



## PRE-ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF CENTRAL ASIA AS A BASIS FOR LATER SYNCRETISM

**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](mailto:azizbek.ungalov111111@gmail.com)

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

**Abstract.** *This article analyses how the pre-Islamic religious and cultural landscapes of Central Asia became the historical basis for later syncretism. Its aim is to present syncretism not as an accidental mixture arising on empty ground after Islamization, but as the continuation of a complex environment shaped over centuries by Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity and local cults, by sacred spaces, burial customs, visual culture and social memory. Written and archaeological sources, ossuaries, fire temples, wall paintings and numismatic data are examined through source-critical, comparative and landscape approaches. The findings indicate that later syncretism was a long transformation of sacred geography, ritual habit and cultural memory rather than a sudden fusion.*

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, pre-Islamic religions, religious landscape, cultural landscape, syncretism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, sacred space, material culture, cultural memory.*

**Annotatsiya.** *Maqolada islomgacha bo'lgan Markaziy Osiyoning diniy va madaniy landshaftlari keyingi sinkretizm uchun tarixiy zamin bo'lib xizmat qilgani tahlil etiladi. Tadqiqotning maqsadi sinkretizmi islomlashuvdan keyin bo'sh maydonda paydo bo'lgan tasodifiy aralashuv sifatida emas, balki zardushtiylik, buddizm, moniylik, xristianlik va mahalliy kultlar, muqaddas makonlar, dafn marosimlari, vizual madaniyat hamda ijtimoiy xotira asrlar davomida shakllantirgan murakkab muhitning davomi sifatida ko'rsatishdir. Yozma va*

arxeologik manbalar, ossuariylar, olov ibodatxonalari, devoriy suratlar va numizmatik dalillar manbashunoslik, qiyosiy hamda landshaft yondashuvi asosida o'rganildi. Natijada keyingi sinkretizm muqaddas geografiya, marosimiy odat va madaniy xotiraning uzoq muddatli transformatsiyasi ekani aniqlandi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Markaziy Osiyo, islomgacha dinlar, diniy landshaft, madaniy landshaft, sinkretizm, zardushtiylik, buddizm, muqaddas makon, moddiy madaniyat, madaniy xotira.

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется то, как доисламские религиозные и культурные ландшафты Центральной Азии стали исторической основой позднего синкретизма. Цель исследования – показать синкретизм не как случайное смешение, возникшее на пустом месте после исламизации, а как продолжение сложной среды, веками формировавшейся зороастризмом, буддизмом, манихейством, христианством и местными культами, сакральными пространствами, погребальными обрядами, визуальной культурой и социальной памятью. Письменные и археологические источники, оссуарии, храмы огня, настенные росписи и нумизматические данные изучены на основе источниковедческого, сравнительного и ландшафтного подходов. Установлено, что поздний синкретизм был длительной трансформацией сакральной географии, ритуальной привычки и культурной памяти.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, доисламские религии, религиозный ландшафт, культурный ландшафт, синкретизм, зороастризм, буддизм, сакральное пространство, материальная культура, культурная память.

**INTRODUCTION.** Discussions of religious syncretism in Central Asia frequently begin with the Islamic period, as if the encounter between Islam and local belief took place on neutral ground. The evidence points in the opposite direction. Long before the Arab campaigns, the region was a layered religious environment in which Zoroastrianism coexisted, often peacefully, with Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity and shamanistic cults [Soucek, 2000, p. 49–51]. Zoroastrianism in particular was among the most widely diffused beliefs, and its influence remained

perceptible well after Islam arrived [Iminova, 2024, p. 30–32]. To understand what later became “syncretic Islam,” one must first reconstruct the landscape on which it was built.

The problem addressed here is conceptual as much as historical. A religious landscape is not a list of faiths; it is the spatial and social organization of belief – the temples, fire platforms, burial grounds, trade routes, painted halls and remembered places through which religion was practised and transmitted. Already in the Achaemenid period the sacred landscape of Central Asia was composed of diverse cults growing out of local traditions, among them the widely venerated deity of the Oxus river [Wu, 2023, p. 12–14]. The argument advanced below is that later syncretism did not emerge from a cultural vacuum but was historically prepared by these older landscapes, whose sacred geography, ritual habits, visual imagination and regional identities proved durable enough to survive, be reclassified, or be reinterpreted during and after Islamization.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS.** The study draws on written sources, archaeological reports, numismatic and iconographic data, architectural remains, burial evidence and modern scholarly literature preserved in the relevant source base. Four complementary approaches are combined. Source criticism separates documented fact from interpretive framing, which is essential where later ethnographic categories such as “survival” colour the description of earlier practice. Historical-comparative analysis and regional comparison set Sogdiana, Khwarazm, Bactria and Khurasan against one another rather than treating Central Asia as uniform. A landscape approach reads temples, fire platforms and burial grounds as elements of an organized sacred geography, not as isolated monuments. Finally, religious-anthropological interpretation is used to distinguish direct continuity, symbolic reuse, ritual adaptation and later reinterpretation, so that persistence and transformation are not conflated. Each method is tied to the concrete material: a fire platform is read spatially, an ossuary funerarily, a mural iconographically.

**RESULTS.** The first finding concerns regional diversity. The pre-Islamic religious map of Central Asia was plural at every level. In the south, Khurasan was dominated by a dualistic Zoroastrianism centred on fire veneration and distinctive burial rites, a tradition already established in the region by roughly the early first millennium BCE and coexisting with other cults rather than suppressing them [Soucek, 2000, p. 49–51]. Bactria under Achaemenid rule sustained followers of local land and river spirits alongside foreign deities, including the Babylonian Bel, an unusually wide pantheon for a single province [Wu, 2023, p. 30–32]. The Kushan expansion added a deep Buddhist layer that reshaped the religious landscape of the whole region [Iminova, 2024, p. 30–32], while in the eastern reaches of Central Asia religious texts and images attest a remarkable blending of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Zoroastrian ideas [Foltz, 2010, p. 6–8].

The second finding concerns sacred space and ritual geography. The fire cult left the most legible spatial signature. Archaeological work has suggested that fire temples originated in Central Asia and only later spread westward toward Iran, which reverses the conventional assumption of a purely Iranian export [Wu, 2023, p. 13–15]. The excavations at Qizyltepa revealed a monumental fire platform roughly ten by twelve metres and some eleven metres high, its summit preserving only ash and charcoal – direct material proof of organized fire ritual in the Achaemenid horizon [Wu, 2023, p. 17–19]. Burial constituted a second, equally distinctive ritual zone. The Central Asian form of Mazdaism absorbed indigenous nature worship tied to agricultural cycles and to ideas of mortality and rebirth, and it was marked above all by its burial customs, in which exposed and cleaned bones were gathered into decorated ossuaries [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4]. Sacred geography therefore operated at two poles, the fire platform and the burial ground, both of which would later attract Muslim reuse.

The third finding concerns material culture and the visual signs of interaction. Temple murals and sculpture register a continuous exchange in which Zoroastrian and Buddhist motifs appear together, and traces of contact between several cultures

are visible within single artistic programmes [Iminova, 2024, p. 30–32]. The most thoroughly syncretic tradition was Manichaeism, whose deliberate and unusual fusion of elements made it, in effect, a religion built for a plural environment [Foltz, 2010, p. 6–8]. Christianity left its own material traces: at the Durmontepa settlement an equal-armed Nestorian cross found in a grave indicates that the deceased belonged to the Church of the East, embedded within an otherwise mixed religious population [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 4–6].

The fourth finding concerns the social carriers of these landscapes. Merchants were the most important. Sogdian and other Silk Road traders crossed Central Asia continuously from antiquity into the late medieval period [Soucek, 2000, p. 45–47], and they did not merely move goods; they conversed, formed social ties and carried new religious impressions back to their homes [Foltz, 2010, p. 7–9]. The diffusion of universalizing, missionary religions such as Buddhism and Manichaeism expanded in parallel with this commercial activity [Yusuf et al., 2023, p. 130–132]. Political authority formed a second carrier: the petty princes of Transoxiana, content with small but prosperous domains, acknowledged the suzerainty of the Turkic nomads, an arrangement that kept the religious field decentralized and open [Soucek, 2000, p. 45–47].

The fifth finding concerns cultural memory as the bridge to later syncretism. Older sacred forms did not vanish; they were retained at the level of habit. The reverence for fire is still discernible in Uzbek family ceremonies, notably in the circling of a bridal couple around flames [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4]. The pre-Islamic worship of a supreme sky god, Tangri, conceived in some traditions as a male-female pair, Tangri-Umai, preserved a framework into which later monotheism could be received [Sultanova, 2011, p. 1–3], while older female deities survived in transformed guise in figures such as Bibi-Seshanba, still revered as a protector of women [Sultanova, 2011, p. 1–3]. Such cosmological memory persisted even in decorative art, where the embroidered suzani encoded a pre-Islamic image of cosmic harmony [Sultanova, 2011, p. 100–102].

The sixth finding concerns the mechanics of reinterpretation during Islamization. The process was gradual and legally flexible: the adaptability of Hanafi jurisprudence and the work of Sufi missionaries folded Zoroastrian, Buddhist and shamanistic practices into an Islamic framework and produced a distinctively Central Asian Islamic culture between the eighth and tenth centuries [Ungalov, 2025, p. 74–76]. Sufi lodges and shrines were frequently established on pre-Islamic holy places – springs, caves and burial mounds – so that the new sacred geography overlay the old [Ungalov, 2023, p. 38–40]. Ritual forms migrated rather than disappearing: the circular dance and drum of the shaman found a counterpart in the vocal zikr and frame drum of certain Sufi orders, and instruments such as the qobiz entered Yasawi practice [Kurmanbek et al., 2025, p. 1–3]. The persistence was uneven in time; in some communities full Islamization was not complete until the late nineteenth century, and shamans were recorded performing traditional rites using Qur’anic verses and Arabic letters [Weller, 2023, p. 3–5].

**DISCUSSION.** These findings support a reading of later syncretism as historically prepared rather than accidental, but they also require care, because the evidence has been interpreted in more than one way. One body of scholarship emphasizes deep continuity, treating contemporary practice as the visible residue of pre-Islamic belief; recent survey data, for instance, report very high participation in practices such as the forty-day chilla and shrine visitation, and read these as enduring pre-Islamic elements within Muslim devotion [Jurayev et al., 2026, p. 423–425]. A second body of scholarship is more cautious about the very language of “survival,” noting that the category was shaped by Tsarist and Soviet ethnography with its own assumptions and should not be taken at face value [Weller, 2023, p. 2–4]. The most defensible position holds these together: the older landscapes were real and durable, but their continuation was always mediated by reclassification, not mechanical preservation.

For this reason the analysis must distinguish carefully between modes of persistence. Direct continuity is visible in the household fire customs that carry an

explicit Zoroastrian gesture [Abdukadyr kyzy et al., 2025, p. 2–4]. Symbolic reuse appears where Sufi shrines occupy pre-Islamic sacred ground, transferring the sanctity of a place rather than its doctrine [Ungalov, 2023, p. 38–40]. Ritual adaptation is at work when shamanic dance and drum are reread as zikr [Kurmanbek et al., 2025, p. 1–3]. Social memory operates in the conversion of a sky-god framework and older goddesses into received and renamed figures [Sultanova, 2011, p. 1–3]. Treating all of these as one undifferentiated “mixture” obscures the distinct historical mechanisms that produced them.

The decisive theoretical point is that Islamization in Central Asia is better described as indigenization than as replacement. As the most influential study of the question argues, formerly polytheistic Turkic and Mongol populations did not abandon their inherited culture upon accepting Islam; they domesticated the new faith, and the adoption of Islam is more accurately understood as cultural blending than as cultural substitution [DeWeese, 1994]. This conclusion is consistent with the regional evidence assembled above. A landscape already organized around fire platforms, ossuary burial, monastic way-stations, merchant networks and a decentralized political order did not simply yield to a new religion; it supplied the spatial, ritual and cognitive materials out of which a local form of Islam was assembled. Where the older order had been plural and accommodating, the new order inherited that disposition.

**CONCLUSION.** The evidence reviewed here supports several connected conclusions. First, pre-Islamic Central Asia was not a religious blank but a structured landscape in which Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity and local cults coexisted across distinct regions. Second, this landscape was spatial and material as much as doctrinal, organized around fire temples and platforms, ossuary burial, painted halls and the deity-laden geography of rivers and provinces. Third, its principal carriers were merchants, priests, ruling houses and ordinary households, and its main channels were the trade routes that moved goods, texts and religious impressions together. Fourth, cultural memory preserved older cosmologies, female

deities and ritual gestures in forms suffice enough to be received into a new religious setting. Fifth, Islamization proceeded gradually and by accommodation, through legal flexibility, Sufi mediation and the reuse of existing sacred places, rather than by abrupt erasure. Sixth, later syncretism must therefore be parsed into direct continuity, symbolic reuse, ritual adaptation, social memory and reinterpretation, not flattened into a single notion of mixture. Taken together, the later syncretism of Central Asia was historically rooted in its pre-Islamic religious and cultural landscapes, which furnished a durable foundation of sacred geography, ritual practice, visual imagination and cultural memory that continued to shape the region long after conversion.

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