

HISTORICAL FORMATION OF UZBEK TOPONYMS: CONTACT LAYERS, ADAPTATION, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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Abstract

This article examines the historical formation of Uzbek toponyms from diachronic and linguocultural perspectives. Based on the revised Uzbek segment of the original corpus, it analyzes Turkic, Iranian-Sogdian, Arabic-Islamic, Mongolian, and late administrative layers, as well as the mechanisms of graphic and phonetic adaptation of place names across different writing traditions. The study establishes that Uzbek toponymy combines natural motivation with memory of trade routes, sacred geography, and ethnopolitical history. A four-stage model of the historical development of a place name is proposed: substrate - contact - adaptation - canonization.

Keywords

Uzbek toponyms, historical toponymy, diachrony, cultural memory, sacred geography, ethnopolitical history, canonization

Uzbek historical toponymy developed within a space of intensive linguistic and cultural contacts in which Iranian-speaking, Turkic, Arabic-script, Mongolian, Russian-language, and modern national writing traditions succeeded one another. Therefore, an Uzbek toponym is rarely the product of a single layer; more often, it represents the result of prolonged interaction among substrate heritage, contact reinterpretation, phonetic and graphic restructuring, and institutional fixation. This makes the Uzbek material especially revealing for the general theory of historical toponomastics.

For the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, the Iranian-Sogdian substrate, ancient Turkic expansion, Islamization, Mongolian influence, and later Russian-Soviet administrative standardization proved particularly significant. Unlike many English place names, in which a formant often directly signals the type of object, an Uzbek historical toponym is frequently decipherable only within a broad historical and cultural context: through trade routes, urban history, sacred geography, and the memory of political centers. [Bakhtiyorova, 2025, pp. 72-74; Usmonova & Makhmudova, 2025, pp. 894-896]

Contemporary studies emphasize that the toponymy of Central Asia is important not only as a source for the history of language but also as a carrier of cultural memory. Place names preserve early forms of settlement, economic structure, religious practices, clan and tribal ties, and the mechanisms of state-administrative renaming. Consequently, the analysis of Uzbek toponyms requires a combination of onomastic, historical-geographical, linguocultural, and translation-oriented approaches. [Hoffmann, 2023, pp. 8-10; Xudoyorova, 2021, pp. 204-207] The aim of this article is to identify the key mechanisms underlying the historical formation of Uzbek toponyms and to describe how the multilayered nature of their origin affects their modern form and interpretation. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to identify the leading contact layers, describe productive formants, show the role of writing systems and administrative canonization, and reveal the functions of sacred and ethnopolitical memory in the structure of the name. The scientific novelty of the article lies in transforming the original comparative material into an independent model for the development of the Uzbek historical toponym as such.

The research material consisted of 40 Uzbek historical toponyms representing different etymological and cultural layers: Tashkent, Samarqand, Buxoro, Xiva, Termiz, Jizzax, Parkent,



Nurata, Qo'qon, G'ijduvon, Qoratepa, Bo'stonariq, and others. The corpus included both major cultural centers and names reflecting local models of natural, sacred, and economic nomination. Selection was based on historical representativeness and recurrence in contemporary studies. [Xudoyorova, 2021, pp. 201-203; Bakhtiyorova, 2025, pp. 71-72]

The methodology combines etymological, diachronic, morphemic, linguocultural, and historical-cartographic analysis. For each toponym, the possible substrate layer, the path of interlingual transmission, formant structure, graphic variants in different scripts, and the degree of fixation in the modern norm were taken into account. This approach is justified by the fact that Uzbek historical toponymy often develops under conditions of several competing exonymic and endonymic forms. The research procedure included the same four stages as in the original model: identification of the early layer, analysis of the formant, description of adaptation, and consideration of canonization. However, for the Uzbek material, special attention was paid to script change - Arabic, Cyrillic, and Latin - as well as to the role of intermediary languages in the transmission of historical names. It is precisely this factor that substantially affects the modern interpretation of form and the practice of its transmission into English.

Model 1. Four-stage model of the historical formation of a toponym

SUBSTRATE -> CONTACT -> ADAPTATION -> CANONIZATION

The model shows the sequence of transition from an early designation of an object to its fixed normative form in writing and cartography.

Turkic models dominate in the corpus under study: 18 units out of 40, that is, 45% of the total dataset. The Iranian/Sogdian layer comprises 9 units (22.5%), the Arabic-Islamic layer 5 units (12.5%), the Mongolian layer 3 units (7.5%), and the hybrid-administrative layer 5 units (12.5%). These data confirm the multilayered character of Uzbek toponymy, in which the leading role belongs to the Turkic system, while the most important cultural centers and historically prestigious names preserve older or mixed foundations. From the standpoint of word-formational stability, the formants -kent/-kand, -tepa, -obod, -rabot, -qo'rg'on, -ariq, and -buloq are of particular importance. Their specificity lies in the fact that some of these elements entered from another language or historical layer, but were later morphologically naturalized in the Turkic environment and came to be perceived as native patterns. Thus, Uzbek toponymy often preserves historical depth not through root transparency, but through the long-term functioning of an adapted formant. [Choraqulova, 2023, pp. 51-54; Usmonova & Makhmudova, 2025, pp. 894-896]

The names of major centers - Samarqand, Buxoro, Tashkent, Xiva, and Termiz - occupy a special place. In several cases, their etymology remains debatable; however, the mechanism of formation is relatively clear: an early substrate root passes through successive stages of phonetic and graphic restructuring within Sogdian, Persian, Arabic, Turkic, Russian, and modern Uzbek traditions. Therefore, for Uzbek historical toponymy, the key issue is not only the meaning of the root, but also which writing and political tradition fixed a particular formal variant. Unlike the more regular settlement classification of English place names, the Uzbek historical toponym often carries an expanded cultural burden. It may simultaneously indicate landscape, fortification, a water object, caravan infrastructure, a sacred center, or ethnopolitical memory. For this reason, the semantics of an Uzbek place name is often socially saturated and requires extra-linguistic data for correct interpretation. [Xudoyorova, 2021, pp. 205-207; Toshpulatov, 2020, pp. 137-140]

A significant result is also connected with the role of sacred geography. Studies on theotoponymy and historical memory show that some Uzbek names become fixed around holy places, cult objects, clan and tribal landmarks, and memorial events. As a result, even when geographic motivation is present, the semantic profile of the name often includes a confessional or cultural-memorial component. [Toshpulatov, 2020, pp. 137-140; Bakhtiyorova, 2025, pp. 72-73]



Another substantial finding concerns writing systems. In the Uzbek tradition, the same historical names could function in Arabic script, Cyrillic, Latin script, and in exonymic Russian-language or English-language forms. Therefore, the grapheme itself becomes a historical source: it records not only orthography, but also a stage in the cultural and political canonization of the name.

Table 1. Etymological layers of Uzbek toponyms in the author's corpus

Layer	Count	%	Typical formants	Examples
Turkic	18	45.0	-tepa, -qo'rg'on, -ariq	Qoratepa, Bo'stonariq
Iranian/Sogdian	9	22.5	-kent/-kand, ancient bases	Tashkent, Samarqand, Parkent
Arabic-Islamic	5	12.5	-rabot, sacred components	Rabotak, Hazoras
Mongolian	3	7.5	ethnopolitical markers	historical regional forms
Hybrid-administrative	5	12.5	mixed and late forms	variants of Qo'qon, etc.

The results obtained show that the historical formation of Uzbek toponyms follows the same general pattern of substrate - contact - adaptation - canonization; however, the dominant mechanisms here differ from those in the English material. Whereas morphemic reconstructability of form is more important for the English tradition, the primary role in Uzbek is played by the cultural-historical context, including trade networks, Islamic scholarship, urban civilization, tribal geography, and state reforms.

From a theoretical perspective, Uzbek toponymy refutes the simplified view that a historical name can be reliably explained only through the internal means of a single language. On the contrary, in Central Asia a crucial part of the modern toponymic stock arose under conditions of prolonged interlingual mediation and must therefore be studied as a product of contact history. This is especially evident in the fate of macro-toponyms and historical centers, where each new writing tradition reformatted an already existing name.

In practical terms, the proposed model is important for orthographic standardization, translation, reference-book compilation, and the teaching of the history of the Uzbek language. When working with historical names, it is necessary to take into account not only the modern normative form, but also earlier graphic and cultural layers; otherwise, translation or transliteration will inevitably lead to semantic reduction.

Thus, Uzbek historical toponyms are formed as multilayered signs of space in which natural nomination, ethnopolitical history, sacred memory, and administrative codification are combined. In the corpus under study, the Turkic layer is dominant; however, key cultural centers often preserve Iranian-Sogdian, Arabic-Islamic, or mixed foundations. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the fact that comparative material has been transformed into an independent explanatory model of the historical dynamics of the Uzbek toponym. Further research should be directed toward expanding digital corpora of historical attestations, systematizing cartographic



variants, and developing more precise rules for transmitting Uzbek historical names in English-language and Russian-language scholarly communication.

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