Ethiopian International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 10,October-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF SAMARKAND BASED ON ANCIENT SOURCES

Marupova Nargiza Soleyevna

Key words: citadel, Marakand, Afrasiab, Shahristan, rabad, Sogd, Siab.

Abstract: The article examines data on the earliest stages of the history of the city of Samarkand, based on archaeological, linguistic, and written sources. It analyzes mythological conceptions of the city's origin, archaeological findings from the Afrasiab hill, and information provided by ancient authors. The study emphasizes the significance of Samarkand as one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and as an important center of culture, trade, and state formation since ancient times.

Introduction

Uzbekistan is a country with an ancient culture. Archaeologists have established that tens of thousands of years ago, prehistoric humans lived in mountain caves, on the slopes of foothills, along riverbanks and lakeshores, and even in what is now the Kyzylkum and Karakum deserts—in short, everywhere there was water and food. Depending on where these early humans lived and on their level of development, they engaged in hunting and fishing or gathered wild plants for food; later, they learned to domesticate animals and eventually began cultivating the land.

From primitive tools made of stone, bone, and wood, they gradually progressed to producing copper and bronze tools, and later iron ones, essential for both work and warfare. Over many millennia, a civilization emerged among the peoples inhabiting the vast territory of modern Uzbekistan.

The earliest reliable historical records preserved in the works of Greek and Chinese historians tell us that several thousand years ago, cultural life in Uzbekistan had already reached a high level. Powerful irrigation systems supplied water to fertile fields and gardens, metals were mined in the mountains, and trade caravans moved along routes that crossed steppes and green oases. Along these trade routes, numerous cities arose and developed, thriving in commerce and various crafts.

Archaeological remains of cities and buildings show that magnificent palaces and temples once stood in these places, demonstrating the high craftsmanship of their builders. Written sources tell us that, in those times, the art of making vessels and statues of gold and silver was highly developed. But who created these vessels and statues? Who produced the fine and elegant pottery well known today from archaeological excavations? Who built the buildings, wove fabrics, and sewed garments for the inhabitants of luxurious palaces?

We still do not know this with sufficient precision, though we can assume that for such tasks—and for many others, such as digging canals, cultivating land, and the exhausting extraction of metals from mines—the labor of slaves was used. Alongside the slaves, there likely existed a free agricultural population living in large family communities or clans within villages fortified by high clay walls. Even more strongly fortified were the large castles where the rulers, landowners, and slaveholders resided.

The remains of such castles rise today as large *tepe* (ancient settlement mounds) across all regions of Uzbekistan. Some of these castles, strategically located near trade routes or at key points along major irrigation canals, gained particular importance and, together with the settlements that formed around them, grew into lively trade and craft centers. The owners of these fortified cities, having subdued weaker and poorer neighbors, became "kings"—rulers of vast lands and numerous populations.

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 10,October-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

Main Part

One of the oldest cities of Uzbekistan, known to us from the accounts of Greek historians, is Samarkand (referred to as *Maracanda* by Greek authors). Information about it has survived from descriptions of the campaigns of the Greek king Alexander the Great, who conquered Central Asia in the 4th century BCE. The city was surrounded by a wall, and its inner citadel was fortified by another wall. After capturing Maracanda, Alexander destroyed and burned nearby settlements and then moved his army further toward the Syr Darya River.

Meanwhile, Spitamen, a local leader who led the heroic resistance of the inhabitants against the Greek conquerors, occupied Maracanda and besieged the Macedonian garrison left in the citadel by Alexander. After a fierce struggle, upon the approach of Alexander's main forces, who had learned of the siege and returned to secure the city, Spitamen was forced to lift the siege. The Zeravshan Valley was subjected to brutal devastation by the Macedonians: inhabitants were killed, and settlements were burned and destroyed.

Besides Maracanda, Alexander's historians mention the city of Cyropolis, founded in the 6th century BCE by Cyrus the Great, the "royal city" on the Zeravshan River in its lower reaches, and some other cities, though they provide few details about them. For several centuries afterward, there is no information about Samarkand, and only in the 5th century CE do Chinese historians again mention it, calling it the city of *Samokien*.

By the 7th century, Samarkand is described as a large city, serving as the political and economic center of the extensive region of Sogd (the middle part of the Zeravshan Valley) and as the residence of the *ikhshid*, one of the "kings" mentioned earlier. Around the same time, Chinese sources first mention Bukhara (called *Na-mi*, later *Pu-ho-lo*) and Tashkent (*Cha-che*), as well as many other cities, most of which were largely independent possessions.

In the 7th–8th centuries CE, events occurred that significantly influenced the further development of the peoples of Uzbekistan. The region was conquered by Arab armies from the west and incorporated into the state of the caliphs they established. The Arab period marked a flourishing of geographical and historical literature; Arab writers provide detailed accounts of the conquered lands and their principal cities.

Samarkand during the Arab conquest was located on the site of the now-abandoned settlement of Afrasiyab, near the modern city. In the northern part of the site, above the Siab canal, rose the ancient citadel (fortress), adjoining the area of the city itself, or *shahristan*. From this core, the city began to expand until it covered the entire hilltop. Around the growing city, successive defensive walls were built, remnants of which, in the form of embankments, are still visible today.

Since providing water to the elevated site of Afrasiyab posed certain difficulties, water was supplied to the city through an aqueduct that crossed the fortress moat on high supports, with its channels lined with lead. This remarkable structure functioned for several centuries and was destroyed only in 1220 during the Mongol conquest of the city.

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 10,October-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

Samarkand was not only an important economic and political center of its surrounding region but also played a significant role in international trade along the Great Caravan Route, which connected distant cultural regions such as China and the shores of the Mediterranean. This trade route passed through Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, crossing the entire territory of present-day Uzbekistan.

Unlike Samarkand, Bukhara has always been located at the site of the modern city. It consisted of a citadel (*ark*), which served as the residence of rulers even during the time of the last emirs, and the *shahristan*, the main city area. In the 7th century, the *ark* housed the palace of the Bukhar-khudats (equivalent to the *ikhshids* of Samarkand), rulers of Bukhara and its region. The *shahristan* lay a short distance from the citadel, to its eastern side. Covering no more than 30–40 hectares, the ancient *shahristan* dominated the surrounding younger parts of the city and is still identifiable as a raised area.

At the center of the *shahristan* was a crossroads from which four streets radiated, dividing it into four quarters. To the south, where the underground Magoki Attari Mosque now stands, there was a bazaar located outside the *shahristan* walls. A temple for idol worshippers (possibly Buddhists) stood on this bazaar, later converted into a fire-worship temple before the Arab conquest and subsequently used by the Arabs as a mosque. Remains of this structure were discovered during excavations of the Magoki Attari Mosque in 1934–1935. In front of the *ark* was a large square—the *Registan*—which has retained its name to this day. Here, the Bukhar-khudats held courts, conducted executions, and organized parades and military inspections.

This, approximately, was the appearance of the two most significant cities in the fertile Zeravshan Valley by the time of the Arab conquest of Uzbekistan. The country was developing economically, and the social structure of its population was changing. From primitive forms of economy, with remnants of the old clan system and slave labor, there emerged new social relations based on the seizure of large landholdings by castle owners and the exploitation of the agricultural population living on their estates. This system, which we call feudal, gradually took shape over several centuries.

The transition to new forms of social organization was far from peaceful. It involved wars between powerful feudal lords, destruction of villages and cities, uprisings of oppressed populations, and devastation of extensive areas that were previously densely populated and intensively cultivated. The Arab conquest in the 7th–8th centuries CE, through which Central Asia became part of the vast Arab Caliphate stretching from Gibraltar to India and the Tian Shan, incorporating numerous African and Asian regions with ancient high cultures, accelerated the development of economic, political, and social life in Central Asia. Stronger and more active

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 10,October-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

international connections fostered cultural growth, expanded trade and crafts, and first of all affected the cities of Central Asia, which began to grow rapidly.

The old *shahristans* could no longer accommodate all residents. Large suburbs—*rabads*—emerged outside the city walls, concentrating the commercial and artisanal life of the city and hosting its main bazaars; to protect the inhabitants of the *rabads*, new walls were constructed. High walls were rebuilt or newly constructed to enclose not only the cities but also the surrounding agricultural areas. The wall of Bukhara, running along the boundaries of the entire oasis, stretched approximately 250–300 km. The total length of Samarkand's wall (remains now known as *Divari-Qiyamat*), rebuilt in the 8th century around Samarkand districts, was about 42 km. Walls protecting agricultural settlements also existed in the Tashkent region.

Conclusion

The study of the earliest information about Samarkand allows us not only to trace the origins of one of the oldest cities in Central Asia but also to understand the broader historical processes that took place in the region. As early as the Bronze Age, the territory of present-day Samarkand was a space of complex cultural and economic activity, as confirmed by archaeological data from Afrasiab and the surrounding areas.

Samarkand developed as a settled community within agricultural and pastoral societies and later became one of the centers of the Sogdian civilization—a vibrant and distinctive culture that played a crucial role in shaping the civilizational character of Central Asia. Written sources, from the Avesta to Chinese chronicles and the works of ancient authors, indicate a consistent presence of organized society, advanced trade, literacy, and diplomacy.

Samarkand's significance was further enhanced by its geopolitical position—it was located at the crossroads of trade and cultural routes, facilitating its transformation into a transregional center. Even in antiquity, it served as a hub on the Great Silk Road, connecting East and West, North and South.

Today, the ancient history of Samarkand remains the subject of interdisciplinary research. Archaeology, linguistics, textual studies, historical geography, and source studies converge in the effort to provide a comprehensive picture of its origin and development. Modern methods, including radiocarbon dating, 3D mapping, and interregional comparative studies, expand our understanding of Samarkand's role in Eurasian history.

Thus, Samarkand emerges not merely as an ancient city with a rich cultural heritage but as evidence of early statehood and social development in Central Asia. Further research into its earliest layers may significantly enrich and even revise current understanding of the formation of civilizations across the Eurasian continent.

References

1. Asafiev, A. M. *Samarkand and Its Antiquities.* Tashkent: Fan, 1980.

2. Grünberg, A. L. *Historical Topography of Samarkand in Antiquity.* // Vestnik Drevney Istorii, 1975.

3. Arrian. *The Campaigns of Alexander.* Translated from Greek. Moscow: Nauka, 1972.

4. Litvinsky, B. A., Sarianidi, V. I. *Central Asia in the Bronze Age.* Moscow: Nauka, 1985.

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 10,October-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

5. *Chronicles of the Han Dynasty* (translation and commentary) — Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, 1991.

6. Shishkin, V. A. *Cities of Uzbekistan.* Tashkent, 1943.