

## Kunya-Urgench (Turkmenistan)

No 1199

### 1. BASIC DATA

<i>State Party:</i>	Turkmenistan
<i>Name of property:</i>	Kunya-Urgench
<i>Location:</i>	Dashoguz Vilayet (Province)
<i>Date received:</i>	2 February 2004

#### *Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*. In terms of the paragraph 27 of the *Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, this is a historic town that is no longer inhabited but which provides unchanged archaeological evidence of the past. This is a serial nomination, consisting of three disconnected sections.

#### *Brief description:*

Kunya-Urgench is situated in northwestern Turkmenistan, on the south side of Amu Daria River. Urgench was the capital of the Khorezm region, which was part of the Achaemenid Empire. The nominated property consists of the old town area with series of monuments mainly from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This area has remained a vast deserted land with some remains of ancient fortified settlements (*Kyrkmolla*, *Ak-Kala*, *Khorezm-bag*). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was used as a graveyard. Recent urban development has taken place on the north side of the old town.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

#### *Description*

The nomination is divided into three distinct sections:

1. southern section (333.90 ha),
2. northern section (14.17 ha),
3. western section (5.17 ha).

The sections 1 and 2 are contained within the *Keneurgench State Historical and Cultural Park*.

**Section 1** is limited on its east, south and west sides by the remains of the 14<sup>th</sup> century fortification walls. In the southeast corner of this section, there are the remains of the fortress of *Ak-Kala*. The centre of the section is partly occupied by the fortress of *Tash-Kala*, with the gate of a ruined caravanserai and the remaining base of the *Mamunminaret*. The southeastern corner of the section has

the ruined fortress of *Khorezm-bag*, built as a residence for Khan Muhammed Emin in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From *Tash-Kala*, a road leads to the northwest, passing by most other monuments in this section, all built in brick. These include the remains of the *Kyrkmolla Fortress*, dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the period of the city's foundation.

*Kutlug-Timur Minaret* (1000-1030?) is the most visible landmark of the site with its 60 m height. The diameter at the base is 12 m and at the top 2 m, and its brick surface has fine geometric patterns.

*Il-Arslan Mausoleum* (1150?) is relatively small with a square plan and conical roof. The roof has geometric patterns in brick, and the front gate is surrounded by terracotta inscriptions.

*Tekesh Mausoleum* (1195?) has a similar form, but is bigger. Also here, the roof is decorated in brick patterns with some turquoise tiles still in position. The front gate has stalactite decorations.

*Seyet Akhmet Mausoleum* is simpler in its architecture. The present structure has been rebuilt after the original collapsed in 1993.

*Turabek-Khanum Mausoleum* (1360-1380?) is the largest of the mausoleums. It has an octagonal floor plan, with tall niches opening outward. The entrance is a tall gate structure. The original conical outer roof shell has collapsed. The interior has an exceptional spatial composition crowned with a dome of extremely refined blue-white decoration in delicate geometric pattern.

**Section 2** in the northern part of the town consists of a large Muslim graveyard in the middle of modern urban development. In the centre of the graveyard there is a group of three buildings. *Najm-ad-Din al-Kubra Mausoleum* was built in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was named after Ahmed Ibn Omar Najm-ad-Din al-Kubra al-Khorezmi (born in 1145), the founder of the Kubra School of Sufism, as well as being a painter, physician and chess master. The portal dates back to 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Sultan Ali Mausoleum* is located opposite to the previous, and is linked with the name of Sultan Ali, who ruled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Piryar Vali Mausoleum* is a small complex built in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. It contains the burials of several distinguished persons. At the entrance in the east, the *Dash Mosque*, built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been converted into a site museum.

**Section 3** is a small area in the western part of the old town. The monument of *Ibn Khajib* was built in honor of Ibn Khajib, a talented disciple of Najm-ad-Din al-Kubra. The ensemble was built in several phases from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### *History*

The origins of Kunya-Urgench are believed to go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the early Achaemenid period. Evidence of this is provided by the *Kyrkmolla Fortress*. In 712, Kunya-Urgench was invaded by Arabs and was named Gurgandj. Being at the crossing of trade routes, the town prospered, becoming a major centre from the 10<sup>th</sup> to

14<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was the capital of Khorezm from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the second city after Bukhara in Central Asia.

The city was destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1221, but it was rebuilt and described as the finest city of the Turks with fine bazaars and impressive buildings. It suffered heavily from destruction by the Timurid troops between 1372 and 1388, and never gained its previous position again. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the capital function was transferred to Khiva, and the city was finally abandoned. The Amu Darya River changed its course at the same time.

The city experienced modern development when it was newly colonized by Turkmen from 1831. The new development however took place outside the old town, which was later utilized as a graveyard.

### **Management Regime**

#### *Legal provision:*

The land of the nominated area is government-owned.

All monuments are legally protected. Kunya-Urgench is one of the eight “State Historical and Cultural Parks” in the country, based on a decree of 1985 (n° 10085). It is registered at the Vilayet (provincial) level (decree 440/16), approved by the State Cabinet of Ministers (in 1992).

In addition, there are special bylaws, for example, for the protection of the area identified as the buffer zone.

#### *Management structure:*

There are two agencies with management authority, State Historical and Cultural Park Kunya-Urgench, and the National Department for the Protection, Study and Restoration of the Historical and Cultural Monuments in Turkmenistan (DPM) in Ashgabat.

There is a general management system for the general policies of management and conservation of heritage sites. The system also provides general guidelines. More detailed plans are developed on the basis of these guidelines. Such is the case also with Kunya-Urgench, which includes a set of guidelines and annual work plans, controlling protection, research and monitoring.

#### *Resources:*

There is an official state budget allocated to the site. However, the amounts remaining were unused due to complex procedures. In 2003, the President of Turkmenistan provided information about a proposal to improve the situation. There is an income from visitor entrance fees, which amounted to 7,930 US\$ in 2002.

The site has a staff of 33 persons.

Visitor facilities have been developed since the 1980s, including an ethnographic museum, guides, trails, signboards, parking, toilets and publications. There are no accommodation facilities, restaurants or souvenir shops. Visitors normally sleep in Dashoguz, which is 100 km away. There are plans for a restaurant in the future.

Under the UNDP programme, there was a British expert working on the restoration of Kutlug-Timur Minaret and Turabek-Khanum Mausoleum, in 1999-2000.

### **Justification by the State Party (summary)**

*Criterion i:* Kunya-Urgench is an outstanding collection of exceptional monuments covering a long period in the history of the region. The site embodies an exceptional testimony of the great creativity and advanced building culture developed by the local craftsmen since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Kutlug-Timur minaret, the most striking one at first glance, is a masterpiece of creative genius, and is itself worthy of World Heritage Status. Kunya-Urgench displays various building structures, with rare dome shapes. Amongst them are Tekesh mausoleum, with its conical dome built on a high facet-drum, and the monumental Turabek-Khanum mausoleum, which are remarkable examples of this prominent creativity, which has spread over the entire region.

*Criterion ii:* The ruins are a brilliant testament to the extraordinary skills of the Urgench School of architecture and construction. The architectural styles developed in Kunya-Urgench have exerted considerable influence in the development of religious architecture in central Asia and Iran during the Islamic period. Local architects and craftsmen have participated in the construction of significant monuments in other towns in Uzbekistan and Iran. The Seljuk city in particular influenced architecture and architectural decoration as well as scientific and cultural development.

*Criterion iii:* The monuments of Kunya-Urgench and its associated archaeological remains are exceptional testimonies to the power and quality of the Khorezm capital that rose to great prominence between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, before being destroyed by the Mongols. The sequence of the development of Kunya-Urgench, the series of fortifications and their urban lay-outs bear exceptional testimony to the civilizations of Central Asia. Looking at the beauty of the nowadays preserved monuments, one can imagine the splendor of this flourishing capital, once called the “Pearl of Khorezm”.

*Criterion iv:* The monuments of Kunya-Urgench are outstanding examples of Islamic architecture and ornamentation in this region and played a significant role in their further dissemination.

## **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

### *Actions by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in August 2004.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management (ICAHM).

## Conservation

### Conservation history:

The ancient city of Kunya-Urgench was abandoned in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A new town developed on the north side, leaving the old town area as a deserted land. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been used as a graveyard.

A certain number of monuments remains as a testimony of the history and achievements of the city; many have collapsed or otherwise been ruined over time. From the 1970s, the monuments have been subject to restoration, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. From 1999 to 2000, the UNDP financed a restoration campaign.

### State of conservation:

The present state of conservation is variable. In some cases, the monuments have remained in their ruinous condition. In other cases, there have been variable degrees of repair, restoration and even complete reconstruction.

Of the principal monuments, *Turabek-Khanum Mausoleum* has been subject to restoration since the 1980s. In 1983-1993, the walls were repaired, and the collapsed northern portal was rebuilt. In 1999-2000, the inner dome and the small side domes were restored. The roof was partly rebuilt. There are still problems especially with the decorative elements, such as mosaics and stalactites, though the general condition is stable.

The shaft and staircase of *Minaret Kutlug-Timur* have been restored and consolidated in the 1980s. More recently, also the inclined top has been given attention, but the work needs to be continued in order to avoid collapse.

*Najm-ad-Din al-Kubra Mausoleum* was restored in the 1980s, involving internal and external wall surfaces, domes, screens, and fittings. The main portal has not been touched, and is now leaning out ca. 50cm. The decorative elements require attention. The surroundings have been cleared and arranged for visitors.

*Sultan Ali Mausoleum* has been subject to minor works of repair in early 1990s. The building is currently monitored and will require further work in the future. *II-Arslan Mausoleum* was restored in 1980s. The building is currently stable but will need further work in the future. *Seyet Akhmet Mausoleum* has been completely rebuilt after collapse in 1993. *Ibn-Khajib* complex has been subject to conservation work since 2001, which still continues.

The fortresses and archaeological areas have been partly explored, though many have not been touched yet. For example, *Kyrkmolla* is partly explored, while *Ak-Kala* is untouched. The 14<sup>th</sup> century city wall has been almost completely destroyed. All these sites are subject to weathering and gradual decay.

### Management:

There are 3 documents governing the site management:

- the Law of Turkmenistan, which provides guidelines for conservation and management,

- the Policy for the “State Historical and Cultural Park of Kunya-Urgench”,
- the Action plan prepared every year by the Park management team.

In addition, a plan, recently prepared, sets out the objectives for the site conservation and comprises a list of activities to be implemented in the next five years (2005-2010).

### Risk analysis:

The site is adjacent to an urban settlement of 30,000 inhabitants and there are relatively few visitors. Therefore there is not much pressure for change in the environment. However, there is some residential housing around *Najm ad-Din al-Kubra Mausoleum*, which requires monitoring. Being on a flat land, obviously any tall buildings in the surroundings would have an impact on the nominated site. The buffer zone and the present legislation exist and can counteract such development. Nevertheless, there has been illegal activity in past years. For example, the farmland may encroach into the archaeological park especially from the south side, though forbidden by law. There is also some illegal digging taking place, a common threat in the region. There is a high water table, which can cause salt crystallization in the buildings. Kunya-Urgench is in a zone of moderate seismicity.

### Authenticity and integrity

The overall integrity of Kunya-Urgench as an archaeological site results from its historical condition. Having been abandoned for more than three centuries, and then used as a graveyard, the area has remained relatively “unchanged”. Accordingly, Kunya-Urgench is considered to have retained its historical integrity better than most other sites in Central Asia.

The nomination document includes an interesting photographic comparison of the state of conservation in the past (even in the 1920s), and at present. On this basis, it is possible to have a clear view of the works carried out.

The individual monuments are in variable conditions. Most have partly or nearly completely collapsed. The individual monuments have been subject to various degrees of repair, restoration and reconstruction. The principal monuments have retained a substantial amount of original material, representing a reasonable level of authenticity. Other buildings have remained untouched or been more or less substantially reconstructed. Seeing the condition before repair, one can appreciate that in some cases the choice was a complete collapse or partial reconstruction.

While taking note of the several reconstructions of individual buildings, the principal monuments are still considered to have retained a reasonable level of authenticity.

### Comparative evaluation

The principal period of Kunya-Urgench extends from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Before the Mongol invasion (ca. 1220), the city was a major commercial centre associated

with the Silk Road and a major centre of Khorezm, ruled by the Seljuk dynasty. From this period, there remains especially the Kutlug-Timur minaret, as well as the mausoleums of Il-Arslan and Tekesh. In the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region was under Mongol rule, and then part of the Timurid Empire. From this period remain the mausoleums of Najm-ad-Din al-Kubra, Turabek-Khanum, and Ibn-Khajib.

The nomination document compares Kunya-Urgench with the cities of Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand, in Uzbekistan, which represent the same period. These cities however have continued to grow and change with the times, while Kunya-Urgench is an archaeological site. One can also compare the site with the ancient city of Merv (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999), an oasis in southern Turkmenistan, which has preserved testimonies from several millennia as well as having flourished from 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, like Kunya-Urgench. From the urban planning point of view, Kunya-Urgench still seems to be relatively unexplored, and needs further research.

The main feature of Kunya-Urgench is its remaining monuments as a testimony to its history. In this regard, it does represent a rare testimony to the history of Central Asia. The architecture, built in fired brick, represents high quality craftsmanship. Culturally, it is closely related with the Seljuk, Ilkhanid and Timurid examples in the region extending from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan and Persia.

*Kutlug-Timur* minaret can be compared with *Jam* minaret in Afghanistan (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2002, criteria ii, iii, iv). *Jam* minaret was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is 65 m tall, while *Kutlug-Timur* was constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and is 60 m tall. The other minarets in Central Asia are relatively smaller in size. However, several minarets in Iran also date from the same period. In any case, *Kutlug-Timur* minaret can be seen as an outstanding, achievement both for its period and its architecture.

In the Seljuk period, the architecture of mausoleums developed on two lines, either centrally planned or with a portal construction. The floor plan could be square or octagonal, as in various examples in Merv, Bukhara or Kunya-Urgench. Of the Kunya-Urgench mausoleums, *Il-Arslan* and *Tekesh* remain from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, while *Turabek-Khanum*, the most elaborate in its architectural conception and decoration dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Outstanding universal value**

#### *General statement:*

The nominated property corresponds to the following themes:

- Human beings in society (memorials);
- Spiritual response (Islam);
- Expressions of creativity: Religious and Commemorative architecture (mausoleums); Military architecture (fortified cities); Constructing and developing groups of buildings (towns which are no longer inhabited);
- Movement of peoples: routes and systems of transportation (cultural routes; centers of trade).

The property corresponds, in particular, to the theme of expressions of creativity. Seen in the historical context, there are very few such sites in the region of Central Asia, already mentioned above.

The architecture is interesting particularly in providing examples of memorial architecture i.e. mausoleums. In comparison with other examples in Merv or Bukhara, some of these examples are relatively early. Turabek-Khanum mausoleum, dating from the Timurid period, does have its own personality and uniqueness.

The Kutlug-Timur minaret is a fine construction and dates earlier than the minaret of Jam. Again, there are other fine minarets in Iran, which date from the same period. Nevertheless, this monument merits due respect.

Having been abandoned centuries ago, Kunya-Urgench has the advantage of representing a relatively intact site. At the same time, most of the structures have collapsed or are in ruins. There is relatively little remaining from the city walls and the site has not been systematically explored. In addition, most of the still standing buildings are partly or totally reconstructed.

All this said, Kunya-Urgench represents a rare example and one of the most extensive archaeological sites in Turkmenistan and in Central Asia. It represents an exceptional testimony to architectural developments in the Khorezm region.

Through the trade routes along the valley of the Amu Darya River and the Silk Road, Kunya-Urgench was in close contact with exchanging influences.

#### *Evaluation of criteria:*

As highlighted by the nomination, the criteria ii and iii should justify the inclusion of Kunya-Urgench in the List, since it expresses the large influence of a tradition of architecture and provides an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition (i.e. the Islamic Khoresmian culture).

However, criteria i and iv are not persuasive for Kunya-Urgench.

The criterion i is applied mainly to the decoration of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kutlug-Timur minaret which is identified as a “*masterpiece of human creative genius*”. But the Jam minaret (in Afghanistan, also 12<sup>th</sup> century in age) alone is outstanding in this sense and is a far superior monument in its surviving form to Kutlug-Timur (NB: the Jam minaret, although it is a *masterpiece of human creative genius*, has not been inscribed on the World Heritage List under criterion i).

The application of criterion iv may be hazardous, since the shape and design of many monuments of Kunya-Urgench are represented elsewhere in Central Asia.

## **4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Recommendation for the future***

It is strongly recommended to prevent encroachment on the protected area.

Due to the importance of Kunya-Urgench, a key site in the history of the region, it is to be hoped that the park staff posted on the site will receive sufficient political and financial support to enable them to protect the archaeological area.

It is also recommended that the State Party should submit, at 2-year intervals, a report to the World Heritage Committee, on the state of conservation of the site and the new development zones planned for the small contemporary urban settlement.

***Recommendation with respect to inscription***

ICOMOS recommends that the World Heritage Committee adopt the following draft decision:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B,
2. Inscribes the property on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria ii and iii***:

***Criterion ii:*** The tradition of architecture expressed in the design and craftsmanship of Kunya-Urgench has been influential in the wider region to the south and southwest i.e. in Iran and Afghanistan, and later in the architecture of the Mogul Empire (India, 16<sup>th</sup> century).

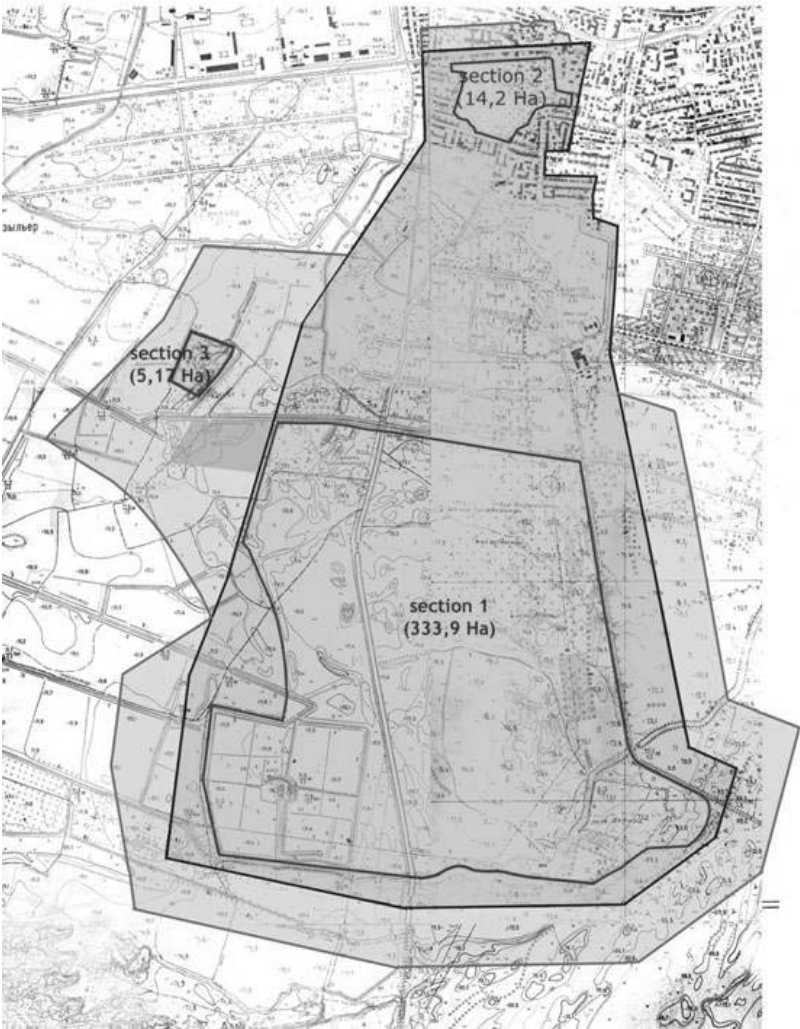
***Criterion iii:*** Kunya-Urgench provides an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition (the Islamic culture of the Khorezm) and is unique in its state of preservation. The society that created this centre has disappeared; however we note that most of visitors are in fact pilgrims from the region.

3. Recommends that every effort be made to prevent encroachment on the protected area.
4. Invites the State Party to provide the park staff posted on the site sufficient political and financial support to enable them to protect the archaeological area.
5. Requests the State Party to submit, at 2-year intervals, a report to the World Heritage Committee, on the state of conservation of the site and the new development zones planned for the small contemporary urban settlement.

ICOMOS, April 2005

# KUNYA-URGENCH LOCATION PLAN

of the territories proposed for inscription  
on the UNESCO World Heritage List  
and buffer zones



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property



**View of Kutlug-Timur minaret and Tekesh mausoleum**



**Mausoleums of Sultan Ali and Nadjim ad Din al Kubra**