

The Sacred Landscape of Central Asia in the Achaemenid Period

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ABSTRACT

The sacred landscape of Central Asia consisted of various religions and ritual practices that grew out of local traditions. The latest archaeological excavations of the Iron Age cultic structures in Central Asia reveal a diverse array of ritual and religious practices during the Achaemenid period. Textual and artefactual evidence confirms the coexistence of various belief systems in Bactria and Sogdia, with the Achaemenid form of Zoroastrianism (or Mazdeism) among the practiced religions. The deity of the Amu Darya/Oxus River held widespread reverence. The Achaemenid dominion over Central Asia left a lasting impact on the region's sacred landscape, achieved not through direct imperial interference but through providing material support to the local religious institutions. Many traditions observed during the Achaemenid period endured over time, remaining fully operational throughout the subsequent Hellenistic era.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia; Achaemenid period; religions; Zoroastrianism; fire temple; water worshipping.

Religion in Central Asia during the Achaemenid period (6th to 4th centuries BCE) is one of the most significant and yet highly-debatable facets of Central Asian history. According to the *Avesta*, Central Asia is the ancient homeland of the Aryans and occupies a prime position in the Zoroastrian sacred topography (see GRENET 2005 with bibliography). In the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, the Persian kings proclaimed themselves followers of Ahura Mazda, the supreme god and creator in the Zoroastrian religion. Given the links between Central Asia and Zoroastrianism and the central role of Ahura Mazda in the Achaemenid royal court, it is important to understand the direction of religious influence during the period of the Persian domination in Central Asia. To date, this question continues to be challenging to answer definitively. Scholars are still debating whether the Persians in the Achaemenid heartland in southwestern Iran were Zoroastrian or 'Mazdian' practitioners (KELLENS 2021; HUTTER 2021; HENKELMAN 2021b). Recent publication of the Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria (ADAB) – a corpus of administrative texts allegedly acquired from Afghanistan and dated from the end of the Achaemenid Empire to the seventh year of Alexander the Great (353–324 BCE) – show that there was much more to Central Asian religion than Zoroastrianism during the Achaemenid period (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 16; TAVERNIER 2017). Moreover, archaeological work in Central Asia in the past two decades has revealed a number of structures of cultic and religious significance, providing us a glimpse of Central Asia's sacred landscape during the Achaemenid period. Drawing on the archaeological, textual, and artefactual evidence, this paper intends to offer a sketch of the ritual and religious landscape of Central Asia, primarily Bactria. It also tackles the problem of the relationship between Central Asia and the Achaemenid Empire through a ritual and religious perspective. The paper proposes that the sacred landscape of Central Asia emerged from various religions and ritual practices originating from local traditions. While the Achaemenid imperial power certainly had an influence, it did not impose itself on the formation of Central Asia's sacred landscape. After a brief survey

of the various types of ritual or religious structures recently discovered in Central Asia, this article will offer a few observations on the sacred landscape of the region; it will also seek for the factors contributing to the formation of such a landscape. Finally, it will finish with a brief discussion on this volume's theme of Hellenistic religion by offering a few insights on the relationship between Achaemenid and Hellenistic ritual practices.

PROBLEMS AND METHODOLOGY

Searching for Zoroastrian fire temples, the hallmark and only standardized form of temple of Zoroastrianism, has long been a focus of interest in Central Asian archaeology. In Central Asia, archaeologists identified temple structures at Bronze Age sites, such as Gonur Depe, Togolok-1, and Togolok-21 in southern Turkmenistan, but most scholars now reject their association with Zoroastrianism. Mary Boyce, one of the most well-known Zoroastrian scholars, suggested that Zoroastrian fire temples first appeared during the late Achaemenid period in the 4th century BCE as a means in opposition to the use of image shrines (BOYCE 1975, 456, 459). Before the introduction of fire temples, she postulated, the ancient Iranians practiced their rituals on artificial mounds open to the sky (BOYCE 1975; 1985). Even with more evidence – both textual and archaeological – supporting the idea that ancient Iranians indeed used open-air platforms for ritual and religious purposes (SHENKAR 2007; GRENET 2008, 30; CANEPA 2013, 328–329), it is still not known when and why fire temples first emerged. Michael Shenkar's (2007) survey of the religious architecture of the Iranian world demonstrated that most temple structures of the Achaemenid period currently known to us were located in eastern Iran. These structures – usually involving the use of fire as an intermediary between human and divine spheres – were not necessarily Zoroastrian in nature, however. Frantz Grenet, drawing on the latest archaeological research in Bactria and Sogdia, proposed that Zoroastrian fire temples originated in Central Asia and spread west into Iran proper, whereas the temple with cult images was borrowed from Mesopotamia (GRENET 2008, 31; GRENET 2015). Upholding a mildly neutral stance in the debate, Claude Rapin uses the term 'mazdaic' rather than 'Zoroastrian' to describe the nature of the sacred structures at Koktepe, Sangir Tepe and Kindyktepa (RAPIN 2017, 448). While the scholars specializing in Central Asia are convinced that the idea of temple structures, including those linked to Zoroastrianism, spread from east to west, experts focusing on Achaemenid Iran, on the other hand, express skepticism about the architectural evidence from Central Asia. They are hesitant to draw a direct link between the religious architecture and cultic remains in Central Asia and those in the Achaemenid heartland (HENKELMAN – REDARD eds. 2017, 9), preferring to treat the development of temple architecture in either region as independent traditions (CANEPA 2013, 332–333). Barring any new archaeological evidence, this disagreement was at an impasse.

A recent publication on Persian religion in the Achaemenid period offers a new methodological approach to studying Central Asian religion (HENKELMAN – REDARD eds. 2017, 7–9). Up to now, the debate has centered on whether Zoroastrianism existed as a religious institution during the Achaemenid period in Iran (BOUCHARLAT 1984; CANEPA 2013, 322; KELLENS 2021; HUTTER, 2021; HENKELMAN 2021b; also see SHENKAR 2007, 174 for references). The publication, rather than continue the long-standing debate, expanded the scope to take into account all the evidence at hand: the ritual behaviors as seen through archaeological remains, administrative texts, and seal images (HENKELMAN – REDARD eds. 2017). The work demonstrated that the religious landscape of the Achaemenid heartland comprised of a variety of forms: open-air platforms, altars,

sanctuaries, royal tombs, and palaces. The work has allowed scholars to shift from the question of whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians to conceive of physical space as a backdrop for active, complex, diversified, and royal-centered rituals and religious activities (CANEPA 2013; CALLIERI 2017; GARRISON 2017). In his survey of this evidence, Pierfrancesco Callieri (2017) makes a careful distinction between the concept of 'religious architecture' and 'ritual architecture', calling on scholars to use the latter to avoid imposing a modern construction of beliefs onto old societies, as religion in Iran was comprised of various levels of ritual practices (SHAKED 1994).

In line with this approach, my article adopts the valuable hermeneutical tools used by these scholars to explore the ritual and religious systems of Central Asia. Before delving into the specifics, it is essential to emphasize two key points: firstly, the origin and early development of the Zoroastrian religion and its fire temples were gradual processes, irrespective of whether one refers to it as 'Zoroastrianism' or 'Mazdeism' during the Achaemenid period. Secondly, there might have been other Indo-Iranian religious traditions in Central Asia during the Achaemenid era that shared certain practices with Zoroastrianism.

Thus, in the following section, the term 'Zoroastrianian' is used to describe the Achaemenid form of the religion. Instead of solely seeking evidence for Zoroastrianism in Central Asia, the section deals with the overall characteristics of the sacred landscape in the region. This reconstruction is based on recent archaeological findings in southern Central Asia, insights gleaned from Aramaic documents from Bactria, artifacts presumably from Central Asia. Additionally, there will be discussions on whether the Achaemenid imperial power had any influence on the formation of Central Asia's sacred landscape.

RITUAL STRUCTURES IN ACHAEMENID CENTRAL ASIA

Archaeological excavations in southern Central Asia – primarily in Bactria and Sogdia – during the past two decades have revealed a number of structures that appear to have functioned as ritual installations during the Achaemenid period. These include fire platforms, fire altars, and possibly the earliest fire temples. The following section presents a brief summary of these monuments in Bactria. Included are ritual installations from ancient Sogdia, which is geographically neighboring and administratively governed from Bactria during the Achaemenid era (VAISSIÈRE 2011; NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 15).

FIRE PLATFORMS

It is generally accepted that, traditionally, ancient Iranians went up to hilltops to perform rituals (BOYCE 1975; SHENKAR 2007; CANEPA 2013). Artificial mounds or platforms are man-made replacements of hilltops. They are the basic form of ritual and religious architecture in both Iran and Central Asia. Platforms used for ritual purposes have been identified at several sites in Central Asia: at Koktepe and Sangir-tepa in Sogdia, Pachmak-tepe, Pshak-tepe, and also Kyzyltepa in northern Bactria.

At Koktepe, a site located near Samarkand in the Zeravshan Valley in Uzbekistan, the Uzbek-French Archaeological Mission in Sogdiana (MAFOUZ-Sogdiane) recovered the remains of a platform made of mudbricks, a large fireplace, and a number of pits connected to purification and other foundation rituals. This structure, rectangular in shape and dated to the Achaemenid period by the excavators, is approximately 30×40 m wide and 3–5 m high. The platform was accessed through a few low steps on the west. It was reinforced by semicircular

towers on at least the northern side (**Fig. 1**).¹ While the structure is still open to alternative interpretations, it was perhaps used for open-air rituals, but, because the surface of the platform was badly damaged, it is impossible to know what kinds of rituals were performed on it. The structure was built on top of a pre-Achaemenid monumental gateway leading to a fortified courtyard that perhaps had a religious function (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 49–50, ill. 2:1; RAPIN 2017, 421–423). Associated with the foundation of the platform were a fireplace, small pits containing sand or pebbles, a small pit enclosing a limestone disk with a handle, and at least eight large oval-shaped pits containing specially arranged stone plaques (**Fig. 2**). These pits were dug immediately before the construction of the fire platform as part of consecration rituals related to the foundation of the platform (RAPIN 2017, 424–425).

The platform at Sangir-tepa is located near Shahri-Sabz in the Kashkadarya Valley, about 600 m outside of the city walls of ancient Kish-Nautaca, or Achaemenid ‘Kesh’ mentioned in Aramaic documents from Bactria (SHAKED 2003, 1519; NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 25, 104; RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 50; RAPIN 2017, 438). The site was also excavated by the French-Uzbek mission. The Sangir-tepa platform, ca. 1.5 m in height, is significantly lower than the Koktepe platform.

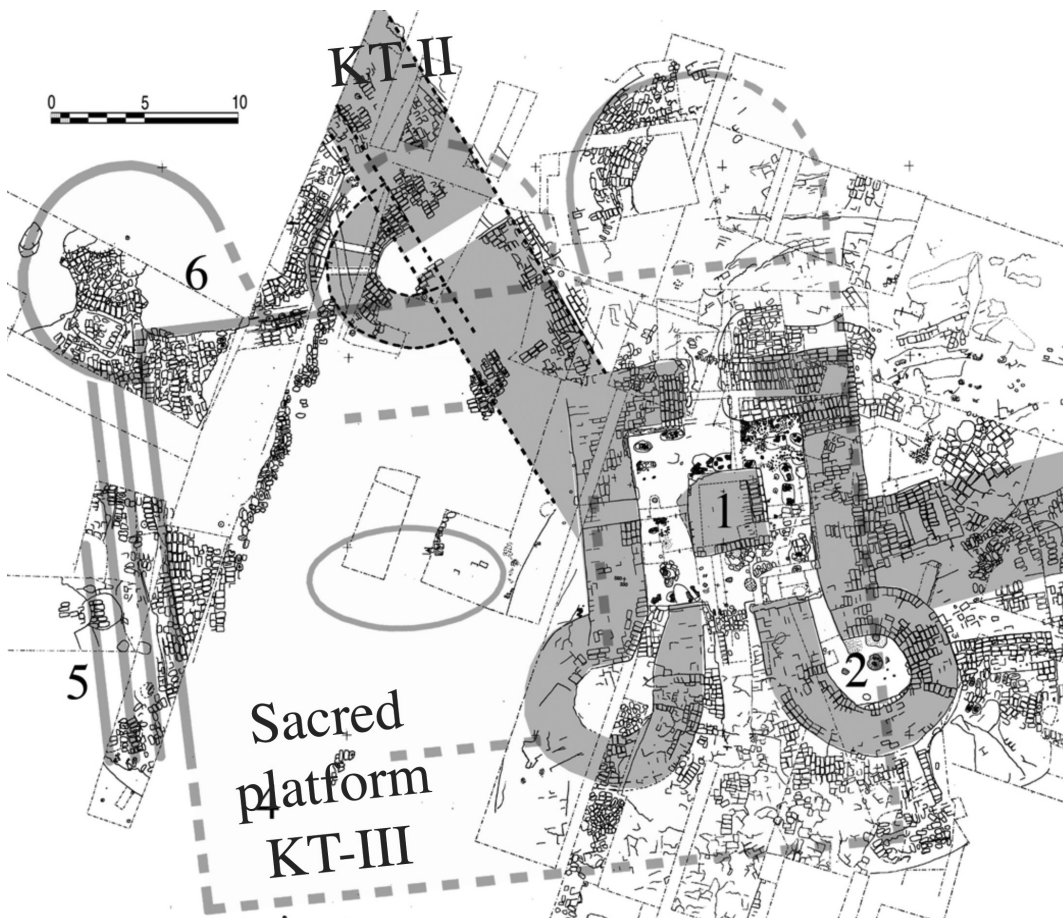


Fig. 1: Plan of the sacred platform dating to the Achaemenid period (indicated with a grey line) above a monumental gateway dating to the pre-Achaemenid period (in grey) at Koktepa.
© Cl. Rapin, MAFOuz de Sogdiane.

1 RAPIN 2017, 423, 456, fig. 3.



Fig. 2: Pits filled with sand, stones, and other substances at Koktepa.

© Cl. Rapin, MAFOuz de Sogdiane.

It was erected on the spot of an earlier temple (see below), which was dated to the Achaemenid period. At the end of its use, the temple was razed and covered with *pakhsa* to accommodate rituals in the open air (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 50). On top of the platform, the excavators discovered remains of various constructions, including an altar and pits of varying depth and contents (RAPIN 2017, 442–443). One pit contained burnt stones, one had a human skull, and many others had clay pots (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 51).² These remains could have been by-products of rituals associated with the platform. Precisely when the shrine was converted into a platform is unclear. Claude Rapin and Mutalib Khasanov believe it was sometime near the end of the Achaemenid period (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 51), but Frantz Grenet (2008, 30) suspects that the conversion occurred during the Greek period, due to the discovery of a coin issued by Antiochus I on the platform (reigned 281–261 BCE).

In northern Bactria, an artificial platform made of *pakhsa* bricks was discovered at Pachmak-tepe outside of the settlement of Djandavlat tepe in the Sherabad district (PIDAEV 1973; 1974; BOYCE – GRENET 1991, 182–183; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 242) and another at Pshak-tepe outside of Shor Tepe in the Surkhandarya Valley (SHENKAR 2007, 177; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 242), but there is little information about these structures.

² According to Rapin (2017, 443), inside the fill of the platform the excavators also found another two human skulls. Rapin tends to attribute these skulls to foundation deposits, but it is also possible that they were buried within the platform as part of a Zoroastrian funerary rite. In Central Asia it is common to find remains of human body parts within Iron Age levels (eg. BENDEZU-SARMIENTO – LHUILLIER 2011, 247; BENDEZU-SARMIENTO *et al.* 2018, 328). A few pieces of human bones have been recovered at Kyzyltepa.

At Kyzyltepa, situated near the modern-town of Shurchi in the Denau region of the upper Surkhandarya Valley (Uzbekistan), excavations in the 1970s revealed a solid mudbrick platform of 10×12 m (SAGDULLAEV 1990, 32). The structure marks the highest point of the site, ca. 11 m. above the ground, towering over the surrounding plain. At its top, there was nothing but ash and charcoal. The excavators suggested it was a fire platform. On-going excavations by the Uzbek-Chinese Joint Expedition at Kyzyltepa revealed that, under this solid platform, there was a deeply buried temple (SVERCHKOV – WU 2019; WU 2021b).³

TEMPLES

Recent excavations in Central Asia revealed three temple structures dating to the Achaemenid period. They are located at, respectively, Sangir-tepa, Kindyktepa, and Kyzyltepa. They all contain in the main sanctuary fire altar(s) and other features, which indicate that they could be among the earliest fire temples known to date (GRENET 2008, 31; RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 50; RAPIN 2017, 441; MOKROBORODOV 2018; SVERCHKOV – WU 2019; WU 2021b). The temple at Sangir-tepa (34×40 m) was built on leveled earth formed by the debris of an older building of unknown function (RAPIN 2017, 438). It consists of a roughly square main sanctuary and two flanking, long rectangular rooms. Inside the sanctuary (11×14 m) were four wooden columns and a conical-shaped altar raised above the ground in the northern part of the room, opposite the sanctuary's main entrance (**Fig. 3**). The surface of the altar, on which fire was burnt, was lined with reddened earth and pebbles (RAPIN 2017, 441). Before the fire chamber was built, a group of small pits (ca. 20 cm in diameter) were dug into the ground. These pits were filled with pure ash, sand, and pebbles. They were dug immediately prior to the construction of the fire chamber, and were most likely the remains of foundation purification rituals (RAPIN 2017, 440).⁴ A wide cobblestone ramp in front of the sanctuary's main gate and a long stepped passageway aligned along the temple's southeastern wing allude to ceremonial processions that took place before entering the temple. Small pits near the top and next to the passageway testify to purification or libation rituals performed in front of the sanctuary. The cultic ceremonies at Sangir-tepa likely involved fire, as indicated by the ruby-colored burnt earth on the pebble-lined altar (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013, 51; RAPIN 2017, 440–441). The temple was later razed and converted into an open-air platform (see above).

3 The Kyzyltepa Project started as an Uzbek-American project, initiated and supported by the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW) of New York University, to which I am extremely grateful. It is now under the auspices of the Institute of Fine Arts of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Fudan University in Shanghai, China. The project has been under the co-directorship of Dr. Leonid Sverchkov and me. For results of previous work at the site, see SVERCHKOV – WU – BOROFFKA 2012; SVERCHKOV 2013; WU *et al.* 2017; SVERCHKOV – WU 2019.

4 Within the foundation of the temple, Rapin and Khasanov found also the remains of a human body, which was discovered inside a layer of debris from the pre-Achaemenid period. On the basis of the position of the skeleton, Rapin (2017, 440) has proposed that the corpse was perhaps casually thrown into the earth fill as part of the foundation ritual before the erection of the temple. He also attempts to link this skeleton with the two skulls found in the foundation layer of the platform, which was constructed on the debris of the temple (see above). This cannot be certain because, during the Iron Age, human bones are often found inside walls or other features (BENDEZU-SARMIENTO *et al.* 2018), and, therefore, more evidence is needed to support Rapin's assertion.

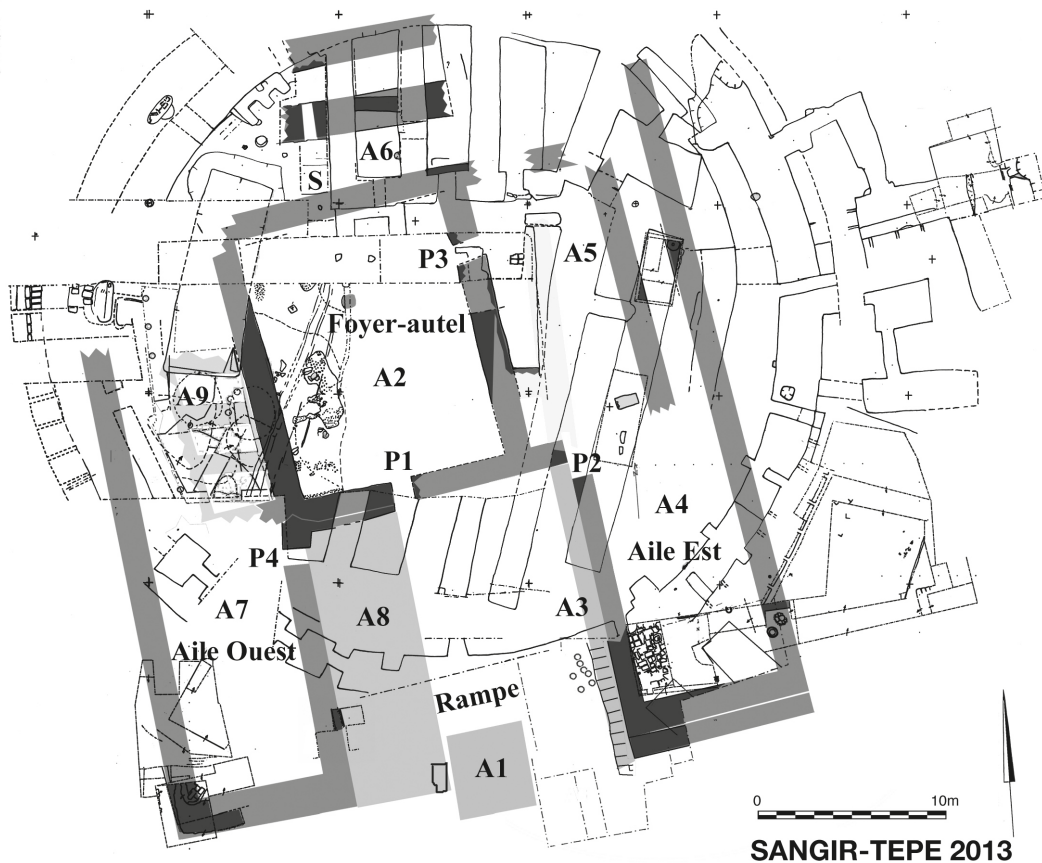


Fig. 3: Plan of the temple at Sangir-tepa (in gray). RAPIN 2017, 458, fig. 7; Cl. Pain, MAFOuz de Sogdiane.

The nature of the temple at Sangir-tepa is debated. While some scholars believe it represents an early Zoroastrian fire temple (GRENET 2008, 31; RAPIN 2017), others question such an attribution, pointing out the site's state of preservation and disturbed stratigraphy caused by the later constructions, making it difficult to interpret the building's function (CANEPA 2013, 331-332). For those who follow Boyce's hypothesis that Zoroastrian fire temples did not exist until the 4th century BCE (BOYCE 1975, 456, 459), the Sangir-tepa temple's early date (6th-5th centuries BCE: RAPIN 2017, 439) also raises doubts about whether the structure had anything to do with Zoroastrianism.

The cultic monument at Kindyktepa, recently excavated at Bandikhan in the Boysun region of the Surkhandarya Valley in southern Uzbekistan by an Uzbek-German mission, provides another example of a temple structure dated to the Achaemenid period (BOROFFKA 2009, 140; MOKROBORODOV 2018). This building is a small, self-contained structure located not far from Bektepa (Bandikhan II), an Achaemenid fortress site (SVERCHKOV - BOROFFKA 2007, 111-128; MOKROBORODOV 2018). Sitting on top of a platform, the building consists of a rectangular main chamber (ca. 14×8.5 m), a narrow corridor-like side room, and an antechamber surrounded by walls of approximately two and a half meters thick (MOKROBORODOV 2018, 346, 349, figs. 6, 7, 11). Within the main room were four irregularly-placed, massive rectangular mudbrick columns surrounding a large circular hearth. Deposits of pure ash in the northern and eastern corners suggest intensive use of fire. Grenet (2008, 31) suggests that such four-columned halls - often referred to as *ātešgāh*, or a structure containing ritual fire - was perhaps the

forerunner of the later Zoroastrian fire temples in western Iran (see also BOROFFKA 2009, 140). Nine round or oval-shaped pits were found in the side room, each containing one type of material, such as pure humus or soil mixed with sand (**Fig. 4**). These pits are believed to have been connected to a certain Zoroastrian purification rite (RAPIN 2017, 444; MOKROBORODOV 2018, 349). Kindyktepa's plan and the features discovered inside the building make it clear that the monument functioned as a cultic structure. The building has been dated to the 4th century BCE or the late Achaemenid period (SVERCHKOV – BOROFFKA 2007, 125, 129; MOKROBORODOV 2018, 349), which coincides with Boyce's presumed inception of the Zoroastrian fire temple. Most scholars tend to agree that it is a cultic space associated with a fire cult (GRENET 2008, 31; CANEPA 2013, 332; RAPIN 2017, 444). At the end of the temple's use, it was thoroughly destroyed and partially filled in. The central room was intentionally sealed with very dense *pakhsa* bricks (MOKROBORODOV 2018, 350).

In addition to these two better-known examples, a third temple has recently been discovered at Kyzyltepa in the upper Surkhandarya Valley. The site is located about 40 km to the northeast of Kindyktepa, occupying the center of the Mirshade Oasis. Kyzyltepa was established in the Achaemenid period. It is the principal site of a cluster of more than ten settlements, and thus forms one of the most important regional centers in ancient northern Bactria (SAGDULLAEV 1990, fig. 1; WU 2018, 192, fig. 3). Excavations at the site revealed a large monumental building referred to as the Citadel. The Citadel was constructed around a cultic structure (WU *et al.* 2017, 289–302), and excavations in the area in 2015 and 2018 have revealed a temple (**Fig. 5 left**). The temple stands on an artificial platform situating on the top of a natural loess hill, whose floor is at least 6 meters above the surrounding plain (**Pl. 1/1**). The building shows several features similar to those of the Kindyktepa temple. The two are identical in size, both measuring 22.5×18 m including the walls (SVERCHKOV – WU 2019, 116). They are similar in shape, both consisting of a corridor-like antechamber and a rectangular main sanctuary. Although Kyzyltepa does not have a separate side chamber for ritual purification, as Kindyktepa does, a bathtub-shaped pit, which was dug into the floor of Kyzyltepa's sanc-

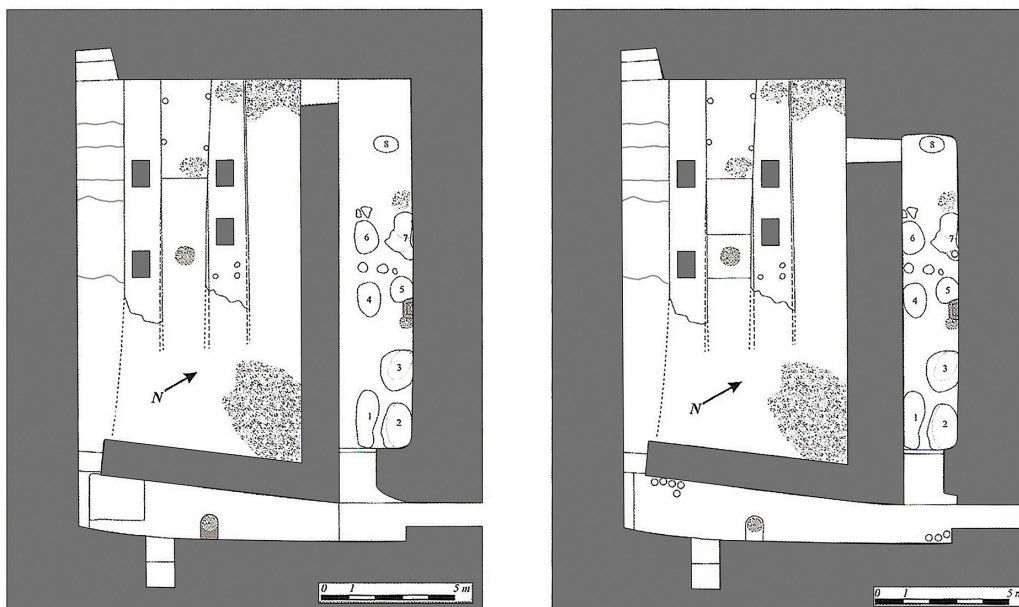


Fig. 4: Plan of the temple at Kindyktepa during its first (left) and second (right) stage. MOKROBORODOV 2018, 346, fig. 6 and 7.

tuary, fulfills the same function (**Fig. 6**). The pit is situated near an entrance of the temple on the northern side of the main altar. Its walls were covered with water-proofing clay. The pit must have been used for the purpose of ritual cleansing.

There is no question that the structure at Kyzyltepa hosted a fire cult. The building shows no trace of domestic activities. There are two altars (at least in the later phase), with burnt surfaces, in the sanctuary: a large square one (7×7 m) in the middle of the room, and a small

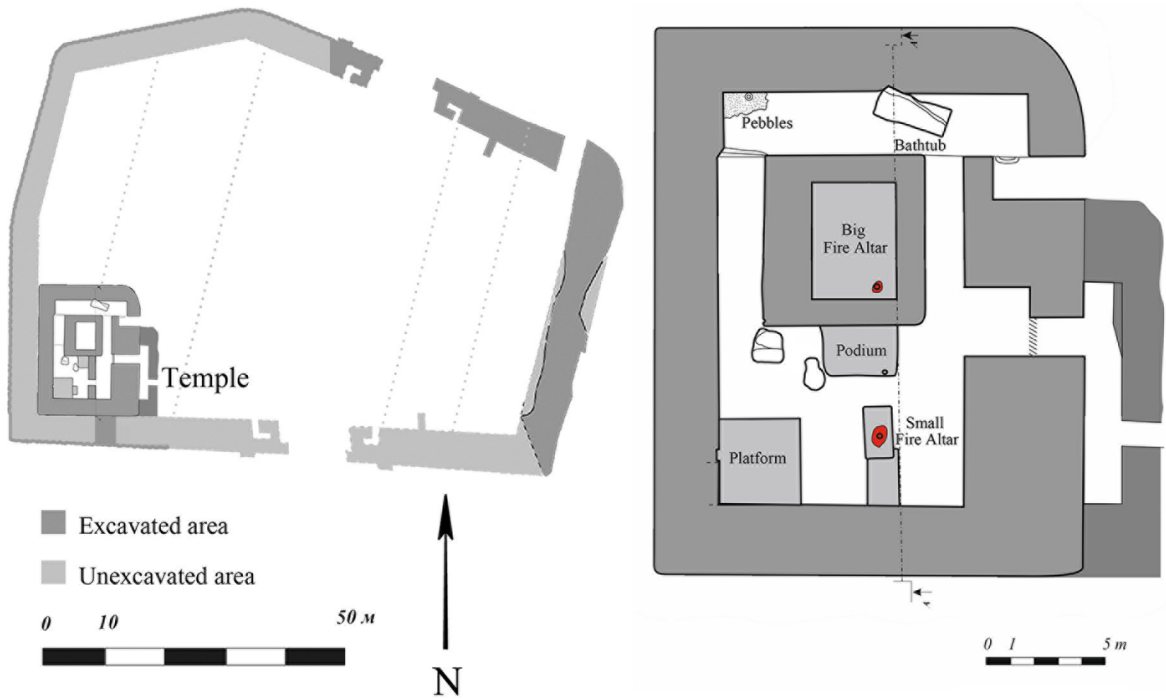


Fig. 5: Left - Plan of the Citadel and temple at Kyzyltepa, during the second phase (based on SVERCHKOV - WU - BOROFFKA 2012, 61, fig. 22; and SVERCHKOV - WU 2019, 115, fig. 16). Right - Plan of the temple at Kyzyltepa, during the early period of the third phase (based on SVERCHKOV - WU 2019, 116, fig. 17, which illustrates the plan of the late period of the third phase).



Fig. 6: A 'bathtub' sunk into the floor of the temple at Kyzyltepa. To the right is the northern edge of the main altar. © Kyzyltepa Project.

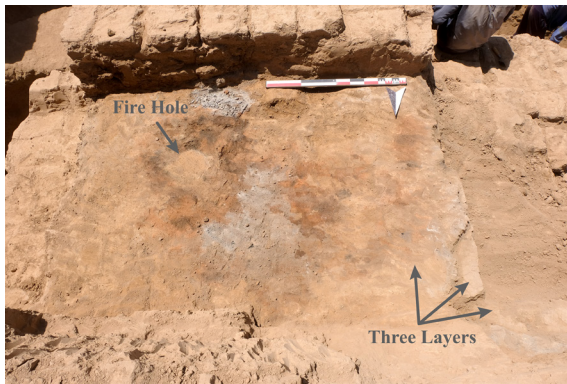


Fig. 7: Surface of the main fire altar at Kyzyltepa, before being completely cleaned.
© Kyzyltepa Project.



Fig. 8: Small fire altar at Kyzyltepa. There were still burnt logs on it when discovered.
© Kyzyltepa Project.



Fig. 9: Terracotta pan with soot found upside down on the podium. © Kyzyltepa Project.

rectangular one (ca. 2×1.4 m) (**Fig. 5 right**).⁵ Several layers of burnt mud surfaces on the big altar indicate that the altar was frequently renewed (**Fig. 7**). Attached to the altar in the south was a podium, which was apparently meant for a priest to stand on while attending the fire. At the southwestern corners of the altar and the platform were two pits containing ash, sand, burnt clay (some in the form of slags), and a type of white mineral used perhaps for improving fire retardancy and lowering fire toxicity. This detritus was apparently the material cleaned off the altar. The small altar, which rises slightly above the floor level in the southern part of the sanctuary, was made of pure loess. A deep fire hole sat in the center of its surface. The surface was very hard and dark gray to black in color, indicating long exposure to fire (**Fig. 8**). The difference between the two altars suggests that they must have had different functions. The small one was perhaps used to maintain a constantly lit fire, whereas the larger one may have been used for important ceremonial occasions during which fire was used. A big, coarse, low-fired terracotta pan was found on the podium attached to the big fire altar. The edge of the pan was blackened by soot. The object was perhaps used to transfer the kindling fire. (**Fig. 9**). A stone pestle found next to the terracotta pan may have been used to prepare *haoma* drinks, which is often used in Zoroastrian and other Indo-Iranian rituals. The finds of the installations and objects within the structure strongly suggest that the building at Kyzyltepa is certainly

5 There is another structure with a podium attached to it at the southwestern corner of the sanctuary, which could be an altar of the early phase, but this is not certain because we have not yet removed the last layer of bricks laid on its top to expose its surface.

a fire temple regardless of whether one uses ‘Zoroastrian’, ‘Mazdian’, or any other term to label it. The building represents an Achaemenid Central Asian form of the Zoroastrian fire temple, which was later canonized during the Sasanian period.

Test trenches excavated near the big altar suggests that the temple was built on top of a man-made structure, perhaps an earlier platform (see below). Drilling on the bottom of one of the pits at the corner of this altar revealed burnt clay of bright red colour, indicating that the place had been used for burning fire before the construction of the platform and perhaps long before the erection of the fire temple.

Like Kindyktepa, at the end of its use life, the temple at Kyzyltepa was deliberately filled and carefully sealed by mudbrick and *pakhsa* blocks. The building’s entrance, antechamber, doorways, and the main shrine were all blocked up. Such actions transformed the building into a solid and massive platform, leading Sagdullaev (1990, 32), an earlier excavator of the site, to assume that the structure was originally a solid fire platform, rather than a deeply buried monumental building.

Ceramic evidence and dendrochronological studies of the fragments of wood from these two sites suggest that the temple at Kyzyltepa was constructed prior to that of Kindyktepa, likely in the 5th century BCE. This date indicates that the fire temple at Kyzyltepa represents one of the earliest fire temples known to us. The two temples overlap chronologically; Kindyktepa was built and used during the later stages at Kyzyltepa, that is to say, in the late Achaemenid period (SVERCHKOV – WU 2019, 116). Like Kindyktepa, the temple at Kyzyltepa went out of use at the beginning of the Hellenistic period.

FIRE ALTAR

Among the other ritual installations identified in Bactria is a monumental fire altar, which was excavated by the Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (DAFA). The altar was found on top of a rock spur at Kafir Qala, which is a hilltop fortress overlooking the settlement of Cheshm-e Shāfa. The latter was an urban settlement founded in the Achaemenid period to control the Balkh river and the road leading into the Balkh Oasis from Central Afghanistan (BESINVAL – MARQUIS 2008, 987–988). The altar was made of one whole piece of limestone. It had a rectangular surface (ca. 2.7×1.6 m) supported by a shaft (height: 2.1 m) with three inverted steps (**Fig. 10**). A circular hole on its surface and burning traces on the shaft suggest that this monumental stone object was used as an altar for burning fire. The shape of the altar resembles the upper part of the fire altars represented on the façade of the tombs of the Achaemenid kings at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis, which also have steps on the base. Seal images preserved on clay tablets in the Persepolis Fortification Archive demonstrate that fire altars without base-steps also existed in the Achaemenid heartland (**Fig. 11**).⁶ Canepa (2013, 332) suggests that the monumental altar from Cheshm-e Shāfa was perhaps copying official Persian forms.

There is little doubt that the altar from Cheshm-e Shāfa belonged to the Achaemenid period. It represents the earliest example of a free-standing fire altar from Central Asia. Nevertheless, disagreement about the nature of the Cheshm-e Shāfa altar exists. Canepa (2013, 332) argues that it would not have been used for containing pure fire but was meant to burn sacrificial animals and perform libations, based on the representations of the fire altars on the seals of the Persepolis Fortification tablets. However, he acknowledges that the artifact reflects a local Central Asian and not necessarily a Persian cultic tradition. Grenet (2018b), on the other hand,

6 See GARRISON 2017, 249, fig. 4:1, PFUS 110s, 149, 156s for other examples.



Fig. 10: Monumental fire altar from Cheshm-e Shāfa in northern Afghanistan. © DAFA.

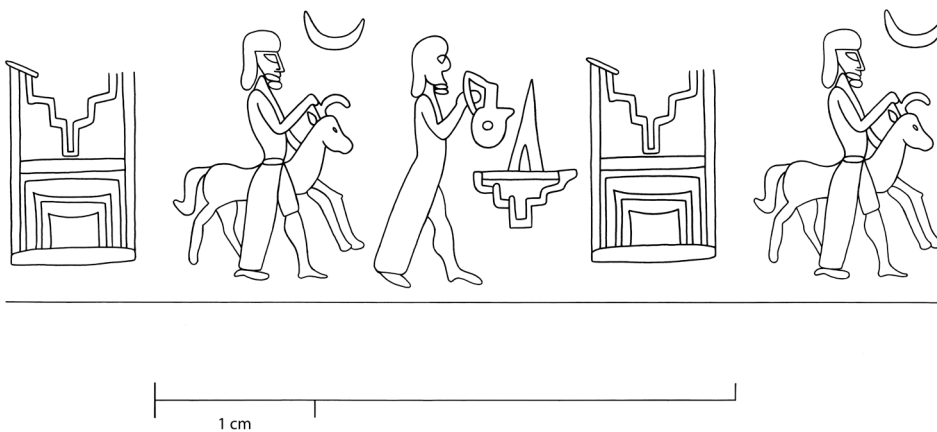


Fig. 11: Drawing of seal PFS 75, reconstructed from sealings on Persepolis Fortification tablets, Persepolis. Courtesy of the Persepolis Seal Project and the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project.

considers the stone altar the only known example in the Iranian world of a monumental fire altar of a shape similar to that depicted on Achaemenid seals. He suspects the altar was once located inside a building and suggests that there might have been a fire temple at Cheshm-e Shāfa (GRENET 2008, 30–31). This hypothesis cannot be proved because the stratigraphy around the altar has unfortunately been destroyed by looters (GRENET 2008, 43, note 6). Remains from inside the room, which were dated to the early Islamic period (BESENVAL – MARQUIS 2008, 987), make it impossible to know whether the altar was in a primary or secondary context. That said, it is entirely possible that the altar was erected as a free-standing cultic installation set to the open air. As Boyce (1975, 457, 464, note 79) pointed out, the existence of a fire altar does not have to depend on fire temples. Numerous representations, both on seals from Persepolis and on Achaemenid royal tombs, indicate that fire altars could have existed long before the emergence of fire temples in Iran (e.g., SCHMIDT 1970, pls. 19, 41; GARRISON 2017, 354–358). In the sacred precinct at Pasargadae, two large limestone plinths have been

associated with fire worshipping (CANĒPA 2013, 329). Since the maintenance of a fire temple, which houses an ever-burning fire, requires regular supplies of fuel, fire temples were usually situated on low hills for easy transportation of fuel (BOYCE 1975, 459). The rock spur at Cheshm-e Shāfa, on which the fire altar is located, seems to be quite high and too steep for housing a fire temple. This and the altar's peculiar location – an out-stretching rock overlooking the settlement and the valley below – makes it more likely that the fire altar at Cheshm-e Shāfa was as a free-standing cultic installation, on which fire would be burnt during festivals or on special occasions. When the fire, regardless of its nature, was lit on the altar during special ritual occasions, the inhabitants in the settlement below and the communities living beyond would see it or be informed about it even if the flames were not seen by everyone.⁷

POSSIBLE WATER SHRINE

At Cheshm-e Shāfa, the DAFA team also discovered traces of what appears to be a shrine dedicated to water (MARQUIS 2018, 165). The structure is located near the settlement, on the right bank of the Balkh River, just in front of a small modern mosque. The remains consist of a flat area with small channels carved in the bedrock and a pediment for some sort of wooden frame. It would have been immersed in the water when the water level was high and exposed to the air when the water level was low. The structure has been dated to the Achaemenid period on the basis of ceramic finds in the deposit above the bedrock. Near the structure and across the river on the other side are warm springs that are known for their healing abilities. It has been speculated, given its unique location, that the structure represents the remains of a shrine dedicated to the Balkh River (MARQUIS 2018, 165). This is possible, as the Aramaic documents from ancient Bactria alludes to that water cult, especially the cult of Vaxš/Oxus, the deity of the Amu Darya/Oxus River, was very popular in Bactria during the Achaemenid period (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 59; TAVERNIER 2017, 118). And today there is still a small shrine located nearby. Nevertheless, we cannot yet exclude the possibility that the structure was built as a facility for healing, given the possible healing capacities of the warm spring surging near the river bank (MARQUIS 2018, 165). More evidence would be needed to draw a conclusion on its nature.⁸

In his *Babyloniaca*, Berossus, a Babylonian priest of the Seleucid period (BURSTEIN 1978, 29), writes how the Persians juxtaposed fire and water as subjects of worship. The discoveries of a fire altar and water shrine (?) from Cheshm-e Shāfa also recall a passage of Herodotus (I, 131) on the customs of the Persians. It reads:

It is not their custom to make and set up statues and temples and altars, but those who make such they deem foolish, as I suppose, because they never believed the gods, as do the Greeks, to be in the likeness of men; but they call the whole circle of heaven Zeus, and to him they offer sacrifice on the highest peaks of the mountains; they sacrifice also to the sun and moon and earth and fire and water and winds. These are the only gods to whom they have ever sacrificed from the beginning.

The passage is certainly problematic. Ample evidence from both Iran and Central Asia demonstrated unmistakably the use of temples and altars in the Iranian world. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that the Persians sacrificed to the sun, the moon, the earth, fire, water, and winds.

7 It is not impossible that the promontory also acted as a defensive fire station that sent out fire signals to the settlement down below and to the next fortress down the way.

8 According to personal communication with Frantz Grenet.

The natural environment at Cheshm-e Shāfa, where mountain, river, and spring with healing powers were in close vicinity to an urban settlement, makes it possible to venerating all these elements. Sacrifice at/for water (rivers, lakes, and springs) is an age-old Iranian practice. It also existed across a range of cultural boundaries (HENKELMAN – REDARD eds. 2017, 8–9; HENKELMAN 2021a, 1224; HENKELMAN 2021b, 1249–1251; HUTTER 2021, 1292). Evidence for the veneration of water has been noted at major Achaemenid sites, such as Behistun and Naqsh-e Rostam.⁹ That Cheshm-e Shāfa has both a river and a healing spring makes it an ideal place for sacrificing at/for water. That said, before more evidence emerges, the suggestion that a water cult at Cheshm-e Shāfa existed remains hypothetical.

COMMON FEATURES OF RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

The ritual installations from Bactria and Sogdia clearly do not form a unified architectural tradition. Among the above-mentioned sites, except for Kindyktepa and Kyzyltepa, which were perhaps fire cult centers, the nature of the ritual structures is still unknown. Nevertheless, the varied forms of the structures, sometimes co-existing in time and space, indicate that the inhabitants of Central Asia probably practiced different ritual functions or different religions.

That said, the ritual or religious structures of the Achaemenid period in ancient Bactria and Sogdia indeed share some common features. First, most of the sacred structures (barring Koktepe) are located near – but outside the limits of – settlements, usually within 1 km from them. For example, Sangir-tepa is about 800 meters to the south of the wall of an Achaemenid period urban settlement, for which Padayatak tepe formed its ‘upper town’ (LHULLIER – KHASANOV 2013, 390); the platform of Pachmak-tepa is located approximately 1 km southeast of the main site of Dzhandavlattepa (STANČO 2018, 180); and the Kindyktepa temple is situated about 300 meters to the northeast of Bektepa, the fortress of the large urban settlement of Bandikhan II (MOKROBORODOV 2018, 343). The segregation of ritual and religious structures from urban agglomerations may be presumably explained by religious, administrative, or social reasons. Religiously, the separation of the sacred site from the settlement may be abiding to purification laws, protecting the site from the waste of daily life, or to certain ritual practices, such as enabling processions from the city to the site, similar to what occurred during the *Akitu* Festival, a New Year festival in Mesopotamia that required the king to proceed from the city to a temple outside of the city wall. Administratively, it could be a manifestation of economic independence of the institution behind these structures. In the Achaemenid economic system, temples as institutional households enjoyed relative autonomy from the local administration (HENKELMAN 2017, 290). This could also have been the case in Central Asia, which had been well integrated into the Achaemenid administrative and economic system (HENKELMAN 2018; WU 2021a). Socially, an extramural location may have made it easier for some non-settled communities of pastoralists living on the edge of the urban centers to visit the ritual sites. In Central Asia, pastoral tribes formed an indispensable constituency of society. Rapin (2017, 448) has argued that the numerous pits dug in the foundations of the Achaemenid period platforms at Koktepe and at Sangir-tepa reflected rituals meant to unite the various tribal groups of the region. He has suggested that the pits found at these sites may indicate the same ritual being repeated several times, or – and more likely – by several groups of individuals (clans or communities) participating in the consecration of the sites (RAPIN 2017, 425, 448). We do

9 CALLIERI 2017; HENKELMAN 2021b, 1250, about the water installations also found at Persepolis. Also, according to personal communication with Ali Asadi (April 20, 2018, Shiraz, Iran), to whom I am grateful.

not know which specific factor(s) were at play behind the separation of ritual and religious installations from the urban settlements, but the phenomenon was certainly not a mere coincidence. It seems to be a tradition carried onto the later period (see below).

The second common feature about the monuments of ritual significance is that most of them show evidence of the use of fire. Despite their various forms, either as closed temples, open-air platforms, or altars (of both indoor and outdoor), the rituals performed on or within these cultic structures generally involved fire. The open platforms and temples may represent, as Rapin and Grenet have suggested, ‘the earliest indications in the eastern Iranian countries of a fire cult organized at a community level’ (GRENET 2005, 49, note 25; also GRENET 2008, 30; RAPIN 2017, 448). The use of fire makes it very tempting to connect these ritual structures with Zoroastrianism or Mazdeism,¹⁰ as Rapin has suggested (RAPIN 2017, 48), but we must be cautious in conclusively linking the ritual installations, fire, and the Zoroastrian religion. Most scholars believe that the early Zoroastrians practiced their rituals on artificial terraces open to the sky (e.g., BOYCE 1975; YAMAMOTO 1979, 26; BOYCE 1985; SHENKAR 2007, 170), but open-air platforms are not exclusively reserved for fire cults. Growing evidence from the Achaemenid heartland in Iran demonstrates that open-air sanctuaries with altars, and often on terraces, were used for various rituals and sacrifices ranging from daily offerings to animal sacrifices and funerary practices (CANEPA 2013, 326–329). Also, the Persians performed collective sacrifices to both Iranian and non-Iranian gods during the same ritual event (HENKELMAN 2008, 281–304; HENKELMAN 2017, 308–310; HENKELMAN 2021b). While the platform at Kyzyltepa shows strong evidence of fire usage,¹¹ worthy of note is that the platform surfaces at Koktepe and Sangir-tepa – the best documented platforms among all the examples listed above – do not show traces of fire and ash, although, it is possible that these platforms were used for other types of rituals such as animal sacrifice, where fire is present, but not so conspicuous as in the fire cult.¹² Meanwhile, it must be said that both the platforms were severely damaged, precluding any definite conclusion.

The third common feature among these ritual structures is that, on the same sacred spot, the ritual installations changed form at different times. At Sangir-tepa, a closed temple was converted into an open-air platform, perhaps at the beginning of the Seleucid period (RAPIN – KHASANOV 2013, 50; RAPIN 2017, 443–444). This appears to be the case at Kyzyltepa, too.¹³ Evidence from Kyzyltepa also suggests the existence of an earlier structure underneath the temple (see above). The bathtub, which was presumably used for ritual ablutions, was dug into what appears to be an earlier platform constructed of solidly-laid mudbricks. At the bottom of a pit, which was cut into the big fire altar near its northeastern corner, there was a flat surface that appears to be an earlier floor. Sounding using drilling near the main altar, which reached approximately five meters under the sanctuary’s earliest floor, revealed a thick deposit of ruby-colored burnt earth. In the southeastern side of the big altar, evidence shows that over 3 meters below the first temple floor, there are thick layers of ash scattered in a large area. These discoveries suggest that the temple was sitting on top of an earlier structure and

10 Some scholars prefer to use the term ‘Mazdeism’ to refer to Zoroastrianism before the religious reform of Zoroaster, but others take it as merely another way to say ‘Zoroastrianism’ (HUTTER 2021, 1286–1287; KELLENS 2021, 1212–1213, 1218–1219).

11 Aside from the documentation of fire and ash by Sagdullaev (1990, 32), our renewed work on top of the platform also revealed a fire hole and patches of floor, which were burnt into red color.

12 I am grateful to Frantz Grenet for his suggestion (personal communication, May 2019, Shanghai). For a description of the conduction of the ritual, see BOYCE 1996, 166–167.

13 Kyzyltepa ceramic finds demonstrate that this transition may have occurred during the early Hellenistic period.

the area where the temple was located was used to host fire long before the construction of the temple. Although the nature of the earlier structure(s) is not yet clear, it is possible that before the temple, a platform existed at Kyzyltepa, following the tradition of using hilltops or artificial terraces to perform rituals.

The fourth common feature, which the above-mentioned installations share, is the associated ritual pits. Pits for ritual purposes were found at Koktepe, Sangir-tepa, Kindyktepa, and Kyzyltepa (RAPEN – KHASANOV 2013; RAPIN 2017; MOKROBORODOV 2018; SVERCHKOV – WU 2019). These pits can be divided into two types: either the remnants of foundation purification ceremonies or the by-products of ritual activities associated with the use of the structures (such as libations).

Also commonly, some of the ritual and religious structures were desecrated or reverentially entombed before they went out of use. The temples at Kindyktepa and Kyzyltepa were ritually buried and sealed before their abandonments (MOKROBORODOV 2018, 350; SVERCHKOV – WU 2019, 116). At Kindyktepa, the sanctuary was badly destroyed, perhaps during Alexander the Great's conquest. Thereafter, the central room of the shrine was filled in with a one-meter-thick layer of very dense tamped *pakhsa* blocks (BOROFFKA 2009, 140; MOKROBORODOV 2018, 350). The similar practice of burying a building is inferred by the discovery at Kyzyltepa where, at some point during late 4th century BCE or slightly afterwards, a partition wall running east-west was built to divide the main sanctuary and the large altar into two halves. The southern half of the altar and the sanctuary was carefully filled up and buried using mudbricks (WU 2021b). The main doorway, which leads from the temple's antechamber into its sanctuary, was also blocked off by well-laid mudbricks (**Fig. 12**). A piece of fine green sandstone, perhaps previously used as a grinding stone and now broken, was erected before the middle of the closed doorway, with its flat surface facing the front, as if it were a tombstone (**Fig. 13**). Undoubtedly, the stone was purposely placed before the blocked doorway. It is planted vertically on a stand made up of pure and very hard compact fine sandy earth. Heavy traces of water, pure sand, and remains of wooden twigs near the stone suggest certain ritual activities were involved when the doorway was blocked off, perhaps to ceremonially announce the 'death' of the building. After an uncertain period of time during the Hellenistic era, the northern half of the sanctaury was also filled up using mudbricks, *pakhsa*, and earth. A fire platform was constructed on top of the blocked temple.

It is worth noting, however, that in Central Asia the practice of 'ritually killing' a building (or space) is not limited to cultic structures. At Kyzyltepa, outside the Citadel, the excavations revealed what appears to be a metallurgical workshop. When the workshop went out of use, it was filled in and completely sealed off by a mixture of mudbrick fragments and specially made, large compact clay chunks wrapped in textile sacks (WU *et al.* 2017, 289, 356, pl. 35c). The practice of ritually closing non-religious structures has also been attested at Ulug depe, a site in southern Turkmenistan excavated by a Turkmen-French expedition (MAFTUR 2012).¹⁴ Inside the Iron Age Citadel at the site, which functioned as an administrative, rather than religious building (MAFTUR 2012, 13–19), the Turkmen-French Mission discovered two rooms whose doorways were blocked when the rooms went out of use during the early 1st millennium BCE (WU – LECOMTE 2012, 316). In one of the rooms' bricked up doorways, a clay bulla with the seal impression of a striding goat was placed over the complete skeleton of a stork (or crane) and the skulls of two foxes. Inside the second doorway, also blocked by earth and mudbricks, the

14 I would like to pay my tribute to Olivier Lecomte, the former director of the mission who recently passed away. I am thankful to him for allowing me to work at the site, and it was an honor for me to publish the Iron Age seal and sealings from the site with him.



Fig. 12: Blocked doorway originally leading from the antechamber into the sanctuary of the temple at Kyzyltepa with a stone erected before it.
© Kyzyltepa Project.



Fig. 13: Detail showing the stone standing on a pile of fine pure sandy earth in front of the sanctuary's blocked doorway at Kyzyltepa. © Kyzyltepa Project.

excavator discovered four clay bullae, also with seal impressions, lying side by side on a flat brick layer (WU - LECOMTE 2012, 323). The peculiar archaeological contexts with bullae and animal skeletons suggest the room was ritually and symbolically closed up.

Behind the commonalities, which the ritual and religious structures demonstrate, are probably shared cultural traditions among different regions. Several traditions may be at work here. The first is Indo-Iranian or Pan-Iranian, as seen in the open-air rituals on natural or artificial platforms and the using of fire in ceremonies. Similar sacrificial platforms were found in Iran, at Behistun, Persepolis, Pasargadae, and other sites dated to the Achaemenid period.

The second is a Central Asian - 'Median' tradition, as manifested by the ritualistic burial or closure of a space when it is abandoned. Such practices were found in the Iron Age Citadel at

Ulug depe and in one of the so-called Median temples at Tepe Nuš-e Jān in northwestern Iran. When the Central Temple of Nuš-e Jān was abandoned, the sanctuary was filled with shale up to 6 meters thick and sealed on the top by mudbricks (STRONACH – ROAF 2007, 88–91, 171, 176). The Median culture is a branch of the ancient Iranian culture. It was centered around the so-called ‘Median Triangle’ in the northwestern part of Zagros Mountains and active from the 9th to the 7th century BCE.¹⁵ Growing evidence suggests that certain cultural elements of the Medes, especially the design of public architecture, may have been transmitted from Central Asia to the Median territory.¹⁶ At Nuš-e Jān, the filling of the temple, as David Stronach and Michael Roaf (2007, 176) have pointed out, was probably for the preservation of the sanctity of the spot, on which the Central Temple was situated. The purpose for the filling of the temples at Kindyktepa and Kyzyltepa was likely the same. At Nuš-e Jān, when the temple was filled up by stones and encased on the top by mudbricks, the structure was converted into a solid man-made platform, to possibly provide a new setting for open-air ceremonies (STRONACH – ROAF 2007, 176). Similarly, it was the case at Kyzyltepa. The practice of filling up a sacred structure is also observed in a fire cult complex at Tash-k’irman-tepe in Choresmia, which was constructed around the end of the 3rd or early 2nd century BC and abandoned in the 2nd century AD. When the abandonment took place, the central room, which housed the ritual fire within the complex, was intentionally filled with a carefully arranged bed of reeds and layers of mudbricks extending all the way up to the roofline (BETTS *et al.* 2018, 218, 221). In the light of the new evidence from Central Asia, it is very possible that the similar practices reflected in the closing of the temples at Kindyktepa, Kyzyltepa, and Tepe Nuš-e Jān may have had a common root in the Central Asian Median tradition. Also worth to mention is that the excavation at Nuš-e Jān revealed an underground tunnel which cut through the floor of the columned hall and penetrated into the bedrock. The channel is more than 20 meters long. It was possibly being dug at the same time when the Central Temple was filled up with stones (STRONACH – ROAF 2007, 157, 166). Similar practice has been discovered at Kyzyltepa. Before the main shrine was filled up with mudbricks, a shaft with multiple tunnels was dug. These channels are in much smaller scale than that at Nuš-e Jān tunnels and extend towards different directions. While the functions of the tunnels at Nuš-e Jān and Kindyktepa are still not clear,¹⁷ it is not impossible that the practices of digging such tunnels inside a ceremonial space could be related and may reflect the same strand of tradition.

The third tradition at play may have been Central Asia’s local tradition. This is reflected by the practices of digging large and small sacrificial pits in the building foundations, and then filling the pits with different material (such as stone, ash, or sand), or saving the substances (including liquid) used for sacrificial offerings in special containers. Apart from the numerous sites dating to the Achaemenid period, similar practices were often found in later temples in Central Asia, for example, under the floors of the temples at Ai Khanum and Takht-i Sangin, where there are pits filled with pure ash or with mixed residues of ash and other materials (LITVINSKY – PICHIKYAN 2000, pl. 18; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2023). Behind Ai Khanum’s ‘Temple

15 For a recent synopsis on the territorial scopes of the Median culture, see STRONACH 2012, 677–679.

16 LECOMTE 2013, 187–188; STRONACH 2013, 676, 678–679. Rémy Boucharlat (2020) takes, with an acknowledgement, a more cautious approach and provides a more detailed account on the similarities and differences among the various elements of the sites with the so-called ‘Median’ architecture.

17 Regarding the function of the tunnel at Nuš-e Jān, Stronach and Roaf (2007, 168) proposed several possibilities, such as for water supply, being holy subterranean space, sally port, and etc., but did not favor any of the explanations. The small sizes of the tunnels at Kyzyltepa, which only allows a person to crawl in, make me to ponder whether they were originally intended to be used as storage spaces, but now I doubt about it.

with Indented Niches', the excavators discovered a series of bottomless ceramic pots, which might have once been used to hold the liquid used during the sacrifices. Although future archaeological work in Iran may find similar practices, their widespread use in Central Asia suggests that these practices may well reflect an independent local custom.

TEXTS AND THE GODS OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Aramaic texts from ancient Bactria provide yet another string of evidence for gleaning information about rituals and religious life in Central Asia. The discovery of ritual/religious structures provides important information about the physical spaces of worship in Central Asia during the Achaemenid period, but they are somewhat ambiguous for interpreting the natures of rites practiced inside those spaces. Information derived from the Aramaic texts, which do not refer to religion *per se*, nevertheless alludes to rituals and religious life in Central Asia during the end of Achaemenid and slightly later period. Personal names containing names of deities indicate that people of Central Asia practiced polytheism. The Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, the eastern Iranian god Mithra, the western Iranian deity Tir,¹⁸ the Central Asian deities – the spirits of the land of Margiana (*Margudāta*, 'created by [the genius of] Margiana') and perhaps of the local mountain or river (*Kaufa-dāta*, 'created by the mountain' or perhaps 'created by the Kabul River') (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 59), and the Babylonian supreme god Bēl, all had followers in Bactria. Among the many gods, Vaxš (or Oxus in Greek), the genius of the Amu Darya or Oxus River is by far the most popular deity worshipped in Bactria, according to the Aramaic texts (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 57–59; FRANCFORT 2012, 109; TAVERNIER 2017, 98–101, 115–120). Regarding Zoroastrianism, references to Ahura Mazda in personal names and the use of Zoroastrian religious terminologies, especially Zoroastrian day or month names, which allude to the existence of a Zoroastrian theonymic calendar,¹⁹ suggest Zoroastrianism or Mazdianism was probably also a part of Central Asian lives (TAVERNIER 2017, 99–102; *contra* NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 35–36).

The diverse religious beliefs in Central Asia, as suggested by the Aramaic texts from Bactria, align with the various forms of religious structures unearthed through archaeological excavations. Although there are uncertainties regarding the exact correlations between these structures and specific cults, the multitude of variations unequivocally attests to the coexistence of different gods and religions across time and space. It also echoes the situation in the Achaemenid heartland, where a variety of gods, including many non-Iranian deities, were worshipped (HENKELMAN 2017; 2021a; 2021b). The limited Zoroastrian influence in Bactrian proper names and the lack of clear Zoroastrian religious references in the Aramaic documents from Bactria also resemble the situation at Persepolis, where Ahura Mazda played a relatively lesser role in cultic activities performed there (HENKELMAN 2011, 96–98; HENKELMAN 2017, 283, 318; TAVERNIER 2017, 118–120).

The Aramaic texts indicate the water deity of the Oxus River was greatly popular in Central Asia. As mentioned above, literary sources suggest that the Iranians venerated water. In his work *Babyloniaca*, Berossos refers to the worship of Anāhitā, the goddess of water and fertility, in Bactria during the late Achaemenid period. The passage reads:

18 On Mithra, see GRENET 1993, 91–92; GRENET 2001, 38; SHENKAR 2014, 102–114. On Tir (Tīriya/Tištrya), see TAVERNIER 2005, 361, 366–368; SHENKAR 2014, 126, 149.

19 For the significance of Zoroastrian calendar, see KELENS 2021, 1215; PANAINO 2017 for reference.

‘[The Persians, Medes, and the Magi] did not believe in wood or stone images of the god but in fire and water like the philosophers. Later, however, after many years they began to worship statues in human form [...] Artaxerxes, the son of Darius, the son of Ochus, introduced this practice. He was the first to set up an image of Aphrodite Anaitis in Babylon and to require such worship from the Susians, Ecbatians, Persians and Bactrians, and from Damascus and Sardis’ (Berossos, *Babyloniaca*, 5.2).

According to this text, the Persian king Artaxerxes II (404–359 BCE) was the first to order cult statues of Anāhitā (‘Aphrodite Anaitis’) to be made and placed in temples in the major centers of the empire, including that in Central Asia. Written evidence from elsewhere suggests that the cult of Anāhitā was rather popular even before the time of Artaxerxes II throughout the empire (Tavernier 2005, 360). Despite this, the Aramaic texts from ancient Bactria nevertheless do not contain any theophoric names incorporating Anāhitā. It appears that in Central Asia the worship of water was transposed to the cult of the local Oxus River god, whose popularity in Bactria during the late Achaemenid period is manifested by the numerous theophoric names including the river deity’s name of ‘Vaxš’ (Tavernier 2017, 116–119). Were the shrine on the riverbank at Cheshm-e Shāfa indeed for a water cult, it would be impossible to know if it was dedicated to Anāhitā, the Oxus River, or the Balkh River, on whose bank the shrine sits, or even the water of the healing hot spring, after which the site is named.

ARTIFACTS REFLECTING RITUAL PRACTICES

A small number of artifacts from ancient Bactria also allow a glimpse into the ritual practices of ancient Bactria. These objects can be attributed to Central Asia with some measure of confidence, due to the material in which they were made, their iconography, or their archaeological provenance. They include several objects from the so-called Oxus Treasure currently housed in the British Museum and a seal from Dil’berdzhin in northern Afghanistan.²⁰

The Oxus Treasure is comprised of 180 gold and silver objects and a large number of coins. The treasure was purchased on the art market in the late 19th century; therefore, there has been long-lasting debates about the Treasure’s provenance and genuineness. Most scholars now accept that the Treasure probably came from a now-missing temple in the Middle Oxus region, perhaps from Takht-i Kuwad, a fortress site on the right bank of the Amu Darya River in modern-day Tajikistan.²¹ Many of the Oxus Treasure objects are stylistically reminiscent of Achaemenid art and are, thus, dated to the 5th–4th centuries BCE. The Treasure contains 51 gold plaques with representations of humans and, occasionally, animal figures. The plaques were perhaps votive offerings donated to the temple.²² Scientific analysis shows that many

20 For original publication of the Oxus Treasure, see DALTON 1964 (reprint of the 1905 version); for most up to date research and bibliography on the Treasure, see the British Museum’s online catalogue https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=oxus+treasure (accessed on April 19, 2019).

21 Even though most scholars now accept the idea that the Oxus Treasure came from a now-destroyed fortified site at Takht-i Kuwad, Litvinsky (2010) maintained that the objects originally belonged to the Temple of Oxus at Takht-i Sangin. For the debate on the Oxus Treasure, see references in MUSCARELLA 2003; CURTIS 2004; HUFF 2011; GRENET 2023. For the latest overview of the Oxus Treasure, see CURTIS 2012.

22 CURTIS 2012, 23. See CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003, 239 for references. Oscar Muscarella (2003) and Dietrich Huff (2011) challenged the authenticity of all or some examples. Scientific investigation

plaques were made of alluvial gold that might have been acquired from the upper reach of the Amu Darya, where it occurs naturally (CURTIS 2012, 51). This scientific study suggests that the plaques were perhaps locally made in Bactria. Unfortunately, because the objects were removed from their original archaeological context(s), much information was lost about the specific meaning of the objects and the context(s) in which they were used. Nevertheless, with the recent discoveries of the ritual monuments in Central Asia and the information derived from the Aramaic documents, we can now try to contextualize some of the objects, which may have had a cultic significance, and gain more understanding about the ritual practices of ancient Bactria.

The 51 gold plaques, which form a consistent group, assumed a dual purpose: first, as valuable goods made from an intrinsically luxury material meant to connote wealth, and, second, as a medium for representing the people who used them. The plaques are most likely ritual objects used as *ex-voto*, or votive offerings. They were offered in the temple to perhaps fulfill a promise, request a divine favor, or act as a stand-in for the donor to serve the god in perpetuity (CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003, 239; CURTIS 2012, 25). The plaques, as Grenet (2023) suggests, may have been purchased on site at the place of worship and thereafter offered to the divine being in the temple or they may have been attached to trees as pendants. The wrinkled surface indicate that most of the plaques were folded horizontally or rolled around the objects to which they were meant to attach. The human figures on the plaques perhaps represent temple devotees. Most of the figures are men wearing hoods or soft-caps and tunics, often cited as Median dress, and a few wear the Persian court-style garment. Many figures are shown carrying *barsom*, or a bundle of sticks or grasses, which are often used during Zoroastrian rituals (e.g., BM 123949; DALTON 1964, cat. no. 48, pl. XIV). Some of them are thought to wear a *padām*, a piece of cloth used by Zoroastrian priests to cover their mouths in order to prevent their breath from contaminating the sacred fire (e.g., BM 123971; DALTON 1964, cat. no. 70, pl. XV). For these reasons, the plaques have long been, to various degrees, associated with Zoroastrianism (DALTON 1964; CURTIS 2012, 61). That said, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the figures carrying *barsom* were not necessarily priests, and only the ones wearing *padām* could be considered Zoroastrian priests (CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003, 232–233 with references; GRENET 2023).

Comparisons of the human figures wearing Median dress from the Oxus Treasure, including both those on the plaques and also three-dimensional figurines, with relief figures on staircases in the palaces or Apadana at Persepolis show that most of what was thought to be *padāms* are, in fact, neck guards rather than *padām*.²³ These neck guards, which were made of hard and thick textile or some other material, are usually rectangular in shape, sometimes with an outturned flap, forming part of the the wearers' headgear.²⁴ Only one figure on the plaques can be safely identified as a Zoroastrian priest (**Pl. 1/2**). This figure (BM 123971) is un-

of 38 out of 51 plaques by the British Museum reveals that these plaques all have a similar composition, which is alluvial gold alloyed with copper and possibly silver. The platinum-group inclusions, which are usually found in alluvial gold and indicative of early goldwork, have been found in most of the gold plaques and a gold chariot from the Oxus Treasure (CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003, 243–244; MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 32). The analysis proves to a certain degree the authenticity of the plaques. GRENET 2023, accepts Curtis's argument about the plaques' authenticity and treats the plaques as a consistent group.

23 See CURTIS – TALLIS 2005, 85, no. 47, 109, fig. 49 and 157, no. 198 for examples depicted on the staircases of accordingly Palace G, Palace of Darius, and/or Palace of Xerxes.

24 For the figurines from the Oxus Treasure, see CURTIS – TALLIS 2005, 170, no. 260 and 226, no. 408. The reliefs show figures walking up the stairs carrying food and animals.

doubtedly wearing a *padām*, which is made of a piece of thin and soft cloth. The *padām* covers both his mouth and nose, which is a proper way for a Zoroastrian priest to wear it.²⁵ Similarly usage of mouth cover is also seen on a stone relief from Daskyleion in Anatolia, which shows two attendants holding what appears to be *barsom*, making animal sacrifices before a tower structure. The human figures have been identified as Zoroastrian priests (CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003, 233).

The figure on the Oxus plaque carries a *barsom* in one hand and a beaker with a lid in the other. John Curtis and Ann Searight (2003, 235) have mentioned that the vessel was possibly used for pouring libation during a certain Zoroastrian ritual, but they were cautious about their assumption. A cylinder seal image preserved on an uninscribed tablet from the Persepolis Fortification Archive provide evidence for using covered vessels in ritual performances at Persepolis (Fig. 14).²⁶ The seal shows an attendant holding a lidded beaker walking towards a fire altar and a tower structure. He is followed by another attendant, who is bringing a goat for sacrifice. The seal image demonstrates that covered vessels were indeed used as paraphernalia during religious ceremonies in the Achaemenid Empire.²⁷

The priest figure on the Oxus plaque wears a knee-length tunic decorated with metal plaques or embroideries, trousers embellished with figures of birds, and an *akinakes* sword. This attire is very similar to that worn by a divine figure depicted on the wall of a temple at Akchakhan-Kala in Choresmia, Uzbekistan, which is identified as the Zoroastrian deity Srōsh,

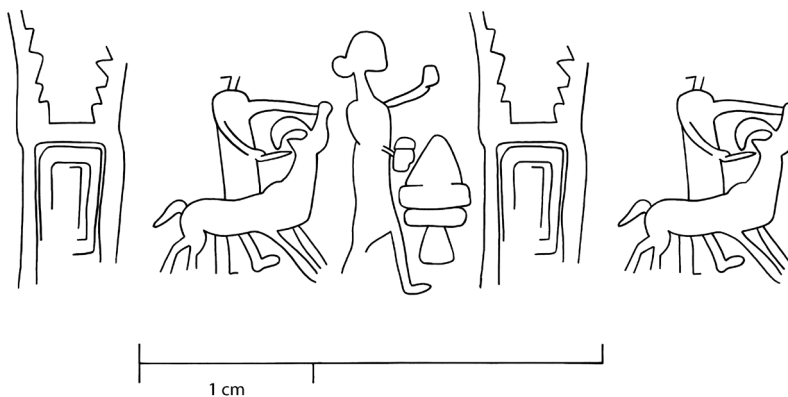


Fig. 14: Drawing of seal PFUTS 147, reconstructed from sealings on Persepolis Fortification tablets, Persepolis. Courtesy of the Persepolis Seal Project and the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project.

25 Huff (2011, 91–95) doubts the authenticity of some of the Oxus plaques (including BM 123971, although less so), as he thinks that the *padāms* were wrongly reconstructed as looking like modern medical masks. GRENET (2023) rejects Huff’s assertion by comparing the *padām* on BM 123971 (DALTON 1964, cat. no. 70, pl. XV) to two strings attached to the *padām* worn by the Zoroastrian priest depicted on a 6th century AD funerary couch of a Sogdian from China, currently housed at the Miho Museum. I would like to point out that what Huff wrongly sees as two strings used to affix the masks on the wearers’ faces are more likely depicting the flaps on the mouth-neck guards rather than real *padām*. These mouth-neck guards can be clearly seen on the figures on the Persepolis staircases (see CURTIS – TALLIS 2005, 85, no. 47, 109, fig. 49, and 157, no. 198 for example).

26 GARRISON 2017, 225–226.

27 For the seal images, see GARRISON 2017, pl. 56 (a, b), PFUTS 147. The lower part of the beaker overlaps with the fire altar. It was partially hidden by the altar and thus its shape appears a little irregular.

the Avestan God of prayer and the guardian of the souls of the deceased (GRENET 2018a; GRENET - MINARDI 2021). The similarities between the priestly figure on the Oxus plaque and the representation of Srōsh at Akchakhan-Kala suggest a link between the Oxus figure and Zoroastrianism. Although the date of the wall paintings, which is in the first century AD (GRENET 2018a, 68; GRENET - MINARDI 2021, 166), is much later than the Oxus plaque, Michele Minardi's study of the iconographic origins and stylistic treatments of the Akchakhan-Kala wall paintings demonstrates that the latter was derived from an Achaemenid archetype and transmitted to Choresmia from Bactria, or was even painted by Bactrian artists (MINARDI 2020, 23). Minardi's hypothesis infers that visual representations of Zoroastrian deities may have already existed in Bactria during the Achaemenid period. The priestly figure on the Oxus plaque corroborates this suggestion. Viewing the evidence together, the existence of fire temple(s) and the images of Zoroastrian deity and priest from Central Asia imply that Zoroastrianism as an institution may have already taken its form in the region during the Achaemenid period.

That said, Grenet (2023) argues that the cohesive group of gold plaques were associated with the worship of a water deity, likely the god of the Oxus River. If this were true, then we will have to interpret the plaque with the Zoroastrian priest as belonging to a local cult, in which other people, including the priests of other religions, paid homage to the Oxus River god, who was at the heart of a popular cult in Bactria. While not impossible, this matter will be the subject of a separate discussion.

Imagery seemingly reflecting ritual performances inside of a shrine also exists. While the human figures on the gold plaques, mostly in a striding pose, appear to represent people proceeding towards a cultic site, two seals from Central Asian contexts seem to show activities



Fig. 15: Cylinder seal and its modern impression (BM 124016) showing a pig-tailed lady standing before a seated figure, Oxus Treasure. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

occurring inside a shrine. The first example is a cylinder seal from the Oxus Treasure itself (**Fig. 15**).²⁸ The seal depicts a lady with a pig-tailed headdress raising her arm to offer a circular object to (or receive it from) a large figure seated in a high-backed chair, with a striding zebu behind. Figures of humans seating in high-back chairs with an animal behind them is a recurrent theme depicted on the Persepolis Fortification tablets (e.g., GARRISON 2017, pl. 28: PFS 307, pl. 31: PFS 978, pl. 32: PFS 2525, pl. 33: PFUTS 616). The Oxus seal fits well in this category, but differs significantly from the Persepolis examples. On the Persepolis examples, the person is usually shown sitting in front of a cultic structure – thus outside of a shrine – and offering what appears to be gifts or libation (in vessels) to the structure, and therefore assumes a subordinate role, whereas on the Oxus seal the seated person is the primary figure, who is either the deity or the representative of a deity. The lack of outside-space markers makes it possible that these activities were being carried out in a shrine.²⁹



Fig. 16: Scaraboid stamp showing a person standing before a seated figure on both sides, from the temple of Dilberdzhin in northern Afghanistan. KRUGLIKOVA 1986, 25, fig. 23:10.

A scaraboid stamp discovered in the foundation deposit of the temple of Dilberdzhin in northern Afghanistan shows an offering scene similar to that on the Oxus seal on both the reverse and obverse sides (**Fig. 16**). The temple was founded in the Hellenistic period, but the seal most likely belonged to the Achaemenid period, when the site was first occupied.³⁰ On the reverse, or the flat side of the stamp, is a scene depicting a woman with long plaited hair standing before a seated male holding with his right hand a circular object before his chest. Evidently a superior figure and perhaps a deity, the seated figure is shown either receiving from or bestowing the object to the woman standing in front of him. This scene and the one on the Oxus seal may represent two consecutive actions of the same ritual: the Oxus seal shows the moment when the standing female passes the object to the seated figure, and the Dilberdzhin stamp depicts a moment when the offering was already passed to the seated figure, or in reverse order. On the convex side of the Dilberdzhin seal, there is a female figure, likely the same person as on the flat side, approaching the same seated figure from the left. Between the two figures is a table-like object, perhaps an altar for libation. This representation seems to depict a libation ritual. The scenes on both sides of the Dilberdzhin seal must be related to each

28 BM 124016. DALTON 1964, cat. no. 115, fig. 66.

29 Above their head is an Aramaic inscription reading ‘Rababath’, which perhaps represents a personal name. see https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1897-1231-115.

30 WU 2005, 204–207. On the site, see BERNARD 1994.

other, but it is unknown whether the offering occurred before or after the libation. The styles of the Dilberdzhin stamp and the Oxus cylinder are also similar, both combining engraving and drilling technique. Considering the iconographic and stylistic connections between these two seals, and the difference between the Oxus cylinder and the cultic scenes on tablets found at Persepolis, it is suggested that the Oxus cylinder, whose original archaeological provenance is unknown, was perhaps also carved in Central Asia, with its image reflecting a local cultic practice. Unfortunately, neither the nature of the cult, nor the form of architecture, within which such ritual occurred, can be said about on the basis of these seal images.



Fig. 17: Model of a fish (BM 123917), gold, Oxus Treasure. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

An object from the Oxus Treasure – the model of a fish in gold (BM 123917; DALTON 1964, cat. no. 16, pl. VI) – could have been related to the worship of water deity in Central Asia (Fig. 17). The fish, which is 24.2 cm long, is of life size for a medium-sized carp. Hollow inside, the object has an applied loop above its left fin for suspending. The object is thought to have been a container for holding oil or perfume or was one of a set of pendants.³¹ If it did indeed function primarily to hold liquid, the vessel would have been an inconvenient container and would have had to stay upright all the time to avoid spilling the liquid. If it was a pendant, given its expensive material, considerable size, and exquisite craftsmanship, the object must have had some sort of ritual or religious significance. A new study suggests that the gold fish represents a specific species of barbel endemic to the Oxus River (CURTIS 2012, 44). The fish can therefore be linked to, both physically and symbolically, the Oxus River. This suggests that the fish was probably used as a cultic object for the worship of the Oxus River deity. Connection between fish and the Oxus is also illustrated by the depiction of Oxus's river god Vaxš on a 2nd century Kushan coin, which shows the deity, identified by the inscription on the side, holding a trident in one hand and a fish in the other (SHENKAR 2011, 129, pl. 19).

The gold fish from the Oxus Treasure was probably used as a pendant, perhaps as part of a horse's saddle decoration, as evidenced in the Pazyryk culture of the northern Central Asian steppe. Numerous representations of fish used as pendants or in vertical positions

31 DALTON 1964, 81. It is also suggested that the ring was used for an attachment to a now-missing stopper. The British Museum. 'The Oxus Treasure'. (https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=282412&partId=1, accessed Feb. 1, 2019). If the fish was filled with a liquid and closed at the mouth, the liquid inside would spill out once the fish was no longer in a vertical position. There are no signs, except for the ring, that show that the fish could be held in an upright position. More on the Oxus fish, see WU 2005, 261–263.



Fig. 18: a - Fish hanging made of felt decorated with griffins, from burial at Ak-Alakha-1, Southern Siberia (POLOS'MAK 2001, 223, fig. 148). b - Reconstruction of horse wearing decorative trappings, from Kurgan 1 at Ak-Alakha-1, Southern Siberia (POLOS'MAK 2001, 40, fig. 20).

have been discovered in the Pazyryk burial grounds and nearby sites in the Altai region in southern Russian Siberian steppe. For example, the male tomb owner of Kurgan 2 at Pazyryk had a large vertical fish tattooed on his right shin (RUDENKO 1970, 109, fig. 51). A set of four large pendants in the shape of fish, each 58 cm long and with the head of a mountain goat in its mouth, have been recovered from Kurgan 1 at Pazyryk. The fish is made of felt and leather and was decorated with gold foil (SIMPSON – PANKOVA 2017, 244, cat. 165). Examples are also found at other Pazyryk culture sites, such as Bashadar, Tuekta, and Ak-Alakha (**Figs. 18a-b**).³² These fish are usually made of wood, leather, or felt, and are often decorated with gold foil. They were usually used as hanging decorations on horse saddles (SIMPSON – PANKOVA 2017, 244).³³ Esther Jacobson (1993) argues, drawing on the iconography and composition of the horse decorations and the funerary customs of the burials in the Eurasian steppe, that decorative horse trappings for Eurasian peoples carry important religious meanings. Therefore, the fish, which takes an important place in the repertoire of horse trappings, must also be religiously significant (WU 2005, 264). At the Ak-Alakha-1 site on the Ukok Plain, a horse saddle with

³² RUDENKO 1960, figs. 34 and 103; POLOS'MAK 2001, 40, 223, figs. 20 and 148.

³³ For examples, see RUDENKO 1960, figs. 34 and 103; SIMPSON – PANKOVA 2017, 244; from Ak-Alakha-3, see POLOS'MAK 1994, 45–46, 48–49, figs. 39, 41–43, 45, 51–52.

remarkably large felt fish hangings was excavated (**Fig. 18a**; POLOS' MAK 2001, 223, fig. 148). On the body of one of the fish, four griffins are embroidered. These griffins were undoubtedly viewed as predators, which is evidenced by their multiple representations attacking deer or wild goats in the Pazyryk culture (WU 2007). The association between griffins and fish imbues the latter with fierceness. A comparable symbolic connection is observed with another type of horse trappings from Pazyryk. These trappings take the form of pendants shaped like wolves, which are also suspended from the horse saddles. The similar usage of fish and wolf symbols in Pazyryk culture implies that the fish was also viewed symbolically as predators.

In Bactria, horse is usually associated with water and is often sacrificed to rivers, especially the Oxus River, whose deity, Vaxš, has been worshipped probably since the Bronze Age.³⁴ The Bactrians seem to have worshipped Vaxš through horses (SHENKAR 2014, 130; GRENET 2023). The cultural meanings of the horse and fish in Bactria may not be exactly the same as in the Pazyryk culture, where a nomadic lifestyle on the Eurasian steppe is practiced. Nevertheless, research has sufficiently demonstrated that the connection between Pazyryk and the middle Amu Darya region, where the Oxus Treasure was allegedly found, was quite strong (DALTON 1964; SIMPSON - PANKOVA 2017, 310–319). The Oxus Treasure contains numerous objects that could have come from the Pazyryk region. Ample evidence demonstrates that the Pazyryk material owes an artistic legacy to Achaemenid art disseminated throughout Central Asia (WU 2007). Considering these connections, it is likely that the gold fish in the Oxus Treasure served a similar purpose as those in the Pazyryk culture. It was probably part of a group of pendants hanging down from the back of a real horse, intended to be offered to the river through a sacrificial act. Or more likely, it might have been used as a pendant on a gold model of a horse. A reference in *Bundahishn* (XIa.8), which Grenet has mentioned, provides a possible explanation of the fish symbolism. According to the text, Daryā-i Panj, the river that joins the Oxus River, was infested with noxious creatures who devour domestic animals while the latter drink water from the river (GRENET 2023). In this context, it is plausible to surmise that the fish associated with the horse were known for their predatory nature. They likely played a role in keeping the river's noxious creatures in check by devouring them. The fish thus functioned as religious paraphernalia during festivals dedicated to the worship of the water deity of the Oxus River and allude to the ritual life in ancient Bactria.

Similarly, the two gold models of chariots from the Oxus Treasure were perhaps also used in certain formal and ceremonial occasions (**Pl. 1/3**). The chariots are miniature in size. A technical study of the better-preserved one by the British Museum's conservators reveals that the metal used for the chariot was native alluvial gold containing traces of platinum; a similar metal was used for the Oxus Treasure plaques. The study of the better-preserved example suggests that the chariot, like the plaques, was most likely manufactured locally somewhere in Bactria (BM 123908, DALTON 1964, cat. no. 7, pl. IV; CURTIS 2012, 51; MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 31–32, 37). This chariot is drawn by four horses. Within the carriage are a charioteer, who is standing and holding the reins, and a seated figure. The latter, who is the principal figure, sits on a bench facing the side. He wears a soft cap or a hood on his head, a long ankle-length robe with narrow empty sleeves, often identified as a *kandys*, a garment typically worn by dignitaries on reliefs at Persepolis. He and the charioteer are each wearing a torque around their necks, a status symbol in the Achaemenid Empire (SCHMIDT 1953, 84, 228, 282; SCHMIDT

34 SHENKAR 2014, 131. Francfort (2012, 120, 124, 128) and Grenet (2023) both suggest that the gold plaques depicting horses from the Oxus Treasure, rather than representing an animal cult, were actual substitutes for the horses sacrificed to the Oxus River.

1970, 112–116). This mode of dress indicates that the principal figure was a member of the Achaemenid elite class (more see below).

The chariot has been variously considered as a votive object, a toy, or as a model of a real military chariot. It is unlikely that it was a toy. The craftsmanship of the piece was very complex, involving a wide range of goldsmithing and decorative techniques (MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 37). Given its superb craftsmanship and its expensive material, this object was no plaything. It too was probably a ritual implement. The chariot displays several unique characteristics. First, the carriage is divided longitudinally into two parts by a bench; and second, the cart is open at the back. These features suggest that the chariot was used during peaceful processions, rather than on the battlefield or in a hunting arena (*contra* ABDI 1999, 121). The third characteristic feature is that the horses are shown walking instead of galloping as represented in most other chariot scenes, which often involve hunting or combat. The walking horses further supports the procession interpretation.³⁵ Another special feature is that the chariot has two extraordinarily large wheels. Two bullae from the Achaemenid period site of Daskyleion in Anatolia show chariots with large wheels (KAPTAN 2002, 198, figs. 199–201). The images on these bullae also represent procession scenes. The horses on these bullae are also shown walking, not galloping. The technological study by the British Museum of the piece suggests that the gold chariot was modeled based on a real chariot from the Achaemenid period (MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 37). The exceptionally large wheels were designed for a flat, rather than uneven, road. This feature, combined with the side-facing position of the chariot's principal figure and the open back of the carriage, suggests that the vehicle was not meant for rapid travel, but for a slow pace. The unique features suggest that the Oxus chariot may be a physical representation of a procession scene.

The chariot also bears ceremonial symbolism. The head of the Egyptian dwarf-god Bes, which decorates the front panel of the carriage, indicates that the vehicle may have had some special religious significance related to protection (ABDI 2002, 151–152; CURTIS – TALLIS 2005, 223; CURTIS 2012, 28). The orientation of the principal figure, who is facing the side rather than the front, recalls the famous Cybele plaque from the 'Temple with Indented Niches' at Ai Khanum (Pl. 1/4). The Cybele plaque, silver with gold appliqués and gilding, is dated to the late 3rd–early 2nd century BCE. It was perhaps made as a votive offering (MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018b, 285). The plaque depicts a ritual procession, in which Cybele, the Anatolian mother-goddess and deity of fertility, or a statue of her, is standing sideways in a chariot driven by winged Nike, the personification of Victory. The chariot is being drawn by two lions prancing across a mountainous landscape towards a stepped podium, where a priest is standing at the top officiating some sort of ritual. A male figure standing behind the chariot holds a parasol, which extends over the Cybele figure and his own head. A star, the crescent moon, and the sun-Helios (sometimes, thought to be Mithra) appear in the sky (FRANCFORT 1984, 93–105, pl. XLI; GRENET 1991). The scene undoubtedly represents a religious event, during which Cybele, or likely the statue of the goddess, ceremonially partook (SHENKAR 2011, 127, with references; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018b, 285). Like the principal figure on the Oxus chariot, Cybele – the main figure on the plaque – is shown with a frontal view, facing the audience, whereas the other figures are either in profile or three quarters of a profile, facing different directions. Rather than understanding it as being lacking an indication of perspective,³⁶ the representation, with

35 Many examples of chariot scenes have been found on the bullae at Daskyleion in Anatolia (KAPTAN 2002, 198–199, 206, figs. 201–206, 253–256).

36 As was unconvincingly described in an exhibition with the chariot: 'Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul', see <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2009/afghanistan/photo-gallery>, accessed on Nov. 25, 2021.

the multiple orientations of the figures depicted on it, renders the imagery the quality of a pictorial narrative. The relations between the various figures are specific and well-articulated. That the goddess is shown facing the side of the chariot towards the audience rather than the front towards the podium was certainly not a random rendition. Rather, it was purposely arranged so that the deity, whether the goddess herself or her statue, could engage with the viewers. There is little chance that this similarity – the peculiar side-facing position of the main figure in a chariot – between the goddess on the Cybele plaque and the nobleman in the Oxus chariot is merely coincidence. The similar visual language likely conforms to some sort of actual ceremony – that began in Central Asia since the Achaemenid period and that continued into the Hellenistic era. The chariot, in which Cybele stands, has a very similar profile to the Oxus chariot, although the wheels of Cybele's chariot appear smaller than those of the Oxus chariot. This is probably because Cybele's chariot was traversing the mountainous landscape. This similarity further supports the hypothesis that the Cybele plaque and Oxus chariot may be related in the way that they both portray or reflect real ceremonial events of a religious nature. During such activities, the principal figure, either a deity, statue of a deity, or elite member of the society, sat sideways so that they could engage with, or be better seen by, the spectators, who watched the procession on the side of the road. The multi-figured composition of the Cybele plaque makes one wonder whether the model chariot from the Oxus Treasure was once part of a sculptural group that was comprised of multiple components including other statues or structures.

The link between the Cybele plaque and the Oxus chariot hints at the religious activities in which the chariot was used. The events depicted on the Cybele plaque seemingly occurred outdoors, in front of an altar located in a natural mountainous landscape. The purported ritual procession which the Oxus chariot is resonant of may have similarly occurred in an outdoor setting. This setting echoes Central Asia's actual ritual landscape, as demonstrated by the archaeological discoveries in Bactria and Sogdia.

As a reminder, except for the ritual platform at Koktepe, which is located inside the settlement, but outside of the administrative complex, all the cultic structures discovered so far in Bactria and Sogdia are located almost exclusively outside of the main settlements' limits. Ritual processions to temples or open-air platforms situated outside of town on important holidays were not only possible but very likely (more see below). Numerous seal images from Persepolis show processions towards cultic structures, such as fire altars or/and tower structures. Processions form an important constituency of Achaemenid ritual behavior (e.g., GARRISON 2017, 275, 277). Persian kings were well known for orchestrating great processions (HENKELMAN 2017, 305), some of which were for military and other religious purposes. The depiction on a type of silver coins minted at Sidon in the 4th century BCE potentially represents such processions. Typically, the coins feature a war galley floating above the water on the obverse side, while the reverse portrays the Persian king accompanied by a driver in a chariot, drawn by two horses, and followed closely by the king of Sidon.³⁷ The Persian king's right hand is raised in front of his chest, indicating reverence. The king of Sidon, who functioned also as the chief priest of the city's cults and the royal cult of the Persian king (BETLYON 1976, 22), is seen holding a ceremonial scepter in one hand and occasionally a votive vase in the other (e.g., NELSON 2011, 67–69, cat nos. 116, 125, 130; BETLYON 1976, pl. III:15–16, pl. IV:33, 35, 37). It is evident that the scene was meticulously arranged, with the Great King and the king and chief priest

37 There are different interpretations of the principal figure in the scene. Some scholars believe that he is the Persian king whereas others think that he represents a certain deity of Sidon and the latter the king, see for example, JIGOULOV, 2010, 86–89; contra ELAYI – ELAYI 2004, 506–524.

of Sidon taking part in a religious procession. The representation holds significant symbolism, contextualized by the Persian king's military success over Sidon (BETLYON 1976, 28, 33). The depiction on the coin, including details such as the lowered head of the horse and the striding pose, closely resembles that of the Oxus chariot, although the passenger in the Oxus chariot is a nobleman rather than the Great King. The purpose of both representations is to showcase the power of those who ride the chariot and their associates during public processions. In the case of the Oxus chariot, one could readily imagine that such processions would have been an ideal occasion for the Central Asian aristocrats, who participated in the ceremonies, to display their power and wealth. The model chariot could have been made to commemorate a certain event of such kind. The object was perhaps created either as a token for a single and important event or as a commemoration of a recurring event. The British Museum's study of the chariot reveals that the object was repaired in antiquity, suggesting the chariot was probably actively used before it was buried (MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 36).³⁸ The Cybele plaque, which follows the Achaemenid models, i.e., both the gold chariot and the representation on the coins of Sidon, display explicitly a ritual, which involves procession.

THE RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL ASIA

The above-mentioned objects corroborate the information about ritual and religious life in ancient Bactria that were derived from texts and archaeological discoveries; that is to say, they support the existence of Zoroastrianism and the cult of the Oxus's river god in Achaemenid Central Asia. They also shed light on religious practices that the texts and archaeological material do not cover, such as the popular cultic practice of presenting *ex-votos* to temples, the ferrying of dignitaries or statues in ritual processions, and the offering of gifts and libations within the temple. The visual material illustrates the actors in the ceremonies, including, the devotee, the priest, the deity, the nobleman, as well as the religious paraphernalia, such as the gold plaques and the gold fish. These three types of evidence – archaeological, textual, and visual – each provide a snapshot of one aspect of religious life in Bactria. These snapshots, when placed side by side, offer a vivid picture of a complicated ritual landscape in Achaemenid Central Asia. Within such a landscape, structures of ritual and religious significance, including platforms, temples, shrines, and altars, occupy locations sacred to the local people. These structures, often located outside of the main settlements on artificial platforms, mountaintops, or river banks, add verticality to an otherwise flat topography. As in the Achaemenid heartland, a variety of deities, some local and others alien, were venerated, either on the same spot or within their own precincts. The society is organized around ritual fires and religious ceremonies, whereby power and sumptuous wealth were displayed. The ritual and religious monuments were not uniform in the Achaemenid Central Asia partially because of the variety of deities venerated in the region, and also partially due to the fact that Zoroastrianism, and as a consequence its rituals and temples, was still in its first stages of formation. Nevertheless, the religious monuments and cultic installations played significant roles among the local Bactrian communities. Zoroastrianism was on the horizon, but it was not the sole, nor most important religion, in Central Asia. There is no evidence to support the notion that the Achaemenid authorities proposed Zoroastrianism as a state cult and imposed it upon Central Asia.

³⁸ The technical report was not conclusive, however, on whether the repair occurred shortly after manufacture or when the object was in use (MONGIATTI *et al.* 2010, 36).

THE SACRED LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL ASIA AND ACHAEMENID IMPERIAL POLICIES

Given that Central Asia formed an important constituency of the Achaemenid Empire, we must ask the question of whether the ritual practices and structures in Central Asia were influenced by those in the Achaemenid heartland. Canepa (2013, 332) argues that the fire altar at Cheshm-e Shāfa was modeled on examples from Persepolis, but all the other ritual and religious structures in Central Asia reflect a local architectural tradition, indigenous to Central Asia and unrelated to those in the Achaemenid heartland. Despite this seeming lack of formal connections, an examination of the distribution of sacred structures within the Bactrian archaeological landscape, however, indicates that the local religious life in Central Asia may have something to do with the Achaemenid rule of the region. In northern Bactria, monumental structures of ritual significance are all located along one of the main roads running northeast-southwest along the foothills of the northern side of the Surkhandarya Valley (**Fig. 19**). In southern Bactria (Cheshm-e Shāfa) and Sogdia (Koktepe and Sangir-tepa), the

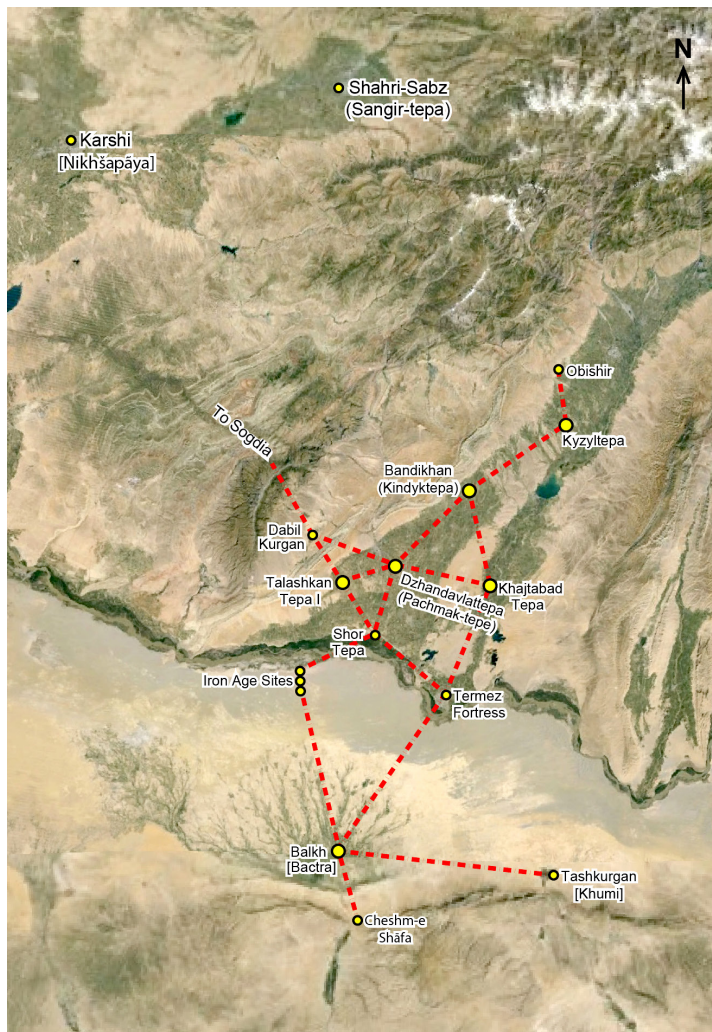


Fig. 19: Map showing the roads and major Achaemenid period sites in Sogdia and Bactria. © Kyzyltepa Project.

ritual structures are all connected to major administrative centers. At sites newly founded during the Achaemenid period, these settlements were equipped with monumental structures for ritual and religious purposes. One may surmise that these structures were important loci for creating social cohesion among the local people. At Kyzyltepa, a temple, or a fire platform preceding it, is the earliest monumental structure at the site. The temple was later embedded into a monumental complex (arbitrarily called the Citadel), forming the core of a large settlement system that included over ten satellite sites. At Cheshm-e Shāfa, which was founded *ex novo* at a location to control the entrance into Bactria from Central Afghanistan, a monumental fire altar was placed high above a rock spur overlooking the settlement below. The fire on the altar must have drawn a significant amount of attention from the people living on the plain and the valley beyond. At sites that pre-existed the Achaemenid period, structures for ritual and religious purposes, often monumental in scale, were added or re-built during the Achaemenid period, remodeling the landscape. At Bandikhan, which was first occupied in the Bronze Age, the occupants constructed a fire temple at Kindyktepa outside of the old settlement during the late Achaemenid period. At Koktepe, a monumental platform was constructed during the Achaemenid period to replace an earlier pre-Achaemenid monumental altar (RAPIN 2017, 421). At Sangir-tepa, too, an Achaemenid period temple was built on the debris of a pre-Achaemenid monument (RAPIN 2017, 440). The construction wave that swept across Bactria and Sogdia during the Achaemenid period could hardly be accidental; rather, it could be the result of a well-mapped project.

Study of the settlement patterns in ancient Bactria reveals that the Persians exercised their rule over Central Asia through a systematic institutionalization of the region's landscape (WU 2021a). This suggests that the construction of ritual structures in Central Asia was an integral part of imperial policy. By establishing new settlements, extending its road network, and controlling the water sources, the Achaemenid administration drastically altered Central Asia's landscape and reshaped the socio-economic life of the local inhabitants (PIDAEV 2001; STRIDE 2005; STANČO 2018; WU 2018; 2021a). Against this backdrop, the presence of newly established sacred installations around the region is unlikely to be merely coincidental. It may have been supported by the imperial system, which contributed to Central Asia's economic development. The high density of ritual structures in ancient Bactria suggests that they formed a tightly-knit network that facilitated community-based cultic activities, which in turn created and maintained social cohesion among the local communities.

The peculiar locations of the cultic structures, which were mostly situated outside of the city walls, but in close proximity to an urban or administrative center, may be indicative of a particular ideological and economic relationship between the religious institutions and the administrative centers. During the Achaemenid period (as in the preceding periods in the ancient Near Eastern), religious institutions had a relative autonomy in both cultic and economic realms (HENKELMAN 2017, 290, 315). At the same time, there was also a significant amount of tension and negotiation going on between religious institutions and the central administration (FRIED 2004). In Bactria and Sogdia, the out-of-town (or away-from-the-administrative-center) location of the cultic installations may reflect this relationship between religion and state. The structures located outside of the city limits gave the religious institutions a certain amount of independence; meanwhile, its location in a liminal space also allowed the sites to be an interface between the local religious institutions and the Achaemenid ruling institutions, serving as 'contact zones' or 'middle grounds' between the Central Asian people and the Persian ruling elite. One of the Aramaic travel texts of ancient Bactria attests to the engagement between Achaemenid administrators and local religious personnel (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012,

177–185). The text records the travel provisions allotted to Bayasa, a very high-status person in the Achaemenid administration. On a trip from Bactra to Varnu, Bayasa made an offering of wine and white flour to the temple(s) or shrine of the Mesopotamian god Bēl and, possibly, to other deities as well.³⁹ Varnu, Bayasa's destination, was located somewhere in southern Bactria. The temple (or shrine) of Bēl situated somewhere between Bactra and Varnu must, therefore, have been located in Bactria. The wine and white flour that Bayasa used to make his offerings at the temple/shrine was also drawn from a central storehouse in Bactria. This text, then, confirms that Achaemenid administrators, including those on a very high level, interacted with local religious institutions. At the same time, since the temple provisions were drawn from an official storehouse at the behest of an Achaemenid administrator, the temple also reciprocally participated in the Achaemenid administrative distribution system. The amount of flour that Bayasa offered to the temple of Bēl, which was 400 liters, matches the amount that Ahura Mazda and some other deities usually received during rituals held in the Persepolis region (HENKELMAN 2017, 307, 311). It indicates that a similar protocol was used in Bactria as in the Achaemenid heartland. Additionally, the allocation was for white flour rather than barley. This is rare in cultic contexts. Wouter Henkelman (2021b, 1254) has suggested that the white flour allocated to cultic activities was perhaps used for baking sacrificial bread. If so, Bayasa himself may have participated in the sacrifice, given that the flour was for immediate consumption. By doing so, the Great King, through his representative, assumed the role of benevolent patron to the local religious institutions. Beyond the façade of religious tolerance,⁴⁰ which the Achaemenid kings were known for, Bayasa's participation in the local religious ceremony may have also served a political end, which was to stabilize the empire's control of the region. In other words, there is no explicit evidence to demonstrate that the Achaemenid authorities imposed their will on the local cults, but they indeed interfered quietly by providing economic support to the religious institutions of Central Asia.

The reference to Bayasa's offerings at the temple of Bēl provides a historical context for the important figure in the gold chariot from the Oxus Treasure. Although it is not possible to conclusively say who the figure in the chariot represents, or whether the figure depicts a specific or generic individual of high status, it is nevertheless clear that the participation of such elite personages – perhaps as a representative of the Persian ruling class – in the local ceremonial procession must have been significant and meaningful to the people of Bactria – significant enough to warrant producing a gold chariot to commemorate such an event. The reference of the text also indicates the existence of an actual temple dedicated to Bēl in southern Bactria, or northern Afghanistan. Although the temple's architectural details remain unknown, it is plausible that it followed a Mesopotamian model. This assumption gains more support from the presence of western temple forms in Central Asia, as evidenced by the excavated 'Temple with Indented Niches' and the 'Extramural Temple' at Ai Khanum in the following Hellenistic period (more details below).

39 For discussion about the nature of the temple cult, see SHENKAR 2011, 129; NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 184, 261; TAVERNIER 2017, 103–110.

40 CURTIS – TALLIS 2005, 153. There is a more recent tendency, however, to reject the assumption the Persians had a policy of religious tolerance. The idea now is to describe Achaemenid religious policy as being 'pragmatic' with political measures, see for example FRIED 2004, 3, 75–78, 108–137; HUTTER 2021, 1287, 1300.

HELLENISTIC PRACTICES AND ACHAEMENID LEGACY

As many scholars have already pointed out, many of the ritual construction techniques and presumably the cultic practices, which began in the Achaemenid period, continued down into the Hellenistic and later periods. For example, Grenet (2008, 31) has suggested that the temple at Kindyktepa was the forerunner of fire-temples with four-column halls, which later became the standard layout for Zoroastrian fire temples in the west. Rapin and Khasanov (2013, 53, 56) argue that the temples at Sangir-tepa and Kindyktepa were the local prototypes for later Hellenistic religious monuments, despite the difference in forms and the lack of absolute symmetry between these temples and those at the Hellenistic temples of Ai Khanum and Takht-i Sangin.

The use of ritual pits in the foundation purification and other ritual activities, as observed at Koktepe, Sangir-tepa, Kindyktepa, and Kyzyltepa, seems to be a tradition carried into the Hellenistic period. Numerous pits containing ash, pure or mixed with the residue of other materials, under the temple floors have also been discovered at the Hellenistic-period temples at Ai Khanum and Takht-i Sangin (MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2023; LITVINSKY 2001, pl. 18). Excavations at Ai Khanum further attest to the continuity of cultic traditions over time, such as performing rituals on open-air terraces, constructing temples outside of the main settlement, and venerating water or river gods. Apart from the city's main temple, or the 'Temple with Indented Niches', there are also two religious installations at Ai Khanum: a small temple located approximately one hundred meters to the north of the city's ramparts, referred to as the 'Extramural Temple', and a monumental stepped podium at the top of the Acropolis (BERNARD 1976a, 303–307; BERNARD 1976b, 272–273). An altar, situated high up on the wide *temenos* of the Acropolis, was used to perform rituals on the open-air terrace, a well-known and well-attested ancient Iranian tradition (BOYCE – GRENET 1991, 182–184; SHENKAR 2011, 130; RAPIN 2017). The small temple has a layout very similar to the main temple, which is modeled, in plan and decoration, on Mesopotamian temple design (SHENKAR 2011, 128; MAIRS 2013, 99–103). Although the archaeological excavations did not reveal any evidence for the identity of the deity or deities worshipped in the temple, the location of the temple outside of the city walls recalls the *Akitu* festival, a traditional Mesopotamian festival celebrating the beginning of the year. During the festival, statues of gods and priests are led in a procession starting from temple(s) inside the city to the *Akitu* House, a temple built outside of the city walls, where Marduk or the city's main god took temporary residence (SOMMER 2000, 94). The festivals were still being celebrated in spring at Babylon and in autumn at Uruk during the Seleucid period (RISTVET 2014). Rituals such as these could well have been performed at Ai Khanum, given that the temples at the site took their form from a Mesopotamian prototype and that the cult of the Mesopotamian god Bēl, assimilated to Marduk, and hypothetically a temple for the deity already existed in Bactria prior to the Hellenistic period.⁴¹ During the celebration, a procession of priests, rulers, and city dwellers could have carried statues of deities from the 'Temple with Indented Niches' to the 'Extramural Temple' along the city's main street. This hypothesis echoes Francfort's assertion that a ceremony featuring the procession of the cult statue of Anāhitā might have existed at Ai Khanum (FRANCFORT 2012, 125–126). It also corroborates the presentation on the Cybele plaque, which is from Ai Khanum and displays features associated with the Mesopotamian world in the west. That said, it is also possible

41 SHENKAR 2011, 129. Mairs (2013, 102) also suggests that the main temple at Ai Khanum may have derived from an official architecture tradition at place in Bactria already during the Achaemenid period.

that the ‘Extramural Temple’ was built to conform to the earlier tradition of building religious structures outside of the settlement, common in Bactria. These assertions will remain hypothetical until more evidence is available. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider that during cultural transmission, the adoption of a foreign element often depends on whether it conforms an existing local counterpart. The ‘Extramural Temple’ seems to fit in this scheme.

At Ai Khanum, the excavations yielded large water basins used for cultic purposes and several dozens of pits and libation pots that were buried under the floor behind the sanctuary. Due to these implements and other finds from the sanctuary, Francfort believe that one of the gods worshipped in the ‘Temple with Indented Niches’ was the God/Goddess of Waters.⁴² The practice of venerating the God(dess) of Waters is more evident at the Oxus Temple at Takht-i Sangin.⁴³ Renewed excavation at the site by the Tajik-German mission has recently discovered in the temple’s courtyard a staircase descending more than twelve meters deep and not yet reaching the bottom. Grenet (2023) believes that the staircase was meant to reach the water table.⁴⁴ If so, this discovery further strengthens the link between the Oxus Temple and the cult of water (BOYCE 1975, 455, 464; SHENKAR 2011, 123). This water cult is a continuation of the local tradition already well-established during the Achaemenid period.

In conclusion, during the Achaemenid period, rituals and religion took many forms in Central Asia. In Bactria and Sogdia, people practiced polytheism. It is likely that Zoroastrianism emerged as an institutionalized belief system and represented one of the numerous strands of the religious practices. In Bactria, the Oxus River god seems to have enjoyed greater popularity. The Achaemenids’ rule over Central Asia had subtle but definite impacts on the region’s ritual and religious life. Instead of employing imperial forces to control local religious institutions, the influence was likely exerted through the provision of financial support to these institutions. Many traditions, which were established during the Achaemenid period, continued over time and were in full operation during the following Hellenistic period.

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42 For a discussion about the identity of the god/goddess, see FRANCFORT 2012; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018a, 403-404; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2023.

43 The original excavators of the monument believed the Oxus Temple was a Zoroastrian fire temple. A statue of Marsyas playing the flute dedicated to the Oxus River found on a small votive altar, however, alludes to a cult associated with water at the site. Francfort (2012, 124), drawing on his analysis of the finds from the temple, asserted that, despite the evidence for fire, the temple was mainly dedicated to the cult of Oxus-Vaxš. For debate on the nature of the temple, see LITVINSKY – PICHIKYAN 2000, 98, 206; BERNARD 1994a; FRANCFORT 2012, 124; CANEPA 2013, 341.

44 More information is needed for this hypothesis. A big underground tunnel was also discovered at Tepe Nuš-e Jān (STRONACH – ROAF 2007, 157-158, 166-169). It is not impossible that we are looking at the same tradition, whose nature is still unknown to us. I am thankful to John Curtis for bringing the Tepe Nuš-e Jān tunnel to my attention.

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Pl. 1/1: An oblique aerial view of the temple at Kyzyltepa, looking from the west to the east in 2018. © Kyzyltepa Project.



Pl. 1/2: Gold votive plaque showing a priest wearing a mouth-cover (or *padām*), holding a barsom and beaker (BM 123971), Oxus Treasure. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Pl. 1/3: Model of a chariot (BM 123908), gold, Oxus Treasure. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Pl. 1/4: Plaque depicting Cybele and other deities, gilded silver, from Ai Khanum, Afghanistan. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. Musée Guimet, 'Cybele Plate', *World History Encyclopedia*. Last modified April 26, 2012. <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/299/cybele-plate/>.