

Pottery from Burgut Kurgan and Kayrit Oasis, Preliminary Report for Season 2015

Johanna Lhuillier

ABSTRACT

This report – making part of a series of mutually related texts – evaluates a newly uncovered assemblage of Yaz I pottery from the Czech-Uzbekistani-French excavations at the site of Burgut Kurgan, south Uzbekistan. This body of material shows remarkable characteristics, linking it with related Handmade Painted Ware cultures both to the north and to the southwest of Burgut Kurgan.

KEYWORDS

Pottery; Burgut Kurgan; Bactria; Yaz I culture; Early Iron Age; Late Bronze Age.

POTTERY FROM THE EXCAVATIONS AT BURGUT KURGAN

The first evaluation of the pottery complex from Burgut Kurgan – based on surface finds – was made in 2014 by A. Askarov and Sh. Shaydullaev (STANČO *et al.* 2014), who already recognized it as typical of the Early Iron Age period (Yaz I period). However, after the 2015 excavation season, it appears that this complex is more diverse than expected on the sole basis of this surface material, which included only handmade pottery. Indeed, all kinds of ceramics known among the Handmade Painted Ware cultures of the Early Iron Age (LHUILLIER 2013) are represented here. Furthermore, the complex is homogenous, since the single occupation of Burgut Kurgan during this period makes this complex undisturbed by earlier or later occupations.

A total of 3154 potsherds have been studied, coming from 45 stratigraphic units from trenches BK01, 02, 03, 04, 05 and from the surface (25 potsherds from the surface; 1,265 potsherds from trench BK01; 1,205 potsherds from trench BK02; 510 potsherds from trench BK03; 139 potsherds from trench BK04; and 10 potsherds from trench BK05). The pottery discovered during the last week of work has not been studied yet and is thus not included in this preliminary analysis.

All the potsherds have been systematically sorted and counted. After this first step, all the non-diagnostic fragments have been brought back to the site. Only the diagnostic potsherds have been kept, including all the rims and bases, body sherds with a lug, handle or spout, and decorated body sherds. The most representative and best preserved of those diagnostic potsherds have been drawn and photographed.

THE MAIN POTTERY TYPES

The pottery production of Burgut Kurgan may be related to four main types, defined after a macroscopic observation and a preliminary technological study: handmade, moulded, wheel-fashioned, and wheel-made pottery (**Fig. 1**).



Fig. 1: Pottery technology.

HANDMADE POTTERY

Most of the pottery from Burgut Kurgan belongs to this type, with 2,987 potsherds (94.7%). Vessels are usually made by coiling, and more rarely for some cooking pots from large slabs.

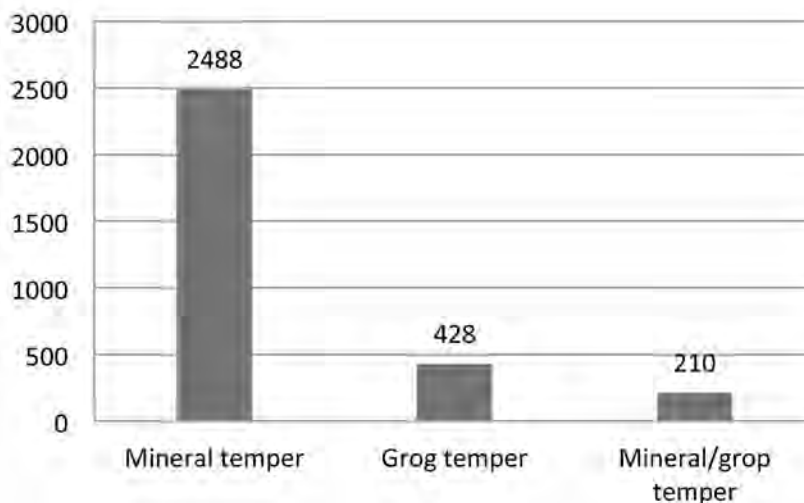


Fig. 2: Handmade/moulded fabric types.

Handmade vessels are usually tempered, with three kinds of temper (**Fig. 2**).

1) Mineral temper, with inclusions from ca. 1 to 3–5 mm, most of the vessels having medium-sized inclusions (2–3 mm). Various minerals are used, including quartz, limestone, black sand, among others; their precise nature is to be defined by further analyses. Most of the vessels from Burgut Kurgan are mineral-tempered.

2) Grog temper, with inclusions of crushed pottery from 1 to 3–4 mm.

3) A combination of mineral and grog temper.

Contrary to what is known of the contemporary settlements, we did not find any evidence of the use of chaff-temper.

The surface is usually beige, pink, light pink, or orange-pink, with sometimes some darker spots due to uneven firing. Most of the cooking pots are blackened by soot outside and sometimes inside too.

The shapes

Similar shapes are also made with the other three techniques, and vessels presented here may be handmade, moulded or wheel-fashioned (**Fig. 3**). The degree of fragmentation is high, and 88 % (2,759) of the potsherds are body sherds; only 12 % of the potsherds belong to diagnostic parts enabling the determination of the original shapes. These include open and closed vessels, cooking pots, lids, “braziers”, and bases. Several examples of overfired, deformed sherds indicate a local – or nearby – pottery production at Burgut Kurgan.

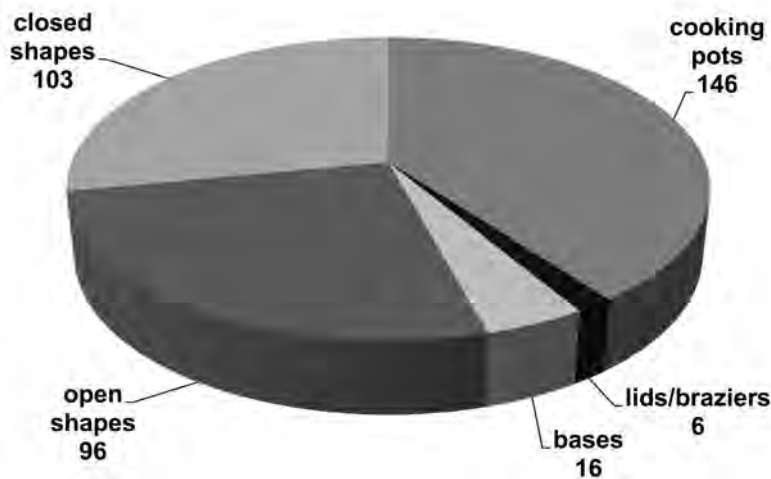


Fig. 3: Handmade/moulded pottery types simplified.

The table vessels include open and closed shapes (**Fig. 3**), with a fine or a medium-tempered fabric. The open vessels (**Fig. 4**) represent 26.15 % of the shapes with 96 potsherds. They include bowls with flared walls (with rounded, thinned or everted rim), with straight walls (with rounded, everted or thickened rim), and bowls with convex, going inwards walls (with rounded, thinned or flattened rim). The closed vessels (**Fig. 5**) represent 28 % of the shapes with 103 potsherds. They include mainly medium-sized jars with a convex body and a large variety of rims, either everted (with a rounded, thinned, flattened, or beak-shaped lip) or raised. Small globular pots with a thin wall are much scarcer. Few complete profiles have been found, but it seems that both opened and closed vessels had flat, rounded or disc bases.

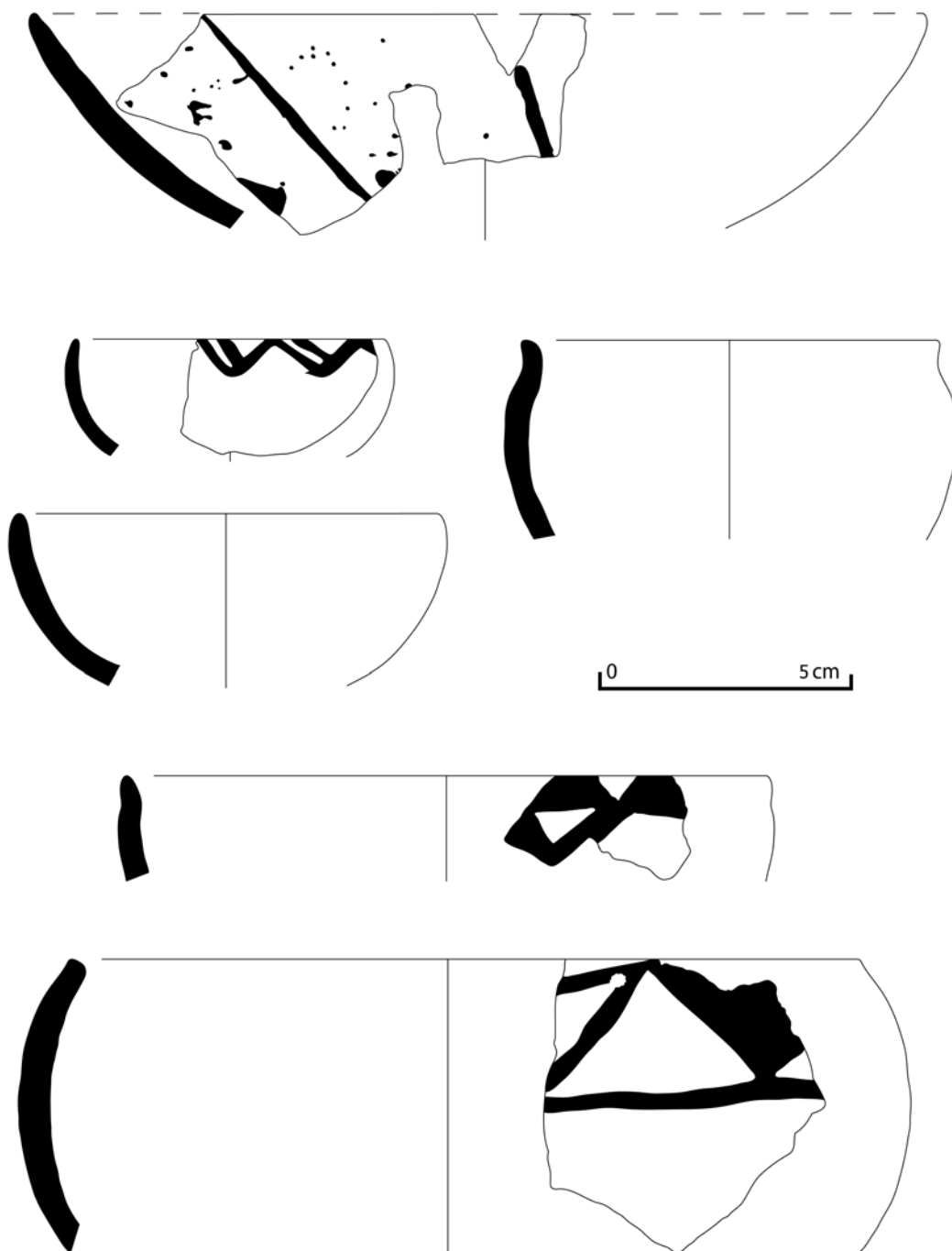


Fig. 4: Selection of open vessels (drawing by J. Tlustá and J. Havlík).

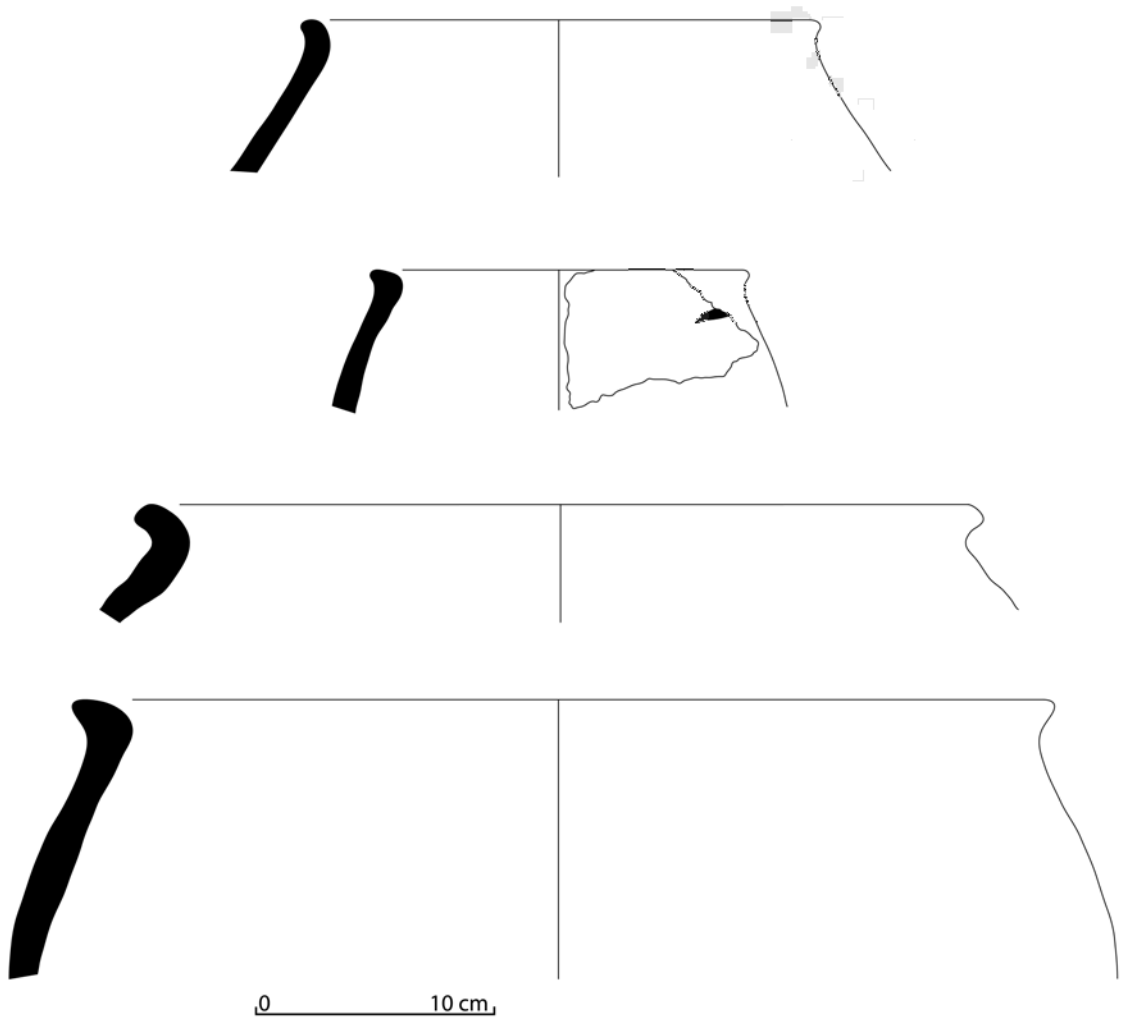


Fig. 5: Selection of closed shapes (drawing by J. Tlustá and J. Havlík).

Most of the potsherds belong to cooking or storage vessels (**Fig. 3** and **6**). They include cooking and storage pots (39.7 % of the sherds, corresponding to 146 sherds), whose shape may be similar to the jars or the largest bowls, but which differ from them by their coarser fabric. They may have a high vertical wall and a rounded or thinned rim; or they may have a globular body and a raised rim (thickened or not). In most of the cases, they have a globular body and an inwards inclined rim, rounded, thinned or flattened. All of these shapes may also have small, round lugs, horizontal straight or arched handles, and/or a tubular spout (**Pl. 4/1**). Black traces of soot are frequent on the outer surface only, or on both surfaces. Lids are quite scarce; they are round and flat. The so-called “braziers” correspond to vessels of which the exact function remains unknown, made by a large, round flat base and a shallow wall, usually smoothed inside and often blackened by soot. They are also rare at Burgut Kurgan.

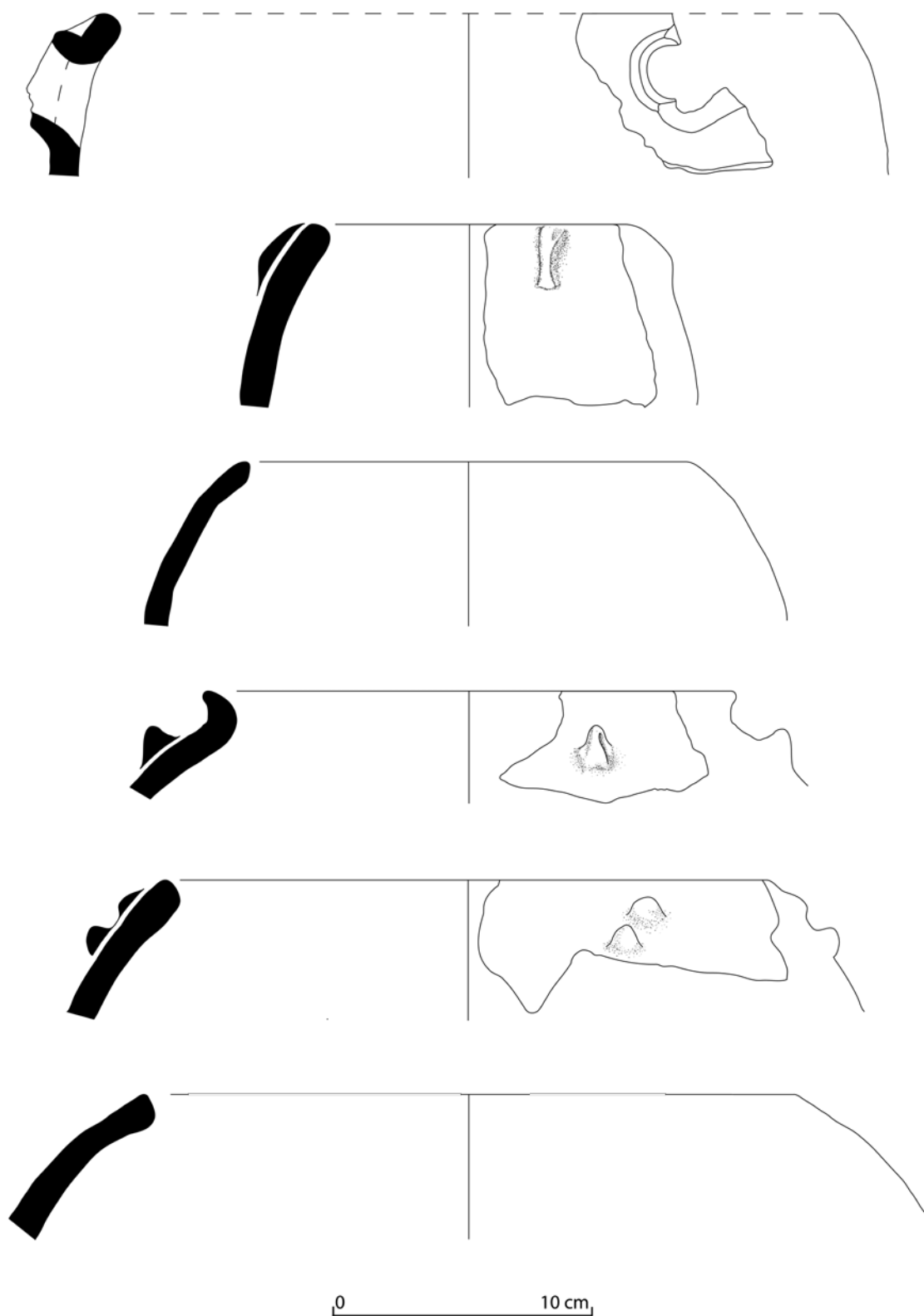


Fig. 6: Selection of cooking and storage pots (drawing by J. Tlustá and J. Havlík).

The decoration

A few of these vessels (2.25 %) have a painted decoration (**Fig. 4** and **7**), which is extremely typical of a series of Central Asian cultures of the studied period, giving them their names. The paint is monochrome, red brown or brown (**Pl. 4/2**). The motifs are exclusively geometric: full, contoured or hatched triangles pointing up or down, horizontal and slanted lines, drops. Paint may also be simply applied over the surface with an irregular tool, such as a large brush or a piece of textile.



Fig. 7: Handmade/moulded decorated pottery.

Some scarce vessels (0.3 %) have an incised decoration (**Fig. 7**). The motifs are always geometric, including horizontal and slanted lines (**Pl. 4/3**), crossed lines and triangles. In two cases, motifs of hatched triangles may have analogies with steppe-related pottery.

MOULDED POTTERY

This technique is much rarer and corresponds to 4.25 % of the potsherds (**Fig. 1**). It combines moulding for the lower part of the vessel with coiling for the upper part. A large slab of clay is moulded on a convex mould which is covered by a textile, presumably in order to make the removal of the clay from the mould easier. Textile imprints are thus found on the inner part of the vessel, usually located on the bottom. These imprints are sometimes partly smoothed, but they usually remain visible, probably playing a “decorative” role (**Pl. 4/4**). Since a large part of the body is made by coiling, and since ceramics are usually highly fragmented at Burgut Kurgan, it is often difficult to differentiate vessels produced with this technique from handmade vessels. Furthermore, both the shapes and the fabrics are the same.

WHEEL-FASHIONED POTTERY

Vessels made with this technique are first handmade and then finished with the use of rotation. Only five potsherds have been identified at Burgut Kurgan (0.16 %). The fabric is usually lightly grog-tempered, with inclusions smaller than 1 mm, or not tempered at all. The surface

is usually beige or light pink, and polished or smoothed. A few shapes only are made in this way, and all sherds identified at Burgut Kurgan belong to open vessels, bowls with vertical walls and thinned rims. One complete vessel shows they had a flattened base (**Pl. 4/5**). When they are painted, it is with a motif of drops along the rim.

WHEEL-MADE POTTERY

Vessels made by this technique are rare too, with 28 potsherds (0.9%). Their fabric is compact, fine and without any visible inclusions. The surface is buff, pinkish beige, pink or orange (**Pl. 4/6**). No decoration has been observed so far. Diagnostic potsherds are rare and include mainly flat bases, some of them with concentric traces from the wheel at the bottom. A body sherd could be related to a small pot with an ovoid body and a narrow neck. Other identifiable shapes are bowls with convex, flared walls and straight-sided walls.

POTTERY FROM THE KAYRIT OASIS

Surface ceramics were collected at several sites scattered around the Kayrit Oasis.

Kurgan Kayrit 16

From the kurgan Kayrit 16 comes a small group of 39 potsherds. All of them were discovered under the stones lying at the surface. These include mainly handmade pottery (37 potsherds), very similar in their fabrics and shapes to the pottery from Burgut Kurgan. Diagnostic sherds are scarce and are all related to cooking pots with a raised rim. Two body sherds are wheel-made, similar to the wheel-made pottery from Burgut Kurgan too.

Dating: These elements indicate the kurgan Kayrit 16 dates back to the Early Iron Age.

Kayrit V and surroundings

Five wheel-made body sherds, beige or pinkish beige in surface. One with incised parallel grooves.

Dating: Bronze Age (Sapalli culture) or Early Iron Age (Yaz I).

Kayrit VI

Twenty two handmade body sherds with either a mineral- or a grog-tempered fabric. One moulded body sherd with textile imprints. Two wheel-made body sherds.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I), maybe a small Bronze Age occupation (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit VII

Four handmade potsherds, including two body sherds, one bowl with straight-sided walls and one jar with a raised rim and a slanted small handle. Two wheel-made body sherds.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I), maybe a small Bronze Age occupation (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit VIII

Eleven handmade sherds, including four body sherds; one bowl with flared walls; six jars (one with an everted rounded rim, two with everted thinned rim, three with raised rim). One moulded body sherd. Four wheel-made body sherds.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I), maybe a small Bronze Age occupation (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit IX

Twenty five handmade potsherds, including 23 body sherds; one bowl with straight-sided walls; one jar with everted thinned rim. Four wheel-made body sherds.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I), maybe a small Bronze Age occupation (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit X and XI

Dating: Late Antique (?) and Islamic periods.

Kayrit XII

Fourteen handmade potsherds, including 13 body sherds; and one flat base. Eight wheel-made potsherds, including six body sherds; one flat base; one closed vessel with an everted thinned rim.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I), maybe a small Bronze Age occupation (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit XIII

Two wheel-made potsherds, including one body sherd with parallel wavy lines incised on the shoulder; one jar or pot with a strongly everted rim and a slight rib on the shoulder.

Dating: Bronze Age (Sapalli culture).

Kayrit XIV

Eleven handmade potsherds, including nine body sherds; one flat, slightly disc shaped base; one cooking pot with an inwards inclined rim.

Dating: Early Iron Age (Yaz I).

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the pottery complex from Burgut Kurgan and the neighbouring sites of the Kayrit Oasis reveals a complex pattern of cultural diffusion. Indeed, moulded pottery is known only among the northernmost handmade painted ware cultures, in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (LHULLIER 2013, Fig. 7), while Burgut Kurgan, along with Dzharkutan and Kuchuktepa in the Surkhan-Darya province, corresponds to the southern border of the distribution area. On the contrary, wheel-made pottery is known during the Early Iron Age among the southernmost handmade painted ware cultures, and Burgut Kurgan is located on the northern border of the distribution area. Furthermore, wheel-fashioned pottery is similar in its technology, shapes and decorations to that discovered at the neighbouring sites

of Dzharkutan and Maydatepa: this technique is found only in the Surkhan-Darya province, i.e. in northern Bactria. Burgut Kurgan, whose material culture should be studied together with similar complexes from Dzharkutan (BENDEZU-SARMIENTO – MUSTAFAKULOV 2013) and Kuchuktepa (ASKAROV – AL'BAUM 1979), seems to be located at a cultural crossroads.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ASKAROV, A.A. – AL'BAUM, L.I. 1979: *Poselenije Kuchuktepa*. Tashkent.
- BENDEZU-SARMIENTO, J. – MUSTAFAKULLOV, S. 2013: Le site proto-urbain de Dzharkutan durant les âges du bronze et du fer. Recherches de la Mission archéologique franco-ouzbèke – Protohistoire. In: J. Bendezu-Sarmiento (ed.): *L'archéologie française en Asie centrale. Nouvelles recherches et enjeux socioculturels*. Cahiers d'Asie Centrale 21-22. Paris, 207-236.
- LHUILLIER, J. 2013: Les cultures à céramique modelée peinte en Asie centrale. Un aperçu de l'assemblage céramique de la deuxième moitié du 2^e millénaire av. J.-C. *Iranica Antiqua* XLVIII, 103-146.
- STANČO *et al.* 2014 = Stančo, L. – Shaydullaev, Sh. – Bendezu-Sarmiento, J. – Pažout, A. – Vondrová, H. 2014: Kayrit Burial Site (South Uzbekistan). Preliminary Report for Season 2014. *Studia Hercynia* XVIII/1-2, 31-41.

Johanna Lhuillier

CNRS UMR 5133 Laboratoire Archéorient
MSH Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée
7 rue Raulin
F-69365 Lyon cedex 07
johanna.lhuillier@ens.fr