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### THE FIRST JEWS IN CENTRAL ASIA

**Abstract:** This article deals with the historical retrospective analysis of the formation of the Jewish nation in Central Asia. The author notes that the origins of the first settlement of Jews in this area have deep roots in antiquity. Emphasis is also placed on the study of sources associated with the study of the spread of Jews in Central Asia and other regions of the East.

**Key words:** Central Asia, the Jewish people, community, culture, religion, history, source.

**Language:** English

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#### Introduction

Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan, has always been a peaceful abode for representatives of various nations and religions, who lived there under one sky. Tolerant aboriginals and convenient location attracted people of various descents to settle there.

Today representatives of 16 religions are living together in peace in Uzbekistan. Among them are the Jews. History of Jews in those lands roots to thousand years. Influenced by traditions of local aboriginals they developed significant ethno-confessional community.

The issue of first Jew settlements in Central Asia, development of local communities and their socio-cultural life has always been of big interest among historians. Most famous of them are M.Zand [1], S.Gitlin [2], Z.L.Amitin-Shapiro [3].

Despite the abovementioned fact, the question about exact time of first Jew settlements in Central Asia remains open. Dozens of books dedicated to the issue are overfilled with contradicting information and hypotheses.

#### Materials and Methods

Analyzing all information, we find out that most historians incline that first Jews came to Central Asia 2 000 – 2 500 years ago. The reason of such vagueness is lack of sources giving information about that time. According to most scientists the III-

IV<sup>th</sup> centuries are least studied ages of Central Asian history. Only sources regarding that time belong to Arab writers and mostly consist of history of 'arab futuhat' (conqueror) of V-VIII centuries. We can see little information about events of II-IV centuries in later sources [4, 749].

Historians agree that Central Asian Jew communities came there from Israel [5, 39]. Their settlement in these lands are closely related with their exile from Israel after collapse of Israel Kingdom in I century BC and destruction of Temple in Jerusalem. In 586 BC, far earlier from destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and Babylonian captivity first Jewish diasporas spread to Egypt and Mesopotamia, in the beginning of new era to eastern coasts of Mediterranean Sea, Persia and other lands [5, 39]. Life of Jews in Persia was complex. We can see many data in historical documents regarding discrimination of Jews there. Researchers parallel this with aggravation of political and especially religious conditions [5, 41]. After enthronement of Yazdegerd II (438-459) and his son Piruz (460-484) oppressions toward Jewish people strengthened. During the rule of Piruz we can even see genocide of Jews. For instance, historical documents state that in 468 (in some sources 472) Piruz killed half of Jewish population in Isfahan accusing them of killing two Zoroastrian *mobads* (priests). Another example of Piruz's severe attitude towards Jews was killing the leader of Babylonian Jewish community Hun Marin [6, 65-67; 7].



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Intransigent policy of Yazdegerd II and Piruz towards Jews resulted mass migration of Jewish people from Persian kingdom. Migrated people settled in Byzantium, Crimea, India and China, where Zoroastrianism did not have much influence.

Most researchers agree in the point that Jews migrated and settled in Central Asia during the rule of Ahamanide dynasty (after 559 BC) [5, 43]. As a proof they cite book of Esther from Old Testament, written in 78-77 BC, where it is said "...jews spread in all territories of Persia" [8, 6]. First reliable information on the settlement of jews in Central Asia show that jewish people emerged in Balkh, Merv and Khorezm in VIII-IX centuries AC. In contrary to this, according to M.Zand immigration of Jews to Central Asia falls on IV<sup>th</sup> century [9, 531-533]. To prove this he adduces Babylonian Talmud, where it is written that member Babylonian Amoraim [10] Samuel Bar Biseni (Pumbedata [11]) travelled to Merv. Visiting his brothers in faith abstains from drinking wine. Stressing on this fact, M.Zand says that Jews, after several centuries' life in Merv, have forgotten religious rituals of preparing the wine. That is why Samuel did not drink their wine [9, 531-533].

All researchers, including M.Sand, attribute the migration of Jews to Central Asia with their silk trade activity through The Great Silk road [9, 531-533]. But, it would be unreasonable to link this only with Silk Road. It is known that repressions of Jews by the romans during the rule of Marcus Aurelius, forced the Jewish people to migrate to other lands, including Central Asia [8, 8].

According to Jacob Neusner [12], in first centuries AC Jews played important role in socio-economic life of Parthian Empire. Most of them were engaged in Roman-Chinese trade [13, 910].

In the beginning of new era Dura-Europos became a big Jewish center [14]. Archeological excavations detected there remainings of ancient synagogue [8, 9]. Dura-Europos bordered with Khatra (arabic – al-khadhr) [15], Khamadan, Parthia, Marghiyana and Baktria. Famous scholar on history and traditions of Central Asian Jews E.Rtveladze, states that Jews migrated to Central Asia from these territories [8, 8].

Undoubtedly, it was Merv where lived most Jews in Central Asia. During archeological excavations in 1954-1956 were found ossuaries with rectangular Hebrew inscriptions on it dating VI-VII centuries. Later information about those findings were published by A.Kelvan [16, 91-92].

According to E.Rtveladze, jews later spread from Merv to Baktriya, Tokharistan, Soghd and Khorezm. The main reason of it, he states, was policy of Babylonian Jew academy, starting from 6<sup>th</sup> century, towards spreading Judaism across South Iran, Khorasan and other neighbouring territories [8, 9].

Some researchers stress that Jews lived in Balkh till 709, when the city was conquered by Arabs. According to such sources as "Fadail al-Balkh" and "Bakhr al-asrar" one of the gates of Balkh was called "Yahudiyyah" (Jewish), also in the outskirts of Balkh there was residential area called "Yehudanak" (Little home of Jews) [9, 531-533].

Historical sources evidence that in the Juzhjan province, north-west of Balkh, there was a town called Yahudiyyah. In the period between 988-1031 it was renamed as Maymanah. This fact corroborates that the town was founded by Jews or was reconstructed by them in early medievals. Furthermore, many graveyards of Jews with gravestones with written epitaphs in Persian and jewish language were found in Herat and other cities of Afghanistan [17, 335-342].

It is difficult to find written sources about life of Jews in Bukhara and Samarkand in early medieval. Famous historian Narshakhi in his "History of Bukhara" quoting from Nishapuris "Khazain al-ulum" (Treasury of sciences) states that territory of Bukhara was covered with riparian forests and only in 6<sup>th</sup> century after settlement of people from other territories of Central Asia it became a city. Researcher P.Is'hakov relies on these sources and in his "History of bukhara-jewish ethnos" supposes that since Bukhara city did not exist until the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century, then till that time there lived neither jews nor other nations [5, 43].

E.Rtveladze in his article "Jews in pre-Islamic Central Asia" quotes a narration from Nasafis "Kandiyyah". According to it before the Arab conqueror there was a well called Juyi Arziz, and this well was dug up by Jewish man [8, 9]. Another orientalist O.N.Logofet suggests that Jews came to Central Asia, particularly to Bukhara together with Arab conquerors [18].

Sources witness that settlement of Jews to Khorezm was much earlier from arab futuhat (conqueror). In the historical treatise called "Shakhrestani-I Iranshakhr" written in Pakhlavi language it is said that the founder of Kat, the capital of ancient Khorezm Narse (Narshakh) was a son of a Jew [9, 531]. According to the myth given in medieval historical sources, another city of ancient Khorezm – Khiva was founded by Sam, the son of prophet Noah. Of course those myths may seem far from reality. But there may be a part of the truth. Because, at-Tabari in his famous "Tarikh" (History) states that before the conqueror of Kat by arabs in 712 among advisers of the Kharezmshakh were people called akhbars [19]. It is known that the term akhbar was used by arabs for representatives of other religions, especially Jewish priests (rabbis).

Later, through Soghd, Chach and Ferghana Jews reached Eastern Turkistan. An ancient document of Jewish merchants dating 8<sup>th</sup> century AC, found in Dandan-Uylak [20] is written in

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jewish-persian language using abramic scripts. This evidences that those merchants who made this document were from Central Asia or Iran [19].

The information given above show that there are many hypotheses about migration and settlement of Jews in the lands of Central Asia, and all of them pretend to be truth. It is known that some associate emergence of Jews in this region with biblical traditions. But we must not forget that there is difference between emergence, spreading and settlement. We cannot ignore that individual Jews existed in Soghd from ancient times. But this fact is not supported by historical sources. For instance, near the Onega Lake was found a graveyard dating the Neolithic Period. Among hundreds of skeletons was found skeleton of a human from Negroid race. But despite this well-known fact no one from researchers said that Negroids were widely spread in Northern Europe in Neolithic Period [21, 1].

Most researchers are certain in one point – Jews came to Central Asia through Afghanistan and other frontier to the region countries. It is considered as undoubted reality. Cultural monuments of the region show that direct relations between Jews and people of Iran and Central Asia have at least 4 thousand year history.

It is important to stress that migration and settlement of Jews in Central Asia did not occur at the same time, but it was slow process, which lasted for hudread years, stage by stage.

The delta of Amudarya River is considered as historical and geographic center of Central Asia. Nowadays, much part of this region goes to the

territory of modern Uzbekistan. Other smaller parts of it go to modern Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan (Chimkent region), Kirgizstan (Osh, Jalalabad), Tajikistan (Khojand, Khisar and head of Amudarya) and Afghanistan (left Coast of Amudarya River). Central regions of Central Asia are much fertile. Nearly all ancient cities of sub region as Samarkand, Merv, Bukhara, Khiva and little independent states are situated in this region [22; 23].

Jews massively settled in Central Asia coming from Afghanistan, Iran and even Iraq. But, historians do not rule out the possibility of individual settlement of Jews in Bukhara in earlier periods. Relying on M.Sand we can conclude that migration and settlement of Jews to the region is closely associated with The Great Silk Road, which was founded in early 1<sup>st</sup> century AC [5, 45]. Besides, according to Chinese Jews their coreligionists came to China in first century during the rule of Han dynasty. At this period there was a road linking Manchjuriya, Eastern Turkestan with Central Asia. Historians believe that migration of Jews to China was via this road [24, 5-7].

## Conclusion

As we see, study of history of Jews in Central Asia is based on written sources, archeological and ethnographic researches. Summarizing results of those studies and researches, it will be appropriate to date the emergence of first Jews in Central Asia as 1,5-2 thousand years BC.

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- Jacob Neusner (2016) (born July 28, 1932) is an American academic scholar of Judaism. He is often celebrated as one of the most published authors in history, having written or edited more than 950 books.
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14. (2016) Dura-Europos - The ancient city on the Euphrates (near modern Qalat es-Salih in Syria), which existed from about the year 300 BC. e. up to 256 years. He is famous because of archaeological finds and well-preserved ancient frescoes. Dura in Aramaic means "fortress"
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