The Painted Vase of Merv in the Context of Central Asian Pre-Islamic Funerary Tradition

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Archaeological ceramic finds from Merv, the historical centre of the ancient region of Margiana, are among the best known of Central Asia. The scale of the corpus of the region's well documented finds has been the result of a long period of careful archaeological work conducted since mid-Soviet times. Until recently, attested Hellenistic and Parthian objects often received the lion's share of attention (Callieri 1996).

"The Painted Vase of Merv" — at present kept in the National Museum of History of Turkmenistan (Ashgabat) — is interesting for several reasons. First, its considerable size: it is about half meter high. Second, this ceramic vessel has unusual, possibly unique decoration [Fig. 1]. And third, its attribution to the 5th–6th century CE makes it post-Parthian. Following an initial analysis by Gennadii Koshelenko, Nicolò Manassero recently made a comprehensive study, and for this reason, many of that article's useful technical findings will not be repeated here (Koshelenko 1966; Manassero 2003). However, one point is worth mentioning; namely, the archaeological context in which it was found. In fact, despite its painted scenes, identified as Mazdean rituals, the vase is reported to have been recovered during the excavations of a Buddhist *stupa* in a part of Merv called Gyaur Kala. The relevant Soviet scientific literature does not further clarify the context of this enigmatic find. It is surmised that the vase would have contained written documents, the nature of which was never specified. If any of them survived, their present location is unknown.

Painted pottery without any apparent vitrified glaze is well attested in pre-Islamic Central Asia. Fragments from Merv often have figurative decoration. Images of people are common and, at least in one case inscriptions

Fig. 1. Sketch of the four scenes of the painted vase of Merv.

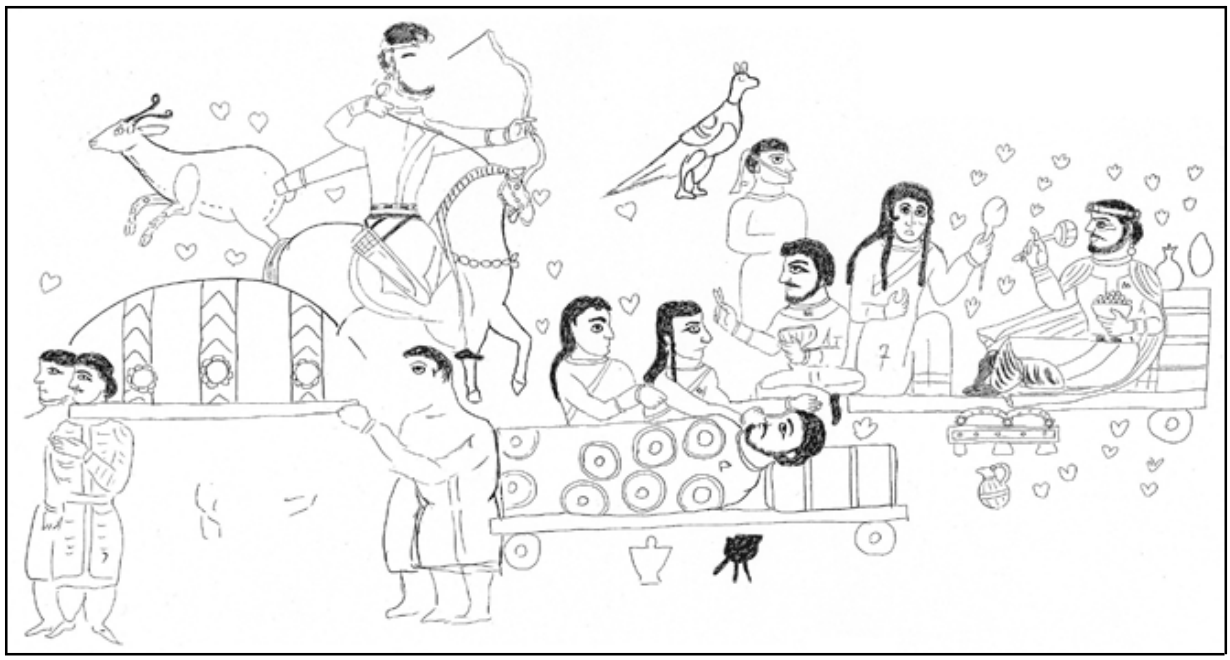

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Fig. 2. Fragmentary painted vase from Afrasyab/Samarkand.

in Aramaic have been identified (Lunina 1977); Pugačenkova and Usmanova 1995, Fig. 22). There is also a unique fragment from Afrasyab now in the Hermitage Museum [Fig. 2], which deserves some further consideration (Marshak, Raspopova et al. 2006, p. 49). Many things about the vase's decoration suggest it has clear Sogdian antecedents. Important characteristics include the composition's division into different levels of frieze with animals in the upper level (reminiscent of the procession of animals and beasts at Varakhsha) and then the possible representation of people under arches. Other distinctive decorative elements include pomegranates, pearls and indeed the colours themselves. It appears increasingly likely that this kind of painted pottery was well-known and popular in certain periods in pre-Islamic western Central Asia.

In his analysis, Manassero made many interesting observations about the painted scenes on the vase from Merv although some additional iconographic elements may be pointed out. Moreover, Manassero seemed to have accepted implicitly that the vase was of local origin; while Vladimir Lukonin (followed by Boris Marshak) gave it a Persian context, considering it to be a very rare specimen of Sasanian painting (Lukonin 1977, pp. 219–21; Marshak 2002, p. 12). More recently, Markus Mode has identified it as a cultural artefact of Sogdiana (Mode 2009). These three hypotheses are very interesting and should be approached with the knowledge of two further points. Firstly, in an almost forty-year-old paper, Martha Carter made an attempt to associate the scenes on the vase with the celebration of the New Year festival (*Nawruz*), as is sometimes portrayed (in her opinion) on some Sasanian or Sasanian-related metalwork (Carter 1974, p. 188). Secondly, the scenes of the painted vase may now be compared with some recently-uncovered decorated funerary monuments erected to commemorate important Sogdians then resident in China. Other scholars have tried to show that, on at least three of these "Sino-Sogdian" funerary monuments, there are banquet scenes that should be identified as representing *Nawruz*.

The *Nawruz* hypothesis

In her very detailed paper, Carter discusses a number of pre-Islamic silver plates which undoubtedly share very similar iconographic or technical features. The banquet and funerary scenes also suggested to her an association with the Merv painted vase [Fig. 1]. She also referred to certain elements of later Islamic art (presumably she meant illustrated manuscripts) with clear parallels which also deserve further attention. Overall, her paper is a very good one, well supported by her iconographic analysis and evidence from literature. In particular, she noticed that the eye of the man who is lying on the funerary bed is open. This suggested for her that he should not perhaps be assumed to be dead, as have all other scholars. Carter, moreover, mentions a text by Qazvini (13th century), who describes what a king is supposed to see on the morning of *Nawruz*: a "handsome young man on a fine horse holding a falcon." She identified this description with the hunter on the vase of Merv which also depicts a big bird (Carter 1974, p. 193).

However, other elements suggest that such a precise identification is unjustified and, in fact, Frantz Grenet rejects a number of Carter's ideas (Grenet 1984, p. 197). This debate is discussed below. However, one observation about the parallel between banquet scenes (or better said, "court scenes"), and the celebration of *Nawruz* appears to offer further support to Carter's theories, despite some new discoveries in the field

of Iranian studies. Nonetheless, the lack of any incontrovertible element, such as an inscription on the objects that she assesses, makes caution the better part of valour.

I have recently proposed that the paintings on the western wall of the so-called Hall of the Ambassadors at Afrasyab (c. 660 CE) offer potentially a very good basis for comparison between court scenes on 6th century Sogdian funerary monuments and certain Islamic illustrated manuscripts (Compareti 2009, pp. 88–100). Even though that painted cycle at Afrasyab is probably a representation of local *Nawruz* traditions, it is impossible to give such a precise ascription to other court scenes. In fact, the composition of the Afrasyab cycle has the locals represented on the western and southern walls, while the Chinese are depicted on the northern wall, with the eastern wall dedicated to Indians and, probably, the Turks. It is specifically the comparison with the scene dedicated to China on the northern wall at Afrasyab that offers a strong indication of the nature of the scene on the western wall. Unfortunately, this cannot be done with other objects (the dishes, the Sogdian funerary monuments or the Merv painted vase) since the scenes that embellish them are always found individually to represent largely a single cultural tradition.

There is another argument against identifying the court scenes in Carter's list with representations of the celebration of *Nawruz*. It is quite probable that the same scheme could have been a kind of generic "iconographic recycling," adopted for life in local courts throughout pre-Islamic Central Asia and the wider Persian Empire. Therefore, the scenes may not necessarily exclusively be representations of the ceremonies of *Nawruz* (Compareti 2009, pp. 89–100). This is famously true for the pre-Islamic Sasanian courtly images represented on metalwork, or in illustrated manuscripts of the Islamic period. Here, pre-Islamic motifs and scenes were used extensively, without significant change, but employed to represent new ideas (Grabar 1989, pp. 13–32, 60–62, 108–18, 257, 262). Some of these banqueting/court scenes may well have been inspired by these standard representations, circulating throughout the Persian *oikoumene,* of the celebration of *Nawruz* — even at Afrasyab — and not vice-versa. However, the identification of the western wall in the Hall of the Ambassadors as a representation of the specifically local *Nawruz* ceremonies strongly suggests the contrary.

Hunting scenes possibly had some significant association with *Nawruz,* because of the way the one at Afrasyab is presented, and, as pointed out by another scholar, on other enigmatic Sasanian monuments such as the Taq-i Bustan rock reliefs (Movassat 2005, p. 141). However, the only hunting scene at Afrasyab appears on the wall dedicated to China [Fig. 3], while Taq-i Bustan presents scholars with other problems not yet irrefutably solved, such as the identity of the (late) Sasanian king who commissioned its construction [Fig. 4].

Fig. 3 (above). Right part of the scene on the northern wall at Afrasyab.

Fig. 4 (below). Detail of the relief of the great boar hunt, Taq-i Bustan, Kermanshah. The relief is in a sad state of conservation today, damaged by water seepage and countless grafitti.

After: Al'baum 1975, fig. 16.

Photo © Daniel C. Waugh 2010.

After: Trever and Lukonin 1987, pl. 19.

Fig. 5. Strelka silver dish, Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. S-520.

Photo © Daniel C. Waugh 2009.

Fig. 6. Kushano-Sasanian silver dish, British Museum, B.M. 124093.

One interesting object is the so-called Strelka dish now in the Hermitage Museum [Fig. 5]. Carter mentioned the Strelka dish but without linking it directly with the scene on a piece of metalwork from the British Museum that was the object of her discussion about court scenes and *Nawruz* [Fig. 6]. In fact, both those dishes present a central scene divided into two parts, one above and one below. This does not seem to be a formula employed for metalwork produced for the central Sasanian court. While in the British Museum dish, the two sectors of the central part depict courtly scenes, the Strelka dish also includes a hunting scene in the lower part [Fig. 7]. The two dishes do not appear to be products attributable to a central Sasanian context — meaning they are probably not from Fars or Mesopotamia. They are more likely to be eastern Iranian. According to Prudence Harper and Boris Marshak, the British Museum dish should be attributed to the Kushano-Sasanians and the Strelka dish to the same region, though a different period — the 5th to 6th century CE.[1]

Hunting scenes are a common theme in Sogdian paintings and on the funerary monuments of powerful Sogdians who died in China. Carter made very interesting observations about the British Museum dish and did mention the Strelka one, though without making much of its association with the Iranian New Year festival. This is understandable since the study of the Afrasyab paintings had not yet uncovered their iconographic significance when she was writing.

Photo © Daniel C. Waugh 2006.

Fig. 7. Detail of the lower part of the Strelka dish.

Comparison with the "Sino-Sogdian" funerary monuments

Hunts must have been among the most popular and prestigious activities for ancient Iranians and especially Sogdians, since these are the highest frequency scenes found in the Panjikent paintings and on the 6th century Sogdian funerary monuments found in the area of Xi'an. Hunting was also very important for Chinese elites. It is conceivable that sinicized Sogdians wanting to be considered important members of Chinese society could have designed their funerary monuments so as to represent something appreciated in both cultural milieus. As already observed, the hunting scenes usually appear together with banquet scenes, and at least three funerary monuments from Xi'an were embellished with courtly scenes identifiable with the celebration of the Sogdian *Nawruz* (Grenet and Riboud 2003, pp. 136–41; Lerner 2005, p. 24, figs. 10–12).

Before further considering these monuments, other written sources should be examined. The *Xifan ji* by Wei Jie is a 7th century text, the main passages of which have been preserved only in later Chinese sources. In one fragment there is a description of a shooting competition on horse-back to be performed by the people of Samarkand one week after the *Nawruz* celebrations, in a forest in the eastern outskirts of the capital (Chavannes 1903, p. 133). There is not enough detail to say whether this competition was associated with a hunt or, better yet, with a New Year celebration hunt. However, the mention of a forest may suggest that, in all probability, the targets of this shooting competition were wild animals.

Among the reliefs of the 6th century sarcophagus belonged to the Sogdian Wirkak, recently found in Xi'an, there are other interesting scenes. Here, a man is represented kneeling and wearing headgear resembling the head of an animal with pointed ears. He is hunting a deer with a bow [Fig. 8]. Even though this is the only such figure

After: Xi'anshi 2005, fig. 27, left.

Fig. 8. Detail of the relief on the base of the Wirkak funerary monument.

depicted in the whole collection of Sogdian funerary monuments, it is worth observing that very similar headgear is shown on at least two painted caskets from the area around the Buddhist complex of Subashi (Kucha). It is worn by musicians and dancers together with animal masks [Fig. 9]. As has been proposed in the past, these scenes may thus be tentatively identified as

After: Sun 1996, fig. 28.

Fig. 9. Decoration of the Buddhist casket from Subashi, Kucha.

representations of a local festival connected with the New Year celebration (Gaulier 1973, pp. 168–70; Gaulier 1982, p. 338). The *Youyang zazu* (a text on things that were for the Chinese exotic, written in the 9th century) records that in the country of Yanqi (Agni) on the first day of the year and the eighth day of the second month, a local festival is celebrated called *Pomozhe* (Lévi 1933, pp. 12–13).

The ancient inhabitants of Agni were not Iranians but Tokharians, an enigmatic Western "Indo-European" population who embraced Buddhism and were turkicized after the coming of the Uighurs. According to Paul Pelliot, there were Tokharians also living in Turfan and Kucha who observed a *Pomozhe* festival, which was known in Chinese under other names, such as *Poluozhe* or *Sumozhe* (Pelliot 1934, p. 104; Liu 1969, pp. 10, 170). The latter name is definitely the most interesting term. In fact, *Sumozhe* (reconstructed by Pelliot according to the pronunciation of the Tang period as **samacha* or **somacha*) may have had some connection with the Indian god Soma (and his Iranian corresponding divinity Haoma). His festival involved the consumption of intoxicating

Fig. 10. a. (left) Banquet and hunting scene of the An Qie funerary bed; b. (right) hunting scene of the Wirkak sarcophagus.

beverages during specific celebrations. This was a practice well-known among ancient Iranian groups and more generally among wider ancient "Indo-European" societies. The initiation of the young warriors may have been associated in some cases with the consumption of intoxicating beverages and linked to an annual festival commemorating a dragon-slayer hero.[2] This annual festival, observed by some Iranians and Tokharians, could have coincided with the New Year celebrations, a time when people played music and danced, while animal-masked actors performed as recorded in the Chinese texts. It may be possible to identify this in the Sogdian monument in question.[3] It is likely some kind of hunt was performed, exactly as depicted on several Sogdian funerary monuments recovered in China [Fig. 10] and in some of the paintings from Panjikent (Marshak and Raspopova 1994, p. 202, n. 80). This is of course merely a hypothesis advanced on the basis of the rather scant information obtained from indirect sources on Kucha and from archaeology.

Another painting from Panjikent does not represent a hunt but rather a procession of musicians wearing goat (?) skins [Fig. 11]. These figures are possibly celebrating an annual (?) festival, maybe associated with the hunting scene represented in the same room.[4] Despite the great temporal distance, those scenes are reminiscent of 17th century Persian miniatures where some dancers and musicians are dressed in goat skins (Ettinghausen 1965, pls. III–V). It is not impossible that during the Safavid period, some ostensibly Islamized Persian festivities continued to resound with the influence of pre-Islamic rituals.

The report about the celebration of *pomozhe-sumozhe* does not mention any hunt, and no hunting scenes are found embellishing the Subashi reliquaries. However, the suggestion of actors dressed as animals or beasts calls to mind the images on the sarcophagus of Wirkak and also the descriptions in some Chinese sources dated to the Han period that recount the New Year festival and the processions of actors possibly dressed as dragons and other fantastic creatures.[5]

Again, the only pre-Islamic monument to be positively associated with the Iranian *Nawruz* is represented by the (enigmatic) painted cycle of Afrasyab. The only hypotheses about Persia relate to the Apadana of Persepolis (at present rejected by some scholars [Nylander 1974; Wiesehöfer 1996/2005, p. 25; Briant 1996, pp. 196-198; Imanpour 2006]) and the very enigmatic Taq-i Bustan reliefs. Other possible depictions of the celebration of *Nawruz* can be found in the Kushano-Sasanian silver dish in the British Museum studied by Carter, the Strelka dish and the 6th century Sogdian funerary monuments of Xi'an.

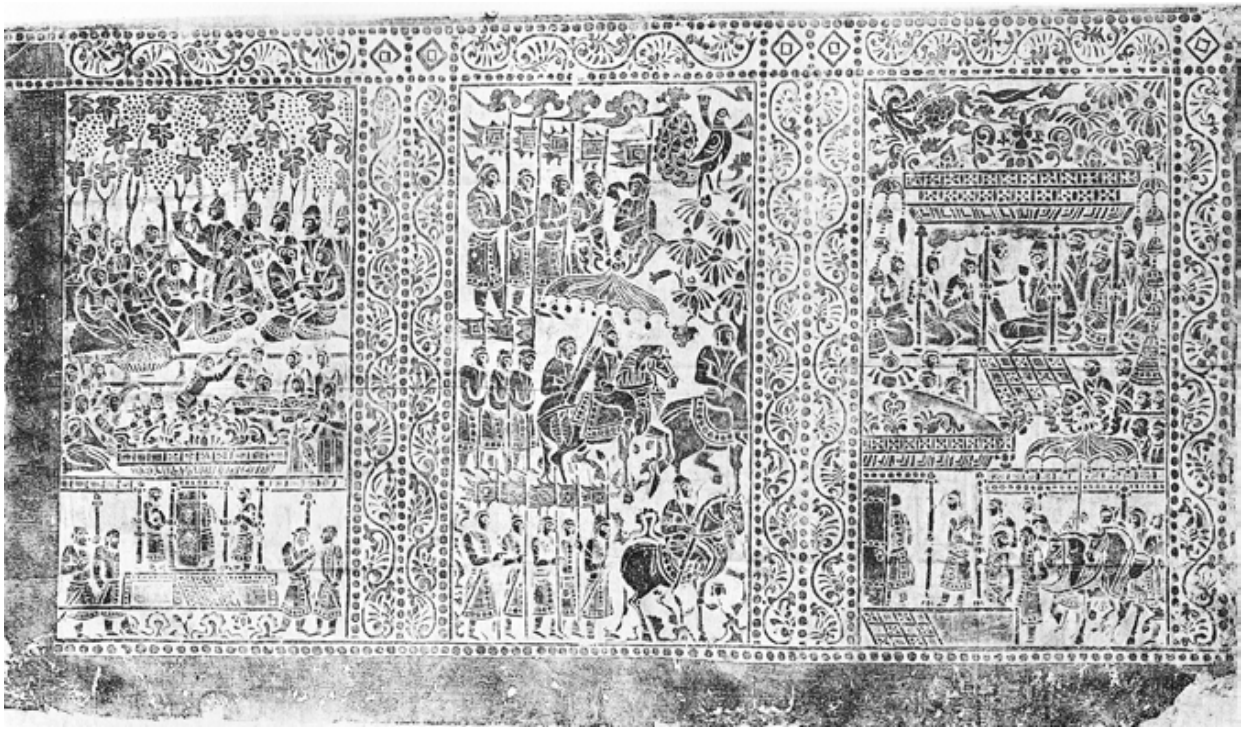
Fig. 11. Detail of a painting representing people dancing and playing music dressed with goat skins, Panjikent.

All 6th century funerary monuments belonging to important Sogdians resident in China show at least one panel embellished with reliefs representing a hunting scene. In the present list only two of them coming from controlled professional excavations have been reproduced. The panel in Fig. 10a embellished the An Qie funerary bed, which belonged to a man whose name clearly reveals his Sogdian origins and, even more remarkably, his precise origin — the region of Bukhara (in Chinese: *An*). The second panel comes from the Wirkak sarcophagus [Fig. 10b]. This is not the most archetypical of Sogdian funerary monuments, but it does display very clear Iranian elements. Some scholars have identified banquet scenes on other panels of the same monuments that may possibly be associated with the celebration of *Nawruz* (Grenet and Riboud 2003, p. 136; Lerner 2005, p. 24). Actually the panel identified with the celebration of the *Nawruz* on the An Qie funerary bed is the one where the hunt also appears [Fig. 10a]. The two moments of the life of An Qie (?) divide the panel in two parts almost equal in term of space. They are separated by a frame of vegetal elements, most likely grapes. The main character of the two scenes appears to be always An Qie himself, for in both, he is wearing the same hat. The panels of the Wirkak sarcophagus include more complex decoration. Again, in the scene considered to be a representation of the *Nawruz* banquet, the grape vine occupies the whole of the upper portion [Fig. 12]. It is worth observing that Wirkak too

After: Xi'anshi 2005, fig. 50.

Fig. 12. Banquet scene of the Wirkak sarcophagus.

Fig. 13. Banquet scene of the Anyang funerary bed.



After: Shepherd 1966, fig. 148.

is represented wearing a hat very similar to the one An Qie sports. To be precise, the Anyang (or, better, Zhangdefu) funerary bed is the third of these monuments to depict a scene probably connected with the celebration of the *Nawruz*. In this case also, the grape vines are represented very realistically [Fig. 13]. No hunting scenes appear on the Anyang funerary bed, whose excavation was not reported and whose panels are at present dispersed among several important museums in Europe and America (Priewe 2009). It is not impossible that some panels of this funerary bed have been lost, and also one (or more?) of these possibly may have depicted the hunting scene.

Both funerary beds and sarcophagi reflect, and survived because of, very well known Chinese funerary practices which were not observed in Central Asia or Persia except in very rare cases. One of these rare cases where we have something surviving to go on is the painted vase of Merv. In China epitaphs represent a cultural convention and are to be found in the grave sometimes both in Chinese and the Sogdian language (as in the case of Wirkak), while in Iranian lands inscriptions were not common.

The banquet and hunting scenes also perfectly fit either an Iranian or Chinese sphere, because they have been strong elements of both cultures since ancient times and it seems likely, at least in the Persian world, had a connection with funerals. The same scenes appear also on the Merv vase, whose connection with death is evident. Even though Carter based some of her inferences about one of the four scenes of the painted vase on the open eye of the prone man, allowing her to conclude that it could represent the *Nawruz* celebration, as everyone knows the dead can have wide-open eyes. It could also be that the man was still alive in the very moment represented in the scene although was on the point of passing away. If the man with a cup in his left hand sitting just above the head of the dead/dying man is considered part of the mourning scene, then the blessing gesture he is making with two fingers of his right hand may have some meaning associated with death. This sign — which reminds one of an icon common in Christianity of the blessing Christ — is also repeated by Iranian divinities on Sogdian ossuaries (*astodan*) and on Kushan coins (Mithra). It can also be identified on the famous *rhyta* from Nisa.[6] As can be seen on one panel of the Anyang funerary bed [Fig. 13] and in some paintings from Panjikent, the use of a *rhyton* during the banquet (to be possibly identified with the *Nawruz*?) was common among Sogdians (Jäger, 2006).

The presence on the Merv vase of two women, who may be crying for the death of the open-eyed man, should also be noted. People crying for the dead or lacerating their faces with a knife are represented not only on some Central Asian ossuaries and in lamentation paintings, especially in Sogdiana and in the Tarim Basin, but are also reported in Chinese sources (Grenet 1984, pp. 259–64). Lastly, if the group on the left can be identified as pallbearers transporting a corpse, then it is evident that the main subject of the Merv vase is a funeral. The transportation of the corpse seems to be a significant moment in the life of the occupant of the Sogdian funerary monuments from Xi'an, since some panels are invariably dedicated to the image of an oxcart and a harnessed horse under an umbrella without a rider (Riboud 2003). These are clear references to the last journey of the wife and husband respectively and are in keeping with Chinese practices, although the presence of the horse (or, most likely, the horse sacrifice) had some importance in enacting the celebration of the Iranian *Nawruz* (Lerner 2005, pp. 17–18).

Also for this part of the decorative cycle of the Merv vase, a parallel with the scenes on the Sogdian funerary monuments may be proposed. One last element deserves to be considered in detail and this will be the focus of the following section of the present study.

A recurrent pattern

There is an interesting characteristic of the big bird represented in front of the hunter, also noted by Manassero — two circular elements above its head resembling ears or feathers like those of a peacock [Fig. 1]. Manassero did not say much on this point but, in a footnote, just observed that these circular elements could indicate a Simurgh (Pahl. *Senmurv*, Av. *Saena*). This would convey some sort of epic significance on the painted vase and connect it to Persian myth and literature (Manassero 2003, p. 142). The association that he made with the bird and a Simurgh is very

appropriate because this is exactly what is reproduced in illustrated books of the Islamic period.

Stylistically, the Simurgh has been represented in Persian art since the Ilkhanid period as a Chinese phoenix or, in some book illustrations from the 1330s and 1340s, as a big bird with long feathers on its head resembling an owl or a parrot [Fig. 14] (Swietochowski and Carboni 1994, pp. 18–19; cat. nos. 3 e-h, 7 a-b, 8; figs. 17, 25). There is also a good argument to be made that during the pre-Islamic period the Simurgh was a fantastic bird and not the composite monster identified many years ago by Kamilla Trever. That monster (what we could call the "pseudo-Simurgh") appeared quite late in Sasanian art as, for example, at Taq-i Bustan [Fig. 4], and, as proposed by Alessandro Bausani and Boris Marshak, it should be considered a representation of the royal glory of the Sasanians. I suggested recently that the Simurgh be identified with the big bird with ears that is shown flying with a female figure in its claws on a Sasanian silver dish kept in the Hermitage Museum [Fig. 15]. The iconography is likely to have been based on the Indian Garuda (which explains the presence of a woman and not the usual young Zal of Islamic art [Azarpay 1995]). But the scene would have been understood by an Iranian audience too, since in Sogdian Buddhist literature the name *synmrγ* (that is to say, Simurgh) can be found in place of Garuda (Compareti 2006, n. 24; Compareti 2009–2010; Compareti 2010, pp. 99–104).

The only point of disagreement with Manassero's insightful observation is that he, and all other scholars who have studied the painted vase of Merv before him, considered the bird to be the target of the hunter because the rider is advancing in the direction of the bird.[7] However, as Manassero himself already noted, there are several problematic points in the four scenes decorating the painted vase of Merv, and so it is difficult to identify whether one element or person belongs to one scene or the next one.

Fig. 14. Representations of the Simurgh in Islamic book illustration.

In this writer's opinion, the gazelle behind the hunter is the real target and not the bird. In fact, if the bird is considered the target, the presence of the gazelle would be completely redundant. We should also observe that in the whole attested artistic production of the pre-Islamic Iranian peoples (especially Sogdian painting and Sasanian metalwork) there is not a single example of a hunter killing a bird. The usual prey is a lion, wild boar, stag, gazelle or another animal of this kind.[8] Also, in all the Sogdian funerary monuments recovered in China, hunters are always represented in the act of killing many

Fig. 15. A fantastic giant bird with a woman in its claws on a Sasanian silver dish, State Hermitage Museum Inv. No. S-217

animals but not birds. However, it is hard to believe there was no bird hunting at all in ancient Iranian lands. The reason for this absence may be intentional on the part of Iranian artists who did not want to create confusion between birds; or, fowling may simply not have been considered a prestigious enough activity to be thought worthy of reproducing on objects of art and craft.

If the bird is not considered to be an element of the hunting scene, it is obvious that the only other scene it could fit is the banquet scene just below. Fantastic birds can be observed often in funerary Sogdian monuments from Xi'an hovering around banqueting scenes. Judith Lerner has already attracted the attention of students of Iranian arts to this detail (Lerner 2005, p. 25). In particular, in the Anyang panels at least two fantastic haloed birds appear above the building where the two foreigners and their attendants are drinking exactly as in the banquet scene on the vase from Merv [Fig. 13].

Since there is more than one bird, it becomes more difficult to consider them to be multiple representations of a Simugh. These possibly all represent the divine glory (Pahl. *Xwarrah*, Sog. *Farn*). Divine protection/benevolence may also sometimes be represented as a bird with ribbons or a halo, or a ring in its beak. The interchangeable bird as representation of divine manifestation or protection has been noted already in the Avesta and indeed as a recurring motif in Persian arts since the pre-Sasanian period.[9]

Lerner noted that beribboned or haloed birds appear mostly on banquet scenes which are not to be connected with the *Nawruz* celebration. In fact, they can be observed in the scenes where the important couple (possibly the occupants of the grave) engages in the act of drinking. If the birds are identified as a symbol of divine protection or benevolence, then these banquet scenes may be understood as an important moment in the life of the occupants of the grave, most likely a marriage, although funerary banquets were also an important subject that was given artistic expression by many ancient peoples.[10] This is possibly also the meaning of the banqueting scene on the vase from Merv: a wedding banquet where the man (who is also represented in the other scenes) is holding in his hands an unidentifiable object that is identical to the one in the hand of his wife (a bunch of flowers?).[11] He also holds a cup full of fruits, most likely individual grapes. One can imagine that, between the two fingers, where unfortunately the paint has faded, the woman was holding one of those grapes.

Conclusion

The 6th century funerary monuments which belonged to important Sogdians recently found in the area of Xi'an appeared to be the perfect yardstick with which to compare the scenes on the painted vase from Merv in the hope of arriving at an improved understanding, or at least a more insightful interpretation of it. This comparison has helped make clear that the context of that vase is very likely a funerary one. Thus, scholars (such as Frantz Grenet) who identified the vase as a local variant of an ossuary were in all probability correct.

Since the funerary monuments in China are all dated to the 6th century CE, a better chronology may be proposed for the vase itself, which should date it no later than the 6th century. Prudence would suggest we should say 5th–6th century.

The four scenes of the vase appear to have the same main character — the bearded man — represented at different moments of his life: marriage, hunting, in death and being transported to the grave/cemetery. The way he is dressed, his flowering crown and his makeup are probably to be connected to an important event, although some literary and archaeological sources have recorded that both male and female Central Asians made frequent use of cosmetics since at least Parthian times (Invernizzi 1990; Kaim 2010, p. 328).

The presence of the fantastical bird is a key element for the correct interpretation of the whole painted cycle on the vase. It should not be identified as the target of the hunter or a falcon used to hunt but rather as the manifestation of divine protection/benevolence, a totem that can also often be found on the Sogdian funerary monuments from Xi'an in banqueting scenes.

Many other details in the scenes of the painted vase from Merv still await identification. For example, there is no persuasive theory for the

presence of the letter-like decoration on the garments of some of the figures. These can perhaps be identified with *tamgas,* although it is unclear why they are different and are associated only with some people and not with others. In the absence of almost any other archaeological evidence, many details of the vase from Merv may be destined to remain subject to unverifiable hypotheses for some time to come.

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Notes

1. Harper and Meyers 1981, pp. 108–10; Marshak 1986, figs. 96. See also B. Marshak in *Splendeur* 1993, cat. no. 61; *Perses sassanides*, 2006, cat. no. 34. For the British Museum dish, see also B. Overlaet in *Splendeur* 1993, cat. no. 62.

2. Widengren 1959, pp. 252–53; Widengren 1965, pp. 41–99; Ustinova 2002, pp. 105–15; Russell 2004. These practices were common also among other so-called "Indo-European" societies such as, for example, the Celts and the Germans when the warrior was ritually transformed into a totemic animal (generally a wolf) (Speidel 2002). It is worth remembering that the Sogdians were celebrated in Chinese sources as very fond of music, dance and wine: Chavannes 1903, p. 134. *Sumozhe* is very similar to the Japanese *Somakusa*, a festival which was introduced from the "West" through China into Japan to be celebrated by musicians and dancers wearing animal and monstrous masks (Eckardt 1953).

3. On the representations of plays in Sogdiana when actors worn special costumes, see Marshak and Raspopova 1994, p. 200; Compareti 2009, pp. 163–67.

4. At least one other scene of dancing people can be observed at Panjikent (XXI/2) (Belenizkij 1980, p. 119). Customs appear in other Sogdian paintings such as in temple II at Panjikent where some actors are dressed as local divinities (Marshak and Raspopova 1994). These customs are described in Sogdian Buddhist literature too (Tremblay 2007, p. 95).

5. It is worth observing that, even today, people dressed in a dragon costume dance in the street during the traditional Chinese New Year celebrations (Bodde 1975, pp. 159–60). Not every scholar was convinced by Bodde's ideas about the connection between the Chinese New Year and the monsters (cf. Knechtges 1982, pp. 230–33). However, such ideas seem to be supported by studies of Han funerary art (Bulling 1966–1967; James 1985, p. 284; Berger 1998, p. 50–52).

6. On the Sogdian *astodan*, see Grenet 1986, figs. 39, 45; Grenet 2002, fig. 222, pl. 231. On Kushan coins, see Grenet 2006, fig. 2. I owe the information about the *rhyta* from Nisa to E. Pappalardo who presented an interesting paper on the occasion of a conference at the Hermitage Museum: *The Sogdians at Home and in the Colonies. Papers Presented on the Occasion of the 75th Birthday of Boris Il'ich Marshak*, 13th–14th November 2008, Sankt-Peterburg. On the gesture on the *rhyta* from Nisa, see Masson and Pugačenkova 1982, p. 79, pl. 81.1. On this gesture see also Choksy 1987, pp. 204–05.

7. Carter proposed (cautiously) the identification of that scene as hunting with a falcon (Carter 1974, p. 193), but this idea is not supported by pre-Islamic Iranian culture and art where there are no representations of falconry. Moreover, if the hunter is hunting with the falcon, why he is also using a bow? Further, how he could expect to hunt a gazelle with a falcon? To my knowledge, only Chiara Silvi Antonini observed that the real target of the hunter was not the bird but

the gazelle: Silvi Antonini 2003, p. 103.

8. There is only one piece of metalwork (possibly not a central Sasanian one) recovered in China and now part of a Japanese private collection that is embellished with a hunting king shooting at ostriches that, in any case, are non-flying birds (Sun 1999).

9. Compareti 2006, figs. 7–8. It is worth noting that, in the Strelka dish (Fig. 7) a bird is represented on the left part of the hunting scene. It is definitely not the target of the hunting king because, most likely, this is a manifestation of divine protection. Something similar can be observed very often in Sasanian art and in Sogdian paintings (Azarpay 1975).

10. Funerary banquets can be observed in Greco-Roman art during the pagan and Christian periods such as in the Iranian world, also during the Islamic period (Silvi Antonini 1996).

11. In one silver dish kept in the National Library in Paris that Marshak considered to be a product of 6th century Tokharistan, eight women appear around a central goddess sitting on a dragon [Fig. 16] (Marshak 1986, fig. 187). The scene is not clear but the presence of the dragon and two crescents containing a (male?) bust seem to point at the divine nature of the representation. The only lady with a bird in her left hand who looks like dancing is also holding a bunch of flowers or a vegetal element in her right hand. Once more, it is a completely enigmatic scene but it is worth noting the objects in her hands, the crown and the short hair that are very similar to the attributes of the bearded man in the Merv vase.

Fig. 16. The silver dish in the Bibliothèque nationale, found prior to 1843, probably in the Urals.