

A Tale of Two Women: Medieval Dress, Jewelry, and Archaeogenetics Uncovered at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan)

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Abstract

Archaeological excavations at city of Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan), which flourished between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, have uncovered 103 graves. These human remains and their associated artifacts are identifiable as Christian, because of their construction, orientation, and gravestones (kayraks), which bear crosses and Syro-Turkic inscriptions. So far, two burials stand out because they belong to women who had conspicuous grave goods signifying their elite status. Forensic and DNA-analysis has also allowed our archaeological team to reconstruct their pathologies, age, ethnic, and geographical background. This scientific data, combined with their grave goods, allow us to reconstruct a clear picture of the roles that these women may have played within Ilibalyk society. One of these women may be interpreted as a khatun – a term used to designate the positions that wives of the rulers (khans) had in both Turkic and Mongol culture. Their religious identity also provides another layer of complexity, since Christianity has its own set of expectations for female leaders. This archaeological and archaeogenetic data complements what has been written in historical documentation, as well as providing new knowledge that was either never written or lost over the centuries.