

## MONUMENTS AT KUNYA-URGENCH, TURKMENISTAN: COMMENTS ON PRESERVATION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

by *Dr. M. Rafique Mughal, FSA, Professor of Archaeology and Heritage  
Boston University, U.S.A.*

In August 2004, I had an opportunity to visit a group of monuments and sites at Kunya-Urgench, located in the northern part of Turkmenistan and close to the border of Uzbekistan. I had meetings with several individuals who are involved in the management and preservation of ancient sites and monuments. The site and its present state of preservation can be viewed as an interesting case study of the heritage management policies and preservation procedures being followed in this part of Central Asia. Discussions with Dr. Mukhammed A. Mamedov, Chief/ Chairman of the National Department for the Protection, Study and Restoration of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Turkmenistan; Mr. Igor Zubanov (architect), Chief of the Department for Restoration and Design; Ms. Meretgul Gurdjieva, Director of the State Historical and Cultural Park at Kunya-Urgench; her colleague, Mr. Kerim Bazarbayev, Head of the Research and Science Section of the SHCP-Kunya-Urgench; and Mr. Atdayev Bairamurdy, Hakim (Governor) of the Kunya-Urgench Atrap (Administrative Sub-division) of Dashoguz Vilayet (Province) have been very helpful.

Kunya-Urgench is located in Dashoguz, which borders Uzbekistan and is about 100 km from the provincial capital city, in the northern province of Turkmenistan. The ancient city was attacked by Chinggis Khan in 1221 and destroyed by Amir Timur in a series of attacks, between 1372 and 1388, and then finally abandoned in 1646. The remains of the ancient city are still dotted with monuments over a very large area, covering more than 350 hectares. It includes a series of forts defended by a mud-brick fortification wall. The surviving monuments at Kunya-Urgench consist of burnt brick tombs, and mosques generally decorated with glazed tiles, cut-brick designs and stucco ornamentation. The most prominent buildings are the Kutlug-Timur Minaret (c.1000-1030), IL Arslan and Tekesh mausolea (12<sup>th</sup> century), the mausolea of Najamud Din Al Kubra and Turabek Khanum (14th century) and the tomb of Sultan Ali (c.1550). The mound, where a number of religious monuments still stand, is yet to be excavated. It is now partially covered with Muslim graves. The entire site of Kunya-Urgench survives as an architectural ensemble consisting of burnt brick buildings, a mud-brick fortification wall, a very large buried city site, and a surrounding plain without any sign of disturbance, encroachments or changes in the old landscape.

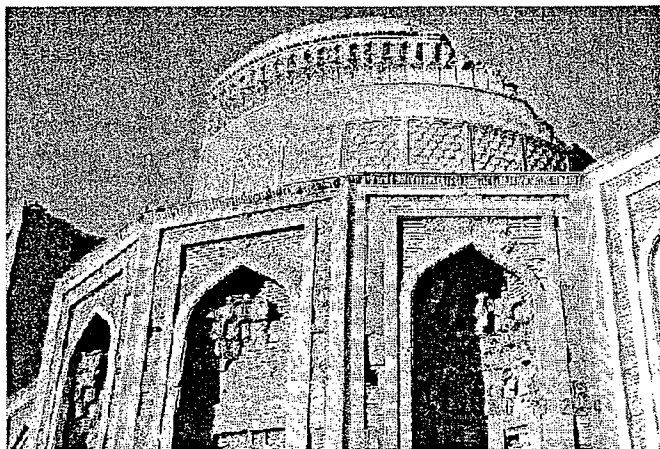
Kunya-Urgench represents a very important architectural ensemble in the evolution of Islamic architecture in Central Asia during the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, which is intimately linked with the contemporary centres in the same region and beyond. Its cultural, artistic and architectural significance is further emphasised by its location on an ancient international route connecting East Asia with the western world. A distinctive architectural style and decorative art emerged in this region and profoundly influenced the building art in the adjoining regions of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. Kunya-Urgench continues to be an integral part of the groups of monuments at Samarkand, Khiva and Bukhara.

Kunya-Urgench is one of the 1,300 officially listed monuments and is protected under the national cultural law. It is managed and controlled locally by an administrative body called the 'State Historical and Cultural Park-Kunya-Urgench' (SHCP-KU) working under the overall authority of the National Department for the Protection, Study and Restoration of Historical Monuments, Government of Turkmenistan, at Ashgabad. The SHCP-KU is one of the eight 'Parks' created by the government at important sites such as Merv, a world heritage site. The SHCP at Kunya-Urgench has its own staff headed by its director, Ms. Meretgul Gurdjieva. It is an organised official establishment at the site run by competent and qualified architects, conservators and other supporting staff members. It contains a documentation and research wing where all records on monuments, pertaining to the past and present restoration and conservation measures, are maintained. Aware of the importance of training young people in restoration work, the SHCP-KU regularly recruits young architects, both male and female, from academic and technical institutions. In this way, it continues to build up a future generation of heritage conservators. It is this team of SHCP-KU's experienced architectural conservators that implement restoration projects and take preventive measures to stop further deterioration.

An examination of the restoration work on the monuments reflected a high level of preservation, with due regard for maintaining the originality of structural plans and designs. The monuments preserved thus far still stand on their original foundations, though decorative details are missing. In most cases, the use or function of the monuments has not been changed, and no modifications to the original plans and building materials have been made in the process of restoration. In one case, a madrasa (school) has been converted into an ethnological museum, which adds another attraction for the visiting public.

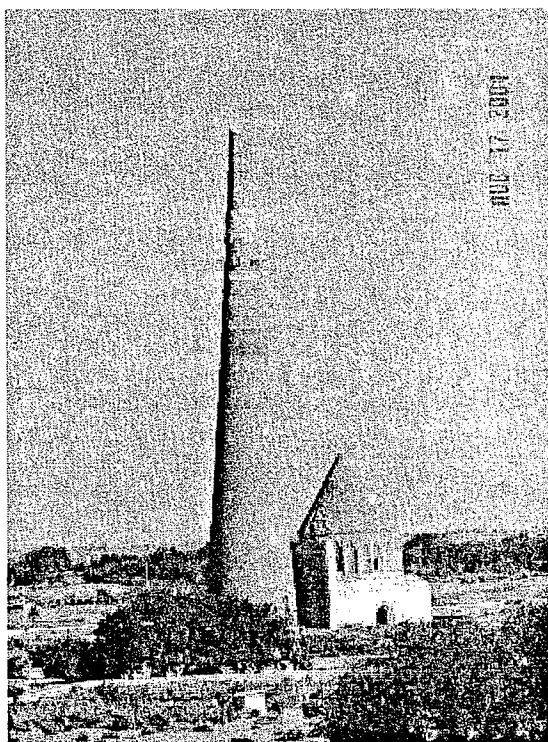
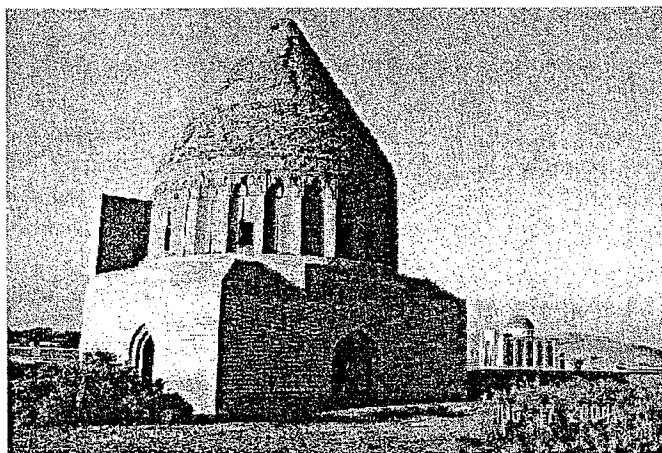
The religious structures in particular underwent extensive repairs and restoration during the last century because they were considered 'living' monuments, and they continue to function as such up to the present day. The procedure for restoring monuments, which is generally considered locally as 'conservation', is almost standardised in Turkmenistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. For restoring decayed monuments, a detailed study and documentation of the existing state of preservation precedes any restoration work or intrusive repairs. Turkmenistan has inherited a long tradition of the restoration of monuments from Soviet conservators. However, it appears that the restoration methods developed by the Soviets were not necessarily in full agreement with the preservation principles defined in the Venice Charter. The restored monuments at Kunya-Urgench reflect those traditional conservation and restoration concepts that facilitate restoration without changing the basic plan and style of a structure. As such, the site retains its original character, and each monument is, therefore, an authentic record of the past, providing credible information, as defined by the terms of the NARA Document of Authenticity. At the time of my visit, restoration work was in progress at the Ibn-Khajab tomb and at the fortification of Kyrkmolla. Two brick kilns run by the SHCP-KU manufactured special bricks of the desired size and quality for the restoration of the monuments.

(Boston, 13 November 2004)

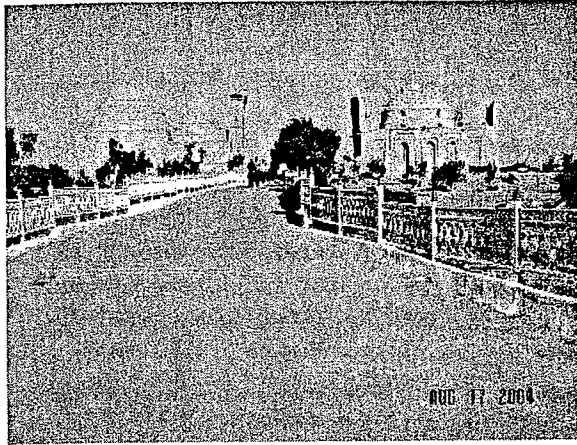


Mausoleum of Turabek-Khanum (1370 ACE)

Mausoleum of Sultan Tekesh marked by conical cupola decorated with glazed tiles (12 – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries ACE)

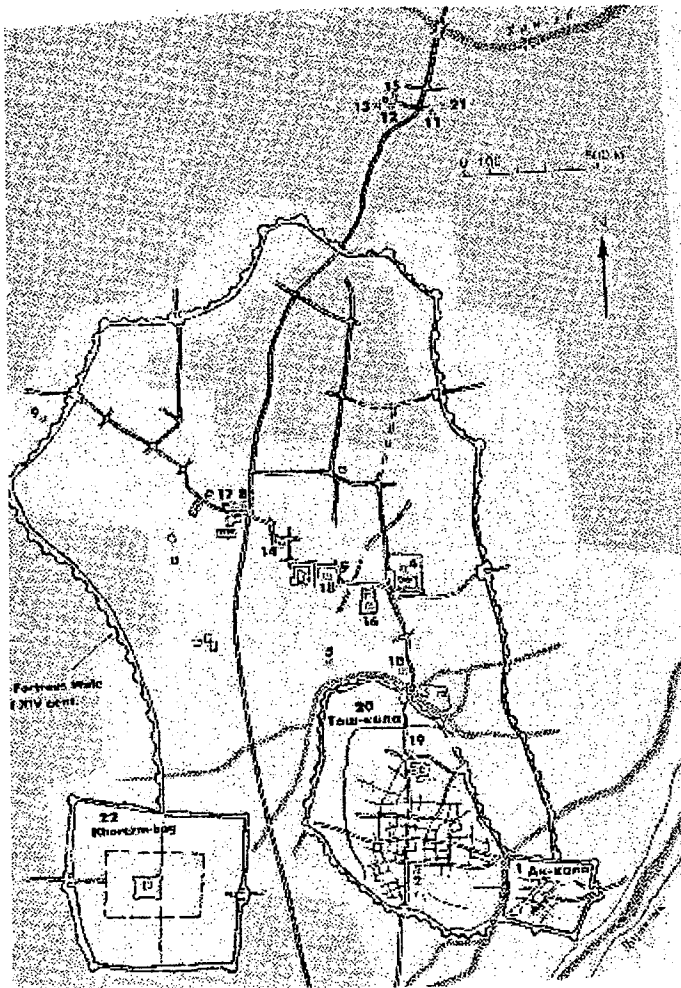


60-meter high Kultug-Timur minaret (11<sup>th</sup> –14<sup>th</sup> centuries) is the highest of all the minarets built in Central Asia



Mausoleums of renowned sufi saint Najam-ad-Din al-Kubra (left) built in early 14<sup>th</sup> century and Sultan Ali of 16<sup>th</sup> century

(All photographs © Rafique Mughal)



Ancient city of Kunya-Urgench and groups of monuments

(Courtesy: Drs. M. Mamedov and R. Muradov)

\*\*\*\*\*