

## **New perspectives on origins of the Fire Temples: recent archaeological discoveries in pre-Achemenid and Achemenid Central Asia.**

Fire temples are a major part of the archaeological landscape in Iran, but at the moment all documented examples (except for one) date from the Sasanian period. The question of genesis and typology have been assessed by many authors, the main steps being (in my opinion) Mary Boyce (1975), Rémy Boucharlat (1985), Pierfrancesco Callieri (2014). In Iran itself the main progress has come from the recent archaeological study of structures in mud brick (and not only in stone, as in previous studies), allowing for better precision in the functional attribution of the various rooms.

At the same time, the question of the origins has, for the main, remained in the state which had been formulated by Mary Boyce (1975 ; refined in 1982) : as fire temples are documented in the post-Achemid period in regions which had ceased to be part of Iran after Alexander's conquest, they were necessarily an Achemenid creation, which Boyce attributed to the imperial family under Artaxerxes II, and explained as a counter-measure meant to appease the « orthodox » after image temples had been established under Babylonian influence, also by royal patronage.

This picture has recently been challenged by fresh discoveries in Central Asia, still little publicized. Besides a monumental stone fire altar at Cheshme Shafa near Balkh (in an unclear architectural context), and a few terrace temples in the open, of a type mentioned by Herodotus and Strabon (Ai Khanum, Koktepe), « covered » buildings dating from the Achemenid temples, with no living area but a central hall sheltering a large fire place in its middle, have been excavated in Southern Sogdiana (Kyzyl-tepe, Sangir-tepe, Kindyk-tepe). A specimen safely dated from the pre-Achemenid period is currently being excavated in Areia (Topaz Gala). At Sangir-tepe the room has four wooden columns, at Topaz Gala three massive brick pillars of square section, at Kindyk-tepe four, seemingly forerunning the *chahar-tāq*. Storage of ashes has been observed and, in one case (Kindyk-tepe), nine pits interpreted by the excavator as a *bareshnum-gāh*. Even if a caution is needed for such conclusions, it seems already possible to propose a new model for the respective origins of the image temple and the fire temple : the first one probably traceable to a Babylonian tradition, but the second one originated in the eastern satrapies from which it would have reached Western Iran under the Achemenids, in a movement parallel (or related?) to the diffusion of the Avesta.

Main references:

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