

TAJIKISTAN

A view from outside

Tajikistan is a wonderful mountainous country with prosperous valleys, that attracted people to live there from the earliest times in human history. Its territory was always on the crossroads of the main trade and cultural routes between the largest civilisations of the Eurasian continent and throughout history it was part of the greatest states of Central Asia: Bactria and Soghd, Achaemenid empire, Greek Bactria, the kingdoms of Kushan, Gaznavids, Samanids, Karakhanids and Timurids. A rich cultural heritage is evidence of that and has the highest universal value.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has passed through a series of severe tests of economical and political change, followed by the civil war. But since the very outset of recovery from this difficult time, the government of the new Republic of Tajikistan has been paying considerable attention to cultural heritage preservation. The Inspectorate for Heritage Protection, Historical and Cultural Reserves, the State organisation for heritage restoration, under the Ministry of Culture has started functioning again. The country has a List of Properties of National Significance protected at the government level, and sites of universal value are already entered on a World Heritage Tentative List, with work begun preparing the nominations.

But all this is just a beginning and the amount of heritage in danger is vast, but the team of experienced professionals dealing with cultural properties is too few. Old conservation methods and technologies from the 1970s–80s continue to be in use in the country, with insufficient inauthentic materials and with restoration prevailing over conservation, despite the results of such works being visible on numerous medieval architectural monuments all over the country. And when one threat is from improper conservation, another is a total absence of conservation, while many archaeological sites of exceptional value were excavated many decades ago, or are under continuous archaeological study. When comparing the results of the effect of these two main threats, it is difficult to judge which is the more dangerous for Tajikistan's heritage: conservation or its absence.

Mohammad Basharo Mausoleum (11th–14th centuries)

The Mausoleum was erected over the grave of the prominent Sufi saint Mohammad Bosharo, highly esteemed in the region, who lived in the 8th–9th centuries. It is situated in a small village (*kishlak*), Mazary Sharif, 25 km from the town of Penjikent. The building was erected on a small platform at the foot of a mountain with an ancient necropolis, which started to develop as far back as pre-Islamic times. A picturesque mountainous landscape with beautiful and worshipped places of nature, not affected much by human activity, together with the unhurried traditional village life nearby is an excellent setting for the monument with its preserved original architectural appearance, formed as a result of the building's harmonious evolution over several centuries (11–12th–14th centuries) in the Middle Ages.

Today the building is not large but has extended symmetric planning, with burial chambers by the sides of the main worship hall (*ziarat-hana*), covered with domes and vaults of varied styles, traditional for the region in different periods. But originally, it was a small mosque (11th–12th centuries) erected near the holy grave, which being a place of great spiritual value was enlarged at least

once later. One of the most significant construction periods is in the 14th century (1342–43), when a beautifully decorated portal was erected. It is faced with beautiful Islamic motives and inscriptions as well as using non-glazed carved terracotta and polychrome glazed carved terracotta, combined with various types of majolica and its incrustations into terracotta. It shows the early stage of transmission from monochrome decoration to polychrome, and is a rare or unique example in the whole of Central Asia. The portal design follows a decoration of painted clay *mihrab nische* (11th–12th centuries) of the building, also a rare or unique preserved example in the region. The original carved wooden portal door as well as carved gravestones are also among exceptional preserved examples. As has been already stated by most researchers, the mausoleum is of high artistic, historical and architectural significance and ranks among the best samples of medieval Central Asian architecture.

The most recent technical examination of the building shows that its condition on the whole is stable for the moment, but despite there being no cracks and other visual damage, it is overall inadequate. Restoration works with inauthentic materials, such as concrete and bitumen, insufficient water insulation and damp reduction, done in the 1980s, have brought many problems to the building. Original brickwork is highly affected by water and salts moving and excreting. There are many signs of recent plaster falls,

Mohammad Basharo Mausoleum



new leaks are appearing and condensation areas in spite of annual maintenance. Permanently very high humidity inside the building is not suitable for its wooden and clay items and paintings, as well as for visitors. Emergency works should be done as soon as possible, which could correct restoration mistakes and stop the monument's deterioration processes.

Hissar Fortress (1000 BC–20th century)

Situated approximately 20 km from the city of Dushanbe, it is a former eastern capital of the Bukhara khanate. The first settlement was established here in the first centuries BC, from the Greek-Bactrian and Kushan periods, as administrative centre of Hissar valley, the area being known as Shuman in the early Middle Ages. According to Suan Tzin this name was first mentioned in the 7th century, he wrote, it took four days to cover the territory of the khanate Su-man from the West to the East and one day from the South to the North. One of the most significant caravan routes, described in detail by most travellers, passed here, and until the 20th century, it was a prosperous city beloved by its powerful rulers. Only at the time of the Russian invasion into Central Asia, the Bukhara emir, supported by the Tsar's troops, succeeded in conquering Hissar in 1870. It later happened that he took his last refuge in its fortress before leaving his lands for Afghanistan in 1924 when the Red Army came to Bukhara and it was announced as the People's Republic of Bukhara.

After establishing Soviet power on the territory of the Bukhara khanate, the administrative centre moved to Dushanbe, and Hissar city was neglected. Left by their inhabitants, Bek's Residence and other buildings at the fortress were destroyed by earthquakes and people in few decades. The fortress has turned into a wonderful archaeological site with many well preserved layers from the 1st millennium BC until contemporary times. Only the fortress' earthen wall still reminds us of its former glory.

Life in the fortress' surroundings with *rabads* and markets, mosques, caravanserais and *madrasas* also has gone and the city has become a conservation site, which with all its monuments shows the history of the beginning and evolution of urban structural development since the 1st millennium BC until the 20th century. The monuments exist successfully within the modern, yet very traditional village, which often reuses the old city fabric.

The fortress area with its surroundings is inscribed in the List of Properties of National Significance of the Republic of Tajikistan and was announced as a State Historical and Cultural reserve. Hissar Fortress itself is included in the World Heritage Tentative List. Much work was done in the 1980s with the aim of heritage conservation, but unfortunately, the works on all the medieval building remains were done according to the at the time popular restoration methodology of using modern materials instead of authentic ones, without anticipating proper damp insulation and water reduction and drainage. Now all of them - the Fortress gateways, Kuhna madrasah (14th–16th centuries), Nav madrasah (18th century), Sangin Mosque (10th–16th centuries), Mahdumy Azam Mausoleum (10th–16th centuries), are suffering from the major effect of all this, causing damp with salts rising in the brickwork, condensations and high humidity in the interiors. Destruction by restoration is here close to destruction resulting from an absence of any conservation: the ruins of the Fortress' earthen walls are standing without having had any maintenance for about 70 years, disappearing beneath the rain, winds and pressures from animals and people. In former times, as eye-witnesses say and old photos prove, they had a height of about 7 m with a width of 3 m.

Ajina Tapa Buddhist Monastery (5th–8th centuries)

Among the best-known and studied examples of Buddhist heritage sites in Central Asia are the remains of the monastery now known as Ajina Tapa. It is situated in the Vahsh river valley not far from the city of Kurgan-Tube. The ruins are the remains of an earthen rectangular building complex, of approximately 50 m x 100 m. Its regular plan represents the remains of a building complex, consisting of two parts, one of which was monastic and another a temple. Each part had an internal square courtyard at its centre, standing on the common main symmetric axis. All the halls and premises of the complex were arrayed around these courts in a regular order, connected by a system of vaulted corridors, open to the courts. A cross-system of *avians* (traditional Central Asian open premises) provided the appearance of a double mandala to the building plan, and reflected many times in numerous large and small stupas, found during archaeological excavations at the site. This composition of the building plan with a 4-*avian* courtyard in the centre, as at the Ajina Tapa monastery, became the most popular plan for all types of public buildings (madrasas, mosques, and so on) as well as rulers' palaces, some centuries later in the Islamic period. The Buddhist site of Ajina Tapa is among those rare examples clearly demonstrating a succession of cultural traditions reflected in architecture.

Excavations of the remains were undertaken in the late 1960s, when the whole monastery complex was unearthed. Many artefacts of exceptional artistic value were found, and the most of them made of mudbrick: a reclining Buddha in Nirvana (12 m long), and many fragments of painting and sculpture on Buddhist themes. All of them have already found their conservators and places in the best museums, but the site itself with its tangible and intangible values, unique to the whole of Central Asia and to the world, was left without any conservation works until recently. This in spite of the fact that it is inscribed in the List of Properties of National Significance of the Republic of Tajikistan and even in the World Heritage Tentative List. Until now, these were all merely declarations.

The earthen structures are melting and disappearing being exposed to rain and winds. Cotton fields cut through with irrigation channels have come close up to the foot of the monastery platform, which rises above the flat landscape. These channels bring salts in the sub-surface water even up to its top, contributing much to the destruction of the wall remains, as do domestic and wild animals, attracted to this site for the shade of its earthen shelters. Comparing the survey materials from excavations in the late 1960s, it is easy to realise that some parts of the site may disappear in the nearest several years, if no attempt for its conservation is made. Not tomorrow – but right now.

Ancient Penjikent (5th–8th centuries)

The remains of this mudbrick city, 1.5 km from the modern city of Penjikent, are recognised worldwide as the best example of a medieval pre-Islamic town in Central Asia. It is a fact, that it is the rarest medieval city site in the region, at which archaeological research is going in all directions, studying urban life as an integral structure and source of knowledge: palaces and everyday dwellings, public buildings and burials, urban networks, monumental and decorative arts, all reflecting early medieval Central Asian culture, all being of interest to researchers.



View from Hissar Fortress Citadel



Ancient Penjikent

The city was established in the 5th century 60 km to the east of Samarkand as a separate estate, which was sometimes independent and sometimes a tributary possession of this powerful neighbour. It was built on the edge of a plateau with a precipice, forming its northern and western borders and was surrounded by mudbrick fortified walls with city gates on the other sides. A large palace for the ruler stood on a separate hill under the protection of the citadel and fortified castle. The city fabric was developed over four centuries following a regular rectangular network of streets on the area of about 35 ha. Archaeological excavations have been going on in this area permanently since 1946 and about two-thirds of it is already unearthed.

The Penjikent city site is included in the List of Properties of National Significance of the Republic of Tajikistan and in the World Heritage Tentative List, but archaeological excavations are still going on there continuously without anticipating any conservation works to protect the monument. Mudbrick building remains are under an intensive process of erosion and destruction, melting from year to year, turning into dust.

Khulbuk (9th–12th centuries)

The archaeological site of Khulbuk is located in a picturesque place near the famous mountain with the world's largest deposit of salt. There are beautiful caves and oases with springs here, attracting many people all year round. In early medieval times Khulbuk was the capital of a large Khuttal region. The city citadel was erected on a platform of about 7 m–10 m in height, its buildings were made of adobe, mud and fired bricks, and even the platform slopes and defensive walls were faced with fired bricks. The palace area of the citadel was excavated in the 1980s. As many

scholars agree, it is one of the rarest studied palace complexes of the early Moslem Middle Ages in the region, and its architecture is an outstanding example of the same type. Besides that, a lot of unique discoveries have been made here in the process of excavations. For example, unique finds include found fragments of the main gates' portal decoration, and impressive decoration of excavated building interiors, made of carved ganch/gypsum, as well as fragments of wall painting.

Some conservation has been done at the site by back-filling with earth. Artefacts are stored and displayed in the nearby Khulbuk Museum and in other state museums of the republic. The site is included in the List of Properties of National Significance of the Republic of Tajikistan and in the World Heritage Tentative List. In 2002 a National historical and cultural reserve of Khulbuk was established aiming for the site's protection, conservation and presentation for public. In the near future, it is planned to remove all modern dwellings from the territory of the monument's protection zone and this work has already started. The site itself is included in the program of the 2005 celebrations devoted to the 2500th jubilee of the city of Kulyab, near which it is located.

All this seems good, but such jubilees often become a serious threat to heritage sites, because usually large financial allocations have to be used in a very short time, often not enough to follow world recognised heritage conservation standards. And as usual, the tasks, coming from the highest governmental level are directed mainly on making high impression on the public of the grandeur of cultural properties, without regarding such things as authenticity and the site's real needs, and restoration in such cases often takes a dominating role. We won't try to judge here the project of reconstruction/restoration of the portal and the walls of Khulbuk citadel, on which the restoration works have been already started, but we are appealing to our colleagues in Tajikistan not to use inauthentic materials, and not to hurry to restore the ruins.

Natalia Turekulova
Timur Turekulov
ICOMOS/Kazakhstan

Khulbuk Citadel



Adjina Tepe, Buddhist monastery

