

The steppes of Kazakhstan and Transoxiana in the late XV century

By the end of the fifteenth century, Timurid power in Transoxiana had split into a number of principalities ruled by independent and semi-independent sultans (princes or chiefs). Tashkent had passed into the hands of the Chingissid Yunus Khan of Moghulistan, and, following his death, to his son Sultan Makhmud Khan. Khwarazm was only nominally subject to the ruler of Khurasan, Sultan Husayn (1469-1506), who had his seat at Herat. Such a situation encouraged internecine warfare, out of which tribal chiefs in the eastern parts of Dash-i Kipchak steppes, extending to the north of Khwarazm and the lower reaches of the Syr Darya began increasingly to seek power and influence for themselves.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the eastern Dasht-i Kipchak was occupied by nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic and Turkified Mongol tribes ruled by khans (sovereigns) who claimed descent from Shayban, son of Johi (a son of Genghis Khan). One of the best best-known rulers of what became a steppe empire was Abulhair Khan (1428-69). His realm included various cities along the Syr Darya, such as Sygnak, Suzak, Arkuk, Uzgend and Yasi (renamed Turkestan) which were ruled by the khan's deputies, known as sultans. The armies led by Abulhair Khan formed a powerful and highly maneuverable cavalry, to which individual warring Timurid princes appealed for support on more than one occasion. Some of them hoped to seize power in Samarkand with the help of Abulhair Khan; others attempted to annex neighboring lands to the territory already under their control.

In 1451, with the help of Abulhair Khan Timurid ruler Abu Sacid (1451-69) was enthroned in Samarkand; and as a token of his gratitude he arranged to give Rabica Sultan, the daughter of the late Mirza Ulugh Bek, in marriage with Abulhair Khan.

Three years later, Abulhair Khan helped Abu Sacid's adversary Mukhammad Juqi and in 1468, he helped the ruler of Otrar, who had revolted against Abu Sacid. In 1468, Sultan Husayn arrived in Abulhair Khan's camp, soliciting military support in the struggle for Timurid's throne in Khurasan. However, then khan was stricken with palsy and was unable to meet his request for aid.

Following the death Abulhair Khan, a struggle for power ensued, which led to the break-up of the steppe empire into separate units ruled by sultans and tribal chiefs. Increasingly prominent among these was Muhammad Shayban, the son of Shah Budak Sultan, the eldest son Abulhair Khan. He had a gift for political intrigue and military strategy, and was a fairly well-educated man with a taste for sedentary life. Before his conquest of Transoxiana he had visited the region a number of times and was well acquainted with conditions there.

The inhabitants of the steppes already had close economic, ethnic and cultural ties with the settled population of Transoxiana. There was a fairly brisk trade conducted between them: the sedentary inhabitants needed livestock products, while the nomads required agricultural produce and also various items made by urban craftsmen. This interaction between nomadic and sedentary cultures was reinforced by ethnic links. Intermarriages between Timurid rulers and families of the steppe chiefs were quite frequent. As noted above, one of the wives of Abulhair Khan was the daughter of Mirza Ulugh Bek. The mother of Timurid Sultan Ali, who was deposed from the throne of Samarkand by Mukhamad Shaybani was Zuhra Begum, a woman from the steppes; Sultan Kasim was a son-in-law of Timurid prince Badicu'l Zaman and one of the wives of Shaybanid Ubaydullah Khan was Kazakh Khanum, the daughter of Kazakh Kasim Khan.

Used materials:

Zhanat Kundakbayeva, "History of Kazakhstan in the late medieval period of the XIII-the first third of the XVIII centuries"