

**Bokijon Kh. Matbabayev**

 [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-8797-979X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8797-979X)

**Alisher A. Aloxunov**

 [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-2210-990X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2210-990X)

**Bakhtiyor Kh. Mirzarakhimov**

 [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2241-6747](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2241-6747)

## Regarding the Results of Scientific Research Conducted by the Joint Uzbek-Chinese International Archaeological Expedition in the Mingtepa City Ruins

Wyniki badań naukowych przeprowadzonych przez uzbecko-chińską międzynarodową ekspedycję archeologiczną w ruinach miasta Mingtepa

**Abstract:** This article presents the scientific findings obtained from archaeological research conducted by the joint Uzbek-Chinese international archaeological expedition in the ruins of Mingtepa, a major archaeological monument of the ancient period of

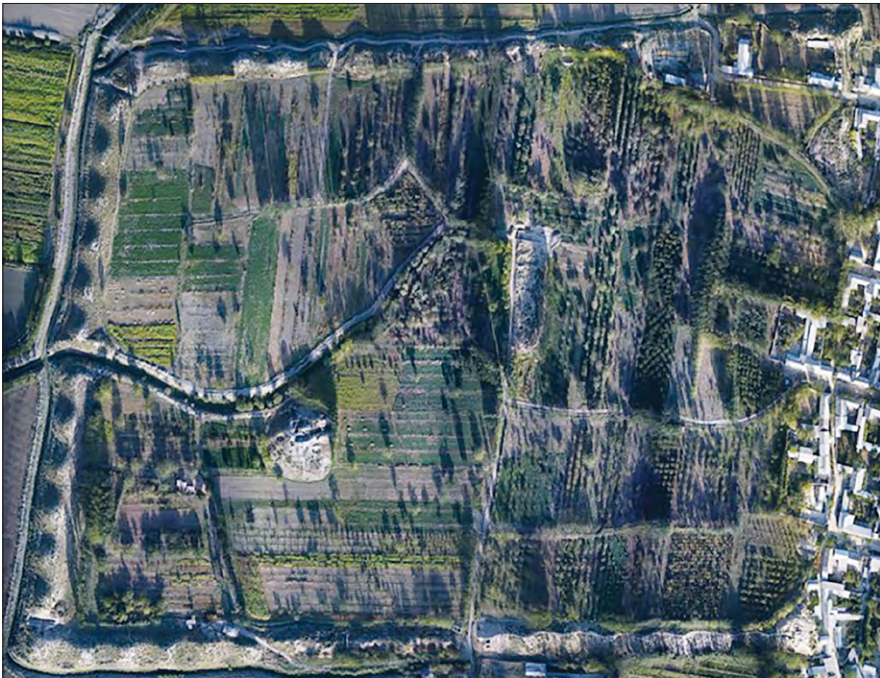
the Fergana Valley. In particular, it provides information about the structure of the city (the ark, inner city, and outer city), the stratigraphy of material cultural layers, the defensive system, as well as the crafts, art, customs, and religious beliefs of its inhabitants.

**Keywords:** Fergana Valley, Uzbek-Chinese international archaeological expedition, Mingtepa city ruins, inner and outer city, defensive system, straw walls and raw bricks, cultural layer, stratigraphy, pottery, stone fragments, burials, religious beliefs

### Introduction

The ancient history of the Republic of Uzbekistan has also attracted great interest among foreign specialists. Historians, ethnographers, archaeologists, and anthropologists from Europe, America, and Asia actively participate in the study of its past. Uzbek scholars of antiquity, in cooperation with foreign archaeologists, have achieved significant results through joint archaeological expeditions.

In particular, since 2012, the Uzbek-Chinese joint international archaeological expedition – organised in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Social Sciences of the People’s Republic of China and the Institute of Archaeological Research of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan – has been conducting extensive scientific research at the large archaeological site of Mingtepa, an ancient settlement in the Fergana Valley dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.



**Fig. 1.** Aerial photograph of the Mingtepa inner city, captured with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) for archaeological documentation purposes (photo by B.Kh. Matbabayev, A.A. Aloxunov, B.Kh. Mirzarakhimov).

Mingtepa (Uzbek: *Mingtepa* – “Thousand Hills”) is located in the Markhamat district of the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. The site consists of an inner and an outer city, surrounded by strong defensive walls. Today, only the defensive wall enclosing the inner city on all four sides remains. At intervals of every 38–40 m along the wall, observation towers were constructed, each measuring 18 m in length, 9 m in width, and 3–4 m in height. In total, 52 towers were built. The cultural layer of the central hill on the northwestern side of the inner city exceeds 10 m in thickness, with the lowest strata dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. According to specialists, the inner city served as a citadel.

Archaeological excavations and surveys have been carried out at more than 20 locations across the Mingtepa site. The work has been conducted jointly by eight archaeologists, ten technical specialists, professors and lecturers from Andijan and Fergana State Universities, as well as students of the Faculty of History. The primary objective of these investigations is to analyse, based on archaeological material, the role and significance of Mingtepa in the history of Central Asia, its involvement in the trade and economic networks of the Great Silk Road, and its economic activities.

In recent years, excavations have yielded new data on the structural organisation of the settlement (the ark, inner city, and outer city), the stratigraphy of its cultural layers, its defensive system, as well as the crafts, artistic traditions, social customs, and religious beliefs of its inhabitants. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the urban, economic, and cultural development of Mingtepa as one of the key centres of the Fergana Valley in antiquity (Fig. 1).

### Materials and methods

The first archaeological study was conducted in the 9<sup>th</sup> observation tower (*burj*) (Bichurin 1950)<sup>1</sup>, located in the western defensive system of Mingtepa. New information was obtained regarding the structural features, cultural layers, and



**Fig. 2.** Architectural section of the defensive wall and tower from west to east (photo by B.Kh. Matbabayev, A.A. Aloxunov, B.Kh.Mirzarakhimov).

<sup>1</sup> The word *observation tower* may also be used.

construction stages of this defensive wall. During the excavation, the oldest monolithic (primary) thatched wall was identified. The wall is 5.45 m wide at the base, 4 m at the top, and its preserved height is 6 m. Such defensive walls, built of straw in the early antiquity (4<sup>th</sup> century BC) in the Fergana Valley, are considered among the earliest examples, lacking observation towers or embrasures (Gorbunova 1995: 61–62). At this point of the western wall, brick watchtowers with a right-angle plan were later added. Constructed after the thatched wall, they were designed to protect both sides and reached an impressive size of 18 x 10 m (Fig. 2).

The building material used in the construction of the ancient defensive wall (solid straw blocks) and the durability of its structure indicate that our ancestors were aware of wall-breaking devices (machines) known in the Middle East at the time.

The study of the defensive system revealed three construction periods. In the first period (4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC), the main arrow wall was built, reconstructed from well-baked straw blocks laid over cultural layers, as described above. Fragments of floral pottery from the Shorabashot period (4<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC) were also found in this layer. Defensive walls rebuilt from straw blocks (50 x 50 cm, 40 x 45 cm, 40 x 30 cm) have also been recorded at Dalvarzin, a Bronze Age monument of Ferghana Valley (Zadneprovsky 1976: 5; Zadneprovsky 1978: 15).

During the second construction period (2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC), double walls and observation towers were added to reinforce the original wall. This suggests that Fergana faced a significant threat from the east at that time. This danger may have come from China, as the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) was rapidly developing and expanding during this period.

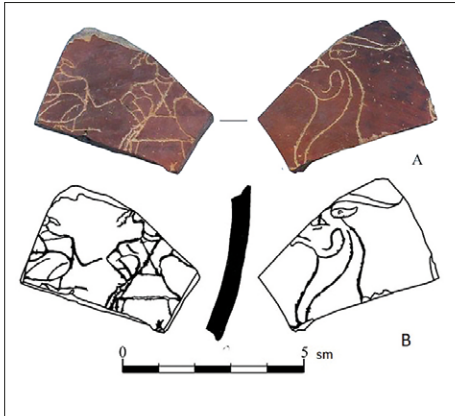
In the third construction period (1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), to strengthen and repair the main wall, an additional straw wall was added, forming a double wall. At a height of 2.5 m from the lower part of the wall, there was a 1-meter corridor (?) that may have served for the movement of soldiers. It is possible that the city was protected by these walls during this stage.

The ancient defensive system of Mingtepa was a complex engineering structure, reflecting advanced military knowledge in cities with well-developed fortifications. The construction of such robust and sophisticated three-line defensive installations indicates the existence of interstate conflicts and external threats during this period.

The second archaeological excavation was carried out in the central tower at the southwest corner of Mingtepa. In the past, the top two construction layers – the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> – had been cleaned and exposed, and were dated to the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. For the first time in Mingtepa's history, fragments of incised pottery with scratched floral decoration were found. Anthrozoomorphic (human and animal) images were also discovered. In addition, the technique of scratched floral decoration is both technically and chronologically distinct from earlier traditions. During excavations in 2014–2015, several pottery sherds with

scratched patterns were recovered. To date, seven images have been identified on four fragments. The images on the ceramics were restored by Alisher Ummatov, a restoration artist from Markhamat.

One ceramic fragment depicts the neck and head of a hyena (wild wolf). On the inner side of the same fragment, an image of a warrior was found, and on the reverse, a bird in motion with its beak clearly visible. The human figure is fragmentary: part of the head, legs, and left hand are missing, while the right hand rests on the waist. Only the shoulder, abdomen, chest, and neck portions of the clothing are preserved. On the chest, there is a “cross” band or head detail, and the figure is holding a weapon (sword?) in the left hand. The Khumo bird has long symbolised freedom and victory among the peoples of Central Asia. Its depiction on the back of the warrior may be interpreted as imbuing the figure with the spirit of assistance and triumph (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Decoration applied to the surface of the ceramic artifact (photo by B.Kh. Matbabayev).



**Fig. 4.** A ceramic vessel from the period of the ancient Fergana Davan kingdom (4<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC) (photo by B.Kh. Matbabayev).

The inside of the second ceramic fragment found at Mingtepa shows an image of the legendary Fergana horse. The head and tail of the horse have not been preserved. The depiction of the horse on Mingtepa pottery closely resembles horse images from the rock paintings of Aravon and Ayrimachtau in the neighbouring Kyrgyz Republic (Zadneprovsky 1962: 180). On the outside of the same pottery piece, an image of a peacock was painted. Except for the head and legs, only half of the image has survived. The peacock has been revered in Fergana and neighbouring regions since antiquity for its beauty. These beautiful creatures were often kept in the corridors of rulers' palaces, giving them a distinctive appearance (Fig. 4).

A dove's head is depicted on the surface of third pottery fragment. A similar bird image can be found in the eastern hall of the Varakhsha palace dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Rempel 1961: 33–35). The subject of the images on another pottery piece remains unknown (Matbabaev, Ummatov 2019: 18–19).

Thus, among the Mingtepa materials excavated by the joint Uzbekistan-China archaeological expedition, the first discoveries of ancient fine art are noteworthy. These finds provide an important source for studying the religious and ideological views of the peoples of the Fergana Valley 2000–2200 years ago.

In the second excavation, the main focus was on the identifying the lower construction levels of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and the architectural remains of an earlier period. As a result, three rooms built in a row and a corridor surrounding them on four sides (four long, narrow rooms) was uncovered. The walls of these houses were constructed directly on the walls of earlier rooms from the Davan period (4<sup>th</sup> century BC – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD). Numerous special finds – rock fragments – were also recovered, indicating iron production. In addition, antimony (a component of women's cosmetics) and lead ingots were discovered. Samples of red *angob* pottery with double-sided scratched floral decoration were also identified.



**Fig. 5.** An ancient grave was discovered beneath the defensive wall in the northwestern part of the inner city (photo by B.Kh. Matbabayev).

The third archaeological excavation was conducted in the northwestern corner of the inner city. Here, a body was found lying on its back in a separate grave, providing information on the funeral rites and religious beliefs of the Fergana

population<sup>2</sup>. A ceramic vessel – a long jug (*khurmacha*) – was placed in a special recess near the right hand, while three iron knives and two arrowheads were found in front of the left hand (Fig. 5). The burial customs – placing the deceased with the head to the west and the body aligned west–east, depositing a wheel-made ceramic vessel in a recess, and furnishing the grave with iron knives – are also known from the Oktom and Kungai tombs of the Eilat culture. This grave can be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The closest parallels have been observed 20 km from Mingtepa, in the materials of the old Niyozbatir cemetery, located to the northwest near the city of Asaka (Kozenkova 1959: 34–35).

The fourth archaeological excavation was carried out on the central hill (*Zindontepa*) of the inner city – the ark. Excavations from previous years were re-examined, and certain clarifications were made. The outer edge of the 4.85 m thick foundation discovered in 1986 was identified. It is not difficult to imagine the grandeur of a building erected on a foundation approximately 5 m. It was rebuilt using straw blocks and raw bricks, and three sides have been exposed to date. During excavation, four hearths situated close to one another on the floor were noted<sup>3</sup>. The Platform (*tagkursi*) and the monumental building above it can be associated with religious ceremonies. This preserved structure may be considered the remains of the ark, where the governor's residence and palace were located.

## Results and discussion

The analysis of the results of the joint Uzbek-Chinese archaeological expedition allows the following preliminary conclusions to be drawn:

1. The archaeological monument is structurally composed of an inner and outer city. The remains of the ark are located in the inner city, of which only the central part has been preserved. Here, the remains of a monumental building (floor and several hearths) were recorded, constructed on a platform foundation nearly 5 m thick. The inner city became the main residential area. Therefore, in the second stage, the walls were reinforced with towers. The defensive structures of the inner city have been preserved almost in their entirety. According to reconstructions by Chinese colleagues, there were 12 observation towers to the north and south, 20 to the west and east, and 64 in total. The remains of the outer city's defensive system were noted in the 1940s and 1950s

<sup>2</sup> A city cemetery (necropolis) was recorded for the first time in the archaeology of the valley at a depth of 1 metre in a cultivated cotton field, beyond the outer city wall. This discovery yielded substantial new information.

<sup>3</sup> The occurrence of several hearths on one level was also noted during excavations at the village of Uchtepa, Norin District, in 2019 under the direction of Academician A. Askarov.

- but not studied. Using the *Tan chan* tool, applied by our Chinese colleagues in the ancient cities of Luoyang and Yeche in China, the outer city wall and cemetery were identified. This is considered a major achievement in the archaeology of Fergana. Research by A.N. Bernstam, Yu A. Zadneprovsky, and B. Matbabaev in past years documented five construction stages within the inner city and three in the defensive walls. Based on the findings obtained during the archaeological investigation, the construction of ancient Mingtepa began in the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC and continued until the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. These dates are consistent with earlier conclusions (Zadneprovsky, Matbabaev 1991: 71–72).
2. The locations of two city gates (western and southern) were identified, although their structural features remain difficult to reconstruct. Excavations are underway at the defensive complex in front of one of the gates. The evidence suggests that great attention was given to fortifying the entrances, as shown by the construction of elongated rooms on either side of the gates.
  3. The stratigraphy and architectural solutions of the construction phases of two towers near the gate were also examined. Information about the earliest defensive wall was obtained from the excavation of the middle part of the western wall. The oldest wall was built on top of a cultural layer (Matbabaev et al. 2013: 21, Fig. 3.), a fact also confirmed by ceramic fragments with floral decoration from the Shorabashot period recovered at the site (Matbabaev et al. 2013: 33, Fig. 19, 1–2). The city's defence was clearly prioritised: four central observation towers were constructed at its four corners. One such tower was attached to the earlier wall and restored (10 x 18 m). Therefore, in the second and third construction phases, the walls were reinforced with towers and double walls. As a result of these reconstructions, the defensive wall reached a total thickness of 7.3 m, with an upper width of 3.4 m and a height of 6 m<sup>4</sup>. Such monumental defensive walls and towers have not been found elsewhere in the valley. Square-plan towers first appeared in the Fergana Valley at the site of Eilatón (6<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC) and were gradually perfected. In Eilatón, a room (guardhouse) was uncovered inside a tower, most likely serving as a gatehouse. The platform was built of baked clay, with a large brick tower above it (Gorbunova 1995: 61). In our opinion, Mingtepa likely had gates on all four sides, with the central gate located between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> towers. In many respects, it resembles the gates of ancient Chinese cities. The gates were four-winged, with the outer entrances serving as “royal” gates for the emperor and the inner ones for the common people.

<sup>4</sup> The total length of the inner city wall is 2.6 km, while the outer city wall extends 6.8 km, demonstrating the monumental scale of earthworks.



4. In our view, the unpreserved outer city may have developed into a *rabad* in the Middle Ages – a district of trade, handicraft workshops, and residential quarters, as known from cities in Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan. In earlier, more turbulent times, it may have served as a settlement area for nomads. The existence of at least two gates in the outer city is likely. The fact that later medieval Andijan had three gates, and Uš likewise had three (Matbabaev, Mashrabov 2011: 98–99), supports this interpretation<sup>5</sup>.
5. The ceramic, stone, and bone finds uncovered by the joint Uzbek-Chinese expedition date from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD (Zadneprovsky, Matbabaev 1991: 71–72). Ancient Mingtepa followed a gradual, evolutionary path towards becoming a major capital, beginning as a modest settlement and evolving over 500–700 years into a significant urban centre.

## Conclusions

According to archaeological excavations, Mingtepa was a city along the Silk Road where crafts and trade flourished in ancient times (4<sup>th</sup> century BC – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD). Most Ferghana scholars agree that the Mingtepa monument may be identified with the city of Ershi. Several reasons support this view (Matbabaev 1995):

1. The archaeological complex of Mingtepa (defensive walls, inner and outer city, and handicrafts) chronologically corresponds to the period mentioned in the Chinese chronicles – 138–115 BC. The thickness of the cultural layers and the scale of the building remains are also consistent.
2. According to Chinese sources, the remains of the “middle city” of Ershi were preserved in the valley only at Mingtepa (covering the area of more than 40 ha) (Bichurin 1950: 165; Borovkova 2001). The “Middle City” was surrounded by two rows of strong defensive walls, which have been archaeologically recorded (Bernshtam 1948: 155–161, Fig. 2).
3. Careful study of the sources indicates that Ershi was the city reached after Yu (Yuchen) when the Chinese entered the valley. Based on the present geographical situation, this would place it in Eastern Ferghana (Bichurin 1950: 162). This evidence is further supported by archaeological research in the valley conducted over the past 70 years. As the eastern side of the valley was the centre of early farming, the earliest cities, and the first developments of statehood, B.Kh. Matbabaev calls it “the urbanised area of eastern Ferghana” (Matbabaev, Mashrabov 2011: 22). The materials from the Shagim cemetery dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Similar processes are attested in other regions of Central Asia, for example at the ruins of Kalai Zohaki Maron in Sughd and at Eilaton in the Ferghana Valley.

millennium BC and the “scale stones” found in the school museum of the city of Karasuv are monuments of the Early Bronze Age in Eastern Ferghana. It has been established that 60–70 percent of the key agricultural monuments are located in this area. Oasis states emerged in the valley as early as the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Matbabaev 2002: 23). During the period under study, smaller states were united into the ancient kingdom of Ferghana (Matbabaev 2009: 48–49). Furthermore, the Ferganologist N.G. Gorbunova suggested, on the basis of archaeological materials, that the Davan state was located in Eastern Ferghana (Andijan, Ush, and Jalalabad regions) (Gorbunova 1977: 118).

In conclusion, the Davan kingdom in the Fergana Valley and its capital Ershi (Mingtepa) were first mentioned in sources in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. The latest mention comes from the years 280–286, when China sent an envoy to the king of Ferghana. After this, the name disappears. A single later report, from 436, notes that an envoy of Emperor Wei went to Dun Wan Polona, formerly Davan. This suggests that the political situation in Davan had changed and the kingdom was thereafter known by another name (Borovkova 1989: 104–130).

The findings of the joint Uzbek-Chinese international archaeological expedition also confirm that the capital of the ancient Ferghana state of Davan, Ershi, was located at Mingtepa. Even A. Anarboyev, who long argued for Akhsikent as Ershi in his articles in “Vodiynoma” magazine (2016, Issue 1), has since acknowledged that Mingtepa is the more likely identification.

In our view, Mingtepa belongs to the type of “big city” (*dao chen* in Chinese). Chinese sources state that there were two walled cities in Davan (Borovkova 2011). The current archaeological results justify including Mingtepa among such cities. It should be noted, however, that Chinese sources did not use the term “capital” with reference to foreign states. They reserved the term *ginsbi* exclusively for the capitals of China. The capitals of other countries were called *du*, meaning residence (Bichurin 1950: 149).

The orientalist A. Khojayevev recently argued that Yuan-cheng should be considered the capital of Davan. If confirmed, this would belatedly correct N.Y. Bichurin’s misidentification. However, references to Yuan-cheng are found only in Khojayevev’s translations (Khojaev 2011: 25–27), and the views of European and Russian sinologists remain unknown. In the 1970s–1980s, the St. Petersburg Ferganologist Yu.A. Zadneprovsky also suggested that Davan may have had two capitals, like the neighbouring state of Kangju, one of them serving as a residence (Zadneprovsky 2000). That is, he expressed the opinion that there were two capitals in Davan, just like the neighboring state of Kanguy, and one of them should be a residence (Zadneprovsky 2000). As Kangju is known to have had summer and winter residences, Yuan-cheng may likewise have been a royal residence. Researchers have noted that in Bichurin’s translations, the toponym Yuan-cheng is

rendered as “residenziya davanskoy” or “residenziya davanskaya” (Davan residence) (Khojaev 2011: 26).

Khojayevev has further proposed that Yuan-cheng may have been located at Andijan (Khojaev 2011: 27). This interpretation is plausible, as the archaeological finds and their dating from the Old City of Andijan do not contradict it. In the Old City (surrounding Sujoat, Sarvontepa, and Tutzor streets), excavations have revealed cultural layers up to 1 m thick, dating back 2400–2600 years, covering 15–20 hectares. This material has been used to establish a 2500-year history for Andijan (Matbabaev, Mashrabov 2011).

Taken together, this evidence indicates that Mingtepa possessed the characteristics of a capital city. The settlement originated in the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, and life there came to an end in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The reasons for this decline remain unknown.

Archaeological research confirms that Mingtepa/Ershi was located on the network of transcontinental routes (the Great Silk Road), linking Bactria, Ustrushona, and Choch with China. For centuries, it played a geopolitical role as a centre of crafts and trade and as a major caravan settlement. This is evidenced by the Chinese coins (Wu Zhu, *kai yuan tong bao*, and *hotyuan*), silk fabrics, and mirrors found in the Ferghana Valley.

The discovery of the city cemetery further supports Mingtepa’s identification as a capital and a major city. Known locally as Changalmozor, the cemetery is located beyond the outer defensive wall. Today, the site is under cultivation and no grave markers are visible on the surface. However, at depths of 50–100 cm, burials with damaged upper parts have been found.

At this point, one critical issue must be stressed: the preservation of Mingtepa. Most of the outer city, the entire inner city (except for the defensive walls), and a large part of the citadel (ark) have already been destroyed by agricultural activity. This destruction is ongoing. Over the past five years, archaeologists have repeatedly appealed for the protection of Mingtepa, but without result. Even a court order to remove illegal constructions within the protected area has not been enforced. It remains to be seen whether the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers “On the preservation, research and rational use of the archaeological heritage site ‘Mingtepa’ in the Marhamat district of Andijan region” (December 29, 2018, №1059) will be implemented. Unless this unique monument is preserved, future generations may be deprived of one of the most important sites of the country’s heritage.

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## Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje nowości naukowe uzyskane w wyniku badań archeologicznych przeprowadzonych przez wspólną uzbecko-chińską międzynarodową ekspedycję archeologiczną w ruinach Mingtepa, jednego z najważniejszych stanowisk archeologicznych okresu starożytnego w Kotlinie Fergańskiej. W szczególności przedstawiono informacje dotyczące struktury miasta (cytadela, miasto wewnętrzne i miasto zewnętrzne), stratygrafii warstw kultury materialnej, systemu obronnego, a także rzemiosła, sztuki, zwyczajów i wierzeń religijnych ludności zamieszkującej ten obszar.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kotlina Fergańska, uzbecko-chińska międzynarodowa ekspedycja archeologiczna, ruiny miasta Mingtepa, miasto wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne, system obronny, mury ze słomy i surowej cegły, warstwa kulturowa, stratygrafia, ceramika, fragmenty kamienne, pochówki i wierzenia religijne

### **Bokijon Kh. Matbabayev**

Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan  
Institute of Archaeological Research  
e-mail: bokijon@mail.ru

### **Alisher A. Aloxunov**

Fergana State University  
Uzbekistan–China Joint Department of Archaeology  
e-mail: alohunov@inbox.ru

### **Bakhtiyor Kh. Mirzarakhimov**

Fergana State University  
Department of Philosophy and National Ideology  
e-mail: alfargoniy.uz@gmail.com