

The Study of the Early Medieval History of Khorezm in English-Language Literature: Approaches and Perspectives

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Abstract

The Khorezm oasis, strategically located along the Great Silk Road, was a major hub of ancient and early medieval Central Asian civilization. The Afrighid dynasty, which ruled the region from the late 3rd century until the late 10th century (995 AD), represents a crucial transitional period where indigenous Zoroastrian traditions gradually intersected with early Islamic culture. This article aims to critically analyze the dynamics, conceptual shifts, and key achievements of studying the early medieval history of Khorezm specifically the Afrighid period within English-language (Western) historiography. The research employs a chronological-problematic framework, historical-comparative approaches, and detailed historiographical analysis. It systematically evaluates the works of British, American, and Australian researchers spanning from the late 19th to the early 21st century. The scientific conclusions of these Western scholars, widely published in authoritative academic platforms such as the Encyclopaedia of Islam, Encyclopaedia Iranica, and Iranica Antiqua, are comparatively studied alongside the established paradigms of Soviet archaeology (e.g., S.P. Tolstov's Khorezm Expedition) and modern Uzbek national historiography.

Keywords: Khorezm, Afrighid Dynasty, English Historiography, E. Sachau, C.E. Bosworth, Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE), Iranica Antiqua.

1. Introduction

The Khorezm oasis, one of the most ancient and culturally rich regions of Central Asia, has consistently been a focal point for global orientalists due to its strategic location, complex irrigation networks, and unique statehood traditions. The period of the Afrighid dynasty, which ruled Khorezm from the 4th century until 995 AD, represents a pivotal transitional era where ancient traditions intersected with early Islamic culture. The urbanization of this period (characterized by systems of fortresses and rural estates/koshks), the distinct Khorezmian language and calendar, and its socio-political structure (the institution of the Khorezmshahs) hold significant importance in regional history [1].

While the early medieval history of Khorezm has been extensively studied in Soviet and Uzbek national historiography (S.P. Tolstov, Y. Gulyamov, I. Jabborov, B. Vainberg, M. Mambetullaev, G. Khojayov, S. Baratov, etc.), the interpretation of these processes in Western,

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particularly English-language historiography, has not been sufficiently highlighted as a specific, comprehensive object of historiographical research [2]. It is impossible to write a fully objective national history without assimilating foreign sources and literature that analyze the history of global civilizations on a broad scale. From this perspective, analyzing the stages of study, methodological approaches, and achievements regarding the history of the Afrighid dynasty in English-language historiography is of urgent importance for the contemporary historical science of Uzbekistan [3].

2. Research Method

Modern methods of historiography were utilized to conduct this research. The primary methodological foundation is the chronological-problematic approach. This method allowed for the categorization of English-speaking scholars' research on Khorezm into temporal stages and the identification of priority scientific issues (language, religion, urbanization, dualism of power) within each stage. Additionally, through the historical-comparative method, the conclusions of Western scholars were compared with the results of the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (KHAE) led by S.P. Tolstov and contemporary local research conducted during the years of independence. The object of study includes translations of written sources, monographs, and scientific articles published in the UK, USA, and Australia from the late 19th to the first quarter of the 21st century, particularly those in authoritative international publications such as the Encyclopaedia of Islam, Encyclopaedia Iranica, and Iranica Antiqua (IA).

3. Results and Discussion

The conceptual study of the Afrighid dynasty's history in English-language historiography can be divided into three major periods. These periods are directly linked to the development of global oriental and archaeological sciences.

First Stage: Textology and the Introduction of Written Sources into Foreign Languages (Late 19th – Early 20th Century).

The Western world acquired its first reliable and systematic information about the early medieval history of Khorezm through translations of Islamic-era written sources. The works of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, an encyclopedic scholar and a native of Khorezm, played a decisive role in this regard [4].

The initial fundamental step in English-language historiography regarding Afrighid chronology and pre-Islamic culture was taken by Eduard Sachau, a German orientalist who worked in Great Britain and published in English. In 1879, he translated and published Al-Biruni's "Al-Athar al-Baqqiya 'an al-Qurun al-Khaliyya" in London under the title "The Chronology of Ancient Nations" [5].

Sachau did not merely provide a translation; in his detailed introduction and commentaries, he introduced the Western academic community to the list of Afrighid kings, the Khorezmian calendar, ancient festivals, and the tragic events surrounding the destruction of Khorezmian written culture and scholarship following Qutayba ibn Muslim's conquest (712 AD). Sachau's work subsequently served as the cornerstone for all European scholars studying the history of Khorezm [6].

Second Stage: Linguistic Analysis and the Study of Socio-Political History (Mid-20th Century – Late 20th Century).

By the mid-20th century, the discovery of ancient Khorezmian coins and documents written in the Khorezmian script (from Topraq-kala and other sites) by the KHAEE led by S.P. Tolstov triggered an explosion of interest in Khorezm abroad, particularly among linguists and Iranologists in the English-speaking academic environment.

During this period, Walter Bruno Henning, a scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, made an unparalleled contribution to the study of the ancient Khorezmian language. His works on the dictionary and grammar of the language, particularly his 1955 study titled "The Khwarezmian Language," revealed the ethno-linguistic profile of Afrighid society [7]. Henning's research was continued by his student D.N. MacKenzie, who analyzed the vocabulary of the Khorezmian language that survived into the Islamic period through his work "The Khwarezmian Element in the Qunyat al-munya" [8].

Concurrently, issues of socio-political history and the region's integration into Islamic civilization were deeply researched by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, one of Great Britain's most prominent orientalist. Bosworth's extensive fundamental articles such as "Afrighids," "Khwarazm," and "Khwarazm-Shahs" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd Edition) and *Encyclopaedia Iranica* remain key reference sources in Western universities today [9]. In his analyses, Bosworth logically substantiated the decline of the Afrighid dynasty using political and geographical factors. He highlighted the elevated role of the dihqans (rural nobility) during the Afrighid period, the relatively limited power of the king (Khorezmshah), the economic stagnation of the capital Kath, and the subsequent overthrow of the Afrighid dynasty by the emirs of Northern Khorezm (Gurganj) — the Ma'munids — who had turned their city into a major commercial hub by the end of the 10th century [10].

Another major specialist, Vladimir Minorsky, explained the economic and political rivalry between the cities of Khorezm, particularly Kath and Gurganj (the crisis of the Afrighid period), in his commentaries while translating the anonymous 10th-century geographical text "Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World" [11]. Furthermore, the works of Soviet scholars such as G.A. Pugachenkova and B.A. Litvinsky were translated into English (through projects like *Antiquity and Survival* and the *UNESCO History of Civilizations of Central Asia*), bringing the art, architecture (koshks), and ossuaries of the Afrighid period to Western readers.

Third Stage: Multidisciplinary Archaeological Approach and the Activities of the KAE (Late 20th Century – Present).

Following the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the practice of organizing joint archaeological expeditions with local and foreign scholars became widespread. The activities of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE), involving scholars from the University of Sydney (Australia), marked a revolutionary turning point in English-language historiography concerning the study of ancient and early medieval defensive structures, art, and architecture of the Khorezm oasis [12].

Within the KAE framework, scholars such as Svend Helms, Alison Betts, and Fiona Kidd conducted research in collaboration with Uzbek scholars (V. Yagodin, F. Khojaniyazov) at numerous sites in the Republic of Karakalpakstan (ancient right-bank Khorezm), including Akchakhan-kala and Kazakl'i-yatkan. Their findings were disseminated globally through the journal *Iranica Antiqua* and international monographs.

From the perspective of the Afrighid period, Western scholars (particularly F. Kidd) conducted deep analyses of early medieval Khorezmian mural paintings, terracotta figurines, and clothing traditions [13]. Diverging from earlier Russian/Soviet historiography, KAE representatives advanced the following approaches:

Rejection of the "Isolation" Theory: During S. Tolstov's era, Afrighid Khorezm (4th-8th centuries) was viewed as a "ruralized" region where ancient cities had declined, leaving the area in isolation. Based on new findings, Western scholars (S. Helms, A. Betts) and recent Uzbek archaeologists argue that Khorezm was an integral part of the Great Silk Road during this period. Khorezmian merchants controlled international trade networks stretching from China to the Volga region and Byzantium.

Expanded Civilizational Context: Foreign scholars evaluate Afrighid culture as a "buffer" (intermediary) zone between Iran (Sassanids) and the Turkic Khaganates. In Western methodology, the synthesis of Zoroastrian elements and nomadic (Turkic-steppe) traditions in Khorezmian art, as well as the evolution of its urban planning, are treated as a single, interconnected chain.

The historiographical analyses conducted demonstrate that a profound evolutionary leap has occurred in the representation of Khorezm's early medieval (Afrighid) history in English-language literature. While early orientalists (E. Sachau, V. Minorsky) primarily viewed historical processes from the outside—relying almost exclusively on Arab-Persian geographic and historical compilations—the subsequent generation of scholars (W. Henning, C.E. Bosworth) managed to penetrate the internal socio-political fabric of the region.

A major point of discussion in modern Western historiography is the critical re-evaluation of political power dynamics during the Afrighid period. C.E. Bosworth's comprehensive analysis of the dihqan class challenged the traditional view of a highly centralized Afrighid state. Instead, English-language literature reveals a highly fragmented political landscape where the local landed nobility (dihqans) wielded significant socio-economic and military autonomy, often rendering the authority of the central Khorezmshah nominal. This dualism of power is now considered the primary internal factor that led to the vulnerability of the Afrighids during the Arab conquests and their eventual overthrow by the Ma'munids [14].

Furthermore, contemporary English-language research represents a significant departure from the rigid socio-economic determinism characteristic of Soviet archaeology. S.P. Tolstov's fundamental works categorized the Afrighid period primarily through the Marxist lens of a transition from antiquity (slave-owning society) to feudalism. This Soviet paradigm heavily emphasized the "ruralization" of the oasis, arguing that monumental urban centers suffered a severe decline in favor of fortified rural estates (koshks). In stark contrast, Western scholars, utilizing empirical data from the KAE, strongly argue against this narrative of catastrophic urban decline. The extensive excavations at sites like Kazakl'i-yatkan and Akchakhan-kala provide compelling evidence of continuous, vibrant urban life, monumental architecture, and sophisticated artistic traditions that thrived well into the early Middle Ages [15].

The discussion surrounding Khorezmian art has also been radically redefined in Western literature. Scholars like Fiona Kidd and Alison Betts have demonstrated that the figurative art of early medieval Khorezm—particularly its murals and terracotta figurines—indicates a unique Chorasmian artistic milieu. Rather than being isolated, this art synthesized local Zoroastrian motifs with broader Hellenistic legacies and nomadic Steppe influences. This cultural hybridity suggests that Afrighid Khorezm was highly receptive and innovative, serving as a cultural melting pot rather than a stagnant periphery [16].

Finally, the conceptualization of Khorezm's integration into a "Global Network" marks a major theoretical advancement in Western historiography. Western archaeologists and historians emphasize that the Afrighid state was an active trans-regional commercial facilitator. Numismatic evidence and the widespread distribution of Khorezmian silver bowls and artifacts

into the Volga-Ural region, Eastern Europe, and along the Silk Road toward China demonstrate that Khorezmian merchants were key operators in Eurasian trade. This perspective effectively dismantles the long-held "isolation" stereotype, proving that the Afrighid period was characterized by proactive economic adaptation and international engagement, actively shaping the broader geopolitical landscape of early medieval Central Asia.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the early medieval history of Khorezm and the Afrighid dynasty possesses a solid, analytical foundation in Western, specifically English-language, historiography. The works of foreign authors are distinguished by their objectivity, their analysis of issues within a broader Eurasian geopolitical context, and their ability to complexly synthesize linguistic, numismatic, and archaeological data.

One of the primary tasks facing modern Uzbek historical science is to deeply analyze materials published abroad (especially in journals like *Iranica Antiqua* and *Journal of Asian History*), to create historiographical monographs, and to actively integrate the experiences of international expeditions like the KAE into national schools of archaeology and source studies. This integration will ensure that Khorezmian civilization attains an even more prestigious position in the global scientific arena.

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