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The Afrāsiāb wall paintings refer to 7th-century Sogdian murals, discovered in 1965 in the residential part of ancient Samarqand (Samarkand), the most famous cycle of which was found in the so-called “Hall of the Ambassadors.”

History of discovery. The importance of Afrāsiāb as an archaeological site was already recognized after fragmentary wall paintings were found at the beginning of the 20th century (Field and Proston, p. 242; D’yakonov, fig. 1). In 1965, the local authorities nonetheless decided to continue with the construction of a road in the middle of Afrāsiāb tepe. During the course of this construction process, more murals were accidentally discovered, though some parts were irremediably destroyed. In any case, the destruction of the upper portion had already happened around the 10th-11th centuries (Fedorov, p. 222), and for this reason it was impossible to attempt a reconstruction. The site was named sector 23, and wall paintings were discovered in rooms 1, 2, 3, and 9. The main cycle embellished the walls of room 1, which is now known as Hall of the Ambassadors. Only a small portion of the paintings in room 9, which depict a divine couple under an arch, escaped the bulldozers. Some paintings were found in rooms 2 and 3, but they are, unfortunately, only

partially published.

Due to the fragmentary state of the paintings in room 1, their subject is still a matter of debate. But scholars agree that the main wall shows some representatives of foreign lands with gifts. Therefore, the suggestion of V. Shishkin and L. Al'baum (1971, p. 86) to call this room the Hall of the Ambassadors was generally accepted. Scholars also agree that these murals form a comprehensive cycle combining the representation of Sogdiana and its neighbors with important calendar-based references to local festivals. But there is not yet a scholarly consensus about several aspects of these paintings, and some of the hypotheses (which are outlined below), may in the future be rejected or modified. Chinese chronicles are the main sources for the comprehension and chronology of the wall paintings. M. Mode (1993, pp. 20-24) was the first to note the description of a Sogdian royal pavilion in a passage in *Tangshu*, a history of the Tang dynasty that was composed in 1060 about 7th-century Kušāniya, a Sogdian city state to the west of Samarqand. In this Chinese source, the Sogdian pavilion had images of Persians and Byzantines on the western wall, Chinese on the northern, and Turks and Indians on the eastern. The correspondences with the murals at Afrāsiāb are remarkable (Grenet, 2005, pp. 124-30). The modest dimensions of the building with the Hall of the Ambassadors seem to indicate a private residence and not a royal palace where foreign envoys were actually received (Akhunbabaev, 1990; 1999). Moreover, the Hall of the Ambassadors could have served a religious function, although this interpretation is only supported by the *Tangshu*, according to which the king of Kušāniya prayed every morning in this pavilion.

Since 1965, most wall paintings of room 1 have been removed from their place of discovery. They were restored, and are today on display in a small museum at Afrāsiāb, though some parts were transferred to the Samarkand Archeological Institute and the Tashkent Museum of History. In 1975, Al'baum published the first study of the murals, while other Russian studies focused on the technical aspects of the Afrāsiāb excavation (Abdurrazzakov and Kambarov). Soviet excavations between the late 1970s and the early1980s unearthed a few more pre-Islamic wall paintings of plants and architectural elements (Akhunbabaev, 1987), while, more recently, wall paintings dated to the Islamic period have also been recovered (Inevatkina; Karev).

The western wall is the main wall, and faces the entrance. It shows several groups of ambassadors bearing gifts — Chinese (with plain silk), Iranians (with

necklaces and embroidered silk), men from the mountains (with yak tails), as well as Koreans (without gifts and with feathers on their headgear) — between groups of Turkish soldiers, seated or guiding the embassies. The procession is directed toward a central figure, now lost, at the top of the wall.

Fragmentary inscriptions on this wall, in which Varkhuman is mentioned as sovereign (Livšic, p. 61), have been used to suggest a historical context for the execution of the Afrāsiāb wall paintings. Between 650 and 655, the Chinese emperor Gaozong (r. 650-83) recognized Varkhuman (Avarumān) as governor of Samarkand and Sogdiana (Chavannes, 1903, p. 135). In 658, when Sogdiana already belonged to the Tang protectorate in Central Asia, Gaozong even sent an envoy to Varkhuman's court to hold an official investiture (Anazawa and Manome, pp. 21ff., and *apud* Kageyama, 2002, p. 320). The inscriptions also talk about representatives of Čaḡāniān and Čāč, who could be among the groups of foreigners at the bottom of this wall, wearing Iranian garments. Similarly, Chinese envoys with gifts of silk (FIGURE 1; see ABRIŠAM) are to be identified by their Chinese clothes. But the portrayal of Korean envoys seems to be derived from an iconographic formula borrowed from Chinese art, rather than the painters relying on personal observation (Kageyama, 2002). Another fragmentary inscription suggests that the men dressed with leopard skins and bringing yak tails may be Tibetans (Livšic, p. 67).

There are diverging interpretations of this mural. Many scholars understand it as showing the Iranian New Year Festival in conjunction with the coronation of the local king (Silvi Antonini; Kageyama, 2002; Compareti and Cristoforetti, 2005; Grenet, 2005 and 2006; Fedorov, 2006). Gift giving during the Nowruz festival is a very ancient Iranian custom. Some Persian texts from the 10th and 11th centuries report with regard to Jamšid, the mythical first king of Iran, that Nowruz was considered the most propitious time for the coronation of kings (Widengren, p. 253; for efforts to support this interpretation with visual evidence in Ilkhanid miniatures, tentatively dated ca. 1300, see Esin; Pugachenkova). During the 7th century, Sogdians celebrated Nowruz in the summer, and mild weather seems to have caused one Turkish guard to wrap his garment around his hips (Grenet, 2004, pl. B; 2006, p. 49).

According to this interpretation, the lost figure at the top should be Varkhuman, the king of Samarkand. However, two alternatives have been proposed. B. Marshak, basing himself on Panjikent parallels, regarded this wall as depicting a religious ceremony, and assumed that the central figure should be a deity or a divine couple (Marshak, 1994; 2006). Yet another theory

(Mode, 1993; 2006; la Vaissière, 2006) interprets the scene as showing the presentation of tribute to the local king's Turkish overlord, the *ḵāqān*, in which case the latter should be restored as the focal point of the composition.

The southern wall bears a mural that seems to show part of the Nowruz festival, though, unfortunately, it is not well preserved. On this occasion, according to the *Tangshu*, the Sogdian sovereign of Čāč celebrated a funerary ritual in honor of his ancestors in a temple located on the town's eastern fringes (Marshak, 1994, pp. 11-15). It seems that such was the case near Samarkand also (la Vaissière, 2006, pp. 157-9; Marshak, 2006, p. 82). The wall painting (FIGURE 2) shows four geese and, more remarkably, an un-mounted horse, accompanied by men wearing the *padām*, the traditional face mask of Mazdean priests, and two men with sacrificial maces, sitting atop a camel (Grenet, 2005, p. 125). This scene could be interpreted as a parade of priests and sacrificial animals, which is, moreover, followed by a larger horse with a large rider. These animals also appear on the decoration of garments, which Mazdean divinities wore inside the temple (Motov), but it is not yet clear as to how this observation pertains to the mural's interpretation. In the wall painting, differences in size seem not to be used to distinguish gods and goddesses from regular worshippers, and at least at Panjikant, divinities are always larger than human attendants. While the large horse and its horseman may be interpreted as the king and his mount, the three men in the temple could be priests, and the man with armor, outside the temple, a soldier (Compareti, 2009).

The eastern wall contains the entrance. The mural is in an extremely bad state of preservation so that an interpretation of the whole scene is presently impossible. Al'baum (1975, pp. 80-85) originally proposed that this mural was intended to evoke India, and F. Grenet (2003) has recently reconsidered his interpretation. On the left, one can recognize a horseman and two men, possibly a teacher and student, with a round object between them. This object could be an armillary sphere (Grenet, 2003, p. 127, pls. 3a-c). This leads Grenet to suggest that Hellenistic iconographical traditions are here used to show how astronomy was passed on from the Greeks to the Indians. On the right, there is an enigmatic water scene. It has been suggested that this depicts the fight betweens the cranes and the dwarves, placed in India by some ancient authors (Pliny, *Natural History* 7.26, see Mode, 1993, p. 98; la Vaissière, 2006, p. 159; Grenet, 2006, p. 46-7; 2007). The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, one of the main Indian texts about sacrifices, records that funerary rituals should be held in autumn

or summer; it also lays down the construction of an altar which should be south-east oriented. The aquatic scene is, in fact, on the corner between the eastern and southern walls at Afrāsiāb. Every phase of the complex construction of the altar requires also the presence of animals such as a turtle, an animal which can be actually observed in the aquatic scene under a kneeling person. Furthermore, after the funeral, the relatives of the dead had to wash themselves and, after putting on new clothes, they were also supposed to return home holding the tail of an ox (*Satapatha-Brahmana*, pp. 421-40). Although some details do not seem to be exactly the same as in the Afrāsiāb paintings, this text provides a remarkably convincing explanation for the figure of the person holding the tail of the ox in the water.

The most interesting hypotheses have been put forward with regard to the middle paintings close to the entrance. Two hypotheses about the top part have received particular attention (FIGURE 3). On the one hand, Grenet (2006, pp. 44-47) has argued that this mural showed the legendary fights of Kṛṣṇa against demons in animal forms, so that the still visible legs of human and animal could be Kṛṣṇa confronting the demon Keśin. On the other hand, Compareti (2006-07) has proposed that the painting depicts the Indian *aśvamedha*. Though the sources do not agree whether this festival was celebrated in spring or summer, the sources clearly indicate that this festival always demanded a horse sacrifice. Few sovereigns could afford such a festival due to its high costs and the two or even three years of preparation it required. According to scant Indian historical data, in the second half of the 7th century, Ādityasena, a king of the Later Gupta, performed the *aśvamedha*. Since Sogdiana maintained very strong cultural and commercial relations with India, Sogdians could have known of his celebration. But an *aśvamedha* occurred only once during a king's reign, even though it marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new year (Swennen, p. 206), and thus would correspond to the festivals possibly depicted in the other wall paintings with regard to both their cultic importance and their season. Mode (1993, pp. 97-104), however, interprets the topic of this scene as the mythical origins of the Turks. According to the *Tangshu*, Turks are represented on the eastern wall, and accordingly, he does not recognize a horse in the lower parts of the quadruped, but a wolf.

The northern wall is clearly Chinese and bears a two-part wall painting with an extremely complicated content associated with astronomical matters (Compareti and Cristoforetti, 2005; 2007). Moreover, the two-part scene

corresponds with the scenes on the western and the southern wall and, possibly also with the scene on the eastern wall. The mural on the northern wall is probably a representation of the Chinese New Year Festival, and the depiction of a Chinese theme on the northern wall confirms the description of the Sogdian pavilion in the *Tangshu*. An analysis of the garments has revealed that they are cut in the style of garments in contemporary Chinese funerary paintings (Yatsenko; Kageyama, 2006). On the right side, a hunting scene includes a hunter on horseback who is piercing a leopard with his spear (FIGURE 4), and on the left side, there is an aquatic scene (FIGURE 5). On a pond crowded with aquatic creatures, musicians and singers sit in a boat with a prow shaped like a bird's head. A lady, larger than her attendants, is feeding the fish, while a composite winged monster is recognizable beneath the boat. One man is leading two horses to water, and another man, half-naked and carrying a stick, is wading into it. Mode (2006, p. 113) supports the interpretation that this scene is a reference to the negotiation of a marriage alliance. The local king or his overlord is trying to marry a Chinese princess, and the larger lady in the boat is on her way to Samarqand, even though Chinese ladies customarily traveled in carts. But this two-part scene also recalls Chinese poems about an ancient custom of the Han emperor, who conducted a ritual hunt in a particular part of the imperial park in Chang'an to kill evil animals, such as feline beasts. After the hunt, Chinese aristocrats visited a pond in the same park to listen to musicians and singers, while some attendants were diving to catch water-animals (Compareti, 2006a). These poems also mention the appearance of a dragon, perhaps connecting the ritual hunt with the New Year Festival (Compareti, 2006b). The literary sources support an interpretation of this scene as ritual hunt. The bigger hunter with the spear could be the Chinese emperor Gaozong, the composite winged monster might be interpreted as a dragon, and the lady could be the empress Wu Zetian, who was the widow of Gaozong and usurped the Tang throne between 690 and 705. Although it is not yet possible to link the man leading the horses to a specific Chinese ritual, the recurrent presence of horses in the Afrāsiāb murals is salient (Riboud; Mao). But the gesture of the woman feeding the fish also recalls the *Duanwu* Festival, which today is still performed on the 5th day of the 5th month of the traditional Chinese calendar (i.e., around the summer solstice) to commemorate the suicide of the poet Qu Yuan (340-278 BCE). People throw food into the water to keep the fish from eating the corpse of Qu Yuan. Since his corpse was never found, the festival comprises ritual searches for his body, and some people dive in rivers and lakes, while others hold races in dragon-shaped boats. In the mural, the posture of the half-naked

man with the stick in the water is a gesture that may be interpreted as searching for something in the water. The second part of the ancient Chinese New Year Festival, as described in Han poetry, and the Duanwu Festival very much resemble each other. According to the Gregorian calendar, the Chinese New Year Festival falls between January-February, while the Duanwu Festival falls between May-June. The latter date coincides with the Sogdian Nowruz, which in the 7th century, as mentioned above, was celebrated in the summer. This observation leads to the hypothesis that the artists in charge of the Afrāsiāb wall paintings fused or, rather, deliberately merged the two festivals to create a calendrical agreement between a local Sogdian, an Indian (?), and an important Chinese festival that could function as counterpart to the Chinese New Year celebration (Compareti and Cristoforetti, 2005; 2007).

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