CHAPTER THREE
FROM TENTS TO CITY.
THE ROYAL COURT OF THE WESTERN QARAKHANIDS
BETWEEN BUKHARA AND SAMARQAND

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The Qarakhanids (999-1212) were the first Turkic dynasty after the Arab conquest to come from the steppe and take control of the old urban centres of Transoxania. The question addressed in this article is how and where these new rulers settled. We shall deal with the Western Qaghanate (1040-1212) and the situation in its two major cities, Bukhara and Samarqand.

Ten years ago, little was known about the physical reality of court life in Samarqand, the major city of Transoxania (Māwarāʾ al-nahr) under the Qarakhanids (see Fig. 1). The excavations on the lower terrace of the citadel of old Samarqand on the Afrasiab (Afrāsiyāb) site undertaken by the French-Uzbek archaeological mission (dir. Franz Grenet and Muhammadzhon Isamiddinov) have provided an unexpected amount of information on the subject, ranging from the type of settlement established by the ruling clan within a given space in the city’s fortress to outstanding depictions of the Qarakhanid khan.

I shall base my analysis on the main results of the excavations I have directed on this site since 1991 as a member of the French-Uzbek archaeological mission, in collaboration with Anvar Atakhodzhaev, member of the Samarqand Institute of Archaeology. As is usual, the introduction of new original (and not fully published) material permits a re-analysis of the data already available, both written and archaeological, from a new perspective. This chapter also aims to retrace a particular aspect of the history of the Western Qarakhanids: their moving towards and into the city. This process took quite some time, starting generations after the conquest, and came to an end only in the very last generation of Qarakhanid rule in Transoxania. Generally speaking, the Qarakhanids initially ruled ‘from the outside’, then constructed lightly built residences in suburban areas (attested for Bukhara and highly probable in Samarqand), and later moved into the cities and even into the citadel (attested for both cities). Methodologically, the
Fig. 1. Map of Transoxania/Māwarāʾ al-nahr (8th-13th centuries).