

SOI: [1.1/TAS](#) DOI: [10.15863/TAS](#)
International Scientific Journal
Theoretical & Applied Science

p-ISSN: 2308-4944 (print) e-ISSN: 2409-0085 (online)

Year: 2025 Issue: 03 Volume: 143

Received: 20.03.2025
Accepted/Published: 30.03.2025 <https://T-Science.org>



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TASHKENT THROUGH THE AGES: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL LEGACY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP AND TRADE

Abstract: This paper explores the rich archaeological and cultural history of Tashkent, focusing on its evolution as a center of craftsmanship and trade from ancient times through the medieval period. Highlighting the significant archaeological findings from the region, the study examines the technological advancements in pottery, metalwork, and glassmaking, as well as the role of Tashkent in the Silk Road network. Special attention is given to the discovery of mercury-glazed pottery and its cultural significance, alongside the city's position as a major trade hub linking various cultures across Central Asia. By analyzing both the local and foreign influences that shaped Tashkent's artistic traditions, this paper provides valuable insights into the region's historical development and its impact on broader cultural exchanges.

Key words: Tashkent, archaeology, craftsmanship, Silk Road, pottery, metalwork, glassmaking, mercury-glazed pottery, trade, Central Asia, medieval period, cultural heritage.

Language: English

Citation: Aripdjanov, O. (2025). Tashkent through the ages: the archaeological and cultural legacy of craftsmanship and trade. *ISJ Theoretical & Applied Science*, 03 (143), 294-297.

Soi: <https://s-o-i.org/1.1/TAS-03-143-20> **Doi:** <https://dx.doi.org/10.15863/TAS.2025.03.143.20>

Scopus ASCC: 1200.

Introduction

The Tashkent Region Through Different Eras

The Tashkent region, historically known as Chach, Chachstan, and Shash in Arab sources, is located on the middle flow of the Syr Darya or Yakhartes rivers, with its core situated in the basins of the Chirchik and Ohangaron rivers. The region is surrounded by the powerful Tian Shan Mountain range from the northeast, east, and southeast, offering a varied and diverse geographical landscape [1, p. 4]. Choch-Iloq was one of the important regions in the development of the Uzbek people and Turkic culture, and many archaeological monuments from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages have been uncovered and studied here.

Tashkent's position at the crossroads of agricultural areas and the pastoral regions of deserts and mountains has sparked interest among historians. According to ancient Chinese sources, it was once part of the Shi region, with its importance in subsequent periods shown by sources referring to its involvement in various other territories [2, p. 15]. In Chinese, the

characters “石国” (Shi Guo) [3], meaning “stone city,” correspond to the Turkic name for Tashkent, which also means “stone city.” In the 7th century, the traveler Xuanzang passed through Choch and mentioned several large and small cities [4, p. 1857-1858]. In Arab manuscripts, Choch is often referred to as “the largest territory of Turkistan.” The Arab geographer Istakhri, writing in the mid-10th century, noted that there was no other country like Choch in terms of the number of villages, cultivated lands, mosques, and the strength and valor of its people, both in Khorasan and Transoxiana.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907), cultural exchanges between China and Shash left their mark in both written records and archaeological findings. Many foreign scholarly publications focus on these interactions, although they remain less known to our readers. Among these exchanges, we can observe depictions of Sogdian dancers and musicians performing the famous “Sogdian whirl” (Hutun) dance [5, p. 6-9].

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Tashkent as a Historical Center of Crafts and Trade

Along with other historical cities in the Tashkent region, the city of Tashkent has long been a center of craftsmanship, producing items made from ceramics, metals, wood, and precious stones, distinguishing it from other historical regions. Archaeological, ethnographic, and written sources provide valuable information about the unique schools of craftsmanship that developed here.

Some of the city's inhabitants engaged in trade. Choch, as the capital, was one of the bustling international trade centers. Tashkent served as a major trade hub, connecting various regions, and goods from distant lands were traded here. This, in turn, not only made the city an important center but also transformed the region into one of the key trade hubs along the Great Silk Roads. Numerous coins minted in various states, from the Byzantine Empire to China, have been found here, further confirming Tashkent's role in international trade.

In the 9th–12th centuries, Shash was the capital, and many researchers believe that the ancient part of Tashkent, known as the Eski Shahar, is located here. Archaeological excavations conducted over the years have confirmed this hypothesis [5, p. 26]. The city's geographical location along key trade routes played a crucial role in its prosperity.

Tashkent's Medieval Ceramics and Cultural Influences

The ceramic products of Tashkent in the Middle Ages reflect both the cultural influence of the Silk Road and local traditions. Craftsmen utilized local clay mixed with quartz sand and chamotte to produce high-quality ceramic items. The surfaces of ceramic products were often coated with lead-based glazes mixed with metal oxides such as copper and cobalt, creating delicate shades of green and blue. After applying the glaze, ceramics were fired a second time, resulting in a smooth and glossy finish.

Tashkent's glazed pottery, especially those in blue and turquoise, stood out from the products of other regions like Samarkand or Bukhara. Local ceramics were characterized by a dominance of green and brown hues, which made them distinctive. The archaeological excavations in the Tashkent region have uncovered these pottery examples, confirming the significant technological traditions of the area.

The Cultural Layers of Tashkent in the Middle Ages

In studying the cultural layers of medieval Tashkent, the production of ceramics in the Binkat area stands out due to its high quality and diversity compared to other regions. The quality and variety of the glazed ceramic products from this area indicate a high level of craftsmanship. For example, the decoration on the glazed pottery often includes geometric and floral motifs, such as spirals, leaves, lotuses, and complex symmetric patterns.

Occasionally, the ceramics feature inscriptions in Kufic script, including wishes or religious texts, giving these items spiritual significance. Some pottery even depicts animals, such as birds and fish, symbolizing prosperity.

Scholars S. Il'sova and Dj. Ilyasov discovered and studied over 20 wise sayings written on glazed ceramic vessels dating back to the 9th–10th centuries, publishing their findings in their monograph titled "There Is No Good in Wealth..." [6]. Additionally, 16 of these sayings were unique not only to Shash but to Central Asia as a whole. These inscriptions, often found on pottery, were primarily linked to the findings in Eastern Iran, showing the connection between the region's cultural exchanges.

A number of glazed ceramic vessels found in the Tashkent region are kept in the collections of the Uzbekistan National History Museum [7, p. 73]. Among these are vessels with epigraphic decorations from the city of Tashkent and a vessel depicting a horse from Nurafshan (Toytepa) dating back to the 10th–12th centuries.

Medieval Pottery and Technological Advancements

Starting from the second half of the 14th century, pottery production and decoration underwent significant changes in all leading ceramic centers of Central Asia. This shift in pottery style is closely linked to the rise of the Timurid Empire, particularly with Samarkand becoming the capital of Amir Timur's reign. New decorative techniques, such as cobalt blue decoration and transparent turquoise glaze, emerged during this period, reflecting the use of new technological methods and the spread of a new artistic style, which was largely influenced by the Timurid period [8, p. 44–45].

The development of high-quality glazed ceramics during the medieval period not only demonstrated the skill of craftsmen but also their deep knowledge of the technological processes involved in firing ceramics. This is evidenced by the sophisticated kilns found during archaeological excavations. For example, the two-chamber kiln from Shahrukhia, dated to the 16th–17th centuries, was divided into two sections: one for firing pottery and the other for burning fuel. The fine ceramics found here are distinguished by their refined blue-colored designs (see image 10).

Tashkent: A Major Center for Craftsmanship in the Middle Ages

Tashkent was one of the major centers of craftsmanship in the medieval period. The variety of decorative techniques and craftsmanship traditions applied in the production of pottery, glass, and metal objects suggests a high level of local and regional interaction. These crafts not only provided everyday goods for the local population but also facilitated economic and cultural ties with neighboring regions. The mining and glassmaking industries were crucial

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for supplying the necessary raw materials, and this connection to the local resources shows the technical expertise and availability of materials to local artisans.

Craftsmen in Tashkent created durable and aesthetically pleasing products, which gave them an edge in the trade markets of Central Asia. The detailed study of these artifacts not only helps us appreciate the craftsmanship of medieval artisans but also provides insight into the cultural and economic characteristics of Tashkent as an important cultural and commercial hub.

Pottery with Mercury Decorations in Medieval Tashkent

Another type of pottery found in Tashkent is the mercury-glazed vessels, often referred to as “simobkuzacha” (mercury-eyed) in scientific literature. These items were widely found in Tashkent and have been studied extensively. In particular, Y.F. Buryakov researched mercury-glazed pottery from the 10th-11th centuries in Central Asia and emphasized its spread and significance [8, p. 34]. Additionally, archaeological studies conducted in Shahruxhia and the Tashkent region have uncovered mercury-glazed vessels that shed light on this particular craft [9, p. 91, 96].

In the Tashkent region, particularly in the ruins of the ancient city of Kanka, over fifty mercury-glazed items were discovered and studied by archaeologists L.G. Brusenco and Z.S. Galieva [10, p. 214-216; 11, p. 130]. These vessels, with their distinct design and decoration, further attest to the flourishing pottery craft in this area.

In 1974, a significant find was made in the Kokcha area of Tashkent, where 108 mercury-glazed pottery vessels were discovered and are now preserved in the Uzbekistan National History Museum’s archaeology fund [12, 135-143]. These vessels, richly decorated with intricate designs, suggest the existence of specialized pottery workshops in the city, where such items were produced. The discovery of these vessels further

highlights Tashkent’s role as a key center of craftsmanship during the medieval period.

Specialized Pottery Workshops in Tashkent and Surrounding Areas

Mercury-glazed pottery workshops, specialized in producing these unique items, have been identified in the Tashkent region. One such workshop was found in the Chighatoy cemetery area of Tashkent [13, p. 159], where the remnants of mercury-glazed pottery production dating to the 10th-11th centuries were uncovered. Similar workshops have been found in the north-western part of Old Termez [14]. Excavations in these areas revealed kilns used for producing both glazed and non-glazed ceramics.

In Tashkent, several archaeological sites such as the Imloq and Kavardan [15, p. 91, 96] areas have revealed mercury-glazed vessels from the 10th-11th centuries. Moreover, the Taraz site (southern Kazakhstan) yielded over 300 mercury-glazed items during archaeological excavations [16, p. 255-266]. These findings further demonstrate the widespread use and production of mercury-glazed pottery in the region.

During the medieval period, one of the most developed sectors of Tashkent’s craftsmanship was mineral extraction, pottery, and glassmaking. These crafts, developed through cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, shaped local traditions while incorporating influences from other cultures. This fusion of techniques led to the establishment of a unique local style, which was well-recognized in trade markets across Central Asia.

Tashkent’s miners and craftsmen created high-quality products not only for daily use but also for trade with neighboring regions. The area’s resource-rich environment provided the necessary raw materials, which allowed local artisans to develop specialized skills in creating ceramics, glass, and metal objects. This technological expertise and the availability of resources supported the development of local crafts, which were highly sought after in Central Asia’s bustling trade routes.

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