

ARWA Central Asian online lectures 2024:  
The Anthropocene in Arid Central Asia:  
interdisciplinary perspectives on the Qyzylkum and its contiguous landscapes

**The Anthropogenic Qyzylkum: rural unsustainability in the hinterlands of the Bukhara Oasis at the turn of our era**

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This paper explores environmental change and rural settlement strategies in the Kimerik-kum region of the southern Qyzylkum around the turn of our era within the context of the Anthropocene. Early results from a systematic remote sensing and geophysics survey among the “Bashtepa Group” of sites (roughly 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE to 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE) provides further evidence that the water intensive agricultural regimes were once the norm at the terminal arms of the Zerafshan River in Sogdiana. By sometime in the early first millennium BCE this vast cultivated extension of the Bukhara Oasis was greatly diminished. Today the region is arid desert pocked by the ghosts of rural manor houses, fortifications, and field systems that serve as a testament to gradual ecological unsustainability in the rural margins. Here rural unsustainability in the pre-Islamic Bukhara Oasis is presented with today’s climate crisis in mind to suggest that archaeology has a role to play in case studies of “doomed to fail” landscapes. Rather than serve as a presentist parable for modern catastrophe, this talk considers archaeology’s role as a record of past moments where communities were unable to overcome human engineered ecological crises.

