

**THE SOCIAL SYSTEM, TRIBAL UNIONS, STATEHOOD, AND GOVERNANCE  
SYSTEM IN THE KHOREZM OASIS DURING THE 7TH-6TH CENTURIES BCE**

**Matyakubov Khamdam Khamidzhanovich**  
Associate Professor, Department of History,  
Urgench State University, PhD.  
E-mail: [hamdamtarix@gmail.com](mailto:hamdamtarix@gmail.com)  
Tel: (97)-601 09 40

**Annotatsiya.** Mazkur maqolada Quyi Sirdaryo havzasi va Sharqiy Orolbo‘yi erlarida ilk temir davridagi ijtimoiy-iqtisodiy va xo‘jalik-madaniy taraqqiyot jarayonlari o‘rganilgan. Saklar kabi ko‘chmanchi va yarim o‘troq chorvadorlarning xo‘jaligi, bronza va temir davrida sug‘orma dehqonchilikning ahamiyati, aholining turmush tarzi hamda ijtimoiy tuzumi tahlil qilingan.

**Kalit so‘zlar.** Saklar, Quyi Sirdaryo havzasi, Sharqiy Orolbo‘yi, ilk temir davri, sug‘orma dehqonchilik, ko‘chmanchi chorvadorlar, “Avesto”, harbiy demokratiya, ijtimoiy tuzum.

**Аннотация.** В данной статье изучены процессы социально-экономического и хозяйственно-культурного развития в эпоху раннего железного века на территории низовьев бассейна Сырдарьи и Восточного Приаралья. Рассмотрено хозяйство кочевых и полукочевых скотоводов, таких как саки, значимость ирригационного земледелия в бронзовом и железном веках, а также образ жизни и социальный строй населения.

**Ключевые слова.** Саки, низовья бассейна Сырдарьи, Восточное Приаралье, ранний железный век, ирригационное земледелие, кочевые скотоводы, «Авеста», военная демократия, социальный строй.

**Annotation.** This article examines the socio-economic and cultural-historical development processes during the Early Iron Age in the Lower Syr Darya Basin and Eastern Aral Sea regions. It explores the economy of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists, such as the Saka, the importance of irrigated agriculture in the Bronze and Iron Ages, as well as the lifestyle and social structure of the population.

**Keywords.** Saka, Lower Syr Darya Basin, Eastern Aral Sea, Early Iron Age, irrigated agriculture, nomadic pastoralists, "Avesta," military democracy, social structure.

**Introduction.** The information about the Early Iron Age populations inhabiting the Lower Syr Darya basin and the Eastern Aral Sea region has been formed through extensive archaeological research conducted over many years. Studying the lifestyle, economic activities, social organization, and cultural development stages of the Saka people in this region is of significant importance. The Saka exhibited diverse ways of life, including nomadic, semi-nomadic, and sedentary patterns, shaped by various environmental conditions. Their achievements in agriculture and craftsmanship influenced the cultures of neighboring peoples in the region.

**Literature Review.** The data on the Early Iron Age culture in the region primarily stem from the results of archaeological expeditions. The works of researchers such as V.S. Sarianidi, L.T. Yablonskiy, and V.N. Yagodin serve as crucial sources for understanding the development of the Bronze and Iron Ages in the area. These scholars studied the Saka lifestyle, their settlements, and cemeteries.

**Methodological Framework.** This study employed a combination of historical-archaeological, ethnographic, and source-critical methods. Comparative analyses were conducted based on material culture artifacts unearthed during archaeological investigations. Ethnographic methods were utilized to examine the distinctive features of nomadic and sedentary lifestyles in the region.

**Analysis.** The Saka populations in the Lower Syr Darya basin (Eastern Aral Sea region) were primarily nomadic. In contrast, the Saka groups inhabiting the Sarikamysh basin, formed by the Dovdon and Daryolyk branches of the Amu Darya River in the western part of the Khorezm oasis, adopted semi-sedentary and sedentary pastoral lifestyles. Here, agriculture played a supplementary role in their economy. Their culture has been studied based on findings from burial mounds like Sakarchaga and settlements such as Quisoy 2, Yassiqir, and Qangha.

In the eastern part of the Khorezm oasis, specifically in the Akcha Darya delta, which was extensively utilized during the Bronze Age, no settlements dating back to the 7th–6th centuries BCE have been discovered. During the Bronze Age, irrigation systems branching from the Akcha Darya allowed for small-scale agriculture around semi-permanent settlements. Agricultural activities were carried out collectively by kinship-based communities, with irrigated farming developing under limited conditions.

During the Early Iron Age, significant changes in the economic and cultural landscape were observed. In the Sarikamysh basin, settlements and burial mounds were located on elevated terrains. No traces of ancient irrigation systems, such as canals or ditches, have been identified in these areas. The population predominantly raised cattle, sheep, and goats, with equine breeding playing an essential role in pastoral practices [6, pp. 121–123].

Historical and ethnographic data suggest that livestock breeding adapted to steppe conditions evolved primarily in nomadic and semi-nomadic (semi-sedentary) forms. This mode of economy required relatively low labor input, as pasture grasses served as the primary feed for livestock. Consequently, camels and fat-tailed sheep were bred, adapting to frequent relocations across desert dunes. In contrast, horses were raised in riverine forests or stables and provided supplemental feed, such as grain and alfalfa.

The steppes of the Sarikamysh basin, based on the topography of Early Iron Age sites, were utilized for pastoral purposes over an area approximately 180×120 kilometers (excluding the inner Kyzylkum desert). Including these areas, the range extended to about 250×150 kilometers. It is hypothesized that nomadic and semi-nomadic Saka communities used these regions for seasonal migrations and livestock grazing.

Since the Bronze Age, the pastoral communities of the Eurasian steppes, including those in the Aral Sea region, have seen the emergence of large patriarchal families. This development was driven by advancements in productive forces, the acquisition of surplus products, the growth of productive livestock breeding, expanding exchange opportunities, and socio-economic factors.

Archaeological materials and early written sources indicate that by the 7th century BCE, the socio-economic prominence of extended patriarchal families (consisting of fathers and sons) had grown among pastoralists. This social structure is reflected in the Avesta. In the Yasna section of the Avesta, references to families, clans, and tribes are made, categorizing social groups into priests, warriors, pastoralists, and artisans.

According to sources, the family (nmana) constituted the basic social unit, combining several related extended families into clan (vis) communities. A clan comprised at least 15 extended families and formed the foundation of society. Clan communities collectively made up a tribe (zantu), and the territory inhabited by a tribe was referred to as shoytra [16, pp. 139–144].

This social structure developed significantly among the pastoral communities in the steppes, corresponding with the emergence of nomadic pastoralism [14, pp. 81–94].

In the works of ancient Greek historians, the term "ethnos" (people) was not applied to describe the nomadic pastoral tribes such as the Sarmatians, Dahae, Saka, and Massagetae. Additionally, their territories were not associated with specific names, and their ethnonyms were not explicitly mentioned. For example, this is evident in Herodotus' description: "These Massagetae are a brave and numerous tribe" [11], and in Strabo's account: "Each of the Massagetae and Saka tribes has its own name."

In the economic and daily life of the pastoral communities of Khorezm and the Aral Sea region, the production of tools and other items from bronze and later from iron played a significant role. It should be noted that, as in other parts of Central Asia, in the artisanal sectors of the Aral Sea communities, iron was initially considered a precious metal. It was used not only for practical purposes but also for ornamental items. For instance, an iron bracelet was discovered alongside bronze and silver ones in the Uygarak burial complex [7, p. 81]. Similarly, two iron bracelets were recovered from the Sakarchaga burial mound. These findings substantiate the aforementioned observations.

Among the grave goods recovered from Saka burial mounds were weapons, horse equipment, bronze harness elements, and decorative plaques. The bronze harness ornaments and plaques often featured depictions of predatory birds and animals with stylistic similarities. Decorations on horse gear, such as bronze cheekpieces, displayed imagery of predatory birds, leopards, and boars, crafted in the animalistic style characteristic of steppe nomadic art.

According to L.T. Yablonsky, the social system of the Saka and Khorezmian communities in the 7th–6th centuries BCE included warriors, cavalymen, priests, priestesses, and members of the clan communities, including impoverished individuals.

In burial mounds in the eastern Aral Sea region, artifacts such as ceremonial items and offerings were found in the graves of priestesses, while horse equipment was discovered in the graves of female cavalry warriors. These findings highlight the significant social status of women in the Saka-Massagetae societies and the persistence of matriarchal elements.

The existence of female leaders—"queen-rulers" such as Tomyris and Zarina—is noted in the works of Herodotus and Ctesias. These women were portrayed primarily as military leaders, demonstrating that they mastered the art of warfare alongside men. Based on historical accounts from Babylon and Assyria, where priestesses often bore the name "Tamaris," it has been hypothesized that Queen Tomyris was not only a military leader of the Massagetae but also their chief priestess [15, p. 172].

In the 7th century BCE, it is plausible that tribal leaders in the Khorezm oasis also performed the duties of chief priests, as clan and tribal members regarded their leaders as individuals who brought safety, prosperity, military success, and overall benefit to the community. Simultaneously, it is reasonable to assume the emergence of a distinct priestly class responsible for religious practices. By the early Iron Age, reverence for ancestral spirits, as well as worship of natural forces, the sun, and fire, gained importance among the Saka-Khorezmians [22, p. 151]. Under conditions of "military democracy," tribal deities embodied attributes of war, the sun, the heavens, and the clan's ancestral founders. Alongside these beliefs, specific rituals associated with the Avesta were performed. Priests were knowledgeable about clan traditions and customs, spreading beneficial knowledge among their kin.

The Avesta valued the labor of pastoralists and the bravery of cavalry warriors, providing detailed accounts of their weapons. The production of weapons and armor held significant

importance in Saka society. These items, along with horse equipment, were crafted in specialized workshops.

Written sources describe the military formations of the Saka and Massagetae, which included cavalry and infantry units.

The core of their military strength comprised mounted archers, who also wielded spears, battle axes, and daggers. Recent studies have examined the military equipment and tactics of ancient Aral Sea pastoralists as a dedicated subject of research. The Saka governance system was based on the leadership of large families and clans, with tribal leaders serving as key figures. Vital decisions were made at tribal councils or assemblies, where armed warriors discussed matters such as war and peace. In the 7th–6th centuries BCE, this system had not yet evolved into formal political administration, retaining traditional clan and tribal customs.

In the 1990s, members of the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition revisited the early history of statehood in the Khorezm region. According to O.A. Vishnevskaya and Y.A. Rapoport, the formation of an archaic state in the lower Amu Darya basin should be dated to the late 7th–6th centuries BCE. The ruins of the Koy-Krylgan Kala fortress offer significant evidence of this early phase of Khorezmian civilization and statehood [8, pp. 150–151]. However, earlier views and debates regarding the history of ancient Khorezmian statehood were neither addressed nor critically re-evaluated in subsequent academic literature.

It is noteworthy that these views, particularly those developed by members of the Khorezm archaeological expedition, provide critical insights.

During the 8th–7th centuries BCE, pastoral communities inhabiting the Aral Sea region achieved notable technical advancements in military practices and the production of weapons. Horse gear and bronze and iron weaponry unearthed from burial mounds at Tagisken, Uygarak, and Sakarchaga closely resemble the armaments of nomadic tribes from the Eurasian steppes, such as the Scythians and Sarmatians. Livestock was the primary wealth of these nomadic herders. In the "Yasht" section of the Avesta, it is recorded that tribal leaders and military commanders sacrificed "a hundred stallions, a thousand cattle, and countless sheep," reflecting the centrality of pastoral wealth. The text emphasizes, "We call for peace in pastures and abundant grazing for livestock," underscoring the importance of animal husbandry [1, pp. 22–23].

High-productivity livestock farming allowed communities to meet their nutritional and raw material needs more effectively than agriculture. This provided surplus resources for exchange and fulfilled daily requirements for wool, leather, and other materials. The pastoral economy significantly contributed to the material prosperity of these societies.

**Results.** The transition to nomadic pastoralism, driven by economic and demographic factors, necessitated the expansion of grazing territories, occupation of new pastures, and exploitation of natural resources. In such circumstances, the use of force to seize property and livestock from others became commonplace. Consequently, the development of military strategies and tactics advanced significantly.

The Avesta mentions double-edged arrows, stone maces, war axes, spears, daggers, shields, helmets, and chariots harnessed with horses, as well as "swift riders." It also describes past invasions, wars, pillaging, and the destruction of settlements [2, pp. 67–68].

In the history of ancient pastoral societies, the emergence of political unions and militarization was not solely for launching campaigns and raids against neighbors but was primarily aimed at protecting their territories, pastures, settlements, and livestock from external threats. This necessitated that every shepherd be armed and ready to strike in formation, whether on foot or



horseback. Such socio-political environments were far removed from the hypothetical scenarios of "internal exploitation" and "class stratification" often assumed in earlier theories.

According to V.N. Yagodin, during the late 7th and mid-6th centuries BCE, the Kozyalykyr site in western Khorezm served as a new political center. The state's borders were likely confined to the Sarykamysh region. Governance was based on the authority of a leader or "king," supported by tribal aristocracy and military power. Reception ceremonies and religious rituals involving fire worship were conducted within the palace of the inner fortress [3, pp. 28–29].

Research suggests that Kozyalykyr functioned as a military-administrative and religious center. During ceremonial events, the Sakian king would be seated on a throne placed in the spacious courtyard of the palace located in the inner fortress. Along the sides of the courtyard, benches constructed of raw bricks housed tribal nobility, while a high pedestal in the courtyard center supported a sacred fire altar.

The author of this dissertation also supports the notion that during the 7th–6th centuries BCE, the formation of statehood in Khorezm was influenced by socio-economic and military-political factors. However, it is argued that early state structures in the oasis region developed independently in separate areas (e.g., Kozyalykyr in the west and Hazarasp in the south). These structures were territorially confined and represented small-scale states, reflecting a broader regional pattern observed throughout Central Asia. This feature is considered applicable to Khorezm's historical development as well [21, pp. 202–203].

This perspective was influenced by the re-evaluation of early statehood history in the 1990s and early 21st century, incorporating new data and archaeological evidence. Concurrently, studies in Margiana and Bactria proposed that early Bronze Age states emerged within isolated agricultural oases. Excavations at Jarqoton in southern Uzbekistan revealed an inner fortress, palace, and temple [4, pp. 23–25].

Similar architectural structures were identified in Northern Afghanistan and the Lower Murghab oasis (e.g., Dashly, Gonur). Archaeological findings from agricultural communities indicate increasingly complex socio-economic relationships, highlighting the emergence of leaders responsible for production organization, adherence to communal customs, and regulation of social interactions. The development of an early monarchy resembling the ancient Eastern model, such as Margush in the Lower Murghab, was also suggested. Further studies addressed the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age and related issues of early state formation [13, pp. 3–11].

Based on new findings, several indicators of state formation in Khorezm during the late 7th century BCE were identified:

- The presence of a military-religious center with a comprehensive defense system, inner fortress, and palace.
- A fortified shelter for communities and their wealth during external threats.
- The development of craftsmanship, including the processing of iron and bronze, production of various metal items and weapons, ceramics, and architecture.
- The advancement of high-productivity livestock farming.
- Social stratification, encompassing herders, craftsmen, builders, common community members, tribal leaders, priests, and warriors [19, pp. 188].

The Kozyalykyr example illustrates that by the first half of the 6th century BCE, Khorezm's social relations had undergone complex transformations, as evidenced by the construction of a palace and a religious center within the inner fortress.

The construction of previously unknown military fortifications, defensive systems, and large edifices in the Khorezm oasis, the initial use of packed mud and raw bricks in construction and architecture, the dissemination of practical architectural knowledge and techniques, as well as the adoption of the potter's wheel and iron tools, are all recognized as consequences of migrations by the populations of Margiana and Bactria. During the Kuzaliqir cultural period, the development of statehood was initially based on the social relations, customs, and beliefs of clan-tribal systems. Governance was directed toward addressing the vital socio-economic, territorial, and military needs of communities. However, the rapid development of socio-economic relations and external interactions during this period led to the expansion and increasing complexity of administrative functions [17, pp. 127–128].

According to researchers, between 545 and 539 BCE, the Persian King Cyrus II conquered Margiana, Khorezm, Sogdiana, and Bactria, extending the territorial boundaries of the Achaemenid Empire to the Syr Darya basin and the northwestern regions of India [12, pp. 104]. However, the Saka-Massagetae nomads living in the steppes between the Caspian and Aral Seas remained independent of Persian rule. In 530 BCE, Cyrus II launched an unsuccessful campaign against them.

During the second phase of the Late Bronze Age, approximately in the 15th–10th centuries BCE, the widespread expansion of steppe pastoralists across Central Asia and Kazakhstan led to the development of a sedentary pastoralist culture with agricultural skills in the Aral region. Clan traditions and customs held a dominant position in their social structures.

In the third phase, encompassing the 9th–8th centuries BCE, according to the "Avesta," the southern regions of the area witnessed the reign of "Kavi-kings." Meanwhile, in the Eastern Aral region, particularly in the Northern Tagisken culture, the emergence of military leaders and the formation of early tribal unions began to take shape among pastoralist communities.

The fourth phase, spanning two stages, saw the unification of Saka clans in the Khorezm oasis and Eastern Aral region into military alliances during the 7th century BCE. These alliances produced weapons such as spears, daggers, axes, bows and arrows, and large knives, aimed at protecting their settlements and conducting external campaigns. This period also witnessed the increasing prestige of military functions, leaders, and warriors within society.

By the end of the 7th century BCE to the mid-6th century BCE, the Kuzaliqir culture emerged and developed, representing a significant innovation in Khorezm compared to earlier historical stages. The Saka-Khorezmians adapted to this new cultural environment. The Kuzaliqir fortress served as not only the political and religious center of the tribal confederation but also as a refuge for pastoralists and their livestock during external threats. Researchers link the meanings of concepts like "military fortifications" and "defensive structures" to the etymology of "Khorezm," interpreted as "hu-warazam," or "a land with good fortifications for livestock," based on the "Avesta" terms "wara" (fortress, defense) and "zam" (land, territory).

Earlier periods in Bactria and Sogdiana had already seen the construction of large fortified centers surrounded by defensive walls and containing inner citadels. Examples include Qiziltepa, Oltindilyor, and Otchopar in Bactria [18, pp. 85–86], as well as Uzunqir, Erqurgon, and Koktepa in Sogdiana, which provided refuge for agricultural and pastoral communities against military invasions.

In the Kuzaliqir fortress, the discovery of grain storage facilities, granaries, and ironworking workshops suggests its use as both an administrative center and a hub for economic and military activities. The material culture of Kuzaliqir includes handmade Saka-style ceramic vessels, bronze arrowheads, and horse equipment, alongside architectural and technological features such as large mudbrick structures, defensive systems, and pottery crafted on wheels. The dissemination of Zoroastrian burial practices reflects the influence of southern civilizations.

Sedentary pastoralist settlements such as Quisoy and Yassiqir were located along the Dovdon branch of the Amu Darya in the Kuzaliqir oasis. The population of southern Khorezm, particularly in the Khazarasp oasis near the Amu Darya, engaged in agriculture and craftsmanship, as evidenced by archaeological finds from Xumbuztepa, Qaratosh, and Toshsaqa [5, No. 1]. Additionally, the discovery of Qoshqala on the left bank of the middle Amu Darya, associated with the Kuzaliqir culture, has contributed to discussions on the ancient southern boundaries of Khorezm [10, p. 40–41]. This perspective is supported by Sh.T. Adilov's article, which posits that the settlement of Western Sogd-Bukhara oases during the 6th century BCE was directly influenced by Khorezmian migrations [3, pp. 124–125].

**Conclusion.** The evidence presented highlights the socio-economic and cultural transformation of Khorezm during the first half of the 6th century BCE. The expansion of territorial settlement, the emergence of fortified agricultural sites, and the advancement of craftsmanship signaled significant historical developments. These changes necessitated the evolution of leadership roles, including administrative and territorial governance, as the Khorezm population spread across regions such as the Saryqamish basin, ancient Amu Darya courses, and the Khazarasp and Qoshqala oases.

Early written sources associate the toponym "Khorezm" with the concept of a "country," as evidenced by its references in the "Avesta" as "Xvarizam" and in Old Persian as "Huvarazmis." Ancient Greek historians also referred to its inhabitants as "Chorasmians."

Additionally, the socio-economic administrative system saw advancements in planning, implementation, and regulation, influenced by the emergence of internal and external economic networks. By the first half of the 6th century BCE, Khorezm transitioned from tribal confederations of the 7th century BCE into a nascent monarchy. This process was driven by socio-economic, military, and cultural factors, with shared territory, ethnicity, language, material culture, and Zoroastrian religion serving as unifying elements.

The campaigns initiated by Persian King Cyrus II in 540 BCE and concluded under Darius I by 519 BCE integrated the sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic Saka of Central Asia into the Achaemenid Empire. As part of the 16th satrapy, which included Khorezm, Parthia, Areia, and Sogdiana, the region contributed not only silver taxes but also livestock, agricultural, and craft products. This integration into the Persian administrative system interrupted the independent development of local statehood traditions in the ancient territories of Central Asia.

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