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Astana

A Cultural Guide to the Capital of Kazakhstan

Gian Luca Bonora

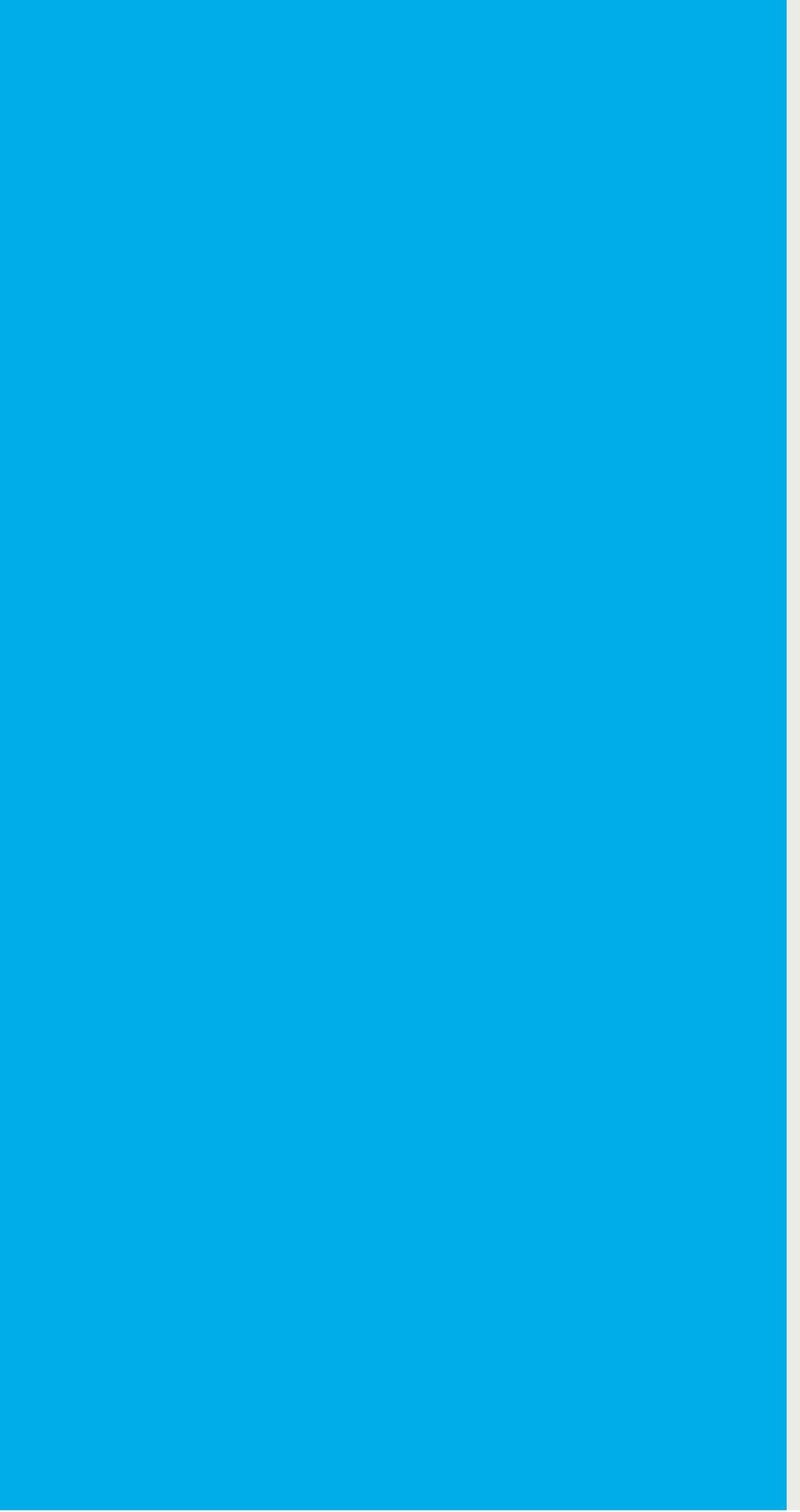
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Presentation

Adriano V. Rossi

Astana is a young city, not characterised by a long and glorious history as Rome, Athens, Aleppo and Istanbul. It is an even younger capital, if we consider that it replaced Almaty as the capital of Kazakhstan in 1997, exactly twenty years ago.

But the heritage of Astana may be legitimately defined as ancient, as the city is rooted in millennia of historical and literary events, trade and economic relations, works of art and technological innovation. The testimonies of this glorious heritage are evident in the funerary barrows of the Iron Age, in rough brick mausoleums erected at the same time as the earliest spread of Islam in Central Asia, in the fortified cities and citadels, fortresses and caravanserais along the arterial routes that form the Silk Road, and even in the mysterious, unknown underground mosques. Almost a dozen dot the parched earth of the Ustyurt and Mangyshlak, between the Caspian and the Aral Sea.

An Italian Institute of science and culture - just as young yet heir to an ancient tradition - based on a proposal by Gian Luca Bonora, for whom Kazakhstan is like a second home, came to the decision of creating this Cultural Guide to the Capital of Kazakhstan in record time. The purpose of ISMEO - International Association of Mediterranean and East Studies, founded in Rome over four years ago and now able to expand its sphere of action and research thanks to a five-year *revitalisation* project approved by MIUR (Italian Ministry of the Education, University and Research) in 2016 - is to carry out study programs, training and research related to the cultures and countries of Asia and Africa and their interactions with the Mediterranean basin. Among its numerous activities and scientific and cultural activities, ISMEO coordinates and implements study and research programs, organises congresses, conferences and exhibitions, carries out cooperative, advisory and assistance projects, with particular reference to the preservation and enhancement of the cultural and environmental heritage, carries out missions, study trips and archaeological campaigns, acquires and preserves all kinds of documentation on the historical, artistic, cultural and environmental heritage of these countries, as well as performs editorial activity on its own or in collaboration with other institutions or publishers. The comparison between the youth of Astana, which is notwithstanding based on a rich historical and cultural past,

and that of the refounded ISMEO, is well understood if it is considered that the latter, like a phoenix, has risen from the ashes of prestigious Italian research institutions active in the nineteenth century, such as IsMEO (Institute for the Middle and Far East), the Italian-African Institute and IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient), fruit of the merger of the two previous ones in 1995.

Since the end of 1933, under the guidance of the great Italian explorer and orientalist Giuseppe Tucci, IsMEO undertook the study of Asia, its countries and its peoples for the ultimate purpose of mutual understanding as the inevitable foundation of cultural, economic and political relations between the entire European continent and the whole Asian continent ("Eurasia"). As far back as the end of the Second World War, the Institute organised scientific expeditions in Tibet (1948) and Nepal (1952 and 1954), and since 1955 entered into agreements with the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran to open sites for archaeological excavation and monumental restoration in some of the most historically significant areas, such as the Swat Valley, Ghazni, Isfahan, Pasargade, Persepolis. In the following years, new agreements were made with cultural institutions of many other Asian countries, making the Institute an essential point of reference to Italian research activities in Asia.

In 1995, the IsMEO was merged with the Italian-African Institute, establishing the IsIAO - Italian Institute for Africa and the East. The IsIAO, led by President Prof. Gherardo Gnoli, who has been president of the IsMEO since 1980, has continued in the footsteps of its founding institutes, promoting cultural relations between Italy and Asian and African countries through international conferences, exhibitions, publications, archaeological excavations, restoration of important historical and religious sites, and research projects of historical, linguistic and philological nature. Despite the difficulties which have arisen due to the ever-changing international geo-political situation, the Institute has always striven to maintain and promote pre-existing Italian scientific activities in strategic areas, as well as expanding archaeological initiatives to various Central Asian and Caucasian countries in the territories belonging to the former Soviet Union. In 1999 in Almaty, an Agreement of Scientific Cooperation was signed by Professors Karl M. Baypakov and Maurizio Tosi in the Institute of Archeology "A.Kh. Margulan" for the organisation of a joint Italian-Kazakh archaeological mission. In addition to Tosi (1999-2002), subsequent Italian scientific directors include Maurizio Cattani

(2002-2006) and Gian Luca Bonora (2007-2014). From 2012, for three seasons, the archaeological expedition studied the cultural interactions between mobile groups of breeders in the steppes around Astana, in the heart of Eurasia, and the settled community of farmers of Middle Asia and the Indo-Iranian Borderland. In other words, the mission studied the cultural and commercial relations that the ancestors of the inhabitants of Astana entertained with the other human groups across the Eurasian space.

The opportunity to publish the first ever Cultural Guide on Astana, a city undergoing extensive urbanistic and architectural development, defined by many as a bridge between east and west where the different identities of modern-day Kazakhstan and Eurasia meet and take shape, could not be overlooked by ISMEO which, as the institutions which are its scientific ancestors, has always given priority to the study of the ancient and contemporary culture of Eurasia in its strategic location between the Mediterranean and Asia, between east and west.

Through the publishing and distributing of this Cultural Guide to Astana, ISMEO wishes to present to the entire world the history, largely unknown, of a region that over the centuries has always been the source of important historical and cultural events. Readers will discover that this region is home to the funeral mausoleum of Zhanibek Khan, one of the two founders of the first Khanate exclusively composed of tribal groups of Kazakh origin, founded approximately 550 years ago. And just 5 km west of the center of the capital is located an archaeological site, Bozok, where the remains of a medieval settlement of great social and political importance have been brought to light: it served firstly as a military outpost headed by a khan who controlled an important junction along the caravan trade routes in the northernmost Silk Road, across the steppes at the border with Siberia and subsequently as a religious centre witnessing the diffusion of Islam and all Muslim traditions in the whole Central Asian region.

The main urban axis of the ultra-modern Astana, planned about twenty years ago, begins precisely from the archaeological site of Bozok and the Khan Shatyr trade center, Kaz-MunayGaz Headquarters, Bayterek Tower, Ak Orda Presidential Palace, Palace of Peace and Reconciliation (aka Pyramid) and the Kazakh Eli Monument were built along its eastward route: in other words all the most important sites and monuments of the capital, having a deep social, economic and political meaning as well as propagandistic. A second, recently

planned, urbanistic axis intersects perpendicularly with the first at the Bayterek Tower and continues south towards the new EXPO 2017 quarter and the international airport. The capital of Kazakhstan is thus planned on two perpendicular axes that follow in the footsteps of the past and "fly" to the future.

The future of Astana is already outlined: in a short time the city will become a metropolis with a population of more than a million and will be at the same time the most innovative administrative, commercial, scientific, educational, cultural, sports and industrial center in Central Asia. It will be characterised by polycentrism, complexity of buildings and architectural structures, and a density of inhabitants that will enable a safe and comfortable living environment for all the citizens and tourists from over the world. The strengthening of its infrastructure is therefore a priority. Astana is already a city which is future-focused and blends with the four seasons of the year, respecting the changing rhythms of nature. The integration of urban and rural, man and nature, East and West, is therefore central to all urban development plans of the capital and derives from the "philosophy of symbiosis" which is the legacy of renowned architect K. Kurokawa to the world of architecture and urban planning. At the same time, Astana is a city characterised by a strong focus on the issues of environmental sustainability, public health and energy recycling that are the main topics of EXPO 2017.

To conclude this presentation, Astana is a metropolis which aspires to the utopia conceived and designed by designers aware of the role that architecture can still have for building a national identity and a political, social and cultural consolidation. The city quickly moves towards the goal of President N.A. Nazarbaev to give a concrete form to the socio-cultural identity of the Kazakh people by providing them with a capital, the first capital of a people which traditionally and economically have always been characterised by a high percentage of nomadism. At the same time, the city has also become the representation of the power and energy of the country, whose echo spreads on a global scale with EXPO 2017.

The theme chosen by the organisers is Future Energy: energy, with particular reference to renewable energies and their relationship with the environment. It is therefore a great hope for the future of an increasingly interconnected, human and sustainable world.

Prof. Adriano V. Rossi, President, ISMEO