*Hespéris-Tamuda* LVI (4) (2021): 237-263

# Suburban Cities and Fluid Boundaries: Stories beyond the Walls of Islamic Urbanities in Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent

**M. Manu Prithvish Sobti**
University of Queensland
Brisbane-Australia

**Abstract**: The locus of the so-called Islamic city and proximities to its urban core have long been acknowledged as sites for architecture and institutions of bustling trade. In provocative departure from this commonly held view, this contribution argues how within the *longue durée* of the early medieval Central Asian city, it was no longer the core, but rather the periphery of the urban district and the outlying zone of suburbia (frequently multiple suburbia) that served as a setting for the intertwined activities of trade and exchange. Following their recent arrivals in Central Asia after crossing the legendary Oxus River (later the Amu Darya) between 650-821 CE, the Arabs had termed these commercially-active, ex-urban zones outside the urban walls as the *rabaḍ*. In the multiple emporia along the Silk Road's Eurasian branch, these *rabaḍ* propagated into full-grown cities adjoining the enceinte, replete with their own *caravanserai, ribāṭ, funduq* and *sūq* structures. By the early fourteenth century, these "suburban" yet city-based trade networks and their physical typologies had also pervaded the geo-politics of the Delhi Sultanate cities, which lay geographically further south-eastwards. Finally, the arrival of the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent by the early sixteenth century exaggerated this status quo. In nostalgic rendition of typologies extant in the broader Eurasian world left behind – conceptually stretching from Herat and Samarqand to Tabriz and Shiraz – the outwards expanding Mughal city now re-embraced the *bazaar* or market street. In a twist of memories re-built, "covered" *bazaar* were included within the fort layouts at Lahore, Agra, Shahjahanabad, Fatehpur Sikri and Burhanpur – the five royal Mughal capitals. How then did these suburban architectures and trade networks emerging in the "fluid boundaries" of the Oxus influence developments – formal, spatial and legislative – while moving eastwards and westwards? Where did the highly mobile Eurasian mercantile communities transport and reinterpret the notions of the suburban city model within and beyond the definitions of Islamic urbanism? These are among the many questions explored by this contribution.

**Keywords**: Islamic City, Amu Darya, *Rabaḍ*, Central Asian Trade, Mughal Cities, Urban Peripheries.

## 1. Introductions to an Unfamiliar Urbanity in Central Asia

In the year 983 CE, a Persian geography by a still-anonymous author from Guzgan (current-day northern Afghanistan) – the *Ḥudūd* al-ʿĀlam min al-mashriq ʿilā al-maghrib or simply the *Ḥudūd* (literally The Boundaries of The World from The East to the West) – enumerated the forty-five lands (*nāḥiāt*) north and south of the equator. Its descriptions spanned al-Andalus, the Byzantine Empire, and Rus' in the west, to Tibet and India in the east.[1] The compendium's writer detailed the margins of the Islamic world and in its chapter on the geographically peripheral Turkic lands of Central Asia provided flattering descriptions on the size, status, and significance of Bukhara, Samarqand, Merv, Nishapur and Balkh among the multiple cities and towns of this region. While the *Ḥudūd* remains universally-acknowledged both as a preliminary overview and an evident compilation of earlier sources, even its perfunctory accounts clearly validate some important commonalities across the five mentioned urbanities. First, in characterising the Central Asian urban foundations as "…impressive…" the *Ḥudūd* was categorically documenting unprecedented urban growth in these mentioned cities, especially following the epoch of the momentous Arab invasions (650-750 CE) that had occurred some 300 years prior. Second, the *Ḥudūd* employed new taxonomy (terminology) to direct attention to the unusual morphologies emerging across the burgeoning urban centres under observation. The innocuous tripartite sub-division of the city into *qala, shahristan* and *balad* now also included the so-called *rabaḍ* (suburban) district, indicative of the prolific growth that the earlier city had encountered. Third, and most importantly, in exuberantly documenting unprecedented urban change, the *Ḥudūd* was in all likelihood, erroneous in its assessments on the size and extent of urban territory in each case. The square layout of Bukhara was described as 12 *farsang* on each side, while Nishapur only 1 *farsang* and endowed with a large population. Similarly, other cities either had substantial populations, or were large and walled (sometimes identified as *shahristan*). In effect, not only were these categorizations clearly inconsistent, but also brought into question what Bukhara's 12 *farsang* or Nishapur's 1 *farsang* layout actually included. Was this the entirety of the city in each case or merely its urban core – the so-called *shahristan*, with or without the *qala*?

Undeniably, by the late tenth century CE and coinciding with the compilation of the *Ḥudūd*, several dynamic changes had been catalysed in the morphology of the Central Asian cities. In 650 CE, the Arab forces had crossed the legendary Oxus River (Amu Darya) into Central Asia. This was the first of their multiple incursions into Mawarranahr until 751 CE. While the arrival of a new religion caused substantial conversions to Islam, material destruction remained limited and the biggest cities were left largely untouched.[2] Interventions and encroachments on pre-existing urban sites were aimed largely at establishing Arab supremacy through the foundations of new institutions to propagate the new faith. Meanwhile, a substantial Arab population composed of the sedentarizing garrison also settled in these cities, fostering a unique cultural synthesis with the indigenous Sogdian population.[3] The arriving Arabs also endorsed the Samanids (819-999 CE) as

---

1. Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *Hudud al-ʿAlam: The Regions of the World. a Persian Geography* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1982), 5-27.

2. Hamilton Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1923).

3. Manu P. Sobti, "Eurasia's Historical Space of Palimpsest-Desert, Border, Riparian and Steppe," in *Architecture on the Borderline: Boundary Politics and Built Space*, ed. Anoma Pieris (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019), 13-35.

their representatives, whose short-lived cultural efflorescence developed capitals at Bukhara, Afrasiyab-Samarqand, Penjikent and Paikend and other provincial locations. In bedazzlement of these cities with their superlative exemplars of urban architecture, could the inconstancies as regards documentation have been compounded by the inabilities of previous commentators to reasonably fathom this unfolding scenario of dramatic, socio-spatial urban changes?

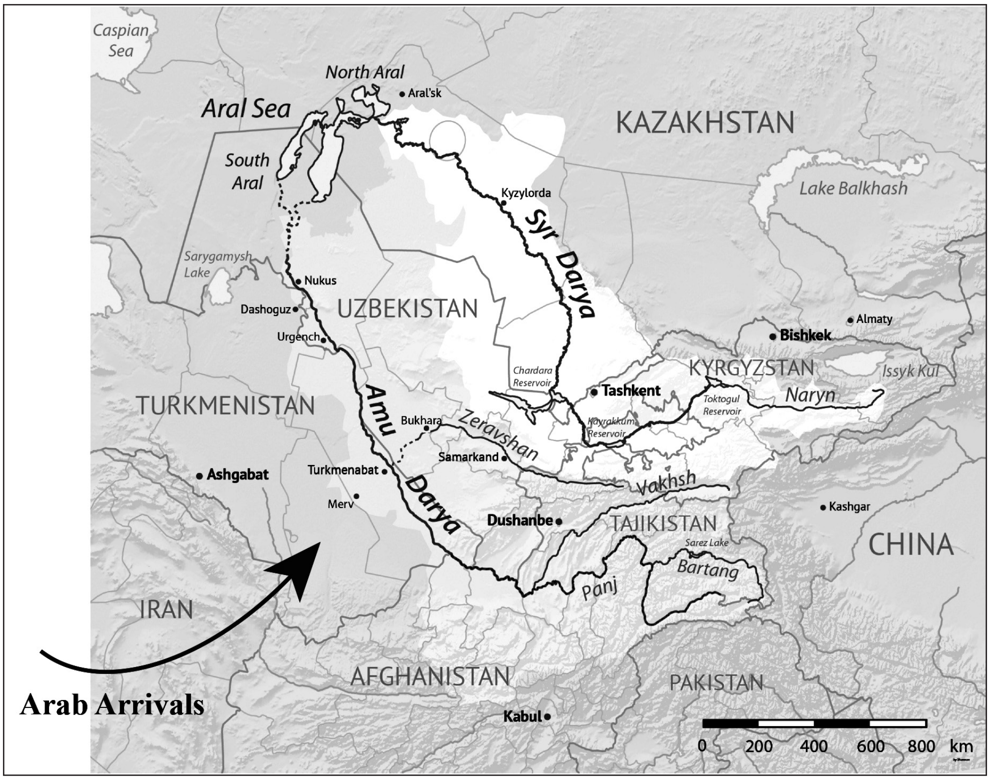
Caspian Sea
North Aral
Aral'sk
Aral Sea
South Aral
KAZAKHSTAN
Lake Balkhash
Kyzylorda
Syr Darya
Sarygamysh Lake
Nukus
Dashoguz
Urgench
UZBEKISTAN
Almaty
Bishkek
KYRGYZSTAN
Issyk Kul
Chardara Reservoir
Tashkent
Toktogul Reservoir
Naryn
Kayrakkum Reservoir
TURKMENISTAN
Amu Darya
Bukhara
Zeravshan
Samarkand
Ashgabat
Turkmenabat
Merv
Vakhsh
Kashgar
Dushanbe
TAJIKISTAN
Sarez Lake
Bartang
CHINA
Panj
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
Kabul
Arab Arrivals
0 200 400 600 800 km

**Fig. 1**: Map of Central Asia showing Amu Darya and Arab Invasions, (© Manu P. Sobti).

Beyond the *Ḥudūd* itself, Central Asian urbanity in the early medieval era also found coverage in other contemporary sources, although these were not necessarily geographical in scope or genre. Among the few that should be specifically mentioned, the *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-ʾAqālīm* or *Aḥsan* (composed 985-86 CE) partially followed the global focus of the *Ḥudūd*. Its author, Shams ad-Dīn ʾAbū ʿAbd ʾAllāh Muḥammad Ibn ʾAbi Bakr al-Bannāʾ al-Bashshārī (945-1005 CE) or simply al-Muqaddasī, combined the Balkhī School's map making acumen with geographic ruminations of the known world, self-consciously subdivided into distinct regions or *ʾiqlīm*.[4] Adventurously cartographic in its breadth yet not merely an atlas, and written just a few years following the *Ḥudūd*, the *Aḥsan* highlighted the first momentous Oxus crossing by the Arab Riddah hordes, the first among multiple incursions into Mawarranahr. It explained how the invasions on the region (*ʾiqlīm)* of al-Mashriq had catalyzed the steady process of urban expansion (*tamṣīr*), specifically introducing armed encampments such as the *amṣār* and *ribāṭ*.[5] This suggested synthesis of mainstream Islamic city-building traditions with nascent, quasi-nomadic Sogdian urbanity was of special interest to al-Muqaddasī, who documented how the process had (and was still) effectively transforming military encampments first into urban quarters and later into impressive cities. In contrast to the geographically-inflected accounts of the *Ḥudūd* and the *Aḥsan*, ʾAbū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī's (838-923 CE) *Tārīkh ar-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* or the *Tārīkh aṭ-Ṭabarī* concatenated geographical data and place descriptions into historical narratives. In his multiple volumes, al-Tabari's work imparted considerable gravity to the cultures of mobile populations that left their imprints on rapidly-changing Central Asian urbanities.[6] As the "real" account of Arab hordes progressing towards the Oxus, the text highlighted "paths through the desert" which would later blossom into "retail connections" connecting culturally-segregated worlds. Finally, beyond the general descriptions of a rapidly unfolding cultural phenomena as witnessed in the anonymous *Ḥudūd*, in al-Muqaddasī's *Aḥsan*, and in aṭ-Ṭabarī's Tārīkh, was ʾAbū Bakr Muḥammad Jaʿfar al-Narashakhī's (899-959 CE) incomparable Tārīkh-i Bukhārā.[7] Written between 943-48 CE, *Narshakhī's Tārīkh* was among the few specific descriptions of the rapidly changing Central Asian city. The Tārīkh documented Bukhārā under the Samanid apogee led by Emir ʿAbd al-Malik b. Nūḥ b. Naṣr. Narshakhī presents the dynamic vignette of an expanding city replete with institutions and brimming at its "fuzzy" edges well beyond the conventional city walls.

---

[4] Muhammad Hamid Altai (ed.), *Al-Muqaddasi-The Best Division for the Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. Basil Anthony Collins (Reading UK: Garnet Publications, 2001).

The mentioned four interlocutors, while encompassing a range of scales I their descriptions, especially commented on the "new" type of urbanity created in Central Asia following the Arab invasions across the Oxus. This urbanity undeniably supplanted the layout of the circumvallated enceinte observed further west in the Islamic world and was characterized by the unprecedented development of its suburb or *rabaḍ* district.[8] The new commercial districts (frequently multiple districts) of these trans-Oxus urbanities prospered in place of what had traditionally been the city center or the *shahristan*. Following up on al-Muqaddasī's observations, the Arab fiat city or militaristic *amṣār* that was brought in Khorasan and subsequently Central Asia following the Riddah raids

---

[5] Paul Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[6] Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. F Rosenthal, 39 vols (Albany NJ: State University of New York Press, 1985-89).

[7] Mudarris Razavi, *Al-Narshakhi-Tarikh Bukhara*, trans. Abu Nasr Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Ghabavi (Tehran: 1387/2008-09).

[8] Manu P. Sobti, "Urban Metamorphosis and Change in Central Asian Cities after the Arab Invasions," (PhD dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, 2005), 9-10.

– may have served as the formal basis for several of these foundations. Prior Greco-Roman, Parthian and Hephthalite foundations would have also provided the orthogonal bias for this underlying plan. For the incoming Arab hordes, the exodus of the urban population to the suburban *rabaḍ*, versus a preference for the crowded *shahristan* (as was the case in earlier times), was a visible indicator that society had undergone a critical transformation. Contributing to this process was the substantial administrative stability that now prevailed in the urban environments of Central Asia. This dynamic geo-politics appears to have attracted peasants and the traditional land-owning *dihqan* or feudal lord class alike, as they moved towards the prosperity imparted by the city. In effect, the existing *shahristan*, and more frequently the suburbs – where land prices were speculatively attractive amidst a collation of new buildings alongside existing ones – were patronized by the *waqf* or charitable endowments established by the emerging elites.

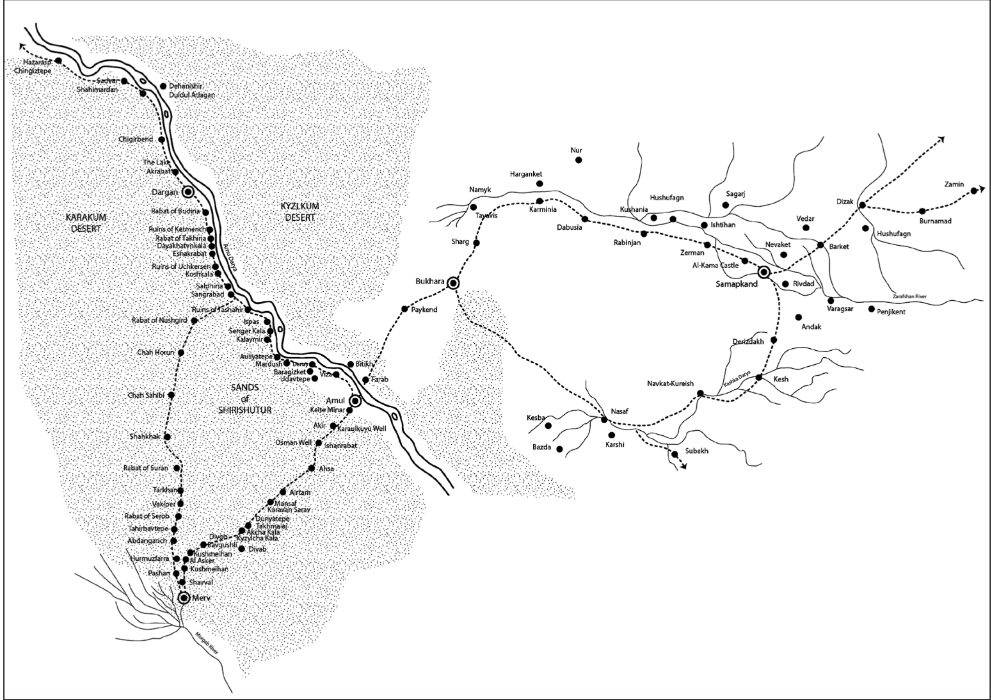
Hazarasp
Chingiztepe
Sadvar
Shahimardan
Dehanishir
Duldul Atlagan
Chigirbend
The Lake
Akrabat
Dargan
KARAKUM
DESERT
KYZLKUM
DESERT
Rabat of Budina
Ruins of Ketmench
Rabat of Takhiria
Dayakhatynkala
Eshakrabat
Amu Darya
Ruins of Uchkersen
Koshkala
Salphiria
Sangrabad
Ruins of Tashahir
Rabat of Nushgird
Ispas
Senger Kala
Kalaymir
Chah Horun
Auliyatepe
Mardush
Deny
Baragizket
Udavtepe
Viza
Bitikh
Farab
SANDS
of
SHIRISHUTUR
Chah Sahibi
Amul
Kelte Minar
Akir
Karaulkuyu Well
Shahkhak
Osman Well
Ishanrabat
Ahsa
Rabat of Suran
Tarkhan
Airtam
Vakiper
Mansaf
Karavan Saray
Rabat of Serob
Dunyatepe
Takhmalaj
Tahirbavtepe
Akcha Kala
Abdangarich
Divob
Kyzylcha Kala
Bavgushli
Divab
Kushmeihan
Hurmuzfarra
Al Asker
Kushmeihan
Pashan
Shavval
Merv
Murgab River
Nur
Harganket
Namyk
Tayavis
Karminia
Sharg
Dabusia
Kushania
Hushufagn
Ishtihan
Sagarj
Rabinjan
Zerman
Al-Kama Castle
Vedar
Nevaket
Barket
Dizak
Hushufagn
Burnamad
Zamin
Bukhara
Paykend
Samapkand
Rivdad
Varagsar
Penjikent
Zarafshan River
Andak
Derizdakh
Navkat-Kureish
Kashka Darya
Kesh
Kesba
Nasaf
Bazda
Karshi
Subakh

**Fig. 2**: Schematic Map of trans-Eurasian Trade across and along the Amu Darya River, (© Manu P. Sobti).

As cities in Central Asia spilled beyond their limiting walls and formed unfortified agglomerations covering substantial areas of formerly rural territory, multiple cores of development were created within the urban fabric. Therefore, estimates by contemporary geographers (as in the *Ḥudūd*) on the city's layout and size were virtually impossible, for it was unclear where the urban areas ended and rural areas began. Also, the so-called 'centrality' of organization that had once characterized cities in the Middle East, and large parts of Eastern Iran, no longer prevailed in Central Asia. While the *qala* itself moved outside the confines of the walled city, no longer was even the so-called urban core located at the city's geometric center. Instead, the development of suburban pockets created increasingly asymmetrical urban layouts, often with urban spaces straddled between the *qala* and *shahristan*, and appendages radiating from the core (or cores) towards the urban peripheries.

Within the complex framework of transformative urban change, long-distance trade leveraged the unique locational advantages of Central Asia. The region was characterised by the incessant perambulations of its closely-knit tribes at least until the early decades of the twentieth century.[9] And, while the steppe remained geographically isolated over the course of its global histories, it intrinsically connected to adjoining regions via a preponderance of geological and "climatic" land bridges.[10] Well into the pre-modern era and the twentieth century, multiple Eurasian nomadic tribes and clan confederations aggressively pursued contacts with sedentary cultures. Besides imparting strategic social and political advantages, more significantly these interactions transformed the nomads in cultural terms, metaphorically passing on to them the so-called "baggage" of the sedentary. On these lines, the exchange of cultural and luxury objects could be viewed as agential to the region's economic prosperity and to the unique patterns of urbanization that emerged during the early medieval period. As a case in point, the prolific Seljuq dynasty that emerged from around Lake Balkash between 1025-1195 CE, thoroughly integrated with the sedentary populations of both Central Asia and Asia Minor (present day Turkey). So complete was their cultural assimilation within the proliferating syntax of urban spaces and grand architecture as vehicles for self-legitimacy, that multiple Seljuq experiments with built monuments were extolled as exemplars in the centuries following. And the Seljuqs were merely one among the many nomadic peoples who reached out to befriend sedentary dynasties on the edges of the Eurasian world. Yet, as scholars have suggested, the Islamic world was the only major world region to maintain any degree of sustained and direct contact with Eurasia during the late antique and medieval periods.[11] Was this owing to the complex nature of Islamic governance and "gunpowder" polity that had made substantive inroads into Central Asia following the Arab invasions? Or was it the resultant of specific institutions whose proliferation encouraged sustaining nomadic linkages between transforming centres, still remains contested.

---

[9] Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China 221 BC to AD 1757* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

[10] Guy Le Strange, *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905).

[11] Ronald Findlay & Kevin O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), xxii.

More importantly, within the framework of this essay, the vast trade inroads created by the arrival and spread of Islam in Central Asia transformed the commercially active, ex-urban zones outside the urban walls – the *rabaḍ* – into full-grown cities adjoining the enceinte, replete with their own *caravanserai, ribāṭ, funduq* and *sūq* structures. This centrifugally moving urbanity with its dissipated boundaries that effectively combined sedentary urban space with the notions of the nomadic *yailaq*, was vastly removed from the older centripetally-conceptualised Islamic city, wherein proximities to its urban core were sites for architecture and institutions of bustling trade. In departure from this commonly held view, within the early medieval Central Asian city, it was no longer the core, but rather the periphery of the urban district and the outlying zone of suburbia (frequently multiple suburbia) that served as a setting for the intertwined activities of trade and exchange. By the early fourteenth century, these "suburban" yet city-based trade networks and their physical typologies had also pervaded the geo-politics of the Delhi Sultanate cities, which lay geographically several thousand miles further south-eastwards. Finally, the arrival of the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent by the early sixteenth century appears to have exaggerated this status quo. In nostalgic rendition of typologies extant in the broader Eurasian world left behind – conceptually stretching from Herat and Samarqand to Tabriz and Shiraz – the outwards expanding Mughal city now re-embraced the *bazaar* or market street. In a twist of memories re-built, "covered" *bazaar* were included within the fort layouts at Lahore, Agra, Shahjahanabad, Fatehpur Sikri and Burhanpur – the five royal Mughal capitals. How then did these suburban architectures and trade networks emerging in the "fluid boundaries" of the Oxus influence developments – formal, spatial and legislative – while moving eastwards and westwards? Where did the highly mobile Eurasian mercantile communities transport and reinterpret the notions of the suburban city model within and beyond the definitions of Islamic urbanism?

## 2. The Complexity of Central Asian Trade Networks

Within Central Asia's transforming Islamic urbanities, both geographically local and trans-regional commerce networks were an historical imperative. By around the tenth century CE, these networks had diversified at three distinct scales, engaging the regions small and large urban settlements and its well-populated cosmopolitan centres. They were sustained by infrastructural complexes, comprising of city gates and walls, *bazaar* and market spaces, *caravanserai*, watering points and roads at the so-called Extra Large or XL scale, the Medium or M scale, and Small or S scale.[12] Of these, the XL scale functioned transnationally and included trade routes stretching from China to the shores of the Mediterranean. These primary or 'trunk', interconnected routes were sequestered via inter and intra-dynastic agreements and alliances (such as the Pax-Mongolica). These routes also straddled the grasslands and riparian terrain on both banks of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) moved across the inhospitable Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts. Within Central Asia, the long-term sustenance of these extra-large (XL) spatio-economic armatures also enabled the temporal vacillations of the medium (M) scale of trade terrains creating spheres of influence. Catalysed by the processes of dynastic progression, the medium scale trade terrains were highlighted by Seljuk, ilkhanid, Safavid and Timurid rulers whose authorities continually negotiated with the region's nomadic tribes, alternating periods of relative stability with chaos and cultural hiatus. In an epoch of fluid boundaries, trade terrains often stretched beyond the geo-political limits of the empires that actually exuded them. Besides the large trades routes and the medium trade terrains, commerce networks in Central Asia culminated in the small (S) scale city and settlement clusters. Each of these clusters were replete with their own specific production, consumption, and transit points, these in turn nested within big and small urban centres, each with respective institutions of trade. In summary, while trade channels had historically criss-crossed the steppe, maintained by a combinations of the nomadic Yasa and legislations of sedentary dynasties, it was the unprecedented suburban city model that served as the single most critical condition for this prolific expansion.

---

[12] Manu P. Sobti, "Persianate Civitas: Networked Urbanities & Suburban Hinterlands in Erich Schmidt's," in *Revisiting the Historiography of Persianate Architecture*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016), 14-40.

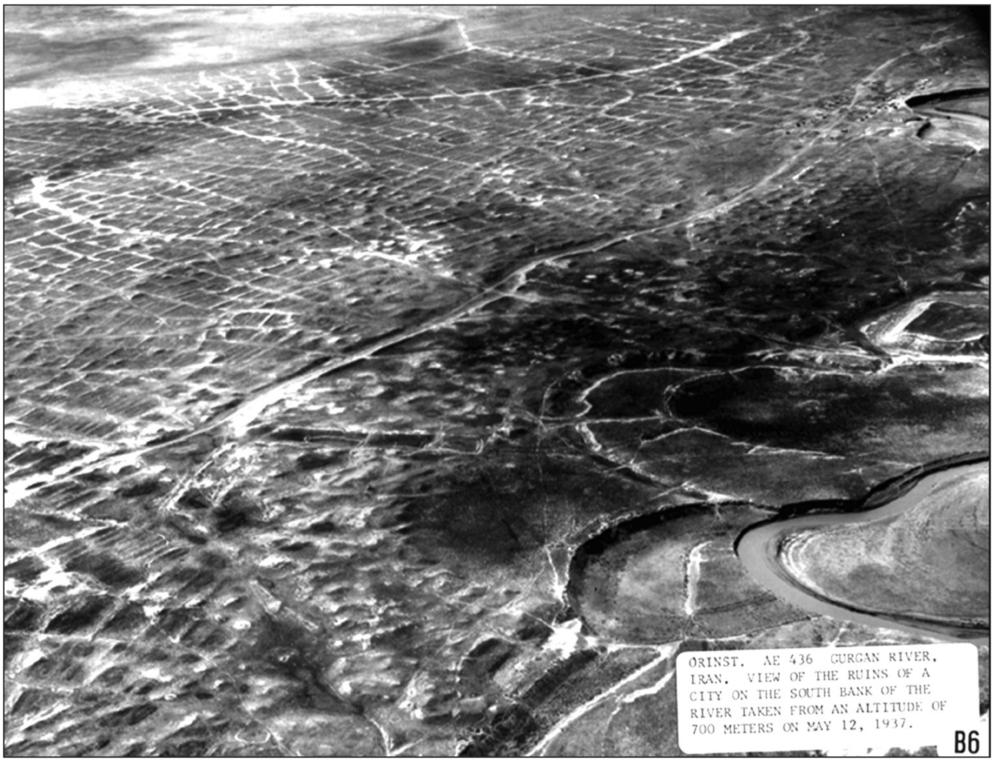
ORINST. AE 436 GURGAN RIVER, IRAN. VIEW OF THE RUINS OF A CITY ON THE SOUTH BANK OF THE RIVER TAKEN FROM AN ALTITUDE OF 700 METERS ON MAY 12, 1937.
B6

**Fig. 3**: Erich Schmidt's Aerial Photograph of Gurgan River, Iran, (dated May 12th 1937).

Within this scenario, the city-settlement clusters or *manzil* appears to have instrumentally shaped structural components of the commerce networks based on conditions of geography and landscape. While roads connected cities, settlements, *caravanserai*, *ribāṭ*, production and consumption zones, these were also staging grounds for the introduction of massive infrastructural projects including agricultural zones, dams, water supply systems that drastically changed the physical landscape of Central Asia and Eastern Iran. The expansion of roads in the Persian basin created the context for establishing new trade structures such as *caravanserai*, *khān* and *sūq* on the urban peripheries. In the urban core, besides the *maydān* and *bazaar*, were embedded institutions such as the *madrasa, bīmāristān, khangah, ḥammām* and *zurkhaneh*, all of which shaped the public spaces of these cities.

The spatial relationship of the *bazaar* with socio-cultural complexes enabled merchants to have influences on different layers of Persianate society, in ways beyond the economic. The so-called *bazaariyyan* (traditional merchants of the bazaar) were among the middle and upper middle-class population echelons in society. They formed the main taxpayers for the government and were at the same time, the financial supporters of the Ulama class and religious institutions. In effect, they cemented a multi-layered connection with the *bazaar* districts that abounded in the Persianate world. The *bazariyyan* also supported and patronised master builders, architects, artists and craftsmen in establishing new spaces within the urban core and its hinterland. The *bazariyyan* mercantile community also established several production zones and connected these zones to the trade networks therby leveraging their own positions of prestige and access in the *bazaar* itself. Social institutions such as mosques, *takyeh*, and *khangah* – which supported the lower class and poor via altruistic provisions food and shelter – were also funded by the *bazariyyan* in many cases. Governmental and religious taxes such as the *zakāt* and *khoms* which were paid by the *bazariyyan* kept them close to the ruling class as well as to the important religious figures and clerics. In effect, the *bazariyyan* were also responsible for keeping the economy sustained in domestic and international markets. Therefore, the role of trade was not only in shaping the spatial organization in market districts but also in how it reached out to socio-cultural connections as well and intertwined these with space.

## 3. The City as Extended Marketplace-the *Rabaḍ* at Bukhara, Samarqand & Merv

Based on this information, topographical details of the extensive Bukharan *shahristan* can now be reconstructed. By the second quarter of the tenth century, Bukhārā’s urban layout consisted of an inner city or *medina* enclosed within walls built in the Islamic period, a citadel situated to the west of the *medina* and outside it, and an outer city, containing these two, which was surrounded by yet another wall. Curiously, in the case of Bukhārā, this third wall appears to have contained the first two walls, the citadel and the several suburbs which extended beyond the boundaries of the city. The geographer al-Narshakhī's describes in the *Tārīkh Bukhārā*, that this "third wall" measured an enormous 12 *farsakh* x 12 *farsakh* (72 kms. x 72 kms.) in total size, while the second wall, which would normally have been identified as that of the outer city, measured 1 *farsakh* x 1 *farsakh* (6 kms. x 6 kms.).[13] Based on these two "loose-fitting" spatial zones of vastly different size, immediately apparent is the enormous distance between the inner and outermost walls, further exaggerated by the non-centric nature of the layout. This imparts an even greater credibility to how the elaborate suburbs *(rabaḍ)* of Bukhārā overpowered her urban landscape. And although the *shahristan* was still a force to be reckoned with, the city's *rabaḍ* was really the engine of economic growth. The elaborate, densely-populated Bukharan *rabaḍ* was described by Arab historian Ibn Ḥawqal in 978 CE as "… long and wide …" with its multiple districts seeming to lie between protective walls. Geographer Ibn al-Faqīh's description of Samarqand in 903 CE is similarly dramatic and substantiates the reconstruction of the Bukharan *rabaḍ*. Faqih was evidently re-cycling familiar urban models from his travels in the western realms of the Islamic world, and not including the new urban typologies emerging in Eastern Iran and Central Asia. He too mistakenly described the large Samarqandī *rabaḍ* as an area under crops, missing how these croplands were but straddled within and around multiple cores of development. On the other hand, why would Faqih have ever distinctly differentiated the "crop" area from the surrounding rural hinterland, had it not been for a clear formal distinction of some sort, such as a perceived boundary, a wall, a pattern or system of ownership?

Meanwhile, within the city's core, the commercial townscape of Bukhara included the Poi-Kalyan group of monuments, the Lyabi-Khauz ensemble, the Kosh Madrasa, and the Gaukushon Madrasa in the Hodja-Kalon ensemble. Several were set up at the important crossroads within the city fabric that lead to the city's bazaars. These bazaars were accentuated by the Taki Sarafon (Dome of the Moneychangers), Taki-Tilpak-Furushan (Dome of the Headguard Sellers), the Tim-Bazzazan, and the Tiro-Abdullah-Khan. By the early seventeenth century, many more buildings were patronized via private sponsorship or *waqf*, including the impressive Magoki Kurns Mosque (1637 CE), the Abdullaziz-Khan Madrasa (1652 CE) and a plethora of small and large warehouses for merchants arriving at the city gates.

---

[13] Manu P. Sobti, "A Palimpsest of Cultural Synthesis and Urban Change: Bukhara after the Islamic Invasions," *Built Environment* XXVIII, 3 (2002): 217-30.

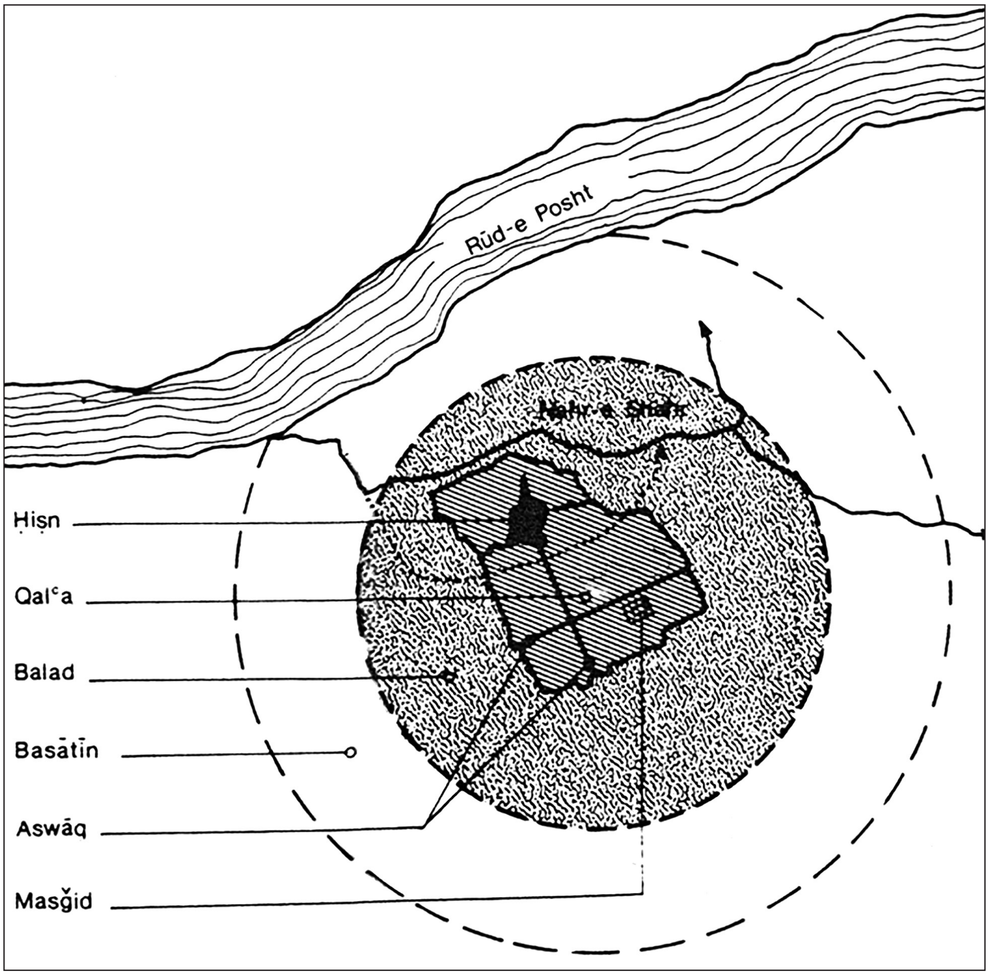

**Fig. 4**: Schematic Plan of Islamic Cities west of Central Asia, (in this case showing Bam, Iran).

While Bukhara and Samarqand's location in the Mawarranahr heartland produced the phenomenal growth described, this also resonated in the other important cities located south of the Amu Darya, within the Karakum desert (present day Turkmenistan). At Merv – aggrandized as the "… mother of all cities in Khurasan …" by none other than al-Muqaddasī again – was essentially the area contained in its elaborate *rabaḍ* which stretched along the multiple canals of the great Murghab river and its fertile delta. As these suburbs began to gradually spread westwards with the changing course of the river, the rapidly urbanizing suburban pockets also served as locations for the important civic institutions of the city. Attesting to their significance, among the three Jami or Friday Mosques in Merv, only the first – the Jami of Bani Mahan – stood within Merv's formally-designated original *shahristan* or urban district. The second – called the Masjid-al-ʿAtīq or the Old Mosque – stood at the gate opening to the Sarakhs road, at the westwards-oriented Bāb-al-Madīna which accessed Merv's suburbs. Also, the New Mosque of the Majan suburb was actually outside this gate, where the great markets of Merv were found. Meanwhile, no other major building projects were realized in the traditionally walled city. In fact, the legendary *ark* or citadel at Merv – a defensive structure established in the earlier period and ascribed to Alexandrine foundations – was now effectively reduced to a watermelon plantation, and its *shahristan* – once the district of the greatest population – was almost completely abandoned.

Hence, in the Central Asian context after the Arab Invasions, the creation of the *rabaḍ* district (or frequently multiple *rabaḍ* districts), and the massive migration of population to these districts owing to the increased sense of security created outside the urban walls, evidently produced a very different kind of city from one which had existed prior to the invasions. No longer was this city concentrated about a single point or area; it was characterized by its organizational bipolarity, occasionally tri-polarity and occasionally even multipolarity. In fact, with the creation of the *rabaḍ*, the older center or core of the city no longer remained its only focus. Several, if not many centers, developed at various locations within the *rabaḍ*, each concentrating about a group of public institutions and possibly a set of urban spaces.

Furthermore, even beyond the urban and *extra-muros* limits of cities such as Merv, Samarqand and Bukhara, two desert transit routes could be identified reaching and crossing the Chardzou crossing on the Amu Darya. Among these two, the first ran north-eastwards, spanning between the cultural entrepots of Merv, Bukhara and Samarqand. It had as many as 17 stopping stations between Merv and Bukhara, and as many 13 resting points between Bukhara and Samarqand. Thereafter, the route turned eastwards towards China and south-eastwards towards Afghanistan. The second route skirted the southern bank of the Amu Darya river. It connected Merv to Khwarazm in the west, with 12 stopping points dotting the Karakum desert landscape all the way to Sangrabad, an additional 10 between the significant city of Amul and Sangrabad, and 14 between Sangrabad and Khwarazm. Most among these stopping points comprised a caravanserai, with provisions to passing travelers and their caravans. Some even had distribution warehouses where goods could be accessible.[14]

## 4. Revisions to the Islamic City Model and the Central Asian City as a special case within the examination of the Islamic City

"There is agreement, of course, that all cities bear certain resemblances to each other in both landscape and function, and that "systems" of cities have developed in all countries, evolving out of the socio-economic conditions that characterize them. The controversial issue, one that intrigues geographer, sociologist, and historian alike, turns to a considerable degree on the relationship between value systems and social organization, on the one hand, and the development of city systems and various types of urban morphological patterns, on the other. It also involves levels of living and rates of economic development as they influence the nature of cities in various societies and countries. In other words, if types of urban hierarchy or urban morphology as taken as "dependent variables," to what extent is "culture" as an "independent variable" significant in "explaining" the differentiation among them?"[15]

---

[14] Sobti, "Eurasia's Historical Space of Palimpsest," 13-35.

Two kinds of approaches have traditionally characterized the study of cities across the Islamic world, at least until scholars began to be increasingly critical in terms of their research methodology. The first has viewed the city as a physical artefact that must be analysed to discern its logic, this analysis disregarding the instrumental forces that shaped the city over time. This view also confirmed the notion that there was a type that prevailed. In contrast, the second approach has examined the socio-cultural mechanisms operative within these cities, seeking to look back at the European city for comparison and terminology, a misplaced emphasis owing to the very different historical trajectory of historical developments occurring in the Islamic world. Within the framework of these two approaches, it would be fair to argue that either the Central Asian city should be considered a special case within the general examination of Islamic cities (in itself a field of intense debate), or more logically, that the description of characteristic Islamic cities must be reasonably altered to accommodate those in the Central Asian region. The earlier argument presented on the *rabaḍ* developments in early-medieval Central Asian cities seeks to support this latter premise. It emphasizes that the commonly-prevalent nineteenth and twentieth century Arab-Middle East "Islamic City" model needs to widen to include more culturally and geographically diverse examples of urbanism, produced through the synthesis of Islam with existing regional and local characteristics. This described process is also viewed as enabling prevailing scholarship on cities in the Islamic world to become far richer in content, facilitated by the "thick descriptions" of cities.[16]

Sheila Blair, in her review of "Urban Developments in the Islamic World," begins by characterizing the traditional urban Islamic world as one where no single type of city existed, but instead, several diverse types resulted from a varied set of factors combining in each instance.[17] Within her three-fold categorization of urban types in the major cultural zones of the Islamic world – lands of the Mediterranean and Near East; Iran and Western Central Asia; finally Anatolia and the Balkans – she points to the 'fundamental feature' of the Arab Islamic city within the Central and Western Islamic lands as one where "... [there] is the separation between public centres for economic, religious and cultural activities, and private zones, mainly reserved for residence." While Blair's analysis of cities in the Central and Western Islamic lands makes it apparent that this segregating feature of distinct public and private domains may have been to some extent true for certain kinds of cities in the western Islamic world, it must be handled with some caution with respect to Central Asia.

---

[15] Norton Sidney Ginsburg, "Urban Geography and 'Non-Western' Areas," in *The Study of Urbanization*, eds. Philip M. Hauser & Leo F. Schnore (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), 311-12.

[16] Urban layouts may also be considered to be 'signs' to a culture that must be observed, recorded and interpreted comprehensively. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 1973).

[17] Sheila Blair, "Islamic Art-Urban Development," in *Dictionary of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 260-5.

For one, Blair's detailed thesis and descriptions almost completely depend on the model of the concentrically-organized city, one where a central zone developed in close proximity to an urban focus (such as a fort or *qala*, palace or *dīwān*, or main mosque), and this in turn completely surrounded or enveloped by residential tissue. The *non-concentric* urban environments of Central Asia, would, by necessity, have some "curious" interstitial spaces or zones which could never be accounted for within this present framework. Blair also focuses too narrowly on cities with a single, main centre, accessible primary by means of major linkages that began at the city walls and passed through the public centre. While this was to some extent true for some of the cities that she mentions in the text, it is difficult to gauge how the explanation would work for the several, smaller (though nevertheless public and active) *bazaars* located in the *rabaḍ* which formed a larger urban system. Would the public-private separation be still as conspicuous? Urban and public space in early-medieval, Central Asian cities continued from the city core towards the peripheries. On this front, Blair's review gives the impression that it was merely the city centre (geometrically located about the centre according to her proposed model), that was the focus of all socio-cultural and economic activity in the Arab Islamic city. This may be easily proven otherwise, if the *bazaars* and carnivals at the city gates are considered within the larger picture. Furthermore, in several of the medieval cities in question a large quantum of business was actually transacted outside the city walls, through traveling merchants who interact at the fortified *ribāṭ* and *caravanserai* located on the city outskirts, within the *rabaḍ* area. It would, therefore, have been difficult to discern where the public domain ended, and private domain began – as is clearly apparent in the extended market districts of the Central Asian examples under study.

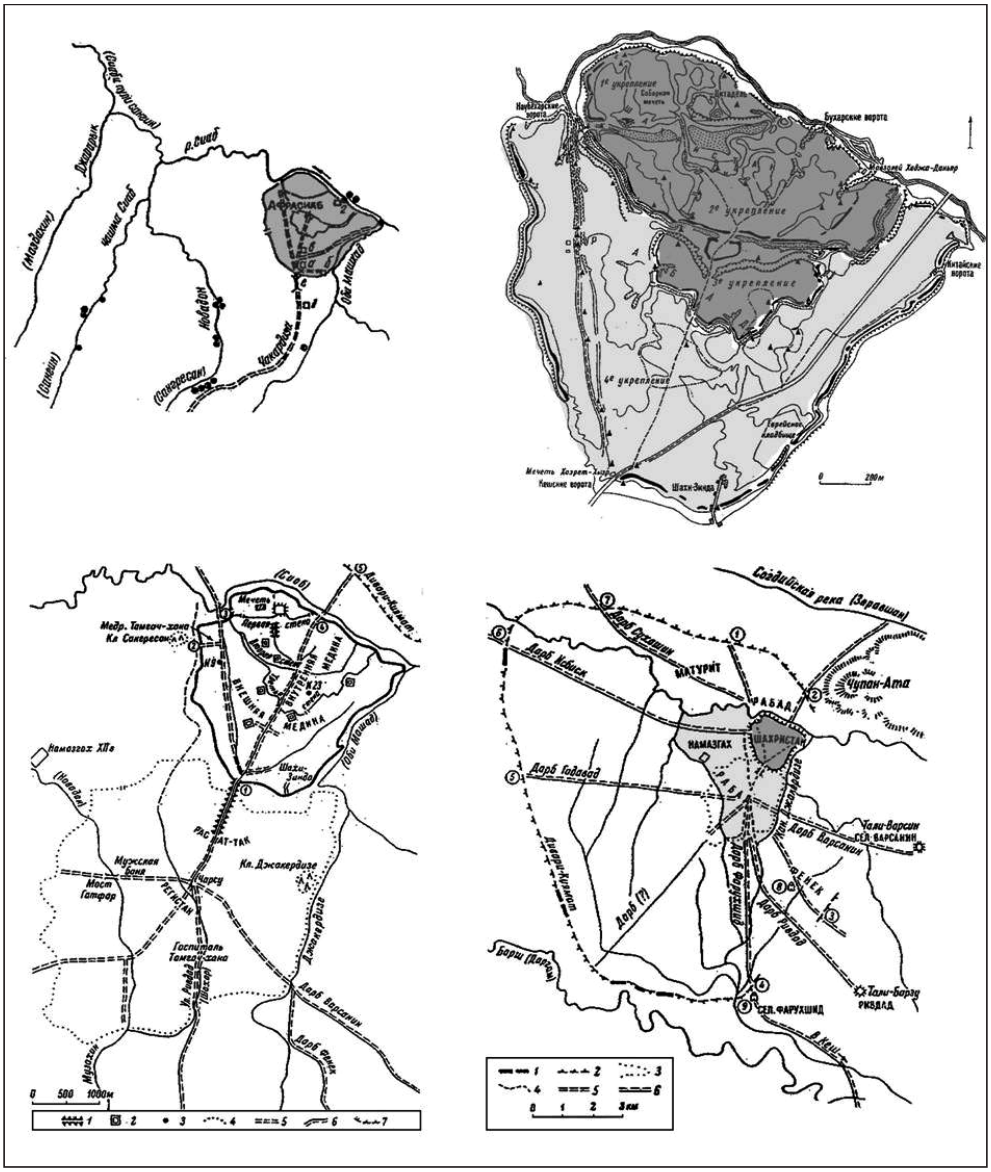
(Сиабы гули сангин)
Джуйарык
р. Сиаб
чашма Сиаб
(Маздахин)
Афрасиаб
Новадон
(Санчин)
(Санаресан)
Чакардиза
Оби Машхад
1е укрепление
Соборная мечеть
Цитадель
Наубехарские ворота
Бухарские ворота
Мавзолей Ходжа-Даньяр
2е укрепление
3е укрепление
4е укрепление
Китайские ворота
Еврейское кладбище
Мечеть Хозрет-Хызр
Кешские ворота
Шахи-Зинда
0 200м
(Сиоб)
Мечеть
Перелр. стена
Медр. Тамгач-хана
Кл Санересан
Диввори-Кизмат
Внутренняя стена
Внутренняя медина
Внешняя медина
К23
Намозгох XIIв
(Новодон)
(Оби Машад)
Шахи-Зинда
Рас ат-так
Мужская баня
Мост Гатфар
Чарсу
Регистан
Кл. Джакердизе
Джакердизе
Госпиталь Тамгач-хана
Ул. Ривдад
(Шахор)
Дарб Варсанин
Дарб Фенек
Мулохин
0 500 1000м
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Согдийская река (Зеравшан)
Дарб Сухашин
Матурит
Дарб Исбиск
Рабад
Чупан-Ата
Намазгах
Шахристан
Дарб Годавад
Рабад
Кан. Джакердизе
Тали-Варсин
Сел. Варсанин
Дарб Варсанин
Феней
Дивари-Кирамот
Дарб (?)
Дарб Фаруханид
Дарб Ривдад
Барш (Даргом)
Тали-Барзу
Ривдад
Сел. Фарухшид
В Кеш
1 2 3 4 5 6
0 1 2 3км

**Fig. 5**: Medieval Samarqand and its Outlying *Rabaḍ* Districts,
(© Manu P. Sobti).

Last, but not the least, while Blair does closely examine urban developments in the Islamic context, and reiterates the separation between public centre and private zone as a conspicuous characteristic of traditional Arab cities, she cities no clear reason why this may have happened in the first place. As observed by Lewcock, urban quarters within Islamic towns came to represent aggregations of clans of friendly tribes, and they were separated by open spaces from those of hostile tribes who might reside in neighbouring sections of the city.[18] Taking this view, the so-called *space* between adjoining quarters, or for that matter between certain parts of the city, may not have come about because of the often argued public-private dichotomy, but because it became neutral territory, used by tribes to separate their quarters. Of course, public-private gradients did definitely exist in these cities, and the entrance of the quarter or *moḥalla*, with its small aggregation of public functions (few shops, a small mosque, possibly a *madrasa*), would have served as the adequate transition, but carrying it a step further, and claiming that the entire city may have developed on this basis, may need to supported with better evidence. Lewcock's arguments on the other hand, can be proven to be true on the basis of recent studies on how land parcels or "*khiṭṭas*" were sub-divided among the several tribes at the time of urban foundation. In any case, while there were superficial 'physical' barriers between private and public domains in the city, this dichotomy did not necessarily decide the way the city was constructed. In other words, this was merely part of the socio-cultural psyche of the people.

In the second part of her review, Blair states that cities in the Eastern Islamic world are less well-known than those in Arab Islamic lands. She is correct about the lack of information which has plagued research on the subject, largely owing to the fact that most of them were constructed in mud-brick which has perished over time, and also the fact that several, are still unexcavated sites. However, her description of a typical east Islamic city leaves much to be desired. In her understanding, while the inner city *(shahristan)* was centred on a citadel *(kuhandiz)* and flanked by suburbs *(birun)*, it was essentially a modification of a pre-Islamic core. Following the upheavals of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the cities were usually fortified. Major arteries led from the gates to the city centre, and quarters between them were divided into residential blocks. Furthermore, within the blocks hence created, twisted *cul-de-sacs* gave pedestrian access to individual buildings.[19] If Blair's version is to be believed, then the kind of city we would visualize in the eastern Islamic world, and more precisely in the Central Asian region, would be largely similar to that in the central and western Islamic lands (which Blair has described earlier). This was in fact generally not the case, except for certain obviously superficial characteristics. There were some important differences that modified the so-called separation between the public centre and a private zone.

### 4a. The *rabaḍ* as the unique feature of the early-medieval, Central Asian City

It is within this background that our own examination of the two terms that form the focus of this discussion, namely "public centre" and "private zone" in

---

[18] Ronald Lewcock, "Working with the Past," in *Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*, ed. Margaret Bentley Sevcenko (Cambridge MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1988), 89.

[19] Blair, "Islamic Art," 264-5.

Central Asian cities, must begin. Our point of departure is the first distinguishing feature of the Central Asian city at this time, namely the *rabaḍ*. Prior to the Arab invasions, the city had been made up of only three parts or zones, delineated by two sets of walls, namely the *qala, shahristan* and the *balad*. In the ninth and the tenth centuries (the pre-Samanid and Samanid eras), this model was radically altered by the addition of a new zone – the suburb or *rabaḍ* – an area to which the most important activities of the city were transferred. While Barthold and a number of other scholars believed this suburb or *rabaḍ* to be a mere extension of the city, or suburbia growing beyond its walls, Scerrato, writing several years later, believed that it presence indicated yet another historical dimension to add to that which archaeological research had identified. He proposed that the *rabaḍ* – which virtually became a city after the first waves of sub-urbanization – attracted administrative and governmental offices as well. This could have been possible only if it became the nerve-centre of control in the pre-Samanid and Samanid city, attracting activity from the traditional core of the city.[20]

The *rabaḍ* became a new addition to the structure of the Central Asian city in this period; it was the virtual antithesis to the notion of a city as a densely-built up area contained by a wall. Prior to the Arab interventions, the few studied pre-Islamic towns of the Zarafshan Valley usually covered a relatively small area, and were fairly compact structures. The walls of early medieval Samarqand, by far the largest city in the region till the seventh century, enclosed a total area of 70 hectares,[21] while smaller capitals like Penjikent, Maimurg (Kuldor-tepe), Abgar (Durmen-tepe), Kabudanjaket (Kurgan-tepe), the royal residence at Varaksha, and the self-governing urban community of Paikend, were on average concentrated within areas of 20 hectares.[22] Even at Bukhara, most estimates have kept the urban area within a 35-hectare limit.[23] Spurred by the effects of the Arab invasions, Samanid cities on the other hand spilled beyond their limiting walls and formed un-fortified agglomerations covering large areas of formerly rural territory. Estimates by contemporary geographers and historians on the city's size were therefore virtually impossible, for it was unclear where the urban area actually ended, and the rural area began.

---

[20] Umberto Scerrato, "Samanid Art," in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, ed. B. Myers (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), 673-82.

[21] G. V. Shishkina, "Ancient Samarkand: Capital of Soghd," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 8 (1994): 81-99.

[22] Aleksandr Belenitckii, B. Marshak & V. Raspopova, "Sogdiiskii gorod v nachale srednikh vekov - Itogi i metody issledovaniia drevnego Pendzhikenta," *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* 2 (1981): figure 1; B. Ia. Staviskii and M. Urmanova, "Gorodishche Kuldor-tepe," *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* 1 (1958): 232, figure 1; G. Shishkina and A. Naimark, "Istoricheskaia topografiia Durmen-tepe v svete rabot 1986 goda," in *Zadachi sovetskoi arkheologii v svete reshenii XXVII-go sezda KPSS. Tezisy dokladov vsesoiuznoi archeologicheskoi konferentsii. Suzdal'* (Moscow: 1987), 287-89; Kh. Akhunbabaev, "Drevnii Kabudanjaket," in *Arkheologiia Srednei Azii. Tezisy dokladov* (Tashkent: 1990): 26-7; Vasilii Shishkin, *Varaksha* (Moscow: Izdatelctbo Akademii Nauk USSR, 1963), 38, figure 5; A. Mukhammedyarov et al., *Gorodishche Paikend* (Tashkent: Izdatelctbo Fan, 1988), 77.

[23] M. Turebekov, *Oboronitelnye sooruzheniia drevnikh poselenii gorodov Sogda (VII-VI vv. do n.e. - VII v.n.e.)* (Nukus: 1990), 56-65; A. Mukhamedzhanov, D. Mirzaakhmedov & Sh. Adylov, "K izucheniiu istoricheskoi topografii I fortifikatsii Bukhary," in *Istoriia material'noi kultury Uzbekistana*, vol. 20 (Tashkent: 1986), 99-100.

The creation of the *rabaḍ*, and the massive migration of population to it owing to the increased sense of security outside the urban walls, evidently produced a very different kind of city from one which had existed prior to the Arab invasions. No longer was the city concentrated about a single point or area. With the creation of the *rabaḍ*, usually an uneven growth that dominated a part or all of the city's periphery, the older centre or core of the city no longer remained its only focus. Many, if not several centres, developed at various locations within the *rabaḍ*, each one concentrating about a group of public institutions and possibly an urban space. The public centre, as it were, actually stretched and spread out to create an unprecedented poly-centric city, re-configuring the public-private relationships in radical ways by restructuring the patterns of land-use; thereby residential areas became partly commercial, commercial areas residential and partly institutional, and major linkage arteries cut through residential districts changing their intrinsic character.

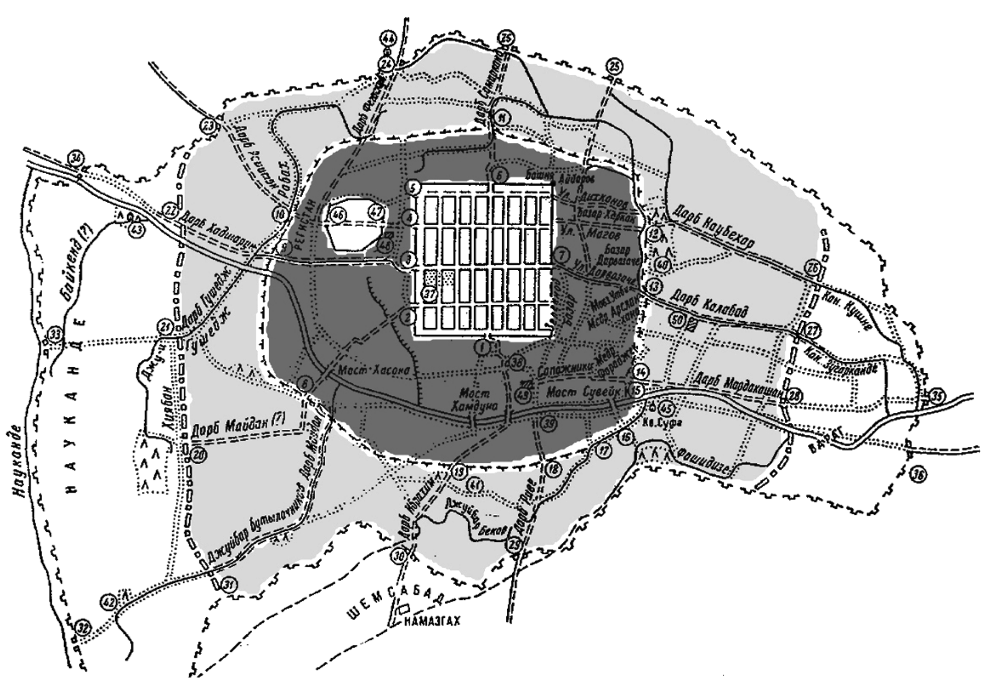
Дарб Хадшарун
Дарб Гушедж
Гушедж
Байкенд (?)
Наукande
НАУКАНДЕ
Джуй
Хиябан
Дарб Майдан (?)
Дарб Жизада
Джуйбар бутылочников
Дарб Фатхан
Дарб Самарканд
Рабат
РЕГИСТАН
Башня Айдаров
Ул. Диханов
Базар Харкак
Ул. Магов
Базар Дарвазаче
Ул. Дарвазаче
Базар
Мост Хасана
Мост Хамдуна
Сапожники
Мост Сувейк
Медр. Фараджек
Медр. Арслан-хана
Дарб Наубехар
Дарб Калабад
Кан. Кушне
Кан. Зугаркандe
Дарб Мардакашан
Кв. Суфа
Фашидизе
ВАРАГ
Дарб Ибрахим
Джуйбар Беков
Дарб Рамс
ШЕМСАБАД
НАМАЗГАХ

**Fig. 6**: Medieval Bukhara (Xth-XIIth Centuries CE) showing Orthogonal Core and *Rabaḍ* Districts, (© Manu P. Sobti).

This also meant that communities from within the city migrated out in large numbers, and *vice versa*. That such changes did really happen within the urban environment of a large city, such as Bukhara, is seen in one particular neighbourhood of the city. This was a part of the town, to which great importance was attached in the eighth century, where the *Kash-Kushans*, rich-merchants of foreign extraction, had retired after Qutaybah's conquest of the town. Tomaschek supposes them to have been descendants of the Kushans or Hepthalites. They gave up their houses in the *shahristan* to the incoming Arabs and built for themselves 700 castles amidst gardens outside, and settled their servants and clients there, so that the population of the new town rapidly exceeded that of the old.[24] The locality received the name of the "Castle of the Magians" *(Kushk-i Mughan),* and here for the most part were to be found the temples of the fire-worshippers. Social unrest in the Samanid period, associated with the escalation of land prices in the part of the city occupied by the *Kash-Kushans,* appears to have led to the eventual destruction of most of these palaces. In Barthold's view, building material from them, especially idols from the castle gates, were reused in the construction of the Friday Mosque in the city. Based on Narshakhi's descriptions, Barthold situates the *Kushk-i Mughan* near the Gate of the Street of the Magians, locating it in the north-western part of the town.[25]

Migrating communities such as the "outwards-migrating" *Kash-Kushans*, or the "inwards-migrating" Arabs, obviously needed to rebuild the physical environment of their residential sectors. As a corollary, they would have needed to adapt their new environments to their lifestyles. This would have, in all possibility, entailed a significant change in public-private gradients which once existed in the city, in contrast to an environment that preserved these qualities forever. While the ramifications of this change on the exact nature of residential tissue will be discussed a little later, it was not merely the residential tissue which underwent large changes owing to the creation of the *rabaḍ*. Important changes also affected the so-called public spaces of the city as well. Bukhara during the Samanid period is again a convenient example. In its early period, the Bukharan citadel was a protected structure with an internal keep, a structure defined as the "castle" by Barthold and "*kakh*" by Narshakhi.[26] ʾIsṭakhrī, writing in 930-3, describes the palace of the Bukhar-Khudat Bidun within this citadel (presumably located in the *kakh*), and its use by the early Samanids. Muqaddasī, however, writing between 985 and 997, claims that the later Samanids only had their treasuries and prison located within the citadel. Obviously, the nature of use of the citadel had changed dramatically between 900 and 980 AD. This may have been partly due to the increased sense of security against Turkish nomads in the early decades of the Samanid era.[27] Narshakhi specifically writes that the

---

[24] Gibb, *The Arab Conquests*, 39.

[25] Vassili Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London-Philadelphia: Gibb Memorial Trust-Porcupine Press [distr.], 1977), 108.

[26] Barthold, *Turkestan*, 100.

[27] The strong walls of the city, which were constantly kept in good repair, also fell into ruin in this period. Richard N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia* (London: Phoenix Publications, 2000), 205-6.

Samanid Nasr II (914-43) built a palace in the *Rigistan* with accommodations for his ten different state *diwans* – a process undoubtedly aimed at formalizing the nature of the space. To this ensemble was added a magnificent mosque, built by the *wazir* Abu Jaʿfar Utbi in 959 under the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik (954-61). During the reign of Manṣūr b. Nūḥ (961-76), this palace is said to have been destroyed by fire, but Muqaddasī, writing a few years later, says that the *Dār al-Mulk* was still standing on the *Rigistan* and praises it highly.[28] But positioning large, public buildings with multiple courtyards appears to have been only one way in which the *Rigistan* space was formalized. There is additional evidence that the Samanids were conscious about defining its perimeter. In this respect, Narshakhi points out to the construction of another royal palace on the Ju-i-Muliyan Canal, located to the north of the citadel, once again in the vicinity of the *Rigistan*, probably on its north-western corner.[29]

The complications caused by the creation of the *rabaḍ* were further intensified in the Central Asian city by the non-centric location of the *ark* or citadel. As a second characteristic feature of Central Asian cities, this was usually located to the west of the central city area, on a raised mound or ridge. At Bukhārā the *ark* was due west of the core, and remained in the same position despite the growth of the city. At Afrasiyab, the *ark* was north-west with respect to the north-south axis of the walled area. It was enclosed within a wall called the *perbaya stena* (first wall or fortification). At Penjikent, the citadel was not only located west of the main city; additionally, it was also built on an entirely different hill. This citadel or *ark* hill was separated from the raised eminence of the *shahristan* by a deep gully, an inaccessible barrier even today. This particular aspect was repeated at Paikend, where the citadel was located to the north-west of the two *shahristan*. Among the four cities examined in the course of research, the western or north-western direction of the citadel or *ark* with respect to the city was a constant phenomenon. This development was also connected to another important issue regarding the *ark*. In two of the four cases discussed, at Bukhārā and Penjikent, there was the apparent evolution of the city organization from a concentric scheme to a non-concentric scheme – a process that evidently caused a westward expansion or movement of the fast-growing urban sprawl. The citadel and the city therefore formed two independent systems of fortification, each surrounded by its own set of defensive walls. As is in fact evident at Bukhārā, Afrasiyab-Samarqand, Penjikent and Paikend, this strong structural separation of the citadel and the main city caused the urban tissue to grow in a particular manner, agglomerating as it were around each of the primary elements.

---

[28] Barthold, *Turkestan*, 110.

[29] Vassili Barthold (rev. Richard Frye), “Bukhara,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), 1293-96.

### 4b. Orthogonality as the second feature of the Central Asian City

Migrations within the Central Asian city, and the changes wrought by the creation of the *rabaḍ*, were only the first among the critical factors that modified the relationship between the public centre and private zone. A second and extremely decisive factor was the nature of the urban tissue itself. An organic-accretive residential tissue had been the chief characteristic of cities in the Arab Islamic world, described by Blair in the first part of her review. Within such cities, neighbourhoods or quarters based on internal socio-ethnic cohesion formed clusters. Since no formal notion of the "block" really existed, these quarters created their own internal spatial logic. Individual residences within these quarters therefore faced inwards, towards an internalized space, and rarely, if ever, faced an exterior street. In sharp contrast, a review of the urban patterns at Bukhārā, Afrasiyab-Samarqand, Penjikent and Paikend in the pre-Samanid and Samanid period shows the predominance of the inner city as a fortified enclosure, highly rectilinear in its form, in all probability based on a grid-iron plan with cross-axial roads.

At Bukhārā, substantial evidence survives to support the claim for a grid-iron plan; the vestiges from the Kushan period still dominate the layout and street pattern in some parts of the city. In place of the original "crossing" of the streets, the *chahar-su* structure still exists, now in the form of a domed pavilion that accentuates the intersection. So does the Magoki Attari mosque, believed to have been built on the ruins of an older fire-temple, and the space outside it, which forms a market-place.[30] Similar evidence appears among the ruins of Afrasiyab, located north-east of the present-day city of Samarqand, though there it is somewhat less distinct. While it apparently had a significant north-south axis, and the semblance of an east-west crossroads, it has not been proven to have had a checker-board or grid plan (largely due to the absence of extensive excavations). At Penjikent, evidence for a rectilinearly-organized city is evident in several areas already excavated. Work on other intermediate areas, presently in process, is expected to clarify this picture further. Significantly, at Penjikent, despite a clearly-defined north-south *bazaar* street, no real cross-axial streets are seen. Was the main "crossing" we are looking for then be located within the area of the *rabaḍ*, or did the cross-axial streets culminate in a monumental space inside the urban walls? Since no real "urban-space clusters" existed in Penjikent (as at Bukhārā), a space of this kind would have been defined by important public buildings along its perimeters or edges. Except a few of the larger structures, almost all buildings at Penjikent have yet to be excavated, let alone critically researched or examined. Finally, at Paikend, not only is the grid-iron clearly seen in both *shahristans*, so too is an excavated main avenue connecting several of its major institutions. While no cross-axial streets are seen within the walled

---

[30] Richard N. Frye, *Bukhara: The Medieval Achievement* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publications, 2012), 7-8.

*shahristans*, the location of fortified *ribāṭs* outside the walls, as narrated by Narshakhi, is convincing evidence that the main *bazaars* of the city would have in all probability been located in the *rabaḍ*.[31]

Could the gridded structures, such as those described in these Central Asian cities, have significantly affected the public-private gradients we are presently concerned with? It could definitely have, assuming that the grid was even or equal across the entire site of the city, in which case all junctions created by intersections of two perpendicular grid lines would have been exactly the same everywhere in the city, except along the edges of the grid. While finding out the exact nature of the grid in these cities may be somewhat premature, considering the state of archaeology in the region, there may be yet another way to discern its underlying presence. A closer examination of the residential tissue located within the grid-iron system, reveals that the now largely-invisible grid extended deeper than mere surface. It influenced the actual plan forms and architecture of buildings within the urban fabric, and the nature of public spaces created between them. The now-demolished Madrasa Bughara Khan, within the Shah-i-Zinda complex built by the first Qarakhanid ruler of Samarqand around 1050 AD, and the surviving Rabat-i-Malik, situated near Kermine on the ancient road connecting Samarqand and Bukhara, built in the tenth and eleventh centuries, are good examples. So too are residential dwellings from the Kushan period excavated at Taxila, Pushpkalavati, Mathura and Penjikent. While obviously pre-dating the Arab invasions on Central Asia by several centuries, they are nevertheless valuable assuming that the grid-iron structure in the pre-Samanid and Samanid period had its origins in the Kushan period, or was its faithful reconstruction.

The grid did allow for some subtleties. At Dalverzin-tepe, in Bactrian territory, we find initial evidence of 'social-sectoring' at work in a Kushan city. Within its dense layout with large buildings blocks, urban thoroughfares and water reservoirs, there existed socio-spatial hierarchies in the city. Houses belonging to the aristocratic section of the population were situated in the heart of the city, while those belonging to the poor were built on the outskirts. Toprak-qala, on the other hand, was a geometrically-ordered city, in the shape of a rectangle. It was actually divided into 10 symmetrical *insulae* by means of a north-south main street. Significantly, the size of these *insulae* measures 40 x 100 m, relating back to the Hellenistic antecedents so important for understanding how urban tissue was different in the Central Asian city.[32]

The city of Penjikent, owing to the extent of its excavated ruins provides us a final idea regarding the nature of the dwelling and the resultant residential sector in the urban setting in the early eighth century AD. The size of the present excavations – about a third of the whole area – gives a precise notion of what the town looked like. Building materials consisted exclusively of mud bricks and clay, and enough wood to form flat roofs. The area was densely occupied, with some 4000 people in the space of 15 hectares (37 acres) within the walls. Detached buildings were few, most houses being built in compact blocks without internal courtyards and comprising two or three floors, sometimes also bridging the streets and turning them into passageways. This congestion was partly due to the influx of refugees in 712 AD, making necessary the demolition of the eastern wall of the city, which previously formed part of the internal defences, in order to erect in its place a long wall of aristocrats' dwellings.

---

[31] Razavi, *Al-Narshakhi-Tarikh Bukhara*, 17-8.

[32] B. Litvinsky, "Cities and Urban Life in the Kushan Kingdom," in *The History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2 (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 296-99. and Galina Pugachenkova, "Kushan Art," in *The History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2 (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 331-42.

The animation and congestion of the streets were compounded by the activities of the craftsmen, whose workshops and stores, often sharing the same space and opening onto the street, existed all over the town, but were particularly numerous alongside the houses of the aristocratic quarter. Adjacent to the latter, a metal market had grown where all stages in the manufacture of metal objects took place side by side, from the refining of the ores to the finishing of products such as armour, coins and bronze items. Here we observe the beginning of that process which, in the Islamic period, led to all commercial activity being transferred from the fortified town (*shahristan*) to the suburbs (*rabaḍ*). Although most of their work was carried out near the wealthy houses, the craftsmen had no personal links with them; they lived away from their place of work and managed their own activities. It is much more likely that the craftsmen's dependence on the nobility was strictly a matter of economics; the latter rented out the commercial property, controlled the sources of raw material, and represented the essential requirement of the market-demand.

The social and cultural life of the city mainly took place within private dwellings. Each aristocratic house included a huge reception hall of 80 sq. meters (860 sq. feet) equipped with benches along the sides. The frescoes which embellished the walls from top to bottom, give an idea of the activities which took place in these halls. These included banquets apparently restricted to men, libations to the family deity depicted on the wall facing the entrance; concerts and the recital of legends and epic sagas. Some researchers have claimed that the smaller rooms adjoining this reception space were chapels with fire-bearing alters, but they may simply have been heated winter rooms. Domestic life, and perhaps also the social life of women, was concentrated on the main floor. The craftsmen's houses on the other hand, though considerably smaller in size and scale, often had a reception hall and painted walls; the town-dweller, it seems, however modest, enjoyed a different order of existence from the countryman.

As a reconstruction of a residential quarter in Sogdian Penjikent – the arched doorway opened on the street beside a row of shops and workshops, established on sites leased by the owner of the big house. The plan of the latter was arranged around a reception room two storeys high and decorated with frescoes, beneath a terrace roof supported by four carved wooden columns, in the centre of which a lantern opened. A spiral ramp in a stairwell led to the upper rooms, which included a small salon, possibly reserved for the women, which opened on the exterior by a window with small columns (frescoes also show corbelled balconies). Ordinary houses on the other hand, had vertically stacked spaces connected by flights of steps.

In this period of time Sogdian and pre-Islamic cities grew manifold. The great increase in urban population caused a marked densification of the urban fabric, changing the character of these cities to a substantial extent. One-storied houses of the fifth century were replaced by two or three-storey buildings in the sixth and the seventh. In the course of the seventh century, the open spaces between buildings and yards were largely eliminated, while by the eighth century, the upper stories of the Penjikent houses were extended on cantilevers over the streets, creating the phenomenon of fully-covered lanes.[33] Suburban housing within the *rabaḍ*, on the contrary, did not form a continuous fabric. Excavations by the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art showed that at the well-preserved environs of Durman-tepe, a large city in present-day Uzbekistan, there were about a dozen castles and strongly built manor houses. Similar conditions are also observed to have existed outside the walls of Penjikent and Paikend, and were in fact attested by the accounts of Narshakhi.[34]

Unique as it was in multiple ways, the encircling walls of Central Asian suburbia were in general impossible to defend against the marauding hordes of nomadic groups who crisscrossed the Oxus region. Besides of course the incredible prosperity, the exaggerated vulnerability of the *rabaḍ* district came from its little or minimal strategic urban defenses, in contrast to those specifically designed to surround the traditional *shahristan*. Even at Bukhara and Samarqand, where successive dynasties had extracted large revenues from the plethora of activities that blossomed in the *rabaḍ*, the superficially massive adobe walls were more symbolic and less functional. While these were but necessary to prevent the desert sands from moving into arable plots which were an important component of the *rabaḍ*, the constructions were otherwise largely futile against the war tactics of the incoming nomads. The disastrous raids by the Ghuzz Turks in 1155 CE on the oasis of Merv and thereafter Chengiz Khan's onslaughts on Samarqand and Bukhārā beginning 1225 CE first destroyed the water canals or *qanāt* that supplied water to the overgrown *rabaḍ* of these cities. Any remaining resistance was thereafter extinguished through continual sieges, plain warfare and terrifying catapults. By the end of the Mongol invasions under Hulegu in 1255 CE, most of these overgrown urban organisms had shrunken to a but a fraction of the original sprawl.

---

[33] V. Raspopova, *Zhilishcha Pendzhikenta-Opyt istoriko-sotsialnoi interpretatsii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 164-69.

[34] O. Bolshakov & N. Negmatov, "Raskopki v prigorode drevnego Pendzhikenta," *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii SSR* 66 (1958).

## Bibliography

Akhunbabaev, Kh. “Drevnii Kabudanjaket.” In *Arkheologiia Srednei Azii. Tezisy dokladov*, 26-7. Tashkent: 1990.

Altai, Muhammad Hamid (ed.). *Al-Muqaddasi - The Best Division for the Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. Basil Anthony Collins. Reading UK: Garnet Publications, 2001.

Aṭ-ṭabarī. *Tārīkh: The History of al-Tabari*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater. Albany NJ: State University of New York Press, 1985-89. (39 vols.)

Barfield, Thomas. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China 221 BC to AD 1757*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Barthold, Vassili. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. London-Philadelphia: Gibb Memorial Trust-Porcupine Press [distr.], 1977.

______. (rev. Richard Frye). “Bukhara.” In *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 1, 1293-96. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961.

Belenitckii, Aleksandr, B. Marshak & V. Raspopova. “Sogdiiskii gorod v nachale srednikh vekov-Itogi i metody issledovaniia drevnego Pendzhikenta.” *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* 2 (1981).

Blair, Sheila. “Islamic Art-Urban Development.” In *Dictionary of Art*, 260-5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Bolshakov, O. & N. Negmatov. “Raskopki v prigorode drevnego Pendzhikenta.” *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii SSR* 66, Moskow, (1958).

Bosworth, Clifford Edmund. *Hudud al-ʿAlam: The Regions of the World. A Persian Geography*. Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1982.

Findlay, Ronald & Kevin O’Rourke. *Power and Plenty: Trade, War and the World Economy in the Second Millennium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Frye, Richard N. *Bukhara: The Medieval Achievement*. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publications, 2012.

______. *The Golden Age of Persia*. London: Phoenix Publications, 2000.

Geertz, Clifford. “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 310-23. New York: Hachette Book Group, 1973.

Gibb, Hamilton. *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1923.

Ginsburg, Norton Sidney. “Urban Geography and ‘Non-Western’ Areas.” In *The Study of Urbanization*, eds. Philip M. Hauser & Leo F. Schnore, 311-12. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965.

Le Strange, Guy. *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905.

Lewcock, Ronald. “Working with the Past.” In *Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*, ed. Margaret Bentley Sevcenko. Cambridge MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1988.

Litvinsky, B. “Cities and Urban Life in the Kushan Kingdom.” In *The History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, 296-99. Paris: UNESCO, 1992.

Mukhamedzhanov, A, D. Mirzaakhmedov & Sh. Adylov. “K izucheniiu istoricheskoi topografii I fortifikatsii Bukhary.” In *Istoriia material’noi kultury Uzbekistana*, vol. 20, 99-100. Tashkent: 1986.

Mukhammedyarov, A. et al., *Gorodishche Paikend*. Tashkent: Izdatelctbo Fan, 1988.

Narshaki, Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar. *Tarikh-e Bukhara: History of Bukhara*. trans. Richard Frye. Cambridge MA: Mediaeval Academy of America,1954

Pugachenkova, Galina. “Kushan Art.” In *The History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, 331-42. Paris: UNESCO, 1992.

Raspopova, V. *Zhilishcha Pendzhikenta-Opyt istoriko-sotsialnoi interpretatsii*. Moscow: Nauka, 1990.

Scerrato, Umberto. “Samanid Art.” In *Encyclopedia of World Art*, ed. B. Myers, 673-82. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.

Shishkin, Vasilii. *Varaksha*. Moscow: Izdatelctbo Akademii Nauk USSR, 1963.

Shishkina, G. & A. Naimark. “Istoricheskaia topografiia Durmen-tepe v svete rabot 1986 goda.” In *Zadachi sovetskoi arkheologii v svete reshenii XXVII-go sezda KPSS. Tezisy dokladov vsesoiuznoi archeologicheskoi konferentsii. Suzdal’*, 287-89. Moscow: 1987.

Shishkina, G. V. “Ancient Samarkand: Capital of Soghd.” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 8 (1994): 81-99.

Sobti, Manu P. “Eurasia’s Historical Space of Palimpsest-Desert, Border, Riparian and Steppe.” In *Architecture on the Borderline: Boundary Politics and Built Space*, ed. Anoma Pieris, 13-35. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019.

______. “Persianate Civitas: Networked Urbanities & Suburban Hinterlands in Erich Schmidt’s.” In *Revisiting the Historiography of Persianate Architecture*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour, 14-40. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016.

______. “Urban Metamorphosis and Change in Central Asian Cities after the Arab Invasions.” PhD dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, 2005.

______. “A Palimpsest of Cultural Synthesis and Urban Change: Bukhara after the Islamic Invasions.” *Built Environment* XXVIII, 3 (2002): 217-30.

Staviskii, B. Ia. & M. Urmanova. “Gorodishche Kuldor-tepe.” *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* 1 (1958): 232-54.

Turebekov, M. *Oboronitelnye sooruzheniia drevnikh poselenii gorodov Sogda (VII-VI vv. do n.e. - VII v.n.e.)*, 56-65. Nukus: 1990.

Wheatley, Paul. *The Places Where Men Pray Together*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

## العنوان: مدن الضواحي والحدود المرنة: محكيات ما وراء جدران المدن الإسلامية في آسيا الوسطى وشبه القارة الهندية

**ملخص:** لطالما تم اعتبار موضع ما يسمى بالمدينة الإسلامية ومجاورات قلبها الحضري كمراكز للعمارة ومؤسسات التجارة الحيوية. بالابتعاد عن هذا الاعتبار السائد، تناقش هذه المساهمة كيف كانت الأنشطة التجارية وحركات التبادل متركزة في أطراف النطاق الحضري والمناطق البعيدة من الضواحي (غالبا العديد من الضواحي) وليس في المركز الحضري للمدينة في بلدان آسيا الوسطى والتي امتدت طويلا في العصر الوسيط المبكر. وبعد وصول العرب إلى آسيا الوسطى بعد عبور نهر جيحون المشهور أو الأكسوس (سمي لاحقا اَمو داريا) بين عامي 650-821، أطلق العرب اسم ربض على هذه المناطق الحيوية تجاريا والممتدة بعيدا عن الحضر خارج أسوار المدن. وقد تحولت هذه الأرباض إلى مدن ناضجة في المراكز التجارية العديدة على طول الفرع الأوراسي من طريق الحرير لتصبح على اتصال بالأسوار وتضحي مفعمة بمبانيها من خانات للمسافرين، وأربطة، وفنادق، وأسواق. وبحلول بداية القرن الرابع عشر تخللت هذه الشبكات التجارية وأنماطها المبنية القائمة في الضواحي قريبا جدا من المدن، تخللت في السياسة الجغرافية لمدن سلطنة دلهي والتي تتموضع جغرافيا في اتجاه الجنوب الشرقي. أخيرا، أدى وصول المغول إلى شبه القارة الهندية بحلول القرن

السادس عشر إلى تضخم الوضع السائد. وفي ترجمة حنينية للأنماط المبنية الكائنة في العالم الأوراسي الواسع المتروك – والتي تمتد فكريا من هيرات وسمرقند إلى تبريز وشيراز – قامت المدينة المغولية المتوسعة نحو الخارج باحتضان البازار أو شارع السوق. وبتحويل الذكريات التي أعيد بناؤها، تم تضمين البازار المغطى ضمن حصون لاهور، أكرا، شاهجهان اباد، فاتح بور سيكري، وبرهان بور – العواصم الملكية المغولية الخمس. كيف أثرت عمارات الضواحي تلك والشبكات التجارية الناشئة على الحدود المرنة لنهر الأكسوس، كيف أثرت في تطورات – شكلية، مكانية وتشريعية – بينما كانت تتحرك شرقا وغربا؟ إلى أين قامت المجتمعات التجارية الأوراسية الكثيرة الارتحال بنقل وإعادة تفسير مفاهيم نموذج مدينة الضواحي ضمن وخارج حدود تعريف التحضر الإسلامي؟ هذه بعض الأسئلة التي تطرحها هذه المساهمة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**: المدينة الإسلامية، اَمو داريا، ربض، تجارة آسيا الوسطى، مدن المغول، الأطراف الحضرية.

**Résumé**: **Villes suburbaines et frontières fluides: histoires au-delà des murs des urbanités islamiques en Asie centrale et dans le sous-continent indien**

Le lieu de la soi-disant ville islamique et les proximités de son noyau urbain ont longtemps été reconnus comme des sites d’architecture et d’institutions de commerce animé. En partant de ce point de vue commun, cette contribution fait valoir que dans la longue durée de la ville médiévale d’Asie centrale au début, elle n’était plus le noyau, mais plutôt la périphérie du district urbain et la zone périphérique de la banlieue (souvent de multiples banlieues) qui a servi de cadre aux activités interdépendantes de commerce et d’échange. À la suite de leurs récentes arrivées en Asie centrale après avoir traversé la légendaire rivière Oxus (plus tard Amu Darya) entre 650 et 821 CE, les Arabes avaient qualifié ces zones ex-urbaines commercialement actives en dehors des murs urbains de *rabaḍ*. Dans les multiples emporia le long de la branche eurasienne de la Route de la Soie, ces *rabaḍ* se sont propagés dans des villes adultes attenantes à l’enceinte, remplies de leurs propres structures de caravansérail, *ribāṭ*, *funduq* et *sūq*. Au début du XIV$^{ème}$ siècle, ces réseaux commerciaux “suburbains” mais basés sur les villes et leurs typologies physiques avaient également imprégné la géopolitique des villes du sultanat de Delhi, qui se trouvaient géographiquement plus au sud-est. Enfin, l’arrivée des Moghols dans le sous-continent indien au début du XVI$^{e}$ siècle a exagéré ce statu quo. Dans une interprétation nostalgique des typologies existant dans le monde eurasien plus large laissé pour compte – s’étendant conceptuellement de Herat et Samarqand à Tabriz et Shiraz – la ville moghole en expansion vers l’extérieur a maintenant réintégré le bazar ou la rue du marché. Dans une torsion de souvenirs reconstruits, le bazar “couvert” a été inclus dans les plans de fort à Lahore, Agra, Shahjahanabad, Fatehpur Sikri et Burhanpur – les cinq capitales royales moghole. Comment ces architectures suburbaines et ces réseaux commerciaux émergeant dans les “frontières fluides” de l’Oxus ont-ils influencé les développements – formels, spatiaux et législatifs – tout en se déplaçant vers l’est et vers l’ouest? Où les communautés marchandes eurasiennes très mobiles ont-elles transporté et réinterprété les notions de modèle de ville de banlieue dans et au-delà des définitions de l’urbanisme islamique? Telles sont parmi les nombreuses questions explorées par cette contribution.

**Mots-clés**: Ville islamique, Amu Darya, *Rabaḍ*, commerce d’Asie centrale, villes moghole, périphéries urbaines.