

A model of chartak from Parhar (question of its origin)

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In 2008, in the course of archaeological prospecting in Parhar region of Tajikistan¹ we discovered stone bases of different sizes, pilasters manufactured of limestone in Greek-Bactrian architectural style (fig. 1), as well as a stone mock-up of chartak (fig. 2). All architectural details are pertaining to an edifice that once rose above a lofty terrace. In the 1970s, following the development of cultivation area, remains of the building were остатки здания были leveled by a bulldozer, stone columns and other architectural constructions were thrown off a hill slope, later on a site under cemetery. A stone column was later unearthed here – a model of chartak of Zoroastrian temple (fig. 3). In all probability, a Zoroastrian temple of fire must have towered above an underlying village – chartak with its model attached to the temple.

The find is unique and the only of its kind. The column is manufactured of unbroken limestone; consists of two parts: a foundation and a building with a dome of sub-square form: cross section, 21,5 x 21,5 cm, 23 cm in height. The foundation stood in a groove, possibly stone, 23 cm in depth. The model depicts a square in plan chartak with arrow-shaped angular towers, 20 x 20 cm. Total height of the mock-up is 68 cm, height of the dome - 17 cm, width of drum - 5 cm, height of under dome gallery - 7,5 cm, height of chartak without gallery - 22 cm.



Fig.1. Stone base and stone pilaster (author's photo).

Drum is decorated on one side with vegetable ornament of fir-tree type, perhaps, a leaf of haoma; on other side – with net-shape ornament; lack of ornament on third and fourth sides. Entrances and windows are designed with arches; peshtak is in front of entrance. Depth of the cut for arches is 0,7 cm. Windows and arches are gilded to single out cult significance of the model.



Fig.2. A model of chartak (author's photo).

To judge by architectural elements, a column of chartak building goes back to the 1-2 centuries A.D., i.e, Kushan period. As viewed by L.I. Rempel, models of two kinds were used in the Central Asia: cult and architectural proper, and both affected the applied art.²

Following the adoption of Islam, fire temples were destroyed; this notwithstanding, fire had still been worshipped in one form or another, though its Zoroastrian substance, perhaps, forgotten.

Altar niches of fire turned into praying niches – mihrabs; temples of fire - into mosques. New mosques and mausoleums were built to comply with chartak design;

chartak model was put above graves of Moslem religious figures; they were called Chiragkhona – lamp depository. A lamp above burial grounds goes back to the Zoroastrian tradition. As viewed by L.I. Rempel, with the lapse of time, functions of “fire temples” were devolved on ceramics that imitated architectural forms. These were portal-domical structures and practically identical to a building model³ (fig. 4.1).

As for chartak genesis, Herodotus noted that “to erect statues, temples and altars (to gods) is not a rule for Persians. Those involved are reputed to be fools, for they, in my view, do not consider gods to be humanoids, as do Hellenes. Thus, sacrifices to Zeus (Ahura Mazda) are offered up on top

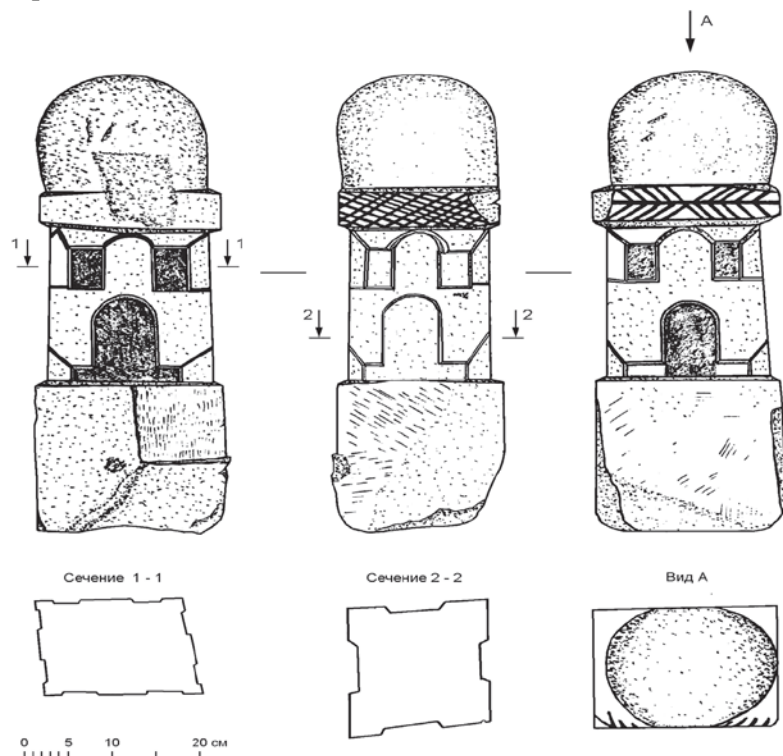


Fig.3. A model of chartak (by archaeologist T. Hudjageldiyev).

of the mountain, and the entire vault of heaven is called Zeus. They also immolate to sun, moon, fire, water and winds”⁴. As is known, stone altars are installed on top of the mountain in Pasargad, homeland of Ahemenide kings.

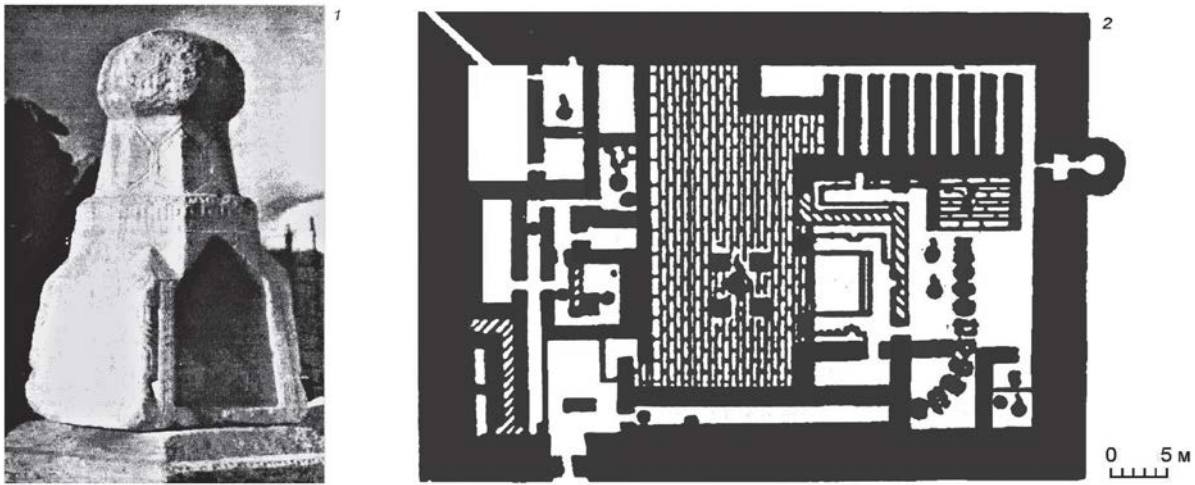


Fig.4: 1- Chiraghkhona. Bukhara. 16 century (after Rempel); 2- temple of fire. Jarkutan (after Askarov).

R.M.Girschman writes that “Cyrus built a stone tower, 14 m high and 7 m high, with a small room on the top where sacred fire was kept and a majestic staircase led to. A similar tower was built by Darius in Nakshi-Rustam, religious center of Persepolis, and also built a sacred terrace out of enormous drafted stones on halfway between them called Tahti-Rustam where stone altars stood”⁵ (fig. 5). Note that altars stood in the open air. R.M.Girschman further notes that “a 4-column temple of fire sprang up in the Parthian period and appreciably developed in the Sasanid period. Sasanides called themselves descendants of Ahemenides, and Ardashir I, in accordance with Ahemenide traditions, built a sacred terrace in his town with four stone staircases. There was a ground with an altar on the terrace rising between four monumental piers of veneered pulleys to for a basis of dome. The tradition is reflective of centuries-long innovations that shaped a plan of temple with four columns. The building looked open to the winds and thus revived the ancient Iranian ritual. It is none other than “an ancestor”



Fig.5. Fire altar. Pasargard, 6 century.²⁷⁴

of “Chakhartak”, “a canopy” with a dome on four columns to expose a sacred fire. Note that believers gathered in the open air around this erection, so typical for religious structures of Sasanides,⁶ i.e. chartaks.

Obviously R.M. Girschman associates emergence of chartak with Sasanides, i.e. 3-4 centuries A.D. However, later 1970s Uzbek archaeologists explored in the east of Termez, Sherabad region a town of the 17-12 centuries B.C. where they discovered remains of a monumental cult fire temple. A rectangular temple, dimensions 60 x 44,5 m, encircled with strong defensive walls, 4,5 m thick. Functionally, the temple complex is divided into two parts: cult and economic (Fig. 5.2).

The cult part of the temple occupied a considerable part of the complex, dimensions 35x35 m; its architectural-design structure included an entrance corridor, 25 m long, a courtyard of the sanctuary with sacrificial room and a sacred well under ayvan, a sacral platform with a main altar under chartak; a depository of sacred ashes of pronaos type with two side rooms and a treasure-house for temple relics and offerings.⁷

Chartak rises above a brick platform, 2,5 m high. It was built to comply with rules and canons of Zoroastrianism; its fire altar is under a canopy, possibly, wooden, and open to the winds. Chartak of Jarkutan is the oldest ever temple in the history of Zoroastrianism. A temple of fire in Jarkutan disproves Herodotus' opinion that Persians- Iranians knew nothing and did not build temples for gods. Fire temples in Jarkutan, Gonur, Dashly-3 and Togolok-21 are illustrative that eastern Aryans-Iranians worshipped god of fire in the II Millennium B.C. and had temples-chartaks with monumental architecture and fire altars of Samangan type in the open air.



Fig.6. Altar in Samangan (author's photo).

In 3 km from the regional centre Aybak, Samangan there is a circular stone foundation was cut on top of a limestone rock, 10 m high, diameter 22 m in the upper part from the north to the south; 21 m from the west to the east; 25 m in the lower part. In the middle of this circular foundation-socle there is an altar, dimensions 6,4x6,46 m and 2,4 m high. The altar is two-step; walls of the lower part are designed in the form of colonnadetype building. Second step,

dimensions in the foundation are 2,18 x 2,15 m and 60 cm high, makes up an otashdon (fig.6) with a hollow in the middle, 65 cm in diameter and 50 cm in depth. A fire was kindled here for religious rites. In the eastern part of the southern wall of altar there is a chamber, dimensions 2,25 x 2,35 m and a height 2 m. Length of corridor-shaped passage is 2,15 m; width of doorway is 80 cm. The chamber has a dome-shaped ceiling (fig. 7.1, 2).

It should be noted that an identical chamber is located in the stone altar in the open air, 1,5 km from Pasargard. Researcher Farruh Saidi believes that the chamber was dug to lessen the weight of altar. In

all probability, the chamber of Pasargard altar has the same designation as the Samangan one, i.e. ministers of altar stored firewood in the chamber.

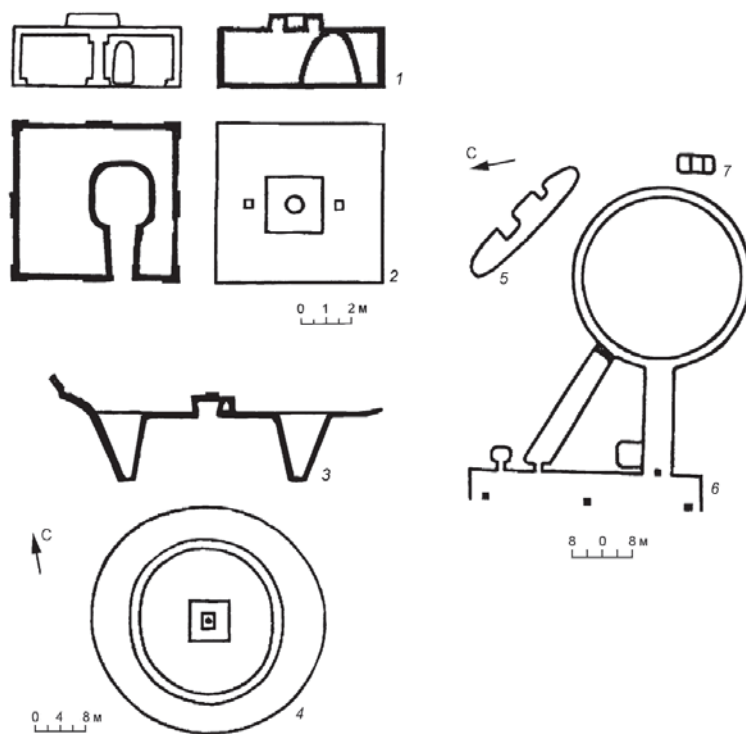


Fig.7. Fire altar in Samangan: 1-2 – plan and section; 3-4 –general plan; 5-7 – cave places to the north from the altar; 6–plan of ayvan and altar-related premises, a corridor around the foundation.

In front of the temple, along the north-western slope there is an ayvan in a rock, 4m wide and 32 m long, that had a wooden ceiling with wooden columns along the open terrace. There are remains of hollows from wooden columns. From this ayvan, passages led to three rooms. One of them, dimensions 4x3,5 m and 2,1m high, is located in the north-eastern part of ayvan. Width of doorway is 1 m; height 1,5 m. The second room is located 19 m from the eastern wall of ayvan, dimensions 16x3 m, height 1,9 m. Ceiling is flat, width of entrance is 1 m, height 1,7 m. The southern wall is destroyed; as a result, an entrance arose from altar's bypass corridor (fig. 7.6).

Besides, six rooms were cut in the north-eastern rock, of which contours remained so far. A room cut inside a rock, 4,8 m long, 2,2 m wide and 1,9 m high remained in the south-eastern part. The room has two exits with a stone wall, 1,5 m wide.

In the western part, there is a water reservoir inside a rock, 6,5 m long, 4 m wide and 3 m deep. Leading to the reservoir are two grooves along rock's slope for water collection. Above the reservoir there was a roof with two square holes of identical dimensions (88x73 cm), from water was taken⁹.

The Avestan literature refers to the installation of fire on altar in Asnavand and Revand mountains that can scarcely be localized. Perhaps, they were located in Bactria. In other words, Bundahishna points to

Note that the Pasargard altar is dated to the Achaemenide period.⁸ Around the Samangan altar there is a corridor, 15 m deep, 7-4 m wide in the upper part, 1,65 m in the lower part. An entrance of the corridor (3,5 m wide, 2 m high) leads to a room, 18 m long, 4,4 m wide, above 2 m high, located in the north-western part of the altar. To all appearances, the entrance was initially archshaped, 1 m wide; then another cave room was cut in the north-western part of the premises, dimensions 3,2 x 4,2m; to illuminate, the entrance was widened up to 3,5 m.

the establishment of fire temple and altar in the open air (Samangan type). It should be noted that ancient Indo-Europeans imagined the structure (i.e. Earth and Heaven) in the form of circle and square with common centre. The Samangan altar in question is consistent with this scheme: circle is column; square is its altar.

Rig-Veda's hymn-sura devoted to Sun-god says that it props up Heaven and is called Column of Heaven (Rv. IV, 13, 5). Thus, on the one hand, Sun is symbolized by Column of Heaven; on the other, circle is a symbol of Sun, Heaven and Eternity; hence, circular temples, sepulchers, burial mounds, etc. It may be assumed that the Samangan temple-fire altar was a Zoroastrian cult erection. This is in line with Herodotus' view that ancient Aryans who came to Persia were unaware of temples; but instead erected altars on eminences, and lit ritual fire when appropriate.

The Samangan fire altar is a category of altars when ritual fire was lit on religious occasions, especially Novruz. By the way, local residents claimed that they celebrated Novruz around this monument. To all appearances, the observance of Novruz around this altar goes back to ancient times. In considering that Zoroastrianism is based on astral cults, especially the cult of Sun, all ancient ground-based erections of Aryans were noted for circular planning: Arkaim sites of the 17-15 centuries B.C. and their burial mounds,¹⁰ Dashly site-3 and particularly temples in Northern Bactria,¹¹ Sak barrows-dahma in Priaralye, including a famous temple Koykrylkankal in Khorezm.¹² A foundation of the Samangan fire altar, i.e. its socle is also of round planning.

Under the Avestan tradition, Zoroaster got the divine revelation at the age of 30 while at the confluence of four rivers – tributaries of Daytie in Arian Veydj and met with god Ahuramazda for 10 years. In all probability, a word "samangan" may be a modified "sablon"; or, instead, a word "sablon" is a variant of "samangan. Perhaps, prophet came here, Samangan mountains, and within 10 years stayed at these cave rooms Tahti-Rustam, while his admirers cut this stupashaped socle with altar and created other rooms of cave type. The architecture of cave space of Tahti-Rustam is very archaic, rooms have uneven walls, floor and ceiling reminiscent of natural caves. All these suggest that Tahti-Rustam erections go back to the ancient times and are the first cult Zoroastrian monument of the epoch that Zoroaster lived, i.e. the II millennium B.C.¹³

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