

Returning to Varakhsha

Aleksandr Naymark

*Hofstra University,
Hempstead, New York*

There are archaeological monuments and archaeological monuments. After a while you start distinguishing a kind of individual presence in these hills. Some of them are grim and unfriendly, others leave a light, pleasant imprint on your soul. Varakhsha is one of the most welcoming and enjoyable sites where I have been fortunate to excavate. Even the wind performing its lonely dance in the roofless empty halls of the palace sounds like a distant chorale. As to the Sogdian lunar god Mah, whose light floods the uninterrupted dreamy plains stretching from the foot of the citadel to the flat horizon, I have not seen him so beautiful in any other part of the world. These personal feelings make me wish to revisit the site, but, by themselves, they do not constitute a legitimate reason for a scholarly return to Varakhsha, a monument which has held an exceptional place in the history of exploration of Sogdiana. Such a scholarly re-examination is necessary for our understanding of the site

in order to update it in the context of recently-studied monuments and to make use of materials brought to light by the last decades of research.

The very first Sogdian archeological site

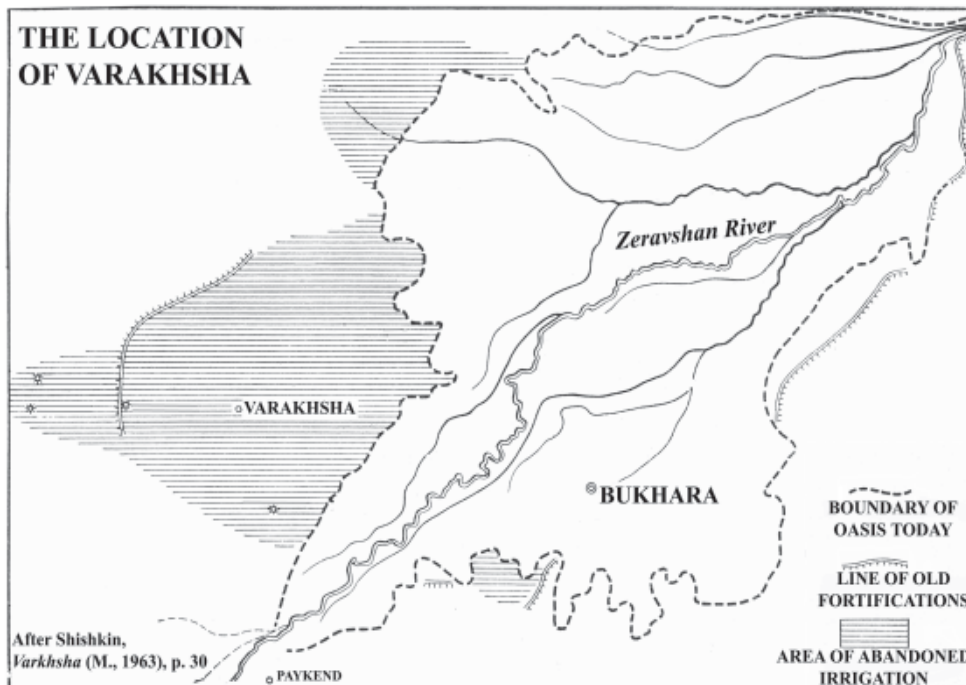
A British artist and adventurer, James Fraser, who collected information about the Uzbek Khanates while traveling in Khorasan in 1821 and 1822, mentioned that the Bukharan oasis would

afford a rich field to the antiquarian, for there are several sites of ancient cities scattered over it, among the ruins of which, gems, coins, medals, and various antique utensils and arms are to be found. One person who was himself a dealer in such articles, mentioned to me a city called Khojahwooban, which he described as having been overwhelmed by sand, under which

extensive ruins lie buried; in this place after rain, people go to dig for such articles, and find a great many; particularly plate, and utensils of gold and silver, for all of which they find a ready market with Russian merchants, who, he assured me, would give five times their weight for such articles of metal, and a very high price for all carved gems. I should indeed have doubted greatly the rates he quoted for such things, and would have believed that it was a trick to induce me to make purchases, had it not been for the prices actually demanded by others in Mushed, and those which he himself offered for individual articles, which convinced me that the merchants of Bokkhara had found ready, and probably ignorant purchasers for things of which they could hardly be judges. [Fraser, p. 98]

Fifteen years later, another British traveler, Alexander Burnes wrote:

About twenty-five miles north-west of Bokhara, and on the verge of the desert, there lie the ruins of an ancient city, called Khojuoban, and which is assigned by tradition to the age of the caliph Omar. Mahommedans seldom go beyond the era of their Prophet, and this proves nothing. There are many coins to be procured in this neighborhood; and I am fortunate in possessing several beautiful specimens, which have turned out to be genuine relics of the monarchs of Bactria. They are of silver, and nearly as large as a half-crown piece. A head is stamped on one side, and a figure is seated on the reverse. The execution of the former is very superior; and the expression of features and spirit of the whole do credit even to the age



of Greece, to which it may be said they belong. They brought numerous antiques from the same place, representing the figures of men and animals cut out on cornelians and other stones. Some of these bore a writing that differs from any which I have before seen, and resembled Hindee. [Burnes, pp. 319-320]

Indeed coins and gemstones presented in the engraved plates illustrating Burnes' book are of great interest.

The same Khwaja Uban was said to be a source of important finds under the Russian colonial rule. The famous Russian scholar and eager collector of gemstones, Alexander Semenov mentions that one of the most resourceful people trading in antiques at the turn of the 20th century used to say that the most precious of his objects came from Khwaja Uban [Semenov 1957, pp. 149-150]. Semenov thought that his informant referred to the site situated in the now deserted area beyond the western border of the Bukharan oasis on the road to Khoresm [Semenov 1945, p. 30].

The very first archaeological survey conducted in the area of Khwaja Uban by Vasilii Shishkin in the early 1950s established that the actual site bearing this name is rather small and did not conform to this image of an antiquarian Klondike responsible for the gigantic volume of finds which throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries filled the local market with antiquities. Shishkin's survey brought to light almost no archaeological material from the surrounding plain either. Moreover, the hillock Khwaja Uban and the area around it produced nothing datable prior to the fifteenth century, except for the bricks of the early Islamic period which were re-used in the construction of the building itself [Shishkin 1963, p. 134].

The explanation for this little mystery of Khwaja Uban turned out to be the local toponyms. Shishkin pointed out that by the end of the nineteenth century the entire zone of the abandoned lands of ancient irrigation situated to the West of the Bukharan oasis was called Chul'-i Khwaja Uban. We know now that this designation of the desert on the western fringes of the Bukharan

oasis appears in a local chronicle as early as the late Ashtarkhanid period [Tali - Semenov 1959, p. 138]. The reason why the name of the one and not very significant site was extended to the large territory was the great popularity of the *mazar*, the "holy grave" situated on the top of the archaeological mound of Khwaja Uban. [Among the early descriptions is that by Vambery. The most detailed is Shishkin 1963, p. 134; for fictionalized description of life on this mazar in the early twentieth century, see Aini 1949, p. 210 ff.]. Bukharans shared a popular belief that this mazar had special healing powers and the complex of the buildings constructed in the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries on the top of the mound served as a *makhaw khona* - "a reservation for lepers." In other words, it was not the Khwaja Uban site, but the huge zone of desolate lands of ancient irrigation in the western part of the Bukharan oasis (about 700 sq. km), that produced such a large volume of various archaeological finds. Yet, there is little, if any, doubt that the ruins of the ancient city "overwhelmed by sand" mentioned by Fraser and Burnes are the remains of Varakhsha, by far the largest and the most impressive among the archaeological sites situated in this zone. This makes Varakhsha the very first Sogdian archaeological site mentioned in European literature.

On the other hand, the name of Varakhsha was well known to the historians of Central Asian long before Shishkin identified it with the mysterious Khwaja Uban. This was due to the important role that Varakhsha played in local history during the dramatic period of the Arab conquests. At that time, the old Bukharan ruling family moved the royal court to Varakhsha, thus turning it into the scene of many tragic events of their dynastic history.

This "residence" status may also explain the exceptional role that Varakhsha later played in the traditional pre-Islamic calendar of Bukhara. The history of Bukhara written by Muhammad Narshakhi in 943-4 CE relates that

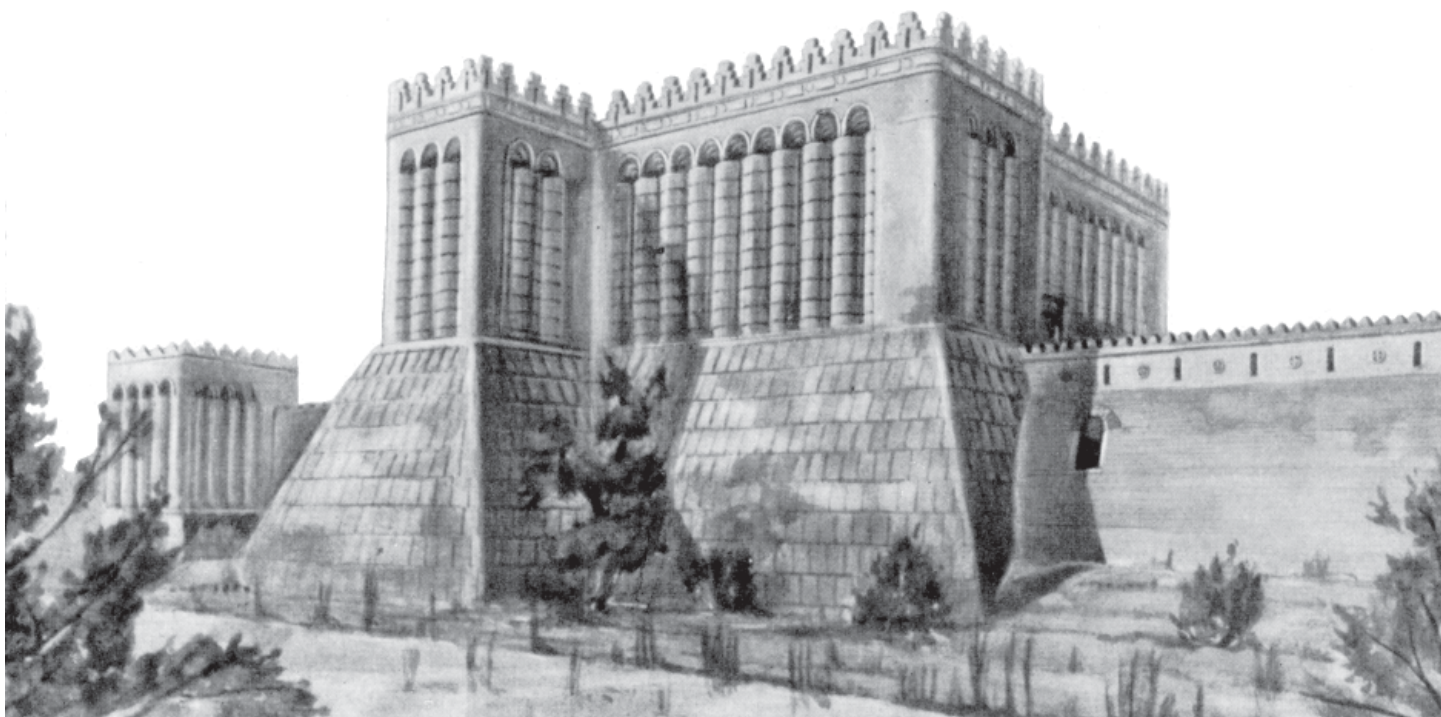
every (year) for fifteen days there is a market in this village, but when the market is at the end of the year they hold it for twenty days. The

twenty-first day is then New Year's day, and they call it the New Year's day of the farmers. The farmers of Bukhara reckon from that (day) and count from it. The New Year's day of the Magians is five days later. [Narshakhi-Frye 1954, p. 18]

As we know from ethnographic materials, Central Asian festivals of this type required participation of local lords or squires - *dihqans*, whose role was to start the agricultural year by plowing the first furrow. The "farmer's New Year" of the entire Bukharan oasis would require participation of the Dihqan of Bukhara, i.e. the Bukhar Khuda, originally the king and then a descendant of the kings. This very well corresponds to various passages in contemporary early Islamic writings (for example: Biruni, Firdawsi) ascribing to dihqans and kings from old dynasties the function of the ritual leaders of the agricultural community.

Apart from the temporary political and religious significance connected to its residence status, well-fortified Varakhsha was an important military outpost on the western border of the oasis [Muqaddasi - de Goeje 1906, p. 282]. It was also a considerable trade center situated on the road between Bukhara and Khoresm [Istakhri - de Goeje 1870, p. 338; Ibn Hawqal - de Goeje 1873, p. 400] and in the contact zone between the nomads and sedentary population. As its population deliberately rejected township rights, it was considered "the largest of the villages" in the Bukharan oasis [Narshaki - Frye 1954, p. 18], but we can safely assume that it was also a major center of crafts, because Narshakhi states that the suburbs of Varakhsha "were like those of Bukhara" itself [Narshaki - Frye 1954, p. 17; Naymark 1999, pp. 49-50]. This statement of the chronicle is supported by the discovery of the traces of industrial quarters in Varakhsha's environs made in the course of the surveys and small scale excavations conducted by the archaeological expedition of the Museum of Oriental Art in the 1980s. Last, but not least, Varakhsha was the center of a large agricultural area "irrigated by the twelve canals" [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 17].

Varakhsha's role in local history, and especially the abundance of the infor-



Source: Shishkin, *Varakhsha* (1963), facing p. 96

The Varkhsha palace (V.A. Nil'sen's reconstruction)

mation in written sources, attracted the attention of scholars as early as the nineteenth century, but it was Vladimir Barthold who first suggested the correct location of the ancient settlement by placing it near the well Varakhchin had marked on the nineteenth-century maps [Barthol'd 1963, p. 167]. Later Barthold's student and one of the first serious amateur archaeologists of Russian colonial Turkestan, L.A. Zimin, mentioned in the report on his archaeological trip to this area that the remains of the ancient town were the large mound Varakhsha and extensive adjacent ruins [Zimin 1917, p. 131, n. 4]. These were situated at a distance from Bukhara which corresponds quite well to the four farsakhs mentioned by Sam'ani [Barthol'd 1963, p. 167] or a one day trip reported by Ibn Hawqal [Ibn Hawqal - de Goeje 1873, p. 400].

Vasilii Shishkin and archaeological exploration of Varakhsha

Yet Varakhsha had to wait for its true explorer for two more decades. During the Bolshevik revolution the only two archaeological institutions of Russian Turkestan - the Tashkent and the Ashkhabad Circles of the Amateur Archaeologists - disappeared together

with the representatives of Russian colonial administration (Zimin, for example, perished in the hands of the Baku Revolutionary Tribunal). The turmoil of the Civil War (1918-1920) left Russia ruined, and the subsequent process of rebuilding the country's economy prevented the allocation of resources to support Central Asian archaeological research. New investigations of ancient cultures of the area started in the second half of the 1920s and reached a fairly significant scale only by the second half of the 1930s.

By that time, Vasilii Shishkin, the man who was destined to become the real discoverer of Varakhsha, had already spent a fairly significant amount of time in Bukhara. He originally did not plan to become an archaeologist at all. Born in 1889 in the village of Spaso-Talitskoe near Viatka, Shishkin followed the steps of his father in selecting the profession of a teacher. After graduating from Viatka College, he received an appointment in the Siuhsin Higher Initial College as a teacher of drawing, but in September of 1915 was drafted into the army and fought on the south-western front. With the end of the First World War in 1918, Shishkin returned to his peaceful occupation but was

drafted once more, this time by the Red Army. Following the end of the Civil War, he was ordered to Turkestan. Fascinated by Central Asia and not an army man by persuasion, Shishkin demobilized and by 1926 graduated from the Oriental Department of Tashkent University. In 1928, he received an appointment to Bukhara as the local representative of the Uzbekistan committee for the preservation of cultural heritage. Despite the strained conditions and limited resources, he did a lot for the preservation of Bukhara's cultural heritage. These, however, were the roughest years of the Soviet era when almost any activity was pregnant with trouble. Well versed in local languages, Shishkin worked closely with the surviving Bukharan architects, ganchkors, painters, embroiderers and other artists. Many of them were famous in the pre-Soviet era, and some worked on the orders of the former Amirs. According to the then existing practice, these lucky ones were assigned a court rank. In 1936, however, the record of such a formal affiliation with the Amir's court proved to be dangerous: when the wave of Stalin's proscriptions reached Bukhara this "incriminating fact" started being used as sufficient pretext to sentence a person to certain

death in Siberian camps. Shishkin tried to save old artists by using his official status and the position of an outsider. He testified on their behalf during the court procedures, although he certainly realized the danger of engaging in controversy with local secret police (NKVD), which of course saw him as a mere obstacle in their efforts to meet their targets of a certain number of arrests and convictions. This "unwise behavior" labeled Shishkin, a Russian from Viatka, as a "Bukharan nationalist," and one day a warrant was issued for his arrest. Shishkin's personal popularity and a mere chance, however, saved him - a well-wisher inside the NKVD who happened to learn about the pending arrest warned Shishkin several hours in advance. Shishkin caught a train to Tashkent shortly prior to the beginning of the regular nightly harvest by the NKVD. As often happened at the time, the prosecution did not bother to pursue him; they could hardly cope with the plan of proscriptions imposed on them by the central authority. Shishkin returned to Bukhara as a member of the Tashkent Institute of History and Archaeology a year later, when a new wave of repressions had wiped out those NKVD investigators themselves. Yet, after this incident he completely switched to the safer field of archaeology and for a while did not work in the city itself.

It is, however, a rare ill wind that blows no good. Indeed, it was this dramatic encounter with the almighty secret police that pushed Vasilii Shishkin to the lands of old irrigation on the western fringes of the Bukharan oasis. The further steps simply followed the logical path: the largest and the most impressive of the monuments situated in this zone, Varakhsha, simply called for excavation. Once on the site, Shishkin noticed the outlines of rooms on the surface of the elevation to the east of the citadel. This looked promising, and the first excavation spot was set there. One of the rooms turned out to be filled with the fragments of ornamental and figurative decorative stucco in early (what was then considered Sasanian) style. This find became a true archaeological sensation. That is how the palace of Varakhsha became the very first Sogdian monumental edifice to undergo archaeological excavations.

The Varakhsha excavations, which had been interrupted by World War II, resumed in 1949 and then continued for another six years. They stood out among the contemporary archaeological work in Central Asia because of the unusual attention devoted to the building history of the edifice and the meticulous recording of different architectural materials. I believe that Shishkin's initial education as a painter and his later interest in the history of architecture were largely responsible for this unusually advanced methodology. The quality of the work on the excavation turned Shishkin's expedition into one of the major schools of Central Asian field work in which many future leading scholars, like archaeologist Lazar Albaum, orientalist Nataliia D'iakonova, the architect V. A. Nil'sen, and art historian V. A. Meshkeris were trained.

Yet Varakhsha's primacy in the study of Central Asian adobe brick architecture carried negative aspects as well. The majority of simple "methodologies" allowing an archaeologist to synchronize different stages in rebuilding of adobe architectural structures, now considered to be the alpha and beta of Central Asian archaeology, had not yet been developed at the time of Varakhsha excavations. For example, excavators did not pay special attention to the passages between the rooms; in the majority of cases, no effort was made to establish the correspondence of numerous floor levels in neighboring rooms through the connection to the repairs of their common walls, etc. Consequently, no true archaeological stratigraphy was elaborated, and hence no archaeological dates could be offered for the famous Varakhsha paintings and stucco.

The Varakhsha excavations came to a halt in 1954. Since then, Central Asian archaeology and art history advanced both by the accumulation of a large quantity of new precise data and through the development of research methodologies. As a result, our understanding of Varakhsha, once the most advanced monument of Sogdian archaeology, lagged behind the now much better dated and understood monuments excavated on the sites of Panjikent and Afrasiab.

In the 1970s, a joint expedition of the Moscow Institute of Restoration and the

Institute of Archaeology of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences removed the paintings on the southern wall of the Blue Hall at Varakhsha, but without any effort to clarify the building's history. In 1986-1991, the team from the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art conducted more or less extensive excavations on the site of Varakhsha, but because of conservation concerns, its work on the palace was mostly limited to the so-called *eiwan* in the western part of the palace. These small scale excavations discovered three different stages in the history of this part of the building [Alpatkina 1999; Alpatkina 2002], but provided practically no dating materials. Unexpectedly interrupted in 1991, they could not solve the major problems related to the chronology of the different stages in the edifice's building history, leaving us with the firm belief that more archaeological work is needed.

Narshakhi's story of the Varakhsha palace

Yet, it is possible to solve some of the puzzles even without excavations. In doing this, we can utilize some new data accumulated in Sogdian numismatics, art history and archaeology in general. Even more beneficial, however, may become yet another unique feature of the Varakhsha palace: this palace is the only archaeologically known Sogdian architectural structure which has a written history. Indeed, in the *Tarikh-i Bukhara* composed in 332 AH/943-4 CE by Muhammad Narshakhi we find a special passage devoted to this building:

There was a palace in it [Varakhsha - A.N.], the beauty of which is told in a proverb. It was built by a Bukhar Khudah more than a thousand years ago. This palace had been destroyed and abandoned for many years when Khnk Khudah restored it. It again fell into ruins, and again Bunyat b. Toghsada, Bukhar Khudah, rebuilt it in Islamic times and made his court there till he was killed in it. Amir Isma'il Samani convoked the people of the village and said, "I shall give 20,000 dirhams and wood, and shall take care of the rebuilding of it. Part of the building is standing. You make a grand mosque out

of this place." The village people did not want it, and said that a grand mosque was unnecessary and unreasonable for their village. So the palace existed till the time of the amir Ahmad b. Nuh b. Nasr b. Ahmad b. Isma'il al-Samani. He brought the wood of that palace to the city and used it to build a mansion which he made at the gate of the fortress of Bukhara. [Narshaki - Frye 1954, pp. 17-18]

Although no exact dates are found in this passage, it gives us an opportunity to enhance the dating of different stages in the history of the building if we use the four mentioned historical figures as chronological anchors.

Stage One - The Palace of Khunak

The information provided is certainly insufficient to identify the anonymous Bukhar Khudah, who built the palace "more than a thousand years ago." Yet the second personage of this story, Khnk Khuda is certainly a historical figure. He appears once more in the text of *Tarikh-i Bukhara* as one of the leaders of the anti-Arab coalition of 88/707:

Among the villages of Bukhara, between Tarab, Khunbun, and Ramitin, many troops gathered and surrounded Qutaiba [b. Muslim - A.N.]. Tarkhun, ruler of Sughd, came with many troops. Khnk Khudah¹ came with a large army; Vardan Khudah with his troops, and king Kur Maghanun, nephew of the emperor of Chin also came. [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 45]

It is quite obvious that even combined the two mentions of Khnk Khudah in the *Tarikh-i Bukhara* are insufficient to help with the identification of this mysterious man.

The presence of the Khuda component of the name (New Persian - "master" as a substitution for Sogdian *xws*) places this personage in a group with Central Asian princes such as Bukhar Khuda - "Lord of Bukhara", Vardan Khuda - "Lord of Varadana", Chaghan Khuda - "Lord of Chaghanian", Khuttal Khudah - "Lord of Khuttal", Saman Khuda - "Lord of Saman", etc. Yet in all known titles of this type, the first component is the name of the realm con-

trolled by the bearer of the title. In the case of Khnk Khuda, however, such an interpretation seems to be implausible - we are aware neither of an apanage, nor even of a village called Khnk in Sogdiana. The silence of written sources can hardly result from a gap in our knowledge. Judging from his role in the coalition of the year 88/707 (commander of large army) and from his rebuilding of the great palace, Khnk Khuda must have been a major prince. In other words, the title of this personage as it is given by *Tarikh-i Bukhara* appears to be "suspicious."

Fortunately, the same personage appears in the description of this very episode in Ya'qubi's *Tarikh*: "When Qutaiba left, Tarkhun Sahib of al-Sughd began to agitate and then Khnk Abu Shukr Bukhar Khuda and Kurmaghanun an-Nufasi came at the head of the Turks." [Ya'qubi - Houtsma 1969, p. 342]. Contrary to Narshakhi, Ya'qubi treats Khnk as a personal name. The accuracy of Ya'qubi's account compared with the version found in Narshakhi's work is attested by the appearance of a certain Shukr b. Khnk, evidently a son of the person mentioned by Ya'qubi, among other Central Asian princes in Tabari's account of the siege of Mug castle in 722 CE [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, 1447].

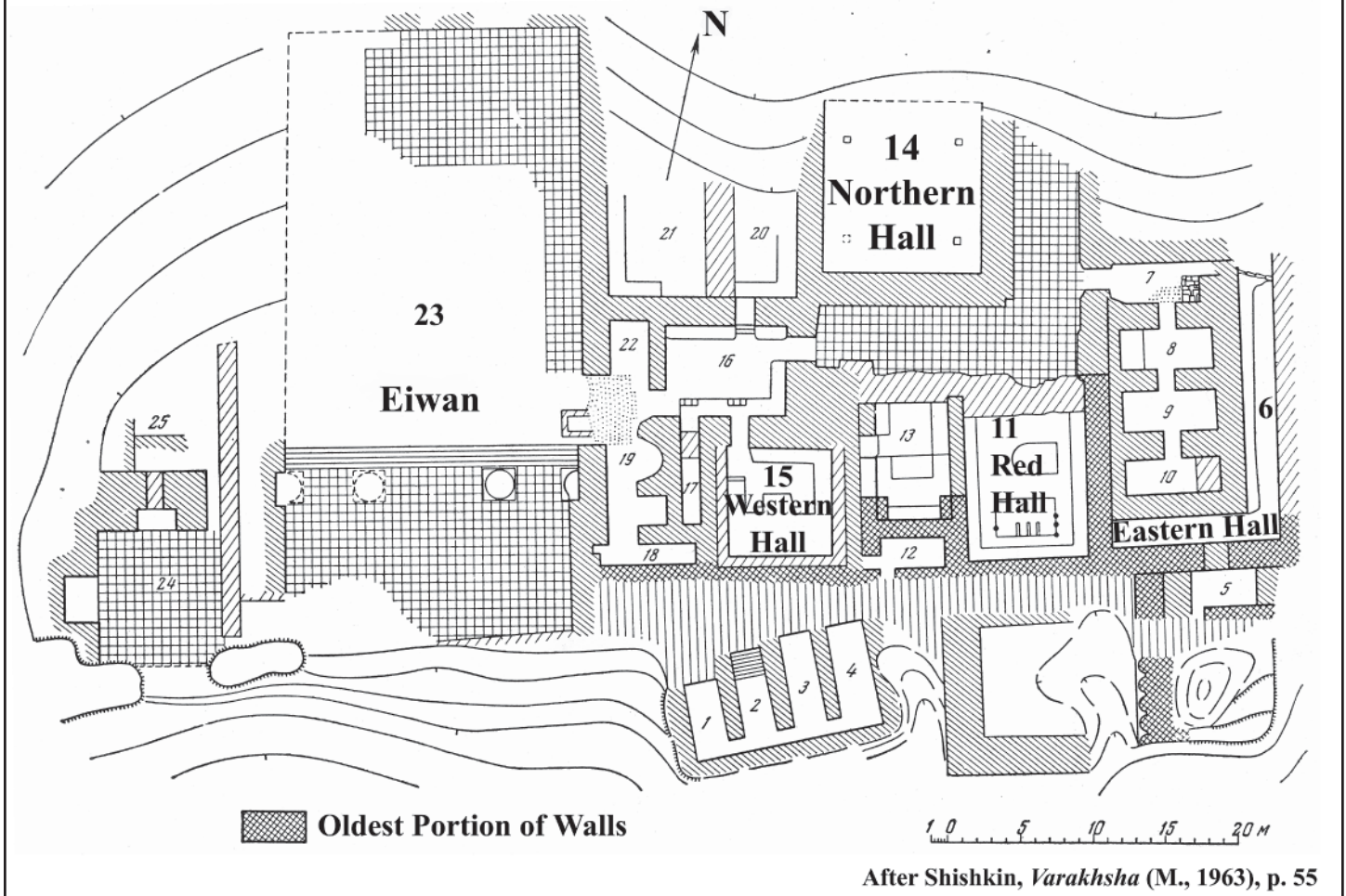
There is another drastic difference between the information of the two sources - Ya'qubi supplies Khnk with the title of Bukhar Khuda. The veracity of Ya'qubi's account in this matter is indirectly supported by Narshakhi himself: it is unclear why a certain Khnk Khudah would resolve on restoring the Varakhsha palace of the Bukhar Khudah dynasty; yet if we accept the version of Ya'qubi, everything falls into place.

In other words, the fairly slim data of written sources suggest that the restorer of the Varkhsha palace, a certain Khnk, was a Bukhar Khuda who ruled over Bukhara around 707 CE. All this may seem rather speculative, but fortunately there is an independent and authentic source which supports Ya'qubi's information - Sogdian legends on Bukhar Khuda drachms. One of the types of Bukhar Khuda drachms, which until now has escaped the attention of numismatists, carries the inscription *pwx'r xwß xn/wn/wk* - Bukharan King

Khunak or Khanuk. Another type of Khunak/Khanuk coins has puzzled scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century - the so called drachms with the long Sogdian legend, which reads clearly *pwx'r xr' xwß xw/nn/wk* - "Bukharan *Great King Khunak".² On the basis of typologic and stratigraphic considerations these coins can be attributed to the time of the Arab conquests, which makes the Khunak/Khanuk mentioned on them chronologically compatible with Khnk of Narshakhi and Ya'qubi (707 CE), the father of Shukr b. Khnk of Tabari (722 CE). In other words, a cross-examination of coins and written sources allows identification of the personage mentioned in *Tarikh-i Bukhara* as the restorer of the Varakhsha palace as a Bukhar Khuda named Khunak/Khanuk, who was active around 707 CE.

However, turning to the history of the Bukharan royal family as described in *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, we do not find such a ruler. In an abridged form, the story told by Narshakhi reads as follows. After the death of Bukhar Khudah Bidun, power was assumed by his wife, who ruled fifteen years on behalf of her minor son Toghshada. The reign of this queen (whom sources usually call by her title, Khatun) started prior to 674 CE, for she is said to have been in charge of Bukhara during the first Arab attack on Sogdiana led in that year by 'Ubaidallah b. Ziyad. According to Narshakhi, she reigned for fifteen years, i.e. to 689 CE or a little earlier. At the time of Khatun's death her son Toghshada was already fit to rule, but the throne was usurped by the ruler of Vardana, who remained in power until the systematic conquest of Sogdiana by Qutaiba b. Muslim, which started in 707 CE. "Qutaiba had to fight many battles against him. Several times, he drove him from this district so that he fled to Turkistan. Vardan Khudah died, and Qutaiba seized Bukhara. Qutaiba gave Bukhara back to Toghshada and made him ruler." [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 10]. This happened in 90 or 91 AH/708 or 710 CE.³ Toghshada's reign ended with his assassination in Ramadan of 121 AH (August 11- September 9, 739 CE) near Samarkand, in the tent of the Arab governor of Khurasan Nasr b. Saiyar [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, p. 1693; Narshakhi - Frye 1954, pp. 60-2].

PLAN OF THE VARAKHSHA PALACE



How does our newly discovered Bukhar Khudah Khunak fit this picture? Chronologically his rule coincides with the usurpation of Vardan Khudah, and the simplest way to settle the discrepancy between the sources is to put an equals mark between these two figures. This seems quite possible since none of the written accounts mentions Vardan Khudah's personal name. Moreover, there could be quite a reasonable explanation how this one personage became "split" into two separate historical figures: since it was Qutaiba b. Muslim who "restored" Toghshada to the throne, Arab historians deliberately negated the legitimacy of Vardan Khudah's claim to the throne of Bukhara. Tabari, for example, labels Vardan Khudah the "Malik of Bukhara" [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, p. 1230], which is the exact Arabic equivalent of the title Bukhar Khuda, but never calls him Bukhar Khuda although he uses

this latter title when mentioning the enthronement of Toghshada in the year 91/709-710 [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, p. 1230]. In other words, the discrepancies between the two *Tarikhs* (Abu Shukr Khnk Bukhar Khudah of Ya'qubi versus Vardan Khudah of Tabari) likely result from the political agendas of the time. Likewise, the appearance of the strange combinatory creature Khnk Khudah in the *Tarikh-i Bukhara* seems to reflect a retrospective attempt on the part of a descendant of the Bukhar Khuda family who supplied Narshakhi with the information about the Varakhsha palace to deprive the usurper of the royal title. In the part of his book written later, Narshakhi ran into Bukhar Khuda Khunak once more, while copying the text of the Arabic source from which he borrowed the episode about Qutaiba's encounter with coalition forces in 707 CE. In order to smooth the contradiction, Narshakhi gave preference to his oral local source and cor-

rected the Arabic text by splitting the original Vardan/Bukhar Khuda Khnk into two separate personages, Khnk Khuda and Bukhar Khuda. There is a clear trace of this simple operation in the text: the two "Khudahs" are mentioned only under their "titles," while "Tarkhun, ruler of Sughd" and "king Kur Maghanun, the nephew of the emperor of Chin" retained both their titles and their names.

What effect may this little investigation into the chronology of the Bukhar Khuda dynasty have on our understanding of the history of Varakhsha palace? I believe it establishes the fact that the actual building of the palace by Bukhar Khudah Khnk after "the thousand years" of neglect took place sometime immediately prior to Qutaiba's conquest of Bukhara. If we go further and accept the identification of Khnk, the Bukhar Khuda, with the anonymous usurper Vardan Khudah, we would be able to attribute this ma-

for re-building of the edifice to the time span between 689 (or a little earlier) and 709-710 CE.

Shishkin distinguished the earliest walls of the Varakhsha palace by their specific bond of vertically alternating courses of headers and stretchers "floating" in thick layers of unformatted clay mortar. The stage in the building history of the edifice characterized by this rather specific masonry technique ended in the major redesigning which was outlived only by a few walls incorporated into the later structure. Since Shishkin's excavations did not specifically aim to study this period, the original floors connected to this first building were reached only in a few cases, and we do not have a single complete chamber pertaining to this stage, except for tiny room twelve. Yet there is a very important piece of evidence coming from one of these floors. A coin found in the stratigraphic trench under room fourteen (Northern Hall) belongs to the most common type in the Bukharan "camel" series, which on typologic grounds can be dated to the second quarter of the seventh century [Naymark 2001, p. 174]. From the stratigraphic data received during the recent excavations in Paykend we know that such "camel coins" circulated along with Bukharan cash at least until the very end of the seventh century [Semenov 2003, p. 148]. How can this find affect the date of the earliest building? Even if we accept the earliest possible date of this "camel" coin (second quarter of the seventh century) as the date of the earliest structure in which it was found, it would be hard to fit a long period of neglect (even if it was ten times shorter than the metaphorical 1000 years of *Tarikh-i Bukhara*) between the middle of the seventh century and the reign of Khunak, which started in 689 or even earlier. In other words, the date of the coin does not allow us to associate the structure in question with the legendary palace of the anonymous Bukhar Khuda. On the other hand, Khunak's restoration of the palace reported by Narshakhi fits quite well into the end of this interval, i.e. it is possible that these earliest structural remains belong to his reign.

In other words, the earliest palace building does not belong to the fifth or the sixth century, as it was earlier

thought, but rather to the end of the seventh century. Unfortunately, without additional excavations, we can say very little about the actual layout of this building.

Stage Two - the Palace of Toghshada

The building of the second period is quite well known: the principal layout of rooms six (Eastern Hall), eleven (Red Hall), thirteen, fifteen (Western Hall), sixteen to twenty-one and the original walls of the so-called eiwan date to this time.

Our attribution of the early palace to the time of Khunak pushes the dates of the next stage in the construction history of the building to the eighth century. Unfortunately, almost no archaeological and numismatic material belonging to this stage has been recovered during the excavations. Some support for our date of this stage is provided by the famous scene painted on the southern wall in the Eastern Hall. Previously it was dated to the seventh

century, but an investigation into the textiles depicted in it led Alexander Belenitskii and Boris Marshak to believe that the eighth century is more appropriate as their date [Belenitskii and Marshak 1979; Belenitskii and Marshak 1981, p. 49]. The date of this painting suggested by Belenitskii and Marshak equally well fits into the rule of any of the two Bukhar Khudas of the early eighth century: usurper Khunak (689-708/9 CE) and his challenger and successor Toghshada b. Bidun (709-732 CE), but since there are sufficient grounds to associate the previous stage in the building's history with the former, we can attribute the second stage in the history of the building and the paintings of the Blue Hall to the reign of Toghshada b. Bidun.

On the first glance the clearly "zoroastrian" content of these paintings, which shows the royal couple performing a fire ritual in front of the giant figure of Vashagn, the Sogdian god of war and the celestial patron of the Bukhar Khuda family, seems to con-



Painting of the fire ritual in the East Hall

Source: Shishkin, *Varakhsha* (1963), Plate XIV (det.)

tradict the statement of the sources, that Toghshada b. Bidun "accepted Islam from the hands of Qutaiba b. Muslim" [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 10]. We have, however, a reason to suspect that Toghshada's conversion was only a part of a political deal and that, in secret, he kept practicing the traditional Sogdian form of Zoroastrianism. In addition to the plain statement of *Tarikh-i Bukhara* that "he was still an unbeliever in secret" [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, pp. 60-2], we know that he was buried according to the local version of Zoroastrian burial rites [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, p. 1693; Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 62].

However, it is hard to imagine that an open statement of Toghshada's actual religious affiliation, like the one we find in the Eastern Hall, could be issued during the life of Qutaiba b. Muslim or during Toghshada's close affiliation with the Arabs in the 720s or 730s. There seems to be only one point in Toghshada's career when he could allow himself to do something of this sort. It was after the death of Qutaiba b. Muslim, when the Arab power in Mawarannahr was shaken, and the Bukharan King decided that time came to abandon his new masters. In 719, he asked the Chinese Emperor for help against the Arabs [Chavannes 1903, p. 203; 1904, p. 39; Bartol'd 1964, pp. 381-2]. His copper coin type which shows the scene of the fire ritual on the reverse belongs apparently to the same year(s) [Naymark 1999]. It was probably this apostasy of Toghshada that prompted the Arabs to keep another challenger for the Bukharan throne, Shukr b. Khunak, among their troops while suppressing the Sogdian uprising of 722 CE [Tabari - de Goeje 1906, II, p. 1447]: if necessary this landless prince could turn into a handy political resource.

In other words, the second rebuilding of the palace is likely to have taken place under Toghshada and most likely was completed around 719.

Stage Three - The Aesopic language of the Red Hall

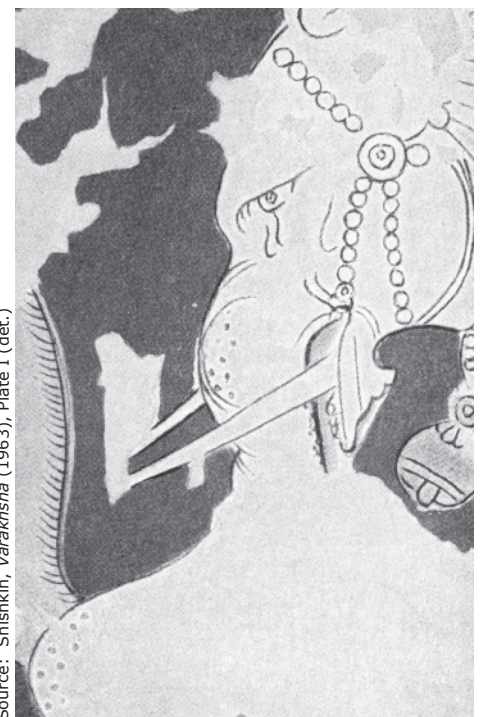
The alterations of the third stage aimed the creation of the new system of gala halls. This involved modifying, partially replacing and extending the older combination of the Red Hall and the East-

ern Hall, which for some reason did not satisfy the owners of the palace any more. The Eastern Hall was not architecturally altered, but seems to have lost its function as a gala hall - instead of proper repainting and restoration having been undertaken, the losses of the painted surface on the southern wall which occurred during this period were replaced with a primitive geometric motif. No changes took place in the principal layout of the Red Hall, but here a new layer of paintings covered the older one. The Western Hall (room fifteen), however, was significantly modified and painted anew. Unfortunately, the state of preservation does not allow us to judge the content of these paintings. Similar decorative works must have been planned for room thirteen, but this hall was apparently still in the process of remodeling with the intention that it be decorated with paintings when the owners of the palace resolved on a new, fundamental alteration of the building's layout. Judging from this unfinished business, the third stage must have been very short. In the process of preparation for the next building stage, the Red Hall and room thirteen were partially destroyed, walled up and filled with debris separated by the regular layers of brick.

It is not clear what caused damage of the paintings in the Eastern Hall and why it became necessary to repaint the Red Hall. Shishkin thought that this was the result of simple aging, but this theory is incompatible with the newly established dates of the previous stage (eighth century, most likely around 719 AD), because, as we shall see later, there was not enough time for simple aging. There could be other reasons for neglect of some paintings and for the repainting of others. For example, a scene of a fire ritual involving the owners of the castle, like the one in the Eastern Hall, could cause major trouble for the owner of the edifice in the quickly changing political and confessional situation of the eighth century. Since we do not know what was the subject of the earlier paintings of the Red Hall, all theories about the causes for repainting would be mere speculation.

Surprisingly, the subject of the well-preserved upper layer of paintings in

the Red Hall also remains a matter of speculation. Even the completely readable repeating scenes of the lower register, which show a fierce fight between the hero riding an elephant and beasts, real and fantastic, finds no parallels in other Sogdian paintings. In other words, little has changed since Shishkin's times when the absence of firm parallels prevented him from suggesting an interpretation of these scenes [Shishkin 1963, p. 205]. This forces us to look for the formal prototypes beyond Sogdiana. The enlarged earlobes and the naked figure of the main hero, together with rich gold jewelry of undoubtedly Indian type recall the typical iconography of a Bodhisattva. The immediate source of this image was probably the iconography of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who is shown riding an elephant. Besides the strikingly similar ratio between the body size of the elephant and the rider, which are exactly those found in the images of Samantabhadra, this analogy is supported by an "anatomic anomaly" of Varakhsha elephants. The elephant of Samantabhadra has six tusks, three on each side. The Varakhsha painter did not reproduce this fantastic aspect of Buddhist iconography, and reduced the number of tusks to normal. Yet, since the three tusks of Samantabhadra's el-



Source: Shishkin, *Varakhsha* (1963), Plate I (det.)

Detail of elephant from Red Hall



The hunting mural in the Red Hall

Source: Shishkin, *Varakhsha* (1963), Plate IV

elephant were "filling" the entire mouth, the painter of Varakhsha faced an unexpected problem: he did not know from where a single tusk should grow. Unable to solve this riddle, he made a wrong choice and placed the remaining tusk in the lower jaw.

In other words, the scholarly opinion which generally recognizes a strong Indian influence in the Red Hall paintings is correct. Yet this "Indic" iconography was not derived directly from India, but rather from eighth-century Tang art, or, more likely from the art of Eastern Turkestan of the Tang period. It is Puxian, the Chinese version of Samantabhadra [see for example: Li Jian 2003, p. 161], who is usually depicted riding a bridled and saddled elephant with festooned ears, i.e. an elephant which shares all the highly unrealistic characteristics of its cousin at Varakhsha. Our Sogdian painter could have encountered the Chinese iconography of Puxian in the *but-khaneh*, the house of idols, which was brought in

the trousseau of the "daughter of the king of Chin" and was established in Ramitan near Bukhara [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 8].

The establishment of the iconographic prototype, however, does not provide much help in deciphering the meaning of the depicted scenes - there is no way that the fiercely fighting hero of the Varakhsha painting could be a Bodhisattva. Two interpretations of this figure seem possible.

The first one was suggested by Belenitskii and Marshak, who thought that the main hero of this painting was Adbag, the supreme divinity of the Sogdian pantheon. This idea rests on a strong, but sole argument: Adbag's live attribute, an animal companion similar to the Indian *vahane*, which could be depicted as the god's throne or as his riding animal, is known to be an elephant [Belenitskii and Marshak 1981]. Yet this interpretation is very hard to prove; the elephant rider displays no standard divine attributes which would allow a Sogdian to iden-

tify him as the depiction of a god. On the other hand, this absence of the standard indicators of the divine status may not be taken as an absolute negative proof, because, as we shall see further, the paintings of the Red Hall stand out from the entire system of Sogdian art by their genre characteristics, and thus the data accumulated in the course of the study of Sogdian paintings may not be completely applicable in this case.

Another possibility is to see in the elephant rider of the Varakhsha painting the King of the South, one of the four great monarchs of the four cardinal points [Pelliot 1923; Bartol'd 1966, p. 216; Marshak 2000, pp. 77-8]. This "geopolitical" concept was Buddhist in origin but undoubtedly popular in Sogdiana; its artistic embodiment is found in a building in the Sogdian city of Kushania [Chavannes 1903, p. 145]. The image of the King of the South, who was also known as the king of the elephants and the king of wisdom, would require the Indian appearance

and this, in turn, would explain why the Varakhsha painter drew on the iconography of Samantabhadra - Puxian. It is harder to explain why the King of the South was selected for depiction on the walls of the palace of Bukhar Khudas. These images could have a certain genealogical significance in legitimizing the origin of the Bukhar Khuda dynasty or could be a part of a larger iconographic program that included an "Indian Hall", analogous to what was found in European palaces during the popularity of Chinoiserie in the eighteenth century. There seems to be one aspect of this unusual imagery that supports the second interpretation over the first one. The main deviation from the rather faithfully reproduced iconography of Samantabhadra - Puxian, which makes the elephant rider at Varakhsha certainly a non-Buddhist figure, is the fierce fight with the fantastic and real beasts of prey. This alteration, however, is nothing other than the application of an ancient Near Eastern iconographic formula, which was widely used in the Iranian world in general and in Sogdiana in particular. As far as I know, in the Iranian world from at least the Achaemenid period and in the Near East in general throughout the early medieval period, a king and not a deity is depicted fighting beasts. Retrieval of this old iconographic formula could have transparent political connotations in the troubled eighth century.

Yet the most puzzling aspect of this painting is its genre characteristics. Indeed, in all known monuments of Sogdian art, we find a clear tendency to avoid repetition of scenes while here we see at least eleven similar compositions rhythmically repeated on the walls of the hall. Such intentional reiteration of one and the same statement yields very little information, but stresses the majesty of the main personage. This would fit well with the principles of imperial Achaemenid art, but it looks odd in Sogdiana, where most painted decoration is narrative in nature.

A rational explanation for the peculiarities of this genre can be offered if we accept Belenitskii and Marshak's congenial "religious" interpretation of the "animal run" frieze in the second register of the Red Hall paintings. Similar friezes with an "animal run" are known

in Sogdian art, but all animals in the Varakhsha palace display one very unusual feature - they are all saddled. Since each Sogdian god had an animal throne, often depicted as an Indian *vahane*, a riding animal, this procession of saddled animals can be interpreted as the depiction of the deities of the Sogdian pantheon [Belenitskii and Marshak 1981, pp. 32-3]. Yet this way of representing deities certainly deviated from standard iconographic programs commonly found in Sogdian gala halls, where gods would be depicted mostly in a sort of "blown up" icon on the back wall of the hall, as Vashagn, for example, was represented in the slightly earlier paintings of the neighboring Eastern Hall. Together with the unusual genre characteristics of the lower register, this leaves the impression that the patron ordered both the religious content and the political agenda of the paintings to be "coded" and hidden under the neutral cover of the rhythmically organized anthropomorphic and zoomorphic "ornament."

In the historical context of the eighth century, these observations on the language of the Red Hall paintings may be used as a dating resource. Such an Aesopic language perfectly fits the situation in which Toghshada would find himself from the time when Arabs restored their control over Sogdiana in 722 until his death in 738 CE. It is not clear how much time passed between the completion of the second stage (around 719 CE.) and the beginning of the third one. It is, however, tempting to suggest that the sharp change of building plans, such as the interruption of the unfinished reconstruction of the rooms, and subsequent conversion of the entire block of gala halls into a platform for a new building, indicates the "arrival" of a new master, i.e. reflects the situation when the power passed from Toghshada to his son Qutaiba in 738 CE, upon Toghshada's death. If this bold suggestion is correct, then the paintings of the Red Hall are likely to belong to the later part of Toghshada's reign, probably the 730s.

Before the final demolition of the roof construction, somebody cut off several pieces of paintings in the Red Hall. Shishkin thought that this was an act of vandalism performed by iconoclastic Moslems [Shishkin 1963, p. 83]. Several of these "cuts", which I was

able to investigate visually prior to removal of the last paintings during the re-excavations in the Red Hall in 1987, certainly do not comply with this notion. First of all, the easiest way to damage the wall painting on dry plaster would simply be to scratch off the painted surface, as we see in damaged paintings of Afrasiab. If something more serious was needed, the plaster itself could be knocked off the wall and brought down, as was done in the gala halls of The Panjikent palace. In the latter case, one would expect chaotic cuts going parallel to the surface of the wall in order to break off large "slabs" of plaster. Yet, the person who cut pieces of paintings in the Red Hall first marked the borders of the pieces that interested him by cutting circles around them. Then he cut deep into the wall, so that the final product of his work looked like a cone for which the painted surface of the wall served as a flat base. In other words, these cuts seem to be the result of very accurate and time-consuming work aimed at the removal of wall fragments with an intact painted surface. Since each cut concentrated on a certain compact element of images, like the head of a man or the wing of a gryphon, these cuts are very likely to be done by an artist who used this opportunity to obtain samples of superior work for his pattern collection from the paintings destined for inevitable destruction. This unusual fact provides us with a rare insight into one of the mechanisms that allowed the elements of pre-Islamic artistic tradition to be passed to the art of the early Islamic period.

Stage Four - The Palace of Qutaiba b. Toghshada

We know almost nothing about the next stage in the palace's life. It was during this stage that the central element of the later palace's plan, the elbow corridor, was designed. Marshak pointed out that such corridors were typical for Sogdian palaces and rich dwellings, and that even such details as the engaged wooden column fortifying the protruding corner on the elbow finds analogies in the early medieval architecture of Central Asia [Marshak 2000, p. 155]. Some traces of rooms belonging to this period were discovered on the top of the platform that incorporated the booted remains of the Red Hall and room thirteen. Judging from the brief



The eiwan in V. A. Nil'sen's reconstruction

Source: Shishkin, *Varakhsha* (1963), facing p. 80

textual description (none of Shishkin's several publications devoted to the excavations in Varakhsha provides us with any illustrative materials), these indistinct fragments of walls could not be made into a comprehensible plan. Apatkina dates the erection of the massive arches of the eiwan to this period [Apatkina 1999, 2002], but this does not seem right to me; the foundations of these constructions cut through the corresponding floor and certainly belong to the next stage (palace of Buniyat).

Of the finds of this period which could be used for dating, Shishkin mentions only an early shahada "Caliphate" fals. Although the coin is preserved in the Coin Room of the Samarkand Institute of Archeology, its poor state leaves no chance of a more precise attribution. No other dating materials are reported on the floors of this period, which were reached in the Western Hall, in the "elbow" corridor, in a trench in the Northern Hall and in the eiwan.

We have almost no knowledge of the palace's decoration at that time. Re-used in the next, fifth, state were the large terra cotta slabs with human fig-

ures in high relief covered with a thin layer of alabaster ground. Another unpublished slab of this type preserved in the Bukharan Museum shows a gryphon in low relief. Most likely belonging to the fourth period, neither the material nor the technique used in their production are found in the earlier architectural decor of Sogdiana, and they do not seem to find a place in the decoration of the third stage, which, in terms of technique, is very traditional. Altogether, these slabs look like an experiment which was meant to imitate some foreign prototype but, due to its unsuccessful nature, was not continued. Yet, the string drapery of these reliefs seems to correspond quite well to that known in Sogdian terra cotta figures and on slab-molded ossuaries of Samarkandian Sogd of the seventh century.

This period terminated with a major fire, traces of which are found in all the rooms where floors of this period were reached, except for the Eastern Hall and vaulted rooms in the south. This fire likely resulted from an event which Narshakhi described by saying that Qutaiba b. Toghshada "was a Mus-

lim for a while until he apostatized in the time of Abu Muslim (may God show mercy on him). Abu Muslim heard [of his apostasy] and killed him. He also killed his brother with his followers" [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 10]. This took place in late 751 or early 752.

Stage Five - the Palace of Buniyat b. Toghshada

Our information about the second personage mentioned in the history of the Varakhsha palace, Bukhar Khuda Buniyat b. Toghshada, is limited to the two passages in the *Tarikh-i Bukhara* recording the succession of Bukharan rulers. The first of these passages is likely to be a later, literary interpolation full of chronological mistakes, contradictions, and inconsistencies [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 8-9]. This suspicious passage is the only place where a certain Sukah is mentioned as brother and successor of Qutaiba b. Toghshada and as brother and predecessor of Buniyat b. Toghshada.

The second of these passages, on the contrary, bears no evident traces of later distortions. It repeats twice that

Buniyat b. Toghshada directly replaced his brother Qutaiba b. Toghshada, who was killed by Abu Muslim in Varakhsha around 753 CE [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 10-11]. The majority of scholars who dealt with the dates of the Buniyat's reign tried to smooth out the severe discrepancies between these two passages and to combine their information in one coherent "system." As a result, in all published chronological and genealogical charts devoted to the Bukhar Khudah dynasty, we see Sukah succeeding his brother Toghshada and ruling for seven years, with Buniyat stepping in after the death of Sukah and remaining in power until his own assassination by the order of al-Mahdi [Smirnova 1981, pp. 426-8; Goibov 1989, pp. 39-44, 89-95; Frye 1995; Rtveladze 1999, p. 33].

However, the methodology of source studies does not allow a scholar to merge such diverging accounts without an investigation into the causes of the contradictions between them, especially when they appear in the adjacent chapters of one and the same source. Once started, such an examination immediately reveals that the first of the passages is a later interpolation by a real ignoramus who not only made a number of major mistakes in chronology, but also "constructed" evidence. One of his "constructs" is Sukah with his biography while, in reality, it was Buniyat who replaced his brother Qutaiba b. Toghshada. Fortunately, there are not any discrepancies in sources when it comes to the date of Buniyat's death: both these passages of the *Tarikh-i Bukhara* agree that he was murdered in the Varakhsha palace in 166/782-3 on the order of Caliph al-Mahdi, who suspected him of sympathizing with Muqanna's revolt. In other words, Buniyat "ruled" for 30 years from 751/52 to 782/3.

Since we attributed the construction activities of stage four to the times of Qutaiba b. Toghshada and interpreted the traces of fire which are found all over the palace as the evidence for the destruction of the building which occurred at the moment when Qutaiba b. Toghshada was killed, we should look at the subsequent reconstruction of the edifice as the work of Buniyat b. Toghshada.

This assumption is perfectly supported by the investigation of architectural remains; Shishkin was certainly right in attributing the latest reconstruction of the palace to the early Abbasid period. With the significant bulk of archaeological materials accumulated during the last 60 years of archaeological exploration in Sogdiana, we can now point to three prominent architectural features which put the early Islamic date of the reconstruction carried out during stage five beyond a reasonable doubt: (1) the use of baked brick (not recorded in Sogdiana until the 730s or even 740s); (2) the massive round brick columns supporting the passages in the so-called "eiwan" (one of the standard features in the repertory of eastern Abbasid architecture, possibly derived from the older Sasanian tradition, but completely unknown in pre-Islamic Sogdiana); (3) and the very use of stucco as the means of architectural decoration (completely absent from the monuments of this area prior to the Arab conquest).

Some Conclusions

The original building of the palace dates to the reign of Khunak (689-709 CE). The first remodeling took place during the reign of Toghshada and the paintings on the blue background (the Eastern Hall and an early layer of paintings in the Red Hall) most likely belong to the period of his "apostasy" around 719. The new paintings of the Red Hall belong to the later part of Toghshada's reign, which ended in 738 CE. The fourth stage in the history of the building was connected to the enthronement of his son Qutaiba b. Toghshada (738-753 CE). Finally, Buniyat b. Toghshada (753-782) was responsible for the major reconstruction of the palace and the first stucco decoration. The content and genre characteristics of the Varakhsha paintings as well as their fate reflect the political instability of the time and the dubious position in which the rulers of Bukhara found themselves. Bukhar Khudas had to balance between their own pretension to rule over the Bukharan oasis and the overwhelming power of the Arabs. This position required a sophisticated maneuvering between the old national and religious traditions on the one hand and the at-

tempt to present themselves to Arabs as pious converts to Islam on the other.

About the Author

Born in Tashkent, Aleksandr Naymark received his education in archaeology and history at Tashkent and Moscow Universities. After moving to the United States in 1992, he received a Ph.D. in Central Eurasian Studies from Indiana University, his dissertation being on "Sogdiana, Its Christians and Byzantium: A Study of Artistic and Cultural Connections in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages." He has participated in more than 30 excavations in Central Asia and for a time worked in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art as its curator of Central Asian pre-Islamic art and coins. Between 1997 and 1999 he was a fellow of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin. Dr. Naymark is currently an Assistant Professor in Art History at Hofstra University. He has published widely on early Islamic art, numismatics and archaeology in Central Asia. He may be contacted at Aleksandr.Naymark@Hofstra.edu.



Stucco relief from the Northern Hall
Source: Shishkin, Varakhsha (1963), p. 65

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Notes

1. Thus, in the majority of manuscripts, in both scholarly editions and in all translations. The MS of the American Oriental Society reads Khbk Khuda [Narshakhi - Frye 1954, p. 45, n. †].

2. For detailed discussion see: Naymark 2001, pp. 264-278; Naymark 2001a, pp. 56-7; Naymark 2004.

3. Tabari dates this enthronement to 91 A.H. which leaves 31 years to the death of Toghshada in 121 A.H., while Narshakhi speaks about Toghshada's 32 years of rule.



Detail from mural of procession on south wall of the palace at Afrasiab (photographed in Afrasiab Museum)

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