

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES OF UZBEKISTAN – FROM THE CONQUESTS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT TO THE KUSHAN EMPIRE

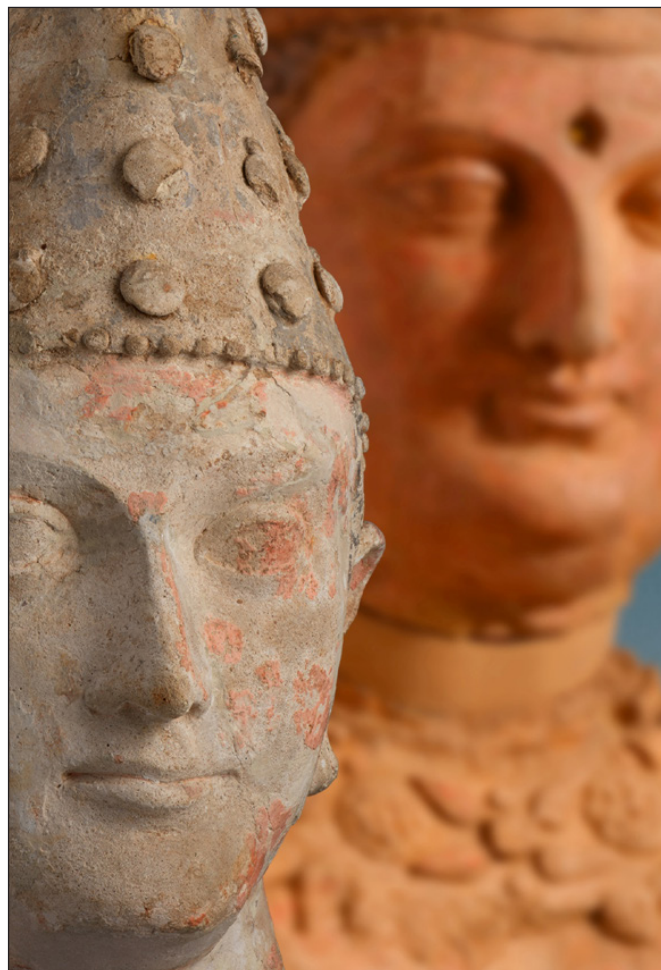
RÉKA GULYÁS

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 12 (2023) Issue 2, pp. 64–66.

*The name of Uzbekistan is appears more and more frequently in archaeological forums in Hungary, with an increasing number of researchers focusing on the archaeological record, ancient horse herds, and unique cultural heritage of the country (Fig. 1). This makes the joint exhibition of the James Simon Gallery and the Neues Museum, which opened in early May and will remain on display in Berlin until mid-January 2024, so remarkable.*

In historical context, Uzbekistan is known primarily as part of the Silk Road, while Samarkand and Bukhara as important stops on this trade route; however, the areas south of the Silk Road are still *terra incognita* for many. Yet the one-time provinces in the area of today's Uzbekistan were an important link between East and West in the Antiquity, and their important cities were centres of power and culture. The exhibition in Berlin provides the highlights of the archaeological record of these areas from the 4th century BC to the 4th century AD. As Herrmann Parzinger, President of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, said in his opening speech, the exhibition presents artefacts from this period that fill a gap in our knowledge of this region of Inner Asia. The exhibited finds tell us a lot about the living conditions and religious and moral culture of the peoples who once inhabited the region (Fig. 2).

The majority of the 280 exhibits came from various museums and archaeological institutes in



*Fig. 1. Poster motif of the exhibition: a terracotta statue of a prince and a statue of a Bodhisattva from the temple complex of Dalverzintepa. Institute of Art History in Tashkent, © polyform / studio Edgar Kandratian*



*Fig. 2. A view of the exhibition  
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Uzbekistan (State Museum of History of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, Archaeological Museum of Termez, Samarkand State Museum, Bakhara State Museum, Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan) and they had only been exhibited outside the country in the Louvre before. Curators Cayana Umerova, head of Art and Culture Development in Tashkent, and Manfred Nawroth, archaeologist at the Museum für Ur-und Frühgeschichte in Berlin, Completed this interesting and valuable selection with a further 70



Fig. 3. Persian King Darius III on a copy of the Alexander the Great mosaic and the routes of Alexander the Great's conquests on the museum floor

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Amur Darya), which was the natural border between Bactria and Sogdia, but which the West considered the 'end of the world'. However, this did not stop Alexander the Great; in 329 BC he drove Bessus across the Oxus and, after his capture and execution, crowned himself king of Persia. There he could have settled down, but as he wanted to reach India, he pushed his new empire further north to the next great river, the Jaxartes (now known as the Sihr-Darya), and founded a new city there called 'Alexandria the Farthest' (now Hundjand/Khujand, Tajikistan). The Sogds lived on one bank of the river, the Scythians on the other, and neither of them welcomed the invader; they made this known to the ruler with numerous rebellions and frequent attacks. Therefore, Alexander the Great had several fortresses built in the frontier, which can be seen in the exhibition in drone footages and photographs. The new king spread Hellenic culture to the conquered territories, appointed new governors to head the cities, and minted new coins. The finds found here, such as Alexander the Great's drachmae, utensils decorated with Greek motifs, and gold jewellery, are testimony to these activities.

The extreme weather conditions in the area and constant fighting took their toll on the strength and health of Alexander the Great and his troops. Some

artefacts from museums and collections in Berlin. With such a large number of objects on display, it is no wonder that the exhibition extends from the Neues Museum to the James-Simon Gallery and covers a total of 1200 square metres. The rooms in the Neues Museum have been largely devoted to finds related to the conquests of Alexander the Great in regions from Macedonia to southern Uzbekistan, while those in the James-Simon Gallery have been dedicated to artefacts of early Buddhism.

Alexander III, or Alexander the Great, achieved one of his greatest triumphs in 333 BC at the Battle of Issus, when he defeated the Persian king Darius III. This battle is the subject of the Alexander the Great mosaic excavated at Pompeii, which shows the two commanders sizing each other up as they engage in battle. This famous motif is displayed on the floor of one of the exhibition rooms, along with the subsequent conquests of the Macedonian general (Fig. 3).

Alexander the Great was 23 years old at the time of the Battle of Issos, and at the time no one would have guessed that this talented young man had only ten years to live. The Persian king, who had been deposed by Alexander the Great, was assassinated by Bessus satrap, who also claimed the Persian throne. Alexander the Great set out in pursuit with his troops, crossing the Hindu Kush and the Afghan desert to reach the River Oxus (today known as the



Fig. 4. A view of the exhibition,

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of his soldiers froze to death, others fell, and he himself died of malaria in Babylon in 323 BC (Fig. 4).

After the death of Alexander the Great, immigrants arrived in his former empire mainly from the East, calling themselves the Yuezhi, or Moon People, later known as the Kushan. The finds from southern Uzbekistan, mainly from Termiz and Dal'verzin tepe, which can be assigned to the Kushan culture, are exhibited in a special showroom at the James Simon Gallery. Central Asian Kushans settled in the area of Bactria in the 2nd century BC, and between 100 and 250 AD established a vast empire stretching from northern India to the Narmada River, which survived for a long time alongside the Roman and Chinese empires. The main characteristic of the Kushan culture was that it tolerated a variety of religious and artistic trends, which could develop in parallel. Two major trends in Kushan art can be distinguished: Gandhara art, which was influenced primarily by Hellenistic art, and Mathurau art, which had more Indian cultural characteristics. The western, Hellenistic influence is reflected, for example, in the fact that Buddha, who until then had usually been depicted as a lion or a wheel, now also appears in human form. An iconic piece in the exhibition is a carefully carved Buddha statue. Two monks stand beside a serene seated Buddha figure in the centre, and the composition is framed by Corinthian columns (Fig. 5).

One of the most important sites in south Uzbekistan is Dal'verzin Tepe, where, in addition to life-size Buddha statues, a gold hoard of thirty-six kilograms was discovered (it is worth noting that one of the world's largest gold mines is now also in Uzbekistan). The find assemblage includes gold jewellery items, bars and other artefacts. While the bracelets and necklaces have a rather simple, clean design that matches well with modern taste, the exhibition also includes a 3rd–4th-century AD gold hedgehog – once perhaps a talisman – from the area of present-day Tashkent, which is a fine example of the high quality of ancient goldworking.

In addition to the varied and exciting exhibits, the drone footage, photographs, and digital animations projected onto large surfaces are also fascinating, as they really bring the ancient empire to life in all its grandeur. Buddhist monasteries, fortresses, and cities come to life in the very recent footages of today's excavations, taken in November 2022.

The exhibition was the result of years of high-level political and contract negotiations. The most important thing for the Uzbek partner was to show the diversity of religions and cultures that existed before the advent of Islam in what is now Uzbekistan, and that at that time this region was a melting pot of different peoples and traditions. Uzbekistan has been opening up to the West since the fall of the the Soviet Union and is now seeking to distance itself from the great powers, Russia and China, to showcase its own rich cultural heritage and to reposition itself on the world cultural map. The exhibition in Berlin, which includes some 700 years of rich excavation material, is an important step in this endeavour.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by the Kadmos Publishing House in Berlin (Manfred Nawroth & Matthias Wemhoff, Hrsg.: *Archäologische Schätze aus Usbekistan. Von Alexander dem Großen bis zum Reich der Kuschan*. Paperback, 448 pages, 500 colour and black and white illustrations. ISBN 978-3-86599-545-2, € 49,80).



*Fig. 5. A finely carved early Buddha statue representing the Graeco-Buddhist style*

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