

The sogdian cults and Zoroastrianism

Archaeological material on cults of ancient Central Asia is not limited to Zoroastrianism which is known as Avesta and is an ethnography of parsians. In retrospect, by looking at archaeological material, we have observed the beginning i.e from bronze epoch to the advent of Islam to Central Asia; we observed a succession of the material displays from cult-ritual traditions, its symbolics, attributes, which were caused in continuity with development of mythology, demonology and cult's ritualistic practices of settled agriculturist of Central Asia. Moreover, the Bronze Age corresponds to the dynasty of Pishdadids, the Early Iron Age – to dynasty of Keyanids, and Ancient period - to dynasties of Ashkanids and Sassanids in traditional periodization of history of Ajam, including Iran and Turan.

When we consider features of cult displays of tribes of Central Asia of Bronze Age it turns out, that all of Northern and North-Eastern part of Central Asia was occupied by tribes of Andronovo culture, who can be distinguished because of their funeral rites of which cremation and burning a fire in sepulchral pit were unique. By late Bronze Age, we see the spread of this funeral rite to Tajikistan and to the South. Further in India, the Veda Cult Tradition practices this funeral rite till this day. All this requires more research on the fact that Andronovo people were ancestors of indoarians who developed mythological plots and entered further in Rigveda and Veda mythological cycles (Litvinsky B.A., Mandelshtam A.M., Kuzmina Ye. Ye., Pyankova L. T.).

In proto-urban oases of settled agriculturist tribes of pre-historical Margiana and Bactria people practiced burying, but the discoveries of the unique cult architectural complexes made by A.A. Askarov and V.I. Sarianidi in late years allows for concretizing the picture of features of cult-mythological traditions of these protourban centres of civilization of Bactria and Margiana.

These features of material evidences like the striking illustration of the cult of fire in all the functioning of temple on early urban site Jarkutan, and traces of cult of fire in temples of Dashli-3 in Bactria and an appearance of burials of peeled bones in burial ground of Jarkutan, give an opportunity to think, that Bactria was a zone of the formation of Avesta Cult-Mythological tradition, which is also the basis on which Zoroastism was formed.

In Margiana on Cult complexes Togolok-21, Togolok-1, Gonur and other, on the contrary, cult of fire occupies only a minor place but the libation of Khaoma was more central, many ritual pots, special baths with little canals and remains of poppy and efedra in it further justify this claim. On Mihr-Yasht and Khaom-Yasht sacrifice libation of Khaoma took the central place in the cult of one of the main deities of ancient Iran pantheon of Mitra, who replicated the position held by Yazata in Zoroastrianism, but Mitra had the title of Bag in Sogd before Islam.

Hence, Margiana in the period of late Bronze Age was a zone of the formation of proto-Mitraistic or early Mitraistic cult-mythological traditions.

The Early Iron Age on the wide space of Central Asia began with the Great migration of people, it led to cardinal renovation of ethno-cultural panorama of Central Asia in the beginning of I millennia B.C. This period began with the spread of traditions of Karasuk culture in steppe zones, the culture of late painted pottery was formed in oases. Many features of cult-ritual practice are specific to this culture, all of them were canonized in Zoroastrianism later. It was - fire cult, and rare at that moment, was the practice of putting dead people without building any constructions.

Steppe zone with its nomadic environment remained to be a keeper of archaic indoarian cult traditions, which were the heritage of Andronovo culture of Bronze Age. The scene of Ashvamedha, depicted on petroglyphs of Sarmish-say, where the investigation of the picture of adorant with horse at the sacrificial pole. Sacrifice of the horses to the Sun which were done by Massageta about which Herodotus informs us, belongs to the same tradition. The main sacrificial animal of Iranian tribes and later of Zoroastrians was bull.

The scene depicted the sacrifice of a he-goat by the way of suffocation by loop on petroglyphs of Hojakent on the same rite that was mentioned by Herodotus about the Skitbians of Northern Black Sea coast is specific to the Veda cult tradition. On the head of adorant from Hojakent is a head-dress that was the saka.

With the funeral rite of steppe tribes of Early Iron Age and the spread of burial practice in steppe regions of Kazakhstan the general Indo-European rite of cremation which was kept in original in Veda funeral practice, were developed.

In ancient period in many main oases of Central Asia temple constructions of ancient cities were investigated. The architecture of cult of this period is marked by the combination

of tradition of autochthon architecture with the features architecture of Mesopotamia and Hellada. While the material cult is marked by the development of sculpture and painting of cult character and also by the rites of burning fire and sacrificial libation.

We should remember that the time of official predominance of Zoroastrianism at the period of Achaemenids in Central Asia gets altered by the short but striking and serious syncretism of Hellenistic period.

The ancient saka and autochthon cults and related mythological plots, I think, find an official status; the temples are built for their deity in II c. B.C. at the time of Kanguy dynasties. This tendency continues till the advent of Islam.

The materials of the Temple of Goddess of Yerkurgan which was a capital of Southern Sogdiana are very significant from this point of view. She was a Goddess of atmospheric and river moisture, and the patron of city and region. The attributes which are found together from the fragments of sculpture: bronze mirrors, figurines of Silen, frogs, snakes lay bare her water main point. We do not know her name, but it could not be Anahita as frog and snake are representatives of evilspirits in Zoroastrian bestiary, hence she was not inscribed in Zoroastrian pantheon.

Indian goddess of Ganga River which was painted on Makara dragon may be the nearest parallel to her. The image of goddess with dragon or snake is known on toreutics of Tillatepe, terracotta from Merv, paintings of Gandara and Penjikent in Central Asia. H. Nyberg supposed that Kharakhvaty Ardivisura firstly was a river nimpha of ancient saka tribes who lived on Coast of Syrdarya River. I think that at that period of development in the II millennium B.C. she was near (may be identical) to Indian Ganga. Their intimacy on canons: they are representatives of atmospheric moisture, they flow with the help of the world's mountain and leave for ocean, indicates that. Understandable mention in Ardivisur-yasht about malicious dragon Gandarva, who was a representative of Lie by prayers-is another example of dualistic conception of Zoroastrianism. His Veda parallel Gandarva - is the husband of the woman of waters, of Apsaras. The official names were analyzed by W. Henning and it was revealed that Gandarva was revered in Sogdiana too.

Syrdarya referred to as the river of Kanga in the middle ages. Ardivisur-yasht informs about Kangha and Danayturs who lived on the coast of this river. The main lands of ancient Kangu were situated on Syrdarya, and Shah-Name puts Kang or Gang on the coast of

Syrdarya. I think that this holy hydronium was made on one of the great rivers of Northern India together with goddess like beautiful woman by Indo-Aryans during the bronze epoch. Similar movement of ancient hydroniums are common in history.

The absence of the name of Anahita in Central Asia may be explained by the fact that more ancient mythological image of water goddess who adorned similar symbols which are representatives of water fauna were retained in this area. Figurines of Silen – the river deity belonging to low class is the Hellenistic image of mythological plots about deities.

The mirror was the main symbol of Greek-Roman goddess of moisture and love Afrodite-Venera too.

The unique impression of stamp from estate of ceramists of Yerkurgan helps to understand the role of this goddess in urban life and all Nahshab. Scene on the surface gives the moment of blessing, goddess donning a beautiful dress gives a goblet to a ruler sitting on dragon. This typical motif of ancient Eastern and Scythian proclamation art, I think, is related with the plot of holy marriage, when the ruler of the region is shown to enter into a mystic marriage with the goddess through his dedication and devotion, this also gives legacy of power to the dynasty and helps to develop the country.

Dragon of ancient Eastern and Indo-European mythology were the keeper of moisture. Indian Ahibundhya, archaic Poseidonus like dragons of art of Varahsha and Penjikent give beginning to sources of moisture.

From the point of view of this theme, the scene on the stamp corresponds to classical plot about river goddess who is always with two males. So Ganga, who was accompanied by a Makara, is the wife of Shiva. On the paintings of the Temple II of Penjikent on the plot of goddess sitting on a dragon; a triton is present. Even in later cycles of goddess of waters, legend about Anbar-Ana - a patron of waters of Amudarya in Khorezm, events are played around three main persons: Anbar-Ana, her son Er-Hubbi and his father Hakim-Ata. In the plot, as a result of conflict between father and son, the son leaves for waters of Amudarya to live there forever. Like Ardivisura Anahita one of the water goddess of Indo-European mythology Ardivisur-yasht is also a lonely and clean maiden. According to me, this was the result of Near Eastern influence but here we can see traces of the Ganadarva story. Besides that, the goddess according to Yasht, is also waiting for her heroes and their worship of her, and that was again refers to the ancient holy marriage plot mentioned before.

About funeral rites, for Khorezm and Bactria we continuously have pictures of development of the rite of peeling bones (Rapoport Yu.A., Grenet F., Rtveladze E. V., Litvinsky B.A., Sedov A. V.). In Sogdiana the materials of this rite belong mainly to early middle ages. Dahma of Yerkurgan allows us to date it further back to the more ancient period in Sogd till II-I c. B.C. The fundamental difference of rites of Khorezm, Sogd and Chach is in keeping bones in ossuaries, as these were not practiced in Bactria and Iran.

Dahma of Yerkurgan differs importantly from all known memorial constructions of Central Asia. The central high tower used for putting remains of the dead. To the East and to the West from the main tower there were two low platforms. The Eastern platform was where the remains of pot with skull and the cross-bones of big men may were buried or it could also have been the place for keeping peeled bones. The Western platform was lower and wide and could be used for ritual cleaning which was very important in Zoroastrian funeral rites. For the rites of cleaning, “barashnom” were special constructions “barashnomgah”, was where along the stone track, ritual washings and cleaning by urine of holy bull was performed. The tracks were made from burned bricks on the western platform of dahma and gives opportunity to wonder whether that it could be used for analogical rites.

Building the dahma of Yerkurgan coincides with supposed period of codification of Videvdad, which regulates the rites of Zoroastrians including funeral rites.

The specific variation of burial rites of peeled bones is investigated on mausoleum of Yerkurgan which was built in the period of supremacy of Khionits. The burials of peeled bones were in big hums (big-pot) and were accompanied with clay burial sculpture, here. Analogical rite was indicated in culture of Khionits of Kunya-Uaz and Kanga-Gyr Kala sites. Beginning of this rite, I think is exposed in cult-memorial complex of Aybugir-Kala. Putting the image of dead people, I think, goes back to tradition of “tul”, which was wide-spread in ethnographical traditions of people of step zone of Central Asia. This tradition was related to Khionits in Central Asia, Ammian Marcellin indicates, that when Khionits buried the son of leader (on funeral ceremony) they made special manikins. From specific side of funeral rite which was exposed on mausoleum of Yerkurgan, it is necessary to notice the funeral rite of bringing clay plummet of weaving loom, more than 200 of these were found at this site.

Moirs and Parks or Greek-Roman mythology and analogical persons of Hittite mythology indicate the relation in mythological mind of spinning the thread with lines of people's fates. This mythological plot was known in Central Asia, the picture of woman with

thread in hand on the painting of Palace of Toprak-Kala indicates this. Findings of plummet of weaving loom, I think had relations with the second plot about the relation of Fates with weaving, which was fixed in Atharvaveda (10.8.37-38) about deities “kavi” drawing seven threads of weft and basis, which was related to the act of cosmogony. A similar plot in Roman mythology influenced early Christian poetist Klavdian, and hence the poem, “Abduction of Prozerpine”, is a poem in which the embroidery of Prozerpine, who is stuck in an underground Palace magically provides harmony and development in the entire world. We know about “Mama” – patroness of weaving in ethnography of Central Asia. I think, in III-V c. A.D. in mythological imagination of sogdian of Nahshab in Bukhara oasis, Chol-tepe in Semirechye, we see, that funeral fire and bonfire continued to accompany the bones, which were already peeled in Sogdiana. But it is not the same as, I think, that archaic Veda Agni, who eats his sacrifice and raises it to the sky.

I think that late Pehlevi Bahman-Yasht with no firm foundation calls the sogdian, khionits, eftalits and turks as worshippers of Devs and as enemies of belief, e.g. Zoroastrianism of Iran. I think, in III-VI c. A.D. in Nahshab in Khionito-Eftalit period one of variations of Devayasna was spread, these are archaic ancient Iranian cults which are kept out of borders of Sasanian Zoroastrian church denomination, these cults included some mythological plots from canonized Zoroastrianism, but they were not changed in scholastic way. All this included elements of Indoarian traditions of funeral rite which is a remainder of steppe tribes.