

# On the Track of the Ancient Silk Road

by Fredrik T. Hiebert

Driving westward from Tashkent (the modern capital of the Republic of Uzbekistan) to the ancient city of Samarkand, way station on the so-called Silk Road, is an amazing experience for any archaeologist who has heard about the fabled route. Samarkand is located on thick bluffs of fine loess silt along the Zarafshan River, and appears suddenly from the surrounding valley and plains. As one approaches the city, turquoise blue domes shimmer through the haze of dust that hangs in the air. Samarkand is a fascinating mosaic of old and new—a living archaeological site, with a bustling food market located in the shadow of the famous 14th century blue-domed mosque of Bibi Khanum. The center of the city is comprised of a large complex of monumental buildings called the Registan, with three glazed-tile facades forming a courtyard of striking beauty (Figs. 3,4). Samarkand was a center for law, religion, and the arts during the medieval Islamic period (12–15th century AD) and is built upon the remains of a much older city, Afrasiab, whose remains form an extensive field of ruins nearby. Afrasiab is currently being excavated by a joint Franco-Uzbek team. Recent research has pushed the origins of the town back into the middle of the 1st millennium BC.

Through ancient and medieval times, the “Silk Road” was a major thoroughfare for trade and travel between China, the Middle East, and Europe, a channel for the flow of goods, people, and ideas. However, the term “Silk Road”—coined in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen—is misleading, for there is no actual road. In Central Asia the route took the form of a series of oasis settlements separated by large stretches of desert and steppe. These central Asian settlements had an antiquity and



Fig. 1. A goat perches steadfastly on the head of a bronze pin from Sapalli tepe (2000 BC) in southern Uzbekistan. The tin in the bronze came from either Afghanistan or Kazakhstan. History Museum, Tashkent. H. 20 cm



Fig. 2. Uzbekistan. Map by Anne Martin-Montgomery



Fig. 3. The intricately tiled facades of the Registan were erected in the 15th century by the great Uzbek ruler Ulugh-Beg. They enclose a courtyard at the heart of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, one of the central “staging” points on the famed Silk Road.



Fig. 4. A monumental decorative tile from a 15th century AD building in Samarkand. This and the other objects pictured here can be seen during the current exhibition of treasures from Uzbekistan at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania.

Art Museum, Tashkent. H. 65 cm



Fig. 5. The road south from Samarkand into southern Uzbekistan drops from the peaks of the Hissar mountains to the broad valley of the Amu Darya River. The mountain range is home to the wild goats frequently pictured on classical Bactrian objects like that shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 6 a,b. (a) Fred Hiebert (left) and Timur Shirinov excavate within a structure at the Bronze Age site of Sapalli tepe. The ridges that can be seen running across the center of the photo and elsewhere show where wall foundations lie beneath the surface. The patches of green indicate where the rooms of the complex were excavated in earlier field seasons—the soil that was disturbed holds the scant moisture better than the unexcavated walls. (b) Plan of Sapalli tepe.

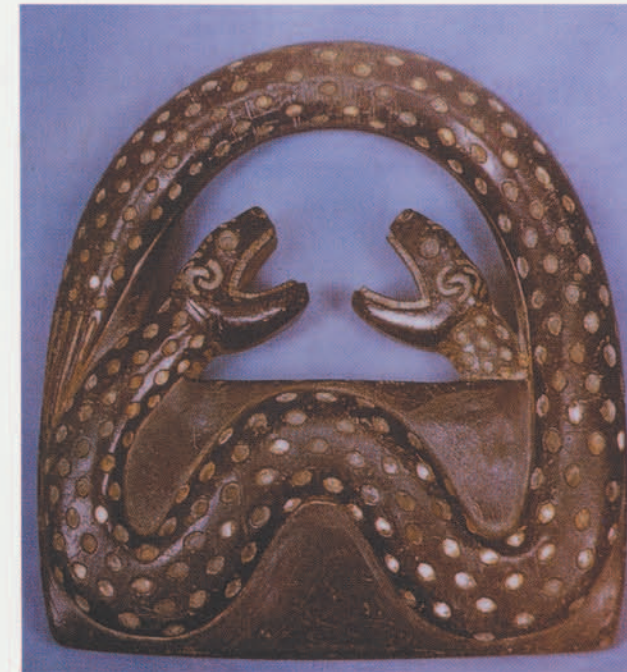
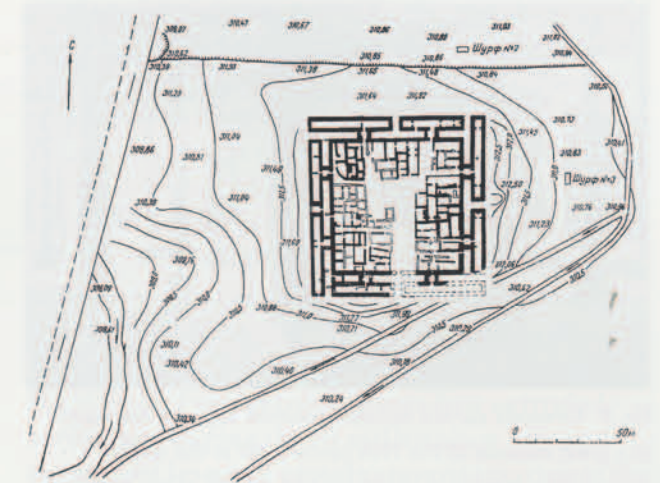


Fig. 7. Made of steatite with alabaster inlay, this ritually stylized loomweight dates to the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. It is decorated with intertwined snakes in a style known across Mesopotamia, Iran, and Central Asia. It was found at the turn of the century in the Soch Valley of Uzbekistan. History Museum, Tashkent. H. 36 cm



Fig. 8. An animal with a long neck bites its tail on a 9th century AD bowl from Afrasiab. Registan Museum, Samarkand. Diam. 25 cm



Fig. 9. Ornately carved wooden columns support the weight of a great mosque of the 19th century AD in the walled oasis center of Khiva in northern Uzbekistan. (One of these columns will be in the Ross exhibit.)  
H. of column ca. 3.5 m

a distinctive culture of their own (Fig. 2), and along with their associated rich burial sites have attracted the attention of archaeologists for more than one hundred years. The Russian Archaeological Society, succeeded by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and now the Republic of Uzbekistan's Institute of Archaeology have worked here continuously since the 19th century, uncovering the history and archaeology of this region.

#### SOUTHERN UZBEKISTAN

To the south of Samarkand, the modern road leads through a small mountain pass and opens onto a large river valley overlooking the plain of the massive Amu Darya River. The Amu Darya is the Oxus River described by classical geographers and historians like Strabo, Ptolemy, and Herodotus. It flowed through the ancient country of Bactria, and in the broad alluvial plains of nearby small rivers are dozens of mounded classical-period Bactrian sites (called "tepes" in Uzbek). This region of southern Uzbekistan has been actively explored since the turn of the century, and large-scale excavations have revealed complex cities, uncovered early traces of Buddhism, and documented the development of the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms and that of the subsequent Kushan dynasty.

In the early 1970s Soviet archaeologists located much earlier Bronze Age remains in the

region. These "Bronze Age Bactrian" sites, dating to around 2000 BC, had unique architecture and did not compare to anything else that had been excavated in the greater Near East. They were extremely well planned but could hardly be called "urban"; they appeared to be individual fortified building complexes.

These Bronze Age sites have a distinctive set of ceramics and small finds comparable in technological expertise and style with finds from other Bronze Age cultures of Iran, South Asia, and the Near East. But the closest parallels can be found only in Turkmenistan, separated from southern Uzbekistan by some 300 miles of desert. There the Soviet archaeologists Viktor Sarianidi and Emil Masimov discovered a series of Bronze Age oasis sites characterized by surprisingly similar fortified architecture, ceramics, and artifact styles. The sites found in the delta of the Murgab River of Turkmenistan were the predecessors of the classical Silk Road sites in the region, as were the early sites of southern Uzbekistan.

#### COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

Our collaborative research in Uzbekistan began in 1994, after Uzbekistan gained its independence. The initial field team consisted of myself, Timur Shirinov, director of the Institute of Archaeology in Samarkand, and Dr. Valeri Gulaev, assistant director of the Institute of Archaeology in Moscow. Leaving Samarkand, we drove south into the foothills and passes of the Hissar mountain range (Fig. 5). There we saw wild tulips and wild goats like those often depicted in the iconography of the ancient Bactrian world (Fig. 1). South of the mountains we followed the small rivers which approach but do not join the Amu Darya, instead forming vast delta-like fans bordering the great river. The first sites that we investigated were Sapalli tepe and Djarkutan tepe (Fig. 6). Both are unique building complexes of the Bronze Age where the architecture and ceramics had already been revealed through widespread excavations. Over subsequent weeks we worked with several enthusiastic colleagues from the Uzbek Institute of Archaeology, creating a true collaborative study of an early Asian civilization.

The results of our research, based on the collection and study of faunal and botanical materials, and analysis of a new set of radiocarbon dates, indicate that the distinctive oasis civilization of southern Uzbekistan employed large-scale irrigation agriculture as early as 2200 BC, and was comparable in social complexity with the neighboring great civilizations in the Indus Valley, Iran, and Mesopotamia. We have subsequently been able to sample sites in the region that show that these oases are in many ways the cultural and economic predecessors of the classical cities which later came to be major trade centers on the Silk Road.

#### TREASURES OF UZBEKISTAN: THE GREAT SILK ROAD


An exhibition of objects from Uzbekistan has opened at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania (see box). The opportunity to exhibit these treasures is a direct result of the excellent relations generated by our international collaboration. The pieces illustrate the richness and variety of the ancient cultures of Uzbekistan from the Bronze Age through the 19th century AD.

"Treasures of Uzbekistan:  
The Great Silk Road"  
November 8, 1999 – February 13, 2000

Now on display at the Arthur Ross Gallery on the  
campus of the University of Pennsylvania.  
Organized and curated  
by Fredrik Hiebert of the UPM.  
Coming for the first time to the United States  
from Uzbekistan museums, objects dating from the  
Bronze Age to the 19th century AD, including  
textiles, tiles, ceramics, architectural elements, and  
rare manuscripts. For information on hours and  
directions, please call (215) 898-2083 or visit their  
web site at [www.upenn.edu/ARG/](http://www.upenn.edu/ARG/).

FREDRIK T. HIEBERT, the Robert Dyson Assistant Professor and Assistant Curator of the Near East Section at the UPM, investigates the Bronze Age civilizations and trade routes of the deserts of Central Asia and the related ancient ports and shipwrecks of the Black Sea. For this research, he was presented with the Chairman's Award from National Geographic Committee on Research in 1998, and an honorary commendation from the Uzbekistan Ministry of Culture in July 1999.

Exquisite objects from the Bronze Age world of southern Uzbekistan show that the region was already in contact with the great surrounding civilizations of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC (Fig. 7). During the 1st millennium BC the art and archaeology of Uzbekistan reflect cosmopolitan influences from as far away as Europe, China, and India. The sites of Central Asia at that time took their place among the cities of the ancient world. The art and archaeology clearly demonstrate the spread of Greek influence and, later, Buddhism. Formal trade routes first extended across Asia during the 1st millennium AD—and the storied image of camel caravans arriving at the loess hills of Afrasiab would have been a reality (Fig. 8). By the medieval period, the great oasis cities became world-renowned centers of art and learning. During the 18th and 19th centuries, power shifted to the oasis lords—the khans of Central Asia, renowned for their wealth (Fig. 9).

The Silk Road manifested itself in different ways through the history of the region. It was never a simple road, but there is no doubt that this term is an important abstract concept that denotes the centrality of this region. 

#### RECOMMENDED READING

- Frye, R.  
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