SEALINGS FROM KAFIR KALA: PRELIMINARY REPORT

SARA CAZZOLI AND CARLO G. CERETI

The site of Kafir Kala consists of an impressive fortified castle and of its suburb. It is located by the Dargom Canal, 11.7 km south of present day Samarkand, measured from the Ras al-Taq crossroad. Its north-western flank is protected by the canal itself, its eastern one by the Ilon sai, while its southern and western flanks are guarded by a system of moats and ramparts. The site covers an area of about 15.2 ha. The position of the castle gave it control of both the main East-West and the main North-South communication routes of the middle course of the Zarafshan river and was the fulcrum of a complex defensive system, including a number of smaller watch towers within sight of the main castle, some of which are still visible today.

Since 1936 and until the outbreak of the Second World War, the first systematic excavations at Kafir Kala were directed by Grigoriev. The main trenches were opened in the shallow mounds on the right bank of the Ilon sai, outside the towering central corpus, in order to explore the town area. The results of these excavations have mostly remained unpublished, following the death of Grigoriev during the siege of Leningrad. However several areas of craft activities, including clusters of ceramic furnaces, were brought to light suggesting a significant level of economical activities. Most likely the town was inhabited for a longer time period than the fortress, as partly indicated also by the small test trenches made in 1939, under the direction of Yakubovskii, that brought to light Sasanid materials, especially ceramics.

Excavations were resumed only in the 1950s. Between 1956 and 1957 a small mound located on the right bank of the Ilon sai was explored by Shishkina. The uncovered structures, built in pakhsà (beaten clay) and adobe mudbrick, suggested it was the farmhouse of a rich landowner, but the site was completely destroyed.
A few years later, the upper part of the eastern earthen rampart was investigated by Obel’chenko, who identified two main periods of occupation for the settlement area, the main one dated to the AD 6th century, while a re-settlement during the 11th-12th century would correspond to the second one. 4

The present exploration phase was initiated by the Institute of Archaeology of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences in 1990, under the technical direction of Amruddin Berdimuradov. This time the main target was the central building of the compound, the actual castle, also in order to establish its actual conditions of stability and to plan an appropriate conservation strategy. 5 Excavations were laid out on the upper part of the citadel, in the southern part of the central courtyard closer to the entrance, extending outwards to include the protruding corpus of the battlement tower in the north-western corner. Due to the lack of funding the excavations were interrupted in 1994.

The 411 bullae specimens of which are discussed here, all but three presenting a single sealing each, have been found in an area directly behind what has been identified as the main entrance gate of the castle during the campaigns of 2001 and 2002. The Soviet archaeological mission had previously excavated this area; in fact, the first sealings were found while sieving the excavated dumps coming from the courtyard immediately inside the gate. As a consequence of this discovery, Maurizio Tosi and Enrico Menghi decided to further investigate the area and excavated a surface measuring 11 × 10 m (Figs. 1-2). During the 2001 season a first set of 296 sealings was found. The 115 remaining ones were found in 2002. 6 The stratigraphy reveals the existence of at least three chronological periods ranging from the AD 7th to the 9th century. The two upper layers only show that the site had been subject to limited re-utilization after some traumatic event which presumably put an end to the political importance of the castle. The layers identified by archaeologists as belonging to the 7th century have been divided into two stratigraphical units also supported by Lebedeva (Lebedeva 1994, 7-9), while Nil’sen interpreted the structure as a cultic building connected with Zoroastrian funerary rituals (1965, 116-123).

5 A preliminary description of this work is published in Berdimuradov, Semibaev 1992.
6 These numbers refer to the finds as preliminarily recorded by Enrico Menghi. In the definitive catalogue they will probably change slightly due to a more attentive analysis of the material. One such case is that of three fragments previously individually catalogued and now entered as only one sealing (now cat. No. 363).