



Sogdian Rural Communities: Structural Composition And Features

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Abstract. This article examines the socio-political and economic structures of Early Medieval Sogdiana through the analysis of written and archaeological sources. Particular attention is given to the development of rural communities, landownership patterns, and the emergence of the dehqon class as a new rural aristocracy. The study explores the etymology and social function of the term naf, a kin-based community structure comparable to the modern mahalla, and its role in organizing social life. Additionally, the presence and status of slaves (qul) and the lowest social group (bantak) are discussed within the broader context of social stratification. The analysis of archival documents, including the Mount Mug archive and the Samarkand Treaty, offers valuable insights into the property relations and communal organization in Sogdiana during the early 8th century. The findings demonstrate that Early Medieval Sogd society was marked by complex layers of kinship, landholding, and hierarchical relations that significantly influenced its political and economic development.

Keywords. Sogdiana, Early Middle Ages, dehqon, naf, rural community, landownership, social structure, slavery, Mount Mug archive, Samarkand Treaty, kinship, social hierarchy.

Introduction. Throughout various historical epochs, it has been observed that human beings have consistently united with one another, forming organized social groups. These unifications have played a significant role in periodizing history. The earliest stages of such social cohesion manifested in the form of primitive hordes, tribal communities, and confederations of tribes. It is undeniable that the gradual development of these collective structures eventually laid the groundwork for the emergence of statehood.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the rise and fall, revitalization, and the qualitative and quantitative transformations of such societies, it is essential to study their developmental trajectories. Neglecting the analysis of internal dynamics, external influences, and the socio-economic, political, and spiritual conditions that shaped these historical processes can result in a one-sided interpretation within the field of historical science.

Among the key factors ensuring societal sustainability were the mechanisms of organizational and economic management, resource conservation, and the equitable distribution of goods—all of which were regarded as essential even in ancient times. Notably, during the Early Middle Ages, regions of Central Asia, particularly Sogdiana—covering the Zarafshan and Kashkadarya river valleys—developed into a confederative system comprising nine administrative units (Samarkand as the center, along with Kesh, Nakhshab, Ishtikhan, Maimurg, Panch, Kabudon, Kushaniya, and Fayy). Each administrative unit consisted of several village communities.

Chinese chronicles even refer to the presence of 500 "cities" around the Kesh area. However, these were not cities in the classical sense, but rather a multitude of rural settlements. Similar patterns were evident in the neighboring region of Ustrushana, where numerous villages emerged in the Early Middle Ages, later evolving into urban centers. Therefore, village communities and their structural characteristics formed the backbone of Sogdian development, making their study crucial for understanding the broader historical context of the Early Medieval period in Central Asia.



During the Early Middle Ages, urban population growth, the expansion of handicrafts, and the intensification of both domestic and international trade led to a significant increase in the demand for agricultural products. Consequently, the areas surrounding cities saw a marked expansion of cultivated lands. As a result, villages gained substantial economic importance as stable sources of raw materials. This development elevated their status within the economic structure of the region and, simultaneously, brought about a gradual transformation in land relations—particularly concerning ownership and control over cultivated lands. Thus, the Early Middle Ages is often characterized as a period of profound changes in property relations.

The formation and development of rural settlements in Central Asia during this era have been extensively studied by M. Pardaev, who identified four main evolutionary trajectories of village development:

Fortified settlements constructed around the central cities of specific historical and cultural regions, intended as defensive structures against the raids of nomadic pastoralists. These were enclosed by protective walls and fortifications.

Sedentary settlements that emerged primarily from the fifth century onwards, due to the mass transition of nomadic populations to settled life, driven by social stratification and essential subsistence needs. These villages were initially established in steppe and desert regions and later extended to plains and foothills.

Newly cultivated settlements that arose as a result of the increasing economic significance of rural areas as vital sources of raw materials. This included the reclamation and irrigation of virgin and fallow lands to establish new productive oases.

Estate-based settlements that reflected the consolidation of landownership systems in the Early Middle Ages. These comprised large patriarchal estates managed by noble landowning farmers and were often located in close proximity to one another (approximately 600–800 meters apart), typically built in the form of fortified manors or compounds.

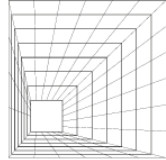
Acknowledging these classifications, it becomes clear that the formation of villages across the Central Asian region did not follow a uniform pattern, but rather varied according to specific geographical and ecological factors. In particular, the example of Sogdiana demonstrates how effective utilization of vital resources and early advancement in trade significantly contributed to the region's rural development and gradual urbanization.

The analysis of written and archaeological sources provides a broad and detailed understanding of the socio-political, economic, and ethno-cultural life of Sogdiana during the Early Middle Ages. Among these materials, particular attention is given to evidence regarding village life and the everyday conditions of the rural population. These sources allow researchers to draw well-founded conclusions about the dynamics of rural society in that era.

By the Early Middle Ages, favorable climatic conditions and geographically advantageous factors in Sogdiana had contributed significantly to changes in property relations and social stratification. These shifts were most visible in rural areas, where urban centers remained relatively few. One of the key transformations was the emergence of a new wealthy class in the countryside—the rural nobility—who began to be referred to as *dehqons* or “village lords.”

The *dehqons* represented a newly rising noble class that emerged during the final phase of the long-standing patriarchal system, in which the rural community formed the backbone of the agrarian economy. Over time, their influence grew to the extent that they played a decisive role in shaping the developmental trajectory of the country. Gradually, they came to occupy positions of both economic and political significance within the upper echelons of society.

These noble *dehqons* typically possessed luxurious residences and palatial estates in urban areas, often complemented by workshops, marketplaces, and artisan quarters. In rural areas, they held vast agricultural lands along with estates featuring pavilions, fortresses, water



mills (objuvoz), oil presses (moyjuvoz), and other infrastructural facilities. The rural population, in turn, was composed of several strata: dependent peasants (kadivars) subordinated to wealthy landowners, members of village communities, small-scale landowners, tenant farmers, slaves, female servants, and various laborers renting land for cultivation.

According to B. Ghoibov, the term “dehqon” in the Early Middle Ages denoted the leading social stratum responsible for managing land-based affairs. In Sogdiana, large landowners, local aristocrats, and at times even village elders were referred to as dehqons. These figures often resided in well-fortified castles and maintained control over entire villages. Thus, during this period, the village head or administrator was commonly known as a dehqon.

Etymologically, the term “dehqon” is rooted in a combination of Iranian and Turkic elements: diha (meaning “village” or “settlement”) and qoon (meaning “khan” or “ruler”). This linguistic construction is still evident today in place names such as Dehi-Baland (“Village on the Height”) and Dehi-Nav (“New Village”), derived from the diha component.

According to the researcher, the dissolution of the Kang state led to significant changes in landholding patterns in Sogdiana, resulting in the rapid emergence of dehqon-based property ownership. Multiple forms of land tenure developed, including private estates, communal lands, and holdings associated with Zoroastrian fire temples—known as vaghzē (βγνζ’yh). These arrangements reinforced the authority of local landed elites.

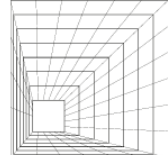
Over time, aristocrats (khvabū – γωβω) and free farmers (āzāt(kār) – ’z’t(k’r)) accumulated wealth and power, while members of the peasant communes (kashovarz – kšw’rz) became increasingly dependent on them, evolving into a subordinate class referred to as kadivar (k’δw’r), tied to land and labor.

Both archaeological findings and written sources support these observations. For instance, document A-13 from the Mug Mountain archive references a monetary tax payment for the use of a bridge. The letter was addressed by the people of Panjikent and the city tax collector to a tarxan—an official of the Turkic Khaganate responsible for tax collection. M. Iskhaqov, the Uzbek-language editor of the document, interprets this as evidence of the strong communal structure of the time. Furthermore, the very phrase “the people of Panjikent” indicates the existence of a collective identity and unity. It suggests that this community possessed a shared voice, a sense of self-worth, and an established identity, all of which highlight the presence of an early form of communal self-awareness.

The use of the term naf in Sogdian documents offers valuable insight into the social structure and communal organization of Early Medieval Sogdiana. As employed by scribes, naf referred not simply to a general populace but to kinship-based communities residing in a particular locality—resembling the contemporary concept of the mahalla. These kinship units likely included craftsmen, merchants, hired laborers (korikors), middle-ranking nobles, farmers, and herders, all of whom played integral roles in the economic and social life of the time.

Linguistically, the term naf is connected to the Persian-Tajik nāf, meaning “navel” or “center,” metaphorically indicating a familial or blood-bound core. Thus, the term connoted not only spatial proximity but also familial cohesion and shared identity. However, the extent to which enslaved individuals (qul) were considered part of the naf remains uncertain due to a lack of direct evidence in the sources. It is plausible that slaves, as a distinct class, were excluded from these kin-based community structures.

Documents from the Mount Mug archive (e.g., Nov. 3 and Nov. 4) and references to the “Samarkand Treaty” between Sogdian ruler Ghurak and the Arab governor Qutayba ibn Muslim confirm the existence of slavery in Sogd during the early 8th century. Enslaved individuals may have entered servitude through warfare, debt bondage, or domestic roles.



Additionally, the term *bantak* in Sogdian records appears to denote the lowest societal stratum, suggesting a rigid social hierarchy in which *naf* likely functioned as a structure for the free population.

These findings underscore the complexity of social categorization in Early Medieval Central Asia, revealing how kinship, class, and occupation intertwined within localized community frameworks.

Conclusion. The historical and archaeological evidence from Early Medieval Sogdiana offers a multidimensional view of rural socio-economic structures, property relations, and the emergence of local aristocracy. The period witnessed a gradual but significant transformation in land tenure, driven by favorable climatic and geographic conditions, resulting in the rise of the *dehqon* class—landholding nobles who became central figures in both the governance and economic life of rural communities. These *dehqons* not only owned vast agricultural lands but also exerted political and fiscal influence, gradually becoming a dominant force in the social hierarchy.

The diversification of land ownership—including private, communal, and temple estates—reflects the complexity of economic and legal systems in Sogdiana. The stratification of rural society into landowners, dependent peasants, and various tenant groups illustrates the consolidation of a feudal-like socio-economic structure. Moreover, written sources, such as the Mug archive documents, confirm the existence of strong community identity and organization, particularly in settlements like Panjikent. These findings underscore the critical role of villages in the broader process of urbanization and state formation in Early Medieval Central Asia.

In summary, the evolution of rural communities in Sogdiana reveals key patterns in the transformation of social order, economic relations, and local governance—elements that shaped the region's long-term historical trajectory.

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