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FORMATION OF EARLY URBAN CULTURES IN CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE BRONZE AGE (A CASE STUDY OF JARQOTON AND SOPOLLITEPA)

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Annotation: This article examines the process of the formation of early urban cultures in Central Asia during the Bronze Age through the examples of Jarqoton and Sopollitepa archaeological sites. Based on archaeological evidence, the economic, social, cultural, and religious life of these settlements is analyzed. The study also highlights the processes of early urbanization, the development of craftsmanship, labor specialization, and the emergence of elements of statehood.

Keywords: Bronze Age, urbanization, Sopollitepa, Jarqoton, agriculture, craftsmanship, early cities, Central Asia, archaeology.

Central Asia has long been recognized as an important crossroads of civilizations connecting the ancient cultures of the Near East, South Asia, and the Eurasian steppes. Its strategic geographical position facilitated the movement of people, goods, technologies, and cultural traditions. As a result, the region became an active participant in the broader processes of cultural and economic development that characterized the Bronze Age world. Archaeological research conducted over the past several decades has revealed that Central Asia was not merely a recipient of external influences but also an independent center of innovation and urban development (Rtveladze, 2005). The southern regions of present-day Uzbekistan, particularly the Surkhandarya oasis, represent one of the most important areas for studying the Bronze Age in Central Asia. Numerous archaeological discoveries have demonstrated that this territory was home to highly developed agricultural communities that successfully adapted to local environmental conditions through the construction of irrigation systems and the intensive cultivation of fertile lands. These achievements created the economic foundation necessary for population growth, craft specialization, and the emergence of complex social institutions. Consequently, the Surkhandarya region became one of the earliest centers of urbanization in ancient Central Asia (Asqarov, 1973). Among the many archaeological sites discovered in the region, Sopollitepa and Jarqoton occupy a particularly significant position. These settlements provide valuable evidence regarding different stages of urban development during the Bronze Age and serve as key sources for understanding the evolution of ancient Bactrian civilization. Sopollitepa represents an early agricultural settlement characterized by defensive architecture, organized residential structures, and specialized craft activities. Jarqoton, on the other hand, reflects a more advanced stage of development and exhibits many of the features typically associated with an early city, including a fortified citadel, religious complexes, craft production areas, and evidence of social differentiation (Asqarov, 1977). The importance of these sites extends beyond their local historical context. The archaeological materials recovered from Sopollitepa and Jarqoton have contributed significantly to scholarly debates concerning the origins of urbanization and state formation in Central Asia. Earlier historical interpretations often emphasized the influence of neighboring civilizations such as Mesopotamia or the Indus Valley in explaining the development of complex societies within the region. However, recent archaeological evidence increasingly supports the view that Central Asia possessed its own indigenous trajectory of social and urban development. The emergence of urban centers in ancient Bactria appears to have been largely based on local economic resources, agricultural productivity,

and internal social transformations rather than solely on external influences (Sarianidi, 1998; Rtveladze, 2005). The concept of urbanization is central to understanding the historical significance of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton. Urbanization is generally defined as the process through which settlements grow in size, complexity, and functional specialization, eventually developing into cities. This process is often accompanied by the emergence of social hierarchies, administrative institutions, religious centers, economic specialization, and extensive exchange networks. Archaeological evidence from southern Uzbekistan demonstrates that many of these characteristics were already present during the Bronze Age. Therefore, the study of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton provides an excellent opportunity to examine the mechanisms and stages through which urban culture developed in Central Asia.

The Bronze Age represents a significant stage in human history characterized by the development of productive economies, advances in metallurgy, and the emergence of early urban cultures. During the third and second millennia BCE, settled agricultural communities appeared in Central Asia and gradually laid the foundations for urban civilization [3]. The archaeological sites of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton, located in southern Uzbekistan, are among the most important sources for studying the Bronze Age. These sites provide valuable evidence regarding the earliest stages of urbanization in the territory of ancient Bactria [1].

Sopollitepa is a Bronze Age archaeological site located in the Sherabad district of the Surkhandarya region. It was first systematically investigated by the archaeologist Asqar Asqarov in 1968 [1]. Archaeological evidence indicates that Sopollitepa dates to approximately the 18th–15th centuries BCE and served as an important center of the ancient Bactrian agricultural culture [1; 2]. The settlement covered an area of about one hectare and was surrounded by defensive walls, demonstrating an advanced level of planning and security [2] The main occupations of the population included irrigated agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery production, metalworking, and textile production [1]. Excavations have revealed remains of wheat, barley, and other cultivated crops, confirming the existence of an advanced agricultural economy [2].Archaeologists discovered pottery workshops, bronze-smelting furnaces, metal artifacts, and stone and bone tools, indicating the emergence of labor specialization and craft production [1; 3].Jarqoton is considered one of the largest centers of ancient Bactrian civilization and represents a later stage in the development of the Sopollitepa cultural tradition [2].According to archaeological studies, Jarqoton developed during the 15th–13th centuries BCE and covered more than 100 hectares, making it one of the earliest urban centers in Central Asia [2; 4].The site consisted of a citadel, residential quarters, craft production areas, a temple complex, and a cemetery. Such a layout demonstrates a relatively advanced level of urban planning [4].The temple discovered at Jarqoton is considered one of the earliest religious complexes in Central Asia. Archaeologists found evidence of sacred fire rituals, ceremonial objects, and sacrificial areas [4]. These discoveries indicate that religious beliefs played a significant role in social and political life [3; 4].Archaeological findings demonstrate the development of metallurgy, pottery production, jewelry making, and textile production. Trade relations with neighboring regions, including ancient Iran and Mesopotamia, have also been identified [3; 4].The archaeological materials from Sopollitepa and Jarqoton provide important evidence for understanding the development of ancient Bactrian civilization, early urbanization processes, and the emergence of social complexity in Central Asia [2; 4].These sites demonstrate that the roots of urban culture in present-day Uzbekistan date back to the Bronze Age and developed on a local foundation.

Conclusion

The archaeological evidence from Sopollitepa and Jarqoton confirms that irrigated agriculture, specialized crafts, trade, religious institutions, and social stratification collectively contributed to the rise of urban civilization in Central Asia [1; 2; 4].

Therefore, these sites remain among the most important sources for studying the ancient history of Uzbekistan and the broader Central Asian region [5; 6]. The study of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton archaeological sites demonstrates that the Bronze Age was a crucial stage in the historical development of Central Asia. During this period, significant economic, social, cultural, and technological transformations took place, creating favorable conditions for the emergence of the earliest urban centers. The archaeological materials obtained from these sites provide convincing evidence that the process of urbanization in Central Asia was not a sudden phenomenon but rather the result of a long and gradual evolution of settled agricultural communities. The analysis of Sopollitepa shows that by the middle of the second millennium BCE, the population of southern Uzbekistan had already established a stable agricultural economy based on irrigation systems. The development of agriculture enabled communities to produce a surplus of food, which in turn supported population growth and encouraged the diversification of economic activities. The emergence of specialized crafts such as pottery, metallurgy, weaving, and construction reflects a higher level of economic organization than that found in earlier prehistoric societies. The presence of defensive walls and carefully planned residential areas further indicates that Sopollitepa had already begun to exhibit characteristics associated with proto-urban settlements. The archaeological evidence from Jarqoton reveals a more advanced stage of urban development. Unlike Sopollitepa, Jarqoton possessed many of the structural and functional elements that are generally associated with an early city. These include a fortified citadel, residential quarters, specialized craft districts, religious buildings, and a clearly organized settlement layout. Such features indicate the existence of a more complex social organization and administrative system. The scale of the settlement, covering more than one hundred hectares, suggests that Jarqoton served not only as a residential center but also as a political, economic, and religious hub for the surrounding region.

One of the most significant findings related to Jarqoton is the presence of a temple complex. This discovery demonstrates that religious institutions had become an important component of social life and may have played a role in regulating economic and political activities. The evidence of ritual practices, sacred fire worship, and ceremonial objects indicates that religious beliefs contributed to social cohesion and the consolidation of authority within the community. The emergence of such institutions represents an important step in the development of complex societies and early forms of statehood. The comparative analysis of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton clearly illustrates the evolutionary path of urbanization in ancient Bactria. Sopollitepa reflects the initial phase, characterized by the formation of stable agricultural settlements and the gradual development of specialized economic activities. Jarqoton, in contrast, represents a more mature stage in which urban planning, administrative organization, religious institutions, and social stratification had reached a significantly higher level of development. Therefore, these two sites can be regarded as successive stages of a single historical process that led to the emergence of urban civilization in Another important conclusion is that the development of early urban culture in Central Asia was closely connected with the region's favorable environmental and geographical conditions. The river valleys and fertile lands of southern Uzbekistan provided suitable opportunities for irrigated agriculture, which became the economic foundation of social progress. At the same time, the strategic location of the region facilitated contacts with neighboring civilizations, including those of ancient Iran, Afghanistan, and Mesopotamia. These interactions contributed to the exchange of technologies, cultural traditions, and economic practices,

accelerating local development while preserving distinctive regional characteristics. The archaeological materials also demonstrate that social differentiation became increasingly visible during the Bronze Age. Variations in housing structures, burial practices, and material wealth indicate the emergence of social hierarchies and unequal access to resources. Such developments suggest that leadership structures and administrative institutions were gradually taking shape. Consequently, the Bronze Age communities of southern Uzbekistan can be viewed as important precursors to the more advanced political formations that emerged in Central Asia during the Iron Age. The significance of Sopollitepa and Jarqoton extends beyond the history of Uzbekistan. These sites contribute to broader scholarly discussions regarding the origins of urbanization and civilization across Eurasia. For many years, early cities were primarily associated with regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley. However, archaeological discoveries in Central Asia have demonstrated that this region also played a major role in the development of complex societies. The evidence from Sopollitepa and Jarqoton confirms that Central Asia possessed its own independent traditions of urban growth, social organization, and cultural development. Furthermore, the study of these sites enhances our understanding of the cultural heritage of the Uzbek people and the historical roots of statehood in the region. The achievements of Bronze Age communities in agriculture, architecture, craftsmanship, and social organization laid the foundations for later civilizations that flourished in Central Asia. Their legacy can be traced through subsequent historical periods and remains an important part of the cultural identity of the region today.

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