Қазақстанның археологиялық ескерткіштерін зерттеу тарихы

The history of the study of archaeological sites in Kazakhstan

История изучения археологических памятников Казахстана

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The Great Silk Road in the works of Alkey Margulan

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Түйін сөздер: *археология, Сарыарка, Далалық Жібек жолы, Марғұлан, ортағасырлық қалалар*
Ключевые слова: *археология, Сарыарка, Степной Шелковый путь, Маргулан, средневековые города*

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The Great Silk Road served as a catalyst for the development of ancient and medieval civilizations. Its study began in the mid-20th century and is associated with the name of A.Kh. Margulan. The article briefly outlines the factors that led A.Kh. Margulan to turn to archaeology, highlights the main methodological approaches used to reconstruct the routes of the Steppe Silk Road from the medieval cities of southern Kazakhstan northward to the cities of the forest-steppe zone of the Urals and Siberia. It is noted that the cartography of transcontinental caravan routes is based on the direct localization of settlements and cities discovered by him, the analysis of medieval written sources, and knowledge of oral steppe historiology. The article presents archaeological evidence of the operation of trade and diplomatic arteries in the Eurasian steppe from ancient times, starting from the mid-1st millennium BC.
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Әлкей Марғұлан еңбектеріндегі Ұлы Жібек жолы

Ұлы Жібек Жолы – ерте және ортағасырлардағы өркениеттердің дамуына ықпал еткен қозғаушы күш. Оны зерттеу XX ғасырдың ортасынан басталды және оны алғаш зерттеушілердің бірі Ә.Х. Марғұлан болды. Мақалада Ә.Х. Марғұланның археология саласын келу факторы қысқаша мазмұндалады, Қазақстанның оңтүстігіндегі ортағасырлық қалалардан солтүстікке, Орал мен Сібірдің орманды далалық зоналарындағы қалаларына қарай жалғасқан Далалық жібек жолы трассасының қайта құрылуының негізгі әдіснамалық қадамдары көрсетіледі. Трансконтинентальды керуен жолдарының картографиясы қалалар мен қоныстардың тікелей орналасқан жеріне, дала тарихын ауызша білуіне және ортағасырлық жазба мәліметтерді талдауға негізделгені баса айтылды. Мақалада б.з. дейінгі I мыңжылдықтың ортасынан, яғни сонау ежелгі заманнан бастап далалық Еуразияның дипломатиялық және сауда жолының атқарған қызметі туралы археологиялық фактілер келтірілді.

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Великий Шелковый путь в трудах Алькея Маргулана

Великий Шелковый путь – это катализатор развития цивилизаций древности и Средневековья. Изучение его началось в середине XX века и связано с именем А.Х. Маргулана. В статье кратко изложены факторы обращения А.Х. Маргулана к археологии, показаны основные методологические подходы к реконструкции трасс Степного шелкового пути от средневековых городов юга Казахстана на север, к городам лесостепной зоны Урала и Сибири. Отмечено, что картография трансконтинентальных караванных дорог основана на непосредственной локализации открытых им поселений и городов, на анализе средневековых письменных сведений и знании устной степной историологии. В статье приведены археологические факты функционирования торговых и дипломатических артерий в степной Евразии с глубокой древности – с середины I тыс. до н.э.
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Introduction

The term “Silk Road” was introduced to academic discourse in 1877 by the German geographer F. von Richthofen. Initially, it referred to a system of routes that, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, connected the main cultural regions of Eurasia: China, India, the Middle and Near East, and the Mediterranean [Лубо-Лесниченко 1988: 361]. Over time, research has broadened the scope of this term. Today, the term “Great Silk Road” encompasses more than the concept of a transportation route alone; it is understood as a unique historical and cultural phenomenon. The Great Silk Road unified diverse civilizations, fostering communication and exchanges across cultural, technological, political, and religious spheres. It became an independent integrative force defining the cultural and historical unity of Eurasia [Байпаков 2013: 386–393].

The aim of the article is to trace the origins of interest in studying the Great Silk Road within Kazakh historiography, to highlight A.Kh. Margulan’s contribution to the historical interpretation of this phenomenon, and to illustrate his use of interdisciplinary methods in mapping caravan routes across the Betpak-Dala desert. This research holds relevance for reconstructing the ethnocultural history of the Eurasian steppe belt and understanding communication networks across different levels of civilization.

In Soviet historiography, A.Kh. Margulan was the first scholar to study the history of the Great Silk Road. Starting his scholarly career as a historian, ethnographer, and linguist, with an outstanding academic background from Leningrad universities where he attended lectures by renowned Orientalists such as S.F. Oldenburg, Yu.I. Krachkovsky, E.E. Bertels, S.E. Malov, V.V. Struve, and S.I. Rudenko, Alkey Khakanovich turned to archaeology at the age of 42. This shift was influenced by the ideological and political climate in the country, which had led to repressions against historians.

Margulan’s archaeological research brought him great recognition, particularly his work on the famous Begazy-Dandybai culture of the Late Bronze Age in Saryarka. Today, no discussion of the Eurasian Bronze Age omits references to the materials of this culture. Another area of A.Kh. Margulan’s archaeological

pursuits focused on the medieval period in the history of the Steppe: types of cult-memorial monuments, mausoleum architecture, urban culture, mining and irrigation, and material traces of the economic activities of the Kimeks, Oghuzes, Kipchaks, and Kazakhs. His research consistently employed interdisciplinary methods, drawing on written sources, ethnography, folklore, epics, legends, and toponymy.

For 30 years, A.Kh. Margulan led the Central Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition (1946–1976), crossing the Betpak-Dala desert dozens of times on his way to his beloved Saryarka. His annual traversing of the desert along the trails of Kazakh nomads became the foundation for the map of the caravan routes of the Steppe Silk Road that he created.

Methodology

In studying the history of the Great Silk Road, methods of analysis and synthesis were applied to published materials, organized thematically. Modeling and cartographic methods make it possible to correlate the locations of medieval cities with archaeological discoveries of recent decades, resulting in a refined map of trade routes—one that demonstrates the formation of caravan roads in Saryarka millennia before the medieval period. As a result, segments of the Steppe Silk Road were reconstructed, with an emphasis on the toponymy of landscape and cultural sites playing an important role. For the history of Eurasian migration and trade routes, the obtained data expands and complements the transcontinental routes known from ancient sources. To support this assertion, a comparative analysis method was applied to correlate historical events and archaeological sources of the relevant eras.

Materials

A.Kh. Margulan was a prominent Kazakh social scientist and the founder of archaeological and ethnographic schools in Kazakhstan. His remarkable talent and extraordinary erudition, combined with exceptional diligence, enabled him to produce a substantial body of scientific work on the history of the material and spiritual culture of the Kazakh people [Маргулан 1998]. From the vast scope of his work, worthy of the accomplishments of entire academic institutions, our article focuses on academician A.Kh. Margulan's contribution to the historiography of the Great Silk Road, specifically his substantiation of the famous caravan routes of the Steppe Silk Road.

Let us first examine his path into archaeology. On August 9, 1944, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of the Bolsheviks issued a Resolution "On the State and Measures for Improving Mass-Political and Ideological Work in the Tatar Party Organization" [Коммунистич. партия... 1985: 513–520]. The so-called "nationalist" errors regarding the history of the Golden Horde left a deep impact on the writing of ancient and medieval history in the national republics of the Soviet Union. Alkey Margulan was also subjected to repression during these years. He was accused of "nationalism", and his works "On the Character and Historical Conditionality of Kazakh Epic" and "Edige in History and Legends" (1944) were banned [Степанов 1947: 42, 43]. Such persecutions were a severe blow to Kazakh historians, making it difficult to continue this research. Afterward, Alkey Margulan fully devoted himself to archaeology. In 1946, the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR was established, and archaeological excavations in Kazakhstan, which had begun before the Great Patriotic War, continued. Archaeological expeditions led by A.Kh. Margulan, A.N. Bernshtam, S.P. Tolstov, S.S. Chernikov, and K.A. Akishev uncovered the urban culture of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, closely linking the history of the Silk Road to the medieval cities of Kazakhstan.

The Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR organized an expedition led by A.Kh. Margulan to conduct a reconnaissance survey of historical sites in the basins of the Sarysu and Kengir rivers, the areas adjacent to the Betpak-Dala desert, and in Karatau [Маргулан, Аеева 1948: 3]. overing 6,000 km, the expedition documented ancient architecture, irrigation canal remains, and the ruins of medieval cities from the 10th to the 15th centuries.

Alkey Margulan traversed ancient trade routes and nomadic paths across Kazakhstan, identifying archaeological sites in the vast desert steppes and presenting them to the global scientific community. He adeptly combined field data from excavations with written sources, legends, and literary works. His research of caravan routes, including Betpak-Dala's Khanzholy, Karkaralyzholy, Uanaszholy, Zhetikonyrzholy, and Sarysu zholy, detailed roads linking southern Kazakhstan with Central Kazakhstan and Western Siberia, strengthening cultural and trade ties in these regions [Манапова 2021: 50]. His works were invaluable for the study of cities, settlements, and caravanserais in Kazakhstan, as well as for determining the routes of the Silk Road, not only those of the southern and Syr Darya cities but also the steppe roads of Betpak-Dala, Mangystau, and the Caspian region. To this day, Kazakhstani archaeologists and historians use his books as a reference in archaeological surveys and excavations.

Prior to field archaeological work, data was gathered on archaeological discoveries and accidental finds across the Kazakh SSR over a period of 20 years (from 1926 to 1946) [Маргулан, Аеева 1948: 3]. The summary, published in 1948, lists archaeological work and findings across the regions of the republic: Almaty, Aktobe, Semipalatinsk, East Kazakhstan, Gurev, Zhambyl, Karaganda, Kyzylorda, Kokshetau, Kostanay, and Pavlodar.

In 1949, A.Kh. Margulan published his work "Ancient Caravan Routes Through the Betpak-Dala Desert", which remains relevant to this day. He noted "For the caravans circulating between the Kipchak steppes and the Syr Darya cities, the oasis of Zhetikonur served as a resting place. The Betpak-Dala desert was crossed in the past by several major roads from south to north, the traces of which, in the form of paths, abandoned wells, burial monuments, and road signs—omaks—have survived to this day" [Маргулан 1949: 73–75]. Central Kazakhstan was at the heart of caravan route activity, with main routes and their branches passing through it, including Desht-i-Kipchak.

In his book, A.Kh. Margulan accurately identifies the sections of the Silk Road through Central Kazakhstan [Маргулан 1997: 17]. The easternmost of these roads in the early Middle Ages connected the cultural oases of the Talas and Chu/Shu river valleys (the city of Kulan and Talas) with the nomads and settlements of the Kimeks along the Irtysh River and in the Irtysh steppe region. In later times, it also connected to the cities of Western Siberia.

The route began in the middle reaches of the Chu River (the Kokterek region) heading north and northeast through the vast Betpak-Dala desert, passing the Zhambyl, Kaiyptyn-Kzylzhartasy, and Bolattau mountains, and reaching the upper Sarysu River (Zhanaarka village). From there, it continued through the Nury River valley and the steppe regions near the Irtysh River, ultimately reaching the lower courses of the Ishim, Tobol, and Irtysh rivers. By the mid-18th century, this route became known as Khanzhol (the "Khan's Road") after it was traversed by Khan Abai and his retinue.

Margulan also noted that "in the Middle Ages, this road had great economic importance, maintaining trade connections between the cities of the Chu and Talas valleys and the steppes of Central Kazakhstan, as well as with the cities along the lower reaches of the Ishim, Tobol, and Irtysh rivers. Numerous caravans traveling from the south passed along this road to the Irbit, Petropavlovsk, and Tyumen fairs, where lively trade in both Eastern and Russian industrial goods took place" [Маргулан 1997: 17]. A.Kh. Margulan, describing this route, provides a detailed account of numerous branches of the ancient caravan roads that traversed the Betpak-Dala desert in a meridional direction. These roads connected the southern cities with the vast steppes of Central Kazakhstan and extended to the lower reaches of the Ishim, Tobol, and Irtysh rivers. Between the 8th and 10th centuries, Kimek settlements emerged here, and by the medieval period, these areas were home to the flourishing cities of Western Siberia [Маргулан 1997: 20].

Currently, several expeditions have been organized following the traces of A.Kh. Margulan across the Betpak-Dala desert. These expeditions have led to the discovery of petroglyphs and Stone Age settlements. The archaeological investigation of the Atasu microdistrict in northern Betpak-Dala is currently the most active. According to archaeologists, Betpak-Dala «has not yet been fully explored archaeologically; the

monuments of this vast, low-water, and desert region still appear as separate 'clusters', although they cover relatively large areas" [Бейсенов, Бедельбаева 2017: 174–181]. As we can see, the steppe part of the Silk Road remains largely unexplored. In 1950, the book "From the History of Cities and Architectural Art of Ancient Kazakhstan" was published [Маргулан 1950]. In this work, A.Kh. Margulan unveils the history of cities and caravanserais in Semirechye, Southern Kazakhstan, and the Syrdarya cities. Utilizing both written and archaeological sources, for instance, when mentioning the city of Taraz (Talas), he cites the notes of the Byzantine historian Menander Protector and the Chinese historian Xuanzang. In describing the cities, he consistently connects each one to the Silk Road. For example, about Kumkent: "It lies at the crossroads of ancient caravan routes coming from ancient Talas and Sayram to the region of the Kipchaks, who inhabited the steppes of Central Kazakhstan." About Koilyk and Almalyk: "Numerous caravans stretch from both the west and the east." And about Otrar: "It became one of the most important trade cities in Central Asia, situated on the caravan route from Urgench to Almalyk" [Маргулан 1950: 31, 55, 58, 72].

In the 1950 book, A.Kh. Margulan was the first in Kazakh historiography to note the cities and settlements of Western and Central Kazakhstan that were situated on branches of the Silk Road. This included a discussion of the city of Saraychik as a major political and trading center of the Kipchaks in the 14th–15th centuries. Describing the city, he writes: "It was located on a major caravan route that connected Rus' with the Central Asian territories; through it passed numerous caravans loaded with goods from various cities, along with merchants, travelers, and diplomatic agents from feudal Western Europe, who left various records about this city" [Маргулан 1950: 86]. To support his claims, A.Kh. Margulan references the notes of Ibn Battuta (14th century). As he pointed out, between the 13th and 15th centuries, there was a major caravan route between Saraychik and Urgench, along which postal stations and caravanserais with residential buildings were constructed. He also connects the city of Saraychik to a vast group of monuments uncovered by the archaeological expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR in Central Kazakhstan.

The Silk Road routes through Mangystau and Ustyurt are also described as significant, forming an important corridor from the lower Syrdarya to the Southern Urals, the land of the Bulgars, and Ancient Rus. In the medieval period, this was a vital route connecting Eastern Europe with Kazakhstan and Central Asia [Маргулан 1997: 28].

This section of the caravan routes was investigated between 1949 and 1953 by the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition of the USSR Academy of Sciences, led by S.P. Tolstov. The expedition uncovered and surveyed the settlements of Shemakha-kala, Devkesken, Erburun, Assikeaudan, the caravanserai Kosskuduk, as well as the sites of Churuk, Beleiuli, and Uchkuduk [Толстов 1958]. From 1991 to 2000, archaeological work in Mangystau was resumed by the Western Kazakhstan Archaeological Expedition, led by Z. Samashev of the Margulan Institute of Archaeology, under the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan [Самашев и др. 1997: 68–69]. These expeditions uncovered new settlements and caravanserais, shedding light on the ancient trade infrastructure in this region [Самашев и др. 1999: 72–74].

Discussion

The study of the caravan routes of the Great Silk Road can be divided into several key aspects. The first is chronological, which involves determining the age of the Great Silk Road through the history of sericulture, silk weaving, and the spread of silk yarn beyond China. The second aspect is identifying specific trade routes, rawing upon written records, political circumstances, and environmental factors. The third aspect concerns the rise and development of cities as key hubs along strategically important trade routes. The fourth issue is the Great Silk Road as a pathway for the spread and mutual penetration of various religious beliefs, with a focus on tolerance and religious tolerance. In these cities, communities of Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims coexisted peacefully. Churches, mosques, Buddhist

temples, and monasteries were built, and historical records show that often members of the same family adhered to different faiths

The earliest remnants of silk fabrics were discovered in China in 1958 during the excavation of Neolithic burials. The quality of the yarn indicated that by this time, sericulture had already advanced beyond its primitive stage. Therefore, the history of silk weaving in China spans over five thousand years.

According to Chinese historians, the beginning of the “Silk Road” dates back to the 2nd century BC, during the period when the Great Han Empire explored the “Western Regions.” This was prompted by the desire to find allies in the fight against the Xiongnu (Huns). In 139 BCE, Emperor Wu Di of the Han Dynasty sent the prince Zhang Qian as an envoy to the West. He returned after 13 years, having passed through Eastern Turkestan, the Tian Shan mountains, and learned the route to Central Asia, western Semirechye, Ferghana, and northern Afghanistan. From that point on, the systematic exploration of the western territories began, and caravans loaded with silk reached the borders of the Roman Empire.

Several primary routes of the Silk Road are identified by specialists, all connected to the ancient cultural regions of the Near and Middle East. The caravan route from China passed through Eastern Turkestan, Central Asia, Northern Mesopotamia, and the Syrian desert to the Eastern Mediterranean. The journey across the vast expanses of Central Asia was not easy, especially through the desolate desert near Lop Nor, the mountain passes of the Pamirs, Tian Shan, and the Syrian desert. The journey could take 7–8 years, but in case of success, the trade operation would bring a fortune in profits.

One of the oldest routes of the Silk Road, known as the “northern route”, passed through the region between the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers, the Aral Sea region, and continued west through the steppe to the Black Sea and Western Europe.

The Great Silk Road, throughout history, had numerous branches, covering not only the southern agricultural regions but also the Eurasian steppes. In determining the routes of the Steppe Silk Road, archaeological data take precedence. These indicate that silk fabrics appeared in Central Asia and deeper regions of Eurasia five centuries earlier than the official starting point of the Silk Road, i.e., before the 2nd century BCE.

Evidence of Chinese silk garments, including a silk cloak embroidered with a phoenix and a Chinese bronze mirror, has been found in burial mounds in the Altai region, dating back to the 7th–5th centuries BCE. Silk fabrics and silk fringes were discovered in graves from the 6th-5th centuries BCE in various regions of Southern and Western Europe. All of this allows us to assert that the oldest «Silk Road», stretching from the Huang He to the Northern Alps, was established around three thousand years ago and passed through Altai, the steppes of Kazakhstan, and southern European Russia. The existence of this route is confirmed by ancient written sources.

Herodotus, in his Histories, describes a Scythian trade route running from Olbia northeastward to the “foothills of the high mountains”. This route passed through the lands of peoples who spoke different languages, so the Scythians had to communicate with the Argippeans in seven languages, using seven translators. Scholars have debated specific segments and the endpoint of this route, but most agree that it stretched from the Black Sea through the Southern Urals, the Kazakh steppes, and reached the Altai, home to the “griffins guarding gold”.

Excavations of Altai’s “frozen” burial mounds at the Pazyryk, Berel, and Ukok plateaus have yielded well-preserved artifacts made of leather, bone, felt, and wood, due to unique climatic conditions.. The favorite motif of the art of these tribes was the fantastic griffins. All items were wrapped in gold foil, providing archaeological evidence for the truthfulness of Herodotus. Among these mounds, Chinese silk clothing, lacquerware, Chinese umbrellas, mirrors, and a cart with a canopy were discovered. These burial mounds belong to the Pazyrik archaeological culture and date back to the 6th–4th centuries BCE. Alongside Chinese items, woolen carpets from the Near East were found in these mounds.

The 6th–4th centuries BCE was the time of the first world empire – the Achaemenid Empire, which united lands from Egypt to Northwestern India, imposing tribute on many neighboring countries. A well-

established connection, postal system, and state roads existed between the most distant corners of this empire, and trade flourished. Thus, we can assert that many sections of the future «Silk Road» were functioning as early as the 1st millennium BCE.

Herodotus's "trade route" is indeed the Steppe Silk Road. Its formation dates back to the Bronze Age when the steppes of Eastern Europe and Kazakhstan were inhabited by related tribes of the Timber and Andronovo cultural-historical communities.

The existence of established connections is confirmed by the discovery of bronze items in the Northern Black Sea region and the North Caucasus, whose chemical composition indicates their origin from Eastern Kazakhstan. These facts demonstrate that the steppe was not a wild and barbaric periphery; its most distant parts were interconnected. The Eurasian steppes were not only a corridor for migrations and resettlements of peoples but also a well-organized transportation route, linking Western and Eastern civilizations into a unified cultural and historical space.

In the Soviet Union, the academic publication of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR coordinated all historical science in Kazakhstan. In 1957, a new two-volume academic publication titled «History of the Kazakh SSR» was released. The fourth chapter, authored by A.Kh. Margulan, discussed the Great Silk Road. The key ideas presented in his earlier book were continued in this work.

In the chapter «Culture of the Tribes and Peoples of Kazakhstan in the 6th–12th Centuries,» it is written: «In the 6th-7th centuries, the territory of Kazakhstan was connected by caravan routes through Central Kazakhstan and Altai with southwestern Siberia. These routes ran along the right bank of the Syr Darya in the Aral Sea region and to the Southern Urals. The caravan road from Central Asia to China, called the 'Great Silk Road', passed through the southern regions of Kazakhstan» [История КазССР 1957: 84]. Thus, the routes and scope of the Silk Road in Kazakhstan were expanded, and its role in the history of Kazakhstan significantly increased. Compared to the previous academic edition of 1943, the section on the history of the Turkic Khaganate in the 6th–12th centuries frequently mentioned the Great Silk Road, noting that it had not lost its previous significance, or highlighting its expanded scale. It also mentioned trade between China and Central Asia, with data about Byzantine ambassadors to the Turkic Khagan Istemi, led by Zemarchus. The section on "Art and Architecture" describes the development of cities in Southern Kazakhstan and their role on the major caravan route and in trade relations with China, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. However, not all of A.Kh. Margulan's ideas were fully explored in this book. The reason for this, it is believed, lies in the fact that the author had been persecuted by the Soviet government and the academic publication itself was under strict state censorship.

After the publication of this academic book, A.Kh. Margulan began to explore earlier periods of ancient Kazakh history, conducting archaeological excavations of the Bronze Age in Central Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

The steppe is interwoven with numerous caravan trails running in both latitudinal and longitudinal directions. The key factors in the emergence of caravan routes were the availability of drinking water and pastures for horses. These were plentiful, as many steppe rivers and streams provided an unimpeded way for travelers to penetrate from the distant south into the deep forest areas for the delivery and exchange of exotic goods for furs, which were highly valued in the markets of the cities along the Great Silk Road. Archaeological finds of Eastern Iranian silver, Chinese coins, mirrors, lacquerware, and jewelry in ancient and medieval burials in Western and Eastern Siberia and Northern Ural testify to this.

In contemporary Kazakh historiography, the routes of the Silk Road leading to Central Asia have mainly been studied. The vast territory of Kazakhstan, with its numerous branches, opened the way not only to Central Asian states but also towards the Caucasus and through the Caspian to the Black Sea, the Urals, and Siberia. This route eventually led to Europe. The Silk Road covered the entire territory of

Kazakhstan; however, unfortunately, the Ural-Caspian and Saryarka sections (the western and northern regions of Kazakhstan) have not received sufficient attention from researchers. These branches were no less important in terms of trade, economy, culture, and politics, as they connected the various cultural worlds of the Eurasian peoples. It was these paths that were first explored by Alkey Margulan.

Today, renewed interest in the Great Silk Road extends beyond academia; it has become a political and economic factor, symbolizing Eurasia's cultural and historical unity and highlighting the need to preserve cultural heritage amid global civilization's advances.

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