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## COMMONALITY OF TRADITIONS OF THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE MIDDLE REACHES OF THE SYRDARYA RIVER AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE TASHKENT REGION AND THE SOUTH OF KAZAKHSTAN

*The basin of the Middle Syrdarya River is one of the most interesting and complex regions in the cultural and historical aspect. In the south, it includes the Tashkent oasis, and the oases of Turkestan and Otrar, in the north. The similarity of their material cultures can be traced back to the ancient times. The finds of the hearth-altars at the small archaeological site of Shodmalik-ota demonstrate that, apart from the territory of present-day Southern Kazakhstan and Chach, it is now possible to include the medieval Ilak into their common area. They do not have complexity of ornamentation, but their form and function perfectly coincide with the richly decorated specimens from Otrar, Kuyruktobe, and Sauran.*

*At the 8th-9th c. site referred to as Kostobe, Kazakhstan, corrugated-shaped sufas were discovered. The podium found at Shodmalik-ota, decorated with corrugated patterns, is another example of use of these patterns in the interior design, and chronologically it is the latest identified so far, as it dates back to the 11th century. Elements of architectural decor identified at Shodmalik-ota: the corrugations, modest carved ornamentation on the sides of the niche, a fragment of architectural decor of carved terracotta – all indicate the ceremonial status of the structure and suggest similarity to the artifacts from South Kazakhstan.*

*On the surface of the sites of Shodmalik-ota and Imlak (equated to Tunket, the capital city of Ilak), a number of bronze items have been collected - small indoor statues, and parts of a belt ensemble, including several belt onlay pads with Arabic inscriptions. They find close analogies among the artifacts from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, demonstrating the spread of the uniform style during the Karakhanid period. The new examples published in this article confirm the existence of common traditions in the material culture of the Middle Syrdarya Basin. The new examples published in this article confirm the commonality of the material cultural traditions among the archaeological sites of the Middle Syrdarya Basin.*

**Key words:** *The finds from Middle Syrdarya, Ilak, Shodmalik-ota, and Tunket*

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I WAS honored to meet with Erbulat Smagulov in my family home in 2015, when he traveled through Tashkent. It was the time when we happened to discuss the results of our excavations at Mingurik and his work at Kultobe. Unfortunately, we never got to see each other again. At present, every new day convinces me there are increasing multitudes of questions in regards to the common or somewhat overlapping subjects that we could still discuss together. Alas! One is compelled to look for answers to those questions in his numerous publications, rather than in the live dialogues with this eminent scholar.

The basin of the Middle Syrdarya River is one of the most interesting and complex regions in the cultural and historical aspects. It covers several locations: in the south, it encompasses the Tashkent oasis, and the oases of Turkestan and Otrar, in the north. The material and spiritual culture of this vast territory reveals deep strata of integrative ties of the sedentary and nomadic ethnic components (*Buryakov 2010: 202, 205*). The commonality of traditions can be traced back to ancient times. The results of new excavations represent more and more facts of identity

and mutual influence though the discovered objects of material culture.

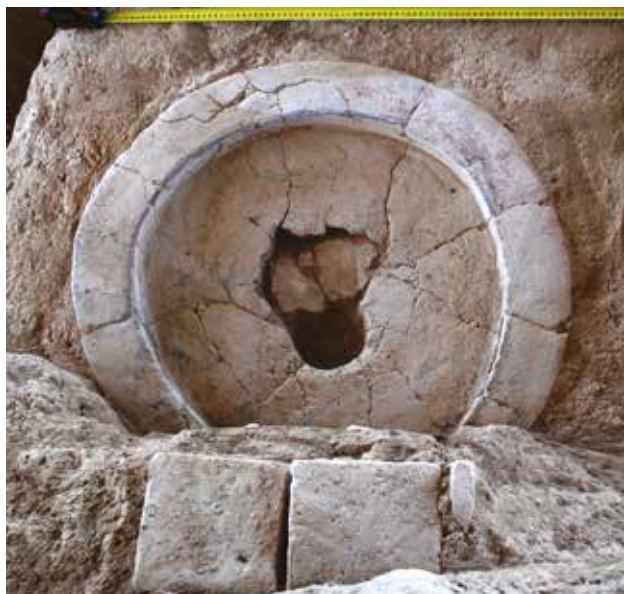
### Mingurik and Kultobe

The 2008-2009 excavations at the archaeological site of Mingurik in Tashkent have revealed a cruciform structure, whose dating and functional interpretation led to differences of opinion among the researchers of the site (*Filanovich, Bogomolov, Ilyasova* 2009: 56).

E. A. Smagulov, who initiated the excavation of the cruciform structure at Kultobe (Turkestan), interpreted this kind of buildings in various ways, sometimes leaning towards the version of their cult func-



Ил. 1. Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-1, керамический очаг-алтарь, вид с запада (фото: С. Р. Ильясова)



Ил. 2. Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-4, керамический очаг-алтарь, вид сверху (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)

tion (*Smagulov, Erzhigitova* 2019: 11), other times referring to the structure at the Kultobe citadel as a cross-shaped castle (*Smagulov* 2019: 23, Fig. 3, 4). The time of the construction of the most ancient buildings at the citadel of the Kultobe site dates back to the first centuries BC. Although in the work of 2017 he cited as the dating period the first centuries B.C. - first centuries A.D. (*Smagulov* 2017a: 312).

The latest publications on Kultobe clarified its dating on the basis of the pottery finds - the cruciform building was built not earlier than the turn of the 1st-2nd centuries A.D., and the castle appeared during the first half of the 2nd century A.D. (*Torgoev, Kulish, Erzhigitova* 2020: 119). This dating option is getting closer to our dating of the cruciform building of Mingurik - the 3rd - 4th centuries A.D. (*Bogomolov, Ilyasova* 2010: 178).

### Hearth-altars

Mazar Shoabdumalik-ota (or Shodmalik-ota) is located about 40 km away from Tashkent by the Akhangaran highway on the right bank of the valley of the river of Akhangaran. An unnamed tepe is located southeast. The work on it started in 2018 by the Akhangaran detachment of the Institute of Archeology (at present - the National Center of Archeology) of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan with the financial support of the Tashkent regional branch of the Oltin Meros International Charitable Foundation.

A round earthenware hearth in the form of a flat-bottomed reservoir was discovered in the center of the settlement, directly under the plowing layer at Excavation 1 (Fig. 1). Its diameter is 72 cm, the thickness of the rim is 8 cm, the inner diameter is 57 cm, the depth of the bowl is 3.5 cm. The bottom is broken, a large fragment was lying upside down. Large fragments of pottery (khums and caldrons) were found nearby (*Ilyasova* 2020: 134 - 136; *Ilyasova, Wulfert* 2020: 112, Fig. 3).

At Dig No. 4, another "altar-hearth" was unearthed, which is a flat-bottomed earthenware reservoir, 70 cm in diameter, 10-12 cm deep, with the 15 cm wide side (*Ilyasova* 2020: 134 - 136; *Ilyasova, Wulfert* 2020: 112-113, Fig. 4, 5). At the bottom there is a hole having the diameter of 10 - 12 cm, slightly offset from the center. The reservoir is partially recessed in a wall covered with burnt plaster, preserved to the height of about 30 cm. The plaster is decorated with decor in the form of circles painted on the wet clay and two round relief moldings with a depression in the center (Fig. 2, 3).

In the upper layers of Dig pits P-1 and P-4, as well as in the archaeological remains, several other fragments of flat-bottomed vessels were discovered, which had been made of refractory clay and decorat-



Ил. 3. Шодмалик-ота, раскоп-4, керамический очаг-алтарь, вид с запада (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)

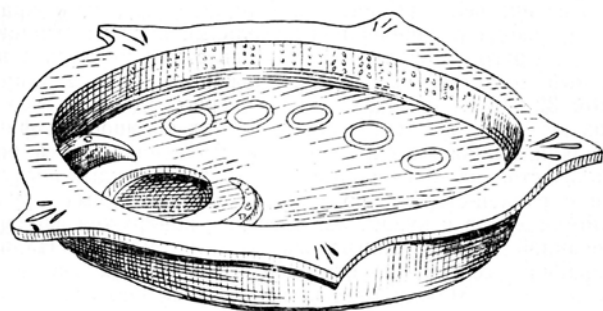
ed with engobe; these vessels appeared quite massive and for the most part do not have stamped or carved ornaments, with the exception of three fragments or shards (Fig. 4).

The category of round hearths of the 11th - 12th centuries in the form of a flat bowl ("trough", "dish-pan", or "pan", in the terminology used by К. М. Байпаков), richly decorated with floral and geometric patterns, was repeatedly encountered during the excavations of fortified sites in the Southern Kazakhstan (Otrar, Kuyruktobe, Sauran) (Байпаков 1986: 151, Fig. 36 - 38). К. М. Байпаков referred them to the group of purely utilitarian heating devices, in whose

decorative design, the echoes of previously relevant meanings were preserved which have lost the meanings today. At the same time, the researcher noted that in the strata of the 12th century (Otrar and Kuyruktobe) they are, in effect, numerous, and that there are no complete analogies of this category of items to be found among the artefacts of the pre-Mongolian times in the other archaeological sites of Central Asia. The researcher suggested that the high relief parts and cones, in particular, the two cones called chiga (breasts) on the tandoors of the Yagnobian ethnic group of Tajiks, may have served to them as a reminiscence of the anthropomorphic nature of the



Ил. 4. Шодмалик-ота, керамические очаги-алтари, фрагменты (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)



Ил. 5. Канка, очаг-алтарь  
(по: Брусенко, Галиева 1979)

earthenware hearths (Ваураков 1986: 151). Perhaps the same way of interpretation may be used for the round high relief parts on the hearth items from Dig No. 4 of Shodmalik-ota (Fig. 3.) (Ilyassova 2020: 134 - 136; Ilyassova, Wulfert 2020: 113, Fig. 4b, 5).

Important conclusions and generalizations about the hearth-altars were drawn in the publications by E. A. Smagulov (Smagulov 2011a: 338 - 352, Fig. 13 - 20; Smagulov 2017b: 317 - 335, Fig. 1, 4 - 7). In particular, he formulated the following concept: ceramic hearthlets and altarlets convey an image or are the models of local religious buildings - temples that existed in the pre-Islamic times (Smagulov 2011a: 344; Smagulov 2017b: 331-332).

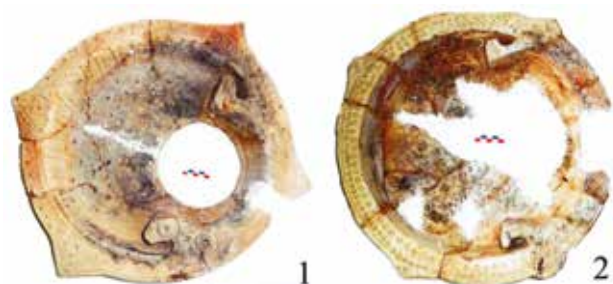
For a long time, the question of the origin of the hearthlets remained open. However, in one of the articles of late, the researcher made an interesting observation. At the Karatobe site, under the 12th - 13th century strata, in close proximity to a hearth-altar, yet an earlier stratum was documented, where a hearth-altar, built of clay, was also located on the flooring. That is, compulsive evidence was obtained that earthenware altars are a local phenomenon and they continue the tradition of the early floor-mounted clay hearth-altars, but in a different, more presentable manner (Smagulov 2017b: 322). The floor-mounted earthenware altars were attributes of every dwelling - playing the role of a spiritual center, connected with performance of certain rituals in the family's intimate sphere (Smagulov 2011a: 348). A complete analogy to "kuyruk" and "altyn" hearths in the dwellings of the 7th-10th centuries there are chronologically more ancient (as well as synchronous) hearths in the houses and crypts of the Dzhetasar culture. It was these hearths that, under the state ideological oppression, appeared in the dwellings to replace the semi-oval hearth-altars of the destroyed sanctuaries of Sogd, Chach, Khorezm and Kangu-Tarband. The latter can be clearly located only in the Syrdarya region and the adjacent parts of the Sogd region. The origin of the shape of these altars (horseshoe-shaped, semi-oval) is, apparently, to be sought among the Sarmatian

cult antiquities. The continuation of the tradition of hearth-altars rests with the altars of the "Dzhigir-bent" type and in the Otrar terracotta altars of the 11th-12th centuries (Smagulov 2011b: 78-79). The researcher has arrived at these conclusions.

According to E. A. Smagulov, the hearth-altars are not acknowledged among the finds in other Central Asian regions, neither as integral items, nor as fragments thereof. Apparently, their existence is a kind of an ethnographic feature of the local regional urban culture in the 10th - 12th centuries, a purely local, "Syrdarya phenomenon" (Smagulov 2011a: 348; Smagulov 2017b: 317).

The hearths from Shodmalik-ota decorations are more modest, but the hearth at Dig pit P-4 is decorated with a panel featuring relief ornaments. The bottom part of the hearths from Kazakhstan has a circular 8-14 cm in diameter through hole at some distance from the center; in this hole, upon further unearthing, one commonly finds a bottom portion of a small earthenware pot made of refractory clay (a small cup or a noggin or just a small pot), which served as a container for permanently smoldering coals. This small pot with the coals during the use of the altar was the center of a small open fire (Smagulov 2011a: 349). The two fragments of small pots made of refractory clay with the admixture of a significant quantity gruss (or granite sand) found at Shodmalik-ota apparently confirm this.

In Chach, at the Kanka archaeological site, there are also finds of fragments of earthenware hearths with a round hole, somewhat displaced off the center of the hearth. They are ornamented, and equipped with distinctive handles and owing to these handles, possibly, the items may have served, according to the researchers, as portable pans (Brusenko, Galieva 1979: 96, Fig. 32) (Fig. 5). Archaeologically, the integral "pans" found at the Kanka site are richly ornamented and also have a round hole, set off away from the center (Fig. 6). One of them, found near the hearth, according to the researcher, performed two functions: "served the hearth" and could be used to heat up the room (Gritsina 2016: 143, Fig. 16, 1-2). We believe that it is not entirely correct to consider these devices as portable pans - this is contradicted by the presence



Ил. 6. Канка, очаги-алтари (по: Грицина 2016)



Ил. 7 Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-6, пом. 3, остатки подиума с гофрами (фото: Дж.Я. Ильясов)

of a hole in the bottoms. The altar-hearth is the aptest name, given that, in their shape and ornamentation, there is a specially highlighted part, symbolizing niches in the walls, the so-called capellas or chapels, which were addressed during the rituals.

Plate-shaped vessels with a rim diameter of 80 - 85 cm made of fired clay with a considerable admixture of attenuation agent were repeatedly encountered in Tunket, Abrlyg, Namudlyg (*Buryakov* 1972: 99, 102). However, these finds were made in the production strata, right next to blacksmith kilns. It should be noted that the Chach finds, unfortunately, escaped the attention of E. A. Bulatov.

Our finds made at the small archaeological site of Shodmalik-ota demonstrate that, in addition to the territory of present-day Southern Kazakhstan and Chach, it is now possible to include the medieval Ilak, that is, the southern foothill and mountainous part of the Tashkent oasis, into the area of the wide-spread use of such hearth altars. They are devoid of rich decor, but their form and function fully coincide with the richly decorated specimens from Otrar, Kuyruk-tobe, and Sauran. One of the Shodmalik-ota hearths was found to be located not in the center of the room, but set next to a wall, and in this case the modesty of the decor of the round part was compensated by the elegant decoration of the back wall with rows of circles and two protrusions within a ring of similar

circles, evoking associations with the feminine principle.

E. A. Smagulov noted that in the Syrdarya regions, inhabited mainly by Turks, a special situation has developed - even in a sedentary urban environment, the ousting of the ancestral faith occurred gradually, stretching in time over the period from the 9th to the 11th century. It is presumed that the earthenware altars, which appeared in the 11th century, reproduced the structure and decor of public worship buildings which had vanished by then. Thus, the practice of public rituals moved into the sphere of the private dwelling (*Smagulov* 2017b: 324). The researcher expressed the idea that archaeological studies of the settlements of the Lower and Middle Syrdarya will increase the number of sites where such altars were distributed (*Smagulov* 2011a: 346, Note 25). Our finds confirm the correctness of the views expressed by our recently deceased esteemed colleague.

#### Architectural elements

The commonality has also been acknowledged in the architectural elements of the regions under consideration. At the settlement of Shodmalik-ota at Dig No. 6, the remains of a building from the Karakhanid period were studied (*Ilyasova, Ivanov* : in the press). Here, in the northwestern part of the excavation, the remains of two rooms with traces of a strong fire - the

charred wooden beams and the walls obviously after going through the red-hot condition were found. In room 3, at a depth of 455 cm from the grade reference point, flooring surface was unearthed that had been paved with large-format fired tiles -  $50 \times 35 \times 4$ ,  $51 \times 51 \times 6$ ,  $53 \times 51 \times 4.5$  cm (Fig. 7, 9). From the east, the pavement was bounded by a groove, beyond which the nature of the pavement changed - instead of large slabs, small-format bricks measuring  $29 \times 11 \times 5$  cm were used (Fig. 7, 10). This suggested that the rooms were separated by a wooden partition with a door, of which only iron braces and a double-hook chain were found on the floor. The chain consists of an oval-shaped link ( $7.5 \times 4-4.4 \times 1.3$  cm), three eight-shaped links ( $7.3 \times 2.5-3.5 \times 1-1.2$  cm,  $8.5 \times 3.1 \times 1-1.2$  cm) and rings with a double straight rod extending from them, whose one end is bent at the right angle ( $12.3 \times 4 \times 1.7-1.9 \times 0.6-1-1.5$  cm), and the other end was broken off (Fig. 12).

In room 3, near the north-western wall, there is a structure in the form of a podium, decorated with corrugations, constructed from 2 adobe bricks, placed on their end face, connected at an angle to create a triangular base and plastered with five layers of plaster to form even semi-columns. On the corrugations, adobe bricks had been laid in one row, forming a shelf or a kind of a table cover, having the thickness of 14 cm. The surface of the podium had been plastered, it was then burnt in a fire; part thereof is, unfortunately, destroyed (Fig. 8). The podium goes to under the western edge of the excavation, the number of the unearthed corrugations is 5; their original total quantity is unknown. The total length of the unearthed part of the facade of the podium is 1.5 m. The height from the pavement is 52 cm, the diameter of the corrugations is 25 cm. The total height of the structure is 66 cm. This is too high for a sufa. It is most likely to have been a podium or a table, where dishes or some other objects would be placed. The presence of the podium-table also explains the arrangement of a bench



Ил. 8. Шодмалик-ота, раскоп-6, пом. 4, ниша, вид с севера (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)



Ил. 9. Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-6, пом. 4, ниша, узор на штукатурке (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)

next to it in the form of a narrow sufa, lined with fired bricks on its top (Fig. 9).

Room 4 has been unearthed only partially in the triangular space between the northern edge of the excavation and the southeastern wall of the room. In this wall there was a niche 65 cm wide, located 1 m from the conventional boundary with room 3 (Fig. 10). On the walls, on both sides of the niche edge, a pattern in the form of floral curls had been scratched or carved in the uncured plaster (Fig. 11).

Architect Z. G. Shardenova noted that the use of an element in the form of corrugations, which is widespread in the decorative design of the exterior of buildings, is rarely found in the interior design. The corrugations were known to her only from the archaeological remains of the 8th century in Penjikent and at an 8th-9th century site of Kostobe (Kazakhstan), where corrugated sufas were found. The special design of these sufas can possibly be associated with the special status of the rooms or part thereof (Shardenova 1994: 73, Figure 2; Baypakov, Shardenova, Peregudova 2001: 68-70, 191, Fig. 28, 29, 30). The podium revealed at Shodmalik-ota is yet another example of the use of corrugations in the interior design, and chronologically it remains the latest, since it is dated to the 11th century.

In a hall with corrugations at the Kostoba site, there was a niche carved in the southern wall. The arrangement of ornamented niches in the formal rooms is a widespread technique in the architecture of the East (*Shardenova* 1994: 76). Home altars are found in southern Kazakhstan at the ancient settlements of Kuyruk-tobe and Altyn-tobe in the early medieval period. It is note worthy that they combined the everyday and cult functions alike. The altar consisted of two parts - the altar's niche and the altar's podium. It is possible that in an altar's niche, they would place revered images. While the altar podiums, according to E. A. Smagulov, were probably intended for lamps and incense burners (*Smagulov* 1992: 35, 37).

The described rooms that were unearthed at Shodmalik-ota, have so far been only partially excavated, which certainly complicates their interpretation. Nevertheless, their uncommon character is beyond doubt, as indicated by the design making use of corrugation techniques, the modest carved decor on the sides of the niches, and a fragment of architectural decor in the form of carved terracotta discovered in one of the pits (Fig. 13). In order to enable further conclusions, it is necessary to continue the excavation work, however some of the currently identified parallels with the Southern Kazakhstan archaeological remains do seem representative to us even today.

#### Metal items

A number of bronze items were collected on the surface of the Shodmalik-ota site over the time of the research (*Ilyasova* 2019: 20–23). Besides, the archaeological remains obtained over the recent years at the excavated archaeological site of Imlak, generally equated to Tunket, the capital of Ilak, have also yielded objects of small copper-bronze plasticity characteristics - primarily being parts of belt ensembles. Since most of these materials does not have stratigraphic documentation, similar materials found in neighboring regions are indispensable for their pertinent regimentation.

In the publications of E. A. Smagulov, bronze items from Sauran and Aktobe are widely represented. In particular: spoons, knives, bells, bronze pendants, as well as belt onlay pads (*Smagulov* 2011a: 272, 274, 281–285, Fig. 40, 42–43, 49, 52–53, 55). These are important materials, among which we are identifying analogies to the Ilak and Shodmalik finds, for example, the heart-shaped plaques, or spoons, bells, and pendants.

A special monograph on the materials of the Krasnaya Rechka archaeological site (*Baipakov, Ternovaya, Goryacheva* 2007) is devoted to the finds of bronze items. These findings, too, were mainly collected on the surface of the site situated in the north of Kyrgyzstan. They also include analogies to our ar-



Ил. 10. Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-6, железная цепь с крючком (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)



Ил. 11. Шодмалик-ота, Раскоп-6, фрагмент архитектурного декора, резная терракота (фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)

tifacts, including belt mordants and belt onlay pads. A detailed study undertaken by A. I. Torgoev and dedicated to the belt decorative designs of the Karakhanid era (*Torgoev* 2013), has immensely facilitated the task of working with the finds material. Let us note that Chach and Ilak are not mentioned in the aforesaid works among the regions where such finds have been ample. In order to fill this informative gap somehow, let us now present some of the finds from Tunket. There are several belt onlay pads, for example, with Arabic inscriptions, whose shape and the handwriting leave no doubt about their belonging to the Karakhanid period. On three similar belt mordants, we can see the popular formula of “al-mulk li-llah” - “Power / Kingdom belongs to Allah”<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 14, left). Identical onlays from the city of Osh and from the Krasnaya Rechka site were published by A. I. Torgoev (*Torgoev* 2013: ill. 4, 4, ill. 5, 11). An inscription on another Tunket mordant, which, judging by the position of this inscription, adorned the end of a narrow vertical strap, reads “Al-mulk li-llah bara/katun”, meaning “The power belongs to Allah, blessing” (Fig.

<sup>1</sup> Inscriptions reading and epigraphic comments by Dzh. Ya. Ilyasov.



Ил. 12. Тункет, ременные накладки, бронза  
(фото: Дж. Я. Ильясов)

14, right). A similar mordant was found on the surface at Shodmalik-ota (Ilyasova 2019: 21). A similar onlay pad, which was also published by A. I. Torgoev, originated from some of the archaeological sites in the eastern part of the Chuy valley, i.e. from Ak-Beshim, Burana or Krasnaya Rechka. Let us that in the reading of the inscription on this mordant authored by A. D. Pritula, the last word, written separately, is omitted (Torgoev 2013: ill. 5, 5). A bronze belt-end onlay pad from stratigraphic pit 1 of the Otrar site was repeatedly published (Akishev, Baipakov, Erzakovich 1972:

61, Fig. 17; Nastich 1975: 97–105). In his own day, O. G. Bolshakov read from it: “The Statehood is from Allah”, which allegedly reads in Arabic: “Al-mulk li-llah”, but then V. N. Nastich re-specified the dating and the reading by making it read “Min Allah al-daraja” - “from Allah is a degree” (Nastich 1975: 97–98, Fig. 1, 2). In the article by A. I. Torgoev, photographs of the mordants of the belt with the same inscription made in a handwriting similar to that of the Otrar find were published, but quoted the reading authored by A. D. Pritula, given here, was different: “Min Allah ad-Daulat” - “The State is from Allah” (Torgoev 2013: 4, 1, 3). According to Dzh. Ya. Ilyasov, the reading by V. N. Nastich is more accurate.

Let us also highlight two mordants of different sizes, but featuring similar cutwork decoration, which are apparently part of the ensemble of the same belt decorated with plates (Fig. 15). A. I. Torgoev emphasizes that such cutwork products appeared precisely in the Karakhanid epoch, and publishes buckles similar to those of Tunket showing decoration “in the form of a central medallion with a winged figure in the center and four slightly curved amygdalae extending from the central medallion” from the Krasnaya Rechka and Osh sites (Torgoev 2013: 381, 385, No. 22, ill. 2, 25, ill. 6, 2, 3). A fragment of a similar onlay was found at the Sauran settlement in the Turkestan district of the South Kazakhstan region, i.e., within the territory under our consideration for purposes of this article (Smagulov 2011a: Fig. 53, 6). It is obvious that the belt ensembles of the Karakhanid period were largely standardized and widespread within Central Asia and in the area of what we know as South Kazakhstan.

Thus, the new examples published by us in this article are just another piece of evidence towards the commonality of traditions in the material culture of the Middle Syrdarya basin archaeological sites, which

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