The Qushbegi Chancellery: Paperwork as Heritage

UZBEKISTAN PATHWAYS · FREE READER GUIDE · BUKHARA / TASHKENT · 2 NOVEMBER 2026

A city can leave more than monuments

When people imagine the historical city of Bukhara, they often begin with buildings. A dome, a courtyard, a minaret or a fortified gateway seems to offer an immediate way into the past. Yet a piece of office paper can change what we think we know about the same city. A handwritten order may show which official could command another. A petition may tell us what an applicant wanted a government to recognize. An inventory may reveal what an office counted and what it did not. A diplomatic letter may disclose the subjects that an administration believed were worth communicating to another government.

The Qushbegi Chancellery of the Bukhara Emirate is an unusually rich place to practice that form of reading. Its value does not lie in the assumption that an official record is a complete account of life. The archive matters partly because it makes an authority's choices visible: what it wrote down, how it classified people and places, and which words it used to turn a claim into an administrative action. To read these papers carefully is to ask both *what does the document show?* and *whose experiences might not appear in it?*

This article offers a practical way to begin. It explains what the collection is, how to avoid common mistakes when interpreting a record, and how to build an original metadata card without pretending to have transcribed or translated a document that you have not seen. The example at the center is a real document described by UNESCO: an 1806 decree of Emir Haidar concerning appointment to the position of *qadi*, or judge. We will use only the information provided in the official caption, not invent the decree's wording or motives. [S1]

What is the collection, and what is it not?

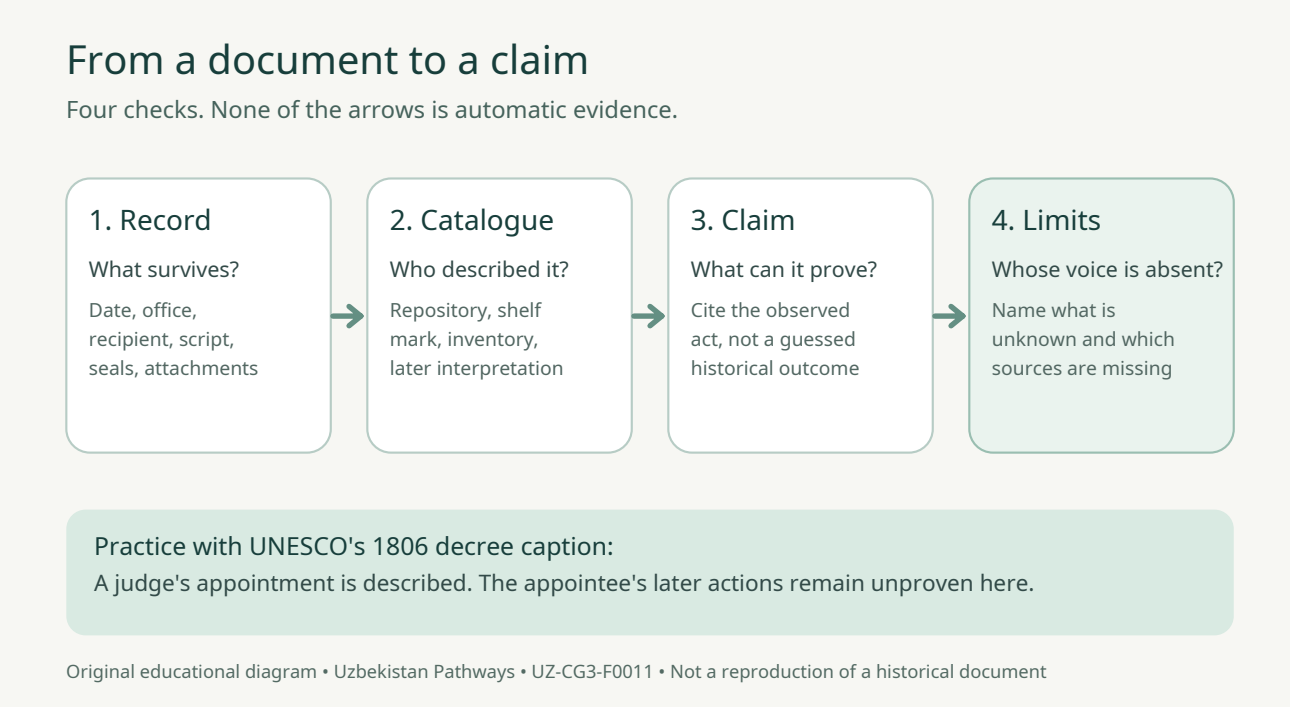
UNESCO registered **The Qushbegi Chancellery of the Bukhara Emirate** on its **Memory of the World International Register in 2023**; Uzbekistan submitted the nomination in 2021. UNESCO identifies the collection as archive **I-126**, housed in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Its description gives an approximate extent of **9,500 folders and about 200,000 separate items** and lists languages including Arabic, Persian, Uzbek Chagatai, Russian and others. It connects the holdings with political, social, economic and diplomatic activity in Bukhara and across territories that today belong to more than one country. [S1]

These figures are an inventory description, not a claim that a reader can presently access 200,000 digitized documents. A folder is not the same counting unit as a letter, sheet or separate document. Nor does the collection's international significance mean that a historical record is free of institutional bias. A document can be authentic and still contain a limited, mistaken or self-serving view of an event. **Authenticity asks whether the record is what it purports to be; historical interpretation asks what its contents can actually establish.**

Memory of the World is a programme for documentary heritage. It is not the same designation as the UNESCO World Heritage listing for the **Historic Centre of Bukhara**, which concerns a physical historic place. A paper collection kept in Tashkent and the architecture still standing in Bukhara should never

be presented as the same location or the same UNESCO inscription. [S1, S3]

The name *Qushbegi* refers to a high office in the emirate's administration. A chancellery is a working system of official communication and record keeping, not simply a building full of interesting calligraphy. The documents survived administrative changes, physical transfers, cataloguing decisions and conservation work. Their present ordering was shaped both by the historical office and by later archivists. That history makes the collection valuable, but it also means an individual record's physical neighbours in a modern box may not be the same documents that accompanied it when it was first written. [S2]



Original evidence-flow diagram. A catalogue description is not a substitute for an examined historical document.

Seven questions to ask before reading the first sentence

A record has at least two stories: the event or transaction it discusses, and the circumstances under which it became a record. Begin with the second. If a page contains beautiful handwriting, it is tempting to treat the text as a window we can simply look through. Resist that temptation. The first task is not translation. It is identification.

1. Which institution created or received it? A message from an emir's office is different from a response sent by a district administrator. A petition reaching a central office is evidence that a petitioner made a claim; it is not automatically evidence that officials granted the request. Separate author, sender, recipient and later copyist whenever a catalogue allows it.

2. What kind of document is it? A decree, tax register, diplomatic letter, legal deposition and archival summary are different genres. A decree describes an intended exercise of authority. A ledger records entries within a system of accounting. A petition offers the applicant's position. An archive's modern catalogue note is a later description of a historical object, not the historical object itself.

3. What are its dates? Distinguish the original document date from a copied version, subsequent endorsement, archival accession date and online catalogue update. A calendar system used in the record might require specialist conversion. A visually familiar Western year in a secondary description

does not prove that the same year appears on the sheet.

4. Which language, script and translation are in play? UNESCO describes several languages across the collection, not a single uniform language on every page. Arabic script can be used for different languages. A museum caption in English is a modern explanation, not necessarily a literal translation of an original text. Record uncertainty rather than guessing a language from the shape of the letters.

5. What is the physical and archival identifier? Start with the collection reference **I-126**, then seek the relevant inventory, folder and document identifiers. Without that smaller locator, a remark such as “the Bukhara archive says” may be too vague for another researcher to check. Ask whether the cited image represents a full document, a detail, a transcription or a later reproduction.

6. What did the document's author need the audience to believe? A request, an order and a report can be sincere while also being strategic. Someone might emphasize compliance, urgency, poverty, military necessity or their legal standing because of the person who would read it. The wording may reflect an administrative convention rather than a full account of what happened outside the office.

7. Who is absent? People who could not write to officials, whose concerns did not fit the office's categories, or whose testimony was recorded through an intermediary may be difficult to hear. The absence of a name is not proof that a person did not exist; it is evidence about the limits of what the surviving record identifies.

These questions work together. The genre explains why the sender wrote. The date helps place the action. The locator lets someone check the claim. The missing voices keep us from mistaking a government perspective for every resident's experience.

One real example: an appointment decree from 1806

UNESCO's collection page includes a photograph captioned **“Emir Haidar's yarligh (decree) to put Qadi (judge) position, 1806.”** The credit is to the National Archive of Uzbekistan. This gives us several genuinely useful facts: the object is presented as a decree, it is associated with Emir Haidar, its stated year is 1806, and its described subject concerns the position of *qadi*. [S1]

Now notice what that caption does **not** tell us. It does not supply the appointed person's full identity in an independently transcribed passage; it does not translate the full document; it does not describe the duties performed after appointment; it does not prove the appointment was universally accepted; and it does not tell us every community affected by the judge's decisions. We cannot safely fill those spaces with invented dialogue, political motives or courtroom anecdotes.

A cautious one-sentence description therefore reads: **“UNESCO illustrates the Qushbegi archive with an 1806 decree associated with Emir Haidar and appointment to a qadi position.”** That sentence is narrower than a dramatic story. Its advantage is that a second reader can trace each part of the claim to the stated source.

If a historian later examines a legible original and an authenticated translation, they might refine the account: which authority issued it, which jurisdiction was involved, which seals are present and how the document was received. Until then, those are research questions. A modern catalogue caption should remain a catalogue caption rather than being promoted into a complete primary-text transcription.

This distinction is especially important for images online. A visible seal may be part of official authentication, but an untrained reader should not identify its owner from appearance alone. A photograph may crop the reverse side, a marginal note or a register reference. Even where the historical document itself is old, the photograph, its arrangement and its descriptive metadata may have separate rights. This article reproduces no UNESCO or archival image and offers an original conceptual diagram instead.

A source card you can actually use

The following form is an original teaching aid. It is not a catalogue card supplied by the archive. The first sample contains only UNESCO-confirmed facts; the question marks deliberately remain open.

Metadata field	Cautious entry for the UNESCO-captioned example
Collection / repository	Qushbegi Chancellery, Central State Archive of Uzbekistan; collection I-126 [S1]
Item-level locator	**Not provided in the short UNESCO caption**; ask the archive or inspect the nomination and inventory
Reported item type	*Yarligh* (decree) [S1]
Issuing authority	Associated with Emir Haidar in the official caption [S1]
Described action	Appointment to a *qadi* (judge) position [S1]
Date	1806, according to the UNESCO caption [S1]
Original script / language	**Not established by the caption alone**
Named recipient / named appointee	**Not established by the caption alone**
Original wording	**Not transcribed or translated in this article**
Material evidence seen	Only the public caption and collection description consulted for this exercise
Open questions	Exact individual, jurisdiction, seals, additional dates, endorsements, completeness
Limits of conclusion	An appointment decree is described; actual subsequent enforcement is not demonstrated

Do not feel obliged to fill every blank. A good card that contains an honest “unknown” is more valuable than a confident card with invented facts. If you teach this exercise, ask learners to circle all fields supported only by the modern caption. Then ask what additional evidence would be required to move any open field into the “confirmed” column.

The diagram accompanying this manuscript illustrates a reading path: **physical record → archive description → research claim → limits of inference**. Every arrow represents a question, not an automatic guarantee. The reader should be able to identify what the archive supplied, what the editor added and what remains unknown.

The inventory tells us about the office, not everyone under its rule

The UNESCO nomination document gives a revealing outline of the collection's catalogued topics. It describes materials about state administration, diplomacy, taxes and rent, military matters, legal affairs, cultural ceremonies, public health, and religion and education. Its second-inventory summary provides numbers for some categories, including **522 files for economic matters**, **366 for diplomatic matters**, **147 for legal matters**, **29 for public health** and **80 for religion and education**. These numbers are reported in that inventory summary; they should not be mistaken for a complete, mutually exclusive census of all items or all historical experiences. [S2]

Consider the interpretive difference. A file classified as “taxation” may contain disputes and exemptions, not merely a neutral account of revenue. A “public health” file may tell us what administrators believed required action, but the small category count does not establish that disease was rare. A “diplomatic” file may illuminate correspondence between offices while remaining silent about how trade or warfare affected an individual household. The filing label tells you something about the administration's categories; it does not measure how important the issue was to the people who lived through it.

The collection's languages also complicate simple assumptions about identity. The nomination describes Persian, Arabic, Chagatai and Russian, among other languages, with various forms of official documentation. It would be misleading to assume that every item attributed to Bukhara was written in the same language, that every writer spoke only the language on the document, or that modern national boundaries map neatly onto an older administrative world. [S1, S2]

A safe teaching activity is to choose a *hypothetical* archive entry such as “request concerning an irrigation channel.” Ask students to distinguish four possible claims: (a) a request was made, (b) an official received it, (c) an order was issued, and (d) water actually reached a particular field. Even if an authentic petition verifies (a), it does not automatically verify (b), (c) or (d). Each step needs a different kind of evidence.

Documents have a life after their original purpose

A historical archive is not a perfect time capsule. The 2021 nomination recounts how the Qushbegi papers were recovered, reorganized and transferred through institutions after the emirate's political order ended. It describes documents found around the Bukhara Ark, later inventory and classification efforts, and the movement of holdings to archival institutions in Tashkent. The nomination also discusses obstacles caused by older bundles and evolving numbering systems. These are institutional accounts that should be read with the same attention to dates and evidence as the older papers themselves. [S2]

The history matters for three reasons. First, a later archive classification can make a topic easy to find without proving that the historical chancellery organized it in that way. Second, older historians may have cited identifiers that do not match a newer inventory directly. Third, the condition and sequence of documents can affect what survives to be quoted. A text lifted from a convenient digital description may appear complete even if the original had attached papers or endorsements.

The 2021 nomination said that access for scholarly use was governed by archival regulations, described microfilm access, and stated that a broader digitization programme was planned at that time. **Those are statements about the arrangement reported in 2021**, not a promise that a particular scan, reading-room appointment or website is available in November 2026. Contact the

responsible archive for current access conditions before travelling or requesting reproduction. The existence of an image on an informational UNESCO page does not give blanket permission to reproduce a larger archival collection in a commercial publication. [S2]

The geography needs the same care. Bukhara is the principal historical setting in this article; Tashkent is the stated present repository of the collection. A visitor standing beside a Bukhara monument has not, by that fact alone, visited the storage location of archive I-126. A map for this topic should therefore label **historic setting** separately from **current custody**, and avoid inventing a public-facing archive entrance, walking route or opening time.

Three ways to misread official paperwork

Mistake one: treating a request as an outcome. A petition might say that a farmer needed access to water. The authentic petition would establish that this claim was made in a certain context. It would not independently establish the later water distribution, the fairness of the allocation, or even the government's final decision. A follow-up ruling, an accounting entry and a local record might be needed to test different parts of the story.

Mistake two: treating official silence as social absence. Suppose a file on a ceremonial payment names only senior officeholders. It does not follow that households, craftspeople, women or children had no part in the wider occasion. Those groups might appear in other sources or not have left written accounts at all. A responsible writer names the evidentiary gap without inventing testimony to fill it.

Mistake three: treating a folder count as an estimate of historical frequency. If one category has fewer surviving folders than another, it might reflect filing rules, loss, consolidation, administrative priorities or later cataloguing. It is not by itself a rate of illness, the number of court cases or the relative importance of diplomacy in people's lives. Establish the counting unit and archival history before making comparisons.

There is a fourth, often overlooked temptation: making a document sound more accessible than it is. A polished English summary can hide difficult handwriting, specialist legal vocabulary, changing place names and competing transliterations. Where a writer has used a catalogue summary rather than the original, the citation should say so. That is not an embarrassment; it is how the next researcher knows where to begin.

An exercise: four levels of a claim

The following situation is **fictional**, designed only to practice evidentiary discipline. No actual Qushbegi document is alleged to contain it.

Practice scenario. A regional official writes to a central office asking for repairs to a bridge after seasonal flooding. A reader finds a modern catalogue line: “Correspondence concerning bridge repair.” A later summary describes an order for inspection, but no engineering report has been found. A photograph of a modern bridge in the area circulates online.

What can the student say? “An archival description reports correspondence about a bridge repair” would be reasonable if the catalogue was consulted. “The bridge was inspected” would require the actual order or reliable transcription. “The bridge was rebuilt” would require evidence of execution, such as a dated expense record or a contemporary observation. “Today's bridge is the same one” would require an independent chain of location and construction evidence. The photograph cannot substitute for those missing records.

A useful approach is to make four columns: **claim**, **source seen**, **source still needed**, **confidence**. Try writing one sentence in each column without overstating what has been viewed. The exercise teaches an important habit: more vivid prose is not necessarily more accurate prose. Often the strongest sentence is a precise description of a smaller fact.

Field guide for responsible quotation and visual use

When you encounter an attractive manuscript image, begin with its provenance, not its decoration. The UNESCO illustration can teach readers that a formal decree existed; it does not license a fabricated full translation. If an independent transcription is available, check who prepared it, whether there are variant readings, how uncertain names and dates are marked, and whether the original can be located by inventory reference. Keep the translator's interpretation separate from the issuing office's wording.

For reproductions, distinguish the historical artifact, the photographer's image, the archivist's descriptive record, and your own new explanatory artwork. Their rights and required credits may differ. The diagrams made for this article depict an evidence-checking method. They neither trace an archival photograph nor imitate the handwriting on an original page. If future editors add a documentary photograph, they must record the specific license or permission, archive credit, descriptive alt text, crop status and the exact document identifier. “Found on UNESCO” is not a sufficient rights statement.

If a teacher wants to use the article in a classroom, the strongest exercise does not require buying a reproduction or travelling to Uzbekistan. Students can work with the official collection description, the dated 1806 caption, and the blank metadata card. Ask one group to record everything they can prove. Ask another to list what remains open. Ask both to agree on a one-sentence caption. That collaboration shows how uncertainty can improve a publication rather than weaken it.

A compact twelve-point checklist

Before you cite a Qushbegi document, check the following: (1) named repository; (2) collection identifier; (3) item or folder identifier; (4) document genre; (5) author or issuing office; (6) recipient or intended audience; (7) date and its calendar; (8) language and script; (9) whether you saw an original, facsimile, catalogue, or translation; (10) what the document actually asserts; (11) what other evidence is needed to show a historical outcome; and (12) reproduction rights and credit. You may leave fields unknown, but do not silently replace them with guesses.

When a public account attributes an entire neighborhood's experience to one royal order, this checklist offers a practical correction. Which named item? Who was speaking? What relationship did the writer have with the decision? What would a competing account look like? The questions take time, but they allow a reader to enjoy Bukhara's history without mistaking an official voice for every voice.

Closing: an archive is a conversation, not a verdict

A document from the Qushbegi Chancellery can preserve a precise administrative act that would otherwise be lost. It can also preserve the assumptions and blind spots of the administration that produced it. UNESCO's 2023 recognition makes the scale and significance of the archive easier to discover; it does not remove the need to read one document at a time. [S1]

Begin with the shelf mark. Name the genre. Separate source from caption and caption from inference. Let a blank on the metadata card remain a blank until evidence fills it. Once you do that, the archive becomes more than a storehouse of old paper. It becomes a disciplined way of asking who wrote history in the course of doing government business—and whose perspectives historians must still seek

elsewhere.

Sources and verification notes

[S1] UNESCO Memory of the World, “The Qushbegi Chancellery of the Bukhara Emirate.” Official collection description, registration 2023, submission 2021, archive I-126, stated extent and languages; caption for Emir Haidar's 1806 decree. https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/qushbegi-chancellery-bukhara-emirate (consulted 2 November 2026). This is a collection-level description, not a translation of the decree.

[S2] Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, UNESCO International Memory of the World Register Nomination Form: The Qushbegi Chancellery of the Bukhara Emirate, signed 12 October 2021. Section 5 addresses rights/access; sections 6.2–6.5 describe the contents, inventories and later archival arrangement. https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mow001/63_52%252B.pdf (consulted 2 November 2026). The submission was written to support the nomination and should be described as such, not as an independent audit of every document.

[S3] UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Historic Centre of Bukhara.” A separate World Heritage property concerning the historic city, not the documentary collection. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/602/ (consulted 2 November 2026).