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TUPROQQALA - THE POLITICAL CENTER OF ANCIENT KHOREZM

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Annotation: Tuproqqala (also known as Toprak Kala or Topraq Qala), meaning "Earth Fortress" or "Clay City," stands as one of the most significant archaeological monuments of ancient Khorezm (Chorasmia). Located in the modern Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, this fortified settlement served as a royal residence and political-administrative center of the Khorezmian state during the Kushan-influenced period (roughly 1st–4th centuries AD, with peak importance in the 2nd–3rd centuries AD). Excavations have revealed a sophisticated urban layout, a grand palace complex with unique wall paintings and sculptures, religious structures, and evidence of advanced irrigation, craftsmanship, and governance. This article explores its historical role, architectural achievements, cultural significance, and contributions to our understanding of ancient Central Asian civilizations.

Keywords: Tuproqqala, Toprak Kala, ancient Khorezm, Chorasmia, Kushan period, Khorezmian Expedition, S.P. Tolstov, royal palace, Zoroastrian influences, Central Asian archaeology, desert fortresses.

Introduction

Ancient Khorezm, situated in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya River, represents one of the oldest and most resilient civilizations in Central Asia, often compared to a "Central Asian Egypt" due to its advanced irrigation systems, urban development, and cultural longevity spanning millennia. Among its numerous fortified settlements—legendarily numbering in the thousands—Tuproqqala emerges as a pinnacle of political and cultural organization.

Discovered in 1938 by the prominent Soviet archaeologist Sergey Pavlovich Tolstov during the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition, Tuproqqala quickly became a focal point of intensive research. The site, covering approximately 17 hectares in a rectangular plan (about 500 x 350 meters), functioned not merely as a fortress but as a dynastic capital and royal residence. Its construction and flourishing coincided with a period of relative stability and external influences, particularly from the Kushan Empire, while maintaining distinctive Khorezmian identity.

The importance of Tuproqqala lies in its role as a political hub that centralized power, facilitated administration over irrigated agricultural lands, and served as a ceremonial and religious center. Artifacts such as coins, archives (including documents in the Khorezmian language), frescoes depicting Zoroastrian deities, and monumental architecture provide invaluable insights into the socio-political structure, economy, and worldview of ancient Khorezmian society.

Main Part

Historical Context and Development

Khorezm's history traces back to the early Iron Age and earlier cultures like the Kelteminar. By the Achaemenid period (6th–4th centuries BC), it developed into a structured state with fortified centers. After Alexander the Great's campaigns, the region navigated Hellenistic and subsequent Parthian/Kushan influences while preserving autonomy.

Tuproqqala was likely founded or significantly expanded in the 1st–2nd centuries AD, possibly under King Artav (Artabanus), and served as the capital around the 3rd century AD. The city was strategically positioned near ancient branches of the Amu Darya, supported by a sophisticated canal system that enabled agriculture in an otherwise arid environment. This hydraulic engineering was crucial for sustaining a population estimated at around 2,500 inhabitants at its peak.

The Khorezmian Expedition, led by Tolstov, conducted major excavations in the 1940s–1950s, with further work in the 1960s–1970s under scholars like Yu.A. Rapoport and E.E. Nerazik. These efforts uncovered the High Palace (a massive structure on a platform), residential quarters, temples, and administrative buildings.

Architectural Features and Urban Planning

Tuproqqala exemplifies advanced town-planning. The rectangular layout featured strong defensive walls (up to 10–20 meters high and thick), gates, and internal streets. A central highway divided the city, leading from the entrance to the palace complex in the northwest corner, which included three prominent towers.

The palace, built on a high brick platform, contained over 100 rooms, including a throne hall with a distinctive three-arched portal, ceremonial halls (such as the Hall of Kings, Hall of Victories, and Hall of Dancing Masks), and a fire temple. Wall paintings and sculptures—often executed in clay—depicted rulers, warriors, Zoroastrian deities, and mythological scenes, showcasing a rich artistic synthesis of local, Iranian, and Kushan elements. A fire temple in the southeast further underscores Zoroastrian religious practices prevalent in the region.

Beyond the main citadel, a northern suburban complex with additional palaces and temples extended the site's functionality, indicating planned urban expansion.

The use of mud bricks, pakhsa (rammed earth), and sophisticated vaulting techniques allowed these structures to endure for centuries in harsh desert conditions, though many artifacts suffered from exposure post-excavation.

Political and Socio-Economic Role

As a political center, Tuproqqala housed the royal court, administrative apparatus, and military garrison. It controlled key trade routes and agricultural resources, projecting power across the oasis. Discoveries of an archive with Khorezmian documents highlight bureaucratic sophistication, while coins (including those of Kushan rulers like Kanishka and local kings) attest to economic integration and minting capabilities.

The site reflects a centralized slave-owning or early feudal society with a stratified structure: rulers and nobility in the palace, artisans and farmers in the quarters, and defensive capabilities against nomadic threats. Its decline in later centuries was linked to shifts in river courses, invasions (Huns, Turks, Arabs), and environmental changes, though parts were reoccupied or restored in the medieval period.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Tuproqqala provides evidence of Khorezm's role in Zoroastrianism, possibly linked to the Avesta’s origins. Ossuaries, fire temples, and iconography point to strong Iranian religious traditions blended with local elements. Artistic finds demonstrate high levels of craftsmanship in sculpture, painting, and glyptics.

Discussion

Tuproqqala's uniqueness lies in its well-preserved monumental architecture and artistic program, comparable to sites like Dura-Europos or Taxila in terms of planned urbanism. It bridges Hellenistic, Kushan, and Iranian worlds, offering a lens into cultural interactions along the Silk

Road's northern branches. Challenges in preservation—due to salinization from modern agriculture and erosion—highlight the need for integrated conservation strategies, as noted in UNESCO tentative listings for the Desert Castles of Ancient Khorezm.

Comparative studies with other sites like Ayaz Kala, Koy-Krylgan Kala, or Kyzyl Kala reveal a network of fortresses supporting the Khorezmian state. Future research, including non-invasive methods and digital reconstruction, could further illuminate daily life, economy, and interactions. Uzbek and international scholarship continues to build on Tolstov's foundational work, emphasizing indigenous contributions to Central Asian history.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Tuproqqala symbolizes the ingenuity, resilience, and cultural richness of ancient Khorezm. As a political center, it exemplified effective governance, urban planning, and cultural synthesis that sustained a civilization in a challenging environment for centuries. Its legacy enriches our understanding of pre-Islamic Central Asia and underscores the importance of preserving such sites for future generations.

Suggestions:

- Enhance conservation through international collaboration, including anti-erosion measures and site stabilization.
- Develop educational tourism infrastructure as part of the "Pearls of Ancient Khorezm" routes, with interpretive centers featuring reconstructions and artifacts.
- Promote further archaeological and interdisciplinary research, including archaeobotany, DNA analysis, and comparative studies.
- Integrate into school curricula and cultural programs to foster national pride in Uzbekistan's ancient heritage.

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