

The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: New Perspectives on Kingship and Religion in Ancient Chorasmia

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“The world is at peace on the walls of Persepolis as it never was in reality.
While news of the Persian sack of Miletus was striking terror in the
Athenian soul, artisans from near and far were carving dreams in stone for
Darius.” (Cool Root 1979:311)

INTRODUCTION

Akchakhan-kala² is a massive fortified site located in the delta region of the Amu-dar'ya, the land known in antiquity as Chorasmia (Khorezm)³ (Fig. 1). Of all the varied settled regions of Central Asia, Chorasmia is one of the most northerly, and also one of the least known. Its prehistory is related to that of the nomadic populations of the northern steppes, but by the early Iron Age the lands on the east bank of the river had a settled population, dependent on simple irrigation agriculture to supplement their herds. The economic and political possibilities of the region must have been attractive as Chorasmia fell under Achaemenid imperial expansion around the sixth century, perhaps under Cyrus, but certainly by the time of Darius, and then slipped away again to become probably broadly independent around the fifth – fourth century BCE.⁴ While little is known of her relationship to Persia, exposure to Persian elite practices changed the region for ever, and fostered a period of rich and successful independence lasting up to the early medieval period.

The Amu-dar'ya delta was extensively explored in the mid-twentieth century by a major Soviet era research team, the Khorezm Expedition, led by Sergei P. Tolstov.⁵ This multi-disciplinary group mapped sites, ancient canals and river beds, and conducted extensive excavations at most of the major monuments. Since 1995 excavations in the Tash-k'irman oasis, one of the last unstudied areas on the east bank of the Amu-dar'ya, have been conducted under the auspices of the University of Sydney Central

Asian Program (USCAP)⁶ and the Karakalpak Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences as the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE) with a particular focus on the major site of Akchakhan-kala (Kidd, Negus-Cleary and Baker-Brite 2012; Kidd 2011; Kidd and Betts 2010; Yagodin et al. 2009; Betts et al. 2009; Kidd et al. 2008; Betts et al. 2005; Helms et al. 2002; Helms et al. 2001; Helms and Yagodin 1997).

Akchakhan-kala consists of two parts, an upper and a lower enclosure measuring *c.* 15 and 27 hectares respectively (Fig. 2). The upper enclosure was built first. It was heavily fortified with two-storeyed towers, each eight square meters in area, the corner ones enlarged, galleried curtain walls some six meters wide with ranks of arrow slits, all set on a high *pakhsa* socle. Following construction of the walls, a *proteichisma* was set up in front with a raised and paved covered way and double ditches. Complex gateways of the “labyrinth before wall” type are visible on the surface on three of four flanks, with the fourth so far apparently a less complex entrance slightly off-center.

Following construction of the *proteichisma*, the lower enclosure was added to the south. This was also heavily fortified with galleried curtain walls, towers and a *proteichisma*. The upper enclosure (Fig. 3) contained several discrete areas of monumental architecture in the north-west corner, the exact centre and the south-west corner. These are visible above the sand dunes, but other lower structures may also exist, still concealed. The south-western corner contains the “Kushan-Afrighid” *donjon*

(Area 11: South-West Enclosure), stratified over earlier monumental walls contemporary with the fortifications. At the centre of the site is an artificial high place/terrace characterised by two massive plinths and vaulted passages, accessible on one of its sides by a monumental ramp (Area 07: Central Monument). The function of this structure in a clearly highly symbolic location is uncertain but is likely to be associated with ritual and ceremony (Minardi and Khozhaniyazov 2015). In the northwest is a richly ornamented ceremonial complex that has been the subject of most excavation of the interior (Area 10: Ceremonial Complex). Both of these last two building complexes are contemporary with the fortifications.

Akchakhan-kala is perhaps the largest, and has proved to be certainly among the richest, of the sites known in ancient Chorasmia. Based on present evidence (Betts et al. 2009), it was founded around the end of the third century or early second century BCE and was abandoned in early “Kushan” times,⁷ around the second century CE. The site saw a partial re-occupation in “Kushan-Afrighid” times when the Area 11 *donjon* was built among the standing ruins of the earlier site, dated, based on the ceramics, to the late fourth to fifth centuries CE.

THE CEREMONIAL COMPLEX (AREA 10)

The ceremonial complex (Area 10) (Fig. 3) consists of an elaborate, roughly square monumental building set in the northwest corner of the Upper Enclosure. Surrounding it is a series of walls, chambers and walkways. The Central Building of the complex can be reconstructed as roughly 60 by 60 meters square with rounded corner towers (Fig. 4).

In its final stage, the Central Building had a double wall, forming a surrounding corridor. Both walls were built of mud brick on *pakhsa* foundations. Extensive sections of the inner wall of the corridor were painted with abstract and figurative images. A gate with flanking rounded towers is more or less centered on the western wall between the corner towers. It leads directly into the interior and opens onto the corridor in both directions. On the south wall is a more monumental gateway with towers set back *c.* four meters from the entrance. This entrance leads directly to a blank wall with the only access possible along the corridors. To the east, the corridor extends three meters and then is blocked by a cross wall. To the west the corridor is not excavated, although it seems likely that it continues unblocked to the western corner tower where it has been traced, albeit in a poorly preserved state. The western corridor is much better preserved. The northern

corridor has been partially opened and is also well preserved at its excavated western end. There is evidence that the Central Building was originally constructed either on a natural rise in the ground surface that was leveled off flat for construction or, more probably, on a made clay platform. The underlying sterile clay falls away sharply to the south-west and to the north-west it disappears in soundings several meters beyond the outer wall of the Central Building.

A complex array of structures surrounded the Central Building (Fig. 3). To the west, where a large area of over 750 square meters has been opened up between the main building and the fortification wall, a number of rooms have been identified. Narrower trenches to the north, east and south have also revealed walls and rooms. Painted decoration has been found in places on the walls of some of the rooms.

In the Central Building, only a little over a quarter of the interior has been exposed, in the southwest quadrant (Fig. 4). In the final stage much of this was occupied by a hypostyle hall, formed to the south and the west by the walls of the corridor and to the east by a single wall extending into the interior. The hall was open to the north, facing an open courtyard with several unusual features, probably cultic installations. The roof was supported by wooden columns, now gone, that stood on two part sandstone column bases, some of which still remain. Three rows of four columns stretched east-west across the building with an intervening span of *c.* four meters. The walls and ceiling of the hypostyle hall were elaborately painted, and the columns were also covered in painted plaster. A concentration of molded gypsum plaster elements was found in the south-west corner, as was a small fragment of molded mud-plaster with gilded ornamentation. The plaster seemed to have been pinned onto an underlying structure of some kind and was originally partially or wholly painted.

Towards the southeast of the central building was an altar complex with many fragments of wall paintings and painted mud-plaster sculptural fragments. Due to the intricate nature of the decoration, the complex has been only partially excavated. A number of unusual fire features have been found outside the south gate, in the courtyard to the north of the hypostyle hall and around the altar complex.

Three main stages of construction and use have been identified in the Central Building (Fig. 5), the latest of which is well preserved. In some stages interim phases may also be seen. In the first stage (Stage 1) a wall was built on the alignment of the inner wall of the final stage.

Shortly afterwards, a wall was built along the line of the outer wall, forming the corridor (Stage 2). Later still, the first inner wall was demolished, leaving only a stub some 10–15 cm high, and a new wall was built, offset to the outside by *c.* 20 cm (Stage 3). This wall was then covered in painted plaster. The outer wall of the corridor shows no signs of ever having been painted. This final stage (Stage 3) is followed by two identifiable stages of abandonment, robbing and decay. The site was abandoned around the second century CE without any apparent evidence for destruction. There then followed a period of deliberate removal of all reusable materials: timber, metal and worked stone. During the lifetime of its use the Ceremonial Complex was kept remarkably clean. It had clay plaster or mud brick floors, which did not permit the casual loss of artifacts of daily use. As a result the main archaeological evidence from the site consists of the architecture and the fallen paintings. Ceramics were preserved only where they were used in architectural contexts and small finds come almost exclusively from the later abandonment stages.

DATING

Several absolute dates have been obtained for the Central Building in the Ceremonial Complex. Within the interior of the building, the earliest (Wk 20222: 346 cal BCE–23 cal CE) dates a pit within Stage 1, associated with the earliest interior corridor wall. The pit was sealed below a clay basin set into the final floor of the courtyard north of the hypostyle hall. While the range is wide, the calibration graph suggests a date within the early second to mid first centuries BCE is most likely (Fig. 6). Two more (Wk 31987: 185 cal BCE–1 cal CE; Wk 31986: 115 cal BCE–cal 55 CE) date pits of Stage 1/2, sealed below the final floor of Stage 3 in the hypostyle hall. These fall from the second to the first century BCE and from the end of the second century BCE to the early first century CE. The final date (Wk 20221: 170 cal BCE–90 cal CE) comes from ash within a bi-concave rectangular fire feature dated to Stage 3 in the courtyard outside the hypostyle hall. The graph shows that this falls most likely within the mid-first century BCE to the mid-first century CE and must necessarily date close to the final abandonment of the site. A second date (Wk 31988: 55 cal BCE–cal CE 70) confirming this likely time of abandonment comes from the southern gate where a radiocarbon date was obtained from burned reeds set into the top of the wall framing the “burning entrance”⁸ of the gatehouse dating a late use of the structure in Stage 3.

Dates have also been obtained from within the corridors and help to establish the architectural chronology. Four radiocarbon dates have been obtained for these parts of the building, three in the corridors (Wk 23065: 166 cal BCE–46 cal CE (layer 246); Wk 23064: cal 107 BCE–cal 80 CE (Layer 247); Wk 17404: 53 BCE–115 CE) and one in the south-west corner tower (NZA 15967: 107 BCE–135 CE). The three in the corridors date Stage 2 when there are small hearths on the floor. These just predate or are associated with the construction of the final inner wall of the corridor on which the paintings were set. Generally the dates span the first century BCE into the first century CE. The date from the southwest corner tower was obtained from the upper levels of the fill, possibly also associated with Stage 2 or early Stage 3. It falls within a similar date range.

A date of 321–206 cal BCE (OZS402: 2,250 +/- 30) has been obtained from charcoal used for the pigment for the paintings. This dates the combined organic matter of the mastic and the charcoal. Given the other fairly consistent date ranges, this apparently earlier date requires explanation. The best hypothesis for this is that the small hearths in the corridor from which the Stage 2 dates came were made by workers constructing the final wall. The building is otherwise remarkably clean and these hearths are anomalous. When the final building was completed they were sealed by a clay floor. Workers are most likely to have used local shrubs for fuel, meaning that the wood was young. The reeds from the south gate fall into the same category of ‘young wood’. On the other hand the charcoal used for the pigment may well have come from a commercial source. Professional charcoal burning uses relatively large timber and a good supply of old trees existed along the banks of the Amu-dar’ya. While there is no direct evidence for commercial charcoal production in ancient Chorasmia, it is very likely that it did take place. The commercial production of charcoal is well documented for fifth–fourth century BCE Athens, where it was integrated into many aspects of daily life and economic activity (Olson 1991: 414–6). Charcoal yields much more heat per kilogram than dry wood and so transport costs per kilocalorie are much lower for locally produced charcoal than for locally gathered wood. Charcoal also creates a much hotter, more even, and more easily controlled heat than wood, so it is better suited for domestic cooking, and virtually essential for metal working, especially iron, which requires very high temperatures (Olson 1991: 412). It is very likely to have been available in local bazaars at the time of the creation of the murals.

THE WALL PAINTINGS

In the Central Building, mural art is associated only with the last main stage of construction, Stage 3. The new inner corridor wall built at this time was covered in paintings around its entire currently exposed surface, and it can be suggested that this was the case all around the building. The opposite wall of the corridor was not painted. In the interior of the Central Building, in the hypostyle hall, the western and southern walls were painted, as was the wooden ceiling and probably the columns. It is likely that the eastern wall was also painted but this has not yet been proven. Paintings have also been found in the buildings to the west of the Central Building. Here the architectural stratigraphy is not so clear, but it is most likely that the murals in these rooms were painted around the time of the final remodelling of the Central Building. In any event, they formed a visible part of the formal decoration at the site up to the time of its abandonment. Plastered columns have been found here. Likewise, we do not know when the sculpture and paintings around the main altar area to the east of the hypostyle hall were made, but they too formed part of the visual corpus up to the end of the site.

For the mural art, the surfaces to be painted were covered in a layer of mud plaster that was then overlaid with a 1–5 mm thick layer of gypsum plaster. The pigments comprised mainly charcoal and a variety of iron oxides, creating a palette dominated by reds, browns and yellows (Yagodin et al. 2009: 9; Brite 2006: 32). Some paintings were found *in situ* in the corridor, particularly in the south section of the western corridor. Here was a partially preserved procession scene with animals, mostly horses, and some traces of human figures walking between them (Kidd 2012). Most paintings, however, had fallen off the walls and were preserved as fragments in the debris of the wall collapse. Some lay face upward, others face down. It is likely that many of the paintings fell very early after the abandonment of the building. The timber beams that would have formed the roof of the hypostyle hall, and which may also have covered the corridor, were robbed out, and this action must have dislodged much of the wall plaster. Certainly, the plaster from the ceiling of the hypostyle hall was brought down at this time. Sections of plaster still moulded in the shape of beams have been found there. This probably accounts for the good state of preservation of the fallen plaster, by contrast with the paintings still on the walls, which have suffered much weathering and are in poor condition.

In the north section of the western corridor was an extensive series of portrait heads (Yagodin et al. 2009:

9) (Fig. 7). These figures, framed by black rectangles, have colourful V-necked garments (Kidd and Baker-Brite 2015). Most wear a gold spiral torque with animal head finials, some have earrings, and several wear a diadem, some of which are adorned with zoomorphic emblems in the form of the haunches of a crouching beast and a bird-headed frontispiece.⁹ One curious and significant aspect of these portrait busts is that there are no obvious clues as to their gender. In the rooms on the north-western exterior, only one clear image has been recovered, a magnificent horned and bearded ungulate, possibly either an ibex or, more unusually, the remarkable saiga antelope common on the Ustyurt plateau that borders Chorasmia to the north. In the altar area a small fragment has been found showing a group of faces in a “crowd scene” and another fragment has part of a face bordered on one side by a trailing vine (Kidd 2011: figs. 3, 12).

THE COLOSSAL FIGURE

A large number of painted fragments have been recovered from the hypostyle hall. Among these is a consecutive set of large pieces of plaster (Fig. 8: 66a-f) that appear to be associated with the collapse of the rear wall of the hall. The pieces were found face down in a line. When work began on the cleaning of these pieces in 2014, it soon became clear that the subject matter of the painting was something very new and significant. The fragments as lifted consist of six sections of plaster, each measuring around one meter square. When cleaned and placed in sequence they revealed an anthropomorphic figure (Fig. 9 a, b), frontally represented in right profile, almost certainly male, wearing a massive mural crown and with a short sword (*akinakes*) strapped to his right thigh. Round his neck is an elaborate collar decorated with scenes of humans and animals engaged in diverse activities. He wears a tunic with a broad panel running down the front. This is divided into smaller panels and in each one is a repeated motif of two opposing human-headed roosters wearing masks that designate them as Zoroastrian priests and holding in one hand the bundle of *barsom* twigs associated with Zoroastrian ritual. On the right thigh, the tunic is lifted by the strap supporting the sword to reveal the trousers, which are decorated with a repeated pattern of long-legged, long-necked birds. The figure is preserved from the crown to around the knee and measures about five meters in height. Assuming that he was standing, he would have been around six meters or more tall. The head and crown lay at the northern end of

the row of fragments and the scabbard and trousers to the south, consistent with the assumption that the figure had fallen from the back wall of the hypostyle hall.

CONSERVATION

The work of the conservators is crucial in the reconstruction of the image. The paint is fragmentary and irregularly faded, while the plaster is cracked and broken in many places. Piecing this together as accurately as possible requires technical skill and some necessary interpretation. In the trenches the fragments were fixed with reversible synthetic adhesive, Paraloid B72, to cotton gauze backing. Excess soil was removed, leaving a few millimeters on the surface. This treatment rendered them sufficiently stable for transport and temporary storage. In the laboratory the fragments were cleaned and consolidated. When this had been done the relationships between the pieces became clear, particularly as some of the patterns of ornamentation could be aligned. To better understand the painting, detailed tracings were made on Mylar™ (transparent plastic sheeting), using permanent markers (black, red, yellow, and blue) to represent the original colors in schematic form (See Table of Color Coding in Color Plate 8).

After the tracings were completed, they were photographed in high definition. A grid of 30 cm large squares was set over the tracings to facilitate the merging of the photographs and avoid parallax distortion. Each tracing required the merging of roughly nine photographs. When this was done, grids were deleted and colors intensified.

The reconstruction was carried out with a Wacom™ tablet. Small missing elements (up to three cm) were drawn with a pencil tool. After small sections were completed, larger elements could be reconstituted. On certain fragments, especially fragment B (belt), certain details were relocated by using the cutting-paste tool. It was assumed that the fragments had broken apart when they originally fell and lay separated by up to one to five cm. After each fragment was partially reconstructed, all fragments were assembled together allowing further completion. The position of the fragments is open to discussion, especially the relative position of fragments D and C (head and chest). However, for the other fragments, the reconstruction was quite clear.

After consultation with the archaeologists, additional reconstruction work was done to clarify the image for the viewer. A schematic profile has been added to frame the

face more clearly. The outlines of the sword, scabbard and belt have been enhanced. No enhancement has been carried out on the collar or the decorative elements of the costume, with the exception of the red rings framing the central panel and hem of the tunic. Further careful study of the painting may produce more details, while cleaning of adjacent plaster fragments is likely to yield more pieces of the full picture.

During the cleaning of the fragments some differences were noted in certain areas about the way the pigment had been applied to the painting, using a binder, commonly of vegetable gum (Kirianov 1960: 13).¹⁰ Over time the organic binder decays, so that the paint is held in place only through the crystalloid structure of the mineral grain of the pigment and the gypsum plaster. Due to this fragility, it is usually possible only to clean the painting mechanically. The mud is moistened with a composition of alcohol and demineralised water. It can then be removed using a pointed wooden rod and a scalpel. Over most of the painting, it was necessary to use this technique, but during the cleaning of fragment 66D (the head of the figure) it was discovered that the red brown paint on this fragment is more stable than the other colors, and it was possible to clean the color carefully with moist cotton on the tip of a wooden stick. This is the first time it proved possible to clean a deep red color layer by this method and suggests that a different technique was used for this part of the painting (Fig. 10). Two factors might have played an important role in the consolidation of the painting. First, it is possible that the paint was applied on a plaster ground that was not completely dry – a technique similar to the fresco technique in lime plaster. The pigment could have soaked into the wet plaster, fixing the color in the surface layer of the plaster as it dried. A second possibility is that diluted plaster was mixed with the pigment before application.¹¹ This could explain why the face was colored red and brown and in the neck the colors shade from light to dark, with the light area more resistant than the dark one due to the addition of white plaster as a lightening agent.

THE COSTUME

The figure wears a white upper body garment or tunic with a central decorative panel running from the neck to approximately knee level. Remains of white trousers decorated with red birds are preserved under the tunic, while it is possible to speculate that a cloak was worn over the shoulders. He appears to be standing, although

the absence of evidence for the limbs makes it difficult to talk about pose and gesture. He wears an impressive circular neckband or collar, and a soft yellow/gold belt knotted around his waist. The ends of the belt hang in front of the central panel to upper thigh level, and terminate in an elongated triangle with a circular bead (?) visible just below the apex. The terminals are outlined in red, while the outlines of the rest of the belt are black. A second belt securing the thong supporting the scabbard is visible below the yellow one. This form of double belt is well documented in association with the *akinakes*, most notably on the Persepolis reliefs (Fig. 11).

Both sides of the circular neckband are obscured by poorly preserved areas of yellow/orange pigment. Traces of the same color are found at mid-thigh level on the viewer's left. At the waist of the figure traces of dark red pigment are preserved. Based on preliminary interpretations of the costume worn by two new figures, still under conservation, found in the same area of the building complex, it is possible to suggest that the yellow/orange pigment indicates the trim of a cloak lined with dark red. On the right shoulder the remains of three circles are visible along a black line. Again, based on the two new figures, it seems that this pattern forms a decorative element on the shoulders of the cloak. Thus, the figure appears to be wearing a red-lined, white cloak draped around the shoulders, with yellow trim on the openings and a decorative pattern on the shoulders.

The central panel of the tunic is outlined with black parallel lines, which are bordered on their outer side by small, evenly spaced red rings. The panel is divided into numerous rectangular frames, similarly outlined on the top and bottom with black parallel lines. Where the evidence is preserved, the decoration of the rectangular spaces is repeated: opposing human headed roosters (Fig. 12). The panel seems to narrow towards a curved lower line at around knee level. Do the rectangles represent individual plaques or bracteates, or were they embroidered as a separate long strip, or sewn directly onto the garment? The continuation of the central panel to the round neck of the tunic can be seen in the poorly preserved traces of the birds above the collar. The hemline of the tunic is hinted at where the black thong of the scabbard has caught and dragged it up in a neat arc outlined in black. A single register of red rings, slightly larger than those bordering the central panel, traces the curved hemline.

Below the hem are preserved the remains of small birds outlined in red on a white background (Fig. 13), presumably decorating the trousers worn underneath the tunic. These birds clearly differ from the roosters on the

central panel in the splayed feathers on their wings and the absence of pronounced tail feathers. The decoration is also differently conceived to that of the central panel: whereas the figural designs on the panel are limited by rectangular bands, the birds on the trousers appear to cover the fabric, albeit in an orderly fashion; it is possible to make out at least three columns of the birds running down the preserved section of the leg.

The conception of the dress is simple, while the rich ornamentation helps to highlight the center of the body as the main focus area. This idea is manifest in the oversize crown, the most telling element for the status of a figure (Wobst 1977: 332); the red face; the impressive neckband or collar with pendant, and the central decorated panel of the upper body garment. This centrality is reinforced by the position of the knot of the belt, as well as the belt terminals.

The main colors represented on the costume of this figure – white, red, yellow – are almost certainly symbolic given the context of the figure, the iconography of the garment decorations, and the accessories. The white of his overall dress, which includes his tunic, trousers, and perhaps his cloak, is associated with the priestly class, while red represents the warrior class (Rossi 1994; Dumézil 1985). This red-white combination may suggest for this figure some warrior-priest association, although the dominance of white suggests greater importance for the sacred aspect. The dark red lining of the cloak preserved at the figure's waist, together with the rest of his dress, recalls Xenophon's description of Cyrus: "upon a chariot ... wearing his tiara upright, a purple tunic shot with white..., trousers of scarlet dye about his legs and a mantle all of purple" (VIII, 3.13). The yellow/gold belt, too, is symbolic in a Zoroastrian context (*Yasht* 15, 57) and recalls another classical description of royal Persian dress, that by Quintus Curtius of Darius III in his battle against Alexander at the Granicus River: "a purple-edged tunic woven about a white center, a cloak of cloth of gold, ornamented with golden hawks, which seem to attack each other with their golden beaks; from a golden belt, with which he was girt woman-fashion, he had hung a scimitar, the scabbard of which was a single gem" (III.3.17–20). The red face of the figure is more difficult to understand; there are parallels for colored faces, both at Akchakhan-kala (Kidd 2011: fig. 3), and more broadly in Central Asia, such as the red faces of some of the Dal'verzin sculptures (Pugachenkova and Rtveladze 1978). Its significance here, however, is unclear.

Despite the repetitive nature of the decorative elements of the costume, at least part of the figure appears to have

been completed without the aid of a template.¹² This is manifest in the slight differences in size in the rings bordering the central panel, and the slightly uneven decorative square panels on the scabbard, which become rectangular on the right side, perhaps to fill the remaining space.

The belted tunic with a cloak or other garment worn over the shoulders with trousers underneath is typical of the costume of the Iranian world. The central decorative panel on the tunic, however, facilitates a more specific perspective on the Akchakhan-kala dress. Well-preserved parallels for the conception of the Akchakhan-kala tunic – especially with the single central decorative panel – are found at Palmyra (*e.g.*, Tanabe 1986: figs. 225–26), and at Surkh Kotal (Rosenfeld 1967: figs. 119–20). These panels are typically framed on the long side with a geometric pattern, including circles, which hints that the rings framing the central panel on the Akchakhan-kala tunic belong to the tunic, and not to the lining of a cloak. One clear difference between the Akchakhan-kala tunic and the Parthian and Kushan examples is the form of the decorative motifs on the panel: the Palmyrene and Kushan examples are usually floral, and Greek in inspiration, whereas the Akchakhan-kala figural motifs are clearly Iranian and, more specifically, Zoroastrian. Hellenic influence on the visual art of Akchakhan-kala has been identified in other areas of the building (Kidd 2011: 255–63; Minardi 2015; Minardi 2016), so the presence of the Zoroastrian pattern here demonstrates a very clear choice on the part of the patron or artisans. This innovative mixing of influences and iconographies is typical of the visual art of Akchakhan-kala: it reflects not only its position between the mobile and (semi)-sedentary worlds of Central Asia, but as a powerful center of rule.

Several other elements of the costume find inspiration in the Achaemenid world. The small birds on the trousers may be compared with a single column of birds decorating the lower trouser leg of a standing figure on a gold plaque from the so-called Oxus Treasure (see below; Fig. 26); Dalton 1905: pl. XIV, 70). It has been suggested that these birds are of gold (Thompson 1965: 122) or of leather or felt (Moorey 1985: 24) and were applied to the trousers. Birds – often identified as eagles and water birds – are depicted on Iranian dress from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian periods.¹³ The circular and triangular framing devices on the central panel of the tunic and the neckband find convincing parallels across the Achaemenid world. The dentate border lining the edge of the scabbard and on the neckband and pendant recalls decorative borders on both monumental and smaller mobile art,¹⁴ and is

found on other unpublished wall painting fragments from the hypostyle hall. The rings also find close parallels on the borders of Achaemenid and Parthian royal and military dress but, as discussed above, are found much more broadly.¹⁵ The concept of individually framed iconographic motifs decorating costume is common in the Iranian (*i.e.*, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian) world, as well as the steppe.

THE NECKBAND

The neckband comprises a broad band, divided into rectangular fields (four are visible) framed on each side by a dentate border (Fig. 14). Hanging below the central frame is a second element, a pendant (?) of two rectangular fields, similarly framed. The curving lines of the pendant flare visibly at the base to cover the black outlines of the central panel of the tunic. Each frame of the band and of the pendant appears to have been individually decorated with a cultic scene, although the details are poorly preserved. Figures – humans, animals, and possibly birds – can be identified, as can boats, decorated on the sides with a repeated swastika-like motif.

An unprovenanced parallel for the neckband with pendant is in the Miho Museum (Fig. 15).¹⁶ Formed of three sections, all of worked gold, the main part comprises a hollow tube with duckbill terminals, which was placed around the back of the wearer's neck. The duck heads serve as the clasp for the second, front section, which is a wide, circular band, decorated with four registers. The third section is a pendant attached to the middle of the band. The pendant is made of two rectangular panels, each showing a different, although typically Achaemenid scene, and is bordered on three sides by small circles in which a male bust rises from a crescent. It is particularly relevant in this context that the upper panel shows a stylized image of Ahuramazda framed by two birds, interpreted by Bernard and Inagaki (2000: 1385) as doves. The Achaemenid subject matter of the frames, together with the polychrome cloisonné style, which clearly recalls the pieces found in the Susa burial have prompted Bernard and Inagaki to cautiously ascribe the piece to the fourth century BCE, and more specifically to a workshop at Susa (Bernard and Inagaki 2000: 1392–99, 1416–18). Although this style of neckpiece ultimately derives from Egyptian imagery (Bernard and Inagaki 2002: 207), it would seem more likely that the Achaemenid world – and perhaps even pieces produced in the Susa workshop – provided the direct inspiration for the Akchakhan-kala piece.

THE MURAL CROWN

A dominant part of the full image, the crown symbolizes city walls, and is symmetrical. Five angled towers rise in a radial pattern from an undecorated base. Four of these towers are arranged to either side of the main central one, which is taller and white in color. The two tapered towers at the extremities of the crown are also white, while those in-between are red. Alternatively, the red towers might be interpreted as sections of an enclosure wall. The towers have arrow-shaped embrasures drawn in red and badly preserved battlements. Where they are better preserved, *i.e.*, on the fourth (red) tower from the left, the battlements appear to be horned. The two red towers also show red dentils in their upper part, just below the battlements. The mural crown could have been purposely painted oversize and tilted, in an effort to create an optical correction due to the height of the figure when seen from below;¹⁷ the double red lines on the white tower at the extremities of the crown may be an attempt to create depth.

The typology of this mural crown – with high towers, in some cases characterized by arrow slits and battlements – immediately recalls one of the characteristic attributes of the goddess Tyche (and sometimes Cybele).¹⁸ Its closest parallels appear in representations of the Cypriote Aphrodite (Rogge and Zachariou-Kaila 2014), and in those of the Tyche or related female deities in Hellenistic and Romano-Hellenistic contexts such as Greece and Syria (Fig. 16),¹⁹ with the addition of first to second century CE Gandhāra²⁰ and Late Antique Sogdiana, Bactria, and Chorasmia (Minardi 2013: figs. 3, 13, 14). The mural crown certainly has a more ancient origin (Papageorgiou 1997; Metzler 1994), but in the Akchakhan-kala example the archaeological and historical context, as well as the typology and its iconography point towards a Hellenistic artistic ascendancy.

That the Chorasmian mural crown is worn by a male figure suggests that the concept differs from that of Tyche/Fortuna, unlike other Chorasmian representations of mural crowns in Late Antiquity (Minardi 2013). In Achaemenid Persia and in the wider imperial lands a similar crenelated headdress is the most common attribute of individuals of high status (male and, more rarely, female), as shown for instance in the reliefs of Persepolis and in Achaemenid glyptic and coinage.²¹ The sacred symbolism and protective meaning of the crenelation could be similar to that expressed by the towers but typologically the two “crowns” are quite different. Probably following the Achaemenid tradition, the only kings in Persia depicted

on their coinage with a triple-stepped crenelated crown before the advent of the Sasanian dynasty are some of the *Frataraka* rulers of Persis.²²

The first depiction of a male individual wearing a proper mural crown within the territories influenced by the Persian *koiné* is perhaps represented by a Cilician coin type of uncertain mint dating to the fourth century BCE (Casabonne 2004: pl. 4, no. 25) (Fig. 17). Also from Cilicia, a Greek-influenced representation of Ahura Mazda of *c.* 382 BCE could be related to this iconography.²³ In the Roman west a mural crown is one of the attributes of the *Genius populi Romani* (first half of the first century BCE) (Callu 1960) and the *corona muralis* was also the war decoration bestowed on the first brave soldier who assaulted an enemy rampart.²⁴ In Imperial times a few male divinities are sometimes represented with this specific attribute: the Thracian god Heron (Moorman 2011: 113, fig. 49), Aristaios, son of Apollo and Cyrene (second century CE) (Matheson 1994: 28, fig. 13), and, in the late Imperial period, Dionysos (fourth century CE) (Lenzen 1960: esp. pls. 2, 9). Generally, it seems that the use of the mural crown as an attribute by superhuman or human males did not achieve the popularity as did the Tyche’s mural crown. In Chorasmia, the only other possible case of a mural crown worn by a male is the fragmentary unbaked-clay head of a “warrior” from the palace of Toprak-kala (*c.* third century CE) (Rapoport and Nerazik 1984: 104, figs. 51, 52; Pugachenkova and Rempel 1965, fig. 90). On the other hand, in Late Antique Sogdiana we have examples of one male and one female divinity represented wearing mural crowns on the decoration of Zoroastrian ossuaries (see *An attempt at a Zoroastrian interpretation* below).

From an architectural perspective, the towers of the Akchakhan-kala mural crown feature the distinctive local,²⁵ and also more broadly Central Asian,²⁶ arrow-shaped embrasure, once again with an early attestation at Susa, a center of the Achaemenid Empire (Dieulafoy 1891: 281). The battlements, on the other hand, if “horned” as conjectured here, deserve particular attention because the only attested parallels consist in representations of buildings related to the fire cult in some Achaemenid seals,²⁷ in the parapet of a Achaemenid (or post-Achaemenid) edifice at Persepolis (Tilia 1972: pl. 8 and 9; Haerinck and Overlaet 2008), and in the *Frataraka* numismatic iconography with representations of similar edifices (clearly linked to the seals noted above).²⁸ There are no known parallels in Chorasmia. Moreover, the presence of the red dentils in the upper part of the towers of the Chorasmian mural crown seems once again to link

the iconography of our figure to an Achaemenid Persian cultural heritage (Roaf 2010).

THE *AKINAKES*

One of the most prominent elements of the Akchakhan-kala wall painting is the sheathed sword suspended from the sword-belt by two black thongs, and placed along the right thigh, to which it appears to be fastened (Fig. 18). The short sword rests in a tapered scabbard covered in a framed floral/geometrical decoration rendered in red and white. The scabbard has a round chape and a protruding flat element from which a roundel supports one of the suspension straps and a triangular appendix on its upper part. The upper suspension thong connects the roundel through a hook with the sword-belt. The sword hilt is bent toward the right and is characterized by a rectangular pommel and a grip decorated with the same stylised vegetal element as the scabbard, which entirely covers the visible parts of the weapon. A second suspension strap is attached to the base of the scabbard at its juncture with the chape. The sword is certainly an *akinakes*.²⁹

The origin of this type of sword has been until recently an object of debate involving broader issues concerning Median art (Barnett 1962; Bernard 1976; Moorey 1985; Genito 1986; Muscarella 1987; Pfrommer 1998; Stronach 2001; Boardman 2006; Stronach 2011). With regard to the Akchakhan-kala figure, what is important is that the *akinakes* was in use during Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid times.³⁰ During Persian rule it belonged, in its standard shape, to the armament of several of the “nations” at the service of the Achaemenid kings, which included the Chorasmians.³¹ In Ancient Chorasmia, this kind of sword is still attested, and perhaps used, in post-Achaemenid times, i.e. during the first century BCE to the first century CE. Ancient Chorasmia was a Central Asian Iranian country with a strong semi-nomadic local tradition, which since the sixth century BCE was imbued with Achaemenid elements (writing, religion, aspects of its material culture, etc.) and later selected and adopted some Hellenistic components (Minardi 2015; Minardi 2016).

The weapon carried by the figure is not only equivalent to Achaemenid specimens of *akinakai* with their suspension system as represented in the Persian reliefs from Persepolis (Fig. 19), but the whole iconography of the painting can be compared with similar representations of armed men in Achaemenid territory.³² The “false profile” of the figure, with the torso in frontal position, follows

Persian representational conventions, well-known from examples in Persepolis (Fig. 11).³³ The only peculiarities of the Chorasmian sword consist in its bent hilt, which find parallels only in later Sasanian weapons of the same class (e.g., Nickel 1973), and the second thong departing from the chape of the scabbard, perhaps a local variation on the suspension system.³⁴ Overall, the Achaemenid iconography of the figure is remarkable. The position of the sword tilted towards the front and the presence of a third thong that fastens the weapon to the right leg are both elements attested in Achaemenid representations (and are necessary devices for wearing this kind of weapon). The correspondence between the end line of the trousers (*anaxyrides*) and the tunic (*sarapis*) with this latter strap (painted in black as the others) is again very important to emphasize: in this case a *stilema* for which several examples can be found in the Achaemenid reliefs where often the strap corresponds with the lower end of the top garment.³⁵

The typology of the scabbard, however, is closer to Eastern European specimens from early Hellenistic times than to those of proper “Median swords” as Erich F. Schmidt called this variety of short-bladed weapon.³⁶ The Akchakhan-kala scabbard has a homogenous decoration all over its surface and does not present a distinct bi-lobed mouthpiece as in those worn by the figures depicted at Persepolis, as well as in some surviving scabbards, such as the gold Oxus example in the British Museum.³⁷ Its shape, especially in the upper part, is closer to the early Hellenistic scabbards from the kurgans of Ukraine,³⁸ yet there are also differences, such as an isolated round chape and, of course, the type of decoration,³⁹ which, in the Akchakhan-kala case, we might speculate was enamelled gold.

The main decoration of the Akchakhan-kala scabbard certainly has an ancient Near Eastern origin.⁴⁰ It consists of a well-known floral and geometric design (quite simplified in the Chorasmian example⁴¹) but with several variations in earlier Persian crafts, as for example in the decorations of some Achaemenid *phialai*,⁴² and on Xerxes I’s dress, as represented in a relief in the main hall of the so-called harem building at Persepolis (Tilia 1978: 54, fig. 6).⁴³ Closer comparisons are attested in Central Asia, as for example in the Achaemenid-derived decoration of the Pazyryk pile carpet from Kurgan 5 (end of fourth to third centuries BCE),⁴⁴ and by some decorative square-framed gold plaques from a garment found in Tomb 4 at Tillya Tepe (first century CE) (Sarianidi 1985: pl. 6.; Schiltz 1994: fig. 283), which is almost contemporary to the Akchakhan-kala wall painting.⁴⁵ Other examples can be

found in Central Asia, such as the tapestry from Sampula (Francfort 2011: fig. 42) and the border of a cotton painting showing the Kushan emperor Huvishka (c. 150 – c. 190 CE, Marshak and Grenet 2006).⁴⁶ The design was a popular secondary decorative element in the later arts of Gandhāra and Sogdiana where it was often used to represent fabrics.⁴⁷ Along the profile of the scabbard the decoration consists of a series of triangular elements. The only component that differs from the framed floral pattern and from this simple series of triangles is the roundel in the upper portion of the scabbard, which connects the sword to the sword-belt by means of a thong. This element, although not perfectly preserved, appears to be a “scallop” (Barnett 1962) or a “beak and eye” (Boardman 2006) decorative element. The same element, of Scythian origin, appears also in the *akinakes* worn by the king’s weapon bearer at Persepolis (Fig. 19) (Schmidt 1953: pl. 120).

The Persian type of the Akchakhan-kala *akinakes*, represented on a Chorasmian mural of the first century BCE – first century CE, seems to have been less in vogue among the contemporary steppe dwellers and neighbors of Chorasmia than another side arm, the short sword with four-lobed scabbard as found in the necropolis of Tillya Tepe (Tomb IV dating to the second quarter of the first century CE) and used early in the first century BCE by Antiochus I of Commagene, the Parthians, and the Sacae (Francfort 2012: 92–93). For this reason, and considering the iconography of the whole figure in addition to the cultural conservatism of Chorasmia (Minardi 2015), an Achaemenid influence on this Chorasmian work seems quite plausible as does the *akinakes* as a traditional status symbol in the polity until the beginning of our era.⁴⁸ Thus, whether the *akinakes* originally came from the steppes or from Iran (Potts 2014: 70–71), it seems quite possible that in Chorasmia it was “imported” (or standardized) by the Persians.⁴⁹

AN ATTEMPT AT A ZOROASTRIAN INTERPRETATION⁵⁰

The figure measures six meters at least; in Iranian art, figures that are oversize are generally gods.⁵¹ One can also note that it differs in other important features from the figures in the “portrait gallery,” which are most probably kings and members of the royal clan, living or dead: his face is painted red, whereas in the portrait gallery all faces are white, with only ears and mouth red; his crown type differs completely from the types now attested in

five variants in the “portrait gallery,” as well as from all royal crowns later known from Chorasmian coinage. Therefore, it is likely that this figure is a god. A difficulty that hampers our interpretation is that we do not know what he held (no arm was folded on his chest for the decoration pattern of the tunic is nowhere interrupted).

A fundamental element to consider in the figure’s identification is the exclusively Zoroastrian character of the image repeated all down the central vertical band of his tunic – semantically, a most important spot in the costume. This is the image of a facing pair of “bird-priests,” hitherto known only in contexts from the sixth century CE in Sogdiana (Fig. 20), on Sino-Sogdian sarcophagi and funerary beds (Fig. 21), and at Bamiyan on either side of Mithra in the painting that surmounted the head of the 33-meter high Buddha. All examples known prior to the present composition have been reproduced and aptly discussed by Riboud (2012).

The common features which appear on the later examples are all distinguishable here: rooster body, human face and bust, hands holding the *barsoms*, the sacred twigs used in the Zoroastrian ritual (replaced by torches at Bamiyan and by a gesture of salutation on the Samarkand ossuaries); hair covered by a soft cap; face bearded (except on the ossuaries) and covered by the *padām*, the ritual mouth-cover still used today by Zoroastrian priests to prevent pollution of the sacred fire during the office. These figures never occur outside a Zoroastrian context (the only two Sino-Sogdian funerary beds which seem to have belonged to non-Zoroastrians, the one from Tianshui and the one presented at the Guimet museum in 2004, omit them). The precise meaning of this hybrid figure was elucidated in 2004 by Oktor Skjaervø from the Avestan passage, Vd. 18.14–16:⁵² in the office of the last third of the night, *ušahina*, presided over by Sraosha (Middle Persian *Srōsh*), the rooster assumes the function of his assistant-priest (*sraošāvarəza*), because he perceives the coming of the sun before all other creatures and warns them with his cry. The motif of the bird-priest as it appears at Akchakhan-kala predates by five or six centuries the same motif in Sogdiana and related regions, and the possibility that it was first elaborated in Chorasmia must be seriously considered.

Thus, we must look for a god of the Zoroastrian pantheon. Two kinds of approaches can be attempted: a purely “iconographical” one, using as the main criterion some formal analogies with already identified images of Zoroastrian gods; or a more “theological” one, postulating that the artist, or rather the priests who controlled his work, had in mind some precise Avestan



passages and some rituals associated with the specific god they intended to depict.

In the first approach, the only element that can lend itself to comparison is the crown. It is a *corona muralis* whose precise type with a series of adjacent towers, as shown by Minardi (above), is borrowed from Hellenistic and Parthian art where it is characteristic of the female Tyche; in Gandharan sculpture it appears on goddesses protecting particular cities. The syncretic goddess of Fortune, Hārītī-Ardwakhsh (ARDOXŠO of Kushan coins), however, has inherited only Tyche's cornucopia, while her headgear is a *polos* instead of a *corona muralis*, and the male god of Fortune, Farn, functional counterpart of Ardwakhsh, wears a Greek helmet or winged headgear manifestly borrowed from Hermes. The *corona muralis* reappears later in Central Asia, still with female deities: a Tyche-like goddess on the Sogdian ossuaries of Miankal (here possibly reinterpreted as Amurdād in the series of the Amesha Spentas) (Grenet 1986a), and the high goddess Nana on Chorasmian metalwork. Analogies with male deities can be found only when loosening the precision of the attribute and turning to the variant "crenellated crown." Thus, on Sasanian reliefs and coins such a crown is characteristic of Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd), and also of Anāhīd, the other main deity. In the case of Ahura Mazda this association is possibly already witnessed, as shown by Minardi, on coins emitted by the Achaemenid satrap Tissaphernes in Cilicia. In later Sogdian art an iconography of Ahura Mazda is difficult or impossible to detect; the only god that appears with a crenellated crown is Srōsh on the only certain and complete image we have of him, a Samarkand ossuary from the seventh century or thereabouts (Fig. 22).

The second most prominent feature of the figure, the *akinakes*, is even less specific. In the *Avesta* many gods (but not Ahura Mazda) are described with weapons, and on Kushan coins most Iranian male gods have, at least in some variants, a long or a short sword; among the exceptions are Ahura Mazda (he has a spear or a scepter) and the Oxus (probably a trident). Srōsh's weapon is described in the *Avesta* (Y.57.31) as "sharp-edged, easy to whirl over the head of demons" (*brōiθrō.taēžim huūā.vāēγəm kamərəde paiti daēuuanəm*); while the first epithet is fitting for an *akinakes*, the second one calls to mind a long sword, or perhaps the mace (*dru, vazra*), mentioned as Srōsh's weapon in other Avestan passages.⁵³

At this point it appears that no precise solution can be reached with the "iconographical" approach: the balance is perhaps in favour of Ahura Mazda, but Srōsh could also have some claims.

Let us now try the "theological" approach. A strong incentive to look in that direction is the precise scriptural base of the bird-priest motif, the most ubiquitous of all motifs on the god's dress, though more discrete than the crown and *akinakes*. In the contexts where it is subsequently attested it refers either to Srōsh (in his function of guardian of the soul during the three days after death, hence its use on funerary objects) (Fig. 22) or to the watch *ušahina* (hence its association with Mithra's dawn epiphany at Bamiyan, and again the funerary contexts as the soul is judged at the dawn on the fourth day). Ahura Mazda is not associated with *ušahina*.

The only other clearly decipherable motif appears in the ornamental rectangular frame of the neckband in the lowest panel of the pendant (Fig. 23). As first recognized by Kidd, it is a boat, at its stern the figure of a bird and a man pushing a pole; the figurehead of the boat is not preserved, but a second pole is visible; the slope of both poles shows that the boat is moving towards the left. A squatting character appears slightly behind the middle part of the deck,⁵⁴ with low stands around him similar to those used in Zoroastrian rituals; there are possibly one or two animal heads. I interpret the curved *swastika*-like motifs on the hull as a rendering of whirlwinds.⁵⁵ The frame just above could contain the same boat and *swastika* motif, but it is poorly preserved, except for the big head of some large-eared animal which cannot be identified in the present condition of the fragment.

Another navigation scene is also recognizable in the curved band below the neck of the god (Fig. 14), in the frame just to the left of the axis: although the general outline of the boat is not visible one can distinguish, to the left, the head and long neck of a horse or a camel which could well be the figurehead; just behind it, a standing man pushing a pole with his right hand while the left hand rests on his waist; in the middle, a squatting character holding some long object in his right hand; to the right, a bearded man standing in right profile and raising his right hand, probably also pushing a pole. The *swastika* pattern appears again, on the front part of the hull. In the *Avesta* one god, Srōsh, appears in connection with the crossing of waters: according to his *Yasht* (Yt.11.4), and only to this text, protection is granted to those who recite the *Ahuna vairya* prayer "on a great water, or in a great danger, or in a dark, misty night, or on a ford (bridge) on waters in spate,"⁵⁶ or on the bifurcation of roads."⁵⁷ All the situations enumerated imply a risk (being drowned, or getting lost at night on a track, or encountering robbers at crossroads), against which the natural protector is Srōsh, chief fighter against all demons. Another passage, in the other hymn to

Srōsh (Y. 57.14), says that he keeps the “floods (*vōiynā*)” away from the houses of his worshippers.⁵⁸ The crossing of waters was surely a greater concern in Chorasmia than anywhere else in Central Asia.⁵⁹ If indeed animal heads rest on one or two boats, this would suggest a cult practice, for there is hardly any practical reason to transport severed animal heads on a river.⁶⁰ If this interpretation is correct, the squatting characters could be interpreted as referring to a sacrifice, for in Zoroastrian ritual the *zaotar*, chief priest, recites the liturgy in this position. He is, however, supposed to be in contact with the earth, which is not the case here, and, generally speaking, the interpretation of these squatting figures is no more than a guess.

Some other Avestan passages related to Srōsh appear characteristic or at least compatible with the figure under discussion. Srōsh is qualified as “fair of form” (*huraōḍa*), “young” (*yuuan*), “tall” (*bərəzant*), epithets not specific to him but never used for Ahura Mazda. He is also “swift” (*āsu*), like some other gods. His swiftness is expressed by a comparison with birds, Y.57.28: the steeds drawing his chariot are “faster than two well-winged birds” (*āsiianḡha vaiiaēibiia hupatarətaēibiia*). On our painting the trousers of the god are decorated with a repeated motif showing a long-legged bird – a bustard according to our Karakalpak colleagues (Fig. 25).⁶¹ Kidd and Minardi have recognized the same motif on the trousers of one of the donors depicted on the golden plaques of the so-called Oxus Treasure (Fig. 26) (Dalton 1905: pl. XIV, 70). The breed, MacQueen bustard (*Chlamydotis maqueenii*),⁶² which lives in Chorasmia, is said to run energetically and to fly swiftly, being able to escape the attacks of hawks. Placed on the leggings, this image obviously functions as a symbol of velocity. Admittedly, two other gods, Khvarenah (Farn) and Verethraghna (Wahrām), can appear as a bird, but in both cases the bird is specified as a hawk (*vārəyṇa*).

The most puzzling choice is that of the crown, for which a foreign model, Hellenistic or Parthian, was borrowed but transformed in a quite exuberant way, with a fiery color for half of the towers and for the embrasures of the others. Perhaps this was a way to express Srōsh’s function as the one “who has the protection of the material world from Ohrmazd,” assigned to him not in the Avesta but in Pahlavi texts (*Iranian Bundahishn* 26.49; other texts call him *dahibed*, “lord of the land”). In this case, the *corona muralis* would keep the same fundamental meaning it had with the city goddesses. But the Avestan passage Y.57.21 could also be considered: Srōsh has a “victorious house (*nmānəm vārəθrayni*), firmly set on a thousand pillars, on the highest height, on Harā the high, endowed with its

own light inside (*x’āraoxšnəm antara.naēmāt*), adorned with stars outside.” According to *Iranian Bundahishn* 5B.3, Mount Harā – or rather the “house” built on it – has 360 apertures through which the sun enters and comes out. Could not the “victorious house,” the abode of the gods, be symbolized here by the *corona muralis* with its many arrow-shaped embrasures?⁶³

Around the time that Akchakhan-kala was abandoned and looted for architectural elements, a new royal center, Toprak-kala, was being built only about 20 kilometers away to the northeast. It cannot be proved precisely that the two events occurred simultaneously, but Toprak-kala certainly succeeded Akchakhan-kala as a royal seat within the southern delta. Excavations at Toprak-kala recovered some written texts and it may be significant that Srōsh is among the few Iranian gods who appear in the theophoric names in these documents.⁶⁴

On Kushan coins Srōsh is not present under his own name, but it is very likely that the Indian war god Mahāsena (MAASĒNO) is syncretized with him (they are explicitly identified with each other in the Rabatak inscription). His attributes are a rooster on a staff and a short sword, while the details of his crown are not distinct.⁶⁵

All matters considered, Srōsh appears a likely candidate. Turning this proposal into certitude will be possible only when all fragments are cleaned and the figure entirely reconstructed.

ART AND KINGSHIP

Akchakhan-kala stands in a unique position between the world of the Parthian (Persian) Empire⁶⁶ and that of the Saka steppe nomads. Its richly symbolic decorative elements reflect the influence of both (*cf.*, Kidd 2011). Displays of power among the nomads were generally manifest in clothing, personal ornamentation and weaponry, feasting and battle, and finally, in death. Power among the Persians may have been displayed in these also, but was also embodied in the built environment, in magnificent palaces and especially in works of art. We know that Akchakhan-kala was a royal seat thanks to fragments of painted texts written in the Chorasmian language, using Aramaic script, that were found in the western corridor near the “portrait gallery.” A provisional reading by Vladimir A. Livshits identified the ideogram for “king,” with fragments of personal names and the ideogram for son. Additional provisional readings by Pavel’ B. Lur’e have identified at least one or more references to “king.” This implies not only a royal seat,

but a dynastic one. The prehistory of Chorasmia is a steppic, tribally-based one, so that Chorasmian notions of kingship were almost certainly drawn heavily from those of the Persians. However, the position of a king of Chorasmia was very different from that of Cyrus or Darius.

The Greek historian Xenophon described how Cyrus the Great instructed his satraps “to imitate him in everything that they had seen” (*Cyropaedia* 8.6.10). By way of example, among others, he gave detailed descriptions of the strategic use of processions. Margaret Miller (2010) suggests that the satrapal capital may have functioned as a small-scale replica of the great royal palace centers, both in physical appearance and in administrative and ritual practices. Akchakhan-kala post-dates Achaemenid control over Chorasmia probably by at least two to three centuries, and there is no clear evidence that Chorasmia was the seat of a satrapal residence.⁶⁷ Yet it seems likely that a more localized form of administrative residence once existed. Since Chorasmia’s other main external cultural influence was from the steppe, with no tradition of architecture, and certainly no models of courtly behavior, it is reasonable to suppose that even two to three centuries on, the hypostyle halls at Akchakhan-kala retained models that were still structured in good part on the Achaemenid Persian ideal; provincial echoes in miniature of the magnificence of the great imperial palaces at Persepolis and Pasargadae (Minardi *et al.* forthcoming).

The art and architecture of Akchakhan-kala, in particular the ceremonial complex, show a site designed for royal processions and ceremonies to stress the links between the king and the divine. The mechanisms of propaganda had been borrowed but the message was, necessarily, different. Looking first at the concept rather than the intended meaning in the Chorasmian context, Achaemenid art was “the art of kings ... brilliantly conceived and consciously evocative” (Cool Root 1979: 1). Art was commissioned in the service of kingship to project a set of images of power and hierarchical order. The story told by these images was, however, a subjective idealized construct. Despite war and taxes, the vision was one of piety, control and harmonious order (Cool Root 1979:2). This is in some contrast to other great powers of the period, in Mesopotamia and Egypt for example, where images of war and conquest stood alongside those reflecting strong stable leadership.

Persian royal propaganda placed the king in close communion with the divine but the relationship between Avestan tradition, Zoroastrianism and Achaemenid

kingship is one of complexity. From at least Darius I onwards, the king assumed the role as representative of the gods (*e.g.*, Ahura Mazda) on earth.⁶⁸ Kings are depicted before fire altars on seals, coins and rock reliefs.⁶⁹ Chorasmia is rich in Zoroastrian traditions: exposure of the dead, ossuary burials (Grenet 1984), cult buildings for the veneration of fire (Betts and Yagodin 2007, 2008). Included in these is Chil’pyk, a large, well-preserved *dakhma* (“Tower of Silence”) (Grenet 1984: 229), broadly contemporary with Akchakhan-kala. The presence of an Avestan god placed so prominently within the ceremonial complex, particularly in conjunction with the numerous cultic fire features associated with the Central Building, strongly indicates that this practice was also followed in Chorasmia.

The themes in the art of Akchakhan-kala as we know it so far seem to conform to the Achaemenid model of piety, control and harmonious order. In particular they may reflect dynastic messages, if we can see the “portrait gallery” in this light (*cf.*, Kidd 2012: 88). The “procession” could be seen as a diplomatic delegation, possibly from the nomads. Yagodin also suggested that it may depict the arrival of the legendary Chorasmian ancestor Siyawush (Biruni 1879: 40; Kidd 2012: 87). If this last is so, then it, too, would reflect dynastic themes. The importance of emphasizing legitimacy of rule can be well understood where the king sits between tribe and state, ancestrally almost certainly with a foot in both camps. To maintain effective rule, his kingship must trump his tribal allegiances. It is not surprising then that, to reinforce earthly claims, he would choose, like the Achaemenid kings, to position himself close to the divine.

CHORASMIA AND ZOROASTRIANISM

The significance of the Colossal Figure lies in its remarkable Zoroastrian attributes. Practices such as fire cults and exposure of the dead have not in themselves been sufficient to prove the centrality of Zoroastrian beliefs in ancient Chorasmia, particularly at such an early date. Based on a strong array of C14 determinations, it is clear that the date range of the paintings is around the second half of the first century BCE, or at the latest, early in the first century CE.

In 1901 Joseph Marquart proposed to identify Chorasmia with *Airyanem Vaējah*, the first and most eminent country mentioned in the Avestan list of “Aryan countries,” *i.e.*, countries where the Zoroastrian faith

was prevalent or present at the time of the composition of the list, in the sixth c. BCE at the latest (*Vidēvdād* 1) (Marquart 1901: 155). Chorasmia is mentioned under its own name (*Xvāirizēm*) in the *Mihr Yasht*, at the end of the countries contemplated by Mithra when he surges over the central Hindukush (Yt.10.14). Subsequently other philologists produced additional arguments, and, in 1962, the identification of Chorasmia with *Airyānem Vaējah* could still be presented as the most authoritative opinion (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 139–40).

This theory sometimes went together with the idea that the Chorasmia of today was only the northernmost part of a “Greater Chorasmia” which in pre-Achaemenid times would have comprised also Margiana and Aria. Among the scholars who promoted this set of conceptions, Walter Bruno Henning went one step further in contending that Chorasmia, or at least “Greater Chorasmia,” had been the theater of Zoroaster’s life (Henning 1951). In particular, he argued that the Chorasmian language as we know it from medieval documents was a direct descendant of Avestan, or at least that nothing went against this idea. In his seminal book, *Drevnii Khorezm*, Sergei Tolstov quoted favorably Marquart’s identification of Chorasmia with *Airyānem Vaējah* (1948a: 286), but despite his firm “Chorasmocentrism” Tolstov never went so far as to endorse Henning’s proposal, of which he was probably not aware.

This scholarly edifice received a serious blow with Gherardo Gnoli’s book *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland* (1980). Shortly afterwards the linguistic argument was demolished by David Neil MacKenzie and Helmut Humbach, who demonstrated the independence of the Chorasmian language in relation to Avestan (MacKenzie 1988: 81–92; Humbach 1991: 38–39). Today nobody maintains any more that Chorasmia was *Airyānem Vaējah*, whose geographical reality, if at all, is instead to be looked for in the Hindukush or in the Pamirs, while attempts to localize precisely “Zoroaster’s homeland” (or, more cautiously, the location of the “Gāthic community”) within the broad frame of Central Asia and the steppe zone to the North have been almost abandoned.

At the same time, it must be admitted that Gnoli exaggerated the “marginality” of Chorasmia,⁷⁰ a view for which Tolstov can in some way be held responsible, at least concerning his “Kangyu period” (third–first c. BCE), but which must be substantially qualified on the basis of current research on the archaeological material (Minardi 2015). As far as Zoroastrianism is concerned, there is now indisputable evidence of an official use of the Zoroastrian calendar as early as the late third or second century BCE,

the date assigned by Livshits to the Isakovka silver bowl bearing a dedicatory inscription in Proto-Chorasmian, dated from the third day of month *Frawardīn* (Livshits 2003: 147–72 [inscription No. 1]). More precisely, this inscription probably hints at the royal celebration of *Nowrūz*, the Zoroastrian New Year, for 3 *Frawardīn* falls within this festive cycle and the bowl (qualified a “festive bowl”) was presented to the king.

Later Pahlavi literature shows a certain awareness that Chorasmia had been an ancient Zoroastrian country: the *Iranian Bundahishn* (18.6–7) claims that the *Ādur Farnbāg*, the sacred Fire of the priestly estate, had originally stood on Mount Khwarrahōmand in Chorasmia and that Wishtāsp, Zoroaster’s kingly protector, had moved it to Kāriyān in Fars, where it was still burning in Sasanian times (Boyce 1983).

Some influence from Chorasmia towards southern regions (Margiana, Sogdiana) has been detected in funerary practices, at least in the use and shape of ossuaries. The chronology of Chorasmian ossuaries is not undisputed, but at least it appears that the “casket ossuaries,” which were to become hegemonic, are first documented in the cemetery of Kalaly-gyr 1 (third – early fourth centuries according to the excavators, but possibly later).⁷¹ At the same time, the Zoroastrian documented religious iconography in Chorasmia is (or rather was, before the discoveries at Akchakhan-kala) extremely limited in comparison with Sogdiana. The only attested deity, on seventh–eighth c. silver dishes, is the four-armed Nana, whose degree of syncretism with Anāhitā remains a matter of discussion between specialists. The presence of a Zoroastrian pantheon in the “Hall of Kings” at the palace of Toprak-kala (second–third century CE) is no more than a hypothesis, due to the fragmentary condition of the clay statues (Rapoport and Nerazik 1984: 116–35; Grenet 1986b: 132–33).⁷² Bearing all this in mind, the discovery that the purely Zoroastrian symbol of the “bird-priest” existed in Chorasmia five or six centuries before it is safely attested anywhere else comes as a great surprise and should certainly provoke a re-evaluation of Chorasmia’s role in the history of Central Asian Zoroastrianism.

This remarkable find must also be viewed in another context, in terms of our understanding of the iconographically complex site of Akchakhan-kala, and what it can tell us about ancient Chorasmian kingship. In the wider symbolism of the site, there are references both to the world of the steppe nomads and to the imperial dominions to the south, but in particular, it speaks to a regal relationship with the divine, through image and through fire, to a greater degree, perhaps, than his

Persian antecedents. The location of the painting in the hypostyle hall within the Central Building indicates that this particular message was designed for a highly select audience; it is likely that the king received visitors from the nomadic north and from the settled south, and also was vulnerable in both directions. The propaganda then is perhaps less “dreams” as Root (1979: 311) proposes for the Persians, and more an essential message to reinforce a delicate balance of power.

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Yagodin *et al.* 2009, Amirov, Yagodin and Fray 2009

Vadim. N. Yagodin, Alison. V. G. Betts, Fiona J. Kidd, Elizabeth Baker Brite, Ghairadin Khozhaniyazov, Shamil S. Amirov, Vadim. V. Yagodin and Geraldine Fray, "Karakalpak-Australian Excavations in Ancient Chorasmia. An Interim Report on the Kazakly-yatkan Wall Paintings: the Portrait Gallery," *Journal of Asian Art and Archaeology* 4 (2009): 7–42.

Notes

1. Betts and Yagodin contributed to the archaeological interpretation of the site, Grenet to the Zoroastrian interpretations of the painting, Kidd to the costume and neckband, Minardi to the sword and crown, Bonnat and Khashimov to the conservation. All authors have contributed to the discussion and conclusions. The work at Akchakhan-kala is supported by the Australian Research Council (DP130101268) and is carried out by the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition previously jointly directed by Professor Vadim N. Yagodin (Research Institute of the Humanities of Karakalpak branch of Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan), now by Professor Ghairatdin Khozhaniyazov, and Professor Alison V. G. Betts (University of Sydney). The work of Michele Minardi in this paper is supported by the French State in the frame of the "Investments for the Future" programme IdEx Bordeaux, reference ANR-10-IDEX-03–02. The production of this article was supported by the University of Sydney through the Journal Article Incentive Fund 2014 (Religion and Religious Studies: FOR 2204).

2. In earlier publications the site was called Kazakl'i-yatkan (Kazakly-yatkan). The name has been changed from this local one to the name registered in the official heritage record of Uzbekistan.

3. Latin version of the Old Persian (*H*)*uvārazmi* used also in other forms, e.g. Khwarezm, Khwārazm, Khorezm.

4. For a detailed discussion of this issue see Minardi 2015.

5. See especially Tolstov 1948a, b, 1962.

6. USCAP is directed by A. V. G. Betts (University of Sydney).

7. The fundamental Chorasmian chronology is based on the work of Tolstov's Soviet-era Khorezm Expedition. It is almost wholly a relative chronology, relying on internal typological developments, primarily ceramic, supported in places by external parallels. It has since been revised in the light of new discoveries and more recent scholarship. The most recent and extensive revision is that of Minardi (2015) who has reconsidered the chronological framework for Ancient Chorasmia and also revised the terminology. However, the original terminology is retained here to provide continuity with previous publications on the site.

8. These "burning entrances" are a particular feature of cult sites in the Tash-k'irman oasis. They are also known at the Fire Cult complex of Tash-k'irman-tepe 10–15 km west of Akchakhan-kala (Betts and Yagodin 2007, 2008). Walls on either side of the doorways have a thick clay coating into which it seems that burning stakes were placed. Traces of these remain as lines of fire-reddened clay circles, sometimes with some fragments of charcoal.

9. For the spiral torque see Kidd 2011: 246–49; for the headdresses see Kidd and Betts 2010: 660–66.

10. According to Birstein (1975:14), binder used on the Toprak-kala paintings, and on paintings from Khiva was made from either apricot or cherry gum.

11. This technique was used to create "false blue" in the Akchakhan-kala paintings, mixing charcoal with gypsum to create a bluish-grey shade (Yagodin *et al.* 2009: 9).

12. In the "portrait" gallery, too, the images appear to have been drawn freehand.

13. See Tanabe 1983: 112–13 for discussion of Achaemenid (*passim*) and Sasanian examples at Taq-e Bustan, where the heavily ornamented costumes are especially relevant. Here birds – identified as eagles – are clearly depicted on the trousers of the king on the stag hunt scene. Clearly different are the water birds with a much longer neck that decorate the costumes of various personages – see Peck 1969, pl. VI and XII.

14. For Achaemenid examples in various media see Tilia 1978, fig. 6; Amiet 1972, fig. 20; see also textiles from the Pazyryk kurgans, e.g., Rudenko 1970, figs. 139, 140.

15. For Parthian examples see Sellwood 1980, type 23/1 (Mithradates II) and type 30/1 (Gotarzes I).

16. For discussion see Bernard and Inagaki 2000, 2002; see also de Laperouse 1996:185 for conservation remarks.

17. As well as the head. Cf. Plato, *Sophist* 235 E-236 A; Tzetzes, *Chil.* VIII, 53.

18. The standard model of all Hellenistic and Romano-Hellenistic Tychai is that of Seleucid Antioch (founded 300 BCE) by Eutyichides of Sicyon (Pliny, *N.H.* XXXIV, 51; Pausanias, *Periegesis* VI, 2, 7; see also Meyer 2006). The first Greek deity represented with a proper mural crown is Aphrodite who appears on the reverse of the coins of Salamis struck under Evagoras II (361/360–53/352 BCE; see Markou 2011: 228–29 with fig. 122; 272–73; pl. XX-XII and XXXIII, nos 370, 389 and 390). This type has also been copied (or it is a Cypriote variation) in the Cilician area under Persian influence (see Göktürk 2000, pl. XVII, no. 5 – with seated Baal on the front; XXII, no. 2 – with “head of satrap” on the front). On the relation between Cilicia and Achaemenid Persia, see Casabonne 1996; 2004.

19. Cf. e.g., Sparta (Palagia 1994); Corinth (Edwards 1990); Palmyra, c. 50–100 CE (Colledge 1976: figs. 8 and 38); Dura Europos, around 159 CE (Colledge 1976: fig. 146), first century CE (Matheson 1994: 23, fig. 7), and third century CE (Cumont 1926: pl. L – the famous wall painting with the Roman tribune Terentius).

20. E.g., Facenna 1962: pl. CDL inv. no. 3506; Bussagli 1984: 28 and 114 (the latter also published in Gnoli 1963).

21. A summary of the different types of crenelated headdresses has been published by Roaf (1983: 131–33 with fig. 132); on royal Achaemenid headgear, see also von Gall 1974, Henkelman 1995/1996, and Calmeyer 1993 with references. On the seals, see Garrison and Cool Root 2001; on the so called “royal archer” of the Persian gold and silver emissions, see Alram 1994; Nimchuk 2002; Garrison 2010.

22. On the numismatic sequence, see Alram 1986. On the *Fratataka* of Fārs, see Callieri 2007 with references. On the debated chronology and for further references, see most recently Sarkhosh Curtis 2010. Outside Iran, other crenelated male headdresses are attested in Pazyryk (Rudenko 1970, pl. 155b; see also Stark 2012, pp. 119–20) and India (Gupta 1990, pl. 38b).

23. But most likely the god is wearing a crenellated headdress/*kidaris*. On the context of the Cilician specimen and its Achaemenid connections, see Casabonne 1996 (coin illustrated at pl. I, no. 15); see also Casabonne 2000, pl. VII, nos 1–2 and 2004: 188–89 (with pl. 3, nos 25–26; pl. 4, no. 1).

24. Gellus V, 6, 16; Suetonius, *Aug.* XXV, 6; Livy VI, 20, 7; X, 46, 3; XXX, 28; XXVI, 48, 5; Polybius VI, 39 (made of gold).

25. Attested in Akchakhan-kala and in most of the other Chorasmian fortified sites; also reproduced in the local architectural ossuaries (e.g., Rapoport 1971: 59, fig. 14).

26. Cf. e.g.: Khalchayan, Surkh Kotal (Pugachenkova 1979: 48, fig. 51; 49, fig. 52); Gandhāra, Dal’verzin tepe and Kunduz (*ib.* 51, fig. 55); Bactria (Seipel ed. 1996, fig. 126). See also the ceramic miniature ossuaries from Dal’verzin tepe in Pugachenkova (1978: 82, no. 60).

27. For seal impressions from the Persian fortification tablets, see Garrison 2013.

28. Potts 2007; Haerincq and Overlaet 2008 with exhaustive references and a summary of the debated matter. On the crenellation and its meaning, see also Anderson 2002 with references.

29. Herodotus, *Hist.* VII. 54.2: “A Persian sword which they call *akinakes*,” for further references on the western sources regarding the *akinakes*, see Bernard 1976; Miller 1997: 46–48.

30. The early Hellenistic specimens from the kurgans of Crimea. See for instance the shape of two gold sheaths published in Schiltz 1994: 399, figs. 330–31.

31. The throne bearers of the Royal Tombs are identified by captions: see Schmidt 1970, in particular fig. 34; on the Chorasmians depicted in the Achaemenid reliefs, see Minardi 2015 with references. On the Persian outfit and gear see the recent survey made by Potts (2014) with references.

32. E.g., some of the gold plaques from the Oxus treasure held in the British Museum (Dalton 1905 pl. XIII, no. 48; pl. XIV, no. 70; also published in Curtis 2012, figs. 10 and 41).

33. The sword suspension system with its sword-belt below a knotted cloth-belt finds very close parallels with analogous Achaemenid representations (e.g., Schmidt 1953, pl. 37b, right attendant).

34. A variation on the suspension system attested at Persepolis seems present in the depiction of a horseman with *akinakes* on the Çan Sarcophagus, first quarter of the fourth century BCE (Sevinç et al. 2001: 395; Rose 2013: 133).

35. E.g., Schmidt 1953, pl. 37 B, right-end figures; *ib.* pl. 120. Cf. fig. 9 with figs. 11 and 17.

36. Bernard (1976: 229) has defined the type as “Median-Achaemenid.”

37. Curtis 2012, fig. 9. On the other hand, the well-known ivory scabbard from Takht-i Sangin does not present the bi-lobed mouth piece (Litvinskii and Pichikyan 1999: 90).

38. In particular see the shape of the Scythian scabbard in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession number 30.11.12). For other specimens, see conveniently Schiltz 1994: 394–95 with pictures.

39. However, the scarcity of the surviving specimens must be taken into account.

40. Cf. e.g., the Neo-Assyrian threshold slab with “carpet design,” and the sixth century BCE terracotta tile from Gordion with “floral and geometric design,” both in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession numbers X.153 and L.1994.96.5). For discussion see also Kidd and Betts 2010: 672–78.

41. There is a second example from Akchakhan-kala (Kidd and Betts 2010: fig. 14).

42. Cf. e.g., the four-lobed phiale published in Miller 2010, fig. 4. See also the silver coins from Miletus with the same symbol (Travaglini ed. 2011, tabs. I-II) and the coins minted in Caria under the satrap Hekatomnos (Konuk 2000: 171–83, pl. XXX nos 5 and 7, first decade of the fourth century BCE).

43. For general parallels see also Kidd and Betts 2010, fig. 18.

44. Rudenko 1970, fig. 155b; Schiltz 1994, fig. 215. Also noted by Tilia 1978.

45. For other Chorasmian examples from the mural art of Akchakhan-kala, see Kidd and Betts 2010.

46. See also *ib.* Bernard's remarks p. 963.

47. *E.g.*, the decorative pattern of the gown of the seventh century CE four-armed goddess from Pendjikent Temple II (Belenitsky 1980, fig. 17). Cf. with some late Chorasmia coins in which the royal Chorasmian mural crown (with only battlements) has an inner element with such decoration (Vainberg 1977, pl. XXIX).

48. Darius III himself had a very precious *akinakes* hanging from its golden belt "*zona aurea muliebriter cinctus acinacem suspenderat, cui ex gemma vagina erat*" (Curtius III, 3, 18). Cf. Xenophon, *Anabasis* I, 2, 27, and I, 8, 29 (in both cases a gold *akinakes* is mentioned as a gift/token of honor bestowed by the Persian king).

49. On the Achaemenid equipment of the Chorasmians, see Minardi 2015. This sword is also contemporary, yet strictly different from the long sword used by the Kushan rulers (on this, see also Mode 1995). Note, however, that the scabbard and the belt of Kanishka (Mathura, *c.* first/second century CE) have bands decorated with similar four-lobed elements (see Rosenfield 1967, pl. 2).

50. Frantz Grenet: This note has greatly benefited from exchanges with Samra Azarnouche (on the Avestan vocabulary), Michael Shenkar (on mural crowns), Étienne de la Vaissière (on river navigation) and Mihaela Timuş (who at once suggested Srōsh as the most likely identification). Of course they cannot be held responsible for my conclusions.

51. There are a few exceptions, all postdating the painting under discussion: the seven-meter funerary statue of Shāpūr I in a mountain cave near Bishapur, carved from a natural stalactite; King Varkhuman and the Chinese imperial couple in the "Ambassadors' Painting" at Samarkand; the royal couple in the East Hall at Varakhsha. [Additional note: since completion of this article two other figures of the same size have been cleaned in the hypostyle hall at Akchakhan-kala, one of them being safely identified as the personification of the Fravashis (forthcoming article by Alison Betts, Melodie Bonnat, Fiona Kidd, Frantz Grenet, Stanislav Khashimov, Ghairatdin Khozhaniyazov and Michele Minardi, "Des divinités avestiques sur les peintures murales d' Akchakhan-kala, Ouzbékistan," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres*, séance du 30 octobre 2015). Consequently, there is no longer any doubt that the figure discussed in the present article is a deity].

52. Personal communication included in Grenet, Riboud, and Yang 2004, p. 278. I use the following abbreviations for Avestan books: Vd = *Vidēvdād*, Y = *Yasna*, Yt = *Yasht*. A combined use of Bartholomae 1904 and Schlerath 1968 is indispensable for determining whether a specific Avestan passage or epithet is unique or recurrent.

53. Translated according to Kellens 2011: 97. Earlier translations have "good to thrust," better for an *akinakes*, but Kellens is closer to the original meaning of the root *vij* "to whirl." On Srōsh, see Kreyenbroek 1985; Malandra 2014. Shenkar 2014 is now the most complete survey of the iconography of all Iranian deities.

54. Poorly visible on the drawing, but distinguishable on the original.

55. See the same motif in the "Ambassadors' painting" at Afrasiab, constructed with four thin fish: Al'baum 1975, pl. XXXVIII (bottom left of the image).

56. *pərətu* "ford" or "bridge"; *nāuuaiia* is now understood as "in spate" (Skjærø 2011: 326) instead of "unfordable," still preferred by Kreyenbroek 1985: 61, 99–100.

57. Part of the enumeration is repeated in Y.42.1, without reference to Srōsh or to dangers. In later times Wahrām appears as chief protector of travelers, including those at sea (Boyce 1975: 62 with n. 267), but he has no association with the rooster and none of the animals whose shape he can take appears prominently in our painting.

58. *vōiynā* is in fact a problematic word. It seems to mean either "flood" or "hunger," depending upon the context (in which case the second sense, the only one attested for Sogdian *wynh*, would derive from the first one, for in Central Asian valleys the season of the spring floods is often the most difficult). In the passage quoted here it is probably "flood."

59. See Rtveldze 2012: 43–44, 168–81, on traditional boat transportation on the Amu-darya. Some flat-bottomed *kimè*, in Khorezm *kema*, could measure 20 by 5 meters but the average type was 5 by 3 meters and was handled by three to five boatmen. They were used both as ferries to cross the river (with a horse swimming in front in order to show the current), and for transportation along the bank (sometimes with the help of horses for towing). They were adorned with figureheads. This seems to be the type depicted here. The only other ancient image of an Amu-dar'ya boat, on a fourth-century CE sealing from Termez, shows a different type: a double-decked galley used for troop transportation (Peters 1996; Rtveldze 2012: 170). A clay token in the Aman ur-Rahman collection, from Gandhāra or possibly from Bactria, shows a boat very similar to those at Akchakhan-kala except that it is propelled by two oars instead of two poles (Fig. 24) (ur-Rahman, Falk 2011: 63, no. 05.01.08). The dragon-headed boat carrying the Chinese empress and her servants in the "Ambassadors' Painting" from Samarkand is probably Chinese.

60. In recent times crews sacrificed animals to "the Amu-dar'ya" (Snesarev 1973: 103–11). A bull was sacrificed and thrown into the river the day the irrigation channels were opened (Snesarev 1960).

61. The head and long neck of the bird shown on the trousers is strongly reminiscent of the bird-headed diadems on some of the figures in the Akchakhan-kala portrait gallery (Yagodin *et al.* 2009: fig. 10).

62. <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22733562/0>. The MacQueen's bustard has another characteristic that might also have helped its association with Srōsh: it lives on a diet of frogs and insects (all classified as *khrafstra* "creeping," hence "Ahrimanic creatures"), which it catches mainly at night, and therefore it can be considered a helper of Srōsh in his constant fight against nocturnal demons.

63. See Harper 2009 for the upper element of royal Achaemenid censers and their arrow-shaped openings as a possible symbol of Mount Harā. It should be noted, however, that the "windows" of the celestial bodies on Mount Harā are explicitly mentioned only in Pahlavi texts and that this detail (also found in the *Book of Henoah*: I Henoah LXXII.3) was perhaps borrowed from Mesopotamian astronomical conceptions.

64. List by Livshits in Vainberg 2004: 190–91. The other gods are (in Middle Persian forms): Mihr; Māh; Wāy; Wahman; Ādur; Nāhid; plus Wakhsh (the Oxus), not belonging to the Avestan pantheon but very popular in Chorasmia as well as in Sogdiana and Bactria. Three other gods appear in personal names in the Kalaly-gyr 2 documents,

broadly dated from between the late third c. BCE to the second c. CE: Tīr; Hōm; Rashn (quite significant for us as he is Srōsh's close associate). To the list one can possibly add Ard and Farn, but in both cases the name can refer not to a deity but to a notion ("Order, Justice" and "(Male) Fortune" respectively). If Ard is a deity it can be either shortened from the god Ardwhisht or represent the goddess Ard (Avestan Ashi, the Female Fortune, *i.e.*, the very popular Ardwhaksh of Bactria).

65. See Shenkar 2014: 12–13, 146, pl. 24.

66. And more broadly with the Central Asian components of the former Achaemenid Empire in Bactria, Sogdiana and elsewhere (Minardi 2015a).

67. Herodotus places Chorasmia in the sixteenth satrapy together with the Parthians, Sogdians and Arians (Hist III.93). The exact composition of the satrapy that included Chorasmia is debated (Minardi 2015), but there is no suggestion that Chorasmia formed a single satrapy on its own.

68. *E.g.*, the Behistun inscription: "Says Darius the king: Auramazda gave me this kingdom; Auramazda bore me aid until I obtained this kingdom; by the grace of Auramazda I hold this kingdom" (Col. I, l. 9. Tolman trans. 1908).

69. Questions on the nature of royal art, kingship and cult in Chorasmia have been raised in relation to the slightly later "Kushan period" site of Toprak-kala a few kilometers northeast of Akchakhan-kala (Rapoport and Nerazik 1984; Rapoport 1994:161–85; Grenet 1986b: 123–35).

70. Gnoli (1980:110): "A remote, outlying province which never played a really central part in the political and cultural history of Iran before the Middle Ages."

71. On Chorasmian ossuaries and their influence in Central Asia see Rapoport 1971; Grenet 1984, esp. 232–37; Grenet and Khasanov 2009. The chronology of Chorasmian ossuaries as proposed by the KhAEE was discussed in the 1990s by Ivanitskii, in a paper unfortunately rejected by the journal *Rossiiskaia Arkheologiia* and still unpublished ("O khronologii khorezmiiskikh ossuarev," generously communicated to us by the author). On the chronology of Kalaly-gyr 1, see Minardi 2015 with references.

72. Still at Toprak-kala some bearded figures interpreted as warriors-musicians should perhaps be re-identified as bird-priests, the "scales" of their armor being just as correctly recognizable as feathers. The figures in the so-called "Warriors' Hall" are paired, each one being turned towards a central character of which very little has survived; they have their hands crossed over their chests and their mouths are covered by an object that has been considered as possibly a *padām*, although eventually interpreted as a mouth-piece for a pipe (Rapoport and Nerazik 1984: 103–06, with figs. 51–52). On another fragment, found in another room, the rooster's chest shown frontally is fairly distinct (Rapoport and Nerazik 1984: 63–64 with fig. 29; color photograph in Abdullaev, Rtveladze and Shishkina 1991, II, no. 346). Interestingly enough, some attributes of the figure which in our painting we propose to identify as Srōsh appear transferred to the subsidiary figures at Toprak-kala: crenelated crown on the first series, neckband with rectangular pendant on the other specimen.



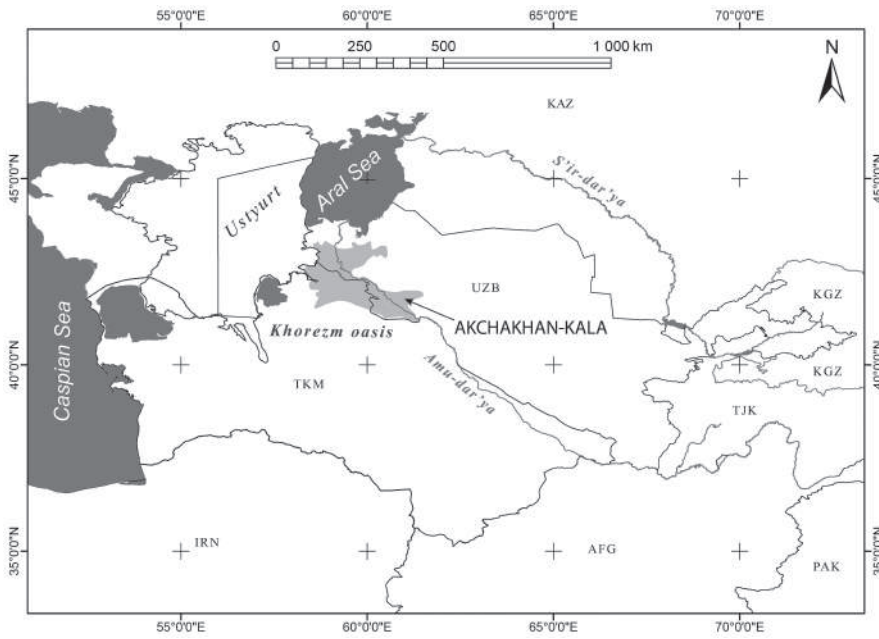


Fig. 1. Central Asia showing location of Akchakhan-kala.

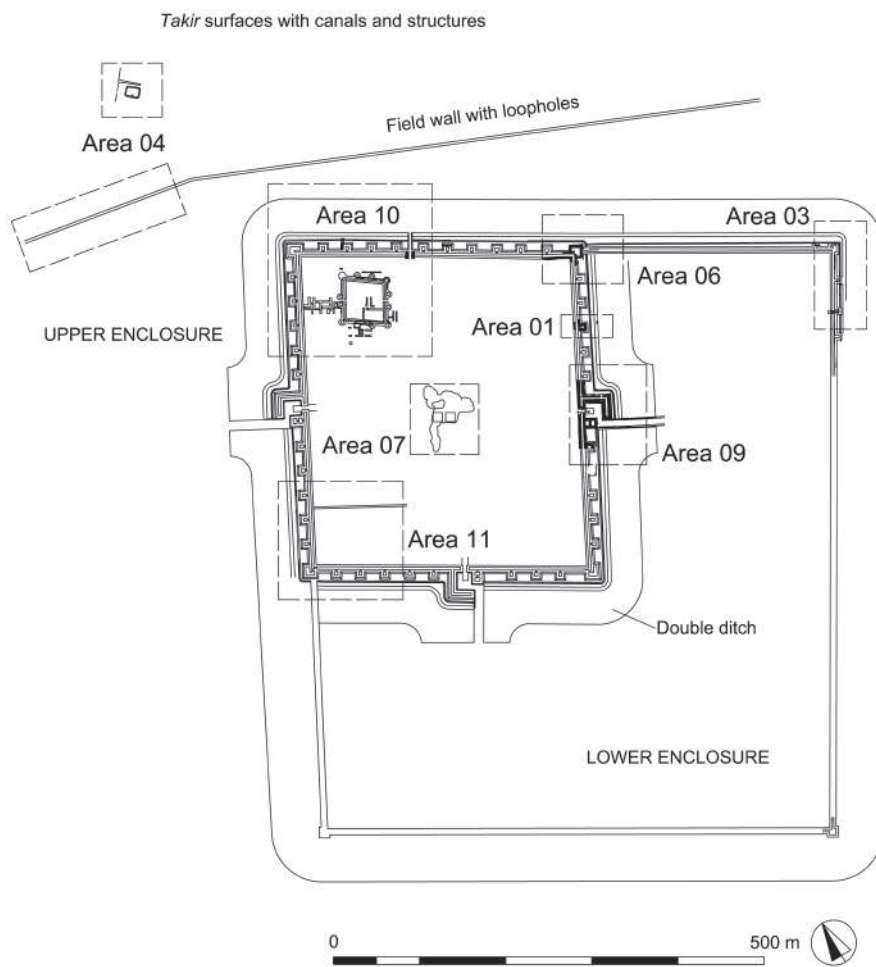


Fig. 2. Akchakhan-kala. Site plan.

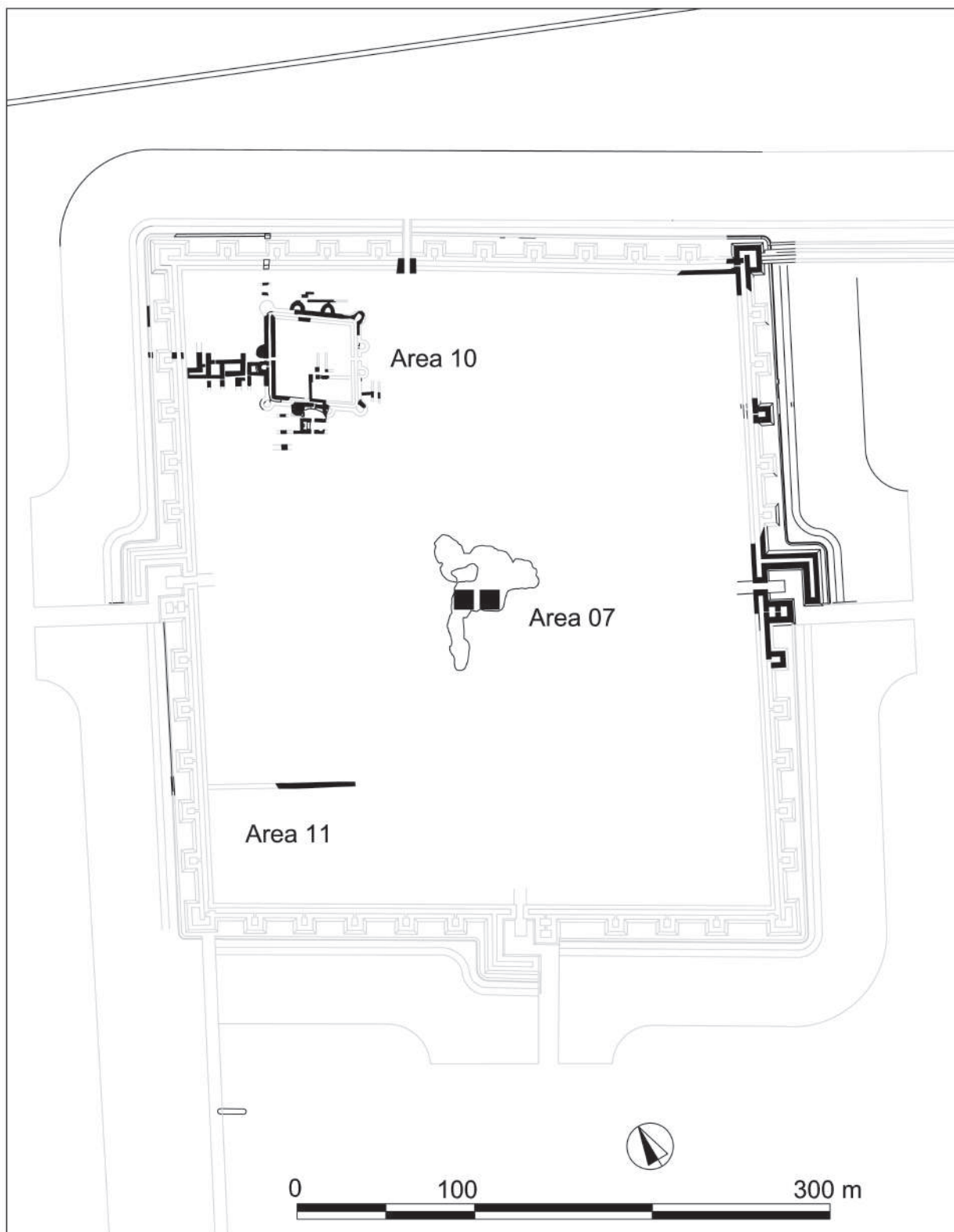


Fig. 3. Akchakhan-kala. The Upper Enclosure.

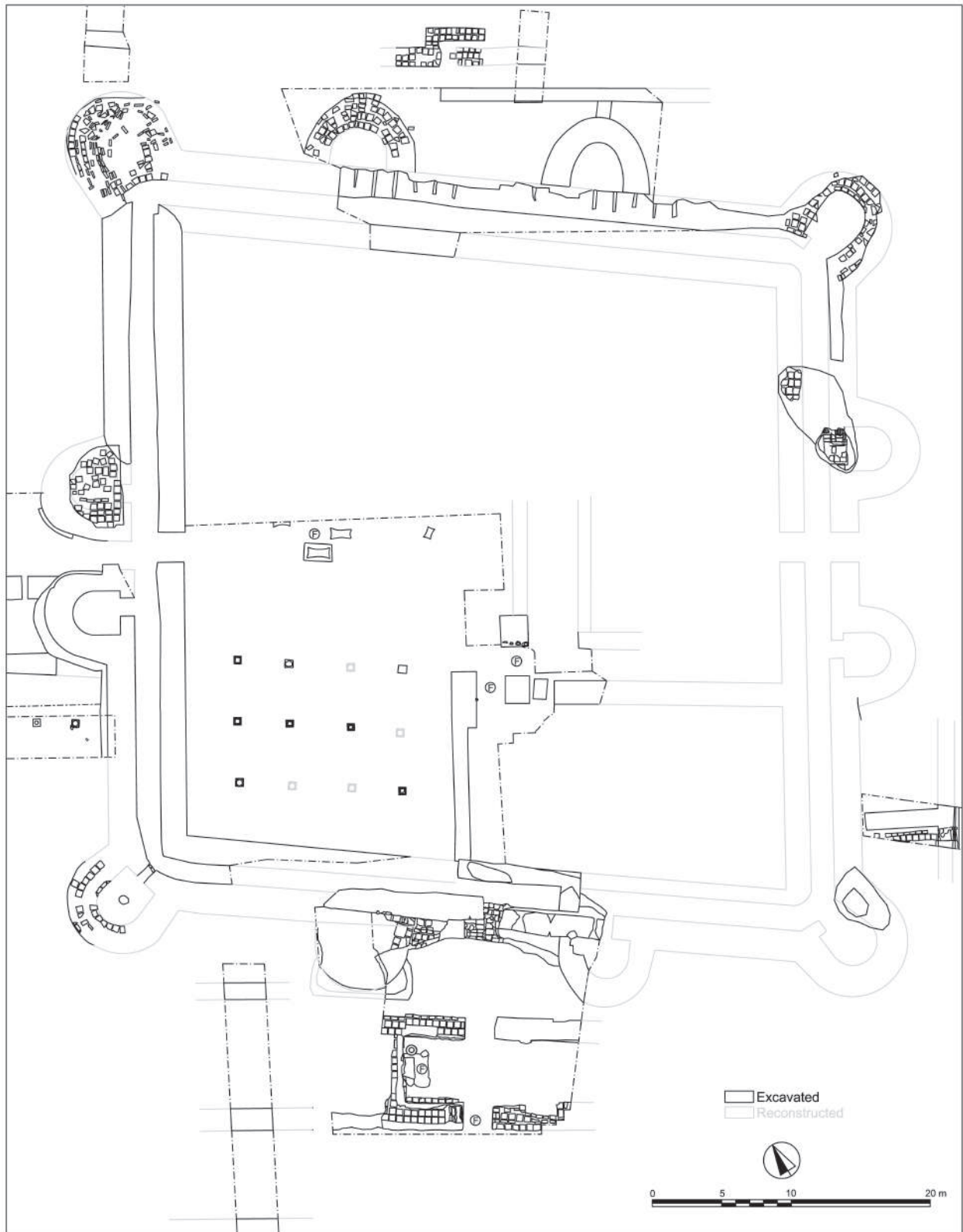


Fig. 4. Akchakhan-kala. The Ceremonial Complex, Central Building.

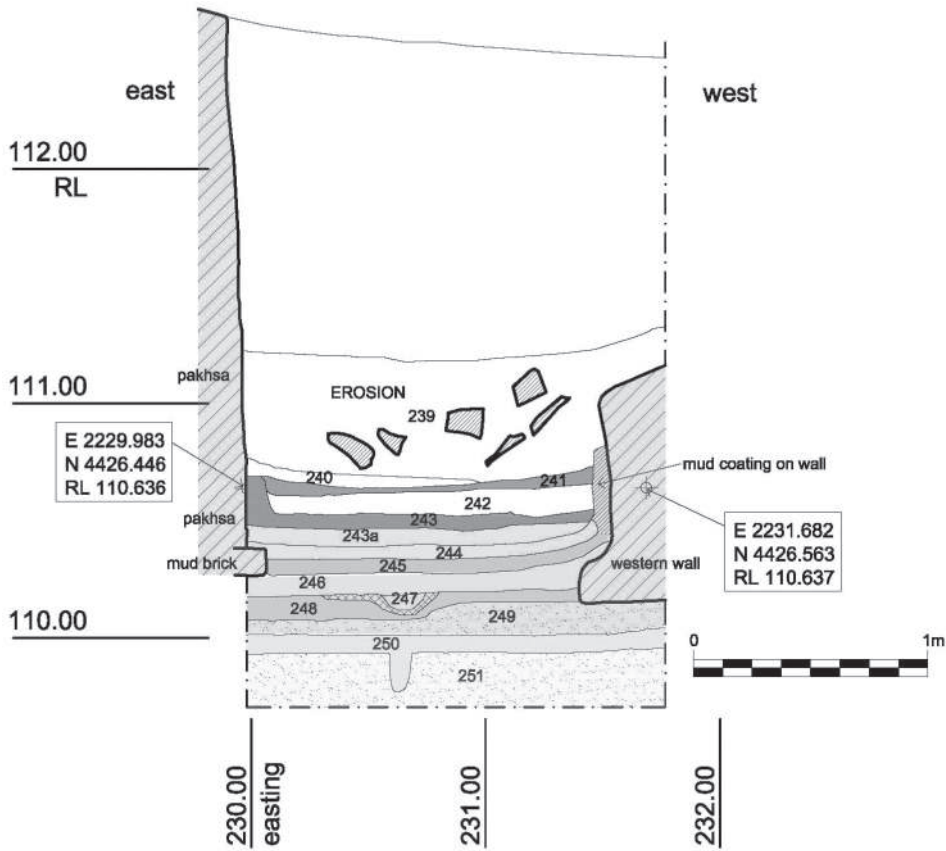


Fig. 5. Section of southwestern corridor, looking south-west. Stage 1 (ochre), Stage 2 (green); stage 3 (purple). See Color Plate 1.

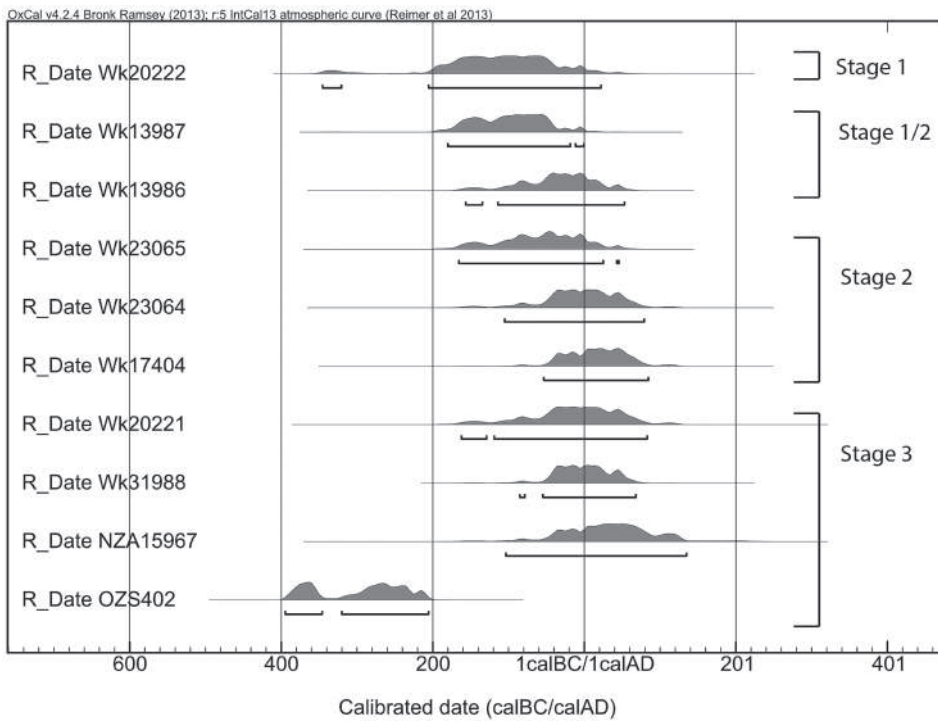


Fig. 6. Radiocarbon dates for the Central Building (Area 10).

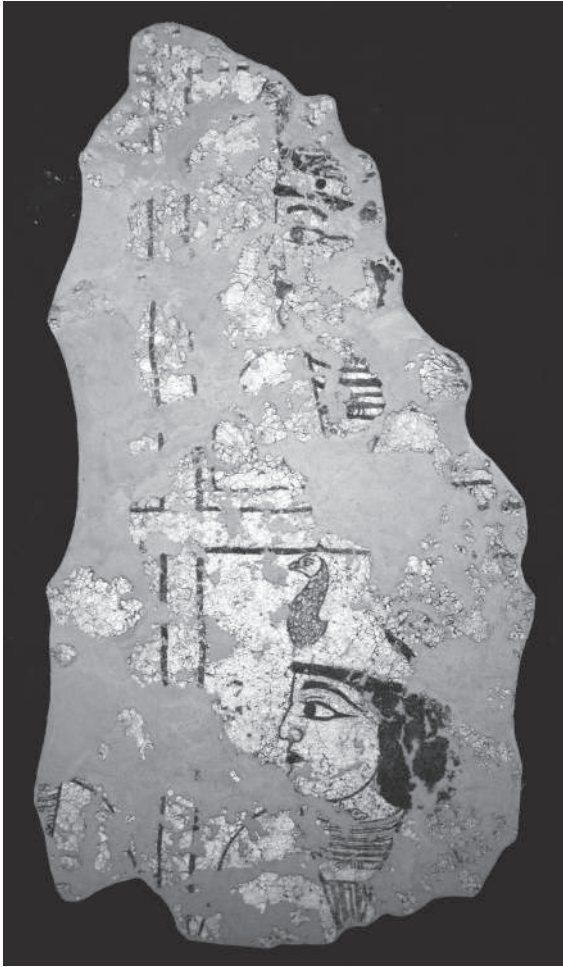


Fig. 7. Portrait figures from the northwestern corridor.
See Color Plate 2.

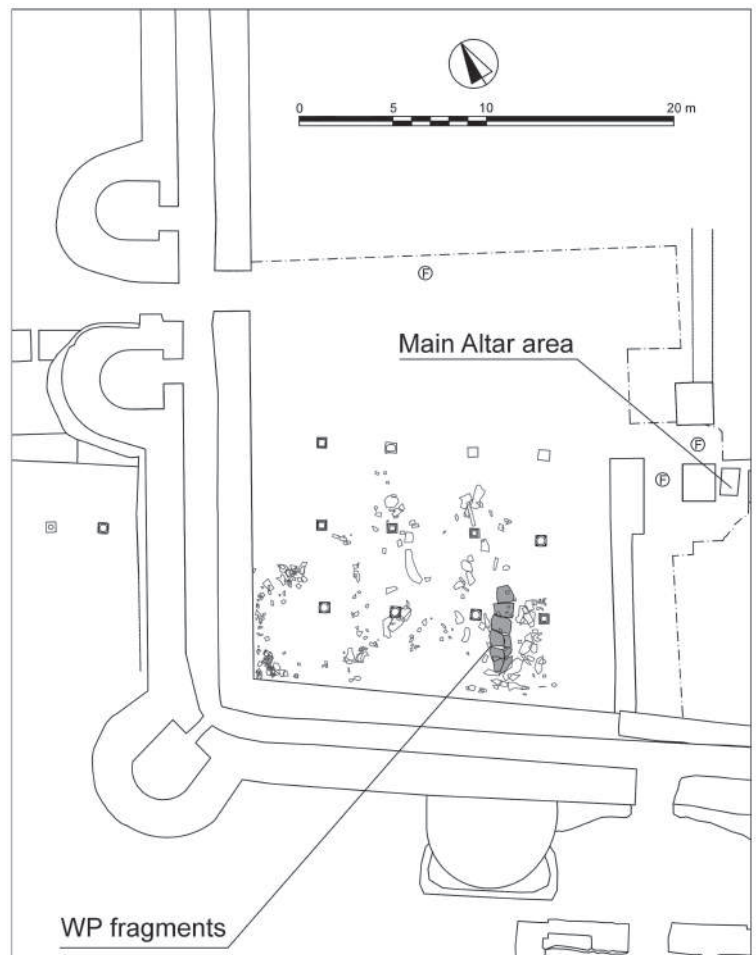


Fig. 8. Location of plaster fragments within the hypostyle hall. See Color Plate 3.

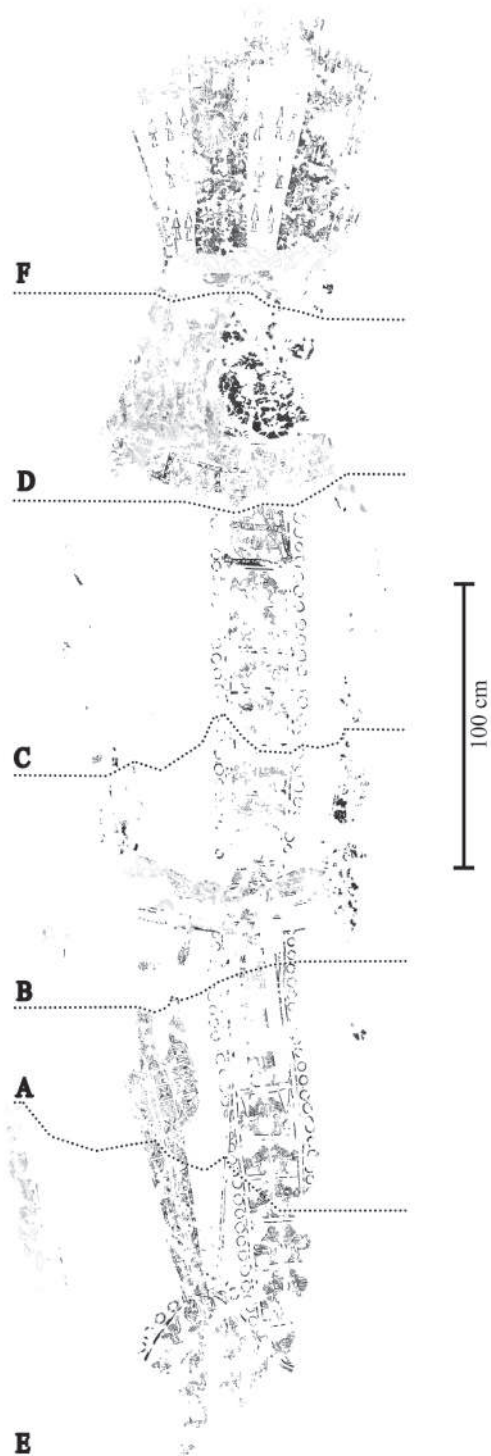


Fig. 9a. The colossal figure. Original tracing.
See Color Plate 4.

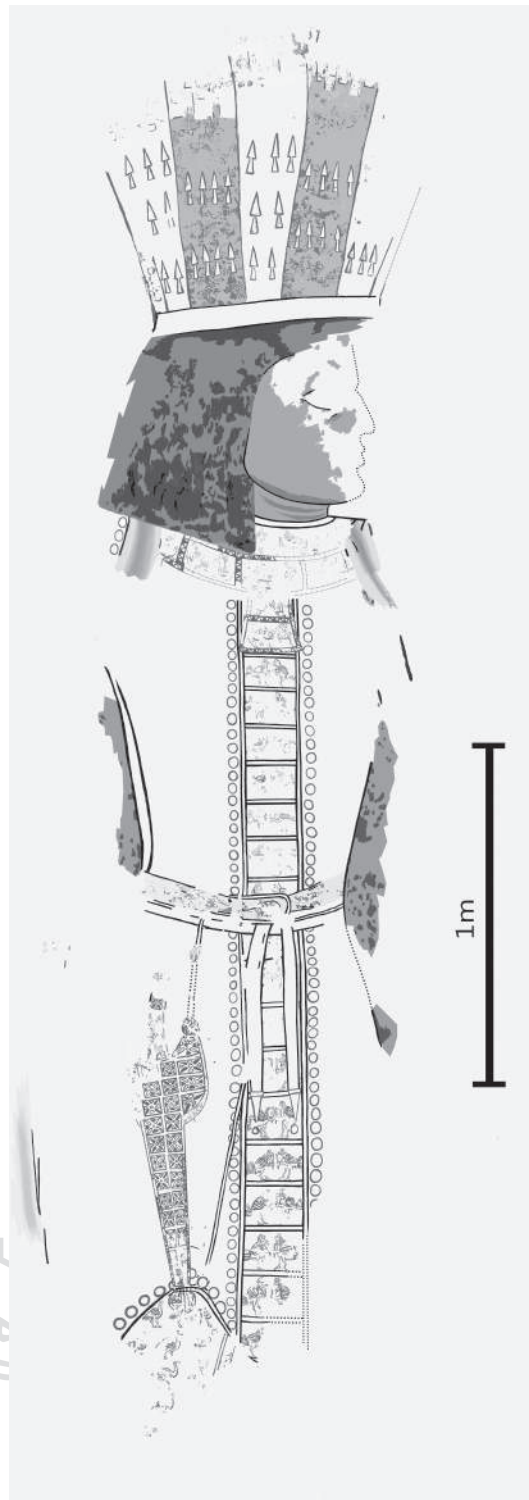


Fig. 9b. The colossal figure: preliminary reconstruction.
(The reconstructed image necessarily includes some interpretation and may change with further detailed study).
See Color Plate 5.

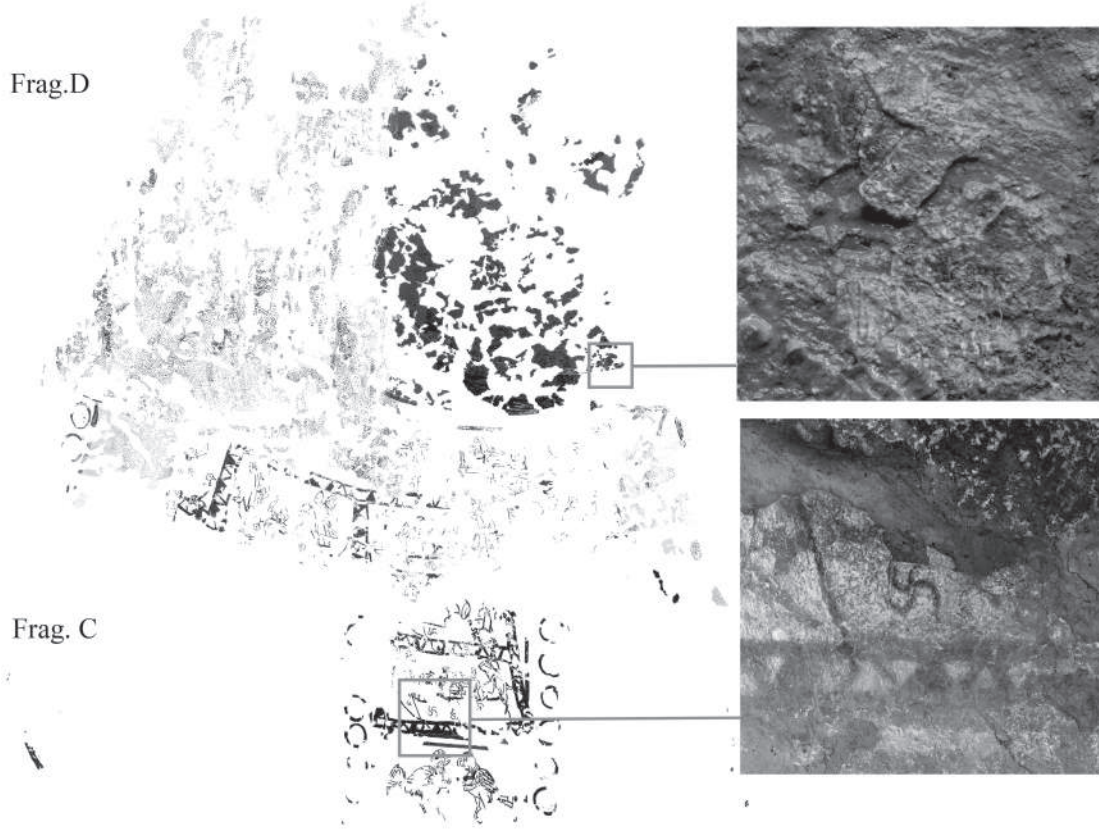


Fig. 10. Cleaning of stable paint layer (above), cleaning of fragile paint layer (below). See Color Plate 6.



Fig. 11. Detail of relief from Persepolis (after Schmidt 1953, plate 37).



Fig. 12. Detail from the central decorative panel of the tunic (original tracing). Note ends of the belt tassel slightly covering the upper panel.

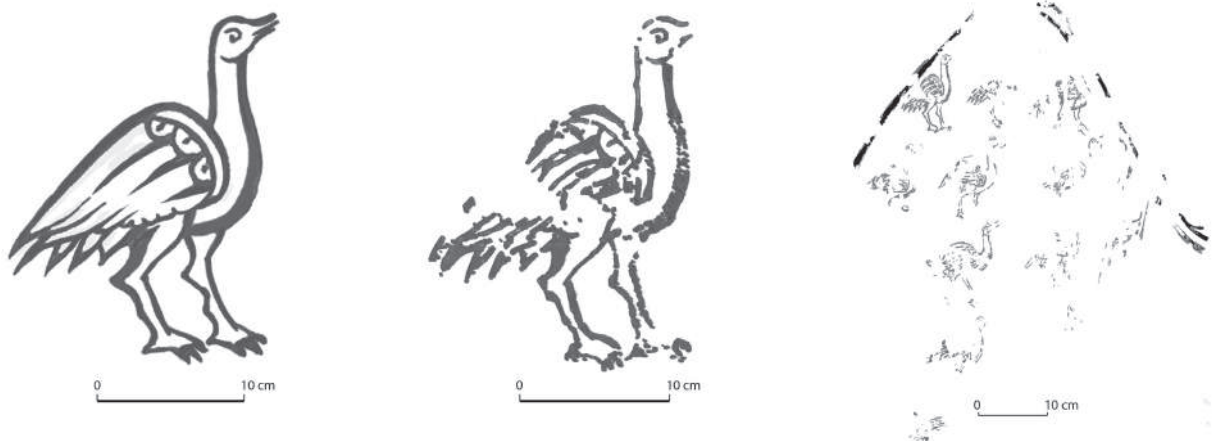


Fig. 13. Details and reconstruction of the ornamentation on the trousers.

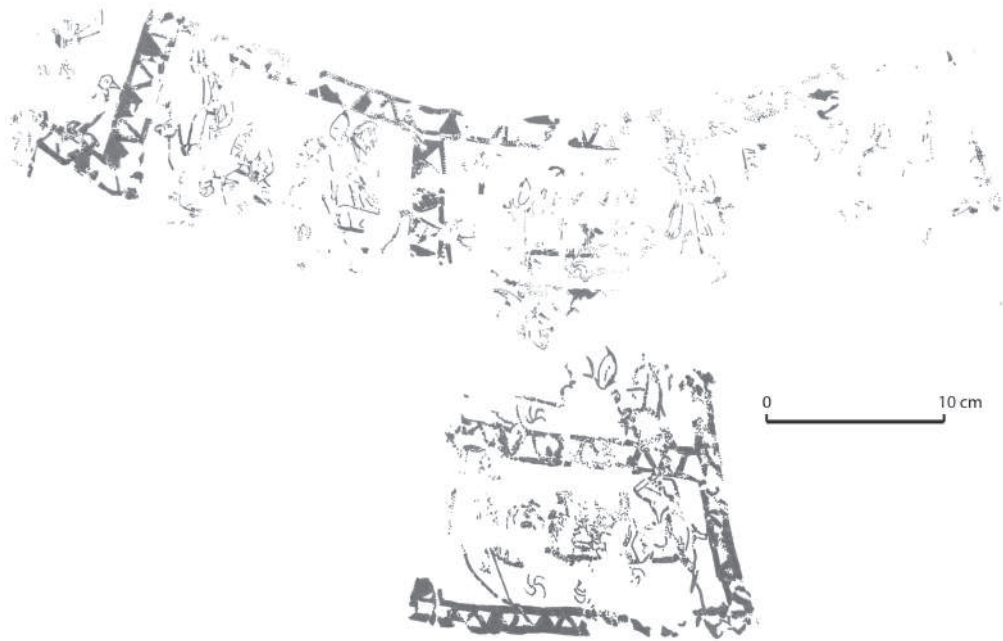


Fig. 14. The neckband (original tracing).



Fig. 15. Ornamental torque. (Reproduced with permission from the Miho Museum. Provenance unknown).



Fig. 16. Head of Atargatis or Tyche with doves. First century CE. Limestone. Yale-French Excavations at Dura-Europos. (<http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/6834>).



Fig. 17. Cilician coin type of uncertain mint, fourth century BCE. Provenance unknown. (Casabonne 2004: pl. 4, no. 25) [*The Sunrise Collection No. 103*].

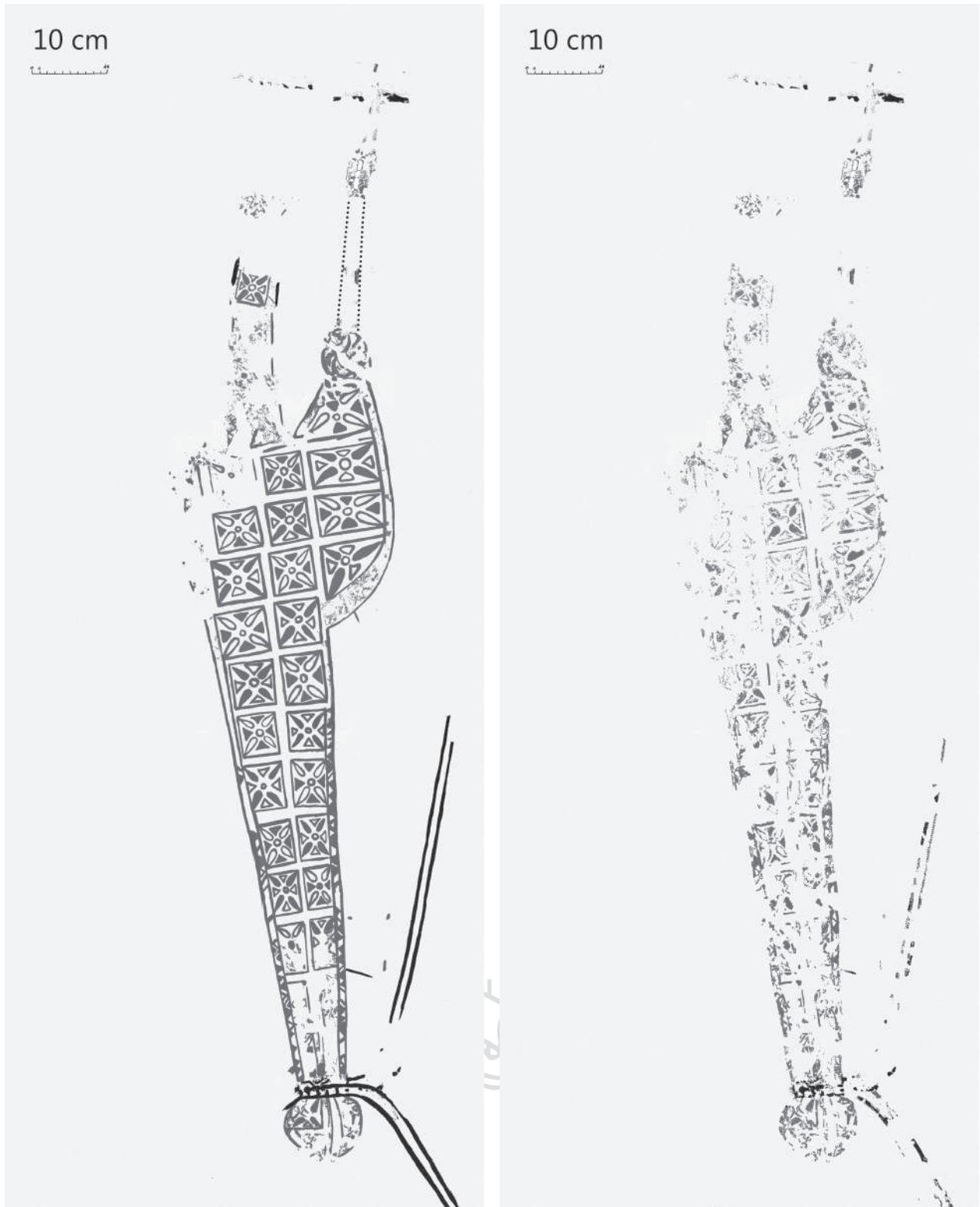


Fig. 18. The *akinakes*. Reconstruction and original tracing. See Color Plate 7.

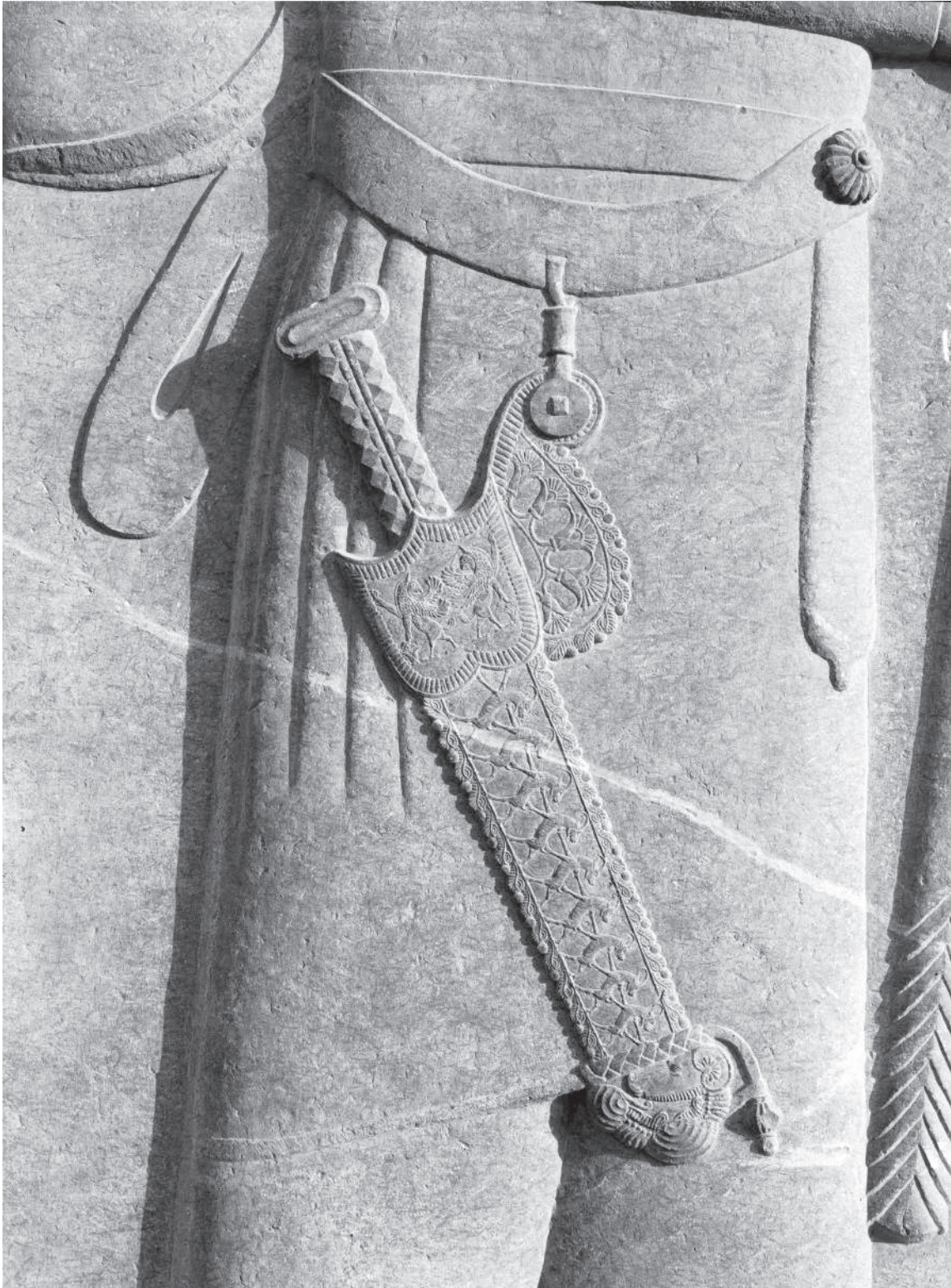


Fig. 19. Southern relief from the Treasury, Persepolis. Sword of the king's weapon-bearer. Image courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Fig. 20. Relief applied on a Samarkand terracotta ossuary, c. sixth century CE. Afrasiab Museum, Samarkand. Document MAFOUZ de Sogdiane.



Fig. 21. Relief above the doorway of the tomb of An Jia (d. 579), Xi'an (Xi'an Museum) (Riboud 2012).



Fig. 22. Ossuary from Samarkand, c. seventh century CE. Srōsh introduces the soul (figure missing) and its good deeds, symbolized by an incense burner that Rashn will weigh on the Chinwad Bridge. Tashkent Historical Museum. Photo F. Grenet.



Fig. 23. The pendant. Second tracing.



Fig. 24. Boat depicted on a clay token, Aman ur-Rahman collection (Aman ur-Rahman and Falk 2011, p. 63, No. 05.01.08).



Fig. 25. The houbara bustard, *Chlamydotis maqueenii*. After Grönvold, in Stuart Baker 1921:187, Pl. IX.












	black
	faded black
	intense red
	pink-orange on the face
	less intense red on the crown
	faded red
	faded brown in the hair
	shades of red in the neck
	yellow
	white

Table 1. Color coding of original tracing. See Color Plate 8.



Fig. 26. Gold plaque, "Oxus Treasure." After Moorey 1985, fig. 2; Dalton 1905, no. 70.



- black
- faded black
- intense red
- pink-orange on the face
- less intense red on the crown
- faded red
- faded brown in the hair
- shades of red in the neck
- yellow
- white

Plate 8. Color coding of original tracing.

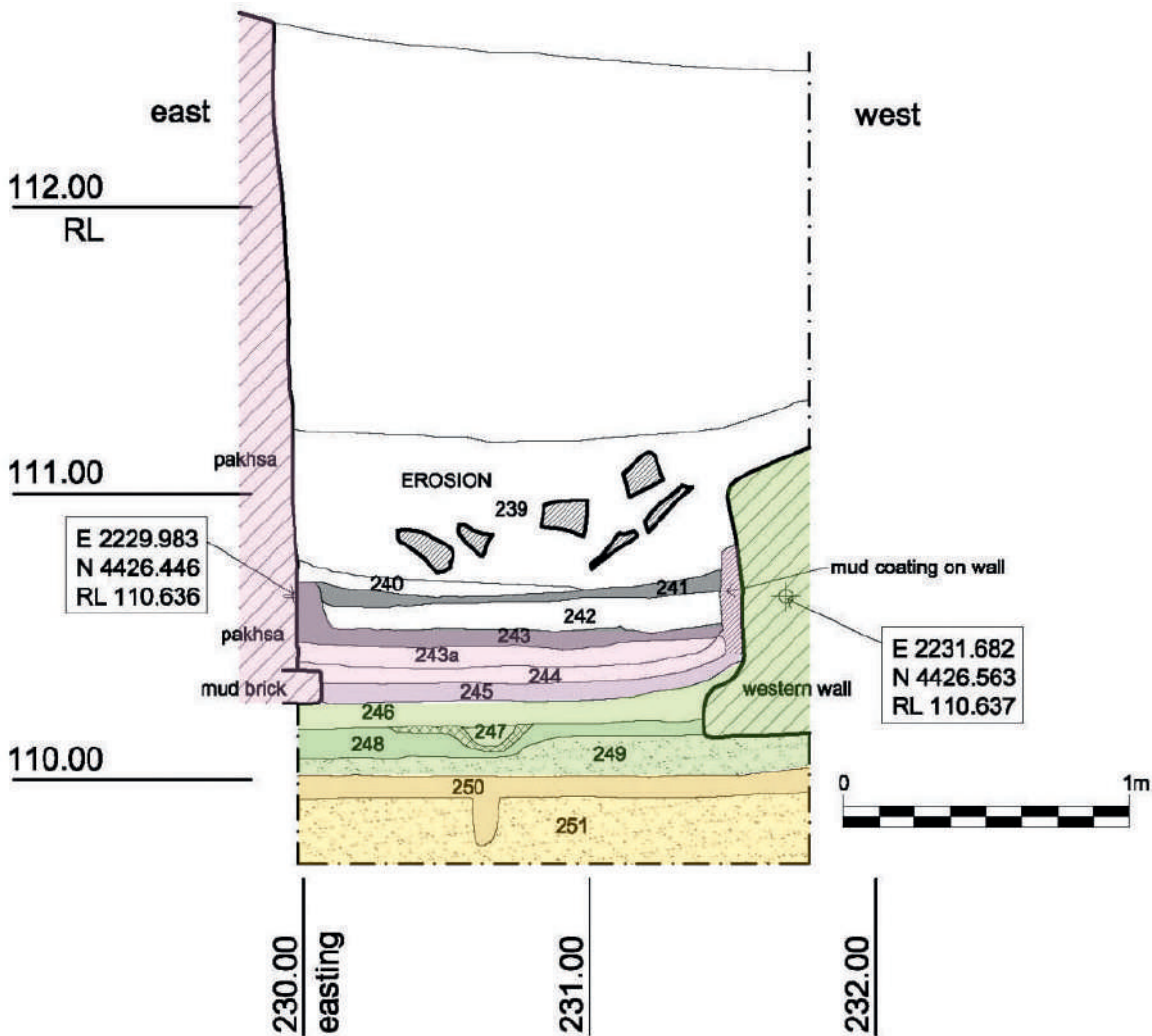


Plate 1. Section of southwestern corridor, looking south-west. Stage 1 (ochre), Stage 2 (green); stage 3 (purple).



Plate 2. Portrait figures from the northwestern corridor.

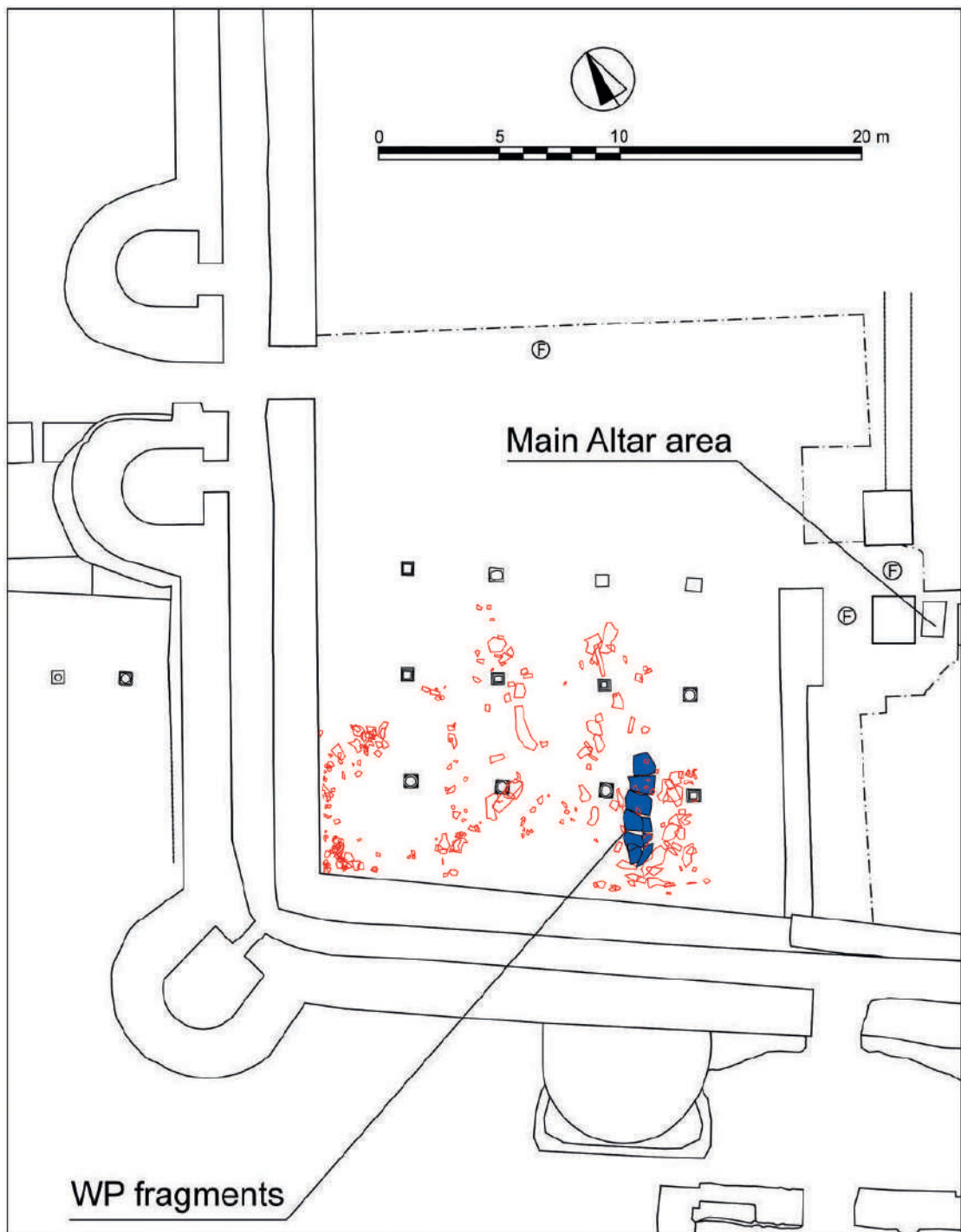


Plate 3. Location of plaster fragments within the hypostyle hall.

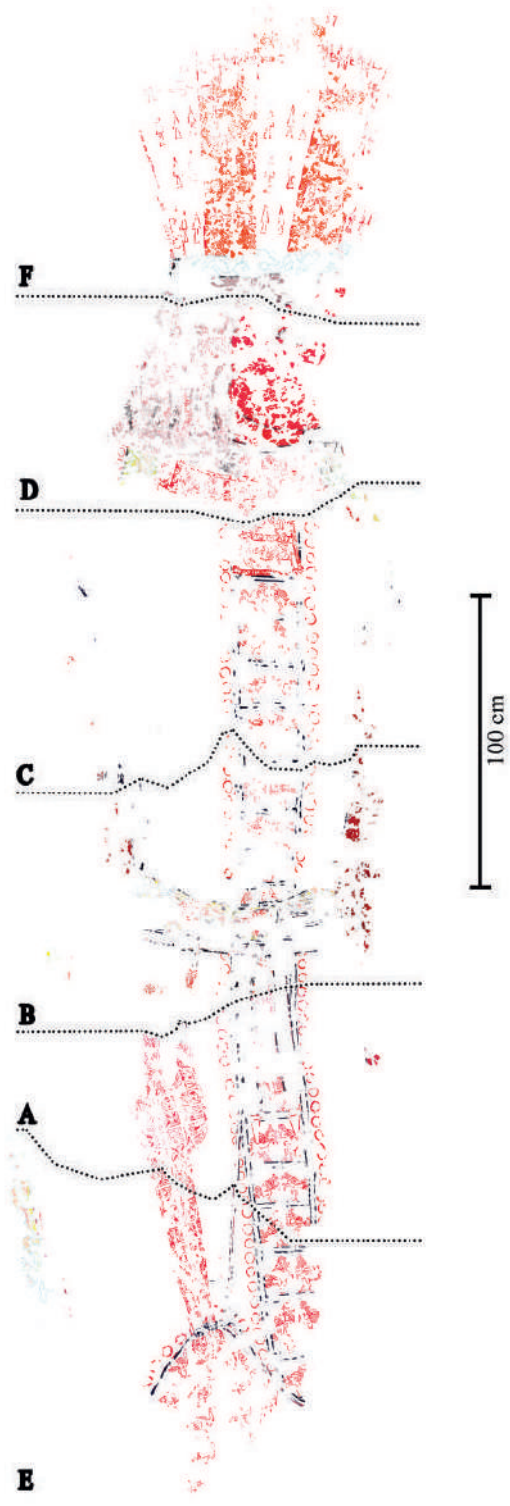


Plate 4. The colossal figure. Original tracing.

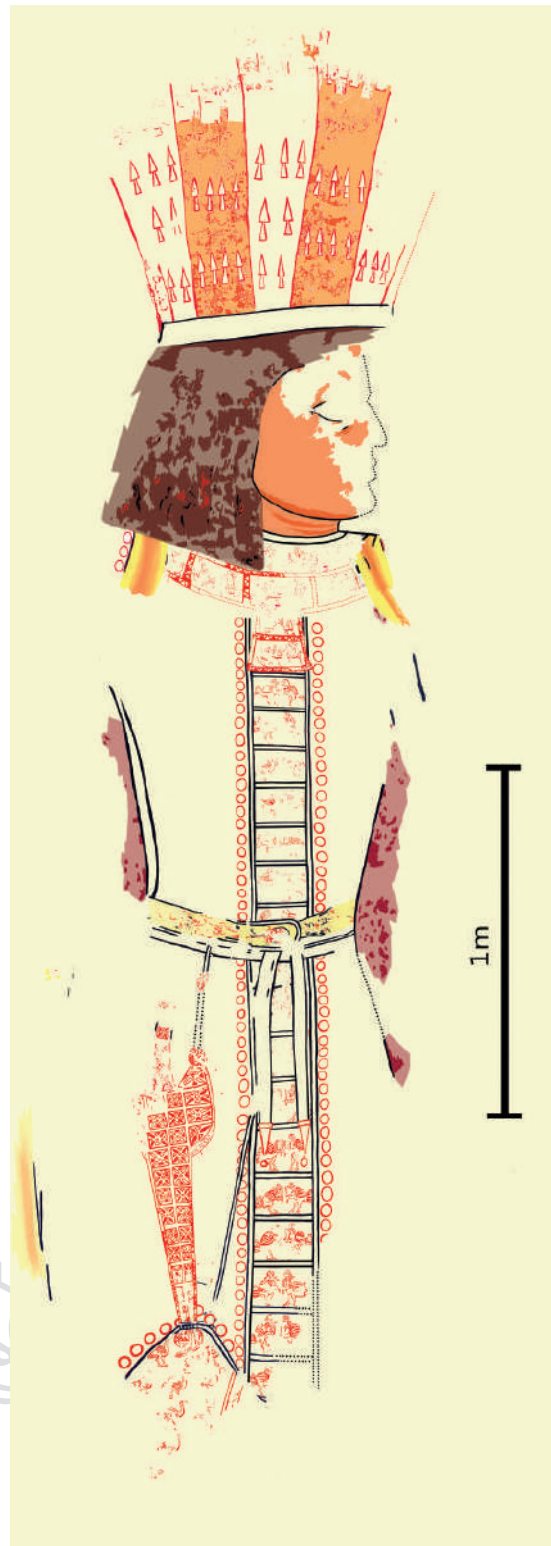


Plate 5. The colossal figure: preliminary reconstruction. (The reconstructed image necessarily includes some interpretation and may change with further detailed study).

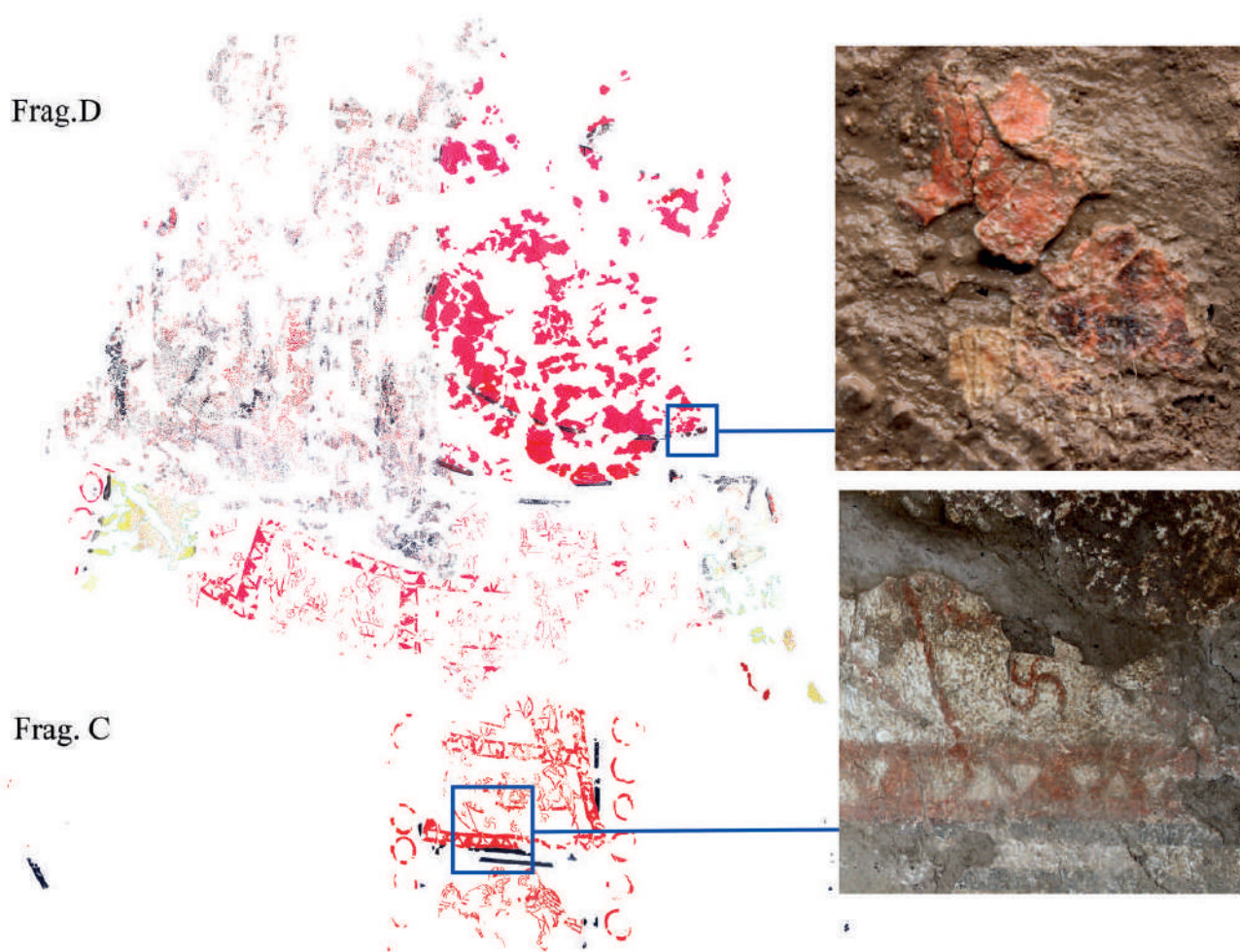


Plate 6. Cleaning of stable paint layer (above), cleaning of fragile paint layer (below).

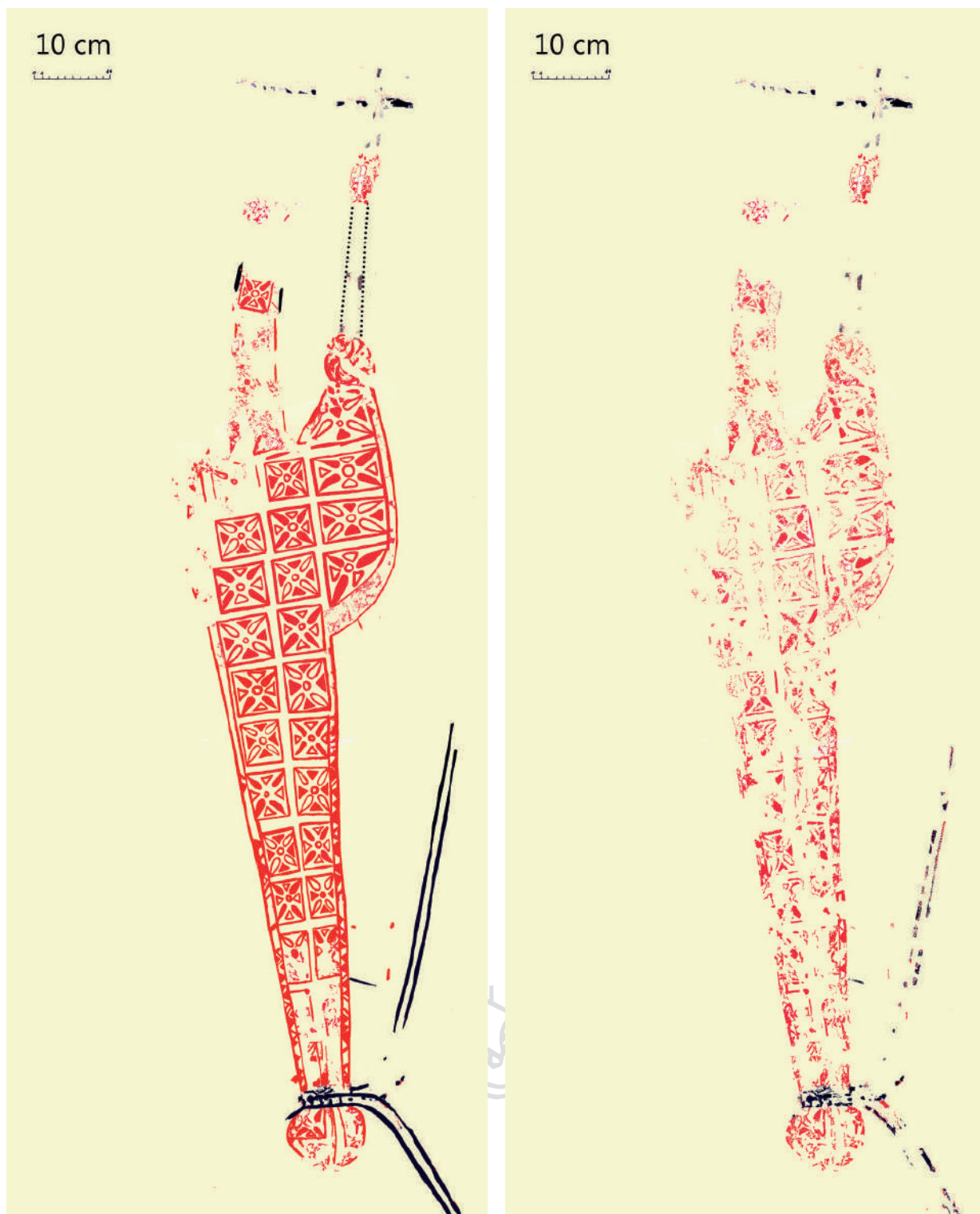


Plate 7. The *akinakes*. Reconstruction and original tracing.