



# Exploring KHOREZM









Ichan Kala  
at dusk  
Gai Jorayev

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The inner town, Ichan Kala, that resides within Khiva, Khorezm, is the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in Uzbekistan. Originating from largely agricultural beginnings, the importance of the area grew immensely with acknowledgements given by the Ancient Greek historian Herodotus and later Arrian who tells of Khorezm's dealings with Alexander the Great. The expansive desert landscape has changed dramatically over many centuries of human occupation; once being a notable oasis within the desert. However, with an ever-increasing reliance upon irrigation, the landscape is becoming more arid and vital rivers are drying up. Yet, the physical environment is not the only change that the landscape has witnessed. Cities within and around the Khanate have risen and fallen; buildings have stood proudly and after time been buried in the sandy lands. For centuries, these thriving settlements around Ichan Kala were the vital last resting points for merchants and traders travelling along the Silk Roads; a feature that is echoed in the archaeology all around.



# Legends from a SHIFTING OASIS

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ichan Kala is immersed in the scenic landscape of Khiva: a district within Khorezm. Once renowned as a green oasis, the landscape boasts a breathtaking desert backdrop that has preserved this ancient city until the present day. Local mythology tells of the founder of Khorezm being a fairy, exiled by the Prophet Soleyman, who fled with a giant as her companion. They settled there for its plentiful land within the arid landscape: the name of Khorezm is often translated as the ‘*Fertile Lands*’.

Tales surrounding Khorezm time after time recall its prominent greenery. Due to the long, hot, dry summers in Central Asia there has, throughout history, been a reliance on areas with water; Khorezm is no exception. According to legend citizens escaping Zahhak, the Persian ruler, fled across the desert, to what is now Khorezm, seeking a new life and forming the first settlements along the river. When asked to return by the new ruler some years later, the story goes that they simply replied that “even a gold coin turns green when planted” with the river representing new life.

This was the ancient Amu Darya river, known to the Romans and Ancient Greeks as the *Oxus* (Ὠξος), which currently flows from the mountains of Afghan-

istan through to Uzbekistan and has been recorded to have met both the Aral and Caspian Seas at one point. In the desert plains, this water is vital and has created thriving communities within Khorezm, through which it passes. In fact, this river is so pivotal to the landscape that the capital city of Khorezm relocated from the city Konye Urgench (old Urgench) to Khiva as a direct result of the change in the river course in the late 1500s. Again, many tales abound as to why the riverbed of the Amu Darya frequently changes its course – some say the shallow channels within the sand allow the river to flow wherever it wishes, others tell of a failed marriage proposal. The tale goes that Sultan Sanjar requested that Tyurabek-hanym, the ruler of Khorezm, become his wife which she and the people refused. Out of spite, the Sultan ordered his warriors to dam the Amu Darya leaving Khorezm without water for 6 months. Seeing that this could not continue any longer, Tyurabek tricked the Sultan by agreeing to marry him so that he would open the river again and then fled. It is said that the people dug a new channel for the water to flow through and this is why the Amu Darya follows the course that it does today.

**Previous spread:**  
**Ichan Kala, Khiva**  
National PR-centre,  
Uzbektourism  
**Top:**  
**The Amu Darya river**  
Gai Jorayev  
**Middle:**  
**Group of yurts**  
Gai Jorayev  
**Bottom:**  
**Kirk Kiz fortress**  
National PR-centre,  
Uzbektourism





The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the silhouette of a large, ancient stone fortress or city wall. The wall features battlements and is set against a sky transitioning from a pale blue at the top to a warm orange and yellow near the horizon, indicating sunset or sunrise. A thin, white crescent moon is visible in the upper left portion of the sky.

# **KHOREZM** through the **AGES**

Where modern administrative boundaries and national borders have created a rather complicated subdivision of the landscape, the ancient Khorezm region originally encompassed a significantly wider and more consistent area. This included portions of Karakalpakstan and Turkmenistan, revolving around the most important natural feature found in an overall desert-like environment: the river Amu Darya. The vital river separates the oasis from the Kyzyl Kum (red sands) in the east from the Kara Kum (black sands) in the west.



As the Amu Darya made its way through the region, with its load of precious water and fertile sediments, its banks were the perfect place for the development of the first human settlements, which rapidly evolved into towns and strongholds overlooking the waters. However, due to the lack of land formations and ridges on the landscape, the river course is considerably susceptible to change. Throughout ancient history, a change of the river course determined the rise and fall of several cities. Among the fallen cities was the former capital of the Khorezm-shahs, Konye Urgench, that suddenly witnessed the disappearance of the river – a vital lifeline within the oasis.

Scouting the ancient river beds, it is possible to see the remains of several archaeological sites dating as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC at a time when unenclosed settlements started to be converted into fortified complexes. Khorezm, on the edge of the ‘known world’, was the last stop before crossing into the untold miles of uncharted territory under the rule of nomadic tribes that thrived in the steppes. This privileged position has often been the cause of destruction and ravage brought upon the oasis by neighbouring peoples and migrating tribes.

Nonetheless, the people of Khorezm periodically managed to escape from the yoke of these neighbouring powers, flourishing as an independent society, and benefiting from trade routes connecting the farthest reaches of the East and the West. Its position brought with it a plethora of goods as well as practices and religions. Considered the cradle of Zoroastrianism, Khorezm came in contact with Buddhism brought to its bor-

ders by the Kushan Empire between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. The Islamic expansion reached Khorezm in 712 AD, marking the beginning of a golden era for astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and literature. Under the rule of the Khorezm-shahs, an Empire was eventually established peaking at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, although suddenly obliterated by the Mongol Invasion in 1220.

The Khiva Khanate followed centuries of disruption and migrations, and the new capital flourished between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The rulers Abulgazi-khan, Shirgazi-khan, and Muhammad Rahim-khan II resolved to adorn the Ichan Kala (inner city) with new madrasas, mosques, and palaces, defining the superb city that can be seen to-

**The 9<sup>th</sup> Century mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, whose ‘nisba’ (geographic origin), identifies him as from Khorezm, had a significant influence on Medieval Europe. His name was Latinized as Algorismus, from which derives the modern English word algorithm.**

day. Under the rule of Muhammad Rahim-khan II, in 1873 the Khanate became a Russian protectorate, which marks the final phase of Khorezmian independent history. Modern irrigation techniques established during the Soviet era enhanced the agricultural capacity of the region. However extensive agricultural and urban expansion led to the disappearance of several archaeological sites, as well as severe changes to the Amu Darya and the Aral Sea, the latter now almost completely dried up.







Mausoleum of  
Tyurabek-hanym,  
Konye Urgench  
Gai Jorayev

# The City of the Khorezm-shahs

## KONYE URGENCH

**K**onye Urgench (Old Urgench) was the former capital of the Khorezm-shahs; at its peak the dynasty controlled a large part of modern-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Located along the old Amu Darya rivercourse, Urgench was a key Silk Road trading city, at the cross-section of two caravan routes – one east towards China, and one south – north-west, from Persia to Russia. Urgench is mentioned in

in the fortress and prayed until it vanished underground, protecting everyone. Today it is a sacred site that women visit for fertility. The city also features numerous mausoleums, including that of Tyurabek-hanym, a legendary queen, and the minaret of Kutlug Timur, which at 62m high is the tallest in Central Asia. In 1221, Urgench was sacked by the Mongols, but recovered and continued to hold large trade bazaars until 1388,

**“Once the water of the river reached the very walls of this city; then the residents built a dam from brushwood and trees, stopped the water flowing in this direction and bent it towards the east. This work is really remarkable.”**

the Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, as “*Urga*”, pointing to its antiquity (5<sup>th</sup> Century BC). The oldest surviving building is the fortress “*Kyrkmolla*”, which in the medieval period housed the exceptional library of Sultan Mamun. The name comes from a local legend; during the Mongol conquest, 40 (*kyrk* in Turkic), *mullahs* (Muslim theologians) hid

**– al-Maqdisi, 985 AD**

when Timur’s (Tamerlane) forces destroyed it, and took the skilled workforce to Samarkand and Bukhara, where they were tasked with building new outstanding architecture. With this and the Amu Darya’s course changing to the north, Urgench was abandoned and the capital of the Khorezm khanate moved to Khiva.



# Zoroastrianism and Islam

## GYAUR KALA & MIZDAHKHAN

Gyaur Kala, or Fortress of the Unfaithful, was formed in antiquity and used until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. The name comes from the Arab conquest, since before this the fortress was inhabited by Zoroastrian practitioners; and indeed, numerous remnants of hearths show that the residents of Gyaur Kala worshipped fire. Today all that remains of the fortress is the northern and western walls, but initially it was trapezoidal with 10m tall double walls and two-tiered arcades for archers, as well as towers and arrow-slits; a typical construction for Khorezmian fortresses at the time.

Below the hill of Gyaur Kala is Mizdahkhan city and necropolis. Mizdahkhan was once one of the largest cities in Khorezm, at the cross-section of major trade routes. The necropolis shows the adoption of Islam in the region, with the construction of mausoleums, tombs, and mosques. The most significant is the 14<sup>th</sup> Century underground mausoleum of the princess Mazlumkhan-Slu,

with a hall of washing and prayer. According to legend, she was incredibly beautiful and fell in love with a simple builder. The khan agreed to give his daughter to the builder if he built a minaret as tall as the sky in one night. The builder completed this task, but the khan broke his promise, and so the builder threw himself from the tower, as did the princess. The khan ordered the minaret to be destroyed and buried the two together, building a mausoleum out of the minaret bricks. Another mausoleum is the seven-domed tomb of the giant-saint Shamun Nabi, still considered a sacred place. Shamun Nabi was a sorcerer, and locals say his tomb is surrounded by magic stones; if you put 7 stones in a pile and make a wish, your wish will come true. Mizdahkhan is still an active cemetery today, so if you visit it do not be surprised if there are people in prayer or finishing pilgrimages, and please be respectful that this is still a sacred place for many.

View of Mizdahkhan  
from Gyaur Kala  
Gai Jorayev







Chilpyk Dakhma  
Gai Jorayev

# Zoroastrian Tower of Silence

## CHILPYK DAKHMA

A Tower of Silence (*dakhma*) is a round tower-like structure used in Zoroastrianism for disposing of the dead. Khorezm is generally agreed to be the heartland of Zoroastrianism; indeed, archaeologists have found 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC rocky platforms used for by Iron Age peoples that could be precursors to later *dakhmas*. The *dakhma* at Chilpyk is more than 2200 years old; it is 15m tall without any roof, and 65m in diameter, towering at the top of a natural hill, and accessed by a 20m staircase cut into the hill itself. The deceased were left in the tower to be eat-

en by predatory birds like vultures; afterwards the bones were collected into clay vessels (ossuaries) and buried. This follows the Zoroastrian philosophy that forbids the decaying flesh to be buried in the ground.

After the spread of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, the tower was rebuilt and used by the Khorezm civilization as a signaling and defensive tower along with other fortresses. Today Chilpyk has a topographic survey tripod marking the highest point of the tower: it is covered with bands of cloth, which locals tie on for luck.



## A Different Kind of City

# JANBAS KALA

Janbas Kala (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD) was one of the easternmost fortresses in the Khorezm oasis. It spans 200 x 170m, with very well-preserved fortress walls, still standing 10m high. The walls are unique in their lack of any defensive towers, unlike most Central Asian fortresses; instead, over 1000 arrow-slits were spread along the surface, with archers able to fire from multiple levels. The number of arrow-slits suggests both men and women defended the city, as the population was fairly small at around 400 households.

Inside, a wide main street led to a large building with a Zoroastrian fire altar of eternal flame and a large hall, used for communal feasting during religious festivals. In the altar room, known as “*house of fire*”, archaeologists found a thick layer of saxaul (*Haloxylon ammo-*

*dendron*) tree ash below the floor; ash from the sacred fire was not thrown out, but kept in the room as a relic.

The main street divided the city into two large residential blocks, each containing over 150 similarly sized rooms, all inter-connected without alleyways. The walls of the blocks used bricks with *tamgas* (family emblems). The *tamgas* found in one block were completely different from those in the other one, suggesting the fortress was divided into two main family or tribe-groups, each living in their own block. Rather than being organised hierarchically through class as most cities are, this city was organised by kinship, creating an indigenous Central Asian urban tradition.

Janbas Kala's walls  
Azamat Matkarimov





Despite the limited area of the Khorezm oasis, human activity has flourished for centuries, often damaging previous landscapes. With modern intensive agriculture and increasing populations, change has become particularly destructive. The comparison on the right shows the effects of 60 years of urban expansion at the ancient city Khazarasp, now engulfed by buildings. To minimise the damaging impact of human activities on heritage, the CAAL project, including local stakeholders, is developing an open access database monitoring the condition of Central Asian cultural sites and the risks facing them.



Khazarasp from satellite images

Top: Bing Maps, © 2021 Microsoft Corporation

Bottom: Declassified CORONA image, 1964



## The Southern Gateway of Khorezm

# KHAZARASP

**K**hazarasp is one of the oldest surviving fortress cities of Central Asia. When excavated by archaeologists, its oldest cultural deposits dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. It is located on the southern edge of the Khorezm oasis in Uzbekistan, and as such played a crucial role in managing trade relations with Sogdian, Bactrian, and Persian merchants – for this reason it is known as the “*Southern Gateway*”. Its location at a strategic crossing point on the Amu Darya also made it an important military base for preventing invasions by nomadic and Iranian tribes. The name ‘Khazarasp’ means ‘a thousand horses’, from *hazarha* (thousand) and *aspa* (horse) in ancient Iranian – the rulers of Khorezm kept a large cavalry at the fortress for defense.

The city is surrounded by mighty mudbrick walls with towers, almost 12m high. At its height from 5<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC, it was also a key crafting centre – near the fortress is Khumbuz-Tepe, a large pottery production centre whose pottery has been found across Khorezm, including at Koi Krylgan Kala. Khumbuz-Tepe also contained a Zoroastrian temple from as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, pointing to Khorezm as the origin of the religion. Throughout the medieval period, Khazarasp was a secondary centre of the Khiva khanate, serving as a home for several members of the ruling dynasty. Although it is just a small town today, it is one of the few cities in Khorezm with such a prolonged and continuous existence.



# A Magnificent Palace in the Dust

## TOPRAK KALA

**T**oprak Kala (Earth/Dust Fortress) was the palatial stronghold of Khorezm. It was a fortified city (500 x 300m), with a huge palace-citadel in the north-west, active from 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD. At this time, Khorezm was independent and traded with the Kushan Empire to the south-east, with Khorezm rulers showing their power by marking coins with the S-sign of Siyavush, the mythical founder of the dynasty. Archaeologists found evidence of silk, amber and even coral craft production, as well as several workshops making renowned Khorezm bows. They also found an archive of documents in the palace, written in indigenous Khorezmi script, which was used until the Arab conquest.

The north-western palace had several ceremonial halls, including the Hall of Kings with 24 larger-than-life clay figures; these have been interpreted as kingly ancestors or perhaps deities like Aredvi Sura Anahita, Iranian goddess of the waters. Another was the Hall of

Dancing Masks, with dancing statues and a central altar dedicated to a female deity flanked by animals, and the Hall of the Warriors. Here were warrior statues wearing Persian-style headdresses, and painted to have dark skin, unlike most depictions of Khorezm people from that time; perhaps they were mercenaries hired to defend the king. A second complex stood to the north of the city, with a three-storey Zoroastrian temple. On entering the temple, one would pass between two fires burning on the sides of the entrance as a ritual purification. These palaces show Khorezm's multiculturalism as it interacted with its neighbours.

As with Janbas Kala, Toprak Kala's residential area was divided into blocks of interlinked rooms; over 200 people could live in one such large-family home. Despite influences from other cultures, this was an original form of Central Asian urbanism that placed importance on kinship as the social glue of the city.



**Above:**  
Palace of Toprak Kala  
Azamat Matkarimov

**Right:**  
Aerial photograph  
of Toprak Kala, 1969  
Khorezmian Archaeological -  
Ethnographic Expedition  
British Library, EAP1075 project



The group organisation of Central Asian cities was not just limited to ancient times. There are legends from Islamic times of ritual yearly fighting between citizens divided into two groups; in Merv and Samarkand - the residents of the “medina” and the “old bazaar”, in Gorgan - the “shahristan” (central city) and the Bekrabad suburbs, separated by the river. This helped to reaffirm group allegiances within the city, but also strengthened both groups’ ties to their urban identity - without the city, neither existed.





Guldursun Kala  
Azamat Matkarimov

## The Traitor City

# GULDURSUN KALA

**G**uldursun Kala is one of the largest fortresses in Khorezm. Although it first formed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, it gained a new importance under the Khorezm-shahs as a defensive fortress on the borders of the steppe, with monumental walls and towers built in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century AD.

The city's name comes from a legend: it was once known as Gulistan, the city of flowers, and was ruled by a king who had a daughter, Guldursun. One time, Gulistan was besieged by nomadic tribes – the residents held out until they were starving. But they came up with a clever plan – they knew their attackers were also hungry since they burned all the fields. So, they took one of their last cattle, fed it as much grain as they could allow, and released it to their attackers, who prepared to eat it. When they cut it open they were surprised to see its stomach full of grain and thought: “The city must be full of food, while we are

hungry. We should give up the siege!” But the king's daughter Guldursun had fallen in love with the son of the besiegers' leader, and she sent him a message saying: “Wait one more day and the city will surrender”. The attackers waited another day and when the defenders in the city saw that their plan was unsuccessful, they surrendered. The city was looted and burned, and Guldursun went to be with her beloved. But when he saw her, he said: “If she could betray her own father and people to the enemies of her land, how will she act with me?” So he ordered that she be tied to wild horses and be torn apart for her betrayal. Her blood spilled onto the city and from then on it was known as Guldursun. This legend has a historical basis: the city was sacked by Genghis Khan in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, and again in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century by Tamerlane's forces.



# The Monumental Temple

## KOI KRYLGAN KALA

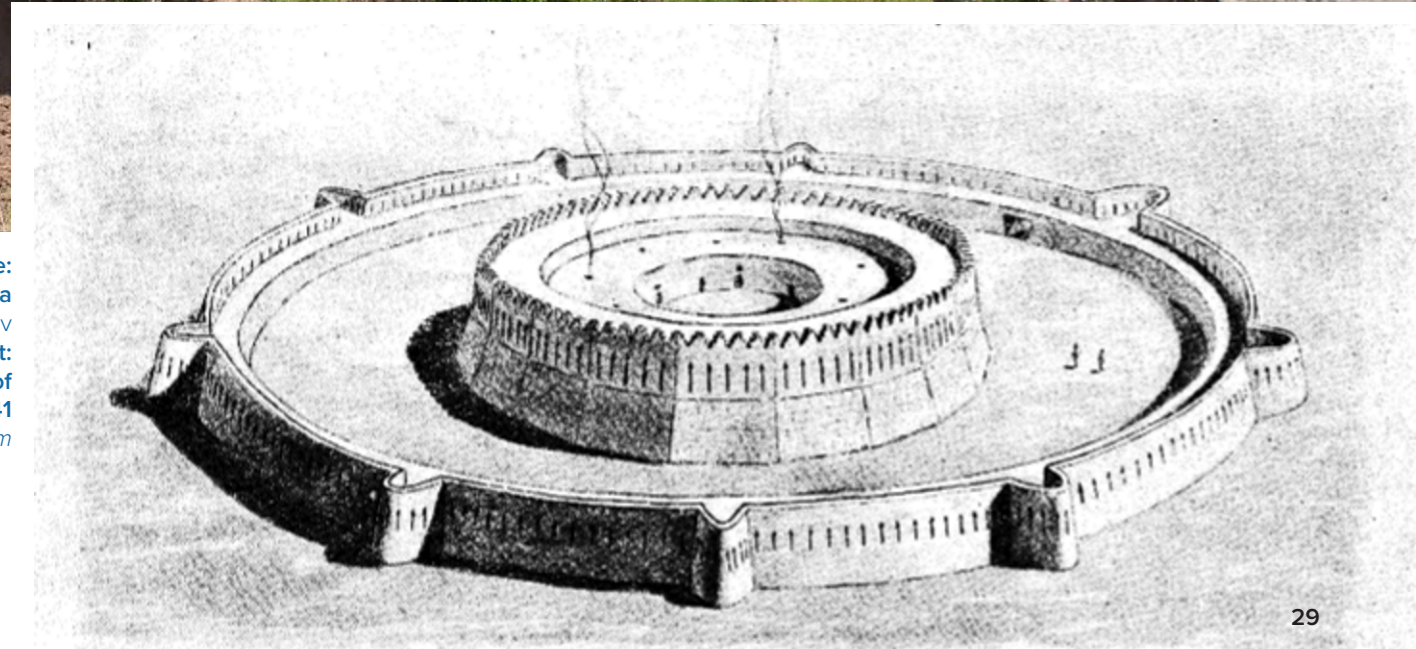
**K**oi Krylgan Kala (Fortress of the Perished Rams) is around 30km south-east of Toprak Kala, surrounded by salt flats and sands. In ancient times it was placed along a canal leading from the Amu Darya, although this has now dried out. The fortress is unlike any other in Khorezm because it is circular, surrounded by a round wall which once had nine towers. The centre of the circle is taken up by the 18-sided citadel, 40m in diameter and 15m from the outer wall. Rather than a normal city, it seems to have been a temple and mausoleum complex with chambers around the citadel walls and a Zoroastrian fire temple decorated with frescoes of wine

drinking. On the eastern side, chambers were used for storage of temple utensils and performing funerary rites, while on the western side were burial chambers. Archaeologists have found some of the earliest ossuaries (clay burial vessels) and Khorezmian inscriptions here, as well as statuettes of gods and goddesses, and a huge amount of decorated pottery, both local and imported. The shape and placement of the tower has led to suggestions that priests used the tower as an astronomical observatory – astrology and the zodiac were frequently referenced in Zoroastrianism to predict and date events.



Above:  
Koi Krylgan Kala  
Azamat Matkarimov

Right:  
Reconstruction of  
Koi Krylgan Kala, 1941  
S. Tolstov, *Drevniy Khorezm*







Ayaz Kala I and  
II in winter  
Gai Jorayev

# A Kushan Outpost

## AYAZ KALA

At the edge of the Kyzyl Kum desert stand the ruins of one of the largest fortresses of ancient Khorezm, Ayaz Kala (Fortress on the Freezing Wind). It is actually not one fortress but three, comprising a defensive complex that guarded the Khorezm oasis from attacks by nomads.

The main fortress, **Ayaz Kala I**, was built around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, likely by the Kushan Empire under Kanishka the Great (127 – 150 AD), who expanded the empire to its greatest extent. Although the Kushan Empire did not control Khorezm itself, its heartland was in Bactria in modern Afghanistan, and as such it needed to protect its western border. Ayaz Kala was part of a system of border fortresses, often built on elevated areas to transmit signals to each other.

On approaching the site, one first sees the ruins of Ayaz Kala I on top of a steep reddish-brown hill, towering nearly 60m above the surrounding desert plateau. The fortress has impressive rectangular walls with half-circular

towers, as well as an arcade for archers with arrow-slits above the entrance gate. The gate also had a “labyrinth” wall in front of it, so that while the gate faced south, the entrance was from the south-east. Such a labyrinth made it difficult for the enemy to attack the gate head-on, forcing them to approach along the wall and making them vulnerable to attack from above. The inside of the fortress was completely bare – the garrison lived in vaulted rooms at the base of the walls. This was a purely defensive fortress built by a central government, which probably served as a refuge for people in the adjoining settlement.

South-east of Ayaz Kala I is a lower hill with **Ayaz Kala II**, an oval fortress with well-preserved walls. Although the initial walls were built in the Kushan period, it was also renovated in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Afrighid Khorezm-Shahs – a rectangular structure similar to the pre-gate labyrinth was added, along with half-columns on the walls. The strategic location of the fortress clearly made it valuable even centuries after the collapse of the Kushan Empire. To the south of these two hills lay an agricultural settlement made of large homesteads, each encircled by a brick wall containing a courtyard and multi-room homes – one house had more than 40 rooms. One of the largest ones is **Ayaz Kala III**, a rhomboid-shaped ex-

ppanse measuring 260m x 180m, which today is almost completely eroded. Near the northern wall was a giant multi-room building made up of 30 rooms.

Although Ayaz Kala III is bigger in area than Ayaz Kala I, this was not a fortress but a homestead, probably for a powerful aristocratic family in the settlement; the same can be said for Ayaz Kala II, which may have housed the ruling family. At this time, Khorezm’s social organisation was based around *dehqans*, feudal elite land-owners who

**The fortress was built out of pahsa, an indigenous Central Asian building method where clay is laid in thick 1m layers, rammed together, forming a durable material.**

could command their surrounding settlements; each fortress and settlement was its own polity.

It’s possible that the Kushan Empire made an agreement with the local *dehqans* to build a fortress to protect the settlement (and the region beyond) in exchange for them providing the guards with food and supplies. Such agreements would ensure that the Kushan Empire was guarded from attacks from the desert, while allowing Khorezm’s feudal lords to remain independent.



# Trade and COMMERCE

The region of Khorezm played a major role in the grand network of one of the most famous and important trading routes in history: The Silk Roads. This must not be thought of a singular road but an interlaced series of routes that, at its peak, stretched for over 8000km. From China to the Mediterranean, the influence of the Silk Roads was visible in the architecture and felt in the intermingling of cultures. Despite the extremely difficult terrain and, at times, harsh conditions, the Silk Roads connected some the greatest empires in history.

One of the most interesting consequences of the Silk Roads upon the historic landscape are the caravanserais that can be found strategically placed along the trading network. These were conveniently established at a day's ride apart from each other. Caravanserais were bustling hubs for travelling merchants to rest and trade which, over time, encouraged towns and cities to grow around them as the routes became more frequented. However, the impact of the caravanserais on the Khorezm and Central Asian landscape is far beyond physical. They provided an opportunity for the multitude of diverse traders from far and wide to mix, trade and interact. Not only were goods exchanged, but an assorted mix of cultures impacted upon the cuisines, religions, traditions and languages spoken. The conglomeration of multiculturalism became the legacy of the Silk Roads.

**Ichan Kala** is one of the finest examples of caravanserais in the region. Despite its humble beginnings as a place for merchant caravans to rest, the grandeur of the inner city must not be underestimated. Two of the main gates that impose upon the landscape were equipped for goods to be safely brought in by camels. Products were sorted and the camels were prepared for the next journey that lay ahead. Within the city walls lay the trading house which featured two stories and had 105 *hujras* (cells). Rooms that lined the ground floor were shops for merchants whilst rooms above were *mekhmankhana* (hotel). Within the market it was possible to find local Khivan *alacha* (striped cotton fabric of handicraft work), as well as, unique jewellery from Khorezm masters. English cloth, Iranian silk, Bukhara boots, and Chinese porcelain littered the thriving market – inherited by today's living culture.





# RELIGION in KHOREZM

Khorezm's strategic location as a fertile oasis surrounded by deserts made it both a cross-cultural hub as many tradeways passed through here on the way to China or the Near East, and developing in relative isolation due to the difficulties of getting to the region. Over the millennia, numerous religions have gained popularity, often incorporating local customs and festivals. Ancient Khorezmians were polytheists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Buddhists, and later, Muslims. To understand the history of Khorezm and the place it is today, it is important to understand the various belief systems that have influenced its culture and its people.





## The Oldest Continuously Practiced Religion

# ZOROASTRIANISM

**Z**oroastrianism may be the world's oldest monotheistic religion, with roots dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, although it crystallises in the 8<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when its prophet Zoroaster is said to have lived and its sacred text *Avesta* written. It sees the world in dualistic terms, divided into Good and Evil, Order (*Asha*) and Chaos (*Druj*). These are ruled by Ahura Mazda, from whom all Light and Creation stems, and Ahriman, representing the forces of Chaos and Destruction.

Zoroastrianism emphasises following the Threefold Path of Asha – that of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds – to ensure happiness and fight against chaos on a cosmic scale. Ultimately Good will prevail, and all of creation will reunite with Ahura Mazda. In this theology, one can see the same ideas around which later religions such as Christianity and Buddhism were based; heaven and hell, free will and redemption, the importance of good deeds. The four elements of the universe – water, fire, earth, air – are seen as sacred, with fire being revered in temples (*Atash Behram*) due to its purifying force.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Persian Empire adopted Zoroastrianism as its state religion, spreading it across Iran. Although today Zoroastrianism is

mainly practiced in Iran and India, its origins lie in Central Asia, with Khorezm mentioned in the *Avesta*. Archaeological investigations in Khorezm have revealed numerous stone platforms with surrounding burials; these are reminiscent of later *dakhmas*, or Zoroastrian towers of silence (see: Chilpik Dakhma), and date to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, around the time of Zoroaster.

Many ancient Khorezm palaces such as Toprak Kala and Koi Krylgan Kala contained fire temples with characteristic altars and passageways flanked by purification flames. Zoroastrianism continued to be practiced, and indeed be the main religion of Khorezm, straight until the Islamic expansion in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, and its impact can still be seen in the *novruz* celebration, a festival of the coming of Spring on March 21. In Khorezm, *novruz* festivities are often held at Toprak Kala, pointing to the continued importance of both the site and its ancient religion.

Previous spread:  
Juma mosque, Ichan Kala  
National PR-centre,  
Uzbektourism  
Right:  
Entrance to Chilpyk Dhakma  
Gai Jorayev



A ceramic lid from the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, found in northern Turkmenistan in the Kara Kum desert. It is divided in two registers. On the bottom it shows hills with a palmette-tree in the middle, with two circles on the sides (possibly representing the sun and moon). On the top is a winged part-man, part-ox, known as a *gopatshah* in Iranian mythology, who was created by Ahura Mazda. On the *gopatshah*'s head rests a basket, similar to those that builders would use to carry bricks or clay during construction. In this way, the lid represents the myth of creation: the mythical creature of Ahura Mazda carries bricks to build the world shown below, with the sun, moon, and tree.

Sergey Bolelov, <https://arzamas.academy/mag/608-oriental>; image from The State Museum of Oriental Art [www.orientmuseum.ru/collections/ancient\\_asia](http://www.orientmuseum.ru/collections/ancient_asia)



# The Prevailing Religion

# ISLAM

From the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Arabs swept across Central Asia and began a process of Islamicization. Khorezm was conquered by the Arabs in 712 AD, with many cities becoming abandoned, but was only nominally under control of the Islamic Empire; it wasn't until the 9<sup>th</sup> century that a Khorezm-shah converted to Islam, gaining the name of Abdallah ("slave of God").

Although Islam in Khorezm was originally of the Sunni branch, it has been heavily influenced by folk traditions and Sufism, a mystic sect of Islam which emphasises spiritual experience and oneness with God through rhythmic chanting, pilgrimage, meditation, and *sama*, a ceremony with trance-like states of dancing and music. Aspiring members join a *tariqah* or fraternity, led by a *sheikh* (teacher) and can become *dervishes*, wandering Sufi monks who pilgrimage across the Muslim world. It is because of such travel and pilgrimage routes that stopped at Khiva that Sufis had such an impact on Khorezm, which was otherwise isolated from the rest of the Islamic world by surrounding deserts.

Initially Islam co-existed alongside Zoroastrianism and Christianity, but in 1400, the conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) began to heavily persecute

any "infidels", with many Christian monuments undergoing destruction. By the time the capital was moved to Khiva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had become the religion of the region and the khanate, which is reflected in the architecture of Khiva. At its height, Khiva would have been a profoundly religious city. People would come here to study religious law and other topics in the numerous *madrasas*, Islamic colleges. At key points in the day – sunrise, mid-day, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall – calls to prayer would ring out from the city's tall minarets, giving pause to the bustle of urban life as people came to mosques and prayed.

Mausoleums dotted across the city housed the bodies of saints and shahs, serving as pilgrimage sites and usually with attached prayer halls (*ziyarat-hanas*); many continue to be highly revered and seen as holy sites. At many mausoleums today, there will still be a *mullah* - one learned in Islamic theology and sacred law - inviting people to join him in prayer; visiting pilgrims might leave money and food offerings and receive blessings.



Top left:  
Kalta Minar minaret,  
Ichan Kala  
Gai Jorayev

Bottom left:  
Madrasa of  
Allah-Kuli-khan,  
Ichan Kala  
National PR-centre,  
Uzbektourism

Right:  
The mausoleum  
of Pahlavan Mahmud,  
Ichan Kala  
National PR-centre,  
Uzbektourism





# Religious MINORITIES

## Missing Evidence

Today, Buddhists in Uzbekistan are a minority, mostly of Chinese origin. At the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Kushan Empire rose up from a unification of Bactria and Sogdiana in western Uzbekistan and proceeded to encompass an area stretching south-east across Pakistan and North-west India. Although Khorezm was not part of the Kushan Empire proper, it did pay tribute at one point and there were likely tradeways connecting the two. As such, it would be expected that Buddhism also spread to Khorezm. However, neither Buddhist monuments nor Buddhist artefacts have been found in Khorezm archaeology, so it is unclear when Buddhism was established here.

## The Eastern Diaspora

Judaism spread to Central Asia during the Achaemenid Persian period, after Cyrus the Great freed the Jews from captivity in Babylon. According to S. P. Tolstov, a Soviet archaeologist who wrote extensively on Khorezm, the region may have been the origin of a Jewish nucleus that later influenced the 8<sup>th</sup> century Khazar khanate, which stretched across the Caspian, Pontic Steppe and into Central Asia; the Khazar elite are known to have converted to Judaism. However, there has not been enough archaeological data to support a large presence

of Judaism in Khorezm. It is likely that due to the oasis's isolation, Jews would rarely reach it and if they did settle there, would have formed very small communities. For instance, although most have emigrated, there is a small Jewish community in Bukhara, with a synagogue still operational in the city.

## Influences from the West

Unlike in the West, Christianity in Asia has been a minority religion, with around 2.5% of people in Uzbekistan identifying as Christians today. Initially, Christianity existed alongside Zoroastrianism, which remained the state religion of the Sassanid Persians until the Arab incursions in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. In Central Asia, the main Christian sect was Nestorianism, which views Christ as separately human and divine; with this doctrine, Mary was the mother of the human Jesus but not the mother of God. This was considered heresy by the Church and many Nestorians fled to Persia and disseminated into Central Asia from there from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike in other areas of Central Asia, where Nestorianism prevailed, Khorezm also retained a Melkite tradition, related to the Eastern Orthodox Church today. This was likely due to its geographical separation from the rest of Central Asia; Melkite communities here were not squeezed out by Nestorians. According to Christian tradition, Konye Urgench, the capital of Khorezm before Khiva, contained the grave of the patriarch Job from the Old Testament, whom the Arabs later called Ayyub and also saw as a prophet. Archaeological finds have revealed Khorezm coins and beads with impressions of the cross, as well as Christian symbols on burials at the ancient necropolis of Mizdakhan. With the coming of Islam however,



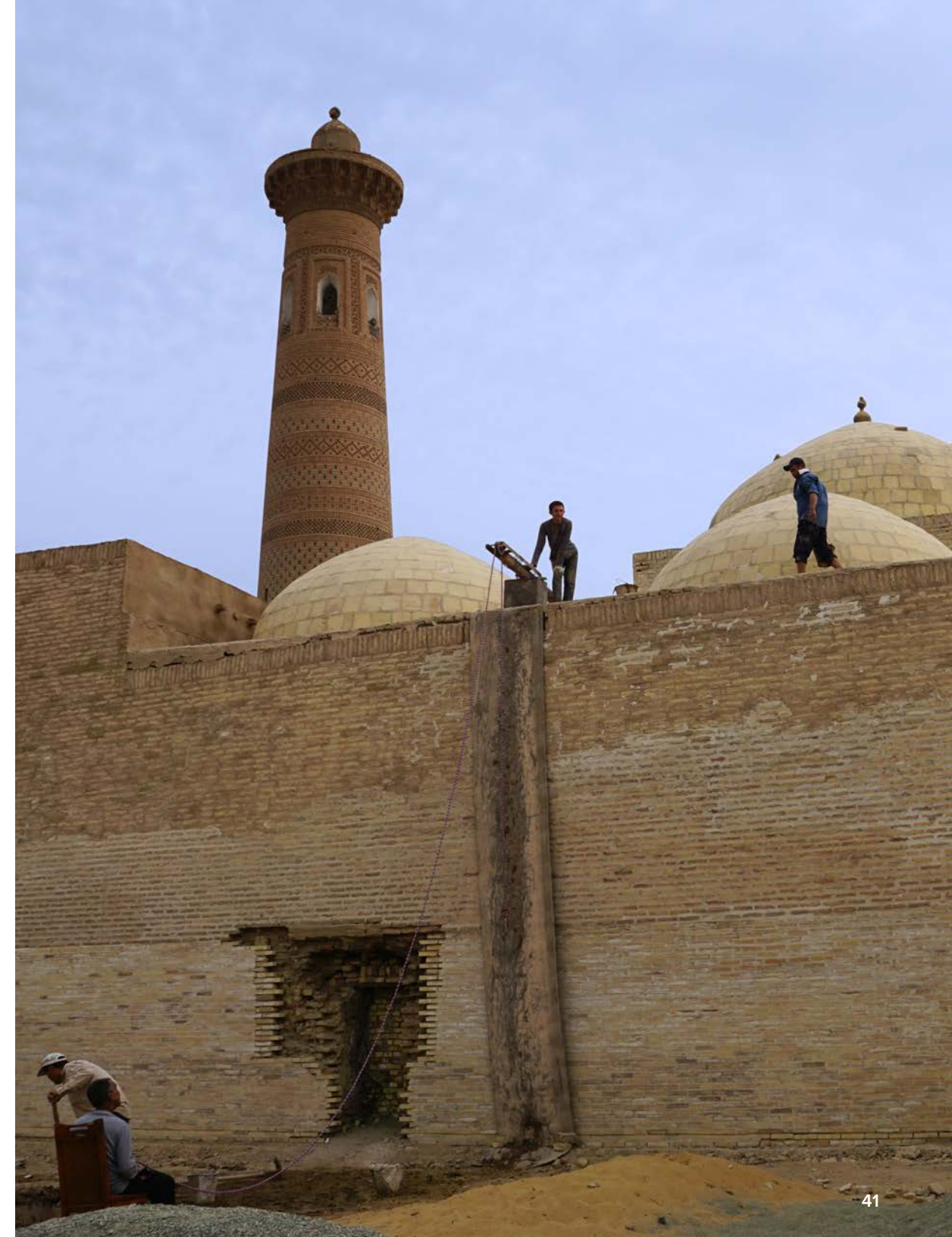
Christianity moved to an underground place in society, not re-emerging openly until the conquest by the Russian Empire in 1871.

## Religion and the Soviet Union

In the first years following the 1917 Russian Revolution, the USSR passed a decree separating religion from the state and schools and making all religions equal. Nevertheless, such a policy was very hard to implement in Central Asia, where daily life and education were highly regimented according to Islamic law. Madrasas and religious schools were at first allowed to function alongside newer Soviet schools, and were better funded and staffed; in 1923, Khiva had 89 religious schools, attended by over 2,550 people. From the mid-1920s, the Soviet attitude to religion became increasingly hostile. In 1929, the USSR passed a policy that religious organisations had no right to activities beyond satisfying religious needs, i. e. prayer, and so must be removed from any other spheres of social life. The Communist Party now pushed for an atheistic communist worldview, viewing religion as backwards and something to abandon. This policy lasted until the collapse of the USSR, at which point religion was able to return to most spheres of life. Today, most people would identify as Muslim in Khorezm, but are not as strict practitioners. Although mosques and especially mausoleums remain active places of worship, and many people believe in the power of saints and blessings, all but one of Khiva's minarets are now silent.

**Left:**  
**Madonna and Child**  
I.V. Savitsky Museum of Arts,  
Nukus

**Right:**  
**Local community repairing**  
**Said Niyoz Sholikorboy**  
**mosque, Khiva**  
Gai Jorayev





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## Further information

**Ichan-kala Museum Reserve**  
khivamuseum.uz

**Khorezm Region Tourism Development Department**  
travelkhorezm.com  
@travelkhorezm

**National PR-centre** tourists information  
uzbekistan.travel

**Arzamas** podcast on Khorezm (RU)  
<https://arzamas.academy/mag/608-oriental>

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Ayaz Kala II  
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