



SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF SYNCRETIZATION IN TRANSOXIANA IN THE 7TH– 9TH CENTURIES

Ungalov Azizbek Amiriddin ogli,

Doctor of Philosophy in History (PhD),

1st-year doctoral student of the Department of History of
Uzbekistan,

Faculty of History, Samarkand State University named after
Sharof Rashidov

Tel.: +998 90 100-10-22; E-mail:

azizbek.ungalov111111@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7600-941X>

Abstract. *This article examines the social and cultural foundations of religious-cultural syncretization in Transoxiana (Movarounnahr) during the 7th–9th centuries. Its aim is to argue that syncretization was neither a superficial mixture of religions nor a mere survival of pre-Islamic traditions, but a complex process shaped by urban life, local elites, merchant networks, household ritual, sacred space, visual culture, and the gradual progress of Islamization. Written and archaeological sources, ossuaries, wall paintings, numismatic and epigraphic data are analysed through source criticism and historical-comparative methods. The findings indicate that syncretization was a transformative process in which Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Manichaean, Christian, local and Islamic elements coexisted, competed, and were reinterpreted within a changing social world.*

Keywords: Transoxiana, syncretization, Islamization, Sogdiana, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, local cults, sacred space, ossuary, cultural transformation.

Annotatsiya. *Maqolada VII–IX asrlarda Movarounnahrda diniy-madaniy sinkretizatsiyaning ijtimoiy va madaniy asoslari tahlil etiladi. Tadqiqotning maqsadi sinkretizatsiyaning dinlarning yuzaki aralashuvi yoki islomgacha an'analarning oddiy saqlanib qolishi sifatida emas, balki shahar hayoti, mahalliy zodagonlar, savdo tarmoqlari, maishiy marosimlar, muqaddas makonlar, vizual madaniyat va bosqichma-bosqich islomlashuv shakllantirgan murakkab jarayon sifatida asoslashdir. Yozma va arxeologik manbalar, ossuariylar, devoriy suratlar,*

numizmatik hamda epigrafik dalillar manbashunoslik va qiyosiy-tarixiy metodlar asosida o'rganildi. Natijada sinkretizatsiya zardushtiylik, buddizm, moniylik, xristianlik, mahalliy kultlar va islom unsurlarining o'zaro yashashi, raqobati va qayta talqini orqali kechgan transformatsion jarayon bo'lgani aniqlandi.

Kalit so'zlar: *Movarounnahr, sinkretizatsiya, islomlashuv, Sug'diyona, zardushtiylik, buddizm, mahalliy kultlar, muqaddas makon, ossuariy, madaniy transformatsiya.*

Аннотация. *В статье анализируются социальные и культурные основы религиозно-культурной синкретизации в Трансоксиане (Мавераннахре) в VII–IX веках. Цель исследования – обосновать синкретизацию не как поверхностное смешение религий и не как простое сохранение доисламских традиций, а как сложный процесс, формируемый городской жизнью, местной знатью, торговыми сетями, домашними обрядами, сакральными пространствами, визуальной культурой и постепенной исламизацией. Письменные и археологические источники, оссуарии, настенные росписи, нумизматические и эпиграфические данные изучены на основе источниковедческого и сравнительно-исторического методов. Установлено, что синкретизация была трансформационным процессом сосуществования, конкуренции и переосмысления зороастрийских, буддийских, манихейских, христианских, местных и исламских элементов.*

Ключевые слова: *Мавераннахр, синкретизация, исламизация, Согдиана, зороастризм, буддизм, местные культы, сакральное пространство, оссуарий, культурная трансформация.*

INTRODUCTION. The two centuries that followed the Arab campaigns into Transoxiana (Movarounnahr) form one of the most consequential transitions in the history of Central Asia. Islam began to spread in the region during the second half of the seventh century, and its arrival set in motion deep changes in religious, political and cultural life [Iminova, 2024, p. 31–33]. Yet the older order did not simply vanish. Before the conquest, religion in Sogdiana was a layered affair: the

indigenous tradition was an Eastern Iranian form of Mazdaism, alongside which Manichaeism, Christianity and Buddhism had taken root as introduced faiths [Ashurov, 2020, p. 1–2]. Understanding what happened to this plural world after the conquest requires moving beyond the formal succession of doctrines.

The central problem addressed here is why syncretization in seventh- to ninth-century Transoxiana is best studied through its social and cultural foundations rather than through theology alone. Religion in Sogdiana never had an official creed imposed from above, a feature directly tied to the decentralized political structure of the Sogdian principalities [Gibson, 2025, p. 4–6]. Such a setting did not produce a single confessional authority capable of policing belief; instead, it produced overlapping ritual practices, shared spaces and a habit of absorbing outside elements. The argument advanced below is that syncretization was not an accidental blending but a historically specific process generated by urban society, elite patronage, merchant mobility, household devotion and the uneven advance of Islamic rule.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. The study draws on written sources, archaeological reports, numismatic and epigraphic data, iconographic material, architectural remains and burial evidence preserved in the relevant scholarly literature. Written testimony ranges from Chinese pilgrim accounts to early Arabic administrative records; the material record includes fire temples, ossuaries, sealings, coins and the wall paintings of Sogdian houses. Four methods are combined. Source criticism is used to separate the factual content of each report from its interpretive framing, especially where confessional or political bias is involved. Historical-comparative analysis sets the Sogdian heartland against its Chach, Bactrian and steppe peripheries. Contextual analysis reconstructs the social setting of ritual objects, treating a defaced mural or a household idol as evidence of a relationship rather than an isolated artefact. Finally, religious-anthropological interpretation is applied to distinguish continuity, adaptation, reinterpretation and syncretization proper, so that the same practice is not read as all of these at once.

RESULTS. The social actors of syncretization were diverse and unequal. At the top stood the local landed elites and city rulers whose decentralized authority left religious life unregulated and therefore open [Gibson, 2025, p. 4–6]. Political power could rest in unexpected hands: at the time of the early campaigns Bukhara was governed by a woman, Khātūn, who ruled on behalf of her son Tughshāda and used the city's wealth to hold her position [Foltz et al., 2025, p. 3–5]. Beneath the elite, merchants formed the most mobile carriers of religious ideas. Sogdian scribes translated Buddhist, Manichaean and Christian texts into the languages of the Silk Road, and some of the earliest translators of Buddhist scriptures were themselves of Sogdian origin [Lerner, 2018, p. 9–11]. Manichaeism, mobile and adaptable, suited these culture-crossing merchant communities particularly well, presented in the west as a form of Christianity and in the east as a form of Buddhism [Lerner, 2018, p. 11–13]. On the rural and steppe fringe, conversion came later and through different channels; the geographer Ibn Ḥawqal recorded thousands of Turkic families between Isfijab and Shash accepting Islam in a mountain-steppe zone [Maidanali et al., 2020, p. 27–29].

Sacred space was the physical ground on which these groups met. Religious practice shaped both common and individual spaces, some devoted to a single faith and others shared between several [Ashurov, 2020, p. 13–15]. The excavated temples of Panjikent show two sanctuaries coexisting, one containing a four-columned atesh gah with a fire altar and an adjoining room holding a water container for ablutions [Shroff, 2016, p. 8–10]. At Kanka in the Chach oasis, horse skeletons found in a temple have been linked to a New Year sacrifice to the souls of royal ancestors, a rite echoed in Chinese descriptions of Sogdian practice [Ashurov, 2020, p. 23–25]. The same site preserved a Manichaean episcopal sealing naming Bishop Sānak, son of Kawāt [Lerner, 2018, p. 12–14], while crosses and related symbols there point to a Christian community as well [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 4–6]. To the south, in Bactria-Tokharistan, the Chinese monk Xuanzang counted roughly a hundred Buddhist temples and three thousand monks, financed by Silk Road

traders [Foltz et al., 2025, p. 1–3]. Institutional Buddhism in the Sogdian core, however, was already thin: the Korean pilgrim Hye Ch'o found only a single monastery and a single monk at Samarkand in 727 [Gibson, 2025, p. 9–11].

Ritual practice and material culture carried strong regional signatures. The Central Asian form of Mazdaism absorbed indigenous nature worship and was distinguished above all by its burial customs [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4]. Exposure of the dead was followed by the preservation of dried bones in clay ossuaries decorated with images of the Amesha Spentas, an Eastern Iranian variant of the practice [Shroff, 2016, p. 1–3]. A fragment preserving a version of the Ashem Vohu prayer, nearly three centuries older than any surviving Avestan manuscript and written in an Old Iranian idiom, attests the depth of this liturgical tradition [Shroff, 2016, p. 5–7]. Cult images were designed to move between public spaces and private homes, and when public worship contracted under Islam many of its elements were carried into new traditions rather than erased [Ashurov, 2020, p. 34–36]. The persistence of this domestic layer is still visible in later Uzbek family ceremonies, where the circling of a bridal couple around fire and the apotropaic use of soot preserve recognizable Zoroastrian gestures [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4].

The visual and textual record offers the clearest signs of fusion. In Sogdian painting the Iranian wind god Vayu was conflated with the Indian Shiva, producing an image that was neither purely Iranian nor Indian but distinctively Sogdian [Lerner, 2018, p. 6–8]. Temple murals and sculptures registered a constant exchange between Zoroastrian and Buddhist motifs [Iminova, 2024, p. 30–32], and a Buddha with a standing devotee placed in a domestic reception hall at Panjikent turned that room into what can be called a space of religious dialogue [Ashurov, 2020, p. 15–17]. Textual syncretism went further still: a ritual manuscript combines a Buddhist mandala and the deity Mahākāla with a Zoroastrian hymn to an Iranian wind god within a single document [Gibson, 2025, p. 12–14], while Chinese sources report

that the people of Sogdiana revered the Buddha's teaching yet also enshrined Zoroastrian gods [Gibson, 2025, p. 9–11].

The relationship between Islamization and the older order can be read most precisely at Panjikent. About forty per cent of the houses of the period before 722 had reception halls richly decorated with religious paintings; during the sack of that year the images were defaced and Arabic graffiti scrawled across them [Vaissière, 2020, p. 169–171]. Public sanctuaries were destroyed – one Panjikent temple was wholly burnt, and the rural temple of Jartepe was burned in the same phase [Vaissière, 2020, p. 166–168]. Within a single generation of the conquest of 705–712, by 728, the Sogdians were treated as *ḍimmī* and paid the *jizya* in its precise sense of a religiously grounded poll tax [Vaissière, 2020, p. 164–166]. Religious painting did not disappear but withdrew to the inner rooms of houses, protected on a private basis in line with the policy attributed to al-Ḥajjāj [Vaissière, 2020, p. 170–172]. Tellingly, when decoration resumed it sometimes showed a procession honouring a great book rather than the old pantheon, as if the Sogdians chose to present themselves as adherents of a Religion of the Book [Vaissière, 2020, p. 171–173]. In parallel, the Zoroastrians who remained shifted to a closed mode of devotion, retaining fire as a hidden symbol of the divine presence [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 3–5].

DISCUSSION. Read together, this evidence resists a single explanation, and the disagreements among the relevant studies are themselves instructive. One line of interpretation treats syncretization as the organic outcome of everyday coexistence: shared sanctuaries, mixed pantheons and bilingual ritual texts emerge naturally from a society that, lacking an imposed creed, met difference by adding gods rather than banning them [Gibson, 2025, p. 4–6]. A second line is more sceptical, arguing that the blending visible in coins and dedications was not a harmonious fusion at all but a strategic instrument – economic in the case of multilingual, multi-deity coinage meant to ease cross-cultural commerce, and political where rulers used religious plurality as a tool of consolidation [Mohammed, 2025, p. 114–116]. These readings

are not mutually exclusive. The merchant networks that made Manichaeism attractive were also the networks that demanded portable, negotiable symbols, and the same elites who tolerated diversity benefited from it. Network analysis indeed suggests that after periods of political fragmentation older religious and commercial nodes such as Samarkand and Bukhara remained resilient, sustaining exchange and allowing Buddhist and other elements to persist into the eve of Islamization [Mohammed, 2025, p. 116–117].

The conquest evidence forces a further distinction, since syncretization here was not always peaceful accretion. The defacement of murals and the conversion of the Sogdian elite's self-image into that of a People of the Book [Vaissière, 2020, p. 171–173] describe adaptation under pressure, in which a community reinterprets its own tradition to fit a new legal and political reality. This is analytically different from the direct continuity preserved in domestic fire customs [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4], from the symbolic reuse of an existing iconography, and from the later reinterpretation by which a pre-Islamic ancestor cult was gradually recast as the veneration of Muslim saints [Ungalov, 2025b, p. 40–42]. Treating all of these as one undifferentiated mixture obscures the very mechanisms that produced them.

The longer trajectory clarifies why Islam took root without erasing the cultural substrate. Islamization was gradual and frequently combined with the preservation of local traditions, with Bukhara and Samarkand becoming centres in which local values and Islamic norms were synthesized [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 6–8]. The flexibility of Hanafi jurisprudence and the work of early Sufi missionaries allowed Zoroastrian, Buddhist and shamanistic practices to be folded into an Islamic framework, yielding a distinctively Central Asian Islamic culture [Ungalov, 2025a, p. 74–76]. The prior monotheizing tendency within Tengri worship among the Turks may have eased acceptance of Islamic monotheism rather than opposing it outright [Maidanali et al., 2020, p. 26–28]. None of this supports the claim that old religions simply disappeared and were replaced; rather, symbols, rituals, spaces and social

identities were transformed, marginalized or absorbed within a changing cultural setting.

CONCLUSION. The evidence reviewed here supports several connected conclusions. First, syncretization in seventh- to ninth-century Transoxiana grew out of social structure, above all the decentralized authority that left religious life unregulated and open to exchange. Second, its principal agents were urban elites, mobile merchants and translators, women of the ruling houses, artisans and, later, rural and Turkic populations, each engaging older and newer traditions differently. Third, its cultural foundations lay in sacred space, burial custom, iconography, ritual text and household practice, where Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Manichaean and Christian elements visibly coexisted. Fourth, Islamization advanced unevenly and often by accommodation, pushing public devotion into private space while incorporating earlier elements rather than abolishing them. Fifth, the process must be parsed into distinct modes – continuity, symbolic reuse, ritual adaptation, reinterpretation and genuine syncretization – rather than flattened into a single notion of mixture. Sixth, the scholarly record itself is divided between organic and strategic readings of syncretism, and the most defensible position treats these as complementary. Taken together, syncretization in this period emerged from the interaction of local social structures, pre-Islamic cultural memory, urban and regional diversity, and the gradual spread of Islam; it was a process of transformation rather than of simple preservation or abrupt replacement.

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