

LAZURITE FROM CENTRAL ASIA ACCORDING TO THE ETHNONYM BALKHARA*Ruslan Kostov*

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Lazurite $(\text{Na,Ca})_{7-8}(\text{Al,Si})_{12}(\text{O,S})_{24}[(\text{SO}_4)_2, \text{Cl}_2, (\text{OH})_2]$, according to archaeological data, has a broad distribution as a precious mineral throughout the centuries and has been highly estimated as a sacred mineral among the peoples and civilizations in Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt and Central Asia (Kostov, 1993). Its value is related to the dark blue colour, which in certain cases with tiny "golden"-yellow pyrite crystals has been compared to the starry sky. This is the reason for the presence of lazurite as a gemmological material not only in the material culture, but also in front place in the poems of Sumer and Accad, Assiria and Babylon. The name lapis lazuli has been in use mainly in Medieval treatises as a synonym of lazurite or lazurite-bearing rock. Lazurite is regarded as a representative mineral in the history of gemmology, as until the end of XVIII century the region in the mountain valleys of Hindou-Kush (contemporary northeastern Afghanistan) has been the unique place of its exploitations and during the centuries its trade routes can be traced to remote countries.

Lazurite has been known from artefacts in the regions of Mesopotamia (the Uruk and Jamdet Nasr periods) and Elam (Suza I) at least since the second half of the IV mill. BC, and in Central Asia as beads – from the middle of the IV mill. BC (Masson, Romodin, 1964). Since the IV mill. BC lazurite objects are known also from the territory of Turkmenia and Iran (Sialk; it has been suggested that this settlement has been captured at the end of the same millennium because of its strategic position on the route of the lazurite trade) (Sarianidi, 1984). The archaeological age, as well as the large quantity of artifacts, allows the assumption for the beginning of its exploit in the Hindou-Kush area even in the V mill. BC, later on reaching on the west even remote countries as Ancient Egypt during the Predynastic period. In a Sumer text there is evidence for exchange of corn for lazurite, obtained from tribes on the East, but it has not been clear who was in charge for its digging and trade in the Badakhshan area (Masson, Romodin, 1964).

Geology and mineralogy of the Badakhshan lazurite

The main deposit of lazurite in the Hindou-Kush mountains is the Sar-e Sang deposit, which is situated in the valley of the river of the same name, tributary of the river Kokcha. It has been under exploitation since Antiquity to modern times. The lazurite deposits in the Badakhshan province have been described in a lot of mineralogical and gemmological papers (Връчкл, 1937; Lapparent et al., 1965; Blaise, Cesbron, 1966; Efimov, Sudderkin, 1967; Rossovsii, 1980; Wyart et al., 1981; Bancroft, 1984; Yurgenson, Sukharev, 1984; Heflik, Natkaniec-Nowak, 2003). They are related to metasomatic processes on the boundary of magnesium-bearing (dolomitic) marbles of the Sahi suite and intruded into them granitoids with pegmatitic and aplitic veins. The lazurite mineralization is located as nests or lenses in the skarn zones, represented by diopside, plagioclase, forsterite, scapolite, tremolite, flogopite

and in some cases – pyrite, quartz, graphite and sodalite, as well as in interbedded calcified rocks with gneisses and amphibolites. The lazurite has different in intensity and hue blue colouration. Rarely some lazurite crystals with rhombic dodecahedral habits reaching 5 cm in diameter have been reported (Wyart et al., 1981; Bancroft, 1984).

The deposits are located at a 3700-4300 m level in extremely steep and unaccessible according to geomorphology characteristics valleys, the whole region being part of the zone of manifestation of numerous and strong earthquakes of a high magnitude. The ancient manner of extracting lazurite by putting fire and cold water on the rocks so that they can crack and desintegrate has been in use up to the XIX century. On the markets in Bukhara and in India three sorts of lazurite have been known: *nili (neeli)* – dark blue or indigo blue, *asmani* – sky blue and *sebsi* – greenish blue (Wood, 1841).

Antique and Medieval sources and artefacts

Medieval scholar al-Biruni mentions two lazurite (*lazaward*, *lazward*, *lazuward*, *alazward* in Persian and Arabic – "blue") deposits – the best variety at the Karan mountains (probably the Tirgaran range) after the steep valley of the river Pandjkhir (Pyandj) and at Tus-Bunak near Zaruban (southern Afghanistan). He writes correctly that in Byzantine times it has been known as *arminakun* (*Armenian stone* – turquoise), as it is similar in colour to turquoise (Biruni, 1963). The Sar-e Sang deposits have been known in the past with the name of the near-by village of Firgamu (Wood, 1941). It is possible that this name can be a derivative of Birgamu (with root *bilg-*, *bulg-*). The suffix *-ar* (*-or*; *-ur*) and the deposit (village) with a root *Birg-* (*Bulg-*) can constitute the ethnonym *Bilgar* (*Bulgar*) (Kostov, 2003).

In Sumerian language lazurite has been known as *zagin*, and in Accadian – *ukun* (*Reallexikon...*, 1938). In Sogdian language lazurite has been known as *r'zβwrt*, *r'zwrt* or *r'cβrt*, from where the new Persian and Tadjik name of the mineral appears, and in Indian sources – as *tājavarta*, *rājavarta* and (Litvinsky, 1972). In Ancient Egypt the mineral has been known as *khesdeb* with a variety known as *qesonkh* (Petrie, 1967). In Ancient (Theophrastus; Pliny the Elder) and Medieval literature, lazurite, as well as other blue minerals have been commonly named "*sapphires*".

During the Chalcolithic and Bronze period in Iran, beads or ornaments from lazurite, carnelian and turquoise have been found at Shahr-I Sokhta and Hissar, as well as in Pakistan (Beluchistan and Harrapa), displaying the important role of this settlements as trade and manufacture centers towards the West (*History...*, 1992). Similar has been the role of the oasis Shahdad in the Kerman province. Thus two main lazurite routes can be pointed out: on the West through the Iranian plateau and mountains towards Mesopotamia and on the South – to

wards Ancient India. The routes have been relatively constant throughout the centuries, giving advantages and earning living for the inhabitants along the routes by trade of mineral and other resources. There has been a suggestion for a trade route on the south to India by the Indus valley and later by sea to the mouths of the Tiger and Euphrates rivers and from there to the town of Sipar in Mesopotamia (identified as the town Tefrer, from where lazurite has been traded to Ancient Egypt). Lazurite on the East towards Ancient and Medieval China and Tibet has been recognized in later periods (I mill. BC) mainly along the famous silk and nephrite route – by the town of Hotan.

As some of the most ancient lazurite finds in Northern Mesopotamia are artefacts from Gavra XIII dated ~3500 BC, and in Southern Mesopotamia – those from the Uruk II period (Derakhshani, 1999). Among the most interesting Sumerian objects form precious minerals and gold in the Ur necropolis (XXVI c. BC) are the so called “Standard of Ur”, with a mosaic inlay of small lazurite and shell pieces, as well as gold-bearing bull heads with lazurite beard or standing goat figures with horns and decoration from lazurite. Among some of the other objects in the British museum in London can be noted rectangular and cylindrical seals, as well as a sceptre with triangular lazurite inlay 21.5 cm long (Woolley et al., 1934).

Among the numerous poems from the period of the first civilizations in Mesopotamia of interest is the epic tale *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (III mill. BC), in which is preserved the story about the exchange of corn for lazurite, gold and silver from the mountainous country Aratta in need for the building of palaces (Kramer, 1952). A lot of researchers have been trying to trace the country Aratta, from where or through where the precious lazurite and noble metals have been found or traded (Derakhshani, 1999). According to some ideas, the country Aratta has to be located on the south or southeast of the Caspian Sea (Herrmann, 1968), and according to others this country coincides in its location with the mountainous Badakhshan, because in the poem one can find expressions as “lazurite in pieces”, “they gather for her (goddess Innana) lazurite from the deposits” or “lazurite from the mountains” (Sarianidi, 1971). Another hypothesis relates the Shahr-I Sokhta site to the mythical country Aratta.

Lazurite has been included in epic poems of the Sumerians, which have also influenced later Babylonian or Hittitic versions of the myths: the Epic of Gilgamesh, the visit of the goddess Innana (she herself decorated with lazurite jewellery) in the underground world; the myth for the origin of the mattock “with a forehead of lazurite” and a lot of others (Kostov, 1993).

An evidence for an Assirian campaign towards Bactria (Balkhara – R. I. K.) has been preserved, showing the presence of a strong state unit – the emissary had to bring back lazurite but because of the local uprising he appealed for some armed support (Masson, Romodin, 1964). During the Assyrian regime there is evidence that king Tiglatpalasar III (VIII c. BC) wanted a 9 t tax of lazurite from the neighboring territories (probably Balkh – R. I. K.) (cit. by Lubo-Lesnichenko, 1985).

Most of the Ancient Egypt art researchers are unanimous

that the source of lazurite in the decorative art objects is of Badakhshan, which has been traded by a complex net of routes, some alternative opinions also being introduced (Lucas, Harris, 1962). The blue decorative mineral has been found in objects since the predynastic Naqada II period represented by beads and small amulets (about the middle of the IV mill. BC; during the Old Kingdom lazurite artefacts are lacking between the II and IV dynasty, Payne, 1968), and in later times – scraps or pieces for inlay in small objects (Petrie Museum of Egypt Art, London). During the Late Kingdom, because of the lack of the blue mineral, its imitation of dark blue faience has been widely used.

In the Aegean region the well known archaeologist H. Schlieman finds in the lower levels of Troy (2500-2000 BC) a few stone axes, one of them supposed to be of lazurite (Brückl, 1937).

In the Archaeological Museum in Sofia is exhibited a necklace of gold and lazurite as part of other gold objects, found near Sadovetz, district of Pleven, and dated about the V-VI century AD. It is represented by closely alternating 5 triangular plates of gold and 6 triangular plates of lazurite. This object has a similar analogue in Mesopotamia, where at the royal cemeteries of Ur has been found a necklace with alternating gold and lazurite beads of a triangular shape (British Museum; Woolley et al., 1934).

In the historical literature already has been defined the region of inhabitation of the Ancient Bulgarians in the plains, valleys and the fore-mountains of the Pamir and Hindou-Kush area of Central Asia (Dobrev, 1998; 2004). At later periods during the migrations, the area of inhabitation has been broaden to mainly mountain parts of the territories of modern Tadjikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, as well as towards the Caucasus mountains. In this region the name of the ancient kingdom Balkh (Balkhara, Balkhika, Bactria, Bolor, Bolur – Bulgaria) has been mentioned and the main city has also been known as Balkh (Dobrev, 1998; 2002; 2004). These lands, according to Armenian and Persian sources, have been inhabited by people, known as *Bulkh* or *Bulgkhar*, and in Europe, during Greek and Roman times, these lands are known as Bactria. Another district in the mountains south of Samarkand with the name Burgar has been reported by the Arab scholar Ibn Haukal – now on the territory of contemporary Tadjikistan not far from the Zeravshan river with the local name Falhar (Dobrev, 2002; 2004). For the region of Badakhshan there have been some opinions, that the primary inhabitants have come from the plains of Balkh (Wood, 1841). The name of Badakhshan (province Badakhshan in Afghanistan; autonomous region Gorni-Badakhshan in Tadjikistan) according to a lot of Medieval sources has been related to the name *Balakhshan* with *Balkh* root (see Kostov, 2003). In the same valleys where the lazurite deposits have been located lives one of the specific to the region ethnic groups called Mundjan, which according to linguistic studies has similar words in their language as in modern Bulgarian language (Dobrev, 2002; see Litvinskii, 1972). The name *Mundjan* is regarded as one of the most ancient in Badakhshan, thus in Indian sources from the middle of the I mill. BC a big state unit Mundjayana has been reported related to the Mundji tribe

(Kamaliddinov, 1996).

The inhabitants of the mountain regions of Pamir and Hindou-Kush have been involved actively with extraction and trade of gem minerals (Kostov, 2003) and noble or other metals (Kostov, 2004) giving opportunity for intensive trade contacts in different countries. The people in the region, because of the rich natural resources, have been frequently assimilated or slaughtered, thus forced to migrate or hide in difficult for access regions.

The traditions of prospecting, exploitation and trading with gem minerals and noble metals have been preserved during Medieval times in Volga's Bulgaria, where in the settlements of Bolgar and Selitrennoe different decorative materials have been found, among which 6 objects of lazurite in the shape of rhombic platy amulets, pieces for inlay and rings (Poluboyarinova, 1991).

Conclusion

The reviewed examples of the different kind of lazurite objects from the Badakhshan deposits in the different centers of civilization demonstrates the extremely prestige character of the mineral as a precious material together with the noble metals. The routes for its infiltration in remote to its sources countries throughout the centuries is continuing to be under discussion. Part of the successors of the Ancient Bulgarians has survived in the mountain valleys of the Pamir and Hindou-Kush region, where it is possible that during the centuries the next generations have preserved the traditions in prospecting and trade with metallic and non-metallic raw materials. For elucidation of the possible link during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age of the Ancient Bulgarian (Balkhara) center with the region of the lazurite deposits a more detailed research of the material culture and literary sources is supposed to be done in the future.