

## GREAT SILK ROAD AND CHOCH TOWNS: HISTORICAL PROGRESS

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**Annotation:** This article analyzes the history of the cities of Chach along the Great Silk Road, their development processes, and their role in international trade and economic relations. Chach has long been an important trade and cultural center, playing a significant role in the connections between the East and the West. Based on archaeological findings and historical sources, the economic, social, and cultural development of Chach cities is examined. Additionally, the influence of various civilizations on the region and urban planning traditions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Great Silk Road, Chach, Tashkent oasis, trade routes, caravan routes, cultural relations, economic development, urban planning, archaeological findings, historical sources, China, Byzantium, Sogdiana, Turan, Islamic period, ancient cities.

The Great Silk Road played a crucial role in the economic and cultural integration of Eastern and Western nations, uniting Eurasian states from China to the Mediterranean for many centuries. The Central Asian region also held significant importance in these connections. In particular, the oasis territories located in contact zones with the steppe regions occupied a special place<sup>1</sup>.

The earliest caravan routes connecting China and Northern India with the Western lands passed through the southern regions of Central Asia. The main branches of the trade route reached Bactria from the Near East via the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. From there, one route led through the mountainous regions of the upper Amu Darya basin to Northern India and then to the Chinese Empire. The second route turned northward, passing through Samarkand, the capital of Sogd, and then to Khujand. During this period, Chinese chroniclers also mentioned another northern branch of the trade route. This branch extended from China through the Tian Shan Mountains to Fergana and further along the Syr Darya to the northern states of Kangju, Yanqi, and Yancai<sup>3</sup>.

Chach held a unique significance along this route, as the northeastern branch of the Silk Road passed through its territory. The primary sources for studying the topography of Chach's cities are written records in Arabic and Persian. Based on these sources, two roads connected Sogd to Chach. The first was the northern route from the 10th to 12th centuries, which led caravans through the steppes on the left bank of the Syr Darya to the Chirchik Valley, reaching the city of Chinanchket and then the oasis capital, Binkat. Additionally, there was a southern route. According to Qudama ibn Ja'far and Ibn Khordadbeh, this route passed through the desert from Zamin to Khavos (6 farsakhs), from Khavos to the Chach River (5 farsakhs), where there was a river crossing. From this stop along the river, it was 4 farsakhs to Benaket, and from Benaket to Chinanchket on the banks of the Turk River, another 4 farsakhs, where the Turks had a crossing<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф., Грицина А. Мавераннахр на Великом Шелковом пути. Самарканд-Бишкек: IICAS, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Бичурин Н.Я. Собрание сведений ... Т. 2. С. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 13.

Trade caravans departed from Samarkand, passed through Ustrushana and Chach, and then headed towards Jetisu<sup>4</sup>. Sogdian merchants, craftsmen, and farmers settled in the mountainous and foothill regions of Chach during various historical periods and circumstances, living alongside the semi-nomadic and sedentary local Proto-Turkic population. Some villages and cities, such as Parkent, Piskent, Zarkent, Khojakent, Dukent, Nuket, Kharashkent, Chinanchkent, Binkent, and Banoket, bear Sogdian names, while others like To'qkent, To'nkent, and Khotunkent reflect a Turkic-Sogdian toponymic symbiosis in the oasis<sup>5</sup>.

In the early Middle Ages, especially during the era of the Turkic Khaganate, Chach's trade relations entered a new stage. After the Turkic khagans conquered vast territories, they not only obtained great spoils but also collected tributes from Chinese dynasties, primarily in the form of silk. For this reason, the Turkic khagans were interested in establishing trade relations with Western countries. Located at the crossroads of the Silk Road, Chach merchants actively participated in supplying goods to foreign markets alongside the Sogdians. In the eastern trade centers, they lived together with the Sogdians in the same villages, using the Chinese surname "Shi." This branch of the Silk Road served the interests of the Turkic Khaganate, generating substantial revenue for the khaganate's treasury. Consequently, the khaganate bore the responsibility of protecting merchants both politically and militarily<sup>2</sup>.

The main trade route from Sogd reached Chach through Zamin, Benaket, and Kharashket. According to archaeological excavations, Benaket is around 2,000 years old. Arab and Persian sources describe it as a major urban center among the many cities of Chach, located along the Ilaq River and on the right bank of the Syr Darya. It was an important stop on the Great Silk Road. The trade route from the south, passing through Zamin and Khavos from Sogd, led directly to this city and was known as the southern Benaket route. The ruins of this city are located at the site of the Sharqiya/Shakhrukhia monument in present-day Oqqo'rg'on district. This site is about 30 km from the Syr Darya river crossing and situated at the confluence of the Ohangaron/Angren River. Excavations have revealed cultural layers up to 15 meters deep, containing glass and pottery fragments, fired brick remains, and coins from different historical periods.

The rabat (suburb) of the city housed pottery workshops, where archaeologists found pottery kilns, raw material remains, tools, and small furnaces used by jewelers, along with various colored metals. Additionally, a separate district was dedicated to glassmaking, as evidenced by production waste, kilns, and glass fragments, indicating that this city was a significant glass production center of its time. Such a large-scale glassmaking site has not yet been identified in other parts of Central Asia. In Benaket's market square, a unique underground storage facility, or "icehouse" (muzkhona), was discovered, which was used to preserve food supplies for caravan<sup>1</sup>. Qanqa, one of the major trade and economic centers of the oasis, was established in the early 3rd century BCE and remained continuously inhabited until the late 11th century<sup>2</sup>. This monument is compared to Kharashket, which is mentioned in the works of medieval authors<sup>3</sup>. Ibn Hawqal, in

<sup>4</sup> Мавлонов Ў. Марказий Осиёнинг қадимги йўллари. Б. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Камолиддин Ш.С. Древнетюркская топонимия Средней Азии. Т., 2006. С. 81-84; Отахўжаев А. Илк ўрта асрлардаги сиёсий, ижтимоий-иқтисодий ва маданий муносабатларда Суғд ва Чоч // O'zbekiston tarixi, № 1. Т., 2009. Б. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Древнейшая городская культура ... С. 19-20.

<sup>1</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 14-18.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Генезис и этапы развития ...С. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Массон М.Е. Ахангеран. Археолого-топографический очерк. Т., 1953. С. 105.

his accounts, emphasizes that in terms of size, it was the second-largest city in the oasis after Binket<sup>4</sup>. In the 3rd–4th centuries, a third shahristan (urban district) surrounded by separate defensive walls was formed in the city. During the 6th–7th centuries, as observed in many other Central Asian cities, Qanqa underwent a significant contraction, leading to the development of a second shahristan, which was enclosed by an internal defensive wall. As a result, by the 6th–7th centuries, the city had fully developed three shahristans, each with its own fortifications beyond the ark (citadel). In the 7th–8th centuries, with the emergence of pottery production in the southern part of the city, the rabat (suburban area) was also established. The trade and handicraft production center of the ancient and medieval city was located approximately 300 meters inside the southern Sogdian Gate, along the street leading to the second shahristan's defensive wall.

Archaeological excavations near the gate uncovered pottery kilns from the 7th–8th centuries and around 30 workshops from the early 10th–11th centuries. These workshops were used for pottery, glassmaking, bone carving, iron and copperworking, and various other crafts. Household items, tools, and jewelry were also found and studied<sup>1</sup>.

According to Y. F. Buryakov, the flat area located 7–10 meters below the ruins of the second shahristan's defensive wall was likely the city's market<sup>2</sup>. At the intersection of the southern and western streets, there was a city caravanserai<sup>3</sup>.

The city of Xarashket, which was the capital of the oasis, stretched northward toward the Chirchik Valley and eastward toward Iloq. The center of Iloq, Tunket, extended southward through Kohisim toward Fergana. At the same time, there was also a northern route leading directly east from Jizzakh into the steppe desert. In this area, on the banks of the Chirchik (Paroq) River, the city of Chinanchket—also known as the "Chinese city"—emerged. This city played a crucial role in trade relations with the steppe pastoralists.

Another city, known as Nejaket or Unjaket, was located at the confluence of the Chirchik and Syr Darya rivers. According to Istakhri, this city was situated in the Choch Valley, where the waters of the Turk River converged. Ibn Hawqal also mentioned that the waters of the Turk River flowed into the Choch River near Nujaket<sup>4</sup>.

V.V. Bartold identified Chinanchket with the archaeological site located in the present-day Chinaz district of Tashkent region. In 1934, G.V. Grigoryev studied the site and created its schematic plan<sup>1</sup>. The city of Chinanchket was formed during the early medieval period. It consisted of an ark (citadel), a shahristan (urban core), and surrounding defensive walls. The city's peak prosperity occurred between the 9th and 12th centuries. Archaeological findings and written sources confirm that the rabat (suburban area) of the city was also inhabited by a pastoral population<sup>2</sup>.

From chinanchket, the caravan route followed the Chirchik River eastwards to the town of Ushturket/Shuturket. According to Arab geographers, in terms of size, this city was the third largest after the ancient capital of choch, Kharashket, and the medieval capital, Binket. Holy describes the city as having well – fortified and beautiful closed markets-Tims. The name

<sup>4</sup> Абу-л Касим ибн Хаукаль. Извлечения из книги «Пути и страны». Перевод Е.К. Бетгера // Труды САГУ. Вып. 4. Т., 1957. С. 24.

<sup>1</sup> Древняя и средневековая культура Чача. Т.: Фан, 1979. С. 93-109.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 31-36; Древняя и средневековая культура Чача ... С. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 31-36.

<sup>4</sup> Абуль Қосим Ибн Хавқаль. Пути и странъ ... С. 23.

<sup>1</sup> Григорьев Г.В. Отчет об археологической разведке .... С. 8-12, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 47-51.

Shuturket, meaning "City of camels", served as a stopping point for caravans to exchange their animal vehicles, while the city, which was at the intersection of trade routes, was a major trading center<sup>3</sup>.

The route from shuturket to Binket was 4 farsakhs, or a day's drive, and included Danfaganket/Dinbaginaketa, the so-called "Temple City of Religions". Researchers have found that the city had a major synagogue, considered the sacred center of the Chirchiq Valley. The ruins of the city coincide with the place of Yoghontepa near the village of Niazboshi, 4 km east of the modern Yangiul district Qawunchi temiryol station. Having settled at the foot of the Chirchiq River, the city had a large circular-shaped citadel with a circumference of 150 meters with a height of 20 meters. To its West was a square-shaped Shahrstan, more than 16 in area, with traces of defensive walls with 6-7 towers by four well preserved<sup>1</sup>. As a result of stratigraphic investigations, it was determined that the period of intensive life in the shahrstan corresponds to the 4th–7th centuries, while the next cultural layer belongs to the 9th–10th and 11th–12th centuries. The citadel of the city served as a religious center. Pottery and metallurgical workshops, as well as uniform residential buildings of the population, were discovered and studied in the shahrstan. The earliest layers of the citadel date back to the 1st century AD, while its fortification dates to the 5th–7th centuries. In later periods, the city was abandoned and burned as a result of struggles against the Arabs. However, the city was later rebuilt.

From Danfagan, the route continued to Binket, the early medieval capital of Chach. The ruins of Binket correspond to the Shoshtepa site. Here, a unique architectural complex, including defensive and religious structures, was established. In the works of 9th–10th century Arab geographers, the city is referred to as Binket. For instance, Qudama ibn Ja'far called it "Madina ash-Shosh." In Chinese chronicles, the city is recorded as Shi or Chjeshi. Based on Chinese sources from the Tang period (7th–10th centuries), Chjeshi was believed to have been located at the site of Yuni. Researchers equated the locations of both cities with the ruins of Mingo'rik in modern Tashkent<sup>3</sup>.

However, long-term archaeological research has not revealed any archaeological layers from the ancient period indicating the existence of Yuni in the territory of modern Tashkent. For this reason, archaeologists initially identified the ruins of Binket as the capital of Chach, which shared its name with the early medieval state. However, more than 200 test pits, trenches, and excavations carried out by members of the Tashkent Archaeological Expedition in Binket did not yield any materials confirming the presence of a city from the early Middle Ages. Consequently, the expedition members concluded that the city at the site of Binket emerged only from the 9th–10th centuries onward<sup>1</sup>.

By the early Middle Ages, the geography of oasis cities had also changed. While in earlier periods, cities primarily formed near the Syr Darya River, during this time, settlements began emerging deeper within the oasis, along the banks of the Chirchiq and Ohangaron rivers. The largest urban center developed in the northern regions of the oasis, bordering the steppe. It was precisely in this area that the capital of the oasis, Madinai Choch, was relocated.

From an economic perspective, during the early Middle Ages, nearly 40% of the oasis cities emerged along the right bank of the Chirchiq River, with 20% of them located within the

<sup>3</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 51-52.

<sup>1</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 52-55.

<sup>3</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 63.

<sup>1</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 64.



present-day territory of Tashkent. Archaeological excavations conducted by the Tashkent Archaeological Group have confirmed that the capital of Chach shifted to the Tashkent area due to its proximity to steppe regions—facilitating alliances with nomadic pastoralists—and the advantageous water system<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, cities and settlements began to appear not only in areas bordering the steppe but also in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions. The second major group of cities emerged in the Ohangaron River valley, closely linked to mining and metallurgical production. The ancient city within present-day Tashkent corresponds to the ruins of Mingo'rik. These ruins are located in the Mirobod district, along the Salor canal, near the current Northern Railway Station. The name "Mingo'rik" originates from a large apricot orchard that existed there in the 19th century. In the southern part of the site stood a rectangular citadel, whose elevated position indicates the presence of a ruler's palace. The preserved area of the site exceeds 30 hectares. Between 1957 and 1959, excavations at the site were conducted by archaeologists Y.F. Buryakov and D.G. Zilper, followed by O.V. Obelchenko in 1959 and D.G. Zilper again from 1968 to 1973. In later years, extensive excavations were carried out by the Tashkent Archaeological Expedition under the leadership of M.I. Filanovich.

Stratigraphic studies revealed a cultural layer up to 15 meters deep, along with defensive walls and towers. Remains of an imposing palace structure from the 7th–8th centuries were discovered, featuring luxurious wall paintings, as well as residential buildings dating to the 10th–12th centuries. The citadel of Mingo'rik contained a palace complex with rooms designated for residential, economic, guest, and religious purposes. A grand guest hall and its connecting corridors were adorned with elaborate wall paintings. In the northern part of the palace, a religious complex consisting of two rooms was located. This palace complex in Mingo'rik, with its opulent guest accommodations, is currently the only known example of such structures from the 6th–8th centuries in Chach and Iloq<sup>2</sup>.

It has been determined that this city ruin originally emerged as a fortress in the 4th–5th centuries. Its rapid development took place in the 6th–7th centuries, during which the citadel walls were constructed, occupying half of the ancient fortress, and the shahristan, whose exact size remains unknown, took shape. The citadel's defensive walls underwent two distinct construction phases. At one point, the walls were destroyed but were soon rebuilt and reinforced with additional fortifications. Archaeologists associate this process with the conflict between the Turkic Khagan Sheguy and the people of Chach, which ultimately led to the appointment of a Turkic deputy in place of the local ruler.

The period of Mingo'rik's greatest prosperity corresponds to the first half of the 7th century and the early 8th century. During this time, the city expanded significantly, and grand architectural structures were erected. However, by the 8th century, the city was destroyed and subsequently abandoned. Researchers attribute this devastation to the intense resistance that Chach, along with Sogdiana, Fergana, and the Turkic Khaganate, waged against the Arab conquest. As a result of the campaigns led by the Arab caliphate's governor Qutayba ibn Muslim (713–719), the city was completely depopulated. Taking into account the city's size, its rapid growth, architectural structures, and topographical location, Y.F. Buryakov identified Mingo'rik as the capital of Chach in the 7th–8th centuries<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Генезис и этапы развития ...С. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Генезис и этапы развития ...С. 130.

<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Генезис и этапы развития ...С. 130; Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 66.

Around the ruins of Mingo'rik, the palaces of the nobility and temples were located, which are now known as Oqtepa. Several Oqtepas exist in different parts of Tashkent, including Ko'kcha, Chig'atoy, Chilonzor, and Yunusobod. Among them, Yunusobod Oqtepa stands out due to its size. Archaeological excavations at this site were conducted by A.I. Terenokhin in 1940 and later by M.I. Filanovich from the 1970s onward.

The fortified palace was surrounded by strong defensive walls and consisted of barracks, towers, a two-story building, and additional structures for servants and warriors. From the outside, the complex was enclosed by a deep moat connected to a canal. Excavations revealed that the two-story palace was built on an elevated platform, making it the highest structure among all the surrounding buildings<sup>1</sup>.

One farsakh south of Binket, medieval geographers mentioned the city of Nujket. Located along the Chirchik River, it was situated on the road from Binket to Iloq and Fergana. Archaeologists associate the ruins of this city with the Khanobod site. The ruins of Khanobod are found at the southernmost edge of present-day Tashkent, about 0.5 km from the Chirchik River. The city had a square layout, measuring 570 x 530 meters on each side, covering an area of more than 30 hectares. The remains of the shahristan are poorly preserved. In the eastern corner, a square-shaped citadel stood, rising 10 meters above the surrounding terrain. A large structure remains in the southern part of the shahristan, featuring two hollow depressions resembling pools in the center and a spacious area to the west, which likely served as a market. In the southwestern part of the shahristan, archaeologist V.M. Masson identified a separate structure, which was a trade caravanserai. The citadel dates back to the middle of the second half of the first millennium. By the 6th–7th centuries, the area had been fortified with defensive walls, transforming it into a city-like stronghold. Pottery fragments from the late 7th and early 8th centuries, discovered in the northwestern and southwestern parts of the shahristan, indicate that the site was densely populated during this period<sup>4</sup>.

Archaeologists do not know exactly when the walls of the shahristan were built, but they suggest that a city-type settlement already existed by the early 7th–8th centuries. Based on archaeological excavations, the city's intensive development dates to the 9th–10th centuries when the entire area was settled, and a significant cultural layer accumulated. Accordingly, the shahristan wall was likely built during this period, as evidenced by the construction of a caravanserai outside the walls in the rabat area.

At the southwestern edge of the city, there are small ancient mounds known as Kuygantepa or Nogaytepa. The ruins of Nogaytepa correspond to Banunkent, which was located one farsakh from the capital of Chach. Archaeologists initially identified Jabg'ukat with Tog'aytepa, located 4 km south of the village of Do'rmon, northeast of Tashkent. Later, they associated it with Okota, situated north of Tog'aytepa. Historical sources mention two cities, Jabg'ukat and Xotunkat, located close together, two farsakhs from Binket, making their precise identification somewhat difficult. However, after a thorough study of all available data, archaeologist Y.F. Buryakov successfully proved that Jabg'ukat corresponds to the ruins of Okota, while Xotunkat matches the Tog'aytepa site.

The Okota site was first studied in 1940 by M.E. Voronets. Covering an area of 18 hectares, it featured a 5–6-meter-high citadel. Unfortunately, extensive excavations have not yet been conducted at the site. However, stratigraphic surveys have uncovered materials dating to the 7th–

<sup>1</sup> Филанович М.И. Ташкент: зарождение и развитие города и городской культуры. Т., 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография ... С. 71.

8th, 10th–12th, and 15th centuries. The central area of the site, particularly its early medieval citadel, is distinctly recognizable. Excavations in the citadel revealed a layer of mudbrick structures and a small number of unglazed ceramic artifacts in the lower part. Due to this, some archaeologists have considered Okota a settlement rather than a full-fledged city. Nonetheless, Y.F. Buryakov, one of the leading researchers of the site, confidently concluded that it was indeed a small city<sup>2</sup>.

During this period, a new city called Ulkanto'ytepa emerged between the Chirchik and Ohangaron rivers, specifically along the southern channel of the Chirchik River. The city covered an area of 20 hectares, with a citadel occupying 1 hectare, surrounded by defensive walls. Archaeological excavations in the shahristan have uncovered materials dating back to the 6th–8th centuries. Additionally, a cemetery with burial chambers was discovered outside the city. The ruins of Qavardon city are located near the village of the same name, 25 km east of Tashkent and 6 km from Yangibozor. Archaeologists compare this site to the historical city of Kabarna. The site is situated on the left bank of the old channel of the Chirchik River, stretching 1,150 meters from north to south, with a width ranging from 600 to 700 meters. Before excavations, the city's walls were well-preserved on three sides, except for the western side, where modern road and canal construction led to its destruction. The city was enclosed by defensive walls with towers, covering an area of over 75 hectares. Although the western wall was damaged, the remaining fortifications illustrate the city's significant size and strategic importance during its time<sup>1</sup>.

In the 6th – 8th centuries, the following conclusions can be drawn about the Oasis urban culture: cities increase in numbers, they develop in connection with economic and socio-political factors. Once Choch is part of the Turkish khaganate, the introduction of many new ethnic groups and their processes of grazing occur. The intensification of cross-cultural relations, especially the influence of Sughd on Oasis culture, is mocked. During the incessant military campaigns of the Arab Caliphate in the first half of the 8th century and the popular uprisings against them, like most other lands in the region, the towns and settlements in Choch face a devastating crisis. From time immemorial, a large part of cities with crafts, shopping centers were destroyed, and the rest were almost deserted. Also, in Metallurgical Mines, work stops and irrigation networks dry out.

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<sup>2</sup> Буряков Ю.Ф. Историческая топография... С. 75.

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