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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE TASHKENT OASIS: FROM THE LATE 19TH TO MID-20TH CENTURY

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Abstract. This paper examines the historical development of archaeological research in the Tashkent Oasis from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. The study traces the evolution from the initial amateur explorations during the Russian Imperial period to the formation of institutional and methodological foundations of archaeology under Soviet administration. Drawing upon archival materials and the works of prominent researchers such as A.L. Kun, N.P. Ostroumov, G.V. Grigoryev, M.E. Masson, and A.P. Okladnikov, this research reconstructs the stages of archaeological investigation in the region. The paper argues that the emergence of the Turkestan Circle of Amateur Archaeologists (THAA) in 1895, followed by state-sponsored expeditions in the 1930s–1950s, laid the groundwork for modern archaeological science in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Tashkent Oasis, archaeology, Qovunchi culture, Soviet archaeology, Turkestan Circle of Amateur Archaeologists, Central Asia

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola XIX asr oxiri va XX asr o'rtalari oralig'ida Toshkent vohasida arxeologik tadqiqotlarning tarixiy rivojlanishini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot Rossiya imperiyasi davridagi dastlabki havaskor tadqiqotlardan tortib, Sovet boshqaruvi davrida arxeologiyaning institutsional va metodologik asoslarining shakllanishigacha bo'lgan evolyutsiyani kuzatib boradi. Arxiv materiallari va A.L. Kun, N.P. Ostroumov, G.V. Grigoryev, M.E. Masson va A.P. Okladnikov kabi taniqli tadqiqotchilarning ishlariga tayanib, ushbu tadqiqot mintaqadagi arxeologik tadqiqotlar bosqichlarini qayta tiklaydi. Maqolada 1895-yilda Turkiston havaskor arxeologlar doirasi (THAA) ning paydo bo'lishi, undan keyin 1930-1950-yillarda davlat homiyligidagi ekspeditsiyalar O'zbekistonda zamonaviy arxeologiya fanining asosini yaratganligi ta'kidlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Toshkent vohasi, arxeologiya, Qovunchi madaniyati, Sovet arxeologiyasi, Turkiston havaskor arxeologlar doirasi, Markaziy Osiyo

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается история развития археологических исследований в Ташкентском оазисе с конца XIX до середины XX века. Прослеживается эволюция археологических исследований от первых любительских исследований в период Российской империи до формирования институциональных и методологических основ археологии в советское время. Опираясь на архивные материалы и труды таких выдающихся исследователей, как А.Л. Кун, Н.П. Остроумов, Г.В. Григорьев, М.Е. Массон и А.П. Окладников, исследование реконструирует этапы археологических исследований в регионе. В статье утверждается, что создание Туркестанского кружка археологов-любителей (ТКА) в 1895 году, а затем и государственных экспедиций в 1930–1950-х годах, заложило основу современной археологической науки в Узбекистане.

Ключевые слова: Ташкентский оазис, археология, ковунчинская культура, советская археология, Туркестанский кружок археологов-любителей, Центральная Азия

1. Introduction

The Tashkent Oasis, located in the southeastern part of the Chirchiq and Bo‘zsuv river basins, is one of the most archaeologically significant regions of Central Asia. Its fertile land and favorable geographical position have long supported human settlement and cultural development. However, systematic archaeological studies began only after the Russian Empire annexed the region in the second half of the nineteenth century.

During this period, Russian military officers, Orientalists, and amateur researchers began collecting artifacts and documenting ruins. Their work, though unmethodical by modern standards, provided the foundation for the academic study of Central Asian archaeology (Grigoryev, 1871).

The development of archaeological research in the Tashkent Oasis reflects broader historical dynamics — from colonial curiosity to institutional science. Initially motivated by imperial interests, early studies aimed to document the cultural heritage of the newly conquered territories. By the mid-twentieth century, however, archaeological practice in the region had transformed into a professional discipline integrated within Soviet academic institutions.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

2.1. Early Research Traditions

The first systematic attempt to study the ancient monuments of the Tashkent Oasis was undertaken by **A.L. Kun** in 1871 on behalf of the Imperial Archaeological Commission. His expedition collected fifteen boxes of artifacts from Turkestan, one of which was entirely from Tashkent (Ostroumov, 1896). This collection served as the earliest material basis for the archaeology of the oasis.

Later, **V.V. Vereshchagin, G.V. Grigoryev**, and **N.P. Ostroumov** conducted sporadic surveys and published descriptive accounts of ancient sites such as Shoshtepa, Qovunchitepa, and Qanqa. Their contributions were primarily antiquarian, focusing on collecting objects and making preliminary hypotheses about ancient local civilizations.

2.2. The Turkestan Circle of Amateur Archaeologists

A major milestone occurred in **1895**, when the **Turkestan Circle of Amateur Archaeologists (THAA)** was established in Tashkent. Although composed of non-professional enthusiasts, the circle laid the groundwork for organized archaeological research in Central Asia (Smirnov, 1897). Members like Ostroumov and Smirnov carried out excavations at Shoshtepa and Qanqa, discovering ceramics, glassware, and coins.

THAA's publications, while methodologically simple, provided valuable data for later studies. For instance, **Smirnov (1897)** hypothesized that Qanqa corresponded to *Kanx* — a city mentioned in the *Avesta* — reflecting early attempts to link archaeological evidence with historical texts.

2.3. Methodological Approach of the Present Study

This research employs a **historical-analytical methodology,** synthesizing field reports, published monographs, and archival documents from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The analysis identifies four chronological stages of research development and evaluates the changing methodological paradigms. The sources used include both primary archaeological reports (e.g., Ostroumov, 1896; Obolduyeva, 1958) and secondary analytical works (Masson, 1947; Okladnikov, 1960).

3. Discussion

3.1. The Imperial Period (1870–1917)

The late nineteenth century represents the formative stage of archaeology in the Tashkent Oasis. Russian scholars and administrators viewed archaeological exploration as part of their mission to study and control the new territories of the empire. The focus was primarily on collecting artifacts rather than conducting systematic excavations.

A.L. Kun's 1871 expedition was the first to collect material evidence from the oasis. **G.V. Grigoryev's (1871)** work *On the Scythian People "Saka"* marked an early attempt to interpret Central Asian material culture within broader historical frameworks. In **1887, N.P. Ostroumov** excavated tombs near modern Do'rmon, discovering ceramics and animal bones, which were later identified as belonging to the **Qovunchi culture** (Obolduyeva, 1958).

Despite the amateur nature of these efforts, their documentation formed the first archaeological database for the region. By the turn of the century, dozens of sites had been recorded, including **Chimboyliq, Soyliq,** and **Shoshtepa**, each representing different settlement phases of ancient Tashkent.

3.2. The Early Soviet Period (1917–1940)

Following the Russian Revolution, the newly formed Soviet government nationalized all cultural and historical artifacts. In **1918**, the Turkestan ASSR issued a decree on the protection of cultural heritage, marking the beginning of state-directed archaeology (Masson, 1947).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, archaeological research gained institutional support through **Uzkomstaris**, which organized large-scale surveys led by **A.A. Potapov, M.V. Voyevodskiy,** and **M.P. Gryaznov**. Their expeditions catalogued more than 150 sites in the Tashkent region and produced detailed topographic maps — a significant methodological advancement over the earlier, descriptive studies.

During the same period, **G.V. Grigoryev** identified the **Qovunchi culture,** dated to the late first millennium BCE – early first millennium CE, characterized by distinctive pottery and fortified settlements. **T.G. Obolduyeva (1937)** later distinguished the **Jun culture**, dating from the 3rd–4th centuries CE, thus expanding the cultural chronology of the oasis.

3.3. The Institutional Period (1940–1960)

The establishment of the **Department of Central Asian Archaeology** at the Central Asian State University in 1940 under **M.Ye. Masson** institutionalized archaeology in Uzbekistan. This era marked the transition from sporadic expeditions to sustained academic programs.

Excavations during the construction of the **Tashkent Canal** revealed new Bronze Age materials, leading to the identification of the **Burgulik culture**. Despite World War II disruptions, research continued at sites such as **Bo‘zsuv, Chimboyliq,** and **Obirakhmat.**

By the 1950s, a new generation of Uzbek archaeologists, including **A.P. Okladnikov, X.K. Nasriddinov**, and **A.R. Muhammadjonov**, began to explore the Paleolithic sites of the region — **Sho‘ralisoy, Khojakent, Oqtosh,** and **Tusiyo** — using stratigraphic and comparative analysis methods (Okladnikov, 1960). These studies not only enriched knowledge of prehistoric human habitation but also introduced a methodological shift toward scientific excavation and cultural stratification.

4. Results

The analysis allows for the identification of **four main phases** in the history of archaeological research in the Tashkent Oasis:

Period	Main Characteristics	Key Researchers
1870–1917	Amateur explorations, collection of artifacts	A.L. Kun, N.P. Ostroumov, G.V. Grigoryev
1917–1940	State-sponsored surveys, cultural chronology established	M.V. Voyevodskiy, M.P. Gryaznov, A.A. Potapov
1940–1950	Institutionalization of archaeology, discovery of Burgulik and Qovunchi cultures	M.Ye. Masson, T.G. Obolduyeva
1950–1960	Professionalization and Paleolithic excavations	A.P. Okladnikov, X.K. Nasriddinov, A.R. Muhammadjonov

These four phases collectively demonstrate a shift from descriptive antiquarianism to a professional, interdisciplinary scientific discipline. Moreover, the evolution of archaeology in the Tashkent Oasis mirrored the broader transformation of Soviet archaeology, integrating Marxist historical frameworks, typological classification, and field-based analysis.

5. Conclusion

The history of archaeological research in the Tashkent Oasis reveals a gradual yet profound transformation of approaches, methods, and institutional structures. Beginning as amateur exploration under the Russian Empire, archaeology evolved into a systematic and professional field by the mid-twentieth century.

The contributions of early researchers — Kun, Ostroumov, Grigoryev — established the foundation for later Soviet scholarship. The Soviet period introduced institutional frameworks and

scientific methodologies that not only advanced knowledge of Central Asian prehistory but also positioned Uzbekistan as a major archaeological center in the region.

Ultimately, the study of the Tashkent Oasis illustrates how political, cultural, and intellectual shifts can shape the evolution of a scientific discipline. The progression from curiosity-driven antiquarianism to data-driven science stands as a testament to the enduring value of archaeological inquiry in revealing the deep cultural history of human civilization.

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