



Formation of the Topography and Developmental Dynamics of the Kitab-Shahrisabz Oasis

Nafisa Gilmanova

Doctor of Architecture (DSc), Leading Research Fellow Department of Urban Planning and Architecture Institute of Art Studies
Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent city

ABSTRACT: This study examines the formation of the historical topography and the developmental dynamics of the Kitab-Shahrisabz Oasis in southern Central Asia from antiquity to the early twentieth century. The aim is to reconstruct the principal stages of urban development of Kitab and Shahrisabz and to clarify the historical relationship between these two urban centers and the ancient city of Kesh. The study is based on archaeological, topographical, architectural, historical, and ethnographic evidence obtained through field investigations and the analysis of published and archival sources. Particular attention is given to the results of the Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition (KATE), whose investigations in the 1960s provided important evidence for the reconstruction of the ancient and medieval urban landscape.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest urban development within modern Kitab dates to the third-second centuries BCE, while the ancient settlement reached its peak during the Kushan-Kangju period. The remains of defensive walls, the citadel at Qalandar-tepa, cultural deposits, ceramics, coins, and architectural materials demonstrate the long-term continuity and transformation of the settlement. In contrast, archaeological evidence from Shahrisabz indicates predominantly rural occupation during the Early Medieval period, with intensive urban development beginning in the ninth–twelfth centuries. The study therefore supports the hypothesis that ancient Kesh was located on the site of modern Kitab rather than Shahrisabz. At the same time, the subsequent transfer of the political and economic center to Shahrisabz contributed to its transformation into a major urban, cultural, and architectural center under the Timurids.

KEYWORDS: Kitab, Shahrisabz, Kesh, historical topography, urban development, archaeology, Kashkadarya Oasis, Central Asia, KATE, Timurids.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the formation of the topography and the dynamics of the development of the Kitab-Shahrisabz Oasis in the Kashkadarya Region, based on investigations carried out by scholars and enthusiasts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Russian topographers and military officers who travelled through the cities of Karshi and Shahrisabz on official assignments left only a limited amount of archaeological information in their publications. The Orientalist A.L. Kun [1], as well as members of the Turkestan Circle of Archaeology Enthusiasts, including B.N. Litvinov [2] and I.A. Castagné [3], devoted only occasional attention to local historical and architectural monuments.

During the pre-revolutionary period, archaeological investigations were extremely limited. One of the few expeditions was the survey conducted in 1916 by the Orientalist L.A. Zimin [4].

During the existence of the Bukharan People's Republic (1920–1924), students of the Turkestan Oriental Institute visited Shahrisabz and Kitab in 1923. In their manuscripts, they recorded a number of archaeological observations and facts [5].

From 1924 onward, the cities of Shahrisabz and Karshi began to be visited more systematically by historians, art historians, and architects.

A.Yu. Yakubovsky noted that the elevated part of the city had been surrounded by defensive walls in antiquity. According to his data, the area enclosed by the walls was approximately 20 hectares, while the total length of the walls reached 2 km. He also indicated that the city was clearly divided into two parts [6].

In 1942, M.E. Masson and G.A. Pugachenkova, in the course of their investigations of Shahrisabz, concluded that Shahrisabz could not be identified with the ancient city of Kesh. Their conclusion was based on the absence of archaeological remains characteristic



of urban settlements that had existed prior to the Arab conquest of Central Asia. They suggested that, during the early feudal period, the site of present-day Shahrisabz had been occupied by a rural settlement with a large dehqan estate, while the formation of an urban settlement had taken place during the period of developed feudalism. They further hypothesized that the ancient city of Kesh was located on the site of modern Kitab [7].

In 1942, stone column bases with square plinths and high torsos, characteristic of the ancient period, were brought from Kitab. According to the account of a local resident, Abdul-Hamid, a fortress belonging to a heroic princess, the daughter of a ruler who resided in a nearby stronghold, once stood on the hill of Qalandar-tepa. The latter fortress was subsequently transformed into the Bek's Citadel (Bekovskaya Kala).

Beginning in 1946, systematic investigations of archaeological sites in the eastern part of the Kashkadarya Valley were undertaken as part of the research program of the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek SSR [8].

Between 1946 and 1948, S. Kabanov collected extensive material concerning the ancient settlements of the oasis. He established that the largest ancient city in the Karshi Oasis had been a settlement located within the territory of present-day Kitab. On the basis of his study of the Qalandar-tepa archaeological site, dated from the third century BCE to the eighteenth century CE, he concluded that its ruins represented the remains of an ancient citadel [9].

In 1948, the ethnographer O.A. Sukhareva [10] visited Kitab and Shahrisabz in order to collect topographical data. She recorded that Shahrisabz consisted of 52 quarters (guzars) [11]. The quarters were relatively small; even the largest contained only slightly more than 100 houses.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the nineteenth century, Shahrisabz had a clearly defined quarter-based urban structure that reflected the social and occupational differentiation of its population. According to a schematic plan compiled by M.E. Masson, the northwestern part of the city was inhabited primarily by members of the Muslim clergy, whereas the southern districts were occupied by artisans, particularly tanners and potters. The author also provided general information on the population of the Shahrisabz Bekdom. Masson further identified the names of three city gates: the northern gate, known as "Arka"; the western gate, "Kushkhona"; and the southern gate, "Charimgar." These data provide valuable information on the topography and social organization of nineteenth-century Shahrisabz [12].

Traditional residential architecture played a key role in shaping the topography of the historic part of Shahrisabz. Over the centuries, the urban structure developed while preserving its ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

Ancient Shahrisabz included distinctive monumental structures and traditional residential buildings, many of which were constructed during the Timurid period. Monumental buildings surrounded by residential quarters gave the city a distinctive appearance characteristic of Shahrisabz. The clear division of the Timurid city into administrative-political, religious, and residential zones can also be traced in the modern urban layout, reflecting the historical continuity of its urban-planning structure.

The cities of Shahrisabz and Kitab, located in the Kashkadarya Valley, were historically closely interconnected and could therefore be regarded as a kind of twin cities. They were enclosed by a common defensive wall known as the Chim, which protected not only the two cities themselves but also the surrounding settlements of the oasis.

In their architecture and urban planning, Shahrisabz and Kitab preserved distinctive traditions that differed from those of Bukhara, emphasizing their cultural and architectural identity. By incorporating the surrounding lands and settlements, Shahrisabz successfully resisted the expansion of the Emirate of Bukhara for an extended period.

At the end of 1962, the Faculty of History of Tashkent State University (TashSU) planned the first independent architectural expedition organized by the Department of Archaeology of Central Asia. The principal objective of the expedition was to investigate the historical topography of the Kashkadarya Region.

A significant contribution to the scholarly study of the historical topography of Shahrisabz was made by the Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition (KATE), organized in 1963 under the direction of M.E. Masson. The expedition continued its work until 1967 and included members of the academic staff and students of the Department of Archaeology of Tashkent State University. At various stages, the expedition involved S.V. Lunina, Z.I. Usmanova, and N.I. Krasheninnikova, as well as department students G.Ya. Dresvyanskaya, L.I. Zhukova, V.D. Kochnev, and T. Khodzhanizayov [13].



Between 1963 and 1965, Z.I. Usmanova, a member of the Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition (KATE), conducted research on the defensive walls of Shahrisabz and on the historical topography of the city during the reign of Amir Timur and the Timurid dynasty. Her research made a significant contribution to the understanding of the city's fortification architecture and urban development during this period [14].

Members of KATE reassessed the evidence provided by historical sources, conducted archaeological investigations, interviewed the local population, prepared archaeological and topographical plans of archaeological sites, and excavated test trenches in order to examine in detail the historical topography of ancient Kesh [15].

One of KATE's primary objectives was to investigate the ancient Chim wall, whose existence had been questioned by V.V. Bartold [16].

The four-year investigation of Shahrisabz conducted by KATE confirmed the principal periods and stages of its historical development and substantially deepened understanding of its historical topography. The most intensive occupation of the city's territory appears to have occurred in the ninth century, when an urban settlement developed and expanded along the principal north-south street, which formed part of the trade route from Samarkand to Balkh. The Mongols referred to this route as "Temir-kahalka," meaning "Iron Gate."

Excavations yielded archaeological materials dating from the tenth to the early thirteenth centuries, including both glazed and unglazed pottery, as well as construction bricks measuring between $20 \times 20 \times 3$ cm and $22.5 \times 22.5 \times 3-4$ cm.

In 1964, a fragment of a copper, silver-plated dirham was discovered in the city wall. The coin had been minted in Samarkand in the name of Khwarazmshah Muhammad (1200–1220). Glazed tile fragments dating to the first half of the fourteenth century indicate the existence in Shahrisabz of buildings constructed prior to the reign of Amir Timur.

The remains of an earlier wall of the Shahrisabz hisar, preserved in the form of eroded earthen ramparts, indicate that during the Timurid period the fortress was considerably larger than the later fortifications of Shahrisabz. However, the location and structural configuration of the ancient walls, referred to as "bandi-qadim," remain uncertain. According to Hafiz-i Abru, these walls had already been destroyed by the time of Amir Timur. In 1378, Timur ordered the construction of new defensive walls, possibly incorporating the remains of earlier structures, in a manner comparable to the practice of rebuilding the eleventh–twelfth-century walls of Shahr-i Berun within the Samarkand hisar.

Between 1973 and 1989, the Uzbek Research and Design Institute for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural and Archaeological Monuments carried out periodic investigations in Shahrisabz. During this period, the archaeologist Kh.T. Sultanov conducted extensive studies of the architectural monuments of the city of Shahrisabz [17].

In 1982, the Department of Archaeology of Central Asia at the Faculty of History of Tashkent State University resumed archaeological investigations in Shahrisabz. At that time, intensive construction outside the city walls resulted in the destruction of ancient defensive structures, thereby complicating their study. The reconstruction and replanning of the central part of the city also led to the destruction of multilayered cultural deposits [18]. Nevertheless, it was during this period that cultural layers dating to the seventh–eighth centuries were identified for the first time within the area of the Timurid-period city, as confirmed by coin finds [19].

Excavations at Baland-tepa, located north of the fortress walls, demonstrated that during the Early Medieval period (fifth–eighth centuries) the population of Shahrisabz was dispersed across the territory of the city and its surrounding areas. Baland-tepa probably served as a ruler's residence accompanied by an adjacent unfortified settlement [20].

In 1993, researchers G.Ya. Dresvyanskaya, S.B. Lunina, Kh.T. Sultanov, and Z.I. Usmanova noted the absence of a consensus concerning the historical core and precise location of early medieval Shahrisabz, as well as the date of its foundation. The periods and stages of the city's formation, its historical-topographical structure, the patterns of development of its urban layout and architectural ensembles, and the functions of these structures during different historical periods remained insufficiently studied [21]. Obtaining more precise data on the emergence and development of Shahrisabz's architectural complexes requires the integration of architectural studies with archaeological excavations. Archaeological methods were employed in the study of the city's monuments, supplemented by evidence from toponymy, history, epigraphy, and ethnography [22].

The formation of Shahrisabz and its medieval architectural monuments was also investigated by Academicians E.V. Rtveladze and A.S. Sagdullaev. Their joint work [23] provides an extensive historical overview of the oasis based on their own observations. The authors addressed important questions concerning the formation of ancient and medieval Shahrisabz, tentatively localized possible



sites of the city's ruler's residence during the eighth–twelfth centuries, and briefly outlined the history of the formation of the city's architectural monuments and their subsequent development.

RESULTS

Of particular interest to the present study are the results of KATE's survey of the territory of Kitab, since no significant architectural structures of the historical city have survived there.

The most widespread interpretation associates the name “Kitab” with the Uzbek word kitob, meaning “book.” However, alternative explanations have also been proposed. One suggests that the name derives from the Persian expression “Kifti-Ob,” translated as “shoulder of water.” This interpretation is associated with the geographical location of the city between the Aksu Darya and Kashkadarya rivers [23].

Other researchers believe that the name may represent a transformation of the phrase “Kel-top,” meaning “come-you will find [it].” This hypothesis, proposed by S.K. Kabanov, is based on phonetic similarity and the possibility that the name underwent linguistic transformation over time. According to local traditions, the city of Kitab was formerly known as “Kish” or “Kisht,” a name associated with the term “boat.” This interpretation is explained by the abundance of water in antiquity and the existence of a lake on which boats were reportedly used for transportation.

The precise etymology of the name Kitab remains a subject of scholarly debate, and no definitive explanation has yet been established.

According to some researchers, Kish was a city in Uruk (in the northern part of Lower Mesopotamia). It is possible that the name Kish was brought to the Kashkadarya Oasis by migrants during the period of large-scale population movements in 3200–2900 BCE [24].

Modern Kitab is situated on the right bank of the Aksu Darya River. In the nineteenth century, the city had an elongated east–west layout. Its defensive walls enclosed an irregularly shaped area measuring approximately 2.2×0.8 km. By the time of the archaeological investigations, a considerable portion of the defensive walls had been demolished and replaced by residential buildings, making the study of their surviving remains particularly important. Nevertheless, individual sections of the walls survived to a height of up to 4 m and were constructed of pakhsa and mud bricks measuring 57 and 65 cm in height.

In the southern section, between the Darc(h)a postern gate and the Khoja-Rushnoi Gate (within the territory of the Zagotskot base), a surviving section of the wall measuring 11.7 m in length was identified. It was constructed of mud bricks measuring 42×12 cm, 42×16 – 16.5 cm, and $42 \times 41 \times 14$ – 17 cm. The lower part of the wall contained two superimposed and chronologically distinct courses of pakhsa blocks, between which a layer indicating a period of abandonment could be traced. These findings suggest the possible existence of an earlier defensive structure at this location, dating to the ancient period.

Investigations conducted by KATE demonstrated that the basal section of the ancient wall consisted of several layers of pakhsa (rammed earth), each measuring 56–57 cm in height. The width of the foundation exceeded 12 m, suggesting that the exposed section may have represented a cross-section of a tower (burj). The upper part of the wall was inclined at an angle of approximately 25 degrees and transitioned into a masonry structure composed of large mud bricks measuring $41 \times 41 \times 14$ cm to $42 \times 42 \times 15$ – 17 cm, with mortar joints reaching up to 35 cm in thickness.

Over time, this ancient defensive wall fell into disrepair and was extensively destroyed. During the Early Medieval period, its eroded crest was leveled, and a new city wall was constructed upon it using elongated mud bricks measuring $41 \times 21 \times 13$ – 14 cm to $47 \times 22 \times 15$ cm. Nearly a millennium later, an pakhsa masonry wall dating to the eighteenth century was constructed over the surviving remains of the earlier structures.

The investigations also established the locations of six city gates. Testimonies collected from elderly local residents made it possible to identify the locations and names of six gates and one postern of the former Kitab fortifications: Eastern Gate – Yuqori Darvoza (also known as Kunchiqar); Northern Gate – Namazga Darvoza (also known as Charimgar); Northwestern Gate – Gau-khana Darvoza (also known as Jangil); Western Gate – Khoja-Rushnoi Darvoza (also known as Gisht Kuprik); Southern Gate – Sherbetkhona Darvoza; Postern Gate – Darcha. **Figure 1.**

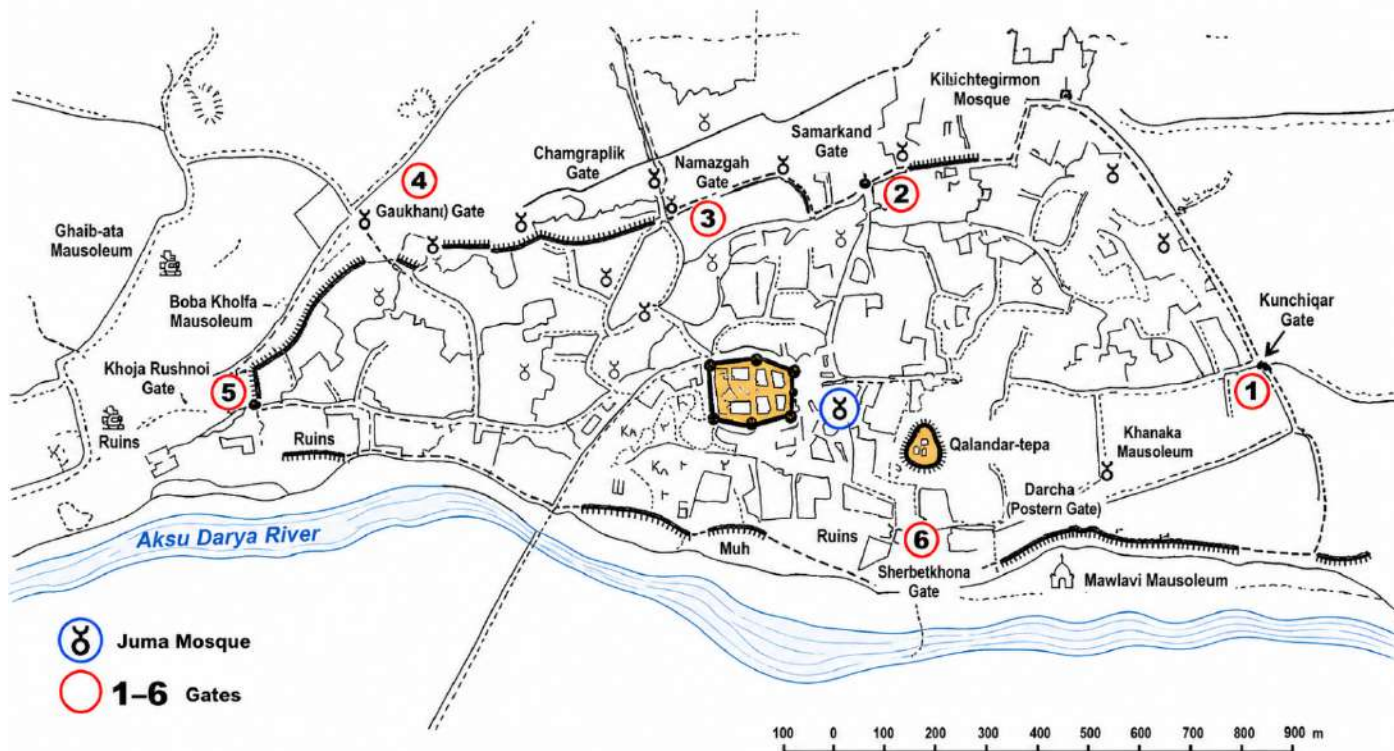


Figure 1. Plan of Kitab showing the remains of the ancient defensive wall, six entrance gates, the early medieval fortress, and the citadel on Qalandar-tepa Hill. Compiled from materials of the Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition (KATE), 1963–1967; graphic design by N. Gilmanova.

The ancient city of Kitab, enclosed by defensive walls, occupied approximately 40 hectares at the height of its development. This area was comparable to that of the shahristan of medieval Kesh, although smaller than the area occupied by nineteenth-century Kitab.

The earliest settled area of ancient Kitab is believed to have been Qalandar-tepa, a large settlement that subsequently became the nucleus of the future city. The central element of the ancient city was the Ark (citadel), situated on the site of the artificial Qalandar-tepa mound near the southern city wall. This location may be explained by the perceived threat of attacks from the south, from the direction of Bactria. Archaeological evidence indicates that the ancient Ark had a rectangular plan and occupied approximately 1 hectare, making it comparable in size to the Kuhandiz of ancient Samarkand at the Afrasiab site. Its foundations were constructed on a platform of compacted pakhsha.

At the beginning of the fourth century CE, the ancient city and its Ark experienced the crisis of the slave-owning system, which resulted in their decline.

Consequently, the archaeological evidence obtained by KATE indicates that early medieval Kesh emerged on the site of an earlier city. It is suggested that this may have been the city mentioned in the historical records of the Later Han dynasty (220 BCE–20 CE) under the names Suhe, Suse, or Susai. Its precise Sogdian name remains unknown, although it has been suggested that it may correspond to the term “Sugud.” In the second century BCE, the city was conquered by the Kangju, and it was already an established settlement during the period of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom [25].

Architectural materials dating from the third century BCE to the third century CE, discovered within the territory of medieval Kesh, attest to the rich history and cultural heritage of the oasis.

KATE investigations established that the latest medieval cultural layer identified within the territory of Kitab belonged to the flourishing city of the eighth–early ninth centuries, above which cultural deposits dating to the eighteenth century were subsequently



accumulated. Based on the ceramic material recovered, Qalandar-tepa was dated to the ancient and early feudal periods, continuing up to the ninth century [26].

The topographical structure of Kitab reflected the traditional three-part organization characteristic of medieval cities of Central Asia: the Ark (citadel), the Shahristan (inner city), and the Rabad (suburban area).

DISCUSSION

Medieval geographers and historians described Kesh in different ways. Al-Muqaddasi characterized it as a “vast” city (balad), while al-Istakhri referred to it as the “Medina” of Transoxiana. Ibn Hawqal, in turn, mentioned the presence of a Kuhandiz (citadel), a fortress, and a Rabad. These authors also referred to the existence of two Rabads in Kesh, comparable to those of Binkath (Tashkent) and Bukhara: Rabad Dakhil (“inner suburb”) and Rabad Kharij (“outer suburb”).

Chinese sources associate the flourishing of Kesh with the activities of a powerful ruler named Diche, who ruled in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. He is believed to have rebuilt the city and made it his residence, with the city having a circumference of approximately 1 km. His domain extended over thousands of kilometers and included approximately 500 settlements. In 605, Diche established diplomatic relations with the most powerful Chinese empire of the time.

During the period of Kesh's flourishing, the city was also ruled by a king known as Sha-Shebi or Shishpir. It has been suggested that during this period the city was home to a revered temple where prayers were offered before military campaigns.

In the second half of the seventh century, the growing influence of Samarkand led to a decline in the political importance of the Kesh domain. By the end of the same century, the Arabs had begun an active advance across the Amu Darya, accompanied by sieges of Kesh.

In 775, a major anti-Arab uprising led by al-Muqanna broke out in Transoxiana and was particularly active in the Kashkadarya Valley and the region of Kesh. Al-Muqanna, whose real name was Hakim ibn Hashim, led the movement known as the “People in White Garments.” The uprising was eventually suppressed by the forces of the Caliphate.

In the ninth century, the attitude of the Tahirids and Samanids toward Kesh was ambivalent. Measures were undertaken to suppress the local population, including the deliberate reduction of the political significance of the capital of the rebellious region. Many inhabitants were forcibly resettled, while the Kuhandiz and the Kitab fortress were abandoned. This contributed to the emergence, beyond the Rabad, of a new settlement known as “Medina Kharij,” presumably located on the site of a small village called Barkan, which had only two gates and a main street running between them. Over time, this settlement developed into the city of Shahrizabz [27].

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Orientalist V.V. Bartold [28], in his description of the city of Kesh, mentioned a ruined Citadel and Shahristan with four gates, as well as a Rabad with two gates and bazaars. He noted the emergence of a new city in their vicinity and associated the decline of Kesh during the Samanid period with the rise of Bukhara and Samarkand.

The Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition conducted a detailed study of the Kitab city wall dating to the period of the rule of the Bek rulers. By the time of the investigation, only minor fragments of the wall had survived. The wall was constructed of pakhsa and consisted of six courses of masonry. According to the testimony of elderly local residents, it had originally comprised as many as eight courses and reached a height of approximately 7 m. They did not, however, recall the presence of crenellations (kungura) along the top of the wall. The width of the wall's foundation varied between 5.5 and 6 m.

The expedition also attempted to reconstruct the approximate internal layout of the Bek's fortress (Kala) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the basis of oral testimonies provided by local residents. By the time of the investigation, the fortress had been almost completely destroyed as a result of the construction of a stadium on its site.

Archaeological investigations of the territory of the Bek's Kala, on the site of a fortified castle dating to the seventh century CE, revealed cultural layers belonging to the ancient period. Mud bricks measuring between $38 \times 38 \times 13$ cm and $40 \times 40 \times 14$ cm were discovered.

The modern territory of Kitab, particularly its central part, has undergone extensive construction, creating considerable difficulties for the archaeological investigations conducted by KATE. In addition, the high groundwater level prevented deep excavation of the cultural deposits down to the natural soil. Nevertheless, KATE succeeded in broadly reconstructing the historical topography of the site over the past 2,000 years.



The earliest archaeological finds within Kitab date to the third–second centuries BCE. It can be stated with a high degree of confidence that the ancient city known as Su-khe reached its peak during the Kushan–Kangju period. In the fifth century CE, when the Kashkadarya Valley was conquered by the Hephthalites, the city experienced a period of profound decline. A significant revival took place in the sixth century CE. Following the restoration of urban life, the settlement may have acquired a new name –Kesh (at approximately the same time, Shash and Varakhsha were also known by these names). However, following the uprising of al-Muqanna, Kesh entered a period of stagnation that lasted for almost a millennium.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries marked a period of intensive development of cities and major settlements. Particular attention was subsequently devoted to Shahrisabz under Amir Timur and Ulugh Beg.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Bukharan government began to take an active interest in the Karshi region [29].

In the course of its investigation of the historical topography of Kitab in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, KATE identified 74 urban quarters (guzars), six of which had a semi-rural character. A topographical plan of the city was prepared, showing the quarters, the former Registan Square, principal streets, caravanserais, mosques, mazars, and the location of the brick bridge known as “Gisht-Kuprik” across the Aksu Darya. According to local tradition, the bridge was constructed during the rule of the Manghit dynasty.

Scientific investigations conducted in the Kitab and Shahrisabz areas made it possible to trace the process of topographical formation and the developmental dynamics of the two urban centers.

It was established that intensive construction in Shahrisabz began only in the ninth–twelfth centuries, as evidenced by substantial architectural remains discovered beneath the Kok Gumbaz Mosque and the Mausoleum of Shams al-Din Kulal. During this period, the capital of Kesh was transferred to Shahrisabz, and the city developed into an important economic and cultural center, repeatedly mentioned in the works of Arab geographers and historians [30].

CONCLUSION

The historical-topographical study of Shahrisabz and its surrounding area has confirmed that the city cannot be identified with the ancient city of Kesh. This conclusion is based on the absence within Shahrisabz of archaeological remains characteristic of an urban settlement dating to the period preceding the Arab conquest of Central Asia. The evidence indicates that during the Early Medieval period (fifth–eighth centuries CE), the site was a rural area containing a large dehqan estate, while the formation of an urban-type settlement began during the period of developed feudalism (ninth–twelfth centuries). Accordingly, the ancient city of Kesh should be localized at the site of present-day Kitab.

Based on the findings of the Kesh Archaeological and Topographical Expedition (KATE), the ancient city of Kesh was located on the site of present-day Kitab. Within the territory of Kitab, the latest medieval cultural layer dates to the eighth–early ninth centuries, above which cultural deposits dating to the eighteenth century were subsequently accumulated. In the ninth century, the Kuhandiz (citadel) and the Kitab fortress were abandoned. This contributed to the emergence of a new settlement beyond the Rabad, known as the Medina Kharij, presumably on the site of a small village called Barkan. The settlement originally had two gates connected by a main thoroughfare and, over time, developed into the city of Shahrisabz.

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