


Zoroastrian Creation Beliefs and the Nature of Pre- Sasanian Kingship



Being and Nothingness in Antiquity

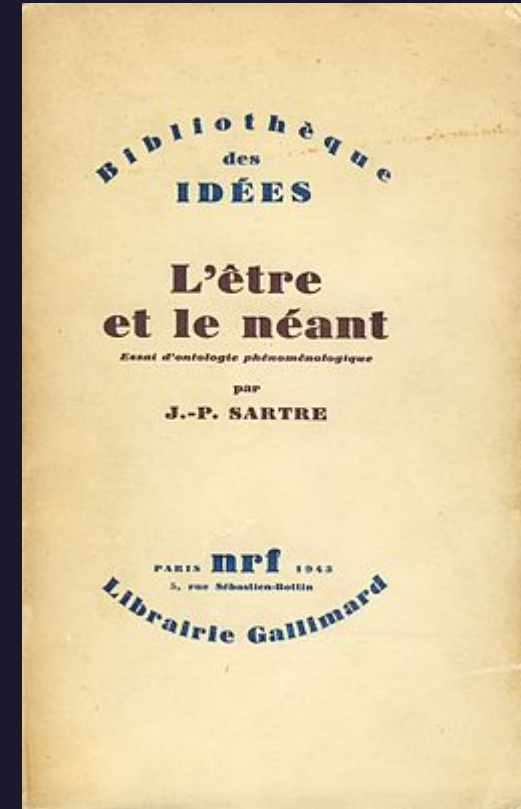
BEING AND NOTHINGNESS IN ANTIQUITY

The theme of this conference is the very earliest history of the problem of being.

How these notions were understood in a variety of earlier contexts, focusing in particular on the flow of ideas between cultures.

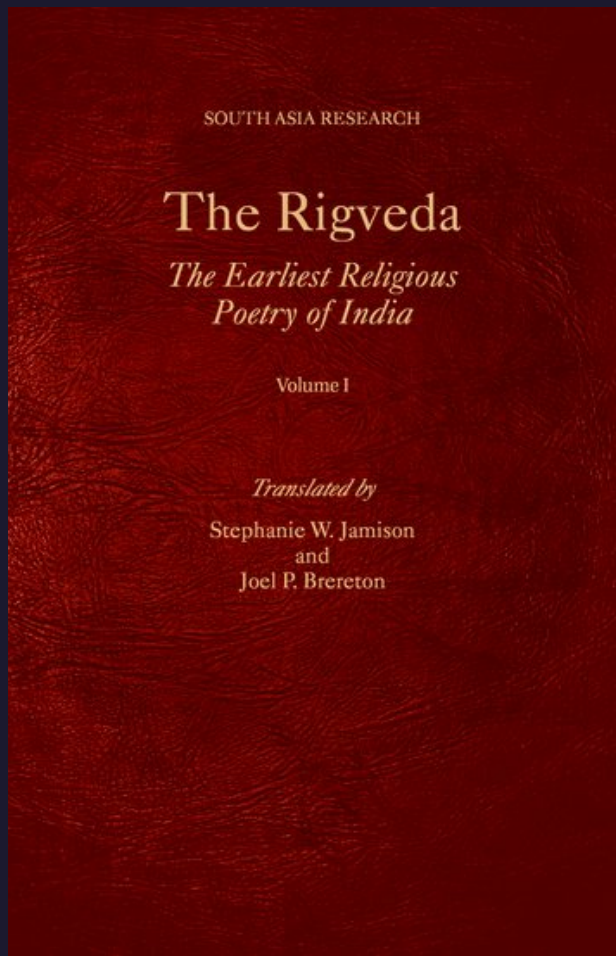
How (if at all possible) was the problem of why there was something rather than nothing posed across a range of contexts in antiquity.

If it was not a posable question, what structure was absent? Did the then-current theories about Being render such questions about non-Being irrelevant?



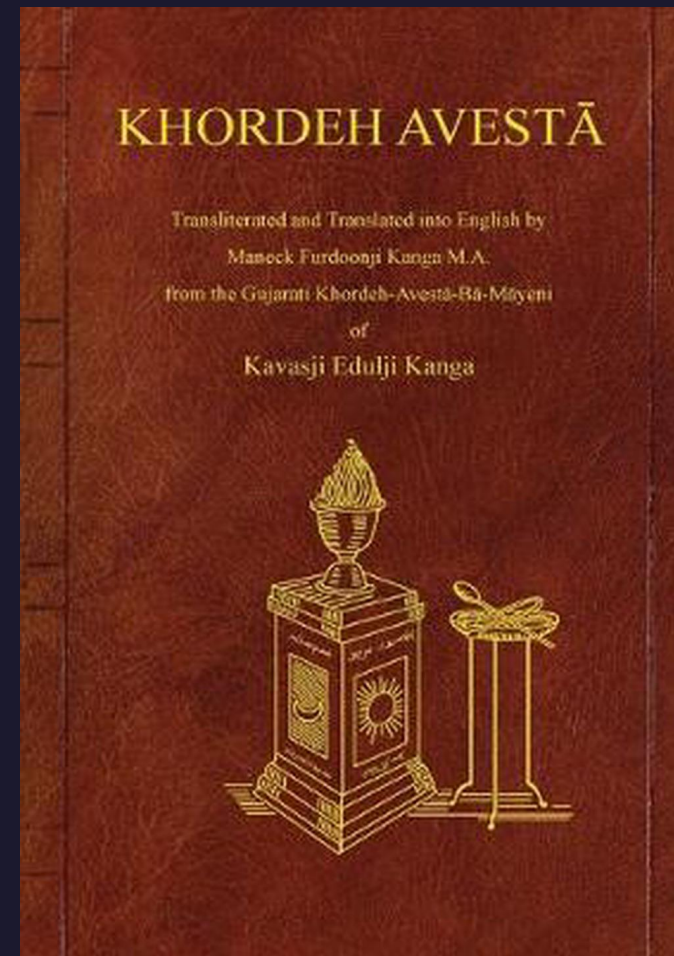


The Evidence



The Avesta and the Rig Veda share a deep common ancestry as the remaining accounts derived from the thoughts and practices of prehistoric Indo-Iranian religion.

Among the four Vedas, the Rig Veda is the oldest one. The Hymn of Creation in the Rig Veda reveals the cause of the creation of the universe, which is explained as a mystic, occult, and even unfathomable course of action.



The key texts of the Zoroastrian tradition are those of the Avesta which survive only in later copies of long-lost originals. The earliest Avestan texts ('Old Avesta') include the Gāthās, five hymns ascribed by some scholars directly to the hand of Zoroaster. The other texts included in the corpus are later in date ('Young Avesta') as indicated by the form of their language.

Who really knows, and who can swear,
How creation came, when or where!
Even gods came after creation's day,
Who really knows, who can truly say
When and how did creation start?
Did He do it? Or did He not?
Only He, up there, knows, maybe;
Or perhaps, not even He.

Rig Veda 10.129.1-7. Translation by Prof. Raimundo Panikkar,
The Vedic Experience- Mantra-manjari (Motilal Banarasidas)



*The Nasadiya Sukta of Rigveda (10.129) describes the primal condition of things before the creative power of the Deity was exercised. This hymn contains perhaps the earliest speculations of the Hindus respecting the creation that have come down to us; **and the wise conclusion was arrived at that God alone knew how the world came into being.** But as time went on this confession of ignorance did not satisfy the cravings of the human mind: hence succeeding ages sought by its conjectures, which are given with the assurance of exact knowledge, to throw light upon the unknowable. (W.J. Wilkins, 1900. Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic)*

The main scheme of creation in Zoroastrian literature is adopted from the Young Avesta. In this scheme Ahuramazda creates the world in the manner of a skillful craftsman who conceives of the form of his product and then fashions it in matter.

(after Amir Ahmadi 2021. The Standard Doctrine of Creation in Zoroastrian Pahlavi Texts)



Persepolis: low relief frieze

PROBLEMS OF DATING

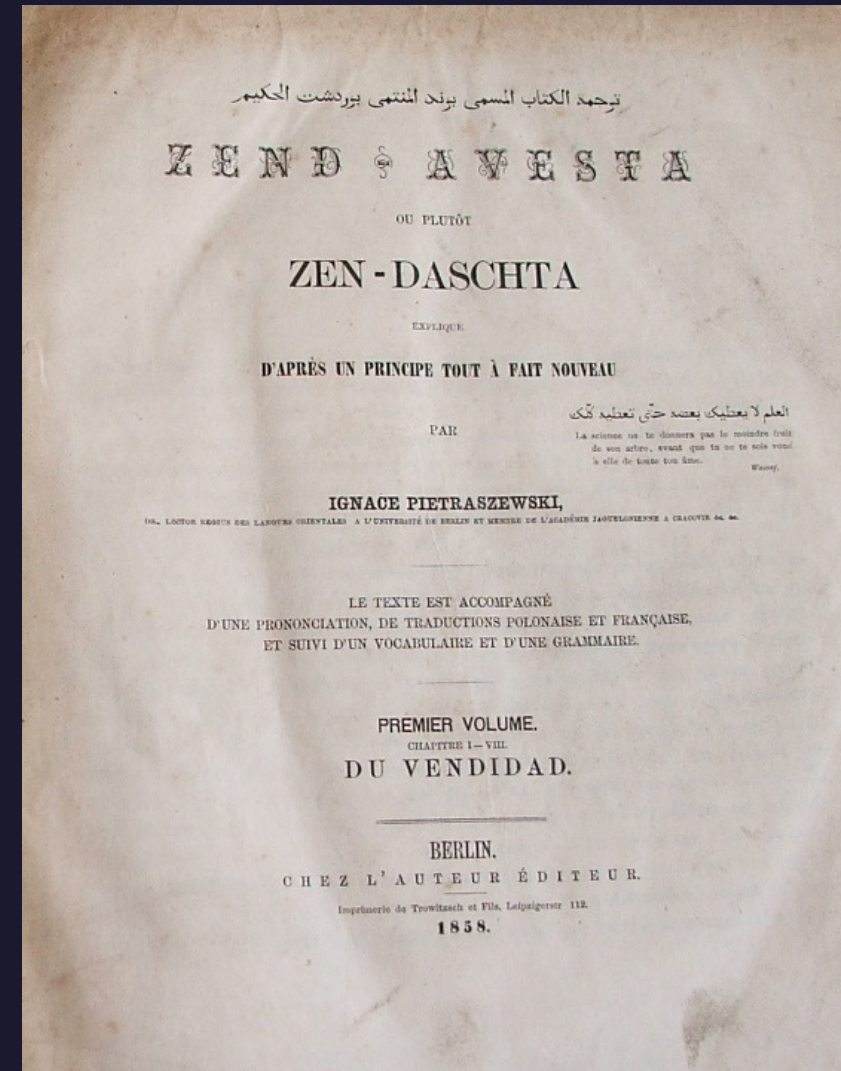
The foundations of the sacred texts of both the Avesta and the Rig Veda are believed to have been laid down as early as the mid-2nd millennium BCE.

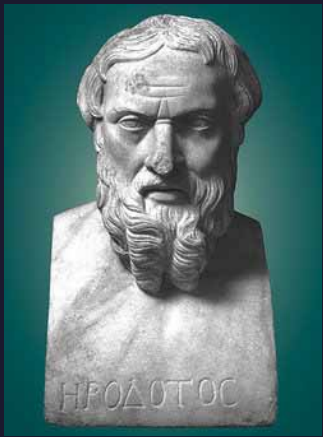
The dates for the ministry of Zoroaster himself are much debated. The great Zoroastrian scholar Mary Boyce believed it should be dated around 1200 BCE but recent scholarship places it around 600 BCE.



LACK OF EARLY WRITTEN EVIDENCE

The surviving texts of the Avesta, as they exist today, derive from a single master copy produced by collation and recension by the Mazdean priesthood during the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE).





Herodotus *Hist.* I.131.

“The customs which I know the Persians to observe are the following: they have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly.”

LACK OF EARLY MATERIAL EVIDENCE



Achaemenid fire altars but little firm evidence for fire temples.

The genesis of this religion occurred in Central Asia around the middle of the second millennium BCE.

There is very great uncertainty concerning the first thousand to fifteen hundred years of Zoroastrian history as, unlike the other great world religions, we know extraordinarily little about its early practice in Central Asia up until the Sasanian period.

At this time, in the 3rd to 7th centuries CE, there was rapid and widespread construction of fire temples and use of Zoroastrian imagery in material culture.

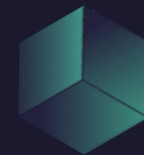


The 3rd century Zoroastrian high priest, Kerdir and inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran



1700 BCE – 300 CE? This leaves us with a vast gap of up to two thousand years.

The Creation Myths



BACKGROUND OF COMPLEXITY

To the contemporary observer, Zoroastrianism offers the perplexing picture of a religion whose followers worship one god, Ahura Mazda, and alongside him a host of other sacred beings, or yazatas. The latter include not only individual deities, such as Anahita (a water and fertility deity), Mithra (the personification of 'contract'), Armaiti ('right-mindedness'), A'si ('reward'), Srao'sa ('attentiveness') and Ra'snu ('justice'), but also natural phenomena, such as the earth, water, wind, sun, moon and stars.

Moreover, the sacred texts, ritual plants and ritual are also worshipped.

In addition, the good, divine creation of Ahura Mazda has an enemy, Angra Mainyu in Avestan and Ahreman in Middle Persian, the embodiment of Evil, whose sole desire is to bring disorder and destruction to Ahura Mazda's perfect world. The religion thus seems to involve monotheistic, polytheistic and dualistic features simultaneously.

(Almut Hintze 2014. *Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way*)



https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/obf_images/da/05/ba090979e72f38c2286119d3f555.jpg

THE OLD AVESTA

The primordial existence of good and evil is one of the fundamental truths revealed in the earliest Zoroastrian sources.

The Gāthās describe a choice made at the dawn of existence by two spirits or mental powers, Angra Mainiu and Spənta Mainiu (an epithet of Ahura Mazdā), the first for “deceit” (druj-) and the second for “rightness” (aša-).

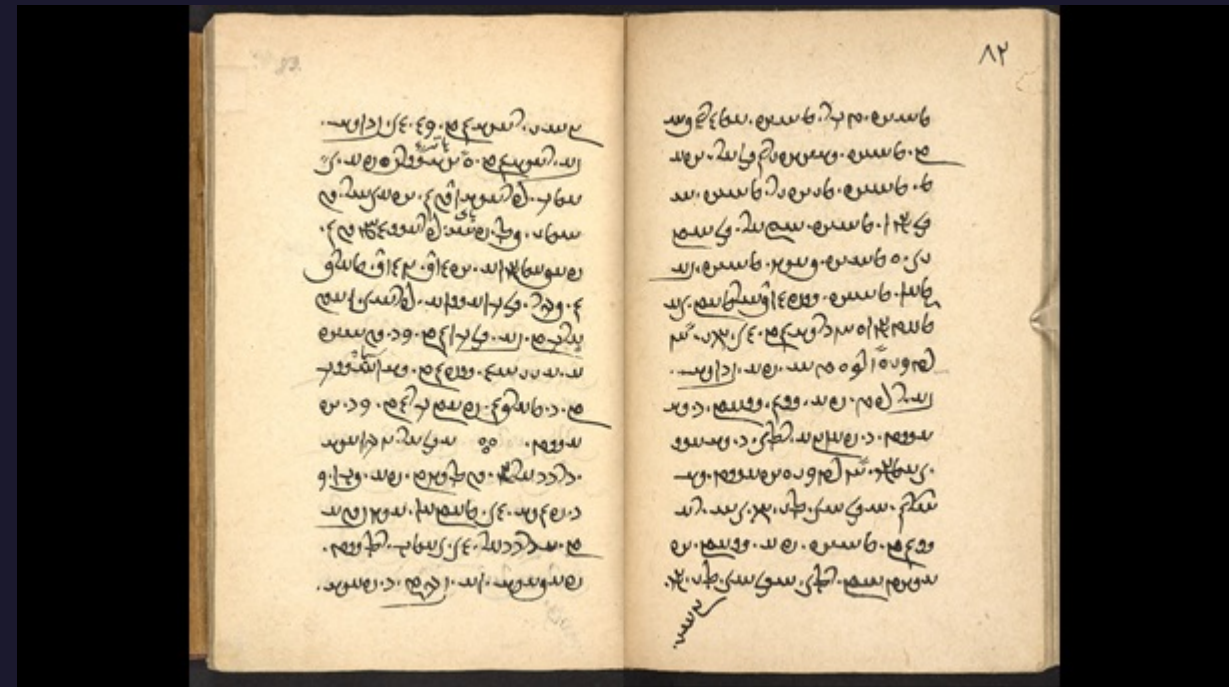
This choice mirrors human beings’ choice for good or evil in their own lives, the consequences of which are made manifest in reward or punishment after death.



THE YOUNG AVESTA

Bundahishn, meaning “Primal creation,” is a major Pahlavi work of compilation, mainly a detailed cosmogony and cosmography adopted from the Young Avesta.

Although the Bundahishn draws on the Avesta and develops ideas alluded to in those texts, it is not itself scripture. The content reflects Zoroastrian scripture, which, in turn, reflects both ancient Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian beliefs.



<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-bundahishn-or-zoroastrian-primal-creation>

The Bundahishn is preserved in two distinct recensions, an Indian version and a more complete Iranian one. This manuscript gives the text of the Indian Bundahishn and is written in Pazand (Pahlavi written in a phonetic Avestan script).

LATER INFLUENCES

The fundamental concepts of creation in the Gāthās received elaboration and reworking in the Young Avesta and later sources, and the Pahlavi version of the Zoroastrian creation mythology is significantly influenced by Greek natural philosophy. The creation story that the Bundahishn relates is very different from that of the Gāthās.

Most of the chapters of the Bundahishn date to the 8th and 9th centuries. The later chapters are several centuries younger than the oldest ones, while the oldest existing copy dates to the mid-16th century.

Interpretations are thus influenced by both Christianity and Islam.

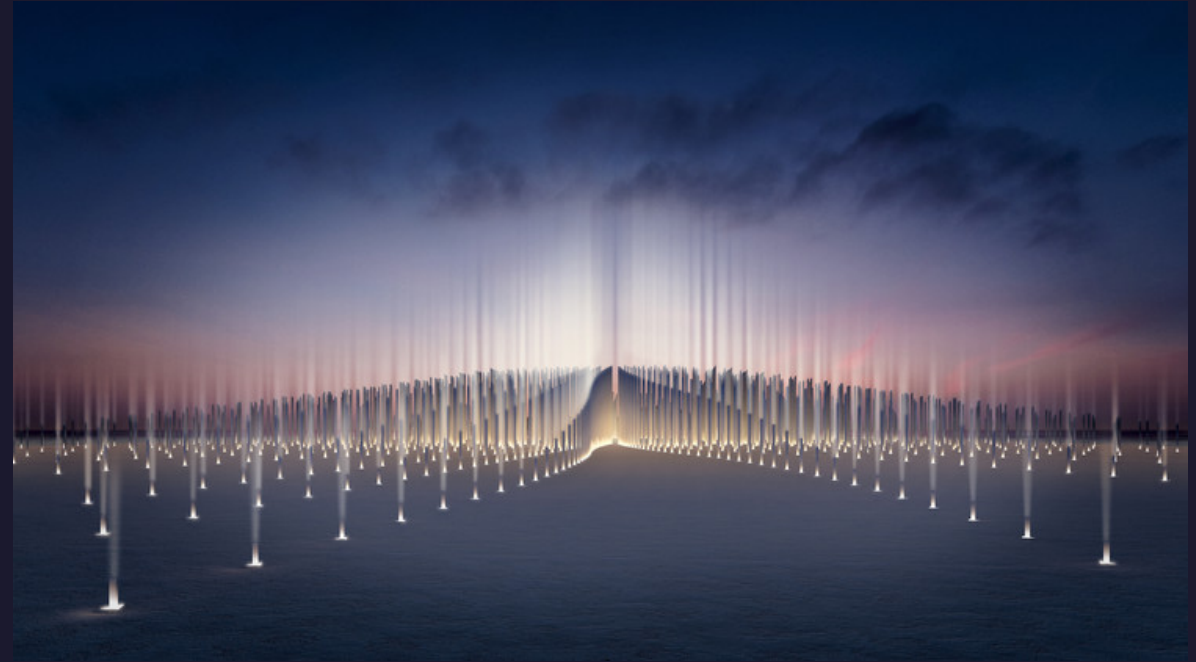


SPIRITUAL AND MATERIAL

By the time of the Bundahishn Spənta Mainiiu and Aṇgra Mainiiu have become Ahuramazda and Ahriman.

They are **mēnōg**, spiritual, as opposed to **gētīg**, material, beings. The term **gētīg** alludes to the material, visible, physical, and tangible aspect of the world; **mēnōg** refers to the aspect of the world that is essentially spiritual, mental, invisible, and intangible.

The distinction between the material and spiritual worlds is not an ethical division; good and evil exist in both states of existence. At the same time, mēnōg was prior to gētīg in the process of creation, and every gētīg, physical being has a mēnōg, spiritual counterpart.



FINITE AND INFINITE

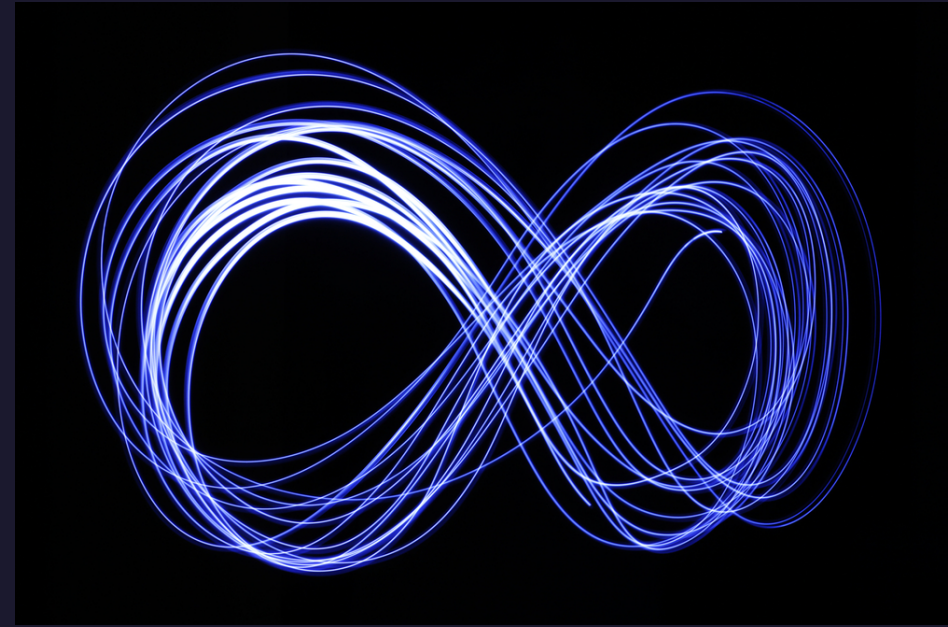
Ahuramazda was on high, in omniscience and goodness, for eternity in the light.

Ahriman was in darkness, afterthought, and aggression, down deep. Aggression was his nature and darkness his place; some call it “endless darkness”.

Between them was a void.

Both spirits were finite and infinite. For above was what is called endless light, unbounded. Down deep was endless darkness, and that is infinite. At the border both were finite, for between them was the void, and they did not touch. Again, both spirits were finite in their own bodies.

Moreover, on account of Ahuramazda's omniscience, all things are finitely within Ahuramazda's knowledge.



THE CREATION OF TIME



At the Final Body, the creatures of Ahuramazda will have perfect power for ever and ever; that is infinity. And at that time, the creatures of Ahriman will be destroyed, so that the Final Body can come to be; that is finitude.

Ahuramazda in his omniscience knew that the Evil Spirit exists, what he was planning to do in his jealousy, how he would mix creation from the beginning to the end, and with how many instruments; so he fashioned the creatures spiritually with the necessary instruments.

For three thousand years, the creatures were only spiritual; that is, they were unthinking, unmoving, and intangible. With his clear vision, Ahuramazda saw that the Evil Spirit would never turn from his attack, that the attack could not be made powerless except by creation, for the creatures would not become animated and begin to move without time, and when time was created the creatures of Ahriman would also be animated.

So, of necessity, in order to render the Adversary powerless, he created time. The reason was that the Evil Spirit could not be made powerless except by battle. From eternity, he created Time of Long Dominion; some call it “finite time.”

THE BATTLE PLAN

Ahramazda said to the Evil Spirit:

“Let us set a time, so that by this pact our battle will be limited to nine thousand years.”

For he knew that in this time he would render the Evil Spirit powerless.

Thereupon the Evil Spirit, because of his inability to foresee the end, became a party to that agreement, just like two men who set a time for a duel, saying, “Let us do battle on such and such a day until nightfall.”

Ahramazda, in his omniscience, knew as well that in these nine thousand years, three thousand would go entirely according to his own will; three thousand, during the Mixture, would go according to the wills of both Ahramazda and Ahriman; and in the final battle, it would be possible to make the Evil Spirit powerless and to keep evil from creation.



THE BEGINNING OF CREATION

I will first describe material creation in its spiritual form and then in its material form.

Before creation, Ahuramazda was not Lord, but after creation he became Lord, beneficent, wise, harmless, manifest, ever-arranging, bounteous, and all-observing.

At first, he created the essence of creation, goodness, that spirit through which his own body was made good when he thought of creation. For he became Lord through creation.



He fashioned Time of Long Dominion as the first creation that was infinite.

Ahramazda fashioned the forms of his creatures from his own essence, from light existence, in fire-form: bright, white, round, and distinct.

This fire-form was separate from the passage of time.

He maintains his spiritual creations spiritually. He first created the material creatures spiritually, and then created them again in material form.

The first of the material creations was the sky, second water, third earth, fourth the plant, fifth the cow, sixth the man, and seventh Ahramazda himself.

He fashioned his creatures with the help of Way of Long Dominion, for when he fashioned Way of Long Dominion he, too, was an instrument he needed for creation.

In creation, Ahramazda is both mother and father of his creatures: mother when he spiritually nourished the creatures, and father when he created them in the material world.



CREATION FROM LIGHT

Zoroastrianism is based on five principles:

- The supreme god is Ahura Mazda
- Ahura Mazda is all-good
- His eternal opponent, Angra Mainyu, is all-evil
- Goodness is apparent through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds
- Each individual has free will to choose between good and evil

Adherents express these principles by:

- Telling the truth at all times
- Practicing charity
- Showing love for others
- Practicing moderation in all things

PRINCIPLES OF ZOROASTRIANISM



The purpose of human life was to take the side of Good against the forces of Evil and maintain order against chaos. Every human born was required to choose a side simply because that was the nature of human existence. Those who chose to follow Ahura Mazda would live full, productive, satisfying lives and be rewarded after death; those who followed Angra Mainyu would lead lives of confusion, strife, and petty self-interest and be punished in the afterlife.

A POSTSCRIPT: THE QUESTION OF THE ORGINS OF EVIL

The problem presented by Zoroaster's vision, however, was the origin of evil. If Ahura Mazda was all-good, and the source of all creation, where did Angra Mainyu and his legions of demons come from? How could an all-powerful, all-good, uncreated supreme being create evil when evil was, in no possible way, part of its nature?

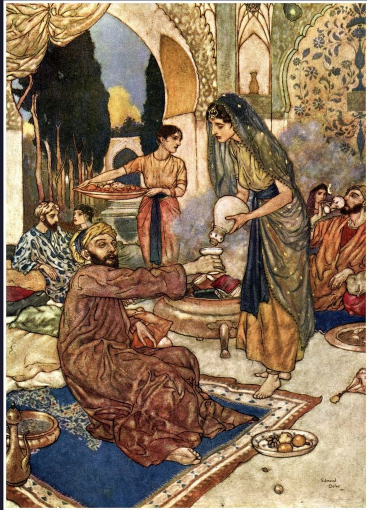


This gave rise to Zorvanism, a Zoroastrian breakaway sect which emerged in the late Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE) and flourished during the Sassanian Empire (224-651 CE). It is often referenced as a Zoroastrian heresy because it departed significantly from two central Zoroastrian beliefs:

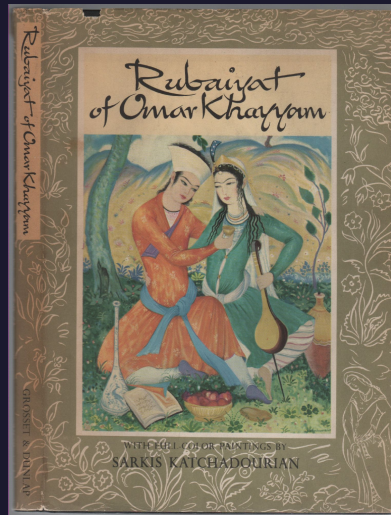
- That the Supreme Deity Ahura Mazda was the One Uncreated God
- That human beings had free will to choose between good and evil

Zorvanism claimed that Ahuramazda was a created being, the twin brother of Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) and the Supreme Deity was Zorvan Akarana, "Infinite Time". Time brought all things into being and caused them to pass away and, since time was implacable and human beings were helpless in resisting it, human existence was directed by fate, not free will.

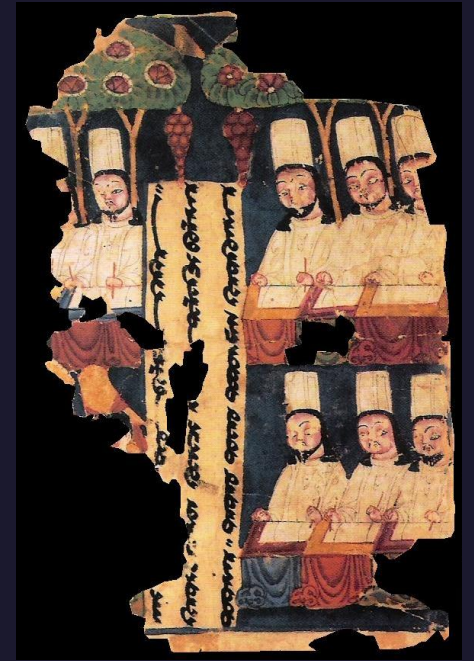
Zorvan appears in writings of the religious visionary Mani who was a guest of the Sassanian king Shapur I (r. 240-270 CE) and lived at his court. In Mani's text, Zorvan is the Father of Greatness in the Realm of Light and the creative force in the universe. It seems clear that his understanding of Zoroastrianism was actually more Zorvanite, and this suggests that Shapur I was himself a Zorvanite since he assisted Mani in developing and spreading his new faith.

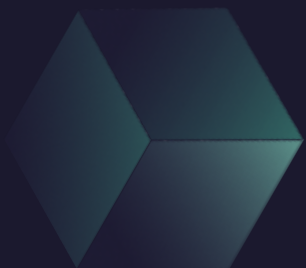


*For some we loved, the loveliest and the best
That from his Vintage rolling Time hath prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to rest.*



The concept of fate as more powerful than free will also influenced later Persian poets and the literary motifs which inform some of the greatest works of Persian literature and, through them, world culture.





The Flow of Ideas

WORSHIP OF AHURAMAZDA UNDER THE ACHAEMENIDS



FIRE



Zoroastrians venerate fire. They turn towards a flame or a source of light while praying. At the heart of a Zoroastrian place of worship burns a fire - and where possible the fire burns continuously, symbolizing an eternal flame.

The temporal fire represents the spiritual flame within and the ethical values of order, beneficence, honesty, fairness and justice.

BURIAL PRACTICES

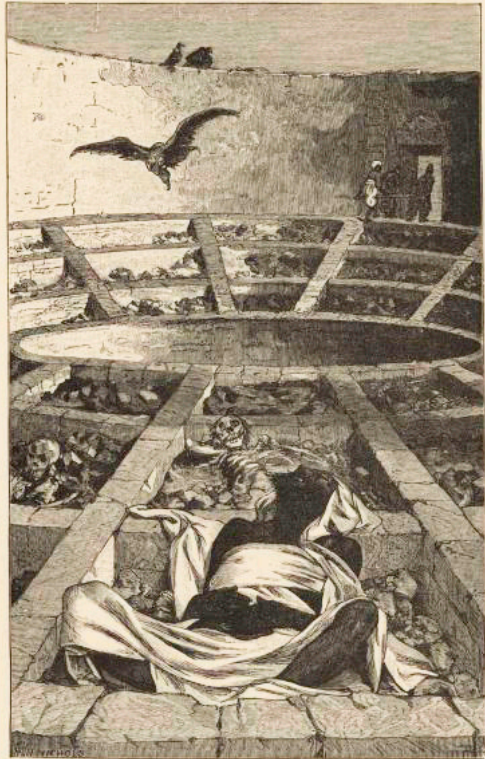


FIG. 3.—Parsi Towers of Silence (interior).
511.1521

Burial customs—India

R.T. PUNJEE
PUNJEE COLLECTION

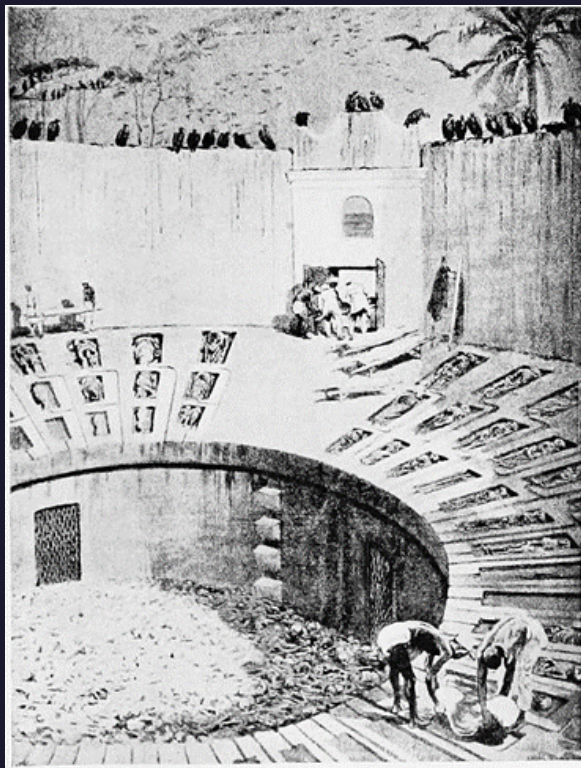


Chyl'pyk: *Dakhma* or Tower of Silence, Khorezm



Dakhma at Yazd, Iran

The Zoroastrians expose their dead, usually in open enclosures on hilltops, known as *dakhma* or 'Towers of Silence'.

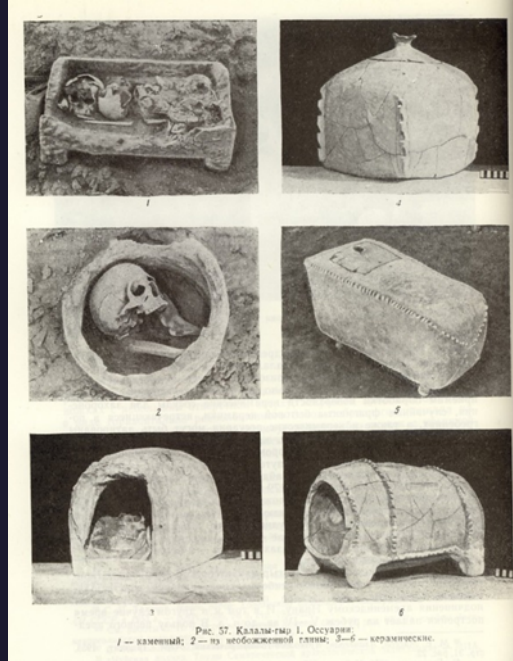


From a Russian print
Interior of a Tower of Silence

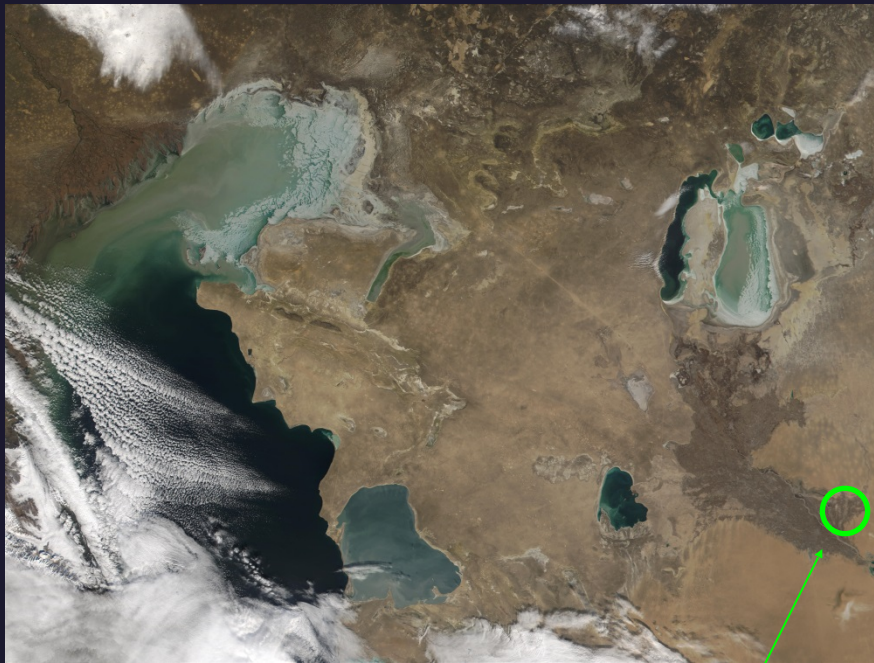
In Central Asia, rather than casting the bones into the central well of the *dachma*, they were gathered up and placed in ossuaries, a practice that appeared in Central Asia by the 4th century BCE.



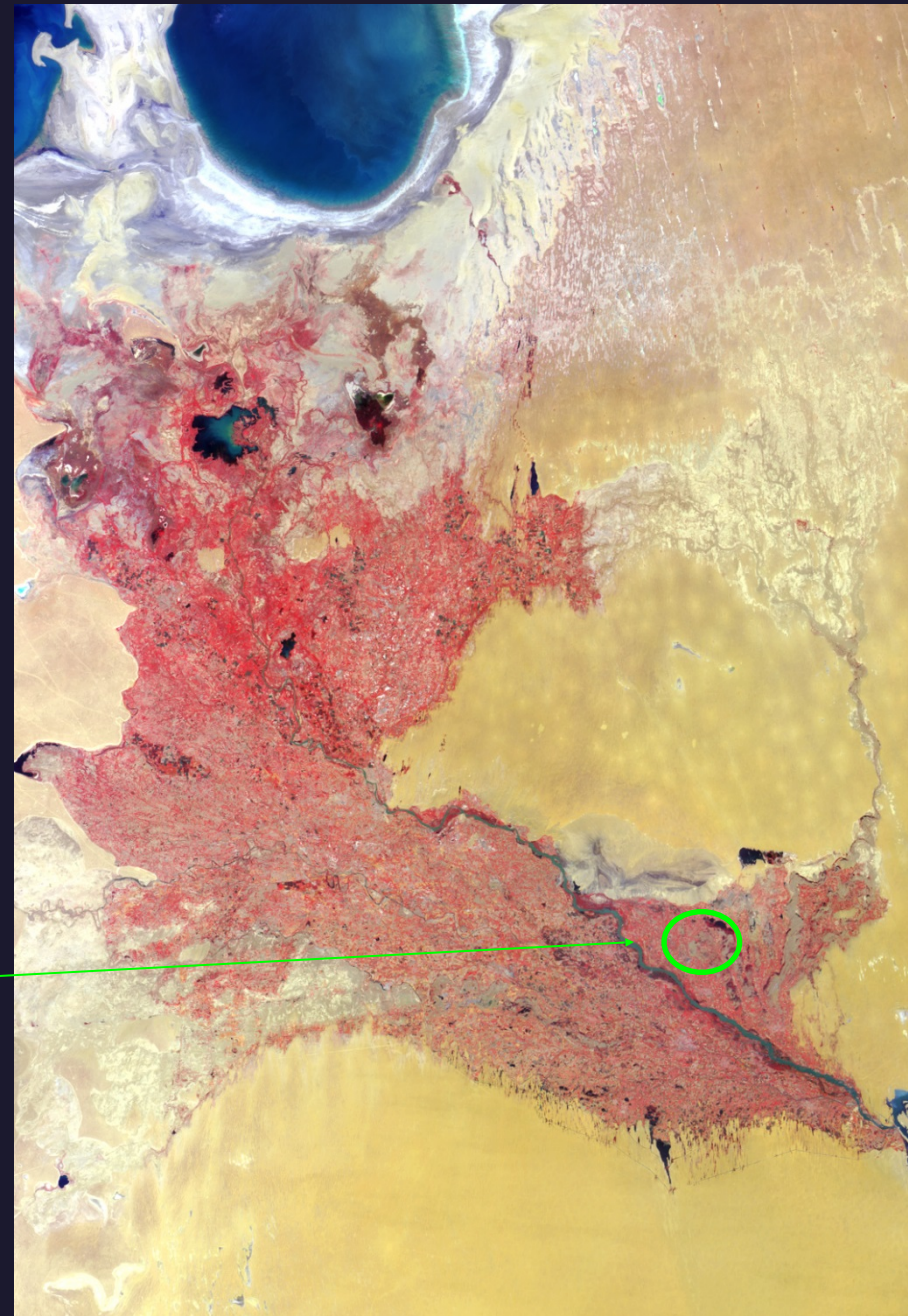
Khorezmian ossuaries



Sogdian ossuary from Mullah Kurgan



The Tash-k'irman oasis



AKCHAKHAN-KALA



Zoroastrianism in Khorezm



In 1901 Joseph Marquart proposed to identify Chorasmia with *Airyanem Vaējah*, the first and most eminent country mentioned in the Avestan list of “Aryan countries”, i.e. countries where the Zoroastrian faith was prevalent or present at the time of the composition of the list, in the 6th c. BCE at the latest (Vidēvdād 1).

Pahlavi literature shows a certain awareness that Chorasmia had been an ancient Zoroastrian country: the Iranian Bundahishn (18.6-7) claims that the Ādur Farnbāg, the sacred Fire of the priestly estate, had originally stood on Mount Khwarrahōmand in Chorasmia and that Wishtāsp, Zoroaster’s kingly protector, had moved it to Kāriyān in Fars, where it was still burning in Sasanian times.

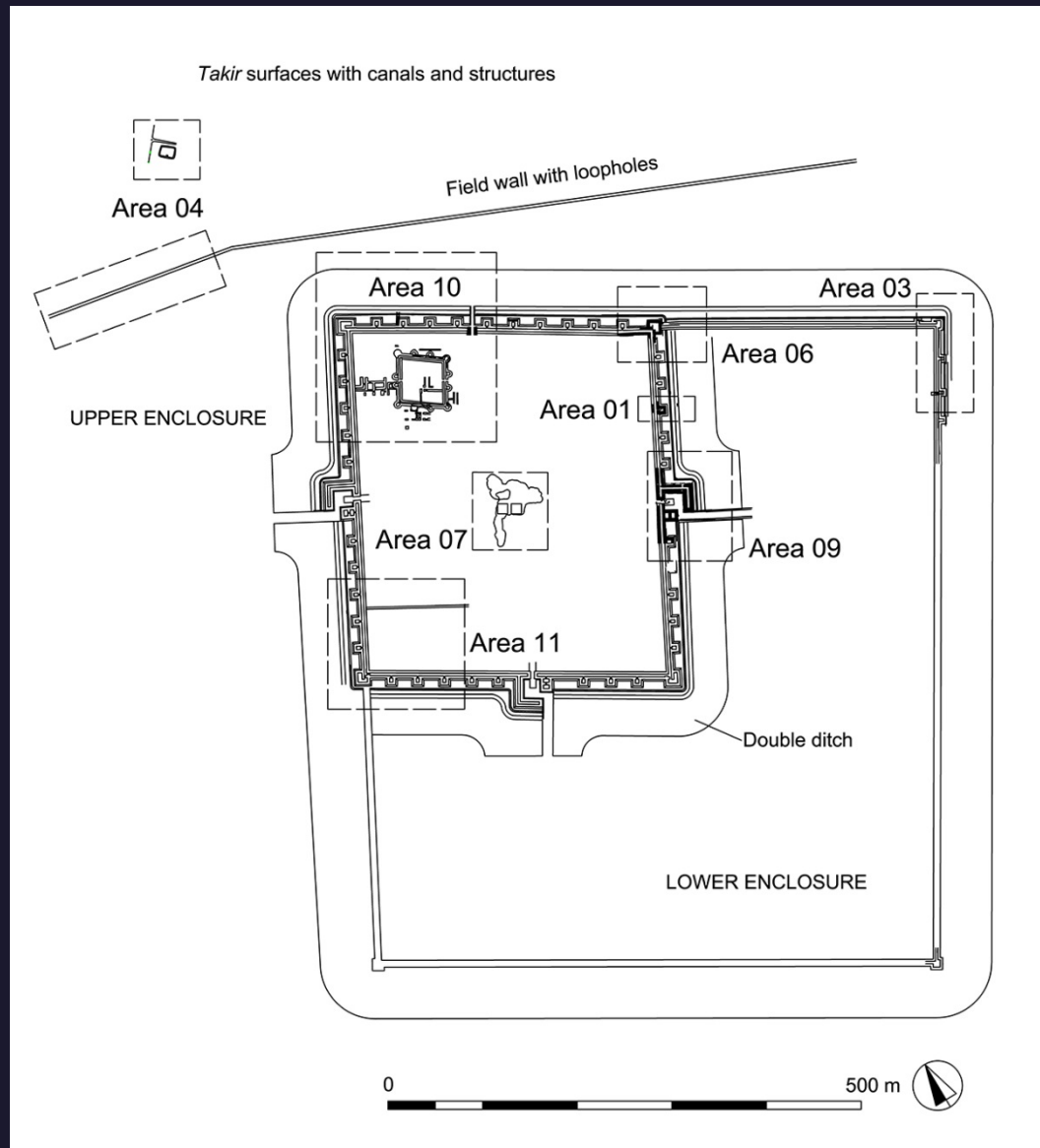
However, Marquart’s idea was subsequently dismissed, the notion of the Farnbag Fire considered mythological, and Chorasmia was relegated to a fringe interest in Zoroastrian history.



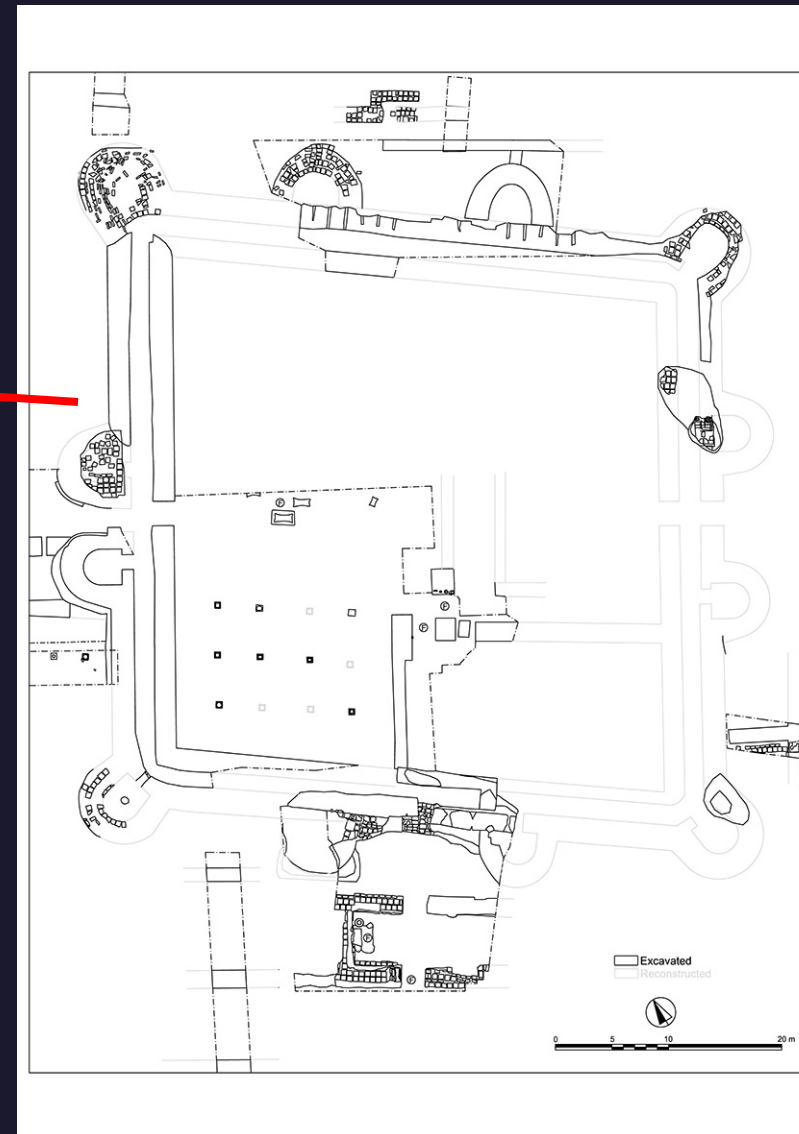
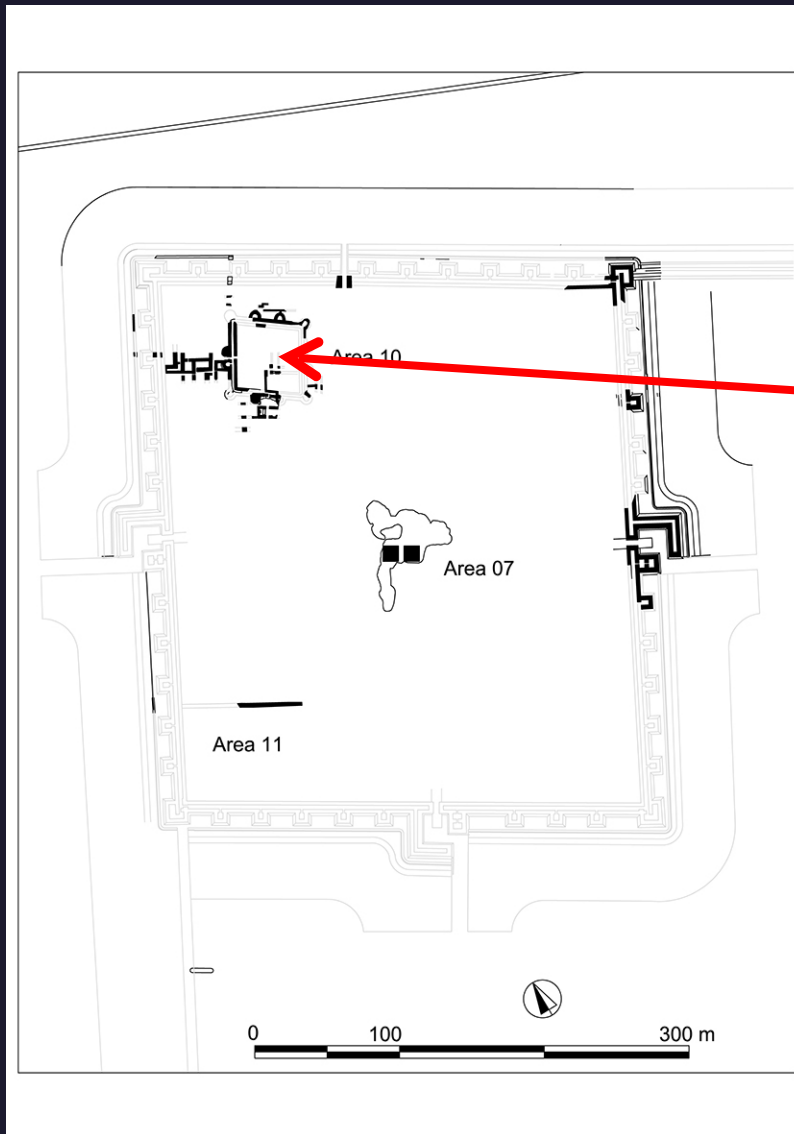
There is only one 'mountain' in Khorezm, the Sultan uiz-Dagh. Akchakhan-kala and its successor, Toprak-kala, face the mountain. It was clearly regarded as a sacred place at the time that these sites were occupied.

Ossuaries on the Sultan-uiz-Dagh

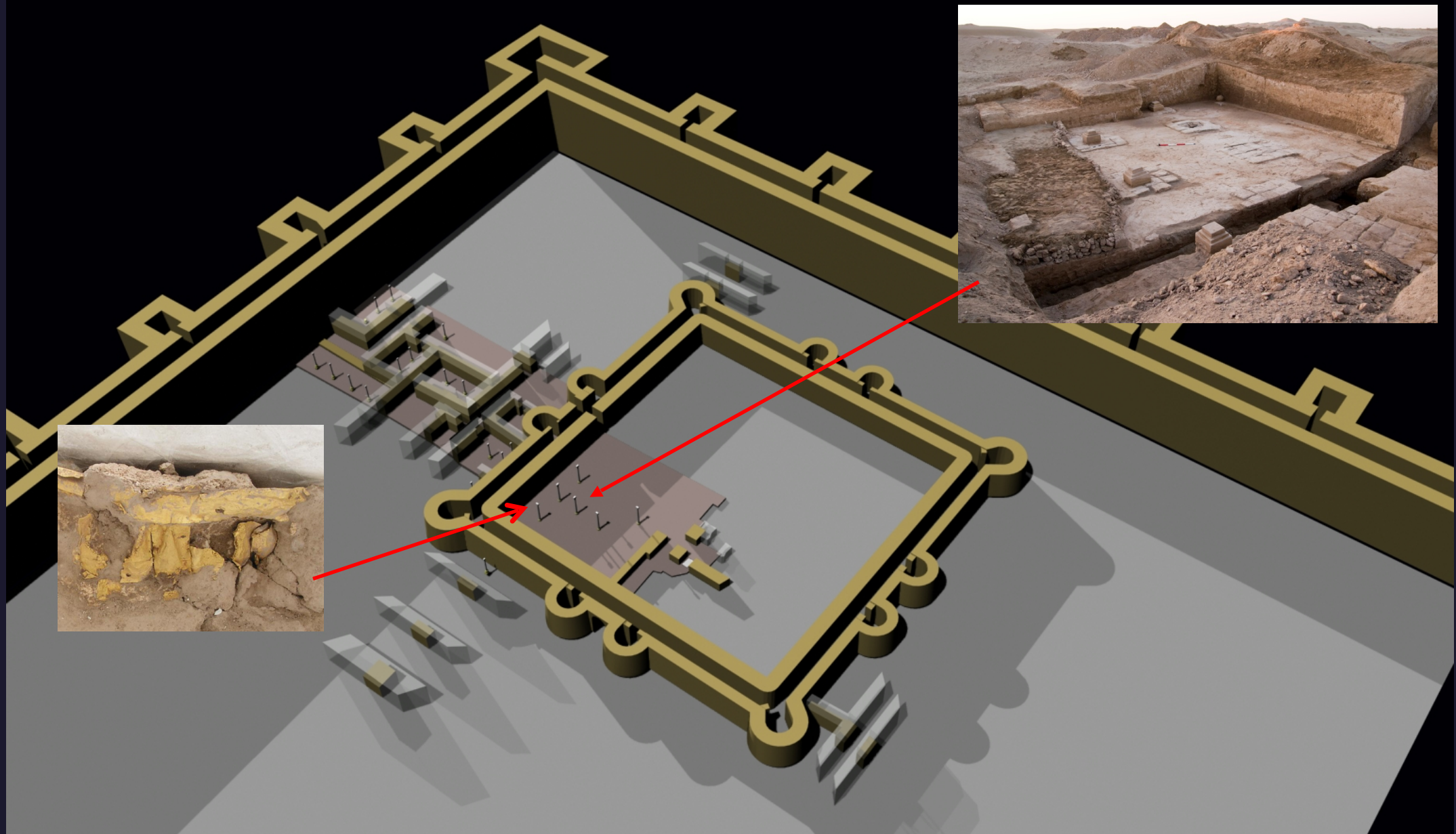
AKCHAKHAN-KALA



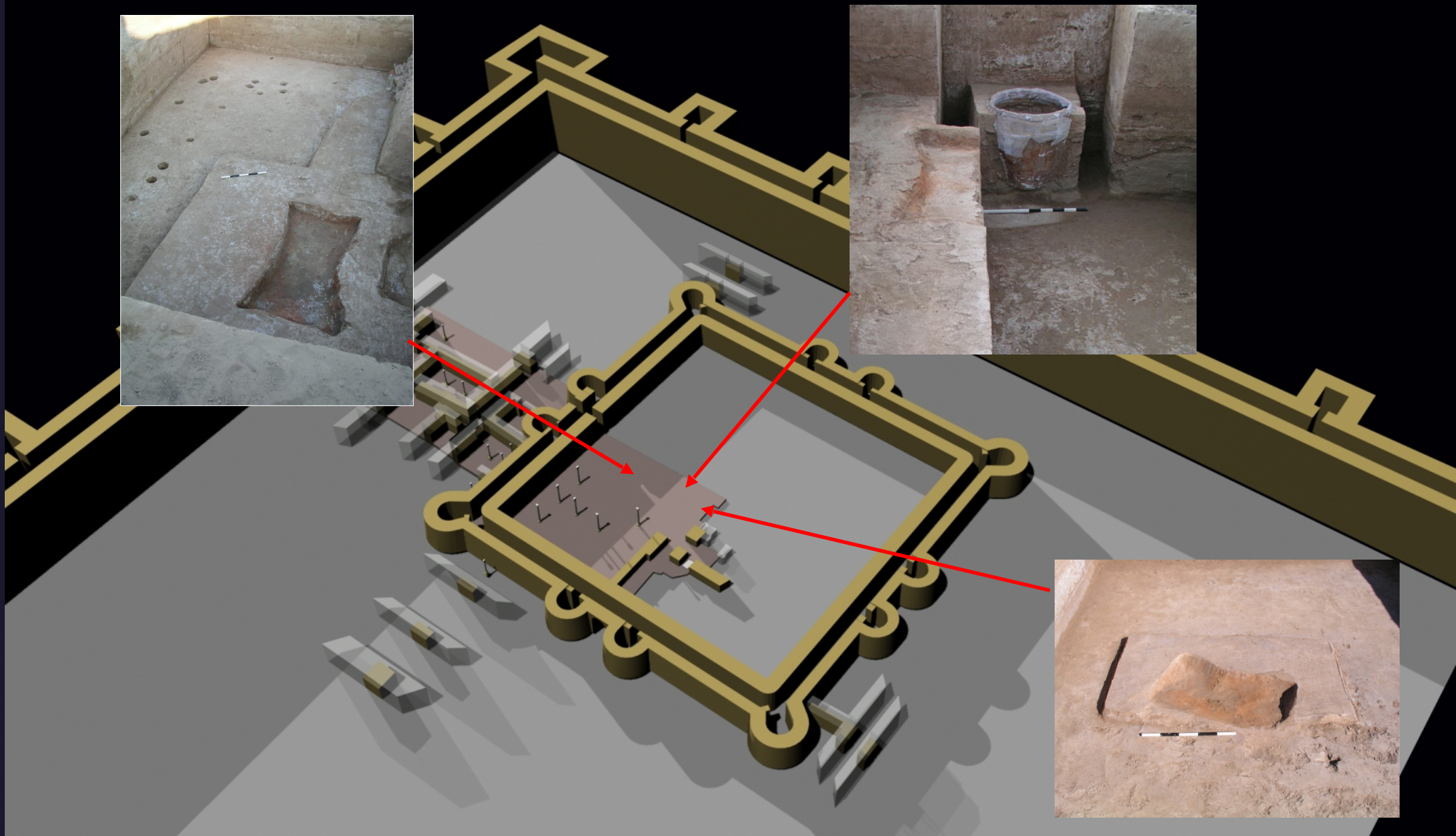
c. 2nd century BCE – 150 CE



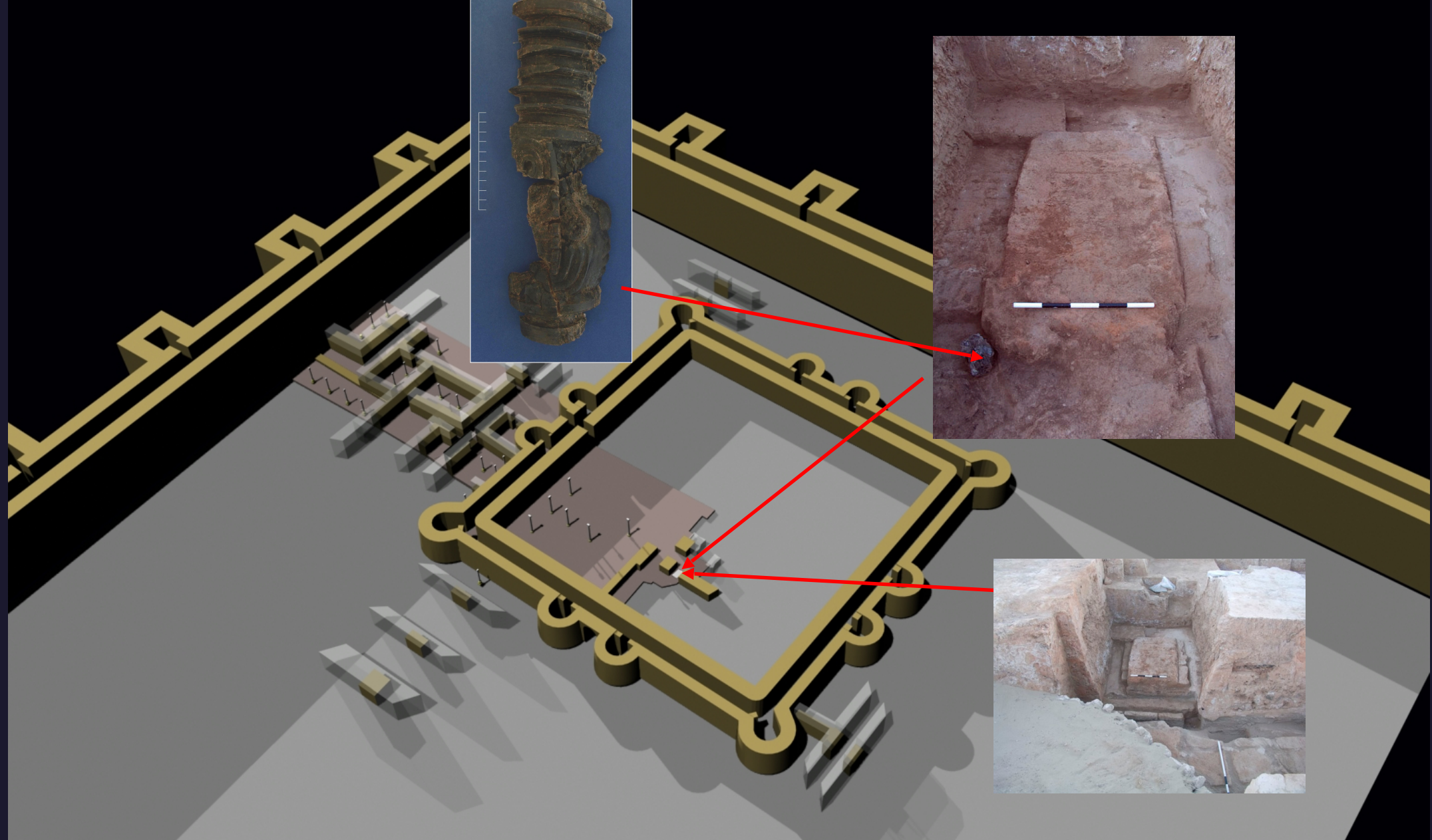
AREA 10: The Ceremonial Complex



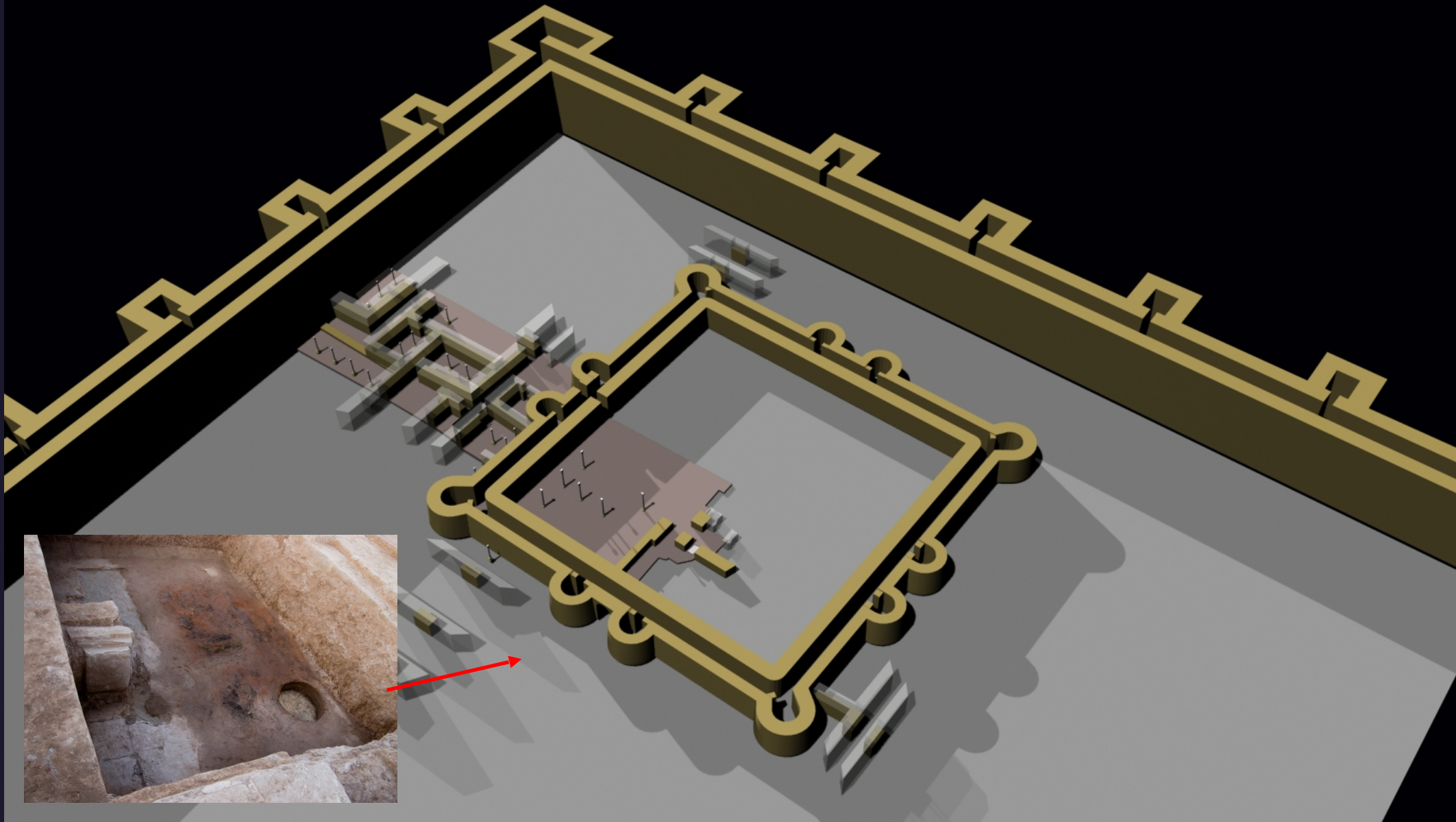
Area 10: hypostyle hall



Area 10: 'fire features'



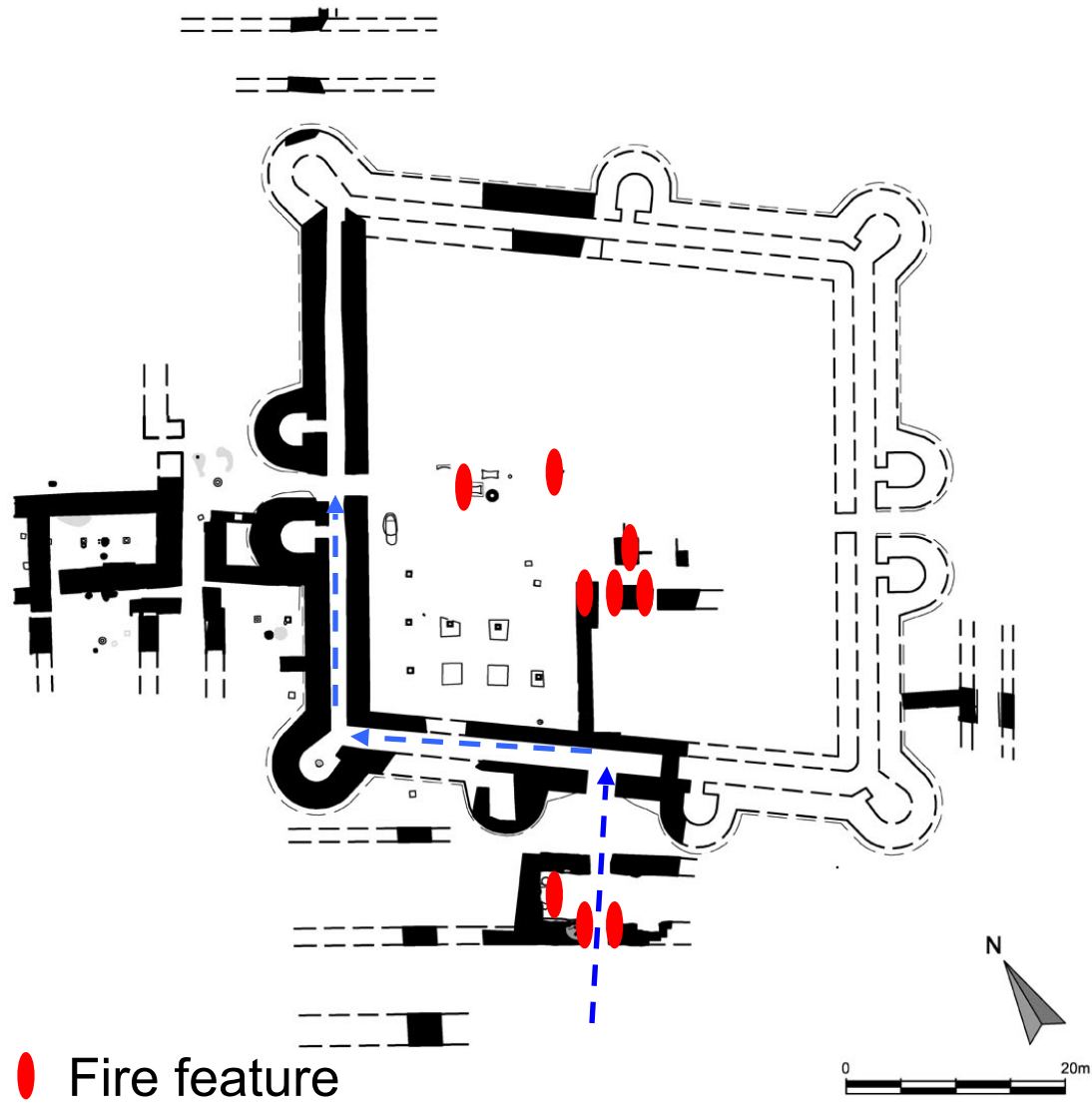
Area 10: fire altar complex



Area 10: southern gatehouse



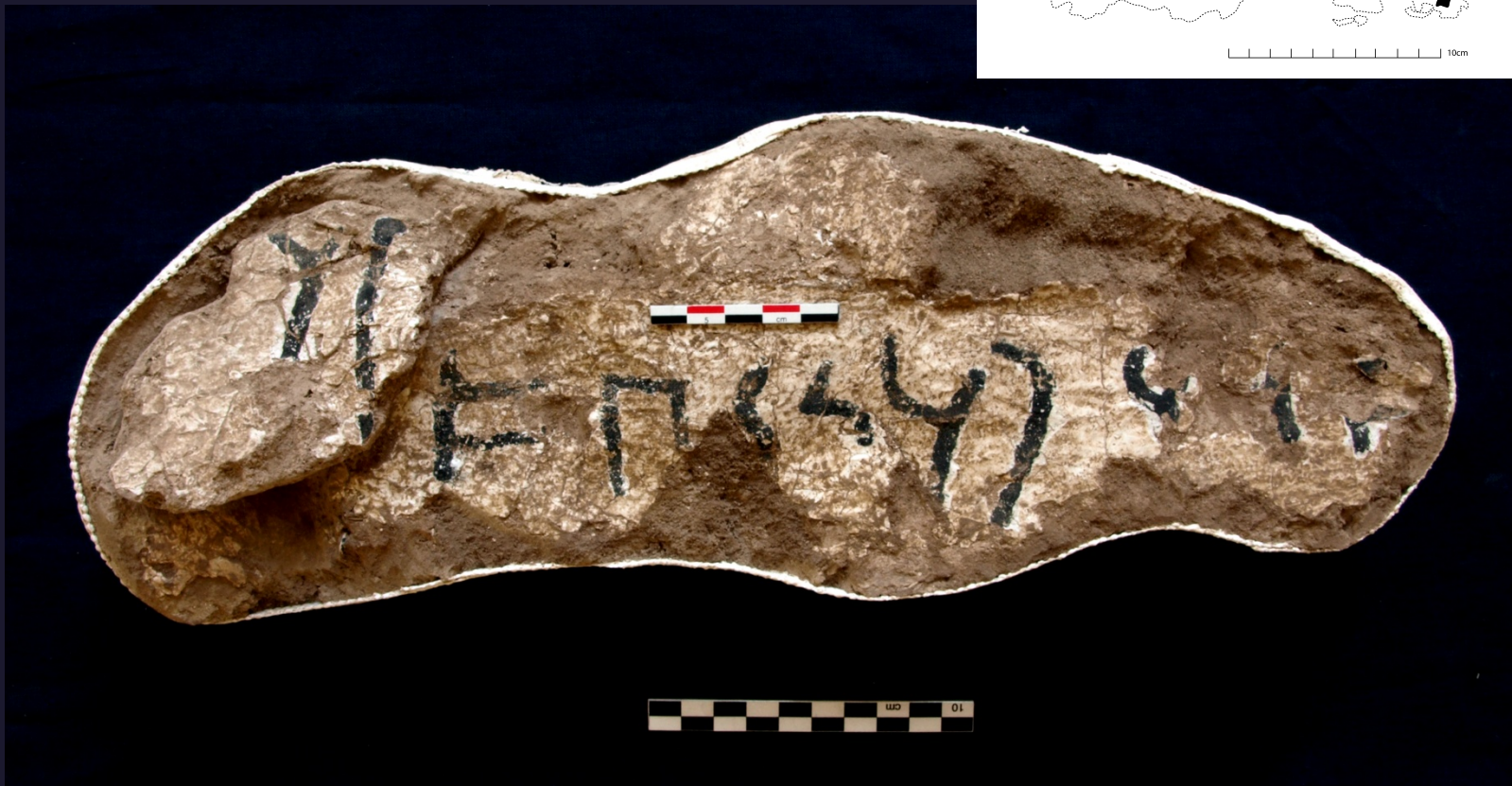
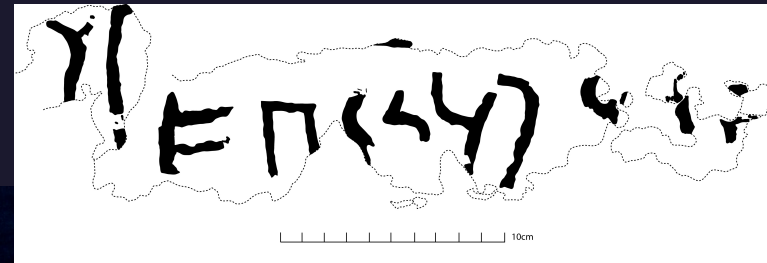
Area 10: southern gatehouse and 'burning doorway'

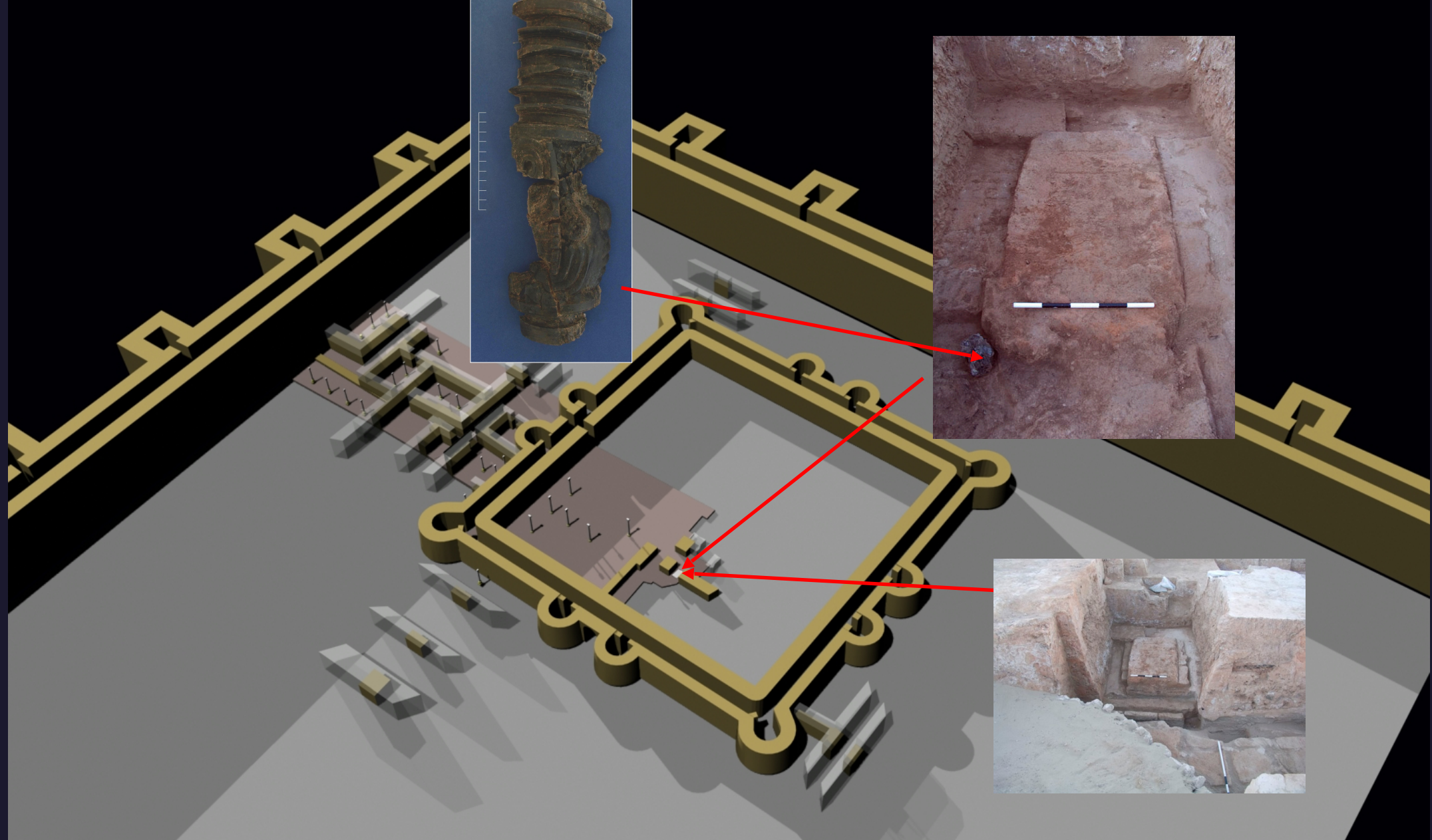


KINGSHIP

Painted text written using Aramaic script, but the language appears to be an early form of Khorezmian

V.A. Livshits has identified 'king' [MLK], 'son' and at least one name or fragment of a name





Area 10: fire altar complex



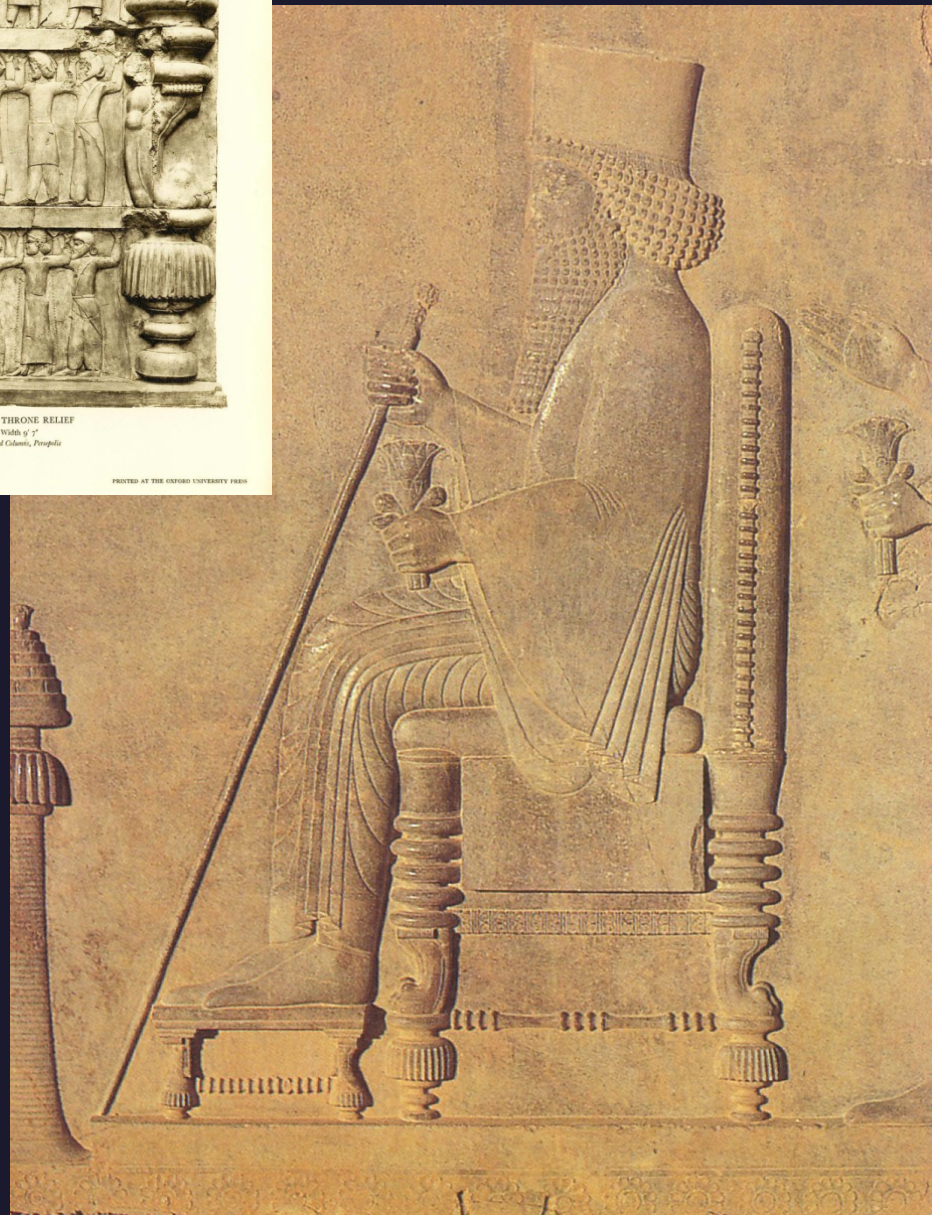
CASTS OF PERSIAN SCULPTURES, ACHAEMENID PERIOD



9. LOWER PART OF THRONE RELIEF
Height 1' 4". Width 9' 7".
From Hall of the Hundred Columns, Persepolis

BRITISH MUSEUM

PRINTED AT THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS





Fire-altar on reverse of coin of King Ardashir I, circa 226 CE

The combination of altar and throne on Sasanian coins signifies a Royal Fire. From the Median period onward the Iranian sovereign's official title was "king of kings. At the time of coronation he kindled a "royal fire," which was extinguished, along with other fires of the realm, only at his death.



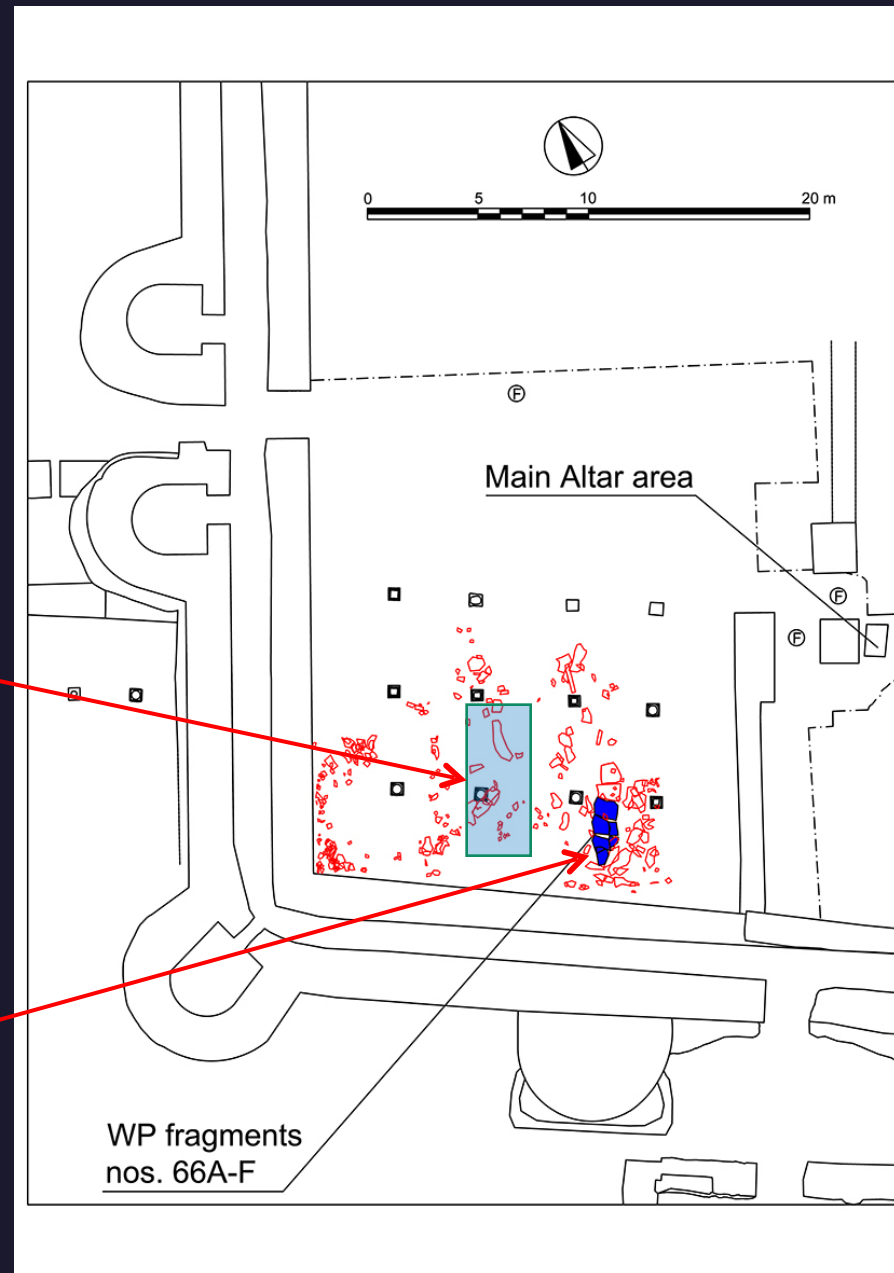
Darius the King says: Ahuramazda, the greatest of the gods... he created me; he made me king... This palace which I built at Susa, from afar its ornamentation was brought... The gold was brought from Sardis and from Bactria... The precious stone lapis lazuli and carnelian... was brought from Sogdiana. The precious stone turquoise, this was brought from Chorasmia...

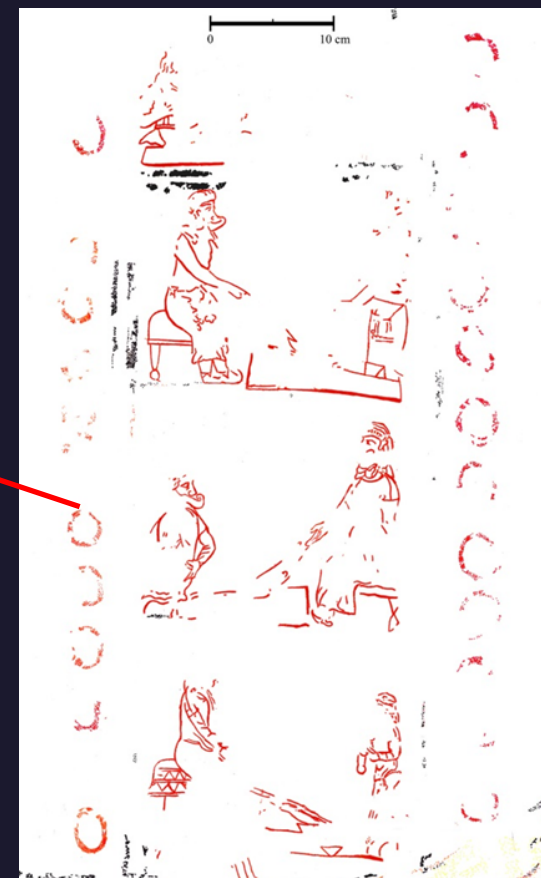
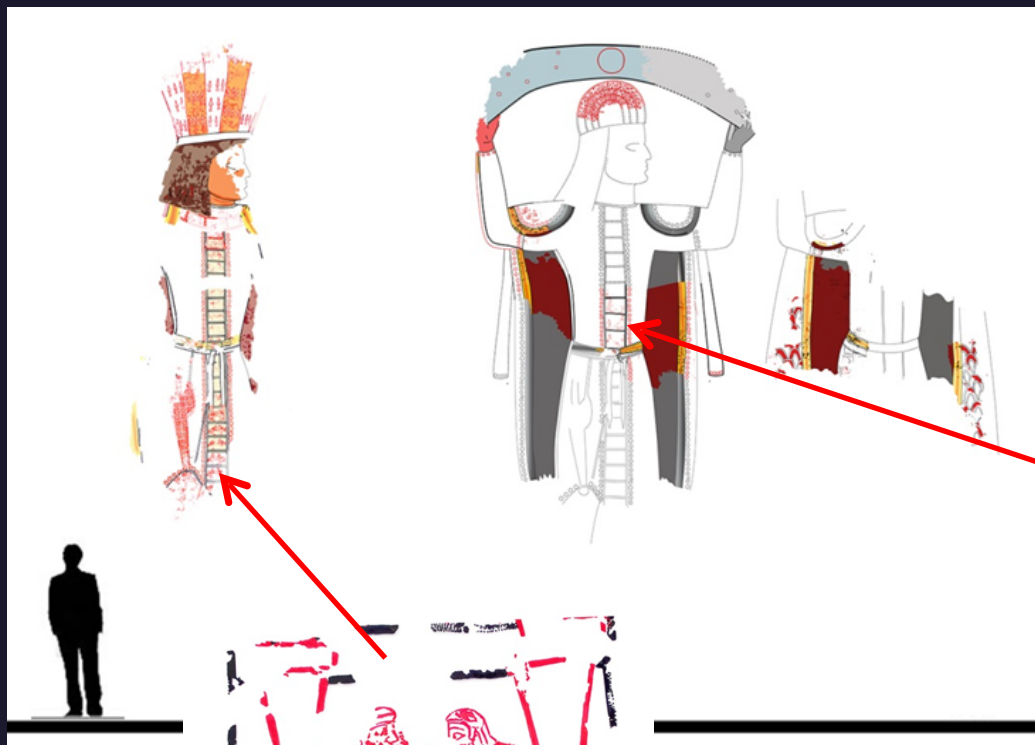


THE AVESTAN DEITIES

Second figure

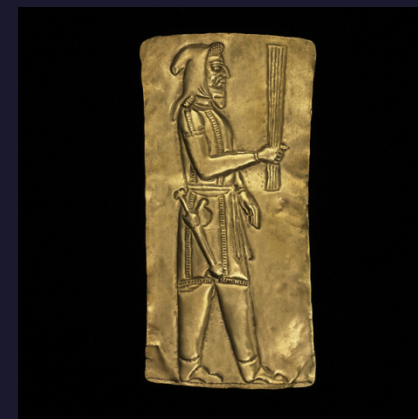
First figure

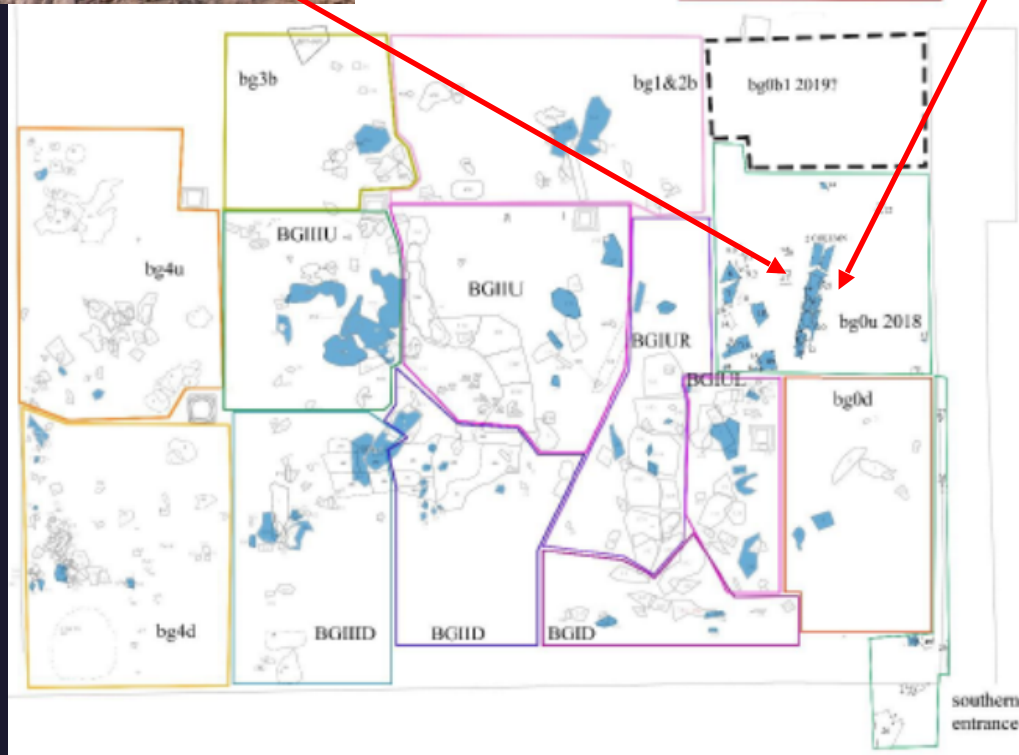
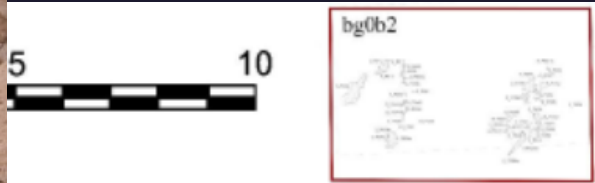




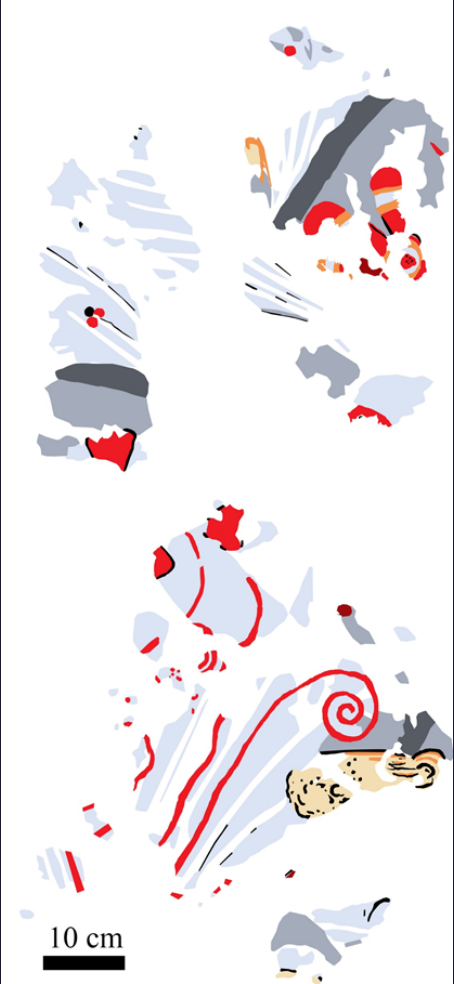
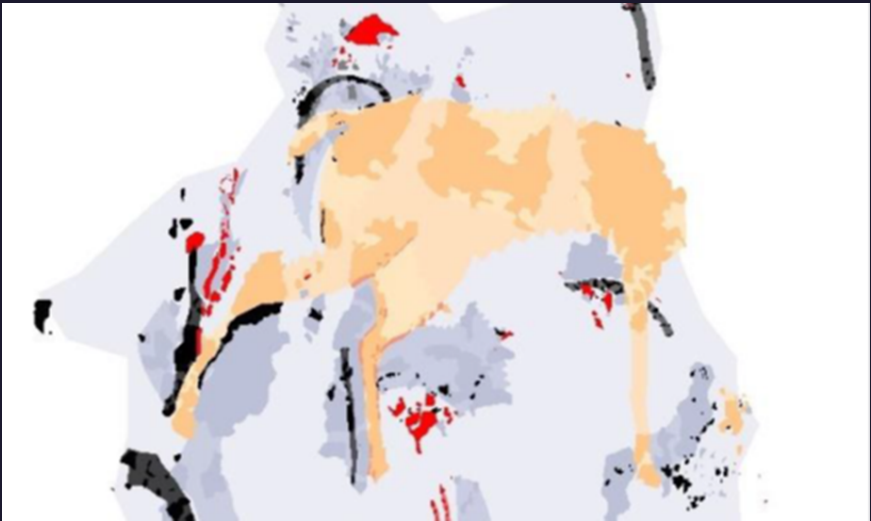
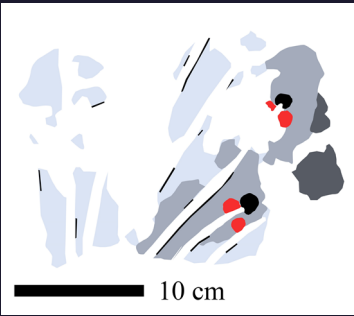
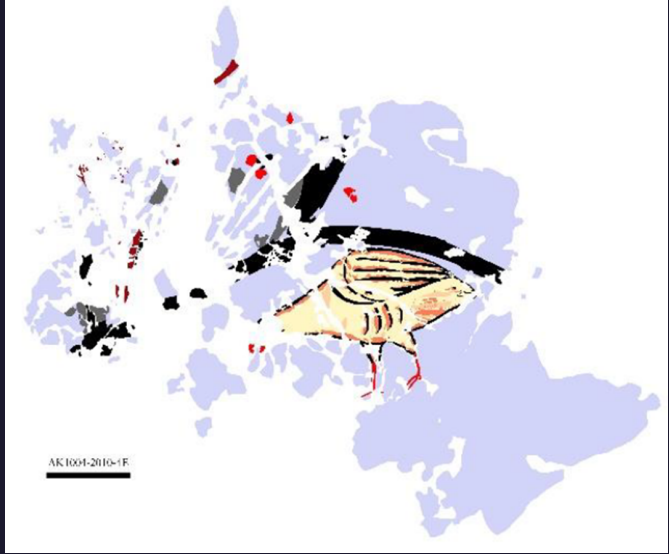
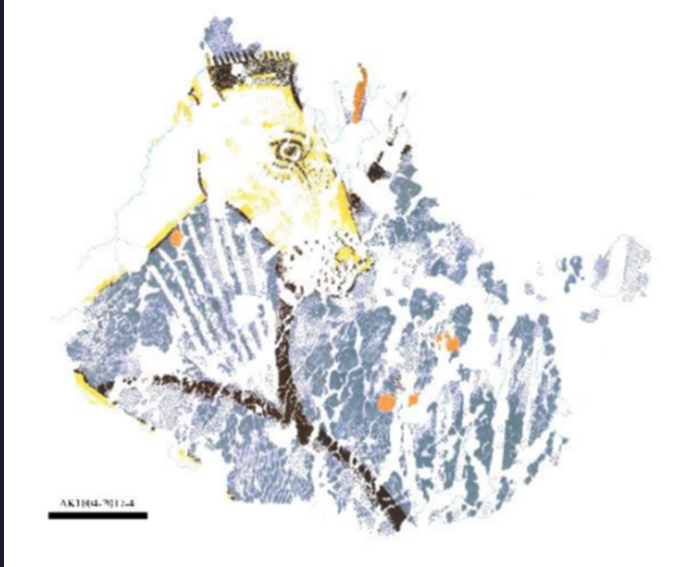
Avestan deities with
details of Zoroastrian
priests

*Votive plaque from
the Oxus Treasure*





PAINTED COLUMNS





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Detail from School Of Athens by Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520 CE) Painted 1509-10. Fresco in Stanza della Signatura, Vatican Palace, Rome. The prophet Zoroaster is shown with his back to the viewer, holding a globe and wearing a crown.

- The date of Zoroaster is believed to be c. 1200 BCE.
- We have no known images of Avestan deities on this scale or complex detail in Achaemenid or Parthian material culture.
- There is only limited evidence for fire temples prior to the Sasanian period.
- The best parallels for our material occur 600 years later and in Sogdia and western China.
- Akchakhan-kala with its fire cult practice and Avestan themed paintings shows that Chorasmia must now be seen as an important regional centre for the development of early Zoroastrian practice.



Darius the King says:
Ahuramazda, the greatest of the
gods... he created me; he made
me king...





Akchakhan-kala was a royal seat specifically associated with ceremony and ritual that reinforced the role of the king through his relationship to the gods.

We may further suggest that the king's grip on power through the notion of the creation of kingship by Ahuramazda was a forceful influence on the probably universal practice of Mazdean religion in ancient Khorezm.

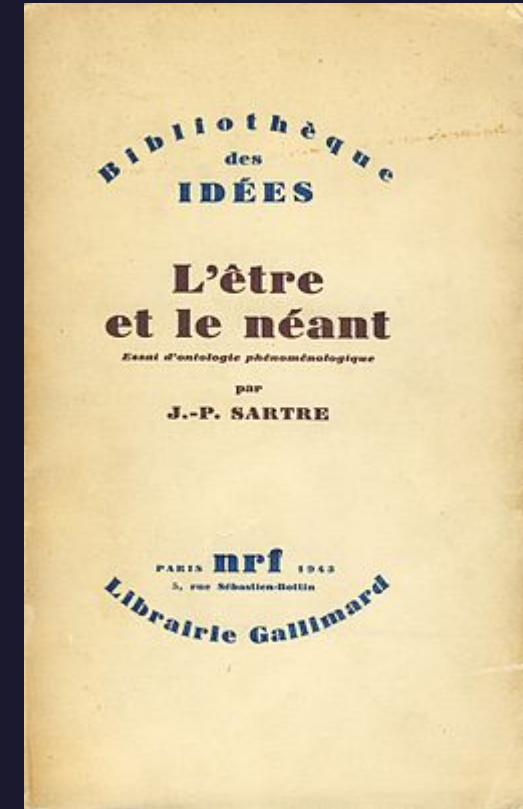
BEING AND NOTHINGNESS IN ANTIQUITY

The theme of this conference is the very earliest history of the problem of being.

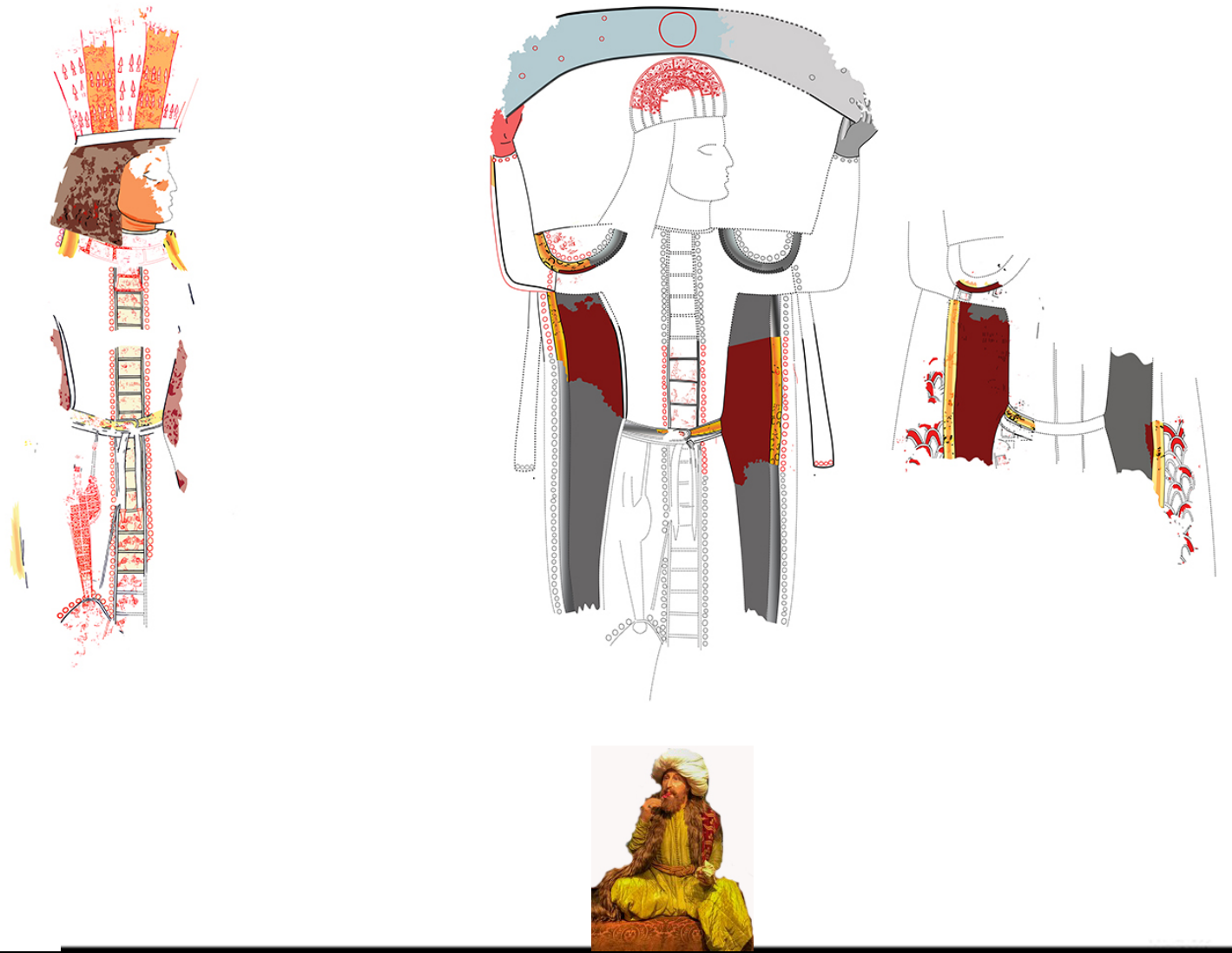
How these notions were understood in a variety of earlier contexts, **focusing in particular on the flow of ideas between cultures.**

How (if at all possible) was the problem of why there was something rather than nothing posed across a range of contexts in antiquity.

If it was not a posable question, what structure was absent? Did the then-current theories about Being render such questions about non-Being irrelevant?



In other words, the spiritual and philosophical nature of the Mazdean belief system, borrowed or introduced from the Achaemenid heartland, may have been subsumed or hijacked by the quest for power and control.



Wall Paintings in the Hypostyle Hall

Chorasmia did not fall under Sasanian control and was not subject to the revisionist policies of the Sasanians.

Evidence suggests that Mazdean/Zoroastrian beliefs and practices continued in the oasis until the coming of Islam and lingered for some time even after that.

Unfortunately, all records and books were burned by the Islamic conquerors and we know very little about religious thought at that time. It is only the lucky accident of the discovery of the Akchakhan-kala paintings that gives us this brief insight into this unique fragment of religious history.





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