

Herding, farming and urban life

Nomadic and semi-nomadic herding was the principal economic activity of the Kazakhs. The animals reared were mainly sheep, horses, camels and cattle. The meat and milk of sheep served as food, and their skins and wool were used in making clothes, footwear, vessels and many other objects of daily use. Horse-breeding was no less important. Haydar Dughlat aptly quotes the Kazakh khan Qasim's words: 'We are men of the desert, and here there is nothing in the way of riches or formalities. Our most costly possessions are our horses, our favourite food their flesh, our most enjoyable drink their milk and the products of it.' [1] Kazakh pastoralists often moved seasonally with their herds of animals from one location to another to make the best use of available pastures. Wheeled transport was widely used, though horseback was the normal mode of travel [2].

Because fodder was not usually put by for the winter, there were mass deaths of animals (known as zhuts) if deep snow covered the steppes for too long or there was a prolonged drought. Nomadic life was thus even more subject to natural disasters than settled life. In addition to stock-breeding the Kazakhs were also involved in farming and enjoyed a settled mode of life; others lived in towns. From the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century, life in the Syr Darya region and Semirechye became largely sedentary. The development of towns and settlements, and of agriculture itself, was greatly supported by exchanges with nomads and semi-nomads.

The town of Sighnak retained its importance as the major economic and political centre of the eastern Dasht-i Qipchaq. The town finally came under the permanent authority of the Kazakh khans in 1598. Nomadic stock-breeders came to Sighnak, driving their beasts before them ('fat sheep, horses and camels', in the words of the author of the *Mihman-nama-i Bukhara*) and delivering the produce of animal husbandry (meat, skins, hides, wool and woollen goods) and furs. Such valuable goods as 'fur coats of... sable and squirrel, taut bows, arrows of white birch, silk cloth and other costly wares' were also brought to Sighnak to be sold [3].

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the city of Turkestan became the most important centre of southern Kazakhstan. Ibn Ruzbihan calls Yasi 'the capital of the rulers of Turkistan'. Written sources contain references to many settlements around Yasi (modern Turkestan) that together formed a large farming oasis, especially the settlements of Iqan, Qarnaq, Qarachuq and Suri [4]. Ishim Khan made Turkestan his capital, a place at which much of the cultural and political life of the entire Syr Darya strip was centred. The Kazakh khans, like the previous rulers of West Turkistan, also attempted to maintain the role of the city as a centre of Islamic learning and rites.

Sauran retained its importance as an urban centre. It was one of the strongest fortresses of the region. To quote Ibn Ruzbihan again, 'the town is surrounded by a high wall, which cannot be rapidly taken by armed force, and around it there is an unassailable moat.' [5] Like other towns in southern Kazakhstan, Sauran was the centre of a farming district from which it obtained its food supplies; apart from being a grain exporter, it was reputed around 1520 for its 'incalculable wealth' and 'the comforts of the vilayet' [6].

During the final third of the fifteenth century and early in the sixteenth century, Otrar remained one of the region's major administrative centres. Artefacts unearthed during excavations at Otrar in recent years point to the prosperity of the town and the surrounding farming district in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [7].

In the late Middle Ages Sayram was at the heart of a densely populated agricultural district at the junction of the trade routes from Transoxania to the Dasht-i Qipchaq and Semirechye. There are

references in our texts to other towns in the Syr Darya region that were also surrounded by farming districts, such as Suzaq, Arquq, Uzgend and Aq-Kurgan.

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References:

1. Haydar Dughlat, 1898, p. 276
2. Fazlullah b. Ruzbihan Isfahani, 1962, pp. 140–4; Russian tr., 1976, p. 94. This work describes Shaybani Khan's campaign against the Kazakhs in 1508–9. See also Sayfi's statement (1580) that the Kazakhs had their dwelling on carts (Barthold, 1956, p. 159)
3. Fazlullah b. Ruzbihan Isfahani, 1962, pp. 199–201; Russian tr., 1976, p. 117
4. MIKKh, 1968, pp. 269, 283; Pishulina, 1969, p. 19; Fazlullah b. Ruzbihan Isfahani, 1962, p. 256
5. MIKKh, 1968, pp. 78–81, 116; Fazlullah b. Ruzbihan Isfahani, 1962, p. 253
6. Vasifi, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 341–3; Persian ed., 1970, Vol. 2, pp. 267–9
7. Akishev et al., 1972