

Merv (Turkmenistan)

No 886

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	State Historical and Cultural Park “Ancient Merv”
<i>Location</i>	Mary Vilayet
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Turkmenistan
<i>Date</i>	7 November 1996

Justification by State Party

The Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar is a masterpiece of human creative genius and is itself worthy of World Heritage Status. It is preserved in the centre of its city, with outstanding fortifications, street layout, citadel and other monuments. **Criterion i**

The cities of the Merv oasis have exerted considerable influence over the civilizations of Central Asia and Iran for four millennia. Located in an oasis on a major east-west trade route, known popularly as the Silk Road, they have facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas. The Seljuk city in particular influenced architecture and architectural decoration and scientific and cultural development. **Criterion ii**

The sequence of separate major cities, the series of fortifications, the ability to study different street layouts across the cities, and the Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar are unique. **Criterion iii**

The corrugated monuments, built of mud brick, are characteristic examples of Central Asian buildings, the preservation of which is rare. The majority survive in the Merv oasis, with two outstanding examples to the west of the Seljuk city. Recent discoveries of advanced early Islamic steel furnaces indicate Merv was a major technological centre. **Criterion iv**

The mud brick monuments of Merv, such as the corrugated buildings, pavilions, and icehouses, are characteristic traditional structures of the area, fragile by nature and vulnerable under the impact of irreversible environmental and socio-economic change. **Criterion v**

Numerous major events and personalities of historic importance have been associated with Merv. These include Abu Muslim, who initiated the Abbasid revolution, the Seljuk sultans, and scholars attracted to the libraries and observatory of Merv, such as the

geographer, Yaqut al Hamavi, and the poet/astronomer, Omar Khayyam. **Criterion vi**

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

History and Description

History

The oasis of Merv in the Karakum Desert has supported a series of urban centres since the 3rd millennium BC. The earliest Bronze Age centres (c 2500-1200 BC) were located in the north of the oasis, where the Murghab river came to the surface and could easily be utilized. With the development of more advanced irrigation techniques, the centres moved further south, and there is a series of important Early Iron Age sites.

The historic urban centre developed around 500 BC to the east of the oasis, where it was well sited to take advantage of routes to the east. It consisted of a series of adjacent walled cities, occupying an area of more than 1200ha. The oldest of these, Erk Kala, is attested in written sources from the Achaemenian period (519-331 BC), most notably on the famous trilingual inscription of Darius the Great at Bisitun in western Iran

The oasis formed part of the empire of Alexander the Great, and Pliny the Elder suggested in his *Natural History* (VI, 16-17) that the Hellenistic city was founded by Alexander himself. The Seleucid king Antiochus I Soter (281-261 BC) rebuilt it and named it *Margiana Antiochia*; it is identified with Erk Kala and Gyaur Kala. It was occupied for some 1500 years, throughout the Parthian and Sasanian periods and into the early Islamic period. It has been suggested that Greek and Roman soldiers, survivors of the crushing Parthian defeat of the Romans at Carrhae in 53 BC, may have been settled at Margiana. Islam became dominant with the death of the last Sasanian king, Yazdigird III in 651. However, Merv was little more than an industrial zone in the 8th-10th centuries, although the central mosque continued in use as late as the 11th-12th centuries.

The medieval city of the Seljuks developed to the west of Gyaur Kala, replacing it as the urban centre as the latter declined. It was walled by Sultan Malikshah (1072-92), and further suburban developments to the north and south were later also walled by Sultan Sanjar (1118-57).

The city, extending over more than 600ha, was the capital of the Great Seljuk Empire (11th-13th centuries), and was one of the principal cities of its period. Its famous libraries attracted scholars from all over the Islamic world, including the astronomer-poet Omar Khayyam and the geographer Yaqut al Hamavi.

This brilliant flowering came to a violent end in 1221-22, when it was sacked by the Mongols, who slew many of its inhabitants and destroyed the complex water

system. It survived in a much diminished form, as part of the empire of Timur (1370-1405) The new and much smaller city, known today as Abdullah Khan Kala was built on another site to the south by Timur's successor, Shah Rukh (1408-47).

In the 16th century Merv came under the domination of the Uzbek Turks, who ruled from Bukhara, and a century later it was incorporated into the Persian empire. An increase in population in the 18th century led to the creation of a fortified extension, known as Bairam Ala Khan Kala, now mostly ruined.

Description

The oasis of Merv currently occupies an area of 85km by 74km in the Karakum Desert at the crossing point of the Amu Darya on the main east-west route to Bukhara and Samarkand. It was formed by the silt brought down by the Murghab river which created an alluvial fan. The landscape is flat, except where it is disturbed by irrigation works, and it is interspersed by a dense pattern of ancient sites dating from the Bronze Age to the post-medieval period.

- The Bronze Age centres (2500-1200 BC)

The earliest settlements were in the northern part of the oasis. Five of these are to be included in a protection programme - Kelleli, Adji Kui, Taip, Gonur, and Toguluk.

Kelleli is an area of settlement with two major sites. Kelleli 3 (4ha) has a double external wall with towers flanking four symmetrical entrances.; an area of houses has been cleared in the south-western sector. Kelleli 4 (3ha) also has a double outer wall with towers. Both sites are poorly preserved, but they contain important evidence of Middle Bronze Age *Margiana*. From the same period is Adji Kui 8 (8.5ha).

The transition from Middle to Late Bronze Age, and from one form of settlement pattern to another, is illustrated by Taip. Two close but distinct mounds consist of a walled square area of 3.5ha with a large courtyard building in the south.

The largest Bronze Age site in the Murghab delta is Gonur Depe (55ha). The enormous northern mound survives to a height of 4m above its surroundings. Excavations have revealed the existence of a huge palace and a probable fire temple, both from the Middle Bronze Age. There is a large contemporary necropolis lying to the west of it.

The much smaller southern mound (3ha) had a village erected on it in the Late Bronze Age. It is enclosed by a massive square wall with circular corner towers and semicircular towers along each side. This site is well preserved.

The Toguluk area was densely occupied during the Bronze Age. Excavations have revealed the remains of several large fortified buildings.

- The Iron Age centres (1200-300 BC)

Two Iron Age centres are to be included in the overall protection scheme - Yaz/Gobekli Depes and Takhirbaj Depe.

Iron Age settlement was also in the northern part of the oasis. Takhirbaj Depe is the most prominent site in the whole area. Excavations have revealed that settlement began in the Late Bronze Age with the construction of a walled and moated citadel and subsequently extended considerably. It was the most important Iron Age centre of the region and it continued in occupation through to the Achaemenid period.

Yaz Depe is of special importance less for its archaeological remains as for the fact that it has produced abundant ceramic finds that provide the basic typology for the period. Nearby is the well preserved Partho-Sasanian rectangular fortress of Gobekli.

- The historic urban centre

This consists of three principal elements - Erk Kala, Gyaur Kala, and the medieval city of Sultan Kala or Marv al-Shahijan.

Erk Kala (20ha) is a walled and moated polygonal site with walls surviving to c 30m and an internal citadel.

Gyaur Kala is roughly square in plan, with walls c 2km long. In the interior there are the remains of a number of important structures. The central Beni Makhhan mosque is partly obscured by excavated dumps, but its cistern demonstrates how water was distributed by means of underground canals. The Buddhist *stupa* and monastery in the south-east corner is the westernmost excavated structure of this kind known to date. The "Oval Building" in the north-west quarter consists of a series of rooms around a courtyard on an elevated platform.

Medieval Sultan Kala, which lies to the west of Gyaur Kala, began as a suburban development and was not walled until the 11th century. It is about the same size (4km²), but another walled area of 2-3km² was later added to it. The Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (1118-57) was constructed in the centre of the Seljuk city. The cube-like structure that survives originally formed part of a large religious complex. Its fine detail, such as the elegant brickwork, the carved stucco, and the surviving mural paintings, make it one of the most outstanding architectural achievements of the Seljuk period.

The walls of the medieval city and of the citadel (Shahriyar Ark) are unique. They represent two consecutive periods of 11th-13th century military architecture. The 12km circuit of the walls includes towers, posterns, stairways, galleries, and in places crenellations; the earlier work is preserved by being encased in the later structures.

In addition to these main urban features, there is a number of important medieval monuments in their immediate vicinity. The Mausoleum of Muhammad ibn Zayd was built in 1112 for a descendant of the Prophet. Its domed chamber has a fine Kufic inscription, and part of the original decorated brick facade is still visible in the prayer hall.

One of the most characteristic architectural features of the oasis are the monuments known as *köshks*. These are isolated square or rectangular structures, usually of two storeys. The walls above glacis level are divided into corrugations, giving them a characteristic appearance. Two of the most impressive are the Greater

and Lesser Kiz Kala, in which the principal rooms are arranged around a courtyard on the first floor; the rooms on the ground floor are dimly lit through slit windows.

- *The post-medieval city, Abdullah Khan Kala*

Apart from the walls and moat of the 15th century, only a few walls of the palace survive in the citadel. However, the walls are of exceptional interest, since they continue the remarkable continuous record of the evolution of military architecture from the 5th century BC to the 15th-16th centuries AD.

There are many major monuments from the historical period in the oasis. The imposing fortresses at Gobekli, Uly Kishman, and Garry Kishman formed part of the 30km of earthen ramparts built for protection against threats from the northern steppes.

There are many fine mosques and mausolea from this period in the oasis. Among them are the three mausolea from the Timurid period at Geok Gumbaz, the magnificent 12th century Seljuk Talkhattan Baba Mosque, and the extensively restored mausolea of Imam Bakr and Imam Shafi in the Talkhattan cemetery. There are also several well preserved *kōshks* and defensive towers (*dings*) from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Merv is covered by the provisions of the 1992 Law on the Protection of Turkmenistan Historical and Cultural Monuments. The State Historical and Cultural Park "Ancient Merv" was created by decree in 1997. All interventions, including archaeological excavations, within the Park require official permits from the Ministry of Culture.

Management

The Park is the property of the Republic of Turkmenistan. It comes, along with the seven other State Parks, under the aegis of the National Department for the Protection, Study, and Restoration of Monuments, an agency of the Ministry of Culture. Management and conservation of the sites and monuments within the Park and of all standing monuments within the oasis is the responsibility of the Office of the Park, which comes under the National Department.

The staff of the Office, the headquarters of which is situated close to Sultan Sanjar, consists of a Director, an Assistant Director, an archaeologist, office clerical staff, and wardens. There are two subsidiary offices in Mary Vilayet responsible for monitoring of outlying monuments.

A draft Five-Year Management Plan has been drawn up by Dr Georgina Herrmann (Director of the International Merv Project - see "Conservation history" below) for the UNESCO Office in Tashkent. This makes a number of specific proposals for urgent work to be carried out at vulnerable monuments. General recommendations

concern the provision of interpretation facilities and recommended routes for visitors and infrastructural improvements (enlarged parking facilities, upgrading of roads, the relocation of power and telephone poles and pylons in the vicinity of monuments). There are very detailed specific proposals for individual monuments concerning conservation needs, access and safety facilities for visitors, clearance of debris, drainage, structural surveys, removal of unsightly modern structures and scaffolding, and the provision of effective buffer zones around individual monuments.

A three-stage implementation programme is put forward for the improvement of tourist facilities. In the first stage this will be confined to improvement of interpretation and reception provisions. The second stage concerns upgrading of hotel facilities in Mary, the construction of visitor and study centres, restaurants, and offices at Merv, and a major staff and guide training programme. The third stage, dependent upon a substantial increase in visitor numbers and tourist revenue, considers the possibility of the creation of an hotel complex at Merv itself.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

There has been no systematic conservation of the Merv monuments and sites, which were neglected during the Soviet period. They have only been treated as a group since the State Park came into being, and since that time most of the work has been *ad hoc*, in reaction to urgent threats. The Islamic monuments, particularly those built in baked brick, have been subject to emergency conservation actions since the early 20th century. However, no further work is being undertaken on major monuments, to avoid the potential for degradation following their uncovering.

All conservation work is carried out by the staff of the Park under the supervision of the Scientific Methodological Council on the Study and Restoration of Historic Monuments, chaired by the Deputy Minister of Culture and composed of experts from the Monuments Protection Department, the Academy of Sciences, the State University, and the Ministry of Culture.

There has been no vandalism or intrusion since the Park was established, and unauthorized construction in the neighbourhood has been halted permanently. The only modern intrusions are the roads in Sultan and Gyaur Kalas, which are used for the access of visitors.

The International Merv project is a joint Turkmen-British archaeological collaboration between YuTAKE, the South Turkmenistan Multidisciplinary Archaeological Expedition, Department of History, Academy of Sciences (Ashgabad) and the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. It is supported by a variety of official bodies and private foundations, from the United Kingdom, the USA, and elsewhere. It has a wide-ranging programme, covering survey, mapping, inventarization, excavation, conservation, and analysis.

Records of all work carried out since the creation of the Park are maintained at the Park Headquarters. A photographic dossier of all changes in the sites and monuments since the late 19th century has been prepared by the International Merv Project and is due to be published, that on secular buildings in 1999 and that on religious buildings in 2000.

Authenticity

It is difficult to generalize about the authenticity of so vast and complex a property as the State Historical and Cultural Park "Ancient Merv," which is the subject of this nomination.

The archaeological sites have been relatively untouched and so their authenticity is irreproachable. Restoration and conservation interventions at some of the Islamic religious structures during the present century have not been carried out according to current conservation principles, though they may be defended as essential to stabilize and ensure the continuity of these "living" monuments. They have been well documented and it is possible to reverse them if required. In any case, they represent only a minute proportion of the totality of this ancient landscape and its monuments.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Merv in December 1998. ICOMOS has also benefited from discussions with the Director of the International Merv project.

Qualities

The long history of human occupation of the Merv oasis is preserved to a remarkable degree in its sites, monuments, and landscape. It is a unique material record, largely untouched, of this culturally significant but relatively unknown region over a period of more than four millennia.

Comparative analysis

There is a number of prehistoric and historic settlements in Central Asia along the Silk Road. None, however, is comparable with Merv in terms of the special nature of the wealth of material evidence over so long a period, and none exhibits the special pattern of shifting urban settlement to so high a degree.

ICOMOS recommendations

The draft Five-Year Management Plan (see "Management" above) is admirable and well suited to the current requirements of this property. ICOMOS recommends the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee to seek assurances that the Plan will be approved and fully implemented with the minimum delay.

ICOMOS wishes in particular to draw the attention of the State Party to the need to increase the security staff available for this enormous property and provide it with the necessary equipment (vehicles, communications).

Brief description

Merv is the oldest and most completely preserved of the oasis cities along the Silk Route in Central Asia. The remains in this wide oasis span some four thousand years of human history, and a number of monuments are visible, particularly from the last two millennia.

Recommendation

The Bureau recommended that this nomination should be *referred back* to the State Party, requesting assurances that the Five-Year Management Plan should be approved and fully implemented before the end of 1999 and a map showing the precise boundary of the site. At the time this evaluation was prepared for printing, nothing had been received. In the event of such assurances and the map being provided by 1 October 1999, ICOMOS recommends that this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iii*

Criterion ii The cities of the Merv oasis have exerted considerable influence over the cultures of Central Asia and Iran for four millennia. The Seljuk city in particular influenced architecture and architectural decoration and scientific and cultural development.

Criterion iii The sequence of the cities of the Merv oasis, their fortifications, and their urban lay-outs bear exceptional testimony to the civilizations of Central Asia over several millennia.

ICOMOS, September 1999