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THE PURPOSE OF THE CLAY CRAFTSMANSHIP ITEMS OF THE SAPALLI CULTURE¹

The discovery of the Sapalli culture gave a powerful impetus to the study of such important issues as the problem of urbanization of the region, the formation of the first state formations and the Bactrian cultural genesis in general. This paper considers another aspect of the cultural-historical retrospective of the materials of this culture, namely monofunctional clay forgeries found in the burial-cult site of Buston VI. When they are studied and verified with Vedic sources, a large number of parallels are observed, which cannot be a mere accident. The peculiarity of the products under consideration is that they are represented by a standardized set, which includes anthropomorphic figurines that are directly identified with certain deities of the Vedic pantheon, various products that had a ritual and symbolic orientation, as well as ritual utensils (a vessel and a devil-spoon) for sacred offerings. The work defines not only their parallels with the data of the Vedas, but also the origin associated with the arrival of the steppe Eurasian tribes in the territory of Northern Bactria. The relevance of this study is determined by the possibility of restoring ideological ideas and structuring the picture of the mythological worldview of the Sapalli society in the Late Bronze Age. The influence of the cattle-breeding Srubna-Andronovo tribes, which left a significant mark on the culture of ancient farmers, which served as the basis for the formation of a new Vedic culture in North India, is emphasized.

Keywords: Sapalli culture, Bronze Age, Buston VI necropolis, clay handicrafts, verification, Vedas

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STARTING the early 1970s, the yearly archaeological excavations of the new Sapalli culture dispelled the myth of the “Bactrian mirage” (Popov 2015), made adjustments to the problems of the formation of the urban civilization and statehood in the south of Central Asia.

Geographically, this culture occupies the territory of the south of the modern-day Uzbekistan (Fig. 1). Its sites date as far back as the Bronze Age and generally cover the period of only the 2nd millennium BCE. The Sapalli culture (hereinafter referred to as the SC) is a vivid example of the ancient Eastern proto-urban civilization. This is an ancient rural culture, the basis of its economy being agriculture with a small share of animal husbandry. It is known from such monuments as the settlement-proto-city of Sapallitepa, proto-city, temple and burial grounds of the same name particularly referred to as Sapalli burials of Dzharkutan, Molali, and Buston (Askarov 1973; 1977; Askarov, Abdullaev 1983; Avanesova 1989: 63-77).

Among all the monuments of the SC, the Buston VI necropolis (hereinafter referred to as B-VI) stands out for its originality and peculiarity, where the clay

handicrafts covered in this article were recorded. As is known, clayware or earthenware finds² are not that frequent in archaeological research in general. Finding earthenware items within earth, or else clay within other clay, requires great skill and professionalism from an archaeologist. Especially if the age of this find is in excess of three millennia. Discovery of an entire standardized set of such things within enclosed Bronze Age complex is a rare occasion requiring some undivided attention. This article focuses on a number of standardized monofunctional unfired clay handicraft items found within graves B-VI.

Over the fourteen split field seasons implemented within the period from 1990 to 2008, the site research was carried out by archaeologists and students of Samarkand State University as part of their field archaeological internships, under the constant guidance of the principal researcher, Prof. N. A. Avanesova.

¹ The work is based on archaeological materials and fact-based sources of the Samara State University Museum of Archeology.

² It is not ceramics or fired clay that we are dealing with, of course, but earthenware without heat treatment.

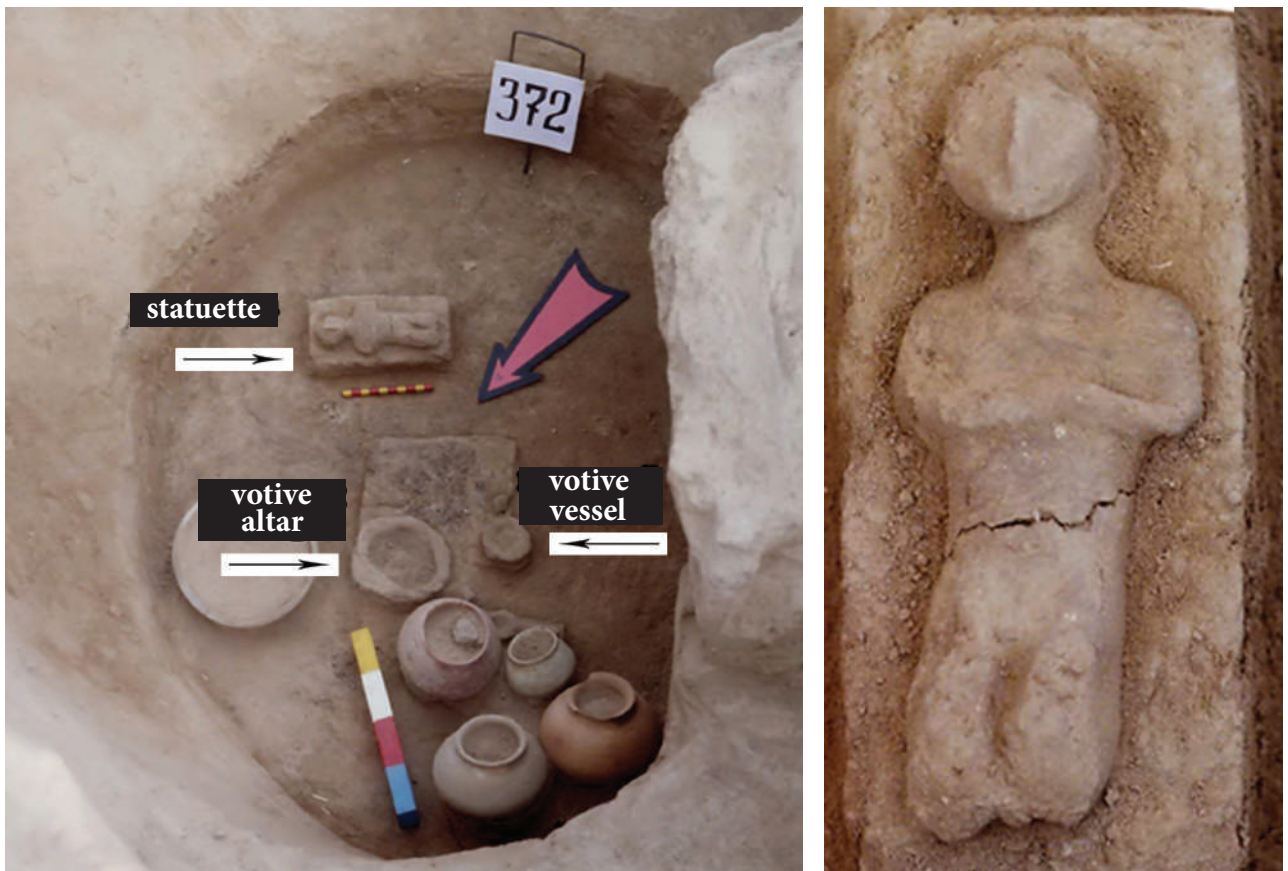


Fig. 1. Grave with clay crafts – a variant of symbolic burials

Buston VI³ is a polyritual site, where not only the the dead of the tribes were buried, but also various ritual actions were performed. This statement is confirmed by 211 burials, in which various ways of dealing with the corpses were revealed, including cremation, which is not characteristic of the Sapalli culture. Besides, evidence was found of rituals related to the burial practice of the Eurasian steppe culture traditions.

The uniqueness of the complex is due to the fact that some of its purposes were various solemn religious ceremonies. The figure shows that more than half (58.3 per cent) of all studied objects of the necropolis are of a ritualized nature (Fig. 2). These may be various death bills, altar pits, cenotaphs and fictitious graves, animal burials, or handicrafts, including anthropomorphic figurines. Such items were monofunctional (since they were made of unfired clay), intended for a single ritual act that would occur at the time of the burial. In the grave, they were always clearly localized and compactly occupied a certain place.

³ The timeframe of the functioning of the complex under consideration is limited by the final stage of the Sapalli culture (the 13th – early 10th century BC).

As a result of the many years of research, N. A. Avanesova discovered approximately forty graves,⁴ in which a standardized set of the same type of clay items was to be found (Fig. 3). A set comprises one, or, much less often, two anthropomorphic figurines, a rounded votive altar, three cone-shaped tokens, a scoop or spoon, and a miniature pot-shaped vessel, in which small pebbles were sometimes found. It is quite obvious that we were faced with a completely new, previously unknown ceremony practiced by farmers of Northern Bactria, which should have appeared in mid to late 2nd millennium BC.

The burial ground was formed and functioned during the period of active penetration of the Eurasian steppe tribes into the local environment, which served as a strong impetus to transformation of appearances of the culture. This is evidenced by a new burial rite of cremation, rituals associated with fire and its symbols, by the material culture, heterogeneity of the pertinent anthropological system, etc. (Avanesova, Toshpulatova 1999; Avanesova et al. 2010:

⁴ Enclosed complexes are taken into account, where monofunctional clay items acted both as the principal grave goods and as goods accompanied by burials of whole animal carcasses or human remains.



Fig. 2. Variants of an anthropomorphic figurine

118-136; Avanesova 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Avanesova, Kasparov 2015: 27-54). It can be assumed that rituals using the items in question could appear under the influence of the steppe ethnic groups. However, the origin of these mortuary gifts and grave goods is not known to us. Of note is that even among the early farmers of the Dzheitun Neolithic culture, similar handicrafts, though made of fired-clay, are known to us: anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, and chips or tokens (Masson 1971: 43-44, Pl. XL, XLI). If we assumed that the origin of the Sapalli culture (SC) is associated with the ancient agricultural oases of Turkmenistan, we cannot exclude the formation of this rite among the sedentary tribes.

Upon review of Vedic literature, N. A. Avanesova interpreted the clay handicrafts of the burial ground at issue as artifactual writing. In her article "The artifactual writing of the pre-urban Bactria" [*Predmetnoe pis'mo dourbanistichaskoi Baktrii*] (Avanesova 2004), the author arrived at the conclusion that this rite was used for ritual writing, relying, among other things, on the analogy of the artifactual writing cited by Herodotus in his description on the Scythians' response to Persian ruler Darius: "... Scythian kings... sent a herald with gifts to Darius, sending him a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows... the Persians convened a council... He

[Gobryas] explained the meaning of the gifts as follows: "If you Persians do not fly into the sky like birds, or burrow yonder in the ground like mice, or jump away into swamps like frogs, you will not return, but be struck by these arrows." (Herodotus IV: 131-132).

Indeed, the clay handicrafts considered in this work bear very clear reminiscence to Vedic characters, and to ceremonial symbolic paraphernalia. Thus, for instance, especially bright in our opinion is interpretation of the anthropomorphic figurines whose sizes vary from 14 to 25 cm. The human-like figures differ morphologically and stylistically and are based on the typification of the human image. The position of hands varies, but, for the most part, hands are in a special ritual position: the arms are bent in front of the chest, or pulled up at the elbows, with the hands brought together, as it were, in prayer (Fig. 4 b, c). In some cases, the depiction of the limbs is only stylized (Fig. 4 a), which is yet another piece of evidence towards the ritual symbolism of the very presence of the statuette, leaving detail symbolism aside. The gender was only manifested in two cases.

Initially, the author and supervisor of the excavation work made an assumption that these anthropomorphic figurines are a kind of "substitute" for the body of the deceased, which, for one reason or

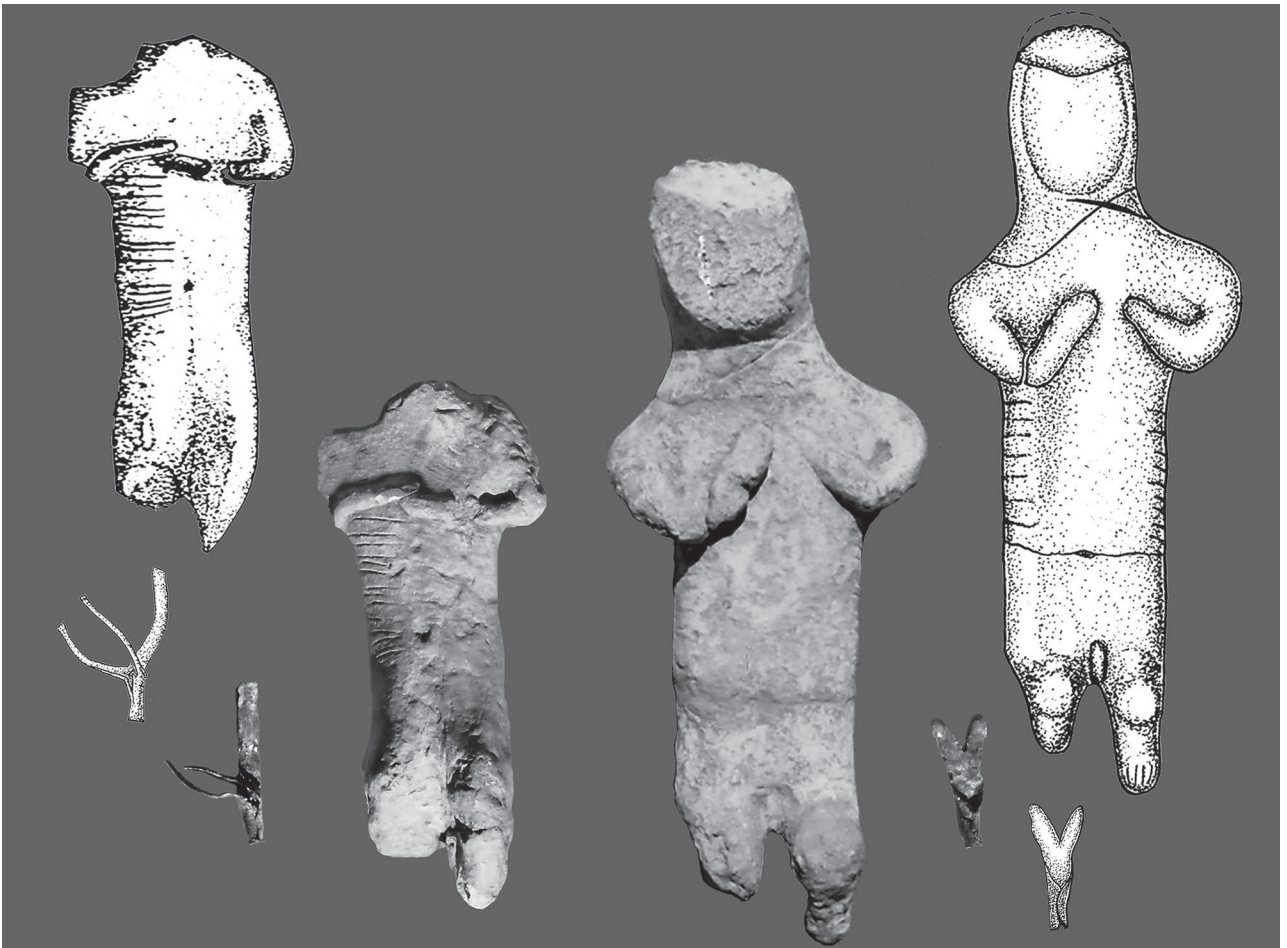


Fig. 3. Anthropomorphic deities of the “water element”

another, the tribesmen could not bury in their burial ground (for example, if the person died in a foreign land or went missing). However, with accumulation of artifacts, and, most importantly, owing to the possibility of verifying them with the data of the Vedas, the understanding of their purpose has changed radically. Thus, for example, on some anthropomorphic figurines, horizontally drawn parallel lines were identified, creating an impression of some wavy surfaces (Fig. 5). It is common knowledge that wavy lines in many cultures denoted water and the water element as such.

Since, as a rule, votive metal wands (a symbol of power) were also found in combination with such figurines, it can be assumed that we are faced with mythological characters of the Indo-Aryans such as Varuna (the god of rain), Indra (master of thunder and keeper of waters), Sarasvati (fruitful power of rivers), Maruta or Rudra (gods of the wind, storm, thunderstorm, lightning, that kill people and livestock), related to water (*PB V 29-2,41-11,12, 85-3* and others). Apparently, the “thunder club of Trishandha” (*AB XI, 11*) should be interpreted as votive metal bi-

or tri-digitate wands found in some burials with an anthropomorphic statuette (Fig. 5). The number of endings on the wand, apparently, was of crucial significance. It is likely that the wand, which had three branches, represented the “three-membered cudgel of Indra” (*AB 1989: 38*) and served as a “deadly weapon” in the fight against asuras (lower deities in opposition to the gods - Suras) (*AB XI, 10*).

As mentioned above, there are known cases when pairs of figurines were found in burials. Thus, for instance, in one of the burials, in a standard set of earthen items, two figurines were found, made in the same style, but definitely of different sexes. In this regard, an interesting fact is that in the Rigveda there is a mention of opposite-sex twins – Yama and his sister Yami (*PB X, 10*). Yama (literally means “twin”) - the king of the dead, the first mortal who by having died laid the foundation for death. In the Vedic notions, it was from the incest between these twins that the human race originated (in the times of the Rigveda, incest was already condemned from the standpoint of morality, and was called “not befitting the nature of genus” (*PB X, 10-9*)). Apparently, the identification of



Fig. 4. Different-sex “twins”

these deities with fertility and childbearing led to the creation of these figurines.

The relative diversity of the discovered anthropomorphic figurines makes it possible to develop an interpretation and put forward various correspondence theories between the Vedic gods and the anthropomorphic figurines. We have only illustrated some of the options.

Not only anthropomorphic images find their analogies in the Vedas. A clear verification against the data of the ancient Indian literature is also shown by other votive items from the mentioned standard set of clay handicrafts. Some of the most frequently recorded items are rounded votive altars, which in some cases have even preserved charcoal as the remains of ritual burning (Fig. 7). These⁵, probably, symbolize

the solar disk, the eternal change of day and night. In Vedic literature, Mitra is identified in various versions with the daylight hours, while Varuna with the dark hours: “*Surya takes on this color of Mitra (and) Varuna, To be visible in the bosom of the sky. One side of it is infinitely bright, Another, black side, is put together by (his) mares*” (PB I, 115-5).

Adhering to this interpretation of ancient texts, we can talk about the appeal of the Sapalli tribe to the greatest deities of the Vedic pantheon, identified with the solar disk and verified by us as represented by the votive altars. Besides, the dual personification of Mitra as day, and Varuna as night fits into the dualistic concept of the world’s earliest religion (Zoroastrianism), which later became dominant over a vast territory from India, to Iran, to Azerbaijan. It should be noted here that the seemingly dual day-night (light-darkness, good-evil) juxtaposition can

⁵ It must be noted that wheels mockups were found in the burials of the Buston VI necropolis, some of these mockups had “spokes” depicted on them (Avanesova 2013a). With a certain degree of conventionality, it can be assumed that these finds might also symbolize the solar disk, and the “spokes” on the wheels represented the sun’s rays. Another option for verifying the altars

can be a ring, disk, etc., which might also be associated with the concept of the sun, and are widely known and generally accepted symbols, in this regard (Avanesova 2004: 22).



Fig. 5. Votive clay altars and tokens

also be interpreted as the unity of being, the constant change of day and night, where Mitra and Varuna rule together (Dumézil 1986: 51). Moreover, in the Rigveda, emphasis on differences between gods can be discerned extremely rarely, and manifests itself only in vague wording and subtle allusions. In the later Atharvaveda, the division is much clearer cut, and the deities are often described in direct juxtaposition to each other. The latter makes it possible to suggest that during the period of the initial formation of the beliefs in question, which spread in Northern India with the advent of the Eurasian nomads, Mitra and Varuna were personified as a single deity.

Often, miniature votive altars were combined with cone-shaped tokens or tags (Fig. 7). Their semantics is connected, in the first place, with the symbolism of number 3. In Vedic literature, this figure runs like a red line both in the social component (three main varnas) and in all religious texts and canons (one of the main ones is the trifunctionality of the Indo-Iranian gods, and the cosmogonic idea of the three vertical worlds). The universe consists of three parts: the world of the gods (the sky), the world of people (the atmosphere) and the world of the dead (the underground). It is possible that the clay chips embodied the idea of the cosmos trinity (Dumézil 1986: 12) (PB X, 125). The tripartite nature of the world is associated with Agni (the god of fire, mediator between the people and the gods). It is trinitarian in relation to the three levels of the universe; it is also represented by three sacrificial fires (PB X, 90. 15), which are also there in the structure of the necropolis - on its sacral platforms (Avanesova 2013: 511-524). Thus, the presence of three tokens or tags in the set of the clay

handicraft items semantically reflects the symbolism of the primacy of the religious cult component in the social and public life of Sapalli society.

Speaking about their purpose, let us go back to the analogy with the cone-shaped “chips” of the Jeitun archaeological site. Let us assume that such items, having passed through the epochs along with the settlement of the pioneering farmers, spread to the East through Margiana and, having reached Northern Bactria, were transformed from items having a narrow utility purpose to a kind of relay repeater of religious and mythical ideas. V. M. Masson, in search of similar phenomena, drew attention to the presence of the “chips” in Tepe-Sialk (Central Iran), the early Tripoli settlement of Luka-Vrublevetskaya, and others. He concluded that they may have served as playing pieces and may have come from a single set (Masson 1971: 42).

The symbolism of some clay handicrafts also conveys the desire of the Sapalli people to offer a ritual repast. The ritual repast to be offered to ancestors and gods implied that there was a need to produce monofunctional vessels and scoops (Fig. 8). The dishes were presented in various shapes, but most of them were shaped as a cauldron. Some vessels contained pebbles (Fig. 6), which we interpret as a crushing stone (PB IX, 67-19), and this leads us to believe that the vessels were intended for the sacral drink of soma (or “xao-ma”). The significance of this sacral drink as the main offering to the gods is evidenced by the fact that the entire Mandala IX refers “To Soma” and starts with the following lines: “With the sweetest, most exhilarating flow // Do purify thyself, oh Soma, // Squeezed Indra art thou, made for drinking!” (PB IX, 1).



Fig. 6. Monofunctional earthenware vessels and votive scoops

Almost all the vessels were accompanied by spoons, which were apparently intended for scooping and drinking the ritual offering contained in the vessel. In the Rigveda (PB X, 118-2) and the Atharvaveda (AB XVIII, 4-5, 6) the spoon appears as an obligatory utensil. At the same time, their variability is obvious, which is consistent with the concept of the world divided into three parts (the sky, the atmosphere and the underground) and is explained in the Atharvaveda: "A butter spoon supports the sky, a pouring spoon supports the air, and the obligatory scoop holds the firmament of the earth" (AB XVIII, 4-5).

The question of the time of compilation of the Vedic literature is highly debatable. But if one should adhere to the opinion that this literature, and the Rigveda, as its most ancient component, are the same age as the crafts under discussion, then the obvious conclusion is that the religion of the ancient Vedas and the religious beliefs of the population of Northern Bactria are verifiable on the basis of the artifacts of the B-VI necropolis.

Thus, summing up the data published herein on the monofunctional clay handicrafts, this research material proves, at most, that the artifacts draw their origin from the establishment and dissemination of the religious beliefs of the ancient Indo-Aryans, and, at least, that the same cultural element must have affected both the formation of these artifacts and the existence of the trends mentioned here. The entire complex of the clay handicrafts of B-VI mark the address of the Sapalli community to the mythologized deities of the Vedic pantheon and Vedic cosmology, or, according to N. A. Avanesova, - they are artifactual text.

They make up a single holistic picture of the worldview, and they help to clearly outline a unified mythological structure, providing an idea of what were the beliefs of three thousand years ago. Clay handicrafts are intended to "explain" the mythological and ideological concepts of the population of the pre-urban Northern Bactria using the language of symbols.

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