

## MES AYNAK – AN ANCIENT CITY AT THE MEETING POINT OF CIVILIZATIONS

TIBOR PALUCH<sup>1</sup>

*Between May of 2012 and July of 2013 I spent 14 months at Mes Aynak in Afghanistan. As a member of an international team I took part in the archeological excavation of an ancient settlement located in this area. Based on the available information, it was first settled in the Bronze Age, but its golden age can be dated between the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During this period the area was under the control of the Kushan Empire, and then later the Sasanian Empire expanded its power to here, which was brought to an end by the Arab conquest. About two years ago, after spending a few months in Afghanistan, I wrote a brief report for Hungarian Archeology about the work I had performed there, which described what were then fresh, new experiences.<sup>2</sup> Now, after some 14 months in Mes Aynak and about 8 months after returning, I would like to offer a more long-winded summary about the conditions in Afghanistan, the work that was carried out and the extent of the task there.*

### HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN BETWEEN THE 3<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY B.C. AND THE 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The northern areas of Afghanistan, under the name Bactria, made up the eastern province of the Achaemenid Empire. The province, following the conquest of Alexander the Great and his death in 323 B.C., became a part of one of the successor states, the Seleucid Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> The Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, which became independent in 256 B.C. under Diodotus I, reached its greatest extent in 180 B.C. when Demetrius occupied the city of Pataliputra in northern India. The fall of the kingdom was caused by internal power struggles and the constant threat from nomads. The nomad ethnic group – called the *Yuezhi*<sup>5</sup> in Chinese sources and the *Tokhari* in western sources – appeared in the former Bactria in connection with their migration that began following their defeat by the Xiongnu in 174 B.C. After they occupied the kingdom they set up five *Tokhari* regional principalities, which sometime around the birth of Christ were united under the leadership of the *Kushan Dynasty*.<sup>6</sup> From this point it can be considered the era of the Kushan Empire. The empire reached its greatest extent under the rule of Kanishka I at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> and beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., when it stretched from Mathura in Central India, through North-Central India and Bactria to the areas bordering China (Fig. 1).

The Kushan Empire played an important role from several perspectives in the history of Central Asia. The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia can be attributed to the Kushans. They convened the Fourth Buddhist Council around 100 A.D. in Jalandhar or Kashmir, where they even altered the existing canon

<sup>1</sup> Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hungarianarchaeology.hu/?p=2553>

<sup>3</sup> See the pertinent sections of what is still to this day the best summary of the history of Central Asia: Harmatta, János (ed.): *History of Civilizations of Central Asia II. The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250.* (Darantière: Quétigny, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> On the military campaigns of Alexander the Great and the Macedonian ruler's sojourn in Bactria: Holt, Frank. L.: *Into the Land of Bones. Alexander the Great in Afghanistan.* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2005).

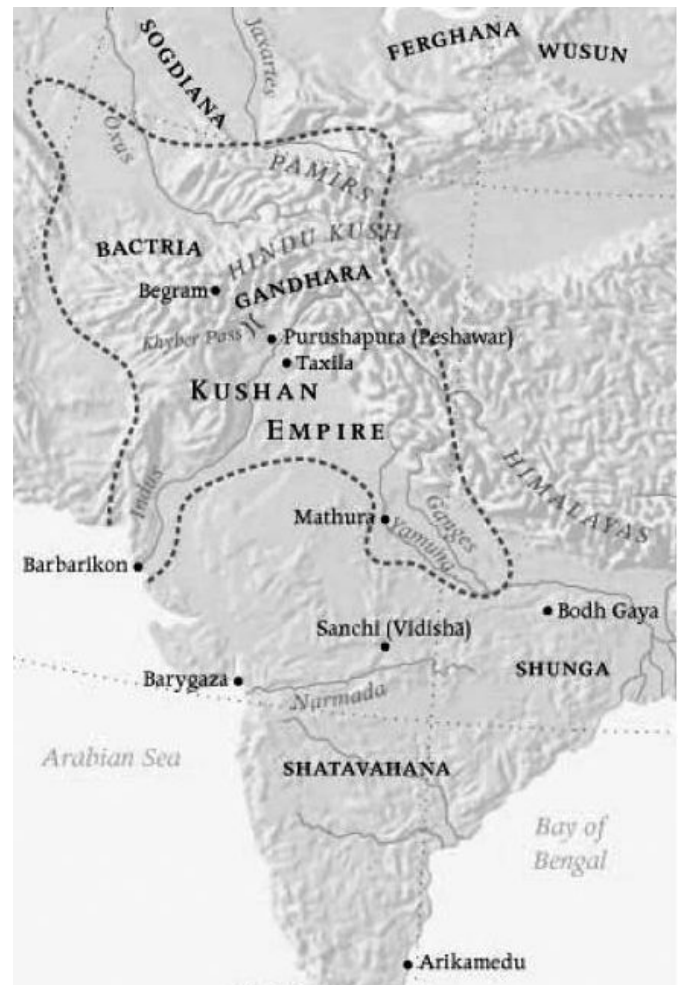
<sup>5</sup> On their origins: Taishan, Yu: *The Origin of the Kushans. Sino-Platonic Papers* 212 (2011), 1–22.

<sup>6</sup> On the issue of the *Yuezhi* and the chronology of the Kushan Empire: Loeschner, Hans: *Notes on the Yuezhi - Kushan Relationship and Kushan Chronology. Oriental Numismatic Society* 197 (2008), 1–28.

in the interest of unifying the various sects. This also made it possible for Buddhism to attain a much greater extent than previously.

The Kushan Empire also has great significance from the perspective of the era's art, which has unique characteristics in the area of the Bactria-Gandahara region. In the wake of the Greek conquest, the local art in Central Asia was built upon a Hellenistic base that was layered upon the art of Buddhism supported by Kanishka, but in the wake of the later Indian conquests it was also combined with Brahmanist and Jainist trends. Characteristic features were the realistic depiction of the human form, and in sculpture figures were portrayed in a frontal position. Representations of the Buddha gradually spread along with the acceptance of figural depictions (*Fig. 2*). However, officially it was only the Buddhist council held in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that sanctioned the practice of depicting the human figure.<sup>7</sup>

The strengthening of the trade along the Silk Road that linked the Far East with Rome can also be associated with the Kushan Empire (*Fig. 3*). Kujula Kadphises (r. 30–80 A.D.), who founded the empire, extended his power to India, all the way to the Indus delta. He strove to gain influence over the sea trade there, which stood in direct contact with the Roman ports in Egypt, so it represented an opportunity to avoid the Parthians and their taxes. Due to the trade on the Silk Road, the summer capital of Kanishka (r. 127–153 A.D.), Capsie (today Bagram) situated to the north of present-day Kabul, became the meeting point of various cultures and an unrivaled repository for material goods. The excavations have brought a fascinating collection of finds to the surface, from a great mass of precious Indian ivory carvings, through Syrian glass vessels and Roman masterpieces of bronze, alabaster and marble, to lacquerware from China. Alongside all this the Kushan Empire presumably imported a great deal of silk. It is not just the palace of Bagram and the warehouses that tell us about its prosperity and taste, but also the remains and golden relics of other settlements – Dilbarjin located to the north of



*Fig. 1: The Kushan Empire at its greatest extent (source: Grenet, Franz: The Nomadic Element in the Kushan Empire (1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). Figure 1. Journal of Central Eurasian Studies 3 (2012), 1–22.)*



*Fig. 2: Fragment of a small "home altar" and "home shrine" carved from slate (photograph: Tibor Paluch)*

<sup>7</sup> Cheema, Iqtidar Karamat: The Historical Origins and Development of Gandhara Art. *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 8 (2007), 75–91.



Balkh and Sheberghan further to the west – or the buildings, statues and the acropolis of Surkh Kotal as well as the inscriptions found there.<sup>8</sup>

## HISTORY OF THE MES AYNAK ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE AND THE CONDITIONS OF THE EXCAVATION

<sup>8</sup> Puskás, Ildikó: Görögök, hunok, törkök, arabok (Greeks, Huns, Turks and Arabs). *História* 23 (2001), 93–99.

<sup>9</sup> On the period between the Sasanian and Arab conquests of Afghanistan: Litvinsky, Boris A. (ed.): *History of Civilizations of Central Asia III. The crossroads of civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750* (Quéigny: Darantière, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Urugodawatte, Bindu: *Buddhism in Central Asia*. In: *2600 Years of Sambuddhatva: Global Journey of Awakening*, eds. Asanga Tilakaratne et al. (Colombo: Ministry of Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs, Government of Sri Lanka, 2012), 329–355.

<sup>11</sup> Verardi, Giovanni: Buddhism in North-western India and Eastern Afghanistan, Sixth to Ninth Century AD. *Zinbun* 43 (2011), 147–183.



Fig. 4: Location of Mes Aynak  
(source: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/23/archaeologists-joy-afghan-mine-delay>)

A 1977 expedition researching Afghanistan's prehistoric mines also found Mes Aynak, and it is mentioned in their report that on the basis of the surface finds there may have been an important copper mine here in the Kushan period.<sup>12</sup>

The excavation of this area not too far from the Pakistani border came to the forefront when the Chinese state mining company (*China Metallurgical Group Corporation*) purchased the right to exploit the mine in 2007 with an enormous financial investment (they paid a total of 3 billion dollars for the area and 350 million dollars per year for the concession). This investment is immensely important to Afghanistan, since it is one of the poorest countries in the world, and according to certain calculations it can expect about a 20% increase in GDP due to the mine yield.

Prior to the commencement of the archeological work, the *Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan* (hereinafter the DAFA)<sup>13</sup>, which has been operating in Kabul with on-and-off breaks of varying lengths, prepared an impact study for the archeological tasks at the site of the mine.<sup>14</sup> They made a survey of a total of nineteen archeological sites, and indicated thirteen of these as quite intensive. They determined the size of area to be excavated to be 450,000 m<sup>2</sup>. So that the excavations would not cause interruptions in the mining work, the areas of the copper mine were ranked from an archeological perspective, based on the order of the construction projects. They framed "zones" indicated by different colors (red, orange, yellow and green) according to the intensity of the archeological sites. The so-called Red Zone, the most important from archeological considerations, unfortunately also stood in first place amongst the areas marked off for construction (Fig. 5). The original excavation deadline for this area of some 230,000 m<sup>2</sup> was 31 December 2012.

However, the impact study also indicated that this deadline could only be met if the necessary numbers of professionals with the proper skills were available, these numbers were determined to be 90(!) archeologists and 900 laborers and other professionals (for restoration, geodetic surveying, 3D scanning, aerial photography, etc.).<sup>15</sup> For even then it was possible to suspect that the former settlement played a crucial role along the Silk Road. This is precisely why it was clear that everything must be done to perform the most thorough excavation possible of the site prior to the opening of the mine.

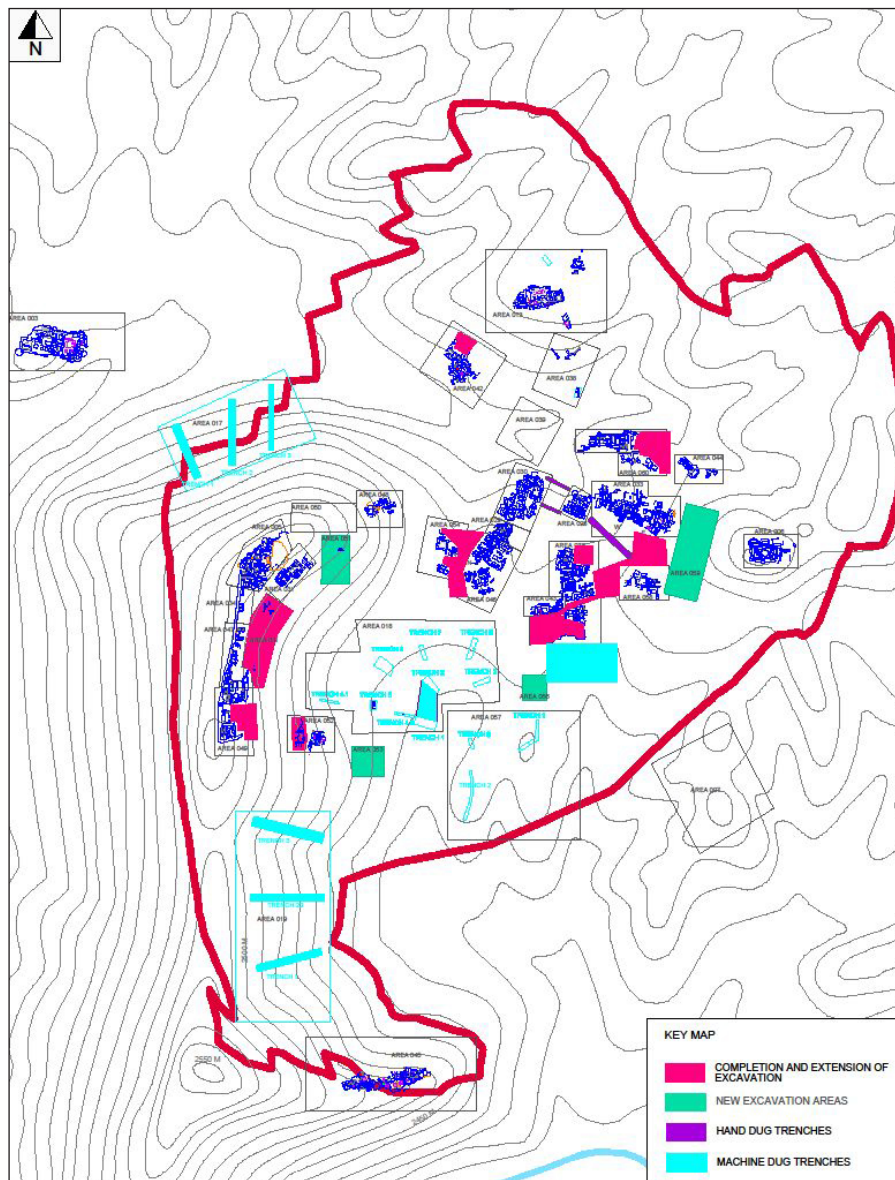
<sup>12</sup> Berthoud, Thierry – Besenval, Robert – Cesbron, Frank – Liszak-Hours, Jean: *Les anciennes mines d'Afghanistan*. (Paris: Commissariat à l'énergie atomique, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> On its history and operation: <http://www.dafa.org.af/>

<sup>14</sup> *Més Ainak. A comprehensive assessment of the archaeological issue*. Report from DAFA. (Kabul, Afghanistan, no date).

<sup>15</sup> Even at the high point – in the summer of 2012 – only about half of this ideal number participated in the work: 25 Afghan and 26 foreign archeologists and about 450 laborers.





*Fig. 5: The “Red Zone” (prepared by: Roberta Marzani and Konstantina Romantzi, Mes Aynak Archaeological Project)*

The second fundamental problem was the safety conditions. For the commencement of both the archeological and mining work there needed to be a guarantee that there would be no threat to the lives of the participants. The third problem was caused by the issue of financing this archeological excavation of such an enormous scale.

The resolution of the first and third problems was closely intertwined, since it was clear that the community of Afghan archeologists alone would not be able to excavate the entire area. In addition to the lack of numbers, reasons related to the lack of proper training and experience were behind this. Taking all of this into account, an international team of archeologists began being assembled.<sup>16</sup> The World Bank accepted the financing of the estimated costs of nearly 55 million American dollars for the archeological investigations. The Ministry of the Interior resolved the safety issue: the mine and its security zone was provided with several rings of protection, which were guarded by 4 battalions of soldiers and police – representing about 1,700 men – so the Mes Aynak mine became one of the safest areas of Afghanistan.

<sup>16</sup> This operated under the guidance of the DAFA at the beginning, then, from 2011 the foreign archeologists worked under the leadership of the Ministry of Mining. The Afghan archeologists participated in the work under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture.



*Fig. 6: View of the Lower Town  
(photograph: Raphael Dallaporta  
and Yves Ubelmann, Mes Aynak  
Archaeological Project)*

The first, at that time still small scale excavations began in 2009 and 2010 with excavation of the monastery buildings of Gol Hamid and Kafiriat Tepe, respectively. A mere two years after commencement the site was already presented in an exhibit and a related publication.<sup>17</sup> The first members of the detachment of international archeologists began participating in the work in July of 2011, and I joined them in May of 2012 as their eighth member.

### THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

By 2011 it became clear that the primary area to be excavated, the so-called Red Zone, was made up of three sections that could be distinctly differentiated from an archeological perspective. The first was the Aynak Mountains, which constitute a natural protective barrier to the west. On the basis of the results of the excavation the eastern slopes were occupied by galleries created in the course of copper mining that could be dated to the Kushan period. The second was the lower town, which is located in the valley at the foot of the Aynak Mountains. This may have been the economic and residential center of the former settlement, a conclusion allowed due to the residential buildings that had been renovated and altered multiple times. Its economic role is indicated by the manuscripts and the significant amount of coins found here. In a few buildings it was also possible to observe signs indicating small scale metalworking and handicraft workshops (*Fig. 6*). The third was the most spectacular portion of the excavation, the six peripheral monastery buildings that enclosed the lower town in a semicircle. The Buddhist monasteries were comprised of one or more stupas, the cells of the monks, a meeting hall and alcoves and shrines for the placement of statues (*Fig. 7*).<sup>18</sup> The Buddhist religious structures are made up of five building elements: a rectangular foundation, a semispherical vault, a conical peak, a sickle and a disk. However, in the beginning these were simple mounds of earth where they interred relics of the Buddha. According to legend, after the death of the Buddha his body was cremated and the ashes were distributed to eight stupas. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., Ashoka (304–232 B.C.) opened these and distributed the ashes to the several thousand stupas that he built, and it was at this time that Buddhist architecture took on this characteristic form. In general they are associated with the monastery buildings, but smaller stupas were also discovered in the lower town of Mes Aynak, where they were connected to the workshop buildings (*Fig. 8*). However, the most monumental

<sup>17</sup> Omara Khan Massoudi (ed.): *Mes Aynak – Recent Discoveries Along the Silk Road. Exhibition Catalogue* (Köln: asmuth druck + crossmedia gmbh & co, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Barnes, Gina. L.: An introduction to Buddhist archaeology. *World Archaeology* 27/2 (1995), 165–182.



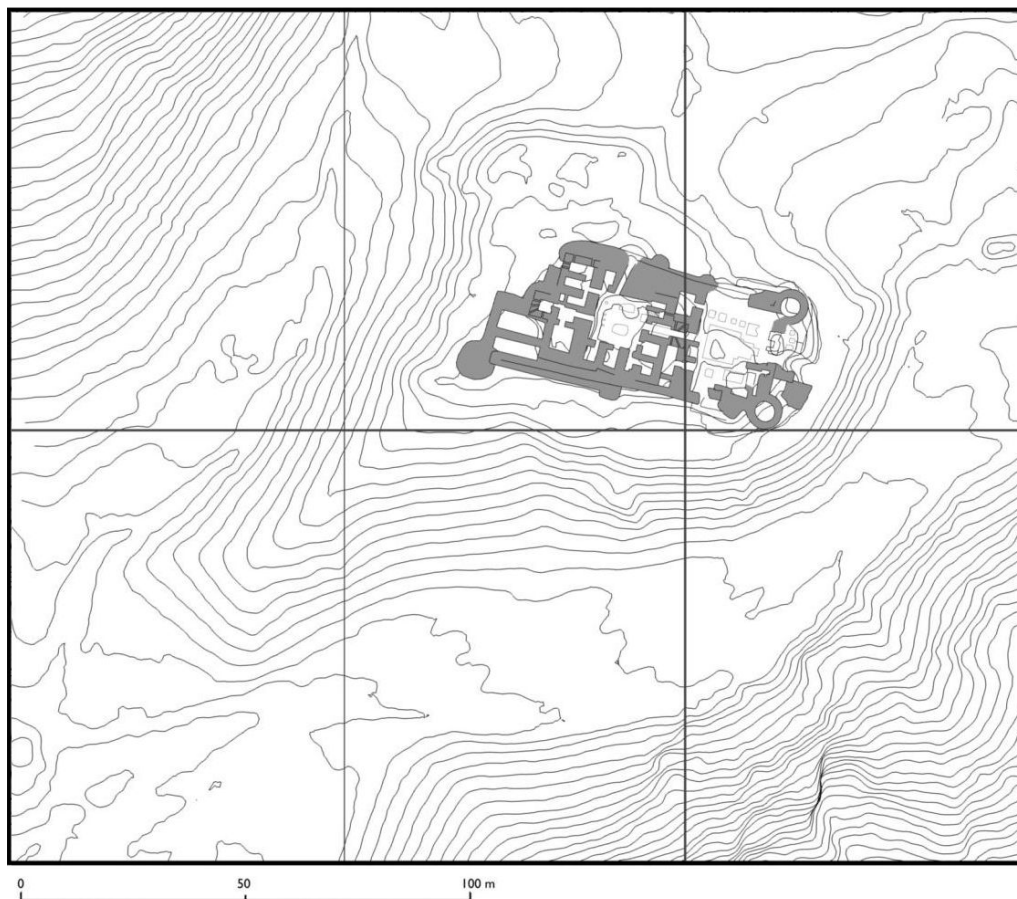


Fig. 7: Tepe Kafiriat  
(source: Més Ainak. A  
comprehensive assessment  
of the archaeological issue.  
Report from DAFA. Kabul,  
Afghanistan)



Fig. 8: Stupa (photograph: Tibor Paluch)



Fig. 9: Giant statue of the Buddha  
(photograph: Tibor Paluch)

constructions found at the excavation, even taller than the buildings, were the enormous standing, sitting or reclining statues of the Buddha. These at one time may have been 8–10 meters tall, but today all that has survived of the standing statues are their feet and shins, which even so reach 2 meters in height (*Fig. 9*).

On the basis of the results of the archeological excavation, the city had its golden age from the 2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C. until the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It did not survive to see the Islamic conquest in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, as no signs of this, primarily destruction layers, were found during the excavations.<sup>19</sup> Several reasons may have been behind the abandonment of this formerly flourishing settlement. In its current state there are just two dry river beds, but once two streams embraced the town, the *Kouh-I baba Wali* and the *Siso Khwar*, and their drying up can be placed at this period. It also may have been that the copper mining at this time had reached the limits of the strata that could be exploited on the basis of the technological development of the time and place. However, the settlement may also have lost its role in connection with the fact that in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, with the appearance of the Hephtalite Huns, significant renewed migrations of peoples occurred, as a result of which the branch of the Silk Road running here may have been relocated or abandoned.

The settlement's importance, which became more and more distinct during the course of the excavation, is shown by the fact that significant international movements were begun for its preservation. The goal of these movements is to convince the Afghan government not to allow the excavated monuments to be destroyed, but instead to safeguard them and present them to the public and for posterity. In conjunction with this, significant pressure is also being placed on the cultural organization of the UN, for it to provide effective assistance for this.<sup>20</sup> However, according to all indications economic interests will overwhelm the opinions related to the world's cultural heritage. According to the most recent news, the archeological work will be shut down at the end of August 2014, and starting in September the preparation of the infrastructure for mining will begin, after which the mining of the copper will commence.

#### RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

FUSSMAN, GÉRARD – LE BERRE, MARC

*Monuments bouddhiques de la région de Caboul*. Paris: Diffusion De Boccard, 1976.

HARMATTA, JÁNOS (ed.)

*History of Civilizations of Central Asia II. The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250*. Quétigny: Darantière, 1994.

LITVINSKY, BORIS A. (ed.)

*History of Civilizations of Central Asia III. The crossroads of civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750*. Quétigny: Darantière, 1996.

OMARA KHAN MASSOUDI (ed.)

*Mes Aynak – Recent Discoveries Along the Silk Road. Exhibition Catalogue*. Köln: asmuth druck + crossmedia gmbh & co., 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Recently the view is gaining ground, according to which Islam as a religious conquest occurred more slowly and “bloodlessly” in this area.

<sup>20</sup> [Benard, Cheryl – Sugarman, Eli – Rehm, Holly: Cultural Heritage vs. Mining on the New Silk Road? Finding Technical Solutions for Mes Aynak and Beyond. Conference Report. June 4-5, 2012, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C. 20036, 2012.](#)