

Sogdian Villages: Before and After the Arab Conquest

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Abstract: This article analyzes the economic and social significance of Sogdian villages during the early medieval period, with particular attention to their role in irrigation, agriculture, and craftsmanship. Based on archaeological data, it explores the typology, spatial distribution, and interrelations of rural settlements with the urban economy. The study also discusses the economic and administrative transformations that followed the Arab conquest and their impact on rural life.

Sogdian villages are evaluated as the fundamental basis ensuring the economic stability of urban civilization, and their position within the system of early feudal relations in Central Asia is examined scientifically.

Keywords: Central Sogd, Sogdian villages, early Middle Ages, irrigation system, agriculture, craftsmanship, economic development, archaeological data, urban-rural system.

Introduction: Determining the exact number of towns and villages in Central Asia during the early medieval period remains a complex and debatable issue. One of the main reasons for this is that archaeological research on the subject has not yet been carried out systematically or in sufficient depth. Furthermore, the term “village” lacks well-defined scientific criteria, which reduces the precision and comparability of research results.

In most studies, the classification of archaeological sites is primarily based on architectural features—such as the presence of fortification walls or citadels (arks). However, this approach covers only the architectural aspect and does not fully reflect the actual social and economic status of the settlement. For instance, certain small villages possessed defensive walls, yet their role in the economic structure and the occupational composition of the population did not reach the level of an urban settlement. Therefore, distinguishing between towns and villages requires consideration not only of architectural indicators but also of demographic data, economic activities, irrigation networks, and the development of craftsmanship.

The region of Central Sogd serves as one of the most important areas for studying rural life in the early Middle Ages. The villages located here were not merely centers of irrigated agriculture but functioned as the

fundamental pillars of urban civilization, maintaining economic stability and serving as strategic nodes of production. The production systems, irrigation networks, and craft sectors established in the Central Sogdian countryside constituted the main resource base for the urban economy.

Archaeological data indicate that many Sogdian villages developed upon the foundations of earlier, antique settlements. They were typically located near irrigation systems and performed essential productive functions—such as cultivating crops, processing livestock products, and supplying raw materials to urban markets. These connections tightly linked the rural economy to the city, making the villages integral “supply chains” of the urban system.

At the same time, the Sogdian countryside played a crucial cultural and social role. Villages served as primary bearers of local traditions, customs, and religious practices that later shaped urban culture. Zoroastrian rituals, ancestor veneration, and annual community festivals were preserved first within rural environments and only later assumed new ideological forms through urban reinterpretation.

The importance of Central Sogdian villages during the early Middle Ages can thus be evaluated in dual terms—economic and cultural. On one hand, they sustained regional economies through agriculture and irrigation; on the other, they provided demographic

and material foundations for urban stability. Hence, Sogdian villages should not be regarded merely as auxiliary economic units, but rather as independent socio-economic entities in their own right.

Studying the rural settlements of Central Sogd is vital not only for regional archaeology but also for understanding the internal dynamics of Central Asian civilization as a whole. Through these villages, the processes of early feudal formation, the development of irrigation-based property systems, and the economic foundations of urban-rural interdependence become apparent.

In this sense, the Sogdian villages of the early Middle Ages acted as the material and social foundation for the sustainable evolution of urban civilization and the continuity of Central Asian culture. Historically, they functioned not only as centers of agriculture and craftsmanship but also as key structural units within the broader socio-economic system.

The Role of Villages in Sogdian Society and Their Historical Context

Prior to the 8th century, rural life in Central Sogd had developed extensively, playing a decisive role in the economic and cultural fabric of society. The early medieval era marked a turning point for the Sogdian oasis: large centralized formations disintegrated, new political and economic structures emerged, and invasions by the Chionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites, and later the Arabs brought profound social transformations. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that rural communities became increasingly active, assuming key roles in economic production and cultural stability. These villages formed the backbone of the Sogdian food supply system, production infrastructure, and demographic growth.

In the southern surroundings of Samarkand, more than 179 archaeological sites dated to the 4th–8th centuries CE have been recorded, primarily situated between the Dargom and Zarafshan rivers, along the Zadarghom canal basin, and around Pakhtachi and Urgut. Analyses reveal that many of these settlements emerged upon ancient foundations, underwent reconstruction during the early medieval period, and in some cases remained inhabited for several centuries. This continuous development trajectory demonstrates that the Sogdian countryside provided the material-economic basis for urban civilization.

Based on archaeological evidence, Sogdian villages can be classified into the following main types:

1. Small, unfortified mounds or farmsteads — dynastic agricultural centers;
2. Small fortified settlements — sparsely

populated and defense-oriented sites;

3. Medium-sized fortified villages (0.5–4 ha) — economically and socially active rural communities;
4. Two-tiered castles (ark and rabat) — administrative and military centers;
5. Heavily fortified strongholds (1.5–4 ha) — residences of local rulers or military garrisons, usually near water sources;
6. Large population centers (over 4 ha) — settlements with trade, craft, and administrative functions approaching urban status.

This typological diversity reflects the complex functional differentiation and hierarchical structure of property ownership and authority within Sogdian society (Askarov, 1995, pp. 10–13).

Architectural and Social Structure of Rural Settlements: The Case of Madm

The village of Madm (Gardani Khisor), investigated by Yu. Yakubov, consisted of two main parts — the ruler's palace complex and the residential quarters, separated by a central street (Yakubov, 1970). The settlement corresponded to approximately 30–35 households, whose inhabitants lived under the dependence of a feudal lord (Livshits, 1962, pp. 155–173). Madm possessed fortification walls and a citadel; its houses were mostly built of pakhsa (rammed earth) and sun-dried bricks, usually forming one- or two-room compositions with storage areas and verandas. Such architectural design reflects adaptation to natural and climatic conditions, organization of household reserves, and self-sufficient economic structure (Davydov, 1973).

Archaeological observations show that early medieval Sogdian villages generally occupied an area of 0.5–1 ha; for example, Jangal covered about 0.8 ha. Such a settlement would typically accommodate 200–300 inhabitants. For comparison, Panjikent housed nearly 4,000 residents, while surrounding villages served as the primary production and supply bases for the urban economy.

On the eve of the Arab conquest, a chain of feudal castles had emerged across the rural districts of Samarkand. Residences such as Saratepa and Zargartepa functioned as key nodes in the oasis-wide defensive and logistical network. These castles were often built at the upper sections of irrigation systems, near the main water-distribution points, allowing their owners to control drinking and irrigation water supplies to the city. In this way, feudal lords consolidated their economic and political power through control over food and water resources (Central Asia..., 1999, pp. 62–66).

The Arab Conquest and the Disruption of the Urban–Rural System

As a result of the Arab conquest in the 8th century, many cities were destroyed or depopulated; some lost their administrative status and degenerated into villages. For instance, Panjikent was abandoned after the Arab invasion, while Kafirqala near Samarkand—once a fortified and prosperous site—fell into ruin. The city of Soghaj, mentioned in medieval written sources and identified with Sogishtepa, remained active from the 7th to early 8th century, i.e., up to the Arab conquest (Aslanov & Omonov, 2017, pp. 74–75). This process signified not only the decline of urban culture but also the relative rise of rural communities as centers of economic and domestic stability.

Arab Policy: Integration and Control After subjugating Samarkand, the Arabs sought to strengthen control over trade routes and the supply chains of food and water, particularly in their struggle against the feudal nobility. For this purpose, a defensive-control wall known as the “Wall of Qiyamat” was erected around Samarkand. Through its gates, trade and irrigation routes were strictly monitored, and garrisons were stationed along some canals. Such policies reduced the political autonomy of local landlords, binding them to the urban supply network.

According to Arabic sources and Narshakhi’s account, during the 9th–10th centuries the existence of a Friday (Jome) mosque was a defining criterion for recognizing a settlement as a city. For example, the inhabitants of Varakhsha were denied urban status because they refused to build a mosque, whereas Paykend achieved city status after erecting one (Shishkin, 1963, p. 82). Thus, the urban–rural boundary was defined not only by economic parameters but also by religious-institutional criteria.

Following the suppression of al-Muqanna’s rebellion, Zoroastrian rituals were banned, and the institutional introduction of Islam intensified. After nearly two centuries of resistance, by the mid-9th century Sogd had become an officially Muslim society. During this time, a linguistic shift also occurred: the Sogdian language was replaced in administrative and official domains by Persian (Dari).

By the late 8th – 9th centuries, the appearance and rapid development of polychrome (glazed) ceramics were observed, along with the expanded use of small-sized sun-dried and baked bricks in construction. These transformations marked a new stage in the technological and economic exchange between urban and rural material culture.

Restructuring of the Rural Network under the Samanids Conflicts between Arabs and local feudal lords

continued into later centuries, yet the emergence of indigenous dynasties, particularly the Samanid state, brought a new phase of socio-economic development. Large feudal estates and castles lost their former political significance and became ordinary components within the infrastructure of agricultural villages. Although rural districts continued to supply cities with food and water, they now operated under centralized state control. Thus, early feudal territories were incorporated into a unified administrative system, losing their independence.

Despite the predominance of subsistence (natural) economy, villages maintained stable trade and exchange relations with urban markets. Rural artisans—potters, blacksmiths, tanners—supplied raw materials and finished goods to the cities, which, in turn, acted as administrative and religious centers coordinating rural activities. This symbiotic relationship contributed to economic stability and reinforced the internal social structure of society.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the rural population largely practiced Zoroastrianism or its localized variants, as demonstrated by the presence of sanctuaries and sacrificial sites. During the spread of Islam, certain Zoroastrian elements were assimilated into the new religious system, reflecting cultural continuity under new ideological forms.

Irrigation Systems and the Agrarian Landscape. Craft Production. During the early Middle Ages, irrigation networks such as the Dargom, Narpay, and other ancient canals were restored and expanded, resulting in the reclamation of new fertile lands, increased agricultural output, and greater population density. Irrigation became the primary factor not only supporting production but also driving demographic growth. Control over water distribution, in turn, often served as a source of feudal authority.

In the early medieval economic and social development of Central Asia, the Sogdian oasis occupied a particularly significant place. The villages of this region were not merely agricultural settlements, but integral components of a regional economic system closely connected with urban centers. Through archaeological data, written sources, and material culture remains, it is possible to reconstruct the economic life, irrigation infrastructure, and trade relations of Sogdian villages.

Irrigated Agriculture as the Basis of the Sogdian Village Economy Archaeological evidence shows that in the 4th–8th centuries the Dargom, Narpay, Zarafshan, and other irrigation canals were in operation, constructed to convey water from higher elevations to the lower agricultural fields. This canal network not only ensured food production, but also constituted the principal

factor determining the spatial distribution of population and the configuration of the rural settlement network.

According to archaeological analyses, each village occupied a specific node within the irrigation system, with water distribution controlled by feudal landowners or local authorities. Irrigation devices—chigir (water-lifting wheel/saqiya), water-carrying channels, and weirs—enabled the expansion of agricultural scale. Consequently, the area of arable land increased, the population grew, and material prosperity improved.

The economic composition of Sogdian villages was multi-sectoral, encompassing irrigated agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, and craft production. Archaeological finds—granaries, storage jars (khum), and traces of cultivated plots—confirm the high level of organization in agriculture. The principal crops were wheat, barley, rice, and vegetables, which were regularly supplied to urban markets. At the same time, orcharding and viticulture represented important components of the economy.

Animal husbandry was primarily oriented toward local needs: villagers raised cattle, sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys. These livestock provided not only food resources but also traction and transport, integrating animal power into the rural production regime. The stability of the village economy was closely tied to the reliability of irrigation infrastructure and water sources.

Craft production was widely developed, with pottery, ironworking, leather processing, and textiles occupying leading positions. Ceramic wares—storage jars, cauldrons, teapots, and water vessels—met local demand while also circulating in urban markets. The variety of household vessels recovered from archaeological sites indicates well-established local manufacture.

Some villages (for example, those around Kafirqala and Zargartepa) functioned as specialized craft centers. Goods produced there spread through trade relations with nearby cities and neighboring regions.

Economic interdependence between Sogdian villages and cities operated along two axes:

1. Internal economic circulation — villages supplied cities with foodstuffs, raw materials, and animal products;
2. Trade and exchange relations — via urban hubs, local products were exported to other regions.

Products manufactured by rural artisans (ewer/jug, leather goods, iron tools) were sold in urban markets, while urban craftsmen delivered finished iron goods and construction implements to the countryside. In this

process, villages formed the material foundation of urban civilization's economy.

Because the Sogdian oasis lay on routes connecting East and West, some villages were built near caravan roads. They served as rest stops and exchange points for merchants, which further heightened the economic importance of the countryside.

With the establishment of Arab rule in the 8th century, major changes occurred in the Sogdian economy, including the rural sector. The previous system of feudal proprietors was dismantled, and lands came under centralized state control. The Arabs reorganized water infrastructures and land taxes, thereby tightening the linkage between villages and the urban economy.

Documents from Mugh Mountain show that peasants paid taxes (kharaj) in kind and in produce (Livshits, 1962). Although this system curtailed the economic autonomy of villages, it preserved their structural role within the state economy. Villages remained the primary source of food, livestock, and raw materials for cities.

Conclusion

During the early Middle Ages and the subsequent period following the Arab conquest, Sogdian villages continued to function as the core system ensuring socio-economic stability. By integrating irrigation, agriculture, and craft specialization, they supplied cities with essential resources, while in the hierarchy of property and power, control over water and logistics became a key political lever. The institutionalization of Islam, transformations in administrative-legal structures, and linguistic shifts unfolded in parallel with innovations in material culture. Under the Samanids, the rural network was incorporated into a centralized state apparatus, laying a stable foundation for subsequent phases of Sogdian civilization.

In the early medieval period, Sogdian villages developed a complex economic system that encompassed all sectors of production. Alongside food production on irrigated lands, they participated actively in crafts and trade. Villages served as the material base for the economic resilience and cultural development of urban civilization. Even after the Arab conquest, their economic significance did not diminish; rather, it continued in adapted form within the new state order. Accordingly, the study of the rural economy of Sogd is crucial for understanding the economic geography of early medieval Central Asia, the politics of irrigation, and the systems of trade relations.

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