

SOME REMARKS ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF MUGTEPA

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Annotation.

This article analyzes certain scholarly data regarding the study of the urban site of Mugtepa, its chronological dating, and its defensive system.

Keywords.

Mugtepa, urban planning, Northern Tajikistan Archaeological Detachment, archaeological excavations, pakhsa platform, mudbrick, defensive wall, ceramic vessels, chronological dating.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological site of Mugtepa, located in the northern part of Ura-Tyube (modern Istaravshan, Tajikistan), represents one of the most important multi-layered monuments in Central Asia. The site preserves cultural layers that span several millennia, from the Antique period through the Early Middle Ages and into the Late Medieval period. Archaeological investigations at Mugtepa began in the 1950s–1970s, when the first excavations and soundings were carried out by the Northern Tajikistan Archaeological Detachment. These studies revealed the unique stratigraphy of the settlement and confirmed the existence of cultural deposits reaching over ten meters in depth.

Main Discussion

Early Excavations (1963–1974)

In 1963, the Northern Tajikistan Archaeological Detachment initiated large-scale excavations in the northwestern sector of Mugtepa (Excavation VIII, 10×10 m). Initially, only the Late Medieval layers were studied. Subsequent research in 1969 extended the sounding to the natural soil, though the limited area did not yield sufficient data to reconstruct fortress construction. By 1970, a broader excavation strategy was adopted, and between 1972 and 1974, the research area was expanded westward, northeastward, and southeastward. Excavations ultimately reached a depth

of 10.3 m (21 stratigraphic layers), where the lowest archaeological finds were identified as belonging to the Early Antique period.

In the southern part of the site, a section of a wall dated to the Antique period was exposed, though no other architectural remains were recorded. Results indicated that the excavation had intercepted only the northwestern section of an ancient structure, while the residential areas in the south and southeast remained beyond the investigated zone.

Renewed Investigations (1981)

In 1981, the Ura-Tyube unit of the Northern Tajikistan Archaeological Complex Expedition (NTAKE) resumed fieldwork at Mugtepa. South of Excavation VIII, large-scale excavations revealed poorly preserved architectural remains in the lowest layers, consisting of pakhsa (rammed earth) blocks measuring 50×30, 60×30, and 40×30 cm. In the southwestern corner, traces of a room or large rectangular pit, possibly a domestic area, were recorded.

Excavation III (19th–20th layers) uncovered a dense monolithic pakhsa platform, approximately 2 m thick, interpreted as a leveling construction rather than a wall. This feature contained abundant ceramic material and indicated that the city's relief, sloping from south to north, had been artificially leveled.

Room Structures and Finds (1st–4th centuries CE)

In the 16th–17th stratigraphic layers of Excavation VIII, the remains of two room structures were documented. Based on ceramic analysis, these were dated to the 1st–4th centuries CE. Room II, measuring 7.5×8 m, exhibited a sloping floor surface (10–15 cm) towards the south and west walls. Beneath the floor, a 25–30 cm layer of loose soil was found, containing numerous fragments of large and small storage jars (khums) and other pottery.

Artifacts from these levels included:

- fragments of two boat-shaped grain grinders,
- cauldrons,
- convex-shaped pottery sherds,
- a stone weaving spindle,
- the foot of a goblet, and
- ceramics decorated with vertical polished lines, characteristic of the 4th–2nd centuries BCE.

These finds closely resembled ceramic complexes recovered from Excavation III.

Urban Fortifications (5th–9th centuries CE)

The excavations also revealed remains of city walls constructed of large pakhsa blocks, dated to the 5th–6th centuries CE. These fortifications remained in use until the 7th–

8th centuries. In Excavation VIII-A, a defensive tower was discovered, preserved to a height of more than 6 meters. It was built in the 5th–6th centuries CE and functioned until the 9th century.

Mugtepa in the Late Middle Ages

During the Late Medieval period, Mugtepa served as the residence of the Ura-Tyube beylik. The fortifications of this period were investigated by the Tajik archaeologist N. Rahimov. However, the Antique-period defensive walls of Mugtepa have not been fully uncovered, largely due to the site's complex stratigraphy and its multi-layered occupation.

Today, the site has been partially redeveloped: its surroundings have been landscaped, and a modern amphitheater has been constructed directly on the monument, further complicating the possibility of comprehensive archaeological investigation.

Conclusion

The archaeological site of Mugtepa is a unique multi-layered urban complex that reflects the historical and urban development of Ura-Tyube across several major chronological periods. Excavations have documented cultural deposits spanning from the Antique era (4th–2nd centuries BCE) to the Late Medieval period, with evidence of continuous settlement, domestic structures, defensive fortifications, and craft activities.

The stratigraphic richness of Mugtepa confirms its role as an important urban center in ancient and medieval Central Asia. Although modern construction has hindered further large-scale research, Mugtepa remains a monument of great scientific importance, not only for the local history of Tajikistan but also for the broader study of the historical processes of Central Asia.

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