

The Burial Rite: an Expression of Sogdian Beliefs and Practices

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As a sequel to contributions on the life and times of the Sogdians, highlighted in volume 1/2 of this Newsletter, this article focuses on the treatment of the dead in a funerary monument from Sogdiana. In a review of the archaeology of Sogdiana in that Newsletter, Boris Marshak has brought attention to a change in the funerary practices of the Sogdians marked by the appearance, from the fifth century, of vaulted surface burial chambers (Marshak 2003). These chambers, which were built until the eighth century at Panjikent, Samarkand and Bukhara, housed ossuaries in which were collected and placed the bones of the dead in accordance to a manner that Marshak there compares with the Zoroastrian Persian custom. Marshak also draws attention to the appearance of the Zoroastrian-type fire cult in some Sogdian temple complexes that date to the fifth century. These observations now justify reexamination of the artistic context, meaning and function of a remarkable funerary rite associated with a Sogdian royal personage, depicted in a mural from the sanctuary of the Temple II complex, at Panjikent, dated to the early sixth century CE.

The Sogdian mourning scene

The focal point of the mural in the principal sanctuary of Temple II at Panjikent is a mourning scene represented as a large composition along the entire face of the temple's south wall (Fig. 1). This mural shows the funeral bier of a youthful personage, whose death is mourned by both mortals and gods. Although the identity of the deceased is a matter for conjecture, the ritual depicted in this composition appears as a reference to what might have been customary practice, recorded also on ossuaries from Khwarezm and

Sogdiana. In these scenes explicit demonstrations of mourning, which were prohibited by the Persian Zoroastrian church, are combined with the Zoroastrian-type burial in ossuaries. This mixture of pre-Zoroastrian and Zoroastrian practices is reflected also in Sogdian religious concepts, hence, for example, the implied participation of gods in this otherwise ordinary funerary ritual. One of the curious features of the mourning scene from Temple II at Panjikent is the depiction of a seemingly domed funeral bier which is borne by a row of mourners, a feature that may suggest the display of the corpse in a temporary structure, such as a tent or a yurt, prior to its eventual disposal in a permanent installation, a practice known among some Central and northeast Asian peoples.

Earliest antecedents and later parallels for the display of the corpse in temporary structures prior to its burial

The practice of temporary burial in a nomadic tent is first recorded in Jordanes' *Getica* in connection with the Hunnic burial of Attila in AD 453:

His body was placed in the midst of a plain and laid in state in a silk tent as a site for men's admiration. The best horsemen of the entire tribe of the Huns rode around in circles, after the manner of the circus games.... When they had mourned him with such lamentations, a *strada*, as they call it, was celebrated over his tomb with great reveling.... Then in the secrecy of night they buried the body in the earth [Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 275].

Attila's burial was compared by Otto-Dorn (1964: 139) with that practiced in the seventh and eighth centuries by the *Tou-kiue*, the Western Turks, who exposed the body in a tent prior to its disposal. Tent burial was also practiced by the Mongol Great Khans of Mongolia and northern China, and has survived to the present century

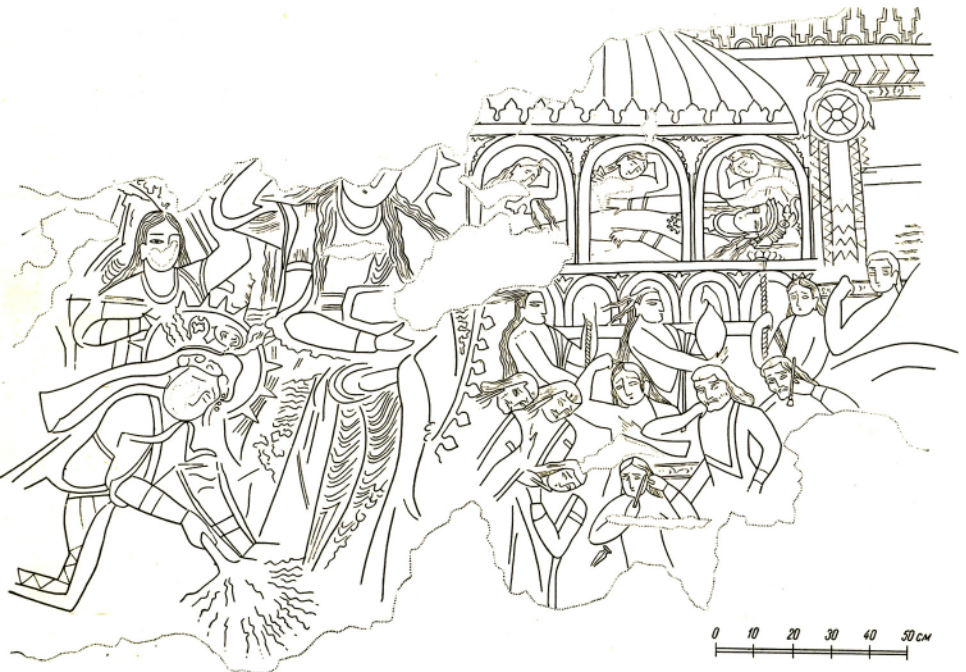


Fig. 1. Mural of funerary rite, south wall of Temple II complex, Panjikent

among the Tungus and Mongol tribes of northeast Asia. The encampment, or *ordu*, of the Mongol Great Khan was used after his death as a temporary burial place that housed his body during the performance of funerary rites. The Khan's *yurt*, though occupied by his wife, became taboo (*qoruq*) after his death and was maintained as his symbolic burial place. Adaptation or emulation of the Turco-Mongol yurt as a model for the temporary burial depicted in the Sogdian mural from Panjikent, finds other echoes in later burial practices, such as in the Islamic tomb towers of eastern Iran and their subsequent Anatolian versions (Azarpay 1981a).

The significance of the parallels with other artistic traditions

The foregoing comparisons are not intended to imply an identity between Turco-Mongol tent burials and Sogdian funerary practices. What the Sogdian mural from Temple II at Panjikent suggests, rather, is the artist's enhancement of the importance of a local event by its equation with the prevailing practices of other royalty with which the Sogdians had become familiar. Another instance of the enhanced status for the deceased is perhaps claimed at a pavilion, reportedly decorated with images of the kings of the four quarters, at Kushaniyah (presumably situated midway between Samarkand and Bukhara; see Azarpay 1981b: 132) where Sogdian princes are said to have paid homage. The account of these images now finds material parallels in depictions of rulers of various lands, carved in relief, on a series of stone panels associated with Sogdian tombs uncovered in China in recent years. The enhancement of meaning in a given theme in Sogdian art, achieved through the use of the prevailing artistic formulas of the time, finds another notable expression in the particulars of the mourners from the Panjikent mural from Temple II, which correspond with those from Parinirvana scenes, found in Buddhist cave paintings from Kizil, Kucha and elsewhere along the Silk Road.

About the author

Guitty Arzapay is a Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She has made valuable contributions to the study of the arts of the Silk Road: in addition to her frequently-cited book, *Sogdian Painting* (1981), her articles include "Iran and Silk Road: Art and Trade along Asia's Crossroads," *Iran Nameh* XIV/2 (1996), and "A Jataka Tale on a Sasanian Silver Plate," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1997). In recent years she has focussed attention on important electronic cataloguing projects: *Sasanian Sealstones: an Electronic Cataloging Project* (Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative/California Digital Library; <http://ecai.berkeley.edu/sasanianweb/>) and the *Pahlavi Archive Electronic Publication Project*, cataloguing an important collection of seals and manuscripts in the Bancroft Library.

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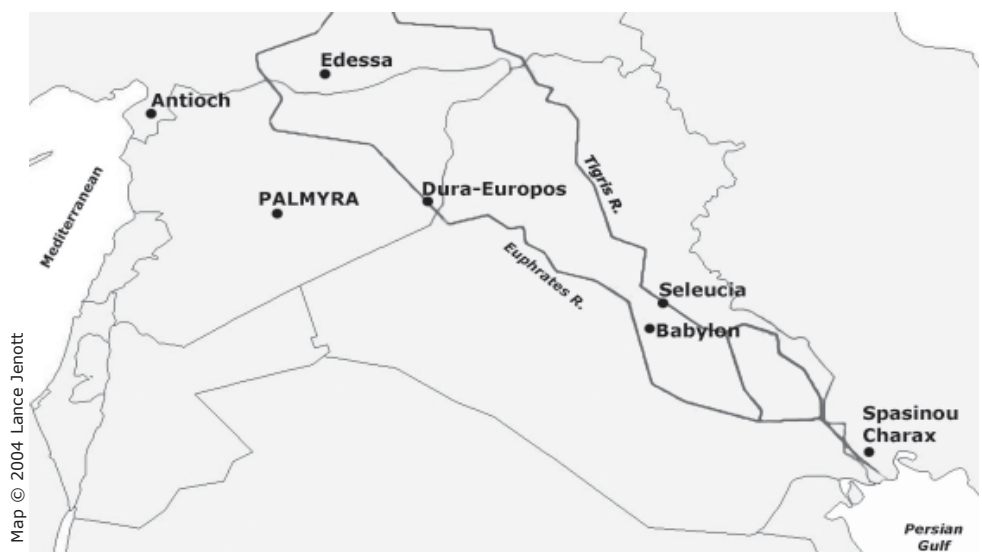


Fig. 1. Palmyra and its neighbors