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XYLOPHAGOUS INSECTS AND TERMITE DAMAGE TO ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Doschanova Manzura Babajanovna,

Khorezm Mamun academy, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Biological Sciences,
manzuradoschanova84@gmail.com

Abstract. Xylophagous ("wood-eating") insects – notably termites (order Blattodea: infraorder Isoptera) and various wood-boring beetles – play a key ecological role in decomposing dead wood[1]. Termites are eusocial insects that digest cellulose via symbiotic gut flora or their own enzymes[2]. Subterranean termites live in large colonies (often 10^5–10^6 workers) and require soil moisture, whereas drywood termites can colonize isolated wood. In natural ecosystems they recycle nutrients, but in built heritage they become invasive pests. Historic buildings are especially vulnerable: early conservators note that "historic buildings and structures are particularly vulnerable to subterranean termite damage, given the traditional use of wood as a building material"[3]. Termite attack is often irreversible and can severely compromise structural integrity[3]. This review examines termite ecology and behavior, surveys documented cases of termite damage to cultural monuments, and analyzes the unique situation in Itchan Qala (Khiva, Uzbekistan) in comparison with other heritage sites worldwide (e.g. Angkor Wat, Fatehpur Sikri, Luxor). We assess damage patterns, environmental factors, and mitigation measures, drawing on recent scientific and conservation literature.

Keywords: xylophagous insects, termites, cultural heritage preservation, historical monuments, Ichan Qala, architectural conservation, wooden structures, pest management, subterranean termites, drywood termites, environmental factors, comparative heritage studies, Southeast Asia heritage, Central Asia architecture, integrated pest management.

Termites live in colonies with distinct castes (workers, soldiers, reproductives). Subterranean species (e.g. Reticulitermes, Coptotermes) build soil nests and forage through ground-contact wood, while drywood species (e.g. Cryptotermes, Kalotermes) infest wood above ground. Both rely on symbiotic protozoa or bacteria to digest cellulose[2]. They prefer warm, humid environments and wood with high moisture content[4]. Laboratory and field studies confirm that subterranean termites thrive when wood moisture (equilibrium moisture content) is high[4]. Consequently, regions with heavy rainfall or high ambient humidity (e.g. Southeast Asia, southern China, tropical climates) see pervasive termite activity[5][6]. Termites are also attracted to damp or salt-affected timber – historic structures often have rising damp or leaks, which can create ideal conditions for infestation[7][4]. Termite colonies forage extensively: a single mature colony can range over 100 m and number millions of individuals[8]. Traditional termite control (e.g. soil insecticide barriers) can be impractical in heritage settings due to drilling or contamination[9]. Modern strategies favor targeted bait systems (e.g. hexaflumuron baits) that eliminate entire colonies with minimal hazard[10]. Nonetheless, knowledge of termite behavior (e.g. ground contact, seasonal activity) is crucial for heritage management. For example, a Korean study found termite damage was highest when wooden beams had direct ground contact, and minimal when wood rested on stone foundations[11]. This underscores the importance of architectural details: elevated foundations or stone plinths can break termite pathways[11].

Termite Damage in Cultural Heritage: Literature Review

Across the globe, termite-related deterioration of wooden cultural assets has been widely documented. In East and Southeast Asia – regions with abundant wood architecture – surveys report widespread infestation. In one Korean study, termite-detection dogs identified 87.6% of 362 national heritage wooden buildings as infested, with visible damage in 51.1% of cases[12]. Similarly, a 1970s Japanese survey found 42.6% of ~2000 cultural properties had termite damage[5]. Termite problems are common in southern China and Taiwan[5], and numerous Asian wooden temples and shrines are known to suffer active decay. For example, Vietnam's historic port town of Hôi An (wooden houses, temples) reported 265 of 800 surveyed relics with termite attack, often worsened by seasonal floods[13][6]. In subtropical climates, heavy rains can create "holes under the soil" from termite burrowing, which then fill with water and undermine foundations[14][15]. Heritage conservation literature emphasizes that wooden structures in any climate are at risk. Even in arid regions, isolated outbreaks occur when conditions allow. For example, an Associated Press report (Luxor, Egypt, 2018) described a "tiny termite" plague in which many traditional houses near Luxor nearly collapsed as termites "consume wood at an alarming rate"[16]. This shows that termite damage is not purely tropical: increased irrigation, humidity, or introduction of termite species can trigger localized epidemics. The risk is compounded in heritage sites by aging materials and deferred maintenance. In general, termite damage in historic buildings tends to manifest as hollowed floor or roof beams, weakened wooden columns or ceilings, and below-ground tunneling that destabilizes foundations[14][17]. Because damage is irreversible (consumed wood cannot be replaced by preservation), literature stresses prevention and early intervention[3][17].

Ichan Qala (Khiva, Uzbekistan): Case Study

Itchan Qala – the walled "inner town" of Khiva – is a 18–19th century oasis citadel featuring 37.5 ha of mainly mudbrick architecture[18]. Its 51 listed monuments (mosques, madrasahs, palaces, mausolea) and 250 traditional houses exemplify Central Asian Islamic design[18]. Many buildings contain wooden elements (e.g. carved columns in the Djuma Mosque, wood-framed ceilings and window screens)[18][19]. Despite Khiva's arid climate, excess moisture (from irrigation or rains) accumulates in adobe walls and foundations, attracting drywood/subterranean termites. UNESCO notes that "termite infestation of wooden structures" is a recognized natural threat to the site[19]. Indeed, both UNESCO State of Conservation reports and local records repeatedly highlight termites as a major conservation problem. Recent surveys found severe termite damage across the historic fabric. In Itchan Qala proper, several private residences and outbuildings became infested; in Dishan Qala (the adjacent outer town), entire mahallas (neighborhoods) of houses were affected[20][21]. In 2013, the Mevaston and Yangi Turmush districts of Dishan Qala (outside the fortification walls) were declared structurally unsound from termite rot and were demolished, with residents relocated[21]. Within Itchan Qala, at least dozens of wooden roofs and beams have been eaten away. A 2020 UNESCO report states: "Termites remain a major threat … causing irreversible damage to several houses in Itchan Kala," ultimately leading to demolition[20]. A follow-up report (2024) confirms termite "infestations remain a major threat to the stability of structures" – even the Tash Khauli Palace and Juma Mosque had suffered damage[22]. In affected houses, walls have bulged and ceilings collapsed as key timbers lost strength. Conservation responses in Khiva have focused on both remediation and prevention. Damaged wooden members are removed and replaced, often using the same design but with pre-treated, termite-resistant timber[23]. Many condemned residences have been carefully dismantled and rebuilt in authentic style for continued use[23]. Crucially, preservation efforts now include integrated pest management: authorities are surveying termite populations, installing moisture barriers under foundations, and drafting guidelines that mandate chemical pretreatment of all new and repaired wood[7][24]. For example, drainage and ventilation systems have been added beneath key monuments to keep wood "away from salt and moisture that attracts termites"[7]. The Khorezm Heritage Department has also limited new wood-based constructions and promotes periodic fumigation or bait stations. These measures are beginning to slow the trend of loss, but experts warn that any lapse (e.g. broken pipe leak or flood) can trigger renewed infestation.

Comparative International Examples

Angkor Wat (Cambodia) and Southeast Asia. The Angkor archaeological park is composed mainly of sandstone temples, but extensive wooden supports (temporary scaffolds, staircases, perimeter palisades) and tropical vegetation surround the site. Cambodian conservation authorities report that termites "have damaged areas around the temples," including wooden shoring, stairs, and sheds[14]. During the rainy season, termite burrows fill with water, undermining temple foundations and causing rock fall[14]. In some cases termites have even gnawed on trees within temple precincts, leading to toppled branches that damage stonework. To combat this, the local Apsara Authority mandates regular termite control: woodworks are painted or treated, infested fences are removed, and areas with high termite activity are sprayed with insecticide[25]. These Asian examples mirror Khiva's situation: saturated soils plus porous materials lead to termite ingress, so drainage and wood management are key. More broadly, a 2025 study of world heritage sites notes that tropical monsoon climates (e.g. Angkor Wat) inherently "trigger… termite activity, which may damage structures from within"[15]. Hoi An (Vietnam). A prominent Southeast Asian example is the ancient town of Hội An (UNESCO site), where nearly one-third of heritage buildings were found to have termite problems[13]. Annual flooding and humid heat make Hội An exceptionally prone: locals report termite outbreaks following monsoon floods, with galleries in major pillars and beams[6][17]. The wood-dominated architecture (shop-houses, communal halls) offers termites abundant fuel[26]. Conservationists there emphasize constant monitoring and community action: equipment to trace and poison termites has been installed at many relics, and termite prevention is included in all restoration projects[27][28]. Fatehpur Sikri (India). The Mughal-era city of Fatehpur Sikri (Uttar Pradesh) is largely built of red sandstone, but it contains significant wood (doors, lintels, carved screens) in mosques and palaces. While we found no published survey specific to termites at Fatehpur Sikri, India's climate and heritage context suggest vulnerability. Subtropical northern India hosts many subterranean termite species (e.g. Odontotermes, Heterotermes), and wood carvings on monuments (e.g. Humayun's Tomb, Agra Fort) often require pesticide treatment. In general, conservation texts warn that "many historical buildings… are at risk of termite attack"[3]. Thus, as in Khiva, Fatehpur Sikri's wooden elements (ancient lattice screens, shrine coverings) would benefit from preventative measures: use of treated or naturally resistant timber, avoidance of ground contact, and regular inspection.[3][11]. Luxor (Egypt). The vast Theban necropolis (Luxor and Karnak temples, Valley of the Kings) is mostly stone, but recent news highlights that even dry areas can face termite episodes. In 2018, Egyptian media reported an emergency: subterranean termites were "causing big damage" in villages south of Luxor, consuming wood so aggressively that many adobe houses nearly collapsed[16]. Although these were non-monumental homes, the incident underlines a point: termites present in a region will attack any accessible wood. In Luxor, this means temple wooden elements (roof beams, doors) and modern wooden infrastructure must be protected. The example also shows that termite outbreaks can be sudden and severe when environmental conditions (perhaps irrigation runoff or unusually high humidity) align. Heritage managers in Egypt have therefore begun to integrate termite monitoring into site maintenance, especially for earthen or wood-reinforced structures adjacent to the Nile floodplain[16].

The table below summarizes the key comparisons:

Heritage Site	Materials/Architecture	Termite Threat & Impact	Mitigation
Itchan Qala (Khiva, UZ)	Mudbrick buildings with wooden beams/doors	Severe – dozens of wooden houses and mosques' beams ravaged[20][23]	Houses demolished/rebuilt; wooden elements now pretreated; moisture control under foundations[7][24]
Angkor Wat (Cambodia)	Sandstone temples, wooden scaffolds and outbuildings	Significant – subterranean galleries and wood supports eaten; holes under structures causing collapses[14]	Regular wood treatment and pesticide spraying; improved drainage; limiting wooden scaffolds[25]
Hội An (Vietnam)	Traditional timber houses/temples, high humidity	Very high – ~265 of 800 relics termite-infested[13]; beams and pillars decayed rapidly	Community termite-control programs; elevation of wooden parts; constant restoration and fumigation[27]
Fatehpur Sikri (India)	Red sandstone monuments with wooden doors/lintels	Potential – warm climate and historical use of wood imply risk[3] (no specific survey found)	Use termite-resistant wood, break wood-soil contact, routine inspections[3][11]
Luxor Province (Egypt)	Ancient stone temples, local mud-brick/wood buildings	Moderate – local termite outbreak destroyed modern wood houses[16] (temples not stone-bored, but adjacent buildings at risk)	Public awareness; termite monitoring near Nile; preservation of wooden temple elements[16]

Table 1: Comparison of termite infestation risks and responses at selected cultural heritage sites.

Damage Patterns and Environmental Factors

Analyses across case studies reveal common patterns. Termites typically attack wood where it contacts soil or retains moisture[11][4]. In Khiva and Hội An, damaged structural timbers were often ground-floor beams or columns that soaked up rain or rising groundwater. At Angkor, termite burrows under the temple caused secondary collapse of stone blocks when rains percolated into the cavities[14]. Environmental factors strongly influence damage: flooding, high humidity and warm temperature extend termite active periods and reproduction (studies note termites forage 200–300 days/year in warm zones)[29][4]. Conversely, dry or cold seasons slow activity. Vegetation and forests adjacent to sites also matter: forest edges harbor termite colonies that can invade man-made structures[30]. Experts emphasize that because termite damage accumulates invisibly, buildings without apparent recent damage may already be compromised internally. Sophisticated assessments (e.g. canine detection or acoustical surveys) often reveal hidden galleries before visible collapse. When wooden components finally break or sag, it signals advanced infestation. At Itchan Qala, irreparable damage to elaborate carvings and beam sockets indicates that even restored houses can only preserve “original form” if termite exposure is halted[23][20].

Mitigation and Conservation Strategies

Conserving termite-threatened heritage demands integrated pest management combining architecture, materials, and monitoring. Key strategies include: Moisture control: Preventing wood from becoming damp is critical. In Khiva, conservation teams installed ventilation and drainage under foundations to “keep buildings away from salt and moisture that attracts termites”[7]. Similarly, ensuring sound roofs and gutters, and repairing leaks, removes termite attractants. Physical barriers and design: As the Korean heritage study showed, breaking ground contact is highly effective[11]. Elevating wood on stone or brick plinths, or providing air gaps between soil and lower beams, dramatically reduces infestation. Historic restoration can incorporate stone footers or concrete slabs to isolate timbers. Termite-resistant materials: New and replacement timbers should be naturally durable species (e.g. teak, cedar) or treated with borates/fumigants[24]. UNESCO reports now mandate “termite-resistant timbers… and chemical treatments” for Itchan Qala restorations[24]. Replastering adobe with insecticide-laced mud or covering wood with protective cladding are also used. Chemical and biological control: Where feasible, baiting systems (hexaflumuron or imidacloprid baits) allow colony-wide elimination without pervasive poisoning. The famous Sentricon system, used even on the Statue of Liberty[10], exemplifies how targeted baits can collapse colonies. Pyrethroid or chlorpyrifos barriers in soil have been used beneath museum display floors, though such methods must avoid groundwater contamination in historic sites[9]. Some sites utilize nematode or fungal biological agents under trial. Monitoring and community action: Regular inspections by trained conservators (or even termite-detection dogs) are essential to catch infestations early[12]. Awareness programs educate residents and staff; e.g., Angkor’s authorities train guides to spot termite “swarmers” and damaged wood. Local pesticide applications (creosote, lime-soaked rags) around vulnerable spots can deter reinvasion. Planning and policy: Conservation plans increasingly include termite guidelines. The 2018 ICOMOS mission for Khiva recommended a detailed termite survey and national standards for pest management in heritage works[21][31]. Urban planning (buffer zones, regulated irrigation) also plays a role: in Luxor province, avoiding new sewage leaks or landscape plantings too close to temples can reduce termite reservoirs. In summary, no single solution suffices. Successful termite mitigation at heritage sites is multi-layered: environmental management, material science, and vigilant maintenance must be coordinated. The losses at Itchan Qala underline that severe termite damage cannot be reversed; however, with sustained conservation effort (as begun in Khiva and elsewhere), further destruction can be halted and future stability ensured.

Conclusion

Xylophagous insects, especially termites, pose a global threat to wooden cultural heritage. Historic monuments with timber – whether in Central Asia’s adobe cities, Southeast Asia’s shrines, South Asia’s palaces, or even Egypt’s temples – face significant risk if preventative measures lapse. The case of Itchan Qala demonstrates how pervasive termite damage can become when climatic and infrastructural factors align. International comparisons (Angkor, Hoi An, etc.) show similar dynamics: humidity, wood contact with soil, and neglected maintenance invite colony attack. Conversely, these cases also illustrate effective countermeasures: building design that minimizes wood-soil interface, rigorous drying of structures, use of treated materials, and integrated pest monitoring. Moving forward, conservation of wooden heritage will depend on treating termites as an ever-present "natural threat"[19] – one that must be managed with both traditional craft and modern science.

References:

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