

Gates of the Zoroastrian Paradise

Victoria Kryukova
St. Petersburg

Representation of arches and arcades on traditional Tājik wedding embroidery and also the high ritual importance of bedding items (which are placed, sometimes, in a *mehrob*, a cult niche for Moslems) in Central Asia, provides evidence of the preservation of images of pre-Islamic cult architecture. This helps us to understand the ritual meaning of the wedding bed as a symbol of the temple and heaven, which goes back to the Avesta.

Since antiquity, fabrics and items made out of them have not just been used for utilitarian purposes, but also to express important ideas, filling the spiritual needs of a society. Not only is text like textile (as the Russian-American poet Lev Losev wrote), but also fabrics are like a text, and the interweaving of threads and elements of the ornament were and remain a vivid story of the organization of the universe and mankind's place in it. The ritual meaning of the fabric itself may be that it has been seen as a sacrificial offering, acting, among other items and products, as an additional, and also a substitute (instead of a human) sacrifice. In Central Asia pieces of fabric which the groom presents to his bride are a pledge of a successful fulfillment of the marriage ceremony — the expert seamstresses turn these pieces of fabric into ritual wedding clothes in the course of a day, which confirm the beginning of a new life together for the young couple. Furthermore, in the bride's house the woman herself, her mother and other female relatives prepare a set of items for the wedding: a sheet for the bed of the newly-weds (*rōyjo*, *joyšab*, *joypōš*), a mandala-like *bolinpōš* covering (Figure 1) for the head of the bed, a *joynamoz* rug to perform prayers, a large *sōzani* wall-hanging, and sometimes a long and narrow *zardewor* with the depiction of an arcade and a covering for a child's cradle. The wedding bed itself is made up of all the mattresses and clothes of the bride, on which the *rōyjo* sheet is laid, and the *bolinpōš* is placed on the pillows. In some regions, a large *sōzani* is placed on the blanket which covers the couple. After

the wedding rituals are complete, the embroidery is hung on the walls for a time (with the exception of the *zardewor*, which was initially hung on the wall under the ceiling), and then removed (Kislyakov 1959: 132-133; Shirokova 1981: 130ff.).

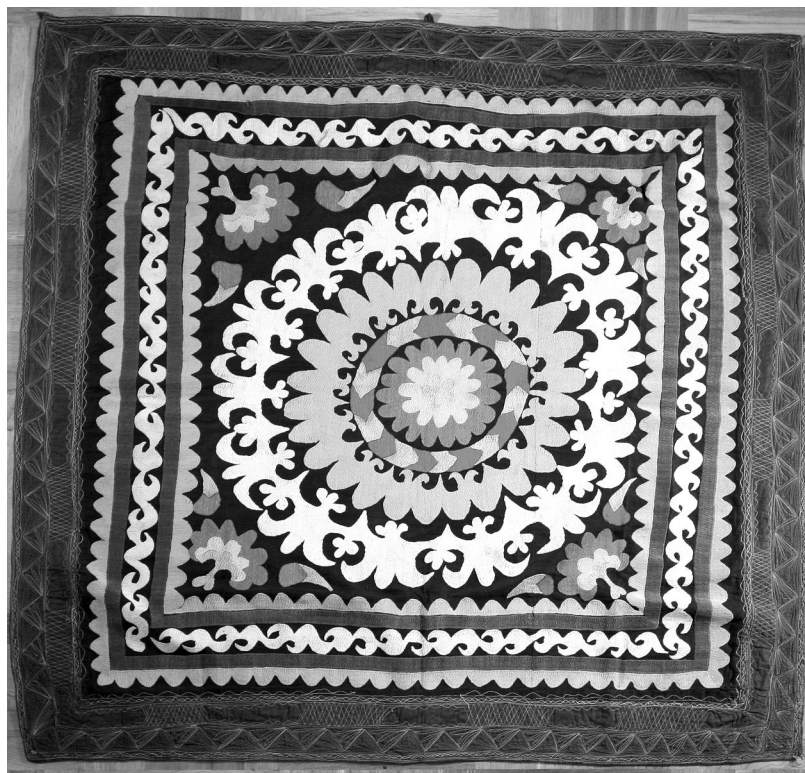


Figure 1. *Bolinpoš* covering for the head of a bed, 123×123 cm. Samarkand, beginning of the 20th century. No. 7304-19. Courtesy of Peter the Great's Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences, St.Petersburg.

Most interesting is the pattern of the items, which was handed down from generation to generation, though not the meaning of this pattern — for the understanding of the symbols has been lost with time — then at any rate, as a sort of specimen from which a constant reproduction of the bases of traditional culture takes place. It is a kind of “puzzle” which can only be deciphered by us, using ancient pictures and texts.

Among the wedding items an important article is the *rōyjo* sheet, on which a wide border in the form of an arch (Figure

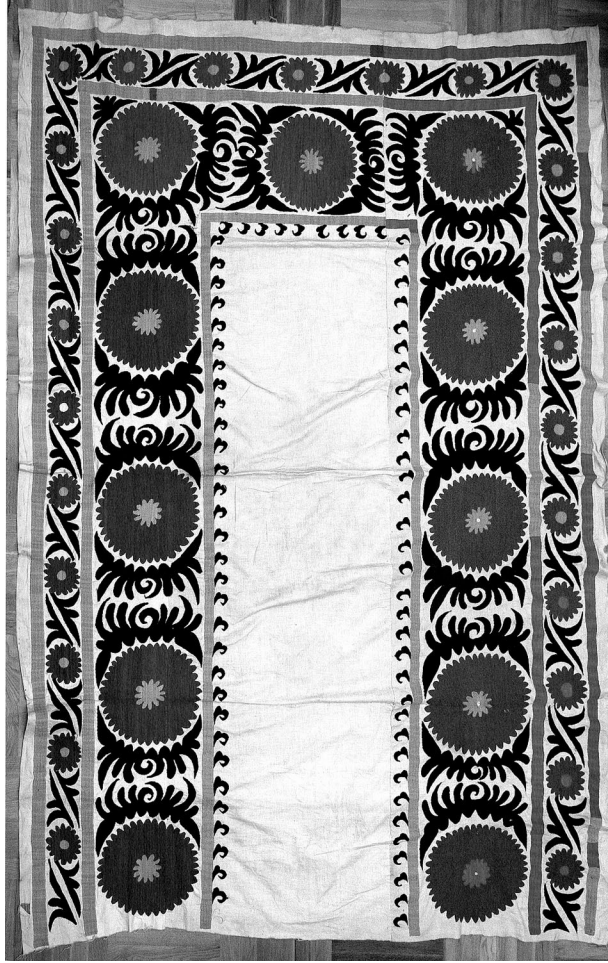


Figure 2. The wedding sheet *rōyjo*, 250×162 cm. Samarkand, end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th century. No. 73044. Courtesy of the Museum.

2) consisting of flowers is sewn. The main area is free of embroidery. The representation of flowers on embroidery is highly symbolic. Similar but probably earlier than *rōyjo* patterns are ornaments of the *sōzani* embroidery on which cyclic compositions of floral rosettes are placed or the whole area is completely covered by rows of rosettes. Floral garlands and wreaths are widely known in different Indo-European ritual contexts, especially in wedding rites. In Indian rituals, both Hindu and Zoroastrian (continued in the Parsee sect), the

wedding floral garland, named the *toran* “arch”, was hung on the door of a bride as an emblem of marriage (Modi 1986: 25). Apparently this “arch” being the indispensable detail of temple architecture (contrary to the architecture of the ordinary dwelling) was one of the signs of the transformation of the bride’s home into the ritually consecrated place related to the temple on earth and in heaven.

It is notable that the *joynamoz* prayer rug is sewn in a similar way, and sometimes with a precise repetition of the ornament, with the difference that the arch on it has an arrow-shaped form, similar to a *mehrob*, a niche in the wall indicating the direction of prayer for Moslems. In some districts of Central Asia, after the wedding rituals are completed, the bedding items are placed in this niche in the wall of the house. This niche is hung, as a rule, with the *rōyjo* sheet. If the bedding is not kept in the niche, then the front part (consisting of blankets and sheets) is sometimes covered by the prayer rug. According to a verbal report by Dr. R. Rahimov in the submountain areas of Central Asia, in Tājīkistān, if the house is oriented strictly north to south, the niche is accordingly made in the western wall of the house and preserves the name of *mehrob* (otherwise it is more commonly called the *toq* “arch”). When the *namoz* is performed, the people pray in front of the *mehrob* where the bedding is contained. In the opposite, eastern wall of the room, directly opposite the *mehrob*, the fireplace is located, also in the form of an arrow-shaped arch. In the vivid expression of R. Rahimov, this fireplace, which is used for cooking, serves as a kind of “female altar” in the Tājīk home.

In the territory of Central Asia the first appearance of such an architectural detail as the wall niche dates back to the Jeytun culture, which existed in the VIth millennium BC in the foothills of Southern Turkmenistan. According to V. M. Masson the layout of Jeytun dwellings was standardized, with a square house plan and a large rectangular hearth with an adjacent utility compartment near the one wall, and on the opposite wall a projection was seen in which a small niche was located (Masson 2006: 31-32). So the plan of placement of the hearth and the niche in the opposite wall goes back to the extreme antiquity of Central Asia. In the Bronze Age there were some Central Asian city centers which took an intermediate position between the civilizations of the Near

East and the Indus. Numerous wall niches discovered in Altyn-depe and Gonur (Turkmenistan) are typical for rooms used both for religious and other purposes. The niches were also seen in tombs that reproduced dwelling houses. But as a rule the niches indicate the religious character of the buildings in which they are made, showing the most probable points of the placement of sacred objects. At the same time each dwelling is sacred to a varying degree: the house duplicates the temple and heaven, respectively. It is no coincidence that one of the Zoroastrian names of heaven used as far back as the Gāthās of Zarathushtra, is “The House of Praise.”

As to the regions of Central Asia populated by Iranian peoples, in the time before the Moslem conquest, there are examples of the cult niches replaced by the Moslem *mehrobs*. It can be assumed that the niche was a common sight, a place for sacred objects in the Near and Middle East and also in Central Asia. In this sense as well as long before, the niche was used in the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian and Mithraic cult architecture and then found its place in the Moslem mosques. It is an accepted view that the idea of the *mehrob* (arab. *mīhrāb*) was borrowed and re-formatted in Islam from Christianity¹. At the same time, in Central Asia, the *mehrob* took the place of the local cult niche of earlier periods, and became one of the “universal” elements inherited by various religious traditions, and we see the ancient patterns preserved in the context of traditional culture. Besides the proper niche there were other sacred objects of similar purpose (before Islam) in Central Asia. These are the so-called “small hearths” and “oven doors” or “screens” connected with local Zoroastrian domestic rites, which were widespread in Sogdiana. These terracotta items described in detail by G. A. Pugachenkova (Pugachenkova 1950a: 8-57) were fixed in the wall or leant against the wall. The images on the terracotta represent the most important architectural details from a religious point of view – formalistic columns and arches depicting the temple. Pugachenkova believed that the shape and the décor of the

¹The main meaning of the Arabic root *hrb* is “to arouse anger, to be angry; to rob, to take away” and a derivative meaning “to fight” (Baranov 1989: 163) doesn’t seem to explain the use of the word *mīhrāb* for the designation of the sacred place or the cult niche. We can only suppose a semantic connection of this new (for the nomadic world) object with portable sanctuaries, which accompanied the Arabic troops to battlefield (e.g. *’otfe*).

Sogdian “screens” were a basis for the early *mehrobs* from Central Asia, such as *mehrobs* of the 9-10th centuries from Iskodar, Samarkand, Meshhed-i Misrian and also from Asht (Pugachenkova 1950b).

But let us go back to the Tājīk wedding embroidery. Undoubtedly, the depiction of the arch on the *rōyjo* sheet, like the placing of the bedding in the *mehrob*, is no coincidence. Even the arch form, both in the embroidery on the wedding sheet and the prayer rug, and in the architectural detail, signifies a link primarily with temple architecture and is an appeal to the sphere of the divine. It is not for nothing that Sāsānid Zoroastrian temples were called *chahārtāq* (*chārtāq*) — “four arcs, vaults” (in Russian this word exists in two variants — “*chertog*” (palace) and “*cherdak*” (attic)). How can one explain the connection of bedding items to the divine world of prayer and the temple?

Some help in solving this mystery may come from a custom found among another Iranian people, the Yazīdī Kurds, whose religious tradition has preserved archaic features which take us into the distant past. The fact is that the Yazīdīs use the fire houses of *pīrs* and *šayxs*. The holy place and the center of direction of the cult for them is a high pile of bedding items, called a *stēr*, which is kept next to the wall of a separate room, and is covered by a light covering (it is raised in the evening, as it is believed that the protector of the house dwells here). Usually, items sacred to the Yazīdīs are put on the *stēr* — a hair-shirt and clay “balls”. The Yazīdīs say their prayers facing the *stēr*. The word *stēr* is cognate with the Avestan *star-* “spread out”.² The Avestan *stairiš-* “place, bed” is encountered several times in the Avestan *Videvdāt*, and almost always next to *barəziš-* “head of the bed, pillow” (*Videvdāt* 5.27, 5.59, 7.9) (cf. Tāj. *bolinpōš*, where *bolin* is “head of the bed”, “pillow”: OIr. **byzīn* > OP. **br̥dīn* > MP. *bālīn* > Tāj. *bolin*). The Avestan *starəta-* “smoothed out, spread out” together with the Avestan *gātav-* “place” makes up the expression “spread out a bed” which in its turn is used in the Avesta to describe the heavenly beds of the gods. In the Avestan hymn dedicated to the goddess of fertility Arədvī Sūra Anāhita, spread-out beds with bed heads are mentioned which stand in the palaces of

²Bartholomae: “sternere”, “auseinander breiten, spreiten, durch Spreiten zurecht machen” (Bartholomae 1961: 1595). On *stēr* see Asatrian, Livshits 1994: 97.

this goddess (*Yašt* 5.101—102) and in the hymn to the goddess of good fortune Aši, the happy life of righteous men favored by this goddess is portrayed (*Yašt* 17.7—10). The second description of this is more reminiscent of a promise of heavenly bliss — researchers have on several occasions made the suggestion that the lines of the Avestan hymn may have prefigured the Moslem concept of a heaven populated by beautiful houris:

5.101—102. ...In each channel there stands a palace, well-founded, shining with a hundred windows, with a thousand columns, well-built, with ten thousand balconies, and mighty...

In each of those palaces there lies a well-laid, well-scented bed, covered with pillows...

17.7. ...well-scented where the beds are spread and full of all the other riches that may be wished for. Happy the man whom thou dost attend!..

9. The men whom thou dost attend, O Ashi Vanguhi! have beds that stand well-spread, well-adorned, well-made, provided with cushions and with feet inlaid with gold...

10. The men whom thou dost attend, O Ashi Vanguhi! have their ladies that sit on their beds, waiting for them: they lie on the cushions, adorning themselves, ... with square bored ear-rings and a necklace of gold: “When will our lord come? when shall we enjoy in our bodies the joys of love?”³

It is notable how the marriage bed, where the depiction of the arch is associated with the temple building and heavenly gates, has proven to have such a durable correlation with the heavenly palaces, equipped with “spread-out beds” and heads of beds. Even the Kazakhs, whose nomadic way of life rules out the use of the furniture of a settled people, preserve the custom of keeping a ritual (rather than everyday) bed in the yurt, where bedding is placed. As for the palaces of the gods, such as the dwelling-places of the above-mentioned Arədvī Sūra Anāhita, the Avestan hymns put them where the world tree grows, on the world mountain from whence the life-giving spring flows.

³Translation by J. Darmesteter.

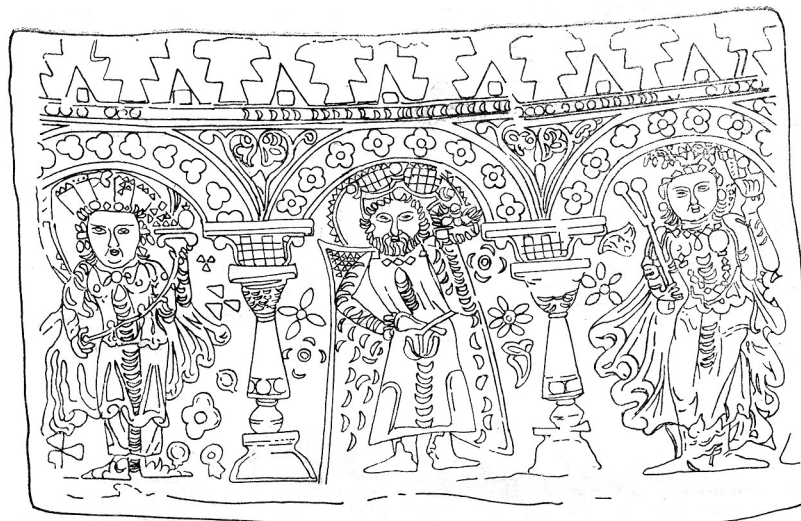


Figure 3. After Grenet 1987: 44

Correlating arches on embroidery (here we can also mention the rugs with a similar subject which are well-known in the Moslem East) with Zoroastrian temple architecture discovered in the territory of Central Asia, in Sogdiana, not only explains the depiction and confirms its antiquity, but makes it possible to determine the time that the tradition arose. The features of Sogdian temple architecture were best rendered in the décor of Zoroastrian ossuaries. Pictures on different groups of ossuaries represent, for example, a formalized temple as on an ossuary from Molla-Kurgan, figures in arcades as on Biyanayman and Miankal ossuaries (Figure 3), architectural details of temples (Figure 4) and, at the same time, the heavenly dwellings of gods. V. G. Shkoda correctly calls the latter “an imitation of a cult building, a model of a temple”, which, in its turn, is associated with a “model of the dwelling of gods, or heaven”, while the “idea of ‘heaven’, as of the building, found a reflection in an entire group of ossuaries with the depiction of people in arcades” (Shkoda 1991: 62-63). As for the origin of the latter, specialists believe that their motif was borrowed from Roman art.⁴

⁴See Shkoda 1991: 66-67, n. 19 where references are also made to Grenet 1986: 129 and also to Mkrtichev, Naymark 1987: 70-72.

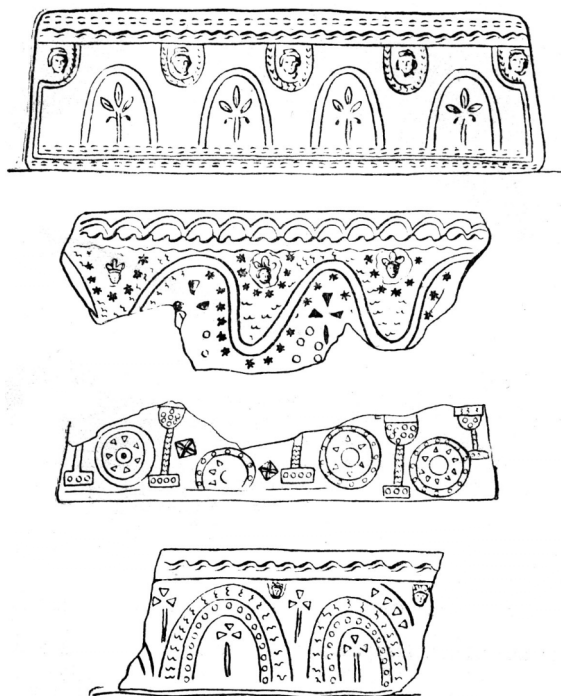


Figure 4. After Pugachenkova 1950: 11

Besides the arcades themselves, with gods or without them, depictions of trees were made on the walls of ossuaries, which were planted by temples in a sign of remembrance of the world tree, the “tree of all seeds”. Thus, in the ornamentation of the Tājik *zardewor* wedding embroidery, which has an arcade composition, this idea is repeated, finding a new and striking expression. In some cases the decoration of both ossuaries and embroidery reveal a startling similarity, e.g. when we wish to compare a crude ossuary from Semirechye (Figure 5) with one of the *zardewors* from the Kunstkamera museum in Saint-Petersburg (Figure 6) which is decorated with flowering bushes in place of human figures. On the one hand, here we can see a simplification of the pre-Moslem Sogdian images of gods on the ossuaries;—they were replaced by “flowers” and “trees” in arcades. On the other hand, the return to the most “simple” forms like floral rosettes makes the meaning of composition less concrete, allowing the presentation, with the help of a “universal” image, of several ideas at one time, of the world tree, altar, sacrifice, fertility and

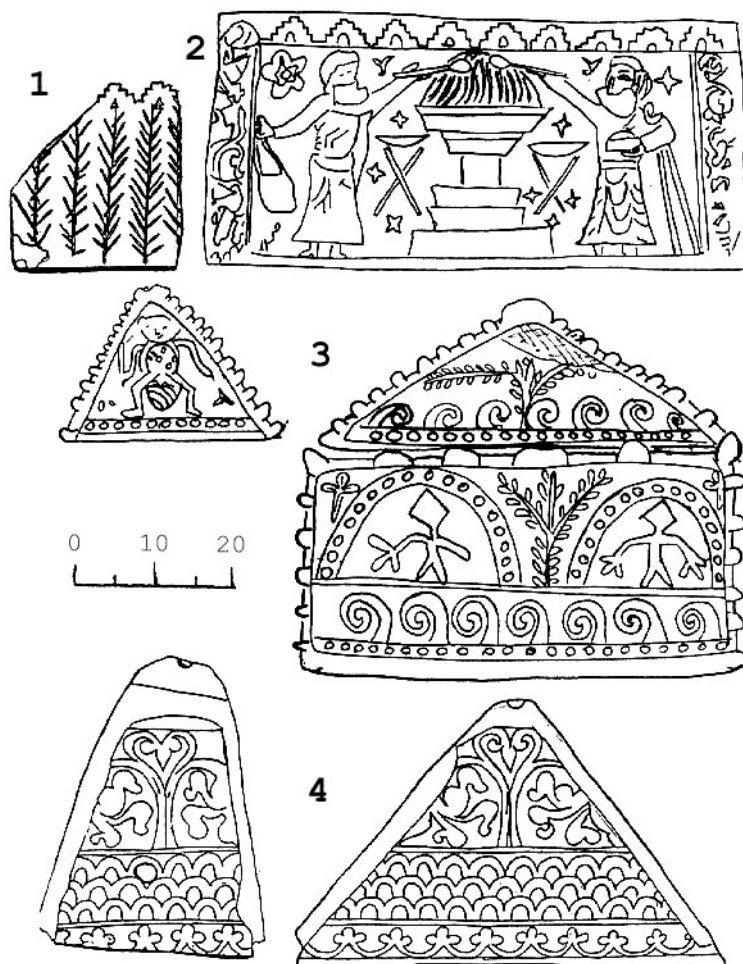


Figure 5. After Kol'chenko 1999: 50

so on. At the same time the embroidered “arcade” designs, supplemented with a depiction of trees, flowers, and various fertility symbols, can be seen as a direct citation of the images of ancient Zoroastrian temple architecture. The ideas which were once the basis for temple construction continued their existence after the Moslem conquest of Central Asia, in the use of traditional ritual items. It is profoundly symbolic that *zardewor* embroidery, often many meters long, is hung on the upper part of walls — almost under the ceiling of the room where the married couple spend their first wedding night. The

temple and at the same time heavenly arcades and heavenly gates show the unearthly localization of the event at the first act of coitus, the sacrifice made for the sake of the continuation of life.



Figure 6. Wedding embroidery *zardewor*, 62×1270 cm.
Samarkand. No. 7304-5. Courtesy of the Museum.

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