



THE HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES IN THE SURKHAN OASIS REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical significance and study of cultural heritage sites located in the Surkhan oasis. Using examples such as Dalverzintepa, Fayoztepa, the Mausoleum of Hakim at-Termezi, and the Boysun traditions, it analyzes the region's tangible and intangible heritage. The paper highlights research stages from the 19th century to the present, including Soviet-era excavations and UNESCO-supported restoration projects in the independence period. It also outlines future prospects for preserving and promoting the Surkhan oasis's cultural heritage for upcoming generations.

KEYWORDS

Surkhan oasis, cultural heritage, archaeological monuments, Dalverzintepa, Hakim at-Termezi, Sultan Saodat, UNESCO, Boysun traditions, restoration, tourism.

Introduction

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматривается историческое значение объектов культурного наследия, расположенных в Сурхандарьинском оазисе, и процесс их изучения. На примере памятников Далварзинтепа, Файзтепа, мавзолея Хакима ат-Термизи и традиций Бойсунана анализируется материальное и нематериальное наследие региона. Также освещаются этапы исследований с XIX века до настоящего времени, включая советские экспедиции и реставрационные проекты, реализованные в сотрудничестве с ЮНЕСКО в годы независимости. Статья подчеркивает перспективы сохранения и популяризации культурного наследия Сурхандарьинского региона для будущих поколений.

Ключевые слова: Сурхандарьинская оазис, культурное наследие, археологические памятники, Далварзинтепа, Хаким ат-Термизи, Султан Саодат, ЮНЕСКО, Бойсунские традиции, реставрация, туризм.

Introduction

The Surkhan Oasis is located in the southeastern part of the Republic, within the Surkhan–Sherabad Valley. The name of the region originates from the Surkhan River (Persian-Tajik: “red”) that flows through the oasis. Since ancient times, the oasis has held particular importance due to its location at the crossroads of a major trade route between Central Asia and India — the Great Silk Road [1]. The region's natural geography — a combination of mountainous and oasis landscapes, along with the proximity of the Amu Darya River — has created favorable conditions for human settlement since

antiquity [2]. Archaeological findings confirm that people have inhabited this area since the Paleolithic period [3].

The Surkhan Oasis is rich in tangible cultural heritage sites, which can be classified into three groups: archaeological, architectural, and religious-ethnographic sites [4]. Archaeological monuments include the ruins of ancient cities such as Dalvarzintepa, Fayoztepa, Kampirtepa, and Karatepa [5]. Among the architectural monuments, the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum, the Sultan Saodat Complex, and the Jarkurgan Minaret stand out for their distinctive decoration and historical significance [6]. The region's rich religious heritage reflects the influences of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Islam, while the traditional folklore of Boysun has been included in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage [7].

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis serves as an important source for studying the history of Uzbekistan, its religious and cultural processes, and international intercultural relations [8]. In recent years, efforts to restore historical monuments, conduct scientific research, and promote tourism in the region have intensified [9]. This, in turn, enhances the significance of the topic at both national and international levels.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the history of the study of cultural heritage sites in the Surkhan Oasis, to summarize existing research, and to identify future research directions. Accordingly, the article examines the types of monuments, stages of their study, research methods, as well as current challenges and opportunities.

Results and Discussion

The Surkhan Oasis is one of the most ancient cultural centers in the territory of Uzbekistan. Archaeological research conducted in the region confirms that the oasis has a history spanning more than two thousand years [4]. Among the major archaeological sites of the region, Dalvarzintepa and Fayoztepa occupy a special place.

Dalvarzintepa is a large urban ruin dating back to the Kushan period. It was founded in the 1st century BCE and remained active until the 4th century CE. Since 1967, the site has been studied by an archaeological expedition led by M. E. Masson, during which gold artifacts, coins, and remnants of temples were discovered. Research findings indicate that Dalvarzintepa is one of the key sources for understanding the process of urbanization in Central Asia [3].

The Fayoztepa site dates to the period when Buddhism was widespread and was formed during the 2nd–3rd centuries CE [7]. Discoveries at this site—including a Buddhist monastery, sculptures, and wall paintings—demonstrate the cultural connections of the Surkhan Oasis with India and Eastern Turkestan. In particular, the Buddha statues from Fayoztepa show clear influences of Gandhara art, which is of great importance for studying processes of religious and cultural synthesis [7].

The Surkhan Oasis embodies architectural traditions from antiquity and the medieval period. Among the most renowned monuments are the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum and the Sultan Saodat Complex. The Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum, dating from the 9th–12th centuries, is located in the city of Termez. It was constructed over the grave of the renowned Islamic scholar and Sufi Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ali at-Termezi and represents one of the early examples of Islamic architectural style [4]. The mausoleum has undergone several restorations, first in the 1980s and later in the 2000s. Today, it is regarded as one of Uzbekistan's sacred pilgrimage sites.

The Sultan Saodat Complex, dating from the 11th–15th centuries, consists of dynastic mausoleums in Termez where rulers and religious figures from several generations were buried [3]. The architectural composition of the complex harmoniously combines brick domes, glazed tile decorations, and monumental portal elements. Studies of this monument provide valuable insight into the architectural characteristics of the Timurid period in the Surkhan Oasis [3].

Historically, the Surkhan Oasis has been a crossroads of various religious traditions. In the early periods, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism were widespread in the region, followed later by the dominance of Islam. Remains of fire temples represent the Zoroastrian period, while Buddhist-era monuments such as Fayoztepa, Karatepa, and Kampirtepa temples serve as important sources for the study of Buddhism in the region. With the spread of Islam, sacred sites such as the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum and the Sultan Saodat Complex were established.

In addition, the intangible cultural heritage of the Surkhan Oasis—the Boysun traditions—was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. The folklore, ritual songs, traditional games, and handicrafts of the Boysun people reflect the region's rich ethnographic heritage. This recognition highlights the Surkhan Oasis not only as a center of tangible heritage but also as an important source of intangible cultural heritage [7].

The first scholarly information on cultural heritage sites in the Surkhan Oasis dates back to archaeological observations conducted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the period of the Russian Empire. In the 1880s–1890s, members of the Archaeological Amateur Circle under the Turkestan Governor-Generalship compiled initial descriptions of ancient ruins and architectural monuments in the oasis [4]. During this period, prominent Orientalists and historians such as A. A. Semyonov, V. A. Vyatkin, and V. V. Bartold documented major sites in the region, including the ruins of Kampirtepa and Dalvarzintepa, from a scientific perspective [3]. As a result of these early expeditions, the presence of monuments dating to Ancient Bactria, the Kushan period, and the Islamic era in the Surkhan Oasis was established.

From the 1920s–1930s onward, archaeological research in the Surkhan Oasis began to take on a systematic character. Archaeological expeditions organized under the Committee of Sciences of the Uzbek SSR, and later the Academy of Sciences, initiated comprehensive studies of major sites in the region. In particular, the Upper Amu Darya Archaeological Expedition, launched in 1936, conducted excavations at significant monuments such as Dalvarzintepa, Fayoztepa, and Karatepa [7].

During this period, scholars such as M. E. Masson and G. A. Pugachenkova carried out in-depth studies of Kushan-period art, Buddhist monasteries, and Islamic architectural monuments in the Surkhan Oasis. Alongside archaeological excavations, efforts were also made to compile registers of cultural heritage sites and place them under state protection. In the 1970s–1980s, restoration work was undertaken at the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum and the Sultan Saodat Complex in Termez, while ethnographic sites and traditional rituals in the Boysun district were systematically studied [4]. Consequently, the Surkhan Oasis began to be widely recognized in academic literature as one of the richest archaeological and ethnographic regions within the Uzbek SSR.

Following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, a new stage began in the study and preservation of cultural heritage sites in the Surkhan Oasis. In 2002, the State Archaeological Museum of Uzbekistan was established in Termez, bringing together thousands of archaeological artifacts discovered in the region and making them accessible to researchers and visitors [3].

In recent years, heritage sites in the Surkhan Oasis have been studied in cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS. Notably, the Boysun traditions were inscribed on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 [7]. In addition, projects involving the digital documentation, 3D modeling, and restoration of monuments such as Dalvarzintepa and Fayoztepa have been implemented. In 2018, an international archaeological conference was held in Termez, where new discoveries and research methodologies related to the Surkhan Oasis were discussed.

Today, the Surkhan Oasis remains one of the most important academic centers for the study of Uzbekistan's history. Research on the region's ancient urban ruins and architectural monuments plays a crucial role not only in understanding national history but also in illuminating cultural interactions between Central Asia and India [4].

Conclusion

Cultural heritage sites located in the Surkhan Oasis constitute unique sources that illuminate some of the most ancient and significant stages in the history of Central Asia. Archaeological monuments such as Dalvarzintepa, Fayoztepa, and Kampirtepa provide insight into the political and cultural development of the oasis during the Kushan period, while architectural monuments such as the Hakim at-Termezi Mausoleum and the Sultan Saodat Complex represent outstanding examples of Islamic-period architecture. The Boysun traditions and other ethnographic heritage elements reflect the region's rich intangible cultural legacy.

From a historical perspective, the study of cultural heritage sites in the Surkhan Oasis has progressed through several stages: initial observations in the 19th–20th centuries, large-scale expeditions during the Soviet period, and international scholarly cooperation in the years following independence. In particular, projects implemented in collaboration with UNESCO and other international organizations during the independence period have played a crucial role in the restoration and promotion of these monuments.

Nevertheless, a number of challenges remain. Insufficient financial resources, the impact of natural disasters, and limitations in human and technological capacities continue to hinder effective heritage preservation efforts. At the same time, promising directions such as digital documentation, 3D reconstruction, and the expansion of tourism potential offer opportunities not only to safeguard this heritage but also to promote it on an international scale.

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