

# Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ğāfar al-Naršahī, Bukhara története (History of Bukhara). Translated, introduced, and edited by Miklós Sárközy.

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Not much is known about the life of the Sogdian Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ğāfar al-Naršahī – except that, as his name suggests, he came from the village of Naršah in the oasis of Bukhara – the first known historian in Central Asia to write the history of his native Bukhara in Arabic in the mid-10th century. This is the only known book that he wrote. The *History of Bukhara* traced events from the middle of the 7th to the beginning of the 10th century and was presented to the Samanid emperor Nūḥ I in 943/944 AD. This original version is lost, but a 12th-century Persian translation, or adaptation with minor additions, is still extant. The text was altered in translation. The *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, translated by Abū Naṣr Aḥmad al-Qubāwī in 1128–1129, omitted passages the translator considered tedious and unnecessary and extended the time frame, bringing the history down to 975. This Persian version was later modified again: Muḥammad ibn Zufar ibn ʿUmar shortened it in the 12th century and also added material from other works, such as the *Ḥazāʾin al-ʿulūm* by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nišāpūrī, bringing the history down to the 12th century. An unknown author after the Mongol invasions must also have made additions because the Mongol conquest of Bukhara is mentioned in some chapters. Therefore, the text has at least three different layers of content, and there are two languages involved.

Since few local chronicles or city histories written in this region survive from before Mongol rule, the *History of Bukhara* is one of the most important sources on the early mediaeval history of Central Asia. The *History* thus provides important information that cannot be found in other contemporary sources.

Al-Naršahī's work consists of three sections. The first part presents famous locals, landmarks, and urban myths about the founding of the city. The second part tells the history of the pre-Islamic Sogdian *hudāts* (princes) of Bukhara, the arrival of the Arabs, and a detailed description of the conquest of Central Asia by the Caliphate (one can also read about the wars of the Turks and Arabs here). The third part contains a comprehensive history of the rise of the Samanid dynasty.

Al-Naršahī wrote his history at a time when a great change was taking place, namely the replacement of the old Sogdian world by the rule of Islam, which meant a change in religion, but also a cultural transformation and, on the social level, the change of the elite and ruling circles. To represent the situation before this shift, al-Naršahī exhibits a considerable number of ancient Sogdian legends, myths, and traditions. At the same time, to acknowledge the shift, he places Bukhara at the centre of the Islamic world, creating a kind of Bukhara-centred micro-history interwoven with universal Islamic traditions. Bukhara is also presented as a religious centre that played a crucial role for various religions such as forms of worship in the early Sumerian era, Tengerism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and finally Islam. The book also tells stories about Buddhist and Gnostic religious groups and their presence and role in Central Asia from the sixth to the tenth centuries. Al-Naršahī draws on seminal works of Arab historiography, such as those of al-Ṭabarī, al-Madā'inī, and al-Bayhaqī. He also relies on local traditions for much of his information.

The *History of Bukhara* could be of interest to different readers with various concerns, including the following.

For historians interested in Central Asia: in the tenth century, Bukhara was a cultural centre rivalling Baghdad and the starting point of the Persian literary Renaissance. It served as the seat of government of the Samanid dynasty, which ruled most of present-day Iran and Central Asia. The work provides invaluable information on the topography and built environment of the city through people who lived in it, and as such has no parallel among the early local histories of Iran. Al-Naršahī's account of Bukhara in the pre-Islamic period shows that there were a variety of urban centres in the oasis and that Bukhara was neither the oldest nor necessarily the most important. The oral history of the area is covered in detail in the book, and there are many stories about the ancient villages that used to stand in the area. Ancient Iranian folktales are also recorded, as many of the important symbolic figures of the Persian Empire had to pass through this region to either found villages in their name or build sacred fire temples.

Linguistic interests include the fact that the ancient Dravidian city names that are no longer known today were well recorded in oral histories. The *History* also contains glosses in the Sogdian language, suggesting that the Sogdian language was still in use in Bukhara in the 10th century. The book lists many Turkic place names in the vicinity of Bukhara dating back to the 10th–12th centuries, indicating a strong ethnic presence of Turks in and around Bukhara.

The *History* is also a source for Hungarian studies because Bukhara was on the Silk Road and had many connections from Byzantium to China – and the Hungarians who lived in

Central Asia must have lived nearby. Bukhara and its surroundings are part of the Eurasian steppe region: thus, the events narrated also provide an insight into the history of the steppe – the broader background of the migration of the Hungarians – and clearly show the diverse relationships between the sedentary city dwellers and the nomads. Nevertheless, this chronicle has not been consulted in the study of Hungarian history: though it does not mention the Hungarians by name, it does mention Turkish ethnic groups and Sogdian townspeople, who are presumably related to the Hungarians. It also describes how Islam and its culture spread - and among the ancestors of the conquering Hungarians were the Volga Bulgars, who had adopted Islam and maintained lively trade relations with the Central Asian Samanids. Al-Naršahī wrote his work in a milieu that also produced other historical and geographical works that provided information about the Hungarians, such as the now lost Chronicle of al-Ġayhānī and the Persian geographical work *Hudūd al-‘ālam*, which devotes a chapter to a group of Hungarians.

The first manuscripts were brought to Europe and America in the 19th century. The first scholarly use of this *History* was by P. Lerch in his numismatic research. Then the first detailed analysis of the work in European scholarly circles was performed by the Hungarian scholar Ármin Vámbéry, whose popular *History of Bukhara* made al-Naršahī’s work known to a wider public. The chronicle, which can now also be read in Hungarian, can also serve as a source for Hungarian researchers interested in the history of the Steppe. The book under review appeared in the series “*Források és tanulmányok*” (Sources and Studies) published by the Early Hungarians Research Team of the Research Centre for the Humanities. Miklós Sárközy’s translation presents a captivating narrative that recreates the intellectual and commercial life of this ancient city, to which numerous annotations that attest to wide reading have been appended. The notes are elaborately written and render the text easy to follow even for a non-specialized reader; at the same time each note contains references and indications for further reading for those who wish to study the given topics. While the most well-known earlier translation, the English one by Richard Nelson Frye, simplified the text, Miklós Sárközy aimed at following the Persian text more closely. He worked from the 2008 reprint of Raḍawī’s Teheran edition of 1939, but also considered the versions mentioned by R. N. Frye and indicated the differing manuscripts, thus a critical approach is evident. The notes bring alternative translations for those *loci* where the different manuscripts offer another reading.

The translation is followed by an Epilogue, a study that first places the *History of Bukhara* in the context of early Islamic historiography in Central Asia, familiarizing the wider readership with its various genres and methods. Both a non-Orientalist researcher of Hungarian studies and a general readership may benefit from this information, which helps to understand the unique nature of the work. The Epilogue also applies the concepts of micro-history and urban history, thus letting a non-expert better appreciate these concepts. Then it describes the characteristic features of the *History* itself, elaborating on the features caused by Bukhara’s peripherality as well as its claimed centrality, together with questions of authorship and sources. The treatment of this subject matter is concise, but informative even for

an expert readership. A description of the extant manuscripts and our current knowledge concerning the work follows, helping a critical evaluation of the text and giving guidelines to those who want to know the research history better. Miklós Sárközy then presents the circumstances in which the work was composed, highlighting the most important features of the changes that took place in Central Asia in the 7th–10th centuries, which serve as a background for those who are interested in the conditions under which Early Hungarians – among others – lived. Regarding Bukhara, M. Sárközy assesses al-Naršahī as a source on pre-Islamic Bukhara and Central Asia, describes the formation of early Islamic Bukhara, and evaluates al-Naršahī’s book as a source on the spread of Islam in this period of transition. The final subsection of the Epilogue presents the Samanids as the first independent Muslim dynasty of Central Asia.

After the Epilogue, the Appendix helps the non-expert reader with a series of lists (Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, *amīrs* of Ḥurāsān, *Buḥār ḥudāts*, *amīrs* of Bukhara, and rulers of the Samanid dynasty). There is no index, though it could have made searching for specific data easier, and a brief note on transliteration might be appreciated (e.g., the use of “j” in a Hungarian text might need clarification for a non-expert reader). A series of maps also helps the reader follow the historical descriptions.

The Hungarian edition is welcomed by those interested in Central Asia who cannot read Persian, experts and a wider circle of readers alike, and its sophisticated edition, notes, and study are much appreciated. ■