

**RELIGIOUS CENTERS IN ANCIENT KHOREZM AND THEIR ROLE IN URBAN
DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF KOYKIRILGANKALA AND TOPROKKALA**

Razzakov Sardor Kenjavoy ugli

Master's student at Urgench State University

E-mail: sardortarix@mail.ru

Phone: 91-426-32-42

Abstract: This article analyzes the archaeological sites of Qoyqirilganqala and Toprokkala, located in the ancient Khorezm region. Based on archaeological excavations, the study highlights the defensive architecture, religious functions, and social life of the population. Particular emphasis is placed on Zoroastrian temples, worship of the fertility goddess, and evidence of astronomical observations, which indicate the presence of religious and scientific centers in ancient Khorezm.

Keywords: Ancient Khorezm, Koykirilgankala, Toprokkala, religious center, astronomical observation, Zoroastrianism, fertility goddess, temple, archaeological findings, fortification structures.

Introduction. The Khorezm oasis, considered an ancient region of Central Asia, stands out for its advanced culture, developed irrigation system, religious centers, and urban planning traditions. The ancient cities and fortresses formed in this area, their structures, locations, and socio-economic as well as religious functions, continue to serve as important sources for archaeological and historical research.

This article analyzes the religious-educational centers of ancient Khorezm — the monuments of Koykirilgankala and Shovot Toprokkala — focusing on their architectural features, astronomical observations, religious rituals, and artisanal activities to shed light on the life of the ancient society. Through archaeological findings, scientific conclusions are drawn about the religious beliefs, external relations, scientific knowledge, and cultural-domestic life of the ancient population.

Literature Review. Initial studies of ancient Khorezm monuments began in the 1930s with the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition (KAEE) led by S.P. Tolstov. These studies formed the basis for the discovery, investigation, and description of archaeological sites such as Koykirilgankala, Kalali Gyr, and Govurqala.

Tolstov's research was later continued by scholars such as V.I. Vainberg, Ya.G. Gulyamov, A.V. Vinogradov, S.R. Baratov, and others. In particular, detailed descriptions of the two-phase construction of Koykirilgankala, wall paintings, ceramic vessels, terracotta figurines, and astrolabes reveal the religious life and level of scientific knowledge of the ancient society.

Methodological Foundations. This study was conducted based on archaeological and historical approaches. The primary methods used include historical-stratigraphic, comparative-archaeological, intercultural, cartographic, and interdisciplinary analyses. Through the layers of the monuments, architecture, and findings, their chronology was determined, religious beliefs and astronomical observations were compared with other cultures, and the spatial layout was evaluated using GIS technologies.

The integration of methods enabled a systematic analysis of the religious, scientific, defensive, and social functions of ancient Khorezm cities.

Analysis. The layout of Koykirilgankala is circular in shape, with a total area of 90 m² [5, p.44]. The monument is located in the Ellikkala district of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. It was first discovered in 1938 by members of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition led by S.P. Tolstov. From 1951 to 1957, stationary archaeological research was conducted at the site [2, p.5].

The fortress was originally built in the 4th–3rd centuries BCE and was destroyed in the 2nd century BCE. It was rebuilt in the 3rd–4th centuries CE. Its central part — the citadel (ark) — was constructed in cylindrical form, with a diameter of 44 meters and consisted of two levels. Residential buildings of the population were erected between the ark and the defensive walls. Special attention was paid to the fortification of Koykirilgankala. The fortress was protected by a double line of defensive walls and a moat. The lower part of the defensive wall was constructed of pakhsa (rammed clay), while the upper part was built of sun-dried bricks. The thickness of the outer wall measured 7.2 meters, while the inner wall was 1 meter thick and 7 meters high. The surrounding moat was 15 meters wide and 3 meters deep, and it was filled with water [1, p.104]. The defensive wall was additionally protected with a protexizma system.

On the outer defensive wall, nine semi-circular towers were constructed at 20-meter intervals. The towers were built on the same level plane as the wall itself.

The entrance gate to the fortress was designed in the shape of a rectangular labyrinth, located on the eastern side of the wall. In front of the gate, a 34-meter-long ramp was built [6, p.92]. Access to the central building was provided via a drawbridge.

Archaeological studies carried out at Koykirilgankala revealed that the site underwent two construction phases. The first phase dates back to the 4th–2nd centuries BCE, during which the central citadel (ark) and the defensive wall were built. The second construction phase dates to the 1st century CE, and occupation continued until the 4th century CE. At the beginning of the 4th century, traces of a major fire were discovered at the site, after which the fortress fell into ruin.

Astronomical observations were conducted at Koykirilgankala, as evidenced by fragments of a ceramic astrolabe dated to the 4th–2nd centuries BCE. This instrument resembles the ceramic astrolabe described in al-Biruni's "al-Kanun al-Masudi".

Astronomical observations at the fortress were conducted by priest-astronomers, who played a crucial role in the intellectual and ritual life of the community. They accurately identified key solar events such as the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, as well as the summer and winter solstices. These celestial observations formed the basis for the creation of a solar-agricultural calendar, which was essential for regulating seasonal agricultural cycles, religious festivals, and communal activities.

Excavations of the first floor of the ark (central citadel) revealed eight domed chambers, within which a rich assortment of ceramic vessels, terracotta figurines, and ritual objects were found. The intricate craftsmanship and artistic style of these artifacts reflect the advanced state of artisanal production and the aesthetic sophistication present in Ancient Khorezm. Such findings not only underscore the region's technological capabilities but also attest to the symbolic and ceremonial significance of material culture in reinforcing religious beliefs and elite authority.

Results. Based on the archaeological materials found at the site, it is possible to determine the religious customs and social lifestyle of the people of that time. The discovery of a figurine depicting a baby monkey indicates that the Ancient Khorezmians had interactions with the population of India.

On one of the fortress walls, a colored mural was found depicting a warrior holding a bow. Numerous terracotta figurines, created in a similar style, were discovered. These figurines portray women dressed in long robes, standing with one hand lowered and the other placed on the chest, wrapped in a scarf, and holding a pomegranate in their hands. This imagery reflects the population's belief in Anahita, the goddess of fertility.

Zoroastrian priests lived within the fortress. Around the fortress, traces of fields, vineyards, and pottery workshops belonging to farmers were discovered [7, p.74]. This indicates that villages existed in the vicinity of the fortress and that they supplied the fortress with food.

Koykirilgankala is distinguished not only within the context of Ancient Khorezm's archaeological heritage but also holds a prominent place among the most significant historical monuments discovered throughout the territory of present-day Uzbekistan. Its exceptional architectural layout, complex defensive systems, and rich assemblage of artifacts set it apart as a unique cultural and scientific site.

The archaeological evidence obtained from Koykirilgankala provides deep insights into the material culture, religious beliefs, and everyday life of the region's ancient inhabitants. These findings serve as a critical resource for reconstructing the socio-economic, spiritual, and intellectual development of early Khorezmian civilization. Thus, Koykirilgankala stands as a key monument that contributes profoundly to the study of Central Asian history and enriches the cultural legacy of the Uzbek people.

Conclusion. The Shovot Toprokkala monument, discovered in the territory of the Shovot district of the Khorezm region, is also considered to be associated with the religious beliefs of the area. The monument was built along the now-dry Shahmurod canal in the basin of ancient Dovdon. The city's layout is circular, with a total area of approximately 5 hectares. The preserved height of the fortress walls reaches up to 3 meters. At intervals of 22–30 meters, semi-oval towers were constructed along the wall. The city was also protected by a moat with a width of 32–42 meters. The inner part of the monument is free from structures [4, p.12].

The first phase dates to the late 5th century BCE – 3rd century BCE, during which the defensive walls were built. The walls were corridor-like in shape and protected by semi-circular towers.

The second phase, dating from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, was characterized by minor reconstructions. Square-shaped sun-dried bricks were used in this phase, and houses were constructed along the wall.

The third construction phase, belonging to the 3rd–4th centuries CE, involved repairs to the walls using a mixture of pakhsa (rammed clay) and sun-dried bricks. The city ceased functioning by the 4th century CE [3, p.12].

The defensive walls of Shovot Toprokkala were 14 meters thick. According to researchers, it is possible that the population performed religious ceremonies at this site.

In the construction of ancient cities, those associated with religious rituals were predominantly built in a circular form. Examples include Koykirilgankala and Kichik Qirqqiz on the right bank of Khorezm, Kalalikir 2 and Govur 3 on the left bank, and the city of Chirikrabod on the lower Syr Darya frontier.

The urban development within the territory of the Ancient Khorezm state was closely aligned with the region's diverse geographical and ecological landscapes. Due to the vast expanse of the state, the territory was strategically divided into three primary economic zones, each shaped by its distinctive natural environment: The right bank, encompassing the Akchadarya river basin;

The left bank, representing the Sarykamysh delta region; The Pre-Aral zone, situated near the former shores of the Aral Sea.

Within these larger ecological-economic zones, smaller micro-oases emerged—fertile and habitable areas where urban centers were systematically established. These cities were constructed with multi-functional purposes, often serving as administrative, religious, economic, and cultural hubs tailored to the specific demands and livelihoods of the local population.

Moreover, a fortified network of strongholds was developed along the periphery of the Khorezmian state. These strategically placed fortresses not only served as military defenses against external threats but also functioned as symbols of state control and political integration. Their existence highlights the organizational strength and centralized authority of Ancient Khorezm, underscoring its status as a powerful and cohesive polity with advanced administrative and territorial management.

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