



SCIENCE AND INTELLECTUAL LIFE IN THE QASHQADARYO OASIS FROM THE 16TH TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Utkir Rajabaliyev

Master's student at Asian University of Technology

Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of the development of scientific thought and intellectual culture in the Qashqadaryo oasis between the 16th and early 20th centuries. It explores the role of madrasahs, prominent scholars, manuscript culture, and the impact of political and social changes on scientific activities. By tracing the interplay of traditional Islamic scholarship and emerging modern influences, this study reveals the resilience and evolution of knowledge in one of Central Asia's historically rich regions.

Keywords: Qashqadaryo oasis, Central Asia, Islamic scholarship, Madrasah education, Manuscript culture, 16th–20th centuries, Intellectual life, Science and religion, Jadid movement, Educational reforms, Islamic medicine, Astronomy in Central Asia, Traditional education, Russian imperial influence, Cultural heritage.

The Qashqadaryo oasis, situated in the fertile valleys of southern Central Asia, served as a crucial cultural and scientific hub for centuries. From the 16th century, a period marked by political shifts and cultural ferment, through the dawn of the 20th century, this region nurtured a vibrant intellectual environment. This article examines how science and intellectual life evolved in Qashqadaryo, focusing on its institutions, scholars, and the sociopolitical forces shaping them.

The Qashqadaryo oasis lies at a crossroads of major trade routes and cultural currents linking Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent. During the 16th century, the region was influenced by the Shaybanid dynasty, which patronized Islamic scholarship and arts. The subsequent rise of the Ashtarkhanids and later the Manghits brought new political dynamics but sustained the cultural vibrancy.

Despite periodic invasions and wars, Qashqadaryo's cities—Karshi, Kitob, Shahrisabz—remained centers of learning. The influence of earlier great scholars from Central Asia, such as Al-Biruni, Al-Khwarizmi, and Avicenna (Ibn Sina), continued to permeate the educational and scientific traditions.

Madrasahs were the main institutions of higher education in the Islamic world, and Qashqadaryo was no exception. They offered curricula that included religious sciences (fiqh, tafsir, hadith), but also subjects like logic (mantiq), philosophy (falsafa), mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.

Notable Madrasahs and their Curricula

- **Karshi Madrasah:** One of the most prestigious madrasahs, it attracted students from across Central Asia. Its curriculum balanced traditional Islamic sciences with practical disciplines like mathematics and astronomy.

- **Kitob Madrasah:** Known for its specialization in medicine and natural sciences, it played a key role in preserving and transmitting medical knowledge from classical Islamic scholars.

Madrasahs operated through the waqf system, where charitable endowments funded teachers and students. This model ensured the sustainability of educational activities even during politically turbulent times.

Qashqadaryo produced numerous scholars who contributed both to religious sciences and to the wider realm of science.

Mulla Iskandar (18th Century)

A noted logician and astronomer, Mulla Iskandar authored several treatises that circulated widely. His works often engaged with the Aristotelian tradition, integrating Islamic philosophy with empirical observations.

Hakim Muhammad Ali (19th Century)

A physician-scholar who synthesized classical medical texts with local medicinal practices, Hakim Muhammad Ali was a pioneer in the Qashqadaryo medical tradition. His manuscripts on herbal medicine are still referenced in regional folk medicine.

The Transmission of Knowledge

Many scholars traveled between Qashqadaryo, Bukhara, Samarkand, and even further afield (e.g., Ottoman lands), facilitating a vibrant intellectual exchange that helped the region stay connected to broader Islamic scientific developments.

Manuscript Culture and Libraries

Books were precious commodities. Manuscripts were handwritten on paper or parchment and often beautifully illuminated. Copying manuscripts was both a scholarly and an artistic endeavor.

Wealthy patrons, religious leaders, and scholars amassed personal libraries that included theological texts, scientific treatises, poetry, and legal codes. Some madrasahs housed libraries accessible to students and teachers.

Topics and Language of Manuscripts

Manuscripts from Qashqadaryo covered a wide array of topics:

- Theology and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh)
- Logic and philosophy
- Astronomy and mathematics
- Medicine and pharmacology
- Poetry and history

They were typically written in Arabic (the language of science and religion), Persian (the literary lingua franca), and the local Turkic dialects.

In Qashqadaryo, as in much of the Islamic world, science and religion were deeply intertwined. Religious scholars were often the scientists, and the study of the natural world was seen as a means of understanding God's creation.

- Astronomical observations helped in determining prayer times and the Islamic calendar.

- Medical knowledge was rooted in the traditions of Hippocrates and Galen, but also enriched by Quranic and prophetic medicine.

Impact of Political and Social Changes (18th to Early 20th Century)

The political landscape shaped the intellectual life significantly:

- The decline of local khanates and eventual incorporation into the Russian Empire in the 19th century brought both challenges and new opportunities.
- Russian imperial policies introduced secular schools alongside madrasahs, creating a dual educational system.
- Reformist movements like Jadidism emerged among local intellectuals who sought to modernize education and integrate scientific knowledge from Europe while preserving Islamic identity.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, traditional madrasahs faced competition from Russian-style schools that emphasized modern sciences, languages, and technologies.

Jadid Movement

This intellectual reform movement advocated new teaching methods, curriculum reforms, and the study of modern subjects such as geography, physics, and chemistry.

Many Qashqadaryo intellectuals became involved in this movement, laying foundations for the modernization of education in the region.

Conclusion

From the 16th to the early 20th century, the Qashqadaryo oasis sustained a rich and evolving scientific culture that combined Islamic scholarship with local traditions and external influences. Madrasahs, manuscripts, and scholars formed a resilient intellectual network that preserved knowledge through turbulent times. The gradual shift towards modern educational models in the late 19th century marks a significant transformation in the intellectual life of the region. Further archival research and manuscript study will continue to illuminate the scientific heritage of Qashqadaryo and its contribution to Central Asian history.

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