

James Abbot. Narrative of a journey from Herat to Khiva, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Vol. I 1843.

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British officer, trained in financial- and tax matters. Served as political assistant to the British envoy at Herat, Afghanistan. He has neither experience nor knowledge of the area, a very limited knowledge of Persian language, no knowledge of Djagatai, nor of any other Turkish dialects.

He is sent to Khiva by his superior to strengthen recently established contacts.

Around 1840 the Khan of Khiva is strong enough to keep safe communications between Khiva and his far away frontier with Afghanistan (Pendj-deh).

Abbot's travel is therefore safer, though still eventful, than Mouraviev's before him or O' Donovan after him. He travels from Herat to Khiva and from there to a small Russian port of the Caspian Sea North of the Mangyshlak Peninsula, called Aqtau (Fort Alexandrovsk).

Only months after his meeting with the Khan, another British officer, Lieutenant Shakespear, will reach Khiva and, building on Abbot's good contacts with the Khan, will persuade him to release, without any preliminary condition, all his Russian slaves. The Tzar, thus deprived of a welcome pretext for attacking Khiva, will pretend to be delighted by this outcome and shower Shakespear with honors and medals.

Page 2: The Turkic tribes established between Russia and Khiva are miscalled **Kirghiz** by the Russian, but are in fact **Kazakhs**. The Russians wanted perhaps to avoid any confusion with their own **Cossacks**.

(Note: Probably true, since still today the population living North- and Northwest of Khiva are indeed Kazakhs, while the Kirghiz live further East.) In 1843, most Kazakhs are, at least nominally, already tributary of Russia.

Page 3: Kwaresm (the Khiva oasis) is isolated in all direction by steppes and deserts sparsely populated by marauding tribes. The territory claimed by Khiva covers about 800X600 miles

(Note: Of which only a small part is the densely populated oasis itself. Its southern limit (Pendj deh) is quite close to Herat)

Page 8: Travelling from Herat to Khusk: «...the capital of the Jemshidi, a tribe of Turkish origin, living in black circular felt tents, raising sheep and horses...», then riding toward the Murgab river. The Khusk river is an affluent of the Murgab.

(Note: The Jemshidi, one of the 4 major Aymaks tribes, are now believed to be of mixed Arab and Persian descent).

Page 20: Arrival in Pendj-deh on the Murgab river, occupied by 300 yurts of the **Yomuds**.

(Note: Pendj-deh is nominally under Khivan rule at the time. The Yomut were probably there by order of the Khan).

«...The (Yomud-) Khetkhoda, a tall, sawney, miserly looking fellow, here made me welcome with a second edition of hand-joining, and spreading a handsome carpet on the earth, begged me to be seated, until my habitation should be ready. I did so, and soon perceived that we were surrounded by a crowd of curious faces, all decidedly Tartar, yet not generally uncomely.... in about half an hour, the tent was ready for my reception, and I was escorted to it in due form. I found the floor spread with fine carpets, the manufacture of the Khail (or «aoul»= village). One of these had almost the softness of velvet, and would have sold elsewhere for a high price.... »

« ...These Turkomans tents are the most comfortable of dwellings in this serene climate. A house cannot be adapted to the vicissitudes of heat and cold which mark the year. Whereas by removing a portion of the felt covering, this tent is open to the air in summer and, in winter, a fire lighted in the centre makes it the warmest of retreats, all the smoke rising through the skylight in the roof. Not to mention the great advantage of being able to migrate, dwelling and all, to a sunny or a sheltered spot....»

Page 30-31: « ...Near Pendj-Deh, the Murgab valley is about nine miles in breadth with barren steppes, narrowing downriver. Many ruins, the area is sparsely populated. The river has formed a clay canyon, sometimes 30 feet deep. Tamarisk is the main tree with bushes of camel thorn. Large number of caravans to Merv, laden with barley which they exchanged for slaves at Herat ... »

Page 32: At Yolatan, down river from Pendj-deh: Many yurt villages near the river, with some agriculture. The Murgab Valley is now a large plain limited by the desert. There is a local (Khivan-) Uzbek beg, but the power seems in the hands of the local Turkmen khetkhoda. Abbott does not mention his tribe.

Page 38: Merv is only a few hours ride from Yolatan.

Page 47: «.....I had a rare specimen of this abominable plain, passing through an atmosphere of dust that almost stifled me. My road lay through the Bazaar of low huts, which constitutes the present city of Merv. I issued from thence into the plain of deep fine sand,, its wide extent of some three thousand square miles, not a blade of any herb, far less the leaf of any tree, but raked up by the lightest wind, until the sky is blotted out by the dust....»

Page 51-52: The dam on the Murgab had been rebuilt and the land brought to culture again. The «city» of Merv is made of about 100 mud huts, where a considerable market is held. About 60 000 Turkmen are living in the oasis, chiefly as cultivators (*probably seasonal*). No mention of tribes.
(*Note: Evidently Saryk and Salors at the time*)

Page 54: Near Khiva:

«...*The Turkoman women are by all accounts modest, and not concealed. When a traveller enters a Yomud village, he is accommodated in the public guest tent, if there be one. If the camp is small, there is probably no guest tent, in which case he is admitted into the family tent of his host, where he finds the wife and children.... At night, under veil of darkness, the several parties undress.... The children are early married, the boys at the age of fourteen years, the girls at that of eleven or twelve years, and before the age of puberty. The marriage is immediately consummated, and a tent is provided for the young pair, which is pitched near that of the boy's parents.....*».

(*Note: This description collides with O'Donovan's and de Blocqueville's ones, although one has to remember that O'Donovan's and de Blocqueville's hosts, are Tekes, not Yomuds as in Abbots' case*)

Page 70: At Khiva: Trees are poplars, elms (wide and shadowy) as well as plane trees.

Page 108-109: The Khan of Khiva explains to Abbot the origin of his problems with Russia, claiming that until about 20 years ago the relations with Russia were peaceful.

(*Note: the Khan has a rather selective memory! In fact there were frequent skirmishes for example when a Russian army attacked Kwaresm, which offered no significant resistance, but under the pretense of treating them as hosts, succeeded in dividing the Russian forces, slaughtering all the soldiers and skinning alive the naive general, who ended up his military career as the upper part of a drum*).

About 1820, a rich caravan escorted by 200 Russian infantry bound to the kingdom of Bokhara tried to force its way through the Khiva Khanate). The Khan, fearing that once arrived in Bokhara this force would join the army of the Khanate of Bokhara and attack Khiva, ordered his cavalry of Turkmen- and Kazakh irregulars to stop the caravan after its fording of the Syr darya. The Russian troop inflicted heavy casualties to the Khivan cavalry, but their own losses forced them to retreat to Russia. The caravan was plundered. After this casus belli, the Kazakhs tribes allied with Russia and the Kazakhs and Turkmen subjects of Khiva, started encroaching on each others' territories. The Khivans occasionally capturing and enslaving Russians.

In 1838, the Russian built Novo Alexandrovsk (A small fort and port, North of the Mangyshlak peninsula on a territory claimed by Khiva), captured Khivan caravans and kept 550 Khivan merchants captive.

The Khan said to Abbot that he did sent three embassies in good faith, asking for an exchange of prisoners, but that the general commanding in Orenburg did not play fair, keeping about 120 released Russians without any counterpart.

Page 118. In order to win the Khan's trust, Abbot is avoiding being too curious about Khiva and remains nearly in seclusion.

(*Note: His limited knowledge of the Central Asian civilization, his lack of interest for the natives, even some racial prejudice, make his report much less interesting for the reader than O'Donovan's or Burnes'.*)

Page 120: The Khan informs Abbott that the Yomuds roaming the area between Khiva and the South of the Mangyshlak peninsula are, at this particular time, in open rebellion against him. These Yomuds «...*being plunderers by profession, he could not recommend this route to the Caspian...*».

A route towards the shores, North of Mangyshlak is more secure and is the normal route for caravans wishing to embark for Astrakhan (Russia).

(*Note: this detail shows that Turkmen tribes are not monolithic: while the Yomuds of Pendj-deh or those living at the fringe of Khiva oasis (see page 212) are allied with the Khan, at the same time the Caspian Yomuds are hostile.*)

Page 131: Another example of the lack of racial prejudice between nomad tribes: Tribes of Kazakhs and Turkmen share the same area of the Caspian shore, north of Mangyshlak.

Page 187-188: A Chodor chief is instructed by the Khan of Khiva to guide Abbot to a port of the Mangyshlak peninsula. The Chodor tribe «...*all potent in the latter district...*» is estimated at about 12 000 families or 60 000 souls. Russian vessels are waiting for caravans on an Island near the shore.

The Chodor chief describes the peninsula as being inhabited by Chodors and Kazakhs living in yurts and stated that there are no houses on the peninsula.

Page 210. «.....*The black tent is so much more comfortable, than any permanent habitation known in central Asia, that the Turkoman abandons it with reluctance, and only when he has become, thoroughly and exclusively, an agriculturist. For, many Turkomans, who have taken to the latter avocation, retain their love for the wilderness and its comparative freedom and continue to resort thither, yearly, to pasture their flocks and herds, which, at other seasons, are watched, there, by their children or retainers.....*».

Page: 210: «..... *We approached, shortly after noon, a considerable aoul of Chodor Turkomans, and our friend The Thief, handsomely mounted, rode forth to escort me to the tent of his elder brother, the Yuze Baushie, Kooch Muhummud.*

I was shown into a beautiful black tent, of the largest size and handsomest material, forming the most agreeable dwelling imaginable. The women of the house had collected to gaze....»

Page 211: An example of the rather relaxed ways the Turkmen follow the rules of Islam:

«...The chief men of the (Chodor) Khail (aoul, village) paid me a visit...the elder brother, Kooch Muhummud,... led-in his young daughter, a child of some eight or nine years, and seated himself, at my invitation, near me. The little girl wore a scarlet, hemispherical cap, with silver tassels and bells, over her brown hair, which was braided in four tads.

Her introduction was regarded by my old Mirza (Abbott's Afghan secretary) with holy horror and Summud Khan afterwards gave me a sermon, upon the same text, from which I learned, that a father should not see his daughter after the age of eight or nine years.....».

Page 212: *« ..The number of slaves in Kwaresm is supposed to exceed the Uzbek population of 700 000...» (Note: The author makes no mention here of the Sarts, descending from the former owners of the oasis, mostly involved in commercial and agricultural activities, nor of the Turkmen subjects of Khiva, mainly Yomuds and Chodors nomads, which have three main activities, raising sheep, goats or camels, slave-hunting and seasonal small scale agriculture).*

Near the ruins of old Orgundje, the author overnights in a Yomud village. He makes a similar remark to one made 40 years later by O'Donovan:

«...Here I saw many Turkoman women, engaged in various occupations about the camp; one of them appeared beautiful, the generality comely, decidedly European ; and often with features almost English. The eyes, indeed, though sparkling, are small, and the lids are ill cut, the arch above being precisely similar to that below. The complexion, even when the hair is light, cannot be termed blonde, because the white of the skin, (so to speak) is a transparent sunny hue, such as we see upon a ripe nectarine, or an evening cloud...»

(Note: The Yomud seem to have mixed their blood with Persians more than some other Turkmen tribes. They certainly were among the best providers of Persian slaves to Khiva, but also integrated slave women in their own household.)

Page 223: The usual discussion about the «westward-bound dry bed of the Amu darya». The question will be settled a few decades later by the Russians.

Page 259: At a Kazakh village, East of the Caspian Sea: *«...At an intermediate halt, he (a member of Abbot's group) asked my permission to take a lesson in carpet weaving, of the inhabitants of a neighboring tent. I saw him there, between two fair teachers laughing and learning....».*

(Note: A Russian rug experts has informed Rugdom that the Kazakhs never wove rugs before the end of the 19 th century and then solely to profit from the commercial boom created by western imports. Here in 1842, about 30 years before the Russian conquest of Khiva, a couple of insolent Khazack maids dare to contradict him.)

Page 300: The author signals again that, as in all Kazakh yurts, the cauldron is of (Russian) cast iron. *(Note: And so probably also the dyeing pot).*

Page 376: The author thinks that in 1842 the Chodor tribe is the strongest force in the Mangyshlak peninsula and that despite their superior numbers the Kazakhs are more often the victims of Chodor raids than the opposite.