

MICHELE MINARDI

Research Associate, Ausonius UMR 5607 CNRS (France)

**THE KARAKALPAK-AUSTRALIAN EXPEDITION ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SURVEY ON THE SULTAN-UIZ-DAG/SULTAN-UVAIS RANGE:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant 170101770¹ currently supports the work of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia (KAE)² in cooperation with the Institute for the Humanities, Karakalpak branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Nukus. Under these auspices, I am leading the archaeological survey on the Sultan-uiz-dag/Sultan-uvaish mountain range of Karakalpakstan. This paper presents a concise overview of our as-yet unpublished results of the 2017 and 2018 surveys, excavation seasons and material analysis as an homage to Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov for his 70th *jubilee* and to congratulate him for his professorship appointment.

As of the end of the 2018 fieldwork season, the current extent of the area surveyed on the Sultan-uiz-dag corresponds with the southeastern part (Karakuduk), equivalent to ca. 100 sq. km stretching from the peak of Kazantau to the eastern end of the range corresponding to the area of the *gorodishche* Burly-kala. Archaeological operations started in 2017 with the survey of the southeastern edges of the mountains and the excavation of **SUD17 Site 01**, a well-preserved cluster of Zoroastrian ossuary burials already previously recognised during a preliminary inspection in 2015³. Continuing the work previously done, fieldwork in 2018 was resumed in order to broaden the survey area and to investigate in detail **SUD18 Site 01**, an enigmatic monument built on the top of the highest peak of the southeastern edge of the mountains (373 m a.s.l.)⁴. Detailed papers on this archaeological exploration are currently in preparation.

The vast Sultan-uiz-dag is the only range elevating from the flat landscape of Karakalpakstan. It rises in a desert environment and is characterised by a barren landscape and by black rocky peaks (of amphibolite stone) which give it its local name of 'Karatau', or 'Black Mountains'. Thanks to Yu. Man'lov's foundational work in this area in the 1970s⁵, we already knew of the archaeological potential that work in these mountains might reveal. We were confident such an investigation would add much to the study of the funerary customs of the Ancient Chorasmians, who were assumed to have been a population of Zoroastrian faith. The definition of 'Zoroastrian' is still debated in the Academy; some scholars still deny the possibility of 'true' Zoroastrianism in Central Asia before the standardization of this religion with the Persian Sassanid dynasty. That is why the recent and extraordinary discovery of the earliest imagery of Avestan (Zoroastrian) gods known so far (1st century BC – 1st century AD)⁶ made by the KAE in 2010 at the site of Akchakhan-kala provides a key contribution to the debate: it shows that the Chorasmians were worshippers of Ahura-Mazda. The discovery has proven the importance of Chorasmia in relation to the history of early/pre-Sasanian Zoroastrianism, so that the investi-

gation of the necropolises of the polity would be another crucial step in the direction of validating the early and 'true' nature of this religion in the area.

The Avestan book *Vendīdād* ('The Law repudiating the Demons') describes the Zoroastrian funeral rite⁷. This ritual, which is still practiced today by Zoroastrian communities such as the Parsee of India, is mainly characterized by the exposure of the corpses in *dakhmas* where birds (vultures, crows, kites) consume the human remains of the faithful by cleaning them to the bones. In contrast to today's customs, in Ancient



Fig. 1. SUD 17 Site 01: the ossuary cemetery before excavation. View from the south-west (Photo Minardi)

Chorasmia, after the process of excarnation, the skeletal remains of the Zoroastrian believers were stored in ossuaries (bone containers) in burial sites in elevated places of non-cultivated and sterile ground such as the Sultan-uiz-dag. Not only does the most ancient *dakhma* of Asia, Chil'p'yk, rise in Karakalpakstan 16 km northwest of the Sultan-uiz-dag but several extended ossuary necropolises are today known in the country⁸. Here in the 1960s some important sites such as Tok-kala⁹ and Mizdakhkan¹⁰ were excavated, whereas investigations in the area of the Sultan-uiz-dag, closer to the Chorasmian capitals of Akchakhan-kala and Toprak-kala, were very limited. Moreover, notwithstanding the important data obtained in those excavations, the anthropological analysis of the skeletal remains was made according to the scientific standards of the time, which are now superseded by the continuous development of the scientific discipline of physical anthropology. Thus, the Sultan-uiz-dag survey project has been conceived not only to gather new data relative to early Zoroastrianism in Chorasmia, but also to integrate and shed a new light on old evidence. It has already proven successful: the data gathered are of the utmost importance to complete the framework study on early Zoroastrianism in Central Asia which has seen a 'reboot' with the discovery of the painted colossal Avestan gods of Akchakhan-kala. For the first time, thanks to the collaboration of two physical anthropologists, Kristina Scheelen and Jan Nováček, scientific evidence on excarnation of human bodies through carnivores in *dakhmas* is consistent and, further, data at the very beginning of Chorasmian history of the southeastern part of the Sultan-uiz-dag acknowledges their use as a burial ground.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS. 2.1 SUD17 SITE 01. This site, investigated in 2017, consists of a cluster of ossuary burials covered by a roughly circular mound of stones with a radius of ca. 3 m. Some of the burials were disturbed in modern times but most of them were still intact when excavated.



*Fig. 2. SUD 18 Site 01: the structure on top on the “nameless peak”.
Viewed from its south-east corner (Photo Minardi)*



Fig. 3. Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov (at the centre) visiting the site (Minardi)

A minimum of 32 individuals¹¹ were distributed in 12 ossuaries, arranged in four parallel rows and two groups. All of the ossuaries were manufactured in ceramic except one made of gypsum. It seems that none of the ossuaries was designed to contain the re-

mains of a single skeleton¹², with two being, in multiple cases, the minimum number of individuals recorded in one container and, in just one case, the maximum being six (detailed statistics and further details will be discussed in a forthcoming paper). The ossuaries were not originally buried in the ground but laid on the ground and separated by unworked stones. The fragment of another ossuary (No. 13), was found among the covering stones of the mound, and its presence indicates that a completely destroyed/decayed upper level of secondary depositions might have existed, or that at least one case of burial superimposition had occurred. The typology and shape of the ossuaries vary, and it might be possible that not all the containers were synchronous, as in the case of the gypsum specimen that appears to have been placed in a too-narrow space for it and with a different orientation (N-S). Typologically all the ossuaries, except for the above-mentioned gypsum specimen and the rectangular Ossuary 9 with square feet, are ovoid-shaped with small rounded feet, although their dimensions vary. Their dating encompasses the period from the 4th to the 6th century AD according to their typology (so called 'Afrighid', i.e. the beginning of the Chorasmian Late Antiquity) and radiocarbon dating results.

The archaeological excavation of the site was completed in 2017 along with an initial classification and scrutiny of the collected skeletal remains. The preliminary results of this work were presented by this writer in November 2017 at a conference held at the DAI in Berlin. Then during the 2018 KAE fieldwork season, Kristina Scheelen and Jan Nováček began a comprehensive and still ongoing anthropological examination of the skeletal remains. Their expertise confirmed what had only previously been assumed: all the skeletal remains discovered are highly incomplete and all the burials are of the secondary type; moreover, almost all the bones present traces of excarnation by animals such as canids (gnawing marks) and birds (beak and claw marks). In addition, cranial deformations were observed. Such bioarchaeological investigation is a first and the fact that the material under analysis belongs to a known Zoroastrian context means that it will begin to shed new light on the practice of this religion in Central Asia.

What seems thus clear is that the individuals who buried their relatives on the Sultan-uiz-dag at SUD17 Site 01 were following the prescriptions that we can read in the Avestan *Vendīdād*. The reason why this burial cluster formed and whether the persons using it belonged to the same clan/family or not is still an object of our ongoing inquiry.

2.2 SUD18 Site 01. This second key site, investigated in 2018, rises on the highest peak of the same area of SUD17 01. It is a square building with sides of ca. 7 m made of big and heavy stones bonded with clay mortar and built directly on bedrock. The interior consists of a small chamber (ca. 16 sq. m) with a floor of bedrock. The east and south walls of the building are the better-preserved ones, still standing up to a height of ca. 1 m because of having been protected by the fallen debris of their upper parts. The other north and west walls, due to the fact that they were laid out at a higher level on the natural soil, are on the contrary badly preserved since, differently from the others, they were not shielded from erosion by their debris, which instead rolled downhill on the steep slopes of the summit. The access was probably located on the west side of the building.

Erosion is quite strong on this nameless peak: overlooking on its south and east sides the flat land of Karakalpakstan, on the west, the other black summits and on the north the lower barren hills of the range ending in the Kyzyl-Kum, the peak is for most of the year exposed to strong winds, in winter to seasonal rains and frost, in summer to elevated heat. Amphibolite stones, characteristically fragile, dense and of low porosity, are

prone to erosion and so the barren and sheer peaks of the ‘Black Mountains’ crumble and shift constantly, especially in winter.

The interior of the building has been subject to strong wind and water erosion and no stratified context, apart from a layer of aeolian deposits mixed with minor debris and clay, has been found at its interior. Ceramic material has nonetheless been recovered on the surface, on the slopes of the summit (certainly belonging to the site due to the morphology of the area) and in the debris of the walls. This material (pale greenish-slip khoums but also red-slip bowls), currently under analysis, belongs to the Antique 1 facies of the Chorasmian period, very likely to its end, that is, the late 4th century BC¹³. During the excavation, a single sample for radiocarbon analysis was collected from the only fire feature discovered – the remains of a circular lodging (for a torch?) containing ashes and charcoal set in clay reddened by heat. This sample will likely confirm this dating. More recent material has not been found. Thus, it seems that the building was abandoned after its erection and never reused. Considering the lack of layers of occupation (although perhaps eroded), however, and the fact that the structure was erected in an area without water sources on the highest peak of southeastern Karakuduk – dominating an extended ossuary necropolis localized at its feet – it might be possible to infer that it was actually not used for a protracted period of time. If this is the case, we may therefore consider a funerary function for it: the edifice was built and then closed, not deserted. Other Antique 1 khoums found in the surroundings of the monument, possibly used as bone containers, might add some validity to this hypothesis. For these reasons I would tend to exclude a military use of the building (such as a watchtower), despite its commanding position and visibility from most of the fortified sites of the Chorasmian plain.

While the height of the building did not exceed about 3 m, judging from the stones collapsed from the east wall, the effort necessary to build the structure was nevertheless remarkable. The site is not easily accessible. The heavy stones, after having been hewn, had to be laid on top of one another and fixed with clay mortar. A single unit of this material, of irregular shape and variable size, can weigh up to 30 kg and water had to be carried on the steep small *saj* which is the most direct access to the summit. Moreover, wood would have been necessary for the scaffolding and the roofing, of which unfortunately there is no trace left. This extraordinary effort, as well as the archaeological evidence and the site’s antiquity, may be an indication of the building’s function as a ‘naus’, a building used to store bone containers.

2.3 OTHER DATA. In 2017 and 2018, the survey also ascertained the presence of several other ossuary burial sites in different locales in the southeastern portion of the Sultan-uiz-dag mountains. Most of these depositions were found in the area dominated by SUD18 Site 01, south of the site but also at a variable distance from it, for example in the area at the northeast of the *gorodishche* Burly-kala. The fragments of pottery found in association with the fragments of the ossuaries indicate a prolonged use of the area as an extended necropolis. Some of the ossuaries found are of the ‘architectonic type’ presenting battlements or arrow-slits; others, made in gypsum and pottery, were of shapes similar to those unearthed at SUD17 Site 01. Fragments of stone ossuaries have also been recorded.

The majority of the ossuaries, however, because they were simply laid on the ground without protection except for some stones, are very poorly preserved. In some cases, only flakes of ceramics – associated with potsherds – discovered on the summits re-

main to hint at their use as burial places. In other cases, ossuaries still within simple circles of stones have been recorded, such as the small cluster of tombs at the foot of the northern side of the 'nameless peak' of the SUD18 Site 01. Unfortunately only fragments of these have been found and are noted to be recently disturbed. It seems that before Late Antiquity the Chorasmians who deposited their dead on these mountains were not concerned with the long-term preservation of their mortal remains.

CONCLUDING REMARKS. The study of Chorasmian funerary evidence, resumed after a long hiatus, even in its early stages had already shown its potential and proven the value of further pursuit of archaeological fieldwork in the Karakalpak region. The KAE, with a series of significant discoveries, has completely reshaped the history of the region, putting it under a new and previously unknown light. Our work continues to demonstrate that archaeology in Chorasmia can have a large impact and broader repercussions on the study of the religious history of Eastern Iran.

The next steps will result in the completion of the survey project on the Sultan-uizdag, implementing the mapping of its funerary, as well as other, archaeological evidence and to integrate a thorough investigation of the *dakhma* of Chil'pūk within the current inquiry of the KAE on early Zoroastrianism.

In concluding this brief overview of our 2017 and 2018 fieldwork, I would like to again take this opportunity to thank Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov, eminent authority on the history and material culture of Ancient Chorasmia and personal friend of mine, for his continuing advice during fieldwork operations and for his encouragement and support of my project ideas in Karakalpak and Khorezm. I look forward to more collaborations with him on these projects in the near future.

NOTES

¹ Co-PIs: **A. Betts, M. Minardi, F. Grenet and M. Karlybaev.**

² Co-directed by **A. Betts** (Sydney) and **G. Khozhaniyazov** (Nukus).

³ **Амиров Ш., Хожаниязов Г., Беттс А.В.Г., Минарди М., Турсунбаева Х.** 'Археологические разведки в горах Султануиздаг в 2015 году' – ~~forthcoming~~ [in this volume]

⁴ According to the data obtained with a handheld GPS. The height of the peak results 368 m a.s.l. on Soviet topographic maps.

⁵ **Маньлов, Ю. П.** 1974. 'Бирюзовые выработки VI - V вв. до н. э. в Хорезме', *Вестник Каракалпакского филиала Академии наук Узбекской ССР* 1 (55): 53-57; 1975. 'Курганы VI-V веков до н. э. в Хорезме', *Узбекистонда ижтимоий фанлар/Общественные науки в Узбекистане* 3: 81-83; 1981. 'Новые данные о погребальном обряде Хорезма первых веков нашей эры'. **И. К. Косымбетов /В. Н. Ягодин**, *Археологические исследования в Каракалпакии*, Нукус: 50-64; unpublished doctoral thesis.

⁶ **Betts, A.V.G., Bonnat, M., Kidd, F., Grenet, F., Khashimov, S., Khozhaniyazov, G. & Minardi M.** 2015. 'Des divinités avestiques sur les peintures murales d'Akchakhan-kala, Ouzbékistan', *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 2015/III: 1369-1396; **Betts A.V.G., Grenet F., Yagodin V.N., Kidd F., Minardi M., Bonnat M. & Khashimov, S.** 2016. 'The Akchakhan-kala wall paintings: new perspectives on kingship and religion in Ancient Chorasmia', *Journal of Inner Asia Art and Archaeology* 7: 125-165.

⁷ A complete translation of the books of the Avesta was recently published in France: Lecoq, P. 2016. *Les livres de l'Avesta. Textes sacrés des Zoroastriens ou Mazdéens*. Paris.

⁸ For references, see: **Minardi M. & Amirov S.** 2017. 'The Zoroastrian funerary building of Angka Malaya', *Topoi* 21/1: 11-49.

⁹ **Гудкова А.В.** 1964. Ток-кала, Ташкент.

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¹⁰ Ягодин В.Н., Ходжайов Т.К. 1970. *Некрополь древнего Миздахкана*, Ташкент.

¹¹ Ossuary 6 was found completely empty while Ossuary 1 was heavily disturbed and only a few fragments of bones remained. They had to have contained at least the remains of 1 individual each.

¹² Although we do not have data on ossuaries 6 and 1, see note 11 above.

¹³ Minardi M. 2015. *Ancient Chorasmia. A polity between the semi-nomadic and sedentary cultural areas of Central Asia. Cultural interactions and local developments from the sixth century BC to the first century AD (Acta Iranica 56)*. Leuven.

KEYWORDS: Funerary archaeology, bioarchaeology, Chorasmia, Sultan-uiz-dag, Avesta

ҚОРАҚАЛПОҚ-АВСТРАЛИЯ ЭКСПЕДИЦИЯСИНING СУЛТОН УВАЙС ТОҒ БЎЙИЧА АРХЕОЛОГИК ТАҲЛИЛИ / СУЛТОН УВАЙС: ҚИСҚАЧА ШАРҲ

РЕЗЮМЕ: Австралия тадқиқот кенгашининг 170101770 сонли грант тадқиқот лойиҳаси ҳозирда Нукусдаги Ўзбекистон Фанлар Академияси Қорақалпоғистон филиалининг Гуманитар фанлар институти билан ҳамкорликда Қадимги Хоразмни ўрганаётган Қорақалпоқ-Австралия экспедицияси (ҚАЭ) ишини қўллаб-қувватламоқда. Унинг ҳомийлигида Қорақалпоғистондаги Султон Увайс тоғ тизмасида археологик изланишлар олиб борилди. Мазкур мақолада биз томондан ўтказилиб, ҳали нашр қилинмаган 2017-2018 йил сўровномалари, қазилма мавсумлари материаллари ва уларнинг таҳлили қисқача шарҳланган.

КАЛИТСЎЗЛАР: дафн археологияси, биоархеология, Хоразм, Султон Увайс тоғ, Авесто.

АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР ПО СУЛТАНУИЗДАГУ КАРАКАЛПАКСКО- АВСТРАЛИЙСКОЙ ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ / СУЛТАН-УВАЙС: КРАТКИЙ ОБЗОР

РЕЗЮМЕ: Грант 170101770 Исследовательского проекта Австралийского исследовательского совета в настоящее время поддерживает работу Каракалпакско-Австралийской экспедиции по Древнему Хорезму (КАЭ) в сотрудничестве с Институтом гуманитарных наук Каракалпакского отделения Академии наук Узбекистана, Нукус. Под этой эгидой проводились археологические исследования горного хребта Султануиздаг / Султан-Увайс Каракалпакстана. В этом документе представлен краткий обзор наших пока неопубликованных результатов опросов 2017-2018 года, сезонов раскопок и анализа материалов.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: погребальная археология, биоархеология, Хорезм, Султануиздаг, Авеста.

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Айсулу Искандерова

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Т. Ш. Ширинов

Рецензенты:
Д.К. Мирзаахмедов, Ф.А. Максудов

Редакционная коллегия:
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В сборнике освещаются результаты археологических, исторических, этнографических исследований, проведенных на территории Приаральского региона и сопредельных территорий. Хронологически охватывается широкий диапазон — от памятников античности до новейшего времени. Освещается планировка и топография городищ, история архитектуры, ремесло и ремесленная технология, а также вопросы развития идеологических воззрений и этнографических исследований.

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