

DÉCOR OF THE EIGHTH-CENTURY TURKIC RULERS' RESIDENCE IN THE CITADEL OF KULAN TOWN

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This essay presents preliminary results of excavation during 2015 at the ancient settlement site of Kulan, located in southeastern Kazakhstan. In particular, the focus was on two palatial chambers in the citadel, which stratigraphy indicates date to the 8th century. The first of these chambers, presumed to be part of the palace of the Turgesh ruler, contains two arched portals covered with remarkably well preserved carved clay that extends as well along the walls. The second chamber has remnants of mural painting and graffiti which are sufficient to allow some reconstruction of the depicted figures and their costume.

The ancient settlement of Kulan (also known in the archaeological literature as Tarty and Lugovoe) is one of the best known and most thoroughly excavated sites in the southwestern Jetysu (Semirech'e) region of southeastern Kazakhstan. The city was frequently mentioned in the medieval Arabic and Persian geographical and historical texts. Its location is the Ryskulov County of Jambyl Region on the northeastern edge of the modern village of Kulan on the bank of the Karakat River, a tributary of the Shu (Chu) River (Baipakov 2002a, p. 83). Following the lead of Wilhelm Tomaschek, the great expert on the history and geography of Central Asia, Vasilii V. Bartol'd (1966, p. 49) had located the medieval Kulan here, an identification which has never been questioned in the subsequent literature.

The Semirech'e Archaeological Expedition (SAE) headed by Kemal A. Akishev began excavation at the site in the 1960s. One of its units opened trenches in the citadel and studied several residences in the area adjoining the settlement (Baipakov 1966). However, neither then nor later was the excavation systematic even though the site and its analogues were nominated for the UNESCO "World Heritage" list. Thus,

the excavation reported here, begun in 2015, aimed to examine both the exterior and interior of the citadel in order to establish a proper chronology from the stratigraphy and provide a clear idea of the architecture. Moreover, the project included the drawing up of a topographic map of the entire settlement contained within the walls and selective excavation outside of the walls. [Figs. 1, 2]

Fig. 1. Topographic plan of the central ruins of Kulan.



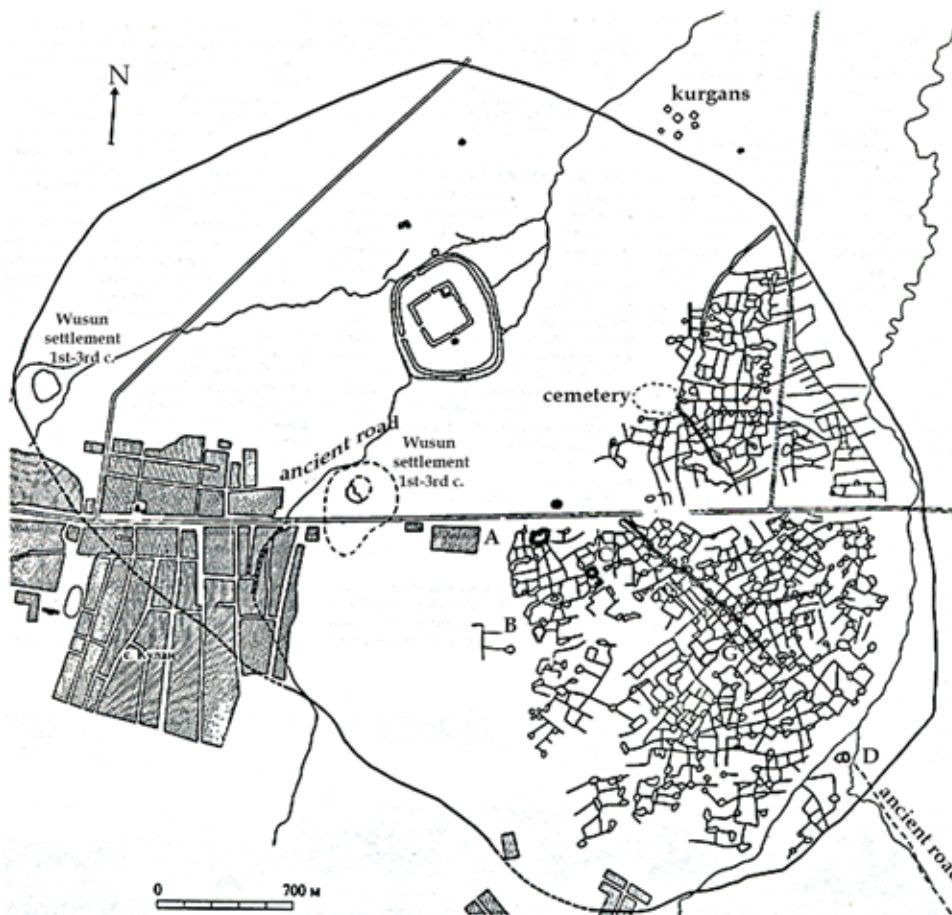


Fig. 2. Plan of the central ruins (the beled) of Kulan inside the "long walls".

a radius of 45 m. and a height of ca. 5 m. Probably this is the remains of fortification assemblages connected with the entrance.

The NE entrance can be made out as a shallow gully 20 m in width and 1 m deep, flanked by towers on both sides. Twenty meters to the east from the line of the gate where towers had once stood is a rather poorly defined mound. The ruins of fortified structures in front of the gate form a substantial rectangular area measuring 85 x 45 m and extending along a line from SW to NE with a median height of 4 m.

The most developed and strongly fortified structure among all the four gates of the shahristan is the NW entrance, located, as in the cases of the others, in the center of

Questions Regarding the Topography

Even though questions have been raised regarding the applicability of the "theory of the tripartite structure of medieval cities" (citadel, shahristan [~residential area] and rabad [~suburb]) to the settlements of Semirech'e and in particular to Kulan, that scheme is the one we have followed in our research to date.¹

The central part of the site (the "shahristan") is a square mound whose corners are oriented to the cardinal directions and measures along the crest of the side slopes 216 x 220 m. Its median height is 11.5 m and highest point 12.5 m. The citadel is located in the northern corner and measures 47 x 43 m. In the center of its upper area is a depression ca. 25 m in diameter and 2.5 m deep. The elevation above the surrounding area is 13 m².

There are four entrances into the shahristan, located opposite one another, each in the center of its respective wall. The SE entrance is in the form of a shallow gully 20 m wide and 1.5 m deep. It is flanked by two towers, the traces of which can be easily discerned. In front of the entrance is a raised area, triangular in shape, measuring 65 x 50 m and 4 m high. The SW entrance has a two-meter depression. On the southern side are the remains of a tower in the form of a rounded mound. In front of the entrance can be made out a raised area, semicircular in shape, with

its corresponding wall. At the location of the passage is a 20 m wide shallow gully, 1.2 m deep. The gate is flanked by two towers; 40 m to its NW can be discerned a second row of towers. The ruins of the entrance complex form a gently sloping area measuring 80 x 60 m and 8 m high.

Straight main streets connect the gates, situated directly across from each other. Where the street was located is a shallow gulley 25–30 m wide and up to 1 m deep, overgrown with thick grass. On the northern side of the intersection of the streets is a depression where the central square of the settlement was located.

As we can see, in this part (i.e., the shahristan and citadel), Kulan is a typical settlement of the *tortkul* type, that is "a square or rectangle with entrances in the middle of all four sides." The main streets connecting the gates directly opposite one another form a central square where they intersect. Such a foundational plan is characteristic for settlement structures of Eurasia from the time of the camps of Roman legions to the early Chinese urban residences. It can be seen in the Islamic plan of shahristans of such large Central Asian cities as Merv and Bukhara. A good many examples of it can be hypothesized for the topography of central city cores now buried by later layers, such as the medieval Kazakh settlements of Sairam, Otrar, and Taraz. Such a plan is clearly in evidence in the topography

of Nujiket, Aspara, Kostobe, Ornek, etc., which ceased to be occupied in the 12th–14th centuries (Baipakov 2002a, pp. 101, 221, 307).

In the literature describing Kulan are differing views concerning the third part (the rabad) of what is considered characteristic of the topography of a medieval city [Fig. 2]. We are dealing here with part of the town whose perimeter has well defined remains of fortification walls, extending 1900–2000 m with a height of about 2 m and width of 20–25 m. Around its exterior is a moat now about 2 m deep and up to 10 m wide. This wall is 100–150 m from the wall of the central rectangle (the “shahristan”). On this area between the walls, the territory of what we consider is the rabad, are mounds with various configurations up to 5 m high. Very likely it contained several small settlements. Apparently the building up of this area occurred later than that of the shahristan/tortkul with the citadel.³

The area of this territory, as estimated by Nurzhanov and our survey, covers about 15 km² and has the shape of an irregular oval with axes 4.7 x 4.4 km (Nurzhanov 2010, p. 143). Traces of its buildings are more or less well preserved only in a few areas. The largest of a number of separate residences, the so-called “residence G”, has been excavated. Inside it were panels decorated with carved clay displaying a variety of ornamentation. In the ornamental composition of one of the walls of the corridor-like passage into the chamber, the excavators even determined that there was a Biblical subject depicting Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge (Baipakov 1986, pp. 121–35; Baipakov et al. 2001, pp. 41–42, 109–15; Baipakov and Ternovaia 2004, p. 31).

While details of the topography and chronology can be worked out only following more systematic excavation, it seems likely that the town of Kulan in certain historical periods could have been the center of what the medieval sources term a *rustaq*, a cluster of settlements within an integrated region, located on the tributaries of the middle reaches of the River Shu. In the 10th–12th centuries a number of small population centers could have been part of it, the ancient settlement sites in the form of tortkuls located now near the contemporary villages of Enbekshi, Karakystak, Zhalpaksaz, Kyzylwharua, and Kuragaty (Baipakov 2002a, pp. 289–305). It is likely that Merke to the east of Kulan and Zhul’shub to the west were neighboring rustaqs. The town of Kulan itself experienced all the basic stages of development of towns in Semirech’e: it first emerged as the camp of the local feudal ruler; the tortkul with a citadel and with castles and palaces located around it (6th–8th centuries) later developed into a small medieval town—a shahristan with a rabad and in some areas densely developed suburbs (9th–13th centuries).

The Archaeological Excavations; Stratigraphy

The most complete data on the stratigraphy of the vari-

ous objects at Kulan, accumulated over a half century of its study, are in the article published in 2002 (Baipakov 2002a, 283–89). A stratigraphic trench dug in the citadel and occupying 30 m² yielded three consecutive building layers or horizons (BL). The lowest, ca. 2 m thick, was dated to the 7th–8th centuries. The middle one is up to 1.5 m thick and dated 9th–10th centuries. In the uppermost and last one, apparently about a meter thick, are the remains of walls of fired brick and fragments of glazed ceramics from the 11th–12th centuries.

A stratigraphic cut also was entered in the southern wall of the shahristan. It showed that the general thickness of the cultural layer there was 5.3 m, below which was a platform made of parallelepipeds of stamped clay (*pakhsa*). On it was erected a wall made of large blocks of *pakhsa* layered with adobe measuring 50 x 25 x 10 cm. Two construction periods were evidenced in the wall. In the structure of the adjoining cultural layer, in contrast to the structure of the cultural layer of the citadel, two levels were discerned. Leveled and compressed building remains with traces of fire constituted the foundation of the “second” one. The structure from the second building layer was preserved up to a height of 3 m.

Probably because the stratigraphic trench opened in the citadel provided little expectation of quickly locating impressive artefacts, the emphasis in the archaeological study of Kulan has been on digging the “homesteads”, the monuments of “suburban construction”. Thus, the published information includes short descriptions of the results of excavations of three “homesteads” on the territory of the suburban zone: A is a “castle”, B a “winery”, and C is a “palace”. However, no stratigraphic data are provided; the chronology of the structures is given very generally as 8th–12th and 7th–10th centuries. In all likelihood that merely indicates the period during which one or another of the structures might have existed.

Of course the citadel is usually the core around which a town would first develop. Later it would be the place where the most prestigious and functionally defined structures would be built. In Central Asia, it is precisely the study of the citadels of ancient and medieval settlements which provides the most telling archaeological material. More often than not, to be found there are the most representative materials for the history of fortification, architecture and art, and the answers to many questions about the history of the emergence and development of the town. This then was the rationale for the focus of the excavations begun in 2015 and extending over the next seasons, which indeed yielded remarkable results.

Some Results of the 2015 Field Season

In August 2015 a trench was opened on the NW side of the citadel, initially with an area of 15 x 20 m², later extended another two meters to the SE and NW. It was assumed that the trench would encompass both a part of

Fig. 3. Pottery complex from the toilet (bodrab) in BL 1.

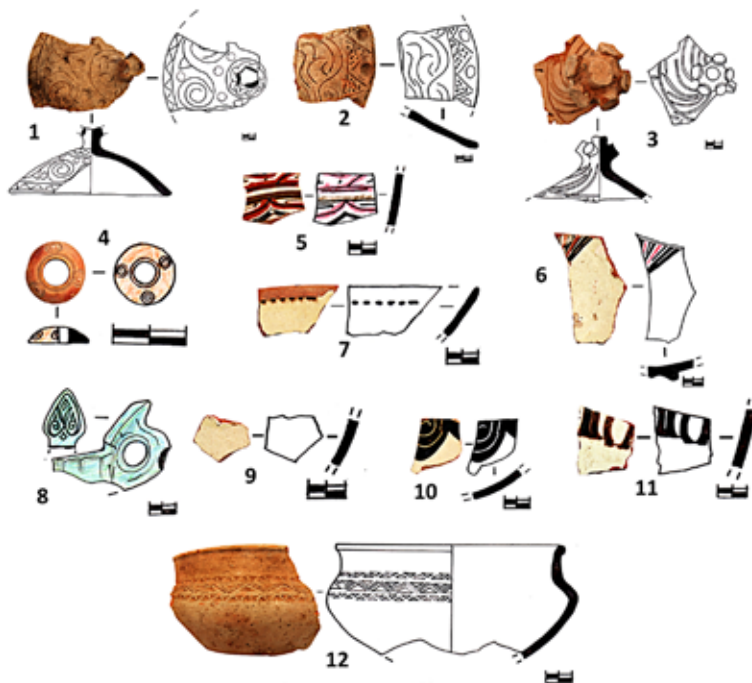
the exterior wall and an area inside of it, which taken together would provide sufficiently representative material to determine the stratigraphy and chronology of the citadel and the nature of its architectural complex.

The stratigraphy that was uncovered in Trench No. 1 is as follows. The uppermost layer (Level 1) has a loose bed of sod resting on a compact bed of the remains of a ruined building. Cleaning of the horizontal surface revealed the outlines of nine grave pits in which were found the remains of five children and four adults. The skeletons were oriented with the head at a slight angle from N to NW, the faces turned to the SW, that is, the direction of the *qibla* (Mecca). This fact, along with the complete absence of any grave goods, indicates that these are Muslim graves. It is quite common to find that after a town has been abandoned and its remains become a large mound, it later is used as a cemetery. These late grave pits frequently cut through the structures of the upper construction horizon (BL 1). (In the preliminary publication, they are designated as BL 3 [Khazbulatov et al. 2016]). All the bones from these graves were removed and reburied in a special secluded location.

The walls of the monumental structure in BL 1 emerged already at a depth of 0.6 m. Within the boundary of the excavation trench were found the complete outlines of three rooms, whose corners are oriented in the cardinal directions. Two of them were but noted (not excavated). The exterior NW fortress wall, which was the exterior wall of the citadel, had completely disintegrated; it is likely that its lower levels can be fixed at a later date.

The structures of this upper (that is, final) construction horizon (BL 1) could be traced in the excavation in the form of rather ill-defined fragments of walls, sections of roughly surfaced floors and openings of toilet-pits. However, it was still possible to determine that in the final period of the occupation of the citadel, several buildings had been erected here on the ruins of the lower, foundational horizon (BL 2). Their remains over a period of many centuries had been erased and swept off the surface of the platform which had been constructed out of the ruins of the earliest buildings of the citadel. Only the fill of the rubbish pits/toilets remained from that uppermost building horizon, material which made it possible to date it to the 10th–11th centuries [Fig. 3].

The careful cleaning of the surface of the excavation along the top of the second level revealed the outline of the walls of BL 2 and the intact masonry of its structures. The bricks which filled the upper part of



the spaces of the structures in main area of BL 2 were rectangular, measuring 48=47 x 20 x 10 cm, along with bricks measuring 53 x 23 x 11 cm. That is, both new bricks and the bricks of the earlier structure were used for fill. Thus the ruins of the ancient citadel (BL 2) were recycled into the platform for construction of the final ("Karakhanid") building horizon (BL 1).

The contours of major walls could be made out following the clearing on the surface of this platform. The structure which emerged turned out to belong to a monumental building which, it seemed, occupied the entire area of the citadel (40 x 40 m). Its ruins, as could easily be imagined, shaped the main topography of the citadel, apparently forming a "cirque" of various rooms arrayed around a wide central courtyard.

Fig. 4. View of the excavated rooms of the Kulan palace.



Within the excavated area were the remains of six rooms [Figs. 4, 5], three of which were entirely cleared during the 2015 field season (Nos 1, 2, 3). The rooms are aligned on a NE to SW axis, with the corners oriented in the cardinal directions with only slight deviations. The walls are composed of adobe brick, made of yellow clay mixed with lumps of gray clay. The rectangular bricks measure 48 x 20 x 10 cm and 53 x 23 x 11 cm. The thickness of the walls varies from 1.4 to 2.1 m. It appears that the north-western wall of the structure was the exterior fortress wall of the citadel. The rooms attached to it have very substantial walls while the walls on the side of the courtyard are somewhat thinner.

Although as yet details of the plan of the entire building are not clear, two chambers (Nos. 1 and 2) of those cleared in the excavation of 2015 are of unquestionable interest [Figs. 4, 5].

Chamber No. 1 is rectangular, measuring 6.6 x 5.7 m. The upper part of the space within the chamber was filled to a depth of about 1.5 m with masonry made of adobe brick of the same format as the bricks of BL 2. Then there was a layer of rubble from pieces of those same bricks which came from the walls of the chamber itself. The upper floor of the chamber is 2.65 m below the top of what has been preserved of the walls. Along the NW, SW and SE walls is a low bench, 1.2 m wide on the NW, 1.9 on the SW and 1.2 on the SE, widening to 1.4 m to the SW. The walls were covered in a single layer of plaster 2-3 cm thick, which has survived only in a few sections. In many places it has been thoroughly damaged by the digging of rodents.

In Chamber No. 1 of BL 2 are two floor levels, which mark two construction periods of the entire architectural complex (for convenience, we will conditionally term them SP1 and SP2, the first/lower and second/upper levels connected with certain changes in the interior of the structure). So far we have cleared this chamber down to floor SP2.

Fig. 5. The excavation trench opened in the Kulan citadel in 2015.



The surviving height of the NE wall is 2.75 m, its length 5.7 m and its width 2.1 m; the NW wall is 6.6 m long, 1.4 m wide and 2.5 m high. The SW wall of the chamber has been cleared so far only along its interior face, with the rest left under a protective strip for future excavation. The wall has survived up to a height of 2.4 m. The SE wall is 6.6 m long, 1.9 m wide and 2.0 m high. The mixed structure of the masonry of this wall and the absence of plaster on it suggests that it had been re-built. The adobe bricks are only in its upper part; probably this is repaired masonry. The lower part of the wall is compacted brown and yellow soil. The entrance to the chamber is in its SE corner. It has no distinctive features and probably had been built later (at the time of SP2), following the rebuilding of the walls. The width of the entrance is ca. 1 m.

The walls of the chamber were richly decorated with carved clay [Figs. 6, 7, 8, next pages]. The designs were carved in specially prepared high quality plaster, applied as a 4 cm thick layer of smoothed adobe. The designs were carved directly on location, following, of course, a preliminary sketch. The upper relief cornice is a narrow moulding shaped from the thickest layer of plaster, which gives the whole composition a depth of relief. Then the panel was painted in red (with ochre?).

The unique preservation of the carved panels enables one to reconstruct at least the overall decorative scheme of this obviously exceptional chamber. As an approximation, what survives in situ on the walls is one-sixth to one-eighth of the entire decoration. Given the losses, details such as, for example, the tympana of the arches which crown the frames of the portals, so far cannot be faithfully reconstructed.

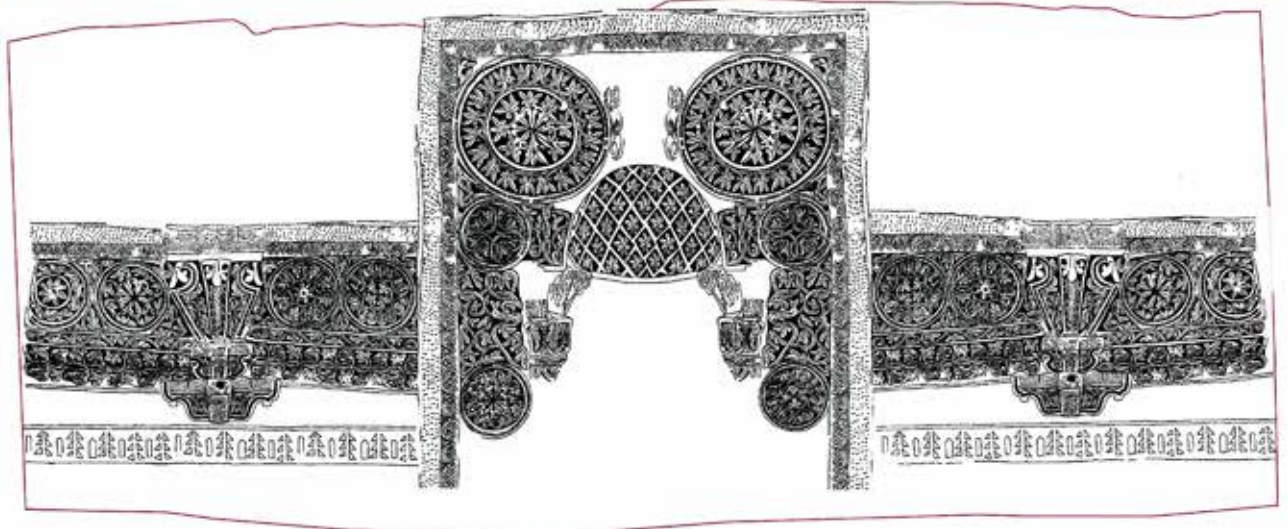
Increasingly, scholars have come to understand that it is not the individual elements of ornament but their larger composition which embodies the meaning of the decoration. If such is the case, then to understand and reconstruct the compositional structure of the decoration should make it possible to arrive at an understanding of the semantics of separate elements and the purpose of a room. The ornament of semantically charged wares of traditional crafts such as carpets, coverlets, dishes, and walls of residential and religious structures, etc. embodied the image of a balanced, harmonized, bright and richly saturated world, the kind of world which its traditional culture, personified by its inhabitants – its creators and users – wished to see. For example, in Central Asian ornament “net-like” and “medallion” ornamental compositions were the most popular ones. If the net-like compositions (*bendi-rumi*) create the image of an ordered world space, the medallions represent the main giver of life, the sun: round rosettes or medallions traditionally symbolized the sun, which blessed and protected and embodied the desire for all good things (Giul’ 2013, pp. 41-49). The braiding of vegetal and flower motifs in eastern ornament is the depiction of the garden of Paradise, of a world that resembles it, a world which

every religion promised people as part of its ideological system.

The overall composition of the decorative scheme of Chamber No. 1 seems to have been as follows. In the center of the opposing NE and SW walls the panels of carved clay framed “rectangular portal frames with arches”. For convenience we will label the portal on the SW wall “A” [Fig. 6] and that on the NE wall “B” [Fig. 7]. From the edge of the portal frame along the entire perimeter of the wall is a decorative band of carved clay approximately 1.1

m wide. Its lower edge is at a height of 30–35 cm above the top of the bench SP2. The panels of carved clay have been preserved on the SE wall, beginning from the frame of “portal A” and extending to the western corner of the chamber, and on the NW wall from corner to corner. But here two sections have been destroyed—in the northern corner and approximately in the middle of the wall, and on the NE wall, from the northern corner to the frame of

Fig. 6. View of the SW wall of Chamber No. 1 with Serik Akylbek's reconstruction drawing of décor.

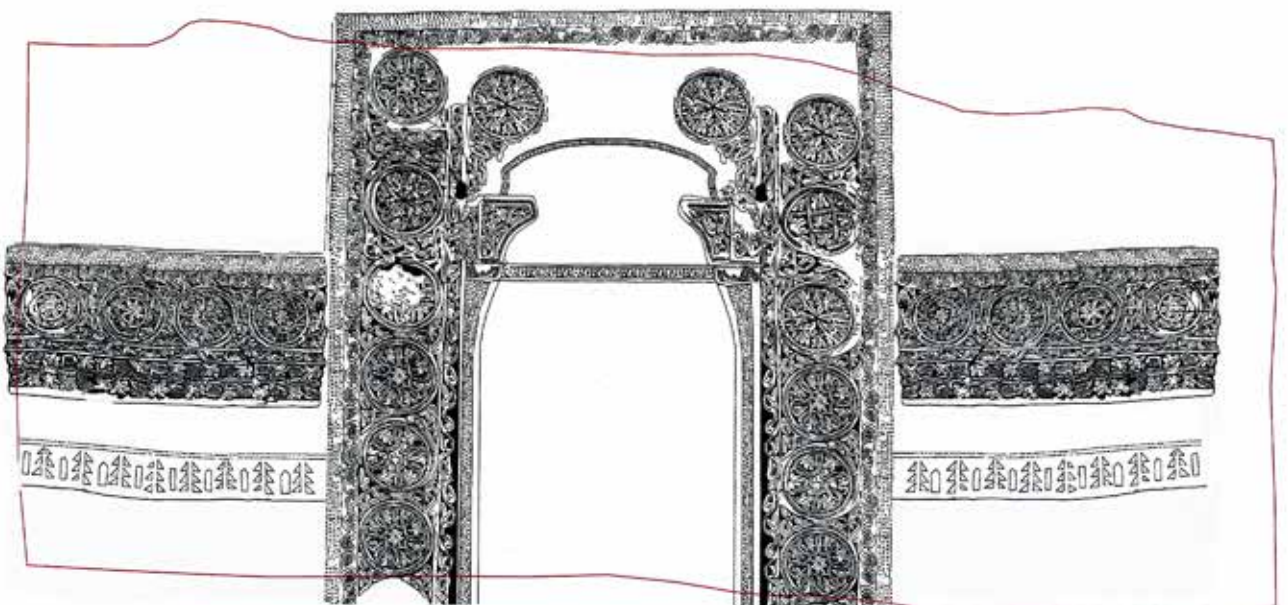


“portal B”. The decorative frames of the “portals”, the modeled colonettes and other decorative details were all carved in wet clay.

Portal B on the NE wall survives up to the height of 2.65 m and is 2.2 m wide. The upper part of the frame has been lost. The side panels are 0.5–0.6 m wide and consist of two narrow framing relief borders, a wide field filled

with large round rosettes (28 cm in diameter) and a narrow interior border with a continuous sinuous grapevine. Within the portal is a shallow (0.20–0.25 m) niche, flanked on the sides by two colonettes whose capitals apparently supported the arch of the niche [Fig. 7].

Fig. 7. View of the NE wall of Chamber No. 1 with Serik Akylbek's reconstruction drawing of décor.



At 1.6 m above the floor are projections that resemble the impost of an arch. They project 20 cm, are 10 cm wide, and are decorated on the edges with “pearl” beading and filled with sprouts of vegetation. The “colonnette” of the arch becomes wider at the top (the height of the extant part of the colonnette is 0.75 m; it is 1.1 m above the floor), and then it transitions into a “capital” (whose height is 0.2 m). The colonnette is decorated with “scales” and the capital with pearls. At a height of 1.5 m. is a cross-beam 7 cm wide, which connects the span of the arch (its width is 1.1 m) at the point of intersection of the impost and the

capitals. The imposts and cross-beam do not abut the tympanum; there is a space of 2 cm.

The flat inner wall of the niche is very sooty; it lacks decoration. In front of the niche on the floor was a layer of gray ash mixed with charcoal. Under this layer is a free-standing stove of semicircular shape whose flat side is directly adjacent to the niche. Its inner surface is strongly calcified; ash was collected on the southeastern bench at the entrance. In the center of the chamber is another

Fig. 8. View of the NW wall of Chamber No. 1 with Serik Akylbek's reconstruction drawing of décor.

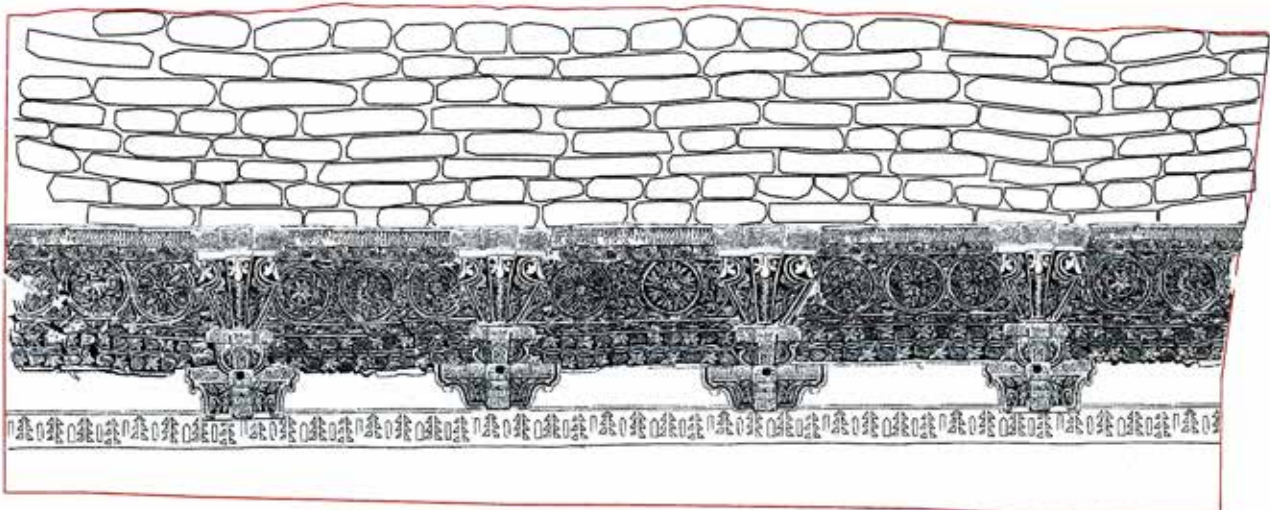




Fig. 9. The panel fragments from the left part of portal A.

free-standing stove, roughly square in shape measuring 1.15 x 1.0 m, with 0.25 m thick walls adobe brick in a single row. Its extant height is 0.13 m. Next to the SE side of the stove is an accumulation of ash. Here an ash pit with charcoal was cleared.

Portal A on the SW wall is 2.6 m wide and has been preserved up to a height of 2.1 m, with a depth of 0.2 m. From the frame of the portal survive a piece of the right vertical panel 1.6 m high and 0.5 m wide and a tympanum on which is a large (0.54 m diameter) round rosette [Fig. 6]. As a minimum three additional rosettes (half the size, 23-26 cm) were inscribed on a field of vegetal tapestry on the vertical side panels [Fig. 9]. In the center of the portal is a flat arched niche 0.2 m deep whose surface is covered in an angled net of rhomboid cells with five-petaled flowers in the center. The niche has an arched shape; it is framed along the sides by two $\frac{3}{4}$ colonnettes with capitals on which the vault of the arch rests. As is known, the filling of decorative surfaces with a "rhomboid net" was a widespread decorative device. For example, preserved

Fig. 10. The decorative borders.



fragments of a similar net in the décor of the SE niche of the corridor (Chamber B) in the palace of homestead "G" at Kulan was originally interpreted as the depiction of the Biblical "Tree of Knowledge" (Baipakov and Ternovaia 2004, p. 28, Fig. 15).

The horizontal ornamental band of carved clay around the perimeter of all the walls of the room is about 1.1-1.05 m wide and consists of several bands:

1. At the top is a relief cornice which protrudes from the wall some 5-7 cm. It consists of two horizontal elements—a sharply projecting beam up to 10 cm wide with a surface covered with arc-like depressions which give it a "scaly" appearance. Below is a flatter (but still projecting some 0.5 m from the surface of the carved panel) strip 7-8 cm wide decorated with elements that look like "flower buds" [Fig. 10.1].
2. The main carved panel, a wide strip (28-30 cm) with round rosettes in pearl roundels.
3. Between smooth lines, a narrow strip of wavy grapevine, with symmetrically projecting half palmettes [Fig. 10.2].
4. A band with two strips of alternating clusters of grapes and leaves, 18 cm wide.
5. Below it, a band of smooth plaster with no decoration, 0.25-0.27 m wide.
6. Lastly, the bottommost band with a solid row of merlons 0.2 m wide [Fig. 10.3]. Such crenellation crowned the walls of castles and fortresses of the 6th-8th centuries and later (9th-10th centuries) became decorative elements emblematic of their exterior appearance. Attesting to this is their frequent discovery in excavation of actual castles in Tashkent, Taraz and Turkestan and the well-known depictions of early medieval castles (on the Anikov plate [Hermitage Coll., Inv. No. S-46], the mural painting of Panjikent, etc.). The depiction of crenellation on the Kulan band is analogous to the depictions of these elements on bricks from Dabusia and Rabinjan [Fig. 11] (Rempel' 1961, p. 133, Figs. 52.2, 52.4, 52.5).

Fig. 11. Bricks with the imprints of merlons and ceramic rosettes. (After: Rempel' 1961, Fig. 52).





Fig. 12. Some rosettes from the walls of Chamber No. 1.

Colonnettes with figured capitals “support” the carved panel extending “from portal to portal” in three places (in the part which has been preserved). Against a background band with round medallions, they rest on the upper cornice and, it seems, are positioned as though they are behind the band with the crenellation. Whether or not this was the intent of the creator of the decorative scheme of this chamber, the impression is that beyond the top of a fortress wall with merlons can be seen the top of an iwan,

Fig. 13. Rosettes in the décor of ossuaries of the 8th century.
(After: Rempel’ 1961, Fig. 27).



whose roof rests on columns with intricate carved capitals. Thus, the decorative band on its walls in fact is the upper carved frieze with round rosettes located at the very top of the iwan façade under the roof.

On the preserved panels we have noted a total of 32 rosettes (in some cases fragmentary). But it is entirely likely that originally they numbered 66! Thus, the main decorative element in the shaping of the appearance of Chamber No. 1 is the round, ornamental rosette/medallion in various combinations with grape clusters and leaves. Moreover, the variety of their graphic execution is striking. If one looks closely, with any two rosettes apparently composed of similar elements, one can discern differences in detail [Fig. 12].

The ornament of the frieze under the ceiling in the form of a decorative strip with rhythmically distributed large rosettes placed on a field of intertwined stems was especially popular in the Near East in the Middle Ages, and its origins in all likelihood are to be sought in the art of the Ancient East. Later such bands of ornamental composition were widespread in the décor of various kinds of wares and were transferred to the walls of homesteads and palaces.

In neighboring Sogd, the walls of the temple buildings of the 6th–8th centuries, whose interiors were replicated in the décor of the external walls of ossuaries, usually were decorated with large rosettes with rays, contained in various kinds of frames [Fig. 13]. But it appears that they predominated as well in the decorative scheme of residences, public and palace chambers. An example is the décor of stucco and terracotta of the palace at the site of Varakhsha, which is considered to be a kind of encyclopedia of pre-Islamic decorative art. Around the time of the Arab conquest it developed a distinctive style as a kind of local response under the obvious influence of the art of the Hellenistic Black Sea region and Ancient East (Shishkin 1963, p. 170). Along with rich ornamentation in the décor of the palace were figures of animals and people in bas-relief which constituted at some point compositions whose meaning has now been lost. But certain ornamental compositions lend themselves to persuasive reconstructions. As the director of the excavations, Vasilii A. Shishkin, wrote (1963, p. 168), one of the numerous borders “consists of ornamental circles, combined smoothly with curling tendrils that have tooth-edged leaves in clusters. Only one of the circles of this border could be found. It quite definitely recalls the ‘wheel of the law’ (‘dharma chakra’) – the ancient symbol of the sun which figures in Buddhist art as the symbol of the Buddha (in the reliefs of Barhut, Sanchi, the temple of Sur’ia and other sites in India), and is preserved in the decorative art of Varakhsha, possibly as a vestige recalling those times when Buddhism had penetrated the territory of Central Asia.”

And another variant of the ornament consists of round rosettes, which, incidentally, do not duplicate one another (!) and are present in a large number of variations, ones which are distinguished by a heart-shape, the number of the petals, their style, etc. The triangular areas between the rosettes are filled with varied palmettes. This ornament, along with the star-like one already mentioned, was one of the most widespread types of décor and is encountered in several variants, differing in scale, the number of rosettes, the nature of the decorative scheme located between them, etc.

Down to the present, analogous ornamental compositions are especially popular in traditional decorative arts. They can be seen until very recently in the ornament of Kazakh wooden chests and cupboards for dishes and produce. The varied rosettes fill Pi-shaped frames of woven wall carpets (“Tuskiiz”) in Kazakh yurts (*Kazakhskie traditsii* 2002, pp. 162–63). They are also common in the décor of Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik wooden wares. They can be found on wooden household furnishings and on the walls of homes of Indo-Iranian peoples in remote valleys of the Hindukush (Kalter 1991, Fig. 150, p. 137; Fig. 190, p. 154; Klimburg 1999, 2, Figs. 574–75).

For example, in Bukharan embroidery, such medallion decorative compositions are known by the popular term *lochak-turpush* (Giul’ 2013, pp. 41–49). In them, the main decorative features are variously composed rosette-medallions that are rounded inside. These rosettes are identified by the Arab word *shams*—the sun. It can be a single large rosette in the center of the embroidered field of a *suzani* or represented in two to three rows with from nine to twelve rosettes of varying design. The term for the entire square or rectangular field of the *suzani* is the Arabic word *polak/folak*, the sky or space (in the sense of the “world-space”). Overall, the ornamental composition of the *suzani* symbolizes the “world as a garden of Paradise, illuminated by the blessedly eternal sun.” There is no reason to think that in ancient times the meaning of analogous compositions was any different.

The Ceiling of Chamber No. 1

As indicated earlier, Chamber No. 1 is approximately square in plan, measuring 6.6 x 5.7 m. Given that on the level of the original floor no bases for freestanding columns were found, then it was logical to suppose that there was a wooden cupola “*ruzan*”-type ceiling. However, our attention was drawn to a strange feature of the construction of the upper edge or plinth of the horizontal decorative panel on the NW wall. The adobe masonry here is of the most common kind (the so-called “English bond”), with alternating courses of bricks laid lengthwise along the face (“stretchers”) and with courses where the bricks are perpendicular to it, the ends facing out (“headers”), thus ensuring that the bricks would be solidly anchored in the wall. Here in the northern corner we observed that in the

“header” row, located uppermost on the edge of the clay panels, the short sides are protruding from the surface of the wall, and in that row are regular gaps (where bricks had been lost?) [Fig. 8]. Furthermore, on the NE and SW walls, which form the corners with the NW wall, where there is a surface layer of fine-grained yellow plaster are obvious traces of tapering extending up to the upper corners of the NW panel. That is, on the SW and NE walls in the right and left corners of the portals the finely grained yellow binding plaster is missing and in its place is a layer of soot. Moreover, the preserved edges of this plastering, it seems, have a characteristic slope from the place where the cornices of the carved panels connect above to the central vertical axis of the portal niches [Fig. 14]. These details are evidence that the given chamber could have been covered with a light, tent ceiling, the lower edge of which rested on a “shoulder” of bricks which ran along the very top of the decorative clay panel, and a top which rested on longitudinal beams extending from wall to wall. The too wide span of the ceiling would lead one to suppose that the lateral sloping faces were supported above on two longitudinal beams and that, in addition, in the middle there was a horizontal part of the roof (that is, the peak was truncated), in which was a smoke hole and skylights. Only with such a construction of the ceiling would no plastering of the walls above the decorative panels be needed (as we can see all along the southwestern wall), and in the corner where the walls meet.

The Decorative Scheme of Chamber No. 2

Chamber No. 2 is rectangular, measuring 7.7 x 6.8 m. Unlike Chamber No. 1, it extends along a SE-NW axis and

Fig. 14. Lines drawn in the corners indicate where the wooden roof was fastened to the walls of Chamber No. 1.



has brick masonry reaching all the way from the floor to the top of the walls—that is, it is the foundation for structure BL 1. As a result, the interior, which has benches of varying heights, steps, podiums and the remains of flanking walls, is preserved rather well. The extant height of the walls is 3–3.5 m, their thickness 1.8–2.1 m. The walls in this room were covered with a 3 cm thick layer of plaster and were smoothed over with a thin layer of alabaster (*kyr*). The plastering of the lower part of the walls up to 1 m had been damaged by moisture and salts; the upper part for the most part survived but has significant gaps where the plaster has fallen away and also damage due to burrowing rodents and insects.

The NE wall was cleared along its interior face, the remaining part left for future excavation. The entrance into the room is in the center of the SE wall. Along the NE, NW and SW walls are benches, 0.55 and (the NE one) 0.4 m high. The width of the “main” (NW) bench is 1.8 m, and that of the others 1.4 m. A two-step stair one meter wide rises in the center to the central, honorific place on the bench. In the middle of the room, close to the entrance, is a square podium measuring 1.1 x 1.05 m and 0.2 m high.

All the walls of this room have *drawings*, and, outlined in black on the white alabaster background, are designs in a wide band at chest height. The upper part of the band is occupied by vegetal ornament of tendrils and branches. The walls have graffiti depicting human figures and images of the animal world and birds.

In its layout and decorative scheme, this chamber can be interpreted as a throne room from the first construction period [Fig. 5, rm. 2]. Unfortunately, the original drawings have been but poorly preserved, which can be explained, it seems, by two reasons. First of all, probably, the initial instability (poor quality) of most of the colorants which were used, except for the black (in fact only it can be seen on some parts of the wall).⁴ Secondly, the progressive leaching of salt on the surface of the walls played a major role in the loss of the painting, as did, possibly, the entire filling of the room with adobe brick during the next construction phase. However, the painting on the western part of the hall (located farthest away from the edge of the mound), on the SW and especially the NW wall (where one posits the

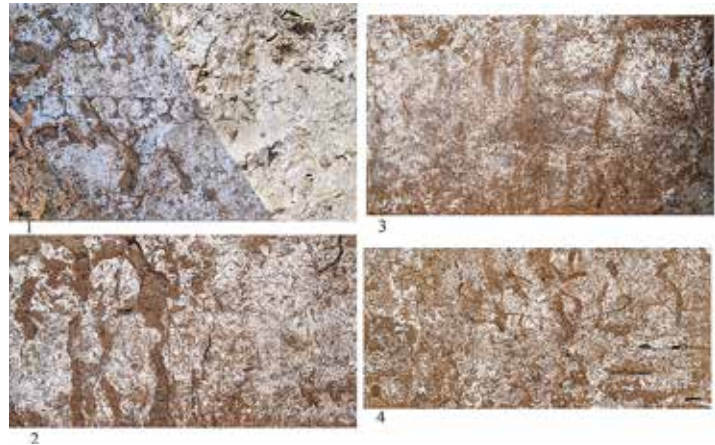


Fig. 15. Depictions (faintly discernable in the photographs) on the walls of Chamber No. 2: 1) the NW wall; 2) the SW wall -- Group I; 3) the SW wall -- Group II; 4) the SE wall.

throne was located) suffered less. The images on the SE wall were damaged as well by the cutting of an entrance into it during the excavations (only a single graffito has been preserved there). Lastly, part of the surface was damaged by burrowing animals and by the roots of plants.

The drawings were made on the alabaster surface of the walls approximately at chest level [Figs. 15, 16]. Unfortunately, for the most part what has survived

Fig. 16. The depictions on the walls of Chamber No. 2: 1) the NW wall; 2) the SW wall; 3) the NE wall; 4) the SE wall. Roman numerals mark the separate groups discussed in our text.



are the ornamental motifs (horizontal dividing strips with rows of pearl roundels that are so common in the painting of neighboring Ustrushana and Sogd [Belenitskii 1973; Al'baum 1975; Sokolovskii 2009])⁵ [Figs. 15.1, 16.1]; in a number of instances the solid background field of vegetal tendrils and medallions. Only on the NW wall have the heads of two individuals been preserved [Fig. 16.1], and on the SW wall the painted eye pupils on the face of the ruler. One can assume that for the painting of the decorative borders and the background more stable colors were used. Another explanation is possible too: the painting of the walls was only begun but not finished, and the artist succeeded in laying on only a single color.⁶ Unfortunately, the chemical analysis of samples of the colorants has not yet been carried out.

Some (short) time after the drawing of the images (possibly when they had begun to fade) on all four walls, inscribed by an amateur artist using the blade of a knife, were *graffiti* in a different artistic style, in a number of instances, undoubtedly, to create a planned composition. These graffiti (for the most part, very primitive) in many places are directly superimposed on the decorative lines of the early painting but do not become part of their composition (thus, on the NE wall they cover the horizontal band of drawn "pearls"; and on the opposite, NW wall, the only graffiti among the remains of the painting (a dog and some kind of large animal) is carelessly "chopped" into them, etc.) [Fig. 16.1]. Taking into account the few remains of paint on the more significant individuals of the SW wall, the one which is significant for us (that is, the pupils of the ruler and, apparently, his spouse), and as well the greater realism and mastery in the execution of the

two latter images [Fig. 16.2], one can suppose that the contours of these drawings retain the original outline by the artist and later were carelessly renewed and supplemented (cf. similar "renewing" in early Turkic petroglyphs [Cheremisin 2011]).

Unfortunately it is very difficult to reconstruct the program of the paintings on account of their very poor state of preservation. Judging from the NW wall (where the two horizontal dividing rows of lines with pearls are), the vegetal motifs and individuals were positioned at several levels [Fig. 16.1]; on the SW wall the remains of the field of tendrils are above the line of the graffiti. The graffiti are what is better preserved on the walls, which allows us to be more confident in their interpretation in a number of instances.

One can suggest that the portrait in the SW wall, likely that of the ruler and his consort [Figs. 16.2; 17.1,2], was originally rendered in color within the indicated contours (thus, the painting of the pupils of the man has been preserved), and then somewhat renewed. In support of this hypothesis is the more professional and realistic manner of their depiction compared to the rendering of the other graffiti. The remaining incisions on this and the other walls are executed in a style that is very close or identical to that of early Turkic rock drawings.

The *graffiti of the SW wall* include four compositions, which form a single horizontal sequence [Fig. 16.2]. In them all in all are seven anthropomorphic personages (the sacred number); for the six largest of them, the significant (possibly, decisive) role in the identification of the image is to be found in the headdress and details of the coiffure.

Look first at *Group I* consisting of four anthropomorphic figures located on the left part of the wall and facing left. On the left is the ruler, who, judging from the pose (leaning left [as seen by the viewer] toward his supposed spouse), was depicted as seated (naturally then the same can be assumed is the case with his wife). Alas, only the upper part of these figures has been preserved [Fig. 17.1]. Their heads, shown almost in profile, are what is most carefully rendered (presumably following some kind of model); the faces are wide with massive rectangular jaws. Thrown over their shoulders is an original head-dress shaped as a cap with folded wide rims (apparently with slits) and a rather high semi-egg-shaped crown. On the left edge of the rims hang a pair of ribbons, whose lower edge has a jagged fringe. A similar kind of head gear is known from the 9th–10th centuries among the Turkic Uighurs who settled in the north of Xinjiang (Yatsenko 2000, Fig. 65.16). The narrow eyes retain pupils

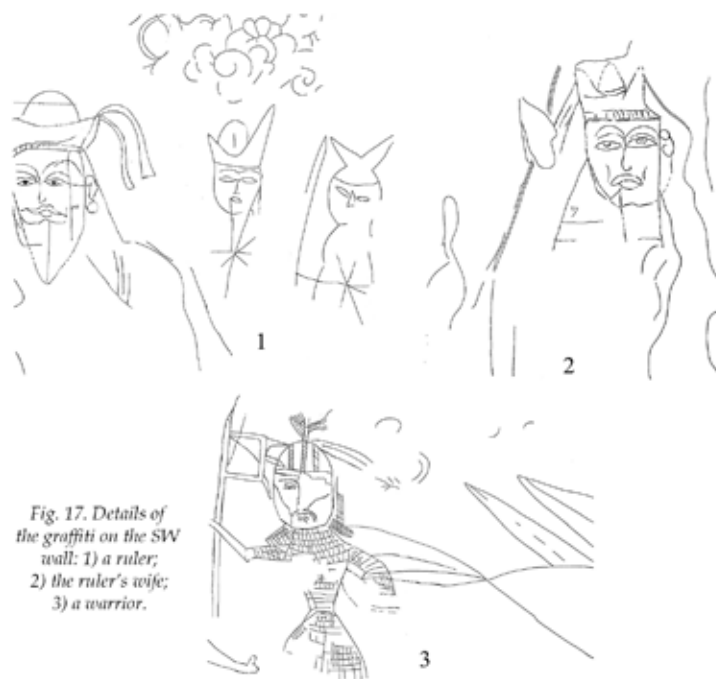


Fig. 17. Details of the graffiti on the SW wall: 1) a ruler; 2) the ruler's wife; 3) a warrior.

painted in black. The horizontal moustaches, it seems, are oiled, and the left one bends upwards. On the left cheek, turned toward the viewer, can be seen a small tattoo, analogous to that on the faces of Turkic men depicted in the barrow of the second half of the 7th century at Shoroon Bumbagar in Northern Mongolia (Yatsenko 2014, Fig. 5.4-6). The long hair falls down across the back (possibly, following ancient custom, it was plaited into a braid), and there is a long and wide beard that comes to a point. In the ears are (gold) wire, hoop-shaped earrings. The dress caftan has been rather carelessly thrown on the shoulders but retains its fold to the left; one can see a hanging, long and, apparently, wide left sleeve whose edges have two strips of embroidery. The proposed consort of the ruler [Fig. 17.2] directly adjoins her husband on his right side. Her face, as with him, is turned to her right, but is not so carefully drawn as that of the man. She wears a three-horned headdress, which was usual for female rulers, as can be seen from depictions on Turkic coins of Central Asia (Chach) (Yatsenko 2013a, Fig. 9.4). As with the male figure, the headdress has a jagged fringe along the bottom hem. A long mantle hangs from its horns; its lower edge has not been preserved. In back of the ruler, to the right, are two male figures of lower status: they stand, and their height is approximately half that of the ruler.

Behind the ruler, to his left, stand two male figures who are 2-3 times shorter than he and are rendered very schematically. These apparently are young individuals (they lack moustaches and/or beards such as are emphasized on the other men on this wall). On their heads are two very similarly shaped headdresses with two long and sharp projections made clearly of hard material (felt or leather), since they do not droop or hang down. The one in front (closer to the ruler) has the more complex of these headdresses; in its center is a small semi-spherical crown. The rear and less significant personage apparently is an armed bodyguard (he holds a spear), and his two-horned headdress is simpler without the crown. Such headgear has been documented both in the northern and southern oases of neighboring Xinjiang from the 2nd-3rd to the 8th centuries CE (Yatsenko 2000, pp. 311-12, Figs. 58.5, 60.12).

The central *Group II* on this wall consists of three individuals [Fig. 16.2]. Its composition is not entirely common for Turkic and Central Asian art. The core of the composition is a pair of men, the left one of which is clearly the more prestigious. His figure is more substantial (more precisely, while of equal height to the second one, who is standing, the first man apparently is sitting), in that his head is twice as large and his left hand extends in the direction of the standing figure. His headdress is very interesting: a semicircular cap with three parallel jagged strips. This headdress

is known only in the paintings from the same period from the Kucha oasis in Xinjiang (Yatsenko 2000, Fig. 60.6). He also has a rather long and pointed beard (not only just long, as with the ruler) and shorter moustaches. The collars are delineated on his clothes and on the right shoulder is possibly a rectangular buckle for a cloak.

In front, back to him, stands the second man with his face turned toward the seated individual [Fig. 17.3] — a soldier in a helmet with a plume and ribbons dangling from the crest, dressed in long lamellate armor (all of its plates are rendered primitively but in detail). This is a possibly younger individual (he has long drooping moustaches but no beard). This image is the most detailed one of all the graffiti in the hall. Its left hand, possibly, rests on a sword that has not been preserved. He holds in the right hand a banner on a spear (?) shaft. The banner is small, with three points. This type of banner is well known from early medieval petroglyphs of southern and eastern regions of Kazakhstan and the Baikal region, where we see it held by a rider (Samashev 1992, Fig. 180; 2006, pp. 120, 128). A foot-soldier holds such a banner in one of the engravings of Eshkiolmes (Baipakov et al. 2005, Fig. 237). This pair of men, it seems, represent a notable and the soldier who serves him. However, whether the episode depicted in *Group II* is intended to be realistic is rather dubious on account of the third figure whose body leans against that of the standing soldier. This is a very large (half human height) bird (clearly not a raptor), standing with its back to the men, but with its head turned toward them. Judging from the “military” context, what we have here is some kind of Turkic epic scene, where a bird rather often appears as a herald (Hamaïun among the Bashkirs and others).

Group III also is very interesting. Here are inscribed seven wild ungulates of varying degrees of preservation (the sacred number). A rather large sun disc occupies the center of the composition, flanked by mountain goats (two addorsed pairs in the upper register and one more a bit lower). In the lower register are two larger deer, depicted in a different style. Finally, in *Group IV* (if you please, the most primitive in its execution and preserved only fragmentarily) is a scene an archer on foot, probably accompanied by a dog, hunting two or three ungulates. To his left stands what appears to be his horse.

Graffiti of the NW wall are in its center, covering a band of painting that has not been preserved in that section [Fig. 16.1]. Unfortunately, both figures are badly damaged. Here the incising was done rather carefully and in a style that differs from that on the other walls. On the left is a running dog, to the right of which is a (probably fantastic) being with a long tail and very long ears that faces in the opposite direction.

The graffiti on the NE wall [Fig. 16.3] consist of two groups. All of the individuals face left. On the left, *Scene I* has been preserved only fragmentarily. However, one can suggest that here are two persons and some rather large artefacts. The man from whom the legs have been preserved moves left; in his hands he holds some kind of dangling object. On him can be seen the hem of a fastened garment with characteristic semicircular nobs known in Sasanian Iran from the 4th century and soon spread in the south of Central Asia (Tocharistan) (Yatsenko 2006, p. 216, Figs. 158.25a, 168, 189.48-49). On the right is possibly a female figure (there are fragments of a long garment with many fine pleats). To the right of *Scene II* are several (no fewer than 7) figures of mountain goats of various sizes, all of which face left.

Only the duo of a man and a large bird has survived from the graffiti of the partially destroyed SE wall [Fig. 16.4]. The bird (which most resembles a peacock) is rather carefully drawn in profile (especially its head). On its body is an image of a front-facing man, with a beard, moustaches and wearing a low cap. Also drawn on the body of the bird, apparently, was the figure of a running ungulate (?) in profile. Possibly these large images of a bird and a man are connected and reflect a popular folkloric motif of the flight of a hero on a magic bird.

One may assume that all the graffiti were inscribed on the walls of the hall in a brief period and are to be connected with a single conceptual scheme or pictorial program (in any event, all of the main compositions have been drawn in a single row, are not superimposed on one another, etc.). However, they were executed in different styles by different individuals.

The realia depicted in the graffiti, in particular specific details of costume, entirely support the dating of the palace of the Kulan citadel to the 8th century. The fact is that there are no known analogies from the earlier 6th and 7th centuries to three of the four types of original headdresses in the "throne hall" (cf. Yatsenko 2014, 2013a, 2009, 2010, 2013b, 2004), which of course is no accident. However, all of them, as already noted, are known in neighboring Xinjiang (!): one in the Kucha oasis (and an earlier one in the Niya oasis) and among the Uighurs who settled there in the 9th century (the head-covering of the ruler on the SW wall). This is no surprise, since the contribution of the Xinjiang oases to the costume of the early Turks has been noted previously (Yatsenko 2013b, pp. 593-94). On the other hand, at the beginning of the 9th century, the Arab forces already had reached Kulan, and it is unlikely that a place remained in the official residence for an analogous array of motifs (in clay and in the graffiti). Hence we are to conclude that the creators of this complex were the *Turgesh*, whose kaghanate arose in the

first half of the 8th century.

The Ceiling of Chamber No. 2

The preservation of the walls to a height of 3.5 m enables us to explain the roofing system of Chamber No. 2. At a height of 2.1 m from the level of the benches in the walls are located the bases of what we suppose were grooves or mortises for beams or trusses of a tent-like wooden roof. The height of the mortises is 0.6-1.1 m, their width 0.2-0.25 m. A wooden tent ceiling has been reconstructed by Leonid V. Gurevich over a religious or altar chamber in the castle of Ak-tepa-Yunusabad in the early medieval Tashkent oasis and for the altar chamber of a religious complex of ancient Kanka. Such a tent ceiling has also been proposed for the square Chamber No. 14 (4.85 x 4.85 m) of the Balalyktepa castle of the 6th-7th centuries (Northern Tocharistan) (Gurevich 1990, pp. 73, 74). There, at a height of 1.2-1.3 m above the benches, the walls were covered with painting depicting scenes of feasting. Above the upper edge of the painting along its entire perimeter are traces of the supports for a wooden ceiling. The surface of the walls ended above this. The reconstruction depicted a dark chamber with a low, truncated tent ceiling where an eternal flame burned on a central altar.

Traces of beams inserted in the walls and placed at a distance of 50-55 cm from each other at a height of 2.6 m. were found in the "Red Hall" (12 x 7.85 m) of the palace at Varakhsha (7th-8th centuries), which, in the opinion of Gurevich was an altar room for religious purposes. There too he reconstructed a wooden tent ceiling. One should also mention Chamber No. 6 in the plan of the cult complex of the Kostobe palace in the vicinity of Taraz as one of the monuments with a very similar tent ceiling (Baipakov and Ternovaia 2004, p. 9).

A high pyramidal ceiling was characteristic for a specific type of cult structure of Sogdia in the pre-Islamic period. Their architectural appearance reflects the more complex decorative elements of ceramic ossuaries, which feature a high pyramidal cover. In the prototypes (of religious buildings), the ceilings, undoubtedly, were constructed of wood. It is possible that inside they were decorated with carving, and on top was installed the sculpture of a deity, as has been shown on a number of examples (*Kul'tura i iskusstvo* 1991, pp. 67, 69).

Thus one has good reason to suppose that the excavated Chamber No. 2 also was representative and could have fulfilled the function of a hall for ceremonial receptions, the enactment of religious rituals and collective meals in the presence of the local ruler, the lord of the castle.

The cleared chambers lack artefacts, except for a few

fragments of ceramic vessels from atop the benches of Chamber No. 3. Before their completion, the chambers were carefully cleaned; no traces of destruction or fire have been found.

Conclusions

The excavations on the citadel have opened part of a monumental structure akin to a castle with chambers that had various purposes, among them cult activity. The representative chambers found in the palace complex of Kulan town are unique in that they have comparatively well preserved decorative elements and ornamental compositions, wall painting and graffiti with discernable motifs which show various aspects of the artistic culture of the local inhabitants.

The stratigraphy and also the character of the depictions on the walls of the chambers partially excavated on the Kulan citadel suggest that the structures date to the 8th century. The study of this part of the town is at its beginning stages and has some analogies in the construction of buildings with the functional characteristics of a temple, although it is still premature to determine the function of many of the rooms.

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Notes

1. For details about the issues involved, see the longer, Russian version of this article: Akylbek, Smagulov and Yatsenko 2016.

2. The measurements of the Kulan shahristan given in the 2002 publication *Svod pamiatnikov* are a third larger – 300-320 m. Apparently this difference is to be explained by the measurements having been taken along the base of the walls, not along the crest (Baipakov 2002a, p. 285).

3. Cf. the views of Aranbai A. Nurzhanov (2010), who provided details of the topography not presented in the earlier literature, but apparently believes this area was the shahristan, not a rabad.

4. Among the sizing paints (with a binder of gum from fruit trees) which were used for mural painting in the 5th–8th centuries in Inner Asia, the black (obtained from charcoal from plum, grape etc. or from soot), along with ultramarine and chalk-white, was mixed with the strongest binding solution (Kosolapov and Marshak 1999, pp. 41, 44; Sokolovskii 2009, pp. 65, 94).

5. These roundels are limited to the contours, but clearly not formed from a stencil and thus often are somewhat deformed.

6. It is difficult to imagine that the original intent was to paint using only black on a white background. In any event, this is entirely uncharacteristic for pre-Islamic Inner Asia.

-- translated by Daniel C. Waugh