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Ancient Trade Centers Of Central Asia And Their Architectural Evolution

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Abstract

This article analyzes the architectural evolution of trading structures in Central Asian bazaars—ranging from simple shed-like awnings to sophisticated vaulted complexes such as tim, chorsu, and tok structures that have survived to the present day. It highlights how the peoples of Central Asia, through their rich material and spiritual values, have historically made a worthy contribution to the treasury of universal human civilization.

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Introduction

It is well known that ancient trade relations played a pivotal role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the peoples of Central Asia. Looking back into history, we witness active trade exchanges between Central Asian civilizations and Europe, Southeast Asia, the Far East, and the Mediterranean basin. The Greek historian Photius recorded that as early as the 6th–5th centuries BCE, Central Asian peoples had established trade links with India [1]. Furthermore, the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian, often regarded as the "discoverer" of the Great Silk Road, observed Chinese goods in the markets of Bactria during his visit to Central Asia in 126 BCE [2]. Trade relations flourished particularly during the Middle Ages, which found vivid expression in the monumental construction of trade centers and specialized commercial structures[3].

Objective

Numerous commercial structures were erected in medieval bazaars, and those that have survived continue to embellish the architectural silhouette of our historic cities today. Observing these structures naturally prompts the questions: "What architectural forms did trading structures possess initially, and how did their evolutionary development proceed?" By examining historical data and written sources, this study attempts to answer these and related questions.

Methodology

Data concerning the history of bazaars was compiled from the primary works of Muhammad al-Narshakhi, Ruy González de Clavijo, Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hawqal, and Zhang Qian. These accounts were synthesized with the scholarly findings and analyses of A.P. Fedchenko, G.A. Pugachenkova, A.S. Uralov, N. Ibragimov, and A. Anarbaev to formulate comprehensive conclusions.

Main Body

Uniform socio-economic conditions across the Near and Middle East generated a variety of specialized commercial structures, including caravanserais, tok (domed junctions), tim (roofed markets), chorsu (four-way intersection bazaars), shops (dokan), kappon, and covered trading streets.

Naturally, Central Asian trade centers and structures also developed distinct characteristics shaped by local climatic conditions and indigenous traditions. Identifying these specific traits necessitates a thorough investigation into the historical development stages of commercial architecture.

Written records and archaeological monuments indicate that even in pre-Islamic times, Central Asian cities possessed dedicated commercial spaces and structures. Archaeological excavations at ancient Panjakent revealed two small bazaars dating back to the 7th–8th centuries CE. The first was situated at a street intersection and functioned as a complex of trade and handicraft workshops. The second consisted of an open square adjacent to a main street, bordered on three sides by workshops. Additional interconnected linear rows (rasta) of workshops existed along other streets of ancient Panjakent.

Result and Discussion

However, these early small bazaars and workshops did not yet dictate the macro-level urban layout of commercial zones[4]. Primary trade activities possessed a periodic, fair-like character, conducted in unstructured open marketplaces situated outside the city gates (shahristan) [5]. This placement was necessitated by the need for expansive open spaces to accommodate large crowds and pack animals, as well as the convenience of avoiding city entry tolls and minimizing security risks from armed merchants or disguised adversaries entering inner residential quarters. Consequently, Central Asian bazaars traditionally gravitated toward the southern, southeastern, or eastern gates of the shahristan. This climatic adaptation maximized daylight exposure during winter and utilized city walls as a natural windbreak against cold northern air currents.

During the 9th to the early 13th centuries, positive transformations in the political, economic, and cultural life of Mawarannahr stimulated urban growth, particularly around gate-adjacent bazaars [6]. The expansion of domestic and international commerce elevated the social significance of these commercial hubs, prompting artisans, merchants, and citizens to settle nearby. This proximity fostered the emergence of specialized trade structures, caravanserais, tims, and chorsus, accompanied by neighborhood mosques and bathhouses. As urban areas expanded and suburban districts (rabad) formed around these nodes, access roads evolved into major urban thoroughfares, transforming gate-adjacent bazaars into both economic and geographic city centers [7].

Among the prominent trade centers of Mawarannahr was Samarkand, described by Al-Istakhri (10th century) as the commercial harbor and gathering place for merchants, where the bulk of regional goods concentrated before distribution [8]. Samarkand's principal market was located in the Ras-at-Tok district south of the Kesh Gate. According to Al-Istakhri, the market featured extensive streets, shops, and a central domed structure (chorsu). Ibn Hawqal (10th century) also documented indoor markets, caravanserais, and trading rows inside the Samarkand shahristan [9]. Archaeological investigations at Afrasiab identified four intra-mural marketplaces near the congregational mosque and the Navbahor Gate [10].

Another monumental trade hub was Bukhara. As Muhammad al-Narshakhi noted in his History of Bukhara (10th century), Bukhara's commodities were exported to Syria, Egypt, and Rome [11]. Commercial activity initially clustered outside the southern Bozor Darvoza (Market Gate). Narshakhi's accounts also mention specialized commercial sectors, such as tims for hat-makers, boot-makers, money changers (sarrof), and textile merchants (bazzoz), proving the early functional specialization of medieval trade architecture [12].

The establishment of the Timurid Empire created favorable economic conditions that propelled bazaars and commercial architecture into a new developmental zenith. During the 14th through 19th centuries, bazaars anchored the hearts of the rabad districts and extended along major trunk roads leading to city gates. These expanded corridors featured monumental domed structures, toks, chorsus, tims, and covered trading streets, alongside smaller neighborhood (guzar) markets dedicated to daily provisions and local craft production [13].

As the capital of the Timurid Empire, Samarkand transformed into a major entrepôt of the Great Silk Road, welcoming goods from China, India, and Tatarstan . In 1403, Amir Timur ordered the construction of a grand commercial street between the Registan and the Ohanin Gate, featuring twin vaulted storefronts with elevated white-stone platforms. Later Timurid rulers, such as Tuman Aga and Ulugh Beg, commissioned further monumental commercial structures [14]. The domed Chorsu market standing in Samarkand's Registan square today dates back to the 18th century. Similarly, in Herat—the second capital of the Timurid Empire—Shahrukh Mirzo ordered the large-scale reconstruction of markets in 1410–1411, erecting vaulted brick bazaars, light shafts, and central chorsu junctions [15].

Conclusion

Trade relations in Central Asia possess deep historical roots that profoundly influenced urban morphology. The evolutionary trajectory of commercial architecture followed a clear developmental sequence:

Initial Stages: Early market structures originated as simple open sheds or awnings (ayvon).

Specialized Shops: With structural refinement and the addition of perimeter walls, individual shops (dokan) and linear rows (rasta) emerged.

Trading Streets: As trade outgrew central squares, commerce spilled along main urban arteries flanked by continuous shopfronts.

Covered Markets and Monumental Domes: By the 15th century, trading streets were increasingly roofed with lightweight structures or brick vaults, culminating in sophisticated monumental complexes such as tims, chorsus, and toks (e.g., Toqi-Zargaron, Toqi-Telpakfurushon, Toqi-Sarrafon).

Ultimately, Central Asian trading architecture evolved from basic protective awnings into enduring architectural masterpieces that continue to define the cultural landscape of historic cities.

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