

The ancient cities of Kazakhstan

For a long time, major historical and cultural regions of rural life, and in the Middle Ages – urban life existed in Kazakhstan. Some of these were in South Kazakhstan and Semirechye. Southern Kazakhstan or the Syr Darya geographical district was the main center of urban culture in the region.

Sogdian colonization most influenced the development of Semirechye agriculture. Under the influence of the Sogdians, towns became craft, trade and agriculture centers. Closely interwoven with autochthonous traditions, residential architecture, terracotta, ceramic kits, inscribed pottery, coins and funerary structures and burial rites developed. Dzhamukat, Bundzhikat cities arose as a result of cultural integration processes.

Along with the Sogdian traditions in Semirechye, in Southern Kazakhstan and Maverannakhr Turkic cultural influence spread, as is evidenced in archaeological materials, including massive finds containing metal utensils and weapons, and items with runic inscriptions. As a result, in the VI, to the first half of the IX century in Semirechye and Central Asia, a synthesis took place, which could be called Turkic-Sogdian. The most striking manifestation of this integration was observed in the culture of medieval towns.

Archaeological research in Southern Kazakhstan found 25 sites with layers from the VI-IX centuries, which were the ruins of the cities. The names of some of them are known –Isfidzhab, Sharab, Buduhket and Otrar (Farab), Shavgar. Another 25 sites were found in Semirechye (the Chui and Talas valleys). These were identified with the chronicle of Taraz, Kulan, Atlahom, Dzhamukat and Merke. South Kazakhstan cities usually consisted of three sections: the Ark (citadel), the shakhristan (inner city) and the rabad (artisan suburb). The topography of Semirechye settlements was a bit different: they have determined a central section, consisting of citadel and shakhristan and suburban areas, surrounded by a long wall. So, shakhristan of the fort of Kok-Mardan in the Otrar oasis basin in the VI to the first half of the VII century was built in blocks, which was typical of a feudal city with its people organized according to groups connected along family lines, common professions and religion. In the city citadel, usually housed the palaces of the rulers, with interiors decorated with paintings and items of clay and carved wood.

The cities were centers of crafts and commerce. In addition to international trade, the development of local international trade, trade with the nomads also took place.

Coins for use in international and regional commerce trade are an indication of the development of trade. Different religions spread in urban areas. The Arab conquest had a strong impact on the life of Kazakhstan and Central Asia and although neither the south of Kazakhstan, nor Semirechye had gone under the power of the Arabs, the consequences of conquest affected urban culture. Linked by close economic and cultural ties with Central Asia, it experienced a strong influence from Muslim culture. The number of cities rose rapidly. Thus, in the foothills of Talas Alatau, the cities of Dzhumishlagu and Mankent appeared, District Kendzhide with its center in Usbaniket was formed in the Middle Arys, whereas in the Otrar oasis – the cities of Keder, Vesidzh and Boorook, in Shavgar – Ash, Shagildzhan, Karnak, Karachuk, Sauran and in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya – Sygnak, Jenda, Asanas, Barchkent, on the northern slopes – Balazh and Beruket, in the Talas Valley – Dzhikil, Baloo, Sheldzhi, Tekabket, Kul, Sus, Kendzhek, in the Chu Valley – Balasagun, and in the northeastern Semirechye – Tahir, Laban, Ikioguz and Kayalyk.

In the same period, sedentary and urban life is distributed in Central Kazakhstan. Towns and villages started to locate in the valleys Dzhezdy, Kengir, Sarysu, in the Ulutau foothills. Cities also appeared in Eastern Kazakhstan, in the Irtysh valley. Written sources indicate these cities belonged to kimaks. The largest was Imakia – the summer residence of the king (Hakan). Apart from the capital, other cities were known, such as Damour, Saraus, Bendzhar, Dahlan and Astur. Towns rose in western Kazakhstan, in the valleys of Uil. They belonged to the Turkic-Oguz. Mosques became a new feature of the building of cities. Public baths also became characteristic of cities constructed in Southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye, as well as other cities in the East. Two of these were discovered in the rabad of Otrar and two in the shakhristan of Taraz. Trade reached its peak at this time. International trade along the Silk Road is understood from the writings of medieval authors. Excavations produced findings that included imported items such as artware and coins. Isfidzhab, Keder, Otrar, Taraz, Navaket, Balasagun remained large centers of commerce. Cities of the northeast of Semirechye, such as Kayalyk and Iki-Oguz were added. In Isfidzhab there were covered markets and linens markets, caravanserais. Some of the caravanserais were populated by merchants from Samarkand and Nahsheb and the merchants of Isfidzhab traveled with goods to Baghdad. Trade between the cities, the country and the steppe grew. Some of the goods that entered Kazakh towns from the steppes were goat skins and furs. An active growth in commodity-currency commerce appeared, thereby overshadowing barter relations. Mins started to operate in Isfidzhab, Otrar, Taraz and Yassi.

Today, ancient cities and architectural monuments of Kazakhstan are not only places of pilgrimage for the faithful from different countries, but are also tourist attractions; most frequently visited by foreign travelers. Many of these that were set up in the steppe along the Silk Road have only left ruins behind. Only scattered monuments of that distant era have survived. Some of these are located near modern Taraz.

The first information on Taraz is dated to the year 568. It reached its heyday in the XI-XII centuries as the capital of the Karakhanids. The Karakhan Mausoleum belongs to this period, which was built over the grave of one of the dynastic rulers. It is built with a brick portal-dome construction, inside of which, a stepped gravestone has survived. A second small mausoleum is the Sha-Mansur, which was built at the burial site of one of the Mongol khan governors, who was murdered in 1262, as evidenced by an inscription preserved on a stone slab inside the mausoleum.

Of particular interest to researchers and tourists are two monuments, located near Taraz and included onto the UNESCO list of rare world architecture sites. The first is the Babaji Khatun Mausoleum, which was built in the XI century and has a very rare hip dome design. Second is the Aisha-Bibi Mausoleum, which was constructed in the XII century. Its façade is entirely covered with carved terracotta with rich ornamental tiles with varied patterns, as well as cornices, glazed tiles and stylish signatures. Capitals and columns created from terracotta pieces, as well as the entire wall are covered with subtle patterns representing the richest collection of Oriental ornamental design.

In October 2000, under the auspices of UNESCO, another city in South Kazakhstan –Turkestan widely celebrated its 1500th anniversary. The history of this city was known up to the XVI century as the city of Yassi and it is also inextricably linked with the development of ethno-cultural contacts in Central Asia, with the processes of Islamization of the Turkic-speaking people and the formation of the first capitals of the Kazakh Khanate. With great importance as a monument of ancient city planning, Turkestan is currently a site of pilgrimage for people from all over the world coming to visit the Mausoleum of Khaji Ahmad Yassawi, which is an unsurpassed masterpiece of medieval architecture. The small mausoleum where Yassawi was buried in 1167 subsequently became an object of mass pilgrimage and worship for Muslims. Triple visit to it was equated with the hajj to Mecca. The present mausoleum built over the grave of this great Sufi was erected 233 years after his death by the order of emir Timur. It is a huge longitudinal axial portal-dome construction. In its main hall, which is named

Kazanlyk – is a huge cauldron, which a symbol of unity and hospitality for the Turks. The cauldron is made of a seven metal alloy. Its diameter is 2.45 m and it weighs 2 tons. Kazanlyk is blocked by a brick dome with a diameter of 18.2 meters – the largest surviving in Central Asia. The walls of the mausoleum are built of baked bricks, with manufacturing technology that was perfected at the time. The northern portal stands out with its amazing beauty as well as its carved bone inlaid door to the vault.

Near the confluence of the Arys into the Syr Darya, lie to the ruins of a city, which memory has survived for the centuries. Its name has remained until now – it is the city of Otrar. This city is widely famous as the birthplace of the great Middle Ages thinker, Abu Nasir al-Farabi. Otrar (Farab) was the capital of the Otrar-Farabi district in the Middle Ages. Now it is part of Otrar district of South Kazakhstan region.

The ruins of Otrar since ancient times have attracted rumors of the treasure of ancient kings, piles of gold coins and jewelry buried underground. The first excavations were conducted here back in 1904. After a long break in the 40s an expedition led by A.N.Bernshtam investigated Otrar. In 1969, a special archaeological expedition was led by K.A.Akishev. since then, the Otrartobe fort became one of the main objects of study for Kazakh archaeologists. The city is dating from the first centuries AD to the XVIII century. It is the remains of the famous medieval town Otrar, which is mentioned in almost all geographical and historical writings on the medieval towns of Semirechye and Isfidzhab. The settlement plan is typical for most medieval monuments in Kazakhstan and Central Asia and includes the citadel and the shakhristan, surrounded by a wall, which has retained its 70-80 degree steepness. There were towers on the wall. Behind the wall there is a visible 10-15 meter wide ditch. The city had three entrances. The central street connected the southern entrance with the northern one. The hill occupied by the citadel and shakhristans adjoins the 150 hectare rabad fenced area.

Excavations of Otrar's layers of the VII-VIII centuries indicate it was already an established town. They found the remains of building structures made of adobe bricks and a collection of tableware characterized by narrow-necked jars, lamps with pole shaped legs and samples of the local coinage. The city at the time occupied a territory of 200 hectares. Otrar was built close together with houses, grouped into blocks and neighborhoods. During the excavations at Otrar, the remains of two baths were found, which were located in the rabad. Archaeologists got a large collection of pottery from the IX-XII centuries, remains of pottery kilns and a collection of glass and jewelry. There are reports the city had one of the

largest libraries in the region. The flourishing city was interrupted by the Mongol invasion, but by the middle of the XIII century, Otrar again became a major trade center. The city had a mint, which produced coinage, which was put into circulation throughout Central Asia. In the XVI-XVII centuries, Otrar population was 5-7 thousand. It can be concluded from the description of the history of the conquest of Sygnak, that Sygnak at the beginning of the XIII century was a large and well-fortified city. The residents of Sygnak refused to surrender the city without a fight and gave the Mongolians a persistent and stubborn resistance. After a seven-day siege, the Sygnak people were forced to surrender. Jochi, who headed the army during the city's capture, severely punished the inhabitants for the resistance. Most of the population of Sygnak was killed and the city was destroyed and burnt.

The first news about it after the Mongol destruction is from the Armenian king Hetum. He passed through Sygnak in 1254. Sygnak revival began in the XIV century in connection with the growth of Ak-Orda district. Khan Erzen played a major role in elevating city life and the construction of buildings in the cities of Ak-Orda. During the time of Urus Khan, Sygnak became the capital of Ak-Orda. The first known coins of Urus Khan with the date 728 (about 1327-1328) were also made in Sygnak. Sygnak of the XIV century – is a commerce center, fort and the capital, which was built and decorated in various ways.

The most detailed information on Sygnak came from the XVI century. The essay titled “Mihman nameyi Bukhara” of ibn Ruzbihan has some interesting information about the city. The city is regarded as the most distant city in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya. Ibn Ruzbihan called the city “Bandari Dasht-i-Kipchak”, meaning a “harbor” of the Kipchak steppe. With credible sources, he says, 500 head of camels were driven daily in the markets of Sygnak, which were sold during the day. Stressing that cultural grounds were in a narrow strip, he said they were irrigated via canals, derived from the Syr Darya. The same author mentioned that the Uzbek khans of Shaybani clan had arranged a family cemetery for themselves in Sygnak. Back in the early twentieth century, in the valleys of the Syr Darya, mausoleums could be seen along with shrines built by the descendants of the Ak-Orda khans. 40 kilometers north of Turkestan, you can see the walls of the largest city in Kazakhstan. It is Sauran – the pearl – city on the Silk Road. The first reports of Sauran appeared in the X century from the Arabic historian Istakhri. For many years Russian merchants and envoys wrote about it. The city was surrounded by seven walls, inside of which, a rabad – a central part of the city, inhabited by citizens was located.

Sauran is considered as a fortress city, which always was a tasty morsel for Central Asian rulers and Kazakh khans. Shaybani Khan's rule was the golden age of Sauran. A beautiful medrese was built at this time, all travelers visiting the city were writing about it enthusiastically. Unfortunately, this structure has not survived until now. Shaybani Khan built a mosque in Sauran with swaying minarets. Its remains were discovered in the second half of the XIX century by the first explorers to the city.

Sauran was the largest city in Kazakhstan. Archaeologists have determined the city had its own center for ceramic production. Interestingly, there was no river near Sauran. The city was supplied with water through a system of underground conduits and kiryazes, more than 7 kilometers long. Water filled a moat surrounding the castle walls. In 2004-2005 as a result of excavations at the ancient Sauran site, archaeologists found the remains of two mosques and the city center – regestan. Besides, ceramic fragments and many carved bricks were uncovered. Archaeological studies on the site of the ancient settlement of Sauran began more than a hundred years ago. However, this city is still of a special interest for researchers in Kazakhstan. Sauran is a unique monument of the Middle Ages in Kazakhstan. Experts believe that now, the most important thing is to preserve the ancient city and create an open-air museum at the site.