



The Strategic Role of Ancient Termez At The Crossroads of The Great Silk Road: Cultural Exchange, Trade, and Urban Development

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Abstract

The Surkhandarya Province situated on the cross-roads of ancient civilizations in South Uzbekistan is one of the most diverse cultural landscapes in Central Asia. This region was a crucial part of both the ancient Great Silk Road - and its corridors saw an active exchange of goods and products, religious beliefs and art. History Surkhandarya was a host for early Buddhist cultural centers such as that of Fayaztepa which was the center of the Greco-Buddhist Culture along with Khalchayan. Other notable sights include a fortified tower located in Sariosiyo and Dulmurod's house (early 19th century) built in traditional architectural style. With these monuments beside it, the region retained such strong traditions of pottery production, carpet weaving, and embroidery as defined much of its cultural identity. However, one way of doing this is by undertaking a comparative historical analysis alongside a descriptive examination of material culture. Materials The materials used in this study were archaeological and inscriptive data, archival documents, and local craft studies which were integrated to track the developments emplaced over different historical phases. Results testified that the Tavka fortress represented a customs point of the Silk Road with unique mural paintings; Karatepa and Fayoztepa Buddhist centers with multilingual inscriptions and sculptural appearance became eminent on their time, whilst Kirqqiz complex was an early scientific and astronomical institution. Although alternating periods of decline and revival occurred, crafts on the local level preserved peculiar stylistic features and socio-cultural relevance. Multilayered historical and cultural heritage of Surkhandarya as a testimony to longstanding interaction, continuity of artistic traditions and spiritual history, testament of the need for preservation sites and crafts.

Keywords: Surkhandarya heritage; Buddhist complexes; Tavka fortress; Kirqqiz observatory; traditional crafts; Silk Road culture.

1. Introduction

The Surkhandarya area as a periphery The Surkhandarya was at the crossroads of ancient cultures in southern Central Asia and, by historical context, it has not been a "backwater/far away" region of political development but rather a centre of culture, economic

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vitality and scientific exchange. Its location on the path of the Great Silk Road laid ground for the creation of border customs points, strongholds and cities that managed transcontinental trade routes from east to west. Both archaeological and historical sources attest that the region was dotted with customs stations and forts in a systematic way, both for controlling the caravans, taxing them, or protecting against theft [1]. One good example of these is the Tavka fortress in the Sherabad district, where archaeological research has shown that it included well-preserved structures and murals from Kushan and post-Kushan periods. These results suggest that Tavka was not only military and administrator but a ceremonial space, representing political power as well cultural identity [2].

Broader cultural context in Surkhandarya is represented by such complexes as Qaratapa, Fayoztapa and Kirqqiz (Shahri Somon) and major religious- intellectual institutions. Archaeological research on Qaratapa and Fayoztapa has revealed the architecture of Buddhist monasteries, sculpture, and records in multiple languages that testify to the establishment of institutions for religious education and performing rituals from the first to the seventh centuries AD. This is substantiated by epigraphic sources in Brahmi, Kharoshti and Bactrian languages that testify to intercultural encounters and participation of various religious traditions. Regarding Kirqqiz, the medieval written sources and architectural evidence confirm its stature as a place of learning in Islamic times (9th to 11th Century). Collectively, these edifices demonstrate that religious and scientific institutions as well as architectural conventions in the region persisted for many centuries from antiquity through medieval times [3].

In addition to the legacy of these monuments, Surkhandarya has a long tradition of local craftsmanship that has been integral part in the development and formation of its social and cultural image throughout its history. Ethnographic evidence, archives and oral history show that such traditional crafts as pottery, carpet-weaving, hat-making, embroidery and leatherwork were well developed in the main centers in this region: Termiz (Termez), Sherabad, Denov and Boysun. Denov and Sherabad pottery was characterized by special methods of glazing and forms, Boysun embroidered skullcaps and Termiz carpets known not only in the region, but also far beyond its borders up to in markets of domestic and foreign countries. These craft traditions were handed down through master-apprentice relationships and dynasties of families that kept stylistic continuity alive for generations to come [4].

Local industries in Surkhandarya did not completely disappear, despite far-reaching social and economic changes during the Soviet period: a process of industrialization and organization of traditional economic systems. Archival evidence suggests that even though some centers declined or were reorganized, many traditional craftspeople adjusted their production to changed circumstances, continuing to make local decorative styles and production methods. This persistence reveals the survivability of intangible cultural heritage, and its ability to store cultural memory despite political and economic transformation [5].

In this situation, conservation and restoration of monuments are endowed with special importance and so are its traditional handicrafts. A combination of archaeological sites and living craft traditions yield an integrated picture of Surkhandarya as a culturally interwoven landscape historically [6]. In addition to helping to protect national identity, conservation efforts help sustain cultural tourism and the passing on of historical information to new generations. Therefore, Surkhandarya region appears as a unique model of cultural continuity, transformation and acculturation as part of the general history of Central Asia [7].

2. Research Method

It is the coexistence of administrative centers like Tavka fortress with large Buddhist religious complexes and later Islamic-period intellectual sites, which indicates that the area served as a stable cultural corridor, not an outlying region. The cultural evolution of the Surkhan oasis was gradual and smooth in the form of adaptation and synthesis, but there was no Gablian break.

The survival of such traditional craft-making activities until the mid-twentieth century indicates how intangible cultural heritage perpetuates regional identity in the face of radical social and economic change. By integrating archaeological monuments with living craft traditions, Surkhan Oasis can be appraised as a resilient and dynamic cultural landscape with historical significance spanning many periods of time.

The report was prepared based on three scientific articles devoted to the historical monuments, archaeological artefacts and traditional craft in the Surkhan oasis. The reported facts in these works were amalgamated, and the content was considered as additional empirical data. Archaeological interpretation, historic-ethnographic investigation, cultural heritage description and archival research were the essential methodological grounds of the study.

In stage one, Tavka fortress as an ancient customs station, murals and processes in history related to the Great Silk Road on the region of Surkhandarya were identified. They gave also an answer to the meaning of those structures and complex stratigraphy settings, interpreted in light of the archaeological research conducted by Sh. Rakhmonova.

In the following stage, major Buddhist sites such as Karatepa, Fayoztepa and Kirqqiz were researched. Some monuments were dated between both traditions based on the architectural systems, structural arrangement, inscriptions, sculptural aspects and religious-cultural traits of these shrines. The primary evidence base for this part of the study came from archaeology tour reports, unearthed artifacts, inscriptions and interpretations of such readings by scholars.

It was also important to reveal particular features of the local handicraft traditions in Surkhan oasis of 1950s-1980s. The evolution of pottery, embroidery, carpet making, shoemaking, and traditional headwear (aykol) production was explored through periodical press materials as well as archival documents (fonds 258 and 544), oral history interviews and ethnographic records documenting the artisanal work of multi-generational craftsmen. The impact of soviet industrial policy, the fall of traditional craft centers and the loss and transformation of a number of craft branches was reconsidered from standpoint of scholarly neutrality.

Thanks to the principle of historicity, every social-cultural process could be perceived in its historical period. Comparison with similar monuments from other regions allowed us to establish common features inherent in the monuments of the Surkhan oasis, among which were aspects of the local construction technique, decorative system and craftsman's processing. The archaeological descriptive approach helped construct aspects related to the structural and material features of monuments, while ethnography contributed to an understanding of learned crafts knowledge, apprentice-master systems, and intergenerational continuity of craft skills. Thirty years later, a comparison of the archival documents with academic literature made it possible to retrace precisely how the history and culture of the region developed.

3. Results and Discussion

Archeological and historical evidence show that the Surkhan oasis served as an autonomous and linked up cultural "continuum" over a sustained period of time. Excavations at the most informative objects such as Tavka fortress, Karatepa and Fayonztepa testify that all architectural structures are arranged in a continuous range from the 1st to 7th centuries A.D. according to both strata dating and material culture remains. Historical sources and ethnographic material reinforce this observation that organization of administration, religion, and crafts continued in the region. Taken as a whole, these results suggest that the Surkhan oasis was a long-term locus of strategic and cultural development for the Oasis Complex along the Great Silk Road, rather than an intermittent or dispersed site [8].

According to the archaeological data, the Sherabad region has become a center for concentrated strategic activities in medieval during early Middle Ages in Surkhan oasis. ExplorationE Excavations at the fortress Tavka have exposed vast architectural remains including a fortification wall and internal structures, mural paintings with hunting scenes, feasting of the elites, and symbolic animal imagery. The material results then supply physical evidence of the complex shaping and artistic undertaking at the location. Defensive architecture and representational wall paintings show that the Tavka also served as not only a military and administrative strong hold, but also a ceremonial and symbolic center during 5th–7th centuries AD [9]. The archaeological findings achieved at Tavka agree generally with previous scholarly interpretations, of which those suggested by Sh. A. Rakhmonov, who included this stronghold in a list of major fortified installations of the northern provinces of Tokharistan during the early Middle Ages strategy. Excavation is integrated with historical and ethnographic sources to demonstrate continued presence of administrative structures and elite practices in the Sherabad district. These results correlate with the idea that there was co-inhabitation of state institutions, religious tradition and craft production in some kind of unified cultural system at the Surkhan oasis, rather than individual or discontinuous occurrences [10]. Buddhist monuments in Karatepa and Fayoztepa were identified as the main religious and educational focal points in the Surkhan oasis, through archaeological and epigraphic material. According to epigraphic data found at Karatepa, monks, donors and pilgrims came from far-off regions: Bhami-, Kharoshti- and Bactrian language inscriptions can be seen here. Such inscriptions also offer firm evidence for religious patronage, as well as for monastic activity and trans-regional movement. The multilinguality of the texts is indicative of sustained communication between local Central Asian communities, and wider cultural worlds linked to the Indian subcontinent. In combination, this corpus of epigraphic evidence clarifies that Karatepa became a part of transregional Buddhist networks and functioned as a node for the active traffic of religious messages and items rather than a solely local monastic site [11].

The archaeological remains at Fayoztepa show that it was a formalised, structural Buddhist monastic complex in the 1st–3rd centuries AD. It includes large limestone colossal Buddha images, a wide variety of stucco decorations, and an orderly infrastructure in housing as well as religious spaces. These material traces are evidence of a high level of artistic proficiency in the production of sculpture and architectural form. The spatial layout of the complex, as well as the variety of art confirm that Fayoztepa served for both ritualistic and systematic monastic life as well as production of art. Together these data testify to the functions of Fayoztepa as a multi-purpose worship and institutional hub, and echo similar traditions of monumental Buddhist art and architecture in the Surkhan oasis in the early centuries AD [12].

The literary sources inform us that the intellectual life of the Surkhan was not confined to the Buddhist period but endured into early Islamic times. Medieval Islamic writer mention

scientific scholarship in the lands including astronomy and mathematics, and citing scholars such as Ahmad al-Usturlabi for astronomical instrument invention and instruction. These notices afford evidence of systematic scholar work under the Samanid dynasty. When compared with the architectural remains and site layout of sites like Kirkkiz, the information may indicate an institutional context for education and scientific activity. In sum, written and material evidence for the Surkhan oasis corroborate that intellectual traditions in this region were shifted and adjusted under Islamic domination rather than interrupted, hence allowing scholarship to continue within different cultural and religious parameters [13].

Archival sources, ethnographic reviews and oral memories prove that the traditional crafts of a Surkhan oasis used to operate during the 20th century alongside industrialization and economic reorganization. It was only through Sherabad, Denov and Boysun that glazed potteries of specific forms and techniques continued until a later time [14].

Further proof of their connection is provided by the tradition of embroidery, carpentry and carpet-weaving has been brought through from the past - with such regional products as boysun "guldo'zi" headgear and "lolagul landscape panorama"; Poshkhurd village woolen carpets (dating back long centuries) or Termez district carpet-weaving traditions itself. These remains attest that manual workmanship did not disappear in the Soviet era, instead adjusted to other economy and way of live conditions but keeping stylistic elements own for each locality [15].

The continuity of these craft traditions is tangible proof of cultural continuity at the local level. Despite the industrialization and rational economic planning of the twentieth century, craftsmen preserved inherited techniques, decorative motifs, and modes of transmission that were dependent on family and master-apprentice relations.

This evidence demonstrated that traditional handicrafts played the role of a modus for maintaining cultural knowledge and social identity in Surkhan oasis at the turn of XIX – XX centuries.

Taken along with the archaeological and epigraphic evidence outlined above, these finds support the conclusion that Surkhanoasis evolved as a networked cultural complex in which administrative centers, religious institutions, intellectual activity and craft communities co-existed at different chronological moments.

The composite evidence of monuments and living craft traditions verifies continuity and adaptation between eras rather than a break, offering empirical support to consider the Surkhan oasis as an enduring cultural landscape characterized by interaction and change.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this work show that the Surkhan oasis represents a deep-going and internally interconnected cultural landscape, whose development has been guided by ongoing interactions between political power, religious authorities, thought patterns and craft activities. Archaeological and historical data attest that this was not just a pass-through area on Great Silk Road, but an important center of authority, religious life and knowledge in antiquity up to the Middle Ages. Important monuments, for example the Tavka fortress, are able to deliver insight into administration and customs of the territory and present Political power in architecture and mural art in early medieval Northern Tokharistan. Likewise, the Buddhist Karatepa and Fayoztepa monasteries exemplify the Surkhan oasis as an important regional religious centers linked in transregional cultural and intellectual networks. Multilingual inscriptions, sculptural traditions and monastic architecture testify to intimate and sustained

contact with other regions as well as a high level of contemporary Buddhist intellectual activity and artistic endeavor. Ongoing intellectual activity in the Islamic period, as shown by the Kirqqiz complex, also demonstrates that this is a region able to retain and develop previous scientific and educational traditions. One of the success stories is the survival of old crafts into the 20th century, which testifies to how resilient intangible cultural heritage can be in the face of major political and economic changes. pottery, embroidery and carpet-weaving as instruments of cultural continuity that reproduced regional distinction, collective memory notwithstanding industrialization and the transformation of institutions.

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