

ANCIENT CITY OF THE BUKHARA OASIS – VARDANZE: HISTORICAL AND
ECONOMIC ANALYSIS*Qosimova M.SH.**Master's student at Bukhara State University. Bukhara***Abstract**

This article explores the origins, political status, and economic life of the Vardanze (Vardona) settlement, one of the oldest and strategically most important cities in the Bukhara oasis. The article provides detailed information on the fierce struggles between Vardonkhudot and Qutayba ibn Muslim during the Arab conquest, as well as the development of ancient farming culture and handicrafts in the region. Abu Bakr Narshakhi's "History of Bukhara" is analyzed as the primary source.

Keywords

Vardanze, Vardonkhudot, Narshakhi, Shopurkom, Zandaniji, agriculture, Qutayba ibn Muslim, history of Bukhara.

Thesis

Vardanze (Vardona) is a fortress-city that left an indelible mark on the early medieval history of not only the Bukhara oasis but all of Central Asia. According to Abu Bakr Narshakhi, this city is older than Bukhara itself and served as an independent political and economic center in the northern regions of the oasis during its time. The fact that the city's foundation was laid by the Sassanid prince Shopur and the excavation of the massive "Shopurkom" (Shofirkon) canal to bring water to it testifies to the region's long-standing status as a center of cultural agriculture.

Vardanze's economy was fundamentally based on highly developed agriculture and horticulture. Fertile lands irrigated by the Shopurkom canal produced grain, rice, and melons. In particular, viticulture and the cultivation of figs were primary occupations for the inhabitants. Archaeological research and historical data indicate that the lands around Vardanze were distinguished from other districts in the oasis by their high productivity.

Alongside agriculture, livestock breeding was widespread among the city's population, as Vardanze directly bordered the nomadic steppe known as "Turkistan". This geographical location created favorable opportunities for the exchange of livestock products. Vardanze stood out from other areas of the Bukhara oasis as a rare example of the integration of cultural farming and strategic livestock breeding. Farming here was not merely planting seeds but a high-skill engineering solution based on a constant struggle against the aggressive desert sands. As noted in the research of V.A. Shishkin, Vardanze farmers created "living walls"—dense rows of saxaul and thorny shrubs—to stop sand dunes from encroaching on crop fields, which was a unique meliorative approach for that period. The use of water-lifting wheels (charkhpalak) and complex water distribution structures to raise water from the Shopurkom canal to higher-level fields demonstrates a high level of technical thinking. The sandy soil's ability to absorb heat quickly during the day and release it to the roots at night resulted in

an exceptionally high sugar content in fruits like figs, grapes, and pomegranates, making Vardanze's horticultural products famous as the sweetest and highest quality in the oasis.

Furthermore, Vardanze's livestock breeding was defined by its geographical position at the junction of the settled oasis and the vast Kyzylkum desert, forming a unique "symbiotic economy". The city served as a "gate" for nomadic Turkic tribes; farmers provided them with winter fodder (alfalfa, straw) and grain in exchange for resilient, high-quality pedigree livestock from the steppe. The "caravan-service" livestock breeding established here was vital for transit trade, providing camels prepared for long journeys and developing horse breeding. Raw materials like wool and hides from livestock served as the basis for certain types of "Zandaniji" cloth and leather goods, ensuring a close link with handicrafts. Archaeological excavations revealing massive jars (khums) and grain storehouses prove that Vardanze was not only a city of warriors but a wealthy and prosperous settlement with solid economic reserves that created a perfect model for life in a desert climate.

Special mention must be made of Vardanze's world-famous "Zandaniji" cloth. This textile was produced not only for local needs but was exported to international markets, specifically to Eastern and Western countries via the Great Silk Road. Narshakhi notes that the fabrics woven in Vardanze and its neighboring villages were exceptionally durable and elegant; they were even used as the sacred cover (Ka'baposh) for the Kaaba in Mecca. This proves that weaving, dyeing, and trade were developed to a very high level in the city. Zandaniji cloth is one of the most famous types of textiles produced in the Middle Ages, leaving an indelible mark on the textile history of not only Uzbekistan but the entire world. Although the fabric takes its name from the village of Zandana near Bukhara, it was later produced on a large scale in Vardanze and other parts of the oasis. While it was originally a fine silk fabric, cotton versions were later produced to meet market demand. It was characterized by its extreme durability, bright colors, and ability to retain its properties after washing. Patterns often featured Sassanid-era motifs, including animals (lions, deer, leopards), mythical birds, and the "tree of life," usually placed within circular borders. Dominated by dark red, blue, yellow, and brown hues, Zandaniji was a true "brand" of its time. According to Narshakhi, the demand was so high that it was exported to many countries: it was highly valued among Byzantine and European knights and the upper class. Even today, fragments of Zandaniji are preserved in ancient churches in Belgium, France, and Italy, used as shrouds for saints or as religious artifacts.

The military-political power of the city was clearly demonstrated in the early 8th century during the campaigns of the Arab conqueror Qutayba ibn Muslim. At that time, the ruler of Vardanze—Vardonkhudot—was the most powerful figure in the Bukhara oasis. He competed with the Bukhar-khudots (Kings of Bukhara) and sought to unite the oasis under a single center. Between 707 and 709, Qutayba's troops besieged the Vardanze fortress several times. Vardonkhudot gathered a large allied army of Sogdians and Turkic tribes and offered unprecedented resistance to the Arabs. Narshakhi writes that these battles were so fierce that Qutayba ibn Muslim was on the verge of defeat several times. Vardonkhudot amazed the Arab commander with his military strategy. It was only after Vardonkhudot's unexpected death in 709 (according to some sources, from a serious wound) that the defenders' morale plummeted. Only then were the Arabs able to fully subdue Vardanze and, subsequently, the entire Bukhara oasis.

Today, the Vardanze mound (45-50 meters high) remaining in the Shofirkon district is a material witness to that great past. Pottery, millstones, and metal tools found here confirm that ancient

Vardanze was not just a city of warriors, but a haven for hardworking farmers, skilled artisans, and enterprising merchants. The Vardanze fortress is not merely an ancient ruin buried under sand, but a living symbol of how our ancestors built a high civilization in the complex geographical conditions where the desert and oasis meet. Studying the history of this settlement allows us to more fully imagine the socio-economic and political landscape of the Bukhara oasis in the early Middle Ages.

Firstly, Vardanze is a product of perfect engineering thought for its time. The Shopurkom canal and its surrounding irrigation systems, along with the meliorative methods used against desert sands, show that ancient agricultural culture relied on science and practical experience. Secondly, the international fame of "Zandaniji" cloth made Vardanze an integral part of the world market. This fabric not only brought economic profit but also served as a bridge for regional cultural and technological exchange. Thirdly, the liberation struggles led by Vardonkhudot represent a heroic chapter in our people's history, demonstrating the resilience of local people in preserving their independence and cultural identity.



This fierce resistance against the Arab invasion confirms that the Bukhara oasis possessed not only economic but also strong military potential. The archaeological findings of scholars like V.A. Shishkin, combined with Narshakhi's written records, scientifically prove that Vardanze was the "northern gate of the oasis" and a major strategic center in its day.

Preserving Vardanze today as a state natural monument is a vital step toward passing this priceless heritage to future generations. Further study of this monument, its inclusion in international tourist routes, and ensuring its rightful place on the UNESCO World Heritage List is an honorable task for both historians and society. Vardanze is a great treasure that speaks of our past, our will, and our high culture.

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