

HOLY STEPS. AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF THE HISTORICAL TOPONOMY OF THE CITY OF SAMARKAND

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the Holy steps, the rich historical toponymy of Samarkand, one of the most ancient inhabited cities in Central Asia. Through a multidisciplinary approach, he studies the evolution of place names in Samarkand, illuminating the cultural, linguistic and historical tapestries of the city. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the toponymic heritage of Samarkand and its importance in shaping urban identity for thousands of years through the analysis of various sources, including ancient texts, archaeological finds and linguistic research.

Keywords: Samarkand, toponymy, historical, evolution, cultural, linguistic, Central Asia, heritage, identity.

Introduction

Rich in history and legend, Samarkand has stood as a crossroads of civilizations for over two millennia. Its toponymy, the study of place names, offers a unique lens for exploring the city's intricate tapestry of cultures, languages, and histories. From its ancient origins as Marakanda to its vibrant role as a hub along the Silk Road, Samarkand's toponymic landscape reflects the ebb and flow of empires, religions, and peoples. This article embarks on a journey through time to uncover the layers of Samarkand's toponymic heritage, highlighting its significance in understanding the city's past and present.

Following Uzbekistan's independence, renewed attention was directed toward preserving the rich cultural and historical heritage passed down from our ancestors. Historical monuments were brought under state protection. During the years of independence, structures of great historical and cultural value in cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Termez, Khiva, Tashkent, Kokand, and Shahrisabz—built by our illustrious forebears—were restored

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and given their due recognition. Restoring these monuments and preserving their original appearance became a key priority of national policy.

Forgotten chapters of our history, revered sacred sites, and monuments that had almost faded into obscurity were repaired and revitalized. Memorial complexes were established in honour of great scholars such as Imam al-Bukhari, Imam at-Tirmidhi, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Ahmad al-Fergani, Burhanuddin al-Marghinani, and Mahmud az-Zamakhshari. Statues of prominent historical figures, including Amir Timur in Samarkand and Shahrisabz, Mirzo Ulugbek, and Alisher Navoi in Tashkent, Jalal al-Din Manguberdi in Urgench, and Alpomysh in Termez, were erected.

Today, the country safeguards over 7,000 heritage sites, including 2,500 architectural monuments and more than 2,700 works of monumental art. Since 1991, key sites have been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List: the Ichan Kala fortress in Khiva (1991), the historic centre of Bukhara (1993), and the historic centre of Shahrisabz (2000).

Literature Review and Methodology

One of the sacred sites restored during the years of independence is the Oqmasjid, located in the Khatirchi district of the Navoi region. This mosque was built by one of the revered figures, Sayyid Ota, reportedly constructed between 1380 and 1390, according to local elders. During the independence period, the Oqmasjid transformed into a revered pilgrimage site, promoting values of goodness, peace, and harmony, and fostering unity and solidarity among the people.

Until the 1920s, the mosque was a cherished centre for Muslims. Scholars and clerics who graduated from Bukhara madrasas taught here, offering lessons in Islamic law (sharia) and spiritual practices (tariqa), encouraging worshippers toward integrity, purity, peace, and tranquillity. However, under the oppressive Soviet regime, religious figures and worshippers faced persecution. Mosques were closed, and the faithful were labelled as "kulaks," "enemies of the people," "clerics," or "bandits," forcing them to distance themselves from religious spaces. During the war years, like many other mosques, Oqmasjid was converted into a storage facility. Both the mosque and the tombs of Sayyid Ota were neglected, leaving the site in



disrepair.

By the 1980s, despite the risk of political backlash under the communist ideology, a few worshippers cautiously continued to visit the mosque. On September 1, 1981, permission was granted for the operation of the Shaykh Gadoy Selkin Mosque in the district center, which included Oqmasjid.

Following this development, religious leaders and worshippers organized community efforts to restore and beautify the mosque. On September 5, 2003, the Oqmasjid reopened in a formal ceremony and resumed its religious activities.

Today, this majestic mosque, adorning the Khatirchi district with its impressive appearance, serves as a beacon of virtue and a place for prayer and reflection.

Preserving our past, valuing historical monuments, and safeguarding cultural artefacts are integral to understanding the great legacy of our nation and its direct connection to the social life and future of our people. These characteristics form the core of our national identity and have been deeply ingrained in the spirit of our nation for centuries.

Discussion and Results

Analysing the historical place names of Samarkand, it is logical to first address the origins of the city's name. Samarkand is one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, and its name has been the subject of various interpretations over the centuries. The earliest mention of the city's name origin can be found in Al-Mustawfi's 11th-century work *Tawarikh-i Samarqand*. Other significant sources analyzing Samarkand's toponymy include Al-Idrisi's *Kitab al-Kamal li-Ma'rifat al-Rijal* and An-Nasafi's *Kitab al-Qand fi Tarikh-i Samarqand*. Abu Tohir Khoja Samarkandi, in his 19th-century work *Samariya*, documented numerous historical place names in the city.

According to *Samariya*, the name "Samarkand" derives from the name of a king, Samar, and the Turkic word "kand," meaning "city." Other sources suggest that "Samarkand" could be interpreted as "city of sweetness," with "samara" meaning fruit or harvest [1]. Historian K. Katayev, in *Samarqandnoma*, offers another perspective, emphasizing that the name might not be linked to an individual but to certain attributes. In ancient Arabic and Persian, "samar" had multiple meanings: with three dots, it meant

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fruit, while with the "sin" letter, it signified being famous or well-known [2, 5].

Medieval historians like Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal mention that Samarkand province included 12 districts, such as Bunjikat or Panjakent, Varagsar, Maymurg, Sanjarfigon, Dargam, and others. Over the centuries, administrative divisions of the region underwent significant changes. Researcher V.L. Vyatkin studied the geography of Samarkand during the Timurid, Shaybanid, and Ashtarkhanid periods, offering detailed accounts of district names and boundaries. For instance, the Shovdor district stretched from Mascho to the village of Kunduzsofi and later to Ayimobod, reaching the Shahrisabz mountains in the south.

Prominent historical landmarks in Samarkand include its network of canals such as Obi Mashhad, Chokardiza, Novadon, Sangin (Chashmai Siyob), and Mazdakhin, which were vital to the city's life. Among these, the "Juyi Arziz" ("Lead Canal") is noteworthy. According to Istakhri, water flowed into the city through a lead channel, entering Afrosiab via the Kesh Gate. The canal was destroyed by Mongol forces in 1220, halting life in Afrosiab.

Another iconic site is the Shah-i-Zinda complex, located in the northern part of the city. It is built around the tomb of Qutham ibn Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This architectural masterpiece is one of Central Asia's most renowned pilgrimage sites. The name "Shah-i-Zinda" (The Living King) comes from a legend in which Qutham ibn Abbas reportedly entered a niche in the mosque's mihrab, escaping a Zoroastrian attack, and disappeared into a deep well.

Samarkand and its surrounding region are among the cradles of ancient civilization. The thousands of place names associated with this area have histories spanning centuries. Studying toponyms and their etymology provides valuable insights into historical events and cultural heritage. Recognizing the importance of geographical names in our daily lives, compiling and scientifically analyzing the toponyms linked to Samarkand is a vital task for historians, geographers, linguists, and intellectuals. However, this endeavor requires collaborative efforts due to its complexity and scope.

Conclusion

Samarkand's toponymic legacy is a testament to its profound historical and cultural significance as one of the world's oldest and most enduring cities.

From its ancient roots to its pivotal role along the Silk Road, the city has been a melting pot of civilizations, religions, and languages. The study of Samarkand's place names not only unravels the etymological mysteries behind its identity but also provides a window into the broader historical, cultural, and socio-political transformations of the region.

Through the restoration and preservation efforts undertaken during Uzbekistan's independence, Samarkand and its heritage sites have regained their rightful place as symbols of national pride and cultural continuity. The revival of sacred sites, monuments, and architectural treasures underscores the nation's commitment to honoring its past while building a cohesive cultural future.

The analysis of Samarkand's toponyms highlights their intrinsic connection to historical events, societal changes, and the enduring spirit of its people. These names serve as vital threads in the tapestry of the city's rich legacy, offering insights into its diverse influences and the resilience of its identity through centuries of change. Moving forward, a collaborative effort by historians, linguists, geographers, and the wider academic community is essential to further uncover the layers of meaning within Samarkand's toponyms and to preserve this invaluable aspect of human heritage for future generations.

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