

A MONUMENT SPEAKING FROM THE PAST: TRACES OF BELIEF IN JARKOTON

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Akmal Uralovich Abdurasulov

an independent researcher at

Nizami Tashkent State Pedagogical University

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается формирование религиозных верований в земледельческих общинах бронзового века Южного Узбекистана. В этих сообществах можно наблюдать различные формы религиозных представлений, включая поклонение предметам, животным (тотемизм), огню, а также ранние проявления зороастризма. При анализе этих верований широко используются результаты археологических исследований.

Annotation

This article explores the formation of religious beliefs in the agricultural communities of the Bronze Age in southern Uzbekistan. Various forms of religious practices can be observed in these societies, including the veneration of objects, animals (totemism), fire worship, and early manifestations of Zoroastrianism. The analysis of these beliefs is based on extensive archaeological research findings.

Key words

zooastrizm, religious beliefs, bronze Age, agricultural culture, fire, appearance, cattle breeding.

In the periodization of primitive society history, the earliest religious concepts began to emerge during the Middle Paleolithic stage. By the Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Eneolithic periods, people's religious perceptions had significantly expanded. These developments were closely linked to the fragmentation of kin-based communities into smaller collective branches and communal groups. Throughout this process, each communal group gradually developed its own distinctive characteristics and spiritual values. Each communal group venerated a specific animal as their totem. Such totemistic religious concepts are referred to in scholarly discourse as zoolatric totems, which, in an Uzbek context, can be understood as the "nickname" of a kin-based community that became a vital tradition. These cults represent one of the informal, decentralized forms of religion and, in terms of their historical structure, can be classified into family or clan cults and tribal cults. Their presence is evidenced in Eneolithic and Bronze Age stone beads and amulets, as

well as in family and communal seals, which have been preserved to the present day (**Figure - 1**). Certain manifestations of these religious beliefs have been preserved among the people to this day. For example, it is common to attach an evil eye bead to a child's hand or headwear and to sew amulets onto their clothing. These objects are believed to protect the child from various harms and the effects of the evil eye.

Ancestor worship, which manifests as a form of primitive religious belief, has been scientifically recognized as a distinct religious concept. It is characteristic of the early patriarchal clan stage of historical development. The core idea of this belief is the notion that "the spirits of deceased forefathers and clan leaders protect their descendants from misfortunes and calamities".

The Jarkoton archaeological site, which provides extensive information about the Bronze Age in the southern regions of Uzbekistan, has proven the existence of religious beliefs associated with ancestor worship. In the citadel area of Jarkoton, a nine-room house belonging to a patriarchal family was fully excavated, with gravel-paved corridors located on both sides of the house. Seven burials dating back to the Jarkoton period were discovered beneath the walls, floors, and stone-paved corridors of the house.

Adjacent to the stone corridor, a separate room was constructed, featuring a raised platform in its central part. Researchers suggest that this room served as a place of worship for the patriarchal family. Among the artifacts found in this room were a statue depicting the head and neck of a male figure and a clay figurine of a pregnant woman.

The head sculpture of the male figure is remarkably well-preserved, with black-colored hair and beard depicted. The cheeks, nose, and neck are painted red, while the nose is sharp and prominent, the mouth is shown open, and the ears are portrayed as protruding. The eyes are depicted in a closed state, suggesting that this may be a statue of a deceased person (**Figure 2**). Additionally, this sculpture provides insights into the anthropological features of the Bronze Age population.

The female figurine (**Figure 3**) features a rounded belly, with a pronounced abdominal area symbolizing pregnancy. The two preserved hands are placed over the stomach, with two snakes depicted moving between them. Various parts of the belly and hands are painted red. Additionally, two clay masses resembling embryos are present on the belly.

The red coloration on certain parts of the pregnant woman's figurine and the depiction of snakes are believed to symbolize the afterlife. In mythology, the color red represents blood, while snakes are associated with the underworld deities. This suggests that a pregnant woman might have been buried in this grave.

Similar figurines have also been discovered in the burials of Sapallitepa (**Figure 4**). The presence of a deceased person's statue alongside the pregnant woman's figurine indicates the belief that the spirit of an ancestor could protect both the mother and her unborn child from misfortune. This reflects the practice of ancestor worship as observed in material culture.

Fire worship held a central place in the religious beliefs of the Sapalli culture. One notable manifestation of fire worship is the altar. Archaeological excavations at Sapalli culture sites have uncovered a total of 12 altars, which, based on their structure, are classified into two types: circular altars and square-shaped altars.

Circular altars first began to spread widely in Central Asia during the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages. Such altars have been identified in the Eneolithic construction layer of the Sarazm culture, at the Eneolithic sites of Geoksyur 1 and 7 in southern Turkmenistan, and in the Early Tulkhor cemetery, which dates back to the Late Bronze Age in southern Tajikistan.

The second type of altars is rectangular in shape and was not widely distributed. The discovery of only two such altars at the Jarkoton site further indicates their limited prevalence.

In recent years, research on the Sapalli culture has revealed that, based on the placement of altars and two-chambered hearths, they initially served as family fire-worship centers during the early stages of the Sapalli culture. However, with the emergence of centralized temples in the later Kozali and Molali phases, these forms of belief did not entirely disappear. While temples became places where communities gathered for collective fire worship and performed various religious rites and ceremonies, each patriarchal family also maintained its own personal household altar for worship.

In one of the rooms of the Jarkoton temple, a pit designated for storing ash was discovered. Since producing fire was a complex process, ancient people sought to preserve it by keeping it burning in hearths. Researchers have suggested that these pits were specifically designed to store embers from the sacred fire, ensuring that they remained alight until the next morning. Given that embers are a part of fire, this practice may have symbolized the perpetuity and continuity of fire. The pits were tightly sealed to prevent airflow, allowing the embers to remain active until morning.

T. Shirinov, who conducted research at this site, noted that certain portable containers were adapted for carrying embers. Considering their convenience for transport, he referred to them as "mobile altars." The discovery of altars in the Jarkoton temple highlights the fundamental role of fire in human life, daily existence, and religious beliefs. Fire has not only played a vital role in ancient times

but continues to be an essential element of human civilization today. Recognizing its enduring significance, it is important to acknowledge fire as an indispensable resource for humanity and society.

In recent years, research conducted at the Jarkoton site has revealed traces of pre-existing religious beliefs persisting unconsciously within the context of an emerging centralized religion. One such belief system is zoolatric religious thought.

By the Bronze Age, social stratification began to emerge within kin-based communities due to the increasing number of resourceful individuals who demonstrated exceptional leadership and entrepreneurship for the benefit of the group. As a result, members who had acquired personal property and positions of authority started consolidating their control over others in pursuit of mutual interests. Naturally, this process found reflection in the ideological perspectives of society. Fire worship held a prominent place in their religious beliefs, and religious-ideological policies began to serve their interests. In such a context, the common people placed greater emphasis on totemism, particularly animal cults.

According to research, the origins of cults can be classified into several types, including solar (fire) cults, water cults, and the cults of animals, birds, plants, and various creatures. In the ancient cultures of Bactria and Margiana, totemistic cults were primarily associated with animals such as snakes, eagles, insects, predatory beasts, and trees. The Bronze Age marked the final stage in the religious significance of these creatures as totemistic symbols.

By the Late Bronze Age, these beliefs gradually began to fade. One of the main reasons for this was the increasing role of irrigated agriculture within farming communities. As agricultural production became the primary source of economic prosperity, people came to recognize that the key elements ensuring their livelihood were the sun, earth, and water. Consequently, various totemistic cults, including zoolatric religious beliefs, were gradually replaced by the worship of the four natural elements-sun, earth, water, and air.

The veneration of these four natural elements and the concept of keeping them pure became deeply ingrained in people's consciousness and worldview. This belief system has been preserved in our culture from ancient times to the present day.

Starting from the final stages of the Bronze Age, temples were built in their honor, and various rituals and celebrations were conducted. As a result, agricultural communities developed the fundamental belief that the origin and reflection of everything were connected to the sun. Consequently, in people's religious consciousness, the faith of fire worship (Zoroastrianism) emerged.

With the emergence of the fire-worshipping religion (Zoroastrianism), earlier totemistic religious beliefs began to be represented in amulets as protective symbols

against the evil eye. At the same time, these totemic symbols also started appearing on the seals of tribal elders who held governing authority.

One of the animals associated with zoolatric religious beliefs is the two-humped Bactrian camel. Numerous seals and terracotta figurines depicting camels have been discovered at Bronze Age sites in Margiana and eastern Iran. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the two-humped camel was present in the Andronovo culture during the 15th–13th centuries BCE. It is well known that among animals, the camel is one of the most resilient to extreme heat and water scarcity. For this reason, since ancient times, the two-humped camel has been the primary means of transportation for trade caravans traveling long distances between different regions. This indicates that the two-humped camel also played a crucial role as the main transport animal for Bronze Age tribes.

A seal discovered at Jarkoton features a two-humped camel on one side, while the other side bears a depiction of a human figure that has lost its original form over millennia (**Figure 5**). If our hypotheses regarding the analysis of this seal are correct, it not only confirms the zoolatric significance of the camel but also allows us to associate the origins of Zoroastrianism with the Late Bronze Age, as first suggested by the Avestan scholar Mary Boyce. Furthermore, this provides grounds to consider Bactria, alongside Sogdiana and Margiana, as one of the regions where early Zoroastrianism emerged.

However, many scholars conducting research in this region interpret the discovered temples as Zoroastrian fire temples. The material evidence found at the temples of Togalok, Dashtli, and Jarkoton suggests a direct connection between these sites and the early Zoroastrian places of worship. In fact, considering that Zoroastrianism emerged on the foundation of fire worship and was later reformed by Zarathustra, it is reasonable to assume that its origins and early stages developed in regions where fire worship was strong and where ideological centers dedicated to fire veneration existed. A significant number of such ideological centers have been discovered in the territory of Ancient Bactria.

Thus, during the Bronze Age, agricultural communities developed religious concepts and beliefs that were in harmony with their era. Among the festivals that have been revered and celebrated by our ancestors since ancient times is Nowruz, which remains widely observed today as a symbol of nature's awakening. This festival was marked by sowing seeds into the soil with good intentions, hoping for an abundant harvest from the planted crops. Remarkably, our ancestors were aware of the spring equinox on this day, recognizing the equal length of day and night. This indicates that they also possessed knowledge of astronomy, which is indeed remarkable. Given that, during the medieval period, this land produced

great scholars such as Al-Bukhari, Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Al-Kharezmi, and At-Tirmizi –figures who mastered various fields of knowledge and made significant contributions to the advancement of global science – it is natural to assume that the ancient inhabitants of this region were also highly observant of changes in nature. However, due to the absence of written sources from the time of our ancestors, their level of intellectual development can only be determined and reconstructed through meticulous study of the material cultural monuments they left behind.

Faith plays a crucial role in uniting people, guiding their lives in the right direction, and shaping their way of living. Regardless of its form, faith encourages individuals to do good, endure life's hardships with patience, and look to the future with confidence. The religious beliefs of Bronze Age agricultural communities evolved from simple to complex – ranging from faith in everyday objects, amulets, and animal cults to the establishment of major religious institutions, such as fire-worship and early Zoroastrian temples. This progression indicates that people's strong connection to religious faith was fundamental to their society, emphasizing that a stable life could never be built without faith in any era.

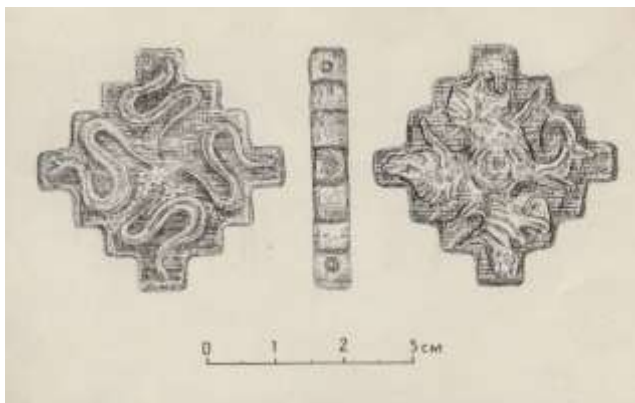


Figure 1. A tribal seal found at Sopollitepa (A. Askarov, 1977).



Figure 2. A statue of a Bronze Age human. (Sh. Shaydullaev, 2002).



Figure 3. Jarkoton. A statue of a pregnant woman. (Sh. Shaydullaev, 2002).

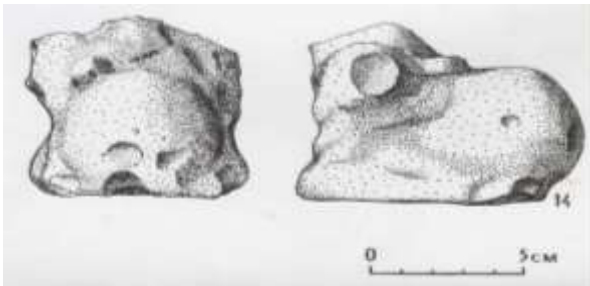


Figure 4. Sopolitepa. A statuette of a pregnant woman from Cenotaph Grave No. 71 (A. Askarov, 1977).

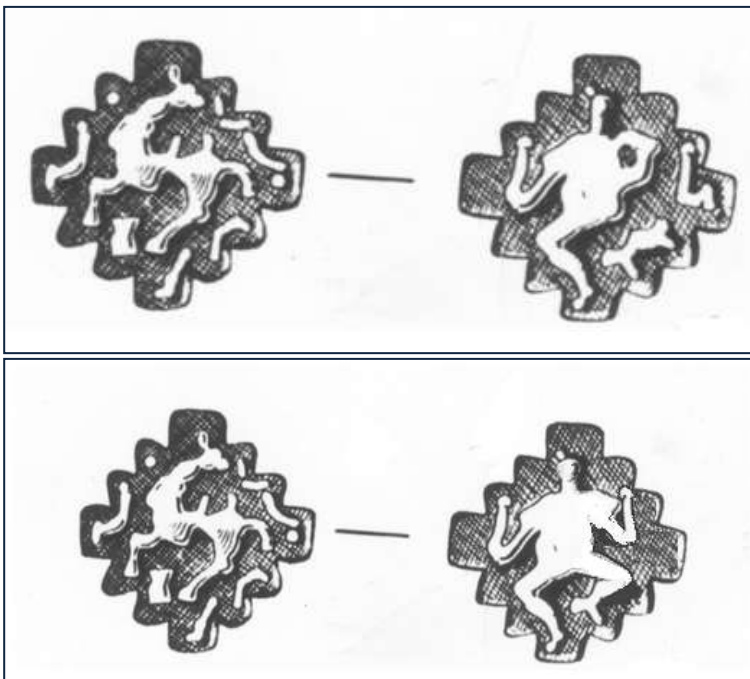


Figure 5. A seal discovered in Jarkoton (A. Askarov, 1977).

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