

Archaeological Survey in the Surroundings of Kayrit (South Uzbekistan), Preliminary Report for Season 2015

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ABSTRACT

This text represents an overview of the results of the extensive surface survey, conducted in the hinterland of the site of Burgut Kurgan, south Uzbekistan, during its excavations in 2015. The basic data on the settlements, kurgans and related phenomena are presented here, as well as a preliminary interpretation of the whole as a complex cultural landscape of the Late Bronze / Early Iron Age.

KEYWORDS

Pashkhurt Valley; Kayrit village; Burgut Kurgan; surface survey; kurgans; petroglyphs; Bactria; Yaz culture; Early Iron Age; Late Bronze Age; Middle Ages.

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan, along with the other Post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, ranks among the regions with a long tradition of archaeological research including surface surveys and mapping of archaeological sites (cf. published or unpublished reports called *Svod po pamyatnikam* in the archives of the Archaeological Institutes in the given countries). Despite the impressive results of the field work during the previous few decades, every new scholarly generation possesses new tools and methods that allow for new types of analysis, but also for new approaches in the field work itself. There are still many blank places on the archaeological maps preventing a proper spatial understanding of the various archaeological cultures or particular aspects of these cultures (e.g. burial customs, religious beliefs, agricultural settlements and facilities). As archaeologists working in the region, we are obliged to use these new tools and approaches in order to broaden the amount of data with one key imperative: our work must be driven by an effort not to destroy more archaeological contexts than absolutely necessary and in this way to keep untouched as much data as possible for the future generations equipped with even better and more sophisticated scientific methods. Therefore, non-destructive methods should be preferred.

After several years of both intensive and extensive surface survey in the lowlands of the Sherabad District, south Uzbekistan, that brought to light substantial new data on this particular region, but generally – and with some exceptions – rather confirmed what scholars knew about the region so far (STANČO – TUŠLOVÁ in print), the Czech-Uzbekistani team decided from the year 2014 to intensify the prospecting activities in the piedmonts of Kugitang, situated to the north-west of the Sherabad lowlands. Before, we paid only several selective visits mostly to already known sites or verified features detected on satellite imagery. During this process, we, nevertheless, also discovered several previously unknown sites, some of them by mere chance. These particular results of our activities remained largely unpublished with the exception of brief reports at the very beginning of the survey (STANČO 2009; DANIELISOVÁ – STANČO – SHAYDULLAEV 2010; general remarks also in STANCHO – SHAYDULLAEV – TUSHLOVA 2013).

A new phase of field work in the piedmont steppe belt, which had already been initiated in 2014, was resumed by L. Stančo and A. Augustinová on a larger scale in 2015 during the excavations of the Czech-Uzbekistani-French team at Burgut Kurgan (STANČO *et al.* 2016). Previous experience has shown that many settlements, but also small kurgans, may not be visible and detectable in satellite images, let alone on topographic maps. The extent of the territory on the one hand and the workload of the team-members during the excavations on the other, did not allow for an intensive surface survey, therefore, the survey was conducted in an extensive and selective way with an emphasis on places and areas with a high potential of detection of anthropogenic phenomena according to the previous experience (e.g. close to water sources and / or courses, on elevated places, etc.). This rather intuitive approach, though, has brought very interesting results, which are presented below.

OBJECTIVES

After its discovery in 2014, the site of Burgut Kurgan (“Mound of eagle”) has been selected as the principal object of our works in the piedmonts of Kugitang for at least two seasons. From the very beginning, however, we asked questions concerning the relation of the site to its hinterland: what was the temporal and spatial relationship between the site and the kurgan-like features in its hinterland? What was the relation between the site and the water canals that appear to supply it with water brought from the Zarabag Oasis? Was this settlement an isolated phenomenon or did it make up part of a more complex pattern? If so, what was its role in such a pattern? The working hypothesis we started the survey with presumed that a small walled site could hardly have existed all alone and also given the pre-eminent state of preservation of Burgut Kurgan itself, we expected more settlements of a similar nature to be found. Regardless of these specific objectives related to the Early Iron Age, the general goal was to collect spatially specific archaeological data on any historical period as a counterbalance and complement to information gained at the Zarabag micro-oasis (see below), since we supposed the interrelated functioning of both these landscape units: an oasis and surrounding steppe.

RESEARCH AREA

The research area is situated in the north-western part of the Sherabad District, Surkhandarya Province, south Uzbekistan, to the north of the village of Pashkhurt that is the natural centre of the basin. The main interest of our prospecting headed into an area between the present-day villages of Maydan, Karabag and Zarabag (**Pl. 2/1**).¹ The latter village and its vicinity had been subject to investigation by the other branch of our expedition headed by A. Augustinová (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015). The results of both sub-projects, however, are closely linked to each other. The focus of the present survey was the territory of and the surroundings of a small village, or hamlet, Kayrit. The area is generally bordered on and protected from the north-west

1 The southernmost point was situated at 66.7953 E, 37.744 N, the easternmost at 66.822 E, 37.751 N, the westernmost at 66.774 E, 37.762 N, and the northernmost point was at 66.7861 E, 37.7805 N. The northern limits are the only ones that correspond to a natural border formed by an elevated ridge with rocky outcrops clearly closing the basin and making a natural barrier. The research area had, however, neither a regular shape, nor was surveyed systematically and thoroughly.

by the ridge of the Kugitang Mountains with the highest point at Airi Baba (3000 m.a.s.l.), while the altitude of the research area reaches 800–900 m.a.s.l.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The steppe belt of the Kugitang piedmonts had been subject to several extensive archaeological surveys undertaken by various teams under different circumstances. These previous research projects did not focus on a specific micro-region in detail, but typically either conducted large-scale extensive surface surveys leading to the detection of isolated archaeological sites (RTVELADZE – KHAKIMOV 1973, 16–17; RTVELADZE 1974, 66–67; BOBOKHOJAEV – ANNAEV – RAKHMANOV 1990), or paid attention selectively to the direct vicinity of the site, which was excavated under the framework of a long-term project, as was the case of Dabil Kurgan and Tilla Bullaq at Pashkhurt (MKRTYCHEV – BOLELOV – IL'YASOV 2005; KANIUTH *et al.* 2010, 154–155). Some of the published reports testify rather to randomly placed investigation targets with promising, but haphazard results (DVURECHENSKAYA *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, among the well-watered micro-oases of the largest of the piedmont valleys – the Pashkhurt Valley including the semi-separated Maydan Valley – some were quite well surveyed by archaeologists, especially their central settlements (Pashkhurt itself, Karabag, Maydan and Goz),² but the other oases in the valley remained surprisingly unexplored.³ The most striking example is represented by the village of Zarabag and its oasis that remained completely omitted until 2015 when it was surveyed by our expedition. The preliminary results of the new research of this particular landscape unit testifies to the high archaeological potential of these oases (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015). It should be noted that among the mentioned surveys, only one has been partly conducted in our research area (DVURECHENSKAYA *et al.* 2014). Beside these broader projects, there were also efforts to study particular problems connected with the piedmont landscape. Some interesting results, unfortunately without any chronologically-specific conclusions, were brought about by the research of the mining and metallurgy of the mountain valleys close to Kampyrtepa village undertaken in 1990 (RUZANOV – BURYAKOV 1997). This area is situated ca. 10 km from Burgut Kurgan.

The above mentioned short research visits of our team in 2008–2011 and their results, including the detection of several previously unknown kurgan burial sites (STANČO 2009; DANIELISOVÁ – STANČO – SHAYDULLAEV 2010; STANCHO – SHAYDULLAEV – TUSHLOVA 2013) stimulated and directed further Czech-Uzbekistani scientific cooperation. In the first step, our aim was to gain a better idea of the kurgan burial sites, of their chronology and spatial distribution. During the short campaign in 2014 we excavated one of the larger kurgans near Kayrit village and started a detailed surface survey in its vicinity that led to the discovery of many other kurgans and several settlements of various periods, among them also the Early Iron Age walled site of Burgut Kurgan (STANČO *et al.* 2014). This site has been chosen as a suitable one for archaeological excavations to be started immediately next season (STANČO *et al.* 2016).

2 Despite these efforts, Rtveladze and his colleagues knew in the 1980s (ARSHAVSKAYA – RTVELADZE – KHAKIMOV 1982) only one archaeological site of the medieval period in Maydan (Maydan Kurgan), one in Pashkhurt (Dabil Kurgan) and three in Karabag (Gilampushtepa, Mazaristantepa and Kurgantepa). Over the next thirty years, only a single new site has been added to this short list.

3 Note that the access to the villages and adjacent valleys situated closest to the main ridge of Kugitang and at the same time to the Turkmen border is restricted by law especially for foreigners. Thus, special permission is required for visit of Kyzyl Alma, Shelkan, Vandob and other villages and hamlets.

KURGAN BURIALS

By now, we have detected 34 kurgans or kurgan-like stone features near Kayrit village and around the road connecting the villages of Maydan and Zarabag. Thus, we have more than doubled the number of these features identified in the previous season. The newly detected mounds are in some cases isolated from each other, there are however also two clusters of ca. five mounds in one place (rather small ones with diameters less than 2 m). The following table (**Tab. 1**) shows the basic characteristics of these burial mounds. The newly found kurgans have not been documented in full detail yet, with the exception of kurgan No. 16 situated between the Burgut Kurgan and the road connecting Maydan and Zarabag. Here we have conducted small-scale excavations in order to get more data on both the structure and chronology of the given features and thus to add some information to the data gained during the excavations of the kurgan Kayrit 1 in 2014 (STANČO *et. al.* 2014). The excavation of Kurgan 16 was carried out by Jakub Havlík. The small stone mound was removed (first one half of it, then the other), under which no burial pit was detected. Instead, we came across a very unusual feature: a broken, but archaeologically complete vessel placed next to a flat stone. The vessel was dated to the Yaz I period by Sh. Shaydullaev and J. Lhuillier (LHUILLIER 2016, 119). We preliminarily assume that we are dealing with evidence of a ritual, which had not yet been attested by previous research. The situation will be further analysed and we plan to open one or two of the neighbouring “kurgans” to understand better, what funeral (or other?) rituals, and how, were performed here during the Yaz I period. For the other kurgan-like features, there are no chronological indicators available at the moment.

SETTLEMENTS

Sixteen previously unknown archaeological sites that can be classified as settlements were detected in the surroundings of Kayrit in 2015 (following the seven discovered the year before). In most cases they were characterised not only by pottery scatters on the surface but also some significant morphological features (including stone architecture, as in the case of Kayrit VI and VII). In most cases, the preliminary dating is based on the surface finds of pottery fragments (**Fig. 5** and **6**), evaluated by Sh. Shaydullaev and J. Lhuillier (LHUILLIER 2016, 119–120). In two cases, however, we conducted small-scale trial excavations in order to get more precise chronological and typological clues.

As is seen from the table below (**Tab. 2**), the predominant period of occupation in the research area was that of Yaz I culture with nine sites. It should be noted, however, that in six cases a (proportionally smaller) part of the material from these Yaz I sites probably dates to the Late Bronze Age (Sapalli culture).⁴ Among these sites, at least two or three deserve closer attention and we aim to study their topography and material culture in detail in the near future. One is Kayrit VIII (**Fig. 1**), with an abundant Yaz I pottery assemblage, but with no visible remains of stone architecture. It is situated on a low natural mound elevated above the flat bottom of the large basin overlooked by Burgut Kurgan (**Pl. 2/1**). This particular area, as we were told by locals, is being used for occasional agricultural activities even nowadays. These, however, depend on the intensity of precipitation in a given season. This seemingly dry area is interwoven by a network of water canals, perhaps mostly dug only recently.

4 One more site with the same characteristics has been detected at the Zarabag village, see AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015, 265. Tab. 1, POL_3.

Number ¹	Coordinates		Diameter (m)	Height (m)	Elevation (m.a.s.l.)
1	66,798	37,752	9	0.5	838.8
2	66,797	37,752	11	0.7	834
3	66,797	37,751	9	0.8	833.5
4	66,798	37,751	10	1.2	834
5 ²	66,797	37,755	3.4	0.1	833
6	66,794	37,750	13	1.5	835
7	66,790	37,750	12	1.4	843
8	66,788	37,757	11	1.4	856
9	66,801	37,756	5	< 0.5	859
10	66,801	37,751	< 2	0.7	829.5
11	66,801	37,751	< 2	< 0.5	823
12	66,802	37,751	< 2	< 0.5	821
13	66,802	37,751	< 2	< 0.5	821
14	66,786	37,757	6	0.5	853
15	66,778983	37,751019	8		903 (G.E.)
16	66,786	37,7548			857
17	66,778	37,761503			841
18	66,777191	37,761895			849
19	66,776792	37,761895			850
20	66,776901	37,761995			849.6
21	66,7861	37,7491			851.5
22	66,7868	37,7492			847.4
23	66,8209	37,7517			776
24	66,819696	37,7515			780
25	66,819397	37,7515			780
26	66,819	37,751399			782
27	66,818796	37,751602			781
28	66,8098	37,752401			778
29	66,8098	37,752299			777
30	6,809702	37,7523			777
31	66,8096	37,7524			778
32	66,8096	37,7523			779
33	66,8094	37,7523			779.6
34	66,779301	37,760904			841.7

Tab. 1: List of kurgan burials (or kurgan-like features) in the area of Burgut Kurgan and Kayrittepa, eastern Pashkhurt Valley.

5 Local numeration for the kurgans in the vicinity of Kayrit.

6 This structure was reinterpreted from kurgan to stone circle at last, STANČO *et al.* 2014, 35.



Fig. 1: The settlement of Kayrit VIII (low mound on the left centre of foreground) with Burgut Kurgan as highest point in the background, view from N (photo by author).

The second example is represented by Kayrit VI, called Norkhontepa⁷ by some locals or (by our team) Kayrittepa (**Fig. 2**) that resembles Burgut Kurgan in its size, remains of stone walls / ramparts, and even in a surface find of an early type of quern stone. Burgut Kurgan and Kayrittepa are obviously very similar to each other, including the topography and strategic position high above a flat valley.⁸ The only important difference is represented by the presence of plentiful water sources directly at the foot of Kayrittepa that supply the hamlet of Kayrit even nowadays.

The third exceptional site (Kayrit VII or Burgutchcha = “Small Eagle”) one find between Burgut Kurgan and Zarabag village. There are also remains of a stone structure, but the site is much smaller than Burgut Kurgan or Kayrittepa (**Fig. 3**). There was probably just a single stone building, circular in its ground plan (diameter ca. 12 m). A single circular tower-like structure does not look like an ordinary settlement and we may speculate on a ritual function of the feature. One possible explanation, especially bearing in mind the hypothesis related to a ritual function of the paved room of Burgut Kurgan as a space for the temporary placement of corpses before moving them to *dakhma* itself (STANČO *et al.* 2016, 106), is that it could have been a proto-*dakhma*, a tower of silence. This highly speculative preliminary interpretation will be verified in the near future.

7 We were told by a local shepherd a fantastic tale about this site, which was reportedly an ancient castle, while the site of Burgut Kurgan had served as its port.

8 By the time of the finalizing of this report (06/2016), Shapulat Shaydullaev, the co-director of the Czech-Uzbekistani team, had already begun the trial excavations of Kayrittepa with promising results: besides the stone ramparts and the well-preserved pottery assemblage of the Yaz I period, also a bronze knife had been uncovered.



Fig. 2: Walled settlement of Kayrittepa (Yaz I period), view from W (photo by author).



Fig. 3: Burgutcha, a stone structure, circular in groundplan (photo by author).

Yet another stone structure (Kayrit XXI) has been found close to the Burgutcha, but it was situated on the slope and what remained resembles a group of orthostats forming an irregular oblong or oval structure (**Fig. 4**). The trial excavation conducted by Alisher Shaydullaev did not answer the questions of chronology and function of this specific structure.



Fig. 4: Group of orthostats forming oval structure (photo by author).

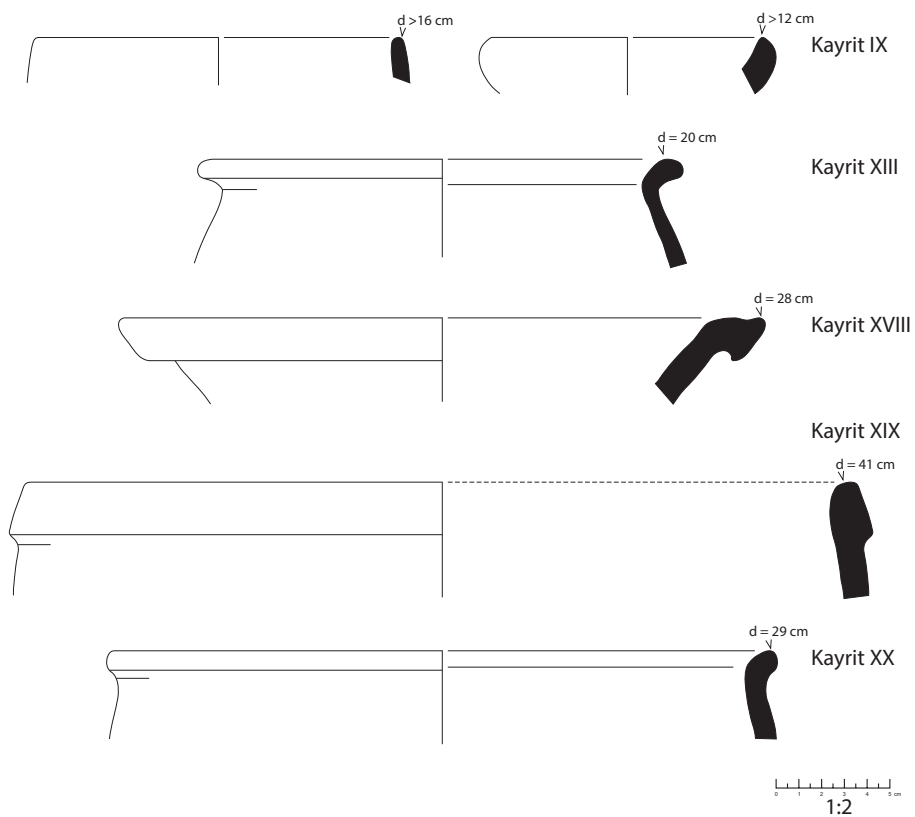


Fig. 5: Selected pottery fragments from the surface survey, sites of Kayrit IX, XIII, XVIII, XIX, XX (drawing by A. Pažout and V. Doležálková).

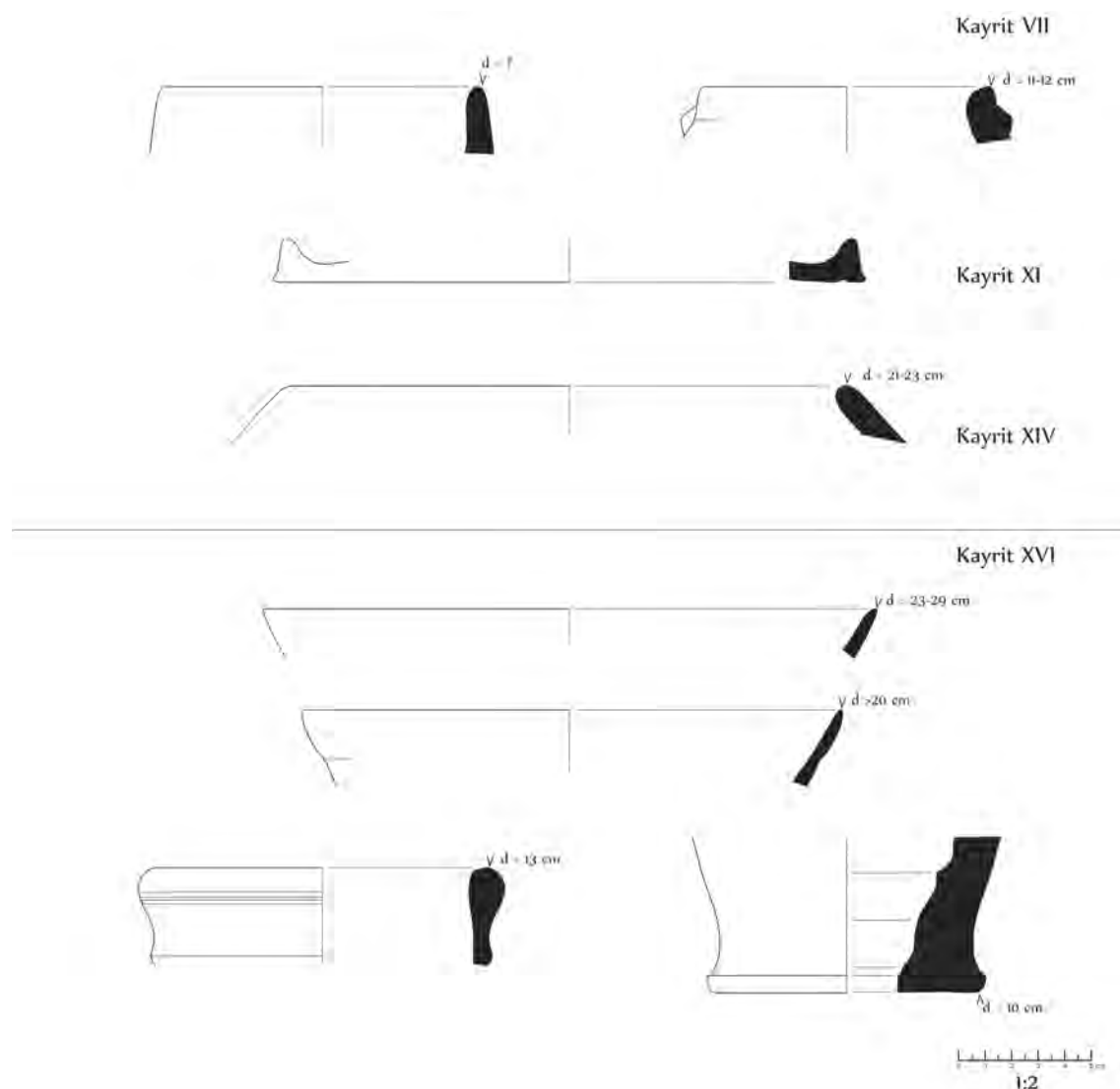


Fig. 6: Selected pottery fragments from the surface survey, sites of Kayrit VII, XI, XIV, XVI (drawing by A. Pažout and V. Doležálková).

We do not know so far, what happened here in the eastern Pashkhurt Valley at the end of the Yaz I period (around 1100 BC), when all of the sites with relevant archaeological material were abandoned. The earliest finds posterior to the end of Yaz I, belongs to Yaz III (or Kuchuk III/IV) only (i.e. about four centuries later), and comes from a group of terraces that were not inhabited in Yaz I, but corresponds very well with the High Medieval occupation of the same places. These locations were well-watered by abundant natural springs. This is the case of the sites Kayrit XVIII–XX located just above the right bank of the Maydan Say at Kayrit village. A similar situation, however, can be observed in the village of Zarabag (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015, 274. Tab. 4, O1). There is also Yaz II/III material in the same place where the medieval finds have been found. Altogether, there are six sites where High Medieval pottery occurs (outside of Zarabag itself). This period seems to be – after the turn of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age – the only historical period with a higher density of occupation in the piedmont steppe. The Late Antiquity/Early Medieval period is only very scarcely represented. By now we have

only one site (Kayrit IIa) clearly belonging to this period.⁹ The Greco-Bactrian and Early Kushan periods are not represented at all. This situation is totally different from the picture we gained down in the Sherabad plain, where Antiquity is the prevailing period representing the heyday of local settlement development (STANČO – TUŠLOVÁ in print).

Four sites have been interpreted as Pre-modern, i.e. dated to the 18th–19th c. and it is possible to correlate them with the Zarabag survey results (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015) and ethnographic studies undertaken by Karmysheva in the 1960s (KARMYSHEVA 1976, 59).

PETROGLYPHS

During the survey, a small number of petroglyphs have been detected in the research area. These finds were further studied and are going to be published together with the other rock art of the Pashkhurt Valley, particularly of the Zarabag area, studied mainly by A. Augustinová (AUGUSTINOVÁ – STANČO 2016), because they all belong to the same tradition and stylistic group. The map (Pl. 2/1) shows, however, their spatial relation to the other groups of archaeological sites of the research area. The surrounding landscape has indisputably high potential for further finds of rock art. On the basis of analogies from broader Central Asia we may date the petroglyphs very preliminarily to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

CONCLUSION

The overall number of settlements – or the accumulations of pottery indicating a settlement or an area of some economic or ritual activities – in the closest surroundings of Burgut Kurgan has thus increased from seven known to us in the previous season (STANČO *et al.* 2014, 36) to twenty-four. Of these twenty-four, we can add five new sites to the list of Yaz I period settlements (besides Burgut Kurgan itself). They are Kayrit VIII, IX, XII, XIV, and XVI. Moreover, after the revision of last year's material and a new visit of the sites, Kayrit VI (Kayrittepa) and VII (Burgutcha) were added to the list of Yaz I sites. Both these sites are specific, since they resemble Burgut Kurgan in having traces of stone architecture (which we previously erroneously considered Medieval). It is therefore obvious that we are dealing with a former micro-oasis populated in the second half of the 2nd millennium by Yaz I people. The entire oasis has considerable potential for further research of the period. Almost all the detected sites are intact and not disturbed by later human activity. The settlements, combined with ritual features – kurgans and petroglyphs, seem to form a complex landscape of Yaz I culture. The oasis was apparently abandoned at the end of the Yaz I period (ca. 1100 BC) and never settled again in such an extensive and intensive way.

Another period represented in the collected material belongs to the later phases of the Iron Age (Yaz II–III). They were, however, detected in different positions than the Yaz I sites. Additionally, we have found several sites with material of the Pre-Mongol Middle Ages (12th century AD) and the Early Modern period. The dating of the surface water canals found in 2014 around Burgut Kurgan still remains open, although they are clearly spatially linked to some of the Early Iron Age sites, including Burgut Kurgan. The same goes for the other canals seemingly leading to the settlement of Kayrit VIII and around (Pl. 2/1). Unfortunately, they are very difficult to date by other, more exact, methods (STANČO *et al.* 2016) and their relation to the best represented Yaz culture sites remain unconfirmed.

⁹ Again, the surface survey in Zarabag shows the same situation. There was only one site with 4th c. material and a few with material dated to the 5th–8th c. AD (AUGUSTINOVÁ *et al.* 2015, Tab. 4).

Site	Number ¹⁰	Coordinates		Dating 2014	Dating 2015 ¹¹
Kayrit I	182	66,799	37,752	Sapalli (Late Bronze Age)	
Kayrit IIa	076	66,792	37,758	4 th c. AD (Kushan- Sasanian period)	
Kayrit IIb	183	66,791	37,751	18 th -19 th c. AD (early modern)	
Kayrit III = Burgut Kurgan	047	66,789	37,757	Yaz I (Early Iron Age)	
Kayrit IV	185	66,785	37,753	18 th -19 th c. AD (early modern)	
Kayrit V	187	66,786	37,756	Sapalli (Late Bronze Age)	Sapalli and Yaz I. Probably not a permanent site (trench with negative results)
Kayrit VI = Norkhontepa = Kayrittepa	186	66,797	37,749	Unknown (few surface finds)	Sapalli (few) Yaz I (dominant)
Kayrit VII	184	66,783	37,758	Unknown	Sapalli (few) Yaz I (dominant)
Kayrit VIII	189	66,788801	37,762062	---	Sapalli (few) Yaz I (dominant)
Kayrit IX	190	66,788048	37,763282	---	Sapalli (few) Yaz I (dominant)
Kayrit X	193	66,783317	37,769274	---	Medieval?
Kayrit XI	195	66,781506	37,767811	---	Medieval?
Kayrit XII	196	66,795962	37,760676	---	Sapalli (few) Yaz I (dominant)
Kayrit XIII	197	66,797407	37,760533	---	Sapalli
Kayrit XIV	191	66,783592	37,759852	---	Yaz I
Kayrit XV	198	66,787021	37,748333	---	Unknown (linear stone structures)
Kayrit XVI	202	66,797981	37,746174	---	Yaz I / High Medieval
Kayrit XVII	194	66,781304	37,76896	---	Medieval?
Kayrit XVIII	199	66,819282	7,751445	---	Yaz III / High Medieval
Kayrit XIX	200	66,817444	37,75136	---	Yaz III / High Medieval
Kayrit XX		66,8144	37,7509	---	Yaz III / High Medieval
Kayrit XXI	203	66,780604	37,759954	---	Unknown (stone-build oval), Yaz I?
Kayrit XXII	204	66,782458	37,76029	---	Pre-modern
Kayrit XXIII	205	66,781309	37,766265	---	Pre-modern

Tab. 2: List of settlements in the eastern Pashkhurt Valley around the site of Burgut Kurgan and Kayrittepa.

10 Local numeration for the kurgans in the vicinity of Kayrit.

11 This structure was reinterpreted from kurgan to stone circle at last, STANČO *et al.* 2014, 35.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was prepared with the support of the Programme for the Development of Fields of Study at Charles University, No. P12 'History from the interdisciplinary perspective', sub programme 'Society, culture and communication in Czech history'.

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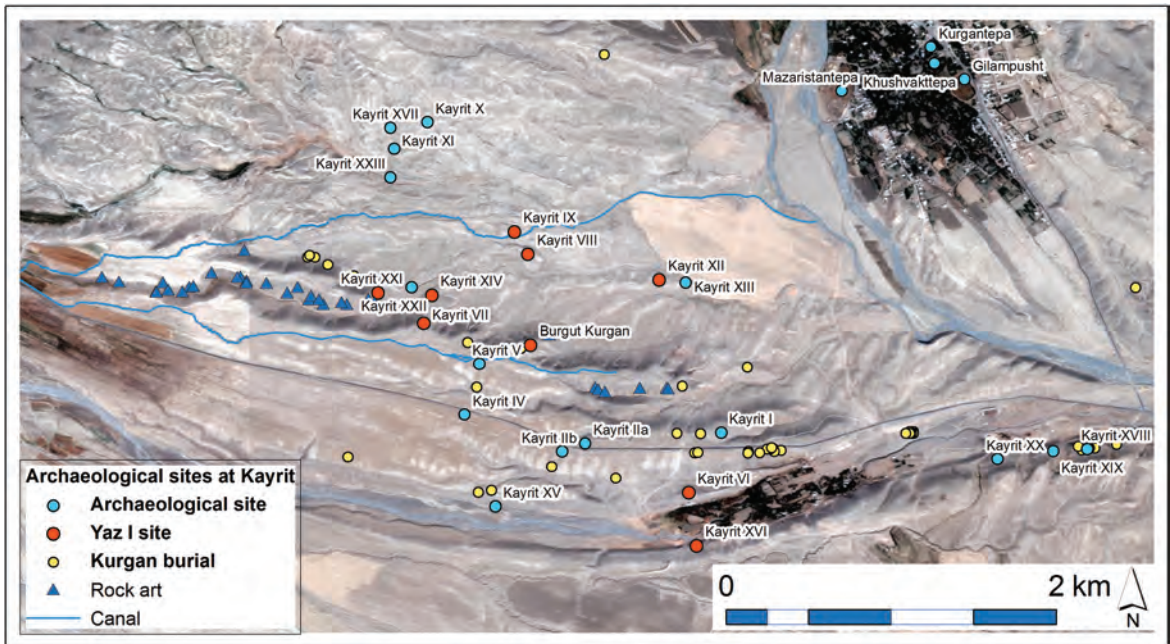
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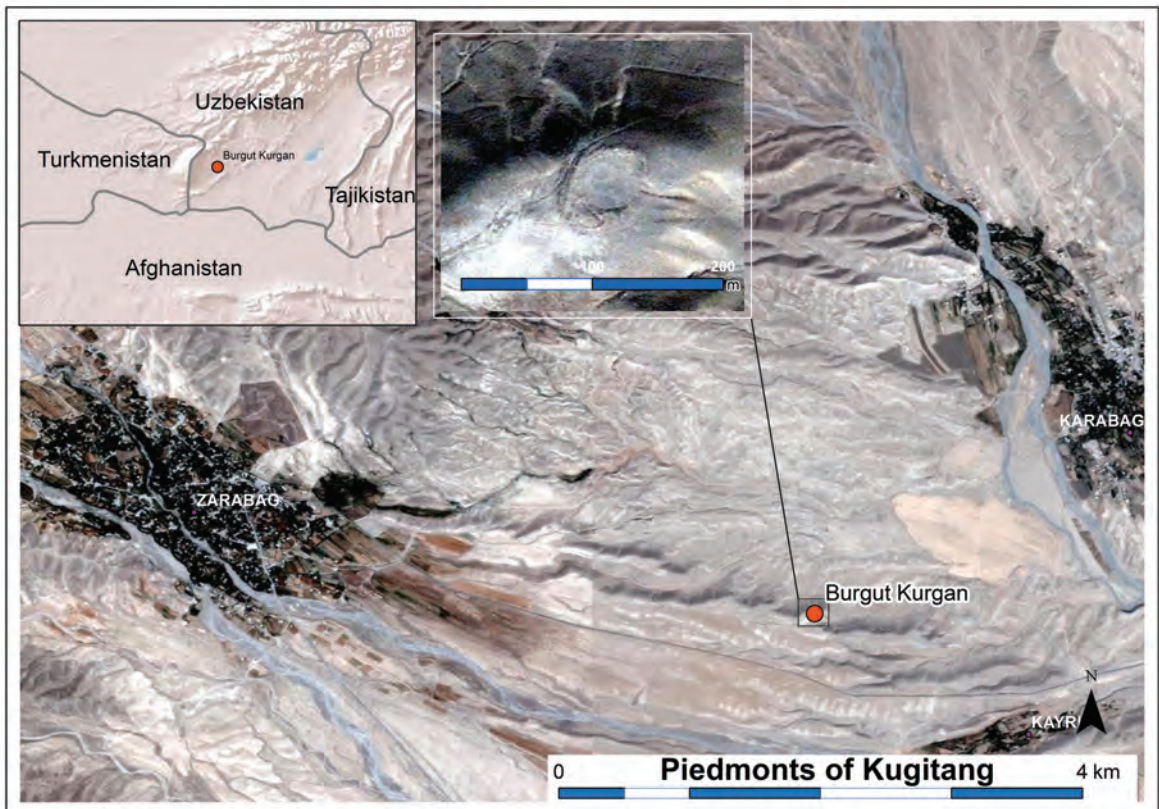
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Pl. 2/1: Distribution of archaeological sites at Kayrit, eastern Pashkhurt Valley, Uzbekistan (map by author).



Pl. 3/1: Location of Burgut Kurgan in the eastern part of the Pashkhurt Valley, Sherabad District, south Uzbekistan (map by L. Stančo).