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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# **SYMBOLS AND RITUALS IN MORTUARY PRACTICE OF PRE-URBAN BACTRIA**

***Nona A. Avanesova. Buston VI – the necropolis of fire-worshippers of pre-urban Bactria. Samarkand: International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS), 2016 – 634 pp. ISBN 978-9943-357-36-5***

This essay presents a monograph of Nonna A. Avanesova “*Buston VI – the necropolis of fire-worshippers of pre-urban Bactria*” (Samarkand: IICAS, 2016. – 634 pp. ISBN 978-9943-357-36-5), published by the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS). The book describes the key issues on study of ritual practices and symbolic transformation in cultural landscapes of pre-urban Bactria, which is called Sapalli culture (with objects Sapallitepa, Djarkutan, Molali and Buston) in archaeological literature (Askarov, 1977; Askarov, Abdullaev, 1983; Ionesov, 1990, 1999).

The author of the book is N. A. Avanesova is a recognized expert in the field of the Paleo-Metal Age of the population of the Eurasian Steppe cultures and South of Uzbekistan. She is an authoritative researcher and practicing field archaeologist, a professor at the Samarkand State University. In 1986 N. Avanesova became the head of the Department of Archeology of the History Faculty of Samarkand University. In 1999, at the invitation of the dean of the Humanities Faculty of the Higher School of the Sorbonne University, Nona Avanesova lectured on the problems of the Bronze Age of the steppe part of Eurasia. In 2016 she was awarded the honorary title of visiting professor of the Samara State Institute of Culture (Ionesov, Kasparov, 2020).

For more than 30 years, Nona A. Avanesova has been the head of the Archaeological Museum-Laboratory at the Samarkand State University. The scientific heritage of Nona Avanesova includes the huge massive studies of historical and archaeological material on the Paleo-Metal epoch of Central Asia and cultures that combine the synthesis of agricultural and cattle-breeding traditions (Avanesova, 1991, 1995, 2016a, 2016b; Avanesova, Dzhurakulova, 2008). In 1985, academician A.A. Askarov invited her to study the monuments of the Sapalli culture (Djarkutan and Biston) of the South of Uzbekistan. Since then, the necropolis of the Bronze Age Buston 6 (B-6) has become the main object of archaeological research of N. Avanesova (Ionesov, 2015). After the analysis of these materials, some issues of the cultural genesis of the Proto-Bactrian civilization were revised. The B-6 materials testify to the beginning of an absolutely new period at the final stage of the Sapalli culture (Avanesova, 2016a). More than 500 burial objects granting the scientist an exceptionally rich and distinctive set of archaeological artifacts were excavated and studied in detail during fourteen field seasons on the area of 6.176 square meters.

The thematic structure of the book includes the following basic parts: a) Materials of excavations at B-6 and ritual groups (Inhumation; Cremation; Extraordinary burial places; Sacrificial burials; Symbolic tombs; Fictitious tombs; Cenotaphs; Funeral feasts and the funeral feast complexes; Altars and bonfire sites; Sacral ceremonial grounds); b) Photographic illustrations and c) Appendix: Database of quantitative and qualitative indices of objects of burial and non-burial purpose. The monograph is a complete publication of results of the long-term excavations at the burial cultic site of the late Bronze Age in pre-historical North Bactria. It is catalogued and recorded 506 archaeological objects.

The author notes that aim of this monograph to give the most complete and comprehensive description of the archaeological source at colleagues’ disposal. Not only exhaustive graphic tables of every burial but also the description of basic traits of burial rites are given. It is quite important that the monograph includes a vast

database of quantitative and qualitative indices represented by the ritual groups and types of ritual objects and artifacts. The book contains 357 pictures and 83 color photos, 23 graphs/diagrams and 88 plates.

According to the sum of attributive material features, N. A. Avanesova classified the site of B-6 as the cult-burial complex of the temple type of Northern Bactria. From the chronological point of view, Bustan ceremonial centre is the earliest form of a temple of open type' of the late 2nd millennium BC (Avanesova 2016a, 509-511).

The evidence is the well-organised ritual spatial structure of the necropolis being a stage ground for the symbolic dramaturgy of religious-ritual cults and burial practice. The systematically organized planographic structure of the site forms an uncommon nature of the site in comparison with the synchronous burial grounds. The author has ascertained that the necropolis was not only a place for burial, but at the same time the ceremonial centre – 'sanctuary' for the cult ceremonies and rituals. The necropolis landscape includes the worship objects and places for sacred actions. It is shown the system ritual relations between dead and living as a way of constructing place for the mourning symbolic space for ritual burial (cemetery). It is environmental structure of relations, signs and ideological and aesthetic communication between dead and living, which are in fact both engineered and perceived by the living.

It is also importance that detailed archaeological description of every group of burial grounds and the associated ritual constructions is carefully elaborated in the book. The author reveals and clarifies ritual poly-variance in mortuary practice of B-6. The structure of ritual practice of the site includes the single corpse interment; the partial or total dissection of the dead (the re-interment); burial grounds with post funeral pre-meditated disturbances (the desecrated graves); the partial burial grounds (the fractional graves); the cremation; cenotaphs (graves without human remains and objects); burial grounds with 'thanks giving' or redemptive human sacrifices (parts of corpse are cut to bones).

As author shows that ritual is a means of transmitting vital issues of society and social challenges. Ritual is a way of regulating social relations, reflecting experiences of integration inside the cultural system. The formation of rituals and other symbolic actions is determined, first of all, by the constructing of a new system of social-normative values in proto-state society.

Thus, the grand materials of archaeological excavations of the B-6 necropolis given in N.A. Avanesova's book document the formation of a new period of Sapalli culture at the final stage of its transformation. The co-existence of different ceramic traditions, the artistic poly-stylistics in the design of the metal and stone items, the multicomponent features of ritual practice reflect a complicated cultural and genetic process in the Sapalli culture. Nona Avanesova convincingly proves that the process of cultural synthesis in pre-urban Bactria at the late 2nd millennium caused kindred, but qualitatively different culture with new community and ideology based on the fire-solar symbolism.

No any doubt that N.A. Avanesova's monograph is the valuable and thoroughly documented archaeological resource for comprehension complicated cultural and historic processes in genesis of Central Asia's first urban civilizations.

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Reference to book: [https://www.academia.edu/31080858/BUSTON\\_VI\\_THE\\_NECROPOLIS\\_OF\\_FIRE-WORSHIPPERS\\_OF\\_PRE-URBAN\\_BACTRIA](https://www.academia.edu/31080858/BUSTON_VI_THE_NECROPOLIS_OF_FIRE-WORSHIPPERS_OF_PRE-URBAN_BACTRIA)