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Sanjar-Shah: A Sogdian Town in the Zeravshan Valley

Some preliminary results of the recent archaeological investigations

Michael Shenkar and Sharof Kurbanov

Abstract: This paper presents some preliminary results of the excavations conducted at the site of Sanjar-Shah in 2014 and 2015. Sanjar-Shah is located 12 km to the east of the Sogdian city of Panjikent in Tajikistan and seems to be roughly contemporary with it (5th–8th centuries CE). The previous excavations in 2001, 2003 and in 2008–2013 have mostly concentrated on the Round Tower (Area 1) in the north-western corner of the site and on Area 2 in the eastern part of the town. Some important finds have been made in the Round Tower in 2008–2009, including a well-preserved cotton shirt and fragments of Arabic letters written on paper. These fragments are dated to the 8th century CE, which makes them the earliest known Arabic texts written on paper. The results of the recent excavations suggest that all the rooms uncovered so far in Area 2 belong to two different households separated by a large open courtyard and a wide street. Furthermore, it appears that this part of Sanjar-Shah was most probably a living-craftsmen quarter. In addition, this paper discusses the possible ancient name of Sanjar-Shah and its relations with the neighboring city of Panjikent in light of the evidence of the Mount Mugh documents.

Keywords: Sogdian, Panjikent, Sanjar-Shah, Tajikistan, Arabic epigraphy.

Резюме: В данной статье приводятся предварительные результаты раскопок на городище Санджар-Шах в 2014-2015 годах. Городище Санджар-Шах расположено в 12 км к востоку от древнего Пенджикента в Таджикистане и видимо синхронно с ним (пятый-восьмой века н.э.). Предыдущие раскопки в 2001, 2003 и в 2007-2013 годах проводились главным образом на Объекте 1 (Круглая Башня) в северо-западном углу городища, и на Объекте 2 в его восточной части. При раскопках Башни в 2008-2009 годах были сделаны важные находки, включающие в себя хорошо сохранившуюся детскую рубашку из хлопка и фрагменты арабских писем написанных на бумаге. Эти письма датируются восьмым веком н.э., что делает их древнейшими арабскими документами написанными на бумаге дошедшими до наших дней. На основании результатов раскопок можно предположить, что помещения открытые на Объекте 2 относятся к двум домовладениям разделенным площадью и широкой улицей. Эта часть городища по-видимому являлась ремесленным кварталом. Кроме того, в статье обсуждается возможное согдийское название Санджар-Шаха и его связи с Пенджикентом в свете данных документов с горы Муг.

Ключевые слова: Согдиана, Пенджикент, Санджар-Шах, Таджикистан, арабская эпиграфия.

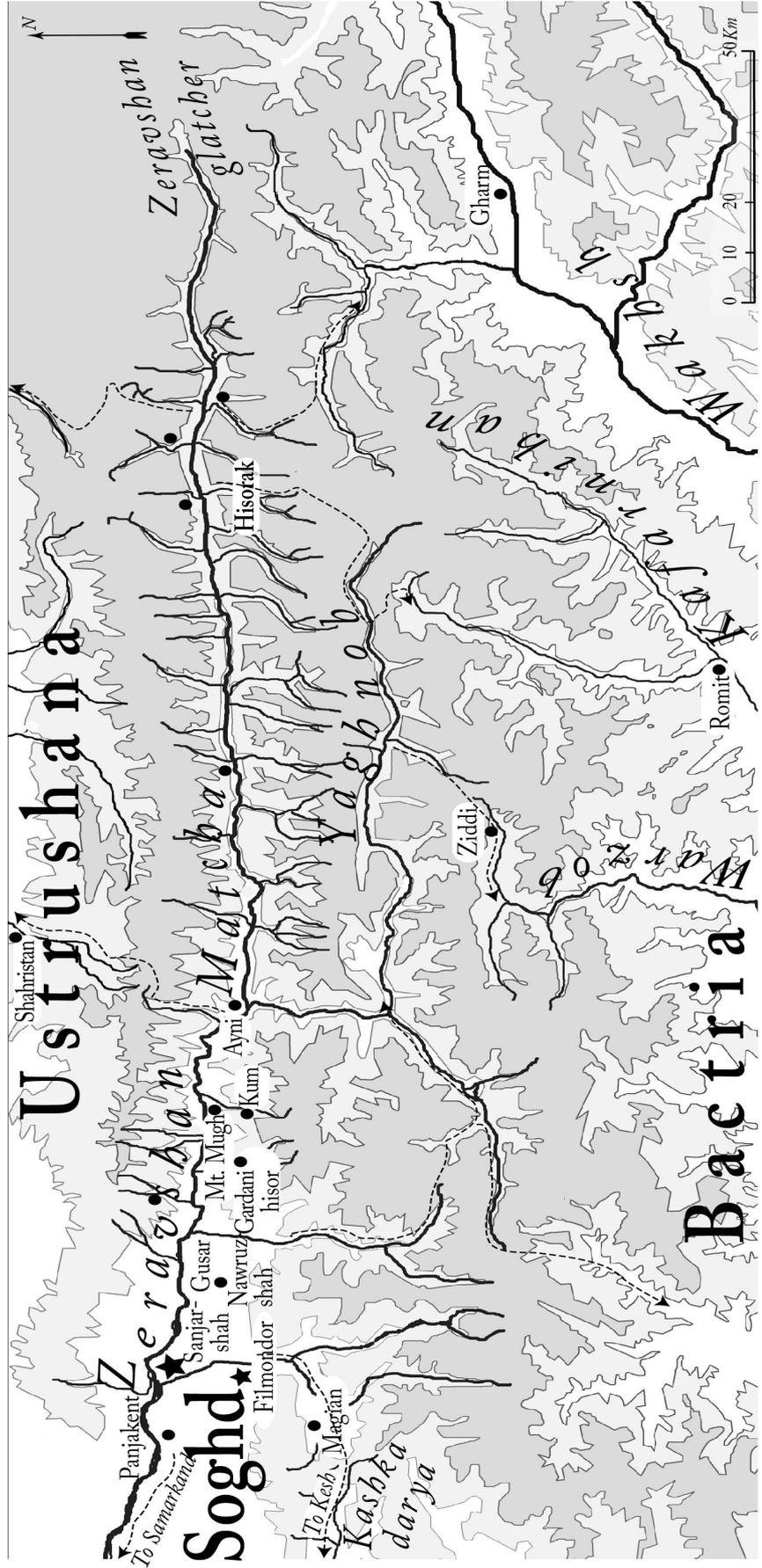


Fig. 1: Map of the Upper Zerafshan Valley (courtesy of Pavel Lurje and Alexey Akulov).

1 Site and name

The archaeological site of Sanjar-Shah is located on the southern outskirts of the present-day village of Sujina, 12 km to the east of Panjikent in north-western Tajikistan (Fig. 1). Sanjar-Shah has been known since 1947, when a survey was conducted at the site by Olga Smirnova and her team (SMIRNOVA 1950: 71–72). However, the first excavations took place only in 2001, when a German-Tajik archaeological team directed by Gerd Gropp and Sharof Kurbanov worked at Sanjar-Shah for two seasons in 2001 and 2003 (GROPP/KURBANOV 2007). In 2008, a new excavation project was initiated by Sharof Kurbanov and Alexey Savchevko, with the financial support of the Society for the Exploration of EurAsia.¹ Since 2014, the excavations have been directed by the present authors – Michael Shenkar and Sharof Kurbanov. This article will present a general overview of the site and some of our preliminary findings during the 2014–2015 seasons.²

Sanjar-Shah covers around 5 ha and seems to have been roughly contemporary with the neighbouring Sogdian city of Panjikent that existed between the 5th and 8th centuries CE. The site comprised three distinct parts (Fig. 2). The Round Tower in the north-western corner, and the town itself (*shahristan*), which is divided into western and eastern parts. The town was protected by walls except from the northern side. During the 1950s and the 1970s, virtually the entire surface of the site was levelled for agriculture, though the inner wall and the moat separating the two parts of the *shahristan* were still preserved when Smirnova visited the site and they are clearly visible on the plan she published in 1950. The town probably had at least two gates: one in the western part of the southern wall, and a second supposedly located in the south-eastern corner.

The site's name – Sanjar-Shah – was used by the local Uzbek population after a Seljuk ruler of the 11th century, but what was the ancient Sogdian name of the town? According to Early Medieval geographers, one of the 12 districts (*rustāqs*) of Samarkand was called Sanjarfaghān (BARTOL'D 1963: 144).³ It was, however, situated to the west of Panjikent, while Sanjar-Shah is located to the east, and thus it cannot be associated with Sanjarfaghān. Nevertheless, the fact that the component *sanjar* is

already attested in a Sogdian toponym in the same region⁴ suggests that the same component might lie behind the modern name Sanjar-Shah. There seem to be no local traditions or folk stories connecting the site with the Seljuk Sanjar-Shah, and it is possible that the original place-name of the Sogdian town was reinterpreted by the Turkic-speaking population who settled around the site in the 19th century as the name of the Seljuk ruler (and hence the addition “shah”).

Sujina – the name of the local village adjacent to the site from the north and from the west – seems to derive from the Sogdian *swcynk* (“burned”),⁵ but this toponym is also absent from the Mount Mugh documents, which record dozens of even small settlements in the Upper Zeravshan region (LIVSHITS 2015). Interestingly, describing the campaign of Qutaybah ibn Muslim in the Kashka Darya Valley and his capture of Nakhshab and Kesh, Ṭabarī also mentions that the Muslim general burned a certain *Fryab*, which was from then on called “The Burned” (HINDS 1990: 175–176). While the described events take place in the Kashka Darya Valley and cannot be connected to Sanjar-Shah, it provides a context within which the name *swcynk* could have been created. It is plausible that it is the name given to Sanjar-Shah after it was conquered by the Arabs in one of their numerous campaigns in the region in the 8th century.⁶

Sanjar-Shah is by far the largest settlement in the vicinity of Panjikent, and it is therefore difficult to explain its absence from the Mount Mugh documents. These documents consist, for the most part, of two archives: that of Dēwāštīč, ruler of Panjikent, and of *Framāndār Ūt* (*pr̄m'nδ'r 'wt̄*) (LIVSHITS 2015). *Framāndār* (“order holder”), appears to have been the highest administrative authority in the region, after Dhēwāštīč. His domain is not indicated in the letters and it has been suggested that it was located in the area of the Magian Darya River, near the modern village of Filmondor, whose name is derived from *framāndār* (LIVSHITS 2015: 111–112), or located in the castle excavated in the present-day village of Kum (ĀKUBOV 1988: 95). However, both are small and appear inappropriate for a seat of such a high-ranking official. While the Filmondor castle might well have been a *framāndār's* “week-end retreat” (or a marker of the southern border of the region administered by him), the main residence of the *framāndār* was probably Sanjar-Shah, located only 11.1 km (as the crow flies) downstream from Magian Darya – approximately only one hour on

1 We would like to thank the Society for the Exploration of EurAsia and its director, Dr Christoph Baumer, for their help and constant support.

2 Several reports have been published so far: KURBANOV 2010; 2012; 2014. Brief annual excavations reports are published on the website of the Society for the Exploration of EurAsia: http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/projekt_5.htm

3 We are grateful to Yury Karev, with whom we consulted on the geographical matters discussed below.

4 Lurje compares it with the Persian *sangar*, “entrenchment”, and thinks that the Sogdian word must have been identical; LUR'Ē 2004: 213.

5 We are grateful to Pavel Lurje for this information.

6 It is worth noting that parts of the Western Household in Area 2 (especially Room 21) were clearly destroyed by fire. See below.



Fig. 2: Sanjar-Shah, aerial view (photo by Pavel Lurje).

horseback. As the second largest settlement after Panjikent, Sanjar-Shah would have been a perfect candidate for the seat of the second-ranking official after the ruler of Panjikent. There is no doubt that Sanjar-Shah was a place of special significance for whoever controlled Panjikent. If the identification of Sanjar-Shah as the principal seat of the *framāndār* is to be accepted, the “*framāndār* archive” of the Mount Mugh documents in fact originates from Sanjar-Shah.

Between the 5th and the 8th centuries CE, Sogdiana was a classic “city-state culture” (as distinct from a territorial “macro-state”) as defined by the Copenhagen Polis Centre.⁷ The country was divided into independent principalities, each being a separate civic community (*nāf*). We do not possess any written evidence that both Panjikent and Sanjar-Shah belonged to the same polity (*Panch*), though this seems likely, due to their close proximity to each other. The Mount Mugh documents also demonstrate that the sphere of Dhēwāštīch’s activities and interests extended far beyond Sanjar-Shah, into the mountainous areas of the Upper Zeravshan Pargar region. It is therefore plausible that Sanjar-Shah was part of the city-state of Panjikent

(*Panch*), and that the *framāndār* was in fact appointed by the Panjikent prince. We can even speculate that the populations of Panjikent and Sanjar-Shah were perhaps considered to be part of the same civic community. Interestingly, even into the first half of the 20th century, the local inhabitants of Panjikent identified Sanjar-Shah as the site of “Ancient Panjikent” (instead of Kaynar-su, where excavations have revealed the remains of the city of Dhēwāštīch) (SMIRNOVA 1950: 71).

2 Area 1: The Round Tower

To date, excavations have for the most part concentrated on the Round Tower in the north-western corner of the site (Area 3) and on Area 2 in the eastern part of the town (Fig. 3). Together with the area along the southern wall (Area 4), these are the only places at the site that have not been affected by levelling. The tower excavated in Area 1 is round and divided into two parts (Fig. 4; Fig. 5). The central two-storey section of the tower (11.2 m in diameter) consisted of two rooms on the upper floor. It was constructed of sun-dried mud brick and the walls were preserved up to 6.80 m. In the 7th century, the tower was surrounded by a one-storey circular gallery with 11 additional rooms, bringing the overall diameter of the tower to 24 m. During the last phase, the tower probably served as a granary and a barn, which created unique conditions

7 “A city-state culture arises when a region is inhabited by a people who have the same language (or a common lingua franca), the same religion, the same culture and the same traditions, but is divided politically into a large number of small states, each of which consists of a city and its immediate hinterland.” HANSEN 2006: 9.

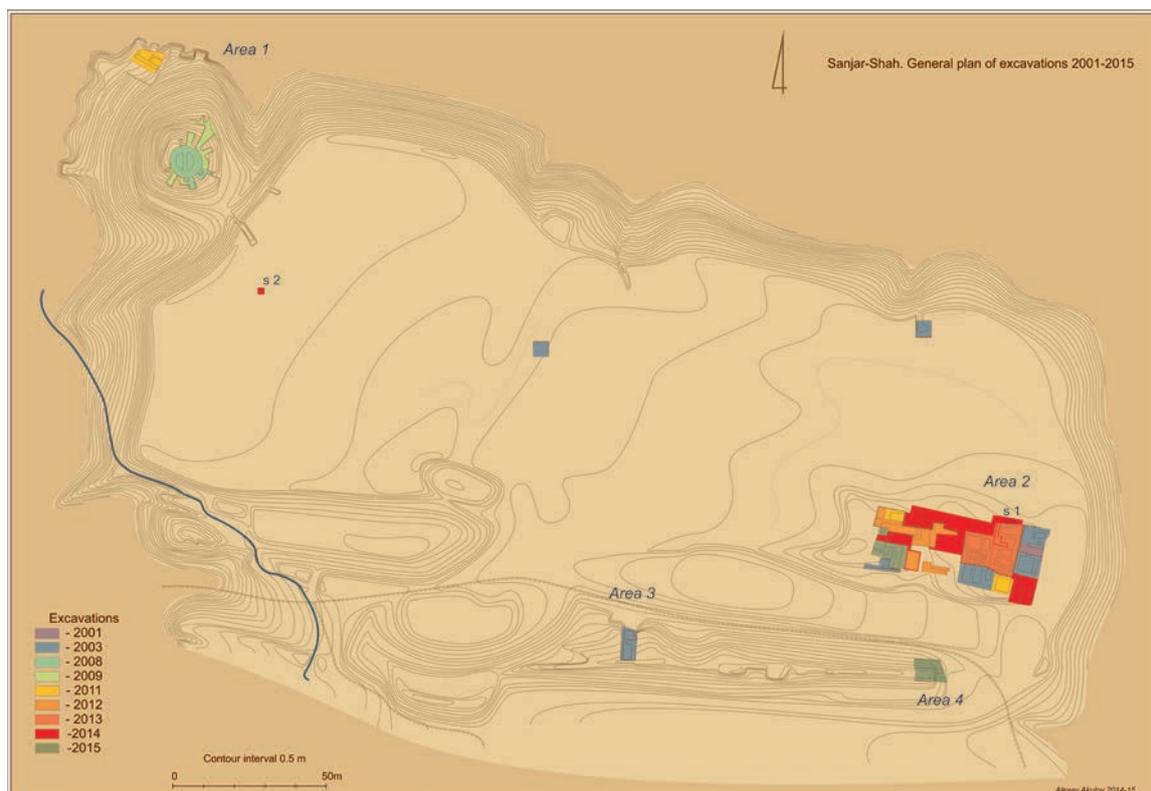


Fig. 3: Plan of Sanjar-Shah showing excavated areas (drawing by Alexey Akulov).

for the preservation of organic materials sealed by a stratum of dung. Some important finds were made there in 2008–2009, including numerous fragments of cotton and silk fabrics, leather, woven baskets, a well-preserved child’s cotton shirt (KURBANOV/TEPLYAKOVA 2014), and fragments of three Arabic letters written on paper (HAIM/SHENKAR/KURBANOV 2016). Excavation of the inner rooms of the tower was not completed because of the danger of collapse.

Together with Chilkhudjra castle in Ustrushana (PULATOV 1975), the Sanjar-Shah tower is one of the best-preserved examples of Sogdian architecture. The original tower had no living quarters and therefore probably served as a watchtower, providing a perfect view and control over the road to Panjikent and further south to the Kashka Darya Valley along the course of the Magian Darya. To our knowledge, the architectural layout of the Sanjar-Shah tower is unique, and there are no comparable free-standing circular towers among known Sogdian fortifications (SEMENOV 1996). The Sogdian castles of this period are usually square, with rectangular or square towers (SEMENOV 1996: Figs. 67, 68). An interesting comparison is provided by a circular fort (45 m in diameter) excavated by the French-Uzbek Archaeological Mission in Sogdiana at Sangyr-tepa near modern Shahr-i Sabz in the Kashka Darya Valley and dated to the 4th century CE (GRENET 2010: 268–270). Although the inner layout of the Sangyr-tepa

fort is completely different from that of the Sanjar-Shah tower, the general circular shape – which is otherwise unattested in Sogdiana – and their close chronological proximity may suggest some connections between the two. Interestingly, Sanjar-Shah also controls the road along the Magian Darya via which the Shahr-i Sabz oasis is easily reached.

Also important for our discussion is the citadel of the town of Khoja-Ajvandi-tepa in the Bukhara oasis, which is now being excavated by the Uzbek-American Mission. The excavators describe the fortifications of the citadel as circular, featuring rectangular towers, and note that such a plan is unique for Bukhara. The oldest phase of the fortifications that have been reached to date can be dated to the 4th century CE (STARK 2015: 7).

In his classic study of Sogdian fortifications, Semenov established that between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE, Sogdian fortifications were characterised by square towers (SEMENOV 1996: 137). In the Samarkand region, the replacement of rectangular towers with circular ones occurs from the beginning of the 6th century (SEMENOV 1996: 185). Thus, in the 6th century, round towers replaced rectangular ones in the Panjikent fortifications (SEMENOV 1996: 170). The semi-circular tower built in the corner of the southern wall in Panjikent (Area V) has almost the same diameter as the Sanjar-Shah tower – approximately 10 m (SEMENOV 1996: 45). This tower and the adjacent wall are dated to the 6th cen-



Fig. 4: The Round Tower (Area 1) after the excavations in 2009 (photo by Sharof Kurbanov).

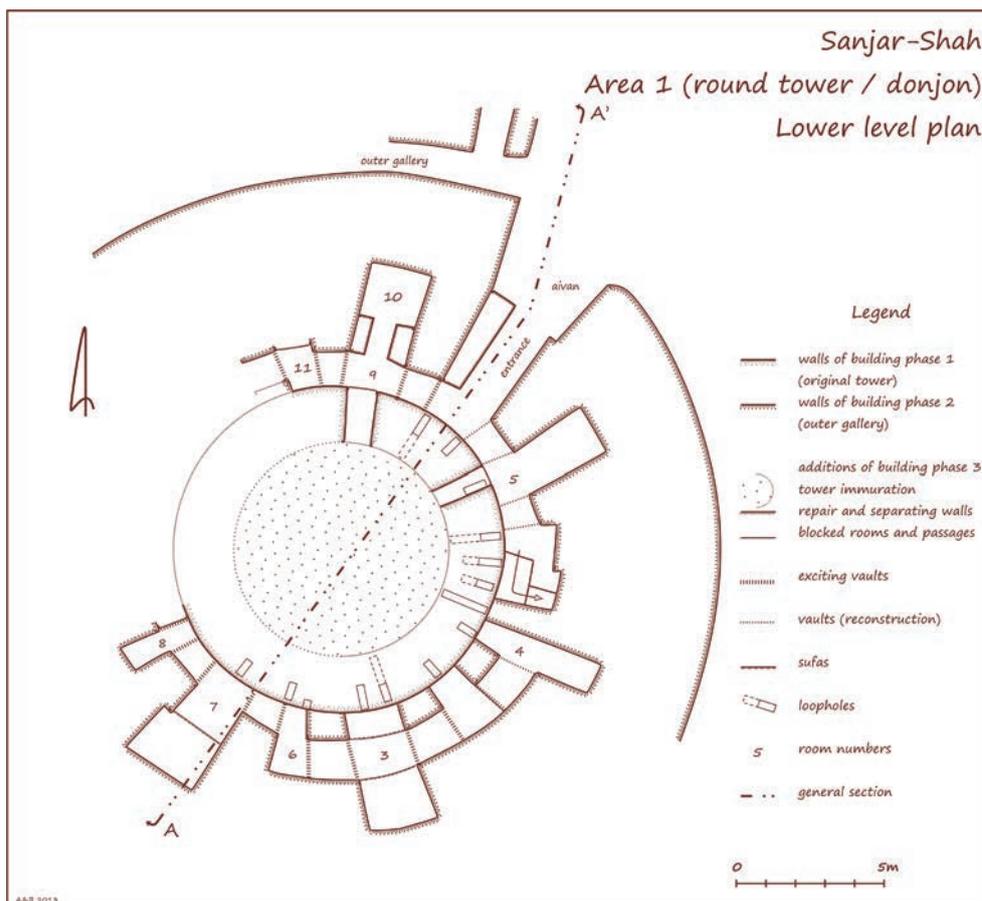


Fig. 5: Plan of the Round Tower, Area 1 (drawing by Alexey Akulov).

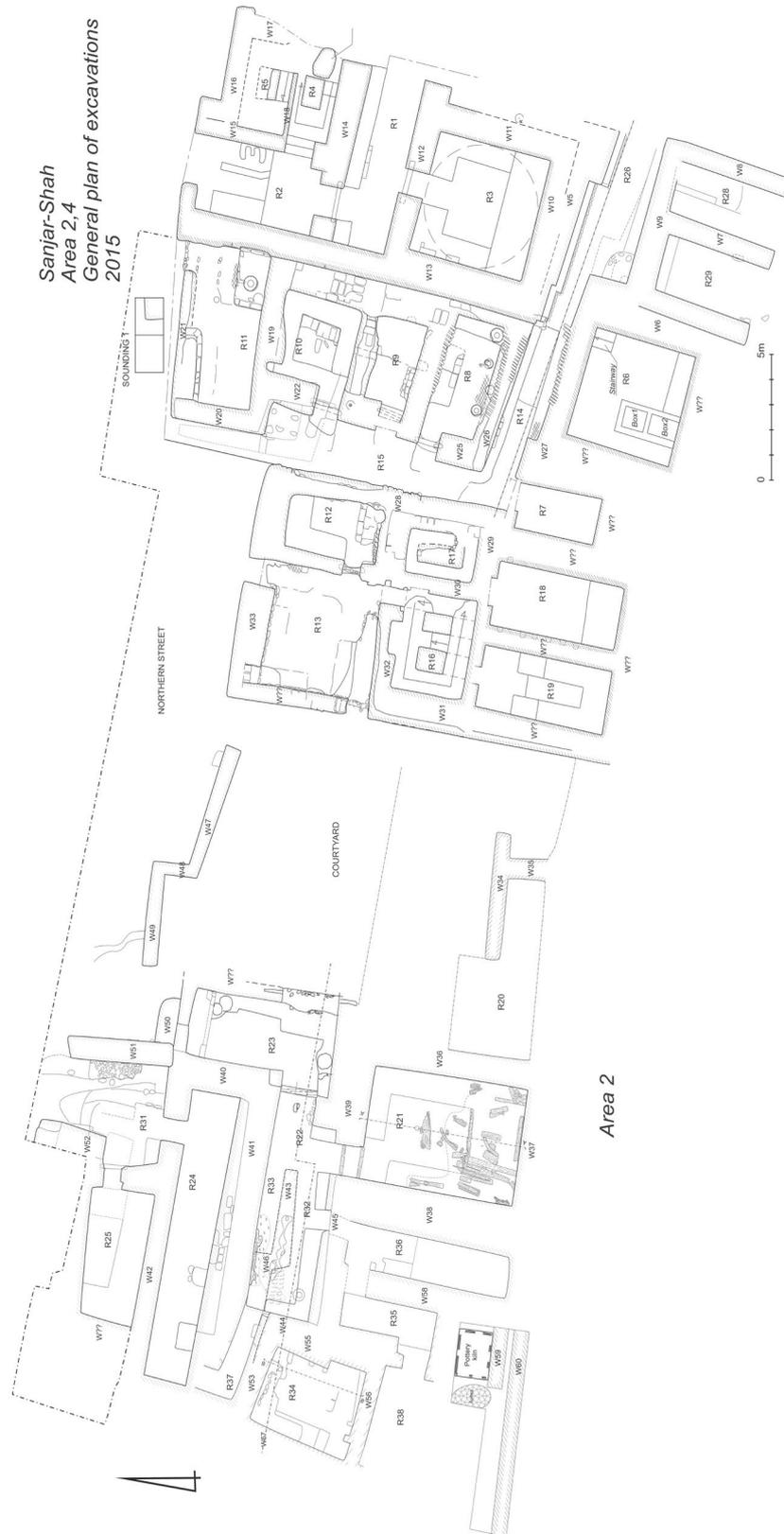


Fig. 6: Plan of Area 2 (drawing by Alexey Akulov).



Fig. 8: Room 21 after excavations (photo by the authors).

towers in the Panjikent city walls. The topography of the north-western corner of the terrace on which Sanjar-Shah was built, and the presence of a natural hill forced the builders to make an unorthodox decision and construct a free-standing defensive tower instead of one incorporated into the town's wall. It seems that at a later stage the tower was connected to the city wall. Thus the earliest section of the Round Tower should most probably be dated to the beginning of the 6th century CE. It is possible that it was preceded by an earlier structure or structures, since the excavations on the terrace immediately below the tower have revealed structures with ceramic complexes from the late 5th century CE.

3 Area 2: The “Craftsmen’s Quarter”

Area 2 of Sanjar-Shah was most probably the quarter of the town where various craft industries were located and the craftsmen and their families resided (Fig. 6). This is confirmed by traces of forging and the pottery kiln excavated in the western part of the Area 2 in previous years, as well as by small finds such as a bone scraper probably used in the manufacture of lather, and an iron knife used for cutting wood. Its location in the easternmost part of the town is also indicative. In pre-modern cities, industries that created unpleasant odours were placed in the part of the city that was farther away downwind. The prevailing wind at Sanjar-Shah blows from west to east, which explains the location of this quarter on the eastern edge of the town.

The rooms uncovered to date in Area 2 probably belong to at least two different households separated by a large open courtyard and a wide street – the “Western” and the “Eastern”. Especially noteworthy is Room 21 (4.5 × 6.45 m), which we have called the “Wooden Room” (Fig. 7; Fig. 8). In this room, with a layout indicating that it was a reception hall, there are numerous fragments of burned wood that were originally part of the ceiling. The burned wood can be divided into three categories: 1) long beams; 2) wide, thin planks; 3) small carved panels. Of the fragments of panels, six were carved. Five of them have geometric designs. The most interesting is a rectangular panel decorated with diamonds inside a frame (Fig. 9). Also noteworthy is a panel decorated with rows of quincefoliate flowers. Exact parallels to such flowers are known from wooden panels uncovered in Panjikent and Shahrstan (VORONINA 1959: Figs. 16, 18, 25, 26). Southern Wall 37, located opposite the entrance, was decorated with wave-like and tree-like ornamentation, which was made with a tool with three indentations (Fig. 10). In the eastern part, there are “trees” and in the western part there are “waves”. In the centre of the wall, the plaster is not preserved. From the typical layout and the presence of carved wood and wall decoration, it is clear that Room 21 was the “Reception Hall” of this household. Furthermore, the walls of the adjacent corridor (Room 22), which provided the only passage to Room 21, were also decorated with similar “trees” and “waves” ornamentation. Such “waves” are known from Panjikent (VORONINA 1953: 131, Fig. 23). Interestingly, the same “trees” ornamentation was found in Room 13 of the Varakhsha Palace

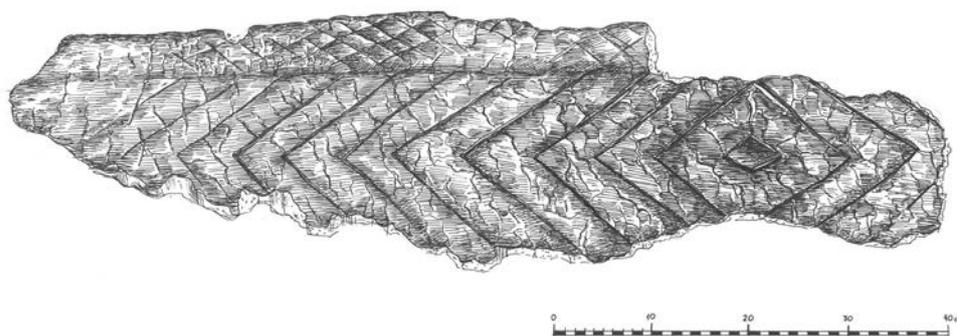


Fig. 9: A rectangular wooden panel decorated with diamonds inside a frame, Room 21 (drawing by Maria Gervais).

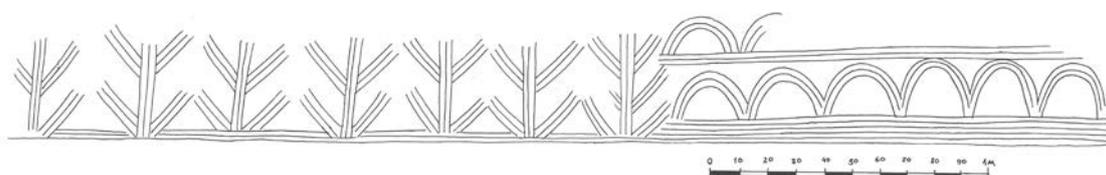


Fig. 10: Decorations on Wall 37, Room 21 (drawing by Maria Gervais).



Fig. 11: Room 34, Area 2 (photo by the authors).

in the Bukhara oasis (ŠIŠKIN 1963: 60, Fig. 22). This falls within the well-known pattern from Panjikent, where paintings are usually found both in the Reception Hall and the corridor adjacent to it. On our site, despite comparable dimensions and construction techniques, the impressive and valuable figural paintings that reflected the elevated position of the

house-owner in the social hierarchy were replaced with simple and unsophisticated ornamentation. Modest geometric and floral designs of the wooden ceiling also indicate that the owner of this “Western Household” did not belong to the upper classes of Sanjar-Shah, but was rather trying to emulate the decoration principles of aristocratic houses within

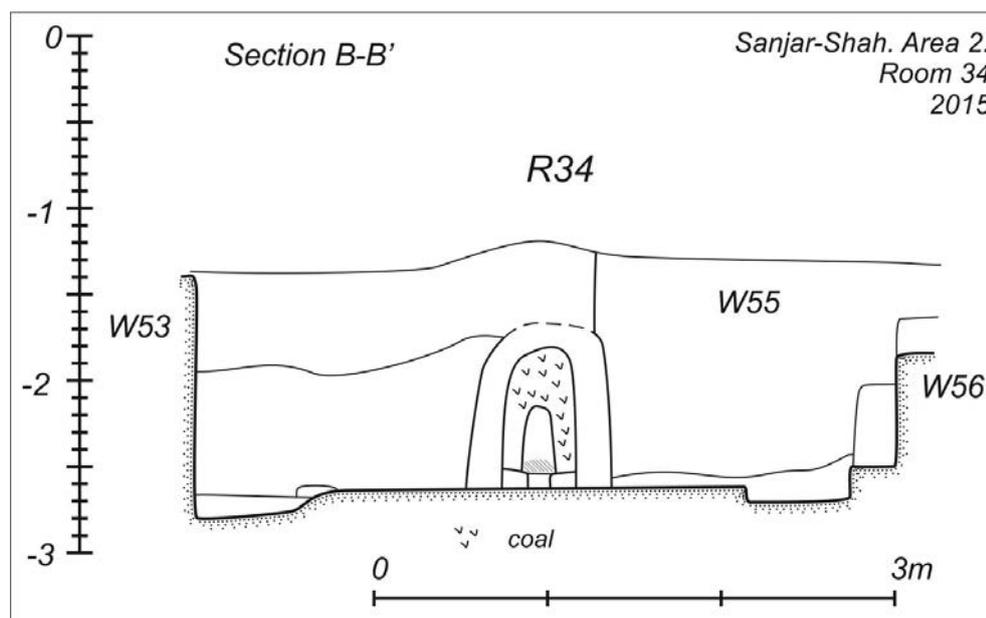


Fig. 12: Room 34 (Section), Area 2 (drawing by Alexey Akulov).

the limits of his rather restricted finances. However, compared with other rooms in Area 2, it seems clear that Rooms 21 and 22 stand out both for being the only decorated rooms and for their solidly built walls. It appears that they belonged to one of the wealthier individuals in this neighbourhood.

Also noteworthy is Room 34, which is of relatively modest dimensions (3.9 × 3.6 m), located in the western part of the Western Household (Fig. 11; Fig. 12). A hearth was found adjacent to the eastern wall, flanked by two columns. The right-hand column has arboreal decorations with pomegranates painted in red and white (Fig. 13). The back of the hearth itself was also repeatedly plastered and painted. There are more than 20 layers of plaster, painted with red circles, which probably also represented pomegranates. This motif appears on the column of a domestic hearth from Samarkand (AHUN-BABAEV 1999: Fig. 68). Such rooms with similar hearths are well-known from Sogdian sites in the Zeravshan Valley (Panjikent, Hisorak, Gardani Hisor, etc.). Traditionally, they were interpreted as private “house-chapels” and the hearth was seen as a domestic fire-altar. However, it has recently and convincingly been demonstrated by Pavel Lurje that these rooms should be rather understood as “winter rooms”, where the extended family would live during the winter (LUR’E 2014).

In 2014, we also conducted limited investigations in Room 3 (“Domed Hall”), partly excavated by the German-Tajik mission in 2003. This room was interpreted by Gerd Gropp – the director of the mission – as a “fire-temple” (GROPP/KURBANOV 2007). In order to understand the context of this room, we also investigated the unexcavated area immediately adjacent to Room 3 from the south. During our work,

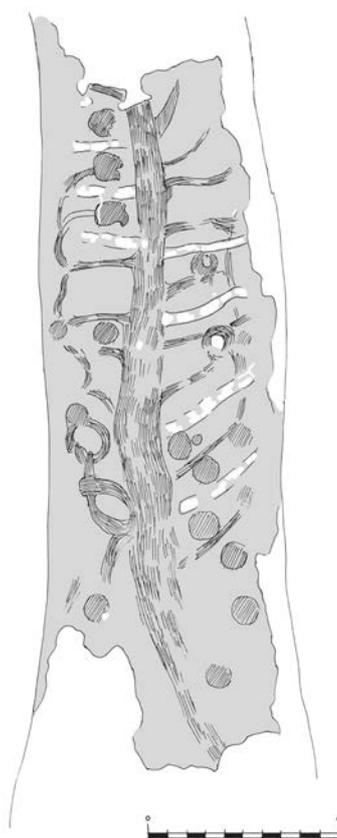


Fig. 13: Decoration on the right column of the hearth. Room 34, Area 2 (drawing by Maria Gervais).

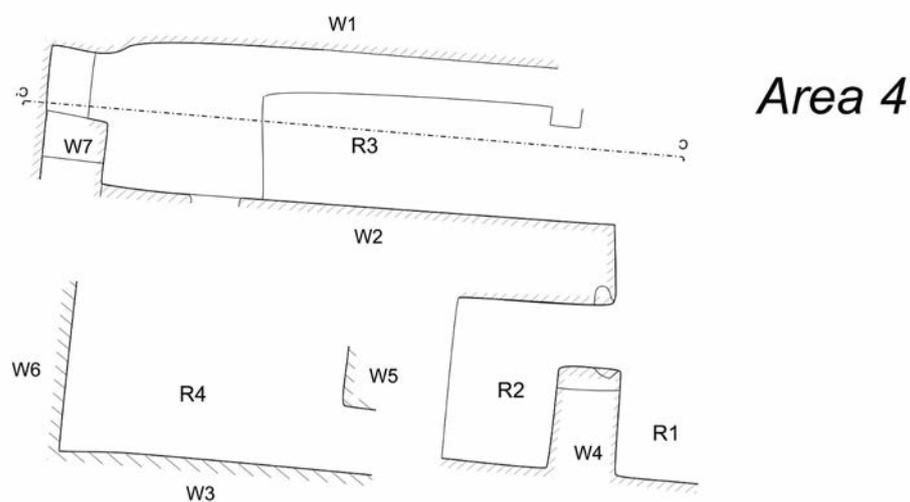


Fig. 14: Plan of Area 4 (drawing by Alexey Akulov).



Fig. 15: Room 2, Area 4 (photo by the authors).

no traces of any ash layers or “fire-altars” described by Gropp were found. Instead, we uncovered a third *sufa* along Wall 10 in the corner of Rooms 10 and 11, which was not fully excavated by the German team. Therefore, Room 3 with its three *sufas* appears to have a typical Sogdian reception-hall layout. The dome that covered this hall cannot be taken as sufficient argument for its cultic function, since such domed halls, though rare, are nevertheless attested in Sogdian secular architecture, for example at Afrasyab (BAIMATOWA 2008: 409–413).

Unlike Panjikent, the stratigraphy at Sanjar-Shah in Area 2 is very complex. We have tentatively iden-

tified several building stages that indicate that the rooms in this area were continuously repaired and rebuilt. Rooms 9 and 10, and the walls in Sounding 1, belong to the earliest building period. The ceramic finds dated to the 4th–5th centuries CE in the sounding made by the German-Tajik Mission in 2003 in Room 1 suggest that during this period a small settlement probably already existed in this part of Sanjar-Shah.

The second building phase took place during the “heyday” of Sanjar-Shah. It is to this period that Rooms 21–25 of the “Western Household” belong. They are characterised by a high-quality building

technique and décor. Later periods differ significantly, and the building quality is much lower. In the last building phase, public spaces, like certain parts of the Northern Street and the Courtyard, were enclosed by walls, which seem to be evidence for the general decline of public life and the city administration when the institutions of the civic communities were destroyed by the Arabs. According to the coin finds, we may date the upper level of the Courtyard and the Northern Street level to the last quarter of the 8th century CE. Therefore we have reason to believe that Sanjar-Shah was abandoned shortly after Panjikent, probably in the late 770s or 780s.

4 Area 4

In 2015, we started excavations in the new area (Area 4) in the south-eastern part of the site immediately adjacent to the southern wall of the town (Fig. 14). The area along the southern wall, together with the Round Tower (Area 1) and Area 2, was not levelled during the Soviet period. In 2003, limited excavations were made close to the middle of the southern wall (Area 3; GROPP/KURBANOV 2007). The architecture here is preserved to an exceptional height of up to 4 m and therefore has great potential for archaeological investigation. So far, four rooms have been excavated. Especially noteworthy is Room 2, preserved to a height of 4 m (Fig. 15). It is built from solid *pakhsa* blocks. The room was vaulted and its original height, including the vault, rose to 4.7–4.8 m.

Many walls in Sanjar-Shah are built on a foundation of river boulders undoubtedly brought from the nearby Magian Darya. In general, the construction of walls from *pakhsa* or mud brick on a stone foundation is a distinctive feature of Sanjar-Shah architecture, which is almost non-existent in nearby Panjikent (located farther from the Zeravshan River).

In 2014, two soundings were made in the western and in the eastern part of the site in order to determine the depth of cultural levels there, and to determine whether there was enough potential for excavation. Bedrock level occurs at a depth of 2.25 m in the eastern part and at a depth of 2.40 m in the west. In Sounding 1 in the eastern part, four, unfortunately very small (3 cm), fragments of paintings were found. They are coloured blue, red, white and brown. One fragment bears clear traces of a delicate, thin, black outline, which seems to have belonged to figural paintings. Unfortunately, the source of these wall paintings is not clear and we have not yet been able to find a wall to which they could have belonged. This is the first time that fragments of wall paintings have been found at Sanjar-Shah and it gives us hope that larger fragments and perhaps even entire sections of painted walls will be discovered in the future.

Our priorities for the forthcoming seasons are to continue excavating along the southern wall and to investigate the western part of the site, which until now has not been excavated. Since the excavations below the round tower in 2011 did not yield remains of any administrative buildings or the palace of the Sanjar-Shah ruler, they were probably located in the western part of the town. Sounding 2, which was made in this part of the site in order to determine the depth of the cultural layers, revealed these areas to be some 2 m deep and therefore excavations here will be possible.

5 Arabic documents

The fragments of Arabic letters are undoubtedly the most remarkable finds made so far at Sanjar-Shah.⁸ They are dated to the 8th century CE, which makes them the earliest known Arabic texts written on paper. Before the discovery of the Sanjar-Shah letters, the earliest Arabic documents written on paper were those dated to the 9th century (BLOOM 2001: 58–59). In total, there are seven fragments of three different letters (Fig. 16). Their formulae and script are typical of the 7th and 8th centuries, though they show differences from the script of the famous Arabic letter from Mount Mugh (KRAČKOVSKAĀ/KRAČKOVSKIJ 1934). The layer in which they were found is dated to the 8th century CE based on ceramic finds, but unfortunately more precise dating is hardly possible since no coins have been found.

The letters seem to be official correspondence. Unfortunately, they are very fragmentary and badly preserved; and, as it happens, all the important historical data is in the lacunae, while we are left mainly with the polite formulae. Nevertheless, the first letter (L1) (Fig. 16) mentions an *amīr*, a certain Abū Mas‘ūd, “our brothers” and “our companions” and the general impression one gets from it is that we are probably dealing with the correspondence between commanders of the Arab forces in the region. It is possible, therefore, that the *amīr* in L1 was not necessarily a provincial governor, such as the governor of Khurāsān. He may have been a lower-ranking official, such as a governor of a town or a region, or the commander of an outpost or of an army.

From other letters, we also have partially preserved names of the sender and of the addressee. Curiously, like Abū Mas‘ūd, all of them appear to be *kunya* – an honourable but less formal means of address in the official correspondence of the 7th and 8th centuries. The term *kunya* was often used to show special favour and to mark the addressee out, especially in official relationships. Its use may

⁸ For the *editio princeps* and detailed commentary, see HAIM/SHENKAR/KURBANOV 2016, on which this section is based.



Fig. 16: Letter 1 (photo by Anastasia Chizhova).

indicate special informal relationships and a certain degree of intimate acquaintance between the two persons. However, in certain cases this could have also been interpreted as a sign of familiarity and disrespect. Unfortunately, we have been unable to identify Abū Mas‘ūd or any of the other names with known historical characters active in Sogdiana in the 8th century. The name of the sender of the second letter (L2) ends with Yahya, which may be a part of a *kunya*. Yahya was the patronymic of four Abbasid officials active in the second half of the 8th century.⁹ The first two are Ġibrā‘il ibn Yaḥyā al-Baḡalī, the governor of Samarkand (appointed in 159 H/775 CE) during the revolt of al-Muqanna‘ (d. 163 H/779 CE or later), and his brother Yazīd. The third official is al-Aṣ‘aṭ ibn Yaḥyā al-Ṭā‘ī, who was one of the supporters of the Abbasids during the revolt of ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Azdī in 141 H/758 CE. He is also known from coins he minted in 143 H/760–761 CE (Bukhara) and in 144 H/761–762 CE (Samarkand) on behalf of the heir apparent to the caliphate at that time, al-Mahdī Muḥammad ibn al-Manṣūr. The fourth is Sa‘īd ibn Yaḥyā, also an Abbasid supporter and the local governor of Shash (Čāč), who minted coins there in

149 H/765–6 CE. He may have been the brother of al-Aṣ‘aṭ al-Ṭā‘ī.

Two governors of Khurāsān in the 2nd H/8th century CE were Ġunayd ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Murrī (111–116 H/729–734 CE) and Sa‘īd ibn ‘Amr al-Ḥaraṣī (103–104 H/721–722 CE). It is, of course, tempting to connect the letters with al-Ḥaraṣī, who is famous for the role he played in capturing the Mount Mugh fortress and for executing the last ruler of Panjikent, Dēwāštīč. If the sender of L1 is indeed Sa‘īd ibn ‘Amr al-Ḥaraṣī, then the letters should be dated to 102–104 H/721–723 CE and closely related to his campaign in Sogdiana, which is also reflected in the Mount Mugh documents. Unfortunately, there is no additional evidence to support this assumption.

According to the famous story told by Ṭa‘alībī (d. 429 H/1039 CE), paper was introduced to the Islamic world by Chinese papermakers taken prisoner after the battle of Talas in 133 H/751 CE, who began to manufacture paper in Samarkand. The paper analysis carried out by Anna-Grethe Rischel and Michelle Taube from the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen demonstrates that the paper of the Sanjar-Shah letters is an imported Chinese paper (HAIM/SHENKAR/KURBANOV 2016: Appendix). Therefore, beyond being important new evidence for early Arabic epigraphy and a new source for the history of Sogdiana in the 8th century, the fact

⁹ A recent comprehensive discussion of the historical characters mentioned in this section is provided in KAREV 2015.

that there are fragments of three different letters indicates that the use of paper by the Arabs start-

ed earlier and was more widespread than has been hitherto assumed.

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