

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Social, Economic and Cultural Life of The Population of The Syrdarya Region in The Middle Ages

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## ABSTRACT

The text offers an insightful look into the medieval Ustrushona region, shedding light on its complex administrative, economic, and cultural life. The region, located in the fertile lands of Central Asia, had a thriving agricultural economy, with a focus on irrigation farming that produced cotton, cereals, and fruits. In addition to agriculture, livestock farming flourished in the steppe and desert areas, supporting the livelihoods of the population.

**Keywords:** "Beishi", Western Turkic Khanate, "Afshin", Chirdmish, Satachari I, Rakhanch I, Satachari II, Kharabughra, Al-Mu'tasim, the Turkic Khagan, Qal'ai Qahqaha, Mink, Asbanikant, Biskar, Bangam, Vokr, Shahar, Mascha, Buttam.

## INTRODUCTION

The country, which is located in a geographically favorable geographical area, which includes mainly mountain, sub-mountainous plain and desert areas, on the international caravan routes, occupies a unique place in the Middle Ages with its locally based political, economic and social life and unique serqirra culture.

**Political life.** As a result of the disintegration of the Kang'u state in the 5th century, Ustrushan gained independence. There is information about this in the Chinese chronicle "Beishi", which describes the historical events of 435 years. However, soon, from the end of the 5th century to the 7th century, Ustrushona was under the control of the Hephthalites, and then the Western Turkic Khanate. During this period, Ustrushona will retain its internal autonomy. The Ustrushona state was ruled by a dynasty of local rulers known by the rank of "Afshin". Rulership was passed down from father to son. Today, the names of 14 representatives belonging to two dynasties of these rulers have been determined. The names of representatives of the first dynasty of Afshins: Chirdmish, Satachari I, Rakhanch I, Satachari II, Satachari III, Rakhanch II, Rakhanch III were determined based on numismatic sources. We do not know the exact dates of the reign of the representatives of

this dynasty, which is believed to have ruled mainly between 600 and 720. Written sources indicate that only one of them ruled between 618 and 626. At the same time, the chronological sequence of these Afshins' reigns is also based on more speculation. From written sources, it is known that the second dynasty of Afshins, ruling Ustrushana starting from 720 CE, included Kharabughra (720-738), Khanakhara (738-800), Kavus (800-825), Haydar (825-840), and Hasan. Additionally, numismatic sources provide information about the last two Afshins, Abdullah and Sayr ibn Abdullah. These numismatic records confirm that the final Afshin of Ustrushana ruled until 893 CE.

Analyzing historical sources indicates that this dynasty had Turkic origins. This conclusion is supported by the name of Ustrushana's ruler in 720, Kharabughra (Black Camel), which aligns with Turkic traditions. It is worth noting that the depiction of a "she-wolf nursing two babies," found in Shahrison, might also be associated with the genealogy of these Turkic Afshins.

However, some specialists attempt to link this mural to the influence of Christianity in Ustrushana. They claim that the image was inspired by the Capitoline Wolf statue in Rome,

representing the myth of Romulus and Remus, the founders of the Eternal City. At the same time, historical studies suggest that the Etruscan tribes, credited as the founders of Rome, might have originated from the East, which deserves mention in this context.

Historically, it is known that during this period, many rulers of Central Asia maintained close relations with the Turks and often sought to establish kinship and tribal ties with them. Written sources preserve information about one of the Afshins of Ustrushana, Haydar ibn Kavus, who arranged the marriage of his son Hasan to Utrunjoy, the daughter of Ashnas, the Turkic commander under Caliph Al-Mu'tasim. This serves as an example of such connections.

By the early 8th century, Arab invaders began entering the territory of Central Asia. The first written mention of the Afshin Kharabughra, previously noted, is in connection with a military alliance formed in 737 between the Turkic Khagan and rulers of neighboring states against the Arabs. After the defeat of this alliance, Kharabughra's son Khanakhara ascended the throne of Ustrushana in 738. Like his father, he sought to pursue an independent policy. For instance, during the Arab military campaigns led by Nasr ibn Sayyar in 738 and Fadl ibn Yahya in 795, Khanakhara maintained Ustrushana's autonomy through political negotiations and by paying a certain amount of tribute.

**Social life.** The administrative system of early medieval Ustrushona is not entirely clear. Written sources provide information only about the "administrator of the Afshin's palace (hero) Taradis" or the governors of the rustaqs, referred to as "the person with the title Zaminch" (the governor of the Zamin rustaq). These sources suggest that other rustaqs were likely governed in a similar manner. Based on archaeological research, it has been determined that the local nobility - related to the peasants - who resided in forts and settlements spread across the region must have played a significant role in the state administrative system. Considering the above, we can infer that the administrative structure of early medieval Ustrushona was similar to that of neighboring regions (Sogd, Choch, Parkana) and was likely organized in the following hierarchy: Ustrushona Afshins, palace officials, rustaq governors, local nobility (peasants), and village elders (qadhudo).

The state of Ustrushona in the Middle Ages was divided into several rustaqs, and based on the names of these

rustaqs mentioned in written sources, it is estimated that there were 18 in total. Of these, 9 rustaqs, which were located in the plains, include Bunjikent, Sabat, Zomin, Burnamad, Kharakana, Fagnon, Khovos, Shavkat, and Fakat (Vagkat), each of which contained several cities (including rustaq centers) and numerous villages. The remaining 9 rustaqs were mountainous: Mink, Asbanikant, Biskar, Bangam, Vakr, Shahar, Mascha, Buttam, and Burgar. It appears that only the Mink rustaq had several cities, while the others mainly contained numerous villages. Medieval historians and geographers referred to Ustrushona as a "land of 400 fortresses." The results of archaeological surveys conducted in the region, including ancient architectural complexes and many archaeological sites under study, confirm these claims. These fortresses were built at strategically advantageous points to protect the rustaqs that were based on the numerous oasis settlements (micro-oases) of the region, forming a unique and robust military-defense system. The majority of these fortresses and citadels date back to the early Middle Ages. This military-defense system, based primarily on defense and more specifically on the independent defense of separate oases and settlements, was part of a broader trend across Central Asia in the early Middle Ages, indicating that feudal fragmentation affected Ustrushona as well. The conflicts between rulers of Central Asian states during this period, and the feudal fragmentation, can also be observed in Ustrushona, such as in the disputes between the Afshins of Ustrushona and the Ikskhs of Sogd.

**Economic life.** The authors of written sources provide information about the favorable location of Ustrushona, its fertile lands, and natural resources, also emphasizing its close ties with neighboring regions and states. Since Ustrushona was located in one of the ancient agricultural oases of Central Asia, agriculture was one of the dominant sectors of its economy. Mainly relying on natural and artificial irrigation systems, agriculture in the region was supported by numerous water sources, including springs, mountain rivers, and streams (Sangzor, Achchison, Khojamushkentsoy, Shahristansoy, Kattasoy, Basmandasoy, Aqsuv, Isfanasoy), as well as complex networks of artificial water structures such as canals and qanats. Some people described the Mirzachul region as a "desert without a soul," with the saying, "When birds fly, their wings are tired, and when people walk, their feet hurt." However, this is not entirely accurate. Our ancestors, in the Middle Ages, brought water from the Syr Darya to Mirzachul via the Urimboy canal, and life flourished there. Russian specialists who arrived in the region in the second

half of the 19th century, unfamiliar with the local conditions of Mirzachul, mistakenly claimed in 1870 that the engineer Baron Aminov and in 1917, the researcher Karavaev, wrote that water was taken from the Syr Darya near the village of Choltukay (Kazakh name Shal-tugay) along the coast of the Urimboy canal. In reality, the Urimboy canal diverted water from the Syr Darya near the village of Kushtigirman in the Spitamen district of the Sughd region of modern Tajikistan. This conclusion is drawn because the Syr Darya only rises in that area, making it possible to divert water to Mirzachul from there. Traces of this canal have been preserved in the territories of the villages of Boyavut and Uch Kahramon in the Guliston district. The Urimboy canal flows north in parallel with the Syr Darya and reaches Choltukay (modern-day Matonat village of the Syrdarya district), where it then turns left and irrigates the area up to Chordara. There are also speculations that the Urimboy-Oghuz canal came very close to the Karoy and Mirza-Rabot canals in the vicinity of the Tuyator river flow near the village of Malik in the present-day Syrdarya district. Karavaev, who conducted research in the Mirzachul region, suggests that the canal was dug in the 10th-12th centuries, based on the "Oghuz" ethnonym in the name of the canal.

Agriculture, which was one of the key sectors in the economy of Ustrushona, developed not only in the central, southeastern mountainous, foothill, and plain areas, but also in the desert and semi-desert regions of the northern and northwestern parts. The farmers of Ustrushona specialized according to the natural conditions of the region, cultivating cotton along the Syr Darya in the northern areas, while in the foothills, plains, and mountainous regions, they grew cereal crops (wheat, barley, etc.), engaged in horticulture, viticulture, and melons farming. The many tools and agricultural remains discovered through archaeological research also support these facts.

Another important sector in Ustrushona's economy was livestock farming, which primarily developed in the highland pastures and in the desert and semi-desert regions. The sedentary population of the region and the nomadic pastoralists living in the northern, mainly desert areas, known as "ghuz" or "nine oases" in written sources, specialized in breeding horses, camels, small and large livestock. Archaeological studies conducted at various sites, such as special facilities for livestock and burial monuments related to nomadic herders, as well as remains of bones from different domestic animals, further confirm

these findings.

Ustrushona's land was rich in natural resources, and in ancient and medieval times, mining and metalworking were developed in the region. According to written sources, gold, iron, copper, saltpeter, and other minerals were mined in Ustrushona. These materials were used to create products for daily life, including agricultural tools, household and military weapons, and jewelry. Archaeological research of mining centers and workshops where these materials were processed shows that Ustrushona had a well-developed mining sector during the Middle Ages. The agricultural, livestock, and mining sectors of the economy formed a stable foundation for Ustrushona's sustained development.

Ustrushona's handicraft industry was a multi-sector field, encompassing blacksmithing, architecture, pottery, weaving, and many other areas. The centers of metalworking, primarily iron, bronze, and precious metals, were found mainly in Bunjikent and its surrounding areas, as well as in the Mink rustaq, though these crafts were widespread across other regions of Ustrushona as well. Items made by Ustrushona craftsmen, including agricultural tools, household items, military weapons, bronze and copper utensils, and various ornaments, were widely traded. Additionally, iron from Ustrushona's Mink rustaq was "exported" to Fergana, particularly to the ironworking workshops of Akhsikent.

**Spiritual Life.** The unique and developed art of medieval Ustrushona is primarily assessed based on archaeological sources. Archaeological finds provide valuable information about the folk applied arts (jewelry, woodwork, engraving, etc.), visual arts, music, and other aspects of Ustrushona's artistic life. Rare examples of products made from gold, copper, bronze, and other precious metals found in Kultepa and other monuments, created by casting and engraving techniques, depict various patterns, mythical figures, and complex representations of scenes. These include precious rings and earrings, lamps and candlesticks, seals and bowls, dishes, altars, and wooden and clay items. These discoveries serve as a legitimate foundation for highly evaluating the practical arts of Ustrushona's craftsmen and jewelers.

One of the main types of Ustrushona's art, visual art, has over 70 compositions found mainly in the city of Qalai Qahqa. These include works such as "A She-Wolf Nursing Two Cubs," "The Multi-Armed God," "Three Cavalry

Warriors," "Warrior on a Battle Chariot," "A Three-Eyed Mythical Figure," "A Three-Headed, Four-Armed God," "Winged Warrior," "Bird and Dragon," "A Warrior Healing His Horse," "A Woman Playing the Harp," and many others. These pieces provide detailed and rich insights into the advanced stage of Ustrushona's art. The vivid colors and unique style in these depictions reflect the deep roots of the Ustrushona people's developed worldview, traditions, and their close connections with neighboring peoples and states (Sogdiana, Tokharistan, etc.) as well as the broader East (Greek, Roman, Chinese) cultural and spiritual life.

Archaeological discoveries also provide information about another form of Ustrushona's artistic life, music. Among these findings, the depiction of "A Woman Playing the Harp" and the remains of musical instruments hold particular scientific significance.

As we can see, the country's rich political history, multifaceted economy, and diverse spiritual life clearly prove that medieval Ustrushona was one of the most advanced regions of Transoxiana. Its high material and spiritual culture also played an important role in the subsequent fate of the peoples of Central Asia.

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