

K. JETTMAR (FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY)

FORTIFIED "CEREMONIAL CENTRES" OF THE INDO-IRANIANS

The scholar who proposes the interpretation of an archeological monument differing from a previous interpretation given by the excavator himself, is certainly in a weak and delicate position—especially if his suggestions are only based on written reports. On the other hand, it may be that the excavator does not see the wood for the trees. Perhaps he is not aware of all chances of explanation offered by the brand-new material.

In this case we should offer him an unexpected model quickly enough not only to influence the future written publication but even the course of digging on the spot. If an archeological team has only a limited staff of well-trained collaborators and a fixed timing, then the attention will focus on certain subjects, and these would not necessarily be the right ones. For instance, in sites on the Iranian Plateau or nearby, fire-places are always excavated with special care, because Iranians are known to have worshipped the fire. But other constructions could be even more worthy of attention.

Deliberations like this brought me to the rather audacious attempt to deal with the most fascinating discoveries in the archeology of Central Asia, namely, the monumental buildings excavated in North-Western Afghanistan by the members of the Soviet-Afghan Expedition during the last years. I shall concentrate on the so-called temple town explored by Sarianidi at Dashly 3, in an oasis to the northwest of Balkh [27, pp. 49-71; 28, pp. 21-86; 29, pp. 203-224; 23, pp. 154-177].

The central area of this temple was already excavated several years ago and the results have been published repeatedly. So I need not give a description once more. It is a round rampart with nine towers sheltering some rather irregular buildings. Inside the rampart samples were taken to be tested by radiocarbon and gave the date 1110 ± 70 B. C. [29, pp. 203], so we have to deal with the crucial period when Iranian tribes expanded over large areas of Central Asia. The site is in Western Bactria; to the east we find the so-called Vakhsh or Bishkent culture, certainly indicating the presence of Iranian or even Aryan settlers [24, p. 111 ff.; 25].

The "temple" is surrounded by houses explained by Sarianidi as having been secular buildings. The ground plan shows no regularity except that the axes are directed toward the centre of the "temple". Otherwise they look like farm premises, individually built side by side without any strict regulation [29, pp. 203-224, fig. 1]. Two walls encircle the central "temple" in the form of two not quite regular rings of different diameter, dividing the "manors" into three zones (Fig. 1).

The whole complex is enclosed in much higher walls forming a square protected by a ditch. Sarianidi calls this square "gigantic", adding that the sides are between 130 and 150 m. long. Evidently, the excavation has not yet proceeded far enough to give an exact statement, but the design can be clearly recognised on the surface, so Y. M. Paromova could try to present a reconstruction [29, pp. 203-224, fig. 3] (Fig. 2).

Thus, we see a square town, as yet without any indication of the existence of gates. In the centre we see the towering so-called temple. In the ring walls only small gates are visible. The whole area is sprinkled with compounds,

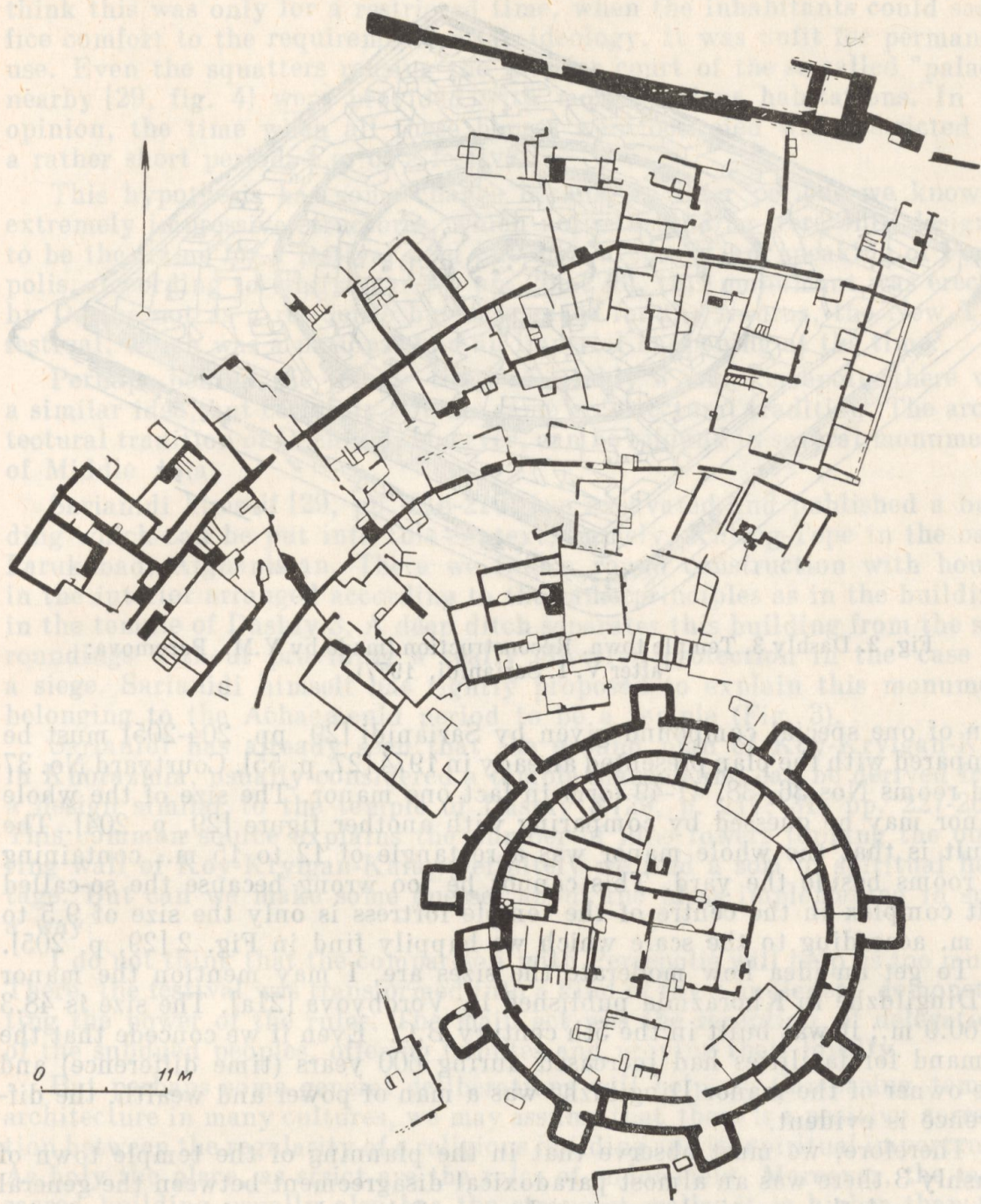


Fig. 1. Dashly 3. Temple town. Plan of excavated part (after V. I. Sarianidi, 1977)

thoroughfares do not seem to exist. Sarianidi believes that the extent of the surface reserved for the secular buildings is large enough to assume that the inner circle was settled by the priests and their families. In the outer districts the ordinary people had their homes. As we see even in modern Indian temples, economic activity will be attracted, including trade and handicrafts. As for the "temple" in the centre, Sarianidi is looking for prototypes well known in the Near East. In his report of 1977, he is not so much concerned with the functional analysis, but he is showing more and more parallels.

Here we should stop and make some critical notes on the plan. First, the reader, deeply impressed by the results of the excavation and by the fascinating reconstruction, will almost forget how small the "compounds" inside the square walls really are. Even the towering temple fortress in the centre has only a diameter of 40 m., including the protruding towers. The descrip-

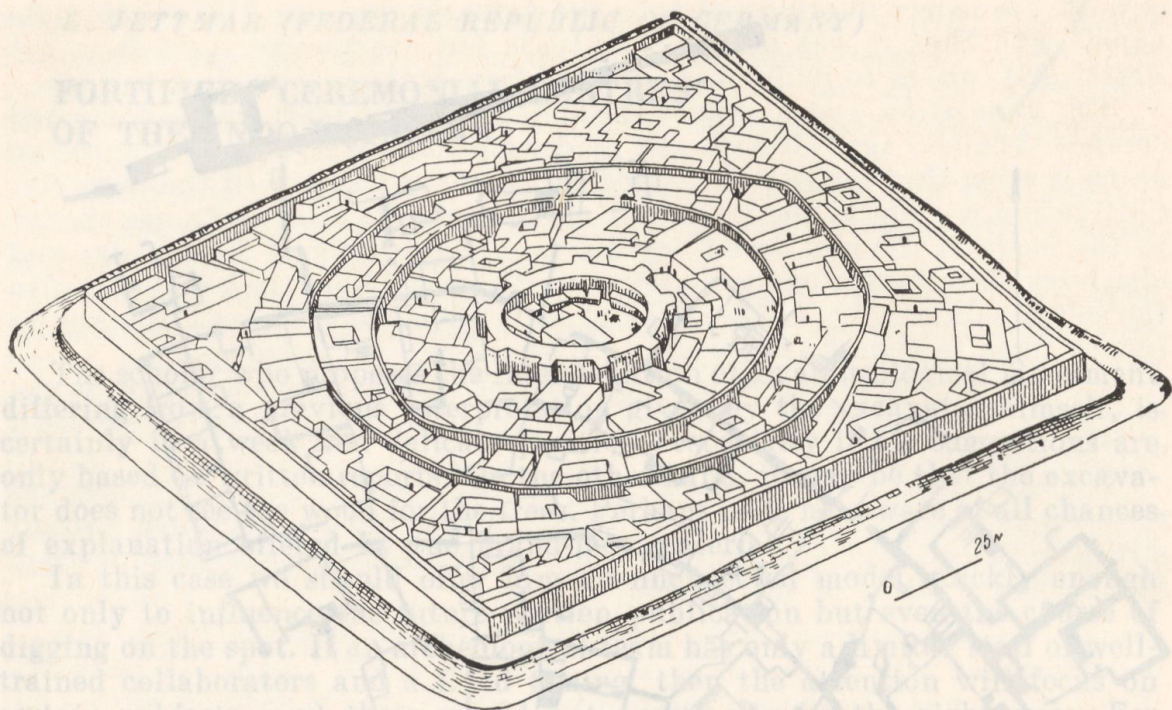


Fig. 2. Dashly 3. Temple town. Reconstruction (made by Y.M. Paromova; after V. I. Sarianidi, 1977)

tion of one special compound given by Sarianidi [29, pp. 204-205] must be compared with the plan presented already in 1974 [27, p. 55]. Courtyard No. 37 and rooms Nos 36, 38, 41-49 form in fact one manor. The size of the whole manor may be guessed by comparing with another figure [29, p. 204]. The result is that the whole manor was a rectangle of 12 to 15 m., containing 11 rooms beside the yard. This cannot be too wrong because the so-called cult complex in the centre of the temple fortress is only the size of 9.5 to 13 m. according to the scale which we happily find in Fig. 2 [29, p. 205].

To get an idea how moderate the sizes are, I may mention the manor of Dingildzhe in Khorazmia published by Vorobyova [21a]. The size is 48.3 to 60.9 m.; it was built in the 5th century B.C. Even if we concede that the demand for facilities had increased during 600 years (time difference) and the owner of the manor Dingildzhe was a man of power and wealth, the difference is evident.

Therefore, we must observe that in the planning of the temple town of Dashly 3 there was an almost paradoxical disagreement between the general design and the practical accomplishment. Other observations are pointing into the same direction. The circular walls had no value of defence. On both sides the houses lean on them directly, as can be clearly seen in the reconstruction. Mr. Fussman privately informed me that they were rather thin, too.

In the Hindu Kush I visited villages of definitely prehistoric appearance. The houses are concentrated in a very narrow space; they have continuous passages leading to the gates. Without any thoroughfares it would be difficult to provide the households with water and firewood, not to speak of hygienic matters [9, pp. 85-87]. On the other hand, I have also seen ruins which were only a multitude of very small rooms—but they lay on the top of steep rocks intended to serve as refuges in time of raids by superior enemies.

To speak frankly, I believe that the planning of the temple town only makes sense if we suppose it to be a diminutive rendering of a larger prototype, a sort of "model town".

I do not want to maintain that it was impossible to live there. Sarianidi [29, p. 25] has found store-vessels and fire-places for cooking. But I

think this was only for a restricted time, when the inhabitants could sacrifice comfort to the requirements of an ideology. It was unfit for permanent use. Even the squatters reusing the interior court of the so-called "palace" nearby [29, fig. 4] were provided with more spacious habitations. In my opinion, the time when all these houses were occupied was restricted to a rather short period, e.g. of a festival.

This hypothesis has some chance because in later periods we know of extremely impressive structures, which notwithstanding were only designed to be the frame for a festival held but once a year. I am speaking of Persepolis. According to Ghirshman [6, pp. 265-278], this monument was erected by Darius not as a residence but as a place for the Nauroz, the New Year festival, which was a national and an imperial happening at the time.

Perhaps behind the temple town of Dashly 3 and Persepolis there was a similar idea, but certainly not the same architectural tradition. The architectural tradition of Dashly 3, however, can be refound in several monuments of Middle Asia.

Sarianidi himself [29, pp. 216-219] has excavated and published a building which can be put into this context, namely, Kutlug-Tepe in the oasis Farukabad, Afghanistan. There we find a round construction with houses in the interior arranged according to the same principles as in the buildings in the temple of Dashly 3. A deep ditch separates this building from the surroundings without providing a really effective protection in the case of a siege. Sarianidi himself has rightly proposed to explain this monument belonging to the Achaemenid period to be a temple (Fig. 3).

Sarianidi has already seen that the ground plan of Koy-Krylgan-Kala in Khorazmia, usually considered a temple-mausoleum, can be derived from a design similar to the temple of Dashly 3 [29, p. 217; 31, pp. 227-264]. This common source explains the number of nine towers topping the outer ring wall of Koy-Krylgan-Kala. Definitely we find a sort of spiritual heritage. But can we make some guesses about the ideas implemented in such a way?

I do not think that the comparison with Persepolis will help us too much. There, the festival was transformed into a kind of royal audience, demonstrating the power of the ruler. The main act was the reception of delegations of the subdued peoples, offering tributes and proving their loyalty.

But perhaps some general deliberations will help us. Comparing temple architecture in many cultures, we may assume that there is a positive correlation between the regularity of a religious building and its spiritual importance. As holy the place, as strict are the rules of endowment. Moreover, the most sacred building usually also has the strongest walls; it is higher than the surrounding secular houses. With these rather simple rules in mind, we must confess that the central temple of Dashly 3 is a rather puzzling exception. The religious buildings in the centre of the complex are more irregular than the surrounding fortified enclosure. They have relatively thin walls, so even Sarianidi himself concluded that they must have been lower than the enclosure, which can be seen in the reconstruction. This can only mean that they were, if not in reality, so in the mind of the designer, a later addition. They did not express the main idea.

But what was this main idea?

I think that the idea could not be expressed by houses, nor by a statue, nor by the fire-altars, which perhaps existed in the buildings, but certainly were not posted at an overwhelmingly important place. The main idea was expressed by the gathering of the community itself, performing their rituals inside the enclosure in an atmosphere of sanctity. They were separated from the outer world by symbolic fortifications.

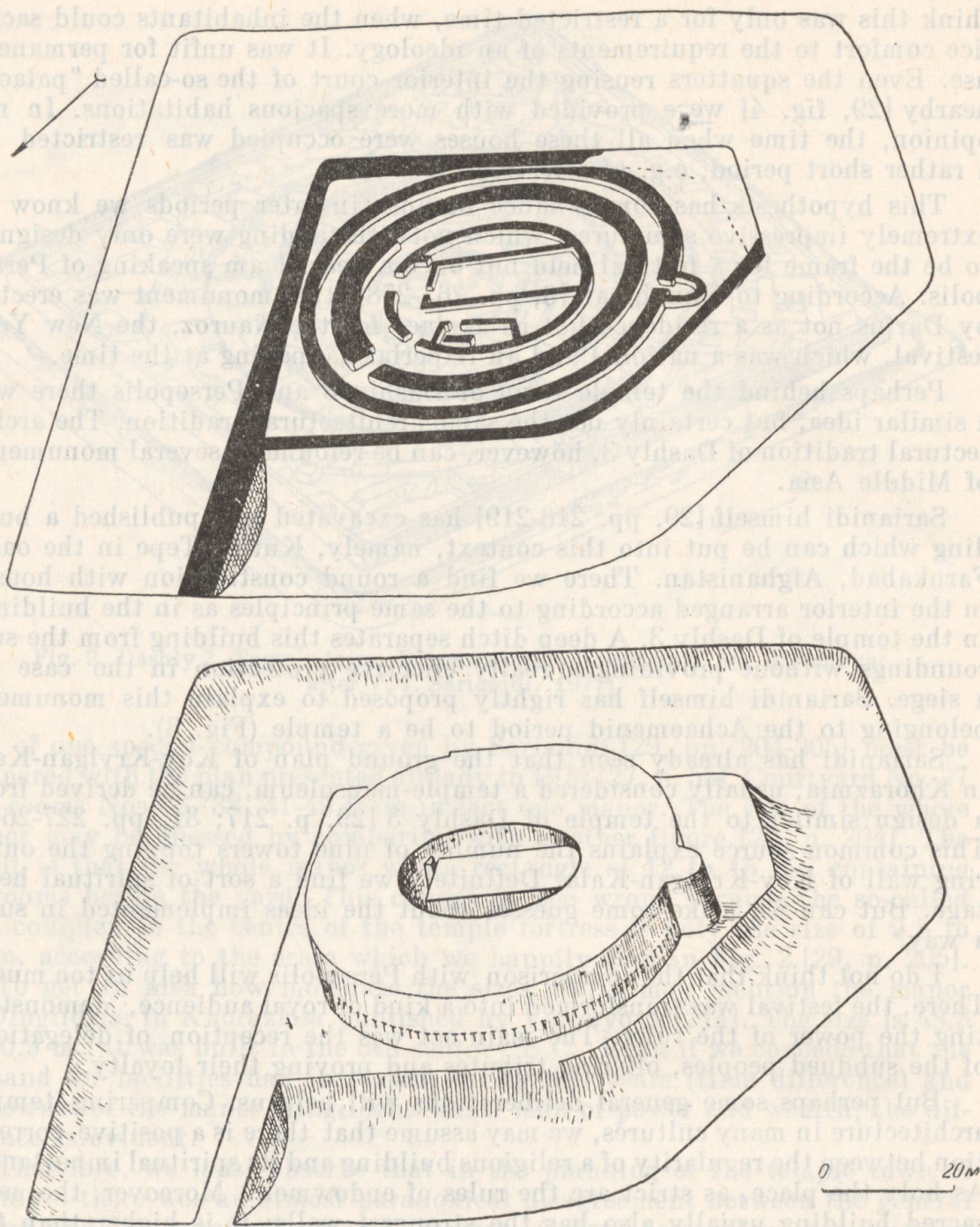


Fig. 3. Kutlug Tepe

1 — axonometrical model; 2 — reconstruction (made by Y. M. Paromova; after V.I. Sarianidi, 1977)

This explains the rather surprising analogy between the buildings of the late 2nd millennium B.C. (including perhaps Altyn 10, object 4) and some early Muslim mosques, built at places where the heritage of other religions was not prevalent [cf. 3, pp. 10-16, 234-317].

Such mosques were more or less assembly places protected by bastioned walls. The analogy is based on the common belief of both religions involved that the divinity is present when the believers gather in his (or her) name. The difference, however, is that in the Muslim context the religious activity is restricted to the prayer. On the other hand, the Bronze Age people had a much broader programme—the consumption of soma, shamanistic rites, if we believe Nyberg and his followers, most probably dancing and certainly excessive feasting.¹ In this context we may mention that Sarianidi found many

small impressions in the lower floor inside the round rampart filled with ashes and remainders of bones. They indicate fire-places where small cattle was roasted [29, p. 203]. Perhaps in still older constructions, which were the prototype of Dashly 3, all the activities were performed in the open, and only later on buildings were erected for special rituals.

For the protracted period of feasting the community lived together and therefore the "model town" around was erected as a part of the solemn occupation of the region. It was divided into three zones according to the different grades of ritual purity represented by the members of the community. A connection with the system of classes or proto-castes among the Indo-Iranian tribes has to be considered [cf. 7, pp. 210-221].

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But here we have to stop our flight of phantasy. Buildings of this kind are certainly known to prehistory. In the Andean area of South America they are called "ceremonial centres". Today their heritage is taken up by rural churches, which attract a very large number of people once a year for a religious festival and fair. During the rest of the year, such a centre "is either closed and empty or houses only a small permanent population of caretaker personnel" [16, p. 54].

But have we any hint that such "ceremonial centres" existed among Indo-Iranian tribes of the past?

Yes, we have. I made this seemingly extravagant proposal only on account of the fact that I did my fieldwork in an area which has still preserved institutions of this kind and had many more when the Nuristanis were still Kafirs, i. e. pagans. I am speaking of the mountain peoples of North-East Afghanistan and North Pakistan.

Even today among the Kalash tribe of Chitral a part of the population sticks to the old religion. Here only some of the religious ceremonies are performed around the altars of the different deities, mostly placed at the mountain side at a distance from the villages and the fields.

Some of the most important rites, however, are held in the assembly hall of the lineage. This hall is considered to be the temple of a female deity, Jestak. But that is not quite correct. The invocation of the ancestors not directly connected with Jestak is performed here, too [10, p. 364]. It is better to regard this building as an assembly hall and as a temple of the genealogic unit deified in the shape of the Great Mother. Outsiders have called this house the "dancing-hall", indicating the most striking religious activity. During the Midwinter festival, for a period lasting not less than 15 days, the whole village was transformed into sacred precincts. In these precincts, according to common belief, deities and demons, human souls and spirits of animals could freely mix with the living, recreating the aboriginal integrity of creation [10, pp. 279-287].

Most of the religious ceremonies of the Kati-Kafirs occurred at the "gromma", which was therefore explained by an interpreter of Robertson, who had seen the British in India and their strange customs, as the "church" of the Kafirs [15, pp. 215-216, 494-616]. In fact, the gromma was the place for the council, for dancing in the name of the gods and for the reception of the successful warriors. It was simply an open piece of land, the only one that was flat in the village, about 30 yards square. Behind it was a building of the same ground size to be used in rough weather. Certainly, there was a crude altar nearby, with traces of fire almost always to be seen. Benches of the important lineages were erected on the sides. Some ceremonies had to be performed there. This gives me the idea that at Dashly 3 the round rampart

with the nine towers could also be used as a sort of gallery for the participants.

In the area of the Shina speakers at Gilgit, such assembly places with religious functions were called "biyak" [10, pp. 230-232, 235, 317; 4]. Menhirs were erected around to remember the name-giving ancestors of the lineages. In some places we found such a biyak built separately to serve as a spiritual centre for all the villages of a valley. Festivals performed here could last for many days, even weeks.

If we assume that not only the modern descendants, but also their ancestors had such ceremonial centres, then we have to look into the religious texts in which the spiritual heritage of the Indo-Iranian tribes is enshrined. Perhaps some remembering, distorted or embellished, have been preserved.

The so-called vara mentioned in the Videvdad and several other Iranian sources has certainly got many phantastic traits in the course of time, according to the Indologists [cf. 8, pp. 11-40]. We hear of a sort of subterranean but fortified elysium, where the blessed survive the Long Winter, finally to recover and to reoccupy the world [21, pp. 52-54; 2, pp. 17-19]. Tolstov was the first who tried to show that a special type of fortress from the early Achaemenian period in Khorazmia, which we could call "oppidum with habitable ramparts", was the realistic model for the description given in Videvdad 2, 21-43 [30, pp. 79-81].

This attempt had a surprising success. It was accepted by several specialists in Iranian studies. For example, it can be shown that Widengren, when translating this passage of the Videvdad, adapted it in order to fit into the picture given by Tolstov [cf. 20, pp. 271-273].

But with the same or even better reasons we could claim that the programme of such a vara had influenced or even determined the actual realisation of our so-called temple (for me—ceremonial centre) at Dashly 3:

(a) According to the text of the Videvdad, the vara has fortifications of different kinds; scholars translate "Vorhalle—Schutzwehr—Umwallung" [20, p. 271] or "un mur d'appui, un rempart, une enceinte des murailles" [2, p. 17]. This is quite right for Dashly 3.

(b) According to the Videvdad, the vara is a large square. This fits, too.

(c) The vara has passages, nine in the exterior or upper part, six in the middle part and three in the interior or lower part. Evidently, this is an arrangement not quite easy to combine with the four sides of a square ground plan. But in a complex like Dashly 3 the combination would be quite easy. The numbers 3-6-9 could refer to the round circles of walls and the central enclosure. Of course, we do not know how many doors were in the concentric walls, but the central enclosure certainly had nine towers and apparently three doors. So here, too, a parallel is to be seen.

(d) The vara has houses and storehouses. These were found also at Dashly 3.

Of course, not all is in agreement. Dashly 3 is not placed under the soil. We hear nothing of a water canal or of a self-illuminating gate.

As you know, the vara was constructed by the first man and first king, called Yama by the Aryans, and Yima by the Iranians. This culture hero became the supreme deity of the tribes of Kafiristan under the name of Imra. The vara is an integral part of the mythology around Yama/Yima. If the vara was really a ceremonial centre, then the ceremonies were held to honour Yama/Yima.

Therefore, it is not uninteresting that the mythology of the Kafirs has also preserved the idea of a divine fortress designed not for the gods, but for the souls, most probably the souls of the deceased. This concept of the other world is quite incompatible with the normal belief of the Kafirs in heaven and hell [10, p. 52]. This fortress is not mentioned in connection with Imra, but with a female deity—Disani/Disni [10, pp. 97-103]. However, Disani

is closely related to Imra: she sprang into existence from his right breast. For the rest, she is a personification of the community (as the Jestak of the Kalash). We hear that she has made a golden castle with four corners and seven gates [13, pp. 182-183]. In another text we read that she has built a tower. From this tower seven streets diverge [10, pp. 98-99]. If we compile these texts, we can reconstruct a plan, showing a central fortress and a radiate ground plan of the outer area, all enclosed in a square. Only the number seven instead of nine makes it difficult to compare with Dashly 3. But the holy number of the Kafirs is seven, and in spite of this there must have been a tradition that the fortress of Disani had not seven but nine gates. A hymn² praises Disani as the keeper of "the nine gates of mercy".

Let me now come to my conclusion.

As it became clear, not so much from the book of Schippmann [18] as from the excellent review of this book by Mary Boyce [1, pp. 454-465], the Iranians had several types of sanctuaries.

There were simple altars on mountain tops, domestic fire-places, image shrines, temples for the flowing water and, last but not least, temples for the eternal fire. I just proposed to add one more category, namely, "ceremonial centres" where the members of a tribe or their representatives came together and lived together for several days or even weeks during the course of the ceremonies. These centres were the symbol of the community and therefore had some similarity with the fortified terraces of South-Western Iran, studied by Ghirshman [5, pp. 205-221; 7, pp. 210-221]. Perhaps, Masjid-i-Sulaiman and Bard-i-Nishundah were designed as assembly places for the army, identical with the people [11, pp. 122-125].

I think that the "temple" of Dashly 3 is an early example of this tradition. An even more elaborated ceremonial centre was perhaps the so-called palace of Dashly 3 with the ground plans strangely reminding a mandala, as suggested to me by Brentjes (personal communication). Many unexplained or only partly explained constructions may belong to the same category; for instance, Dahan-i Ghulaman in Seistan. Its "rows of altar ovens" probably belonged to the genealogic units coming together in this building [17, pp. 2-30].

Even Surkh Kotal could be mentioned here. Its three terraces would form an excellent tripartite assembly place [cf. 19, p. 207]. We already spoke about Koy-Krylgan-Kala, evidently a combination of necropolis and ceremonial centre.

To my mind, to identify the grave of the ancestors with the ceremonial precincts was typical of the "Early Nomads". Therefore, in the most prominent funeral construction of the steppes, in the Arzhan kurgan [cf. 22, p. 192], we find a burial surrounded by a "model town", namely, three zones of wooden buildings arranged in a radiating lay-out.

For my argument it is not important whether the vara originally meant such a ceremonial centre or not. But the possibility cannot be excluded. And maybe the ancestors of the Kafirs heard about such a construction and preserved the idea in their myths.

As for the social background of ceremonial centres, we may presume that they came into existence after a period of extensive migrations. Thrice were the pasture lands expanded by Yima before the coming of the Long Winter. In such a situation substantial symbols were needed to preserve and to recover the spiritual closeness of the community.

¹ Cf. the descriptions given by Robertson [15].

² Noted by Motamedi and Edelberg [14].

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Резюме

Советско-афганская экспедиция открыла в Северо-Западном Афганистане одну (или несколько) культур эпохи бронзы. Автор рассматривает комплекс, обнаруженный В. И. Сарияниди к северо-западу от Балха, выдвигая свою собственную научную гипотезу.

Для этого комплекса характерны не только укрепления, но и другие монументальные постройки. Одно такое сооружение (Дашлы 3) В. И. Сарияниди обозначает как «храмовой город». Автор доклада сопоставляет различные данные, которые позволяют ему предположить, что не только план круглого укрепления с девятью башнями, расположенного в центре комплекса, но и окружающие постройки подчинены определенной религиозной идее. Пространство между квадратной внешней стеной и круглым храмом было разделено двумя стенами на три зоны. Разделительные стены не могли служить для обороны, не было здесь и признаков городских кварталов с укрепленными воротами. По мнению автора, и центральное круглое укрепление, и прилегающие постройки должны были использоваться лишь во время длительного ежегодного праздничного периода.

Воспоминания о таких ритуальных центрах сохранились в сообщениях о «вара», содержащихся как в древнеиндийских, так и в древнеиранских текстах (прежде всего в Виведат II, 21—43). Во всяком случае, черты сходства между открытым сооружением и описаниями в древних текстах значительно более четки, чем между первыми и памятниками Хорезма, привлеченными к решению вопроса.

Мифология нуристанцев (ранее известных как кафиры Гиндукуша) содержит указания на «небесный замок», в котором находят приют души. Описание замка также напоминает во многом сооружения в Северном Афганистане.

В степной зоне имеется несколько сооружений, которые следует рассматривать как дальнейшее развитие плана «храмового города» Дашлы 3. К их числу нужно причислить не только Кой-Крылган-калу (как уже указал В. И. Сарияниди), но и курган Аржан в Туве.