

KP 376 Asrik Chai

The Site

This site was on the ridge of high ground, between the Tovuzchai river and its tributary, the Asrikchai. These two rivers are less than 900m apart at this point, and both occupy steep valleys, leaving a ridge of fairly level ground around 100m wide between them. The ground falls away very steeply to the east, towards the Asrikchai, and slightly more gradually to the west towards the Tovuzchai. The whole ridge is covered by sagebrush scrub and is used as rough grazing for sheep and goats.

The site was found during topsoil stripping on 17th May 2004, spreads of pottery being exposed on the subsoil surface. There was a restricted easement in this area, and the BTC and SCP pipe trenches were 10m apart.

Excavation was carried out between 26th May and 13th June 2004. In view of the relatively large area covered by the spreads of pottery and the short time before further construction work was scheduled, it was decided to excavate sample squares, rather than attempting full excavation of the whole area. Initially, a line of thirteen contiguous 5m squares was marked out, roughly corresponding to the centre-line of the SCP pipe. Six of these squares, grouped into three pairs and corresponding to the greatest concentrations of visible finds, were excavated.

In addition to the working width, an area approximately 40m square had been stripped to the south of the pipeline easement on the lip of the slope down to the Asrikchai, to provide a stacking area for excavated subsoil. There were large visible spreads of pottery in the centre of this area, and these were also targeted for excavation, in one large area composed of four 5m squares, and a further isolated 5m square to the east. Several squares were later extended in order to define the edges of the pottery spreads.

Description of Archaeological Remains

The westernmost of the three excavated areas along the working width produced one small spread of pottery, including large fragments of a single vessel. A group of large stones within an area of fire-blackened ground included one very large, regular stone, approximately 80cm long by 30cm wide. This appeared to have been deliberately set on a bed of smaller stones, which included fragments of querns. The large stone showed extensive cracking and reddening.

The central excavated area contained the crushed fragments of one fairly large storage jar, along with less complete remains of at least eight other pottery vessels. The large jar was at the western end of a spread of fire-blackened ground. Because of the shape and dimensions of this dark spread, it was thought that it might have been a funeral pyre but there was no trace of burnt bone and it is perhaps better interpreted as a cooking fire.

The eastern area had a more extensive pottery spread, and the original 5m squares were extended to the south and west to reveal its limits. The remains of at least eight separate vessels could be seen, together with large numbers of small sherds, covering a roughly oval area 6m long by 3m wide. The ground in the northern part of this area was noticeably dark, and contained patches flecked with fire-reddened clay. A thin

layer of small stones was also visible in places. Amongst the pottery finds were three objects that may have been candlesticks, tall fluted cylinders with small, central holes.

The large area in the southern part of the site, in the area designated for the subsoil stack, had a similar large spread of pottery fragments. The edges of this spread were rather ill defined, but it extended for nearly 9m from north to south and was up to 6m wide. It was cut by a modern cable trench, the small area to the east of this cut being rather amorphous and diffuse. At the southwest extremity, the remains of a large jar contained a dark silty fill. Elsewhere, at least twelve crushed vessels were present, among a mass of smaller sherds. One vessel was recovered intact, a small biconic jar.

The small area to the east had a very diffuse scatter of pottery fragments, but was notable for a well-defined patch of burnt ground. This was slightly oval, 85cm long by 70cm wide and consisted of thin layers of dark sooty material interleaved with heat-reddened clay.

Because of the benching of the slopes in this area, the preparation of the pipeline right-of-way removed a varying depth of subsoil as well as the thin topsoil layer. It was therefore difficult to judge the depth of deposits from the original ground surface. Apart from the large stone at the west end of the site which may have been more than 1m deep, all the finds seemed to be relatively shallow, forming a compacted layer in the top of the subsoil. Though a small number fresh breaks caused by the pipeline construction work were apparent, the overwhelming majority of the breaks were clearly old.

The pottery and other finds were of late Bronze Age date.

Interpretation

The range of pottery is probably typical of domestic cooking vessels, and the site is probably the result of a settlement area. The location is extremely exposed, and it perhaps more likely that this was seasonally occupied, or possibly a defensive position commanding the valley of the two rivers. Although badly crushed and disturbed, much of the pottery consisted of the broken remains of vessels still in situ, implying that there has been little lateral displacement so that the spreads of pottery correspond very closely to the areas of its utilisation. Each pottery spread perhaps represents the floor or yard area of a single structure.

The damage to the pottery seems to have occurred over time, the result of erosion of the ground surface and subsequent compaction, probably exacerbated by episodes of cultivation. Though a few possible posthole-type features were investigated, but none was convincing, and any structural evidence has probably been lost to the same processes of erosion.

There were areas of burning associated with the pottery. These were initially thought to be cremation sites, but the absence of any burnt bone, and the range of pottery types found, indicate that a domestic function for the site is more likely. The large, fire-cracked stone found near the west end of the site was probably also used in a food preparation process, such as baking bread. Its association with fragments of quernstones seems to confirm that grain processing was taking place close to the site.

Need to add in:

Bit about dating when available.

Additional finds during SCP trenching – Claire knows about.