

## RURAL COMMUNITIES OF SOGD: DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This article explores the structure and functions of rural communities in the early medieval Sogdian region, focusing on the Nakhshab oasis. Drawing upon archaeological research by S.K. Kabanov, as well as written sources such as the Mount Mug archive and the Tarikh of al-Tabari, the study examines how rural populations were organized into autonomous communal units based on familial ties or economic specialization. It highlights the role of community elders and village heads (dehqons), the tax system based on natural goods, and the practice of redistributive aid from state granaries. The findings demonstrate the significance of these rural communities in the agricultural, administrative, and defensive infrastructure of Sogdian society during the early medieval period.

**Keywords.** Sogdiana, Nakhshab, rural communities, Mount Mug archive, katyabshauz, dehqon, early medieval Central Asia, agricultural taxation, kinship structure, community specialization, redistribution, socio-political organization.

### Introduction

In the early medieval period of Sogdiana, the primary segment of the productive population consisted of agriculturalists and livestock breeders. Although the study of rural communities in early medieval Sogd has been acknowledged as a significant issue by many scholars, there is considerable variation in how the presence and nature of such communities in ancient and medieval Central Asia—particularly in Sogd—have been defined. One of the main reasons for the limited exploration of this topic lies in the scarcity of written sources that directly address the structure and administration of these communities. Despite the availability of numerous ethnographic data related to early medieval Sogdian society, this subject remains insufficiently investigated.

When comparing the socio-economic structure of early medieval rural Central Asia to that of Western Europe in the 10th–11th centuries, parallels can be drawn—particularly in terms of land ownership relations. The aristocratic Sogdian landholders and the patriarchal households under their control bore resemblance to the landowning feudal class in medieval Europe, commonly described using terms such as "fief" and "len." As a result, until the early 1990s—prior to the independence of many Central Asian states—this era was officially recognized in

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Soviet historiography as the "initial stage of feudalism." This interpretation was also reflected in school textbooks, where the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 CE was cited as a pivotal event that supposedly triggered the emergence of feudal land relations in Central Asia. However, historical evidence suggests that such land tenure relations in Central Asia and adjacent regions developed considerably earlier. The pace of social and economic development in the region was relatively rapid, with land ownership systems beginning to take shape as early as the 2nd–3rd centuries CE.

Turning specifically to rural communities in Sogdiana, significant insights are provided by documents from the Mount Mug archive. These materials serve as vital primary sources confirming the existence and characteristics of rural settlements during the early medieval period. The documents contain records of villages, including information on taxes paid to the state or levies imposed on specific settlements. For instance, documents B-10 and B-2 note that barley and wine were supplied from the village of Khshikat, while wheat came from Fatmev. Documents B-13 and B-15 (correspondence from Aspadak, a servant of Farmondor Avat—the steward of the Devastich palace economy) report the delivery of fruits and grains from the village of Iskudar to the central authority.

Such documentation illustrates the tax obligations and production roles of various villages under the jurisdiction of the Panjiktent administration. Dozens of similar records addressed to Farmondor Avat from different villages underscore the systematic collection and redistribution of rural produce within early medieval Sogdian society.

An analysis of the documents from the Mount Mug archive reveals that taxes and other types of levies collected from rural communities were delivered to central authorities by designated tax officials. One such figure mentioned in the records is Farmondor Avat, identified as the official responsible for these matters under the administration of Devashtich. However, it appears unlikely that Avat was directly involved in handling all related affairs himself, as the letters addressed to him were written by various individuals, not by Avat personally.

It is plausible that the individuals corresponding with Avat, such as Aspadak, were local village elders or heads of rural communities. These elders—referred to in Sogdian sources as “katyabshauz”—not only administered village affairs but were also responsible for collecting natural taxes from the inhabitants and delivering them to the central authority. After collecting the products, they would either directly or indirectly ensure their transport to the central hub of administration.

The documents further indicate that taxes were primarily paid in the form of agricultural and livestock products—namely wheat, barley, maize, wine (musallas), and domesticated animals such as cattle and small ruminants. These commodities represented the most essential and marketable goods produced by rural communities. Moreover, rural communities were not only taxed based on land and income but also for the usage of public infrastructure such as bridges.

Document A-13 of the Mount Mug archive explicitly states that a village was required to pay an annual fee of 150 drachms for using a bridge, illustrating the breadth of the tax system.

Another notable source, document B-6, lists the names of two individuals from several villages, implying the imposition of *corvée* labor (forced labor services) such as herding animals and transporting goods. For example, from the village of Dargaut, individuals named Anchandok, Gon, and Khartak were sent; from Fatmaut, Anutch and Frikhoshak; from Pokhut, Kajvisart; and from Varz (also known as Varziminor), individuals named Vghubon (?) and Vargan (?) were dispatched. These records point to the organized mobilization of rural labor by state authorities.

Document B-11 contains a letter from Aspadak to Farmondor Avat, in which he discusses the transfer of small livestock (sheep and goats) and requests instructions for the task. The presence of such communications, especially the detailed naming of individuals assigned to these duties, suggests the existence of labor obligations that could be interpreted as a form of exploitation or subjugation of rural inhabitants.

These findings provide critical insight into the administrative mechanisms, tax structures, and social dynamics that characterized rural Sogdian communities during the early medieval period. The Mount Mug archive thus remains a valuable corpus for understanding the socio-economic fabric of the region.

Another important aspect of rural tax administration in early medieval Sogd concerns the possibility that the state, after collecting taxes and dues from the rural communities, redistributed a portion of these resources back to the same communities as a form of social assistance. According to the research of historian E. Sattorov, during this period, most taxes and tributes were collected in kind, rather than in currency. Archival economic records from the Mount Mug documents confirm the registration of various agricultural products such as wheat, apricots, wine, and others, along with their respective revenues, expenditures, and deliveries.

Several documents, including A-16, A-18, B-13, and B-15, refer to the distribution of food supplies from the Panjikent administration to villages in Upper Zarafshan, such as Kushtut, Falgar, Madm, and Martushkat. These records suggest a system in which goods were periodically redistributed from central storehouses to rural populations, likely in response to need or hardship.

In addition, other grain-related documents preserved in the Mount Mug archive, as referenced by Sattorov, indicate that communities such as Khufarn, Khutachan, and Zrunb received allocations of 200 kafch of grain—an amount estimated to equal approximately 2–3 tons. While the precise basis for this distribution is not stated in the documents, no monetary exchange or compensation appears to have been involved. The absence of transactional

language suggests these grain allocations were not commercial in nature but rather part of a traditional community-based system of social support.

This form of redistribution may be interpreted as a reflection of early state efforts to mitigate the effects of crises such as invasions, famine, or drought. The provisioning of essential goods under such conditions illustrates the existence of a rudimentary social safety mechanism within the rural governance framework of early medieval Sogd. In this context, the state functioned not merely as a tax collector but also as a redistributor of resources to maintain social stability and cohesion during times of distress.

According to the Mount Mug archive, grain and wine paid as taxes by rural communities were recorded using specific measurement units such as pōn and kpč. While the exact volume of the pōn unit remains uncertain, the term kpč is likely synonymous with the later "kafch" or "kafiz," which is estimated to have been approximately three liters. Archival documents indicate that the village of Khshikat delivered 24 pōn of barley, while Fatmev provided 10 pōn of barley and 2 kpč of maize to the central authorities. In total, Khshikat contributed around 29 units of produce (barley and maize combined), and Fatmev supplied approximately 20 pōn and 2 kpč of maize.

Drawing on the research of O.I. Smirnova, it becomes evident that each of these rural communities had access to their own arable land. The diversity and volume of agricultural goods recorded in the documents support this conclusion. These data points reflect the agrarian nature of early medieval Sogdian society, in which crop-growing communities constituted a significant portion of the population.

In this context, the term naf (written as n'β in Sogdian) should not be understood narrowly as simply "people" or "population." Rather, it can also encompass broader meanings such as "community," "territorial unit," or "nation." The village elder, referred to earlier as katyabshauz, who was responsible for tax collection, appears to have managed not just individual villages, but specific nafs—that is, distinct community groups within the village structure. It is thus possible that a single village contained multiple, administratively separate communal groups, each governed by its own katyabshauz.

Support for the existence of such internal communal divisions can also be found in historical literary sources. The 10th-century historian Narshakhi describes the settlement of Baykand (Paykand), near Bukhara, as having more than a thousand rabats (fortified stations or outposts), corresponding to the number of surrounding villages. According to him:

“Baykand was a large and prosperous location, where each village built a rabat and stationed a group of people there, sending provisions from their home village. During the winter, when attacks by unbelievers were common, many villagers would gather at their respective rabats to defend the area. Each group would go to the rabat built by their own community.”

This account illustrates that each rural community in Sogd not only owned land but also maintained its own fortified post, further reinforcing the idea that villages were composed of multiple distinct communal entities, each functioning semi-autonomously.

Thus, both Eastern Sogd (Panj) and Western Sogd (Bukhara) exhibit similar patterns of communal rural organization during the early medieval period. These patterns substantiate the existence of structured, landholding rural communities (nafs) as integral elements of the region's socio-political landscape.

Archaeological investigations conducted by S.K. Kabanov in the Kashkadarya (Nakhshab) oasis, including sites such as Kajartepa, Mudintepa, Shurtepa (Asantepa), Neguztepa, Dagaytepa, Yarkurgan, Pirmatbobotepe, Avultepa, Uchtepa, Kultepa, Pishaktepa, Oytughditepa, Chaukaytepa, Pashtantepa, and Koshtapa, have contributed significantly to our understanding of rural community structures in early medieval Sogdiana. Based on his findings, Kabanov suggests that rural communities (kishloq jamoalari) were integral components of broader rural settlements, and that these communities could be grouped according to their residential patterns and spatial organization.

The Nakhshab oasis, and the Sogdian cultural sphere more broadly, exhibited unique characteristics of communal living within village contexts. Each rural community appears to have been composed of multiple households that were united for the purpose of ensuring economic self-sufficiency. This suggests that shared economic interests were one of the key drivers behind the formation of these communities.

Other factors may have also played a role, such as kinship ties, which likely led to the clustering of extended families into a single community. In some cases, these communities may have been structured along the lines of the "extended patriarchal family," where members were connected by blood or marriage and lived cooperatively.

Additionally, occupational specialization may have shaped the structure of these communities. It is plausible that each community within a village was engaged in a specific craft or economic activity. Supporting this view, documents from the Mount Mug archive show that different communities paid taxes to the central authority in the form of specific goods—suggesting a division of labor and production across communities. This implies a degree of economic interdependence, where communities relied on one another for goods and services not produced within their own group.

In a broader social and political context, each rural community was subordinate to a village elder (katyabshauz) and, ultimately, to the village head or dehqon—a landholding noble who served as both the administrative leader and the military protector of the village. The dehqon was responsible for defending his lands and people, a role vividly illustrated in historical sources such as al-Tabari's *Tarikh*, which recounts how the dehqons, led by Devashtich, mobilized resistance against the invading forces of the Arab Caliphate.

This layered administrative and communal structure reveals the complexity and resilience of early medieval rural life in Sogdiana, where agricultural production, kinship, occupational identity, and military obligation were closely intertwined within the framework of village society.

## Conclusion

The early medieval rural communities of Sogdiana, particularly within the Nakhshab (modern Karshi) oasis, formed the backbone of the region's social and economic organization. Archaeological findings and archival sources, including the Mount Mug documents, reveal that these communities were structured around extended families, kinship ties, or occupational specialization. Villages were composed of multiple autonomous communal units (nafs), each led by an elder (katyabshauz) and subordinated to a village head known as the dehqon. These communities not only cultivated their own lands and paid taxes in kind (grain, wine, livestock), but also received redistributive support from state authorities during periods of crisis. The documented existence of specialized economic production and localized military responsibilities reflects a complex and well-integrated rural administrative system that played a pivotal role in the socio-political fabric of early Sogdian society.

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