



Article

# The History of the Study of Toponyms

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the history of the study of toponyms. It examines the formation of toponymy as a scientific discipline and its development based on historical-comparative and etymological approaches. Particular attention is given to the contributions of thinkers, foreign scholars, and Uzbek researchers, as well as to their scientific studies and works in this field. In addition, the role of toponyms in reflecting linguistic and historical-cultural information is briefly explained. The study also partially highlights modern approaches and outlines the future prospects of toponymic research.

**Keywords:** toponym, onomastics, research, interpretation, etymology, geographical name, scholar, scientific inquiry.

## 1. Introduction

Toponymy is an integral branch of onomastics that studies and elucidates the origin and development of place names. This discipline has emerged through the integration of several fields, including geography, history, linguistics, ethnography, and archaeology. It examines, from both scientific and practical perspectives, place names that have been assigned, renamed, and are currently in use within society [1].

The primary objective of toponymy is to collect the place names of various peoples, to identify their national and cultural characteristics, and to analyze their lexical-semantic and structural-grammatical features. From the earliest periods, prominent scholars and thinkers have studied, either directly or indirectly, the formation, origin, interpretation, explanation, and etymology of place names [2].

The earliest information about geographical names—that is, toponyms—can be found, like early geographical knowledge in general, in the works of Herodotus (*History*) and Strabo (*Geography*). It should be emphasized that a scientific approach to toponymic data first appeared in the works of Eastern scholars such as Abu Rayhan Beruni and Mahmud Kashgari.

In the works of Abu Rayhan Beruni, including *Qanun al-Mas'udi* and *Saydana*, numerous observations on the principles of toponymy, as well as extensive information on the place names of Central Asia and their interpretations, are presented. Beruni wrote: "The Greeks and Arabs distorted words and adapted them to their own pronunciation, as a result of which the meanings of the words changed." In *Saydana*, he mentions more than 400 toponyms, while in *Qanun al-Mas'udi* he refers to over 600 place names.

The renowned linguist and geographer Mahmud Kashgari's work *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* is also of great significance in the study of place names. In addition to the place names recorded on the map included in the work, the text itself contains the names of 82 villages and cities, 68 countries and regions, and 25 seas and rivers. Furthermore, he was the first to employ geographical terms characteristic of the natural conditions of the region, such as *ort*, *sirt*, *qayir*, *dovon*, and *dasht* [3].

**Citation:** Qizi, A. M. A. The History of the Study of Toponyms. *Pioneer: Journal of Advanced Research and Scientific Progress* 2026, 5(1), 14-18.

Received: 4<sup>th</sup> Mar 2026

Revised: 19<sup>th</sup> Mar 2026

Accepted: 10<sup>th</sup> Apr 2026

Published: 26<sup>th</sup> Apr 2026



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The work *Baburnama* by Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur also played a significant role in the formation and development of toponymy. It provides information on the names, pronunciation, and orthography of places in the Fergana Valley during the 15th–16th centuries. The terms found in *Baburnama*, such as *band* (dam), *jazoir* (island), *jangal* (forest), *tagob* (riverbed), *yayloq* (summer pasture), *uchma* (steep slope), and *kasaba* (small town), were of considerable importance in the formation of Uzbek national terminology.

According to Suyun Qorayev, one of the earliest works on Uzbek toponymy is *Geographical Names of Central Asia* (written in German) by Arminius Vambery, which was the result of his secret journey to Central Asia. The glossary section of this work contains nearly 600 place names arranged in alphabetical order [4].

The study of toponyms gradually attracted the attention of linguists. In the history of Russian linguistics, Alexander Vostokov is considered the first scholar to provide a scientific foundation for the study of place names and to produce significant works in this field. Scholars rightly recognize him as a pioneer in the scientific study of toponyms, as he was the first to demonstrate that the scientific analysis of geographical names makes it possible to investigate the history, language, and development of the peoples inhabiting a given region.

The toponymist A. L. Khromov, discussing the origin of geographical names, emphasized that names constitute the source of toponyms and described them as “distinct linguistic systems governed by their own internal laws.” Similarly, the linguist B. Turaev stated that “geographical names, or toponyms, represent a doctrine of life. Every people and nation serves as both a witness to and a representative of different historical periods, while toponyms constitute an important source for studying the history, language, and cultural development of a region.” Indeed, each toponym possesses its own history and inevitably reflects aspects related to the worldview and mentality of the population associated with that place.

From the late nineteenth century onward, interest in toponymy increased significantly due to the needs of cartography and archaeology. Specialized works on toponymy began to appear, and societies dedicated to the study of geographical names were established. For example, in England, one of the first such organizations in the world—the Toponymic Society—was founded in 1923 to coordinate all toponymic research within the country. Subsequently, similar societies and groups emerged in Western Europe, including France, Germany, Poland, and other countries [5].

In Russia, toponymic research was conducted by representatives of history, geography, and philology. Among the early researchers of Russian toponymy were academician Shegrel, the well-known historian and ethnographer Nikolai Nadezhdin, and the linguist Kastreis. In 1847, the Commission for the Study of Geographical Terminology established under the Russian Geographical Society, along with the Society of Lovers of the Russian Language and Literature, attached great importance to toponymy. In 1904, a Cartography Commission was established under the Russian Geographical Society.

## 2. Literature Review

During the Soviet period, toponymic research developed even further. Substantial efforts were made in the collection and processing of toponymic materials. The works of scholars such as A. Matveyev, E. M. Mirzayev, V. A. Nikonov, A. Popov, A. V. Superanskaya, A. A. Reformatsky, B. A. Serebrennikov, V. N. Toporov, and O. N. Trubachev became widely known.

One of the most prominent toponymists in the world is the distinguished geographer E. M. Mirzayev. Over more than half a century of scholarly activity, he conducted extensive research on the origin, transcription, and interpretation of geographical names, including those of Uzbekistan. He produced numerous valuable

works, articles, monographs, and dictionaries devoted in particular to local geographical terminology. In his long academic career, Mirzayev paid special attention not only to the theoretical issues of toponymy but also to geographical terminology. For example, his *Dictionary of Folk Geographical Terms* (Moscow, 1984), which contains approximately 4,000 entries, attracted considerable attention from toponymists and linguists worldwide [6].

Another prominent Russian toponymist, V. A. Nikonov, made a significant contribution to the recognition and development of toponymy as an independent scientific discipline. His major works include *Introduction to Toponymy* and *Concise Toponymic Dictionary*. Nikonov emphasized that toponyms are social phenomena that arise as a result of historical processes, and he highlighted the important role of suffixes and grammatical affixes—especially in Slavic toponymy—in the formation of geographical names. He also formulated several laws concerning the interrelated emergence of toponyms, as well as the principle of relative negativity, according to which geographical objects are often named based on rare or distinctive features. In his toponymic dictionary, he provided etymological explanations for nearly 4,000 major geographical names worldwide [7].

One of the leading Russian linguist-toponymists, A. V. Superanskaya, authored numerous works devoted to toponyms and, more broadly, to proper names. Her most significant work addressing the linguistic principles of geographical names is *What is Toponymy?* [8]. This book presents the theoretical foundations of toponymy and provides historical information on geographical names.

Any specialist engaged in the study of Uzbek toponymy can obtain extensive information about the meanings and origins of place names in Uzbekistan from the historical and geographical works of scholars such as Vasily Bartold, Mikhail Andreyev, Sergey Tolstov, Yahyo Ghulomov, B. A. Ahmedov, A. R. Muhammadjonov, Mikhail Masson, O. D. Chekhovich, A. A. Semenov, and O. A. Sukhareva [9].

Among Russian Orientalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the works of academician Vasily Bartold occupy a special place in toponymy. It is difficult to find any of his works that do not relate to historical geography or include geographical names. The value of his works for toponymy lies in the fact that he did not limit himself to studying literature in Russian and Western European languages; rather, he read sources in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages in their original form, critically analyzed them, and compared them with one another. He identified the transcription, etymology, and location of hundreds of place names mentioned in Arabic and Persian sources. Bartold studied place names in connection with the history of countries and their geographical environments, while also paying considerable attention to the linguistic aspects of toponyms [10].

Academician Yahyo Ghulomov's work *History of Irrigation in Khorezm* contains a large number of toponymic names. Ghulomov attached great importance to terminology, which enabled the clarification of the meanings of many toponyms. In Khorezm, there are numerous geographical names formed with elements such as *arna* (e.g., Mang'itarna, Paxtaarna, Shovotarna), *yob* (*yop*) (Bog'yop, Tozayop, Xonyop, Chirmonyop), *qir* (*g'ir*) (Manqir, Toyqir, Tuzqir, Yassiqir), and *qal'a* (Bozorqal'a, Burgutqal'a, Tuproqqal'a, Kofirqal'a). Ghulomov provides explanations of these terms. For instance, the term *arna* in Khorezm currently denotes a "main canal," whereas Ghulomov explains that its original meaning was "a branch of a river" or "a tributary."

Ancient historical documents, legal deeds, and waqf records are of great importance for toponymic research. In this regard, the collections prepared by O. D. Chekhovich—Bukhara Documents and Samarkand Documents—are invaluable toponymic sources. For instance, Samarkand Documents alone contains more than one thousand geographical and historical-topographical names. Of these, over 200 toponyms have been identified in terms of their location, their modern equivalents, and, in some cases, their etymology. In

addition, Chekhovich provided explanations for numerous terms related to land and water relations, legal deeds, and waqf documentation [11].

In Uzbekistan, Professor H. H. Hasanov made a significant contribution to the development of toponymy and geographical terminology. In his works—*Spelling of Geographical Names*, *From the History of Central Asian Place Names*, *The Secret of Geographical Names*, *The Language of the Earth*, *Dictionary of Geographical Terms*, *Central Asian Geographers and Travelers*, and *Scholar-Travellers*—as well as in numerous articles and essays, he emphasized that the study of place names has long been of importance in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan.

Among linguist-toponymists, Professors T. Nafasov and Z. Dosimov, as well as Associate Professor N. Okhunov, made substantial contributions to the development of toponymy in Uzbekistan. They elucidated the principles of nomination (naming) of toponyms and determined the etymology of numerous place names. One of the scholars who made a significant contribution to the development of toponymy in Uzbekistan is T. Nafasov, who was the first in the country to defend a candidate dissertation in toponymy. He subsequently published a number of monographs and articles in this field. His *Explanatory Dictionary of Uzbek Toponyms* primarily addresses the etymology of microtoponyms in southern Uzbekistan. At the same time, it provides etymological interpretations of certain historical toponyms in the region, such as Boysun, Kesh, Chagʻoniyon, and Qarshi [12].

Z. Dosimov conducted research on the toponymy of Khorezm, focusing on the history and etymology of place names, as well as their linguistic features, models, and types. In his monograph *“Toponyms of Khorezm”* (1985), he examined the formation and stages of development of Khorezm toponyms.

The scientific works of scholars such as Yahyo Ghulomov, R. N. Nabiyev, A. R. Muhammadjonov, R. Qongirov, H. Hasanov, and Suyun Qorayev are noteworthy for studying the origins of place names in the republic, the ethnogenesis of nations, tribes, clans, and lineages, as well as geographical terminology.

### 3. Methodology

This study applies an integrated methodological approach to the analysis of toponyms. First, the historical-comparative method is used to examine the formation and development of place names across different periods by comparing various historical sources. In addition, the etymological analysis helps to identify the origin, meaning, and linguistic roots of toponyms. Furthermore, lexical-semantic and structural-grammatical analyses are employed to investigate the internal structure and semantic layers of geographical names. The research is based on the analysis of historical documents, scientific literature, and dictionaries, followed by classification and generalization of the collected data [13].

As a result, the study reveals that toponyms function not only as linguistic units but also as important carriers of historical and cultural information.

### 4. Result and Discussion

The history of the study of toponyms demonstrates that this field has evolved from the simple description of names into a complex, multi-layered system of scientific analysis. Initially regarded merely as a means of identifying geographical objects, toponyms have come to be interpreted as important sources of historical, ethnographic, linguistic, and cultural information. In particular, the development of the historical-comparative method in linguistics during the 19th and 20th centuries, along with advances in areal linguistics, etymology, and semantics, laid the foundation for the establishment of toponymy as an independent scientific discipline [14].

The results of these studies confirm that toponyms encapsulate not only the linguistic features of a given region but also its socio-political history, migration processes, and cultural layers. In this respect, toponymic materials often serve as crucial evidence for reconstructing historical realities that are not reflected in written sources. For example, the analysis of ancient morphemes, ethnonyms, or natural-geographical features preserved in place names makes it possible to draw conclusions about ancient population strata and their languages [15].

At the present stage, the development of toponymy is becoming increasingly profound through its integration with cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguoculturology. As a result, toponyms are interpreted not merely as nominative units but as expressions of human cognition, conceptual systems, and worldviews as manifested through language. This necessitates the application of new methodological approaches and research methods in the study of toponyms.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of toponymic studies demonstrates the growing scientific significance of this field. Toponymy has developed not only as an essential component of linguistics but also as an integrative discipline closely connected with history, geography, and cultural studies. In the future, the integration of toponymic research with digital technologies and corpus linguistics is expected to further expand this field and contribute to new scientific achievements.

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