



KĀṬ

KĀṬ (or Kāt, Kat), the old capital of [Chorasmia](#), situated by the Oxus/[Āmu Daryā](#) river, near its delta at the Aral Sea. Like the other large urban centers of Chorasmia, Kāt owes both its glory and demise to the Oxus, an unending source of sustenance as well as destruction in human history. While silt deposits from the river made the surrounding land fertile, and its water, through a network of man-made irrigation canals, has aided agricultural growth on vast scales since ancient times, at the same time, the nearly flat alluvial plain on which the lower course of the Oxus flows caused the riverbed and adjoining canals to shift over time, a disadvantage for the towns built on or near the lower Oxus. Accordingly, Kāt was relocated due to flooding at various times. One may infer from historical reports that such a natural shift was in progress during the 10th century, when Kāt was at the zenith of its history; this is the only period for which we find numerous reports on the city.

No historical or archeological record exists on Kāt from the pre-Islamic period, when the Afrighid dynasty (see [ĀL-E AFRIG](#)) of [K̄ārazmšāhs](#) is assumed to have ruled Chorasmia from their capital, Kāt. There are several archeological sites nearby, and the closest excavation hitherto, Toprak-kala, is some 25 miles north of Kāt (see [CHORASMIA i](#)). According to a Chorasmian tradition related by Abu Rayḥān Biruni (*Ātār*, tr., p. 41), one of the Afrighid kings, whose reign marked the beginning of the Chorasmian calendar (616 of the “era of Alexander,” i.e., the Seleucid era, corresponding to 305 CE, as reckoned by Biruni), built his castle at Fir on the outskirts of the city of [K̄ārazm](#) (i.e., Kāt); this citadel of clay and tiles consisted of three concentric forts, in the middle of



which rose the royal palaces. Fir's fortifications were so high that they would be visible from a distance of ten miles or more (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr., p. 41). The citadel Fir (or Fil) was one of the three parts of the town during Arab invasions of Chorasmia (which began ca. 44/663 and culminated in 93/712; see Ya'qubi, II, pp. 222, 252; Balāḍori, p. 423; Ṭabari, II/2, p. 1238; tr., XXIII, pp. 186-89; cf. Karāmati, forthcoming). Arab coins dated 56/676 and 79/699 bear the toponym Fil (which location was surmised in Jorjāniya by John Walker, 1958, p. 170, and Fir[uzābād] by Heinrich Nützel, no. 100, plate IV; no. 327, p. 381). For the next two centuries little is recorded specifically about Kāt; one may suppose that the capital city had experienced a fate similar to that of Chorasmia in its entirety.

In terms of size and splendor the capital of Chorasmia rivaled the major urban centers of the Iranian plateau. Moqaddasi (p. 287) compares Kāt in size to Nišābur, which, according to Eṣṭakri (p. 254), equaled one *farsak* in length and breath, which amounts to fourteen square miles. Other accounts give three *farsaks* (Tostari, p. 322) and one-third of a *farsak* (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 487; Eṣṭakri, p. 301; cf. Barthold, p. 145). The town was marked by a citadel, a prison, a congregational mosque, and a marketplace that was built along both banks of a canal known as Jardur that flowed through the center of the town (Eṣṭakri, p. 301; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 487; Moqaddasi, p. 287). A progressive inundation of Kāt can be inferred from the successive reports of the 10th-century Muslim geographers, especially those of Eṣṭakri (951 CE), Ebn Ḥawqal (976), the anonymous author of *Ḥodud al-ālam* (982), Moqaddasi (985), as well as Biruni (until 998). The congregational mosque that Moqaddasi describes as standing in the midst of markets, with black-stone column pedestals (Moqaddasi, p. 288), appears to be a new edifice replacing the old Friday mosque destroyed by flood, as reported a decade earlier by Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 478; cf. Barthold, p. 423). Likewise, subsequent to desertion of the old citadel of Fir due to overflow of the river, the palace was now standing in the center of the town (Moqaddasi, p. 278; for elucidations by modern scholars, see Le Strange, pp. 446- 47; Barthold, pp. 144-45; Bosworth). According to Biruni, who eye-witnessed the flooding of his hometown before his emigration at the age of twenty-five (in 998), Fir “was broken and shattered by the Oxus, and was swept away piece by piece every year, till the last remains of it had disappeared” in the year 1305 of the Seleucid era (994 CE) (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr., p. 41).

Moqaddasi, in spite of praising Kāt's edifices and architects, which points to a



continuous practice of construction as the city shifted, found the city very filthy, containing many refuse drains, which everywhere overflowed onto the high road (Moqaddasi, p. 288); this indicates again the consequences of flooding: a high underground water table which rejected sewage waste. Approaching the end of the century, the old town was constantly flooded by the river, and the inhabitants were moving farther and farther away eastward from the bank. A recent study by Yunes Karāmati expands our knowledge of the historical geography of medieval Chorasmia. In an elaborate array of computations, Karāmati compares the geographical coordinates of towns in Biruni's *Taḥdid* with the data obtained from modern satellite images. Among his conclusions we find that the observatory where Biruni and his associates collected their information was located, not in Kāt itself, but to the southwest towards Urganj and Khiva, the later capitals of Chorasmia (Karāmati, 2012, pp. 28-29). This data further confirms that Kāt, with the continuing flooding it had suffered, was no longer an appropriate place to build an observatory (Borjiān, 2012).

The Chorasmian capital was a commercial metropolis with a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population. The anonymous author of *Ḥodud al-ʿālam* (p. 122; tr., p. 121) describes Kāt as a town with abundant wealth (*k̄āsta*), a “resort of merchants,” and an “emporium of the Turks, Turkistan, Transoxiana, and the Khazars” (see KHAZAR). Its major products were cushion covers (*ruy-e moḳadda*), quilted garments (*qaḏāgand*), cotton stuffs (*karbās*), and felt carpets (*namad*), which suggest that cotton played an important role in the rural economy of the region, just as it does today in Uzbekistan. There must have been in Kāt substantial non-Muslim inhabitants. It is reported that Kāt was the seat of bishopric of the Christian church in the 8th century (Tolstov apud Bosworth). It was probably in Kāt that there lived and worked the Christian scholar ‘Isā b. Yaḥyā’ Masiḥi, a colleague of Abu Rayḥān Biruni, himself a native of the suburbs (*birun*) of Kāt. There must have also been a sizeable Zoroastrian community in Kāt from whom Biruni obtained the rich research data on Zoroastrianism in his *Ātār al-bāqia*. The *Ḥodud al-ʿālam* adds that Kāt was the gate (*dar*) of Ġuz Turkestan and that the townspeople were warlike and active fighters for the faith (p. 122, tr., p. 121). This statement reflects the frontier (*taḡr*) status of Kāt within Islamic lands, which compelled its inhabitants to defend their faith and civilization against the Turkic nomads, who were on their historic westward and southward migrations in the 10th century.



The process of Turkicization of Chorasmia in general, and Kāṭ—located on the right or Turkic side of the Oxus—in particular, was probably intensified soon after the Iranian dynasty of the K̄ārazmšāhs lost power to the Turkic dynasties (see [Chorasmia ii](#)). Kāṭ is referred to in several historical works by the name of the province, K̄ārazm (e.g., Ṭabari, *passim*; Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr., p. 41; Biruni, *Ketāb al-mosāmarāt fī aḵbār K̄ārazm*, quoted by Bayhaqī, pp. 656 ff.; tr., II, pp. 381, 392; see also the index in each book), or as K̄ārazm’s capital: *šahrestān* (Moqaddasi, p. 287), *qaṣaba* (Eṣṭaḵri, p. 301), *madina* (Biruni, *Taḥdid*, p. 246), and *šahr-e bozorg* (Tostari, p. 322). The meaning “major town, capital” could have been expressed by the word *kaṭ* or *kāṭ* in Chorasmian or other East Iranian languages of Central Asia (cf. Sogd. *kaθ*, *kanθ*, *kand* “town” [see Gharib, nos. 4761, 4470, 4937]; Khot. *kanthā*– “city” in Bailey, p. 51), which appear as suffixes in several Central Asian toponyms, such as Bonjikaṭ, [Aḵsikaṭ](#), the capital of [Fargāna](#), and Marakanḍa (Sogd. Smār(a)kanθ) “Samarqand,” the capital of Sogdia. There is yet another interpretation of the toponym: Yāqut (IV, p. 222) states that the word *kāṭ* was used by the Chorasmians for a wall (*ḥā’eṭ*) on the steppe; this seems to correspond to Sogdian *kaθām* “city wall” (Gharib, no. 4946; cf. *katām* “wooden structure,” *kadvāda* “wall,” in *Borhān-e qāṭe’* III, p. 1606, and Sogd. *kadwē* “roof,” in Gharib, no. 4725). Moreover, in the sole printed edition of *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam* (p. 122; tr., p. 121) we find the name of the Chorasmian capital spelled as Kāḷ; this must be an orthographic confusion between the symbols for *ṭ* and *ḷ*, both written with three dots above in the Perso-Arabic script.

Kāṭ lost its status as the capital of Chorasmia to Gorgānj across the Oxus, synchronous with the dynastic change from Afrighids to Ma’munids in 385/995. Three centuries later, in 732/1333, Ebn Baṭṭuṭa (tr., p. 549), on his way from Gorgānj to Bukhara, passed through Kāṭ, which he portrays as a small but prosperous town. Some forty years later, Timur devastated Kāṭ during his combat with Toqtameš, but later he had the destroyed walls reconstructed. The fact that Šaraf-al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi (index) makes several citations of Kāṭ implies its relative importance in the late 14th century.

The modern history of Kāṭ is marked by more flooding and population shifts but also by name changes. In the 17th century, another wave of flooding washed out the old canals. As a result, Anuša, khan of Khiva (1663-85), dug the canal Yārmīš and built a fortress on the left side of the Oxus and brought here the remaining population of Kāṭ. Meanwhile, the ruins of old Kāṭ on the right side of the river became known as Shaikh ‘Abbās Wali, after a local



mausoleum. In the 19th century the inhabitants of the new Kāt once again were relocated across the river around the mausoleum, and the settlement was renamed Šābbāz (i.e., Shaikh ‘Abbās; see *UMI* V, pp. 68-69). In Soviet Uzbekistan, the settlement Šobboz was renamed Beruniĭ in 1957 and gained the status of an urban center in 1962, dedicated to the forthcoming millennium observance of Abu Rayḥān Biruni. Beruniĭ is the administrative center of a district (*tuman*) in the Karakalpakstan Republic within Uzbekistan (*UME* I, pp. 723-25; see also *Atlas Uzbekskoi SSR*). In the early 21st century, the district of Beruniĭ, that is, the ancient Kāt, appears on satellite maps as a vast continuum of built environment and farmland, with a network of canals branching out from the Āmu Daryā River.

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