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**Preislamic Central Asia and Naršaḥī's *History of Bukhara*<sup>1</sup>**

The mid-10<sup>th</sup> century history of Bukhara of Abū Bakr Muhammad Naršaḥī is one of the most important sources for the study of early Islamic Central Asia, but it is also essential for a better understanding of the period preceding the Islamic conquest of Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> The present study tries to shed light on the fascinating preislamic material preserved in the *History of Bukhara* relating to the preislamic heritage of Central Asia, especially the Bukhara valley. Unfortunately I cannot demonstrate all the major arguments in this rather short paper in their entirety, however, I believe that the present work is somehow able to shed light on the main issues relating to the rich preislamic material preserved in the *History of Bukhara*.

Being the earliest surviving urban history of Central Asia from the Islamic period Naršaḥī's *History of Bukhara* exists now its Classical Persian variant created in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, an earlier version had been penned in Arabic around 940, manuscripts of which did not survive. Its original author, Abū Bakr Muhammad Naršaḥī was a scribe of nativist background in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century Samanid court in Bukhara and perhaps the *History of Bukhara* was commissioned by the Bukharan court of the Samanid dynasty.

As for the *History of Bukhara*, it faithfully follows the genre of Islamic historiography developed since the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, where both universal works, such as the accounts of al-Tabari as well as local, nativist approaches and urban histories (for instance that of the by now mainly lost early Islamic chronicle of Central Asia written by Sallāmī) all influenced the work of Naršaḥī. The author of the *History of Bukhara* modelled his work according to earlier Arabic urban histories, faithfully depicting its 9-10<sup>th</sup> century Muslim intellectual circles, the geographical distribution of Bukhara and the Bukhara valley.

Besides Islamic legends, holymen and Samanid institutions, Naršaḥī's work contains a rich preislamic material as well, which apparently seemed to be still important in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, two centuries after the Islamic conquest of Bukhara. It is probable, that later Persian compilers of the Kara-

<sup>1</sup> The present paper was written with the generous support of the scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (Magyar Művészeti Akadémia).

<sup>2</sup> For the life and work of Naršaḥī see Abū Bakr Muhammad b. Ja'far NARŠAḤĪ: *Tārīḥ-i Buḥārā*. Ed. Muḥammad Taqī Mudarris Rażawī. Teherán, 1387/2009. FRYE, R. N., *The History of Bukhara, Translated from a Persian Abridgment of the Arabic Original by Naršaḥī* Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954. Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ja'far al-NARŠAḤĪ: *Bukhara története: Fordította, az utószót és a jegyzeteket írta: Sárközy Miklós*, Budapest, Magyarország, Eötvös Loránd Kutatási Hálózat Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2021. 141–158.

khanid period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century may have transformed, edited, shortened the book of Naršaḥī and in some cases perhaps added also minor parts to the original account, though the extent of these amendments is not exactly known due to the lack of the original Arabic version.

### *Central Asia before the Islamic conquest*

Central Asia underwent significant changes due to the arrival of the caliphate's army and the gradual process of islamization. The History of Bukhara meticulously depicts these major political and religious changes that occurred between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in Central Asia. Therefore, the *History of Bukhara* can be considered a key-source for the study of major political and religious changes in the region.

As for the aspects of regional ethnicities, the region between the Oxus and Iaxartes was the homeland of Turkic and Iranian speaking ethnic groups before the advent of Islam. Soghdians, Ḥwārizmians, Bactrians were the major ethnic groups of Eastern Iranian background which predominantly ruled trade routes and urban centers of the area. Besides these Eastern Iranian people, one can see a growing presence of Turkic people in Central Asia, but also in areas belonging now to present-day Afghanistan, where elites of the Hephtalite principalities appear to bear Turkic names or titles as early as the 5–7<sup>th</sup> centuries. We should also mention the Western Turkic Khaganate which exerted a significant influence on the ethnic character of preislamic Central Asia already in late antiquity. The western fringes of Central Asia around 600 AD belonged to the Sasanian Empire (the provinces of early Islamic Ḥurāsān, Harāt, Marw, areas west of Balḥ) with a mixed population consisting of Parthian and Hephtalite ethnic elements. Balḥ and Tuḥāristān (Bactria) were ruled by late Hephtalite principalities, where a large number of newly discovered Bactrian documents were discovered a few decades ago providing interesting material for the history of Hephtalite and Sasanian administrative practices south of the Oxus river. On the other hand, the areas north of the Oxus river were mainly influenced by the Western Turk Khaganate as well as the Tang dynasty of China in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, though their political control was not entirely complete in Central Asia due to geographical and other reasons. In the main oasis cities of preislamic Central Asia, there were local dynasts of mainly eastern Iranian background as vassals of the Chinese or the Western Turk Khaganate in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, though our knowledge is rather scarce about their chronology. It appears, however, that in Kāth, which was the capital of Ḥwārizm, the local Āfrīgīd dynasty ruled since the 4th century until 998 according to al-Bīrūnī.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the study of preislamic Ḥwārizm and the Āfrīgīds see Clifford Edmund BOSWORTH: "Āl-e Āfrīgī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online Edition*. "<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/al-e-afrig%201984>"<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/al-e-afrig1984>

The importance of the *History of Bukhara* cannot be overestimated relating to the Soghdians. As it is well-known, Soghdian cities flourished in the central and eastern parts of Central Asia, but we hear about Soghdian settlements well beyond the historical Soghdia in present-day western China, Kazakhstan and the Crimean peninsula. Soghdians played a pivotal role in organizing the Silk roads and were excellent tradesmen building a commercial empire between China, the Steppe and the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

### *Soghdian states in Central Asia and the History of Bukhara*

As for the political map of Soghdia prior to the Islamic conquest, our knowledge is as fragmented as these Soghdian principalities could have been in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Our Chinese sources speak of the rule of nine families in Soghdia, referring to nine major cities and provinces of Samarkand, Bukhara, Kiš, Baikand, Maymurğ, Ištīhān, Kabūdānjakath,<sup>5</sup> Ustrūšana,<sup>6</sup> Kūšānšahr.<sup>7</sup> However, it appears that this list extracted from Chinese sources does not cover the entire area of Soghdia. Important centres of Soghdia such as Waraḥša, Wardāna, Tirmidh, Čāč are totally missing from this list. Therefore, it is not well understood where the exact boundaries of Soghdia were located in late antiquity. For instance, Soghdia included territories south of Oxus in the Kushan era (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD), such as Tuḥāristān, which traditionally were linked rather to Bactria. On the other hand there are doubts on the status of Bukhara as an integral part of historical Soghdia. On the Orkhon inscriptions of Kül tegin, or in the *Ḥudūd al-ālam* of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century or in the Soghdian *Nāfnāmak*, Bukhara is traditionally considered as being outside of the boundaries of Soghdia, despite its Soghdian speaking population well into the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This distinction can be felt also in Naršaḥī when he describes Tarḥūn, the ruler of 'Suğd' as a king of a different province unrelated to Bukhara during the wars with the incoming Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (18-20<sup>th</sup> chapters).<sup>8</sup>

Due to the extreme scarcity of our preislamic sources, it is rather difficult to assess the political history of preislamic Soghdian dynasties. To make the political map more complicated, most of these local Soghdian families with their rather fragmentary inner borders were often vassals of several major powers such as the Chionites in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Hephtalites in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries and later

<sup>4</sup> For the study of Soghdian commercial activity the most erudite essay was written by de la Vaissière, see Étienne DE LA VAISSIÈRE: *Sogdian Traders. A History*. Leiden, Brill, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Maymurğ, Ištīhān, Kabūdānjakath were provinces north of Zaratšān mountains

<sup>6</sup> Roughly identical with the Farghana valley.

<sup>7</sup> Presumably the area between Samarkand and Bukhara.

<sup>8</sup> Matteo COMPARETI: *Samarkand the Center of the World, Proposal for the Identification of the Afrasyab Paintings*. Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2016. 13-18.

the Western Turk Khaganate and Tang China made attempts to exert their influence north of the Oxus river.

It is only Samarkand, the traditional heartland of Soghdia and Bukhara which provide us with a rather fragmentary list of local rulers based on Islamic (mainly Naršaḥī and al-Ṭabarī), Chinese sources as well as some numismatic data add some further names, but in general our written accounts suffer from much inadequacy. Our sources, including the *History of Bukhara* of Naršaḥī apply the title *ḥudāt* for the kings of Bukhara, while the rulers of Samarkand and Farghana *iḥšīd* (Soghdian: xšyδ, xšēδ). However, our informations on other Soghdian dynasties of Kiš, Tirmidh, Ustrūšana Čāč, Wardāna, Waraḥša, Baikand in the preislamic period are extremely limited.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Beginnings of preislamic Bukhara*

The fact, that Bukhara originally was on the western periphery or even outside of old Soghdia, is supported by its relatively late date of foundation. Due to the lack of extensive excavations in the old city of Bukhara, we cannot be sure concerning the date of the very first settlements in Bukhara. Though newly discovered findings may hint to the existence of a Hellenistic Bukhara, the rise of Bukhara coincides with the emergence of the Soghdian commercial empire in the 4–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD which may refer to the possible arrival of Soghdian colonists to the Bukhara oasis from east of present-day Bukhara. Late antiquity witnessed a heightened colonizing activity of Soghdian tradesmen when new places such as Tashkent (or as it was called in Soghdian Čāč) or Isfījāb (present-day Sayram in Kazakhstan) were founded outside of Soghdia by Soghdian colonists. It is also important to stress that besides the city of Bukhara there were several other places in the Bukhara oasis which were as significant as Bukhara (such as Waraḥša, Rāmītān, Baikand).<sup>10</sup>

As far as the foundation and administration of preislamic Bukhara are concerned, the *History of Bukhara* gives us a very detailed report on the water channels around Bukhara which could have served as the economic basis for the local Soghdian population. Though a large number of the citizens, especially the men, were possibly itinerant merchants trading with China mainly at the Silk roads, those remaining in Bukhara were predominantly agriculturalists whose main income came from those irrigated areas in the Bukhara oasis. The detailed description of the water channels by Naršaḥī can help us to somehow reconstruct the social and political institutions of late antique Bukhara. It appears,

<sup>9</sup> NARŠAḤĪ 2021, op.cit.,164. COMPARETI, op.cit., 13–18.

<sup>10</sup> For instance for the importance of Baikand, another major urban centre in the Bukhara oasis: Sören STARK: “The Earliest Attestation of Paykand”, *Journal Asiatique* 309/1 (2021), 97–105. For the beginnings of Bukhara: Richard Nelson FRYE: “Bukhara. i. In Pre-Islamic Time”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online Edition*. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bukhara-i>

that Bukhara was ruled by a local Soghdian king, called *ḥudāt*, parts of the local elite came from the local Soghdian aristocracy and from the so called *dihqān* group as it was mentioned several times by Naršaḥī. The *dihqāns* seemed to be rich landowners and/or merchants according the informations provided Naršaḥī. Apparently the *ḥudāts* acquired the power of Bukhara through the possession and (re)distribution of the water channels of the Zarafšān river and the crop fields around Bukhara among the members of their retinue (13<sup>th</sup> chapter). It appears that objects linked to the so called Silk roads and the revenues gained from transcontinental trade routes were less important in creating a firm basis for the power of the kings of Bukhara before Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, memories of the Silk roads and the once thriving Soghdian commercial empire are also echoed in the *History of Bukhara*. The story of the merchants of Baikand returning from China and their attempts to free their wives from Arab captivity, as well as the tale of mesmerizing treasures amassed by these merchants of Baikand in local sanctuaries well demonstrate the involvement of local Soghdian communities involved in long-distance commercial activity along the Silk roads. The *History of Bukhara* also makes references to the well-known Soghdian settlements Tarāz and Isfijāb. It was in Tarāz, that the Byzantine envoy, Zemarchus met Ištēmi, the *yabghu* of the Western Turk Khaganate in 568 to create a Byzantine–Western Turkic political alliance against the Sasanians. As for Isfijāb, there is a brief reference in the *History of Bukhara* to a Christian church still active in late 9<sup>th</sup> century which was converted into a mosque by Ismāʿīl Sāmānī (892–907) according to Naršaḥī (23<sup>th</sup> chapter).<sup>12</sup>

The very much fragmentary political situation in the Bukhara oasis is well depicted by the *History of Bukhara*, where the *ḥudāts*, these rather petty local rulers of the Bukhara oasis waged regular wars against each other on a regular basis, and these skirmishes very much contributed to the success of the conquering Muslim armies of Qutaiba b. Muslim in occupying Bukhara. Western Turkic influence is also well attested in the early history of Bukhara by Naršaḥī, the legendary story on the foundation of Bukhara mentions a certain Šīr-i kišwar (name of which appears to be a Persian translation of the Western Turkic Īl-Arslān), as well as political figures of Turkic descent such as Abrūy és Qarā Jūrin Turk (3<sup>rd</sup> chapter). On the other hand, the city of Bukhara maintained its autonomy governed by local Soghdian elites in the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries who allegedly could have made important financial and administrative services to the Western Turkic Khaganate.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> COMPARETI, op.cit, 7–8. NARŠAḤĪ 2021, op. cit., 162–171.

<sup>12</sup> DE LA VAISSIÈRE, op. cit, 327–328.

<sup>13</sup> Vasilij Vladimirovich BARTHOLD–Richard Nelson FRYE: “Buḵ ḥ ārā”, *The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition (2nd Edition)*.v. I. Leiden–New York, Brill, 1960, 1293–1296. COMPARETI, op.cit, 45–49.

### *The preislamic elites and social institutions of Bukhara*

Our knowledge is extremely scarce about the earliest Buḥār Ḥudāts, As for the Bukharan kinglist provided by the *History of Bukhara*, Naršaḥī calls the first ruler of Bukhara Abrūy (or Abarzī in another transliteration), whereas numismatical data do not support this view, and it appears that the earliest Bukhar Ḥudāt was called Ašdād. It is more interesting that Naršaḥī uses the name Kana as a name of a ruler, here it is tempting to assume that the name Kana was part of an ancient Soghdian royal title (*βwy'r γwβ k'w' vāgy k'n' 'heroic king of Bukhara'*) and *k'n'* could have meant 'hero' in Bukharan Soghdian. Another obscure figure mentioned by the *History of Bukhara* is that of Māḥ, whose identity remains unknown in other sources, but in *History of Bukhara* Māḥ is called the king of Bukhara and the founder of the so called 'idol-market' where idols (deities of an undisclosed non-Islamic religious cult) were sold once a year according to Naršaḥī well into the Islamic period.

Ironically, it is the military expeditions of the Islamic caliphate which helps us to identify some of the Buḥār Ḥudāts. It seems to be that the very first identifiable king of Bukhara was Bidūn (or Bindū) who was murdered in 681 in Bukhara and whose name occurs in several later Arabic and Classical Persian sources. Bidūn's widow, whose original name remains rather in shadow, being simply called as Ḥātūn (queen in Soghdian and in several Turkic languages) is also a popular figure in our early Islamic accounts relating to Bukhara. In this sense, the *History of Bukhara* is especially important by glorifying the rather heroic and valiant queen of Bukhara who bravely resisted the Arabs in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Ḥātūn's semi historical-semi legendary episodes, besides many intriguing details on clashes of Arabs with Soghdians and Turks, give Naršaḥī's work a fairly epic character, where traces of local popular legends and folk tales could have influenced the narrative (3<sup>rd</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> chapters). Tuḡšāda, the son of Ḥātūn is another notable and very complicated character of the *History of Bukhara*. His rather flamboyant personality, his balancing policy between local Soghdian elites and Arab amirs of Ḥurāsān greatly enrich our knowledge on the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of Islamic rule in Central Asia. Tuḡšāda, himself fell victim of a plot masterminded by unhappy Soghdian aristocrats and the description of his funeral by Naršaḥī gives us a rare glimps to local Zoroastrian funeral practices of Central Asia of the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century.

As for the curiosities, institutions of Soghdian Bukhara described by Naršaḥī, mention should be made of a Bukharan military muster, where a group of young noblemen formed the ceremonial double line according to the *History of Bukhara* (3<sup>rd</sup> chapter). It is probable that this description can refer to the noble guardians of Soghdia called *čākar* ('servant' in Soghdian) and mentioned by Chinese and Arabic sources as well. This institution could be widespread in the courts of Soghdian principalities before the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The popularity and perhaps the



efficiency of the Soghdian čākar guardian units resulted in its survival even in later times, when for instance caliph al-Ma'mun reestablished it as *al-šākiriyya* during his rule. The institution of *al-šākiriyya* survived well into the 870's in the Abbasid court in Baghdad and Samarra as a special military unit recruited from Central Asia with a significant Soghdian ethnic contribution. It seems to be that the description of Naršaḥī on the guardianship of the Khatun of Bukhara is a hitherto largely unnoticed account of the čākar institution.<sup>14</sup>

A more difficult issue is the case of the so called *kaškatha* people in Naršaḥī (12<sup>th</sup> chapter). Bukhara, as a major trading centre already in late antiquity could have several neighbourhoods of different ethnic or religious groups. As for the *kaškatha* it was suggested by Frye that they can be of Kushan ethnic background, however there is no clue to prove their Kushan origin in Naršaḥī's account. It is also not well-known for what reason the *kaškathas* were highlighted in Naršaḥī's narrative.

### *Non-Islamic religious groups in the History of Bukhara*

Apparently the most fascinating part of Naršaḥī's preislamic accounts relates religious history. It is the different non-islamic cults so frequently mentioned by Naršaḥī which make the *History of Bukhara* a unique source of nativist religious cults well into the Islamic period. For instance we can mention the description of the idol market of the rather mythical king Māh of Bukhara, which once could be in the vicinity of the Mağuk-i Aṭṭārān mosque (still existing in modern-day Bukharan old town). The detailed story of this idol market (6<sup>th</sup> chapter, still operating in mid-10<sup>th</sup> century when Naršaḥī lived!) can hint a relatively slow and prolonged process of Islamization among the local people of *Bukhārā-i šarīf*, where despite the triumph of Sunni Islam during the Abbasids and the Samanids, different religious groups of the previous centuries could have survived well into the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard the idol market of king Māh stands out as a rare evidence for the tenacious survival of a non-Islamic Soghdian society in the Samanid period. On the other hand it is not exactly clear which religious movement is featured in this episode of the *History of Bukhara*. Being a multicultural society with widespread presence in Eurasia, Soghdians had a good knowledge of numerous religious cults prevalent along the Silk roads as it was testified by various Buddhist, Manichaeic, Zoroastrian and Christian texts penned in Soghdian.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the funeral process Tuğšāda the Buḥār Ḥudāt (25<sup>th</sup> chapter) mentioned by Naršaḥī leaves no doubt on its clearly Zoroastrian character

<sup>14</sup> DE LA VAISSIÈRE, op. cit, 285.

<sup>15</sup> For the history of Soghdian manichaeism see: KÓSA Gábor: "A kaméleon-misszió A manicheus térítés technikái", *Conversio. Az Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Karán 2011. szeptember 22-23-án tartott vallástudományi konferencia előadásai*. Szerk. Déri Balázs. Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Vallástudományi Központ, 2013, 304, 310, 311, 319, 323, 329.

for the readers of modern times (and perhaps for the readers of Samanid period as well). Tuğšāda was killed in 739 by two outraged Soghdian *dihqāns* in the court of the Arab amir Ḥurāsān in the city of Marw and the hasty and for Muslim eyes definitely horrifying process of separation of human flesh and body took place in Marw according to Naršaḥī. Though Tuğšāda showed growing signs of willingness for cooperation with his Arab overlords during his rule, the decision of his servants to strictly follow local Zoroastrian funeral practices after his assassination even in the presence of the amir of Ḥurāsān, shows that the Soghdian ruler of Bukhara remained a faithful adherent of Central Asian Zoroastrianism until the very end of his life. The removal of the flesh from the bones of the Tuğšāda and the transport of the bones to Bukhara clearly refers to an essentially Zoroastrian funeral rite widely practiced in 8<sup>th</sup> century Soghdia where Islam just started to spread a few decades before.<sup>16</sup>

Traces of Buddhism and Buddhist influences can be also found in Naršaḥī's chronicle. The *History of Bukhara* several times speaks about the construction of 'buthānas', though the Classical Persian term 'buthāna' can be interpreted as a temple of idols literally and therefore it cannot be assigned exclusively to Buddhism. A possible influence of Chinese Buddhism can be felt in the episode of the dynastic marriage of Šīr-i kišwar, the legendary founder of Bukhara where mention is made about the arrival of a 'buthāna' from China to Bukhara as a part of the dowry of a Chinese princess. In this story the only major question is that of the chronology given that Tang influences were rather prevalent in Bukhara since the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century whereas the name of Šīr-i kišwar as a possible Classical Persian translation of a Turkic Il Arslan who lived in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century CE as a son of the high ranking Western Turkic prince Ištēmi yabghu. Chinese dominance in Bukhara became strong only during Tang emperors or Taizong (626–649) and Gaozong (650–683) when the area of Bukhara seems to be a Chinese protectorate.<sup>17</sup> However, Naršaḥī's account about the arrival of a Chinese 'buthāna', despite the chronological inadequacies, can be a distant echo of Chinese Buddhist activities<sup>18</sup> in 7<sup>th</sup> century Bukhara (3<sup>rd</sup> chapter).

One of the most exciting and most detailed episodes of the whole chronicle of Naršaḥī is the account of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>. A vehemently anti-Arab and anti-Islamic religious group, the followers of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> represent the last major local uprising against the Islamic rule in the years of 760–770. In this regard, *The History of Bukhara* is an exceptionally valuable source offering fascinating details on al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>'s revolt not found in other written sources. The ceremonies of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>, the words attributed to al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> in Naršaḥī as well as the circumstances of his death all reflect the complexity of his religious views sug-

<sup>16</sup> FRYE, 1954. op.cit, 141. 223. n.

<sup>17</sup> COMPARETI, op.cit, 40–45.

<sup>18</sup> DE LA VAISSIÈRE, op. cit, 77–79; COMPARETI, op. cit., 34.



gesting it as an interesting amalgam of gnostic and perhaps Buddhist elements (27–28<sup>th</sup> chapters).<sup>19</sup>

Preislamic Central Asian rural messianism is also well-represented in the *History of Bukhara*. The grave of Siyāwuš in Bukhara, signs of his cult in the Bukhara oasis as late as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the yearly cock killing sacrifices by local Zoroastrian magi all clearly suggest its widespread popularity in early Islamic Central Asia. Naršaḥī's description on the cults of Siyāwuš, who could be originally a deity of dying and nascent vegetation hailing from Central Asia according to newer archaeological findings, shows the process of gradual absorption of a preislamic cult into the medieval Muslim culture of Bukhara, where the memories of Siyāwuš and the legendary Turanian king Afrāsiyāb coexists with the adherence of Hanafi Muslim sheikhs such as Abū Ḥafṣ (1067–1142) whose tomb was in the direct vicinity of that of attributed to Afrāsiyāb according to Naršaḥī (4<sup>th</sup> chapter), while the tomb of Siyāwuš was at the gate of the Ark (Citadel) of Bukhara according to local legends (8<sup>th</sup> chapter). The convivance of parallel pilgrimage sites of Afrāsiyāb, Siyāwuš and Abū Ḥafṣ hints once again the acceptance of certain preislamic traditions in medieval Islamic Bukhara.<sup>20</sup>

Besides elements of these greater religious movements, Naršaḥī also preserved traces of heroic legends of preislamic background, which can be connected to other Turkic or Persian legends of the late antiquity. The name of the so called Copper city (*madīnat al-ṣufr* in Arabic, *baqir baliy* in old Turkic or *šahr/šahristān-i rūyīn, diz-i rūyīn* in Persian) is several times mentioned in Naršaḥī (4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> chapters) who interestingly locates it in the Bukhara oasis and in two cases he explicitly identifies the ancient city of Baikand near Bukhara as the Copper City.<sup>21</sup> According to Firdawsī, the Copper City was a magic fortress once ruled by Arjāsb, the mythical Turanian hero who was killed by Isfandiyār, an Iranian hero. In other Middle Persian texts (such as the Bundahišn) and medieval Islamic sources (such as the *Siyāsatnāma*) the *baqir kūf* or *qal'a-i mis* are mentioned as places where famous figures, heroes such as Mazdak, Abū Muslim or the Shiite Mahdī reside and wait for their return at the end of times.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia CRONE: *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran. Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 128–129.

<sup>20</sup> For the multireligious Soghdian society see: Frantz GRENET: "Iranian Gods in Hindu Garb: The Zoroastrian Pantheon of the Bactrians and Sogdians, Second-Eighth Centuries", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2006), 87–99. Frantz GRENET: "Religious Diversity among Sogdian Merchants in Sixth-Century China: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaesim and Hinduism", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 2, 463–478.

<sup>21</sup> For the concept of Copper City see: CZEGLÉDY Károly: "Bahrām Čōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 8 (1958). 1, 21–43. Alireza Shapur SHAHBAZI: Bahrām VI Čōbīn", *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online Edition*. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-06-466-467>. Khodadad REZAKHANI: *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 178.

## *The decline of the Soghdian language*

The *History of Bukhara* covers the centuries of a linguistic transition as well when the once widely spoken Soghdian language strongly linked to preislamic cultural and religious customs and manners is gradually replaced by other languages coming from the South and from North representing the emerging Islamicate civilisation. It is probably the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE when the usage of the Soghdian is largely marginalized in and around Bukhara and in other cities of al-Suġd. As we know, Soghdian does not disappear entirely since at least one Soghdian dialect survives in present-day Tajikistan in the valley of Yaghnāb, however, it appears Soghdian became rather a domestic language in the major urban centers of Central Asia by the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, though some Soghdian settlements outside Central Asia (in the peripheries of the traditional Soghdian populated areas) still continued to write in Soghdian for a while.

Soghdian as a language and a culture failed to adapt itself to the new Islamic milieu which fact contributed its disappearance from the linguistic map of Islamicate Central Asia. The Flemish monk Rubruck and the Armenian chronicler Het'um still record the scattered groups of Soghdian merchants in the 13–14<sup>th</sup> centuries in present-day Western China and Mongolia.<sup>22</sup> As far as the decline of the Soghdian language of Bukhara is concerned, according to de la Vaissière it was the first third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE when the last Soghdian speaking generation was born in Bukhara. It is also possible that in the villages around Bukhara Soghdian persisted for a longer period. Al-Muqaddasī records that Muḥammad b. Faḍl, a Hanafite imam in Bukhara used often the *lisan al-Suġd* in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>23</sup> However the extreme scarcity of Soghdian written in Arabic letters imply that Soghdian was not included to the nascent new culture of Central Asia, where Persian and several Turkic languages will rule the linguistic map throughout the middle ages. Soghdian was increasingly regarded as a relic of a more and more distant period of nonislamic cultural practices of Central Asia.

It is very possible that Naršaḥī belonged to the abovementioned last generation of Soghdian speakers of Bukhara, he several times refers to the '*Bukharan language*' spoken in Bukhara which apparently can be a local variant of 10<sup>th</sup> century Soghdian and it is also probable that some tales and legendary stories which we can read in the accounts of Naršaḥī could have come from local oral sources rather than from written ones. Naršaḥī also preserved two short Soghdian glosses relating to the inauguration of the Friday mosque by the conquering Arabs.

<sup>22</sup> Rubruck speaks in 1253–1254 about a group called 'Soldaini' in the court of the Golden Horde. Het'um, an Armenian monk in his report prepared for the French royal court mentions a Central Asian Christian group called 'Soldini (Soldin, Soldi)', who 'did not pray in Greek'. COMPARETI, op. cit, 59.

<sup>23</sup> DE LA VAISSIÈRE, op. cit, 289.

Here during the first *ṣalāt*, the local Soghdians who were new Muslims needed some training in performing Islamic rakaats during the *ṣalāt*. Thus some instructions were told in Soghdian for those less trained in Islamic rituals, and these two short sentences were preserved in original. Did it mean that the audience of Naršaḥī's work still spoke some Soghdian in the mid-10 century? I would be inclined to say rather yes, though we must keep in mind that the entire work of Naršaḥī was written in Arabic originally. A more surprising sign of a vernacular early Islam in Bukhara is also mentioned at the same scenario of Soghdian *ṣalāt* instruction. Naršaḥī says that while the instructions for the proper *ṣalāt* were said in Soghdian, the Qur'an recitation was sung in Persian in 709, the year when the victorious Arabic armies of Qutaiba b. Muslim successfully occupied the city of Bukhara (21<sup>st</sup> chapter). It can mean that most of Qutaiba's army seems to be bilingual Arabo-Persian as early as the first years of the 8<sup>th</sup> century suggesting that a very early variant of Classical Persian perhaps served as an important vernacular language among the first Islamic conquerors of Bukhara. It also refers to the rather fascinating nativism of Central Asian early Islam where local languages such as Soghdian, Persian and perhaps also Turkic were allowed to be used occasionally during Friday *ṣalāts* and where the exclusivity of Arabic was not yet established among the new converts of Ḥurāsān and Central Asia.<sup>24</sup>

### Abstract

*The present essay addresses aspects of the preislamic material preserved in Naršaḥī's History of Bukhara. The History of Bukhara is the oldest extant chronicle of Central Asia penned by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Naršaḥī in Arabic in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, later the whole text was translated into Persian (and possibly abbreviated) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. It appears that Naršaḥī's work contains important details on preislamic Bukhara. The history of Bukhara writes extensively on the decades of the Islamic conquests of Bukhara and Central Asia, the Soghdian-Turkic resistance against the Arabs where detailed descriptions of Arabic military expeditions are sometimes intertwined with folkloric elements. Of particular importance are the accounts relating to preislamic social and military institutions of ancient Bukhara as recorded by Naršaḥī. Further important preislamic material was preserved in the accounts relating to the local religious communities of Bukhara of the 6–10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, here we encounter traces of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and early traces of Islam in Bukhara we also learn about an idol bazar still flourishing in 10<sup>th</sup> century*

<sup>24</sup> For the aspects of the vernacular Qur'an in the early Islamic period see: Travis ZADEH: *The Vernacular Qur'an Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. 70–75. For the aspects of the birth of the New Persian and its very first texts: Christian REMPIS: "Die ältesten Dichtungen in Neupersisch", *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 101 (1951), 126–127. Gilbert LAZARD: *La langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane*. Paris, 1963.

*Bukhara. As for the heterodox manners and customs of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>'s religious movement, the History of Bukhara is the most valuable source of information having detailed descriptions of this otherwise little known cult of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.*

#### Keywords

Naršaḥī, Bukhara, Soghdians, Zoroastrianism, Central Asia, Ḥurāsān, Turks, Caliphate, Samanids

#### Rezümé

Jelen dolgozat a Naršaḥī *Bukhara története* című művében fennmaradt preiszlám vonatkozású megjegyzéseket tárgyalja. A *Bukhara története* Közép-Ázsia legrégebbi fennmaradt krónikája, amelyet Abū Ja<sup>c</sup>far Muḥammad Naršaḥī írt arabul az i. sz. 10. században, később a teljes szöveget lefordították perzsára a 12. században. Úgy tűnik, Naršaḥī munkája fontos részleteket őrzött a preiszlám Bukharáról. Egyes fejezeteiben bőséges beszámolót olvashatunk Bukhara és Közép-Ázsia muszlim hódításának éveiről, az arabellenes szogd-török katonai szövetség lépéseiről, itt olykor a katonai expedíciók részletes leírása folklorisztikus leírásokkal keveredik. Különös jelentőséggel bírnak azok a beszámolók, amelyek az ókori Bukhara preiszlám társadalmi és katonai intézményeire vonatkoznak. Újabb fontos preiszlám vonatkozású adatokat találunk a Kr.u. 6–10. századi bukhari helyi vallási közösségekkel kapcsolatos beszámolókból. A buddhizmusról, a zoroasztrianizmusról és a közép-ázsiai iszlám korai nyomairól több érdekes megjegyzést láthatunk, amint-hogy olvashatunk a Bukharában még a 10. században is virágzó bálványbázarról is. Ami pedig al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> vallási mozgalmának heterodox szokásait illeti, Naršaḥī krónikája a legértékesebb információforrás, amely részletes leírásokat tartalmaz a 8. század végén kialakult, egyébként kevésbé ismert kultuszról.

#### Kulcsszavak

Naršaḥī, Bukhara, szogdok, zoroasztrianusok, Közép-Ázsia, Khurászán, türkök, kalifátus, Számánidák

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