

A Dozen Years of Central Asia: an archaeologist's blog

Heinrich Härke

Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, Institute for Prehistory, Early History and Medieval Archaeology,
Department of Medieval Archaeology, 72070 Tübingen, Germany

Email: heinrich.haerke@uni-tuebingen.de

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7160/KS.2022.180103>

Prof. Dr. Heinrich Härke (born 1949) taught archaeology at Queen's University Belfast, University of Reading (both UK) and Universität Tübingen (Germany). He now holds a professorship in Moscow (Center of Classical and Oriental Archaeology, Higher School of Economics University, Staraya Basmannaya ulitsa 21/4, Moscow 105066, Russian Federation); he is also Honorarprofessor at the Universität Tübingen and Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Reading.

Abstract

The paper provides, in a series of anecdotal observations and accounts, an impression of the main political and cultural conditions under which archaeology is being conducted in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) in the early years of the 21st century. The author uses almost exclusively the experience of his own work in the region since 2009. The observations made over the best part of a dozen years suggest an amalgam of factors influencing the work of archaeologists there, ranging from post-Soviet national and ethnic ideologies voluntarily adopted by some native practitioners, to quite open and complete control and even suppression by the authorities in parts of the region. The status and behaviour of foreign archaeologists is often ambiguous, with a degree of compliance with 'local conditions' usually required in order to do any work at all. The attraction of the tremendously rich archaeology of Central Asia, as well as hopes of contributing to changes for the better, often appear to outweigh individual concerns about collaboration with the local powers that be.

Keywords

Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, archaeology, politics of archaeology, Dzhankent.

By way of introduction

I have been a latecomer to Central Asia, both personally and scholarly. After a mere dozen years of visits to, and work in, this complex region I would not regard myself as a 'specialist' in the way that colleagues can who have worked there since their student days. But over the years I have made some observations on regional cultures and their contexts which may be of interest to some, if only for their perspective: that of a West European archaeologist.

Historians and archaeologists, when abroad, tend to stick to writing about their own respective fields of research – and thereby about the past, and much less often about the present which is surrounding them. This is understandable, but also regrettable because archaeological work is done in a contemporary context which influences, sometimes even shapes what is later presented as objective conclusions about a supposedly distant past.

For this reason, and in order to preserve the freshness and authenticity of my comments, I am sticking to the chronological sequence in which I wrote them down at the time. The dates are also important because of changes which happened over these years: changes in the wider context, in the administration of culture, and in my own perspective. Such changes or later developments are explained in footnotes, where necessary. Likewise, bibliographical references, internet links or additional comments on archaeological sites are relegated to footnotes in order to keep the flow of the text which has very deliberately not been structured like a conventional scholarly text.

While I am making some frank comments in places, I have refrained in several cases from giving the names of colleagues, friends and acquaintances in order to protect them and their ongoing work in Central Asia. The Kubatin case in Uzbekistan which is described below should be warning and explanation enough.

From Russia to Kazakhstan (2009)

Russia has become a difficult environment for archaeology – it is in the grip of The Crisis as much as western countries, if not more so.¹ The depressed state of the Russian property market and the general economic situation mean that there are fewer developments and building projects which, in turn, means less developer-funded archaeology. This is the negative consequence of the otherwise very progressive 10% rule (introduced under Stalin, and confirmed by new legislation a few years ago) according to which one tenth of the development costs of any project have to be spent on recording the archaeological, historical and ethnographic heritage of the place which is about to be destroyed. One well-known rescue archaeology unit run in a Russian form of public-private partnership had excavation contracts up to May 2009, and nothing for the rest of the year. Few regional units have fared better, though the central Rescue Excavation Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences is one that has. At the same time, the perilous state of the Russian government budget (caused by the

¹ This was written in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008 which more or less wiped out the emerging Russian middle class.

collapse of the price of oil) means not only fewer state-funded building projects with their own rescue funding, but also less money for research funds. Thus, archaeology will be badly affected by the announcement of the Russian Fund for Humanities that no new projects will be funded this year, and the state of affairs at the Fund for Basic Research is not much better, though interdisciplinary research applications may still get lucky.

So, what's the advice to the roaming archaeologist? "Go east, young man" (or old man, as the case may be). On arrival in Kazakhstan, in search of a new project, I am assured repeatedly that "There is no Crisis here", although the evidence offered for this confident statement, such as the observation that there are lots of new state building projects, including massively oversized schools in every village, fail to convince the skeptical visitor. More convincing is the existence of a class of newly rich Kazakhs, dubbed 'Kazanovas'. Crisis or not: there is considerable interest in international cooperation, and we (that is, myself and two Russian colleagues) are well received at the University of Kyzylorda (western Kazakhstan), and even granted a short audience with the Rektor (top executive of the university, like Rektor in Germany and Vice Chancellor in Britain). I am intrigued to learn from my Russian colleagues that there appears to be a conflict between the interests of such provincial institutions intent on building their research profile, and that of central institutions which would prefer archaeological sites of 'national interest' to be excavated by Kazakh institutions.

Kazakhstan is a pivotal point (if you can call a country the size of Western and Central Europe a 'point') in the Eurasian steppe belt, and this is reflected in the archaeological record. Some of the earliest evidence of the post-glacial colonization of Asia is found here; it is a centre of early horse domestication, with a proud tradition of horse-breeding up to the present day; there are outstandingly rich barrows of the Bronze and Iron Age steppe cultures, with one of them, the Gold Man of Issyk (of the Saka/Eastern Scythian culture)² immortalized in a monument in the centre of the former Kazakh capital, Almaty; the Silk Road ran the length of the country; and there are fortresses and planned towns of the first millennium AD with walls still rising up to 10 m from the flat steppe. One of these towns, Dzhankent (Fig. 1), which is the one we are eyeing for a collaborative project, was the reputed home of the Kazakh cultural hero, Korkyt Ata, who is believed to have invented, in the 10th century AD, the national musical instrument, the two-stringed lute (*kobyz*).³ This archaeological heritage is in danger

² An exceptionally rich grave of the Early Iron Age excavated in 1969 by K.A. Akishev.

³ For Korkyt-Ata, see Bartol'd 1962. – The fortifications of Dzhankent enclose 16 ha. Our latest C14 dates from 2019 show that settlement at this site dates from the 6th to 11th centuries AD; Härke et al. 2020,

from the decline in monument recording and protection since Kazakh independence from the disintegrating Soviet Union in 1991, and it is not helped by the parallel decline in excavation standards reported by Russian colleagues working in Kazakhstan. It seems a worthwhile goal to help Kazakh colleagues recording this heritage, in spite of administrative obstacles and of practical problems, such as transport, accommodation, visa procedures, and border controls which are never friendly, and occasionally close to hostile.⁴



Fig. 1. Dzhankent (Goffriller 2018).

Kazakhstan (2011)

After a successful season of fieldwork at Dzhankent, an early medieval town site east of the Aral Sea, our travelling circus of Kazakh, Russian and German archaeologists, reinforced by two professorial visitors from Britain and Germany, respectively, moves on to the regional

online https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Publications/Tea/Tea_66/Research_news/EAA/Navigation_Publications/Tea_66_content/Research_news.aspx (accessed 19.02.2022).

⁴ Kazakh border controls, both on trains and at airports, have improved immeasurably in terms of politeness, occasionally even friendliness, since these lines were written.

capital of Kyzylorda.⁵ It is a bumpy 7-hour trip along a stretch of roadworks which will become the Kazakh part of a road linking China to western Europe – a kind of modern Silk Road, one imagines fondly while crunching steppe dust between one's teeth. We stop on the way to have a look at Sortobe, a town site half destroyed by a bend of the river Syr-Darya (the Jaxartes of Classical antiquity).⁶ The sherds we pick up along the river bank refuel our running debate about the interpretation of the early medieval pottery here in terms of ethnic identity and migration routes – interpretations that our Kazakh and Russian colleagues are still wedded to in an automatic and uncritical way that makes even an avowed migrationist like me uncomfortable.

We arrive at Korkyt-Ata State University of Kyzylorda to find that all my suggestions about how to run our planned workshop on early medieval urbanization in East and West have been ignored in favour of something that maximizes status and prestige for the university and the local organizer. On the first day, a TV crew attends the lectures by Professors Grenville Astill (University of Reading, Great Britain) and Jörn Staecker (Tübingen University, Germany) who give students the first of their scheduled presentations about urbanization in England and the Baltic Sea region, respectively. It gets much more serious on the second day when our workshop transmogrifies into an 'international conference', the media are present in greater numbers, the carefully invited students are dressed respectably, and the Rektor sits in all morning. But in order to fit everything in and have the time for the inevitable 'banquet' in the afternoon, papers are cut to 10 minutes each and discussion is cut out completely. A moment of light relief for the western visitors is provided by the Rektor referring our grant from the 'Wenner-Grenville Foundation' – the British colleague's composure is admirable.⁷ But the Rektor's interest has a positive outcome: in talks before and after the 'workshop', he agrees that the near-defunct Archaeology Laboratory at his university will be upgraded to an Archaeology Center, and a new Head will be appointed, a young and energetic Kazakh who did his doctorate with our Russian co-director in Moscow. This will be a real boost to archaeology in western Kazakhstan where few archaeologists are in permanent positions, and none of them has a degree higher than a BA.

⁵ For a published report of the 2011 season and the following workshop, see Arzhantseva et al. 2012, online https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Publications/TEA/Archive/EAA/Navigation_Publications/TEA_content/Archive.aspx#37 (accessed 19.02.2022). For updates, see Härke et al. 2020 (online link in footnote 3); Härke and Arzhantseva 2021, online <https://www.brepolonline.net/doi/abs/10.1484/J.JUA.5.123675>.

⁶ For fieldwork at Sortobe, see Kurmankulov et al. 2011; Bilalov et al. 2017.

⁷ Our 2011 fieldwork was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation (ICRG-105), USA.

While our western visitors head to the airport to go home, the Russian-German remnant of the travelling circus go on to Almaty (formerly Alma-ata), the former capital. The first half of the 20-hour train journey is across perfectly flat steppe and semi-desert, and I stare for hours at the horizon, trying to get into the mindset of nomads who used to live on these plains from the Bronze Age, at least, until the early 1930s when the Soviet regime brutally crushed nomadism in Kazakhstan. How does orientation work on what is to our eyes a featureless plain? That question brings home the point about building kurgans (barrows) on the steppe: they are there not just to be seen, but also to provide points of navigation on a sea of grass (or shrub). And would a 10th century nomad have felt claustrophobia in the town of Dzhan Kent? That's when you realize that urbanization in a nomad society (or possibly any society) involves not just a change in settlement patterns, but also a huge change in mentality.

At Almaty, we are summoned to the court of the new khan. The new director of the Institute of Archaeology⁸ deems all existing cooperation agreements to be defunct with his appointment, and he demands, among others, negotiations with Moscow and Kyzylorda for continued research at Dzhan Kent (which requires an excavation licence signed by him).



Fig. 2. Gold Man of Issyk poster at Al-Farabi (Härke 2016).

To westerners used to the stability of institutions and agreements, this thoroughly eastern attitude is strange – but it is the tradition which saved Europe from the Mongols when their generals had to return home on the death of Genghis Khan to elect a new khan and

⁸ Institute of Archaeology named after A.Kh. Margulan (Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan); its English-language website is here: <https://www.archaeolog.kz/index.php?lang=en> (accessed 19.02.2022).

renegotiate their positions. Less strange, though unexpected in their sheer frequency, are the references to the past and to archaeology on the government propaganda posters which are as frequent here as Marlborough hoardings used to be in the rest of the world. A statue of the Gold Man of Issyk (Fig. 2), disrespectfully called ‘The Scarecrow’ by Kazakh archaeologists, graces a square in the centre of Almaty, and a picture of his reconstruction is on a fair proportion of posters showing the President of Kazakhstan: a richly decorated warrior of the Early Iron Age has become the symbol of Kazakhstan’s golden past as well as that of its present regime.⁹

Kazakhstan (2013)

In the second half of 2013, I had occasion to visit three Central Asian countries for various archaeology-related activities: Kazakhstan for fieldwork, Uzbekistan mainly for excursions, and Turkmenistan for a conference. While, from a safe distance, all these countries appeared similar, I discovered significant differences from an archaeologist’s perspective.

Our August fieldwork in western Kazakhstan, in the deserted early medieval town of Dzhanakent east of the Aral Sea, goes well enough, despite our lack of a western grant this year and despite the efforts of a senior archaeologist from Almaty who continues to open undocumented trenches so as to prevent the extension of our own trenches (we suspect). We are working with a committed team of Moscow volunteers, and an enthusiastic group of Kazakh history students several of whom this year state their intention to pursue a career in archaeology. This has to be an effect of the new Center for Archaeology and Ethnography which was founded in 2011 at the regional University of Kyzylorda, as a direct result of the fieldwork project we had run that year. On the way from the site to Kyzylorda, we visit the Dzhetysay (which is Kazakh for ‘Seven Fortresses’, but in reality there are more like 70), an archaeological landscape with scores of fortified elite dwellings and enclosed sites. This impressive settlement network of the first half of the 1st millennium AD at the edge of the Kyzyl-kum desert has hardly been explored so far – small wonder given its east-west extent of more than 150 km.¹⁰ Preliminary discussions at Kyzylorda University for a project there quickly identify a big obstacle: the new Kazakh visa rules which impose a time limit of 30 days for each visit. This had already been a problem for this year’s fieldwork, limiting the

⁹ This is all the more remarkable as the find of Issyk quite clearly belongs to the Saka, according to scholarly consensus an Iranian people and culture, while the modern Kazakhs strongly emphasize their Turkic heritage. – For more information on Issyk, see below.

¹⁰ We have in the meantime begun preliminary work for a major project in the Dzhetysay; see Arzhantseva et al. 2020, online DOI 10.31600/978-5-907298-09-5-236-237 (accessed 17.02.2022).

actual season to less than four weeks. The University's International Coordinator holds out the hope that the visa requirement may be scrapped for EU citizens – but I have heard that about the Russian visa requirement for the last 20 years, and we still have it.¹¹

Uzbekistan (2013)

At Kyzylorda, we board the *Gastarbeiter* train (as the Russians call it)¹² from Moscow to Tashkent for our onward journey to neighbouring Uzbekistan, land of cotton, gorgeous fruit and state-sanctioned child slave labour. Most Uzbek passengers appear to be travelling without regular tickets and leave the train at an unscheduled stop just short of the Kazakh-Uzbek border to travel on by the waiting taxis and coaches. For us remaining passengers, the border controls are like crossing the Iron Curtain again. The Uzbek border guard inspecting my luggage for banned items sternly asks me what the book in my bag is about, and I have to explain who Schliemann was. This is a police state, and no mistake about it.

At Tashkent station, we are met by a local archaeologist who later describes the situation of, and prospects for, Uzbek archaeology in very pessimistic terms: no funding for research and fieldwork, no career opportunities, and therefore no student interest in the subject. What a difference to the student enthusiasm we had encountered in Kazakhstan! Our Tashkent colleague confirms that archaeology in Kazakhstan is infinitely better off in terms of funding and careers. To outsiders, this is an interesting contrast because the past is used extensively in both countries for propaganda purposes. The entrance hall of the Museum of History in Tashkent is graced by a chauvinist quotation of the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov. And the museum display of the wonderful finds from Hellenistic Bactria and the Silk Road towns is dominated by huge wall paintings interpreting the archaeological and historical past in romanticizing, nationalist terms.

The same uncertainty about the future of Uzbek archaeology is prevalent at Nukus, capital of the culturally distinct, self-governing region of Karakalpakstan on the banks of the Amu-Darya (the Oxus of Classical antiquity). Here, the Academy of Sciences Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology is one of only two such regional research institutes in Uzbekistan which survived last year's cut in government funding – before that, there were

¹¹ By 2018, visa regulations had indeed become less restrictive, and EU citizens have since been able to enter Kazakhstan without a visa for up to 30 days (although that is usually not enough for a full fieldwork season, so a visa is still necessary in many cases). This visa regime 'light' has been suspended during the Covid crisis, leading to an interruption of international fieldwork at Dzhankent and in the Dzhety-asary in 2020 and 2021.

¹² The German word which has become a standard Russian term is now considered politically incorrect in its linguistic homeland.

fifteen. We learn this at the end of a 20-hour train journey the length of the country to its western end where the base of the legendary Khorezmian Expedition was located, the longest-running and most successful of Soviet-period archaeological ventures. The base has been razed to make way for a college, and there is no archive material left here. But there are still the amazing sites discovered before and after the Second World War by the expedition and its charismatic director, Sergej Pavlovich Tolstov.¹³ A three-hour trip by taxi takes us through part of the Kara-kum desert to Toprak-kala, a huge Kushan fortress (3rd – 4th cent. AD) where the grid of excavated rooms still graces the citadel (confounding the foreign visitor who mistakes them for Wheeler excavation squares; Fig. 3), and to Ayaz-kala, an Achaemenid border garrison (5th – 3rd cent. BC), its massive walls and semicircular bastions turning red in the evening light.



Fig. 3. Toprak-kala (Härke 2013).

The conclusion of our pilgrimage is celebrated with a warm vodka (day temperatures are above 40 degrees centigrade) in the tourist yurts at the foot of the Ayaz-kala hill. This camp is one of several indicators of efforts being made to develop heritage tourism in this

¹³ Tolstov 1948a; 1948b; 1962.

remote part of Uzbekistan, of all places. There is also a small Australian tourist group at the base of the long-running Australian-Karakalpak Expedition where we spend the night, switching from warm vodka to cold beer (as you would expect). Here, among sand dunes which threaten to overrun their site, Alison Betts (University of Sydney) and her Nukus colleagues have been excavating the walled Hellenistic site of Akchakhan-kala (3rd cent. BC – 1st cent. AD) since the early 1990s, with impressive results and some outstanding discoveries (such as the wall paintings found in 2007).¹⁴

I meet other foreign archaeologists in Samarkand where the French colleagues celebrate 25 years of their involvement in Uzbek archaeology with an exhibition, and a conference on ‘Cultural Transfer’ organized and sponsored by the UNESCO International Institute for Central Asian Studies. I turn up at the event uninvited, in the company of Russian friends who have been working with the French in Uzbekistan for decades and who are miffed because they haven’t been invited either. The exhibition is in the Afrasiab Museum, within the Hellenistic to early medieval predecessor of Samarkand destroyed by Dzhingis Khan. Samarkand itself, with its mausolea, mosques, minarets and medressas of the Timurid dynasty (14th – 15th centuries), looks like a dream from Arabian Nights, but its current presentation is post-Soviet. The intention to attract heritage tourism has been successful, but it was achieved at the price of razing entire quarters of the old town centre, thereby destroying much of its oriental atmosphere. On the outskirts of town, I conclude another pilgrimage by visiting the early 15th century observatory of Ulugh Beg, to my knowledge the only astronomical observatory (in the scientific sense of the word) which has been excavated archaeologically (in 1908); the excavator, Vassilij L. Vyatkin, is buried on the site.¹⁵

Leaving Uzbekistan turns out to be even more difficult than entering it. Because of the heinous crime of spending the last night at the house of a colleague (which is *verboden* – foreigners have to stay in hotels and provide proof of it), a zealous border police captain threatens to keep us until our plane has left. We are let off 5 minutes before boarding time expires. What did that Kazakh colleague say when I told him about our travel plans? “Uzbekistan? I’ve been there once – that’s enough.”

¹⁴ Betts et al. 2016; Kidd 2011, online DOI 10.3406/topoi.2011.2406 (accessed 17.02.2022).

¹⁵ Barthold 1958, Vyatkin 1926. A good picture of Vyatkin’s grave slab is here: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Observatie_Ulugbek_varri_Vyatkin_V._L...JPG (accessed 19.02.2022).

Turkmenistan (2013)

I'd say the same about Turkmenistan now, having been there in November for a conference entitled 'One-Thousand Year Tradition of Building Culture of Turkmenistan'. It all starts well enough, with tickets and hotel accommodation for foreign delegates paid for by the organizers (the Ministry of Culture), and VIP treatment at the airport of Ashgabad, the capital. But we have to pay a price for it, and in the end we realize that we are just extras in the choreography of power of a dictatorial regime which is built on gas-fuelled generosity, and which is hungry for international recognition.

It turns out that there is only half a day allocated to our papers, in four parallel sections, and in order to accommodate all speakers from abroad, the length of our papers is severely curtailed (Russians get 3 to 5 minutes, westerners 10 to 15 minutes) while the numerous Turkmen scholars whose papers are included in the programme are not given any time at all. By way of compensation, the opening and concluding sessions are long and elaborate, with the huge hall behind us filled with some 500 extras from the Ministry of Culture and the university, and with students of all subjects brought in by minders to fill every single seat in the hall (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Ashgabad conference (Härke 2013).

The welcome message from President Berdimuhamedov is given a standing ovation turning into rhythmic clapping, North Korean style, which many of the confused and surprised conference delegates in the first two rows join while TV cameras are being pointed at them. The opening lectures by the three foreign scholars on the panel of the plenary

session, on the stage in front of us, had been drafted in the Ministry of Culture (as one of them confirmed to me afterwards) and were full of references to the achievements of the President. The Ministry official chairing the concluding session creates the impression that all 100-odd scheduled papers had actually been presented, and the openly critical comments in English by the only non-Turkmen section chair are simply not translated. In between these shows, we are shepherded by our minders to the opening of an exhibition on ‘Sport, Leisure and Education in the Prosperous Epoch of the Powerful State’ where we are given green rosettes to wear, are required to listen to the opening speech by a cabinet minister, and are urged to tour the incongruous collection of displays by tourist agencies, foreign universities, sports equipment manufacturers and diplomatic missions which is already being dismantled by the time we come back from our sumptuous dinner on the top floor of the new exhibition centre. All the time, we are asked to give interviews for TV and radio, never knowing what Turkmen ‘translation’ of our utterings will be broadcast. In one case, we do find out later what was made of a televised ‘Round Table’ with architects and archaeologists from Canada, Austria and Germany, chaired by Turkmen scholars whose introductory comments and concluding observations in Turkmen were not translated for us at the time: a video on the internet shows the Turkmen version where my foreign colleagues appear to refer to the President several times – I was there, and I know they never did.¹⁶

This seems to be the price that foreign archaeologists have to pay for working in Turkmenistan. Is it worth it? Some clearly think it is, and they include Britons, Italians, Frenchmen, Russians, Germans and others. And the archaeological potential of the country is, indeed, tremendous. We are taken on excursions to the Parthian capital of Nissa, a World Heritage site on the outskirts of Ashgabad, where we see evidence of the relatively new concern with site conservation (now a constituent part of every contract with foreign excavators). We are flown to Mary, for a visit to the impressive Silk Road town of Merv (Fig. 5) which is not really a single town, but a series of successive, overlapping towns dating from the 6th century BC to the 13th century AD.¹⁷ British archaeologists have worked here for a decade or so, taking the lead on this site as well as in another project which aims to obtain World Heritage status for the Silk Road as such, not just a single site on it.¹⁸

¹⁶ I only learnt about this video from another western participant; it does not seem to be accessible any more.

¹⁷ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/ancient-merv-project/about-ancient-merv-project> (accessed 18.02.2022).

¹⁸ The World Heritage status given by UNESCO in 2014 to part of the Silk Road stretches from China to Kazakhstan, and does not include sites in Turkmenistan.



Fig. 5. Merv excursion and interview (Härke 2013).

Backwaters such as the small town of Mary would benefit from the expected increase in heritage tourism, hopeful beginnings of which are already reported by local archaeologists there.

It is a thoughtful and tired group of foreign conference delegates that is taken to Ashgabad airport at the crack of dawn on departure day. The constant activities, visits and excursions, from dawn to nightfall, and the absence of conference sessions (boring or otherwise) during which one might have had a brief nap, has led to virtual sleep deprivation – which may or may not have been part of the plan of the organisers. While we are being driven through the marble desert that is the centre of Ashgabad today (the old town was destroyed in a disastrous earthquake in 1948, and the post-Soviet dictatorship has ‘improved’ on the Soviet reconstruction by cladding all buildings, old and new, in marble), I suddenly realize what the megalomaniac architecture reminds me of: Hitler’s plans for post-war Berlin. The architects in our minibus concur. But Hitler did not have Turkmenistan’s gas which allows the authoritarian government here to bribe foreigners and to keep the population quiet (no taxes, free gas, free electricity, etc.). In that sense, it is not a Central Asian North Korea, as Kazakh

friends would have it: it is less openly brutal, but in a way even more sinister. As a Russian archaeologist commented quietly: “Now we know how easily it can happen” – I know she meant collaboration.¹⁹

Central Asia (2016)

Disturbing news from Central Asia: Turkmenistan has decided to terminate all international collaboration with foreign archaeologists. There will be no extension of agreements with external project partners (and independent foreign projects were never permitted, anyway). Even more disturbing is what a Russian archaeologist was told by Turkmen authorities when asking for the reason: “Foreigners excavate our sites, and then they interpret them incorrectly.” When I tried to obtain confirmation from elsewhere, a western archaeologist who has carried out fieldwork in Turkmenistan for many years reported that their project was discontinued last year for ‘administrative reasons’. While this is what one might expect from a secretive and paranoid regime, it is a serious blow to archaeology: a significant part of the Silk Road crosses through Turkmenistan, and it boasts a number of World Heritage sites, including the Parthian capital of Nissa, and the multi-period trading city of Merv (see above). It is also worrying because it reflects a wider trend of regimes trying to control the interpretation of their national histories. Russia now puts on trial anyone who states publicly that the Red Army attacked and occupied parts of Poland in 1939 – as is happening right now to somebody who posted excerpts from his post-Soviet Russian school book on *vkontakte* (a popular Russian social network).

Turkmenistan’s neighbours Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are not about to bring the shutters down in like fashion – on the contrary. While lack of funding is still preventing high-profile collaborative projects in Uzbekistan, the country does its best to capitalize on its Silk Road past. My visits to Samarkand and Bukhara this spring gave me the impression of flourishing heritage tourism, with busloads of visitors from all major European countries, the USA, Japan and India clogging the streets and monuments of the towns. One wonders how many of them come back for a second visit, given the cumbersome procedures and often rude staff encountered at customs and passport controls when entering the country. The benefits of this tourism go well beyond economics. Talks with several craftsmen on the markets in Bukhara brought home the fact that work for the tourists enables the survival of traditional crafts (such as textile-working, carpet-weaving and knife-making), and sometimes at high

¹⁹ For two cases of archaeologists’ collaboration with dictatorships, see Härke 2014; Arzhantseva 2015.

standards, but often with some adaptation to expectations and tastes of tourists (quite different, though, from the typical mass-produced souvenirs as found at all tourist hot-spots across the world).

Kazakhstan, while not a model democracy either, is probably the least oppressive and secretive country in Central Asia, and it is certainly not paranoid (although it is getting wary of Russian ‘interest’ in north-eastern Kazakhstan with its large ethnic Russian population).²⁰ It has even joined the European University Area and the Bologna Process, not always to the delight of local academics. But this move has had positive effects, too, and I was able to see some of them in March of this year while inspecting the Archaeology & Ethnology course at the Al-Farabi University in Almaty on behalf of a German agency which had been asked by the university to do some of the required European-style accreditation. Like other leading national universities in Kazakhstan, Al-Farabi operates a bilingual policy (teaching in Kazakh and Russian), but with an increasing emphasis on English. Thus, elements of the Archaeology & Ethnology course are offered in all three languages, as are the voluminous course handbooks. Although the English handbook turned out to be a hilarious jumble, you have to concede that at least they try. There is also an advanced taught option on ‘Archaeology Abroad’ which turns out to be mostly about British archaeology.

On the downside, Al-Farabi’s combined Archaeology & Ethnology course only looked ‘progressive’ from a distance because the combination seemed to be modeled on the concept of cultural anthropology – but it isn’t. It is an ill-conceived attempt to save old-fashioned regional ethnography from post-Soviet reorganization by bolting it on to an Archaeology Department with a good reputation. This shotgun marriage does not work because of the lack of a common anthropological perspective – and the ‘real’ Cultural Anthropology with a more up-to-date outlook is taught as a separate subject in a different faculty so that it cannot be combined in any way with elements of the Archaeology course. The university is aware of the issues involved, but their problem is that Kazakh universities are not free to re-organize their faculties, or re-shape their courses, as they like; there are clear and detailed guidelines from the Ministry of Education which has the last word on everything. Perhaps the

²⁰ This comment has been overtaken by recent events in January 2022 when President Tokayev, successor of Nursultan Nazarbayev, called for Russian military assistance to quell popular unrest and decide an internal power struggle – but he also made sure that the foreign troops left after only a very short time in Kazakhstan.

recommendations of the visiting accreditation delegation will be able to shift the tectonics of this rigid structure at least a little bit.²¹

Uzbekistan (2017)

Something may be stirring on the Silk Road, insiders realized as the recent heritage conference at Tashkent (Uzbekistan, 14-17 May 2017) unfolded. Its cumbersome title was inauspicious: ‘Cultural Legacy of Uzbekistan as the Path to the Dialogue between Peoples and Countries’. This is Soviet-style diction, as the presentation of ‘results’ at the end was in Soviet style: listing the titles and positions of the most prominent scholars attending, and the numbers and titles of prestigious publications in the pipeline. That is what you would expect in a Central Asian dictatorship, but it was deceptive. This was the first Uzbek conference organized and funded by a privately owned business (a media empire whose owner is close to the ruling clique of the country); it was the first time that American scholars had been given visa to visit post-Soviet Uzbekistan; and it was the first time that ordinary Uzbek archaeologists had been invited to join an international ‘show conference’ in their own country. This was some compensation for the presence of the usual array of bigwigs from politics as well as organisations and foundations supporting the project, such as UNESCO, the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, etc.

On the surface, this conference was mostly about the presentation (in papers and videos) of the innovative project ‘Cultural Legacy of Uzbekistan in the Collections of the World’ which is cataloguing and publishing artefacts, paintings and manuscripts from Uzbekistan held in museums and libraries across the world.²² Five high-quality volumes have already been published, mostly covering Russian institutions (Museum of Oriental Art, Museum of Ethnography, Tretyakov Gallery, and Russian National Library), but also one on embroidery and carpets of Uzbekistan in collections world-wide. Another five volumes are at an advanced stage of preparation, and the series is planned to continue, covering institutions in Europe (including the British Museum) and the New World. The project had been started under the previous president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, and is continued now under his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev who was elected in December 2016. But some important

²¹ The ACQUIN agency’s Accreditation Report is online here: <http://docplayer.org/58296832-AI-farabi-kasachischen-nationalen-universitaet-almaty-kasachstan.html> (accessed 18.02.2022).

²² The official website of the project is <https://legacy.uz/en/> (accessed 19.02.2022). There is also a good photograph of the eminent archaeologist Edvard Rtveladze mentioned in the next paragraph.

changes happened in this transition, outwardly signalled by the prominent role in the project now of a journalist who was a well-known opponent of the deceased dictator.

There was a second significant theme to this conference: the 75th birthday of Edvard Rtveladse, doyen of Uzbek archaeology, an ethnic Armenian born in the Russian North Caucasus who achieved his greatest scholarly successes in Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Colleagues praise him as an immensely likeable individual with great humour, and entirely without careerism. He rose to the top simply on the strength of his fieldwork and publications. In spite of a recent stroke, he remains the driving force behind the project, and carefully edits every volume of the Cultural Legacy series himself. A wiry man decorated with the recently awarded order of Honoured Scientist of the Republic of Uzbekistan, he attended the entire conference himself without ever falling asleep (as some other grandees did), he responded graciously and with great wit to all honours and praises heaped upon him, and insisted on the immediate distribution, there and then, of his latest archaeological book and his memoirs to all conference delegates from abroad. When this took the organisers longer to implement than he had expected, he threw something close to a temper tantrum in the conference hall.

After the first day with a ridiculously overloaded programme, the conference moved by charter plane (paid for by the sponsor) from Tashkent to Samarkand. Here, the splendid Registan Square of the 15th to 17th centuries AD formed the backdrop of proceedings, with further sessions held in the Madrasah of Ulugh Beg, ruler of Central Asia from 1411 to 1449, and a famous astronomer in his own right (see above). Delegates were entertained by bazaar scenes re-enacted in the courtyard of the madrasah, and taken on an excursion for a sumptuous lunch accompanied by demonstrations of Uzbek crafts. The grand finale of the congress was to be the premiere in the Registan of a 3D laser show on the cultural legacy of Uzbekistan. This, however, took a long time to start because of the old Soviet (and new UNESCO) conference ritual of reading out to the congress delegates a long-winded 'resolution' drafted by unknown persons, amended by a committee and 'passed' by the congress without even the fig-leaf of a vote. In fact, the resolution proclamation took so long that there were stirrings of protest by shouting and clapping among the public who were kept out of the cordoned-off square reserved for the congress participants – the whole scene a perfect illustration of elitist science administration stuck in the (political) past.

The laser show, when it finally started, immediately quelled the public unrest: it was, indeed, visually breathtaking – and what a setting for it! It purported to present the cultural history of the world, from cave paintings to space flight, as a shared legacy of humankind,

surely a worthy message, but with some grating details. While representing the year of Uzbek independence (1991) as marking the beginning of a new period in worldwide science must have seemed over the top to international attendees (to put it mildly), it drew applause from Uzbek attendees and members of the public. This might suggest that not much has changed in this country, but people with a longer experience of working here remarked that the open expression of public displeasure about anything would have been unthinkable under the former president. On the other hand, quotes from Karimov's hackneyed pronouncements on Uzbek culture and heritage still grace the entrance of every museum in the country (certainly of every one that I have visited; Fig. 6). His successor appears to be cautiously reversing some policies which had negatively affected scholarship in the country: the almost defunct Academy of Sciences has been revived as a central research institution, and there appears to be a political will to strengthen the humanities, foremost archaeology and ethnography.

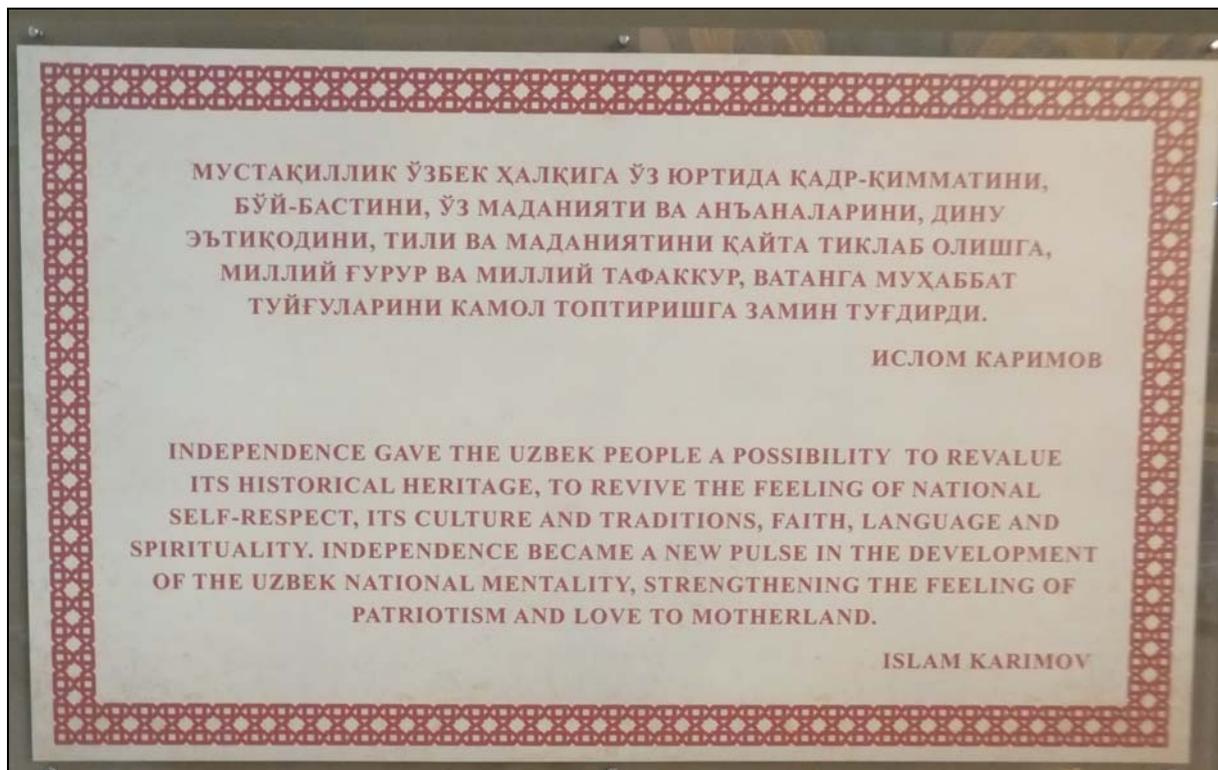


Fig. 6. Karimov quotation in Amir Timur Museum Tashkent (Härke 2017).

So there may be changes afoot, but they will be slow and gradual, as Uzbek scholars pointed out in private conversations. In the meantime, their western colleagues might feel justified in collaborating in this big top-down project as long as the overall changes are moving in the right direction. The wider significance of the Uzbek Cultural Legacy project is that it may be one possible model of how to take the sting out of the debate about the

restitution of cultural property: by making high-quality representations of cultural objects, together with scholarly texts, available to all.

Uzbekistan (2018)

What sounds like a publisher's wet dream, has become tragic reality in Uzbekistan: a scholar has been imprisoned for swapping PDF files. Andrey Viktorovich Kubatin, Senior Lecturer at Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, has been sentenced in December 2017 to 11 years imprisonment (since then reduced to five years) under Article 157 Part 1 (Treason against the State) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The charge against him: exchanging PDF files with a Turkish colleague! This being a high treason case, the details are being kept secret by the Uzbek authorities, but the general assumption among colleagues is that the files exchanged between the two would have contained nothing but scholarly publications. Dr Kubatin is a scholar in Turkic and Iranian studies, specializing in numismatics, and his Turkish 'partner in crime' works in the same field.

The Central Asian scholarly community is extremely concerned about the case, not just because the career of a promising young scholar with a family has been destroyed. The implications are much wider: if an Uzbek scholar can be imprisoned for exchanging files with undisclosed contents, nobody in that country can exchange information any more without being in danger of arrest and criminal charge – and that means the end of scholarship because that cannot thrive without communication. This disastrous implication has been spelt out in a letter of protest written to the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev, and signed by some 150 Uzbek and international scholars. The Uzbek Academy of Sciences does not want to become involved in the case, clearly fearing political consequences although their own semi-official explanation is 'lack of information on the details of the case'. One would think that this alone should be a reason for getting involved, but clearly this is not going to happen even though recent political developments in the country had given rise to the hope that historical and archaeological disciplines in Uzbek institutions might benefit from a more liberal (or less oppressive) regime.

This makes this case even more puzzling. But most of all, until there is a fundamental change in the Uzbek political system, western scholars should be extremely cautious and

circumspect when exchanging information of any kind with Uzbek colleagues: they might put them in real danger.²³

...and back in Moscow (2020)

For historical reasons, Oriental and Eurasian archaeology have long been strongly represented in Moscow. Foreigners will associate this strength primarily with the *Musej Vostoka* (Museum of the East, in English often called Museum of Oriental Art). It is home to some of the most distinguished specialists on Central Asian and Caucasian art and archaeology. The other key research centre in this field used to be the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN). It was founded in the 1940s by Sergej Tolstov, the Soviet answer to Indiana Jones: a charismatic expedition leader and innovative field archaeologist who revolutionized Central Asian archaeology between the 1940s and 1960s (see above). His legacy had been run down by the last two directors of the IEA, first by shutting down their institute's Centre for Eurasian Archaeology, and then by wholesale corruption facilitated by Putin's 2015 'reorganisation' of the Academy of Sciences which gives directors of institutes complete, and completely intransparent, control over financial management. The last director awarded herself a salary (incl. a 'research productivity bonus') which was thirty(!) times that of a senior researcher in her institute. Total and permanent disaster was averted by a 'people's revolution' this spring when the members of the institute, called to elect a new director, rejected the internal establishment candidate and voted by an overwhelming majority for the external opponent. This new director, Dmitrij Funk, is an ethnologist specializing in northern Siberia, but he has vowed to keep and re-invigorate Eurasian archaeological research in the IEA.

Teaching of Eurasian and Central Asian archaeology has been through similar ups and downs, also with a happy outcome this year. For some time, Central Asian and Caucasian

²³ Andrey Viktorovich Kubatin (9 March 1984-29 October 2020), an expert on the history and culture of the Turkic world, was arrested in March 2017 during a police raid. The specific charge against Kubatin was that he had surreptitiously handed over classified materials to the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, Ankara's foreign aid agency, in exchange for a payment of \$1,000. Investigators alleged that the materials in question could have been used to incite anti-Turkish sentiment and to provide confidential information about Uzbekistan's geological reserves. Kubatin's lawyers rejected such accusations as absurd, arguing that the materials in question were freely available to the public.

In 2017, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison, and a year later his sentence was reduced to five years.

In late September 2019, a court in Tashkent acquitted him and ordered his release after dozens of academics from several countries signed a petition calling on Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to release Kubatin. A year after his release from prison, Andrei Kubatin died of COVID-19. He was 36 years old. Sample monograph: KUBATIN, A.V. *Sistema titulov v tyurkskom kaganate: genezis i preemstvennost'*. (The system of titles in the Turkic Kaganate: genesis and continuity.) Tashkent: Yangi Nashr, 2016.

archaeology had been taught in option courses by part-time teachers in the Russian State University of Humanities (RGGU) in Moscow. Last year, it was agreed to move all staff and facilities for teaching and research of Oriental culture lock, stock and barrel to the Moscow Higher School of Economics (HSE). While this may sound an unlikely place for studying languages and history of the ancient east, HSE (rated the leading Russian university in social and economic disciplines) is now expanding its fledgling Faculty of Humanities. This appears to happen in direct competition with Moscow State University (MGU, considered to be Russia's leading humanities university) where since 2015 Putin's daughter, Katerina Trikhonova, has held a senior administrative position controlling a \$1.7 billion development project to create a science innovation centre.

The Director of the new HSE Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, Prof. Ilya S. Smirnov (a renowned expert on Chinese literature and culture), used the opportunity to create a Center of Classical and Oriental Archaeology with permanent staff of international standing.²⁴ In September 2019, two professors and three lecturers started teaching their first intake of 19 postgraduate students on a two-year MA course covering Eurasian archaeology from the Early Iron Age to the Middle Ages, supported by a teaching research fellow and a full-time administrator. Plans for the future include fieldwork in the Caucasus and Central Asia (continuing existing staff projects), and cooperation with Kazakh and Chinese institutions with a view to cover the length of the Silk Road.

Postscript

The links between the pursuit of the past and the politics of the present (or put more widely, its social context in the present) are now, after more than three decades of quite intensive discussion, sufficiently well known to require further emphasis here.²⁵ In that sense, my observations made in Central Asia and set out above do not represent anything out of the ordinary, but they serve to highlight some aspects which are specific to the region. Among them, one may identify an emphasis on, or even glorification of, nomadism; an exaggerated interest in early state origins in the region; and above all something which a Russian colleague of mine likes to call the 'glorious ancestors' syndrome. The latter is best illustrated by a little incident at the Turkmenistan conference described above where a Kazakh archaeologist exclaimed at the end of his brief paper (attended by a handful of colleagues and

²⁴ The Center's website is <https://iocs.hse.ru/en/ccoa> (accessed 17.02.2022).

²⁵ Taking as a starting point the archaeological debates sparked by the collapse of Communist regimes in Europe between 1989 and 1991.

a class of drafted art-school students) that “The Turks are the greatest people in history!”, followed by a few quick highlights of their historical greatness. It is a kind of ethnic chauvinism which has gone out of fashion in Europe since the end of the Second World War, at least among serious scholars, but it is something which has provided an underpinning of post-Soviet state formation in Central Asia where it merges with remnants of Soviet-period autochthonism. So far this mixture seems to me to lack the aggressive potential it clearly has in the North Caucasus, but it is something that deserves some concern, not least because it can have a corrosive influence on scholarship.

My other main impression from work in the region, an impression seriously underplayed in my comments above, is the exceptional hospitality of people, and the generosity of spirit which visitors and researchers from abroad encounter among colleagues there. It is again best illustrated by a little anecdote, this time from our fieldwork at Dzhanakent. During the visit by a senior colleague from one of the leading archaeological institutions in Kazakhstan, my co-director introduced me as a “specialist” (as Russian colleagues frequently do). Much to her annoyance, I jokingly reacted by saying that “I am not: I am an amateur” (a play on words about doing the things you love doing - which works in English, but not in Russian) whereupon that visiting colleague quickly reassured me by responding graciously “Don’t worry – we will help you”. They all have, which is why I continue to love working and travelling in Central Asia.

References

- ARZHANTSEVA, I. A. and A. A. TAZHEKEEV. *Kompleksnie issledovaniia gorodishcha Dzhankent: raboty 2011–2014 gg.*, Almaty: Arys, 2014.
- ARZHANTSEVA, I. A., KARAMANOVA, M. S., HÄRKE, H., RUZANOVA, S. A., TAZHEKEEV, A. A. and I. N. MODIN. Early medieval urbanization and state formation east of the Aral Sea: Fieldwork and international workshop 2011 in Kazakhstan. *The European Archaeologist* 37, Summer 2012. 14-20.
- ARZHANTSEVA, I. A., GOFFRILLER, M. and H. HÄRKE 2020. Multidisciplinary approaches to the Dzhety-asar archaeological landscape: Early state formation in the eastern Aral Sea region? In: V. P. Nikonorov, L. B. Kircho, E. O. Stoyanov, V. A. Alyokshin, M. E. Kilunovskaya and O. V. Sycheva (eds.). *Ancient and Medieval Cultures of Central Asia*. Mandelstam conference proceedings, 10-12 November 2020. St Petersburg: IIMK RAN 2020. 236-238.
- ARZHANTSEVA, I. The Khorezmian expedition: imperial archaeology and Faustian bargains in Soviet Central Asia. *Public Archaeology*, 2015, 14.1: 5-26.
- BARTHOLD, V. V. *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*. Vol. 2. *Ulugh - Beg*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958.
- BETTS, A. V. G., YAGODIN, V. N., GRENET, F., KIDD, F., MINARDI, M., BONNAT, M. and S. KHASHIMOV. The Akchakhan-kala wall paintings: new perspectives on kingship and religion in Ancient Chorasmia. *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology*, 2016, 7. 125–165.
- BILALOV, S., TAZHEKEYEV, A. and R. DARMEN. Archeological research of the medieval fortress Sortobe. *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Journal of History*, 2017, 87:4. 62-74.
- HÄRKE, H. and I. ARZHANTSEVA. Interfaces and Crossroads, Contexts and Communications: Early Medieval Towns in the Syr-Darya Delta (Kazakhstan). *Journal of Urban Archaeology*, 2021, 3. 51-63.
- HÄRKE, H. Archaeology and Nazism: A warning from prehistory. In: V. Mordvintseva, H. Härke and T. Shevchenko (eds.). *Archaeological and linguistic research: Materials of the Humboldt-Conference (Simferopol – Yalta, 20-23 September, 2012)*. Kiev: Stilos 2014. 32-42.
- HÄRKE, H., ARZHANTSEVA, I. A. and A. TAZHEKEEV. The early medieval town of Dzhankent (Kazakhstan): from initial hypothesis to new model. *The European Archaeologist* 66, Autumn 2020. 27-34.
- KIDD, F. J. Complex connections: figurative art from Akchakhan-kala and the problematic question of relations between Khorezm and Parthia. *Topoi. Orient-Occident*, 2011, 17(1), 229-276.
- KUBATIN, A.V. *Sistema titulov v tyurkskom kaganate: genezis i preemstvennost'*. (The system of titles in the Turkic Kaganate: genesis and continuity.) Tashkent: Yangi Nashr, 2016.
- KURMANKULOV, Zh., ARZHANTSEVA, I. A. and A. A. TAZHEKEEV. Oguzskie gorodishcha v Nizovye Syrdar'i: svyazy s dzhetyasarskoj kultury [Oguz fortified towns on the Lower Syr-Darya: links to the Dzhety-Asar Culture]. *Vestnik Kyzylordinskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni Korkyt Ata*, 2011, 32 No. 2. 27-32.
- TOLSTOV, S. P. *Drevnyy Khorezm*. Moscow: MGU, 1948 (a).
- TOLSTOV, S. P. *Po sledam drevnekhorezmijskoj tsivilisatsii*. Moscow and Leningrad, 1948 (b).

TOLSTOV, S. P. *Po drevnim del'tam Oksa i Yaksarta*. Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 1962.

VYATKIN, V. L. *Afrasiab-gorodishche bylogo Samarkanda*. Tashkent: Narkompros UzSSR, 1926.