

The Formation Of Villages And Towns In The Middle Syr Darya Basin: A Comparative Analysis Of Written And Archaeological Sources

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historical development of rural and urban settlements in the Middle Syr Darya basin during antiquity and the early Middle Ages on the basis of written and archaeological sources. The study applies a comparative and critical approach to data derived from ancient Greek and Roman authors, Chinese chronicles, and Arabic and Persian geographical works. Particular attention is paid to the hydronym Syr Darya, its various historical names recorded in different sources, their etymology, and related toponymic features. The article also examines the formation of settlements in historical regions such as Chach, Ustrushana, Otrar, Isfijab, and the Mirzachul area, emphasizing the interactions between sedentary agricultural communities and nomadic pastoral populations. The research findings contribute to a more precise understanding of the historical geography of the Middle Syr Darya basin and are significant for interpreting the ethno-cultural processes of the region.

Keywords: Middle Syr Darya basin, Syr Darya, settlements, rural and urban sites, historical geography, written sources, archaeological evidence, hydronym, toponym, Chach, Ustrushana, Otrar, Mirzachul.

Introduction: The Syr Darya River, one of the major water arteries of Central Asia, and its middle basin have from ancient times constituted an important economic, social, and cultural space for both sedentary and nomadic populations. Geographically linking historical regions such as the Fergana Valley, Chach (Tashkent oasis), Ustrushana, Otrar, and Isfijab, this area has occupied a distinctive place in the system of historical geography and settlement patterns of the region. In particular, the Middle Syr Darya basin, owing to its favorable natural and climatic conditions, abundant water resources, and transport and communication opportunities, has long been one of the most suitable areas for the formation and development of human settlements.

The emergence and evolution of networks of rural and urban settlements in the Middle Syr Darya basin during antiquity and the early Middle Ages—together with their ethnic composition, economic activities, and the interactions between sedentary agricultural communities and nomadic pastoral groups—represent

one of the key and debated topics in historical scholarship. However, information on the history of settlements in this region is scattered across written sources of different periods and languages, which makes their comparative and systematic analysis a pressing scholarly task.

The earliest references to the Middle Syr Darya basin appear in the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors. Subsequently, information about the region was substantially expanded in Chinese chronicles as well as in the writings of Arabic and Persian geographers and historians. These sources provide diverse accounts of the river's name, the cities and villages located within its basin, their geographical positions, economic significance, and political affiliations. At the same time, scholarly debates persist regarding the hydronym Syr Darya and its various historical names recorded in the sources, such as Jaxartes, Tanais, and Sayhun.

The present article aims to conduct a comprehensive study of the settlements located in the Middle Syr

Darya basin during antiquity and the early Middle Ages on the basis of written and archaeological evidence. Drawing upon ancient, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian sources, the research analyzes the processes of settlement formation, their historical-geographical characteristics, and the ethno-cultural environment of the region. The conclusions presented in this article contribute to a more precise reconstruction of the historical geography of the Middle Syr Darya basin and to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and cultural processes that unfolded in the region.

METHOD

This study is based on generally accepted methodological principles in historical research, including historicism, objectivity, and systematic analysis. The history of settlements in the Middle Syr Darya basin during antiquity and the early Middle Ages is examined through a comprehensive use of written and archaeological sources.

Historical-analytical and comparative-historical methods are employed to analyze and compare data from ancient, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian sources. A historical-geographical approach is applied to examine settlement locations and their relationship with the natural environment. In addition, source-critical analysis and toponymic-etymological methods are used to study the hydronym Syr Darya and selected place names within the basin.

RESULTS

Information concerning the Syr Darya River is largely composed of interrelated data. It is the second largest water source in Central Asia after the Amu Darya. Written sources in various languages have preserved information about its origins, terminal outlets, tributaries, upper, middle, and lower basins, wide and narrow sections, fords, navigation, as well as the rural and urban settlements located along its banks. Some of these accounts derive from Greek and Chinese sources dating to the pre-Christian era and the early centuries CE, while others belong to later periods and are found in Chinese and Greek (Byzantine) chronicles and historical works, as well as in various documents, inscriptions, and historical writings in Sogdian, Armenian, Old Turkic, Arabic, and Persian.

More detailed information on the settlements surrounding the Middle Syr Darya basin can be obtained primarily from Arabic and Persian sources. Another important group of written sources that provide valuable data on settlements in the Middle Syr Darya during antiquity and the early Middle Ages consists of Chinese chronicles and travel accounts. The significance of Chinese sources lies in the fact that Chinese authors recorded information about Central

Asian regions either directly from envoys and merchants who had traveled from those areas or on the basis of reports by their own envoys and travelers who visited the region. Unlike many other traditions, Chinese authors paid particular attention to the geographical location of each region, distances, major cities, administrative centers, population, and related characteristics.

For example, in determining the general situation and territorial extent of the Chach oasis in the first quarter of the seventh century, the information provided by the Chinese monk Xuanzang (627–645) is of particular importance. He notes: “The circumference of the country of Zhe-shi is about 1,000 li, and its western border adjoins the Ye River (Syr Darya). [The country’s] eastern and western sides are narrow, while its northern and southern sides are broad. The fertility of its soil and its climatic conditions are similar to those of the country of Nuchi-jian (Nuchket–Chimkent). There are about ten cities, each governed by its own ruler. There is no single supreme ruler. As a vassal state, they are subordinate to the Tujue (Turkic Khaganate).”

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Although the monk does not mention the names of major settlements in the Chach oasis in his account, it is nevertheless evident that a sedentary population lived in the oasis at that time and that the number of major cities there was approximately ten. Moreover, the information he provides indicates that a similar situation existed in the neighboring region of the Chach oasis—territorially considered part of the Middle Syr Darya basin—namely, the Chimkent area, where both sedentary and nomadic populations also coexisted.

It should also be noted that while Xuanzang refers to a historical region located to the northeast of Chach under the name Nuchijian, most scholars reconstruct this name in the form Nuchket and identify it with Nuchket, one of the major cities of the Shash oasis mentioned in Arabic sources[2]. However, the Kazakh archaeologist B. Baitanayev, relying on a number of factors, has proposed identifying Nuchijian with Chimkent[3].

Together with Chach and Ustrushana, an important part of the Middle Syr Darya region was formed by the areas located to the northeast of the Tashkent oasis, comprising both steppe zones and territories suitable for irrigated agriculture. In the early Middle Ages, the historical region of Otrar and the surroundings of the present-day city of Turkistan were also known under the names Farab, Tarband, and Shavghar[4]. The Chinese chronicle *Xin Tang shu* provides the following information concerning this area: “To the northeast, the state of Shi borders the Western Turks; to the northwest, it adjoins the state of Bo-la (Farab). To the south, at a distance of 200 li, lies Jü-zhang-ti (Khujand), and to the southwest, at a distance of 500 li, lies the state of Kan (Samarkand)”[5].

It should be noted that in this account the name Bo-la appears in the form Pa-lap, which is consistently used in all translations of the Chinese chronicles[6]. Yu. A. Zuev previously emphasized that the Chinese term Bo-la represents the Chinese transcription of the polity of Farab (Otrar), located in the Middle Syr Darya basin and mentioned in Arabic and Persian geographical works[7]. The fact that this polity is described as lying to the northwest of Chach further supports this interpretation.

DISCUSSION

During the early Middle Ages, the Turkic and Sogdian populations played a significant role in the emergence of dozens of villages and cities in these regions, a fact that is also reflected in the Turkic–Sogdian basis of place names in the Middle Syr Darya basin. Examples of such toponyms include Shavghar–Qarachuuq, Farab–Otrar, Isfijab–Sayram, as well as Yangikent, Sutkand, Sughnak, and other place names[8].

This pattern is particularly evident in the case of the Chach oasis. During the early Middle Ages, the oasis contained Turkic and Turkic–Sogdian toponyms such as Chach, Tunkat, Ilaq, Jabghukat, and Khatunkat, alongside numerous place names of Sogdian origin, including Binket, Farnket, Nukat, Dinfaghnek, Barsket, Pskom, and many others.

A number of scholars emphasize that the large-scale settlement of Sogdians in the oasis corresponds to the early Middle Ages, specifically to the period of Sogdian migration into the Middle Syr Darya basin and Semirechye (Jetysu)[8]. Other researchers, however, argue that the spread of the Sogdian population in the oasis occurred earlier, in the late first millennium BCE and the early centuries CE. In this regard, it is appropriate to cite the view of the Sogdologist A. Otakhodjaev, who notes that Sogdian merchants, entrepreneurs, craftsmen, and farmers entered the Chach oasis during the following historical periods: (1) up to the 6th century BCE; (2) from the 4th to the 3rd centuries BCE; (3) from the 3rd to the 8th centuries CE; and (4) after the 8th–9th centuries CE[9].

The northern parts of the historical region of Ustrushana, located on the left bank of the Syr Darya, lay within the Middle Syr Darya basin. This territory, largely consisting of the Mirzachul steppe, contained comparatively fewer settlements in both antiquity and the Middle Ages than the Chach and Otrar oases. Only the southern parts of Ustrushana, situated south of the Mirzachul—specifically the Mascho area (Uratepa and its surroundings) in the present-day Turkistan mountain range and the slopes of the Zomin Mountains—were home to dozens of cities and hundreds of ancient villages.

This region, first mentioned in Chinese chronicles and Sogdian documents, is described in the *Tang shu* chronicle as follows: “The polity of Eastern Cao—also known by the names Shuaidushanna, Suiduyishana, Kiputana, and Suduchini—possesses four names in total. This country is located to the north of the Bossi Mountains. During the period of the Great Han dynasty, these lands were subordinate to Ershi (the central city of Fergana). The distance to Gui-zhang-ti (Khujand) to the northeast is 200 li; to Shi (Chach) to the north; to Kan (Samarkand) to the west; to Ninyuan (Fergana) to the northeast is 400 li; and to Tukholo (Tokharistan) to the south is 500 li. All of these cities are located at distances exceeding 400 li... During the reign of Emperor Wu-di (618–626), an embassy was sent from this polity.”[10].

This indicates that in the early Middle Ages Ustrushana constituted a distinct polity whose southern, more precisely southwestern, parts bordered Sogdiana,

whose northern areas adjoined Chach, and whose northeastern extent reached as far as Khujand. In 629, the monk Xuanzang (629–645), who passed through the oasis on his way to Sogdiana, recorded the following in his memoirs: “The territory of Sutulishena (Ustrushana) extends over one thousand four hundred or one thousand five hundred li. Its eastern boundary adjoins the Ye River (Syr Darya). The source of the Ye River originates in the northern ranges of the Congling (Pamir) Mountains. Its waters flow from north to west. This river is rather wide, its water turbid, swift, and fast-flowing. Its agriculture and customs are similar to those of the Che-shi (Chach) people. It has its own ruler and is subordinate to the Tu-jue (Turkic Khaganate).”[11].

Based on the information provided by Xuanzang, it can be determined that the eastern boundary of Ustrushana reached the Syr Darya River. Moreover, his account indicates that the way of life and economic practices of the population of Ustrushana were similar to those of the inhabitants of the Chach oasis. By emphasizing that agricultural practices were identical to those in Chach, the monk implicitly confirms the existence of sedentary settlements—namely, cities and villages—in this region as well[12].

As noted above, more precise information about ancient settlements in the Middle Syr Darya basin and adjacent regions can primarily be obtained through the works of Arabic and Persian geographers. To begin with, it is appropriate to examine the information on the Syr Darya River presented in *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*. According to this work, “The Uzgend River originates on the slopes of the Khallukh (Qarluq) Mountains. It flows past Uzgend, the city of Bab (Pop), Akhsikat, Khujand, and Banokat. It then reaches the territory of Chach; passes through many towns such as Sutkand and Porob; flows onward to the lands of Jand and Javora, and finally empties into the Khwarazm Sea.”

From this account it becomes clear that the upper basin of the Syr Darya was known at that time as the “Uzgend River,” while another designation—more precisely referring to the middle course of the river—was the “Chach River.” This is further clarified by the following passage in the same work: “The Parak River originates on the slopes of the Khallukh (Qarluq) Mountains and flows southward. Between Banokat and the Wall of Qalos it flows into the Uzgend River. When all these waters merge, they take the name Chach River; the Taziks, however, call this river Sayhun.”

This information indicates that the local population initially referred to the Syr Darya according to the region through which it flowed—whether a particular valley or oasis—as well as by the names of the historical provinces corresponding to its upper, middle, or lower

course. With the arrival of the Taziks, that is, the Arabs, the river came to be known as Sayhun. This is further confirmed by medieval sources, in which the middle course of the Syr Darya is referred to as the “Banokat River,” while the territories along its right bank—particularly the Chach and Otrar oases—are mentioned under the name “Banokat Valley.”

In fact, during the developed Middle Ages, Banokat was the name of a specific city in the Chach oasis and one of the largest urban centers in the Syr Darya basin. For this reason, the river came to be called the “Banokat River,” and the oases within the basin associated with it were referred to as the “Banokat Valley.” This interpretation is also supported by the following statement found in *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*: “Banokat is a beautiful and prosperous town located on the banks of the Khashart River.”

In *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, when historical provinces and districts of the Middle Syr Darya basin and adjacent regions are discussed, numerous settlements within their territories are mentioned. The work notes: “Sarushana is a large and prosperous district, abundant in resources, with many cities and rural settlements (*rustāqs*) ... Zomin is a city located on the road between Khujand and Fergana and belongs to the district of Sarushana. It has a strong fortress ... Charkon is a small town that is part of Sarushana, a prosperous place; Fagkas, Ghark, Sobot, and Kurkas are towns within the territory of Sarushana, with cultivated lands and numerous inhabitants.”

Among these cities and towns of Ustrushana, Sobot (Sabot/Sabat) and Kurkas (Kurkat) were settlements located close to the Syr Darya basin, situated in the area adjoining the village of Khavos, which lay nearer to the river. First mentioned in the works of Arabic and Persian geographers of the developed Middle Ages, the place known as Khavos is recorded as one of the major settlements of Ustrushana, alongside Zomin and Sobot (Sovot). In his work *Kitāb al-Mamālik wa-l-Masālik*, al-Iṣṭakhri refers to Khavos as a major settlement on the route leading from Zomin to Banokat (Shash).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Middle Syr Darya basin was one of the most significant historical-geographical regions of Central Asia during antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The formation of rural and urban settlements in this area was closely linked to natural and geographical conditions, water resources, and interactions between sedentary agricultural and nomadic pastoral populations. Data preserved in ancient, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian sources complement one another in reconstructing the historical names of the Syr Darya, settlement patterns,

and the administrative-territorial organization of the basin.

Through a comparative analysis of written sources and archaeological evidence, the study establishes the substantial role of Turkic and Sogdian populations in the development of settlements in Chach, Ustrushana, Otrar, and adjacent regions. In addition, toponymic and hydronymic evidence allows for a more precise reconstruction of the historical geography of the Syr Darya basin. Overall, the conclusions contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and ethno-cultural processes that unfolded in the Middle Syr Darya region.

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