The Archaeology of Sogdiana

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Sogdiana (or Sogd) is a region in Central Asia that was populated by Sogdians, people speaking and writing in an Eastern Iranian language. According to Greek and Roman authors, Sogdiana included territories between two rivers, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Khoresm, which occupied the Amu Darya delta, was not part of Sogdiana. Later Sogdiana, beginning at least in the first and second centuries CE, occupied a smaller territory. Thus its southern border was no longer along the Amu Darya but along the Zeravshan mountain range. Ferghana and Ustrushana, situated between Chach (the Tashkent oasis), Ferghana and Sogdiana, did not belong to Sogdiana, although the inhabitants of Ustrushana wrote and, perhaps, spoke the Sogdian language. Big Tokharistan, a successor of Bactria, was located south of the Zeravshan mountain range. It is not clear, however, whether the Sogdians populated all the lands which Greek and Roman authors attribute to Sogdiana. It is possible that these authors referred to administrative boundaries of the Achaemenid Empire, ignoring population distribution in the area. According to archaeological convention, any monument located in the lower Zeravshan and Kashkadarya River valleys (but not to the south or north-east of this territory) is defined as Sogdian regardless of the date. I should note, however, that prior to the first and second centuries CE, in archaeological terms, there is no difference between Sogdian culture and cultures to the south of the Zeravshan mountain range. This said, in the present article, following the established convention, Sogdiana denotes the region including the Zeravshan and Kashkadarya River basins. Clearly, the archaeology of Sogdiana is dated no earlier than the first millennium BCE, when Sogdians emerged on the historical stage. However, for a more complete picture we need to note the monuments of earlier periods.

The most ancient archaeological findings on the territory of Sogdiana date to the Middle Paleolithic period. There are a few Upper Paleolithic settlements (in Samarkand, for example) as well; at the same time, nothing from the Neolithic period has yet been found. Sarasm, situated between Samarkand and Panjikent, is an Eneolithic monument dated to the fourth and third millennia BCE. Abdullo Isakov and his students, as well as Roland Besenval and Bertille Lyonnet, studied this monument which consists of several settlements that occupy hundreds of hectares. Sarasm pottery combines characteristics of northern Iranian (Tepe Hissar), southern Turkmen (Geoksur), southern Afghan (Mundigak), Khoresm (Keltiminar), and even southern Siberian (Afanasiev) cultures. There are, perhaps, local types as well. Bezanval attributes such "multiculturalism" of Sarasm to the resettlement of people from different lands to this area, attracted there by the mineral resources of the upper reaches of the Zeravshan River.

The Bronze Age is not well studied. However, we are aware of the Zamanbaba culture in the lower Zeravshan Valley. Dated to the early Bronze period, this culture is close to the Afanasiev culture in Siberia. Also, a burial cave was discovered in Zardcha-Khalifa, a location near Panjikent, dated the beginning of the second millenium BCE. This cave is attributed to the second phase of the Sappali culture, a variant of the Bactrian-Margiana culture. The Andronov steppe culture penetrates the Zeravshan basin somewhat later, in the first half of the second millennium BCE, as evidenced in the Muminabad tomb in Samarkand region and the Dashti Kozy tomb to the east of Panjikent. These unrelated monuments do not help, however, to explain the origins of the Sogdians.

Urban development in Sogdiana began sometime in the early first millennium BCE, i.e., in the early Iron Age, when a new culture emerged in Samarkand and Kashkadarya, Sogdiana [Isamiddinov]. Some characteristic features of this culture are more archaic than those included in the Bactrian-Margiana cultural circle or even those of the more ancient culture of Sarasm. For example, so-called semi-huts appeared in place of houses made of unbaked brick and consisting of several rooms. Plain pottery, sometimes decorated with simple painting, replaced dishware found in sedentary settlements which was produced with the use of a potter's wheel. This pottery is different from the Andronov type. At the same time, the emergence of Iranian-speaking tribes in the first millennium BCE, including the ancestors of historical Sogdians in the regions where the latter lived, is often associated (although empirically unsupported) with the arrival of Andronov tribes.

If, indeed, these tribes that populated the steppe during the late Bronze Age invaded Sogdiana, they must have lost their older pottery tradition by the time of the invasion. The fact is that, about the same time, in the beginning of the first millennium BCE, nomadic pastoralism had developed in the steppe, the original area of the Andronov culture, replacing the old herding-agricultural type of economy. Nomadic pastoralists, as ethnographic research has shown, do not make pottery. Most likely, it was the invasion of the nomads that reduced to practically nothing the achievements of the Bactrian-Margiana

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The ruins of Panjikent

culture, although it did not eliminate old traditions completely. Some invaders settled on deserted and fertile lands and took up agriculture. Mountain people, always in need of additional land, participated in this process as well. Pottery has always been a typical product among them, right down to modern times [Peshchereva].

In the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, settlements with semi-huts were replaced by large cities, among them Kok-tepe (with an area of 100 hectares; the name is the modern one) and Samarkand (220 hectares; the ancient town was Afrasiab). The study of these sites by the Uzbek-French expedition demonstrates that the process of erecting city walls in Samarkand and Kok-tepe and shrines in Kok-tepe included large-scale works [Rapin, Isamiddinov and Khasanov]. According to Isamiddinov's reasonable hypothesis, irrigation canals in Samarkandian Sogdiana, the length of which was more than 100 km, were built at about the same time as the cities. With some changes, these canals survived until the present. Three important factors facilitated this socio-economic transformation: rapid population growth on fertile land, military organization of a newly established state ruled by those who not long before were nomads, and the advanced cultural traditions of the Bactrian-Margiana culture, which still survived to some degree.

A new stage in cultural development in Sogdiana began in the seventh and the sixth centuries BCE. Its characteristics were found in Bactria, Margiana, northern Parthia, and, somewhat later, in Khoresm as well. These characteristics (for example, cylinder cone-shaped pottery made with the use of the potter's wheel and the production of large, rectangular, unbaked brick) did not spread beyond the territories in the northeast of Sogdiana. It has been argued that these lands were included in the same state in the seventh and the sixth centuries. However, it is not clear yet what was this state's major political and administrative center. Even before this period, a new large urban center, the remnants of which are now called Er-kurgan, emerged in southern Sogdiana. In 1950, Aleksei I. Terenozhkin developed relative and absolute systems of chronology of Sogdian pottery and other specimens that were dated between the sixth century BCE and the end of the eighth century CE. Cultural change (as much as it can be assessed by archaeologists) did not occur immediately after Bactria, Sogdiana, and Khoresm were conquered by Cyrus the Great and became part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the second half of the sixth century BCE. New elements (in particular, open forms of pottery - cups and bowls, characteristic of Iranian culture) spread only in the fourth century BCE during the late Achaemenid and the early Hellenic periods. During the Hellenic period, semi-huts were built along with unbaked brick constructions. The Kurgancha settlement in southern Sogdiana, which was excavated by M. Khasanov, dated the fourth and the third centuries BCE, is characteristic of this trend.

Neither Persian influence during the Achaemenid period nor Greek influence in the Hellenic epoch had an immediate impact on the Sogdian culture. Greek forms in the Afrasiab pottery, including "fish plates" and kraters appeared in the third century BCE during the rule of the Seleucids, not right after Alexander the Great's conquest of Sogdiana in the 320s BCE. Nomads conquered Sogdiana in the end of the third century. Greeks may have returned to Sogdiana in the first half of the second century, but by mid-century, the nomads took it over again. Ancient oriental elements prevail in the architecture of the Greek period. A typical example is the Afrasiab city wall. It was built from large unbaked bricks of a type unknown in Greece on which were written the names of the makers in Greek letters. Unbaked brick constructions were typical of Sogdiana during its whole history. The French-Uzbek expedition excavated at the Afrasiab citadel a large storehouse for grain that belonged to the state or the temple. This storehouse had been built in the time of Greek rule and then was burned, most likely during the nomadic conquest.

Burial sites of the nomadic population near oases date from first centuries BCE to the first centuries CE. Artifacts produced by sedentary masters, including pottery made on the potter's wheel, were popular among pastoralists. During the period between about the late second and the first centuries and the first and the second centuries CE, tall goblets became a widespread item, and iron arrowheads replaced those made of bronze. The urban culture of Samarkand, Er-kurgan, and other cities and settlements dating from this period is well explored. However, in contrast with the situation for Er-kurgan, the later period from the end of the second to the fourth centuries is not well studied for Samarkand. Under

the rule of the Kushan kings in the second and the beginning of the third centuries, urban life flourished in Tokharistan. Sogdiana, on the other hand, declined during the same period, although the depth of the decline should not be exaggerated. The Sogdian "Ancient Letters" show that in the beginning of the fourth century many Samarkandians lived and traded in China, mailing and receiving letters from their hometown. A public temple of the gods with two pillars made of burnt brick in the main hall was built around the third century in Er-kurgan.

At least from the second century BCE to the first century CE, there were also smaller fortified buildings, often with a square main floor. These buildings had towers at the corners of the square floor or in the middle of each side. In the latter case, the floor plan of the building is cross-like. These tall, two-story constructions were built for military defense and were not suitable for living. Sometimes walls were built around the central fort, and the space between the fort and the wall was filled with dwellings. Similar forms in rural forts emerged much earlier in Iran (Shakh-i-Kumys). They were also found in Ferghana, Ustrushana, and Chach. In Sogdiana, citadels in small rural settlements were expanded so that the original four towers and spaces between them were transformed into inner quarters around which new walls with eight towers were erected. In the fifth century, there were landlords' palaces near citadels. These palaces were fortified, and, by the sixth and the seventh centuries, actual castles emerged with a tripartite system of military defense. Each palace consisted of a residential tower, often built around the old fort tower, as well as the inner and outer systems of reinforcement. In most cases, warriors inhabited residential towers and masters stayed in the inner yard, while the outer wall served to defend dwellings of subordinate landownders landowners and tenants.

Iurii Iakubov discovered a settlement in the upper reaches of the Zeravshan River (Gardani Khisor) dated to the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth centuries that was built entirely around the master's palace. Later, when these palaces were abandoned by their inhabitants, they eroded into flattened hills, hundreds of which have survived in Samarkandian Sogd and in the upper Zeravshan Valley.

Very little is known about the structure of ancient Sogdian cities. The so-called palace of Er-kurgan is similar to houses of wealthy urban residents in Hellenic and Kushan Bactria. The streets of Er-kurgan crossed at 90 degree angles, making square blocks. However, it is uncertain when we should date this systematic design. In Samarkand of the third to fifth centuries, a wall separated the northern third of the city that was densely filled with houses from the other part of the huge area, which was only sparsely settled. Starting with the sixth century, houses of aristocrats were built between this wall and the ancient outer palisade. In the fourth century, some Huns conquered Sogdiana and founded a new Samarkandian dynasty. Later, by the end of the fourth century and, especially, in the fifth century, the population of the country rapidly increased. In the fifth century, new urban centers such as Panjikent were built, which included both citadels and cities proper laid out in a regular plan. The city walls dating from that period were tall with frequent towers and many loopholes. They looked impressive, but were ill suited for military defense. The Hellenic (Bactrian) tradition survived in the architecture of temples in Panjikent and Jar-tepe (between Panjikent and Samarkand). Beginning in the third century BCE, stamped terracotta statuettes appeared, specifically those depicting a seated Hellenic goddess. In the first centuries CE, largely female votive figurines became widespread. Terracotta icons depicting a god or goddess in a temple niche were typical in Samarkandian Sogd in the sixth century. Right up to the fifth century, Sogdian coins imitated Hellenic types. In the fifth century and especially in the sixth century, Sassanian silver coins began to circulate in Sogdiana. Local imitations of Sassanian drachmas also date from the same period.

In general the fifth century marked a number of important changes. A Zoroastrian House of Fire was added to one of the two temples in Panjikent. An altar with the perpetual fire appeared as well in the fifth century in a temple in Er-kurgan. This is also the period when the first vaulted, surface burial chambers were constructed in Panjikent to hold the ossuaries in which, according to Zoroastrian custom, the bones of the deceased were collected. Such chambers and ossuaries were common in Samarkandian and Bukharan Sogdiana in the sixth and on down to the eighth century.

Growing prosperity in Sogdiana resulted in the emergence of a new type of dwellings for aristocrats in the seventh and the eighth centuries. These dwellings were divided into three parts: living quarters, quarters for the domestic economy, and ceremonial public rooms. The ceremonial halls were decorated with wall paintings and wooden reliefs and statues. Houses of the elite in Samarkand and Panjikent were similar to the palaces of the Sogdian rulers at Varakhsha and Panjikent, albeit smaller in size, and the homes of the wealthy urban residents resembled those of the aristocrats. Standards of living among ordinary citizens improved as well. Professional builders constructed two-story houses with complex vaulting both for nobility and ordinary inhabitants. In the seventh and first half of the eighth centuries the bronze coins minted in Samarkand, Panjikent and other centers had square holes in the center (imitating Chinese designs) so that they could be strung on cords. The abundance of these coins is an indication of the growth of retail trade in these cities.

The pottery of the third to the sixth centuries speaks to emergence of local schools that developed distinct forms (at Tali Barzu near Samarkand [layers 1 to 4, G. V. Grigoriev's excavation]; earlier layers of Panjikent). In the seventh century, a new style of pottery, imitating the designs on silver dishes, emerged in new pottery centers such as Kafyr-kala near Samarkand (G. V. Grigoriev's excavation). This development reflects urban dwellers' attempts to affect the lifestyle of wealthier counterparts. In the periphery, however, especially in mountain regions, pottery was still hand-modeled and burnt in a fire rather than being made with a potter's wheel and fired in a furnace. Urban citizens used hand-modeled pottery as well, including dishes for meal preparation. Many artisan shops, including those whose masters worked with metal, were found in Sogdian cities such as Panjikent.

The houses of peasants who lived in the mountains were different from urban dwellings, resembling the houses of Mountain Tajiks in the twentieth century. In the plain, and especially in proximity to cities, there were houses which more or less corresponded to urban norms. The architecture of fortified residences was similar to that of the houses of wealthy citizens.

In the Sogdian decorative arts images of the gods were formed under the Greek influence, to which were added Iranian elements in the fifth century and, in the sixth century, Indian elements. Secular narrative painting was used to illustrate literature of different genres, such as epics, fairy-tales and fables that used local, Iranian, Indian, and Greek plots. Feasts and other celebrations, and equestrian hunts were favorite themes in this painting. Occasionally, artists utilized events of recent history. The mature Sogdian style of the seventh and the eighth centuries was dynamic, and featured a bright and harmonious palette. Among the mineral pigments ochre predominated, and Badakhshani ultramarine was used for the backgrounds.

In the eighth century after several military actions the Arabs conquered Sogdiana, which became one of the richest parts of the Caliphate. However, economic prosperity was combined with cultural assimilation. In the second half of the eighth and the ninth centuries, urban citizens adopted Islam. Simultaneously Persian (Tajik) language replaced Sogdian, although for a long time afterwards inhabitants of rural areas continued to speak Sogdian.

The Uzbek-French expedition [Frantz Grenet, Ivanitskii, Iurii Karev] discovered in Samarkand two palaces of Arab vicegerents dated to the 740s or 750s. Their architecture is not Sogdian. Under the Arabs, local principalities gradually lost autonomy, and noblemen and wealthy merchants abandoned small towns such as Panjikent. However, it was a time of the rapid growth of large cities, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, which then became administrative centers. In the ninth century, Sogdiana lost its ethnic and cultural distinctiveness, although many elements of Sogdian material culture are found in materials dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. This is why, starting with the ninth century, it is impossible to speak of Sogdian culture on the territory of Sogdiana itself at the same time that it survived until the eleventh century among Sogdian immigrants who resettled in eastern Central Asia and China.

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Ossuaries on display in the Samarkand Museum of History, Art, and Ethnography

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(For additional references, see the annotated bibliography by Frantz Grenet in this Newsletter. There is some overlap between the two listings, but the editor felt it important to reproduce Dr. Marshak's selection in its entirely.)

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