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Connecting Central Asia and Western China. Roads and Networks through the Karategin Valley

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Olivier Bordeaux

Arnaud Bertrand et Ségolène de Pontbriand



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Dr. Olivier Bordeaux is an archaeologist and numismatist. He specializes in Central Asia, with a focus on the Hellenistic, Yuezhi and Kushan periods from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE. He was appointed deputy director of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan (DAFA) between 2017 and 2019, before being recruited by the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in 2020. He is currently a CNRS Research Fellow (CRCN) in the UMR 7041 laboratory Archéologies et Sciences de l'Antiquité ('ArScAn'), as part of the 'Archéologie de l'Asie centrale' team. Since 2021, he has been excavating in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as part of the Mission Archéologique Française au Tadjikistan Méridional (MAFTM), Mission Archéologique Française en Asie Centrale (MAFAC) and 'Bactriane' archaeological missions. Furthermore, he is the scientific coordinator of the ANR FRONTIER project (ANR-23-CE27-0002; 2024–2027). His scientific work has been published in the *Revue Numismatique*, *Monuments Piot*, *Topoi Orient-Occident* and *Археологические работы в Таджикистане*, and he was awarded the Prix Roman et Tania Ghirshman by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.

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Connecting Central Asia and Western China:

Roads and
Networks through
the Karategin Valley

INTRODUCTION

Where to draw the boundary of an empire? In the context of Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Northwest China), which combines the steppe and the oasis world, the territorial cohesion of the great empires is based on a policy of intense and multi-scalar expansion, as well as on the emergence of large exchange networks. Nevertheless, the centre-periphery approach only partially accounts for the notion of frontier; here, understood as a zone of contact with or without a specified boundary line, namely, its manifestation, perception and permeability, culturally and materially as well as geographically.

Our research topic is thus part of a broader study of the borderlands of Central Asian empires during Antiquity. The period between the fifth century BCE and the fifth century CE saw the emergence and establishment of vast empires in Central Asia and China. While long-ranged contacts and exchanges within and across Central Asia have been well established, peripheral areas (passes, high valleys, deserts) have often been neglected for lack of interest and data, or difficulties in conducting fieldwork. The main objective of this project is to leave the relatively well-known heartlands of Central Asia to highlight the interactions taking place in more remote areas.

Research approach

This project focuses on the compilation of available bibliographical data from Russian and Chinese academic publications, with the latter focused particularly on the relevant chronological periods, that is, the Silk Roads during Antiquity. Indeed, this investigation highlights the documented trade and circulation routes from Uzbekistan to Northwest China through the Pamir, the Karakoram and the Tianshan mountain ranges, as well as on both sides of the Tarim Basin.

The proposed location for this research topic, the Karategin (or Rasht) Valley, is poorly known despite its strategic importance from Antiquity to the present day (Figure 1). This valley is situated in Northern Tajikistan, connecting it to China via Kyrgyzstan. The compilation of published data⁴² from archaeological surveys and maps is based on reference works in that field of study. Namely, the compilation comprises archaeological maps published in Russian (Bubnova, 1997 and 2015), annual or biannual reports issued in Tajikistan (see 'References' section), as well as national surveys undertaken in Western China (see 'Methodology' section).

The projected survey aimed to identify around 50 to 100 sites. We expected to find materials (ceramics, carved stones, such as column bases, and possibly coins), tombs and cemeteries, and architectural remains acting as cultural markers. The national archaeological survey volumes published in Chinese contain essential untranslated information related to the research question addressed by this project. The study undertaken sought to link known sites with their precise geolocation, including bibliographical references. This novel database is entirely unprecedented

and, crucially, it will help quantify human settlements during that time. Initiated in 2022, further work is still required to complete the database, but it has already revealed the close network of fortresses and settlements along the northern and southern routes in the Tarim Basin.



Figure 1. The Karategin Valley in central Tajikistan, between Garm and Jirgatal.

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The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

This new dataset will allow this work-package to overcome the challenge of limited, exploitable and contextualized data on the peripheral areas in Central Asia during Antiquity. It will also allow for a broader view of material culture and architectural features, which will serve as a basis for comparative studies. In addition, the identification of routes and passages will not be limited to a simple compilation, but also to an analysis of their dynamics (formation, emergence, abandonment) during the period under study.

State of research

The Karategin Valley has been archaeologically explored during two main time periods: the mid-1950s and between the late 1970s and 1980s. These surveys were undertaken by the A. Donish Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography (IHAET) under the National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, which was created

in 1951. At that time, Tajikistan, which was part of the USSR as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, began a series of archaeological surveys throughout the country to identify its cultural heritage. Operations were conducted in the cities of Penjikent, Khodjent, Kulob (or Khathlon), among others.

The first explorations in the Karategin Valley were conducted by Anatolii M. Mandel'shtam, a specialist of the Bronze Age and Antiquity in Central Asia, who notably wrote extensively about the Yuezhi and Kushans. His archaeological and historical research covers several of the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia. Mandel'shtam led two survey campaigns in the Karategin in 1954 and 1955, and he later published his results in the Tajik national journal dedicated to archaeology: *Arheologičeskie raboty v Tadžikistane* (Mandel'shtam, 1956a and 1956b).

From an archaeologist's point of view, these surveys were unfortunately disappointing. Although the research team was able to identify several sites in the valley, including some fortresses (Kala u sei. Nušori Bolo, Kalača ũžnee s. Fathabad, Kalai Šohon)⁴³, nothing of real interest was found. Indeed, it is quite possible that most of the archaeological sites present near the riverbed had been washed away by floods from the Surkhob River, a phenomenon that had already been observed in the Zeravshan Valley in Western Tajikistan. In any event, these inconsequential discoveries did not encourage further exploration of the Karategin Valley, and Mandel'shtam and his team moved on to other research areas.

Interest in this valley was rekindled in the 1970s, which coincided with Tajikistan's agricultural and economic boom. Between 1959 and 1970, the population in the country grew from 2 million to 3 million, and land use developed exponentially. Echoing a phenomenon known in other parts of the world, notably in Europe, this led to a series of archaeological discoveries. Consequently, a new team was formed, led by historian and archaeologist, Yusufsho Ya. Yakubov, member of the National Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, to renew a survey of the valley. Yakubov thus led several survey and excavation campaigns from 1978 to 1986, with the help of M. Mullokandov and I. A. Maslov. These campaigns led to several crucial discoveries (Yakubov, 1984, 1986; Yakubov and Mullokandov, 1987; Yakubov and Maslov, 1991; Maslov, 2005).

The Karategin Valley team excavated the downstream side of the Surkhob, the site of Kalai Šohon, which had already been identified by A. M. Mandel'shtam. The site comprises a small fortress located on the bank of the second terrace, high above the floodplain of the Surkhob River. It has an almost regular quadrangular shape and is surrounded on three sides (north, east and south) by stone and clay walls; the west side is adjacent to the terrace cliff and has no wall. At the four corners, there are square towers measuring 4 x 4 metres. The entrance to the fortress is clearly located in the northwest corner. The monument is relatively well preserved: the remains of the walls are 1 to 2 metres in height, while the preserved towers are

up to 2.5 metres. To the south of the fortress, at a distance of around 10 metres, is a small oval-shaped hill with a rectangular depression at its centre. Unfortunately, the site cannot be dated, but it appears to date from Antiquity.

Another site close to Kalai Šohon is Kalai-Imlok (or 'Darband'), which is located on three hills of different sizes at the confluence of the Surkhob and Obikhingou rivers. This fortress has a maximum length of 300 m and a maximum width of 210 m. The fortification walls, whose thickness can be up to 4.50 m, consist of a high rampart that includes 21 defensive towers. The mudbrick dimensions of these walls are approximately 50/52 x 25/28 x 8/12 cm. Crucially, the ceramic material discovered during the excavations dates to the Kushan period and closely resembles finds unearthed in Termez (on the Afghan-Uzbek border) and Kalai Mir (in the lower Vakhsh Valley in Tajikistan). These pot sherds can also be compared to the material found in Ajina-Tepe, Penjikent and Afrasiab (Samarqand). Located at a high altitude (approximately 1,200 m) in this valley, this fortress is a significant landmark of the Kushan period.

On the upstream side of the Surkhob River, near the village of Lâhš, more than 20 tumuli or *kurgans* (nomadic tombs) have been found close together. Two ensembles, named Lâhš I and II, have been identified. The largest *kurgan* is 20 m in diameter and 1.5 m in height. Unfortunately, during the archaeological survey, it was discovered that several of the tombs had been looted, which is a common occurrence with these remains. Kurgan 3 contained an iron sword with a wooden handle and copper decoration. It was found in a wooden chest, on which a gold brooch was inlaid with carnelian (a semi-precious stone). However, the most significant find is a decorated silver bowl, which was found next to the head, alongside the remains of cotton fabric and ram bones. We will later return to this object.

Kurgan 10 is a burial pit measuring 220 x 90 cm. This tomb contained a bronze mirror with a short, pierced handle, a cosmetic bowl, an iron knife, bronze earrings, a clasp and pearls, and 4 gold leaf rosettes. No utensils were found in the *kurgan*, which suggests that they were probably made of wood and were therefore likely to have decomposed. Kurgan 21, which is 1.8 m deep, contained three skeletons and the bones of a ram, as well as a bracelet and cowrie shells (an ancient form of money). Finally, a *kurgan* with a female individual was excavated, which was found to contain carnelian and agate beads, as well as a female copper headdress (two circles joined by a thin plate). Both sites were dated to between the fourth and sixth centuries CE.

In the 1990s, the Rasht Valley, unfortunately, became the site of numerous battles during the Tajikistan Civil War (1992–1997), which led to recurring instability in the ensuing years. As a result, the IHAET archaeologists ceased their activities, which explains why this particular valley remained underexplored and poorly known to this day, despite its strategic importance since Antiquity and during the Medieval and Modern periods, as well as its key position between Central Asia and Western China.

METHODOLOGY

This work was carried out by Dr. Olivier Bordeaux, Dr. Arnaud Bertrand and Dr. Ségolène de Pontbriand. On the one hand, this research focused on the archaeological data gathered from Tajik publications (in Russian) related to the Karategin Valley and, on the other hand, on the national survey volumes (SAX, 2013; VRAX, 2012) published by Chinese archaeologists working in Western China. The methodology followed was therefore twofold and adaptative. Beyond the mere accumulation of data, it was essential to georeference the documented sites, centralize the information, and meticulously record the written sources and quoted bibliography.

The national survey volumes, mentioned earlier, often only provide a vague location of the sites. Nevertheless, the individual recordings of the sites are sufficiently detailed to locate them on satellite images. The example of Shayati (沙牙提古城) from the SAX volume refers to an archaeological site dating to Antiquity, our period of interest. The settlements belonging to the Han Dynasty are coloured in blue, as well as its approximate location on a map of Western China, county by county. The same site appears in the VRAX volume, which has no maps, but is, nonetheless, more detailed from an archaeological perspective; the record notably includes pictures and a sketch plan of the site. Based on this information, our work consisted of pinpointing the right location on Google Maps. Despite this time-consuming and tedious process, the resulting database is unique, unpublished, and extremely useful.

The bibliography covering archaeological sites in Tajikistan is twofold. As shown in the 'State of research' section, our primary source of information was *Arheologičeskie raboty v Tadžikistane*, an annual or biannual journal published since 1954. Furthermore, for the last 30 years, the IHAET has encouraged the publication of Tajikistan's archaeological map. Several regions have thus been covered (the Pamirs, the Zeravshan Valley, Jaloliddin Balkhi district, among others), although, unfortunately, not the Karategin Valley. Nonetheless, we have taken into account the valuable data from the Gorno-Badakhshan region; indeed, this information is essential for understanding the Silk Roads network during Antiquity, especially the extent to which the Karategin Valley or the Pamir passes were active at that time.

Once the data in the Karategin Valley had been gathered, the next step was to first conduct a survey based on the available satellite pictures and, secondly, on Soviet military maps on a 1:100,000 scale⁴⁴ and, when accessible, a 1:50,000 scale. These maps, edited between the 1950s and 1980s, sometimes indicate historical remains, such as fortresses, temples, ruins, etc. This research covers the Karategin Valley between Garm and Jirgatal, which is broadly located at an altitude of between 1200 m and 2000 m. The aerial survey (Figure 2) was conducted within the main and connected valleys, following a path indicated by the yellow line and secured through survey points (SP).



Figure 2. The survey points (SP) covered by the aerial survey.

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PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As shown in the previous section, several sites have been pinpointed from the downstream to the upstream part of the Karategin Valley thanks to the effective methodology adopted in this project. The work conducted thus far has led to the identification of 33 potential archaeological sites (23 on the right bank and 10 on the left bank). Accordingly, these sites have been indicated in our database (RD [rive droite] and RG [rive gauche], depending on their location, and given a unique number S [site]). Interestingly, these prospective sites are not concentrated in a specific area of the valley; rather, they are disseminated alongside the riverbed.

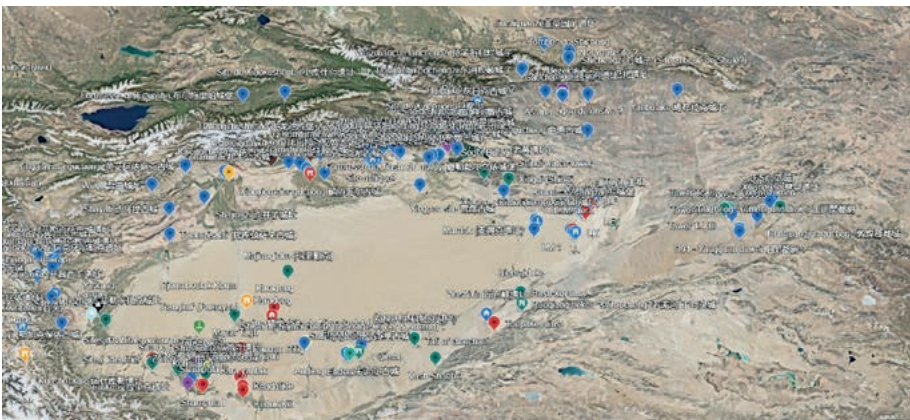


Figure 3. The geotagged database of Chinese archaeological sites belonging to Antiquity.

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All things considered, thanks to UNESCO's financial support, more than 220 archaeological sites were identified and geotagged, both in Central Asia and Western China (Figure 3). They are broadly distributed as follows: about 70 sites in the first category (Central Asia), and about 150 in the second (China). Our initial dataset, compiling about 150 sites, met the objective of our original application of identifying between 50 and 100 sites. Stepping back for a broader view of the bigger picture has been enlightening. We can see that the northern and southern roads around the Tarim Basin were heavily occupied and active during Antiquity.

This observation has several historical consequences. First of all, it confirms what we suspected: the existence of migration routes between Western China and Northern Pakistan through the 'Hanging Passages', for example, in the Ishkoman Valley in the Gilgit-Baltistan Mountain range (Neelis, 2007, 2011). These intense interactions can be seen from the material culture, for example, by the Sino-Kharosthi coins of Khotan, which combine both Indian and Chinese features (Cribb, 1984), or in the religious texts carried by Buddhist monks, who were active along these routes.

Secondly, from Dunhuang to Kashgar and Yarkand via Lulan, and beyond to Tashkurgan (meaning 'stone fortress'), along the northern Silk Roads, our research led to the discovery of dozens of sites. The Tarim Basin thus shows no evidence of a preferred route, as this depended on the destination. It is important to note that there were also significant sites in the oasis of the Taklamakan, such as Djumbulak Kum and Karadong (Debaine-Francfort and Idriss, 2001). There are many fortified settlements among these archaeological sites, which bear witness to the western expansion of the Chinese Empire, notably under Han rule (206 BCE–220 CE).

In the Karategin Valley, several fortresses were identified in the lower part of the valley, notably at Kalai-Imlok, which produced material from the Kushan period⁴⁵ (Mandel'shtam and Rozenfel'd, 1960; Yakubov and Maslov, 1991; Maslov and Yakubov, 1993, 2003; Maslov, 2005). Further downstream, in the Vakhsh Valley, more sites were identified (Zeimal', 1961, 1974). Additionally, *kurgans* or tombs have been found in

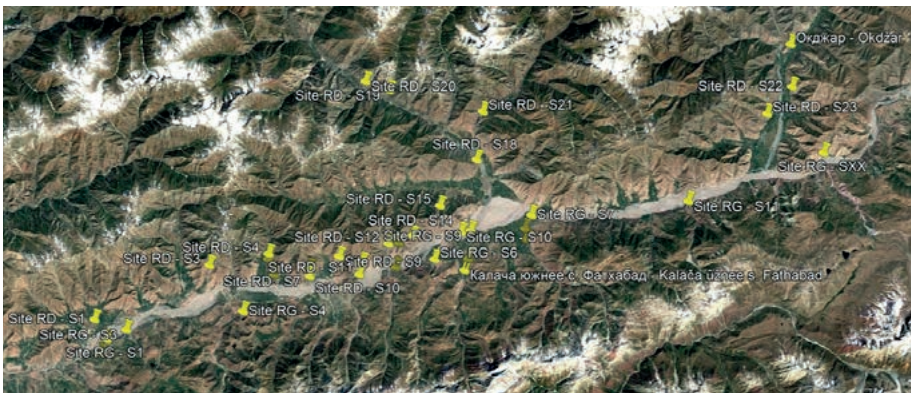


Figure 4. Results of the aerial survey in the Karategin Valley.

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the higher part of the valley, close to the villages of Lâhš and Oksai (Yakubov, 1984, 1986; Yakubov and Mullokandov, 1987). The material (jewellery, weaponry) found in these tombs clearly dates from Antiquity. In one of the tombs, an exceptional silver bowl decorated with Indian-style iconography was unearthed. This object testifies to the strong cultural links between this region and the Indian world.



Figure 5. Examples of surveyed possible sites, RD S10 and RG S6.

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As mentioned earlier, the aerial survey was a success. Figure 4 provides a general view of the inventoried sites, as well as some examples (Figure 5). Based on this new data, we can confidently conclude that this valley was a trade route, part of the overland Silk Roads between Western China and Central Asia. The density of sites, coupled with the materials found there, strongly supports this conclusion. This new data can be seen within the context of a valuable written source: the path followed by the caravan of Maes Titianos, a Macedonian trader, around 100 CE (Bernard, 2005). Maes Titianos was neither the first nor the last person to have taken this particular route in the Karategin Valley, which is notable for its fortresses and settlements established at relatively regular intervals, the most important of which was Daraut Kurgan ('stone tower'), whose precise location has yet to be determined.

This route was shared by Marinus of Tyre (c. 70–130 CE) to Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100–170 CE), who wrote about it in *Geography*⁴⁶. It follows the caravan from the ancient Greek city of Hierapolis (in present-day Turkey) to the city of Wuwei (*Sera Metropolis*) in China, the Near East, the Iranian plateau and Central Asia. When the caravan arrived in the Oxus Valley, specifically in Bactra, Paul Bernard, a French archaeologist, was of the opinion that it went to Termez in the Surkhan-darya Valley, then on to the Kafirnigan Valley, to finally join the Vakhsh Valley, continuing up the Karategin Valley. The other option would have been to travel through the Pamir or the Badakhshan region, but this itinerary has since been dismissed.

Returning to the silver bowl (measuring 24 cm in diameter and 6 cm in height) unearthed in Kurgan 3 at Lâhš II, the decoration of this element is of particular interest owing to its Indian origin. Its stylistic elements include two fruit trees (possibly vines), a river, and a female figure with a shawl, bells, bracelets and a necklace. The grape vines – if that is what they are – are especially interesting. The consumption of wine since Antiquity in the Chinese world is now well established (Trombert, 2001). This type of object could have been used for personal, social and/or religious purposes. On a Noin-Ula (Mongolia) embroidered carpet, possibly made in Bactria and excavated in a *kurgan* (no. 20), several wine cups with scenes of wine being filtered attest to this practice, way beyond Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic Central Asia (Polosmak, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This research proposal started from the hypothesis that the Karategin Valley was one of the main highways of the Silk Roads connecting Western China and Central Asia. In fact, knowledge of this valley was either incomplete or patchy, spread across various publications. Today, we have a clearer picture of the role of this valley during Antiquity. Its connection between these two regions, through the Kyzyl-Art Pass (4,280 m), has now been established by archaeological, material and written sources. By using data from existing bibliographies and by assembling and combining them with the results of an aerial survey, we have been able to capture the importance of this particular region as a trading route, which had previously been poorly understood. To understand the chronological evolution of the so-called Silk Roads, their evaluation must be based on hard data. Furthermore, this study is pioneering in its approach as it combines field information from Russian-speaking Central Asian sources and information gathered from the Chinese world. Human settlements, seasonal circulation and cultural interactions were common in the high valleys, and the database we compiled is thus a unique addition to the archaeology of this region. Nevertheless, many questions still remain: who were the populations that settled in this valley? Were there times when these interactions were cut short? To a certain extent, the history and policies of Central Asian empires and their borderlands still elude us. Nevertheless, this study greatly contributes towards helping archaeologists and historians better understand the intense and multicultural interactions along the Silk Roads.

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