

Zoroastrian Funerary Beliefs and Practices Known from the Sino-Sogdian Tombs in China

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Until a little more than 50 years ago our knowledge of Sogdians and other Central Asians living in China was limited to written sources. Since then, the identification and discovery in north and northwest China of their tombs and funerary furnishings have provided us with heretofore unknown information about these foreigners and their descendants who lived among the Chinese in the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, Sui and early Tang periods (second half of the 6th to the mid-7th century). Specifically, the stone funerary beds and sarcophagi from their tombs offer us a unique and vivid glimpse into their lives – their appearance and dress, their mercantile and diplomatic pursuits, their pastimes (such as hunts and banquets),¹ and their religious beliefs. Among the most intriguing aspects of these depictions is that, although these tomb owners were buried in Chinese-style tombs on a Chinese-style stone bed or within a Chinese-style stone sarcophagus, each individual owner's choice of decoration for his bed or sarcophagus reveals his affiliation with at least some aspect of Central Asian culture and the religion that was prevalent there – Zoroastrianism or, more broadly, Mazdaism.

Even more intriguing is that the carved decoration on some of these beds and sarcophagi illustrates specific Zoroastrian funerary rites for which we have no visual documentation in Sogdiana itself, in other parts of Central Asia, or even in Iran, where some form of Mazdaism was practiced. These funerary rituals, known only from the Zoroastrian texts and the actual funerary practices of Zoroastrians and their Parsee co-religionists in India, along with beliefs associated with the soul of deceased entering Paradise, are the subject of this article – but first, a brief background on these beds and sarcophagi.

The use of beds and sarcophagi by Central Asians

Characteristic of Zoroastrian funerary practice is exposure of the corpse to birds of prey and other scavengers. The bones are then gathered and deposited in ossuaries, stone or ceramic containers that are often decorated with images of Zoroastrian deities or some aspect of Zoroastrian ceremony. This practice, though, was not universal; there is evidence in Sogdiana, as well as in Iran, of other means of treating the corpse. Not found in Sogdiana and Iran, however, and seemingly antithetical to Zoroastrian belief, is deep ground inhumation within a structure such as the Chinese tomb of this period – that is to say, a subterranean square chamber with domed roof, reached by a long and sloping narrow shaft or corridor, its walls embellished with paintings, and its inclusion of grave goods, such as personal belongings and funerary models (*mingqi*), as well as a stone funerary bed or sarcophagus to support or contain the deceased's remains.²

That foreigners living in China also used such stone funerary furniture became known when, in the 1950s, Gustina Scaglia recognized that the three carved stone panels shared by Boston and Paris and two gateposts in Cologne depict Central Asians and thus were made for a member of that community living in China. To date, we have evidence of nine examples of funerary beds and sarcophagi attributed to these foreigners: six stone beds and three stone sarcophagi. Some come from excavated contexts, which have also yielded other funerary furnishings, including in most cases the epitaph stone giving the name and biography of the deceased. Unfortunately, others were acquired on the art market, thereby depriving us of important information about the tomb owner, other than what can be inferred

from their decoration.³ Many more tombs of these Central Asians await discovery (in the old imperial capital of Xi'an alone, archaeologists have plotted at least 40 additional tombs waiting excavation in the areas that yielded the two stone beds and one stone sarcophagus mentioned here).⁴

Based on the visual evidence from the relief carvings on these beds and sarcophagi, as well as on the epitaphs that have survived, we know that at least seven of these men were elites in the foreign communities in different cities in China.⁵ The owners of the bed in the Kooros collection and of the sarcophagus found at Yidu (in Shandong) seem to have been highly-placed Han Chinese or of nomadic Xianbei origin. Like other elites (including some members of the different dynastic royal families ruling in this period) they had adopted some of the visual imagery of the Sogdians in their midst and apparently even followed some of their practices.⁶

Zoroastrian funerary practice and belief

With this knowledge of the tombs of Central Asians who lived in China, let us look at how their beds and sarcophagi depict their funerary rites and beliefs. As prescribed by the Avestan scriptural text, the *Vendidad*, the Zoroastrian funeral ritual consists of continuous prayers and ceremonies over the course of three full days and nights (divided into five "watches" or *gahs*), performed in the house of the deceased. On the fourth day the corpse is conveyed to the *dakhma*. This is the so-called "tower of silence," a brick- or stone-lined structure that keeps the corpse from coming into contact with the earth (and thereby defiling the earth), and allows its exposure as carrion (Russell 1989, p. 561).⁷ It is on this fourth day ("*chahārōm*") that the soul is believed to make its way across the Chinvat Bridge into paradise, but only after its life on earth has been judged worthy of this passage.

The Sagdīd Ceremony

Central to the funerary rite is the *sagdīd* ("the viewing by the dog"), which is done three times in the course of a funeral. The first *sagdīd* is performed immediately after the death. The dog, regarded as beneficent and righteous, is made to look at the deceased, since its gaze is believed to

drive away the evil and polluting spirit of dead matter (*nasā*) which tries to attack the dead body; it also is believed to discern better than a human that a person is dead (Modi 1922/1979, pp. 58-68). The second *sagdīd* is made in the course of the three-day watch over the corpse, after it has been washed and the ritual fire kindled, and just before it is removed to the *dakhma*. The third *sagdīd* occurs after the funeral procession has reached the *dakhma*: the dog gives a final glance at the corpse just before it is left.

The *sagdīd* is clearly depicted on the central panel of the funerary bed in the Miho Museum, which dates to the Northern Qi period (550-577 CE): in a rocky landscape, in the upper part of the composition, a long-robed Zoroastrian priest stands before a fire altar; the lower part of his face is covered by the *padām*, the white veil that prevents pollution of the sacred fire by human breath [Fig. 1]. Behind him are four men, two kneeling and two standing, holding knives to

Fig. 1. The central panel of the Miho Museum funerary bed depicting the *sagdīd* ceremony.

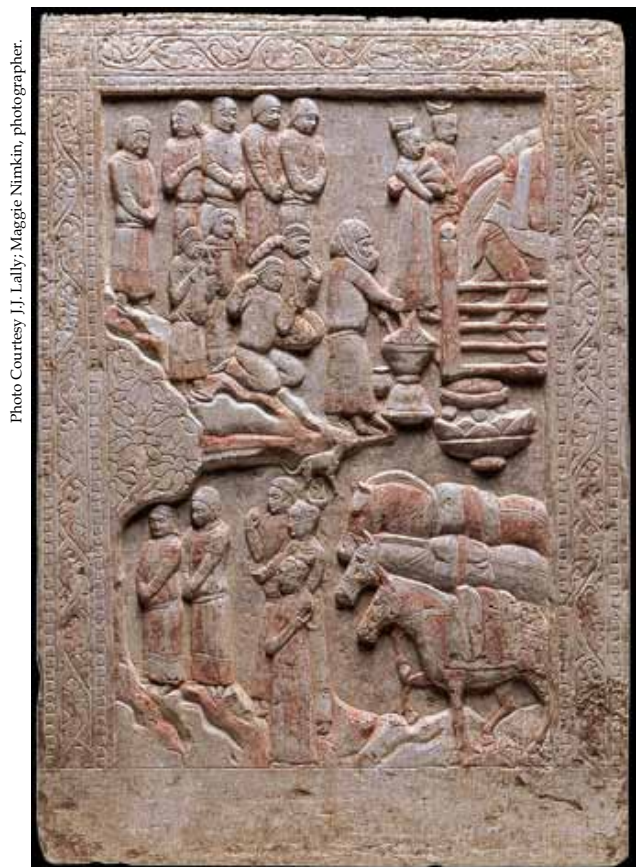


Photo Courtesy J.J. Lally; Maggie Nimkin, photographer.

their heads; five additional men appear behind them, standing with downcast eyes and clasped hands. On the other side of the fire, or to either side of it, are a pedestal dish that holds some type of food, a tripod stand filled with some other foodstuff or incense, and on the far side, between the priest and the brazier, a round-bellied vase. The priest is performing the *āfrīnagān*, the liturgical ceremony of blessing before the sacred fire in which offerings of flowers and such edibles as fruit, bread and wine, water, milk, and sorbet are shared by the worshippers (Modi 1979/1922, pp. 377 ff and esp. pp. 391–94). Beyond these objects, in the upper right, are two women, one of whom holds a folded cloth, and the hindquarters of three camels behind a portion of a railing. We shall return to this part of the composition later. In the lower half of the panel, a group of men and women stand in reverent poses before a tree, with three saddled horses behind them.

The standing and kneeling men who stab at their heads or cut their hair are mourners, exhibiting their grief in a manner that is antithetical to the Zoroastrian texts (Grenet 1984, pp. 40–41) but one that is known from painted scenes of grieving at Sogdian Panjikent in Tajikistan and at Kizil in the Kucha oasis in Chinese Turkestan (Lerner 1995, p. 184). That this is the mourning ritual of *sagdīd* is shown by the figure of a dog, just below that of the priest, in the precise center of the scene: the first *sagdīd* has been performed to ascertain that death has occurred; the fire has now been lit and the dog brought again to gaze on the corpse [Fig. 2]. Whether this is the second or final *sagdīd* is difficult to say. After the washing of the corpse the fire is lit and the dog brought again to gaze on the corpse, and indeed, the women in the

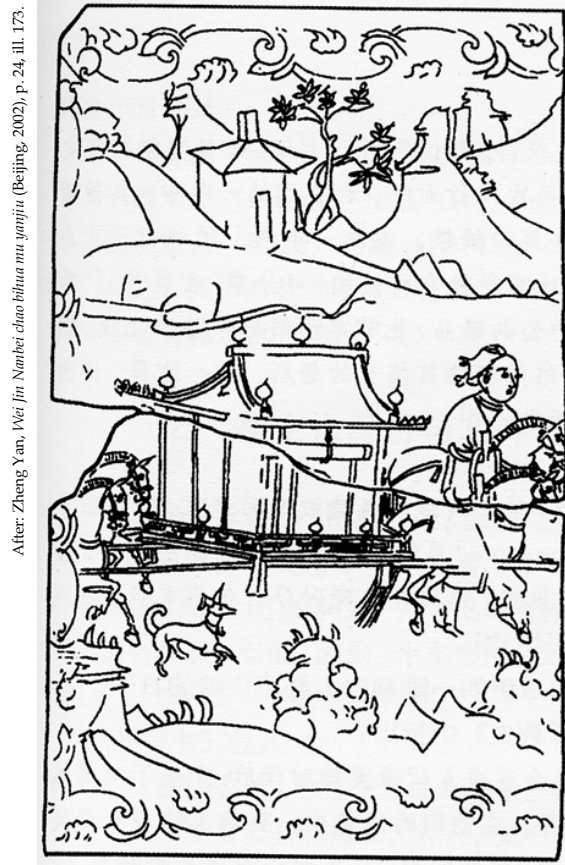


upper right, as will be discussed, appear to be participants in a ritual that occurs before removal of the corpse and the third *sagdīd*. But the rocky landscape and the railing and camels also

Fig. 2. Detail of the *sagdīd* ceremony on the Miho panel.

in the upper right may instead, as will also be discussed, indicate the events of the fourth day or *chahārōm*.

Certainly relating to the third and last *sagdīd* is a scene on one of nine engraved stone slabs that formed an apparently house-shaped sarcophagus found at Yidu, Shandong, and which is dated by its associated epitaph stone (now lost) to 573 CE, during the Northern Qi [Fig. 3] (Lerner forthcoming). The slab shows a rider commanding



Alter: Zheng Yan, *Wei jin Nanbei chao bishu mu yanjiu* (Beijing, 2002), p. 24, ill. 173.

Fig. 3: Panel from a sarcophagus found at Yidu, Shandong, 573 CE, showing a sarcophagus being transported (line drawing).

a team of four horses that bears a house-shaped sarcophagus with the same hip-and-gable roof as the sarcophagi that housed the remains of other Central Asians buried in excavated tombs, Yu Hong and Shi Jun.⁸ This surely represents the tomb owner's sarcophagus being brought to his tomb. The presence of the small dog — similar in breed to that on the Miho panel — running alongside refers to the final viewing of the corpse

that will take place when the procession has reached the tomb.

Perhaps also referring to the rites performed at the Chinvat Bridge are the two priests, each standing before a low fire bowl, one on each gatepost of the Anyang bed, both gateposts now in the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne [Fig. 4]. Like the priest on the Miho panel, they plunge a long stick or rod into the fire, although the Miho priest holds two sticks to the flames. These are the *barsom*, the ritual twigs used in the typical fire ceremony,⁹ known as an “outer” service. As noted by Frantz Grenet, this is in contrast with the “inner” service and does not need to take place on consecrated ground (Grenet 2007, pp. 470–71). Long sticks are held in a similar manner by the “priest-birds,” half-man and half-bird, who wear the *padam* over their mouths, and tend the sacred fire on the *sabao* Shi Jun’s sarcophagus, as well as by the pair of “priest-birds” who each hold the barsom over an offering table on the lunette above the door to the *sabao* An Qie’s tomb chamber (Grenet 2007, fig. 9).¹⁰ These hybrid creatures are affiliates of Sraosh, the god of obedience and cultic activity, who is associated with the passage of the soul into paradise. On an ossuary from Sivaz (southern Sogdiana) a priest holds similar sticks over an offering table in what Grenet interprets as the *chahārōm* ceremony (Grenet 1993, fig. 6 and p. 61).

Returning to the *sagdīd*, we have seen that the Miho couch and the Yidu sarcophagus illustrate a funerary ritual central to Zoroastrian belief, as yet not found in the indigenous art of Zoroastrians in Sogdiana. Even though on the evidence of these panels Zoroastrians in China do not seem to have actually exposed the corpse (indeed, it was forbidden) they apparently performed the *sagdīd*, with the third and final one presumably taking

Photo courtesy of the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne.



Fig. 4: Ends of the Anyang gateposts, each showing a priest holding the barsom.

The Chinvat Bridge

At the dawn of the fourth day the soul of the deceased crosses the “Bridge of Judgment” (*Chinvat Pul*). Various rites are performed to facilitate this difficult passage: if the deceased’s good thoughts, words and deeds in life are deemed sufficient, the bridge widens and the soul is met by a beautiful maiden, the *dēn*, who helps it cross over to paradise (called by Zoroastrians the “House of Song”); however, if the soul has been judged wicked, the *dēn* appears as an ugly maiden, the bridge narrows like a razor blade, and the soul falls into hell. Determining the soul’s fate is the divine tribunal, consisting of the gods Mithra and Sraosh, along with Rashn, who weighs the good and the evil deeds of the soul with his spiritual balance (Taffazoli 1991).

The weighing of the soul decorates an ossuary from Afrasiab, in Sogdiana (Pugachenkova 1996, fig. 12),¹³ but for illustrations of the *entire* passage over the Chinvat Bridge, as described in the Zoroastrian texts, we again turn to the Sino-Sogdian monuments. Shi

Jun’s sarcophagus provides us with a detailed illustration in the carvings on its eastern wall [Fig. 6, next page]. Following the description of Grenet, Pénélope Riboud, and Yang Junkai (2004,



Fig. 5. Woman holding the sedra, detail from the Miho panel.

place at the tomb instead of at a *dakhma*.¹¹

The Sedra

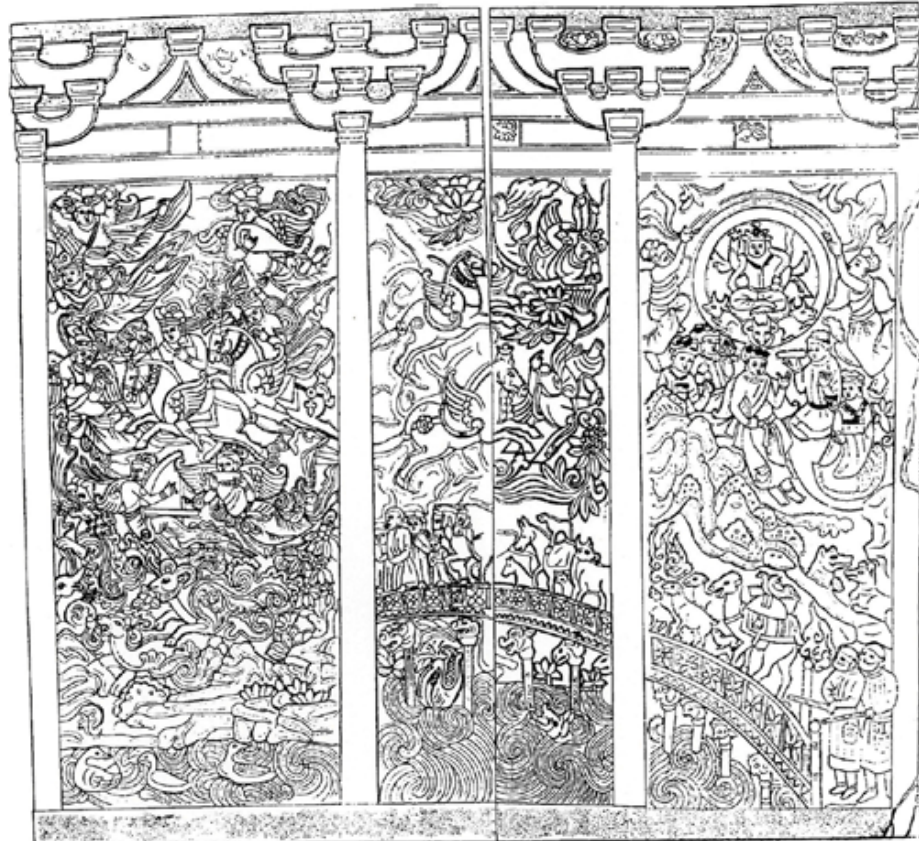
At the end of the last watch of the third day, the priest blesses a length of cloth that will serve as “a ‘spirit-garment’ for the soul in the hereafter.” This is the *sedra*, symbolic of the sacred shirt that every adult Zoroastrian wears (Boyce 1977, pp. 154–55). Frantz Grenet (2009) has identified as the *sedra* the cloth held by one of the women in the Miho *sagdīd* panel [Fig. 5]. This seems to be, so far, the only depiction of the *sedra* in the funeral rite.¹²

Fig. 6. Drawing of the panels on the eastern wall of Shi Jun's sarcophagus, excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi.

pp. 276–83), in the lower central and right panels we see the Chinvat Bridge, its supports topped by monstrous heads, arching over a churning sea from which other demonic heads emerge. In the lower right, two Zoroastrian priests stand at the entrance of the Bridge, each holding long *barsom* bundles in performance of the *chahārōm* service; shown above them (but probably intended to be standing to the side) are the two dogs that guard the Bridge. These and other details of the soul's journey after death are

paralleled in the Zoroastrian texts (see Grenet 2007, pp. 492–93). Moving across the Bridge is a caravan with camels and other beneficent animal species deemed appropriate for paradise. This entourage is led by Shi Jun and his wife who have successfully reached the other end and have ascended to paradise. Above this scene is the next stage in Shi Jun's heavenly ascent, before the Sogdian god Vayu-Weshparkar and the welcoming figure of the *dēn*, pictured here as a winged maiden accompanied by two other women without wings who respectively hold a cup and flowers, attributes that in the texts are ascribed to the *dēn* herself (Grenet 2007, p. 494).

Based on this clear depiction of the soul's passage across the Chinvat Bridge, Yang Junkai has interpreted the upper right portion of the Miho panel with its camels placed behind a railing and the women with the *sedra* as another depiction of the Bridge (Grenet, Riboud and Yang 2004, p. 279). Militating against this identification is the single priest and lone dog; however, this small element at the edge of the panel may refer to the crossing of the Bridge as the next sequence of the funeral



After: Kaogu 7 [2004], 44, fig. 6

ceremony, after the second *sagdīd* or perhaps the third and after the blessing of the *sedra*. Indeed, it may suggest that the panel actually represents the third *sagdīd* since its setting is a rocky landscape, which could fit with the location of a *dakhma* (see n. 6). Or the Miho panel preserves elements of the Zoroastrian funerary rite as the tomb owner wished it to be presented for eternity.

Conclusion: Zoroastrian imagery and Sino-Sogdian art

The Miho bed, the gateposts of the Anyang bed, and Shi Jun's and the Yidu sarcophagi illustrate specific Zoroastrian beliefs and practices associated with death that are not found in the art of Sogdiana; they are also unique among the other examples we have of funerary furniture from other foreigners' tombs in China. We must note, however, that the beds and sarcophagi of these foreigners — as well as the four examples highlighted here — are replete with other Zoroastrian subject matter: beribboned birds and hybrid creatures, such as the *Senmurv*, who are believed to protect humans from evil and malice;

half-man and half-bird beings in addition to those from Shi Jun's and An Qie's tombs; a depiction of paradise, replete with dancers and musicians (Lerner 1995; Grenet 2007). Most of these images have counterparts in Sogdiana itself, in contrast to the scenes discussed here of actual Zoroastrian funerary practices — rituals that we can observe only on these Sino-Sogdian beds and sarcophagi.

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Judith A. Lerner is an independent art historian in New York City and a Research Associate at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. She specializes in the art and archaeology of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia, with particular expertise in the glyptic art of Sasanian Iran and regions to the east: Bactria, Sogdiana, and Gandhara. Her interest in the Greater Iranian world of Central Asia has led to her work on the funerary art of Sogdians and other Central Asians who lived in China during the 6th and 7th centuries (see bibliography). Other publications include, with Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Seals, Sealings and Tokens from Bactria to Gandhara (4th to 8th Century CE)* ("Studies in the Aman ur Rahman Collection 2"); Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011); "Observations on the Typology and Style of Seals and Sealings from Bactria and Greater Gandhāra," in *Coins, Art and Chronology II. The First Millennium CE in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands*, M. Alram, D. Klimburg-Salter, M. Inaba, and M. Pfisterer, eds. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010): 245-66; and "An Alan Seal," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* N.S. 19 (2005 [2009]): 83-89. She also co-edits the *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology*. She can be reached at <judith.lerner@nyu.edu>.

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Notes

1. The hunting scenes do not necessarily commemorate an activity pursued in life by the deceased (especially when a lion hunt is depicted) but more likely perpetuate a popular theme in Sasanian and Sogdian art. In contrast, the banquet scenes, also a major pictorial theme in Iran and Sogdiana, may well immortalize an actual pastime of the deceased and additionally refer to his well-being in paradise. It is noteworthy that both pictorial themes — the hunt and the banquet — are the *razm u basm* (fighting, hunting and feasting) that continue to be celebrated in Iranian poetry and painting of the Islamic period.

2. Yet the use of stone beds and sarcophagi need not be in conflict with Zoroastrian beliefs, as they prevent the body from coming into contact with the earth and thereby polluting it. Further, we cannot be sure that none of the corpses of Central Asians were exposed. While we have evidence from some of the excavated tombs for the interment of the complete body, we cannot be certain that the bodies were not exposed and their bones subsequently gathered and placed in an ossuary or other container upon the bed or within the sarcophagus. See Lerner 2005, pp. 8–12; and note 7 below.

3. Of the six funerary beds, three have been excavated (that found in Tianshui, in Gansu; those of An Qie and Kang Ye in Xi'an, Shaanxi, the Northern Zhou and Sui capital) and three others are in museums: Scaglia's bed, attributed to Anyang, Henan, near Ye, the Northern Qi capital, is divided among the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Musée Guimet, Paris, and the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne, and what most likely is its base is in the Freer Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the other two beds are in the Miho Museum, Shigaraki, Japan; and the Vahid

Kooros collection, Houston, TX. Of the three sarcophagi, two are scientifically excavated, and the third was salvaged from an irrigation ditch: that of Yu Hong, from near Taiyuan, Shanxi; that of Shi Jun (whose Sogdian name was Wirkak) from Xi'an; and that from Yidu, was found as slabs that originally formed the walls of a sarcophagus. References for all nine monuments through 2005 are in Lerner 2005.

4. That these areas were burial grounds not only for Sogdian and other Central Asian elites but for other exalted foreigners is suggested by the discovery in 2005 of the tomb of Li Dan (d. 564), who, according to his epitaph, was a Brahman émigré from Kashmir who in his lifetime was recognized officially for his noble blood, and was appointed Prefect of Hanzhou posthumously by the Emperor (Lerner 2005, p. 2, n. 2).

5. An Qie and Shi Jun, were *sabaos*, a Chinese title indicating the head of the local Sogdian community, in Tongzhou (Dali, northeast of Xi'an) and Liangzhou (Wuwei), respectively. These Sogdian communities (though they probably included other foreigners), consisted mainly of merchants residing in China, but also of others, such as craftsmen (for a discussion of the term, see Dien 2009 and references within). Yu Hong served as an emissary to various countries in Central and Western Asia as well as in India, while Kang Ye was posthumously awarded the provincial governorship of Ganzhou.

6. For example, the annals documenting the latter part of the Northern Wei dynasty (early 6th century) mention royalty and nobility following Zoroastrian precepts. See Liu 1976.

7. The place of exposure need not be an enclosed space built above ground, but can be an arid tract of land so that the corpse cannot contaminate water, earth, or vegetation (see Boyce and Grenet 1991, p. 130). Indeed, the artificially-constructed "tower" as a place of exposure is a development of the Islamic period.

8. The use of house-shaped sarcophagi in China is a development of the 5th century, one century prior to Sogdian use of the form. Wu Hung has noted that such sarcophagi "were favored by [the nomadic] Xianbei, Sogdian and other people of either Chinese or non-Chinese origins who moved to north China from the West" (Wu 2002,

p. 40). These people continue to use sarcophagi, as well as stone beds, into the 6th and early 7th centuries, the same time span as the Central Asian burials. For further discussion of house-shaped sarcophagi in China and house-shaped ossuaries in Sogdiana, see Lerner 2005, pp. 8 (with n. 13) and 11.

9. In ancient practice, the *barsom*, as shown in Sogdian and Sino-Sogdian depictions — as well as in Sasanian representations, such as the figures to either side of the fire altar on coin reverses — seems to have made of long sticks; in more recent times the *barsom* is a bundle of short twigs or metal. In contrast to the Sogdian and Sino-Sogdian images, those from Sasanian Iran — on coin reverses, rock reliefs and seals — show the *barsom* raised and never pointed into the fire.

10. A similar pair of bird-men holds what seems to be the *barsom* on a carved base that most likely supported the panels of the Miho bed. However, they do not actually tend the flames, as in place of the fire altar is a Chinese-style censer that appears above them (Juliano and Lerner 2001).

11. Of course, it is possible that the *sagdīd* was not actually practiced, but was an artistic convention, recalling this important funerary rite from the Sogdian homeland. Yet there *is* some evidence of excarnation in China into the early 8th century; and the outdoor setting on the Miho panel may support this. For additional references to exposure of the corpse in China — among Buddhists as well as Zoroastrians — and to evidence of members of the imperial family and the nobility following Zoroastrian precepts, see n. 6, above, and Lerner *forthcoming*, n. 43.

12. Grenet, however, identifies (2009, p. 107) the dressing of the already departed soul in the *sedra* in the decoration of two Sogdian ossuaries found at Sivaz, near Shahr-i Sabz, Uzbekistan, and dated to the 6th or 7th century. In the upper register the soul, naked except for a cap, is being wrapped in a cloth held by two deities, identified by Grenet as the *dēn*, the beautiful maiden who assists the soul in its entrance to paradise, and the god Wahman, the embodiment of Good Thought.

13. In this ossuary fragment, the railing of the Chinvat Bridge and the swirling waters appear below Rashn who holds the scales and Sraosh who stands nearby.