

# AN EGYPTIAN CONTRIBUTION TO A LATE 5<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY CHINESE COFFIN

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The Silk Road was a conduit in which goods and ideas were transported from West and South Asia to and from East Asia. Religious ideas were carried long distances from Bactria (Tajikistan) and Gandhara (northern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan) by courageous monks attempting to fulfill the Chinese fervent desire for an understanding of Buddhism. Goods and small precious objects were transshipped from West Asia and the Mediterranean between towns and oases on animals under the aegis of successive traders. The actual routes changed in different periods depending on the threat or absence of marauding tribes such as the Xiongnu and the tribes' relations with the various polities on the way. The ultimate eastern destination is said to have been Xi'an (Chang'an), the capital during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and later the Tang (618–907 CE) Dynasties. The period of interest here is that of the Northern Wei (386–534 CE), a conquering dynasty whose capital until 494 was Datong (Pingcheng) in northern Shanxi and was the destination of the precious goods traveling east.

Some ideas and important goods did spread all over China; indeed the Silk Road can be said to have

Fig. 1. Drawings of "bird-bodied" creatures: (left) Dengxian; (right) Northern Wei epitaph Yuan Mi (524 CE). After: Juliano 1980, Fig. 29.



Fig. 2. "Immortal Teasing a Tiger," tile mural from Huqiao Tomb, Danyang, Jiangsu, drawing. After: Juliano 1980, Fig. 20.



Fig. 3. Jade anthropomorph with avian attributes, Xin'gan, Jiangxi. Ca. 1200 BCE. After: Falkenhausen 2003, Fig. 17.



stretched from the Mediterranean to the Yellow Sea. Many of these objects carried artistic ideas or motifs which took root in their final destination. The conveyors may not have understood their original meanings, and so the motifs might have been interpreted in their destination in new ways. As will be seen, the motif to be discussed here, human-headed birds, did retain some of its original foreign implication.

The newly introduced human-headed birds which appeared in China in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE may be defined as having horizontal or inclined real bird bodies with real bird legs, but normal human heads attached in front. Of course they had wings and indications of feathers. They were completely birdlike except for the human heads (Fig. 1). They are to be distinguished from "transcendentals," Daoist aerial beings with feathers growing from their distinct arms and legs which had appeared about the same time (Fig. 2).

On the other hand, native Chinese depictions of birdlike humans had been produced since the Neolithic period. These were upright, often grotesque humans with suggestions of human legs, whose only birdlike features were feathered headdresses, wings, or perhaps tails (Fig. 3). No writing was associated



Fig. 4. Shaman in feather headdress riding birdlike monster. Laingzhu jade. Ca. 2500 BCE. After: Rawson 1995, p. 34, Fig. 17.

with them. Usually fashioned from jade, what did they represent: gods? shamans in the thrall of their familiars (avian conveyors to the spirit world)? That the latter is a possibility is suggested by the Liangzhu jade depicting a shaman in feather headdress riding a birdlike monster (Fig. 4).

Into this antique world flew the “anatomically correct” human-headed bird from afar, as first seen in the

Fig. 5. The lower half of Lady Dai of Mawangdui’s silk painting. The human-headed birds and the atlantean yaksa have been circled here. Color image after: New Archaeological Finds 1973, cover; drawing after Sullivan 1984, p. 72.

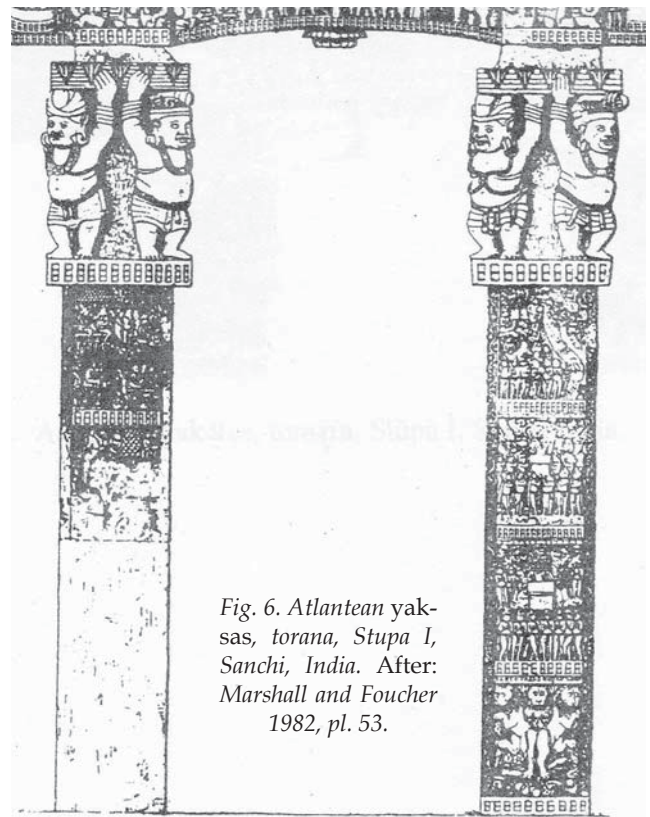
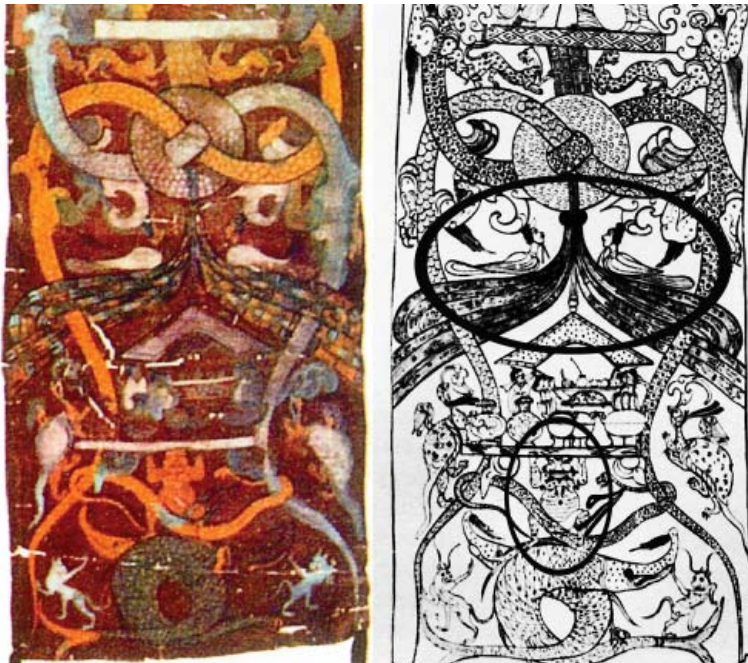


Fig. 6. Atlantean yak-sas, torana, Stupa I, Sanchi, India. After: Marshall and Foucher 1982, pl. 53.

tomb of the Marchioness Dai of Mawangdui (shortly after 168 BCE) in the enlightened and unified period of the Western Han. Surprisingly located south of the Yangzi River, Changsha (near her resting place) was far from the metropolitan center of Chang’an. Nevertheless, Lady Dai, with artistic foresight, managed to accumulate three innovative, and foreign, motifs in her tomb. The first is the reversed hindquarters of a cervid, a nomadic motif, depicted on the end

of her third (next to smallest) lacquer coffin. The second is the grimacing, pot-bellied dwarf at the bottom of the silk painting (sometimes called a banner) overlaying her coffin (Fig. 5). No doubt it derived from the prototype for the atlantean figures at Bharhut (ca. 100–80 BCE) and Stupa I at Sanchi (second to third decade of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in northern India) (Fig. 6; see also Huntington 1985, pp. 66 and 95).<sup>1</sup> The third innovative motif is, of course, the pair of human-headed birds situated above the atlantean figure on the silk painting.

From this auspicious beginning, human-headed birds could be found not only in many tombs of the Han, even as far as Koguryo in North Korea, but through succeeding dynasties right throughout the Northern Wei. An example of the latter is the Guyuan sarcophagus of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, probably



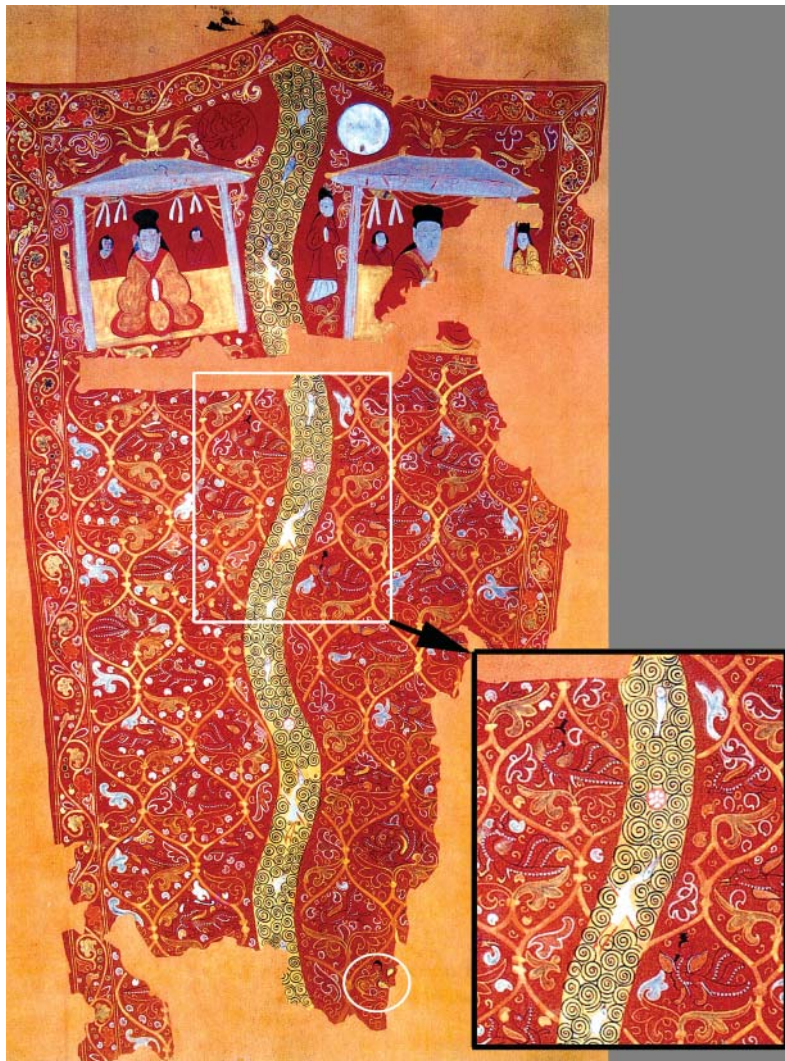


Fig. 7. Copy of cover of the Guyuan sarcophagus. Marked by the rectangle are the human-headed birds with topknots; the circle marks the location of the third bird. After: Ningxia Guyuan Bowuguan 1988, unn. plate.

Fig. 8. Line drawings of the three human-headed birds on the Guyuan sarcophagus. After: Ningxia Guyuan Bowuguan 1988, fold-out drawing.



made in Datong and shipped to Guyuan, Ningxia. This red lacquer coffin is covered with images and motifs from all over Asia, among them many fanciful animals as well as minor Buddhist deities included probably for apotropaic purposes, that is, to ward off evil spirits on the perilous posthumous journey and to ensure a happy outcome in the afterlife (Fig. 7 and Color Plate V). On the cover, three of these composite animals, are human-headed birds, two with elaborate topknots (Fig. 8).

This interest in fanciful animals was particularly exemplified in *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas),<sup>2</sup> a popular imaginary geography dating from the third century BCE through the first century CE. Each geographical feature was inhabited by a strange creature, e.g.:

Book 2, chapter 2: *Duck-wait* on Mount Stagstand looks like a cock but has a human face. It sings calling its own name 'Fu-shee'. When it appears there will be warfare. [p. 19]

Book 8: *Ape Strong* has a human face and a bird's body. His ear ornaments are two green snakes. He treads on two green snakes underfoot. [p. 124]

In a further example of the thought of the period, the fearful deity, Queen Mother of the West, to whom souls were thought to have gone in their posthumous journey, was accompanied by several pairs of animals, including human-headed birds.





Fig. 9. Egyptian ba-bird, painted gesso over wood, ca. 525–305 BCE. After: Padgett 2003, No. 8.

Fig. 11. Human-headed bird, metal, North Syria, 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, collection of Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Photo © 2001 Rosalind Bradford.



## Foreign Influence

Whence came the horizontal (or diagonal) human-headed birds? The point of origin of these creatures may well have been Egypt, where the *ba* (Fig. 9) represented the mobile aspect of the soul. It “could fly between the tomb, where the portion of the soul known as the *ka* remained with the body, and the heavens, where the third part of the soul, the *akh*, abided” (Padgett 2003, p. 123). (Fig. 10). Though *ba* had long been depicted, often as humans with bird heads, it was not until the New Kingdom (Dynasty 18 beginning 1558 BCE) that they appeared as human-

Fig. 10. Deceased with two souls, *ka* and *ba*, mural from a tomb at Dier el-Medina. After: Bulteau 1995, p. 5.



headed birds, and as such they continued into Ptolemaic times.<sup>3</sup>

They first appeared in Greece from the eighth century as supports for ring handles on bronze cauldrons imported from West Asia, especially Urartu, that were dedicated at Greek sanctuaries such as that to Zeus in Olympia and at Delphi (Fig. 11).<sup>4</sup> They began to be copied in Greece in its seventh century Orientalizing Period when Greek art acquired a florid style it had not known before. Although less horizontal, protomes of human-headed birds as bases for the vertical handles on *hydriae* (Fig. 12) became widely popular,

Fig. 12. Siren *hydria*. Mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Found up Dniipro River, Ukraine. After: Reeder 1999, No. 82.

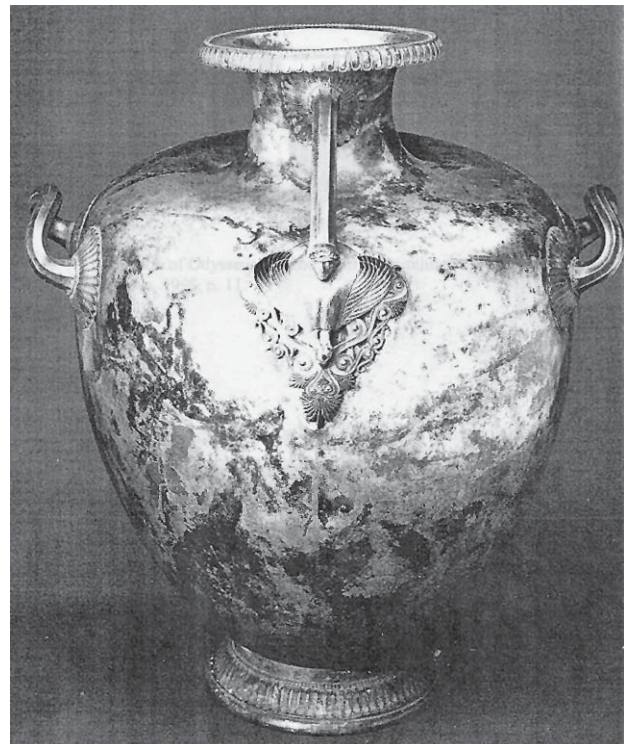






Fig. 13. Reproduction of Odysseus Legend from a Corinthian aryballos, second half of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. After: Lao 1988, p. 11.



Fig. 14. Odysseus Legend. Red Figure vase, Attic stamnos from Vulci, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. After: Lexicon 1981, p. 632 Odysseus 155.



Fig. 15. Siren carrying the soul of a dead man, relief from Xanthos, Licia. After: Lao 1998, p. 157.

having been found from as far afield as the Dnieper River in Ukraine. These *hydriae* were used in funerary rites for pouring libations.

Homer's sirens effected death on sailors through their tantalizing musical ability (Fig. 13)<sup>5</sup> and, in a later tradition, Odysseus, having outwitted their vocal charms by plugging his sailors' ears with wax, caused the death of one siren by failing to succumb (Fig. 14). According to Ovid, a later Roman writer, they were daughters of Acheloos, the river god, associated with the underworld and were companions of Persephone who was abducted by Hades into the underworld, thus their association with death (Padgett 2003, p. 303).

Fig. 16. Pyxis showing male siren. After: Padgett 2003, p. 288.



As mourners, sirens were depicted on stelae like that of a woman in Athens, Marmor in the fourth century BCE and, on another, carrying the soul of a dead man in a relief from Xanthos, Licia (Fig. 15). On a more commonplace note, a male siren decorates a pyxis (Fig. 16), and oil bottles in the form of sirens were molded in Corinth, Samos and Rhodes in the sixth century and widely exported (Fig. 17). Sirens continued to be portrayed in the Hellenistic period and, as such, may have marched across Asia with Alexander and his Seleucid successors.<sup>6</sup>

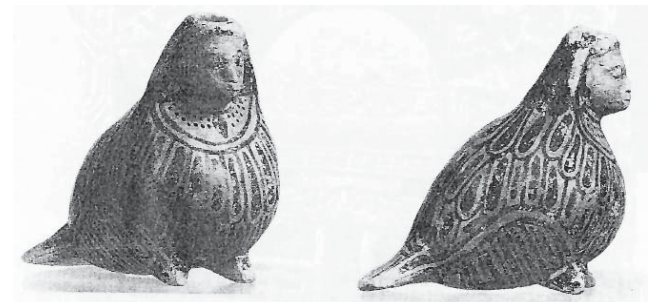


Fig. 17. Corinthian siren. After: Biers 1999, Fig. 2.2.

The association of birds with death seemed to have a more general distribution in Asia. In the higher reaches of the Mongolian Altai on sloping outcrops, images were pecked of birds leading horses in presumably a funeral cortege (Fig. 18, next page). The period has been difficult to ascertain: it has been suggested that this notion preceded the inclusion of sacrificed horses in burials before the Late Bronze Age (Jacobson-Tepfer 2012, p. 8).

By the time of the consolidation of Buddhist beliefs in Tang-period China, human-headed birds and other imaginary animals that had been so prominent even





Fig. 18. (above left) Petroglyph depicting bird men leading paired horses to a narrow opening guarded by a frontal figure. Within the enclosure to the right is a crouching figure holding paired horses. Baga Oigor, Mongolian Altai. Photo © 2005 Daniel C. Waugh.



Fig. 19. (left) Landscape with fabulous beings, detail insert showing human-headed bird, on northern slope of ceiling, Mogao Cave No. 249, Dunhuang. Western Wei Dynasty. After: Dunhuang 1999/1982, pls. 97, 103.

Fig. 20. (above right) Kimnaras, East Torana of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. After: Hallade 1968.

on the ceiling of the sixth-century Western Wei Cave 249 at Dunhuang (Fig. 19) were disappearing.

There remained one further role for human-headed birds, this time in India. As *kimnaras*, a form of *apsaras* (heavenly beings), they decorated a stupa, that

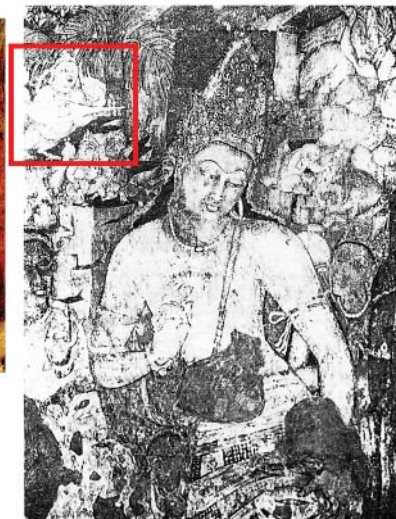
symbol of Buddhism, in first century Sanchi (Fig. 20), and also serenaded Padmapani, a form of Avalokiteshvara or Bodhisattva of Mercy, in a sublime painting in late fifth century Cave 1, Ajanta (Fig. 21). No longer connoting death, *kimnaras* indicated the supreme joy of release from earthly cravings, the essence of Buddhism.

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**Rosalind Bradford** studied Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Toronto, Harvard University (AM 1960) and the London School of Economics. Many years later, her growing interest in early East Asia and in Central Asia led her to enroll in the University of Pennsylvania, Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and earn a PhD in 2009. Her dissertation was published as *The Guyuan Sarcophagus: Motifs from All Asia*, 3 vols. (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing,



Fig. 21. Kimnara serenading Padmapani, Cave 1, Ajanta. B/w image after: Harle 1986, Fig. 284; color detail after: Behl 1998, p. 71.





2011-12) and is available on Amazon. E-mail: <rosalind.bradford@alumni.utoronto.ca>

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## Notes

1. The late Beth Knox, Royal Ontario Museum, dated Bharhut to 150 BCE (personal communication).

2. Birrell 1999. Illustrations were added centuries later. Bruce Brooks says the first five books date to the fourth century BCE (personal communication)..

3. In West Asia, they occurred only rarely on Sumerian cylinder seals. See, for example, the Early Dynastic III seal depicted in Waterbury 1952, pl. 2, B, where the human-headed bird is on the lower left.

4. Mycenaean and Minoan art does not include bird-bodied females.

5. Harpies, also human-headed birds, effected starvation through their disgusting habits.

6. Hellenistic sirens are shown in the Pergamon Museum. Alexander and his successors, the Seleucids, founded a number of cities in Central Asia including Taxila and Ai Khanum (Bernard 1994, pp 91 ff).



Plate V

