

THE EMERGENCE OF EARLY RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: THE CASE OF THE
SURKHAN OASIS

Jurayev Sanjar Ramazonovich

Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Medicine

Termiz University of Economics and Service

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4306-8796>

jurayevsanjar1983j@gmail.com

Tosheva Feruza Rustamovna

Student of the Faculty of Medicine

Termiz University of Economics and Service

Abstract: The emergence of early religious beliefs represents one of the most significant stages in the spiritual and cultural development of humanity. This article examines the formation and evolution of primitive religious concepts in the Surkhan Oasis as a distinct historical and cultural region of Central Asia. Based on archaeological findings, ethnographic materials, and comparative-historical analysis, the study explores the origins of animism, totemism, fetishism, and ancestor worship among the ancient populations of the oasis. Special attention is given to burial rituals, cultic objects, rock art, and settlement patterns that reflect early mythological thinking and symbolic perception of nature. The research highlights that the geographical environment of the Surkhan Oasis, characterized by mountains, rivers, and fertile valleys, significantly influenced the worldview and spiritual imagination of early communities. Natural phenomena were sacralized, and religious beliefs emerged as a means of explaining the surrounding world, regulating social relations, and ensuring communal cohesion. The findings demonstrate that early religious consciousness in the Surkhan Oasis developed gradually, transforming from simple animistic perceptions into more structured belief systems. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural foundations of spirituality in Central Asia and emphasizes the importance of regional archaeological evidence in reconstructing the origins of religious thought.

Keywords: early religious beliefs; Surkhan Oasis; animism; totemism; fetishism; ancestor worship; archaeological evidence; mythological worldview; primitive society; Central Asia.

Introduction

The emergence of early religious beliefs marks a crucial stage in the intellectual and spiritual evolution of humankind. Religion, in its primitive form, originated as an attempt to comprehend natural phenomena, life processes, and social relationships that ancient communities could not rationally explain. Early religious consciousness was closely connected with mythological thinking, symbolic perception, and the sacralization of nature. The Surkhan Oasis, located in the southern part of Uzbekistan, represents one of the most ancient cultural and historical regions of Central Asia. Archaeological discoveries in this region indicate continuous human settlement from the Paleolithic period onward. The geographical landscape — including mountains, rivers such as the Amu Darya, fertile valleys, and caves — created favorable conditions for early human habitation and significantly influenced their worldview. Primitive communities in the Surkhan Oasis developed belief systems rooted in animism, totemism, fetishism, and ancestor worship. These forms of belief were not isolated phenomena but functioned as social regulators, strengthening communal solidarity and shaping early moral norms. Burial practices, cult objects, petroglyphs, and settlement structures serve as important sources for reconstructing the spiritual life of ancient populations. This study aims to analyze the origins and development of early religious beliefs in the Surkhan Oasis through archaeological and comparative-historical perspectives, revealing their socio-cultural significance in the broader context of Central Asian civilization.

Materials and Methods

The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining archaeological, ethnographic, historical, and comparative analyses. Materials for the study include: Archaeological findings from ancient settlements and burial sites in the Surkhan Oasis; Rock art (petroglyphs) and symbolic representations discovered in mountainous areas; Cultic objects, ritual artifacts, and funerary constructions; Scholarly works and previously published research on early religious systems in Central Asia. The study applies the following methods: Comparative-historical method – to examine similarities and differences between early belief systems of the Surkhan Oasis and other ancient civilizations. Archaeological analysis – to interpret material

evidence such as burial structures, grave goods, and ritual objects. Structural-functional analysis – to evaluate the role of early religious beliefs in maintaining social cohesion and regulating communal life. Hermeneutic interpretation – to analyze symbolic meanings embedded in rock art and ritual practices. Chronological method – to trace the gradual transformation of primitive beliefs from animistic concepts to more organized religious structures. The integration of these methods allows for a comprehensive reconstruction of early religious consciousness in the region.

Results

The research demonstrates that early religious beliefs in the Surkhan Oasis emerged gradually as a response to environmental, social, and existential challenges faced by primitive communities. Archaeological evidence indicates the presence of animistic ideas, reflected in burial rituals where grave goods were placed alongside the deceased. This practice suggests belief in an afterlife and the continued existence of the soul. The orientation of graves and the inclusion of personal belongings indicate a developed spiritual understanding rather than purely practical burial customs. Totemic elements are visible in rock carvings depicting animals such as mountain goats, bulls, and birds. These images likely symbolized tribal identity, protective spirits, or sacred ancestors. The repetition of specific animal motifs suggests their symbolic and possibly cultic significance.

Discussion

The findings of this research confirm that early religious beliefs in the Surkhan Oasis developed as a complex and gradual process shaped by environmental, social, and psychological factors. The sacralization of natural elements such as mountains, rivers, animals, and celestial bodies demonstrates that primitive religious consciousness was closely linked to ecological dependence. Ancient communities interpreted natural forces not merely as physical phenomena but as spiritual entities requiring respect and ritual interaction. Burial practices discovered in the region indicate a developed concept of the soul and the afterlife. The placement of grave goods suggests that early inhabitants believed in the continuation of existence beyond death. This reflects a significant cognitive shift from purely biological survival instincts toward metaphysical reflection. The collective character of certain burial sites also implies the strengthening of kinship structures and ancestor worship as a form of social continuity. Rock art and zoomorphic depictions found in mountainous areas of the Surkhan Oasis provide further evidence of totemic symbolism. Recurrent animal

imagery may represent clan identities or protective spirits. Such symbolic representations demonstrate the early formation of mythological narratives and collective memory. Moreover, fetishistic objects discovered in archaeological contexts suggest an attempt to materialize supernatural power. These objects likely functioned as mediators between humans and invisible forces, reinforcing communal belief systems and ritual practices. From a structural-functional perspective, early religious beliefs served to regulate social behavior, legitimize authority, and create moral norms. In comparison with other regions of Central Asia, the Surkhan Oasis presents both shared and unique features in the development of early religious thought. While animism and totemism were widespread phenomena, the specific environmental and cultural conditions of the oasis shaped distinctive ritual patterns and symbolic systems.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the emergence of early religious beliefs in the Surkhan Oasis was a dynamic and multi-layered process rooted in humanity's attempt to interpret the surrounding world and secure social stability. Archaeological evidence, including burial customs, rock art, and ritual artifacts, confirms the presence of animism, totemism, fetishism, and ancestor worship among early communities. These belief systems played a crucial role not only in explaining natural and existential phenomena but also in organizing communal life, strengthening kinship ties, and shaping early cultural identity. The transformation from simple nature worship to more structured spiritual concepts reflects the intellectual and social advancement of primitive societies. The Surkhan Oasis, as one of the ancient cultural centers of Central Asia, provides valuable material for reconstructing the origins of religious consciousness.

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