



SOGDIANA ART

Tursunov Farrukh Gulomovich

Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture the department of "Social Sciences and Humanities" Acting Associate Professor of Pedagogy Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Tashkent, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

The article shows the role of ancient Sogdiana and the Sogdians in Central Asia and human civilization, and provides a comparative analysis of local legends and scientific sources.

KEYWORDS: *Sogdiana, Sogdians, Great Silk Road, culture, silk cloth, Sogdian writing, peoples, legend.*

INTRODUCTION

Sogdiana, with its capital of Afrasiab, was already noted for the sophistication and number of its towns when Alexander the Great conquered it in 328 BC and opened it up to Greek soldiers and administrators, and eventually to Roman traders. The Sogdians resented being governed by Alexander's successors, the Greek kings of the Seleucid dynasty. It is difficult to establish their relationship with their Seleucid suzerains and still more so with the later Kushans, but there is ample evidence to show that neither group of conquerors hindered the rise in both Sogdiana and Chorasmia of a local feudal nobility and class of rich farmers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A considerable amount of secular and religious pottery sculpture dating from the early Christian era to the Arab invasion of the 8th century has been found at Afrasiab. The more interesting examples consist of statuettes of clothed women, some of them representing Zoroastrian deities such as Anahita. They have foreshortened bodies and large heads with a withdrawn expression on their faces and wear tiaras, hats, or hoods sewn to their cloaks. When the cloaks are sleeveless, they are worn over straight, long-sleeved robes instead of draped garments. All the figures hold a piece of fruit, a symbol of fertility. Statuettes of the 3rd-4th centuries from the fortified town of Tali Barsu, to the south of Samarkand, depict Syavush, the god of annual death and spring rebirth, as a musician. Statuettes of women flutists, riders, animals, and the Iranian semihuman-semianimal demigod Shah Gopat have also been discovered there. In the 7th and 8th centuries, sculpture, whether in clay or alabaster, was highly developed at Pendzhikent, a site some 40 miles (60 kilometres)

east of Samarkand, where Indian influence was often felt.

The earliest of Turkistan's mural paintings have been found in its eastern section. Those at Niy date from the 2nd century AD, those at Miran from the 3rd. The inspiration for both stemmed from Rome, whereas Buddhism provided the impulses for the slightly later murals at Bamian and Kizil. In the eastern zone the paintings were designed as backgrounds for sculpture, and, as in western Turkistan, they were executed in tempera. Some very high-quality murals recently discovered in western Turkistan are dated slightly later. The oldest ones, which are extremely fragmentary, are from the Varakhsha, a princely residence to the northeast of Bukhara, now lying in the desert; they date from the 3rd to the 4th century AD. Murals discovered at the beginning of the 20th century at Samarkand, which are almost contemporary with those at Varakhsha, have been lost. The importance of these murals is wholly eclipsed by the slightly later works discovered recently in Sogdiana, such as the 7th-century works at Varakhsha. Some of the rooms in the main apartments of the Varakhsha Palace (which consisted of several detached buildings) are decorated with high-relief alabaster stucco panels and carved woodwork, as well as with paintings. Benches are inserted into the walls of one room, the area above them divided into two registers, or horizontal rows, both painted red. In the upper register was a procession of animals, little of which survives, and, in the lower, splendidly attired hunters seated on elephants pursued spirited leopards and creatures of the griffin family.

Some 200 miles (300 kilometres) east of Samarkand, in a once fertile, now desert tract of land, the ruins of the great feudal castle of Mug survive. Among the objects excavated there was part of a



wooden shield with the painted figure of a rider (State Hermitage Museum), which foreshadows a type commonly found in Islamic Persian book illumination. Mounted on a splendidly caparisoned horse, he wears a tunic of local cut and is equipped with a long sword, two daggers, two bows, and a quiver full of arrows. He is wasp-waisted in the manner of figures depicted in murals of Varakhsha and Pendzhikent.

At Pendzhikent, a site close to Mug, and some 40 miles (60 kilometres) east of Samarkand, Sogdian architecture can be seen to advantage. The desert-engulfed city contained several large temples built of rectangular adobe bricks and blocks of beaten clay. The bricks were used for vaults and domes, while the flat sections of the roofs were made of rafters supported by wooden pillars or piers, some of which had been set in stone bases. Many of the more important houses were two-storied. A square room measuring 26 by 26 feet (eight metres by eight metres) had served as a temple sanctuary.

Although, in a series of rooms connected to it, some fragmentary religious paintings survived, the paintings in another temple are better preserved. They depict the death, the Sogdian burial rite, and the rebirth of a youthful Syavush. More than 50 figures of this vast composition survive, some representing Sogdian noblemen, some a group of Turks. A number of the Sogdians are seated cross-legged in the Oriental manner and hold gold and silver vessels of Sasanian shape in three fingers of one hand. The men's single, close-fitting Sogdian tunics resemble garments depicted in paintings of the Buddhist temples of Bamian and eastern Turkistan, notably at Kizil and Kuca. The style and, in some cases, the subject matter of these Sogdian scenes must have influenced the illuminators of such Islamic Persian works as the *Shah-nameh*. Another set of murals is unusual in that it was executed in high relief and then coloured. It shows human beings, sea monsters, and fish, with the waves of the sea rendered in lower relief than the figures. Yet another mural depicts a feast against a black background: a king and several priests sit cross-legged under a canopy; a woman harpist, some musicians and dice players, and a procession of elephants complete the scene. By placing light figures against dark or vivid backgrounds, Sogdian artists evolved a distinct form of perspective.

A study of the religious paintings shows that Central Asian Zoroastrianism retained elements from the earlier indigenous cult of the Sun and Moon. Some of the scenes in the secular works are linked by their subject matter (but not their style) to a small group of older Siberian gold and bronze B-shaped buckles and to the Siberian and Ordos plaques that are thought to illustrate local epics. Other secular scenes give full expression to Sogdian interest in the splendour of contemporary court life and prowess in hunting and warfare. The love of overall decoration and of animal motifs is as prevalent as in nomadic art. Details incorporated in Sogdian paintings proclaim the eclecticism of the society they depict and for which they were created. Sasanian influence from Persia is seen in crowns trimmed with ribbons, veils, and bells; in the styling and trimming of hair and beards; and in many of their vessel shapes. The helmets worn by the warriors in the Pendzhikent libation scene resemble those depicted in the murals of eastern Turkistan. The clothes follow local fashions, and certain horse trappings display disks the shapes of which recall nomadic types.

Archaeological exploration of major cities such as Afrasiab (Samarkand) and Chash (Tashkent) shows houses much like those still found in some Central Asia regions today, houses built of lavishly decorated mud brick with individual living quarters¹ and one or more large reception halls or courtyards.

¹ G. L. Semenov, *Dwelling Houses of Bukhara in the Early Middle Ages, Transoxiana*, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, available at: <http://www.transoxiana.com.ar/Eran/Articles/semenov.html> Accessed 16 Feb 2004

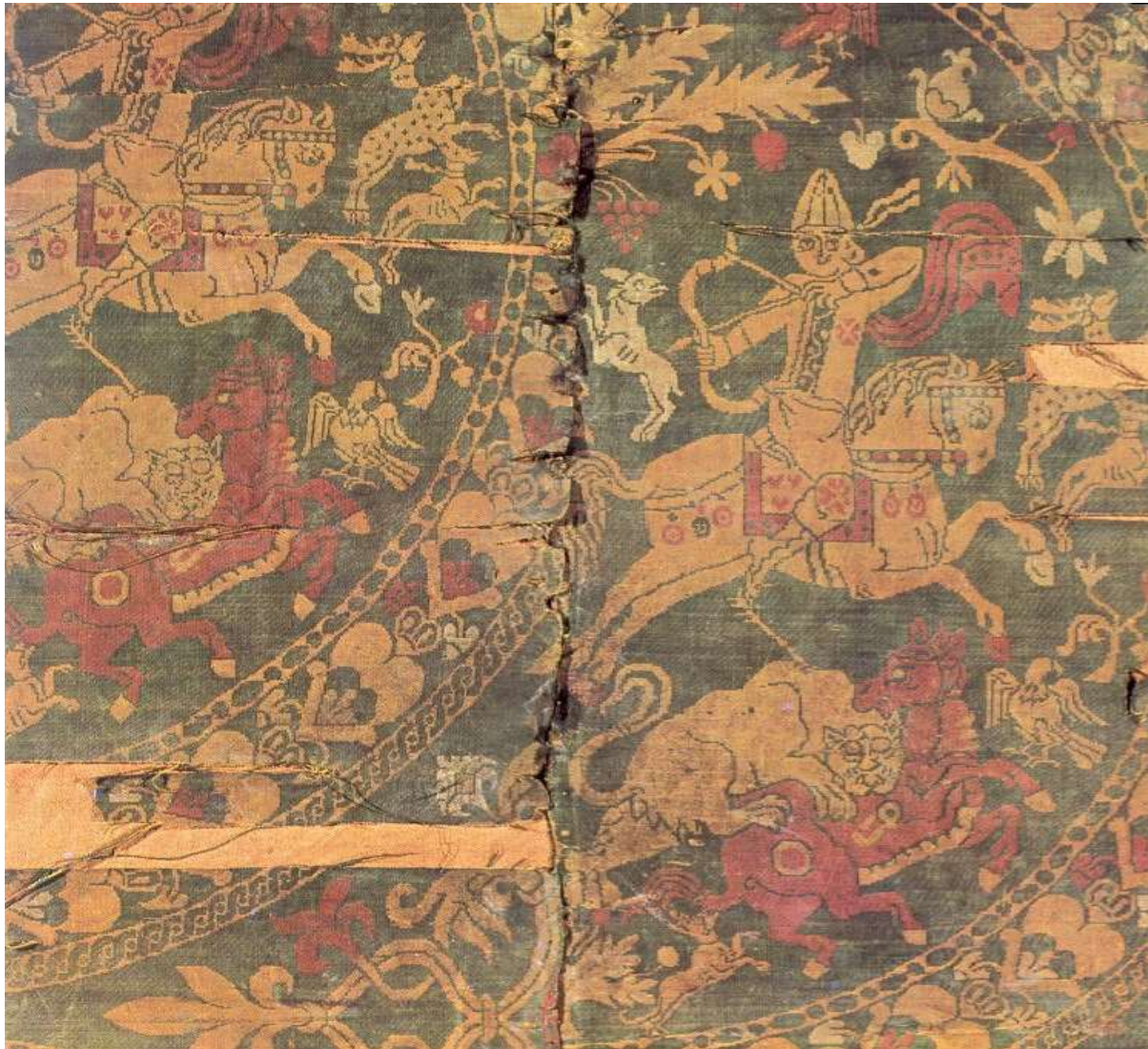


Figure 1. Fresco of the Ambassadors, Samarkand (Afrasiab) C7th. Note the Sasanian style silk robes²

Carved wooden pillars, decorative stucco, and large murals are found in dwellings from Miran in Xinjiang to Varakhsha near Bukhara. The murals especially (figure 1), with their gorgeously dressed men and women, give us an insight not only into the pre-Islamic culture of the region, but also into the use of textiles, not only as costume, but also as caparisons for horses and camels, and as canopies and even sunshades³.

² Aleksandr Belenitsky (trans. James Hogarth), Central Asia, Archaeologia Mundi (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1968)

³ For a comprehensive survey of Silk Road city murals, see the illustrations in Jonathan Tucker, The Silk Road, Art and History (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003)



**C8th textile of Sasanian Persian or
Sogdian origin combining hunt and animal
combat motifs⁴**

culture, both in relief and in the round, was widely produced in Sogdiana. Much of the earlier work takes the form of panels or friezes made of alabaster, stucco, and wood. Rosettes, roundels, disks, and vegetation provide the chief motifs. Audience chambers and large reception rooms often contained statues in the round. Even the statues attached to the wall had the appearance of being worked in the round. The earliest wooden caryatids, or columns in human form, are found at Pendzhikent.

⁴ Roman Ghirshman, *Iran, Parthians and Sasanians* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962)



Ancient Sogdian wall fresco: The men in this fresco resembles officials of Tang Dynasty, China, which was the contemporary of Bunjikath



Scenes of conflict: The Sogdian Confederacy was finally wiped out by the invading Arabs. The previously hegemonous Chinese were chased out of the region after the Battle of Talas in Kyrgyzstan

The caryatids in the form of women have their hair elaborately dressed, and, although nude at the waist, they wear boleros, as well as close-fitting, heavily trimmed skirts and splendid necklaces of Indian appearance. Once again, these figures recall those on Bagram's ivory plaques and Buddhist statuettes of the 1st to 5th centuries⁵.

Sogdian textiles are known to have been in great demand among their neighbours. Sasanian motifs must have reached Sogdian weavers by way of imports from Persia, indirectly routed through

Parthia, and also from Zoroastrians seeking protection in Sogdiana from Persian persecution. These motifs often figure both on surviving textiles and on those recorded in the paintings. The murals at Varakhsha, for example, include motifs taken from textiles, and a 5th-century mural from Balalyk Tepe displays the head of a tusked, boarlike animal set in a roundel that is almost identical to that on a Sasanian fabric found at Astana in eastern Turkistan.

CONCLUSION

Between the 5th and 7th centuries, the Sogdians made dried-brick caskets shaped like rectangular rooms to contain ossuaries, or urns for

⁵ <http://www.weecheng.com/silk/tajik/sogdian.htm>



the bones of the dead. The sides and lids of the ossuaries were decorated. The ornamentation on an ossuary from Bia Naiman (State Hermitage Museum) has so many points in common with the decorations on a series of silver vessels that were, until recently, assigned to Bactria that the latter have come to be accepted as Sogdian. Several ewers have niches containing nude women rendered in a markedly Indian style, thereby recalling many a carved ivory plaque from Bagram. Very similar niches adorn the Bia Naiman ossuary, but these contain crowned figures. In both cases the niches owe their form to Western influence, but those on the ossuary are formed of columns surmounted by capitals upholding pearl-studded arches, while on the ewers the Central Asian rosette replaces the capitals and the pearls.

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