

THE ROLE OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENTS IN THE KHOREZM OASIS

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Abstract. *This thesis examines the settlement patterns and economic activities of prehistoric communities in the northern regions of the Khorezm oasis, with particular emphasis on the role of natural and geographical factors. Special attention is given to the Sultan Uvais Mountain as a key source of lithic raw materials and its importance for hunter-gatherer groups during the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. Based on the results of archaeological excavations conducted in the Akchadarya basin, including the Jonbos settlement complex, the study analyzes dwelling remains, ceramic artifacts, stone and bone tools, as well as evidence of hunting and fishing activities. The findings of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition carried out from the 1930s to the 1960s demonstrate the significant role of the Khorezm oasis in the development of early human societies in Central Asia.*

Keywords: *Khorezm oasis, Sultan Uvais Mountain, Akchadarya basin, prehistoric settlements, Paleolithic, Neolithic, hunter-gatherers, stone tools, pottery, Khorezm expedition.*

Introduction. The study of early human settlement in Central Asia is closely connected with the availability of natural resources, favorable environmental conditions, and geographical features. One of the key factors that influenced the distribution and development of prehistoric communities was access to stone raw materials suitable for tool production. In this regard, the Khorezm oasis occupies a special place among the historical and geographical regions of the Aral Sea basin.

Archaeological and geographical research shows that the Khorezm oasis was settled later than some neighboring regions, particularly the Ustyurt Plateau. This delay was largely due to differences in relief and natural resources. While Ustyurt is characterized by open clay plains and limited mineral sources, the northern part of the Khorezm oasis, especially the Sultan Uvais mountain area, provided early human groups with essential lithic raw materials.

This thesis aims to analyze the role of the Sultan Uvais mountain mining resources, the development of Neolithic settlements in the Akchadarya basin, and the results of long-term archaeological research conducted by the Khorezm expedition. Special attention is paid to settlement patterns, material culture, and subsistence strategies of prehistoric populations in the Khorezm oasis.

Analysis. Archaeological evidence indicates that during the period of 40–35 thousand years ago, hunting communities actively used the mining and stone resources of the Sultan Uvais mountain region. Favorable natural conditions and the presence of accessible raw materials made this area a major source for stone tool production. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the Khorezm oasis was settled later than the Ustyurt Plateau, which lacks mountainous formations and consists mainly of open loamy surfaces.

It is particularly noteworthy that Sultan Uvais Mountain does not reach the altitude of major mountain systems such as the Pamir or the Tien Shan. Its height is only 471 meters, and in terms of geographical appearance, it resembles the Ustyurt Plateau. Nevertheless, despite its relatively low elevation, the Sultan Uvais mountain area played a crucial role in supplying prehistoric populations of northern Khorezm with stone raw materials. This factor significantly influenced the formation of early settlement networks in the region.

From the late 1930s, the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition began systematic archaeological surveys and excavations along the right bank of the Amu Darya, particularly in the southern part of the Akchadarya basin. As a result of these investigations, a number of important Neolithic sites were identified and recorded. One of the most significant among them is the Jonbos-4 settlement.

Excavations at the Jonbos-4 site revealed hand-made, decorated ceramic vessels of small size, as well as boat-shaped pottery fragments. These artifacts are dated to the 4th–3rd millennia BC. In 1940, further excavations at the site uncovered additional samples of hand-made decorated pottery, confirming the long-term occupation of the settlement. The ceramic assemblage is characterized by a variety of shapes, predominantly jar-like forms, decorated with straight, vertical, diagonal, dotted, and wavy lines. The bases of the vessels are pointed, the walls gradually expand upward, and near the rim narrow again to form a circular mouth.

The analysis of faunal remains from the cultural layers of Jonbos-4 shows that fish bones constituted approximately 86% of the total findings. According to the studies conducted by G.V. Nikolsky, D.V. Radakov, and D. Lebedev, the most frequently hunted fish species included carp, pike, and catfish. These data indicate that fishing played a dominant role in the subsistence economy of Neolithic communities. Interestingly, this tradition has been preserved among the modern population of the Khorezm region, where carp and pike remain staple food products, while catfish is consumed in smaller quantities.

Between 1945 and 1950, archaeological excavations were conducted at the Jonbos-4 and Jonbos-5 settlements. As a result, numerous stone tools and richly decorated ceramic artifacts were discovered. Alongside pottery, stone and bone tools such as arrowheads, scrapers, polished axes, bone awls, stone drills, and other everyday

implements were identified. These findings indicate a well-developed material culture and a diversified economic activity based on hunting, fishing, and gathering.

In 1945, as part of fieldwork in the Akchadarya basin, additional settlements including Jonbos-5, 11, 12, 14, and 18 were registered and included in the scientific research plan. Further archaeological surveys carried out in 1954 and 1955 expanded the scope of research to the eastern and southern parts of the Akchadarya basin. Neolithic artifacts were discovered at sites such as Kokcha, Qurgoshin, Kunyak-Jingeldi, Kaundi-1, Jingeldi-6, and Kaundi-3 and 4. However, archaeological sources provide limited information about hunter-gatherer settlements in the northern areas of the basin.

In 1955, archaeological surveys conducted in the northern Akchadarya basin led to the identification of several new Neolithic sites. These included Taji-Qazghan-2, 3, 5, 6, 6a, 8, and 14 in the Tajikazghan ravine; Qurali-1 in the Qurali ravine; and Baraktam-10, Kamisty, and Uch-Tagan settlements. Excavations at these sites yielded stone tools and decorated pottery characteristic of the Neolithic period.

From 1957 to 1961, the Khorezm expedition continued its investigations in the southern Akchadarya basin and the Sultan Uvais mountain region. Excavations at sites such as Dingildji-6, Qavat-5, Qurgoshin-G and D, Qavat-7, and Qavat-8 resulted in the discovery of stone and bone tools, remains of wild animals, bird eggshells, and fish bones. These materials demonstrate that Neolithic communities actively exploited local natural resources and used a wide range of tools to meet their daily needs.

Since 1945, the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition has involved specialists from various scientific disciplines. Research themes were clearly defined, including S.P. Tolstov's archaeological studies, A.S. Kes's research on geomorphology and paleogeography, B.V. Andrianov's work on ancient irrigation systems, Ya.G. Gulyamov's studies on irrigation history, A.V. Vinogradov's research on the Neolithic period, and M.A. Itina's studies on the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The results of these studies were published in numerous scientific works and remain fundamental sources for the study of the Khorezm oasis.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the archaeological and geographical evidence demonstrates that the settlement of the Khorezm oasis was closely connected with the availability of natural resources, particularly stone raw materials from the Sultan Uvais mountain region. Although this area does not possess high mountain ranges, it played a crucial role in supplying prehistoric populations with essential resources for tool production.

The results of long-term archaeological research in the Akchadarya basin reveal a dense network of Neolithic settlements characterized by developed pottery traditions, diverse stone and bone tools, and a subsistence economy based primarily on fishing, hunting, and gathering. The findings of the Khorezm expedition significantly

contribute to our understanding of early human adaptation to natural environments in Central Asia.

Overall, the Khorezm oasis represents an important center of prehistoric human activity, where natural conditions and human ingenuity combined to create stable and long-lasting settlement systems. Continued research in this region remains essential for reconstructing the early stages of human history in the Aral Sea basin.

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