

THE KESH OASIS WITHIN THE SYSTEM OF SOUTHERN SOGD: POPULATION SEDENTARIZATION, TRADE, AND POLITICAL PROCESSES (6TH–8TH CENTURIES)

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Abstract

This article provides a scholarly analysis of the processes of population sedentarization in the territory of Southern Sogd, the historical and geographical position of the Kesh oasis, and its significance in the political, economic, and cultural life of the region during the sixth to eighth centuries. Based on data from ancient Chinese chronicles, Turkic and Islamic written sources, as well as the results of archaeological research, the study examines the features of the confederative political structure of Sogd, the leading role of the Sogdians along the Great Silk Road, and their political, economic, and cultural interactions with Turkic tribes.

Keywords: Southern Sogd, Kesh Oasis, Nakhshab, Sogdians, Great Silk Road, Population Sedentarization, Turkic Khaganate.

Introduction

Аннотация

В статье на основе научного анализа рассматриваются процессы оседлости населения в регионе Южного Согда, историко-географическое положение Кешской оазисы, а также её значение в политической, экономической и культурной жизни региона в VI–VIII вв. На основе данных древнекитайских хроник, тюркских и исламских письменных источников, а также результатов археологических исследований раскрываются особенности конфедеративного государственного устройства Согда, ведущая роль согдийцев на Великом шёлковом пути и их политические, экономические и культурные связи с тюркскими племенами. Полученные результаты позволяют определить место Кешской оазисы как одного из ключевых политических и торгово-экономических центров в системе Южного Согда.

Ключевые слова: Южный Согд, Кешская оазис, Нахшаб, согдийцы, Великий шёлковый путь, оседлость населения, Тюркский каганат.

Introduction

Sogd occupied a distinctive place in the historical processes of Central Asia. In particular, the territory of Southern Sogd had from ancient times been one of the principal centers for the formation of sedentary agriculture and trade culture. The sedentarization of the population ensured economic stability in the region and provided a strong impetus for the development of systems of political administration. During the sixth and seventh centuries, Sogd played a leading



role in the political and economic life of the region as one of the central nodes of the Great Silk Road linking East and West.

Ancient Kesh never lost its political, socio-economic, or cultural significance in any historical period and, at the same time, occupied an important place in the lives of the peoples of both the East and the West. Over the centuries, the Great Silk Road brought various tribes, ethnic groups, and peoples closer together, elevating their cultures to the level of great civilizations. It is widely acknowledged, both in earlier scholarship and in modern research, that the Sogdians—whose origins can be traced back to Proto-Turkic and ancient Turkic, specifically Saka tribes—made an exceptionally significant contribution to this process of integration. From the middle of the first millennium BCE to the first millennium CE, the Sogdians played a leading role in commercial, cultural-spiritual, economic, and political processes extending from the Amu Darya to the Hexi (Heshi) Corridor of Gansu, with the support of Turkic groups related to them and settled along the northeastern directions.[1]

Methods

The research is based on the principles of historicism and objectivity. It employs source-critical, historical-comparative, archaeological, and interdisciplinary methodological approaches. Ancient Chinese chronicles (*Tang Shu*, *Bei Shi*), the works of Mahmud al-Kashgari, and data from modern historiography were comparatively analyzed.

Results

The results of the study demonstrate that Southern Sogd, and particularly the Kesh oasis, did not lose its significance in any historical period. The Sogdians played a leading role in trade and handicraft activities along the Great Silk Road. They were not merely intermediaries in commerce, but also actively exported their own products of horticulture, viticulture, animal husbandry, jewelry making, and silk production to vast regions stretching from Byzantium to Korea and Japan, and from Tibet to Sri Lanka. According to the *Tang Shu* chronicle, nine diplomatic missions were sent from the “political and trade alliance” of Central Asia to China between 618 and 647. Central Asian peoples under Sogdian leadership, guided by their way of life, established a network of commercial and craft centers along major trade routes—namely in Chach, Yettisuv, Eastern Turkestan, and up to the frontier zones of Turkic tribes bordering China (Gansu–Kengsuv). These centers took the form of *kents* (from the Sogdian *k'nδ*, meaning city, fortress, or stronghold), including Harashkat, Novkat, Chinonchkat, Parkent, Piskent, Shavkat, Navkat, Kurkat, Khuvakand (Kokand), Sutkat, Hamukat, Shaljikat, Juvikat, Navikat, Nuzkat, and others.[2]

In these settlements, not only Central Asians but also Persians, Indians, and Chinese were actively engaged in economic and cultural activities. This environment facilitated close interaction among representatives of different cultures. Nomadic Turkic tribes were particularly interested in such contacts. Since this activity generated substantial revenue for the treasury of the Turkic Khagans, the rulers regarded it as their responsibility to provide political and military protection to Central Asian merchants operating under Sogdian leadership. Over time, the Iranian-speaking segment of the Sogdians began to return to their ancient Turkic linguistic roots. In this regard, Mahmud al-Kashgari wrote that “the Sogdians of Balasaghun originated from



Sogd, located between Bukhara and Samarkand, and had adopted the clothing and customs of the Turks.”[3] This process reflected a transition from coexistence and symbiosis—living side by side with Turkic groups—to assimilation and cultural homogenization among the Sogdians within the Turkic milieu. According to the sinologist E. G. Pulleyblank, “they (the Sogdians) were not only skilled merchants, but also painters, craftsmen, and propagators of new religions. Spreading across Central Asia and settling along the Silk Road, the Sogdians penetrated the interior provinces of China as well as the societies of nomadic peoples. One of the outcomes of this process was the civilizational influence of the Sogdians on the Turks.”[4]

Discussion

During certain periods, Kesh was part of the Hephthalite state and later incorporated into the Turkic Khaganate. In ancient Chinese sources dating to the sixth and seventh centuries, Kesh is recorded as the center of Southern Sogd [5]. For instance, the kingdoms of Maymurch (Mi-go), Kesh (Shi-go), Kebudan (Tsao-go), and Kushan (He-go) are noted as having belonged to the state of Kang (Kangju). The *Bei Shi* chronicle emphasizes that the state of Shi-go (Kesh) was located on former Kang (Kangju) territories, at a distance of ten *li* (approximately 5.76 km) south of the Dumo-shui (the Kashkadarya River). According to Chinese scholars, Nami-shui refers to the Zarafshan River, while Dumo-shui represents the ancient name of the Kashkadarya. After returning to China in 762–763, the Tang army commander Du Huan recorded in his work *Account of Places Visited by Du Huan* under the designation “Zhuqing Zhao” the following territories: Samarkand (Kang), Bukhara (An), Kibut (Cao), Kesh (Shi), Maymurch (Mi), Kushania (He), Khwarazm (Huohun), Bitik (Wudi), and Shahrissabz (Shishi).

The founder of ancient Ki-she (Kesh), one of the rulers of Kesh, Diche (600–620), also referred to as Ticho in other sources, is described as having possessed considerable authority among contemporary rulers [6]. It is noteworthy that during his reign envoys from Kesh were dispatched to other states, and foreign envoys likewise arrived at the court of Diche–Ticho. The confederative state structure of Sogdiana proved unable to withstand the Arab military campaigns. According to general information from written sources, internal rivalries among Samarkand, Kesh, and Nakhshab played a negative role in resisting external enemies. As an example, the separate minting of coins by the rulers of Nakhshab and Kesh indicates that their independent monetary policies undermined mutual economic relations. Until the mid-eighth century, the province of Kesh remained at the center of struggles aimed at becoming the capital of the unified Sogdian kingdom. However, following the reign of Shishpir (654–655), Samarkand ultimately remained the political center and capital of Sogd [7].

Conclusion

The territory of Southern Sogd, particularly the Kesh oasis, was one of the key political, economic, and cultural centers in the ancient and medieval history of Central Asia, and its development was closely connected with the process of population sedentarization. The results of the study indicate that, owing to favorable natural and geographical conditions, a well-developed irrigation system, and a strategic location, the Kesh oasis remained one of the core regions of Southern Sogd over a long historical period. During the sixth to eighth centuries, the activities of the Sogdians along the Great Silk Road played a decisive role in establishing Sogd’s



leading position in the political and economic life of the region. In addition to acting as commercial intermediaries, they distributed handicraft and agricultural products across vast territories, thereby accelerating economic and cultural integration between Eastern and Western civilizations. In this process, Kesh and its surrounding areas emerged not only as a crucial hub of trade routes but also as an active center of diplomatic and political interactions.

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