

Analytical Reflections on The Ethnographic Research of The French Scholar Joseph Antoine Castagné In the Territory of Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article provides an analytical assessment, based on historical documents, of the activities and ethnographic research conducted by the French scholar Joseph Antoine Castagné in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan during the colonial period of the Russian Empire.

Keywords: Joseph Antoine Castagné, Turkestan, Turkestan Branch of the Russian Imperial Geographical Society, Turkestan Circle of Archaeology Amateurs, archaeology, ethnography, geography, speleology, Fergana, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara.

Introduction: Although many scientific studies conducted in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century served the colonial interests of the Russian Empire, a considerable number of researchers sought to preserve scientific objectivity in recording, documenting, and publishing their findings. One such researcher was the French scholar Joseph Antoine Castagné.

Castagné conducted studies in archaeology, ethnography, speleology, linguistics, numismatics, geography, and related disciplines. Through his numerous scientific works and articles, he made a significant contribution to the development of historical studies, ethnography, and museum science in Central Asia, particularly in Turkestan.

Joseph Antoine Castagné was born in 1875 in the small French town of Gaillac and died in Montpellier in 1958. Although he was born and died in France, he spent approximately twenty of the most productive years of his life within the Russian Empire [1].

After receiving a diploma that granted him the right to teach French in secondary schools, he arrived in Russia in the spring of 1899. In February 1901, after successfully passing examinations before the pedagogical council of the Vladikavkaz Gymnasium, he

was appointed a teacher of French language at the institution [2].

In 1904, Castagné made his first journey to Turkestan. Beginning in 1909, he served as curator of a museum operating under the patronage of the Orenburg Scientific Archival Commission [3]. On 28 September 1913, he obtained Russian citizenship. In 1912, at his own request, he was granted permission to transfer his professional activity to Tashkent. Thereafter, he worked as a French-language teacher and class supervisor at a secondary-specialized school in Tashkent. From this period onward, his research activities in Turkestan expanded considerably [4].

METHODS

Castagné carefully analyzed the cultural and religious customs of the peoples of Turkestan and provided valuable information concerning their way of life, beliefs, and rituals. His works continue to serve as important sources for the ethnography of Central Asia [5].

He studied the culture of the peoples of Turkestan through three principal approaches:

- collecting and analyzing folklore materials, including legends, myths, and songs;
- investigating ancient monuments and sacred sites

through archaeological research;

- conducting interviews with local inhabitants to gather first-hand information about their customs, traditions, and beliefs.

RESULTS

Another methodological principle consistently employed by Castagné was comparative analysis. Through this approach, he sought to determine the place and significance of Central Asian culture and art within the broader framework of human civilization. A vivid example of this method can be found in his 1913 treatise entitled 'The Cult of Snakes among Various Peoples and Its Traces in Turkestan' (Кульť змей у различных народов и следы его в Туркестане) [6].

The inspiration for this work was a remarkable amulet discovered in 1913 in the Sokh district of present-day Fergana Region. The object, carved from black stone, depicted two snakes facing one another in a circular composition. Castagné argued that such imagery could not have been accidental and reflected deep-rooted religious symbolism [6, p.23].

He analyzed snake worship across different civilizations using legendary, ethnographic, and archaeological materials. Drawing evidence from the Torah, the Bible, ancient Judaism, ancient Greece, the history of Constantinople, Christian church history, North African ethnography, written sources of Western Asia, Slavic traditions, India, Southeast Asia, and Europe, he attempted to demonstrate that snake worship represented a surviving element of paganism and totemism. He also emphasized that the civilizations of Central Asia occupied a worthy place among the civilizations of the world.

S. Gorshenina later positively evaluated Castagné's conclusions, noting that subsequent discoveries suggested the Sokh amulet could be dated to the Bronze Age and possibly linked to Mesopotamian cultural influences. Although some of Castagné's comparisons were relatively simple, his assessment of the antiquity and semiotic significance of the artifact proved largely correct [2, p.16].

Castagné also investigated the religious beliefs and demonology of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples. He examined beliefs concerning spirits and supernatural beings, as well as rituals associated with them. Furthermore, he studied magical and exorcistic practices among Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Eastern Turkic peoples, analyzing their origins, performance, and social functions.

He devoted special attention to sacred Islamic sites in Turkestan, studying pilgrimage traditions and local reverence for holy places. He analyzed their historical

significance, associated legends, and role in the lives of local communities [7]. In addition, he explored remnants of ancient religious beliefs and rituals in Central Asia and demonstrated their reflection in contemporary customs and traditions [8].

In particular, Castagné began one of his investigations in the village of Karakurgan (Qoraqo'rg'on) near Chust. He described the shrine of the sacred figure known as 'Boboy Paradus', beliefs regarding its healing and blessed powers, and the practices of visitors, including sacrifice, lighting candles and oil-soaked wicks, and tying pieces of cloth to trees and riverbanks. He concluded that, although these practices outwardly appeared Islamic, they preserved elements of ancient shamanism, animism, Zoroastrianism, and popular nature cults.

He further observed that the custom of producing ritual smoke ('is chiqarish'), still practiced among the population, originated from pre-Islamic beliefs connected with honoring ancestral spirits through offerings and charitable food distribution. The lighting of wicks at sacred places was closely associated with this tradition because wicks produced smoke, whereas candles generally did not [9].

Moreover, among certain Arab groups that migrated to Transoxiana under the banner of Islam from the mid-seventh century onward, customs similar to those of Turkish peoples of Central Asia were preserved, including reverence for the hearth, lighting ritual wicks in honor of spirits, and ceremonies dedicated to deceased ancestors. Vestiges of these practices remain visible today among Arab communities in Kashkadarya, Samarkand, and Khorezm [10].

DISCUSSION

In his writings, Castagné paid particular attention to the concept of baraka (blessing). Among local communities, objects associated with holy persons—including stones, trees, and even soil—were believed to possess healing and beneficial powers. Such descriptions provide valuable insight into the spiritual worldview of the population and their deep respect for revered religious figures. Through saints and sacred places, people sought divine blessings, healing, prosperity, and family well-being.

CONCLUSION

Through his research, Castagné contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious heritage of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. His works provide valuable information on the daily life, customs, and beliefs of local populations while reflecting a rational and analytical scholarly approach. Consequently, his studies continue to serve as

important sources for ethnographers, historians, and cultural scholars.

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