

Alexandria on the Oxus: Ai Khanoum and the Greco-Bactrian Synthesis in Ancient Central Asia

Hadi Baharangiz

Selcuk University, Turkey

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000136>

Received: 28 July 2025; Accepted: 04 August 2025; Published: 01 September 2025

ABSTRACT

The ancient city of Alexandria Oxus (Ai Khanoum), located in northeastern Afghanistan, is one of the most significant examples of the interaction between Greek civilization and local Central Asian cultures during the Hellenistic period. Founded in the late 4th century BCE, it was likely established by Alexander the Great or his successors and marked the easternmost point of the Greek empire. Official excavations, initiated in 1964, uncovered major structures such as the royal palace, gymnasium, theater, arsenal, bathhouse, and temple. Inscriptions and a coin hoard provide valuable insight into the city's political, economic, and artistic life. Although Ai Khanoum was severely damaged and looted during the civil wars, the surviving evidence demonstrates the city's role in the Hellenization of the East and the fusion of Greek and local traditions. This article aims to analyze and reassess this cultural heritage, which has yet to be fully explored.

Key words: Ai Khanoum, Alexander, Artifact, Excavation, Greek, Bactria.

INTRODUCTION

In the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, two great empires (namely the Greeks in the West and the Persians in the East) were frequently in conflict with one another. Alexander the Great, who had a warrior-like character and adhered to the ideas of Aristotle, came to power in 334 BCE and immediately launched a campaign eastward. After securing victories in three major battles, he defeated the Achaemenid king Darius and, in 330 BCE, entered the territory of what is now Afghanistan. Within three to four years, Alexander conquered the entire region of Bactria (Afghanistan), and ultimately, in 327 BCE, he died in Mesopotamia as a result of wounds sustained during the battles.

During his stay in Afghanistan, Alexander the Great founded five or six “Alexandrias” (military fortresses). The subject of this article is Ai Khanoum, one of the most important of these cities, believed to have been built either by Alexander himself or by one of his generals, Seleucus I. Ai Khanoum is located in the Dasht Qala district of Takhar province, at the confluence of the Amu and Kokcha rivers. This ancient city was first discovered in 1961, and excavations were initiated in 1965 by a team of French archaeologists. Over the course of 14 years, numerous artifacts were unearthed from the site.

The city of Ai Khanoum was divided into two sections by a main road. On both sides of this road stood palaces, temple, gymnasium, theater, an arsenal, the tomb of the city's founder, as well as administrative and residential buildings details of which will be elaborated in the main body of this article. The city measured approximately 1,800 meters in length and 1,600 meters in width. It was surrounded by a series of natural barriers and fortified with strong, tall walls and towers ranging from 6 to 10 meters in height. The city had a lifespan of around 200 years, before it was eventually destroyed and abandoned around 145 BCE due to repeated attacks by the Saka.

Excavations at Ai Khanoum came to a halt in 1979, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the site was left completely unprotected. It was during this period that looters and antiquities smugglers gained access to the site. Over the following decade, the area was illegally excavated, and artifacts unearthed there were smuggled to CIA-controlled markets. In general, it can be said that Ai Khanoum, as a city, no longer exists;

looters and smugglers have completely destroyed it. Broadly speaking, the aim of this article is to study Ai Khanoum based on the surviving sources and artifacts, to provide detailed and comprehensive information about the city, and to explore how Greek artistic, cultural, and ideological elements were influenced and transformed in Bactria.

Valuable research on the ancient city of Ai Khanoum has been conducted by the French archaeologist Paul Bernard. Between 1964 and 1978, he carried out extensive excavations at the site and provided significant results that have served as a foundation for subsequent studies. Among his works are: *Ai Khanoum in Yesterday's Afghanistan (1964–1978)* and *Today (2001): A Site in Danger, Future Prospects (Informations); Excavation Operations at Ai Khanoum, Afghanistan, in 1969; The 1970 Excavation Campaign at Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan); The 1975 Excavation Campaign at Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan); and The 1976–1977 Excavations at Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan)*.

In addition, other important sources include: Mohammad Rasul Bawari and Mohammad Hossein Ahmadzai (2016), *Archaeology of Afghanistan*; Mohammad Rasul Bawari (2008), *Archaeology of the Early Civilizations of Afghanistan*; and Nazar Mohammad Azizi and Mojtaba Arefi (2013), *Engineering Systems in Ancient Structures*. These sources have investigated various topics, but this article will offer a comprehensive and holistic discussion of the architecture and artifacts uncovered at Ai Khanoum. Through the study of architectural remains, urban systems, and artifacts discovered at the site, this article seeks to examine how Greek art penetrated the region and to analyze the reciprocal influences between local traditions and Hellenistic artistic and architectural forms.

Who built the city of Alexandria (Ai Khanoum) and why?

The existence of an ancient settlement in the area was first noticed in 1925 by Jules Barteaux (Carvajal 2024). However, the official discovery of Ai Khanoum took place in 1961, after which French archaeologists began excavations at the site (Azizi and Arifi 2013, 107). The discovery of Ai Khanoum and the excavations carried out there led to serious debates over whether the city had truly been founded by Alexander the Great. Why had such a large city been established in such a remote area? In fact, in ancient times, the region surrounding Ai Khanoum was not considered as remote as it is today, since from the very beginning of human history, this area held continuous commercial and military significance. An unpublished study on the fortress of Ai Khanoum reveals that it was already in use during the Achaemenid period well before Alexander's conquest of Afghanistan and the foundation of the Greek city. This clearly suggests that Ai Khanoum had previously been regarded by earlier kings as a strategic region and possibly as a military outpost on the frontier (Lee 2014, 88).

The ancient military fortress, which remains unexcavated, is located in the Balaab direction, less than two kilometers from Ai Khanoum. Today, its eastern part has been lost due to erosion by the Amu River. The fortress consists of a circular moat and a defensive wall surrounding a smaller inner area. This architectural form is characteristic of fortresses from the Achaemenid period as well as from the Early Bronze Age. On a slightly higher elevation, excavations carried out in the 1970s revealed remains of a Bronze Age civilization at a site known as Shartghai, indicating commercial ties with the Harappan and Indus Valley civilizations (Lee 2014, 88–89).

In any case, this historical site is a Greco-Bactrian city founded in the 4th century BCE by Alexander the Great or one of his early successors (Anonim 1981, 1–6). Although there is no definitive information about the founder of Ai Khanoum, the renowned Greek scholar Ptolemy refers in his works to a city called “Alexandria on the Oxus,” which can be associated with Ai Khanoum. Some evidence suggests that Seleucus I and later his son Antiochus may have been directly involved in the city's construction. Moreover, it appears that a famous architect named Kineas also played a significant role in its planning.

A funerary inscription discovered along with a tomb located within the city walls has provided archaeologists with valuable information (Mason 1982, 23; Bawary 2009, 77). This inscription indicates that Kineas, the owner of the tomb, was in fact the founder of the city, since in the Early Hellenistic period, only city founders or those who played a major role in its construction were granted the privilege of being buried within the city walls (Azimi 2017, 370). Kineas was born around 300 BCE and died around 250 BCE. Accordingly, the city

of Ai Khanoum must have been founded around 275 BCE, during Kineas's adulthood—coinciding with the final years of Seleucus I's reign (281 BCE) (Lee 2014, 83–85).

The tradition of granting the privilege of burial within the city to its founders is also mentioned in other sources (Farhadi 1980; Amini 2020; Habibi 1998, 17; Azimi 2017, 371). Other deceased individuals were buried outside the city. Two types of graves have been identified in the outskirts: one consisting of coffins made from unbaked clay, and the other comprising Tikri jars used to collect the bones of previously deceased individuals. Both types of burials contained ceramic vessels dating to the same period and boxes with valuable items.

The city lasted for more than 200 years, until around 145 BCE (Bawary and Ahmadzai 2016, 76–77). However, nomadic Saka tribes from Central Asia invaded Bactria and destroyed the city. Although the population returned, a second attack by the Saka about 15 years later led to the complete burning and destruction of the city (Lee 2014, 89). After that, the city was never rebuilt and was left in ruins. The exact reasons for the fall of Ai Khanoum remain unknown. Some theories attribute it to invasions and warfare, while others suggest natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods. There are also hypotheses pointing to gradual abandonment due to economic decline or shifting attachments to religious and cultural centers (Kokkinidis 2024).

Location of Ai Khanoum

This ancient city, now world-renowned, is located in Takhar Province of Afghanistan, in the district of Dasht-e Qala (Azizi and Arifi 2013, 111; Anonim 1981, 1–6). It lies at the confluence of the Amu and Kokcha Rivers. A village still bearing the name Ai Khanoum exists in the area today, known by the local population (Anonim 1981, 1–6).

The archaeological site is situated at 37°59' north latitude and 66°25' east longitude. The city possessed an exceptionally strategic natural location. It was bordered to the north by the Amu River and to the west by the Kokcha River. A strong military fortress was constructed to its southwest. To reinforce the city's towers and defensive walls, a deep moat filled with water was dug around it. The Badakhshan mountains lay to the southeast (Azizi and Arifi 2013, 111–113). The site is located about 100 kilometers northeast of the city of Kunduz and stands at an elevation of approximately 500 meters above sea level (Ansari 2018, 157).

This ancient city, also referred to in some sources as “Mah Khanum,” derives its name from the Turkic-Uzbek languages: “Ay” meaning “moon” or “moonlight,” and “Khanum” meaning “lady” or “woman.” Together, they form the name “Moon Lady” or “Mah Khanum.” Many local residents also recognize and refer to the area by this name (Bawary 2017, 76–77).

The city is located approximately 20 kilometers from the ancient city of Balkh. Ai Khanoum was considered one of the key centers of the Greco-Bactrian Empire and served as one of its defensive strongholds. According to the prevailing view, the city was built to defend against threats posed by peoples living north of the Amu River. Additionally, the fertility of the surrounding lands raised expectations among the inhabitants for agriculture and settlement. Ptolemy frequently referred to this city as “Alexandria on the Oxus” in his writings. According to him, a large variety of crops were harvested in Alexandria Oxus, and the region was equipped with a well-organized irrigation system (Bawary 2017, 76–77).



Figure 1. This ancient city is located in Takhar Province, Dasht-e Qala District, at the confluence of the Amu Darya and Kokcha Rivers (Bernard 2001, 971–1029).

Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great was born on the Macedonian peninsula in the Balkans and ascended to the throne upon the death of his father, Philip II, in 337 BCE. Compared by his father to Heracles and by his mother to the legendary hero Achilles, Alexander was a young warrior and a leader who embraced the philosophy of Aristotle. He transformed a weak state into a vast empire that stretched across Asia, Europe, and parts of Africa (Bawary 2009, 68–69; Parnia 1964, 1461). Having prepared his army since the autumn of 335 BCE, Alexander began his campaign eastward in 334 BCE with 13,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry. He defeated the Achaemenid army in three major battles Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela (Pernia 1964, 98; Muradi 2010, 165–166). Following these defeats, Darius III was severely wounded and killed by the satrap of Bactria, Bessus. His body was sent to Pasargadae (Bawary 2009, 69–70).

After the conquest of Persia, Alexander captured the territories of present-day Afghanistan and founded several cities named Alexandria in places such as Herat, Sistan, Helmand, Kandahar, Ghazni, Bagram, and Balkh (Muradi 2019, 70–72; Bawary 2009, 69–70). He then crossed the Amu River, conquering Sogdiana and India as well. However, due to the exhaustion of his army, he returned to Babylon, where he died at the age of 32 (Muradi 2010, 165–166). The arrival of the Greeks and Hellenistic culture in Bactria led to the blending of Greek and Bactrian civilizations an influence clearly visible in sculpture, architecture, and urban planning. The coins of Greco-Bactrian kings reflect the rituals of Greek gods and their resemblance to local deities; moreover, elements of Indian and Buddhist art are also evident in the artifacts of this period. Archaeological excavations at the ancient city of Ai Khanoum vividly reveal this cultural synthesis.



Figure 2. Alexander's movement towards Iran and Bactria (Anonymous a, 2024).

Excavations at Ai Khanoum

The excavations at Ai Khanoum have generally been conducted in two forms: unofficial excavations and official excavations. Each of these is described below.

Unofficial Excavations

With the arrival of the British in Afghanistan during the 18th and 19th centuries, the trade in antiquities in the country began to flourish. British soldiers and archaeologists, upon entering Afghanistan, excavated stupas and began collecting artifacts such as statues and coins (Anonim 1981, 1–6). Ai Khanoum was also affected by this wave of looting. Until 1961, the site remained largely unnoticed by researchers. However, in that same year, a local farmer accidentally discovered two Greek artifacts and brought them to the Kunduz market. One of these items was a one-meter-high Corinthian-style column, and the other was a cylindrical stone container. A team of French and Afghan archaeologists, in cooperation with local authorities, traced the origin of these objects and initiated formal excavations at Ai Khanoum (Farhadi 1998; Amini 2020).

Between 1965 and 1978, the team conducted a total of 15 excavation seasons. However, with the outbreak of war in 1979 and the expulsion of foreign archaeologists, Ai Khanoum like many other archaeological sites in the country was left unprotected and subjected to extensive looting (Farhadi 1998; Amini 2020). According to the AIA network, no significant remains are left at the ancient site of Ai Khanoum today (Feroozzi 2004, 3–5). Looters, using modern equipment, including bulldozers, have completely destroyed the architectural remains. Corinthian and Doric stone column capitals have been identified in Peshawar, with one of them reportedly being used as a table in a café. Many valuable objects such as ivory carvings, jewelry, medallions, gold and

silver coins, small figurines, and decorative stones were unearthed through illegal excavations and sold on the market. These items clearly reflect the legacy of the Greco-Bactrian civilization in northern Afghanistan (Farhadi 1998; Amini 2020).

According to Esadullah Zamri, a local resident, the Ai Khanoum site was excavated during times of conflict by powerful individuals using unprofessional methods. The artifacts were smuggled abroad, and the profits ended up in the hands of the mafia (Anonim b, 2024). After the Soviet withdrawal, the area came under the control of a local military commander and was further destroyed using bulldozers. Looting continues to this day, and reports have recently emerged about the discovery and smuggling of a large statue from Ai Khanoum (Ansari 2018, 165).

Official Excavations

Ai Khanoum was first excavated in 1965 by Daniel Schlumberger, the head of DAFĀ, who had conducted research in several regions and identified “gaps in knowledge.” During the opening of test trenches, a column base and a stone vessel were found, although the function of the vessel remains under investigation. Following Schlumberger, Professor Paul Bernard assumed responsibility for the excavation of Ai Khanoum. From 1965 to 1987, systematic and regular excavations were carried out over a span of 22 years, mostly during the autumn seasons. During this period, most of the artifacts were preserved in museums. However, following the victory of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, all remaining artifacts were looted. Based on archaeological evidence and architectural remains, Paul Bernard argued that the city of Ai Khanoum had been inhabited for 230 years. He also noted that before Alexander or the Seleucids founded the city, the local population had used the area as a place for keeping livestock (Bernard 2001, 971–1029; Azizi & Arifi 2013, 108–110).

Paul Bernard defines six periods at Ai Khanoum, starting around 330 BCE and ending around 130 BCE. According to the archaeological evidence from the excavations at Ai Khanoum, three main artistic styles were generally used in the decoration of buildings:

Corinthian (Korit)

Doric (Dor)

Ionic (İyon)

Artistically, the artifacts found at Ai Khanoum are also divided into three categories:

Works featuring exclusively elements of Greek art without influence from other styles. For example, the Hermes statue from the 3rd century BCE depicting an elderly man with a thick beard.

Greek-origin works that show a blend of architectural styles with western and eastern regions of Afghanistan.

Works combining Greek artistic elements with local art, which later contributed to the development of Gandhara art (Bernard 2001, 971–1029; Azizi & Arifi 2013, 108–110).



Figure 3. A stone pillar capital discovered in Alexandria Oxus, dating to the 3rd–2nd century BCE (Amini 2020; Kokkinidis 2024).

Architecture of Ai Khanoum

The ancient site of Ai Khanoum is situated on a natural acropolis approximately 60 meters above the surrounding plains (Bernard 1982, 148–159) and is structurally divided into two main parts: the upper section and the lower section. The upper section contains cemeteries and defensive structures, while the northern slope, being flat and devoid of building remains, was primarily used for agriculture and gardening (Farhadi 1980; Amini 2020). The lower part of the city includes residential areas, administrative offices, treasury, library, gymnasium, theater, and temples. The city area is divided into two by a straight street about 1.5 kilometers long, starting from the large northern gate and extending to the Kokcha River. Temples, palaces, halls, theaters, stadiums, tombs, and arsenals are located on both sides of this street (Lee 2014, 83–85). Ai Khanoum measures approximately 1800 meters in length and 1600 meters in width, featuring a well-organized city plan with separate quarters for habitation, administration, military, and religious purposes (Yusufzay 1983, 11–12; Azimi 2017, 371).

Defensively, Ai Khanoum enjoyed a natural position, with only the northern part of the lower city lacking natural protection. This area was secured by a large wall 11 meters high and 10 meters thick, fortified with Greek-style towers and defenses. These towers were rectangular and constructed according to Greek architectural examples, whereas towers in Achaemenid and Kushan fortresses in northern Afghanistan were generally circular (Farhadi 1980; Amini 2020). These large towers projected about 10 meters outward from the wall (Bernard 1982, 148). Large square mud bricks were used in the defensive walls and city structures, while baked bricks were preferred in houses and some other buildings. The mudbrick settlement covers approximately 90,000 square meters. The administrative palace and its associated units measured 137 by 180 meters and were surrounded by 108 stone columns (Lee 2014, 88). The city was constructed with aesthetic skill, and its water supply and irrigation system consisted of several canals; this system conforms to the engineering tradition of the period. This tradition also existed in the Bactria region for example, the famous "18 River" irrigation system in Balkh. Although Ai Khanoum was founded by the Greeks, local techniques were also employed in palace construction and engineering (Azizi & Arifi 2013, 111–113).

The houses of nobles and high-ranking officials were completely different from those of ordinary people, especially Persian-speaking Bactrians. While the main architectural principles were inspired by Greek ideals, other elements including decoration and even religious texts clearly show the influence of local Bactrian style. Most local houses were designed in an eastern style (Lee 2014, 83–85), which confirms the presence of local architects and workers in the city's construction. All columns at Ai Khanoum differ from the widespread architecture in Central Asia. Here, columns were made of stone, whereas in other parts of Central Asia, columns were usually wooden and placed on stone bases. The capitals of royal palaces were made in a special Greek architectural style inspired by Olympia in Athens; these capitals are a blend of Greek and local Bactrian art. This style can also be found in the temples of Lydia and Attalos (Azizi & Arifi 2013, 114).

Ai Khanoum is the first architecture where Greco-Bactrian hybrid art was used. The structures were primarily built from raw mud bricks, with baked bricks used in some parts. Additionally, local architectural techniques, still common in Afghanistan today, were applied. The roofs are flat and non-Greek in style. Greek architectural elements consist of cut stones connected by lead nails and stacked without mortar. The roofs are tiled, and limestone used in the construction of columns and doors was brought from the southwestern region approximately 50 kilometers away (Azizi & Arifi 2013, 114).

Royal Palace

The plan of the royal palace includes a large courtyard and was designed with either 116 columns (Azizi & Arifi 2013, 114) or, according to another account, 118 columns (Ansari 2018, 195). Upon entering Ai Khanoum, after passing through the "Greek" rooms, the shape of the gate appears. Upon entering through the gate, the area opens up. The space between the palace and the gate is enclosed by 20 columns, each standing 15 meters tall. The columns were constructed in the Greek Doric and occasionally Corinthian styles (Azizi & Arifi 2013, 111–114). According to Bernard, this palace, like the palaces of Susa and Darius, served three simultaneous functions: government administration, royal residence, and treasury. The mentioned building had a total area of 108 by 137 meters (Bernard 1976, 287–322; Ansari 2018, 159).

Since Greek architects were unfamiliar with the concept of the palace in its Eastern form, they turned to models they had encountered during their conquests such as the royal Persian structures like Darius's palace at Susa. On the southern side of the courtyard, a hall with three rows of columns opened into the heart of the palace. In the southeastern corner of the palace grounds were administrative buildings; the most notable among them was a square-shaped structure measuring 52 meters on one side. Its interior was divided into two groups of symmetrical rooms by corridors intersecting at right angles. On the eastern side of the building, there were two reception halls whose walls were decorated with stone columns. On the western side, there was a space interpreted as two offices for administrative use. Along the western boundary of the palace area, a small courtyard with a 60-column colonnade created a more intimate formal atmosphere. A total of three private apartments occupied the southwestern corner of the palace grounds. Each included not only residential quarters but also a bath and a forecourt, distinguishing them clearly from the other palace structures. On the western side of the palace complex, a group of storerooms arranged around a central courtyard functioned as a treasury. The plan of this building was inspired by a non-Greek tradition. The vessels stored here, along with related finds such as pearls, rough and polished agate, opal, garnet, lapis lazuli, beryl, and crystal indicate that this building served as a storage place for precious objects (Bernard 1982, 148–159).

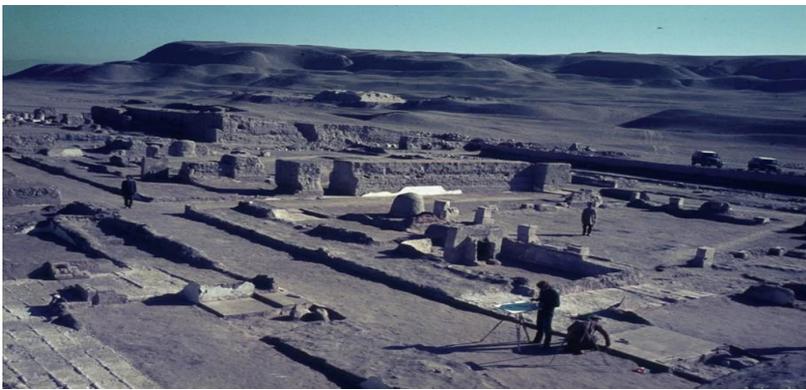


Figure 4. Alexandria oxus, view of the excavations of the administrative district or palace located in the centre of the lower city; in the background stands the high city and theatre (Bernard 1976, 287-322; Ferozi 2004, 4).

Gymnasium and Theater

One of the most famous structures of Ai Khanoum is the Gymnasium, which was built near the Amu Darya River. This building covers an area of 100 square meters and, according to its plan, is a Greek-style structure. Greek athletic exercises were practiced here. An inscription found at the site confirms this claim (Bernard 1976, 287-322; Ansari 2018, 160). On one of the columns, a Greek dedication of the city to Hermes and Herakles is inscribed. The letter is dedicated to two men with Greek names Tribalus and Strato (Bernard 2001, 971-1029; Anonymous d, 2024).



Figure 5. Alexandria Oxus, a picture showing the clean brick walls of the Gymnasium. The mountains of Tajikistan in the background (Ferozi 2004, 4).

The theater building was constructed in the northern section of the lower part of the city and is entirely Greek in its architectural plan. It features 35 semi-circular rows (cavea) with a radius of 42 meters. With a seating capacity of 6,000 spectators, this theater was likely modeled after the Babylonian theater, which is considered the only theater of the Hellenistic period in the Middle East (Bernard 1976, 287-322; Ansari 2018, 160). The theater of Ai Khanoum ranks second in seating capacity after the Theater of Epidaurus (Feroozi 2004, 3–5).

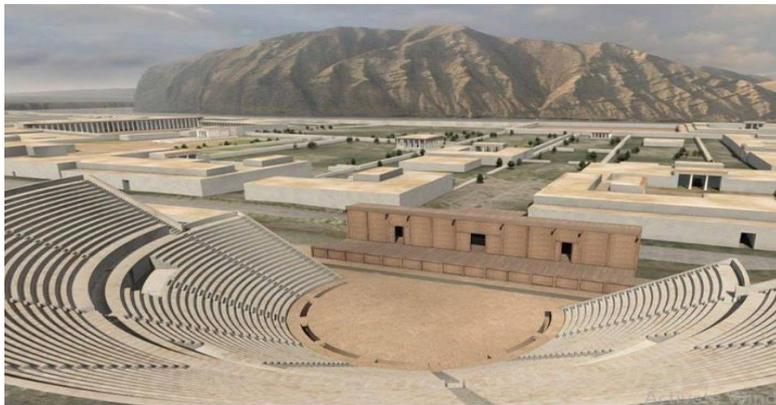


Figure 6. A digitally restored theater image of Ai Khanoum in the past (Amini 2020).

Arsenal

The arsenal was a rectangular building situated along the city's main street. It measured 140 meters in length and approximately 100 meters in width. The structure featured a series of long storerooms that opened onto a large central courtyard (Bernard 1982, 148–159).

Bathhouse (Hamam)

The elite class of Ai Khanoum placed great importance on bathhouses. Each bath was divided into two or, more often, three sections. The walls were covered with red plaster and stone or with cement and pebble mosaics (while the floors of other rooms were earthen). The first of the three sections was a changing room. The second was the main washing or bathing area. Hot or cold water for bathing came from a third room. The stove in the adjacent kitchen was used to heat the water (Bernard 1976, 287-322; Bernard 1982, 148–159).

Another feature of Greek art in Ai Khanoum is the use of mosaics in bathhouses and other architectural areas. These mosaics contain vegetal motifs, which indicate a fusion of Greek art with Eastern and local traditions, since animal motifs were more commonly used in ancient Greek art. Only in the floor of the palace bath at Ai Khanoum are there depictions of dolphins, sea urchins, and sea monsters. Here, instead of the square tesserae typical of Greek mosaics, smaller, finer, and more colorful pieces were used (Bernard 2001, 971-1029; Farhadi 1980; Amini, 2020). These mosaics are composed of pebbles that have been regularly cut into square shapes. Most of the mosaic floor is covered with red stones, and black stones were added in certain places to emphasize particular details (Bernard 1982, 148–159).



Figure 7. Alexandria Oxus, administration area, bathroom mosaic. The photograph shows the dressing room in the bathroom in the administration area. The floor of the room is covered with Macedonian-style mosaics (Bernard 1976, 287-322; Feroozi 2004, 4).

Temple

In Ai Khanoum, three temples were discovered that are in no way Greek in character. The main structure, located along the main road near the palace, is a large square building set on a high platform with three steps. The second temple, located outside the city walls near the northern gate, closely resembles the first. The third temple is equally non-Hellenistic and consists of a broad stepped platform in the southwestern corner of the acropolis. Greek sources mention that the Persians worshipped in open-air spaces located at high altitudes (Bernard 1982, 148–159). Two other temples, like the Greek gymnasium and theater, were dedicated to Greek gods (Lee 2014, 83–85). The large temple, built on a terraced surface, followed the traditional Bactrian and local style (Anonim 1981, 1–6). The Ai Khanoum temple is a square structure measuring 19 by 19 meters, built on a high platform. Inside the temple, a large hall was first constructed by order of the priests, followed by two side rooms used as altars. The material is mostly baked clay, and a statue of a Greek goddess can also be seen. The building contains three standing statues, but none of them were found intact only some traces and remains of their lower parts have been preserved (Azizi and Arifi 2013, 114–111).



Figure 8: A fragment of the foot of a statue of Zeus. Made of marble, dating to the 2nd–3rd century BCE. (Taken by the author from the National Museum of Afghanistan).

This temple was also markedly different from religious structures in classical Greek design. It stood on a prominent raised platform, and a high wall separated the sacred area of the temple from the impure section. On the other side of the wall was a courtyard, at the end of which stood a flat-roofed **herem** (a type of temple). This inner herem was built higher than the level of the courtyard and was accessed by a staircase. Such architectural designs are more characteristic of Near Eastern and Persian temples than of Greek ones (Lee 2014, 85–86). Archaeologists have confirmed the presence of three statues in the Ai Khanoum temple, and it is likely that one of them represented the moon goddess. So far, there has been no official report confirming whether this statue has been found. However, in 1996, rumors circulated that a nearly two-meter-tall bust from Ai Khanoum had fallen into the hands of a local commander, who was attempting to sell it secretly (Ansari 2018, 161).

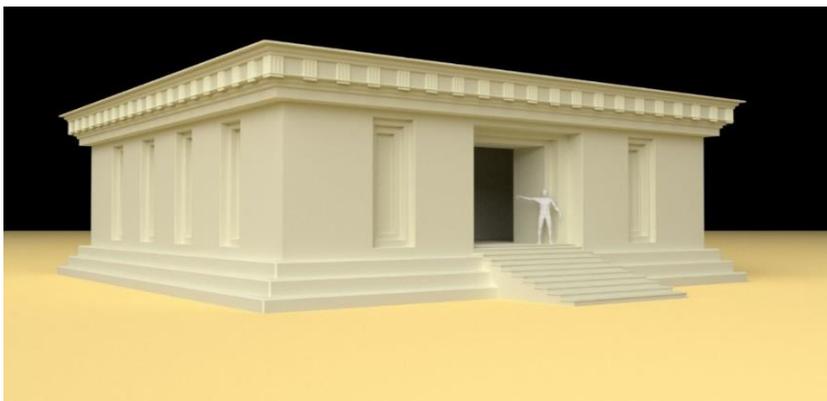


Figure 9. temple view from the past, digitally restored (Anonim a, 2024).

Inscriptions

Greek Inscriptions: A funerary inscription was found on a stone fragment. Additionally, texts of Greek wisdom and philosophy written on papyrus have been discovered. A ceramic vessel was also found bearing three items related to the recording and delivery of goods (it bears the name of a tax or accounting official from the Greek and Bactrian administration) (Anonim 1981, 1–6). In Room 109 of the palace, inscriptions were uncovered referring to a set of jars used to store valuable seeds and essential liquids. From this room, eight inscriptions were recovered, written on a clay cloth, where the Greek word "Ud" (meaning aloeswood or oud) could be read. Oud is a valuable aromatic wood that was brought from Arabia to Central Asia (Afghanistan). The inscriptions on the ceramic wrappings, written in Greek letters, refer to the delivery of money stored inside jars. The names of both the senders and recipients of the money appear in the texts, and some of these names are not Greek. This indicates that local people were also employed in administrative affairs (Farhadi 1980; Amini, 2020). Fragments of philosophical texts and an inscription bearing the Delphic maxims were also found in this area. Delphi was one of the main sites of the Olympic games and also the home of the prophetess Sybl, who was consulted by rulers before embarking on important and risky undertakings (Lee 2014, 83–85). This inscription, written in Greek, was recovered from the tomb of the city's founder, Kineas, and dates back to around 300–325 BCE (Yusufzay 1983, 11–12; Azimi 2017, 371).

{ἀνδρῶν τοι σοφὰ ταῦτα παλαιότερων ἀνάκει(τα)ι / ῥήματα ἀριγνώτων Πυθοῖ ἐν ἡγαθέαι / ἔνθεν ταῦτ(α)
Κλέαρχος ἐπιφραδέως ἀναγράψας / εἶσατο τηλαυγῆ Κινέου ἐν τεμένει. / παῖς ὢν κόσμιος γίνου / ἡβῶν
ἐγκρατής / μέσος δίκαιος / πρεσβύτης εὐβουλος / τελευτῶν ἄλυπος} (Carvajal 2024).

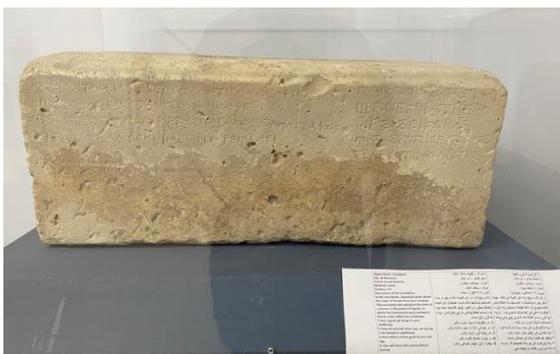


Figure 10. The Kineas inscription with references to Delphi, found at Alexandria on the Oxus. The inscription dates to the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE. (Taken by the author from the National Museum of Afghanistan).

This inscription contains two texts. The first is a copy of the Delphic maxims, written in broken Greek script. It was added by a respected and noble man named Klerkaus, who wrote “The wise sayings of men of the past and the speeches of famous men at the sacred temple of Pythes have been preserved, and Klerkaus has taken them from there and quoted them carefully.” (Habibi 1998, 19; Azimi 2017, 371).

This inscription, part of a larger monument, was found in front of the corridor of Kineas’s tomb. Within it, five moral maxims written in Greek are legible. They are part of the 150 Delphic recommendations originally inscribed at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece (Farhadi 1980; Amini, 2020). The second text is written in a proper and elegant style and reads as follows:

In childhood, learn manners and morality!

In youth, control your behavior, emotions, and desires!

In adulthood, practice piety and justice!

In old age, offer helpful advice to others!

Then, die without regret!

This inscription, one of the oldest Greek-written artifacts found in Afghanistan, indicates that the citizens of this city had acquired knowledge of Greek language and culture. The date of the inscription can be attributed to about a century after Alexander. By relocating this relic, they attempted to strengthen their own local culture far from their ancestral homeland nearly 5,000 miles away (Yusufzay 1983, 11–12; Azimi 2017, 372).

Inscription in the Local Language: In Ai Khanoum, most inscriptions were written in Greek. However, numerous inscriptions have also been found in non-Greek scripts, including Aramaic and Brahmi, which also contain non-Greek names. Nevertheless, Greek remained the official and administrative written language (Farhadi 1980; Amini, 2020). An inscription was also discovered on a piece of silver, written mostly in the Bactrian language, using an undeciphered script that has not yet been read (Anonim 1981, 1–6).

Coin Hoard of Ai Khanoum

At Ai Khanoum, a large number of Seleucid and Bactrian coins were discovered, along with ten empty bases, indicating the presence of a mint in the city. A city emblem (a triangle within a circle) was engraved on bricks from what appears to be one of the city’s oldest buildings. The same symbol appears on various eastern Seleucid coins, suggesting that these coins were likely minted at Ai Khanoum. As a result, many Seleucid coins have been attributed to the Ai Khanoum mint, and it has been concluded that Ai Khanoum may have been a larger minting center than Balkh. The coins found at Ai Khanoum begin with those of Seleucus I, but they abruptly end with the coins of Eucratides, which suggests that the city was conquered at the end of Eucratides’ reign (Bernard 1971, 385-453; Anonim e 2024).

In the treasure of 63 silver coins discovered at Ai Khanoum, depictions of Greek gods such as Zeus, Heracles, and Artemis are present. On the other hand, the figures of Greek kings from Alexander to Eucratides and Heliokles appear with increasing frequency. Coins minted in India, bearing the images of Indian gods (such as Vasudeva and Krishna), have also been found at Ai Khanoum. Additionally, a coin die was recovered from the site, indicating that Ai Khanoum had the authority to mint coins (Farhadi 1980; Amini, 2020).



Figure 11: A gold stater minted by Seleucid King Antiochus I at Ai Khanoum, dated to around 275 BCE. Obverse: Head of Antiochus the Great. Reverse: A naked Apollo seated on the Omphalos, leaning on his bow and holding two arrows. Greek legend: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ (of King Antiochus). On the left, the Δ symbol of Alexandria on the Oxus (Ai Khanoum) is visible (Amini 2020; Anonim, e 2024).



Figure 12: A coin of Agathocles dated to around 180 BCE, found at Ai Khanoum, presents some of the earliest known depictions of selected Hindu deities and features inscriptions in both Greek and Brahmi scripts (Bernard 1971, 385-453; Anonim, e 2024).

One of the oldest artifacts found at Ai Khanoum is a gilded silver ceremonial plaque. The image depicts the Greek nature goddess Cybele riding in a chariot. Beside her is the winged goddess Nike, holding the reins. The chariot is drawn by two lions and passes through a mountainous landscape filled with stones and mud. Cybele is accompanied by two priests: one stands behind her holding a parasol, and the other stands on a tall altar, offering gifts.

In the sky, three celestial bodies shine: the sun god Helios, a crescent moon, and a star. Overall, this plaque represents the nature goddess presiding over a well-ordered universe (Bernard 1970, 300-49; Anonim a, 2024).



Figure 13: Gilded Silver Plaque (Bernard 1970, 300-49; Anonim a, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The ancient site of Ai Khanoum was not only one of the most advanced Greco-Bactrian cities in ancient Central Asia, but also a living symbol of the coexistence and intermingling of two completely different cultural traditions: on the one hand, the Greek tradition, rooted in Hellenistic art, philosophy, and urban planning; and on the other hand, the climatic, political, and religious realities of the Eastern Iranian world and Bactria. Findings such as non-Greek temples, hybrid statues, multilingual coins, and inscriptions emphasizing ethics and wisdom all indicate that Ai Khanoum was not merely a reflection of Greek influence, but rather a composite product of cultural interaction, localization, and local creativity.

Despite such significance, Ai Khanoum fell victim to the turbulent historical conditions of recent decades. As a result of prolonged war, insecurity, and instability in the region, the site remained for many years in the hands of antiquities smugglers and was almost completely looted. Many of its artifacts were destroyed, smuggled, or illegally transferred to international markets. This destruction represents not only a loss for Afghanistan, but also a blow to the cultural heritage of all humanity. For Ai Khanoum was part of the shared history of East and West and served as a living testament to the possibility of civilizational dialogue in the distant past.

Based on this bitter experience, three key strategies may be proposed to prevent similar catastrophes in the future:

Strengthening legal, protective, and research structures at the national and regional levels to identify, document, and preserve historical sites;

Developing international cooperation, both in terms of legal prosecution of antiquities traffickers and in returning looted objects to their countries of origin;

Investing in public education and engaging local communities in the protection of cultural heritage, particularly through education, sustainable tourism, and participatory projects.

In conclusion, Ai Khanoum is not only an ancient archaeological site, but also a center of cultural synthesis between East and West. This historic city, like a mirror of the past, invites us to reflect on the importance of preserving cultural roots, embracing diversity, and honoring the collective memory of humanity.

SOURCE

1. Amini, mohammad akbar, 'Ay Khanum Is a Greek City in Northern Afghanistan', Mandigak , 2020 <<https://mundigak.com/fa/آی-خانم، یک-شهر-یونانی-در-شمال-افغانستان>>
2. Anonymous, National Museum of Afghanistan (accepted Afghanistan: Kushan International Research Center, 1981)
3. Anonymous A, 'The Greek Colony of Ai Khanum', 2024 <http://www.museoon.com/go/museoon/home/db/events/_page_id_558/_page_id_588/_page_id_235/_page_id_567.xhtml>
4. Anonymous, B, 'No Title Takhar Residents Want to Preserve the Remains of the Historical Settlement "Ayhanim"', 2024 <<https://sw.n.af/the-residents-of-takhar-want-to-preserve-the-remains-of-the-historical-settlement-ai-khanam/>>
5. Anonymous, D, 'Ay Khanum', 2024 <https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/آی_خانم>
6. Anonymous, E, 'Ai-Khanoum', Wikipedia , 2024 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ai-Khanoum#/media/File:Sakuntala_plate_reconstitution.jpg>
7. Ansari, sultan mohammad, Art History of the Wrold and Afghanistan (bakh Afghnistan: rah-e-saadat university, 2018)
8. azimi, mohammad azim, Afghanistan's Wonderful Places (accepted Afghanistan: Nigar Publishing, 2017)
9. Azizi, Nazar Mohammad and Mojtaba Arifi, Engineering Systems in Ancient Settlements (Kabul Afghanistan: Yousufzad, 2013)
10. Bawary, muhammad rasol, Archeology of the First Civilizations in Afghanistan (accepted Afghanistan: Amiri, 2009)
11. Bawary, muhammad rasul and husain Ahmadzai, Archeology of Afghanistan (kabul Afghanistan: yousufzad, 2016)
12. Bernard, Paul, 'An Ancient Greek City in Central Asia', Jstor , An Ancient Greek City in Central Asia, 1982, 148
13. Bernard, Paul. 1970. 'Campagne de fouilles 1969 à Ai Khanoum en Afghanistan', Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 114: 300-49.
14. Bernard, Paul. 1976. 'Campagne de fouilles 1975 à Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan)', Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 120: 287-322.
15. Bernard, Paul. 1971. 'La campagne de fouilles de 1970 à Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan)', Comptes-rendus des séances de l'année - Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 115: 385-453.
16. Bernard, Paul. 2001. 'Ai Khanoum en Afghanistan hier (1964-1978) et aujourd'hui (2001): un site en péril. Perspectives d'avenir (information)', Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 145: 971-1029.
17. Carvajal, Guillermo, 'Ai-Khanoum: The Lost Greek City in Afghanistan', 2024 <[>](https://www.labrujulaverde.com/en/2024/08/ai-khanoum-the-lost-greek-city-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=At the confluence of the,means)
18. Feroozi, abdul wasey, 'The Impact of War upon Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage', in AIA , 2004, pp. 3–5 <https://www.archaeological.org/pdfs/papers/AIA_Afghanistan_address_highres.pdf>
19. Habibi, Abdulhay, History of Afghanistan's Ancient Calligraphy and Writings (peshavur pakistan: Knowledge library, 1998)
20. Kokkinidis, Thasos, 'Afghanistan's Ancient Greek City and the Mystery of Its Demise', Greek Rep Rter , 2024 <<https://greekreporter.com/2024/09/23/afghanistan-ancient-greek-city-mystery-demise/>>
21. Mason, wanim, Ancient Monuments of Afghanistan (kabul Afghanistan: Kabul university, 1361)
22. Muradi, saheb narar, Ariane's and Ariana (accepted Afghanistan: said, 2010)
23. Parnia, mohammad hasan, History of Ancient Iran (tehran iran: tehran university, 1964)
24. Rawan Farhadi, Abdulghafor, 'Ay Khanum, the Meeting Place of Greece and the Bakhtar', Journal of Archeology , 1980
25. Yousafzay, Abdulzahir, 'Ay Khanum, a Western Greek City in Northern Afghanistan', Journal of Archeology , 1983, 11–12