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Islam and the Oghuz in the Aral Region (on studies of the Jankent Settlement)

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Abstract. The work covers current issues of the historical period from the mid-7th to the mid-10th century. The article provides a brief historical overview of the period when the Oghuz state functioned, which played a key role in the process of Islamization of Turkic tribes throughout Central Asia and in the territory of modern Kazakhstan. The work aimed to demonstrate, using sources as an example, the processes of successful unification of ethnically diverse groups of nomadic and semi-nomadic populations, with different cultural and religious traditions, into a complex political structure. The territorial scope of the study covered a significant portion of these tribes, who settled and inhabited the fertile banks of the ancient Syr Darya River, moving from an exclusively nomadic way of life to a more sedentary, agricultural and trading activity. The discussion section of the work characterizes the geopolitical landscape of the region, which radically changed in 750 AD, when Arab troops defeated the Chinese armies, occupied many strategically important cities, and established strong Islamic rule in the territory of southern Kazakhstan. The paper demonstrates that this historical event marked a crucial turning point in the region's religious and cultural development, as vast territories came under the direct influence of Islam. The discussion section addresses questions regarding the integration of major urban centres in southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye into the broader Islamic ecumene, which contributed to the formation of distinct ethnoreligious communities. These groups, mostly composed of Turkic peoples who had converted to Islam, became known as "Turkmen" – literally meaning "Turk-like" – reflecting their special status as Islamic converts who retained their Turkic ethnicity and cultural characteristics. The authors also emphasize historical processes in their discussion that point to gradual religious transformations rather than an instantaneous mass conversion to Islam. The authors analyzed sources that described the lands located to the east as “countries of war and unbelief,” emphasizing the ambiguity of religious boundaries and ongoing clashes between Islamized and non-Islamized populations. In the concluding section, the authors express the opinion that the adoption of Islam by a significant portion of the Oghuz population had significant political consequences. Their active participation in protracted wars for control of Transoxania (Mawarannahr) during the gradual disintegration of the Samanid state in the 10th century led to significant demographic shifts and a mass exodus from traditional areas of residence. The authors, summing up the results of the study, concluded that, despite the mention of Dzhankent in historical sources in later periods, archaeological research data indicate that the main urban settlement actually ceased to exist by the end of the 10th century, marking the end of an important chapter in the history of urban development in Central Asia.

Keywords: Oghuz State, Islamization, Central Asia, Turkoman, Jankent, Samanid State, Arab Conquest

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Ислам и огузы Приаралья (по материалам городища Джанкент)

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Аннотация. В работе освещаются актуальные вопросы исторического периода с середины VII до середины X века. В статье дается краткий исторический экскурс периода, когда функционировало Огузское государство, которое играло ключевую роль в процессе исламизации тюркских племён по всей Центральной Азии и на территории современного Казахстана. Целью работы стало показать на примере источников процессы успешного объединение этнически разнородных групп кочевого и полукочевого населения с различными культурными и религиозными традициями в сложную политическую структуру. Территориальные рамки исследования охватила значительную часть этих племён, которая обживала и осела вдоль плодородных берегов древней реки Сырдарья, переходя от исключительно кочевого образа жизни к более оседлой, земледельческо-торговой деятельности. В дискуссионной части работы характеризуется геополитическая картина региона, кардинально изменившаяся в 750 году н.э., когда арабские войска нанесли поражение китайским армиям, заняли множество стратегически важных городов и установили прочную исламскую власть на территории Южного Казахстана. В работе показано, что данное историческое события стало важнейшим поворотным моментом в религиозном и культурном развитии региона, так как обширные территории оказались под прямым влиянием ислама. В разделе «Обсуждение» поднимаются вопросы касательно интеграции крупных городских центров Южного Казахстана и Семиречья в более широкую исламскую ойкумену, которая способствовала формированию отдельных этнорелигиозных общностей. Эти группы, в основном состоявшие из тюркских народов, принявших ислам, стали известны как «туркмены» — что буквально означает «похожий на тюрка» — отражая их особый статус исламских неофитов, сохранивших при этом свою тюркскую этническую принадлежность и культурные особенности. Также в обсуждении авторы акцентируют внимание на исторические процессы, указывающие на постепенность религиозных преобразований, а не на мгновенное массовое обращение в ислам. Авторы проанализировали источники, в которых содержалось описание земли, расположенной восточнее, как «страны войны и неверия», подчёркивая неоднозначность религиозных границ и продолжающиеся столкновения между исламизированными и неисламизированными населением. В заключительной части авторы высказывают мнение, что принятие ислама значительной частью огузского населения имело важные политические последствия. Их активное участие в затяжных войнах за контроль над

Мавераннахром (Трансоксанией) в период постепенного распада Саманидского государства в X веке привело к значительным демографическим сдвигам и массовому исходу населения из традиционных мест проживания. Авторы, подводя итоги исследования, пришли к выводу, что, несмотря на упоминание в исторических источниках Джанкента и в более поздние периоды, данные археологических исследований свидетельствуют, что основное городское поселение фактически прекратило своё существование к концу X века, ознаменовав завершение важной главы в истории градостроительства Центральной Азии.
Ключевые слова: Огузский каганат; исламизация; Центральная Азия; Сырдарья; Туркоман; Джанкент; государство Саманидов; арабское завоевание

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Ислам және Арал маңы оғыздары (Жанкент қалашығының материалдары бойынша)

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Андатпа. Мақалада 7 ғасырдың ортасынан 10 ғасырдың ортасына дейінгі тарихи кезеңнің өзекті мәселелерін қамтиды. Ғылыми еңбекте бүкіл Орталық Азиядағы және қазіргі Қазақстан аумағындағы түркі тайпаларының исламдану үрдісінде шешуші рөл атқарған Оғыз мемлекеті қызмет еткен кезеңге қысқаша тарихи шолу жасалады. Жұмыстың мақсаты дереккөздерді мысалға ала отырып, әртүрлі мәдени және діни дәстүрлері бар көшпелі және жартылай көшпелі халықтың этникалық әртүрлі топтарының күрделі саяси құрылымға сәтті бірігу процестерін көрсету болды. Зерттеудің аумақтық ауқымы ежелгі Сырдарияның құнарлы жағасын қоныстандырып, мекендеген, тек көшпелі өмір салтынан анағұрлым отырықшы, егіншілік және сауда қызметіне көшкен осы тайпалардың едәуір бөлігін қамтыды. Жұмыстың талқылау бөлімінде біздің заманымыздың 750 жылы араб әскерлері Қытай әскерлерін талқандап, көптеген стратегиялық маңызды қалаларды басып алып, Оңтүстік Қазақстан аумағында күшті ислам билігі орнаған кезде түбегейлі өзгерген аймақтың геосаяси көрінісі сипатталады. Еңбекте бұл тарихи оқиғаның өлкенің діни және мәдени дамуындағы үлкен бетбұрыс кезеңі болғаны, өйткені ұлан-ғайыр аумақтар ислам дінінің тікелей ықпалына түскені көрсетілген. Талқылау бөлімінде Оңтүстік Қазақстан мен Жетісудың ірі қала орталықтарының жекелеген этноконфессиялық қауымдастықтың қалыптасуына ықпал еткен кең ислам қауымдастығының бірігуіне қатысты мәселелер көтеріледі. Негізінен исламды қабылдаған түркі халықтарынан

құралған бұл топтар өздерінің түркі этникалық және мәдени ерекшеліктерін сақтап қалған ислам дінін қабылдағандар ретіндегі ерекше мәртебесін білдіретін «түрікмендер» деп аталды, яғни сөзбе-сөз «түрік тәрізді» дегенді білдіреді. Сондай-ақ авторлар өз пікірталастарында исламды бірден жаппай қабылдауды емес, бірте-бірте діни өзгерістерді көрсететін тарихи процестерді атап көрсетеді. Авторлар шығыста орналасқан жерлерді «соғыс және имансыздық елдері» деп сипаттайтын дереккөздерді талдап, діни шекаралардың анық еместігін және исламданған және исламданбаған халықтар арасындағы қақтығыстарды атап өтті. Қорытынды бөлімде авторлар оғыз халқының едәуір бөлігінің ислам дінін қабылдауының елеулі саяси салдары болды деген пікірін білдіреді. Олардың 10 ғасырда Саманилер мемлекетінің бірте-бірте ыдырауы кезінде Трансоксанияны (Мауараннахр) бақылау үшін ұзаққа созылған соғыстарға белсенді қатысуы айтарлықтай демографиялық өзгерістерге және дәстүрлі қоныстанған аймақтардан жаппай кетуге әкелді. Авторлар зерттеу нәтижелерін қорытындылай келе, кейінгі кезеңдерде тарихи деректерде Жанкент туралы айтылғанына қарамастан, археологиялық зерттеу деректері негізгі қала қонысының 10 ғасырдың аяғында іс жүзінде өмір сүруін тоқтатып, Орталық Азиядағы қала құрылысы тарихындағы маңызды тараудың аяқталуын білдіреді деген қорытындыға келді.
Түйін сөздер: Оғыз қағанаты; исламдандыру; Орталық Азия; Сырдария; Түрікмендер; Жанкент; Саманидтер; араб экспансиясы

Introduction

From the mid-7th century to the mid-10th century, a powerful nomadic community named *Mufazat al-Ghuzz,* led by the Oghuz, existed across the steppes of the southeastern Aral region and western Kazakhstan, extending to the Volga River. During this period, the State united various ethnically diverse nomadic and semi-nomadic population groups, most of whom had settled in the basin of the ancient Syr Darya River. The three-century-long history of the Oghuz people is full of traces of their unique internal structure and the active foreign policy of this steppe state, which competed with strong states like the Khazars in the west. This nomadic community, neighboring the Samanid state in the south and other Turkic states in the east – such as the Karluks, the Kara-Khanids, the Kimak State, and the Kipchaks – underwent significant upheavals.

In addition, the adoption of Islam by a portion of the population and the emergence of a new ethnic group known as the Turkmens, as part of the Oghuz state, are among the significant historical facts of this period (Barthold 1968: 17-192; Agadzhanov 1969: 296; Garustovich and Ivanov 1939: 212; Zaporozhets 2011: 295). During this process, the Oghuz succeeded in changing their settlement areas twice. Their ancestral homeland is known to have been the lands of Semirechye (Zhetysu). However, in a later period, due to pressure from the Karluk State, the nomadic communities migrated to the Syr Darya and the Aral Sea basin, and shortly thereafter expanded further south into the agricultural areas of Central and Minor Asia, as well as Iran and Iraq. They also moved westward and reached the steppes north of the Black Sea.

The partial adoption of Islam by the Oghuz Turks was far more than a simple religious conversion; it represented a fundamental reconfiguration of their cultural identity and geopolitical orientation. Oghuz groups that embraced Islam established closer political and cultural ties with the Abbasid Caliphate and other Islamic polities, fostering new channels for diplomatic engagement and strengthening transregional trade networks.

This religious transformation also carried notable military implications. By aligning themselves with the broader Islamic world, Muslim Oghuz warriors gained the ideological and legal framework to participate in jihad campaigns alongside other Muslim forces. Such participation not only enhanced their legitimacy within the Islamic political sphere but also extended their territorial influence and reinforced their status as a rising power in the region.

These migrations demonstrate the Oghuz's adaptability to changing social and geographical conditions and to maintain their nomadic lifestyle (Barthold 1965: 711; Tolstov 1947: 55-102; Agadzhanov 1973: 166). The living spaces of these nomads did not just change; their relations with surrounding peoples were also disrupted. This created the necessity for the Oghuz to reconstruct their place in the social structure of each new region. Migration movements not only resulted in changes in geographical position but also brought about significant transformations in cultural and social dynamics. In every region they migrated to, the Oghuz had to enter into new and unique interactions with the local communities and adjust their own social structure according to these dynamics. In this context, the continuous need for adaptation arising from their nomadic lifestyle kept the Oghuz in a dynamic position both geographically and culturally.

Methodology, methods and materials

Degree of study of the problem.

This work reflects the studies of leading scholars from Central Asia and Kazakhstan dedicated to the issues of pre-Islamic beliefs and the Islamization of Turkic peoples. Notable among them are V.V. Barthold, S.P. Tolstov, S.G. Agadzhanov, K.M. Baipakov, O. Karayev, and other scholars whose research is directly related to this topic. Their works have laid the foundation for further exploration of the processes of religious transformation and culture within Turkic-speaking societies in the region.

Scientific approaches and methodology of the study.

The conceptual and methodological basis of the research relies on the use of a complex of interdisciplinary approaches and methods. The analysis of the tradition of venerating pre-Islamic beliefs and the process of the Islamization of the Turks involves considering this topic not only from a cultural perspective but also with the involvement of archaeological, historical, and ethnographic data. Special attention is paid to the study of ritual-mythological complexes, which allows for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of religious practices and their transformation during the process of Islamization.

Written Sources

In the works of medieval historians, geographers, and travelers, in addition to the cultural and historical processes that occurred in this geography between the 9th and 12th centuries, there is also comprehensive information about the social relations, administrative systems, and daily life activities of the nomadic tribes located in the region. These written sources particularly reflect developments in the Eastern Aral Sea region during the period from the late 9th century to the 10th century. The earliest information about the Oghuz tribes, who gained strength along the borders of Khwarazm and Khorasan during this period, can be found in the works of Arabic-speaking geographers and historians. The southwestern neighbors of the Oghuz referred to

them by different names; for example, Arab authors called the Oghuz tribes "Guz" (al-Ya'qubi 1939: 149; al-Istakhri 1939: 167–168; Ibn Fadlan 1939: 159). During the reign of Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the Oghuz were referred to as "Uz" (Bogryanarodny 1991: 155-157).

The first documentation of the term "Guz" is found in the work titled *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* by Ibn Khordadbeh, who lived between 820 and 912. Ibn Khordadbeh listed Pechenegs, Kimaks, Kipchaks, and Guz among the Turkic tribes and used this term (Ibn Khordadbeh 1939:144). In the geographical work *Kitab al-Buldan* ("Book of Countries") by Arab historian and geographer al-Ya'qubi, there is information about the regions inhabited by the Turks. According to al-Yaqubi, "Turkestan and the Turks are divided into various peoples and states, such as the Karluks, Toquzghuz, Turgesh, Kimaks, and Guz. Each Turkic tribe has its own state, and some are in a continuous state of conflict with others" (al-Ya'qubi 1939: 149).

According to Mahmud al-Kashgari, the Oghuz are defined as one of the Turkic tribes and are generally known as Turkmens. They are composed of 22 different clans *(batn).* Each clan has its own signs and symbols used to identify and differentiate their animals. The primary lineage among the Oghuz is called *Kınık.* This family produced rulers during Mahmud al-Kashgari's time (Mahmud al-Kashgari 1939: 309).

In al-Istakhri's work, detailed information is provided about the Oghuz tribes living in the Syr Darya valley and the Shash region. According to al-Istakhri, "The borders of the Guz land include the territories of the Khazars, Kimaks, Karluks, and Bulgars, and also comprise the borders of Muslim countries. The area stretching from Jurjan to Farab and Isfijab includes the living spaces of these Oghuz tribes" (al-Istakhri 1939: 167). According to al-Istakhri, "All the borders of Transoxiana extend from Khwarazm to the Guz-Turkic neighboring region of Isfijab, and these areas are among those frequently experiencing hostilities" (al-Istakhri 1939: 178).

Alongside the works of 10th-century Arabic writers, the travel notes of explorers have also survived to the present day. Among such sources, one of the most prominent is the work titled *Notes (Zapiska)* by Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who served the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir in 921–922 and was sent as an envoy to the Volga Bulgars. The observations and notes Ibn Fadlan made during his journey to the Volga River are a significant source about the cultural and geographical structure of the period (Kovalevsky 1956: 348). His statement about his arrival in Oghuz lands is as follows: "... he encountered the Turkish tribe called al-Guzziyya. This community typically adopted a nomadic lifestyle; their dwellings were usually made of felt, and the members of al-Guzziyya could live either a settled or nomadic life" (Ibn Fadlan 1939: 159). Ibn Fadlan's statement regarding the religious practices of the Oghuz is as follows: "From time to time, among the Oghuz, I would hear this expression: 'There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.' This gives the impression that they imitate Muslims, but lack genuine faith. If one of them is afflicted by a calamity or trouble, he raises his head to the sky and says 'Ber Tengre!' This expression means 'By the One God!' in Turkish, where *ber* means 'one' and *tengri* means 'god' in their language. As a rule in Oghuz life, when they hear a Muslim say 'Glory be to Allah' or 'There is no god but Allah', they themselves also repeat these expressions. As observed in the early 10th century, this reflects the beginning of the Islamization process among the Oghuz."

Arab historian and geographer al-Masudi, in his work *Kitab Muruj al-Dhahab* written in 947, presents the following statement about the physical features of the Turks: "they are the shortest

and have the smallest eyes" (al-Masudi 1939: 166). According to al-Masudi, it is stated that the inhabitants of the region known as New Town (Jankent) were Muslims.

While some writers describe the Oghuz nomadic "wandering" lifestyle, other sources emphasize the existence of large Guz cities, indicating a settled life and a distinct culture. According to 11th-century writer al-Idrisi: "... there are many Guz cities, stretching one after another to the north and east" *(Materials on the History of Turkmens and Turkmenistan 1939: 220).* Medieval writers frequently mentioned Guz cities such as Sauran, Sütkent, Sighnaq, Balaj Ordu, Akhsiket, Farab, Yesi, and the cities in Semirechye (Zhetysu), also naming other cities in the middle Syr Darya region.

According to the Iranian historian Ibn Hawqal, "New Settlement is a city inhabited by Muslims and is also the capital of the Guz province" (Ibn Hawqal 1939: 184). The Oghuz *Yabgu* resided in this city only during the winter months. Ibn Hawqal also mentions two other cities named Jend and Khora, along with the city referred to as New Village: "The nearby cities of Jend and Khora are also inhabited by Muslim populations and are under the control of the Oghuz. Among these three places, the largest is New Settlement, which is ten days from Khwarazm and twenty days from Farab."In the anonymously written work *Hudud al-'Alam,* there is also information about the cities of New Settlement, Jend, and Khora: "Jend, Hare or Khware (Khora according to Ibn Hawqal), Deh-i Naw (New Village according to Ibn Hawqal), are three cities located along the Syr Darya (Chach) River. They are ten marches from Khwarazm and twenty from Farab. The Guz prince generally resides in this Deh-i Naw during the winter" (Excerpts from Hudud al-Alam 1939: 217).

Another significant source for the study of the Oghuz is found in the historical records of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, which contain occasional references to northern Turkic tribes – some of which are regarded as direct precursors to the Oghuz. Although often indirect in detail, these records provide valuable evidence for reconstructing the early migratory routes from the Altai Mountains and the Semirechye region. Placing the Oghuz within this broader geographic and historical framework situates them firmly in the enduring tradition of steppe empires. It also highlights the pivotal role of intercultural exchanges – political, economic, and cultural – in shaping the formative stages of Oghuz socio-political organization and identity.

Archaeological Research

New materials obtained from the Jankent settlement provide an opportunity to reassess the Islamization process of a specific Oghuz Turkic group. During archaeological excavations conducted in the Shahristan area of the city of Jankent (this part of the city comprises its core, including commercial and residential areas, religious and other public structures), findings were uncovered that confirm the presence of Muslims in the city and indicate a transformation in the religious views of the local population. In addition, a shift was observed in the architectural and planning principles of residential buildings in Excavation Area No.1. It was recorded that after the initial construction period, buildings were rebuilt and renovated. In these living areas, the central focal point – a sanctuary built with protomes in the shape of a ram's head – disappeared. The findings related to this object have been briefly described (Zilivinskaya et al. 2011: 27-39; Zilivinskaya 2013: 100-107; Darmenov and Tazhekeev 2018: 109-122). The best-preserved hearth complex is located in Room No. 6 on the western side. The hearth measures 1.7 x 1.1

meters and is constructed from mudbrick blocks placed along the edges. The hearth is oriented along a meridional (north–south) axis. Near the southern wall of the hearth, a mudbrick stand has been placed. On the northern side, close to this structure, a stylized ceramic "hearth stand" depicting a two-headed ram was found. Similar hearths have been unearthed in early medieval cities such as Kesken-Kuyuk-Kala, Sortobe 1 (Darmenov and Tazhekeev 2018: 109-122), and other settlements of the Syr Darya basin, as well as in other contemporary Oghuz monuments around the Aral Sea region (Smagulov 2019: 61-74).

In Excavation Area No.1 of the Jankent settlement, also known as the "Manor" living complex, approximately two dozen copper coins belonging to the Samanid state were discovered. These coins are significant archaeological evidence indicating the connection between the settlement and the outside world (Arzhantseva et al. 2010: 162). All the Samanid coins are contemporary, dating back to the period of the examples found. They were minted at the Bukhara mint and correspond to the years 343–350 AH (954-961 CE) and 347–348 AH (958-960 CE). These coins represent important historical evidence emphasizing Jankent's economic and trade relations with the Samanid state.

The most frequently encountered archaeological material in the area is ceramics. The ceramic collection includes items inscribed in Arabic. Among these are examples such as red clay vessels coated with red slip and polished at the top, made using molds. In addition, the ceramic collection includes glazed tableware imported from the southern regions of Central Asia (Amirgalina and Bilalov 2022: 142–156). All glazed ceramics were made by carefully mixing red clay rich in iron and shaping them on a high-quality potter's wheel. Most of the ceramics that include Arabic inscriptions or the inscriptions themselves were found in the upper two building layers of Excavation Area No. 1, which corresponds to the residential sector.

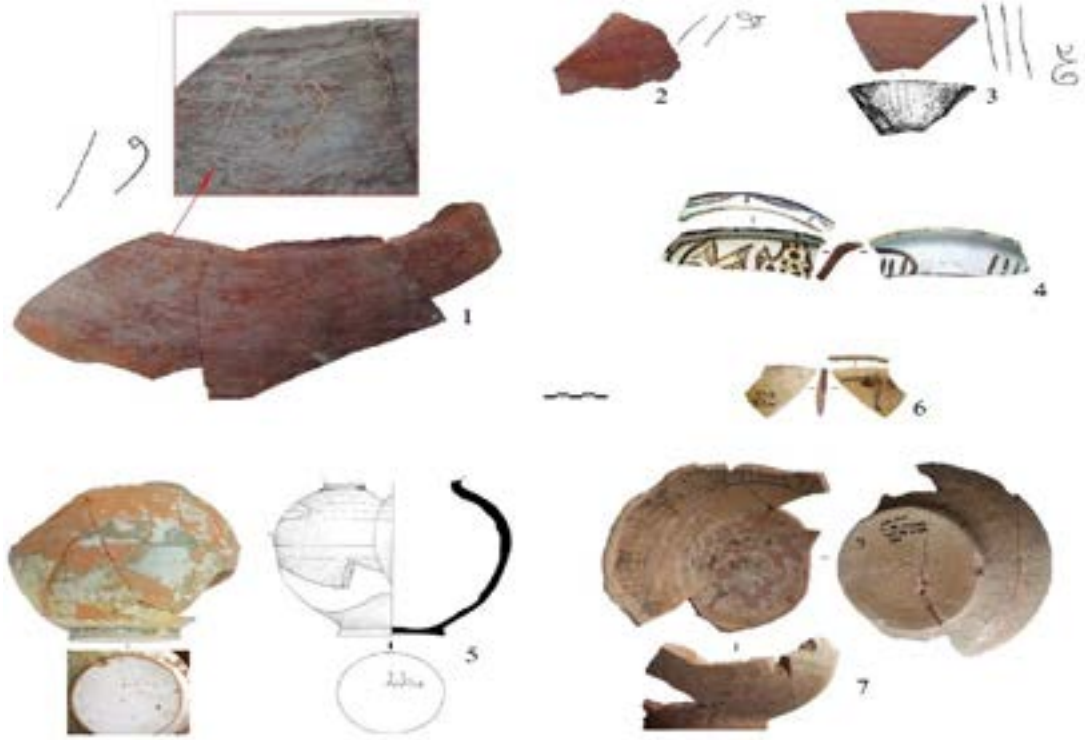


Fig. 1. Photo and Drawing (G. Amirgalina)

The writings on the plates were either engraved on the fired surface or applied as paint on a plastered background, bearing phrases such as those related to *Abd al-Malik I ibn Nuh* of the Samanids.

Among the red clay vessels, there are two incised marks representing the Arabic letters "" (alif) and "" (waw), engraved after the firing of molded *hum* fragments (Figure 1, 1).

On the outer surface of a small vessel fragment (probably a *hima* or jug), there are two marks (possibly Arabic letters) engraved after firing, aligned along a horizontal line. These marks are placed along the same horizontal line and likely represent Arabic letters. These signs include two parallel lines resembling the Arabic letter *alif,* and a character resembling the Arabic letter *ʿayn*, consisting of two lines with an additional line below (Figure 1, 2).

On another fragment from the neck of a molded jar, three parallel lines along the burnt inner surface, and a clearly written Arabic letter "" (ʿayn) along with a possible Arabic *alif* (?) are visible (Figure 1, 3).

The most remarkable in this collection is an inscription in Arabic letters carved into the disk-shaped base of a vessel with a spherical body and missing neck and handles. Most likely, this inscription belongs to the body of a glazed jug. Due to the ambiguity in the writing, determining the exact combination of letters is difficult. According to personal evaluations by experts in the Arabic language, the probable translation of this inscription is "min dilda", which may mean "a thousand coins" (?) (Figure 1, 5). The vessel is coated with a white engobe covered with a colorless transparent glaze.

On the inner surface of one of the glazed spherical table bowls, there is a panel containing Arabic inscription elements. In this context, a decoration in the shape of a six-pointed star is applied in the center using manganese pigment on a white engobe background. Between the rays, round stamps are also present. In the center of the star, faint lines filled with dots can be observed. Along the wide band inside the bowl, there is a decorative element imitating an Arabic inscription in Kufic calligraphy or Kufic style (Figure 1, 7).

A wall fragment of a bowl with white slip and transparent glaze contains Arabic inscription elements painted in dark blue pigment on the inner surface (Figure 1, 6). This inscription fragment bears a striking resemblance to two 10th-century bowls found on a ring tray in the Tashkent oasis (Nos 343, 348). The translation of the inscriptions on these bowls is: "Thenoblest of wealth is to renounce desires" and "Be patient before expressing (your thoughts)" (Ilyasova et al. 2016: 396–403).

Another example is represented by a bowl fragment decorated with Arabic inscriptions in Kufic style along the inner walls. This fragment belongs to a bowl of hemispherical shape with a sharply outward-curved rim and is completely coated with thick white slip. The inner surface of the bowl is decorated in brown and green paints over the engobe. The inscription elements are made of thick contour lines, surrounded by small and large dots (Figure 1, 4).

Discussion

It should be emphasized that the Islamic-world artifacts found in the Jankent settlement are associated with the upper first construction horizon, dating to the mid-19th century. However, historical sources indicate that the Oghuz first encountered the Islamic world much earlier – in the mid-8th century, while they were settled in the riverine regions of Semirechye. The first

Arabic detachment reached Talas, and in 809–810 CE (194 AH), the Arabs launched a campaign against the Kulan settlement. At the end of 893 CE (280 AH), the Samanid ruler Ismail ibn Ahmad conquered the city of Taraz and converted its inhabitants to Islam. The ruler of Taraz, facing difficulties, surrendered along with his retinue to the Samanid emir, and Taraz became property of the Muslims.

Internal rivalries among Turkic tribes for power in the Western Turkic State and the Oghuz tribes' defeat by the Karluks in the mid-8th century forced them to migrate to the lower reaches of the Syr Darya River. The earliest mention of the Oghuz state appears in late 9th and early 10th-century Arabic historical and geographical works. It appears that during this period, the state of the Syr Darya Yabgul, with borders extending south to Khwarezm and east from the Syr Darya river basin to the Semirechye region, took its final form.

According to Mehmed Neşri's Oghuzname, during the Abbasid Caliphate, after the death of Salur, Janak Khan, son of Tag Khan, ascended the throne under the title "Kara Khan." Janak Khan is one of the first Turkic rulers to convert to Islam. In 999 CE (300 AH), two thousand Turkic tents accepted Islam and were thereafter called "Turks" (Agadzhanov 1969: 132).

"Karahan" refers to the title of the Karluk leader Satuq Bughra Khan, who embraced Islam. According to Karši, Satuq accepted Islam during the reign of Samanid emir Abd al-Malik I ibn Nuh (954–961 CE). The legend of Satuq Bughra Khan's conversion and his killing of a pagan uncle reflects a story similar to that in the *Oghuzname:* like Satuq Bughra Khan, Oghuz Khan is said to have secretly converted to Islam and, by defeating a pagan relative in a fight, become ruler. O. Karayev notes that certain significant historical events in the Kara-Khanid state are reflected in the *Oghuzname,* for example, Oghuz Khan's campaigns in Central Asia, capturing Talas, Sayram, Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara – similar to the Kara-Khanids.

According to Abu'l-Ghazi, Kara Khan was born as the adoptive son of Oghuz ruler Mur-Yava Khan, and after his death, ascended to the throne as Guz Khan. He was followed by a succession of Bughra Khan, Kut Tigin, Arslan Khan, Il-Tegin, Osman, Asli Khan, Shiban Khan, Boran Khan, and Ali Khan. The genealogical records of the Turkmens show that the Oghuz became dependent on Karluk-Kara-Khanid rulers and remained so for a long time. S. Agadzhanov notes that considering the dynasty's history, records about the power of the Syr Darya Yabgul are complex and cannot be interpreted convincingly. According to Agadzhanov, the accession to power of the last Oghuz ruler, Ali Khan, did not occur until the late 19th century, in connection with Kara-Khanid incursions into Western Semirechye and Transoxiana. He writes: "In those days, the Oghuz lived on both banks of the Syr Darya near its mouth. The Mughals came; they frequently raided. Most were unable to resist and migrated to Urgench. Those who remained raised a khan named Ali. Ali had a small son named Kılıç-Arslan, nicknamed Shahmelik" (Kononov 1958: 66).

According to O. Karayev, the Kara-Khanids were hostile to the Seljuk-Turkish tribes west of Talas. He highlights the Seljuks' aid in the struggle against the Samanids: The Seljuks fled "with their tribe and subjects from the land of unbelievers to the land of Islam"; some settled near Samarkand and Bukhara, others near the city of Jend. This migration occurred in 961–962 CE (355 AH) and corresponds to the early 11th century.

Historical sources show that the work *Melikname* originated in the late 10th to early 11th century. The Oghuz-Seljuks played an active role in the struggle to seize Transoxiana among the Samanids and Kara-Khanids (Agadzhanov 1969: 180).

Archaeological findings indicate that the appearance of a Muslim population in the Jankent settlement is linked to the upper first construction horizon: during this period, hearth sanctuaries were largely dismantled or covered with rubble from residential areas. According to E. Zilivinskaya, under the influence of Islam, pre-Islamic cults withdrew from public life, restricting these rituals to families, and hearth sanctuaries were dismantled en masse. Additionally, residents destroyed sanctuaries and abandoned them as they left their homes, depriving them of sacred status (Zilivinskaya 2013: 107). As E. Smagulov notes, the destructive activities of Arabs and Muslims in conquered territories targeted especially the temples of the old religion and other places of worship, aiming to eliminate the old spiritual culture and its ideology (Smagulov 2004: 110). Archaeological evidence shows that in the 820s–840s CE, temples and sacred sites in the "Chash and Tarband region" were extensively destroyed, likely set on fire and demolished without military conflict. No evidence of military operations has been found; all major religious items were removed from the buildings.

K. M. Baipakov regarded "hearth sanctuaries" primarily as utilitarian installations. However, he noted that these sanctuaries also retained echoes of old meanings through their decorative designs and contained elements intertwined with ancestral cults linked to hearth worship (Baipakov 1990: 178–182; Baipakov and Ternovaya 2005: 236).

Coins minted in Bukhara under the Samanids, who ruled as Abbasid governors, complement our understanding of commerce and the development of ally-vassal relations. Historical sources mention that after the Oghuz-Seljuks captured Jend, they began to wage war on nearby Turkic peoples due to an annual tribute (haraç). The Seljuks refused to pay, demanding that the Muslim populace be exempt. The exact date of the Seljuk uprising and capture of Jend is uncertain, though it is reported to have occurred in 992 CE. Additionally, it is known that the Seljuk leader was buried in that region.

The Oghuz played a significant role in Samanid history: they served as both allies and subjects of the Samanid dynasty. Their support for Samanid rulers in Transoxiana during the late 10th to early 11th centuries is described in detail (Agadzhanov 1969: 179).

A hallmark of Muslim Turkic material culture was its distinction from pagan Turks. In the 10th century in Southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye, artistic metalwork decorated with Arabic inscriptions emerged. The inscriptions contain traditional prayers: on the upper left *[al-mulk lillah]* "power belongs to Allah"; on the right [al-'azama] "greatness"; bottom left [just *mulk]* "power"; and on the right *[barakah min Allah]* "a blessing from Allah" (reading by V. N. Nastich). This tradition continued into the Kara-Khanid era with the awarding of special donation belts bearing the inscription "Allah's Rank" (Nastich 1975: 97).

Numerous written sources from this period highlight donation belts as symbols of social loyalty, playing an important role in expressing wealth and power (East and Early Middle Ages in Eastern Turkestan 1995: 232). Iranian historian Abu'l-Fazl Muhammad ibn Hussein al-Bayhaqi, describing a reception at the emir's palace, explains the function of these belts in detail: "According to the account, each of the two thousand ghulams was equipped with horned caps and precious belts. Each ghulam's belt had ten pendants with silver knobs, a sword, a dagger, and an archer. They wore coats made of Shushtar silk and carried a bow and three arrows. Around the Suffa were about three hundred guards near the emir, adorned with even more valuable attire and gold-knobbed gilded belts. Some belts were decorated with semi-precious stones" (excerpt from Mas'ud's history).

Conclusion

The Oghuz tribes inhabiting the Aral Sea region, like other Turkic groups across Central Asia, became actively engaged in the broader historical trajectory of global religious expansion beginning in the ninth century. This period marked a critical juncture when major world religions – most notably Christianity, Buddhism, and especially Islam – exerted profound influence across the Eurasian steppe. Among these, Islam proved the most enduring and transformative force, fundamentally reshaping Turkic political structures, social organization, and cultural identity.

The process of Islamization brought the Oghuz into multifaceted relationships with the Muslim world, involving both cooperation and conflict. This was particularly evident during the territorial expansion and consolidation of Islamic polities in southern Kazakhstan. The conquest of key sedentary agricultural centers such as Taraz, Shash (modern Tashkent), Otrar, Sighnaq, and Ilaq illustrates this transformation. These urban and economic hubs became focal points of Islamic political authority and cultural exchange, serving as bridges between nomadic societies and the settled Islamic world. As Turkic tribes moved into these regions or were incorporated into Islamic domains, they experienced profound shifts in political allegiance, social structures, and long-standing belief systems.

The influence of Muslim rulers in Transoxiana, especially the Samanid dynasty, played a decisive role in transforming early Turkic tribal governance. Traditional nomadic hierarchies, religious institutions, and ritual practices were adapted to reflect Islamic models of political authority and piety, producing hybrid systems that combined Turkic traditions with Islamic principles. Warfare also underwent significant conceptual change: while pre-Islamic Turkic warriors were celebrated as protectors and martyrs of their tribes, the Islamic concept of ghazwāt – religiously sanctioned campaigns – reframed military activity as jihad, linking martial valor to spiritual reward.

A watershed moment occurred in 960 CE, when the Kara-Khanid Khanate, comprising various Turkic tribes of Eastern Turkestan, officially embraced Islam under Satuq Bughra Khan and his successors. This initiated a three-decade period of expansion during which the Kara-Khanid elite sought to consolidate religious and political dominance throughout Central Asia. Driven by both religious zeal and political ambition, they undertook systematic campaigns against neighboring Turkic groups, including the Oghuz, often framing their conquests in religious terms while pursuing territorial and economic objectives.

One of their most significant achievements was the conquest of Isfijab in 990 CE (380 AH) under Bughra Khan's command. Kara-Khanid forces advanced through the Fergana Valley and Shash, ultimately capturing Bukhara in 992 CE (382 AH), the Samanid capital. This victory marked both a symbolic and strategic triumph, cementing Islam's role in emerging Turkic states and signaling the end of Samanid dominance.

The role of the Oghuz during this transitional period remains partially obscured in historical sources. While increasingly integrated into the Islamic political and cultural sphere, their direct involvement in key events – such as attempts to restore Samanid territories under Nuh ibn Mansur – is documented only fragmentarily. Numismatic evidence from coins minted in Shash in 996 CE (386 AH), bearing Nuh ibn Mansur's name, suggests a limited tributary relationship between certain Oghuz groups and the declining Samanid state (Barthold 1963: 315-321).

Partial Oghuz conversion to Islam coincided with the Samanid collapse, creating political

fragmentation and prompting large-scale migrations. Archaeological evidence from Jankent indicates the settlement's planned abandonment during this period. Excavations reveal the deliberate removal of portable wealth and valuable artifacts, consistent with organized migration in response to political instability. This reflects a broader pattern of displacement and transformation across the steppe.

Material culture from Jankent also points to religious change. Pre-Islamic ritual spaces were either repurposed or abandoned, mirroring a regional trend in which traditional belief systems were marginalized, absorbed into syncretic Islamic practices, or replaced entirely. These changes illustrate the deep cultural reorientation accompanying Islamization.

The Oghuz experience exemplifies the complex and uneven integration of Turkic nomadic societies into the Islamic world during the tenth and eleventh centuries. This transformation was marked by cycles of military conflict, cultural adaptation, selective conversion, and political realignment. The interplay between enduring local traditions and the transformative influence of Islam shaped Central Asian identities and state formation for centuries to come.

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Contributions by authors

R. Darmenov is a leading specialist, during the preparation of the manuscript, he conducted a critical analysis of available data on the topic of research. In the historiographic analysis, important scientific problems were identified, and the main issues and concepts were actively developed. B. Shorayev made a significant contribution to writing in the historical context and editing the final part of the article. Both authors approved the final version of the article.

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