



# THE BURIAL TRADITION OF KUSHANA PERIOD IN AFGHANISTAN: THE TILA TAPA CEMETERY

**STORAI SHAMS MAYAR**

Member, Afghanistan Science Academy, International Center for Kushana Studies, Kabul,  
Afghanistan. E-mail: [storaishams.mayar@gmail.com](mailto:storaishams.mayar@gmail.com) / [mayar.moska@yahoo.com](mailto:mayar.moska@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** Archaeology is the field that studies the past through its material remains, using it as an evidence to order, describe and explain the latent meaning and is the exercise of the creative imagination. So, when it comes to exploring the lives of people along the history, one of the most important sources of artefacts and evidences for archaeological studies are cemeteries, burial sites, tombs and their discoveries. Thus, based on the mentioned point, Ancient Aryana or modern Afghanistan, located in the centre of Asia has a rich cultural heritage related to different periods of history that are found in different sites of the country. Among these sites is the rich golden treasure of Tila Tapa cemetery that includes 20000-24000 golden pieces weighing around six kilograms (decorative items, jewels, weapons, equipments and so on) discovered from six ancient tombs; this golden treasure not only reflects the religious beliefs in the past but is also the basic source for social status studies, describing political and economic power and demonstrates the glory of the historical periods, specifically the Kushana era. The present study is concentrated on the golden treasure trove discovered at Tila Tapa cemetery which is situated in the Jawzjan province in the north of Afghanistan.

This paper aims to elaborate the importance of Tila Tapa cemetery golden discoveries; because this unique golden treasure plays a fundamental and key role in reflecting the importance of religious, historical, political and economical status and power of the Kushana period and is the most valuable source for archaeological studies for Afghanistan in particular and Asia in general. This paper is a descriptive-historical study based on library method.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Afghanistan, Tila Tapa (gold hill), Kushana period, Weapons and Jewellery.

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## Introduction

Studies and investigations about the burial tradition of the ancient world are dependent on different sources. Written texts and archaeological records are two sides of the same coin and the essential means to study all aspects of burial tradition in different periods of time. Written texts however need to be interpreted together with the material remains. Objects recovered from an excavation require to be explained with reference to written evidence when it is available. Additionally, if sometimes written records about the burial tradition in ancient periods and eras in some cases do not exist, it is much difficult for historians to study about, so in this case archaeological evidences are the most meaningful and useful sources for the burial tradition studies. As, Tila Tapa golden discoveries from graves not only demonstrates the magnificence and significance of Kushana period throughout history in terms of social position, economic situation and political power but its burial tradition also, which is the main point of this study. So, a study on Tila Tapa<sup>1</sup> site's discoveries specifically golden relics as the most important source for burial traditions of Kushana period became essential. But discussion on the all relics discovered from six graves of Tila Tapa and its all aspects in this brief study is not an easy task as each grave can be a long term research project. Thus, the main discussion of this paper is concentrated on a brief review of the first, second and fourth graves.

This paper aims to elaborate the importance of Tila Tapa golden discoveries to illustrate the social status and glory of Kushana period; additionally, to prove that as archaeological evidence can affect economic sectors as well. This rich golden treasure plays a key role in reflecting the historical, political and economic status of Kushana period and is the most valuable resource for archaeological studies particularly in Afghanistan and generally in Asia. This paper is a descriptive-historical study based on library method.

## *Tila Tapa*

Most of the time when one dives into burial tradition, some question arises; such as why particular goods were buried with the dead? And why tombs were different and so on?

As tombs and burial sites are sources of artefacts and evidences when it comes to exploring the lives of people from the past, they can provide a wealth of information about the material culture of a civilization, and can tell us a great deal about the status and wealth of the individual buried in it, and about the way the person was regarded by their community (Thompson: 1982: 334-339). According to Hambly, burial is defined as “the custom of placing the corpse in some kind of container, usually a casket or coffin, and putting the containers under the surface of the ground or inside a tomb (Hambly: 1970: 482). In other words, burial is the interment of the corpse in a grave. Burial is simply the burying of the deceased for a final disposal in a grave that has been dug for that purpose and covering it up with sand (Oyibo: 2011: 19-24). Shortly it should be said, based on the points mentioned above and according to historical accounts burial tradition was basically different among the people based on their beliefs throughout the history.

In the formation of burial traditions, factors such as the social status of the deceased individuals, religious beliefs, climatic conditions, political power, and economic capability have been influential, and playing a role in their continuity and obsolescence. The diversity in the quantity and quality of objects and items buried with the corpse, the burial position including the state of head, body, hands, and feet, the construction and architecture style of graves actually reflect the diversity of belief, social organizations, political structures, and economic relations in different cultures (Sherbaf and Nazari: 2017: 171). The first characteristic related to burial is the positioning and location of the dead; that is, the corpse can be placed in various ways

inside a grave, such as lying on the back, lying on one side, even sitting, or standing. Additionally, burial practices can include burial, secondary burial, or cremation. Moreover, the status of the deceased individual can also be communal (grouping) or individual (Rezaie, Sangbargan and Garazheyan: 2021: 250). For example, in ancient Greece, sacred and religious individuals were placed in the Pantheon while ordinary people were generally buried in necropolises situated in some small cities and villages, or their dead were placed in hidden locations such as beneath floor levels or between walls and sealed with bricks and clay. Graves could also take various forms such as crypt or hypogeum, or hidden rooms where multiple even five individuals were often buried in. Greeks living in the Bakhter (ancient name of Balkh province and the northern part of ancient Aryana) might bury their dead in the graves and put a large stone slab over them, then covering it with the necessary tools and buried them in graves, or place their bones with ashes and deposit offerings in metal boxes inside coffins which were then covered with construction materials (Shakohmand: 1980: 35-39).

However, the most common type of graves in Sassanid era consists of graves dug into stone hill beds, which are seen in two forms: deep graves and shallow graves. Deep graves are used for permanent burials, while the second type is used for secondary or temporary burials (Tawfiqyan and Bastani” 2016: 18-19). The ossuary, or bone repository (Astodan), is considered an example of secondary burials. According to Zoroastrian tradition, the corpse must be placed in the open space to allow the soul to leave the body and for the wild animals to consume or eat the flesh and skin; and the place where specified for doing this activity were located in hidden places away from public view and common places known as the Towers of Silence; then, the cleaned and purified bones would be placed in ossuaries. Before Hartsfield; Henning who has translated the word

“Astodan=Usdana” as a repository or container for bones, as he has considered the word “Astodan” equivalent to the word “Astothekai” (Jafari” 2006: 4). In some cases, these ossuaries are also mentioned in the form of “Saghanah”. According to Muradi, it can be said that during the excavations in the 056 area of the Mes-Aynak ancient site of Logar province of Afghanistan, a Saghanah was discovered. This Saghanah was dug inside the hill within the Neogene geological class, which is composed of hard clay, and irregularly placed skeletons were found inside it. Additionally, a skull of a strong likelihood of a horse has also been discovered in this Saghanah; Along with the skeletons, wooden Couch foundations have been found, which were likely used to place the corpse on and bring it to the Saghanah. Continuing the excavations to the western side of area 099, seven cruse or jug structures covered with large stones were also discovered. The cruses were arranged in a way that three of them had openings to the west, three to the east, and one to the north, and during the excavations, five human skeletons were discovered inside one of these cruses. The majority of skeletons found within the cruses belong to children, and this discovery is referred to as the “Cruse Graves” “Figs.1.10-1.13” (Muradi: 2023: 85-89).

In any case, the Tila Tapa site not only was the significant burial site of the Kushana period, but the burial sites related to Kushana period also existed in some other areas of the country. According to Sherbaf and Nazari “The tradition of burying the dead sporadically has also been reported in the eastern part of Iran country. The Kushana-Sasanian cemetery at Saeed Qala Tapa, located in 25 kilometers west of Kandahar city of Kandahar province, is an example of implementing this burial method. Initially, it was thought that these burials might be contemporary with prehistoric layers, but further excavations revealed that this cemetery was located in an abandoned prehistoric village. Based on the

discovered bronze and glassware earrings, and containers, these graves are dated to the Kushana-Sasanian era” (Sherbaf and Nazari, 2017: 171). In any case, the current discussion has focused on Tila Tapa graves (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) in order to reach a desired conclusion.

The city of Sheberghan, the capital of Jowzjan Province in the North of Afghanistan, is an area filled with ancient mounds and hills. Tila Tapa or Altin<sup>2</sup> Tapa is located at 36 degrees north latitude and 65 degrees east longitude, about 5 kilometers northeast of Sheberghan city, not far from Yemechik or Ymchi Tapa/Tepa; and situated to the left of the Sheberghan-Kabul highway (Fig.1.1) (Kamal: 2004: 14 and 143).

The ancient site of Tila Tapa was excavated for the first time by a joint team of Afghan-Soviet archaeologists and anthropologists led by Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi from the Soviet side and Mohammad Ashraf Sharqi, Mohammad Arif Enayat, and Mohammad Ajan Naeem from the Afghan side in 1969-1979. In 1977, a part of the structure was revealed, and in 1978, the entire periods of construction of Tila Tapa were uncovered. The results of the excavations indicated that the initial layer of the Tila Tapa ancient site dated back to the late Bronze Age (1500-1200 BCE) and the early Iron Age in Afghanistan, while the upper layers or the latest period in Tila Tapa dated back to the Kushana period (25 BCE-120 CE). Based on the characteristics of the discovered golden artefacts from the sites, this site may possibly mark the beginning of the rule of Kanishka based on the dating calculations of the year 78 CE (Sarianidi: 1982: 1-3 and Kamal: 2004: 14 and 22). According to Russian archaeologists and anthropologists, the discovered graves at Tila Tapa had a similar shape to current graves, and the burial practices and arrangements of these graves differed significantly from previous periods, and these types of graves are related to the Kushana era and the indigenous inhabitants of the region (Figs. 1.2 & 1.4) (Shakohmand, 1980: 35).

However, archaeological evidence indicates that Tila Tapa was actually the ruins of a large temple was built in the late centuries BCE, on an extensive platform made of raw bricks, reaching a height of 6 meters, and, possibly serving as a fire temple. The central part of Tila Tapa featured a rectangular fort, extending widely to the north and south, with a height of 14 meters. It had a square hall measuring 14×15 meters and its entrance was located in the northern surrounding wall. In the middle part of this fort, there were nine square-based pillars made of bricks and clay, and it seems that mountain stones were used in the foundations, while the exterior walls were decorated with spiral designs and occasionally with point of spears symbols. The Tila Tapa fort had strong fortified walls and seven circular defensive towers. Tila Tapa was destroyed in the late Achaemenid dynasty, and when the Greeks arrived to this region in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE it was transformed into a simple earthen mound. The establishment of the Kushana dynasty around the first century CE in Yemechik or Ymchi Tapa led to Tila Tapa serving as the burial ground for the rulers and dynasty of the Kushana Empire residing in Ymchi Tapa. It doesn't seem that Ymchi Tapa was not the first center of the Kushanas dynasty, but it could have been a residence for their rulers. This means that after spending one or two generations in the nearby mound, they chose Tila Tapa as their cemetery, which had been abandoned. The positioning of the graves can also be a reason for this, as they are excavated in a way that is well controlled from the palace of Ymchi Tapa (Sarianidi: 1982: 1-3 and Kamal: 2004: 17-21; 56-58 and 141). On the other hand, the vertical and ordinary digging of graves without especially building structures on top of them, except the horse skeleton next to fourth grave and the burial of individuals with valuable and legendary jewellery, indicates that the corpses were buried in a hidden and secretive manner, likely in the darkness of the night (Sarianidi: 1982: 1-3).

Overall, it can be said that as a result of excavations, seven graves have been discovered, but due to the time limitations and the fact that the seventh grave was completely destroyed and looted, only six graves were excavated. These graves belonged to the rulers and royal family who had greatness, and their deceased were buried in grandeur wearing royal attire. Three rectangular graves (1-3) situated outside the fort and three others (4-6) inside the fort, and placed to the north, south, east, and west. Among the six graves, one is of a man and the other five are of women; an interesting point is this, that the shape of the graves is similar and some discovered objects have close connection to objects in other graves, especially since the women's graves are placed around the single man's grave, so in this case that Herodotus' perspective is worth of consideration as mentioned in the book "The Recovered Treasures from Afghanistan", where it is stated: "The deceased did not enter afterlife alone, but their sanctuary or Harem accompanied them; therefore, it seems that we are dealing with a king whose Harem's women accompany him on his journey to death" (Fig.1.3). In any case, Bakhtar Treasure<sup>3</sup> including the collection of discovered golden artifacts from these tombs totally between 22607-24000 pieces, including 21618 pieces of gold, silver, ivory, turquoise, pearl, agate and other artifacts, with 20587 of the golden artefacts preserved in the president palace of Afghanistan on that time. The weight of this treasure is approximately six kg and not only has no equal in terms of jewelry making and gold industry in the Bakhtar, but also in the world modern countries such as India, China, Rome, and Greece.

Tomb number one is rectangular in shape, with a length of 2.5-2.30 and a width of 1.30-1.60 meters, and a depth of 2 meters made of raw bricks of various sizes, located outside the fort in front of the central tower of its western wall. The artefacts discovered from this tomb are bronze, iron, and

over 2500 pieces of gold, including jewellery and clothing decorations. Upon inspecting the tomb artefacts, anthropologist L. Bushi believes that a young woman around 25-35 years old was buried in coffin in tomb number one (Figs.1.5a & 1.5b) (Kamal: 2004: 62 and 144; Kamban and Françwa Zharych: 2007: 29, 61 and 155).

Tomb number two, with a width of 1.50-1.60 meters, a length of approximately 3 meters, and a depth of roughly 2 meters, is rectangular in shape located outside the fort on the northwest side, with its outer surface covered with plaster or mud; a rectangular wooden coffin placed at equal distances from the walls of the tomb in the middle of the tomb on wooden bases or on pedestal supports, without a cover, this tomb covered entirely by wood, and then placed plant fibres like mat on top of it, and finally clay were embedded on, the corpse seems to be almost half covered. Upon inspecting the tomb artifacts, anthropologist L. Bushi believes that a woman around 30-40 years old was buried in tomb number two (Figs. 1.6a & 1.6b) (Kamal: 2004: 70; Kamban and Françwa Zharych: 2007: 165).

Tomb number four, a rectangular shape located in the gateway of the central tower of the western wall, with a length of 2.7 meters and a width of 1.30 meters to the north and south, and the depth of the tomb is more than one meter from the surface of the mound. The coffin of this tomb was covered with red leather decorated with black and white paintings and round golden ornaments and placed on pedestals; at a depth of approximately 40 cm; archaeologists discovered the bones of a horse. The deceased was a tall man aged 30 years old, wearing a hat with a golden ram and golden tree attached to it. In addition to beautiful decorations and jewellery, the deceased person had an exceptionally magnificent weapon, which clearly and visibly indicates his high status and position. This weapon was a long sword on his left side and a golden poniard on his right side. Along with the royal necklace, golden belt, sword,

poniard, embossed shoes, and finally the presence of the horse, all these artifacts actually represent the noble and splendid king and horseman and his prestigious status (Fig.1.7) (Kamal, 2004: 89; Kamban and Françwa Zharych: 2007: 194).

According to archaeological studies, all common corpses are placed lying on their back in a stretched out position, and their faces positioned upwards. Corpses were buried in wooden coffins<sup>4</sup> tightly secured with iron pins, without a cover, and covered with tents or clothes decorated with golden and silver artefacts and decorations, and the bodies were hidden underneath in. Only the coffin of tomb 4<sup>th</sup> was covered with a bright red animal skin. When they placed the coffins covered with tents in the tomb, they would cover the tomb with a wood, then throw on top either animal skin or reed, and finally smooth it with soil. This means that initially there was open space inside the tomb, but over time the tomb's cover was destroyed and the tomb completely filled up, which could well be preserved. The reason the coffins were without covers and the bodies were adorned with jewelry and weapons was because that it seemed like the dead would come back to life after some time and would need these items (Sarianidi: 1982: 1-3 and Kamal: 2004: 58-59).

In general, the corpses were dressed in luxurious clothing, consisting of long shirts and pants, with a Chapan or vest on top. These clothes were adorned with golden threads, pearls, turquoise, ivory, agate, lapis lazuli and other golden decorations. Men wore long shirts and pants down to the ankles, with a short vest on top with a belt, and a long Chapan over it. This kind of attire is similar to the attire of the discovered stone sculpture of Kushana King, Kanishka, which is currently on display at the Kabul National Museum of Afghanistan. Additionally, the shape and structure of the jewellery in tomb number 2 and its placing, bears a striking resemblance to the Kushana king's hat discovered from Mathura, and the discovered decorated golden crowns in tombs

number 3 and 6 are evidence of the special status and power of the women, and symbolizing their prestige. Therefore, archaeological evidence and the discoveries from the tombs play an important role in determining the gender of the deceased and their specific social status as well. As customary, men's graves contained masculine tools such as weapons of war, while women's graves contained cosmetic items, perfumes, equipments, decorative items, clothing and household items, and toys and miniatures were placed inside of tombs for children (Fig.1.8) (Sarianidi: 1982: 3-5).

As we have known, the study of burial traditions has not only been valuable for studying the general contents of the cultural and social aspects of human societies, especially in reconstructing the culture of past civilizations throughout history; it also plays a valuable role in examining the reflection and economic prosperity of ancient periods. For instance, in the case of the Bactrian Treasure, especially the discovery of golden artifacts from the six Tila Tapa's tombs, it was discussed. Another important point is this, that showcasing cultural heritage in the development of the tourism industry and ultimately economic prosperity and providing material resource funding for countries is also impactful. For example, the Bactrian Treasure, especially the golden artifacts of Tila Tapa, can be mentioned. As, when the exhibition agreement of the Bactrian Treasures with France was signed, according to which the Treasure was on display at the Guimet Museum of France in 21 November 2006 for the first time and until 9 December 2020, for a period of 13 years in 24 museums in 29 exhibitions in 13 countries around the world, including: France, Italy, Netherlands, United States, Germany, England, Norway, Canada, Sweden, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and China was on display. Alongside, it is worth mentioning that the Bactrian Treasure from international exhibitions generated more than 350 million Afghanis, equivalent to 4.5 million dollars in revenue for Afghanistan. Currently this treasure

is being preserved and kept in the treasury of the Central Bank in the country (Fig.1.9) (Ashrafi, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can conclude that the burial traditions, excavations, and examination of ancient graves and their discovered artefacts are one of the most fundamental evidence for studying the ancient world, and has special importance in the field of archaeology; furthermore, identifying burial methods and customs related to it, is considered as a significant source for introducing the cultures of people throughout historical and ancient periods. As, the discovered artefacts from Tila Tapa ancient area with no language are actually the expressive language of the Kushana dynasty and eloquently reflects the history of that era, especially the glory and grandeur of the Kushana dynasty; given the energy and abundance of decorative and practical objects in these graves, appears that these graves belonged to the elite class of society residing in this region. The fact that the corpses were individually buried, actually confirms the theory of the higher social status of the buried corpses; and some other aspects that were also discussed in details.

Overall, the artefacts discovered from Tila Tapa reveal religious beliefs, traditions and customs, cultural practices, ethnographic characteristics, social status, and economic prosperity of the Kushana dynasty; alongside representing a new chapter in civilization and culture of the Bakhtar. And, it can be considered as the most precious and unique golden treasure of ancient times in the present century.

## Notes

1. Tila Tapa or Tila Tapa is the name of the site, and both pronunciation is common among the people, but the Tila Tapa is most common in Afghanistan; and the Tila Tapa pronunciation is mostly common in Northern provinces specifically among the Turkmens, Uzbeks people.; furthermore, it should be said that the name

of Tillya Tepe is also usable among the people and it seems that is a Pashto word meaning gold hill.

2. Altin Tapa or Tapa is an Uzbek word that means gold that is why the area of Tila Tapa is also known as Altin Tapa.
3. The treasure of the Bakhtar includes 231-485 valuable artifacts discovered from historical and ancient sites in Northern provinces of Afghanistan (Tila Tapa, Tappe-Fulool, Ay Khanom, Begram, and Zargaran Tapa of Balkh).
4. Some of these coffins had bases, while others were placed straight on top of the tomb carpet without a base.
5. Ainnuddin Sedaqat, age 35, Takhar Province, District of Dasht-e Qala, Position, Chief Curator of the National Museum of Kabul, Afghanistan, April 24, 2024.

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#### **Interview**

Ainuddin Sedaqat, age 35, Takhar Province, District of Dashte Qala, Position, Chief Curator of the National Museum of Afghanistan, April 24, 2024.

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Illustrations

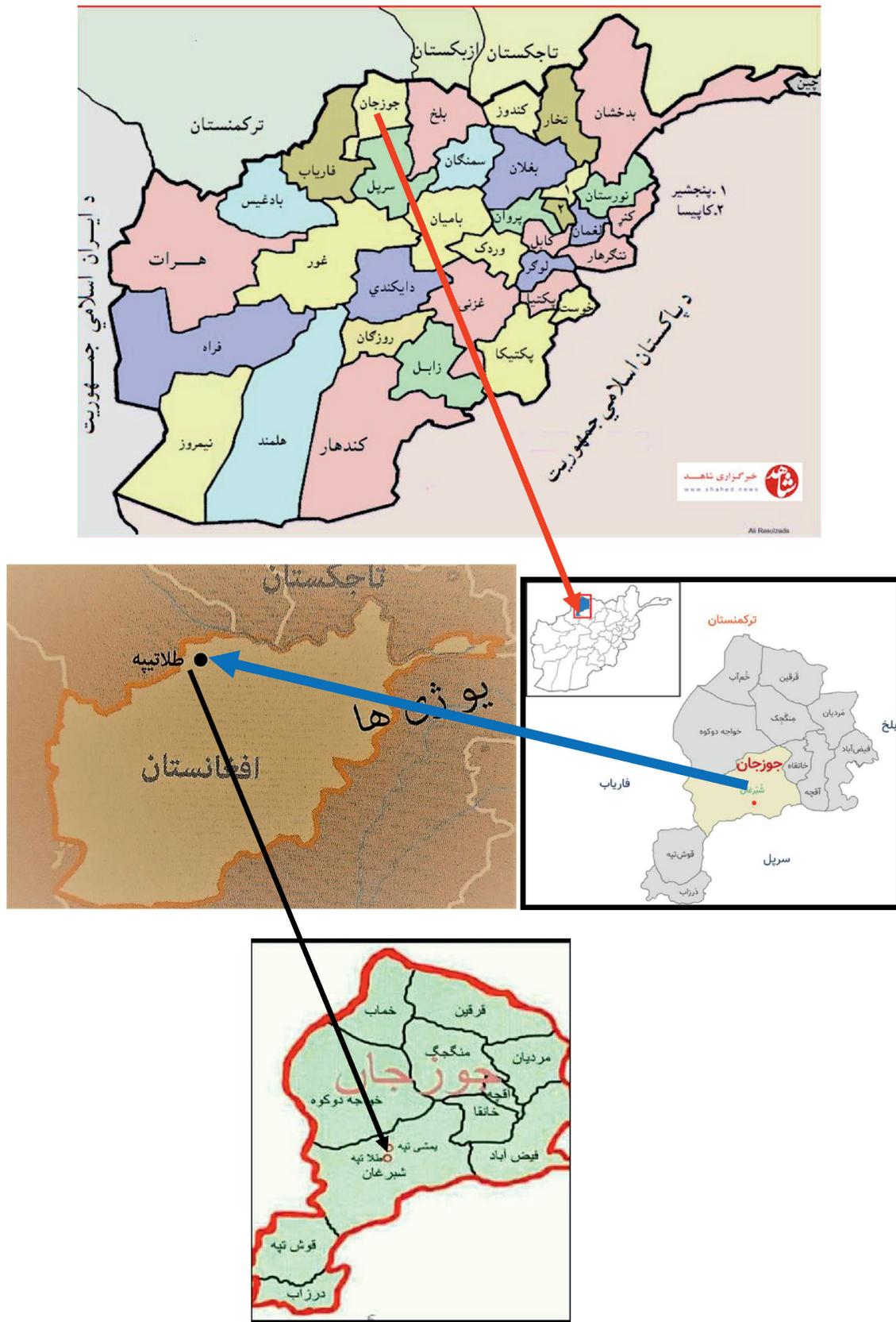


Figure 1.1: Tila Tapa archaeological site location.



Figure 1.2: General View of Tila Tapa Site in Shabarghan, before survey and Excavations, Kabman, 2007: p.102.

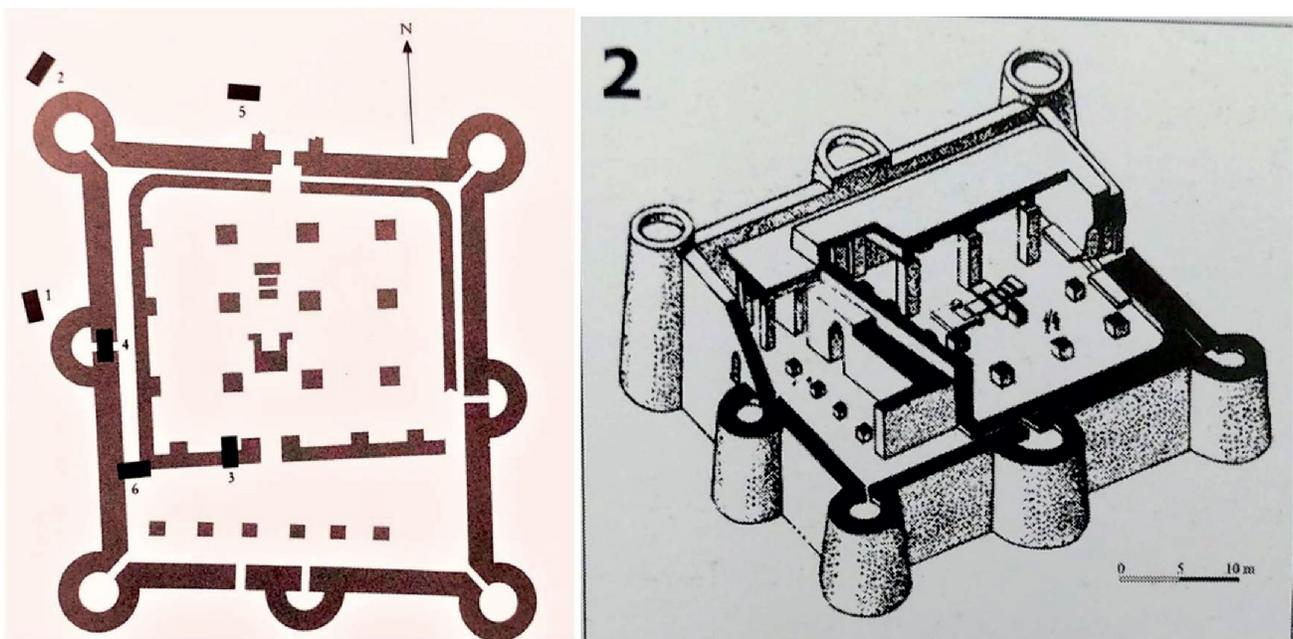


Figure 1.3: Topography, Castle modelling map of Tila Tapa Site and location of the graves, Kamal, 2004: p.60.



Figure 1.4: View of Tila Tapa site under archaeological excavations, and archaeologist during investigations, Kamban, 2007: p. 103.

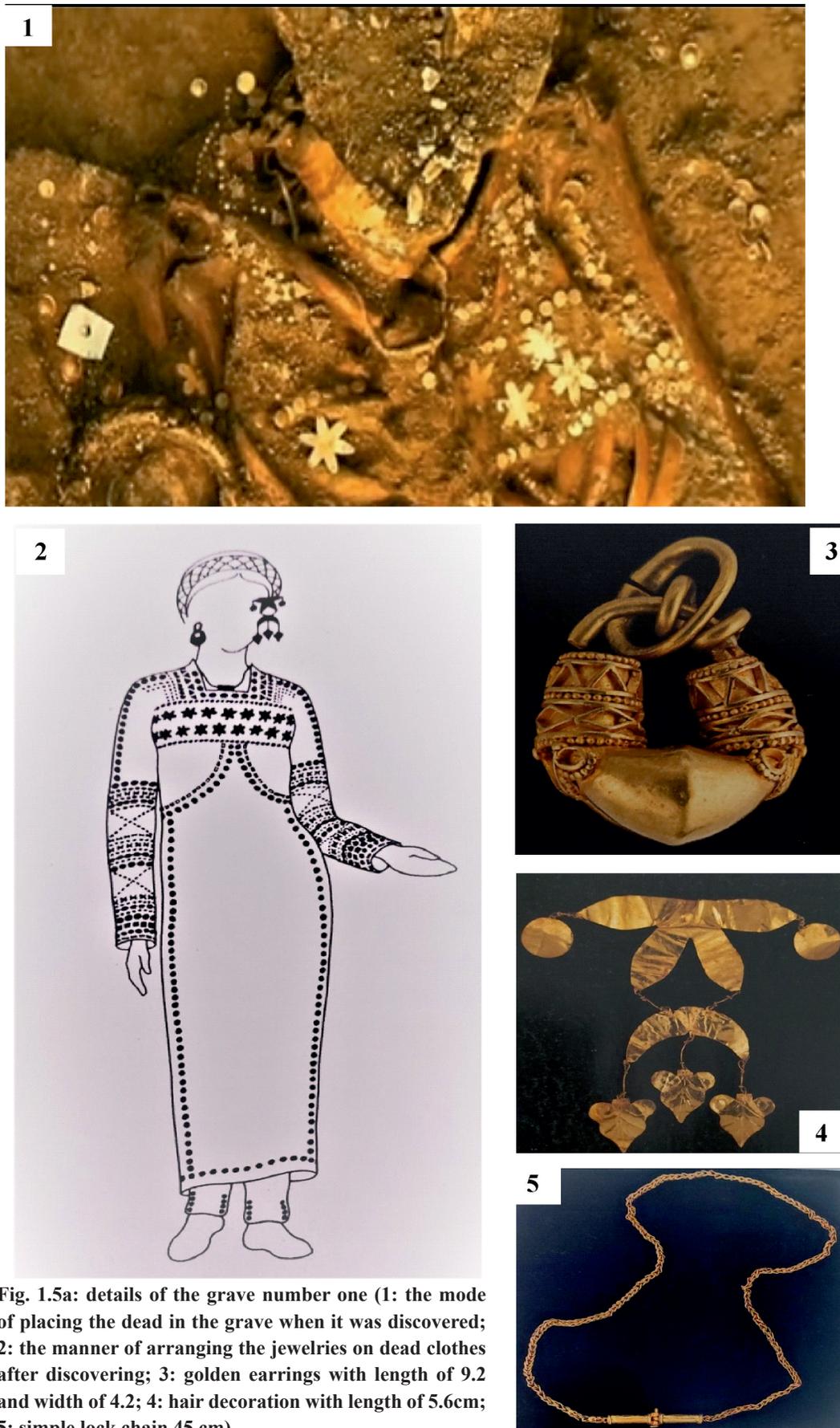


Fig. 1.5a: details of the grave number one (1: the mode of placing the dead in the grave when it was discovered; 2: the manner of arranging the jewelries on dead clothes after discovering; 3: golden earrings with length of 9.2 and width of 4.2; 4: hair decoration with length of 5.6cm; 5: simple lock chain 45 cm).

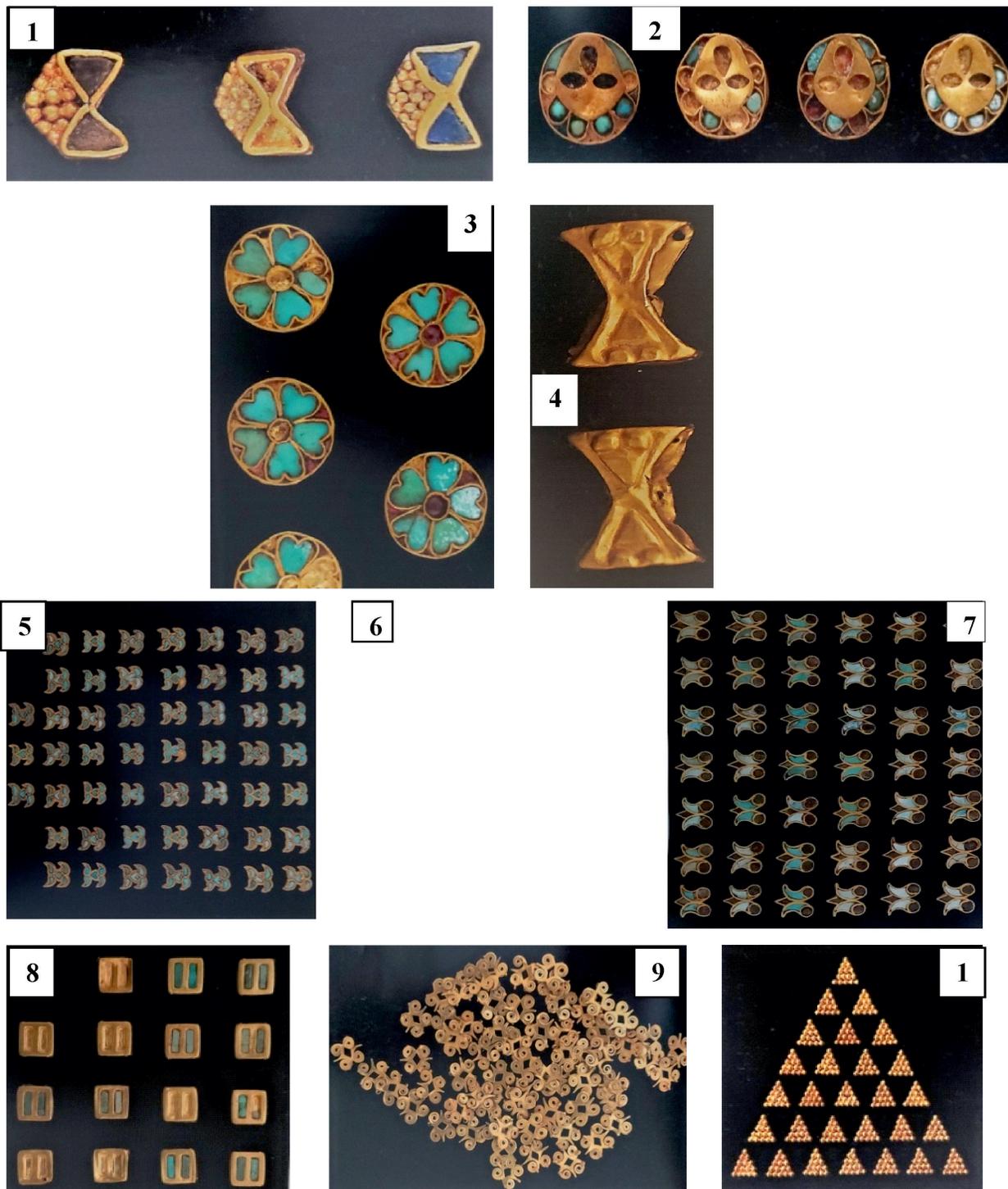


Fig1.5b: details of clothes decorations of grave number one (1: ornaments in the form of inverted triangles studded with golden beads, turquoise and lapis lazuli; 2: ornaments in the form of masks made of gold, turquoise and ivory; 3: five-leaves circular ornaments with turquoise with diameter of 1cm; 4: ornaments in the form of inverted triangles decorated with fake beads; 5: ornaments, hearts with four shapes like a lion's nails claw with jagged edges, gold, turquoise and lapis lazuli; 6: Roses of six leaves; 7: three leaves or lotus ornaments with inlay; 8: square ornaments inlaid with turquoise horizontal lines with length of 9 and width of 8cm; 9: ornaments with two swings showing the heads of two opposing rams; 10: triangular seed ornaments).

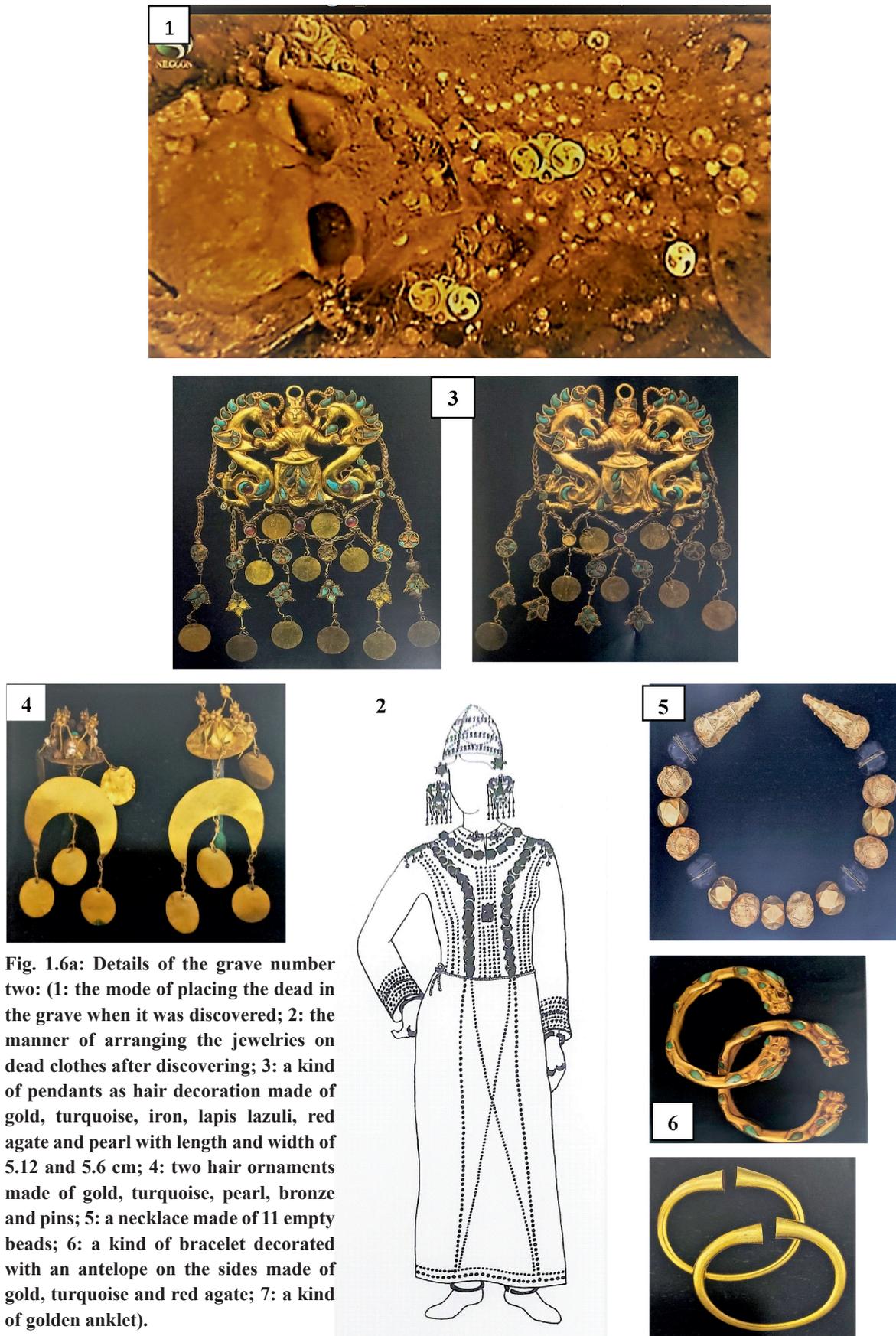




Fig. 1.6b: Details of clothes decorations of grave number two (1: ornaments in the shape of hearts; 2: an ornaments on the dress in the form of a vertical strip at the bottom of the dress; 3: amulets in the form of feed and hands made of gold, turquoise and lapis lazuli; 4: ornaments in the shape of toothed discs and round ornaments with hearts shapes; 5: ornaments objects in the form of pyramids; 6: shoulder ornaments with circular pendants with length of 3.18cm).



**Fig. 1.7: Details of the grave number four: 1: the mode of placing the dead in the grave when it was discovered and the manner of arranging the jewelries on dead clothes after discovering; 2: hair ornament in shape of tree made of pearls and round discs; 3: standing ram and it seems the dead man was wearing a hat with a ram and a golden tree attached to it; 4: ornamental clothes on the top of the dead man's skeleton; 5: adorned necklace with gemstone embossing; 6: belt consisting of eight smooth bands with nine large medals; 7: a sword with a golden handle decorated with a scene of animals fights; 8: sword scabbard; 9: dagger scabbard decorated with two dragons; 10: shoe buckles decorated with a circle drawn by dragons.**



Figure 1.8: The mode of placing the corpses in the graves and the manner of arranging the jewelries on their clothes after discovering.



Figure 1.9: View of the current situation of Tila Tapa site in 2024.

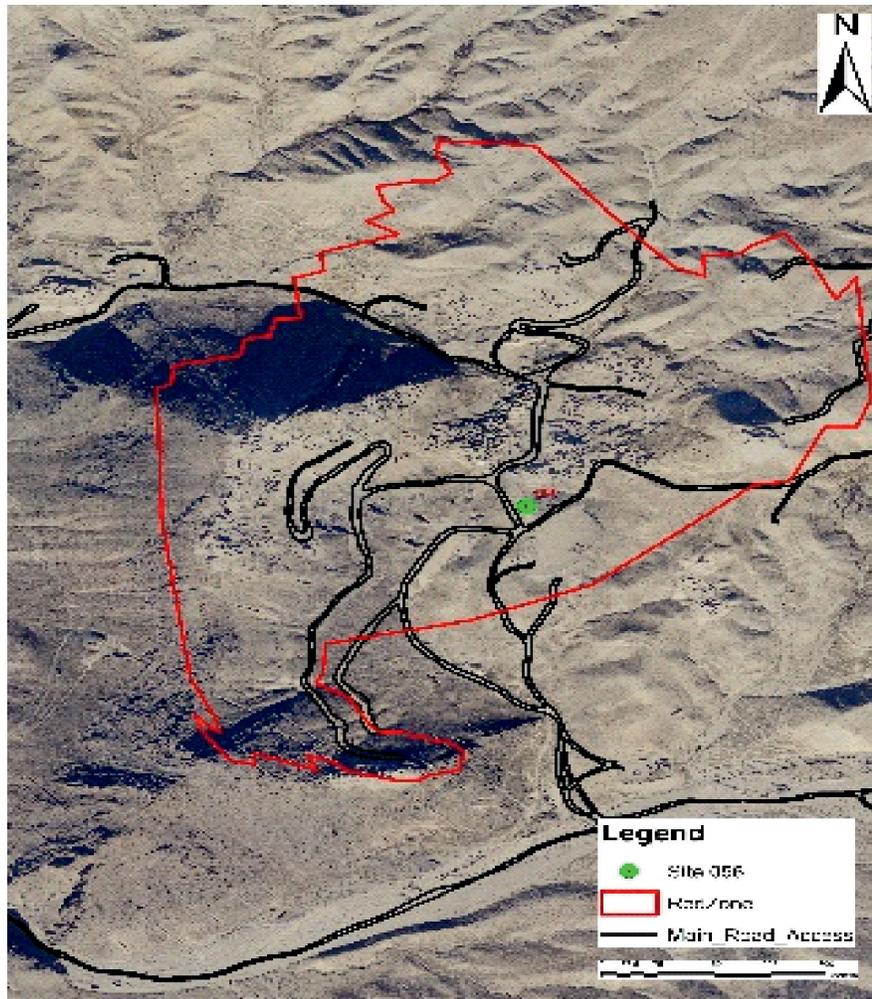


Figure 1.10: Figure in the top is location of the 056 site in general map of Mes-aynak, and the bottom is general view of the graves location from the aerial view, by: Husain Ali Haidari, 2023.



Fig. 1.11: View of the skeleton inside the Saghana of 056 site of Mes-Aynak archaeological site, photo by: Muradi, 2023.

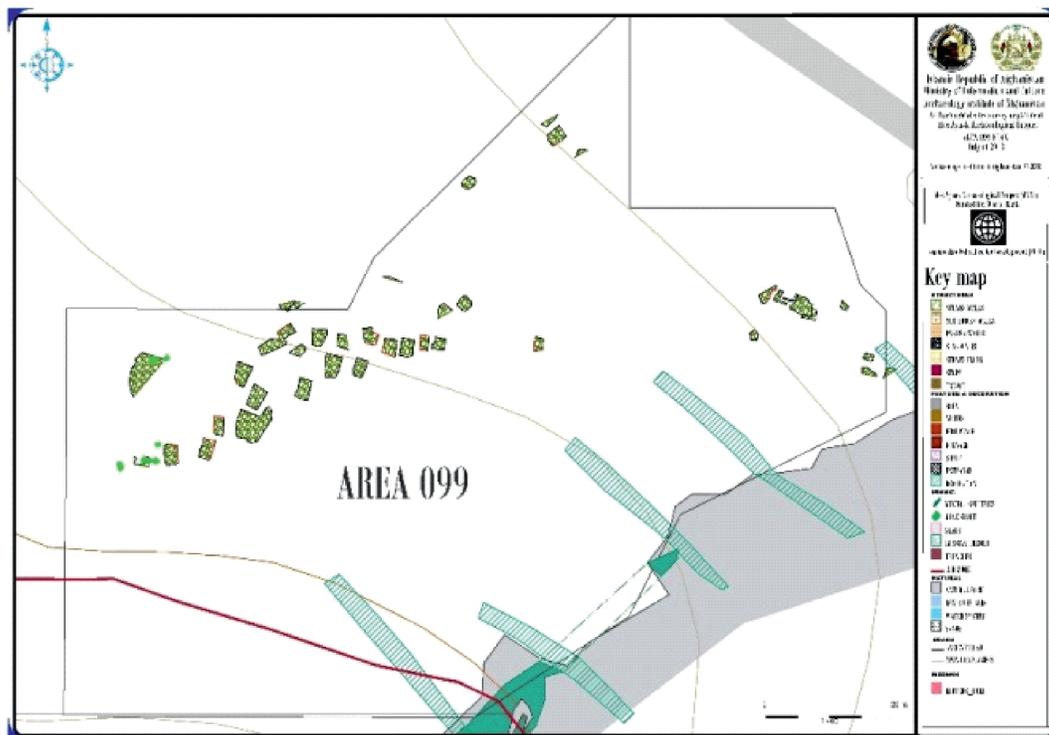


Figure 1.12: Map of the earthen or cruse graves in the 099 site of Mes-Aynak, AIA archive, Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan, 2023.



Figures 1.13: View of earthen or cruse graves in the 099 site of Mes-Aynak Site, photo by: Muradi, 2023.