

## ARTICLE

# Excavating a Silk Road City: the Medieval Citadel of Taraz, Kazakhstan

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The city of Taraz, located near the southern border with Uzbekistan, is one of the most significant historic settlements in Kazakhstan, and two seasons of fieldwork in the central market-place have revealed a substantial depth of medieval stratigraphy. Despite frequent mentions in Arabic and Chinese written sources, both the form and evolution of this important Silk Road city remain poorly understood. Evidence for a series of successive medieval buildings, including a bathhouse and a Zoroastrian flame shrine, was found in the area of the former citadel. These excavations, undertaken as a joint initiative between the Centre for Applied Archaeology and Kazakh archaeologists, were the first for 50 years in the city and form part of a wider public outreach programme.

The aim of the 2011–2012 excavation in the central market in Taraz city (Figs 1 and 2), undertaken as a joint venture between Archaeological Expertise (AE), Kazakhstan, and the Centre for Applied Archaeology (CAA) of the UCL Institute of Archaeology, was to identify remains worthy of *in situ* preservation and conservation, which could be displayed as a permanently covered archaeological exhibition in the city centre. The excavation was only one element of the overall initiative, with education and public outreach also important parts (Fig. 3). The ultimate intention of the joint venture is to assist in developing tourism initiatives based on archaeological resources of the city, and to raise awareness, amongst the local population, of the significance of local heritage, and its protection and management.



**Fig. 1:** Location of Taraz in Central Asia.

## Historical and archaeological background

Taraz, located in the Zhambyl province of southern Kazakhstan, is traditionally believed to have been founded in the 1st century AD, although the earliest historical reference to the city, by a Byzantine writer describing an embassy sent by Emperor Justinian II to the

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**Fig. 2:** The excavation at Taraz city was located in the bustling heart of the central market.

Talas valley, dates to 568 AD (Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 282). Thereafter the city is frequently mentioned in both Arabic and Chinese sources as a major settlement, and its size and significance is undoubtedly attributable to its location between the Talas and Asa rivers on a major Silk Road route between Otrar and Balasagun (Moldakynov, 2010: 10; Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 254–255).

Previous archaeological excavations in Taraz, located in and around the modern market-place, have identified buildings and structures associated with the former citadel of the medieval city. These include an 'eastern' domed bathhouse with evidence of wall paintings, excavated in 1938, and a 'western' bathhouse, found during the construction of the covered market in the late 1960s (Moldakynov, 2010: 14–15). The current excavation, measuring c.26m by 16m, was located around the southern end of the latter bathhouse, adjacent to the covered market building, and within the area of the former medieval citadel.

### Archaeological excavation method and dating

The excavation was undertaken by a joint team of AE staff and UCL staff and students, in the winter of 2011 and the summer of 2012 (**Fig. 4**). The UCL team utilised the single-context recording system, developed in London in the 1970s and 1980s for the excavation of complex urban sequences (Museum of London, 1990), as well as undertaking hand-drawn building elevations and plans of the exposed structures.

The dating of structures and features recorded on the site is both provisional and tentative. However, the best interpretation for the occupation of the site is between the 9th century and the end of the 12th century, based on the spot-dating of the artefact assemblage and a C14 radiocarbon date obtained on a charcoal sample taken from the soot-covered hypocaust of the latest building, the *hamam* (Building 4).



**Fig. 3:** Public outreach is an important part of the Taraz project and the site has attracted a great deal of media interest both in Kazakhstan and further afield.

## Results

### *Phase 1: 7th-8th centuries; Citadel walls*

The earliest structure identified in the excavation consisted of truncated portions of mudbrick walls in the north-west corner of the site, possibly representing parts of the citadel circuit, tentatively dated to the 7th to 8th centuries (**Figs 5 and 6**). The later wall was built directly on top of the earlier wall and was constructed, at least partially, of alternating grey and yellow mudbrick courses. Individual mudbrick courses were not visible in the earlier wall.

These walls were only partially seen and had been exposed by the excavation of a very large later pit. This was the deepest intervention on the site (c.3.5m below ground level), and it is highly likely that further structures

of contemporary date lay below the later buildings described below (Buildings 1–4).

### *Phase 2: 9th-10th centuries; Buildings 1 and 2*

Only part of Building 1 was seen in the excavation area, although it seemed to be L-shaped with the long axis aligned north-west to southeast. Building 2 occupied a similar alignment to the northeast and between the two buildings there may have been an alleyway or street, although no evidence of any surfacing was found. The walls of both buildings were constructed of alternate layers of mud plaster and river-rolled stone cobble with a trench-built foundation.

At least four small rooms were identifiable in Building 1 and the two central rooms seem to have been a shrine and a workshop: in Room B was a mud plaster D-shaped flame shrine and in Room C were the remains of three small furnaces (**Figs 6– 8**). Both rooms had been laid with gravel metalled floors which were later repaired with mud plaster.

Both Rooms A and D may have been open to the street to the north-east, and possibly represent entrances. These rooms had mud plaster benches, as opposed to the mud plaster and stone cobble benches found in Rooms B and C. They were also distinctive from Rooms B and C in that no flooring material was identifiable within these rooms. The walls of Room A utilised noticeably fewer stone cobbles in its construction than the walls to the south, suggesting that this was a different phase, possibly a later extension to an existing structure.

Building 2 is less well understood, with only fragmentary parts visible beneath the unexcavated masonry of the later bathhouse (Building 4). The building had at least two rooms floored with stone slabs and a wall built of mud plaster and stone cobble. Although much of the layout was obscured, the building appeared to be aligned north-east to south-west, with a 4m-wide gap between Buildings 1 and 2, possibly representing an alleyway.



**Fig. 4:** UCL students excavating at Taraz under the purpose-built shelter.

**Phase 3: 10th-12th centuries; Building 3**

After the demolition of Buildings 1 and 2, a large stone building (Building 3) was constructed in this area of the citadel (**Fig. 5**). Building 3 was built in an entirely different manner with split-stone blocks faces and a river-rolled stone cobble core. No contemporary internal walls or floor surfaces survived, and there was no indication of the building's function, although immediately to the north were three conjoined lengths of ceramic water pipe, suggesting that this building had access to running water. Similarly, the absence of large finds assemblages associated with Building 3 greatly restricted the dating of the structure, and the best estimate for its occupation, between the 10th and 12th centuries, is based on its stratigraphic position between the better-dated earlier and later buildings.

Although this building was definitely later than Building 2, it had no stratigraphic relationship with Building 1, and it is feasible that Buildings 1 and 3 were, for a time, con-

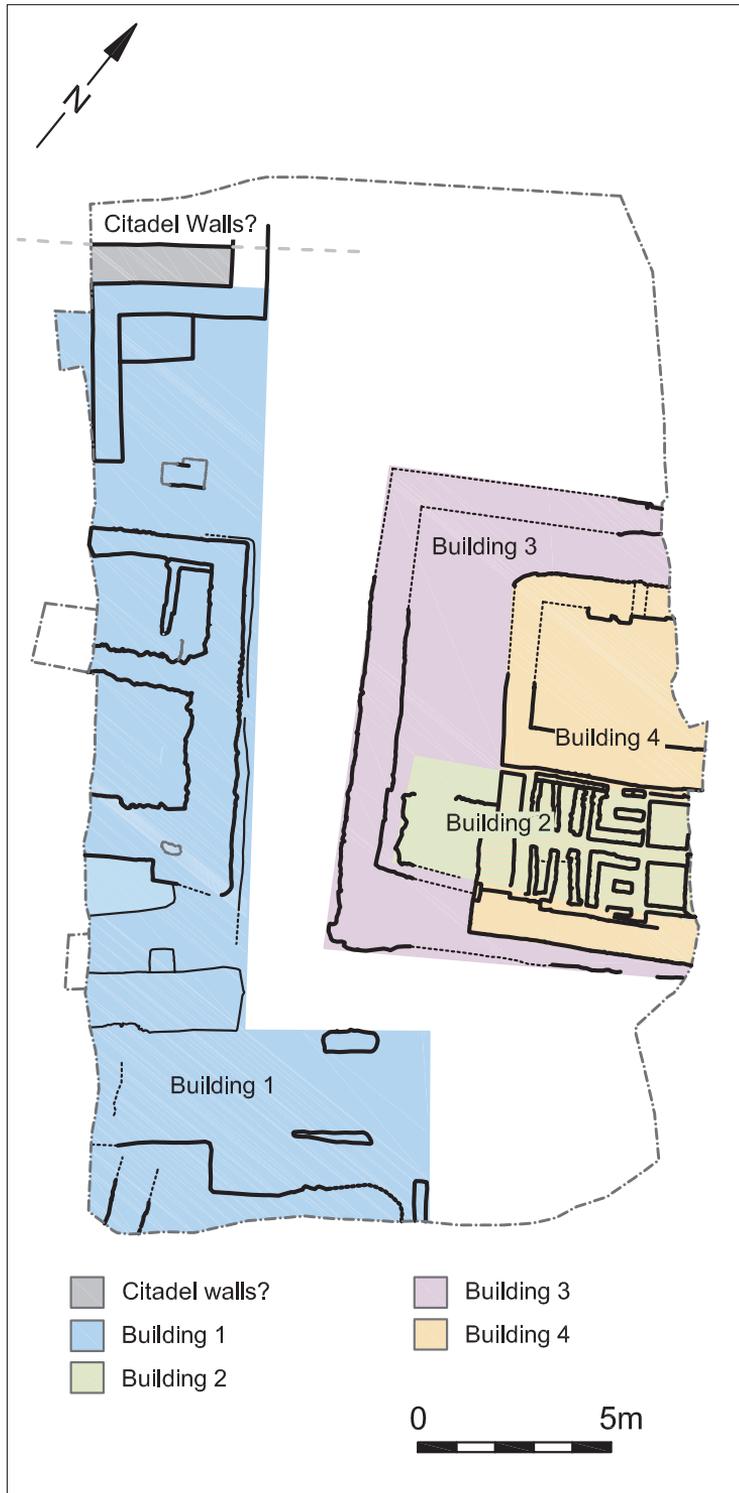
temporary structures separated by a narrow alleyway (2.5m wide).

In the southern corner of the site was a short, truncated length of wall, built in the same stone block and cobble manner as Building 3, and this may well represent a contemporary structure, although too little survived to draw any firm conclusions about its form.

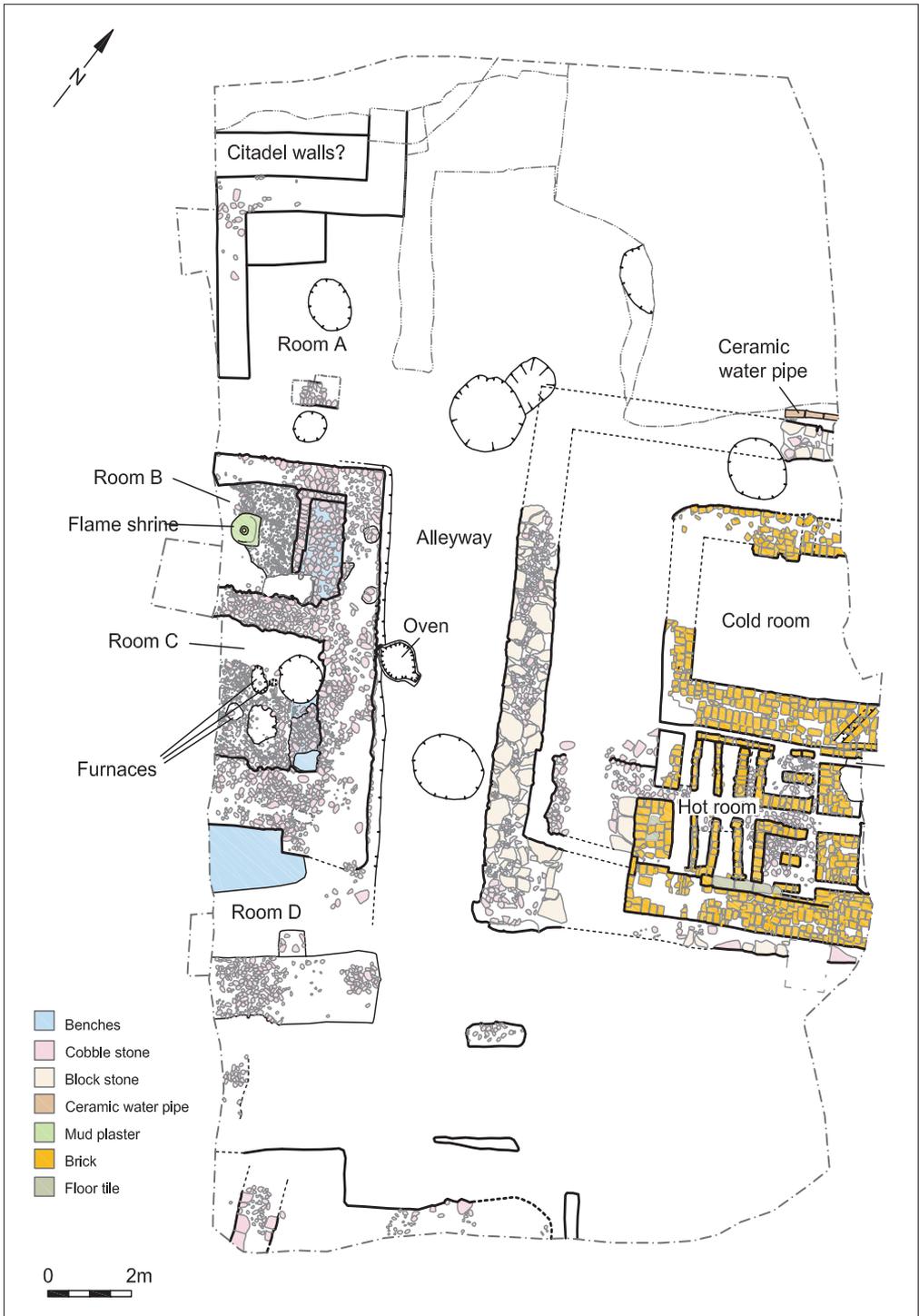
**Phase 4: 11th-12th centuries; Building 4**

The latest and best understood structure was Building 4, the bathhouse or *hamam* (**Figs 5 and 9**). The south-western end of this ceramic brick building lay within the excavation and consisted of two rooms: a cold room to the north-west, and a hot room to the south-east. The cold room had a rectangular aperture, possibly a drain, built into the northern wall.

Within the hot room was a hypocaust, with a yellow ceramic tile floor suspended by a series of dwarf walls. The bathhouse furnaces would have been located beyond the



**Fig. 5:** Taraz site plan (2012).



**Fig. 6:** Rooms B, C and D of Building 1.



**Fig. 7:** The flame shrine in Room B of Building 1.



**Fig. 8:** The workshop (Room C) of Building 1, with three small furnaces.

limits of excavation to the north-east. There were three wall flues, for venting the hot air, located in the south-west.

A C14 radiocarbon date was obtained on a charcoal sample taken from the soot deposit adhering to the dwarf walls of the hypocaust flues. This produced a late 12th-century date (SUERC-38682; 910±30 BP) for the last use of the *hamam* and, as this was stratigraphically the latest structure, it provides a *terminus ante quem* for the occupation of the site.

Other features, mainly to the south-east, may have been contemporary with the *hamam*, mostly cutting through the remains of the earlier buildings. These features were mostly pits and contained large amounts of pottery, as well as other finds (Figs 10 and 11). Other notable features were a circular oven and well.

## Discussion

The excavation exposed a succession of four buildings, dating from the 9th to 12th centuries, and representing at least three constructional phases. Each of the three phases utilised a different building material (mud plaster and stone cobble; stone block and stone cobble; ceramic brick) and ushered in a major reconstruction in this area of the citadel. As all four buildings were unexcavated, some of the stratigraphic relationships and dating are more tentative than others.

Confidence in the interpretation of the function of the individual buildings varies greatly: Building 4 was without doubt a bathhouse, whereas too little of Buildings 2 and 3 was seen (or survived) to make any certain interpretation.

Although the majority of Building 1 was located beyond the limits of the excavation, enough was uncovered to make some suggestions about its form and use. The three small furnaces in Room C would not have been in contemporary use, but rather successive replacements, and indicate that part of the building was a probably a workshop.

The similarities between Rooms A and D suggest they may have had a similar function



**Fig. 9:** The brick-by-brick recording of the *hamam* bathhouse (Building 4).

and, as both had open fronts onto the alleyway, they may have been small shops, possibly the retail space for the adjacent workshop.

Flame shrines, like the D-shaped mud plaster feature in Room B, are known from the medieval city of Kostobe, also in the Talas valley, and are often found in highly decorated rooms (Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 373–375). Although there was no evidence of any decoration in Room B, these flame shrines seem to be related to a fire cult, likely to be a late and somewhat simple form of Zoroastrian fire worship. The Central Asian variant of Zoroastrianism borrowed much from local Turkic cults and was especially preoccupied with reverence of fire, families and animals (Baipakov, no date: 196).

Although the 9th and 10th centuries witnessed the rapid advancement of Islam through the Talas valley, Zoroastrianism continued to be a presence (Baipakov, no date: 196). Both the simplicity and the small size



**Fig. 10:** Part of the exceptionally large ceramic assemblage from the Taraz excavation.



**Fig. 11:** A notable find at Taraz was a copper-alloy animal paw, from one of the numerous refuse pits

of the room, as well as the location between a workshop and a shop, suggest that this shrine was for domestic rather than public use.

Building 1 clearly had a variety of functions: retail, manufacture and religious. In addition, the close similarities in both the initial construction of Rooms C and D, and the later floor repairs, perhaps indicates that the shrine and the workshop had the same owner, who is also likely to have had possession of the two adjacent shops.

Building 4 was the south-western end of a bathhouse or *hamam* building which had been previously located to the north, and is locally known as the 'second' bathhouse, due to its later discovery. The 'first' or 'eastern' bathhouse, excavated in 1938 by A.N. Bernshtam, was of a very different structure, being square in plan, domed and richly decorated with geometric murals, although the discovery of a hoard of 11th-century silver coins within the baths suggests that it was more or less contemporary with the 'second' or 'western' bathhouse (Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 303–304).

The 'second' or 'western' bathhouse was rectangular in plan, between 9m and 13m wide and at least 20m long, quartered into four rooms: two hot and two cold. The hot rooms were located in opposite corners and were constructed with a near identical layout of hypocaust walls and wall flues. One of the cold rooms, excavated in the late 1960s, contained a furnace, housings for copper water tanks and the remains of the external water supply via ceramic pipes (Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 308); unfortunately, all of the internal features of the cold room revealed in the current excavation had been truncated by modern disturbance.

The excavation, although limited in area (c.400m<sup>2</sup>), clearly demonstrated the abundance of stratified archaeological deposits of the medieval citadel that survive under the area of the modern market-place between Avenues Tole and Adambaeva.

In addition, it is clear from the results that there is a complexity of intercutting structures dating to the later period (9th to 12th

centuries) of the medieval city, all located within 2.5m below the existing ground level. The depth of underlying archaeological stratigraphy is still unknown, but undoubtedly earlier elements of the city, for instance the two mudbrick walls [576] and [577], lie preserved beneath these four buildings.

There was no evidence for occupation on the site after c.1200 and, although the later 13th and 14th centuries were periods of political instability, it is believed that the city did continue in a reduced form until the beginning of the 15th century (Baipakov *et al.*, 2011: 308). However, the uppermost medieval deposits on site had almost certainly suffered a degree of modern truncation and any remains dating to the final two centuries of the city may well have been lost.

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