

Ancient Bactria's Golden Hoard

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an and Afghan archaeologists work throughout the
winter to excavate the six golden burials.

SITE: First glimpses of a Bactrian princess, Tomb I,
ations at Tillya Tepe

THE DARK PERIOD, IT WAS CALLED—the period of the shadowy first two centuries A.D., just preceding the Kushan Empire in the land of Bactria, on the northern plains of today's Afghanistan.

In the rainy fall of 1978 that darkness lifted. Digging in an unassuming mound known as Tillya Tepe, the “Hill of Gold,” we chanced upon the graves of six ancients who had lived within that unknown period some 2,000 years ago. And with their bones we found the wealth they were to carry to the afterlife—more than 20,000 artifacts, mostly crafted of gold and semi-precious stones—a treasure of such artistic and descriptive richness that to speak of it was already to begin to understand that distant time.

But before we had a chance to make plaster copies of the pieces, before they could be studied or displayed, war and confusion closed in on Afghanistan. We quickly transferred the treasures to the museum officials in the capital for safekeeping. For years, the priceless hoard from Tillya Tepe lay hidden in Kabul, its condition clouded in mystery, and scholars had no access to study the pieces. Under vigilant guard by Afghan museum and bank officials, these priceless treasures were saved. Today we can finally tell their story, the story of a unique and original culture in Afghanistan at the heart of Silk Road trade 2,000 years ago.

More than three eventful decades have passed since I first went to Afghanistan from Moscow's Institute of Archaeology in 1969. We arrived as part of the joint Soviet-Afghan Expedition to examine the antiquities that lay beneath the fabled Bactrian Plain, once an important crossroads on the great Silk Route from the varied lands of the Roman Empire in the West

TILLYA TEPE



The Tillya Tepe burials were made in wooden coffins. Traces of leather, fine fabric, and gold ornaments adorned the coffins.

to the Chinese cities protected by the Great Wall in the East. We based our camp in Sheberghan, a large village set on the dry plain between the bleak foothills of the Hindu Kush and the desert valley of the Amu Darya.

It reminded me of home, for I was born in Tashkent, in Soviet Central Asia where my father, looking for a more meaningful life, had immigrated from a village in Greece. Sheberghan was on the frontier of the struggling Afghan nation and mired in poverty. Cotton fields pressed against the mud-brick houses, and merchants sat stoically among their stacks of melons and eggplants at the central bazaar. When night fell, everything was still. Neighbors talked to neighbors in the darkness between the houses, and packs of hungry dogs circled in the streets. It was much as Bactria must have been during the dark period. Only in the morning, when the trucks started up, did the 20th century return.

On and off for nine years we dug into the mounds near Sheberghan. At first we focused on an obvious site called Emshi Tepe, the ruins of a monumental city dating from the first century A.D. Inside its walls we found a citadel, perhaps the palace of the local ruler who controlled a cluster of smaller villages that now appeared as small swells of sunbaked earth.

But surely an earlier people had farmed this plain. Day after dusty day I drove from mound to mound, searching for some sign of Bronze Age life, my specialty. In the brittle grass on one such mound my eyes fell on a type of painted potsherd I recognized from a prior dig in Central Asia. It pushed the date of habitation in this area back a thousand years, to the beginning of the second millennium B.C. A fantastic find! While others were excavating nearby Yemshi Tepe, my team set out to see what lay beneath this simple hillock.

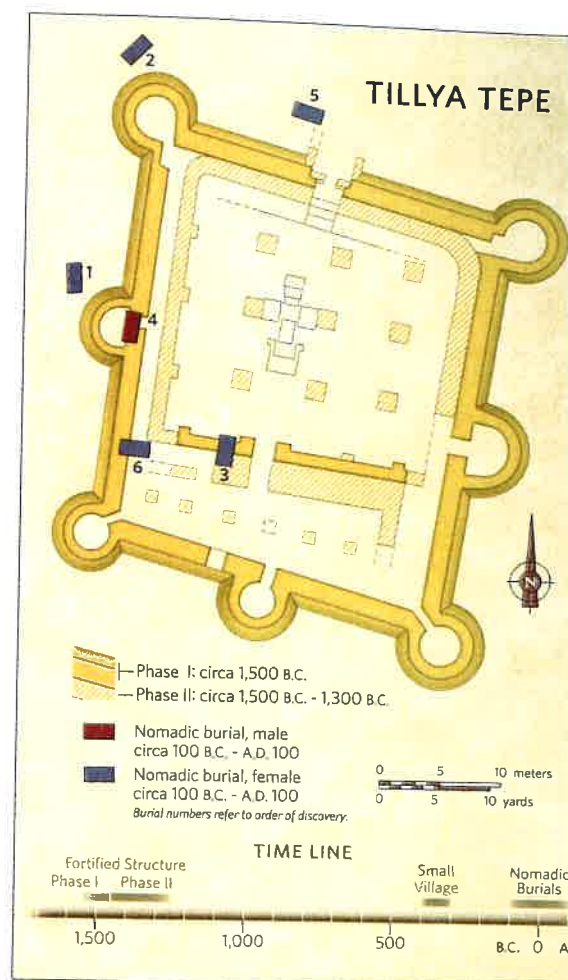
Amid its top layer we found a village from the third century B.C., as we had expected. But from the layer beneath emerged the outline of a massive edifice. Inside, within a double line of columns, stood a mud-brick altar coated with ashes. We speculated that this was a temple for the worship of fire, built 3,200 years ago.

As we excavated in late 1978, Afghanistan was inching toward a civil war. A new socialist republic had been declared. We were not caught in any fighting, but one morning armed tribesmen came on horseback, like sand devils off the desert, circling Tillya Tepe, asking angry questions. The frightened workmen implored us not to say anything or we would be shot. And then the riders were gone. Despite the growing danger, our fascination with the ancient temple urged us on, while clouds that rolled in from the Hindu Kush each day grew darker, promising the heavy, prolonged rains of winter. A cold drizzle started late at night on November 12 and forced us to break off work at noon the next day. But that morning we had found several rusted fragments of iron bands with nails sticking from them. One was bent at a right angle and looked a lot like a bracket from a wooden coffin.

When the weather cleared, a workman suddenly turned up a disk that gleamed among the clods of damp earth. Gold! We called a military guard and waded in with pounding hearts. And soon a grave emerged from beneath our picks and scoops. Staring at us were the hollow eye sockets of a skull, a young woman between 25 and 30 years old, perhaps a princess. A nomadic princess from ancient Bactria looked straight at us after being hidden for 2,000 years. Surrounding her were layers of gold jewelry and ornamentation that had collapsed from her disintegrating clothing. The brilliance of her "dark period" finery astonished us.

The potent word "gold" soon spread across the plain, and a pilgrimage began of village people, tourists, and authorities from Kabul. Some came on donkeys, others walked in. One constant visitor was the farmer whose cotton fields lay next to our excavation. He would sit for hours on the edge of the dig, looking sad. "My wife has chased me from the house," he told us. "She yelled at me, 'All my life you've kept me in poverty, with gold lying under your feet every day!'"

But what was the mound of Tillya Tepe? Who buried the princess here, and why?



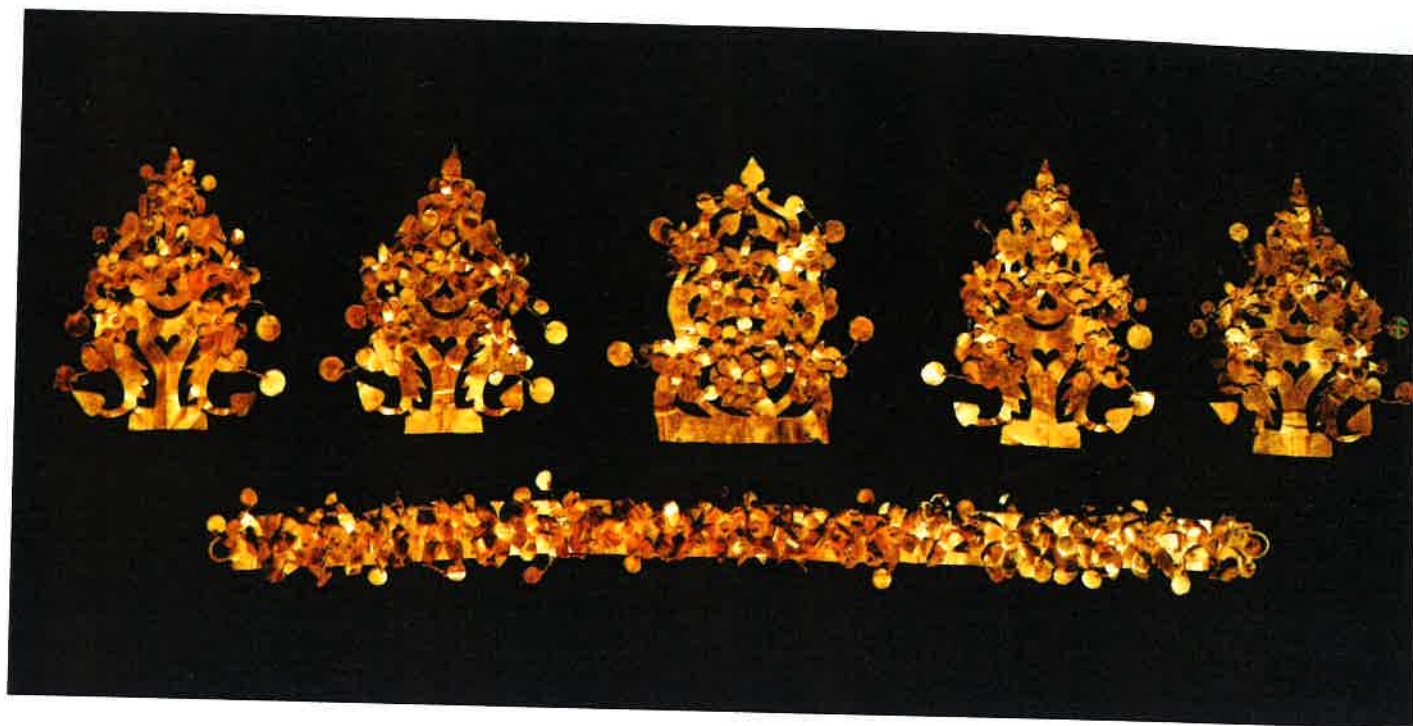
In typical nomadic fashion, the burials were dug into a hill or mound. Here the mound was actually an even older building in ruins, the plan of which is shown in outline. It is unlikely that the ancient nomads knew it was a building when they interred the group.

This is what we know: Four thousand years ago the first agricultural settlers appeared on the Bactrian plain; those who built the earliest structures at Tillya Tepe must have been among them. They constructed a small, fortified settlement at Tillya Tepe that we think may have been a temple. During the next thousand years the site was rebuilt several times. When it fell out of use, the mud-brick walls crumbled into a low mound. Tillya Tepe lay still for 600 years until a small village grew on the remains of the long-forgotten temple. The village did not last long, and again the site crumbled into ruin. So it would remain for 400 years until A.D. 100, when the golden graves were dug into the site's layered history.

While Tillya Tepe lay abandoned, Bactria was buffeted by the growing empires of the Achaemenid Persians and the Greek followers of Alexander the Great. Bactria itself grew into an independent state, known as the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. But the nobles buried in the humble mound were newcomers to Bactria; they had come from the East to plunder the Greco-Bactrian cities.

On the other side of Asia another drama was unfolding. Where wandering tribes had clashed for centuries on the frontiers of China, an aggressive group of nomads called Kushan was pushed west by the Huns into the bleak and limitless expanse of southern Siberia. There the Kushans encountered the Scythians, another nomadic tribe that had coveted the flourishing oasis cities on the trade routes to the south but dared not act alone. United, the horde gathered courage and raged across the Central Asian steppes 2,130 years ago, leaving charred fields and human suffering. When they crossed the Amu Darya—the Oxus River to Alexander the Great—they laid waste the Greco-Bactrian lands.

At first contemptuous of city life and Greek culture, the nomads gradually became enamored of the seductive Hellenic tradition. They rebuilt the cities they had sacked and created the great Kushan Empire on their own debris. In the time between the Greco-Bactrian period and the flowering

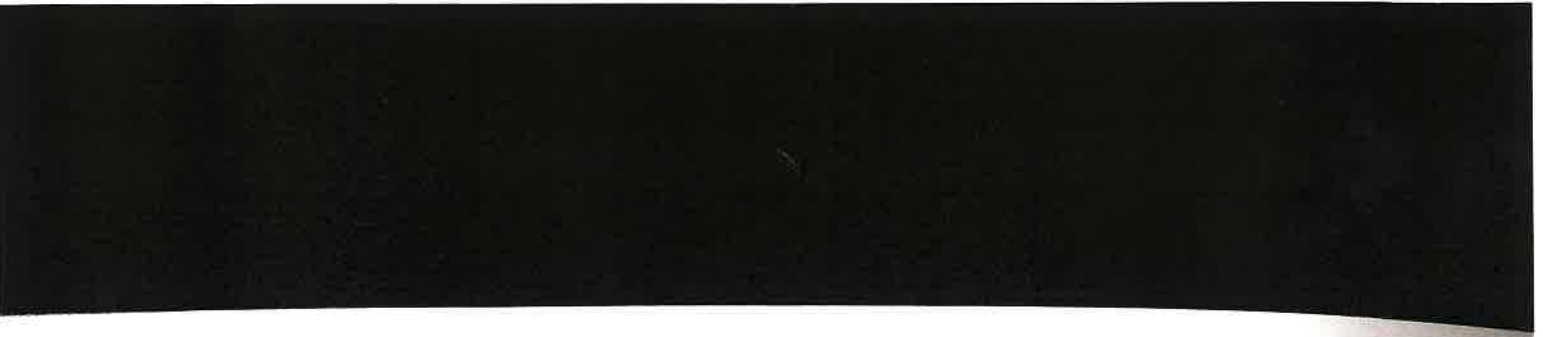


of the Kushans, ancient records fail us. As these nomads struggled with the ways of urban life and empire, the chroniclers of Rome did not visit them. The period was dark until our own time, when the Tillya Tepe treasures speak of those days with resonance and clarity.

The gold of Bactria shook the world of archaeology. It was compared by critics to the treasures of King Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt. The artifacts were found in context, not in some antique shop, not isolated from their owners or their time.

They gave us a chance to glimpse the extensive trade between the East and the West. Nowhere in antiquity have so many different objects from so many different cultures—Chinese-inspired boot buckles (no. 187), Roman coins (no. 176), daggers in a Siberian style (no. 195)—been found together in situ. The local art of Bactria discovered at Tillya Tepe is a tantalizing amalgam of influences. Never has there been an artifact like the chubby little gold Aphrodite (no. 217), who is Grecian in concept but has the distinctly

The crown from Tomb VI (no. 215) was a truly nomadic headpiece. It was collapsible, with five removable tree decorations, which could be attached to the golden band.



TEPE

*The outline of a princess emerges
from Tomb VI, Tillya Tepe*

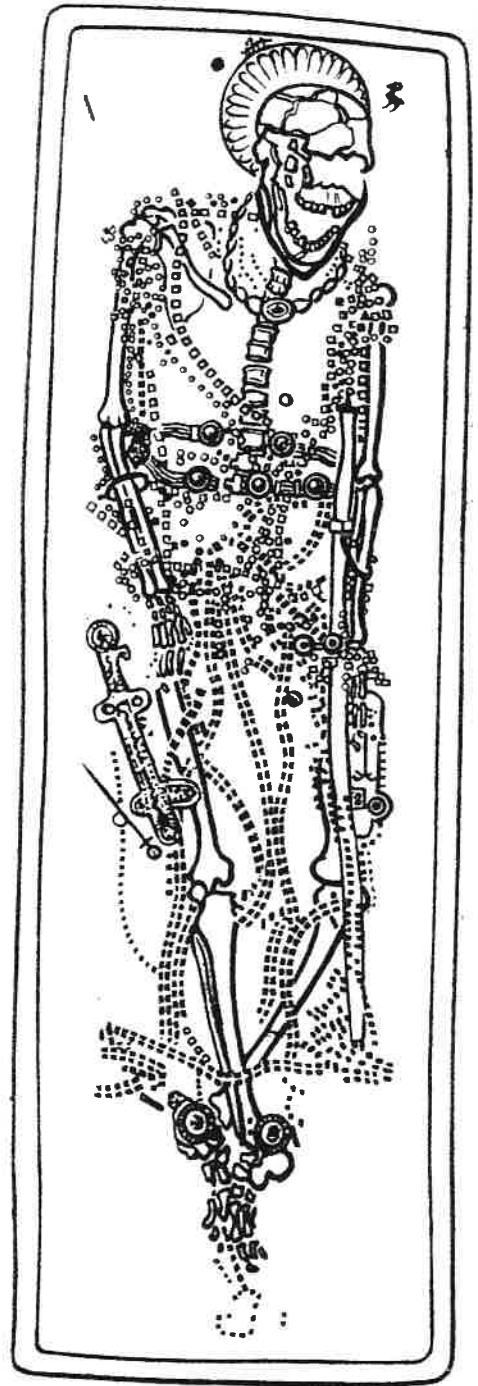


non-Grecian wings of a Bactrian deity and an Indian forehead mark that indicates marital status!

We labored into the winter with fingers numb and shriveled from the bitter winds that leaked through the plywood huts we had erected. Each thin gold platelet had to be cleaned and inventoried. We could barely hold the pincers. We slept in Sheberghan, but ate noodles and canned meat from Moscow while sitting in the truck, embarrassed at how little the workers had. The plan was to return the following fall, in 1979. We posted an Afghan guard over the necropolis and headed for the Kabul Museum with the crates of excavated treasures. But conflict soon erupted, and we left Afghanistan in a hurry in February 1979, never to return to the dig.

We had excavated six tombs of what may have been the family cemetery of the rulers of a large Kushan principedom. Tomb no. II held a bespangled matriarch between 30 and 40 years old. In Tomb no. III lay another female, perhaps a teenager. A tall warrior, the only male found, was buried in Tomb no. IV. In Tomb no. V was a young woman whose relative lack of ornaments suggests she was of lower rank. From Tomb no. VI emerged another woman, also perhaps a princess, who wore a collapsible crown. The seventh tomb had not yet been examined and simply disappeared with the rains, as we sat in Moscow.

And then the country plunged into more than two decades of strife that prevented us from returning to the excavation site or the treasures. The last two graves were looted, the artifacts never recovered. The heroic efforts of a small circle preserved the excavated artifacts—20,578 objects—for our current age. Look well upon these treasures—their beauty, craftsmanship, and originality defies the ages. Here we have an original art style from the heart of the Silk Road. I believe that some time in the future, we will be able to return to the fabled land of Bactria and discover more about the mysterious culture that linked the ancient civilizations of East and West.



Field drawing of Tomb IV, Tillya Tepe