ZOROASTRISM AND ITS ELEMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Zoroastrianism is a religion that professes a monotheistic faith and originates from the Iranian people. It is founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra, Zardõsht) during some time in the ancient Persian Empire of the Achaemenid era.

Although it is believed that all the peoples belonging to “great Iran” were of the Zoroastrian religion, the truth is that in its beginnings, depending on the area of the Achaemenid era, the god Ahura Mazda shared veneration with others of great importance in the Persian pantheon such as Mithra and Anahita, deities responsible respectively for alliance and protection, and for fertility and water.

During this time the foundations of the ancient Zoroastrian religion are created and the greatest expansion that it experiences due to the continuous Iranian conquests that followed.

Little is known about Zoroaster’s beginnings, but it is believed that he was the son of a well-positioned family in Iranian society since his father was a respected priest. Because of this, Zoroaster would have his future within the priestly class. He considered that some of the religious practices of the Iranian people were wrong, such as animal sacrifice, and proposed reforming it.

At one point in his life he had a revelation from a divine entity and identified himself as the one sent by Ahura Mazda to preach the truth. Because of the reforms he sought to implement he was persecuted and even imprisoned by King Vishtaspa. However, through a miracle he was able to captivate this same king, who is considered to be the first official convert of this new religion. Throughout his life he proclaimed the *Mazda truth* until his death.

He took Ahura Mazda as the exclusive god in worship, facing another evil



deity from the Iranian pantheon, Angra Mainyu[1]. Thus, the Zoroastrian religion is characterized by being largely dualistic. The god Ahura Mazda symbolizes the sun and fire whose main objective was purification. So there is a fight between the forces of good against those of evil, a widespread dualism in different societies of the world through the constant light against darkness.

The temples intended for the performance of rituals and worship were open, that is, they were in the open air. These temples were named fire temples, due to the worship of the highest expression of Zoroastrianism: divine fire. And it should be kept on at all times. Both the temples, the fire and the rites were run by the magi. According to Michel W. Ford in his book titled *Drauga. Ahrimanian Yatuk Dinoih*:

“The Medes and their cultic practices spread into Babylon, Bactra, Syria and Cappadocia; the rituals of the Magi in Asia Minor earned them the title of ‘firekindlers’; rituals involve a great sacred fire with the Magi wearing a tiara which covers the mouth. The Magi hold bundles of rods and perform chants. The sacred fire temples of the Magi were guarded constantly by the priesthood, the fire of which they call ‘unquenchable’. The Magi would enter the shrine each day with the baresman2 and patidana and chant in front of the fire for an hour. When the Magus enters the chamber, he would put on his tiara, places wood on the fire and recites an incantation”[3.]

Zoroastrianism reached its peak during the Sassanid empire beginning in the 3rd century AD. and moment in which his sacred book, the Avesto, is finished, proclaiming himself as the official religion of the state. These scriptures contain everything preached by Zoroaster during his life, as well as the laws, rites and customs that emerged from the acceptance of belief. The original hymns were written in Avesto, an extinct language which they wanted to continue to maintain.

[1] Él es *Ahriman* en fuentes medievales en persa, *Areimanios, Ariman* en la literatura griega.
[2] Instrumento hecho con varillas de metal usado en los rituales zoroástricos por parte de los Magi.
[3] Michel W. Ford. (2014) *Drauga. Ahrimanian Yatuk Dinoih.* Createspace Independent Pub. ISBN: 9781500413064. – p. 260.



Some sources indicate that Zoroastrianism originated in the second millennium BC. C and took root in Central Asia:

Zoroastrianism is one of the world’s oldest known living religions and has its origins in the distant past. It developed about three and a half thousand years ago from the ancient Indo-Iranian religion that was once shared by the ancestors of nomadic herding tribes that later settled in Iran and northern India. Zoroastrianism thus shares a common heritage with the Vedic religion of Ancient India and Hinduism. It is thought to have taken root in Central Asia during the second millennium BCE, and from there spread south to Iran. In particular, the regions of Sistan and the Helmand basin play an important part in Zoroastrian imagery, suggesting that this area was a centre of Zoroastrianism from early on. Zoroastrianism became the foremost religion of the Achaemenid (550–330 BCE), Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE) and Sasanian (224–651 CE) empires, engaging with the religions of the Jews and with nascent Christianity and Islam[4].

In general, it is impossible to say exactly when the Avesto appeared. Zoroastrians associate it with prehistoric times, that is, periods with no historical basis or source. UNESCO seems to have fixed the date better than anyone else. Recently, in accordance with the decision of UNESCO, the 2700th anniversary of the Avesto was celebrated. The birthplace of the holy book, according to the famous Russian archaeologists and orientalists V.V. Bartold[5] and S.P. Tolstov[6], who studied ancient monuments from the middle of the first millennium BC to the middle of the last century and came to the conclusion that ancient Khorezm was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism. In fact, out of 63 Zoroastrian monuments found in various countries, including Iran, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, 38

[4] Hintze, A. (2019) *An introduction to Zoroastrianism*. https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/an-introduction-to-zoroastrianism

[5] W.Bartold. Khwarizm. Enz.d.Islasm II, p. 974.

[6] Arzhantseva I. (2015) The Khorezmian Expedition: Imperial Archaeology and Faustian Bargains in Soviet Central Asia, Public Archaeology, 14:1, 5-26, DOI: 10.1179/1465518715Z.00000000081

are in Uzbekistan and 17 of them are in Khorezm.

Tolstov writes:

> Of course, the problem of the origin of Zoroastrianism is still largely controversial, but for us, without a doubt, there is one position that is decisive for this work: Zoroastrianism is closely related to the soil of Central Asia, and the historical facts and ethnographical records drawn from this soil, can be interpreted in the light of Zoroastrian mythology and, in turn, shed light on many of its dark sides. (Tolstov, 287).

Uzbek scholars also note that Zoroastrianism, one of the largest ancient religions, was formed in Central Asia, especially in Khorezm. According to academician M. Khairullaev (1999), the “Avesto” began to appear in the kingdom of Khorezm, describing its basic rules in this place, which is confirmed by the toponymy of the holy book. “The history of statehood in Central Asia also goes back to the kingdom of Khorezm in BC. There is evidence that in the VIII-VII centuries BC. there were states like “Great Khorezm”, “Kingdom of Bactria”. The remains of various castles, large and small, scattered along the banks of the Amu Darya, various archaeological finds found in them testify to the ancient cities and the culture developed in them. The study of the history of our ancient culture is mainly associated with archaeological excavations. Written literature almost does not reach our times. We only know fragments from the Avesto, individual examples of Khorezmian and Sogdian inscriptions”[7].

Avesto is the sacred book for Zoroastrianism and is made up of a series of hymns, commentaries and minor texts. These different parts in turn complement each other. The most important part are the hymns of praise called Gathas, composed by Zoroaster and which were transmitted orally until they were collected

[7] Ma’naviyat yulduzlari. Mas’ul muharrir Xayrullayev M.M. – Toshkent: Abdulla Qodiriy nomidagi xalq merosi nashriyoti, 1999. – 408 b.



in written form. Through devotion to Mazda these songs are intended to lead the individual towards enlightenment, truth and wisdom.

The Zoroastrian worldview is tangible in these sacred texts. It is based on five principles:

1. Ahura Mazda is a supreme being.
2. Ahura Mazda is the absolute truth and owner of the good.
3. Angra Mainyu is absolute evil.
4. Good Deeds, Good Thoughts and Good Words are the basis of good.
5. Each individual has the free ability to choose between good and evil.

Zoroaster gave people free choice to do good or bad deeds, and according to their attitude they would be rewarded or sentenced in the afterlife.

The end of the heyday of this religion is consummated with the arrival and subsequent conquest of the Muslim people in the area of present-day Iran and Central Asia. Zoroastrianism was abolished and the temples dedicated to eternal fire and the Zoroastrian libraries were destroyed.

Currently, Zoroastrianism is a minority religion that is still practiced in some areas of the world. As is the case with the Parsees in North India. However, today there are different tangible exemplifications of Zoroastrian elements in different Central Asian societies, as we see below.

The religion of Zoroastrianism and the origin of the Gats, based on the texts of the Avesto, the promotion of different views, gave rise to different views on the place and time in which the religion originated. In the scientific literature of the 80s of the XX century in the formation of the “Avesto” appear western and eastern directions. Proponents of the western direction note that the Avesto originated in the Median regions and spread to the east, claiming that Zarathustra came from Atropoten (Azerbaijan) or Rag in Media. There is information about this in Beruni's “Monuments of the past”[8].

[8] Yuldashov I. (2021) The Role Of Zoroastrianism In The Formation Of The First Statehood. The American Journal of Social Science and Education Innovations (ISSN –2689-100x) Volume 03 Issue 03-42—73. Published: March 30,



According to Beruni, Zoroaster was from Azerbaijan. “The truth is that Zarathustra was from Azerbaijan”.[9]

In general, Khorezm is considered to be the place where the sacred fire of Zoroastrianism, Ozarkhurra, was first lit and the greatest god, Ahura-Mazda, was associated with Zoroastrianism. The Avesto, the main source of Zoroastrianism, says: “The first sacred fire – “Ozarhurra” was lit in “Airyanem Vaeja (Airyanam Dakhyunam in the Farvardin Yasht)” (in some sources – “Eran-vej”). According to scientists, the geographical and climatic description of “Airyanem-Vaeja” corresponds to that of Khorezm. The Avesto mentions a number of countries with “Blessing and Salvation” created by Ahura-Mazda, and the first of them is Airyanem-Vaeja, “the beauty of which nothing in the world can compare”, and then Sugd (Sogd), “abounding in people and herds of cattle”, “powerful and holy” Mouru (Marv), “land of high raised flags” Bakhdi (Bactria) are mentioned.

In the following photos taken by the authors of the article, you can see elements related to Zoroastrian religion in Uzbekistan:

1. ELEMENTOS DEL ZOROASTRISMO EN LOS RITOS DE LAS BODAS DE UZBEKISTAN (At Bukhara weddings, the bride and groom circle around the fire three times).

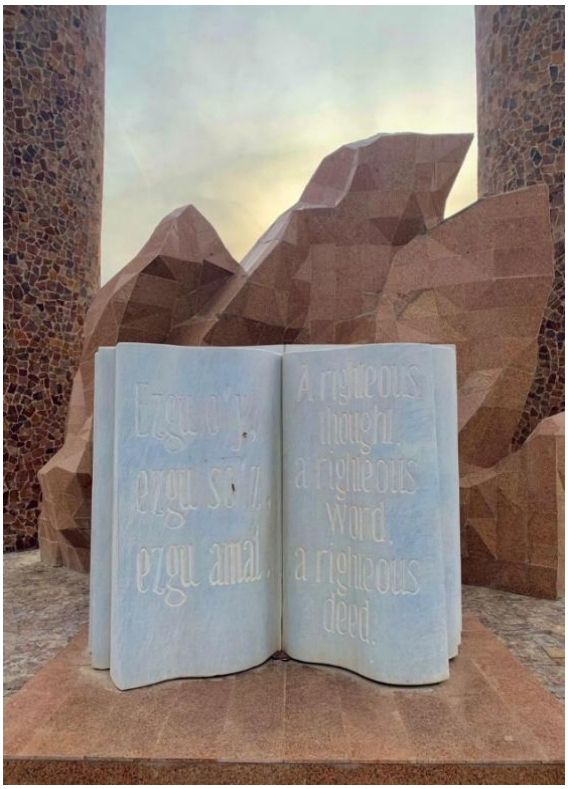
2021| P. 281-287. https://theamericanjournals.com/index.php/tajssei/article/view/800/749

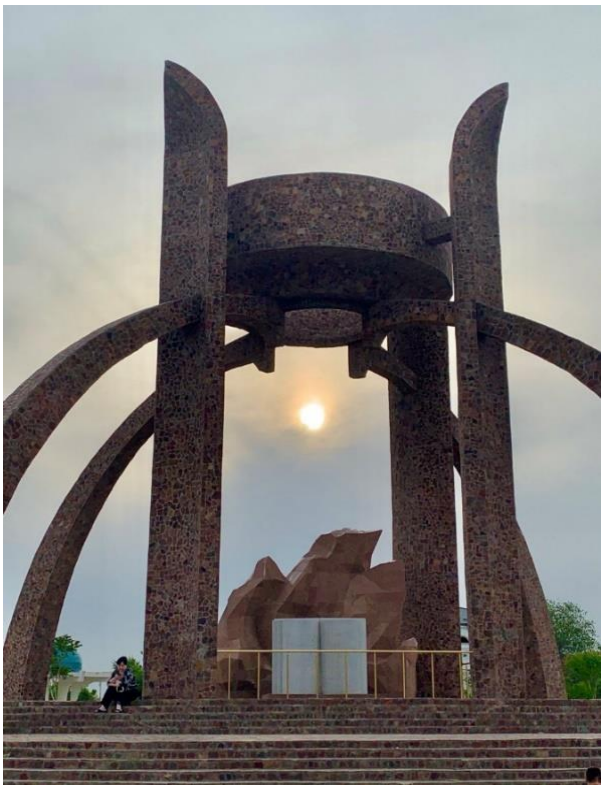
[9] Beruniy. Qadimgi xalqlardan qolgan yodgorliklar. Toshkent, 1968. – 486 b. (B. 238.)



2. MONUMENTO DEL AVESTO (URGENCH)

3-





MUSEO DEL AVESTO (URGENCH)



4- BATIQ (elements of Zoroastrian times on the walls of Muslim mosques of Bukhara and Khorezm)

