

The Influence of Historical-Cultural Ties in Central Asia on Socio-Political Relations

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical-cultural ties and socio-political relations that unfolded in the Central Asian region—specifically between the territories of Sogd and Tokharistan—during the Early Middle Ages. Through a comparative study of Chinese, Arabic-Persian, Byzantine, and Armenian written sources, as well as numismatic and archaeological data, the study sheds light on ethno-cultural migrations, systems of statehood, and foreign policy processes in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, Sogd, Tokharistan, Hephthalites, Turkic Khaganate, Written Sources, Numismatics, Archaeology, Socio-Political Relations.

1. Introduction

Studying the territorial geography, political and historical-cultural contacts, and socio-political relations of populations living in various regions, together with the influence of local cultures and migration processes on cultural relations, has always been regarded as a pressing task within the discipline of history.

Moreover, the chronology of the formative period of the region's modern peoples has not yet been fully elucidated, a gap that underscores the need for a scholarly, comparative study of the diverse historical, cultural, socio-political, and religious features that emerged in Central Asia [1].

The history of Uzbekistan is an inseparable part of the history of Central Asia, and re-examining the historical roots of the region's ancient civilizations from a new perspective, subjecting unresolved problems to source-based scholarly-comparative analysis, and synthesizing the results makes it possible to understand the impact of cultural processes on the development of the region's civilization.

The historical-cultural events and historical-geographic changes that took place in Sogd and Tokharistan during antiquity and the Early Middle Ages exerted considerable influence not only on present-day Uzbekistan but on the processes unfolding throughout Central Asia as a whole. Examining these issues within their historical-social context serves to enrich the pages of the history of Uzbek statehood with new data.

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Although the Early Middle Ages are generally dated to the 5th–9th centuries in the periodization of the region's history, the social and political events of the 6th–8th centuries yield considerably more information about the region's history and culture. During this period, the Hephthalites (420–565) and the Turkic Khaganate (552–744), which held sway over the region, maintained active political and diplomatic relations with Iran, China, and Byzantium—the leading political powers of the time—both within Central Asia and in the adjoining territories.

During the Early Middle Ages (5th–8th centuries), the cultural and socio-political relations between Sogd and Tokharistan in southern Uzbekistan possessed distinctive features of their own. The cultural and migratory processes between the territories of Sogd and Tokharistan, as well as questions of social relations, are documented in numerous written, numismatic, and epigraphic sources composed in various ancient languages.

At a time when globalization processes are intensifying, reconciling Western and Eastern civilizations, deepening mutual relations on the international stage, and preserving cultural heritage and local culture—together with fostering self-awareness among peoples who live across different regions, profess various religions, and speak different languages—are becoming matters of growing importance. It is against this backdrop that the present study revisits the source base for the history of Sogd and Tokharistan in the Early Middle Ages.

2. Research Method

The study of written sources from the Early Middle Ages—texts, memoirs, reports, numismatic data, epigraphic materials, and the like—containing information on the history and culture of the peoples of Central Asia, their ethnic origins, migration processes, and historical geography, began in the mid-nineteenth century. The sources illuminating the historical-cultural processes that unfolded during the Early Middle Ages in Sogd and Tokharistan, located in the southern part of the region, are particularly abundant.

Addressing the research problem calls for synthesizing the achievements of archaeology, anthropology, paleogeography, linguistics, numismatics, source studies, demography, and historical geography, and directing them toward the study of the history and culture of the peoples of Central Asia.

The invasion of the Arab Caliphate during the final stages of the Early Middle Ages, along with historical events pertaining to the region and information on the population's way of life, culture, and beliefs, is to some extent reflected in Chinese, Byzantine, Armenian, Syriac, Middle Persian (Pahlavi), Indian, Sogdian, Bactrian, Old Turkic, and Arabic-Persian sources of that era. Accordingly, the present study adopts a comparative source-critical method, cross-referencing narrative written sources in these languages against numismatic, epigraphic, and archaeological data in order to reconstruct the socio-political and cultural relations between Sogd and Tokharistan.

3. Results

3.1. Territorial and Political-Administrative Framework of Sogd and Tokharistan

During the Early Middle Ages, the region comprised such historical-geographic territories as Chach, Otrar, Ferghana, Ustrushana, Sogd, Bukhara, Marv, and Tokharistan, situated along the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins and the areas adjoining them.

There were both similarities and differences in the political and administrative structures of these territories. Some were considerably larger in extent and outwardly resembled

confederative formations, while others were relatively small yet possessed a more coherent internal structure. For instance, Chach had three, Ferghana six, Sogd close to ten, and Tokharistan more than twenty-five petty rulers, whereas Otrar, Ustrushana, Khorezm, and the Marv oases had only one or two each [2].

Thus, among the oases discussed above, Sogd and Tokharistan resembled one another in political and administrative terms. Sogd comprised separate political-administrative units such as Samarkand, Panjikent, Maymurch, Kabudan, Ishtikhan, Fay, Kushaniya (Kattakurgan), Nakhshab, and Kesh, while in Tokharistan such territories numbered more than twenty-five, including Chaganiyan, Termez, Khuttal, Kubadiyan, Kumed, Badakhshan, Balkh, and Guzgan, among others [3].

3.2. Chinese Written Sources

Nearly ten written sources on the Early Medieval history of Sogd and Tokharistan have survived to the present day. Among them, the Chinese chronicles stand out for their consistency and comprehensiveness, including such annals as the *Bei Shi* (History of the Northern Dynasties), the *Sui Shu* (History of the Sui Dynasty), and the *Tang Shu* (History of the Tang Dynasty). In addition, the accounts of authors such as Xuanzang (629–645) and Hui Chao contain valuable information on the history of Sogd and Tokharistan.

Chinese travelers journeyed through these lands and recorded information based on what they personally saw and heard. Xuanzang, who set out from China toward Eastern Turkestan in a northwesterly direction and witnessed the events of 630–640, traveled along the Semirechye river valley through Chach and Ustrushana, paused for a time in Sogd, and subsequently reached Tokharistan [4].

The traveler Hui Chao, for his part, began his journey from China in a southwesterly direction, recording in his annals everything he observed and learned along the way. The accounts left by both travelers describe the history and culture of the region in considerable detail, characterizing the territories through comparative analysis of one another—Sogdiana and Tokharistan, for example [5].

Likewise, among the Chinese chronicles of the Early Middle Ages, the *Tang Shu* provides information on the socio-political life and administrative structure of Sogd and Tokharistan, their territories and borders, the names and titles of their rulers, and their capitals, on the basis of which one may gain a broad understanding of their armies, domestic and foreign policy, and the language, religion, and culture of their populations. Moreover, the fact that these chronicles drew on information conveyed by envoys, merchants, and travelers who had either lived in Sogd and Tokharistan or traveled from these countries to China further enhances their value as historical sources.

The translation of the Chinese chronicles—first into Russian by N. Ya. Bichurin in 1850, and subsequently into French by Édouard Chavannes in the early 1900s—sharply increased scholarly interest worldwide in Central Asia, and in the history of Sogd and Tokharistan in particular. This growing interest is soon reflected in the research of Josef Markwart (1864–1930), which extensively covered the pre-Islamic political events in the states between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, especially Sogd and Tokharistan. Drawing on Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Chinese, and Syriac sources, Markwart placed particular emphasis on land relations between these two territories and on their foreign policy toward the Hephthalites and the Turkic Khaganate [6].

3.3. Byzantine, Armenian, and Greek Sources

In foreign historiography, the issues of this period are also extensively covered in Greek and Armenian sources with reference to Sogd and Tokharistan, from which conclusions about the political situation in the region can be drawn through the relations and conflicts among its peoples.

The history of social and political relations in world historiography has also been shaped by secondary sources—an example being the works of Armenian authors who recorded accounts heard from soldiers who had come to Tokharistan and served in the Sasanian army, as well as the works of Greek authors who incorporated the reports of Byzantine envoys who had visited the country.

For example, Byzantine authors such as Menander (late 6th century), Theophanes (early 7th century), and Theophylact Simocatta (first half of the 7th century) wrote about the wars waged by the Hephthalites and the Turkic Khaganate against the Sasanians, drawing directly on information brought back by these same envoys.

Because the Sasanian cultural environment exerted a marked influence on Tokharistan during the period of the Turkic Khaganate and the Hephthalites, the dynasties associated with the Khaganate in this region used both Pahlavi and Bactrian scripts in minting coins, which likewise makes this an important type of source. In particular, coins belonging to the Tokharistan Yabghu dynasty (620–750), a branch of the Ashina dynasty, were struck with the title “yabghu” in Pahlavi script.

3.4. Sogdian and Bactrian Written Monuments and Numismatic Evidence

The most reliable sources illuminating the Early Medieval history of Sogd and Tokharistan are, without doubt, the Sogdian and Bactrian written monuments produced within these societies themselves. Among them, the documents composed in each of the two languages are distinguished by the range of subjects they cover.

The Sogdian documents discovered on Mount Mugh, comprising a collection of more than eighty texts, date to the first quarter of the 8th century and contain a wealth of information on the socio-political life of that period. An even richer body of evidence for this period is provided by the Bactrian-language documents, which number more than one hundred and represent the legal records of the time.

The practice of adding Sogdian inscriptions to Sasanian-type coins in Tokharistan was introduced with the establishment of Turkic Khaganate rule in the region. Prior to this, under the Hephthalites, official inscriptions in Tokharistan had been rendered exclusively in Bactrian script; it was only once the Turkic Khaganate governed the state through the Tokharistan yabghus that the Sogdian term “Tokhari” began to appear in inscriptions. Following the Khaganate's conquest of Tokharistan, new coinage began to be minted.

According to the numismatist G. Baboyarov, a similarity can be observed in the double-portrait coins of Northern Tokharistan, Chach, and Sogd. This suggests that the tradition entered Chaganiyan by way of Sogd [8].

These coins were first minted by the Turkic Khaganate in Chach at the end of the 6th century and subsequently spread to Sogd and other countries. Sogdian script, accordingly, came to be used more widely than Bactrian [8].

Moreover, an analysis of the information concerning the ruling divisions of Tokharistan drawn from the Sogdian documents of Mount Mugh also reveals references to the Vashgird territorial unit in Northern Tokharistan and to relations between Sogd and Panjikent [9].

In the course of studying the distinctive features of the Sogdian documents of Mount Mugh, researchers M. Iskhakov and A. Otakhodjayev examined the socio-political and ethno-cultural processes in Sogd and Tokharistan [10]. G. Baboyarov, in turn, addressed the question of Sogd and Tokharistan as well, noting that several ancient Turkic titles were used in Sogd, while close to ten Turkic titles were employed in the administration of Tokharistan [10].

3.5. Arabic-Persian Sources

Arabic-Persian sources also occupy an important place in illuminating the pre-Islamic history of Sogd and Tokharistan. A number of studies on this subject have been published, the earliest dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among them, the works of Yu. Markwart, V. Barthold, and E. Chavannes hold a special place. In particular, Barthold's research, alongside its treatment of the conquest of Central Asia more broadly, also gave attention to questions concerning Sogd and Tokharistan.

In his studies, V. V. Barthold provided a detailed historical-geographic description of the region's territories, along with a thorough account of their culture, history, and urban civilization [11].

The research conducted by G. Ghoibov on the history of Sogd and Tokharistan stands out in particular. In examining the process of the Arab conquest of these lands, the scholar—relying primarily on Arabic-Persian sources—devoted attention to the resistance of both countries against the Arab invasion and to their mutual political and cultural relations [12].

Furthermore, Sh. Kamoliddin, who studied Sogd and Tokharistan in relatively greater depth, addressed in his research—based on Arabic-Persian and Chinese sources together with archaeological materials—such questions as the political and administrative centers of both states, their ruling dynasties, and the political and socio-cultural relations between them [13].

3.6. Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological finds likewise occupy an important place as sources for the Early Medieval history of Sogd and Tokharistan. Over nearly a century of excavation, hundreds of material-culture monuments have been uncovered among the remains of dozens of ancient cities in both provinces.

A substantial portion of the material evidence recovered consists of numismatic and epigraphic materials, seals, ceramic and metal objects, palace wall paintings (at Balalyk-tepe, Afrasiab, Panjikent, Ajina-tepa, Tavka-kala, and elsewhere), terracotta figurines and statuettes, and Zoroastrian and Buddhist temples, among other finds.

A. Malikov, who studied the ancient Turkic material culture of Tokharistan under the Turkic Khaganate, notes—drawing on numerous written sources and archaeological finds—that the Khaganate exerted considerable political and historical-cultural influence during this period over Tokharistan, Sogd, Chach, Ferghana, and other territories [13].

In recent years, researchers in Central Asia—particularly in neighboring Turkmenistan and Tajikistan—have carried out a number of scholarly studies on the history of the Early Middle Ages, focusing mainly on the Tokharistan region and, to a lesser extent, on the history of Sogd. Source studies of this period have advanced considerably, with the research of A. Gurbanov and M. Ismatov drawing particular attention. Both scholars examined numerous written and material sources relating to the Hephthalite period [14].

4. Discussion

Taken together, the source base surveyed above shows that the Early Medieval history of Sogd and Tokharistan cannot be reconstructed from any single category of evidence. Chinese dynastic chronicles and travelers' accounts supply an external, largely administrative and diplomatic perspective, informed by envoys and merchants who had first-hand experience of the region. Byzantine, Armenian, and Greek authors, working mainly through secondary testimony of envoys and soldiers, situate Sogd and Tokharistan within the wider geopolitical contest among Iran, Byzantium, the Hephthalites, and the Turkic Khaganate. By contrast, the Sogdian and Bactrian documents, along with the coinage bearing Pahlavi, Bactrian, and later Sogdian legends, offer an internal, administrative-legal view of the two territories, allowing the transition from Hephthalite to Turkic Khaganate authority to be traced through changes in titulature and script. Arabic-Persian sources, composed after the Arab conquest, add a further retrospective layer, particularly valuable for reconstructing local dynasties and their resistance to the Caliphate. Archaeological data, finally, corroborate and, in places, extend the written record, especially with respect to material culture, urban topography, and religious life.

This layered source base explains both the relative richness of the historiography on Sogd and Tokharistan and the persistence of open questions concerning their internal political structure, since no one tradition of sources was produced with the same aims or level of detail. The comparative reading of these categories against one another, as undertaken by scholars such as Markwart, Barthold, Ghoibov, Kamoliddin, Baboyarov, and Malikov, therefore remains the most productive approach for advancing the field [15].

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the information available regarding the political, cultural, and socio-economic relations between Sogd and Tokharistan during the Early Middle Ages, the following conclusions may be drawn:

— The range of sources illuminating the history of Sogd and Tokharistan in the Early Middle Ages is considerably broad, preserved mainly in Chinese, Arabic-Persian, Greek, and Armenian sources, and partly in Sogdian, Bactrian, Indian, Old Turkic, and Tibetan sources. Overall, from the standpoint of source studies, a substantial body of scholarly research has been conducted on these materials.

— Part of the written sources takes the form of chronicles, historical compositions, and travel accounts, while another part survives in epigraphic and numismatic form, as material objects, documents, and inscriptions.

Overall, the scholarly research being conducted in the field of source studies may be regarded as reasonably satisfactory. Over the course of nearly a century, dozens of major specialists have emerged in this field. A substantial portion of the material in Chinese, Arabic-Persian, Sogdian, Bactrian, and other languages has been translated into major world languages such as English, Russian, French, and German, while some has been published in Uzbek. These works have made it possible to study the socio-political and cultural processes in Sogd and Tokharistan from every angle.

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