

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE AND NATIONAL HISTORY: THE HISTORY OF RESEARCH IN UZBEKISTAN

Rasulov Gayrat Pardayevich, PhD

Head of the Department of Islamic History and Source Studies, IRCICA

Uzbekistan International Islamic Academy

rgayrat@bk.ru

Abstract: This article examines the formation and evolution of archaeological science in Uzbekistan, focusing on the scientific study of historical and cultural heritage sites and their contributions to national historiography. It analyzes large-scale research conducted during the years of independence, international archaeological expeditions, and the objectives outlined in the “Concept for the Development of Archaeological Science in Uzbekistan.” Additionally, the article explores early state formation processes in Uzbekistan during the Bronze Age, using archaeological evidence, with a particular emphasis on Bronze Age monuments.

Keywords: Uzbekistan archaeology, archaeological research, historical-cultural heritage, Bronze Age, early state formation, historiography, international cooperation, archaeological concept

Introduction

Uzbekistan’s territory is a cradle of human civilization, hosting numerous historical monuments and tangible and intangible cultural heritage sites. Archaeological science plays a pivotal role in studying these sites, offering insights into the nation’s historical narrative and fostering a deeper understanding of its past. The development of archaeology in Uzbekistan reflects the country’s commitment to preserving its heritage and advancing scientific knowledge, serving as a key indicator of societal progress and historical consciousness (Mavlonov & Abduvositova, 2014).

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the history of archaeological research in Uzbekistan, tracing its evolution from the late 19th century to the present. It highlights the contributions of archaeological studies to national historiography, the impact of independence-era reforms, and the role of international collaboration. Special attention is given to Bronze Age sites, which illuminate the processes of early state formation in the region.

Historical Development of Archaeology in Uzbekistan

Early Beginnings: Late 19th to Early 20th Century

Archaeological research in Uzbekistan began in the late 19th century, following Russia’s colonization of Turkestan. Initial efforts were driven by Russian amateur archaeologists and local historians, who laid the groundwork for systematic studies (Vyatkina, 1926). In 1895, the Turkestan Archaeological Amateurs’ Circle was established, becoming the first organization to coordinate archaeological excavations in the region. Scholars like V.L. Vyatkin and N.I. Veselovsky conducted significant research during this period, focusing on sites such as Afrasiab and Termez (Vyatkina, 1926).

Despite these efforts, early excavations were limited in scope and lacked systematic methodologies, resulting in incomplete studies of prehistoric and early historical periods.

Nevertheless, these pioneering works provided valuable data, forming the foundation for Uzbekistan's archaeological scholarship and contributing to its historiographical development.

Soviet Era: Institutionalization and Expansion (1920s–1980s)

The formal establishment of archaeological science in Uzbekistan occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, marked by significant excavations led by prominent scholars. V.L. Vyatkin explored Afrasiab (1925, 1929–1930), B.P. Denike studied ancient Termez (1926–1927), and M.E. Masson investigated the Ohangaron Valley (1925–1928) and Ayritom (1932–1933) (Shirinov et al., 2010). Other notable excavations included A.Y. Yakubovsky's work in the Zarafshon Valley (1934, 1939), V.A. Shishkin's studies at Tali Barzu and Varakhsha (1936–1939), and S.P. Tolstov and Y. Gulomov's research in ancient Khorezm (1937–1950) (Asqarov, 1977).

The discovery of a Neanderthal skeleton in Teshiktosh Cave in 1938 was a landmark achievement, garnering global attention and highlighting Uzbekistan's significance in human prehistory (Asqarov, 2001). Excavations at sites like Tuproqqala, Varakhsha, Bolaliktepa, Afrasiab, and the palaces and temples of Samarkand and Kuva revealed advanced Sogdian and Khorezmian cultures, evidenced by the discovery of Sogdian and Khorezmian scripts (Shirinov et al., 2010). These findings underscored the high level of cultural development in ancient Uzbekistan.

The establishment of the Institute of Archaeology under the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences in 1970, based in Samarkand, marked a turning point. During the 1970s and 1980s, the institute conducted extensive excavations across all regions of Uzbekistan, uncovering significant sites such as Teshiktosh Cave, Amir Temur Cave, Obishir, Machay, Omonqoton, Khojacent, Qapchigay, and Qoratog (Asqarov, 1973). These discoveries, spanning the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Ages, provided critical insights into Uzbekistan's ancient history.

Independence Era: A New Phase of Archaeological Research

Since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, archaeology has experienced a renaissance, driven by increased state support and international collaboration. A pivotal moment was the 1998 meeting between Uzbekistan's First President, Islam Karimov, and leading historians and archaeologists, which led to a Cabinet of Ministers' resolution to enhance the activities of the Institute of History (Lex.uz, 1998). This resolution paved the way for the development of the "Concept for the Development of Archaeological Science in Uzbekistan," a two-part framework that has guided research since its inception (Shirinov, 2001).

The first part of the concept emphasizes Uzbekistan's role in global civilization, highlighting its contributions through archaeological discoveries and outlining future research priorities. The second part delineates the key stages of Uzbek statehood and civilization from ancient times to the Timurid period, identifying their characteristics, chronological boundaries, and research directions (Shirinov, 2001). The concept aims to create an accurate historical narrative, integrate Uzbekistan's history into the global context, and highlight its contributions to East-West economic and cultural interactions.

Independence-era research has elevated Uzbekistan's archaeology to international standards, enabling partnerships with leading global archaeological centers. Collaborative expeditions with scholars from Australia, the United States, China, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, France, and Japan have enriched the field, fostering knowledge exchange and advancing methodologies (Mukhamedov & Turambetov, 2020).

Bronze Age and Early State Formation

Archaeological Evidence of Early Urbanization

The Bronze Age (circa 2nd millennium BCE) was a transformative period in Uzbekistan, marked by the emergence of early urban centers and state-like structures. Archaeological studies in southern Uzbekistan, particularly at sites like Sapallitepa, Jarkutan, Qiziltepa, Kuchuktepa, and Mirshodi, have provided critical insights into the genesis and development of the Bactrian civilization (Asqarov, 1977; Ikromov, 2020). These sites, investigated by scholars like A. Asqarov, Sh. Shaydullaev, T. Shirinov, and A. Sagdullaev, reveal the processes of early urbanization and cultural development.

Sapallitepa, one of the earliest urban settlements in Uzbekistan, was fortified with rectangular mudbrick walls and contained residential quarters, utility rooms, and craft workshops (Asqarov, 1973). Located along the Amu Darya, it served as a fortified outpost protecting a river crossing. Similarly, Jarkutan, another significant Bronze Age site, is considered one of Uzbekistan's first urban ruins. Its architectural features, including fire temples and rulers' palaces, align with those of ancient Near Eastern civilizations, positioning the Sapalli culture as a new center of Near Eastern civilization (Asqarov, 2001).

These discoveries confirm that city-states emerged in southern Uzbekistan during the Bronze Age, approximately 4,000 years ago, within the framework of the Sapalli culture (Ikromov, 2020). The architectural and cultural sophistication of these sites indicates a high level of societal organization, with evidence of trade, agriculture, and specialized craftsmanship.

Cultural and Ethnic Transformations

By the late Bronze Age, southern Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, underwent significant cultural, ethnic, and religious transformations. The Sapalli, Dashtli, and Namazgah cultures, local variants of Near Eastern civilizations, faced crises and eventually disappeared from the historical stage, similar to Sumer, Harappa, and Elam (Asqarov, 1977). This period was characterized by large-scale migrations, with semi-nomadic and sedentary agricultural communities dominating Central Asia's historical regions (Hamidov, 2020). These transformations reshaped the region's cultural landscape, setting the stage for subsequent historical developments.

Contributions to National Historiography

Archaeological research has profoundly shaped Uzbekistan's national historiography by providing tangible evidence of its ancient history. The discovery of diverse material cultures, such as the Kaltaminor, Tozabogyop, and Qovunchi cultures, has enriched the understanding of Uzbekistan's prehistoric and early historical periods (Shirinov et al., 2010). Excavations have also illuminated the development of Sogdian, Khorezmian, and Bactrian civilizations, highlighting their contributions to global cultural heritage.

The "Concept for the Development of Archaeological Science in Uzbekistan" has guided efforts to integrate these findings into a cohesive historical narrative. By emphasizing Uzbekistan's role as a bridge between East and West, the concept underscores the nation's contributions to global trade, culture, and intellectual exchange (Shirinov, 2001). This approach has strengthened national identity, fostering pride in Uzbekistan's historical legacy.

International Recognition and Cultural Heritage Preservation

The global significance of Uzbekistan's archaeological heritage is reflected in its inclusion in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Sites like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Shakhrisabz are recognized for their cultural and historical value, attracting international scholars and tourists (Mavlonov & Abduvositova, 2014). The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), established by UNESCO in 1983, designated April 18 as the International Day for

Monuments and Sites, a testament to the global commitment to heritage preservation. As of today, 754 historical sites from 122 countries are included in UNESCO's list, with Uzbekistan's contributions prominently featured (Mukhamedov & Turambetov, 2020).

Preserving Uzbekistan's archaeological heritage involves systematic efforts to protect, study, and promote historical sites. This includes conducting archaeological excavations, restoring monuments, museumifying sites, and transforming them into globally recognized tourism destinations. These efforts not only safeguard cultural heritage but also educate future generations about their historical roots (Mavlonov & Abduvositova, 2014).

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite significant progress, Uzbekistan's archaeological sector faces challenges, including the need for advanced technologies, increased funding, and enhanced training for researchers. The integration of digital tools, such as 3D modeling and geographic information systems, could improve site documentation and analysis (Mukhamedov & Turambetov, 2020). Additionally, expanding international collaborations will facilitate knowledge exchange and access to cutting-edge methodologies.

Future priorities include:

- **Technological Innovation:** Adopting advanced tools for non-invasive archaeological surveys and data preservation.
- **Capacity Building:** Training young archaeologists to meet global standards and sustain the field's growth.
- **Public Engagement:** Promoting archaeological sites through educational programs and tourism to foster cultural awareness.
- **Sustainable Preservation:** Balancing heritage conservation with tourism development to prevent site degradation.

Conclusion

The development of archaeological science in Uzbekistan has profoundly shaped the nation's historiography, providing a deeper understanding of its ancient past. From the pioneering excavations of the late 19th century to the sophisticated research of the independence era, archaeology has illuminated the cultural, political, and social dynamics of Uzbekistan's history. The discovery of Bronze Age city-states, such as Sapallitepa and Jarkutan, has confirmed the region's role as a cradle of early urbanization and state formation, dating back 4,000 years (Asqarov, 2001).

State-led initiatives, such as the "Concept for the Development of Archaeological Science in Uzbekistan," have elevated the field to international standards, fostering collaborations with global archaeological centers. These efforts have strengthened national identity, highlighted Uzbekistan's contributions to global civilization, and positioned its heritage as a source of pride and inspiration. Moving forward, continued investment in technology, training, and international partnerships will ensure that Uzbekistan's archaeological heritage remains a vital link between its past, present, and future.

References:

1. Asqarov, A. A. (1973). *Sapallitepa*. Tashkent: Fan.
2. Asqarov, A. A. (1977). *Ancient agricultural culture of the Bronze Age in southern Uzbekistan*. Tashkent: Fan.
3. Asqarov, A. A. (2001). *The most ancient city*. Tashkent: Fan.



4. Asqarov, A. A., & Abdullaev, B. N. (1983). *Jarkutan*. Tashkent: Fan.
5. Hamidov, O. A. (2020). *New monuments of northern Bactria from the Kuchuk I period* (PhD dissertation abstract). Termez.
6. Ikromov, N. M. (2020). *The Bactrian civilization* (PhD dissertation abstract). Termez.
7. Lex.uz. (1998). *Resolution on improving the activities of the Institute of History of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences*. Retrieved from <https://lex.uz/docs/813643>
8. Mavlonov, U., & Abduvositova, I. (2014). *Historical-cultural heritage as a factor in understanding national ideology*. Tashkent: Academy.
9. Mukhamedov, N., & Turambetov, N. (2020). The role of the Baghistany family in the Islamic culture of the region. *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research*, 9(11), 211–218.
<https://www.indianjournals.com/ijor.aspx?target=ijor:ajmr&volume=9&issue=11&article=034>
10. Shirinov, T. Sh. (2001). *Concept for the development of archaeological science in Uzbekistan*. *Uzbekistan Historical and Cultural Heritage Journal*, 32, 4–10.
11. Shirinov, T. Sh., Berdimurodov, A. E., & Pardaev, M. H. (2010). Uzbekistan archaeology. *Uzbekistan Archaeology Journal*, 1, 4–10.
12. Vyatkina, V. L. (1926). *Afrasiab – The site of ancient Samarkand*. Tashkent: Fan.