

Tillya Tepe, the Hill of Gold: A Nomad Necropolis

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For the man who rides across the wilderness, there comes a rising longing within him for a city.

ITALO CALVINO



Armed guards were brought to the site after the six golden tombs were found.

OPPOSITE: "Man with Dolphin", one of seven appliqués from Tomb I, Tillya Tepe (no. 117)

IT IS NOVEMBER 1978 IN KABUL. AN INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS on the Kushan dynasty for historians and archaeologists is being held there. The Russian Viktor Sarianidi, who has just arrived from the Tillya Tepe excavations, a Bronze Age mound, meets with a French colleague, Paul Bernard, who has been working on the excavation of the Hellenistic city of Aï Khanum. The Russian archaeologist takes out of his pocket a golden dress clasp, which has been carefully wrapped in a piece of newspaper. He shows it to his French colleague, eager to have his opinion. In uncovering the brick walls of the monumental building he had been exploring, his excavators discovered gold. It was a tomb. His Russian-Afghan team immediately had it subjected to a detailed study. The gold object is the "Man With Dolphin" (no. 36). The grave is Tomb I. In three short months another five graves would be opened.

After studying the little gold plaque for a long while, the two scholars go their separate ways. The Russian returns to his excavations at Tillya Tepe, which he brings to a satisfactory conclusion despite the vicissitudes of the Afghan winter. In February 1979 he leaves the country, which is now descending into chaos. The Frenchman returns to Paris and then has to wait a quarter of a century before he is able to revisit the devastated site of Aï Khanum.

At the time of their encounter in 1978, they were still unaware that the necropolis where Viktor Sarianidi's work was interrupted—the discovery of which could be seen as the crowning glory of a life entirely devoted to archaeology—was actually one of the missing pieces in the puzzle, which had been sought so



Afghan excavator uncovering the dagger from Tomb IV, Tillya Tepe

assiduously, the missing link between the end of Aï Khanum, the Greek city on the Oxus River laid waste by nomads, and the foundation by nomads of the great Kushan kingdom.

For if it is still to be demonstrated that the occupants of Tillya Tepe were the famed Yuezhi nomads, originating in the area bordering China, ancestors of the Kushan and founders of their empire, this site nevertheless threw a sharp light on the little-known period between the fall of the Greco-Bactrian rulers and the emergence of a power that would dominate this part of the world for four centuries. What Tillya Tepe shows, both historically and as an element of this exhibition, is that the nomads occupy an important position in the Afghan region.

Their significance went long unnoticed: After all, what traces do nomads “without walls and houses” (Herodotus, IV, 46) leave behind them, apart from their graves? If they appeared in the accounts of Bactria at all, their role was limited to a series of acts of destruction.

As so often happens, it wasn’t exactly this kind of discovery that Viktor Sarianidi expected to make in the winter of 1978–1979 on the hill of Tillya Tepe, or more precisely, it was not only that. The objective of the Russian-Afghan archaeological collaboration, established in 1969, was to carry out new archaeological investigations on the Afghan left bank of the Oxus River, in addition to the excavations in Turkmenistan and the south of Uzbekistan, both then part of the Soviet Union, to gain a better understanding of the urban civilization of the former Bactria during the Bronze Age (the second millennium B.C.).

The French were the first to undertake excavations in Afghanistan, but the Russians also had a long-standing interest in Afghanistan and its archaeology. As early as 1850 Boris Dorn had conducted linguistic investigations. Vasily Grigoriev was active from 1867 onward in Kabulistan in the south and Kafiristan in the east, while the enthusiasm of Vasili Barthold initiated the archaeological investigations in Bactria (Gorshenina and Rapin 2001).

The Discovery

The Afghan-Russian team had decided to investigate a site at the oasis of Sheberghan, around a hundred kilometers to the west of Bactra (Balkh). From this island of green in a barren plain rose the ruins of Emshi Tepe, an ancient walled city with a citadel and palace. The excavations revealed that the city, probably founded in Greco-Bactrian times, had flourished by the time of the Kushan dynasty.

Some five hundred meters beyond the city walls lay a mound 3 to 4 meters high with a diameter of about 100 meters. Scraping away the upper layers, the archaeologists discovered pottery characteristic of the end of the second millennium B.C., comparable with fragments found in southern Turkmenistan. Investigating the mound further, they soon encountered the remnants of a monumental work of mud-brick construction, a terrace and columned hall, surrounded by a thick wall. Among Sarianidi's great achievements is his successful completion and publication of the excavations of this complex from the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, which he interpreted as a temple (Sarianidi 1989). Sarianidi might have been simply tempted to leave everything else aside to dig up only the gold.

The excavations showed that there had been a settlement for a brief time upon the ruins of the temple. At the start of the present era, the mound was no more than a heap of soil and clay. While carting away large quantities of earth, one of the excavators found gold. The name of the site ought perhaps to have alerted the archaeologists from the start: Tillya Tepe, as the Russians called it (the name has now been generally adopted) was known as Tilla Tepa in the local Uzbek language, meaning "Hill of Gold."

Six graves were found, set partly into the side of the mound, partly into the thick walls of crumbling brick. They were set close together, on the side facing the city of Emshi Tepe. With the assistance of Zmaryalai Tarzi, the Afghan head of the archaeological mission, Terkesh Khodzhanayazov, his trusted friend and archaeologist from Soviet Turkmenistan, and other Afghan



Visitors at the site of Tillya Tepe, with Viktor Sarianidi

colleagues, Sarianidi succeeded in carefully exposing all six graves. About 20,000 objects were revealed in the process, all to be cleaned, recorded, and packed up for transfer to the National Museum in Kabul. Just days before the excavations were to conclude, a seventh grave was located, and, who knows, maybe other graves could have been found, but time ran out with the onset of winter, and the grave was carefully covered over with the intention of investigating it further the following year. But in December 1979 the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan and war broke out. Nevertheless, Sarianidi returned to Kabul in 1982, with two photographers. A magnificent book of photographs entitled *The Golden Hoard of Bactria* was published in several languages in Leningrad in 1985. With superb photographs by Vladimir Terebenin and Leonid Bogdanov, this book was for many years the only way in which either art-lovers or specialists were able to examine these objects.

Enormous praise is due to Sarianidi for his generosity in so quickly making his findings internationally known. As a supplement to the countless articles, which immediately appeared in the international press, he wrote another two lively books, widely popular in Russia, which are also filled with precious information. In 1989, while continuing to work on important Bronze Age sites in Turkmenistan (ancient Margiana), he published what still counts as the only scientific publication on the excavations, *The Temple and Necropolis of Tillya Tepe* (Sarianidi 1989). In this work, he wisely called on the knowledge of colleagues like Gennadi Koshelenko to supplement his own expertise, which until then had focused more on proto-history. This publication formed a supplement to the book of photographs mentioned above, amending and clarifying the text in various areas. We discover that it was not only gold, silver, and other beautiful objects that were found at Tillya Tepe (providing the subject matter for superb full-page photographs), but also anthropological material such as skulls and other bones, organic residues, imprints of textiles, fragments of two bows, the remains of a folding throne, and many other items of great value to those interested in things other than

precious jewels. And while we may not nowadays share all the author's conclusions, basing our knowledge on more recent research or new hypotheses, nevertheless, we continue to rely to a great extent on this publication, starting naturally enough with the structure of the tombs and their layout.

The Structure and Position of the Tombs

Leaving aside the objects lying concealed within them, it is first and foremost the structure of the tombs, laid out as they were within a mound, which points to the close involvement of the dead with the nomadic tradition. However, what we have at Tillya Tepe is far from a princely kurgan (tumulus). There is no funeral pit with a lateral burial niche and no wooden burial chamber at all. Instead, there are simple trenches covered with timber planking, spread with earth, with a lidless, cloth-wound burial coffin lying directly on the floor or positioned slightly elevated. Faced with this simple arrangement, so different from graves found elsewhere in the world of nomads, Sarianidi formulated the hypothesis that these were clandestine burials, hastily conducted by night and without the knowledge of the people of the neighboring city of Emshi Tepe, perhaps out of fear of grave robbers. But it is rather difficult to imagine that the digging of these graves and the funeral ceremonies could have taken place unnoticed by the locals, living as they did a couple of hundred meters away. Furthermore there are enough instances of tribes deviating from their usual nomadic circuits, perhaps because they were in the midst of a migration or, indeed, because they were moving to a more settled existence. In such circumstances they often turned to existing burial mounds or even natural hillocks. For the nomadic tradition required that the dead be buried within some kind of mound.

In Kossika for instance, between the Volga and the Don, at a time when nomads, probably the Alani, were moving to the west, a similar type of grave, also containing a dagger with a four-lobed sheath, as at Tillya Tepe, but plated with iron, was laid out on top of a natural mound. It appears that time or means



Viktor Sarianidi and Terkesh Khodzhanyazov inspecting the finds from Tomb IV, Tillya Tepe

The people of Tillya Tepe dealt with images and symbolic language in the same way as with the layout of graves: They took the local traditions into account, but modified them to suit their own customs.

The briefest glance at the plan of the necropolis makes it obvious: The position of the graves does not appear to be merely coincidental or dictated by the terrain. Not only do the five females surround the male, the male is also at the top of the mound, flanked by the most richly ornamented females in Tombs VI and III. They were, for example, the only ones to have the large, symmetrical paired clasps (nos. 160 and 216). These clasps are quite similar to 14 ancient clasps from Siberia, displayed in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg from the famous collection of Peter the Great. In addition, these three primary persons were interred within the ancient walls, while the other women (Tombs I, II, and V) lay at the foot of the mound. Moreover, the girl in Tomb V, so modestly adorned that the workers nicknamed her "Cinderella," seemed to lie quite aside.

Is it possible for us to conclude on these grounds that these graves were laid out according to a clear plan, all at once? And what are the criteria for dating the graves?

Coins and Dating the Tombs

Until now the archaeological evidence that would allow us to establish the relative chronology of these burials has not been available. Only the coins permit their placement within a broad time frame. Setting aside the Indian medalion, there are five coins to consider. Three of these are more or less connected to Parthian coinage. In addition there is an obol of Heraios, connected to the Yuezhi, and a Roman Tiberian aureus (no. 176), struck in Gaul between A.D. 16 and 37 and certainly not after A.D. 37, which provides the most precise date. The fact that there were two different types of coins (nos. 176 and 177) in a single grave, with at least a century between them, demonstrates that we must be cautious and not underestimate the period of circulation of these coins.



Northern Afghanistan near Sheberghan

were lacking to build a “proper” kurgan mound. It seems, therefore, that these were nomads whose normal rhythm of life had been disturbed. They no longer had access to the sites of their ancestral burial grounds, nor did they have the relationships and alliances with other groups that were required to move tons of earth to build a mound. Nevertheless, they found it important that their dead should be interred in the manner of their forebears. For we know that no matter how easy it is to adapt ourselves to new customs in life, when it concerns death, it is always done the old way. Even in present-day Kazakhstan one may encounter huge nomad tents of white felt (yurts) placed between two buildings to honor the dead and as a substitute for a traditional funeral.



ib IV, Tillya Tepe. The preserved back of the prince's body
 aided the exact placement of each appliqué, allowing the
 n to reconstruct the ancient garments the nomads wore.

This is especially true in the case of nomads, for whom prestige weighed more heavily than monetary value. This is well exemplified by the Scythian appliques or *bracteates* (thin gold plaques to be sewn onto clothing) depicting an owl or a rooster, motifs derived from Greek coins, and by the manner in which nomadic women from Central Asia still sew pre-1917 rubles or kopecks on their veils or use them to decorate necklaces. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to assume that the most recent coin, the Tiberian aureus, which must date from A.D. 37 at the latest, and probably reached Tillya Tepe fairly quickly (by sea, and then via southern or central India, where such coins have not infrequently been found) must be fairly close in date to the burial itself. The fact that no coins of later date were encountered supports this assumption.

To go further than this we would need clear indications about the relative chronology of the individual graves. Certain factors suggest that they all date from the same period. First there is the similarity of the structure of the graves, then the strong consistency between certain objects found within them, and most of all the premeditated, hierarchical manner of the burials, with the females surrounding the solitary male. It would be reassuring if this could be explained as the consequence of a bloody battle or an epidemic, since the notion of five or perhaps even more women following their lord and master to their deaths is not terribly appealing. However, we know from Herodotus (IV, 71), as well as from various other excavations, that after his death a man did not go alone to the hereafter, but was accompanied by his "household." And if we are to believe the same Herodotus (IV, 72), they did not scruple to sacrifice 50 young people in honor of the deceased, a year after his death. It is therefore quite possible, even probable, that we have here a leader accompanied in death by the womenfolk among his followers. If that were the case, the funerary rites must have taken place at the end of the first quarter or during the second quarter of the first century A.D.

The Parthian coins tell a different kind of story. The Parthians had a good deal of contact with nomads in the second and first centuries B.C. Sometimes

they attacked them directly, other times they drove them back, or at any rate held them at bay sufficiently to stabilize the situation on their eastern borders. According to the travel journal *Parthian Stations* written by Isidore of Charax at the start of the first century A.D., the whole of the west of modern Afghanistan (the Herat region and the Sistan Province) was under Parthian rule at the start of the modern era. Parthian coins with a countermark were also found, raising the suspicion that tribal leaders and minor nomad rulers had acquired the right to mint coins. This is confirmed by the imitation in gold of a Parthian coin from Tomb VI (no. 227). This was an unexpected find, since all coins, whether of Greco-Bactrian or Parthian origin, as well as those that may have been struck by local chiefs, were of silver or bronze. A coinage system based on a gold standard was only introduced later under Vima Kadphises and the rule of the Kushans. So, the discovery in the hand of the female in Tomb VI of a gold coin displaying affinities with Vima Kadphises (Parthian) coinage points to her clan's link with the Parthians.

Garments, Weapons, and Jewelry

One can read in the catalog entries about the function and nature of some of the garments, jewelry, and weapons. It is important to remember the difficult and uncertain nature of certain identifications. Since virtually no textiles have survived, the clothing of these long-dead people can only be reconstructed by looking carefully at the gold jewelry—brooches, clasps, appliqués, and bracteates—and the manner in which these were placed. However, this is anything but simple. How are we to distinguish, among a profusion of materials, almost all stitched with gold thread, between the veil over the cist, the shroud, and the dead person's own clothing? The clothing itself also consisted of various layers: a shirt, tunic, jacket, and cloak, one on top of the other. The male probably wore a short jacket and a kaftan, with trousers tucked into high leggings, as can be seen on the large bronze statue of a Parthian ruler from Shami (southwest Iran) in the museum in Tehran.



Bejeweled dagger and sheath from an ancient nomadic burial at Dachi, near the Black Sea

The costumes of the women from the different graves were not identical. This may be because the women did not necessarily belong to the same tribe, or more probably because they did not all have the same social status. It has been suggested, for example, that the female in Tomb V was a young woman, who had not yet had children. All the women did, however, wear the type of garb that is still very common in this part of the world, the *shalwar kameez*, a tunic over trousers.

The man's weapons—two bows, a long sword, a dagger with a four-lobed sheath, and an additional sheath for various knives—are all characteristic of the nomads. Like the horse, present here but no longer buried next to its rider, and the four-lobed sheath, which was originally intended to secure the weapon tightly to the upper leg so that it could not hurt the rider when galloping, but which has here obviously a ceremonial function, it seems that the belt was worn more as a sign of power than to gird the waist. We are dealing therefore not with a common horseman but with a *chevalier* or mounted knight, a warlord, buried without a helmet or armor, probably because these were part of the actual fighting equipment and could not be counted as symbols displaying power. Head ornaments, pendants on either side of the face, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, rings in abundance—the briefest glance at these objects leaves no doubt as to their magnificence and great variety. What is less clear are the traditions, models, and influences that determined the forms and decoration of these objects and which the catalogue entries attempt to point out. One significant step forward came from the investigation of the gold and gems conducted by Thomas Calligaro of the Laboratoire des Musées de France, to whom we are indebted for their identification. Perhaps one day we will be able to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between the objects from Tillya Tepe and those of Peter the Great's Siberian collection, the world of nomadic tribes like the Sarmatians, the Alani, and others of the Great Migrations.

Even though the iconography of the Tillya Tepe artifacts may sometimes seem strange to us, because the models that inspired them have been

misinterpreted by their makers, nevertheless the astonishingly high standard of the goldsmith's work can only stir our admiration. Little or no filigree work is evident, but there is surprisingly deft granulation and virtuoso inlay work.

Who were the makers of these superb objects? All the evidence indicates that a good number of the objects came from the same workshop. In the absence of a visual vocabulary, which would have required adaptation if borrowed from an external source, the tricks of the trade were transmitted from generation to generation in the same manner as can still be observed today in goldsmiths' shops in India.

Composite Art

As has been said—and can also be seen in the catalog entries—the art of Tillya Tepe is a mixture. There are Chinese objects or imitations, objects from India or those which reflect Indian traditions, and above all, those which, although sometimes closely associated with ancient animal motifs from the art of the steppes, follow Hellenistic traditions, which are even more apparent in the style than in the thematic repertoire. The art of the Nomads is almost universally characterized by its eclecticism, except perhaps at Arzhan (southern Siberia), but that may be due to our lack of knowledge about it. One thinks, for example, of the art of Altai (also in Siberia), which borrows from the west as well as from the east, or of the finds from the site of Filippovka in the southern Urals, and, of the highly detailed and diverse style that characterizes Greco-Scythian art, an aesthetically admirable monstrosity.

The mixture we see here is sometimes bizarre in effect, and the images are not always free of visual misunderstandings. For example, we have the goddess Athena, her arm extended to hold a lance, but the lance is absent. In another case she is shown sitting, but without a seat. Elsewhere the small Kushan Aphrodite figure is standing erect between what can only be the pillars of a throne. It is also puzzling that certain well-known motifs are absent, such as the Bactrian camel, which oddly enough is found on the pommel of



Handle of the dagger from the site of Dachi (Azov, Black Sea region, depicting a Bactrian camel

*Small golden statuettes from
the Siberian collections at
the Hermitage Museum*



the four-lobed dagger from Dachi on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia.

However, there is one motif that occurs so frequently in these tombs that it cannot be purely a matter of coincidence or due to the personal preference of the artists, and that is the heart motif. Be it smooth or faceted, wide or long, inlaid or not, there is not a single grave where the heart was not found in some form. These artifacts are often in turquoise and from an artistic perspective this is quite an undertaking, as it is more difficult to shape turquoise into the form of a heart than it is to produce a comma or a circle. If no one until now has noticed this omnipresence, it is no doubt because the heart has become such a common motif that we have turned blind to it. We also need to be careful not to misinterpret it. The heart here does not represent a "Queen of hearts," or warm feelings. We will understand the meaning of the motif if we look closely at the obverse side of the handle of the dagger with the four-lobed sheath (no. 195), which shows clearly, hanging down, a heart-shaped leaf with its petiole. This is not the heart-shaped leaf of sarsaparilla, water lily, or poplar, but most probably an ivy leaf. The question remains why this plant should have such a prominent place among the weaponry of this leader and the adornments of the ladies. In fact, despite what we might expect, Outside the Greek world and its Dionysiac connections, this motif was not so common in ancient times, and it certainly needs further investigation.

The most important question raised by this necropolis has intentionally been left aside until now: Which nomadic tribe was responsible for Tillya Tepe? Was it the Yuezhi, driven from the steppes of northwest China with the rise of the Xiongnu kingdom around the second century B.C., who destroyed Ai Khanum, and, once they had crossed the Oxus, settled there? Or was it, as the great number of connections suggests, the Sakas or Sakarauks, moving within the sphere of influence of the Parthian state, who perhaps had always been in this area? To which tribe did the nomads buried at Tillya Tepe belong? Where were the grazing lands of their parents and grandparents?

The nomads were numerous, infinitely more numerous than we might imagine, as their numbers declined steeply with the rise of the great sedentary states. We should probably interpret their movement forward less in terms of conquest and enmity and more in terms of sheer numbers. We should also remember that their world was like a sea with its waves, its eddies, its whirlwinds, which mixed up the waters; making it difficult to identify nomadic groups by name (cf. Schiltz 2002, 874–877).

We are beginning to know more about the people of Kangju, a state north of Bactria (in Khorasmia and Sogdiana). But what was the situation of this Sheberghan oasis, backed by the Hindu Kush, but open to the steppes? It is true that the major centers of Bactra and Dilberjin lay less than a hundred kilometers distant, but could it not have been far enough for Tillya Tepe to escape Yuezhi influence, while the Sheberghan oasis remained active on the great trading route of the East? This would have been a situation comparable with the ethnic diversity of the present population of the area, with its many and various warlords.

Things being what they are, it is futile to look for a perfect correlation between race, language, and culture, not to mention artistic forms. And this is perhaps the most important lesson to draw from this superb collection of finds: That all art represents an alloy and that the Afghan soil was the crucible for this unique alloy.

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*The back side of the Tillya Tepe dagger (no. 195)
from Tomb IV*