Karabalgasun and Karakorum

Nomad Cities as Means of Communication between Nomad Elites and the Multicultural Subjects

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Abstract: This paper introduces the phenomenon of urbanism in the context of the medieval empires of the steppe from a historical-archaeological perspective. Several of the Inner Asian empires that emerged from predominantly nomadic societies developed some degree of urbanization. However, it seems inappropriate to regard this as a transition from nomadic to sedentary societies. On the contrary, we argue that the cities of these polities represent a specific type of urbanism that could only exist in this form in a nomad environment and served to facilitate interactions between the nomad elites and their often-sedentary subjects, allies and enemies. In this paper we present some of the archaeological evidence from two of these sites: Karabalgasun, the Uyghur capital from around 745 until 840 and Karakorum, which was allegedly founded 1220 by Genghis Khan and came to be known as capital of the Mongol Empire. In the comparison of the archaeological remains and the representation of these sites in the written sources of different cultures lie the hints that provide an insight into the purposes these cities served for their builders[1].

Keywords: archaeology, urbanism, medieval, Steppe Empires, Mongolia, Mongol Empire, Uyghur Empire

1 The archaeological results presented in this paper are the fruit of cooperation between the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the National University of Mongolia and the German Archaeological Institute for the last 20 years. It has been funded over time by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

Fig. 01 The view on the Orkhon Valley from the slopes of the Khangai Mountains shows its vastness and abundance of water and rangeland. 2002, photo by H. Wittersheim.

Introduction

The nomad empires of Inner Asia played an important role in the global history. In recent decades, this role has become increasingly appreciated by scholars, often with respect to contemporary phenomena of globalization. This holds especially true for the Mongol Empire. It had close relationships with, or even incorporated, neighbouring sedentary cultures such as those of China, Persia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The mobile elites of the nomad empires became agents of cultural exchange between these cultures by means of warfare, diplomacy, trade and scientific and religious debate (Allsen 2009; 2001, 193). It is an interesting characteristic of the steppe empires that they developed a certain degree of urbanization within their principally nomad setting (see Honeychurch and Amartuvshin 2007, Rogers 2009, Hüttel and Erdenebat 2009, Waugh 2010). Since 2000, Mongolian and German archaeologists have been conducting research on the capital cities Karabalgasun of the Uyghur Empire and Karakorum of the Great Mongol Empire. This paper will give a short overview over this research and the insights into the structure and function of these interesting sites.

The Archaeological Heritage of the Orkhon Valley

Karabalgasun and Karakorum are both located within the Orkhon Valley World Heritage Site. The protected area stretches along the upper and middle reaches of the Orkhon River in Mongolia, which originates in the Khangai Mountain range. From Mount Suvraga Khairkhan it flows northeast through the high mountains. In the foothills of the Khangai range the narrow valley opens towards a wide plain through which the river takes his course, meandering northwards (Fig. 1). The plain is dotted with the herders' *gers* (yurts) and their animals, as it has been for thousands of years. Throughout history, the Orkhon Valley and its surroundings have played a crucial role in the emergence of nomadic steppe empires in Central Asia. Xiongnu burial places and walled enclosures, Turkic memorial complexes and the two great "capitals" of the Uyghurs and the Mongols bear witness to the history of the valley and justify its inclusion in the UNESCO world heritage list in 2004. The valley and its surroundings have often been considered a sacred heartland which served as a centre for several nomad empires, such as that of the Xiongnu, Turks, Uyghurs and Mongols (Hüttel 2016, 72; Rogers et. al. 2005, 872). This may be due to the fact, that the Khangai region is one of the most humid and fertile areas of the northern Mongolian steppes[2] while at the same time being protected against foes and agrarian colonization from the south by the Gobi Desert. The significance of the area already in Xiongnu times has been critically discussed with respect to an apparent lack of archaeological evidence for elite burials of the Xiongnu period in the upper and middle Orkhon valley (Bemmann 2011, 456f). However, this discussion seems to be too narrowly focused on the upper and middle reaches of the Orkhon, where the famous monuments of the Türk, Uyghur and Mongol periods are located. When the Austrian sinologist Arthur von Rosthorn called the lush pasturlands along the the Tuul and Orkhon rivers and the Khangai Mountains *"the stronghold of Central Asia"* and connected them to the Türk term Ötükän, he referred to the fact that the peoples occupying this land often achieved dominion over other nomadic groups roaming the Central

2 Di Cosmo 2015, 73-78, proposed that favourable climate and grassland productivity might have been the main reason to locate the Mongol capital in the Orkhon Valley.

Asian steppes and beyond. His delineation of this heartland includes the areas of the Orkhon, Tamir and Tuul rivers. Rosthorn derived the localization of the nomad's imperial centre from the Chinese accounts of military expeditions against the Xiongnu, Rouran and Türk (Rosthorn 1921, 287, 289-93). He concluded that the summer residence of the Xiongnu ruler must have been to the north of the later Uyghur capital Karabalgasun (Rosthorn 1923, 291, 297). On a conference on toponymy held in Ulaanbaatar in 2017, Akim (2021, 48) proposed that the site of Karabalgasun in the middle Orkhon Valley might have already been the place of the capital of the Xiongnu empire, too. His assumption is based on his reading of the history of the Liao Dynasty, the Liáoshǐ, which was compiled in 1345. Until now, our archaeological explorations of Karabalgasun haven't yielded any evidence supporting such an early dating. In 2020, the debate was revived by a team of Mongolian archaeologists, who excavated the remains of the Xiongnu period site of Kharganyn Dörvölzhin in Ölziit sum, Arkhangai, about 67 km north of Karabalgasun on the left bank of the Orkhon (Iderkhangai et al. 2020). Rooftiles from this excavation bear inscriptions referring to the Xiongnu ruler as "Son of Heaven". The team claimed to have identified the site of the Xiongnu "Dragon City", which was widely acclaimed in the Mongolian media and public (e.g., Tsetseg 2020). A preliminary report has been recently published and tentatively repeated that claim, which is supported by the density of Xiongnu period sites and burials in the close-by Valley of the Tamir river (Iderkhangai et al. 2020, 26; Iderkhangai 2012, 27). If the new site can be identified as the "Dragon city" beyond doubt or not—the findings of the team confirm the significance of the Orkhon valley as a central place of imperial residence already in Xiongnu times.

After the Xiongnu, successive empires arose from this cradle of nomadic civilizations, including the Göktürk, Uyghur and Mongol empires. The memorial inscription for Kül Tegin[3] (d. 731) clearly indicates that this very region, called the *ötükän yıš*, was a central source of political legitimacy and power:

3 Kül Tegin was the brother and co-regent of Bilge Qaghan (r. 716-734), the last ruler to reign successful over the second Eastern Turkic Empire. For both, memorial complexes with famous inscription stones next to each other at the eastern banks of the Orkhon river were erected.

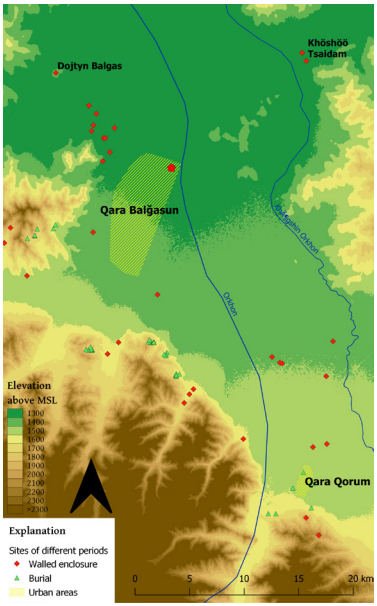

Fig. 02 The map shows the situation of the sites of Karakorum and Karabalgasun and other archaeological sites. As a centre of the medieval nomadic empires and because of its advantageous conditions for pastoral nomadism, the Orkhon Valley features a particularly rich archaeological heritage. By H. Rohland.

if the Türk Qağan possesses/resides in the Ötükän yıš, there will be no sorrow in the polity/imperium […] the Ötükän yıš was the land (suitable) for governing the polity/imperium

(Golden 1992, 49).

Almost 500 years after these words were carved in stone, the rulers of the emerging Mongol empire occupied the region and decided to establish their capital city Karakorum right here, thereby adopting the claim of universal rule (Allsen 1996, 124-28).

The Orkhon Valley and its surroundings, perhaps more than any other region, is a suitable research area for a detailed investigation of the phenomenon of the emergence and foundation of urban centres as fixed points in otherwise nomadic cultures. What does sedentism mean in that context and does this frequently used term actually describe the processes which took place here in the medieval era?

The whole area features a remarkable density of archaeological sites (Fig. 2) and a lively nomadic culture up to the present day. The excavations of recent years yielded

many insights into the complex relationships between the ambitious nomad elites and their subjects, nomads and sedentary dwellers alike, which were addressed by the building of cities in various ways.

This paper will briefly summarize the archaeological research at the urban sites of the Orkhon Valley within the last 20 years conducted jointly by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the National University of Mongolia and the German Archaeological Institute. Excavations by the research group have taken place both in prestigious and modest buildings of both cities, accompanied with more extensive surveys of the sites. The insights gained from these efforts in terms of architecture, city planning, and material culture will be used to discuss character and degree of urbanism as well as the function and importance of these cities within the nomadic society and for the communication between nomad elites and their various subjects.

The Uyghur Empire: Karabalgasun

The Uyghurs, a nomadic group formerly belonging to the Gökturk empire, seized the opportunity and filled the vacuum left by the perishing of their former overlords around 744. They became important military allies of the ruling Tang Dynasty in China and supported the Tang emperors in putting down uprisings threatening the very existence of the dynasty. In doing so, the Uyghurs managed to secure close political and economic relations with China, which were often exploitive. The Tang Dynasty was too dependent on Uyghur support to reject their requests for payment of military service and favourable trade contracts (Barfield 1989, 158–59). The enormous influx of wealth from China, e.g., in the form of silk and luxury goods, enabled the Uyghurs to become agents in and to benefit from the trade of the silk roads. The trade itself was most likely facilitated by the Uyghurs' cooperative relationship with the Central Asian Sogdian people. The Sogdians were an eastern Iranian people. Their homeland was in Central Asia in the valley of the Zerafshan River and the important cities of Samarqand and Buchara. They also maintained a trade diaspora from Central Asia to China and were important middlemen in the Silk Road trade (Pelliot 1912, 104–5; Skaff 2003). The adoption

of the Manichaean religion by the Uyghur rulers (762) and the occasional usage of the Sogdian script indicate the influential position that the Sogdians had in the Uyghur state and society.

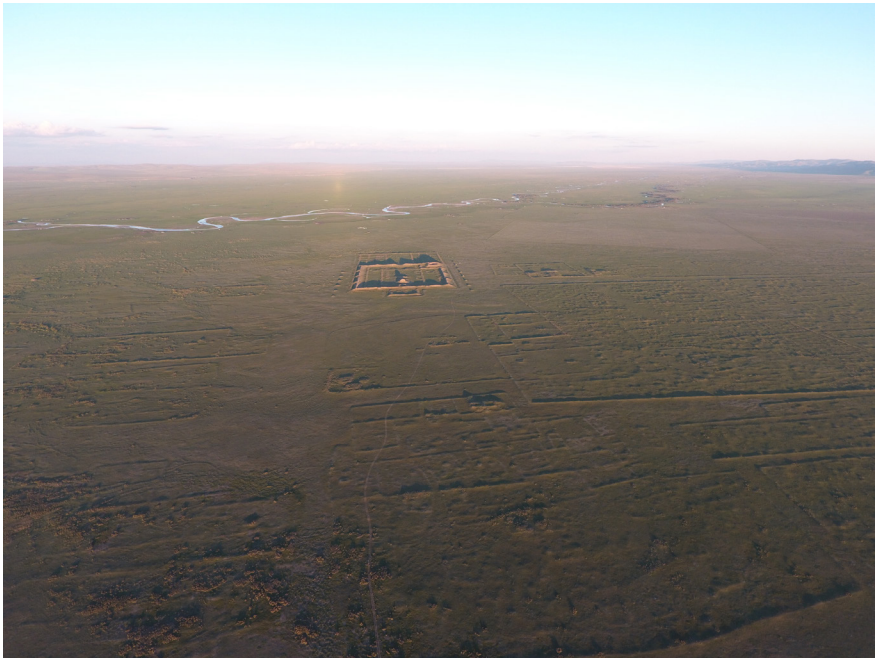

Fig. 03 The remains of the Uyghur capital of the 9th century, Karabalgasun, are perfectly visible until today in the landscape of the valley. 2018, photo by M. Riemer

A Brief Look into History

The first Khaghan ruler of the Uyghurs, Qutlugh Bilge Köl, united them under his rule in 744. He or his successor Moyanchou or Bayan Čor (r. 747–759) asserted his claim to power, as shortly thereafter he had a new capital, called Ordu Baliq, built in the sacred lands of the Orkhon (Golden 1992, 158). Today its remains are called Karabalgasun or Kharbalgas ("Black Ruins") (Fig. 3). In addition to the capital, a larger number of fortified settlements spanning northern Mongolia and southern Siberia were built during the Uyghur period, including the city of Bai-Balik founded shortly after Karabalgasun on the banks of the Selenga by command

of the same Moyanchou. Many of these settlement sites are frequently mentioned on stone stelae erected by order of the Uyghur Khaghans and may mostly be interpreted as administrative centers or seasonal military camps (Dähne 2017, 140–53). Only little of the history and development of Karabalgasun is known. It is certain that the city existed for only around 100 years and was destroyed in 840 during a raid by the Kyrgyz, with whom the Uyghurs frequently engaged in warfare. The Uyghurs abandoned their territories in the steppe and founded kingdoms in the Turpan Oasis area of Eastern Turkestan and in the Gansu region. While some information is known about Uyghur history from Chinese sources (Mackerras 1972), the Uyghur stone stelae inscriptions, scattered throughout Mongolia, mention the capital of Karabalgasun at best indirectly. The tales passed down from the Persian traveler Tamīm ibn Bahr al-Muttawwi'I provide some details on the Uyghur capital:

> *He reports that this is a great town, rich in agriculture and surrounded by rustāqs full of cultivation and villages lying close together. The town has twelve iron gates of huge size. The town is populous and thickly crowded and has markets and various trades (tijārāt). Among its population, the Zindīq religion prevails. [...] He says that from (a distance of) five farsakhs before he arrived in the town (of the khaqan) he caught sight of a tent belonging to the king, (made) of gold. (It stands) on the flat top (saṭh) of his castle and can hold (tasa') 100 men*
> (Minorsky 1948, 283).

While some parts of the report seem topical and cannot be proven by the archaeological remains, such as the twelve iron gates, the distinctive feature of the golden tent is also mentioned in the annals of the Chinese Tang-Dynasty (Tángshū) in the chapter on the Kirghiz (Minorsky 1948, 295; Mackerras 1972, 153–154). Further information about the town and its history can be gathered from the Chinese annals. The importance of Uyghur support for the Tang emperors is

illustrated by the ability of successive Uyghur rulers to secure marriage alliances with the Chinese ruling dynasty. The dynastic history of the Tang recounts an embassy that accompanied a Chinese princess to the Uyghurs in 821:

> *When we got to the barbarian court, we selected an auspicious day to give the princess her appointment as Uighur qatun. The qaġan first ascended his tower and sat facing the east. […] she mounted a sedan chair with a curved screen. Nine ministers carried the chair to the right around the court nine times. When she got down from the chair, she ascended the tower and sat with the qaġan facing east. […] The qaġan made generous presents to the ambassadors* (Mackerras 1972, 118).

Both accounts give the impression of an imperial residence that was not only a place of trade and craft production, but also a center of diplomatic gatherings and displays of power by rituals like a royal marriage. The "castle" or "tower" seems to have been an outstanding feature of the site. The Chinese Tángshū also gives some details on the end of the Uyghur Empire and its capital:

> *Before long, the great chief Chü-lu Mo-ho, together with the Kirghiz, brought together 100,000 cavalry and attacked the Uighur fortresses, killed the qaġan, executed Chüeh-lo-wu and set fire to their court. All tribes were scattered* (Mackerras 1972, 124).

Another impressive testimony of the thriving cultural exchange between different people and the close relations between Uyghurs, Chinese and Sogdians in the town is the famous trilingual inscription stele of Karabalgasun (Fig. 4). It praised the achievements of the eighth Uyghur Khaghan Ay Tängridä Qut Bulmish Alp Bilge Khagan and his predecessors and the conversion of the Uyghurs to Manicheism. The text was carved in Chinese, Sogdian and Turkic runic script (Yoshida 2010).

Fig. 04 The trilingual inscription stele of Karabalgasun praised the achievements of the eight' Uyghur Khaghan and his predecessors and also the conversion of the Uyghurs to Manicheism. The text was carved in Chinese, Sogdian and Turkic runic script. 2014, photo by H. Wittersheim

The Archaeology of Karabalgasun

The remains of Karabalgasun are clearly visible in the Mongolian steppe landscape. The Mongolian-German Orkhon Expedition was founded in 2007 to further the investigation of the Orkhon Valleys cultural landscape and to answer questions about the foundation and emergence of nomadic cities more comprehensively. Its partners, the Mongolian Academy of Science and the Commission for the Archaeology of Non-European Cultures at the German Archaeological Institute, and the National University of Mongolia (which officially joined the Expedition in 2014), are actively investigating the city and its surrounding area today.[4]

4 The Gerda Henkel Foundation has kindly provided many years of financial support for the project.

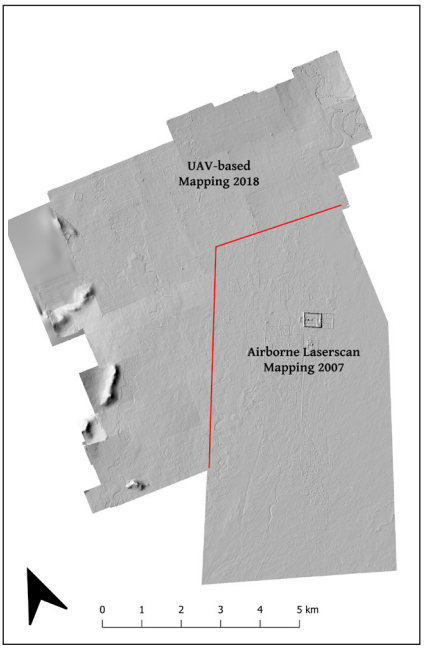

Fig. 05 The Digital Elevation Model of Karabalgasun was partially generated from Airborne Laserscan Data (Arctron GmbH) and partially from photogrammetric data (HTW Dresden). By visualizing the slight undulations of the terrain, the structure of the whole city becomes visible again.

A significant basis for the work is a Digital Elevation Model of the cities' remains derived from airborne laser scanning data gathered in 2007 (Hüttel 2010, 282-87). This was extended to the north and west in 2018 and 2019 with the help of UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or Multicopters) and Structure-from-Motion image processing with the support of the HTW Dresden (University of Applied Sciences) (Block-Berlitz et al., 2021). The plan illustrates the layout of the city in detail (Fig. 5; Franken et al. 2020). The terrain retains numerous visible remains of the city and the archaeological opportunities for exploring it are almost perfect. As with many sites in Mongolia, the sparse vegetation and extensive land-use by nomad herders have minimized the impact of later human activity on the site.

The first modern-era investigations of Karabalgasun took place at the beginning of the 19th century and, due to physical proximity—the ruins of both cities are a mere 30 kilometers apart—were initially connected with the search for the old Mongolian capital of Karakorum. Research expeditions to the borders of the Qing Empire and Mongolia and therefore also to the Mongolian Orkhon Valley were

undertaken primarily in the second half of the 19th century and usually took a holistic scientific approach. In 1873, the Russian I. Paderin was the first to describe the high-walled and still visible area of the city (Paderin 1873). Twenty years later, after N. Yadrincev had successfully surveyed and drew attention to the archaeological remains in the Orkhon Valley (Jadrincev 1889), an expedition directed by W. Radloff completed the first precise description and city map, which he published in 1892 in his *Atlas der Alterthümer der Mongolei* (Radloff 1892). During the 20th century, the expeditions of Kotwicz in 1912, D. Bukinič in 1933/34, S. Kiselev and Kh. Perlee in 1949 dug test trenches on the site but published only cursory reports (Kiselev 1957, 93-95; Perlee 1961, 49-51, Dähne and Erdenebat 2012, 247). In 1976 and 1979 part of the site was surveyed by Ju. Khudyakov (Khudjakov 1982).

The aim of the current projects by the Mongolian-German Orkhon Expedition is to investigate the construction and structure of the two nomadic cities of Karabalgasun and Karakorum, their economic significance, the construction techniques used and their integration into the natural and cultural landscape of the Orkhon Valley and its environs. To date, there have been few investigations of the archaeology of the early Uyghurs, thus there are limited opportunities to draw parallels and the project must be firmly set in the realms of fundamental research and data acquisition.

The archaeological investigations by the Mongolian-German Orkhon Expedition have so far focused on three topics regarding the city: 1) the imperial complex, its layout, architecture and purpose; 2) the building complex around the trilingual inscription stele; and 3) the general layout of the city as a whole and representative sample of structures within it to gain insights into the economic, ethnic, demographic and symbolic structure of the city.

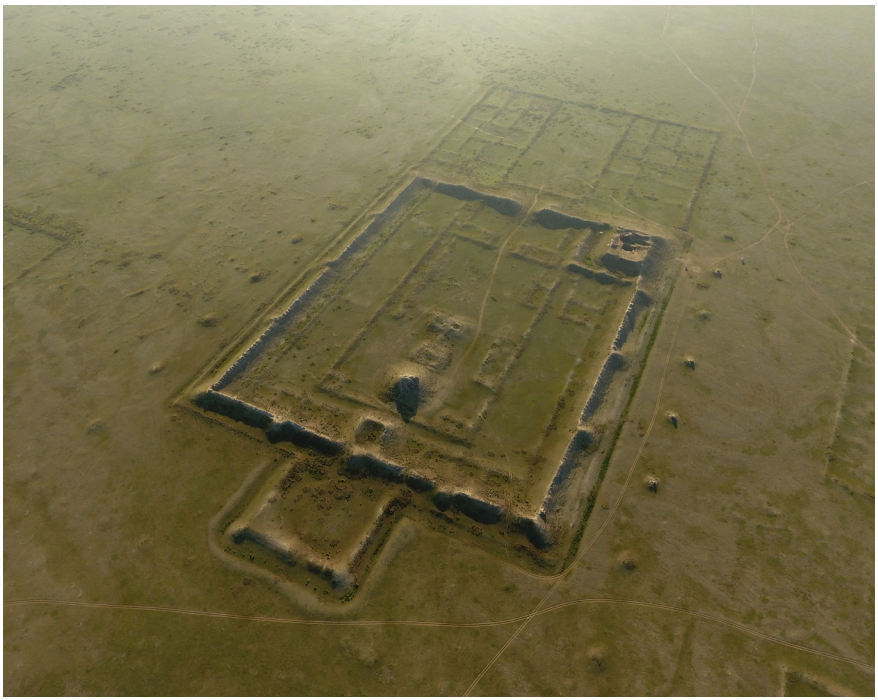

Fig. 06 The imperial complex is situated in the centre of Karabalgasun. The citadel lies at the south-eastern corner of the enclosing wall. Excavation have shown magnificent, prestigious architecture. 2018, photo by M. Riemer

The Imperial Complex of Karabalgasun

So far, it has been possible to gather the most comprehensive information on the function and construction of the central areas of what is called the imperial complex, a large walled enclosure at the centre of the city, containing major buildings and a citadel (Fig. 6). The inside of this imperial complex is primarily characterized by two raised buildings. One is a large structure resembling a stupa in the western half of the encircling wall and the other is the citadel in the south-eastern corner.

While the investigations at the stupa are not yet finished, two buildings immediately to the east have been explored more closely. Between 2009 and 2011, excavations revealed that these were two rammed-earth podiums with square buildings, which could possibly have been used as Manichaean places of worship.

The evidence suggests that they may have been a central sanctuary of the Uyghur state. One example of this is the portico of the western building. It featured nine column-bases with lotus flower-decoration in the style of contemporary Chinese architecture (Fig. 7). However, the number of nine columns neglects the Chinese column order. This may have been a deliberate choice by the Uyghur builders, to signify the nine tribes of the Uyghur confederation as pillars of the state (Dähne 2017, 129–31). The significance of the number nine is also supported by the account of the Tang embassy to the Uyghur court cited above, where the ministers circled around the royal court nine times, carrying the Chinese princess on a sedan chair.[5] Dähne (2017, 130) related the architectural remains found here to the architecture of contemporary Central Asian Buddhist temples with ambulatory, such as the temple of Ak-Bešim.

Fig. 07 The building in front of the "Stupa", may have been a Manichaean place of worship. The image shows the foundation of the main portico with its lotus-shaped column-bases. 2011, photo by B. Dähne

5 Interestingly the number nine is a highly venerated number also in the Mongolian tradition and appears prominently in Mongol Buddhism, Shamanism, traditional law, popular piety and epic literature (Shukowskaja 1996, 130–34). See also the sacrificial deposits of the "nine treasures" in the section on the archaeology of Karakorum below.

The citadel was extensively investigated between 2013 and 2018. The man-made podium pile with an area of 60 × 70 meters at the top still soars about twelve meters above the surroundings (Fig. 6, 14). The citadel was accessible from both the west and north through two gateway constructions. The northern access turned out to be significantly larger and more elaborate. It likely served as the main entrance. In the southeast corner there was a tower-like building with a footprint of around 20 × 20 meters. Walls made of rammed earth and wood subdivided the western half of this building. Three rows of column bases supported the columns of a prestigious hall in the eastern half. Outside there was an open and paved courtyard flanked along its east, north, and south by narrow buildings of lightweight construction, presumably open ambulatories under single-pitch roofs (Fig. 8). At the western side of the citadel was a prestigious building, presumably in the style of a Chinese temple hall (Fig. 14). The configuration of buildings on the citadel can be hypothetically reconstructed as a courtyard, that was surrounded by porticos on all four sides, resembling the Sogdian four-Ivan palace with porticos, which ultimately was developed from Persian and Graeco-Bactrian influences (Arden-Wong 2021, 107; Lurye 2016, 18).

A large circular pit was discovered in front of the western building in the courtyard. During the time-consuming excavation of the 15-meter-deep structure, it turned out to be an excellently preserved well with a hexagonal stone casing in its lower parts (Fig. 9). Artefacts of exceptional quality were preserved here. This includes a bronze bell (Fig. 10), fragments of jade books (Fig. 11), a gold-plated iron padlock, lacquered wooden poles (Fig. 12), and other wood-carvings, finely worked stone bases and terracotta animal masks (Fig. 13). The animal masks and the stone bases are witnesses of Chinese building decoration and construction methods. The bronze bell most likely belonged to the roof as well and was hung from a corner, as can still be seen at Chinese-style temples today. Interestingly, the buildings of the citadel used Chinese principles of roof construction and decoration while the layout of the complex resembles Central Asian citadels and palace architecture. This mix of styles and concepts seems characteristic for urban sites in the steppes. Another striking example is the great Buddhist sanctuary at

Fig. 08 On top of the citadel, a prestigious courtyard and several buildings, that formed a palace compound have been unearthed. The image shows a view into the courtyard during excavation, with remains of the pavement and the enclosing wall visible. 2014, photo by M. Riemer

Fig. 09 In the courtyard of the citadel, a well was discovered. It supplied the citadel with fresh water. The image shows a view into the lower parts of the well with visible scoop vessels at the bottom, 2018, photo by H. Rohland

Fig. 10 The well contained a lot of artefacts, which presumably fell in there during the destruction of the building. The bronze bell with the Chinese inscription: '8-fold happiness and 6-fold virtues may reach the 10 heavens' possibly once adorned the corner of the roof of a building on the citadel. 2018, photo by M. Riemer

Fig. 11 So-called Jade books were used for imperial decrees and religious texts and almost exclusively reserved for the imperial court of the Middle Kingdom. The presence of many fragments of such inscriptions on the citadel of Karabalgasun testifies to the close diplomatic and political ties between the Uyghurs and Tang China. 2018, photo by M. Riemer

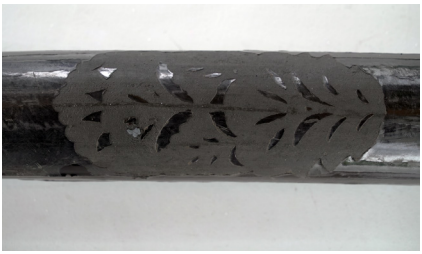

Fig. 12 A floral design was carved into the surface of this black lacquered wooden pole. The object might have served as a pole for a tent or baldachin and was conserved excellently in the water-logged environment in the well. 2018, photo by M. Riemer

Fig. 13 These apotrophic animal masks most likely belonged to the decoration of the roofs and where meant to keep evils away from the respective building. Similar pieces are well known from Tang period imperial architecture. 2014, by H. Wittersheim

Mongol Karakorum, where a Tibetan-Buddhist ground plan was blended with a Chinese-style construction (Franken 2015, 140; see below). The fragments of jade books are special objects, a type of highest-ranking imperial decree, which can be linked to the Chinese imperial court. They testify to the close diplomatic relationships between the two polities (Arden-Wong 2011, 83–85).

The wooden carvings, one of them portraying a wolf, and the lacquered poles, maybe belonging to some kind of tent or baldachin, can be seen as the rare evidence of the material culture of the nomadic elite. These artefacts reinforce the exceptional significance of the imperial complex and the citadel and justify its identification as a prestigious centre of the Uyghur Khaganate (Franken et al. 2018, 2017).

The Layout of Karabalgasun

The remains of the city spread out over 44 square kilometres to the north, south and west of the imperial complex. The built-up area to the north seems to have been characterized by rows of walled enclosures and only sparse remains of buildings, stretching almost to the damp and marshy lowlands of the Orkhon River. Most likely, some of the structures have already been washed away by the river. The development to the south of the imperial complex seems more diverse in its appearance. As a central axis, there is a 200-meter-wide main street that extends at least five kilometres to the south. There are traces of construction along both sides of this axis. The highest building density can be identified inside a wall-enclosed area immediately to the southwest of the imperial complex. The roads and buildings inside are roughly aligned to the north-south orientation of the outer walls. A gateway (Renners and Franken 2017) leads from the main street into the quarter where a large, elongated plaza stretched to the west, which may have served as a marketplace or place of assembly. A survey on foot yielded large quantities of pottery and three smoothing irons, which may have been used to process silk. This, together with the higher building density and the proximity to the imperial complex suggest a permanent settlement of craftsmen and other experts in service of the Uyghur court.

To the east of this area, on the opposite side of the main street, there is a distinctive walled enclosure in the most eastern row of buildings. It contained a central building consisting of a raised podium accessed by ramps. The beforementioned trilingual inscription stele was set up in front of this structure. Because of the findings in the area around the central building, it can be interpreted as a Manichaean sacral complex (Dähne 2017, 65–68).

Investigations of the site with remote sensing technologies, including satellite imagery and a UAV photogrammetric survey of the surface have provided more comprehensive data on the layout of the city (Block Berlitz et al. 2021). The whole built-up area of the site has been covered by a high-resolution digital terrain model, making it possible to draw conclusions on the structure of the city (Franken et al. 2020, 268–271). Looking at the plan of the site, it becomes clear that the main organizational scheme is an arrangement of several rows of buildings, with the largest and most prominent in the eastern row. The other buildings are placed behind and to the sides of the imperial complex, leaving the space to the east completely untouched (Fig. 15).

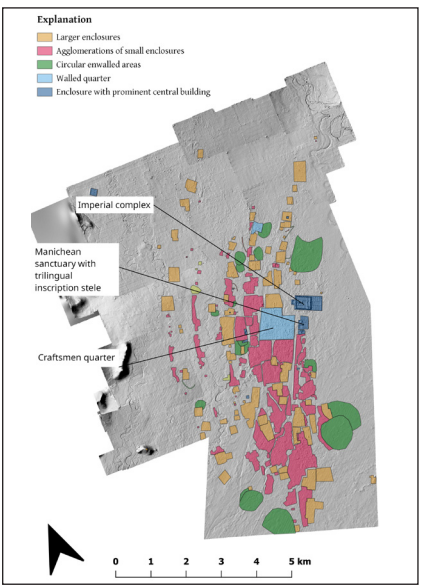

Fig. 15 A preliminary analysis of the Digital Terrain Model of Karabalgasun shows the layout as a crescent centred at the imperial complex. The spatial layout resembles a nomad encampment, as it is known from written reports. By H. Rohland

The structures are arranged around the imperial complex in the form of an arc. The imperial complex can therefore no longer be said to be located at the northern corner of the city. On the contrary, it is right in the centre of the city's sharply delineated eastern border.

Notions of Karabalgasun following mainly Chinese (Arden-Wong 2012, 37f) or Sogdian (Dähne 2017, 158) principles of city planning cannot be upheld. Instead, it follows a genuine nomadic pattern, following the tradition of a nomad encampment as it is described in William of Rubruck's Journey to the Mongols (1253–1255):

> *A court (curia) is orda in their language, and it means "middle," for it is always in the middle of the people, with the exception, however, that no one places himself right to the south, for in that direction the doors of the court open. But to the right and the left they may spread out as they wish, according to the lay of the land, so long as they do not bring the line of tents down right before or behind the court* (Rubruck 1967, 122).

From at least the time of the Mongolian empire until today, the south has been the preferred direction for the orientation of gers, buildings, temples and burials in Mongolia. In the days of the ancient Uyghurs, it has been the east or south-east, as can be seen in the example of the elite burials around Karabalgasun (Očir et. al. 2019, 52). In the light of these thoughts, Karabalgasun seems to be an urban site that is mainly organized on the native principles of the steppe people, while Chinese and Sogdian technologies of planning, building, craft and writing were applied where needed or deemed appropriate (Franken et al. 2020, 270–271).

Another interesting element of the topography of Karabalgasun are the burial sites. In the surrounding mountains, where valleys slope down towards the east, there are smaller cemeteries or burial sites with various features clearly attributable to the Uyghur period. As observed in the *Olon Dov/Khotont Soum* cemetery, these were mostly square burials containing chambers with walls of fired and unfired bricks and roof tiles (Erdenebat, 2016). Some of the walls feature painted plaster

and are comparable in their building techniques and structures to the buildings of the city. More elaborate beehive-like tombs from the same period can be found in a slightly south-facing side valley. Several larger graves of the Uyghur elite are situated there in the Valley *Kulkhijn* am in the mountains south of Karabalgasun. The inside of one of these was painted with red lotus flowers on a white background. There are different types of tombs, which can feature round or rectangular, vaulted brick chambers (Odbaatar 2016, 222–29). One of the domed burial chambers had trumpet arches in the corners to facilitate the transition from the square chamber to the small dome (Očir 2015, 104, Plate 25). This technique is genuinely central Asian and may be attributed to Sogdian influence on architecture.

There are so far no known traces of a re-occupation of the site of Karabalgasun after its destruction in 840. However, Mongol era burials were repeatedly found during the excavations. From time to time, the deceased had been interred in the still upright ruins of the city's buildings. Together with remains of cremated animal bones and vessel deposits, this indicates that the site had still some significance after it was abandoned, maybe as a place of ancestral worship.

Karakorum – The Capital of the Mongol Empire?

One of the most outstanding monuments in the Orkhon Valley is the site often termed the "capital" of the medieval Mongol Empire, Karakorum. After a research history of more than 100 years, this site has been subject to intense archaeological study again since 2000. A cooperation agreement was established between the German Archaeological Institute, the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the University of Bonn in autumn 1998 on the initiative of Prof. Klaus Sagaster from the Institute for Mongolian Studies at the University of Bonn and in the presence of the presidents of both countries. Its objective was the archaeological investigation of the old Mongolian capital of Karakorum.[6] Only 30 km south from the ruins of the Uyghur metropolis, the Mongols had founded Karakorum, which became an important centre of their emerging empire. Almost 400 years after the perishing of

6 The research project of the Commission for the Archaeology of Non-European Cultures was sponsored by the German Research Foundation and the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

Karabalgasun and the Uyghur Empire, the Orkhon Valley again was the centre of a steppe polity.

Karakorum – The Written Accounts

According to the Karakorum inscription of 1346, Karakorum was founded in 1220 as the first capital of Genghis Khan's emerging Mongol Empire (Cleaves 1952, 29; on the history of Karakorum see Sagaster 1999; Barkmann 2002, 2010; Hüttel 2005, 2016; Èrdènèbat 2018). The Franciscan monk William of Rubruck travelled from Western Europe to Karakorum, crossing the whole Eurasian landmass, and spent several months in the city in 1254. He provided an exceptionally lively description of life in the Mongol Empire and its capital Karakorum in the middle of the 13th century. He reports on the Saracen Quarter and the Chinese Quarter, in which permanent houses had been built, describes the palace district, and mentions different places of worship. Numerous Buddhist temples, two mosques and a Christian church demonstrated the great religious and ethnic variety of life in the city. Other sources confirm his depiction of Karakorum as a melting pot of the most varied cultures with an international character and highlighted the tolerant behaviour of the Mongol Khans towards religion. While the city's origin myth describes its founding in 1220 under the reign of Genghis Khan, the construction of the permanent walled city reportedly took place in 1235 under the rule of his son Ögedei. The city was regarded as the capital of the Mongol Empire only until 1260, during this period serving as a centre of administration, as a place for treasure accumulation, the highest place for trials and a gathering point for people from the most varied communities in the empire and also for prisoners of war (Hüttel 2005).

Because of internal struggles within the empire, Karakorum lost its importance as imperial residence in 1260, but remained an administrative centre and of high symbolic significance. Its importance as a manufacturing city, in which numerous Chinese artisans worked in the north of the Mongol Empire, apparently increased in this period. During the 13th and 14th centuries, the city managed to repeatedly recover from military conflicts, lootings, and demolitions. After the expulsion of

the Mongol Yuan Dynasty from China in 1368, the sources fall increasingly silent on Karakorum. The site was once again briefly named as the capital in the 16th century, but it is not entirely clear if any kind of permanent settlement still existed here. The Erdene Zuu Monastery was constructed on its site in the second half of the 16th century, thus suggesting at least awareness of the former significance of the site (Barkmann 2010, 322f). Mongolian sources of the 19th century explicitly refer to the site as the place of the city of the Great Khans. (Galdan 2006, 183).

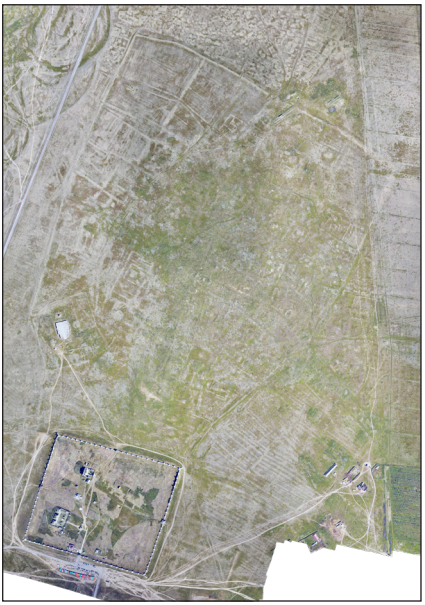

Fig. 16 The aerial view shows the ruins of Karakorum, the capital of the medieval Mongol empire. In the south, the enclosing wall of the monastery Erdene zuu is visible. by HTW Dresden

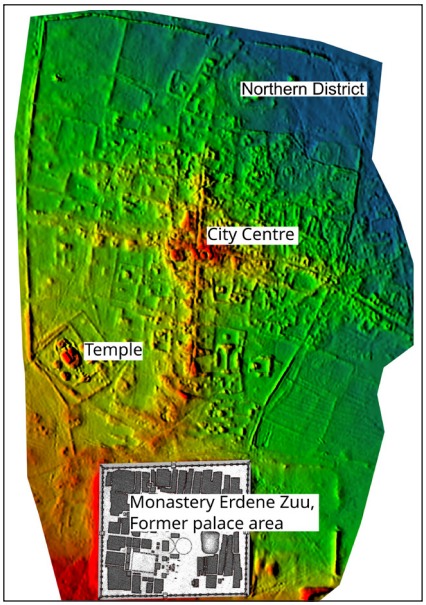

Fig. 17 In the Digital Elevation Model of Karakorum, it's layout with two main axes and a central crossroads is clearly visible. In the southwestern corner is the platform of the Great Hall, which is rotated against the main orientation of the site. by HTW Karlsruhe

The Archaeology of Karakorum

The monastery is still partly preserved today and is a major cultural and tourist attraction in Mongolia. The site of ancient Karakorum is situated to the north of the monastery's surrounding wall. Today, only inconspicous remains testify to the dynamic history of this important site of the Mongol Empire, which in its

heyday stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Only a trained eye can recognize the remains of a city hidden under the gentle undulations of the steppe landscape. Aerial imagery shows that the city was surrounded by an earthen wall with four gates. It enclosed an area of 1.2 square kilometres divided into quarters by a central crossroads (Fig. 16, 17). Initial excavations of the area were undertaken in the first half of the 20th century by D. Bukinič in 1933/34 (2007), S. Kiselev and Kh. Perlee in 1948/49 (Kiselev 1965) and N. Ser-Odčav, D. Bayar and V.E. Boitov in 1976–1985 (Bajar 1999, Vojtov 1990). While Bukinič excavated numerous small test sections across the entire area of the city, Kiselev carried out large-scale investigations at the eastern gate, in the city centre and its southwest corner. These two excavations were used as a basis for the start of work by the Mongolian-German Expedition.

The city's remains were documented in a digital elevation model. A team from the University of Applied Sciences Karlsruhe painstakingly measured 80,000 elevation points in the field. The resulting plan clearly shows the central crossroads and the roads running from it to the four gates in the surrounding walls (Fig. 17). The city centre was densely built-up, while the building density becomes more and more sparsely towards the outer walls. The outer wall has an irregular shape, vaguely approximating a tapered rectangle. To the south the walled area is completed by the still standing northern wall of Erdene Zuu monastery's rectangular enclosure. To the east and north, traces of densely built-up areas show that some of the city life took place outside its walls. The structures north of the wall were not part of the surface survey but can be clearly seen on satellite and aerial imagery. The Mongolian expedition in the 1970s excavated some Muslim-rite burials here (Vojtov 1990, 128–29). More recent investigations making use of geomagnetic, geodetic and archaeological survey methods have yielded a much more detailed mapping of the site, now also including the surroundings outside the walls.

A Chinese model of city planning has been proposed as the underlying pattern for the layout (Steinhardt 1999, 150) but this interpretation is superseded by newer archaeological findings. In the light of the results of the excavations in recent decades, we prefer an interpretation more grounded in the Mongol nomadic

organization of space. This will be further elaborated after a brief overview of the archaeological investigations of the last 20 years in Karakorum.

From 2000 to 2005, the Institute for Pre-Historical and Early Historical Archaeology at the University of Bonn dealt chiefly with the investigation of a Chinese artisan quarter to the south of the central crossroads (Pohl 2009). They found numerous indications of the internal divisions of the city and the significance of trade and crafts.

Fig. 18 From 2000 to 2005, the Great Hall (top right) was under intense archaeological study. Close to the building, an array of four kilns where used to produce building materials on site (lower left). 2000, photo by C. Franken

The Great Hall – A Central Sanctuary of the Mongolian Empire

At the same time, the Commission for the Archaeology of Non-European Cultures (KAAK) at the German Archaeological Institute re-investigated and continued Kiselev's excavations in the southwest area of the city (Fig. 18). A building with

a square ground plan on a man-made raised platform was excavated here. The building stood out from the rest of the city not only by its size, but also by its orientation, which deviated from the main axes of the roads. Instead, the four corners of the buildings pointed towards the cardinal directions. Foundation deposits in the lower layers of the podium consisted of pottery jars filled with millet and items known as the "nine treasures," consisting of objects made of gold, silver, coral, pearls, turquoise, lapis lazuli, shells, copper and steel. They were supposed to bring luck, blessings and health to the building and to its visitors (Franken et al. 2017, 401–5). On top of the podium, granite columns in an eight-by-eight arrangement divided the inside of the hall and supported the wooden construction of a skeleton structure in traditional Chinese-style timber-framing technique. The centre of the building was occupied by a stupa surrounded by four life-size Buddhas. The archaeological material (including thousands of Buddhist votive offerings known as *tsatsas*) and the iconographic program clearly indicate its sacred use as a Buddhist temple. The predominant theme of pictorial art in the temple—primarily in relief statuary—is the five cosmic Buddhas, or Five Tathagatas, with their typical companions, such as Avalokitesvara or Padmapani. Buddhist art from the Great Hall shows the coexistence of at least three artisan styles in both the relief statuary and in the murals, all representative of the "international style" of the 12th to 14th centuries. Indian-Nepalese and central Tibetan influences can be identified in the art of Karakorum. In 2000 the expedition excavated several kilns, which were located immediately beside the temple, similar to a European cathedral workshop. Models and decorative components showed that not only the bricks and roof tiles were manufactured in Karakorum itself, but so were the clay statues and votive stupas in the hall (Franken 2005).

In connection with his excavations, the Russian archaeologist Kiselev identified the podium with its column bases and the remains of a floor as a former palace (Kiselev 1965, 138). However, as shown in the context of the large-scale KAAK excavation 50 years later, his interpretation cannot be upheld. Countless Buddhist artefacts, the atypical orientation of the building complex, and the stone turtle formerly carrying a stone inscription stele in front of the building ultimately

lead to the conclusion that this is the site of the "Pavilion of the Rise of the Yuan" mentioned in the Karakorum inscription from 1346 and therefore relates to the Buddhist centre and sanctuary of the empire (Hüttel 2009; Franken 2015, 161-62). The inscription states, that the Pavilion was five-storied and almost 100 meters high (Cleaves 1952, 29). Doubts regarding the statics of such a high wooden construction in the harsh climatic environment, led to a more modes reconstruction of the site (Franken 2015, 140)(Fig. 19).

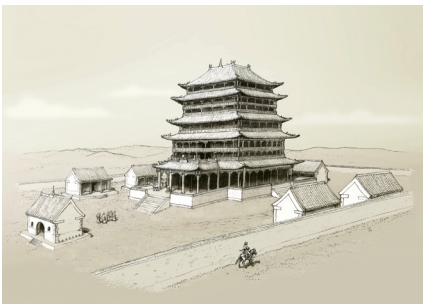

Fig. 19 The reconstruction drawing was made according to the archaeological record and the information given in the Karakorum inscription. It gives a lively impression, how the temple might have looked in its heyday.

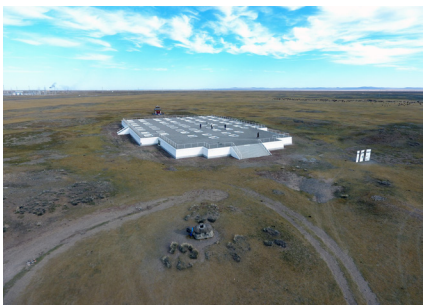

Fig. 20 The temple podium has been reconstructed and is available to visitors as an open-air museum. Information boards give insight into the results of the researches. The stone turtle in the front once bore the Karakorum inscription of 1346. 2020, photo by T. Batbayar

In the context of celebrations for the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Germany and Mongolia in 2014, the temple podium was re-erected in its original form based on archaeological evidence. This, along with the information boards on the history of the city, now offers a starting point for visitors to the ruins and allows them to appraise the former magnificence of the Great Hall (Fig. 20).

The identification of the Great Hall as a temple raised another interesting question again: Where was the palace situated? It was erected by Ögedei Khan and is mentioned independently in several written accounts. It must have been of considerable size, but so far, no immediate traces of it have been unearthed in Karakorum. An import trace lies under the wall around the Erdene Zuu Monastery, which was constructed in the 16th century. It has a very irregular foundation made up of granite building blocks but laid at alternating levels. Obviously, it was built

on top of an older rampart (Radlov 1892, 9). A total of eight excavation sections along this wall showed that the same area had already been encircled by a massive wall in the 13th century. This makes it reasonably likely that the palace city of the old capital was located immediately to the south of the city area (Hüttel 2007, 406–8). The location of the palace has important implications for the discussion of the role, that the Mongol elite had in the planning and construction of the city.

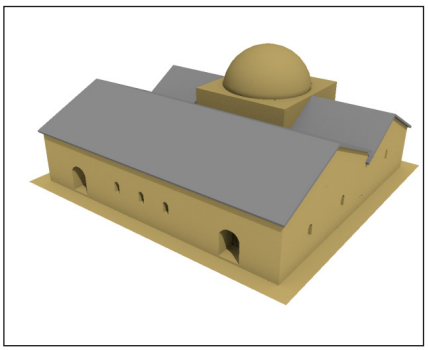

Fig. 21 The hypothetical reconstruction of the older phase of the central building in the northern district. The architecture allows the interpretation that the building was used as a place of worship by an eastern Christian community, by H. Rohland

Fig. 22 Some of the artefacts uncovered in the northern district support the interpretation as Christian church. This fragment belonged to a beaded cross, which was the usual form of the cross used in the eastern churches, by H. Wittersheim

A Christian Church in the Northern Quarter of Karakorum[7]

In the northern quarter of the walled city, an ensemble of structures with a central building and three smaller auxiliary buildings aroused particular interest. The building complex resembled the layout of a small temple in the Chinese tradition, but it was accessed from the west, with the main building situated in the east. This orientation is quite rare for Mongolian religious buildings but would have been a requirement for a Christian church. Although William of Rubruck mentioned a Nestorian church on the edges of the city in his descriptions, excavations between 2006 and 2009 could not prove this supposition beyond doubt (Hüttel 2012, 414-15). However, the excavation yielded some indicators. An older phase of the

7 The detailed study of the findings of the excavations in the northern district of Karakorum was made possible by a Grant of the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

central building resembled central Asian adaptions of elements of ecclesiastical architecture of the Eastern Church. Furthermore, some artefacts such as fragments of a possibly eastern Christian bronze cross (Fig. 22) and a presumable candelabras foot in Mediterranean or Western tradition make such an interpretation entirely possible (Rohland 2020, 414–15; Batbayar 2022, 117–18).

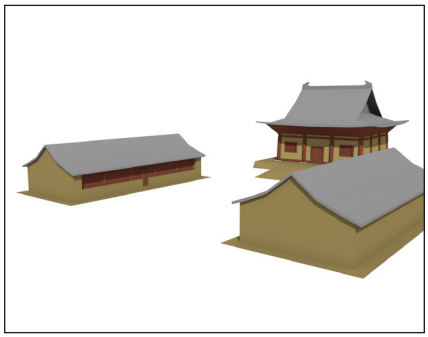

Fig. 23 The younger phase of the ensemble in the northern district resembled a typical Chinese style temple. However, the layout and the artefacts indicate, that it still served as a church after it had been rebuilt, by H. Rohland

The earlier phase of the building shows distinct Central Asian influences (Fig. 21). It was built in the first half of the 13th century, according to the radiocarbon dating of some timber elements in its foundations. The younger phase consisted of a newly built central building and two auxiliary buildings and a presumable gatehouse (Fig. 23). The building retained its orientation with the entrance in the west and the main building in the east, but the architecture underwent a complete change. Instead of Central Asian religious architecture, the building was now built in the fashion of a small Chinese temple. The rebuilding took place in the end of the 13th or the even the first half 14th century, according to radiocarbon dating. This change in architectural layout is a good example of how the Mongol urbanity was entangled with the urban and architectural traditions of people incorporated into the empire. During the first third of the 13th century, Mongol expansion was directed more towards Central Asia. In 1209 the Uyghurs acknowledged the supreme power of the Mongol Khan, 1219/1220 Khwarezm was subdued, while the northern Chinese Jin-Dynasty still withstood the Mongol onslaught. Consequently, Central Asian influences are more present in Karakorum at that time. Later in the 13th century,

first the Jin (1234) and then the Song (1279) dynasties fell, and China became an integral part of the empire. In 1260 Kublai Khan occupied the throne and established the Yuan dynasty. While struggling against his brother Ariq Böke, who was the champion of a more traditional, steppe-centred Mongol empire, Kublai embraced Chinese culture and administrative technology, which provided him the resources to win against his opponent. In the wake of these events, the Karakorum region lost its status as residence and political focus of the empire and became a—still important—provincial centre. The Chinese cultural influence became even stronger when the empire divided into warring factions, cutting connections between the Yuan Dynasty and the Central Asian Chagatai Khanate. In line with these developments, the building in the northern quarter was reconstructed in a Chinese manner, after it had been destroyed, maybe during a raid by one of the warring Mongol factions in the late 13th century. However, it possibly still served as a Christian church, since the Eastern Church was well established among the Mongols, Turkic and some Chinese inhabitants of the Yuan Empire at that time (Rohland 2020, 184–85).

Fig. 24 In 2009, a further Kiln district was uncovered near the Orkhon river. It served for the production of building materials and decoration for Karakorum. 2009, photo by M. Riemer

The excavation of a kiln and pottery workshop district on a small hill near the river, about three kilometres southwest from the gates of the city, on which about 14 kilns and several workplaces had been maintained for various functions, shows that the wider area of Karakorum was also surrounded by large manufacturing districts (Fig. 24). Architectural pottery such as bricks and roof tiles were produced here, while smaller ovens also produced glazed items and pottery figurines. On the west bank of the river, further kilns were excavated in the context of a project by the University of Bonn. This enabled a clear picture to be drawn in archaeological terms of a flourishing manufacturing city with large religious structures (Hüttel 2010, 293–96).

Discussion: Karakorum and Karabalgasun–Nomadic Capitals?

The social and ethnic composition of the cities' inhabitants and the proportion of Mongols among them cannot be precisely known. Clearly identifiable open spaces within the city walls have frequently been interpreted as yurt quarters, i.e., spaces for traditional Mongol dwellings. Whether or not this is correct is difficult to determine. Even today, the question of what significance this city had within the Mongol empire is highly interesting but can only be answered in a rudimentary way (see Sagaster 1999, Hüttel 2016). Another glance at the written record may help to shed light on this problem. It is clear from the written sources that Karakorum was not an administrative centre in the sense of a capital of a modern polity. Although there were administrative facilities, the centre of the empire was the traveling court of the Great Khan. It is striking that variations of the term "capital" are attributed to Karakorum only by chroniclers of sedentary cultures, e.g., Chinese, Iranians or Latin westerners. At the same time the *Secret History of the Mongols*—a source of genuine Mongolian origin—never mentions the building of temples, palaces or even a city at Karakorum, although it was certainly written to glorify the deeds of Genghis Khan and his son Ögedei—the city's founders. While the foundation and building of a prestigious city seems to be a central element for the representation of a ruler in the sedentary cultures, it remained an alien concept for the Mongol Great Khans. For the Mongols and their nomad retainers, the occupation of the holy

lands at the foothills of the Khangai Mountains, the Ötüken of the ancient Turkic royal ideology, was presumably much more important, as it established the claim to rule over the people in all directions (Allsen 1996, 124-28; Hüttel 2016, 73). The building of the city then manifested this claim towards the sedentary cultures in a language of power familiar to them—in the language of prestigious urban architecture (Rohland 2020, 201–2).

Genuine nomadic conceptions of spatial and thereby social order are reflected in the layout of the city. Since the palace seems to have been in the area of today's monastery Erdene Zuu, the layout of the city adheres to the scheme of the imperial camp described by Rubruck, cited above. The place of the ruler is in the south, while others had to gather behind and to the sides. The layout of the city thereby somewhat resembles those discussed in the case of Karabalgasun. The palace area is in the most prominent part of the city, in that case the south. In close proximity is the quarter where the courts servants live, craftsmen, traders, religious and administrative experts. This is the enwalled area, which Rubruck most likely identified as the city itself, given his western-European understanding of a town. However, the occupation of Karakorum stretched far beyond the walls (Bemman 2022, 165). Maybe this area is to be interpreted as an analogue to the craftsmen's quarter of Karabalgasun. As such, it would have been the mere part of the city, where foreigners in the service of the court lived permanently. This settlement was embedded in the itinerant court of the Great Khan, that would occupy the area in and around the palace and the walled city, when the Khan visited Karakorum twice a year.

Bemmann et al. (2022, 177) called for breaking away from the European cityscape as a model to understand nomad cities and tried to grasp the phenomenon of nomad urbanism with his concept of an "implanted city". This implies that the Mongol Great Khans had these cities built by decree and for political reasons and that "these cities remained foreign entities, the continued existence of which was unimportant for the pastoral nomads, as they were not dependent on them" (ibid., 176). This falls somewhat short of the claimed break-away from European perception of urbanism, as it is to narrowly focused on the buildings in and around

the walls. But these were indeed of less importance for the nomad elite and the pastoral nomads. The Karakorum region was important for the nomadic state and society mainly because of its sacred geography (Allsen 1996) and its role as part of the nomadic itinerary of the great khans (Boyle 1974). It is in this sense, that Karakorum and also Karabalgasun can be called a capital. The Karakorum region is the place of the itinerant court during summer as the centre of political power. The built-up sites, that we can grasp archaeologically, are additions to these ephemerous capitals, that provide services to the court and formed an interface for the symbolic communication of the nomadic elites with their settled subjects. Bemman and Reichert (2020, 18) stated, that "all these urban places or fixed settlements quickly declined after the overarching political system vanished". This seems to be true for the urbanism in the narrower sense of the fixed buildings, but does not account for the continued central role of the Karakorum region and the Orkhon Valley from the times of Xiongnu until the Mongol period and beyond. We have to consider a possible continuity of ephemerous camps and events of political, religious or military character, that are occasionally and temporarily supplemented by fixed settlements for trade, craft, religion and administration. This happened, when larger polities emerged from the steppes, that where able to channel the necessary resources and had an interest in such settlements, i.e. when the nomad elites controlled considerable tracts with a settled population or had close interaction with them. These settlements indeed vanished, when the preconditions weren't met anymore, but what apparently didn't cease was the importance of the heartland as "capital" of the nomads.

In Karakorum, as in the case of Karabalgasun, the architecture of sedentary subjects was used within the context of a nomad encampment made partially permanent, thereby incorporating the settled into the social order of the steppe society. This at the same time shows, that the nomadic elite was not dependent on their sedentary subjects to conceive and establish a city. They just had them integrate their sedentary settlement structures as a sub-unit into the sites of their itinerant royal camps.

Conclusion

The historical sources and archaeological findings both allow some insights into the processes that led to the establishment of permanent (capital) cities in the context of the medieval nomad empires of the Uyghurs and Mongols. Both cities exhibit traces of cosmopolitism in terms of multilingualism and a variety of different people and their architectural and cultural traditions. In the case of Karakorum, religious tolerance and diversity can be added, a trait which currently cannot be proven directly for Karabalgasun. Both cities where places for political gatherings and diplomacy, as is stated by the written record. What is puzzling in both cases, is the seeming underrepresentation of the nomad elite in their "capital cities." Excavations yielded traces of foreign architectures, Chinese, Sogdian and other craftsmen, as well as prestigious and religious buildings, but they failed to yield many traces of the daily lives of nomadic elite households. This can partially be explained by the written accounts. Rubruck (1929, XXX 1) and Chinese sources (Masuya 2013, 234–35) state that the Mongol Khans visited Karakorum only twice a year. Tamīm ibn Bahr related that he encountered the Khaghan of the Uyghurs encamped "in the neighborhood of his town" (Minorsky 1948, 284). In fact, the autochthonous writings of the nomadic people, such as the Uyghur inscriptions or the *Secret History of the Mongols*, never ever use a term like "capital city". Terms like "royal city", "city of the king", "residence", "capital" and the Chinese dū 都 (= capital) are attributed to Karabalgasun and Karakorum by the authors from sedentary people like the Chinese, Persians, and Latin Westerners (Rohland 2020, 54–55). This shows that these cities were regarded by these people as a focus of encounter with the nomad polities and as an important centre of political, diplomatic, and economic exchange. But this importance was mainly given for the encounter between nomadic and sedentary people. According to this notion, the cities would have been fixed places of communication and cultural mediation, where the sedentary people were spatially, symbolically and in real transactions incorporated into to the nomadic world order.

Fig. 25 The depiction of Ikh Khuree in 1912/1913 shows the layout of the city. It is clearly visible, that major temple and palace buildings had a free space south of them, adhering to ancient conventions of nomad urban planning. The image also demonstrates the ephemerous nature of most of the dwellings of the city, even after the city had been settled on the same site for more than 100 years. The housing consists mainly of Gers. Permanent and massive building structures are reserved for major temples, palaces, and the houses of the foreigners, such as Chinese and Russian merchants. The painting was drawn by the Mongolian artist Jugder. It is kept in the Bogd Khan Palace Museum, Ulaanbaatar.

The traces of these cities, that we can see or excavate today, are not representative of the whole phenomenon of nomadic urbanity. They do represent the foreign component, the traders, craftsmen, clerks and diplomats of the subdued sedentary cultures, while the nomad elite and population retained their lifestyle without turning to sedentism. Only when the royal encampment settled in and around the walls of the city, it really served as a capital. It is interesting in this context, to have a look at the youngest capital city of Mongolia: Ikh Khuree or Örgöö, which became todays Ulaanbaatar. If we look at the depiction of the city in 1912/1913 (Fig. 25), it consists mainly of the Gers of the Mongolian nomads, while permanent buildings are limited to the palaces and temples and the Chinese and Russian quarters. The city also still adhered to the principles of the nomadic city layout, we identified in Karabalgasun und Karakorum with the help of Rubrucks description: The central, most eminent temple-palace complex, the Shar Ordon ("Yellow Palace") of Züün Khuree features a large, empty space to the south, providing an unobstructed view to the sacred Mountain Bogd Uul to the south. The further palaces of the Bogd Khan are located south of the rivers, again unobstructed by any development

in front of them. The Gers and other parts of the city gather behind and to the sides of the palaces. Even in the socialist period, when the city was renamed to Ulaanbaatar and the parliament building was built just south of site of the former Shar Ordon, the Mongolian urban architects still adhered to these principles. The space south of the parliament and the great plaza was used as large park and kept largely free of buildings. Intriguingly, it was the very same guiding principle that determined Mongolian urban planning at least from the time of the Uyghurs until modern Ulaanbaatar. This principle remained unchanged under the varying foreign influences, be it Sogdian, Chinese or European/Russian. Only in the age of capitalism, the adherence to nomad urban planning loosened somewhat, with tower buildings now occupying the southern Sukhbaatar square and parts of the former park area. But still, until today, if one stands in front of the parliament and looks to the south, one can see the peaks of the Bogd Uul rising over the silhouette of Ulaanbaatar.

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