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How Ancient Is Bukhara?

Ever since the late Shah of Iran convened a great pageant at Persepolis more than a quarter of a century ago to celebrate the 2,500 years of the Iranian monarchy, neighboring countries have tried to prove that they could match its antiquity. In Central Asia the first country to enter the competition was Uzbekistan which, not to be outdone by Iran, put forth Samarqand as equally ancient. Since Bukhara had to be at least as old as its sister city up the Zarafshan River, the official line now is that Bukhara is also at least 2,500 years old.¹ But is this true?

The sources are not so encouraging. If we look at the Persian text of the history of Bukhara by Narshakhi, we find the following. "This place, which today is Bukhara, [formerly] was a swamp; part of it was a bed of reeds and part planted with trees and a meadow. Some places were such that no animal could find footing there, because the snows melted on the mountains of the districts near Samarqand and the water collected.... The area which is Bukhara was filled [with mud carried away by the river] and the land became level. That river was the great river of Sughd, and the filled area became Bukhara."² Our author presumably refers to the city of Bukhara rather than to the large oasis designated by the same name, but it could be the reverse. What should we believe?

Let us begin with geography and irrigation. There is no evidence that the Zarafshan River reached the Oxus in historical times and the existence of swamps and lakes in early times is almost certain. Ptolemy's Oxian lake could have been situated in the oasis of Bukhara, although it was more likely at the combined delta of the Zarafshan and Kashka rivers. Before canals were created for draining the swamps, one may conjecture that only the high land in the oasis of Bukhara was occupied by settlements.

Since the site of the city of Bukhara was not as elevated as the land around Paikand, it appears reasonable that a site such as Paikand, near the Oxus, with easy access to Samarqand, and in the deltas of both the Zarafshan and Kashka rivers, would attract settlers searching for places to live to the oasis of Bukhara. Furthermore, Paikand was situated on a low plateau of circa 100 sq. km.³ Narshakhi reports that Paikand was older than Bukhara, and in ancient times every ruler of the oasis made Paikand his capital.⁴ From a number of excavations in Central Asia, archaeologists suggest that the deltas of rivers such as the Tejen, Murghab and Hilmand were the places of earliest settlements in Central Asia, and the Zarafshan River delta would most likely conform to this pattern. Consequently, we may suggest that the oasis of Bukhara certainly received settlers at a very early date, but the city of Bukhara was late in becoming a significant settlement. The exact date can hardly be ascertained, but the period of the great Kushan empire

is the most likely time, because before the great expansion of urbanism under the Kushans, the earlier Greco-Bactrians probably only ruled the area around Marakanda, and even there, such dominion was shortlived. Bactria was called "the land of a thousand cities" by the Greeks, but north of the Hissar Mountain range, few traces of Greek settlement have been found. After the Saka expansion of the first century B.C., only under the Kushans do we find archaeological evidence of settlements along the Oxus River with an extension into the oasis of Bukhara.⁵ Under the Kushans in Bactria, urban life continued to flourish, and irrigation was the key to the wealth of the land. We should not forget that the vast Kushan empire of the first two centuries of our era was a rival of its Roman and Chinese counterparts.

So we may tentatively assign the beginning of settlement on the site of the future city of Bukhara to the first century of our era, but it is doubtful that the city became the center of the oasis before the end of the fifth century and more than likely, later. Even then, rival towns maintained their own rulers and were centers of trade and the textile industry. Probably Bukhara obtained hegemony over the oasis only shortly before the Arab conquest at the end of the seventh century. From the geographies written in Arabic (Istakhri, Ibn Hauqal, Yaqut, etc.), we find that the name of the village on the site, or near the site, of modern Bukhara was called Numijkath.⁶ The second part of the word - *kath* or *kand*, means "town" in Sogdian, while the first part may be related to the Sogdian word for "ninth," or less probably, the word for "law" (from Greek *nomos*).

The site of the city of Bukhara would have been a natural place for settlement since the Zarafshan River divided there into several forks, according to the Arabic geographies. Because of the great fertility of the oasis, reported by the geographers, we may speculate that the whole area was called **pwk'r* (*fwq'r*) in Sogdian, meaning something like "excellent, splendid," which the Arabs, as the English are wont to do, called the city *la kbira* with a similar meaning in their language. This is my suggestion for the origin of the name Bukhara, rather than the *Volksetymologie* that derives the name from the Indian Buddhist *vihara*. This appellation (*pwk'r*) which was applied to the district, was then transferred to the principal city, just as the name of the province Parsa was given to the site of Persepolis.

The rise of the city of Bukhara to great prominence, in my opinion, really dates from the Arab conquests and the coming of Islam to Central Asia. Because of its favorable location and its fame as both a rich agricultural and textile area and a trading town, Bukhara became the great center of Islamic learning in Central Asia. Why did this city become such a center rather than Samarqand or some other city? I believe this can be answered by the circumstances of the Arab occupation of Bukhara as contrasted with other cities, except Merv, which was the first site where the Arabs settled in the homes of the local people as they did in Bukhara. There was a difference, however, between Bukhara and Merv. During almost a century of Umayyad rule, from the 660s to 750 of our era, the whole oasis of Merv was divided and then settled by Arab tribes in various villages. The Arabs were

mainly interested in raiding across the desert to the Oxus River and beyond, using Merv as a base. There was no principal city of the Merv oasis, and Merv had been a military outpost of the Sasanian Empire, as it continued to be under the Arabs. The inhabitants of the oasis of Bukhara, on the other hand, were merchants as well as landlords and peasants, and trade with China and elsewhere was an important source of the wealth of the towns in the oasis. This does not mean that Merv was unimportant in trade relations, but the end of its position as the military and economic outpost of an empire based in Iran, in a sense, shifted the frontier to the east and Bukhara became the "dome of Islam" in the east. Furthermore, the political conflicts of the Arab tribes settled in Merv did not help that oasis to retain its once preeminent position in the caliphate. So under the Umayyads, the Arab tribesmen maintained their tribal organization in the Merv oasis, while in Bukhara (where the Arab tribal warriors were settled in quarters of the city rather than in the oasis), the Arabs soon mingled with the local population who, in great measure, converted to Islam sooner than elsewhere in Central Asia. Bukhara and Samarqand were also no longer on the frontier but in the center of Sughd (Soghdiana), the richest and most populous part of former Soviet Central Asia even unto this day. The "Golden Age" of Bukhara, however, was in the tenth century when the Samanids, the last Iranian dynasty, ruled Central Asia. It was under the first ruler Ismail (875-907) that the long walls around the oasis, called Kampir-duval, were neglected and abandoned after Ismail declared that they were unnecessary since he would be the bulwark of the oasis against raids of nomads or other enemies. It was under Ismail's grandson, Nasr, that the poet Rudaki wrote his famous lines about the section of Bukhara city by the canal called the Juy-i Mulyan which so moved the ruler, who was in Herat at the time, with nostalgia that he mounted his horse and returned to his beloved Bukhara.

Just as artists prefer to live in poverty on the left bank of the Seine or in Greenwich Village in New York, so did poets, scholars, and artisans crowd into the narrow streets and alleys of the capital of the Samanids. While some authors writing in Arabic praised the city and extolled its virtues, Chars compared it to the crowded cesspool of Baghdad. There is no question, however, that Bukhara was a populous metropolis, the Baghdad of the east.

Just as in Nishapur and other cities of the Islamic world, craft guilds⁷ developed, and certain quarters became the shops and residences of various craftsmen. Guilds became well organized and powerful, so much so that the government listened when they demonstrated their complaints through the streets. It is significant that after the fall of the Samanids, when the Turkic Karakhanids ruled Central Asia, Bukhara and other cities had a greater measure of independence than under the Samanids. Religious leaders became the real force in city government, and in Bukhara this led to a veritable dynasty of local theocrats, the Al-i Burhan, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The Mongol conquest of 1220 brought an end to the flourishing medieval city of Bukhara, and the city

we see today is built upon the ashes of the Samanid metropolis. Bukhara did not regain its preeminent position in Central Asia until the Uzbek renaissance of later times, when it became the capital of a much smaller area than in the glorious days of the Samanids. But, as Arabic chronicles tell us, what has been related is brief and not all; God alone knows best!

NOTES:

1. L. Yu. Mankovskaya in *Bukhara, A Museum in the Open* (in Uzbek, Russian, and English), (Tashkent, 1991), p. 70.
2. Narshakhi, *The History of Bukhara*, trans. R. N. Frye (Cambridge, Mass.: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954), p. 6; text in *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, ed. Mudarris Rezavi (Tehran, 1351/1973), pp. 7-8.
3. A. A. Askarov, ed., *Gorodishche Paikand* (Tashkent: FAN, 1988), pp. 21-22.
4. Narshakhi, *History of Bukhara*, trans. p. 18, text p. 26.
5. On both sides of the river, but especially on the west side, south of present Charjui (Amul) a number of sites with Kushan remains have been surveyed, and some excavated.
6. Some Arabic texts tell us that Numijkath was the name of a village some four *farsakhs* from the city of Bukhara.
7. Much has been written about the guilds and corporations in the Islamic world; cf. Richard Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).