the western Iranian culture. In the 6th century BC, the Chorasmian material culture of the Antique 1 period shows links with Achaemenid Central Asia. The Oxus Treasure very likely contains also Chorasmian *ex-voto*. The material culture of the Antique 2 period shows the adoption of some Hellenistic-originated technological and production innovations and forms mostly and solidly “inspired” by the Bactrian area.<sup>162</sup> Chorasmia in the following Antique 3 (in an advance phase of this, since the 2nd century AD) period partakes of the consequence of the Kushan domination of Asia (but always the Chorasmian material culture preserves its originality and traditional traits).<sup>163</sup> The terracotta head of an “old woman” (fig. 22)<sup>164</sup> found nearby Koï-Kr̄ylgan-kala and inspired probably by the same Hellenistic models<sup>165</sup> that may have contributed to the creation of the “feasting Buddha” image c. the 2nd century AD in Gandhāra<sup>166</sup> (and from which it may derive) underlines a continuous connection along the axis of the Oxus.

161 Bolelov in Vainberg 2004.

162 For instance, apart from the whole influence visible in the Chorasmian material culture of the period (Minardi 2015a, 87-113), finds such statuettes of a monkey (from the excavation of Koï-Kr̄ylgan-kala, Tolstov & Vainberg 1967, 192) and of an elephant (Stawiski 1979, fig. 156) underline this relation (as already noted in Tolstov & Vorob'eva 1959, 143).

163 Several specimens of Kushan copper coins were found in Chorasmia, many of them countermarked (for further details, see Vainberg 1977, 87-89). This further sustains the argument of the integration of a politically independent Chorasmia in a broader network of exchanged with Kushan Asia.

164 Tolstov 1958, 189.

165 Already hinted in Stawiski 1979, 198. A probable Alexandrine model (as the “old drunken woman”, see Pollitt 1986, 141-146); cf. terracotta statuettes from Taxila (Marshall 1951, Pl. 133, nos. 40-41; similar statuettes are known in the west (see examples illustrated in Masséglià 2012).

166 Rhi 2008; Behrendt 2010 (3rd-5th centuries AD).



FIGURE 22 Terracotta head of an “old woman” found in the vicinities of Koi-Krylgan-kala (after Stawiski 1979, fig. 155).

In Late Antiquity, India is still the source of some of the formal elements reinterpreted in Chorasmia art, as it is for Sogdiana, but in a changed historical horizon.<sup>167</sup>

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167 Minardi 2013.

## 6 Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to remark upon the originality of the Chorasmian arts: the colossal Chorasmian Zoroastrian gods, reusing and reinterpreting an Achaemenid iconography, until proven otherwise, are a Chorasmian invention. Regarding the root of their “archaism” this has perhaps to be sought locally, in this country where the Achaemenids left a lasting cultural imprint. Moreover, those elements such as the “bird-priests”, or the crowns of some the “portraits” from the northern corridor of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala are remarkably and unexpectedly present earlier in Chorasmia than in Sogdiana, where these elements appear later. The same holds true for the sculpture of *ketos*, with a model however certainly existent in the Hellenistic milieu, and for the remains of the fire altar, a Central Asian (Zoroastrian *ab origine?*) article of Achaemenid-derived Hellenistic style and made of Indian material (elephant ivory).<sup>168</sup> This fact is certainly partially due to an accidental lack of evidence from Sogdiana and Bactriana. In any case, archaeology in Chorasmia is helping to fill a huge gap in our knowledge on the history and art history of Central Asia.

In the third quarter of the 2nd century BC, the Graeco Bactrian kingdoms were invaded and Central Asia was politically reshaped. Ai Khanoum experienced a dramatic *caesura* around 145 BC (Martinez-Sève in this volume). The territories of Sogdiana, the closest to Chorasmia south of the Oxus, were likewise occupied by new steppic populations.<sup>169</sup> Three Parthian kings of this period campaigned against “Scythians”: Phraates II (c. 139/8-128 BC, killed by his Greek troops led into battle against “Scythian” mercenaries at his pay who had rebelled in Parthian territory), Artabanus I (c. 127-124/3 BC, killed in battle by the Tochari) and Mithradates II “the Great” (c. 124/3-88/7 BC, who “fought a number of successful campaigns against the Scythians, and avenged the injury inflicted on his ancestors”). These events on such scale movements of populations, warfare and political instability – must have had repercussions on the polity of Chorasmia, which at present are not easy to put into focus.<sup>170</sup>

168 Betts *et alii* 2016a; on the ivories of Nisa probably manufactured in Bactriana or in another strongly Hellenised environment, see Bernard 1985.

169 Conveniently see Rapin 2007.

170 Justin 42.1-2. These facts may have directly involved Chorasmia, being the label “Scythians” among western authors – which, however, in the passage quoted above specifically includes the Tocharii (cf. Strabo 11.9.2) – a very generic one (Minardi 2015a). The likely idea that Chorasmia, albeit absent from western sources, was involved in the history of Central Asia in one of its most eventful phases, has been already considered by Vainberg (1992; 2004, 240 – with a specific historical reconstruction and view on the archaeological

What appears to be more clear is that in the 1st century BC Chorasmia seems to prosper after a cultural shift marking the beginning of the Antique 3 period occurred around 50 BC (beginning of the event that precedes Akchakhan-kala Stage 3): traces of sieges were recorded during archaeological excavations at the sites of Akchakhan-kala and Koi-Krylgan-kala<sup>171</sup> and very likely this is the period in which the Chorasmian Era started.<sup>172</sup> This evidence does not have to be forcibly attributed to an external invasion of which there is no evidence.<sup>173</sup> The sieges very likely witness internal power struggles that led to the construction of the dynastic centre of Akchakhan-kala and the accession to power of a new ruling dynasty that, as seen, does not show a close political connection with the Parthians. The deficiency of sources on this regard is total and the need to integrate our data with archaeology to avoid speculation is essential. However, we may not exclude the likely possibility that the Chorasmians played some role in the military and political events that involved Central Asia and Iran at that time and even that, pushing forward a working hypothesis regarding the arts of Chorasmia, some of the people fleeing from regions invaded by “barbarians” sought refuge in the walled centres of the polity.

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data that cannot be discussed in detail here). As once observed by Olbrycht (1998, 95, note 54 – referring to Väinberg 1992), the supporting evidence for this reconstruction is at present insufficient (see also Olbrycht 2000, 186-188 with a review of the traditional Russian scholarly positions on this matter). Currently there is no evidence to sustain the idea of an Arsacid control over Chorasmia.

171 As already observed in detail for these two sites in Minardi 2015a; additionally, in “Left Bank” Chorasmia, some areas close to the round building of the site of Kalaly-gÿr 2 (and Gyaur-kala 3) seems to have been damaged by fire that caused its end, earlier, in the 2nd century BC (Väinberg 2004, 51-52; 240). This was also noted by Rapoport (2000, 52) who related the fire at Kalaly-gÿr 2 and the siege of Koi-Krylgan-kala to a 2nd century BC external invasion of Chorasmia, without a solid argument. Cf. note *supra*. Akchakhan-kala was unknown to the former KhAEE members.

172 As argued in Minardi 2013. See also Lurje in this volume.

173 Olbrycht (2015, 341) has recently pondered on the possibility of an “Arsacid control” over Chorasmia and certain areas of “Transoxiana”. But, absence of archaeological evidence apart, the only possible interference in Chorasmia hinted by the available sources for the mid 1st century AD might have been that of the “K’ang-chu”, according to Chinese second-hand records not centred on the area (Minardi 2015a, 55-59). The costume of the Chorasmian individual on the Kalaly-gÿr 2 horn (wearing a Scythian short-sleeved cutaway coat over a shirt, long baggy trousers and a hood with earflaps) is very likely more traditional than “Parthian” (*pace* Olbrycht 2015, 341) and in fact it is almost identical to the costume that the Chorasmian “allegory” wears on the Achaemenid bas-reliefs with representations of subdued “nations” in Persia. The connection of Chorasmian with the steppes has been always clear and repeatedly noted in the works of the KhAEE. Now, see Kidd & Betts 2010 and Minardi 2015a with literature.

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