

A Case Study of an Early Islamic city in Transoxiana: Excavations at the Medieval
Citadel in Taraz, Kazakhstan

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This report presents a summary of the 2011 and 2012 excavations of the joint UK-Kazakhstani excavations in the medieval citadel of Taraz. The city of Taraz, located near the southern border with Uzbekistan, is one of the most significant historic settlements in Kazakhstan, and the investigations in the central market place have started to reveal the composition of the medieval city. Despite frequent mentions in Arabic and Chinese written sources, the form and evolution of this important Silk Road city remains poorly understood. These excavations, which identified a series of buildings including a bathhouse and a fire shrine, are the first for almost 50 years and include the first C¹⁴ radiocarbon date from the city. In addition, this is one of the first detailed accounts in English of an urban excavation in Kazakhstan.

KEYWORDS: Kazakhstan, Early Islamic, Bathhouse, Fire Shrine, Urbanisation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report presents a summary of the 2011 and 2012 excavations of the joint UK-Kazakhstani excavations in the medieval citadel of Taraz. The excavations were undertaken by two commercial archaeology companies, Archeological Expertise (Kazakhstan) and the Centre for Applied Archaeology (CAA), the contracting division of University College London (UCL) UK. This joint venture was a result of an invitation by Kazakhstani archaeologists for co-operation in the field with UCL archaeologists and students on an urban excavation intended to become an open-air museum, the first of its kind in the city.

This invitation was largely based on UCL's considerable experience in undertaking archaeological fieldwork on urban sites in both Central Asia (such as Merv, Turkmenistan) and Europe. One of the main aims of the collaboration was to introduce Kazakhstani archaeologists to the general techniques of urban excavation, as well as the system of single-context recording. This system was developed by the Museum of London in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly on Roman and medieval sites within the city, to excavate and record archaeological stratigraphy too complex for traditional approaches (Museum of London, 1990).

Kazakhstan has witnessed a boom in archaeological fieldwork in the last ten years, largely driven by a vast increase in commercial funding and a new emphasis on cultural heritage management. As a result, and uniquely in the region, Kazakhstan has developed a burgeoning commercial archaeology sector to fulfil the vast increase in archaeological work required by private development. However, the state still provides the majority of funding for archaeological fieldwork, mainly through

the investment in large-scale infrastructure projects. A notable recent initiative was the extensive National Programme of Cultural Heritage ('Madeni mura' in Kazakh) that funded conservation projects, as well as over 40 large-scale archaeological excavations, including this one in Taraz (Turysbekova, 2010; Madeni-Mura, 2011; Kul-Muhammed, 2011).

These developments in Kazakhstani archaeology, and the resultant body of data produced from this upsurge in fieldwork, have largely gone unnoticed by western scholarship. Despite recent improvements, there remain few publications in English on the medieval archaeology of the region. Academic neglect by the English-speaking world is a problem in other Central Asian studies, and the causes are likely to be the complexity of the region's political, religious and ethnical composition, as well as the publication of most specialist texts exclusively in Russian with a limited print run (Liu, 2011: 55-81).

2.0 THE 2011-2012 EXCAVATIONS IN THE MEDIEVAL CITADEL OF TARAZ

The Centre for Applied Archaeology (CAA) of the UCL Institute of Archaeology, along with Kazakhstani archaeologists (Archaeological Expertise), have undertaken two seasons of excavations (2011-2012) in the medieval citadel at Taraz (Figure 1). The aim of the excavations, located in the central market, was to identify remains worthy of in situ preservation and conservation, eventually displayed as a permanently covered archaeological exhibition. This specific location was chosen as previous archaeological excavation in the 1960s had found part of a bathhouse, which was believed to still be preserved in situ (Moldakynov, 2010: 15). The excavation was only one element of a wider educational initiative, including a significant public outreach programme, with the ultimate intention of assisting in the development of tourism based upon archaeological resources.

Although Taraz was one of the most important Silk Road cities in Kazakhstan, it is one of the least well understood, since, unlike the other major medieval settlements of Otrar and Sauran, it was reoccupied in the post-medieval period and is today a thriving modern city. Other than a short length of fragmentary mudbrick citadel wall, no upstanding fabric of a medieval building survives in the city, and the layout and composition of the medieval urban core remains largely unknown. However, enough of the medieval citadel and outer city walls remained in the 19th century to allow their outline to be mapped (Figure 2). This mapping, as well as the former citadel area surviving as a c. 3-4 m high flat topped mound or tepa (also known as a tell or tobe) was enough to allow the targeting to some degree of the handful of previous archaeological excavations within the medieval city. Despite the importance of the citadel, it was by far the smallest district, covering less than 4% of the overall area of the city (5 out of 144 hectares).

Taraz, like most medieval Central Asian cities had three distinct districts: the citadel, the shahristan, and the rabad. In broad terms, the citadel was the military-political core, and was fortified along with the adjacent shahristan, or inner town. Beyond the walls, lay the outermost suburb, the rabad. However, while attempts have been made to further characterise these districts (such as Fedorov-Davydov, 1983), recent work has increasingly shown the complexity of the urban form, both spatially and chronologically, and early Islamic cities do not lend themselves readily to simple assumptions (Kennedy, 2006; Whitcomb, 2007; Williams, 2007).

2.1 Historical and Archaeological Background

Taraz, the principal city of in the Zhambyl province of southern Kazakhstan, is traditionally believed to have been founded in the 1st century AD. The earliest historical reference to the city, by a Byzantine writer describing an embassy sent by Emperor Justinian II to the Talas valley, dates to AD 568, and thereafter the city is frequently mentioned in both Arabic and Chinese sources as a major settlement (Baipakov, et al. 2011: 282). The city, founded on the fertile, well-watered piedmont, was a nodal point on the Silk Road skirting the northern edge of the Chatkal and Kirghiz mountain ranges, and connecting with Burana in the east, and Samarkand and Otrar in the west (Williams, 2013: 84-87).

The handful of previous archaeological excavations in Taraz were located in and around the modern market place, and these succeeded in identifying buildings and structures associated with the former medieval citadel. These include an 'eastern' domed bathhouse with evidence of wall paintings, excavated in 1938, and a 'western' bathhouse, found during the construction of the covered market in the late 1960s (Moldakynov, 2010: 14-15). The current excavation, measuring c. 26 m by 16

m, was located around the southern end of the latter bathhouse, adjacent to the covered market building.

2.2 Dating Evidence

The dating of structures and features recorded on the site is both provisional and tentative. However, the best interpretation for the occupation of the site is between the 9th century and the end of the 12th century, based on the spot dating of the artefact assemblage and a radiocarbon date obtained on a charcoal sample taken from the soot-covered hypocaust of the latest building, the hammam (Building 4).

2.3 Phase 1: 7th-8th centuries Citadel walls

The earliest structure identified in the excavation consisted of truncated portions of walls in the NW corner of the site, possibly representing parts of an earlier citadel circuit, tentatively dated to the 7th to 8th centuries (Figures 4 and 5). The later wall, built directly on top of the earlier wall, had a decorative scheme of alternating grey and yellow mudbrick courses. Rather than using individual sun-dried mudbricks, the earlier wall was of *pakhsa*: a large mass of rammed-earth (usually mixed with water and straw) constructed wet and left to dry in situ.

2.4 Phase 2: 9th-10th centuries Buildings 1 and 2

Only part of Building 1 lay in the excavation area, although it seemed to be L-shaped with the long axis aligned NW/SE (Figures 4 and 5). Building 2 occupied a similar alignment to the NE and between the two buildings, there may have been an alleyway or street, although no evidence of any surfacing was found. The walls of

both buildings were similar, utilising alternate layers of *pakhsa* and river-rolled stone cobble with a trench-built foundation.

At least four small rooms were identifiable in Building 1 and the two central rooms seem to have been a shrine and a bakery: in Room B was a *pakhsa* D-shaped fire shrine and in Room C were the remains of three ovens (Figures 5 and 6). The shrine was 0.7 m by 0.75 m, and 60 mm high with a raised rim around the straight rear edge. In the centre was a shallow bowl for the flame, 0.16 m diameter and 80 mm deep, with evidence of heat-affection and charcoal staining. Significantly, behind the shrine abutting the external wall was a *suffa*, a *pakhsa* and stone cobble bench: a raised area where most day-to-day activities were undertaken and an architectural feature usually associated with domestic dwellings.

Three oven bases were located in Room C, and a fourth oven, likely to be of contemporary date, was located externally in the alleyway (Figures 5 and 7). The oven bases were all roughly oval-shaped, with sunken heat-affected bases c. 0.12 m deep, and the varying sizes, between 1.1 m and 0.22 m in length, are likely to reflect functional aspects. The two larger ovens bear a similarity with *tandir* ovens: a beehive shaped clay dome used exclusively for baking unleavened bread. The internal and external oven locations have a parallel in Turkey, where an ethnoarchaeological study showed that these ovens were often located both indoors for use in winter, and in the street for use in summer (Parker, 2011: 603-627).

The entrances to both Rooms B and C were located to the west, beyond the limits of excavation and both rooms were of a similar narrow width (c. 2.5 – 3 m). The rooms also had a similarity in construction: with *pakhsa* and stone cobble *suffas*

located abutting the external wall, and gravel metalled floors with later mud plaster repairs.

Both Rooms A and D may have been open to the street to the NE, and possibly represent entrances. These rooms had suffas built entirely of *pakhsa*, as opposed to the *pakhsa* and stone cobble suffas found in Rooms B and C. They were also distinctive from Rooms B and C in so far as that no flooring material was identifiable within these rooms. The walls of Room A utilised noticeably fewer stone cobbles in their construction than the walls to the south, suggesting that this was a different phase, possibly a later extension to an existing structure.

Less well understood is Building 2, with only fragmentary parts visible beneath the unexcavated masonry of the later bathhouse (Building 4). The building had at least two rooms floored with stone slabs and a wall built of mud plaster and stone cobble. Although much of the layout was obscured, the building appeared to be aligned NE/SW, with a c. 4 m wide gap between Buildings 1 and 2, again probably representing an alleyway.

2.4.1 Discussion

Although the majority of Building 1 was located beyond the limits of excavation, enough was uncovered to make some suggestions about its form and use. The three small ovens in Room C would not have been in contemporary use, but were rather successive replacements, and indicate that part of the building was a kitchen or bakery. The similarities between Rooms A and D suggest they may have had a similar function and, as both had open fronts onto the alleyway, they may have been small shops, possibly the retail space for the adjacent bakery.

In Room B, the simplicity and the small size, as well as location next to a bakery suggest that this fire shrine was for domestic rather than public use. However, what this fire shrine represents is problematic, and there is debate among Kazakhstani archaeologists to which fire-worshipping ritual tradition or religion, such as Zoroastrianism, these are related. While more broadly there has been considerable advances in the theoretical and methodological study of the archaeology of religions (for instance, Insoll, 2004 and Rowan, 2012), it is still recognised that any interpretation requires great care, and that the full complexity of meaning and belief may never be realised (Rowan, 2012, 2). In addition Foltz has outlined the interpretational difficulties of inferring religious belief from archaeological and documentary evidence from Silk Road sites (1999: 19-21), and Baldick has detailed the inherent problems of defining shamanic belief as opposed to 'religion' (2012: 177-178).

Nevertheless, with this in mind, a cautionary interpretation can be ventured. While Zoroastrian fire shrines have been identified in Transoxiana, and an example broadly dating to the 8th to 13th centuries AD was recently excavated at Kulan, southern Kazakhstan (Voyakin and Massanov, 2014; 135), it can be suggested that this shrine represents a Turkic cult of fire-veneration, a form derived from nomadic Tengri worship. Recent excavations in southern Kazakhstan have identified several similar shrines, some of which are direct parallels to the Taraz example, such as at domestic buildings in Kayalyk (9th – 13th century AD; Baipakov and Voyakin, 2007: 105) and at Talkhir (10th – 12th century; Voyakin and Massanov, 2014; 138). Other larger fire shrines, described as 'cult rooms' by their excavators, are known from Kok-Mardan, Otrar (2nd – 4th century; Baipakov and Aldabergenov, 2005: 31) and Djamukat (6th – 12th century; Baipakov and Ternovaya, 2004: 42-50; Baipakov et al.,

2011: 373-375). These 'cult rooms' are much more elaborately decorated than the domestic shrines, but they retain the same basic features of a rammed-earth platform, often D-shaped with a central hollow for the flame. The Kok-Mardan shrine was particularly notable for its ram's head decoration above the shrine (Baipakov and Aldabergenov, 2005: 31). While the dating of these shrines is often imprecise, they mostly date to the post-Arabic conquest, and in some cases demonstrate use well into the early Islamic period. Clearly more investigation is required into these some-what enigmatic structures, they do appear to suggest, at least in western Transoxiana, a diversity of worship and a continuing toleration by the Islamic elite into the later medieval period.

2.5 Phase 3: 10th-12th centuries Building 3

After the demolition of Buildings 1 and 2, a large stone building (Building 3) was constructed in an entirely different manner with split stone block faces and a river-rolled stone cobble core (Figures 4 and 5). No contemporary internal walls or floor surfaces survived, and there was no indication of the building's function, although immediately to the north were three conjoined lengths of ceramic water pipe, suggesting that this building had access to running water. Similarly, the absence of large finds assemblages associated with Building 3 greatly restricted the dating of the structure, and the best estimate for its occupation, between the 10th and 12th centuries, is based on its stratigraphic position between the better-dated earlier and later buildings.

Although this building was definitely later than Building 2, it had no stratigraphic relationship with Building 1, and it is feasible that Buildings 1 and 3 were, for a time, contemporary structures separated by a narrow alleyway (c. 2.5 m

wide). In the southern corner of the site was a short, truncated length of wall, built in the same stone block and cobble manner as Building 3, and this may well represent a contemporary structure, although too little survived to draw any firm conclusions about its form.

2.6 Phase 4: 11th-12th centuries Building 4

The latest and best-understood structure was Building 4, the bathhouse or hammam (Figures 4, 5 and 8). The SW end of this ceramic brick building lay within the excavation and consisted of two rooms: a cold room to the NW, and a hot room to the SE. The cold room had a rectangular aperture, possibly a drain, built into the N wall.

Within the hot room was a hypocaust, with a yellow ceramic tile floor suspended by a series of dwarf walls. The bathhouse furnaces would have been located beyond the limits of excavation to the NE. There were three wall flues, for venting the hot air, located in the SW. A radiocarbon date on a charcoal sample taken from the soot deposit adhering to the dwarf walls of the hypocaust flues produced a late 11th/12th century date for the last use of the hammam and, as this was stratigraphically the latest structure, it provides a terminus ante quem for the occupation of the site.

Table 1 Radiocarbon dating of hammam

2.6.1 Discussion

Building 4 was the SW end of a bathhouse or hammam, with the NE end previously excavated in the 1960s, and locally known as the 'second' bathhouse, due to its later discovery. The 'first' or 'eastern' bathhouse, excavated in 1938 by

Bernshtam, was of a very different structure, being square in plan, domed and richly decorated with geometric murals, although the discovery of a hoard of 11th-century silver coins within the baths suggests that it was more or less contemporary with the 'second' or 'western' bathhouse (Baipakov et al., 2011: 303-304).

The 'second' or 'western' bathhouse was square in plan, and very small, only c. 9.5 m by 9.5 m (Figure 9). A greater amount of fixtures were identified in the northern half including a furnace, housings for copper water tanks and the remains of ceramic pipes for supplying the water (Baipakov et al., 2011: 308). The entrance to the bathhouse was via the cold room in the southwest, where upon the bathers would proceed anti-clockwise through the three hot rooms (all with hypocaust floors), with each room increasing in temperature as the distance to the furnace diminished. Compared to other known structures, the Taraz 'western' bathhouse was a particularly small example, and although bathhouses often had to fit into tight urban plots, this may have been a privately owned business, or part of an adjacent elite residence.

Small bathhouses, such as Building 4, were a key urban facility in medieval Islamic cities, and their popularity throughout the Islamic world is well-attested (Yegül, 2012). Islamic medieval baths were the direct descendants of the Roman and Byzantine baths that they evolved from, and they utilised essentially the same heating system technology (Sibley and Jackson, 2012: 155). The architecture of Islamic baths differed mainly from the Roman in lacking areas for physical exercise and cold-water bathing halls (Yegül, 2012). In most Islamic baths washing was a private affair undertaken in individual basins, using either ceramic or metalwork vessels or basins built into the structure.

The washing of different body parts required different levels of privacy, and accordingly hammams provided rooms with varying levels of light as well as secluded niches. The most public and well-lit areas were the entrance hall and the undressing room, and these provided an important social space, especially for women, as it was their only gathering place outside the home (Sibley and Jackson, 2012: 155).

This building, the Taraz 'western' bathhouse, is part of a small group of bathhouses from the far Islamic East to have been archaeologically excavated. This collection of bathhouses date mostly to the later medieval period and, based on the ground plans, can be broadly divided into two types: cruciform and square. The two most complete examples known from the region at Otrar (Baipakov and Aldabergenov, 2005: 33) and Kayalyk (Baipakov and Voyakin, 2007: 113-121) are both cruciform in plan. However, this Taraz 'western' bathhouse is of the lesser known, square type, with a simple progression through increasingly hot rooms. It is possible that these two types of bathhouses represent chronological, functional or even social division, although so few of these buildings have been excavated and published that few conclusions can be confidently ventured.

3.0 Conclusion and Further Work

The succession of four buildings excavated, dating from the 9th to the 12th century, represent at least three constructional phases. Each of the three phases utilised a different building material (mud plaster and stone cobble; stone block and stone cobble; ceramic brick) and ushered in a major reconstruction in this area of the citadel. This chronological variation in building materials has not been seen elsewhere in the region, and seems to be specific to Taraz. Detailed published

reports of urban excavations from the region are sadly lacking, and an architectural chronology has not been developed. Similarly, a typology or fabric series for the fired ceramic building materials is also yet to be realised.

As all four buildings were unexcavated, some of the stratigraphic relationships and dating are tentative. Confidence in the interpretation of the function of the individual buildings varies greatly: Building 4 was without doubt a bathhouse, whereas too little of Buildings 2 and 3 was seen (or survived) to make any certain interpretation. Building 1 clearly had a variety of functions: domestic, religious and possibly retail.

The excavation, although limited in area (c. 400 m²), clearly demonstrated the abundance of stratified archaeological deposits that survive under the area of the modern market place between Avenues Tole Bi and Adambaeva. In addition, it is clear from the results that there is a complexity of intercutting structures dating to the later period (9th to 12th century) of the medieval city, all located within 2.5 m below the existing ground level. The depth of underlying archaeological stratigraphy is still unknown, but undoubtedly earlier elements of the city, for instance the two possible earlier citadel walls, lie preserved beneath these four buildings.

The political history of Transoxiana after the Arab invasions is complex, and Taraz experienced repeated occupations by invading powers, often after prolonged sieges. Between the 8th and early 13th century, the Karluks, Samanids, Karakhanids, Saljuks, Karakitai, Khorezmians and finally the Mongols had all held the city (Golden, 1990: 357-361). However, despite this apparent political turmoil, the period saw significant economic growth within Transoxiana, especially under the Karakhanids, who were one of the most dynamic of Central Asian regimes, playing a fundamental

role in the creation of a Turko-Islamic culture (Golden, 2011: 72). A parallel theme to the economic growth was extensive urban development and renewal, occurring despite the fact that political elites remained nomadic or semi-nomadic. The preliminary results of these excavations suggest that the city escaped these repeated takeovers largely unscathed, and an indicator of the economic buoyancy is the regular remodelling of the citadel buildings and the creation of an extensive canal and irrigation system in the hinterland of Taraz (Baipakov et al., 2011: 210-212; Golden 2011, 71-73).

There was no evidence for occupation on the site after c. 1200 and although the period after the Mongol conquest of the region in the early 13th century was a time of increasing political instability, the city may have continued in a reduced form until the beginning of the 15th century (Baipakov et al., 2011: 308). However, the uppermost medieval deposits on site have almost certainly suffered a degree of modern truncation and any remains dating to the final years of the medieval city may well have been lost.

Much work remains to be done in the former central market place and new areas of excavation are planned, which will identify further buildings of the later medieval city. The problems of excavating to depths below 3 m the existing ground level in the restricted confines of an urban setting will inevitably mean that the earlier phases of the city will remain unexplored, and the investigation must be content with developing an understanding of the later city (mostly the 9th to 12th century).

As the intention was to create an open-area museum, the anticipation was that the inevitable question of what to preserve in situ or not would arise frequently. However, this turn out not to be the case, as after removal of the modern

overburden, a series of buildings deemed worthy of exhibition (including the bathhouse), were located at around 2 m - 3 m below the existing surface. This was also the maximum depth affordable without posing too many engineering and safety problems for the subsequent museum.

The other main area of work is the post-excavation analysis of the finds, including examination of the c. 50,000 pottery sherds, both of local manufacture and imported, in order to form the first major ceramic reference collection for Kazakhstan. The study of this assemblage will allow an insight into the economics of internal Central Asian trade, one of the main driving forces behind the Silk Road (Beckwith, 2009: 320-321).

Like many other Central Asian cities, Taraz experienced a massive destruction of its medieval buildings in the 20th century with the rise of Modernism and the Soviet era. The most important legacy of these excavations and the creation of the open-air museum is perhaps the restoration of a tangible link in Taraz to its medieval origins.

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