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FESTIVALS AND RITUALS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL SOGD: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Annotatsiya: Maqolada ilk o‘rta asrlar Sug‘d hududida bayram va marosimlarning ijtimoiy, diniy va madaniy vazifalari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda Navro‘z, ajdodlar kulti, saroy marosimlari, ibodatxona amaliyotlari, musiqa, raqs, ziyofat va dafn marosimlari Sug'd shahar madaniyatining muhim belgisi sifatida ko‘rib chiqiladi. Shuningdek, marosimlarning an’anaviy shakllari Turk xoqonligi, Xitoy-Tan madaniy aloqalari, buddaviylik, moniylik, nasroniylik va islomiy bosqichlar ta’sirida qanday transformatsiyaga uchragani yoritiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Sug‘d, ilk o‘rta asrlar, bayram, marosim, Navro‘z, ajdodlar kulti, ibodatxona, an’anaviylik, transformatsiya, Buxoro, Samarqand, Panjikent.

Аннотация: В статье анализируются праздники и обряды раннесредневекового Согда как важные формы социальной, религиозной и культурной жизни. Особое внимание уделяется Наврузу, культу предков, дворцовым церемониям, храмовым практикам, музыке, танцам, пиршествам и погребальным ритуалам. Рассматривается также трансформация традиционных обрядов под влиянием Тюркского каганата, китайско-танских связей, буддизма, манихейства, христианства и раннеисламских процессов.

Ключевые слова: Согд, раннее средневековье, праздник, обряд, Навруз, культ предков, храм, традиция, трансформация, Бухара, Самарканд, Пенджикент.

Abstract: This article analyzes festivals and rituals in early medieval Sogd as important forms of social, religious and cultural life. It examines Nowruz, ancestor worship, court ceremonies, temple practices, music, dance, feasting and funerary rites as elements of Sogdian urban culture. The study also explores how these ritual traditions were transformed under the influence of the Turkic Khaganate, Tang Chinese contacts, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity and early Islamic processes.

Keywords: Sogd, early Middle Ages, festival, ritual, Nowruz, ancestor cult, temple, tradition, transformation, Bukhara, Samarkand, Panjikent.

The study of festivals and rituals in early medieval Sogd is important because the ceremonial life of this region reveals the interaction between social order, religious imagination and urban identity. Sogdiana was not a centralized empire; it consisted of a number of oasis principalities and cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Panjikent, Kesh and Maymurgh. Yet the cultural coherence of these communities was maintained through shared language, commerce, aristocratic networks,

temple institutions and ritual practices. A festival in this context was not merely an occasion of entertainment. It was a social mechanism through which the city remembered its ancestors, displayed political authority, confirmed status relations and renewed relations between human beings, divine powers and the natural world [1, 47].

The chronological frame of the article is the fourth to eighth centuries CE, the period usually regarded as the flourishing age of Sogdian culture. Archaeological discoveries from Panjikent, Afrasiab, Varakhsha and other sites show that Sogdian elites decorated palaces, houses and temples with paintings representing mythological, epic, ceremonial and everyday themes. These images allow scholars to reconstruct not only religion but also the social atmosphere of celebration, procession, music, dance, sacrifice and collective memory [6, 34]. Written evidence from Chinese, Arabic and Iranian sources complements the archaeological data and demonstrates that Sogdians were recognized as active merchants, translators and cultural transmitters across the Silk Road [8, 30].

The purpose of this article is to analyze early medieval Sogdian festivals and rituals from the perspective of tradition and transformation. The main tasks are to define the ritual functions of the festival calendar, to examine the role of Nowruz and royal-ancestral ceremonies, to describe temple and domestic ritual practices, and to determine how religious plurality changed the ceremonial culture of Sogdian society. The methodological basis of the article is historical-cultural analysis combined with the interpretation of archaeological and written sources.

The study of Sogdian ritual culture is complicated by the fragmentary character of the sources. No complete Sogdian liturgical calendar has survived. Therefore, researchers reconstruct the ritual world of Sogd through several groups of materials: wall paintings, temple architecture, ossuaries, seals, coins, legal documents, Chinese dynastic histories, Arabic narratives and religious manuscripts found in Turfan and Dunhuang. Each type of evidence has its own limitation. Paintings show visual programs but do not always explain the exact ritual. Written sources record external observations but may interpret Sogdian customs through Chinese, Islamic or Christian categories. For this reason, the most reliable interpretation requires comparison between material culture and textual data [1, 70].

The concept of tradition in this article refers to those stable ritual elements that connected Sogdian communities with Iranian religious heritage and local city identity. These include the cult of fire, respect for water, ancestor commemoration, sacrifice, seasonal renewal, ritual feasting and the integration of rulers with sacred legitimacy. The concept of transformation refers to changes produced by political contacts, trade mobility, religious pluralism, migration and Islamization. Transformation does not necessarily mean disappearance. In Sogdiana many older practices were reinterpreted, relocated or combined with new religious meanings [3, 272].

The city-state is a key category for understanding Sogdian festivals. Because Sogdiana lacked a single centralized monarchy, the city itself became the main unit of ritual organization. Temples, palaces, markets, gates, necropolises and aristocratic houses formed a ceremonial topography. Public rituals connected the ruler with the urban community, while domestic rituals connected family groups with ancestors and protective deities. Thus, festivals and ceremonies should be studied as part of the spatial organization of the city [1, 380].

Among the best-known festival themes associated with Sogdian culture is Nowruz, the Iranian New Year. In the early medieval period Nowruz functioned not only as a seasonal celebration but also as a political and cosmological ceremony. It marked the renewal of time, the beginning of a new cycle of prosperity and the symbolic purification of social relations. At Afrasiab, the famous wall paintings of the Hall of the Ambassadors have been interpreted by many scholars as connected

with a royal Nowruz celebration in Samarkand. The southern wall shows the ruler Varkhuman, members of the court, richly dressed processions and sacrificial animals. This composition suggests that the festival connected royal authority, ancestor cult and civic identity [4, 14].

The importance of Nowruz in Sogdian society can be explained by the agricultural and urban character of the region. Sogdian cities depended on irrigation, river valleys and seasonal cycles. The festival of spring therefore had both religious and economic meaning. It symbolically renewed the fertility of land, the prosperity of trade and the legitimacy of rule. At the same time, Nowruz created a social stage where different groups of the city could be represented: rulers, nobles, priests, musicians, courtiers, envoys and ordinary participants. The procession was a visible hierarchy of society [6, 70].

The traditional element of Nowruz was its connection with Iranian concepts of time, purity and cosmic order. The transformative element was the ability of the festival to absorb new political meanings. In the seventh century, Sogdian rulers operated between the Western Turks, Tang China and local aristocratic houses. Therefore, the visual language of royal ceremonies included not only Iranian but also Chinese and Turkic elements. The Afrasiab murals show foreign embassies and courtly scenes that reflect diplomatic transformation of the festival space [4, 19].

In this sense Nowruz was not a closed ethnic ritual. It was a public language of power. Through the festival, Samarkand represented itself as an old Iranian city and simultaneously as a participant in the international world of the Silk Road. The ritual therefore combined memory and diplomacy. It preserved inherited forms while adapting them to the multilingual and multiethnic environment of early medieval Central Asia.

The cult of ancestors occupied an important place in Sogdian ceremonial life. In Iranian religious culture, the souls of ancestors were associated with protection, memory and continuity. In Sogdiana this cult acquired a strong urban and dynastic character. The ruler and his family were not only political figures; they were also guardians of the city's sacred continuity. Ceremonies addressed to royal ancestors legitimized authority and united the community around shared memory [1, 607].

The South Wall of Afrasiab is especially important in this regard. Scholars have connected the scene with a New Year sacrifice to royal ancestors. The presence of sacrificial animals, priestly figures and ceremonial movement indicates that the festival did not only celebrate seasonal renewal but also reaffirmed the bond between the living ruler and the ancestral line. In this ritual, the past entered the political present. Authority was justified not merely by military strength or economic success, but by the ruler's ability to preserve the city's sacred heritage [4, 22].

Ancestor-related practices were also connected with funerary rituals. Sogdian burial culture included the use of ossuaries, which reflected Zoroastrian ideas about purity and the separation of the body from the elements of earth, fire and water. The decoration of ossuaries often contains images of deities, mourning figures and protective symbols. These objects demonstrate how domestic, social and religious memory intersected in the treatment of the dead [7, 181].

The transformation of ancestor cult occurred when Sogdians migrated eastward and settled in China. Tombs of Sogdian elites in Northern China preserve Iranian funerary and banquet motifs while adapting them to Chinese burial architecture. The deceased is often represented as a host, official, traveler or noble person. These images show that Sogdian commemoration could be translated into a new cultural environment without losing its basic concern for lineage, status and memory [13, 57].

Temple ritual was another central sphere of Sogdian ceremonial life. Archaeological excavations at Panjikent and Jartepa reveal temple complexes that functioned between the fourth

and eighth centuries. These temples contained halls, altars, paintings and ritual objects related to fire, deities and offerings. The evidence suggests that Sogdian religion was not identical with the official Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran. It preserved many Iranian elements but developed local forms of worship around deities such as Nana, Tishtrya, Mithra and other divine figures [1, 52].

Fire played a crucial role in ritual practice. In Zoroastrian and Iranian traditions, fire was a sign of purity, divine presence and ritual order. In Sogdiana, fire worship was connected not only with temples but also with domestic life. The hearth, incense burner and small altar could serve as ritual centers within the household. This indicates that religious practice was not limited to institutional priests. Lay families and aristocratic houses also participated in the maintenance of sacred fire and offerings [10, 89].

The temples of Panjikent provide valuable evidence for the ceremonial transformation of Sogdian religion. Wall paintings and ritual objects show a mixture of local, Iranian and transregional elements. Some rooms were decorated with divine and heroic scenes, while other spaces were organized for offerings and processions. These temples were not isolated from the city. They were integrated into the urban landscape and connected with the social authority of elites [1, 610].

The traditional basis of temple ritual was the idea that sacred power had to be maintained through repeated acts: offerings, prayers, purification, incense, sacrifice and communal gathering. The transformative process appeared in iconography and religious plurality. Sogdian temples could represent local deities with visual forms borrowed from Mesopotamian, Iranian, Indian and Hellenistic traditions. The result was a flexible religious art that reflected the cosmopolitan position of Sogdiana [7, 96].

Festivals in Sogdian society were not only religious ceremonies; they were also performances of social life. Chinese sources often describe Sogdians as fond of music, dance and wine. Such descriptions may contain stereotypes, but they correspond to visual evidence from Sogdian and Chinese art, where Central Asian musicians, dancers and banqueters appear frequently. Music and dance were important markers of Sogdian identity on the Silk Road [2, 43].

Feasting was a social ritual through which hierarchy and solidarity were both expressed. In aristocratic houses at Panjikent, wall paintings depict banquets, drinking, heroic stories and entertainment. These scenes suggest that noble households used festive culture to display wealth, hospitality and cultural refinement. The banquet was a place where oral tradition, epic imagination, diplomacy and social prestige met [5, 116].

The participation of women in festive culture is also important. Sogdian paintings and tomb reliefs often show noble women in courtly, musical or ceremonial contexts. While the political system was patriarchal, the representation of women in elite visual culture indicates that household and ceremonial identity could not be constructed without female presence. In marriage, mourning, feasting and ancestor commemoration, women participated as visible carriers of family prestige and ritual continuity [6, 142].

Ritual feasting also transformed in diaspora communities. Sogdian merchants in China preserved banquet motifs in tombs, where the deceased appears seated with guests, servants, musicians or family members. In the Chinese environment, these images communicated both Sogdian heritage and social success. The feast became a symbolic language that joined homeland memory with new elite status abroad [13, 62].

One of the defining features of early medieval Sogdiana was religious plurality. Zoroastrianism was the dominant indigenous tradition, but Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity were also present, especially through trade routes and diaspora communities. This

plurality did not produce a single unified system. Instead, it created overlapping ritual spaces where different communities preserved their own ceremonies while interacting with the broader Sogdian social world [1, 67].

Buddhist rituals influenced Sogdian travelers and translators particularly in the eastern regions of the Silk Road. Sogdian names and inscriptions found in the Upper Indus region show that some Sogdians participated in Buddhist pilgrimage and devotional practices. Manichaean communities used Sogdian as a language of scripture and mission, while Christian Sogdians left evidence in Turfan and in the Urgut region near Samarkand. These religious processes transformed the ritual vocabulary of Sogdian society [14, 102].

However, transformation did not erase the older ceremonial structure. The Sogdian capacity to transmit Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity can be explained by the already existing culture of mobility, multilingualism and ritual adaptation. Merchants, translators and caravan leaders could move between religious communities because Sogdian society itself was accustomed to cultural negotiation [9, 2].

The Islamic conquest of Sogdiana in the eighth century initiated another stage of transformation. Some temples were destroyed or abandoned, while many social practices continued in modified form. Seasonal festivals, reverence for ancestors, sacred fire symbolism and local pilgrimage traditions did not disappear immediately. They were gradually reinterpreted within new Islamic frameworks or survived in popular customs. This process demonstrates that ritual tradition changes more slowly than political authority [1, 692].

The social meaning of Sogdian festivals can also be understood through the economic rhythm of oasis life. Sogdian towns depended on irrigation systems, orchards, vineyards, grain fields and caravan trade. Seasonal ceremonies marked moments when the community needed to secure fertility, water, protection and commercial success. In an irrigated society, the renewal of water and the regularity of agricultural cycles were not abstract symbols. They were matters of survival. For this reason, rituals connected with spring, fire, water and sacrifice helped the population imagine economic stability as part of a sacred order [1, 671].

Trade added another layer to the festival calendar. Caravans did not move only according to religious dates; they also followed weather, pasture, taxation, political safety and market opportunity. Nevertheless, festivals created moments when merchants, envoys and travelers could meet in cities, exchange information and establish trust. A public celebration in Samarkand or Panjikent could therefore function as a market event as well as a religious occasion. Goods, music, food, textiles and stories circulated together. This explains why Sogdian festive culture was so strongly connected with display and performance [8, 31].

The urban square, palace hall and temple courtyard were ceremonial spaces where economic success became visible. Imported textiles, metal vessels, horses, perfumes and luxury goods appeared in processions and banquets. Such objects showed the wealth of the elite, but they also demonstrated the city's connection with distant regions. In this sense, a Sogdian festival was a map of the Silk Road in visual and material form [2, 118].

The question of participation is essential for understanding the social depth of Sogdian ritual. Rulers and priests are the most visible figures in sources, yet festivals involved wider groups. Women, children, musicians, craftsmen, servants and foreign guests all had roles in ceremonial culture. The presence of women in murals, tomb reliefs and banquet scenes indicates that family prestige and festive display were incomplete without female representation. Clothing, jewelry and posture allowed women to embody lineage, beauty, status and household honor [6, 142].

Children and adolescents also participated indirectly in rituals through family ceremonies, apprenticeship and domestic observance. In merchant families, socialization into trade, language and ritual began early. Chinese anecdotes about Sogdian children learning commerce from a young age may be exaggerated, but they reflect a real perception: Sogdian identity was transmitted through practice, not only through formal teaching [1, 373]. Festivals helped young members of society learn who belonged to which household, which deity protected the city, how elders were honored and what forms of behavior expressed social respect.

Craftsmen and performers occupied a special position. Musicians and dancers might not possess the same status as nobles, but they were indispensable for festival atmosphere. Potters, metalworkers, painters and textile producers created the objects through which rituals became visible. Thus, ceremonial culture integrated many forms of labor into a shared symbolic order [15, 64].

The everyday labor of Sogdian society was also related to religious processes. Agriculture, craft production and trade were not purely secular activities. Irrigation required cooperation and respect for water; metalwork and pottery produced ritual objects; textile production supplied garments used in ceremonies; and scribal labor preserved contracts, prayers and religious translations. The social meaning of work was therefore connected with sacred order [1, 671].

Craftsmen were mediators between material and ritual worlds. An ossuary, an incense burner or a painted panel had practical form, but it also carried religious meaning. The production of such objects required technical skill and iconographic knowledge. In the hands of artisans, domestic material became sacred material. This explains why Sogdian art cannot be separated from social history. It is a record of how households, temples and workshops interacted [6, 31].

Merchants also participated in religious processes through patronage. Donations to temples, support for monks and financing of funerary monuments allowed commercial wealth to become religious merit and social prestige. The merchant house, caravan partnership and religious community were often mutually supportive institutions. In this sense, Sogdian trade did not simply spread goods; it supported religious spaces and textual transmission [8, 32].

Socio-domestic culture included moral education within the family. Children learned language, manners, economic skills and ritual obligations in the household. Religious values were transmitted through repeated practices: respect for fire, care for guests, participation in mourning, memory of ancestors and observance of seasonal customs. These forms of education were not always written, but they shaped the religious personality of the individual [10, 72].

Women played an important role in this domestic transmission. They appear in visual culture as noble wives, participants in feasts and members of funerary memory. Although written sources usually emphasize male merchants and rulers, the continuity of household ritual depended on women as organizers of domestic life, marriage alliances and family ceremonies. Their role shows that religion was not only performed in public temples but also maintained in the rhythms of home life [6, 142].

Moral discipline was also connected with economic behavior. A family that violated trust could lose reputation in trade and marriage networks. Religious oaths and social honor worked together. The household trained individuals to act within a world where sacred accountability and practical survival were closely linked [2, 102].

The analysis shows that festivals and rituals in early medieval Sogd performed at least five functions. First, they renewed the relationship between society and cosmic time. Nowruz and seasonal ceremonies linked the prosperity of the city with agricultural cycles and divine order. Second, they legitimized political authority. Royal ceremonies and ancestor sacrifices connected

rulers with sacred memory and civic continuity. Third, they organized social hierarchy. Processions, feasts and temple rituals displayed the positions of rulers, priests, nobles, merchants, musicians, servants and foreign envoys. Fourth, they preserved collective identity. Rituals turned Sogdian cities into communities of memory, even when political conditions changed. Fifth, they enabled transformation. Because Sogdian ritual culture was flexible, it could interact with Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, Turkic power and Chinese court culture without losing its own symbolic core.

Another result is that Sogdian festivals should not be reduced to religion alone. They were complex socio-cultural events. A single festival could include sacrifice, music, dance, royal display, diplomatic representation, hospitality, commercial exchange and artistic performance. This explains why Sogdian wall paintings are so rich in visual detail. They represent not isolated myths but the total ceremonial world of an urban civilization.

Finally, the study confirms that the categories of tradition and transformation are inseparable. Sogdian festivals were traditional because they preserved Iranian concepts of renewal, fire, ancestors and sacred kingship. They were transformative because they adapted these concepts to a changing Silk Road environment. This combination gave Sogdian ritual culture its historical durability and cultural influence.

Festivals and rituals in early medieval Sogd were essential instruments of social integration, political representation and religious meaning. They connected city and countryside, ruler and community, living and dead, local gods and transregional religions. Nowruz, ancestor ceremonies, fire rituals, funerary practices, music, dance and feasting formed a ceremonial system through which Sogdian society expressed its identity.

The traditional character of Sogdian ritual culture lay in its Iranian religious foundations and its attachment to local city memory. The transformative character lay in its openness to political and cultural contacts. Under the influence of Turkic, Chinese, Buddhist, Manichaean, Christian and Islamic environments, Sogdian rituals changed their forms, images and institutional settings. Yet many basic values - renewal, memory, purity, hospitality, status and sacred protection - remained recognizable.

Therefore, the study of Sogdian festivals and rituals is important not only for religious history but also for social and cultural history. It shows how an urban Silk Road society preserved continuity while adapting to constant change. In this respect, early medieval Sogd represents one of the most vivid examples of ceremonial culture as a bridge between tradition and transformation.

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