

Karakorum as a Manufacturing City – Cultural Ties Evidenced by the Archaeological Record

Susanne Reichert

The importance of Karakorum as former capital of the Mongol Empire is unquestioned. From historical sources the city is known for its diverse population what would now be called a melting pot of different cultures. The Franciscan friar William of Rubruck for example described among others a quarter inhabited by Chinese craftsmen. The excavations of Bonn University from 2000 to 2005 in the city center of Karakorum exposed several workshops with evidence for iron, bronze, bone, glass and precious stones works, an archaeological archive unique in its scope in Mongolia. Many questions may be addressed for the first time. Through comparisons of artifacts, techniques and features from all over the Mongol Empire and its fringes the findings help re-constructing the cultural ties evident in Karakorum in diachronic perspective. These conventional antiquarian studies are corroborated by material analyses. Chemical composition and microstructural analyses reveal manufacturing techniques as well as help sourcing the raw materials. Through combining several approaches a detailed picture can be depicted of how foreign groups, transferred from other parts of the growing empire, influenced the appearance and material culture of the city center of Karakorum. However, as a center of craft production outwardly directed trade and its recipients have also to be considered. This paper aims at tracing some of these relations apparent on several levels: the city outlay, architecture, appearance of objects and manufacturing techniques. Which foreign attributes were incorporated in Karakorum, can there be genuinely nomadic properties identified? How does this picture change over time?