



Primitive Religious Beliefs in Sogdiana in the Ancient and Early Medieval Periods

Bozorov Javlon Ochil ugli

Student of Master's Degree at
the Department of Archaeology,
Samarkand State University

+998 93 153 36 65

Abstract

This article provides information about the ancient religions in the Sogdian region during the Ancient and Early Medieval periods, their emergence, spread, and influence on culture.

Keywords: Samarkand, Kesh-Nakhshab, Bukhara, animistic views, animism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, A. Belenisky, fetishism, totemism, Christianity, shamanism.

Аннотация: В данной статье представлены сведения о древних религиях Согдийской области в древности и раннем средневековье, их возникновении, распространении и влиянии на культуру.

Ключевые слова: Самарканд, Кеш-Нахла, Бухара, анимистические воззрения, анимизм, зороастризм и монизм, А. Беленинский, фетишизм, тотемизм, христианство, шаманизм.

In the early medieval period, a number of cities began to develop as administrative and socio-political centers of various regional associations in Sogdiana. Most of them became the centers of internal confederative structures within the historical and administrative divisions of Sogd, such as Samarkand, Kesh-Nakhshab, and Bukhara.

In the early stages of the emergence of cities, in addition to socio-economic factors, military-strategic, natural-geographical, and religious factors also played a significant role. As religious and ideological views developed, the construction of religious buildings in the city centers and the transformation of these cities into religious centers became a key factor in their growth.

T. Shirinov, based on the analysis of numerous archaeological materials, concludes that during the Bronze Age, the first cities of Central Asia served as centers of agriculture, handicrafts, administration, and religion in the oasis regions.

Animistic beliefs in Sogdiana. The first religious belief practiced by our primitive ancestors was animism. After early humans realized that the dead could not return to life, they came to the belief that "the soul is always alive" and lives on in the afterlife. They believed that the spirits of deceased tribal leaders, brave warriors, and fathers would protect the living from various misfortunes and calamities. As a result, they worshiped these spirits and held religious rituals in their honor, hoping to gain their protection.





This religious belief, known as ancestor worship, was widespread in ancient Sogdiana, as noted in scientific literature.¹

Animistic Beliefs and Funeral Practices in Sogdiana. A unique artifact preserved in the Samarkand Museum vividly illustrates these beliefs. It depicts priests near an altar where a fire is burning, and angels are shown flying above the altar. This suggests that after death, the soul begins its journey at the threshold of a fiery altar, which represents the starting point of its journey in the afterlife. It is here that sacrifices are made.

According to the religious doctrines of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, the deceased first ascend and transform into radiant, soul-like entities called fravashis. However, they do not sever their connection with the living world. During the period of Navruz (the first day of the new year), which lasts ten days, rituals to honor the souls of the dead are performed. The fravashis, or spirits of the deceased, visit the homes of the living to receive their prayers and blessings. If the living remember the deceased, the fravashis are peaceful and bless them in return. For this reason, Zoroastrians recite prayers every day in honor of their ancestors in order to fulfill their wishes.

Among the Saka-Massaget tribes of Central Asia, it was believed that humans possessed two spirits: one would leave the body immediately upon death, while the other would stay with the body for a period of time, maintaining communication with the living.

The famous historian Al-Biruni confirms, based on evidence, that during the funeral rituals in Khwarezm and Sogdiana, the relatives of the deceased would wail and tear their faces, which was a common practice. In the wall painting at the Tuproqqala complex in Khwarezm (6th century BCE), a woman with disheveled hair and a torn face is depicted. In our view, this is one of the earliest and most poignant depictions of the mourning ritual in Central Asian visual art, reflecting the mourner's inner emotional state.

This idea is further confirmed by the figurines of hired mourners found at Afrosiyob. Some pieces of land were even bought for these mourning rituals. For example, in a document found in the Mug' Mountain, it is written that a piece of land was purchased specifically for the purpose of conducting funeral rituals for the deceased. The document notes, "This land will be used for the burial ceremony."²

This passage sheds light on the spiritual beliefs and complex funeral practices in ancient Sogdiana, where the connection between the living and the dead was maintained through various rituals, including prayers, sacrifices, and expressions of grief. These practices reveal the deep animistic and religious sentiments that played a central role in Sogdian society.

The Influence of Islam on Funeral and Mourning Practices in Central Asia. With the introduction of Islam in the region, the role of hired mourners began to shift. They were replaced by qalandars and dervishes, who played a significant role in mourning rituals. These mystic religious figures, known for their spiritual practices, performed

¹Авесто. Аскар Маҳкам таржимаси. Тошкент. Шарқ. 2001. – Б. 91.

²Лившиц В. А. Юридические документы и письма // Согдийские документы с горы Муг. . № II. 1962.-С.48





ceremonial dances and prayers, such as the zikr (remembrance of God) near the graves of respected individuals. Women from the deceased's family would perform the *sadr*, a traditional form of ritual mourning dance.³

The arrival of Islam in the Mawarannahr (Transoxiana) region led to the synthesis of certain ancient customs with Islamic practices. As a result, some of these ancient traditions were Islamized, blending pre-Islamic customs with new religious beliefs. This process of synthesis became a distinctive feature of the peoples of Central Asia and did not extend to other Muslim-majority countries.

For example, practices such as commemorating the deceased on the 20th and 40th days after death, as well as preparing food for the deceased's family on the anniversary of their death, continue to be observed to this day in Central Asia. The recitation of Qur'anic verses for the deceased is also a longstanding tradition.

Even with the arrival of world religions like Christianity and Islam, the symbolism of angels and *fravashis* (spirits of the deceased) did not entirely disappear. This can still be observed in the artistic traditions of the region. For instance, Christian churches are often decorated with images of winged angels, a direct link to earlier representations of divine beings in local religious traditions, such as the *fravashis* of Zoroastrian belief.

Thus, the introduction of Islam did not completely erase the old practices, but instead, many of them were adapted and incorporated into the new religious and cultural framework, resulting in a unique blend of traditions that still shape the funeral and mourning customs in Central Asia today. With the arrival of Islam, angels-spirits transformed into celestial beings. A miniature created in Uzbekistan, preserved in the Kyiv Museum, depicts the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on the night of the *Mi'raj* (Ascension). In the scene, he is riding the *Buraq*, a heavenly steed, and ascending to the heavens with eight-winged angels carrying flaming vessels and torches.⁴

In Sogdian religious beliefs, the concepts of "jinn" and "angels" are also present. According to the Iranian scholar B. Sarkarati, in all Zoroastrian texts, the Avestan and Middle Persian terms *rarika* refer to images of women created by Ahriman, symbolizing evil. These terms are associated with devils, including the *dev* and the *dev-woman* (*Jahika*). However, with the arrival of Zoroastrianism, these beliefs were rejected, and Ahriman's evil creatures were declared to be wicked animals.

In the primitive period when our ancestors lived, there was no single unifying religion for all tribes, and various religious beliefs were practiced. One such belief was totemism. Tribes selected certain animals and plants as totems. It is known that totemism persisted in the consciousness of people for many centuries, and later, some of its elements were absorbed into Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.⁵

³ Сухарева О. А. Пережитки демонологии и шаманства у равнинных таджиков // Домусульманские верования и обряды в Средней Азии. № 2.1975. - С. 58.

⁴ Крачковская В. А. Мусульманское искусство в собрании Ханенко. Т. II // ЗКВ. Москва. 1938. - С. 37.

⁵ Бертельс А. Е. Пери // Культура и искусство народов Средней Азии в древности и средние века. — Москва. 1979. - С. 119.





Among the Massaget tribes of Central Asia, the birth of a child was understood as the entry of the totem spirit into the woman's body, and death was seen as the transformation of a person into a totem animal—essentially a return to their origin.⁶

A medallion depicting a legendary animal with large ears and a long tail was found at Varakhsha, the summer residence of the rulers of Bukhara (Bukhoro Khudot). It is assumed that this is a griffin with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle, a mythical winged creature.

According to G. Pugachenkova, the image of the griffin spread from Bactria and Sogdiana among the Sak and Scythian nomadic tribes in the 4th-3rd centuries BCE, and later extended to the Jeti-Su (Seven Rivers) and Altai regions. Based on this, the "wild animal style" of applied art developed in Southern Siberia and Kazakhstan.

In one of the wall paintings at the Panjikent temple, a goddess-queen is depicted in the form of a lioness, sitting on a throne and honoring the hero Rustam.

In Eastern mythology and poetry, the camel was one of the divine totems of the ruling powers in the Central Asian region. At Afrosiyob (6th-8th centuries CE), clay plaques depict a ruler sitting on a throne in the form of a camel, and deities riding camels.

A winged camel-griffin depicted on a metal vessel found in Samarkand (10th century) testifies to the synthesis of two totemic symbols of ancient Sogdiana. Wall paintings at Afrosiyob also depict Sogdian deities, one of whom is clearly holding a vessel resembling a camel figurine. In the wall paintings of ancient Panjikent, a male figure in the form of a camel is shown sitting on a throne, while a female figure next to him is depicted as the symbol of the luck deity Farn, in the form of a ram. On her platter, camel figurines—symbols of divine authority—are placed.⁷

In Central Asia, palace and temple walls were not simply decorated with images of birds and animals, but they also expressed specific mythical or religious-philosophical meanings. Moreover, the depictions of animals were believed to have magical powers, and it was believed that they protected people from evil forces.

Fetishism. One of the religious forms that existed in ancient Sogdiana was fetishism. People believed that certain objects, such as a specific stone, tree, or part of an animal's body, possessed extraordinary divine powers. Members of a tribe who identified with these objects worshipped them. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant considered the human tendency to view both material and immaterial things with the heart, as we do, to be pure fetishism. Some remnants of this religious belief can still be seen in secular religions. Primitive humans believed that they could influence certain objects or events, and therefore, they would ask for help from these objects to fulfill their desires. According to some researchers, this belief laid the foundation for idol worship.

The Tangshu, a Chinese chronicle, mentions that in ancient Uzbekistan, people worshipped the spirit of De-si, and a temple was built in its honor. A golden vessel at the t

⁶ Рапопорт Ю. А. Из истории религии Древнего Хорезма // ТХАЭЭ. . Т. VI. 1971. - С. 26.

⁷ Беленицкий А. М., Маршак Б. И. Черты мировоззрения согдийцев Vн-VIII вв. в искусстве Пенджикента //История и культура народов Средней Азии. Москва. 1976. -С. 81.





emple reads that it was a gift from the "Son of Heaven" to the Xan dynasty. It is likely that this refers to the temple near Romitan, near Bukhara. According to the historian Narshakhi, valuable items were brought to this temple by a Chinese princess who married one of the rulers of Bukhara. The Beyshi chronicle (6th century) further elaborates: "This region is governed by the spirit of De-si, to whom all the peoples living east of the Western Sea offer worship. In the temple in Samarkand, a golden idol was dedicated to the spirit of De-si, with a thickness of 5 meters and a corresponding height. Every day, five camels, ten horses, and one hundred sheep are brought as offerings in honor of this spirit."

When the Arabs captured the ancient city of Poykent, they burned many wooden idols, removed decorations and patterns, and destroyed wall paintings, seeing them as symbols of idolatry.⁸

Sources indicate that in Samarkand, there were temples for both Zoroastrianism and idol worship.⁹ The sources also note instances where earlier religious buildings were repurposed for Islamic worship. According to Chinese chronicles, the Jama Masjid in Bukhara was built on the site of an old idol temple.

As reported by Tabari, even after the establishment of Islam in Sogdiana, idol worship continued. The Arab commander Haydar ibn Kavus al-Afshin made an agreement with the rulers of Sogd to allow each tribe to practice its own religion. As a result, this commander was accused of being involved in a rebellion against Islam.

The ram (Oven, sheep) was one of the ancient totems, and it was also considered a symbol of the Tumor and the success of the deity Farn. In the wall paintings at Afrosiyob, rulers of Samarkand (7th century) are depicted at a feast with winged rams and serpents above them, symbolizing the king's fortune and divine favor.¹⁰

In one of the Biyanayman temples in Samarkand, a deity is depicted holding a sword in the left hand and a fiery fire altar in the right hand.¹¹ Based on certain characteristics, this is believed to be the depiction of the deity Farn.

Farn/Xvarna – Arkhār – is recognized as a symbol of ruling dynasties. Chinese sources indicate that the thrones of some Central Asian rulers were adorned with the ram as a symbol of prosperity and flourishing. In Firdawsi's "Shahnameh," it is written that Kaykavus gifted Rustam a throne in the shape of a ram.

In the wall paintings at Afrosiyob, when the Samarkand king is receiving foreign ambassadors, he is depicted wearing a robe decorated with images of rams. The rams' necks are adorned with bells, a motif that also appears in the wall paintings of Varakhsha and Bolaliktepa. These bells can be considered talismanic objects, as people believed that their sound could drive away evil spirits. The depictions in the Bolaliktepa wall paintings seem to be associated with sorcery.

Fetishism marks the conclusion of the phase of primitive religious ideas and beliefs in human history. Animism and totemism take on material forms and become more

⁸ Наршахий. Бухоро тарихи. А.Расулов таржимаси.Т., "Фан".1966. -Б.56.

⁹ Якубов Ю. Я. Изображение богов на биянайманских оссуариях // Прошлое Средней Азии. 1987.- С. 168.





complex, which leads to the development of more intricate religious beliefs. This process ultimately results in the emergence of belief in a Higher Power, and the recognition of the oneness of the Creator of the universe. Consequently, religious belief reaches its pinnacle.

Initially, in human consciousness, belief in the power of spirits and ancestors left its mark. Later, the belief in their influence on social life became embodied in fetish objects. This process led to the conclusion that if humanity wants to live peacefully and prosper, it must worship supernatural forces and offer sacrifices to them. Without the patronage of a Higher Power, people feel weak and defenseless..

List of Literature

1. Авесто. Translation of Askar Mahkam. Тошкент. Шарқ. 2001.
2. Беленицкий А. М. Вопросы идеологии и культов Согда // Живопись древнего Пянджикента. Москва. 1954.
3. Беленицкий А. М., Маршак Б. И. Черты мировоззрения согдийцев VП-VIII вв. в искусстве Пенджикента // Истории культура народов Средней Азии. Москва. 1976.
4. Бертельс А. Е. Пери // Культура и искусство народов Средней Азии в древности и средние века. — Москва. 1979.
5. Крачковская В. А. Мусульманское искусство в собрании Ханенко. Т. II // ЗКВ. Москва. 1938 .
6. Лившиц В. А. Юридические документы и письма // Согдийские документы с горы Муг. . № II. 1962.
7. Литвинский Б. А. Кангюйско-сарматский фарн. Душанбе. 1968.
8. Наршахий. Бухоро тарихи. А. Расулов таржимаси. Т., “Фан”. 1966.
9. Рапопорт Ю. А. Из истории религии Древнего Хорезма // ТХАЭЭ. . Т. VI. 1971.
10. Сухарева О. А. Пережитки демонологии и шаманства у равнинных таджиков // Домусульманские верования и обряды в Средней Азии. № 2. 1975.
11. Якубов Ю. Я. Изображение богов на биянайманских оссуариях // Прошлое Средней Азии. 1987.

