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The site of Shaym Qalʿa, Marw oasis: reconsidering the chain of information

Abstract: *The ancient city of Marw, Turkmenistan, represents a unique case study for having been the object of many archaeological expeditions, from the pioneering mission of R. Pumpelly (1903-1904) to the most recent aerial-topographic studies of T. Williams "The Ancient Merv Project" (2001-2003). Nevertheless, the settlement dynamics during the transition from Late Sasanian to Early Islamic period (7th-8th cs. A.D.) are not well understood. This contribution focuses on some observations on the site of Shaym Qalʿa, a quadrangular area close to the modern tepe of Gyaur Qalʿa. The latter one represents the hellenistic Antiochia Margiana later determined to be an important shahrestān of the Sasanian's northeastern territories. At first, it was hypothesized that Shaym Qalʿa was a Seljuks military camp (11th-12th cs.), however recent archaeological studies have uncovered elements which could backdate the site to the 8th century. These data go along with Yakubovskii and Bosworth (1991) statements about the ancient Marw; so, the actual hypothesis is that Shaym Qalʿa is an Early Islamic military camp, that is a miṣr. This paper illustrates this latter hypothesis including the favorable points challenges. In addition, this paper verifies two ancient authors, al-Ṭabarī and al-Muqaddasī. Through the readings of the Islamic historians the identification of Shaym Qalʿa can be reconsidered.*

Key words: Shaym Qalʿa, Marw, Early Islamic, *miṣr,* sources

Introduction: the site and previous works

The site of Shaym Qalʿa is located in Marw oasis, Turkmenistan[1] (Fig. 1). It is a small *tepe* 1 km south-east from the modern *tepe* of Gyaur Qalʿa. The latter site represents the hellenistic Antiochia Margiana later determined to be an important *shahrestān* of the Sasanian's northeastern territories[2]. Shaym Qalʿa area covers 110 ha and it is enclosed by fortification walls built in *kaghel*. Inside the area there are some

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[1] From the pioneering mission of R. Pumpelly (1903-1904) [PUMPELLY 1905; PUMPELLY 1908] to the most recent aerial-topographic studies of T. Williams 'The Ancient Merv Project' (2001-2003) [WILLIAMS 2002; WILLIAMS 2003].
[2] WIESEHÖFER 2001: 108.

mounds of soil, geological and antropical material[3]. At present the fortification walls are almost destroyed or in bad conditions, while the site itself is abandoned and in degradation[4] (Fig. 2).

In 1962-63 the site was examined by YuTAKE expedition, an archaeological permanent mission established by Turkmenistan Academy of Sciences at the beginning of 20th century. For forty years the YuTAKE was guided by its founder, Mikhail Evgen'evich Masson, and it published seventeen reports about the main results achieved. Unfortunately, these publications are quite difficult to find[5]. At Shaym Qalʿa the expedition investigated one angular tower, some parts of the fortification walls and a building near one of the gates (which ones and how many gates is not mentioned). Archeological material, pottery and numismatics evidences were not published. Finally, the site was defined as a Seljuks military camp (11th-12th cs.), but YuTAKE archaeologist didn't declare the chronological criteria they used to support this identification[6].
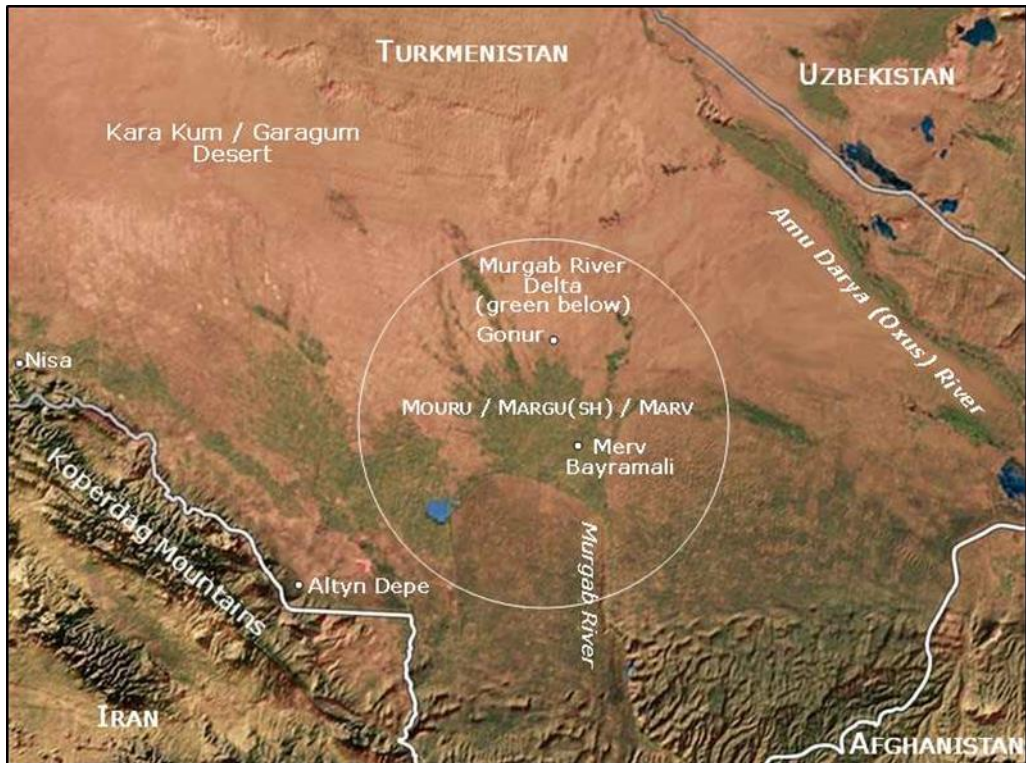

Fig. 1. Oasis satellite shooting

[3] HERRMANN 1997: 7.
[4] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57-59.
[5] PUSCHNIGG 2005: 11.
[6] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.

In 1994 the International Merv Project (IMP) directed by Georgina Herrmann, active in Marw oasis from 1992 to 2001, investigated Shaym Qalʿa and its archaeological potentialities. Nevertheless, the site was already deeply damaged during the previous decays: in '90th years both the fortification walls and the mounds in the area were almost disappeared: on one hand the local climate conditions eroded the structures, on the other hand human activities injured the site for abusive and agricultural purposes. The north-western part of the site area was further damaged by some modern buildings and structures. The inner area was (and is still now) condemned to surveys and excavations for the presence of some agricultural fields and at least two modern implantations producing *khagel*[7].

Fortification walls route was hardly detached through the northern and western borders: in '90th years the fortification walls were in ruins and in the state of mounds 0,80 m high at most. On the southern border the fortification walls were in better conditions: they best preserved sections elevated up to 2 m and run 20 m east-west. On this same border there were also a bastion circular in plant. YuTAKE investigations still documented the presence of defensive structures along Sahym Qalʿa walls, mentioning that there were a series of bastions along the walls, 50-60 m far each other's, and jointed angular towers. In the inner area, 60 north-west from the southern walls, there was a soil mound 4 m high. This mound developed as a quadrangular area, nearly 20 m each side, the top of it artificially leveled. The IMP archaeologists found some fragments of pottery from the side of the mound[8].

IMP expedition opened a trench 20 m east from this last mound: the trench is 5 m broad and 2 m deep, the major length is 20 m from north to south[9]. Along its western section, 1 m deep, was detached a yellow-greenish layer, made by fired bricks. Each brick measures approximately 23x23x4,5 cm. Most probably the layer represents part of the pavement of a covered room or of an inner court; according to the measures and to the color the IMP identified the bricks as 'Early Islamic'[10].

For the bad state of preservation of Sahym Qalʿa and for the lack of data from YuTAKE expedition, IMP archaeologist came only to preliminaries and hypothetic considerations about the date and the function of the site. Nevertheless, Hermann team reconsidered and rectified YuTAKE thesis about Sahym Qalʿa, that is it was a Seljuks military camp. Analyzing the trench inside the inner area, it appeared clear that the amount of archeological material in the site is more than what one could estimate just from the other inner soil mounds. What is more, 'Early Islamic surface material' foundings suggest that the site was already active between the 8th-10th centuries[11].

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[7] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.
[8] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 58.
[9] IMP report doesn't specify who did the trench; HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.
[10] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.
[11] IMP reports use the expression 'Early Islamic' for a period spanning from the 9th to the 10th century, in detail from 9th to 10th century for pottery; HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1993: 60.
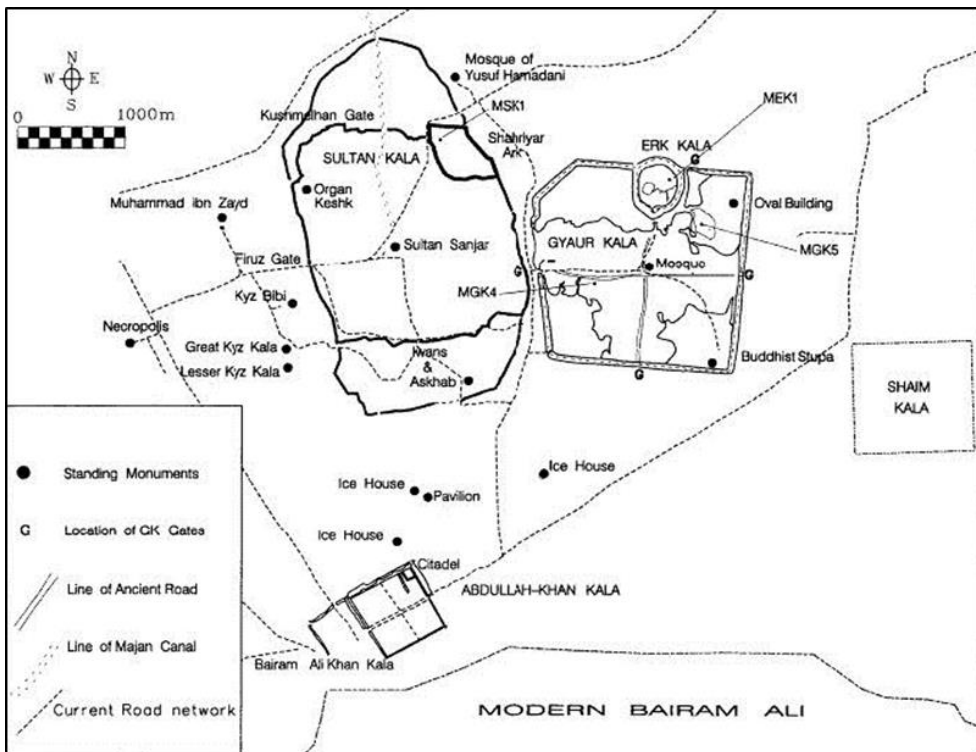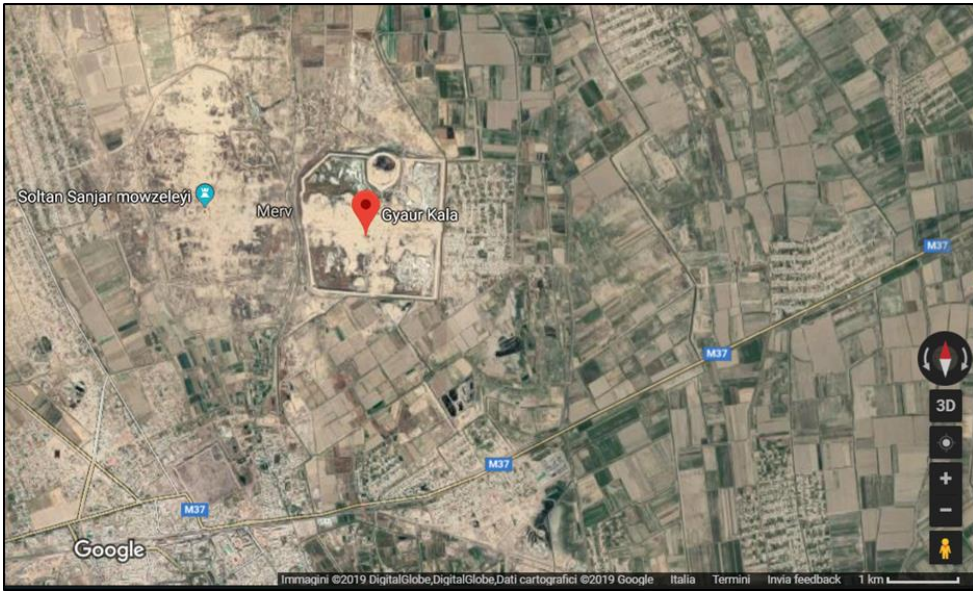
Fig. 2. Upward: Satellite shooting of the modern city of Marw (after Google Maps 01/01/2019); beneath: Marw: plant of all IMP excavation areas (after HERMANN 1997: fig. 1)

The currently hypothesis: Shaym Qalʿa as a *miṣr*

Begining from IMP excavations and reports, the current and general accepted hypothesis points out that at the origin Shaym Qalʿa was an Early Islamic military camp, in other words, a *miṣr*[12]. This hypothesis substantiates and validates what was asserted by Yakubovskii and Bosworth. The two academics wrote the entry *Marw al-Shāhijān* in The *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: concerning the conquest of the oasis by Muslim army[13] they quoted:

> 'It was conquered in this year for the Arabs by the governor of Khurāsān ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿĀmir b. Kurayz[14], who made a treaty with Māhūī Sūrī – the current *kanārang*[15] – […] There was thus from the start a basic difference in settlement pattern from that in the great *amṣār* of ʿIrāḳ and Persia, where the Arabs built distinct encampments as centres of their power. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿĀmir left a garrison of 4,000 men in Marw.

According to this hypothesis, Shaym Qalʿa could be the military camp of the 4,000 men garrison imposed at Marw by b. ʿĀmir[16]. It doesn't mean that Shaym Qalʿa would have become new centre of power and local control, unlike great *amṣār* as Baṣra, Kūfa e al-Fusṭāṭ did. After all, the city and the oasis of Marw surrendered peacefully and the Muslims made a favorable treaty, so there was no need to impose a *miṣr* like Baṣra, Kūfa e al-Fusṭāṭ, where a stronger control was necessary[17]. Otherwise, Shaym Qalʿa could have been set up between 667 and 671, when Ziyād b. Abīhi, successor of ʿAbd Allāh, sent out 50,000 families from Basra and Kūfa, who were then settled in the villages of the oasis by the governor al-Rabīʿ b. Ziyād al-Ḥārithī[18]. In this case Shaym Qalʿa would have been helpful during the settlement operations. In fact, Marw became the military focal point for Muslim to conquest Centrale Asia, particularly during the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685-705)[19]: it was from Marw oasis that during Omayyad period Muslim army were sent to conquer Bukhārā and Samarcanda[20]. Therefore, the hypothesis that Shaym Qalʿa could have been an Early-Islamic *miṣr,* according to the 'Early Islamic surface material'[21] found, would be credible; even though the pottery materials don't allow to date the site more precisely inside the long-time frame between the eighth and the tenth centuries[22].

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[12] HERRMANN 1993: 57; HERRMANN 1997: 7; WILLIAMS 2008: 417.
[13] YAKUBOVSKII, BOSWORTH 1991: 620.
[14] Ṭabarī 2872.
[15] The *kanārang* was the military chief of Sasanian Abarshahr, that was the northwestern part of the Sasanian empire; LITVINSKY 1996: 450; SYVÄNNE, MAKSYMIUK 2018: 43.
[16] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 59.
[17] Ṭabarī 2888=HUMPHREYS 1990: 93.
[18] YAKUBOVSKII, BOSWORTH 1991: 620.
[19] KENNEDY 2008: 104.
[20] WALDRON GRUTZ 1998: 18.
[21] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1993: 60.
[22] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1993: 8.

Indeed, the strategy of local control actuated in Central Asia by the first Muslims is still topic to investigate. Not only Central Asia had a different physical and political geography from the other conquered lands, but also the military strategies and, after the first successes, the conquerors settlement dynamics differed a lot from what is known for al-Shām, Irāq and, in general, ancient Islamic Maghrib. Despite important studies and expeditions at big Islamic cities as Nīshāpūr, Samarcanda, Bukhārā, the data recorded don't give an exhaustive picture for Early Islamic Khurāsān[23]. In fact, during the first campaigns, Muslims didn't prefer to set out permanent military camps in the land conquered, both because armies were composed by not that many soldiers, both because raids were the prevalent military strategy. In other words, it seems there were no need to impose permanent military camps[24]. Also, the first Muslim armies moved independently each other's, and they asked for reinforcements only if and when necessary. More than the cavalry, *rabīta,* that were infantry moving garrisons, were the very core of Islamic army. *Rabīta* were so important that, still during Omayyad period, the élite cavalry of the *fursān* officially appointed to bring always the caliphs were quite little, while *rabīta* were dislocated all over the Islamic territories and, especially the ones in Khurāsān, had at most 30-40,000 men each[25].

The ancient authors: reading the sources

Nevertheless, one could reflect about the meaning of the word *miṣr* (pl. *amṣār).* Lane Dictionary gives the following definition[26]:

'A partition, barrier, or thing intervening between two things […] Hence, A great town; syn. ḥadd […] such is the signification in the language of the Arabs (Lth, TA): or that [town] whereof the greatest of its mosques will not hold, or contain, its habitants'.

The act of foundation of a *miṣr* is technically called *tamṣīr*, and it includes many different aspects still not really understood, as the subdivision of the building area in *khiṭaṭ,* that are kind of land-lots[27].

According to al-Muqaddasī, the therm *miṣr* indicates something more complex than a military camp[28]:

'This chapter is assigned especially to the use of those who wish to learn the metropoles [amṣār] of the Muslims […] You understand that we represent the metropoles [amṣār] as kings, the capitals [qaṣaba] as chamberlains, the towns [mudun] as armies, the villages as foot soldiers. There is a difference

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[23] KENNEDY 2008: 103.
[24] NICOLLE 1993: 10.
[25] NICOLLE 1993: 15.
[26] LANE 1863: I, 2719.
[27] KENNEDY 2006: 23.
[28] COLLINS 1994: 50.

of opinion about the meaning of metropolis: the jurisprudents define "metropole" as any town with a large population, in which legal punishments are administered, having a resident governor, its revenue sufficient for its expenses, and administratively associated with its rural district […] The linguists define as a metropole every city that lies dose to the boundary between two countries, such as al-Basra, al-Raqqa, Arrajān. In popular speech metropole means any large and important town such as al-Rayy, al-Mawsil, and al-Ramla. For our part we use the term metropole in the sense of any town which is the seat of the highest authority, where the governmental bureaux are assembled, to which is assigned the functions of administration, and which, for the towns of the entire region constitutes a central place, for example: Dimashq, al-Qayrawān, and Shirāz'

In the next paragraph the geographer quotes Marw as one of the Islamic capitals[29]. Furthermore, al-Muqaddasī reports also a list of ten *amṣār*, each *miṣr* is characterized by a distinctive connotation[30]:

'The endowments of the capitals [amṣār] are ten: chivalry in Baghdād, eloquence in al-Kūfa, manufacture in al-Basra, commerce in Misr, treachery in al-Ray, harshness in Naysābūr, avarice in Marw, boasting in Bakh, and craftsmanship in Samarqand'.

To sum up, the word *miṣr* originally defined Muslim armies military camps, as for Baṣra and Kūfa, not by chance called also *al-miṣrāni* 'the two encampments', so temporary military outposts set up to carry on the Islamic conquest; then, already from the caliphate of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644), these encampments were stabilized making a first lots partition, and so defining the *khiṭaṭ*. These *khiṭaṭ* were devoted to accommodating the different tribal groups[31]. During this period the word *miṣr* keep the sense of military outpost selected to manage and coordinate the Islamic conquest, but with a more focus on the management of the conquered territories and on the organization of future campaigns. In other words, the word *miṣr* gained a sense of local stability, losing the characteristic of temporariness of the previous decays[32]. Up to one or two centuries from the outpost of the first permanent *amṣār,* the word *miṣr* was generally used to identify big Islamic towns, as al-Muqaddasī[33] did.

Concerning the site of Shaym Qalʿa, its considerable dimensions as its regular form make it very close to an Early Islamic *miṣr,* although the fortification walls are traditionally not recorded for the Early Islamic *amṣār,* as for Baṣra and di Kūfa[34]. Nevertheless, IMP reports don't state a precise chronology for Shaym Qalʿa

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[29] Al-Muqaddasī, 48=COLLINS 1994: 51.
[30] COLLINS 1994: 32.
[31] AL-SAYYAD 1991: 49, referring to Baṣra.
[32] AL-SAYYAD 1991: 45.
[33] BOSWORTH 1993: 146.
[34] AL-SAYYAD 1991: 72.

fortification walls, but they record only the presence of 'Early Islamic surface material' dated between the eighth and the tenth centuries. It means that the erection of these wall could have followed the first *miṣr* outpost. It would be possible considering that YuTAKE expedition recorded materials and data that made them identify Shaym Qalʿa as a Seljuks military camp[35].

This hypotesis could be confirmed thanks to a local legend. According to this, a rich caravan chief called Shaym founded Shaym Qal'a and he possessed lot of camels. He would have found the location during the reign of a mythical pre-Islamic king Khan Gyuar[36]. The legend could hide an allegoric meaning: the name Khan Gyuar could be related to Sasanian Marw, developed on the site of Gyaur Qal'a, and so the mythical king could be the personification of the Sasanian city; while Shaym, chief-caravan and rich camel driver, could be the personification of the new conquerors, the Islamic armies. In fact, Islamic troops didn't ride horses that much, but almost the preferred camels. According to this interpretation, Shaym Qal'a could be a *miṣr* set up by one of the Muslim military chief, clearly reluctant to get together his soldiers and local inhabitants. The detail about camels is very interesting because it sounds historically credible, although, after all, it is a local legend only. During the first Islamic conquests, in fact, long distance campaigns were based on camels' infantries more than real cavalry: the soldiers were few and self-sufficient; they had means and supplies necessary for very long distances, and they moved everywhere was required[37].

Despite the fact that it'd be possible to suppose Shaym Qalʿa be an Early Islamic military camp, there are many points still wide open that weaken this hypothesis. Firstly, excavations data, as told above, are very few and not really diagnostic. The site is bad conserved for having been time by time damaged by human activities[38]. Nowadays Shaym Qalʿa is almost undetachable by aerial-photography, neither by satellite detection (Fig. 2). Moreover, the few information published by IMP archaeologists, don't allow to date the site precisely: the chronology, as told, spans in a log time frame between the 8th and the 10th centruries. IMP reports show only two tables of pottery from Shaym Qalʿa, for only six diagnostic specimens (Fig. 3)[39], then this chronological hypothesis needs more scientific and archaeological investigations.

Furthermore, the same Islamic conquest and the organization of Central Asia during Early Islamic times are not wellknown: even if traditionally ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is said to have established *jund* system, that was the repartition of Islamic territories in administrate and military districts, this system really appeared during

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[35] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.
[36] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 59.
[37] NICOLLE 1993: 10.
[38] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 57.
[39] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 59, figs. 13-14.

Omayyad period. Moreover, *jund* system was not common for all Islamic empire, but only in certain territories, particularly in al-Shām[40]. After all a potential *miṣr* as Shaym Qalʿa wouldn't be very close to traditional *amṣār* like Baṣra, Kūfa and al-Fusṭāṭ, both for creation, both for later development.
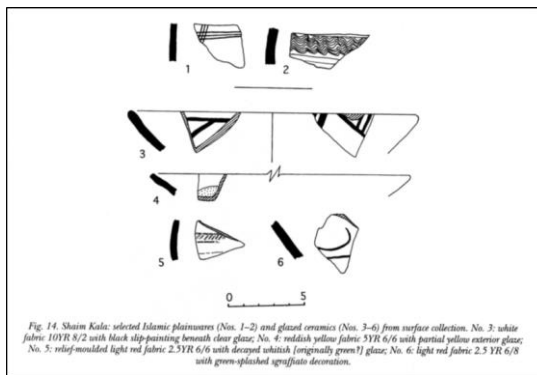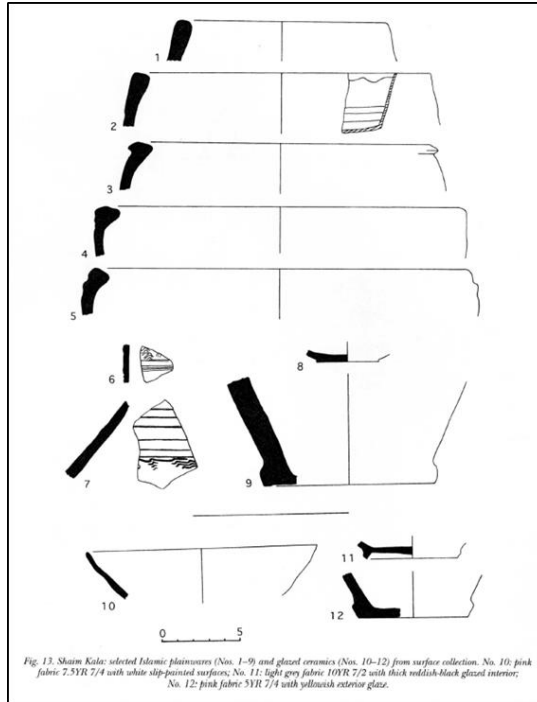

Fig. 3. Shaym Qalʿa, pottery (after HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: figs. 13-14).

Then, additionally to these critical points, a deeply investigation on the origin of this hypothesis shows another question which could contest Shaym Qalʿa as an Early Islamic *miṣr*. Verifying the assertation of Yakubovskii and Bosworth about

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[40] SOURDEL 1986: 601.

Islamic conquest of Marw oasis, one could play attention to the source directly quoted and to the conclusions the scholars went forward. If the two scholars confirm that Marw oasis was characterized by 'a basic difference in settlement pattern from that in the great *amṣār* of ʿlrāḳ and Persia', at the same time the assert that right away after the conquest 'ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿĀmir left a garrison of 4,000 men in Marw'[41].

This last information is specifically quoted from al-Ṭabarī. However, reading al-Ṭabarī *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa 'l-Mulūk*, even Humphreys translation[42], one may find important differences between what Yakubovskii and Bosworth asserted, and the source quoted. The Muslim historian, in fact, reports a military garrison imposed at Marw, but he specifies that it was at a district of Marw al-rudh, not at Great Marw. The passage is the following[43]:

> 'According to ʿAlī (b. Muḥammad al-Madā'inī)-Muṣ'ab b. Ḥayyān- his brother Muǧātil b. Hayyān: Ibn ʿĀmir made peace with the inhabitants of Marw, and sent al-Aḥnaf with 4,000 [troops] to Ṭukhāristān. He advanced until he made camp at the [presentday] location of the Castle of al-Aḥnaf [in the district of] Marwarūdh'.

Concerning the position of the place 'Castle of al-Aḥnaf', Humphreys[44] refers directly to Le Strange[45]:

> 'One day's march from Marv-ar-Rûd, on the same bank and down the river towards Great Marv, was the castle called Ḳasr Aḥnaf, after Al-Aḥnaf ibn Ḳays, the Arab general who in the days of the Caliph 'Othmân, in the year 31 (652), had conquered these lands for Islam. […] At the present day the site of Ḳasr Aḥnaf is marked by the village of Marûchak, or Marv-i-Kûchik (Little Marv) as the Persians call the place'.

'Marv-i-Kûchik (Little Marv)' is a toponymical variant of Marw al-rudh, a city located on the upper course of Murghāb river; its ruins are detached in the modern afghan town of Bālā Murghāb[46], which is far nearly 250 km from Marw[47]. The information referred by Yakubovskii and Bosworth is absent in the source they quoted: al-Ṭabarī, in fact, asserts that[48]:

> 'According to ʿAlī (b. Muḥammad al-Madā'inī) - Zuhayr b. Hunayd - one of his paternal uncles: Ibn ʿĀmir conquered Nīshāpūr and proceeded toward Sarakhs. The inhabitants of Marw sued for peace, and Ibn ʿĀmir sent them Ḥātim b. al-Nủmān al-Bāhilī. He made peace with Abraz [sic], the marzubān of Marw, in return for [a tribute of) 2,200,000 [dirhams]'.

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[41] YAKUBOVSKII, BOSWORTH 1991: 620.
[42] HUMPHREYS 1990.
[43] Ṭabarī 2900=HUMPHREYS 1990: 104.
[44] HUMPHREYS 1990: 104, note 180.
[45] LE STRANGE 1905: 405
[46] YAKUBOVSKII, BOSWORTH 1991: 617.
[47] Measure verified from GoogleMaps (21.12.2018).
[48] Ṭabarī 2888= HUMPHREYS 1990: 93.

Concerning the 50,000 families sent from Basra and Kūfa in the oasis by Ziyād b. Abīhi between 667 and 671, these ones were settled in the villages of the oasis by the governor al-Rabīʿ b. Ziyād al-Ḥārithī[49], as it is directly discernible from archaeological records. In fact, soon after the Islamic conquest of Marw, most of the Sasanians sites widespread all over the oasis were occupied by the Muslim: archaeological data report that during between the seventh and the ninth century almost of these sites were enlarged and developed like little cities. It is plausible to suppose that the 50,000 families from ʿIrāq were settled in these sites. Then, coming back to the hypothesis of Shaym Qalʿa being a *miṣr,* the outpost of a potentially Early Islamic military camp near the ancient Sasanian city – that was the modern *tepe* of Gyaur Qalʿa- doesn't seem strictly connected with the big migration of Iraqi families.

Conclusion

At the end, another important critical point concerns the archaeological data that backdate Shaym Qalʿa; IMP reports, in fact, state that pottery from the site belong at least to the 8th century, not to the 7th century[50]. If, methodologically speaking, absence of archaeological data doesn't mean absence of information, it is also noteworthy for the actual limit of Islamic Archaeology, that is 'the shortage of archaeological evidence for the religion of Islam during the first seventy years of the hijra'[51]. 7th century still rappresents a big lack in terms of knowledge of Islamic history, so it isn't surprising the pottery from Shaym Qalʿa being dated from the 8th century onwards. This last assert doesn't necessarily imply that Shaym Qalʿa couldn't have been an Early Islamic *miṣr* set up with soon after the conquest of Marw oasis, over times still used, developed and equipped with fortification walls. What it is important to stress is that, according to archaeological data and historical sources, this hypothesis is still a mere conjecture.

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[49] YAKUBOVSKII, BOSWORTH 1991: 620.
[50] HERRMANN, MASSON, KURBANSAKHATOV 1995: 59, figs. 13-14.
[51] JHONS 2003: 435.

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