

Hergiswil, 22 February 2018

EurAsia archaeological projects

Brief report on 2017 and outlook for 2018

Dear EurAsia members

Below you will find brief overviews of EurAsia's nine ongoing projects. The detailed archaeological reports will be published on the society's website at the end of April at: www.exploration-eurasia.com



EurAsia projects

I. Tuva, Southern Russia

The rescue excavations of Scythian and Hunnic-Sarmatian graves (6th century BC – 4th century AD) near **Terezin** in Tuva, southern Siberia, which were successfully carried out from 2006 to 2011, were temporarily suspended in 2012-2014.

Several publications appeared in English and Russian. In spring 2015, a new reconnaissance survey was carried out on the site on the banks of the Sayano-Shushenskoye reservoir, which floods the necropolises every year and threatens to destroy them, followed by excavations, during which the previously unknown **Ala-Tey cemetery** was discovered.



Partial view of the Ala-Tey burial ground

As in 2016, the excavations in 2017 were very successful; 53 graves were discovered, 80% of which were excavated, with the remainder to be uncovered in 2018. The dead were laid out in a supine position, mostly in rectangular, rarely in boat-shaped stone coffins. Without exception, they date from the Xiongnu period (2nd century BC to 2nd century AD). Like those uncovered in 2016, the graves had not been plundered, but had been washed out by the annual rise in water levels.

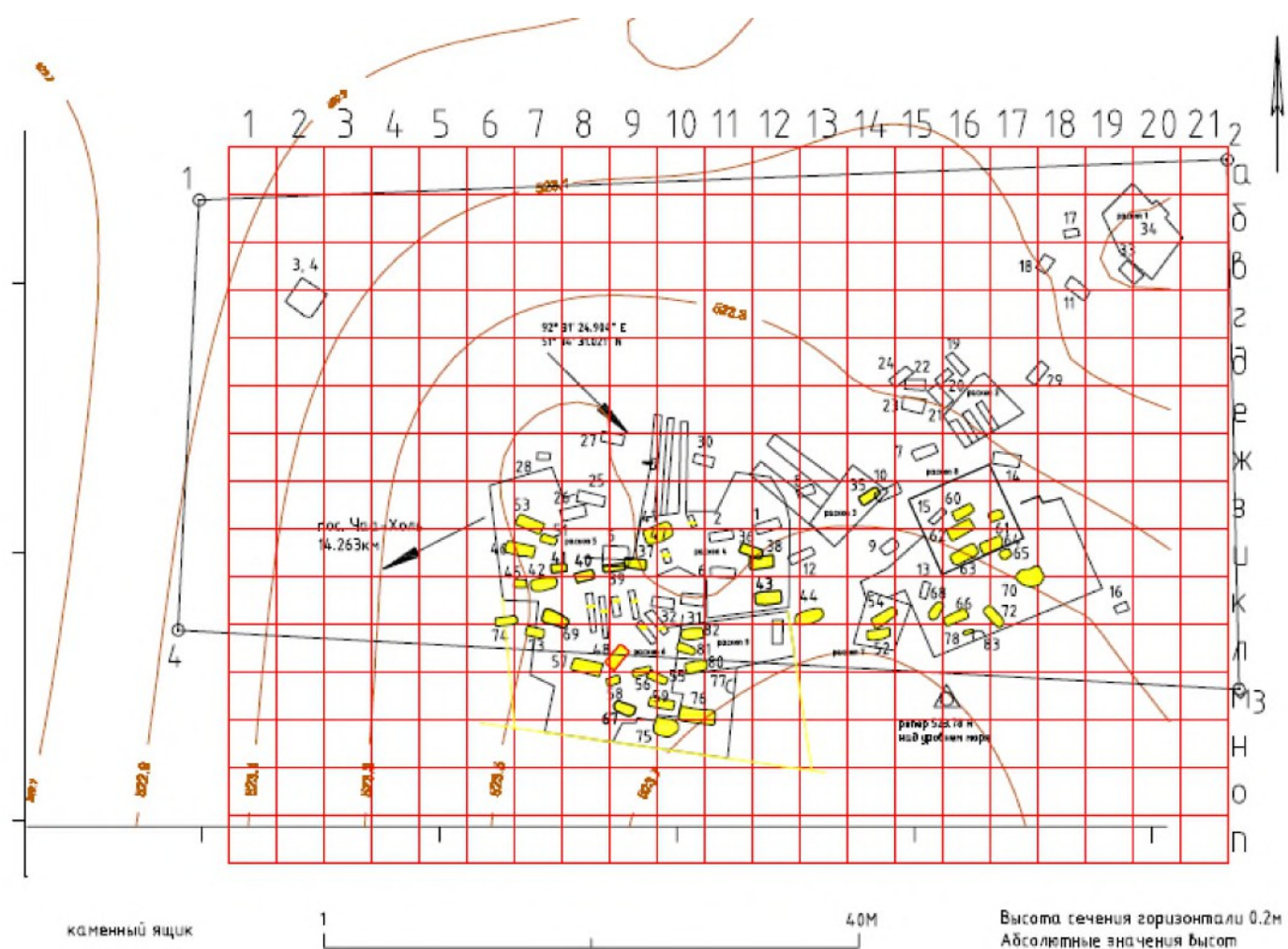


Stone coffin grave with bronze belt buckle (front), bronze mirror (back right) and ceramic vessel (back left).

As in 2016, the most interesting and valuable finds in 2017 were made in women's graves: these include bronze belt buckles with yaks, camels, horses and bulls, Chinese bronze mirrors (original imports and local replicas). In addition, there was another rare stone belt plate with inlaid coral, turquoise and mother-of-pearl, as well as a belt plate made of jet (petrified wood) with engraved animal figures in the "Scythian animal style".



Stone coffin grave with stone belt plate inlaid with coral, turquoise and mother-of-pearl.



Plan of Aia-tey, as of the end of June 2017.



Stone belt plate with inlaid coral, turquoise and mother-of-pearl.



Ceramic finds



Belt buckle made of jet (fossilised wood) with engraved ibexes hit by arrows. Length: approx. 12 cm. At the top right, a horse with a twisted front body in typical "Scythian animal style". Such motifs also appear on the tattoos of the famous Pazyryk mummies.

The numerous archaeologically valuable objects are now being cleaned and scientifically examined, and the copper(II) acetate ("verdigris") is being removed from the bronze objects. This is being done in the laboratories

of the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, IHMC RAS. The financial cost of the scientific follow-up work is now as high as that of the fieldwork.

Three scientific articles in Russian were published in specialist journals and edited volumes.

2018: Excavations continue, with a detailed plan being drawn up based on aerial photographs.

II. Kesken Kala, Kazakhstan

Excavation of a Khorezmian (5th-7th century) and Oghuz (9th-12th century) city.

Excavations continued in the residential quarter within the fortified city quarter of *Shahristan* in the south-eastern sector. The pottery found there dates from the 10th–12th centuries AD. A large building with a floor area of 15 x 6.15 m had an aiwan. Aiwans are tall halls open on one side, usually covered by a barrel vault; they are found in representative buildings such as palaces or mosques. This find confirms the hypothesis put forward at the end of 2016 that there could be a palace-like complex in *the sharistan*. (Last year's annual report of 20 March 2017, p. 3). The detailed report on last year's campaign is still pending.



Aerial view: On the left, the ongoing excavation within the *sharistan*.



The complex excavated in 2017

2018: Excavations continue in *Sharistan*. New excavation sites are opened in the northern unfortified part of the city and near the citadel's defensive walls.

III. Ilan Baliq/Uch-Aral, Kazakhstan

Ilan Baliq is a Christian Nestorian cemetery dating from the 13th-14th centuries. The neighbouring settlement on the former Silk Road is most likely identical to the place Ilan Baliq, which the Armenian king Hetum I of Cilicia (southeastern Anatolia) encountered and described on his way to the Mongolian Grand Khan Möngke (reigned 1251-59) in 1254. The excavation is being carried out in collaboration with the *Archaeological Society of Kazakhstan* and the *Tandy Institute for Archaeology, Fort Worth, Texas*.



The excavations, which began in 2016, were also very successful in 2017. Following the initial chance discovery of a Nestorian gravestone in 2014 and the seven gravestones found in 2016, seven more gravestones were discovered in 2017, one of which bears an inscription in Old Turkic and Old Syriac script. In addition, a ceramic fragment with Old Syriac letters was found.



Uncovering of a Christian gravestone with an engraved cross.



This gravestone, discovered in 2017, names two people buried there: "The grave of Barshabba Quc. The grave of Yoshmid the priest". Since double burials of two men are very unusual, it is assumed that the two buried individuals died during the great plague epidemic of approximately 1335-42, which wiped out all Christian communities in what is now Kyrgyzstan and literally depopulated the region.

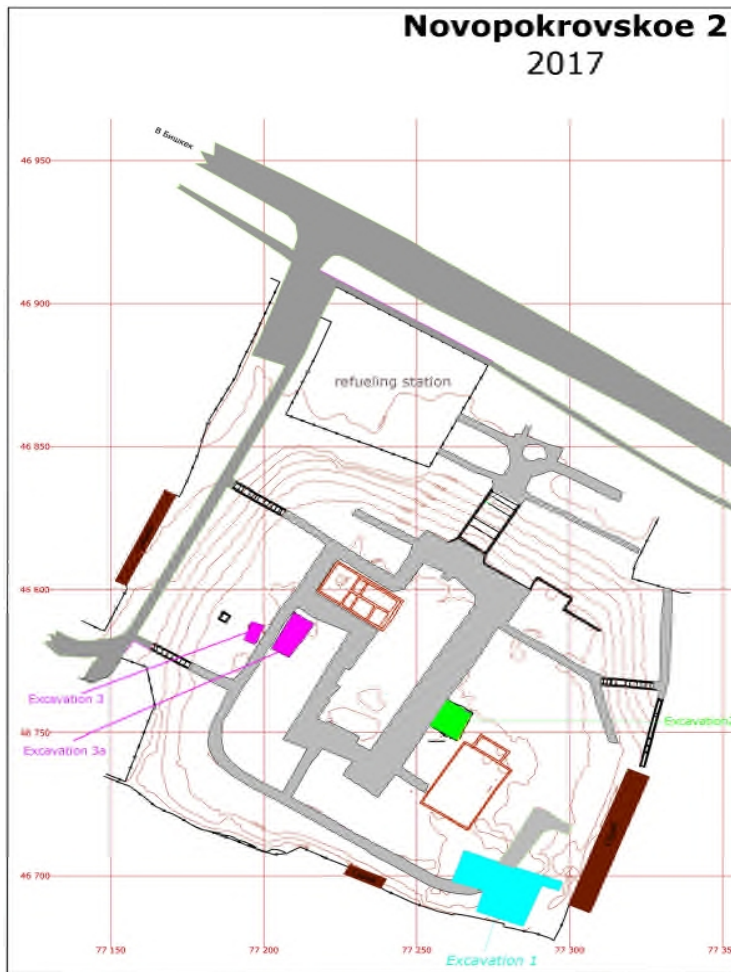
The geophysical prospecting that began in 2016 has been continued. This is all the more important as no graves have been found so far, only the gravestones. In my opinion, the actual cemetery must be located near the current site.

2018: Work continues at the presumed cemetery and evidence is being sought for a cemetery church that is believed to have been located there. In March 2018, two specialists in ancient Syrian inscriptions from Canada and the USA will come to Kazakhstan to study the inscriptions on site.

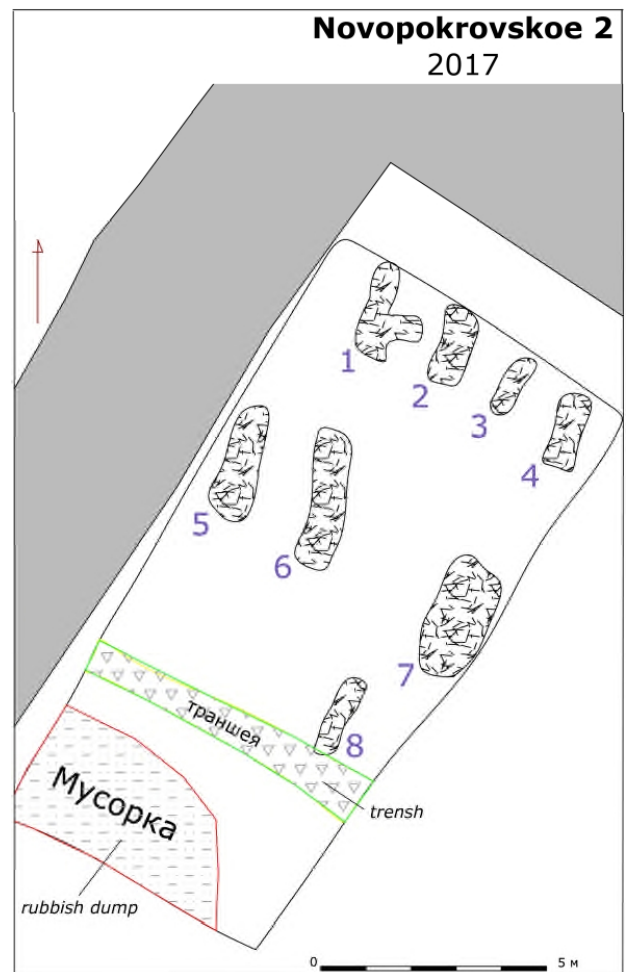
IV. Novopokrovka II, Kyrgyzstan

Excavation of a fortified settlement and a presumed Buddhist monastery.

In 2017, work focused entirely on the centre of the settlement, with Karakhanid and pre-Karakhanid layers from the 8th to late 9th centuries being investigated, as in 2016. Relatively few ceramics and four coins from the Türgesh (8th-9th centuries) were found.



Overall plan of Novopokrovka II.



Sector 3a with the graves.

In the western centre, the last concrete slabs from the Soviet era were removed, "Excavations 3 and 3a" in the plan. Underneath, modern water pipes were initially uncovered, followed by a Muslim cemetery (3a) that was used until the early 19th century. The latter cannot be excavated for socio-political reasons. There were no indications of a Buddhist monument.

A scientific publication on the excavation in the south-eastern sector (Excavation 1 on the map) was published in Russian.

Conclusion: During the fourteen years of excavation, no evidence of a Buddhist monument came to light. Nor were any clearly Buddhist artefacts discovered. The small Buddhist finds made by Kojemjako in 1953 remained isolated items. Therefore, it must be concluded that either Kojemjako's individual finds were privately owned at the time, i.e. in the 8th century, or that the Buddhist monument, if it ever existed, was completely destroyed during the construction of the Soviet cultural centre in 1954. Furthermore, it is impossible to excavate the discovered Muslim cemetery in order to explore the layer beneath it.

For these reasons, this project is being concluded. Selected finds will be handed over to the National Historical Museum for exhibition, while the rest will remain at the Archaeological Institute of Bishkek University. A final report will be prepared.

V. Qarshovul, Uzbekistan

Excavation of a Sogdian city, 4th-8th century. In the 10th century, the Arab geographer and traveller Ibn Hawqal described two Christian (Nestorian) cities: firstly, the monastery of **Wazkerd**, which EurAsia successfully identified, excavated and published near Urgut, south of Samarkand. Secondly, the village of **Weshgird** in the oasis of Chach, today's Tashkent. Following the chance discovery of a metal pectoral cross in Qarshovul (2008), EurAsia began excavations two years later.

Following the controlled discovery of a gravestone engraved with a cross (2012), the 2016 expedition succeeded in uncovering three further pieces of evidence of an early Christian past in the form of coins engraved with crosses.



Northern and north-western sector of the large building in the south of the city.

Results in 2017: The design of the entrance to the large public building is revealing and unique: it appears that visitors to the complex had to pass through a narrow gate immediately after the entrance gate, with a hearth on each of its two pilasters. The three archaeologists Sheyko, Ivanov and Ilyasov suspect that this could be an ancient Turkish fire purification ritual, but this does not necessarily contradict the hypothesis of a Christian ruling dynasty. This is because it was ancient Turkish ethnic groups, such as the Karluks, who adopted the Christian faith more or less superficially but nevertheless retained their old customs. Such mobile fire gates were already described by Byzantine envoys who visited ancient Turkic khans. The discovery is all the more significant as a similar architectural arrangement is unknown. Seventeen coins were also found, at least two of which bear a cross.



Front of the coin: A ruling couple



Reverse: Tamgha with cross; early 8th century.

2018: Excavations continue.

VI. Vardana, Uzbekistan

Excavation of a Sogdian and medieval city in the oasis of Bukhara.

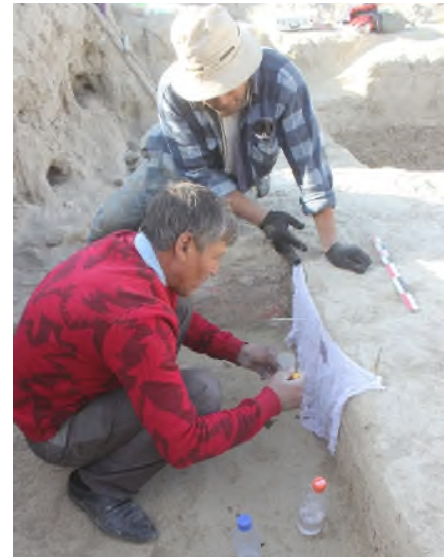


The excavation team in front of the citadel of Vardana.

Excavations continued in the citadel. As already mentioned in the 2016 report on page 10, the hypothesis put forward in 2015 was confirmed and expanded, according to which, at the beginning of the 8th century, economic and storage rooms were built not only *above* but also *within* the state rooms of the former palace from the late 7th century. Small fragments of polychrome wall paintings were discovered here. Most likely, the palace of Vardan Khudah was converted into a fortified castle before 705 due to the impending attacks by the advancing Arabs, and the ruler's state rooms were converted into storage rooms. In 2017, several fragments of wall paintings were uncovered, removed and taken to the Archaeological Museum of Bukhara, where they will later be exhibited.



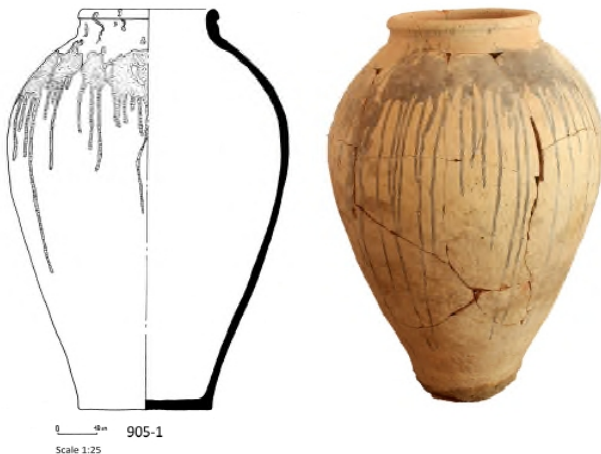
Fixing the mural in the citadel



Removal of the wall painting

In 2017, the natural topsoil was reached in several places within the citadel for the first time; the oldest building structures date from the 4th-5th century AD.

In addition, a 7-metre-deep exploratory trench was dug in the lower town, the *sharistan*, in 2017. Preliminary dating of the oldest building fabric suggests that the first layer of dwellings in the town was built in the same period as the citadel in the 4th-5th century AD. This dating still needs to be confirmed by further comparisons of the architectural fabric and the pottery found with corresponding elements of the citadel. The exploratory trench also revealed two large pottery vessels, one from the 7th/8th century and the other probably from the 5th/6th century.



Vessel with tapered base, 7th/8th century
to the

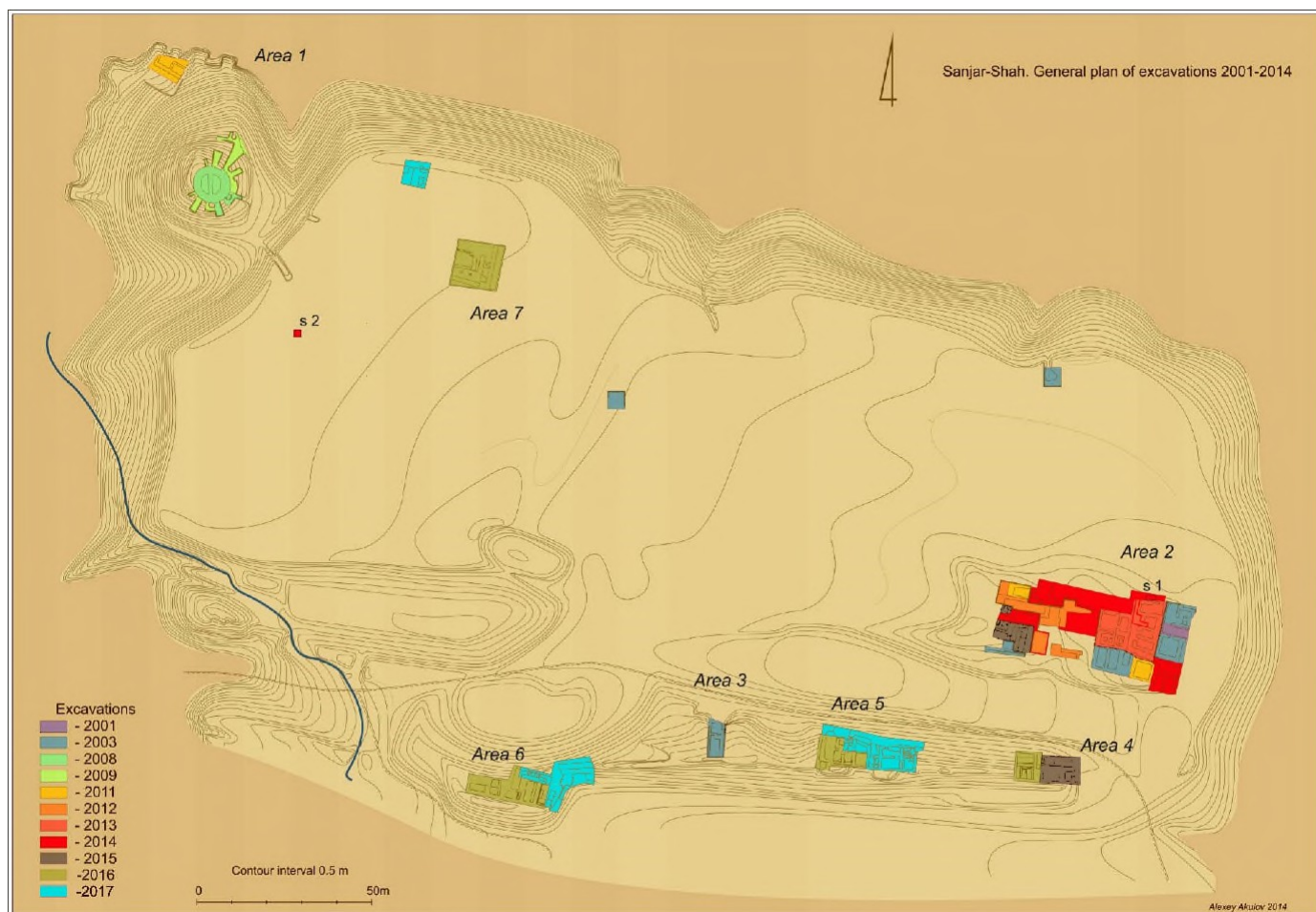


The vessel with a flat base from the 5th/6th century is being taken
Bukhara Museum inside the citadel.

2018: Excavations continue in the citadel and the lower town.

VII. Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan

Excavation of the fortified residence of a Sogdian ruler or a small town with a citadel



Excavations continued in sectors (areas) V and VI in 2017 and began in sector VIII (north of VII).

In the well-preserved sectors V and VI, it was found that the archaeological structure had been preserved to a height of 5 m or three storeys. As in 2016, fragments of wall paintings were uncovered, as well as in sector VIII. In room 6 of sector V, where a fragment of a Chinese bronze mirror and a rare Janus-shaped pin were discovered in 2016, a terracotta figure was found in 2017. It was used in a Zoroastrian ritual called *kusti*.



Sector V during the excavations



Zoroastrian terracotta figure from Room VI, Sector V.



Collapsed false floor in Room 7, Sector V.



Sector VIII, view to the north.

2018: A scientific publication on the Janus-headed pin will appear in 2018.

Excavations will continue in sectors V, VI and, above all, VIII. The wall paintings discovered in room 2, sector VIII, were covered again in 2017. There are plans to continue the excavations there in 2018 with the help of a specialist restorer. Due to the unusual thickness of the walls (2.1 m), this could be a monumental building.

VIII. Gonur, Turkmenistan

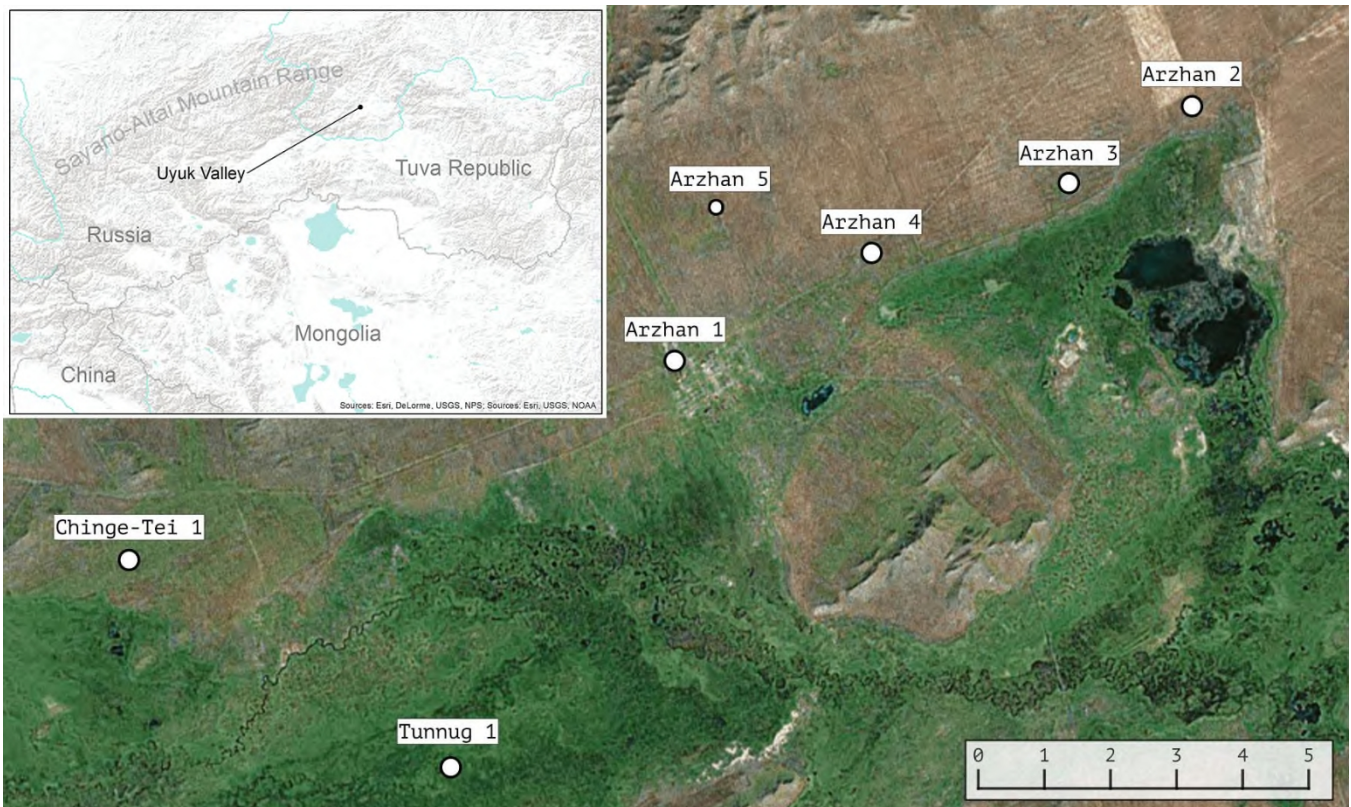
Non-invasive exploration of previously unexcavated areas around Gonur.

Gonur Tepe was the largest city in *the* so-called *Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex*, which flourished between 2400/2300 and 1500 BC between south-western Turkmenistan and northern Afghanistan. The oasis of Gonur, located about 70 km north of Merv, consisted of at least 20 settlements, of which Gonur North and Gonur South (1900-1600 BC), located about 250 m further away, were the most important.

The geophysical prospecting project, which was successfully launched in 2014 and 2015, unfortunately had to be interrupted in 2016 and 2017 because, for unknown reasons, the Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan did not grant a single foreign archaeological expedition a licence to continue the work. We hope to be able to resume work in autumn 2018.

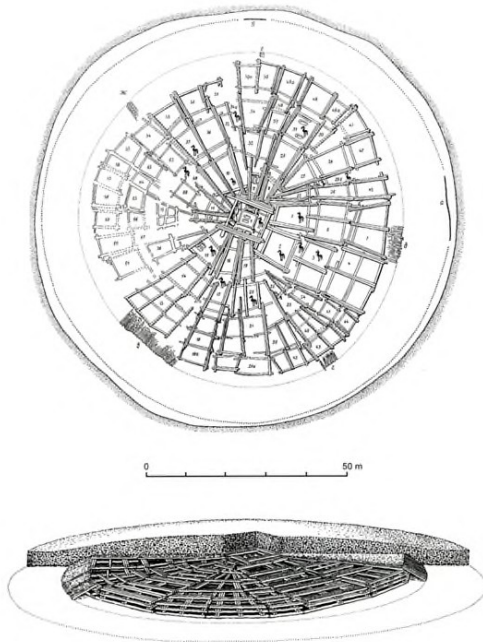
IX. Tunnug 1: An early Scythian kurgan in Tuva, southern Russia

In the summer of 2016, a Swiss-Russian team¹ identified a large, unknown kurgan (a burial mound with a circular layout) in Tuva, southern Russia, using satellite images and aerial photographs. The aerial photograph provided clear evidence of a concentrically arranged wooden structure with dozens of smaller chambers. A unique structure of this kind had been uncovered in the 1970s by archaeologist Gryaznov in the nearby Kurgan Arzhan 1; in the unfortunately plundered kurgan, the bones of sacrificed humans and horses were discovered in several wooden chambers. Arzhan 1 dated from the early Iron Age at the transition from the 9th to the 8th century BC.



The Valley of the Princes' Graves of Arzhan: The newly discovered Kurgan Tunnug 1 is located in a swamp – at the bottom of the picture. The Kurgan Arzhan 1 excavated by Gryazov is in the centre of the picture, and the Kurgan Arzhan 2, excavated in 2000-02 and not looted, is at the top right.

¹University of Bern, Russian Academy of Sciences and Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Wooden structure of Arzhan 1



Aerial view of Tunnug 1; the wooden chambers are clearly visible

The trial excavations carried out in the summer of 2017 were very successful and yielded the following findings:

- The kurgan contains wooden beams.
- Two radiocarbon measurements of wooden beams dated them to the second half of the 9th century BC. Tunnug 1 is therefore the same age as Arzhan 1, which was previously considered the oldest Scythian kurgan.
- Tunnug 1 has a diameter of approximately 140 m, making it 30 m larger than Arzhan 1. This would make Tunnug 1 one of the largest kurgans in Eurasia.
- Beneath the burial mound covered with a layer of stones, frozen ground was found at a depth of only 80 cm and 110 cm – in the middle of summer! Although Tunnug is only 800 metres above sea level, temperatures often fall below freezing at night, even in summer, and reach -50°C in winter. In the vicinity of Tunnug, the permafrost lies at a depth of 5-6 metres; the stone mantle of the kurgan prevents the soil layers from thawing at a depth of approximately 100+ cm. For these reasons, Tunnug 1 is probably a so-called ice kurgan, in which the buried remains and grave goods are enclosed by an ice lens. This means that, provided the kurgan was not plundered in ancient times, organic materials such as mummified corpses, wood, leather and textiles may have been preserved.

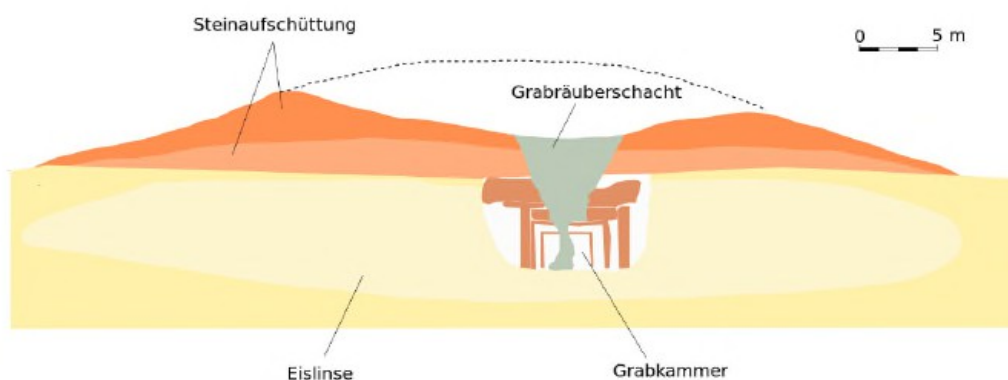


Abb. 2: Das Phänomen einer Eislinse unterhalb von Grabhügeln ist aus dem Altaigebirge bekannt. Wasser dringt durch die Aufschüttung und gefriert die Grabkammer. Die physikalischen Eigenschaften der Aufschüttung erhalten das Eis während der Permafrost in der Umgebung um einiges tiefer liegt.

The hypothesis that Tunnel 1 is an ice coffin has two consequences:

1. Global warming poses a serious threat to the ice lens and the objects preserved within it.
2. If the expedition does indeed encounter an ice lens, excavations must be carried out quickly. Under certain circumstances, entire blocks of ice surrounding a burial chamber may have to be sawn out and transported immediately to a refrigerated laboratory.

A scientific publication appeared in November 2017 in *Archaeological Research in Asia*, among others.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352226717300600>

2018: The actual excavations begin in the summer with the deployment of 17 archaeologists and 35 workers.

X. Further

The monograph on the 2016 scientific congress is planned for 2019.

Finally, we would like to thank all our members for their invaluable and much-appreciated support. With best

wishes for a continued successful 2018, kind regards



Christoph Baumer
President



Therese Weber
Vice-President