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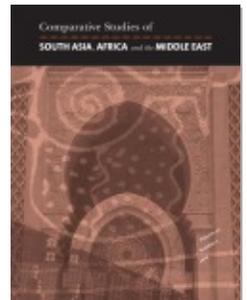
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Religious Diversity among Sogdian Merchants in Sixth-Century China: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Hinduism

Frantz Grenet

Thanks to the pioneering studies of Paul Pelliot, Edwin Pulleyblank, Albert Dien, and Edward Schafer, it has been known for some time that Central Asian people and particularly the Sogdians played a prominent economic, social, and political role in China during the periods of the Northern Dynasties, the Sui and the early Tang.¹ The work of these Sinologists based on Chinese literary records was gradually supplemented by Iranologists who deciphered Sogdian texts discovered in the Chinese territory, mostly in the Dunhuang cave and in various cult places in and near Turfan. These texts that form the bulk of the known Sogdian literature are mostly religious in their contents.² Only a handful can be ascribed to the so-called Sogdian native religion, a form of Zoroastrianism, and in most cases this attribution is disputed. The majority of the Sogdian texts are Buddhist, translated not from the Indian original but from Chinese versions. Then come the Nestorian Christian texts. There are also a substantial number of Manichaean texts that were elucidated mainly by Walter Bruno Henning and Werner Sundermann and contributed greatly to the knowledge of this religion as a whole.³

Since the 1960s progress in Sogdian studies has come mostly from Sogdiana itself, today in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with the publication of the political and administrative archives of the king of Panjikent found on Mount Mugh and dating from the period of the Arab conquest, and, more spectacularly, a very large number of mural paintings from four sites: Panjikent; Samarkand; Varakhsha, near Bukhara; and Shahrstan.⁴ This resulted in a rather unbal-

Translations from Pahlavi texts are the author's. Translations from Chinese texts have been kindly provided by E. de la Vaissière and P. Riboud.

1. Paul Pelliot, "Le 'Cha Tcheou Tou Fou T'ou King' et la colonie sogdienne de la région du Lob Nor," *Journal Asiatique*, ser. 11, 7 (1916): 111–23; Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "A Sogdian Colony in Inner Mongolia," *T'oung Pao* 41 (1952): 317–56; Pulleyblank, *The Background of the Rebellion of An Lu-Shan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955); Albert E. Dien, "The *Sapao* Problem Reexamined," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82 (1962): 335–46; and Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

2. Nicholas Sims-Williams, "Sogdian," in R. Schmitt, *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1989), 173–92; Xavier Tremblay, *Pour une histoire de la Sérinde* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001).

3. Walter Bruno Henning, *Selected Papers*, vols. I–II (*Acta Iranica*, vols. 14–15, Leiden, 1977); Werner Sundermann, *Manichaica Iranica: Ausgewählte Schriften (Manichaica Iranica: Selected Papers)*, Serie Orientale Roma 89, vols. 1–2 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2001).

4. On the political and administrative archives of the king of Panjikent, see A. A. Freiman, *Sogdiiskie dokumenty s Gory Mug (Sogdian Documents from Mount Mugh)*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1962); V. A. Livshits, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1962); M. N. Bogoliubov and O. I. Smirnova, vol. 3 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1963). See also Ilya Yakubovich, "Mugh 1.1. Revisited," *Studia Iranica* 31 (2002): 231–53; and Frantz Grenet and Etienne de la Vaissière, "The Last Days of Panjikent," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 8 (2002): 155–96. On the mural paintings, see Guitty Azarpay, ed., *Sogdian Painting: The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); and Boris

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anced picture, which lasted until a few years ago: the religious literature of the Sogdians came only from China, their archaeological records almost only from Sogdiana.⁵ Seen from China, the Sogdians appeared mostly as adherents and transmitters of the three great “salvation religions” of the time—Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism—while in their homeland their art and religious buildings appeared fairly Iranian and conservatively Zoroastrian.

In the 1990s a new turn was taken when funerary reliefs of Sogdian merchants buried in China appeared both on the antique market and in regular excavations. Six tombs safely attributable to Sogdians are now known, plus two others from Gansu, which are thematically related to the Sogdian tombs but might have belonged to representatives of other Central Asian peoples.⁶ All date from the last third of the sixth century. Three of the tomb owners are identified by funerary inscriptions that give them the title *sabao*, a Chinese administrative function designating the leader of a community of Western migrants and derived from the Sogdian word *sârtpâw* (caravan leader). In most tombs a majority of the panels illustrate the social activities of the deceased, in a rather conventional way. Trade is very discretely alluded to, with one exception, the tomb of Wirkak, which will be examined in detail in this article. The focus is always toward the aristocratic way of life, expressed by hunting and banqueting, in any possible contact situation: with fellow Sogdians, with other Central Asian peoples, with Northern Indians (Gandharis or Kashmiris), and with Turks. At the same time the wife is always shown dressed as a Chinese lady, sharing a Chinese pavilion with her husband.

Anecdote and Biography:

The Guimet Couch and the Wirkak Sarcophagus

This kind of double Sogdian/Chinese social identity found its most extreme expression on the reliefs in a private collection, temporarily displayed in 2004–5 at the Guimet Museum in Paris (fig. 1).⁷ On one panel the deceased is shown in a Chinese park; his dignified stance derives from that of the bodhisattvas in the art of the Wei period. He is accompanied by Chinese symbols such as the crane, symbol of longevity, and the couple of ducks, symbol of marital happiness, and in fact the next panel shows his wife dressed in Chinese attire in a similarly Chinese setting. But on the following panel the deceased, recognizable from his beard and topknot, is drinking from a rhyton, an Iranian and Central Asian utensil, and he drinks heavily as he is about to fall. The attendants below are also drunk, while the lion lapping from a vase derives from Dionysiac motives in the Greco-Roman art.⁸ To have oneself depicted drunk, what is more on his own tomb, would have been inconceivable for a Chinese, but it was acceptable for an Iranian aristocrat, as even the Iranian kings were allowed to appear drunk on certain festive occasions.

The *Sitz im Leben* of the Sogdian *sabao* is most clearly illustrated in the reliefs that adorned what is certainly the most remarkable tomb so far discovered, that of the *sabao* Wirkak, in Chinese Shi Jun (Lord Shi), which was discovered in Xi’an four years ago.⁹ It is in fact a sarcophagus. Framed by religious scenes that betray an extraordinary degree of eclecticism, and which I return to soon, six panels present a continuous narrative of his life and social ascent (fig. 2).¹⁰ In that respect they are closer to real

Marshak, *Legends, Tales, and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2002).

5. This perception was still predominant when the first (French) edition of Etienne de la Vaissière’s fundamental book on Sogdian traders was being written: *Histoire des marchands sogdiens*, vol. 32 (Paris: Collège de France, Bibliothèque de l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 2002). One is now referred to the updated English edition: *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). See also the collective volume, Etienne de la Vaissière and Eric Trombert, eds., *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, Etudes thématiques 17 (Paris: Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2005).

6. The best overall study (but prior to the discovery of the Wirkak and Guimet tombs) is by Boris Marshak, “La thématique sogdienne dans l’art de la Chine de

la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle,” *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (2001): 227–64. See also Marshak, “The Miho Couch and the Other Sino-Sogdian Works of Art of the Second Half of the Sixth Century,” *Miho Museum* 4 (2004): 16–31; and Judith A. Lerner, *Aspects of Assimilation: The Funerary Practices and Furnishings of Central Asians in China*, Sino-Platonic Papers, no. 168 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, 2005), 168.

7. Catherine Delacour and Pénélope Riboud, *Lit de pierre, sommeil barbare: Présentation, après restauration et remontage, d’une banquette funéraire ayant appartenu à un aristocrate d’Asie centrale venu s’établir en Chine au VI^e siècle* (Paris: Musée Guimet, 2004).

8. For further elaboration of this line of interpretation, see Catherine Delacour, “Une version tardive du triomphe de Dionysos? Essai d’interprétation de quelques-uns des panneaux historiés d’un monument funéraire chinois en pierre du VI^e siècle de notre ère,” *Monuments Piot* (Paris) 84 (2005): 65–98.

9. Yang Junkai, “Carvings on the Stone Outer Coffin of Lord Shi of the Northern Zhou,” in de la Vaissière and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 21–45, pl. 1–7.

10. Here I sum up Frantz Grenet and Pénélope Riboud, “A Reflection of the Hepthalite Empire: The Biographical Narrative in the Reliefs of the Tomb of the *Sabao* Wirkak (494–579),” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 17 (2007, in press). References relevant to the present analysis are provided there.



Figure 1. Guimet couch: the deceased seated in a Chinese park (left) and drinking from a rhyton (right). Courtesy of Guimet Museum

events than the self-contained and more conventional panels of hunting and banquets displayed on all the other graves. These scenes are all the more interesting as they can be compared with the long epitaph written in two languages, Chinese and Sogdian; the presence of a Sogdian version is unique.¹¹ Thanks to both texts, it is known that the tomb owner was a man of the nation of Shi, originally from the Western countries, who moved to Chang'an (today Xi'an) and was appointed *sabao* of Liangzhou. He passed away at the venerable age of eighty-five in the year 579 and was married to a Lady Kang, who, it is told, was buried at his side. Wirkak therefore was born in about 494 and lived during the succeeding reigns of three sinicized dynasties of Turkish origin: the Northern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou, all firm supporters of Buddhism except for the Northern Zhou in their last years. The names Shi and Kang indi-

as well, is wrapped in a large cloak. They are visited by two Sogdians, whose richly harnessed horse is waiting outside the pavilion: an adult man, apparently bearded and wearing a twofold high cap, and an adolescent. They are bringing presents.

Scene 2 is divided into two registers. On the top of the panel, a ruler wearing a winged crown hunts various animals in a mountain steppe. On the bottom, one sees a caravan on the move, following a river.

On the top of scene 3, one sees a man with a long beard and a twofold cap, very similar to the one in the first scene. He is accompanied by two younger people, and he shares a drink with a ruler wearing a winged crown and a Western garment and sitting in a yurt. The bottom of the panel shows a caravan resting near a river.

Scene 4 shows a royal couple under a pavilion very similar to that of scene 1. They are

cate a Central Asian origin, since these Chinese characters imply that their owners' families originated from Kesh (today Shahr-i Sabz) and from Samarkand, respectively. Wirkak was promoted *sabao* by an imperial decree, a function his grandfather has already fulfilled.

The six scenes in question are set on the western and northern sides of the sarcophagus, and the narration proceeds from right to left (as obviously indicated by the direction of the horses and caravans).

Scene 1 takes place under a Western-type pavilion near a river. A non-Chinese couple and a baby are sitting together. The man wears a winged crown with a solar symbol, and the woman, crowned

11. Sun Fuxi, "Investigations on the Chinese Version of the Sino-Sogdian Bilingual Inscription of the Tomb of Lord Shi," in de la Vaissière and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 47–55; and Yutaka Yoshida, "The Sogdian Version of the New Xi'an Inscription," in de la Vaissière and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 57–72.

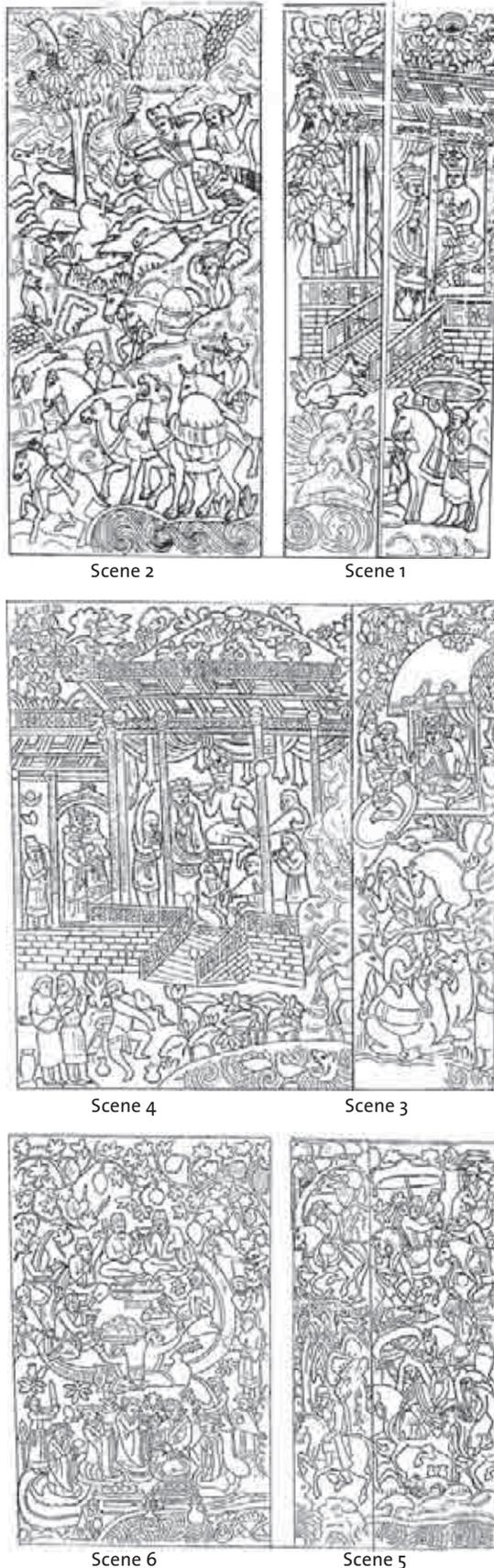


Figure 2. Wirkak sarcophagus: western and northern sides (biographical narrative; the scenes follow each other from right to left). Courtesy of Yang Junkai

entertained by dancers and musicians playing Central Asian instruments. The king has a winged crown, whereas the queen wears a different headdress, similar to the one worn by three young ladies standing under an arch who are bringing presents.

Scene 5 is set in different landscape. The vegetation has changed and is less luxuriant. One sees a cortege of riders moving from right to left. In the center of the top and bottom registers of the scene, the main characters, a man and a woman wearing travel headdress, ride under a canopy. The man exchanges a gesture of blessing with a humbler rider.

Scene 6 shows a drinking party under a vine arbor. Five men are sitting on a carpet, wearing low hats typical for the *sabao* (a observation made by Etsuko Kageyama).¹² Five women, obviously their consorts, sit together below, drinking as well. They wear large-sleeved dresses, crossed over on the front.

Several basic indications are carefully spread over the various scenes and help one to understand the internal logic of the narrative. One may notice that the bearded man appears twice with a younger one, a fact that suggests the latter could be Wirkak himself in his youth, following the Sogdian tradition alluded to in Chinese sources. The History of the Tang Dynasty mentions that “[the people of Kang] are excellent traders; when a man turns twenty, he travels to neighbouring countries and does not stop until there is no more profit to make.”¹³ The fact that the young Wirkak is first shown assisting a middle-aged or elderly man may indicate the fact that he is heir to a family tradition, as mentioned in the epitaph. He must have traveled in several countries (as suggested by the various settings) and traded both in towns and in the steppe (as alluded to by the different types of architecture). In all cases, he must have traveled for a long time: although the setting of the first scene is very similar to that of the fourth, one may notice that the baby does not appear with the royal couple anymore; this may mean that

12. Etsuko Kageyama, “Sogdians in Kucha: A Study from Archaeological and Iconographical Material,” in de la Vaissière and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 363–75, esp. 364–65.

13. *Xin Tang shu*, chap. 221: 6233, 6244, in de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 160.



Figure 3. Wirkak sarcophagus: right, steppe ruler in scene 2; left, steppe ruler in scene 3; middle, Hephthalite coin (Tukharistan, late fifth century). Adapted by F. Ory

the baby of the first scene is now the king of the fourth, and that one generation has passed.

In the fifth and the sixth scenes, Wirkak is now an adult and a married man. From the epitaph one knows that the culminating event of his career was his appointment by the emperor as *sabao* of Kachan (Guzang in Gansu). The rider in the middle of the fifth scene obviously holds an important position. This scene is specially enhanced in the composition, for it occupies the center of the wall and is set in a special frame. In the next scene, Wirkak and his wife are taking part in a drinking party, probably at Nowruz, the Iranian New Year (as suggested by the ripe grapes—the Sogdian Nowruz then fell in July). This is the logical consequence of the previous scene: he no longer has to travel on the roads, and he is now a high dignitary who can spend his time enjoying the good life. Entertaining fellow countrymen at Nowruz was also probably part of the religious duties of a *sabao*.

In addition to the internal organization of the narrative, specific geographical, ethnical, and political hints can be noticed throughout the different scenes. Luxuriant mango trees, traditionally pointing to a Western environment in Buddhist iconography, invade the background of scenes 1 to 4, whereas the trees in scene 5 are those frequently depicted on Chinese reliefs

of the early sixth century. The grape vines in scene 6 are usually associated with the Sogdian way of life. This could be a suggestion that scene 5 takes place in China and scene 6 in Gansu, where Wirkak was appointed *sabao*.

Another interesting allusion to foreign countries is the crowns worn by the rulers of scenes 1–4 (fig. 3). They all share the same crown type, that is, with two wings, although one can notice small variations in detail. The basic crown type derives from the late crown of the Sasanian king Peroz (457–84), depicted on the massive coin emissions that literally inundated the Central Asian territories controlled by the Hephthalites after they subjected Iran to a tribute in 476–77 and for several decades onward. Most probably this crown type, characterized by inward-curving wings framing some symbol, came to be adopted by the Hephthalite kings for ceremonial circumstances. A Hephthalite coin from Bactria shows on one side the bare-headed nomadic ruler and on the other side the portrait of Peroz. On the contrary, such crowns never appear with the Turkish rulers who hold center stage on other Sogdian graves in China: on the An Jia couch the only ruler there who has a winged crown sits outside the *qaghan*'s yurt; he is a Sogdian ruler, or maybe a Hephthalite vassal.¹⁴ On the Wirkak reliefs, the very fact that rulers wear-

14. On the An Qie couch (here "An Jia"), see Marshak, "La thématique sogdienne," 244–52; Marshak, "The Miho Couch," 23–25; Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, *Anjia Tomb of Northern Zhou at Xi'an* [in

Chinese] (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2003). On this particular scene, see Frantz Grenet, "The Self Image of the Sogdians," in de la Vaissière and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 123–40, esp. 136, fig. 9.

Figure 4. Wirkak sarcophagus: right, urban rulers in scene 1; left, urban rulers in scene 4; middle, Stroganov plate (Tukharistan, sixth century). Adapted by F. Ory



ing the same types of crowns and costumes are shown both in an urban and in a steppe setting is consistent with the twofold Hephtalite way of life reflected in the Chinese records.

Another Hephtalite custom that obviously struck Chinese contemporary observers was that rulers usually received their guests with their wives, as pointed out in the description of the land of Huo in the *Liangshu*. This custom is well illustrated by the so-called Stroganov silver bowl in the Hermitage Museum, manufactured during Wirkak's lifetime in Bactria-Tukharestan, the heartland of the Hephtalite empire (fig. 4). The very close resemblance between the Stroganov couple and the two couples depicted on the Chinese reliefs is obvious, as is the striking difference with the banquet scenes depicting the Sogdian New Year: in a Sogdian or Sino-Sogdian environment, men and women receive their guests separately. Indeed the other funerary reliefs have the Sogdian couple seated side by side only in purely private situations. Wirkak's Chinese epitaph clearly mentions that he married a woman of Sogdian origin. One Chinese source (a local history of Turfan) states that there, "as far as clothing is concerned, men follow the fashion of the *Hu* [in this context, "Sogdians"] and women approximately that of the

Chinese"—a use one is tempted to explain by the fact that contrary to the male Central Asian costume, the female one had become disassociated from the ethnos but closely associated with the low-esteemed profession of dancing girl (and consequently borrowed by Chinese dancing girls as well).¹⁵ This difference in costume is meticulously reproduced on the relief. This is not the case of the two foreign queens seated under the pavilion, wrapped in their cloaks as the aristocratic lady on the Stroganov vase.

It seems clear that the intention of the artist was to show that before Wirkak became *sabao*, he had for many years, about the span of one generation, traded in the Hephtalite empire and been trusted by its kings. As Wirkak was born toward the end of the fifth century, his active commercial career celebrated on the grave took place in the first half of the sixth century, under the cosmopolitan Hephtalite empire, which also included northwest India and encroached on Sasanian territories. On the contrary, the owners of the other Sogdian graves, who were born later, had known only the subsequent Turkish empire, less linked with Iran and India. This is certainly an element that should be taken into account when regarding Wirkak's extraordinarily varied religious affiliations.

15. Monograph included in the *Zhoushu*, chap. 57 (slightly different in the *Beishi*, chap. 97). Pénélope Riboud first drew attention to this important textual evidence (Grenet and Riboud, "Reflection of the Hephtalite Empire"). On Sogdian dancing girls, see Schaffer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 50–57.



Figure 5. Left, Zoroastrian priests on the Wirkak sarcophagus (at the entrance to the Chinwad bridge); middle, on the Anyang couch; right, funerary ritual on the Miho couch. Adapted by F. Ory

Some Zoroastrian Subjects

When comparing the scenes depicted on each of the Central Asian funerary monuments discovered in China, one might notice a certain number of recurring themes. Though variations occur in the composition of the pictures from one monument to another, banquets, hunts, processions, and symbolic motives such as the riderless horse and the oxcart seem to have been compulsory images related to the social status of the deceased. Few motives break this monotony, and among them are those related to the divine world.

The images that indicate most directly a Zoroastrian milieu are those of priests, immediately recognizable by the *padâm*, the mouth cover that prevents pollution of the sacred fire by the breath of the priest, still used by Zoroastrian priests today when they officiate. Such priests are depicted on three sets of reliefs: the Wirkak tomb just mentioned, the anonymous one found near Anyang before 1922 and now

dispersed among four museums (the Guimet; the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; and Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne), and the other anonymous couch now at the Miho Museum (fig. 5).¹⁶ In the last case the priest is tending a ritual fire in the context of an office for the departed.¹⁷ One can suppose that the body has been abandoned in the wilderness to flesh-eating animals according to the Zoroastrian ritual, as the family is meditating in front of a mountain landscape and mourners are wounding their faces, a funerary ritual condemned in Zoroastrian texts but nonetheless frequently depicted on Central Asian ossuaries, including on those that bear unequivocal Zoroastrian inscriptions.

In addition, the Miho couch bears the image of the four-armed goddess Nana (fig. 6; left), the chief goddess of the Sogdian pantheon, partially assimilated to the Zoroastrian goddess Anahita but with a residual Mesopotamian

16. Marshak, "La thématique sogdienne," 229–33; Marshak, "The Miho Couch," 16–19.

17. Judith Lerner, "Central Asians in Sixth-Century China: A Zoroastrian Funerary Rite," *Iranica Antiqua* 30 (1995): 179–90. On the Miho couch, see also Mar-

shak, "La thématique sogdienne," 233–44; Marshak, "The Miho couch," 19–22; Annette A. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, "The Miho Couch Revisited in the Light of Recent Discoveries," *Orientalions* (October 2001): 54–61; V. I. Raspopova, "Life and Artistic Conventions of the Miho Couch," *Miho Museum* 4 (2004): 43–57.

component, here expressed by her association with lions, music, and dance, all inherited from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. On another panel (fig. 6; right) the river god Oxus is worshipped in his horse manifestation (his function as a river god is expressed by the fish below). An Iranian god who definitely belongs to the Zoroastrian pantheon, namely, Mithra, probably appears on the sarcophagus of the *sabao* Yu Hong, meeting a riderless horse, which is his specific sacrificial animal, especially in the funerary cult (fig. 7) (it appears with this function in Sogdiana itself, on ossuaries and on a commemorative procession depicted on a Samarkand mural painting).¹⁸

On the same set of reliefs the deceased and his wife are seated together (fig. 8). This is common on Chinese funerary reliefs, whether or not they belong to Sogdians, but in this particular case one is tempted to recognize a depiction of the Zoroastrian paradise: the musicians (the Iranian name for paradise, *garô-dmâna*, means “House of the Song of Praise”) and the haloed female attendants, one of whom has wings that in Sogdian conventions identify her as a heavenly creature (it seems for this detail that the sculptor did not understand his model correctly and that he reinterpreted the wings as palm branches).

On three tombs, those of the *sabaos* Wirkak, An Qie, and Yu Hong, a curious symbol, obviously linked with the fire cult, surmounts or frames the door of the sarcophagus or of the tomb, therefore occupying a privileged position (fig. 9). This symbol is a pair of hybrid



Figure 6. Miho couch: left, the goddess Nana with musicians and dancers; right, worship of the river god Oxus as a horse. Adapted by F. Ory

creatures, half birds and half men. The human component is obviously a priest, as he wears the mouth cover and tends a fire. At first glance they seem closely akin to the *kinnaras* and *kinnaris* of Buddhist art, and one could suppose that this particular type had been created in China. But it appears also at Bamiyan on the Mithra image painted above the thirty-eight-meter Buddha and, even more significantly, on ossuaries recently discovered at Samarkand. As for the interpretation, I once proposed Dahman Afrin, the ubiquitous deity who embodies pious activity, but perhaps one should prefer the suggestion by my good friend Oktor Skjaervø, who drew my attention to a passage in the Avesta, the sacred book of the Zoroastrians (*Videvdad* 18.14), in which it is stated that the cock, the

18. On the Yu Hong sarcophagus, see Marshak, “La thématique sogdienne,” 252–57; Marshak, “The Miho Couch,” 26–29; Shanxi sheng kogu yanjiusuo (Archaeological Institute of Shanxi Province), *Taiyuan Sui Yu Long mu (The Sui Dynasty Tomb of Yu Hong in Taiyuan)* (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2005).

On the riderless horse as a sacrificial animal, see also Pénélope Riboud, “Le cheval sans cavalier dans l’art funéraire sogdien en Chine: À la recherche des sources d’un thème composite,” *Arts Asiatiques* 58 (2003): 148–61.



Figure 7. Yu Hong couch: Mithra (?) on horseback meeting the sacrificial horse. Adapted by F. Ory



Figure 8. Yu Hong couch: the deceased couple in paradise. Adapted by F. Ory

animal associated with Srosh, the god of the cultic activity, is himself the priest of this god. On several images of the “priest-bird” the bird’s tail and legs look very much like those of a cock. The tray toward which the “priest-bird” directs the *barsoms* (the ritual twigs) is typical of the “outer” services, which contrary to the “inner” ones do not necessarily have to be solemnized in consecrated places. One of these outer services is the *chaharom*, performed (as indicated by its name) on the fourth morning after death, at the time when the soul is supposed to move to heaven across the Chinwad bridge. The pres-

ence of a symbol associated with Srosh would be all the more justified as this god helps the soul crossing the bridge and is one of its judges.

The Zoroastrian Hereafter on the Wirkak Sarcophagus

In fact the crossing of the Chinwad bridge, the decisive test before reaching paradise or hell, is depicted in great detail on the eastern side of the Wirkak sarcophagus (fig. 10).¹⁹ It contains one scene divided into an upper and a lower register, each of which must be read from right to left.

19. Frantz Grenet, Pénélope Riboud, and Yang Junkai, “Zoroastrian Scenes on a Newly Discovered Sogdian Tomb in Xi’an, Northern China,” *Studia Iranica* 33 (2004): 273–84 (where detailed references to texts and iconographic parallels are found).



Figure 9. Top, “priest-bird” on the Wirkak sarcophagus; bottom, “priest-bird” on the lintel of the An Qie tomb. Adapted by F. Ory

The lower register begins at the entrance of a long bridge guarded by two dogs emerging from behind rocks. Two Zoroastrian priests with attributes I have already mentioned are standing at the entrance of the bridge. Among the crowd crossing the bridge one can notice four human figures (a couple and two children) who have almost reached the other side. Behind them follow all sorts of animals walking past two flaming balls: a couple of horses, a donkey, a cow, sheep, two camels, and one bird. The bridge crosses over tormented waters, from which emerge the heads of two horrid creatures. The lower structure of the bridge itself is supported by posts with monster-headed capitals. On the far left of the scene, the bridge reaches a rocky shore, over which fly a legion of winged creatures.

The upper part of the scene must also be “read” from right to left. A two-armed god holding a trident in his right hand is seated cross-legged above three bulls and inscribed in a halo flanked by two attendants holding a billowing scarf. Underneath a couple is sitting together, facing three crowned figures. The woman wears a Chinese garment and holds a cup in her right hand, whereas the man, wearing Western clothes and a hat, holds a tray or a cylindrical object. A crowned winged figure stands in front of the couple. Behind her, to the left, two similarly crowned ladies holding a cup and a flower emerge from behind a mountain range. These mountains form a natural boundary between the upper and the lower register.

Continuing in the upper section to the left, before one reaches an assembly of winged deities and creatures flying in the midst of a flowery heaven, one sees a woman with no wings, her hair in a topknot. She is dressed in an Indian-style tunic and is obviously falling from the sky. Above her, a winged creature wearing a crown watches her tumble. On close scrutiny she appears to brandish a small schematic human figure. I shall return to the interpretation of this very strange scene.

The scene continues with the image of four winged horses: two of them flying to the right, and the others heading left. All except for the one on the upper right wear a crescent moon on top of their head. The horses on the left are mounted by a couple, obviously the tomb owners, wearing crowns with ribbons. The group is preceded to the far left by heavenly musicians playing their instruments and an escort of hybrid creatures with elaborate tails: a lion, an ox, a camel, and a ram. These animals are dashing toward the rocky shore mentioned earlier, creating a natural junction between the lower and the upper register, while ducks are swimming below.

Most details of this scene on the eastern side, though not all, can be interpreted by comparison with Zoroastrian texts describing the journey of the soul after death, the most straightforward parallels being found in two ninth-century Pahlavi treatises: the *Great Bundahishn* (otherwise called *Iranian Bundahishn*) and the *Selections of Zadspram*.



Figure 10. Wirkak sarcophagus, eastern side: the ascent to paradise. Courtesy Yang Junkai

The bridge that occupies two-thirds of the lower register is the Chinwad bridge crossing over the pit of hell, the latter being symbolized by monstrous heads emerging from the swirls or carrying the posts. Two details are particularly relevant for the identification of the bridge: the two dogs that can be seen from behind the rocks above the entrance are mentioned in the Avesta as guardians of the bridge; the flames burning in two places over the initial section of the bridge are those that help the soul crossing in the darkness (*Zadspram* 30.52: “The fire form leads across the Chinwad bridge . . . and then there stands the likeness of a mountain over which the soul ascends”—in the image under discussion the bridge is set in front of rocks).

Some other details of the lower register are not directly described in the Pahlavi texts just quoted, but they appear at least consistent with their contents. The two Zoroastrian priests stand before the entrance of the bridge but are not walking on it; they appear to have solemnized the *chahârom* ceremony and, so to speak,

“dispatched” the souls toward the bridge. The deceased Wirkak and his wife have just crossed above the head of the larger monster with its mouth turned upward, which shows that they have victoriously passed the test of the bridge and are no longer under the threat of falling into hell. They are followed by a selection of animal species. This echoes a statement in *Zadspram* (30.57) concerning the creatures of paradise: “The form of the beneficent animal will turn to many kinds of the five classes: on land the quadrupeds, in the water the fishes, in the air the bird form which will rejoice the soul by their pleasant voice.” The fact that one of the camels crossing the bridge is laden with wares probably reflects the particular concerns of a Sogdian merchant on his deathbed.

The upper register of the first panel on the right shows the next stage in the ascent to heaven. The scene is presided over by a god whose iconographic features (bulls and trident) are those of Shiva Maheshvara, but with two unusual variations: the god has one head instead

of three, and a billowing scarf is held over his halo by two flying attendants. In Sogdiana the iconographic type of Shiva Maheshvara or Shiva Mahadeva was transferred to the Iranian god Vayu (Sogd. Weshparkar “Vayu who acts in the superior region”); in a painting from Panjkent a horn is added, blown by one of the three heads, in order to mark Weshparkar’s specific function as an atmospheric god.²⁰ The same concern explains the addition of the scarf (a symbol of the blowing wind) in the present scene. According to the *Bundahishn* (30.23) the “Good Way,” distinct from the “Bad” one who takes the soul away from the body, plays a decisive role just after the crossing of the bridge: “On the summit of Mount Harborz the Good Way takes [the soul] by his hand, he brings it to his own place [i.e., the atmosphere], and as he has received this soul he hands it over.” The absence here of a depiction of the expected Ahura Mazda as supreme master of paradise certainly overemphasizes the importance of Vayu-Weshparkar. The latter’s promotion in the celestial hierarchy seems confirmed by a Chinese account on Sogdian temples in Chang’an: “The Heaven deity of the *Hu* of the Western Countries is the one which Buddhist texts name Moxishouluo (Maheshvara)” (*Weishu, Liangjing xinji*, j.3).

In Pahlavi texts the theme of the encounter with the atmospheric Way sometimes overlaps with that of the Den, the embodiment of the deceased’s own faith, coming in a scented breeze. In the present case it appears that the Den is depicted just under Way, as a winged lady with her right hand passed under the belt (*kustig*), which is by itself a symbol of the Zoroastrian faith. With her left hand she makes a welcoming gesture, or perhaps she is going to receive from Wirkak the roll inscribed with his good actions. She is followed by two other maidens, without wings, who hold some of the attributes that a Sogdian description transmitted in a Manichaean text ascribes to the Den herself: a cup (presented by the maiden to the left) and flowers (held by the maiden in the middle).

The middle and left thirds of the upper register are filled with celestial musicians. They

revolve around four winged horses with astral symbols on their heads. Two are mounted by the deceased couple, and altogether the horses are parted as in Mithra’s quadriga (compare the image at Bamiyan). The notion here expressed is clearly that of the “station of the Sun,” the highest one according to the *Bundahishn* (30.26): “The station of the Sun which is the radiant Paradise.”

Manichaeanism on the Wirkak Sarcophagus

Only one depiction of the crossing of the Chinwad bridge to heaven was already known, on an ossuary from Samarkand that does not provide such a richness of detail.²¹ On the Wirkak relief one part of the composition, however, looks very strange (fig. 11): it is the fall of the woman who

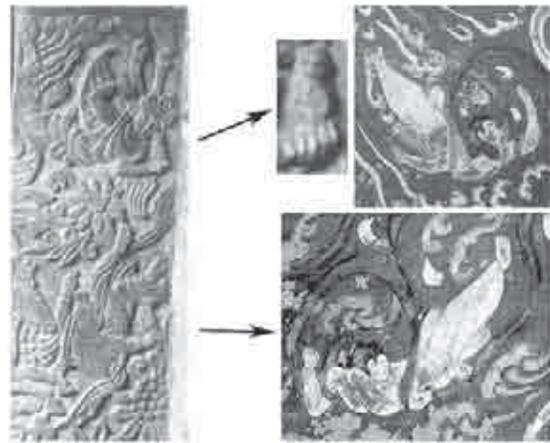


Figure 11. Wirkak sarcophagus: left, detail of previous scene; top right, close-up of the human statue; bottom right, *apsaras* in Dunhuang, cave 322. Adapted by F. Ory from E. de la Vaissière, “Mani en Chine au VI^e siècle,” 5

is apparently threatened by a heavenly creature brandishing a small human statue. When I published the interpretation of the composition together with Pénélope Riboud and Yang Junkai, we could make no satisfactory interpretation of that detail. Since then, Etienne de la Vaissière has brilliantly proposed to interpret it as a Manichaean addition to the overall Zoroastrian picture.²² He was oriented in this direction by

20. Boris Marshak, “Les fouilles de Pendjikent,” *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1990): 286–313, esp. 307–9, fig. 16.

21. Pierre Chuvin, ed., *Les arts de l’Asie centrale* (Paris: Citadelles and Mazenod, 1999), 166 and fig. 226. The ossuary is kept in the Tashkent Historical Museum.

22. Etienne de la Vaissière, “Mani en Chine au VI^e siècle,” *Journal Asiatique* 293 (2005): 357–78.



Figure 12. Wirkak sarcophagus: left, predication scene preceding the biographical narrative; middle, close-up of the three Manichaeans; right, Turfan miniature, Manichaean elects with threefold caps and with tiaras. Adapted by F. Ory from E. de la Vaissière, “Mani en Chine au VIe siècle,” 2

the scene set before the biographical panels, which I have not examined yet here (fig. 12). At first glance it looks like a Buddhist predication scene, with Wirkak and his family renouncing hunting (the repentant flesh-eating, namely, the humans and the lions, are on the left, facing the various hunted animal species: deer, ram, ibex, and boar). On closer examination the preaching figure is not the Buddha, as he wears a pointed beard and executes not a Buddhist mudra but a specific gesture with forefinger and little finger extended, which in Iranian contexts appears to express the idea of victory.²³ He is worshipped by the couple and is surrounded by three groups of differentiated people: Chinese wise men with beards and topknots, Sogdians or other Westerners, and three praying men in loose robes; one of them wears a pointed tiara,

and two a threefold high cap. They are strikingly similar to Manichaean elects depicted in illuminated books from Turfan (tenth and eleventh centuries). The preacher is therefore Mani, the “Buddha of Light,” who having already converted the Western barbarians is now persuading Chinese wise men, probably Taoists. The respect for living creatures and the abstinence from eating meat was a common tenet of Buddhism and Manichaeism.

I now come back to the scene in the center of the upper part of the ascent to heaven (fig. 11). The Manichaean eschatological myth, and only this myth, says that the last particles of light subsisting on earth will be drawn to heaven as a statue, called the *andrias* in the Greek and Coptic versions; on the contrary, Concupiscence in human shape will fall from heaven and be thrown

23. See Carol A. Bromberg, “An Iranian Gesture at Miran,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 5 (1991): 45–58. This interpretation cautiously advanced by Bromberg is now confirmed by a gold medal showing Shapur I receiving the surrender of Philip the Arab, where the

king executes this gesture: Michael Alram, Maryse Blet-Lemarquand, and Prods Oktor Skjaervø, “Shapur, King of Kings of Iranians and Non-Iranians,” *Res Orientales* 17 (forthcoming, 2007): 11–40.

on the ground. The falling female figure is modeled on an *apsara*, which in the iconographic idiom inherited from Buddhism provides a perfect match for the idea of Concupiscence.

It appears therefore that Wirkak was very well acquainted with the teachings of Manichaeism. Whether he had come across them during his faraway travels in the Hephtalite empire, or in Gansu, or even in the capital Chang'an, is not known, but this document predates by fifty years the earliest testimony of Manichaeism in China, namely, the mention of the coming of a Manichaean bishop (*aftâdân*) in 631 (this mention found only in later sources is indeed spurious and the first safe witness is from 694). At the same time the eschatological composition combines symbols that were specific to Manichaeism; others that were Zoroastrian but are also attested in a Manichaean context (the encounter with the Den and the station of the Sun); and, last, others that as far as is known were never current outside of Zoroastrianism (the Chiwad bridge and the Zoroastrian priests standing at its entrance). Perhaps because of his function of *sabao* Wirkak felt obliged to make some display of Zoroastrianism. Perhaps, also, he had time during his long life to devise his own religious mixture.

I lean toward this solution because the relief that closes the biographical narrative (fig. 13) appears even more syncretic than the other religious panels. In the upper part one sees an Indian ascetic meditating in a cave; in the lower part a couple, obviously Wirkak and his wife, are merged in waters containing monstrous creatures; they raise their arms in despair and are rescued by two heavenly beings. Iconographically, as de la Vaissière has shown, the composition derives from Buddhist models attested in Dunhuang: here the future Buddha, exhausted by fasting, is rescued by the gods, who bathe him in an invigorating river. But on the Wirkak relief the meaning is reversed: the



Figure 13. Left, Wirkak sarcophagus: eschatological scene closing the biographical narrative; right, parallel on a Buddhist banner from Dunhuang. Adapted by F. Ory

sea filled with monsters is clearly that of rebirth, *samsâra*, an image expressed both in Buddhist and Manichaean literature. One can quote here a Manichaean hymn: “Who will take me over the flood of the tossing sea. . . . Who will lead me beyond rebirths. . . . May I be saved from the terror of the beasts who devour one another.” Even the ascetic presiding over this scene is liable to a twofold interpretation, Manichaean as well as Buddhist, for in some Western texts Mani is termed “the great ascetic.” In this particular case Zoroastrianism is excluded from the picture, as neither asceticism nor the transmigration of souls was ever part of its doctrine.²⁴

The Guimet Couch: The Tomb of a Hindu?

The Indian component, which in the religious imagery of the Wirkak tomb is present but always in syncretic associations, appears exclusive

24. However, his interpretation of the scene of the advent of the soul differs from mine: instead of Weshparkar he recognizes Mah, the Moon god (symbolizing the Moon station the soul reaches before the Sun station), and instead of the Den and her companions, the three Virgins of Light of Manichaeism. I prefer to maintain a Zoroastrian interpretation for this part of the composition, because (1) the god de la Vaissière identifies as the symbol of the Moon is not at all de-

icted according to the same conventions as the symbol of the Sun; (2) the trident is not proper for the Moon but compulsory for Weshparkar; (3) the three bulls do not necessarily allude to the Moon chariot (cf. the icon of Shiva Maheshvara with two parted reclining bulls at Dandan-uiliq [M. Aurel Stein, *Ancient Khotan* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), pl. 60]); and (4) in the Manichaean myth the Virgins of Light are accompanied by the Wise Guide, who is absent here.



Figure 14. Guimet couch: left, Kubera on elephant with worshippers; right, Surya-Aditya. Adapted by F. Ory

on the anonymous couch once exhibited at the Guimet Museum. This couch is the only one from which Zoroastrian images or symbols are entirely absent. Besides the worldly scenes that I have already examined, this couch includes two panels showing deities.

On one of them, a pot-bellied god rides an elephant (fig. 14; left). In their first publication of the couch, Catherine Delacour and Pénélope Riboud proposed to recognize him as Indra, because the elephant is usually this god's *vahana* (mount).²⁵ But further restoration of the panel has revealed that the god lifts a cup, and consequently they changed their interpretation in a subsequent article, to which I entirely subscribe: the cup hints at Kubera, the god of Fortune and wine drinking, which is consistent

with the grapes framing his face, and with the presence of agitated worshippers who are obviously drunk.²⁶ In fact the artistic treatise *Rupamandana* mentions the elephant as a possible *vahana* for Kubera. Although no image from India shows him riding an elephant, a few later sculptures have a small elephant standing next to him (one is from a Vishnuite temple near Nagada). Therefore it is highly probable that the relief on the Guimet couch has preserved a rare Indian iconographic type that is no longer documented in India itself. A few images of Kubera are known in Sogdiana, always drinking but without an elephant.

The other religious relief on the Guimet couch (fig. 14; right) shows a Sun god encircled in a halo and rising over a sea filled with mon-

strous creatures, quite similar to the image of the sea of *samsâra* on the relief from the Wirkak tomb just examined. Quite often, images of the Indian Sun god Surya are close to Central Asian images of the Iranian Mithra (e.g., on the already-mentioned Bamiyan painting), but Delacour and Riboud have shown that in the present case Surya, not Mithra, is intended, as some attributes are specific to him: the two archers Usha and Pratyusha, symbols of dawn and sunset, and the lotus flowers in the Sun god's upper hands.²⁷ Surya is usually depicted with two arms, but he has four when he is assimilated to Vishnu as Surya-Aditya. A Vishnuite background could perhaps provide an explanation for the sea filled with monsters: in the myth recorded in the *Vishnu-Purana*, Vishnu

25. Delacour and Riboud, *Lit de pierre*, 47.

26. Catherine Delacour and Pénélope Riboud, "Un monument funéraire en pierre en Chine (VIe s.) au musée Guimet," *Arts Asiatiques* 59 (2004): 161–65.

27. Delacour and Riboud, *Lit de pierre*, 44–46; an excellent parallel from Bhubaneshvar is reproduced in fig. 59.

dissolves the impurity of the three worlds in a great ocean. It must be admitted, however, that there is no known Indian iconographic parallel for this part of the composition.

Be that as it may, the only explicit religious references in the reliefs of the Guimet couch are Indian, not Buddhist but Hindu, possibly Vishnuite.²⁸ This raises the question of the ethnic identity of the commissioner. Maybe he was a Sogdian who turned away from his ancestral religion and fell under Hindu influence, which anyway was very strongly felt in the religious art of Sogdiana itself. Maybe he came from some more southern Central Asian country and used artists who worked for the Sogdians. That there were Bactrian-speaking worshippers of Vishnu at that time is known.²⁹ An origin in Kapisa, Gandhara, or Kashmir is also possible. Incidentally, the discovery of the tomb of a Brahman from Kashmir has just been reported in Xi'an, in the same sector as the An Qie and Wirkak tombs.

Conclusions

I have compared the religious picture that now emerges from the funerary reliefs with what could be expected from the literature of the expatriate Sogdians. From that literature one could expect Buddhism in the first place, also Christianity, Manichaeism, plus a certain residual Zoroastrian background. In fact on the reliefs one finds no explicit Buddhism and no Christianity, but Manichaeism in one case, Hinduism in another, and in all the others Sogdian Zoroastrianism as it is known from Sogdiana itself. The residual element is not Zoroastrianism, but Buddhism, which provides some iconographic models but is never displayed as such. Buddhist warrior gods are sometimes included

as guardians of the grave, but there is not one single Buddha.³⁰

Part of this discrepancy can be explained by the very nature of these funerary monuments. They belonged to the wealthiest Sogdians, while Christianity seems to have been confined to the popular levels of the expatriate communities. Also, a devout Buddhist would have had his body cremated and would hardly have commissioned a stone funerary bed. But perhaps more significantly, the particular context of the period when most of these monuments were executed was not favorable to a showing off of Buddhism. At a conference in Beijing in 2004 about the Sogdians in China, Angela Sheng pointed out the coincidence in time between the flourishing of this Sogdian funerary art and the persecution of Buddhism that started in 569 at the initiative of the Northern Zhou. This persecution, according to Sheng, might have “freed up talented stone carvers for non-Buddhist work”; “wealthy Sogdians could have easily commissioned them to carve elaborate programs on commemorative stone couch-beds and sarcophagi.”³¹ Such circumstances could well explain both the remnant Buddhist iconographic idiom and the overwhelming display of the Sogdian native religion, side by side with other religious sympathies, but never with Buddhism. S

28. Riboud tentatively proposes a Vishnuite interpretation for a third panel, showing a young boy seated astride a bull in the sea and shooting in the direction of a bird framed by the sun: it might represent a conflation of several episodes from Krishna's legend (Riboud, *Lit de pierre*, 46–47, fig. 24). But Boris Marshak suggests a Chinese source instead (the legend of the archer Yi shooting the ten suns inhabited by crows) (personal communication with the author, March 2005). In fact none of these hypotheses seems to provide a straightforward explanation for the panel.

29. A seal inscribed in Bactrian, fourth to fifth century AD, shows a Kushano-Sasanian or Kidarite official worshipping Vishnu: Pierfrancesco Callieri, *Seals and Sealings from the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent and Afghanistan (Fourth Century BC–Eleventh Century AD)* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale/Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997), 190–91 (Cat U 7.3), 308–9 (inscription), pl. 57 (bottom). Bactrian names of the same period formed with “Vishnu”: Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Some Bactrian Seal-Inscriptions,” in *Afghanistan ancien carrefour entre l'Est et l'Ouest*, ed. Osmund Bopearachchi and Marie-Françoise Boussac, *Indicopleustoi* 3 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 335–46, esp. 336.

30. Etsuko Kageyama, “Quelques remarques sur des monuments funéraires de Sogdiens en Chine,” *Studia Iranica* 34 (2005): 257–78, esp. 263–67.

31. Angela Sheng, “From Stone to Silk: Intercultural Transformation of Funerary Furnishings among Eastern Asian Peoples around 475–650 CE,” in de la Vaissère and Trombert, *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, 168.