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**Bronze Age Center of Oriental Civilization in the
Karakum Desert (Turkmenistan) and its
Connections with Mediterranean World**

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Bronze Age Center of Oriental Civilization in the Karakum Desert (Turkmenistan) and its Connections with Mediterranean World

Nadezhda A. Dubova

Abstract

From the late 1960th Russian, Greek and Turkmenian archaeologist professor, honorary academician of Turkmen Academy of sciences Victor Sarianidi began to publish articles and later books about some parallels and analogies of architecture, culture, rituals etc. between many Near and Middle Eastern sites and those of the southern part of the Middle Asia. Later he proved the existence in the Bronze Age of Eastern Mediterranean so named Bactria-Margiana archaeological complex (BMAC). Excavations during 1972-2013 years of the capital of Margush country Gonur Depe (2300-1600 BC) have brought many fine findings, confirmed multidirectional communication throughout this area. All materials show that there four thousands year ago earlier unknown center of Oriental civilization was flourished. As Victor Sarianidi argued, one of the important forces that unite the entire population of the country were the rituals, custom and religious ideas on which Zoroastrianism later formed. Thanks to the International conferences, organized by the President of Turkmenistan, many of the world's leading experts agreed with the first idea about the existence of the new center. But the idea about the roots of Zoroastrianism are taken now only by few of them.

Keywords: Victor Sarianidi; Bactria-Margiana archaeological complex; migrations and cultural transmissions; ancient religion, believes, customs, rituals

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In the late 1940s – early 1950s later world famous Greek-Russian-Turkmenian archaeologist Victor Sarianidi took part in his first excavations after graduating of the Historical faculty of the Middle Asian State University in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). His father borne in Trebizond and mother born in Yalta have married in Russia in the second half of 1920s and moved to Tashkent where there were more possibilities to find a job.

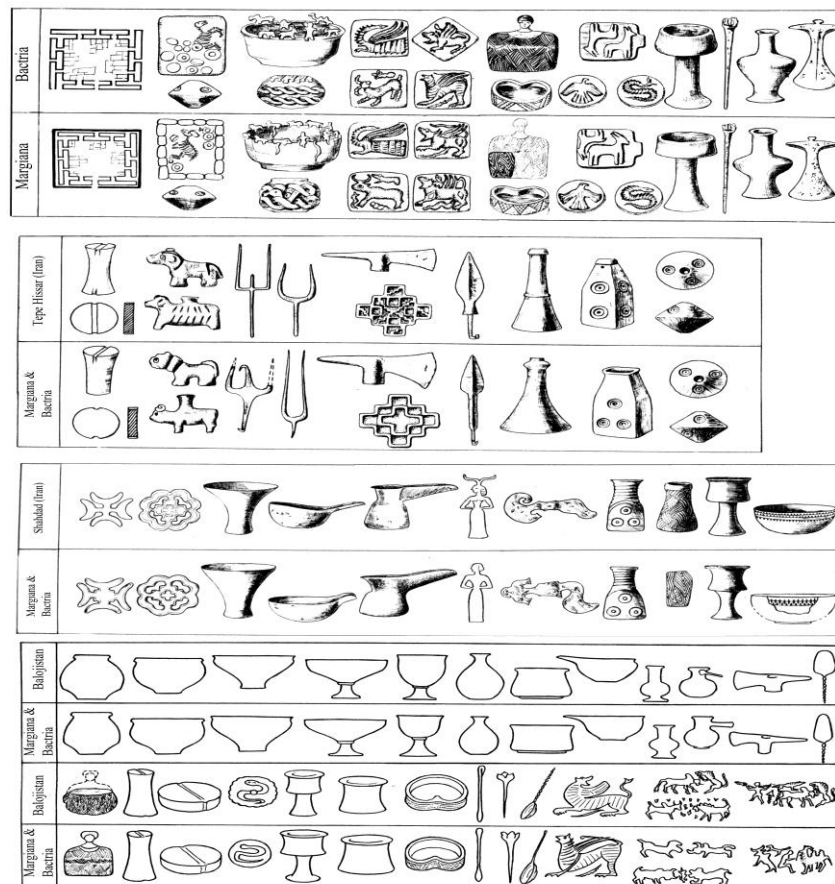
In 1948 Victor Sarianidi was working on the excavations of Ulugbek observatory in Samarkand, where the team headed by V.A. Shishkin (1893-1966) was finishing the last phase of the excavation there. That was also the time when he first time came to Turkmenistan: in different sub-teams of South-Turkmenistan Archaeological Complex Expedition (YuTAKE) he worked in Nisa (1949-1954), Sultan-Kala (1950-1954), participated in root investigations in South-Western Turkmenistan in Meshed-Misrian (1949). The same time (1953) his first scientific article devoted to ceramic kilns of ancient Merv was published.

During these years it became increasingly apparent to his inquiring mind that in prehistory people might have been able to master not only the foothills of the Kopet Dagħ but also those territories which are now concealed by the desert. Clear evidence of this emerged from his work as part of the South-Turkmenistan expedition at Takhirbai and Yaz-Depe in the Merv oasis (1955-1956). In 1957-1959 the Moscow Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Science of the USSR, where V.I. Sarianidi had begun to work, handed him the directorship of excavations in the delta of the Tedjen River in southern Turkmenistan (Harirud in Iran and Afghanistan). His team examined the Chalcolithic site of Geoksyur, where, besides multi-roomed houses of large rectangular adobe bricks separated by narrow streets. Collective burial chambers (tholoi), presumably serving as family vaults were found there for the first time in the south of Central Asia (Sarianidi 1959, 1959a, 1965). More or less detailed characteristics of the creative way of him are published (Mamedov, 1999; Litvinski, 2004; Dubova, 2014, 2014a, 2014b; Boroffka, 2013, 2014)

Spending the most time at the excavations Victor Sarianidi read all possible publications on archaeology not only of Middle Asia but all Near and Middle East as well. He found that a lot of analogies among the artefacts from different monuments from many territories and tried to understand how they were appeared. He understood that in the middle of III Millennium BC the xerothermic period at Mesopotamia and the nearby areas which became a cause of large drought which resulted in the migration of tribes. Many waves of communities abandoned their native places and moved to any directions they can: either to the West, East, South or North. One of such waves reached the territory of modern Turkmenistan, northern foothills of Kopet Dagħ mountains and dispersed together with the local populations further to the East – to Tejen (Harirud), Murghab and Zarafshan Rivers. Working in museums and libraries Victor Sarianidi draws his attention to the similarity of monumental architecture, forms of ceramic, bronze objects, stone artifacts, "narrative" stories on seals and amulets, reconstructed beliefs and practices on the

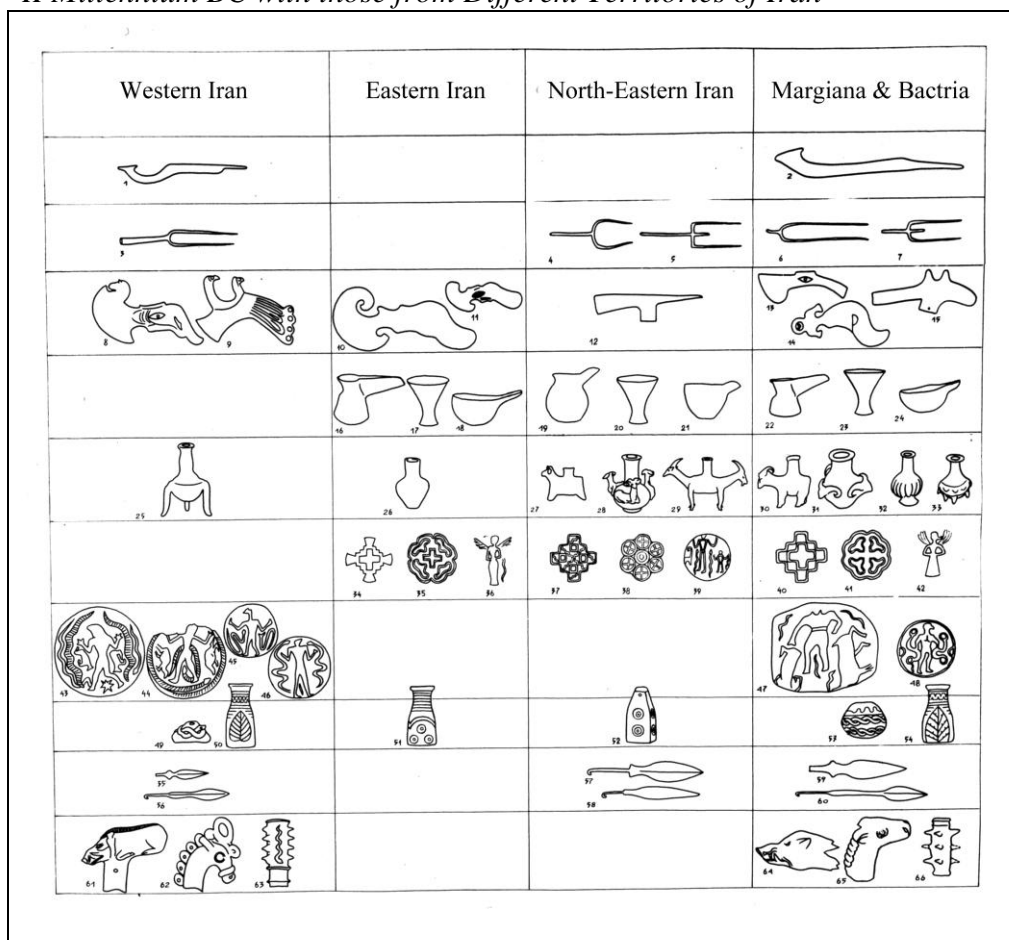
archaeological sites, scattered over a vast area from Mesopotamia, and sometimes modern Greece in the west to the Pamir mountains to the east, from the Iranian Kerman in the south to the north of the Zarafshan (Fig. 1, 2). Therefore, already in 1974, he formulated the idea of the existence of the Bactria-Margiana archaeological complex (BMAC), more fundamentally justifying it in his doctoral dissertation, later published as monograph (Sarianidi, 1974, 1975, 1977). It's very important to underline that similarities have taken place with the local features of cultures, those roots going back to the more ancient epochs (see f.ex.: Tosi, Salvatori, 1997).

Figure 1. *Similarities of Goods of the End of III – II Millennium BC from Different Territories*



Source: Sarianidi, 1990

Figure 2. Comparison of Goods from Margiana and Bactria of the End of III – II Millennium BC with those from Different Territories of Iran



Source: Sarianidi, 1990

Thrust studies in the Karakum Desert, conducted by Victor Sarianidi for almost 60 years, allowed him to find archaeological evidence for the existence of a whole new country, previously known only in the Behistun inscription of Darius the king as the Margush and mention in the Avesta as Moura. Already by 1990, it was clear that in ancient delta of Murghab River in the end of III – in II Millennium BC there were more than 200 settlements with the BMAC culture (Sarianidi, 1990). Only few of them were excavated. Only one but the largest of them, Gonur Depe (2300-1600 BC) excavated almost completely gave so many impressive and brilliant materials which show connections with different regions of the ancient world. There, in the possible capital of Margush country on the square of 25-30 ha were unearthed architectural complexes of palace and some that Sarianidi identified with temples; a huge variety of ovens, kilns, furnaces and hearths, the study of which is still waiting to be explored, very interesting engineering structures (including drainage and cleaning ones); complicated ritual facilities, some of which are related to the animal burials (sheep, dogs, donkeys, bulls) described for this territory for the first time; a complex of elite burial structures that brought sensational finds of mosaic

compositions, unique both in technique and by subject, as well as superb examples of jewelry, arts and crafts, glyptic and sphragistics amounting to hundreds items (Sarianidi, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2008a; Sarianidi, Dubova, 2013).

Continuing his reflection and analysis of the similarities and differences in cultures around the Bronze Age world Victor Sarianidi paid special attention on the images on the seals and amulets because he as well as many other specialists thought, that these “pictures”, symbols, compositions are a kind of inscriptions or “books”, where myths, legend and the whole world outlook of the ancient people were presented (Sarianidi, 1998). Investigation of these distinctive objects indicates that, for all its originality, the BMAC shows clear parallels to the seals and amulets of Iran (especially Elam) and Mesopotamia. Famous French archaeologist Pierre Amiet was the first who draw attention to the fact that these parallels are not limited to Mesopotamia but extend as far as Syria and Anatolia (Amiet, 1986). Excavations at Margiana sites such as Togolok 1 and especially Gonur Depe brought information that there for example were produced seals and amulets depicting anthropomorphic bird-headed figures, shown sometimes on their knees and with one arm lowered and the other raised. They recall figures on Syro-Hittite glyptics and figures from Anatolian seals (Karahoyik) who wear double girdles around their waists that directly correspond to details of Bactrian drawings (Collon, 1987, no. 821; Amiet, 1986, fig. 198-a).

The same type of kneeling bird-headed figure, although more generalized and schematic, V. Sarianidi found on rhomboid amulets from Gonur Depe. The only difference is that the bird-people on the Margiana amulets are shown with lowered arms and without wings (evidently because the shape of the amulet left no space to depict them). It is significant that animals with birds' heads that closely resemble the eagle-headed griffins of Syro-Hittite glyptic art often appear on the reverse sides of these Margiana amulets (Schaeffer-Forrer, 1983). Moreover, these animals are extremely popular figures in local glyptics.

One variant of the bird-person figures from Bactria and Margiana is a silver seal cast in the shape of a kneeling figure with curved wings instead of arms. Amiet notes that it bears such a close resemblance to an analogous depiction from Syria of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries B. C. that it is unlikely that these figures originated in both countries independently (Amiet, 1986, p. 197, fig. 186). V. Sarianidi mentioned that some Margiana amulets bear essentially the same image of a tutelary spirit as that in Syrian and Aegean world glyptic art (f. ex. a kneeling winged spirit from Cyprus, Larnaca region dated to the Bronze Age – Schaeffer-Forrer, 1983, p. 67, fig. A-21.7) (Sarianidi, 1994, p. 27).

Very popular at Gonur Depe were images of anthropomorphic human figures shown with animals they have overcome are a variant of the "master/mistress of animals" motif. On the impression of a cylinder seal on a locally manufactured vessel the central figure is a nude winged human with a bird's head and a long beak turned in profile. On either side, he holds up a winged goat with long curved horns by its legs. Eagles in a heraldic pose and

small flying birds appear between the repetitions of the main figures (Fig. 3 by Sarianidi, 1994, p. 29). Later interesting compartment seal with a man with two goats in his hands was found (Fig. 4). Similar images of bird-people, usually seated on thrones, are depicted in the ancient Bactrian pantheon (Sarianidi, 1986).

Figure 3. *Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan. Bird-headed Man on the Impression of the Cylinder Seal on the Ceramic Vessel*



Figure 4. *Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan. Bronze Compartment Seal with the Image of the Standing Man with Two Goats*



Distinct parallels between the image of the "master/mistress of animals" in Syro-Hittite art (and that of Crete as well) and Bactrian glyptics have been noted in the literature. One Bactrian compartment seal in the form of a standing male and two lions with heads turned to look to the rear looks much like a Cypriot seal from Enkomi (Schaeffer-Forrer, 1983, p. 56). P. Amiet (1986) argues convincingly that Syrian ties to Bactria are confirmed by an eagle-

shaped stone pendant found in burials at Ebla from the eighteenth-early seventeenth century B.C. Very similar pendant (Fig. 5a) and a stone metal-casting mold (Fig. 5b) were found at Gonur Depe. The similarity between these Aegean and Bactrian works is so close and so significant that P. Amiet wonders whether the mythological figure from Crete might not have come to Bactria via Syria (Amiet, 1986, p. 198).

Figure 5. *Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan. Eagle-Shaped Stone Pendant from the Tomb № 2938 (a) and Stone Metal-Casting Mold (b)*

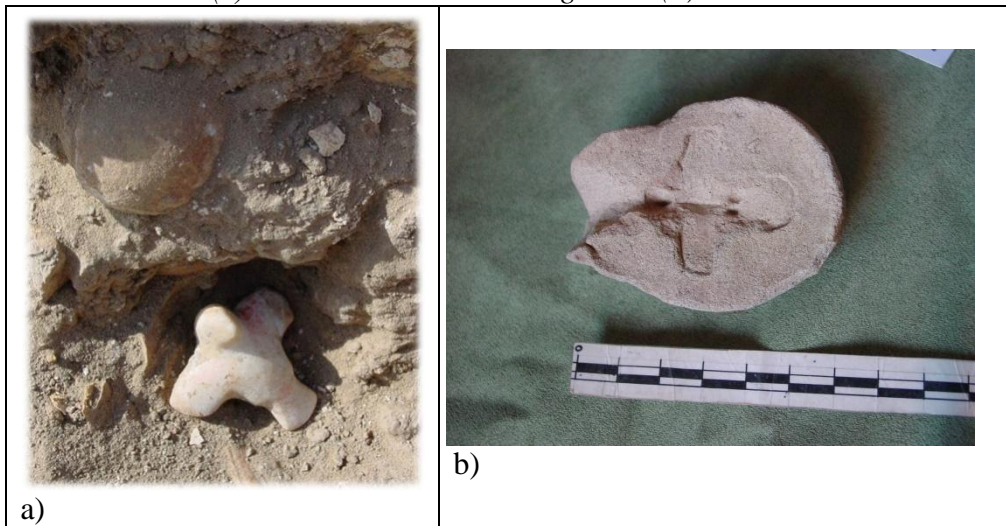


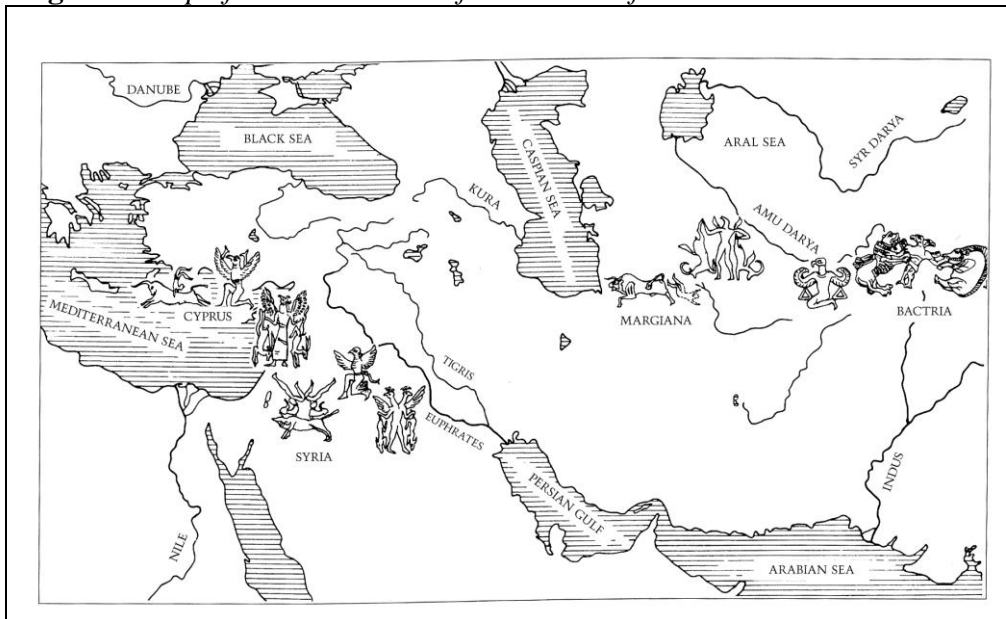
Figure 6. *Togolok 1, Turkmenistan. The Cylinder Seal and its Impression*



One more interesting subject, as wrote V. Sarianidi, can be seen on another Margiana cylinder seal. It was excavated from a burial at Togolok 1 site and illustrates these long-range connections even more compellingly. Almost all of the characters in this narrative composition are depicted as humans with monkey-like animal heads (fig. 6). The central section of the scene is focused on two such figures that together hold a high pole over which an acrobat jumps. Musician with a drum, a kneeling figure who holds an indistinguishable

object and a bull stands on its hind legs in a “human” pose are around. There are a wolf or a dog and, evidently, the god Shamash with a scepter in each hand also. Edith Porada supports the idea that Akkadian priests used animal masks in religious rituals, but the overall practice goes back to Hurrian (Mitannian) traditions (Porada, 1979, p. 5). It can be possible to think that the Margiana figures with animal heads also originated in Mitannian-style glyptics. This seal transmits a scene of ritual festivals that may be compared to the Dionysian mysteries in which masked participants, accompanied by tambourines, performed religious ceremonies, chief among which evidently were acrobatic games. All of the basic elements of this narrative composition have obvious parallels in Syro-Hittite glyptics, but the subject itself (the acrobat) probably originated in motifs of Aegean art (Sarianidi, 1994, p. 27-28). In this respect, a Syrian cylinder seal depicting a bull and a pair of acrobats jumping over it – a motif which is assumed to have migrated from the Aegean world – is representative (Porada, 1985, p. 98, fig. 23). That similar works were known in Anatolia is illustrated by a depiction from Tell Achana-Alalakh VII on which two acrobats also jump over a bull. It has now been established that Syrian seals bearing this subject were known in mainland Greece by approximately 1700 B.C, and in that case the famous acrobat frescos from Crete evidently originated at a slightly later period (Sarianidi, 1994, p. 29-30).

Figure 7. *Map of the Distribution of Similar Motifs Found on Seals and Amulets*



Source: Sarianidi, 1994, p. 34

The acrobat-bull image appears on a stone amulet shaped like a two-humped Bactrian camel found during the excavations of the temple of Togolok 21. On the reverse, one sees the image of a charging bull attacked by eagles; behind the bull arc the partially preserved legs of a man, evidently an acrobat, who was shown hurdling across its back (Sarianidi, 1994, p. 30).

In the 1980th it was not possible to determine the origin of the various motifs and the direction of their diffusion, but V. Sarianidi mentioned that Syro-Hittite parallels can be dated no earlier than the beginning of the II Mill. BC. He wrote: “It was in the second millennium B.C. that contacts between the Aegean world and Syria were at their closest and in the second half of that millennium were strongest at Cyprus. H. Frankfort has adduced evidence of a strong Syrian influence on Minoan art from the early second millennium as well (Frankfort, 1939, p. 288). From the beginning of the II Mill. BC, cultural exchange, most easily traced in ancient glyptics and sphragistics, extended from Anatolian Syria, and Asia Minor in general, in various directions. The westernmost points were Cyprus and Crete as well as mainland Greece, and the easternmost were Bactria and Margiana” (Sarianidi, 1994, p. 33) (Fig. 7).

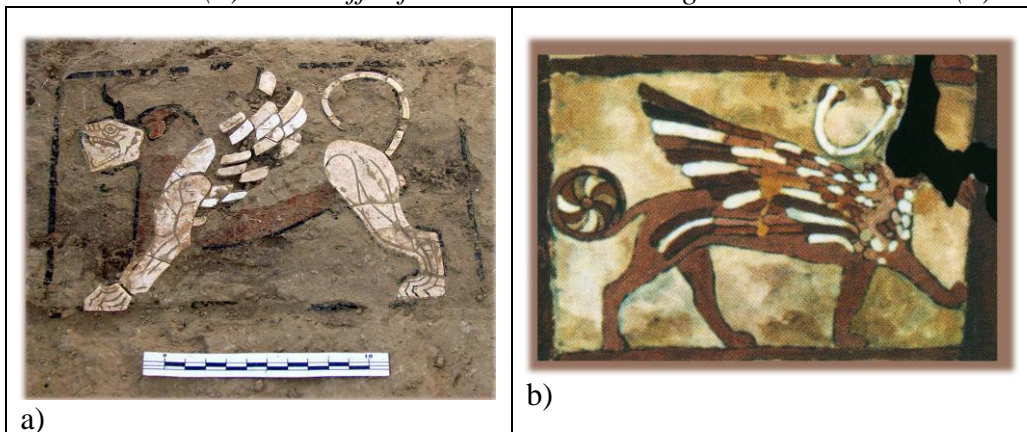
Now, after more than 40 years of excavations at Gonur Depe culture connection between South Turkmenistan, Syria and Mediterranean world received more new evidences. Here I will focus on only two examples. First one is a specific item, so named in scientific literature “harpoons”: long bronze object slightly curved on one end and with the handle on the other. More precisely, they would, of course, called “rods”. They were known in Bactria, but not from the scientific excavations. At Gonur three of them were found in two tombs (Fig. 8a). Very similar object one can see in the hands of Ishtar Goddess, who gives a ring - symbol of rulership on Mari's king on the mural from the palace of king Zimri-Lim (circa 1778-1758 BC) at ancient Mari city on the Euphrates (Fig. 8b). One more parallel of this item in form can be seen in Egyptian sword khopesh, which was very popular in the New Kingdom (Fig. 8c). Many pharaohs were depicted with it. Khopesh fell into disuse of Egyptian troops around 1300 BC. This weapon has been adopted from the Egyptians and the Romans under the new name “kopes” have gained immense popularity in the army of Alexander the Great.

Figure 8. “Harpoons” or “Rods” from the Tombs of Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan (a) and in the Hand of Ishtar Goddess (her foot is on a lion's back) on the Wall Drawing in the Mari Palace (b) (Syria, II Mill. BC); Egyptian Sword Khopesh (c)



Second very important example is fine mosaics found at Gonur Depe in Turkmenistan (Sarianidi, Dubova, 2013a). For the first time the compositions a main part of which was a drawing and some elements made from the stone insertions were found in the royal sepultures of Gonur Depe. All of them have C14 dates 2250-2300 BC. The mosaics decorated some walls and wooden so named “boxes for treasures”. Maximum of compositions were destroyed (stay only separated insertions) but saved ones are quite revealing. The most interesting are mosaics from the tomb 3210: so named “Griffin in cartouche”, “Eagles in heraldic pose” and “Pairs of Griffins”. The position of eagles is very similar to those on the Gonur pendant and stone metal-casting mold. The griffins are depicted artistically, and using the same methods as in Syrian Mari. Posture of fantastic creatures, its bent tail and holding high head – all are very similar (Fig. 9). It can be said that both pictures look like made in “one artistic school” despite the fact that one of them, the Syrian, was created almost 1,000 years later than another.

Figure 9. “Griffin in Cartouche” from the Royal Tomb 3210 of Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan (a) and Griffin from the Wall Drawing in the Mari Palace (b)

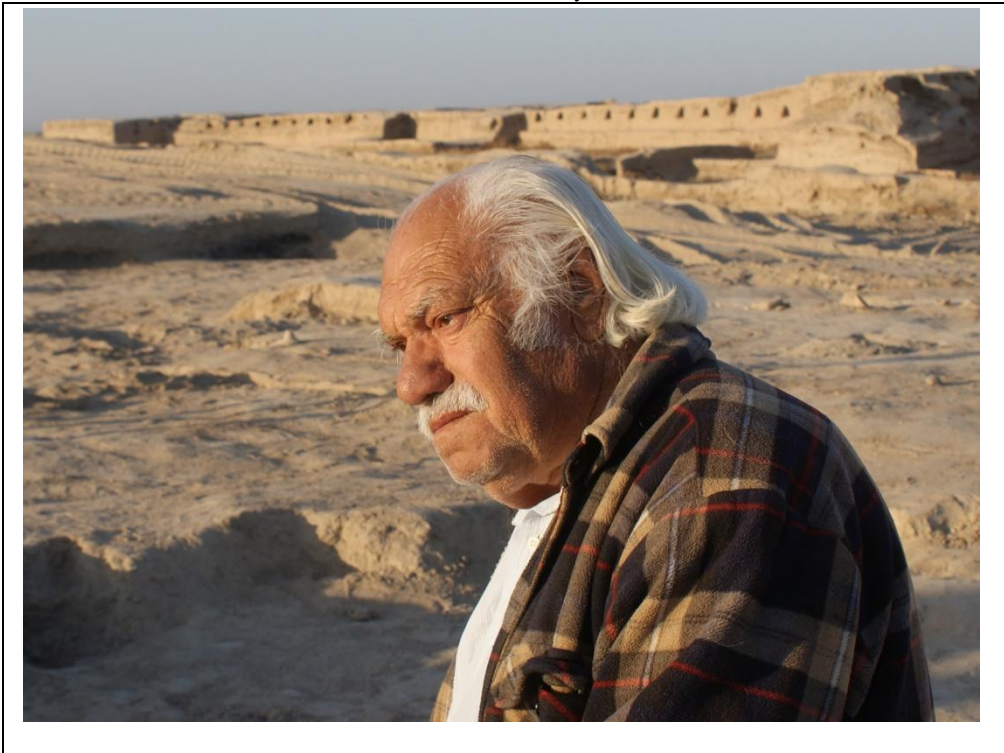


The huge literature is devoted to the analysis of griffins. This image is widely distributed throughout the ancient world. And different cultures have their particular traits. But the main idea of this text is very simple: only to show some new images and their analogues.

BMAC has also some local centers with specific characteristic. One of such center is Margush country in the ancient alluvial fan of Murghab River, on the territory of modern Turkmenistan. Excavations there showed the highest level of culture, art, architecture, craftsmanship of the people who inhabited it in the Bronze Age. Based on the obtained material it can be said that almost four thousand years ago life was flourishing here and that a highly developed center of the world Oriental civilization. Victor Sarianidi showed that the tribes of this country worshipped Fire, Water and Earth. The tribes that inhabited these areas had complicated cults of sacred animals, sheep and domesticated horses in particular. Fire played an important role in the rituals of many ancient peoples of the world. From the very first days of agricultural farming the Earth was considered sacred and even nowadays in some remote places of the world

the people worship it. Separately all these “pure natures” were worshipped in different places but it is remarkable that only here, in Margiana and Bactria, more precisely at one of its most significant monuments at Gonur, all three of them were worshipped with an even respect and care. The same is true regarding the worship of the Soma-Haoma drink and the plant used for its production. On the basis of these or similar to them traditions, rituals and beliefs in a much later period the Zoroastrianism could have been born. Based on this fact V. Sarianidi dares to call this period under discussion the proto- or early-Zoroastrianism (Sarianidi, 1998a, 2010; Σαργιαννίδης, 2008).

Figure 10. *Victor Sarianidi near Gunur Depe in Turkmenistan – the Site which he has Found and Excavated more than 40 years*



Many International conferences with the possibilities to visit the archaeological sites in the Kara Kum desert were organized thanks to the President of Turkmenistan. Many of the world's leading experts agreed with the notion about the existence of the new center of Oriental civilization. But the idea about the roots of Zoroastrianism are taken now only by few of them. But it must be mentioned that the number of scholars supporting and this conclusion of the famous archaeologist is growing year by year.

His discoveries were highly appreciated by the leaders of Turkmenistan and Greece. Victor Sarianidi is the Laureate of the Makhtumkuli Prize (Turkmenistan, 2000), awarded by the Order of "Civic virtue" (Greece, 2002), Order "For the large contribution to the development of independent Turkmenistan" (2009). He is a member of the Anthropological Society of Greece, Foreign Member of the Academia dei Lincei (Italy). He has

commemorative medals of Crete University, of Societies of Pontian Greek of cities of Thessaloniki and Athens, Golden Wreath of Pontian Society of Thessaloniki and others. According to the decision of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan in 2012 Victor Sarianidi awarded the title "Honorary Academician of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan."

Figure 11. *President of Greece K. Papoulis hands Professor V. Sarianidi a state award - the Order of "Civic virtue", 2002*



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