

# **Desert mobilities: results of the Uzbek-UAE expedition to the Qyzylqum**

**Fiona Kidd**

New York University Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi AE

## **Abstract**

Connecting the key Central Asian oases of Khorezm and the lower Syr Darya with Bukhara and Samarkand, and bordered by the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, the Qyzylqum is an exceptional space for understanding mobility. Yet, although deserts comprise more than half of Central Asia, they are often shunned in scholarship as empty non-places; as unproductive spaces – Arrian’s ‘Chorasmian wastes’ – and as places of retreat for mobile populations. The historical silence on these spaces renders largely silent also their inhabitants. Paradoxically, however, the desert/steppe is a productive and integrative space: visual art attributed to mobile populations in fact often reflects a rich awareness of other visual traditions; and even a quick glance at the Qyzylqum on Google Earth immediately reveals a rich mosaic of anthropogenic sites across this wide area. How can we re-align deserts as dynamic spaces that operated together with Central Asia’s diverse ecologies as part of an integrated landscape system? How can we reassess conceptions of the desert to ensure a more inclusive narrative of the past? This paper will share the results of the first season of work by the Uzbek-UAE expedition to the Qyzylqum, in summer 2023, to start to address some of these issues. Our mutli-scalar, interdisciplinary approach to mobility in the Qyzylqum aims to elucidate how this space was inhabited, moved through and perceived over the long term, in order to better understand deserts as critical interactive elements in a wider landscape.