

Coats of arms of the Semirechye region's towns as a historical source

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Abstract

In order to consolidate colonial power at the beginning of the 20th century, the Turkestan Governor-General's Office undertook the creation of coats of arms for regions and district towns, which was explained by an attempt to identify the region as a state entity of the Russian Empire. At the same time, when creating the coats of arms, attention was focused on the distinctive features of the region, taking into account the traditions and other ethnic characteristics of the local population. A city coat of arms is not just an element of culture, but above all a sign reflecting its legal status. It concentrated legal rights and privileges; secondly, the features of the coats of arms reveal the strategic role of the city within the Russian Empire, as well as its degree of importance in the overall hierarchy of cities. The decision to adopt a similar coat of arms for the Semirechye oblast and the city of Vernyi indicates at the first sight the central position of Vernyi. The six coats of arms analysed show recurring themes, with three representations of the maral deer, four references to beekeeping and two allusions to the subjugation of Muslims. The central theme is that of Russian domination over the region, extolling military conquest, economic development brought about by the Russians and scientific exploration. However, the predominant way of life in the Semirechye oblast was nomadic pastoralism, but no reference is made to this. Conversely, several elements recall agriculture, such as ploughs, wheat and vine leaves. The coats of arms adopted for the cities of the Semirechye oblast express a colonial vision of Turkestan and serve to mark Russian power in the region.

Keywords: Coat of arms, Turkestan, Semirechye, colonial empire, cities, heraldic figures

Résumé

Afin de consolider le pouvoir colonial au début du XX^e siècle, la chancellerie du gouverneur général du Turkestan a entrepris la création d'armoiries pour les régions et les villes, ce qui s'expliquait par une tentative d'identifier la région comme une entité de l'Empire russe. Parallèlement, lors de la création des armoiries, l'attention s'est concentrée sur les caractéristiques distinctives de la région, en tenant compte des traditions et autres caractéristiques ethniques de la population locale. Les armoiries d'une ville ne sont pas seulement un élément culturel, mais avant tout un signe reflétant son statut légal. Elles concentraient les droits et privilèges ; d'autre part, les caractéristiques des armoiries révèlent le rôle stratégique de la ville au sein de l'Empire russe, ainsi que son degré d'importance dans la hiérarchie globale des villes. La décision d'adopter des armoiries similaires pour l'oblast du Semirechye et la ville de Vernyi indique aussitôt la position centrale de Vernyi. Les six armoiries analysées présentent des thèmes récurrents, avec trois représentations du cerf maral, quatre références à l'apiculture et deux allusions à la soumission des musulmans. Le thème central est celui de la domination russe sur la région, vantant les conquêtes militaires, le développement économique apporté par les Russes et l'exploration scientifique. Cependant, le mode de vie prédominant dans l'oblast du Semirechye était le pastoralisme nomade, sans qu'aucune référence n'y soit faite. À l'inverse, plusieurs éléments rappellent l'agriculture, tels que les charrues, le blé et les feuilles de vigne. Les armoiries adoptées pour les villes de l'oblast du Semirechye expriment une vision coloniale du Turkestan et servent à marquer la puissance russe dans la région.

Mots-clés : armoiries, Turkestan, Semirechye, empire colonial, villes, héraldique

Introduction

The Semirechye oblast, established in 1867 as part of the Turkestan General-Governorship, covered vast territories, including the present-day southeastern Kazakhstan (Almaty and Zhetisu regions) and northern Kyrgyzstan (Chu and Issyk-Kul regions). The oblast was an important military-administrative and strategic stronghold of imperial policy in eastern Central Asia. At the beginning of the 20th century, the oblast was divided in six *uezd* and each district towns – Vernyi, Dzharkent, Kopal, Lepsinsk, Przhevalsk, and Pishpek – received officially approved coats of arms, which became part of the “classic series” of Russian imperial urban heraldry.



Figure 1. Map of the Semirechye oblast with its coat of arms

The purpose of this article is to analyse the coats of arms of Semirechye's district towns as a historical source reflecting the processes of symbolic integration of the region into the Russian Empire. The focus is on the official procedure for approving coats of arms, the symbols used, and methods of interpreting coats of arms from the perspective of visual culture, heraldic tradition, and postcolonial studies. The heraldic symbols are a unique historical source that reveals the peculiarities of imperial representation, the ideological attitudes of the administration, and local markers of identity included in the visual language of power. The study of coats of arms as a visual and documentary source makes it possible to reconstruct the mechanisms of incorporating peripheral territories into the symbolic space of the empire, to understand how the central authorities constructed images of the “periphery” and conveyed political subordination through visual codes.

Contemporary research in historical heraldry increasingly goes beyond the purely descriptive tradition and seeks to consider coats of arms as elements of the symbolic space of power and cultural representation. Amid growing interest in issues of colonial and postcolonial heritage, the visual practices of the Russian Empire are becoming the subject of particular attention. City coats of arms, as official visual signs of power and subordination, allow us to explore the mechanisms of imperial identity formation and methods of visual control over the periphery. The main publications for Russian Heraldry are firstly the works of the historian Oleg Naumov (Наумов 2005), in which heraldry is presented as an autonomous discipline related to the study of symbols of power, subordination, and administrative representation. Particular attention is paid to the source base and interpretation of coats of arms as elements of ideological construction. Secondly, Sergei Egorov (Егоров 2002) made a popular but valuable contribution to the understanding of the terminology and structure of symbolism.

Of particular significance is the analysis of regional heraldic and more specifically the coats of arms of Semirechye's cities that were previously on the periphery of scientific interest. Their symbolism, established in the context of late imperial reforms, reflects not only the peculiarities of state policy, but also the interaction between the metropolis and local administrative centres. In this context, the coats of arms of district cities can be considered as independent historical sources containing valuable information about the structure of power, the representation of space, and identity politics on the periphery of the empire.

This study is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining methods of historical science, heraldry, visual anthropology, and postcolonial studies. The analysis is based on the interpretation of heraldic symbols as carriers of meaning reflecting the ideological, administrative, and cultural attitudes of the authorities. The key method is content analysis of the visual elements of coats of arms, as well as comparison of the coats of arms of county towns with regional and imperial standards of the heraldic system. Semiotic analysis is also used to identify the symbolic codes embedded in the composition of coats of arms and interpret them in the context of the politics of representation of the imperial periphery. The historical-comparative method made it possible to compare the coats of arms of district towns with each other, revealing both their common features (unified elements, colour palette, form) and individual characteristics (plot, symbolism, local specificity). Visual (iconographic) analysis was used to decipher the symbolism and colour scheme of the coats of arms. Each element-figures, colours (enamels) and metals, crown, shield, decorations-was considered from the point of view of heraldic tradition and possible semantic meaning, including its associations with the nature, economy, and culture of the region.

The source base of this study is based on archival documents describing the process of designing and approving the coats of arms of the district towns of the Semirechye region.¹ In 1903, the Semirechye military governor presented the coat of arms designs to the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, after which they were approved by the Herald Master of the Heraldry Department of the Senate. The coats of arms were approved in 1904, and their final legal confirmation took place on 19 March 1908, by imperial decree.

The evolution of the scientific approach to the study of urban heraldry in the Russian Empire has gone through several key stages. For the tsarist period, the classic source remains the work of Pavel von Winkler (Фон Винклер 1900), which systematises the heraldic emblems approved from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Although the coats of arms approved in the 20th century are not included in the publication, the work serves as a fundamental reference book on imperial territorial heraldry. Other significant works include publications by Aleksandr Lakierev (*Русская геральдика* 1855), Vladislav Lukomsky (*Русская геральдика* 1914), and Yuri Arseniev (Арсеньев 1908), which formulate the basic principles of Russian heraldic tradition, provide a comparative assessment of symbolism in European and Russian contexts, and analyse the function of coats of arms in state visual representation.

During the Soviet period, interest in heraldry remained within the framework of auxiliary historical disciplines due to ideological restriction. A landmark work was the analysis by Nadejda Soboleva (Соболева 1981), in which coats of arms are viewed as a reflection of the administrative and cultural structure of the empire. The author's approach is based on rigorous historical and source analysis and serves as a valuable basis for understanding the socio-political role of urban symbols in provincial and district centres.

Since the 1990s, there has been a steady growth in interest in territorial heraldry. The journal *Гербовед* [Heraldry] publishes archival and analytical materials, among which the articles by Konstantin Bogatov (Богатов 1997; Богатов 2000), devoted to the “classical series” of coats of arms from 1880-1917, include the symbols of the district towns of the Semirechye region. In 1994, the first edition of the reference *Земельная геральдика Российской Империи* [Land Heraldry of the Russian Empire] became an important tool in the systematisation of symbols with images of coats of arms. The second edition appeared due to the need to correct a number of inaccuracies caused by limited data on territorial changes in the empire. Valuable material is also presented in the publication by Dmitrii Boiko (Бойко 2013), which provides illustrations and official blazons of coats of arms, including those for district towns in the Semirechye region.

The coats of arms of the cities of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship remain poorly studied. Only in the last decade have the first works on the symbolism of the region appeared. Thus, Jamshid Adylov and U. Usarov in their article (Адылов 2019) note that the urban heraldry of Turkestan has not been the subject of comprehensive scientific analysis. The authors emphasise the significance of coats of arms as historical sources that record the socio-political realities of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition, Yurii Zhemoido presented a significant systematization of the coats of arms approved after the publication of von Winkler's catalog (Жемойдо 1995). He provides descriptions of the coats of arms approved in 1908 for Vernyi, Pishpek, Przhevalsk, Lepsinsk, Kopal, and Dzharkent, focusing on their symbolism, which reflects the geographical and economic specifics of the region.

¹ Центральный государственный архив Республики Казахстан (ЦГА РК). Ф. 44; Иссык-Кульский областной государственный архив. Ф. 1108.

Russian imperial heraldry and norms for cities' coat of arms

In order to consolidate colonial power at the beginning of the 20th century, the Turkestan General Governor's Office undertook the creation of coats of arms for regions and district towns, which was explained by an attempt to identify the region as a state entity of the Russian Empire. At the same time, when creating the coats of arms, attention was focused on the distinctive features of the region, taking into account the traditions and other ethnic characteristics of the local population. The coats of arms of the district towns had all the same standard, legally adopted form of a French-style battle shield. However, it should not be overlooked that French trends had a strong influence on the Russian imperial court. It is also worth noting the centuries-old tradition of dividing the areas of the coat of arms into primary and secondary ones, as the location of a certain element on the coat of arms in different positions significantly changes its meaning (Egorov 2002).

Coats of arms were usually adorned with crowns. Initially, heraldic crowns were representations of real crowns that were added to coats of arms to emphasise the owner's status. They were first used in coats of arms in the Middle Ages. Gradually, their use shifted from family heraldry to territorial heraldry – city and state. In 1851, Nicholas I issued an order “to adopt as a rule for the future that the coats of arms of provinces, regions, and provincial cities, which will henceforth be submitted for the highest approval, should always depict the imperial crown; on the coats of arms of county towns, the city crown currently used by such cities should be placed” (Соболева 1981). At the discretion of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the imperial crown was to be used only by those county towns that differed from others in terms of population size and, in general, their significance in administrative, commercial, and historical terms. The implementation of the tsar's directives was entrusted to the Heraldry Department, which acted as a catalyst for improving official heraldry and led to the creation of a separate Heraldry Division within the department.

An updated system of heraldic decorations (including crowns) was developed by Boris Köne (1817-1886), heraldist and numismatist who arrived in Russia in 1845 to work at the Hermitage Museum (Закутнов 2019). It was approved by Highest Decrees in 1857 and remained in force until 1917, and in fact, for some time after the revolution.² The heraldic reform of local heraldry led to a departure from the traditions of the Western European style. The coat of arms became one of the many elements that made up the entire system of measures developed by the tsarist government to strengthen its ideological positions. Thus, Russian urban symbolism placed a strong emphasis on the propaganda of official ideology.

Köne focused primarily on the main decoration of the city coat of arms – the crown. Different types of crowns were used to adorn the coat of arms, depending on the city's status and significance. For instance, the coats of arms of county towns with fewer than 50 000 inhabitants were adorned with a silver tower crown featuring three points. In contrast, towns with a similar population but the special status of district administrative centre were adorned with a gold tower crown boasting three points (Бойко 2013, 29). As for other decorations, according to tradition, they had to reflect the political significance of the city and the occupations of its inhabitants. The coats of arms of cities were now framed by the Alexander ribbon with two golden ears of corn for cities distinguished by agriculture and grain trade, and by the Alexander ribbon with two golden vines for cities engaged in winemaking. In addition to the decorations, Köne also changed the structure of the city coat of arms. The provincial coat of arms was now placed not at the top of the coat of arms shield, but in the so-called free part (in the upper right corner) of the city coat of arms shield. When a city moved to a new province, the provincial coat of arms in the free part of the shield changed.

² « О гербах губерний, областей, градоначальств, городов и посадов », *Именной указ*. 4 июля 1857. № 32037.

Approbation of coats of arms for Russian Central Asia

The process of creating and approving a coat of arms for Russian Central Asia took several decades, with various designs that never came to fruition. In 1854, the Governor General of Western Siberia, Gustav Gasfort (1794-1874), initiated the first sketches of a coat of arms for the newly created Siberian *Kirgiz*³ oblast and its five districts, which were under his jurisdiction. The first draft for the oblast was that of a *Kirgiz* horseman with a lance, similar to the coat of arms of the Omsk oblast. The heraldic department rejected the proposal of a *Kirgiz* horseman and suggested that of a horse's head with two lances. Despite Gasfort's efforts, no coat of arms was approved, and the process did not resume until some twenty years later. In 1878, the coats of arms for all the oblasts of Russian Central Asia were approved (imperial decree n° 58684, *Полное...* 1880, 6-7). The one of the Semirechye oblast was described as follows:

On a scarlet shield, an inverted golden crescent moon. The top of the shield is golden, studded with Russian State Eagles. The shield is decorated with an ancient royal crown and surrounded by golden oak leaves connected by an Alexander ribbon.

The draft coats of arms for all the oblasts had been drawn up by the relevant local authorities and examined by the heraldry department, which had either approved them or made counterproposals (Афонасенко 2024).

Approval for the coat of arms of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship took longer. It was adopted at the time of the overall administrative reconfiguration of Russian Central Asia with the creation of the Governor-Generalship of the Steppes in 1882. Unlike oblasts, the project was developed in Saint-Petersburg. Boris Köne proposed an initial sketch of a sun rising above the mountains, symbolising Russian domination over the East, but the option approved in 1882 was ultimately that of a unicorn on a golden yellow background (see [online](#)). In heraldic symbolism, the unicorn is likened to a brave soldier, “who would rather die than fall alive into the hands of the enemy.” Gold signifies wealth and strength.

The next step was the adoption of coats of arms for cities. The municipal authorities were in charge of preparing draft to be sent to the military governor of their oblast. Thus, in 1903, Mihail Ionov (1846-1924), military governor of the Semirechye oblast from 1899 to 1907, initiated the process. The drafts he received were previously discussed with the Heraldry Department of the Senate before transmitted to the General Governor of Turkestan.⁴ Afterwards, the Minister of War was petitioned for the approval of the coats of arms.⁵ On 19 August 1904, the principle of coats of arms for the Semirechye region was approved.⁶ But the final decision took more time and the coats of arms for the cities of Vernyi, Dzharkent, Kopal, Lepsinsk, Przhevalsk and Pishpek were definitively adopted by imperial decree n° 30174 on the 19 March 1908 (*Полное...* 1911, 145-146) and published in the official media (*Семиреченские областные ведомости* 1908).

³ The use of the term *Kirgiz* corresponds to the usage in Russian sources to refer primarily to Kazakhs, with whom the Kyrgyz may possibly be associated.

⁴ Иссык-Кульский областной государственный архив. Ф. 1108, Оп. 1, Д.12.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

The city of Vernyi

The fort of Zailiiskoe was founded in 1854 as an outpost for the conquest of the region. It was renamed the same year Vernyi, related to the faith [Bepa], in a spirit of orthodox piety. The fort has expanded and when the Semirechye oblast was created in 1867, Vernyi became the regional administrative centre and obtained the statute of a city. But it’s only in 1898, that the military governor of Semirechye asked the municipal authorities of Vernyi to design a coat of arms. Paul Gourdet (1846-1914), a French architect who was recruited in 1875 to become junior engineer in Vernyi, was in charge for this design. The coat of arms he drew consisted of:

A shield divided into azure and gules; in the upper half of the shield, a silver fortress [the city of Vernyi was originally a fort]; a cross in the lower half, with a crescent moon below it; the shield is crowned with a golden tower crown with three points and surrounded by two golden apple branches, the branches are connected by an Alexander ribbon (Mukhit 2019).



Figure 2. Paul Gourdet’s sketch of coat of arms for Vernyi

At the same time, the coat of arms reminded the victory of Russian Christians over local Muslims and the local name of the place, Almaty which referred to the apple orchards. The approval of this coat of arms was long awaited and, in the end, Vernyi’s coat of arms was approved on 19 March 1908, but it copied the one of the Semirechye oblast which was adopted in 1878:

A golden crescent moon on a scarlet shield. The top of the shield is golden and adorned with Russian state eagles. It is crowned with a golden three-pointed tower and surrounded by two golden ears of corn connected by an Alexander ribbon.



Figure 3. Coats of arms of Vernyi (1908)

The coat of arms’ pattern is the same for all district towns, with the exception of the golden tower crown, which is awarded to towns of special importance with a population of no more than 50 000. It is also worth noting the Alexander ribbon with two golden ears of corn for towns distinguished by agriculture and the grain trade. The coat of arms of Vernyi has no free part and exactly repeats the coat of arms of the Semirechye region, which once again tells us about its status of regional administrative centre. The shield is divided into two parts, the upper one, which is the priority, depicts nine black double-headed eagles, and the lower one depicts a golden inverted crescent. Having studied the relevant literature, we can note that the black double-headed eagle signifies power.⁷ First of all, the golden inverted crescent moon symbolises the presence of a large Muslim population in the region, as well as conveying the veiled message that the local indigenous authorities have been defeated.

⁷ Similarly, Russian literature since the 18th century has suggested that Ivan III Vasilyevich borrowed the double-headed eagle as the state emblem from Byzantium, as he married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor from the Palaiologos dynasty. At the beginning of the 20th century, N.P. Likhachev questioned this hypothesis, for 25 years have passed between the marriage of Ivan III Vasilyevich and Palaiologos and the eagle being placed on the Russian seal. Many scholars provide evidence that the double-headed eagle was never a symbol of Byzantium. Most likely, the Grand Duke of Moscow, in his desire to increase his international authority, used this emblem in accordance with his political plans. Perhaps he imitated the coat of arms of the Holy Roman Emperor, where the double-headed eagle as a political emblem personified imperial power.



Figure 4. Approval of the Verny's coat of arms
(Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28. часть 2: чертежи и
рисунки, 1908, 7)

The city of Dzharkent

The city of Dzharkent was founded in 1882. After the creation of the Semirechye oblast, the Tsarist armies occupied Chinese territory of Ili in 1871 under the pretext of the Dungan (Chinese muslims) rebellion. There was talk of permanent annexation, but Saint-Petersburg declared that it was occupying the territory to protect its subjects. Finally, a treaty of demarcation was signed in 1881 between China and Russia. Muslim population from Ili were authorised to move to the Russian Empire and a new uezd was created and the city of Dzharkent was founded.

The coat of arms of Dzharkent was approved on 19 March 1908, along with other coats of arms of the Semirechye oblast. It is so described: “On a golden shield, on a mountain, the so-called noble deer” or maral [corvus claphus] in its natural form. In the free part, the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The shield is decorated with a silver tower crown with three teeth and surrounded by two golden grapevines connected by an Alexander ribbon.

A French-style coat of arms, adorned with a silver tower crown with three points, awarded to district towns with less than 50 000 inhabitants. As for other decorations, in this case, the Alexander ribbon with two golden grapevines explains the wine-making industry existing in the region. In the free part of the coat of arms is the Semirechye region, and in the main part is a noble deer or maral. The latter requires more detailed consideration. First of all, in heraldry, the deer is an emblem of a warrior and masculine nobility, but it should not be forgotten that the coat of arms often depicted the animal in its literal sense. Dzharkent, located in the foothills of the Ala-Too, is quite likely to have a large population of this animal.



Figure 5. Coats of arms of Dzharkent (1908)



Figure 6. Approval of the Dzharkent's coat of arms

(Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28. часть 2: чертежи и рисунки, 1908, 8)

The city of Kopal

Kopal was at first a Cossack fort founded in 1846 or 1847 and became in 1848 a *stanitsa*, where the headquarters of the 10th regiment of the Semirechye Cossack army was stationed. It was elevated in status to city along with Ayagoz and Kokpekty, when the Western Siberia General-Governorship was created in 1854. It belonged to the Semipalatinsk oblast. The General-Governor Gustav Gasfort proposed to design coat of arms for the new cities with the coat of arms of the Semipalatinsk oblast, a camel in a azure background, in the free part. The proposition for Kopal transmitted in 1857 was a Kazakh tombstone, in relation to the grave of Kapal, an important Kazakh political figure, which was nearby the city (Сулейменов 2017): “In a green field on a golden rock, a silver quiver with arrows and a bow are placed crosswise, with a helmet above them” (*Материалы*). The golden rock is the tombstone. But it wasn’t approved and a new proposition was elaborated by the local municipal authorities in 1905.



Figure 7. Sketch of coat of arms of Kopal (1857)

Coat of arms of the district town of Kopal:

A divided shield. In the upper black part, a golden eight-pointed cross accompanied by a golden crescent moon with horns pointing upwards; in the lower silver part, a green field fortification (*sternschanz*). In the free part, the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The shield is adorned with a silver three-pointed tower crown and surrounded by two golden ears of corn connected by an Alexander ribbon.

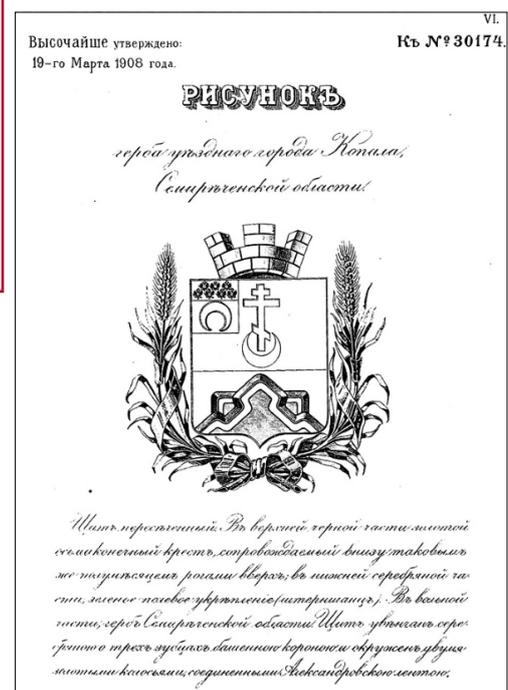


Figure 8. Coats of arms of Kopal (1908)

A French-style coat of arms, adorned with a silver tower crown with three teeth, awarded to district towns with less than 50 000 inhabitants, framed by an Alexander ribbon, with two golden ears of corn, for towns distinguished by agriculture and the grain trade. In the free part is the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The coat of arms is divided into two parts, with a Russian Orthodox cross and a crescent moon in the upper part, symbols representing Christian and Muslim populations that inhabited the city. The Orthodox cross dominates clearly the muslim crescent. In the lower part, there is a green field fortification, a reference to the city’s original status as a military fortification and Cossack *stanitsa* (accessible [online](#)).

Figure 9. Approval of the Kopal’s coat of arms

(Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28. часть 2: чертежи и рисунки, 1908, 12)



The city of Lepsinsk

In 1846, an agreement was signed between the Kazakh khans of the Senior Horde and Russia establishing the sovereignty of the Tsarist Empire. At the location of this agreement, which was a summer pasture for the Kazakhs, a fort was built to guard the frontier with China. This fort was upgraded to a stanitsa in 1855 and gained the statute of city only in 1880. From 1867 to 1893, it was part of the Sergiopol uezd, which was renamed then Lepsinsk uezd. Lepsinsk became the new district administrative centre.

Coat of arms of Lepsinsk:

On a golden shield, the head of a maral (local deer) in natural appearance. In the scarlet tip, there are three golden beehives in a row. In the free part, there is the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The shield is adorned with a silver three-pointed tower crown and surrounded by two golden ears of corn connected by an Alexander ribbon.



Figure 10. Coats of arms of Lepsinsk (1908)

A French-style coat of arms, adorned with a silver tower crown with three points, awarded to district towns with less than 50 000 inhabitants, framed by the Alexander ribbon, with two golden ears of corn, for towns distinguished by agriculture and the grain trade. In the free part is the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The coat of arms is divided into two parts, with a deer's head in the upper part and three golden beehives in a row in the lower part. The image of the deer's head is quite understandable, since Lepsinsk is also located in the foothills of the Ala-Too and is in many ways similar to Dzharkent. The beehives tell us about the active resettlement process, as it is known that many newcomers brought beehives with them for honey production. In general, the Semirechye region was the most favourable for beekeeping in Eastern Turkestan in terms of climatic conditions, specifically the Lepsinsk, Vernyi, and Przhevalsk uezds (РЪЖИКОВ 2013). Cossacks and Russians believed they had introduced beekeeping to Semirechye, which spread throughout Central Asia from the stanitsas of Kopal and Lepsinsk.

Figure 11. Approval of the Lepsinsk's coat of arms

(Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28. часть 2: чертежи и рисунки, 1908, 11)



The city of Przhevalsk

Before the conquest by the Russians, the North of present-day Kyrgyzstan was conquered by the Kokand Khanate. In 1832, Kokandis founded a fort on the Eastern shore of the lake Issyk-Kul along the river Karakol, but the Kyrgyz were able to free themselves and destroyed the fort. Not long after, the Russians asserted their authority over the region and a first fort was built in 1865 not far from the Kokandi one. Four years later, the fort was relocated at the exact place, where the Kokandis established their own fort. Named after the river Karakol, it had a better situation to supervise the important caravan road leading to Kashgar (*Туркестанский сборник*, vol. 426, 7). As the administrative centre of the Issyk-Kul *uezd*, Karakol became a city and was renamed Przhevalsk in 1889.

When creating the coat of arms of the city of Przhevalsk, a variant of the image of the monument to Nikolai Przhevskii in its main part, with a sheaf of wheat, flowers, and beehives with bees at the foot of the monument, indicating the predominant economic activities of the inhabitants. The shield itself was surrounded by a garland of oak branches entwined with a ribbon and crowned with a crown (Иссык-Кульский областной государственный архив. Ф. 1108, О. 1, Д.12).

An imperial decree renamed the city in memory of the Russian geographer and traveller Nikolai Przhevskii (1839-1888), who died here on 20 October (1 November) 1888, at 9 a.m. (*Туркестанский сборник*, vol. 432, 91). On the note, which accompanied the telegram to the Emperor about Przhevskii’s funeral, the Minister of War wrote: “To consider the construction of a monument at public expense.” The monument to Przhevskii was built in 1893 and unveiled on 26 June 1894. By the time the coat of arms was created, the monument to Przhevskii had become a city landmark, and the residents decided to depict it in the coat of arms. The project itself was not approved, but the idea was accepted and symbolically transformed into the final version of the coat of arms:

On a black shield, a silver globe with golden meridians, accompanied by a golden five-pointed star above. In the golden tip of the shield, there are two crossed scarlet ears of corn, burdened at the point of intersection by a bee. In the free part, there is the coat of arms of the Semirechye region.



Figure 12. Coats of arms of Przhevalsk (1908)

Figure 13. Approval of the Przhevalsk’s coat of arms (Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28. часть 2: чертежи и рисунки, 1908, 9)

As can be seen in Fig. 5, the coat of arms was shaped like the French model, adorned with a silver tower crown with three teeth, as noted above, awarded to district towns with less than 50 000 inhabitants. In the free part, we see the coat of arms of the Semirechye region, because the district was under its jurisdiction. The coat of arms is framed by the Alexander ribbon with two golden ears of corn, which tells us that its inhabitants were engaged in agriculture and the grain trade. Its uniqueness in the structure of usual imperial coat of arms is revealed by the division into two parts: in the upper part, on a black shield, there is a silver globe with golden meridians, accompanied by a golden five-pointed star above; in the lower part, on the golden tip of the shield, there are two crossed scarlet ears of corn, burdened at the point of intersection by a bee. In heraldic tradition, the gold star and globe with meridian and base are symbols of outstanding geographical discoveries. In addition, all this is depicted on a black background, which doubles the effect.

On November 9, 1888, at an extraordinary meeting of the organization, the vice president of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, Petr Semenov, said:

The last wish expressed by our dear departed friend to be buried on the shores of Issyk-Kul was not the ravings of a sick imagination. The idea behind this wish is not only profound, but also entirely consistent with Nikolai Mihailovich's [Przhevalskii] Russian national character. In Russian folk art, the fairy-tale Russian bogatyr wishes to be buried at a crossroads, as if pointing with his grave the way forward for those Russian bogatyr who will follow in his footsteps.

We assume that the crossroads mentioned by Semenov in the first version of the coat of arms is explained by the image of the traveller's grave, while in the new version it is explained by the image of two crossed scarlet ears of corn, burdened at the point of intersection by a bee.

The city of Pishpek

Like Przhevalsk, Pishpek was originally a Kokandi fort, founded in 1825 in the Chu valley and situated on a caravan road. The fort was taken by the Russians in 1862 and dismantled by Kyrgyz. At its place were built a Russian fort and a bazar. When the Semirechye oblast was created, Pishpek was part of the Tokmak *uezd*. But it expanded and in 1878 Pishpek became a city and the administrative centre of the *uezd* renamed after it.

As for the district town of Pishpek, the coat of arms was also approved on 19 March 1908, and has the following description:

In an azure shield, a silver belt encumbered with three azure ploughshares in a row. Above and below the belt, there is one golden bee. In the free part, there is the coat of arms of the Semirechye region. The shield is adorned with a silver three-pointed tower crown and surrounded by two golden ears of corn connected by an Alexander ribbon.



Figure 14. Coats of arms of Pishpek (1908)

As can be seen from Fig. 6, the main and external elements of the Pishpek coat of arms are identical to those of the Przhevalsk coat of arms, with the exception of the subject itself. In this case, we have a coat of arms divided into three parts: in the upper and lower azure parts there is one bee each, and in the middle, there is a silver belt with three ploughshares. The blue or light blue shades signify an abundance of water or rivers, and the bees signify beekeeping. The three ploughshares depicted in a row, as part of a plow, signify agriculture, which was actively practiced by the residents of Pishpek. Russian travellers who visited in the second half of the 19th century noted that the Kyrgyz people were skilled in agriculture. In particular, the author of the article “Сведения о дикокаменных киргизах, доставленные от генерал-губернатора Западной Сибири” [Information about the Mountainous *Kirgiz* delivered from the Western Siberia Governor General] published in 1851, noted that “almost all Kara *Kirgiz* [Kyrgyz] were engaged in agriculture, and that it was at a higher level than that of the *Kirgiz* [Kazakhs] of the Great Horde. The Kara *Kirgiz* sow wheat, barley, and millet, using the former to make bread and the latter for food, while millet is used to make *buzu*”⁸ (Сведения о дикокаменных киргизах... 1851).



Figure 13. Approval of the Pishpek's coat of arms (1908)

(Полное собрание законов Российской Империи, Т. 28, часть 2: чертежи и рисунки, 1908, 10)

⁸ *Buzu* is a malt beverage made by fermenting various grains.

It is also worth noting the efforts of Alexei Fetisov (1842-1894), a Russian botanist from Sebastopol who arrived in Turkestan in 1870. At first, he was engaged to develop viticulture and winemaking in Tashkent and then moved to Vernyi and finally Pishpek in 1878 for the construction and cultivation of an urban garden. His name is associated with Karagach Grove and Oak Park in present-day Bishkek. He cultivated also fruit trees, grapes, and ornamental plants, and taught anyone who wanted to learn. The nurseries of young trees (elm, small-leaved elm) set up in various locations for planting in towns and villages brought great benefit to the region, and these trees were provided to the Kyrgyz people free of charge. Ivan Narbut (1851-1919), head of the Tokmak *uezd* between 1888 and 1891, wrote in a note about Pishpek: “Mr. Fetisov, as a gardener, brought enormous benefits to the city of Pishpek, and his loss will be a great loss not only for the Tokmak *uezd*, but for the entire Semirechye oblast.”⁹

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, with the resettlement of Russian peasants, transformational processes began to take place in the economic life of the Kyrgyz people, and the emergence of beekeeping as a specific agricultural sector was an innovation. The *Туркестанский сборник* [Turkestan collection] mentions the active efforts of Gerasim Kolpakovskii, military governor of the Semirechye oblast from 1867 to 1882, who turned his attention to the favourable natural, climatic, and economic conditions for the development of beekeeping in Issyk-Kul (« Пчеловодство... 1907). Kolpakovskii ordered a small number of beehives to be sent from the city of Vernyi to the Issyk-Kul valley and distributed among the peasants. After a while, beekeeping in this area started to grow significantly and found profitable markets in China, where wholesale prices reached 14 rubbles per pood. In 1883, there were already 69 apiaries with 1 533 beehives in the district (*Ibid.*, 7). The *Туркестанский сборник* also reports on the increased interest in beekeeping regardless of occupation; it was practiced by both the privileged and the peasants, as well as the local Kyrgyz residents. Thus, beekeeping began to develop in subsequent years not only in Przhevalsk, but also in the Chu Valley, where was located the city of Pishpek (*Ibid.*, 8). Thus, a general picture emerges: Pishpek and Przhevalsk were inhabited by people engaged in agriculture and beekeeping.

Similarities and differences of the coats of arms of the Semirechye's district towns

External attributes

Similarities include the components of the coats of arms, such as (Бойко 2013, 1-34):

- Quadrangular French coat of arms shield, pointed at the bottom;
- Silver tower crown with three points;
- Free part;
- Alexander ribbon

Differences include the Alexander ribbon, golden ears of corn, and grapevines.

Internal attributes

The differences include:

- The subject of the coat of arms;
- The colour scheme of the coats of arms in question has a different meaning, referred to in heraldry as enamel, represented by scarlet, azure, green, and black. Vermilion, found in all the coats of arms under consideration, corresponds to red and is a symbol of bravery, courage, fearlessness, and valour. It is graphically represented by vertical lines and originally meant fire and warmth. Azure, depicted on the coat of arms of Pishpek, corresponds to blue and is a symbol of beauty, softness, grandeur, clarity, and pleasantness. It is graphically expressed by horizontal lines and served as an image of the sky or water. Green is a symbol of hope, joy, abundance,

⁹ Центральный государственный архив Республики Казахстан (ЦГА РК). Ф. 44, Оп. 1, Д. 21416, Л. 19-20об.

and freedom, as well as a symbol of Islam. It is graphically represented by diagonal lines on the right. In Kopal's coat of arms, it probably symbolically recalled the geographical features of the military fortification. Black, being a symbol of sorrow, prudence, humility, education, and modesty, is graphically represented by intersecting perpendicular lines, or, more often, by solid shading. In Przhevalsk's coat of arms, it probably refers to the great geographical discoveries of the traveller Przhevalskii and the bitterness of his untimely loss. In Kopal's coat of arms, the black has a more religious connotation. The black depicted against the background of a Russian Orthodox cross and a Muslim crescent tells us about the humility of the city's residents towards religious values.

- Metals are represented by gold, a symbol of wealth, justice, generosity, loyalty, constancy, strength, purity, love, mercy, and a noble soul, graphically represented by dots, as well as silver, a symbol of purity, innocence, virginity, kindness, beauty, and truthfulness, which is not graphically represented.
- Heraldic figures are divided into primary and secondary ones. In the coats of arms under consideration, the first group includes elements that occupy a larger area or a higher position on the coat of arms shield. These include: the image of a noble deer—a symbol of a warrior before whom the enemy flees in the coat of arms of Dzharkent; a golden Orthodox cross and crescent moon in the coat of arms of Kopal; the head of a maral in the coat of arms of Lepsinsk; a golden star with a globe in the coat of arms of Przhevalsk; and a silver belt with three ploughshares in a row in the coat of arms of Pishpek. Secondary elements of coats of arms include the coat of arms of the region, located on the free part of the coat of arms of the district town, as well as elements located at the bottom of the coat of arms, such as: a green field fortification in the lower silver part of the Kopal coat of arms; three golden beehives in the coat of arms of Lepsinsk; crossed golden ears of corn with a golden bee in the centre in the coat of arms of Przhevalsk; in Pishpek, golden bees depicted on both sides of the belt.

Conclusion

Comparing the coats of arms of district towns, we can come to the following conclusion: firstly, the identical elements present in all coats of arms (shield, crown, towers, ribbons, etc.), which are attributes of the Russian Empire's power, indicate the administrative and political affiliation of these towns. In Western European countries, city coats of arms emerged in connection with the establishment of a special administrative and legal structure for cities, which distinguished them from villages. A city coat of arms is not just an element of culture, but above all a sign reflecting the legal life of society. It concentrated legal rights and privileges; secondly, the features of the coats of arms reveal the strategic role of the city within the Russian Empire, as well as their degree of importance in the overall hierarchy of cities. The decision to adopt a similar coat of arms for the Semirechye oblast and the city of Vernyi indicates at the first sight its central position.

The six coats of arms analysed show recurring themes, with three representations of the maral deer, four references to beekeeping and two allusions to the subjugation of Muslims. The central theme is that of Russian domination over the region, extolling military conquest, economic development brought about by the Russians and scientific exploration. The maral deer is one of the animals of Central Asian fauna, but the symbol of the deer, which is very present in heraldry, is linked to the power of arms. Laker, in his work on Russian heraldry, notes: "According to naturalists, the deer drives away snakes with its scent and therefore serves as an emblem of a warrior before whom the enemy flees" (Лакер 1855, 41). Similarly, the bee is not only a reminder of the beekeeping practised in the *uezds*: "Bees and ants serve as symbols of diligence and obedience" (Laker 1855, 43).

While the first coat of arms design for the city of Vernyi featured the crescent and the Orthodox cross side by side without indicating supremacy, the coats of arms approved for Vernyi and Semirechye feature an inverted crescent, which expresses submission. This is also the case with the coat of arms of the city of Kopal. The Central Asian populations are represented under this single common religious denominator, and there is nothing that more specifically identifies the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Dungans, Taranchis (future Uyghurs) and Tatars who inhabit the region.

The only element that vaguely recalls a specifically Central Asian heritage is the tomb of Kapal on the coat of arms of the city of Kopal. The predominant way of life in the Semirechye oblast was nomadic pastoralism, but no reference is made to this. Conversely, several elements recall agriculture, such as ploughs, wheat and vine leaves. The coats of arms adopted for the cities of the Semirechye oblast express a colonial vision of Turkestan and serve to mark Russian power in the region.

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