

TURKMEN ARCHAEOLOGY: A CENTRAL ASIAN SURPRISE

The silence is strange. I have lost sight of the road to the Iranian border. Disoriented, I'm exploring a combined Pompeii and Grozny. Was the city abandoned in the 1920s, the Middle Ages, or the Bronze Age?

This happened to me in the fall of 1996 in Turkmenistan, on the Ashgabat-Tejen-Sarax road. I called the place the Mysterious City. The director of the Ashgabat Archaeological Museum said it sounded like Altyn-Tepe, a Bronze Age settlement he had excavated 10 years earlier. My driver said it was the medieval settlement Sandyk Gashi, meaning "the place where they dropped the trunk." He claimed that merchants traveling on the Silk Road dropped a trunk at that place, and as the lid flew off a river of gold coins flowed over the sand.

My Western European diplomat counterparts were skeptical. They claimed to see distinctive turn-of-the-century building patterns in the ruined walls, and scoffed at finding any relics among the sea of shards lining the deserted streets. But even they were seduced by the Mysterious City's enigma, and we organized a number of picnics there together.

This is Central Asian archaeology in microcosm. While I have traveled to all of the Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan — where I spent two wonderful years of archaeological exploration during my tenure as deputy chief of mission at Embassy Ashgabat — is the one I know best. Turkmen archaeology aptly illustrates the cultural surprises Central Asia offers.

The Most Splendid City

Turkmenistan's jewel is ancient Merv, near Mary, that country's second most important city. Some historians believe Alexander the Great visited the city during his daring sweep through the area. At Merv, I found the ruins of the Erk-Kala Fortress — a sixth-century B.C. edifice reconstructed extensively during Merv's Greek period by one of Alexander's generals, Antiochius. The fortress resembles a huge earthen doughnut, 600

meters across, with walls 50 meters high. In the middle are the ruins of a Buddhist monastery from the sixth century A.D. and a Christian monastery, both destroyed by the Arabs who forced Islam on Merv. Mohammed, my local guide during the visit, recalled the tale of the beautiful Persian princess who built the Christian monastery. When she converted to Christianity, her distraught father, the Sassanian shah of Persia, was told

by Zoroastrian priests that he had to sentence her to death. Instead, he sent his only child into exile to provincial Merv, where she married a local tribal prince and founded what is to date Turkmenistan's only home-grown Christian dynasty.

In the middle of the seventh century, the Arabs invaded present-day Turkmenistan, bringing with them forcible conversion to Islam. Merv and its outlying lands became a part of the Umayyid and Abbasid caliphates, and then subsequently the Tahirid and Samanid states. It was during this period that the Silk Road — a complex network of trade caravan routes from Europe to China, invariably crossing the medieval Turkmen towns of Merv, Amul, Zemm, Gurganj, Sarax, Abiverd, Nissa, Dekhistan, and others — became an important factor in world trade. The

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BY *TATIANA C. GFOELLER*

F O C U S

11th century was marked in Turkmenistan by the birth of a powerful centralized empire, founded by the Turkic Seljuks, famous for their military prowess. During their apogee, they ruled lands stretching from Palestine to the Chinese border.

Merv's 12th-century mausoleum of the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar has been rebuilt, but with new bricks cemented to old. Mohammed, a trained archaeologist, lamented that with the fall of the USSR, money for archaeology dried up and most excavations at Merv ceased. Yet money suddenly materialized to rebuild the mausoleum,

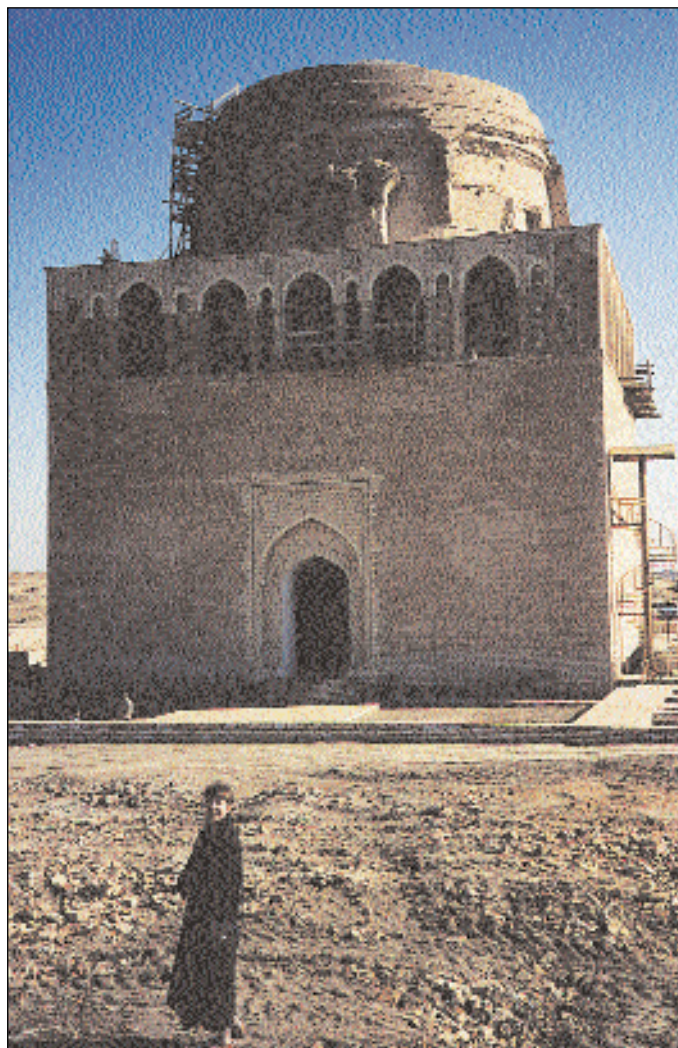
"a really pedestrian piece of medieval Islamic architecture," according to Mohammed. Many of the area's Moslem clerics, however, consider the late sultan a saint, even if, in my driver's opinion, "he obviously chose his architects badly." Indeed, Sanjar is a noted historical figure and the successor of Mohammed Togrulbek the Turkman, the founder and first Sultan of the Seljuks. It was Sanjar who is credited with Merv's rebirth after the Arabs sacked it, turning it into the cultural capital of Central Asia and inviting eminent Islamic scholars and poets to work there, including the world-famous Omar Khayyam.

Nearby stand the Great Kyz Kala and the Small Kyz Kala, two remarkable fortresses. Built just before the Arab invasion in the seventh century, they feature a totally unique architectural style, with walls shaped like petrified, undulating waves. Tragically, half of the Small Kyz Kala crumbled in 1995. Mohammed attributed the decay to increased humidity from the

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The author unearthing a human skeleton (under archaeological supervision) at Margiana, and below, in front of the Sultan Sanjar mausoleum in Merv.



Karakum Canal built nearby in the 1950s. He predicted the rest would collapse within 10 years and gave the Great Kyz Kala only 20 years to stand. There appears to be little interest in preserving this one-of-a-kind monument.

Ignorance and Neglect

As happened to most empires throughout history, the Seljuk empire eventually succumbed to a more ruthless conqueror, in this case, the Mongols. At the time, Merv was considered one of the most splendid cities of Islam, boasting a then-unheard-of population of about one million inhabitants (including Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist minorities). The Mongols are credited with slaughtering the entire city. After killing most of the men, they offered safety to the remaining families if they would surrender the city. When they did, they forcibly marched all of them out into the surrounding desert “for a temporary stay.” They then watched as hundreds of thousands of women, children, and older people died of dehydration, sunstroke, and starvation. Merv had been effectively annihilated. It is said that the Mongols piled the skulls of the dead in several-meter-high hills all around the charred city. Indeed, one just has to scratch the surface at the Merv archaeological site to unearth human bones.

After the defeat of the Seljuks, the subsequent dynasty moved its capital to a city they named Urgench, which presently straddles the Turkmen-Uzbek border. In pre-Soviet days, it was a whole city, belonging to the Khanate of Khiva and boasting a series of splendid medieval Islamic monuments, mainly burial chapels of imposing proportions. With their arbitrary slicing up of Czarist-era Turkestan (roughly speaking, another name for the whole of present-day Central Asia), the Soviets cut right through the city. They left all of the ancient sites in Turkmenistan (now renamed Kunyurgench; i.e., “old Urgench”), and built an abominable concrete-slab proletarian chicken coop of a city on the Uzbek side, now called by the ancient name of Urgench. Kunyurgench is definitely worth a respectful visit, while Urgench is best honored by avoiding it.

The Erk-Kala Fortress is a sixth-century B.C. edifice reconstructed during Merv’s Greek period by one of Alexander’s generals, Antiochius.

Where neglect is slowly destroying the hauntingly beautiful Kyz Kalas in Merv, sheer ignorance has already obliterated half of the medieval Fortress of Amul, just outside the industrialized city of Chardjou, also on the Turkmen-Uzbek border. Tore, my official guide, sighed as he described how he had played on the site as a child, when it was at least twice as large. Where has all of the mud brick architecture

gone? Into a brick factory built on the fortress site. When I visited, other children were playing on it, clamoring to the top and exploring orifices that look like entryways to former dungeons. Though the once proud Fortress of Amul is no longer much to look at, it demonstrates the fragility of archeological sites and the wisdom of preserving historical heritage.

A Lost Civilization

In the middle of the forbiddingly huge Karakum Desert — Turkmenistan’s “inland sea” of sand, covering most of this California-size country — lies the lost civilization of Margiana. Dating to the Bronze Age, the winsomely named city-state is believed to have been Alexander the Great’s capital while he was in Turkmenistan. When the Murghab River — on which Margiana, situated in the river’s delta, based its livelihood — changed course, the city was abandoned. Margiana is a bumpy, two-hour ride in a military jeep through the desert from the nearest inhabited settlement.

The ride was well worth it, however, for stretching before us were miles of foundations, streets, occasional ovens, and burial grounds. Pot shards were plentiful. My then-8-year-old son Emmanuel found the scattered human skeletons awesome. One can literally dig for skulls at every step. Talk about a place for a Halloween party! Archaeologists have found numerous sculptures of the tutelary goddess Anahit, reputed to bring good luck and particularly to increase the erotic enjoyment and fertility of women. Male priests, who drank a potent narcotic from ceramic pots studded with animal sculptures, worshipped her. Fascinating examples of both sculptures and pottery can be seen at the Mary Archaeological Museum.

This site is most associated with the famous Russian archaeologist, Victor Sarianidi, who began digging here in the 1970s and continues to this day. His first famous find was a golden treasure of Bakhtrian artifacts in Tillya-Tepe, near the present Afghan town of Shibirgan, not far from Margiana. Subsequently, he located a vast palace and a monumental Zoroastrian fire temple in Gonur-depe, a major town in Margiana. Data obtained there have permitted scientists to determine that Margiana was probably the birthplace of one of the world's major religions, Zoroastrianism (commonly referred to as "fire worship"). For example, in the necropolis of Gonur unusual burial chambers have been unearthed where the walls had evidently been burnt by fire — the first time such a practice was documented in Central Asia. Archaeologists believe that this was done to purify the walls, since Zoroastrians believe that corpses defile the "pure" earth. Interestingly, these burial sites have a lot in common with present-day Turkmen burial sites known as "mazars."

It should be noted that though Zoroastrianism has seen the number of its adepts shrink thanks to inroads by Islam and Christianity, it is still practiced openly in parts of India and the Caucasus and some of its cultural traditions persist to this day in Central Asia. Indeed, while most Turkmen are at least nominal Moslems, they readily acknowledge that many of their beliefs, folk holidays, customs, and traditions include a great number of pre-Islamic, including Turkic pagan and Zoroastrian, elements. Examples of "fire worship" include springtime festivals, during which young couples jump over fires holding hands; people ride in large swings over open fires; and fires are built to honor forks in the road.

What is the origin of this formidable city-state, or possibly nation? It can truly be said to be shrouded in the dusk of ages. As far as Sarianidi figures it, by the second and third millennia B.C., Aryan-Indo-Iranian people had started occupying the lands of present-day Turkmenistan and other parts of Central Asia. In the Stone Age, the Jeitun culture of agriculturalists and herdsmen formed there — one of the earliest in

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Central Asia. As the centuries passed, the local population mastered the arts of metal smelting, livestock (especially camel) breeding, and horse domestication. In addition — and most visibly seen at the Margiana site — the ancient Margianians perfected the difficult science of crop irrigation, leading to exceedingly high agricultural yields. What is left of these achievements can now

be found in the scattered oases of southern Turkmenistan.

Archaeologists interested in this site have documents pertaining to it only from the middle of the first millennium B.C., when it was part of the Achaemenian dominion, where the ancient Zoroastrian religion held sway. By the end of the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great occupied this territory (as well as neighboring Afghanistan) with his army, leading to the formation of the better-known Bakhtrian state (mostly in present-day Afghanistan). When Alexander left his conquests to his successors, near-by Margiana fell to the lot of his general, Seleucides. In the middle of the third century B.C., the Parthian kingdom was founded in the foothills of the Kopet Dag mountains.

A Long View

Finally, a mere half-hour from the American Embassy in Ashgabat are two exciting archaeological sites. Destroyed by the 1948 earthquake that leveled Ashgabat, the 15th-century mosque of Anau is one of Central Asia's most picturesque ruins. Gorgeous blue and green dragons used to twist their tails over the doorway. Now pieces of mosaic are strewn about. The tomb of a reputed Moslem saint is nearby, festooned with ribbons, safety pins and even pacifiers because local lore says leaving offerings will make the barren fertile. Farther on are three tumuli, or mounds, which display an impressive chronological stratification; where they've been excavated, you can see items dating from the Bronze Age to the 19th century.

Possibly Central Asia's most important archaeological site is the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa, referred to by the Parthian kings as their "patrimonial nest."

F O C U S

Parthia once vied with Rome for control of the world. The Parthian kings were defeated in 224 A.D. by the Sassanians, however, and Nissa then became a Sassanian city. As Turkic-speaking peoples spread from Turkmenistan to Siberia, ancient Parthian and Sassanian traditions melded with Turkic agriculturalist and nomadic-herdsmen customs. Nissa remained where it was, but its character reflected the evolving nature of the local civ-

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ilization. Some stately mud brick buildings (reconstructed to reflect the Parthian era) still stand on their original site. You can enter some rooms and even try your luck at digging (discreetly) a little farther on. As a frequent visitor, I would issue only one warning: Beware the illegal weekend dogfights organized within the ancient walls — those dogs look dangerous!

From the stately walls of Nissa you can see a long way — all the way back to the Bronze Age of Central Asia. And throughout that vast open space, other archaeological sights of equal importance — though less fame — beckon the connoisseur, dilettante and just plain tourist alike. For all of our sakes, I hope that the present turmoil and instability of Central Asia will soon recede. That would allow this great resource to be preserved and developed with international assistance for the economic and cultural benefit of this fascinating region. ■



Gfoeller and her son Emmanuel on the roofs of Nissa; below, Gfoeller at the Great Kyz Kala; and right, with husband Michael and son in front of the Small Kyz Kyla.

