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FROM THE HISTORY OF THE EXPLORATION OF THE TASHKENT OASIS

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Annotation: This article analyzes the research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s on the study of the oasis. It provides information on archaeological expeditions, historical and ethnographic research, as well as the contributions of local historians and amateur archaeologists to the study of the region. The discovered cultural monuments, the significance of excavations, and the scientific conclusions drawn from these studies are also examined.
Keywords:archaeology, history, ethnography, expedition, local historian, amateur archaeologist, cultural monument, excavation, scientific research, museum, collector, orientalist, academy of sciences, numismatics, source studies, ancient cities, archaeological findings, scientific expedition.

The physical and geographical characteristics, natural resources, and diversity of raw materials of a particular historical and cultural center ultimately played a significant role in shaping social, economic, and trade relations in the region. Initially, valuable natural resources were exploited, followed by the use of household items and materials widely employed in daily life, contributing to the local economy. These resources were also exported to neighboring areas, facilitating scientific and technological advancement and the development of scientific, cultural, historical cities as economic hubs, powerful states, and international trade relations and integration.

One such region in Central Asia with abundant natural resources and favorable geographical location is the Chach region. This region has significant economic potential due to its fertile lands in the Chirchiq and Ohangaron valleys, vast well-irrigated pastures suitable for livestock, and extensive areas along the left bank of the Syr Darya river. Since ancient times, the region has been renowned for its mining activities and craftsmanship. Precious stones and colored metals such as gold were mined in Qushbuloq, and silver was mined in Lashkerik, contributing to the region's prominence during antiquity. Turquoise mining in Ungurlikon also played a significant role in Chach's history and its position as a major hub on the Silk Road in later periods.

The archaeology of the Tashkent oasis and the history of its ancient cultures have been a subject of study for many years. Y. F. Buryakov has noted that trade between ancient Eastern countries started sporadically in the era of the first civilizations. Scholars have named roads identified from the Bronze and Early Iron Ages after the most valuable goods of that time. For traders, certain routes were identified as convenient and relatively safe, such as the Lapis Lazuli, Fur (Olmakhon), and Nephrite routes. The Lapis Lazuli route, which carried Lapis lazuli from Badakhshan to Iran and Syria, was actively used in the mid-first millennium BCE, according to archaeological evidence. During the Achaemenid period, the "Royal Road" facilitated the transportation of gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, and salt from Sogdiana and Bactria to Susa, the capital of Persia. [1, 18-45]

During the archaeological surveys and excavations carried out in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, 80s in the Tashkent oasis, burial mounds associated with the late Bronze and Early Iron Age

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pastoralist culture were discovered. Additionally, settlements with a settled agricultural lifestyle were identified. This early settled farming culture, which developed based on simple irrigation techniques, was locally known as Burghulug (introduced into the scientific community as Burganlik). To date, more than 25 villages related to this culture have been identified and studied in the Chirchik and Ohangaron river basins. One of the largest villages of the Burghuluk culture, Shostepa, was discovered in the southwestern part of modern Tashkent near one of the branches of the Yun river. Its location close to running water and fertile soil made it highly suitable for settled life.

It is well documented that the ancestors of today's Central Asian people underwent all major social, economic, cultural, and interactional processes that shaped human history. Since the post-World War II era, particularly from the 1950s and 1960s, several Paleolithic sites in Tashkent have been systematically explored, and this research is still ongoing.

According to official scientific sources, the territory of Uzbekistan is a significant historical region where some of the earliest ancestors of humankind lived. In the 1930s, for example, Soviet archaeologist A.P.Okladnikov conducted excavations in the Selungur Cave located in the Sukh district of the Fergana valley. His findings included stone tools and ashes dating back to approximately 40,000-30,00 BCE, which belonged to late Paleolithic tribal societies. [2, 38-62] Subsequently, Uzbek archaeologists, led by U.Islomov, re-excavated the site and discovered numerous Early Paleolithic stone tools and animal bones in lower cultural layers.

In his early publications on Selungur, Islomov proposed that the site may have been occupied by early humans during the first phase of the Acheulean period. By the early 2000s, international analyses concluded that the site dated back more than one million years. Selungur holds great scientific significance not only for Uzbekistan, but also for the broader Central Asian region, as it provides valuable evidence of human evolution during the earliest prehistoric eras. The discovery of human remains at the site, dated to the period of Sinanthropus, is considered one of the most significant archaeological findings. Since these remains were discovered in the Fergana Valley, they were tentatively named Fergananthropus or Fergana Man. [3, 24-25] However, experts acknowledge that this term has not yet been fully accepted by the international scientific community and further research is needed to confirm its validity.

Thus, Central Asia, in particular the Fergana Valley, was a favorable region for Paleolithic humans due to its geographic location, climatic conditions, and paleo-ecological factors. Evidence suggests that it was inhabited as early as the Pithecanthropus era, making it one of the earliest settled regions in the initial stages of the Stone Age. The discovery of human remains in Selungur was a key factor in establishing Uzbekistan as a globally recognized region where early humans originated.

Although the skeletal remains of Selungur's hominid are poorly preserved, anthropologists V.P.Alekseev and T.Q.Khodjayev demonstrated that the skull cap found on the site is morphologically very old and consistent with other early hominin finds in terms of chronology. The so-called "Fergana Man" fills an important gap in the genealogical line of human evolution between Pithecanthrops and Neanderthals on a global scale.

From the 1940s onwards, research also began in the mountainous and foothill regions of the Tashkent Oasis, which shares similar climatic conditions and natural resources with the Fergana Valley. One of these sites from the Late Early Paleolithic period, about 200,000 years old was discovered about 10-12 kilometers west of Angren, and it was named Kulbulok. In 1962 this cave site was identified and,

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a year later, renowned Uzbek paleontologist M.R.Kosimov began long-term excavations there. Decades of research have revealed that Kulbulok was not just a cave settlement, but an open-air habitation site with 33 cultural layers. These layers contain artifacts from nearly all periods of the Stone Age, including the early, middle and late Paleolithic and the Mesolithic phases. The discovery of such a stratified prehistoric site is extremely rare in Paleolithic archaeology. Kulbulok has been recognized as a unique reference point of great scientific significance for resolving chronological issues in Central Asian Paleolithic research, examining the characteristics of early stone tool crafting, and addressing problems in paleoecology. [4]

According to specialists, early Paleolithic humans lived in primitive hordes. The Middle Paleolithic period (Mousterian), approximately 120,000-100,00 BCE to 45,00-40, BCE, marks the final stage of the primitive horde era. This period, commonly referred to as the Neanderthal Age in historical studies, saw humanity's earliest ancestors spread across vast territories, beginning the process of settling new lands.

The first Neanderthals-era site in Central Asia was discovered in 1938 by A.P.Okladnikov at Teshik-Tash Cave in Baysuntau Mountains. This site has significant scientific importance for Central Asian Paleolithic studies. Excavations at the cave have uncovered numerous stone and bone tools, as well as a burial of a 9-year-old boy under a stone wall inside the shelter. The grave was surrounded by animal horns identified by paleozoologists as belonging to argali (wild sheep) and Bukhara deer that had been hunted.

The burial practice, including placing animal horns around the grave, suggests that elements of religious beliefs began to emerge during the Neanderthal period, marking the first steps towards spiritual life. Following the discovery and detailed study of the Teshik-Tash cave in Surkhandarya, several other sites from this period have been identified across Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan.

Following World War II, archaeological research and excavations intensified in Uzbekistan, including in the Tashkent oasis. Efforts were focused on discovering and studying Stone Age sites, particularly in mountainous regions such as the Chirchiq and Ohangaron river basins. In 1942, while constructing the Bozsu hydroelectric station, an engineer named N.M.Sokolov discovered stone tools accidentally. This led to excavation work being conducted by senior geology students A.V.Golovachenko and O.I.Islomov from Central Asian State University, who uncovered several more stone tools that researcher V.Parfyonov later dated to the Stone Age period. The site, named Bozsu-2 in archaeological literature, became the focus of further studies in 1956 under the leadership of renowned archaeologist and academician A. P. Okladnikov. His team discovered a variety of stone artifacts, including flakes, scrapers, blades, and finished tools. These tools, made from semi-transparent brown and yellow flint, were later analyzed using isotopic methods, dating the site to approximately 38,000 BCE. Okladnik and Islomov classified Bozu-2 as belonging to the Upper Paleolithic in terms of archaeology and the third phase of the Mirzachul geological formation. [5, 51-60]

Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, almost 15 years of intense research in the Bozsu canal basin resulted in the identification and exploration of numerous Paleolithic sites, including Bozu 1-6, Korakamish, and Zeh. Excavations at Shoymkoprik (Buz-1) and Bozu-2 between 1958 and 1960 produced approximately 250 stone tools, including multifaceted cores, blades, flakes. Among them, scrapers and knives characteristic of the Late Paleolithic era were particularly abundant [6, 38-43].

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In 1957, thanks to the initiative of G.V.Parfyonov, a group of school students went on an expedition led by him and discovered the Khojakent I cave site. This site, located near the village of Khojakent at the confluence of the Chatkal and Ugam rivers, was determined by A. P. Okladnikov and R. Kh. Suleimanov as belonging to the Middle Paleolithic (Moustérien) period. [7, 63-67]

In 1960, M.R.Qosimov and A.R.Mukhammadjonov, researchers from the Institute of History and Archaeology at the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, discovered and studied the Tusyo site in the Koratutbosh Gorge of the Kuksay Mountain Range. They identified a dump site where unusable stone artifacts and waste from toolmaking were discarded after surveying the area. More than 40 stone tools crafted from flint-bearing schist were recovered from these mountains. According to R.Z.Ibragimov's study of Stone Age archaeology in the Tashkent Oasis, these tools were large and heavy, with surface patination from natural weathering. This site likely served as a raw material quarry for Mousterian era stone tool production. [8]

Under the leadership of A.R. Mukhammadjonov, the Bustonliq archaeological team from the Uzbek Academy of Sciences conducted research in the Upper Chirchiq River basin. Their work led to the discovery of several cave and open-air settlements, including Khudoydod Vali I–IV, Todakhotin, Zakhsay and Obirahmat. In 1962, during the spring field season, Kh.N.Nasriddinov carried out excavations at Obirahmats cave settlement under the indirect supervision of A.P.Okladnikova.

The trench was 4x3 metres in size and dug to a depth of 1.1 metres, revealing four layers of cultural deposits. The finds – such as points, scrapers, retouched blades and flakes – were mainly found in the lower levels, dating them back to the Middle Palaeolithic. Many of the tools showed secondary retouch, and some of the scrapers were made using techniques typical of Late Palaeolithic period. [9, 21-27]

Since 1965, an expedition led by R.Kh.Suleimanov, a researcher at the Institute of History and Archaeology, continued investigations at the Obi-Rahmat site. During excavations, a cave was dug to a depth of 9 m, revealing 21 cultural layers and thousands of stone tools. R.Kh.Suleymanov focused on statistical analysis of stone tools, and it was observed that weapons in the middle and upper layers showed gradual improvement compared to those in lower layers. Based on this analysis, the researcher divided cultural layers into five complexes, or habitation phases, with the lower layers attributed to the final stage of Mousterian, middle layers classified as transitional from Mousterian to Early Upper Paleolithic, and stone tools from Chotqol and Paltov similar to Obirahmats. [10, 11]

Notably, Middle Paleolithic sites such as Obirahmat, Khojakent and Paltov caves and gorges in the Tashkent oasis, Kölbuloq freshwater source, Kotirbuloq, Zirabuloq and Khojamazgil springs in middle reaches of Zarafshan river (Samarkand oasis) as well as Uchtut, Qizil Nura and Omonqoton at Takhti Qaracha pass have all been identified in post-Soviet Republics of Central Asia. In total more than 50 sites have been found in these regions. [12, 26-27]

The stone tools recovered from these sites, as well as the bone artifacts, exhibit similar functions and characteristics. These assemblages include hand axes, stone knives, pointed and bladed microliths, and stone cores (nuclei). Based on the study of these layers and cave dwellings, specialists have determined that Middle Paleolithic humans specialized in a lifestyle centered on hunting and gathering (collecting wild fruits and edible plant roots). A significant contribution to these studies was made by A.P.Okladnikov and his students, including O.Islamov, M.R.Qosimov, and R. Kh.Suleimanov.

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Especially during this period, the discovery of the burial of a 9-year-old Neanderthal child in the Teshik-Tash cave became a sensational scientific breakthrough in the fields of ancient history and biology. This finding provided crucial evidence regarding human origins and migration across the Earth, scientifically disproving the then-prevalent "Eurocentric" theories, which were unscientific, false, and baseless claims.

The Ahangaran River Valley in the Tashkent Oasis was considered a region inhabited by our ancestors during the Stone Age. M. E. Masson discovered and studied paleolithic settlements in this area nearly a century ago. In particular, a stone tool made from gravel was found on the bank of the Almalyk River near the village of Jonibek in 1932. The tool had a pointed shape on one side and was assumed to be used as a weapon for hunting. [13, 10-13]

During the autumn of 1962, a group of school students led by the local amateur historian, O.M.Rostovtsev, identified several Stone Age settlements, sites and artifact locations in the basins of Kizilolma, Ghishta, and Qarabogsa in the Chatkal mountains, as well as near the village of Samarchuk. In response to these findings, a special research team from the Institute for History and Archaeology at the Academy of Sciences in Uzbekistan conducted further exploration in the eastern part of Chatkal. As a result, several stone-working workshops were found. According to specialists, these workshops were found in areas where Paleogene and Burg geological deposits had been exposed due to various natural factors. Settlements, including Kizilolma I, II, III and IV, were identified on both banks of the stream and in the area of Samarchuk village. The Ghisht I and II sites revealed weapons and tools from all periods of the Stone Age including the Neolithic [14, 21-27].

In the 1960s, thanks to the increased focus on discovering and studying Paleolithic sites in the mountainous regions of Tashkent Oasis, significant results were achieved. Particularly, during 1966-1967, the Chatkal-Qurma expedition team from the Institute of History and Archaeology discovered and excavated the Kuhisam site on the right bank of Nishbashay, near Angren, under the leadership of Yu.F.Buryakov. Specialists uncovered a large number of Middle Paleolithic stone tools under the upper layers covered by medieval cultural deposits, including flint tools, discoid and Levallois-core flakes, single- and double-strike platform cores, and blade fragments, which exhibited Levallois characteristics in their core preparation process. [15, 11-14]

According to the scientific conclusions of N.Kh.Toshkenboev’s expedition, the Kuhisim site was used as a workshop for producing stone tools and weapons, particularly for nearby Kulbulok settlement. In conclusion, during the 1950s and 1960s, nearly 20 caves, open-air settlements and stone tool workshops from ancient times were registered in the Tashkent oasis. Most of these places were studied and presented to the scientific community. The geographic distribution of these locations was concentrated in mountains and foothills, with emphasis on areas with preserved cultural layers. Chronologically, they date back to early, middle, and late Paleolithic times, with Kulbuloq’s stratigraphy confirming its importance in Central Asia’s broader cultural context.

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