

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE SOUTHERN REGIONS OF CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

This article discusses the issues of religious beliefs and migration in the southern countries of Central Asia in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as well as the historical roots, foundations and factors of these processes. The issues of religious beliefs and migration in the southern countries of Central Asia in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as well as the relevance and reasons for studying the contribution of these processes to the development of the civilization of Uzbekistan on a scientific basis are discussed.

Keywords: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, monism.

Introduction

In the present era, as globalization processes accelerate on an international scale, the convergence of Western and Eastern civilizations, the self-awareness of peoples living in diverse regions and adhering to different religions, the deepening of mutual relations on the global stage, and the growing aspiration to preserve cultural heritage and local cultures have become increasingly pressing issues. In particular, the ethnocultural connections of populations residing in various regions of the world, the influence of local cultures, and the impact of migration processes on ethnocultural relations have gained significant importance in historiography. In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to elucidating the scientific and comparative aspects of the numerous ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, religious, and political processes that have taken place across the territories of our republic. "Studying and drawing upon the rich cultural heritage and traditions of creativity in our people's history holds great significance in the process of building a new society."

Central Asia, particularly its southern regions, due to its natural geographical location, has historically been closely connected or adjacent to major cultural centers. On one hand, it bordered ancient cultural hubs such as India and Iran, and on the other, it was linked to significant regional cultural centers like Marv (Khorasan) and Eastern Turkestan (Khotan, Kashgar, etc.). These areas maintained continuous ethnocultural interactions. Notably, religious beliefs played a distinctive role in the migration processes that transpired across these regions.

In the historical and cultural development of the peoples of Central Asia during ancient times, the migration of religious views and beliefs held a prominent position. This trend persisted

actively into antiquity and the early Middle Ages. For various reasons, migrations brought not only religions but also cultures, arts, languages, scripts, customs, and traditions into these regions, leading to ethnocultural intermingling and assimilation—a phenomenon widely acknowledged in historical scholarship. One of the distinctive features of the history of Central Asian peoples is that, even in ancient times, the composition of the local population evolved not only through internal growth but also through external migrations, albeit to a limited extent. Archaeological evidence suggests that migration processes intensified particularly during the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages. During this period, ancient agricultural communities are noted to have widely settled in regions such as the foothills of the Kopet Dag, the banks of the Murghab River, northern Afghanistan, and the Surkhan and Zeravshan oases. In the second half of the second millennium BCE, a rapid migration of pastoralist populations from the Ural region, Central Kazakhstan, and the Western Siberian steppes into Central Asia began. This marked one of the earliest stages of the region's ancient history, characterized by tribal migrations, assimilation processes between tribes with differing economic and cultural foundations, and prolonged mutual cultural cooperation. Under such conditions, the principles of religious and secular tolerance continued to develop on new foundations.

The primary causes of ancient migrations were influenced by ecological, economic, social, and political processes. During this period, political developments in Central Asia were closely tied to numerous wars stemming from external invasions and internal conflicts. The "great migrations" originated from the Eurasian steppes and extended into the regions between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, as well as Khorasan, encompassing the southern territories of Central Asia. It was precisely from this period onward that complex processes unfolded in the social and economic life of Central Asian peoples, contributing significantly to the formation of a distinctive culture that flourished in subsequent eras. In this context, the mutual interactions and migration processes between Central Asian peoples and China, Iran, India, and Byzantium during the early Middle Ages played a crucial role.

Religious dynamics consistently held a unique position within these migration processes. In the initial phase of the early Middle Ages, the religious landscape of Central Asia was notably complex. Research indicates that during this period, four major religions—Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism—were actively promoted by their respective adherents (priests). Simultaneously, as will be explored further below, during this era—particularly under the Turkic Khaganate—the ancient Turkic belief system known as Tengriism also began to spread in the region. In Sogdia and Tokharistan during the early Middle Ages, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism were undoubtedly dominant among the existing religions, with the latter progressively gaining wider influence. Although archaeological evidence has yet to fully substantiate this, written sources confirm that Buddhism exerted influence in Sogdia during the early Middle Ages. For instance, the *Tang Shu* chronicle provides insights into religious beliefs associated with the Samarkand rulers, stating: "They adhere to the law of Buddhism. They offer prayers to the evil spirit of the land. [They craft devices with a high degree of skill.] In the eleventh month, they play the zither and perform dances, beseeching the deity to send cold weather, while playfully splashing water on one another."

During this period, among the widely spread religions in Central Asia, Zoroastrianism was the most ancient and had already extended across nearly all regions of Central Asia before the arrival of other faiths. By the 4th–5th centuries, its dominance persisted in the central and northern territories of Central Asia. For instance, excavations at the ruins of the ancient city of Yerkurgan in Kashkadarya (Southern Sogdia) uncovered a complex consisting of two temples—eastern and western—associated with Zoroastrianism. These temples featured a large courtyard, a spacious room for prayers, and a hearth (altar) where a perpetual fire was maintained. During the excavations, numerous objects linked to religious beliefs were discovered and studied, further evidencing the sustained prominence of this religion in the central and northern regions of Central Asia. In contrast, Buddhism predominantly spread to the southern regions of the area.

In the early Middle Ages, Buddhist centers in Termez, such as Karatepa and Fayaztepa, as well as the Ushturmulla Monastery located along the Amu Darya in Kubodiyon (Kobadiyon), fell into ruin and were abandoned. Researchers attribute this decline primarily to the invasive campaigns of the Sasanian Iranians and, later, to the policies pursued by the Hephthalites.

Turning to the matter of Christianity, this religion began penetrating Central Asia at a relatively early stage. Some researchers link this phenomenon to the persecution of Christians in Sasanian Iran, which prompted their migration eastward. In the Central Asian region, the city of Marv served as a central hub for Christians. Specifically, excavations have identified a Christian church within the Gyaur Kala fortress and a Christian cemetery in Old Marv. Numerous sources attest to the widespread presence of this religion in the Marv oasis. Beyond coins, various material culture artifacts indicative of the spread of Christianity have been discovered at numerous archaeological sites across Central Asia. Examples include a bronze amulet and circular pendants found at Kuktepa (Gukdepe) in southern Turkmenistan, a jar handle with a lamp from the Urgut sites, the "Holy Mina ampulla" (a small, double-handled vessel) from Samarkand, a ceramic tile from Osh, a bronze cross from Afrasiab, and objects from Christian graves in Panjikent.

Written records also provide evidence of Christianity's migration into Central Asia. For instance, a pottery fragment discovered in Panjikent, dated to the mid-8th century, bears an inscription from the Syriac version of the Bible. Similar Syriac writings with Christian content have been found in abundance among the artifacts from the Urgut region. However, due to their poor state of preservation, many of these inscriptions are noted to be extremely difficult to decipher.

In the late antique and early medieval periods, another religion that gained widespread prominence in Central Asia was Manichaeism. Like other faiths, its dissemination was closely tied to migration processes and ethnocultural interactions. According to historical records, Manichaeans left a significant mark not only on the history and culture of Central Asia but also on the histories of peoples connected along the entire expanse of the Great Silk Road. The proponents of this religion began their migratory paths from Iranian cities, eventually reaching the deserts and steppes of Central Asia. Studies indicate that Manichaeans produced a substantial body of religious literature to propagate their beliefs. Naturally, the spread of

Manichaean teachings provoked discontent among Iran's ruling elites and Zoroastrian priests. Consequently, in the 3rd century, during the reign of the Sasanian king Bahram I (273–276 CE), Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, was imprisoned and executed. Following this, his followers faced persecution, leading a significant portion of them to migrate to Central Asian territories.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Tengriism, and Manichaeism, which entered Central Asia's ancient cities and regions as a result of migrations, displacements, and certain political processes, played a distinctive role over several centuries in the development of the region's architecture, material and spiritual culture, as well as its visual and applied arts.

In brief, sources written in various languages (Old Persian, Syriac, Sogdian, Chinese) testify that representatives of peoples from diverse regions lived side by side with local populations in the ancient centers of Eastern civilizations. From this evidence, it can be inferred that the traditions, customs, languages, and rituals of ancient peoples did not hinder their multifaceted interactions. Despite their diverse origins, these peoples exhibited mutual respect for each other's religions and beliefs. There were no racial or religious barriers to adapting to the social and economic conditions of new territorial and cultural environments, as ancient religions were not characterized by dogmatic rigidity.

Religious tolerance has been developing in Central Asia since antiquity, a process that continued into the late antique and early medieval periods. The Great Silk Road and its branches served not only as conduits for trade and economic exchange but also as channels for cultural dialogue. Through these networks, various religions, philosophical perspectives, diplomatic missions, spiritual values, writing systems, and examples of visual arts were disseminated. In the current era of independence, which provides ample opportunities and conditions for scholarly research, numerous studies of varying scope on the history and culture of Central Asia's southern regions have been published. These include the integration of written sources from ancient and medieval periods into academic discourse, data on historical geography, results of archaeological investigations, numismatic findings, and insights from linguistics and ethnography. Among these, research related to religious migration processes constitutes a significant portion.

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