

Material and spiritual culture of Kazakh people in XVI-XVII centuries

Herding, farming and urban life

Nomadic and semi-nomadic herding was the principal economic activity of the Kazakhs. The animals reared were mainly sheep, horses, camels and cattle. The meat and milk of sheep served as food and their skins and wools were used in making clothes, footwear, vessels and many other objects of daily use. Horse-breeding was no less important.

Hayday Dughl aptly quotes the Kazakh khan Qasim's words: "We are men of the desert, and here there is nothing of riches or formalities. Our most costly possessions are our horses, our favorite food their flesh, our most enjoyable drink their milk and the products of it. Kazakh pastoralists often moved seasonally with their herds of animals from one location to another to make the best use of available pastures. Wheeled transport was widely used, though horseback was the normal mode of travel. Because fodder was not usually put by for the winter, there were mass deaths of animals (known as zhuts), if deep snow covered the steppes for too long or there was a prolonged drought. Nomadic life was thus even more subject to natural disasters than settled life. In addition to stock-breeding the Kazakhs were also involved in farming and enjoyed a settled mode of life; others lived in towns. From the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century, life in the Syr Darya region and Semirechye became largely sedentary. The development of towns and settlements, and of agriculture itself, was greatly supported by exchanges with nomads and semi-nomads".

The town of Sygnak retained its importance as the major economic and political center of the eastern Dasht-I Kipchak. The town finally came under the permanent authority of the Kazakh khans in 1598. Nomadic stock-breeders came to Sygnak, driving their beasts before them and delivering the produce of animal husbandry and furs. Such valuable goods as "fur coats of sable and squirrel, taut bows, arrows of white birch, silk cloth and other costly wares" were also brought to Dygnak to be sold.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the city of Turkestan became the most important center of southern Kazakhstan. Ibn Ruzbihan calls Yasi "the capital of the rulers of Turkestan". Written sources contain references to many settlements around Yasi (modern Turkestan) that together formed a large farming oasis, especially the settlements of Ikan, Karnak, Karachuk and Suri. Ishim Khan made Turkestan his capital, a place at which much of the cultural and political life of the entire Syr Darya strip was centered. The Kazakh khans, like the previous

rulers of West Turkestan, also attempted to maintain the role of the city as a center of Islamic learning and rites.

Sauran retained its importance as an urban center. It was one of the strongest fortresses of the region. To quote Ibn Ruzbih an again, “the town is surrounded by a high wall, which cannot be rapidly taken by armed force and around it there is an unassailable moat”.

Like other towns in southern Kazakhstan, Sauran was the center of a farming district from which it obtained its food supplies, apart from being a grain exporter; it was reputed around 1520 for its “incalculable wealth” and “the comforts of the vilayet”.

During the final third of the fifteenth century and early in the sixteenth century, Otrar remained one of the region’s major administrative centers. Artefacts unearthed during excavations at Otrar in recent years point to the prosperity of the town and surrounding farming district in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the late Middle Ages Sayram was at the heart of a densely populated agricultural district at the junction of the trade routes from Transoxania to the Dasht-I Kipchak and Semirechye. There are references in our texts to other towns in the Syr Darya region that were also surrounded by farming districts, such as Suzak, Arquq, Uzgend and Ak-Kurgan.

Used materials:

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