

FOLK LEGENDS AND ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA ON SUFI OBJECTS OF THE MEDIEVAL OTRAR¹

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of the study on the comparison of folk legends both known in an oral form and fixed in the written sources and data of archeological research of the medieval city Otrar, which was one of the centers of the historical region of Turkestan. Legends about Arystan Bab, a mentor of the famous Turkic Sufi Khoja Ahmet Yassawi, were the object of this study in the first place. Materials reflected in the local historical memory together with the data obtained during the archeological observation within the restoration works of Arystan Bab Mausoleum point to that he was a real historical figure, living in Otrar (Farab) in 11th-12th centuries and contradict to the identification of Arystan Bab with Salman al-Farsi. Archeological research of Kuiryktobe hillfort and cross-referencing of its results with local historical data suggest that Arystan Bab's Sufi community location, where he taught his disciples, including Khoja Ahmet Yassawi, was situated in Kuiryktobe hillfort, a suburban settlement of medieval Otrar. Being noted in the written sources as Sufi-Khana, the location of the Sufi community, headed by Khoja Ahmet Yassawi's disciple Sufi Danishmend, probably corresponds to the knoll of Sopy Danyshpan in the Otrar suburbs. Archeological excavation of the part of knoll revealed the untypical materials of the 12th-13th centuries. To make the final conclusion on the matching of the Sopy Danyshpan knoll with Sufi-Khana from the written sources, however, the further excavation works are needed.

Keywords:

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INTRODUCTION

The peoples living in the territories of Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, are known for their rich culture and multi-ethnicity, for example, today about 130 nationalities and ethnic groups live in Kazakhstan peacefully (APENDIYEV et al., 2019). The history of multinational nature of the Central Asian peoples has long been attracting the interest of researchers (APENDIYEV et al., 2016; APENDIYEV et al., 2017). Islamization occupies a special place in the history of Turkic peoples living in Central Asia.

The Islamization of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia took place primarily in the form of Sufism, which for many centuries determined the spiritual life of the local population. The medieval city of Otrar was one of the centers of the historical region of Turkestan, where originated the Yassawiya Sufi brotherhood (Jahriyya). The Arystan Bab Mausoleum, which is located 3 km from the central ruins of the medieval city Otrar, is currently one of the most visited shrines in Kazakhstan. The ruins of Otrar are located on the southern edge of the village Talapty, 11.5 km west of the Timur railway station, near the confluence of the Arys River to the Syr Darya (Kazakhstan, Turkestan region, Otrar district) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Central part of Otrar hillfort (Aerial photograph by Renato Sala and Jean-Marc Deom)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to elucidate the problem of identification of the great Sufi Arystan Bab with Salman al-Farsi by means of a thorough study and comparison of folk legends both known in an oral form and fixed in the written sources and data of archeological research of the medieval city Otrar. The object of this study were legends about Arystan Bab, a mentor of the famous Turkic Sufi

Khoja Ahmet Yassawi. The paper employs general scientific methods of research, such as analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction, scientific abstraction. This study also provides for excavation works needed to obtain more knowledge on the problem under study. In the spring of 2004, 6 small pits were dug along the outer perimeter of the walls of the mausoleum-mosque of Arystan Bab. In none of them were found the remains of walls, facing slabs or bricks of the middle ages. However, in the summer of 2004, during the renovation works inside the building, the tomb was deepened by 35 cm from the current floor level, which revealed a corner of the old brick tombstone, the dimensions of which vary between 18 x 9 x 3.5 cm and 19.5 x 15.5 x 4.5 cm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scattered information about Arystan Bab and his grave can be found in different articles, in almost all research works on the archeology of Otrar, from the first descriptions of antiquities of the late 19th century to monographs about the medieval city, works on the Sufism history in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. However, Arystan Bab remains “a mysterious figure”, as was noted by the famous American scholar Devin DeWeese (2001: 220).

Arystan Bab is credited with a story with an errand given by the prophet Muhammad. According to Nar-Muhammad’s mullah Aziz-Arslanbaev: “Arystan Bab was born during the lifetime of Muhammad and personally buried him. From Muhammad he received a persimmon (date) and a prophecy about the birth of Hazret, to whom the date was to be passed in memory of Muhammad. Having fulfilled this errand, Arystan Bab died when he was 900 years old” (CHERKASOV, 1903: 72).

In the work “Makamat” by Sheikh Nuriddin Basir, dating from the middle of the 15th century, it is stated that the original apprenticeship of Khoja Ahmet Yassawi was held by Salman al-Farsi, who received persimmon from the Prophet and was his disciple (KARIMOV, 2000: 31-32).

However, there is absolutely no historically reliable evidence that a contemporary of the Prophet Salman al-Farsi has ever been anywhere around the area of the Middle Syr Darya. In 712-713, Muslim troops first appeared on the territory of southern Kazakhstan (GOIBOV, 1989: 52). There are known campaigns of the Arabs to the Syr Darya in 737 and 739 (KALININA, 1988: 91). Therefore, Arystan Bab cannot be identified with Salman al-Farsi, who died in 655-657, whereas his grave is located in Madaina, Iraq (KLIMOVICH, 1990: 36).

Orientalist A. Muminov (1996) published a remarkable extract from the work “al-Kand Fi Zikr ‘ulama’ Samarkand”, which refers to the residence in the first half of the 11th century in Otrar of a man who was considered a companion of the prophet. With reference to Najm ad-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar ibn Muḥammad an-Nasafī (1068-1142) and other informants, the treatise discloses the following: “...it was reported to us by Abu’l-Muzaffar Mansur Ibn Huqaym al-Ashbarayani – he said in Ahsiqas in Jumada II 419/ June-July 1028:

“A man, a baker, came to our village and told us that he had visited (vilayat) Ispijab (district) is the area of Barab, where he met a man who said that he was a companion of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). I went to him in Farab, saw him, and he gave us this Hadith from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

Mansur Ibn Huqaym was 115 years old or so. He said: “(The man) told: the one who accompanied the Prophet of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in the war of Tabuk told us: ‘and the whip fell from his (hands), I picked it up and brought it to Him. He said, ‘may Allah prolong your life for a

long time.’ And he lived (ar-Rumi) 340 years or so. And he passed on 14 hadiths” (MUMINOV, 1996: 116).

There are a number of coincidences. Abu Jafar Muhammad Ibn Nastur (Nestor) ar-Rumi and Arystan Bab lived in the same area, approximately at the same time. Both were considered companions of the prophet Muhammad, who lived for hundreds of years. These coincidences suggest that Abu Jafar Muhammad Ibn Nastur (Nestor) ar-Rumi and Arystan Bab are the same person.

The name of the Saint Arystan Bab (other spellings of his name – Arslan Bab, Bab Arslan, Arystanbab) is of Arabic-Muslim origin, it is formed by the addition of two elements Arystan-Arslan + Bab. The first element of the name – أرسلان “Arslan”, according to the composition of the 11th century “Diwan Lugat at-Turk” by Mahmud al-Kashgari, translates as “lion”. Moreover, the author of the first dictionary of Turkic vocabulary added that with this word “the kings were called” (al-KASHGARI, 2005: 1050). The key to understanding the second part of the word “Bab” was given by academician V. V. Barthold, who, relying on historical data, noted that it means “the gate” and was used to refer to the propagators of Islam (BARTHOLD, 1968:118). That is, in literal translation, Arystan Bab means “Lion’s, king’s gate, lion Saint”. In the late 20th century, it was heard that Mamasadyk Narymbetov, a descendant of the guardians of the Holy Site, explained to pilgrims that the word Arystan Bab means “the great gate of Islam.”

But such a simple translation does not explain much. The Kazakh epic “Alpamys” describes how a childless old couple traveled to many Holy Sites with a request that God send them a child. In the end, they met the Saint Baba-Tukty – Shashty Aziz, who informs them that all the Saints, led by Arystan Bab, asked God and God gave them a generous gift (KAZAKH FOLK LITERATURE, 1986: 195). According to the records of the famous collector of folklore A. A. Divaev, Arystan Bab was the eldest among the Saints (DIVAEV, 1899: 4).

The term “Bab” in proper names of Saints became the equivalent of the concept “Saint, patron” (SEVORTYAN, 1978: 10-13). The work of the 11th century “Kashf al-Mahjub” notes that “they call all the dervishes of this country as ‘Bab’. Along with ‘Bab’, the term ‘Baba’ was used (more often ‘Ata’ among the Turks). Perhaps the title ‘Bab’ was a localized version of ‘Baba” (DeWEESE, & MUMINOV, 2013: 220-221). Thus, Arystan Bab is most likely not a name, but a lakab – an honorary by-name, indicating that its bearer occupies one of the highest levels in the hierarchy of Muslim Saints in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

One of the remarkable sources about Arystan Bab is the work by Khoja Ahmed Yassawi “Devoni hikmat”, which is one of the earliest monuments of Turkish-language Sufi literature. The work also contains historical information. According to “Devoni hikmat”, it was Arystan Bab who taught Khoja Ahmed Yassawi “thousands of dhikr” (YASSAWI, 2004: 8). Early Sufi figures of authority emphasized dhikr as the basis of the Sufi path. It was believed that the constant sending of dhikr brought the Sufi to a state of approaching to God. The dhikr of the Yasaviya Sufi brotherhood had its peculiarity. It was loud, accompanied by singing and body movements. Such dhikr is known as jahria, or jahr. By the name of the dhikr, Yasaviya Sufi brotherhood was called Jahria. The famous orientalist N. I. Veselovsky in his manuscript “Description of the ruins of ancient cities on the road from Kazala to Tashkent”, which dates from 1884-1885, noted that Khoja Ahmed Yassawi is a disciple of “Pir (Ishan) Arslan-baba, resident of Turkistan and the head of Jahria sect, widely spread in the Moslem world” (KOJA, 2008: 11).

Information about the apprenticeship of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi with Arystan Bab is found in the hagiographic work of Fakhr al-Din ‘Ali ibn Husain Wāiz Kāshifī (d. 939/1532) “Rashahat ain al-Hayat” (“Beads of Dew from the Source of Life”), in the treatise by Muhammad al-‘Alim al-Siddiqi al-‘Alavi (b. 1564-65, died 1635) “Lāmahat min nafahat al-Quds” and in the work by Mawlana Muhammad Sharif al-Husayni al-Alavi al-Bukhari (d. 1679) “Hujjat al-Zakarīn” (KARIMOV, 2000; DeWEESE, 2001: 220).

References to his figure in a number of sources allow considering him a real historical person. According to the British researcher Trimmingham (1989: 54) “Ahmad al-Yassawi is considered to be the ancestor of all the Turkish Sufis... The Yassawi’s tradition has been Turkic since its foundation. Ahmad began his training under the guidance of the Turkic Sheikh Arslan Baba”.

Terms of training are specified differently in different sources. In “Nasab-nama” (edition “Kara-Asman”) it is stated that “Arslan Baba ... was trained (by Yassawi) for quite a long time” (DeWEESE, & MUMINOV, 2008: 229). Some researchers believe that Khoja Ahmed Yassawi was trained and educated by Sheikh Arystan Bab for almost 16 years. When Ahmed was 23 years old, his mentor died and was buried in the suburbs of Otrar (PYLEV, 1997: 32).

The burial place of Arystan Bab in Otrar (Fig. 2), according to written sources, became a pilgrimage destination during the life of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi. In the genealogical tree of Khoja “Nasab-nama” (edition “Kara-Asman”) it is stated that after the death of Arystan Bab, “Yassawi Ahmad-Khoja traveled for a pilgrimage to his grave in Utrar” (DeWEESE, & MUMINOV, 2008: 229).



Fig. 2: Arystan Bab Mausoleum

In the historical work of the late 19th century “Tarikh-i Jadida-yi Tashkand” by Muhammad-Salih, it is noted: “The blessed grave of Hazrat Arslan Bab [is located] in that area, near the Seykhun River and this is the place of pilgrimage for all the Turks of Desht-i Qipchaq (Cumania). Usually, merchants of these regions stop there to make a pilgrimage and ask for help and blessings from the Saint” (ABUSEITOVA, 2007: 391). This data is the important evidence that the cult of the Muslim Saint Arystan Bab was spread in Otrar. And nowadays, the mausoleum-mosque above the grave of Saint Arystan Bab is an object of mass pilgrimage for Muslims of Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The structure erected over the grave of the Muslim Sheikh Arystan Bab (Arslan Bab) was first described in a concise manner in the academic literature in 1898 by an engineer, a member of the Turkestan group of amateur archeologists I. T. Poslavsky (1853-1914), who visited the ruins of Otrar: “Ancient Otrar consisted, similar to almost all Central Asian cities, of a fortress,

a city proper, and extensive suburbs, behind which more gardens stretched, spreading out maybe more than 100² versts on the whole. From the side of Arystan Bab, a few versts from the citadel, there is still an ancient cemetery that serves as a burial place to this day and it is located in the suburbs of the former city, along with the Mazār of Saint Arslan Baba; later, a mosque was built near the temple and a shallow well with beautiful pure water was dug” (POSLAVSKY, 1898: 236-238). The orientalist N. Lykoshin who examined the antiquities of Otrar in 1899 only mentioned “The tomb of the Muslim Saint Arslan Bab” (LYKOSHIN, 1899: 171). In 1909, the old building of the mausoleum was dismantled and a new, larger memorial structure was built in its place.

In the spring of 2004, at the request of the restorers, we dug 6 small pits along the outer perimeter of the walls of the mausoleum-mosque of Arystan Bab. In none of them were found the remains of walls, facing slabs or bricks of the middle ages. However, in the summer of 2004, during the renovation works inside the building, the tomb was deepened by 35 cm from the current floor level. At a 12 cm recess, a corner of the old brick tombstone was found, the dimensions of which vary between 18 x 9 x 3.5 cm and 19.5 x 15.5 x 4.5 cm (KOZHA, & AKYLBEK, 2007: 319-323; AKYLBEK, 2009: 89-90). A brick close in size to the first one was found in the late Karakhanid horizon of V central knoll of Otrar (AKISHEV et al., 1987: 15). Thus, the archaeological research works inside the tomb confirm that Arystan Bab was a contemporary of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi and was buried in the 12th century.

Cherkasov in 1903, based on the local resident survey data about the monuments nearest to the ruins of Otrar, pointed to the second object associated with the name of Arystan Bab: “On some of the knolls, there were found traces of housing (broken shards, bricks), and local residents refer to them as the place of residence of the masters of Otrar, which explains some of the names. For example, the knoll of Altyn-Tyube, located 6 miles away, is considered to be the place of the mint and treasury, and the residence of the tax collector; Psyakchi-Tyube, being three miles away, is referred to as the residence of the blacksmiths and cutlers; Kara-Kunchik – residence of leather workers; *Arstan Bab, being 3.5 versts away, is the site of the main mosque in honor of the local Saint Arslan Bab*” (CHERKASOV, 1903: 72).

Knowing the distance of the site of the main mosque of Arystan Bab from the ruins of Otrar helps to localize this object. Apart from the indicated site of the main mosque of Arystan Bab, all the other “knolls” mentioned by Cherkasov are localized accurately, as they have preserved their names to this day. Out of monuments located closest to Otrar, only the Kuiryktobe hillfort, which is located closest to the Arystan Bab Mausoleum, was not mentioned. The name of the monument Kuiryktobe (“a knoll in the form of a ram’s fat tail”) was certainly later associated with the silhouette of the hillfort.

The main argument in favor of localizing Kuiryktobe is Cherkasov’s indication of its location – 3.5 versts away from Otrar: “Arstan Bab, situating 3.5 versts away, is the site of the main mosque in honor of the local Saint Arslan Baba”. According to the Otrar district code, the hillfort of Kuiryktobe is located 4 km to the West of the central ruins of Otrar. Using the GPS navigation device, it was found that the distance in a straight line between the South-Western corner of the shahristan of Otrartobe hillfort and Kuiryktobe citadel is 3.95 km, i.e. the distance of 3.5 versts specified by Cherkasov was obtained. Thus, the site of “the mosque in honor of the local Saint Arystan Bab” corresponds to the hillfort of Kuiryktobe.

It is noteworthy that Kuiryktobe was the site where was excavated the earliest to date Cathedral mosque in the territory of Kazakhstan. The mosque was built in the late 9th-early 10th century, rebuilt in the 10th century, and

functioned until the 12th-13th centuries. The findings of facing bricks of the Karakhanid period in the site of the mosque's excavations indicate a richly decorated portal of the building (BAIPAKOV, & TERNOVAYA, 2005: 21-22, 168-169). An early Muslim cemetery was found on the outskirts of the Kuiryktobe hillfort (NURMUKHANBETOV, 1974: 85-94). It is indicative that during the excavation of Kuiryktobe layers of the same period, archeologists found a fragment of a large vessel with the inscription of Sura from the Koran (BAIPAKOV, & TERNOVAYA, 2005: 167), and a ceramic inkwell (in the funds of the Otrar State Archaeological Museum-Reserve).

One more argument for the identification of Kuiryktobe – “the main mosque in honor of the local Saint Arystan Bab” is the text of the gravestone No. 36 of Mullah Yusuf's mother in the cemetery of Arystan Baba, that is situated on the outskirts of the Kuiryktobe hillfort. On the gravestone, the following text is carved:

This is the grave of Mullah Yusuf's mother

With hope we put this stone

In this place was the city of Arystan Baba

May the only God be her protection. 1289”, i.e. 1872-1873 (AKYLBEK, 2000: 24). According to this inscription, Mullah Yusuf considered the hillfort nearest to the cemetery to be “the city of Arystan Bab” in the second half of the 19th century.

The above artifacts suggest that Kuiryktobe hillfort – a suburban settlement of medieval Otrar – was the site of residence of the Sufi community of Arystan Bab, where the Sheikh's disciples, including Khoja Ahmed Yassawi, were trained. The knoll of Sopy Danyshpan should be referred to as the third archaeological site of Otrar associated with Sufism. The knoll of Sopy Danyshpan stands out in relief above the surrounding territory and is situated 700 m North of the village of Kogam, 300 m South-East of the cemetery Arystan Bab, near the junction of the roads Turkestan-Shaulder-Talapy, 3-4 km South-West of the Otrar hillfort. It is a rectangular knoll with dimensions of 25 x 25 m and a height of 1.2 m, with corners oriented to the cardinal points (Fig. 3), having geographical coordinates of N 48°50'811 E 068° 16'561.

Prior to the excavations, fragments of unglazed and glazed ceramics and fragments of a potter's water pipe were found on the territory of the knoll. Currently, the site, as the burial place of Sopy Danyshpan, is visited by some pilgrims. According to the accounts of local residents, there is located a cemetery where some residents of the village of Kogam were buried. These days, the knoll is surrounded by a wall of baked bricks. Along with the fence, a single-chamber structure was erected for reading memorial prayers.

literature known under the false name “candlesticks”, “torchiere”) consists of three parts: a base-tripod, a tubular stem, and an upper “plate”, with the total height of 47.2 cm. It was at a depth of 170 cm from the zero point. Normally, when excavating medieval monuments of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, separate elements of the lamp stand are found. Finding a whole item, as in this case, is very uncommon. Some parts of the bronze stands were found during the excavations of a number of hillforts in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, such parts were found during the excavations of Taraz (SENIGOVA, 1972: 163). Separate elements of the stands were found during the excavations of the Talgar hillfort. Researchers date these findings from the 11th-12th centuries. (BAIPAKOV et al., 2002: 97). There are various opinions in the literature about the purpose and genesis of stands. Senigova relates them to the 10th-12th centuries and believes that such stands were produced for incense burners associated with the performance of religious worship. According to Senigova (1972), the prototypes of these composite devices were Saks bronze lamps with architectural legs and flat monotonous completion.



Fig. 5: A bronze lamp stand. Sopy Danyshpan



Fig. 6: Fragments of facing bricks with inscriptions. Sopy Danyshpan

Fragments of facing bricks of the Karakhanid period with the inscriptions on them should be particularly emphasized among the findings (Fig. 6). Rectangular facing bricks have the dimensions of 4 x 13.5 cm and a thickness of 2.2 cm. On the front part of the brick, two symmetrical frames with dimensions of 2.5 x 5.3 cm and a depth of 6 mm are carved. Inside the right frame, the Arabic Kufic inscription مرواريد stands out in relief. Letter thickness amounts from 1.5 mm to 2 mm. According to the consultation of Dr. Muminov, the facing brick is carved with the Persian word “marvarid”, which means “pearl”. On another fragment of brick, the same inscription is written in the left frame. The third fragment has the same inscription, only on the right recess. In the excavated part of Sopy Danyshpan knoll, there has not been yet revealed the construction of a monumental structure or the site of the ancient grave.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the conducted archaeological research works on Otrar objects confirmed the association of these monuments by the oral memory of local residents and written sources with historical figures of Turkic Sufis. The materials reflected in the local historical memory and data obtained from archaeological observations during the restoration works of the Arystan Bab Mausoleum makes it possible to consider him a real historical person who lived in Otrar (Farab) in the 11th-12th centuries and deny the identification of Arystan Bab with Salman al-Farsi. Archaeological research of the Kuiryktobe hillfort and comparison of the data obtained with the local historical memory suggest that the site of residence of the Sufi community of Arystan Bab, where the Sheikh’s disciples, including Khoja Ahmed Yassawi, were trained, was the Kuiryktobe hillfort – a suburban settlement of medieval Otrar. Being marked in written sources as Sufi-Khana, the site of residence of the Sufi community, headed by Sufi Danishmend, a disciple of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi, most probably corresponds to the knoll of Sopy Danyshpan in the suburbs of Otrar. Archaeological excavations of part of the knoll revealed extraordinary materials of the 12th-13th centuries. However, for the final decision on the correspondence of the knoll of Sopy Danyshpan

with Sufi-Khana from the written sources, further excavations need to be continued.

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