

Afrasiab Museum of Samarkand: A Treasure Trove of History and Ancient Culture in Central Asia

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Article DOI: [10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0408](https://doi.org/10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0408)

DOI URL: <https://doi.org/10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0408>

KEYWORDS: Afrasiab, Samarkand, Sogdian Culture, Archaeology, Wall Paintings

ABSTRACT: The Afrasiab Historical Museum in Samarkand stands as one of the most significant archaeological museums in Central Asia, bearing valuable traces of the history, culture, and art of ancient civilizations, particularly the Sogdians. This study, based on field data, archaeological excavation reports, and historical text analysis, explores the museum's exhibition methods, wall paintings, ceramic vessels, and other excavated artifacts. Findings reveal that the Afrasiab Museum's collections are not only rich in artistic and architectural value but also convey profound cultural and historical messages. These elements are vital for preserving regional historical memory and transmitting cultural identity.

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Published: April 16, 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Samarkand, with a millennia-old history, has long captivated the interest of historians, archaeologists, and cultural scholars. The historic town of Samarkand is a crossroads and melting pot of world civilizations. Founded in the 7th century B.C. as ancient Afrasiab, it flourished during the Timurid era from the 14th to 15th centuries (UNESCO World Heritage). The Afrasiab Museum, located on the ancient Afrasiab hills (Figure 1), serves as a major center for preserving and exhibiting historical artifacts. Established in 1970 on the 2500th anniversary of Samarkand's founding, the museum hosted extensive archaeological excavations (Akhunbabaev 1987), offering insights into the lifestyle, art, architecture, and religious and social beliefs of past societies. Moreover, Persian literature, inspired by Sogdian themes and concepts, has played a vital role in preserving this cultural heritage.



Fig.1: Afrasiab Museum Model (photo taken by author)

The Sogdian language, one of the Eastern Iranian languages was prominent during the early centuries AD (Shenkar 2025), especially in Samarkand, Bukhara, and surrounding areas. It was widely used in commercial, religious (Manichaean, Buddhist, Zoroastrian), and some literary texts.

When discussing “Sogdian culture,” we refer not only to the language but also to a set of cultural elements such as:

- Religious architecture (Figure 2), rituals, and beliefs (e.g., Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism)
- Art and architecture (e.g., Afrasiab wall paintings)
- Clothing, lifestyles, and social structures
- Myths, legends, and cultural symbols



Fig. 2: Zoroastrian fire worshippers (photo taken by author)

The term "Sogdian culture" has become common in modern scholarship, emphasizing its civilizational and identity-bearing aspects beyond mere language (Huang 2021). For instance, analyzing the Afrasiab murals is essentially exploring Sogdian culture—even without written texts.

Hence, while the Sogdian language is a core component of this civilization, it carried a broader culture expressed through art, rituals, and even its influence on Persian literature. The purpose of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Afrasiab Museum's artifacts and explore the mutual cultural influences of Persian and Sogdian heritage in shaping Samarkand's historical identity.

Theoretical Framework and Research Background Historical and Archaeological Context The ancient city of Samarkand, especially the Afrasiab region, is recognized as a major civilizational hub in Central Asia (Group 2025). Since the 1950s, archaeological excavations have uncovered substantial information about urban structures, defensive architecture, wall paintings (Arzhantseva and Inevatkina, 2006) and ceramic vessels. Afrasiab, covering a vast area, has remained a key regional landmark since the 7th century BCE (Gorshenina 2014).

Persian-Sogdian Cultural Exchange

By the middle of the 1st millennium BC, the ancient Sogdian state emerged in the Zarafshan and Kashkadarya river valleys. In the 6th century BC, Sogd became part of the Persian Achaemenid Empire (Basira, et al. 2024). Studying the emergence and development of Afrasiab's defensive walls helps date the city's foundation. Afrasiab was encircled by ramparts by the mid-6th century BC when it became an administrative center of an Achaemenid satrapy.

The Persian-Sogdian literary and oral mythological connection has deep roots. The name Afrasiab, known as "Al Er Tunga" in Turkic literature and "Afrasiab" in Persian texts, exemplifies such interaction. People often associate the name with the legendary king Afrasiab from the epic tales of Turan. However, historians believe the name evolved from the Tajik "Parsiab" (originally Sogdian "Parshvab"), which means "above the black river" reference to the Siahab or Siab River that forms the northern boundary of the site. The Afrasiab area itself spans 219 hectares, and its archaeological layers are impressively deep, reaching between 8 and 12 meters thick.

(Pugachenkova, et al. 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous international studies have addressed the history of Samarkand, the Afrasiab archaeological site, and its cultural and artistic relics. Some scholars such analyzed Sogdian palace murals and artifacts, interpreting religious symbols, social structures, and visual art of the pre-Islamic era (Buryakov and Taguiev 1968); (Azarpay 1990; Grenet 2005). emphasized the Sogdians' pivotal role along the Silk Road, mediating cultural exchanges between Iran, China, and Central Asia.

Sims-Williams (2003). examined the links between Sogdian language and culture with Persian literature, revealing how Sogdian elements are reflected in Persian texts. These interdisciplinary studies lay the groundwork for this paper's comprehensive analysis of the Afrasiab Museum and its role in preserving Samarkand's cultural history and showcasing Persian-Sogdian interaction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses content analysis and case study methodology. Data were collected from field documentation, excavation reports, photographs, and historical texts. Content analysis was conducted on murals, city maps, ceramics, and associated texts to extract cultural and historical messages.

Instruments and Samples

- **Instruments:** Review of books, research articles, field reports, and international databases such as Scopus.
- **Samples:** Afrasiab city maps, defensive structures (walls, gates), sculptures, ceramics, glassware, and artifacts from the Hellenistic, Kushan, and Zoroastrian periods.

FINDINGS

1. Mural Paintings and Cultural Identity

The Afrasiab murals, discovered in the 1960s in a palace-like structure from the 7th century AD, are among the most prominent visual documents of Sogdian culture (Field and Proston 1938, p. 242; D'yakonov 1954, fig. 1).

These wall paintings, which depict diplomatic missions, hunting scenes, royal receptions, and symbolic animals, reflect the multicultural interactions between Sogdiana, China, Iran, and India.

The murals are notable for their vibrant colors, symbolic composition, and representation of royal rituals (Grenet, 2005, pp. 124-30).

They provide rich information on clothing styles, weaponry, musical instruments, and religious rituals and ceremonies (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: Sogdian Ossuary (photo taken by author)

2. Metal, Ceramics and Pottery Art

The metal, ceramic, and pottery findings from Afrasiab—especially glazed vessels, painted bowls, and terracotta figurines (Figure 4 and 5)—display both aesthetic and utilitarian values (Buryakov and Taguiev 1968).

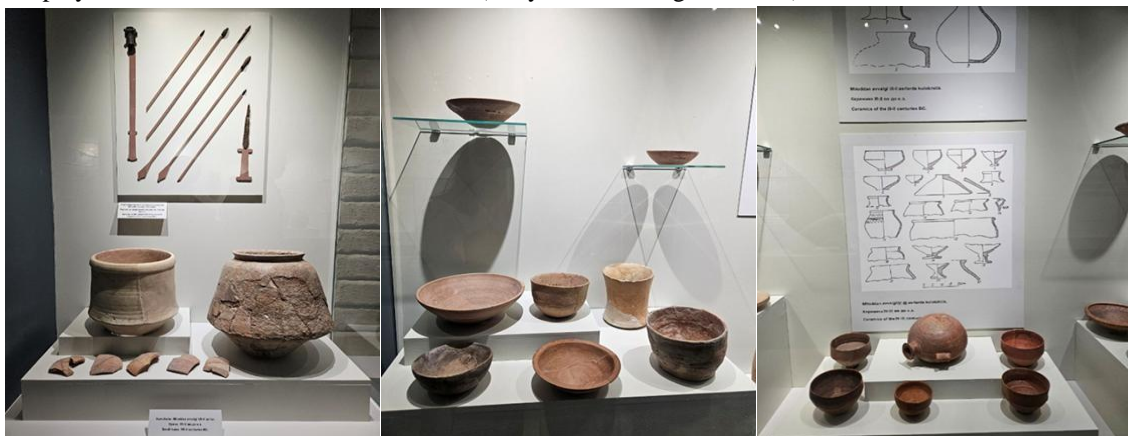


Fig. 4. Ceramics and Pottery in Afrasiab Museum (photo taken by author)



Fig. 5: Metal objects (photo taken by author)

The motifs and techniques used in the artworks suggest influence from Persian, Hellenistic, and Kushan traditions, reinforcing the city's status as a cultural crossroads.

3. Urban Planning and Architecture

Excavations have revealed urban planning patterns that include defensive walls, gates, streets, and residential zones (Akhunbabaev 1987).

The city layout demonstrates advanced engineering skills and a conscious effort to protect political and religious centers. The presence of domed structures and decorated stucco further indicates architectural continuity with Iranian and Central Asian traditions (Vyatkin 1927).

4. Inscriptions and Linguistic Heritage

Several Sogdian inscriptions and textual fragments were uncovered in Afrasiab, highlighting the use of Sogdian script for administrative, religious rituals, and commercial purposes. These texts provide evidence of the region's multilingualism and its role in the transmission of Buddhist and Zoroastrian beliefs (Livšic 2006, p. 61).

DISCUSSION

The findings from the Afrasiab Museum suggest a vibrant, cosmopolitan civilization in which Persian, Sogdian, Hellenistic, Indian, and Chinese elements coexisted and interacted harmoniously. The murals, ceramics, sculptures, and architectural elements demonstrate a synthesis of artistic and religious traditions, positioning Samarkand as a center of cultural diplomacy and spiritual convergence.

As Azarpay's book highlights, the use of Sogdian and Persian motifs in mural narratives, coupled with references to historical figures like Afrasiab (a prominent figure in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*), underscores the cultural exchange between the Persian and Central Asian worlds (Azarpay 1981).

For example, the figure of Afrasiab in Persian literature is often represented as a noble yet tragic warrior (Yarshater 2014), while in Turkic legends he is glorified as Alp Er Tonga, a heroic leader. This dual representation reflects the fusion and divergence of cultural narratives between the two civilizations (Sengupta, 2014).

Moreover, the Afrasiab Museum's significance extends beyond archaeological and aesthetic value; it plays an essential role in the revival of historical consciousness and the transmission of cultural identity. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues, collective memory is socially constructed and preserved through institutions that provide frameworks for shared remembrance. Museums, in this light, serve as crucial sites where communities reconnect with their historical narratives and negotiate cultural meaning.

Jan Assmann (2011) further distinguishes cultural memory from everyday communicative memory by emphasizing its durability, symbolic encoding, and institutionalization. The Afrasiab Museum, by preserving and contextualizing the visual language of Sogdian civilization, transforms these artistic relics into vessels of cultural memory—linking the mythic past with the modern imagination. Visitors, through immersive interaction with the museum's exhibitions, engage in a form of "remembering through seeing," which fosters a renewed sense of belonging and historical rootedness. In this sense, Afrasiab is not merely a space of preservation, but one of activation—where memory becomes lived experience, and heritage becomes identity.

CONCLUSION

The Afrasiab Museum of Samarkand serves as a living archive of ancient Central Asian civilization, offering invaluable insights into Sogdian art, religion, architecture, and language. The museum's collections—especially the 7th-century murals—demonstrate not only the aesthetic brilliance of the time but also the complex cultural dialogues between East and West.

The artifacts and paintings preserved in the museum attest to the shared historical identity of the Persian and Sogdian peoples. They reinforce the importance of Samarkand as a pivotal center of cultural convergence, where trade, diplomacy, religion, and literature flourished.

This study reaffirms that the Afrasiab Museum is not merely a site of archaeological interest but a symbol of historical memory and intercultural understanding. Continued research and preservation efforts will further illuminate the region's role in shaping the intellectual and artistic landscape of Eurasia.

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