

The Question of Population Migration to The Southern Khorezm Oasis and Its Interpretation

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Abstract: This article examines one of the most debated problems in the ancient history of Central Asia – the migration of a farming population to the southern Khorezm oasis in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya and the scholarly interpretation of this process. The study is based on a comparative analysis of three groups of sources: ancient Greek, Roman and Achaemenid written records together with the Avesta; medieval local narratives, above all the works of Abu Rayhan Beruni and al-Muqaddasi, as well as folk legends preserved in the oasis; and the results of archaeological research carried out in the region from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. The analysis shows that in the early sixth century BCE the south-eastern part of the Khorezm oasis underwent a fundamental economic transformation that had no roots in the preceding Amirabad and Kuyusay cultures of the Early Iron Age. Fortified settlements, wheel-made pottery production and irrigated agriculture appeared within a short period, which most researchers explain by the arrival of a population group from the southern agricultural regions. The article systematises the principal hypotheses concerning the original homeland of the Chorasmians (the Merv and Herat regions, the Serakhs oasis on the middle Tejen, the area between Margiana and Bactria) and the causes of their migration (the campaigns of Cyrus II, the taxation policy of Darius I, hydrological changes in the Akes river basin). It is concluded that the archaic culture of southern Khorezm was formed on the basis of the interaction of several cultural traditions brought by migrants and the local pastoral population, and that the two-stage migration model, dating the main wave to the late seventh – sixth centuries BCE, best corresponds to the combined evidence of the written and archaeological sources.

Keywords: Ancient Khorezm; southern Khorezm oasis; migration; Chorasmians; “Greater Khorezm”; Amirabad culture; Kuyusay culture; Khumbuztepa; Khazarasp; Achaemenids; urbanisation.

Introduction: Scholars who have studied the ancient history of Khorezm have traditionally paid attention first of all to the geographical name of the region and its meaning, and at the same time to the question of where the population possessing a highly developed culture originally came from. This question remains one of the most topical and controversial issues in the historiography of the lower Amu Darya region.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, foreign scholars who analysed the evidence of ancient Greek and Roman authors, Achaemenid royal inscriptions and the Avesta put forward the view that the Chorasmians had not originally lived in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya: they had first inhabited more southerly regions and, for some reason, abandoned their homeland and

moved to the lower Amu Darya [1]. In Greek and Roman written sources the population is recorded as “Chorasmians”. Analysing the statement of Scylax and Hecataeus that “the Chorasmians live to the east of the Parthians”, Herodotus’ account of the Akes river and the dam built on a mountain stream, the composition of the sixteenth satrapy of the Achaemenid state, and the note of Stephanus of Byzantium that “they have a city called Chorasamia”, researchers concluded that the Chorasmians initially lived east of Parthia [2]. On this basis the hypothesis of “Greater Khorezm” was developed, which has now been the subject of scholarly debate for more than a century; in the course of this debate arguments both supporting and rejecting the hypothesis have been advanced.

The relevance of the problem is determined by the fact that the written sources record only the territory inhabited by a particular ethnic group – the Chorasmians – while the question of when, from where and why this population moved to the lower Amu Darya can be resolved only by combining the written evidence with archaeological data. The aim of the present study is therefore to bring together the written, narrative-legendary and archaeological sources on the migration of population groups to the southern Khorezm oasis, to systematise the existing scholarly interpretations, and to assess which reconstruction of the migration process corresponds best to the totality of the available evidence.

METHODS

The source base of the study consists of three groups of materials. The first group comprises ancient written sources: the works of Hecataeus of Miletus, Scylax of Caryanda, Herodotus, Athenaeus and Stephanus of Byzantium; the Achaemenid royal inscriptions of the reign of Darius I (521–486 BCE), including the Behistun rock inscription and the palace inscriptions of Persepolis and Susa; and the geographical information of the Avesta. The second group includes medieval local sources and oral tradition: Abu Rayhan Beruni's "Chronology of Ancient Nations" ("Monuments of Past Generations"), the geographical work of the tenth-century Arab geographer Shams al-Din al-Muqaddasi, and folk legends of the Khorezm oasis recorded, in particular, by I. Jabbarov [3; 4]. The third group consists of the published results of archaeological investigations conducted in the lower Amu Darya from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, above all the materials of the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition (S. P. Tolstov, M. A. Itina, A. V. Vinogradov), the studies of B. I. Vainberg on the Kuyusay culture, and the excavations of S. R. Baratov, S. B. Bolelov, M. Mambetullaev and others at the sites of Khumbuztepa, Khazarasp, Meshekli and Uch-Uchoq [5–8].

The study employs the comparative-historical method, which makes it possible to juxtapose the accounts of the ancient authors with the Achaemenid epigraphic evidence and the local narrative tradition; the method of historiographical analysis, used to systematise the hypotheses advanced by I. Gershevitch, W. Tarn, F. Altheim, W. Henning, V. M. Masson, B. Gafurov, B. I. Vainberg, I. V. Pyankov, A. Askarov, S. R. Baratov, E. V. Rtveladze and N. A. Egamberdieva; and the method of comparative typological analysis of archaeological material – architecture, fortification, pottery technology and irrigation systems – which allows the material culture of southern Khorezm to be compared with that of the Serakhs oasis, Margiana, Parthia and Bactria. The retrospective method and elements of

quantitative (chronological) analysis are applied to Beruni's calendar data on the settlement of Khorezm.

RESULTS

1. The pre-migration cultural landscape of the lower Amu Darya. Archaeological research has established that in the tenth – eighth centuries BCE the Akchadarya delta of the Amu Darya (the present-day Tortkul and Beruni districts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan) was occupied by the Amirabad culture. This culture was studied in detail by S. P. Tolstov, who argued – with the support of other archaeologists – that its creators were originally pastoral tribes of the Volga–Ural region who moved into the Amu Darya basin at the beginning of the first millennium BCE [7]. The Amirabad population lived in light dwellings and semi-dugouts in the southern Akchadarya basin, practising pasture-based animal husbandry and floodplain agriculture; their pottery was hand-made and decorated with painted ornament. In the eighth – seventh centuries BCE the water supply of the southern Akchadarya channel diminished and the channel began to dry up, which undermined the traditional economy. As a result the Amirabad population split into two groups: the purely pastoral part moved up the Akchadarya, dispersing to the north-east, south-east, west and south – their sites have been identified in the northern Akchadarya, on the left bank of the Amu Darya (the site of Kanga-kyr 2) and in the lower Syr Darya – while the agricultural part shifted towards the lower Akchadarya and the left bank of the Amu Darya, where their traces have been found in the Tortkul and Beruni districts and in north-western Turkmenistan [8]. It is significant that similarities have been established between the building techniques and pottery of the Amirabad site of Janbas-7 and the site of Kyuzeli-gyr.

2. The Kuyusay culture and the nomadic pastoralists. In the eighteenth – seventeenth centuries BCE an increase in the water flow of the Sarykamysh channel of the Amu Darya attracted numerous tribes to the area. In the 1980s B. I. Vainberg identified and investigated there the Kuyusay culture of pastoralists of the eighth – sixth centuries BCE, whose material culture differed from that of the Amirabad population; researchers derive the Kuyusay culture from pastoral tribes of the lower Syr Darya [9]. Its bearers lived in light dwellings and semi-dugouts, and their economy combined animal husbandry, floodplain agriculture and metal-working. The sites of the culture include the settlements of Kuyusay-2, Sakar-chaga, Yassy-gyr and Tarym-kaya, the Tumek-Kichidjik burial mounds and the Tarym-kaya cemetery. Pottery was hand-made and fired in single-tier kilns, although wheel-made vessels resembling the Yaz II type have also been found, which researchers interpret as the result of contacts with the

southern agricultural communities. In the south-eastern part of the oasis – the territory of southern Khorezm proper – nomadic pastoralists were present at the same time: their burial mounds of the seventh – fifth centuries BCE have been investigated at Meshekli and Uch-Uchoq, and their funerary structures differ from those of the Kuyusay culture [10]. The Tuyamuyun basin served these nomads as a wintering ground. The Meshekli mounds are stone-capped, up to 150 cm high and about 15 m in diameter, arranged in groups of three to seven at intervals of 1–3 km and stretching for up to 10 km from north to south along the Meshekli bay; fragments of pottery of the Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, antiquity and the Middle Ages have been collected around them [11].

3. The transformation of the early sixth century BCE. Against this background, the changes recorded for the beginning of the sixth century BCE appear abrupt. Archaeological investigations have shown that at this time the region underwent a fundamental economic transformation that differed completely from the preceding Amirabad and Kuyusay traditions. In southern Khorezm a pottery-making centre arose; a fortress with defensive walls was built; all pottery was now wheel-made and, as researchers note, was produced for exchange as well as for local use; the principal occupation of the population was agriculture. Within a short period southern Khorezm turned into an economically developed area, and – crucially – the local antecedent cultures exerted no influence on the formation of the new culture. The majority of researchers therefore explain this transformation by the arrival of a population from another region.

4. The evidence of Khumbuztepa and Khazarasp. The migration-driven beginning of urbanisation in southern Khorezm has been studied primarily on the basis of the sites of Khazarasp and Khumbuztepa. O. A. Vishnevskaya, M. Mambetullaev, V. N. Yagodin, S. B. Bolelov and S. R. Baratov date the foundation of Khumbuztepa to the end of the seventh – beginning of the sixth century BCE [12]. S. B. Bolelov, analysing the manufacturing technique of the Khumbuztepa pottery, likewise assigns its earliest phase to the late seventh – early sixth century BCE [13]. In the lowest cultural layer of Khumbuztepa the remains of a dugout, a sanctuary and a pottery workshop have been identified; after a certain time these structures were levelled and large dwellings and a new pottery workshop were erected above them. Comparative analysis has revealed that the red-slipped necks of vessels from Yazdepe II in the Serakhs oasis find parallels in the Khorezm material; that the construction of irrigation canals in the Tejen–Herirud region resembles that of southern Khorezm; that the defensive walls of Khazarasp are comparable

to those of Ulug-depe; and that the kilns discovered in Margiana are similar in construction to those of Khumbuztepa. At the same time, the Khumbuztepa assemblage differs from the material of northern Bactria, Margiana and Sogd [14]. It has also been established that objects resembling the material culture of Margiana, Parthia and Bactria of the sixth century BCE occur in southern Khorezm, which indicates that the archaic culture of the region took shape through the interaction of several cultural traditions [14]. Throughout this period the nomadic pastoralists of Meshekli and Uch-Uchoq continued to inhabit the neighbouring territories, and the newcomers appear to have maintained peaceful relations with them [15].

DISCUSSION

The local narrative tradition. The memory of the arrival of the Khorezmians in the lower Amu Darya is preserved in the local sources and legends. In the “Chronology of Ancient Nations” Abu Rayhan Beruni states that the Khorezmian era began “from the time when people first came and settled in Khorezm”, although he does not specify where they came from [3]. He further reports the arrival of Siyavush, son of the Iranian king Kay Kavus, and the rule of Siyavush’s son Kay Khusraw over the Turkic kings; from this it follows that the first settlers arrived before the Siyavushid dynasty and that the Khorezmians were subordinate to the Iranian kings. A legend recorded by I. Jabbarov tells of an army that rebelled against an unjust king, was exiled to a desolate riverine land overgrown with thickets, transformed it into a flourishing country, and was finally pardoned by the king, who ordered its people to be called Khorezmians [4]. A parallel version is given by the tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasi, in whose account the eastern king exiled some four hundred subjects to a place one hundred farsakhs from inhabited lands; when his envoys later asked the exiles their words for meat (“khar”) and firewood (“razm”), the king granted them the territory under the name Khwarazm [16]. Both versions of the legend agree that the oasis and its people received their name some time after the arrival of a migrant group. This is consistent with the observation of researchers of the etymology of “Khorezm” that the term “Huvarazmish” of the Achaemenid inscriptions began to be applied to the lower Amu Darya precisely in the Achaemenid period.

The chronological problem of Beruni’s account. Beruni’s dating of the migration is itself debatable. He writes that people came to Khorezm 980 years before Alexander, and that Kay Khusraw’s arrival and his rule over the Turkic kings occurred 92 years after the settlement of Khorezm [17]. Since researchers take the

“era of Alexander” to begin with Seleucid rule in 312 BCE [18], mathematical treatment of these figures places the initial settlement at the beginning of the thirteenth century BCE and the start of Kay Khusraw’s reign in the same century. Archaeologically, however, no material remains of this period have been found in southern Khorezm: in the fourteenth – thirteenth centuries BCE the region of Khorezm was inhabited by the bearers of the Tazabagyab and Suyargan cultures [5] [6], whose territory lay not in southern Khorezm but along the Akchadarya channel, in the present-day Republic of Karakalpakstan. Beruni’s chronology therefore cannot be reconciled directly with the archaeological record of southern Khorezm and most probably reflects a telescoped memory of successive population movements in the lower Amu Darya as a whole.

Hypotheses on the homeland and causes of the migration. Although the arrival in southern Khorezm of a population possessing an agricultural culture and highly developed crafts is well substantiated, there is no consensus on when this group migrated and from which territory. I. Gershevitch, W. Tarn, F. Altheim, W. Henning, V. M. Masson, B. Gafurov, B. I. Vainberg and I. V. Pyankov held that the Chorasmians originally lived in the Merv or Herat regions and that the principal cause of their migration was the Achaemenid conquest [19] [20] [21]; some researchers connect it specifically with the campaign of Cyrus II against Margiana. A. Askarov, by contrast, argues that the Khorezmians left the Herat valley for southern Khorezm out of discontent with the taxation policy of Darius I [22]. He bases his argument on the “Periplus” of Scylax, an official at the court of Darius I, whose data were later used by Hecataeus and Herodotus. Scylax was sent to survey the territories subject to the Achaemenids and to establish their taxable capacity, and explored the Indus region in 519–513 BCE in the course of a seven-year journey; it is on his information that the ancient authors located the Chorasmians east of the Parthians. Accordingly, in the last decade of the sixth century BCE – after 519 BCE – the Khorezmians were compelled to move to southern Khorezm, settling in lands that were unoccupied by other tribes but suitable for agriculture. Askarov adduces a further cause from Herodotus’ account of the dam on the Akes river: as a result of the dam the waters were diverted towards the Herat valley, the land of the Chorasmians was flooded, and they were forced to migrate to the lower Amu Darya [22]. It should be noted that the Behistun inscription of 521–516 BCE and the Persepolis and Susa palace inscriptions list Khorezm among the lands dependent on the Achaemenids but say nothing of its location [23]; students of these monuments observe that the dress of

the Chorasmians in the reliefs resembles that of the Saka, and argue that from this period the state on the lower Amu Darya was designated “Huvarazmish”, so that the name “Khorezm” came to be applied to the lower Amu Darya from the sixth century BCE.

The two-stage model and the geographical localisation of the homeland. On the basis of his investigations in the southern Khorezm oasis, S. R. Baratov concludes that the Chorasmians originally lived on the middle Tejen–Herirud, principally in the Serakhs oasis, and that their migration proceeded in two stages: the first in the first half of the seventh century BCE, in the reign of the Median king Cyaxares (625–585 BCE), and the second – involving the majority of the population – under Darius I, when discontent with his taxation policy caused a complete removal to the lower Amu Darya [24]. This reconstruction agrees both with the narrative of the folk legends and with Beruni’s account. E. V. Rtveladze, analysing the question geographically, locates the original homeland of the Chorasmians between Margiana and Bactria, possibly in the Tejen valley – the lands between the Amu Darya and the Murghab in north-western Afghanistan, the foothills of the Band-i Turkestan and the area west of the Paropamisus – and connects their migration with the invasion of Cyrus II, dating it to the second half of the sixth century BCE [25] [26]. He holds that the Akes river described in Herodotus cannot be identified with a single geographical feature: the five branches of the Akes may correspond to several neighbouring rivers – the Atrek, Tejen, Murghab, Safid-rud, Shirin-Tagab and Balkh-ab – four of which (the Murghab, Shirin-Tagab, Safid-rud and Balkh-ab) rise in the Paropamisus ranges of north-western Afghanistan, while the Tejen runs parallel some 100–120 km south of the Murghab [26]. Rtveladze also shows that the natural landscape of the Paropamisus and Band-i Turkestan corresponds to the description transmitted by Athenaeus and Hecataeus – “to the east of the Parthians the Chorasmians inhabit the plains and mountains, where wild trees, thorny cynara, willow and tamarisk grow” [27] – noting that tamarisk covers large areas of these mountains and is used by the local population in religious rites [28], and that the region was intensively settled from the Bronze Age onwards. N. A. Egamberdieva, summarising the evidence, argues that groups of population moved to ancient Khorezm at different times and for different reasons, and identifies three factors: the drying up of the Murghab, the invasion of Cyrus II, and the taxation policy of Darius I; in her view the newcomers occupied vacant lands suitable for agriculture and maintained peaceful, neighbourly relations with the local pastoral population [15].

Synthesis. If the fundamental changes in the southern

Khorezm oasis are interpreted as the migration of a population that had abandoned its former homeland for particular reasons in search of fertile land, the essence of the problem is revealed. After the establishment of Achaemenid rule, ancient Iranian-speaking communities moved to the southern Khorezm oasis, and the Achaemenid written sources may have applied to their new home the former name of the migrants – “Huvarazmish”. The presence in southern Khorezm of sixth-century BCE material resembling that of Margiana, Parthia and Bactria demonstrates that the archaic culture of the region was formed through the fusion of several cultural traditions [16]. The archaeological parallels between the Serakhs oasis and southern Khorezm – in pottery, irrigation and fortification – support Baratov’s proposal that the two areas belonged to a single cultural space, while the geographical analysis of Rtveladze widens the possible zone of the original homeland to the lands between Margiana and Bactria. Taken together, the evidence favours a staged migration beginning at the end of the seventh century BCE and culminating under Darius I, rather than a single displacement.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the written, narrative and archaeological sources permits the following conclusions. First, the population of the lower Amu Darya in the Early Iron Age – the bearers of the Amirabad and Kuyusay cultures and the nomadic pastoralists of Meshekli and Uch-Uchoq – was pastoral in character, and the agricultural-urban culture that arose in southern Khorezm at the beginning of the sixth century BCE has no local roots. Second, the sudden appearance of fortified settlements, wheel-made pottery and irrigated agriculture at Khumbuztepa and Khazarasp at the end of the seventh – beginning of the sixth century BCE, together with the typological parallels linking these sites to the Serakhs oasis and, more broadly, to the zone between Margiana and Bactria, substantiates the migration of an agricultural and craft-oriented population from the south. Third, the causes of the migration proposed in the literature – the campaigns of Cyrus II, the taxation policy of Darius I and hydrological changes connected with the Akhes river – need not be mutually exclusive: the two-stage model, according to which an initial group arrived in the age of Cyaxares and the main wave under Darius I, reconciles the ancient written tradition, the local legends recorded by Beruni, al-Muqaddasi and the folk memory of the oasis, and the archaeological stratigraphy of Khumbuztepa. Fourth, the ethnonym and toponym “Khorezm” (“Huvarazmish” of the Achaemenid inscriptions) was transferred to the lower Amu Darya together with the migrants and became

attached to the region from the sixth century BCE. Finally, the interaction of the newcomers with the local pastoral population – attested by the continued existence of the Meshekli and Uch-Uchoq groups alongside the new agricultural centres – laid the foundation of the urbanisation processes that determined the subsequent development of the ancient Khorezmian civilisation. Further excavation of the earliest layers of Khumbuztepa and Khazarasp, and targeted comparative study of the Serakhs and Tejen–Herirud materials, remain the principal tasks for testing and refining the proposed reconstruction.

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