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Toponymic Research on the Village of Alasha in the Astara Region

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ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8462-9495>Email: mustafayev_info@yahoo.com**Doi Serial**<https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.9.7>**Keywords**Alasha; toponymy; Azerbaijan; Central Asia; Kazakhstan; Talysh Mountains;
archaeology; historical linguistics**Abstract**

This study explores the toponym Alasha in the context of its linguistic, historical, and cultural significance in the village of Alasha, located in the Astara district of southeastern Azerbaijan. Positioned at the crossroads of the Talysh Mountains, the Caspian Sea, and the Iranian border, the region has long served as a nexus of cultural exchange and interaction. The term Alasha holds multiple meanings across Azerbaijani and Turkic linguistic traditions, including interpretations such as "vast land," "weak horse," and "mixed-breed horse," with meanings varying according to dialectal usage and regional phonetic forms. Drawing on archaeological data—particularly excavations at the Divyaka (or Alisha) fortress—and ethnolinguistic analysis, the study contextualizes the toponym within both local cultural memory and broader Central Asian Turkic heritage. The research also explores legends and traditional narratives associated with the name Alasha in Kazakhstan and other parts of Central Asia. The findings offer valuable insights into the historical processes of toponymic formation and contribute to a richer understanding of the region's cultural landscape.

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Introduction

The southeastern region of the Republic of Azerbaijan is geographically delineated by the Talysh Mountains to the west, the Caspian Sea to the east, and the Islamic Republic of Iran to the south. Administratively, this territory corresponds to the Lankaran Economic Region, encompassing the districts of Lankaran, Lerik, Astara, Yardimli, Jalilabad, and Masalli. The region's topography is predominantly mountainous, which has historically contributed to its role as one of the earliest zones of continuous human habitation in the South Caucasus.

Archaeological investigations across the region have revealed evidence of settlement patterns, social organization, and economic activities spanning various historical periods. These findings are vital for reconstructing the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of ancient and medieval times. The study of toponymy in this area further enhances our understanding of how geographic names encode historical and ethnocultural information, often reflecting ancient territorial boundaries, occupations, and ethnic identities.

One of the most significant archaeological sites in the area is the Divyaka or Alisha fortress, located in the village of Alasha in the Astara district (GPS coordinates: 38°27'12"N, 48°47'42"E). The fortress provides crucial material

evidence that supports historical and linguistic interpretations of the toponym *Alasha*. This research builds on such archaeological data, integrating it with linguistic analysis and regional folklore to uncover the layered meanings and historical transformations embedded in the toponym.

Methodology

The present study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach combining historical linguistics, toponymic analysis, and ethnographic interpretation. Primary data are drawn from local oral traditions, regional dialects, historical maps, and archaeological findings, supplemented by secondary sources such as etymological dictionaries, encyclopedic entries, and scholarly works on Turkic and Talysh languages. Particular attention is given to phonetic variations of the toponym “Alasha” across different linguistic and cultural contexts, enabling a comparative evaluation of its meanings and evolution.

Various interpretations exist concerning the etymology of the term *Alasha*, with notable variation in local pronunciation and usage. In the Astara region, for instance, the term is pronounced as *Alasho*, reflecting phonological influences from the Talysh language. According to the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Azerbaijan Toponyms* (Vol. 1), the prefix *ala* in ancient Turkic languages denotes “big,” whereas *sha* is believed to derive from an archaic Talysh root meaning “life.” Based on this interpretation, *Alasha* may be translated as “big village” or “large settlement” (Budagov & Mammadov, 2008, p. 9).

Additional insights are provided in Bashir Akhmedov’s *Etymological Dictionary*, where *Alasha* is identified as a hydronym with deep Turkic linguistic roots. Meanwhile, the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language* defines *alasha* as a “thin or weak horse,” and also relates it to the word *ala* in the compound *ala-byazek*, meaning “mixture” or “blended.” In this semantic context, *alasha* refers to a hybrid horse—offspring of a purebred stallion and an ordinary mare—emphasizing both biological mixing and diminished purity (Ahmedov, 2015, p. 16). Among Turkmen communities, however, the term has a more favorable connotation, referring to a superior crossbreed horse, sometimes linked to the noble breed *Alatekin*, suggesting that *Alasha* may have originally denoted a prized lineage before its semantic shift in Azerbaijani usage.

In addition, Musarza Mirzayev (1993) argues that in the Talysh language, the toponym is pronounced as *Elesho*, and he attributes its origin to the name *Ali Shah*, which is also supported by local oral narratives. Such dual interpretations—linguistic and legendary—demonstrate the toponym’s multifaceted etymology, shaped by intersecting Turkic and Talysh traditions.

Regional dialectological sources further enrich this analysis. The *Dialectological Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language* records the usage of *alasha* in Shamkir and Zangibasar districts with the general meaning of “horse,” indicating the broader geographic diffusion of this term and its semantic constancy across western and southern Azerbaijan.

A noteworthy cultural and geographical feature is the Alasha mineral spring, located approximately 3 km west of the village of Alasha, within the riverbed of the Istisu River. This natural spring is locally renowned for its therapeutic properties and is actively used by residents for medicinal purposes (Aslan & Bayramova, 2014, p. 26), highlighting the intersection between geography, health practices, and toponymic memory.

Results

The research also identifies a toponymically related village named *Alashar* in the Jalilabad district of Azerbaijan. Historical sources indicate that the name derives from the nearby *Alashar* Mountain, situated within the central section of the Burovar mountain range, along the banks of the Shinyapedere River. Notably, this location was registered as a winter pasture (*qışlaq*) in the early 20th century. In Turkic languages, *alasar* refers to a “lowland,” while *burovar* denotes a “highland” or “mountainous area” (Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası, 2007, p. 32), reflecting the topographic dichotomy embedded in regional toponymy.

Furthermore, the *National Encyclopedia of Kazakhstan* provides additional semantic layers to the word *Alasha*, noting that it is used across Central Asia in various cultural and historical contexts. These include its association with tribal structures, traditional cloth weaving patterns (e.g., *alasha* carpets), and ethnonyms, reinforcing the term’s widespread cultural resonance throughout the Turkic-speaking world.

The nomadic peoples of Central Asia have always referred to themselves as the Alasha people, as their legends contain numerous references to Alasha or Khan Alasha. Although in the 16th century the supporters of Genghis Khan consolidated their power and established an independent state, legends about Khan Alasha continued to exist. Some researchers believe that such a ruler lived in the Great Steppe, while others argue that he is not a historical figure but a mythical character. However, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Bashkirs, Karakalpaks, Tatars, and Nogais believe that this Khan Alasha played a decisive role in their history.

According to Kazakh folklore and ethnographic data, the mythical Khan Alasha is considered their first ancestor.

In the Ulytau Mountains of Kazakhstan, on the banks of the Karakengir River, the remains of the Alasha settlement have been preserved. Ulytau was the place where the khans of Ulytau ascended the throne and where the three Kazakh zhuzes (tribal unions) united. Mausoleums were built here for Chuchi Khan and Khan Alasha. Additionally, Tokhtamysh Khan of the Golden Horde and his commander Emir Edige were buried here (Bakytuly, 2022, p. 28) (Fig. 2).

The Kazakhs believe that Khan Alasha established the first state (the Kazakh state), uniting nomadic Turkic peoples such as the Bashkirs, Kyrgyz, Nogais, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, and Tatars. In Abdulkaziz's work *Shajarat-i Turk* (The Genealogy of the Turks), the place where Khan Alasha settled in the center of Desht-i-Kipchak is mentioned.

In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the Khwarezmshah state, which became the largest political union of the Muslim East, encompassed the territories of present-day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, much of Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

It is important to note that within the unified Khwarezm state, through campaigns, wars, and territorial conquests, migrations occurred, which contributed to the mutual influence of spiritual cultures, customs, traditions, and languages.

These facts may explain the existence of interconnected toponymy between Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

Later, cities in Kazakhstan became known for their markets. Nomads arriving from distant lands engaged in livestock exchange, among which striped carpets called "alasha," woven from multicolored (white, blue, yellow, brown) wool yarn, held a special place. The "alasha" carpets played not only a decorative role but also had functional significance in everyday life (Fig. 3). They were commonly used in yurts, during celebrations and family events, passed down from generation to generation as works of art and symbols of family heritage (Mustafayev & Huseynova pp. 18-21).

Discussion and Conclusion

The semantic breadth of the term *alasha* extends well beyond Azerbaijani usage into the broader Turkic linguistic sphere. For example, Hajiye (2018) notes that in several dialects—including Kyrgyz, Barabinsk, Kazan, and Tobol—*alasha* denotes "horse with a tied head," "violent," "fierce person," "stubborn," and "bad" (p. 303). In Kyrgyz literary language, the term still commonly refers to "horse" (Udakhin, 1956, p. 58) and in southern Kyrgyz dialects can signify both stallion and "mixed, selected" animals (Kültür Bakanlığı, 1992, p. 70).

These Turkic-language parallels are consistent with research on the shared linguistic infrastructure of Turkic toponyms. Adilova and Kasimova (2022) identify recurring phonological and morphological patterns in Kazakh and ancient Turkic place names, underlining the historical continuity of Turkic spatial lexicon. Similarly, Kenbayeva, Bekmasheva, and Umarova (2022) show how place-name elements in epic literature serve symbolic and cultural functions, reinforcing the argument that *alasha* is part of a wider Turkic semantic network that carries meanings related to space, identity, and social praxis.

In the case of Alasha village in Astara, archaeological findings, oral traditions, and local etymological attributions—all emphasize its role as an intercultural hub throughout history. The toponym thus becomes a revealing prism through which the continuity and transformation of regional identity, livelihood, and cultural memory can be analyzed in both local and pan-Turkic contexts.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no known competing financial interest or personal relationship that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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Figure 1,2. The Alasha Fortress located in the village of Alasha in the Astara district



Figure 3. Mausoleum of Alasha Khan

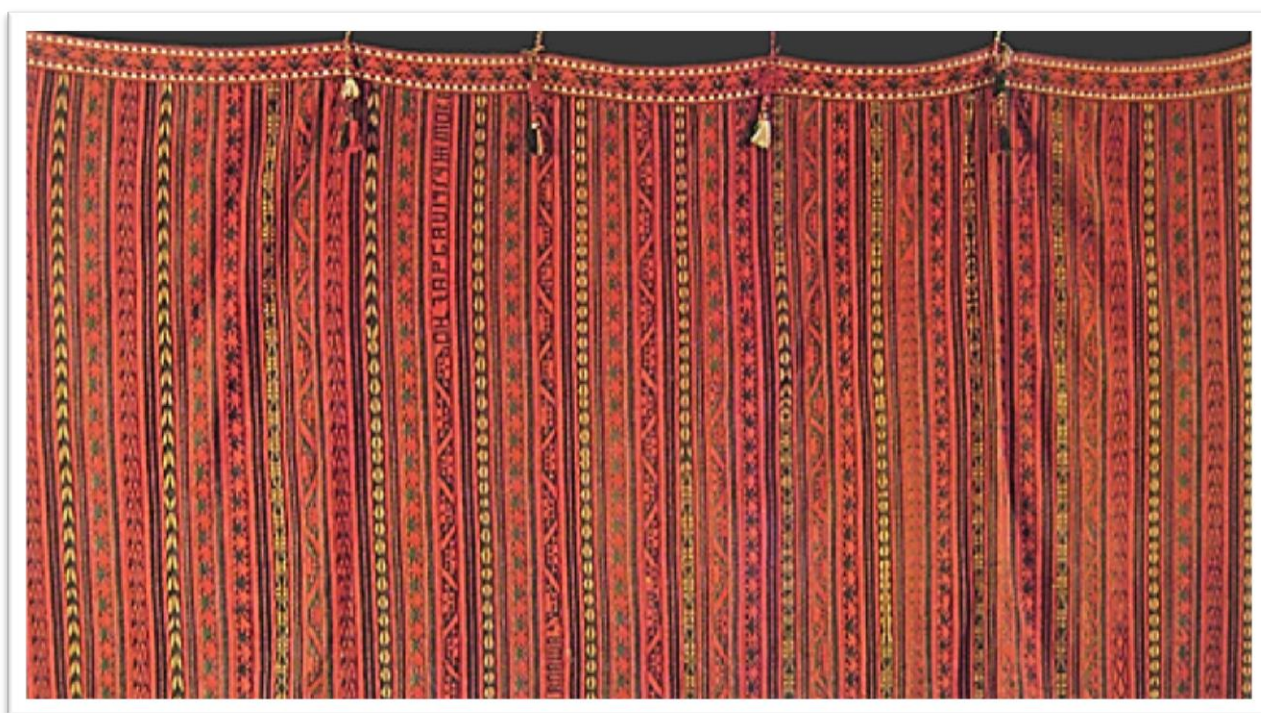


Figure 4. “Alasha” carpets