

Hergiswil, 30 January 2023

EurAsia archaeological projects

Brief report on 2022 and outlook for 2023

Dear EurAsia members

This report provides a brief overview of EurAsia's six ongoing projects. The detailed archaeological reports will be published on the society's website at the beginning of February at: www.exploration-eurasia.com



EurAsia projects; current projects are marked in yellow.

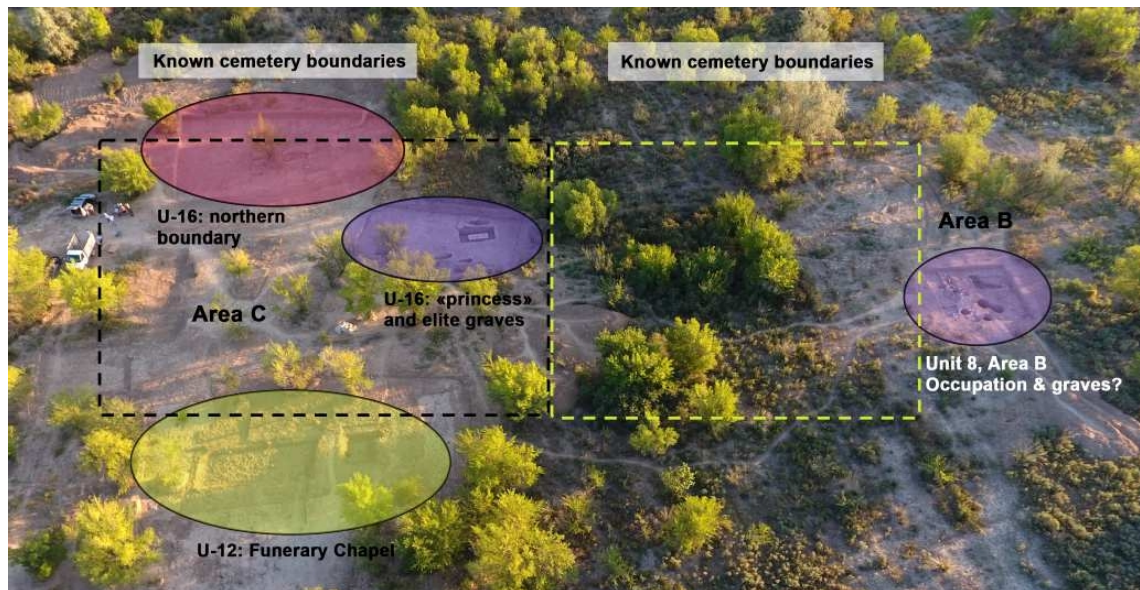
Preliminary remark

Fortunately, after two challenging years of pandemic in Central Asia, research was able to resume at the usual level with sufficient staff and complete teams.

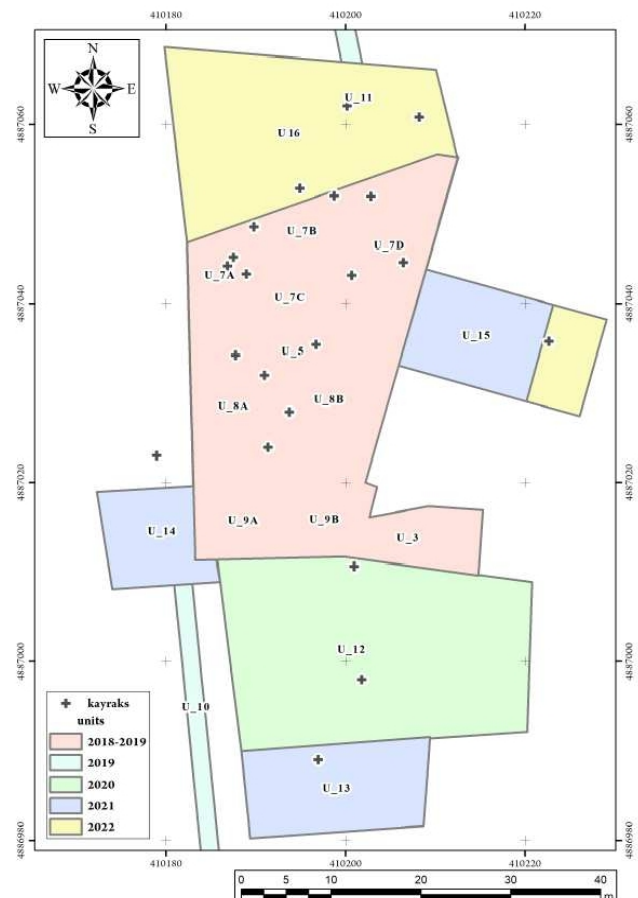
However, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine made it impossible to continue the two projects in Tuva, southern Russia. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the company's board of directors decided that EurAsia's involvement in Russia was unthinkable and suspended the excavations in Tunnug 1 and Ala-Tey/Terezin. Both projects will remain suspended for as long as the war continues; the situation will be reassessed after the war ends.

I. 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 identical to the site of Ilan Baliq, which the Armenian king Hetum I of Cilicia (southeastern Anatolia) found 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*, *Archaeological Expertise, Kazakhstan*, and the *Lanier Centre for Archaeology, USA*.



Aerial view of the north-western excavation site with the burial chapel (U-12), the presumed elite graves and the northern graves (U-16), as well as the mixed zone with graves and residential buildings (U-8, Area B).



The excavation of the cemetery is located in the northwest. Finds of cross stones, *kayrak*, by year of discovery. In the northeast is the as yet unexplored city of *Rabad*, and the citadel is in the southeast.

Excavations continued north of the burial chapel discovered in 2020 (U-12, marked in green on the plan), primarily at U-11 and U-16 (marked in yellow). The aim was to define the northern boundary of the cemetery. A total of nine additional engraved gravestones (kayrak) were discovered, one of which is inscribed in Old Turkish script and language (with the exception of an Old Syrian loanword). The translation reads: "In the year of the hare [presumably 1315, 1327 or 1339], this is the grave. The death of Isho [Jesus, a common Old Syrian name] has occurred." In total, the research team has discovered 48 gravestones since the start of the project. As the burial ground was used as agricultural land during the Soviet era, it can be assumed that a large number of gravestones were removed and lost.

Grave 290, discovered in 2021, belonging to a Christian Mongolian princess, was excavated *en bloc*, including its protective layer of earth, carefully packed and transported by truck to a laboratory in Almaty. There, the grave will be opened in stages and the remains of the deceased will undergo ancient DNA analysis to determine their genome.



U-15, Locus 290: Excavation and packing of the entire grave 290 with the presumed Mongolian princess.



Transport of grave 290 to Almaty for gradual scientific examination.

The excavation of five further graves in the vicinity of grave 290 suggests that there were further burials of high-ranking, presumably noble persons, as they were accompanied by rich grave goods such as silver rings and silver coins.

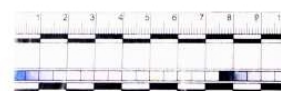


Silver ring from Locus 327, U-15.

In Unit 8, Area B, it is striking that graves, gravestones and clear remains of settlements are located in a small area and at almost identical stratigraphic heights. The obvious hypothesis that the inhabitants of the 14th-century settlement ignored the sacred significance of the gravestones engraved with a cross and/or inscription and used them as building material is not correct. This is because a grave (Locus-08) located immediately northeast of U-8 proves that people were buried here. It is likely that people who had a direct connection to the cemetery (clerics, stonemasons, servants, etc.) lived at Unit 8, or that the area was used as a cemetery extension shortly after these residential units were abandoned.



Engraved gravestone in situ and large vessel, U-8, Locus 44. (kayrak). The find exemplifies the still unexplained coexistence of the burial site and the settlement.



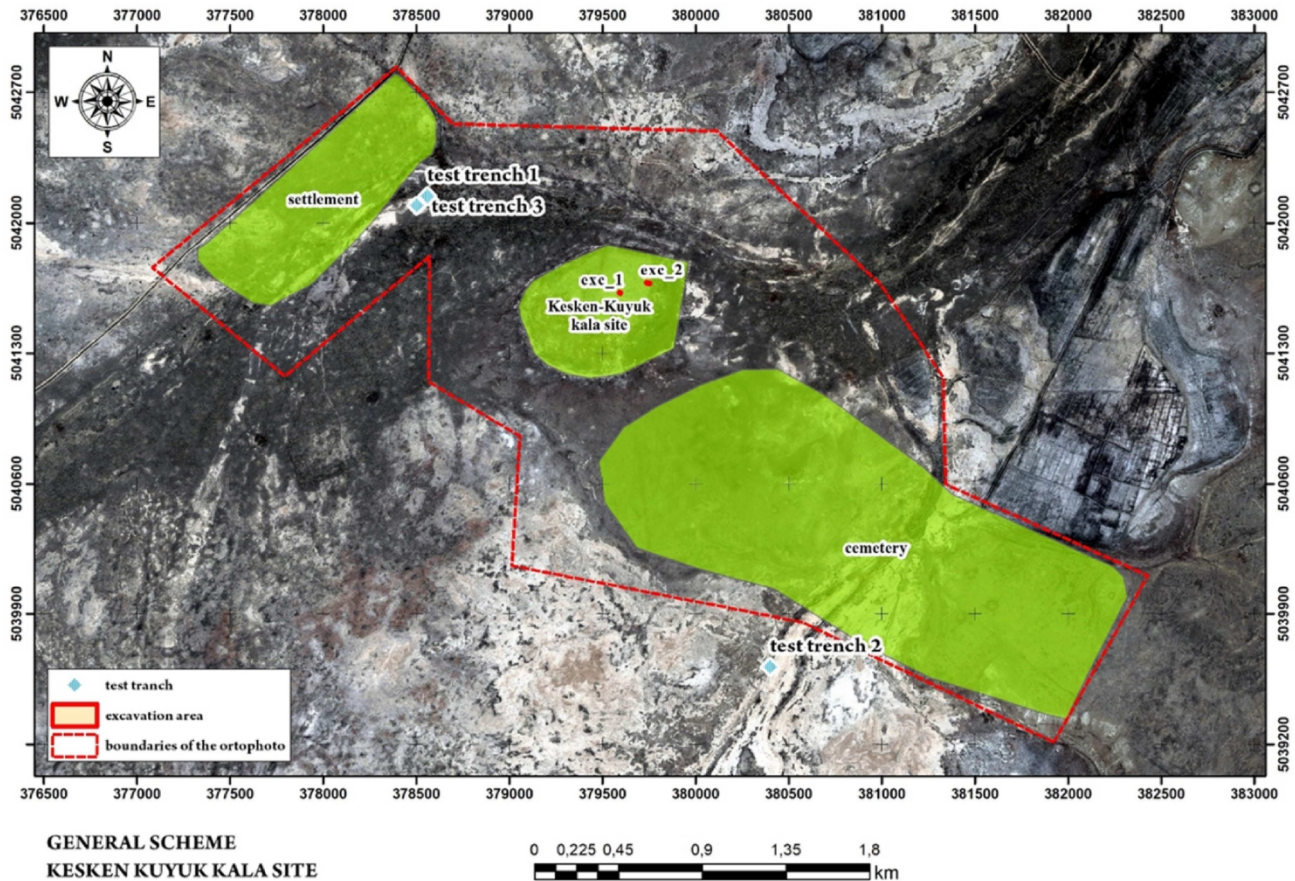
Engraved gravestone

2023: Excavations will continue in accordance with the five-year plan. The objectives are further investigations in sectors B and C. In C, the connection between the residential settlement and the cemetery is to be clarified. Depending on progress and capacity, the town (Rabad) will be explored in more detail.

In addition, the contents of grave 290 will be researched and analysed.

II. Kesken Kuyuk Kala, Kazakhstan

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



Aerial view of Kesken Kuyuk Kala, from left to right: north-western settlement, citadel and fortified city, cemetery.

As the excavations took place in November, the comprehensive excavation report is not yet available. The following work was carried out:

1. The settlement northwest of the citadel (main excavation site) was precisely surveyed for the first time using drones in order to create an orthoplan, a radiometrically corrected aerial image that can be georeferenced in a second step. Two additional elongated test excavations were carried out.
2. Last year's work on a test trench within the citadel was continued and 17 samples of organic material were taken for age determination using C-14 carbon analysis.
3. Using satellite images, an area of 820 hectares was documented by drones and more than forty thousand photos were taken with the aim of researching and understanding the medieval irrigation system. In a second step, three test pits were dug, two of them through irrigation channels and one through a nearby agricultural field. The samples taken are used to determine the age of the channels and for carpological studies, i.e. to identify plants and their relationships to each other.
4. A precise orthoplan was also created of the extensive necropolis, and a test excavation was carried out south of the previously known necropolis.



Stratigraphic test trench 1 at the north-western settlement.



Taking soil samples for carpological studies.

The analysis of the two orthoplans, i.e. the north-western settlement and the necropolis, should provide clues as to whether and where the excavations currently concentrated within the citadel and a small sector of the necropolis should be extended.

2023: Excavation will continue in accordance with the five-year plan.

III. Vardana, Uzbekistan

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

After a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic and uncertainties regarding the jurisdiction of the Uzbek licensing authority, excavation in the citadel was able to resume with a full team in the summer of 2022.



The eastern sector of the citadel, which was explored in 2022, is marked in red. The central sector, coloured dark grey, was investigated in the late 2010s.

After the work in the middle sector (marked in dark grey) and in the elongated northern corridor was completed, this year's excavations focused on the eastern sector. As the western part of the citadel contains graves from the 16th and 17th centuries marked with marble tombstones, including the grave of a Muslim scholar revered as a saint, excavation of this area is out of the question.

This year's excavations confirmed the findings in the central sector, according to which large parts of the early medieval palace, including the ceremonial and throne rooms, were converted into storage rooms at the beginning of the Arab invasion in the early 8th century. During the conquest, the palace burned down and the site remained unused for several decades. Only very small fragments of polychrome wall paintings were uncovered. Under the Muslim Samanid dynasty in the early 9th century, the remaining ruins were levelled and baths and simple living quarters were built on the levelled area. The coarse, unglazed pottery discovered there indicates that people from poorer social classes now lived here.

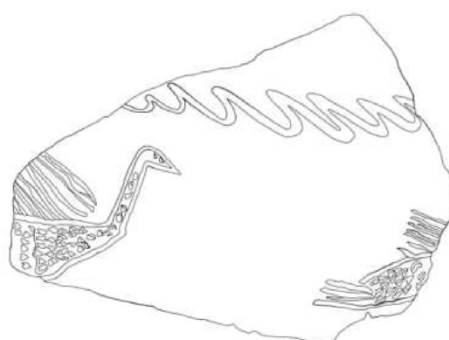
The sewerage system, which supplied water to and drained away from the baths located on a hill, was documented and analysed. In a lower, pre-Islamic layer dating from the 7th century, fine ceramic fragments engraved with birds were discovered.

Fine ceramic fragments engraved with birds were discovered.



The eastern sector of the citadel; inventory from 2022.

In Sharistan, the fortified district below the citadel, bronze coins were found outside their archaeological context; due to heavy wear and weathering, they could not yet be identified.



1335-2/3



Pre-Islamic pottery decorated with bird patterns, 7th century.



Eastern citadel, in-situ sewerage parts.

In addition, several litres of plant sediments were taken from the citadel and Sharistan for archaeobotanical analysis, which is being carried out in collaboration with the Department of Geoanthropology at the Max Planck Institute in Jena, Germany.

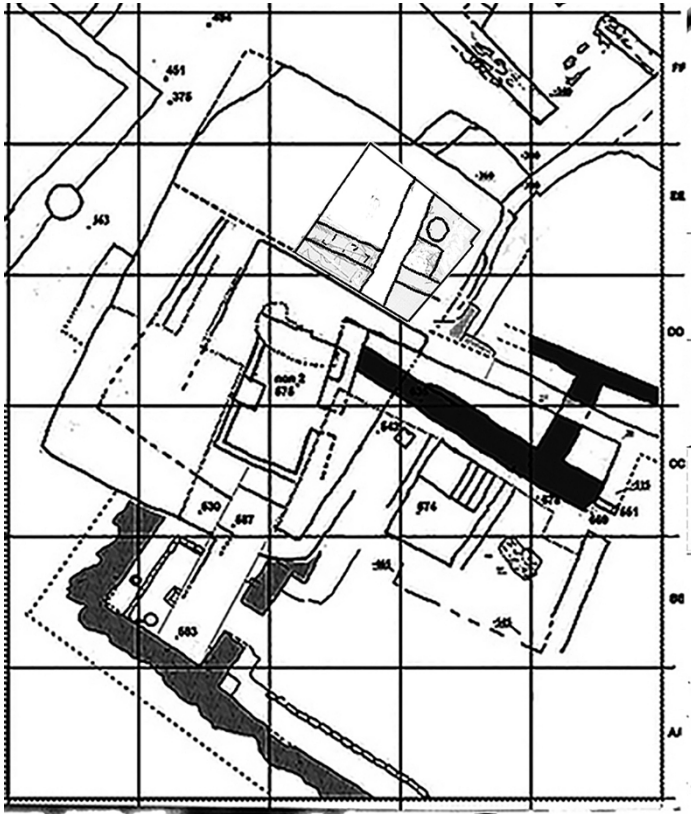


The Uzbek team in Vardana.

2023: The project will continue. The excavation plan with the corresponding priorities is currently being developed; it is likely that the plan will also include a significant trial excavation through Sharistan in order to better assess the excavation potential there.

IV. 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 in 2004 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 expedition succeeded in 2016 in discovering three further pieces of evidence of an early Christian past in the form of locally minted coins bearing a cross.



Plan of the excavated monumental platform



The presumed palace, view to the north-west

Work continued on the monumental platform. This confirmed the findings of the last two years, which indicated that the foundations of a former palace lie beneath the platform. It is believed that the palace, particularly the throne room dating from the 7th to early 8th century, was destroyed during the Arab conquest in the 710s or 720s. Shortly afterwards, the remaining walls of the burnt-down palace were torn down, the rubble levelled and the monumental platform erected above it. The purpose of this platform is still unclear.

The question of the transition in Qarshovul from the Kangju period (1st-5th century AD), when equestrian nomads and East Iranian-speaking Sarmatians settled, to the beginning of the Old Turkic era from the 5th/6th century onwards also remains unanswered. In any case, the city was extensively rebuilt at least three times, probably four times. Why the city was abandoned in the 9th century also remains unclear.

In addition, 24 coins were discovered. The unusually large number of coin finds, well over 200 since the start of the project, suggest that the small town was suddenly abandoned without the last inhabitants being able to take the cash they had kept at home with them.



Bronze seal and bronze coin



Sogdian ceremonial robe with a red deer motif

A remarkable find was a bronze seal engraved with a deer, dating from around the 7th century AD. The same motif can be found on bronze coins (above the seal) and, in particular, on Sogdian ceremonial robes. Although Sogdia had an urban culture shaped by traders and the Sogdian language belonged to the East-Central Iranian language family, a strong influence from neighbouring, predominantly Turkic-speaking steppe cultures can be seen. Together with the big cat, the bird of prey and the wolf, the red deer was one of the most important visual symbols of the ancient Turkic steppe cultures.



The monumental platform or palace is marked as N3 on the plan.

2023: Excavation will continue and the excavation plan for the coming season is being drawn up.

V: Urgut Necropolis and Rock Inscriptions, Uzbekistan

Background

This project resumes the successful and completed excavation of the medieval Nestorian monastery of Urgut, located about 30 km south of Samarkand. http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/inhalt/frameset_projekt_2.html

The excavation took place between 2004 and 2007 and was published in German and English. http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/inhalt_english/frameset_publicationen.html

The monastery, which was visited and described by the 10th-century Muslim historian and geographer Ibn Hawqal, had been forgotten since the Mongol invasion of the 13th century and was considered lost. Based on various clues, the EurAsia archaeological team was able to rediscover the monastery in 2004 and excavate a significant portion of it.

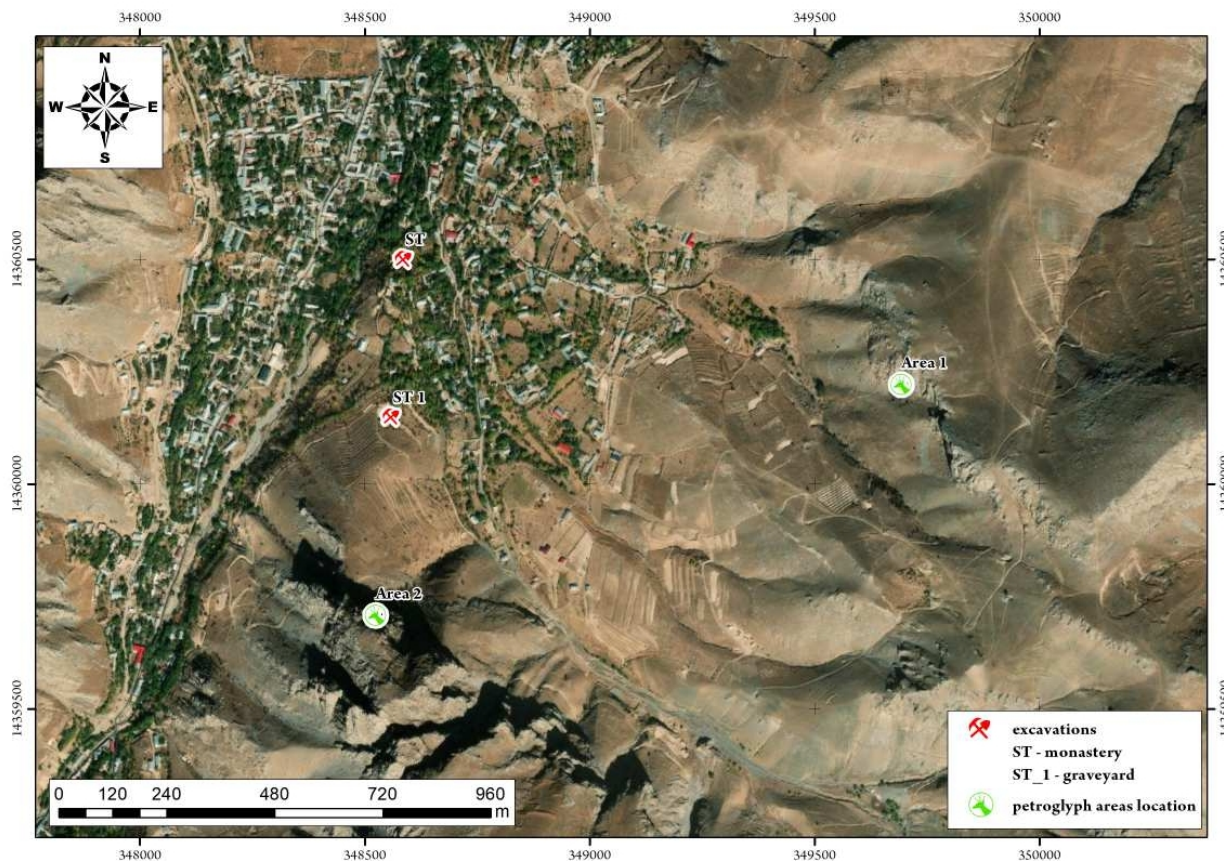
During the work, epigrams in ancient Syrian script and language were also identified east of the monastery in a steep mountainous area. The mountainside contains shelters and caves that served as hermitages for the Nestorian monks, where they engraved short inscriptions and crosses into the rock. However, the location of the cemetery remained unknown.



The double church of the monastery of Urgut, photo 2007. View to the east.

Initial situation

In spring 2022, construction workers carrying out levelling work for the construction of an agricultural building came across human bones and immediately informed the local authorities. Two archaeologists working in collaboration with EurAsia, Dr Dimitry Voyakin and Dr Steven Gilbert, then visited the site and asked EurAsia to get involved immediately so that rescue excavations could begin as soon as possible; otherwise, construction work would continue and the site would be lost. The company agreed, and the first excavations took place in the summer of 2022. At the same time, it was decided to excavate the unexplored monastery courtyard and search for further epigrams.



Aerial view of Urgut with the monastery (ST), the cemetery (ST_1) and the locations with epigrams (Areas 1 and 2).

The excavations at the cemetery, located about 300 m south of the monastery, were carried out by a large team consisting of 6 archaeologists, 1 ceramics specialist and 20 workers, and quickly confirmed the initial hypothesis. The 22 x 7 m excavation site revealed 17 burials, spread over three terraces on a steep grassy hill. All the dead were laid out on their backs and strictly aligned on an east-west axis. Each grave consists of an antechamber and the actual burial chamber. As in the Nestorian cemetery of Ilan Baliq (Project I), the heads of the dead were oriented towards the west and rested slightly elevated on a clay pillow so that the deceased could see Christ appearing in the east on Judgement Day. The fact that all of the skeletons, most of which are excellently preserved, are most likely male and that no grave goods were found confirms that this is the cemetery of the monks of Urgut.

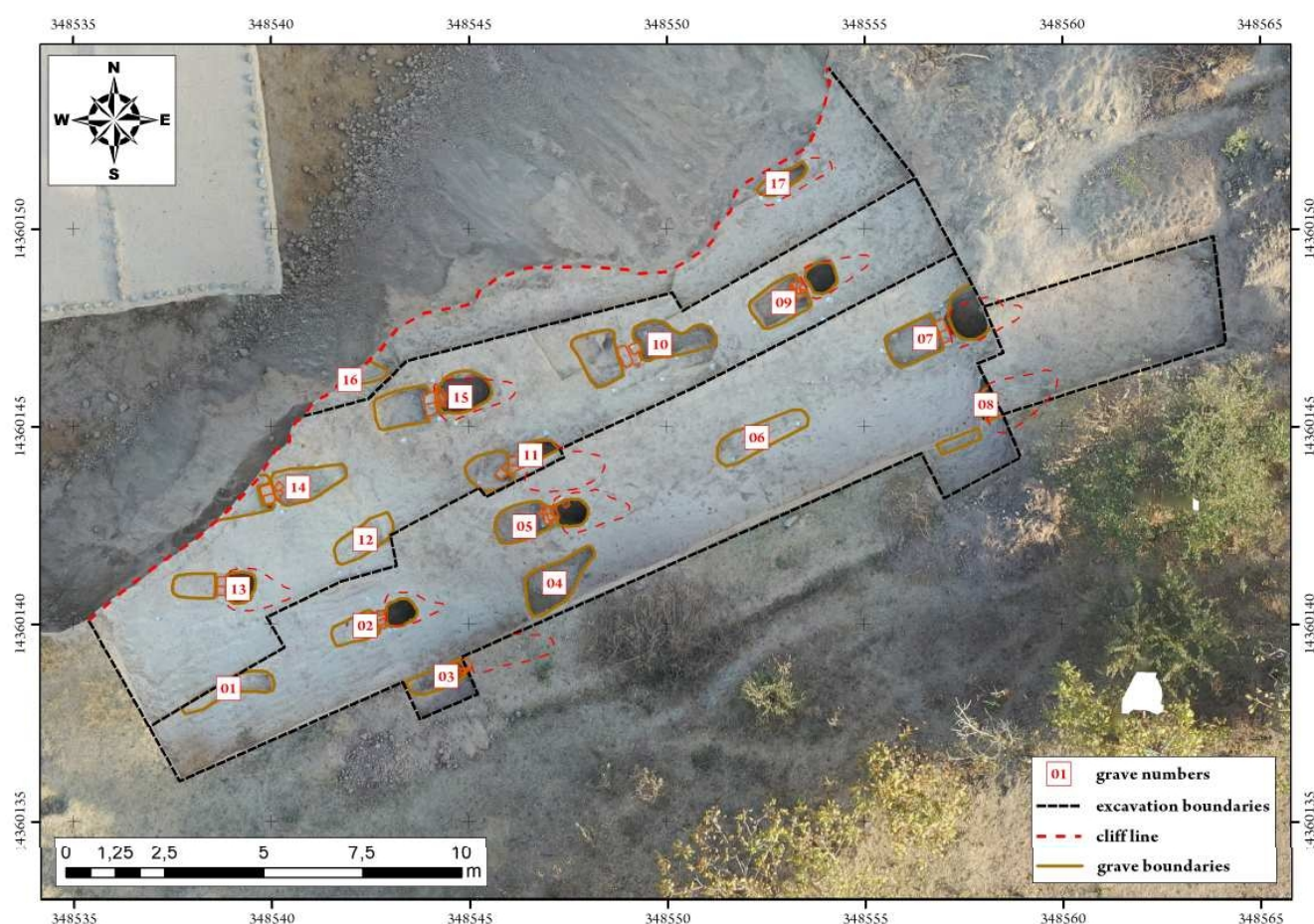
Samples were taken from the dead to determine their age and sex and to analyse their genetic material. We hope this will provide information as to whether the monks were local Christians or, as mentioned by Ibn Hawqal, "Syrians" from Iraq. The first radiocarbon analysis of the bone sample from one individual yielded a date of the 9th-10th century, which fits with the proven dating of the monastery (8th-early 13th century).



Tomb with an antechamber and a slightly lowered main chamber.



The burial ground spread over three terraces. Thanks to the intervention of the Samarkand archaeological services, the levelling work carried out with large construction machinery was stopped in spring 2022. Despite a construction freeze and the presence of archaeologists, a single-storey house was built in the already excavated part of the cemetery (bottom left). Heavy rainfall threatens to cause the site to slide.



The 17 graves of Nestorian monks uncovered in the summer.

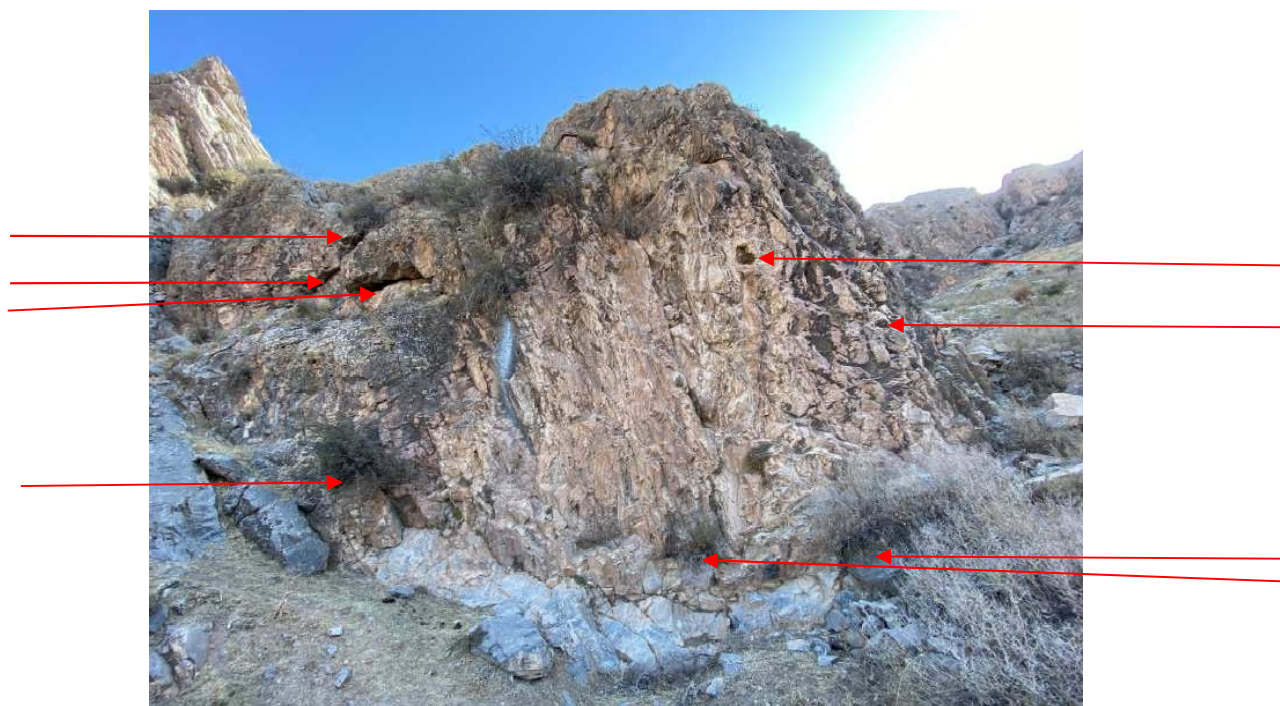
While an initial brief exploration of the hermit cells in the nearby mountains did not reveal any unknown additional inscriptions, the excavation of the southern monastery courtyard yielded interesting finds. These include an unglazed ceramic vessel with a painted cross on the inside bottom, numerous other fragments of glazed vessels, a ceramic fragment with a cross-shaped stamp, and a "Bukhar-Khudah" silver coin with an Arabic inscription from the 9th century, i.e. from the Islamic Samanid dynasty. The coin dates from the early 9th century, as the last "Bukhar Khudah" coins, which actually corresponded to a Sogdian, pre-Islamic type, were minted in the Islamic year 193 AH, which corresponds to the year 808 AD. After this date, regular Islamic Abbasid coins were minted in all important mints.



Unglazed ceramic vessel with a painted Cross in reddish-brown pigments.



Bukhar Khudat silver coin, before 808 AD

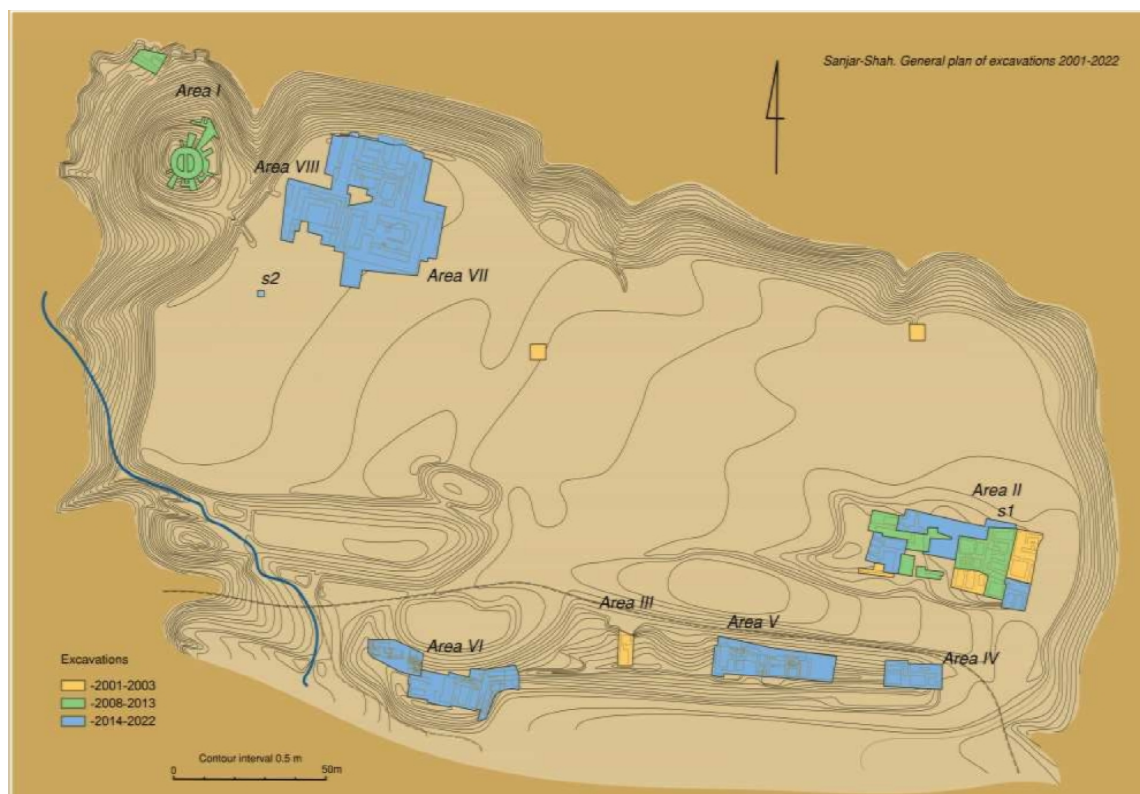


Monks' cells on the mountainside Area 1.

2023: Work will continue in all areas: in the monastery courtyard, the cemetery and the monks' hermitages.

VI. Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan

Excavation of a small Sogdian town with a citadel 12 km east of Panjikent. Sanjar Shah (an exonym, the original name of the town is unknown) probably replaced the much larger town of Panjikent as the administrative centre of Eastern Sogdia after it was burned down in 722.



Plan of the excavations since they began in 2001.

In 2022, excavations continued in the palace complex in the north-western part of the city (areas VII and VIII) and in area VI on the southern outskirts of the city.



The northern part of the throne hall, Area VIII, view to the west.

In Sector VI, the excavation of a ceramic kiln begun in 2019 was completed. Surprisingly, a coin from the Indian Kushan dynasty, minted under Emperor Vasudeva, was discovered at a depth of 20 cm below the original floor. As Vasudeva reigned from 191 to 232 AD, the coin is approximately four centuries older than the city of Sanjar Shah.

Coin finds from the Kushan period are very rare in Sogdia (southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), and there are no material traces of the Kushan in Sogdia. How the coin came to be here remains unknown.

Excavations continued in the large reception hall of the palace, which could also be an iwan. An iwan is a typical architectural form in Iran and South-Central Asia. It is usually a vaulted, rectangular hall, walled on three sides but open on one side. An area measuring 16.7 x 11.6 m has been uncovered so far.



Plan of sectors VIII (above) and VII (below).

The ceremonial hall originally consisted of rooms 12 to 17, which were divided into smaller rooms at a later stage. The excavations confirmed the findings of 2021 that the palace's reception hall was originally richly decorated with wall paintings. A total of 14 large and medium-sized fragments were found in the fill and recovered and conserved by two Tajik restorers. The paintings were applied to a light or dark blue background. The preserved fragments show a diamond pattern, a complex and sophisticated floral frieze with blue flower buds, forehead tile ornaments and figures in Sogdian priestly robes; one of them is holding a small, portable fire altar in his hands.

Depictions of Sogdian priests are known from ossuaries, but this is the very first time that

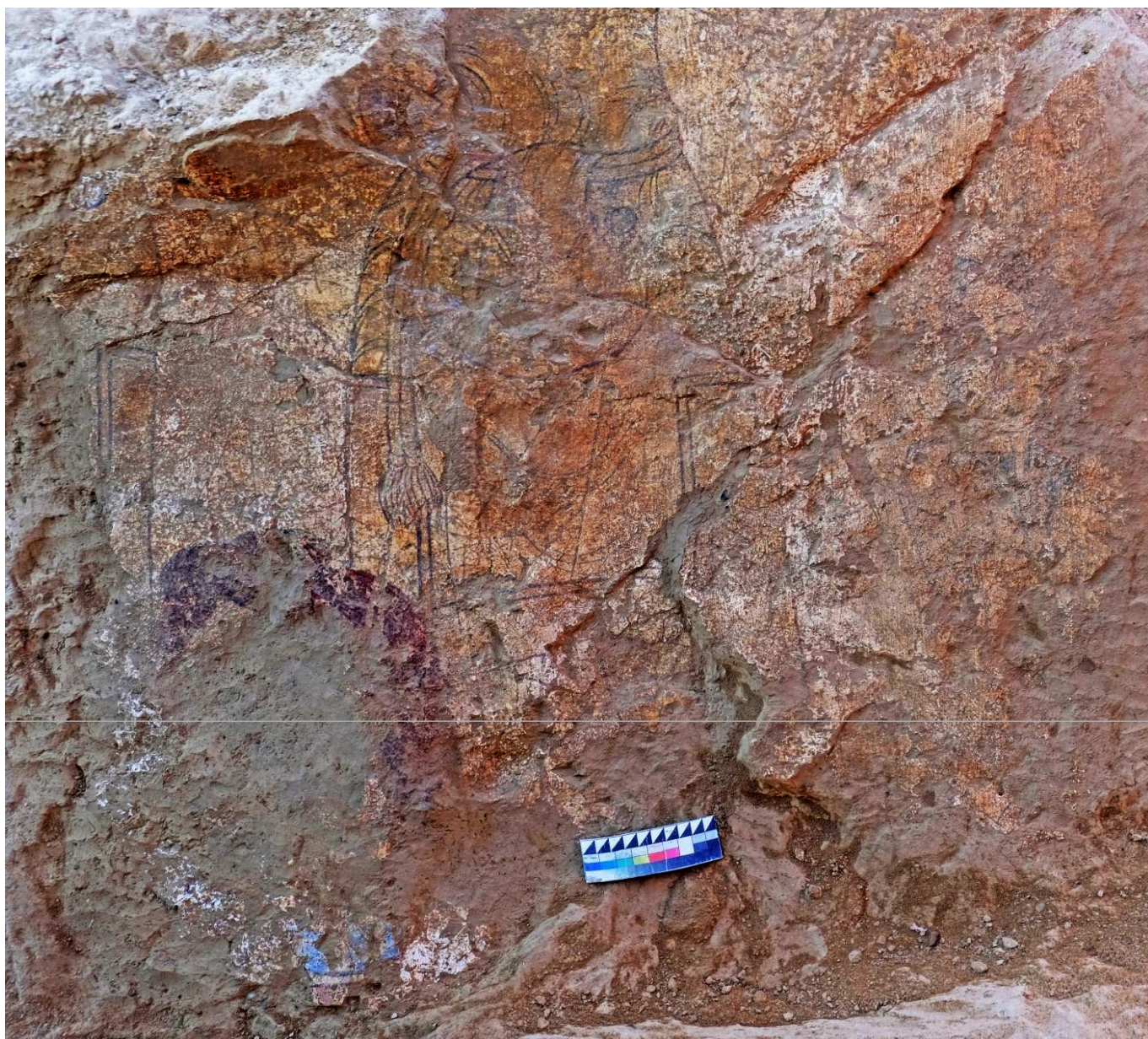
they have been found on wall paintings. In addition, there was a fragment depicting large tongues of flame, which in Sogdian art usually belonged to the divine nimbus of the central deity. However, specific features of the room's architecture suggest that the painted nimbus did not surround a figure of a god, but rather a stationary fire altar.



In the lower part, depiction of a fire altar with blazing flames. Sector VIII.

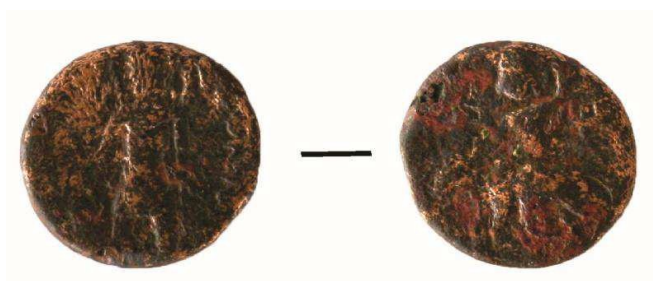


Painting fragment with forehead tile ornaments. Sector VIII.



Fragment of a Sogdian priest holding a portable fire altar. Sector VIII.

The paintings are of the highest artistic quality and represent outstanding examples of Sogdian art, comparable to those from Panjikent. The palace and wall paintings were built in the 740s; they burned down in the 770s or 780s, presumably during the suppression of a Sogdian uprising against the Islamic Abbasid overlords. After the fire, the palace was converted into storage and utility rooms.



Coin of the Kushan emperor Vasudeva (reigned 191-232 AD)

2023: Excavations will continue in sectors VII and VIII to determine the layout and exact dimensions of the ceremonial hall. The team hopes to make further discoveries of Sogdian art and possibly find clues to the original owner of the complex.

VII. Further

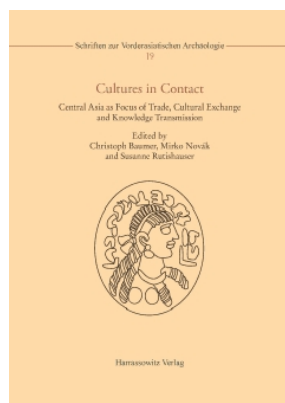
Annual event 2022

Mr Laurent Gorgerat, Basel Museum of Ancient Art, gave a presentation at the Skulpturhalle Basel entitled *The Mistress of Animals. A motif conquers the world.*



Monograph on the Second Congress of 2020

The monograph entitled *Cultures in Contact: Central Asia as Focus of Trade, Cultural Exchange and Knowledge Transmission* was published in summer 2022 by Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden.



The next, third EurAsia Congress is planned for 2024.

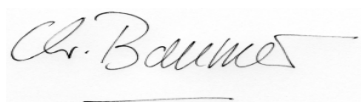
General Assembly 2023

The General Assembly will take place in person in Basel at the end of May. The invitation will follow.

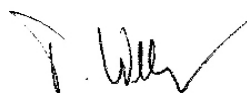
Finally, we would like to thank all members for their valuable and much appreciated support, which is extremely important for the implementation and further development of scientific projects.

We would be delighted if you chose to continue your membership.

With best wishes for a happy, healthy and successful 2023, we send you our warmest regards.



Christoph Baumer
President



Therese Weber
Vice President

Enclosures (where applicable):

- Donation receipt 2022 for the tax authorities
- Payment slip