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Imported Landscapes. The Foundation of the Old-Mongolian Capital Karakorum in the Mongol Empire, ca. A.D. 1220/1235

by *Anne Sklebitz*

This article is based on a talk held at a meeting of the working groups »Mobility and Migration« and »Zones of Interaction« in Málaga 2017. Included in the topic of this meeting – »Transported Landscapes and the Mobile Inventory of the New Arrivals« – are many of the key questions in the cluster as cultural contacts often go along with the transport of landscapes, material culture and ideas. In the case of the Old-Mongolian capital Karakorum this transport and the connecting of cultures are of a special kind. While

the Mongols expand their empire and found a state, they deliberately use and include other cultures. It is an import of landscapes, including people, material culture and language, that is made for reasons of power. This import of landscapes can be researched on the basis of extended historical as well as archaeological sources that complement each other. This article aims to provide an overview on the research potentials of Karakorum and to inspire further studies at other sites by showing the research possibilities.

The Foundation of Karakorum

Considered to be the most important historical source on the foundation of the Old-Mongolian capital Karakorum is the »Stele of the Rising Yuan«. Fragments of this stele have been found in and around Karakorum¹. Through its Sino-Mongol inscription the stele is dated to the year 1346/47². The key sentence regarding the Mongol reasons for founding Karakorum is translated as follows: »In establishing the capital at Ho-Lin [...] (Qorum) [that is Karakorum] the foundation for creating a state was set up.«³ The foundation of the Old-Mongolian capital is thus a political act for reasons of gaining, legitimizing and administering power⁴. Neither is the city naturally grown nor is there an urban planning tradition anchored in Mongol traditions. It is not a city for Mongols to live in but a city built by

imported craftsmen in order to administer the newly founded Mongol state. According to historical sources such as the above mentioned inscription, Karakorum is founded by Genghis Khan in the year 1220⁵. However, building activities at the site are neither reported nor traceable before 1235 according to current research⁶. During this time the Mongol Empire is already subdivided among the heirs of Genghis Khan. The succeeding Great Khan and thus heir of the Mongol throne is Ögedei Khan, the third son of Genghis. Judging from the current state of research Ögedei appears to be the actual builder of Karakorum. Whether or not the foundation of the city can be attributed to him remains a matter of debate. In any case historical reports about the Old-Mongolian capital confirm that it is not

1 See e. g. Franken 2012, 20 f. incl. further references on the stele.

2 See Cleaves 1952 for the translation of the inscription and its dating.

3 Cleaves 1952, 31.

4 Cf. Hüttel – Erdenebat 2009, 4 f.

5 See Cleaves 1952, 29.

6 Cf. Pohl et al. 2017. The author took wood samples for this study in 2010 at Erdene Zuu monastery on behalf of E. Pohl and K.-U. Heußner.

made for Mongols to live in as they are not mentioned as inhabitants of the city⁷. The same applies to the Mongol Khan who – despite the existence of a palace – is not a permanent inhabitant of Karakorum but resides at several camp sites in the vicinity of the city which are not fully researched yet⁸. Overall, the city is to be regarded

as a political construct. As the Mongol regime is considered to be »composed of a complex of Chinese, Jurchen, Khitan, Uighur, and Mongolian administrative techniques and social usages«⁹ it is of substantial interest what influences and cultural landscapes are traceable in the capital of this multifaceted society.

Architectural Features from Karakorum

In order to build Karakorum, Chinese craftsmen are said to have been imported to the region¹⁰. The question is: what kind of buildings did they erect and for whom to live in? Furthermore: Did the Mongols give way to the import of Chinese living habits into their capital? How could this be traceable in archaeological record? Luckily, the special position of Karakorum as the capital of a nomad nation without independent building traditions for solid buildings as well as the availability of historical and archaeological sources that complement each other offers very good research potentials on this topic.

First of all, it is noteworthy that the Mongols – in the case of Karakorum – did not import the Chinese concept of the traditional outline of a capital¹¹. The assumption that the outline of Karakorum corresponds to Chinese concepts is largely based on an outdated interpretation of a building complex that is today known as the »Great Hall«¹². Up until the excavation works at the beginning of the 21st century conducted by H. G. Hüttel from the German Archaeological Institute, this building complex has been interpreted as the palace area of Karakorum¹³. Nowadays it is known that this building complex actually is a Buddhist temple that was built in a Sino-Tibetan style¹⁴. The location of the palace mentioned in historical sources on Karakorum remains unknown. It is currently assumed to be underneath the area where the

monastery of Erdene Zuu stands today adjacent to the ruins of Karakorum city¹⁵.

The Great Hall is a good example of religious life in Karakorum. Through its architecture and the manifold Buddhist objects found inside it, Buddhists in Karakorum are archaeologically verifiable. It is, however, not illustrative of daily life in the city. Judging from historical sources two different quarters existed in Karakorum. These are a Muslim merchant quarter and a Chinese craftsmen quarter which the Franciscan Friar William of Rubruck reports on in his itinerary from the mid-13th century¹⁶. So far, no excavations have been conducted in parts of the city that could belong to the Muslim merchant quarter. However, parts of the area assumed to be the Chinese craftsmen quarter were excavated in the course of the Mongol-German Karakorum expedition (henceforth MDKE). This quarter is located in the centre of Karakorum. During summer campaigns in the years 2000–2005 excavations in this area were carried out by H. Roth and E. Pohl¹⁷. Regarding the topic of transported landscapes, the repeatedly documented feature of a heating system inside the excavated buildings is of special interest¹⁸. Such heating systems can be linked to the architecture of a *kang*. This is a bed-stove which is strongly connected to northern Chinese, i. e. Manchurian, living habits up until today¹⁹. As the *kang* is a heated platform that takes up large

7 Cf. Becker 2007, 38.

8 See on this matter e. g. Masuya 2013 or Shiraishi 2004.

9 Franke – Twitchett 2007, 362.

10 See Barkmann 2002, 9.

11 On the topic of traditional Chinese urban planning (incl. capitals) see e. g. Golany 2001 and Shatzman Steinhardt 1990.

12 See Franken 2012 on the topic of the Great Hall.

13 Cf. e. g. Shatzman Steinhardt 1990, 148 f. whose work needed to be based on these assumptions as this was the current state of

research back then. On the excavation works see e. g. Hüttel – Erdenebat 2009.

14 See Franken 2012, 211.

15 See Hüttel – Erdenebat 2009, 13 f.

16 See Leicht 2012, 169.

17 See esp. Bemann et al. 2010 on the preliminary results of these excavations.

18 These heating systems are i. a. depicted in Pohl 2010, 112 fig. 51.

19 See on the topic of the *kang*, its history and its relevance in northern Chinese living traditions Flitsch 2004.

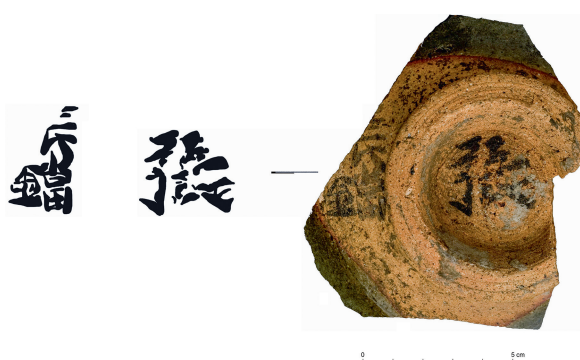
parts of the actual living area, its construction is related to concepts of space and room use²⁰. It can be considered as an imported landscape in the sense of being an architectural element that is to be associated with culturally specific living traditions. The precise constructions of the *kang* vary in Karakorum as they do in general²¹. On the basis of these features, studies on the use of space in

the Chinese craftsmen quarter of Karakorum appear promising. At the present state of research additional data on the topic is still to be published. Yet the import of architectural features from northern China to Karakorum is traceable already. This accounts for the *kang* as well as for the architecture of the Buddhist temple mentioned above.

Tracing Material Culture and Language in the Archaeological Data

In addition to the architectural features outlined above, information on the import of people, cultures, religion and language is traceable in some of the findings from Karakorum. As research on the city is currently work in progress, only some of these findings are highlighted in the present article. All of them derive from the excavations at the centre of Karakorum; i. e. from the so-called Chinese craftsmen quarter. This is to be kept in mind as the material culture in other parts of the city may vary. The largest group of findings in this area are glazed ceramics which constitute the basis of the author's PhD research²². In total, about 76% of these ceramics derive from production regions in modern-day northern China. Another 12% are produced in southern China. Only 1% can be considered to be of Central Asian origin. The provenance of the remaining 12% is unknown and might be local. Therefore, strong economic connections between northern China and Karakorum are traceable in the glazed ceramics. This, however, cannot be considered as a proof for cultural import or the import of people. Luckily, some specifics of the ceramics provide us with additional information on this issue, i. e. the written marks on some of the findings (fig. 1). The majority of these marks is documented on northern Chinese wares. They are written with black ink. As far as they are decipherable, most of them are written in Chinese. Still, non-Chinese characters

or signs occasionally appear²³. The meaning of these marks differs. Dates are written down on some of the ceramics, others are labeled with localities like »Qin's teahouse« or bear good wishes²⁴. Many are personal marks consisting of Chinese surnames like e. g. Jin or Zhang which are documented in the findings from the old Russian excavations as well as in the findings from the excavations of the MDKE²⁵. Comparable marks – partly even including the same surnames – are documented at contemporaneous sites in Inner Mongolia like e. g. Yanjialiang²⁶. Overall, one may consider the Chinese marks on the findings from Karakorum as a proof for Chinese people living inside the city as well as the use of Chinese as one of the common languages there.



1 Chinese mark on northern Chinese Jun ware. Written at the centre of the bottom is the Chinese surname »Zhang«

20 Cf. Qinghua Guo 2002, 33 f. or Flitsch 2004, 199.

21 See samples of the *kang* in general in Qinghua Guo 2002, 41 and samples from Karakorum in Pohl 2010.

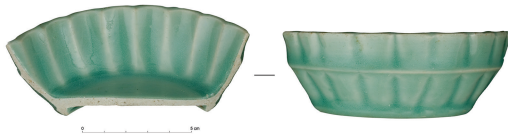
22 Sklebitz 2018.

23 Sklebitz 2018, plates 78–84.

24 See Nagel 2002 for a translation of the marks that are excavated in 2000–2001.

25 See Evtiukhova 1965, 191 for the findings from the Russian excavations. The findings from the MDKE-excavations are published in Sklebitz 2018.

26 See Ta La et al. 2010, colour plates 268–292.



2 Sugarcane-sectioned brush washer from southern China, excavated at Karakorum

Further indicators of the import of Chinese culture to Karakorum are i.a. special ceramic shapes and some motifs in their décor, e. g. the brush washers that are produced in southern China (fig. 2). According to Chinese terminology these are »sugarcane-sectioned brush washers«²⁷. Their shape clearly resembles washers that are made of split sugarcanes. Sugarcane is a tropical to subtropical plant that is indigenous to parts of China but not to Mongolia. Additionally, the shape of these vessels is very specific in its use. It serves as a brush washer and thus forms part of Chinese scholars' writing accoutrements. As such, these findings are indicators for the presence of Chinese officials in Karakorum. Whether these items could also be a part of the inventory of Chinese craftsmen currently needs to remain

a subject of research. Generally, they are more likely connected to officials and are found, e. g., in tombs of members of the feudal aristocracy of the Yuan dynasty²⁸.

Relating to décor especially the motifs on celadon that is produced in southern China can be connected to Chinese culture²⁹. One of these motifs is a pair of fish that is documented in Karakorum (fig. 3). According to Chinese traditions, a pair of fish is a symbol for good fortune and a successful wedding. Because of this, flat bowls like the one excavated are partly described as wedding bowls³⁰. Therefore, these findings are to be considered as another indicator for Chinese cultural habits in Karakorum.



3 Celadon bowl with a pair of fish imprinted on the inside, excavated at Karakorum

Future Prospects

The features and findings outlined above are only selected parts of the research in Karakorum. Currently several PhD projects on the excavations are in progress and will be published in the near future. All of them will provide us with further insights into the history of the city and enable continuative studies. On the basis of the so far available data, research on the import of people, living habits and traditions – i. e. the transport of a cultural landscape – appears promising. Furthermore, excavations in different parts of the city are promising in terms of a potentially different use of space among the different social groups living in Karakorum. It is yet unknown whether the archi-

tecture and/or material culture at e. g. the Muslim quarter differs from that in the Chinese quarter.

Overall, the shortly outlined features in the Chinese craftsmen quarter as well as the specifics on the glazed ceramics already demonstrate the high research potential of Karakorum. The site is a multicultural centre in medieval Asia where nomadic people plus sedentary people from Central Asia and China live together in a planned city that is a political construct. It is of high interest what aspects of living are imported together with the people and how the living together developed and may – or may not – have influenced architecture and material culture.

²⁷ Cf. Wang Qingzheng 2002, 90.

²⁸ See Beijing Institute of Cultural Relics 1986, 100 figs. 6. 10.

²⁹ See Sklebitz 2018, 93–95.

³⁰ See Pierson 2001, 19.

Summary

The foundation of Karakorum in the year 1220/1235 is generally associated with the foundation of the Mongol State as well as a claim to power. In the absence of an independent urban planning tradition in the nomadic Mongolian empire, structures and workers have to be imported. There is historical evidence for the existence of Chinese workers in Karakorum that correlates with archaeological data. In the so-called Chinese craftsmen quarter residential buildings with heating systems in Northern Chinese building-style are traceable. Relating to the material culture in this district, most of the ceramics are Chinese. In the case of Karakorum a systematic import of landscapes, incl. people, material culture and language, is detectable and can be discussed. The site itself proves to be full of research potentials in relation to studies of spatial use of different cultural groups living together in the same place. This article gives first insights into these subjects.

Zusammenfassung

Die Gründung der Alt-Mongolischen Hauptstadt Karakorum in der Zeit um 1220/1235 wird im Allgemeinen mit der mongolischen Staatsgründung sowie der Legitimierung von Herrschaftsansprüchen in Verbindung gebracht. Mangels einer eigenständigen Städtebau-Tradition im nomadischen Mongolischen Reich müssen hierfür Strukturen sowie Arbeiter importiert werden. Historische Dokumente sowie archäologische Funde und Befunde belegen u. a. die Anwesenheit von chinesischen Handwerkern in Karakorum. So sind z. B. im sogenannten chinesischen Handwerkerquartier feste, beheizbare Wohnbauten im nord-chinesischen Baustil nachgewiesen. In Bezug auf die materielle Kultur in diesem Viertel ist auch die Keramik stark chinesisch geprägt. Am Fallbeispiel Karakorum kann damit ein gezielter Import von Landschaften inkl. Personen, materieller Kultur und – über Bodenmarken auf einigen Keramiken – auch der Sprache nachgewiesen und diskutiert werden. Der Fundort an sich birgt große Forschungspotenziale in Bezug auf die Raumnutzung verschiedener kultureller Gruppen beim Zusammenleben an einem Ort, die laut historischen Quellen hier zusammengelebt haben. Der Artikel gibt eine erste Einsicht in diese Thematik anhand archäologischer Daten.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Fig. 1 A. Sklebitz, based on pictures from Nico Becker

Fig. 2 A. Sklebitz, based on pictures from Nico Becker

Fig. 3 A. Sklebitz, based on pictures from Nico Becker

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