



# DIAKONOFF, IGOR' MIKHAÏLOVICH

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**DIAKONOFF (D'yakonov), Igor' Mikhaïlovich** (b. Petrograd, 30 December 1914 [Old style]/12 January 1915; d. St. Petersburg, 2 May 1999), Russian orientalist of international standing, one of the greatest scholars in the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies ([FIGURE 1](#)). He was a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, an Honorary Member of the Royal Asiatic Society, of the American Oriental Society, and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a Member of the Advisory Committee of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, and a Member of the [Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum](#). He also held an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Chicago.

During the 1920s, Diakonoff twice lived in Oslo, where his father, Mikhail Alekseevich Diakonoff (d. 1939), worked at the USSR trade mission. His mother was trained as a physician but mainly stayed at home doing all the housework. His elder brother, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Diakonoff (1907-54), was a distinguished scholar in the field of Iranian history and archaeology. In 1938 Diakonoff graduated from the Leningrad University, where he studied with the well-known Assyriologist Aleksandr Pavlovich Riftin (1900-45). After graduation he was employed at the Department of Ancient Near East of the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, where he worked until 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union during World War II. In 1944 Diakonoff came to Norway again, this time fighting as a Captain of the Soviet Army for the liberation of this country from the German occupation during World War



II. From 1946 to 1950 he taught the Akkadian and Sumerian languages and history of Ancient Mesopotamia at the University of Leningrad, and then, until 1959, he worked in the Department of Ancient Near East at the State Hermitage Museum as the curator of the collection of cuneiform tablets. From 1953 until his death in 1999, he was a senior research fellow of the Leningrad/St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies (Institut Vostokovedeniya) of the USSR/Russian Academy of Sciences.

Diakonoff established international contacts and participated in organizing important scholarly projects. In particular, he took an active part in the organization of the 25th International Congress of Orientalists held in Moscow in 1960 (he was the Executive Secretary of the Organizing Committee). His publications were on a broad variety of subjects, ranging from linguistic studies of Afrasian languages to Scandinavian epics and the works of the famous Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837). Diakonoff was a masterful translator of literary works, including the Epic of Gilgamesh and several books of the Bible (Diakonoff, 1961 and 1973). He also published his own poems and translations (I. M. Diakonoff and M. M. Diakonoff, 1985b). In his life and research Diakonoff exemplified a humanitarian perspective, and he believed that scholars of the entire world constituted one fraternal family. He also believed that scholarship should have no national boundaries and should not depend on political circumstances.

Diakonoff could read texts in Sumerian, Akkadian, Hebrew, Elamite, Hittite, Hurrian, and Urartian; he studied ancient Near Eastern texts of different genres and periods, from the 3rd millennium BCE until the end of the Achaemenid period in the 4th century BCE. The subjects of his publications included languages and cultures, together with ethnic, political, and socio-economic history of the Ancient Near East and Central Asia. He translated Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian laws with detailed comments (Diakonoff, 1952). He also edited the original texts, transliterations, and translations of previously unknown cuneiform everyday letters and economic documents of the Urartian Kingdom, most of which were found during archeological excavations at Karmir-Blur in Armenia (Diakonoff, 1963b) and which are extremely difficult to read. Together with S. A. Starostin, he demonstrated that the Hurrian and Urartian languages were related to the Dagestan languages (Diakonoff, 1986a). One of his outstanding books contains a detailed survey and systematic description of the languages of western Asia (Diakonoff, 1967). His other linguistic publications include a historical study of Afro-Asian roots



and a comparative vocabulary of Afro-Asian languages (Diakonoff, 1981-82 and 1988a), as well as contributions to compiling a comprehensive dictionary of these languages and of a Semitic etymological dictionary. His other works include comparative Hamito-Semitic studies and their phonetic, morphological, and lexical reconstructions, as well as analysis of parallels between the Akkadian language and unwritten Cushite languages (Diakonoff, 1965).

Diakonoff was equally well skilled in philology, history, and linguistics and was a masterful translator of Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Biblical literary works. He published, in various languages, two dozens of books and approximately five hundred articles. The following studies by Diakonoff are in English: *Parthian Economic Documents from Nisa* (co-authored with V. A. Livshits, ed. D. N. MacKenzie; Corp. Inscr. Iran., 1976-2002); *Geographical Names According to Urartian Texts* (in collaboration with S. M. Kashkaï, Wiesbaden, 1981); *Geographical Names According to Urartian Texts (Répertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes, vol. IX, Wiesbaden, 1981)*; *The Pre-History of the Armenian Nation* (New York, 1984); *Phrygian (Anatolian and Caucasian Studies)* (co-authored with V. P. Neroznak, New York, 1985); *Hurro-Urartian as an Eastern Caucasian Language* (in collaboration with S. A. Starostin, Munich, 1986); *Afrasian Languages* (Moscow, 1988); *Early Antiquity* (Chicago and London, 1991); “Proto-Afrasian and Old Akkadian. A Study in Historical Phonetics” (co-authored with O. Stolbova and A. Militarev; see Diakonoff, 1992); *Archaic Myths of the Orient and the Occident* (Gothenburg, 1995). Diakonoff’s last book *The Paths of History* (Cambridge, 1999), in which he summarizes his theories on historical processes from ancient times to the present, contains a detailed overview of the socio-economic aspects and laws that governed them during the entire history of humanity. In the same book he also traces historical processes beginning from Paleolithic times and examines the ethnic, religious, and cultural factors. One of his books was published in German: *Hurrisch und Urartäisch* (Munich, 1971). Finally, he also published about a hundred articles in various Western journals, mainly in English. He created a large school of Assyriologists, who are working in various universities of Russia, the former Soviet Republics, and in several Western countries.

Diakonoff was the principal author of two major volumes of *Istoriya drevnego mira* (History of the Ancient World; see Diakonoff, 1982a), two volumes of *Istoriya drevnego Vostoka* (History of the Ancient East; see Diakonoff, 1983 and



1988), and of several other books devoted to the Ancient Near East, which lead to a better knowledge of the history, economy, and culture of this region and which help to understand the socio-psychological factors and the evolution of the earliest civilizations. One of these books is about the agrarian conditions in Assyria (Diakonoff, 1949). Another book of his is devoted to the formation of the society and state in Ancient Mesopotamia (Diakonoff, 1959). Besides, mention should also be made of his edition of a collective volume of studies by Soviet authors, entitled *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-Economic History. A Collection of Studies by Soviet Scholars* (Moscow, 1969), which contains a general survey of economic history of ancient Mesopotamia and its social institutions. This book was translated into Arabic and published in Baghdad in 1976.

Many publications of Diakonoff are devoted to history, economy, and social institutions of Iranian states in antiquity. He edited and studied an Akkadian inscription from *ca.* 1000 BCE, which was found on the territory of Media. It was engraved on both sides of a bronze plaque and states that a king named Shilisruh freed his subjects from certain taxes in kind. This inscription had been earlier published by [Ernst Herzfeld](#) (1879-1948), but Diakonoff brought more clearness into its understanding (Diakonoff, 1978a). Among his other works, of special interest is *Istoriya Midii ot drevneishikh vremen do kontsa 4 v. do n.è.* (History of Media from the earliest times until the end of the 4th century BCE; Moscow and Leningrad, 1956). This volume contains the first painstaking and comprehensive treatment of ancient history of the northwestern regions of Iran, allotting special attention to their ethnic composition as well as to the rise and fall of Media. For this book, Diakonoff used Assyrian, Babylonian, Urartian, Old Iranian (Persian cuneiform inscriptions and the Avesta), and also classical sources and archaeological evidence. In particular, when referring to [Herodotus](#) and other Greek authors, he considered that the term “Magus” was an ethnicon and did not designate a caste or a profession. But the Magi supplied the Medes with court priests as early as at least under the last Median king [Astyages](#), who was under some influence of the teaching of Zoroaster (see Diakonoff, 1965, pp. 374-75 and 392-400). Some ten years later, this book was translated into Persian and published in Iran as *Tāriḵ-e Mād* (tr. Karim Kešāvarz, Tehran, 1966). An abridged and updated version of this work can be found under the title “Media” in *The Cambridge History of Iran* (vol. 2, 1985). Many of Diakonoff's entries on Median history are published in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.



A number of his works is devoted to ancient Iranian studies. His article “The Origin of the ‘Old Persian’ Writing System and the Ancient Oriental Epigraphic and Annalistic Traditions” (Diakonoff, 1970a) is devoted to the study of the origin of the Old Persian script. In it, Diakonoff shows that the Old Persian inscriptions do not represent the spoken language of Persia, as it is known to us from the borrowings into the Elamite documents of the Persepolis archives, and consequently the language of these inscriptions was not used for practical purposes. He was inclined to assume that the so called “Old Persian” cuneiform writing system was created by the Medes long before the reign of [Darius I](#) (r. 522-486 BCE). He also considered various theories regarding the origin of the Old Persian cuneiform writing, including the role of the Mesopotamian cuneiform and the Aramaic scripts, as well as the role of the Elamite scribes (Diakonoff, 1970a, pp. 98-124). Much later Diakonoff returned to the same subject in his paper “O geterografii i ee meste v istorii razvitiya pis'ma” (On heterography and its place in the history of development of writing; see Diakonoff, 1986b). In this work he analyzes the Aramaic-Iranian heterography in comparison with the Sumerian and Akkadian writing systems and considers them important parallels to the Iranian writing system. When the Medes and the Persians started to create their state institutions, trained scribes could be found mostly among the Arameans. Yet, at the last stage of its development, the Aramaic writing system, used in the ancient Persian empires, became Iranian heterographic, because Aramaic words with Iranian inclusions were read in Iranian. Thus, in the 1st-2nd centuries CE at Nisa, the scribes used Aramaic standard administrative expressions, although they did not have any active knowledge of Aramaic.

Some of Diakonoff's articles deal with the history of eastern and central parts of Asia Minor during the 8th-6th centuries BCE, and his other works are devoted to the ancient cultures of Central Asia. In his article “Vostochnyĭ Iran do Kira” (Eastern Iran before Cyrus; see Diakonoff, 1971a), Diakonoff considered the problems of the origin and allocation of Iranian-speaking tribes in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Eastern Iran, as well as their history in pre-Achaemenid times, based on the Avestan tradition and in the context of archeological data. According to his opinion, pre-Avestan and Avestan cultures of pre-Achaemenid times should be located in Parthia, Margiana, [Bactria](#), and [Arachosia](#) and dated to the first half of the 1st millennium BCE. He assumed that the Indo-Iranian tribes separated from the Indo-Europeans some time in the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE and probably migrated from Central Asia via the valley of the Tejen-Harirud River and thence to Kandahar towards



India, and to Mašhad and Nišāpur towards Iran. He also considered probable the pre-Achaemenid existence of a regional confederation in *Drangiana*, where Zoroaster preached at the court of Vištāspa (see *GOŠTĀSP*) not later than in the 7th century BCE, while the Bactrian confederation existed approximately from 650 to 540 BCE (see Diakonoff, 1971a, pp. 122-54). In collaboration with his brother, Mikhail Diakonoff, and Vladimir Livshits, he participated in the decipherment and study of over two thousand ostraca which were discovered during archaeological excavations at Nisa in Turkmenistan in 1948-61. As these scholars have demonstrated, the above-mentioned ostraca contain economic documents written in Parthian but in Aramaic heterographic script. Later these texts were published by Diakonoff together with V. A. Livshits (Diakonoff, 1960) and then they were edited by *D. N. MacKenzie* (1926-2001) in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* (Diakonoff, 1976-2002).

His extensive memoirs, entitled *Kniga vospominaniĭ* (Book of reminiscences, St. Petersburg, 1995), contain a detailed biography and an account of his scholarly activities.

Several volumes in his honor were published, among them one in English: *Societies and Languages of the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honour of I. M. Diakonoff* (Warminster, 1982). A detailed bibliography of his works is available in *Istoriya i yazyki Drevnego Vostoka: pamyati I. M. D'yakonova* (History and languages of the Ancient Orient: in memory of I. M. Diakonoff; St. Petersburg, 2002, pp. 381-405). For obituary notices see M. Dandamayev and Ph. L. Kohl in *Anthropological News* 40/6 (September 1999, p. 47) and V. A. Yakobson and A. I. Pavlovskaya in *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 2000, no. 2 (pp. 5-17). Each year, the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg and the State Hermitage Museum organize conferences in commemoration of Diakonoff. Proceedings of one of such conferences were published under the title *Edubba vechna i postoyanna* (Edubba is everlasting; St. Petersburg, 2005).

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