

Margiana And Soma-Haoma

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It is a well-known fact that at all times everywhere in the world when people wanted to forget the hardships of their everyday life they used intoxicating drinks made of different local plants. For most of them this habit became a routine part of their life style; but in Zoroastrianism it acquired a special place in the religion. The intoxicating drink was used as a cult drink and had an important ritual meaning. In the Avesta they called this drink “Haoma” and in the *Rigveda* - “Soma”; to this drink they dedicated the most poetic hymns, a fact that speaks for its special place in Zoroastrianism and Vedism.

Zoroastrianism is known to have originated in an Iranian environment and, more precisely, in a society of “Iranian paganism”. It is logical then to assume that the Soma-Haoma cult appeared in this society and that later Zoroaster included it in his new religion.

For a long time searches for “Iranian paganism” were fruitless and only in the last decades the signs of it were found in the territory of Outer Iran, more precisely in Bactria (northern Afghanistan) and especially in Margiana (east Turkmenistan). Archaeological discoveries in Margiana, the country mentioned in the Beihustan script under the name of Margush, have yielded material that pointed to the ritual cult of the intoxicating drink of Haoma which took a central place in the religious ideas of local tribes.

Most representative are the monumental temples (Togolok-1, Togolok-21, temenos Gonur), their sizes and elaborate principles of the layout easily comparable to the famous temples of Mesopotamia. The Togolok-21 temple (Fig.1) can be looked upon as a kind of “cathedral” that served the needs of the whole ancient country of Margush (Sarianidi 1998a: 90-102).

In each of these three temples the main place is occupied by the so-called “white rooms” with a common layout principle. Along the walls of these rooms there are located low brick platforms with dug-in vessels that are fixed in the platforms and that contain thick layers of gypsum. The vessels contain the remains of ephedra, cannabis and poppy, in other words, substances which are known to be used for making narcotics. There is no doubt that in ancient days these plants were also used for an analogical purpose (Meyer-Melikyan, in Sarianidi 1998a: 176-179).

It should be mentioned that some scientists doubt the contents of these vessels (Hiebert 1994: 123-129; Parpola 1998: 127). This doubt is based on the negative results of the analyses of some samples from the Gonur temenos that were received in the laboratory of the Helsinki University. This negative result may be easily explained by the fact that the samples for this analysis were taken from the vessels that for five long years were exposed to the direct influence of the sunlight, rain and snow and this must have had a major influence on the remains of the vessels. In summer of 1999 on the request of the Leiden University new samples from the Gonur temenos were sent for another independent analysis.

So, for the first time in the world archaeological practice, monumental temples were found in which intoxicating beverages of the Soma-Haoma type were prepared for cult ceremonies. Two of them, the Togolok-21 and Gonur temenos, had fire altars as well, that were always located in secret places inside the temples and were hidden behind high blind walls. Their location speaks for their secondary status compared to the Soma-Haoma.

In the Gonur temenos there was found a separate “tower complex” also related to the preparation of the cult beverage (Sarianidi 1995: 296-299, fig.5). In one room on the floor there was a large basket lined inside with a thick layer of gypsum. Next to it was the half of a so-called miniature stone column and a hand-made vessel typical for the nomads of the Andronov culture (Fig.2, No 2). It is significant that fragments of the same type were also found in the temples of Togolok-1 and 21 testifying to the existence of contacts between the agricultural and nomadic tribes of Margiana, at least in the field of the preparation of cult beverages. But this statement needs additional research.

Each of the Margiana temples has a specific set of finds related to the process of producing a drink of the Soma-Haoma type. Such sets may be looked upon as an illustration to what was written in the Avesta and Rigveda. It is quite significant how these written sources are supported by the archaeological data from the excavations of the Margiana temples (Fig.3).

As already mentioned, the excavations documentally proved that poppy, cannabis and ephedra were used for making the Soma-Haoma drinks, and thickets of these plants were found in excess in the vicinity of the excavated temples of Margiana.

Since these alkaloid plants had an unpleasant smell they were first wetted in water. The archaeological excavations of the Margiana temples have yielded

huge vats, “small baths” (and sometimes weaved baskets) that are plastered inside with gypsum layers and were used for this purpose. On the bottom of these containers there were preserved remains of alkaloid plants, cannabis, first of all. In this respect the excavations of the Gonur temenos are very significant. There, around a small temple there were scattered a lot of private houses the inhabitants of which were engaged in the everyday service of the temple. Over twenty five rooms found in these private houses have yielded either large vats or “small baths” made in the special brick platforms (Fig.4). In these vessels also there were found remains with the offprints of seeds, ephedra stems and cannabis, mostly (Fig.5).

The hymns of the Avesta and Rigveda described how these alkaloid plants were processed. First they soaked these plants in liquid, then they ground them on stone plates, using stone pestles and grinders. The archaeological finds support these written data. Numerous stone articles connected with grinding of the alkaloid plants were found in all Margianian temples (Fig.3, No.8). One can only guess what a complicated ritual has accompanied this process! In the Avesta, for example, they speak about the “first priests of mortar”, while in the Rigveda many hymns describe the process of soma making.

According to the hymns, the moment of squeezing out the juice was hardly the most important in the whole process of the preparation of this intoxicating drink. To obtain this the alkaloid plants that were previously roughly ground by pestles and grinders were squeezed out with the help of special pressing stones (the word “haoma” in the Avesta is translated as “the thing that is squeezed”).

All three temples of Margiana and especially the Gonur temenos yielded the archaeological material that documentally illustrate the process frequently mentioned in the Avesta and Rigveda. In one of the rooms of the Gonur temenos, next to the vat that was obviously connected with the process of soaking the alkaloid plants, a round and flat pressing stone was found with a half-spheric projection in the centre (Fig.3 No.4). It is easy to imagine that this stone coupled with another similar one that had a corresponding deepening in the centre could be ideally used for squeezing the juice out of the plants previously soaked.

It is important to mention that besides Margiana the excavations of the settlement of Ulug Tepe near Dushak in south Turkmenistan in the Late Bronze layers (Fig.3, No.11) have yielded one complete “pressure set”, that consisted of a huge stone mortar and a pestle, a pressing stone with a half-

spheric projection in its centre and next to it a similar one with a half-spheric deepening. This find shows that the preparation of a soma-haoma juice was spread not only in Margiana but in south Turkmenistan as well, where related tribes of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex were living.

According to the Avesta and Rigveda on the final stage the soaked plants were mixed with barley, milk (sour milk as well), then water was added and the whole mixture was kept for several days in special vessels for fermentation.

The archeological finds show that this final stage of the preparation of the cult beverage took place in the above-mentioned “white rooms” of the Margiana temples (Fig.3, No.1) since all of them along their walls had brick platforms with dug-in vessels that contained remains of alkaloid plants.

After the fermentation process was finished they had to separate the intoxicating drink from stems and seeds and special strainers were used for this purpose. On the bottom of each strainer there was a hole covered with a piece of wool, a fact that is mentioned in detail in the Rigveda.

The excavations have yielded the so-called ceramic stands found in all three temples of Margiana, as well as special strainers with centrally located holes (Fig.3, No.6). Of outstanding interest was a large room in the Gonur temenos that was located next to the white room. There on the floor and benches along the walls were found five intact round ceramic stands (Fig.3, No.9) and fragments of three more (Sarianidi 1995: 293), as well as large fragments of conic strainers with centrally located holes.

It seems quite natural to suppose that such strainers with holes covered with pieces of sheep wool were placed on the above-mentioned “ceramic stands”. Then the juice together with stems and seeds that was prepared in the neighbouring “white rooms” was strained through the piece of wool and it dripped down into the cup placed under the strainer (Fig.3, No.10).

According to the Zoroastrian texts the ready-made juice was poured into cult vessels, and this process was accompanied by the music of eulogistic hymns. Later this juice was used during ritual ceremonies, cult libations first of all.

These textual data were supported by archaeological finds. In all three Margianian temples vessels were found with long spouts as well as vessels with frail sculptural friezes along the rim. Especially the latter finds have an important meaning since their decorated rims deny their everyday usage and most likely indicate their cult purpose. The vessels with four spouts and

sculptured images of goats standing by the “tree of life” were most probably connected with the cult of libation as well (Fig.3, No.2).

The central place among such sculptured friezes was undoubtedly occupied by coupled figures of people (men and women) clearly in fighting position. The men are usually standing in the “fighter’s” pose with widely spread arms and women in a clearly humble position have their arms behind (Fig.6, No.1-2). In Bactria was found a cult vessel with sculptured image of a man and a woman (judging by their different hair-does), who are purposely shown in what is obviously a fighting position (Fig.7, No.1).

From the Togolok-1 temple comes an intact cult vessel with a sculptured frieze in which the central place is occupied by two standing human figures. One of them, supposedly, is a man with a baby on his chest and the other is a woman in a clearly humble position with her arms behind her back and her head turned down (Fig.6, No.2). Though these personages have no sexual signs it is worth to mention that on the Togolok-21 there were found two similar figurines, one of them is clearly female also with arms behind her back and the other one is obviously male with arms on the chest (Sarianidi 1998a: 102-103, fig.50).

These sculptured friezes constantly repeated on the cult vessels in the territory from Bactria to Margiana most likely reflect some definite myths that were spread in these two related historic areas. Keeping in mind that these vessels were used for cult drinks of the soma-haoma type, one may assume that the sculptured friezes reflected the myths and stories related to this drink and widely spread in Bactria and Margiana (Fig.8).

In this connection especially significant is one myth from the Rigveda about Soma who was a son of Parjanya and of Mother Earth. Parjanya is the god of Rain in the Rigveda, but in an Indo-european perspective his name suggests he is a god of Thunder. The Soma God is most likely representing the soma plant (Elizarenkova 1972: 300-301; and from the brief references in the Rigveda it can be inferred that Parajanya took their common child from the Mother Earth (presumably against her will), and brought him to the heaven to join him to the family of Gods.

It should be added that one cult vessel from Bactria had a male figure with arms spread in a “fighting” pose and an axe at the belt (Fig.7, No.3), pointing to Parjanya as Thunder-God. The subject frieze on the cult vessel from

Togolok-1 (as well as some others from Bactria) may be looked upon as one that reflects the definite myth of soma (Fig.9) [Fig.7? J.H.].

It is not at all accidental that every “white room” is accompanied by a corresponding vast “courtyard surrounded by corridors” that are connected by common passages. This shows that functionally these premises were interlinked (Fig.9). The courtyards are believed to be used for conducting ceremonies connected with cult libations. This assumption is supported by the finds of some small bone tubes that contained remains of poppy pollen (according to N.R.Meyer-Melikyan). One such tube was found at the entrance to the big altar of the Togolok-21 temple and exactly resembled the one that was found in the “white room” of the temple. Similar bone tubes were found in other temples of Margiana, their surfaces polished like mirrors due to their frequent and long usage (Fig.10). The poppy pollen found in them makes one assume that the tubes were used for drinking cult drinks. Significantly, these tubes are decorated with images of eyes with exaggeratedly big pupils. According to Prof. N.R.Meyer-Melikyan such pupils may belong to those who constantly use narcotics (Meyer-Melikyan and Avetov in Sarianidi 1998a: 177).

The seals and amulets with numerous images of poppy, ephedra and presumably of cannabis testify to the fact that the alkaloid plants took a special place in Bactria and Margiana (Sarianidi 1998, A.,fig.).[Number not given, not clear whether 1998a or b is intended, J.H.]

It has been argued that the country of Margush has appeared as a result of the arrival of tribes from north Mesopotamia that got mixed with a few local south Turkmenian tribes (Sarianidi 1998 [a or b, J.H.]). It is likely that long ago these newly arrived tribes practiced the cult libations of intoxicating drinks of the soma-haoma type in their previous motherland, and that they brought these traditions to the new land. And it was this cult drink or, more precisely, the corresponding deity, to whom they dedicated such monumental temples as the Margianian temples of Togolok-1 and 21, as well as the Gonur temenos.

The remains of the fossil poppy found in the area of eastern Mediterranean and Anatolia (Merlin, 1984) may indirectly prove that from there with the migration of the Indo-European tribes it began to spread all over the Old World. Some specialists (Tseiner, Kritikos, Papadakis) consider Greece and Asia Minor the motherland of the poppy cultivation.

It should also be mentioned that besides Margiana, the cult vessels with sculptured friezes on the rims in the whole system of the Near East were widely spread only in Anatolia (Kul Tepe) and in the Aegean world, mostly in Cyprus (Sarianidi 1998, A.,fig.1). Perhaps it is not accidental that in the same region, mainly in Cyprus, there were found small bone tubes with images of faces (Morris,1985, fig.263-268; Pl.190) that resemble very closely the Margianian ones.

Very representative in this connection are the ritual dishes from Cyprus in the form of altars or temples. One of them shows a man with a vessel, this scene probably depicting the process of libation (V. Karageorghis, 1982). Speaking of such Cyprian dishes it should be mentioned that similar ones were found in Elam and Shahdad (Iran). Although they were found in illegal excavations, one can assume that they were locally made though strongly influenced by the Cyprian cult dishes. Some of them represented exact copies of those of Cyprus (Sarianidi, 1998a: 36 Fig.10, No.10).

The intermediate point that marks the area where these vessels were spread is Allalah that yielded a vessel with an animal figure “seated” on the rim and some others with snakes crawling out of vessels (Woolley, 1955, Pl.LVII). Also representative are the finds from Tell Brak that represent vessels with modelled snakes similar to those from Bactria and Margiana (Sarianidi, 1998b, fig.1). They are shown crawling out and trying to reach the rims of vessels (Mallowan 1947, Pl.LXX).

In the Zoroastrian religion haoma had a triple image, that is haoma as the ritual narcotic drink, haoma as the plant used for making the intoxicating drink, and haoma as the diety or legendary priest: the personification of the plant and drink. As shown above so far only in Margiana and Bactria there were found material proofs of the usage of the alkaloid plants (ephedra, cannabis and poppy) for the preparation of the intoxicating drink of the soma-haoma type. And finally, it should be mentioned that only in Margiana the local tribes built monumental temples in honour of the intoxicating drink soma-haoma (more precisely, in honour of the Soma-haoma god), which do not leave any doubts about its divine status.

Another proof of the divine character of Soma-haoma is the fact that three out of four Margianian monumental temples were dedicated to the cult of this drink. It is clear that the above-mentioned direct archaeological proofs make one believe that the soma-haoma cult in the Zoroastrian religion found its origin among the related cults that were spread in “Iranian paganism”,

precisely in Margiana and in Bactria in particular. At the same time one should not concentrate only on these two historical regions. The area where this cult drink was spread includes the whole of “Outer Iran” from eastern Iran and up to the Indus valley. This statement is supported by the accidental finds from Godari-Shah and Quetta (Baluchistan).

Thus, it was in Margiana (and partially in Bactria) that for the first time in the world archeological practice, a certain factual material has been found that illustrates the written sources of the Avesta and Rigveda. Besides, as already noticed, “...among the Iranian deities there were hardly found any other ones with the characteristics that in the Iranian and Indian tradition would correspond so much to the descriptions of haoma from the Avesta and Soma from the Veda” (Dresden, 1977: 351). And it seems very likely that on the Indian subcontinent future studies will also bring to light similar finds.

It is very significant that neither the Rigveda nor the Avesta mention the presence of temples. This is an indirect indication that the libation cult was brought to Central Asia by the tribes that came from the faraway west and that later in their new motherland they reformed it and included it in the Zoroastrian religion. Based on the fact that the “cathedral temple” of Togolok-21 dates back to the last centuries of the second millennium B.C., one may assume that this reform took place some time later, in the period between the first centuries of the first millennium B.C. and the seventh century B.C. This also corresponds to the linguistic data.

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Illustrations (see below)

Fig.1. Temple of Togolok-21. Plan (No.1) and Reconstruction (No.2).

Fig.2. Ceramics of the nomadic Andronov type. Temple of Togolok-1 (No.1) and the Gonur Temenos (No.2).

Fig.3. Summary Table.

Fig.4. “Small baths” with the inner gypsum layer from the rooms of the Gonur Temenos.

Fig.5. “Small baths” and fragments of the gypsum layer with the offprints of *canabis*.

Fig.6. Cult vessels with the sculptured friezes from the temple of Togolok-1 (Nos. 1,2,3) and Togolok-21 (No.4).

Fig.7. Bactria. Sculptured friezes from the cult vessels.

Fig.8. Togolok-1. Frieze on the cult vessel (1–Nos.1,2,3). Summary table of the small anthropomorphic statuettes from the Bactrian cult vessels (2–No.1-8).

Fig.9. Margiana. “White rooms” and “courtyards surrounded by corridors” from the temples of Togolok-21 (No.1), Togolok-1 (No.2) and Gonur Temenos (No.3).

Fig.10. Small bone tubes with facial images from the temples of Margiana.

Note of the editor:

When preparing Prof. Sarianidi's paper for publication I encountered several points where I wished to consult the author but communication between Leiden and Moscow was hardly possible and most of my editorial questions have remained unanswered. I was especially puzzled by the word "alcoholoid" occurring nine times in the submitted paper and not known to English dictionaries. Although Prof. Sarianidi speaks of fermentation of the plants and a link with "alcoholic" could be intended, I finally decided that the word must stand for "alkaloid" and changed the occurrences accordingly. Otherwise I have only corrected a few apparent typing errors and made some minor improvements in English style. A few editorial remarks have been inserted on cross-references that were unclear (which does not mean that each reference where I did not place a remark was clear to me). I of course had to leave unchanged statements which I find problematic, such as that the Avesta and Rigveda refer to a period of several days for the fermentation of the soaked plants "mixed with barley, milk (sour milk as well)" – which must be based on some misunderstanding as the rituals hinted at in these texts seem not to leave room for such a fermentation. Regarding my question on the identity of the publication Dresden 1977 I received (summer 2000) an additional reference to *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. by S.N. Kramer. New York 1961, Preface: I.M. Diakonov. I want to conclude this editorial note with the expression of my sincere gratefulness to Prof. Sarianidi for taking the effort to explain his findings to a group of partly enthusiastic and partly sceptic scholars in Leiden, and now to the readers of the EJVS. Even if it was so far not possible to confirm his identifications and conclusions in all details, Prof. Sarianidi's excavations in Margiana are of the greatest interest for the cultural and religious history and prehistory of Central Asia, Iran and India.

J.H.

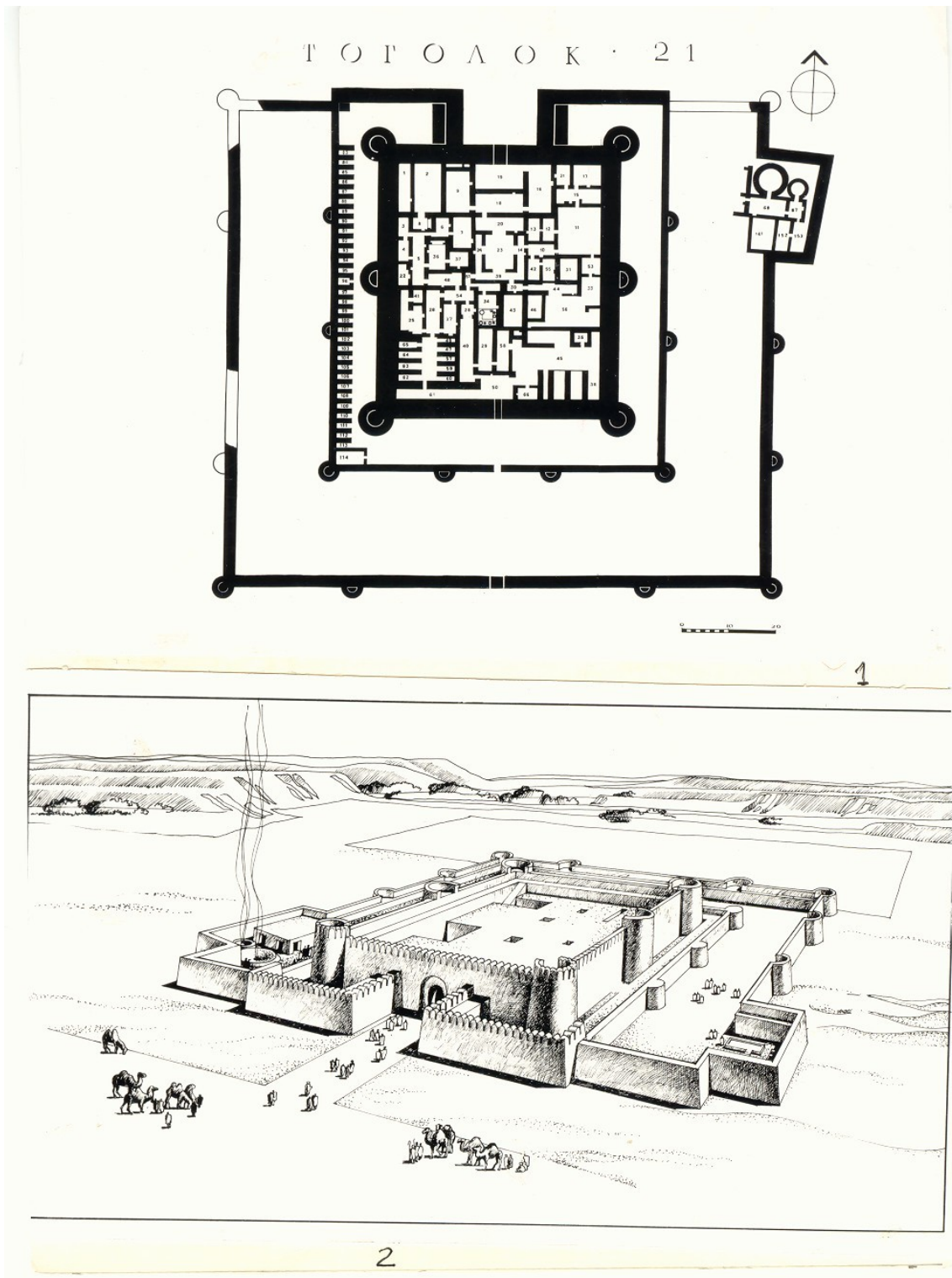


Fig.1. Temple of Togolok-21. Plan (No.1) and Reconstruction (No.2).



Fig.2. Ceramics of the nomadic Andronov type. Temple of Togolok-1 (No.1) and the Gonur Temenos (No.2).



Fig.3. Summary Table.

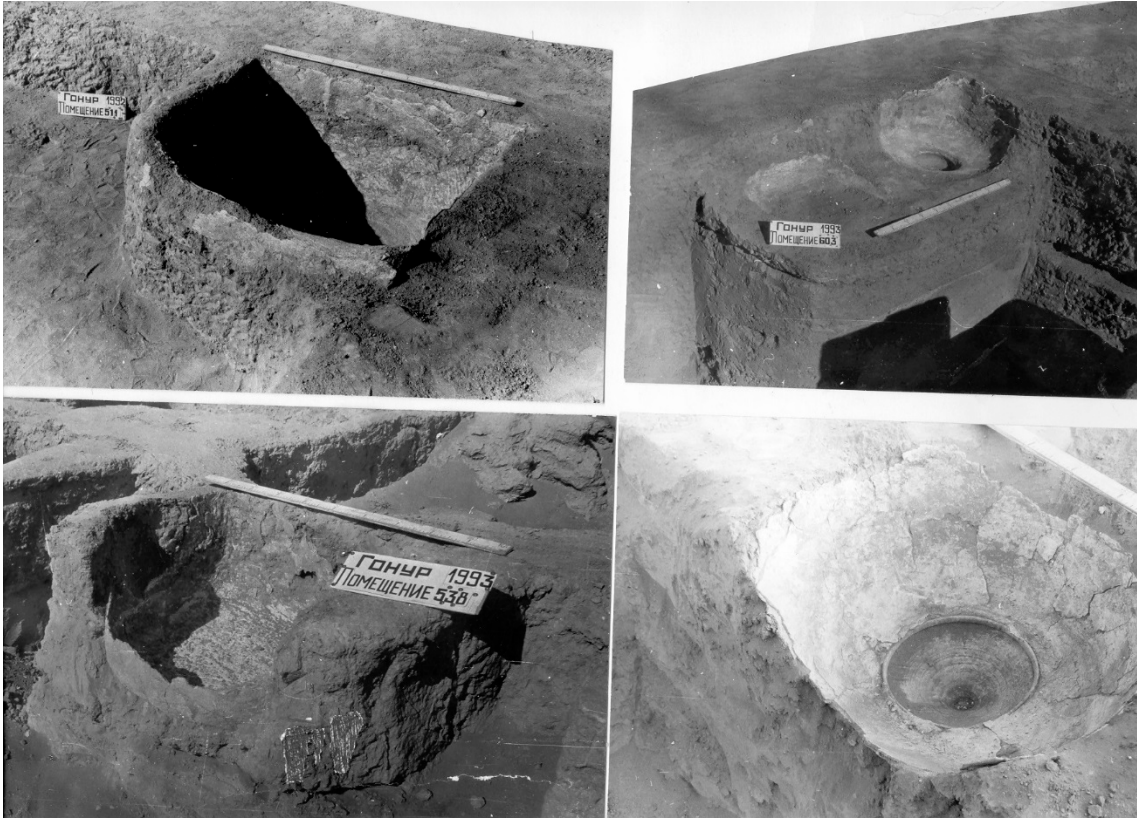


Fig.4. "Small baths" with the inner gypsum layer from the rooms of the Gonur Temenos.

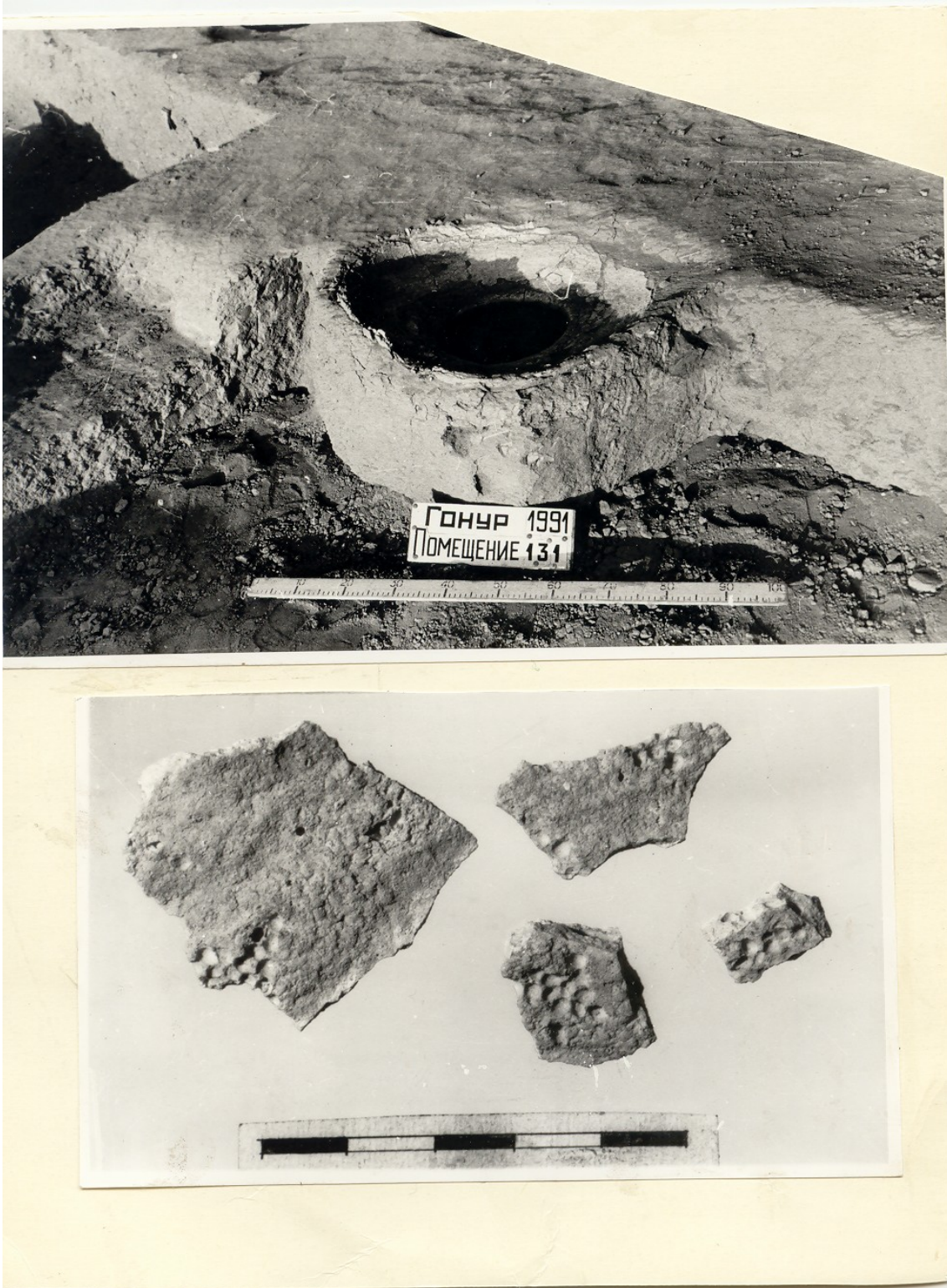


Fig.5. "Small baths" and fragments of the gypsum layer with the offprints of canabis.

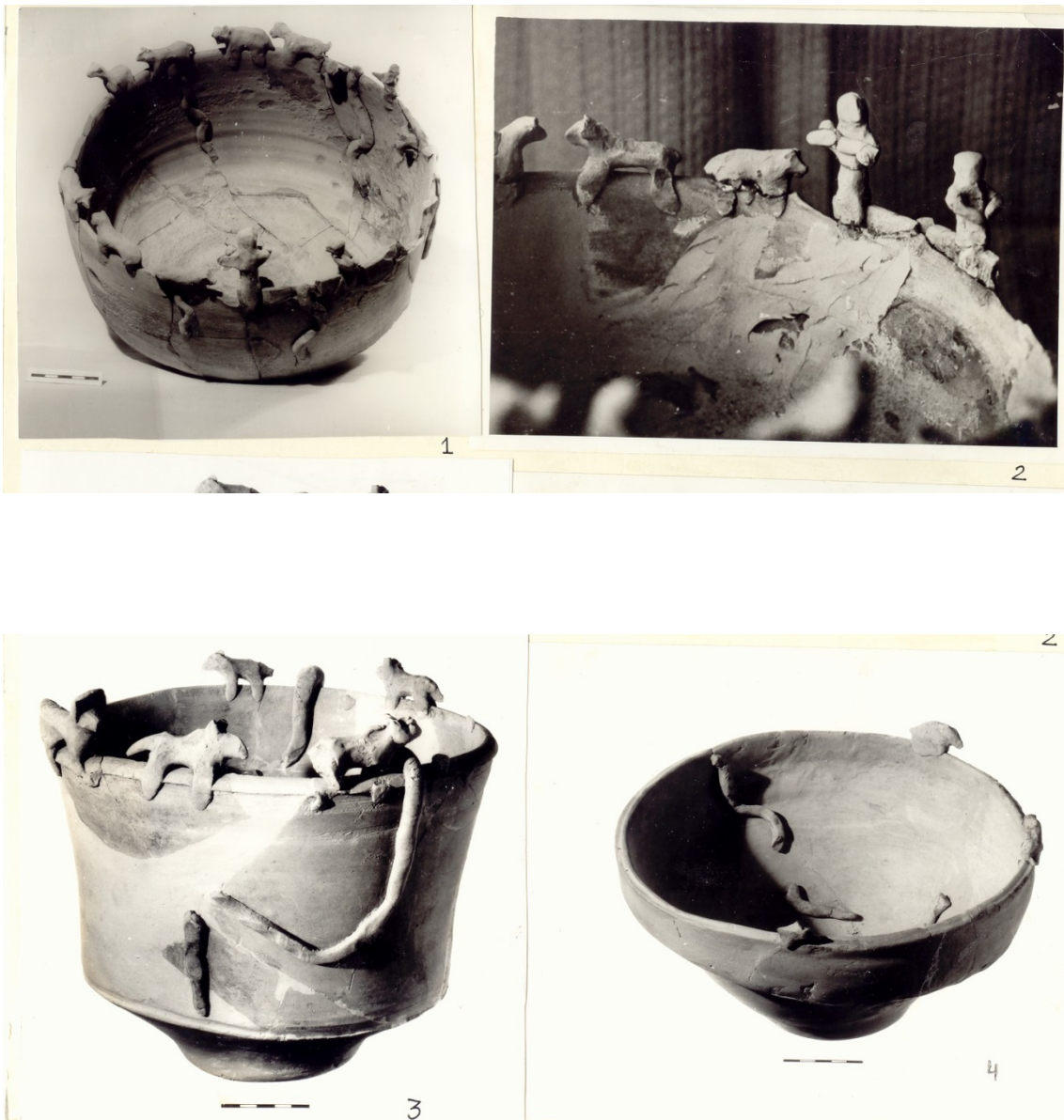


Fig.6. Cult vessels with the sculptured friezes from the temple of Togolok-1 (Nos. 1,2,3) and Togolok-21 (No.4).



Fig.7. Bactria. Sculptured friezes from the cult vessels.

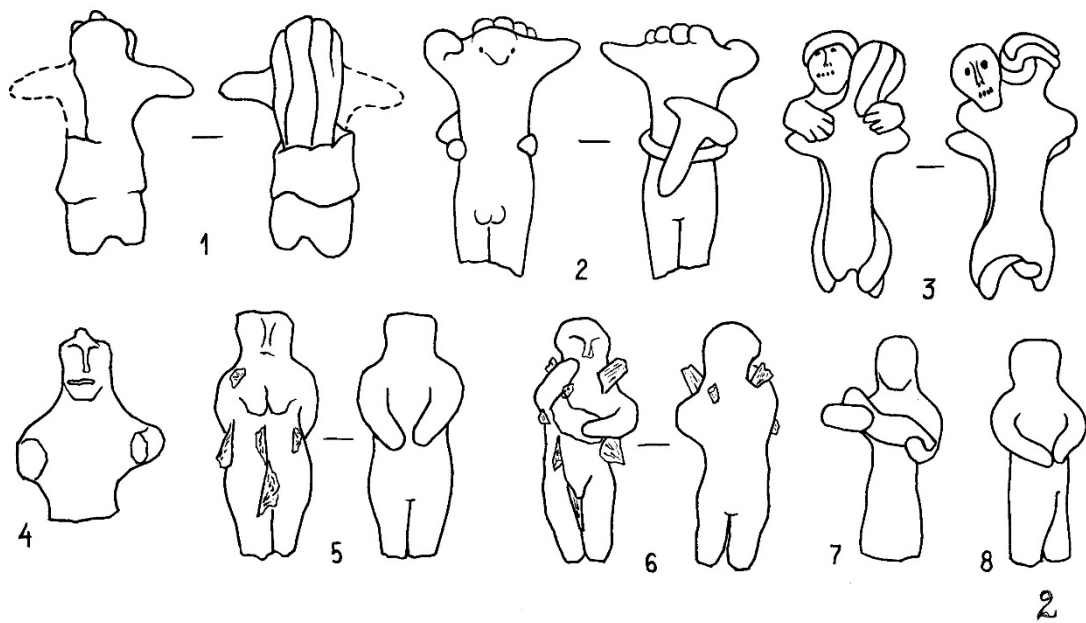
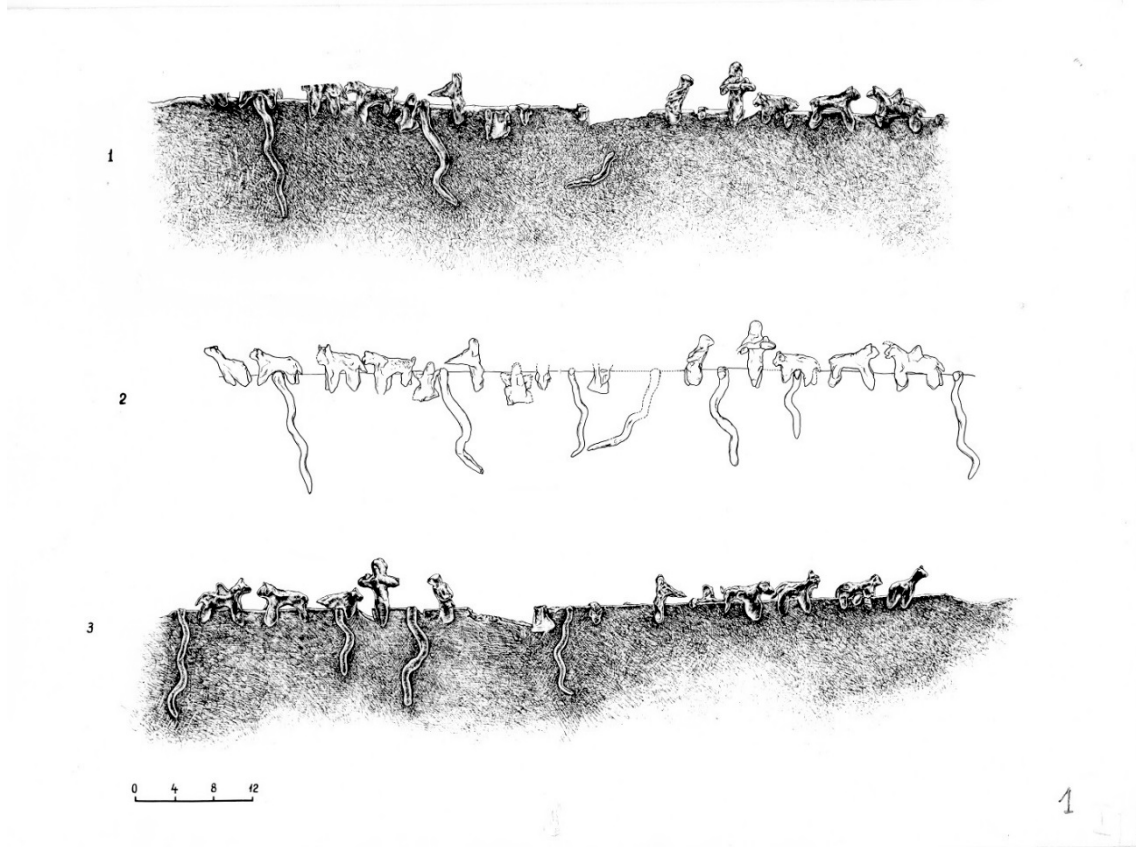


Fig.8. Togolok-1. Frieze on the cult vessel (1–Nos.1,2,3). Summary table of the small anthropomorphic statuettes from the Bactrian cult vessels (2–No.1–8).

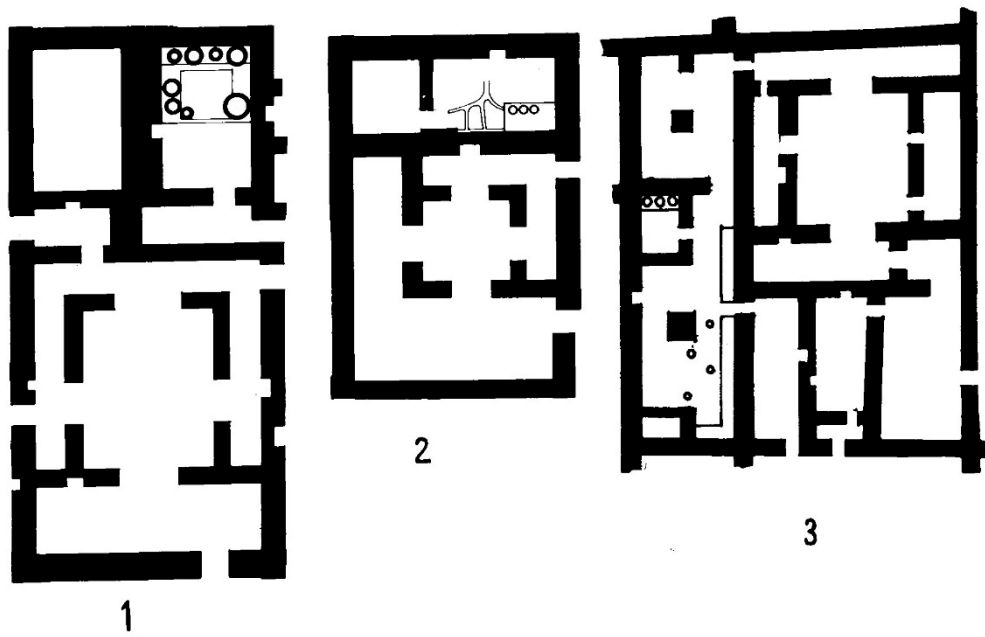


Fig.9. Margiana. “White rooms” and “courtyards surrounded by corridors” from the temples of Togolok-21 (No.1), Togolok-1 (No.2) and Gonur Temenos (No.3).



Fig.10. Small bone tubes with facial images from the temples of Margiana.