

Ancient Religious And Social Beliefs In The Ohangaron Valley

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Abstract: This article highlights the ideological worldview of the ancient and medieval population of the Ohangaron Valley, based on archaeological research conducted at the Suyurlitepa site. The findings provide valuable insights into the religious beliefs, customs, and social life of the local inhabitants. Through the discoveries at Suyurlitepa, our understanding of the cultural and religious development of ancient society has been expanded — including information about temples, animal-shaped artifacts, and catacomb-type burials that shed light on early belief systems.

The study contributes to understanding the lifestyle and worldview of the Ohangaron Valley's population. It reveals the close interrelation between the ancient people's philosophy of life, their religious outlook, and ritual practices. Among the findings are animal-shaped pottery, traces of fire, materials related to sacrificial rituals, and temple structures, all of which reflect the community's beliefs associated with natural forces, celestial bodies, and the spirits of ancestors.

Furthermore, the article emphasizes that the ancient inhabitants of the Ohangaron Valley maintained contacts with various cultural and religious centers, which significantly influenced their worldview and social life. The research results reveal the distinctive features of the region's religious and cultural development, as well as its unique role in broader civilizational processes.

Keywords: Ohangaron, Suyurlitepa, Iloq, terracotta, fir worshippers, figurine, Qovunchi culture, catacomb, Farn, ceramic tableware, incense burner, pentagram.

Introduction: The Ohangaron Valley is an integral part of the Tashkent Oasis, bounded by the Qurama mountain range to the southeast, the Chatkal range to the north and northwest, and the Syr Darya basin to the southwest. The Suyurlitepa site is located on the left bank of the Ohangaron River, at the northern foothills of the Qurama Mountains, about two kilometers east of today's Sanam village, along the highway connecting the cities of Olmaliq and Angren. The Ohangaron Valley is one of the ancient and historically rich regions of Uzbekistan, renowned primarily for its early urban centers, archaeological monuments, and diverse material culture. During the ancient and medieval periods, the ideological worldview of the valley's population was closely connected with their religious,

cultural, and social life.

METHODOLOGY

The natural and geographical characteristics of this region were initially described in general terms in the works of Chinese and Arab travelers. Its study on the basis of modern scientific methods began in 1923, carried out by Russian and Uzbek scholars [36].

Among those who made the greatest contribution to the archaeological study of the Tashkent Oasis was Y. F. Buryakov, who mentioned Suyurlitepa only briefly, listing it among the medieval urban sites in his works [11]. During the years of independence, the historical-archaeological maps and catalog-albums of tourist destinations in Tashkent city and region have also

provided incomplete and somewhat confusing information about this site. The name of the settlement itself appears in various forms across different sources, including Munchoqtepa, Saviltepa, Suyritepa, and Suyartepa.

According to scholarly literature, numerous ancient burial mounds, cemeteries, and urban necropolises have been discovered and studied in the Ohangaron Valley over various years prior to our time. Based on their internal structure and external features, as well as the material evidence and relevant analogies, these sites have been scientifically systematized. Consequently, the ideological and religious beliefs, anthropological types, ethnographic characteristics, chronological framework, and cultural life of the populations associated with them have been examined in detail [24].

In the ideological worldview of this period, religious and mythological beliefs such as Zoroastrianism, shamanism, totemism, and animism played a significant role. Cemeteries, statues, and other cultural objects identified through archaeological discoveries reflect the spiritual and ideological world of the population of that time.

Ancient burial rites were closely connected to the diverse beliefs, customs, and religions of each people and culture, expressing their attitudes toward death and the afterlife. Funerary rituals held one of the most important places in almost all human societies.

Accordingly, great importance was attached to the interpretation and understanding of the concept of life after death. These notions laid the foundation for moral norms and distinctive rituals that gradually developed into traditions, eventually becoming a fundamental component of customary law.

Beginning from the antiquity, catacomb-type burials became widespread in the Tashkent Oasis. Such types of graves are found throughout the entire region — from the lowest plains to the high mountainous zones. Archaeological excavations were conducted in two depressions located in the northwestern part of the Suyurlitepa site. As a result of these excavations, two catacomb-type graves rich in material evidence were discovered. During the 3rd–4th centuries AD, the inhabitants of the Suyurlitepa area believed in the continuation of life after death. Religious concepts and ideas about the otherworld shaped unique notions in people's consciousness, which were reflected in their burial practices.

Studies of the burials from this period uncovered at Suyurlitepa revealed that a large number of objects were interred together with the deceased. Within the burial chambers, various ceramic vessels, ornaments,

weapons, food offerings, spindle whorls, and other items were placed around the bodies. The author also investigated numerous graves in the surrounding areas of the Ohangaron Valley, including the sites of Taypan, Turqushin, Do'lanabuloq, Yuqori Chinor, and Ertosh-Do'lana [16]. In these burials, the deceased were interred both individually and in pairs, and in some cases, up to five or six individuals were placed in a single grave. The bodies were generally laid on their backs in an extended position, though sometimes flexed or with knees bent to the sides. The heads of the deceased were oriented toward the north or northeast, with most burials following a northern and eastern alignment. Some scholars associate these burial orientations with the cultural influences that accompanied the migration of pastoralist groups during the ancient period. Occasionally, disordered or irregular placements of bodies were also observed [16].

Similar features can also be observed at the Suyurlitepa site. The ancient inhabitants, who worshipped the sun, oriented their burials toward the sunrise. Near the head of the deceased, objects used during their lifetime were placed — such as arrowheads, personal ornaments, and food offerings brought by their tribesmen in ceramic vessels. According to previous research, the custom of burying grave goods alongside the body was particularly common in mountain regions [39]. This practice was based on the belief that the deceased would make use of these items in the “land of the dead,” that is, in the afterlife.

The items placed beside the deceased were undoubtedly associated with the individual's lifetime status and occupation. If the person had been a warrior, arrowheads, swords, or daggers were commonly found among the grave goods. In the case of tribal leaders or nobles, a portion of their wealth accumulated during life was buried with them.

In the northwestern part of the ancient city ruins of Suyurlitepa, a temple complex dating to the early medieval period was identified. The preserved section of the Suyurlitepa temple complex has been almost completely excavated, with its boundaries measuring approximately 18.5 by 17.5 meters. Access to the complex was provided through a corridor-passage with a ramp leading upward. The temple consisted of rooms with benches, a main fire sanctuary (atashkada), two altar rooms with entrance doors, and a large open worship area. The entrance corridor led from the southeast via the ramp.

The structure comprised five corridor-like rooms, each equipped with seating benches. In the eastern part of the temple stood the atashkada (fire altar), surrounded by a walled courtyard. Numerous artifacts associated

with religious rituals were discovered within the temple, including a single hookah-shaped vessel (chilimdon), a small pestle, terracotta objects, and various ritual items. The temple is believed to have served the local population until the Arab conquest, after which it was burned down [16].

Excavations conducted in the southern part of the Suyurlitepa site revealed residential structures consisting of semi-subterranean dwellings. As a result of these investigations, four complete archaeological artifacts in the shape of bull heads were discovered. Two of these bull-shaped supports were found in ash pits, while the remaining ones were recovered from household pits. All of the cauldron stands were hand-molded from clay and then fired; one had a broken horn, while two were preserved only partially, retaining their horns.

RESULTS

The pairs of horns on these four bull heads are positioned horizontally, each measuring approximately 8–9 cm in length, with the space between the horns ranging from 4 to 11 cm. The overall length of these bull-head figurines is 17–20 cm, with a width of about 10 cm. Each specimen features two nostril openings spaced 6–8.5 cm apart. These objects were used in their time as cauldron stands. Similar bull-head-shaped ceramic supports have been found at nearly all major archaeological sites across Central Asia.

In many ancient cultures, including those of Central Asia, the bull was revered as a sacred animal and regarded as a symbol of power, abundance, and prosperity. This discovery indicates that people worshipped or venerated the bull, considering it a divine or sacred being [38].

Litvinskiy associates the depiction of animal figures on vessels with the cult of Farn—the deity of fortune, prosperity, and fertility [21]. By the end of the Kovunchi II stage, bull-head-shaped vessel stands, as well as handles modeled in the form of a boar [34], a horse [9], a sheep [39], and a wolf [36] began to appear—reflecting reverence toward these animals [37]. In the cities of the Ohangaron Valley, the female figurine symbolized fertility, the sheep represented divine blessing (qut), while the boar was associated with one of the most powerful deities in the Avestan pantheon—the god of victory, Veretragna. According to one of the Avestan hymns, Veretragna accompanies the Sun god Mithra, bringing glory to humans, granting strength, healing, and driving away evil spirits. He appears in various forms—a golden-horned bull, a white horse with golden ears and reins, a camel, an eagle, or a wild ram—and the boar is one of these manifestations.

During the excavation of ash pits in one of the semi-

subterranean dwellings, a 3.5 cm-high terracotta figurine in the shape of a frog and a 3.2 cm-high lid handle modeled as a horse's head were discovered.

The origins of the frog cult can be traced back to ancient Egypt. The goddess Heket, depicted as a frog and colored green, symbolized the fertile waters of the Nile [40] and was associated with the idea of eternal life. The cult of the frog was linked to the earth, while its celestial manifestation represented the cosmos. The image of the frog thus came to embody the living earth itself. According to ancient Indian beliefs, the earth was thought to rest upon an inverted frog [24]. Among African peoples, it was believed that the cosmos itself took the form of a frog [15]. In ancient Altai legends and mythology, the frog was regarded as sacred, being associated with water-bringing and rain-invoking powers. The Rigveda contains the famous “Hymn to the Frogs [27],” in which their croaking was believed to herald the arrival of spring and rain.

Animals were perceived as intermediaries between the forces of nature and humans. In particular, frogs and turtles have long been used in rain-invoking rituals among the Uzbek people. They were venerated as symbols of moisture and fertility and, owing to this attribute, played a key role in rainmaking ceremonies [1]. In the worldview of the Uzbek people, the frog has traditionally symbolized humidity and rainfall [2]. The people also referred to this creature as a “healer,” since in traditional pastoral practice it was used to treat cattle from various diseases [1].

DISCUSSION

The earliest known frog statuette discovered within the territory of Uzbekistan was unearthed at the Sopollitepa site. It was carved from marlstone [25]. Material evidence related to frog symbolism has also been found during archaeological research in the Ustrushana region, particularly in the Kurkad dakhmas [22] va and in the Yerqo'rg'on temple [31]. According to ethnographic studies, the frog plays an important role in healing magic. Amulets bearing frog images were believed to dispel witchcraft and protect against various forms of evil [17].

Thus, the original semantic meaning of the frog was associated with the elements of earth and water, later evolving in various cultures into a concept linked with fertility in agriculture and animal husbandry. In the spiritual life of the ancient inhabitants of the Ohangaron Valley, the frog may have been regarded not only as a guardian and protector of fertility but also as a defender of crops, human well-being, and lineage. Among the artifacts discovered in the semi-subterranean dwellings were also lid handles fashioned in the shapes of two sheep facing opposite directions,

a horse's head, and an animal horn. These finds can likewise be interpreted as symbols of reverence toward animals during the 3rd–4th centuries AD. Furthermore, the frequent appearance of animal motifs on ceramic vessels suggests that animal husbandry constituted a dominant occupation of the population of that period.

With the introduction of Islam into the territories of the Tashkent Oasis in the 8th century, certain elements of the ancient population's ideological perceptions and reverence toward animals persisted in one form or another. This is evidenced by material artifacts unearthed during archaeological excavations in the northern parts of the city. In particular, excavations conducted in 2022 in the northwestern sector of the citadel (Ark) uncovered a girls' bracelet in the form of a snake's head. The bracelet, made of brass, measures 6.2 cm in diameter, weighs 12 grams, and has a thickness of 3 mm. It is circular in shape, with both ends modeled as snake heads. Snakes are viewed as creatures deeply connected to nature, symbolizing the link between the underworld and the earth's surface. Therefore, bracelets shaped as snake heads may symbolically represent the connection with the forces of nature.

According to Sarianidi, snakes were regarded primarily as "sacred creatures," not as "enemies of humans" [33], and were considered symbols of fertility and productivity. Litvinskiy likewise emphasizes that one of their main functions was the protection of the household [20]. Snake-headed bracelets have also been found at the Bronze Age site of Sopollitepa [5]. In some scholarly works, the snake is associated with fertility beliefs, the continuity of lineage, and the preservation of descendants [18].

One of the findings is the base of a metal oil lamp crafted in the shape of a horse's hoof — the supporting parts of the lamp were designed to resemble hooves.

During the 2022 excavations, a rectangular pit was uncovered in the central room of the building. Among the artifacts found within, a particular stone fragment drew special attention. One side of the stone bears an engraved cross, while the opposite side features a six-pointed star. The stone itself is oval in shape, with the cross carved at its center.

Today, the cross is recognized as the principal symbol of Christianity. However, the origin of this symbol predates Christianity by many centuries.

Depictions of the cross are frequently encountered on pottery, walls, clay figurines, and other artifacts from Neolithic and Eneolithic sites. These symbols are largely associated with the emergence of agriculture during those periods [19]. The cross within a circle represents the division of the year into four seasons. According to

Ribakov, the cross motif is connected with the feminine principle and conveys meanings of fertility and productivity [28].

Similarly, cross symbols appear frequently on early medieval Chach coins [8]. Among Turkic peoples, this sign was also adopted, symbolizing the "wheel of fate." Coins bearing such motifs have been discovered across numerous regions of Turkestan [25].

From the peripheral section of the central room, a bone comb was uncovered from within an ash layer, while near the eastern pakhsa (adobe) wall, a fragment of a broken ceramic tray was found.

The comb measures 8.5–8.6 cm in length and 5.5 cm in width, with the thickness of its teeth ranging from 0.3 to 0.5 cm, and an overall thickness of 0.5–0.6 cm.

The remaining part of the ceramic tray (dasturxon) was found near the northern wall of the central room. The tray has a diameter of 40 cm and a thickness of 2–2.2 cm. It was handmade and stands on three legs. On the underside, where the legs are attached, a five-pointed star enclosed within a circle was depicted. The circle's diameter measures 38 cm. Such ceramic artifacts are characteristic of the medieval cultural layers [26]. According to research, similar trays have been frequently discovered at 7th–12th-century sites located in the Fergana Valley, Zhetysu (Semirechye), and the Tashkent region [8]. The origin of these dasturxons is traced back to the broader cultural traditions of Central Asia. Archaeologists L. Sokolovskaya, G. Bogomolov, and O. Papakhristu have written extensively about ceramic tables and trays [30]. The dasturxon discovered at Suyurlitepa is unique in that it was handmade and features a five-pointed star motif engraved on its underside by the artisan. The five-pointed star, known in scholarship as a pentagram or pentacle, is considered a pre-Islamic symbol. Islam, being a strictly monotheistic faith, excludes the use of such symbols and icons, as the depiction of emblems that could be equated with divine representation is prohibited.

Some scholars associate the five-pointed star with Islamic traditions, particularly with the five pillars of Islam: faith (iman), prayer (namaz), almsgiving (zakat), fasting (ro'za), and pilgrimage (hajj). However, within Islamic symbolism, the five-pointed star almost always appears together with the crescent. The occurrence of the star motif independently therefore raises questions regarding its origin and meaning.

According to various sources, the points of the pentagram represent the five elements — earth, fire, water, air, and spirit — and it was often used as a protective symbol.

In medieval Solomonian texts, the pentagram held great significance under the name “Seal of Solomon.” The Israeli historian Gershom Scholem writes: “In the Arabian desert, the ‘Seal of Solomon’ was widely used. The interchangeability of the hexagram and pentagram was considered a common phenomenon.” In the Latin versions of the Solomonian Texts, the term pentaculum referred to all circular symbols associated with the Seal of Solomon, even when they did not actually contain a pentagram. Similarly, in the Jewish mystical text *Clavicula Salomonis* (The Key of Solomon), numerous depictions of five-pointed stars and pentacles are found.

The pentagram has also traditionally been associated with the human form. In certain Christian interpretations, it symbolizes the five wounds of Jesus Christ — the pierced hands and feet, as well as the wound in his side made by the soldier’s spear. This concept was elaborated in the 16th century by Valeriano Balzani in his work *Hieroglyphica*.

Jewish communities associate the five-pointed star with the first five books of the Torah, the Pentateuch, which were revealed to the Prophet Moses. In our view, the city’s location along a major trade route may have contributed to the settlement of people of various religions and cultures, resulting in a dynamic exchange of spiritual and artistic traditions.

During the 2023 excavations, a pendant shaped like a fish was discovered near the southern wall of the room, lying on the floor surface. The pendant displays a mixture of brown, black, and reddish hues, with small circular white spots on its surface resembling fish scales. The object measures 5 cm in length, with a base width tapering from 2.4 cm to 1.5 cm toward the top. The animal-like form of this stone pendant reflects a continuation—at least in part—of the ancient belief systems of the city’s inhabitants. Although Islam had reached its peak during this period, the presence of such artifacts indicates that the local population had not completely abandoned their earlier traditions.

A black, rhomboid-shaped stone pendant discovered during the 2022 investigations also deserves particular attention. Its surface is smoothly polished, and under light, a greenish tint becomes visible on the reverse side. The pendant weighs 25.7 grams, measures 4.5 cm in height and 3.9 cm in width, and has a thickness of 1.8–1.9 cm.

CONCLUSION

The Ohangaron Valley is one of the regions of Uzbekistan distinguished by its deep and extensive cultural and ideological heritage. Archaeological research demonstrates that the population of this area possessed a highly developed system of religious

beliefs, social life, and funerary traditions. The ancient inhabitants adhered to faiths such as Zoroastrianism, animism, totemism, and later Islam, maintaining a firm belief in the continuation of life after death. Their burial practices reflected their views on death and the afterlife, as well as the ceremonial customs and rituals derived from these beliefs.

Findings from the Suyurlitepa site and other locations provide rich evidence of the spiritual and cultural life of the ancient population. Artifacts buried with the deceased—together with various ritual and domestic objects—illuminate the ideological world of the time. The depiction and veneration of animals such as the bull, horse, and frog as sacred or mythological symbols reveal the depth of belief systems and religious imagination among the inhabitants of the ancient Ohangaron Valley. These discoveries allow for a deeper understanding of early societies and confirm the richness of the region’s ancient civilization.

With the spread of Islam during the medieval period, significant transformations occurred in the ideological landscape of the Ohangaron Valley. Islam profoundly influenced the development of science, culture, and art. Prior to the spread of Islam, during the 3rd–4th centuries AD, the population believed in the continuation of existence after death, as reflected in the inclusion of grave goods accompanying the deceased. This tradition is further evidenced by numerous zoomorphic artifacts—such as bull-head-shaped objects—that symbolize the community’s religious beliefs, worldview, and the diversity of their cultural expression.

With the advent of Islam, certain elements of the ancient population’s ideological perceptions and reverence toward animals persisted in various forms. In particular, findings such as a girls’ bracelet shaped like a snake’s head and depictions of birds and animals on ceramic vessels indicate the continuity of ancient beliefs and traditions. At the same time, the discovery of diverse religious and mythological symbols—such as five-pointed stars and fish-shaped pendants—demonstrates the complexity and multidimensional nature of the population’s spiritual and ideological worldview.

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