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***SILK ROAD – CENTRAL ASIA’S HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
HERITAGE: ANCIENT MERV***

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Abstract

This paper gives an outlook of Ancient Merv which is the oldest and better preserved of the oasis cities along the Silk Road.

The body of the paper is dedicated to detailed information of geographical position of Merv, history of Merv oasis: the Bronze Age, the Hellenistic city and the Han Dynasty, the Arab occupation and influence, the dominance of Islam - the Turk and Mongol control.

The concluding section underlines the importance of the archeological site of Ancient Merv.

Key-words: Silk Road, Central Asia, cultural heritage, historical heritage, Ancient Merv, Seljuk dynasty, Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar

1. Geographical position of Merv

The oasis of Merv is situated at the crossroads of the southeast-northwest route from the Afghan mountain towards the lowlands of Karakum, in the inland delta of the Amu Daria

[Oxus]. Merv oasis is the largest and well-watered area situated in the middle of the Karakum Desert. It is a natural place for routes from Iran towards Transoxiana - the Silk Road, to stop. Merv is situated at the junction of important routes from the northwest-southeast from Indus and towards northwest route to Nishapur [Nichapur], and southeast to Bukhara [Buhara] and Samarkand. (See picture 1).



Picture 1 **Silk Road map**

2. A short history of the oasis of Merv

2.1. The Bronze Age

The oasis of Merv is well-known by a series of urban centres since the 3rd millennium BC. There are traces of the earliest Bronze Age (2500-1200 BC) located in the north of the oasis, where the Amu Darya river came to the surface and its waters could easily be used. In time, the development of irrigation technique moved the centre towards south. Around 500 BC, on the east side of the oasis, it was developed the historic urban centre of Merv, and its position had advantage of routes coming from east. Today, there is a series of walls and the oldest of these walls named Erk Kala (as it is known today) is attested in written sources from the Achaemenian period (519-331 BC), on the famous inscription of Darius the Great. The Erk-Kala is the oldest city ruin, and nowadays it looks as a large hill.

2.2. The Hellenistic city and the Han Dynasty

The Merv oasis was a part of the empire of Alexander the Great, and the city, as Pliny the Elder suggested in his Natural History (VI, 16-17) was named "Alexandria". Today, the

old city is identified with Erk Kala and Gyaur Kala (See picture 2). On Gyaur-Kala only some walls remain.



Picture 2

The remains of Alexandria city during the empire of Alexander the Great

In the year 97 A.D. as part of a military expedition against barbarians harassing the trade routes known as the Silk Road, Han Dynasty led an entirely infantry through Merv. From this military expedition resulted the exodus of some ancient Xiongnu tribes that migrated further west into European lands. One of these descendants are known as the Huns, of whom, Atilla was the most well-known.

2.3 The Arab occupation and influence

As the study of numismatics shows the Sassanid Ardashir I (220-240 A.D.) took Merv, and there was a long unbroken direct Sassanian rule four centuries documented from a series of coins originally minted at Merv. In that period Merv was home of practitioners of a wide range of different religions beside the official Zoroastrianism.

2.4. The dominance of Islam. Turk and Mongol control

Islam became dominant with the death of the last Sassanian king, Yazdigird III in 651, with the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuk Empire, consisted of a succession of dynasties, and all were Turkic. The Great Seljuks seem to have created a unified culture from India to Egypt. The

medieval city of the Seljuk developed to the west of Gyaur Kala. The city was walled by Sultan Malikshah (1072-1092), and further developments of the city to the north and south were also walled by Sultan Sanjar (1118-1157). The city was the capital of the Great Seljuk Empire (11th-13th centuries), and was one of the principal cities of its period. Its famous libraries attracted scholars from all over the Islamic world, including the poet-mathematician Omar Khayyam and the geographer Yaqut al Hamavi. One of the most impressive buildings that stand for Seljuk period is the mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (See picture 3).



Picture 3

The Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (1118-1157)

The Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar can be seen from distance, from different corners of Merv. The Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (1118-1157) has been almost completely restored with the help of Turkish government. The art of the Seljuk period is one of the difficult topics to be discussed because of the wealth of examples and lack of synchronization related to technical and regional developments

Among the surviving buildings are the remains of a 7th century fortress known as the Kız Kala (See pictures 4) but the city was totally destroyed by Jenghiz Khan in 1221.



Picture 4

The remains of Kız Kala

3. Conclusions

The cities of Merv oasis once had considerable influence over the civilizations of Central Asia and Iran. Today they are one of the most important archeological sites well preserved and protected by UNESCO as a cultural World Heritage Site.

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