



Project Gallery

A unique scene of fire worship from the late Sogdian palace at Sanjar-Shah

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In 2022–2023, fragments of figurative wall paintings were discovered in the Royal Palace at Sanjar-Shah, a Sogdian site near Panjikent in Tajikistan. The paintings depict a procession of priests approaching a large fire altar—this offers a rare insight into religious imagery and a representation of fire worship in Sogdian murals.

Keywords: Central Asia, Tajikistan, Late Antiquity, Early Islamic period, Zoroastrianism, wall paintings

Background

The Sogdians, inhabiting the regions of present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, played a leading role in commerce and cultural exchange along the Silk Roads during the first millennium AD. Sogdiana may be classed as a ‘city-state culture’, characterised by colonisation, expansive trading networks and self-governing civic communities (Shenkar 2025). Wall paintings are an important resource for the study of Sogdian civilisation.

Sanjar-Shah in north-western Tajikistan, 12km east of Panjikent (Figure 1), was surveyed by Soviet archaeologists in the late 1940s, and systematic excavations were initiated in 2001 (Figure 2) (Gropp & Kurbanov 2007). The current mission has been working at Sanjar-Shah since 2014 (Shenkar & Kurbanov 2019; Shenkar *et al.* 2022). The earliest building activities at the site probably date to the late fifth century AD, but major urban development took place only in the 740s under the rule of Umayyad governor Naṣr b. Sayyār. At this time, a monumental palace was built in the western part of Sanjar-Shah (Areas VII–VIII), likely serving as the residence of the last ruler of Panjikent. Finds such as a fragment of a Chinese mirror and a gilded belt buckle suggest elite status and long-distance connections. Additionally, fragments of Arabic letters, the earliest Arabic documents written on paper, indicate an Arab presence during the eighth-century conquest (Haim *et al.* 2016).

The palace layout aligns with other Sogdian examples, such as those in Panjikent and Shahrīstan, particularly in the asymmetrical arrangement of multiple reception halls

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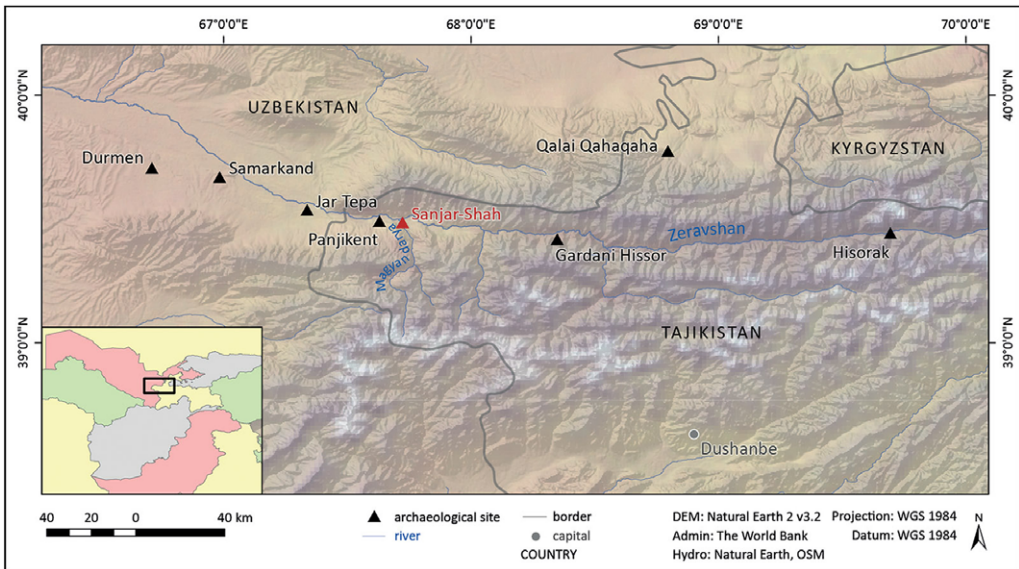


Figure 1. Map of the Upper Zeravshan Region showing the location of Sanjar-Shah and contemporaneous sites (figure by Susanne Rutishauser & Michael Shenkar).

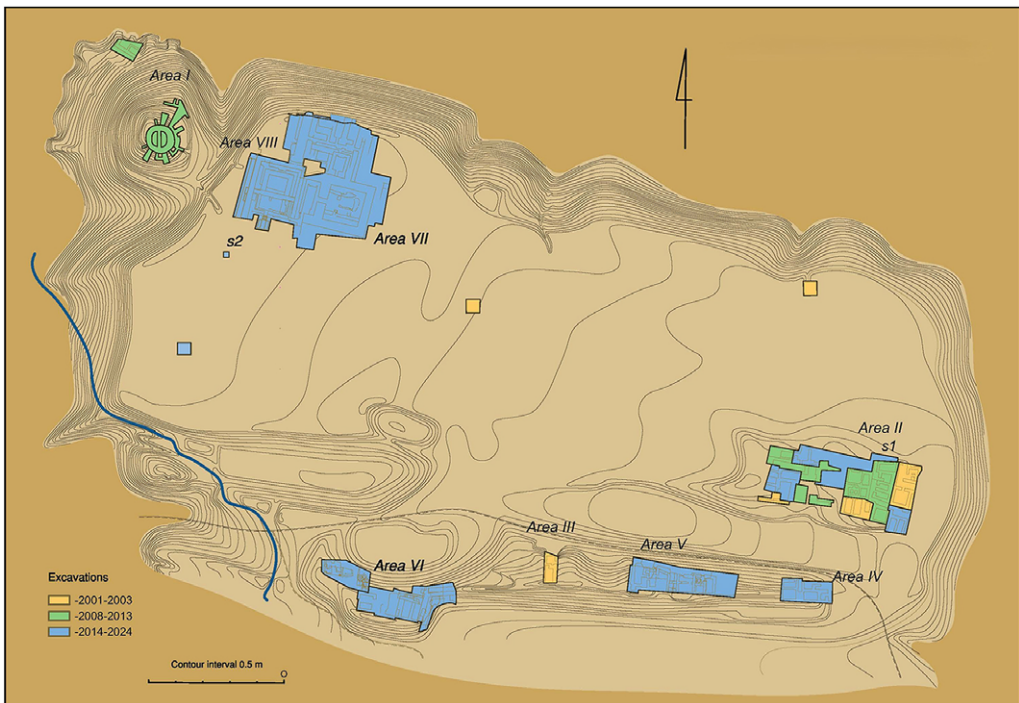


Figure 2. Sanjar-Shah 2024: general plan of the excavated areas. Excavation in areas VII and VIII revealed the palace (figure by Alexey Akulov & Elena Bouklaeva).

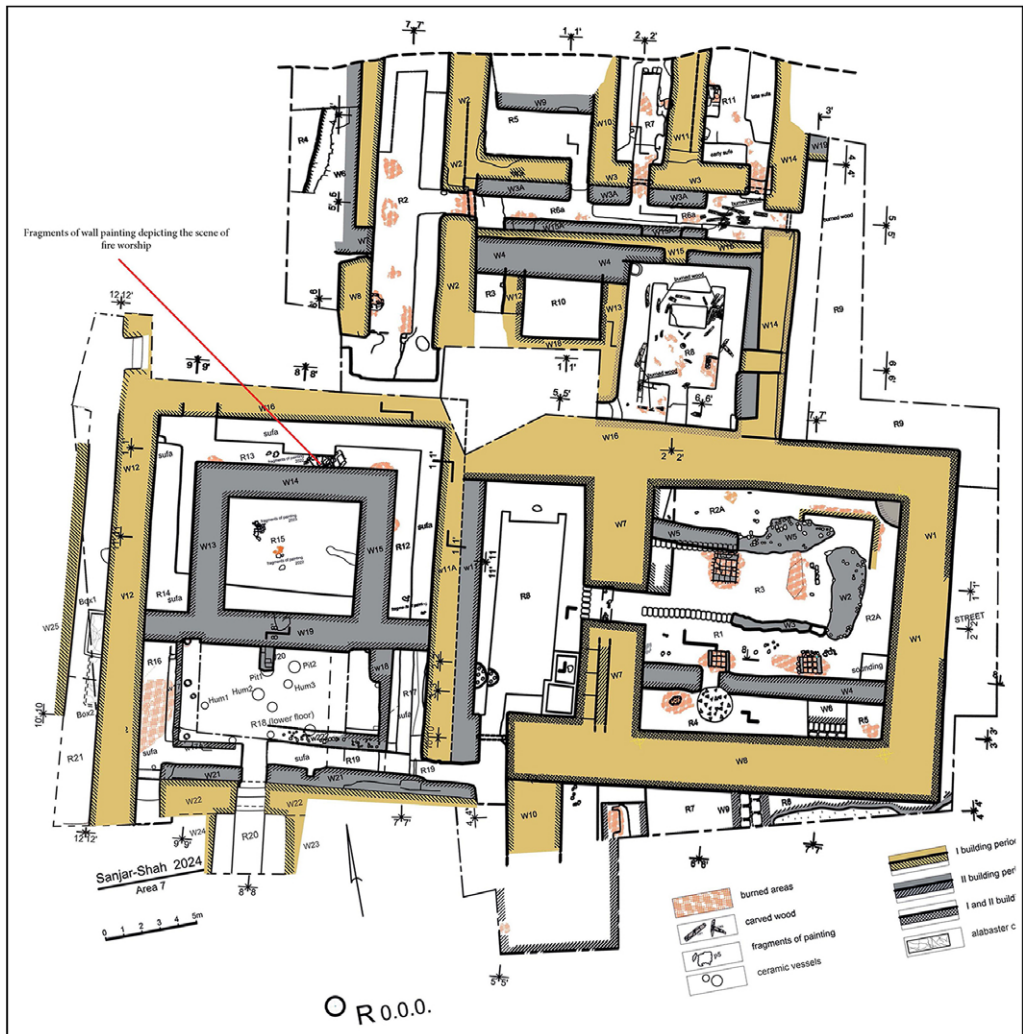


Figure 3. Plan of the Sanjar-Shah Palace (figure by Alexey Akulov & Elena Bouklaeva).

surrounding a T-shaped corridor (Figures 3 & 4). One reception hall (Room 8) featured a podium with fire marks, like those in other Sogdian palaces, suggesting ritual use. Another, nearly square, reception hall (13.5 × 13.8m) is the largest known square hall in Sogdian architecture, while a large ‘Rectangular Hall’ (15.6 × 19m) with unique *sufa* (bench) projections along two walls occupies the south-western part of the palace.

Traces of fire in several rooms indicate the palace’s destruction in the third quarter of the eighth century. The site was then repurposed in the late eighth to early ninth centuries, with the subdivision of rooms into smaller utility spaces. Unlike Panjikent, which was abandoned in the 770s, Sanjar-Shah remained occupied into the early Samanid period (819–900 AD), although the new inhabitants of the site were now peasants (Shenkar *et al.* 2022: 345–46).



Figure 4. The palace, looking east during the excavations in 2022 (photograph by Michael Shenkar).

Decoration of the palace

The Sanjar-Shah Palace was originally adorned with exquisite figural wall paintings and carved wooden elements (see annual excavation reports for images: https://www.exploration-urasia.com/inhalt/projekt_5.htm), only fragments of which remain due to fire damage and subsequent occupation. Carved wooden fragments were primarily found in Room 8 and the T-shaped corridor. These pieces feature a variety of geometric, floral and zoomorphic designs that closely parallel those found at Panjikent, Hisorak and particularly Shahrstan. Two fragments of wall paintings were found *in situ*: one in the T-shaped corridor, depicting blue lotus flowers, and another in Room 5, likely part of a hunting scene with animal legs and a horse's harness. In 2022–2023, about 30 more fragments were discovered in the fill of the 'Rectangular Hall', including several pieces of a frieze with merlons—a common motif in Sogdian art—an elaborate floral frieze and a composition featuring priests and a large fire altar. A fragment showing part of a face with bulging eyes and raised eyebrows—features typical of demonic figures in Sogdian art—is painted in black on a white background. Another fragment preserves the upper body of a heavily armoured Sogdian warrior in three-quarter view, wearing an aventail and lamellar armour. Other fragments depict parts of lamellar armour and a decorative harness tassel, suggesting that at least one wall featured a battle scene between heavily armoured warriors, including horsemen, and demonic figures—a theme also found in

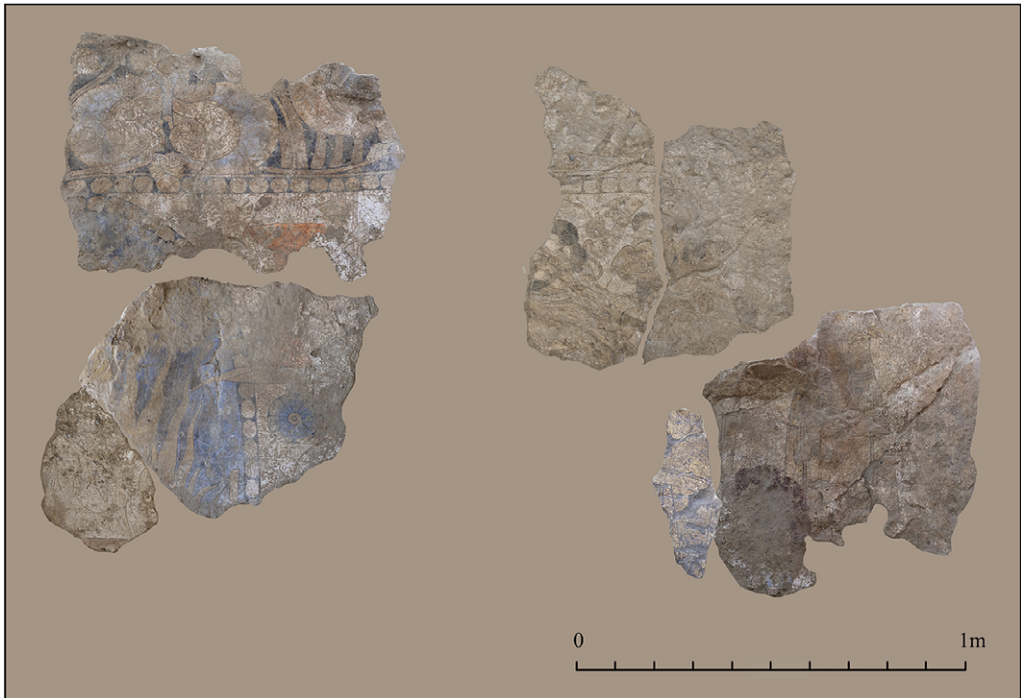


Figure 5. Reconstructed placement of the painting fragments from the scene of fire worship (figure by Michael Shenkar & Maria Gervais).

the contemporaneous ‘Blue Hall’ at Panjikent (Marshak 2002) and the ‘Small Hall’ of the Shahrīstan palace (Sokolovskij 2009).

A scene of fire-worship

Several fragments excavated from the ‘Rectangular Hall’ form part of a single composition divided into two registers, which was probably originally painted on the northern wall above the *sufa* projection (Figures 5 & 6). The reconstructed composition measures 1.54×2.54 m. Given the high degree of fragmentation and poor state of preservation, as well as the uniqueness of the composition, its reconstruction presents substantial challenges. A procession of four priests, possibly accompanied by a child, moves left towards a large, stationary fire altar beneath an arch. In Sogdian reception halls and throne rooms, such arches typically contained large-scale depictions of deities, imitating niches in Sogdian temples. Prior to this discovery, depictions of Sogdian priests tending stationary fire altars were attested only on ossuaries, where they typically appear in pairs. The second and third figures in the procession likely held objects, now lost. The third character from the right wears a *padām*—a ritual mouth cover, still in use today by Zoroastrian priests. The second figure may also have worn a *padām*, while the ribbon

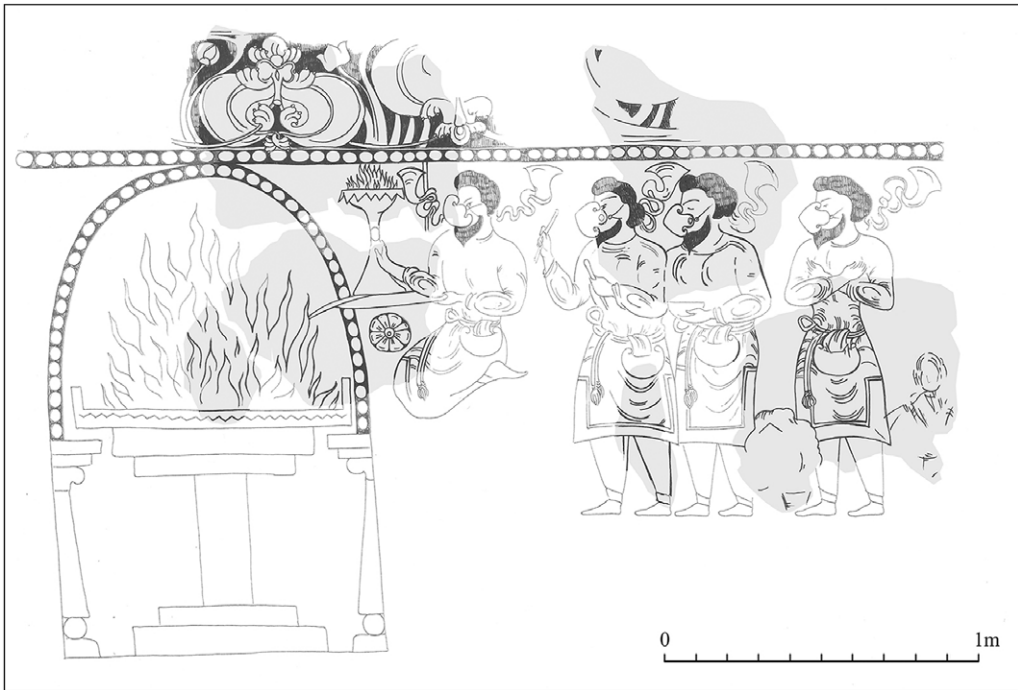


Figure 6. Reconstruction of the scene of fire worship from the 'Rectangular Hall' (figure by Michael Shenkar & Maria Gervais).

extending from the back of his neck is an unusual feature, as such ribbons in Sogdian art typically accompany deities and kings.

The first figure from the right—evidently the most significant—is also the most poorly preserved. Only part of his bent knee, a hand holding a small fire altar and possibly a part of his hair survive. He was likely depicted kneeling on both knees, raising a small altar towards the larger, stationary one—a common posture in Sogdian art, often showing worshippers offering incense on a portable incense burner. The ribbon at his neck indicates that his head was originally in three-quarter view. A long pole without a finial, possibly a barsom, is present, but its relationship to the figure remains unclear. The elongated object extending from the body of the kneeling figure beyond the arch to touch the fire is difficult to interpret; the small altar appears to stand on it, and its uneven lines suggest it may be a plant, branch or priestly utensil, possibly a scoop used to add offerings to the fire. Sogdian rituals typically involved sacrifices on a portable incense burner placed before sculpted or painted deities, conducted privately by household heads or publicly by local magistrates. The relationship between this practice and fire worship remains unclear.

Conclusions

The material from the Sanjar-Shah Palace offers key insights into Sogdian artistic, cultural and religious traditions on the eve of their disappearance. The fire-worship scene is a rare addition to Sogdian visual culture, previously confined to funerary contexts. It confirms that Sogdian priests wore long, belted garments, short hair and beards, without typical aristocratic accessories, and that their attributes included a pouch, ladle, *barsom* and the *padām*.

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