


Some Considerations On Nomadic Culture In The Middle Zarafshan Oasis

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Received: 29 October 2025; **Accepted:** 19 November 2025; **Published:** 26 December 2025

Abstract: This article examines the favorable natural and geographical location of the Middle Zarafshan Oasis, its rich natural resources, and the formation and territorial distribution of ancient nomadic tribes' culture. In addition, scholarly views on the concept of nomadism, the history of archaeological research conducted in this region, and the results of these studies are analyzed. Based on archaeological materials, the paper also briefly discusses current research trends and recent achievements in the field of archaeology related to the study of nomadic culture in the Middle Zarafshan Oasis. In historical sources, the Middle Zarafshan Oasis is also referred to as "Central Sogdiana." Owing to its favorable natural conditions, the region was inhabited by humans from the Middle Paleolithic period onward. In subsequent stages of historical development, urban culture emerged in this area, and it became one of the important centers of cultural and economic interaction between agricultural and pastoral communities.

Keywords: Middle Zarafshan Oasis, Central Sogdiana, nomadic culture, pastoralism, archaeological research, Paleolithic, cultural interactions.

Introduction: The Zarafshan Valley represents one of the most significant regions in the historical development of Central Asia, playing a crucial role in the interaction between nomadic and sedentary societies. Owing to its strategic location in the very heart of Eurasia, the valley functioned as a major crossroads that simultaneously connected and delineated four extensive historical and cultural spheres: China in the east, Iran in the west, the Indian subcontinent in the south, and the northern Eurasian steppes, including the territories of present-day Russia, to the north. As such, the Zarafshan Valley served not only as a natural corridor for transregional communication but also as a zone of sustained cultural, economic, and political interaction. Geographically, the Zarafshan Valley constitutes an elongated basin stretching from east to west, traversed by one of the most prominent rivers of antiquity—the Zarafshan River. The name of the river, etymologically interpreted as "the bearer of gold," reflects both its economic significance and its symbolic value in the ancient world. Classical authors of the Hellenistic period, particularly during the campaigns of Alexander the Great, referred

to the river as Polytimetos, a term meaning "the highly esteemed" or "greatly revered," underscoring its perceived importance within the landscape of Central Asia.

The Zarafshan River originates in the perennial glaciers of the Pamir mountain system and flows westward through the upper valleys of present-day Tajikistan. Subsequently, it passes through the narrow gorges of the Turkestan and Karategin mountain ranges, before emerging into the extensive alluvial plains of Samarkand, which form the core of the middle Zarafshan Valley. These fertile plains played a decisive role in the development of early agricultural settlements and later urban centers. After providing vital irrigation to the Bukhara Oasis, the river ultimately dissipates into the sands of the Kyzylkum Desert, illustrating the hydrological and ecological constraints that have historically shaped human settlement and economic strategies in the region.

In ancient written sources, this region is referred to as Sogdiana and is described as a satrapy within the Achaemenid Empire. Sogdiana was conquered by the Achaemenid king Cyrus II between 545 and 539 BCE.

For the Achaemenids, Sogdiana held considerable strategic importance in both defensive and commercial terms, with Samarkand (ancient Marakanda) serving as one of its principal centers. Following the decline of Achaemenid rule, the region was subdued by Alexander the Great, who is known to have wintered in Marakanda after capturing its fortress. After Alexander's death, control over the territory passed successively to Philip III Arrhidaeus, then to the Seleucid dynasty, and later to Diodotus, marking the establishment of Greco-Bactrian authority in the region.

With the subsequent fragmentation of the Greco-Bactrian state, Sogdiana experienced incursions by nomadic tribes migrating from the regions of present-day China and Mongolia. In ancient sources, these groups are identified as the Yuezhi and the Wusun. These nomadic tribes were themselves displaced from their original homelands by the expansion of the powerful Xiongnu confederation. In later periods, the territories of Sogdiana came under the control of the Kangju (Kang) nomads, whose cultural traditions display close affinities with those of the Yuezhi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burial mounds (kurgans) constitute one of the most significant archaeological sources for reconstructing the population history, cultural traditions, and ideological concepts of ancient societies. In Central Asia, burial mounds are commonly located across diverse landscapes, including plains, mountainous regions, and desert zones, reflecting the mobility and adaptive strategies of nomadic pastoral communities. [1-76] Beginning in the early 1960s, systematic archaeological surveys and excavation campaigns were conducted by scholars in the middle reaches of the Zarafshan Valley. As a result of these investigations, several burial mounds attributed to nomadic pastoral populations were identified and thoroughly studied. These fieldworks provided important data on the funerary practices and material culture of nomadic groups inhabiting the region.

Among the most significant sites documented during these studies are the Ohalik cemetery [2-56-72] located in the southern part of the Samarkand Oasis, the Mironqul cemetery [3-80-90], the Sazagan cemetery [4-72-80], as well as the Oqjartepa cemetery [5-60-68] situated in the northern part of the Samarkand Valley. The materials obtained from these burial complexes have yielded substantial insights into the social structure, burial rites, and cultural affiliations of nomadic communities in the Middle Zarafshan region. Methodologically, the present study is based on a comprehensive analysis of published archaeological

reports, comparative typological examination of burial constructions and grave goods, and the integration of stratigraphic and spatial data. This multi-disciplinary approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of nomadic cultural dynamics within the broader historical context of the Zarafshan Valley. Archaeological investigations have demonstrated that the majority of these burials belong to nomadic populations dating from the fourth century BCE to the sixth century CE. The results of the research indicate that these burial complexes are associated with cultural traditions linked to groups mentioned in historical sources, including the Saka, Sarmatians, Yuezhi, and Hephthalites.

In the 1980s, the Orlot burial [6-122-154] mounds located in the Ishtikhan and Qoshrobot districts were investigated by Academician G. A. Pugachenkova. As a result of these studies, material evidence reflecting the lifestyle of pastoral nomadic tribes inhabiting the territory of Central Sogdiana was documented and analyzed. Excavations of the burial mounds yielded a wide range of archaeological finds, including ceramic vessels, weapons, and items of personal adornment. Scholarly analysis has demonstrated that these materials are culturally attributable to the nomadic Saka tribes, thereby providing substantial evidence for the presence and cultural characteristics of Saka-related nomadic groups in the region.

Between 1963 and 1967, O. V. Obelchenko conducted archaeological excavations of several burial mounds located in the Sazagansoy, Mironqulsoy, and Okhaliksoy areas, situated to the southwest of the city of Samarkand. At the Sazagan site, more than ten burial mounds were initially excavated and systematically studied. These mounds yielded a substantial assemblage of archaeological materials, including ceramic vessels, coins, and weapons. Researchers have noted that the Sazagan burial complexes display close similarities to the Aruktau burial mounds discovered in the territory of present-day Tajikistan, indicating their attribution to a shared cultural tradition. In the Mironqulsoy area, a total of seventeen burial mounds were excavated, from which numerous archaeological finds were recovered. As a result of these investigations, new scholarly conclusions were reached regarding the evolution of funerary practices in Sogdiana up to the seventh–eighth centuries CE, as well as the broader cultural and historical development of the region's population. Having examined numerous burial mounds belonging to pastoral communities in the Middle Zarafshan Oasis, O. V. Obelchenko substantiated that the influence of steppe culture on Sogdiana was particularly strong during the Classical (Antique) period, especially in the early centuries CE.

Based on a comprehensive analysis of burial architecture, funerary rites, and associated material culture, he proposed a chronological classification dividing these burial complexes into three distinct groups.

According to Obelchenko's classification, the burial mounds of the Middle Zarafshan Oasis can be divided into three chronological groups based on construction features, funerary practices, and associated grave goods.

Group I (7th–3rd centuries BCE)

The mounds of this group are primarily simple pit graves, many of which were covered with wooden structures. The deceased were typically laid with their heads oriented to the west, with a reed mat placed beneath the body, and occasionally a reed pillow under the head. Funerary practices included sprinkling the grave with red ochre, and placing bone rods, broken-headed ceramic vessels, sacrificial stones, swords, and daggers (Lavandak) alongside the deceased.

Group II (2nd–1st centuries BCE)

Graves of the second group are oriented along a north–south axis, slightly deviating towards the west. The deceased were predominantly interred in a southwest orientation, and post-holes were often made in the northern wall of the burial pit. Many graves were chambered (yorma) tombs, constructed from stone-lined western walls with steps leading down into the chamber. The chambers were partitioned with reed mats and limestone fragments, indicating an evolution in structural complexity compared to Group I.

Group III (1st–7th centuries CE)

The third group shows further architectural development. Yorma chambers were now separated from the main burial hall by raw brick partitions, and weapons became increasingly rare. The deceased were generally interred in the same southwest orientation, often placed on reed or mat-like bedding. Although the yorma chambers persisted, they were now located lower than the descending slope, unlike earlier graves where the chamber and hall were on the same level. Grave goods included sheep forelegs, various ceramic vessels, weapons, and occasionally eggs. Across all three groups, traces of fire are evident in the burial rituals. Burials could be individual or paired, with some graves containing multiple interments. The bodies were primarily placed in a supine position with legs extended, bent, or drawn to the knees, and occasionally positioned on either side, reflecting variations in funerary customs over time.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a scientific analysis of the

mentioned topic by integrating multiple approaches from written sources and scholarly literature. These include, in particular, a comparative and analogical analysis of the collected data. The research systematically utilizes information obtained from recent archaeological investigations, considering both the chronological sequence of findings and their empirical accuracy. This multi-faceted methodology enables a reliable reconstruction of cultural and historical processes in the Middle Zarafshan region.

DISCUSSION

The region under study extends from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the foothills of the Pamir and Tianshan mountains, and from the Kazakh steppes in the north to northern Afghanistan. This vast territory has historically been a crossroads for a variety of ethnically and culturally diverse populations, with different peoples settling here since ancient times. From as early as the fifth millennium BCE, two primary economic lifestyles developed in this area: (1) agricultural communities that established early irrigation systems, and (2) nomadic pastoral groups.

Populations living along major river valleys and delta regions enhanced agriculture through the construction of artificial canals and irrigation channels, practicing sedentary farming—a lifestyle that continues in many areas to the present day. These communities skillfully managed political authority and developed complex social structures, providing the foundation for the emergence of proto-urban systems akin to those in Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Indus Valley. In contrast, the expansive steppe regions were predominantly inhabited by nomadic tribes, who engaged in livestock herding and maintained trade networks spanning from the Black Sea to the gates of China, and from the Siberian pastures to the Indian Ocean. These vast plains also provide the earliest evidence for the domestication of horses and camels and the emergence of cart-based transport technologies.

Historically, the relationship between nomadic and sedentary lifestyles has often been interpreted as oppositional or even antagonistic. However, contemporary analysis suggests that this relationship was largely economic and regional, manifesting through mutual interdependence. These two systems converged in market zones, where trade flows combined agricultural and pastoral products, demonstrating functional integration without complete cultural assimilation. Sources indicate that these regions represent the fully developed zones of steppe nomadism, a socio-economic world that created its own distinctive economic and political culture. Importantly, it never fully merged with the

sedentary communities' culture, nor was it entirely assimilated by them

RESULTS

Sources indicate that the zones examined in this study represent one of the fully developed areas of steppe nomadism in the Middle Zarafshan Oasis. This nomadic world developed its own distinct economic and political culture, which never fully merged with sedentary communities' culture nor was it completely assimilated by them. Indeed, nomadism was not only a highly specialized economic activity, but also a way of life—a cultural adaptation to specific ecological conditions. The rules regulating this activity were largely based on seasonal movement, determining that groups or families would temporarily inhabit the most favorable pastures until water and natural resources were depleted. Clearly, the nomadic economic system could not sustain itself entirely independently. Trade with sedentary communities was vital, involving the exchange of grain and other agricultural products, pottery, leather, dairy products, and wool—all items produced through pastoralism.

CONCLUSION

Based on the scientific analyses presented above, it can be concluded that the Middle Zarafshan Oasis possessed natural climatic conditions, water resources, and fertile soils that were particularly favorable for nomadic pastoralists. The region's geographical structure was dual in nature: on one hand, it offered fertile lands irrigated through both natural and artificial water sources, and on the other hand, it was surrounded by extensive steppe pastures. This duality played a crucial role in shaping the development of both agriculture and pastoralism within the oasis.

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