

New Directions in Archaeological Research At The Afrasiab Site During The Independence Period

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Abstract

The Afrasiab archaeological site is one of the most important archaeological sources for studying the ancient and medieval history of the city of Samarkand. During the years of independence, research conducted at this site reached a new stage in terms of its content, methodology, and scholarly approach. While in earlier periods Afrasiab was studied mainly within the framework of its general topography, defensive walls, and certain residential quarters, from the 1990s onward excavations began to be carried out on the basis of clearly defined sectors and problem-oriented research directions.

In particular, the lower area of the citadel, the northern and western parts of the shahristan, the defensive walls, areas adjacent to the city gates, the remains of the Jami Mosque, monumental palace complexes, residential quarters, economic structures, and zones that had later turned into burial areas became separate objects of archaeological investigation. The Uzbek–French Joint Archaeological Expedition, along with subsequent local studies, demonstrated that Afrasiab was a multi-layered, multifunctional urban space with a long and complex historical development.

This article analyzes the main directions, scholarly results, and significance of archaeological research conducted at Afrasiab during the years of independence in the study of the historical topography of Samarkand.

Keywords: Afrasiab, archaeology of Samarkand, independence period, archaeological research, Uzbek–French expedition, stratigraphy, historical topography, defensive walls, shahristan, citadel, monumental architecture, urban development.

Introduction

The issue of archaeological research conducted at the Afrasiab site during the years of independence has been addressed in the reports of the Uzbek–French Joint Archaeological Expedition, scholarly articles by local archaeologists, expedition materials, and generalizing studies. The literature related to the topic may be conditionally divided into several groups [1]. These include studies on the stratigraphy and historical topography of Afrasiab, works devoted to monumental architecture and palace complexes, research

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focused on residential and economic structures, as well as sources presenting the results of studies on areas that later became burial zones and interdisciplinary investigations.

The excavations carried out by the Uzbek–French Joint Archaeological Expedition in 1991–2000 marked a distinct stage in the study of Afrasiab [2]. During this period, extensive research was conducted in the lower area of the citadel, the northern defensive line, the Jami Mosque, the area around the “Bukhara Gate,” the remains of monumental palace structures, and the city’s fortifications. The work undertaken with the participation of such researchers as F. Grenet, C. Rapin, P. Bernard, M. Isamiddinov, A. Atakhodjaev, and Yu. Karev played an important role in clarifying the urban development of Afrasiab in the ancient and early medieval periods [3].

In the studies conducted after the 2000s, consistent attention was given to the residential complexes of Afrasiab, its northern and north-western parts, the areas adjacent to the defensive walls, and zones that had later turned into burial areas. The works of A.A. Gritsina, M. Saidov, Sh. Ochilov, A. Nazarov, and other researchers are important sources for elucidating medieval residential culture, communal systems, economic activity, and the transformation of spatial functions within Afrasiab [4].

The existing literature reveals the image of Afrasiab as a multi-layered historical space. However, some studies remain limited to the results of individual excavations or particular field seasons [5]. Therefore, this article summarizes the research carried out during the years of independence and systematically analyzes the main characteristics of the new stage in the archaeology of Afrasiab.

Research Method

This article employs historical-analytical, comparative, stratigraphic, systematic, and source-critical methods in the study of archaeological research conducted at the Afrasiab site during the years of independence. Through the historical-analytical method, excavations carried out at Afrasiab from the 1990s to 2023 were examined in chronological sequence. In this regard, the activities of the Uzbek–French Joint Archaeological Expedition, subsequent local investigations, individual excavation areas, and their scholarly results were consistently analyzed.

Using the comparative method, the results obtained from different areas of Afrasiab — including the lower area of the citadel, the surroundings of the Jami Mosque, and excavation areas R-35, 7, 10, 27, 28V, 29, and 47 — were compared with one another. This approach made it possible to identify the functional interrelations between the site’s defensive system, monumental architecture, residential quarters, economic structures, and areas that later developed into burial zones.

Through the stratigraphic approach, the construction phases, cultural layers, reconstruction processes, and changes in the functional use of space over time at Afrasiab were assessed. On the basis of the systematic method, Afrasiab was analyzed not merely as a complex of separate archaeological objects, but as a complex urban space that embodied defensive, political-administrative, religious, residential, economic, and ritual functions.

The source-critical method was used to summarize expedition reports, scholarly articles, excavation materials, and information on archaeological finds. In addition, archaeobotanical, anthropological, numismatic, and archaeozoological data were also considered in the article as supplementary evidence.

Results and Discussion

During the years of independence, archaeological research conducted in Samarkand Region, particularly at the Afrasiab settlement, reached a new stage in terms of both content and methodology. While in the final years of the Soviet period Afrasiab was studied mainly within the framework of its general topography, defensive walls, and individual residential quarters, from the 1990s onward excavations became specialized according to clearly defined sectors [7]. Targeted research programs were subsequently implemented for separate residential complexes, the urban periphery, areas adjacent to the defensive walls, the lower area of the citadel, monumental palace complexes, zones that had later turned into burial areas, and sections near the city gates. This makes it possible to interpret Afrasiab as a complex historical-organic urban space whose functions changed across different periods.

The materials from the research conducted in Excavation 2 in 1991 are particularly important in this regard [8], [9]. They indicate the existence of a residential and economic quarter in the northern part of the city, where storage jars, sufas, niches, hearths with fireplaces, and finds related to weaving were discovered together within the rooms. The identification of three or more construction phases in certain loci shows that the internal planning changed over time; in other words, residential and production functions were integrated within the same space.

In 1991–1992, the Uzbek–French Joint Archaeological Expedition carried out important research at Afrasiab aimed at studying the ancient urban layers of Samarkand and the fortifications of the citadel [10]. The expedition's work was conducted in the lower area of the citadel, along the northern defensive line, and in control sections. As a result, the earliest walls made of pakhsa and mudbrick, later reconstruction phases, the remains of a monumental building, and column bases were identified. Stratigraphic observations demonstrated the existence of continuous construction and reconstruction processes in Samarkand from the Achaemenid period to the early Middle Ages. Ceramic assemblages, in turn, served as an important source for the chronological attribution of the layers. These studies created an important scholarly foundation for a deeper understanding of the significance of the Afrasiab citadel as a political and administrative center, as well as its defensive architecture and historical topography [11].

In 1992–1994, the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition studied the remains of the Jami Mosque in the area of Excavation 1 at Afrasiab and clarified its place in the topography of ancient Samarkand [12]. As a result of the investigations, it was established that a pre-Islamic residential structure existed beneath the mosque. In addition, on the eastern side, a pakhsa defensive wall more than four meters wide, a possible gate location, and fortification elements were recorded. During the work carried out in 1992–1994, the plan of the mosque, consisting of a courtyard, corridors, and rooms, as well as its floor levels and construction phases, were reconstructed on an architectural-stratigraphic basis. These results showed that the Jami Mosque was a complex religious structure reconstructed over several periods and that it developed in close connection with the ancient urban environment and defensive system surrounding it.

The work carried out in the 1990s in the R-35 excavation area in the western part of Afrasiab also acquired particular scholarly significance [13]. In the studies conducted in 1993 and 1995, the main attention was focused on determining the relationship between the urban quarter and the fortress wall [14]. As a result of deepening the stratigraphic sections, the inner façade of the wall, plaster and floor levels, the wall base, economic pits, a cesspit, and layers

associated with an oven were recorded. These observations demonstrated that the area adjacent to the defensive wall on the western periphery of Afrasiab had been repeatedly filled, reconstructed, and used for different purposes in different periods. The work carried out in the same area in 1997 [15] made it possible to distinguish the fourth construction phase of the defensive wall. The materials from R-35 once again confirmed that the fortifications of Afrasiab were not the result of a single construction event, but rather of a multi-stage process of development.

In 1995, the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition conducted important archaeological research in the Samarkand oasis at the sites of Afrasiab and Koktepa [10]. At Afrasiab, the work was aimed at continuing the stratigraphic and topographic observations begun in previous seasons, as well as at clarifying the city’s structure and the areas associated with large Islamic-period buildings. At Koktepa, the excavations served to determine the sequence of the site’s cultural layers and to reconstruct, in planigraphic terms, its central part, defensive walls, and gate system [16], [17], [18]. The materials obtained provided important evidence for elucidating the historical development of Koktepa, its urban planning traditions, and its regional cultural connections.

In 1996, the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition carried out archaeological research at two important sites in the Samarkand oasis: Koktepa and Afrasiab [19]. The main focus of the work was to clarify the stratigraphic sequence of the Koktepa fortified town and to study the construction phases of the defensive walls and gate complex in the area of the “Bukhara Gate” at Afrasiab. As a result of excavations at Afrasiab, massive pakhsa wall structures, certain brick layers, and plan elements associated with the passage in front of the gate were identified, substantiating the multi-stage development of the city’s defensive system. At Koktepa, the analysis of cultural layers and architectural remains made it possible to clarify the construction and reconstruction phases of the site. These studies serve as an important scholarly source for elucidating the evolution of ancient urban planning, fortification, and monumental architecture [20].

The study of the lower area of the Afrasiab citadel and the monumental structures located in its central part also became one of the most important directions of research during the independence period. In 1997, in the area of Excavation 7, the inner courtyard, passages, rooms, and columned sections of a palace complex interpreted as belonging to the eighth century were re-examined, and it was shown that the complex had several construction phases [21]. P. Bernard, F. Grenet, C. Rapin, M. Isamiddinov, Yu. Karev, and A. Atakhodjaev participated in the excavation. This observation demonstrates, on the basis of archaeological materials, that the early Islamic period at Afrasiab was not merely a period of political transition, but also a stage during which new monumental architectural solutions emerged.

In 2003, the complex in the northern part of Afrasiab, interpreted as the “courtyard of Nasr ibn Sayyar,” and the lower area of the citadel were studied together. As a result, the courtyard walls, corner junctions, a possible entrance area, corridors, and a system of reconstructed rooms were clarified [22]. M. Isamiddinov, F. Grenet, A. Atakhodjaev, I. Ivanitsky, O. Inevatkina, A. Grishina, and Yu. Karev participated in the expedition work. At the same time, certain architectural elements associated with the Qarakhanid dynasty were identified, and special test trenches related to the Hellenistic layers of Afrasiab were also excavated. These studies were aimed at investigating the Afrasiab citadel as a multi-period monumental center in which the ancient, early medieval, and Islamic-period layers were superimposed upon one another.

In 1998, the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition conducted comprehensive archaeological research at Afrasiab and achieved important results in clarifying the history of the city’s engineering infrastructure and monumental architecture. First, sections of the main canal were studied, and on the basis of sedimentary layers, sand, clay, and ceramics, the phases of its operation and changes in the water-supply system were identified. At the same time, excavations carried out in the northern and southern parts of the Jami Mosque recorded wall lines, passages, rooms, and traces of reconstruction, thereby substantiating the multi-stage development of the complex. Research conducted in the area of Excavation 7 in the lower part of the citadel made it possible to reconstruct the plan structure, entrance units, and internal space of the monumental buildings. These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical topography of Afrasiab.

In 1999, the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition carried out important archaeological research at the Afrasiab and Koktepa sites. At Koktepa, in Excavations 1 and 2, a large brick platform in the central part of the site, its repair phases, fill layers, and ceramic assemblages were studied, and it was established that the construction process at the site had developed in several stages. In Excavation 10 at Afrasiab, the outer corner of an early Islamic-period structure dating to the eighth century, wall alignments, road layers, and a system of rooms were recorded. Excavations 15/10 and 15B/28 in the lower area of the citadel made it possible to identify the genesis of the earliest cultural layers, wall foundations, and later intrusions. These studies serve as an important scholarly source for reconstructing the stages of urban development, monumental architecture, and stratigraphic development in the Samarkand oasis.

The excavations carried out in 1999 on the basis of an economic contract made it possible to document areas on the north-eastern edge of Afrasiab that had come under pressure from new construction. During these works, a defensive wall, economic structures, cesspits, glass and ceramic assemblages, as well as ossuaries were identified in the area of Excavation 27 and adjacent sections. The discovery of ossuaries decorated with depictions of musicians is of particular value for the study of the religious-ideological and ritual life of Afrasiab.

In 2000, within the framework of the theme “Medieval Statehood and Civilization of Uzbekistan on the Basis of Archaeological Sources,” the cave complex in the western part of Afrasiab was studied from an architectural and topographical perspective, and a system of corridors and interconnected rooms was recorded [23]. Although this complex has not been fully excavated, its location adjacent to a natural ravine and the defensive ditch zone indicates the existence of a system of structures in the topography of Afrasiab that had special economic and defensive functions.

The excavations conducted at Afrasiab in 2000 were carried out within the framework of the Uzbek–French expedition and contributed to clarifying the ancient and early Islamic history of Samarkand. The research introduced into scholarly circulation new data on the stratigraphy of Afrasiab, the remains of monumental architecture, and the internal topographical structure of the city. In the generalizing reports of the independence period, it was specifically emphasized that this expedition opened a new chapter in the archaeology of Samarkand, identified complexes that had not previously been distinguished, and obtained new information on a magnificent palace dating to the eighth century and on the palace remains beneath the Jami Mosque [24]. Through these excavations, a more precise

understanding was formed of the city's monumental architecture, palace structures, and religious and administrative zones.

In 2001, Z. Izzatullaev conducted research on tropical marine shells identified in Upper Paleolithic and early medieval layers at Afrasiab. He determined the shells zoologically and demonstrated that their origins were connected with East and Southeast Asia, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. These finds confirm that Samarkand had trade and cultural contacts with distant regions from a very early period. In particular, the fact that some of the shells were used as ornaments also indicates their social and aesthetic significance.

The excavations conducted by A.Kh. Atakhodjaev, F. Grenet, and M.Kh. Isamiddinov at Afrasiab in 2002 constitute an important source for clarifying the archaeological topography of the city of Samarkand. The studies examined various layers within the shahristan area, defensive structures, and the chronological characteristics of the cultural deposits. Through the excavations carried out at Afrasiab, the authors further clarified the stages of urban development in ancient Samarkand and its status as a political center. The significance of this research lies in the fact that it sheds light on the development of the city in the ancient and medieval periods through a comparative analysis of written sources and archaeological evidence.

In 2002, F. Grenet, A.A. Gritsina, and I.D. Ivanitsky studied the political and architectural processes in the Samarkand oasis on the eve of the Arab conquest. During the excavations at Afrasiab, they analyzed monumental palace architecture, the system of inner courtyards, decorative elements, and the remains of administrative buildings. The results of the research show that the palace complex was not only a symbol of power, but also one of the political-administrative centers of the oasis. This is of great scholarly importance for understanding the connections between Samarkand and the surrounding centers of local authority.

The archaeological research carried out by the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition at Afrasiab in 2006 was of considerable significance for the study of the historical topography and architecture of Samarkand [25]. One direction of the expedition's work focused on re-clearing and analyzing the fourth outer defensive circuit in the area of Excavation 27. As a result, an ancient defensive wall built of brick, several of its construction phases, and later strengthening works dating to the Hellenistic period were clarified. The second direction involved the study of the Qarakhanid-period palace complex within the citadel, in Excavations 7 and 10, including its courtyard, iwan, corridor, pavilion, and service rooms. These studies shed light not only on the ancient fortifications of Afrasiab, but also on its development as a political and administrative center in the medieval period.

From 2009 onward, research at Afrasiab entered yet another new stage. Excavations led by A.A. Gritsina were conducted in Excavation 28V, on a hill in the northern part of the shahristan near the Chinese Gate [26]. The research was carried out with funding from the Fund for Culture and Art of Uzbekistan. At this site, pakhsa walls, baked-brick and partially burnt structures, as well as a mixed ceramic assemblage dating to the Samanid, Qarakhanid, and partly ancient periods were recorded. These studies demonstrated that the northern part of Afrasiab is a promising area for investigating the city's defensive system and architectural layers of public significance.

In 2010–2011, A.A. Gritsina carried out research at Afrasiab in Excavation 28V near the Chinese Gate. The excavation recorded layers dating to the Samanid and Qarakhanid

periods, as well as ancient and early medieval finds in mixed contexts. The author revealed the complex stratigraphy of the excavation and also drew attention to the confusion between the old and newly numbered excavation systems at Afrasiab. The finds confirm the multi-layered development of the city.

In 2010, excavations were also carried out in the eleventh–twelfth-century layers of Excavation 29. During the excavations, a reservoir, a tashnau, a pipe system, column bases, and structures associated with economic activity were identified [27]. In particular, the water-related structures built of baked brick and stone, as well as the interconnected tashnau system, testify to the city's developed communal culture. The research demonstrates that Samarkand was also highly organized from a technical and infrastructural perspective.

Excavations in Excavation 29 continued in 2011. This excavation is of particular importance for reconstructing the residential culture of Samarkand in the seventh–eighth centuries. The authors uncovered several rooms and identified floors, sufas, hearths, and structures associated with ritual practices. The discovery of fragments of wall paintings—their colors, technique, and human imagery—indicates the high artistic level of residential interior culture in Samarkand.

In 2013, the excavations at Afrasiab distinguished the ninth–thirteenth-century layers identified in Excavation 29 according to construction horizons and provided an analysis of rooms, streets, hearths, economic pits, and everyday household objects. In particular, the changes in residential construction and the street network across different phases demonstrate the dynamics of the city's internal development. The glazed vessels, lamps, iron objects, and other materials discovered at the site shed light on the everyday culture of the population of Afrasiab.

The research conducted in 2014–2017 under the leadership of M. Saidov in the area of Excavation 47 at Afrasiab became one of the most productive directions in the archaeology of the independence period [28]. During the 2014 excavations, residential complexes belonging to different construction periods were identified in the areas of Excavations 29 and 47 [29]. In 2015 and 2016, the excavations in Excavation 47 were deepened, revealing more than 30 rooms and distinguishing three main construction phases: the sixth–seventh centuries, the eleventh–twelfth centuries, and the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries [30].

During the 2017 field season, Rooms 43 and 44 were identified beneath Rooms 36–42, and the eastern sector of House 3, refuse pits, rich ceramic assemblages, hearths, and the internal evolution of the dwelling were reconstructed in greater detail. As a result of these studies, the conclusion was strengthened that the medieval residential structures in the north-eastern part of Afrasiab were formed according to a courtyard-centered plan, and that the internal system of rooms, domestic and communication elements, and production activities were closely interconnected.

In 2018–2019, excavations continued at the Afrasiab site. The research was carried out near the defensive wall of the shahristan; first in a 5 × 5 m area and later in an expanded excavation area, where several graves and their outlines were identified. The graves were constructed in a box-like form from mudbricks, and certain features of the burial rite were recorded. In addition, anthropological and archaeobotanical materials were obtained during the excavation, which increased the scholarly value of the research.

The excavations of 2019–2020 contributed to a reconsideration of the topography of the north-western part of Afrasiab. In 2019, in the area near the defensive wall of the shahristan, on the one hand, a phase of use or architectural activity dating to the seventh–

eight centuries was identified, while on the other hand, a cemetery horizon dating to the twelfth–early thirteenth centuries was distinguished [31]. Box-like mudbrick graves, Muslim burial practices, numerous ceramic objects, and anthropological finds showed that this area had turned into a burial space in the later medieval period.

In 2020, a new 5 × 5 m area was opened to the south of the 2019 excavation, where the topography of the cemetery, grave types, burial rites, anthropological indicators, and objects associated with burials were studied [32]. These studies demonstrated that certain gate-adjacent and defensive areas of Afrasiab changed their function in later phases; that is, they were transformed from topographical urban zones into burial spaces. In this respect, excavations of the independence period have illuminated the history of Afrasiab not only through urban construction and the evolution of residential areas, but also through the re-socialization of space and its functional transformation.

In 2023, research was conducted at the Afrasiab site by M. Saidov, Sh. Ochilov, A. Nazarov, and O. Tursunov. Work in the area near the north-western defensive wall of Afrasiab began with the use of the GPR georadar method. On the basis of anomalies detected in an area measuring 50 × 150 m, a 10 × 10 m excavation area was selected. As a result, burnt layers, a hearth feature, a cesspit, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological samples, seeds of wheat, barley, rye, peas, grapes, and walnuts, more than 110 animal bones, Sasanian, Tahirid, and Samanid coins, as well as various metal objects were discovered. The authors indicate that this area was initially an open space, was developed in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, and later partially turned into a cemetery. The significance of this research lies in the fact that it clarified the internal topography and economic life of Afrasiab on the basis of new interdisciplinary methods.

Conclusion

The archaeological research conducted at the Afrasiab site during the years of independence marked the beginning of a new scholarly stage in the study of the history of Samarkand. During this period, excavations moved beyond the character of general observation and began to be carried out on the basis of clearly defined sectors, problem-oriented research directions, and interdisciplinary approaches. As a result of the Uzbek–French Joint Expedition and subsequent local investigations, important scholarly data were obtained on the defensive system of Afrasiab, the structure of the citadel and shahristan, the Jami Mosque, monumental palace complexes, residential quarters, economic structures, water-supply systems, and areas that later developed into burial zones.

The research demonstrated that Afrasiab was not merely the ruins of an ordinary city belonging to a single period, but a complex urban space that developed continuously from antiquity to the Middle Ages and whose functions changed across different historical stages. In particular, stratigraphic observations, ceramic assemblages, numismatic finds, as well as archaeobotanical, anthropological, and archaeozoological materials made it possible to reconstruct in greater depth the historical topography, economic life, residential culture, and burial practices of Afrasiab.

On this basis, the following recommendations may be proposed. First, it is necessary to create a unified electronic catalogue and mapped database of all excavations carried out at Afrasiab during the years of independence. Second, stratigraphic sections, photographic documentation, descriptions of finds, and plan drawings for each excavation area should be introduced more widely into scholarly circulation. Third, it would be advisable to reanalyze Afrasiab materials on the basis of archaeobotany, archaeozoology, anthropology, numismatics, and GIS technologies. Fourth, the important results of excavations at Afrasiab should be presented more broadly in museum exhibitions and on digital platforms. Fifth,

through the comprehensive study of the defensive, residential, religious, and burial areas of Afrasiab, the model of Samarkand's historical urban development should be further clarified.

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