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Archaeological Sites, Cultural Heritage, and Sustainable Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This paper addresses the problem of protecting and preserving archaeological sites from the Bronze Age through the Medieval Period (ca. 2500 BC–1500 CE) as part of sustainable development that includes such economic and social benefits as (1) promoting national status; (2) integrating archaeological sites into the Silk Route narrative; (3) developing tourism related to historic and cultural heritage; and (4) creating a citizenry that values its cultural and historic resources in the face of rapid economic development and changing natural and cultural landscapes. Two UNESCO World Heritage sites will be discussed briefly: Otrar and the surrounding oasis, a medieval complex of sites along the Great Silk Route, and Tamgaly, a petroglyph and archaeological reserve. These two UNESCO World Heritage archaeological sites or preserves will be contrasted with the Talgar Iron Age sites (400 BC–100 CE) situated in a rapidly changing landscape due to economic development and infrastructure (pipelines, railways, roads, and housing) about 12–15 km east of the major city of Almaty. The goal of this article is to discuss the complexity of the entangled sectors of cultural and historic preservation, economic development, tourism, and global transnational heritage within the framework of sustainability.

Keywords: archaeology, UNESCO World Heritage sites, preservation, cultural properties

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to examine global, national, and regional policies and practices of cultural heritage and preservation of important archaeological sites, monuments, and landscapes in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The global and national importance of the Republic of Kazakhstan's rich cultural and historical heritage is apparent in the UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions of three archaeological and/or historic sites and two natural areas from 2003 to 2016. Thirteen additional nominations dating from 1996 to 2016 have been added to the tentative list for inscription to the World Heritage List. In 2014 the UNESCO has granted World Heritage status to 34 places along the Silk Route that includes the nations of China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan and with funding and support from Norway, Japan, and South Korea [1]. The “One Belt, One

Road” initiative launched by the Chinese government is a set of economic and political alliances meant to strengthen trading, cooperation financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. From 2013 to 2017, the Republic of Kazakhstan has been one of the 21 states who serve on the nominating committee for cultural and historical properties for the UNESCO (usually a 4-year term) (personal communication Yuri M. Peshkov). The UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions in the Republic of Kazakhstan, along with the tentative list for World Heritage inscriptions, have reinforced the necessity for Kazakhstani diplomats, politicians, government officials, and the local citizenry to include archaeological sites, monuments, and cultural properties as part of sustainability efforts. In the case of places such as the archaeological sites of Otrar placed on the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1998, Kazakhstani archaeologists have since worked toward linking archaeological protection and conservation with increased local and international tourism [2]. At the archaeological landscape of Tamgaly, an important petroglyph reserve already nominated as a World Heritage place in 2004, there have been efforts to document the over 5000 rock carvings in the Bronze through Medieval and Contemporary sites, and an area of about 900 hectares has been under state jurisdiction and placed under the 1992 Law on the Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Heritage (UNESCO World Heritage List Kazakhstan website) [3].

The archaeological community, both as part of government organizations under the Kazakhstan Republic’s Ministry of Sciences and Higher Education and the Ministry of Culture, has been directly involved in policies for the protection and preservation of archaeological sites and monuments since independence in 1991. Before, under Soviet rule, there were strict mandates and codes for the protection and restoration of archaeological sites and monuments. Thus, the legal status for protecting, restoring, and preserving archaeological and historical sites has indeed had a long and venerable history in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Of interest, however, is how recent infrastructure development (road building, railways, pipelines, gas and oil, mineral development, and housing) has impacted archaeological sites and monuments. Sustainable development also is the larger umbrella for the consideration of important natural, cultural, and historic landscapes and places. This paper will address these issues at different scales: the local and regional, the national, and the international and global levels by using several case studies in the Talgar region near the major city of Almaty, in the Otrar basin including the UNESCO World Heritage medieval site of Otrar, and at the petroglyph complex of Tamgaly. All these places are in southern Kazakhstan or the Zhetysu Region (Seven-Rivers area). By no means, they are necessarily the most important regions for cultural heritage, but they serve as important examples for other places in the Republic of Kazakhstan either designated as World Heritage places or as tentative listings on the World Heritage inscription list or known as archaeological sites that should be protected as part of the nation’s cultural and historic heritage while still obtaining the goals of sustainability in a rapidly developing nation.

My sources come from Russian, Kazakh, and English reports, anecdotal data, and informal discussions with my Kazakhstani colleagues since the mid-1990s. Also I address changes in land property from collective landholdings to privatization of landholdings, especially in areas where archaeological sites have been found, inventoried, and listed under Svod Pamyatnikov or the official national archives of registered archaeological sites and monuments for the major provinces of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Much of this inventorying, built upon the earlier task of the Archeologische Karta (or the Archaeological Map of Kazakhstan) published in 1960, has been conducted by the Kazakhstan Office for the Preservation and Restoration of Sites and Historic Monuments under the direction of the Kazakhstan Republic’s Ministry of Culture.

2. Local and regional considerations of cultural heritage and historic monuments

In the early 1990s just after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the state organizations for archaeological research and preservation of artifacts, sites, and monuments were often at the brink of transition, lacking both necessary structural guidelines once in place during Soviet rule and sufficient government funding. The permit system remained the same as in Soviet times and was known as the Akrites List, or Open List, by which archaeologists from the institutes such as the Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, universities, museums, and other government-sponsored entities could apply for permits to survey, excavate, and research archaeological sites for scientific purposes. These permits or permissions were obtained through the appropriate bureaucratic entities in the name of qualified archaeologists. The government offices along with the individual archaeologist, to whom the permit was granted, were responsible for reaching all criteria including submitting a final or interim report annually on the methods and results of the research. There were further stipulations that the Ministry of Culture required such as complying with rules of where artifacts and archival information would be placed after the completion of research and study. For international researchers, we were bound to deposit all scientific materials, including ancient objects, to government institutions or museums in the Republic of Kazakhstan. In order to obtain permission through the Open List, international archaeologists work collaboratively with the local archaeologists. Foreign researchers, such as myself, are required annually to sign a scientific protocol and agreement or memorandum of agreement that indicates (1) scientific exchange through sharing of books, articles, and other printed material; (2) listing of all personnel to be included in a project; (3) the funding of the project (usually the responsibility of the international archaeologists through grants); (4) curation of collections (artifacts and reports) which are to remain in the Republic of Kazakhstan; and (5) responsibilities for publishing articles in Russian, Kazakh, and English.

Local mayors (akims) and other officials of the oblasts (provinces) also play an important role in supporting archaeological research in their regions. Often these bureaucrats have funds from their local or regional coffers to aid in costly research work, protection of collections, and furthering museum collections. For example, the “Two Thousand-Year Jubilee Celebration” of important cities along the southern Silk Route in the 2001 such as Taraz and Almaty resulted in funds given for local archaeologists to excavate new sections of urban medieval sites, initiate new restoration and conservation projects, and to mount important exhibitions in local museums and cultural centers.

The importance of scientific archaeological research in the service of providing national and ethnic identities was understood in the 1920s as a way to integrate the far distant republics of the USSR into one nation. In a republic such as Kazakhstan, where the indigenous population of Kazakhs comprised a considerable proportion of the populace, it was also important to highlight important ethnic heroes such as the last nineteenth-century poet, composer, and philosopher Abai Qunanbaiuly. By the time rapid collectivization took place in 1929–1930, the Kazakhs suffered famine and starvation [4–6]. The land was now held under the state apparatus.

2.1 The Talgar case: land privatization, infrastructure development, and UNESCO World Heritage inscription

In 1997–1998 when the Kazakh-American Archaeological Expedition (KAAE) sponsored by A. Kh. Margulan Institute of Archaeology and American archaeologists conducted surveys across a 550 sq. km area of the Talgar alluvial fan, an area about

25 km to the east of the city of Almaty, much of the land we surveyed were open agricultural fields held by state collective farms. It was possible to walk in uncultivated agricultural fields in order to find inventory archaeological sites, usually apparent from scatters of animal bone, ancient ceramic fragments, and grinding stones. By the early 2000s, much of the collective lands were now held by private owners and therefore became fenced, enclosed, and closed to archaeologists and others who wished to conduct scientific research. Private owners of the land once designated as collective lands that previously had been surveyed and even excavated by archaeologists under the proper official channels were now subject to judicial actions and potential lawsuits. Therefore, it became a point of contention as to whether private owners had the right to control and use their land in any way they desired versus the protection and preservation of archaeological sites once found on collective lands.

This kind of acrimony and conflict between stakeholders would continue in the Talgar area from 2008 through 2016 when a private archaeological firm was investigated for destroying cultural properties within the designated borders of medieval Talgar, a 9 h town, occupied from the ninth to the eleventh centuries AD and inscribed as one of the eight sites in the Republic of Kazakhstan found along the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor of the Silk Route in 2014. The resolution of the dispute between the private archaeological firm, the construction work that built a bridge across the Talgar River, A. Kh. Margulan Institute of Archaeology, and the Republic of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Culture led to a unilateral government mandate that halted all construction work on the bridge and salvage archaeology along the proposed bridge corridor on November 21, 2016 [7].

3. Kazakh nationalism and historical tradition

Kazakhstan became independent from the USSR in 1991, at the point where the republic's population had <50% ethnic Kazakhs; the other predominant ethnic group was Russians along with many other ethnic groups. The move toward erasing ethnic Russians as the "elder brothers" to colonizers was achieved by removing Russians from the public sector, business, banking, and the law [8]. In fact President Nazarbayev made moves to create a Kazakh homeland by moving the capital to Astana in 1998–1999. He also declared 1998 "the year of national unity and national history." During this year, specifically in 1998 major archaeological campaigns were carried out at the medieval city of Otrar, and the Saka period frozen tomb burials in Berel, in the Altai region, were excavated by a French-Kazakh team, and many other state-funded archaeological projects were conducted.

Elsewhere I have written about the role of nationalism in archaeological investigations in the Republic of Kazakhstan [9]. The desire to establish the origins of the Kazakh Khanate in the sixteenth century CE also aided in the creation of a Kazakh homeland. Ancient Saka warriors of the Iron Age (ca. 800–200 BCE) such as the Golden Warrior, a 17-year-old youth discovered in the Issyk burial kurgan 40 km east of Almaty (the main city) in 1969, already established an historical connection between Saka Indo-Europeans and Kazakh nomadic culture.

A relatively young nation independently requires a historic tradition, in this case, one that extolls the nomadic past of the major component of the Republic of Kazakhstan's populace, the Kazakhs. As a breakaway from the Russian Imperial rule in the eighteenth century and Soviet rule in the twentieth century, the Kazakh ethnic identity must be promoted as root of the nation while still including the hundred other nationalities or ethnic groups. The adoption of the Kazakh language as the state language where all official documents must be in Kazakh language appears to be a major step toward Kazakhization of the nation and proclaiming one state language [10].

From the very beginning of Kazakhstan's independence from the former USSR, President Nazarbayev initiated the cultural and political ideology of Kazakhization on December 10, 1991, by referring to Ablai Khan who already in the eighteenth century revitalized Kazakh statehood from "the brink of collapse" [11]. The history of Kazakhstan, and especially its deep history regarding the connections of Kazakhs to the ancient Turks. Karin and Chebotarev [11] quote fragments of official speeches from President Nazarbayev from 1996 to 1997 that specifically name the Paleolithic sites in southern Kazakhstan at Shoktas and Koshkurgan established the antiquity of human occupation on the territory of Kazakhstan that could establish the antiquity of human history to 100,000 years or more. Of importance is an underlying concept of ethnogenesis, or the idea that the "ethnos" or the national people originated from a very ancient heritage that established this territory as specifically Eurasian in origin.

4. Transnational and global heritage and the Republic of Kazakhstan

In 2014, 33 sites along the Silk Routes of the Network of the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage sites; 8 of these sites are located in the Zhetysu Corridor of the Republic of Kazakhstan and 3 are located in the Tian Shan Mountains in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan [12]. The entire Silk Routes of the Networks of the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor consist of a 5000 km section from Chang'an/Louyang capital of the Han and Tang Dynasties in China to the Zhetysu Corridor of Central Asia along the Tian Shan Mountain Corridor into the desert oases of Central Asia and dating from about the second century BCE to the first century CE and then lasting until the sixteenth century CE. In particular the Ili, Chuy, and Talas Valleys of Central Asia and these archaeological sites were important for the transfer of Zoroastrian and Manichaeism religions. As previously mentioned, Talgar, a medieval site, was adversely impacted by potential bridge building and the salvage archaeology associated with that proposed construction in 2016 [7]. This, therefore, is an excellent case by which local and regional conflicts between rapid infrastructural development and national and international interests underscored by the UNESCO inscription of archaeological sites along a corridor become visible to the general public and citizenry of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Should a new nation exercise its ability to undertake large infrastructural development at the expense of its rich cultural and historical heritage? Do local stakeholders have any say? Or are the larger issues of national pride and international relations able to override a local, municipal government's desire to introduce modernization in the form of roadways and bridges to its territory? Here the answers lie in the nature of political process whereby cultural and historic heritage sometimes comes at the cost of infrastructure development. The stakeholders may not have even concerned themselves with the larger macroscale processes of transnational cooperation in the form of the designation of a Silk Route Corridor. When the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing, this suggests a failure on the part of all stakeholders to participate in the process of negotiating between the heritage community, the public, and the national and international arenas [13, 14].

This transnational set of historic linkages between the nations of China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan also mirrors the geopolitical push made by China in the "One Belt, One Road" initiative which has the objectives of increasing unimpeded trade; infrastructure connections such as railways, pipelines, and road; and financial integration [1]. The Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor is the example of "soft diplomacy" coupled with hard economic integration and colonization of periphery areas to the Chinese core. As Winters [1] puts it so eloquently:

“For many in the region, the Silk Road is a story of peaceful trade, and a rich history of religious and harmonious cultural exchange. The Belt and Road seeks to directly build on this legacy. It rest up a historical narrative that connectivity—both cultural and economic—reduces suspicion and promotes common prosperity...” [1]

For developing nations such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the invitation to join the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor Silk Route initiative gives these nations status, recognition, and also a stake in the “One Belt, One Road” economic initiatives of the core state of China. World Heritage status of archaeological sites often brings cultural, scientific, and financial backers into a nation. For example, the UNESCO-backed restoration of the medieval city of Otrar, a main city along the southern Silk Route, was for the most part financed by Japan. Petroglyph research and the training of local archaeologists and museum personnel at Tamgaly, the major archaeological rock art and landscape reserve in southern Kazakhstan near the Karatau Mountains, were supported in part by Norway. For local archaeologists in Kazakhstan, these World Heritage nominations attract more tourism and boost employment and research opportunities. Government grants through the Kazakh National Institute of Science and Technology have been awarded to archaeologists pursuing the excavation, survey, and research into significant archaeological sites; both are included in World Heritage site nominations and on the tentative list of cultural properties to be protected.

5. Conclusions

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, cultural and historic heritage of archaeological sites and monuments arises out of the previous Soviet system for the protection and restoration of important archaeological sites and historic monuments. This tradition of heritage management continues to this day but has been influenced now by rapid infrastructural development and national and global mandates under the UNESCO system of inscribing World Heritage sites and natural landscapes. This new level of transnational and global heritage has both positive and negative impacts on the stakeholders of Kazakh history and culture and the citizens themselves. Nationalism, especially with regard to the early evolution of prehistory on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as mentioned by former President Nazarbayev in 1997–1998, builds among its citizenry a sense of pride and belonging to a greater Eurasian past. The linkage between the contemporary Kazakh culture, whose historic roots can be traced to the sixteenth century AD, and earlier nomadic steppe traditions such as the ancient Saka (eastern variants of the Scythians), although perhaps historically inaccurate, does instill a national pride in the dominant ethnic group, the Kazakhs. Under Soviet rule, indigenous nomadic peoples were often seen as the “little brothers” to the dominant Russian cultural and historic traditions. Former President Nazarbayev since independence in 1991 has been able to weave a national identity that is both multiethnic and multireligious within the territory of the nation-state while asserting the political dominance of the Kazakhs through language reform and the Kazakhization of the national culture [8, 10, 11]. In spite of rapid infrastructural development from vast oil and gas reserves, it is also of great importance to the politicians and diplomats as well as the professional archaeologists and historians to promote the role of cultural and historical heritage in the Republic of Kazakhstan. There will still, however, be tensions in these competing national and global narratives as long as sustainable development appears to be separate from the management of heritage policies.

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