

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE FORMATION OF THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE NINTH–TWELFTH CENTURIES

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Abstract. *This article examines social institutions shaping the Islamic cultural environment of Central Asia from the ninth through twelfth centuries. It identifies interactions among religious and legal networks, knowledge transmission, urban economy, trade, and court patronage. The study applies source criticism, comparative historical analysis, and institutional analysis to six Scopus indexed journal articles. Findings show that under the Samanids, jihad and ribat systems, scholars, and volunteer associations reinforced political legitimacy and normative order. In Bukhara and Samarkand, commerce, coinage, food supply, and palace art provided material foundations for integration. Under the Qarakhanids, Turkic, Persian, and Islamic elements produced a durable regional culture.*

Keywords: *Central Asia; Islamization; Samanids; Qarakhanids; ulama; ribat; mutatawwi‘a; trade; city; cultural integration.*

Annotatsiya. *Maqolada IX–XII asrlarda Markaziy Osiyoda islomiy madaniy muhitning shakllanishida ijtimoiy institutlarning o‘rni tahlil qilinadi. Maqsad diniy-huquqiy tarmoqlar, bilim uzatish amaliyotlari, shahar iqtisodiyoti, savdo va saroy homiyligining o‘zaro aloqasini*

aniqlashdir. Tadqiqot oltita Scopus jurnal maqolasining manbashunoslik, qiyosiy-tarixiy va institutsional tahliliga tayandi. Natijalar Somoniylar davrida jihod-ribot tizimi, ulamolar va ko'ngilli guruhlar siyosiy legitimlik hamda me'yoriy tartibni mustahkamlaganini ko'rsatadi. Buxoro va Samarqandda savdo, tanga zarbi, oziq-ovqat ta'minoti va saroy san'ati madaniy integratsiyaning moddiy asosini yaratgan. Qoraxoniylar davrida turkiy, forsiy va islomiy unsurlar qo'shilib, hududiy xususiyatlarga ega barqaror madaniy muhit vujudga kelgan. Maqola institutlararo bog'liqlik modelini taklif etadi. Bu sintez mintaqaviy o'zlikning davomiyligini ham mustahkamlagan.

Kalit so'zlar: Markaziy Osiyo; islomlashuv; Somoniylar; Qoraxoniylar; ulamolar; ribot; mutatavvi'a; savdo; shahar; madaniy integratsiya.

Аннотация. В статье анализируется роль социальных институтов в формировании исламской культурной среды Центральной Азии IX–XII веков. Цель исследования состоит в выявлении взаимосвязи религиозно-правовых сетей, передачи знаний, городской экономики, торговли и придворного покровительства. Работа основана на источниковедческом, сравнительно-историческом и институциональном анализе шести статей из журналов Scopus. Результаты показывают, что при Саманидах система джихада и рибатов, ученые и добровольческие объединения укрепляли политическую легитимность и нормативный порядок. Торговля, чеканка монет, продовольственное обеспечение и дворцовое искусство Бухары и Самарканда создали материальную основу интеграции. При Караханидах тюркские, персидские и исламские элементы образовали устойчивую региональную культурную среду.

Предложена модель межинституциональных связей. Этот синтез также укрепил долговременную региональную идентичность.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия; исламизация; Саманиды; Караханиды; улемы; рибат; мутатавви'а; торговля; город; культурная интеграция.

INTRODUCTION. The ninth–twelfth centuries constituted a formative period in the history of Central Asia, during which Islam ceased to function merely as a marker of external political rule and developed into a cultural environment integrating everyday norms, the urban economy, knowledge production, and political representation. Samanid rule marked a turning point in this transformation. Whereas Transoxiana had previously been a distant province of the caliphate, from the late ninth century onward it became an active political and cultural center governed by a local Persianate dynasty [Tor, 2009, pp. 279–281]. This development makes it possible to understand Central Asia not simply as a region that was “Islamized,” but as a space that helped reshape political and military arrangements throughout the Muslim world [Tor, 2009, pp. 297–299].

The Islamic cultural environment is often explained solely through rulers’ policies or individual religious monuments. Yet new cultural norms required institutions capable of reproducing them. Here, “institution” includes not only physical establishments and formal bodies but also ulama networks, mutatawwi‘a associations, ribats, commercial exchange, mints, urban provisioning, court patronage, and local historical memory. This approach treats religious, political, and economic spheres as interconnected domains.

Existing scholarship generally divides this process among separate disciplines: political history studies dynasties and campaigns, religious

history examines the ulama and conversion, economic history analyzes coins and trade, and archaeology investigates urban consumption and art. Combining these dimensions explains not merely how religion “entered” society but how society was reorganized in Islamic terms. Samanid legitimacy relied on ulama prestige, while religious networks depended on secure routes, monetary circulation, and urban surpluses.

The purpose of this study is to determine how these institutions created an Islamic cultural environment during the ninth–twelfth centuries and how they were reconfigured during the transition from the Samanids to the Qarakhanids. Its central hypothesis is that Islamization was not a linear process directed from a single center; rather, it resulted from interactions among religious legitimation, knowledge and memory, the urban economy, and cultural representation. As Tor demonstrates, the Samanids’ military, commercial, social, and religious engagement with the steppe collectively created the conditions for large-scale conversion [Tor, 2009, pp. 286–289]. The central research question is therefore how these institutions functioned not separately but as an integrated social system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. The source corpus consists of six scholarly articles published between 2002 and 2021 in journals indexed in Scopus. Islamization and political change during the Samanid period were examined separately [Tor, 2009, pp. 279–299]. Evidence concerning the *mutatawwi‘a*, the ulama, and public order was identified [Tor, 2005, pp. 555–573]. The operation of sacred memory in local histories of Bukhara was investigated [Hanaoka, 2014, pp. 289–303]. Evidence concerning Samarqand dirhams and long-distance trade was incorporated [Kovalev, 2002, pp. 197–216]. The urban food economy of Paykend was examined through archaeobotanical data [Mir-Makhamad

et al., 2021, pp. 195–214]. Finally, Qarakhanid palace wall paintings in Samarqand were analyzed as sources of cultural representation [Karev, 2005, pp. 45–84].

The research was conducted in three stages. First, evidence from each article was classified into political-religious, epistemic-communicative, and economic-cultural categories. Second, the evidence was compared across the Samanid and Qarakhanid periods. Third, the findings were synthesized according to five institutional functions: legitimation, norm formation, resource mobilization, memory construction, and cultural integration. All page references correspond to the printed pagination of the cited publications.

The unit of analysis was a recurring social relationship rather than an individual organization. A dirham connected the mint, merchants, and political authority; a dream narrative linked its author and community to prophetic memory. Different evidence types were treated as revealing distinct levels of the same historical system, preserving the difference between archaeological finds and textual narratives while identifying their functional relationships.

The limited corpus requires caution. The six articles do not systematically cover mosques, madrasas, or waqfs; therefore, no independent generalizations about them are offered. Institutional relationships are reconstructed only from full-text, page-verifiable evidence encompassing written sources, numismatic finds, archaeobotanical samples, and monumental art.

RESULTS

Religious and Legal Institutions: Legitimacy, the Frontier, and Public Order. During the Samanid period, religious institutions derived their power not from complete incorporation into the state but

from negotiation among rulers, the ulama, and armed volunteers. Isma‘il ibn Ahmad grounded his authority in piety, jihad, and respect for the *ahl al-‘ilm wa-l-din*, presenting dynastic government as religious service [Tor, 2009, pp. 281–283]. Frontier warfare likewise became more than expansion: it strengthened rulers’ legitimacy before the Muslim community [Tor, 2009, pp. 283–285].

Ribats provided the system’s territorial foundation by assembling volunteers, defending the steppe frontier, and sustaining contact between Muslim communities and Turkic groups [Tor, 2009, pp. 285–287]. Islamization became an enduring social process when warfare, da‘wa, commerce, migration, and settlement reinforced one another [Tor, 2009, pp. 286–289]. The ribat was consequently both a fortress and an institution through which new norms circulated.

The *mutatawwi‘a* were volunteer networks outside the regular army but embedded in society. Kinship, teacher–student relations, asceticism, jihad, and links with the *ahl al-hadith* connected their members [Tor, 2005, pp. 558–562]. The presence of a *ra‘is al-mutatawwi‘a* in mid-ninth-century Bukhara indicates a recognizable organizational status [Tor, 2005, pp. 568–569]. They intervened in public morality by commanding right and forbidding wrong, although their independence sometimes produced conflict with political authority [Tor, 2005, pp. 569–572].

The Samanids consolidated authority through both coercive power and cooperation with religiously prestigious networks. Volunteers served as auxiliaries in the defense of 904 and later campaigns, while the Samanids and Ghaznavids turned leadership of jihad into political legitimation [Tor, 2005, pp. 570–571]. Religious and legal order was thus produced by polycentric institutions operating between state and society.

Education, Knowledge Transmission, and Sacred Memory.

Knowledge transmission extended beyond formal establishments to personal networks of scholars, transmitters, and jurists. Amid political fragmentation, religious authority increasingly shifted from the caliph to specialists in tradition, whose ability to authenticate reports, interpret conduct, and mobilize communities became social power [Tor, 2005, pp. 555–560]. Hadith and ascetic texts circulating among the mutatawwi‘a similarly connected military practice with knowledge and moral discipline [Tor, 2005, pp. 558–562].

Dream narratives in Bukhara’s local histories reveal another form of knowledge. Dreams concerning the Prophet Muhammad linked the city to the prophetic legacy and supported its claim to interpret the Qur’an and Islamic history locally [Hanaoka, 2014, pp. 289–296]. These stories formed an institution of memory that determined which persons, places, and dynasties deserved recognition. Comparison with Tabaristan shows that dreams enabled communities to adapt universal Islamic symbols to local political and territorial needs [Hanaoka, 2014, pp. 296–303].

Education must therefore be understood broadly. Ulama networks transmitted normative knowledge, while local histories transformed it into urban memory. The former created authoritative transmission and legal-moral legitimacy; the latter constructed territorial identity. In Bukhara, “Islamicness” was not a ready-made imported pattern but a system of authority reinterpreted by local producers of knowledge.

Knowledge’s social character also reshaped relations between center and periphery. Bukhara could be imagined not as an echo of Mecca or Baghdad but as a sacred center where prophetic legacy intersected with local events [Hanaoka, 2014, pp. 292–300]. Although scholars, rulers, and urban communities retained different interests, shared Islamic

symbols enabled negotiation and competition. Education thus transmitted knowledge while distributing status and urban prestige.

The Socioeconomic Foundation and Cultural Integration.

The Islamic cultural environment depended on cities' ability to produce and exchange resources. Quantitative evidence from the Samarqand mint indicates extensive Samanid monetary circulation [Kovalev, 2002, pp. 197–203]. These coins' presence in Northern European hoards connected Samarqand to long-distance trade through the steppe and Volga routes [Kovalev, 2002, pp. 203–210]. Coins were both economic instruments and portable signs of sovereignty, circulating rulers' names and Islamic formulas widely.

Dirham production shows that religion and economy were interdependent. Stable currency supported the army and administration while reducing merchants' long-distance transaction costs. Changes in mint output responded to political requirements and northern trade [Kovalev, 2002, pp. 210–216]. Muslim merchants settling in non-Muslim steppe regions became intermediaries carrying religious practices and social ties alongside commodities [Tor, 2009, pp. 288–289].

Paykend's archaeobotanical evidence complements this macroeconomic picture through everyday consumption. Situated at the Bukhara oasis's edge, the city was an exchange center near the Silk Road. Plant remains indicate that its Qarakhanid population used diverse agricultural products [Mir-Makhamad et al., 2021, pp. 195–203]. Sample contexts suggest food flows connecting the city, irrigated oasis, and external markets [Mir-Makhamad et al., 2021, pp. 204–210]. The market was thus social infrastructure linking occupations, territories, and ways of life.

Paykend also demonstrates urban economic continuity after dynastic change. Interaction among rural producers, carriers, merchants, and consumers supported religious centers and court life [Mir-Makhamad et al., 2021, pp. 210–214]. The Islamic environment therefore depended on functioning networks of food, money, and transportation as well as confessional unity.

Qarakhanid palace paintings in Samarqand illustrate the conversion of economic resources into symbolic culture. The ruler's pavilion in the Afrasiab citadel expressed court authority through figures, animals, and inscriptions [Karev, 2005, pp. 45–60]. Turkic political traditions, Persianate court culture, and Arabic-Islamic signs coexisted within this space, revealing multilayered cultural integration [Karev, 2005, pp. 61–74].

Interpreting this art merely as a non-Islamic “survival” is insufficient. Court patronage addressed both local urban elites and the wider Islamic world. Images, inscriptions, and ceremonial space staged the ruler's lineage, power, and legitimacy [Karev, 2005, pp. 74–84]. The Qarakhanids appropriated Islamic culture by recombining earlier Persianate urban traditions with a Turkic dynastic idiom rather than eliminating them.

DISCUSSION. The results support the hypothesis that the Islamic cultural environment arose from mutually reinforcing networks rather than a single institution. Jihad and ribats gave frontiers religious meaning; the ulama and mutatawwi‘a circulated normative order; local histories attached universal Islamic memory to Bukhara; mints, commerce, and food provisioning ensured material continuity; and court art visualized political synthesis. Samanid policies influenced steppe

conversion because military, cultural, commercial, and religious interactions operated together [Tor, 2009, pp. 286–289].

The Samanid–Qarakhanid transition appears as institutional adaptation rather than abrupt rupture. The Samanids strengthened jihad-based legitimacy and Persianate urban administration; the Qarakhanids incorporated Turkic military and dynastic elements into existing networks. Growing Turkic influence initiated a long-term transformation across the Muslim world [Tor, 2009, pp. 288–299]. The Samarqand palace demonstrates reuse of established cultural repertoires [Karev, 2005, pp. 80–84]. Paykend likewise shows reliance on existing urban resources [Mir-Makhamad et al., 2021, pp. 211–214].

This model treats Islamization as more than a change of belief. Stability required conversion to be accompanied by commercial trust, legal-moral authority, food provisioning, written memory, and political imagery. Yet the small, thematically uneven corpus cannot fully assess mosques, madrasas, waqfs, families, or rural communities. The findings therefore offer a testable institutional explanation rather than a definitive regional model.

The model also avoids reducing cultural integration to unilateral assimilation. Local elites adapted Islamic legitimacy to urban memories and political needs, while Turkic rulers combined Persianate administration and urban culture with dynastic representation. Integration was negotiated, resource-dependent, and multilingual. It rested on shared faith and on institutions' capacity to provide different groups with material interests, status, and participation.

CONCLUSION. The Islamic cultural environment of Central Asia during the ninth–twelfth centuries was not created instantaneously by political command. Its religious and legal foundations were constructed

by networks of ulama, mutatawwi'a, and ribats, which connected political authority with moral norms and the defense of the frontier. Networks of knowledge transmission and local histories of Bukhara transformed Islamic symbols into territorial memory. Samarqand dirhams, long-distance trade, and the food economy of Paykend provided the material foundation for cultural life. Qarakhanid court art, meanwhile, embodied a contested yet durable synthesis of Turkic, Persianate, and Islamic elements.

The principal function of social institutions was therefore not simply to administer separate spheres, but to establish connections among them. Religious prestige was converted into political legitimacy, commerce supported urban stability, and urban resources enabled the patronage of scholarship and art. The institutional relationships initiated under the Samanids acquired a new ethnopolitical content under the Qarakhanids and helped transform Central Asia into one of the active centers of the Muslim world. Future research incorporating waqf documents, the archaeology of mosques and madrasas, and evidence from rural communities could test the social scope and regional variation of this model more precisely.

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