



The Society for the  
Exploration of

**EurAsia**

Hergiswil, 26 January 2021

## **EurAsia archaeological projects**

### **Brief report on 2020 and outlook for 2021**

Dear EurAsia members

This report provides a brief overview of EurAsia's seven ongoing projects. The detailed archaeological reports will be published on the society's website at the end of April at: [www.exploration-eurasia.com](http://www.exploration-eurasia.com)



EurAsia projects.

#### **Preliminary remark**

The 2020 excavation season was very challenging due to the pandemic. Thanks to the dedication, flexibility and creative solutions of the respective teams, six of the seven planned excavation campaigns were carried out despite national and regional lockdowns and numerous other restrictions. No scientific compromises were made; however, with the exception of the Kesken Kuyuk Kala project, fewer staff were available. Two local chief archaeologists fell ill with moderate cases of the pandemic. Logistics were significantly more complex and complicated in 2020.

## I. Terezin + Ala-Tey in Tuva, southern Russia

Since 2006 (with one interruption), highly successful rescue excavations of Scythian, Xiongnu and Kokel culture graves (6th century BC – 4th century AD) have been taking place in Tuva near **Terezin** and **Ala-Tey**. Due to the internal Russian lockdown in Tuva, the team was delayed in entering the country, which is why the Ala-Tey necropolis had already been flooded by water from the reservoir. The archaeologists spent the two-week quarantine working at the older excavation site **in Terezin**. Afterwards, Tuvan workers joined the team and the excavation work continued. However, due to Covid, the Russian students were absent.



Terezin: A 4 m deep children's grave, on the right of the picture is the annual floodplain.

Four graves were uncovered, which lay under a 2 to 3 m high sand dune. The actual depth of the graves was 1.5 m, which is why it was necessary to dig down to a depth of 4.5 m. The site was known from earlier excavations (2008-2010), but the shifting sand dune is new. As it was not possible to obtain heavy clearance equipment (tractor or bulldozer) at short notice to clear the sand dune in this very remote location, the excavation area remained limited.



Terezin: The children's grave of the Xiongnu Ulug-Khem culture, 2nd-1st century BC.



The grave goods consisted of many ceramic vessels, bronze belt decorations and one spoon-shaped and one bell-shaped small bronze pendant.

Next, the EurAsia expedition investigated the **Kara Turugh** site, 6 km away. In the 1970s, during the construction of the reservoir, grave finds similar to those in Terezin were discovered here, but the results were never published and most of the brief reports have been lost. Most of the knowledge comes from an elderly local expert who had already worked here in the 1970s.



Kara Turugh: Kurgan before the start of excavation.



Kara Turugh: Exposure of the stone slab tomb in the kurgan.





Kara Turugh: Stone slab grave from the very late Scythian period / early Ulug-Khem culture of the Xiongnu.

The team encountered very unusual grave constructions at two kurgans. The circular graves are formed at the bottom from stone slabs stacked on top of each other, which are positioned diagonally or vertically at the top. The structure represents a primitive dome grave with a false arch. The two kurgans had been partially looted, and some of the skeletons were still in their original crouched position. The burial chambers contained several dead bodies; many sheep and goat skulls (centre right in the picture), ceramics, cowrie shells and bone arrowheads used for hunting were found as grave goods.

These two pseudo-dome graves will be published as soon as possible.

**2021:** Excavations will continue, with the exact plan to be determined later.

## **II. Tunnug 1: An early Scythian kurgan in Tuva, southern Russia**

Excavation of a presumed early Scythian kurgan in Tuva, southern Siberia.

Satellite images and aerial photographs have identified a large, unknown kurgan (burial mound with a circular ground plan). The aerial photograph provided evidence of a concentrically arranged wooden structure with dozens of smaller chambers. A unique structure of this kind was uncovered in the 1970s by archaeologist Gryaznov in the nearby Arzhan-1 kurgan; the bones of sacrificed humans and horses were discovered in several wooden chambers in the plundered kurgan. Arzhan-1 dates back to the early Iron Age at the transition from the 9th to the 8th century BC. Initial excavations proved that the central burial mound contains a perfectly preserved wooden structure that correlates with Arzhan-1. Analyses of wooden beams from larch trunks yielded a date of around 833-800 BCE for Tunnug, making the kurgan at least as old as Arzhan-1.

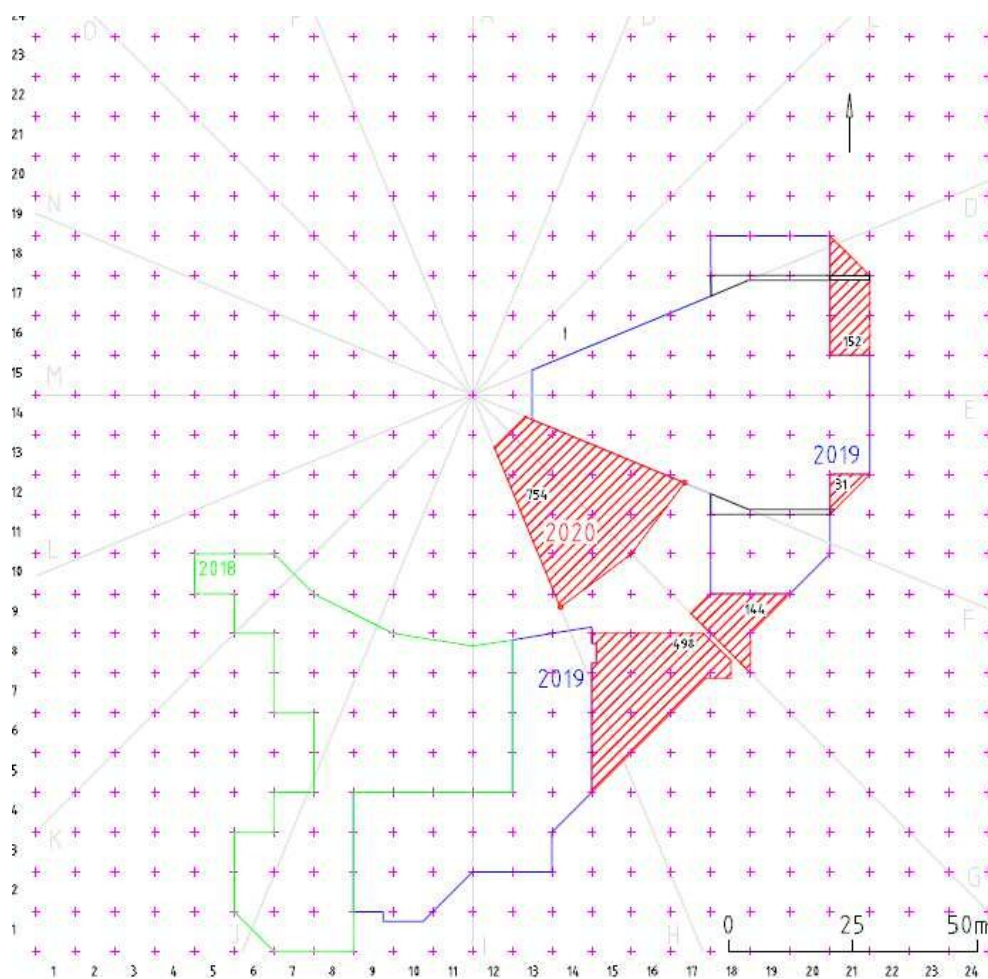
In 2020, the Tunnug team faced the same challenges as the Terezin/Ala-Tey team. The Russian Geographical Society refused to provide logistical support, Tuva remained hermetically sealed until June, there was a shortage of volunteers, and the team of 20 specialists (instead of approx. 120



people) spent the quarantine working at Tunnug. The excavations carried out can be regarded as efficient preparations for the 2021 campaign.



In 2020, excavations took place in the eastern sector of the main kurgan and in the eastern periphery.



Excavation areas: red 2020, blue 2019, green 2018.



**Periphery:** The team continued to investigate the honeycomb-shaped grave architecture and came across ceramic vessels, bone arrowheads and animal bones. Heavy rainfall prevented the investigation of the flooded, deep grave pits.

**Main kurgan:** Horse bones and parts of very early Scythian horse harnesses were uncovered under a layer of stones. It is highly likely that a large horse sacrifice was made at this site.

The discovery of numerous human bones nearby indicates human sacrifices that were made during burial rituals. Both sacrificial finds are analogous to those from Arzhan-1. In addition, the first Scythian gold object was discovered. It is a decorative plate measuring 4 x 2.5 cm that was sewn onto a piece of clothing.



Golden decorative plate originally sewn onto a garment.

Three articles were published in internationally renowned journals such as the *Journal of Field Archaeology* and the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. They will be posted on the Society's website at the end of April.

**2021:** Excavations will continue in accordance with the objectives of the five-year plan.



### III. Kesken Kuyuk Kala, Kazakhstan

Excavation of a Khorezmian (5th-7th century) and Oghuz (9th-12th century) city and a necropolis. The campaign took place in November-December with the entire team of 30 specialists in very cold weather, but without snow.



Digitally processed aerial photograph of Sharistan from Kesken Kuyuk Kala. The photo was taken after a brief, heavy rain, which revealed architectural structures that are normally hidden.



Two building complexes were uncovered in **Sharistan**, the upper layer dating from the 11th century and the lower layer from the 10th century. Among other things, two ceramic altar protomes in the shape of a ram's head were uncovered, decorated with floral patterns. Another ceramic fragment depicts a human figure.



Ceramic fragment with anthropomorphic figure made of stucco, 11th century.

**Necropolis:** After a first kurgan was opened in 2019, three more such excavations followed in 2020. Two kurgans had been looted; in both, a man lay on a wooden floor. The dead were accompanied by horse skulls, horse harnesses, a sword and a dagger, arrowheads and intact stirrups. In the second kurgan, the team found seven small decorative gold plates and copper belt decorations.



The second kurgan before the opening of the burial chamber; its diameter is 12 metres.



In the case of the third kurgan, the earth surrounding the burial chamber was removed. As the burial chamber was presumably untouched by looters and there was insufficient time to excavate it, it was carefully preserved and covered. It will be excavated in 2021. Wood samples were taken from the kurgans for C-14 dating.

These kurgans are the first medieval Oghuz graves ever explored in Kazakhstan.



Golden decorative plates, probably attached to a dress, kurgan 2; 8th-10th century AD.

**2021:** Excavation will continue in autumn 2021 in accordance with the five-year plan.

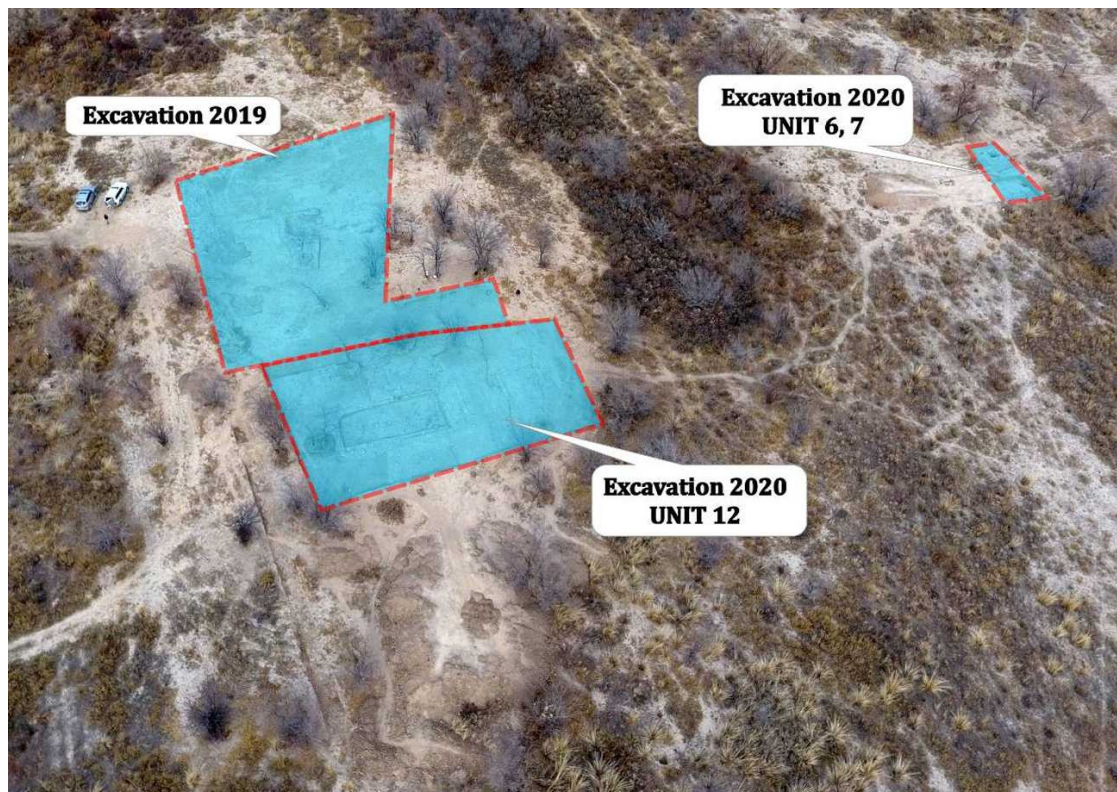
#### **IV. Ilan Baliq/Uch-Aral, Kazakhstan**

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

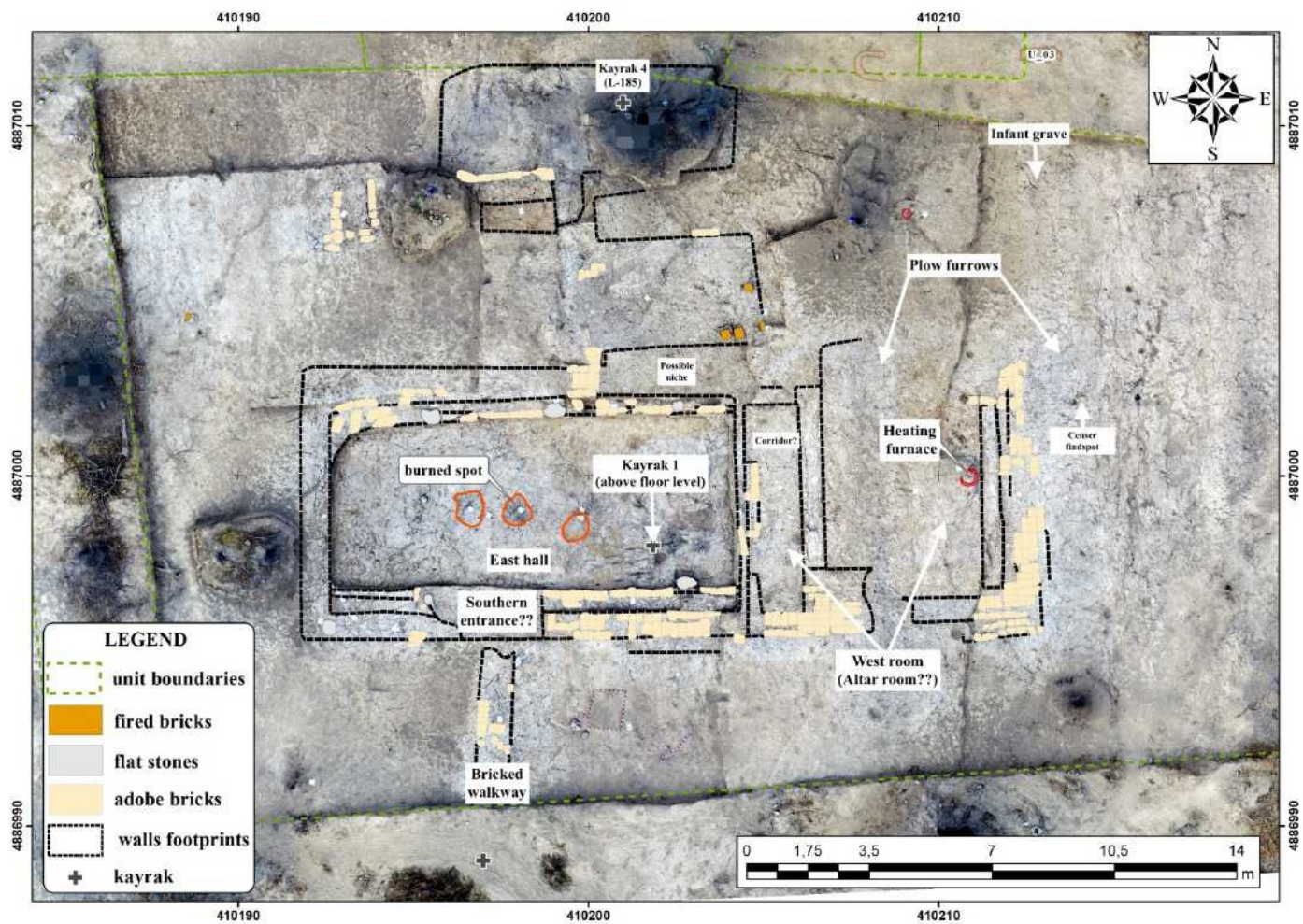
Due to the pandemic, the excavation campaign was carried out without American participation and with fewer staff, lasting 12 working days instead of the planned 30. The absence of American archaeologists was partially compensated for by the hiring of additional Kazakh specialists. Despite these limitations, highly remarkable finds and discoveries were once again made.

South of the partially excavated cemetery C, a 20 x 8.9 m architectural structure was discovered for the first time, named Unit 12 on the following plan. It is aligned on an east-west axis and consists of three rooms: a hall, a presumed narrow corridor and the presumed east-facing altar room. Due to its relatively modest size, it is believed to be a burial chapel. A gravestone engraved with a cross was found in the main hall, and a second one was found in the adjoining courtyard. (Plan on the next page). Fragments of glazed oil lamps and shards of a painted glass vessel from the 13th/14th century, which may have originated in Persia, were also found in Unit 12.





Aerial view of the excavations in 2019 and 2020. The structures of the burial chapel are visible in Unit 12. The entire necropolis may have extended to Units 6 and 7, or may have been even larger.



Aerial photograph and detailed plan of the presumed burial chapel in Unit 12.



Another tomb (Units 6 and 7) was discovered 80 metres east of Cemetery C in Sector B. An extrapolation of the presumed area of the entire necropolis theoretically suggests a burial ground of up to 590 tombs. Two more tombstones were discovered here, one of which is engraved in Old Syrian script. The translation reads: "This is the tomb of Febronia, the teacher." The Sogdian word *quštānč*, "teacher," is the feminine form of *qušti*, "teacher, elder." It is well known that there were female teachers of religious matters in the Nestorian Church of the East. The name Febronia goes back to Saint Febronia of Nisibis (now located on the Turkish-Syrian border), who was martyred under Emperor Diocletian around the year 304. It is not known whether Febronia, who was buried in Ilan Baliq, was originally a native Latin speaker who emigrated here, or whether she was a local who had a Latin name.



Gravestone of the teacher Febronia, Unit 7, Sector B.

**2021:** Excavations will continue in accordance with the five-year plan.

#### **V. Vardana, Uzbekistan**

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

Due to the pandemic, the campaign planned for the summer had to be cancelled, and later there was a lack of the necessary specialist personnel.

**2021:** Excavations will resume in the eastern sector of the citadel.

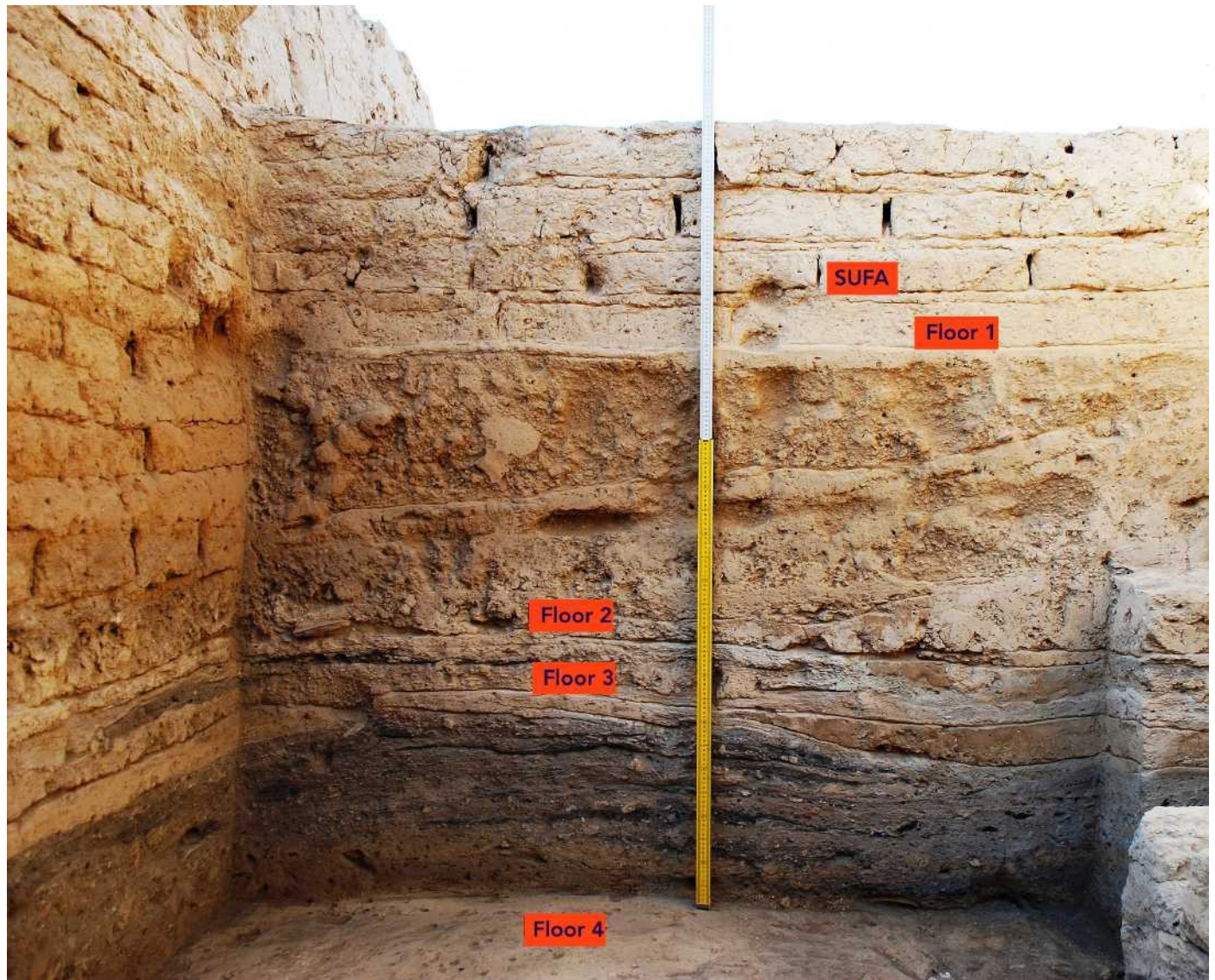


## **VI. Qarshovul, Uzbekistan**

Excavation of a Sogdian city, 4th-9th 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 with a rudimentary engraved cross (2012), the 2016 expedition succeeded in uncovering three further pieces of evidence of an early Christian past in the form of locally minted coins bearing a cross.

In July-August, the 11th excavation campaign was carried out with a slightly smaller team. Three excavation sites were further explored and a fourth (N-9) was newly opened.

**Large platform N-3:** A stratigraphic excavation through four soil levels reached a depth of 636 cm. Two small smelting furnaces for iron smelting were identified in the third layer.

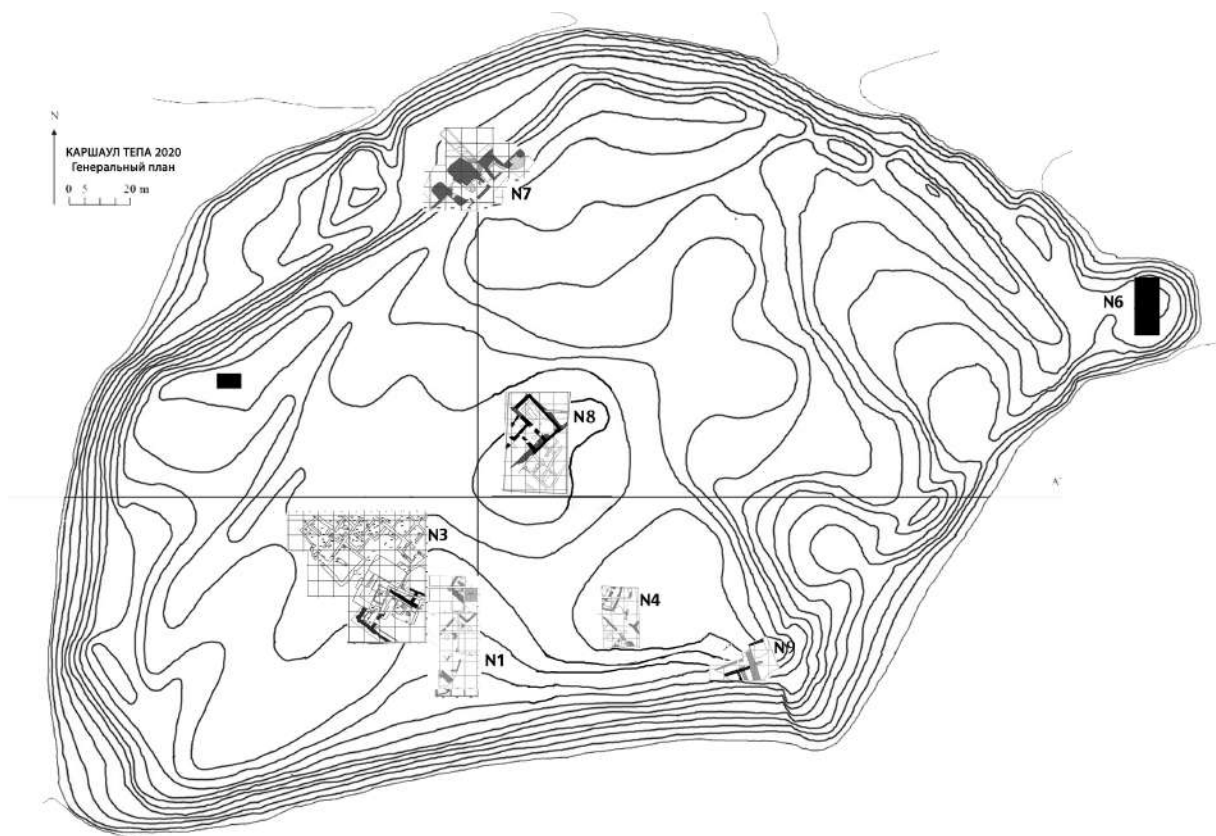


636 cm deep stratigraphy in platform R-3.

**N-4:** The team began excavating this sector on the southern edge of the settlement again, where test pits had been dug in 2011 but not pursued further. Due to the elevated location of the site, the citadel could be located here.

**N-8:** During work in a presumed palace, many ceramics and coins were found.





Plan of Qarshovul with the excavation sectors

**R-9:** Parts of a massive tower were uncovered at this new excavation site. The tower guarded the south-eastern entrance to the city, i.e. the road leading from the Chirchik River to the higher-lying city.



Inside the once mighty tower N-9, a passageway was bricked up at an unknown date; only a ceramic pipe was left in place for water drainage (centre of image).

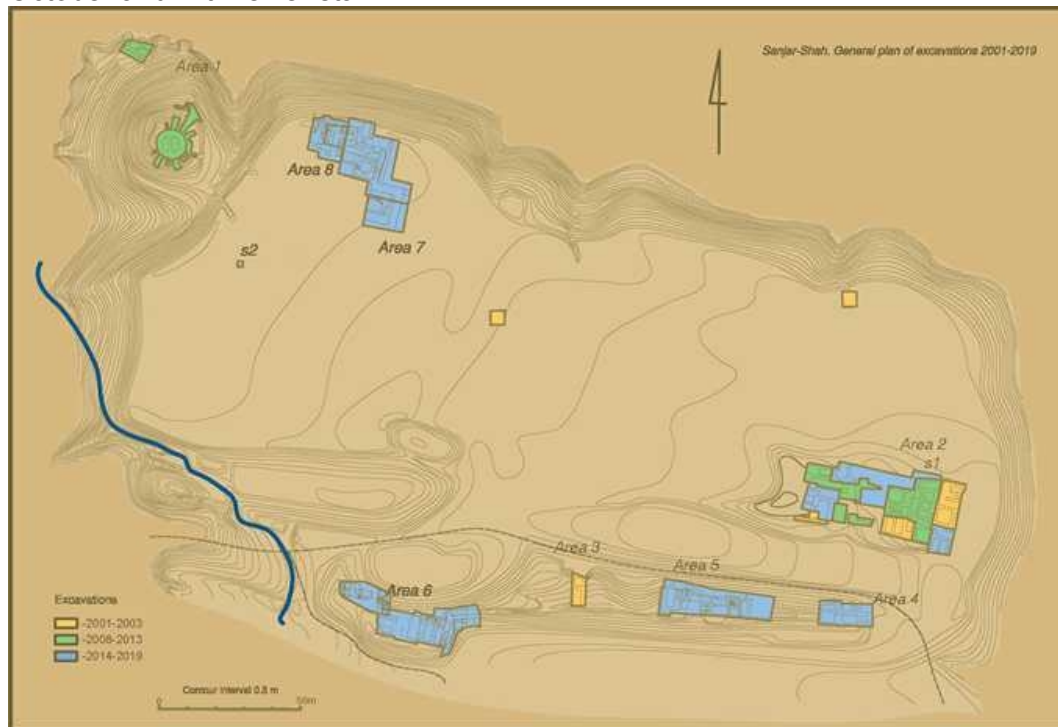
**2021:** Excavations will continue in accordance with the five-year plan.



## **VII. Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan**

Excavation of a small Sogdian town with a citadel.

Due to the illness of the Tajik chief archaeologist and his deputy, the campaign did not take place until October and with fewer staff.



Plan of the excavations since they began in 2001.

The 2020 excavations focused on Sector VII in the north-west of the city. The hypothesis put forward in 2019 that Sectors VII and VIII formed a significant monumental building has been confirmed once again. Nine rooms were completely or partially uncovered, including A 13.5 x 13.8 m reception hall. This is a typical Sogdian reception hall, where the wooden ceiling rested on four massive wooden columns. The 80 x 80 cm pillar foundations consisted of mud bricks reinforced with wooden structures. Fragments of carved wooden beams indicate that the visible roof structure was richly decorated.



The reception hall with a view from the south.



In the reception hall, which originally featured wall paintings, a fragment of a fine terracotta slab was discovered depicting a standing, armoured prince or warrior holding a sword and wearing a crown with a pair of wings.



Terracotta slab with the upper body of an armoured prince or warrior wearing a crown.

Extensive burn marks indicate that the reception hall fell victim to a conflagration towards the end of the 8th century, after which the area was converted into utility rooms.

The carved wooden beams and fragments of paintings discovered and reburied in 2019 could not be excavated and secured again as planned by professional restorers from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, as the pandemic prevented them from entering the country from Russia.

A scientific publication on Sanjar Shah appeared in Tajik at the Academy of Sciences, Dushanbe.

**2021:** Excavations will continue in Sector VII-VIII and the in situ preserved wood and painting fragments will be recovered.



## **VIII. Further**

### **Annual event 2020**

The planned annual event with Prof. Dr Hermann Kreutzmann, Free University of Berlin, and the presentation *The geographical and historical exploration of the Pamirs in Tajikistan and Afghanistan* was cancelled due to the pandemic and postponed to autumn 2021. The date will be announced later.

### **Congress II, 2020**

The second international scientific congress took place from 13 to 15 February 2020 in collaboration with and at the University of Bern with great success. A total of approximately 100 people participated.

Forty scientists spoke on the topic:

#### **Cultures in Contact**

#### **Central Asia as Focus of Trade, Cultural Exchange and Knowledge Transmission**

#### ***Cultures in Contact***

#### ***Central Asia as a Focus of Trade, Cultural Exchange and Knowledge Transmission***

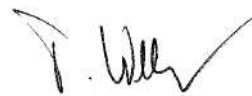
Finally, we would like to thank all our members for their invaluable and much-appreciated support, which is extremely important for the realisation of our scientific projects.

We would be delighted if you continued your membership.

With best wishes for a happy, healthy and successful 2021, and kind regards



Christoph Baumer  
President



Therese Weber  
Vice President

#### **Enclosures** (where applicable):

- 2020 donation receipt for the tax authorities
- Payment slip