

## KP 316 SMX

### Description of Site

The site was located to the west of the Goshgarchai river, just over 1km to the north of Seyidlar village. On the west side of the river, the flood plain (at about 153m above datum) extends for 100m and is bounded by a bank and irrigation ditch. A hedgerow including at least one mature oak tree ran along the top of this bank, but was grubbed out within the pipeline easement. After a further 40m of fairly level ground (at ca 158m above datum) there is a second irrigation ditch, and beyond, a well-worn track leading north from the village.

The side of the valley rises quite steeply from the trackway, climbing to 177m above datum in the space of 120m. At the top of this slope, there is a small, largely dry irrigation ditch and a more substantial track. To the west of the track, the land is flat and arable, in contrast to the slope of the valley, which is rough open pasture, though with marks of furrows and irrigation channels indicating that it has been ploughed in the fairly recent past.

A cemetery to the south of the pipeline easement is still in use. One grave marked by a square of stones is only 40m south of the BTC centre-line, and there is a ruined domed 'pir' a further 10m away.

### Previous Work

During construction of the WREP pipeline, which here runs parallel, 88m to the north of the BTC line, the presence of human remains was noted. Pre-construction surveys recorded the presence of a relatively dense scatter of prehistoric pottery across the slope of the valley. At this time, the presence of standing crops meant that ground visibility was low in the flat area to the west, beyond the top of the slope.

Evaluation trenching of the site was carried out between 30<sup>th</sup> September and 8<sup>th</sup> October 2003. Eleven 4m-square trenches were excavated on the sloping part of the site. These were arranged in an irregular pattern across the full width of the BTC and SCP easement, targeted on areas judged to have the most potential. Human burials were recorded in two of the evaluation trenches near to the top of the slope; others had no discernable archaeological features but produced considerable quantities of prehistoric pottery to a depth of 1m or more.

### Excavation

Work was carried out between 3<sup>rd</sup> March and 25<sup>th</sup> April 2004. Because of time constraints imposed by the construction program, a decision was made to concentrate on the excavation only of a 4m-wide strip along the pipe centre-line, and only on the slope of the hill where archaeological remains had previously been identified. A temporary roadway of river gravel and sand over a geo-textile membrane was laid adjacent to the centre-line to allow construction traffic to pass without causing damage to the underlying deposits. The topsoil above the pipe centre-line was removed by machine to a depth of around 20cm.

Excavation initially covered an area 124m long by 3m. For ease of recording, this was divided up into nineteen 6m by 3m trenches, separated by narrow baulks. Each trench

was excavated in 15cm spits using hand-tools. Where archaeological deposits extended between trenches, the baulks were later removed.

Two trenches were also excavated in the flat area to the east of the trackway at the base of the slope. These were initially also 6m by 3m and centred on the centre-line of the pipe, but the more westerly one was extended to 12m long and up to 6m wide to investigate a stone-rich layer in its southwest corner.

Normal topsoil stripping to prepare the working width for later construction activities was carried out in the field to the west of the top of the slope. Pottery finds in the stripped surface indicated that there were archaeological remains in this area, and a 16m by 8m area was excavated. The eastern part of this excavation area contained human burials and excavation was extended for 18m in a 3m-wide strip to clear these, as far as possible, from the area of the pipe-trench.

### Results

Ten articulated human skeletons together with a disarticulated skull were uncovered in the westernmost 30m of the trench running down the hillside. Another nine skeletons were lifted in the excavated area in the field to the west, and its eastward extension. At least two more skeletons were visible in the sides of this trench, but were not disturbed.

Of these nineteen excavated skeletons, one was of a young infant and three were small juveniles. All were aligned east to west, with the head to the west, and were lying on their right sides, with the head facing to the south. They were generally at a depth of 80cm to 1m below the base of the topsoil, though some were shallower. The state of bone preservation was variable, but was generally good. Most appeared to be within discrete graves though in at least one case the graves were intercut. There was no dating evidence that could be confidently associated with the burials. The position of the bodies strongly suggests that they were Muslim graves, and are assumed to have belonged to the cemetery which still exists to the south of the pipeline route and once presumably extended over a larger area.

Further down the slope of the valley side, more than 15m beyond the most easterly of the Muslim graves, another human skeleton was exposed. This was at a depth of over 1m below the stripped surface, and had been buried with a group of four pottery vessels. Preservation of the post-cranial skeleton was rather poor, but it could be seen that the body was lying on its back with knees bent and legs slightly splayed. The skull, to the western end, was facing slightly to its left side. Gold earrings were found either side of the skull, together with several small gold beads in the neck region. There was also a copper alloy ring on one finger. The earrings were plain circular loops, approximately 2.5cm in diameter, of thick wire with flattened and pierced ends. The four pottery vessels, in a group just to the south of the skeleton, were dated to the antique period.

The graves were all cut through layers of very fine-grained, compact, dusty deposits. The upper layers showed some signs of disturbance and discoloration, but lower down this material was visually identical to the pale sandy-yellow natural substrate. There were considerable quantities of pottery within these layers, most of it seemingly of the later prehistoric period, and generally in the form of small, often weathered sherds.

Pottery finds became less frequent in lower spits, but occurred to a depth of up to 1m, throughout the length of the slope.

Similar pottery was also recovered from the two trenches on the flatter ground of the river terrace at the base of the slope. The more easterly of these was otherwise featureless, but the other one, further from the river, contained a thick layer of large, river-worn stones. The top of this layer was first seen in the southwest corner of the trench, at a depth of around 60cm below the stripped ground surface. As the trench was extended, it could be seen to be at least 1.5m wide and 60cm in thickness, and had associated finds of pottery and animal bone. It was roughly linear, its top surface sloping down towards the east. The rather amorphous shape suggested that it was the fill of a drainage feature, running down the slope towards the river, rather than a building foundation or other structural element.

The area at the top of the slope had much shallow deposits. Topsoil stripping and subsequent grading to form the pipeline working width exposed extensive spreads of pottery, the largest of which covered an area 5m across and up to 1.5m wide. Though mostly consisting of small sherds, these spreads were more or less in situ and in many cases could be seen to be the crushed remains of complete or near complete vessels. The pottery was dated to the early Iron Age (check!!!)

Towards the eastern end of the area, the bases of three large storage jars were set in the ground. The two most southerly of these both had truncated edges nearly 1m in diameter, tapering down to narrow bases. The one to the north was of similar form, but less of the sides survived. The deposits overlying this vessel formed a large, irregularly oval fire-blackened, area. The side of a fourth large storage jar was visible in the southern baulk of the site, but this was not excavated. Other finds in this area included a number of fragments of large, saddle-shaped quernstones.

To the west, these pottery spreads appeared to terminate fairly abruptly, the ground beyond being relatively sterile. To the east, the deposits were cut by the more recent Muslim graves, described above, leaving only scattered residual sherds.

### Discussion

The pottery spreads and other finds at western end of the site are almost certainly the remains of a settlement, probably of Iron Age date. The large storage jars set in the ground were probably either within, or closely associated with, domestic structures. However, the site has clearly been severely truncated by soil erosion and ploughing, with the crushed bases and walls of pottery vessels being found at the base of the ploughsoil layer. No structural features were identified.

It is likely that this settlement was the source of the rather randomly stratified finds occurring in the soils of the sloping part of the site. The quantity and depth of these finds implies that a considerable degree of erosion has taken place. There is a considerable turn-over of the upper layers of soil by animal burrowing, which may have resulted in some of the pottery being intrusive, but it probable that deposition of erosional material since the Iron Age accounts for the upper layers of ground on the valley side and river terrace.

The antique period grave and the later Muslim graves appear to have been cut through this material, suggesting that at least some of the erosion and deposition was an early phenomenon, perhaps the result of the land being first brought into agricultural use.

Future work, especially prior to construction of the SCP pipeline, may provide more evidence for antique period activity, but the single grave that was discovered here appeared to be an isolated feature. The associated jewellery finds implies that this was a relatively high-status burial.

The Muslim graves are undated. It is likely that the village of Seyidlar was established in the medieval period or earlier, but documentary evidence for the antiquity of villages in the region tends to be sparse. The 'pir' near the pipeline route (??date) suggests that the cemetery to the south of the pipeline is long established. It would be expected that tradition and continuity of use of cemeteries over long periods of time would be normal. The burials may date back to the early Islamic period, but could equally be as recent as the nineteenth or early twentieth century.