

# **THE 3700-YEAR CONNECTION BETWEEN AVESTA and TAJIKISTAN**

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The Republic of Tajikistan is one of the Central Asian countries. The people of Tajikistan are descendants of the ancient Aryan tribes, the ancestors of the Iranian nation.

The mountains divide the territory of the Republic into three main parts: Northern, Central and Southern. They had different historical developments in the ancient times: South was a part of the Bactria - Tokharistan, Centre (Zerafshan valley) – part of Sogd, and the Northern part consisted mainly of the lands of Ustrushana and western Ferghana. Each of these historical countries stretched far beyond the modern borders of Tajikistan.

The people of this region being Zoroastrians they worshiped the God Ahura Mazda. After the Arabs invasion of Iran and Central Asia in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century Zoroastrianism was almost ousted by Islam.

The majority of scholars tend to the opinion, that Zoroaster lived around the end of the first and beginning of the second millennium BCE, somewhere in the Eastern lands, inhabited by the Aryan tribes. The Aryans like their relative ancient Indians - Indo-Aryan, were nomads at that time – cattle breeders. They slowly were turning to agriculture, and pastured the cattle on the vast steppe from northern coast of the Black sea to Altai and Central Asia, from the Ural Mountains in the north to the Iranian plateau in the south.

According to the early legend, Zarathushtra was not adopted in his homeland and after many years of wandering he found a shelter in the court of Kavi-Vishtaspa, King of Bactria. The wife of Vishtaspa, queen Hutaosa, his relatives and his court, were the first who adopted the new faith.

Avesta is an important or the main source of Zarathushtrianism in the epoch of the formation of the first statehood in Central Asia. The ancient parts of Avesta describe the life of Eastern Iranian tribes during the first millennium BCE.

Zarathushtra reformed the ancient beliefs, which divided Aryan and Indo-Iranian tribes that use to live together and composed an

integral entity (calling themselves Aryans). His innovation was that he declared the single God Ahura Mazda, which is the creator of the goodness and kindness in the world, including all other deities.

The main aim of the religious reform by Zarathushtra was the creation of the monotheistic religion to replace the polytheism, which existed among the Iranian people before his prophetic activity started. According to his studies, Ahura Mazda was the single God, creator of all beings. Those, who worshiped many gods, he thought, respected evil. By advocating monotheism Zarathushtra was looking forward to create a strong centralized state, strengthened by the common ideology and culture.

The churches, preserved in Arkaim, Jarkutan and Sarazm (Central Asia) confirm the existence of proto-Zoroastrian religion, developed religious studies.

The temple of fire was the main and essential sanctuary of Zoroastrianism. Fire played an important role in the Zoroastrian religious ceremonies. The fire religion in the Northern Bactria (Tajikistan) can be seen in the ritual fire Teguzak, where the ritual ceremonies were held under the open sky, characteristic for the Indo-Iranians worship practice. In "Tigrovaya Balka" the traits of victimization to fire are preserved, probably in foodstuff kind.

The first signs of worshipping fire in Tajik Badakhshan were seen in the bronze epoch monuments, related to the burying custom, dated the 13-9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Here are discovered two types of fire: so called "alive fire" in the open fire and its colas as its substitute.

In the Gorno- Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in Tajikistan there are three temples of fire. Two of them refer to the early medieval epoch: round in Shughnan (Kafyr-kala 1-4) and cross type, in Ishkashim region (Zong). Here in Pathur estate, domestic sanctuaries are also discovered. The developed of the system of constructions is seen in the later temple of fire, discovered in the town of miners Bazar Dala in the 11 century. In it the location of fire is isolated from the premises for prayers.

But later many ancient Iranian gods, rejected by Zarathushtra, were included both in the text of Avesta, and into the pantheon of gods. Their statues were constructed in the temples and they were worshipped. The worshipping of gods, personifying the natural forces was promoted. In Sogd and Bactria by the time of spread of Islam, along with the temples of fire there existed the temples to other gods with their statues. Zoroastrian pantheon was expanded by the inclusion of Izad's into it.

The names, used in Avesta and identified (Sogd, Bactria, Merv), comprised the geographical territories, inhabited by the Iranian tribes. It tells, that Ahuramazda set up seven countries: "The second country he created was Gav, where Sogdians live. The fourth of the best places are countries I have set up, Ahura Mazda, it is Bahdi (Bactria), beautiful with the lifted banners..."

Bactria is the biggest ancient Central Asian country. Many events, important not only for Central Asia but for the world history, are related to it. Tajik nation was formed in Bactria and neighbouring countries, with ancient Bactrians being its integral part. Bactria, like India, has always been recognized by ancient Greece and Rome as the powerful and fantastically rich country, located in the far part of the inhabited world "where the Sun rises". The ancient world has regarded Bactria as most remote country in the east for a long time, and that is why many ancient authors, indicating the most eastern borders of the known civilizations, mentioned Bactria and India.

Sogdiana is a country, located between Ox and Yaksart. In Strabon and Ptolomey, Sogdiana equals to Transoxiana or Maveran-narh, between rivers Ox and Yaksarta.

According to legend, the founder of Balh, Bactr was Luhrasp (Arvataspa), the father of Vishtaspa. Zarathushtra lived during the reign of Vishtaspa. He became the conveyer of the new religion, paving the way for it by adopting it. In trying to spread the religion Vishtaspa conquered new territories and set up the powerful state of Bactria. The end of the dynasty of Vishtaspa coincides with conquest of Bactria by Achamenid ruler Kir in 539-400 BCE. These are the main features of Bactria in pre-Achamenid period.

The power of Achamenids in Bactria relied on the loyalty of local aristocrats, rather than on Persian administration. Inclusion of the richest region in Central Asia to Achamenid Empire was profitable as it strengthened its links with the Near Eastern countries and facilitated trade, exchange of ideas and inventions.

Bactria was the powerful, developed, and one of the leading parts of the Persian Empire. Many Bactrians by origin occupied very important positions in Achamenid Administration. At that time Bactria (later medieval Balh was located in this place) it covered an area of 120 hector, it had town walls and citadel. Besides Bactria, there was the town Baytu-dasht IV in Pyanj region of Tajikistan, which had a smaller human settlement. The remnants of the religious buildings of Achamenid period are still preserved there. The construction is unique in Central Asia.

During two centuries that Bactria was part of the ancient Achaemenid Empire. Bactrians participated in the Persian army (in Greek-Persian wars), provided constructive materials for the construction of the kings palaces in Persia, they had close contacts with Persian and other communities, like Indians, Malaysian, Greeks, Egyptians and citizens of Mesopotamia. During that period "King Road" lay via Bactria from Malaysia to India. All this impacted the artistic demands of Bactrian elite. This class was very rich and its artistic values are expressed in Amu-darya hidden treasure (6-4 BCE).

"Amu-darya hidden treasure" (Ox hidden treasure) is now preserved in the British Museum in London. In 1877, Bokharian merchants found the treasure in Kabadian (Southern Tajikistan), and then through India, after numerous adventures, it was obtained by the British Museum.

All objects in the Ox hidden treasure are divided into several groups: wares of Achaemenid Iran, dated to the 4 century BCE, the masterpieces of Bactrian and Scythian (Skiff) - Siberian art.

Achaemenid period in the history of Central Asia was very important for the development of such regions as Sogd and Bactria with the Persian speaking population. The coexistence of them as one with other regions (Persia, Media, Babylon, Egypt, Malaysia, Greece) brought them closer to one another, and allowed them to develop contacts in culture and trade, exchange achievements, and enrich their own tradition. This syncretism of various civilizations and their unification, as in any empire, became the impulse for the evolution of spiritual and artistic cultures.

The town Takht-I-Sangin was discovered in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became a sensation. Ptolomey and Staron wrote about this center, which is known as the town of Takhtisangin (Uterkala, Meli, Stone town) located in the south of Kabadian (Tajikistan) in the place called Takht-I-kubad, where the rivers Vahsh and Pyanj merge.

The temple of fire itself is the model architectural monument, which surprisingly fully reflects the development of Bactrian culture in the epoch of Achaemenid and Hellenism and its interaction with other regions. It was designed according to the standards of the Persian temples of fire. In its design the elements of the Greek architecture were also used, column, portico, order system.

There were rich and diverse divinities, pantheons, including not only the worship of fire, but also that of water, rivers and related to it gods and nymphs. The Greek god Zeus and Apollo were the common

images for the local citizens. Mainly, they were included in the sculpture compositions of clay and stone, often coloured.

Another important region in Central Asia was Sogd. Its capital in Achaemenid epoch was Samarkand (Marakanda) with the ancient town Afrasiab .

Sogd consisted of small principalities, with many religious constructions, related to worship of fire, and a few Buddhism complexes. The Sogd cultural revival starts from the 4-7 centuries. Many Sogdian colonies in north- eastern parts of Central Asia and further to the East, along the Silk Road appeared in the 5-8<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the cultures of various regions unified, creating environment for the formation of medieval Tajik nationhood in the 8-11<sup>th</sup> century.

In the early 1930s in the mountainous region of Tajikistan (Kalai Mug) an archive was found – written documents of that time and some objects of art, among them light wooden shield with the pulled parchment. The slim figure of the rider was painted on it in bright red yellow and blue colours.

“Archive” from the mountain Mug help to understand the meanings of the names of many towns, settlements and people. With its help the meaning of monumental painting became also clear, which helped to call Penjikent “Pompeii of the East”. Of 130 excavated houses of the urban elite in Penjikent, more than 50 had painted walls. These paintings linked with Bizantium, Indian, West Iranian, Chinese painting, and decoration art of Turkish nomads, that makes them unique. Iconography on the walls of the houses and Governors palace in Penjikent presented a blend of almost all the confessions and beliefs, here one can see Buddha, Mitra, Zoroaster, and Christ, pantheon of Hindus, local idols.

In Penjikent 's wooden style sculpture there are traits of Indian Gupta sculpture and Sasanian art, but the complete analogue was found in the neighbouring Samarkand (Afrasiab), Shakhristan and the Southern temple in Sogd and Tokharistan.

The ancient Penjikent had renaissance period in the first quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when its governor Devashtich pronounced himself the “Tsar of Sogd, the host of Samarkand”. Arabs conquered it from 711. Penjikent principalities as well as other parts of Sogd, came under the control of Arab Khalifat who were opposed sometimes. During one of the rebellions in 722 the citizens left Penjikent. After this events fire temples were not reconstructed and in the place where the Devashtich palace was located in its citadel a shelter was

constructed for Arab soldiers. In the middle of 8 ACE the domestic altars of fire were spoiled and abolished in the houses, as well as the portraits and images of Zoroaster and people, that suggests the conversion of the citizens to Islam.

Books were particularly valued as a spiritual and moral value in Central Asia, as it was a cultural nation. Fragmented information on ancient books in Central Asian region tells that they were small in number and their price was very high. They contained important information for ancient society, religious studies, history of the ruling dynasties, legends and epoch fairy tales, literary compositions, manuals for the craftsmen.

The earliest information about Central Asian books was spread with the expansion of Zoroastrian religion. This information is about sacred books of Zoroastrianism – Avesta. Ancient authors tell, that Zoroastrianism created great literary heritage

Sacred books were written on parchment. Depending from the original material, the parchment was of various density and shading. More thick copies were produced from the leather of carves, bulls, goats, even sheep. Parchment was very expensive.

Social status of calligraphers of the masterpieces, including period of Zoroastrianism, in Bactria and Sogd, was very noble and prestigious. Thus, the great Tajik philosopher Beruni says: “ Farming and writing – is the same. The day Tir (Mercury), the star of writers - became a holiday. On this day Khusheng orders people to wear the clothes of the writers of the days of Vishtaspa as a respect to the matters of calligraphers and with regards to the activities of farmers.

The Avesta manuscripts always started from the words “In the name of the God”, and in the end there was a reference, telling where, when and who made this copy. This tradition was later borrowed and practiced by the calligraphers of Islamic land.

The history of the book, culture of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Manihaeism, reflects the history of gold. Its use in various periods depended from ideological, aesthetic ideals of the epoch and its style. The gleam and beauty of this natural metal attracted people in ancient and medieval times, when the notion of beauty was connected with the notion of light, brightness and divinity.

The symbol of gold in the Aryan culture is based on Iranian and Indian mythology, which played a main role in linking religion and use of the precious metal in the artistic creativity. It is known, for example, in the book collection of the Avesta and Rig Veda the recollection and mentioning of light, gleam, glittering metal is met

very often. According to Rig Veda, initially the world looked like a water space, on its surface there was golden space egg (Hiranyatarbha). In Persian tradition Ahura Mazda, Supreme God of Zoroastrianism, created bright and clear sky in shape like egg made of glittering metal. Its peak reached the infinite light.

Sun and moon, by the perception of the ancient people, were created from the particles of light, and a human –being Gayamart was glittering like a sun. The God Mitra for Parthian and Sogdian Manichaens was a sun and related to the light. The gold served as an ideal emblem for the expression of the notion khvarna (khari) – farn, farrah, farr, that in Indo-Iranian meant “glitter”, “magnificence”, “glory”. According to ancient Iranian mythology, “khvarna” came as a fire into the body of Zarathushtra, and became a part of the prophet himself. The meaning of ‘khvarna’ in Europe was expressed in the nimbus of Christ, and in the east – in Buddha.

Some Indo-Iranian deity had characteristics, linked to the notions on brightness and light. It is suffice to say, that such Avesta deity, as Hauma (Hari in Rigveda) was of golden colour (zari-gauna), depicted in various states and profiles. The description of the anthropomorphic profile of the God of fertility Anahita is preserved. Her clothes and decoration included such golden objects, as crown, jewelry, shoes, and coat.

It is natural, that in the fine arts the prophets and sacred men were marked by special signs, and were visually restored in the type of nimbus, oral or mandorla. Mandorla and nimbus were symbols and decoration elements of the medieval art. This was facilitated by the fact that the sacred parts were written exclusively with gold.

Many sacred hymns and rituals, praising the sun, are important part of the Indo-Iranian tradition from the ancient period, and symbols of light can be considered as one of the characteristics of the cultural heritage of Central Asia. The worship of sun and fire is peculiar to all nations of ancient and medieval times.

The richness of the golden cover of books meant their beauty, value, and indicated at the skilled craft of calligraphers, illuminators and painters. It is enough to remember, how gold was widely used in Bactria in re-writing of Avesta book, or the fact, that while Arabs were burning the Manihaen books in Bagdad (10 century), the liquid gold and silver flowed like a river.

In the process of the artistic and craft practice, gold was selected as the main element of decoration in art and architecture, due to its

diverse presentation by reflexes and shading, high combination and such qualities, as density, firmness and luminescence.

The state of Bactria was first formed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This was a beginning of classic art. In the 3-4<sup>th</sup> centuries ACE it came to an end, with coming of Sasanian dynasty to power in Iran. The classic art in Sogd state was longer and continued to the coming of Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

“Bactria is decoration of Iran” – wrote the Strabon from Rome. This country of the fortified villages and towns, located among gardens and forests, in foothills and on the hills on both sides of Amu-darya on the territory between Pamir and the desert of Karakum. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century the importance of Sogd had grown. Its language had become a lingua franca for all of Central Asia. Various oasis city-states flourished and began to cooperate rather than only compete in trading.

Religious outlook was diverse and tolerant there. In Sogdian and Bactrian land four world religions coexisted simultaneously, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism. Zoroastrian religious churches were discovered in these regions. The sacred places for fire and burials were the most characteristic feature of this religion.

Stylistically the culture of Bactria and Sogdiana on various stages of their history was heterogeneous both by its religious, ideological and aesthetic trends. Various components crossed between them thus producing new merged forms and ideas and deposited themselves upon the old ones, developing them still further. Bactria and Sogdiana as crossroads in economy and culture have played an important part in the history of World civilization.

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