Divine disguises on the crossroads of Khotan: The iconographies from Dandan Oilik

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Abstract

The oasis of Khotan represents a fascinating crossroad of cultures and artistic influences mixed in a unique environment. Paintings, which are visually eloquent, yet very elusive with their mysterious symbolism, have fascinated scholars since the beginning of the 20th century, when they emerged from the sands of the Taklamakan desert. The oasis, one of the largest and most prosperous on the Silk Road, functioned as a transit point between the two huge cultural entities of India and China and, inevitably, absorbed inspirations from all the visitors passing through. It became a Buddhist stronghold whose monastic establishments were praised and where monks travelled to obtain sacred scriptures. Such a heterogeneous environment favored the birth of original artistic manifestations which in many cases resist a unanimous interpretation. For the large quantity of materials spread across different sites in the oasis of Khotan, a restrictive choice was made to better fit the format of this article. The site of Dandan Oilik has been selected as an example, principally because of the great variety of themes represented on mural paintings as well as on wooden votive panels and tablets. The primary goal of this study is to attempt to identify and classify the iconographies of deities belonging to an auxiliary Buddhist pantheon, therefore depictions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are purposely left out. The aim is to describe what could be foreign or local admixtures to an iconographic heritage already heavy with significance and symbolism at its South Asian origins.

Keywords: Khotan, Dandan Oilik, Iconography, Buddhism, Silk Road.

1. The Kingdom of Khotan

Known also as Yutian in Chinese, the oasis of Khotan was one of the major Buddhist kingdoms on the southern route in eastern Central Asia during the first millennium CE (Rhie 2007: 257).[1] Today the oasis is a prefecture of the autonomous region of Xinjiang in Western China, in older sources also known as Chinese or Eastern Turkestan.[2] It is located in the depression of the Tarim Basin, on the southern border of one of the most arid regions of the world, the Taklamakan Desert.[3] The oasis extends for 40 km in an East-West direction. The homonymous modern capital Hotan/Hetian preserves the name of the ancient kingdom, although the old capital city was identified by Stein in the nearby site of Yotkan (Lo Muzio 2017: 343).[4]

To the south of the oasis rises the mountain range of the Kunlun, from it the rivers Karakash (*Black Jade*), Yurungkash (*White Jade*) and Keriya originate. The Karakash and the Yurungkash join into the river Khotan on the northern side of the oasis, which flows into the river Tarim during wintertime. The rivers contribute to the fertility of the oasis by transporting loess rich in minerals from the mountain range. Another crucial resource brought down from the mountains is the precious jadestone, a commodity particularly sought-after by the Chinese, which led to extensive commercial and cultural contacts and provided great wealth to the Khotanese kingdom throughout its existence.

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[1] The southern route was one of the three main pathways used to travel around the Tarim Basin and it connected the chain of garrisons and agricultural oases to the Han capitals of Chang'an and Loyang. After the Hexi corridor, through Gansu province to Dunhuang, the silk roads divided into northern, southern, and central branches. The southern branch began at the Yangkuan gate, outside of Dunhuang, and continued to Miran and Niya. Then it followed the northern foothills of the Kunlun Mountains to Khotan, Yarkand and Kashgar. Another alternative was led from Dunhuang to Loulan on the Lopnor lake, where the itinerary diverged south to Miran and north to Karashahr.

[2] Referred to as Western Regions (*xīyù* 西域) in old Chinese sources, a general term for Central Asia, but more specifically applied for eastern Central Asia. Also known as Serindia, Kashgaria, and Chinese Tartary (Härtel and Yaldez 1982: 18).

[3] The core of this desert area is formed by shifting sand dunes, whereas the periphery changes into a gravel desert dotted with occasional oases, crucial for the successful transition through this inhospitable region since ancient times.

[4] The site was identified by Stein on the basis of the topographical accounts reported by the Chinese sources, the character and the great number of archaeological findings, and its position related to the Buddhist shrines described by Xuanzang (see Stein 1907: 190-210).

To investigate the earliest history of the oasis of Khotan one must rely mainly on Chinese sources. With the expansion of the Han empire in Central Asia, Khotan made its appearance in Chinese dynastic chronicles, which became fundamental for the reconstruction of historical events related to the region. The Chinese became aware of the existence of Khotan thanks to the envoy Zhang Qian sent by the emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty to create an alliance with the clans of the Greater Yuezhi against the threat represented by the nomadic tribal confederation of the Xiongnu. His journey is reported in vivid details in one of the chapters of the monumental *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shǐjì* 史記), as well as in the *History of the Former Han* (*Hànshū* 汉书), where information about the size and position of the kingdom of Khotan is included. The *History of the Later Han* (*Hòu Hànshū* 后汉书) and the *History of the Liang* (*Liáng Shū* 梁书) record the names of several Khotanese kings for the first two centuries CE, but unfortunately the original Khotanese forms of these names are impossible to recover (Kumamoto 2009).

The region became involved in a permanent conflict between the Han Empire and the Xiongnu between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE. Khotan was also in a constant dispute with its Western neighbors, the kingdoms of Yarkand and Kashgar. The predominant influence of the Xiongnu confederation was later replaced with a new power emerging from the south – the Kushan dynasty. The Bactrian kingdom of the Kushans and the Han empire contended the southern part of the Tarim Basin until the general Ban Chao expelled the Kushans from the area. Even though the territory was no longer under their direct influence, the Indo-Bactrian culture continued to spread, as attested by numerous archaeological findings like coins, textiles and other objects (Kumamoto 2009, Compareti 2020: 90–91).

The emergence of local documentation can be tentatively placed in the period of the Later Han, with the appearance of the so-called Sino-Kharoṣṭhī coins, discovered mainly in the oasis of Khotan starting from the end of the 19th century. On the coins it is possible to identify short legends in Chinese and in Prākrit written in the Kharoṣṭhī script. The Kharoṣṭhī legends bear the title of *yuti/yudi rāja,* implying the issuing by Khotanese kings.[5] The most adequate dating for these coins would be the

[5] The names of the kings on the coins do not match those reported in other sources

2nd to early 3rd century CE (Kumamoto 2009). In this timeframe the kingdom of Khotan was supposedly politically independent and the international trade on the Silk Route between China, India and Bactria stimulated the Khotanese kings to create a coinage for local use (Cribb 1985: 141).

Another interesting piece of evidence is a document in Kharoṣṭhī found by Aurel Stein in Endere, dated to the 3rd century CE – the preserved contract of a purchase of a camel written in Prākrit dated to the 3rd year of king Vijita-siṃha. It represents the earliest local form of a king name, also accompanied by an epithet of Iranian origins *hīnāza* (army leader), together with other personal names, clearly Iranian. It is plausible to assume that the royal family and at least part of their subjects were of Iranian-Saka descent (Kumamoto 2009).

Although the written records suggest otherwise, according to archaeological findings the arrival of Buddhism in Xinjiang has been collocated in a period following the first half of the 3rd century CE, as attested by all the artifacts, monasteries, and shrines connected to this religion found in the area.[6] This paradox may be explained by the lack of data, which might be retrieved in future scientific endeavors, but it is also important to consider the hypothesis of long-range proselytism targeted mainly to China, as the great scholar of Buddhism Erik Zürcher conjectured in his work.[7] This would explain why master translators from the Tarim area are reported later than those of Western Central Asia – not only the Parthian An Shigao (the earliest known translator of sacred Buddhist texts in Chinese), but also those from Bactria and Gandhāran regions (Lo Muzio 2017: 313–314).[8]

From the 4th to the 6th century Central Asia witnessed a period of changes and tumults, caused by the presence of Hunnic tribes. Khotan became a tributary state of the Hephthalites (Compareti 2020).

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unfortunately, so a different chronology, either much lower or higher than that of the recorded kings, has been hypothesized. Considering the fact that in later periods (Tang and Five Dynasties) the Chinese transcriptions/translations of the Khotanese royal names had barely any resemblance to the original, the aforementioned problematic identification does not present an insurmountable obstacle (Kumamoto 2009).

[6] The general Ban Chao in addiction tells in one of his accounts from 73 CE that the people of Khotan practiced a form of shamanism or Zoroastrianism (Ma, Y. Sun, Y. 1999: 237).

[7] See Zürcher 1959 or the 2007 reprint.

[8] The most famous translators of Buddhist scriptures from Khotan known from Chinese sources are Mokṣala and Gītamitra (Lo Muzio 2017: 314).

For the period between the 4th century up to the 8th and 10th century, when copious amounts of local documents in Khotanese appeared, the sources of information are limited to Chinese dynastic histories and biographies of eminent monks, who travelled to the Western Regions from China, or came to China from India or from one of the oases in Central Asia, passing through Khotan. The accounts of three Chinese pilgrims are especially precious, all of them confirming the predominance of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the region (Kumamoto 2009).

The first one, Faxian (340–418 CE), who visited the oasis between 399–402 CE, reported a detailed description of monasteries, temples, and Buddhist Mahāyāna rituals, but no significant historical information (Legge 1886: 16–20). Songyun (unknown–528 CE) described the conversion of a legendary Khotanese king to Buddhism (Beal 1869: 180). Xuanzang (602–664 CE) is the one who brings by far the longest account (Beal 1884: 309–326). He discusses in his records the country's official name, which he claims to be *Kustana* or "Earth-breast" in Sanskrit. The origin of said name is explained in the foundation legend reported by Xuanzang, in which the divine origin of the kings of Khotan is affirmed. The story claims the exiled ministers of the son of king Aśoka laid the foundation of the kingdom, which was then seized by an exiled prince from the East (probably China). [9] The prince was unable to have a son, thus directed his prayers to the god Vaiśravaṇa (one of the Four Heavenly Kings), who granted him an heir and suckled the child with a magical breast, which swelled up from the ground (Stein 1907: 157). [10] In other sources, the son of Aśoka figures as the exiled prince, who is fed by the miraculous breast and later becomes the founder of Khotan. This and other legends of the same nature should not be taken as historical facts, a direct Indian colonization of Khotan being highly improbable (Kumamoto 2009).

Khotanese legends are reported by a variety of sources in Khotanese, Chinese and Tibetan and all have essentially a Buddhist background. The most valuable documentation comes from Tibetan texts,

[9] Emperor from the Mauryan dynasty from 268–232 BCE. Great protector of Buddhism, he promoted the spread of the religion throughout ancient Asia and consequently became one of the most important characters of Buddhist legends.

[10] The Heavenly Kings in Hindu and Buddhist traditions are *lokapāla*s, guardians of the four cardinal directions. Vaiśravaṇa is based on the Hindu deity Kubera; both are guardians of the North. As Kubera, he is also considered the king of *yakṣa*s.

probably translation of original Khotanese works which no longer exist. The *Prophecy of the Li Country* (Li yul lung bstan pa ལི་ཡུལ་ལུང་བསྟན་པ་) and the *Religious Annals of the Li Country* (Li yul chos kyi lo rgyus ལི་ཡུལ་ཆོས་ཀྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་) are particularly important since the legends described are arranged following a genealogy of Khotanese kings. The stories narrate mainly Buddhist epiphanic events and report the foundation of monasteries, whose existence is stated in several documents from Khotan and in Chinese historical literature. The legends promote a connection between Buddhism and the Khotanese royal lineage, conveying a message both religious and political (Forte 2020: 43–44).

At the beginning of the 7th century, Khotan became the vassal of the Western Turks, consequently to their expansion into the Western Regions. After many disputes and revolts, the region was alternately occupied by Chinese and Tibetans, who became interested in Khotan in the second half of the 8th century, when the Tang empire was no longer able to maintain control over the region. The kingdom succumbed to the Tibetan conquest by the end of the 8th century but regained independence in 851 CE (Beckwith 1987: 171). After the collapse of the Uyghur kingdom in Mongolia, this Turkic people started to settle in the Tarim Basin and gradually became the predominant ethnicity, inhabiting the region to these days. In 1006 BE the Karakhanids conquered Khotan and Islam came to be the prevalent faith (Compareti 2020: 91).

2. The site of Dandan Oilik

Dandan Oilik is located in the Cele County, Khotan prefecture of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China, 90km north of Domoko, 60 km east of the Khotan river and 30 km west from the river Keriya. It was discovered in 1896 by Sven Hedin and excavated mostly by Aurel Stein between 1900-1901. Stein was able to find 6 dwellings, 11 religious buildings and various artifacts (Lo Muzio 2017: 350). The British explorer dated the site to the 8th century CE, based on Chinese documents found at the site.[11] Later, the site was also visited by the American geographer

[11] The documents were discovered in the northern sector of Dandan Oilik, in buildings D V, VII and VIII. In total Stein found eighteen Chinese documents, concerning primarily the business of a convent. Five of them reported dates corresponding to 781–789 CE. Most were found on the ancient floor level of building D VII. According to Stein, the documents would not survive in such a state of preservation for a long time before the

Ellsworth Huntington in 1905, and by the German geographer Emil Trinkler and the Swiss botanist Walter Bosshard. A hiatus of almost seventy years made the site disappear back in the sands of the Taklamakan, until a team from the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology led by Wang Bihua resumed the studies and visited Dandan Oilik in 1995. In 1998 the Swiss explorer and scholar Christoph Baumer led a Sino-Swiss expedition, which resulted in additional discoveries (Zhang – Qu – Liu 2008: 157).

In 2002 and 2004 a joint Sino–Japanese expedition (Xinjiang Cultural Relics Bureau, Xinjiang Archaeological Research Institute, Niya Research Institute of Bukkyo University) reinvestigated the site and found fragments of wall paintings in Buddhist temples, which underwent a meticulous process of restoration until 2006 (Zhang – Qu – Liu 2008: 157). Since then, no further research has been conducted.

Most shrines in Dandan Oilik have the same planimetry: rectangular building, a squared cella, and a corridor for circumambulation around the cella. Usually inside the cella, towards the inner wall, a podium (squared, circular or octagonal) is set up for a sculpture or a sculptural group of unbaked clay – most of the times the lower part of the sculpture is all that is left, typically the feet on a lotiform support and parts of smaller figures (Lo Muzio 2017: 351)

3. The paintings

The content of Khotanese paintings is essentially Buddhist, and although the pictured deities seem to embody different traditions and are not clearly classifiable as either Buddhist, Brahmanic or even Zoroastrian, we still need to visualize and implement them in a totally Buddhist context. While the art of other sites that are categorized as caravan cities, as Turfan in the Tarim Basin, but also Dura Europos in Syria, reflects the different religions which existed simultaneously, this is not true for Khotan. Chinese sources reports that the people of Khotan worshipped the law of the Buddha and the spirit Xian (*Xiān* 祆), which is probably to be identified with Ahura Mazda. [12][13] On the other hand, in Saka texts the

abandonment of the building, so the year of 789 CE is a *terminus ante quem* for the northern sector of Dandan Oilik (Williams 1973: 109).

[12] The same Chinese character is used sometimes for deities like Maheśvara in Chinese

latter is not considered a supreme god at all, and his name designates the sun. It is very common to preserve Avestan technical terms in the Saka Buddhist literature, so it is reasonable to infer that a similar approach has been applied in the arts: Iranian elements, such as costumes, tributary processions, and the symbols of the sun and the moon, are absorbed and employed inside a Buddhist framework.

Buddhism in Khotan included various branches, such as the early schools of Mahāsāṃghika, a precursor to the Mahāyāna, and Sarvāstivāda. Later the school of the Great Vehicle was predominant, but the scriptures betray an esoteric twist which can be defined as proto-tantra Buddhism (Williams 1973: 113–117). This movement reflects a variety of Hindu influences, and one of the most important aspect, and the topic further elaborated inside the arts, is the adoption of Brahmanical deities. The most obvious example of this phenomenon can be observed in the earliest formation of Buddhist legends, with the attendance of Brahmā and Indra at the birth of the Buddha. In Khotan this trend is presented with the first images of Śiva in a Buddhist context. These deities were powerful on their plane of existence, but they were still chained by the laws of karma, which only Enlightment could break.[14] In later phases of Mahāyāna, the various Hindu deities are conceived as *avatāra*s (incarnations) of the Buddha and they acquired the status of members of the Buddhist pantheon. In Vajrayāna, they are incorporated as agents of the faith (Williams 1973: 115). [15]Some researchers (Baumer, Mode, Rong) have hypothesized a

translations of sacred texts. It is interesting to note that Khotanese texts did not refer to divine beings as *deva*s, controversial to their Zoroastrian eyes, but rather as *gyasta*s or 'worshipful beings', clearly linked to the Avestan *yazata*s (Scott 1999: 48)

[13] At the moment there isn't much relevant material on the presence of Ahura Mazda in Khotanese or Iranian Buddhism. One interesting depiction is to be found at Kara-tepe in Bactria. A painting of one of the cave temples shows a meditating Buddha surrounded by flames. More recently, a figure on his side has been discovered, also meditating and surrounded by flames, with his left hand raised in reverence. An accompagning Bactrian inscription mentions *buddha-mazda.* We could interpret it as a reference to the Buddha surrounded by flames, intended to represent a syncretic fusion of the Buddha and Ahura Mazda. However, the attendant deity could be also understood as Ahura Mazda himself, paying hommage to the Buddha (Scott 1999: 60-61).

[14] In the Saṃyutta Nikāya the moment of Enlightment of the Śākyamuni is described as 'surpassing the divine majesty of the gods' (Scott 1999: 56).

[15] In the Śūraṅgamasūtra the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is said to appear in various forms depending on the background and understanding of the hearer, if needed he could appear even as Śiva, or Maheśvara. Likewise, in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra the Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara was one who ,appears in many kind of bodies, everywhere

Sogdian origin of these divinities, implying the importation to Khotan. The Sogdians were renowned merchants, and many migrated from Uzbekistan/Tajikistan to China and back along the Silk Road, especially between the 5th and the 8th century CE. Some of them moved to the Tarim Basin and China permanently and seem to have adapted local habits while retaining their original culture. In Khotan, the Sogdian presence is attested by primary sources, both in Khotanese and Sogdian languages (Compareti 2020: 92).

In Sogdiana, a clear Indian influence on the arts is visible since at least the 6th century CE. Despite the Indian iconography, the Sogdian divinities belonged to a local form of Zoroastrianism (*Xīān*). A remarkable example is that of the Avestan god Wešparkar (Penjikent room XXII/1) represented with the characteristics of Śiva (three heads, multiple arms, a *triśūla*), yet clearly identified by an inscription in Sogdian on his leg – *wšpr(kr)*. [16]

Other specialists, as Boris Marshak, consider the Khotanese paintings to be a genuine local product. Nonetheless, they present peculiarities not found in other Iranian Buddhist contexts (as in Bactria or Bamiyan), which are more in line with a Tantric interpretation. These elements are usually associated with later Himalayan Buddhism, but an influence of Khotanese art is not to be excluded, although the process of transmission is not yet clearly understood (Compareti 2020: 92).

Maheśvara and Umāmaheśvara

Maheśvara is one of the most important figures in the Buddhist auxiliary pantheon. His representations are fairly consistent in Khotan and one of the most famous, which is also quite faithful to the Indian prototype, is the one depicted on a wooden panel discovered in the temple D VII (Fig. 1). [17] He sits cross-legged on a checkered pillow, behind him a double halo. The

preaching his sutra 'as Sukra (Indra), Iśvara (Viṣṇu) or Maheśvara (Scott 1990: 63).

[16] Sogdian form of the god Vayu, Iranian celestial/wind god connected also to the Kushan Oešo/Śiva.

[17] Maheśvara is the epithet of Śiva in Khotanese religious texts, he is also identified in *Sumukha-sūtra,* a lengthy Old Khotanese text*,* as *devaputra.* He appears as well in the Saka *Rāmāyaṇa.* In this version, a brahman, descent of Maheśvara, is gifted by the deity with a wonder-cow, which he lose to a king. His son, Paraśurama, later tries to avenge him, and he turns out to be a previous incarnation of Maitreya. The Buddhist twist we see in literature is also visible in the arts (Williams 1973: 143).

deity has three faces: one feminine on his right, masculine in the middle with a third eye on the forehead, and a terrific one on his left.[18] He also has four arms, each holding a different attribute: the sun, the moon, a thunderbolt (*vajra*) and an unknown white object (possibly some fruit).[19] His skin is blue (except for his lateral faces), his form is clearly ithyphallic, and his *dhotī* is made from a tiger skin. He is also accompanied by the traditional *vāhana* of Śiva – the bull Nandin, here duplicated (Lo Muzio 2017: 352). The *vajra*, which he holds in his left lower arm, is not part of the traditional iconography of Śiva.[20] The symbols of sun and moon are rarely used in connections with this god in the Indian context, they are though very common in Sogdian art and as ubiquitous divine emblems in Central Asia in general and in Chinese Buddhism, they are not useful for a specific interpretation.[21] The double *vāhana* could indicate a Sogdian influence, since it is customary for this type of iconography to depict deities on zoomorphic thrones, with two divergent animals (Lo Muzio 2017: 352).

[18] This differentiation of the faces of Śiva appeared for the first time at Elephanta in the 6th century CE, but most relevant to Central Asia are the images from north-west India: on Kushan coinage for example, on the coins of Vima Kadphises and later, the god is called Oešo and the iconography corresponds to that of a group of bronze plaques found in Yotkan. A three-faced form of Śiva also appears on the coins of Huviṣka and persists in similar variants up to the 11th century in Kashmir (Williams 1973: 143).

[19] Probably a pomegranate, according to other iconographies of Śiva in Central Asia.

[20] The *vajra* is the symbol of the final and indestructible truth. In Saka, in the sense of 'adamantine' it is sometimes translated as *'ira* (jade). In Khotanese art it usually appears as an attribute of Indra and it is frequently painted on the arms of the cosmic Vairocana. In this depiction it has tips in the shape of *fleur-de-lys*, like versions made of stucco Rawak Vihara (Williams 1973: 116, 143).

[21] On a terracotta panel from Rang Mahal (3rd–6th century CE, Bikaner State) Śiva is depicted with a bust of a figure emerging above his three undifferentiated faces (Hooja, R. 2004: Plate 4). This figure holds a crescent and a disc in its raised arms. Williams (1973: 144) explains it as a depiction of the fifth head of Śiva, as described in the *agama*s, which represents the sky and therefore the crescent and the disk could be interpreted as celestial symbols. These have been identified also as *kapala* and *cakra* (Barret 1957: 59). Others suggest the torso could represent the Ganga (R.C.Agrawala 1956: 61–65) or a second *vidyādhara* (V.S.Agrawala 1960: 63–71).

Fig. 1 - Wooden panel with the figure of Maheśvara from temple D VII, 7th–8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LX).

Fig. 2 - Wooden tablet with a depiction of Umāmaheśvara from temple D X , 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXII).

Maheśvara can be found also on another wooden panel from the temple D X (Fig. 2), depicted together with the smaller figure of the goddess Umā/Pārvatī in an embrace.[22] Unfortunately, the painting is partially damaged, but still possible to distinguish one of the three faces of the god, the wrathful one with a third eye.

The northern wall of the temple D XIII (Fig. 3) has another version of Maheśvara alongside other two deities. He is four-armed, ithyphallic and wears a diadem with a round ornament, a necklace and armlets. In his upper hands, he holds the celestial symbols, in his lower left has he has, again, what seems to be a fruit. On his forehead the third eye is present. His long hair partly falling on the shoulder partly matted in a *jaṭā*. His *vāhana* this time is a black bull. The central figure is a female deity with a swaddled child in her lap. She could be connected to the Buddhist tutelary deity of children and childhood, Hārītī (Hārrva in Khotan), who before conversion to Buddhism a child devouring *yakṣiṇī* (Lo Muzio 2017: 73–74).[23] The third figure is a three-headed, four-armed ithyphallic god; he has two strings across his chest adorned with spiders and serpents wrapped around his arms. His central face is fearsome, eyes wide open in a terrific expression, whereas the faces on the sides are calm. In his upper hands he carries the sun and the moon, in the lower pair a trident held horizontally. It is possible to identify the figure with Mahākāla, one of Maheśvara's aspects, based on the similarity with the rear face of an addorsed sculpture from Fattegarh, Kashmir (Lo Muzio 2017: fig. 6). Even though several clear attributes are present, Baumer identifies the deity as Brahmā/Zurvān. [24] Further to the right a fourth figure was depicted, but only the right knee, part of the seat and the right arm are preserved (Lo Muzio 2017: 75).

[22] This depiction refers to tantric practices and it is not clear if the female counterpart has the role of the Hindu *śakti* (activating force) or the Buddhist *prajñā* (absorbing wisdom, equivalent to the Void, or *śūnyatā*). Nonetheless, Śaktism is reported neither in the Tibetan annals or the Saka texts (Williams 1973: 145).

[23] She has usually more than one child, as documented in Gandhāran iconography. Another well-known example is the mural fragment from Farhad Beg Yailaki (Lo Muzio 2017: 73, Lo Muzio 2017: fig. 10.30).

[24] Zurvan is ancient Iranian god, a chief Persian deity before the advent of Zoroastrianism. A modified form of Zoroastrianism, Zurvanism, appeared in Persia during the Sasanian period (3rd–7th century CE) and influenced Mithraism as well as Manichaeism. Zurvan, or Infinite Time, was believed to be the original remote creator of both Ahura Mazda and his nemesis, Angra Mainyu. In Sogdian buddhist texts he is called *zrw'* and the accompanying iconography clearly links him to Brahma (Scott 1999: 60).

Fig. 3 - Painting on the northern wall othe temple D XIII, Dandan Oilik (after Lo Muzio 2017: fig.5).

Skanda and the Bālagrahas

The western wall of the temple D XIII shows another triad (a fourth figure is present on the far left, but now it is almost totally obliterated) (Fig. 4) which includes Skanda/Kartikeyya seated on his vehicle, the peacock, and furthermore recognizable by the little rooster he holds to his chest. [25] In his lower right hand he is grasping what seems to be a bunch of grapes. The following figure is that of a goddess with two children, a swaddled infant in her arms and the other, naked, who sits on her left leg. As the goddess in the previous triad, she is probably associated with Hārītī. The last figure represents a four-armed goddess with the head of a boar, on which a winged crown with a round central ornament is placed. She is further adorned with large earrings, a necklace and bracelets. She holds the celestial symbols in her upper hands, a lotus in her lower right and probably a fourth attribute in her lower left, now lost. The goddess may represent another Hindu deity, Vārāhī, the female counterpart of Viṣṇu's third *avatāra*, Varāha. Frequently she also appears among the Sapta/Aṣṭa-mātṛkās (Seven or Eight Divine Mothers) (Lo Muzio 2017: 73-74).[26] Some elements of this Khotanese version are the same as those of her Hindu equivalent: the lotus flower and a plump shape. On the other hand, the winged crown is unusual. It is considered to be a typical Sasanian

[25] General of the army of the gods, son of Śiva (or Agni), he has many names (Mahasenā, Kumāra, Murugan) which belonged to distinctive deities, but during the Gupta epoch they merged into a single deity (Lo Muzio 2017: 72). The image of Skanda on peacock was prefered in the eastern part of the Gupta empire, while the western part kept the iconography inherited from the Kushans, standing frontally holding a spear. The cokerel is a typical Gandhāran attribute (Lo Muzio 2017: 72–73).

[26] The Mātṛkās are among the most significant group of goddesses, they are usually mentioned in groups of seven, eight, or sixteen. The earliest references date to the first century CE – some scholars identify similar being already in the Vedic tradition, while others claim an indigenous, non-Vedic origin. They are connected to the birth of Karttikeya/Skanda and other narratives concerning him. Their initial task was to kill the infant god but they eventually end up serving him as his adoptive mothers or as allies in battles. The worship of the Mātṛkās aims to keep their wrath away, which is primarily focused on children – this may be influenced by the belief that women who die childless or in childbirth linger on as jealous spirits. In the post epic period (400 CE) their number and names become increasingly standardized, and their nature is patterned after male deities from the brahmanic pantheon. However, they are not to be understood as mere divine consorts or *śaktis* of the male deities, but rather as extensions or forms of the Devi, the ultimate supreme mother-goddess (Kinsley 1988: 151-160).

emblem, which was later adopted in Buddhist iconography for Vaiśravaṇa (Dunhuang, Japan), but not in Khotan. According to Baumer, the male deity is not Skanda, but represents either the Iranian god of victory, Verethragna, or the Sogdian god Wešparkar depicted as Brahmā on his *vāhana*, the goose, instead of the peacock of Skanda (Lo Muzio 2017: 72).[27]

Fig. 4 - Painting on the western wall of the temple D XIII, Dandan Oilik (after Lo Muzio 2017: fig.1).

In the temple CD4, excavated by the Sino-Japanese expedition in 2002, in the oriental part of the corridor for the circumambulation, similar zoomorphic deities are depicted with Skanda (Fig. 5). The drawing appears as sketchy as those on the northern wall of D XIII (Lo Muzio 2017: 75). All the figures are cross-legged and are distributed on the left and lower part of a large image of a standing Buddha, framed by multiple smaller seated Buddhas. The group arranged vertically has a goddess with an elephant head on top, holding an elongated object, under whom an animal resembling a jackal, or wolf, is painted. The last figure is a female holding an infant, identical to the one on the western wall of D XIII.

[27] Verethragna is considered one of the sons or emanations of Ahura Mazda, most often he is shown in his form of a charging boar. Such a representation is a well-established Iranian convention, and it is presumably attested in Buddhist art in the form of the boar's head motif (Bamiyan, Toyuk). The use of this motif may function as an affirmation of the victory of the Buddhist *dharma* to Iranian eyes (Scott 1990: 61-62).

Below her, in the corner between the two rows of deities, the contours of another figure are visible, but it has now faded beyond recognition. On the horizontal lineup, from left to right, a four-armed goddess with caprine head is followed by Skanda, both holding celestial symbols. The series is closed by a female deity, frowning, her breast sagging. She holds a scrawny naked child, grasping him by the wrists and ankles. Further right a male figure between two horses, which will be discussed separately (see subchapter 3.5. below). Lo Muzio proposes to identify the elephant-headed deity with the female counterpart of Gaṇeśa, Vināyakī, also known as Gaṇeśvarī, Gajānānī etc.[28] Her attribute could then be a radish *mulakakanda*, which is otherwise attested in the hand of Gaṇeśa in Khotanese art. She is expected to be accompanied by the *vāhana* of Gaṇeśa, a mouse, but instead, the animal portrayed below her is more like the *vāhana* of Vināyakī in the temple of the 64 *yogīnī*s at Hirapur, Orissa (Lo Muzio 2017: fig.9). The goat- or ram-headed deity could be linked to Naigameṣa, or to a female counterpart of this demon connected to children's health.[29] An interesting aspect about the Skanda depicted in this group are black dashes on his skin, maybe representing scars (Lo Muzio 2017: 76).

[28] Textual evidence of her iconography is very unclear, also she appears quite late as a member of the Saptamātṛkās sets (8^{th}–9^{th} century). She is more common as one of the 64 *yogīnī*s.

[29] Lo Muzio suggests a comparison with a relief of Cave 21 at Ellora (8th century). There, Skanda is flanked by two ram-headed figures in *añjalimudrā* (Lo Muzio 2017: 76).

Fig 5 - Decoration of the eastern wall of the temple CD4, Dandan Oilik (after Lo Muzio 2017: fig. 7).

Another group of female deities (Fig. 6) headed by Skanda has been found in the temple CD10 by the Sino-Japanese excavations in 2004. On the middle register of the north-western wall of the shrine, seven female deities are lined up in a row, ended on the right by a three-headed four-armed Skanda on a peacock, holding celestial symbols and a rooster. The goddesses are portrayed in the same position, kneeling in three-quarter view, and they share the same outfit in different colors. Most of them are in *añjalimudrā*, although it is possible that they were holding some objects in their hands. The last female deity on the left holds a swaddled infant. To her left, a cuirassed god (for Vaiśravaṇa see 3.4. and 3.7. below) holding a spear is discernible, further left a last female (?) figure is only partially preserved (Lo Muzio 2017: 76).

The presence of Skanda along with female deities reflects the cult dedicated to *grahas* "seizers, snatchers" or *bālagrahas* "children

snatchers".[30] This is also the context in which Skanda first appears in early Hinduism. Before becoming *senāpati (*lord of the army), he was worshipped as a disease-causing deity, who led the malevolent spirits *mātṛ* or *mātṛkā*, harmful to pregnant women and children.[31]

One of the reasons why these ambiguous tutelary deities traveled all the way to Khotan is the inherent strong tie between medicine and Buddhism. The monasteries provided medical education and the studied healing practices stemmed from Vedic and Brahmanic tradition. The monks spread not only religious, but also medical literature, from South Asia all the way to the Far East, translating the works from Pali and Sanskrit to Tibetan, Chinese and Khotanese as well. The spread of the *grahas* is attested by the popularity and diffusion of certain *dhāraṇīs,* mystic spells used to expel illnesses. One astonishing example supporting the case are three folios of a manuscript from the 9th century found by Aurel Stein in Dunhuang (now in the British Museum). Each of these extant leaves of the *Mahāsāhasrapramardanī,* which is one of the *dhāraṇī*s later grouped into the pentad of deified spells *Pañcarakṣa*, bears on both sides representations of demons described in Chinese and Khotanese (Lo Muzio 2017: fig. 13). The texts provide the names of the demons and the specific diseases connected to them. All the figures of the manuscript are portrayed with one or more children, and one of them, the owl-headed goddess Mukhamaṇḍikā, present also in the Khotanese pantheon as Mukhamaṃḍā, holds a child by his wrists and ankles, as the goddess in the temple CD4 of Dandan Oilik.

[30] Written sources do not provide much information on these spirits, their appearence is sketchily described in few cases. The iconographic evidence in India consists of few reliefs from Mathurā (Kushan epoch, 2nd or 3rd centuries). To these we can add some terracotta figurines of single mothers, in some cases goat-headed and with an infant. Similar terracotta figurines have been found in northern India (Rajghat, Kumrahar, Jetavana) in association with Buddhist monasteries (Lo Muzio 2017: 77).

[31] The earliest description of Skanda and the demons is found in the *Mahābhārata* and in Ayurvedic sources. In the *Mahābhārata* the god is gradually emancipated from his wicked origins, until he becomes the general of the army of gods in the *Śalyaparvan* section. In Ayurvedic literature he retains the characteristics of a harmful *bālagraha* and is also known as one of the most dangerous (Lo Muzio 2017: 77).

Fig. 6 - Decoration of the wall of the temple CD10, Dandan Oilik (after Lo Muzio 2017: fig.10).

Indra, Brahma, and Māyā-Śrī

On the panel from temple D X we are presented with an additional triad of deities whose identities have been debated and are still open to discussion (Fig. 7).

The central four-armed female figure has a crenellated crown, her upper arms hold the symbols of the sun and the moon. A parallel with the portrayal of goddess Nanā on Khwarezmian silver dishes and in the paintings of Penjikent (8th century) has been suggested based on these attributes. [32] The Mesopotamian deity was probably introduced in the Achaemenid period in Central Asia or even in a more remote past. The goddess is usually shown with her symbolic animal, the lion, which is missing on the tablet. She was frequently depicted on Kushan currency, seals and other objects of art. It is not farfetched to suppose that Kushan religious iconography had to be known in Khotan, in fact Bactria had a very strong influence in the Tarim Basin during and after the Kushan domination.[33] The presence of Nanā in this triad is still not completely

[32] A goddess of Near Eastern origin, she first appears in the Ur III period in the end of the third millennium BCE and was associated with the Sumerian goddess Inanna/Ištar (even though they were different divinities). In Iran she was equated with Anāhitā. During the Hellenistic period, she was frequently assimilated to Artemis (Ghose 2006: 97–98). A deity of identical portrayal and description to the Sogdian Nana appears in Tibetan Buddhist circles at Gyantse and in their literature (Scott 1990: 56).

[33] Even after five centuries, the memory of some Kushan sovereigns was still very vivid, as proved by the *Kaṇiṣkāvadāna*, a book which describes some episodes from the life of the Kushan ruler Kaṇiṣka, a great supporter of Buddhism (Compareti 2020: 97–98,

accepted and Marshak prefers to associate to it a third male divinity, Zurvān. The crenellated crown, which is supposed to be an attribute of the goddess, is also found on one of the painted altars of Penjikent (see below the interpretation of Mode), but in Persia it is used as well as an element without any reference to Nanā (Compareti 2020: 96).

The accompanying deities seem to have strong Brahmanic connotations. On the right side of the goddess, a male deity with two arms, long hair and a mustache has a scalloped crown and a third eye. He holds a *vajra* in his right hand. Williams (1973: 141) suggests that, based on the combination of the vajra and the crown resembling the *kirīṭamukuṭa*, the figure depicted is Indra or Śakra, who in early Buddhist art is often accompanied by Brahmā, whose form we can also allegedly see in the other deity on the panel.[34] The god has three faces (as Brahmā, who has officially a fourth one on the back mostly invisible in art) and multiple eyes. The bow and the arrows are very uncommon. If we accept this interpretation, the central figure is especially difficult to incorporate in this group. The two male deities are normally seen as attendants of a standard Buddha (not in this case) or they appear in events from the Buddha's life, for instance they assist at the Birth. Such a consideration gives the possibility to explain the occurrence of the female deity as a combination of two subjects: the mother of Buddha, Māyā, who is related to Lakṣmī and Śrī in early Indian art. In the Saka version of *Suvarnaprabhāsottamasūtra*, the goddess Śrī is translated as *śśandrāmata* 'sacred/bounteous earth', which is also the name for the Spenta ārmaitiš, the Avestan "Lady of the Earth". In a culturally heterogeneous place as Khotan, various goddesses of abundance could easily merge to create a new local variation (Williams 1973: 141).[35]

According to the interpretation of Markus Mode, the divine triad could be correlated to a painting from Penjikent (room III/6, Mode 1991/2: fig. 3) dated to the 8th century CE. The Sogdian painting depicts three altars, one of which is decorated with the image of a god with multiple arms, thus dedicated to Wešparkar (modelled after the image of Śiva).[36]

Maggi 2009: 364).

[34]Indra and Brahmā are attested in Khotanese texts as Sakrra and Brrahma (Williams 1973: 141).

[35] Another goddess with similar attributes mentioned by Buddhist writers in Khotan is Sakhimi (Scott 1990: 56).

[36] Sogdian Buddhist literature found in western China also indicate a connection: textual

The other two altars would therefore be associated with Nanā and the other male deity, who should be identified as Adbagh – the Sogdian version of Ahura Mazda.[37] The model for his iconography was probably Indra, hence his symbolic animal became the elephant and his attribute the *vajra*, which is in fact depicted on the described wooden tablet (Compareti 2020: 95–96).

Fig. 7 - Wooden tablet with triad of deities from temple D X, 7th–8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXIV).

The Silk Legend and The Silk God

Fig. 8 - Wooden tablet with a depiction of the Silk Legend from the temple D X, 7th–8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXIII).

analysis suggests that the iconographies of Wešparkar and Śiva should be interchangeable, although this reading has been challenged (Compareti 2020: 96).

[37] Sims-Williams (1983) suggests that the form *ad-bag* was a local rendering of the Sanskrit epithet *adhi-deva*, the 'supreme god', enjoyed by Indra. In the same fashion as Brahma was associated to Zurvan, Indra, as a supreme deity, could be merged with Ahura Mazda.

A very peculiar scene along with a mysterious figure is present in several wooden tablets found in Dandan Oilik. It seems to represent the legend about the introduction of sericulture in Khotan. According to Xuanzang, the king of Khotan sent an envoy to China to procure silkworms and mulberry trees, but the ruler of China wanted to maintain the exclusivity of silk production, so he prohibited the export of silkworms' eggs and mulberry seeds out of his country. The king of Khotan then asked for the hand of a Chinese princess and his wish was granted. An envoy was sent to escort the soon-to-be queen from China to Khotan, and through him, the king let the princess know that to ensure herself silk robes in her new home she had to smuggle some mulberry seeds and silkworms. She managed to conceal them in the lining of her headdress, thus bringing them safely to Khotan. Upon her arrival in the kingdom, she deposited the silkworms and the mulberry seeds at the site where subsequently the Mashe or Lushe convent was built, also known as Ma dza in Tibetan sources. There, the first mulberry trees grew and so the silkworms could be fed. The queen issued an edict, which prohibited the working up of the cocoons until the moths had escaped. Later she also founded a *sanghārāma* on the place where the first silkworms were bred (Hill 2003). The legend is also reported in the *Prophecy of the Li Country*, which places it in the reign of king Vijaya Jaya, the one who married the princess who brought the silkworms to Khotan. In this version, the princess, Puñeśvar, had the initiative to secretly bring the silkworms and the king, misinformed about the creatures, believed them to be venomous snakes and attempted to destroy them. The wife convinced the king about the benefit brought by the silkworms and so the sericulture was established in Khotan. Vijaya Jaya was then the one to build the monastery Ma dza, on the place the worms had been raised. Here an image of the Śakyamuni was installed, protected by the gods Ratnabala and Ratnaśūra (Williams 1973: 149).

The panel from D X (Fig. 8) corresponds to the principal event of the legend, the smuggling of the silkworms in the princess's headdress. We can observe a nimbate female figure at the center, probably the princess, with an elaborated crown and long hair, her arms stretched towards a bowl, presumably filled with cocoons. Another nimbate female figure with a circular headdress, an attendant, points emphatically her left arm towards the crown of the princess. Right behind the central figure a smaller seated

one, apparently a nimbate male deity with four arms, in which he holds a goblet (?), a "trowel" and an unidentified object.[38] On the far left of the central figure a last nimbate figure is present, with a circular headdress, holding a brush. She seems to be using a loom (Williams 1973: 147).

Fig. 9 - Wooden tablet with a depiction of the Silk Legend from the temple D II, 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXVII).

On the wooden panel of D II (Fig. 9) we see a different scene, which could show the persuasion of the king narrated in the Tibetan *Prophecy.* Unfortunately, the painted figures are considerably damaged, and it is not possible to identify all the participants. On the left, two figures are engrossed in the processing of silk: one manipulates a loom, the other has a large bowl heaped high with what may be cocoons.[39] The central figure is the same male deity described in the previous panel. Seated, with four arms and the same set of peculiar objects. Behind him, on the right, a couple of musicians, one playing a four-stringed lute, the other holds small cymbals (Williams 1973: 147–148).

[38] The goblet with a long, conical base is also present in a Khotanese representation of Sañjaya (now lost, from Williams 1973: fig. 40) and the "trowel", which could be a kind of blade, is also held by Gaṇeśa (wooden panel from Endere, Williams 1973: fig. 56, Lo Muzio 2017: fig. 8)

[39] The bowl/basket is also the attribute of another female deity we know from other painted panels found elsewhere in Khotan. They may represent the introducer of silk, the princess herself, who became an object of veneration. She usually wears a very tall crown covered by a scarf; such a headdress is not seen in any other iconographic type (Williams 1973:149–150).

Fig. 10 - Wooden panel with the Silk God from temple D VII, 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXI).

The male deity is thought to be identical to the one depicted on the reverse of the Maheśvara tablet from D VII (Fig. 10). The figure is seated on a red floral cushion, wears a green patterned tunic and black boots, on the head a tall crown. A dagger hangs from his belt made of small disks. He has four arms, one of which rests on his thigh, the other hold a thin rod (stem?), the 'trowel' and goblet seen in the depiction of the previous tablet. Named also the "Iranian Bodhisattva" (Bussagli 1979, 1953) for its Persian influence, this figure is clearly a divine being, due to his multiple arms, elongated earlobes, and overall representation, but no parallel has been found outside of Khotan. His identification is difficult; however, it is possible to outline characteristics common to all the available paintings. Usually, he supervises the scenes depicting episodes from the legend describing the introduction of silk in Khotan, that is the reason why the names "Silk God" and "Patron of Weaving" have been attributed to him. The objects he holds have been associated with the production of silk.

Williams identifies this deity with one of the local guardians, which are also mentioned in Saka, Chinese and Tibetan sources, although it is not certain which one. The most likely candidates are the guardians of the Ma dza monastery, Ratnabala and Ratnaśūra (Williams 1973: 149).[40] Another possible explanation is that the four-armed god represents the king Vijaya Jaya himself. An interesting interpretation has been advanced by Mode, who reconstructed the tool in his right upper arm as a spoon (Mode 1991/1992, Fig. 17.c). This would link the deity to some representation of Adbagh/Ahura Mazda on Sogdian ossuaries. Here the deity has a spoon inserted in his belt, which is used for Zoroastrian sacrifices (Compareti 2020: 99).[41] It has been also advanced by some scholars the possibility to link the deity to the hero Rustam, one of the protagonists of the *Shāh-Nāmeh* (Compareti 2020: 99). [42]

[40] Ratnabala could be a mistranslation back into Sanskrit of Nor bu bzan po (frequently mentioned in Tibetan texts), who is originally Manibhadra. Manibhadra is the king of *yakṣas* in *Suvarnaprabhāsottamasūtra* and one of the Eight Bodhisattvas resident in Khotan (Williams 1973: 149)

[41] At least on one Sogdian ossuary, this deity holds a vessel with a stylized small elephant, which is the animal of Indra, who is the model for the iconography of Adbagh in Sogdiana. The elephant is totally absent from the Khotanese depictions of the Silk God (Compareti 2020: 100).

[42] According to Stein, the figure represented a version of Rustam, by analogy with a painting from Kūh-i Khwāja in the Iranian Sistān (See: Stein, M. A. 1931: 269–273).

The God Riding a Horse

Fig. 11 - Wooden tablet with horse and camel rider from temple D VII, 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LIX).

This deity seems quite popular and has been found on a series of mural paintings and panels. Starting with the wooden tablet from D VII (Fig. 11), we see two riders, the one on the camel will be dealt with later (see subchapter 3.6. below). The rider on the dappled horse has a halo and is dressed in a red tunic, a white scarf flows behind his back (Sasanian input), he wears black boots, and a sword is hanging from his side. He has a diadem and a circular ornament on top of his head and his long hair are tied in a knot. He is holding a bowl in which a small black bird is nose-diving. The horse has elaborate trappings with a crescent and a circle on the head (Williams 1973: 150).

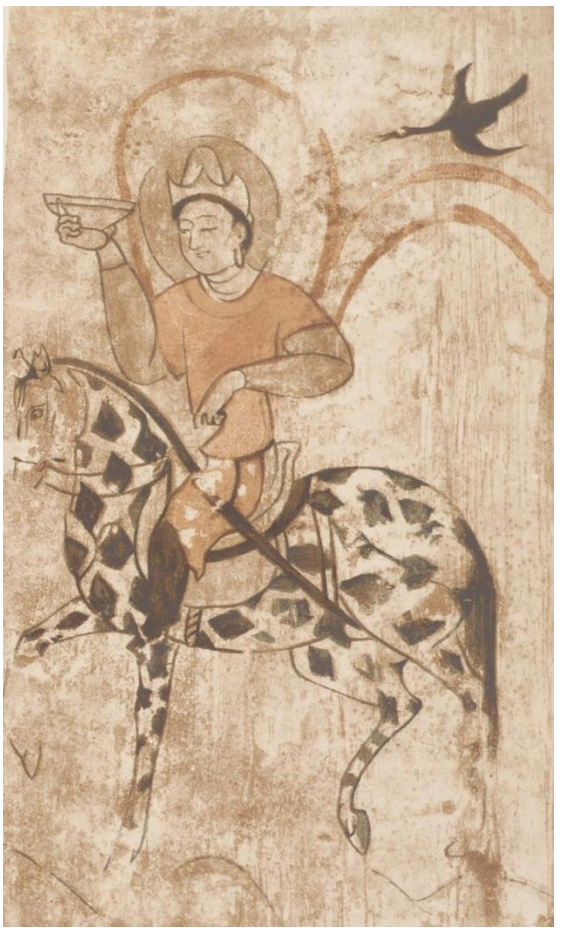

Fig. 12 - Wooden tablet with horse horse rider from D X, 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXII).

On another painted panel from D X a second rider (Fig. 12) is depicted on a dappled horse as well, with almost the same features as the first one. He has short hair and a tall hat and the black bird is painted behind him, above the tail of his horse.

According to Mode, we should see here another aspect of Vaiśravaṇa adapted from Sogdian art. In Sogdian art, the iconography of Vaiśravaṇa is based on that of Skanda (Compareti 2020: 101). He is usually depicted in local costume, with boots and frequently dressed in an armor, and it is important to note that in Khotan, the warrior iconography is consistent (Williams 1973). The god riding the horse is not wearing an armor though. On another tablet (Skrine A, British Museum) he is depicted with an armored divinity who can be easily identified with Vaiśravaṇa – all the characteristics are present, the halo, the spear, the stupa model in his left hand. Therefore, the identification seems to be incorrect.

Fig. 13 - Mural painting from temple CD4, Dandan Oilik (after Compareti 2020: fig. 7.8)

Parades of male deities on horses have been discovered in several temples. Most recently in CD4 (Fig. 13), on its northern wall several riders are portrayed on horses of various colors, each one of them has a halo and seems to hold a vessel. If the depiction is the same as the one found at Domoko Temple 2, each of them should be also accompanied by a black bird. A very important discovery from this group of painting in the temple CD4 is an inscription in Khotanese next to one of the horse riders mentioning the "Eight Spirits", the mysterious protectors of Khotan (Fig. 14). [43, 44]

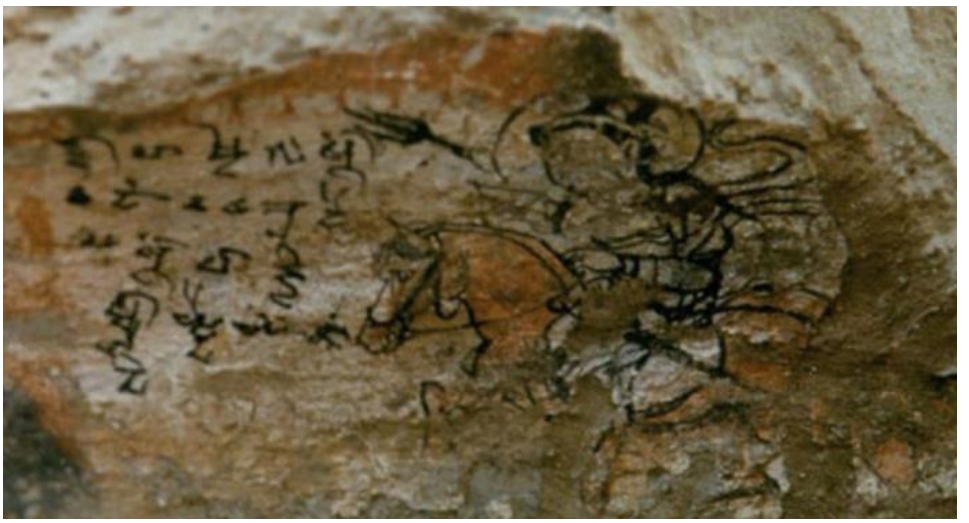

Fig. 14 - Khotanese inscription on the mural painting from temple CD4, Dandan Oilik (after Compareti 2020: fig. 7.10).

A parade of two male figures on horses is also seen on a mural painting in the temple D II (Fig. 18) under larger Buddhist images. The parade begins right after an enigmatic scene with a child and a naked woman bathing in a lotus pond, which will be discussed below (see subchapter 3.8.)

[43] Text: "The donor Budai ordered to draw the eight spirits [gods] there. May they protect him" (Compareti 2020: fig. 7.10).

[44] The origin of the number of these spirits could be found in Chinese culture, where the number eight is very propitious even outside the Buddhist sphere. The number eight could be additionally associated with celestial bodies or their personifications (Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Earth itself or the dragon from Vedic astrology causing moon eclipses, Ketu). It is still important to consider that the riders in some cases seem to be more than eight (Compareti 2020: 105–107).

(Compareti 2020: 104).

The iconography of these riders is not found in any other place in the Tarim Basin, there is no resemblance even for the bird flying directly into the rider's vessel, except a single painting on silk from the oasis of Turfan, even though the armor, the trappings and the vessel of this rider are distinct from the Khotanese examples (Williams 1973: 151). The black bird seems to be a local invention, maybe tied to an astronomical or astrological interpretation. A possible comparison with the textiles of Shanpula (beginning of CE) has been advanced. Some scenes show hunters shooting arrows towards a composite monster, while a bird is hovering above them. This could be a local pre-Buddhist hero, an echo of eastern Iranian myths, which were adapted later and used as foundation for the Khotanese iconographies. Nonetheless, these depictions of processions of riders seems to be a purely Khotanese phenomenon (Compareti 2020:107–108).

The God Behind Confronted Horses

This type of image can be observed on a fragmentary wooden panel from an unidentified site (possibly Dandan Oilik), and it was formerly part of the Trinkler collection (Fig. 15). The same deity has also been found on the eastern wall of the temple CD4 in a much-better condition, in a row with several other deities (Fig. 5 and 16).

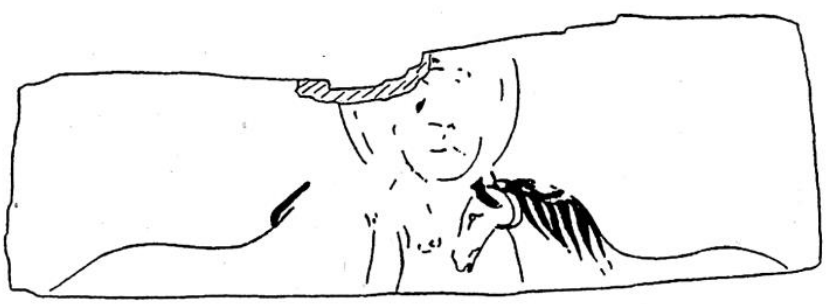

Fig. 15: God with two confronted horses on fragmentary wooden tablet, 7th–8th century CE (?), possibly Dandan Oilik (Trinkler Collection, Overseas Museum in Bremen, after Compareti 2019: fig. 10).

Fig. 16 - God with two confronted horses from the mural painting of temple CD4, Dandan Oilik (after Compareti 2019: fig. 11).

A connection with astronomy/astrology could be possible also in this case. According to Compareti, one must investigate Islamic book illustrations, where we can find Indian borrowings for symbolic representations of planetary conjunctions in the form of fantastic creatures with various attributes and multiple heads, legs and arms. A picture particularly similar to that of our Khotanese deity has been found in one enigmatic astronomical text, made in Baghdad between 1388–1420 CE (Compareti 2020: fig. 7.14). The origin of the iconography used in this text is not certain, although a Central Asian pre-Islamic inspiration is possible.

Another clue to the identity of this deity is given out by the Khotanese language. In this Saka dialect, as well as in Khwarezmian and other Eastern Iranian languages still spoken in the Pamir, the Sun was called *urmaysde*, also a name for Ahura Mazda. This fact would significantly support the hypothesis of Mode, who indicated a connection with a god represented on Kushan coins named MOOZDOANO. The god in question in depicted riding a two-headed horse and has a trident in his hand.[45] If this god could be considered a solar deity connected to Ahura Mazda, it would be enough evidence to imply that the Khotanese pre-Buddhist beliefs had something to do with Zoroastrianism (Compareti 2020: 108–111).

[45] The name MOOZDOANO has been accepted also as an epithet of Śiva, but this interpretation is still disputed.

The God Riding a Camel

This god appears in conjunction with the rider on the spotted horse on the tablet from D VII (Fig. 13). He has the same attributes as the rider from D II, he is holding a vessel as well, but no bird is present. An additional fragmentary depiction has been discovered in CD10, on a mural painting at least two gods appear to ride camels in proximity of Buddhist images (Fig. 17). According to Mode, it could be the Avestan Verethragna or the Sogdian Wašagn. He also associated it to the god sitting on a camel painted on an altar from Varakhsha's Eastern Hall (Mode 1991/1992: fig. 7/a).

Fig. 17 - Procession of camel riders from temple CD10, Dandan Oilik (after Compareti 2020: fig. 7.16).

Sañjaya/Vaiśravaṇa

On a wooden tablet from temple D X (Williams 1973: fig.41) we have something that almost looks like a sketch of a warrior deity, modelled after Kushan imperial portrayals (Scott 1999: 50). One is tempted to identify him as Vaiśravaṇa, since his images are attested elsewhere in Khotan, but it could represent another *yakṣa*-king, Sañjaya, whose

presence is usually hinted by the depiction of a stag and a child.[46] Sañjaya is one of the eight guardians of Khotan and appears frequently in literary sources. He is also described as a Bodhisattva, but most often as the generalissimo of the *yakṣa*s.

Sudhana Jātaka (?)

In the small shrine of D II a beautiful depiction that, unfortunately, did not survive to our days, adorned a mural section right of a clay sculpture of Vaiśravaṇa (Fig. 21). A large, naked female figure emerged from a lotus pond. As we may observe from the image reported by Stein (Stein 1907: II Phot), she wore elaborate jewels and a girdle, her reddish hair piled high and wrapped in a scarf. A small figure of what seems to be a child was clutched to her thigh. On their right, the procession of horse riders already described above, and on an upper register, two large seated male figures dressed in monastic garments. The head of a fish appeared under the left knee of one of the men, it seemed to hold something in its mouth and a string of pearls was placed around its head. It is still a mystery what could this last image possibly represent.[47]

A legend reported by Xuanzang could illuminate the scene. As the story tells a river to the east of the city once ceased to flow. The cause of such misfortune was the passing of the local Nāga and his wife, newly widowed, was unable to issue commands to the waters. In order to restore balance and fertility, a minister of the Khotanese king volunteered to marry the Nāgini, and he rode off into the waters on a white horse. Soon the horse returned alone carrying a large sandalwood drum, which bore the message from the minister that all would be well. Stein supported this interpretation, although he himself admitted that some major hints were lacking, like the drum mentioned in the narration. It is also hard to believe that the horse riders would belong to this scene.

[46] According to Khotanese legends, king Vijaya Vīrya followed a gold and silver stag which turned into Sañjaya, who told the ruler to build a stupa. After it has been done, a child became lost on the same hill and on the place it was later found, the ruler built a monastery (Williams 1973: 136).

[47] A personal interpretation of the author is that, instead of a fish head, a mongoose could be depicted. Vaiśravaṇa is known to be accompanied by this animal, which is frequently portrayed ejecting jewels from his mouth as a gesture of generosity, but the suggested argument is very speculative. The motif may also be reminiscent of the Sasanian duck/bird holding a pearl necklace in its bill, which is fairly used in Sogdian art and also as a decorative element in other Buddhist contexts (Bamiyan, Kizil grottoes, Tuyuk).

A more plausible interpretation is based upon the *Sudhana Jātaka*, which tells the story of the marriage of Prince Sudhana and a beautiful *kinnarī*. In the Khotanese version, the Prince and his father, the old king, each has his own advisor, a *kalyānamitra*. The two advisors are enemies. The advisor of the king convinces him to sacrifice the *kinnarī* while the Prince is absent. She manages to escape and Sudhana, after a difficult journey, finds her by means of a ring she had left him. The scene in D II might be understood as the marriage, with the advisors in the background. The female figure is depicted wearing a ring and her strange girdle might be a sign of her being a *kinnarī*. The Prince Sudhana might be represented as a child because of the fusion with the *Gandavyūha Sūtra*, in which the protagonist bears the same name. The fact that the *kalyānamitra*s are present in the *jātaka* as in the sutra is a supporting factor as well (Williams 1973: 153–154).

Fig. 18 - Mural painting from temple D II, Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate II).

The Rat King

This last image was found on a wooden tablet from temple D IV (Fig. 22). Between two figures, Buddha on the right and what is seems to be a *caurī*-bearer on the left, we are presented with a zoomorphic figure. The face is too damaged to identify the animal with absolute certainty. Stein suggested the identification of this figure as the leader of the divine rats of Khotan, which helped the king to defeat the Xiongnu. According to Xuanzang, the ruler of Khotan prayed to the desert rats and they agreed to help him. The rats destroyed the leather gear of the enemies rendering them helpless. Since then, rats were worshipped at a shrine west of Khotan (probably Pialma). Much more likely, the figure represents one of the *grahas* with a wolf head (Williams 1973: 152).

Fig. 19 - Wooden tablet with depiction of the Legend of the Rat King from D IV, 7th - 8th century CE (?), Dandan Oilik (after Stein 1907: Plate LXIII).

4. Concluding remarks

Buddhism has stimulated the circulation of people, commodities and ideas on a vast area comprising most of the Asian continent, bringing together different traditions and creating new means for religious expression through the visual arts.

The Khotanese iconography deals with a range of topics inside a purely Buddhist context, which is heavily inspired by Brahmanic tradition, but in some cases Central Asia and Iranian motifs are prevalent or at least give a specific twist. Even though it seems there is no limit to the imagination of the artists, we may observe how the iconographic schemes are persistent and certain deities appear frequently in combination to others.

In Dandan Oilik one group of paintings relates to Brahmanic cults, most

certainly of tantric nature, with Maheśvara and Skanda, most of the times perfectly recognizable, accompanied by enigmatic female deities. The cult related to Skanda and the *grahas* taps into the darker past of the god and his connection to demons and illnesses. This instance attests how the diffusion of beliefs is granted also through the transmission of medical knowledge and how religion and traditional medicine were intertwined.
The second group of deities hardly has any parallel in other cultural spheres, even though some attempts to connect them to a Sogdian/Iranian/Zoroastrian background were made. They are considered as local divinities tied to local legends, most notably the Silk God, or pre-Buddhist cults.

Nonetheless, a clear identification in most cases turns out to be exceptionally challenging. Iconographic studies prove to be essential to elucidate ambiguous interpretations and to uncover networks of ideological transfer. A definitive agreement on the identity of these deities may be never reached unless further archaeological, historical, and philological investigations do not bring up uncontestable proofs.

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