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HISTORY AND STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE OLD CITY OF SAMARKAND

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Abstract

This article provides a scholarly analysis of the formation of the Old City of Samarkand, its historical stages of development, and the evolution of its urban planning structure across different historical periods. The research is based on a comparative study of archaeological evidence, historical written sources, and the results of contemporary urban studies. The development dynamics of Samarkand are examined from the ancient Afrasiyab period through the Timurid era and subsequent stages. The findings of the study serve as an important scientific basis for understanding the present-day cultural and landscape identity of the Old City of Samarkand.

Keywords

Samarkand, old city, Afrasiyab, urban planning, historical development, architectural space.

Introduction. Samarkand is one of the oldest urban centers in Central Asia, and its Old City embodies complex historical and urban planning processes that have evolved over millennia. Geographically, the city is located in the Zarafshan Valley, a region that has long provided favorable natural and climatic conditions for human settlement. From ancient times, Samarkand has been situated at the crossroads of major trade routes, a factor that directly influenced its socio-economic development and architectural growth. The concept of the "Old City" extends beyond administrative or territorial boundaries, encompassing historical memory, cultural layers, and a traditional urban environment. Therefore, a scholarly investigation of the formation stages of the Old City of Samarkand is of great importance for understanding the history of urban development.

As one of the major centers of ancient Eastern civilizations, Samarkand played a significant role in the formation of urban culture in Central Asia. Its geographical location within the Zarafshan Valley, combined with favorable natural and climatic conditions, created a strong foundation for early settlement and sustained urban development. Historical sources describe Samarkand as the political, economic, and cultural center of Sogdiana, and the continuity of habitation in the city demonstrates its distinctive urban stability [7, 11].

The concept of the Old City of Samarkand historically encompasses several spatial layers. Primarily, it is associated with the remains of the ancient city located in the Afrasiyab area, followed by the historical urban centers formed during the Islamic period and the Timurid era. These territories represent not merely a collection of architectural monuments but a complex spatial system reflecting the continuous development of historical urban planning principles [9].

In the context of contemporary urbanization, the preservation and development of historic cities constitute one of the most pressing scholarly challenges. In particular, in multilayered historic cities such as Samarkand, a comprehensive study of the formation stages of the Old City provides a scientific foundation for sustainable urban development, cultural heritage preservation,



and reconstruction processes [16]. For this reason, a step-by-step analysis of the historical development of the Old City of Samarkand is highly relevant for modern urban planning practice.

The aim of this research is to analyze the formation and stages of development of the Old City of Samarkand from historical and urban planning perspectives, focusing on the relationship between the evolution of urban space and natural-geographical, socio-political, and cultural factors.

Methods. This study employed historical-comparative, chronological, and morphological analysis methods. The research materials included the results of archaeological excavations conducted at the Afrasiyab site, written sources produced by Eastern and European historians, as well as contemporary scholarly studies in the fields of urban planning and architectural conservation. The development of the urban structure was analyzed in relation to natural and geographical factors, irrigation systems, and the spatial distribution of political and administrative centers. This methodological framework made it possible to examine the Old City of Samarkand as an integrated historical-spatial system.

The research was aimed at identifying the historical stages of development of the Old City of Samarkand and analyzing the evolution of its urban planning structure through a comprehensive scientific approach. Various types of sources were systematically collected and subjected to comparative analysis. Primary materials included the results of archaeological excavations at the Afrasiyab site, topographic plans, stratigraphic sections, and medieval written historical sources. These materials provided a crucial scientific basis for determining the initial formation of the urban area and tracing subsequent territorial shifts [7, 2].

Special attention was given to Eastern historical sources in the analysis of written materials. In particular, the works of authors such as Narshakhi, al-Istakhri, al-Muqaddas, and Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi were examined using the historical-critical method. Descriptions of the city, information on socio-economic activities, and data related to urban infrastructure found in these sources were compared with archaeological evidence in order to assess their historical reliability [3, 20].

Urban planning and architectural analysis methods were also applied in the study. The planning structure of the Old City of Samarkand was examined through morphological analysis. This method enabled the identification of the street network system, public centers, neighborhood (mahalla) structures, and the spatial distribution of religious and architectural objects, as well as the analysis of their transformation dynamics across historical periods. Morphological analysis contributed to identifying the historical continuity of urban space [9].

Using the chronological method, the stages of development of the Old City of Samarkand were defined in sequential order. This approach allowed for a consistent analysis of urban development from the Afrasiyab period to the Timurid era along a historical timeline. Each stage was evaluated in relation to specific historical, political, and social factors [12]. In addition, a comparative-analytical method was employed to compare the development characteristics of the Old City of Samarkand with those of other historic cities such as Bukhara, Khiva, and Tashkent. This approach helped to identify both regional urban development trends and the distinctive features of Samarkand's urban structure [5]. Within the framework of contemporary research, cartographic and visual analysis methods were applied. Historical maps, aerial photographs, and satellite images were used to analyze the spatial boundaries of the Old City and their changes over time. This method made it possible to identify the relationship between the historic urban space and modern urbanization processes [16].

Overall, the combination of applied methods enabled a comprehensive study of the Old City of Samarkand as a historical-spatial system. The research approach may serve as a



methodological foundation for studies in urban history, architecture, and cultural heritage preservation.

Discussion and Results. The formation and development of the Old City of Samarkand represent a continuous historical process that unfolded through several key urban development stages. The earliest stage is associated with the city of Afrasiyab, which functioned as the political and economic center of Sogdiana from the first millennium BCE. Archaeological evidence confirms that Afrasiyab was located on elevated terrain, surrounded by fortified defensive walls, and characterized by an internal structure divided into clearly defined functional zones [7, 11]. During this period, adaptation to natural relief and water resources constituted the primary principle of urban planning. The planning structure of Afrasiyab featured distinct central administrative and religious areas, while residential quarters were arranged around these core zones.

With the advent of Islamic culture, new urban planning elements emerged in the Old City of Samarkand. Mosques, madrasas, and commercial buildings became integral components of the urban fabric. In particular, markets and craft quarters located along caravan routes significantly stimulated the city's economic life. During this period, the urban territory shifted southward from Afrasiyab, leading to the formation of new urban centers. Streets were typically narrow and irregular, forming shaded and semi-enclosed spaces adapted to local climatic conditions [2, 3].

The subsequent stage, corresponding to the Timurid period, marked a new level of development for the Old City of Samarkand. The city was reorganized as a major political and cultural center, and architectural ensembles and open public spaces became key elements of its urban composition. Structures such as Registan Square, the Shahi Zinda complex, and the Bibi-Khanum Mosque occupied central positions within the urban space. During this period, the structure of the Old City was enriched by monumental architectural objects with symbolic and representational significance.

In the Timurid era, the development of the Old City of Samarkand reached a qualitatively new stage. With the city acquiring capital status, monumental architecture and expansive urban squares were formed. The transformation of Registan Square into the central core of urban composition generated new visual and symbolic axes within the Old City. Urban structure during this period acquired not only functional but also ideological and aesthetic meaning [10, 20].

In subsequent centuries, the Old City of Samarkand continued to develop while preserving its traditional structure. The mahalla system was consolidated as a fundamental element of urban social life. Residential buildings were organized around inner courtyards, forming enclosed and introverted spatial configurations. Streets remained narrow and winding, providing shade and natural ventilation in response to climatic conditions. This structure continues to represent a key spatial characteristic of the Old City of Samarkand today.

Based on cartographic and spatial analysis, the boundaries of the Old City of Samarkand remained relatively stable over time, while its internal spatial structure underwent continuous transformation. Although modern urbanization processes have caused significant damage to the historic urban environment, the Old City still functions as a key cultural and historical identifier of Samarkand [16].

In general, the development of the Old City of Samarkand can be characterized as a multi-layered and adaptive process, in which each historical stage left distinctive architectural and planning traces within the urban space. This characteristic makes Samarkand a unique example of historic urban development in Central Asia.



The development of the Old City of Samarkand should be understood not merely as a sequence of historical stages, but as a living urban space formed within the framework of a historical urban landscape. In this context, the city is not viewed as a collection of isolated monuments, but as a complex system shaped by the interaction of cultural, social, and spatial layers. This conceptual approach constitutes an element of scientific novelty in the study, enabling the analysis of the Old City of Samarkand in connection with contemporary theories of historical urbanism and sustainable development [1, 14].

The stages of development of the Old City of Samarkand can thus be interpreted through the concept of the historical urban landscape, with the urban structures of the Afrasiyab and Timurid periods viewed as components of a unified chain of urban evolution. Furthermore, the stability and adaptability of urban space are closely linked to the traditional mahalla system and climate-responsive planning solutions. These aspects may be regarded as a new methodological approach in the study of Samarkand's urban history.

Conclusion. The formation and development of the Old City of Samarkand represent a continuous historical-spatial process. The analysis of archaeological, historical, and urban planning materials demonstrates that, beginning from the ancient Afrasiyab period, Samarkand evolved as a multilayered urban system, with each historical stage adapting its spatial structure to new social, political, and cultural conditions. The development of urban space was closely linked to natural relief, irrigation systems, trade routes, and processes of political centralization, which together constituted key factors ensuring the urban resilience and long-term stability of the Old City of Samarkand. In this context, the preservation of the Old City's spatial structure is of critical importance in the implementation of conservation, reconstruction, and adaptive development projects, as well as in the realization of new construction and infrastructure initiatives within historic areas. Maintaining the integrity of the historical urban fabric is essential for sustaining the cultural and spatial identity of the city.

The results of this study are of significant scientific and practical value for the development of future urban strategies for Samarkand, particularly in addressing the challenge of balancing contemporary urban needs with the preservation of the historic urban environment. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Samarkand as a living historical city and provide a methodological foundation for sustainable urban development policies in historic urban contexts.

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