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Figure Captions:

Fig. 1. Map with location of medieval Ilibalyk, displayed in the context of modern and medieval cities Map by C.S. Stewart.

Fig. 2. Ilibalyk site in relation with modern Usharal (Ucharal) village in southeast Kazakhstan.

Fig. 3. Photos of 4 inscribed gravestones (*капулкс*) from Ilibalyk with translations from Old Turkic and Syriac. Translation by Mark Dickens. Photos by Archaeological Expertise, LLC.

Fig. 4. Drawings displaying True Cross or Calvary Cross imagery from 3 gravestones discovered at Ilibalyk. Drawings by Archaeological Expertise, LLC.

Fig. 5. Jewelry from locus 089 following cleaning and conservation. Two silver bracelets with four-leaf rosette motif, a silver ring with the same motif, one silver ring with cruciform flower design, one gold ring with turquoise stone and two beaded bracelets with stone, glass and coral beads. Photo by D. Sorokin, 2019.

Fig. 6. Horizontally placed mudbrick grave cover in Ilibalyk cemetery. Photo by S. Dulle, 2019.

Fig. 7. Vertically placed mudbrick grave cover in Ilibalyk cemetery. Photo by S. Dulle, 2019.

Fig. 8. Drawing of various cross-inscribed grave markers from Ilibalyk cemetery: 1-3: ceramic brick markers with incised crosses; 4-9: river stones with cross inscriptions. Drawings by Archaeological Expertise, LLC.

period, yet still with a margin for error. The adult graves of the cemetery have provided dates ranging from the 1260s to the 1320s. It is thus safe to say that the second half of the 13th century and the first half of the 14th century is when the Christians of Ilıbalık lived along this northern trade route in today's southeast Kazakhstan. This is also consistent with the date ranges of Christians living throughout the Zhetisu/Semirechye region as recorded on those gravestones found more than a century ago.³³

The analysis of ancient DNA taken from several of the skeletons are still awaiting processing. Cost restrictions and delays in forensic analysis have hindered the obtaining of results. Such analyses could provide significant understanding in the realm of possible pathology, specifically whether plague impacted the Christians of Ilıbalık, which is often regarded as one reason Church of the East Christians virtually disappeared from this region of Central Asia in the 14th century, among other reasons.³⁴

DNA analysis would also solidify our understanding of exactly what ethnic markers the Christians in this community possessed. The gravestones provide us with Turkic, Persian, and Syriac (including biblical) names; DNA could clarify the ethnic identity and whether their progeny was perpetuated in the region even though the religious expression could no longer be found by the 15th century. It could also possibly shed light on whether the Ilıbalık Christians were from the Turco-Mongolian nomads such as the Naiman or Kerait, or if they were religious hold outs maintaining their faith despite possible opposition to their Karakhanid rulers, who were the first Turkic khanate to embrace Islam prior to the Mongolian invasion.

Conclusion

The significant discovery of a Christian community at Ilıbalık from the late medieval period along the northern trade routes of the Zhetisu region of modern Kazakhstan is one more “piece of the puzzle” in the story of this obscure history. It demonstrates a continuity of religious and cultural expression spanning both the Chu and Ili River valleys located in today's Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Excavations at the cemetery, while still preliminary, provide a clear connection between the Church of the East adherents—as represented by the 34 gravestones (*kayraks*) with their cross iconography and written inscriptions—and the 82 bodies examined in the cemetery. The uniformity of interment practices, grave goods, and funerary meals provide sufficient evidence of a multi-generational, homogenous community of Christians that lived in this large city along the northern route of the Silk Road during the 12th through the 14th centuries.

³³ The date range for the *kayraks* found in modern Kyrgyzstan and in Alımalık (northwest China) during the Russian imperial period are from 1200 to 1345 AD and are designated according to the Seleucid calendar, see DICKENS 2009, 15.

³⁴ SLAVIN 2019, 59-90. SCHAMİLOĞLU 2017, 714-19.

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deceased occur on the third, seventh, and fortieth days. It is usually assumed that this custom was introduced to the Turkic tribes by Islam. One, however, should not ignore the contemporary funerary meal custom of the current Assyrian Church of the East, which commemorates the dead in the eucharistic liturgy on the same corresponding days as many Central Asian Muslims.²⁵ Until more ethnographic and anthropological research is conducted in this area, the source of the modern practice could be attributed to any of the major religions, including shamanism or any combination of syncretistic religious practice. The evidence from Ilbalyk now indicates another possible source in Christianity, of which there is a robust literature on the topic.²⁶

Comparisons with Other Known Church of the East Burials

Thanks to a fresh examination of the excavations of Nicholai Pantusov by Kyrgyzstani archaeologist Valery Kolchenko, we now know that Christian graves excavated near today's Bishkek in 1886 contained juveniles interred at shallower levels in comparison to adults. Pantusov reported that children's graves at Burana (medieval Balasagun) were found at a depth of 0.7 – 1.15 meters below the original surface whereas adult "standard" burials ranged from 1.6 to 2 meters below the surface. The children's graves at this location in Kyrgyzstan were also simple grave pits with no accompanying brick tombs, in contrast with several of the adult graves which contained brick with construction types similar to those revealed at Ilbalyk as seen in Pantusov's illustrations. If Pantusov's notes from southern Zhetisu (Semirechye) more than 130 years ago are accurate, then they provide comparable funerary practices with those currently revealed at Ilbalyk. Note that the Burana site is located approximately 450 kilometers to the southwest of Ilbalyk.²⁷

Other individual Christian graves were excavated over the past several decades that come from the same era in Kyrgyzstan and their similar geographical spread and chronology provide further supporting evidence of widespread common interment practices. The archaeologist, Dr. Galina Shishkina reported the excavation of three graves in 1986 with one identified as that of a "warrior-priest" since the grave contained weapons as well as a metallic cross sewn onto the clothing. These tombs, located near Durmen, Uzbekistan, had the same west-to-east body orientation as those in Ilbalyk and a brick placed behind the skull so that the visage of the deceased faced east.²⁸ It should also be noted, however, that one distinct difference between the Ilbalyk graves discovered to date and those in both Durmen and Bishkek was the presence of wooden coffins in some

²⁵ As confirmed in an email to the author from the Assyrian Church of the East Bishop Mar Awa Royel, June 6, 2019.

²⁶ For example, see the references in REBILLARD 2003.

²⁷ KOLCHENKO 2018, 48-103. See the original diaries of PANTUSOV 1886, 2a-31a.

²⁸ SHISHKINA 1994, 63.

instances.²⁹ As indicated above, the Ilbalyk cemetery has revealed only one wooden cover with no box-type coffins.

Pantusov noted the use of fired brick, and specifically provided drawings of tombs with a similar trapezoidal gabled configuration as two tombs found at Ilbalyk. Baipakov during his analysis of individual graves near the Taraz area, which he also identified as Christian, noted various brick configurations placed over these tombs. This included both a gabled roof configuration as well as rows of bricks over the length of graves in a horizontal pattern as also referenced above. In addition, he made a point to differentiate between these burials and those of Muslim graves in the same area which were oriented with the feet facing southwest, toward Mecca.³⁰

Little evidence from these other excavations are found concerning the possibility of funerary meals, perhaps due to missing it in the archaeological context or in part to a thorough lack of knowledge to exactly what how the Turco-Persian Christians of Central Asia carried out their faith and practice in the medieval period. Archaeologists in the Central Asian context have at times puzzled over finding evidence which appears to "contradict Christian tradition."³¹ For example, the inclusion of weapons in a tomb and also sheep remains found next to the body of the supposed "warrior-priest"—as identified by Shishkina—may indicate possible syncretistic beliefs. Certainly, syncretism among medieval Turkic Christians cannot be ruled out. Such heterodox and syncretistic ideas are sometimes attested to by scholars in the Nestorian writings found in northwest China.³² However, distinctions between theological interpretation and theological syncretism are not necessarily clear in the context of excavation in the same way that the examination of written texts might be.

The Anticipation of Dating, Forensic, and Laboratory Analysis

The archaeological team at Ilbalyk has taken radiocarbon (C-14), forensic, and DNA samples from the human remains at various times throughout the excavations. Radiocarbon dating analysis margin for error can still only provide us a range of dates that the Christians of Ilbalyk probably lived and thrived. This is especially important since the gravestones found to date at Ilbalyk have provided no specific dating evidence. The C-14 analysis from 3 samples, one from a midden pit approximately 100 meters to the east of the cemetery and charcoal found in two graves provide a maximum date range spanning from 1217 to 1389 AD. Samples taken from two graves can slightly narrow this 172 year

²⁹ KOLCHENKO 2018, 81; SHISHKINA 1994, 60.

³⁰ BAIPAKOV - TERNOVAJA 2018, 8-147.

³¹ KOLCHENKO 2018, 82. See also SHISHKINA 1994, 63.

³² BAUMER 2016a, 176-179, makes it clear, however, that not all the writings were syncretistic, in fact, at times they are quite polemical against ideas in Buddhism and Manichaeism related to corporeal resurrection.

this second type, there are four subtypes based on the way that the bricks were placed on the grave. The first subtype is a horizontally-placed mudbrick cover (fig. 6). After a narrow shaft the approximate width of the body was cut in the earth, a wider shaft was cut above these forming ledges on which the bricks were placed horizontally across the body which had been covered with a layer of soil. Once these bricks were placed, more soil was likely heaped on top of the grave with the brick covering. The second subtype varied only slightly with the bricks placed vertically along the ledges (fig. 7). These bricks were slightly larger in size than those from the horizontally-placed bricks and the western side of the grave usually had no brick placed over the skull. These bricks may have also been placed at a slant and then had soil placed on top of them. A third brick subtype involved placing either mudbrick or fired brick (of secondary usage) which were placed at an angle creating a gabled or steepled type roof once the pit was dug and the body interred. In one instance the bricks were placed on only the northern side of the grave with tamped earth on the south side.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

The third type of grave construction involved the placement of a wooden-lid covered pit. This type was found with only one grave at the Ilbalyk cemetery so far. As mentioned below, other Central Asian Christian burials have been discovered that contained full coffins. This type only had a wooden cover of interlocking boards as opposed to a box-style coffin. No nails were discovered with this cover, so the boards may have been laid loosely across the grave pit.

The fourth type of grave construction discovered, also only one example, was that of a niche burial. After digging a shaft, a niche was then dug into the northern side of the shaft to contain the full length of the body. Following interment, a wall of vertically-placed mudbrick then sealed this northern niche and the shaft to the south of the niche was then filled with soil.

Brick size varied considerably between graves, throughout the cemetery and the small amount of fired brick found within the cemetery has been of secondary usage, meaning that they were taken from other construction sites and buildings. This is known due to the fact that mortar residue has been found on the bricks that was not utilized in the grave construction itself. Size variation may indicate various time phases in burials, but the uniformity that is there suggests that builders utilized the Persian system of measurement with the basic unit of the *dva* (hands), which was about 10 cm.

Finally, fired bricks in some instances also appear to have been used as grave markers. Previous seasons had revealed crudely scratched crosses on ceramics, both pottery and fired brick, however no conclusion could be drawn as to whether deliberate “scratches” actually signified symbolic intent.²³ Then, during the 2018 excavations, a fired brick with a post-fired cross incision was found *in situ* alongside the grave of a child, presumably hastily created at the time of interment. Two other fired bricks with crude cross incisions were found within the cemetery as well with no apparent grave association. However, due to the *in situ* discovery, it can be logically assumed that these, too, were grave markers similar in purpose to the stone *kayraks* and their cross incisions as religious identity markers (fig. 8).

Fig. 8

Evidence of Funerary Meals

Early in the process, excavators recognized the presence of ash pits throughout the area. These pits were often immediately next to or even on top of the grave, and, in some cases, adjacent to the skull. In several instances bovine bone fragments and potsherds from cookware were contained within the ash pits. While exact associations with specific graves proved difficult at times, at least 14% of the graves had known ash pits connected to the burial.

The presence of ash pits, cookware and domestic animal bones provide possible evidence for funerary meals occurring at the site of the burial. Unfortunately, there are no historical testimonies regarding the significance of such meals in this geographical context during the Middle Ages. Moreover, no known archaeological excavations of other Christian graves in Central Asia have recorded the presence of ash pits or funerary meals, although sheep remains have been found in at least one instance.²⁴

While there is no known historical documentation, there is sufficient ethnographic records and parallel contemporary practices among Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uighurs in the Zhetisu region, as well as throughout Central Asia, that indicate a deep tradition. For example, commemorative meals for the

²³ It is possible that such “scratches” are a Christian form of *tamga* marks. *Tamgas* were identity marks on all forms of property, (livestock, ceramics, coins, etc.), throughout Central Asia dating back to the Bronze Age and lasting into the 19th century and can be symbols of identity for entire clans and/or religious groups. A recent significant study on *tamgas* has been released including an introductory overview and of *tamgas* and their use as possible religious identification, YATSENKO et al 2019, 19-21.

²⁴ SHISHIKINA 1994, 56-63.

a gold ring with a large turquoise setting and gold filigree decoration typical of Turkic designs of the era, and a set of freshwater pearl earrings (fig. 5).

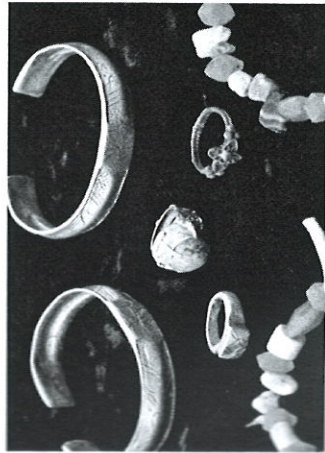


Fig. 5

Of special note were the apparent Christian symbols inscribed on the silver bracelets which appeared to match the silver ring on a raised bezel (fig 5). The symbol was that of what is often termed an almond-leaf rosette, due to the almond-shaped petals which appear in the foreground with an equilateral Bolnisi cross in the background. Art historian, Dr. Charles Stewart, a member of the excavation team, prior to our discovery had already done significant study on this particular design which is found in Christian contexts, including church mosaics and décor, spanning from the 3rd to the 15th century throughout Christendom.¹⁷ The same design has also been found on jewelry in an Ongut tomb at Olon Sume. This site was the northern capitol of the Ongut, a tribe with Church of the East adherents in inner Mongolia and these bracelets with the rosette design date from the same time period as the elite woman buried at Ilibalyk (13th/14th century).¹⁸ Other examples of jewelry with the almond-leaf rosette have been found within Kazakhstan itself, though in one case, the medieval city of Kayalyk, the grave was identified as a Muslim burial.¹⁹ Stewart's theory concerning this rosette design seen in Christian contexts pertained to its optical illusion. Non-Christians, including those who might persecute Christians would see the rosette and view its floral motif, but alert Christians would be aware of the cross design as seen in the background.

A second ring also made of a silver alloy with an intricate series of raised plats which give it a braided appearance contained settings which may have held precious stones. It, too, is in a cruciform shape which could be interpreted as a flower, or a cross, or both. Given the context of this grave in conjunction with the four-leaf rosette design found on one of the rings and the 2 silver bracelets, religious symbolism for this ring cannot be ruled out.

The grave goods in this tomb provide further information besides this woman's connections to the symbols of the broader medieval Christian world. They also tell us that some within the Christian community at Ilibalyk were of elite status. This is further verified from the beaded bracelets which contained carnelian

¹⁷ STEWART 2008, 98-105.

¹⁸ DELACOUR 2005: 94.

¹⁹ BAIPAKOV – VOYAKIN 2007, 124-127; appendix 2, 70.

stones (indigenous to the region), quartz, glass beads, and also red coral (now bleached white due to the weathering in the grave) most probably from the Indian Ocean.²⁰ These Indian Ocean trade connections are also evident by the discovery of 3 cowrie shells at the cemetery, one *in situ* near the neck of an infant. Drill holes in all the shells indicate they were used as jewelry.²¹ Also, a jewelry cache found by another excavation team headed by Karl Baipakov in 2018 in a niche of Ilibalyk's *shahristani*'s wall revealed an entire red coral necklace along with silver beads and bracelets contemporary with our finds in this grave.²² So, the historical record of the expansion of trade along this northern branch of the Silk Road during the 12th through 14th centuries encompassing the period of the Mongolian empire is verified in the archaeological record at Ilibalyk both at its political center as well as among some in the Christian community.

Grave Construction and the Usage of Bricks

The graves at the Ilibalyk Christian cemetery can all be considered "pit burials" which simply describes the process of digging a shaft and depositing the bodies then covering them with soil. The most recent excavations have allowed for the identification of four specific types. It is currently unknown whether the different types reflect a time progression or not, although this hypothesis is certainly under consideration. Radiocarbon analysis of two of the graves from different burial types suggests that this may be the case, however, the margin for error in the samples is not significant enough for that conclusion to be made.

The first type, a plain pit burial, involved depositing the body and covering the body with soil with no other associated construction. These burials were found closest to the surface and are most often associated with children's burials. However, due to the fact that the local soil was used in making the mudbrick found in the grave constructions, discerning the presence of brick in conjunction with a particular tomb is far from easy. In addition, some of these first types may have tamped the soil, known as *taipa* (Russian, *paksa*), once the soil covered the remains.

The second type are burials involved placing brick to cover the grave pit once a layer of soil had been deposited on the body. In most cases this was unfired mudbrick, with the exception of two graves, as will be mentioned below. Within

²⁰ While the most famous red coral dating back, at least, to Roman times is found in the Mediterranean, it is probable that the coral found on the bracelets is one of two species found in the Indian Ocean, further analysis is necessary. See MORADI, 2016, 125-142.

²¹ A recent examination of the role of cowrie shells as currency along the Silk Road and throughout Asia is found in YANG 2011, 1-25.

²² BAIPAKOV – KAMALDINOV 2019.

currently 81 exposed graves have revealed 32 adults and 49 children which provides a current child to adult ratio of 5 children to every 3 adults.

Results are still too preliminary to determine the reason for the large number of juveniles. The most logical explanation so far is the probable high infant mortality rate characteristic of the times, which is possibly borne out in our data since 33 out of the 49 juveniles excavated were 5 years old or younger, and, in a few instances, even stillborn infants. Further forensic investigations may provide a clearer picture as to the cause of death, however, excavators at other Christian burial sites have recorded a high number of infant burials as well. This seems characteristic of the change in burial practices as Christianity was adopted that placed a value on burying children when compared to pre-Christian cemeteries in similar locations that have fewer juvenile interments.¹³

Before comparing the Ilbalyk graves with the records of others in the Central Asian region, a description of the graves found at Ilbalyk is in order. The most consistent factor in 100% of the burials excavated to date at Ilbalyk is the west-to-east orientation of the body, meaning that the head was always placed on the west side and the feet to the east.¹⁴ This proved true regardless of age, including at least one still-born child that appeared hastily interred almost on top of another small infant. Thirty-five percent of the bodies were buried with the head intentionally propped up to face the east. Additional interments might also have had their heads propped up, however, the decomposition or natural shifting of the soil rendered it impossible to interpret the posture in those cases.

In some instances, a small earthen "pillow" or heap of dirt was intentionally formed to place behind the head of the deceased to ensure that the mandible rested on the sternum with the face oriented in the direction of the rising sun. In one instance, a small square-shaped stone was included inside this earthen "pillow." As far as it is known, nothing in the historical record has been found concerning the Church of the East burial practices as to the reason behind this method of interment. However, both body orientation and raising the head to face the east seems characteristic of early Christian burials throughout the Mediterranean region dating from at least the 4th century.¹⁵ The eschatological idea of Christ's statement in the Gospel of Matthew 24:27 that "...as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Thus, the head was oriented to witness Christ's return in the east. Several of the interred adults had a more varied head position, with some with the visage to the north and in some cases the head may have shifted following burial. Regardless, the uniformity concerning directional placement of the body affirms continuity of burial practice related to the Christian community at Ilbalyk.

¹³ FOX-TRITSAROLI 2019, 116-117. See also HAAS 2014, 125-126.

¹⁴ Two infant burials proved too decomposed to adequately determine body orientation.

¹⁵ FOX-TRITSAROLI 2019, 109; SWEETMAN 2019, 519-520.

Positioning of the arms and hands during burial also appeared to follow a ritualistic pattern, particularly for children whose hands were purposely positioned with the arms bent to have the hands rest together at the waist. Teens and adults were buried with a wider variation of hand positions across the abdomen or thoracic region, but in only 3 cases (1 child and 2 adults or 4%) were the hands placed prone alongside the body.

Grave Goods and Their Significance

The majority of graves excavated so far have contained no grave goods (82%). The items that have been found could be categorized three ways: jewelry; a small river stone, usually rectangular in shape; and/or a small potsherd. None of the graves contained all three types of goods. One grave, an adult female, contained elite items of jewelry and will be discussed below.

Nineteen of the graves (24%) contained small round or oblong river stones, which were usually placed in the hand or crook of the elbow, in some cases two or more stones were found. The majority of these finds were in children's tombs, but not exclusively. None of these small stones found with the body appeared to have any type of inscription and usually did not exceed 10 cm in length. Fourteen of the graves (18%) contained jewelry which were predominately beads to a necklace placed around a child's neck. Some may have been bracelets around the wrist, but discerning the difference proved difficult due to hand placement in the abdominal and thoracic regions. In at least one case, the beads appear to have been sewn onto the clothing or burial shroud of the deceased child. The beads themselves were often very tiny (1-2 mm) and made of glass paste. In a few cases, semi-precious stones, such as carnelian were also included. In one instance, an intricate necklace containing small bird bones with alternating turquoise-colored beads was found around the neck of an infant. In a few instances, thin bronze and silver rings which appear to have been part of a pendant attached to a necklace or possibly an earring, were found. These, in some cases contained a small freshwater pearl carefully attached to the earring loop by a thin copper wire. In one case, a silver ring was found around the finger of a child who appeared to be five or six years old.

Only 3 adult graves (9%) excavated so far have contained jewelry. One with a small stone, teardrop-shaped pendant, another with a single carnelian bead. Such finds appear consistent with other Christian cemeteries in a wide variety of contexts both in the West as well as within Central Asia.¹⁶ One major exception are the exquisite jewelry pieces found on an adult female (aged 30 or older). This person, obviously of elite status was interred with 2 silver bracelets, 2 beaded bracelets which included semi-precious stones and ocean coral, 5 rings including

¹⁶ SWEETMAN 2019, 520. KOLCHENKO 2018, 48-103.

Certain general conclusions are immediately evident from the analysis of the gravestones of Ilbalyk. First, one sees that some of the city's local indigenous populace were adherents to Syriac Christianity, specifically the Church of the East. Finds in both Syriac, (the liturgical language) and Old Turkic (the indigenous language of the region), were utilized by the community. This demonstrates that at least some of the local Turkic population (i.e. Karluk or the nearby Turco-Mongol tribes) identified with the Church of the East. The names on the gravestones (seven in total) include a biblical name (Petros), Turkic names (Tegiz and Shirin⁷) or combined Syriac-Turkic names (Baršabbā Quč/Qučā).

Second, the Church of the East's historical connection to the Christians of Ilbalyk is further solidified by the inscriptions on the gravestones which may refer to name sakes from heroes of the faith. The stone in Syriac simply reads: "This is the grave of Shirin the Believer." While certainly a common name in the Turco-Persian context, there is a possibility this is a namesake for Shirin the Christian queen of the Persian Shah during the late 6th and early 7th century. And, while Dickens points out that using the term "the believer" simply designated laypersons—as found on other stones of the Zhetisu corpus—the Muslim historian al-Tabarī utilizes the exact phrase of "Shirin the Believer" in identifying the Persian Queen,⁸ indicating a continuity of history dating back 600 years. The stories of "Shirin the Believer" passed down through the centuries, most probably through the church liturgy, appears to have inspired the Turkic Christians of Ilbalyk to name at least one of their children after this famous queen.⁹

A similar naming connection may link the dual-named Baršabbā Quč with the fourth century missionary bishop to Merv. Mar Baršabbā also had a connection with a Sassanid dynasty queen. In this case, the queen of Shah Shapur II, Shirahan, was healed by Mar Baršabbā. Following the queen's baptism, the Shah exiled her to Merv. She, in turn, took Mar Baršabbā with her. The story, found in a document from the Turfan oasis, indicates Baršabbā's notoriety as he is credited with bringing the faith to Merv. It is conceivable that 900 years later Christians in Ilbalyk named one of their children after the famous bishop. While speculative, at the very least names such as Shirin and Baršabbā indicate a custom in choosing names linked to eastern Christianity in the Ili valley.¹⁰

⁷ It should be noted that Shirin is actually a Persian word meaning "sweet" however, it appears this word was later adopted into Old Turkic. Even today this word is found in the modern Turkic languages as a word for *juice* or *sweet*.

⁸ HUMPHREYS-AL-TABARĪ 1990, 89.

⁹ BAUM 2004. The name Shirin appears on three different gravestones from the Kyrgyzstan corpus, including one with the exact phrase in Syriac, "Shirin the believer." See ZHUMAGULOV 2014, 101-102; 399-400; 446-447.

¹⁰ BAUMER 2016, 72; 178.

Third, Charles Stewart's analysis of the gravestone iconography demonstrates a broader connection to the universal church and specifically the Calvary or True Cross reliquary located in Jerusalem (fig. 4).

While the relationship between Eastern and Western expressions of medieval Christianity is quite complex, the cross inscriptions show a variety of styles and an obvious connection with the Christian world to the West, and specifically with Jerusalem and possibly Rome. In other words, the Christian iconography at Ilbalyk, and Semireche or Zhetisu as a whole, suggests they were part of the greater Christian global network during the period in question.



fig. 4.

Fourth, names on the Ilbalyk gravestones indicate a generational and organized church community, with specific theological connections. Petros the priest is a biblical name likely associated with the Apostle Peter. Baršabbā Quč, a rare dual name with both Syriac (Son of Sabbath) and Turkic connections (Quč, Turkic for *strength* or *power*), is found on the original meter-long stone in 2014. This particular stone marks the grave of the priest Petros, the son of Tegin, the grandson of Baršabbā Quč—three generations. In addition, it is highly likely that Baršabbā Quč's own gravestone was found indicating that he was buried with Yoshmid the Priest.¹¹ This means that two stones make reference to the presence of clergy at Ilbalyk.¹² Thus, the gravestones discovered at Ilbalyk reveal a multi-generational, organized community of Turkic Christians. The human remains found to date also tell us that the community's children were buried with a distinct Christian cultural identity as proven by the small, simple and, at times crudely carved, stones and/or fired bricks which marked their graves.

Summary Explanation of Human Remains at the Ilbalyk Cemetery

Initial excavations revealed predominately children's graves, with only two adult graves found in 2018. However, it is now known that adults were buried in the cemetery, on average, 40 cm lower than children. Subsequent excavations of the

¹¹ There is a slight spelling discrepancy with the name Baršabbā Quč/Qučā on the large meter-long "Petros Stone" found in 2014 with the green "Yoshmid Stone" found in 2017. However, as Dickens has pointed out, such misspellings are not unusual in the Zhetisu gravestone corpus. The highly unusual dual name and the provenance of the *kayraks* makes it quite likely that Baršabbā Quč and Baršabbā Qučā are the same person. For an example of the name "Baršabbā" found on a Sassanid era seal which may demonstrate a Persian link with the first half of this dual name, see GYSELEN 2006, 17-78 as quoted in ASHUROV 2018, 257-295. The name Baršabbā and its variation Basava is found in among the collection of stones from modern Kyrgyzstan along with the dual name Baršabbā Mumin, see ZHUMAGULOV 2014, 27.

¹² The gravestone corpus in the Zhetisu region has a high proportion of gravestones with inscriptions naming priests, see DICKENS 2009, 13-49.

The seven stones included two with written inscriptions utilizing Syriac letters—one in Syriac language, the other in Old Turkic. The following season, an additional eight stones were found with one containing a very clear inscription in Old Turkic with Syriac script. Despite the obvious evidence for a cemetery due to the close proximity of the stones and even analysis using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), no actual graves were found until the third season of excavations in 2018.

Archaeologists determined to penetrate the soil at even lower levels and the team found nine additional *kayraks*, none with writings, yet all with cross inscriptions. This time, archaeologists also found 33 graves, mostly of children, in the location of the gravestone finds. Rather quickly, excavators determined that these graves indicate a homogeneous culture and were connected to the *kayraks* based on proximity and interment practices. The following year (2019), a further 45 graves were exposed with 30 being adult remains with four *in situ* gravestones discovered in and among the remains.

The 2019 excavations enabled archaeologists to make initial determinations on the size and scope of the cemetery. This has proven a challenge since any surface indications disappeared most probably at the start of the 1930s when the region became a Soviet collective farm. Such activity appears to have demolished any visible grave mounds or other features. It is also probable that this agricultural activity resulted in the removal or displacement of many of the gravestones. Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) surveys have also proven inconclusive in determining the limits of the cemetery. However, based on careful exposure of the soil, aided by a providential rainfall at the beginning of the 2019 excavations, grave chambers started to become visible from the soil, revealing mudbrick features as well as faint outlines of various grave pits. Once the archaeological team made this discovery, a water sprayer provided “additional rain” making grave identification significantly easier. In addition to the 80 excavated graves, a further 25 skulls (mostly juveniles) were visible from the exposed surface. Features seen in the soil of the current excavation area (Area C, which measures approximately 1200 m²) may reveal an additional 145 graves.

Further test trenches also helped determine the northern and southern boundaries of the cemetery. Therefore, initial conservative estimates incorporating these boundaries together with the highest concentration of *kayrak* finds mean that the cemetery measures 60 m north-to-south by 70 m east-to-west or an area incorporating 4200 m². If the concentration of burials as recorded in Area C (the site of the current excavations) is consistent at 0.14 burials per square meter, this means that the cemetery could contain as many 588 burials. If these estimates are

correct, it would be the largest excavated Church of the East cemetery ever found.⁵

The *Kayraks* of Ilbalyk

Before providing details on the grave excavations, setting the context of the cemetery's gravestone finds is necessary. Of the 34 stones discovered so far, three contain fully decipherable inscriptions. One stone is cut (probably by an industrial plow) and can only be partially translated. Three of the inscribed stones are in Old Turkic, the other in Syriac (fig. 3).

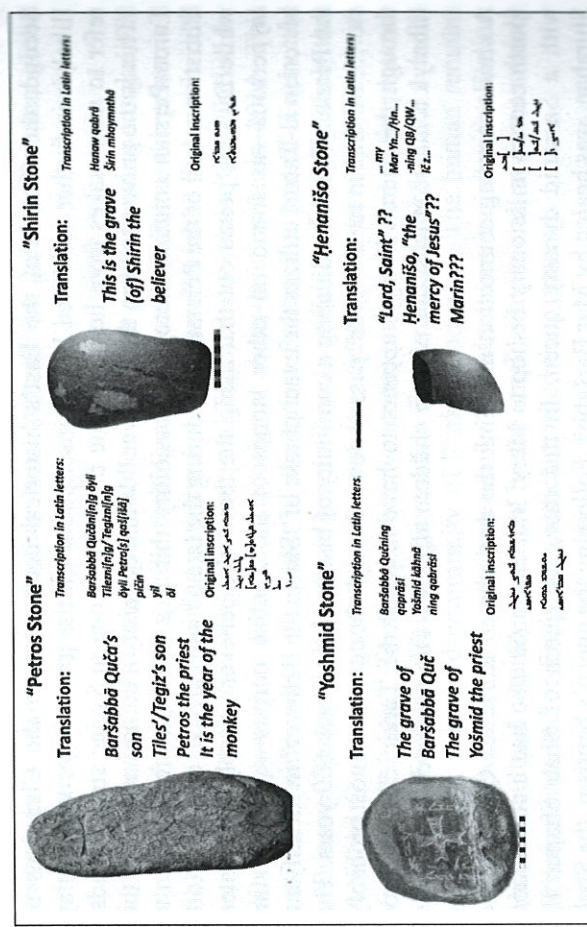


fig. 3

Dr. Mark Dickens, a foremost Church of the East scholar has translated all four of the stones. Dr. Charles Stewart, an archaeologist on the Tandy team and Associate Professor of Art History at Benedictine College, USA, has also provided an analysis of the cross iconography. The descriptions below are based on their translation and investigations.⁶

⁵ Such a claim is qualified by the fact that the Russian imperial excavator Pantusov's records from the 1880s are not complete. In addition, no cemetery has ever been found in the vicinity of the known churches excavated in Ak-Beshim (ancient Suyab) in 1954 and 1994 in Kyrgyzstan, but rather burials were discovered within the two churches found on that site.

⁶ For a full discussion on the translation of the *kayraks* and their analysis see DICKENS & GILBERT forthcoming (2022); as well as the Ilbalyk preliminary field reports via the Society for the Exploration of Eurasia website, Archaeological Expertise 2017 & 2018.

fortified administrative center—appearing as undulating hills to the untrained eye. Prior to the discovery of our large stone, the only digging apart from farmers on the site was the occasional treasure hunter, whose coin hordes sold via the internet, eventually enabled archaeologists in Kazakhstan to accurately hypothesize that this city just 53 kilometers across the mountains from the former capitol of the Chagatai Mongol khanate of Almalyk was the city of Ilibalyk.¹ The name is derived from the Turco-Persian roots: “Ili” for *hook* and “Balik” for city, or specifically, “City along the Hook River.” This large urban area, while actually 24 km from the Ili River in antiquity, proved to be the largest medieval city in the Ili River Valley.

Other than a few historical references to the city, nothing excepting the most general information was known of Ilibalyk or its inhabitants. Numismatic evidence indicates that it was under Karluk rule and specifically the Muslim rulers of the Karakhanid dynasty of the 11th century, just as most of the Zhetisu (Semirechye) area of today’s southeastern Kazakhstan and northwestern Kyrgyzstan.² Eventually, the Mongols asserted their suzerainty over the region—first under the united Mongol khanate and then under the rule of Chagatai, Chinggis Khan’s son and his successors—which is also borne out in the evidence of the coinage. Currently, best estimates attribute occupation of the city from the 8th to the first half of the 15th centuries (fig. 1³).

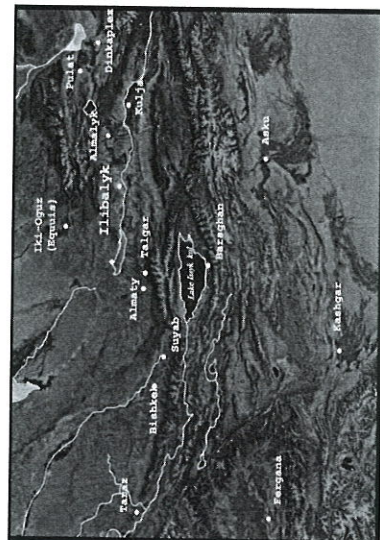


Fig. 1

¹ PETROV ET AL 2014, 61-76. Ilibalyk has a number of variant spellings depending upon the source, Persian *Ilanbalyk*; Armenian *Ilanbalek*; Chinese *I-li-ba-li*.

² While internationally the area is referred to as *Semirechye*, which is the Russian words for “Seven Rivers” referring to the seven rivers flowing from the Tien Shan mountains that make up the region stretching throughout southeast Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan, the local designation with the same translation is *Zhetisu*.

³ All figures in this paper are provided by the current author. The original photos are in colour. See figure captions at the end of this paper.

Thanks to the facilitation of American NGO worker Kevin White and Kazakhstani archaeologists Dr. Dmitry Voyakin and the late Professor Karl Baipakov; an international expedition began initial surveys and excavations on the territory of Usharal-*Ilibalyk*.⁴ Sponsorship for the project came from Dr. Christoph Baumer’s Society of the Exploration of Eurasia and the Tandy Institute for Archaeology, under the auspices of Dr. Stephen Ortiz and Dr. Thomas Davis in the United States provided archaeological teams. Local Kazakhs from around the country and even inhabitants from Usharal itself have all labored together since the project began in 2016.

An entire topographical survey of the site revealed the remains of the city covering approximately 5,000 square meters including the typical inner and outer walls incorporating the *shahristan*, the fortified administrative area. Excavations in this area demonstrated at least two phases of occupation from the 13th and 14th centuries as well as a monumental bath house. Extensive pottery finds of glazed fine ware both in the *shahristan* as well as in the area of the *rabad* neighborhoods (areas outside the inner wall) revealed signs of skilled craftsmanship and extensive kilns that produced both metal and ceramic goods.

Identification of a Church of the East Cemetery

At the conclusion of the 2016 season, while conducting a field survey north of the main site, archaeologists discovered more inscribed gravestones—known in archaeological contexts in Central Asia and Mongolia as *kayraks*—in a concentrated area approximately 2,000 meters from the old city center beyond the northeastern *rabad* (fig. 2).

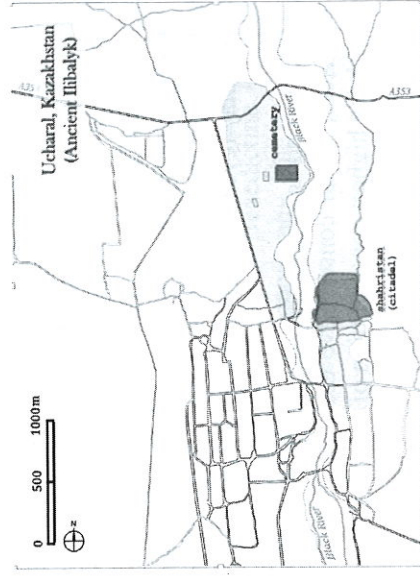


fig. 2

⁴ Usharal designates the name of the current village which lies partially on the site located in the Panfilov district of the Almaty Oblast, 11 kilometers west of the administrative capitol of Zharkent.

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THE CHURCH OF THE EAST CEMETERY AT ILIBALYK

Steven T. Gilbert

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Since 2018, an international team of archaeologists have excavated the human remains of more than 80 graves at Usharal-Ilibalyk near Zharkent, Kazakhstan. This marked the first excavation of a cemetery of a Christian community in Central Asia—most likely associated with the Church of the East—in more than 130 years. This paper will provide an initial survey of the findings as it pertains to the methods of interment, grave goods, and evidence of funerary meals. While analysis continues, particularly in the area of forensics and DNA samples, initial observations demonstrate that homogeneous burial practices combined with the find spots of the gravestones confirm that those buried in the cemetery are directly connected to the stones themselves, which provide clear evidence of a significant Church of the East cemetery of the indigenous population dating to the 13th and 14th centuries.

In 2014, a Kazakh school teacher in the Panfilov district of southeast Kazakhstan, just a few kilometers from the Chinese border, reported the discovery of a large meter-long stone of gray granite which contained a Maltese-shaped cross (sometimes referred to as the True Cross, or Calvary Cross) along with an accompanying unknown inscription to the Archaeological Institute of Kazakhstan. The Institute sent a worker to retrieve the stone, located in an old melon patch just outside of the small village of Usharal, a former Soviet collective farm founded in the early 1930s.

Both villagers and local archaeologists knew that a significant population had lived in this fertile area in previous centuries located between two small streams, the Karasu and Dirgulyk —offshoots of the nearby Ili and Osek Rivers. Often when villagers dug a foundation for a new home or plowed in the field, they found whole pottery vessels and rumors circulated about the discovery of an occasional human body. Most of the local farmers viewed the cultural material as insignificant at best and a nuisance at worst, getting in the way of growing crops. The area just north of the village obviously provided evidence of previous human occupation as indicated by the massive blanket of pottery sherds and even the quite visible portion of mudbrick wall that snaked along the eastern stream.

Despite the 70 years of agricultural activity, small mounds of former structures are still visible, particularly in the 380 X 350-meter *shahrستان*—the innermost,

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PREFACE

The Salzburg International Conference series on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia has been running for almost two decades. Beginning in 2003 in Salzburg, it takes place in normal circumstances every three years in Salzburg. However, the conference of 2019 was a special occasion, as it took place in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Given all the recent exciting archaeological discoveries of medieval Syriac Christianity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, we, the organisers of the conference decided to hold our 6th triennial conference in Kazakhstan in Central Asia, thus bringing scholars and scholarly discussions closer to both the archaeological sites and the artefacts *in situ*.

Such an adventurous plan would not have been successfully executed without the cooperation of our collaborators from Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan to whom our big thanks are due. Among them, the names of two colleagues who played an important role in co-planning the conference and facilitating its sections are particularly worth mentioning: Kevin White, head of the Department of Nestorian Studies, Kazakhstan Archaeological Institute of Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences and Dr. Dmitriy Voyakin, director of the International Institute for Central Asian Studies in Samarkand by the UNESCO Silk Road Programme.

From June 20 to 26, 2019, about fifty people from academic institutions in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America participated in the 6th Salzburg International Conference on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia. What is more, as a noteworthy addition to the conference, scholars from Central Asia, especially, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan joined us and presented their papers during the conference. A total of thirty-five papers covering a wide range of topics related to Syriac Christianity were presented at the conference. The participants also benefited from a field trip to the newly excavated site of a medieval Christian cemetery in Usharal (Ilbalyk) near Zharkent, Kazakhstan.

The current volume is a collection of the revised papers which were originally presented at the Almaty conference in 2019. The papers can be divided into four areas of research focus: archaeological discovery, textual studies, historical perspective and theological reflection. Recent archaeological excavations of medieval Christian sites in Central Asia and China have come to the forefront of our attention. Two newly excavated sites have yielded some exciting results recently: the Syriac Christian cemetery in Usharal in Eastern Kazakhstan and the

Photo: Gravestone, Usharal-Ilibalyk/Kazakhstan, 17 × 28 × 95 cm, discovered 2014 (courtesy of: Archaeological Expertise LLP, Almaty)

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