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THE NAKHSHEB PLAQUE WITH MASKS

This article examines a terracotta plaque recently discovered at the Shullyuktepa ancient settlement (medieval Nesef), where human occupation shifted from Yerkurgan – a large urban center in ancient times during in the 5th and 6th centuries. The plaque, shaped as a thin trapezoid, yet almost square, is made of a yellowish-brown clay. The tile has been fractured into two pieces. Its height is 5.5 cm, the width along the upper edge is 5.5 cm and 4.2 cm along the lower edge. It varies from 2 to 2.5 mm thick. The tile is made by a stamped impression in the shape of a kalyb with its edges and part of the reverse side having been inscribed with a knife. The obverse is decorated with a composition of nine Greco-Roman theatrical masks arranged in three staggered lines. All of them are made utilizing bas-relief. Eight of the masks are comic and one tragic. Most likely, the plaque served as a talisman which had apotropaic and chthonic meaning and was associated with the cult of Dionysus and Demeter. The plaque from Nakhsheb is an important historical artifact. On the one hand, it testifies to the cultural contacts of ancient Sogd, and on the other, it indicates the diffusion of this type of art already by this point in Early Antiquity. This is one of the earliest depictions of theatrical masks found in Uzbekistan.

Key words: *Sogd, Shullyuktepa, Nakhsheb, plaque, mask, talisman, engobe, festivities, dionysiacs, bacchanal theater.*
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THE ACTUAL task of modern archaeological science in Uzbekistan consists in studying the country's rich historical heritage. There are objects of small plastic art, including terracotta items, which serve as an important historical source of information on the region's art and culture. The characteristics of these wares allows for the reconstruction of everyday life, activities, aesthetic and religious ideas of the ancient population.

Among the unique objects recently found in Nakhsheb[1] includes a small terracotta plaque with a depiction of theatrical masks. It was found by a local resident while looking after livestock at the Shullyuktepa site which during medieval times was called Nesef. It is located 1.5 to 2 km south of the ancient capital center of the Yerkurgan (and 5-6 km west of Karshi).[2] N. O. Khushvakov acquired the artifact for the Public Fund of the "Shakhrisabz" State Museum via a governmental representative of the "Oltin Meros" district in the Kashkadarya valley (Uzbekistan). It is now housed in the museum with the inventory number KP-1/89 (КП-1/89).

The plaque is made from a yellowish-brown clay and is shaped in the form of a thin trapezoidal plate (Fig. 1). Three sides (lateral and upper) are slightly curved, while the fourth, the lower one, is flat. In ad-

[1] The valley of Kashkadarya is a region of southern Sogd. To the north of the valley, behind the mountain spurs of the Zeravshan ridge located in the Zeravshan valley was Samarkand Sogd while to the south and southeast, beyond the Gissar ridge, were the lands of Bactria-Tokharistan. The close economic and cultural ties were established between these regions already in ancient times. The valley of Kashkadarya had two large agricultural and geopolitical centers. One in its upper part, ancient Kesh (Shakhrisabz oasis), was covered by mountains and adyrs, and the other one in the lower plain was ancient Nakhsheb (Karshi oasis)..

[2] The ancient settlement of Shullyuktepa is identified as being medieval Nesef/Nasaf, known from the Arab and Persian written sources (Ibn Khordadbeh, al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal, Mukaddasi). In the 3rd and 4th centuries, and even a little earlier, a settlement arose here. Later in the 5th and 6th centuries, a powerful castle was erected on the site of the settlement whose fortifications were designed to protect the head structures of the canals that irrigated the vast territory west of Shullyuktepa. It is here, near the bend of the river Kashkadarya, where human occupation shifted from the old city center of Yerkurgan in the 6th century. In the 6th through 8th centuries the city grew rapidly and took the leading position in the region. At this time, a strong citadel was built and the city walls of the shakhristan (main administrative region) measured 15 m thick. At the end of the 9th century, and especially in the 10th and 11th centuries, the city expanded eastward across the river. This resulted in the formation of a rabad (suburban district), which covered an area of 200 hectares. In some areas, walls

Fig. 1. Plaque with masks from the Shullyuktepa ancient site. Front and back sides

dition, all the rims are trimmed at a slight angle. The tile as found was fractured into two pieces which were successfully assembled so that the fracture is almost invisible. Its dimensions measured 5.5 cm high and 5.5 cm wide along the upper edge and 4.2 cm along the lower one. It varies between 2 to 2.5 mm thick. The tile's design was made using a stamped impression in the shape of a *kalyb*, following the removal of its edge. Part of the reverse side was inscribed with a knife. The front side has the decorative composition of nine masks arranged in three, staggered lines. All of the masks were made utilizing bas-relief.

The top row contains four masks. One of them (the first from the left) is displayed separately while the other three are grouped together. The individual mask (1) is shown face forward with its image slightly damaged. The visage of the mask has a high, wide forehead, apparently, with a bald crown, framed by hair only on the sides (Fig. 2: 1). The figure possesses a small, button nose which is noticeably crumpled. Its eyes look straight ahead formed as ovals with a dot for a pupil in the middle. The lips are closed and pointed with thin rounded edges and slightly stretched into a half smile. The lower part of the face is covered with a wide "spade" beard with its hair divided into separate curled strands. Apparently, this is the mask of a satirical character conveying the image of an old man. A similar method of rendering a beard divided into separate curled strands, which reflected the prevailing fashion at that time, is noted among male coroplast figurines from the Bosporus (*Denisova* 1981).

The other three masks from this top row of the plaque are grouped together and are also satirical. The far left (mask 2) is shown in profile (Fig. 2: 2). Its hair frames the forehead. The eye (only one visible) is depicted by a depression with a dot (ball) in the center. The nose is straight, the tip is pointed and slightly lowered downward. The figure has no mustache or beard, the chin is rounded and slightly protruding. The back of the mask is revealed with a straight, vertical cut. Its edge is emphasized by a low rolled edge, which perhaps depicts a falling, long curl. Therefore, it is possible that the mask depicts the image of a female.

The next mask (3) is rather closely adjacent to the previous one and appears full-face (Fig. 2: 3). Its character has a bald head, eyes gazing straight ahead and possessing the form of oval depressions along with and a small button nose. The high cheekbones are shown with protrusions, the mouth is open with its corners raised upward forming a depression in

have survived. As medieval authors noted, the city at that time consisted of a small shakhristan and a vast rabad. The river divided the city into two parts. The northern part of the shakhristan and rabad was composed of upscale buildings: the Dor-ul-Imarat ("ruler's house"), a prison, bazaars and a cathedral mosque near the Gubdin gate were located here. Its eastern and western parts were living quarters and workshops of artisans (metalworkers, potters, glaziers, jewelers, weavers, etc.). In 1220, the city was easily captured by the Mongols (*Suleimanov* 2000: 28-29). It is known that Genghis Khan spent the summer of 1220 in the vicinity of Nasaf. But a fatal blow to the city was delivered by one of the raids of the Mongol troops of the Iranian Khulaguids in 1272, when the city was finally plundered and destroyed. Apparently, from the 18th century its visible ruins became known under the name of Shullyuktepa, that is, the "Hill of leeches" (*Masson* 1973: 41).

Fig. 2. Masks: Various types of masks from the plaque (1-9). The marble mascaron from Shakhri-Gulgul (10)

the form of a narrow crescent moon. The upper lip is framed by a long, drooping mustache and the lower part of the face is covered with a wide rectangular beard which is also divided into separate, vertically curled strands. The mask depicts an elderly man.

On the right, this mask is adjoined and overlapped by another mask (4) with a male character, depicted frontally. It is characterized by a high, wide forehead and a wide, oval face (Fig. 2: 4). The eyes, almond-shaped depressions, gaze straight ahead with a pupil as a circular-dot in the center. Broad eyebrows droop down along the eyes. The cheekbones are slightly raised. The nose is small. The mouth is closed but the lips are stretched into a wide, good-natured smile. A short beard rendered in short vertical lines borders the lower part of the face. Perhaps these three

masks are grouped for a reason and depict a family (husband and wife at the sides and an old father in the center) or they are characters of some comedy scene played by a lone actor.

The second row of the plaque contains three masks which appear as though they occupy the spaces between the masks of the top row. The first mask on the left in this row (5) is shown in profile (Fig. 2: 5). It is almost semi-circular. The character has a high forehead, a large straight nose and a narrow eye. The lower eyelid is emphasized with a rolled edge. Closer to the nose, the pupil is shown as a circular-dot. The chin is poorly displayed with no beard or mustache. The back of the mask is displayed utilizing an inscribed, uneven vertical line. Its edge is framed by a rolled edge. It is possible that this mask also depicts a female or a young man.

The next mask (6) is placed almost in the center of the row and is turned with its face forward, but due to uneven pressure it was imprinted at a slight angle. The mask depicts a male character with a wide face (Fig. 2: 6). He has a narrow forehead, hair with vertical strands (rolled edges) extending to the crown of the head. The eyes gaze straight ahead and are narrow, almost diamond shaped. The nose is crumpled, but it was apparently wide and small. High cheekbones are shown in relief and the small mouth possesses a narrow gap. Around the mouth there is a long, drooping mustache whose ends hang down the chin. The beard is portrayed by two tufts. It is possible that this mask with its terrifying appearance depicts a barbarian or a satyr.

The third mask (7) on the far right in the second row is also shown with a face-forward position. It depicts is an elderly man with a broad face (Fig. 2: 7). The forehead is high with horizontal lines displaying wrinkles. The eyebrows are marked with a wide rolled edge, the eyes are large and leaf-shaped with a wide pupil in the center. The nose is small, slightly crumpled, and wide. The nostrils are shown as rounded pits at the base of the nose. The mouth is wide open and the lips are shown in the form of rolled edges. A short beard covers the cheeks and chin. On the left side, the ear is shown in the form of a half-arc. Apparently, all the masks of this series represent the characters of a tragedy.

The third or lowest row is formed by two masks also placed below the spaces between the masks of the upper row. The first mask (8) is shown frontally with an indistinct imprint which smeared some of its features (Fig. 2: 8). The character has a narrow, wrinkled forehead that flows into a sub-triangular crown. The eyes are large, concave, looking straight ahead, with a round dot depicting the pupil in the center, with protruding, rounded eyebrows. The high cheekbones are emphasized. The nose is small, triangular, and crumpled. The open mouth is characterized by a square-shaped depression. The chin is not emphasized. The character's head is surrounded by a belt of small intertwining lines running in different directions. Perhaps this technique was used to show tousled hair. Most likely, this is a dramatic mask that conveys feelings of sorrow. Yet, it is also possible that this is gorgoneion – a mask depicting the head of Gorgon Medusa, and the tousled hair is actually snakes wriggling around the head. One of the curls (or snakes) coils up along the cheekbone. This detail brings this mask from the plaque closer to the image of Gorgon Medusa of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD depicted on the sarcophagus from Kep (*Kobylina* 1984: 318, pl. CXXVII, 8).

The last mask (9) is located to the right of the previous one. It is larger and also faces to the front. The mask depicts the character's appearance with a wide face (Fig. 2: 9). It has forward-facing, diamond-shaped eyes with a dot for a pupil in the center. The eyebrows, fused on the bridge of the nose, are made with a wavy, rounded line. The tightly wrinkled nose is small with a wide base with the wrinkles displayed in the upper section. The huge mouth is wide open and made in the form of a moon-shaped depression whose edges are surrounded by a rounded edge. Additionally, an inward bevel is seen in the lower part of the recess which is covered with vertical notches depicting teeth. Within the depression lies a thin, vertical line which depicts a tongue(?). The huge mouth of the character is best explained by the fact that in ancient Greek theater, real actors' masks with a huge bell-shaped mouth were used as a megaphone to enhance the voice of the actor. The upwardly curved outlines of the mouth (conveying the moment of Homeric laughter) served to indicate that the mask belonged in a comedy. A similar image of a mask on a plaque from Shakhrisabz (southern Uzbekistan) depicts a terracotta mask of a comedic actor from the northwestern Black Sea region (*Rusyayeva* 1982: 52).

While dating this object is very important, unfortunately, the lack of an archaeological context from the accompanying material significantly limits the possibility of dating the plaque. Therefore, the iconography of masks must serve as the main criteria. As previously mentioned, originally Greek masks were made with a huge bell-shaped mouth to enable the actors in the vast, open amphitheater, to amplify their voices. During this same time (i.e., in the 6th through 4th centuries BC), the main types of masks were created to display tragedy and comedy. In the first case, the outlines of the mouth with lowered corners expressed sorrow; in the second, the corners of the mouth raised upwards symbolized laughter. Among the images of masks on the plaque from Shullyuktepa, only one (9) has such a huge mouth (fig. 2). However, by the early 3rd century BC the images of masks start-

Fig. 3. Masks of Central Asia. 1. Terracotta plaque with masks from Nakhsheb; 2. Marble mascaron from Shakhri-Gulgul; 3. Golden mask from the Jalpak-Dyopyo burial ground (Kyrgyzstan); 4. Golden mask from the Shamshi burial ground; 5. Ceramic mask from Kuyruktobe (Kazakhstan); 6. Terracotta mask from the Bosporus region; 7. Tragedy mask from Panticapaeum, 1st century AD; 8. Mask of a slave from Olbia, 4th century BC; 9. Statuette of an actor in a female role, Big Twin of the 4th century BC; 10. Actor in the mask of a slave, Panticapaeum, 4th century BC; 11. Frieze with bacchantes and masks above them in the upper section of the rhyton from Old Nisa

ed to change which were most often associated with Menander who developed the "new comedy." In the 3rd through 1st centuries BC, the huge mouths disappeared and acquired a natural shape. This is how the mouths of almost all the other characters are shown on our plaque (Fig. 2). Thus, the plaque's existence can be assumed to be no earlier than the 3rd through 1st century BC. Very close parallels to the masks shown on the plaque from Shullyuktepa are found in the masks and images of actors of this same time period from the northern Black Sea region (*Denisova* 1981; *Rusyayeva* 1982; *Kobylina* 1984).

Among Central Asian cultural material, this plaque with masks is unique and no direct analogies have been found. Closest is a marble mascaron from the Surkhandarya region. It was also a chance find by local residents at the shore's southern edge of the Surkhandarya reservoir near the village of Shakhri-Gulgul in 1973 (*Turgunov* 1976: 105-106). This mascaron was a stylized actor's mask depicting an elderly man with a grape leaf wreath on his head. The mascaron is 8 cm high, 5 cm wide, and 3.5 cm thick.

Another thematically related find is a terracotta mask from a residential building of the 10th or 11th centuries at the ancient settlement of Kuyruktobe (central Syr Darya in southern Kazakhstan). It is an oval, elongated object, slightly convex on the outside. The mask is 20 cm high, 12 cm wide, and while it is significantly large, it is only 3 cm thick. The outer side is smoothed and covered with a red slip. The nose, eyebrows, and chin outwardly protrude and the ears are emphasized with molding. The eyes are narrow slits, and the mouth is slotted. The back or inner surface of the mask has fingertip impressions. There are no traces of an attachment for the mask (*Baipakov* 2005: 61).

Our Nakhsheb plaque, like the mascaron from the Shakhri-Gulgul site is the closest Greco-Roman theatrical mask in terms of the images' iconography. While it appears that the marble mascaron from Surkhandarya was most likely an imported item (*Pugachenkova* 1977: 183); the terracotta Nakhsheb plaque was a local product. The main cultural layers of the Shullyuktepa site date between the 4th to the 13th centuries AD, yet the plaque definitely has features from an earlier ancient cultural tradition. Considering the iconography of the masks and the parallels among the terracotta of the northern Black Sea region, the plaque is most likely dated within the 1st century BC to the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD. It can be assumed that the plaque was either moved here from the nearby Yerkurgan, whose layers date to the Hellenistic period, or it comes from some yet undiscovered earlier area of the settlement, contemporary with the early layers of Yerkurgan.

Origins of ancient Greek theatrical performances lie in the religious rites of the agrarian gods Demeter and Dionysus. The theater and the appearance of masks in ancient Greece are closely associated with the cult and celebrations in honor of Dionysus (*dionysiacs*). First, the theater itself was essentially his temple. The orchestra housed the altar of Dionysus. Second, dressing in the clothes of Dionysus played an important role for the dionysiacs: a yellow chiton, a purple mantle and a wreath of vine branches. Dionysus was accompanied by the processional crowd of male and female companions, the latter possessing the obligatory attributes of a thyrsus in the hand and a goat's skin on the shoulders. All of them sang songs in chorus and played scenes based on the myths about Dionysus. Thespis was the first to contrast the choric performance with a monologue story by a dedicated actor who acted as if in response to the chorus (*Weiss* 2005: 67). Later, by the end of the 5th century BC the number of individual actors increased to three.

Over time, it became customary for a part of the chorus, dressed as satyrs, to accompany the ceremony of sacrifice with dancing and singing, which presumably served as the impetus for the introduction of dressing up on stage (i.e., costumes for actors). While daubing the face with soot and wine dregs became the forerunner to the use of masks; initially, masks were associated with the ancestral cult. Masks were made according to the character of the role for which they were intended. They were even subdivided into a number of static categories: the elderly, youth, slaves, and women. Masks for heroes and deities were endowed with their corresponding attributes (*Weiss* 2005: 69).

As in Greece or Rome, the history of theatrical performances in Central Asia has deep roots in folk culture and goes back to mass spectacular ceremonies dedicated to hunting cults (images of decorative fantastical figures, figures of shamans on petroglyphs of the Early Bronze Age, etc.). Eventually, agrarian cults replaced them (New Year's Eve, autumn harvest festival, etc.), where they evolved from ritual processions of the populace towards a religious object into a theatrical show with the participation of actors, dancers, and musicians. Plutarch briefly comments about his acquaintance with the Greek theater and its performances in his description of the unfortunate campaign of the Roman general Crassus against the Parthians. More precisely, in his spectacular conclusion, he reports on a performance of the drama of Euripides "The Bacchantes" that took place during the festivities on the occasion of the wedding of Pacorus, the heir to the Parthian king Orodes, and the Armenian princess at the court of King Artavazd. In the scene in which the actor—who played the role of the leader of the Bacchantes of Agave—usually would

appear onstage with the effigy of Pentheus' head on a thyrsus, he instead entered with the actual head of the defeated Crassus to the strains of a bacchanal song.

Apparently, along with the spread of Hellenistic culture, the peoples of Central Asia (or, at least, its elite) were acquainted with Greek theatrical performances. Therefore, on a rhyton[3] of the 2nd century BC from the treasury of the Parthian kings from Old Nisa, along with the images of the Olympian gods and ritual scenes, exists a frieze with the images of bacchantes and a belt with theatrical masks above them (Fig. 3: 11). G. A. Pugachenkova believes that some of the ritual scenes depicted on this rhyton date back to well-known myths that could have been staged as Greek dramas in the Parthian arena (*Pugachenkova, Rempel* 1982: 270).

Undoubtedly, the masks of theatrical performances have their origins as ritual and ceremonial masks. Not only among the Greeks, but also among other cultures of the period, masks were used in ritual observances (i.e. processions) and dances of mummers. These masks served as a symbol of reincarnation whose main purpose was to promote or reflect the transformation of a person into the desired image using an outer shell signified by the putting on of a mask or skin; or painting the face and body. By putting on a mask or painting a face, a person magically transformed and acted as another creature. In the archaic rituals of the prehistoric era, the ancient hunter sought to find a common language with the animal and in his magical reincarnation to become physically similar to the beast through a mask or painting of the face and body, thus merging with the image of the animal along with acquiring its strength, endurance, and other qualities. In initiation rites (or rites of conversion) from archaic communities, a person in an animal mask appeared before the initiates while embodying the ancestral animal (totem) in order to introduce the initiates to its qualities and strength. This was the magical aspect of transformation inherent in the various ritual masks.

For many cultures, including the cultures of Central Asia, various rituals and festivals of a special seasonal nature were accompanied by the custom of dressing up, which was characterized not only by changing clothes, but also by putting on masks along with masquerading and using noisemakers. Scholars suggest that initially this custom was associated with early religious ideas, including the ancestral cult, the agrarian calendar, and rites of passage (weddings, funeral rites, etc.) (*Gusev* 1991: 110).

An interesting corresponding example is found in the decor of the palace in Khalchayan (35 × 26 m) in Bactria whose construction dates back to between the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD. Iwan and the palace's main hall were decorated with monumental wall paintings and painted clay sculptures. The sculptural compositions are based on secular subjects which include the reception of the royal couple and the bestowal of military honor on the representatives of the *Geray* Kushan clan. Additionally, a small frieze with images of participants in some theatrical presentation (Dionysian circle) extends along the top of the walls. The frieze depicts female dancers, mummers, musicians and satyrs. According to Galina Pugachenkova, these characters are imbued with the spirit of Hellenism and reflect a peculiar moment of the bacchanal scene on Bactrian soil (*Pugachenkova, Rempel* 1982: 51).

Traces of the bacchanal mysteries have survived in the decor of Toprak-kala (Khorezm). Sergey Tolstov saw a connection with one of the halls of the Toprak-Kala palace complex with the religious mysteries of the Dionysian circle in the first period of its existence (the second half of the 2nd to early 3rd centuries AD). He figuratively called it the "Hall of Dancing Masks" (room no. 14 with an area of 100 m^2). The walls of the room were decorated with paintings whose main motif was rosettes with 16 petals, sprigs and flowers, and stucco garlands complementing the top of the walls. In addition, bas-relief compositions were located along the perimeter of the walls in shallow niches which represented men and women dancing in pairs and individual life-sized female figures on the walls between the niches. Among the finds were the head of a male character in a mask with a beard and animal ears. Yury Rapoport draws a parallel between this find and the image of a goat-headed character on a Khorezm bowl of the 7th century, in which, in his opinion, a character (the king-priest) in a mask makes a sacrifice in front of the altar (*Rapoport* 1984: 83). It is significant that he associated a part of the depicted rituals with the sacred wedding between the king and queen of Khorezm as a fertility cult (*Rapoport* 1984: 85) with the actions of characters from the bas-reliefs in the "Hall of Dancing Masks."[4]

There is little data (especially written sources) about the use of masks in the early medieval Sogd. They could well have been a part of street processions and performances during the Central Asian New Year (Navruz) or other holidays in which their ritual significance was still preserved such as magical properties, associations with fertility, or protection much in the same way as the Chinese "lion dances." So, most likely, this was the purpose for a number of objects on the murals of the ceremonial hall of the Afrasiab palace (ancient Samarkand) from the 7th century. On

[3] The Nisa rhytons are carved for the most part from elephant tusks and represent a hollow horn, the lower tapering end of which was decorated with an animal protoma (i.e. totem), or a figurine of a deity. The upper extended part was crowned with a frieze with a multi-figured relief composition.

the western wall is a depiction of the ruler of Sogd, Varkhuman, receiving the ambassadors from China, Korea, Chaganiyan, Chach, Fergana, and other countries. In the northern part of this scene – behind the Korean embassy and the figures of the Sogdian nobles seated above— appears the depiction of a lightly constructed frame of eleven wooden poles that are tied at the top with a crossbar. Round objects adjoin the lower part of the structure whose front side is covered with images of a frightening persona, a demonic creature with a wide round face with menacingly shifty and bushy eyebrows. He has round eyes painted red, yellow, blue and white. (*Al'baum* 1975: 75-77, Fig. 22, table. XLI). This beast's image is complemented by an expansive mouth with protruding fangs.[5] In our opinion, the structure is a portable wooden frame to which masks were attached. Like the Chinese "lions" they were designed to expel evil spirits from the streets and from the houses of townspeople during street processions (*Bogomolov* 1995: 156). In addition, dating probably from the early Middle Ages, frightening masks have been traditionally used in religious dances in Buddhist festivals of Nepal, Tibet, and Japan. At the same time, they represent a special category of symbols that embody charitable and destructive spiritual forces. The masks are even worshiped together with statues and other images.

Artists' images are found in the early medieval paintings from Afrasiab, Penjikent, and Bunjikat. (*Al'baum* 1975: 68, Fig. 21). According to Xuan Jiang, a Buddhist traveler-monk who visited Samarkand in 629, the people of the city were very fond of their festivities which were accompanied by song and dance. Images of musicians, singers and dancers (sometimes an entire ensemble of musicians) accompany religious and secular scenes on stone reliefs from the burials of the Sogdians in the 6th and 7th centuries in China (*Wertmann* 2015). Moreover, the Chinese chroniclers repeatedly stated that artists, including musicians and dancers, were often sent to China as gifts from Central Asian rulers. For example, there were musicians and dancers sent to the Chinese emperor Xuanzong from Samarkand twice, in 713 and 727 AD.

In the Tang era, the Sogdian cafes in Chinese cities were attractive for many visitors because of the performances of Sogdian music and dances which were held there. Especially popular was the Samarkand *Husyuanu* dance in which a smartly dressed dancer, holding a scarf in her hands, rapidly spun on a ball (*Kryukov, Malyavkin, Sofronov* 1984: 42-43).

Apparently, the popular plays of medieval China involving pantomimes with musical accompaniment came from Sogdian influence. For example, in the play "The Barbarian Drinking Wine" the performer adorned a mask with a big red nose and made complicated somersaults, representing a drunken Sogdian. Another play, entitled "Music for Kicking the Ball," was the staging of a polo game. In the 7th century, a festive performance called *sumoje*, meaning, "to ask for cold" or "to spray cold" was very popular in northern China. Young men in fantastical masks depicting animals and deities would strip to the waist, divide into two groups, and portray two opposing armies (*Kryukov, Malyavkin, Sofronov* 1984: 43).

Muslims promoting the spread of Islam following the Arab conquest of Central Asia, despite severe pressure due to the destruction of temples and clergy from other religions, could not completely eradicate ancient traditions and cults, including festivities with spectacular performances. They continued to exist throughout the 9th through 11th centuries. For example, the pre-Islamic New Year (Navruz) was widely celebrated with festivities, treats, and gifts. Written sources report that even in Baghdad, the capital of the Caliphate, masked performances were staged in front of the Caliph (*Metz* 1973: 327).

As Karl Baipakov has observed, the discovery of a mask in the medieval dwelling at Kuyruktobe mentioned above (Keder) (Fig. 3: 5) testifies to the fact that the performances involving actors in masks took place in the cities of the middle Syr Darya (*Baipakov* 2005: 62). However, at the same time, it cannot be ruled out that this mask could have belonged to a shaman who used it in his rituals.

The images of comedic actors (*maskharabozes*) in masks are found on miniatures of the 15th through 17th centuries. The works of Ibn Arabshah, Sheraf al-Din Ali Yezdi, and Rui Gonzalez de Clavijo all mention spectacular street performances during the rule of Amir Timur. Among their examples are descriptions of colorful processions as well as carnivals in Samarkand and its suburban palaces which were organized by various artisan workshops and urban communities. It was probably this period of guild formation – like other professional associations – which included artists of different genres (*maskharaboz*, *kizikchi*, *kugirchok uyin*, *darboz*). These craft guilds survived until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They had their own charters (*risola*), which provided for general rules and professional standards of activity and were headed by authoritative craftsmen known as *korfarmons* (*Ziyayeva* 2010, p. 278).

From the second half of the 19th century along with the street performances of wandering troupes, which also performed at festivities (*saiyl*) and weddings; court theater troupes existed in many large

[4] Apparently, ceremonial headdresses of the kings of Khorezm and Sasanian Iran in the form of birds and animals, as minted on coins, became a separate line of development from cultic masks.

[5] However, Lazar Al'baum believed that these were shields of warriors with the image of Gorgon Medusa, folded at the bunchuks (tugs) tied together (*Al'baum* 1975: 77, 79).

cities. Each group had its own appointed leader (*aksakal*, *usto*, *kolib*), who reported directly to the *kushbegi*. According to Vsevolod Krestovsky, at the order of the Emir of Bukhara, the court troupes gave free performances during national holidays and festivities in the squares and streets. Most of the performances were held in the evening under torchlight (*Ziyayeva* 2010: 279).

At the same time, according to Gleb Snesarev, even as late as the first quarter of the 20th century, among the general populace, rituals (*on saiyls*) took place in Khorezm. This included dressing the participants in goat's skin and putting horns on their heads (*Snesarev* 1969: 33-34). Apparently, a holdover of a similar ritual involved a custom that had recently taken place in the Tashkent oasis. The ritual involved young single boys and girls gathered in groups from the nearest villages to the local sacred water source, usually a spring, in early May. They organized treats and festivities near the spring. Moreover, one of the young men dressed in a goat's skin. Either he, or a group of young men under his direction, would grasp one of the nearby participants and throw him into the water. All this was perceived as fun, but it has an ancient basis involved a sacrificial fertility rite.

Another important aspect may indicate that masks were associated with the idea of rebirth and protection of the deceased. Therefore, images of masks can be found on the walls of Greek and Roman sarcophagi from last centuries BC and the first centuries AD. These were endowed with apotropaic and chthonic meanings in association with the cult of Dionysus and Demeter (*Kobylina* 1984: 225). In Central Asia, there are also known instances of placing masks within burials. One such mask was found in the Jalpak-Dyopyo burial ground in Alai (Kyrgyzstan). It is a small plate with gold leaf measuring 7.5 × 5.3 cm. The eyes, mouth, and nostrils are portrayed by a series of holes (Fig. 3: 3). It should be noted that the artifact's small size obscures the ability to see a mask on it. It dates back to the 4th or 5th centuries AD (*Abetekov* 1983: 41).

Another curious mask from the Shamshi burial ground in the Chuy valley (Kyrgyzstan) should be mentioned. It was made from a thin sheet of gold. The mask portrays an elongated, but wide face with its features rendered in a very general, schematic manner (Fig. 3: 4). The eyes are concave, small, and shown in the form of almond-shaped sockets with carnelian inlays. The settings were formed by soldering them onto the base with a thin strip placed on the edge and rolled into an oval. The nose is straight, made of an additional sheet of gold which was bent in half and soldered to the base. On the cheeks and along the crest of the nose, indentations display a decorative plant in the form of branches with three paired offshoots extending upward and to the sides. In addition, the front side the grooves of the indentations are covered with white paint. According to Isman Kozhomberdyev, this is a replica of an image depicting the "tree of life." Small holes are punched along the edges of the mask and in the side of the mask's face. It is assumed that the mask was attached to something. It dates to the 4th or 5th centuries AD (*Kozhemyako, Kozhomberdyev* 1983: 46). It is possible that it reflects the similar ideas that existed in the folk Taoist tradition of China, in which the mask served as a symbol of birth and rebirth and was also endowed with the meaning of light and life arising from death and darkness.

The functional purpose our plaque with the masks from Shullyuktepa, remains speculative due to its unique nature. Its edges are cut from the back at a slight angle, meaning it was meant to be inserted somewhere. Could the plaque be a decorative element of some other object? It is also quite possible that it served as a votive gift-offering, reflecting the ideas of the Dionysian circle associated with nature's fertility. It is our opinion that it more likely served as a talisman. It could be a type of apotropaion (The Greek word for an "image that wards off evil") which was a viciously horrible or an ugly, caricatured image that caused laughter (thus, destroying the spell of slander) or fright (thus, scaring away evil spirits). Perhaps the most famous example of such an apotropaion was the representative mask depicting the head of Gorgon Medusa which during Early Antiquity was used to decorate a wide variety of objects including vessels, buildings, armor, shields and even coins. In our opinion, the composition on the plaque served precisely this goal in order to attract and dispel the ill-wisher's evil glance which in turn distracted it from the potential victim.

The plaque from Nakhsheb is an important historical artifact that testifies to the cultural contacts of ancient Sogd on the one hand and points to the diffusion of this type of art which already existed during Antiquity on the other. It also encapsulates one of the earliest images of theatrical masks in the territory of Uzbekistan.

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