



## URGUT

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**URGUT** (Urgūt), 39°24'8" N, 67°14'35" E, a town ca. 30 km southeast of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, containing monuments of historical, archeological, and epigraphic significance ([FIGURE 1](#), [FIGURE 2](#)).

Present-day Urgut is a large town (population ca. 50,000) and center of a county (*tuman*) in Samarkand province (*viloyat/velāyat*). It is situated on the foothills of the Zarafshan (*zarafshān*) mountain range (northern Pamir). Visitors are attracted by the spectacular bazaar, as well as two notable shrines (*mazār*). One, Čār Čenār ("Four plane trees," landscaped by the Emir of Bukhara in 1813), is dedicated to Khoja Abu Ṭāleb Sarmast, a Samanid missionary killed by the "unbelievers" for propagating Islam in the area; certain locations in the mountains are associated with the graves of his brothers and companions, Khoja Bāzmān, Khoja Sagrasān, and Khoja Amon. The second *mazār* (in Saygus, southeast of Urgut) is, in local lore, connected to the activities of Pir Ġawṭ-e A'zam 'Abd-al-Qāder Jilāni (d. 1166), the founder of the Qāderi Sufi order.

It has been suggested that the village of Aspandiza (mod. Ispanza), east of Urgut, takes its name from a sanctuary of the pre-Islamic female deity Aspan[darmat] (Av. *Spəntā Ārmaiti*, Sogd. 'sp'nt'rmt), who possibly may have been regarded as the patroness of the area (Smirnova, pp. 95-96). More tangible traces of the past can be seen at the site of Jar Tepe northeast of Urgut, an early medieval Zoroastrian temple, where a number of murals were found during archeological excavations (Berdimuradov and Samibaev).



In written sources, Urgut is first mentioned as the location of a monastery of the Church of the East: “On al-Šāwḏār [a mountainous area southeast of Samarqand] a group of Christians have a monastery where they gather and have their cells. I found there many Iraqi Christians who migrated to the place because of its suitability, solitary location, and healthiness. It has inalienable properties (*woqūf*), and many of the Christians retire to it; this place towers over the major part of Sogd and is known as *Warkūdah*” (Ebn Hawqal, p. 372; tr., II, p. 478; Eṣṭak-ri, p. 321; both with variant spellings in different MSS). Due to the corrupt spelling of the place-name in the primary sources, the location of the monastery has long been a mystery, despite a number of attempts to find it (Bart’old, 1966a and Barthold, *Turkestan*, p. 94; Vyatkin; Masson). The correct reading was suggested in 1996 (Savchenko, 1996), and has been corroborated by further study (Savchenko, 2005a) and excavations still in progress (Savchenko, 2005b).

Investigations have brought to light a selection of archeological finds, among which are wearable crosses of iron, bronze and coal shale, ceramic wares with Christian motifs, and fragments of stucco decoration. Some items are evidence of an organized liturgy (a bronze censer found in 1916, of Syrian origin: Zaleskaya; manufactured *in situ*: Dresvyanskaya).

Connected to the monastery is the epigraphic site of Qizil-qiya (“Red rock”) situated in the neighboring gorge of Qutirbuloq (Uzbek for “Eczema-healing springs”), a rock face with a grotto on the top, covered with inscriptions, some of which are accompanied by crosses. The site was discovered in 1920, and a number of inscriptions were published in 1996 (Savchenko, 1996, pp. 347-54) and 1999 (Tardieu, p. 42). The languages of the inscriptions (Syriac, Persian, Uighur) reflect the scope of the monastery’s geographical connections and indicate that it was a pilgrimage site (FIGURE 4).

The erstwhile Christian presence is manifested at two other sites containing Christian material: (1) Kosh Tepe, northeast of Urgut, where a *pithos* (locally: *khum*, a type of large jar) was discovered featuring a scene of baptism on its rim (Iskhakov et al., pp. 93-94); and (2) Quq Tepe in Gus, east of Urgut, where a ceramic pot with a molded cross and imitation Syriac writing was unearthed (FIGURE 3). It has also been argued that an ostrakon found in Panjikent is a by-product of the monastic school (Paykova, p. 168), and that two gravestones kept at the Ashkhabad Museum also come from Urgut (Masson).

A local tradition, recorded as late as the end of the 19th century, holds that



Christians once lived all along the Samarqand-Urgut road (Bartol'd, 1966b, p. 91). An echo of it may be heard in the name *Urus-Machit* ("Russian mosque"), by which the site of the monastery was known to the previous generation of inhabitants. This rationalization of the purpose and function of the site is explicable by the fact that Urgut came under Russian rule in May 1868, after General A. K. Abramov defeated the ruler of the city, Ḥosayn Beg, and took the Urgut fortress, which had previously been considered inaccessible.

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