Ritual Process and Symbolic Transformation in Cultural Landscapes of Proto-Urban Bactria: Introduction and Reflections on the New Book by Nona Avanesova

Vladimir I. IONESOV*

Nona A. AVANESOVA: *Buston VI – The Necropolis of Fire-Worshippers of Pre-Urban Bactria* (2016, Samarkand: IICAS. 640 pages. Paperback. ISBN 978-9943-357-28-0)

Introduction

The focus of this discussion is a recent book on the Bronze Age Proto-Bactrian culture of Southern Uzbekistan. I dare say that there are some books that inspire us to study monuments, and there are some monuments that inspire us to write books. But there are some books that become scientific monuments themselves in documenting the archaeological artefacts in the form of texts, messages, and narratives. Among such academic works is the monograph *Buston VI – the Necropolis of Fire-worshippers of Pre-urban Bactria* (Samarkand: IICAS, 2016. – 634 pp. ISBN 978-9943-357-36-5), recently published by the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS). This book was written by Professor Nona Avanesova, of the Faculty of History at Samarkand State University (Uzbekistan). The Proto-Bactrian civilization is a key proto-state phenomenon in the ancient history of Central Asia, which existed at the transition between a 'primitive' society and the formation of the early state. This essay, based on the reviewed book, discusses some significant aspects in the study of social and ritual-symbolic practices that change the cultural landscapes of complex proto-urban societies. The book examines key issues related to the clarification of the historical and cultural developments of this period as they appear in the archaeological record. It is shown that the social complexity of proto-urban

* Vladimir I. IONESOV, Doctor of Culturology (Dr. Sc.), PhD (History), Director, International School for Advanced Research in Cultural Studies, Professor, Chair of Department of Theory and History of Culture, Samara State Institute of Culture, Samara, Russia.
Email address: ionesov@mail.ru

cultures is a phenomenon which owes its genesis to a number of multi-compound organizational processes. The Proto-Bactrian cultural world (the so-called Sapalli Culture), presented by archaeological Buston and Djarkutan objects with different ritual-symbolic artefacts of a necropolis, belongs to a trans-boundary zone which sees the interaction of agriculturalists and nomads. It gives reason to consider the Sapalli Culture as transitional both chronologically and spatially, and offers evidence for this type of multi-compound process.

The Proto-Bactrian Civilization as a Cultural Phenomenon in the Ancient History of Central Asia

Archaeological excavations at these early monuments of Southern Uzbekistan (Fig. 1) testify that in the middle and second half of the second millennium BC Sapalli Culture was the early urban agglomeration of Northern Bactria, which was the economic, political, ideological, trade and religious centre in this Central Asian region (Askarov 1977; Askarov and Abdullaev 1983; Ionesov 1990; Kohl 1984).

Figure 1: Map of Uzbekistan and the adjacent territories (Source: Avanesova 2016a, 8)

The author of the book is N. A. Avanesova, a well-known scientist-archaeologist, and skilled researcher of the Eurasian cultures of the Bronze Age. Avanesova began her extensive fieldwork at sites of proto-urban Bactria in spring 1985 in the Sherabad party of the Surkhandarya expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. The archaeological site examined in the book is the necropolis of Buston VI researched by the author from 1990 to 2008. For more than 30 years, Nona A. Avanesova has been the head of the Archaeological Museum-Laboratory at the Samarkand State University (Avanesova 1991; 1995; Avanesova and Dzhurakulova, 2008; Ionesov and Kasparov 2020).

For three decades, unique materials were collected, and fundamentally new ways of illuminating the historical roots of the peoples of Central Asia and the ethno-cultural contacts of the ancient settled agricultural and cattle-breeding inhabitants of the Eurasian continent were proposed. Avanesova has put forward a reasoned enough hypothesis that ritual sets of artefacts of the necropolis of Buston VI can be reconstructed as representing specific figurative graphic writing, based on the Rigveda. Avanesova discovered in the structure of the necropolis a series of specific structures (boxes) for the cremation of the deceased. She studied this material thoroughly. Currently, throughout the territory of the Eurasian continent, these buildings are the oldest known crematoria, dating from the end of the second millennium BC.

A specific characteristic of the Sapalli Culture can be seen in the widespread use of imitative rites in mortuary practice. The ritual funeral imitations include clay anthropoid figurines, models of altars, sacrificial grounds, grave constructions, burials of animals, and jar graves (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Archaeological manifestations of imitative ritual practices in the Sapalli Culture. a) anthropomorphic clay figurines; b) anthropomorphic figurines, miniature clay altar and clay vessels with spoon, cone-shaped objects; c) cylindrical vessel with roof-shaped lid and hand-made cups, with plan showing disposition in grave; d) miniature tools and weapons; e) burial with immolated sheep; f) cenotaph with wood or cloth figurine (dummy); g) jar burial; h) burial with disarticulated bones; i) plan of the Temple of Fire at Djarkutan. (Source: Ionesov 1999)

The Necropolis Buston VI and its Archaeological Attributes

More than 500 burial objects granting the scientist an exceptionally rich and distinctive set of archaeological artefacts were excavated and studied in detail during fourteen field seasons on an area of 6,176 square meters. Different samples of ritual and cult activities of one of the important centres of settled farmers of Northern Bactria of the late second millennium BC were reconstructed in the light of disclosed and documented materials. This area was a part of the Central Asian circle of cultures of the Ancient Oriental type in the active phase of transformation and

genesis of the early urban civilization (Askarov 1977; Avanesova, 1995; 2016a; 2016b).

The author has noted that this publication is aimed to put the most complete and comprehensive description of the archaeological source at her colleagues' disposal. Not only exhaustive graphic tables of every burial, but also the description of basic traits of burial rites are given. It is quite important that the monograph includes a vast database of quantitative and qualitative indices represented by the ritual groups and types of ritual objects and artefacts.

The author's great archaeological field experience, skilled laboratory processing, and professional intuition gave her the opportunity to obtain such extensive and thoroughly documented materials. The necropolis was excavated using a method of study appropriate to burial grounds, continuous excavation by hand. The research method of continuous polygonal analyses allowed the discovery of the material evidence of ritual acts without missing even the finest components, opening up the possibility of the comprehensive study of the planography and dynamics of the functioning of the necropolis.

The systematically organized planographic structure of the site is an uncommon feature compared with other burial grounds from the same time. The author has ascertained that the necropolis was not only a place for burial, but at the same time a ceremonial centre, or sanctuary, for cult ceremonies and rituals.

According to the sum of attributive material features, Avanesova classifies the site of Buston VI as a cult-burial complex of the temple type of Northern Bactria. From the chronological point of view, the Buston ceremonial centre is the earliest form of the open type of temple found in the late second millennium BC (Avanesova 2016a, 509–11). The evidence for this is the well-organized ritual spatial structure of the necropolis which served as a staging ground for the symbolic dramaturgy of religious-ritual cults and burial practice.

The author divides the archaeological complex of the necropolis into two groups of objects: those with a burial purpose, 211 in number (41.1%), and those without a burial purpose, 295 in number (58.3%). In addition, the burial-cult practices of the Buston population were rather differentiated, with various methods used to send the deceased into the next world. The site's importance as well as the detailed archaeological description of every group of burial grounds and the associated ritual constructions is carefully elaborated in the book.

Ritual Poly-Variance in Mortuary Practice of Buston VI

The structure of the ritual practices associated with the site includes: single corpse interment; the partial or total dissection of the dead (re-interment); burial grounds with post-funeral premeditated disturbances (desecrated graves); partial burial grounds (fractional graves); cremation; cenotaphs (graves without human remains or objects); burial grounds with “thanksgiving” or redemptive human sacrifices (parts of the corpse have been cut off). N. A. Avanesova attributes such a ritual poly-variance to the socially ranked and ethnically heterogeneous structure of the Buston society, which was favourable with regard to kickstarting the Bactrian cultural genesis.

The author’s note that the Buston system of rites is not a simple symbiosis of funeral traditions of the Sapalli Culture deserves attention. Avanesova has adduced proof that innovations in the cult practice of Buston VI (cremation, fractional burials, abundant sacrifice of animals and human beings, the stone structures of chambers and constructions above graves, the sacred graves, etc.) are evidence of inclusion of the Eurasian nomads into the sphere of cultural and ethnic contacts with farmers of the prehistorically Northern Bactria. In addition, the author deduced that the Buston phenomenon bears the distinct seal of syncretic originality and becomes the core generating new stereotypes embodied in the period of urban Bactria (Avanesova 2016a, 523–28).

Avanesova’s study of one the most representative sites of the late Bronze Age has brought about a revolutionary change in our ideas about the sources and content of the civilization of Bactria, and how it entered the cultural and historical heritage of the Central Asian peoples. I consider the outstanding results of the author’s archaeological research not only as a significant academic success, but also as the appropriate result of the long-term, indefatigable and purposeful work of an exacting scientist, noticing every little detail. One eloquent example of such attention to details is the following observations of the author: “... there are cases, when remains together with smouldering coals were put into the grave, where remains burnt out (tempering the soil) in the hole covered by the near-bottom part of a jar”; “evidently, every new act in the chamber started with the lightening a fire”; and “fireplaces above some burial grounds were a mark of a grave”. The so-called funeral feasts (89 cases) or grounds for the sacrificial food used during the ritual funeral feast, as fixed and documented by the author, should be noted in the same line of very precise observations by this exceptional scientist-archaeologist (*ibid.*, 13–23).

The author acknowledges that we proceed from the premise that every detail of sacral objects carries a definite symbolic meaning that was well known in the past.

Exactly this enthusiasm and attention to detail has allowed Avanesova to collect, step by step, the representative material pieces of evidence composing the material language of the site. No wonder that she managed to make every small, 'silent' and imperceptible artefact speak, and this move from local episodes to epochal events. However, the artefacts of Buston VI not only tell us the important data about themselves, but also raise some questions and encourage further research.

Indeed, the materials that are the focus of Avanesova's work raise issues with regard to the epochal transformation of culture, although, as the author acknowledges, such issues cannot always be resolved. It is noted in the book that a cultural innovation of the late second millennium BC in preurban Northern Bactria was the establishment of special sacral grounds with a non-burial purpose, where the ritual actions and liturgical ceremonies prescribed by tradition for interment and after took place. In this case, if actions at the time of burial took place in this location (burning the corpse in a box (type I), exhibiting the dead (type II) etc.), it is unclear why this sacral ground is categorized among those objects with a non-burial purpose? While it is clear that the ground is not a burial itself, it is an integral part of burial rite.

Ritual Imitation and Symbolic Burial Grounds

I once suggested that burial rites in general and the Sapalli Culture in particular are a multistage cycle of ritual actions (with a total of six stages identified), from the moment of death to the posthumous symbolic personification (funeral feasts and other commemorative acts). Undoubtedly, the given sacral constructions of Buston VI prove the presence of this burial cycle by the ritual transmission in the Sapalli Culture (Ionesov 1999).

Another issue is a separate group of objects in the necropolis, such as the so-called fictitious, symbolic burial grounds, cenotaphs and sacrificial burials of animals. The author defines these as "graves of not direct burial purpose" (Avanesova 2016a, 20–25). However, can objects called "graves and burial grounds" really not have a burial purpose? The term "symbolic graves" should be clarified. It seems that the use of "symbolic graves" as a contrast to the factual burial grounds may be admitted just at the level of the empirical classification of objects. In their ritual-semantic ranking the term "symbolic" is surplus relative and its meanings are obscured, because it puts forward a question: do other ritual burials lack symbolic content and can ritual practice be non-symbolic?

In Sapalli Culture cenotaphs and the related rituals are seen in the use of anthropomorphic clay figurines, models of altars, sacrifice areas, methods of

grave construction, burials of animals, and urn burials. The most distinctive of these features are the cenotaphs and the votive bronze replicas of tools and weapons.

A lengthy process of institutionalization of secular and sacred power preceded the spread of imitative ritual in the Sapalli Culture, and culminated in the establishment of the palace and temple complexes at Djarkutan. Its Temple of Fire seems to reflect the incorporation of the novel imitative ritual subsystem into traditional practice. Almost all of the varied evidence of imitation in burials (votive replicas, cenotaphs, sacrifices, etc.) is represented in the temple. Moreover, the temple itself was the embodiment of the imitative-ritual system, as the complex and multilevel world of religious symbols was clearly reflected in its architecture, plan, and contents.

It is obvious that the votive objects were magical things, and through them people tried to influence their immediate environment, and on being included in a ritual they began to play an active social role. However, explaining the value and symbolic nature of ritual actions and their imitative attributes, using the mortuary rites of the Sapalli Culture as an example, in no way solves this problem. It is just the beginning of a comprehensive, theoretical study of this topic.

Every ritual is a means of transmitting vital issues of society and social challenges. Ritual is a mode of regulating social relations, reflecting experiences of integration inside the cultural system. The formation of rituals and other symbolic actions is determined, first of all, by the formation of a new system of social-normative values in proto-state civilizations.

The various collections of mono-functional clay items are especially important for the interpretation of world-view concepts and ritual stylistics of the Buston population. The detailed descriptions and catalogued systematization of all artefacts found at Buston VI, such as sculptures (anthropomorphic), altars, pottery (vessel, dipper-scoop and spoon) and cone-shaped counter tokens are given in the book. They were discovered in this combination neither at a single Bronze Aged site of Central Asia, nor in the cultures of Ancient East and the Eurasian steppes.

Avanesova is able to use the materials to show that the clay items allowed users to enter the world of ritualized self-consciousness and thus had not only utilitarian, but also the sacral-symbolic properties. The basic detail of the semantic code of the clay items is sculptures distinguished in size (from 14 to 25cm) and individual style of workmanship. Importantly, all of these items are the artistic personification of a human image. But it was ascertained that sex was not always

accentuated, and the anthropomorphic images had a ritual regulating function¹, not a sacral-iconographical characteristic.

Material Text in Mythic-Religious System

Following Avanesova, it is impossible not to admit that “it is the early material text that aimed to ‘explain’ in the language of symbols the mythological and worldview concepts of the population of pre-urban Bactria, which analysis indicates has some striking coincidences with the mythic-religious systems of the Indo-Iranians”. The well-grounded analysis of the entire totality of artefacts of interment with votive attributes has allowed the author to deduce that “the language of symbols of clay items corresponds to the figurative graphic writing of the ritual type (mythological iconography of ritual ‘text’)”. The inhabitants of Buston VI manipulated the simplest materials objects and created very complicated mythological compositions in the language of symbols (Avanesova 2016a, 20–27).

The complex of factors characterizing the special features of the cultural-economical type of the Sapalli population and the historical condition in the Proto-Bactrian society in the late second millennium BC assumes the existence of the preconditions needed for the origin and spread of a new ideology. On this point Avanesova proposes that the main stimulus for transformation was the penetration of some groups of a cattle-breeding population (the tribes of the Andronovo, Srubny, Tazabagyab and Beshkent cultures) into the ancient Bactrian region (*ibid.*, 26–28). The artefacts of other cultures also indicate the presence of a diversity of the steppe traditions in the culture of the Buston population. The analysis of the whole collection of ceramics of the steppe type of Sapalli Culture is evidence that penetration of the cattle-breeding tribes into Bactria began in the pre-Andronov period (the Petrov period) from the territory of the Southern Urals area, and then notably intensified in the Fedorov period (*ibid.*, 30–35).

The influence of such tribes significantly transformed the cultural values of the population and the entire orientation of Sapalli Culture. For example, a new level of technical support (the chariot) gave the possibility for a real leap in the sphere of communication and travel. The mobility of cattle-breeders definitely

1 Regarding this fundamental function of ritual regulation, we can observe certain ideational connections between the semi-nomadic and semi-agrarian cultures of Central and Eastern Asia; see for instance Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 5. It would certainly be worthwhile to explore this connection in greater detail, for such a research could doubtless offer us some new insights into the essential links among art, symbolism, religion, rituality and cosmology in early Euro-Asian cultures. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out the lack of thorough research on these important questions (e.g. Zhao 2019, 17).

promoted the activization of migration processes and widened the circle of economic and cultural links. The issue of the interrelations of the ancient farmers with the steppe communities is, according to Avanesova, the issue of not only the interaction of two alien worlds, but also the issue of the cultural genesis of the civilization of Bactria, which was formed on the multi-component basis. In connection with this, several factors leading to the main cultural shifts are singled out: 1) direct interaction of tribes with their synchronous settling; 2) advancement of a separate group from the west and north to the south conditioned by the special features of the raw materials and resources in the different areas; 3) occupation of the land is also possible as a result of aridization of the climate (Avanesova 2016a, 540–45).

We should support the Avanesova's claim that the steppe factor can explain the differentiated approach to burial-ritual practices and the spread of new forms of rites. However, the claim that the diversity of ritual practices is not linked to the inner tendencies of development of the Sapalli society seems to be quite radical. All the more so because the author admits that at the final stage of the historical development of the pre-urban Bactria the penetration of the steppe population reflects a deep inner crisis taking place in the farming oases, and connected to a worsening demographic and economic situation (*ibid.*, 520–26).

Social Transformation and Syndrome of Recurrence in Cultural Process

In addition, the build-up of recurrent practices expressing the reproduction of artefacts of an earlier culture by a later culture clearly took place in the Sapalli Culture (Ionesov 2015). This can be seen in the revival of early local Sapalli traditions in ritual and items (Avanesova 2016a, 527), the presence of a separate group of pottery with the genetic underlying cause of early samples of the Sapalli Culture, and cases of the direction of graves running from north to south becoming more frequent, which might be attributed as phenomenon of neo-archaic model. It is noteworthy that we have previously revealed the analogue processes in materials (excavations of 1984–1992) of the Djarkutan group of burial objects (Ionesov 1990; 1999; Ionesov and Pavlenko, 2002). Such evidence allows us to interpret the revival of archaic traditions in the cult-ritual practice and the material culture as clear evidence of a Sapalli-Djarkutan renaissance. It is thus impossible not to agree with the author that at the final stage the peculiar pivot of further historical development was the steppe cultural genesis and revival of the local early Sapalli traditions in ritual and items (*ibid.*, 521–27).

The question of the phenomenon of the recurrence of archaic traditions in the so-called Buston period occupies an extremely important place in our understanding of the sociocultural processes taking place at the final stage of development of Sapalli Culture, and the issue that I raised in my earlier articles. The phenomenon of rebirth fits into the logical series of fundamentally important transformations of the Proto-Bactrian society, and I consider it one of the key mechanisms of the cultural adaptation of society in the borderline situation of a radical transition to a new sociocultural style. The revival syndrome is widely represented in many crisis / transition societies. A similar situation was expressively reflected in the burial complexes of the Buston time, and at the same time in various aspects of the funeral rite—in the types of burial, in ceramics, in bronze and stone products. After a several centuries' long break the Sapalli traditions of jar and pair burials reappear. For example, vases on tall thin stems, kettles with pipe-like spouts, vessels with wide bases, pot-like *khumchi* without necks, bronze miniature decanters-*surmadons*, amulets with zoomorphic and plant patterns, etc.

It seems to me that it should be considered that the phenomenon of “recurrence” of archaic traditions at the Buston stage were the last attempt, through the intensive reanimation of old tribal cults, to stop the slide of the culture into the crucible of irreversible historical transformations. This is certainly a significant and indeed fundamental issue, and without it one cannot understand the logic of the cultural genesis and transformation of Proto-Bactrian civilization.

Conclusion

The unique materials of the archaeological excavations of the Buston VI necropolis given in N.A. Avanesova's monograph document the formation of a new period of Sapalli Culture at the final stage of its transformation. The co-existence of different ceramic traditions, the artistic poly-stylistics in the design of the metal and stone items, the multicomponent features of ritual practice reflect a complicated cultural and genetic process in the Sapalli Culture. There is a clear demonstration of a wide spectrum of growing cultural links with the population of the steppe world, and it raises the possibility of new approaches to historical modelling.

It is also obvious that the cultural situation fixed in the object articulations of the studied site corresponds to the situation formed on the whole territory of the pre-urban centres of Central Asia. At the same time, the process of cultural synthesis caused kindred, but qualitatively different cultures, i.e. the cultural levelling and transformation led to the formation of a new community and ideology based on fire-solar symbolism.

A thorough analysis of vast amounts of factual material enabled Avanesova to come to the conclusion “that we are at the stage of a qualitative leap in the elaboration of issues on the Indo-Aryans”, with the author adding that it may be necessary to “consider the definite part of the Buston population as the Indo-Aryans” (Avanesova 2016a, 38–40).

Avanesova notes that the historical-cultural content of the cult and ritual practices, issues on modelling, interpretations of the burial rites and cultural genesis of the Sapalli society in the late second millennium BC will be generalized and discussed in a second book. However, it is already clear that her voluminous monograph is a valuable and thoroughly documented resource of unique archaeological sources. Professor Avanesova has managed to widen the sign field of the object world of the Sapalli Culture, to show its symbolic order and possibilities of transformation, and to encourage researchers to further historical and culturological reconstructions. Thereby, the publication of the total collection of material artefacts of Buston VI is, without doubt, important not only for archaeologists of the Central Asian region, but also for the those around the world dealing with the elaboration of concepts and models of development for the first civilizations.

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