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Preface to the 10th ICAANE Proceedings

The 10th anniversary of the International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East was held from 25th to 29th of April 2016 in Vienna, hosted and organized by the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology (OREA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. More than 800 participants from 38 different countries found their way to Vienna to celebrate the 10th anniversary of ICAANE with a wide range of 8 scientific sections, 28 workshops and round tables, a huge poster exhibition and a special section about ‘Cultural Heritage under Threat’.

The topics in focus of this ICAANE covered traditional, as well as new fields, in relation to state-of-the-art approaches and methodologies. The general themes of transformation and migration, cultural landscapes, religion and rituals, environmental shifts, contextualized images, as well as economies and societies, are currently promising fields in archaeology and these proceedings give new insights into former Near Eastern societies. These general questions are obviously challenging topics in present times, too, a fact that is leading us archaeologists into a dialectic discourse of past and present social phenomena. This additional impact within our scientific community and beyond is underlining the ongoing fascination and power of Near Eastern archaeology. The first volume includes papers of the sections ‘Transformation and Migration’, ‘Archaeology of Religion and Ritual’, ‘Images in Context’ as well as ‘Islamic Archaeology’. The second volume is dedicated to the sections ‘Prehistoric and Historical Landscapes and Settlement Patterns’, ‘Economy and Society’, and is completed by ‘Excavation Reports and Summaries’. A number of presented posters are integrated in the theme relevant chapters too. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the editors of these sections, namely Teresa Bürge, Mattia Guidetti, Felix Höflmayer, Marta Luciani, Vera Müller, Markus Ritter, Roderick Salisbury and Christoph Schwall.

Altogether 28 workshops focussing on special research questions and themes demonstrated the ongoing dynamic and new inputs in Near Eastern archaeology. The engaged discussions of internationally high-ranked experts with young scholars was essential for the success and open atmosphere of the 10th ICAANE in Vienna. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the workshop organisers, who are also acting as editors for the separate workshop volumes, published as internationally peer-reviewed books in the OREA series of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, of which some are already in print, accepted or in preparation at the moment. The conference was delighted to have two keynotes given by Mehmet Özdoğan and Timothy Harrison; both pointed to the current political conflicts and related massive destruction of cultural heritage from different perspectives. In facing the current conflicts and continuing damage of cultural monuments in regions of the Near East, we are confronted with situations going far beyond the usual scientific challenges. Although we have to observe highly frustrating ongoing destructions and can hardly influence the general political situation, the archaeological
community is responsible for supporting, re-evaluating and advancing ongoing essential strategies in digital preservation of the cultural heritage and other current activities in that field.

Therefore, we decided to organize a Special Section within the 10th ICAANE about Cultural Heritage under Threat, where well-known experts and political authorities discussed the current challenges and future perspectives in a very fruitful and open atmosphere.

This special section was organized with the great support of Harald Stranzl, the Austrian Ambassador at UNESCO for the Austrian Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs. The discussions and contributions were accomplished by signing the ‘Vienna Statement’ (s. below) by a total of 34 authorities for antiquities in Near Eastern countries, European institutions and stakeholders. My sincere thanks are expressed to Karin Bartl and her engagement in organizing this special section.

The 10th ICAANE aside its impact on international archaeology, can additionally be seen as a powerful boost for the archaeological endeavours in Austria and for our local scientific community, not at least visible in the fruitful cooperation of several archaeological institutions acting committedly in our Local Organising Committee: the Historical-Cultural Faculty and the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies (University of Vienna), the Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection of the Kunsthistorische Museum, the Austrian Archaeological Institute, members of the Austrian Academy of Sciences as well as the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology. My sincere thanks go to Manfred Bietak, Vera Müller, Hermann Hunger, Bert Fragner, Regina Hölzl, Claudia Theune-Vogt, Michael Doneus, Markus Ritter, Christiana Köhler, Marta Luciani, Sabine Ladstätter, Karin Kopetzky and Angela Schwab for their engagement in the local committee and making this conference real. I extend sincere thanks for financial support to several Austrian and international institutions, which are The Austrian Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, the University of Vienna, the City of Vienna, the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF), the Institute for Aegean Prehistory (INSTAP), the Austrian Orient Society/Hammer Purgstall Society and the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

The OREA institute took over the honourable duty hosting this conference with lots of effort and energy, all our institutes’ members, students and scientists were involved in some parts and the OREA team together was making this conference running. Particular thanks and recognition also go to Angela Schwab, Ulrike Schuh and Christine de Vree. Finally, I thank the ICAANE Scientific Committee and the Harrassowitz Publishing House.

Prof. Dr. Barbara Horejs
Director of the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology
Austrian Academy of Sciences
ARCHAEOLOGY OF RELIGION & RITUAL

edited by V. Müller
Evidence of Funeral Rituals from the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex in Turkmenistan: The Case of Gonur Depe

Nadezhda A. Dubova¹ – Sergei P. Grushin² – Robert M. Sataev¹
– Alexei V. Fribus³

Abstract

During the Spring 2015 excavation season at the famous Bronze Age site of Gonur Depe in Turkmenistan (2300–1600 BC) a metal detector was used. The maximum depth of the cultural level able to be scanned was only 20cm, thus only the upper layers of the dumps of previously ground and walls could be analysed. The metal detector indicated a high level of metal present in the unrestored wall of the ritual double hearth in the ‘royal’ tomb 3235. The clearing of this space revealed a silver funnel-strainer, a typical vessel for the preparation of Soma-Haoma (see: Sarianidi 1993; Sarianidi 1998; Sarianidi 2010) which was incorporated within the mudbrick of the oven’s roof. Verification of the other walls of the royal tombs did not provide anything. Nothing like this has previously been found at Gonur Depe or any other Margiana sites and it may be interpreted as evidence of construction, funeral or purifying rituals.

The Bronze Age site of Gonur Depe in Turkmenistan (2300–1600 BC) was discovered by Victor Sarianidi in 1972. Excavations began in 1974 and continue to the present, and are currently conducted by the Margiana archaeological expedition which works within the frame of agreement between the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Turkmenistan Ministry of Culture (Sarianidi 1973; Sarianidi 1990; Sarianidi 2001; Sarianidi 2005; Sarianidi 2007a; Sarianidi 2007b; and others). The site is situated in the south-eastern part of the Kara Kum desert in the ancient delta of the Murghab River. The general description of the site and the results of the previous last years’ excavations have been described earlier (e.g. Sarianidi and Dubova 2014). In 2004, five elite so-called ‘royal’ tombs were found, and an additional three were discovered in 2009 (Sarianidi 2005; Sarianidi 2007a; Dubova 2004; Sarianidi and Dubova 2010) (Fig. 1). These tombs were identified as ‘royal’ or elite because of their complicated construction which includes multi-roomed underground houses with tables, niches and hearths, fine mosaic artistic decoration (Dubova 2011; Sarianidi and Dubova 2013), exceptionally rich gold, silver and bronze funeral gifts (sometimes combined as hoards), many items indicative of the high status of the buried persons such as stone staffs,

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miniature stone columns, large stone disks, and game-boards, four-wheeled wagons and with 4–19 executed servants in each one.

During the Spring 2015 excavation season a metal detector was used at Gonur Depe for the first time and with its help new areas of some of old dumps were inspected. The maximum depth of the cultural level that can be scanned with this equipment was only 20cm. So investigation was limited to the upper layers of the previously excavated ground of the dumps, the height of which often exceeded 3m, and previously excavated walls were also able to be analysed. We examined some areas and the interior of one royal tomb (#3235) and the detector indicated a high level of metal present. This was located in the vaulted ceiling of the ritual double hearth, situated between Rooms 2 and 3 (Fig. 2). It was not attributable to any modern materials used for the conservation and restoration of the tomb because this hearth was very well preserved and no modern metal materials had been used in its conservation (Fig. 3). To understand the cause of the indication it was decided to clean the upper part of the hearth.

All the buildings and other constructions at Gonur Depe were constructed with standard mudbricks with dimensions 42–45 × 20–25 × 10–15cm, and this tomb and hearth were no exception. During cleaning, a silver funnel-strainer was found inside one of the bricks. It was crushed and had been inserted into the wet clay of the mud-brick before drying. It is clear (Fig. 4) that the brick with the strainer was positioned neither above the burner (right on the right photo), nor in the middle of the hearth, but exactly above the left chamber of the oven. Double hearths are characteristic of Gonur Depe where hundreds have been found. At other excavated Margiana sites (e.g. Togolok 1, 21; Kelleli, Taip, Aji Kui) this type of oven is either absent or present in only a few numbers. V. Sarianidi proposed that the chamber, above which the brick with the strainer was found, was used exclusively for ritual food, presumably meat, and that the fire did not touch as a result of a special partition or ledge between the chambers (Sarianidi 2010: 133–134). Such an expensive item being found inside the construction suggests that it was evidence of building, funeral, or purification rituals. This paper does not aim to answer all possible questions about it, but primarily to describe this case, which is the only one known among all the Bronze Age sites of Central Asia, and its context.

At Gonur and in Margiana, on the whole, only a few silver and bronze funnel-strainers have been found in elite tombs (Fig. 5a–f). Some of them have a handle while others do not. The strainer from Tomb 3235 is similar to that from Tomb 3220 (Fig. 5a). It has no handle and is cone-shaped. It is assumed that such funnels were used for straining or filtration of the juice of plants, probably those required to prepare the hallucinogenic beverage. In the buildings interpreted by V. Sarianidi as temples, in some special rooms large ceramic vessels with strainers in the bottom (Fig. 5f) for preparation of a large amount of such liquid were found. No small ceramic strainers or funnels were found. No metal strainers were found out in the common graves, with all silver and bronze examples in the graves of those that had very rich funeral gifts. It is very interesting that Grave 3310 included a lamb in the main burial (Dubova 2012: 112, fig. 4; 113, 117; Dubova 2015: 21, fig 2.4; 23). Since
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Double-chambered Cist 3310 was situated in the south-eastern part of Gonur to the north of the ‘royal’ necropolis and to the south of the fortification wall. The grave is oriented east-west with the lamb lying in the western chamber on its right side on the brick dais. Its neck was resting on the miniature stone column laid on its side. On the floor of the same chamber were the remains of an elderly woman lying in a crouched position on her left side with her head to the west. In the north-east corner of the cist, on the earthen dais, a large jar half-filled with extensively burned sheep bones was placed. The bones of a single young animal were stacked inside the vessel after being burned elsewhere (determination: Sataev 2008; Sataev 2010). Also near the lamb’s legs on the dais were three vessels, large and small copper and bronze dishes, and a bronze cleaver. A few bones of sheep and goats, apparently from a sacrificial meal lay nearby. In the upper layers (at a height of no less than 20cm above the level of findings), at the beginning of the clearing of the tomb, a rectangular soapstone, four-legged box was discovered. The second chamber was intended exclusively for burial offerings that were placed on an earthen elevation around 30cm high. A wide cylindrical ceramic vessel pierced through the bottom with five holes (Fig. 5e) was situated in a central place amongst them. The walls of this vessel are decorated with designs often found in Margush country ornamentation, consisting of a central ‘tree of life’ with horned goats flanking either side standing on the hind legs, incised into the wet clay. The ceramic strainer was surrounded by nine vessels, two of which were imported (probably from Iran): one features black clay with partial glaze, and the other has a high neck and is decorated with painted zigzag designs. On top of both vessels was a wooden ‘game-board’ inlaid with ivory. To the south of this group of offerings, in the middle of the chamber, stacked together with the silver and bronze objects, were six so-called ‘playing sticks’ consisting of five flat octagons and six square figures carved from ivory. Also a silver bugle, a bronze funnel with strainer and handle, a bronze knife, and a small vial were found. In addition to these items in the middle of the chamber there were seven pieces of the rib bones of young (under a year old) sheep. At the edge of the pieces of meat lay a bronze cosmetic bottle and applicator. The collective burial of four young animals (dog, sheep, donkey and calf) arranged outside the southern wall of the cist was another feature of the grave. The animal remains were placed close to the female body inside the cist. All these components suggest the ritual nature and sacred context of the funnel-strainer.

P. Akkermans and G. Schwartz, in their famous volume on archaeology of Syria (2004), explain that in the 3rd millennium BC “... the gradations of social stratification can be observed in the burial data, ranging from the treasure-laden royal graves of Ebla to infant jar burials without attendant goods.” They noted that “... a curious indicator of mortuary ritual is the inclusion of perforated bronze drinking strainers together with jars in graves at Leilan, Chagar Bazar, and Baghouz, pre-
sumably intended as provisioning for the afterlife or for funerary ritual ...” (Akkermans and Schwartz 2004: 322).

Together with the ceramic strainers were ritual ceramic vessels which feature various decoration (e.g.: Sarianidi 1998: 36, fig. 10), small stone ‘mashers’, and bone tubes with engravings of enlarged eyes (Sarianidi 2010: 78). In the South Gonur complex (the Temenos) there were many large jars, plastered inside with numerous layers of white substances made of various plant combinations including cannabis, *ephedra* and poppy (Meyer-Melikyan and Avetov 1998): all plants known to be used for the extraction of hallucinogens. The combination of these facts provided grounds for V. Sarianidi to propose the idea of a cult involving a sacred drink such as Soma-Haoma of the ancient writings and sources of the later Zoroastrian religion (e.g.: Sarianidi 1993; 1998: 2010). Of course strainers can be used in the preparation of other drinks as well, for example in the Carpathian and Northern European Bronze Age they were used in the preparation of alcohol. J. G. Tarbay describes a strainer sold by the Gorny & Mosch auctioneers (Gorny and Mosch, Giessener Münzhandlung GMBH 4 Jahre, Auktion Kunst der Antike 29. Juni 2011: 198, 210, fig. 510) which resembled the shape of the Gonur ones, taking into account the geographical distance and differences in the cultures, and discusses others known in Europe (Tarbay 2014).

In this context, the idea that the funnel-strainer was used as a sacrifice is very interesting. The tomb where it was found, as mentioned above, is an elite or ‘royal’ tomb in the form of an underground house. Despite the fact that it (like all the others) was repeatedly robbed in antiquity, rich funeral gifts were found there (Fig. 2). Just in this tomb alone a fine silver vessel with relief decoration depicting a complicated symbolic scene (Sataev and Sataeva 2015), together with two golden, one silver, and two bronze vessels, were found in the treasury under the floor of Room 3. Above them, on the floor near the wall, a long stone scepter with its end in a form of hoof lay. Within the same room there were many gold foil fragments, two pendants with large agate beads set in gold, 12 flint arrowheads, a beautiful flower with petals made from turquoise, the center from gold foil, and the stem and leaves from bronze. Fragments of another similar flower were found in the oven of the hearth, inside the roof where the brick containing the silver funnel was found (Fig. 6).

The walls of Room 3 of this tomb were well-plastered with clay. The quality of plastering was much better than in the other rooms of the same tomb. This is where the mosaic probably originally was located as is suggested by the presence of such fine plaster. Unfortunately only a few fragments of the mosaic compositions were found in situ in Rooms 1 and 2. One of them was on the wall to the right of the double-hearth in Room 2; another decorated the walls of a small wooden box in Room 1. It can be assumed that most rich goods were placed in Room 3 and possibly in Room 2. This is suggested by the fact that in front of the entrance to Room 3, under the floor (at a depth of 40cm) of Room 4 there were buried seven people; three young men (20–30 years) and four women (30–35 years). The precise number of people, representative of the elites buried there is not easy to discern. Remains of 12 people were found, only
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One female skeleton (apart from the above-mentioned seven servants) was lying in situ and two skulls were close to it. In different places of the tomb the remains of two more people were detected, but we do not know whether they are the main focus of the burial or servants. There is evidence of a tradition of successive burials in elite tombs (Sarianidi 2001; Sarianidi 2007a; Sarianidi 2007a; Dubova 2004).

In Tomb 3235 there were three double hearths (in Rooms 2, 3 and 6) and two simple ones (in Corridor 4 and Hallway 5). All the burnt parts of them were filled with earth mixed with ash which suggests that all the hearths were used only once or less. The construction of this tomb is more complicated than the others (Sarianidi 2006; Sarianidi 2007b) because it has eight components and features four small fire altars. In 2015 all the ruins of the ‘royal’ cemetery were examined with a metal detector and no other findings were detected there.

Because the funnel-strainer was located inside a mudbrick it is possible to consider that it alludes to rituals associated with it construction. This was our first assumption (Dubova et al. 2016), but usually widespread construction rituals involve human or animal sacrifice (‘foundation sacrifice’), or putting skulls, other parts of the skeleton, or coins under the foundation of a new dwelling. In this case the item was not put there and not in the beginning, therefore it may not fit this pattern. It also seems unlikely that it was a case of mortuary ritual, because the action of embedding the strainer inside the mudbrick and using the brick in the building was undertaken during rather than after the burial. It is difficult to presume that mortuary ritual included destroying and repairing the tomb. Perhaps then, this process was a part of a funeral ritual, if we use this term in its widest sense, and the strainer was included during the construction of the tomb.

It needs to be repeated that the aim of this paper is not to discuss sacrifice, but to describe an interesting archaeological discovery, and to emphasise the dissimilarity of this case to other known rituals. It is proposed that the silver funnel-strainer was placed inside the wet clay of the mudbrick before it was dried and subsequently used in the construction of the vaulted roof of the oven in the ritual double hearth, inside the room with the richest gifts in the tomb for an elite person or persons. Certainly we do not currently know a great deal about the rituals of the Bactria-Margiana archaeological complex (BMAC). The existence of this center of civilisation in the ancient Murghab delta and the neighboring areas only became known to science a few decades ago. Only a few artifacts are published and the catalogs are not yet compiled, therefore specialists can analyse only a small amount of what has been found. The majority of the hundreds of objects are carefully stored in the Museum of Turkmenistan waiting for examination. We believe however, that attentive research of this material will open a new chapter in the history of human civilisation and its worldview.

To conclude, we can afford to make an assumption about the discovery. The juice of the plant components of the Soma-Haoma drink had to pass through a physical strainer in order to be cleaned of the stems and leaves of the plants which were unnecessary to the gods. So too, the smells and smoke from the victim (animal or
plant) prepared in the oven of the ritual hearth had to symbolically pass through the funnel-strainer concealed within the roof in order to be rid of impurities and made fit to appear before the gods. Perhaps, in a manner akin to using incense, the ancients were attempting to purify the souls of their relatives buried within this tomb.

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Fig. 1 General scheme of the ‘royal’ necropolis of Gonur Depe
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Fig. 2 General of the sepulcher 3235 at the ‘royal’ necropolis of Gonur Depe. Main goods: 1 – pottery; 2 – fragments of ceramic items; 3 – mosaics inlets; 4 – stone staff-scepter; 5 – human skeletal remains; 6 – two human skulls; 7 – ceramic vase and pottery fragments; 8 – remains of three young men and four women; 9 – human skeletal remains; 10 – traces of the wooden box decorated with mosaics; 11 – two silver vessels; 12 – silver hair-pin with the top in the form of lying bull; 13 – ivory items; 14 – two agate beads with the golden holders and separated golden holders; 15 – a flower made from the turquoise with the golden middle and bronze stem; 16 – pottery; 17 – animal bones; 18 – hoard with two golden, three silver (including one with the relief image of the animalistic scene) and two bronze vessels; 19 – agate bead with the golden holders; 20 – traces of the wooden box on the bronze ‘legs’; 21 – small fire altars; 22 – groups of flint arrowheads (totally 12 items); 23 – small stone pendant in a form of eagle; 24 – traces of the wooden box without decoration
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Fig. 3 General view of the sepulcher 3235 from the east, after it cleaning in 2004 autumn (left) and from the south-west in 2012 after conservation and later winter raining (right). The vaulted ceiling of the ritual double hearth situated between room 2 and 3 is pointed by the arrows (© Margiana archaeological expedition)

Fig. 4 S. Grushin is cleaning the hearth in the sepulcher 3235 (left) and silver funnel-strainer on its place after cleaning (right) (© Margiana archaeological expedition)
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Fig. 5  Funnel-strainers from Gonur Depe: a – sepulcher 3220; b – tomb 2900; c – sepulcher 3235; e – tomb 3310; d – from Togolok 1 temple; f – Ceramic strainer form Gonur Depe, tomb 3310 (© Margiana archaeological expedition)

Fig. 6  Turquoise flower with the golden center and bronze stem and fragment from the second one from the sepulcher 3235 of Gonur Depe (© Margiana archaeological expedition)