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The History Of The Study Of Cultural Heritage Sites In The Surkhan Oasis Regions

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the historical stages of studying the cultural heritage sites of the Surkhan Valley. It focuses on archaeological research conducted from the late 19th century to the 1980s, including early topographic observations during the Russian Empire, systematic excavations of the Soviet era, and the application of new technological approaches in the years of independence. The paper discusses the scientific study of major archaeological sites such as Ayrtam, Kara-Tepe, Fayaz-Tepe, and Dalverzin-Tepe, emphasizing their role in the formation of the Uzbek archaeological school and the international importance of the Surkhan Valley's cultural heritage.

Keywords:

Surkhan Valley, cultural heritage, archaeology, Termez, Ayrtam, Kara-Tepe, Fayaz-Tepe, Dalverzin-Tepe, Kushan period, archaeological expedition, history of Uzbekistan.

Аннотация: В статье анализируются этапы изучения объектов культурного наследия Сурхандарьинской долины. Рассмотрены археологические исследования, проведённые с конца XIX века до 1980-х годов, включая первые топографические наблюдения царского периода, систематические раскопки советской эпохи и внедрение современных технологий в годы независимости. Особое внимание уделено научному изучению памятников Айртам, Кара-тепе, Фаяз-тепе и Дальверзин-тепе, их роли в формировании узбекской археологической школы и международному значению культурного наследия региона.

Ключевые слова: Сурхандарьинская долина, культурное наследие, археология, Термез, Айртам, Кара-тепе, Фаяз-тепе, Дальверзин-тепе, кушанский период, археологическая экспедиция, история Узбекистана.

Introduction

The Surkhan Oasis is located in the southern part of Uzbekistan and has historically developed as a crossroads of civilizations and one of the key links of the Great Silk Road. Its geographical position served as a natural bridge connecting the civilizations of India, Iran, China, and Central Asia. For this reason, a wide variety of tangible cultural heritage sites associated with different cultures and belief systems have emerged in the region since ancient times.

The historical roots of the Surkhan Oasis date back to the period of primitive society,

namely the Paleolithic era. For instance, the Zarautsoy rock paintings represent outstanding examples of prehistoric art and reflect the earliest artistic expressions of human thought. Likewise, the Sopollitepa and Jarkutan sites illustrate the formative stages of early urban culture in Central Asia.

During the Greco-Bactrian and Kushan periods, major Buddhist complexes such as Karatepa, Fayoztepa, and Ayrtam were constructed in and around Termez, transforming the oasis into an important religious, administrative, and commercial

center. In the Islamic period, the Termez scholarly tradition emerged, and architectural monuments such as the Sultan Saodat Complex, the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum, and the Jarkurgan Minaret were built.

Today, the large number of identified monuments in the Surkhan Oasis and their chronological diversity have made the region an object of special scholarly significance for archaeology, history, art history, and cultural studies. Therefore, a systematic analysis of the history of research on the cultural heritage sites of this oasis, along with the identification of its scholarly stages and methodological approaches, remains a highly relevant research task.

Results and Discussion

The scholarly study of the cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the period of Tsarist Russia, within the framework of regional studies and military-topographical research. At that time, the oasis formed part of the southern territories of the Bukhara Emirate, and following its incorporation into the sphere of political control of the Russian Empire, the natural-geographical and historical potential of the region began to be studied systematically.

Early investigations were primarily associated with the compilation of military maps, the identification of river routes, and the collection of information on the ruins of ancient cities. In this process, the first written records concerning Old Termez, the Sultan Saodat Complex, and the Jarkurgan Minaret appeared. Most of these studies were based on military-topographical reports by Russian officers and Orientalists, among whom the works of A. P. Gorshenin and D. N. Zamyatin occupy a special place.

One of the earliest scientifically identified monuments of the Surkhan Oasis is Ayrtam, located 18 km east of ancient Termez. In the 1930s, the site was systematically excavated by the Termez Archaeological Complex Expedition under the leadership of M. Ye. Masson. The discovered Ayrtam frieze was assessed as one of the earliest examples of Buddhist art in Central Asia, clearly demonstrating the influence of the Greco-Gandharan style.

At the same time, in the late 19th century, the renowned Russian Orientalist V. V. Bartold analyzed historical sources related to the history of Termez and Bactria, substantiating the names "Antiochia" and "Tarmita" as ancient toponyms of Termez. Although he did not conduct archaeological excavations himself, his source-based research laid the scholarly foundation for subsequent archaeological approaches.

By the 1920s–1930s, these initial topographical and epigraphic observations were replaced by full-scale scientific expeditions. The early Soviet expeditions organized by Uzkomstaris and those led by B. P. Denike (1926–1927) initiated systematic archaeological excavations in the Surkhan Oasis. This period marked the beginning of the formation of a scientific archaeological school for the study of the region's material culture.

The 1920s–1940s marked a new stage in the study of the cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis. During this period, earlier sporadic observations were replaced by systematic scientific expeditions. With the establishment of Soviet power, archaeology in the territory of Uzbekistan became a state-supported scientific discipline.

The activities of Uzkomstaris, the Committee for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments established in the 1920s, laid the foundation for the registration and initial scientific documentation of monuments in the Surkhan Oasis. In 1926–1927, an expedition of the Moscow Museum of the Cultures of the Peoples of the East, led by Professor B. P. Denike, conducted excavations in Termez and its surrounding areas. During this expedition, ceramic artifacts, coins, and wall paintings from the antique and early medieval layers were discovered, with a portion of the finds transferred to Moscow museums.

By the 1930s, the Termez Archaeological Complex Expedition (TAKE), led by M. Ye. Masson, began its work in the Surkhan Oasis. Between 1936 and 1939, this expedition was carried out in collaboration with the Uzbek SSR Academy of Sciences and the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. During this period, the Ayrtam frieze, Buddhist monuments in Old

Termez (Karatepa), as well as initial excavations in Chingiztepa and Fayoztepa, were systematically conducted.

These studies not only led to the discovery of new archaeological monuments but also enabled the chronological stratification of Termez. M. Ye. Masson identified the antique, Kushan, and early medieval stages of Termez as distinct historical periods. This work firmly established the Surkhan Oasis as an independent archaeological space on the scientific map.

The mid-20th century through the 1980s marked a new stage in the archaeological study of the Surkhan Oasis — the period of systematic research and the formation of a scientific school. During these years, large-scale excavations were conducted in collaboration with the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, and the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies. In particular, findings related to the Kushan period established the oasis's significance in global archaeology.

The Qoratepa Buddhist monastic complex, located in the northeast of Termez, dates to the 1st–3rd centuries CE and was systematically studied in the 1960s–1970s under the leadership of B. Ya. Staviskiy. The results scientifically confirmed the central role of the Termez Oasis in the spread of Buddhism through Central Asia.

The Fayoztepa site, discovered in 1968, was excavated under L. I. Albaum from 1968 to 1976. A carved Buddha statue found here was recognized as one of the finest examples of Buddhist art in the territory of Uzbekistan.

The ancient city of Dalvarzintepa in the Denov district (2nd century BCE – 4th century CE) was studied by an expedition led by G. A. Pugachenkova between 1967 and 1975. In 1972, a 34 kg hoard of gold objects, known as the “Dalvarzintepa Treasure,” was discovered, providing striking evidence of the economic and cultural prosperity of the Kushan period.

G. A. Pugachenkova, B. A. Litvinskiy, and E. V. Rtveladze were the leading researchers of this period. Pugachenkova analyzed the architectural systems of Dalvarzintepa, Fayoztepa, and Kampirtepa; Litvinskiy studied

the regional connections of Kushan culture, demonstrating the close links between Termez and Takhti Sangin; Rtveladze conducted an in-depth analysis of the historical topography, coinage, and defensive systems of Termez and Kampirtepa in the 1970s–1980s, establishing them as classical monuments of Uzbek archaeology.

As a result, the Surkhan Oasis archaeology developed its own scientific school. Based on the Qoratepa, Fayoztepa, Dalvarzintepa, and Kampirtepa sites, a clearly periodized scientific model of Kushan-period culture was created. From the mid-20th century onward, the oasis became not only a key site in Uzbekistan but also a central region in the archaeology of the entire Central Asian area.

After Uzbekistan gained independence, the study of the cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis entered a new stage. During this period, state policy prioritized the preservation, research, and presentation of cultural heritage to the global scientific community. Research methodologies in the post-independence era have increasingly incorporated modern technologies and international collaboration.

Excavations at Kampirtepa, conducted under the leadership of Academician E. V. Rtveladze (1990–2010), fundamentally transformed the understanding of urban development in the ancient period of the Surkhan Oasis. Rtveladze proposed the scientific hypothesis linking this site to Ox Alexandriya, allegedly founded by Alexander the Great. During the excavations, fortification walls, Buddhist structures, and coins were discovered, and a 3D digital model of the site was created.

In addition, in the 2000s, joint expeditions between Uzbekistan and France, Germany, and the Czech Republic were carried out. As a result of these collaborations, new stratigraphic layers were uncovered at Fayoztepa, Dalvarzintepa, Kolbuluq, and Qiziltepa.

The intangible cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis has also gained global recognition. The cultural environment of Baysun was included in UNESCO's “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” list in 2001 and

subsequently on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. This recognition highlighted the local folk culture and traditions of the region on a global scale. Consequently, the "Baysun Spring" international festival was revived, playing a significant role in promoting cultural heritage and enhancing tourism potential.

Conclusion.

The history of the study of cultural heritage in the Surkhan Oasis represents an evolutionary process that has played a significant role in the development of archaeology and cultural studies in Uzbekistan. This journey, which began with incidental observations in the late 19th century, evolved by the mid-20th century into systematic expeditions, the establishment of scientific schools during the Soviet period, and, in the years of independence, into research incorporating digital technologies and international collaboration.

As a result of these studies, the Surkhan Oasis was recognized as one of the centers of ancient Bactrian culture. Sites such as Qoratepa, Fayoztepa, Dalvarzintepa, and Kampirtepa illuminated the material foundations of Kushan-period civilization. At the same time, the cultural environment of Baysun received UNESCO recognition, bringing the traditional values of the oasis to the attention of the international community.

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