



Population Composition Of The Villages Of The Syrdarya Basin

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ethnic and linguistic composition of the population of the Syr Darya basin based on written sources and toponymic materials. Particular attention is paid to the interaction of Sogdian- and Turkic-speaking populations and their role in the ethnocultural development of the region.

KEYWORDS: Syr Darya basin, ethnic composition, Sogdians, Turkic peoples, villages, toponymy, ethnocultural processes.

INTRODUCTION

The Syr Darya basin has historically been one of the important regions of Central Asia, where various ethnic groups and cultures interacted over many centuries. Favorable geographical conditions, the development of agriculture and pastoralism, and the location of important trade routes contributed to the formation and development of numerous rural and urban settlements in the region.

Written sources and historical toponymic evidence indicate that the population of the Syr Darya basin was ethnically and linguistically diverse. In particular, Sogdian- and Turkic-speaking communities played an important role in the region during the early and developed Middle Ages. Therefore, studying the ethnic composition, languages, and ethnocultural relations of the population of the Syr Darya basin based on written sources and toponymic materials is important for understanding the historical and ethnocultural development of Central Asia.

Discussion and results. In order to examine the socio-cultural life and ethnic composition of villages and major settlements in Central Asia, particularly in the Syr Darya basin—an important constituent region of Central Asia—during the pre-Islamic period, especially in the sixth to eighth centuries, as well as during the first centuries following the spread of Islam in the region, it is necessary to consult contemporary written sources. Covering a period of nearly a millennium, the socio-political and ethnocultural processes that took place in the region are primarily reflected in written sources in Chinese, Sogdian, Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and other languages. The information contained in these sources makes it possible to examine the ethnic composition, spoken languages, everyday life, and, more broadly, the socio-cultural conditions of the populations of major settlements.

It should be noted that contemporary written sources contain relatively limited information concerning the ethnic composition of the inhabitants of villages in the Syr Darya basin, as well as those of villages throughout the broader region, particularly with regard to the languages spoken by rural populations. Only a few works dealing with the history of the region provide brief references to the languages spoken by its inhabitants. For example, Chinese chronicles generally refer to Central Asia as “Xi-yu” (“Western Regions”) or the “lands of the Hu”

("countries inhabited by sedentary populations"). However, they only rarely provide information on the ethnic composition, spoken languages, and ethnic characteristics of the populations inhabiting Central Asia, particularly the territories between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya and the adjacent regions. A similar situation can be observed in the works of Arab and Persian geographers, where information concerning the ethnic characteristics of the inhabitants of particular towns or villages appears only occasionally. Nevertheless, by comparing brief written accounts in various languages dating from the Early and High Middle Ages with toponymic materials, it is possible to develop a certain historical understanding of this issue. In this regard, it should first be emphasized that the populations of settlements extending from the upper reaches of the Syr Darya to its middle and lower basins displayed considerable diversity in terms of spoken languages and other ethnic characteristics. At the same time, these populations also shared certain similarities with the inhabitants of settlements located in other river basins of the region.

In other words, as in almost all oases of the region, part of the population of the Syr Darya basin was sedentary, while another part led a nomadic way of life. Agriculture and handicrafts constituted the principal occupations of the sedentary population, whereas pastoralism was the predominant economic activity among the nomadic communities. The majority of the sedentary agricultural population spoke Sogdian, while the nomadic pastoralists predominantly spoke Turkic languages. This linguistic pattern was particularly evident among the inhabitants of villages situated along the Syr Darya. In fact, the populations of Central Asian cities and major settlements were ethnically diverse, with Sogdian-, Turkic-, and other language-speaking communities living alongside one another.

During the Early Middle Ages, the indigenous population of the Fergana Valley was predominantly composed of sedentary agricultural communities living in towns and villages, while nomadic pastoralists were more numerous in the mountainous and foothill areas of the valley. During this period, the Fergana Valley was surrounded by regions such as Chach, Isfijab, Talas, Kashgar, Tokharistan, and Ustrushana, where Eastern Iranian- and Turkic-speaking peoples lived alongside one another. In 629, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang travelled to India through Semirechye and Chach, passing through Sogdiana. On his journey, he crossed the regions of Semirechye, Isfijab, Chach, and Sogdiana, located to the northwest of the Fergana Valley, and recorded that their inhabitants predominantly spoke the Suli (Sogdian) language. Regarding the language of the population of Fergana, Xuanzang wrote: "The language [of the people of the country of Feihan] differs from that of other countries," thereby emphasizing that the language spoken by the inhabitants of the valley differed from those spoken in the surrounding regions [1].

Nearly a century after Xuanzang, the Chinese traveller Hui Chao (723–726), who visited the southern regions of Central Asia, recorded the following regarding the language of the people of Fergana: "Their language is different and does not resemble that of the people of other countries." [2]. Based on such accounts, some researchers have argued that the language spoken by the inhabitants of Fergana differed from both Sogdian and Turkic and was not closely related to either of these languages [3]. It should be noted that these accounts by Chinese travellers suggest the possibility that, approximately a millennium before their journeys, the language spoken by the inhabitants of Fergana may have been closely related to the languages of the ancient sedentary populations of Central Asia, particularly the Sogdians and Parthians, and that



over the centuries it gradually diverged from these languages. Chinese chronicles dating to the third–second centuries BCE state that “although the inhabitants of the lands extending from Dayuan (Davan) to Anxi (Parthia) spoke different languages, they were able to understand one another.” [4] It follows from this that the populations inhabiting the territories extending from the Fergana Valley to Parthia, including Sogdiana and the neighboring historical regions situated between them, spoke closely related languages. Thus, a significant part of the population of Fergana in the early centuries CE appears to have consisted of Eastern Iranian-speaking peoples. Over the following centuries, linguistic changes may have occurred as a result of the migration of various ethnic groups into the region, or the language of the ancient Ferganians may have been gradually displaced by the languages of later populations. This may explain why, by the Early Middle Ages, the language of the Fergana population was perceived as distinct from those of the neighboring Sogdian- and Turkic-speaking peoples.

According to some researchers, the language spoken by the inhabitants of Fergana in the Early Middle Ages, and perhaps even in antiquity, was closely related to Tocharian, the language spoken by the ancient populations of Kucha, Aksu, Karashahr, and Turfan in Eastern Turkestan, east of Fergana. It is otherwise difficult to explain why Chinese authors, when discussing the languages spoken in the sedentary regions of Central Asia, specifically distinguished the language of the neighboring population of Fergana from those of other regions.

This interpretation also underlies the view advanced by some archaeologists that the Tocharians, one of the Indo-European peoples who migrated eastward across the Eurasian steppes during the first millennium BCE, eventually settled in Fergana and Eastern Turkestan [5]. Although Tocharian belonged to the Indo-European language family, it differed considerably from the Indo-Iranian linguistic branch from which the Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages developed. Likewise, although Tocharian-speaking populations lived in proximity to Turkic peoples in Eastern Turkestan and the Southern Altai region, their language was fundamentally different from Turkic in terms of its linguistic origin.

A considerable body of evidence from written sources and toponymic materials supports the view that the population of the Middle Syr Darya basin predominantly spoke Turkic and Sogdian, while other languages were also present in the region. Information concerning the languages spoken by the inhabitants of individual oases of the Middle Syr Darya region, such as Chach, Otrar, and Isfijab (Sayram), makes it possible to form a more specific historical understanding of the linguistic situation in this area.

Regarding the language of the inhabitants of Chach and the neighboring oases to its northeast and south, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang wrote: “The region extending from the city of Suyeshui (Suyab) to the country of Jieshuangna (Keshaniya/Kesh) is called Suli (Sogdiana). [The inhabitants of this region] are likewise known by the same name. Their script and language are also designated by this name.” [6]. It follows from this account that the territory extending from Semirechye to Kesh (Shahrisabz) was referred to as Sogdiana during the Early Middle Ages. This makes it possible to regard Chach as one of the oases situated within this broader geographical and cultural sphere. At the same time, the fact that many of the ruling dynasties of pre-Islamic Chach were of Turkic origin, together with the presence of major settlements such as Chach, Ilak, Tunkat, Arbalig, Jabghukat, Khatunkat, and Namudlig, whose names represent Turkic or mixed Turkic-Sogdian toponyms, suggests that a part of the

population of the oasis was ethnically Turkic. It also indicates that Turkic-speaking communities founded a number of villages and towns in the region during this period.

There is evidence suggesting that a certain part of the population of the Middle Syr Darya region consisted of the inhabitants of Chach and that their language possessed distinctive features, differing from both Turkic and Sogdian. The Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi (10th century) noted that the language of the people of Chach was the most beautiful among all the Haytal (Hephthalite) languages. He further indicated that this language was distinct from other languages spoken in the region, including that of the population of Sogdiana (Samarkand) and the linguistically related inhabitants of the neighboring rural districts of Bukhara [7]. This suggests that not all inhabitants of Chach were Sogdians during the Early Middle Ages. In other words, al-Muqaddasi's observation that the language of the people of Chach differed from the language spoken in Sogdiana and the rural districts of Bukhara (Sogdian) was unlikely to have been made without a basis in the linguistic realities of the period.

At the same time, the Sogdian origin of the names of dozens of settlements –towns and villages –in the Chach oasis dating back to the pre-Islamic period and recorded in the works of Arab and Persian geographers indicates that Sogdians constituted a significant proportion of the population of this region. Such toponyms include Banokat, Binkat, Dinfaghkat, Navkat, Chinonchkat, Kharoshkat, and others.

From the fourth–third centuries BCE onward, the Sogdians, who had become actively involved in international trade, established trading settlements along the northeastern routes, many of which later developed into towns [8]. These settlements witnessed a synthesis of different cultures, particularly the emergence of a Turkic-Sogdian symbiosis. This natural process developed on the basis of mutual interests. The nomadic (Proto-Turkic) communities benefited from economic and cultural relations with the Sogdians, while the Sogdians were interested in maintaining political relations with the nomadic populations. Consequently, within the network of “Turkic-Sogdian settlements” extending from Chach to Gansu, place names containing the Sogdian elements kent (k'nδ), meaning “village” or “town,” and diz (δyz), meaning “fortified settlement” or “fortress,” are frequently encountered[9]. In particular, settlements in Ustrushana, Chach, Semirechye, Eastern Turkestan, and Gansu, functioning as major centers of trade and craftsmanship, also exerted a significant influence on the cultural, religious, and ideological life of these regions.

A significant proportion of the Turkic peoples, both in antiquity and during the Middle Ages, tended to prefer a nomadic way of life to urban life. This is supported by the following account recorded by Mahmud al-Kashgari: “Yatuq refers to anything forgotten or abandoned. Hence, a lazy person is called a yatuq kishi. Among the Oghuz, those who do not leave their towns and do not participate in warfare are also called yatuq. The term means ‘lazy’ or ‘abandoned.’”[10]. This suggests that population groups accustomed to a highly mobile way of life did not readily accept the sedentarization of their fellow tribesmen and the abandonment of traditional customs, viewing such people negatively as “lazy” or “inactive.” Interestingly, although the Oghuz Turks constituted a substantial part of the population of towns in the middle and lower reaches of the Syr Darya, the persistence of such a concept among them indicates that the nomadic way of life continued to be regarded from a distinctly different and, in many respects, more favorable perspective.

At this time, as in the Sogdian confederation as a whole, the administrative and political system of Panjikent (Panch) possessed a distinctive internal structure based, albeit relatively, on a confederative form of governance. Written sources dating to the Early Middle Ages indicate that a number of administrative units known as rustaqs, roughly corresponding to present-day districts or large villages in the Upper Zarafshan Valley, formed part of the principality of Panch. The documents from Mount Mugh mention the following estates or minor principalities belonging to Panch: Makhiyan, Parghar, Kshtut, Martushkat, Madm, Kum, Zarovat, Iskadar, Khshikand, Varz, Krut, Fatmiv, Pakhut, Eftmaut, Shavkat, the Yaghnob Valley, Anzab, Buttaman, and others[11].

In fact, although these administrative units were territorially comparable to individual villages, they possessed their own autonomous systems of governance. Therefore, in a certain sense, they may also be described as “minor principalities.” In the Arab-Persian historical works of the period, these small territorial possessions belonging to the principality of Panch were generally referred to as rustaqs [12]. These sources indicate that each rustaq had its own local administrator, who, in turn, was subordinate to the supreme ruler of Panch. More generally, Arab-Persian sources demonstrate that relatively large principalities of Transoxiana, such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Ustrushana, likewise contained administrative units known as rustaqs, similar to those found in Panch.

An analysis of the Mount Mugh documents as a source for historical geography demonstrates that most of the place names referring to principalities, administrative territories, and localities recorded in these documents are directly associated with the geographical and political environment in which they were produced. These primarily include the principality of Panch and its subordinate territories, such as Parghar, Partan, and Khakhsar, which represented relatively large administrative-geographical units broadly corresponding to present-day districts or fortified settlements, as well as dozens of villages of varying sizes.

The fact that the administrators of territories such as Parghar, Partan, and Khakhsar are referred to in the documents by the Sogdian term xuvu, meaning “ruler” or “governor,” just as the supreme ruler of Panch was, suggests that these territories constituted administrative-political units possessing a certain degree of semi-autonomy. At the same time, the content of the Mount Mugh documents indicates that places such as Iskatar, Krut, Anzav, and Akhsikand, which are mentioned several times, were economically important villages within the principality of Panch.

A historical-geographical analysis of these documents not only makes it possible to identify the locations of dozens of toponyms, but also provides valuable evidence for reconstructing the original local forms of place names recorded in written sources in other languages, particularly in Chinese chronicles, whose authentic forms have remained disputed or uncertain to the present day.

1. Parghar is a Sogdian term meaning “above the mountain/mountainous place” or “the upper part of the mountain.” It was the name of both a mountainous area and a historical region in the Upper Zarafshan Valley, situated in the left-bank basin of the Zarafshan River. Today, the name survives in the form Falghar, referring to the territory between the Kshtut and Fan Darya tributaries flowing into the Zarafshan River. Parghar appears to have occupied a particularly important position in the economic life of Panch. Economically and administratively subordinate to Panch, Parghar seems to have resolved many of its affairs not through the

central authority in Samarkand, but directly within the administrative and political framework of the principality of Panch[13].

2. Partan/Portan is recorded in eighteenth-century documents in the form Pordon and may be identified with a place of the same name located in the Shavdar district of the Samarkand region, within the Moghiyan Darya basin[14].

3. Khakhsar literally means “head of the spring” or “source of the spring.” It was a minor principality located southeast of Samarkand.

4. Iskatar corresponds to the present-day village of Iskodar in the Upper Zarafshan basin. This settlement, which was situated near the villages of Urmetan, Zarovod, and Khshikat between Panjikent and Matcha, is located near the administrative center of present-day Ayni District in Tajikistan.

5. Krut corresponds to the present-day village of Kurut in the Upper Zarafshan Valley, situated between Panjikent and Matcha. Located near Ayni District in Tajikistan, this settlement lies in the vicinity of the villages of Iskodar, Khshikat, and Fatmev.

6. Anzav corresponds to the present-day settlement and mountain pass known as Anzob, located in the Yaghnob River basin in the Upper Zarafshan region. The Yaghnob River is a tributary of the Zarafshan River.

7. Akhsikand corresponds to the present-day village of Khshikat (Khushikat) in the Upper Zarafshan basin. Situated between Panjikent and Matcha, this settlement lies near the villages of Zarovad, Iskodar, and Fatmev and is located in close proximity to the administrative center of Ayni District in Tajikistan[15].

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12. Rustaq is a Persian term corresponding to the meaning of "village" and was used as a historical-geographical concept in Central Asia, Iran, and, to some extent, in Arab countries. The term could denote a village, town, aul, market, cultivated territory, sedentary settlement, agricultural land, or a developed urban locality. Following the Mongol conquest of Central Asia and Iran, the term tuman gradually came to be used in place of rustaq. See: *National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan*. Tashkent: "National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan" State Scientific Publishing House, 2004, p. 395.
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