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A Decorated Ivory Belt from Tilla Bulak, Southern Uzbekistan

Martin Gruber, Jangar Il'yasov and Kai Kaniuth*

Abstract
The ivory belt-plate, one of two found in a burial at the site of Tilla Bulak, Uzbekistan, shows a battle scene between two groups of mounted warriors. It belongs to a small group of figural belt plates from the region and is dated iconographically to the 1st century BC / 1st century AD. The elephant tooth from which it was worked was more than 2000 years old at the time.

Keywords
Middle Asia, Uzbekistan, Burial, Ivory, Belt, Tilla Bulak, Antiquity

Introduction

Tilla Bulak is a site in the Kugitang area of the Sherabad district, Southern Uzbekistan (Fig. 1). The region is situated at a height of 800-850 m AMSL, bordered in the west by the towering Kugitang mountain range with summits above 3000 m, and in the east by a barren ridge of some 900-950 m elevation, separating this small piedmont valley from the alluvial plain of the Surkhandarya river. Access to the Kugitang district is possible on foot from all sides (albeit with difficulty from the west), but best manageable with animals or carts only from the northern and southern ends, i.e. the direction of the modern Sherabad-Guzar road or from Kelif. In addition, two rivers which water the region break through the easterly ridge near Gaz and Aktash and provide comparatively easy access from the Surkhandarya plain. The major settlement of the Kugitang region is Pashkhurt (Fig. 2).

* Martin Gruber and Kai Kaniuth: Institut für Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Universität München, Geschwister-Scholl-Pl. 1, 80539, München, Deutschland, Email martingruber_mg@yahoo.de, kaniuth@vaa.fak12.uni-muenchen.de; Jangar Il'yasov: Institute for Art Studies, Academy of sciences of Uzbekistan, 2, Mustakillik sq., 100029, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Email jangaril@hotmail.com.

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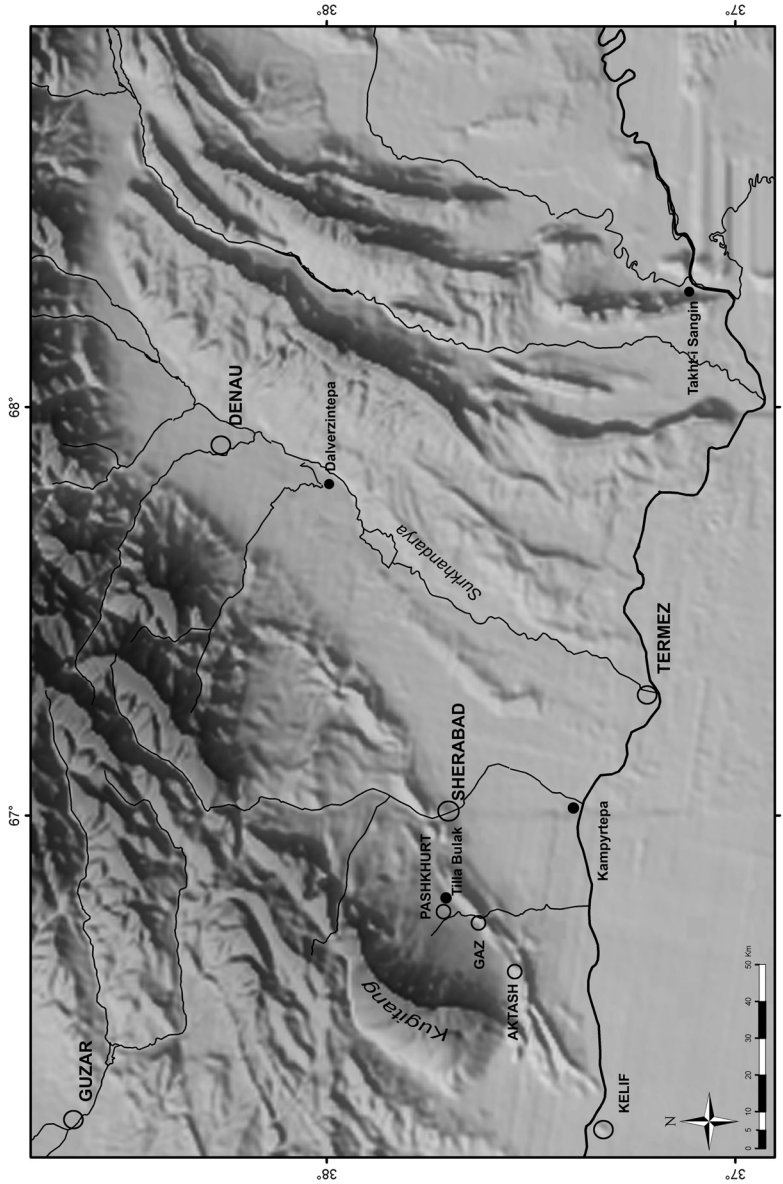

Fig. 1. Regional map of Surkhandarya Obl.

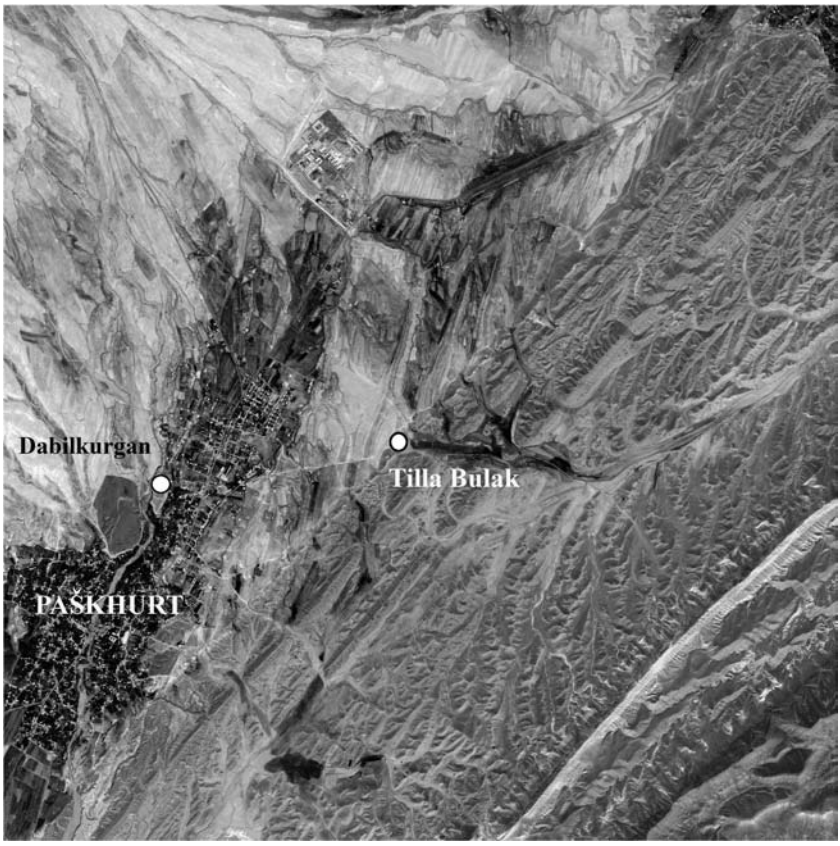

Fig. 2. Satellite image of the Pashkhurt environs.

In contrast to the Surkhandarya plain itself, the peripheral Kugitang region has received hardly any scholarly attention. A single survey was carried out in the late 1960s by E. Rtveladze,[1] while a second survey is under way, headed by L. Stančo.[2] The largest of the Pashkhurt sites, Dabilkurgan, with settlement layers assumed to go back into pre-Hellenistic times,[3] was excavated from 2002–2006 by a joint team of the Tokharistan Archaeological Expedition (TAE)[4] and the Ancient Orient Museum, Moscow.[5]

[1] Rtveladze & Khakimov 1973.
[2] Danielisova *et alii* 2009.
[3] Rtveladze 2002, 126.
[4] Institute of Art History, Tashkent.
[5] Bolelov & Il'yasov 2006.

Discovered and sounded by the Dabilkurgan working group in 2006, Tilla Bulak has been the centre of another joint research project of TAE in collaboration with Munich University. Excavations here took place from 2007 until 2010.[6] Tilla Bulak is essentially a site of the early second millennium BC Sapalli Culture,[7] when southern Uzbekistan was colonized by agriculturalists of the Namazga tradition from either northern Afghanistan or Turkmenistan. The Late Bronze Age site is a small hamlet of 0.4 ha, strategically located atop a natural hill steeply sloped on three sides, commanding one of the region's few perennial springs and a choice agricultural area immediately to the east (Fig. 3). These springs, generated by a tectonic fold running in NNE-SSW direction which is clearly visible on satellite imagery, were the focal points of the initial settlement in the 20th century BC (LB I).[8] After some two-hundred years, the Bronze Age settlement was abandoned. No further activity at the site can be documented archaeologically for almost two millennia: During the Late Bronze II period, the scanty evidence points to a shift of the preferred settlement locations towards the river Dabilsaï, within the area of the modern town of Pashkhurt.[9] After the mid-2nd millennium BC, no settlements are known in the entire Kugitang area until the Later Iron Age. But even after this period, with the major sites of Dabilkurgan and Kirk Kiz (near Gaz), and smaller places such as Maïdantepa, our knowledge is scanty at best (Fig. 2).[10]

Some time in the late 1st millennium BC, another use began to be made of Tilla Bulak, namely as a burial ground. The custom of selecting isolated hillocks for individual interments has been fairly widespread since then, as all sites sounded during our project (Tilla Bulak, Ara Bulak, Khontepa) attest. At Tilla Bulak, the medieval graves regularly intersect with Bronze Age burials. The question is difficult to answer, whether this way of burial, which is habitually connected with herders, could indeed be indicative of a certain subsistence mode, or whether a more detailed model of interaction between town dwellers and the landscape around them should be considered. Altogether, eleven graves were found at Tilla Bulak (Figs. 4, 5), of which eight date to the Bronze Age; the remainder are intrusive into the Bronze Age strata (Tab. 1). One of these graves merits our particular attention.

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[6] Kaniuth 2007; 2009; 2010a; 2011.
[7] Askarov 1973, 1977, 1981; Askarov & Abdullaev 1983.
[8] Kaniuth 2010; for the phasing of the Sapalli Culture see Teufer 2005.
[9] Mokroborodov 2006; Kaniuth 2010, 154-155.
[10] For these sites see Danielisova *et alii* 2009.

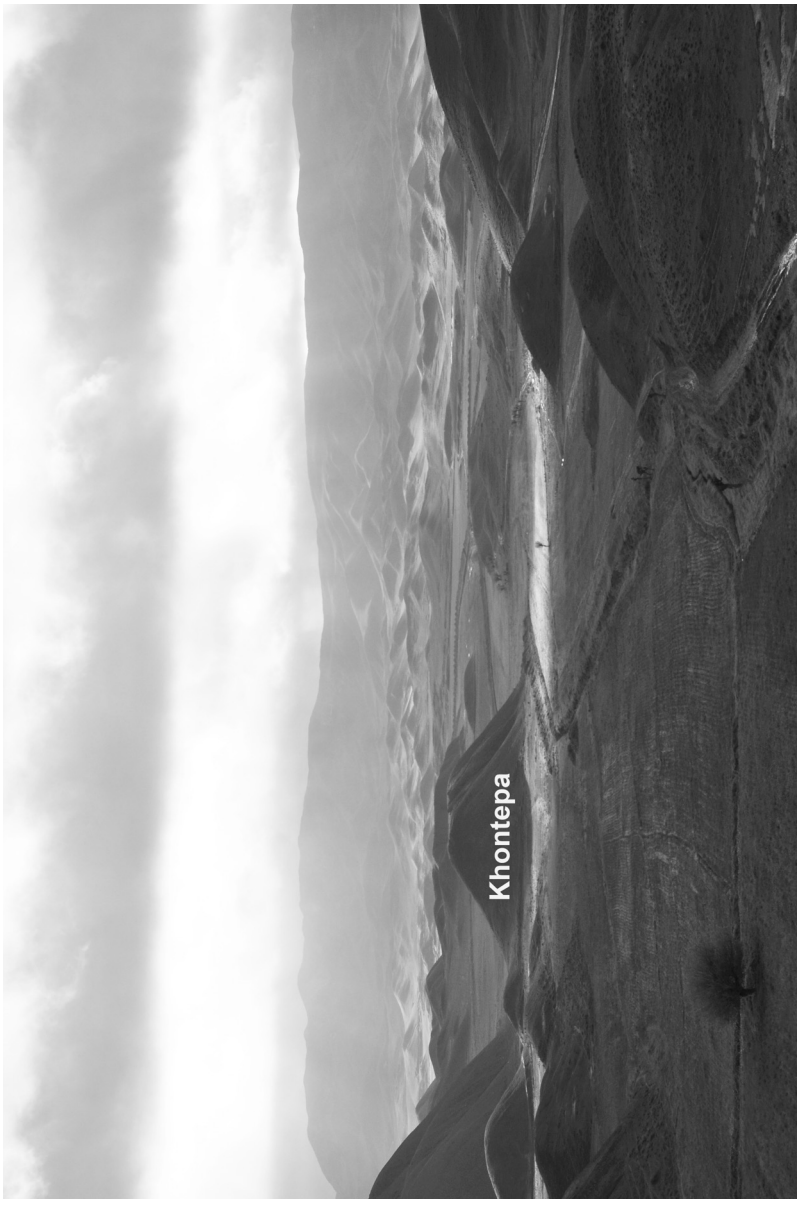

Fig. 3. Agricultural area as seen from Tilla Bulak with the Early Medieval Khontepa at centre left.

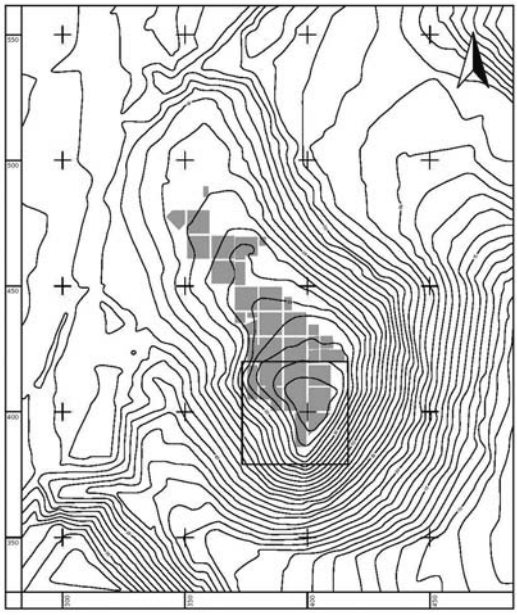

Fig. 4. Topographic plan of Tilla Bulak.

Grave 3

The burial chamber of Grave 3 was found just northwest of the top of the modern hill in the south-eastern corner of area 390/400[11] on April 15, 2010 and excavated until the season's last field day on April 17. The grave was oriented northwest-southeast and consists of a vertical shaft (context TB-655) with a parallel burial chamber (TB-936) cut into the north-eastern side of the shaft's base (Fig. 6). Only half of the grave shaft and two thirds of the burial chamber were within the trench as originally excavated; the remainder extended into the southern baulk. The southern portion of the burial chamber was therefore emptied from the standing section on the final day of fieldwork, but the larger portion of the shaft was left in situ. While this somewhat unsatisfactory solution was dictated by the close of the 2010 campaign, we are fortunate in having the complete section along the southern edge of trench

[11] The Tilla Bulak grid has as its base an arbitrary datum on the highest point of the hill, with the coordinates 400 m East / 400 m North, and a given elevation of 100 m. Areas and quadrants are designated by the coordinates of their south-western corner point, *i.e.* area 390/400 is the 10 × 10 m square north-east of point 390 E/400 N.

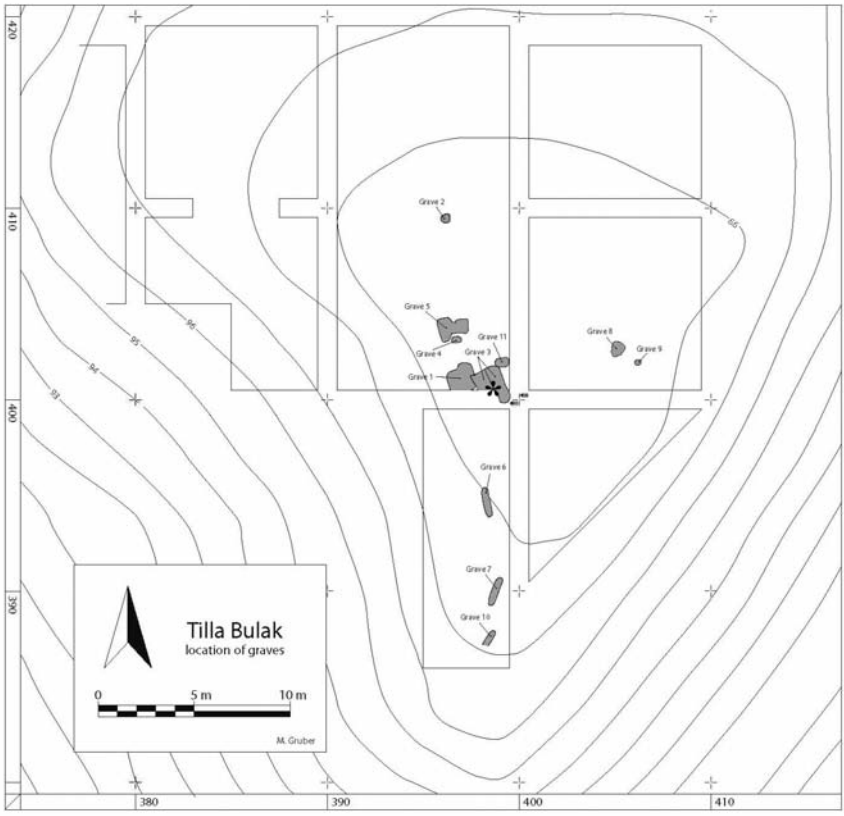

Fig. 5. Plan of burials found in Tilla Bulak; Grave 3 marked with an asterisk.

390/400 preserved and documented (Fig. 7), facilitating the stratigraphic placement of the burial.

Stratigraphic Situation

The Late Bronze Age settlement into which Grave 3 was dug is composed of several occupation levels which for reasons of simplicity we conflate here into an "earlier" and a "later" group.[12] The earlier walls of the settlement rest on

[12] Since designations of levels may yet change as a result of our ongoing analysis, we will refer all readers to the final report of the excavation for a detailed description of the stratigraphic situation. For preliminary assessments see Kaniuth 2007, 36; 2009, 76 and 2010, 131, according to which the "early" LBA levels would correspond with levels A and B-1, and the "late" LBA levels with levels B-2 and C, respectively.

Table 1. List of burials from Tilla Bulak

Number	Context number	Inhumation	Grave inventory	Age	Date
1	TB-678 (pit)		None	adult	Bronze Age?
2	TB-724	KF-635	Pottery	infant	Bronze Age
3	TB-450 (Burial in shaft TB-655)	KF-646	Animal bones	infant	Bronze Age
3	TB-936 (pit) TB-655 (shaft)	KF-862	KF-863 (Ivory belt plates) KF-864 (Bronze studs) Animal Bones	adult	Antique
4	TB-794	KF-704	Animal Bones	infant	Bronze Age
5	TB-843 (pit) TB-820 (shaft)	KF-742	Pottery	adult	Bronze Age
6	TB-916		None	adult	Antique/Medieval?
7	TB-937		None	adult	Antique/Medieval?
8	TB 960	KF-873	Pottery, animal bones	adult	Bronze Age
9	TB-955	KF-866	Pottery	infant	Bronze Age
10	TB-956		None	inf./juv	Antique/Medieval?
11	TB-985 (pit)	KF-925	Pottery, animal bones	infant	Bronze Age

virgin soil. Floor level TB-959 (Fig. 7, *11*) belongs to these walls and was partially removed when the burial chamber was dug. The end of these earlier levels came through a destructive fire. The rooms were filled with collapse, including remains of burnt roof beams and thick layers of burnt mud-brick debris (Fig. 7, *7-10*). Shortly after the fire, (this part of) the settlement was rebuilt partially along the older plan but with some modifications. One of these was the extension of a narrow street running uphill in a north-south direction along the eastern portion of areas 390/420-390/400. In the earlier levels it ran against a massive east-west wall (TB-643) which served as a retaining wall between two sections of the settlement, with a difference of 0.50 m in height between contemporary levels on the northern and the (higher) southern sides. In the later levels an opening was cut into this wall and the street continued southwards. The calcareous greenish deposits found on this alley (Fig. 7, no. 4) are perhaps the result of a gradual accumulation of thin tip-lines from the rubbish thrown out of the houses. Another rebuilding followed during the later phases, when the east-west wall (TB-643) was partially cut

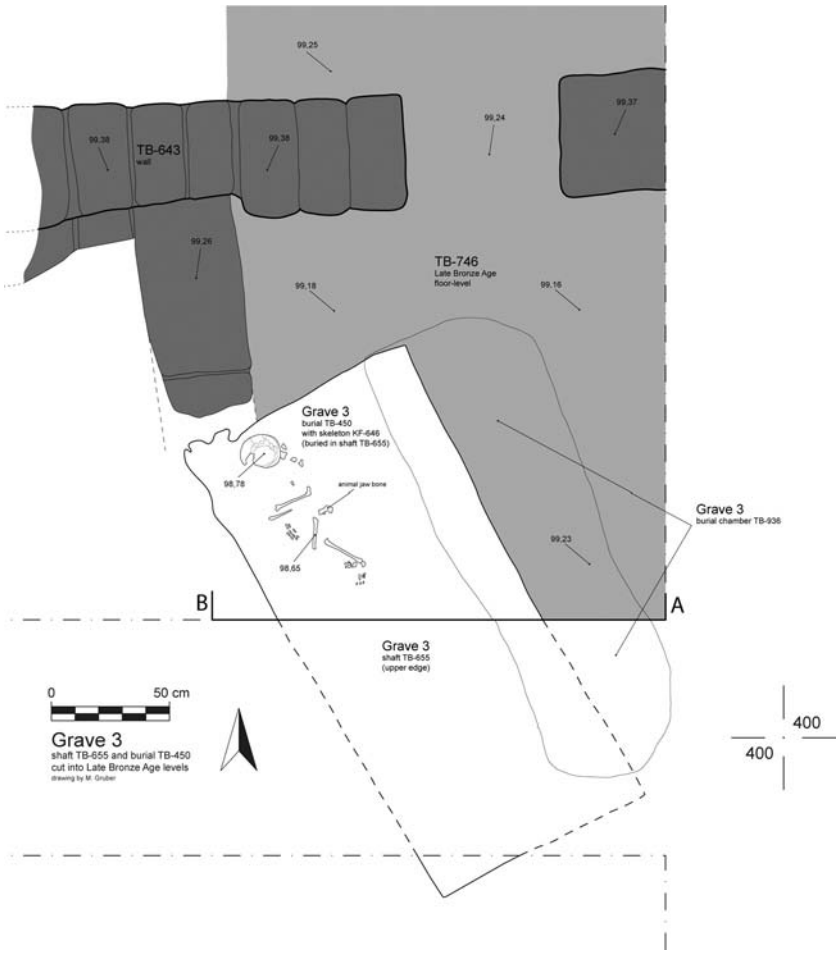

Fig. 6. Tilla Bulak Grave 3, plan of shaft TB-655.

down and rebuilt at a slightly different angle. The width of the opening was narrowed and the new surface (TB-746) now consisted of solid brown clay (Fig. 7, *3*).[13] Succeeding settlement layers (Fig. 7, *2*)[14] testify to a continuous occupation, although no substantial remains have survived.

[13] On the western side of the section no limit of floor-level TB-746 could be recognized, therefore it seems probable that it was cut away by the grave shaft. Some loose mud-bricks visible in the section (fig. 7, *5*) could indicate a former wall or a feature that delimited the floor.

[14] See also the sequence of street-levels just north of the opening without preserved architectural features (Kaniuth 2010, fig. 4).

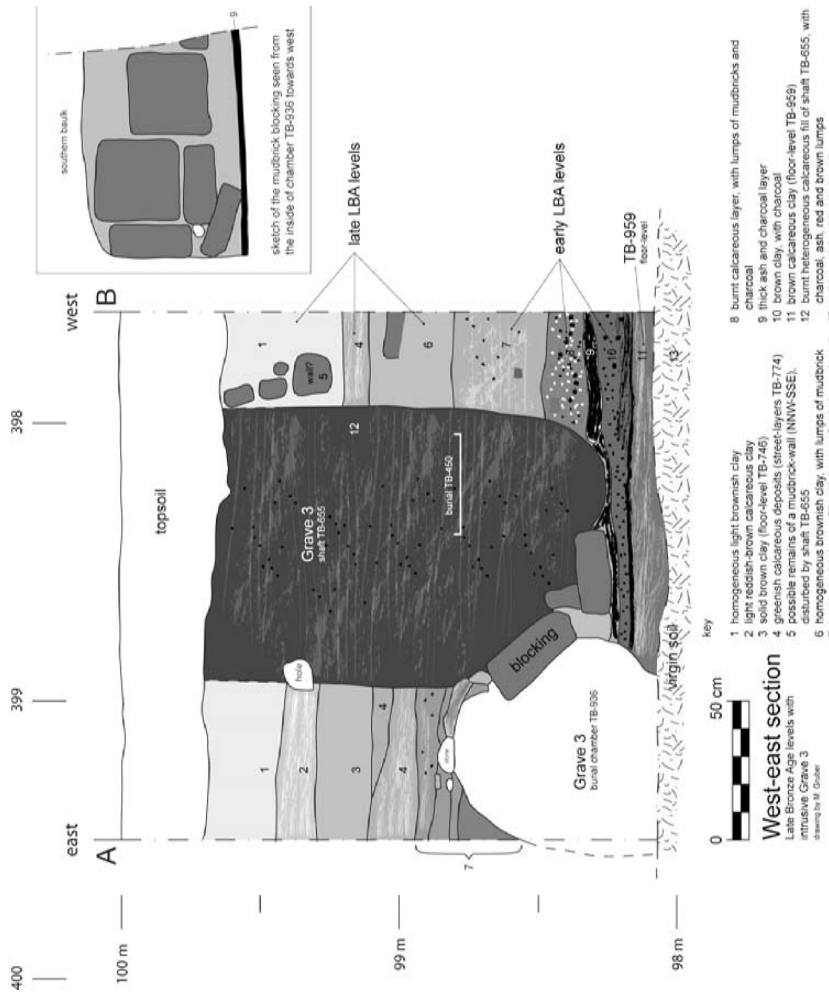

Fig. 7. Section along 400 N between 397,50 and 399,50 E.

The shaft of Grave 3 measured 2.30 × 1.00 m at the top. During excavation, the first traces of its dark-coloured fill were discovered at 99.70 m immediately after clearance of the topsoil. This was the highest preserved level of the shaft – of course, the original surface from which the grave was excavated may well have been higher. The shaft was dug straight down into the Late Bronze Age levels to a depth of at least 1.44 m. Its sides were nearly vertical. At the bottom (around 98.24 m) an opening 0.45 m high was cut along the entire eastern length of the shaft, giving access to the burial chamber, measuring 2.05 × 0.70 m, just sufficient to accommodate the body of the deceased. After the funeral, the shaft was filled up with a heterogeneous mixture of burnt dark material easily distinguishable from the surrounding soil, with the exception of its lower parts, where it was excavated from similarly textured burnt layers. The fill is composed of charcoal, red or brownish lumps of clay, ash and chalk particles. The pottery contained in the shaft may be divided into two units:

TB10-KER 2142 upper part of fill (99.70-98.92 m); 31 potsherds: (0.74 kg) (Fig. 8).
TB10-KER 3012 lower part of fill (98.92-98.26 m); 52 potsherds: (2.17 kg) (Fig. 9).

Apart from the physical characteristics of the fill, the altogether small quantity of sherds (83) suggests that the shaft had not been filled in with the soil heaped up during its excavation. All diagnostic pieces (in total 16) are preserved only in small fragments and must therefore be considered accidental inclusions. Among them were fragments of high footed bowls with inward-curving rims (Fig. 8, TB09-KER-2142-01.04; TB10-KER-3012-08.09), a conical bowl with sinuous body (Fig. 8, TB09-KER-2142-02), an open-spouted cup (Fig. 9, TB10-KER-3012-10) and different fragments of small jars and beakers (Fig. 8, TB09-KER-2142-05; Fig. 9, TB10-KER-3012-05.06.07). All ceramic finds date to the Late Bronze Age Sapalli culture, more precisely to its earliest phase (LB Ia),[15] which is fully in line with the LBA occupational history of the site. Only one rounded base of a handmade miniature vessel (Fig. 9, TB10-KER-3012-03) might conceivably be of post-Bronze Age date.

The burial chamber stretches along the whole eastern side of the shaft and measures 0.70 × 2.00 m, with a maximum height of 0.73 m. The actual level of the burial lies *c.* 0.20 m below the shaft's base directly on virgin soil. The upper side of the chamber is simply rounded without any additional features.

[15] Following Teufer 2005.

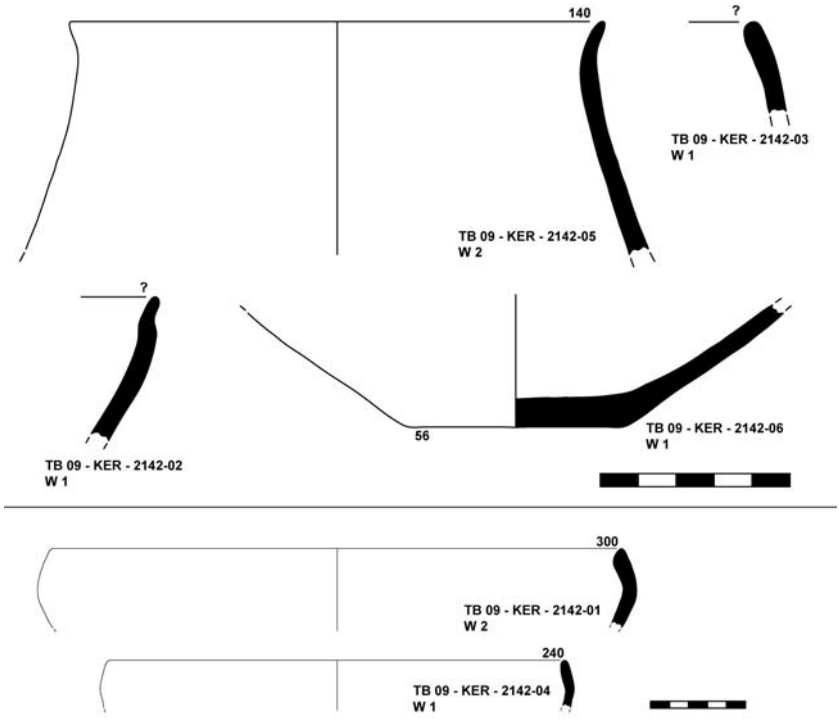

Fig. 8. Pottery collection TB10-KER 2142.

It was filled up with loose soil, probably through natural processes, because the superimposed layers showed no signs of collapse. The mudbrick blocking was built with bricks measuring 35 × 35 × 15 cm, arranged in an irregular pattern (see sketch included in Fig. 7).

Burial 3 also disturbed a LBA grave which was itself intrusive into the settlement layers: The adult inhumation in Grave 1 lay in a flexed position facing southwest with its head towards northwest. The shaft of Grave 3 damaged the south-eastern edge of the burial chamber cutting away the pelvis, the upper parts of the thigh bones and the feet of the skeleton. Two loose bones lying inside the shaft of Grave 3 must, because of their size, belong to this Bronze Age grave (the southern bone-fragment could be one of the displaced femoral heads) (Fig. 10).

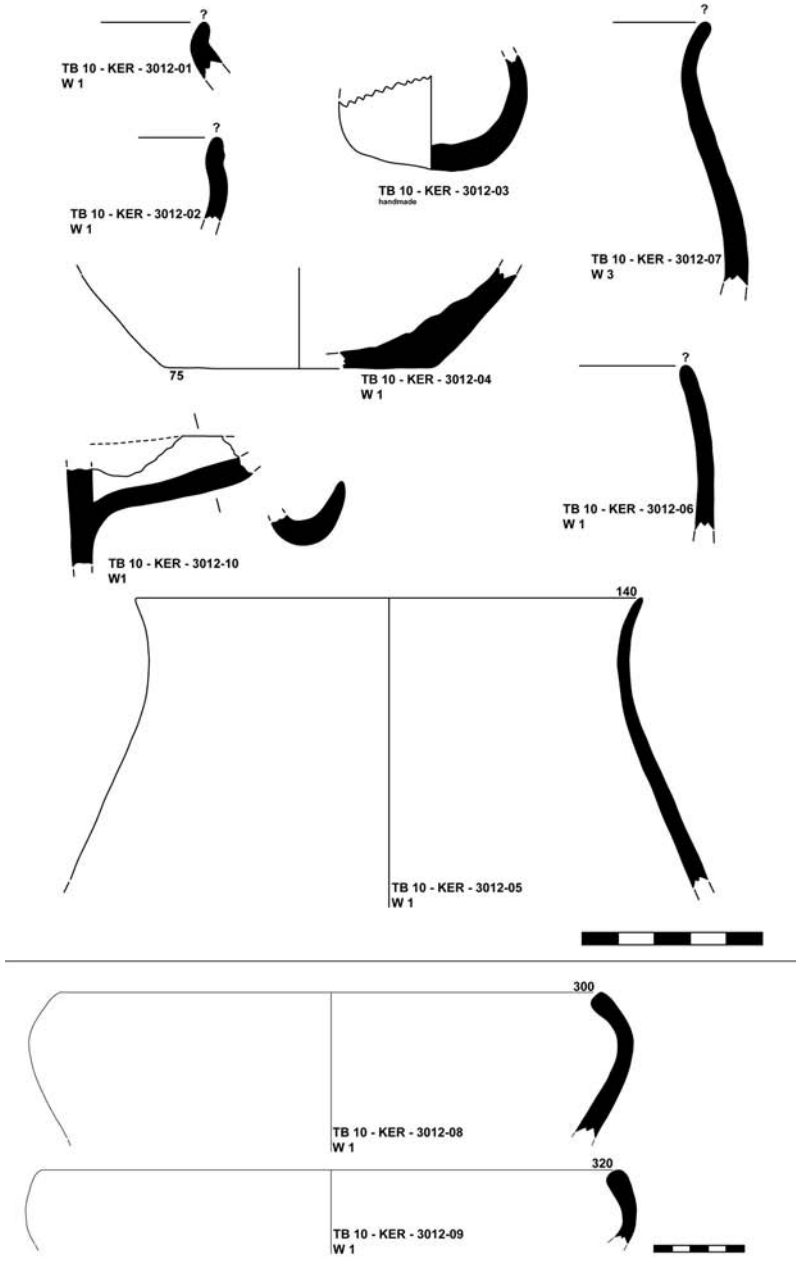

Fig. 9. Pottery collection TB10-KER 3012.

Fig. 10. Photograph showing relationship of Tilla Bulak Graves 3 (a) and 1 (b).

The Burials of Grave 3

Grave 3 held two inhumations, a child burial (TB-450) within the shaft and the adult main burial in the actual chamber (TB-936). The child burial lay close to the western side of the shaft at *c*. 98.60-98.80 m (Figs. 6, 10). No additional pits or disturbances in the upper half of the shaft could be made out; thus, it seems to have been deposited during the infilling of the shaft. The skeleton (KF-646) was undisturbed but in large parts decayed – only the damaged skull and extremities were preserved. The body lay on its right side with the head towards the northwest. The legs were slightly flexed. With the exception of an animal jaw bone (Fig. 10, *a*) lying at the height of the pelvis no grave goods were found with this skeleton. The femora and the two loose bone-fragments next to the burial (Fig. 10, *b*) belong to the older (Late Bronze) Grave 1 which was partially cut by the shaft TB-655.

The main burial (TB-936 with skeleton KF-862) lay in an extended position with its head towards north-northwest, originally perhaps facing west, with both arms extended along the body (Fig. 11). The skeleton was almost completely preserved, but the bones were extremely fragile. No anthropological analysis of the skeleton has so far been carried out, but according to size and general cranial features, our preliminary examination suggests the burial of an adult male.

The Inventory of Grave 3

Several objects were interred with the deceased as part of its garment or personal equipment: In his left hand he held an object of organic material, possibly a wooden rod or thick leather whip, now completely decayed to a soft grayish-white substance. It was decorated with 43 bronze studs (KF-864). Their position allows for a plausible reconstruction, with the nails driven into the "rod" in three rows arranged lengthwise (Figs. 11, 12, 13). Immediately next to the hand, and perhaps originally as part of a handle, lay chips of wood and fragments of a harder reddish material (leather?). At two points along the eastern side of the body further traces of wood were discovered (Fig. 11). Our first assumption, that they were remains of a coffin or plank running along the back side of the burial chamber, could not be confirmed, because in that case much more material should have survived in spite of the conditions. It seems more likely that it was originally a wooden stick at least 0.40 m long. A disturbance in the eastern portion of the grave chamber affected both this stick, and the tip of the belt plate (see below). In

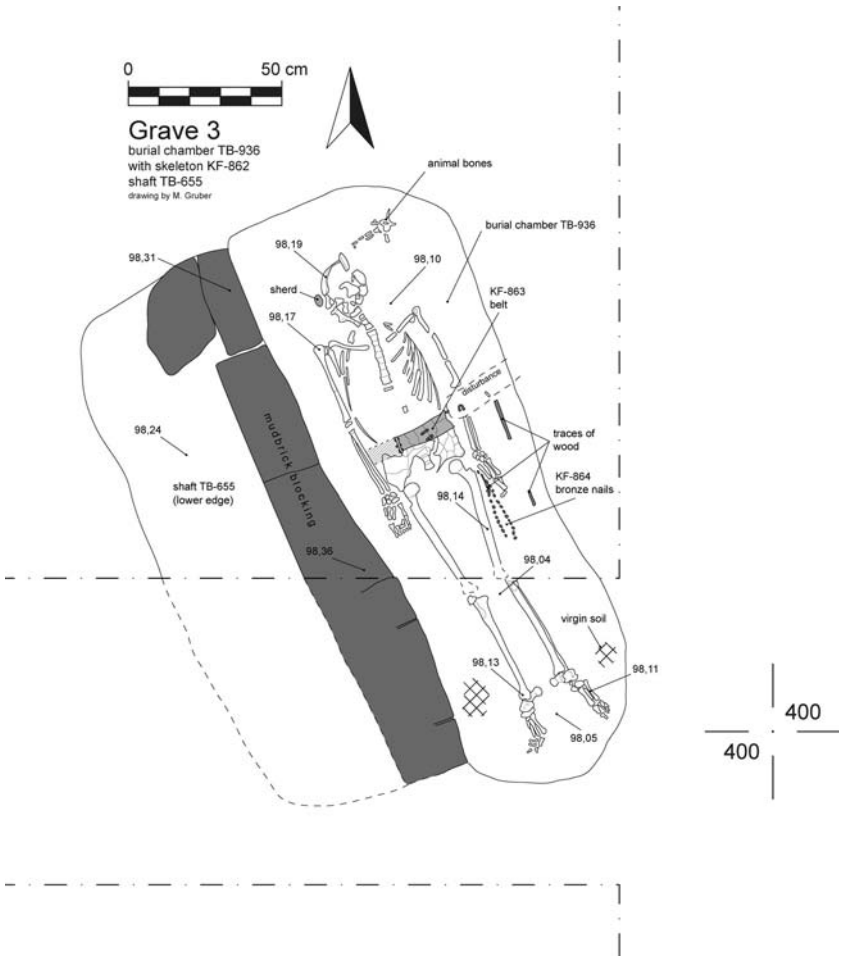

Fig. 11. Tilla Bulak Grave 3, plan of pit TB-936 and lower portion of shaft TB-655.

this disturbance, an omega-shaped bronze object with two rivets (Fig. 14) was found; originally it must have belonged to the belt, probably as a sort of D-ring to attach further gear. The same disturbance caused the disappearance of the upper half of the left ulna and radius. Close to the skull in the north-eastern edge of the chamber some animal bones were found, mostly vertebrae and ribs. Lastly, a single rounded sherd lay next to the skull, just in front of the face.

Fig. 12. Close-up of bronze studs KF-864 *in situ*.

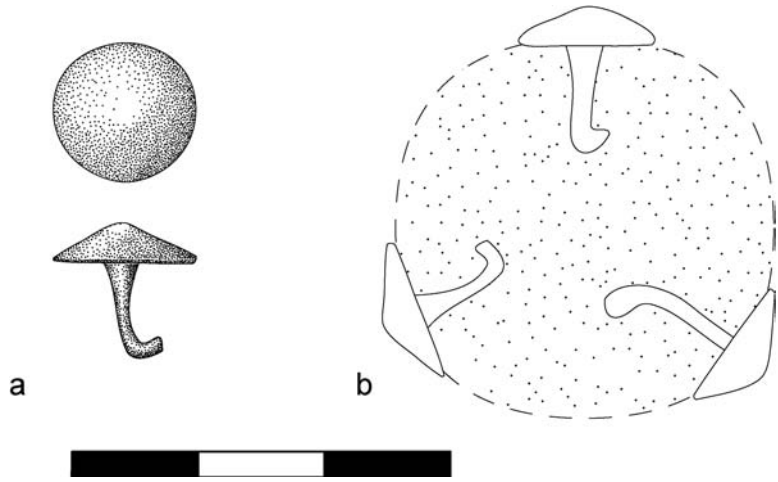

Fig. 13. Reconstruction of the bronze studs' (KF-864) original arrangement.

The Belt KF-863

Of the grave goods deposited with the primary burial, the most noteworthy are two rectangular plates of ivory[16] lying across the hips (KF-863) (Fig. 14). Originally, they were attached as frontal plates of a leather belt. Upon closer inspection, they proved to have some decoration which, in spite of its poor state of preservation, deserves to be considered in greater detail. The belt was not worn during burial, but was deposited lying loosely on the hips in such a way, that the decoration was upside down, as if to be seen by the deceased, and not an observer. The part originally worn across the right hip (hereafter part I) was now lying across the abdomen (Fig. 11). The easternmost end had suffered from a disturbance, probably caused by an animal burrowing (see above). The part worn during life on the left hip (part II) was now leaning vertically against the right hip bone; part of it had disintegrated under its own weight, and the remainder had partially sunk into the softer ground between the right hip and arm.

The numbering of the ivory plates will proceed from left to right in the order in which the belt would have been observed when worn. The numbering of the persons depicted will start from the better preserved inner edges of the belt plates, near the fastening, and proceed outwards in both directions,

[16] For the identification of the material we are indebted to N. Benecke, German Archaeological Institute, Berlin.

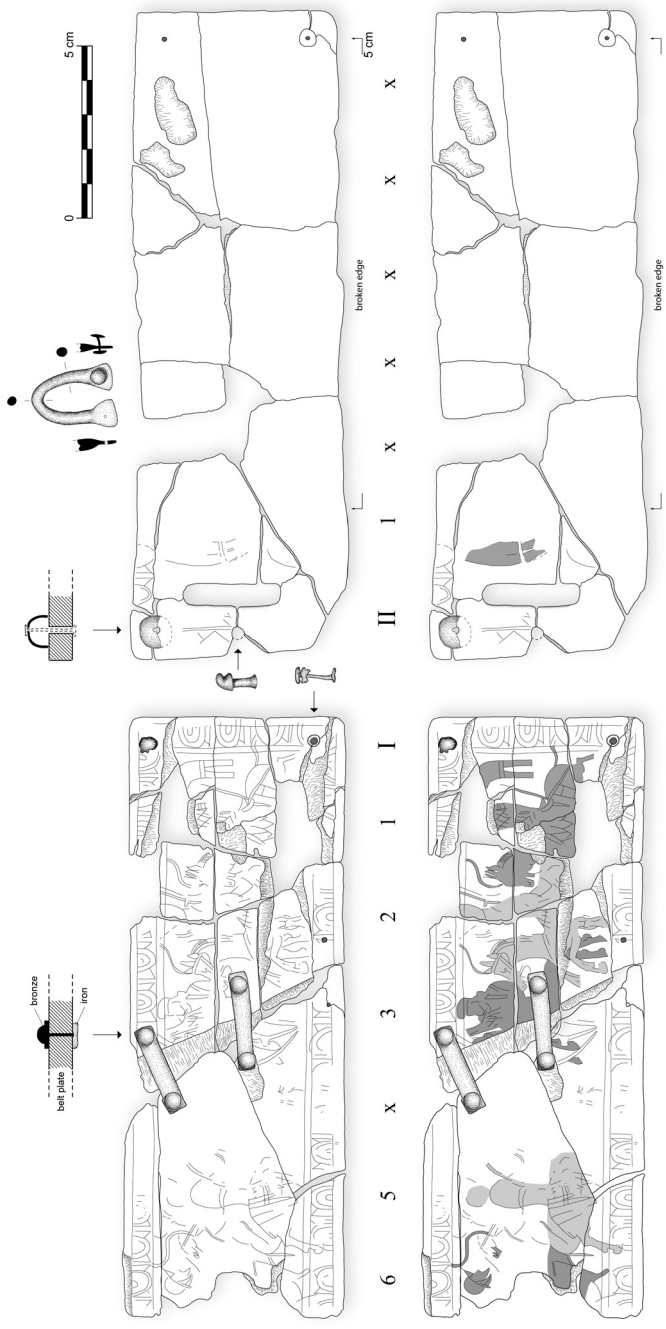

Fig. 14. Composite drawing and reconstruction of the ivory belt KF-863.

towards the damaged edges (Fig. 14). Thus, I.6 refers to the outermost figure on the left plate, II.1 to the innermost figure on the right one. Both plates are of rectangular or, more precisely, trapezoidal form, with a barely noticeable narrowing towards their outer edges.

Plate No. II served as the actual buckle. It now consists of six large and seven or eight small fragments, with some loss to the original. The original length was 18 cm on the bottom and 18.2 cm on the upper edge, its width is 5.8 cm on the narrower and 6.5 cm on the broad end. The thickness of the plate varies between 0.5 and 0.7 cm. The narrow sub-rectangular slot, serving for the passage of the punctured leather strap, measures 2.8 × 0.5-0.6 cm. The slot shows signs of wear on the side facing the navel, from the repeated passage of a leather belt. Next to it, a hole bored through the belt plate once held a bronze hook, which in turn secured the belt on one of the eyelets after it had passed through the slot. In all three preserved corners there were rivet holes for the fixation of the lining. Some traces of red on the reverse side suggest that this was the colour of the lining.

The belt-plate was originally covered with an engraved decoration. Because of the strongly decayed surface, this engraving was barely visible already during excavation; the drawings shown here are composites assembled mostly from in situ sketches and the photographic documentation (Fig. 15). Clearly visible on several fragments is the ornamental border of double semi-ovals connected by arrow-shaped lines pointing towards the interior. This decorative element goes back to the classic *cymation*, in this case its Ionic variant (egg-and-dart) and it can safely be reconstructed for the entire piece. As for the central field, making out anything definite is very difficult. One can see distinct lines, one of which may be guessed to form the curved line of a horse rump and tail, and another, just above, can with analogy to the second plate (see below), be interpreted as the remains of a standard (Fig. 16).

The other plate (No. I) had already been repaired in antiquity. There is substantial loss, and a number of small pieces could not be placed in their original context due to their fragmentation. Because of the poor condition, giving precise measurements is difficult; the length of the plate was about 18 cm and the width of the edge joined to the first plate with a strap measured *c.* 6 cm. In other words, the two plates were almost identical in size. In the two preserved corners there are rivet holes, the bronze rivet in the top right corner of the plate is still in place. As mentioned above, the plate was broken in antiquity. This appears to have been the result of a diagonal slashing attack, possibly caused by a sword. The plate was repaired by drilling three pairs of holes along the break, each pair 18 mm apart, which were joined with metal clamps of which only the upper two have survived. The third must have been

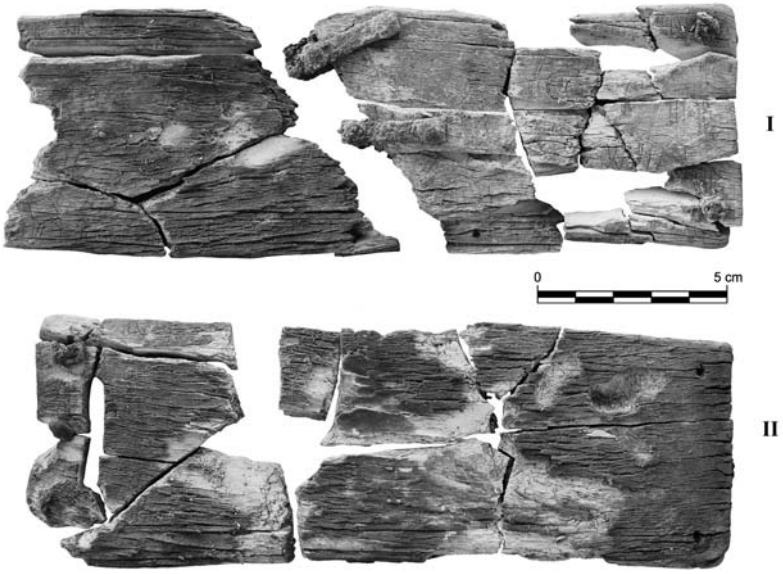

Fig. 15. KF-863 – Photographic mosaic of the fragments.

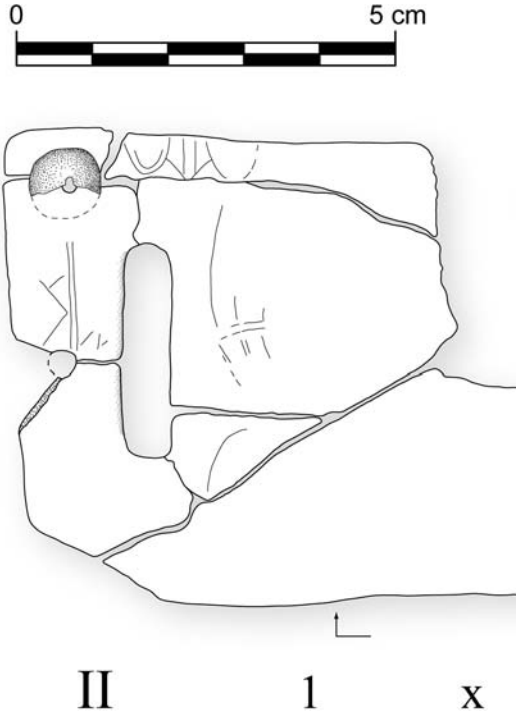

Fig. 16. Detail of fig. 14, showing Belt Plate II, figure II.1.

lost already prior to deposition. At the front these clamps consist of bronze strips 27 × 5-6 mm, whereas on the back side the strips were made of iron, measuring approx. 40 × 10-12 mm. The latter are heavily corroded. Both metal strips were then joined by bronze rivets.

Despite noticeable effects of decay on the surface, the decoration on this plate is much clearer than on the other one. On the borders we again observe the egg-and-dart frame. On the right side of the central field three horsemen are depicted, galloping to the left, two of whom apparently draw their bows (Fig. 17). On the left side of the plate, at least two riders are seen galloping towards the right (Fig. 18). One of them carries a bow. The space between the two groups is sufficient for the depiction of a sixth figure. We are thus dealing with a battle scene, probably involving three horsemen on each side.

The first warrior from the right-sided group (I.1) is probably clad in a coat of armour, as suggested by crosshatching on his torso, and elongated triangles on his loins. His bow is curving up just before the horse's head. At his back a standard hangs from a flagpole and a *gorytos* is suspended over the horse's croup. The rounded croup of his horse, its left hind leg and the crupper strap are all clearly visible, as is the tail in the form of two narrow wavy lines flying horizontally across the frame, indicating the animal is in full gallop. In its form, the tail is reminiscent of leather-sheathed tails. From the next rider (I.2) just enough is preserved that we can discern the vertical and horizontal stripes of mail armour or a caftan, as well as a bow at the head of his horse. The horse's mane is cropped between the ears with a single long lock raised up. The horse trappings are clearly visible. This horse is also shown galloping, as both front legs are raised from the ground. The third rider (I.3) is discernible in his outline, while much of his horse is overlapped by the previous one. The rider is turned towards the viewer in a three quarter perspective. His features are indistinguishable, but he may have a beard. What is visible is a soft headgear reminiscent of a Phrygian cap, with the top of the cap falling forward. From under this cap his hair falls down his neck and ends in a round tuft. He also seems to wear a caftan; the left hand hangs down, while his right hand is raised up, possibly holding either a whip or a weapon. Visible just to the left of the raised hand are the ears and cropped mane of his horse. This horse is in gallop, with the front legs raised and the hind legs on the ground (they protrude from under the second horse's belly).

In the left half of the composition, the leftmost rider (I.6) pulls a bow, a feature not as clearly visible on his companion (I.5). The rider I.6 wears a smooth hemispherical helmet of the "Boeotian" type with horizontal brim and cheek-pieces. He may have a mustache and pointed beard. The head of his horse is barely visible, but the rider's right leg appears clearly below the horse's

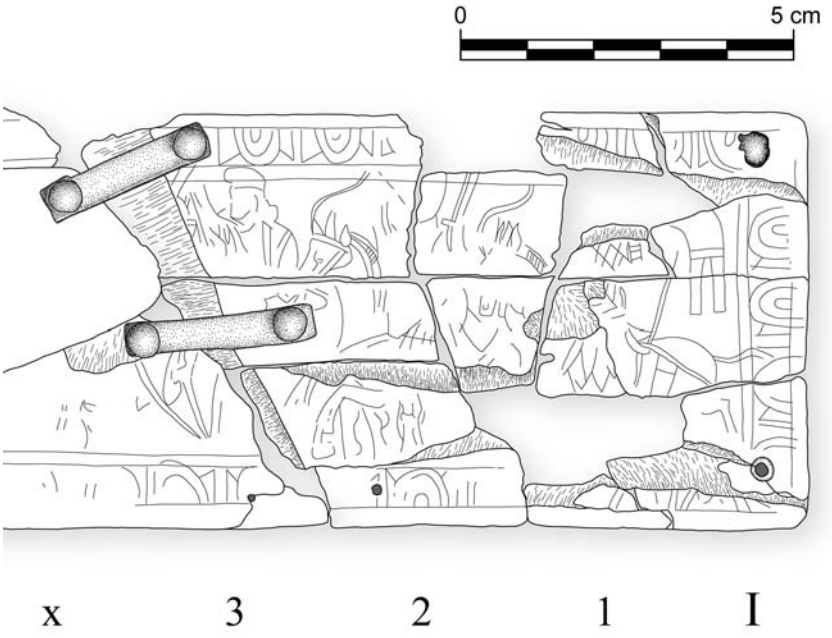

Fig. 17. Detail of fig. 14, showing Belt Plate I, figures I.1-I.3.

belly. The second rider (I.5) apparently also has a rounded helmet, and he may wear a coat of mail or a quilted coat. To the left a detail is visible that might be taken for a sword. Typically, the sword is worn on the left, and the quiver or *gorytos* on the right. That is, the last rider's sword should not be shown on the right, as it is here, and the *gorytos* should not be placed on the left, as is the case with the last rider on the right side (I.1). However, examples for such a formal depiction of armaments are known from the bone plates of Takht-i Sangin (see below). There, the horseman's *gorytos* is depicted on the viewer's side, regardless of the direction of riding. As mentioned, the assumed lead figure of this group [I.4] is not preserved.

Despite the very poor preservation of the plates, and the images on them, we may draw some conclusions: First, the plates formed part of a belt and they were decorated with engraved decorations of warriors set within an ornamental frame, which is a variant of the Ionic *cymatium*. Since plate I was engraved with images of fighting cavalrymen, attacking their foe with bows and arrows, it is a likely suggestion, inspired by the composition on the well-known Orlat plaques, that the second belt plate, which has practically nothing of its decoration preserved, was decorated with similar imagery. Slight traces of a

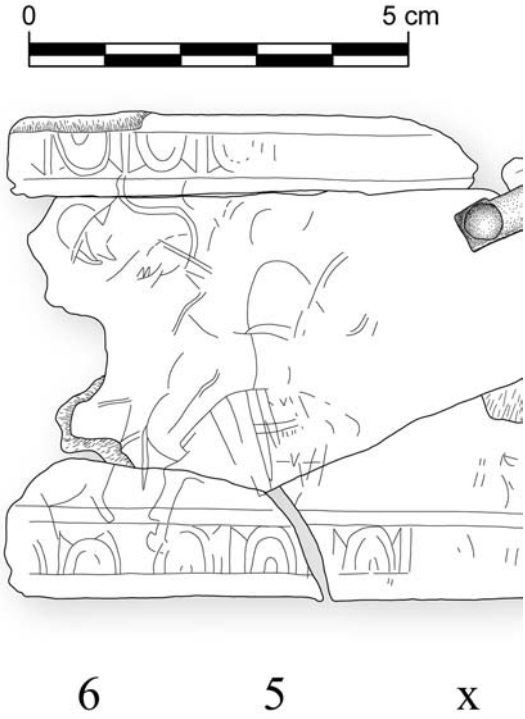

Fig. 18. Detail of fig. 14, showing Belt Plate I, figures I.5-I.6.

standard behind the rider II.1 (Fig. 15) support the idea of a symmetrical arrangement.

Comparanda

A first analogy for the Tilla Bulak plates are the famous plates of Takht-i Sangin (Temple of the Oxus), with scenes of hunting mounted archers, one of which is preserved in its entirety (Fig. 19), while the second, unfortunately, consists only of smaller fragments. This plate was repeatedly published by the excavators, B. A. Litvinskiĭ and I. R. Pichikyan,[17] and has been the subject of special contributions by Litvinskiĭ.[18] In all of these works, they are interpreted as side

[17] Zeĭmal' 1985, 98, No. 247; Litvinskiĭ & Pichikyan 1986, 117, fig. 3; Rickenbach 1989, 50, no. 22; Litvinskiĭ 2001, pl. 12, 13; 2004, 26-29.

[18] For example Litvinsky 2001.

Fig. 19. Belt plate from Takht-i Sangin (Litvinskiĭ 2001; Rickenbach 1989).

panels of small boxes and the dating proposed has changed over time. Initially they were considered to date from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, but later Litvinskiĭ readjusted this date to the 3rd century AD in order to conform to an assumed influence of Sasanian iconography on the finds from Takht-i Sangin. One of the authors of this publication (J. Il'yasov) has repeatedly expressed his doubts with respect to both this later dating, and the pieces' interpretation as panels of boxes (a view subsequently adopted by V. E. Maslov).[19] It seems that the original dates – the 1st century BC to 1st century AD – come closer to the truth. In any case, their interpretation as belt plates would seem to be beyond doubt in the light of this new find. We should emphasize again, that both the Tilla Bulak and the Takht-i Sangin plates show a slight narrowing towards their ends, and that they are similar also in their overall measurements (*c.* 21.6 × 6.2-6.4 cm, with a thickness of 0.7 cm for the Takht-i Sangin

[19] Il'yasov & Rusanov 1998, 109; Il'yasov 2003, 282-283; Maslov 1999, 225.

pieces). This form is characteristic of belt plates.[20] The misinterpretation of the Takht-i Sangin find was mostly due to the fact that the functionally required slots were not preserved. Thematically, the decoration of the Takht-i Sangin belt plate also differs from that of the Tilla Bulak example. The Oxus Temple plate shows a hunting scene on a leopard, mountain sheep and deer, but the central motif of the mounted archers aiming in full gallop is, of course, the same. The Takht-i Sangin plates, in turn, have no ornamental border.

A further good example for such a belt plate was found in a burial of the Tulkhar cemetery (Beshkent Valley, Southern Tajikistan) by A. M. Mandel'shtam.[21] Here such bone plates were found *in situ* in kurgan 7, all with an elongated trapezoidal shape and sizes of *ca*. 20 × 4.7-6.5 cm (Fig. 20). The main difference lies in the method of affixing the belt plates to their leather or textile base: The Tulkhar pieces have several small holes drilled along the rim, compared to just four larger ones in the Tilla Bulak and Takht-i Sangin examples. Also, the Tulkhar plaques were not engraved but decorated with silver studs in rhombic form. More importantly, one of them has the fastening slot preserved, a feature identically observed on the Tilla Bulak set, as well as on the famous Orlat belt plates of the first two centuries AD.[22] Here, too, the plate on the wearer's left hip was used for fastening with a slot and a hook.

The imagery on the Tilla Bulak belt is more akin to the engraved battle scene on one of the Orlat belt plates (Fig. 21), where two groups of horsemen and foot soldiers, including archers, are facing each other; the second Orlat plate shows three mounted archers pursuing their prey. Thus, the imagery on the Tilla Bulak plaques is well-attested on other bone belt sets of Bactria and Sogdiana.

Dating

A radiometric dating of a small detached fragment of the Tilla Bulak belt was carried out at the Mannheim AMS laboratory. The result of MAMS-13273 of 3883 ± 62 radiocarbon years (2561-2149 cal. BC at 2σ)[23] does not contribute towards the dating of the engraving. In fact, it makes the bone even older than the Bronze Age settlement where it was found and serves only for a very

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[20] For this argument see Il'yasov & Rusanov 1998 with additional belt plates and a reconstruction of the fastening mechanism (*ibid.*, pl. 8).

[21] Mandel'shtam 1966, 29, pl. 46; Il'yasov & Rusanov 1998, 109, pl. 6, *2*.

[22] Pugachenkova 1987; 1989; Brentjes 1989; 1990; Il'yasov & Rusanov 1998.

[23] The calibration was carried out with INTCAL09 (Reimer *et alii* 2009) und SwissCal 1.0 (L. Wacker, ETH-Zurich). The ^{14}C-ages are standardised against $\delta^{13}C$=-25 (Stuiver & Pollach, 1977).

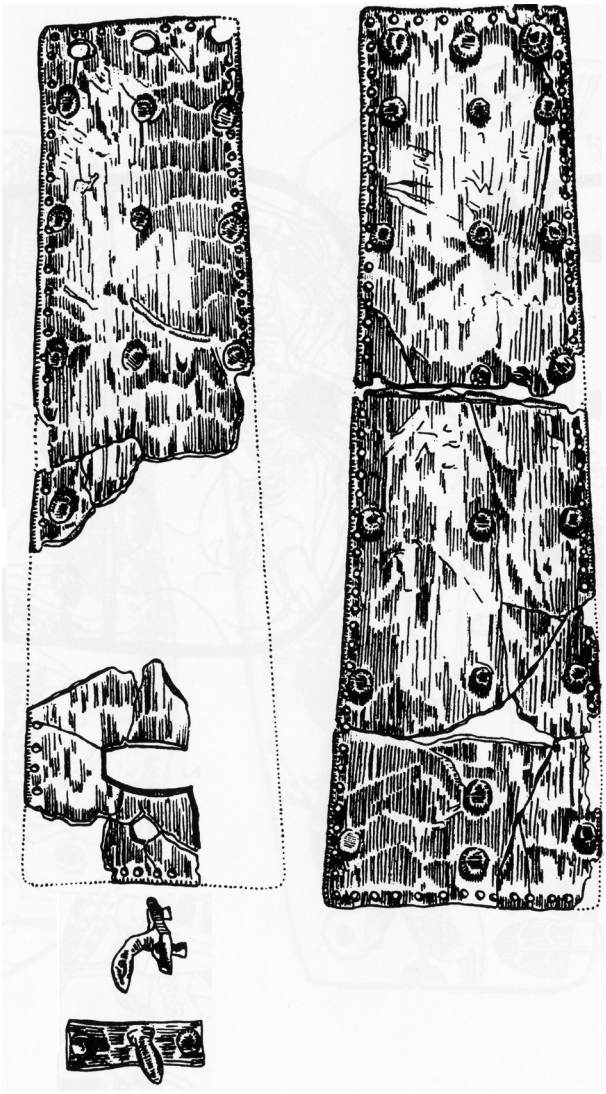

Fig. 20. Belt plates from Tulkhar (Ilyasov & Rusanov 1998, pl. VI. 2; after Mandel'shtam 1966).

Fig. 21. Orlat belt plate (Ilyasov & Rusanov 1998, pl. IV; after Pugachenkova 1989).

general *terminus post quem*. It does help, however, in locating the ultimate source of the raw material, which must be Indian elephant ivory.[24] Why and how these pieces originally reached the territory of Uzbekistan will probably never be solved; it may have happened already in the late 3rd millennium BC, when an Indus Culture presence is attested in the region,[25] or two millennia later, when another phase of increasing contact followed the conquests of Alexander the Great.[26]

For dating the engraving and the burial it was found in, we have to turn to the individual motives depicted. The presence of an egg-and-dart border, for one, is highly unlikely before the 3rd century BC. It appears on a number of objects from Takht-i Sangin, namely strips of gold foil[27] or a miniature footed box made of ivory (No. 1091/1186) in the form of a lion's paws, described as decorated with "a number of Ionian ovals and dividing arrows between them".[28] Litvinskiĭ uses the egg-and-dart for dating this object to the late 4th/3rd centuries BC although it was found in Kushan levels. For the Tilla Bulak plates such a dating is, of course, far too early. Another example would be the belt buckle from Saksanokhur (Southern Tajikistan). Cast in solid gold it is dated to the 1st-2nd centuries AD.[29] Here too, a *cymatium* serves as ornamental border surrounding a mounted warrior hunting a boar with a spear (Fig. 22). The egg-and-dart also appears on gold objects from Tillya Tepe (northern Afghanistan), dated to the 1st century AD.[30] Thus, the Ionic *cymatium*, which appeared in Middle Asia in the Hellenistic period, continued to be used as an ornamental motif in the era of the Great Kushan, that is, the 1st-2nd centuries AD.

The images on our plates are so poorly preserved that it is difficult to speak about the appearance of the horsemen or details of weaponry and horse trappings. Nevertheless, some observations can be made. The image of a rider in the cap and coat (I.3) resembles a figure on the famous woollen embroidered fabric from the barrow cemetery No. 6 of Noin-Ula (Northern Mongolia). It was excavated by the Tibeto-Mongolian Expedition of the Russian Geographical Society under P. K. Kozlov in 1924-1925 (Fig. 23). This mound is understood to contain the remains of the Hsiung-nu shan-yü (ruler) Wu-chu-lü,

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[24] Hippopotamus and African elephant can safely be excluded due to their distance from the find spot, while boar tusks would be too small for the manufacture of the plates. Mammoth ivory must be excluded due to the sample's age.

[25] For these issues see Francfort 1989; Parpola 2005; Francfort 2007; Kaniuth 2010b.

[26] Hansen *et alii* 2009.

[27] Pichikyan 1991, 108, fig. 22.

[28] Litvinskiĭ 2004, 29-30, fig. 5.

[29] *Shedevry* 1983, 34; Zeïmal' 1985, 117; Hansen *et alii* 2009, 343, No. 222.

[30] Sarianidi 1985, 138, 141, 236; Cambon 2007, 181, No. 79.

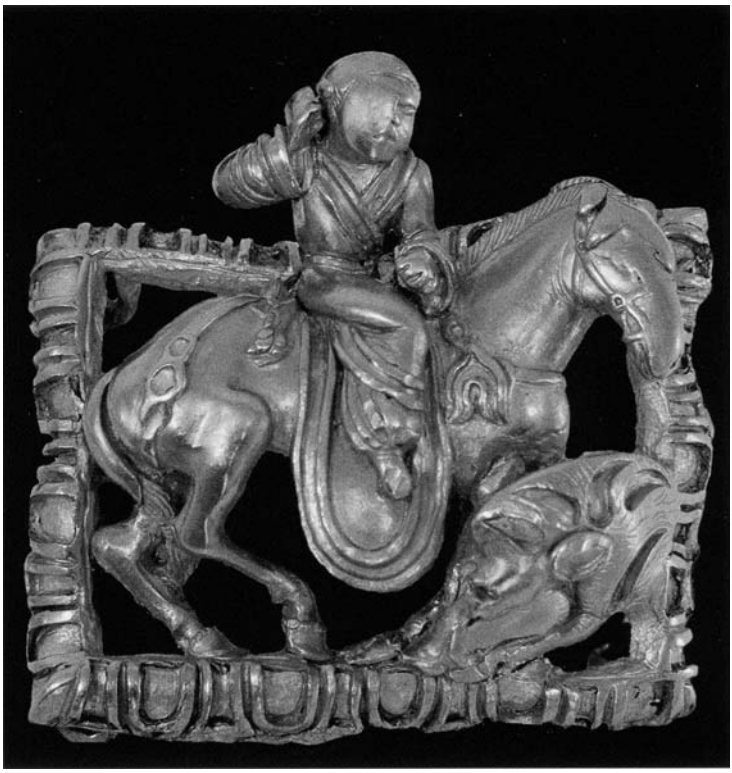

Fig. 22. Belt buckle from Saksanokhur (Hansen *et alii* 2010, Kat. No. 222).

who ruled from 8 BC, and died in 13 AD.[31] The wool fabrics with embroidery in his grave presumably originate from the territory of Bactria.[32] K. V. Trever assumed that the tissue had been made in the 2nd century BC, and tied their production to Hellenized Bactrian workshops, but a comparison of one of the Noin Ula fragments with a portrait of mustachioed men with headbands (Kurgan No. 25),[33] with the sculptures from Khalchayan (Surkhandarya region, southern Uzbekistan) and the portrait on the Heraios coins shows, that they should rather be dated to the 1st century BC-1st century AD, and connected with the Yüeh-chih and Kushan.[34]

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[31] Bernshtam 1951, 37-38.

[32] Trever 1932, 22, 32, pl. 6; 1940, 141-143, pl. 39, 40; for good colour illustrations see Stawiski 1979, 81-85, fig. 57, *60*.

[33] Trever 1932, 29, pl. 1; 1940, 144-145, pl. 42.

[34] Pugachenkova 1966, 190-192, pls. 22-25, 30; Rempel' 1989, 121-122.

Fig. 23. Embroidery from Noin Ula, kurgan 6 (Stawiski 1979, fig. 60).

The helmet of the rider I.6 closely resembles the Greek helmets of Boeotian (or Macedonian-Boeotian) type. These usually tend to have a more squat form, and also a plume, but depictions from Central Asia in particular show considerable variability in this respect. The (reused!) gem on a pectoral from burial 4 of the Tillya Tepe necropolis depicts a man with similar hemispherical headgear, lacking a crest.[35] It is another example of the adoption of particular motifs from a foreign source and should not be taken as an indication of the wearer's cultural affiliation: Whether the image represented a rider wearing a war trophy, whether the helmet was a local adaption or whether the artist was not familiar with the subtleties of Greco-Bactrian weaponry – our belt plates, the scenes engraved on them, and the battle tactics depicted are not Hellenistic, and neither is the burial rite of Tilla Bulak Grave 3. Numismatics suggest a relatively narrow time frame for the currency of the helmet type, namely the reigns of Eucratides (171-160 BC) to Amyntas (83-80 BC),[36] with a later adaption under the Indo-Scythian kings from Azes I to Azes II (mid-1st century BC to *c.* AD 30).[37]

Certain motifs, such as an encased horse's tail, are also found on the Takht-i Sangin and Orlat plates. This element also appears on the above-mentioned Saksanokhur gold buckle, the Indo-Scythian coins, and many other images.[38] The flag behind the right-most rider on the Tilla Bulak plaque also finds an analogy in one of the Orlat plates, namely, on the left, which served as the buckle (Fig. 21). The flag of the Orlat warrior, however, has a different shape – it is in the form of tubes, so probably made from felt or thin leather. These two-tongued flags are typical for Indo-Scythian (Indo-Saka) coins, for example coins of Azes II (around 16-30 AD).[39] Overall, the analogies for the Tilla Bulak plates and their decoration suggest a date for the belt between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD.

Burial Rite

The burial rite of Grave 3 finds good parallels in the region: Burial chambers dug into the eastern side of the entrance pit as well as the northern orientation of the deceased, are typical for northern Bactrian burial grounds such as the Tulkhar, Chajparrak, Bishkent cemeteries (BM) V and VI (southern

[35] Sarianidi 1985, 122-123, figs. 68-69.
[36] Dintsis 1986; Bopearachchi 2003, nos. 79-86 (the latter in the author's opinion a posthumous edition by the Yüeh-chih).
[37] Bopearachchi 2003, no. 132.
[38] Il'yasov 2003.
[39] Errington & Curtis 2007, 61, 253.

Tajikistan) and Babashov (Turkmenistan), all dating from the late 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD.[40] The use of mudbricks in the grave construction is attested at the Babashov cemetery, where square bricks of 36 × 36 × 12 / 46 × 46 × 12 cm were used.[41] Incidentally, the size of bricks closing the chamber of Tilla Bulak, Grave 3 (35 × 35 × 15 cm) may be used in support of our relative dating of the burial: In northern Bactria square bricks appear probably in the Greco-Bactrian period and are of a large size – 52.5 × 52.5 × 16 cm, 50 × 50 × 14 cm (Takht-i Sangin), 47-48 × 47-48 × 12-13 cm, 45 × 45 × 12 cm (Dalverzintepa citadel, *etc*.) – gradually decreasing in size to 30-32 × 30-32 × 10-12 cm in the period of the Great Kushan.[42]

As mentioned, the belt was not worn by the deceased; it was laid on his belly during the burial ceremony with the decoration upside down. Whether a "reversal" of this kind may be indicative of a reference to the particular situation – an overturning of the deceased's status and a period of uncertainty for the next of kin, requiring a symbolic and factual disassociation with the former group member – must remain open. It could just as well be due to the limited space left for insertion of the object after the placement of the body.

A few words should be said about the other grave goods found in Tilla Bulak Grave 3. The 43 bronze nails were, judging by their location, most likely parts of a whip, namely its handle which was placed at the left hand. Lashes and scourges have played an important role in the ideology of pastoralists, serving as symbols of authority. There are numerous images on the coins of the Indo-Scythian (or Indo-Saka) kings, such as Maues, Azilises and Azes II which show the ruler on horseback, holding a whip in his raised right hand (Fig. 24) The identical posture is adopted by their followers, such as the Indo-Parthian king Gondophares I (*ca*. 32-60 AD).[43] Ceremonial whip handles decorated with gold have been found during excavations of Scythian and Sarmatian burials in the steppes of Eurasia.[44]

In Central Asia, similar nails were discovered in the cemeteries of the Beshkent Valley (Tulkhar) and in Babashov. In a number of burial mounds clusters of nails were found lying to the left of the pelvis and thigh, or across the top of the pelvic bones. A. M. Mandel'shtam described the latter examples as the remains of belts, small pouches or scabbards.[45] While this seems a

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[40] Litvinskiĭ & Sedov 1984, 112-115, 128-134, fig. 29, *2-4*.

[41] Mandel'shtam 1975, 74, 78.

[42] Litvinskiĭ & Pichikyan 2000, 180; Pugachenkova & Rtveladze 1978, 232; Il'yasov 2006, 73, 82.

[43] Senior 2001a, 145-146, 149; 2001b, 5, 7-10, 50-72, 80-114, 119, 123-126, 129, 131-136, 138-143, 152-153.

[44] Akishev 1978, 37, 41, fig. 50, pl. 32.

[45] Mandel'shtam 1966, 135-136; 1975, 100, 103, 125, pl. 33, *16-18*.

Fig. 24. Coin of the Indo-Scythian ruler Azes II.

reasonable assumption, incidences of nails found arranged on the side of the pelvis may have to be reconsidered as representing the remains of lashes.

The main difference between our burial and those of the three other northern Bactrian burial grounds is that Tilla Bulak Grave 3 completely lacked ceramics and weapons. At the reasons it is only possible to guess. As the evidence from Tulkhar shows, the deposition of weapons played a minor role within the burial rite: From 220 burial mounds there, only 2 swords and 27 daggers were recovered.[46] The deposition of the child in the entrance shaft is without parallels in the North-Bactrian sites and currently defies interpretation.

Another very interesting question concerns the relationship of the burial site and the Dabilkurgan settlement, which was populated during the time of burial.[47] The distance between the two would not exceed the usual limits for an extramural burial place. On the other hand, the fact that there is no direct line of sight between the two may be taken as an indication that the burial is unrelated to Dabilkurgan. Lacking any material evidence, a more specific attribution of the deceased is not possible.

[46] Mandel'shtam 1966, 101-103.
[47] Rtveladze 2002, 126.

Conclusion

The belt from Tilla Bulak is one of a small group of objects known from Middle Asian contexts, usually recovered from burials, which presumably formed part of distinguished individuals' riding dress. The state of preservation precludes any detailed stylistic analysis of the piece, but the combination of motives strongly suggests a date within the 1st centuries BC-AD. While the date of the Tilla Bulak plate in no way bears upon the dating of other, similar belt plates, it serves to point out that this particular item of male equipment appeared already in late or post-Hellenistic times. The imagery of horsemen fighting emphasizes the important role of the mounted warrior which is apparent also from other monuments of the period. In combination with the remains of a lash deposited next to the deceased, we may assume that being a mounted warrior was also constitutive for his own social persona.

Given the measurements of the belt plates, an intact chunk of an elephant tusk must have been transmitted over the course of two millennia before it was carved into our rider's belt plates. Whether it arrived on the shores of the Oxus with Indus Culture settlers or merchants, with Gandharan traders or Greco-Bactrian soldiers is just another question that will have to remain unresolved.

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