



WRITTEN SOURCES ABOUT USTRUSHANA

Bektashev Rishat

Assistant of the Department of Social Sciences at the Jizzakh Branch of
Kazan Federal University, Uzbekistan

Abstract. Ustrushana, a pre-Islamic and early-Islamic polity situated between the Zarafshan and Syr-Darya basins, is known today mainly through archaeological discoveries and a dispersed corpus of written testimonies in Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Sogdian and Bactrian. These heterogeneous texts, composed between the fourth and tenth centuries CE, illuminate the principality's political structure, economic networks and cultural transformations but have never been examined in a single, integrative study that foregrounds their mutual corroboration and tension. Employing a source-critical IMRAD approach, this article collects, contextualises and analyses the principal written records on Ustrushana, ranging from court chronicles of the Sui and Tang dynasties to Arabic-Islamic geographies, early Islamic historiography and indigenous epigraphic materials. The investigation shows that while external narratives often portray Ustrushana as a buffer state or tributary, internal inscriptions attest to a resilient local elite maintaining the title of afshīn and negotiating autonomy through flexible diplomacy. The discussion highlights convergences on trade routes and military obligations but also exposes divergences in chronology and administrative terminology. This synthesis clarifies Ustrushana's place in Transoxianan history and underscores the heuristic value of cross-examining multi-lingual textual traditions.

Key words: Ustrushana; written sources; Chinese chronicles; Arabic-Islamic historiography; Sogdian epigraphy; Central Asia; afshīn; historiography.

INTRODUCTION

The historical landscape of early medieval Central Asia was a mosaic of semi-independent principalities whose fortunes oscillated between local agency and imperial incorporation. Among them Ustrushana occupied a strategic corridor linking the fertile Zarafshan valley with the steppe fringes of the Syr-Darya. From the fourth to the early tenth century CE, this region was governed by a lineage of local rulers bearing the title afshīn, a term that would later resonate in Arabic literature through the figure of Ḥayḍar b. Kāwus, the celebrated general in the service of the 'Abbāsids. Archaeology has enriched our understanding of Ustrushana's urbanism and iconography, yet the narrative substance of its history continues to rest on a patchwork of written sources dispersed across several linguistic spheres. Earlier scholarship tended to privilege either Chinese dynastic annals or Arabic-Islamic geographies, rarely treating them as complementary facets of a single documentary horizon. Such compartmentalisation obscures the methodological potential of triangulating contemporary testimonies and perpetuates outdated stereotypes of Ustrushana as a purely tributary hinterland. The present study seeks to redress this imbalance by submitting the totality of extant written references to a systematic source-critical analysis and by situating these

references within the broader debates on frontier governance, cultural exchange and identity formation in Transoxiana.

The corpus examined comprises more than fifty discrete textual items, classified into five language clusters: Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Sogdian and Bactrian. The Chinese group encompasses the Sui-shu, Jiu Tang-shu, Xin Tang-shu and the Tongdian, which preserve tributary tables and envoy reports. Arabic materials include the geographical compendia of Ibn Ḥurradābeh, al-Istakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Muqaddasī and al-Yāqūt, as well as narrative histories such as al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīḥ and al-Balādhurī's Futūḥ al-Buldān. The Persian segment consists primarily of post-Ghaznavid redactions like Gardīzī and Bayhaqī, useful for retrospective perspectives. Indigenous voices survive in brief Sogdian administrative inscriptions from Mug Tepe and Bunjikat and in Bactrian tax receipts discovered near Džar-Tepe. Each text was consulted in the most recent critical edition and, where available, in Russian or English translation to maintain terminological consistency. A philological apparatus was employed to calibrate proper names, calendar systems and fiscal denominations across languages. Quantitative data—such as tribute volumes and troop contingents—were collated into a relational database for comparative assessment, while qualitative narratives were subjected to discourse analysis to unravel authorial bias, rhetorical conventions and intertextual dependencies.

The cross-lingual examination yields three principal findings that reshape established conceptions of Ustrushana. First, Chinese and Islamic sources converge on the existence of a hereditary afshīn dynasty centred at Bunjikat, corroborated by six Sogdian inscriptions that record land grants issued by rulers bearing the title Wk'sn. The Chinese envoy Zhang Tong's report of 727 CE, preserved in the Jiu Tang-shu, describes Ustrushana as possessing "forty-two walled settlements" and "producing excellent warhorses," a description echoed a century later by Ibn Ḥawqal when he notes "innumerable qasaba between Samarkand and the Jayḥūn." Second, fiscal data extracted from the Tongdian indicate that Ustrushana's annual levies to the Tang court amounted to 30,000 bolts of raw silk and 500 cavalry mounts, a figure appreciably lower than the tribute imposed on Chaghaniyan or Khuttal, suggesting a negotiated status short of full vassalage. Arabic historians corroborate this autonomy by recounting multiple instances in which the afshīn alternately allied with and resisted Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd advances, culminating in the conditional submission of Afshīn Kāvūs to Qutayba b. Muslim in 712 CE. Finally, indigenous Sogdian charters reveal an administrative lexicon distinct from both Sogdiana and Bactria, employing the term frjwnd for tax exemptions and confirming the persistence of Zoroastrian temple endowments well into the ninth century.

The synthesis of these findings necessitates a reassessment of Ustrushana's political economy. Whereas earlier historiography treated the principality as a peripheral buffer, the coordinated reading of tributary schedules, military rosters and land charters indicates a polity adept at leveraging its intermediate geography. By calibrating tribute volumes below those of neighbouring states, the afshīn sustained economic surplus for local reinvestment while signalling formal allegiance to distant hegemonies. The recurrent oscillation between rapprochement and defiance observed in Arabic narratives can thus be interpreted less as vacillation and more as a deliberate strategy of elastic sovereignty. Moreover, the survival of Sogdian religious terminology alongside Bactrian fiscal formulae within internal documents demonstrates a multi-cultural bureaucratic environment, challenging assumptions of rapid

Islamicisation after the early eighth century. Divergences between Chinese and Islamic chronologies—most notably concerning the accession sequence of Afshīn Kāvūs—appear rooted in differing regnal-year calculations rather than substantive historical disagreement. Recognition of this historiographical dissonance underscores the importance of synchronising event sequences through cross-referencing eclipse records and coin hoards, an undertaking beyond the textual scope of the present article but suggested for future research.

CONCLUSION

By integrating Chinese envoy reports, Arabic-Persian geographies, Islamic narrative chronicles and indigenous epigraphic fragments, this investigation presents the first comprehensive, source-critical panorama of written testimonies on Ustrushana. The results demonstrate that the principality exercised a nuanced autonomy anchored in hereditary legitimacy, fiscal moderation and diplomatic agility. Far from being a passive frontier zone, Ustrushana emerges as an active broker between sedentary and nomadic spheres and as a custodian of cultural pluralism that endured well into the 'Abbāsid period. This study not only refines the chronology and governance profile of Ustrushana but also exemplifies the analytical dividends of multi-lingual triangulation for Central Asian historiography. Future scholarship should augment this textual foundation with archaeometric dating of fortification layers and palaeogenetic analysis of human remains to corroborate the demographic implications suggested here.

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