

Ancient Panjakent

At that time, the centre of power in Sogd was based on the outskirts of modern Panjakent town – the ancient Panjakent town, which had appeared in the 5th century. In the 6th century the area of the town was extended to the east and south, defended by a castle wall. The shahristan was divided into urban and suburban parts (the overall area comprising 13.5 hectares). The inner wall was destroyed in the 8th century A.D.

From the 5th century A.D. the shahristan comprised the religious section of the town, where two temples, similar in construction, were built. Each of these temples had two courtyards: one to the east which led on to the street and one to the west where was situated a platform on which the temple was standing.

The orientation of the temple yard was east-west. The entrance was through a columned portico leading to a very narrow ramp which ascended to the platform of the main building. The main building had a wide entrance which opened on to a four-columned hall, without an east wall. On the far side of the hall there was a door which led to a rectangular cella. The hall is surrounded by a gallery on the three sides. The main statues of the temple perished but in the south of the temple, towards the end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th century there was a special building for holy fire, and the northern part was devoted to water.

Painted wooden carving decorated the main rooms in the houses of wealthy citizens. The main halls (usually with high wooden panelling) were painted, with corridors connecting them to other rooms such as the rooms with the walled altar-hearth or the portico at the entrance to the house. The size of the main halls could be anything between 30m² to 250 m². They are square or rectangular in shape with a pitched roof. The quadrilateral halls often had squinches, leaning into the four columns. The Devashtich palace and citadel (occupying an area of 2,100 m²) was very similar to the houses of the nobles in the shahristan (except that the palace also had four main halls: three which were square and one rectangular) which distinctly shows that, while he was the Monarch of Panjakent, he was also just a ‘first among equals’ in relation to the city nobles.

Painting. More early paintings corresponding to the 5th century A.D. were found in temples. The temples were rebuilt many times during the period between the 5th and 7th centuries A.D.. With each rebuilding came new paintings. From the 6th century A.D. wall painting appears in houses but most of it relates to the period of the city’s heyday, at the beginning of the 8th century A.D..

In the temples, palaces and houses paintings are necessary elements of the area dedicated to worshipping an idol. Before this or that idol a representation of the patron was depicted, making prayers or offerings. Each family had its own protector – a deity from the Sogdian pantheon. Large images would be portrayed opposite the entrance to the main hall and, positioned not far from it, were small figurines of these protector-deities and, probably, the family’s ancestors.

The shrines in the halls were usually set in arched niches, opposite the entrance or in painted arches. Paintings depicting various rituals, hunting, feasts, military actions were positioned on the sides of the shrine but on a smaller scale. The religious

symbols in scenes involving the hunter or a feast showed that these paintings “of the noble way of life” did not have a merely secular meaning. The paintings of the Devashtich palace reflected contemporary events. There are also some scenes featuring the Arabs and Arab sieges using Mandanik siege engines which had been used at the time of the siege of Samarkand in 712. In the houses the paintings mainly refer to scenes of the time. They were generally presented as a long frieze along the walls of the room. There were also scenes depicting the exploits of Rustam who was one of the central heroes of Firdausi’s ‘Shahnama’ and others from the Indian epic, the ‘Mahabharata’.

The last type of painting was small-scale. It was mainly on the lowest part of a wall, replacing ornaments which would commonly be in such places. The section of lower friezes is divided into rectangular panels, each depicting a new scene. These are paintings of tales, fables and anecdotes. The paintings drew inspiration for their themes from a wide, international, spectrum and are consequently very well known. Overall, it can be said that the art of Panjakent gave a better insight into secular themes than all the preserved texts of Sogd.

Wood carving. All the big buildings of the town, the main halls and porticos, were richly embellished with wood carving. During the Arabs’ conquest of Devashtich in 722, the palace in the citadel, one of the temples and many houses of the city’s notables were burnt and destroyed. Due to the effect of the fire parts of the carving of the columns which supported the roof was not destroyed but the preservation of the form which allowed the restorers to prepare them for exhibition in the Museum.

At the time of the building the construction included a flat ceiling, and wooden segmented cupolas. Details which were added later consisted of a framework made of wooden beams with blocks filling the cells between the beams. The walls were covered with wood panels. In halls both with and without columns were caryatids which in some cases were positioned under the segments of the cupola, atop the columns. The capitals of the columns were covered by carvings. Friezes were carved deep in the walls. Motifs in the decoration are redolent with echoes of the spirit of the age. The deep carving was done on a large scale and very often the blocks decorated not only with ornaments but also with figures in high relief. Along with images of an idol emphasizing that the ceiling symbolized the sky, we meet also the other themes, the classic example being a hunting scene.

The doors were decorated with rich carvings on the jambs, lintels and arches. The fretwork figures and ornaments were adorned with paintings. Indian Gupta and Iranian Sasanid influences are clearly evident in the Panja-kent style of wood carving. Similar carving was found in neighbouring Samarkand (the site of Afrasiyab), in Ustrushanian Shahrison and in the south Sogd and Tokharistan castles.

The decorations of halls and the houses of nobles and even ordinary people of Sogd were similar to the decoration of the main buildings of the king’s palaces and temples.

The necropolis has been explored outside the city. In a small rectangular overground burial chamber (nauses) with one entrance, were laid ceramic ossuaries which were set deep into the walls. These held the cleaned bones of the dead (according to the Zoroastrian burial custom). The interment of the bones in large vessels and khums in the tombs on the outskirts of Panjakent are famous. Among the

populations of local Zoroastrian religion in Panjakent also lived the Buddhists, Christians, and in 8th century, the Muslims.

The final phase in the life of the city began after the 740s when a peace agreement with the Arabs was reached. After the middle of the 8th century the home altars and shrines, the images of idols and people were destroyed in many houses when Islam actively started to enter into the lives of the people. Panjakent was not the only town in the eastern part of Sogd.