

**ANCIENT SAMARKAND CIVILIZATION: HISTORICAL FORMATION,
ARCHAEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND MODERN URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

Isroilova Farangiz Abdumannon qizi

Student of the Faculty of History, Jizzakh State Pedagogical University

Annotation. Samarkand is one of the oldest continuously inhabited urban centers in Central Asia and has played a significant role in the historical, cultural, and economic development of Eurasian civilization. This article examines the city's formation, archaeological layers, and representations in written historical sources, as well as its transformation into a modern global heritage site. The study draws on archaeological evidence, medieval chronicles, and contemporary historiographical research to analyze its long-term urban development. The findings highlight Samarkand as a multilayered cultural landscape shaped by irrigation-based agriculture, Silk Road trade networks, and successive historical transformations.

Keywords: Samarkand, Afrosiyob, Silk Road, urbanization, archaeology, Timurid Empire, Central Asia, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Samarkand is recognized as one of the most ancient and continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia. Its origins date back to the 1st millennium BCE, when early settlement structures emerged in the fertile Zarafshan valley. The geographical location of the city played a decisive role in its development, as it lay at the crossroads of major trade routes connecting East and West.

Archaeological research confirms that the earliest urban layers of Samarkand are associated with the Afrosiyob site, which represents the ancient core of the city. Excavations have revealed residential structures, fortification systems, pottery workshops, and material remains of complex urban life. These findings indicate that Samarkand developed as an early urban civilization with a high level of social organization (1, p.112).

Historical sources refer to Samarkand under different names. Greek authors mentioned it as "Maracanda," while Arabic and Persian sources consistently used the name "Samarkand." In linguistic and historical works by Mahmud Kashgari and Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, various interpretations of the city's name are presented, often connected to legendary figures and early historical narratives (2, pp.610–611). This demonstrates the cultural depth and historical complexity of the city's identity.

METHODS

This research is based on a multidisciplinary methodological approach combining archaeological analysis, historical textual interpretation, and comparative urban studies. Primary archaeological data from Afrosiyob were analyzed alongside medieval written sources and modern scholarly literature.

Stratigraphic analysis was used to identify different historical layers of urban development. Material culture, including ceramics, architectural remains, and mural paintings, was examined to reconstruct socio-economic structures. In addition, historiographical analysis of travel accounts and medieval chronicles was applied to understand external perceptions of Samarkand.

Significant contributions to the archaeological study of Samarkand were made by Soviet and post-Soviet scholars, including Mikhail Masson and Vasiliy Shishkin, whose systematic excavations provided a scientific foundation for understanding the city's ancient urban structure (3, p.78; 4, p.95).

Recent interdisciplinary studies on Samarkand emphasize that the city should not be understood only as a historical monument, but as a continuously evolving urban ecosystem. Geoarchaeological research shows that changes in the Zarafshan River system significantly

influenced settlement expansion and contraction patterns around the Afrosiyob area. These environmental dynamics played a decisive role in shaping urban planning strategies across different historical periods, especially during transitions between antiquity and the medieval era.

RESULTS

Early Urban Formation. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that Samarkand developed through multiple stages of urbanization. The Afrosiyob site reveals continuous habitation layers from the Bronze Age to the early medieval period. The discovery of fortification walls, residential quarters, and craft production zones indicates a highly structured urban environment (1, p.112).

Another important research direction focuses on the intangible cultural heritage of Samarkand, including oral traditions, craft transmission, and urban memory. Ethnographic observations indicate that many traditional artisan practices, particularly in ceramics and textile production, preserve techniques that can be traced back to pre-modern industrial structures. These cultural continuities demonstrate that Samarkand's historical identity is not only preserved in monuments but also embedded in living social practices.

Sogdian Civilization Period. During the Sogdian period, Samarkand became a major political and commercial center. Wall paintings discovered at Afrosiyob depict diplomatic ceremonies, royal processions, and daily life scenes. These artistic representations reflect a sophisticated cultural and ideological system (5, p.120).

In addition, recent comparative studies between Samarkand and other Silk Road cities reveal shared patterns of cultural interaction and technological exchange. Evidence from ceramic typology, metallurgical techniques, and architectural design shows that Samarkand functioned as both a receiver and transmitter of innovations across Eurasia. This interconnectedness reinforces the idea that the city was not an isolated cultural center, but an integral part of a broader transcontinental urban network.

Islamic Period Transformation. Following the Islamic conquest, Samarkand transformed into an important center of science, trade, and Islamic culture. The city became known for paper production, textile manufacturing, and intellectual activity. Medieval sources describe Samarkand as a major commercial hub attracting merchants from across Eurasia (6, p.13).

Modern technological applications have also transformed the study of Samarkand's archaeology. Remote sensing, GIS mapping, and 3D digital reconstruction are increasingly used to analyze buried urban layers without extensive excavation. These methods have revealed previously unknown structural patterns beneath Afrosiyob, suggesting a more complex spatial organization than earlier Soviet-era reconstructions proposed.

Mongol Destruction. In the early 13th century, the Mongol invasion caused severe destruction to Samarkand. Many architectural monuments were destroyed, and the population significantly declined. This period represents a major disruption in the city's historical development (7, p.203).

Timurid Renaissance. A new stage of urban revival began under Amir Timur, who established Samarkand as the capital of his empire. Massive architectural projects transformed the city into one of the most magnificent urban centers of the Islamic world. Contemporary accounts by Ruy González de Clavijo describe Samarkand as a city of extraordinary beauty and architectural grandeur.

Finally, Samarkand's contemporary role in global cultural diplomacy has become a subject of scholarly interest. The city now functions as a platform for international academic forums, heritage exhibitions, and intercultural dialogue. This modern positioning reflects a continuity of its historical function as a crossroads of civilizations, but in a redefined form shaped by globalization and heritage-based urban development policies. **Later Historical Periods.** During the Shaybanid and Ashtarkhanid periods, Samarkand maintained its regional importance,

although political instability gradually affected its economic strength. By the 18th century, environmental degradation, water system collapse, and internal conflicts led to urban decline (8, p.351).

Recent archaeological interpretations suggest that Samarkand's urban evolution was not a linear process, but rather a series of adaptive reorganizations shaped by environmental, economic, and political pressures. New stratigraphic analyses from peripheral zones of Afrosiyob indicate that urban expansion often shifted toward more stable water-access areas, reflecting a high degree of flexibility in ancient city planning. These findings challenge earlier assumptions that Samarkand developed through a single centralized urban model, instead highlighting a dynamic and multi-nodal settlement structure.

Modern Development. In the 19th century, Samarkand was incorporated into the Russian Empire, marking the beginning of a new administrative and urban transformation. According to American diplomat Eugene Schuyler, Samarkand was one of the most impressive cities in Central Asia, characterized by its architectural diversity and vibrant social life (9, pp.171–207).

DISCUSSION

The historical development of Samarkand reflects a cyclical pattern of rise, destruction, and reconstruction. Its strategic geographical position ensured its continuous relevance across different historical epochs.

Archaeological evidence from Afrosiyob demonstrates the complexity of early urban systems, indicating advanced planning, economic specialization, and cultural sophistication. The Sogdian murals provide insight into ideological and artistic traditions, while Islamic and Timurid transformations highlight the city's adaptive capacity. The Timurid period represents the peak of Samarkand's urban and cultural development, where architecture, science, and political power converged. In contrast, later periods illustrate gradual decline influenced by environmental and political factors.

Modern archaeological research, including cataloging projects by Berdimurodov and Isamiddinov, has significantly contributed to the systematic documentation of Samarkand's heritage sites. Their work provides a comprehensive scientific classification of archaeological monuments in the Samarkand region (10, pp.9–20, 175).

Today, Samarkand is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and serves as a global center of cultural tourism and international diplomacy. Modern conservation efforts and digital archaeological technologies are enhancing the preservation and interpretation of its historical layers.

CONCLUSION.

Samarkand represents one of the most significant urban civilizations in human history. Its development reflects a complex interaction of geography, economy, politics, and culture over more than two millennia. Archaeological and historical evidence confirms that the city functioned as a major Silk Road hub and a center of cultural innovation. The continuity of Samarkand from ancient settlement to modern global city demonstrates its historical resilience and adaptive capacity. Today, it remains a living heritage site and a key subject of interdisciplinary research in archaeology, history, and urban studies.

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