

BRONZES FROM NORTHWEST AFGHANISTAN

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Our Soviet colleagues enriched our stock of knowledge concerning the Bronze Age of Northwest Afghanistan by quick and well aimed excavation. Unfortunately, these excavations were immediately followed by grave-robberies of formidable scale. Sarianidi mentions that thousands of graves belonging to the middle and the later half of the 2nd millennium B. C. have been plundered.¹ The objects unearthed were sold to foreigners via Kabul, even by vendors putting their collection at display in the open streets. One part evidently was exported to Paris, another one to New York. What became of the rest we shall see sooner or later (Fig. 1).

Sarianidi was quite aware that material gained by illicit digging had also to be used for scientific purposes.² He took many photographs in the bazaar of Kabul and described and compared the objects with his own finds and neighbouring cultures. Amiet studied the specimens available in Paris.³ As far as I know the French Archaeological Mission shall make salvage-purchases in accordance with the Government in Kabul.

I got the initiative to meditate on this matter from Sarianidi himself who showed me his photographs with great liberality in Moscow during my stay in 1977. In Summer 1978, I could see an extremely interesting collection of seal-amulets given as a loan to the Metropolitan Museum. Other things were shown to me by a dealer, E.H. Merrin, in the Fifth Avenue. Earlier, I had already asked Dr. Klimburg to make additional snaps in the bazaar of Kabul. So he did, and I have to thank him for his help. When I finally came to Kabul myself in autumn 1978, I took photographs of my own. Copies of them I presented to Sarianidi.

Let us compare the conclusions drawn by Sarianidi and Amiet from their studies of the undocumented objects:

1. Both scholars agree that objects from predatory excavations in Northwest Afghanistan have striking similarities to objects found at the southwestern fringe of the Iranian Plateau, in Luristan and former Elam. The connections are even more definite than we would expect on the basis of the grave-inventories.
2. Amiet infers from such comparisons that the chronological framework constructed by Sarianidi – in the middle and second half of the 2nd millennium B. C. – is not wide enough. Part of the tools “without passport” must be considerably older. We add that Amiet’s opinion is supported by Askarov. He studied the same Bactriano-Margianic Complex in Southern Uzbekistan on the basis of his own excavation and proposed that the first

1 Sarianidi 1978: 186

2 Sarianidi 1977, 1978

3 Amiet 1977, 1978



Fig. 1: Antiquities at display by a local dealer in a street of Kabul.

Author's photograph, October 1978.

phase started from about 1700 B. C.⁴ The date would be augmented by three and a half centuries, if we take into account the calibration according to the MASCA-system.⁵

Finds, strange and unexpected to that degree, demand almost too much of the excavator's phantasy. Specialists in neighbouring fields ought to offer their suggestions. In fact, Amiet with his solid knowledge of Elamic and proto-Elamic antiquities is a valuable partner of Sarianidi. I think that more scholars of different origin and orientation should participate in the discussion — at the risk that the excavator on the basis of unpublished material might easily reject their proposals.

I already ventured such an outsider's proposal.⁶ Here I offer another one:

According to the published reports, which are based on the excavations before 1975, Soviet scholars opened more than 500 graves which were not recently plundered, belonging to the Bactriano-Margianic Complex in Southern Uzbekistan and Northwestern Afghanistan.⁷ Only a small number of these graves (about 15 %) were robbed in antiquity. There are some collective tombs, in some cases they contain animal instead of human skeletons, and there are several epitaphs. Anyhow, what we have is a rather representative sample.

This sample has yielded the same types of pottery which were observed among the undocumented findings as far as I can see. There are a few exceptions, for instance, only among the stray-finds there are square earthen boxes with some sort of compartment in one corner. Amiet calls them "house-models", but they show more similarity to "braziers" or "censers for burning incense" observed in the Zaman-Baba culture around Buchara.⁸

Regarding the metal objects we find many types represented in the graves and among the undocumented finds as well: mirrors, pins, awls, bracelets, arrowheads, phials (?), seals and seal-amulets (Fig. 2). Some specific types, however, appear frequently among the material from predatory excavations but occur in the graves either in rather inexpressive variants, or very sparsely, or not at all.

4 Askarov 1977: 101

5 Ralph, Michael and Han 1973

6 Jettmar 1978

7 cf. Sarianidi 1977: 50, Askarov 1977: 38–46, 48–59, Askarov/Abdullaev 1978: 19–42

8 Kuz'mina 1958: 27



Fig. 2: Part of the dealer's stock.

Near a "house-model" we see a mattock (frequently observed in Hissar IIIB and IIIC), a spear-head, dagger-blades, mace-heads, bracelets, perfume-vessels, besides many objects of more recent origin. Author's photograph, October 1978.

In this short and preliminary report I want to mention the following types of bronzes underrepresented in controlled diggings:

1. Fork-shaped instruments, some of them with prongs shaped into hooks,⁹
2. Spear-heads of various forms, some of them socketed,¹⁰
3. Mace-heads of cylindrical form with prongs,¹¹
4. Mace-heads resembling axes, but without sharp edges,¹²
5. Mace-heads in shape of blunt socketed celts. There is one specimen transferred into a boar's head,¹³
6. Flat bronze axes (not published by Sarianidi but to be seen in his photographs).

In order to explain the lacking congruency between the types represented in the graves and those observed among the loot, I see several possible ways which are perhaps only fit for different groups of objects and, therefore, not exclusive:

a) We may presume that robbers opened graves belonging to an earlier period than those scientifically excavated. The shape of the bronze forks which frequently occur among the

⁹ Sarianidi 1977: 78, Fig. 37

¹⁰ Sarianidi 1977: 79, Fig. 38

¹¹ Sarianidi 1977, pl. II, 1, 3

¹² Sarianidi 1977: 75, Fig. 75

¹³ Sarianidi 1977, pl. II, 3

undocumented findings may point to this direction. They are not similar to late specimens from Armenia,¹⁴ but strongly reminiscent of those belonging to the Maikop culture. That would mean a dating still in the 3rd millennium B. C.¹⁵ That the Bactriano-Margianic Complex, indeed, had local roots going back into the 3rd millennium B. C. is indicated by radiocarbon dates of the so-called round building at Dashly 3, published by Sarianidi without further comment,¹⁶ in spite of the fact that they make his chronological system highly questionable. They are 1720 ± 150 B. C., 2110 ± 70 B. C., and 2280 ± 70 B. C., i. e., between 300 and 900 years older than the typical Bactriano-Margianic grave opened at the same spot: 1390 ± 50 B. C. Once more, Amiet's opinion that there must still be an unknown formative stage is confirmed.

We must, however, concede that the pottery found by illicit diggers cannot be explained in the same way. It is too homogeneous, it hardly represents an evolution lasting for more than one millennium.

If we would assume that a rather large part of the bronzes comes from earlier graves than those hitherto scientifically excavated, we must make up this hypothesis by the conjecture that such graves had no pottery at all. Otherwise, the grave-robbers would have brought such pottery to Kabul, as they did with ceramics found in later burials.

b) If we now consider the possibility that most of the enigmatic objects do not belong to an earlier or later period but are rather contemporary to the objects scientifically excavated, then we must assume that they come from cemeteries or isolated graves equipped with normal pottery but with sophisticated bronzes and stone objects as well. Maybe, such things were the paraphernalia of chiefs or priests.

c) A variant of this explanation would be the supposition that such fanciful and expressive specimens were not found in burials but in sanctuaries where they were deposited as votive-offerings, as was the custom in Luristan, e. g., in Surkh-Dum.¹⁷

Peculiar stone objects abundantly offered by dealers in the streets of Kabul could have such an origin. I am speaking of "miniature columns", as known from Hissar III C,¹⁸ "round stone discs with a grip" (a very beautiful piece was shown to me by Mr. Merrin), and cigar-shaped stone rollers, sometimes more than one metre long (Fig. 3). A set precisely encompassing these three objects was found near the altar of room 7 in the funeral sanctuary of Altyn-depe supposedly belonging to the end of the 3rd millennium B. C.¹⁹ Certainly, the "roller" of Altyn-depe had the same purpose but not the same design. It is biconical and has a sharp edge.

Of course, such objects may also occur in graves as paraphernalia of priests, as in Hissar III C.²⁰

14 Martirosjan 1964: 143, 158

15 Machmudov/Munčev/Narimanov 1968: 24, Munčev 1975: 334

16 Sarianidi 1977: 168

17 Amiet 1976: 1

18 Schmidt 1937: 216–219

19 Masson 1974: 8, Fig. 5

20 Schmidt 1937: 216

Fig. 3: Two “miniature columns”, a round stone disc with a grip, and four “cigar-shaped rollers” at display in the streets of Kabul before a big pile of Bronze Age ceramics. Photograph by the author, October 1978



We could argue for the explanations b) and c), i. e., contemporary origin but occurrence in exceptional graves or sanctuaries, that a few of the imaginative objects were found in graves, though not in Afghanistan, but in South Uzbekistan. In grave no. 22 of Sapallitepa a battle-axe was found,²¹ in grave no. 93 of Džarkutan two mace-heads in shape of socketed celts were discovered. In South Uzbekistan miniature models of axes were observed. One miniature column was found in Dashly, but not in a grave.²²

d) Finally, a fascinating hypothesis should be mentioned:

The graves excavated until now seem to belong to sedentary farming communities. Askarov found well-preserved grains of wheat (*Triticum compactum* Host, *Triticum aestivum* 1) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare* 1) and the seeds of grapes.²³ Sarianidi mentions grains of wheat at Dashly 3.²⁴ Possibly, nomadic herdsman lived in the same area as the settlers in some sort of symbiosis. Maybe, most of the more sophisticated metal objects belonged to the equipment of such pastoralists. Perhaps their chiefs had bronze mace-heads as symbols of rank.

The assumption that there was a web of nomadic pastoralists in vast areas of the Near and Middle East including Afghanistan became quite fashionable in the last years.²⁵ We could almost say that Father Schmidt's "Hirtenkulturkreis" had some sort of resurrection. Shaffer believes that archaeological assemblages recovered at Dara-i-Nur and identified by Dupree as "Goat Cult Neolithic" are, in fact, the cultural remains of Bronze Age nomads and that their interaction with the sedentary agriculturists of Dashly can be traced in the strange coincidence that both populations made burials of domestic animals, goats at Dara-i-Nur and sheep burials at Dashly (and in South Uzbekistan). Shaffer summarizes as follows:²⁶

"In contrast the Afghan data indicates a strong probability that specialized agriculture and specialized pastoral nomadism developed as contemporary and reinforcing adaptations allowing maximum use of resources" ... "The existence of such a bi-dimensional adaptation and the associated symbiotic relationships which resulted are vital in under-

21 Askarov 1977, pl. XXVIII 2

22 Sarianidi 1978, Fig. 23

23 Askarov 1977: 218

24 Sarianidi 1977: 130

25 cf. Klengel 1972

26 Shaffer 1978: 186

standing the cultural similarities perceived through space and time and the distribution of items with limited sources of origin."

Amiet stresses the fact that in the chronological sequence elaborated for Luristan some periods are represented by burials only, not by settlements.²⁷ Apparently, the cemeteries belong to nomadic tribes. Perhaps such nomadic tribes were engaged in trade and had far-reaching relations, as far as Bactria.²⁸

Artamonov, one of the classics of Soviet archaeology, and for many years director of the Hermitage, died in 1972. Five years later, one of his articles was published, evidently too progressive for immediate use. In this article he disproved a thesis which he himself had helped to formulate and which subsequently became almost a dogma, namely, that pastoral nomadism only arose at the turn of the 2nd to the 1st millennium B. C. The posthumous publication means that now most of his colleagues are ready to accept his self-criticism.²⁹

During the conference "Ethnic Problems of the Early History of Central Asia", held at Dushanbe in October 1977, it became clear for the participants that interaction of aboriginal and migrant tribes must have been an important factor in the cultural history of India as well as the areas west of it.

If I take into consideration the general tendency to reckon with the existence of migrant populations which is difficult to be grasped already during the 3rd and 2nd millennia B. C., then it seems quite possible to me that a part of the still enigmatic bronze objects came from the graves of nomads, perhaps without pottery of their own, or from their ceremonial centres if they had no graves.

It is by no means impossible that some tribes of the nomads had no graves at all. Perhaps a part of the Iranians took over this tradition.³⁰ Certainly, the Kafirs who entered the valleys of the Hindukush already in the 2nd millennium B. C., kept it up almost to the present day. When Alexander fought the mountain tribes there, he ordered to burn down the graves of the locals, evidently the wooden chests as today, in order to prevent a night-attack.³¹ In the Tarim Basin the exposure of dead bodies is attested back to the Han period.³²

But this does not mean, that all pastoral tribes had the same burial customs. In the Vachš valley there were catacombs under kurgans.³³ In the Biškent valley a variety of rituals existed, some of them showing Vedic influence.³⁴

If we accept the hypothesis that the unexplained objects among the bronzes of Northwest Afghanistan indicate pastoral tribes of this region, it would be easy to explain some otherwise startling observations:

1. The wide-spread and far-reaching affinities as shown by typological comparisons.

27 Amiet 1976: 99–105

28 Amiet 1978: 154

29 Artamonov 1977

30 Humbach 1961

31 Lentz 1938

32 Maringer 1950: 61–140

33 Tigrovaja Balka, P'jankova 1974

34 Mandel'stam 1968, Litvinskij/Zejmal/Medvedskaja 1973

Fig. 4: Mace-heads in form of blunt socketed celts in an antiquities shop in Kabul.
Photograph by the author, October 1978



If the socketed celt in Upper Eurasia really is of Far Eastern origin – a possibility already stressed by Childe³⁵ – then we could explain the socketed hammers with oval cross-section observed among the stray-finds as derivatives from socketed celts rooted in South East Asia (Fig. 4).³⁶ A Soviet author asked whether tin bronze came to the western world from the Far East where it was used since the 4th millennium B. C.³⁷

2. The ancestral rôle of some elements of the Bactriano-Margianic Complex adhering to important symbols of rank among the Northern Nomads of the Eurasian steppes.

I think that some of the burial monuments belonging to the leaders of tribal confederations in the north can be understood in this way. The temple-town at Dashly 3 was the prototype of the mausoleum Koj-Krylgan kala in Khorezmia and of the much earlier Aržan Kurgan in Tuva (erected during the 7th century B. C.).³⁸

Sarianidi already laid stress upon the close affinities between the ceremonial axes (without cutting edge) of Bactria and the Iranian bronze hammers described by Deshayes.^{39,40} But we may add that the so-called horse-head sceptres⁴¹ used in the Caucasus, in Scythia and in Middle Europe under Thraco-Cimmerian influence are most certainly later offshoots (Fig. 5).

The situation may indicate that the economic and political structure of the Northern Nomads evolved under the influence of their southern predecessors who were integrated in the political system of the evolving states since a long time.⁴²

35 Childe 1954

36 Solheim 1972: 71

37 Selimchanov 1970: 71

38 Jettmar 1978: 91

39 Sarianidi 1978: 187

40 Deshayes 1958

41 Il'inskaja 1965

42 Klengel 1972

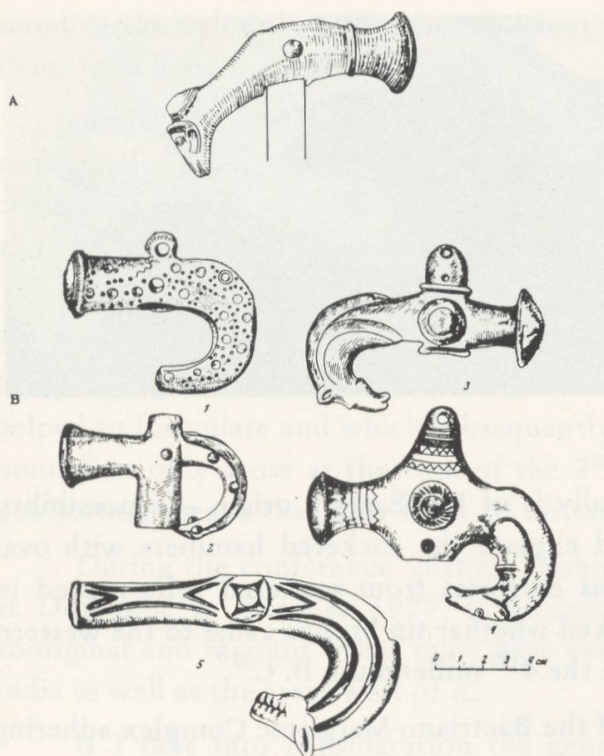


Fig. 5:

- A — “Iranian” bronze hammer published by Deshayes (1958, pl. XXIII, 3) allegedly found between Delphi and Thermi.
- B — Bronze sceptres of the pre-Scythian period, after Il’inskaja 1965.
- 1 — from Kisköszeg, 2 — from Předměřice,
 2 — from the Sárvíz-Canal, 4 — from the Komitat Turócz,
 5 — from a cemetery near Kislovodsk.

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