



The Buddhist occupation of Tchingiz Tepe (Termez, Uzbekistan) in the Kushan period through the ceramic contexts



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ABSTRACT

Termez was one of the great Buddhist religious centers in northern Bactria in the Kushan period, as evidenced by the notable monastic complexes sited in the city. The stratigraphic excavations and 14C analysis recently conducted at Tchingiz Tepe, in a monastic cell (sector RC) and in a space for worship (sector RA), provide new data on the complete occupational sequence. In the present study we examine the reliably dated pottery contexts from these two sectors, aiming to create a preliminary typological classification of the Kushan and early Kushano-Sasanian pottery from northern Bactria. The data related to the chrono-spatial context and all the formal, metric, decorative and functional attributes of the pottery wares were categorized and implemented in a database. By comparing the pottery from the two sectors we expected to ascertain the significance and functionality of the spaces and the formal evolution of the types between the mid-second and the mid-third centuries AD. We also compared the pottery with the vessels found in other monastic complexes at Termez (i.e. Kara Tepe) and in other contemporary sites from northern Bactria in order to assess the degree of singularity or standardization of the pottery types at a regional level. The study revealed that tableware (consisting mainly of reddish slipped cups, bowls, plates, platters and jars with or without burnishing, incised and stamped decorations), common wares (basins and storage pots), and large jars or containers were prevalent in the two sectors. Cooking wares appeared only in the monastic cell; in contrast to the high degree of technological standardization detected in the other wares, the cooking pots presented major formal and technological differences. However, all the pottery used at Tchingiz Tepe is consistent with the regional prototypes observed in other nearby sites, whether or not they were Buddhist religious centers.

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1. Introduction

The site of Termez is located in southern Uzbekistan, near the Afghan border, on the banks of the Amu Darya River (the ancient *Oxus*) and near the mouth of its tributary, the Surkhan Darya (Fig. 1). The current name is a derivative from *Tirmiz* or *Tarmiz*, the appellation given in the Arab sources. The name of the city, in the variant *Tarmid*, appears in a letter written in the Bactrian language dated in 527 AD (Sims-Williams, 1996: 643). In the seventh century AD the Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang identified the city with the name *Ta-mi* (Harmatta, 1994a: 434; Leriche, 2001: 79–83; Leriche and Pidaev, 2008: 81–83). Various etymologies have been suggested for this toponym, and it has also been identified with other cities known

through written sources, but none of the proposals has been conclusively demonstrated (Leriche, 2001: 79; Pidaev, 2001: 53).

Archeological excavations conducted at the site have provided clear evidence of the earliest settlement at Termez, which consisted of a fortified rectangular enclosure (Citadel) erected over a small hill overlooking the river (Fig. 2). Pottery found in these levels resembles the prototypes of Hellenistic tradition that were common in ancient Bactria during the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian periods (Houal and Le Maguer, 2013: 424–426; Leriche and Pidaev, 2007: 185–187). Other evidence from this period has also been recorded outside the walls, to the north of the Citadel, where two monumental constructions associated with worship (Buildings A and B) were later built (Leriche, 2013: 150–154). The architectural elements and artifacts in Greek style found at Termez have led archeologists to recognize it as one of the great centers of northern Bactria during the Hellenistic/Seleucid periods (Bernard, 1994: 103).

The invasion by the nomadic tribes generically known by the name Yuezhi around the half or late second century BC brought the Greek kingdom of Bactria to an end (Enoki et al., 1994), but the occupation in Termez does not seem to have been interrupted. Little is known of

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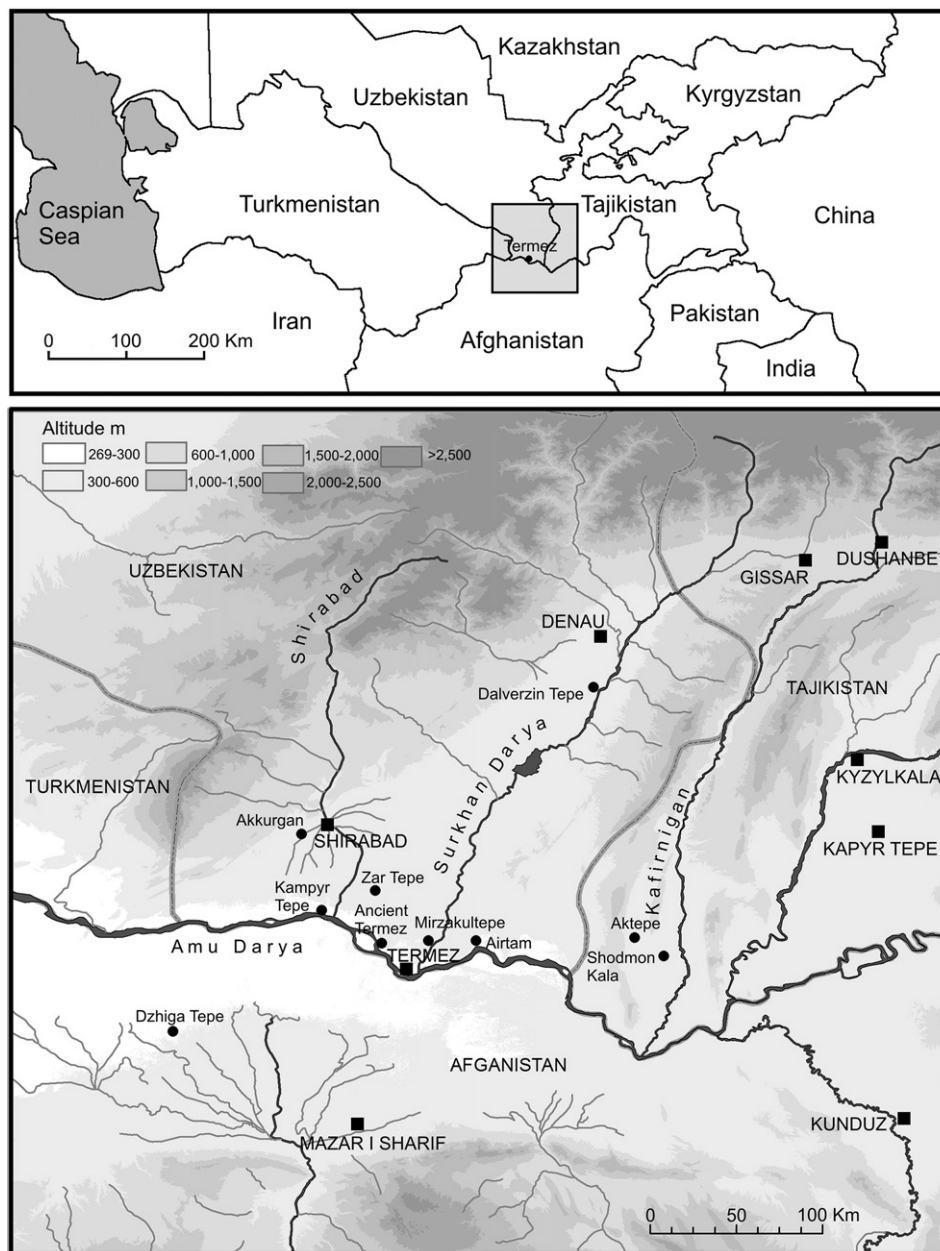


Fig. 1. Map of northern Bactria with the location of Termez and the main settlements cited in the text (drawing by A. Sánchez del Corral; cartographic base: Aster Global Digital Elevation Map NASA, <http://www.gdem.aster.ersdac.or.jp>, last accessed on 17 December 2014).

this phase, although the pottery characteristic of the Yuezhi period has been recovered in several sites in Termez (Houal and Le Maguer, 2013: 426–427). Recent excavations and radiocarbon dating carried out in the fortified enclosure of Tchingiz Tepe (Fig. 2), located slightly less than 1 km north of the Citadel, reveal that the first occupation of this area dates from this period, although it is not possible to determine whether the initial occupiers were Greco-Bactrians or nomads. ¹⁴C dating has placed the construction of the enclosure's wall between the early second century BC and the mid-first century BC, an interval of time that leaves both possibilities open (Martínez Ferreras et al., 2014: 424). It is likely that Termez was one of the capitals of the Yuezhi although there is no agreement on which one exactly; some scholars suggest *Tumi* (Abdullaev, 2001: 202), and others *Ghian-chi* (Leriche, 2013: 160). The notable similarity of the place name *Tumi* to the names used by Bactrian, Chinese and Arab sources in later periods to refer to the city make it the likelier option.

Under the Kushans, Termez remained a major urban center. Although the exact date of the first Kushan kings is debated, it is generally accepted that Kujula Kadphises ruled during the second half of the first century AD (Harmatta, 1994b: 489; Puri, 1994; Sims-Williams and Cribb, 1996). The walls of the Citadel were rebuilt and reinforced and a large construction (Building A) was built in the place of worship. In spite of its poor state of conservation, it has been identified as a royal palace since it contained *propylaea* and several large halls, some of them with pilasters attached to the inside wall (Leriche, 2013). Moreover, the occupation of the alluvial plain outside the walls expanded with the construction of a new fortified area known as *Shahristan* (Leriche, 2001, 2013; Leriche and Pidaev, 2007, 2008: 44–55). However, the most important change at this time was Termez's growing importance as a center of Buddhist worship, coinciding with a period of political stability that has been called the *Pax Kushana* (Aldrovandi and Hirata, 2005). In the immediate surroundings of the city, though a

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