

Specimens of Religious Scenes on Sino-Sogdian Funerary Monuments and Sogdian Ossuaries

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Abstract

Richly embellished tombs of powerful Sogdian immigrants found in China have greatly increased our knowledge on Central Asians who were active along the so-called Silk Road during medieval times. Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments often display scenes such as banquets, hunts, and funerals with images of Sogdian Zoroastrian deities that offer interesting parallels with Sogdian paintings and ossuaries from pre-Islamic sites in modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The comparative study of the representations of the passage into the Zoroastrian underworld in Sino-Sogdian art and several Sogdian ossuaries could shed new light on the identification of Zoroastrian deities and rituals.

Keywords: Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments, Sogdian art, Zoroastrian deities, ossuary.

The immigration and settlement of Sogdian people in China represent a well-known subject among researchers of Central Asian and the Silk Road studies. According to Chinese written sources, Sogdian Buddhist missionaries started to arrive just after the fall of the Han Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) while, during the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589), these immigrants were mainly traders and they followed other religions as well (De La Vaissière 2005: 77-9). Richly embellished tombs excavated in Gansu, Shaanxi and Shanxi, and even family cemeteries found in Xinjiang and Ningxia definitely demonstrated that many Sogdian immigrants had settled in China especially during the sixth century CE. Scientifically excavated funerary monuments to be certainly attributed to powerful Sogdians were found in the northern suburbs of Xi'an. Investigations conducted on these monuments allowed to include in the group of "Sino-Sogdian" funerary objects also unexcavated ones that are now part of public and private collections (Marshak 2001, Zheng 2001, Lerner 2005, Wertmann 2015).

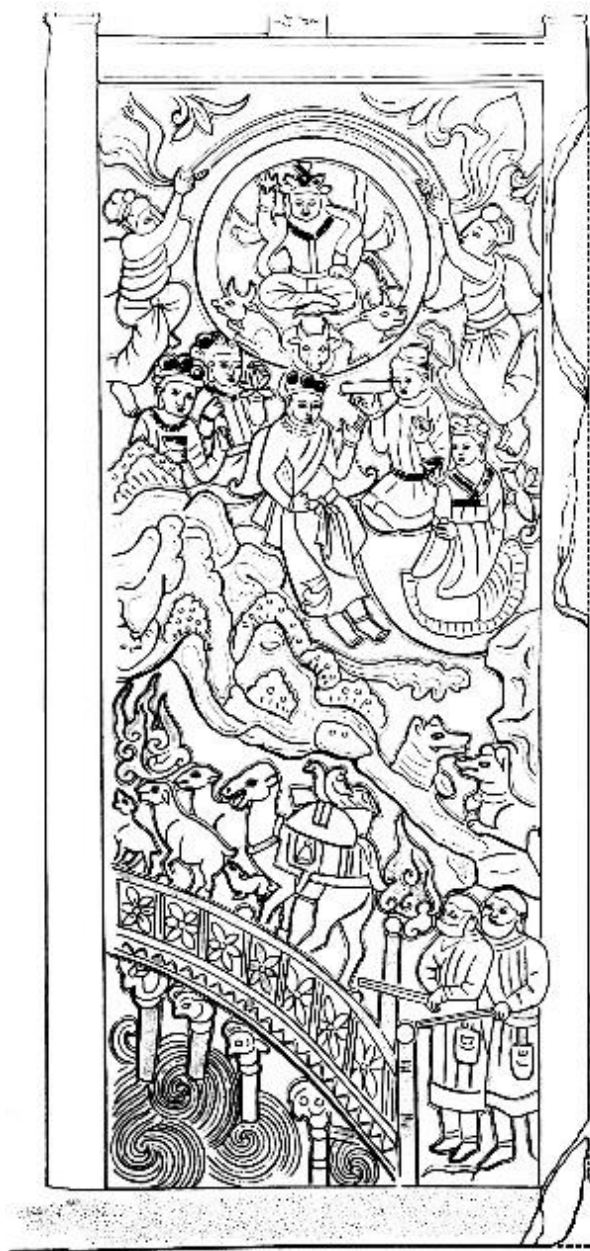


Fig. 1 - Shi Jun/Wirkak funerary monument. Shaanxi History Museum (after Grenet, Riboud, Yang 2004: fig. 3).

The term “Sino-Sogdian” art started to be adopted by experts to describe those monuments that included both “sarcophagi” shaped as houses and funerary couches that were quite common in pre-Tang northern China (Müller 2019). As it is obvious to expect in situations like this, powerful Sogdians in China preferred to display local habits to appear as much as possible to be Sinicized officials. Some Chinese sources do not hesitate to disapprove of Sogdian funerary habits rooted in Zoroastrian traditions such as next-of-kin marriage and exposing the dead to be eaten by dogs (Grenet 2015: 142-3).

Studies intensified in the last twenty years on Sino-Sogdian monuments. They should be considered most likely the creation of Chinese artists. However, the scenes and subjects depicted on Sino-Sogdian monuments are clearly rooted in the religion and culture of Sogdiana with very little Buddhist or Manichaean elements. Scenes such as banquets, hunts, and funerals can be found often on Sino-Sogdian monuments. Images of Sogdian “Zoroastrian” deities also sometimes appear on Sino-Sogdian monuments and a parallel can be usually traced with Sogdian paintings from pre-Islamic sites from modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Shenkar 2014).

Chinese authors used the specific term Xian (祆) to describe Sogdian religion that could be considered a local form of the faith usually called by scholars “Zoroastrianism” or “Mazdeism” (Riboud 2005). Many Avestan deities (and even Mesopotamian Nana) preserved their relevance in Xian religion. According to written sources, Ahura Mazda (called in Sogdian Adbagh) was an important deity in Sogdiana but not like in pre-Islamic Persia (Shenkar 2014: 63-5). Sogdian artists modelled the iconography of Adbagh on the one of Indian Indra; the elephant was his symbolic animal and the lyre his attribute (Compareti 2016: 228-30). Curiously enough, he does not seem to appear in any Sino-Sogdian monument while his description along with some other Xian deities can be found in Sogdian Buddhist texts exclusively found in China (Compareti 2009: 177-80).

On the other hand, Sogdians and other Central Asian people such as Chorasmians had different funerary habits in their motherland (Grenet 2013). Archaeological investigations that scholars have been carrying out since the end of World War II revealed that Central Asians mainly exposed the dead whose flesh had to be eaten by animals. They later collected the bones in special terracotta ossuaries that, in many cases,

presented interesting decorations. There were several differences between Sogdian and Chorasmian ossuaries while Bactrian ones have never been found (Bogomolov 2021). In this presentation, I would focus on religious scenes on Sino-Sogdian monuments excavated in northern China and Sogdian ossuaries that were found in the territory of modern Uzbekistan.

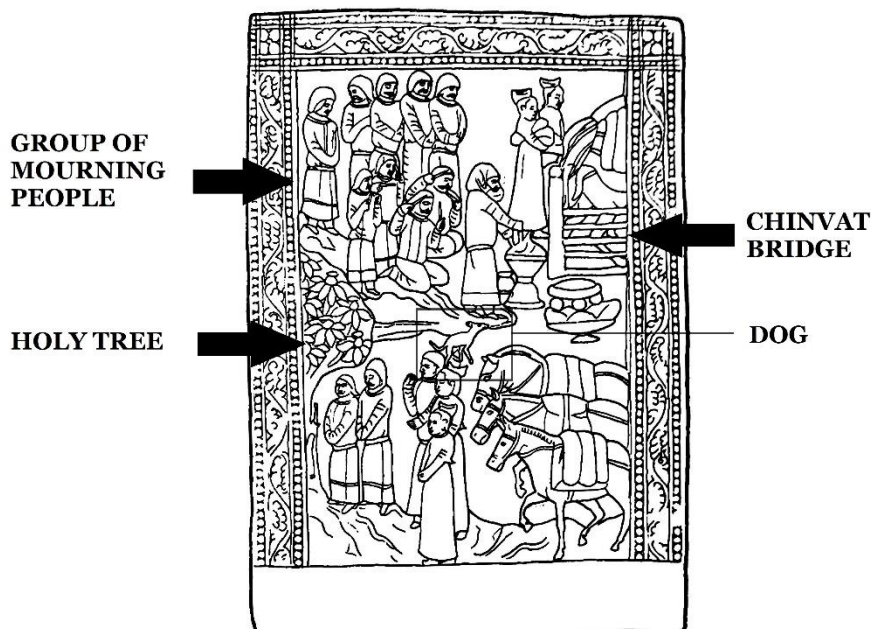


Fig. 2 - Miho Museum funerary monument. The Miho Museum, Shigaraki (Japan) (after Zheng 2001: fig. 25).

Zoroastrian deities appear sometimes on Sino-Sogdian monuments, the most interesting one being a god sitting on three bulls while holding a trident on the late sixth-century Shi Jun “stone house” (Fig. 1). He should be identified with Weshparkar who corresponded to the Avestan wind god Vayu. In fact, for some reason not completely clear, Sogdian artists had adopted the iconography of the Indian god Shiva to represent Weshparkar since the sixth century CE (Compareti 2009, Grenet 2013: 26-7). One inscription in Sogdian language on an eighth century painting from Penjikent (room 1, sector XXIV) definitely allowed to identify Weshparkar (wšpr) with a multi-armed and three-headed god who is even holding the typical trident of Shiva (Shenkar 2014: 154). Two attendants beside Weshparkar in the Shi Jun funerary monument are holding a drape

blown by the wind that reminds one of the iconography of wind deities in Greco-Roman art. This drape was an appropriate substitute for any other attribute connected to the Sogdian wind god whose iconography is the result of a mixture of different religious traditions.



Fig. 3 - Fragmentary ossuary. Tashkent History Museum, Tashkent
(after Bogomolov 2021: fig. 8.1).

The representation of Weshparkar in the Shi Jun stone house constitutes a very interesting funerary element. In fact, the scene in the lower part of the panel with Weshparkar is probably a representation of the passage of the Chinvat Bridge that Zoroastrian believers had to cross in the underworld: for the good believer the passage was very comfortable while for the sinner the bridge was going to become sharp like a blade. At the beginning of the bridge there are two Zoroastrian priests wearing a typical ritual mask (*padam*) and with sticks (*barsom*) in their hands. Two dogs, almost hidden behind some rocks, complete the scene that reminded scholars of Zoroastrian funerary rituals (Grenet, Riboud, Yang 2004: 279).

Another partial representation of the passage of the Chinvat Bridge appears in one panel of the so-called Miho Museum funerary couch that was probably excavated somewhere in China and is at present kept in Japan (Fig. 2). It is worth observing that also in the Miho Museum panel, there are camels and probably other animals of burden on the bridge

because the dead was a leader of a local Sogdian colony or, in Chinese, *sapao* (萨保 or 萨宝), a term that in origin pointed at the caravan leader. Next to the passage of the Chinvat Bridge there is a lamentation scene and some other people who seem to be praying in front of a (holy) tree (Lerner 1995: 185). As it was already recognized by some scholars, another panel of the Miho Museum funerary bed presents the prominent Sogdian goddess Nana with four hands behind a wall embellished with two lion heads. She is superseding a music and dance scene in the lower part of the panel (Marshak 2001: 234).

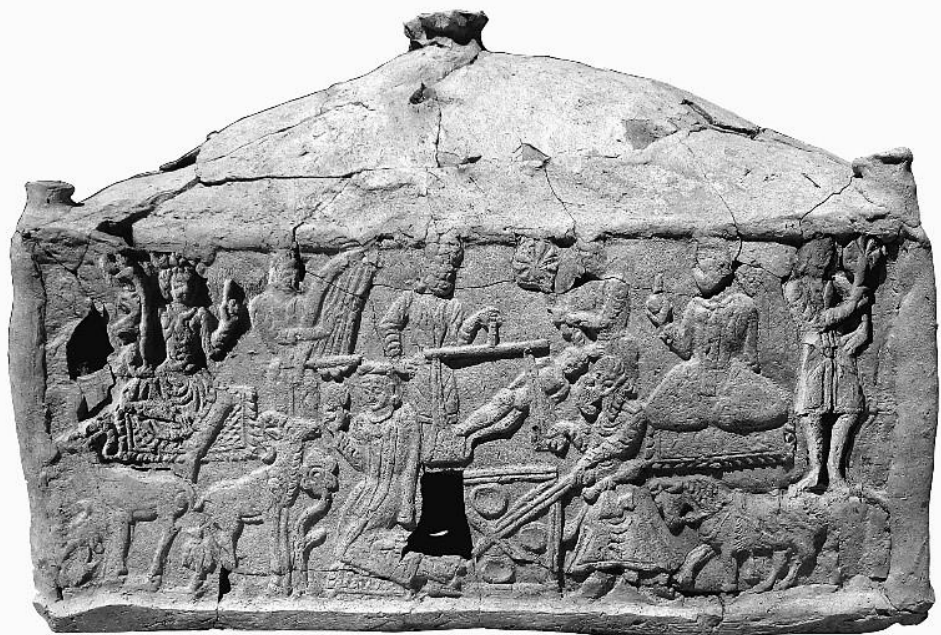


Fig. 3 - Yumalktepa ossuary. State Museum-Reserve of Shahrizabz (after Berdimuradov, Bogomolov, Daeppen, Khushvakov 2008: fig. 1).

One fragment of a non-scientifically excavated Sogdian ossuary kept in the Tashkent History Museum presents a scene taking place on a structure above water that could actually be the Chinvat Bridge (Fig. 3). In this case, there is no caravan passing the bridge but a scene that seems to be rooted in Zoroastrian traditions as well. There are two persons on the bridge: one is standing with a portable altar or another similar object in his right hand. With his left hand, he is holding the hand of another person

(possibly the soul of the dead) that is completely lost. In front of the standing deity, there is a person sitting cross-legged with a scale in his left hand. Most probably, this is a representation of the god Rashnu, whose attribute was the scale.

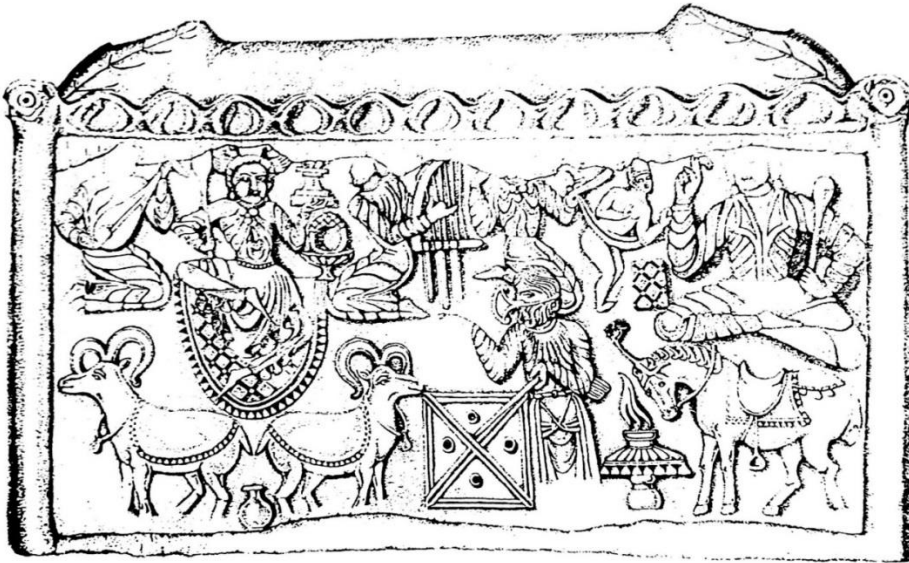


Fig. 4 - Sivas ossuary. Tashkent History Museum (after Grenet 1993: fig. 6).

According to Zoroastrian texts, Rashnu was a judge and he used a scale to test the soul of the dead (psychostasy) during his passage into the underworld (Grenet 1999: fig. 226). The other deity standing in front of Rashnu should be another important Zoroastrian god of the underworld. In the beginning of the fourth chapter of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian “Book of Arda Viraz” there is a clear description of the visit into the underworld of a good believer. Two gods, Srosh and Adur, welcomed and took the believer by his hand during his visit (Gignoux 1984: 155). This ossuary in the Tashkent History Museum corresponds pretty well to the scene described in the Book of Arda Viraz. For this reason, the deity standing in front of Rashnu could be actually Adur holding the hand of the dead and a fire altar that could be his own attribute. In fact, Adur was the personification of fire. Grenet and Minardi (2021: 156) preferred to identify this deity with Srosh although also Adur could be a reliable alternative because of the description in the Book of Arda Viraz and, above all, the fire altar.

Rashnu did not appear in Sogdian art exclusively in connection with the Chivat Bridge. Some other fragmentary ossuaries from Yumalaktepe (Kashka Darya region, Uzbekistan) present funerary scenes with at least three deities, two attendants, one priest and, possibly, one family member of the dead (Berdimuradov, Bogomolov, Daeppen, Khushvakov 2008). One can recognize Rashnu with a scale in his hands and two more enigmatic deities whose identification is extremely hard to determine (Fig. 4). One deity sits on a rug suspended above two rams standing back to back. On the other side, another deity stands on a rug above a horse. It should not be ruled out that the animals could be related to those gods since Sogdian deities were often represented sitting on their symbolic animals and, sometimes, even holding a dish with a small reproduction of that same animal. For this reason, one could speculate that the solar god Mithra referred to the horse while it is not easy to establish any clear identification for the deity above the rams.



Fig. 5 - Khantepa ossuary. Tashkent History Museum (after Grenet 1993: fig. 7).

Another Sogdian ossuary very similar to the one from Yumalktepa was found in Sivas (Tashkent region). The Sivas ossuary is very similar to the Yumalktepa one with some slight differences. In the Sivas ossuary, the image of Rashnu does not appear and in its place, there is another deity holding a piece of textile attached to a small naked figure (Fig.. 5). This could possibly be a symbolic representation of the soul of the dead (Grenet 2013: 24). However, the scene looks almost the same except for the dissimilar attributes the deity on the upper left side sitting above two rams presents and is less fragmentary than the Yumalktepa ossuary. In this case,

it does not seem that the two deities are exactly the same and, therefore, one should admit that they could be two different deities and possibly the rams are not referring to them. Michael Shenkar (2014: 85) recently argued that the deities beside Rashnu with his scale on the Yumalakptepa ossuary and the god wrapping in a textile the soul of the dead in the Sivas ossuary could be the Avestan god of “Good Thought” Vohu Manah on the right above the horse and the goddess of Fortune Ashi on the left just above the rams.

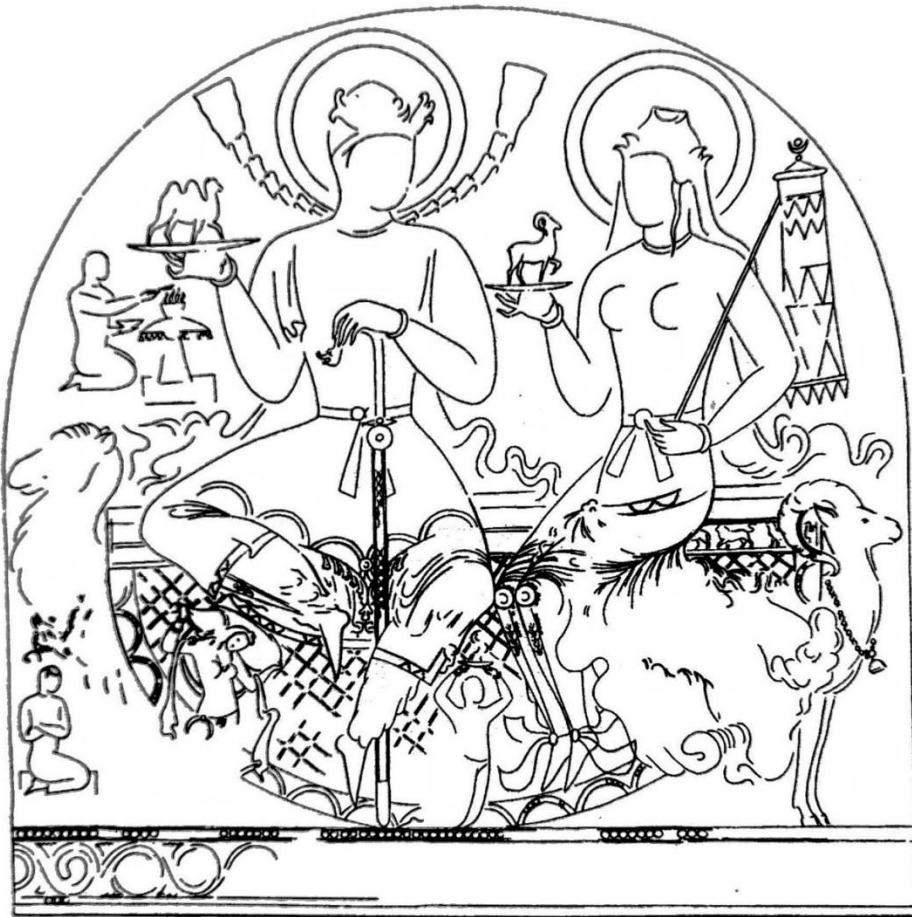


Fig. 6 - Painting from Penjikent room 28, sector XXV.
The State Hermitage Museum.
(after Shenkar 2014: fig. 130).

Another Sogdian ossuary from Khantepa with the representation of a deity sitting on a throne covered with a rug could be useful for our research (Grenet 1993: fig. 7). From one side of the rug, a lion-protome come out while, on the other side the figure is not preserved (fig. 6). All deities in the Yumalaktepa, Sivas, and Khantepa wear very similar garments that, at first glance, could be male clothes. However, as already mentioned above, the lion is the symbolic animal of Nana and, so, the deity in the Khantepa ossuary should be connected to her. One could assume that the central deity in the Khantepa ossuary is Nana represented according to unusual iconographical features. Such an iconographical incongruence could be valid for other Sogdian ossuaries as well. For this reason, even an identification of the deity in the Yumalktepa ossuary with a goddess and not a god (as already proposed by Michael Shenkar) could be acceptable. In order to propose any further identification, a short digression is necessary.

At least three eighth century Sogdian paintings from private houses in Penjikent (rooms 2 and 13, sector XXIV and room 28, sector XXV) present the same divine couple including a god sitting on a throne shaped as a camel and a goddess on a ram (Shenkar 2014: figs. 128-30). They both hold in their right hand a dish with a miniature image of their symbolic animal above (Fig. 7). As already mentioned, it is not easy to identify the deity above the two rams in the Yumalaktepe and Sivas ossuary although one should not exclude the possibility that this deity is not a man but a woman who could be actually the “wife” of the god on the camel. In fact, some details of the Yumalktepa ossuary are not well preserved and it is not completely clear which garments and accessories appear in that point. If the identification with a female deity could be convincing, then who could she be?

According to recent researches by Matteo Compareti (2021: 139-40), the Sogdian goddess sitting on the ram could be connected with the planet Venus whose Iranian counterpart was Anahita, the Avestan goddess of water and fertility. One aspect of Greco-Roman Venus called Aphrodite Pandemos (Aphrodite of sensual pleasures) appeared sometimes in Classical art as a goddess completely dressed while riding a ram or goat (Fleischer 1984: 98-100, Schmidt 1997: 292-5). Compareti argued that the correct reading of Sogdian deities is sometimes rooted in the iconography of astrological-astronomical symbols that are very difficult to decipher. This could be the case of the Sogdian ossuary from Yumalaktepa and Sivas as well. It is, in fact, worth observing that the deity in the

Yumalaktepe ossuary is holding a flower that could be a very appropriate attribute of Anahita. Some connections between Anahita and vegetal elements under arches occur, for example, in Sasanian art such as on the column capital from Bisutun that was later transported and displayed in the park of Taq-i Bustan in Kermanshah (Compareti 2018: 25). Moreover, the vase between the rams in the Yumalaktepe ossuary could remind one of the ewer from which Anahita is pouring water in the upper level on the back of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. Scholars considered this ewer in late Sasanian art as a very appropriate attribute of Anahita as a fertility and water goddess (Shenkar 2014: 71).

However, while Rashnu and Mithra were definitely connected to the passage into the Zoroastrian underworld, the position of Anahita is not so clear. She started to be represented in Central Asian art only after the Sasanian conquest of Bactria-Tokharistan in the third century (Shenkar 2014: 75). In fact, the main female deity of pre-Islamic Central Asia was Nana. Since Nana had Mesopotamian origins, it seems obvious to think that other “western” cultural elements were always very important in Central Asia especially in the astrological-astronomical sphere. As already argued by Compareti (forthcoming), Aphrodite Pandemos could have some associations with other Near Eastern fertility goddesses (such as Ishtar) who had among their symbolic animals the ram or goat and were definitely associated to the planet Venus. Moreover, Nana and Anahita could have shared some common elements among Iranian people such as the Parthians who originally migrated from Central Asians into Persia.

Such observations could be particularly appropriate for the (female?) deity above the two rams in the Yumalaktepe and Sivas ossuary. In fact, the animals are represented back to back, a position that could remind one of Sogdian divine thrones. On the other side of the main scene on those ossuaries, there is a deity suspended above one single horse that could be associated to Mithra. In fact, Mithra too was a god of the underworld. However, Grenet (1993: 61) already argued that the horse could be part of a Zoroastrian sacrifice called *chaharom*. If Grenet’s hypotheses were correct, there would be then some evidence to consider the horse as a sacrifice animal in the lower part of the scene not necessarily connected to the god sitting above. For this reason, it should not be ruled out the possibility that in the upper part of the scene in the Yumalktepe and Sivas ossuary there is actually a divine couple including

Anahita above rams and her husband whose symbolic animal is not represented possibly because of lack of space.

Compareti (2021: 140) cautiously accepted Boris Marshak and Valentina identification of the husband of Anahita with Washaghn (Avestan Verethraghna). He was the Zoroastrian god of war and victory whose symbolic animal in Sogdian art was probably the camel. Such an identification should be considered from the point of view of Iranian astrology-astronomy in Central Asia that had some connections with Mesopotamian and Greek cultural elements. As it is well known, Venus and Mars (who possibly corresponded in Sogdiana to Anahita and Washaghn) formed a couple in Greek mythology. It is however, worth reminding that, some other scholars hypothetically proposed to identify the divine couple sitting on a camel and ram with Washaghn and Ashi (Shenkar 2014: 85, Farridnejad 2018: 414-18).

One would expect to find on Sino-Sogdian monuments in China and ossuaries in Sogdiana motherland just funerary scenes or Zoroastrian deities of the underworld such as Rashnu, Srosh, Adur and Mithra or, possibly, even the main god of the Sogdian pantheon Ahura Mazda/Adbagh. This is not the case of the Shi Jun and Miho Museum stone house where two panels are embellished with the images of Nana in the Zoroastrian paradise and Weshparkar above the Chinvat Bridge. These deities could have therefore had some funerary connections for the Sogdian immigrants in China. This point suggests that the identification of the deity sitting on a lion throne on the Khantepa ossuary with Nana could be correct. Weshparkar too had some role for the passage of the soul into the underworld (Grenet, Riboud, Yang 2004: 282, Grenet 2013: 24). Possibly, Sogdian Zoroastrians considered also other deities of their pantheon as connected to funerals and the passage into the underworld. Unfortunately, Sogdian funerary habits are not yet completely clear. Not only in Central Asian but in Persia too Zoroastrian rituals presented some controversial points. Avestan and Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts represent a very important source of information in order to identify enigmatic deities in Sogdian, Chorasmian or Sasanian art but, at the same time, they should be cautiously used.

It should not be ruled out that the excavation of more Sino-Sogdian monuments in China and the acquisition of illegally excavated ones by Chinese authorities would allow in future identifying more Zoroastrian deities and rituals. This process could be extremely useful for both Sino-Sogdian monuments in China and Sogdian ossuaries found in Central

Asia. In the present note, I just wanted to call the attention on other possible interpretations for deities whose identification was not clearly established.

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