



ALTIN TEPE

ALTIN (ALTYN) TEPE, a settlement of the Neolithic period and Bronze Age in the south of Turkmenistan near the village of Miana. Extensive excavations have been carried out there since 1965 by the South Turkmenistan Archeological Complex Expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the Turkmen SSR and of the Leningrad Archeological Department of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The now shapeless ruins cover an area of 25 hectares and rise to a height of 22 m. Strata containing traces of human habitation extend 8 m deeper than the surrounding plain, so that the total thickness of the stratification reaches 30 m. The excavations show continuous development of an early agricultural culture from the 5th to the early 2nd millenium B.C. Though a settlement of the Neolithic Jaitun culture (6th millenium B.C.) is situated nearby, at Altin Tepe no similar strata have been discovered. During the early Neolithic period (5th millenium B.C., complex of the Namazga type), Altin Tepe formed a comparatively large settlement covering an area of 6 hectares. The strata of that time have yielded pottery painted with geometric designs, mainly large triangles on a yellowish background, as well as bone and copper artifacts. In the 4th millenium B.C. the inhabited area of Altin Tepe increased to 12 hectares, and the prevalent ceramics have a red background decorated with parallel lines along the rim. Large realistic statuettes show seated, plump female figures with painted-on necklaces and other ornaments. At the end of the 4th to the early 3rd millenium B.C., Altin Tepe covered 25 hectares, acquiring the character of a large inhabited center partly at the expense of neighboring villages which were abandoned from that time. During this period appear ceramics with polychromatic painting in the



Geoksur style; the excavations permit a detailed tracing of their development (strata A 9-14). At this time Altin Tepe had a surrounding wall of unbaked bricks 1.5-2 m thick. Brick kilns were situated in the northern part of the settlement. Findings include single and collective burials in tombs with an oval ground plan (*tolos*), a house containing many rooms, and a sanctuary with an oval hearth in its center.

During the early Bronze Age (middle of the 3rd millennium B.C., complex of the Namazga IV type), late Neolithic traditions altered (strata A 4-8); the potter's wheel came gradually into use, and in the A 6 stratum most of the pottery is mechanically produced. The painting becomes coarser, and the number of decorated vessels decreases. To that time belongs the concentration in one of the quarters of Altin Tepe of small temple buildings with rectangular hearths (*podia*), and toward the end of this period the main entrance, 15 m in width, was given shape by massive pylons and decorated pilasters.

Altin Tepe reached its most flourishing stage at the end of the 3rd-early 2nd millennium B.C. (complex of the Namazga V type), when it was a settlement of the early urban type. Various handicrafts achieved considerable development, concentrated in the northern part of the settlement ("artisans' quarters"), where some sixty two-tiered kilns have been discovered. A religious complex emerged consisting of a four-stepped tower reminiscent of the Mesopotamian ziggurats, spacious storerooms, and a priest's tomb in which objects of great value have been found, among them the gold heads of a wolf and of a bull. Excavations of inhabited quarters and of tombs situated there make it possible to distinguish three groups of inhabitants according to their way of life and degree of wealth. The "artisans' quarter" is characterized by massive blocks, containing many rooms calculated for a community of large families with a common household economy, and by poor tombs. The quarters of wealthy citizens consisted of houses for small families with separate courtyards containing household buildings. Beads and seals were found in the tombs there. The upper society of Altin Tepe was represented by the inhabitants of the "quarter of the nobility," which had regularly planned streets along which were situated neatly built houses occupying an area of 80 to 100 square m. The tombs in this quarter have yielded many ornaments of silver and precious stones, as well as seals and female terracotta statuettes.

The culture of Altin Tepe during the developed Bronze Age is characterized by artistic pottery, stone vessels, hafted bronze and copper daggers with flat blades, tabbed silver and bronze seals showing cross-shaped figures and



animals (goats, eagles, panthers, a three-headed dragon). The female terracotta statuettes are shaped in a conventionalized, flat style with long, plaited hair; some of them bear scratched signs which can be classified in groups and may possibly be symbols of various female deities. During the excavation of the “quarter of the nobility” a seal was found with two signs of proto-Indian lettering. It is not impossible that the culture of Altin Tepe may have belonged to a population using a language of the proto-Dravidian type.

Altin Tepe was closely linked with the contemporary ancient East. In architecture and toreutics, traits of Mesopotamian influence have been noted; vessels of black clay have been found originating from northwestern Iran (Heşār, Shah Tepe), as well as ivory artifacts imported from the Harappa settlements of Hindustan. The culture of Altin Tepe reflects the process of the formation in southern Turkmenistan of a local civilization of the Ancient Oriental type. The abandonment of the site appears to have been connected with the exhaustion of the soil and climatic changes. Definite genetic links with the culture of Altin Tepe appear in objects of the Bronze Age from Murgab, southern Uzbekistan (Sappali), and northern Afghanistan (Dašli), whither, at the end of the 2nd millenium B.C., tribes from the foothills of southern Turkmenistan had apparently migrated.

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