

Between Desert and Oasis

Border Markets and their Place in Economic Networks in Southwestern Central Asia

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Introduction

Discussions of macro-economic phenomena and trends—in pre-modern Central Asia as elsewhere in the ancient world—usually take a broad, transregional perspective. However, such broad discussions run the risk of oversimplifying microregional realities on the ground. They tend to overemphasize certain features of the ancient economy while neglecting other important aspects—such as local actors and local circumstances—simply because they tend to be less visible in the bigger picture. In order to bring such otherwise-lost aspects into the picture, microregional perspectives not only need to remain part of the discussion—they oftentimes provide a productive starting point for further inquiry.

In the following, I hope to exemplify this by looking at the role of border markets within regional and transregional economic networks, focusing on the Bukhara oasis as a node within the larger network of commercial exchanges across southwestern Central Asia and beyond. This network is often conveniently labeled the “Silk Roads”—a term that has morphed into a powerful, yet rather problematic, historical narrative.¹ One of the many problems with the conventional Silk Road narrative of commercial and cultural encounters across Central Asia and beyond is its emphasis on cities: in this narrative, it is almost exclusively the urban centers of the fertile oasis regions, such as Bukhara, Balkh, or Marw, that supposedly serve as “natural” nodes for commercial and cultural encounters, imagined as dots along the trajectory of caravan routes. By contrast, largely overlooked remains the fact that, apart from the urban centers of

1 See, for example, Rezakhani 2010; Brosseder and Miller 2018.

irrigated river oases, commercial hotspots serving as important nodes in transregional economic networks notably developed in the border zone of these river oases in the form of border markets and specialized production centers. This zone is in the center of the following discussion.

Oasis, Border, and Frontier: The Case of Bukhara

The microregional anchor point of my discussion is the oasis region of Bukhara (Fig. 1). It is formed by the alluvial fan of the Zerafshan river, one of the two large rivers of the historical region of Sogdiana. Bukhara and its hinterland represent an excellent case in point. On the one hand, this microregion was situated at an important crossroads between Bactria–Tokharistan, Chorasmia, the Iranian Plateau, and the Syr Darya regions. On the other hand, we have some detailed information about a whole gamut of extra-urban bazaars in this region from a relatively early written source: the *Tārikh-i Bukhārā*.² This important local history was written in Arabic before 943/4 CE by a certain Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar Narshakhī, a native of one of the villages in the hinterland of Bukhara. However, this history has come down to us only in the form of an abridged translation into Persian, amended with additional material in 1128/9 CE by a certain Abū Naṣr Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Qubāwī, and then again in 1178/9 CE by a certain Muḥammad ibn Zafar ibn ʿUmar.³ The latter notably added information from a now lost work entitled *Khazāʾin al-ʿulūm* (“Treasures of Sciences”) by a certain Abūʾl Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad Nīshāpūrī, which preserved many older traditions from the countryside outside of the city. Indeed, with regard to its richness on information pertaining to the countryside, the extant version of the *Tārikh-i Bukhārā* is quite unique among the local histories of eastern Iran and western Central Asia that have come down to us.⁴

Of course, there is no denying that urban markets in the oasis centers were of great importance. During the early medieval period, they were centered in the suburbs to the south and the southeast of the inner city (Arab. *madīnah*, Pers. *shahristān*), close to the Shāh-rud canal, the main watercourse of the city since early medieval times.⁵

2 *Tārikh-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984.

3 On the textual evolution of the *Tārikh-i Bukhārā*, see Смирнова 1965. There are even later additions to the text.

4 On this group of sources, see, for example, Paul 1993; 2000; Melville 2000.

5 Commerce in this area culminated during a biannual fair called “Bazaar on the day of Mākh,” where, during the middle of the tenth century, daily transactions surpassed 50,000 dirhams

But what is sometimes overlooked is the fact that traveling inside the irrigated oasis territories was actually quite difficult. Nineteenth-century travelers repeatedly mention the bad quality of roads: in winter and spring they were muddy, while during early summer the high water in the canals made many bridges impassable.⁶

Thus, the markets of the major centers inside the oasis were by no means “natural” transit hubs for those who passed by on their way to other destinations. This is one of the reasons why the originally relatively small site of Paykand—located outside the oasis of Bukhara with no significant agricultural hinterland of its own, but right on the desert–steppe tract of the king’s road between Khorasan and Samarqand—developed between the fourth/fifth and the eighth centuries into one of the most commercially vibrant cities of the entire region: a veritable border city.⁷

When we turn to the nonurban zone of the border of the Bukhara oasis, we notice two seemingly contradictory conditions. On the one hand, this was a well-defined border. In ecological terms, the sandy expanses of the Kyzyl-kum desert stretched to the north and west of the oasis, while the desert–steppe plateau of the so-called *orda chül* bordered the oasis to the east and south. Militarily, at least at some point around the fourth century and again between 830 and ca. 900 CE, the entire irrigation oasis was also enclosed by an impressive oasis wall defense system—Bukhara’s famous *Dīvār-i Kanpirak*, complete with close to sixty fortresses, watchtowers, or fortified gates.⁸ But on the other hand, the outer border zone of the Bukhara oasis was also a fuzzy frontier, where central authority was rather contested. In the early nineteenth century, Russian caravans coming from Orenburg via the lower Syr Darya were met and inspected and sealed by the customs officials of the *amir* (under the command of the *qūshbēgi*) at a place called Kargata, some eighty kilometers deep in the Kyzyl-kum

(*Tārikh-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 29–30). Apparently, this and other fairs in Bukhārān Soghd (see below) were originally connected with Sogdian temple festivals—see Bīrūnī, *al-Āṭār al-bāqīya*, ed. Sachau 1878, 234–235. On permanent bazaars in the suburbs, see *Tārikh-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 73 (the bazaar at the southern gate, also called the “Gate of the Spice-sellers”), 79 (the bazaar of Kharqān beyond the eastern gate and stretching northwards), 131 (the bazaars destroyed by the grand fire of May 937). A small bazaar (including a small metal workshop) dating to the late Samanid and early Qarakhanid period has been identified in the course of recent archaeological excavations conducted by the Uzbek–American Expedition in Bukhara (UzAmEB) just to the north of the present-day Congregational Mosque—see Mir-Makhamad et al. 2023; Schibille et al. 2024; Мирзаахмедов et al. 2024. For the bazaars of the city between the sixteenth and the twentieth century, see in detail Nekrasova 1999.

6 Von Helmersen 1839, 67; von Schwarz 1900, 166–172; 418–422.

7 Наймарк 1992; Stark 2021.

8 For written sources on this oasis wall, see <https://isaw.nyu.edu/research/bukhara-project/sources> (accessed May 17, 2025), especially the *Tārikh-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 46–48. For archaeological research, see Обельченко 1960; Мухамедов 1961; Мухамедов 1961; Мухамеджанов 1983; Штарк and Мирзаахмедов 2015; Мирзаахмедов et al. 2016; Stark and Mirzaakhmedov 2016; Мирзаахмедов, Штарк, and Мирзаахмедов 2018; Stark forthcoming.



Fig. 1 Map of the Bukhara region with sites and places mentioned.

desert.⁹ Apparently, this was a countermeasure to what usually happened along the Syr Darya, another border zone, with Russian caravans going up this river to Kokand: when they arrived in the first frontier settlements at the middle course of the river, small “black markets” emerged spontaneously, in which caravan traders sold parts of their commodities to local Kazakh nomads, thus avoiding customs payments for part of their goods, because taxes were only levied further upstream upon entering the Tashkent oasis.¹⁰ During the tenth to twelfth centuries, this outer border zone was probably mostly monitored from caravanserais located deep in the desert. A telling example of this is the remains of one such caravanserai in the Kyzyl-kum desert on the route from Bukhara to Khorezm, today called Ak-Rabat by local pastoralists (who still use its old well for their herdsmen station)—doubtless the *ribāṭ* Tāsh mentioned

⁹ Eversmann 1823, 60; von Meyendorff 1826, 234; von Helmersen 1839, 66.

¹⁰ Von Helmersen 1839, 68.

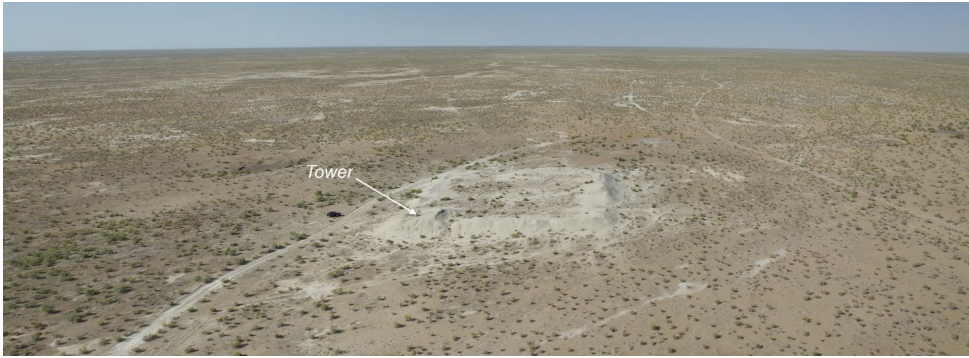


Fig. 2 Aerial photograph of Ak-Rabat.

by al-Muqaddasī (Fig. 1).¹¹ Situated some twenty kilometers (i.e., a one-day journey) beyond the “Long Wall,” this caravanserai seems to have been built during the later tenth century and featured a ten-by-ten-meter tower next to its entrance (Fig. 2).¹² This tower probably housed a small outpost that safeguarded the caravanserai but perhaps also controlled incoming caravans before they reached the actual border of the oasis the next day.

Regular Border Markets: The Early Medieval Evidence

Much more important than the unregulated, largely spontaneous “black markets” in the outer border zone were regular border markets. These were situated right at the heavily policed immediate border of the irrigated oasis. Taking the form of either weekly rural bazaars or annual fairs, they could attract a considerable volume of trade.

Among the important rural bazaars mentioned by the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, the one at Wardāna was surely a veritable border market. Wardāna (today Vardanze)¹³ was located at the northern border of the oasis (Fig. 1), in an interaction sphere with the pastoral world of “Turkistān” as well as on an important route leading to the lower Syr Darya. It is probably for these reasons that this market was, in the time of Narshakhī, a commercial hotspot that saw “much trading” (*bazargānī bisiyār*).

11 al-Muqaddasī, ed. de Goeje 1877, 343.

12 Шишкин 1956, 5–6; Stark et al. 2015, 26.

13 On the history of the site and the result of recent excavations, see Pozzi 2018; Pozzi, Mirzaachmedov and Sultanova 2019; Pozzi 2024.

Specifically mentioned among the commodities traded there is “well-made Zandanījī (cotton) textiles” (*zandanījī būda nikū*).¹⁴ The geographers of the tenth to twelfth centuries frequently mention such cotton textiles as exports to the west, but they were also important for the trade with pastoralists.

As for fairs—perhaps all originally associated with Sogdian temple festivals (Sogd. *γ'm*)¹⁵—a particularly large one was situated in the area of Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs (approximately in the area of present-day Kyzyltepa; Fig. 1). It is mentioned in a wide range of sources, several of them specifically stressing its transregional importance.¹⁶ Importantly, this fair was not situated in the depths of the oasis but at or very close to its border. Its most detailed description is preserved in the extant version of the *Tāriḫ-i Bukhārā*, possibly derived (although this is not explicitly stated) from Nīshāpūrī's *Khazā'īn al-ʿulūm*¹⁷ and, thus, perhaps going back to some local oral tradition:

In former times there used to be a fair for ten days in the season of the month of Tīr. The nature of that fair was such that all defective goods, such as curtains, covers, and other goods with defects, were sold in this fair. There was no way or means to return goods in the fair, for neither the seller nor the buyer would [return or] accept them back on any condition. Every year more than 10,000 people came to this fair, both merchants and buyers. They even came from Ferghāna, Chāch, and other places, and returned with much profit. Because of this the people of the village became rich, and the reason for that was not agriculture. It is located on the royal road to Samarqand, seven parasangs from Bukhārā.¹⁸

Important additional information about this border fair is preserved in Bīrūnī's *Kitāb al-Taḥfīm*:

The Magians of Soghdia also have their feasts and festivals of a religious nature called āghāms [...] In these they hold bazaars [...] at which we are

14 *Tāriḫ-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 21. For a long time, these Zandanījī textiles were believed to be silk textiles, but they are clearly cotton textiles. Cf. Marshak 2006; Sims-Williams and Khan 2008; Dode 2016.

15 Our main source on these temple festivals is Bīrūnī (Bīrūnī, *al-Ātār al-bāqīya*, ed. Sachau 1878, 221; Bīrūnī, *al-Taḥfīm*, ed. Wright 1934, 184). See also Смирнова 1970, 141–142.

16 *Tāriḫ-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 17–18; Bīrūnī, *al-Taḥfīm*, ed. Wright 1934, 184; Bīrūnī, *al-Ātār al-bāqīya*, ed. Sachau 1878, 221; Iṣṭakhrī, ed. Ḥīnī 1961, 175; Ibn Ḥawqal, ed. Kramers 1939, 489; al-Muqaddasī, ed. de Goeje 1877, 281; al-Idrīsī, ed. Cerulli et al. 1970–1984, 495–496; Ḥudūd al-ʿālam, ed. Sutūda 1962, 113.

17 This was already suggested by O. Smirnova (Смирнова 1970, 144), who had been working on a critical edition of the text.

18 Trans. Frye 1954, 13 (with corrections by author).

told stolen articles are sold, great confusion prevails and no returns are made. [...] The fair of Ṭawāwīs, a large and populous town, lasts for seven days from the 15th of Mazhīkhandā (Sogd. *mazēxand*) the sixth month.¹⁹

In addition, a number of tenth- to twelfth-century geographers stress the transregional importance of this fair:

Ṭawāwīs, où les habitants tenaient autrefois une foire, qui rassemblait une affluence considérable de monde venant de tous les points du Khurāsān, à une date fixe de l'année. On s'y procure des étoffes de coton avec une telle profusion qu'on en exporte en Iraq.²⁰

Judging from all these accounts, we are dealing here with an annual fair that generated a huge volume of trade. In order to assess the character of this important fair, we must answer four questions: 1) Where did the fair take place? 2) When did it take place? 3) What were the main commodities traded there? and 4) What was its catchment area?

We know that the citadel of the town of Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs was situated very close to the northeastern border of the oasis (Fig. 1).²¹ From our extant sources, it is not clear where exactly this fair took place, but given its dimensions, it is unlikely that it was situated inside the densely inhabited and intensively farmed oasis area. It was probably held at the nearby border with the desert steppe, where caravans passed by on their way between Samarqand, Paykand, and Marw. During the periods when the oasis of Bukhara was fenced off towards the desert–steppe by an oasis wall, the fair most likely took place at one of the major gateways into the oasis. Indeed, there used to be a unique archaeological ensemble ca. 3.2 km to the southeast of the actual town of Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs constituting the remains of the main gate of the oasis wall in this area on the main road to Samarqand.²² Unfortunately, most of this ensemble is destroyed today. However, it was investigated by A. Iakubovskii's and V. Shishkin's Zerafshan expedition in 1934 and by the Uzbek–American Expedition in Bukhara (UzAmEB) in 2011 and 2015–2016. The ensemble is also clearly visible on Corona

19 Trans. Wright 1934, 184.

20 Ibn Ḥawqal, ed. Kramers 1939, 489; trans. Kramers 1964, 469. Similar al-Idrisī, ed. Cerulli et al. 1970–1984, 495–496 and Iṣṭakhrī, ed. Ḥīnī 1961, 175, who has “Mawarannahr” instead of “Khurāsān” and does not mention Iraq; al-Muqaddasī, ed. de Goeje 1877, 281 calls the market “quite long.”

21 Namely, at the archaeological site of Khoja-Buston, ca. 3.8 km to the northwest of the present-day rayon center Kiziltepa. Cf. Штарк and Мирзаахмедов 2015, 93.

22 Якубовский 1940; Алпаткина, Иневаткина, and Кулакова 2008; Шишкин 2015; Мирзаахмедов and Штарк 2012; Штарк and Мирзаахмедов 2015; Stark and Mirzaakhmedov 2016; Мирзаахмедов, Штарк, and Мирзаахмедов 2018.

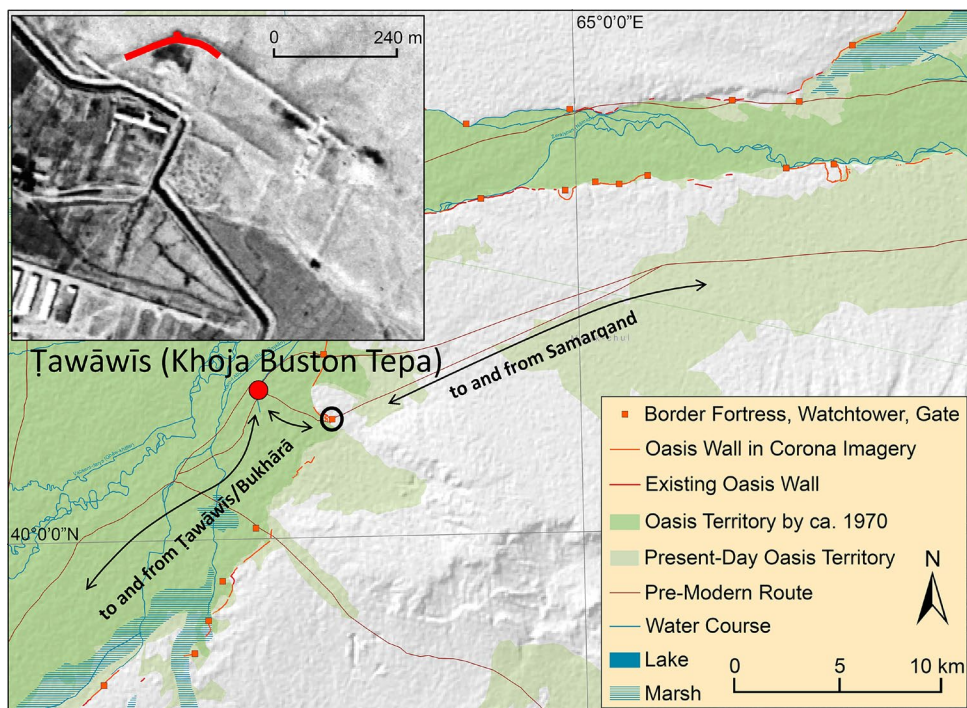


Fig. 3 Map with Corona image of Kiziltepa ensemble.

imagery from March 1970 (Fig. 3). It consisted not only of a strong border fortress, the line of the oasis wall, and a gate opening adjacent to the fortress but also of a large enclosure, measuring a total of more than ten hectares. The area of this enclosure is littered with sherds mainly dating to between the fourth and the tenth centuries CE, but it showed few traces of permanent habitation. This seems like a very good candidate for the spot where the famous fair of Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs could have taken place (at least during the periods when the “Long Wall” was functioning): situated right at the interface of the oasis and the steppe on the main route to and from Samarkand but, at the same time, fenced off from the steppe and thus, in all likelihood, heavily policed.

The second question is the exact timing of the bazaar. Most modern commentators hold that this was a summer fair because the “month of Tīr” is the fourth month of the Persian solar calendar, corresponding to mid-June to mid-July. However, we know that the Sogdians employed a mobile calendar and that, in late pre-Islamic times, the Sogdian New Year fell at the end of July. At that time, the fourth month of the year would have occurred in the fall. This is confirmed by Bīrūnī’s *Kitāb al-Taḥfīm*,

which states that the fair started on the fifteenth day of the sixth month—that is, September–October. So, in all likelihood, this was a fall fair, not a summer one.

But what were the main commodities of this border fair? According to the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, “defective goods, such as curtains, covers, and other goods with defects” (*ākhriyān-i ma’yūb būdī az barda wa sutūr wa digar ākhriyān bā ‘aib*) were sold. The tenth- to twelfth-century geographers all mention cotton cloths being sold at this market. However, there is an additional interesting detail reported by Bīrūnī, namely, his strange assertion that “stolen goods” were sold here, that could not be returned. The point that sales could not be rescinded also appears in the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*—but there it is mentioned with regard to defective goods, which makes perfect sense. As for the “stolen goods” (*masrūqāt*), I am inclined to follow O. Smirnova’s suggestion to simply eliminate a dot over the *qaf*, thus arriving at *masrūfāt*—meaning something like “things eaten by worms” (i.e., by moths), thus suggesting silken or woolen (but not cotton) textiles.²³ This fits well with the curtains and covers mentioned by the *Tārīkh-i-Bukhārā*. As there is no good evidence for silk production in Bukhara in the tenth century or earlier,²⁴ we may assume these were mostly woolen carpets, covers, and wall hangings—in addition to the cotton textiles mentioned by the tenth to twelfth century geographers (which were apparently also traded at the border market at Wardāna; see above).

This finally leads us to the question: who were the main actors at this bazaar? Or, in the words of the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*: who were these people from “Ferghana, Chach, and other places”? Geographically, this clearly points to the regions along the middle Syr Darya, and indeed, there were several important steppe routes connecting Bukhara directly with the middle course of the Syr Darya, running north of the Nuratau range.²⁵ We know that the city dwellers along the micro-oases of the middle Syr Darya and its tributaries lived very closely intertwined with pastoral communities in the steppes and high mountains. Thus, the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā* could have been referring to urban middlemen from Ferghana, Chach, and all the way up to the Otrar–Turkestan–Sawrān area, who sold or bought woolen textiles at this fair in Bukhara; but it is equally possible that these people from “Ferghana, Chach, and other places” included pastoralist groups from the middle Syr Darya regions. And here the timing of the fair comes into play: we know that the fall was the time when pastoralists drew near the marshy eastern fringes of the oasis, using them as winter pasture area.²⁶ For the centuries around the turn of our era, this is impressively attested by the presence of hundreds of kurgans along the eastern fringes of the Bukhara oasis, including the

23 Смирнова 1970, 144–145.

24 As opposed to later periods; for the sixteenth century and later, see Nekrasova 1999, *passim*.

25 These routes largely remained outside of the purview of the tenth- to twelfth-century geographers, but they are attested in later sources (e.g., Ott 1974, 87–89) and by the remains of caravanserais and sardābas (Немцева 1985; 1987; 2006; Манылов 1987).

26 Шаниязов 1975, 189. See also Paul 1996, 111 n. 82.

border area near Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs (with extensive kurgan clusters at Shakhri-Vayron, Kiziltepa, Lyavandak, and Kuyu-Mazar).²⁷ Thus, it is also possible that the enormous fair at the border near Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs, held at some point in the fall, was the place where pastoral groups from up to the middle Syr Darya regions sold woolen fabrics during their seasonal migrations into the region. In this context, it is worth remembering a particular detail mentioned by the *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā* with regard to the fair at Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs: the sale of defective textiles. Perhaps we have to understand this curious notice in the sense that this fair was dominated by wholesale trade, i.e., these textiles were predominantly purchased in bulk by city-based resellers (perhaps similar to the later attested *dallāl*)²⁸ and not by final consumers; but at the end of such fairs, remaining and defective goods were sold to the local population at cheap prices.

A similar trade with, perhaps, more local pastoralists might have occurred at a second important fair, not far from the eastern border of the oasis zone, at the large village of Shargh. We are told that it took place in winter and that lamb and sheepskin were, in the time of Narshakhī, among the dominant trade items.²⁹ That herdsmen would sell their highly priced lambskins at a winter fair makes perfect sense, as winter was the traditional lambing season for the famous Karakul lambs in this region.

Specialized Craft Production in the Border Zone: Some Thoughts on Archaeological Evidence for the Pre-medieval Period

Not only trade took place in the border zone. There was also specialized craft production, notably the production of ceramics and metal tools. In the following, I would like to focus on some archaeological evidence that allows us to bring our inquiry chronologically back to antiquity (third century BCE–third/fourth centuries CE).

In an important study, published in 2006, S. Bolelov surveyed more than seventy archaeological sites in the regions of Chorasmia, the lower Syr Darya, Sogdiana, Bactria, Margiana, and Parthyene directly associated with the production of ceramics and dating between the middle of the first millennium BCE and the middle of the first millennium CE. Apart from urban potters' quarters and specialized open production

27 On these kurgans, see Wang 2020 (with earlier literature).

28 Some sort of “brokers,” “agents” (Arabic: *dallāl*—lit. “guide”). On the role of these *dallāl* in nineteenth and early twentieth century Bukhara and Qaraqul, see Калашников 1927, 130–131; Сухарева 1966, 236–238; Джаббаров 2011, 183.

29 *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, ed. Riḍawī 1984, 20–21.

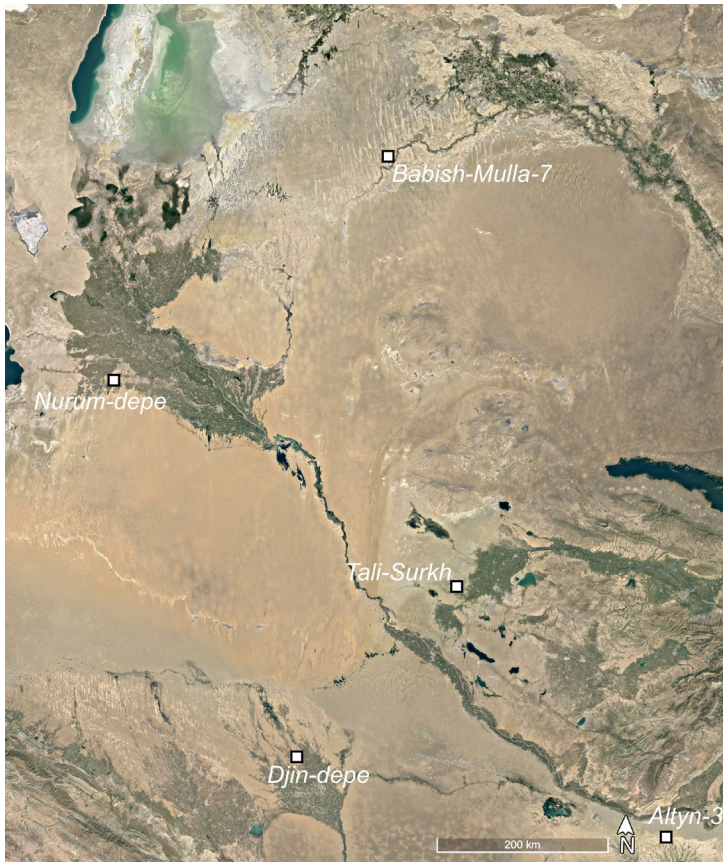


Fig. 4 Map with specialized potters'/craft production/bazaar settlements.

areas in the rural countryside, he notices another interesting type of production site, namely, specialized potters'/craft production/bazaar settlements (Fig. 4).³⁰ In Bolelov's study, four sites represent this type of production site: the site Babish-Mulla-7 in the old delta area of the Syr Darya (in the area of the Chirik-Rabat culture along the old bed of the Jana-Darya),³¹ the site Altyn-3 in Bactria,³² a cluster of farmsteads around Nurum-depe in left-bank Chorasnia,³³ and the site Djin-depe in Margiana.³⁴ The

30 Болелов 2006, 116–119.

31 Болелов and Утубаев 2017; Утубаев et al. 2023.

32 Болелов 2006, 116.

33 Вайнберг and Болелов 1999; Болелов 2005; 2006, 116–119; 2012, 483–484.

34 Мержин 1962; Кошеленко 1963.

former two sites date to the third quarter of the first millennium BCE; the latter two to the centuries around the turn of our era.³⁵ Considering this low number, one should be careful with far-reaching generalizations, but all these sites represent non-fortified open settlements comprised of individual farmsteads around or next to some more monumental central building, complete with a substantial amount of kilns (between fifteen and forty). These were not separated from the settlements; instead, almost every farmstead seems to have had its own kiln. One of the farmsteads of the site in Nurum-depe in left-bank Chorasmia, which happens to be the best explored within this group so far, also housed a smithy and wine presses. Such specialized craft production/bazaar villages also existed in the region in later times; they were studied in the early 1950s by B. Vainberg. Typically, production took place in houses that were loosely scattered around the manor house of some local notable; the products were then usually sold on site. Such craft-production/bazaar settlements often served Turkmen and other nomadic groups living further away.³⁶

A similar purpose has been suggested by Bolelov for the sites of Nurum-depe, Djin-depe, Babish-Mulla-7, and Altyn-3. Indeed, all these specialized craft-production settlements are found at the fringes of the agricultural oases or in the zone already dominated by pastoralists, suggesting that production was probably geared towards the latter.

To this group of sites we might now add a fifth one: the small site of Tali-Surkh, first discovered by V. Shishkin and recently investigated by the UzAmEB (Fig. 5).³⁷ It is situated on the western outskirts of the oasis of Bukhara and seems to have, according to surface finds, functioned first between the third century BCE and the first century CE, and then again briefly between the third and fourth centuries CE. During the earlier phase, it was part of a small settlement cluster that occupied the area at the border of the irrigated farmland, while during the later period, it formed an isolated site just beyond the perimeter of the late antique/early medieval oasis wall. The site follows the same general structure as observed by Bolelov for sites of the type “craft-production/bazaar settlement”: a very small (ca. 0.1 ha) central tepa (perhaps the remains of a manor house) surrounded by a non-fortified open settlement (indicated by low mounds) and production areas. The latter are attested in form of two distinct areas, where considerable amounts of ceramic and metallurgic slag were deposited. Indeed, a geomagnetic survey conducted by the UzAmEB in March 2023 under the direction of Zachary Silvia revealed clear traces of kilns and/or furnaces.³⁸ In addition, pedestrian

35 Болелов (2012, 484) notes that some of the central manor houses at Nurum-depe might date as early as the fourth–second centuries BCE.

36 Вайнберг 1961, 17–18.

37 Шишкин 1963, 143; Stark et al. 2019; Мирзаахмедов et al. 2020, 209–212.

38 Silvia et al. in preparation.

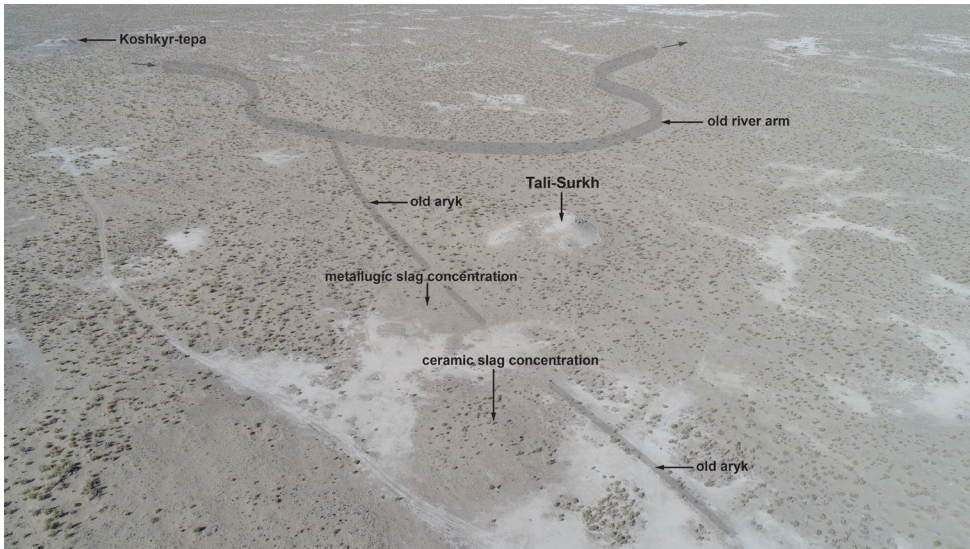


Fig. 5 Aerial photograph of Tali-Surkh.

surveys of the surroundings of the site conducted in August 2018 and September 2022 (the latter by a group of metal detectorists)³⁹ yielded numerous finds of worked stones, misfired ceramics, a total of ten bronze finger-rings, a bronze seal, two terracotta fragments, and the fragment of a mold for a terracotta figurine.⁴⁰ Thus, presumably, not only ceramics were produced around Tali-Surkh but also terracotta figurines and perhaps also personal jewelry. That there might have been some sort of bazaar at this spot is suggested by a concentration of coin finds around the site.⁴¹ Thus, there are good reasons to suggest that the ensemble of Tali-Surkh represents the remains of a specialized craft-production/bazaar settlement at the western border of the Bukhara oasis at some point between the third century BCE and the third/fourth century CE.

39 My heartfelt thanks go to Tomáš Bek, Miroslav Kratochvíl, and Václav Kalenda for their collaboration.

40 For the terracotta figurines and the mold from Tali-Surkh, see Stark et al. 2019, 168–170.

41 V. Shishkin mentions finds of “completely corroded small bronze coins” encountered during his surveys in 1937 or 1938 (Шишкин 1963, 143). A. Musakaeva reports a Hyrcodes imitation coin among Shishkin’s finds at Tali-Surkh (Мусакаева 2014, 135). In addition, our metal detector survey of the surroundings of the site in September 2022 revealed one Hyrcodes obol (first to second century CE?), five late Hyrcodes hemi-obols (early third century CE?), and one potential post-Kushan copper coin (third to fourth century CE?). Unfortunately, this area has been systematically looted by local metal detectorists for more than ten years now, so these are likely only the “leftovers” of a once much more substantial assemblage.

Conclusion

This paper hopes to have shown that, in the fertile oasis regions of southwestern Central Asia, it was not only the major urban centers where commercial hotspots and specialized production areas developed but also the seemingly “peripheral” border zones of the oases.

First of all, one needs to acknowledge that the notion of the “border” itself involved both ecologically (and sometimes militarily) well-defined border “lines” as well as a fuzzy frontier (or “outer border zone”). The latter, sparsely populated by (mostly) pastoral groups, was a place of contested authority that nonetheless gave opportunity to commercial activities, often in the form of small unregulated “black markets” evolving around passing caravans.

However, and perhaps not surprisingly, regular border markets right at the usually heavily policed immediate border of the irrigated oasis were much more important. In the oasis of Bukhara alone, data from textual sources (both historical and ethnographic) and archaeological investigations reveal a whole gamut of vibrant border markets—ranging from rural weekly markets to major yearly fairs of transregional importance.

These border markets and associated production centers played an important role in serving the economic needs of pastoral and agro-pastoral groups in the region. However, as impressively shown by the famous fair at Arqūd/Ṭawāwīs, they could also attract actors from neighboring regions and even beyond. Either way, these border markets served as important nodes in regional and transregional economic networks—the latter sometimes spanning across Central Asia and beyond. This observation forces us to rethink our traditional focus on urban centers even when it comes to broad discussions of macro-economic phenomena and trends, or at least to be careful not to mistake the heightened visibility of cities in many of our sources as an accurate reflection of the realities on the ground, which tend to be more complex and involve a wide range of nonurban actors and agents.

Figure Credits

Fig. 1, 4 Map: Sören Stark, Google Earth imagery.

Fig. 2, 5 Photo: Sören Stark.

Fig. 3 Map: Sören Stark; inset: Corona imagery, March 1970.

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