

Ili Valley Settlement: Urban Development along the Northern Silk Route

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Abstract

Currently archaeologists are excavating the city of Ucharal-Ilibalyk, which flourished between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, near the modern border between China and Kazakhstan. Discoveries, so far, include a sophisticated bath complex in its citadel and a Christian cemetery containing gravestones with Syro-Turkic inscriptions. These findings, and other recently discovered sites, have prompted a reassessment of all medieval monuments between the Syr Darya and Ili River Valleys. Urban development in this area facilitated trade networks northwest of the Tarim Basin, and their monumental architecture and material culture demonstrate that a wide range of artistic concepts and products were exchanged—forms originating as far away as the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea to the Bohai and Khambhat Gulfs. Ili settlements formed stable societies that contributed to, and supported, the emergence of the Karakhanid Khanate and, later, the Mongol Empire. As such, the excavations of Ucharal-Ilibalyk has prompted a reassessment of all the available evidence for the development of urban settlements within the Ili River basin.