



SAMARQAND I. HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

i. History and Archaeology

Since the publication of the entry [Afrāsiāb](#) (*EIr.* I, 1984, pp. 576-78), new information has been brought to light on this archeological site and, consequently, on the history of pre-Mongol Samarqand. This progress is mainly a result of the activities of the MAFOUZ (Mission Archéologique Franco-Ouzbèke), which commenced in 1989 and continues to date.

Concerning the foundation of the city, which resulted from the fortification of the plateau (already sporadically occupied in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages), a pre-Achaemenid date, between ca. 650 and ca. 550 BCE, seems now confirmed. The specific character of this first urban foundation stands out more clearly. A wall follows the whole circuit of the plateau (5.5 km), complemented by another one which separates the town from the acropolis, situated in the northern part and itself including a citadel raised on an artificial platform. These topographical-functional features were to last as long as the town was centered on this site. The existence inside Afrāsiāb of an artificial water supply through the Dargom channel (extending 40 km from the Zarafšān River), a branch of which entered through the southern gate, is archeologically confirmed for the Achaemenid period only; but it seems probable that it existed from the beginning. The wall, 7 m thick, is massive, in contrast to those which were built upon it in the city's Achaemenid and Greek



periods. It is made of coarse mud bricks of plano-convex shape, all of which bear a mark, an indication that labor was strictly organized in groups of workers at the initiative of the local political power. Similar building techniques have been noticed at other Sogdian and pre-Sogdian sites during that pre-Achaemenid period: Kok Tepe (30 km north of Samarqand, with similar brick marks, a fact which suggests a contemporary foundation), Padaiatatak Tepe and Sangyr Tepe near Šahr-e Sabz, Eilatan and [Dal'verzin Tepe](#) in [Farğana](#).

The Greek occupation appears to be divided into two phases, the first lasting from Alexander to some date in the second half of the 3rd century BCE and the second, a shorter period of reconquest under the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides (r. ca. 171-145 BCE). The pottery complex differs markedly between these two phases, which seem to have been separated by a period of nomadic invasion, at a time when the Greek line of defense was temporarily shifted to the south (as witnessed also by the earliest wall brought to light by excavations in the strategic pass at Derbent [see [DARBAND](#)]). In addition to the fortifications, the Greek garrison (in the first phase) left its mark with a large granary, built in the center of the acropolis, at a place now buried deep below the mosque.

The peak of the pre-Islamic Sogdian civilization is mostly documented from the excavations at Panjikent (q.v.). At Samarqand, the major source of evidence for this period is the aristocratic residence which stood just inside Wall III, which constituted the southern limit of the fortified town between the 6th and 8th centuries CE. The famous wall paintings ([Afrāsiāb ii](#)) which were commissioned for a reception hall ca. 660 CE, probably by King Varkhuman himself, are the object of ongoing study and interpretation. Contrary to what had been proposed in [afrāsiāb](#), the whole composition is no longer believed to be related to the arrival of embassies at Samarqand (which forms the specific theme of the western wall), but to more varied themes of geopolitics and royal propaganda: the dynastic cult (southern wall), the greatness of the Chinese ally (northern wall), Indian legends (eastern wall).

A substantial amount of information (sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting with the picture hitherto drawn from textual sources) has come to light concerning the 8th century. Excavations carried out beneath the mosque have revealed evidence for a rapid succession of monumental buildings. A massive enclosure, perhaps the *temenos* of the pre-Islamic temple mentioned in the sources, was razed some time after the Arab conquest of 712.



Instead of a first mosque, as was hitherto assumed, the site was occupied by a large palace (ca. 115 x 84 m), built in the 740s (according to numismatic evidence), and it is therefore attributable to the last Omayyad governor, Nasr b. Sayyār. Architecturally, it appears as a transitional building, combining features inherited from earlier Sogdian palaces (a rectangular ‘throne hall’, corridors), and others that are more innovative (such as *beyts*, i.e., rooms grouped in a rectangle around a courtyard or hall). Some of the baked bricks had been lavishly used for pavements – another innovation. They carry Kufic inscriptions, most often consisting *’xšyd*, i.e., *ekšīd*, the Sogdian royal title. It is conjectured that the then representative of the local dynasty, residing outside Samarqand and still in charge of tax collection, had agreed to pay part of it in kind to contribute to the building of the governor’s palace. Some time between 765 and 780 sections of the palace were leveled to make room for the Friday mosque, which was first built on a square plan, and then (probably at the beginning of the Samanid period, ca. 820-30) enlarged towards the western direction, which led to the leveling of the remaining parts of the palace. Finds made in the palace include exercises in Arabic, which testify to the existence of a *maktab*, as well as the earliest set of chess pieces ever discovered in an archeological context. Important fragments of the stucco decoration of the *qebila* wall of the first mosque, buried after the enlargement of the building, belong to the pre-Samarra Abbasid style, hitherto known only from examples in Syria, Iraq, and Fārs.

Before that, in the early 750s, a second Arab palace had been erected to the east of the citadel, evidently by Abu Moslem (although written sources credit him only with the construction of the wall around the oasis). The regularity of its plan stands in marked contrast to the previous palace and indicates the work of an architect from Iran or the Near East. The same applies to the use of porticoes of octagonal columns, built in mud brick in both the inner and the outer courtyard. An *eyvān* opened to the latter (instead of into a closed throne hall). This palace never received any decoration, which is not consistent with the high representative functions it was obviously destined to fulfill. After an interruption, no doubt caused by Abu Moslem’s execution in 755, it was eventually completed with radical alterations to the original plan, the porticoes being replaced by corridors. Some parts of the palace subsisted until the 10th century. (However, the *dār al-emāra* mentioned by Eṣṭakri and Ebn Ḥawqal at the citadel was probably a later construction).

Knowledge of the two last centuries of Afrāsiāb has also progressed



substantially. Above the leveled ruins of Abu Moslem's palace in the northern section overlooking the Siab river, pavilions were added in the Qaraḳānīd period (11th-12th centuries), as an extension of a new palace built on the citadel (where these levels have been entirely destroyed by early archeologists). Since the year 2000, the excavation of one of these pavilions has brought to light collapsed remains of remarkable painted decoration, almost the only evidence for mural painting so far reported in Transoxania for this period. It comprises birds in a floral and calligraphic setting (apparently based on Persian poetry), dancers, a frieze of hunting dogs, and fragments of a large composition with Turkish guards presenting the ruler with symbols of power (the figure of an archer has been restored). The very last phase at Afrāsiāb was marked by a reconstruction of the palace at the citadel (mentioned in 1221 by the Chinese traveler Changchun) and by a complete rebuilding of the Friday mosque, commissioned (according to the Persian chronicler Jovayni) by Moḥammad b. Tekeš after his bloody capture of the town in 1212. Excavations have shown that the latter project was suddenly abandoned even before the monumental pillars had been built above floor level. They were replaced by wooden columns, probably requisitioned ones. The reason for this change was most probably the Mongol threat, which led to a massive reinforcement of the fortifications at the citadel and at the gates.

The first datable fortification of the oasis is the Divār-e Qīamat, initiated by Abu Moslem and completed under Hārūn al-Rašīd, along a circuit of about 35 km. Its gates were dismantled under the Samanids, and only a few sections survive today. A transverse wall, the Divār-e Kundalyang, now entirely destroyed, cannot be dated. Its attribution to the Achaemenid period rests only upon the "LXX stades" given by Curtius Rufus 7.6.10 for the city wall of Maracanda. However, this figure is suspected to be corrupted from XXX, i.e., 5.5 km, which is exactly the perimeter of Afrāsiāb. The transfer of city life to the south of Afrāsiāb, completed shortly after the Mongol invasion, was already on the way in the 11th-12th centuries. For this period temporary disruptions of the water supply, due to the continuous rise of the occupation level, can be observed in the northern part of the plateau. Ceramists' quarters were gradually moving upstream along the channel branches. According to the descriptions by Arab geographers, the main commercial center was around the Ra's al-Tāq, the embankment which led the water channel through the southern gate. Archaeology is of little help here, because of the presence of the modern town. It has been supposed that the wall that was built later on by Timur in order to encircle his town had taken the place of a suburb wall



already existing before the Mongols. However, there is no archeological proof for this. The main sources of information for the southern suburb in that period are two *waqf* documents from 1066. One concerns the endowment for a *madrasa*, situated in the southern part of Afrāsiāb (although this has been disputed), but perhaps the *madrasa* does not in fact correspond to the remains excavated in front of the mausoleum of Qoṭam b. ‘Abbās. The second document creates a hospital for the poor, which is situated somewhere to the south of the main bazaar. Both give precise locations and descriptions for the various estates listed in the endowments, mostly *kāns* (caravansarais), all of which appear to be in the bazaar zone or in its vicinity. Some toponyms have survived until modern times, such as the Čahār Suq and the ‘Sand (place) of the merchants’, probably predecessors of the Registān square, at the crossroads of the oasis.

The capture of Samarqand by the Mongols left it with one-quarter or even less of its former population (evaluated by Changchun to “more than 100,000 households” in the oasis before the conquest). Moreover, this remaining population did not include the craftsmen who were transported to Mongolia and subsequently, in a second wave (under Ögedey), to Simāh (Siun-ma-lin), north of Peking, where they introduced vine growing and a particular kind of brocade. Samarqand had by then become part of the *ulus* of Čāgatāy. The huge losses in working population were certainly the decisive factor for the abandonment of Afrāsiāb, whose water supply required more skills and labor than the southern suburb. According to the Moroccan traveller Ebn Baṭṭuṭa, who stayed in Samarqand in 1333 (or 1335), it did not have functioning walls or gates anymore, and many monuments were in ruins. However, the bazaar was again prosperous, and the complex around the grave of Qoṭam (the only part of Afrāsiāb still occupied) was splendidly built.

In 1371, Timur chose Samarqand as his capital and immediately had the new site fortified by a new wall and a citadel in its western part, containing the Kok Sarāy, a palace used only for ceremonies. The court and the army lived in the gardens built around the town. The rebuilding of the city on its new site was resumed on a grand scale after Timur’s return from his western campaigns in 1396, in particular with the construction of the Friday mosque (Bibi Kānum) next to the northern gates and the opening of the bazaar mainstreet between the mosque and the Registān area. Craftsmen deported from all the conquered countries contributed to the new buildings, and some villages in the vicinity are still named after their places of origin (Širāz, Demašq). From that period



onwards, archeological information comes more from the recording of monuments still standing (see samarqand. monuments) than from excavations, with the exceptions of the citadel (destroyed in the Tsarist and Soviet periods) and the observatory built by Uluġ-Beg in 1421 to the northeast of Afrāsiāb and rediscovered in 1908.

After the final conquest of Timurid Samarqand by Moḥammad Šaybāni (in 1500), the function of capital of Transoxania was transferred to [Bukhara](#). The Šaybānids and their successors, the Astraġānids, continued however to embellish Samarqand: the Registān square received its final form with three *madrasas* in 1660. A sharp decline occurred in the 18th century, with Kazakh inroads, dynastic strife, and eventually an occupation by Nāder Šāh's army in 1740-47. Already in the 1720s, the city was almost deserted and the *madrasas* on the Registān were turned into winter stables by nomads. Recovery was slow and incomplete. At the time of the Russian conquest in 1868, the city numbered only 55,128 inhabitants, in contrast to figures known for the 13th century (see above) and today (about 500,000).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(in addition to works cited in [AFRĀSIĀB](#)):

Studies based mainly on archeological material. Kh. G. Akhun-babev, *Dvoretz Ikhshidov Sogda na Afrasiabe* (The palace of the Ikhshids of Sogd at Afrāsiāb), Samarkand, 1999.

P. Bernard, "Maracanda-Afrasiab colonie grecque," in *La Persia e l'Asia centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Atti dei convegni Lincei 127), Rome, 1996, pp. 331-65.

P. Bernard, F. Grenet, M. Isamiddinov, "Fouilles de la mission franco-soviétique à l'ancienne Samarkand (Afrasiab): première campagne, 1989" and "Fouilles de la mission franco-ouzbèque à l'ancienne Samarkand (Afrasiab): deuxième et troisième campagnes (1990-1991)," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-lettres*, 1990, pp. 356-80 ; 1992, pp. 275-311.



Iu. F. Buryakov, ed., *K istoricheskoi topografii drevnego i srednevekovogo Samarkanda* (About the historical topography of ancient and medieval Samarkand), Tashkent, 1981.

E. Iu. Buryakova, “K planirovke i fortifikatsii Samarkandskoi tsitadeli XIV-XIX vv. (About the plan of the fortifications of the citadel of Samarkand, 14th-19th centuries), in G. A. Pugachenkova, ed., *Kul'tura srednevo Vostoka. Gradostroitel'stvo i arkhitektura*, Tashkent, 1989, pp. 115-25.

G. V. Chichkina [Shishkina], “Les remparts de Samarcande à l'époque hellénistique,” in P. Leriche, H. Tréziny, eds., *La fortification dans l'histoire du monde grec*, Paris, 1986, pp. 71-78, figs. 287-302.

F. Grenet, “L'Inde des astrologues sur une peinture sogdienne du VIIe siècle,” in C. Cereti, M. Maggi, E. Provasi, eds., *Religious Themes and Texts in Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia. Studies in Honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli*, Wiesbaden, 2002.

F. Grene [Grenet], I. D. Ivanitskiĭ, “Dvorets omeyadskogo namestnika pod mechet'yu Abbasidskogo perioda na Afrasiabe” (The palace of the Umayyad governor under the mosque from the Abbasid period at Afrasiab), in T. Sh. Shirinov, ed., *Arkheologiya, numizmatika i epigrafika srednevekovoĭ Srednei Azii*, Samarkand, 2000, pp. 58-62.

F. Grenet, C. Rapin, “De la Samarkand antique à la Samarkand médiévale: continuités et ruptures,” in R. P. Gayraud, ed., *Colloque international d'archéologie islamique*, Cairo, 1998, pp. 387-402.

O. N. Inevatkina, “Fortifikatsiya akropolya drevnego Samarkanda v seredine pervogo tysyacheletiya do n.e.” (The fortification of the acropolis of ancient Samarkand in the middle of the 1st millenium BCE), *Material'naya kul'tura Vostoka* 3, Moscow, 2002, pp. 24-46.

E. D. Ivanitskiĭ, O. N. Inevatkina, “Periodizatsiya i etapy razvitiya vodosnabzheniya Afrasiaba” (Periods and stages of the development of the water-supply of Afrasiab), *Istoriya Material'noi Kul'tury Uzbekistana* 30, Samarkand, 1999, pp. 96-103.

E. Kageyama, “A Chinese Way of Depicting Foreign Delegates Discerned in the Painting of Afrasiab,” in Ph. Huyse, ed., *Iran: Questions et connaissances. Actes du IVe congrès européen des études iraniennes. Paris, 6-10 Septembre 1999*, vol.



I: *Etudes sur l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 2002, pp. 309-23.

Yu. Karev, "Un palais islamique du VIII^e siècle à Samarkand," *Studia Iranica* 29, 2000, pp. 273-96.

E. de La Vaissière, *Histoire des marchands sogdiens*, Paris, 2002.

B. Lyonnet, "Les Grecs, les nomades et l'indépendance de la Sogdiane, d'après l'occupation comparée d'Aï Khanoum et de Marakanda au cours des derniers siècles avant notre ère," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 12, 1998, pp. 141-59.

B. Marshak, "Le programme iconographique des peintures de la 'Salle des ambassadeurs' à Afrasiab (Samarkand)," *Arts Asiatiques* 49, 1994, pp. 5-20.

N. B. Nemtseva (with notes by M. Rogers), "The origins and architectural development of the Shah-i zinde," *Iran* 15, 1977, pp. 51-73.

C. Rapin, "Fortifications hellénistiques de Samarcande (Samarkand-Afrasiab)," *Topoi* 4, 1994, pp. 547-65.

G. V. Shishkina, *Remeslennaya produktsiya srednevekovogo Sogda* (The artisanal production of medieval Soghd), Tashkent, 1986.

Idem, "Ancient Samarkand: Capital of Soghd," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 8, 1994 [1996], pp. 81-99.

G. V. Shishkina, L. V. Pavchinskaja, *Terres secrètes de Samarcande. Céramiques du VIII^e au XIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1992.

Studies based mainly on historical sources. A. M. Belenitskiĭ, I. B. Bentovich, O. G. Bol'shakov, *Srednevevovyi gorod Srednei Azii* (The medieval town in Central Asia), Leningrad, 1973 (esp. pp. 143-62, 219-32, 266).

Dzh. Z. Bunyatov, T. B. Gasanov, "Dva samarkandskikh vakfa serediny XI v." (Two *waqf* documents from Samarkand, mid 11th century), *Vostochnoe istoricheskoe istochnikovedenie i spetsial'nye istoricheskie distsipliny* II, Moscow, 1994, pp. 39-63.

Yu. Karev, "La politique d'Abū Muslim dans le Māwarā'annahr. Nouvelles données textuelles et archéologiques," *Der Islam* 79, 2002, pp. 1-46.

M. Khadr (with an introduction by Claude Cahen), "Deux actes de *waqf* d'un



qarahanide d'Asie centrale," *JA* 255, 1967, pp. 305-34.

B. Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, Cambridge, 1989.

J. Paul, "The histories of Samarqand," *Studia Iranica* 22, 1993, pp. 69-92.

P. Pelliot, "Une ville musulmane dans la Chine du Nord sous les Mongols," *JA* 211, 1927, pp. 261-79.