

TRADE WITH ROME

'So many merchants ships arrive in Rome with cargoes from everywhere, at all times of the year... that the city seems like the world's warehouse. The arrival and departure of ships never stops – it's amazing that the sea, not to mention the harbour, is big enough for these merchant ships.'

The Roman writer Aelius Aristides in the 2nd century AD.

The Romans bought luxury goods from across their own empire and beyond in large quantities – perfumes, spices, cotton and Chinese silk for example. One Roman writer, called Pliny the Elder, said in the 1st century AD:

'India, China and the Arabian states drain our Empire of a huge amount of money every year – this is what our luxuries and our women are costing us.'

ERK KALA

During the time of King Darius the Great there were a number of uprisings in the empire. An inscription at Bisitun, near Kermansha in western Iran refers to the crushing of a revolt in the province of Margiana:

'While I (Darius) was in Babylon, there are provinces which rebelled against me – Persia, Elam, Medea, Assyria, Egypt, Parthia, Margiana, Sattagydia, Scythia....one man, Frada, a Margian – him they made chief...He said 'I am king in Margiana.' So I sent against him a Persian, by name Dadarshi, my subject, satrap (governor) in Bactria. Thus I said to him: 'Go forth, attack and destroy that army which does not call itself mine!'

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Alexander founded Alexandria in Margiana, which was later destroyed by the barbarians, but Antiochus, son of Seleucus, restored the Syrian city in the very same place, through which passes the River Marg, which flows into the Lake of Zotkha. Antiochus preferred the city to bear his own name.

Pliny the Elder, Roman writer on natural history, history and science. AD 23-79.

Margiana is surrounded by deserts. Admiring its fertility, Antiochus enclosed a circuit of 1,500 stadia with a wall and founded a city – Antiochia. The soil of the country is well suited for growing vines.*

Strabo, Roman geographer. Lived about 64 BC – AD 21.

*a stadium was a Greek measure of length equal to 184 metres.

GYAUR KALA

The city walls are square and run for 15li (about 8000 metres).The inhabitants made the city gates with iron..

This is part of a description of Antiochia Margiana by a Chinese prisoner, called Du Huan, held in Merv in AD 765 under the Abbasids (see next section).

MERV

The Persian text of the 10th century, the Hudud al-Alam (The Regions of the World), described Merv as a

"...pleasant and flourishing place...with numerous castles...in all Khorasan there is no town better situated."

SULTAN KALA

For its cleanliness, its good streets, the divisions of its buildings and quarters among the rivers and gardens and the separation of the people of each suq from another, their city (Merv) is superior to the rest of the cities of Khurasan.

Al-Istakhri, an Islamic geographer writing sometime before AD 951.

Marv, a large town. In the days of old the residence of the mir (governor) of Khurasan was there but now he lives in Bukhara. It is a pleasant and flourishing place with a citadel....in it there are numerous köshks. It used to be the abode of the Sasanian kings. In all Khurasan there is no town better situated. Its market is good.

An unknown geographer writing in AD 982.

MAUSOLEUM OF SULTAN SANJAR

In the 13th century the geographer Takut-al-Kamawi visited Merv and describes it::

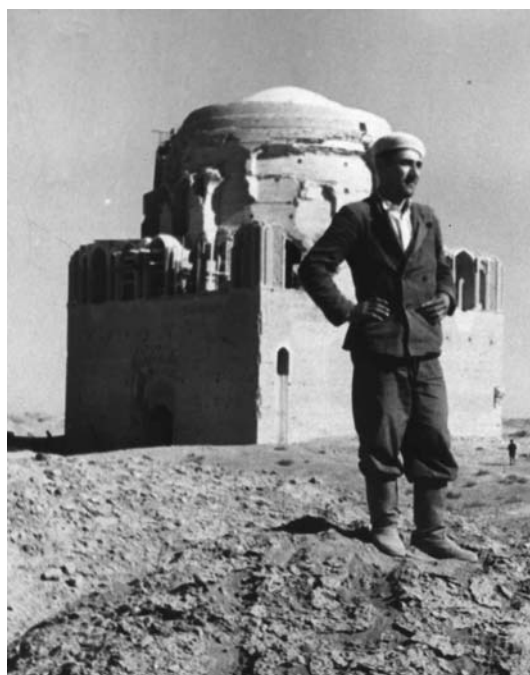
Despite the vast extent of his kingdom, Sultan Sanjar, son of Malik-Shah the Seljuk, chose it (Merv) above the rest of his cities and continued to live there until his death. His tomb is there in a vast dome and a window towards the great mosque. Its dome is blue and can be seen from a day's journey away.

The exterior of the dome has a complex arrangement of galleries and, below that arches with intricate designs.

Although the writer Isfizari, in the 11th century, declared that Sultan Sanjar's mausoleum was '...one of the greatest constructions of the world's kingdoms, so strong that it would be impossible to destroy it', this great building has suffered over the years.



The mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar in 1890.



The west and south sides of Sultan Sanjar in 1954.

MONGOLS

Genghis Khan sat on a golden throne and ordered the troops who had been seized should be brought before him. When they were in front of him, they were executed and the people looked on and wept. When it came to the common people, they separated men, women, children and possessions. It was a memorable day for shrieking and weeping and wailing. They took the wealthy people and beat them and tortured them with all sorts of cruelties in the search for wealth. Some of them died when there was no money left to pay their ransom. Then they set fire to the city and burned the tomb of Sultan Sanjar and dug up his grave looking for money. They said, 'These people have resisted us' so they killed them all. Then Genghis Khan ordered that the dead should be counted and there were around 700,000 corpses.

Ibn al-Athir's account after talking to refugees in Mosul in 1221.

The geographer Yaqut al-Khamavi, who lived in Merv in the early 13th century wrote:

"...Truly but for the Mongols, I would have stayed and lived and died there. Hardly could I tear myself away."

He raised the defences of Merv and got ready for siege. When the imperial forces arrived outside Merv, they laid siege and began battle, resisted valiantly by Abu'l-Muhsin's soldiers. The whistle of arrows began to draw blood from both sides and sometimes the stones hurled reduced a fortress tower to rubble, and sometimes the vessels of fire thrown into the middle of the imperial forces took many lives. For three or four months the siege continued but in the end both father and son, weary of battle, arranged a ceasefire.

Timurid historian Ghiyath ad-Din Khwandamir (1475 - c 1535)

MERV IN 1882

More modern documents and writings from travellers or archaeologists may give us clues to monuments which have since become ruined or destroyed completely. The traveller Edmund O'Donovan visited Merv in the late 19th century and wrote in 1882,

"I caught my first glimpse of the old cities of the plain – the ancient capitals of Margina. A long line of walls and turrets, dominated by some towering domes, broke the line of the horizon...I could scarcely express my anxiety to proceed there and then to this mysterious spot concerning which so much has been written and so little known."

