



THE NUR FORTRESS (NURATA) IN WRITTEN SOURCES AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE 2024 EXCAVATIONS

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Abstract. *The article examines the historical background of the Nur fortress, the ancient core of present-day Nurata in the Navoi region of Uzbekistan, on the basis of written sources, the history of archaeological research and the first results of the excavations carried out in May–June 2024 by the Samarkand Institute of Archaeology. The fortress, which covers about 2.5 hectares on a hill at the foot of the Nurata mountains, was the northernmost fortified town of Sogdiana and controlled the route linking the lower Zarafshan valley with the steppes of present-day southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye. The article summarises the results of earlier research by Ya. G'ulomov, Kh. Mukhamedov and L. P. Smirnova, analyses the references to Nur in the works of Narshakhi and in the accounts of the Mongol conquest of 1220, and traces the political history of the town in the period of the Uzbek khanates and the Emirate of Bukhara up to the late nineteenth century. It then sets out the objectives and methodology of the 2024 excavations, which for the first time combined area excavation in the citadel with stratigraphic trenches in the citadel and the town wall, and which yielded materials dating from the antique period (fourth–third centuries BC) to the nineteenth century.*

Keywords: *Nur fortress, Nurata, Sogdiana, citadel, defensive wall, Narshakhi, Mongol conquest, Emirate of Bukhara, archaeological excavation, stratigraphy.*

INTRODUCTION

It is well known from the history of Central Asia that the development and defence of large capital cities required the construction, at no great distance from them, of towns of military and strategic importance. One of these towns was Nur – the Nur fortress, or the ancient town of Nurata – founded in the northern part of Sogd. As one of the ancient towns of Central Asia, Nur played an important political, economic and military-strategic role in the history of Sogdiana and Mawarannahr (Samarkand Institute of Archaeology [SIA], 2024:7).

The fortress stands on a hill at the foot of a large mountain to the south of the modern town of Nurata in the Navoi region. Its total area is approximately 2.5 hectares. Only part of the internal architectural layout of the fortress has survived. Its external watchtower stands on the top of the hill and measures 26×26 m; it is surrounded by high and thick defensive walls (SIA, 2024:7). Despite the importance of the site, written sources and earlier investigations do not provide a complete picture of the history of its foundation, the stages of its development, its architecture and its crafts. This gap determined the need for new excavations, which were carried out in May–June 2024 by the Samarkand Institute of Archaeology named after Ya. G‘ulomov with the financial support of the Cultural Heritage Department of the Navoi region.

The aim of this article is to bring together the evidence of written sources and earlier archaeological research on the Nur fortress and to set out, against this background, the objectives and first results of the 2024 excavations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on the report on the archaeological excavations carried out at the Nur fortress in May–June 2024 (SIA, 2024), on published archaeological research on the site, and on narrative sources on the history of Bukhara and Mawarannahr, including the History of Bukhara by Narshakhi, the accounts of the Mongol conquest and the Dastur al-muluk of Sayyid Termizi. The historical-comparative method, source analysis and the traditional methods of archaeological field and laboratory research were used. The fieldwork in 2024 combined planographic excavation of the central part of the citadel with stratigraphic trenches, which made it possible to establish the chronological sequence of the cultural layers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Earlier archaeological research. The first archaeological reconnaissance at the Nur fortress was carried out in 1960 under the direction of Ya. G‘ulomov. On the basis of the data obtained, he concluded that the town took shape around the fourth–third centuries BC, that is, in the antique period (Gulyamov, 1979). This conclusion placed Nur among the oldest urban centres of the northern part of Sogdiana.

In 1961, reconnaissance research directed by Kh. Mukhamedov examined the defensive structures of the region. According to his observations, the Nurata mountain

range protected the Zarafshan oasis from the dust storms carried across the Kyzylkum desert, while strong defensive walls built around the agricultural oasis protected the region from enemies. Among the local population this wall was known as “Pirosta”, and it was said to have been built in the sixth century AD (Mukhamedov, 1961). These observations show that the Nur fortress was part of a broader system of fortifications that protected the oases of the lower Zarafshan from the steppe.

In 1993, L. P. Smirnova noted that the large towns of the lower Zarafshan valley – Bukhara, Karmana, Paykend and others – maintained regular trade and cultural relations through Nur with the towns of present-day southern Kazakhstan and Semirechye, and that Nur, as the northernmost town of Sogdiana, was of great military-strategic importance (Smirnova, 1993). Thus, Nur was not only a frontier stronghold but also a gateway through which the sedentary world of Sogdiana communicated with the regions to the north.

Nur in early medieval written sources. Medieval written sources contain more information about Nur. In his History of Bukhara, Muhammad ibn Ja‘far al-Narshakhi states that even before the city of Bukhara appeared, some of its villages already existed, and among them he mentions Nur, Kharqanrud, Vardana, Tarovcha, Safna and Isfana (Narshakhi, 1995). This statement, although it reflects the historical tradition of the tenth century rather than direct evidence, indicates that Nur was regarded as one of the most ancient settlements of the Bukhara region. In the Bukhara emirate, besides Nurata, there were also place names such as Nurqadam and Nurbuloq; the source specialist Sh. Kamoliddinov noted that medieval sources applied the name Nur also to the mountains near these places (Kamoliddinov, 1993).

Nur and the Mongol conquest. The importance of Nur as a fortified town is clearly reflected in the accounts of the Mongol conquest. According to the data summarised in the History of the Uzbek SSR, the Persian historian Juzjani, who lived in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, put the garrison of Nur at 12,000 men, while the historian Juvayni stated that it numbered about 20,000 warriors (History of the Uzbek SSR, 1970:429–430). Whatever the exact figure, both authors present Nur as a substantial military centre.

The Hungarian scholar Hermann Vámbéry, in his History of Bukhara or Transoxiana, retells the story of how Nur was taken, emphasising that the fortress was so strong that it was captured not by force but by stratagem (Vambéry, 1990). According to this

account, which goes back to the Persian historians of the Mongol period, Chinggis Khan, marching with his son Tolui from Otrar towards Bukhara, first took the town of Sartaq to the north of Bukhara without a fight and renamed it Qutlugh. The next town he conquered in the Bukhara oasis was Nur. The Mongols approached Nur by a new road with the help of Turkmen guides; this road was long afterwards called the “Khan’s road”. The attack on the fortress was led by a commander named Tayir Bahadur. Long ladders were made in the forests to the north of Nur, carried on horseback and by hand and placed against the town walls. Tayir Bahadur informed the inhabitants of Nur that a powerful Mongol khan was approaching and promised that no harm would come to anyone if they surrendered the town voluntarily. The gates were then opened. In accordance with the agreement, the inhabitants left the town, leaving behind the tools and livestock needed for agriculture. After occupying the town, the Mongols agreed with the negotiators on the amount of tribute and dismissed them courteously. Chinggis Khan then left Nur for Bukhara at the beginning of the month of Muharram in 1220 and pitched his tents beside the walls of Bukhara (Vambery, 1990).

This episode is significant for the history of the fortress in several respects. First, it confirms that in the early thirteenth century Nur was a well-fortified town whose capture by direct assault was considered difficult. Second, it shows that Nur lay on the route from the northern steppes to Bukhara and therefore served as the first line of defence of the Bukhara oasis from the north. Third, the peaceful surrender of the town may explain why life at Nur continued after the Mongol conquest, as the archaeological materials of later periods confirm.

Nur in the Timurid period and in the period of the Uzbek khanates. It is well known from history that in the Timurid period Nurata was one of the political, socio-economic and trade centres of the Bukhara oasis. After the Timurid dynasty, Mawarannahr was divided into the Bukhara and Khiva khanates. The history of these states, known as the Uzbek khanates, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries was marked by internal conflicts, and Nurata did not remain aloof from them. According to the sources, at the end of the seventeenth century Nurata was governed by Termizbek of the Jalayir tribe of the Uzbeks (Termizi, 1952). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Nurata passed into the hands of the Burkut clan of the Dasht-i Qipchaq; in the second half of the eighteenth century it came under the control of Muhammad Rahim Khan, the

founder of the Manghit dynasty of Bukhara, and after him it passed again to the Burkut clan (Semenov, 1954).

Nur in the late nineteenth century. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the emir of Bukhara Muzaffar appointed his son Abdulahad as bek of Nurata. Under Abdulahad, Nurata, being located on a trade route, developed rapidly in all spheres and even became the second most important trade centre after Bukhara. Crafts reached a high level of development, and the products of Nurata craftsmen were exported to neighbouring countries such as China, Iran, Bulgaria and Afghanistan (Mirzaev & Akhmatqulov, 2018). Historical sources indicate that life in the Nur fortress continued until the end of the nineteenth century, since the fortified town of Nur housed the residence of the Nurata bekdom of the Emirate of Bukhara (SIA, 2024:10).

The need for new excavations. However numerous the written and historical sources on the town and fortress of Nur may be, they cannot provide complete information about the fortress itself. They record political events, rulers and military episodes, but they say almost nothing about the date of the foundation of the fortress, the stages of its development, its architecture and its crafts. These questions can be answered only by archaeological research. For this reason, in the summer of 2024 the expedition of the Samarkand Institute of Archaeology carried out excavations at three points of the site: an area excavation in the centre of the citadel (Excavation 1), a stratigraphic trench in its south-eastern edge (Excavation 2), and a stratigraphic trench across the town's defensive wall in order to establish when it was built (Excavation 3) (SIA, 2024:10). The aims of the work were to clarify the chronological limits of the site and to prepare it for museumification (SIA, 2024:6).

First results of Excavation 1. Excavation 1 was laid out near the centre of the citadel and covered an area of 12×8 m. In the course of the work, Room 2, located on the south-western side, was fully exposed, while Rooms 1, 3, 4 and 5 were partially exposed within the excavated area. It was established that, as in all the towns of Mawarannahr, the builders of the Nur fortress mainly used mud brick, pakhsa (rammed earth) and baked brick, and in many cases also mountain stone (SIA, 2024:10). The extensive use of stone evidently reflects the location of the fortress at the foot of the Nurata mountains, where this material was readily available.

Chronology of the site. The study of the new archaeological materials obtained during the 2024 excavations has, for the first time, provided data relating to the antique

period (fourth–third centuries BC), the early medieval period (fifth–eighth centuries), the medieval period (tenth–twelfth centuries) and the late medieval period (fourteenth–sixteenth and seventeenth–nineteenth centuries) (SIA, 2024:6). These results confirm Ya. G‘ulomov’s conclusion about the antique origin of the town and show that life at Nur continued, with interruptions and reconstructions, for more than two thousand years – a conclusion consistent with the written evidence that the fortress remained the residence of the Nurata bek until the end of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The Nur fortress was one of the most important strongholds of northern Sogdiana and of the Bukhara oasis. Written sources – from Narshakhi’s History of Bukhara to the accounts of the Mongol conquest and the chronicles of the Uzbek khanates – show that Nur was regarded as one of the oldest settlements of the region, that it was a well-fortified town on the route from the northern steppes to Bukhara, that it was taken by Chinggis Khan in 1220 by stratagem rather than by force, and that until the end of the nineteenth century it served as the residence of the governors of Nurata. Earlier archaeological research by Ya. G‘ulomov, Kh. Mukhamedov and L. P. Smirnova established the antique origin of the town and its place in the defensive and trade system of the lower Zarafshan. The 2024 excavations, combining area excavation in the citadel with stratigraphic trenches in the citadel and the defensive wall, have for the first time provided archaeological materials covering the period from the fourth–third centuries BC to the nineteenth century. Further research at the site will make it possible to reconstruct the architecture and crafts of the fortress in detail and to create a scientific basis for its museumification and inclusion in tourist routes.

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