

## KAZAKHSTAN

### The Oasis of Otrar

The oasis of Otrar lies in the Kyzylkum district of the Chimkent region in south-west Kazakhstan, 170 kilometres north-west of Chimkent and 60 kilometres south of Turkestan city (the location of the mausoleum of Khwaja Ahmed Yasavi). The nearest inhabited town is Shaulder, 12 kilometres from the Otrar Tobe site. At present, there is a small village at Otrar. The oasis is in the marginal zone, between what has historically been a nomadic area to the north and a predominantly sedentary area to the south, and this has had a marked effect on its development. It is also a point at which several routes of the "Silk Road" join.

The oasis, covering an area of more than 200 square kilometres, comprises a series of large archaeological sites, ancient and mediaeval towns surrounded by irrigated land. The irrigation network includes the remains of large canals and artificial dams, which carried the water for over 40 kilometres from the river Arys, a tributary of the river Syr Daria ending in the Aral Lake. Systematic analyses of hydraulic societies, though for an earlier period of

the 3rd millennium, have been made by Robert Mc Adams and Hans Nissen since the 1960s for the Diyala Region, Mesopotamia. Less than ten years ago Frederik Talmage Hiebert from the Peabody Museum at Harvard University published an analysis for the Margiana region, Turkmenistan. Earlier studies had already been carried out by Soviet archaeologists (V. Sarriani, V.M., Masson, I. Massimov et. al.). Though the cultures represented by the numerous tobes in the Otrar Oasis are (so far) much younger (starting with the 2nd century B.C.), the phenomena of the development of hydraulic societies may be similar.

With at least 100 hectares in size Otrar seems to have been the largest town in the oasis, which was named after it. Here most of the excavations in the citadel area took place since the late 1960s by Russian and Kazakh archaeologists (predominantly Prof. Baipakov). The large towns normally consist of an elevated "citadel" (Shakistan) and a lower town. About ten of the several towns have so far been studied by archaeological activities, mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, which left the archaeological remains unprotected. The majority of buildings consist of earthen architecture, with only some prominent buildings, such as the mosques in Otrar, built of brick. But not only the archaeological sites need further studies. The complete phenomenon of settlement time and space relation as well as the geographical setting between the mountains in the east and the river in the west, flowing into the Aral lake in the north-west, need to be further investigated. The executed archaeological work at the different tobes has given first information about the chronological relation. The highly sophisticated irrigation system obviously has been of primary economic importance for the whole oasis (see e.g. Karl Wittfogel 1977). As can be gathered from aerial photographs, this more than 2000 years old system was only recently abandoned.

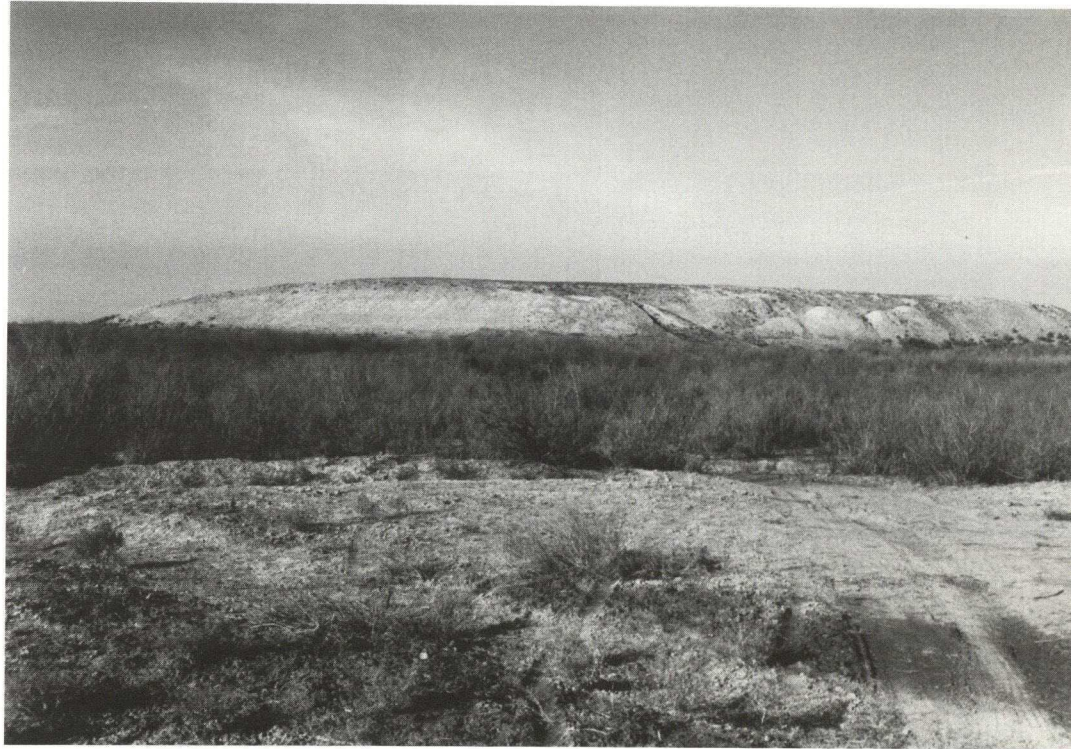
The towns with their exposed earthen structures as well as the whole oasis with its historic canal system are highly endangered. While the exposed earthen structures are rapidly eroding under the influence of water and wind, the oasis as a whole has been suffering from human interactions for the past twenty years. Recent activities by UNESCO and the Japan Trust Fund have started minimum interventions for the saving of the largest site, Otrar. But much more activity is required, especially by the local government, to protect this unique example of urban development between the northern steppes and the southern areas and between traditional nomadism and sedentary life.

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#### References

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 Wittfogel, K. 1977. *Die Orientalische Despotie*. Köln





Views of the Otrar oasis

