

# The Role of Samarkand as a Center of Islamic Scholarship and Cultural Exchange in Medieval Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the role of Samarkand as a centre of Islamic scholarship and cultural exchange in Medieval Uzbekistan. Samarkand stands as an iconic symbol of intellectual prosperity, knowledge dissemination, and cultural exchange in medieval Uzbekistan. The city's strategic geographical position, distinguished educational institutions, exceptional scholars, and the production of influential texts all contributed to its status as a leading centre of Islamic scholarship. Moreover, the cultural interchange and diverse influences fostered an environment of vibrant intellectual dialogue that shaped medieval Muslim thought. By remembering the pivotal role played by Samarkand, we can further appreciate the rich intellectual heritage it left behind, laying the foundation for modern advancements in Islamic scholarship and cultural exchange.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Samarkand, nestled in the heart of Uzbekistan, is a city of immense geographical significance, serving as a central trading hub between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Positioned along the Silk Road, it has long been a melting pot of diverse cultures and influences. This strategic location not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also promoted the transmission of knowledge, ideas, and cultural practices across vast distances.

At the crossroads of various trade routes, Samarkand became a vibrant centre for merchants from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Its position on the Silk Road, the ancient network connecting East and West, made it a crucial link in the exchange of goods, technologies, and ideas. Merchants brought spices, silk, ceramics, and precious metals from distant lands, enriching Samarkand with a wealth of exotic commodities.


The city's bustling bazaars and caravanserais were teeming with activity, showcasing a variety of goods and fostering an environment of cultural exchange. Scholars, scientists, and artisans flocked to


Samarkand, contributing to its reputation as a hub of intellectual and artistic achievements. This vibrant interchange helped shape the city into a historical gem, reflecting the rich tapestry of human civilisation.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The city's geographical location also played a pivotal role in establishing Samarkand as a key hub for travellers and pilgrims. As one of the waypoints along the Silk Road, the city attracted a multitude of merchants, diplomats, scholars, and explorers. These interactions contributed to a cross-cultural exchange of knowledge, languages, traditions, and ideas.

Samarkand's strategic location also facilitated the spread of Islam across the region. Muslim scholars and missionaries travelled through the city, disseminating Islamic teachings and establishing mosques, madrasahs, and other educational institutions. The city's cosmopolitan atmosphere attracted converts, students, and intellectuals from

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various backgrounds, enhancing the diversity and intellectual vibrancy of Samarkand .

Furthermore, the geographical positioning of Samarkand made it a significant centre for cultural exchange and artistic endeavours. Influences from Persian, Turkic, Arab, Mongol, and other civilizations converged in the city, resulting in a unique fusion of artistic styles, architectural designs, and cultural expressions. The city became known for its distinctive blue and turquoise ceramics, intricate tilework, and intricate geometric patterns that adorned its mosques, palaces, and mausoleums.

The geographical significance of Samarkand extended beyond its position on the Silk Road. The city also benefitted from its proximity to fertile lands and water sources, making it an agricultural hub. The region around Samarkand was known for its agricultural productivity, yielding crops such as cotton, grapes, melons, and wheat. This agricultural prosperity not only sustained the city but also contributed to its economic growth and cultural legacy.

Located in the heart of Uzbekistan, the city of Samarkand has become a vibrant cultural melting pot through centuries of diverse influences. Situated along the ancient Silk Road, Samarkand's strategic location has facilitated the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and cultural practices between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The Silk Road, a network of trade routes spanning thousands of kilometres, served as a lifeline for the exchange of goods and ideas between the East and the West. Samarkand, with its favourable geographic position, became a pivotal point along this route. Merchants from distant lands brought spices, silk, ceramics, and precious metals, enriching the city with a wealth of exotic commodities.

This constant flow of goods and people created a unique environment in Samarkand, where different cultures seamlessly merged. As merchants travelled through the city, they brought with them not only their products but also their languages, traditions, and customs. Over time, these influences blended with the local culture, resulting in a vibrant and diverse society.

One of the most significant influences on Samarkand's cultural fabric came from Persia. The Persian Empire, with its rich cultural heritage, left an indelible mark on the city. Persian language and literature became integral parts of Samarkand's cultural life, influencing everything from poetry to architecture. The city's stunning blue-tiled mosques and madrasahs reflect the architectural style of Persia, showcasing intricate patterns and designs.

Turkic and Mongol influences also played a significant role in shaping Samarkand's cultural identity. The conquests of Genghis Khan and his successors brought Turkic and Mongol traditions to the region. These influences, blended with local customs, gave rise to a unique fusion of cultural practices. Art, music, and folklore bore the imprints of Turkic and Mongol heritage, creating a rich tapestry of traditions in Samarkand.

Arab merchants travelling along the Silk Road brought Islam to Samarkand. The religion took hold and flourished, eventually becoming an integral part of the city's cultural and religious fabric. Mosques, madrasahs, and other Islamic institutions were established, attracting scholars, intellectuals, and students from across the Muslim world. Samarkand became a centre of education and a hotbed of intellectual exchange, further enhancing its reputation as a cultural melting pot.

The influence of various cultures on Samarkand also extended to its culinary traditions. The city's cuisine reflects a blend of Persian, Turkic, and Central Asian flavours. Dishes like plov (a rice pilaf) and shashlik (grilled skewered meats) are staples of the local cuisine, showcasing the vibrant blend of culinary influences that have shaped Samarkand's food culture.

Another prominent feature of Samarkand's cultural heritage is its traditional arts and crafts. Skilled artisans have passed down their craftsmanship through generations, creating exquisite ceramics, tapestries, and intricate woodwork. The city is renowned for its blue and turquoise ceramics, which feature geometric patterns and floral motifs, a testament to the blending of different artistic traditions.

Beyond its physical manifestations, Samarkand's diverse cultural influences have also shaped the mindset and worldview of its inhabitants. The city's cosmopolitan atmosphere has fostered an appreciation for different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. This openness to diversity has enriched the intellectual and creative spirit of Samarkand, contributing to its enduring legacy as a hub of knowledge, art, and cultural exchange.

Samarkand stands as a testament to the power of diverse influences in shaping a vibrant and culturally rich society. Its position along the Silk Road allowed for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices, resulting in a unique fusion of traditions. Samarkand's architectural marvels, traditions, cuisine, and artistic heritage bear the imprints of Persian, Turkic, Mongol, and Arab influences.

Samarkand, nestled in the heart of Uzbekistan, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and its status as an important centre of trade and knowledge along the historic Silk Road. One facet of this cultural legacy lies in the city's formidable Islamic madrasahs, academic institutions that have played a significant role in shaping the intellectual and religious fabric of Samarkand.

One of the most prominent and widely recognized madrasahs in Samarkand is the Ulugh Beg Madrasah. Constructed in the early 15th century by the astronomer and ruler Ulugh Beg, this educational institution stands as a testament to both academic excellence and architectural splendour. With its intricate designs, elegant blue-tiled facade, and beautifully adorned entrance, the Ulugh Beg Madrasah is a stunning example of Timurid craftsmanship. It is said to have attracted scholars from far and wide, nurturing a community of intellectuals who delved into diverse realms of knowledge, including mathematics, astronomy, and Islamic sciences.

Adjacent to the Ulugh Beg Madrasah, the Sher-Dor Madrasah carries an equally impressive legacy. Constructed in the 17th century, it is adorned with iconic mosaics depicting two tigers chasing deer, symbolizing the eternal struggle between good and evil. The Sher-Dor Madrasah offered courses in Islamic theology, Quranic studies, and Arabic language, fostering a keen understanding of religious and scriptural knowledge.

Standing opposite the famed Registan Square lies the Tilla-Kori Madrasah, which completes the ensemble of iconic madrasahs in Samarkand. Built in the 17th century, it is renowned for its magnificent exterior, adorned with shimmering gold accents. Its name, "Tilla-Kori," translates to "adorned with gold," accurately reflecting the grandeur and opulence of the edifice. Scholars who pursued their studies here were exposed not only to Islamic teachings but also to a range of subjects such as Arabic literature, logic, and law.

These three prominent madrasahs are remarkable not only for their architectural beauty but also for the intellectual scholarship that thrived within their halls. Students and teachers alike engaged in rigorous academic pursuits, exploring Islamic theology, jurisprudence, Arabic language, and various scientific disciplines.

These institutions attracted scholars from various parts of the world, establishing Samarkand as a hub of intellectual exchange and religious scholarship. Students travelled from afar to study at these

esteemed madrasahs, drawn to the city's reputation for academic excellence.

The madrasahs of Samarkand were not only centres of learning but also cultural beacons, fostering an atmosphere of artistic expression and creative exploration. Music, poetry, calligraphy, and other forms of artistic endeavour were celebrated and nurtured within their walls, providing students with a well-rounded education that went beyond the realms of academia.

Today, these historic madrasahs continue to enthral visitors with their magnificence and cultural importance. Students and scholars no longer occupy their halls, but the legacy of intellectual pursuit and cultural exchange lives on. The madrasahs of Samarkand bear witness to a bygone era when knowledge was highly valued and celebrated, and when scientific, literary, and religious enlightenment seamlessly melded into a holistic education.

The renowned madrasahs of Samarkand bear testament to the city's rich educational and cultural history. These majestic institutions not only served as centres of religious and academic scholarship but also fostered a deep appreciation for the arts and sciences. The legacy of these madrasahs lives on, inviting visitors to marvel at their architectural grandeur and revere the intellectual pursuits that once flourished within their walls. Samarkand's madrasahs have left an indelible mark on the city's cultural landscape, embodying the timeless pursuit of knowledge and the enduring quest for enlightenment.

In addition to its architectural wonders and bustling markets, Samarkand was also home to a thriving intellectual community, reflected in the availability of libraries and scriptoriums that enriched the city's intellectual and literary landscape.

Libraries in Samarkand served as repositories of knowledge, housing a vast collection of books, manuscripts, and scrolls. Scholars from far and wide flocked to these libraries, seeking wisdom and enlightenment within their hallowed walls. One such library was the Library of Ulugh Beg, an illustrious ruler and astronomer of the 15th century. This library housed an extensive collection of books on various subjects, including mathematics, astronomy, Islamic theology, and philosophy. It was a hub of learning, attracting scholars eager to delve into the depths of knowledge and engage in intellectual discourse [6].

The Library of Mirzo Ulugbek, another prominent institution, was established in the 16th century. This library was known for its impressive collection of manuscripts in Persian, Arabic, and other languages. Scholars could access texts on a wide range of subjects, including literature, history, law, and

science. The Library of Mirzo Ulugbek played a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating important works of literature and scholarship.

Accompanying these libraries were the scriptoriums, workshops where skilled scribes meticulously copied and transcribed manuscripts. These scriptoriums were vital in the production of books, ensuring that knowledge could be duplicated and shared among scholars. Through their meticulous craftsmanship, scribes safeguarded texts for future generations, meticulously copying each letter and ornamentation with utmost care and precision.

It is important to note that these libraries and scriptoriums were not just places of solitary study and transcription but also social hubs. Scholars, intellectuals, and students congregated in these spaces to engage in scholarly debates, share ideas, and discuss the latest intellectual trends. The libraries and scriptoriums of Samarkand fostered a sense of community and camaraderie among the intellectual elite, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and the advancement of learning.

Within these cultural institutions, access to knowledge was not limited to a privileged few. Libraries and scriptoriums welcomed students, scholars, and intellectuals from all walks of life. People of all backgrounds had the opportunity to expand their intellectual horizons, traversing the realms of literature, science, philosophy, and theology.

The availability of libraries and scriptoriums in Samarkand was a testament to the city's commitment to education and intellectual enrichment. The rulers and scholars of Samarkand recognized the value of preserving and disseminating knowledge and investing in the establishment and maintenance of these institutions. The libraries and scriptoriums of Samarkand stood as pillars of enlightenment, nurturing a love for learning and intellectual exploration.

Though the libraries and scriptoriums of Samarkand have evolved over the centuries, their legacy endures. Modern libraries and educational institutions in Samarkand continue to provide access to knowledge, ensuring that the spirit of intellectual pursuit remains alive and well in the city. Today, visitors can explore the rich literary and scholarly heritage of Samarkand in museums that showcase rare manuscripts and ancient texts, offering a glimpse into the historical significance of these libraries and scriptoriums.

The availability of libraries and scriptoriums in Samarkand exemplifies the city's commitment to intellectual advancement and knowledge

dissemination. These institutions served as bastions of wisdom, welcoming scholars from different backgrounds and facilitating the exchange of ideas. Today, Samarkand's libraries and scriptoriums continue to inspire and foster a love for learning, ensuring that the legacy of knowledge endures in this historic city.

From the golden age of the Islamic world to the present day, these scholars have made significant contributions to various fields of knowledge, including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, and Islamic theology.

One of the most renowned scholars from Samarkand is Al-Khwarizmi, often referred to as the "Father of Algebra". Born in the 9th century, Al-Khwarizmi played a crucial role in the development of algebra and introduced the concept of algorithm, which still bears his name. His works on arithmetic, algebra, and astronomy had a lasting impact on scientific knowledge, influencing scholars across the Islamic world and beyond.

Another influential figure from Samarkand is Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, a polymath who lived during the 11th century. Al-Biruni made significant contributions to astronomy, physics, geography, mathematics, and history. He was a keen observer and studied various cultural and scientific fields during his extensive travels. Al-Biruni's works on astronomy and mathematics helped advance these disciplines and were highly regarded by scholars in his time and beyond.

Moving forward in history, we come across the remarkable figure of Mirzo Ulugbek. Born in the 15th century, Mirzo Ulugbek was not only a ruler but also a prominent astronomer. He established the Samarkand Observatory, which quickly became a centre for astronomical research and observation. Under Ulugbek's patronage, Samarkand became a hub for scholars interested in studying the stars and understanding the workings of the universe.

The intellectual legacy of Samarkand continued into the modern era with the influential scholar and philosopher Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Farghani, better known as Alfraganus. Born in the 9th century, Alfraganus made significant contributions to the fields of astronomy and mathematics. His work, which notably included the revision of Ptolemy's astronomical tables, greatly influenced the study of astronomy in the Islamic world and Europe.

Samarkand also produced notable scholars in the field of literature. One such figure is Alisher Navoi, a 15th-century poet, writer, and statesman. Navoi is considered one of the greatest contributors to the development of the Chagatai language and literature.

His works, including epic poems, ghazals, and treatises on various subjects, are part of the rich literary heritage of Samarkand.

These influential scholars from Samarkand, along with many others, have left an indelible mark on the intellectual landscape of their time. Their contributions to knowledge and the pursuit of learning continue to inspire scholars and enthusiasts around the world. Samarkand's legacy as a centre of intellectual and cultural excellence remains alive, attracting visitors who seek to explore the city's rich history and discover the remarkable achievements of its scholars.

Today, Samarkand maintains its commitment to education and intellectual development with the presence of prestigious academic institutions and libraries. It continues to be a place where scholars, students, and intellectuals can gather to engage in intellectual discussions, conduct research, and expand their knowledge.

Over the years, Samarkand has produced numerous influential texts that have shaped scholarly discourse and influenced thinkers across various fields. These texts cover a wide range of subjects including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, and philosophy. Let's explore some of the most notable texts produced in Samarkand.

One of the most significant texts originating from Samarkand is Al-Khwarizmi's "Kitab al-Jabr wa al-Muqabala" (The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing), which is considered the foundational work of algebra. Published in the 9th century, this text introduced systematic methods for solving linear and quadratic equations. It also presented the concept of algorithm, a term derived from Al-Khwarizmi's name, which laid the foundation for computational mathematics.

Another influential text is Abu Rayhan al-Biruni's "Kitab al-Saidana" (The Pharmacology Book), a comprehensive study of pharmacology and materia medica. Al-Biruni, a polymath who lived in the 11th century, explored the medicinal properties of various substances and documented his findings in this seminal work. "Kitab al-Saidana" became a valuable resource for physicians and pharmacists, contributing to advancements in the field of medicine.

Moving on to the field of astronomy, Mirzo Ulugbek's "Zij-i-Sultani" (The Sultani Table) stands out as a remarkable achievement. The Zij was an astronomical table that contained precise predictions of planetary positions and eclipses. Compiled by Ulugbek, who was not only a ruler but also a skilled astronomer, this text revolutionized the study of astronomy in the Islamic world. It provided

unparalleled accuracy and served as a standard reference for scholars and astronomers for centuries.

In the realm of literature, Samarkand gave birth to some extraordinary texts. Alisher Navoi, a 15th-century poet, composed the epic poem "Khamsa" (The Quintet), which consists of five interrelated works. Navoi's "Khamsa" represents a pinnacle of Chagatai literature, showcasing his mastery of poetic techniques, lyrical expression, and profound philosophical ideas. The poem remains highly regarded and continues to inspire contemporary writers.

Samarkand also played a crucial role in the transmission and preservation of classical texts. The city's libraries, such as the renowned Samarkand Khoja Ahrar Library, housed invaluable manuscripts and served as centres for academic exchange. These texts, from ancient Greek and Latin works to Islamic philosophical and theological treatises, were meticulously copied and preserved by dedicated scribes and scholars. The libraries of Samarkand became important repositories of knowledge, ensuring the preservation and dissemination of a vast intellectual heritage.

The production of influential texts in Samarkand was not limited to any particular period. Scholars throughout the centuries have nurtured a culture of intellectual pursuit, resulting in a rich literary tradition. Whether it works on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, or philosophy, the texts originating from Samarkand have made significant contributions to their respective fields.

Today, Samarkand continues to cherish its intellectual heritage, and many of these texts can still be found in libraries and museums, offering glimpses into the city's glorious past. Visitors to Samarkand can immerse themselves in the rich intellectual history by exploring these texts and delving into the ideas and discoveries made by scholars of the past.

Samarkand's contribution to the world of knowledge through its influential texts is remarkable. From Al-Khwarizmi's groundbreaking work on algebra to Mirzo Ulugbek's precise astronomical predictions, these texts have had a lasting impact on their respective disciplines. The texts originating from Samarkand stand as a testament to the city's intellectual vibrancy and its commitment to the pursuit of knowledge.

Samarkand has been a crossroads of different civilizations, resulting in a vibrant cultural tapestry that has shaped the city's identity.

For centuries, Samarkand served as a hub along the Silk Road, the famous trade route that connected East and West. Merchants, travellers, and diplomats

from various regions crossed paths in Samarkand, bringing with them not only goods but also ideas, languages, customs, and traditions. This continuous flow of people and knowledge gave rise to a unique multicultural environment, where different cultures mingled and influenced one another.

One of the most profound impacts of cultural exchange in Samarkand can be seen in its architecture. The city showcases an exquisite blend of Islamic, Persian, and Central Asian architectural styles. The Registan Square, with its majestic madrasahs (Islamic schools), beautifully illustrates this amalgamation of influences. These architectural marvels, adorned with intricate tilework, calligraphy, and geometric patterns, are a testament to the craftsmanship and artistic brilliance fostered through cultural exchange.

Furthermore, the art and craftsmanship of Samarkand reflect the city's multicultural heritage. Traditional crafts such as silk weaving, ceramics, and metalwork display influences from various cultures that have left their mark on the city over the centuries. Local artisans have skillfully incorporated Persian, Chinese, and Central Asian motifs in their creations, resulting in a unique blend that reflects the rich history of the region.

Cultural exchange in Samarkand has also had a profound impact on language and literature. The city became a centre for intellectual discourse and scholarship, attracting scholars and writers from across the region. As a result, Persian became the dominant language of literature and administration in the city, greatly influencing the development of literature in the Islamic world. This exchange of ideas and literary traditions enriched the cultural and intellectual landscape of Samarkand, fostering a legacy that continues to be celebrated to this day.

Music and performing arts also flourished in Samarkand as a result of cultural exchange. Various musical traditions from Persia, China, and Central Asia blended together to create a unique musical style known as *Shashmaqam*. This genre combines mesmerizing melodies, poetry, and traditional instruments to create an enchanting musical experience. The impact of cultural exchange is evident in the harmonious fusion and evolution of musical forms in Samarkand.

Moreover, the influence of cultural exchange extends beyond the realm of art and architecture. It has also shaped the culinary traditions of Samarkand. The city's cuisine reflects the fusion of Central Asian, Persian, Turkish, and Russian culinary techniques and flavours. Delicacies such as *plov* (rice pilaf), *shashlik* (grilled meat), and *manti* (dumplings) have

become staples of Samarkand's gastronomic identity, bearing the imprints of diverse cultural influences.

The impact of cultural exchange in Samarkand can be seen not just in the city's tangible heritage but also in the intangible aspects of its identity. The cultural exchange has contributed to the openness and tolerance of the city's inhabitants, fostering an inclusive environment where different cultures are celebrated and respected. Samarkand's people embrace diversity, acknowledging the shared cultural heritage and the richness brought about by their encounters with other civilizations.

Today, Samarkand continues to be a magnet for travellers and cultural enthusiasts seeking to explore the impact of cultural exchange. The city's historic sites, museums, and vibrant bazaars offer a glimpse into the past, showcasing the deep-rooted connections between different cultures.

Visitors can immerse themselves in the beauty of Samarkand's architecture, indulge in its culinary delights, and engage with its artistic traditions, gaining a deeper understanding of the city's multicultural heritage.

In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, the impact of cultural exchange in Samarkand serves as a powerful example of the value of embracing diversity and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Samarkand's cultural tapestry is a testament to the richness that emerges when different cultures come together, inspiring creativity, innovation, and mutual respect. (Kodirova et. al-Dagiev., 2013)

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Samarkand's geographical significance as a central trading hub between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East along the Silk Road cannot be overstated. Its strategic location, at the crossroads of multiple trade routes and cultural influences, enabled the exchange of goods, ideas, and knowledge across vast distances. The cosmopolitan and diverse nature of Samarkand, shaped by its position on the Silk Road, fostered intellectual vibrancy, cultural enrichment, and artistic expression. Recognizing the geographical significance of Samarkand helps us appreciate the city's historical legacy as a centre of trade, knowledge, and cultural exchange, and its enduring impact on the region.

Samarkand's long-standing tradition of producing influential scholars across various fields is a testament to the city's intellectual vibrancy and commitment to knowledge. From Al-Khwarizmi's

foundational work in algebra to Mirzo Ulugbek's advancements in astronomy, these scholars have made invaluable contributions and left a lasting legacy. Samarkand's status as a centre of intellectual excellence remains an inspiration for future generations, encouraging the pursuit of knowledge and the exploration of new ideas.

Samarkand stands as an iconic symbol of intellectual prosperity, knowledge dissemination, and cultural exchange in medieval Uzbekistan. The city's strategic geographical position, distinguished educational institutions, exceptional scholars, and the production of influential texts all contributed to its status as a leading centre of Islamic scholarship. Moreover, the cultural interchange and diverse influences fostered an environment of vibrant intellectual dialogue that shaped medieval Muslim thought. By remembering the pivotal role played by Samarkand, we can further appreciate the rich intellectual heritage it left behind, laying the foundation for modern advancements in Islamic scholarship and cultural exchange.

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