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Karabalgasun – Stadt der Nomaden: die archäologischen Ausgrabungen in der frühuigurischen Hauptstadt 2009–2011

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Archaeological Excavations in the Early-Uygur Capital Karabalgasun in 2009–2011 – Summary

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This monograph deals with the excavations of the Mongolian-German Orchon expedition (MONDOrEx) in the Uygur capital, Karabalgasun/Mongolia, carried out between 2009 and 2011. Beginning with the recent research history of Karabalgasun, as well as an historical introduction, the main focus of this work are the following chapters concerned with the description and evaluation of the excavation results, particularly regarding the archaeological evidence relevant to the structural and urban development of the city. Finally, the excavation results are set into context with the early settlement and urban history of Central Asia, particularly in Mongolia, southern Siberia and Buryatia. This monograph shall be considered as a standard reference on the capital of the first Uygur kaganate, which is barely known based on the primary sources. In continuation of the research history of Karabalgasun, this work offers a summary overview of recent, as well as, past research on Karabalgasun; also containing new maps. Due to the evaluation of recent archaeological excavations, a scientific publication on the history of the Uygur capital was possible for the first time. It shall serve as a seminal contribution to the research of the city within the late nomadic cultures of Central Asia.

Karabalgasun is particularly important in the settlement history of late nomadic Central Asia. Here, for the first time, the ambition of horse-mounted nomadic tribes seeking to claim power by establishing a capital is manifested. This also reveals obvious cultural changes from a purely pastoral nomadic lifestyle to a certain degree of sedentarism. However, this process of urbanization, which came in a late nomadic context for the Uygurs, was triggered by many individual factors, each playing a significant role. The relations between the Uygur, Chinese and Sogdians are already well known from sinological and turkological research and are only one aspect of this phenomenon. From its earliest stages in 2007, scientific research carried out in the Uygur capital Karabalgasun, has offered an excellent contribution to further understanding this process and provides a basis for continued research in the field.

Sources

There are only few historical sources on Ordu Balıq or Karabalgasun. These can generally be divided into Chinese chronicles, Uygur/Old Turkic inscriptions of stone stelae, as well as Arabic or Persian travel accounts. The most important inscription associated with the Uygur capital is the so called trilingual inscription from Karabalgasun. The inscription was erected in the centre of a double-walled complex and praises the military success of kagan Ai Tängridä (808–821) and his ancestors in Old Turkish, Sogdian and Chinese. It also hails the conversion of the

Uygurs to Manicheism. Since numerous historical events are evidenced only by this inscription, this find represents a significant historical document for the history of the first Uygur kaganate and Manicheism. From the beginning, the more recent research history of Karabalgasun was very closely associated with an interest in the Old Mongolian capital Karakorum, which, as known today, is situated only 35 km south of Karabalgasun. Due to the close proximity to Karakorum, when considering the vast Mongolian steppe, Ordu Balıq was long considered to be the Old Mongolian capital.

A first expedition directed by the Turkologist Wilhelm Radloff in 1891, drew scholarly attention to Karabalgasun. A Russian-Polish team then carried out first excavations in 1912, under the direction of Kotwicz and Maskov. The excavation documentation was just recently rediscovered in Polish archives. The Russian archaeologist Sergey Kiselev commenced extensive excavations at Karakorum in 1948/49. During his research on the Old Mongolian capital, he also opened some test pits at Karabalgasun. Unfortunately, the results of these excavations were not as comprehensively published as those at Karakorum. Since 1949, no scientific excavations at Karabalgasun have been conducted. Only survey activities by Khudjakov and Ceveendorž in 1976 and 1979 revealed a spectrum of Uygur ceramics within its urban environment.

City Complex

Previous to the excavations of the MONDOrEx, a LiDAR scan was conducted for the urban area of Karabalgasun in 2007, thus replacing the only previously existing plan from the late 19th century Radloff expedition. Based on the new measurements, it became evident that structures belonging to the city are dispersed over an area of approximately 32 km^2.

The analysis of the urban plan has shown that, with few exceptions, the orientation of the structures is set along a grid mirroring the usual Old Turkic and Uygur orientation to the east. The so called palace or temple district is the most pronounced area of the city, and already of great interest to travellers in the late 19th century. The rampart overlooking the surrounding steppe is still preserved to a height of 8 m and was built using the so called *hangtu* construction technique, which is typical for Central Asia. As long as the function of this district remains unclear, it will be continuously referred to as the so called palace or temple district and labelled as HB2 within the project. The ground plan resembles other ramparts of Central Asia from Uygur and Old Turkic times. However, these structures are only known as singular complexes without the context of surrounding settlement structures. At first glance, the location of the palace or temple district within the city is unusual. It is situated at the north-eastern end of the densely built area. Only a few singular structures could be identified in the north and none were documented in the east. Particularly regarding the eastern orientation of Uygur architecture, the completely open area east of the district (and its only eastern approach) is striking. Additionally, the course of the city's main road, the structures oriented along it, and the approach to the palace or temple district seems misplaced as well. A definitive conclusion as to the location of the district cannot be given: On the one hand, the areas east of the rampart are extremely moist due to the course of the river Orkhon running close-by, and on the other hand, the northern lands are characterized by disadvantageous marshlands as well. The other urban structures therefore spread to the west and particularly to the south. Another explanation is the question of the contemporaneity of the different districts of the city. For example, the location of the palace or temple district could have been a (cultural or administrative) centre in Old Turkic times, which the Uygur utilized as their first main site. With the formation of the Uygur kaganate in 744/745 and the increasing trade and tribute payments, this initially isolated district was then developed into the larger urban centre of Ordu Balıq.

Another distinct structure is situated only a few hundred meters south of the so called palace or temple district. This structure is a double-walled complex containing the fragments of the trilingual inscription at its centre. The immediate proximity to the district HB2 as well as the clear existence of main and auxiliary buildings as well as the association with the inscription stela was of great interest for the research activities of the MONDOrEx. This complex is referred to as HB1.

The numerous buildings located southwest of the palace or temple district are neither clearly distinguishable from each other, nor could larger quarters divided by streets or ramparts be observed. The only exception is a separately walled area of about 1000 m × 1000 m at the northern end of the city's main road. The area's entrance was in the east leading directly to the main road, which featured a wide interior open square with a length of about 500 m. This district of Karabalgasun was labelled HB3.

When analysing the urban plan of Karabalgasun, the non-existence of city walls is a striking feature. For the city's defence it was possibly sufficient to secure the central Orkhon valley with observation posts. The city is securely located between natural boundaries with the slopes of the Khanggaj Mountains to the west, the Orkhon River to the east, as well as the marshlands to the north, rendering a city wall obsolete. Additionally, nomadic cities or urban centres do not follow the same definition of »city«,

as those of the European Middle Ages or the Chinese Tang period.

Specifically regarding the city complex as a whole, contemporary cities of imperial China during the Tang dynasty are constructed according to a different plan. Furthermore, the main characteristic of Chinese cities, the city wall, is missing at Karabalgasun. Also, Chinese imperial architecture follows a strict scheme that can be best characterized by its symmetry and clear axial hierarchy between structures. This concept is not strictly followed at Karabalgasun. With the palatial city in the northern centre and the main road oriented along the main axis and directly leading to the main gate, Chinese urban arrangements stand in contrast to that of Karabalgasun, where one must continue down the main road to the palace or temple district and walk around it in order to reach its main gate. The southern structures at Karabalgasun more resemble urban centres in eastern Iran, e. g. Old-Panjakent, a Sogdian city from the first quarter of the 8th century, in modern-day Tadžikistan. Here, the similarities to Karabalgasun in terms of urban design are much more pronounced, as exemplified by the non-central main road and the high building density along it.

Excavation Results

HB1 – A Manichean Sacral Complex

The central building of this complex is directly associated with the rampart and the trilingual inscription in its centre. Its significance is demonstrated by its location along the central axis, as well as the overall architectural design and the building structure of the platform of rammed earth.

The building clearly shows two construction phases. The first phase is characterized by the construction of a platform that was enlarged by steps and ramps. The ground of the natural steppe was locally levelled in order to prepare the construction of the main platform. This inner platform and all other related parts of the building were built in hangtu (rammed earth) and occasionally also with adobe bricks. The higher platform had no additional structures. Interior painted plaster walls were discovered only on the north and west side, although they most likely existed on the south side as well. Various steps and ramps in front of the platform, which were integrated in the structure, also belong to this first phase giving the building further structure.

Access to the higher platform was gained by a ramp from the east as well as presumed steps from the west. It is unclear whether the northern and southern ramps belong to the first phase as these access points cannot be verified with certainty. They possibly only served as an elongation of the north-south axis of the main platform and as delimitation between the rear structures and the forecourt. In the first building phase the two eastern ramps lead via a horizontal intermediate level (B 1015) up to the higher platform. Additional features such as wooden sleepers and post-holes support the assumption of a pedestrian access. The interior courtyard is situated in the rear and was accessed by steps from the higher platform. Another building is situated immediately west of the courtyard, along the central axis of the complex. It is possible that both structures were directly associated with each other. The courtyard ends with a flanking wall in an east-west axis with the southern podium edge. Apart from two dislodged granite ashlars, only one in situ column base could be documented. The location of the main platform in the north-western corner may suggest more bases in the building's axis and corners. However, none could be located.

In the second phase, the surface of the main platform was enlarged in eastern direction by raising the front step of the podium B 1015 to the level of the higher platform (B 1003). Access was now gained via a steeper ramp. The reason for the reshaping and restructuring of the platform remains unclear. The central building was definitely constructed in the same phase as the entire double-walled complex. This is evidenced by the unquestionable orientation of the structures to each other. The parallel orientation of the structure's side walls with the outer walls of the complex HB1 as well as the location along the central axis suggests a contemporary date for the entire arrangement. However, the function of the main building remains unclear. The trilingual inscription was added some time after the foundation of the city and the construction of the double-walled complex and was evidently not dislodged. Turkological studies discussed the date of the inscription ranging between 815, 821 or 834, all three falling in the second half of Karabalgasun's existence. The inscription deals mostly with the adoption of Manichaeism in 762. Together with choosing a central position within the double-walled complex, a direct association to Manichaeism may be drawn and therefore suggesting a sacral function of the structure. The building's modifications in the second phase may be associated with the erection of the inscription and the conversion or possibly also renewal of the complex into a Manichean sanctuary.

Auxiliary buildings: Two rooms were discovered so far: One in the north-western corner of the building and in the eastern wall. Both rooms have hard layer of clay as a floor as well as interior wall plaster. Based on the spatial distance to each other and the not yet excavated area in between, the rooms do not appear to belong to each other. Also, the floor level of the rooms has a difference

of 35–40 cm. The lower courses of the walls are made using the *hangtu* technique. Collapsed fragments of adobe bricks suggest that higher wall courses were constructed of mud or adobe brick. All interior wall faces show a clear and, as far as could be observed, unpainted lime plaster running to the ground. The ground plan of both rooms could not be verified. An eastern access to the rooms, similar to those of the eastern entrance gates of the complex as well as the steps to the central building, could not be found.

An annex building is built south of the room with the researched eastern wall evidenced only by a southern, east-west running 1,20 m wide niche. The interior of the niche was covered in plaster. Concerning the interpretation, it is worthy to consult the LiDAR scan: In the area of the niche, a depression was identified that marked the southern delimitation of the interior room of the central building (B 0037). There is no depression in the farther southern part, which was probably made of a more solid foundation, possibly a platform of rammed earth. Only further excavation will show whether the entire north-western building complex is oriented to the south, due to the not yet evidenced eastern access and the southern platform enlargement. However, a larger depression between the central building and the north-western auxiliary building may have been an interior courtyard that was delimited by the northern ramp of the central building. Within the ensemble, the auxiliary building therefore may have been oriented to the south.

The debris layers between the two rooms contained material of higher building elements such as collapsed walls and parts of the roof.

The building can be dated by ceramic material. Fragments with typical Uygur or Old Turkic decorations were discovered in the debris layer B 0012 directly above the floor level B 0011. Results of ^{14}C analyses confirmed the dating to the Uygur period. The discovery of a burial suggests a subsequent secondary use of the building. A presumed Old Mongolian niche burial with a coffin made of planks was added subsequently in the western side of the north-western room, disturbing parts of the original wall and its plaster as well as the floor. Based on the funerary finds and the north-south orientation of the body, the burial was definitely not Uygur. Detailed osteological studies have not yet been conducted.

Rampart Section: The section that was laid through the northern outer wall of the double-walled complex HB1 did not reveal any clear results on the construction of the rampart. The excavated material does not suffice to offer a sound interpretation. The outer wall probably did not serve any direct defensive purposes. It seems more to be simply enclosing the complex for delimiting a quarter, as the wall's measurements of 3 m width and at least an height of 1,20 m may suggest. The few structures situated on higher ground within the complex were definitely visible from outside the complex. Numerous roof tile fragments within the interior debris layers suggest an, at least partial, roofing of the structures.

HB2 – Palace or Temple District

The two central hills within the so called palace or temple district belong to a building ensemble that, due to their axial orientation, enjoyed special significance. They are therefore considered to stand in context to each other and thus the excavation results of both hills are evaluated together.

The building on the western hill is a clay podium und is situated, seen from the eastern access point, behind the eastern hill delimiting the central courtyard in the west. The building had an approximately 5 m deep, and possibly open forecourt, carried by a row of wooden, and therefore no longer preserved, columns. The decoration of the associated granite bases shows direct links to Tang period architectural ornamentation. However, the Chinese column order was deliberately ignored since an uneven number of columns (*zhu*), and therefore an even number of yokes (*jian*), was chosen. A blue screed covered the area of the hall and the southern part was divided by orthogonally laid wooden beams. The transition to the interior room was partially divided by a crossing layer of rammed earth, which showed the bricked niches built of slimmer wooden beams. These could have served either as roof beams or possibly also as bases for statues. A similar construction can be found in the western part of the Buddhist ambulatory of the 7th century at Ak-Bežim in Kyrgystan. There, west of the columns and along the wall ashlars are small pedestals with niches for Buddha statues with the offertories set centrally in front of them. This analogy is particularly important concerning the presumed Manichean context of the building: In Manichean societies within contact zones with other religions, iconographical and architectural elements are often adapted. Particularly in connection with the stupa, situated west of the building along the main axis and having a sacral function within Buddhism, the ensemble could have held Manichean significance.

The entrance hall was probably the entrance to a building of 16 m length and 29 m width. A gallery of square fired mud brick plates in the north and west encloses this building. At the north, the gallery does not continue consistently, but is interrupted by a 3 m long clay block with indications of plaster on its sides. Test pits could not yet reveal evidence for a western entrance in the direction of the stupa. In fact, none of the other excavated areas allow a clear assumption concerning the function of the building. In addition, the walls were built by the *hang-*

tu technique and adobe brick, and particularly wood and clay was used a construction material. Depending on the function some of the thresholds were extended as walls by adding smaller wooden poles vertically to the beams and then smeared with clay as well. Simple clay-covered sleeper beams were partially built in front of walls of rammed earth as well. Influences from the Chinese Tang dynasty can be observed by the use of typical eaves-shaped tiles, the ornamentation of the column bases, as well as a granite dragonhead that decorated the southern side of the podium. However, with the deliberate renunciation of the Chinese column order it becomes clear that influences or architectural role models were not randomly chosen or were applied to specific architectural elements. The potentially most important part of the building's centre was considerably disturbed by earlier excavations. Under the surface of the platform is a wooden box-like construction embedded in sterile clay. ^{14}C-dates of the beams indicate that the wooden beams date one century prior to the foundation of Karabalgasun. However, the low number of probes has to be considered when evaluating these results. It is possible that this is a structure dating before the foundation of the Uygur kaganate (744), which was demolished in order to reuse the building material. If this is case, the structure on the western hill would represent the oldest part of the city, which existed already before the proclamation of the Uygur realm in 744/745 and could in fact belong to an early Uygur *ördü* that was not substantially built. In that context, the nine column bases, which perfectly follow the Uygur number symbolism, could represent the nine united Uygur tribes. On top of the old settlement and cult centre, a meeting place could have been created that represented Uygur unity to the outside world. In any case, the walled district was undoubtedly the administrative and/ or sacral centre of the Uygur kaganate.

It is known the numerology in Old Turkic or Uygur societies is based on the number three and multiples of it, especially the numbers 9 and 12 (e. g. 12 »Beings of Light«. As already suggested by the city's ground plan, Sogdian and Manichean influences have to be considered when analysing the architectural design. The nine column bases of the western hill of the so called palace or temple district suggest more a Manichean than a Buddhist context. Number symbolism may have played a role in the design of a geometric figure with which various small finds were decorated. For instance, a symbol was scratched into three clay plates after they were fired. It resembles a game board for Nine Men's Morris. In this case, it is a variation of Twelve Men's Morris where the corners of the concentric squares are also connected by lines. This variation, possibly deriving from a Manichean milieu, is played with twelve stones and was brought to Europe by Templars during the Crusades. The very same pattern was found carved in an astragalus bone of a sheep which could be used as a gaming piece.

The building on the eastern hill is yet sufficiently excavated in order to propose a reconstruction in terms of size and architectural design. Its foundation is also a platform of rammed earth and has a screed floor as well. Traces of parallel wooden thresholds indicated singular plots or rooms. In the eastern part of the settlement hill, an about 7 m × 8 m large pavement made of presumably reused building material was built. The dating is unclear. Apart from the pavement itself, no architectural construction elements such as walls, posts or column bases were identified. Also, the access to the building is not yet verified. Only future excavations will reveal more clear information.

Context

Archaeological research on settlements of late nomadic tribes in eastern Central Asia is just at the beginning. Since the early expeditions in the late 19th century, research activities have intensified only since the middle of the last century. For Mongolia, the Mongolian archaeologist Perlee initiated a systematization of ancient settlement monuments. Kyzlasov then conducted more detailed research on ramparts in the Tuva region along the rivers Yenisey and Khemčik. The results of the last comprehensive studies on the settlement history of late nomadic cultures in southern Siberia and Transbaikalia (Zabaikal'e) were published by Danilov in 2004. In most cases, these studies were not accompanied by archaeological excavations meaning that the chronological context was mostly established by surface finds or structural characteristics such as orientation or associated burial grounds. The mentioned settlements of the late nomadic periods, from the Xiongnu to the Uygurs, demonstrate the difficulties of classifying ancient settlement monuments without further research or archaeological excavations. Archaeological test trenches were particularly missing at ancient ramparts of presumably Uygur date. Therefore, it is not yet possible to give a comprehensive overview of Uygur settlements.

The first settlements and fortifications in a late nomadic context date to the Xiongnu period. Danilov characterizes heavily fortified settlements such as Ivolga as refuge forts. However, some of these settlements show elements of an early city or »proto-city« and their residents being associated with agriculture and metal processing. For the first time it may therefore be assumed that purely pastoral nomadism was actually an exception within the horse-mounted nomadic tribes. Minyaev points out that previously purely nomadic Central Asia

experienced a first phase of urbanization during the Xiongnu period, however mostly due to economic endeavours than for military or strategic reasons.

The main question currently concerning research on the settlement history of late nomadic tribes is the problem of continuity. This problem not only concerns the architecture and size of settlements, but, more importantly, settlement location. After the reign of the Xiongnu in Central Asia, the Hsien-pi and Jou-jan controlled the region. However, no settlements are known of either of these realms, although Chinese chronicles mention that the capital of the Jou-jan was fortified by two ramparts. Apart from that, these tribal confederations were not characterized by their evident relationship to a sedentary neighbouring state. Only the Old Turkic kaganate continued the policies of the Xiongnu by exploiting foreign states. They forced China to pay tributes and traded commodities via intercontinental trade routes to Byzantium and Arabia. This is the reason why Perlee assumed the existence of Old Turkish settlements and cities. However, clear evidence is still missing today.

Despite the missing fortified settlements, the literary evidence, the stelae inscriptions and the important memorial square at Chöšöö Cajdam bare witness to the significance of the Ötükan of the Orkhon valley. In comparison to previous late nomadic tribal confederations, the Uigarian realm, which succeeded the second Turkic kaganate, was characterized by its extended capital. The choice of locating it in the Ötükan follows the Old Turkic tradition as, for example, evidenced by the memorial square of Chöšöö Cajdam near Karabalgasun. In the vicinity of the capital there are also many other smaller rampart complexes which were presumably of military or administrative significance.

However, there are not enough examples in order to compare the various ramparts of the late nomadic period. Nevertheless, some conclusions may be drawn. Concerning the construction technique, there is evidence from archaeological excavations, for the application of the *hangtu* technique and the use of dry mud brick throughout all periods. This is due to the available resources and the technical knowledge in Central Asia. Particularly striking, however, is the foundation of urban centres such as Karabalgasun and Bay Balıq starting in Uygur times. It becomes apparent that not only are relatively small ramparts constructed, in which only (seasonal) camps could be set up, but also more extended centres for accommodating thousands of people. Different aspects must have played a significant part in this development, which distinguishes the Uyigur kaganate from previous late nomadic tribal confederations. The relationship between the Uygur kaganate and the Chinese court of the Tang dynasty is different. The Uygur kagans received a disproportionate amount of wealth in form of »gifts« for their military assistance fighting off a revolt against the Chinese imperial house. Otherwise they would have plundered Chinese cities. Even under these tribute payments, described as »trade treaties«, the Chinese costs were completely disproportionate to the services provided by the Uygurs. The commodities that were presented to the Uygur kagan as gifts, tributes or tax payments, were primarily luxury goods. Portions of these goods were traded along the Silk Road to Iran, Byzantium and Arabia and required places for storage as well as for selling. The Sogdians profited by the increasing significance of trade who served as consultants to the kagans and acted as supervisors on the intercontinental trade network, thus being influential personnel to the Uygur ruler. Through the Sogdians, the Uygurs came into contact with Manichaeism, which was adopted as the state religion and thus continued cultural change. Compared to previous late nomadic tribal confederations, the increased development of trade and the adoption of Manichaeism as a state-wide religion, may have triggered these cultural changes, which made a particular form of urbanization possible.

The difficulties for interpreting late nomadic ramparts or settlement structures archaeologically are undeniable. However, the number of archaeologically researched settlements has risen together with the gradual research carried out at Karabalgasun, particularly in the last years. Therefore, setting the Uygur capital within the wider settlement context may only be preliminary at this point, but nevertheless not without results.