

The Main Stages Of Khorezmian Cultural Development In The 14th–15th Centuries: A Historical And Archaeological Perspective

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Abstract: The 14th and 15th centuries mark a pivotal transitional period in the history of the Khorezm oasis, characterized by profound geopolitical shifts, the decline of the Golden Horde, and the eventual integration of the region into the centralized empire of Amir Temur (Tamerlane). Historically, the specific cultural and urban dynamics of Khorezm during the Temurid era have remained under-researched, often overshadowed by macro-historical political narratives.

This article aims to elucidate the primary stages of cultural, economic, and urban development in Khorezm during the 14th and 15th centuries, specifically analyzing the transition from the semi-independent Kungrad Sufi dynasty to Temurid administrative control. The findings demonstrate that despite the military campaigns of Amir Temur between 1372 and 1388, the urbanization and cultural development of Khorezm did not cease. While the political hegemony shifted, archaeological and numismatic evidence reveals robust urban continuity in cities such as Khiva, Hazorasp, Vazir, and Adak. The period witnessed significant developments in irrigation networks (the Uzboy and Sarykamysh basins) and a reorientation of transcontinental trade routes.

Keywords: Khorezm Culture, Amir Temur, Temurid Empire, Golden Horde, Kungrad Sufis, Numismatics, Medieval Urbanization, IMRaD, Central Asian History.

Introduction: The cultural and political history of the Khorezm oasis during the 14th and 15th centuries unfolded against a backdrop of intense internal and external geopolitical turbulence. For decades, the specific historical trajectory of Khorezmian culture during the reign of Amir Temur and the subsequent Temurid dynasty remained on the periphery of specialized historical inquiry. In the broader historiography of Central Asia, peripheral regions and distinct ethno-cultural zones within the centralized Temurid state were frequently marginalized in favor of Movarounnahr (Transoxiana) and its capital, Samarkand. Consequently, the nuanced processes of cultural continuity, urbanization, and economic adaptation in Khorezm during this epoch require a profound and objective re-examination.

To fully comprehend the policies of Amir Temur and the Temurids in Khorezm, it is imperative to contextualize the preceding historical landscape. Following the

devastating campaigns of Genghis Khan (1219–1221), the sovereign state of Khorezm was forcibly bifurcated. According to the Yassa (the Mongol code of law), the southern territories (including Khiva and Kat) were allocated to the Chagatai Ulus, while the north-western sector was incorporated into the Jochid Ulus (the Golden Horde). Notably, the capital city of Gurganj was partially administered by Chagatai representatives, creating a complex dual-jurisdiction. This fragmentation planted the seeds of enduring jurisdictional conflicts, which subsequently erupted between Amir Temur and the semi-independent Kungrad Sufi dynasty that emerged in Khorezm [12].

By the 1360s, the Jochid Ulus experienced severe political fragmentation—a period of intense internecine strife commonly referred to as the "Great Troubles." This crisis was exacerbated by the enigmatic deaths of Khan Jani Beg (1357) and Berdi Beg (1359). As the Golden Horde's centralized authority weakened,

local aristocracies sought autonomy. In Khorezm, the Kungrad Sufi dynasty capitalized on this power vacuum, emerging as a formidable semi-independent political entity. It was during this pivotal juncture that the minting of coins bearing the names of Golden Horde khans ceased in Khorezm, replaced by the issuance of anonymous coinage—a definitive marker of nascent statehood and political defiance [1, 13].

This study aims to bridge the historiographical gap by systematically analyzing the cultural and developmental stages of Khorezm across these two centuries. The research focuses on the hypothesis that the inclusion of Khorezm into the Timurid Empire was not merely an act of military subjugation, but a complex integration process that ultimately facilitated a new era of urban and economic development in the region.

Materials And Methods

To achieve a comprehensive reconstruction of Khorezmian cultural development in the 14th and 15th centuries, this study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, synthesizing historiographical textual criticism, numismatics, and archaeological stratigraphy.

Textual and Historiographical Analysis

The primary historical narratives are drawn from contemporaneous Persian and Arabic chronicles. A critical comparative analysis was conducted on Nizomiddin Shomi's and Sharafuddin Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnoma* (Book of Victories) to trace the diplomatic and military interactions between Amir Timur and the Kungrad Sufis [8, 14]. These official court chronicles were cross-referenced with accounts from Arab travelers and scholars, such as Ibn Battuta, Shihab al-Din Fadlallah al-Umari, and Ibn Arabshah, who provided socio-economic descriptions of Khorezmian cities [11]. Furthermore, European diplomatic and travel records—including those of Plano Carpini, Marco Polo, André de Longjumeau, and Giovanni de' Marignolli—were utilized to assess the international perception of Khorezm (often referred to as *Organso* or *Urganich*) within the global trade network [5, 10].

Numismatic Methodology

Numismatic evidence constitutes a core metric for assessing political sovereignty and economic transition. The study evaluates the chronological sequence of coin minting in Gurganj. Data regarding the transition from imperial Golden Horde coinage (the last being minted under Khizr Khan in 1361) to the anonymous coins of the 1360s and 1370s were analyzed. The theoretical debate between prominent Soviet numismatists—M.E. Masson [6], G.A. Fedorov-Davydov [12, 13], and B.I. Vaynberg [1, 2] on one side, and S.A. Yanina [15] on the

other—regarding the degree of political independence reflected in these coins is critically evaluated to establish the political status of the Kungrad Sufis.

Archaeological and Topographical Data

The physical manifestation of cultural development is assessed through archaeological data obtained from the Khorezmian oasis. The study relies on the extensive mid-to-late 20th-century field research conducted by the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (led by S.P. Tolstov) [11] and the irrigation history studies by Y.G. Gulyamov [3]. Topographical data from North-Western Khorezm (the Ustyurt plateau, Sarykamysh, and Uzboy regions)—specifically the urban sites of Vazir (Devkesgan), Adak (Oqqal'a), and Shemakha-qala—are analyzed to determine the continuity of urbanization and defensive architecture during the Timurid epoch [2, 4].

Results

The analysis reveals that the cultural development of Khorezm in the 14th and 15th centuries occurred in two distinct yet interconnected phases: the early 14th-century renaissance under the Golden Horde (culminating in the Sufi dynasty's autonomy), and the subsequent Timurid integration.

Numismatic Evidence and the Rise of the Kungrad Sufis

The political detachment of Khorezm from the Golden Horde is distinctly recorded in its numismatic history. Following the reign of Qutlugh Timur (1312–1336) a powerful representative of Uzbek Khan in Khorezm the region lacked strong centralized governance. Exploiting the dynastic chaos in the Golden Horde, local aristocrats, merchants, and religious leaders elevated the Kungrad Sufis to power [4].

Numismatic analysis reveals that in the 1360s and 1370s, new types of anonymous coins were minted in Khorezm. Rather than bearing the names of contemporary Khans, these coins featured the names of the *Khulafa al-Rashidun* (the first four "Righteously Guided" Caliphs of Islam) alongside the inscription: "Kingship belongs to God." The earliest iterations of these coins date to 762 AH (1360–1361 CE) and 772 AH (1370–1371 CE). According to M.E. Masson, G.A. Fedorov-Davydov, and B.I. Vaynberg, this numismatic shift unequivocally signifies the rise of the Kungrad Sufis as semi-independent sovereign rulers, marking the first major stage of Khorezm's 14th-century cultural localization [1, 6, 12]. Although Toxtamish later attempted to assert influence by minting coins in his name in Khorezm in 1380 to incite rebellion against Amir Timur, the Sufi administrative apparatus had already established a distinct local political culture.

Geopolitical Realignments: Amir Temur's Campaigns

Simultaneously, the 1360s witnessed intense power struggles in Chagatai-ruled Movarounnahr, culminating in Amir Temur assuming absolute power in 1370. The provocative actions of the Kungrad Sufis directly challenged this new order. In 1367 (768 AH), Husayn Sufi seized the cities of Kat and Khiva—territories legally belonging to the Chagatai Ulus.

Historical chronicles demonstrate that Amir Temur initially pursued diplomatic integration. According to Nizomiddin Shomi, Temur dispatched an embassy led by Alafa Tovachi in March 1371, carrying a letter advocating friendship and unity. Husayn Sufi rejected this, declaring: "I conquered this province (Southern Khorezm) with the sword, and it can only be taken away by the sword" [7]. Sharafuddin Ali Yazdi corroborates this in the *Zafarnoma*, noting Temur's demand for the return of Chagatai lands to maintain peaceful relations [14]. The situation escalated drastically when Husayn Sufi imprisoned a subsequent envoy, Shaykh al-Islam Jamal al-Din Keshi. In medieval diplomacy, the imprisonment of an envoy was a fundamental *casus belli*.

Consequently, Amir Temur launched five military campaigns into Khorezm between 1372 and 1388. During the first campaign (July 1372), Temur captured Kat and besieged Gurganj. Husayn Sufi's death led to a temporary truce initiated by his successor, Yusuf Sufi. However, Yusuf's subsequent violation of the treaty prompted a second campaign in early 1373, which was halted near Bukhara after a heavy silver indemnity was paid by the Khorezmian amir Hasan Surij, sparing the populace [14]. While the prolonged conflict ultimately resulted in the dissolution of the Sufi dynasty and the deportation of scholars and artisans to Samarkand in 1388, the results show that the southern territories of Khorezm sustained minimal infrastructural damage during the initial subjugation.

Urbanization and Material Culture in the Temurid Era

The second, and arguably most crucial stage of Khorezmian cultural development spans from the 1370s to the end of the 15th century. Archaeological topography indicates substantial urban vitality in the north-western sectors of Khorezm. During the Mongol invasions, the diversion of the Amu Darya's waters through the Daryalyk and Uzboy channels toward the Caspian Sea facilitated the development of extensive irrigation networks in this sub-region [3].

European sources (such as Plano Carpini) and Arab chroniclers (Ibn Battuta) had earlier described Urganch as a magnificent city with wide streets, expansive markets, hospitals, and monumental architecture [8, 10]. Crucially, archaeological excavations confirm that

this architectural and urban momentum persisted under the Temurids. Settlements such as Vazir (Devkesgan), Adak (Oqqal'a), Shemakha-qala, and the Butantau environs functioned as thriving urban centers [11]. These cities were integral to transcontinental trade routes linking Khorezm with Khorasan and Eastern Europe.

Discussion

The findings of this study invite a critical re-evaluation of several historiographical paradigms regarding Khorezm in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Firstly, the debate surrounding the political status of the Kungrad Sufis warrants attention. While S.A. Yanina [15] argued against categorizing the Sufis as a semi-independent entity, the overwhelming numismatic evidence compiled by Masson and Fedorov-Davydov [6, 13]—specifically the minting of anonymous Islamic coinage—strongly supports the thesis that Khorezm was experiencing a profound cultural and political localization. This local autonomy was the critical prerequisite for the cultural renaissance that occurred prior to Temur's hegemony, evidenced by the construction of significant architectural monuments by figures like Qutlugh Timur and Turabek Khanum.

Secondly, the narrative surrounding Amir Temur's relationship with Khorezm is often monopolized by the destruction of Gurganj in 1388. However, the macro-historical results demonstrate that the integration of Khorezm into the centralized Temurid state did not halt cultural evolution; rather, it catalyzed a systemic reorientation. As noted by eminent archaeologist Y.G. Gulyamov: "The irrigated lands of Southern Khorezm and cities like Khiva, Hazorasp, Khanka, and Kat continued to exist during the Golden Horde and Temurid periods... representing the general economic and cultural rise of Khorezm at that time" [3]. The preservation and architectural enhancement of these southern cities underline a pragmatic Temurid policy that favored economic continuity over absolute desolation.

Furthermore, the geopolitical and environmental shifts played a massive role in urban relocation. The shifting course of the Amu Darya (as noted by Hamdallah Mustawfi Qazwini and later Abu al-Ghazi Bahadur Khan) created highly fertile, habitable zones west of Urganch during the Temurid period. The fortress-cities constructed on the Ustyurt plateau (Shemakha-qala, Adak, Vazir) in the 15th and 16th centuries were characterized by classic medieval Khorezmian defensive architecture: crenellated walls, observation towers (*burjs*), and embrasures [11]. These were not merely military outposts but thriving commercial hubs facilitating trade along the Khorasan corridor. The

eventual relocation of the capital to Khiva in the late 16th century, often attributed solely to the shifting of the Amu Darya back to the Aral Sea (circa 1573), requires further geomorphological investigation, as similar shifts had occurred previously without triggering a capital transfer.

Ultimately, the Timurid policy of infrastructural rehabilitation—which saw the restoration of the Barlos canal in Azerbaijan and the Murghab networks in Khorasan—was symmetrically applied to Khorezm. The cessation of internal tribal conflicts under a unified imperial banner allowed agricultural, artisanal, and commercial sectors to flourish, deeply integrating Khorezm into the global Silk Road economy of the late Middle Ages.

Conclusion

The cultural history of Khorezm in the 14th and 15th centuries is defined by two major developmental stages. The first stage (early to mid-14th century) was characterized by economic revival under the Golden Horde and the subsequent political assertion of the Kungrad Sufis. Despite the political ambitions of the Sufi rulers, their fatal diplomatic miscalculations in dealing with Amir Temur brought an end to their dynasty.

The second stage (late 14th to the end of the 15th century) encompasses the Timurid era. Contrary to simplified historical narratives of conquest and devastation, the incorporation of Khorezm into Amir Temur's centralized empire provided a robust framework for socio-economic stability. Archaeological and textual evidence irrefutably confirms that cities such as Khiva, Hazorasp, Kat, Vazir, and Adak experienced significant reconstruction and urban expansion. The fortification of trade routes, the development of complex irrigation systems along the Uzboy and Sarykamysh, and the integration into a broader transcontinental economic network signify that the Timurid epoch was a period of profound cultural and infrastructural progression for the Khorezm oasis.

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