

ANCIENT SOGDIANA: A 'ZOROASTRIAN STRONGHOLD'¹



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The early presence of Zoroastrianism is biased towards the west of Iran, but it is known that the Avesta is not a South-western Iranian language. Thus the cradle of Zoroastrianism must be looked for to the east and north-east of Iran. The scripture Vendidad lists the lands created by Ahura Mazda, beginning with the mythical Airyana Vaejah, and continuing with the regions of Sogdiana, Margiana, Bactria, and others. In a Pahlavi text, Shahristaniha i Eran, a legend is reiterated that "the Avesta itself was preserved in the citadel of Samarkand, the capital of Sogdiana." (Nicholas Sims-Williams, Some Reflections On Zoroastrianism in Sogdiana and Bactria, IV Silk Road Studies).

Sogdiana (now located in the modern Central Asian states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) was conquered by Cyrus the Great in 540 BCE. According to scholars, Sogdian religious practice could be considered to be a polytheistic variant of Mazdaism, different from the later reformed

¹ The title is adapted from Dr. Mary Boyce's 'A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism,' Ratanbai Katrak Lecture 1975.

Zoroastrianism of the Persian Sassanians. Sogdian art depicted images of multiple gods, but these were sometimes altered to conform to an Iranian model. Among the identified deities portrayed are twenty three of Zoroastrian origin, including Sroasha, Verethragna, Anahita, Mithra, and 'Meh-Ahura.' The veneration of fire was common, and archeological findings have revealed places of worship where these deities were honored.

Dakhmas for exposing the dead in the traditional manner also existed in Central Asia, but under an Eastern Iranian variant, the bones after drying were preserved in clay urns, called ossuaries, decorated with pictures of the Amesha Spentas, and engravings depicting Zoroastrian beliefs. The ossuaries were deposited in a building, called naus, housing together deceased members of a family. The ossuaries are said to constitute an essential source of information on Central Asian Zoroastrianism.

Based on the author's visits in 2013 and 2014 to several archeological sites in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and joining Russian archeologists carrying out excavations in Panjikent and Hisorak (both in Tajikistan), the paper presents the findings of an extensive number of artifacts, documents, funerary items, temple structures, and coins indicating the practice of a variant form of Zoroastrianism from the 5th to 7th centuries CE.

Reference is also made to archeological findings in Western China, where many Sogdians arrived after the Arab invasion. Among the rich findings is a document found in Dunhuang which is considered to reveal a version of the Ashem Vohu prayer, the text of which is nearly 300 years older than any surviving Avestan manuscript.

The paper also briefly reports on the work of an Australian Professor and Archeologist who has recently found new evidence of Zoroastrian imagery in the ancient region of Khorezm, (Choresmia) in Uzbekistan. In 2014, her team pieced together the painting of a 'colossal figure' thought to be Sraosha, which is the earliest representation by five or six centuries of a well attested and purely Zoroastrian symbol. This finding, it is stated "should certainly provoke a re-evaluation of Khorezm's role in the history of Central Asian Zoroastrianism."

Introduction

From about the 7th century BCE, Iranian speaking people inhabited a large area of Central Asia, including a major swath of what is now known as the Silk Road. ²

2 For a geographical survey, see Xavier de Planhol, Cambridge History of Iran, vol.1, The Land of Iran (1968), and Sergey A. Yatsenko, Problems and Study Methods of the Ancient and Early Iranian-Speaking Peoples' Nishan-Signs, www.academia.edu. The term "Iran or Iranian World/Region" is also described as reaching "beyond the borders of the modern Islamic Republic ... to the region from the Hindu-Kush mountains in the East to the Zagros in the West and from Tranoxania in the North to the Persian Gulf in the South, which in the first millennium BCE was inhabited by Iranian-speaking tribes": Michael Shenkar, "Temple Architecture in the Iranian World before the Macedonian Conquest," in Iran and the Caucasus 11 (2007), p. 169, f. n. 1.

Among them were Sogdians, Bactrians, Khwarzamiens, Sakas, Parthians and Persians.



SILK ROUTES, EXPEDITIE ZIJDEROUTE, REIS NAAR HET WESTEN, SCHATTEN UIT DE HERMITAGE 21 (AMSTERDAM 2014).

Many of them were traders who transported goods from China and India to the Eastern Mediterranean. They were also responsible for the spread of such religions as Buddhism, Manicheism, Nestorian Christianity, and Zoroastrianism throughout the region. “Bactrians and Sogdians followed Zoroastrianism, as well as local religious practices.”³ Today I will present some of the evidence of the practice of Zoroastrianism in regions that were part of former “Eastern Iranian” lands in Central Asia.

I will concentrate on the ancient regions of Sogdiana and Bactria, now located in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with a southern flank in Northern Afghanistan.

³Touraj Daryaee, Khodadad Rezaekhani, Matteo Comparati, *Iranians on the Silk Road: Merchants, Kingdoms and Religions* 3 (2010).

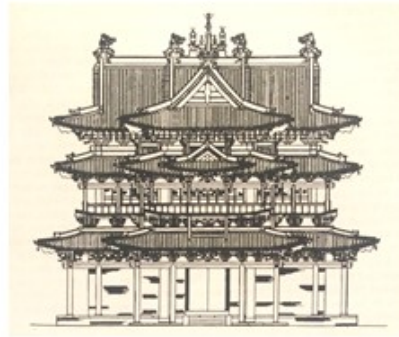
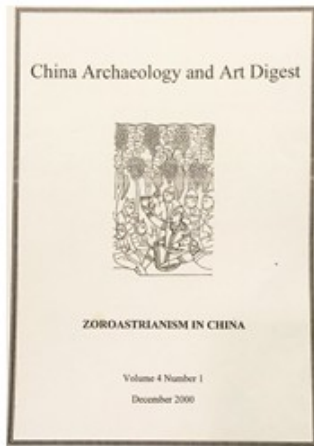


TAJIKISTAN

I visited Tajikistan in 2013 and 2014 and Uzbekistan in 2014, mainly to tour archeological sites. In Tajikistan I also had the opportunity to volunteer with a team of Russian archeologists at two ancient sites. Such sites continue to reveal organic findings of a rich religious and cultural tradition that ranks Zoroastrianism as one of the faiths practiced in the region.

In a way, though, my journey began many years prior to my actual visits. A few years ago, I had the pleasure of hosting a Parsi archeologist and her husband, who were interning at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Having aroused my interest in archeology, they left me with a parting gift which was an issue of a journal entirely devoted to 'Zoroastrianism in China.'⁴

4 4 China Archeology and Art Digest, No. 1 (December 2000).



LINE DRAWING BY CHAI ZEJUN OF ZOROASTRIAN TEMPLE, JIEXIU, SHANXI PROVINCE, CHINA

4 China Archaeology and Art Digest 85 (2000).

In it are ten lengthy research articles written by leading Chinese scholars under titles, such as, “Research on Zoroastrianism in China, 1923-2000”, and “Zoroastrian Art of the Sogdians in China,” The Digest noted that after the Arab conquest large numbers of Zoroastrians moved eastward to China where they were warmly received under the Tang Dynasty. Following two spectacular archeological discoveries in 1999 and 2000, religious iconography that had long been vaguely described as Buddhist was finally pronounced to be Zoroastrian. Another writer, after comprehensively tracing the name *Atar* or *Adar*, for fire, used in China at the time, sees it as providing “solid and direct evidence that the Zoroastrian faith had a native following in medieval northwestern China.”⁵ The Journal also notes that Zoroastrian Temples were established in several Tang capital cities, including one in Jiexiu, Shanxi province, a line drawing of which is shown.⁶

A Sogdian statue?

5 Sanping Chen (Ottawa), From Azerbaijan to Dunhuang – A Zoroastrianism Note, 47 Central Asiatic Journal, No. 2, 183-197, 193 (2003).

6 China Archeology, *supra*, note 4, 85. For a recent discussion of the presence of Zoroastrianism in China, see Kejia Yan, The Parsi Diaspora in Chinese Coastal Cities: The Variety and Continuity of Zoroastrianism in China (2013), abstract at: <http://ijas.asia/sites/default/files/Programme%20and%20Book%20of%20Abstracts%20-%20Asian%20Cities.pdf> (last visited , 9/15/2016). While discussing the continuing history of 250 years of the Parsi diaspora in Shanghai, the author notes the earlier Zoroastrianism of the ‘Sogdian Xianjiao’ that came from Central Asia.



A PERSIAN
RIDING A
HORSE, OR
A
ZOROASTRIAN
PRIEST?
CLAY STATUE,
8TH C., CHINA,
FONDAZIONE
TORINO MUSEI
(WSJ, SEPT 3,
2011)

Made in China during the latter part of the eighth century, an unusual Tang dynasty burial figure may be found in a museum in Turin, Italy. It is not known exactly as to who or what he is. For the moment, the museum has labeled him as "a Persian riding a camel or a horse." The Curator of Asian Art at the museum has noted that "at the height of the Tang period, the population of the imperial capital was about one million and, of these, at least a fourth were probably foreigners," many of whom were Sogdians."⁷

But the camel-rider interpretation is thought not to be entirely satisfactory. The foundation which acquired the statue at auction speculates that the mysterious man is probably a Zoroastrian priest feeding the sacred fire. The foundation points to the fact that Zoroastrian Sogdians had a visible presence in Tang China and that Zoroastrian priests wore a face cover during rituals to avoid polluting the fire with breath or saliva.⁸

The reach of Zoroastrianism into China merits a separate discussion, but I should also mention that the Chinese welcome ran out in the year 845 CE when Emperor Wuzong began the suppression of Zoroastrianism, along with the other Persian religions. Had Zoroastrianism survived in China, we can only wonder whether there would have been cause to write a Qisse-E-Chinn!

⁷ Lee Lawrence, A Mysterious Stranger in China, Wall Street Journal, Sept. 3, 2011.

⁸ *Id.*

Zoroastrianism in Eastern Iranian Lands

The Sogdians practiced, as one writer puts it a ‘largely unknown local form of Zoroastrianism.’⁹ So, it should be stated at the outset that the eastern Iranian variant of Zoroastrianism must be seen as separate from the later reformed and codified monotheistic faith of the Sassanians. The eastern form was largely independent of the Persian empires.¹⁰ “Early medieval Sogdians were familiar with Zarathustra, the prayers of the Avesta and the main deities, but their religion (like those of their neighbors) encompassed a mass of alien influences that did not pass the test of [Sassanian Priest] Kerdir’s strict rules.”¹¹ Sogdian archeology and research have revealed features that sometimes agree with Zoroastrian books and sometimes depart drastically from them.¹² The Sogdians venerated fire and had fire altars in temples and in private homes. Hsuan-tsang, a Chinese monk, who in the 7th century CE undertook a 17-year journey (629–645) through Central Asia to India, noted that in Samarkand, the capital of Sogdiana, “The king and the people do not believe in the law of Buddha, but their religion consists in sacrificing to fire.”¹³ It should also be noted that many of Central Asia’s historical regions, its rivers and mountains are mentioned in the Avesta.¹⁴

Moreover, the veneration of fire was not their only form of Zoroastrianism. In their places of worship many deities were honored. For example, a Sogdian temple named Bagina – meaning the dwelling place of God, shows signs of the worship of many statues of Iranian origin. This clearly indicates that in eastern

9 Matteo Compareti: <http://isaw.nyu.edu/people/alumni/scholars-2013-2014/matteo-compareti> (last visited 4/13/2015).

10 Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran, Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* 318 (2012).

11 Pavel Lurje, *Other Religions On The Silk Road, In Expedition Silk Route, Journey to the West, Treasures from the Hermitage, Hermitage Amsterdam* 72 (2014).

12 Crone, *supra* note 10, at 317.

13 Richard Foltz, *When Was Central Asia Zoroastrian?* 38 *Mankind Quarterly* 189 (1998). *Also see* Gustav Glaesser, *Painting in ancient Pjandzikent*, 8 *East and West*, No. 2, 199 (July 1957).

14 *Expedition Silk Road, supra* note 11, 22.

Iranian lands, the cult of images was not subject to the taboo of Sassanian Zoroastrianism.¹⁵

Ahura Mazda, referred to as Khurmazta Bagh, was among the many deities worshipped.¹⁶ In one Sogdian temple there were images of at least ten different ones, and a room with a separate entrance that housed a statue of Shiva sitting on a bull.¹⁷ They also worshipped a Mother Goddess, Anahid - Anahita in Persia;



ANAHITA, TERRACOTTA
FIGURINE, SANJAR SHAH
SITE, NEAR PANJIKENT,
TAJIKISTAN

[http://www.exploration-
eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/frameset_projekt_5.html](http://www.exploration-
eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/frameset_projekt_5.html)

Zarvana, also called the “king of gods”; Washeghn or Verethragna, the god of victory; Nanaiya, a Mesopotamian or Elamite goddess whose cult had spread among Zoroastrians, and others known to the Iranian world.¹⁸ There also was a

¹⁵ Foltz, *supra* note 13; Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* 50 (2011); III *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, The Crossroads of Civilizations, A.D. 250 to 750*, 401(UNESCO 1966).

¹⁶ Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road, A New History* 118 (2012).

¹⁷ *Id.* 122.

¹⁸ Golden, *supra* note 15.

widespread devotion to idols made of wood or clay, bedecked with jewels or precious stones. One 6th century wooden idol on display in the National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan is identified as the 'God Mehr-Ahura'.¹⁹



'MEHR-AHURA'. WOOD. KUHI SURH, AINI DISTRICT, TAJIKISTAN 6th century

THE ALBUM 173
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
ANTIQUITIES OF TAJIKISTAN
(2005)

A line drawing of the idol in full regalia is also on display.



'MEHR-AHURA'
IN FULL
REGALIA, WITH
REGAL CROWN
AND STAFF WITH
WARDER HEAD

NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
ANTIQUITIES,
TAJIKISTAN
(2013)

While the corpses of the dead were exposed to the elements in the traditional Zoroastrian manner, the bones after being picked clean were collected in clay urns, called ossuaries. Engravings on some ossuaries document the belief that the

19 The Album, National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, 173.

bones would be reconstituted on judgement day.²⁰ Dr. Franz Grenet, a renowned archeologist and scholar on Central Asia has stated that “ossuaries in many ways are an essential source of information on [Central Asian] Zoroastrianism.”²¹ A 7th century ossuary from Mullakurgan, near Samarkand, is on display in the Afrasiab Museum in Samarkand²²



CERAMIC OSSUARY,
MULLAKURGAN
SAMARKAND
REGION
7-8th CENTURY

AFRASIAB MUSEUM
UZBEKISTAN

www.heritageinstitute.com

It depicts a Zoroastrian ceremony showing a *zot*, the main priest, holding a short *barsom* stick and kneeling on the ground while reciting the Gathas. The ossuary’s peaked lid creates a heavenly scene in Paradise. The ossuaries were also

²⁰ Id. 123.

²¹ Franz Grenet, The Silk Road, Central Asia and China, in *The Everlasting Flame, Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* 98 (Ed. Sarah Stewart, 2014).

²² Id., 100.

deposited in a small rectangular over-ground burial chamber, known as a *naus*, for together housing the deceased members of a family. The ossuaries were set deep into the wall.²³



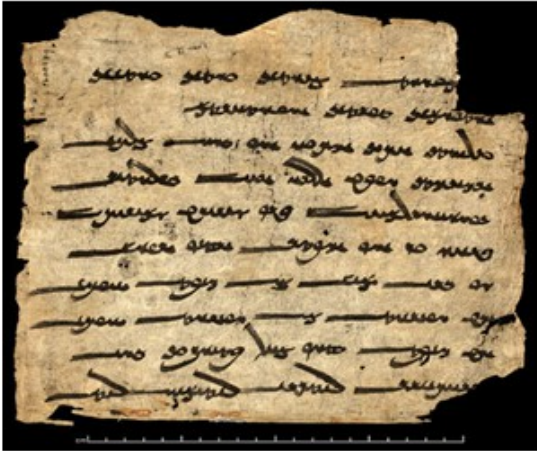
BURIAL NAUS, REPOSITORY FOR FAMILY OSSUARIES
PANJIKENT, TAJIKISTAN (2014)

Despite the inclusion of non-Zoroastrian divinities among the Sogdian gods, the influence of Zoroastrianism cannot be disputed.²⁴ The historian Al-Biruni, and other Arabic writers, considered Sogdians to be Zoroastrian. The Sogdians probably regarded themselves as such. That it was the traditional religion of Sogdiana is also reflected in a fragment of a rare document which was part of the discoveries made by a famous British-Hungarian archeologist, Sir Aurel Stein, who in the early 1900s travelled from India to China and brought back a large number of manuscripts. Many of these are to be found at the British Library. Line three onwards of one document describes a scene in which a supreme god, presumably Ahura Mazda, is paid homage by Prophet Zarathushtra “from the left knee to the right, from the right knee to the left” and addressed as “O God, beneficent law-maker, justly-deciding judge.”²⁵

23 The Album, *supra* note 19, 153.

24 History of Civilizations of Central Asia, *supra* note 15, at 250, citing Henning.

25 The Silk Road, Trade Travel, War and Faith, Eds. Susan Whitfield with Ursula Sims-Williams 118 (2004), published on the occasion of the exhibition at the British Library in 2004.



'ZARATHUSHTRA
FRAGMENT' 9th

C.
THE SILK ROAD' 118 (Eds.
Susan Whitfield with Ursula
Sims Williams, 2004)

Sogdian Version of
Ashem Vohu
Prayer (1st two
lines)

The British Library
[http://idp.bl.uk/data
base/oo_loader.a4
d?pm=Ohr.8212/8
4](http://idp.bl.uk/data/base/oo_loader.a4d?pm=Ohr.8212/84)

The preceding two lines of the fragment remarkably present a version of the Ashem Vohu prayer. This text is nearly 300 years older than any surviving Avestan manuscript. Moreover, as Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams, the foremost scholar on the Sogdian language has explained, the text is not in standard Sogdian or Avestan, but in an Old Iranian language dating back to Achaemenian times.²⁶

Speaking of the Achaemenians, it was Cyrus the Great who conquered Sogdiana in 540 BCE. Sogdians were therefore represented in a series of tablets that were discovered in the foundations of a palace constructed by King Darius I in Susa. Called the Charters of Susa, these tablets describe the conditions under which the palace was built and enumerate the materials furnished by the various provinces of the Achaemenid Empire.²⁷ One tablet stated that “the rare stones of lapis lazuli [blue gemstone with pyrites which shimmer like stars] and carnelian [a glassy translucent stone]... were brought from Sogdiana.” Historical references to Sogdiana are also found in the inscriptions at Behistun and at Naksh-e Rostam in Iran.²⁸ I should also note that the third son of the Achaemenian Emperor,

26 Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Some Reflection on Zoroastrianism in Sogdiana and Bactria,” in *Realms of the Silk Road, Ancient and Modern*, Silk Road Studies IV, pp. 1-12 (2000).

27 Etienne de la Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders, A History* 18 (2005).

28 Richard Frye, “Sughd and Sogdians: A Comparison of Archeological Discoveries with Arabic Sources”, 63 *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, pp. 14-16 (1943).

Artaxerxes I, was named Sogdianus, the other sons being Darius II and Xerxes II.²⁹The Sassanians, too, temporarily occupied southern regions of Tajikistan.³⁰ As heirs to the Achaemenians, the Sassanians had set themselves the aim of restoring 'Iranian might.'³¹

Avestan gahambar were also celebrated as religious feasts in Central Asia.³² Al-Biruni records a feast on the 15th day of [the month of *Basakanaj*] the 4th month of the Sogdian year, that let people again eat leavened bread after having abstained from eating or drinking anything that had been touched by fire. At a mid-year holiday, people gathered at the temples and ate a special dish made of millet, butter and sugar.³³

Archeologists and Scholars

Before moving on to specific sites of archeological wonder in Sogdiana and Bactria, a few words about the men and women who are literal ground breakers in making major discoveries from excavations deep in the rough terrains and sands of Central Asia. A large bulk of the extensive archeological work in Central Asia has been carried out by Russian archeologists and scholars since the 1860s.³⁴ Their findings remained little known in the West given the lack of collaboration with western archeologists. It was only after the end of the Cold War that there was a dramatic increase in collaborative research and excavation activities in the former Soviet Republics, now independent states in Central Asia.³⁵ Nowadays, teams from many countries conduct major archeological research throughout Central Asia.

29 Lindsay Allen, *The Persian Empire* 4, 102 (2005).

30 *The Album*, *supra* note 19, 23.

31 *Expedition Silk Road*, *supra* note 11, 24.

32 *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, *supra* note 15, 255.

33 Golden, *supra* note 15.

34 B.A. Litvinskij, *Archeology in Tadzikistan under Soviet Rule*, 18 *East and West*, 125-146 (1968).

35 Lamberg-Karlovsky, C.C., *The Oxus Civilization: The Bronze Age of Central Asia*, 68 *Antiquity*, No. 259, June 1994.

King Devastich

So let's move to present day Tajikistan, to the towns of Panjikent, seventy or so kilometers northwest of the capital, Dushanbe (Dushanbe, of course, meaning Monday in Persian). On display in a central square of the modern town is a tall statue of a warrior sitting astride a horse.



DEVASTICH
LAST 'KING OF
SOGDIANA'

STATUE IN TOWN
SQUARE, PANJIKENT,
TAJIKISTAN
(2014).

This is a very interesting figure, who claimed to be the last King of Sogdiana, and who in his way struggled against the invading Arabs. The intriguing name, DEVAstich, puzzlingly bespeaks of demons in Zoroastrian mythology.

In 1933, local people found close to a hundred ancient documents on nearby Mt. Mugh.



MT. MUGH,
TAJIKISTAN

KING
DEVASTICH'
S LAST
STAND, 722
CE
(2014)

Ninety three of the documents written on paper and leather were in the Sogdian language, while three were in Chinese, and only one in Arabic. They have been identified to have been written during the period 709 – 722 CE. The letter in Arabic was from Devastich to the Arab Governor of Khurasan. In it he deferentially refers to himself as a Mawla (thus indicating the acceptance of Islam) and offers to send the sons of the previous ruler of Samarkand for safekeeping. Yet, in another letter written in the summer of 721, Devastich speaks of an alliance of a large army of Turks and Chinese rising against the Islamic forces. The historian al-Tabari chronicles the capture by the Arabs of the fortress at Mt. Mugh and the defeat of Devastich. He is reported to have sought safe passage from the Arab commander who initially granted it, but who later reneged. In the words of another author, the commander “slew Devastich, crucifying him on a [Zoroastrian] burial building [naus].”³⁶ His head was sent to the region of present day Iraq and his left hand to a Muslim ruler in Tokharistan. Later, however, the Arab commander was dismissed for the gruesome treatment of Devastich.

I had the opportunity to ascend Mt. Mugh, in the company of our expedition leader, “Pasha”, Dr. Pavel Lurje, an accomplished archeologist from the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, and a scholar whose writings are cited multiple times in this paper. He heads an annual archeological expedition to Tajikistan and has excavated various sites there for nearly twenty years. On top of Mt. Mugh, Pasha brought technology to this ancient site by flying a camera mounted drone to take aerial views of the fort.

Ancient Panjikent

³⁶ Valerie Hansen, *supra* note 16, 136.



PANJIKENT ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE, TAJIKISTAN, 5th - 7th centuries CE
AERIAL VIEW FROM DRONE FLOWN BY DR. PAVEL LURJE, 2014

Among the ruins of the archeological site of Panjikent, there were two temples co-existing, built side by side during the first half of the 5th century C.E.³⁷ Temple I contained a four-columned *atesh gah* which had a fire altar and on its side a prayer room with a “water container for ablutions.”³⁸ The expansions made to the Temple in the second phase of its existence were in conformity with the temple architecture of Sasanian Iran. In the decorations in Temple I, two deities have been identified: Mithra and Druwasp, the protectress of horses. A painting shows a ceremony around a fire altar,



PAINING IN
PANJIKENT
TEMPLE

NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
ANTIQUITIES,
TAJIKISTAN
(2013)

37 Franz Grenet and Samara Azarnouche, “Where Are the Sogdian Magi?” 21 Bulletin of the Asia Institute 159, 160 (2007).

38 Id. 163. Further according to Pasha, a separate room was used for storing an aromatic wood from apricot trees.

and another scene depicted the temporary success and eventual defeat of Zahak, the demon with snakes emanating from his shoulders.³⁹ In a separate location, a semi-circular tympanum, a decoration placed over an entrance, was found. In the bottom center of the tympanum is the image of Zahak.⁴⁰



CARVED TYMPANUM, CLAY, BUNJIKANT, TAJIKISTAN, 8th c - 9th c. THE ALBUM 176, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF TAJIKISTAN (2005)



FIGURE OF ZAHAK IN TYMPANUM, BUNJIKANT, TAJIKISTAN, 8th c -9th c. THE ALBUM 176, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF TAJIKISTAN (2005).

In a chapel attached to Temple I are two scenes depicting seasonal festivals, one showing some persons pouring water on each other (could it be the water festival of Tirgan?) and a Fravardigan scene showing banqueters seated with yellow flowers in their caps, a funerary celebration still practiced in the mountains of Tajikistan. Later, there was a house attached to the southeast corner of the

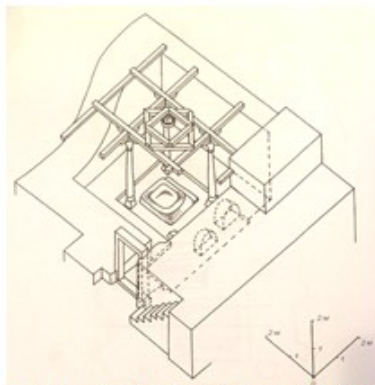
39 Id. 164.

40 The Album, *supra* note 19, 176.

Temple which Dr. Grenet claims to be “not too daring to identify” as the lodging of the *moghu pat* of Panjikent. Sherds of pottery bearing the alphabet also indicate that the temple housed a primary school.⁴¹

Upon the conquest of Panjikent in 722 CE by the Arabs, the Zoroastrian Temple I was set on fire, while Temple II was saved.⁴² Later, however, the ruins of Temple I were used for performing a ceremony referred to as the “Baresnum [gah] of the nine nights” as evidenced by nine pits found on the side of the courtyard.⁴³

Both these Temples have been extensively surveyed by Dr. Valentine Shkoda an archeologist and scholar of the cultural history of Central Asia. In 2009 he published a book in Russian on “Penjikent Temples and the Problem of Sogdian Religion.”⁴⁴ In a comprehensive study with a large number of drawings, Shkoda claims that Temple I is “undoubtedly Zoroastrian in origin” and “combined fire-worship and the veneration of divine images.” A line drawing in the book recreates the Atashgah in Temple I, with a staircase connecting to the main building.⁴⁵



LINE DRAWING OF ATASH GAH, TEMPLE I, PANJIKENT, TAJIKISTAN. Valentin Shkoda
'The Temples Of Pendjikent' 172, The State Hermitage Publishers (2009)

41 Shkoda, *The Temples of Panjikent* 153 (St. Petersburg Hermitage Publishers, 2009).

42 Grenet and Azarnouche, *supra* note 37, 164.

43 *Id.* at 166, Fig. 8.

44 Shkoda, *The Temples of Panjikent* (St. Petersburg Hermitage Publishers, 2009).

45 *Id.* Fig. 17.

During our visit in 2014, Pasha put out the word that repairs were needed for a part of the Temple which had suffered damage during the previous winter. The Zoroastrians in our group readily raised a contribution for the repair.⁴⁶



REPAIRING PANJIKENT TEMPLE, PHOTO PROVIDED BY DR. PAVEL LURJE, STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA (2014).

One of the murals in Temple I is that of the legendary hero Rustom, found in an eponymously named room. The mural is now housed in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. It is acknowledged that “[A]n Iranian strain, originating in Sassanian Iran, runs through all the art of Central Asia.”⁴⁷ Included among the murals is one depicting a duel between Rustom and the knight Avlod, who the hero takes prisoner with a lasso. Others show Rustom slaying a dragon, and the war with the Dev, half-animal demons.

46 My second visit to Tajikistan in 2014 was in the company of Dr. Dolly Dastoor, from Montreal, and Shahdokht and Jimmy Dholoo of Gaithersburg, Maryland. Shahdokht and Jimmy also toured Uzbekistan with me.

47 Albert Skira, *Central Asian Painting, From Afghanistan to Sinkiang*, text by Prof. Mario Bussagli 43 (1979).



RUSTOM
SLAYING A
DRAGON,
PAINTING,
PANJAKENT
TEMPLE,
TAJKISTAN
(8th-9th c.
CE)
HERMITAGE
MUSEUM,
ST.



Close to Panjikent is a necropolis around which several *naus*, as previously mentioned, have been excavated. These structures housed the ossuaries containing the bones of deceased. Across from the necropolis are thought to be the remains of buildings that housed professional body washers. The handling of the corpses being restricted to small groups of professional people has been attested to in 7th century Sogdiana.⁴⁸

Before passing on to another Sogdian site, I would like to make a personal note relating to the Panjikent Temples. During the visit in 2013, after a day's work of digging and clearing a *sufa* [a mud platform], I revisited the remains of the

48 D.A. Scott, Zoroastrian Traces Along the Upper Amu Darya (Oxus), *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 2, pp. 217, 219 (1984).

Temples. On the way back my companion and I picked up some interesting looking stones that we showed to Pasha. Later, after I had returned to the U.S., Pasha delivered some surprising news:

“By the way, at a closer look at the terracotta figurine ... found in the temple area, I realized that it was the known image identified as Sraosha/Srosh. The position of Sraosha on such figurines is explained as “binding kusti.”⁴⁹



'SROASHA BINDING KUSTI', TERRACOTTA, DRAWING OF FIGURINE FOUND NEAR PANJIKENT TEMPLES, 2013 (left), PREVIOUS FINDINGS (1st & 2nd right)

Commenting on the last days of the Sogdian civilization, an encyclopedia of archaeology appropriately notes: “[E]xcavations of the town [of Panjakent] undertaken uninterruptedly by Russian archeologists from the end of World War II onwards, have yielded very few written documents. But they have exceeded expectations in all other ways and count among the great adventures of recent times in the important rediscovery of the Middle Ages.”⁵⁰

I can certainly attest to the sense of adventure in twice visiting Panjakent, sometimes called the ‘Pompei of the East’.

49 E-mail from Pasha to author, dated July 30, 2013, with attached line drawings of the terracotta figurine. The find is recorded in the Materials of the Panjakent Archeological Expedition, Report on the Field Work, (7th edition) (as translated from Russian) Fig. 108 (3). A clay cooking pot, 7-8th centuries, excavated by the author at another archeological site, Hisorak, is shown on page 260. For a separate account of the author’s first journey to Tajikistan in 2013, see “Finding Sroasha Tying A Kusti In Sogdiana,” Parts I & II, Hamazor (a publication of the World Zoroastrian Organization), 2014, No.1, 28-31; 2014, No.2, 31-34.

50 The World Atlas of Archeology 234 (Portland House, New York, 1985).

As to fire temples generally in Central Asia, more of them are reported to have been discovered in Eastern Iran than in Western.⁵¹ Three such temples, known as ‘Togolok-1’, ‘Togolok-21’, and the ‘fire temple of Gonur’ were excavated in Margiana in Turkmenistan, thought to date back to 1000 BCE. The excavator of the temples was an Uzbek-Russian-Greek archeologist by the name of Victor Sarianidi.⁵² Based on the presence of a sacred fire and the use of haoma, he claimed that the structures were “proto-Zoroastrian temple(s) of the Indo-Iranian, Aryan tribes.” This claim has been criticized on the ground that rituals concerning fires, involving the haoma, were a part of the common Indo-Iranian heritage and not specific to Zoroastrianism.⁵³ But, I am pleased to note that our distinguished keynote speaker today, Dr. Jamsheed K. Choksy, based on the available evidence has postulated that the ritual room at Togolok-21, may have been “a pre-Zoroastrian or even a very early Zoroastrian *atarshgatu* [fire temple]”.⁵⁴

Two Sogdian Documents

Turning briefly to a couple of written documents found on Mount Mugh, among them is an interesting marriage contract written in Sogdian in the year 710 CE.

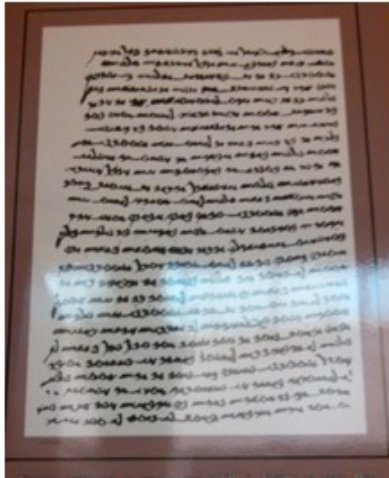
51 Shenkar, *Temple Architecture*, *supra* note 2, at 169.

52 In 1977, Sarianidi coined the phrase “Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex” (BMAC) to encompass the original materials he uncovered in northern Afghanistan (southern Bactria) in the late 1960s and 1970s: Review of Frederik Talmage Hiebert’s ‘Origins of the Bronze Age Oasis Civilization in Central Asia’ (1994), by Christopher Eden, 301 *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 91 (Feb., 1996).

For a fuller discussion of the extent and nature of the BMAC, see Willem Vogelsang, *The Afghans*, chapter 5, *Archaeology and the Indo-Iranians*, 66-80 (2002).

53 Shenkar, *supra* note 2, at 171.

54 Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Reassessing The Material Contexts Of Ritual Fires In Ancient Iran*, 42 *Iranica Antiqua* 229-269, at 261 (2007). For another article, see Dr. Choksy’s extensive analysis of how the ritual settings for fire altars and fire temples have endured and changed: *Altars, Precincts, and Temples: Medieval and Modern Zoroastrian Praxis*, 44 *Iran* 327-346 (*British Institute of Persian Studies*, 2006).



SOGDIAN MARRIAGE CONTRACT
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES,
TAJIKISTAN
(2014)

In it the husband accepts his obligations, and states: “And, Sir, by Mithra, I shall neither sell her nor pawn her.”⁵⁵ The contract shows a strict reciprocity of obligations in that each party can end the marriage under similar circumstances. In the event that the marriage ends at either party’s instigation, the husband promises to return the wife to her guardian, and to pay a fine of one hundred dirhams if he fails to return her unharmed to the guardian’s family. Another contract is for the rent of a burial place, a mud built *eskase*- a burial well, for two brothers for twenty five dirhams. It is thought that since no burial wells have been found in Sogdiana, *eskase* may refer to the *naus* structure.⁵⁶

Also found at Mt. Mugh were 23 small wooden sticks made of willow with writings recording household expenditures.

55 Hansen, *supra* note 16, at 134. Scholars have debated that “by god Mithra” should be translated as “by God [that is, Ahura Mazda] and Mithra.” *Id.* footnote 76.

56 *Id.*



SOGDIAN WRITING, HOUSEHOLD ACCOUNTS, WILLOW STICK, PANJIKENT MUSEUM, TAJIKISTAN (2014)

One stick marks the payment of fifty dirhams to a Zoroastrian priest, while another notes an expenditure of only fifteen dirhams for both a doctor and a wine pourer.⁵⁷ Our Mobeds would be thrilled if the higher regard for their services were the norm today.

Sanjar Shah, Tajikistan

The site of Sanjar Shah, its modern name, is located 12 km from Panjikant. To the south of the village, is a 7 to 8 m high, rectangular citadel. The surrounding walls are well preserved above ground. Inside the citadel, the remaining walls indicate living quarters and possibly a Zoroastrian temple. The site is tentatively dated from the 7th to 8th centuries CE.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 132.

⁵⁸ [http://www.exploration-
eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/frameset_projekt_5.html](http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/frameset_projekt_5.html); [http://www.exploration-
eurasia.com/EurAsia/pictures/09SanjarShah.pdf](http://www.exploration-
eurasia.com/EurAsia/pictures/09SanjarShah.pdf) (last visited 9/21/2016).



SANJAR SHAH CITADEL, POST-RESTORATION (2014)



SANJAR SHAH CITADEL, PRE-EXCAVATIONS

http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/Inhalt_english/frame5et_projekt_5.html

According to a local tradition, the natives of a nearby settlement along a river known as the Magian-darya – “the River of the Magi”- are identified by the same name and are considered to be descendants of Zoroastrian priests.⁵⁹

A Tajik archeologist, Dr. Sharofuddin Kurbanov, a Research Fellow in the Archaeology Department of the Academy of Scientists in Tajikistan, who headed the excavations, proudly displayed to us a garment found in the structure. It is a child’s dress made of cotton, dating from 5th – 7th centuries CE. To my untrained eye, it has some similarity to the Parsi *Dagli*.⁶⁰

59 *Id.*

60 *Id.* The dress is in the collection of the Rudaki State Museum of Panjikent, Tajikistan.



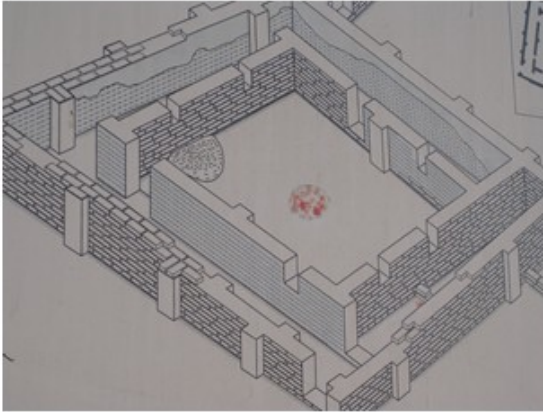
CHILD'S GARMENT, SANJAR SHAH, 5th-7th CENTURIES CE
http://www.exploration-eurasia.com/EurAsia/inhalt_english/frameset_projekt_5.html

Sarazm, Tajikistan

About 15 kms. west of Panjikent is another archeological site called Sarazm. A chance discovery in 1976 of a bronze axe led to the revelation of an ancient settlement dating back to 3500 BCE. Continuously occupied through four periods, the site reveals the remains of adobe buildings comprising dwellings, workshops, storage areas, palatial buildings and religious structures. The town had connections to the west with Turkmenistan, to the northeast with the Eurasian steppe, to the southwest with the Persian plateau and to the south with Bactria, Baluchistan and the Indus valley. It was an important center for tin, bronze, copper and lead and for manufactured goods such as ornaments, ceramics and tools.

Excavations at thirteen different locations show an extensive settlement. During the second period of the settlement ending around 2900 BCE, rooms in houses were found to have small domestic shrines, with round hearth-altars in the middle.⁶¹ In the third period, the shrines became larger, with square and round hearth-altars. In some cases, the shrines were separately located from the houses.

⁶¹ Tajikistan, Nomination to the World Heritage List of Sarazm, whc.unesco.org UNESCO Advisory Evaluation, 1141 rev.pdf



FIRE ALTAR,
LINE
DRAWING,
SARAZM
(2013)

Excavation at the eleventh location revealed a temple with a central room, with a fire altar in the center with remains of ashes, which could have been a place for sacrificial offerings. In the subsequent excavation a complex of temples was revealed suggesting that the hearth-altars were used for ritual purposes. In its successful application to UNESCO to list Sarazm as a World Heritage Site, Tajikistan noted that the practice of the veneration of fire could be regarded as belonging to a “pre-Mazdaeism substratum.” “The Avestic literature mentions Sogdiana, and Sarazm provides the natural setting for the evolution of Zoroastrianism from Indo-Iranian traditions”, it claimed.⁶² In honor of our arrival, the supervising archeologist, Dr. Abdurauf Razzokov, lit a small fire on one of the ancient altars.⁶³

⁶² *Id.*, at 12.

⁶³ For a further description of Sarazm and the following site of Takhti Sangin, see the author’s “Zoroastrian Traces’ in Two Ancient Sites in Bactria and Sogdiana: Takhti Sangin and Sarazm,” 28 FEZANA Journal 38-41 (Summer 2014).



FIRE ALTAR,
SARAZM,
TAJIKISTAN

A FIRE LIT IN HONOR
OF VISITORS

(2013)

Takhti Sangin, Southern Tajikistan, in Bactria

Towards the end of our visit, we travelled south from Dushanbe and arrived at a southernmost tip of Tajikistan along its border with Afghanistan. This is the area in which the famous Oxus treasures from Achaemenian times, now in the British Museum, were probably found at the nearby site of Takhte Qubod.



GOLD CHARIOT

OXUS
TREASURES
ACHAEMENIAN
PERIOD
IN BRITISH
MUSEUM

blogs.fco.gov.uk

Here also are the remains of a temple with Greco-Persian features. Takhti Sangin (“the stone platform”) is a sanctuary from the 3^d century BCE, predominantly Iranian influenced, but with Greek features.



TAKHTI SANGIN, OXUS TEMPLE, TAJIKISTAN
LOOKING TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

Two *atashgahs* have been identified in the corridors to which pits were dug in floors for depositing ashes. The Oxus Temple is named after the nearby river Oxus, or Vakhshas, now known as the famous Amu Darya of Central Asia. The temple was constructed in the 3rd century BCE, and a stone altar supporting a bronze figure playing a double flute was found, bearing the inscription in Greek “Atrosokes dedicated his vow to the Oxus.”⁶⁴ The altar is stated to vividly embody the synthesis of Greco-Bactrian culture. Atrosokes was the local priest of the fire, whose name stems from ancient Iranian, signifying “blazing (or sacred) fire” or “useful to the god of fire.”⁶⁵

According to Willem Vogelsang, the area of Takhti Sangin is the land of the *Saka Haumavarga*, who are probably identified as the “*Haoma*-using (?) Sakas of the Persian Achaemenid sources.”⁶⁶ The Sakas were known to the Greeks as Scythians.

64 B.A. Litvinskiy and I. R. Pichikiyan, *The Temple of the Oxus*, *Journal of the Royal Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 2 (1981), pp. 133-167, 153.

65 *Id.*

66 Vogelsang, *supra* note 52, 109, 103.

The Pamir Region and the Ismailis



PAMIRS, TAJIKISTAN

The ventures into Tajikistan could be said to have ended at Takhti Sangin, but a literary detour to the far eastern regions of the country reveals a further connection to an early Zoroastrian civilization. The high Pamir Mountains are sometimes also called *Bomi Jahon* (the roof of the world). Many scholars interpret the name Pamir as being *Poi Mehr*, meaning the foot of Mithra. Many faiths and beliefs co-existed in the Pamirs for centuries, Zoroastrianism being among them. The region still contains many ceremonial constructions relating to Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Fire temples of the VII-VIII centuries are reported to have been discovered in places such as Ishkasim and Bogeiv-Dara.⁶⁷

Among the present day inhabitants in the Pamirs are the Ismailis, around 200,000 in number, who are reported to preserve their Zoroastrian past in their architecture and arts. The Ismailis form a Shiite minority belonging to the Nizari

⁶⁷ Donish Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography; Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, *The Folk art of the Pamirs* 143 (2009).

branch of Ismailism, and are followers of the Aga Khan, the 49th Nizari Imam. They refer to themselves as Pamiris or Badakshani and believe that they were converted from Zoroastrianism to Ismailism in the 11th century CE by the poet-philosopher Nosiri Khusrow (Nasir-i-Khusrow).⁶⁸

A house of fire, called the *Aloukhona*, is still represented in their places of worship. The *Aloukhona* is kept separate from the *Mihrab*, the prayer niche facing Mecca. Even in Pamiri homes, the most common structure is a five-pillar building, called the *chid*, the fifth pillar of which is interpreted to represent the Zoroastrian messenger *Sroasha*, the symbol of eternity and strength of the house. An association is also made with Mehr, referred to as “the angel of love” in Zoroastrianism.⁶⁹ The Pamiris are also stated to speak “an Avestan language.”⁷⁰

At the modern Ismaili Center in Dushanbe, the young guide escorting us through the public parts of the ornate building confirmed the significance of the fifth pillar in Pamiri Ismaili architecture.

68 Gabrielle van der Berg, Keeping religion alive: performing Pamiri identity in Central Asia, Newsletter of the International Institute for Asian Studies 74, Summer 2016 (Leiden, Netherlands).

69 The Folk Art of the Pamirs, *supra* note 67, 146.

70 Jack Wheeler, The Pamir Knot, To The Point, September 3, 2010.



THE ISMAILI CENTER, DUSHANBE
(2013)

Coins of the period

Zoroastrian themes predominate in the ancient coins found in Sogdiana and Bactria. Gold coins from the Achaemenid period, called the Darik, minted in Darius I's reign have been found. Silver Shikils were also found.⁷¹ On most coins from the Kushan period of Tajikistan (2nd century BCE – 4th century CE), the King is seen with the sacred fire.



On most of the coins from the Kushan period of Tajikistan (2nd century BCE – 4th century CE), the King is seen with the sacred fire. Sassanian coins carrying images of Ardashir, Piruz I & II, Bahram I & II, Hormozd II have also been found. "The sacred fire [is] the most common image... found on the coins of the Sassanids." Abduvali Sharifzoda, Coins of Tajikistan 146, in National Museum of Tajikistan, Album 2014

71 Abduvali Sharifzoda, Coins of Tajikistan 146, in (National Museum of Tajikistan) 2014.

Sassanian coins carrying images of Ardashir, Piruz I & II,



111 Drachma of Piruz
Sassanian, Susa/Persepolis/Susa,
420/10 AD.

Exchange Along the Silk Road

55

SASSANIAN
EMPEROR
PIRUZ
DRACHMA

EXPEDITIE
ZIJDEROUTE,
REIS NAAR HET
WESTEN,
SCHATTEN UIT
DE HERMITAGE 55
(AMSTERDAM
2014).

Bahram I & II, Hormozd II have also been found. “The sacred fire [is] the most common image... found on the coins of the Sassanids.”⁷² The Sassanian currency played a key role in the trade along the Silk Road, and in sales contracts the amounts were given in Drachmas ‘of belief’, which could be a reference to the fire altar.⁷³

Khorezm, ancient Chorasmia, Uzbekistan

⁷² *Id.* 147.

⁷³ Pavel Lurje, *Exchange Along the Great Silk Road*, *supra* note 11, 55.



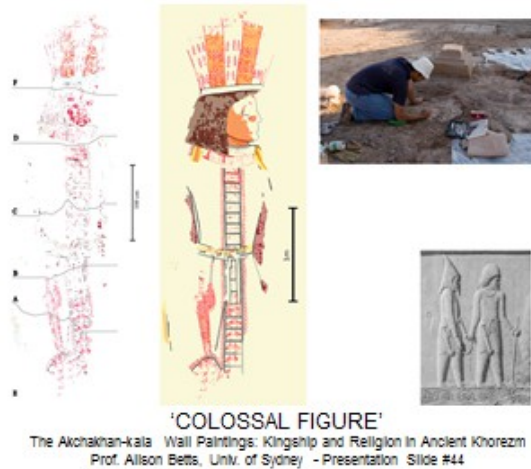
The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: Kingship and Religion in Ancient Khorezm
Prof. Alison Betts, Univ. of Sydney - Presentation Slide #5

Before concluding, a brief report is given on excavations that have been carried out since 1995 in Khorezm, Uzbekistan, the most northerly and one of the least known regions of Central Asia. Under its ancient name, Chorasnia fell under Achaemenid expansion around the 6th century BCE, perhaps under Cyrus, but certainly by the time of Darius, and then probably became independent around the 5-4th centuries BCE.

In collaboration with the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, a team from the University of Sydney has been working on a major site known as Akchakhan-Kala, which has proved to be among the richest in Chorasnia. Dr. Alison Betts, the University of Sydney's Professor of Silk Road Studies gave a talk in 2015 at New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, on the well-preserved wall paintings and clay sculptures found in Akchakhan-Kala. She submits that they reveal "important new evidence of Zoroastrian imagery in association with royal ritual and cult practice."⁷⁴

Professor Betts has graciously sent to me a draft paper co-authored by her with six other contributors, including Dr. Grenet. The article explains the finding of fragments of paintings, put together in 2014, that reveal a 'colossal' figure with a right profile of a person wearing a massive mural crown and a short sword called the 'akinakes' tied to his right thigh.

74 The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: Kingship and Religion in Ancient Khorezm, at <http://isaw.nyu.edu/events/akchakan-kala-wall-paintings> (last visited 3/30/2015).

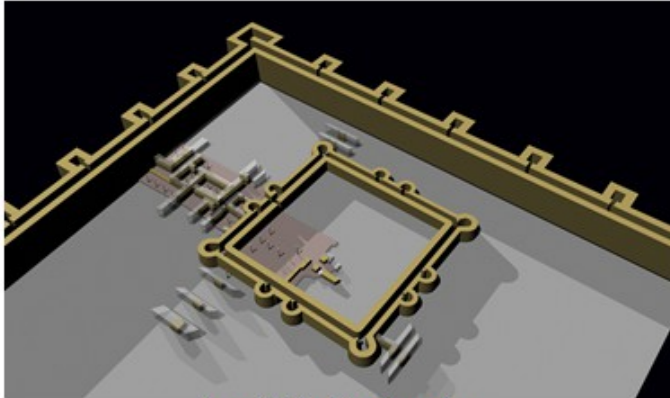


He wears a tunic with a broad panel in the front which is divided into smaller panels. Each one of the smaller panels carries a motif of two opposing human-headed roosters wearing masks which, according to the authors, designate them as Zoroastrian priests holding in one hand a *barsom*, the bundle of twigs associated with Zoroastrian ceremonies.

According to the archeologists and authors, this figure is the earliest representation by five or six centuries of a well attested and purely Zoroastrian symbol. They further argue that the figure may be a representation of the Avestan divinity – you guessed it - *Srôasha*. They conclude that the finding “should certainly provoke a re-evaluation of Khorezm’s role in the history of Central Asian Zoroastrianism.”⁷⁵

Other Zoroastrian features in and near the Akchakhan-kala site are stated to be a fire altar complex, a doorway lined with burning fires, and a *dakhma* at nearby Chilpyk.

75 A report in French was published in 2015. The final article in English is to be published in late 2016.



Area 10: Fire Altar Complex
 The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: Kingship and Religion in Ancient Khorezm
 Prof. Allison Betts, Univ. of Sydney - Presentation Slide #29



Area 10: Southern gatehouse and 'burning doorway'
 The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: Kingship and Religion in Ancient Khorezm
 Prof. Allison Betts, Univ. of Sydney - Presentation Slide #32



Chyl'pyk: Dakhma or Tower of Silence
 The Akchakhan-kala Wall Paintings: Kingship and Religion in Ancient Khorezm
 Prof. Allison Betts, Univ. of Sydney - Presentation Slide #59

Visual Representations of Zoroastrianism in Tajikistan

A collage of the authors' photographs, convey a glimpse of the current representation of Zoroastrianism in the streets and institutions of Tajikistan:



Clockwise from top left:

- The angel Vayu (wind), as depicted in the National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, in Dushanbe; Street painting near Dushanbe of the killing of Sohrab by Rostom;
- Portrait of Zoroaster in the Museum of Southern Tajikistan (informally called the 'Avesta Museum');
- Written in Cyrillic: Guftare Nek, Pindare Nek; Kirdare Nek (Good Words, Good Thoughts, and Good Deeds) at the entrance to the Persian section in the Khojand Museum in Northern Tajikistan;
- A Farvahar symbol on the Opera Building in Dushanbe;
- A major hotel and a grocery store named 'Avesta' in Dushanbe.



- A depiction of scenes from Zoroastrian history in the 'Avesta Museum'; (top)
- Painting of a Farvahar symbol in a street near Dushanbe; (bottom) and



- A street painting near Dushanbe of Zoroaster captioned 'the first profit [sic] of the Aryan people.'

Closing remarks

As has been said, the geography of Zoroastrianism in ancient and medieval times was much broader than Iran in its modern limits. It covered parts of Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Armenia on the west, and Central Asia on the East. The culture of Scythians in the steppes cannot be understood without Zoroastrian connotations. Some stray elements of Zoroastrianism went even further as Mithraism in the Roman Empire. Even today the chief god of Tuvans (a Turkic people in southern Siberia) bears the name Qurbustu Tengri, i.e. "God - Ahuramazda" and one of Finno-Ugrian mythological characters in Taiga around the Urals is called Voy, meaning Vayu.⁷⁶

Sogdiana presents eastern variants of Zoroastrianism as they existed in the past. The region now displays in combination the values of historical geography, archaeology, and anthropology. The work done by Soviet archaeologists and their followers in various parts of Tajikistan have unearthed various sites associated with Zoroastrianism. The most famous of them is the Oxus temple at Takhti

⁷⁶ E-mail to author from Pasha, dated March 19, 2014.

Sangin on the Amu Darya. The holy nature of the river's sweet waters is indicated in the Avesta (noted with regard to Aredvi-sura and Anahita). Another significant site is Panjakent, a comprehensively excavated Sogdian town. Unlike the Sassanians, eastern Iranians – Sogdians, in particular, adopted iconography for depicting Zoroastrian deities. Some images are identified as the "great God," Ahura Mazda, Zurwan, Mithra, Verethraghna, Anahita, Sraosha, Rashna, and others. They are depicted on wall-paintings, in wooden sculptures, terracotta figurines, and ossuaries. In one of the two temples found in the center of ancient Panjakent, its Zoroastrian affiliation is reinforced by the discovery of a fire sanctuary.

While the Tajiks,⁷⁷ formally abandoned Zoroastrianism for Islam more than a millennium ago, in their customs (especially among the people living in the mountains) there still are elements going back to their Zoroastrian past. They pay great reverence for fire and water, use bull's urine for medical purposes, as well as ephedra, called *hum* - that is, haoma. As evidenced by the visual representation of Zoroastrianism in Tajikistan, the people have great respect for their ancient past, and know well that their ancestors were "Magians" from the Mt. Mugh area. In the Pamir Mountains, the present day Ismailis retain a Zoroastrian element in their religious and residential architecture. These historical derivations startlingly impressed me during the visits.

To end, while in London in 2015 to give a talk at a seminar organized by the World Zoroastrian Organization, I came across a news item that made a significant point on knowing one's history. During the horrific destruction of the ancient site of Palmyra by Islamic terrorists in Syria, Neil Macgregor, the then Director of the British Museum, called the protection of cultural property as 'the foundation of a civilized society.' He stated: 'It is vital [that] you know your place in the past and in the world to keep you grounded.'⁷⁸ Macgregor was urging the United Kingdom

77 Among them are the direct descendants of Sogdians, known as Yagnobis, who survive in the mountains of Tajikistan.

78 Evening Standard (London), June 5, 2015, 10.

to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954. Nor has the United States ratified the Convention.

I submit that Macgregor's call to "know your place in the past" equally applies to Zoroastrians. We must increase the knowledge of past practices of the faith, including those in former eastern Iranian lands in Central Asia. No matter how different those practices may have been compared to currently held views, knowing them will keep us 'grounded' in the practice of the faith today.

*Kersi B. Shroff, Esquire, is an international attorney who in recent years has developed an avid interest in the ancient civilizations and history of Central Asia. He lives in Derwood, Maryland, USA.



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