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## **From Northern Afghanistan to Xinjiang, Hellenistic influences in the history of a Yuezhi-Kushan burial**

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### **Abstract:**

*In this essay an object in particular, that is the golden clasp with two Macedonian warriors from the Kushan site of Tillya Tepe, burial n° 3, will be discussed as a case-study. Using a comparative method, this artefact becomes clearly an example of cultural interaction with other sites, histories and objects along the Bactrian side of the Silk Road, till China.*

*The Hellenistic, Central Asiatic, “nomadic”, and Chinese artistic and historical influences, will be here analysed in relation with a particular geographic area that is the Oxus Region between the conquests of Alexander the Great (4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C) and the early Kushan kingdom (1<sup>st</sup> c. A.D.). The area of Bactria, that has the river Oxus (Amu Darya) as a natural landmark and way of communication, saw during the period taken in consideration, an incredible and unique process of cultural assimilation and syncretism. This artistic syncretism of the ancient world clearly trespassed the traditional geographical and cultural barriers.*

### **I. The historical background of Tillya Tepe: the legacy of Alexander the Great in the Oxus region, and the city of Ai Khanoum until the Kushans (334 B.C- 1st century. A. D)**

Although it is a well studied subject (Briant 2010: 156-157), it is still interesting to summarize the history of the events that preceded the formation of the Kushan dominions of Northern Afghanistan in the area of Tillya Tepe (fig. 1). I will concentrate here the attention on the Greek military and cultural penetration into a specific region of Central Asia: Bactria. The historical parenthesis that follows is used with the aim of explaining the Hellenistic influence clearly visible in the golden clasp from Tillya Tepe in the second chapter.

Concerning the history of Afghanistan, India and Central Asia more in general, an un-precedented event was the invasion of the

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Macedonian army of Alexander the Great into the dominions of the Persian Empire. In 334 B.C Alexander started war against Darius III Codomannus. With a series of brilliant, victorious and rapid military campaigns, the Macedonian general, son of Philip II, launched the first Western military expedition on such a grand scale in the vast and unknown territories of Central Asia, against the Achaemenid Empire. This enormous military enterprise arguably represented the first transcontinental conquest of the world, but it was also an exploration that arrived far beyond the lands known to the Greek geographers. On May 327 B.C. Alexander crossed the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush and entered in the Indian Subcontinent (Torri 2007: 93). He defeated King Porus of India in the Battle of Jhelum, defined “*among the most brilliant operations of ancient warfare*” (Bosworth 1996: 6). After a mutiny of his veteran Macedonian troops, the army reached the river Hydaspes, a tributary affluent of the Indus. There, Alexander was forced to retire the whole army back to Babylon, where he died under unclear circumstances, but arguably of illness, in 323 B.C.

After the celebrated Alexander’s expedition an enormous empire was formed. From Pella in Macedonia, the capital established by Alexander’s father, to Egypt where the young general founded Alexandria at the delta of the Nile, to present day Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan till the Punjab (the region of the five rivers that includes the Indus), till the doors of India. After his unexpected death, the eastern part of the empire of Alexander the Great was divided and after the treaty that followed the battle of Ipsus in 304 B.C, Seleucus I *Nicator* became the ruler of a vast area from Babylon to the region of Bactria and the founder of the Seleucid Empire (Torri 2007: 93).

It should be noted that Hellenism was a truly important cultural phenomenon that introduced in Central Asia many aspects of the Greek culture, such as a greek system of writing, and most importantly, urban life in cities. In Central Asia, Alexander himself founded, on virgin territories of strategic importance, many *polis* with the first function of military garrisons flourishing. These outposts were also strategic for the spread of Hellenism. It was a period that, with the climax of the Greco Bactrian Kingdom, was characterized by multiculturalism for the

Greeks-Macedonians and a multilingual environment for the local inhabitants of Central Asia (Frye 1996: 106).

The region of the Oxus, and the region of Bactria in particular (fig. 1), seems to be an important as well as an evocative place, situated between the Oxus River and the mountains of the Hindu Kush. As Frank L. Holt recently wrote, “*like the Nile, the Oxus region had a potent influence on the imaginations [...] it was rumoured for example that rich deposits of gold lay unmolested along its banks, and that the actual descendants of Alexander the Great lived near its upper reaches*” (Holt 2003: 27).

Bactria and the territories of the Amu Darya, (the current name for the river Oxus) have often been defined by specialists as the “*Central Asiatic Mesopotamia*” (AA-VV 2005: 410-411). Since the time of Strabo and Ptolemy, the region has been identified of having a strong connection with both of the banks of the river Oxus (AA-VV 2005: 411). The region has also been named by Pierre Leriche: “*the land of a thousand cities*” (Cribb and Herrmann 2007: 121).

In the Afghan province of the Seleucid Empire between 311 B.C. and 246 B.C. and in the Greek colonies, the Hellenization of Central Asia, after the death of Alexander, had reached its peak (AA-VV 1994: 95). As A. H. Dani and P. Bernard wrote, both quoting Robert (Robert 1973), this was, “[...] *a crucial period for these colonies as their Hellenism was then nourished by frequent contact with Mediterranean influences which were able to penetrate freely, propagated by officials, soldiers, merchants, artists and intellectuals*” (AA-VV 1994: 92). Between 246-238 B.C. Diodotus, the sovereign of Bactria-Sogdiana, took power in Central Asia in the region of the Oxus and formed the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom (AA-VV 1994: 92).

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Figure 1. Map of the Bactrian region between present day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. It shows the vicinity of the sites taken in consideration of the region. The site of Tillya Tepe is also indicated.

After the re-conquest of India made by Antiochus III the Great 203 B.C. and the conquests of the Punjab in 183 B.C. conducted by the General Demetrius, a whole Greek Empire was built over the region of northern and eastern Central Asia (Torri 2007: 93). It was the biggest empire ever formed by Greek-Macedonian colonists and it included the Oxus region, until the Pamir and the Punjab until the delta of the Indus (Torri 2007: 93). This region is often called Paropamisade (Tarn 1938: 141).

Under the reign of the Buddhist king Menander, the Greek Empire of this part of Asia was divided in two autonomous provinces: one was Bactria and the other one was the northern part of Pakistan (the present day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), including parts of the Punjab (Torri 2007: 94). As Tarn notes, specifically underlining the essential peculiarities of this Greek Kingdom: *“Bactria [...] was an Hellenistic state, with many of the usual characteristics of such states but one very important one of its own, and its history was a branch of Seleucid history [...] as a Hellenistic state it must be treated.”* (Tarn 1938: xx).

Before starting to analyse "the decline and fall" (Edward Gibbon) of the last Greek states, under the attacks of the Parthians and the *Sakas* in the region of Bactria, it is worth coming back to the Seleucid Empire's times (312 B.C-63 B.C), to an integral episode in the founding of the city of Ai Khanoum in northern Afghanistan.



Figure 2. Photographic view of the excavations conducted at Ai Khanoum by the French equipe of archaeologists (DAFA), directed by Paul Bernard during the Sixties, before the Soviet invasion of 1978.

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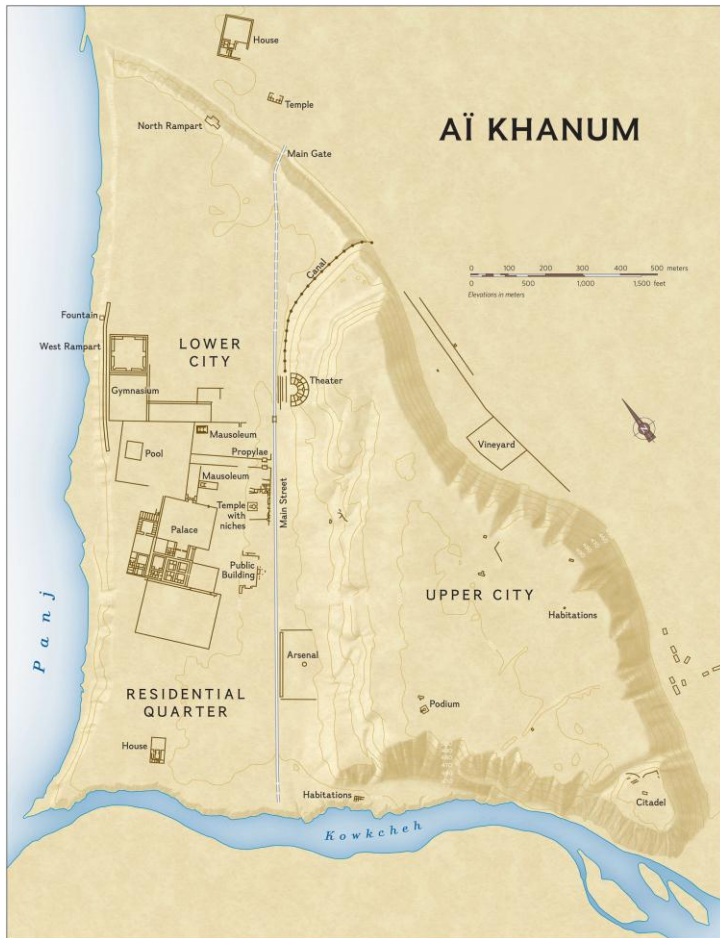


Figure 3. Map that shows in detail the city of Ai Khanoum, Bactria, northern Afghanistan.

Ai Khanoum, or “Lady Moon” (Holt 2005: 154) is the site of once upon a time a flourishing Greek colony (fig. 2), situated at the confluence between the river Amu Darya and the Kokcha, currently at the border between northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is now completely devastated by the war and pillaged by treasure hunters. However, just a few years after Tarn’s death and after a life of work on the Greeks in Bactria the site was discovered by the French

archaeologist Paul Bernard in 1962. The DAFA (Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan) started to systematically excavate the place with a modern methodology (Holt 2005: 155).

A recent study by the Japanese and the French also reconstructed the city in 3D and shows the real shape of how the city at the frontier of the Greek world could have appeared at visitors' eyes (Cribb and Herrmann 2007: 155-162).

The site (fig. 3) features an elevated acropolis with a citadel on the top of the upper city. On lower ramparts Ai Khanoum includes a gymnasium, a palace, a mausoleum with a colonnade (*propylae*). In Ai Khanoum, during the Greek rule, as Paul Bernard observed, the Greek language, and of course the Greek culture, were perceived "*as the cement for national identity*" (Bernard 2011: 95).

But the city of Ai Khanoum was destined to fall. As Rachel Mairs writes, "*even if the site was well-defended with a large natural acropolis and heavy fortifications [...] was sacked in the mid-second century B.C., around the time that the Greek kingdom of Bactria as a whole fell to the nomadic invasions from the north*" (Mairs 2009). The destiny of Ai Khanoum was to be one of disappearing, being pillaged and destroyed repeatedly, from the wars of the ancient times, to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1978, until the modern warfare of the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Masood against the Taliban (Holt 2005: 154). Concerning the ancient end of the city, as Paul Bernard wrote, "*[...] it came suddenly around 145 B.C. Nomads from northeast, perhaps Sakas on their way to plunder Bactria, set fire to the palace of Ai Khanoum, the seat and the symbol of authority, and robbed the treasury*" (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 104).

The Greek dominions of the lands of Bactria, already seized by the increasing power of the Parthians, were finally left in ruins by the invasions of the Saka in 135 B.C (Torri 2009: 94). Even for the Indo-Greek kingdoms of ancient Gandhara and the Punjab those were the last days and for the first century C.E. they were also wiped out by the Sakas and by the Parthians (Narain 1957).

Ai Khanoum is therefore the best example to illustrate the Greek presence in the Bactrian region, before the invasions of the nomads and the first Kushan period that is otherwise exemplified in the Tillya Tepe archaeological findings. It is also a perfect example of the



passage between the Greek era of Bactria and the so-called “nomadic” period (Skripkin 1994: 281).

As mentioned before, the city experienced the definitive destruction in 145 B.C. by another “nomadic” population: the Yuezhi. They came from China, from the region of the Taklamakan, and they soon became the first founders of the Kushan Empire of Bactria (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 104). As Xinru Liu writes: “*by the late second century B. C. E., according to the Han envoy Zhang Qian [...] the Yuezhi tribe conquered the region called Daxia, probably Hellenistic Bactria in modern Afghanistan, and ruled this territory from a city on the Oxus*” (Xinru 2002: 256).

This invasion of the Yuezhi proves the existence of a series of contacts along the Silk Road, from China to Afghanistan, even since Greek times. With every probability they were “*the invaders of Ai Khanoum*” (Xinru 2002: 266). The Yuezhi-Kushan, are therefore, with every probability, the cultural ethnic group that produced the art of the necropolis of Tillya Tepe (Ibid: 261).

These *phenomena* of cultural migration and assimilation became even more evident thanks to the extraordinary discoveries made back in the 1970’s by Russian archaeologists. One scholar in particular, the archaeologist Victor Sarianidi is the discoverer of the so-called “Golden Hill” of Northern Afghanistan (Sarianidi 1980: 125). The site is situated in the plain surrounding Bactra (Balkh), the ancient Greek capital of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, and not far from Ai Khanoum itself.

These revealing burials dating back from the beginning of the First Century C.E., give an extraordinary new light to the so-called period of the “Dark Ages” (Sarianidi 1980: 125; Enoki, et al. 2011: 188). Tillya Tepe is therefore one of these enlightening evidences. As the Russian scholars Enoki, Koshelenko and Haidary analysed: in Tillya Tepe, “*the social barriers dividing the world of the Greeks from that of the Bactrians were swept away [...] by the nomads [and] also with them their art, which spread in their wake in Bactria, Sogdiana and the Indian Subcontinent*” (Enoki, et al. 2011: 188).



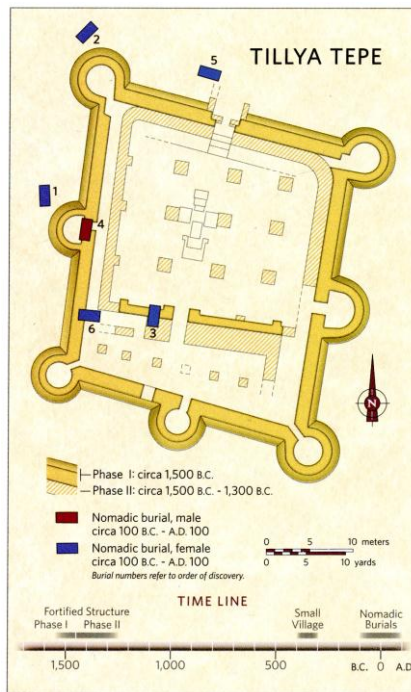


Figure 4. Map of the various phases of occupation of the necropolis of Tillya Tepe; those highlighted in blue are from the burials between the 1st c. B.C. and the 1st A.D., and the tomb 3 (Hiebert and Cambon 2011).

It therefore becomes clear that the ethnic group of the Yuezhi, moving from the Chinese Turkestan founded the first cultural basis for the Kushan Empire at the necropolis of Tillya Tepe (fig. 4). As Chiara Silvia Antonini pointed out, quoting the discoverer of the burials (Sarianidi: 1985), those “*are the tombs of the Kushan princes, dating back to the beginning of the Christian Era*” (Antonini 1994: 296). Coming in between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., the findings of Tillya Tepe actually “*fix the gap*” of this obscure period in between the Greco Bactrian Kingdom and the Kushan Kingdom (Sarianidi 1980: 130).

## **II. The golden clasp from the tomb n° 3 of Tillya Tepe: comparative perspectives and evidence from the Oxus region to the Taklamakan desert**



Figure 5. Clasp representing two Greco-Macedonian warriors, from tomb n° 3 of Tillya Tepe, second quarter of the 1st c. A.D., gold, 9.0 x 6.3 cm, National Museum of Kabul.

It clearly emerges that the findings of Tillya Tepe give light to a period about which literally nothing was known. The discovery of the “Golden Hill” connects the site to the legacy of Alexander the Great and of the Seleucids (Sarianidi 1985). However, it is also related, as previously illustrated, to the fall of Ai Khanoum and of the Greco Bactrian Kingdom.

The tomb n° 3 of Tillya Tepe is an extraordinary rich burial of a woman (Schiltz 2011: 254). It can arguably be dated in quite a precise way thanks to a Parthian coin in the hands of the lady (Schiltz 2011: 254), probably a local imitation (Sarianidi 1980: 84), dating back to the reign of the Parthian sovereign Mithridates II, 123-88 B.C. (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 261). It is still disputed if the whole burial complex

of Tillya Tepe can be dated purely through the evidence of coins, but one coin in particular, from the time of the Roman emperor Tiberius circa A.D. 37, has been used to provide an accurate system of dating the tomb (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 225).

One object in particular from the tomb n° 3 is reputed for our scope to be paradigmatic of this mix of Central Asiatic and Hellenistic cultures and is the golden clasp with the two warriors (fig. 5). This artefact was found around the neck of the woman of the tomb and offers a very stimulating framework of research. It is used both to understand the Greek and “nomadic” influences in the arts of Central Asia during the period taken into consideration and on the geography of the Silk Road (Frye 1996: 154).

As Joan Aruz clearly pointed out: *“the Tillya tepe ornaments reveal great skill in their execution and a local style that incorporates traditions handed down by the Greeks, combined with nomadic animal-style imaginery and features that may be traced to China”* (Aruz and Valtz 2012: 5). Paul Francfort also points out the nomadic influences of the Scythians in the art of the tomb (Aruz and Valtz 2012:6) and writes, connecting this burial from Tillya Tepe with the route of trade of ideas, men and cultures of Central Asia, *“where cities and empires developed and extensive networks of communication, notably the ‘Silk Road’, flourished from first century B.C. onward”* (Francfort 2012: 88). As John Boardman writes, the *“echoes of Greece and China”* from the findings of Tillya Tepe, and from the clasp with the two Macedonian warriors are particularly perceivable (Boardman 2012: 102, 109).

In analysing the various analogies traceable in the golden clasp with the two warriors from the tomb n° 3, it is important to look at the relationship between the Greco-Macedonian influence with other objects from different regions and areas.

The clasp, as is now known, does not represent a portrayal of the Greek god Ares, as Sarianidi once pointed out (Sarianidi 1980: 11), but it portrays two Macedonian warriors, one facing the other, wearing the Greco-Bactrian helmet (Schiltz 2011: 254). This helmet in particular and the bull’s horns, the horns of the Egyptian god Amon-Ra (fig. 5) and as Véronique Schiltz has illustrated, offer close similarities in terms of style to the coins of the period of Alexander the Great and of the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides (fig. 6-7) (Schiltz 2011: 254).

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Figure 6. Silver coin of Eucratides the Great, sovereign of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom between 171-145 B.C. The horns visible on the helmet, a typical Bactrian one, are very similar to the horns of the helmet of the two warriors from the gilded clasp of Tillya Tepe.



Figure 7. Silver coin of the reign of Lysimachus (306-281 B.C.) with the portrait of Alexander with the 'horns of Amon'. The image of Alexander was used by the 'Diadokhoi' (his successors) as a way of legitimizing the political power.





Figure 8. Drawing representing one of the two warriors of the golden clasp with a detail of the profile that resembles the portrait of Alexander from the 'House of the Fauno' of Pompei, note the same style of the eyebrows (Aruz and Valtz 2012: 109).



Figure 9. Detail from the mosaic of 'the battle of Gaugamela' showing Alexander the Great, House of the Fauno, Pompei, around 100 B.C, Naples, National Archeological Museum.

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The influence of the image of Alexander the Great also appears evident from the clasp of the two warriors of Tillya Tepe (see fig. 5). Note the portrait of Alexander from the floor mosaic of the ‘House of the Fauno’ at Pompei, (fig. 9) from around 100 B.C. The mosaic shows an episode of the light charge of Alexander’s cavalry against the army of Darius III at the battle of Gaugamela (331 B.C.). This reference to Alexander that shows him, unlike the Persian troops, without trousers but with Greek armour also appears on Tillya Tepe’s clasp. In both cases Alexander is depicted with open-wide eyes, (fig. 8-9) by the artists with the aim of emphasizing the immortal and almost divine nature of the Macedonian general. There is a remarkable resemblance of all of this visible in the golden clasp.

The style of the Greek dress, on the upper part of the motive of the robe, the *toga*, from the clasp, is also very similar to that one coming from a statue found in Ai Khanoum, portraying a young Greek ephebe, recently destroyed in a iconoclastic fury by the Taliban (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 129, 254).

The sword that the left warrior from Tillya Tepe clasp has attached to his belt (fig. 5) is also very similar to an object excavated from the so-called “Temple of the Oxus” of Takht-e-Sangin (Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 255). This detail of the clasp is almost identical to the “*makhaira [...] zoomorphic handle [...] shaped like a griffin head*”, excavated from the temple of the Oxus (fig. 10) (Litvinskij and Pichikiyan 1999: 48).



Figure 10. the 'makhaira sword' handle shaped like griffin head coming from the 'Temple of the Oxus of Takht-e-Sangin, 2nd c. B.C. This object is very similar to the sword that the warrior on the left of the gilded clasp has attached to his belt (see figure 5) (Litvinskij and Pichikiyan 1999).



Figure 11. Aerial view of the Temple of The Oxus of Takht-e-Sangin, southern Tajikistan, (3rd c B.C.- 1st c. A.D.)



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Situated in southern Tajikistan, and also excavated and studied by the Russian archaeologists, the sanctuary of the “Temple of the Oxus” of Takht-e-Sangin (fig. 11) is modelled on the plan of an Iranian Zoroastrian temple of the fire (AA-VV 1993: 12). On the basis of an architectural comparison between Ai Khanoum and Takht-e-Sangin, the temple that can be dated back to the third century B.C., but will be later modified under the Kushan dynasty, until the third-fourth century A.D. (AA-VV 1993: 12).

A small head in ivory, clearly representing Alexander the Great, found in Takht-e-Sangin (fig. 12) also gives the most resembling artistic and cultural exchange with the clasp with the two Macedonian warriors from Tillya Tepe (Litvinskij and Pichikiyan 1981: 133-167).



Figure 12. Small ivory head of Alexander the Great from Takht-e- Sangin (Litvinskij and Pichikiyan 1981).

This cultural affiliation is of course not limited only to the Bactrian region. Interestingly, a much farther link through the Silk Road exists. A comparative study of the artistic influences between the various objects, show the interconnections between the remarkable finds of

Sampul and Yingpan in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, at the border of the desert of Taklamakan, and those of Tillya Tepe (Jones 2009: 23-31). The trousers of tapestry found by the archaeologists in the oasis of Sampul (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. A.D.), portraying a Greek warrior with the Hellenistic diadem (fig. 15) are reputed here symptomatic of this. A similar style appears also between the textiles enriched with cupids, centaurs and flowers that cover the body of the man of Yingpan (fig. 16). The near life-size head of the Yuezhi-Kushan prince from the palace of Khalchayan in southern Uzbekistan also shows the peculiar realism that is shared between local Bactrian traditions and Hellenistic traditions (AA-VV 1994: 189). The headband-diadem of the warrior of Khalchayan is very similar to that of the warrior of Sampul and the style of the hairdo refers to Alexander the Great, despite the artificial skull deformation (fig. 13).

Despite coming from a later period than the finds from Tillya Tepe, the golden diadem on the head of the mummy of Yingpan (fig. 16) surely exemplifies one thing. That the Hellenistic influence is still perceivable hundreds of miles away from the Oxus region, in a oasis of the Lop Nur desert, in the remote Chinese province of Xinjiang. Hellenism, after Tillya Tepe and the Kushans, therefore expanded from Bactria to the western provinces of what is now China.

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Figure 13 and 14. On the left (13): Head made of clay that represents a Kushan prince, wearing an hellenistic diadem, excavated from the royal palace of Khalchayan, Uzbekistan.

On the right (14): Marble portrait of Alexander the Great, (2nd c. B.C), Archeological Museum of Istanbul.



Figure 15. Tapestry fashioned into a pair of trousers portraying a Macedonian warrior with a tunic, an Hellenistic diadem and a spear, Sampul oasis, Taklamakan, Xinjiang, 2nd 3rd-c B.C.

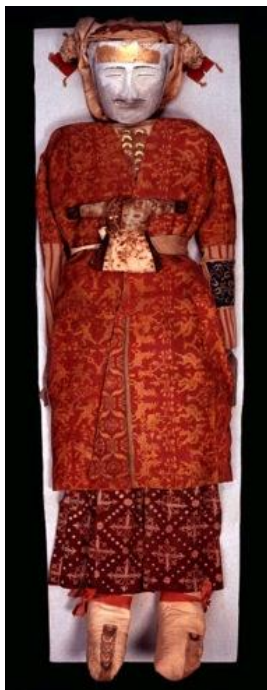


Figure 16. “The man of Yingpan”, Taklamakan desert, Lopnur region, Xinjiang, 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. A. D.

**Conclusion:**

The objects of the site of Tillya Tepe, made for the vast majority with gold, are representative of the artistic fusion with Greco-Bactrian, Yuezhi, early Kushan, nomadic of the steppes and Hellenistic influences. They are an extraordinary example of cultural fusion and syncretism and the result of interactions between different archeological sites of Central Asia.

It becomes clear that Greco-Macedonian-Hellenistic, as well as local, foreign and “nomadic” elements, form a fusion of characteristics that confirms the importance of the Bactrian route of the Silk Road along the region of the Oxus in the communication of ideas, inventions and styles (Hansen 2012). In looking at the finds from tomb n° 3 of Tillya Tepe, the concept of ethnicity is put in discussion and assimilated in a pluralistic way between Western and Eastern cultural and artistic traditions.

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