The So-Called "Pelliot Chinois 4518.24" Illustrated Document from Dunhuang and Sino-Sogdian Iconographical Contacts

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Abstract

Sogdian artists constantly adopted external religious iconographies from Mesopotamia, Greece, and India to represent local deities without major problems. Apparently, they did the same in their colonies abroad and especially in Buddhist Dunhuang where the main cultural milieu was Chinese. Two deities represented on a paper fragment from Dunhuang have been puzzling scholars since the 1990s. They present very strong Sogdian religious elements that, however, should be studied within the framework of Sino–Uighur art and culture of the Western Regions and Dunhuang. Many scholars considered the two deities both to be women. This article discusses the possibility that they actually represent a couple despite their aspect. Only one of them is a woman who can be identified with Nana. The other deity is probably Tish who was Nana's husband and corresponded to the Avestan rain god Tishtrya and, in the Mesopotamian cultural sphere, to Nabu. Nana and Nabu formed a divine couple in Mesopotamian religion. Nabu was in origin the patron of scribes and corresponded to Greek Hermes and Egyptian Thoth. He was also connected to the planet Mercury that Chinese artists represented as a woman. Nana and Tish formed a powerful icon that Sogdians reproduced on inexpensive material that could be easily transported and possibly invoked as protectors of the family.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Sogdian art, Chinese art, Sogdian deities, Zoroastrianism, Nana, Tishtrya, Tir

1. Introduction

A ninth—or tenth—century paper fragment measuring approximately 38 x 30 cm and kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France embellished with a controversial ink drawing has been puzzling scholars since the 1990s. The famous sinologist Paul Pelliot found it during his stay at the Mogao Buddhist Caves in Dunhuang (February-June 1908) and, for this reason, the document is called "Pelliot Chinois 4518.24". The scene includes two

confronted haloed deities in three–quarter view that do not seem to respond precisely to local artistic traditions (fig. 1). As is well known, Dunhuang was an important Buddhist center along the so–called "Silk Road" that is famous because of the paintings in the Mogao Caves and the great amount of ancient written documents (especially Chinese and Sogdian) found in the famous cave 17 or "Library Cave" and at present dispersed throughout many collections (Rong 1999-2000).

Fig. 1 - Pelliot Chinois 4518.24, Dunhuang. Ink on paper, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Sketch: Li Sifei.

Jiang Boqin and Frantz Grenet were the first scholars proposing a Zoroastrian interpretation for this "paper icon" because the two deities share many iconographical aspects with Sogdian art (Jiang 1991; Grenet 1995). According to Grenet, both deities are women because of their hairstyle, jewels, and garments. In fact, they present an elaborate hairstyle that was typical of Uighur and Chinese noblewomen in the late Tang and,

above all, Five Dynasties and Xi Xia period Buddhist paintings at Dunhuang (Wiercimok 1990; Russell–Smith 2005: 99–103). In his seminal study, Grenet identified these two deities with the she–devil (*Daeva*) or "bad Daena" and the "good Daena" that is the personification of a complicated and multifaceted concept of Zoroastrian religion. Scholars mainly relied on Zoroastrian texts for the identification of Daena as a woman usually accompanied by dogs. However, those scholars never completely agreed on the iconography of the Daena in visual arts (Gnoli 1993; Shenkar 2014: 94–95; Shenkar 2015: 100–109).

Frantz Grenet restated his hypotheses in another paper written with Zhang Guanda (1996). Grenet and Zhang realized that whoever painted that piece of paper used the iconography of the goddess Nana to represent the "bad Daena". Some other scholars who studied the Pelliot Chinois 4518.24 document agreed with Grenet's initial identifications and even enriched them with new evidence rooted in Zoroastrian literature (Zhang 2000; Reck 2003: fig. 8; Azarpay 2011; Hintze 2016: 83-92; Azarnouche, Ramble 2020: 369–71). Most of the scholars still prefer the Zoroastrian interpretation although some experts on Central Asian arts proposed different identifications.

Chiara Silvi Antonini (2007) argued that the Pelliot Chinois document presents Mithraic elements and, in her conclusion, she identified the divine couple with personifications of "faithfulness to contracts" and "supreme justice". In her paper on Turfan temple banners, Chhaya Bhattacharya–Haesner (2004: 44–46) did not propose any definitive identification although she presented a complete list of possible candidates that were rooted in the Sogdian and Chinese religious milieu. In her opinion, the multiarmed deity has strong connections with Avalokiteshvara but she was extremely cautious in proposing such a precise identification for one of the deities in the Pelliot Chinois document. Some years later, Almut Hintze (2016: 86-89) pointed at some researches by Lilla Russell–Smith (2005:101; 2015) who found very interesting parallels between the two deities depicted on the Pelliot Chinois document from Dunhuang and other unusual Turfanese "female divine couples" that could have originated in a non-Buddhist sphere. In this group of "female divine couples", one could include also Toyuk Buddhist cave 66 where the female deity on the left presents also an animal looking like a dog while the one on the right is definitely a man (The Research Institute for Turfan Studies, The Turfan Museum 2017: figs. 101–102; Russell–Smith forthcoming a).

Finally, Lilla Russell-Smith and Antonio Panaino presented in their forthcoming articles some new interpretations based on the female counterpart of Sirius rooted in the Egyptian astrological-astronomical milieu who could have easily been adapted to the Chinese name of Sirius: the Celestial Wolf (Panaino 2019: 31). All scholars assumed – with the only exception of Silvi Antonini (2005) – that the two deities in the Pelliot Chinois paper document are women.

In this paper, I would like to contribute to the discussion mainly following the points already highlighted by Bhattacharya–Haesner.

2. Sogdian deities in Dunhuang

Few doubts exist about the identification of the two persons with deities although the conclusions by Grenet still present unclear points. The deity on the left of this drawing is sitting on a rectangular seat supported by lotus petals. This deity wears a long dress and scarf the extremities of which reach the ground and holds metal objects with both hands: a cup in her right hand and a plate with the reproduction of a sitting dog in the left hand. This detail immediately called the attention of Frantz Grenet since it is very similar to the iconography of Sogdian deities who, sometimes, hold a plate in one hand with a small reproduction of their symbolic animal above. On the right of the scene, a four–arm deity is sitting on a ferocious animal with an open mouth. She is holding in the upper hands the symbols of the sun and the moon while the lower hands present an insect (a scorpion according to Grenet) and a snake.

The sun and moon in her upper hands, the throne in the shape of a symbolic animal, and the same presence of four arms are all Sogdian iconographic elements typical of Nana, the main goddess of pre–Islamic Central Asia who originated in Mesopotamia many centuries earlier (Shenkar 2014: 116-128; Farridnejad 2018: 268-69). At least since the sixth century, Indian iconographical elements became very popular in Sogdiana to represent local deities. For this reason, it is common to observe Sogdian divinities with four arms, in some cases with three heads, attributes, and symbolic animals used as vehicles (*vahana*) exactly as in India (Compareti 2009; Grenet 2010).

The adoption of Indian religious iconographies represented the final phase of a process that actually involved local elements and also Mesopotamian and Greek ones. Sogdians were extremely receptive to iconographies from other cultural spheres and abandoned older

iconographies (possibly, even genuinely Sogdian) with great ease (Grenet, Marshak 1998: 8-9). This can be proved to be actually correct in the case of the Jartepa II Temple paintings that represent local deities identified, by the way, with Nana and Tish by Marshak and Grenet (in Berdimuradov, Samibaev 2001) without any trace of Indian iconographical elements because they were executed in the fourth or early fifth century (Shenkar 2014: 122). The change and adoption of external iconographies also implies another curious phenomenon. In fact, more than one Sogdian deity could appear according to various iconographies depending on the period and not just the personal taste of the artists or sponsors of religious paintings from Jartepa, Penjikent, and other sites.

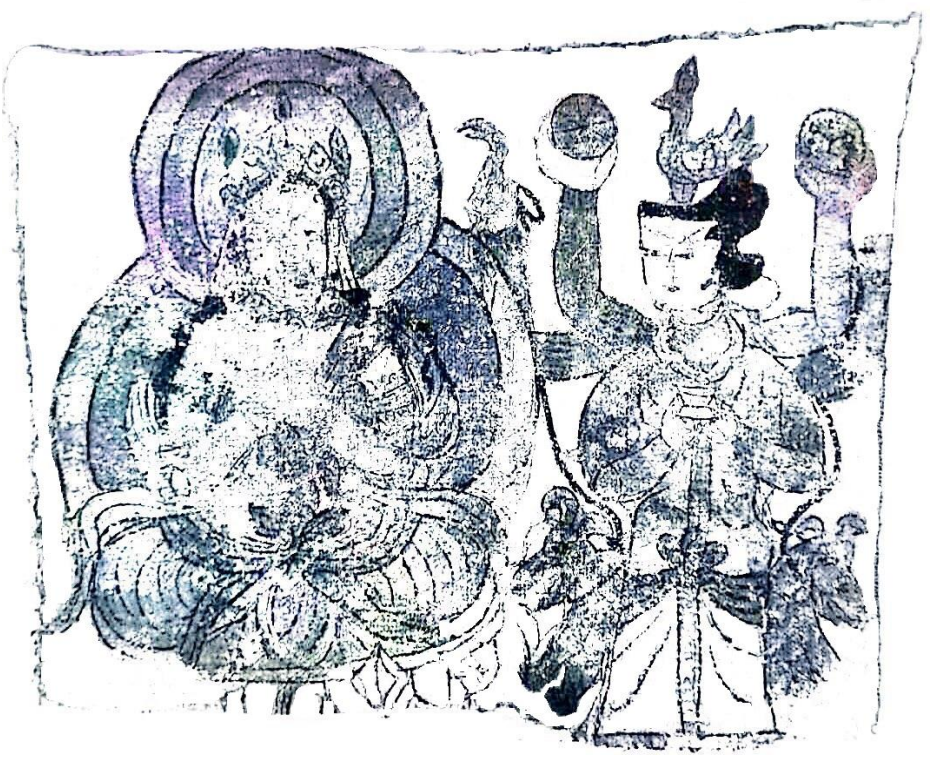

Fig. 2 - Fragmentary Buddhist banner, Turfan. Painted cotton,
Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (III 7243).
(After: Bhattacharya–Haesner 2004: pl. 9.)

All scholars who studied the drawing of the Pelliot Chinois in the Bibliothèque Nationale recognized the similarities between the goddess

sitting on the ferocious animal and Nana (Azarpay 2011: 75; Shenkar 2014: 35). However, they mainly accepted Grenet and Zhang's identification of the evil *Daeva*/bad Daena with the only exception of a few of them. Bhattacharya–Haesner compared the Pelliot Chinois document with a tenth– or eleventh–century fragmentary Buddhist banner in cotton from Turfan now kept in the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (III 7243) embellished with a divine couple (fig. 2).

The main difference between the Pelliot Chinois paper fragment and the Turfan banner pointed out by Bhattacharya–Haesner is the figure on the left. In fact, in the Turfan banner this figure is definitely a haloed Buddha sitting on a lotus. Bhattacharya–Haesner (2004: 44) convincingly identified him as Amitabha. As Grenet and Zhang (1996: 179–80) had already noticed, some other Buddhist "icons" from Dunhuang often presented the image of Amitabha in front of a standing and multiarmed Avalokiteshvara who usually holds the sun and the moon in his upper hands. Avalokiteshvara is the Bodhisattva of compassion that, as is well known, Chinese Buddhists represented as a man or a woman (Guanyin).

The deity in front of Amitabha in the Turfan banner presents a typical elaborated Chinese female hairstyle that includes also a *fenghuang* (the so–called "phoenix" bird). However, in this case, the arms of the deity are six and there is no throne shaped as an animal but (according to Bhattacharya–Haesner) two wolfs or rams behind the standing deity. Only the head and a small part of the body of those animals is visible. The deity is holding the sun and the moon in her upper hands while with both lower hands she holds a cup. In the middle pair of hands, the deity holds the leashes attached to the necks of the two animals. Only the right middle hand is completely visible despite its poor state of preservation. This hand is holding a snake and the final part of the leash together. The portion of the banner with the left middle hand is now lost but it is clear that the deity was holding the end of another leash still visible just above the head of the animal. It is however possible that together with the leash also an insect or scorpion was depicted on this hand as in the Pelliot Chinois fragmentary paper from Dunhuang.

At this point, Bhattacharya–Haesner's conclusion appeared obvious: the Turfan icon does not represent a couple of deities but an unusual representation of Amitabha on the left and Avalokiteshvara as a woman on the right. According to local traditions, women who wanted to have children had to pray to Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin and, for this reason, Chinese artists insisted on the feminine touch of the Bodhisattva. In my

opinion, however, the iconography of Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin in that Turfan icon was rooted in Sogdian art or, in any case, presented an intermediary iconographical phase between India and (western) China (Turfan in the Tarim Basin or Dunhuang in western Gansu Province) that probably passed through Sogdiana or Sogdian colonies along the so-called Silk Road. For this reason, I think that the animal heads beside Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin considered by Batthacharya-Haesner to be wolfs or rams could actually be lions represented in a very approximated way, which reflects Chinese artistic standards.

3. Mesopotamian iconography in Central Asia

Bhattacharya–Haesner (2004: 44) compared the presence of leashes, the snake, and the scorpion in the Pelliot Chinois document and the Turfan banner with a second century CE marble slab from Hatra embellished with the image of the Babylonian god of the underworld Nergal together with his wife Ereshkigal. This Mesopotamian divine couple presents symbolic animals that are similar to the ones in the much later Dunhuang and Turfan specimens. Hatra was a caravan city in northern Mesopotamia that had very close cultural relations with Arsacid Persia until its destruction by the Sasanians in 240 CE but also had cultural exchanges with the Greco–Roman world (Sommer 2003: 19). We should return shortly to Hatrean religious iconography.

As I have tried to demonstrate in another paper of mine, Mesopotamian elements played an important role in the formation of Central Asian art and culture. In that paper, I specifically focused on the Mesopotamian divine couple formed by Nana and Nabu that Sogdian artists continued to represent in eighth century CE paintings from Penjikent after superimposing the image (and functions) of Tish with that of Nabu (Compareti 2017). Actually, Mesopotamian texts mentioned Tashmetu as Nabu's wife and, at the same time, they equated her with Nana/Nanaia (Azarpay 1975: 35; Pomponio 1978: 50, 139, 169; Westenholz 1997: 71, 73, 75). Sumero–Akkadian Nana/Nanaia should not be confused with another goddess of the Sumerian pantheon: Inanna who had been already superimposed to Semitic Ishtar and Greek Aphrodite in ancient times (Westenholz 1997: 64; Potts 2001: 23-25). According to ancient Mesopotamian sources, both Nana/Nanaia and Inanna had some connections with the planet Venus (Heimpel 1982: 9-17).

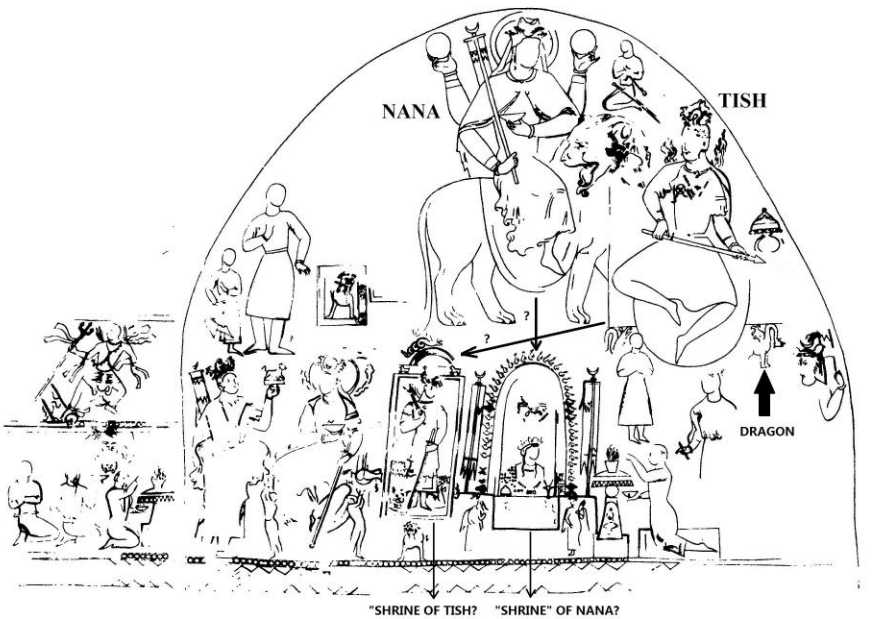

Fig. 3 - Eighth–century Sogdian painting, Penjikent room 12/sector XXV. The State Hermitage Museum. (After: Maršak, Raspopova 1991: fig. 3.)

Sogdian Tish was assimilated with the Avestan rain god Tishtrya whose attribute was probably the arrow. Nabu too was connected with rain and water although this was not his primary function in Mesopotamian religion (Panaino 1995: 76). Sogdian artists possibly carried out a transformation of the attribute of Nabu – the stylus since, originally, he was the god of scribes – with the arrow of Tish. Tish had retained some memory of his original function as patron of scribes also in the Iranian cultural sphere (Panaino 1995: 61; Panaino 2020: 363) and Akkadian texts already associated him with the arrow (Panaino 1995: 29-33, 47-59; Rochberg 2009: 62, 73). Sogdian artists, moreover, kept the symbolic animal of Nabu (the *mushuhushshu* dragon, see Lambert 1984: 88) and transferred it to Tish as is possible to observe in at least one painting from Penjikent room 12/sector XXV (fig. 3) (Maršak, Raspopova 1991: fig. 3). Interestingly enough, the dragons supporting the throne of Tish in Penjikent have an elongated neck that does not seem to be exactly the one of the Mesopotamian *mushhushshu*. Possibly, Sogdian artists modified or changed quite easily also the iconography of symbolic creatures exactly as they did in the case of their deities. As it will be observed below, other

dragons could change iconography in Sogdian art according to their chronological frame.

The identification that I propose for the divine couple in the Pelliot Chinois document is quite simple. In my opinion, the goddess on the right is Nana. She is dressed like a Chinese or Uighur noblewoman of the ninth or tenth century Dunhuang while sitting on her symbolic animal that is the lion. However, for some reason not completely clear, the person who did this drawing represented the lion as a wolf or another ferocious animal.

According to Martha Carter, *Xiwangmu* the Chinese "Queen Mother of the West" of Han art would have had some iconographical connections with Nana since the third century CE. In fact, Chinese artists usually represented *Xiwangmu* sitting on a lion that, by the way, they did not depict in a realistic way (Carter 2008: 110-124). Sometimes Zoroastrian deities appeared on funerary monuments of powerful Sogdians who migrated to China in the sixth century and were mainly buried in Chang'an (modern Xi'an). These monuments are commonly known as Sino–Sogdian art objects and they are not numerous. Only on one panel of the unexcavated Sino–Sogdian funerary couch in the Miho Museum collection (Shigaraki, Japan), there is an image of Nana standing frontally with four arms (Juliano, Lerner 1997: 72–73). The lower part of her body is hidden behind a wall where two lion heads appear probably in place of a throne or a vehicle shaped like an animal (fig. 4). For which reason did Nana appear together with the lion in the sixth–century Miho Museum funerary couch and she was sitting on a wolf-like animal in the ninth– or tenth–century Pelliot Chinois document from Dunhuang?

As pointed out by Jessica Rawson (1984: 110–13), Chinese artists were unfamiliar with lions. These animals began to be depicted in China only after the introduction of Buddhism and with much artistic license (not to say fantasy). According to Guitty Azarpay (2011: 75), the artist who painted those deities in Dunhuang changed the animal of Nana because the lion could had very strong Buddhist connotations. However, this does not explain its resemblance to a wolf that, from a Zoroastrian point of view should be a negative animal like the scorpion and the snake.

The Sogdians have probably always represented felines as wolves. One seventh–century silver dish in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France considered by Marshak (2017: fig. 51) to be Sogdian presents a walking tiger with typical stripes on its body whose head looks like that of a wolf or some other ferocious animal. Some centuries later, the lion could appear shaped like a wolf (and vice versa) in Islamic illustrated

astronomical–astrological treatises (Hartner 1938: fig. 17; Caiozzo 2011: fig. 5). In a thirteenth–century *Daqa'iq al–Haqa'iq* "Degrees of Truths" Persian manuscript from Anatolia at present kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (ms. persan 174), the personification of the Sun with four hands is sitting on an animal that should be a lion but actually looks very similar to the beast in the Pelliot Chinois fragmentary paper (fig. 5).

Fig. 4 - Nana on one panel of the unexcavated Sino-Sogdian Miho Museum funerary couch (Sketch: Li Sifei).

Other details of the Pelliot Chinois paper should remind one of the Sino–Uighur cultural sphere where such a drawing was produced. The bird in the sun and the tree in the moon in her upper hands are definitely rooted in

the Chinese cultural milieu. Very clear Chinese elements such as the use of coins with a square hole in the center or the adoption of a vertical writing system began to appear more and more often among the Sogdian immigrants in China, the Sogdian commercial colonies along the so–called "Silk Road", and Sogdiana motherland itself (Yoshida 2013). There is therefore nothing surprising about the presence of strong Sinicizing elements among medieval Dunhuang's Sogdian immigrants.

Fig. 5 - The Sun sitting on a lion, Daqa'iq al–Haqa'iq (thirteenth century). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. persan 174, Aq–saray, 1272, f° 110v° (After: Caiozzo 2003: fig. 91).

Let us now turn our attention to the deity in front of Nana. He seems to be Tish/Tishtrya who presents a hairstyle like the goddess but a completely different garment. In fact, on his chest, there is stylized armor and his long dress could actually point to trousers that almost completely cover his feet. His jewels too are very similar to those of Nana: the earrings are the same although the necklace could be a torque that was a typical male accessory in pre–Islamic Central Asia. For some reason, the artists choose to represent him sitting on a rectangular chair supported by lotus petals and not a dragon like in the painting in room 12/sector XXV in Penjikent. However, in his left hand he is supporting a plate with a dog that, as already proposed by Grenet and Pinault (1997: 1058) almost twenty–five

years ago, could be considered the symbolic animal of Tishtrya/Tish because of the association between this god and the star Sirius.

Exactly as in the Mesopotamian, Greek, and many other astronomical–astrological systems, ancient Iranians made each planet correspond with a deity of their own "pagan" period. According to this system, ancient Iranians connected the enigmatic Tir to the planet Mercury whose Sogdian and Persian name is also Tir. As already observed above, Tishtrya was associated with the star Sirius that is the brightest star in the night sky and part of the constellation Canis Major. There was some connection between a western Iranian deity called Tir associated to Greek Hermes and the planet Mercury, Mesopotamian Nabu, Avestan Tishtrya (Middle Persian Tishtar, Sogdian Tish), and Egyptian Thoth (Panaino 1995: 76-77). Moreover, the arrow was the symbol of Tishtrya/Sirius and Tir/Mercury (Gnoli 1963: 230-240; Panaino 1995: 63-64, 68, 70-78).

Such an association is however ambiguous because, according to Iranian astrology-astronomy, the planets were demonic entities (Panaino 2019: 553-55). In Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature, Tishtrya was considered to be the general of the eastern quadrant of the sky who had to fight the planetary demonic Tir/Mercury (Panaino 1995: 65). The demonization of the planets is ambiguous too in Zoroastrian literature since every planet of ancient astrology was associated with a deity without any problem. For example, Jupiter corresponded in Middle Persian literature to Ohrmazd (Avestan Ahura Mazda, Persian Hormazd) and Venus to Anahid (Avestan Anahita, Persian Nahid) and such names are still used in Islamic Iran exactly like in the Western "Christianized" world we still say Mercury, Venus, Mars, etc. Antonio Panaino dedicated many studies to this extremely complicated aspect of Zoroastrian astrology-astronomy that scholars could not fully elucidate (Panaino 1990: 48; Panaino 1995: 64-68; Panaino 2019: 53-55; Panaino 2020).

In any case, as already noted by Frantz Grenet and Boris Marshak (1998: 10-16) there are strong connections between Tishtrya, Tir, and Nabu which seem to represent a kind of adaptation to the functions of the latter at least in visual arts. In fact, Nabu formed a divine couple with Nana already in the Mesopotamian milieu and Sogdian artists depicted sometimes this "icon" in Penjikent paintings and on one ossuary from Kirmantepa. Antonio Panaino too discussed this association between Tishtrya, Tir, and Nabu. He concluded that "the eastern Tištrya-Sirius *yazata* was probably associated as early as the Achaemenid period with Tīriya, a Western Iranian divinity of as yet unclear origins linked to the

planet Mercury (cf. the Mesopotamian Nabû) and the art of writing" (Panaino 1995: 108).

The role of western Iranian Tir is not completely clear in Central Asia although it is very unlikely to imagine that Sogdians completely ignored him in referring exclusively to Nabu as the god related to the planet Mercury. Sogdian theophoric names included both Tish and Tir that seem to be therefore two distinguished deities from the linguistic point of view (Gharib 2004: 9753, 9758; Lurje 2010: 1278-79, 1289, 1292-95). Sogdians were used to give proper names that sometimes included deities usually considered to be negative such as in the case of the famous Devashtich (*dev* = demon) who claimed to be king of Sogdiana between 708–722 CE (Gharib 2004: 3805, 3806; Lurje 2010: 471). There are however, a few iconographical details in Sogdian religious art which could shed some further light on this specific problem.

Even though Tishtrya/Tish/Tir(?) in the Pelliot Chinois document is not sitting on the dragon, one could expect the dog to be equally acceptable as a symbolic animal of this god. The dog on the plate seems to be there in order to highlight expressly the importance of astronomical–astrological peculiarities of both deities. The dragon was a direct Mesopotamian inheritance for Nabu while the dog was the animal of Iranian Tishtrya. The presence of planetary deities in the Iranian Buddhist milieu (that, as is obvious to expect, presented strong Indian elements too) occurred in Kakrak paintings in the Bamyan region where a possible personification of Mercury (Persian Tir, Indian Budha) appeared as an archer with a dog sitting next to Buddha (fig. 6) (Compareti 2008: 142–44). Grenet and Marshak (in Berdimuradov, Samibaev 2001: 59) supposed that the way in which Tish is holding the arrow in Sogdian art is the same as that of Indian Budha. At least one eighth–century sculpture from Lucknow (northern India) presents a precise parallel with the ideas of Grenet and Marshak (Hartner 1968: 362). One more ancient non-Buddhist western Bactrian representation of Tishtrya was individuated in fourth-fifth century Ghulbyan paintings in Faryab Province, Afghanistan. Frantz Grenet identified Tishtrya sitting on a throne and holding in his right hand a beribboned arrow. Curiously enough, a pond with fishes under his throne seems to remark his aquatic nature since in the Avesta he is the rain god (Marshak, Grenet 1998: 13-14; Shenkar 2014: 150).

Fig. 6 - The so–called "Hunter King" from Kakrak, Bamyan. Kabul Museum. (After: Compareti 2008: fig. 1.)

Even though the Sogdians kept Tish and Tir distinguished in their theophoric names, the association of both deities (western Iranian Tir and eastern Iranian Tishtrya/Tish) with Mesopotamian Nabu in their local form of Central Asian Zoroastrianism could allow one to assume that the husband of Nana became a kind of syncretic deity among the Iranians. He possibly resumed the characteristics of Sirius and Mercury. Moreover, Sogdian artists who knew extremely well ancient astrology-astronomy attributed to them the symbolic animals and attributes of Mesopotamian Nabu, Iranian Tish/Tir, Indian Budha, and, even those of Egyptian deities

such as Thoth and Isis-Sothis. As Antonio Panaino (forthcoming) and Lilla Russell-Smith (forthcoming a; forthcoming b) argued, the fact that Isis-Sothis appeared still in Roman Egypt as the lady of the star Sirius riding a dog could represent another explanation for the feminine appearance of the deities in the Pelliot Chinois document. One could assume that the ideal intermediary between Roman Egypt and the Iranian world could have been Arsacid Persia

Astronomical–astrological connections in the Pelliot Chinois document had called the attention of several scholars. As already observed above, both L. Russel-Smith and A. Panaino focused on the astronomical-astrological aspect in their forthcoming articles. According to Shen Ruiwen (2019: 366–68), not only the sun and the moon in the upper hands of Nana but the snake and scorpion too had astronomical–astrological connections. There are unfortunately no clear representations of the zodiac in pre–Islamic Iranian arts. Archaeologists found a first century CE complete zodiac in Palmyra (Colledge 1976: 38–39) and Hatra (Neugebauer 1954). From an iconographical point of view, they both depended on Greek models. Despite its schematic reproduction, the sign of the Scorpion of the Palmyrean and Hatrean zodiacs looks very similar to the small animal in the right lower hand of Nana in the Pelliot Chinois document. Syrian cities such as Palmyra, Europos Dura, and Edessa (modern Urfa today in south-eastern Turkey) and, as already observed above, Hatra in northern Mesopotamia had very strong cultural connections with Arsacid Persia. Those cities were also religious centers and important nodes along the caravan routes between Iran and the Roman Empire (Dirven 2009: 51). Greek art was very important in those cities and some scholars had already highlighted some possible cultural ties between the Syro-Mesopotamian region and Gandhara that, on the other side, has been connected with Central Asia and the rest of India at least since the Kushan period (Bussagli 1994: 171-72; Hauser 2014).

The reference to Palmyra and Hatra is not accidental since in both cities there was a temple dedicated to Nabu. According to one of the excavators of this temple in Hatra, Nabu was associated with scorpions (al–Salihi 1983: 144). The possibility should not be ruled out that this animal had some connections to the planet corresponding in Mesopotamian astrology–astronomy to Nabu = Mercury (Pomponio 1978: 202-05; Panaino 1995: 75-76) that was later transmitted directly or indirectly to other religious systems (Deonna 1958; Deonna 1959). In Palmyrean religious art, the snake and the scorpion were the symbolic

animals of Shadrafa, originally a Canaanite god. Shadrafa probably means "healer" (or "satrap" according to a more recent hypothesis, see: Lipiński 1995) and his snake–entwined spear was probably adopted from the iconography of the Greek god Asclepius (Colledge 1976: 160). Nana was also very popular in Mesopotamian (Assur, Hatra, Babylonia) and Syrian (Europos Dura, Palmyra) centers as evidenced by archaeological investigations (Ambos 2003: 238–249).

The artistic production of Palmyra and Hatra represents an ideal intermediary in the process of transmission of later Mesopotamian iconographies to the Iranian world. Such a process probably started much earlier, even before the Achaemenid period, as argued by Dan Potts (2001: 30-31) in a study dedicated only to Nana. However, Palmyrean and Hatrean artists could have contributed to refresh ancient iconographies among the Persians and Central Asians possibly through the Parthian Arsacids at least until the third century CE (Ambos 2003). After this period, only the city of Harran (ancient Charrae) continued to keep alive ancient Mesopotamian beliefs at least until the eleventh or twelfth century (Green 1992: 175–76). Harran was a famous center for the study of astrology–astronomy (Caiozzo 2003: 128–35) and it could have maintained some relations with the Iranian world both in Persia and Central Asia for a very long period. Unfortunately, there are no late images from Harran before its definitive Islamization.

Other interesting elements for the identification of the divine couple under examination could be found in a much later Islamic illustrated manuscript. An early fourteenth–century Arabic copy of *'Aja'ib al–mahluqat wa ghara'ib al–maujudat* "The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence" by Zakarya ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud al–Qazwini at present kept in the British Library [Or. 14140] devotes a lot of space to astronomical–astrological investigation. The personification of planet Mercury (Arabic 'Utarid) is not depicted as a typical scribe but as a haloed bearded man sitting on a fantastic bird holding a book and a more enigmatic coiled snake in his hands. According to Stefano Carboni (2015: 59), the snake could refer to the caduceus of Hermes/Mercury with obvious implications rooted in Greek mythology. The caduceus or (winged) snake–entwined wand was also the attribute of Asclepius whose iconography Palmyrean artists had probably imitated for the representation of Shadrafa. Moreover, Mercury/'Utarid was called *munafiq* (hypocritical) in Arabic because did not have positive nor negative influences. In conjunction with a lucky planet, it brought good fortune, and with an

unlucky planet bad fortune. This concepts appeared also in the *Mirajnama* texts where the Prophet riding the *buraq* flying creature was described passing by the planets whose characteristics reflected their depiction in Islamic astrological treaties (Toutant 2021: 442-43). 'Utarid presided, moreover, over Gemini and Virgo. The first sign is possibly the most ambiguous of the entire Zodiac while, in conjunction with Virgo, Mercury was represented as a beardless young man (Carboni 1997: 13). Middle Persian sources too mentioned the ambiguous conjunction problems with Mercury and its neutral influences (Panaino 1995: 74). Such textual and iconographical elements rooted in astronomy-astrology could further explain the feminine aspect of Tish in Sogdian art.

If it could be assumed that the snake and scorpion were associated with Nabu/Mercury and were somehow transferred to his wife in the Sogdian religious milieu, then each element of the divine couple Nana–Tish of the Pelliot Chinois would indeed be traceable to the very ancient iconography of Mesopotamian and Greek gods. This supposed exchange of attributes and symbolic animals between the divine couple under exam could better explain also the presence of a "canine" lion for Nana. In fact, it could be just another reference to Tish/Sirius. Such observations could corroborate the identification of the two deities in the Pelliot Chinois document with Nana and Tish who had very strong astronomical–astrological connections.

One aspect of the identification of the figures in the Pelliot Chinois as a divine couple still deserves further discussion, namely the female appearance of Tish.

4. Tishtrya/Tish/Teiro/Tir (?)

Many scholars considered the deities in the Pelliot Chinois document to be women because of their hairstyle, jewels, and garments. Their observations are definitely correct at a superficial level. In fact, a female attire or appearance does not necessarily indicate a goddess. This phenomenon is common in both ancient Iranian and Greek art. For example, Dionysus was depicted with female garments and hairstyle in Greek, Roman, and Byzantine art at least until the sixth century CE and the Sasanians reproduced him on some silver vessels according to this feminine style. Some scholars have not been able to understand the representation of Dionysus according to the hairstyle of Ariadne or the maenads around him in those late Sasanian silver vessels and, for this

reason, they preferred to identify that god with Anahita, the Avestan goddess of fertility (Compareti 2019).

For some undefined reason, Tishtrya has been depicted as a woman already in one second century CE Kushan gold coin of Huvishka kept in the British Museum (fig. 7). Kushan coins have the great advantage of bearing inscriptions in Bactrian language that determine the name of the depicted deity. In Bactrian language, Avestan Tishtrya corresponded to Teiro and his iconography was probably based on that of Artemis. Michael Shenkar (2014: 149) remarked that the iconography of Teiro as Artemis is very similar to one of the typologies of Nana in Kushan coins. Such a similarity could be not accidental. Nana had some lunar connections and Kushans were possibly aware of this. In fact, Nana appeared with a crescent in Kushan coins (Carter 2010). However, according to H. Falk (2015), she had also some connections with Venus.

Fig. 7 - A unique Huvishka gold coin with the image of a deity called Teiro. The British Museum (After: Shenkar 2014: pl. 25).

As is well known to experts of ancient Iranian arts, other Kushan deities had iconographical features borrowed from Greek art. Religious

iconographies transmitted by Kushan numismatics presented other anomalies such as in the case of Druvaspa who was a goddess in the Avesta but appeared in male attire on Kanishka and Huvishka gold coins (Shenkar 2014: 96–97; Farridnejad 2018: 317). Nevertheless, Teiro was the only male deity of the Kushan pantheon represented as a woman (Grenet, Marshak 1998: 12; Shenkar 2014: 149–50). Curiously enough, Kushan artists sometimes used the iconography of Greek Hermes to represent Pharro (Avestan *Xwarenah*, Middle Persian *Xwarrah*), the personification of an Iranian concept to be translated as "glory" or "charisma" (Gnoli 1996). Not only Sogdian but Bactrian deities of the Kushan period too presented more than one iconography and Greek elements always received great attention.

As already mentioned above, Mesopotamian elements played a very relevant role in the transmission of religious iconographies from the Sumero–Akkadian original cultural milieu into the Iranian one. The latter included Persia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus region. In fact, written sources (Classical, Zoroastrian, and Islamic) clearly mentioned a goddess called Nana in all those regions during the pre-Islamic period (Shenkar 2014: 19-22, 116-28). It would be interesting to investigate some cases of sexual ambiguity among Mesopotamian deities that involved Nana and her husband. There is actually one unique Parthian silver coin of Fraates II (138–127 BCE) embellished on one side with the image of a bearded goddess who, at first glance, could remind the one of the Greek Tyche. According to Fabrizio Sinisi (2008: 236), she could be Nana although Michael Shenkar (2014: 118) did not accept completely such an identification. It is however worth insisting on the Parthians as the more probable intermediaries in this process of iconographical transfer. In fact, Arsacid rulers controlled not only Iran and Mesopotamia but also the Caucasus and, probably, maintained some connections with their ancestral motherland in Central Asia. The situation is not completely clear under the Sasanians although it seems more obvious to prefer the Parthians since, during their reign, Christianity did not spread yet in Mesopotamia and northern Arabia where traditional religions were still strong. For this reason, it seems more probable to imagine Parthian intermediaries between Mesopotamian and Central Asian cultures.

The Parthians probably kept strong relations and cultural ties not just with Mesopotamian but also other Semitic regions of the Syro-Palestinian coast, Palmyra, the Nabateans, etc. For example, Sogdian Christians and Manichaeans used alphabets strictly connected to the

Syriac Estrangela and Palmyrean variants (Lurje 2021: 67). Interestingly enough, Nabateans, Palmyreans, and other northern Arabic tribes represented the god al–Kutbay according to the iconography of Greek Hermes. In some cases, Hermes/al-Kutbay's iconography included also hermaphrodite traits (Zayadine 1997: 618). As already underlined by Károly Kerényi (2012: 86-88), Hermes too was a hermaphrodite deity as also one part of this term itself (*herm*-) points at. Moreover, Hermaphroditus in Greek mythology was the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Written sources are very few but as some scholars tried to demonstrate, Arabic medieval literature knew Hermes Trismegistus and attributed to him important properties usually referred to the magic and astronomical-astrological sphere (Cottrell 2015: 353-72).

Greek names and attributes of Zoroastrian deities appear sometimes in ancient sources. A second century CE Heracles bronze statuette from Seleucia with a bilingual Greek and Parthian inscription allowed one to imagine that there was some kind of well–established correspondence between Classical and Zoroastrian gods during the Arsacid period (Bernard 1990; Morano 1990). In that bilingual inscription, Tir explicitly corresponds to Apollo and one would expect such a parallel to be confirmed in Arsacid Armenian sources. In his *History of Armenia*, Movses K'orenac'i always identified Tir with Apollo (Tavernier 2005: 364). However, the Christian Armenian author Agathangelos (fifth century) only mentioned Tir as "interpreter of dreams, the scribe of pagan learning, who was called the secretary of Ohrmazd" in his *History of the Armenians* (Tavernier 2005: 364–66). Other Armenian sources and even some earlier versions of the New Testament in Armenian rendered Hermes with Tiour/Tir (Panaino 1995: 61-64). Agathangelos did not give any description of statues or other pre–Christian works of art; he just limited himself to describe the destruction of pre–Christian temples and shrines by Gregory the Illuminator in the early fourth century (Thompson 1976: 317).

According to Greek written sources, more than one Classical deity could correspond to different Iranian (including Armenian) and Mesopotamian divinities. In his study on Zoroastrian deities, Michael Shenkar (2014: 150) was extremely critical about the connections between Apollo, Nabu, and Tishtrya. Nevertheless, if Apollo corresponded to Tir among the Parthians and Apollo also corresponded to Nabu in the Mesopotamian cultural milieu, there would be then more evidence to associate Nabu with Tir and, possibly, Tishtrya. Despite the common association with Nabu, some other Mesopotamian deities corresponded to

Apollo (Schwartz 2005: 148). According to Paul Bernard (1990: 58-60), the inscribed bronze statuette of Heracles from Seleucia points at the correspondence Apollo/Nabu and Artemis/Nana. However, such correspondences still present some unclear points.

At Nimrud Dag (ancient Commagene), the situation is even more complicated because the association was "Apollo–Mithras–Helios–Hermes" (Dörner, Young 1996: 437–440). It is interesting to observe that those inscriptions at Nimrud Dag associated Hermes with Apollo in the Greek cultural milieu although there is little doubt that Apollo was of non-Greek origin. According to one theory, he could have been even a Hyperborean (that is to say, Scythian) deity later adopted by the Greeks (Dodds 1973: 140). Apollo was represented very often on Hellenistic (and especially Seleucid) coins as a young man holding an arrow in his left hand (Iossif, Lorber 2009). In Greek literature, the Hyperborean Abaris was a traveling healer and fortuneteller who carried an arrow explicitly mentioned as a symbol of Apollo [*Lycurgus*, fragment 5a]. However, in those inscriptions from Nimrud Dag, Apollo is identified with Mithra and not, as one could have expected with Tir (Panaino 1995: 74). It is worth observing that Apollo (Nabu's Hellenistic counterpart) can be represented on the back of a monster, specifically a griffin. This is the so-called image of Apollo Hyperboreus and it can be found fairly often on Greek red and black painted vases from the Black Sea region that is another area of intense interaction between Greek and Iranian (Scytho-Sarmatian) cultures (Onajko 1977).

Since the dragon is the animal that supports the god seated together with Nana in the XXV/12 Penjikent painting, it could be considered that some artists still had clearly in mind the original iconography of Mesopotamian deities in seventh-eighth century Sogdiana. Actually, it is not possible to establish on which basis such ancient Mesopotamian elements had arrived so far and how did they reappear after so many centuries. It is however clear that Nana and Nabu were Mesopotamian deities and, therefore, Sogdian (and other Central Asian) priests or artists could have some memories of their original cultural background. Moreover, the caduceus (*kerykeion*) of Hermes sometimes terminates with a point or a very clear arrow head that did not call much attention among scholars of Classical art. On the contrary, some experts noticed that the caduceus could be related to similar objects in Mesopotamian art (Halm-Tisserant, Siebert 1997). There are unfortunately no representations of Tishtrya nor Tir in Arsacid nor Sasanian art (Tavernier 2005: 363). One

fifth century fragmentary Sasanian stucco panel from Bandyan (Dargaz, northeastern Khorasan) presents a person holding a bow in front of a horse that the excavator of the site proposed to identify with Tishtrya (Rahbar 1998). A stone object embellished on four sides from Bishapur (Fars province) that Roman Ghirshman (1948: 293-94) considered to be a Sasanian ossuary presents also the image of a person dressed as a woman with one fish on each side. Ghirshman proposed to identify the deity wearing a long dress as a woman and also Michael Shenkar (2014: 75) accepted her identification with Anahita. In the light of the fishes on the base of Tishtrya's throne at Ghulbyan already observed above, there could be some connection between these animals and the Avestan rain god. Unfortunately, no inscription nor other element could prove such an idea. Pre-Islamic Persia still represents a kind of missing link in this process of iconographical transfer. Our main source of information therefore remains pre–Islamic Central Asian art.

Tish has possibly been a popular deity in Sogdiana at least since the third century CE. A seal impression from Erkurgan (Karshi, Uzbekistan) dated to that period presents a god riding a dragon in front of a woman who seems to present some offerings (Isamiddinov, Sulejmanov 1984: fig. 30). There are a seven–pointed star and a crescent behind the god (fig. 8). This "unknown local deity" holds one object identified by Michael Shenkar (2014: 169) as a whip that actually could be the arrow of Tish with some kinds of ribbons or standards attached to the top. The presence of the dragon and the astronomical–astrological symbols could point to an early iconography of Tish. As already observed by Shenkar, the woman offering a cup and holding the reins of the dragon seems to be a donor and not a goddess. In fact, one would have expected Nana to be represented sitting on a throne or lion. Deities sitting on a throne with the foreparts of their symbolic animal on each side are very frequent in Sogdian art. Among the early eighth–century burnt wooden friezes from Penjikent, there are also the representations of several deities under arches. Next to Mithra sitting on his horse–drawn chariot it is possible to observe a deity sitting on a throne with the foreparts of horned dragons on each side (fig. 9). That deity is depicted frontally holding a flower in his left hand and a stick (the arrow?) in his right hand (Belenitsky 1975: fig. 109).

Fig. 8 - A third century CE seal impression from Erkurgan (Karshi, Uzbekistan) (After: Isamiddinov, Sulejmanov 1984: cover)

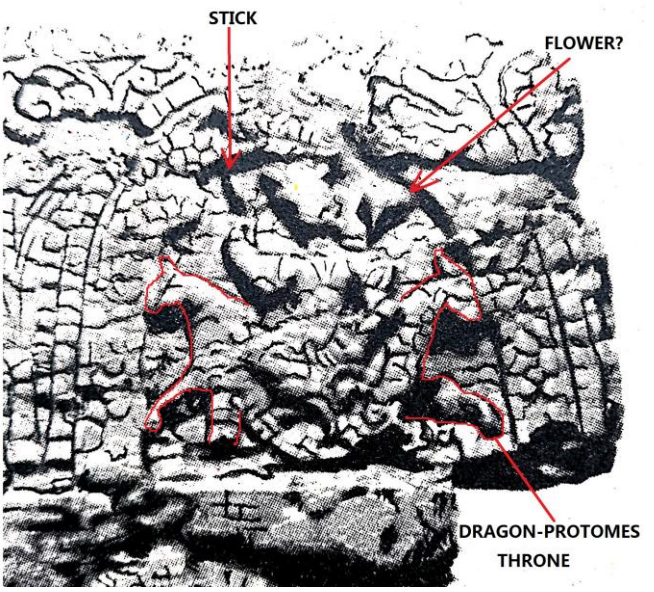

Fig. 9 - Burnt wooden frieze from Penjikent, the State Hermitage Museum (Sketch: author).

Shenkar (2014: 151) rightly observed that Tishtrya was venerated also in Chorasmia because of local personal names containing some forms attributable to that deity. However, he also observed that several Chorasmian silver bowls were embellished with the image of Nana but no image of Tishtrya had come to light. There is actually one interesting eighth–century Chorasmian silver bowl found in Daghestan with the image of a crowned deity sitting on a dragon while holding a small stick in the left hand (fig. 10). According to Boris Marshak (2000), this deity should be a woman because of her clean–shaven face, long hair, and dress. However, in light of the observations exposed above, I would prefer to identify the deity in the Chorasmian bowl from Daghestan as Tishtrya/Tish. Every detail, such as his symbolic animal, the stick that could be an arrow, and his female attire, strongly suggests such an identification.

Fig. 10 - Eighth–century Chorasmian silver bowl from Daghestan, The State Hermitage Museum (Sketch: author).

The main characteristic of the dragon in the Chorasmian bowl from Daghestan is constituted by a pair of horns that deserve further discussion. This characteristic does not seem to refer to Greek art that had a strong impact on ancient Central Asian art and culture during some periods. Focusing specifically on the image of the dragon, recent excavations by

the Karakalpak–Australian Expedition at Akchakhan Kala revealed that a snake–like composite creature that was assimilated to the Greek *ketos* existed in first century BCE–first century CE Chorasmian art (Minardi 2016). In the light of the incompatibility of horns with the Classical image of the *ketos*, Greek elements should not be regarded as pertinent for the image of the goddess sitting on a dragon in the Chorasmian silver bowl from Daghestan.

Horns like those of the dragon in the bowl from Daghestan remind one of elements on the head of the monstrous animal called in Mesopotamian texts *mushhushshu* that was the symbol of Marduk and Nabu (Lambert 1984; Black, Green 1992: figs. 7, 31, 53, 76, 195, 110, 137, 159). One of the best–preserved ancient representations of the *mushhushshu* embellishes the very famous Ishtar Gate at present kept in Berlin Pergamon Museum (fig. 11). In that case, the dragon of Marduk presents two distinguished horns: a pointed and a curly one. Such a strange curly horn occurs also behind the ears of a composite winged creature that is part of the throne of a deity (also called "White Goddess") in a late fifth–early sixth century Sogdian painting from Penjikent Temple II, eastern wall of chapel 4–6, room 5 (period III). The wings of that composite creature present scales and there is a flower on its cheek. Its head looks like one of a dog (fig. 12) (Belenitskii, Marshak 1981: fig. 34). It is possible that the deity on the Chorasmian silver bowl and the Sogdian painting are exactly the same because of their symbolic animal that is a composite creature or dragon with curly horns.

Horned dragons that remind one of Mesopotamian prototypes appeared on some unexcavated Iranian metalwork objects. A *mushhushshu*–like dragon with a musician sitting on it embellishes an early Islamic (?) silver plate from Tomys (Udmurt Autonomous Oblast, Russia) at present kept in the State Hermitage (Marshak 2017: fig. 184). In this specific case, the person on the dragon does not seem to be a deity and the dragon has some vegetal parts on the chest and tail. Another image of a deity sitting on a horned winged dragon appears in the center of a silver dish kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Grenet (2016: 214–15) focused on the four female couples around the central deity on the dragon. He proposed to identify each female couple with a specific Zoroastrian seasonal festivity because of their attributes. For the deity with a dragon in the center, Grenet accepted B. Marshak's hypothesis that compares it with the Tomys silver plate but was quite skeptical about a parallel with a similar deity sitting on a griffin from Kuiruktobe that he preferred to

identify with Spandarmad, the Zoroastrian earth goddess. One last unexcavated bronze statue of a winged dragon with the same horns as in the Tomys and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France silver dishes allegedly said to come from the Helmand River region (Afghanistan) is at present part of the British Museum collection. Scholars have considered it to be early Islamic (Harper 1978: 97–99) or even first-second century Parthian (Simpson 2013). In light of the hypotheses expressed in this study, it should not be excluded that the deities represented on the metalwork objects observed above could refer to Tishtrya/Tish/Teiro and his dragon. As already seen, Tishtrya could be dressed as a woman in Central Asia. For this reason, it is very probable that those metalwork objects could be seventh– or eighth–century Bactrian or Sogdian products.

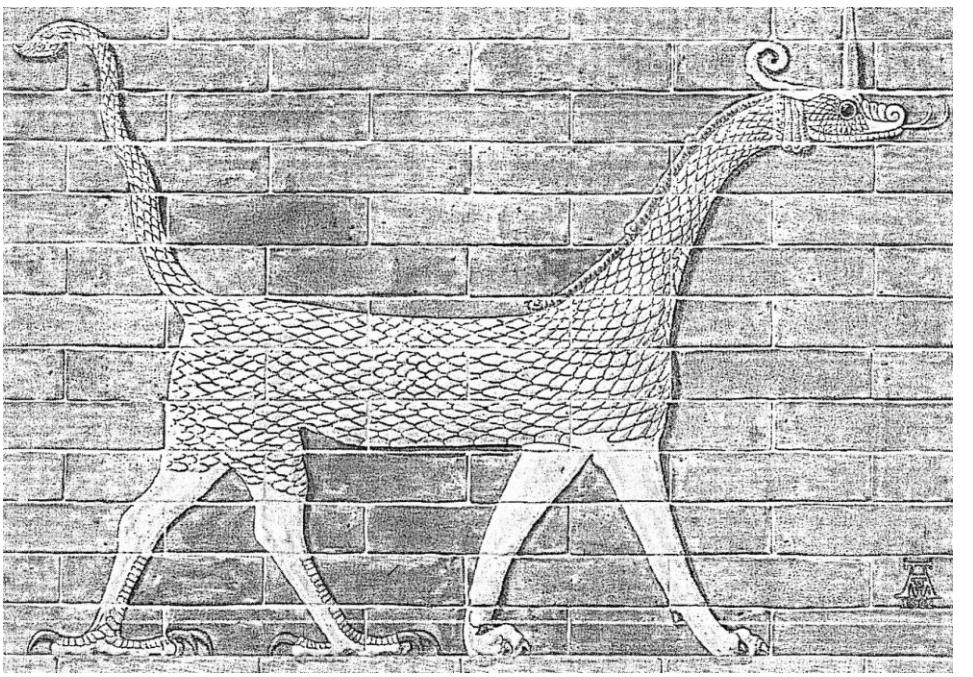

Fig. 11 - Mushhushshu on the Ishtar Gate. Berlin Pergamon Museum (After: P.O. Harper, The Senmurv, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1961: fig. 6).

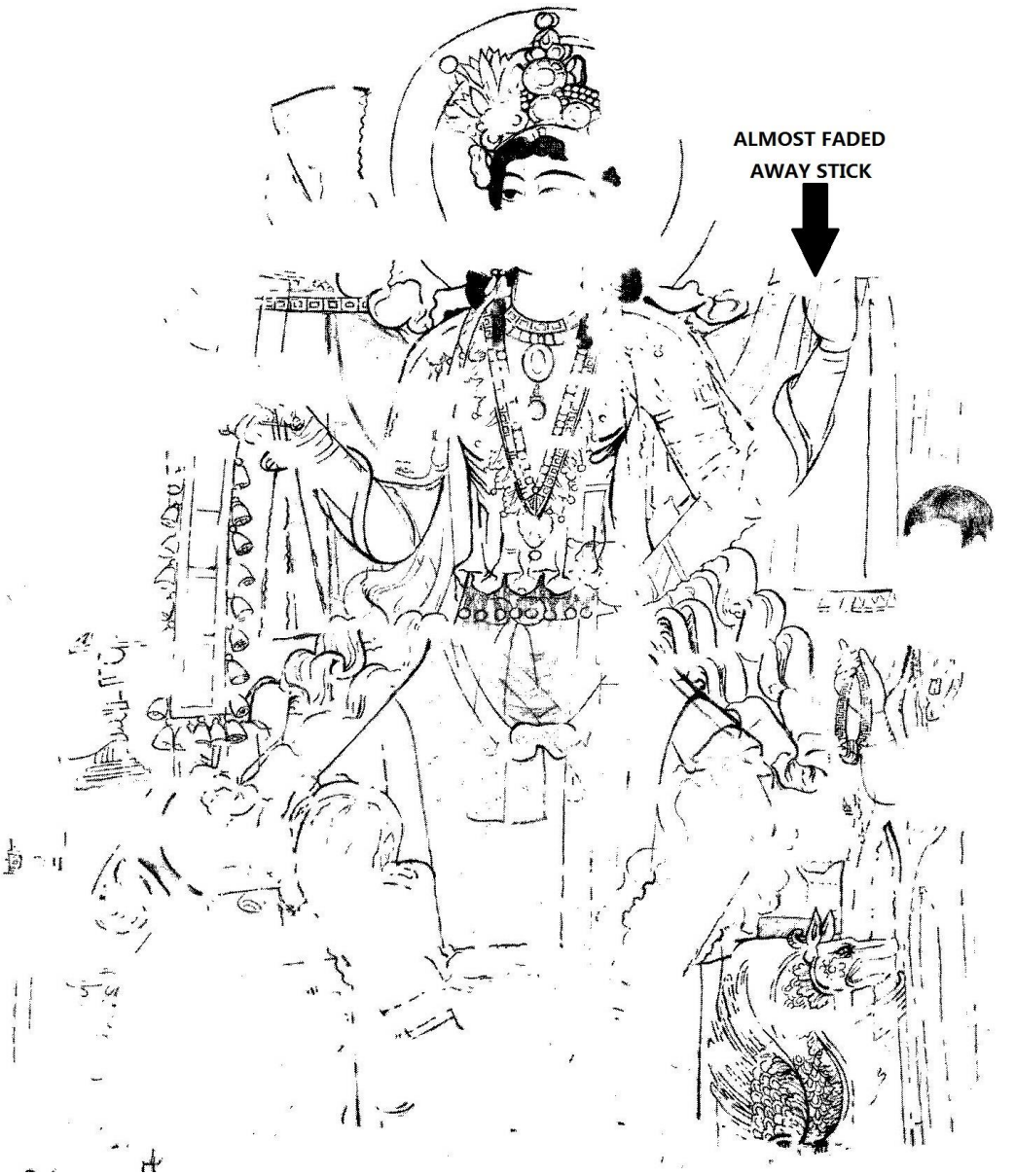

Fig. 12 - Late fifth–early sixth century Sogdian painting from Penjikent Temple II, eastern wall of chapel 4–6, room 5 (period III), The State Hermitage Museum, (After: Belenitskii, Marshak 1981: fig. 34).

According to Michael Shenkar (2014: 78) and Frantz Grenet (2020: 23) the deity in the Sogdian painting from Penjikent chapel II/4–6 could be Anahita while the dragon should actually be identified with a winged or water dog (*sag i abig*) of Middle Persian texts. Guitty Azarpay (2011) too insisted on the dog–like aspect of the creature depicted in that Sogdian painting and, for this reason, she proposed identifying that deity with the personification of Daena.

Only the horn is a constant characteristic in all representations of that dragon while the wings, scales, and the head could be depicted quite freely. According to Marshak, not only was the deity of the Penjikent Temple II chapel a woman but also her symbolic animal was a Sogdian variant of a representation of a typical Iranian concept called in Avestan literature *xwarenah* (Middle Persian *xwarrah*, Persian *farr*, Sogdian *farn*) that we could translate as "glory" or "charisma". Scholars initially confused this composite winged creature with a representation of the *simurgh* of Persian literature (Middle Persian *senmurv*) although Alessandro Bausani (1978) and Boris Marshak (2002: 37) had correctly identified it with the symbol of Iranian glory.

In my opinion, the winged creature in chapel II/4–6 is not exactly a representation of the symbol for Iranian glory: the horn behind the ears could be better explained as a direct borrowing from ancient Mesopotamian art that Sogdian artists still reproduced after many centuries with some other variations. In fact, they probably added the wings and, more interestingly, a dog head. As already observed above, the dog could be considered an appropriate substitute for the *mushhushshu* of Nabu/Tish because of the astronomical–astrological connections of this deity with Canis Major constellation and its main star, Sirius. The canine aspect of the creature under the throne of the deity in Penjikent chapel II/4–6 represents a precise parallel with the dog on the plate in one hand of the god in the Pelliot Chinois 4518.24 paper fragment. For this reason, I think that the so–called "white goddess" from Penjikent is not a goddess at all but a god. In one of the best photographic reproductions of this painting, the enthroned deity wears a long garment that seems to cover a pair of trousers (Marshak, Grenet 1999: fig. 162). In his left hand, there are traces of a short stick embellished with square decorations in sequence. Unfortunately, the upper part of this stick is not preserved but some ribbons and even banners still visible in the background could have been attached to its final part. This stick could be the stylus of Nabu that Sogdian artists transformed into the arrow of Tish. In the other hand, there

was another almost completely faded attribute with some ribbons attached to it. There is finally to observe the sitting position of the deity that reminds one of similar royal scenes in Sasanian rock reliefs and also the deity on the Chorasmian bowl from Daghestan observed above. That sitting position had begun to suit the image of Anahita in Central Asia at least since the Kushano–Sasanian period (Grenet 2020: 23–24). It was introduced after the Persian conquest of Bactria in the third century CE although it pointed originally at kings. Only the absence of a beard and the hair falling on the shoulders seem to have suggested that this character may have been a goddess. Obviously these are unconvincing elements as even a god could have long hair and a clean–shaven face.

Another deity sitting on a dragon without horns can be observed in a sixth–century fragmentary painting from the niche on the western wall of chapel 4–6, room 5 (period IV) of Temple II at Penjikent. In this case, the iconography is definitely rooted in Indian art as clearly suggested by the four hands and the throne–dragon that is very similar to a *makara* (fig. 13). Scholars did not propose any definitive identification for this deity although they all agreed that she was a woman and called her the "red goddess" (Shenkar 2014: 170; Mode 2019: 96–97).

Guitty Azarpay had already proposed to identify the "white goddess" and the "red goddess" as the same deity represented according to different styles that pointed at two separate periods (Azarpay 1975: 27). Even in this case, there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to establish whether this deity is a woman or a man at first glance. On close inspection, the object held in the left upper hand looks like the stick decorated with square elements in the left hand of the Tish painting dated to period III in the same chapel. In addition, the terminal part was embellished with banners whose lower part can be seen just above the head of the dragon. Attributes such as the beribboned stick (possibly an arrow) and the dragon are the same in both paintings and, in my opinion, this is just another image of Tish depicted according to the Indian style that had started to become very popular for the representation of Sogdian deities in the sixth century. The god is the same but the style is different because local artists depicted them in two separate periods. In addition, the garments of the god are very similar in both paintings: they are only partially visible in the mural of period IV because a curtain and some other drape covered the deity (Mode 2019: 95–97).

As highlighted in one recent and extremely informative article by Markus Mode (2019: 94) focusing on the "twin temples" at Penjikent, the

southern wing inside the courtyard of Temple II was decorated with sixth–century sculptural reliefs reproducing an aquatic scene and a podium with traces of a statue (period IV). A *makara*–like dragon appeared in the aquatic scene in the reliefs and the same podium presented another *makara*. Mode argued that all this allusion to water and Indian water creatures should be associated with local rivers, the Oxus and Zerafshan. He was definitely right in proposing connections to a water deity although I think that Tish would better fit such a reconstruction both from the chronological and stylistic points of view. In fact, Tish was the Sogdian name of the Avestan rain god Tishtrya who was a water deity and was sitting on a *makara* in a painting of period IV in chapel II/4–6. At this point, one could propose that Temple I and II at Penjikent were dedicated to a couple of deities who, in all probability, were Nana and her husband Tish.

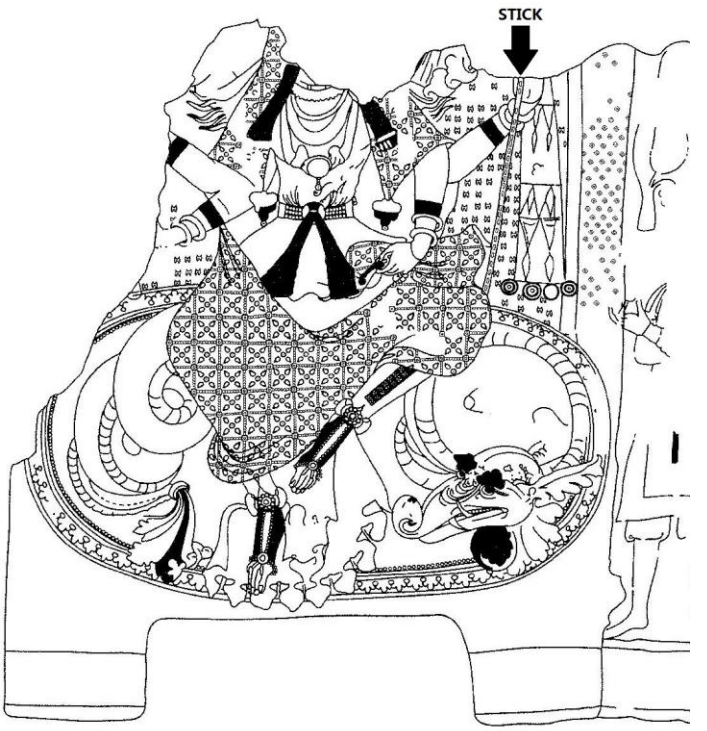

Fig. 13 - Sixth–century Sogdian painting from Penjikent Temple II, niche in the western wall of chapel 4–6, room 5 (period IV), The State Hermitage Museum, (After: Mode 2019: fig. 20).

On the western wall of chapel II/4–6 the archaeologist found traces of a painted image of Nana sitting on the lion (Mode 1991/92: fig. 9b) while on the eastern wall there is the image of Tish enthroned with all his typical attributes and a canine *mushhushshu* (ex "white goddess"). Markus Mode (1991/92: 181; 2019: 95) completed the triad inside chapel II/4–6 (period III) inferring that a third deity should have been painted on the northern wall but no traces are preserved. Sogdian artists depicted images of Nana and Tish facing each other in one of the Penjikent city temples because this was probably a very important icon. They reproduced this icon in private houses such as in room 12/sector XXV and on at least one terracotta ossuary from Kirmantepa in southern Sogdiana (fig. 14) (Shenkar 2014: 123–126). Curiously enough, in the lower left hand of Nana on this ossuary, the goddess is holding an object that could be a scaled monster or a fish shaped as a mace (Mode 1991/92: 185). Nana holding a mace shaped like a fish swallowing a round object also appeared on a sixth–century wooden frieze recently excavated in Kafir Kal'a. Frantz Grenet (2020: 23–24) did not identify another enthroned goddess with a fish–like mace in at least two Sogdian terracotta medallions with Nana. He preferred to identify that goddess with Anahita or the Fravashis. However, on the bases of the mace–like fish and the early chronology of those terracotta medallions (fifth century) this deity could be identified only with Nana whose iconography did not yet present Indian traits.

Figure 14. Sogdian ossuary from Kirmantepa, Kashka Darya region. University of Tashkent. Sketch: Li Sifei.

The same image of Nana from Kafir Kal'a presents some other interesting elements. In fact, that goddess seems to remove a piece of textile with her lower left hand to reveal herself (Grenet 2020: fig. 2). This attitude could remind one of the images of Tish from the niche in the western wall of chapel 4–6, room 5 in Penjikent Temple II (ex "red goddess") that M. Mode considered to be represented in the act of disclosing himself to the worshipers (Mode 2019: 95–97). Such a detail suggests that both Nana and Tish could have been part of ceremonies that included the sacred couple to be shown on special occasions. At this point of our investigation, one could argue that their attributes too could have been interchangeable.

Let us now focus on the mace of Nana. In ancient Mesopotamian religion, the fish appeared among the attributes of Atargatis who was sometimes confused with Nana and Ereshkigal (Colledge 1976: 36). As already observed by Bhattacharya–Haesner (2004: 44), the marble slab from Hatra embellished with the image of Nergal and Atargatis/Ereshkigal presents a demonic dog, snakes, and scorpions around the god while two facing fishes appear on the base of the throne of the goddess. Nergal was the brother of Sin – the main god of the northern Mesopotamian city of Harran (Charrae) – and among his epithets, "Lord with his dogs" (of possible Parthian origin) was still popular in the fifth–sixth century (Green 1992: 58, 72–73; Dirven 2009: 63-68). Since Nabu was closely associated with Sin in late antique Harran, it is not improbable that Nabu and Nergal could have been associated too with some possible iconographical outcomes. Dogs, scorpions, and snakes that were the symbolic animals of Nergal could then be related to Nabu as well. Lucinda Dirven (2009: 68) observed that the association of Nergal with dogs occurred only after the Parthian period probably because of the importance of these animals among Iranians. If this is the case, it could be argued that the Parthians promoted the association between Nergal with Nabu/Tir. Despite the absence of images, archaeologists found several ostraca from Old Nisa that included Tir in theophoric names (Shenkar 2014: 149). It is then worth observing that Apollo too had chthonic associations in western Anatolia because, he was originally a (Hyperborean?) healing deity who lived in the underworld and could cause pestilences. For this reason, Martin Schwartz accepted the parallel between Apollo and Nergal as proposed by other scholars. According to Schwartz, those two gods also shared the same symbolic animals (Schwart 2005: 148).

It is worth remembering that, among the debris found together with the podium inside the southern wing of the Temple II courtyard at

Penjikent, archaeologists excavated fragments of a fish. In his reconstruction of the statue of this water deity (that, in my opinion, is Tish), Mode (2019: 94) reproduced the *makara* on the podium and a plate with a fish in the hand of the hypothetical cult statue according to a typically Sogdian iconographical formula. It should not be ruled out that Sogdian artists could have chosen from various symbolic animals that in the case of Tish were the dragon, dogs, scorpions, snakes, and, possibly, the fish. Interestingly enough, a very ancient Central Asian goddess that Martha Carter associated to Nana could be represented sitting on a dragon. That American scholar concluded that "both lion and dragon appear to have been retained as her vehicles in these instances" (Carter 2008: 123).

Among the numerous deities represented in the painting from Penjikent room 12, sector XXV (fig. 3), there is also the representation of two curious architectonic elements that scholars proposed to identify as the representation of the "gate of hell" on the left and the "gate of paradise" on the right. According to this interpretation, the warrior clad in armor inside the "gate of hell" could be Yima (represented according to the iconography of Indian – or, better, Buddhist – Vaishravana) who had connections with the underworld as remarked by the image of the animal standing below the architectonic structure. F. Grenet, in fact, identified it as a lion or a feline that in Zoroastrian religion was a demonic creature (Grenet 1995/96; Grenet 2010: 94). Inside the "gate of paradise" there is just the bust of a woman and her entire structure is supported by a couple of angels. Markus Mode (2019: 97) has recently proposed to identify the so–called "gate of hell" and the "gate of paradise" as "portable shrines housing divine icons". These architectonic structures could be actually some kind of constructions that Sogdian artists rendered in a bi-dimensional and schematic way. Grenet (1995/96) was definitely right in identifying some elements of the armored god as belonging to the Indian religious milieu. However, his identification with Vaishravana/Yima does not seem justified. Pavel Lurje (2020: 459-64) has recently associated the name of Vaishravana to the Semitic Ba'al Shamin (Aramaic "Lord of Heaven") who was definitely known among Iranians and Armenians as well as a very prominent deity.

From an iconographical point of view, the armored god does not seem to have any negative connotation in Sogdian art and, in fact, he is standing on the figure of a demon inside the "gate of hell". He could remind a multiarmed image of Tish in the Sogdian ossuary from Kirmantepa who is holding an arrow (fig. 14). One more detail seems to

point in this direction since, above the so-called "gate of hell", there is the fragmentary representation of a dragon-like creature or *ketos* that could be just another allusion to Tish. If this identification could be convincing then the fragmentary animal below the "gate of hell" would be a dog and it should be considered just another symbol of Tish. At this point, it seems obvious to identify the goddess inside the "gate of paradise" with Nana despite the fact that she has no attributes and her entire structure is supported by angels. Practically, in the same scene of room 12, sector XXV there could be a divine couple reproduced, for some reason, twice. Another very fragmentary eighth century painting from Penjikent room 2, sector XXVI presents at least five divine figures whose identity is not easy to determine. The central one is probably Nana sitting on the lion while on the left there is just the same god clad in armor who is killing a dwarf at his feet with a spear or a very long arrow exactly as in the painting from Penjikent room 12, sector XXV (Shenkar 2014: 123). This was apparently another late Sogdian iconographical variant of Tish.

Let us now consider again the attributes of the divine couple in the Pelliot Chinois paper. If we assume that the ancient Mesopotamian–rooted attributes of Nana and Nabu/Tish were interchangeable in the Sogdian milieu, then the snake and scorpion in the lower hands of the goddess in the Pelliot Chinois document and the fish on the plate in one hand of Tish at Penjikent might be definitely disclosed. Tishtrya/Tish ambiguity in the Zoroastrian sphere points to this exchange of attributes. He is moreover the only deity possibly associated with Mercury/Tir and, at the same time, Sirius. Planets were considered demonic entities in Zoroastrian astronomy–astrology while stars had a positive nature (Tavernier 2005: 363; Panaino 2020). This ambiguity seems to be much accentuated in the case of Mercury/Tir and could possibly explain his feminine appearance or even an interchange of attributes with his wife Nana on the iconographical level. In ancient Mesopotamian texts, Venus and Mercury are assigned two genders (Rochberg 2009: 73). Ishtar/Aphrodite/Venus too could be described with a beard and she possibly even transmitted such characteristics to other female deities of the Near East (Heimpel 1982: 13-15). It should not be excluded that the ambiguity of Mercury had persisted among Iranian people such as Persians and Sogdians at least since the Achaemenid period. As already observed above, in Islamic astronomical-astrological system, Mercury/'Utarid was considered "hypocritical" that is to say, neutral. This peculiarity of Mercury/Tir could be rendered in visual arts just as sexual ambiguity.

One last hypothesis by Mode could shed light on the practical use of the Pelliot Chinois fragmentary paper. In fact, according to Mode (2019: 97), Sogdian merchants used to carry portable icons for protection or to worship them in every place at home or during their travels. It should not be ruled out that Sogdian travelers produced and sold them abroad as they did in the motherland. Narshakhi (tenth century) reported that still in early Islamic Bukhara local people bought "idols" in a bazaar in the city twice a year according to traditions rooted in pre–Islamic times (Lo Muzio 2010: 179). They used terracotta statuettes in Sogdiana but, possibly, in China they preferred some other inexpensive material such as paper. As is well known, Buddhism had no big problems in accepting divinities that belonged to other religious systems in a subordinate position to Buddha. So, the recovery of a paper fragment embellished with a Sogdian divine couple in a Buddhist center such as Dunhuang should not surprise us at all. One other scholar proposed very similar ideas although, in her opinion, the original artistic milieu should have been Uighur and not directly Sogdian (Russell-Smith 2005: 103).

Tish's feminine aspect is also confirmed in the Chinese cultural milieu and specifically in Dunhuang. In the painting on silk called "Tejaprabha Buddha and the Five Planets" (British Library, Stein painting 31) precisely dated to 897 by a Chinese inscription that Aurel Stein found in Dunhuang, the personifications of the planets appear around the central rayed Buddha on a chariot. According to the description of this painting by Lilla Russell–Smith (2006: 100) "Mercury who is always male in the West, became a female figure in China, but was still portrayed as a writer holding an inkstone and a brush". The same scholar argued that the anthropomorphic representation of the planets became popular in China after the arrival of Buddhism from India. This is definitely true although, in light of the ideas expressed in this paper, the feminine attire of Mercury was probably a Central Asian (most likely Sogdian) and not an Indian borrowing. In fact, as observed above, Indian Budha (Mercury) was a man holding an arrow with both hands. At least one other expert on ancient astrological iconographies described "anomalous" Mercury female appearance in Chinese paintings of "Tejaprabha Buddha" type (Kotyk 2017a: 51). Such an anomaly would appear much clearer if one considers Sogdian (most likely Buddhist) and not Indian intermediaries in this process of iconographic transmission of "western" astrology–astronomy. The planetary deities around Tejaprabha Buddha (Chinese *Chifengguangfo*) along with the symbols of the "western" and Indian signs

of the zodiac represented a popular subject among the Tangut Xixia artists who represented them in some eleventh century *tangka*s at present kept in the State Hermitage Museum collection (Samosjuk 1993).

There is finally to observe that the planet Mercury had always been called in Chinese "Shui xing", literally the "water star (planet)". This name seems to be very ancient (probably even pre-Han) and has no direct connections to Tishtrya/Tir as an aquatic deity. Some late Tang Chinese astronomical-astrological texts even rendered the names of the planets according to their Sogdian (and not Middle Persian) names: Tir is usually called *diè* (Panaino 1990: 198; Kotyk 2017b: 43). However, as Jeffrey Kotyk kindly pointed at me, in at least one case (CBETA 2021.Q2, T21, no. 1311, p. 460a23) the anonymous Chinese copyist rendered Mercury/Tir as *dī* that literally means "drop" (Kotyk 2021: 98-99). Even though it would be impossible to establish that the Chinese copyist tried to connect in this specific passage the name of Tir with a more suitable (and "aquatic") character, its semantic meaning is curious.

This allusion to water could be once more associated to the aquatic nature of Tishtrya/Tish who possibly corresponded to the planet Mercury/Tir in the Iranian world. His original Indian iconography already adopted by the Sogdians in the seventh-eighth century included a warrior clad in armor holding an arrow with both hands. A very similar position appeared for the representation of the *lokapala* of the east Dhrtarashtra in tenth–century Uighur Buddhist paintings in cave 9 at Bezeklik (Turfan, Xinjiang Province) (Meng, Zhao and Geng 1995: 143). Not only the iconography of Dhrtarashtra (Chinese *Chiguo tian*) but also his dominion over the eastern direction could be associated with Tishtrya. In fact, according to the Iranian cosmological system, the sky was divided into five parts each one dominated by a "general". Tishtrya was the general of the eastern part of the sky and had to fight against the planet Tir/Mercury (Panaino 1995: 65). There are unfortunately no pre–Islamic representations of these five Iranian generals. It is however very probable that, in Sogdian art, Tishtrya could have been represented as a warrior clad in armor and holding an arrow as in the Kirmantepa ossuary and some other Sogdian paintings from Penjikent that presented strong Indian elements typical of the iconography of local gods after the sixth century.

5. Conclusions

Central Asian artists have been depicting Tishtrya in women's attire since his very first representation in Kushan coinage and, for some reason, they continued to represent him in this way in Chorasmian toreutics and Sogdian paintings until Islamization. He formed an important icon with Nana that was as revered in the Sogdiana motherland (for example, in the "twin temples" at Penjikent) as in the colonies along the so–called "Silk Road". The Pelliot Chinois 4518.24 document attests the spread of this type of icon in Dunhuang well beyond the complete Islamization of Central Asia. In Dunhuang and the Tarim Basin (that is to say, in the Buddhist milieu), Sogdian, Chinese or Uighur artists probably superimposed the Nana–Tish icon on the Amitabha–Avalokiteshvara icon that was considered a powerful talisman for the protection of the family and children. For this reason, it is possible that Sogdians considered the Nana–Tish divine couple as a powerful icon to be prayed to for the protection of family affairs. Since in origin Nana and Nabu/Tish were Mesopotamian deities, also this component should not be underestimated. Mesopotamian elements represent the less clear components in this complicated pattern of iconographical transmission. The feminine appearance of Nabu/Hermes/Tish should be possibly searched in the Mesopotamian milieu.

This is just one possible reading that, in my opinion, could offer a good interpretation for the couple in the Pelliot Chinois 4518.24 document and a solution to many other iconographical problems in Sogdian art. Those publications based on Avestan and Middle Persian texts by experts on Zoroastrian studies are definitely a great expression of erudition but seem to have addressed a very small circle of intellectuals (perhaps Sogdian priests) and not the common people. Due to the cultural milieu in which the Amitabha–Avalokiteshvara icon was produced, it seems more likely that relatively inexpensive illustrated objects of worship of this type were aimed at a very large audience including mostly illiterate people.

Biographical note

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