



The Society for the
Exploration of

EurAsia

Hergiswil, 25 January 2024

EurAsia archaeological projects

Brief report on 2023 and outlook for 2024

Dear EurAsia members

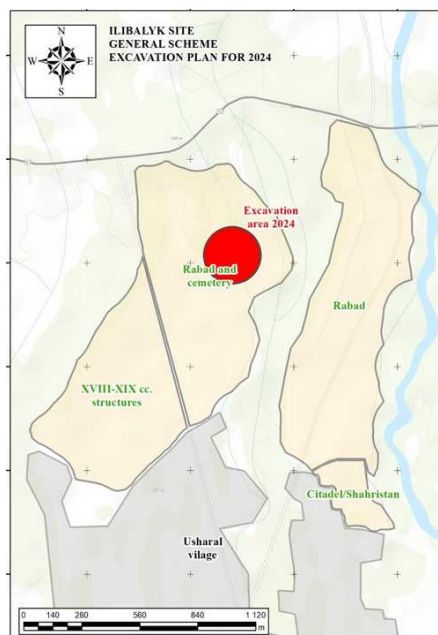
This report provides a brief overview of EurAsia's eight ongoing projects. The detailed archaeological reports will be published on the society's website in April at: www.exploration-eurasia.com



EurAsia's current projects are marked in blue, while those that are currently suspended are marked in yellow.

I. Ilan Balik/Uch-Aral, Kazakhstan, since 2016

Ilan Balik 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 Balik, 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 taking place in Collaboration with the *Archaeological Society of Kazakhstan*, *Archaeological Expertise, Kazakhstan*, and the *Lanier Centre for Archaeology, USA*.



Plan of Ilan Balik. In the centre, the excavation zone, and at the bottom right, the aerial photograph showing the burial chapel, the presumed graves of nobles and the newly discovered double tomb. Citadel.

Excavations continued north of the burial chapel discovered in 2020. This revealed an antechamber that may have served as a *martyrion*, a place where relics were laid to rest and venerated. A double tomb was then uncovered, in the immediate vicinity of which an inscribed tombstone had been uncovered in 2017 with the inscription: "The tomb of Barshabba Quc, the tomb of Yoshemid the priest," the date referring to the period between 1335 and 1342.

The gravestone with the two names probably belonged to the double tomb. One of the two male burials was of very large stature and was accompanied by four oil lamps.



The double grave near the burial chapel.



Gravestone with the inscription "The tomb of Barshabba Quc; the tomb of Yoshmid the priest, ca. 1335–42.

Right next to grave 290, discovered in 2021, which belonged to a Christian, presumably Mongolian princess, the grave of a second woman with typical Mongolian facial features was uncovered. A pair of scissors lay next to her skull, in accordance with a well-known Mongolian burial custom.

The woman buried in grave 290 was uncovered "en bloc", including the protective layer of earth, packed up and transported by truck to a specialised laboratory in Almaty. There, the burial was opened in stages and the remains of the deceased were subjected to ancient DNA analysis. The results are expected in spring 2024.



Opening of burial 290 in a laboratory in Kazakhstan.



The exposed skeleton from grave 290.

South of the two women's graves, the grave of a young man was discovered, who had been buried with a dagger, a spearhead and a helmet, which is unusual in Christian burials. The deceased was probably a warrior.



Grave of a presumed warrior.

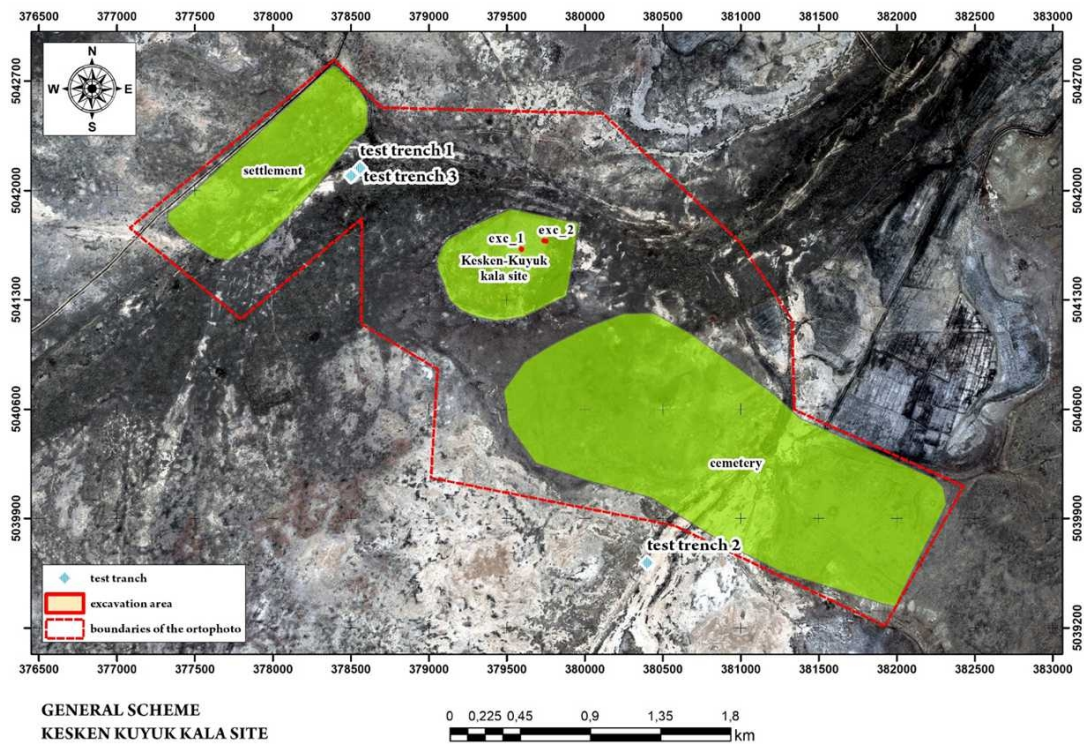


Discovery of an intact vessel.

2024: Excavations will continue in accordance with the five-year plan. The objectives are to further explore the area surrounding the chapel, determine the size of the cemetery and investigate the nearby river course, where a medieval mill is believed to have been located based on the chance discovery of two old millstones.

II. Kesken Kuyuk Kala, Kazakhstan, since 2008

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 town, and cemetery.



Stratigraphic section.



After rain, the building structures are clearly visible.

During the excavation work, Dr Gino Caspari, member of the EurAsia board, conducted a field visit and participated in the excavations. His report can be summarised as follows

In summary, the urban structures of this city from the 9th to 10th centuries CE have been thoroughly researched and analysed, but the lower settlement layers are still relatively unknown. The topsoil has also not yet been reached. Over the next three years, excavations should focus on researching the lower layers in order to establish a complete construction chronology.



The section is more than 7 metres deep.



Mud brick architecture at a depth of 5 metres.

As the excavation did not take place until October, the report is still pending.

2024: The excavation will continue and will focus on researching the strategy in order to better understand the construction history and development of the city.

III. Vardana, Uzbekistan, since 2009

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



Sharistan 1 in the foreground, the citadel in the background.

Until 2023, excavations focused on the citadel, particularly the eastern sector where the early medieval palace stood and where fragments of wall paintings have been discovered in recent years. During the 2023 campaign, two underground galleries were uncovered in the citadel. The danger that the shaft dug through layers of pebbles could collapse made it impossible to reach the topsoil.

In 2023, work focused on Sharistan 1, the district within the city walls. It is located south of the citadel and measures approximately 600 x 300 m. It was connected to and protected by walls from the citadel. Outside this combined citadel-Sharistan defensive wall, there was most likely a second defensive wall, built at a distance of approximately 20 m from the inner wall. In the Middle Ages, camel caravans were only allowed to enter this narrow outer corridor, but not the city itself. In contrast to the citadel, the Sharistan remained inhabited until the early 20th century.

Well-preserved mud brick structures were uncovered in deeper layers, including water pipes and fire pits.



Upper layers in Sharistan 1.



Metal, glass and ceramic finds, Sharistan 1.



Hoard of bronze coins from the 18th-19th centuries.

Christoph Baumer and Therese Weber visited all three EurAsia excavations in Uzbekistan in September.

2024: The project will continue. Excavations will focus on Sharistan; in addition, the southern main entrance gate to the citadel will be searched for. Since the citadel was surrounded by a moat, a drawbridge probably led from Sharistan to the gate of the citadel.

IV. Qarshovul, Uzbekistan, since 2010

Excavation of a Sogdian city, 4th-9th century. The site covers an area of 6 hectares. Based on ceramic finds, there is probably a successor settlement from the Islamic period in the north and burials of nomads of Hunnic or Turkish descent in the southwest. It is assumed that Qarshovul dates back to at least the 2nd to 3rd century AD, as a layer of widespread burnt ash from the 4th century was found. The city was conquered in 713 by the Arab commander Qutaiba, or it was evacuated before the attack. Soon afterwards, the population returned. Qarshovul was probably occupied again in 749 when a Chinese army under the command of the Korean general Gao Xianzhi, who was to lose the battle and his life two years later at Talas, invaded the oasis of Chach (today's Tashkent). The city now remained deserted, perhaps also because the nearby river had changed its course.



The north gate N-7 seen from the inside, with one of the two entrance towers at the back right.



Plan of the excavations.

Excavation N-3: The fire temple was located in the centre of the complex. Visitors had to ritually purify themselves before entering the temple by passing through a gate with two fires. Archaeologists found many coins in the room where the rituals were held, but no votive offerings. The level is 2 m below the highest point, which means that it dates from the 7th/8th century. The large 12x10 m platform is also located in N-3; its purpose remains unknown, but it has now been largely excavated. A long, narrow rectangular room was identified under the platform, which may have served as a small audience chamber. Precious and semi-precious stones were discovered here, suggesting that it was probably a hiding place.



The citadel N-4.

Excavation N-1: This area is the entrance to the audience hall.

Excavation N-8 is the highest point in the city. The 12-metre-long and 5-metre-wide room, whose long sides were lined with *sufas*, i.e. benches made of clay, probably served as a dining room. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the top layer was used as a cemetery, which has since been removed. The 2023 excavations provided evidence that an earthquake damaged the city in the early Middle Ages.

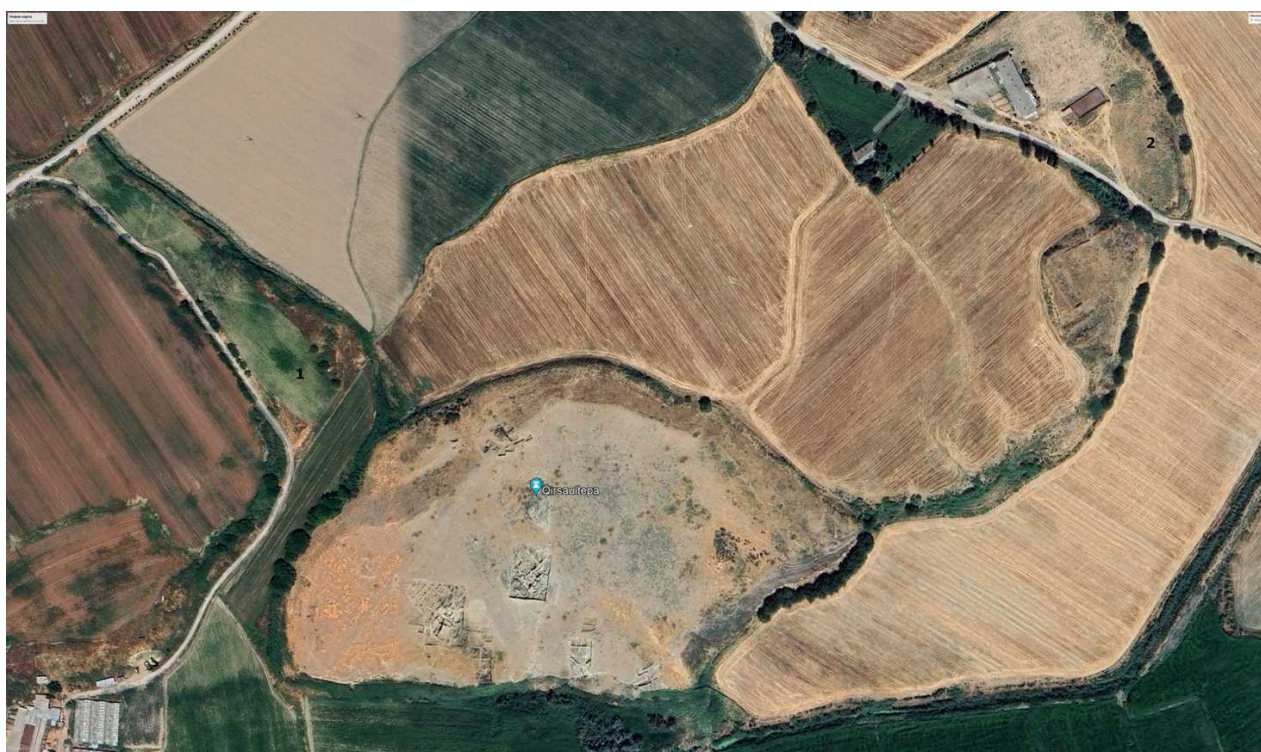
Excavation N-4 is the citadel. The depth of the excavation to the natural ground is -10.5 m from the surface. From the citadel, the city wall runs eastwards to excavation site N-9. In 2023, two city walls running parallel to the east were partially uncovered.



The Qarshovul excavation team



Archaeologist Gennadiy Ivanov and a newly excavated ceramic vessel.



Aerial view of Qatshovul.

2024: Excavations will continue at the citadel and the two parallel city walls, as well as at N-8.

In addition, trial excavations will be carried out at the suspected Muslim settlement northwest of Qarshovul (red arrow on the left). An area northeast of Qarshovul will also be investigated, as there are indications that a Zoroastrian cemetery with ossuaries may be located there (arrow on the right).

V: Urgut Necropolis and Rock Inscriptions, Uzbekistan, since 2022

Background

This project resumes the successful and completed excavation (2004-07) of the medieval Nestorian monastery of Urgut, about 30 km south of Samarkand. http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/inhalt/frameset_projekt_2.html

However, the location of the cemetery remained unknown.



The double church of the monastery of Urgut, photo 2007.



The northern sector of the cemetery, photo 2022.

In spring 2022, human bones were discovered during construction work approximately 1 km north of the church. The rescue excavation quickly undertaken by EurAsia resulted in a halt to construction and uncovered 17 burials spread across three terraces on a steep grassy hill.

In 2023, three more graves were uncovered in the northern sector and a second sector was opened in the east of the cemetery, where four more graves were discovered. As in the northern part, each grave in the eastern sector consisted of an entrance pit (dromos) 130 to 180 cm deep and a burial chamber covered with a clay dome roof. After the body was buried, the burial chamber was sealed with a mud brick wall. During the excavations, a single grave offering was discovered, namely fragments of a silver pectoral cross.



The Urgut cemetery, marked in red for the excavations of 2022 and 2023, and in blue for the excavation of 2023.



The eastern sector with three open dromos.



Skeleton of an adult male.

All of the dead in both sectors were lying flat on their backs. Each grave consisted of an antechamber and the actual burial chamber. As in the Nestorian cemetery of Ilan Baliq, 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 at the Last Judgement. The fact that all of the skeletons, most of which are excellently preserved, are male and that no grave goods were found, with the exception of the silver pectoral cross, confirms that this is the cemetery of the monks of Urgut.



Dr Steven Gilbert, field director at Urgut, explains the northern sector of the Urgut cemetery to participants at the Salzburg conference.

International conference in Samarkand

From 21 to 25 September, the 7th Salzburg International Conference on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia took place, attended by more than fifty scholars. The opportunity was taken to present the excavations at Urgut to the conference participants during an excursion.



Participants of the 7th Salzburg Conference at the eastern sector of the Urgut cemetery.

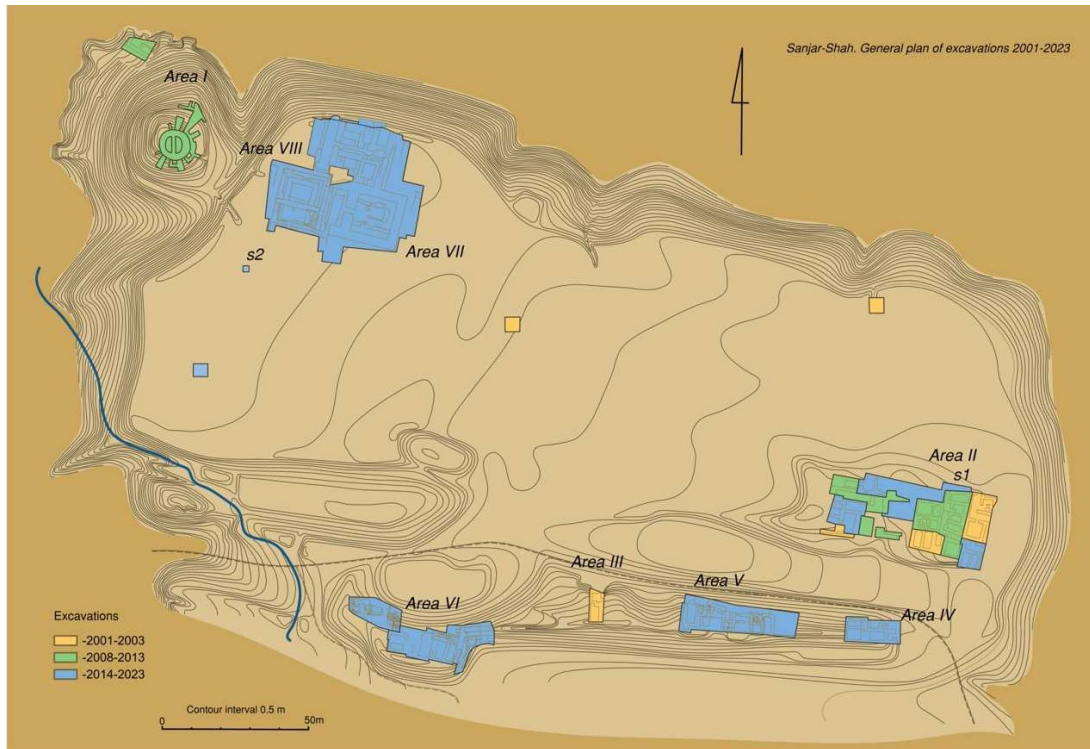


Excavation plan from 2024

2024: Work will continue in the necropolis, continuing in the eastern sector and now also in the south (both marked in purple).

VI. Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan, since 2008

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, initially (2001-03) by a German team.

In 2023, excavations continued in the palace complex in the north-western part of the city (areas VII and VIII) and at a new site south-west of area VIII.



Sector VIII. Southern area of the palace complex. Photo taken from the southeast.

Swiss archaeologist Laurent Gorgerat, a member of the EurAsia Advisory Board, conducted a field visit during the excavations in August 2023 and participated in the excavations.

In the southwestern part of the palace, excavations continued in the large rectangular hall (or open hall), which probably served as the main throne room. Its original dimensions are 15.6 x 19 m (296.4 m²). By way of comparison, the rectangular throne room of the Panjikent Palace measures 22.80 x 12.25 m (279.3 m²), and the throne room of the Shahrstan Palace measures 17.65 x 11.77 m (207.74 m²). The rectangular hall of Sanjar-Shah thus occupied a larger area than in Penjikent. This makes the rectangular hall of the Sanjar-Shah Palace the largest of all known Sogdian palace halls with the exception of the Umayyad Palace in Afrasyab near Samarkand.



Palace in Sector VIII. "Great Hall" (audience/throne room) with a secondary rectangular structure built into it. Photo taken from the northeast.

As in 2021 and 2022, archaeologists found fragments of Sogdian wall paintings. Although small, fragments depicting the upper part of a typical heavily armoured Sogdian warrior, part of a demon's face and part of a horse with a tassel were identified. It therefore appears that at least one of the walls of the rectangular hall depicted narrative scenes of a battle between human warriors, including horsemen, and demons.



Painting fragment of an armoured Sogdian warrior.



View from the northern edge of Old Sanjar Shah towards the present-day settlement.

2024: Excavations will continue in sectors VII and VIII as well as in the new area IX.

VII. Togolok 1, Turkmenistan, since 2023

Togolok is located about 60 km northeast of the present-day district capital Merv and 11 km south of Gonur, where EurAsia was active in 2014-16. Unlike today, this region, which drew its water supplies from the 3,000 km² delta of the Murghab River, was densely populated during the Bronze Age. This area, also known as Margiana, formed the southern Turkmen centre of the BMAC culture (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex), which stretched from here across southern Uzbekistan to northern Afghanistan. This early advanced civilisation, which is still largely unknown, with its urban phase between 2300 and 1600

BCE, was in close contact with Iran, Mesopotamia and the Harappa culture in the Indus Valley.

The settlement cluster of Togolok consists of about 30 sites of varying sizes, making it one of the largest and most important sites of the BMAC civilisation in Central Asia. The settlement complex was inhabited from about 2300 to 1700 BCE. The most recent traces of settlement indicate that Togolok was used simultaneously by nomads migrating from the north, thus promising insights into the end of the BMAC. The site has been known since the work of Viktor Sarianidi, who partially uncovered a walled complex at Togolok 21 and in the southern hill of Togolok-1. He also conducted a deep sounding on the northern hill of Togolok-1. The excavations begun in 2014 by field director Barbara Cerasetti have already yielded important insights into the interaction between sedentary and nomadic populations at the end of the Bronze Age.



Excavation will begin in autumn 2023.

The new project has the following objectives:

- Research into the development of the urban settlement of Togolok 1.
- Establishing a chronology for Togolok 1 based on a fine-meshed stratigraphy and, by extension, establishing a chronology for the entire Togolok-Gonur complex. Since relatively little has been excavated in Togolok 1 to date, there is an opportunity to establish a stratigraphy of the site according to the latest scientific criteria and methods.
- Research into the peaceful or conflict-ridden coexistence of sedentary urban dwellers and nomadic cattle breeders during the late Bronze Age.



Female terracotta figure.



Surveying work.

Work began in autumn 2023 with the creation of plans and surveying work. Test pits were dug at three different locations, which will form the basis for establishing a stratigraphy.

Fine pottery made on a potter's wheel, characteristic of urban life, was found, as well as coarse ware made by hand by semi-nomads. A pottery kiln and a small clay figure of a camel, originating from a semi-nomadic environment, were also found. Finally, numerous metal jewellery items (arm rings, decorative pins) were found, as well as traces of several metal workshops.

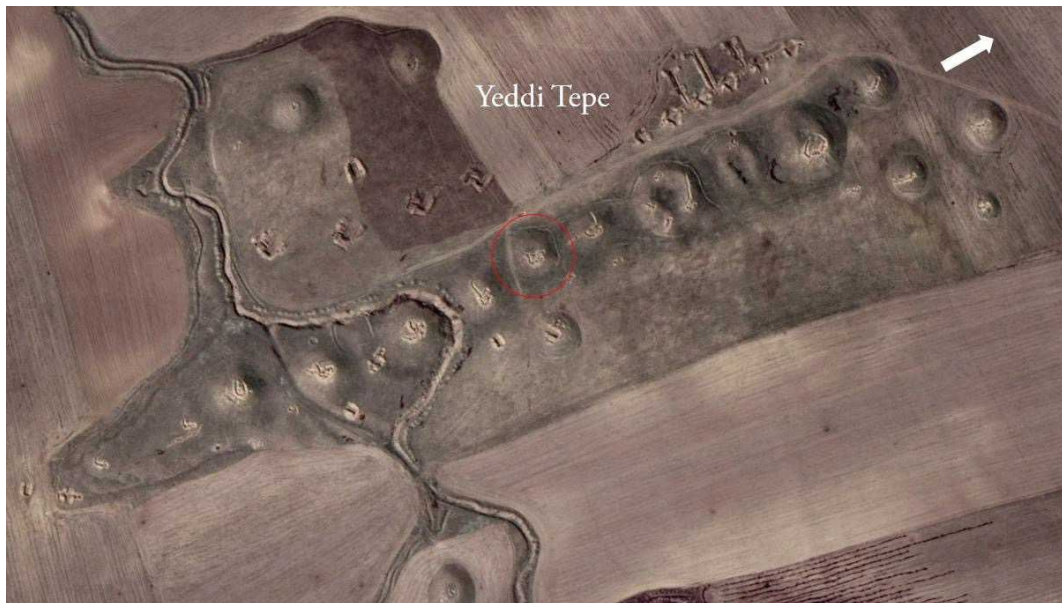
The report will follow in March 2024.

2024: Work on the three sectional excavations will continue.

VIII. Yeddi-tepe, Azerbaijan since 2023

Initial situation

The Yeddi-tepe kurgans in western Azerbaijan consist of 19 identifiable burial mounds and form a burial ground on a natural ridge. The burial mounds were laid out in a north-south direction. In 2022, the largest burial mound in the cemetery was excavated, revealing a burial chamber with exceptionally well-preserved vessels.



Aerial view of the Yeddi-tepe burial ground. Photo 2022.

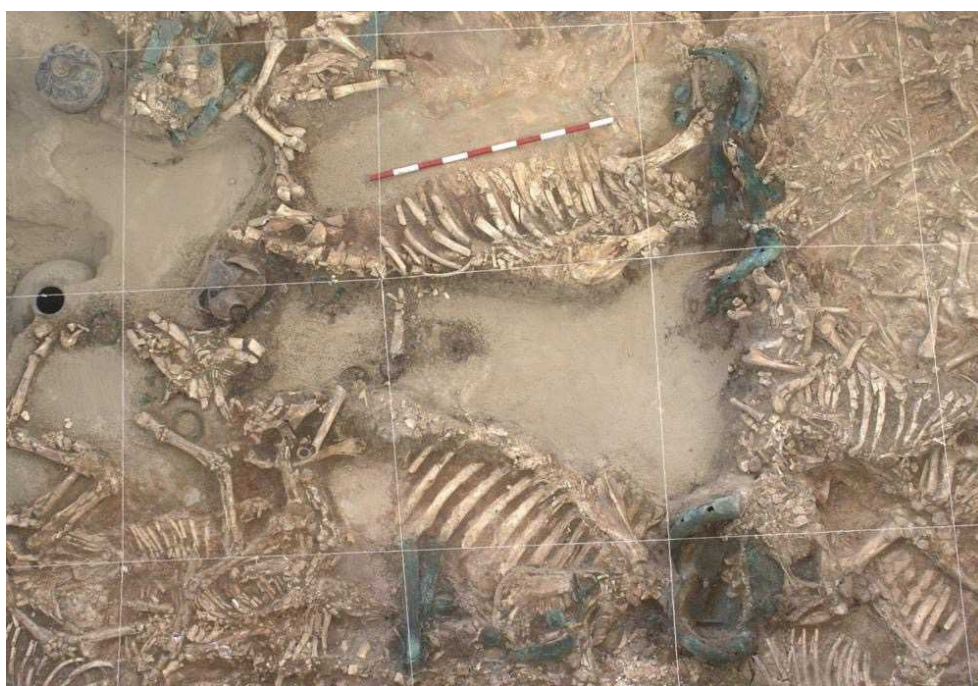
A female skeleton and fragments of animal bones were found in the grave, as well as a two-wheeled wooden cart pulled by two oxen. The ox-drawn cart with light spoked wheels appears to be a transitional model, combining Middle Eastern traditions and influences from the steppe. An iron sword and the skeletons of six sacrificed horses were also discovered. The finds are unique in two respects. Firstly, the combination of a light cart with spoked wheels and two oxen as draft animals is unusual. It is also unusual for the southern Caucasus that the burial of a woman exhibits attributes of a male burial, such as laying out on a cart, horse sacrifices and the inclusion of a sword.



Grave No. 1 during the excavation, photo 2022.



Close-up of the opened grave of Kurgan 1.



Funeral carriage drawn by two oxen.

In 2023, EurAsia participated in a project involving thorough protein screening of samples taken from more than forty objects. By comparing the comprehensive results with existing, extensive protein databases, the nature of the residues in these vessels will be determined. Such analyses provide insight into the dietary habits and domestication practices of the people who used these vessels. This analysis is supplemented by dry screening of the vessel contents. This method focuses on identifying microscopic traces of animal and plant remains. The results of the dry screening and mass spectrometry analyses are combined to obtain a holistic picture of the contents of these vessels at the time they were placed in the burial chamber.

The results report will follow in April 2024.

2024: EurAsia participates in the excavation of further kurgans in Yeddi-tepe.

VII. Further

Annual event 2023

Dr Gino Caspari gave a presentation *entitled An Early Iron Age Chariot Grave in Azerbaijan* at the Skulpturhalle Basel.



UNESCO World Heritage Site, a recognition

The three EurAsia projects of Vardana, Urgut and Sanjar Shah were declared World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee on 17 September 2023 as part of the transnational project "Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor".

Third scientific congress

The third scientific congress on the archaeology of Central Asia took place in Bern from 11 to 13 January 2024 in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bern. The theme was: "Mobility and Archaeogenetics in Central Asia. People – Goods – Ideas." Thirty-four archaeologists from 15 countries took part.

General Assembly 2024

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

Finally, we would like to thank all our members for their invaluable and much-appreciated support, which is extremely important for the implementation and further development of our scientific projects. We would be delighted if you continued your membership.

With best wishes for a happy, healthy and successful 2024, we send you our warmest regards.

Christoph Baumer
President

Therese Weber
Vice President

Enclosures (where applicable):

- Donation receipt 2023 for the tax authorities
- Payment slip