



## BALĶ III. FROM THE MONGOLS TO MODERN TIMES

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### iii. From the Mongols to Modern Times

The medieval and modern history of BalĶ, which has been filled with breaks and recoveries, offers a prime opportunity for a new approach to the study of the post-Mongol period in arid Central Asia. The political history and ethnic evolution of the BalĶ oasis have essentially shared with Mā Warā' al-Nahr (Transoxania) frontier and population movements that can be traced until the middle of the nineteenth century. The final integration of BalĶ into the Afghan domain was then hastened by the Anglo-Russian accord of 1873, which established the Amu Darya as the boundary between the zones of influence of the two empires.

BalĶ belonged to the Mongol Empire after its surrender to Jengiz Khan in 617/1220 and, with Bactria, formed the southern part of what became the khanate of Chaghatay. The destruction resulting from the Mongol conquests was very severe at BalĶ, and the city remained in ruins for more than a century (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, p. 299); for some time, however, hypotheses about the long-term consequences of this destruction have been debatable, for BalĶ did recover some prosperity in the course of the eighth/fourteenth century. Subsequently it was a valued appanage in the territorial system of the different Jengizid ruling houses until the twelfth/eighteenth century. Thus a long period of conflicts began, on the background of the disputes over the



succession and revolving around real or nominal control of these appanages. In this way the Mongol princes of the khanate of Chaghatay vied with one another, whether directly or indirectly through the intermediary of local dynasts, like the Kart rulers (*maleks*) of Herat, who were involved on several occasions.

The territorial changes brought about by the formation of Tīmūr's (Tamerlane's) empire initiated long periods of stability, which, however, began with the devastation caused by the BalĶ campaign in 771/1369. The city was included successively in Tīmūr's, ŠāhroĶ's, and Oloġ Beg's possessions, then, after more than twenty years of internal struggle, belonged to Sultan Ḥosayn Bāyqarā, who ruled southern Turkestan between 872/1468 and 911/1506 and established his brother Bāyqarā at BalĶ. The former died in combat against the Uzbek, who were ultimately victorious, after the short reigns of two of his sons, and established themselves permanently as far as the Hindu Kush. The period of Tīmūr and his descendants, the Timurids, was recognized from the beginning as favorable to the development of urban civilization (Clavijo, pp. 141-48).

The subsequent Uzbek period lasted three centuries, the longest in the post-Mongol history of BalĶ. The establishment of the Uzbeks was reflected in major construction activity at BalĶ (Mukhtarov, pp. 17-97), which became the third or fourth most important city of their empire. The written reports on Shaibanid and Janid BalĶ are quite numerous, and many contemporary authors came from this center of power or lived there (Akhmedov, pp. 3-14; Mukhtarov, pp. 8-16). The position of BalĶ in relation to Bukhara improved in the eleventh/seventeenth century: It became the second most important city in the Bukharan domain and the capital of the heirs to the Janid throne. This important position, however, attracted invaders and led to redefinition of international frontiers in the region.

From the west the Safavids installed themselves in Khorasan; the Uzbeks recaptured BalĶ from them in 922/1516. From the southeast came the Mughals; their occupation of BalĶ, from 1051/1641 to 1057/1647, under the command from 1056/1646 of Awrangzēb, who then became emperor, represented a last attempt to restore the old domain of Bābor. The episode of Nāder Shah a hundred years later was equally transitory. On the other hand, the birth of Dorrānī Afghanistan turned the Amu Darya into a frontier, where first *ataliks*, then Mangit amirs of Bukhara struggled with the Sadōzay and Moḥammadzay rulers of Afghanistan for a century. In 1164/1751 Aḥmad Shah incorporated



Balk into a political entity unconnected with Mā Warā' al-Nahr for the first time since the Mongol conquest. In 1257/1841 the Afghans permanently recaptured the city from the Bukharans, who had reestablished themselves there in 1241/1826 (Ivanov, pp. 107ff.). The suzerainty of the latter did not come to an end, however, until Bukhara itself lost its sovereignty in 1285/1868. Balk, which had shrunk to a large village during the twelfth/eighteenth century, finally lost its status as an administrative center in 1282/1866, in favor of Mazār-e Šarīf. Reduced to 500 households by the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Balk has since increased but is still only one tenth that of its neighbor.

The conditions of recent decline at Balk show that standard explanations of the frequent periods of crisis in the history of the Central Asian oases must often be revised. At Balk, both the population and the number of canals have diminished since the twelfth/eighteenth century, the latter dropping from eighteen to eleven. These facts, along with the importance of nomads around Balk and the supposed drying up of the *Balkāb*, could all be taken as evidence of the evolution of a typical post-Mongol Central Asian city. "It is only within the last 750 years that Balkh has fallen on evil days" (Toynbee, p. 95). The decline of Balk in favor of Mazār-e Šarīf must be viewed aside from the question of the so-called tomb of 'Alī, within the framework of solidarities resulting from the irrigation networks: The two cities form part of the same oasis and depend on the same supply line through the canals from the *Balkāb*. It thus seems more significant for the history of the development of the oasis to emphasize the migration of urban population from there to Mazār-e Šarīf, via Taḳta Pol, rather than contrast the modern village with the large ancient city. In fact, with about 30,000 inhabitants in 1295/1878 and 100,000 today, Mazār-e Šarīf demonstrates the capacity of the irrigation system in the oasis, where present population density is between 30 and 100 inhabitants per square kilometer (*Tübingen Atlas*, A VIII 3), to continue to support the largest city in Afghan Turkestan, as it has done in the past.

The cultural character of the Balk oasis today reflects the ethnic and political shifts in its post-Mongol history. The Turkish populations, especially the Uzbeks but also the Turkmen, predominate over the Tajiks. There are also colonies of Pashtun, though fewer than in the Maymana and Tāšqorġān oases; one Jewish community; and some Arabic-speaking villages (*Tübingen Atlas*, A VIII 16). The linguistic picture is differentiated, including an important component of the Fārsī of Balk, but it corroborates the profound Uzbekization



of the region (*Tübinger Atlas*, A VIII 11).

See also [balkāb](#).

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