

Ancient Chach/Shash In Written Sources

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Abstract: This article examines historical information about the Tashkent oasis found in ancient and medieval written sources. It evaluates the significance of information regarding ancient cities, fortresses, major villages, communication systems, productive forces, and the mining industry for studying the history of the oasis.

Keywords: Chach, Shash, Tashkent, Chatkal-Kurama, Chinese sources, Persian scripts, precious stones, turquoise, Ma'dan ash-Shash, silver mines, Silk Road.

Introduction: The earliest information on the historical and cultural regions of Central Asia is found in the sacred Zoroastrian text Avesta, Achaemenid inscriptions, Greco-Roman sources, and ancient Chinese records. As a political entity, the Chach region is first recorded in ancient and early medieval written sources. Geographically, it emerged in the territories between Ferghana and Sogdiana, on the right bank of the middle course of the Syr Darya River. The earliest references to Chach are found in Greco-Roman sources from antiquity, in Chinese chronicles from antiquity and the early medieval period, and in ancient Persian and Turkic sources. With the advent of Islam, this body of information was enriched by Arab geographers as well as by Chinese and European diplomatic missions.

It is well known that ancient written sources contain important information about the history and culture of various historical and cultural regions of Central Asia. Among this information, numerous records describe ancient mines, minerals, and the regions where precious stones were found. In inscriptions from the Achaemenid kings' palace in Susa, there are references to gold and other rare metals and precious stones brought from Bactria, Sogdiana, and Khwarezm. Specifically, these inscriptions tell us that gold was imported from Bactria, lapis lazuli and "pine stone" from Sogdiana, and a stone known as "akshaina" from Khwarezm, all of which were used in palace construction [23, pp. 11–12].

Nevertheless, ancient sources rarely mention the history of the Chach oasis, where the mining industry

had long been well developed. By the mid-1st millennium BCE, the importance of the region along the middle course of the Syr Darya increased within the communication and transportation networks. This is also reflected in the emergence of cities that became economic and cultural centers in the oasis. The discovery of early fortification systems in areas near the Tuyabo'g'iz Reservoir on the middle course of the Ohangaron River and in the Zarkent region provides evidence of the processes of urbanization in the oasis [1].

The development of economic life in the Tashkent oasis gradually increased the demand for various minerals. In this process, the ancient extraction of rare stones and various minerals from the Chatkal-Kurama Mountains and the advancement of mining activities were of great importance. Analyzing the data provided in the sources, it is evident that these minerals were exported both as raw materials and as finished or semi-finished products to neighboring historical and cultural regions of Central Asia.

It is well known that from the 5th century BCE, ancient historical and geographical works by European authors began to provide information about various historical and cultural regions of Central Asia. Many of these sources frequently mention territories rich in mineral resources. For instance, Herodotus (5th century BCE) wrote that the land of the Massagetae was abundant in gold and copper, and that they did not use iron and silver, as these metals were absent in their region [2].

However, no information is provided in his work about the ancient Chach oasis or its mines. Similarly, in the writings of Strabo (1st century BCE) [3], there are no references to the Chach oasis, despite its richness in useful minerals.

Only at the beginning of the Common Era did European authors begin to mention the history of the Chach oasis. Notably, these accounts increasingly referred to the region's rich and rare mineral resources. Specifically, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder (1st century CE) mentioned the presence of the precious turquoise stone frequently found in the land of the Saka, identified as the Tashkent oasis [4]. It is known that turquoise was widely used in the making of jewelry and decorative ornaments.

Ancient Chinese sources also hold significant importance in illuminating the history and culture of ancient Chach. The information they provide [5] stands out in both scale and importance. Some of the earliest references to the history of Chach are found in the works of Sima Qian (145–86 BCE), particularly in his *Shiji* (Historical Records), written at the end of the 2nd century BCE, and in Ban Gu's *Qian Han Shu* (Book of the Former Han). The history of the great Han dynasty in China (206 BCE – 25 CE) includes records about both Ferghana and the Tashkent oasis, particularly regarding their metallic and non-metallic mineral wealth. According to these records, gold and silver were brought from China to Ferghana during this period, and the people of Dawan (Ferghana) learned the technique of extracting cast iron from the Chinese [6].

In the early medieval period, the amount of information about the Chach oasis in ancient sources continued to grow. Among them, Chinese records are particularly valuable. Descriptions of Chach can also be found in early medieval Chinese chronicles such as *Beishi*, *Suishu*, and *Tangshu*.

During this period, the mineral wealth of the regions of present-day Uzbekistan remained an area of interest for Chinese travelers. Numerous records in Chinese sources attest to this. For example, Xuanzang's travel diary from his journey through Central Asia in 645, as well as the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, mention the gold, rubies, and lapis lazuli of Badakhshan, the black salt of Khwarezm, and five types of salt obtained from the lower reaches of the Zarafshan River. A source from 751 CE also records information about mercury, iron, and gold mines in Rakhon (Ferghana) [7].

During the period of the Turkic Khaganate, the Tashkent oasis saw further development of its international economic and cultural relations via the Silk Road. At that time, the importance of the northern branch of the Silk Road increased, leading to the

expansion of routes passing from Eastern Turkestan through the Tianshan mountain passes into the Semirechye (Jetisu) region, and the active assimilation of these mountainous paths [8]. One branch of the northern route extended from Zomin through Shash to Isfijab, Taraz, Uchkuduk-Kulan (present-day Lugovaya station), and through the Chu Valley to Aspara, Novaket, and the city of Suyab (Ak-Beshim), eventually reaching Upper Barskhan on the southeastern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul [9].

The *Xin Tangshu* (New Book of Tang), compiled in the first half of the 11th century, confirms that this northern route—running from Anxi through the Bedel Pass, Issyk-Kul (Zhehai), the valley of the Chu River (Suiye), Balasagun, Suyab, and Aspara to Talas—was extensively used during the early medieval period [10]. In the city of Suyab, merchants from various countries resided [11]. Pottery similar to that of the Tashkent oasis has been found in Suyab [12], indicating economic and cultural ties that likely followed the route from Chach through Taraz into the Chu Valley.

The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang traveled from China through Central Asia to India in 630 CE. His journey aimed to visit Buddhist sacred sites. The account he left behind is considered one of the most valuable sources on the state of Buddhism in Central Asia and its historical geography during the 7th century CE. Xuanzang traveled across Central Asia from northeast to southwest, starting at the present-day border area between China and Kyrgyzstan and reaching the Oxus River (Amu Darya) in the Bactria-Tocharistan region. He visited numerous historical-geographical regions, cities, and villages, providing concise yet meaningful descriptions. In his accounts, he noted the names and scales of cities and regions and recorded the presence of Buddhist structures and the number of monks residing in them [13].

The information provided by Xuanzang only began to be widely utilized by scholars after his work was translated into European languages [14]. These translations were supplemented with historical commentary, in which the translators attempted to identify Xuanzang's route and localize the regions and settlements he mentioned. While European commentators, particularly the French and British, worked at a time when the archaeological exploration of Central Asia had just begun, by the early 21st century a significant body of archaeological material had been collected. Based on this, E. V. Rtveladze in his article [15] sought to determine the trajectory and localization of the places, cities, and villages described or visited by Xuanzang. According to his account, Xuanzang traveled approximately 1,000 li southeast from Zheshi (Chach) to reach the country of Feihan (Ferghana).

There are two main routes from Chach to Ferghana: one runs eastward along the Angren Valley and crosses the Kamchik Pass in the Qurama Mountains; the other proceeds southeast along the Syr Darya Valley to Khujand and from there into Ferghana.

Two main routes connected Chach to Samarkand: the southern route passed through Khavos and Zomin, along the Molguzar mountain range and reached Temur's Gate before proceeding to Samarkand; the northern route crossed the Syr Darya at Chinachket (modern Chinoz), then passed through the Mirzachul steppe to reach Jizzakh. These two roads eventually converged. The northern route was more complex and corresponds to Xuanzang's description, as it crossed the uninhabited and waterless steppe of Mirzachul. During the medieval period, to supply travelers, trade caravans, and pack animals with water, sardobas (covered water cisterns) were constructed along this route [16]. Xuanzang took the northern route to Samarkand, navigating by the "Great Mountain." This mountain is likely the Turkistan Range, as it is clearly visible in open terrain. From Sudulisena, Xuanzang traveled over 500 li along this road to reach the country of Samo-tsang. There is no doubt that Samo-tsang refers to Samarkand-Sogdiana.

From the Islamic period onward, the Chach oasis—one of the ancient historical-cultural regions of Central Asia—came to be frequently referred to as Shash in numerous Arabic and Persian sources. The famous 11th-century scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni was the first to mention the term Tashkent in his work Monuments of the Past Generations [17]. In many medieval sources, the terms Shash and Tashkent are used interchangeably.

Medieval geographers and historians also provide valuable information about the history and culture of the Shash oasis. Such accounts can be found in the works of Ibn Khurdadhbih [18], al-Tabari [19], Istakhri [20], Ibn Hawqal [21], Biruni's Mineralogy [22], the anonymous Hudud al-'Alam (The Regions of the World) [23], among others.

These sources offer critical insights into the historical geography of Chach and Ilaq oases, including their borders, major cities and villages, productive forces, economic relations, copper, silver, gold, and other mineral resources, as well as their internal and external trade and communication networks.

Among the Arab travelers who visited Transoxiana, special mention should be made of Abu'l Qasim Muhammad ibn Hawqal, who departed from Baghdad in 943 CE and traveled across all Muslim lands. His information is especially valuable. In his work, he notes details about the mines of Ilaq and states that a mint

operated there in the 9th century. The coins minted in Ilaq held significant value in both domestic and foreign trade. Like Ibn Khurdadhbih and other Arab geographers, Ibn Hawqal emphasized that, apart from Bukhara, Samarkand, and Ilaq, no other mints existed in the region of Transoxiana during that time [24].

In the region's southern territories, the Tashkent oasis played a key role in fostering economic and cultural relations with the cities of Semirechye (Jetisu) and Eastern Turkestan. During the flourishing medieval period, the Tashkent oasis was referred to by the names Shash and Ilaq, with Ilaq corresponding to the Angren River valley and Shash to the valley of the Parak (Chirchiq) River [25]. As one of the most prosperous economic centers of Transoxiana, the Tashkent oasis—particularly the region of Ilaq—was rich in valuable mineral resources and, in the period under study, was considered one of the principal centers for the extraction of various metallic and non-metallic minerals in Transoxiana [26].

Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal recorded that the Shash oasis extended for two days' travel in width and three days' travel in length. They described its boundaries as follows: to one side, it reached the Shash (Syr Darya) River; to another, the Kelif Desert between Shash and Isfijab, up to the Temir Darvoza (Iron Gate); on the third side, it bordered the mountains of Ilaq; and on the fourth side, it extended to the Christian village of Winkerd. Both Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal emphasized that in all of Khurasan and Transoxiana, they had not seen a region as rich in mosques, large villages, and buildings as the Shash oasis. They listed 27 cities in Shash and 14 in Ilaq [27].

More detailed information on the political life of the Chach region is found in slightly later sources from the 9th–10th centuries, particularly in the works of historians such as al-Tabari, al-Baladhuri, and Nizam al-Mulk. Al-Tabari, in particular, provides valuable information on the political history of Chach, the resistance of the people of Ustrushana against Arab conquest, and the genealogy of the Afshins (local rulers) of Chach.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, historical sources shed considerable light on both the ancient and medieval history of Chach. The Greco-Roman sources sometimes repeat similar information and, at times, present conflicting accounts. Chinese sources, mostly written by envoys and travelers, tend to provide more detailed and accurate descriptions. The works of Arab historians and geographers focus mainly on the historical geography of Chach, and stand out for their relatively clear and thorough content.

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