



The Society for the
Exploration of

EurAsia

Hergiswil, 5 February 2026

EurAsia archaeological projects

Brief report on 2025 and outlook for 2026

Dear EurAsia members

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



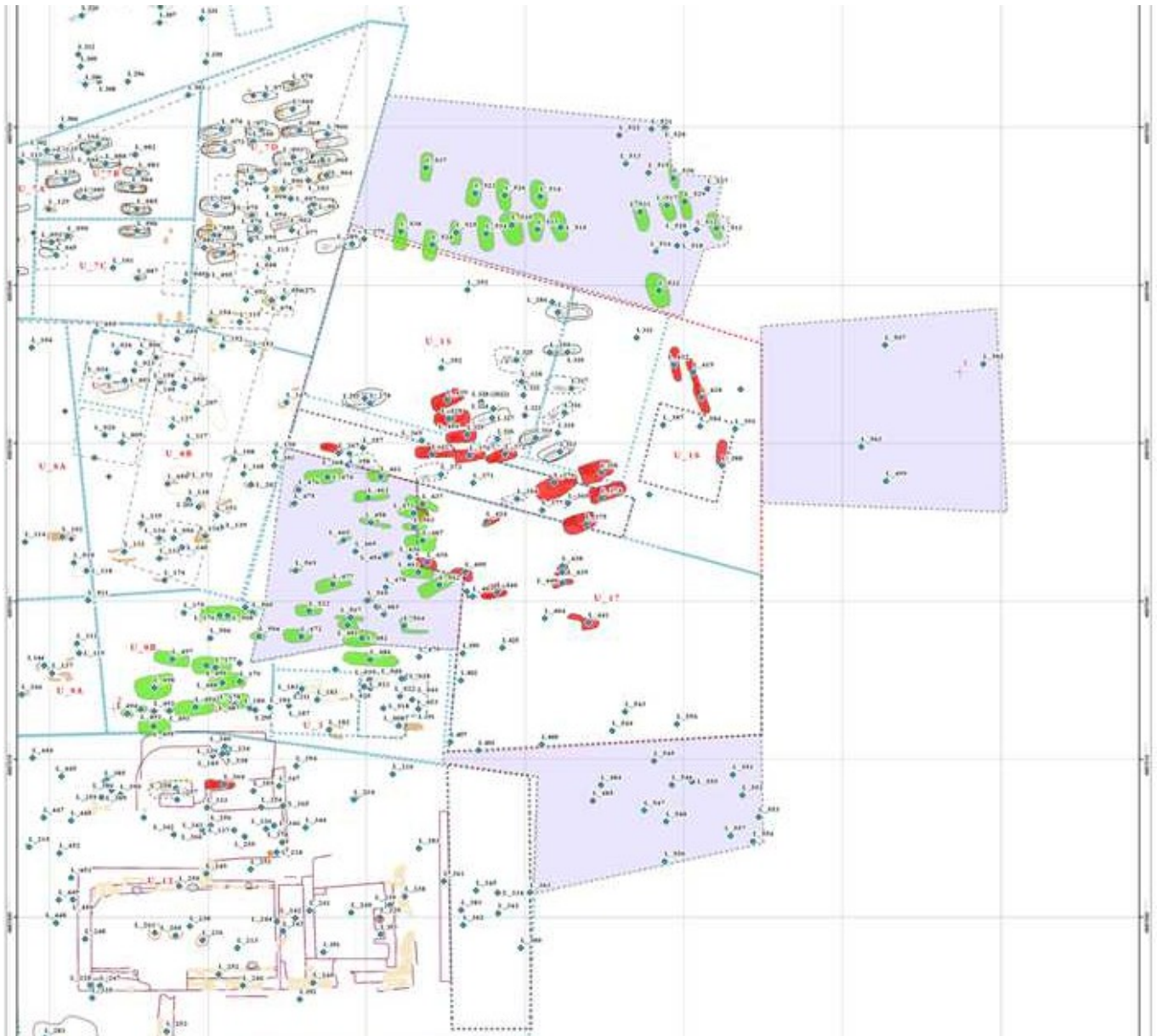
EurAsia's current projects are highlighted in blue, while those that are currently suspended are highlighted in yellow.

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

Ilan Balik is a Christian Nestorian cemetery dating from the 13th-14th centuries. In 1254, the Armenian King Hetum I of Cilicia (southeastern Anatolia), who was travelling to the Mongolian Grand Khan Möngke, visited and described the medieval city of Ilan Balik. The cemetery is located north of the old town, most of whose ruins were levelled during the Soviet era.

The excavation is being carried out in collaboration with the *Archaeological Society of Kazakhstan*, *Archaeological Expertise, Kazakhstan* (ROTRUM), and the *Lanier Centre for Archaeology, USA*.

Since the excavations began, 248 graves have been discovered, 151 of which have been excavated. The fact that these are Christian Nestorian burials is evident from the 52 gravestones found, all of which bear a cross, as well as from the uniform east-west orientation of the graves. The dead were always buried on their backs with their heads resting on a slightly raised clay pillow to the west. According to the beliefs of the time, on Judgement Day they would see Christ reappearing in the east in the morning light. Based on the estimated size of the cemetery, it is thought that there are between 450 and 500 burials.



The north-eastern sector of the necropolis; graves marked in green were uncovered in 2025, those marked in red in 2024.

However, as early as 2024, four graves had been uncovered in the north-eastern part of the necropolis that were not aligned on the east-west axis, but rather to the south-west. The relatively shallow burial depth initially suggested that these burials were somewhat later than most of those laid out on the east-west axis. During the last campaign, 17 additional graves were discovered in the eastern part of this sector, all of which were oriented to the south or southwest. It appears that these burials were Muslim. Whether these burials took place at the same time as the neighbouring Christian burials, which were also relatively shallow, or slightly later, in accordance with Muslim custom, cannot yet be definitively determined. In any case, the Muslim graves are clearly separated from the Christian ones; there was no mixing or overlapping of burials, let alone any disturbance of existing graves. Such a coexistence of

Christian and Muslim graves is unique in Central Asia. If the burials of the two religious communities took place at the same time, one must speak of a joint Christian-Muslim cemetery that was divided into two areas close to each other. However, if these burials were slightly staggered in time, i.e. the Muslim burials took place a few years later than the Christian ones, it is striking that the Christian burials remained untouched.



Field Director Dr. Gilbert shows a fired brick with engraved cross.



lamellae of a Turko-Mongolian breastplate. Brick

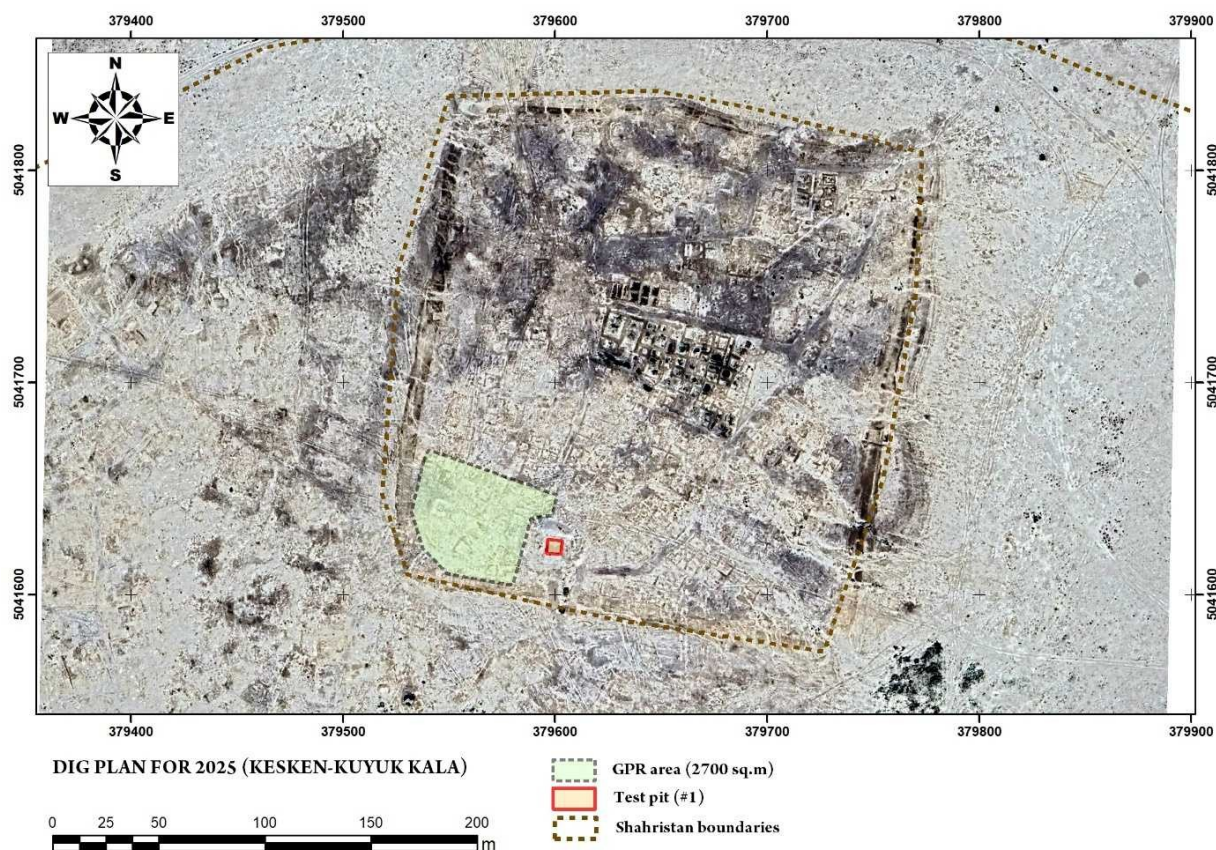
Jewellery such as silver earrings and weapons such as spearheads and knives were discovered in the Christian burials. Inside grave L-487, a brick with an engraved cross was found immediately next to the head of the deceased. Originally, the brick stood at the head of the deceased. Since such bricks normally served to mark a grave and were therefore placed on the surface of the earth, it is strange that the brick at L-487 was placed inside the pit with the deceased.

After a spectacular find was made in 2017 in the citadel, which stands about 850 metres southeast of the cemetery, namely a filled jewellery box, excavations were resumed at this site for the first time. During the excavations, archaeologists came across numerous references to warlike events. They found not only extensive layers of ash, but also catapult stones and fragments of a Turko-Mongolian lamellar breastplate.

2026: Excavations continue in accordance with the five-year plan. The aim is to further explore the cemetery and the citadel.

II. Kesken Kuyuk Kala, Kazakhstan, since 2008

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



Map of the town of Kesken Kuyuk Kala. The area marked in green indicates the citadel.

The investigations into the stratigraphy of the settlement, which began in 2023, were completed in 2025; they reached the natural topsoil at a depth of eight metres. As a primary result, the construction history of the city can be divided into eight construction horizons, beginning in the middle of the 5th century CE, during the later Kangar cultural period, and ending in the 12th century during the Karakhanid period and the invasion of the Kipchak horsemen nomads. A first detailed report will be published in the monograph *EurAsia Mobility and Archaeogenetics in Central Asia*, which will be published in 2026.



A monumental fire altar inside the citadel



Work in the stratigraphy shaft

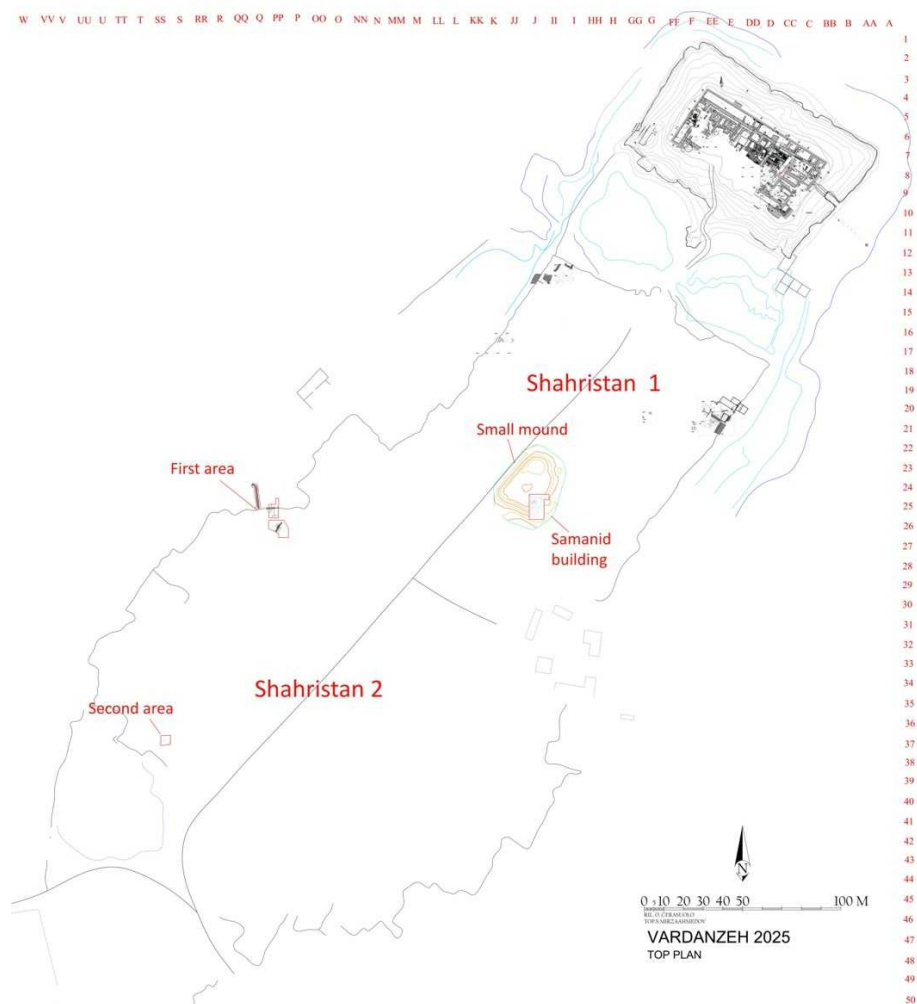
At the same time, excavations began in the citadel. Among other things, a monumental floor fire altar was uncovered, as well as intact plaster coatings on the inside walls of a room. This find from the Pecheneg and Oghuz era is unique in this region of the Syr Darya.

Darya Unterlauf's discovery is unique and could possibly point to wall paintings in neighbouring rooms. Several years ago, poorly preserved fragments of wall paintings were found in Sharistan (fortified district). Additional archaeobotanical investigations were carried out and high-resolution aerial photographs were taken with the aid of drones.

2026: Excavation will continue, focusing on further exploration of the citadel and the creation of a second stratigraphic section to better understand the individual phases of the middle building layers.

III. Vardana, Uzbekistan, since 2009

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



Plan of Vardana with Sharistan 1 and 2; the citadel is located at the top right.

In 2025, excavations focused on the former walled city located southwest of the citadel. Excavations in 2024 had shown that in one part of Sharistan 1, regularly shaped mud bricks dating back to early medieval, pre-Islamic structures had been reused for the construction of a much later platform. Therefore, there was little prospect of finding pre-Islamic Sogdian building fabric. However, local tradition has it that a mosque once stood in Sharistan 1 under a flat mound of earth. This small hill is marked on a sketch made by a soldier in the early 1900s based on the stories of older residents.

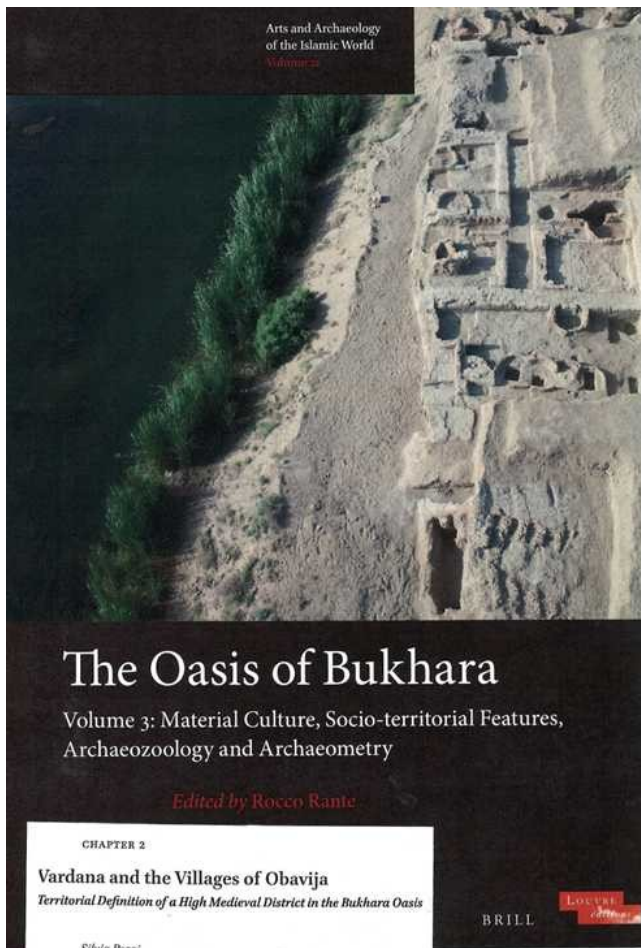
Excavations in Sharistan 1 did indeed uncover early Islamic pottery shards from the Samanid period (819-999). In addition, well-preserved fired clay bricks indicate a building from the same era, with another, possibly pre-Islamic building layer visible beneath this presumed Samanid architectural structure. In Sharistan 2, the finds were limited to traces of a simple 19th-century settlement and two earlier waste pits.



Sharistan 1, a Samanid building



Glazed Samanid pottery (819-999 CE)



In her three-volume work on the archaeology and history of the medieval oasis of Bukhara, chief archaeologist Dr. Silvia Pozzi published an article on the pre-Islamic history of Vardana.

2026: Excavations at the citadel are complete. Before a decision is made on whether to continue the project, the detailed excavation report must be analysed. If the hypothesis of a Samadian structure is confirmed, Sharistan 1 will be further explored. If not, the excavation project will be concluded and a monograph on Vardana will be prepared.

IV. Qarshovul, Uzbekistan, since 2010

Excavation of a Sogdian city, 4th-9th century



Aerial view of Qarshovul. Excavations took place at P2, P3 and P10.

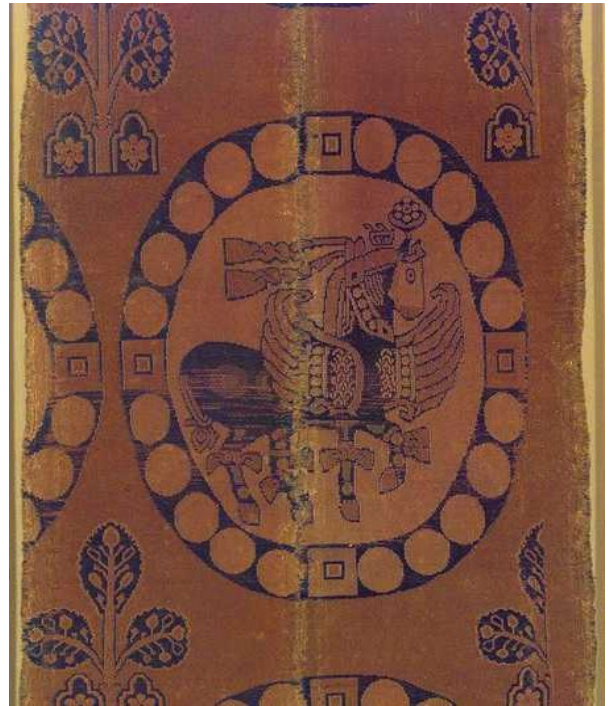
P2 in the west of the city is most likely a temple where a fire altar stood; the temple may have been part of a palace. An L-shaped side room served as a storage room, as shards from numerous large clay pots – called *knum* – were discovered here. Twenty pots bore a *tamga*, a specific mark of ownership. Such *tamgas* were used by families or craftsmen to mark livestock, vessels or fired bricks, by clans to mark land and grazing rights, and by ruling dynasties as a demonstration of power on coins. Since the vessels marked with *tamgas* that once stood in the temple storage room contained oil, they were donations from various individuals or families.



Storage room at P2.



Shard from excavation P-2, seal impression.



Textile with winged horse within a bead kranzes. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

One of these vessels bore a trident-shaped *tamga*, which was also stamped on bronze coins from Khach (Tashkent).

Also noteworthy was a seal impression on a clay shard, possibly part of a wall decoration, showing a winged horse surrounded by a pearl wreath. This motif was a common Sasanian symbol of royal power; however, the principality of Khach never belonged to the Sasanian Empire (224-651 CE), but at most to its peripheral zone of influence.

At P10, the northern inner fortification wall, the defensive structures were further excavated, revealing three different construction phases.

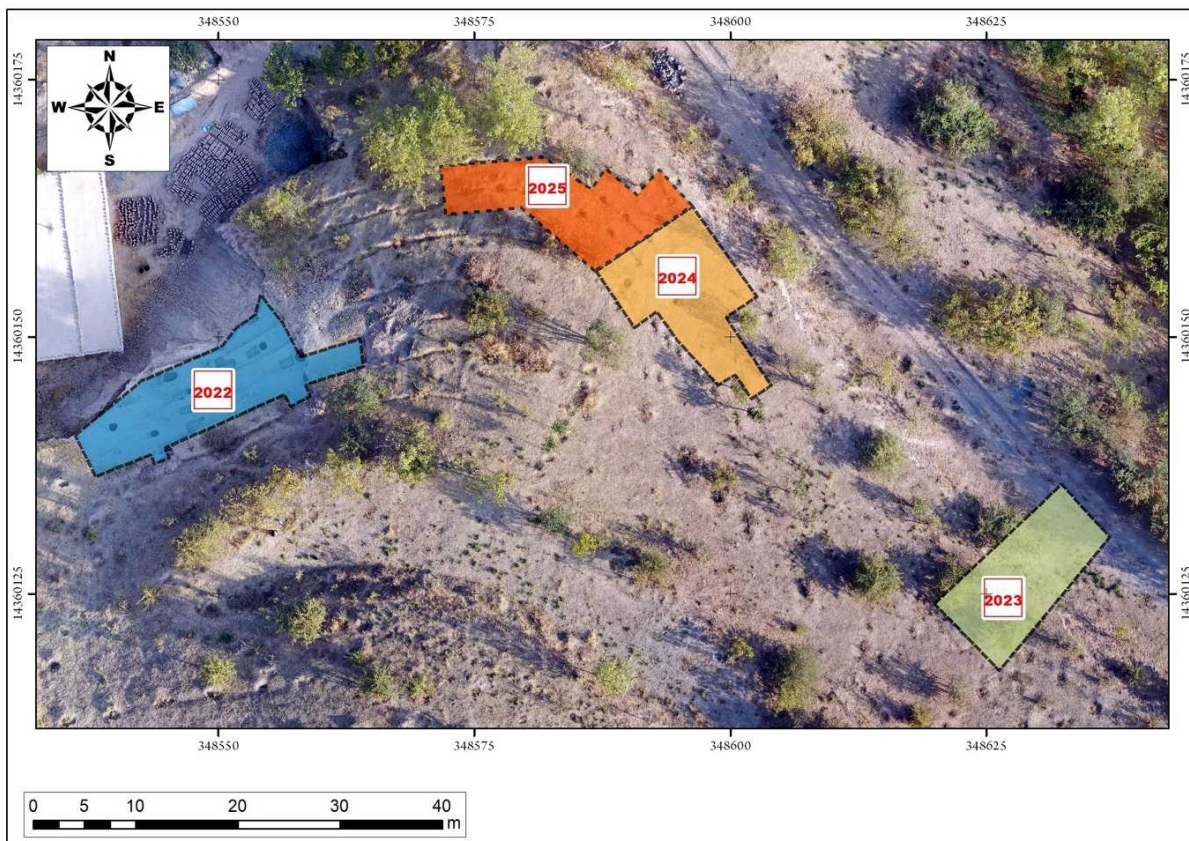
2026: Excavations will continue at locations yet to be determined.

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

Background

This project resumed 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 during the first excavation campaign. 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 an immediate halt to construction and revealed graves spread across three terraces on a steep grassy hill.



Aerial view of the cemetery with the four excavation sites.

A total of 40 burials were excavated between 2022 and 2025. All of the deceased were adult men with an average age of forty. As in Ilan Balik, all of the graves face east; the deceased were laid on their backs and their heads were usually slightly raised by a clay pillow. Since only burials of adult men were uncovered in Urgut, it can be deduced with a high degree of certainty that the monks of the Nestorian monastery were buried here. Preliminary dating indicates a period from the late 8th century to the 11th century. Since the church remained active for one or two centuries after the 11th century, it is assumed that further south, i.e. in the upper part of the cemetery slope, there could be additional graves from the 12th to 13th centuries. The burial chapel is believed to have been located between the monastery church and the cemetery.



Exposure of a skeleton.

Approximately 1.2 km east-southeast of the cemetery lies the southern foot of the Zerafshan mountain range, where numerous caves and shelters are located in the steeply rising rocks. These were used as hermit cells during the time of the monastery. Numerous epigrams in Old Syrian script and Old Turkish and Old Syrian languages bear witness to the presence of these hermits. Although numerous inscriptions were already documented in 2006-08 and published in scientific publications, the expedition undertook a renewed investigation of the rock face. In the process, over 100 inscriptions were scanned and a previously unknown cave with numerous epigrams was discovered.



Southern foot of the Zerafshan Mountains.



A typical hermit's cave.



Old Syrian epigrams south of the Urgut cemetery. The red arrow points to a cross mark.

2026: Work continues in the necropolis. Where possible, the burial chapel is being searched for, but the presumed location is private property.

VI. Tugunbulak, Uzbekistan, since 2024

Tugunbulak was discovered in 2015 and is located at an altitude of about 2000 m in the Malguzar Mountains, approximately 65 km southeast of Jizzakh, in eastern Uzbekistan. Initial explorations using drones with a high-resolution lidar scanner revealed five massive fortifications stretching over 50 hectares on a mountain ridge. Pilot excavations in 2022-23 confirmed the presence of stone and mud brick walls as well as rammed earth architectural fortifications (pakhsa) on the central citadel hill, as well as production facilities with evidence of a ceramics and/or metal industry.

Traces of more than 300 buildings were discovered in total. Initial radiocarbon dating indicates an uninterrupted settlement history of the urban centre of Tugunbulak from the 6th to the 11th century CE, with one exception.

These initial findings suggest that this centre was one of the largest architectural structures in the highlands of Central Asia in the early Middle Ages. This period was marked by radical upheavals such as the immigration of Turkic peoples, the conquest by the Muslim Caliphate, the resurgence of Eastern Iranian culture and changes in the routes of the so-called Silk Roads.

The first excavations in 2024 took place on the middle hill A 2. They uncovered several workshops where ceramic vessels were made and iron ore was processed into iron or steel. Intact ceramic vessels were then found, as well as iron daggers and arrowheads, earrings and coins from the period of the Turkic Khaganate (6th to 7th century CE). A large medieval cemetery was uncovered on a neighbouring hill. It contains approximately 650 burials and is one of the largest mountain cemeteries in Central Asia.



Tugunbulak. Aerial view of the excavations on hill M1.

In 2025, work focused on Hill 2. The stratigraphic excavation covered 255 m² and revealed three different construction periods.

Period 1 correlates with the initial construction and revealed a complex in which each room contained a smelting furnace for smelting iron ore.

During period 2, several walls were rebuilt within the complex, thereby changing the layout of the rooms. This period of use is again characterised by large amounts of slag, smelting furnaces, hundreds of ceramic shards and several intact vessels. The latter finds could indicate that the site was suddenly abandoned at the end of period 2.



The three construction periods at Mound M1: Blue shows the oldest period 1, red period 2 and colourless period 3.

In period 3, the mound was rebuilt. Multi-layered stone walls were erected on double-row stone foundations. While standardised mud bricks were used in period 1,

were used and rammed earth (*pakhsa*) was used in construction phase 2, the stone walls of the third period indicate that the complex had a defensive function. M1 of Tugunbulak now formed a small fortified complex that remained inhabited for about three centuries until around 1050. Iron continued to be produced during this third period, albeit on a smaller scale. The reason why the settlement was abandoned is still unknown; possible reasons include a prolonged period of drought or deforestation in the region, which would have made it impossible to continue smelting iron.

After only two excavation campaigns, there is no doubt that Tugunbulak was a unique iron-producing centre. It seems likely that Tugunbulak is identical to one of the "forgotten cities" described by Ibn Hawqal. Ibn Hawqal (died 978) was a 9th-century Muslim geographer who travelled extensively throughout the Islamic world and described it in detail. In his work *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Ard* (Book of the Image of the Earth), he writes in the chapter on present-day Uzbekistan:

Marsmanda is a very beautiful city without orchards or vineyards... The severity of the cold makes it impossible to grow fruit trees and vines. There are excellent pastures. (...) Iron tools are manufactured in Marsmanda... the iron comes from Ferghana. (...) On the first day of every month, a famous market is held in Marsmanda, which attracts people from far and wide." *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Ard*, § 506-07.

The barrenness of the landscape due to the cold mentioned by the author suggests a considerable altitude, and Tugunbulak is the largest known medieval ironworking site in the area described by Ibn Hawqal.



Tugunbulak at dusk. © Simon Norfolk.

The prestigious Smithsonian Magazine published an illustrated article on EurAsia's excavations in Tugunbulak in December 2025. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/archaeologists-may-have-found-the-lost-city-of-the-silk-road-180987637/>

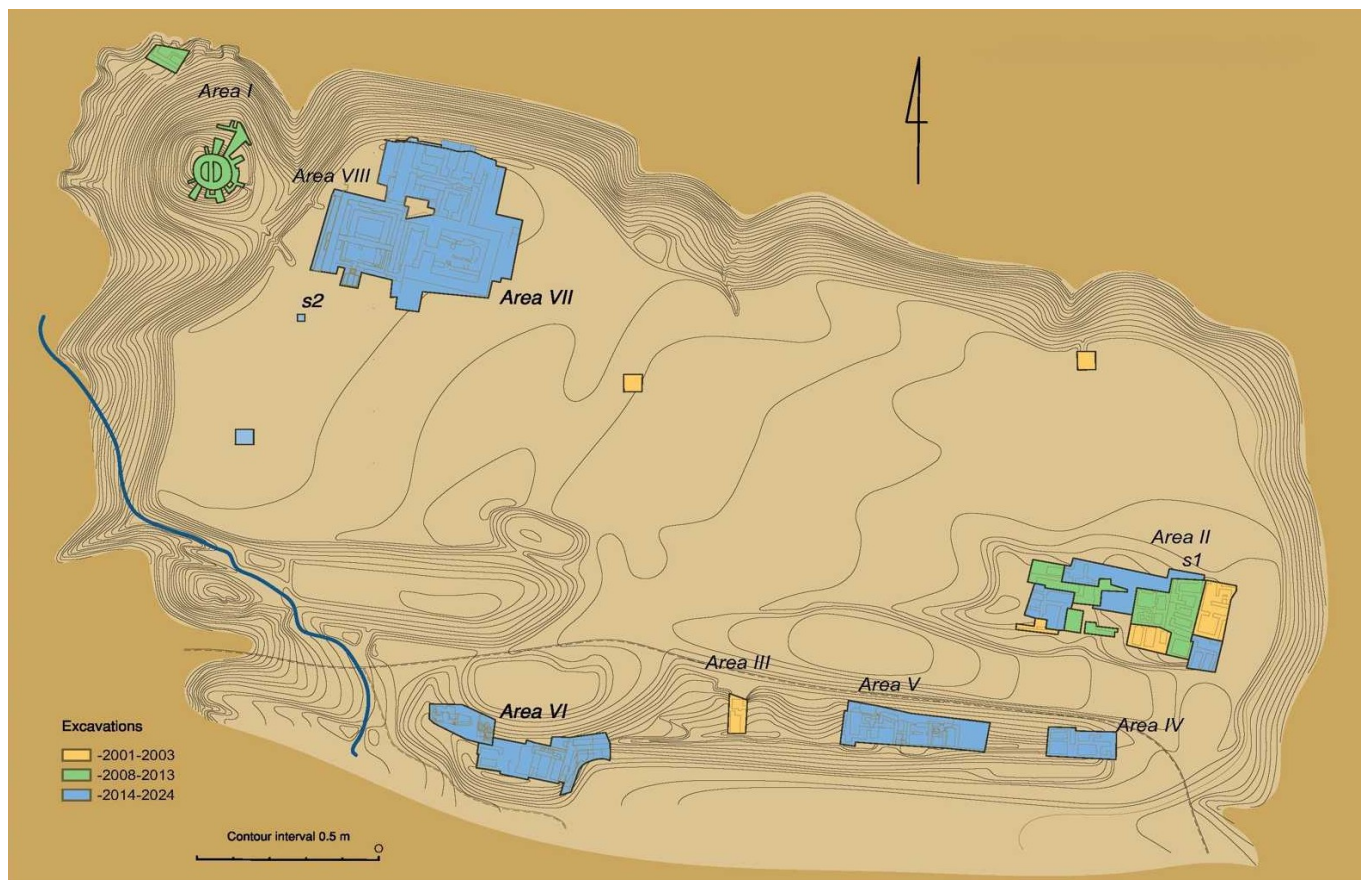
2026: Excavations will focus on a hill near M1. LIDAR aerial photographs showed that the hill was once densely built up; due to its central location, archaeologists suspect that this was the administrative centre.

VII. Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan, since 2008

Excavation of a Sogdian city with a citadel 12 km east of Panjikent. Sanjar Shah replaced the larger city of Panjikent as the administrative centre and seat of the Sogdian governor of East Sogdia after it burned down in 722. East Sogdia belonged to the Abbasid Caliphate from 722 onwards, and the local governor was subordinate to the Muslim governor of the Khorasan region (western Central Asia).



Excavation of the palace in Sector VII in Sanjar Shah; view from west to east.

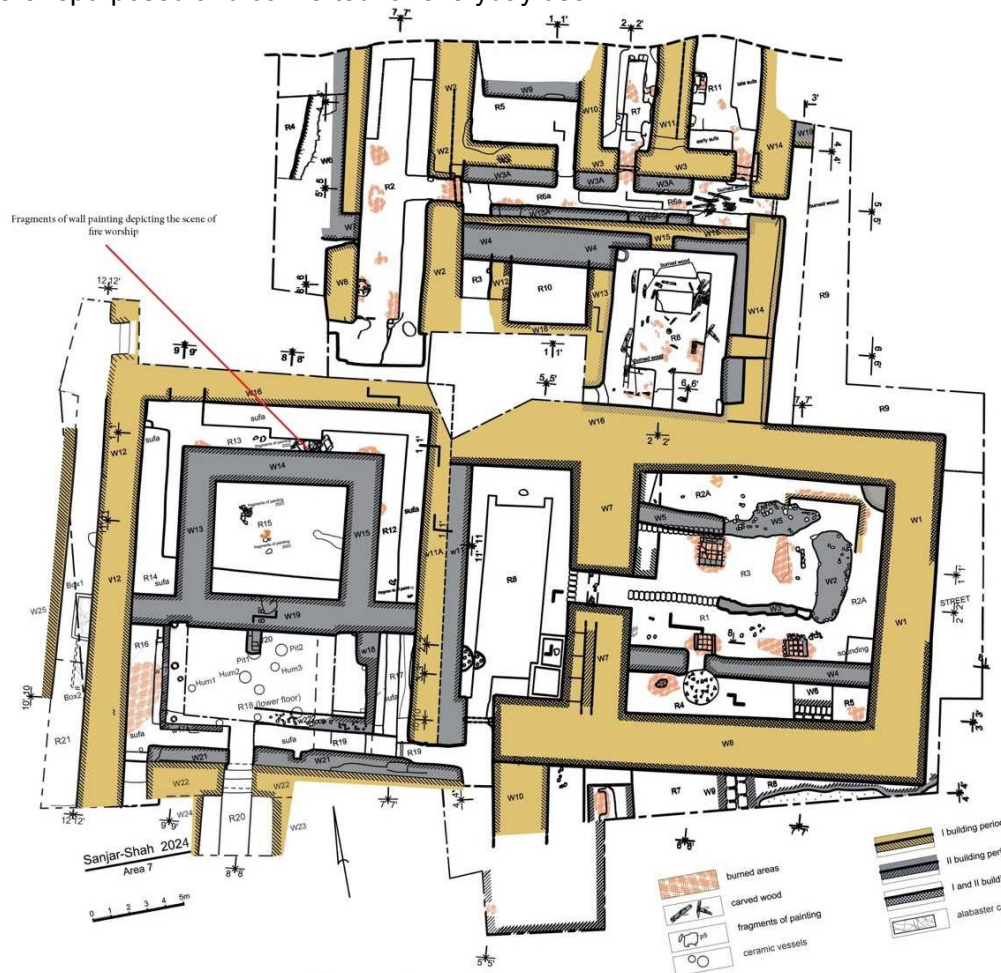


Plan of all excavations from 2001-2003 and 2008-2025.

In 2025, excavations continued in the palace complex in the north-western part of the city (areas VII and VIII) continued; they concentrated on the southwestern part, where the large reception hall, i.e. the throne room, was presumably located. Unfortunately, the wall paintings that had been discovered and covered up again the previous year were not as well preserved as hoped. The existing fragments illustrate a frieze decorated with floral patterns and a procession of animals, including a black donkey.

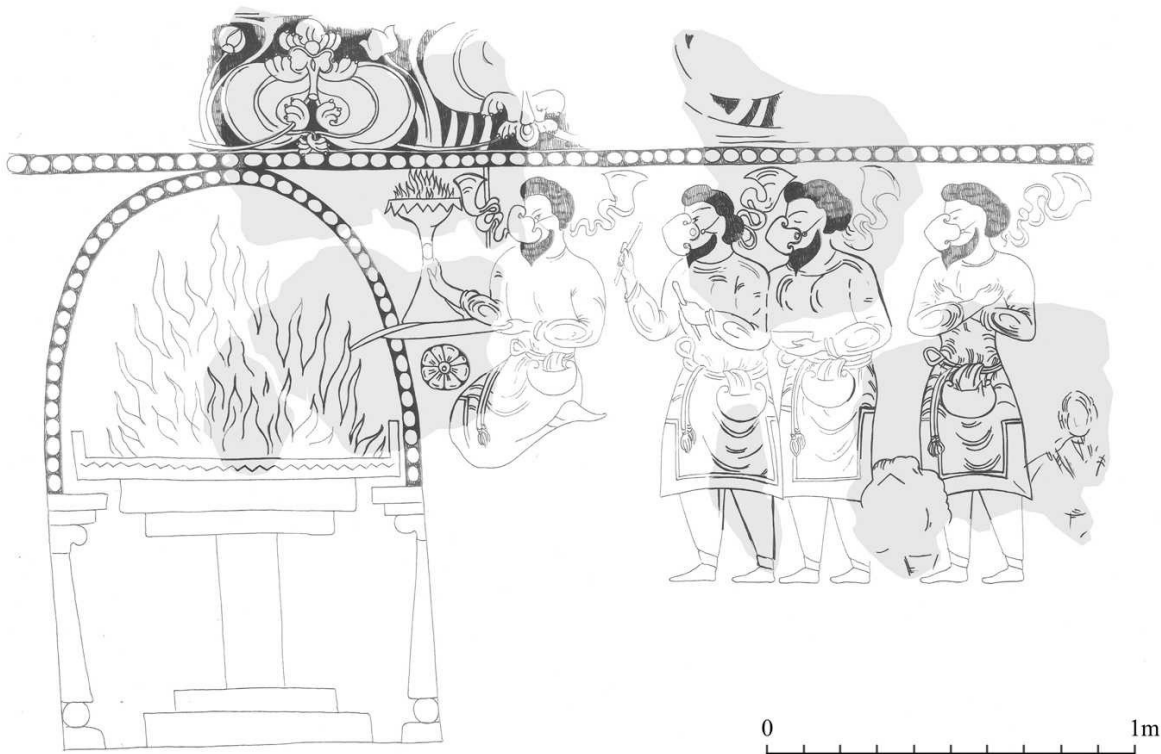
Analysis of the construction history of this magnificent hall led to a surprising result. Until now, Sanjar Shah's palace had been dated to the period from around 740 to around 770/80, which fitted in well with the known historical chronology of Eastern Sogdiana: After the Arabs conquered Samarkand in 712, they slowly advanced further east into the foothills of the Zerafshan Mountains, where they conquered and burned down the city of Panjikent in 722. After almost twenty years of repression against the native Sogdians and their Zoroastrian beliefs, the new governor of Khorasan, Nasr bin-Sayyar (in office 738-748), changed his policy towards the subjugated Sogdians. Instead of persecuting them for their beliefs, he invited the Sogdian merchants and nobles who had fled into exile in China to return to their homeland and guaranteed them freedom of religion. It was solely this tolerant religious policy of Nasr bin-Sayyar that allowed the Sogdian governor of Sanjar Shah to decorate his new palace with figurative murals of Sogdian deities and rituals. The uprising against the Abbasids led by the Iranian al-Muqanna from 774 to 779/80, and the corresponding state repression, led to widespread destruction, including that of Sanjar Shah's palace. Until now, historians assumed that this destruction marked the end of the urban period of Sanjar Shah and his surroundings.

The excavations of 2025 refute this assumption, as the throne room with its fragmentary preserved paintings clearly dates from a second construction period that took place after the fire of 770/80. The palace was therefore rebuilt after the suppression of the al-Muqanna uprising. About two decades later, the palace rooms were repurposed and converted for everyday use.



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The palace district in Sector VII-VIII.



Reconstructed mural in the palace of Sanjar Shah, depicting a fire ritual.

In June 2025, the chief archaeologist of Sanjar Shah, Prof. Dr. Michael Shenkar, published an article in the scientific magazine *ANTIQUITY* on a mural from the first palace era (ca. 740-770/89). The reconstruction revealed a depiction of a fire sacrifice unknown in Sogdian murals. Three Sogdian priests, all wearing face masks called *padam*, approach from the right. In front of them, another priest kneels before a room-filling fire altar. He also wears a face mask and holds a portable fire altar in his right hand. The fact that a Zoroastrian fire ritual was permitted to be painted in a representative room under Islamic Abbasid rule is evidence of the tolerance shown by the local Muslim rulers at that time.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/unique-scene-of-fire-worship-from-the-late-sogdian-palace-at-sanjarshah/E9A61D7E0606EFD4C87E41345608963A>

2026: Excavations continue in the neighbouring structures of the ceremonial hall with the aim of gaining a better understanding of this final period.

VIII. Togolok 1, Turkmenistan, since 2023

Togolok is located about 60 km northeast of the present-day district capital of 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 one of the two centres of the BMAC culture (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex), which stretched from here across southern Uzbekistan to northern Afghanistan. This early advanced civilisation, with its urban phase between 2300 and 1700 or 1600 BCE, was in close contact with Elam (Iran), Mesopotamia and the Harappa culture in the Indus Valley.

The Togolok settlement cluster consists of around 30 sites of varying sizes, making it one of the largest and most important sites of the BMAC civilisation in Central Asia. The most recent traces of settlement indicate that Togolok was used simultaneously by local sedentary populations and nomads who had migrated from the north.

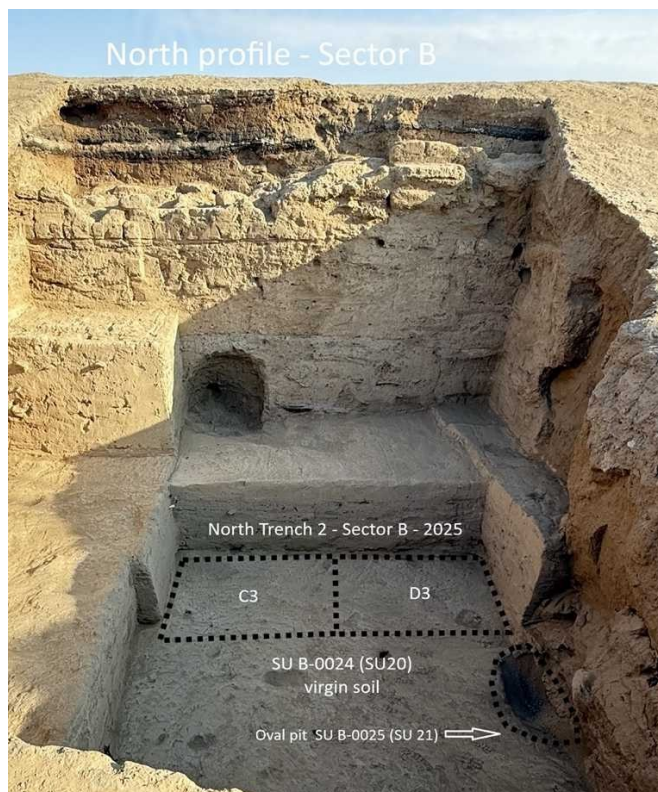
Although archaeological research has been conducted in the greater Gonur area for more than half a century (with interruptions since 1972), there is no clear chronology or settlement structure. While Gonur itself, Adjı Kui, Togolok 21 and other Bronze Age sites have been extensively researched,

the exploration of Togolok 1 has been limited to a few selective excavations and cross-sections. The relative intactness of Togolok 1 offers the opportunity to conduct research using the latest methods with the aim of establishing a reliable chronology not only for Togolok, but for the entire region. Another secondary but not negligible advantage of Togolok 1 is that there are no metre-high piles of excavation debris that would first have to be removed.



The excavation team at Togolok, Turkmenistan.

In 2025, work continued in Sector C at Cross-section 3. Not only was a wealth of data collected for stratigraphic purposes, but the remains of a circular pit house were also uncovered. It was striking that the upper construction layer, which showed clear signs of fire damage, contained fragments of coarse pottery, while the lower layer contained fine, high-quality pottery, indicating two different cultures, and perhaps even populations. The lower, i.e. older, architectural substance had not suffered any fire damage. In the upper, relatively younger layer, small terracotta figurines (two anthropomorphic, one zoomorphic), a piece of lapis lazuli and a clay amulet decorated with a geometric pattern were also found.



Section 2, Sector B.



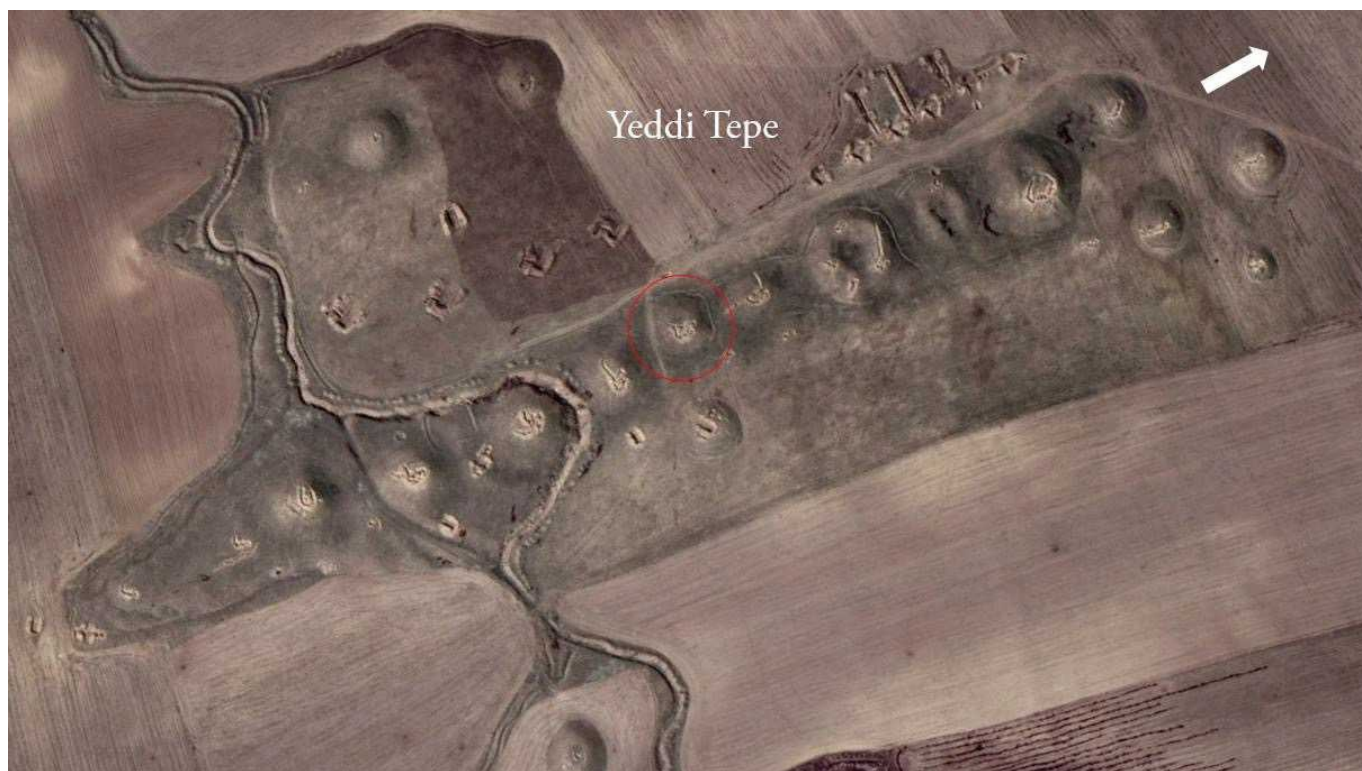
Cross-section 2 is located in Sector B. Here, a cross-section by Soviet archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi (1929–2013) was extended northwards and deepened at the same time. A complete lower jawbone of a child was found in one of the upper layers. Sarianidi had already discovered three child burials slightly deeper down; this is probably a small children's burial ground. While Sarianidi believed he had reached the natural soil here, in 2025 archaeologists came across two mud brick platforms, a semicircular hearth and a large amount of pottery at a greater depth.

2026: Work will continue at locations yet to be determined.

IX. 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 are laid out in a north-south direction. In 2022, the largest burial mound in the necropolis was excavated, revealing a burial chamber with exceptionally well-preserved vessels.



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

The Azerbaijani-Swiss expedition focused on the excavation of Kurgan 4 in Yeddi-tepe in 2023-2024. The remains of a Scythian horseman and sacrificed horses and sheep were discovered in the two burial chambers. The chambers also contained scientifically significant elements of horse bridles made of bone and bronze in the early Scythian style, e.g. in the form of a curled-up big cat or the head of a bird of prey, which bear great similarities to finds of the same age from the northern Caucasus and Tuva, southern Siberia. In addition, a large golden neck ring and a silver vase were discovered, the publication of which has not yet been approved by the authorities.

These zoomorphic pieces of tableware and arrowheads in the Scythian style clearly reflect the material culture of the Scythians at that time. These artefacts correspond to known typologies from similar sites in the North Caucasus and Central Asia and reinforce the chronological and cultural classification of the kurgan.



Work on Kurgan 5 at Yeddi-tepe.

In 2025, work began on the huge, still intact Kurgan 5. To this end, the mound had to be removed. Most of the volume consisted of sterile soil without artefacts, which allowed for the controlled use of heavy equipment. Only human and animal bones were found in the top layer.



Kurgan 5 of Yeddi Tepe.

The burial mound has a simple stratigraphy with thick layers. Number 1 shows the old, natural soil layer on which the kurgan was built. Number 2 refers to the yellow soil from deeper layers, which was excavated during the construction of the burial chamber and deposited directly next to it. Number 3 refers to the original structure of the mound with turf. This structure is clearly visible on the right-hand side towards the burial chamber, where the clearly defined steps indicate the deposition of cut turf. Number 4 indicates the covering of the burial chamber with yellow soil and number 5 is the final mixed layer covering the entire kurgan. Crucially, line 5 slopes down towards the centre of the kurgan at the red arrow, indicating a collapsed burial chamber, possibly due to an air-filled cavity left behind after the burial.

2026: After the removal of the mound, the burial chamber can be opened in 2026.

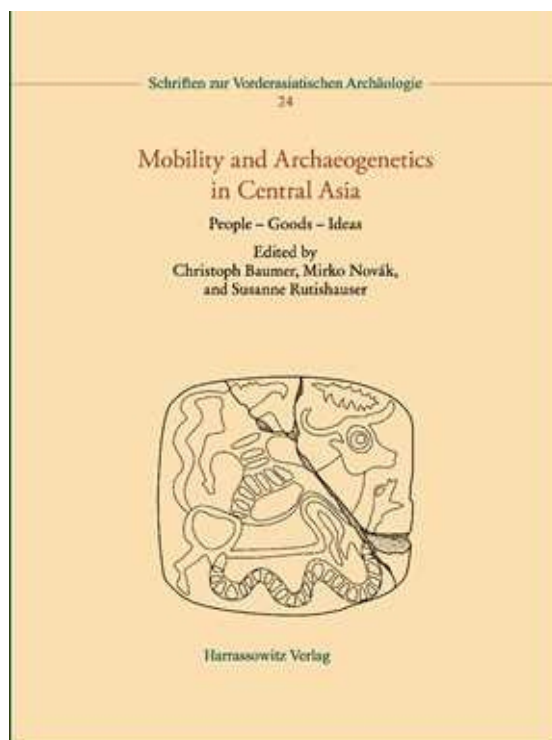
IX. Further

Annual event 2025

On 7 December, Dr Thomas Reimaier gave a presentation at the Basel Museum of Ancient History entitled *Glacier and Mountain Archaeology in the Context of Climate Change*.

Monograph on the 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 corresponding monograph will be published in spring 2026 by Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden.



General Assembly 2026

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 valuable and much-appreciated support, which is very important for the realisation and further development of our scientific projects. We would very much welcome your continued membership.

With best wishes for a happy, healthy and successful 2026, we send you our warmest regards.

Christoph Baumer
President

Therese Weber
Vice-President

Enclosures (where applicable):

- Donation receipt 2025 for the tax authorities
- Payment slip
- Account: Nidwaldner Kantonalbank, Stans. Association account CH11 0077 9014 0546 7300 1