
Further Evidence for the Interpretation of the 'Indian Scene' in the Pre-Islamic Paintings at Afrasiab (Samarkand)

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The Sogdian paintings at Afrasiab were discovered accidentally more than forty years ago during road construction near Samarkand. However, only in 1975 was the first book concerning them published (Al'baum 1975). Archaeological excavations continued at the Afrasiab site for some time, leading to the discovery of other fragments of schematic paintings between 1978 and 1985 (Akhunbabaev 1987). Since 1989 French archaeologists have been excavating at the ancient site in collaboration with Russian and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbek colleagues, but without a specific connection to the paintings themselves.

The room where the paintings were discovered came to be called the 'Hall of the Ambassadors,' since its western wall, facing the entrance, depicts several representatives of non-Sogdian lands bearing gifts. While from the start there has been general agreement on the identification of that imagery, the interpretation of what exactly the ritual is that the scene depicts and some of its details have been a matter of debate. This article is a contribution to that discussion.

General Interpretation

At the end of the 1980s Chiara Silvi Antonini offered persuasive evidence to identify the scene of the western wall in the so-called 'Hall of the Ambassadors' as a representation of the Iranian New Year Festival (*Nawruz*) in conjunction with the coronation of the local king, Varkhuman (Silvi Antonini 1989). In this author's

opinion, Silvi Antonini's idea remains the key for a correct interpretation of the entire cycle of the paintings at Afrasiab. While a detailed study by Markus Mode a few years later disputed her interpretation (Mode 1993), the great specialist of Sogdian studies, the late Boris Marshak, not only accepted it but also added other important elements to the general interpretation of the whole cycle and, especially, of the southern wall paintings (Marshak 1994). Soviet scholars continued to study the Afrasiab paintings, although their interesting results did not become widely known because of their publication in Russian in rare journals or books (e.g., Maitdinova 1984; Akhunbabaev 1990; Motov 1999).

In recent years other authors such as Etsuko Kageyama, Frantz Grenet, Sergei Iatsenko, and Simone Cristoforetti together with the present writer reopened the problem of the interpretation of the Afrasiab paintings considering single scenes or details (Kageyama 2002; Grenet 2003; Yatsenko 2004; Grenet 2005; Grenet 2006; Compareti and Cristoforetti 2005). Finally, a conference was organized by the present writer in March 2005 in Venice in order to collect in one volume the most recent results of the investigations by those scholars who had already studied the paintings together with a new translation of the Sogdian inscriptions at Afrasiab by Vladimir Livshits (Compareti and de la Vaissière 2006).

The inscriptions are extremely important in order to attempt a chronology for the paintings.

Fragmentary inscriptions on the western wall mention the name of a sovereign, Varkhuman, who corresponds to the local king recognized as governor of Samarkand and Sogdiana by the Chinese Emperor Gaozong (649-683) in the period between 650-655 (Chavannes 1903, 135).¹ In 658 Gaozong even sent an envoy to the court of Varkhuman for an official investiture (Anazawa and Manome 1976, 21ff., cited by Kageyama 2002, 320). However, according to Islamic sources, when Sa'id ibn Othman conquered Samarkand in 676 he did not find any king there. So it is possible to suppose that Varkhuman was no longer regent of Samarkand at the time of the Arab conquest (Frye, 1954, 40; Smirnova 1970, 275; Fedorov 2006, 222-223). All of the evidence suggests that the Afrasiab paintings were executed around this period.

Other literary sources (Chinese, Persian and even Sogdian) could be useful for the comprehension and chronology of the mural paintings. They have already been extensively considered in a recent study by Frantz Grenet, who also demonstrated that the spatial organization of the Afrasiab paintings corresponds to an established scheme well known in Sasanian Persia (Grenet 2005, 124-130) and in India too where it possibly originated (de la Vaissière 2006, 148).² In particular, as already noted by Mode (Mode 1993), a passage of the *Tangshu* (History of the Tang Dynasty, composed between 1043 and 1060) referring to 7th-century central Sogdiana mentions a royal pavilion where representations of



Fig. 1. Western wall, Afrasiab (after F. Ory and Grenet reconstruction).

Persians and Byzantines appeared on the western wall, Chinese on the northern wall, and the Turks and Indians on the eastern one (Chavannes, 1903, 145).³ As will be shown in the present paper as well, this is exactly the partition of the walls at Afrasiab, the only exception being the western one.

At present it is almost unanimously accepted that the scenes depicted in the 'Hall of the Ambassadors' are part of a unique cycle. The western wall most likely represents the initial stage of the Sogdian *Nawruz* celebrated in 7th-century Samarkand. According to the mobile Sogdian (and, more generally, Iranian) calendar, during the 7th century *Nawruz* fell in summer (Compareti and Cristoforetti 2005).⁴ The fragmentary paintings enable us to recognize foreign delegates shown during the presentation of some gifts to an upper central figure that is irretrievably lost [Fig. 1]. The presentation of gifts (or, better, tributes) on the occasion of *Nawruz* is a very ancient Iranian custom, and, according to the interpretation by Roman Ghirshman and other scholars which was accepted by Silvi Antonini, it can be clearly observed among the very ancient reliefs of the Apadana at

Persepolis (Silvi Antonini 1989, 125-126).

It seems correct to consider the New Year Festival as a good occasion to celebrate the coronation of a king among ancient Iranians. The hypothesis is supported by some literary sources on ancient Persian habits, transmitted, however, only through Muslim authors (Ibid., 118-126). So, the lost figure in the upper part of the western wall was most likely that of a king, possibly Varkhuman himself. It is not excluded that he was probably represented together with his wife according to a scheme much appreciated on 6th-century funerary monuments belonging to powerful Sogdians settled in China and recently excavated in the area of Xi'an (China).⁵ On those monuments the couple is represented under a canopy both in realistic and paradisiacal scenes (Marshak 2001), but it is not excluded that the two royal figures could have been positioned at a certain distance from each other. In this case, a possible alternative explanation is Mode's hypothesis that the two rows of tribute-bearers were proceeding towards two different sovereigns (Varkhuman and the Turkish Khaghan) (Mode 2006). Also of

interest is Sergei Iatsenko's very interesting observation about the necklace and the reconstructed torque in the hands of the envoy from Chaghanyan on the western wall. The envoy can be recognized in the lower left part of the scene since he is wearing a robe embellished with so-called *senmurv*-like creatures. Considering that all the other foreign envoys are bringing tributes to be presented to the figure that was depicted in the upper part of the scene, then most likely the torque was intended for a man and the necklace for a woman. On the western wall they can only be the Samarkand royal couple (Yatsenko 2004). In this way, as will be discussed more extensively below, the King and Queen of Samarkand could have counterbalanced the Chinese emperor and empress on the northern wall.

Boris Marshak has identified the scene on the southern wall as the final stage of the *Nawruz* festival, when the Sogdian sovereign celebrated a funerary ritual in honour of his ancestors in a temple which — according to the *Tangshu* — was built on the eastern fringes of the town (Marshak 1994, 11-15).⁶ While the paintings are very fragmentary, the shape of an



Fig. 2. Southern wall, Afrasiab (after F. Ory and Grenet reconstruction).



Fig. 3. Northern wall, Afrasiab (after F. Ory and Grenet reconstruction).

enormous horse ridden by a person who was depicted larger than the other people around him can be discerned among the paintings of the southern wall [Fig. 2]. It is highly probable that this person was king Varkhuman moving in the direction of the temple of his ancestors. The representation of this building survived only partially in the left part of the scene depicted on the southern wall, almost on the corner with the eastern wall (the direction of the royal parade according to the Chinese sources). Two people wearing ritual Zoroastrian masks (*padam*) in the middle of the procession could be considered in charge of the sacrifice for the royal ancestors. In fact, they accompany a harnessed horse not mounted and four geese probably destined to be sacrificed in honour of Iranian gods (Grenet 2005, 125).

Chinese subjects appear on the northern wall exactly as reported in the *Tangshu* [Fig. 3]. It is an extremely complicated representation which is divided in two parts, both of them connected with astronomical-astrological matters. It is beyond the aim of the present article to discuss in detail all the elements which led to its general interpretation (Compareti and Cristoforetti 2005; Compareti 2006; Compareti forthcoming; Compareti and Cristoforetti forthcoming). Here it will be enough to say that the two parts of the scene constitute an exact parallel with the western and the southern walls. In fact, most likely, on the northern wall there is a representation of the Chinese New Year Festival. Some Chinese poems report the custom of very

ancient times when the emperor was expected to perform a ritual hunt in a special part of the imperial park and kill evil animals such as felines. After the hunt, members of the Chinese aristocracy went at a pond in the same park to listen to musicians and singers on boats shaped like birds' heads, while some people had to dive in the water in search of animals such as fishes, turtles and ducks. This is exactly what can be discerned in the hunting and aquatic scenes in the left part of the northern wall. Also the appearance of a dragon is recorded in Chinese poems in coincidence with a festivity possibly to be identified with the New Year Festival and, in fact, a composite winged monster can be discerned below the boat in the aquatic scene (Compareti forthcoming). A person leading two horses in the water is probably performing a Chinese ritual which has not yet been identified. As will be observed below, the presence of this last element is quite important for the comprehension of the whole cycle.

There is something more to be added as regards the aquatic scene. One lady on the boat is represented larger than the others, because she is possibly the Chinese empress. She is feeding the fishes just below the boat and, in fact, her left hand is opened as if to drop something into the water. Such an attitude calls to mind a typical Chinese festivity, the *Duanwu* Festival, still performed today around the summer solstice to remember a poet who committed suicide in ancient times, during the Warring States period (453-221 BCE). Every year

on that occasion people feed fishes in order to prevent aquatic animals from eating the

body of the poet and race in rivers and lakes on dragon-shaped boats searching, ideally, for his corpse. Other people dive in the water to look for his body which, needless to say, was never recovered. It is quite clear that the second part of the ancient Chinese New Year Festival, as reported in poems, and the *Duanwu* Festival very much resemble each other.

As is well-known, in Gregorian calendrical terms, the Chinese New Year Festival falls in January-February, while the *Duanwu* falls around mid-June. The latter date constitutes an exact parallel with the Sogdian *Nawruz* which, during the 7th century, was celebrated in summer. The artists in charge of the execution of the paintings at Afrasiab confused the two festivities because of their similarities. Possibly the artists even confused them deliberately in order to have a calendrical coincidence between a local Sogdian festivity and an important Chinese one (namely, the *Duanwujie*) which could balance the Chinese New Year celebration.

The Eastern Wall

At this point we turn our attention to the eastern wall [Fig. 4, facing page]. Many scholars agree that this scene represents India mainly on the basis of the passage in the *Tangshu*, even though there is no Turk representative depicted here. Unfortunately, once more, the Chinese source is not specific about the subject of the scene, and the fragmentary state of the painting makes an identification extremely difficult.

The surviving fragments are concentrated just in the lower part

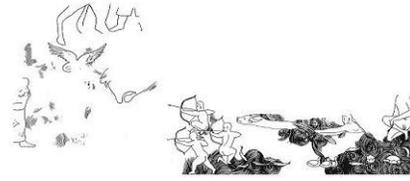
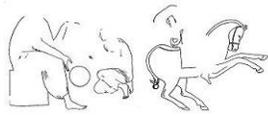


Fig. 4. Eastern wall, Afrasiab (after F. Ory and Grenet reconstruction).

of the wall. Starting from the left part, one can observe two sitting people facing each other in a typical attitude of teacher and student. Between them is a round object which was probably intended to be an armilla used for astronomical purposes. In a recent paper, Frantz Grenet argued convincingly that this image represents the transmission of astrology from the Greeks to the Indians according to an iconography rooted in Classical art (Grenet 2003). Next to them is a rider on a horse but so far there is no satisfactory explanation for its meaning. After the entrance, on the right portion of the wall, a second enigmatic scene can be discerned: a person wearing a long robe is carrying a child while two big birds spread their wings. The background is aquatic. Grenet proposed to identify this scene with a representation of Krishna and his foster-mother, Yashoda, just before the attack of the crane-demon Putana (Grenet 2005, 128). Above them, fragments of an image of a horse and the legs of a person could be intended as another episode of Krishna's youth, when he fought the horse-demon Keshin (Ibid.; Grenet 2006, 45) [Fig. 5]. On the right part of the painting, the background is still aquatic but infant-archers and a man grabbing the tail of a bull together with a



Fig. 5. Eastern wall, Afrasiab, detail (after Al'baum 1975, fig. 26, detail).

kneeling person appear among fishes, turtles, water-birds and flowers. Grenet identified the infant-archers as a multiple representation of Kama, the Indian god of love who was reproduced according to an iconography borrowed from Classical art. His presence could be justified because of the 'allusion to Krishna's romances with the cowgirls' (Ibid.). However, as Grenet himself noted, Markus Mode had already observed that those archers should be better identified with pygmies fighting cranes exactly as described (although differently represented) in Roman sources (Mode 1993, 98; Grenet 2006, 46-47). Mode's interpretation would fit better given the fact that a source in Classical art was proposed for the first scene on the left. Moreover, the demon-crane Putana is one, while in the painting there are parts of at least three birds. Unless there are new discoveries, the interpretation of this scene will remain open.

The long-haired man grabbing the tail of a buffalo in the water may recall an enigmatic scene engraved on a panel of a 6th-century funerary bed from China which possibly belonged to a Sogdian [Fig. 6].⁷ It is possible to recognize an archer shooting a bird while sitting on an ox among waves, a scene which has not yet been identified. However, the Indian (or, better, Vishnuite) context of the panels of this funerary bed, recently pointed out by Penelope Riboud (Riboud 2004, 46, fig. 24), may mean that it provides a good comparison with the detail in the Afrasiab painting even if rendered differently. Other elements such as the pygmy

archers shooting cranes could be part of the same scheme but, unfortunately, the fragmentary state of the eastern wall does not allow one to discern more.

Among the different scenes on the eastern wall, the fragments of 'teacher and student' with armilla and the inferior parts of the horse close to the legs of a person are proportionately larger than the other figures in the same composition. Possibly, this fact is not to be neglected, especially in interpreting the scene identified by Grenet as Krishna fighting Keshin, since on the other walls larger characters have very important roles.

In his most recent paper devoted to the interpretation of the Indian scenes at Afrasiab, Grenet produced a 5th-century Gupta relief from M a n d o r representing Krishna fighting against Keshin (Grenet 2006, fig. 2), although two



Fig. 6. Panel of the Vahid Kooros Collection funerary bed (after Riboud 2004, fig. 25).

other specimens of Indian sculpture — one from a private collection and the other from Mathura — provide good parallels which support his arguments (Harle 1985, figs. 7-8). Lastly, a black wax inscribed seal (possibly Kushano-Sasanian) kept in the Ashmolean Museum deserves to be considered [Fig. 7, next page]. The figure, which appears together with a Bactrian inscription, could be interpreted as Heracles fighting the monstrous horse of Diomedes or Krishna fighting Keshin according to a



Fig. 7. Kushano-Sasanian inscribed black wax seal, Ashmolean Museum (after Harle, 1985, fig. 1).

common iconography which was possibly rooted in Classical art (Ibid.).⁸ The interpretation is again complicated, typical for objects of Central Asian provenance in which Greek, Iranian and Indian elements co-exist, exactly as in the painting at Afrasiab under examination.

In any case, in our opinion, it is not so important to figure out the exact interpretation for the detail of the man with the horse. The very presence of this animal represents an interesting element. A reasonable hypothesis can be offered to explain its inclusion in the cycle of paintings at Afrasiab where, as already observed, a funerary sacrifice in the presence of royal characters is depicted on the southern wall as a continuation of the *Nawruz* on the western wall. On the northern wall the Chinese emperor and empress too are performing local rituals connected with calendrical matters which correspond quite precisely to the Sogdian events. In both the scenes of Sogdian and Chinese rituals the presence of the horse seems to be very important, although on the northern wall the explanation is not yet fully clear. Persian literary sources of the Islamic period explicitly indicate a connection between the horse and water (Cristoforetti 2006). Moreover, in the painting on the northern wall, two horses are swimming, since the connection with the aquatic element should have been extremely important for the Chinese too (Riboud 2003; Mao forthcoming). So, if the

hypothesis of the Indian character of the eastern wall is correct and if that fragmentary painting actually represents the lower parts of a man with a horse, then one should expect to find also there the depiction of an Indian festivity or celebration connected with royalty when a kind of horse sacrifice occurred. Such a ritual is reported in Indian literary sources explicitly and is described as the most important royal sacrifice that only important sovereigns could have afforded to celebrate since Vedic period: the *ashvamedha* (Dumont 1927).⁹

The aim of the horse sacrifice, or *ashvamedha*, in ancient India was the recognition of a king as an universal sovereign. It was also a magical ritual with very ancient solar reminiscences celebrated in order to ensure fecundity to the kingdom. In fact, the king was expected to accomplish it at the end of his reign, when it was almost time for the succession of the designated new king (Ibid., x). The preparation for the *ashvamedha* took normally one year but, sometimes, even two. The sacrificial animal — which was chosen because of his color, speed and other characteristics (Albright and Dumont 1934, 110-111) — had to be ritually immersed in a pond and later was set free together with one hundred castrated horses and obliged to move in a northeastern direction. The land crossed by the horse was considered to be under that king's dominion. Thus this was a warning to the neighboring kingdoms. Young nobles, and among them the designated successor, had to follow the horse in order to allow it to pass wherever it wanted and prevent it from coupling with any mare for one entire year. At the time of its return to the starting point, a three-day celebration took place during which encomiastic singing, music and offerings had to be performed at court. On the second day the sacrificial horse was attached to the royal war-chariot and led by the king himself

to a sacred pond. When he returned, the queen and concubines had to embellish the mane and the tail of the animal while praying. Then the horse was choked in the northern part of the area designated for the sacrifice, and the queen had to lie next to its corpse while the king and his companions performed an enigmas-competition. Only at this point, the dead horse, together with other sacrificial animals, could be quartered in the presence of priests, nobles and common people.

Ritual celebrations and other sacrifices in honor of Indian divinities such as Agni and Soma were performed as well. In particular, the ritual liquid Soma was solemnly offered on the third day of the *ashvamedha*, and, later, all the objects touched by it had to be thrown in the water (Dumont, 1927, 227). On the fourth day a purification bath occurred for all the participants in the *ashvamedha*, together with the sacrifice of twenty-one sterile cows. Although we do not know exactly the representation of that Indian ritual by the Sogdians (nor by the Indians themselves), at least this part of the *ashvamedha* celebration resembles very much the *Duanwujie*.

The *ashvamedha* took place around February-March (but also in spring or summer; see Ibid., 9-10) and had very clear calendrical connections: the wandering of the horse around and outside the kingdom had the symbolic value of the annual movement of the sun which conferred to the king the legitimacy to govern on the land during the period of the year. Furthermore, of considerable interest is the fact that, according to some Indian literary sources, among the characteristics of the designated sacrificial horse was a spot on its body or a tuft of hair on the forehead with a particular shape representing the Pleiades constellation. There is an exact parallel between such a characteristic of the horse of the

ashvamedha and a similar spot or tuft required for sacrificial horses in ancient Mesopotamia. Possibly this was due to the association of a certain period of the year, when the Pleiades were particularly visible in the sky, with phenomena such as inundations by large rivers. In this way, the Pleiades could have been seen as a link to the fertilization of the land (Albright and Dumont 1934, 124-127). So here is another link between horse and water in connection with calendrical matters. As is well-known, many elements coming from Mesopotamian culture were accepted in Central Asia such as, for example, the presence of the goddess called by Kushans and Sogdians Nana who, in the Iranian milieu, should be possibly identified with Anahita and, consequently, with Venus (Tanabe 1995; Grenet and Marshak 1998). Astral symbols seem to have played a very important role in ancient Sogdiana too, and for this reason the artists at Afrasiab were probably attracted by their presence also in other cultural spheres. Specimens of Sogdian art objects produced both in the motherland and in the colonies along the so-called 'Silk Road' present quite often images of a horse or a pegasus with a pole on its head embellished on its top with a half moon containing a star or a flower (Compareti 2003, 34). Since much of the horse represented on the eastern wall at Afrasiab disappeared, any attempt to find such astral symbols is completely useless. However, as now seems likely, the horse was associated with the aquatic element and had astral relationships almost in every ancient culture; for this reason it could have been chosen to be represented on the walls at Afrasiab.

Other details of the eastern wall could be considered to have a precise parallel with elements in the other three painted scenes at Afrasiab. Just as in the scenes

representing Sogdiana and China, where the sovereign was depicted together with his queen, for the celebration of the *ashvamedha* the presence of the royal couple was required. The character of the Indian sacrifice concerned the legitimacy of a king, and at Afrasiab the representation of such a concept can be observed on two opposite walls: the eastern (or Indian) one and the western (or Sogdian) one where the *Nawruz* is celebrated in conjunction with the coronation of Varkhuman. Finally, all the scenes on the four walls present clear connections with astrological-astronomical matters which could be considered reciprocally (although not exactly) balanced: when a king decided to perform the *ashvamedha*, this had to happen around February-March, a period of the year quite close to the celebration of the Chinese New Year Festival (January-February). The Sogdian artists and their patrons were certainly aware of the astronomical-astrological common notions of ancient 'Westerners' such as Indians, Greeks and Mesopotamians, but they had to find also common features with China that, in those days, still followed a different system and only later — most likely through the Sogdians — would have adopted 'western' features such as the division of the week into seven days, each one linked to a planetary deity (Chavannes and Pelliot 1913, 158-177). For this reason they cleverly opted for representations on the northern wall of the Chinese New Year Festival, which fell

approximately during the *ashvamedha*, and the *Duanwu*, which fell around the Sogdian *Nawruz*.

It is not possible to find an exact contemporary parallel for the painting of the eastern wall since, unfortunately, the few elements referring to the *ashvamedha* in Indian art are limited to the representation of the sacrificial horse itself — for example, in at least one sculpture and coins of the Gupta period (Huntington 1985, 187-188; Lindquist 2003). Nevertheless, hints of a horse sacrifice exist in Indian art, although they date to a period much later than the Afrasiab paintings. These are the relief carvings of the great platform of the early 16th century Hazara Rama temple at Hampi (ancient Vijayanagara) (Dellapiccola and Verghese, 1998).¹⁰ Almost forty years ago, the great indologist Hermann Goetz had already recognized among these reliefs some images of foreigners represented in processional rows together with animals such as elephants and horses (Goetz 1967, 195-196, fig. 11). In particular, one relief is extremely interesting because of the pose of one foreigner (possibly a Persian?) holding the bridle of a recalcitrant horse with one hand while the other seems to be beating the animal with a kind of dagger [Fig. 8]. Why would a person of possibly Iranian appearance have been represented in this way? Could his pose be considered the final part of a horse sacrifice? In the pre-Islamic Iranian sphere there was



Fig. 8. Relief carving, Hazara Rama temple, Hampi (after Goetz 1967, fig. 11).

an important funerary horse sacrifice, the *chakharom*, which is just alluded to, for example, on a Sogdian ossuary from Shahr-i Sabz (Uzbekistan) by the sole presence of a harnessed horse (Grenet 1993, 61, n. 44).¹¹ However, if the people in the relief at Hampi are Iranians then they should be considered in all probability Muslims and not Mazdeans. What is needed is an example from Indian art dated to a much earlier period.

As noted above, in Indian art there are very few specimens which can be identified as representations of the *ashvamedha*, and they are all date to the Gupta period. Nevertheless, an interesting horn cylinder seal from the Greco-Bactrian site of Takht-i Sangin [Fig. 9] which has

Fig. 9. Indian horn cylinder seal, Takht-i Sangin (after Rapin 1996, fig. 29b).



been recently attributed to India (Bernard, 1994, 112-113) presents a scene very similar to the relief of Hampi and, possibly, to the reconstruction of that detail of the Afrasiab painting reconsidered here. It is not easy to give an exact interpretation to the scene carved on the seal, which was termed by Claude Rapin 'an Indian myth' (Rapin 1996, 50, fig. 29b; Rapin 1995, 275-281); however, what is really important to consider here is the pose of the person standing in front of the horse, which at Afrasiab as well might have followed an established iconographic formula. It is not possible to be too specific about the pose of the man with the horse on the horn seal since the scene is depicted too sketchily and it could represent just a rider with his steed or even a procession. Processions of

people and animals can be observed already in very ancient Persian art (for example, at Persepolis¹²), and it is well known that the Achaemenids extended their control on some parts of northwestern India, where they influenced local cultures. However, the processions of Persepolis do not look exactly like the scene on the Indian horn seal, where the man seems to stand in front of the animal without walking and his right hand seems to grab the hilt of the sword while with the left, possibly, he holds the bridle.

Since the temple at Takht-i Sangin is much older than any other specimen of Indian art already considered in the present study, then it seems to be likely that a pure Indian iconography is involved at Afrasiab. In any case, independently from the origin of the iconography, it is clear that the Iranians were aware of it. In fact, it is possible to observe very similar scenes in a problematic 7th-century (?) textile fragment acquired on the antiquarian market embellished with nine horses on three parallel lines with people wearing caftans holding in one hand the bridles and with the other one a weapon or a stick. The position of those men indicates a clearly hostile attitude towards the horses; for this reason the scene of the textile could be intended as a representation of a sacrifice (Kitzinger 1946, fig. 46; Trilling 1982, pl. 17) [Fig. 10]. As the present writer has already noted,

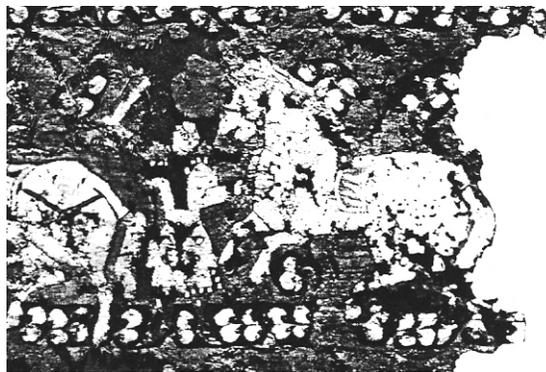


Fig. 10. 7th century fragmentary textile, Egypt? (after Trilling 1982, pl. 17).

notwithstanding the long period of time which separates the creation of the textile and the relief at Hampi, they resemble astonishingly each other (Compareti 2005, 37-40). The same could be said for the earlier horn seal from Takht-i Sangin. That fragmentary Persian textile offers a good, if enigmatic, parallel to the specimens in Indian art. If ancient Iranians knew the Indian iconography for the horse sacrifice and had even adopted it, then it could be considered likely that it is exactly something similar that the Sogdians copied for the representation of India on the eastern wall at Afrasiab. The hypothesis is hardly demonstrable, but at least it can offer a possible alternative identification to the battle between Krishna and Keshin. In any case, the depiction of Indian subjects at Afrasiab according to that iconography could be simply explained because the context there was obviously Iranian.

An Indian King in the Paintings at Afrasiab?

We might, finally, propose a reconstruction for the upper part of the eastern wall which was completely lost: probably also in this scene there was a king together with his spouse; it is not unlikely that the royal couple had larger dimensions exactly as on the other walls. As in the case of Varkhuman and Gaozong on the other walls, could this Indian king be identified? It would seem that Harsha (606-647) is the most probable candidate, since he was a very powerful sovereign of northern India in that period. True, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who visited India in the first half of the 7th century and was a respected guest at Harsha's court, recorded important Buddhist festivities celebrated in that kingdom but gave no hints about the *ashvamedha* (Beal

1884 [1983], 206-224). Xuanzang was a devoted follower of the Dharma, which could explain his scant interest in his memoir in religious customs extraneous to Buddhism. However, this explanation would not explain why Indian sources too, such as the Harshacharita, are silent about the *ashvamedha* during Harsha's reign, even though animal sacrifices should have existed in 7th-century India (Kane 1918, 236).

In the second part of the 7th century, Adityasena, one of the last representatives of the Gupta Dynasty (or Later Gupta) in Magadha performed the *ashvamedha* (Auboyer 1965, 387; Asher 1983), a fact that definitely created great sensation and whose echoes, possibly, reached other regions outside India. For this reason he could have been considered an appropriate candidate to appear together with Varkhuman and the Chinese Emperor Gaozong at Afrasiab.

This last hypothesis — although highly evocative — is hardly demonstrable. Despite the efforts of some students of Sogdian art to reconstruct the other fragmentary parts of the same painting with reference India, proof of the proposed identifications is still lacking (cf. Mode 2002).

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Matteo Compareti graduated from The University of Venice 'Ca' Foscari' in oriental languages and literatures and in 2005 defended his PhD in Iranian studies at The University of Naples 'L'Orientale.' He is a specialist in art history of Sogdiana, especially pre-Islamic Samarkand, although his interests include also Sasanian Persia. At present his research focuses mainly on the iconography of Mazdean divinities.

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Notes

1. In 630, during the reign of Taizong (630-649), the Chinese defeated the Eastern Turk Empire in Mongolia and used Turkish contingents in order to subjugate the Western Turk Empire in the Tarim Basin and Transoxiana. This task was completed during the reign of Gaozong between 657-659 (Sinor 1990, p. 310). Turk guards can be observed everywhere in the paintings of the western wall at Afrasiab: they can be recognized by their hairstyle and other facial traits such as the absence of a beard. In fact, Chinese literary sources describe them as having long hair and plaits. They do not carry gifts in the paintings, and for this reason they have been considered to be guards in service in the territory of their former empire after the submission to the Tang.

2. A possible similar scheme is, *mutatis mutandis*, in the famous early 8th century Omayyad painting at Qusayr 'Amra (Jordan) (Fowden 2004).

3. The king of that Sogdian region (identified with Kushanya) went into that pavilion to pray; so it would not be incorrect to identify

the building as a temple too. This does not seem to have been the case in Afrasiab where the 'Hall of the Ambassadors' has been identified as the private space of a prominent person, possibly Varkhuman himself (Marshak 2006, p. 75).

4. Chinese sources also report the time of year when the Sogdian Nawruz was celebrated (Compareti and Cristoforetti forthcoming). Grenet noted that one of the Turk guards wrapped his robe around his hips, probably since the season was too warm (Grenet 2004, pl. B).

5. Recently Mikhail Fedorov suggested that Varkhuman is the person dressed like a warrior in the left corner of the southern wall, who is, however, depicted on the same scale as the other people around him (Fedorov 2006). For a different interpretation of that detail, see Compareti 2004.

6. It is not clear if this part of the celebration should follow or precede the *Nawruz* (Compareti and Cristoforetti forthcoming).

7. Unfortunately, the funerary monument was not excavated according to scientific criteria, and it is now part of a private collection (the Vahid Kooros Collection, Houston).

8. The same figure of Krishna presents some traits borrowed from Hellenistic culture (Chandra 1983).

9. Also classical authors were aware of the *ashvamedha*. In his book on Apollonius of Tyana, Philostratus (1st century CE) gives a description of an Indian horse sacrifice which could be only interpreted as the *ashvamedha* (*Vit. Apoll. Ty.*, 2, 19, 15, cited in Goossens 1930).

10. This is in all probability a representation of the Mahanavami, a nine-days festival which comprised also horse sacrifices exactly as in the *ashvamedha* to be held in March-April or September-October: (Stein 1983, 75-88). It is worth remembering

that the city of Hampi presents an urban plan which denotes a complex system of astral relationships (Malville 2000).

11. Other harnessed horses possibly ready for sacrifice can be observed in at least one painting at Panjikent and on a 6th-century Sogdian funerary bed from China (Belenitskii 1961, p. 72, fig. 15; Marshak 1994, pp. 11-15).

12. The motif was wide-spread among many ancient cultures connected with ancient Persia from very ancient times to the Islamization of Iran and Central Asia. Processions of this kind can be observed, in fact, at Pazyryk (3rd century BCE; see Schiltz 1994, p. 284, fig. 215) but also in some unpublished fragmentary terracottas from 10th-11th century Dvin (Armenia), directly observed by this writer in the State Museum of Armenian History.