

ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ
ОТ АХЕМЕНИДОВ ДО ТИМУРИДОВ

АРХЕОЛОГИЯ, ИСТОРИЯ, ЭТНОЛОГИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА



Материалы международной научной конференции,
посвященной 100-летию со дня рождения
Александра Марковича Беленицкого

Санкт-Петербург,
2—5 ноября 2004 года



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STATE HERMITAGE

ORIENTAL DEPARTMENT OF THE ST. PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY



CENTRAL ASIA FROM THE ACHAEMENIDS TO THE TIMURIDS

ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY, ETHNOLOGY, CULTURE

Materials of an International Scientific Conference
dedicated to the Centenary of Aleksandr Markovich Belenitsky

St. Petersburg, November 2—5, 2004

St. Petersburg

2004

ИНСТИТУТ ИСТОРИИ МАТЕРИАЛЬНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ РАН
ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ ЭРМИТАЖ
ВОСТОЧНЫЙ ФАКУЛЬТЕТ
САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА



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Санкт-Петербург

2004

УДК 930.26

ББК Т4

*Издание осуществлено при финансовой поддержке
Российского гуманитарного научного фонда
Проект № 04-01-14024 г*

Ответственный научный редактор:

В. П. Никоноров

Editor-in-chief:

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Редакционная коллегия:

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Центральная Азия от Ахеменидов до Тимуридов: археология, история, этнология, культура. Материалы международной научной конференции, посвященной 100-летию со дня рождения Александра Марковича Беленицкого (Санкт-Петербург, 2—5 ноября 2004 года). — СПб.: Институт истории материальной культуры РАН, 2004. — 406 с., ил.

Корректор и редактор — *Ю. Ю. Дмитриева*

Макет подготовлен *В. П. Никоноровым*

Подписано в печать 15.10.2004. Формат 59×88 ¹/₈. Гарнитура основного текста «Times New Roman»
Печать офсетная. Бумага офсетная. Тираж 300 экз. Объем 50 усл. п. л. Заказ № 65

Отпечатано в типографии Санкт-Петербургского Института истории РАН
197110, г. Санкт-Петербург, ул. Петрозаводская, д. 7
тел. (812) 2351586

ISBN 5-201-01233-7

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PROPOSAL FOR A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE NORTHERN WALL
OF THE «HALL OF THE AMBASSADORS» AT AFRASYAB

In China, the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar is dedicated to a very ancient festival called Duanwujie, known among the Westerners as the «Dragon-Boat Festival». Even today during the celebrations, naval races take place with special boats in the shape of a dragon. During the Duanwujie spectators participate: they feed the fish with rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves (the so-called zongzi) prepared the days before the festival.

According to a popular legend, the Duanwujie was originated soon after the suicide of the poet Qu Yuan (c. 340—278 B.C.), who was also a minister of the king of Chu during the period of the Warring States (453—221 B.C.). Qu Yuan committed suicide by drowning himself in the River Miluo (Hunan Province) after being denounced by his enemies and unjustly banished by his king. When the people of the state of Chu realised what had happened, they started to search the corpse in the water but without result. Later they threw food into the river to tempt the fish away from where they thought the body was. The Duanwujie festival recalls this episode every year. Usually it takes place between in the end of Spring and the beginning of Summer.

Most likely, the Duanwujie is an amalgam of different festivities which provided for human sacrifice: in fact the boat race actually recalls naval battles at the conclusion of which was the killing of the losing crews. Later the festival was connected to the cult of suicides, who were considered to be the protector spirits of water where they died. Qu Yuan was just the most famous [Bodde 1975: 314]. Offerings were made to these protector spirits to beg them to allow those who drowned to be at peace. The dragon boats are now considered replicas of the original boats that searched for Qu Yuan [Bodde 1975: 315]. The Duanwujie can be found in historical sources since the fall of the Han Dynasty (A.D. 220) and its association with Qu Yuan was recorded since this time. The Afrasyab Paintings. During the Tang Dynasty (618—906) the Duanwujie was certainly known to be popular among every social class in China. The Tang period represents China's Golden Age. In that epoch the Middle Kingdom was opened to all the neighbouring countries and every exoticism was welcome at the imperial court. This was one of the consequences of the policies of the aggressive early Tang government, which sought to enlarge the imperial boundaries of China at the expense of parts of South-East Asia, Mongolia and Central Asia. Its relations with the latter region were particularly intense, especially with Sogdiana. From at least the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386—581) the Sogdians had started to be employed in the imperial administrations and had become very rich through the trade of luxury goods [Rong 2000]. Recently, several tombs belonging to powerful strangers of Iranian extraction have been excavated in the area of Chang'an, the ancient Wei (535—557) and Tang capital. The funerary outfits discovered during these excavations allow us to identify other objects coming into the antiquary market and attributed to rich Sogdians active in 6th century China [Marshak 2001]. Just after the middle of 7th century Sogdiana submitted to the Tang Empire after the destruction of the Western Turks [Chavannes 1903: 267—268; Compareti 2002: 376—377]. The king of Samarkand, Varghuman, was proclaimed sovereign of all Sogdiana by the Emperor Gao Zong (649—683) [Kageyama 2002: n. 1]. The influence of Chinese art is attested at the main Sogdian sites of this period and in particular at Afrasyab, the pre-Islamic Samarkand. Here, the building discovered in 1965 and commonly known as the «Ambassadors' Hall» has showed paintings of Chinese court life and also a certain knowledge by the Sogdian artists of typical Chinese painting formulae [Kageyama 2002]. The Chinese envoys are represented together with the ambassadors from several Asiatic kingdoms in the Western Wall paintings at Afrasyab in the scene commonly identified with the celebration of the Iranian New Year, or Nawruz (fig. 1). The Northern Wall is totally dedicated to a Chinese scene and, we maintain, the same emperor Gao Zong (represented as bigger in size than his attendants) takes part in it (fig. 2). The scene is divided into two parts separated by the vertical line of the water. On the left there is an aquatic scene with both male and female figures. The focus of the entire composition in this part of the painting is the lady, bigger in size than the others, on the dragon-head shaped boat who, most likely, is the Empress.

On the right a hunting scene is represented with only male figures, including the Emperor, taking part in it¹.

The interpretation of the scene on the Northern Wall, commonly accepted until now, has been that of a generic reflection of Chinese life. This identification, in our opinion, cannot be accepted because, in our view it represents an episode in a particular Chinese festival — namely, the Duanwujie — which was celebrated around the period of the Sogdian New Year. The Western and Southern Wall (fig. 3) depict the Sogdian New Year festival which scholars have (almost) always accepted [Silvi Antonini 1990: 118; Mode, 1993; Marshak 1994: 14; Grenet 2003: 124—125]. In the mid-7th century Sogdiana the Nawruz was celebrated around the middle of June², a date roughly corresponding to the Chinese celebration of the Duanwujie. In one Chinese source the habit was reported of rendering homage to his ancestors on the occasion of the New Year by the king of Chach. This habit could be considered acceptable also for the rest of Sogdiana and, in fact, it is present at Afrasyab in the Southern Wall paintings [Marshak 1994: 14—15].

In the reconstruction of the aquatic scene on the Northern Wall, the lady who is bigger in size has the left hand opened as if dropping something in the water (fig. 2). In fact, among the animals³ and the monsters in the water below the boat there are also some fishes represented realistically while eating the food which had been thrown in by the noble lady. In the upper part, on the right of the boat, two other fishes are represented in the same attitude. In the second boat on the right there are only three male attendants and a fourth one is represented while getting on the boat directly from the water. Two other half-naked male figures with their hair tied are dipping feet in the water in the bottom half of the scene: the first one seems to be searching for something in the water with a stick, while the second one is turning two horses in the direction of the boat with the ladies on. The boat of the male figures does not present the dragon-head shape so it seems correct to consider it as the transportation for the attendants of the lady bigger in size. The two other half-naked figures are probably other attendants employed to search in the water, in which are swimming two horses. These last details do not seem to be present anymore in the modern celebration of the *Duanwujie* festival⁴, so the Afrasyab paintings could be very useful to sinologists for the reconstruction of its ancient stages since there are no reproductions of the *Duanwujie* in Tang arts⁵. In fact, as E. Kageyama suggested for the paintings of the West Wall, these scene could have been reproduced by Sogdian artists according to Chinese formulae and not because of direct knowledge [Kageyama 2002]. The same hypothesis could be considered correct for the hunting scene on the Northern Wall: the Sogdian artists could have simply reproduced another stage of the celebration of the original *Duanwujie*, now forgotten, or they could have chosen a martial attitude for their main ally and protector: the Chinese Emperor. Two elements of Sasanian art are present: the horses of the hunters are represented in the «flying gallop» and the quarry of the Emperor is doubly depicted both at the point of being killed with a spear and already dead under the horse [Francovich 1984: 89—97].

Some figures in the hunting scene are not represented as riding on horses because, most likely, they are attendants. The person represented holding a baggage tight with the help of his right foot could be considered an attendant of the lady in the dragon-head shaped boat who is going to prepare something for

¹ The Afrasyab paintings have been the subject of several studies: Альбаум 1975; Belenitskii, Marshak 1981: 47—49, 61—63; Silvi Antonini 1990; Mode 1993; Marshak 1994; Silvi Antonini 1994; Майтдинова 1994; Мотов 1999; Kageyama, 2002; Silvi Antonini 2003: 171—185; Yatsenko 2004; Grenet, forthcoming; see also Pugachenkova, Rtveldadze 1985. Figure 2 is a reconstruction proposed by F. Ory and F. Grenet in a small brochure published by the Museum of Afrasyab: Grenet, Samibaev 2002: 6—7. Another reconstruction of the same scene by M. Mode can be seen in Internet: <http://www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/afra/north.htm>. For a tentative reconstruction of the West Wall (by F. Ory), see: <http://www.afra.org/ambassador2.html>. For a slightly different interpretation of some details in the West Wall, see: <http://www.eurasianhistory.com/data/articles/a02/422.html>. reconstruction proposed by F. Ory and F. Grenet in a small brochure published by the Museum of Afrasyab [Grenet, Samibaev 2002: 6—7]. Another reconstruction of the same scene by M. Mode can be seen in Internet: <http://www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/afra/north.htm>. For a tentative reconstruction of the West Wall (by F. Ory), see: <http://www.afra.org/ambassador2.html>. For a slightly different interpretation of some details in the West Wall, see: <http://www.eurasianhistory.com/data/articles/a02/422.html>.

² To be precise the *Nawruz* during the 7th century fell between June 9 to 17, that is around the Summer Solstice: Cristoforetti 2000: 149, 155.

³ It is worth noting that nowadays, during the Duanwujie, members of the crew of the boats dive in the water to catch the ducks confused by the fireworks. These ducks will be eaten later by their own hunters. Is this the memory of an ancient phase of Duanwujie in which also a hunt took place?

⁴ For very interesting connections between horses and water sacrifices in pre-Tang China: Riboud 2003: 153.

⁵ Among the most ancient Chinese paintings with the reproduction of the Dragon-Boat Festival, there are at least two handscrolls attributed to Wang Zhenpeng (c. 1280—1329), one kept in the Palace Museum (Beijing) the other kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York): Yang, Nie, Lang, Barnhart, Cahill, Hung 1997: 149—150, fig. 138; Lee, Ho, 1968: fig. 201. The scenes represented in these paintings are completely different than the celebration represented at Afrasyab.

the celebration of the festival. Probably, the baggage was not put in the boat before because of lack of space. It is clear that the attendant is going to dip in the water because his legs are naked in the same way as the person with the stick who has already put one foot in the water. Close to these attendants there is another (not reproduced in the reconstruction of fig. 2) represented while taking off his shoes, a clear reference to his imminent dipping (fig. 4).

Calendrical data. To support the explanation given above about the interpretation of the paintings in the Hall of the Ambassadors there are some calendrical calculations to be taken into consideration. We have long known that the painting on the Western Wall is a representation of the Nawruz and that the Southern Wall is in relation with it, because the ancestors' cult was performed in the last days of the year just before the Nawruz. The present authors suggest that the four walls are connected by a common theme. Most scholars up to the present have accepted that they must be dated to after the fall of the Western Turk Empire by the Tang (658—659) when Chinese influence was at its zenith in Sogdiana. What has not been established has been the exact date of their execution. However, it is well known that the Nawruz shifted slightly from just after the Summer Solstice to slightly before it during the 7th century. We know from early Islamic sources that the Muslim authorities continued the practice of the Sasanians in combining the beginning of Summer with the starting point of the fiscal year (*iftitah al-kharaj*).

In order to calculate the date of the Nawruz for Sogdiana it is necessary to consider the five day discrepancy mentioned by al-Biruni in the «*Athar al-Baqiya*» [Al-Biruni 1923: 233—234] by the calendar used in Persia and those used by its close neighbours (Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Armenia). This discrepancy (the origin of which is a matter that has not been resolved) caused the Sogdian *Nawruz* to correspond with the 6th day of the 1st month (*Farwardin*) of the Persian calendar.

In 658 AD (*27 Yazdgardi*) the *Nawruz* of the Persian calendar fell on the 10th June and the following year as well. Because of the loss of six hours every year the date of the *Nawruz*, in Julian terms, falls one day before every four years. So the *Nawruz* fell in 659 on the 10th June, in 660—663 on the 9th June and so on. On this basis the Sogdian *Nawruz* five days later fell on the 15th June in 659 and on the 14th June during the years 660—663. These dates coincide approximately with the date of the Summer Solstice, which was considered falling on the 18th June (Julian calendrical terms = the 21st June in Gregorian calendrical terms). By the 11th century, in the Islamic period, the *Nawruz* ceremony was celebrated earlier in the year and transformed into a Spring Festival as it would have been in ancient Iranian culture [Cristoforetti 2003: 155—161].

On the West Wall in the Hall of the Ambassadors in Afrasyab are seen several ambassadors giving homage and gifts to an unknown ruler (or divinity). This was a common element of the Summer Solstice Festival of *Nawruz* which was celebrated throughout the Iranian world. As the *Nawruz* was celebrated in the 7th century at the Summer Solstice, we must ask ourselves the question: is the Chinese scene on the North Wall connected to it? At this period the Festival of *Duanwujie* corresponded approximately to the Sogdian *Nawruz*, falling always on the 5th day of the 5th month of the Chinese lunar-solar calendar. Then, the *Duanwujie* was a water festival and in the *Nawruz* the water element was as important as light and rebirth [Cristoforetti 2002: 249—272]. The Chinese calendar is a lunar-solar one, that is to say that the Solar years are divided into twelve lunations, which become thirteen in intercalary years. In modern times the *Duanwujie* shifts between 28th May and 27th June. The median date is June 12th/13th in the Gregorian calendar which corresponds to June 9th/10th in the Julian one during the 7th century. It is the festival, which indicates the approach of the Xiazhi, one of the twelve lunar *Zhongqi* or the Summer Solstice. For the Chinese calendar this fell on average on the 18th June in the 7th century.

If our hypothesis is correct, the paintings on the North, South, West Walls at Afrasyab depict two festivals, one Han, one Sogdian, that sometimes coincided in date with each other. Between 676 and 683 the Sogdian *Nawruz* fell only on the 10th and then the 9th of June. By using the Academia Sinica website⁶ we found the following results for the *Duanwujie* of the years following the fall of the Western Turk Empire in 658—659 to the death of the Emperor Gao Zong (D = *Duanwujie*; N = *Nawruz*; SN = Sogdian *Nawruz*; the two *Nawruz*'s dates remain the same for four years):

659 D: 31 May N: 10 June; SN: 15 June

660 D: 18 June; N: 9 June; SN: 14 June

661 D: 7 Jun

662 D: 27 May

663 D: 15 June

⁶ See: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/~tdbproj/sinocal/luso.html>.

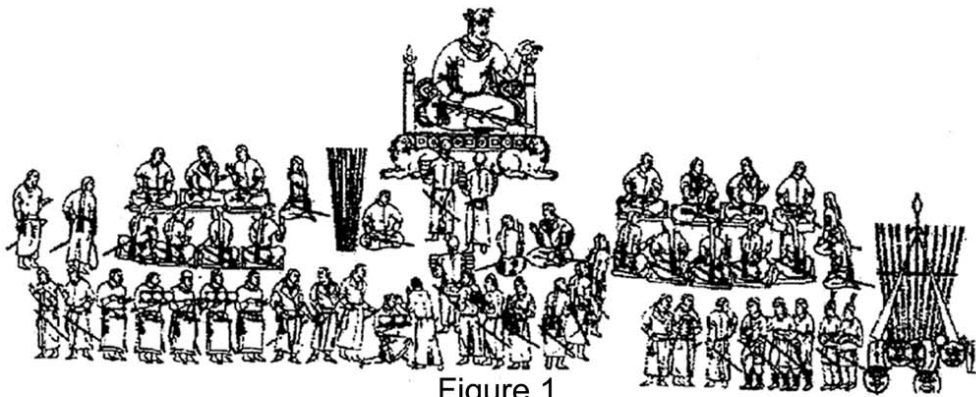


Figure 1



Figure 2

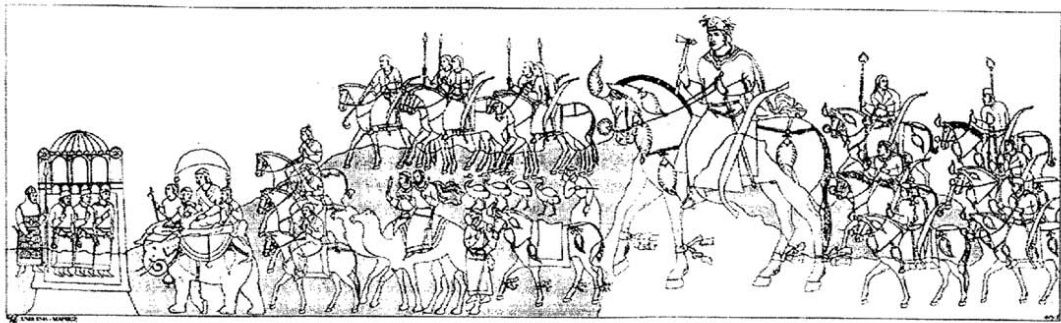


Figure 3



Figure 4

664 D: 4 June; N: 8 June; SN: 13 June
665 D: 23 June
666 D: 12 June
667 D: 2 June
668 D: 19 June; N: 7 June; SN: 12 June
669 D: 8 June
670 D: 29 May
671 D: 16 June
672 D: 5 June; N: 6 June; SN: 11 June
673 D: 26 May
674 D: 14 June
675 D: 3 June
676 D: 21 June; N: 5 June; SN: 10 June
677 D: 10 June
678 D: 30 May
679 D: 18 June
680 D: 6 June; N: 4 June; SN: 9 June
681 D: 22 May
682 D: 15 June
683 D: 5 June

Only in 677 did the Sogdian *Nawruz* correspond exactly with the Chinese *Duanwujie*. In any case, there was more years in which the two festivals proximity was close. We do not have historical reports about celebrations of Sogdian *Nawruz*. So could be useful to consider two more possibilities.

The first — showed in the graphic — concerns the *Nawruz* of the 1st Farwardin, i. e. the New Year Day of the Iranian calendar (Yazdgardī). In this case, the coincidence/proximity period between *Nawruz* and *Duanwujie*'s medial date is the one included between 656 and 663 (*Nawruz* of the 1st Farwardin on the 10th — 9th June). The second one — not showed in the graphic — concerns a problematic Narshakhi's passage about a second *Nawruz* celebrated in Bukhara five days later than Sogdian *Nawruz* [Cristoforetti, forthcoming]. And that extends much more the coincidences opportunities. Leaving out for the moment that second possibility, we can extend the period for research from 656 to 683.

Conclusion. If this hypothesis is considered convincing then the identification of the Emperor Gao Zong and his court is confirmed and that they are represented on the North Wall of Afrasyab as participating in the *Duanwujie*.

Why 677 could be justified is that bands of Arabs had made incursions into Sogdiana between 673—676 at the time when the rulers of Sogdiana were Chinese vassals and probably already in 654 when the Western Turks controlled Central Asia [Compareti 2002: 378]. Perhaps they asked for help to repeal the invaders and the Afrasyab paintings represent the homage of the ruler of Samarkand to the Tang Emperor following their expulsion [Grenet, forthcoming]⁷. In the year 677 the *Duanwujie* and the *Nawruz* coincided exactly. However, it is worth remembering that when Sa'id b. Uthman conquered Samarkand in 676 he found no king there [Frye 1954: 40]. So it can be considered that Varghuman's reign had already finished before 676 and that the paintings at Afrasyab most likely were finished sometime between 656 and 675/676. Recently, S. Yatsenko proposed specifically 662 [Yatsenko 2004].

Furthermore, there seems to be an Indian connection on the East Wall. Although unfortunately it is badly preserved, it could be that the Indian scene had a connection with both the *Duanwujie* and the *Nawruz*. More investigations have to be conducted before definitive conclusions can be made.

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⁷ Also G. Verardi agrees with this hypothesis from a historical and an archaeological point of view but referring to the whole of Central Asia [Verardi 2002; Verardi, Parapatti 2004: 97—102]. Specifically on Sogdiana see: Compareti, forthcoming.

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