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INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE TERRITORY OF UZBEKISTAN IN ANCIENT TIMES AND ITS REFLECTION IN SOURCES

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Abstract. The article examines the elements of intangible cultural heritage that took shape in the territory of Uzbekistan from the Bronze Age to the 5th century AD and their reflection in various sources. Sources on the intangible heritage of antiquity are classified into written, archaeological-iconographic and ethnographic groups, and their informative potential is assessed. The analysis draws on the Avesta, the works of classical authors, Chinese chronicles, the writings of al-Biruni and Narshakhi, and archaeological finds. On this basis, oral traditions, performing arts, rituals and festivals, knowledge concerning nature, and traditional craftsmanship are examined according to the classification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. The historical continuity between ancient traditions and present-day living heritage is characterized as a transformed continuity. The findings can be applied in preparing nomination files, in education and in cultural tourism.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, ancient period, Uzbekistan, written sources, archaeological sources, Avesta, rituals and festivals, historical continuity, UNESCO.

The historical memory and national identity of every people are embodied not only in material monuments but also in the knowledge, skills, customs, rituals and art forms transmitted orally and through practice from generation to generation. Because this heritage is continually recreated and renewed in the life of communities, it is also referred to in the scholarly literature as “living heritage.” Its significance has been recognized internationally: on 17 October 2003, the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [1]. The Convention identifies five principal domains of intangible cultural heritage: oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.

Uzbekistan ratified the Convention on 29 January 2008. The legal and institutional foundations of the field are being consistently developed in the country. In particular, Law No. 269-II “On the Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Objects” was adopted on 30 August 2001 [2]. In addition, a resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of 7 October 2010 approved the State Program for the Protection, Preservation, Promotion and Use of Intangible Cultural Heritage Objects for 2010–2020 [3]. A law that entered into force on 27 July 2026 enshrined at the legislative level the competence of the Ministry of Culture over intangible cultural heritage objects [4]. Several elements have been inscribed on UNESCO lists, including the Cultural Space of Boysun District, Shashmaqom music, Katta Ashula, Navruz, Palov culture and tradition, and the Khorazm dance Lazgi. These inscriptions testify to the recognition of the intangible heritage of the Uzbek people as a universal value.

Today, many traditions still practiced in Uzbekistan have roots extending back to antiquity. Examples include Navruz and other seasonal festivals, customs associated with fire and water, agricultural rituals, heroic legends, music and dance, as well as pottery, textile and jewelry traditions. The study of the historical genesis of intangible cultural heritage is therefore important in three respects. First, it makes it possible to substantiate scientifically the historical roots of national identity. Second, it provides a body of historical evidence for preparing nomination files for the inscription of new elements on national and international lists. Third, it serves as a reliable source of information for education and cultural tourism.

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However, the very “intangibility” of this heritage poses a serious methodological problem for its study in relation to antiquity. A ritual, a song, a dance or an oral legend leaves no direct material trace. Consequently, information about such phenomena has to be reconstructed from indirect sources.

Intangible cultural heritage came to be less widely recognized as a value, and integrating it into the modern way of life raised a number of problems that needed to be resolved. In response, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [1]. The Convention defines “intangible cultural heritage” as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills … that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

Intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history [2]. It follows from this definition that the formation of intangible cultural heritage is not a short-term event but a long-lasting process that continues to this day. Accordingly, studying the history of the formation of intangible cultural heritage in Uzbekistan requires two layers to be considered together.

The first layer comprises the practices themselves and the social mechanisms that transmit them. The practices include festivals, dastan (epic) performance, maqom and crafts. The transmitting mechanisms include the family, the mahalla (neighborhood community), the master–apprentice (ustoz–shogird) relationship, craft guilds and the ritual calendar, each with its own history of formation. This layer is characterized by a long time span and dispersed sources. These sources do not use the term “intangible cultural heritage.” Instead, they describe its individual elements, such as festivals, craft and farming traditions, and knowledge related to music.

The second layer is the history of how these practices came to be identified, documented and safeguarded as “heritage” from scholarly, administrative and legal perspectives. This layer took shape in the second half of the twentieth century in connection with international instruments. In 1989, UNESCO defined folklore as “the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community” and recommended measures for its identification, preservation and protection [3]. The 2003 Convention then incorporated this experience into a legal framework through the Representative List and other mechanisms.

The history of intangible cultural heritage elements in Uzbekistan goes back many centuries.

Several sources provide information on elements of the intangible heritage of this period. These include the Avesta, the oldest source on the history of Central Asia, the works of Greco-Roman authors, the annals of Chinese chroniclers and the Sogdian documents from Mount Mugh. Visual sources include the images from Airtam and Toprak-kala and the murals of Panjikent and Afrasiab.

Navruz is regarded as one of the present-day elements of intangible cultural heritage with the most ancient roots, and its origins can be traced in the Avesta. The Farvardin Yasht (Yasht 13.49–52) states that at the end of the year the spirits of the ancestors return to their homes for ten nights and must be welcomed with food and clothing [4]. Yasna 19.17 reads:

– What are the four classes?

– The priest (āthravan), the warrior (rathaēshtar), the farmer and herdsman (vāstryō.fshuyant), and the craftsman who makes objects by hand (hūiti).

This passage presents artisans as a distinct social group. It thus provides written evidence that craftsmanship and the master–apprentice tradition, both elements of intangible cultural heritage, existed as early as the most ancient periods [5].

Describing the tribes inhabiting ancient Central Asia, the Greek historian Herodotus [6] and the Greek geographer Strabo [7] write that they subsisted on milk, fish and livestock products. This information is confirmed by milk-fat residues identified in ceramic vessels from Saka-period

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settlements. Scholars have also established that the pastoral tradition in the mountain and foothill areas of Uzbekistan has continued without interruption since the second millennium BC.

The Roman author and philosopher Claudius Aelian, who lived c. 170–235 AD, also describes a wedding custom, an element of intangible cultural heritage, in his Varia Historia: “Among the Sakas, a young man who wishes to marry a girl fights her in single combat; if the girl wins, the young man submits to her authority, and the fight continues not to the death but until victory” [8]. This evidence indicates that wrestling was associated with the marriage ritual in ancient Saka society. It may therefore be compared with the wrestling tradition at Uzbek weddings.

Ancient Chinese chronicles also refer to several domains of intangible cultural heritage that existed in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan. For example, the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian (145–86 BC) left a number of valuable accounts of the ancient Fergana state of Dayuan (Davan) in his Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian). His information is based on the reports of the traveler and envoy Zhang Qian, who visited Fergana in the second century BC. Chapter 123 of the work is entitled “The Account of Dayuan” [9]. According to it, the population of Dayuan led a sedentary life, plowed the land and grew rice and wheat. They made wine from grapes. The country had many thoroughbred “blood-sweating” horses, which were fed on alfalfa cultivated over vast areas [10].

In our view, this information is significant for the history of intangible cultural heritage for several reasons.

First, the viticulture, horse breeding and winemaking recorded by Sima Qian were not merely economic activities. They formed a complex system of knowledge and skills passed down from generation to generation. Winemaking is a process that takes decades. Producing vessels that keep wine from spoiling, organizing storage conditions and managing fermentation all require profound practical knowledge. The same is true of horse breeding, which relies on selective breeding, feeding and the cultivation of alfalfa. Under the 2003 UNESCO Convention, such knowledge falls within the domains of “knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe” and “traditional craftsmanship” [11].

Second, the source records the cultivation of rice in the Fergana Valley, which indicates that a culture of irrigated agriculture had already formed there. Hence, the roots of later traditions such as canal digging, rotational water distribution and the institution of the mirab (water master) go back to a much earlier period.

Third, Fergana horses and grapes were so highly valued in China that Emperor Wu sent an army to Dayuan in 104–101 BC to obtain thoroughbred horses.

Fourth, Sima Qian’s accounts are an important source for substantiating the millennia-long continuity of viticulture, horticulture and horse-breeding traditions in the Fergana Valley, including the territory of present-day Namangan region.

The monk Xuanzang, who traveled through Central Asia to India in the seventh century, described Samarkand as a place “where the precious goods of many lands are gathered” [12]. He noted that the city’s artisans surpassed those of all other lands in skill. This testimony confirms the high level of development of craft traditions in Sogdiana and the region’s role as a cultural center on the Great Silk Road.

Certain material sources also bear witness to the domains of intangible cultural heritage in antiquity:

- the depictions of musicians found at the Kushan-period site of Airtam;
- the paintings of Toprak-kala;
- the Panjikent murals depicting a mourning ritual and scenes from the Rustam epic;
- the scenes of rituals and the reception of embassies on the walls of Afrasiab;
- the Sogdian documents from Mount Mugh.

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The results of the study show that a rich and multilayered intangible cultural heritage took shape in the territory of Uzbekistan in antiquity. Many of its elements have survived to the present day, having changed and acquired new meanings in the course of historical development. The analysis leads to the following conclusions.

First, sources on the intangible cultural heritage of antiquity can be divided into written, archaeological-iconographic and ethnographic groups. Each group has its own informative potential and limitations.

Written sources shed light on the content of rituals, festivals and legends. However, most of them were written by outside observers, namely Greco-Roman and Chinese authors. Others were recorded in later periods, for example in the works of al-Biruni and Narshakhi. These sources therefore require rigorous source criticism.

Archaeological and iconographic materials accurately reflect the external appearance of musical instruments, dance, clothing and religious practice. Interpreting them, however, requires recourse to written and ethnographic data.

Ethnographic relics, in turn, make it possible to reconstruct ancient traditions retrospectively.

Thus, reliable results can be achieved only through a comparative analysis of different types of sources.

Second, the sources confirm the existence of ancient elements in all five domains defined by the 2003 UNESCO Convention:

- **oral traditions and expressions:** the legends of Tomyris, Shirak, Zarina and Siyavush, and heroic tales;
- **performing arts:** instrumental music and dance depicted on the Airtam frieze, in the Toprak-kala murals and in terracotta figurines, as well as the musicians and dancers mentioned in Chinese chronicles;
- **social practices, rituals and festive events:** seasonal festivals, customs associated with the veneration of fire and water, funerary customs and rituals connected with the cult of Siyavush;
- **knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe:** the Sogdian and Khwarezmian calendar systems, and agricultural and irrigation knowledge;
- **traditional craftsmanship:** pottery, weaving, jewelry making and clothing traditions.

Third, historical continuity can be observed between ancient traditions and present-day living heritage. Several present-day traditions have roots in antiquity, including Navruz and its associated rituals, fire-related customs at weddings and seasonal ceremonies, ritual folklore, traditional musical instruments and craft schools. This continuity, however, should be regarded not as direct succession but as a transformed continuity. Over a long historical process, the content of these traditions changed under the influence of various religions and cultures.

Fourth, the research findings have practical significance. They can be used:

- to provide historical substantiation for nomination files for the inscription of intangible cultural heritage elements on the national list and UNESCO lists;
- in teaching the history of Uzbekistan, ethnology and cultural studies in higher education;
- in developing cultural tourism routes.

In future, it would be advisable to continue research in this area by:

- creating a unified electronic catalogue of source data on the intangible cultural heritage of antiquity;
- re-examining Sogdian, Bactrian and Khwarezmian written records from the perspective of intangible heritage;
- expanding collaborative interdisciplinary research involving archaeologists, source specialists, ethnologists and folklorists.

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