

ON THE COMMON ICONOGRAPHIC BASIS OF THE IRANIAN WIND GOD IN PRE-ISLAMIC CENTRAL ASIA AND *MARCIUS CORNATOR* IN MEDIEVAL NORTHERN ITALY

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Summary. Bactrian artists adopted many Greek elements that continued to be represented even many centuries after the invasion of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great. This is particularly evident on Kushan coins. Some centuries later, these elements re-appeared in Sogdian art and also in funerary art of those Sogdian immigrants who settle down in northern China. The Sogdian wind god Weshparkar started to be represented as a man who is approaching a horn to his mouth. This was a typical attribute of Greek wind deities and also Fengbo, the Chinese wind god. Even though it is not possible to decide who adopted first this iconography, it is worth observing that Muslim artists knew it and possibly transmitted it to medieval Europe where it started to appear as a typical attribute of the personification of Mars as a windy month, also called in Latin *Marcus cornator*.

Key words: Sogdian art, Sogdian deities, wind god, Romanesque art, *Marcus cornator*, Mars, Ares.

Резюме. Бактрийские художники переняли многие греческие элементы, которые продолжали использоваться даже спустя много столетий после вторжения Александра Македонского в Персидскую империю. Это особенно заметно на кушанских монетах. Несколько столетий спустя эти элементы вновь появились в согдийском искусстве, а также в погребальном искусстве тех согдийских иммигрантов, которые обосновались в Северном Китае. Согдийский бог ветра Вешпаркар стал изображаться в виде человека, который подносит рог ко рту. Это был типичный атрибут греческих божеств ветра, а также Фенгбо, китайского бога ветра. Несмотря на то, что невозможно решить, кто первым перенял эту иконографию, стоит отметить, что мусульманские художники знали ее и, возможно, передали в средневековую Европу, где она стала появляться как типичный атрибут олицетворения Марса как ветреного месяца, также называемого по-латыни *Marcus cornator*.

Ключевые слова: Согдийское искусство, Согдийские божества, бог ветра, Романское искусство, *Marcus cornator*, Марс, Арес.

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Approximately thirty years ago, Katsumi Tanabe published a seminal article on the fortune of the Bactrian wind-god Vado (Avestan Vayu) among the followers or minor deities of the Buddhist religion (Tanabe, 1990). His ideas called the attention of other scholars on the use of Classical iconographies to represent Central Asian deities that would have eventually appeared as far as China and Japan. Many iconographical elements of Vado were based on those of Greco-Roman minor wind deities. The anthropomorphic representation of winds in Classical art (Boreas, Anemos, Zephyros, etc.) included human figures with disheveled hair, a drape blown by the wind above the head, wings, and, sometimes, a horn or shell used to blow the wind as a bugle (Kaempf-Dimitriadou, 1986). Vado appeared on Kushan coins as a running man with disheveled hair, wings and a drape blown by the wind that he is hold-

ing with both hands above his head (Fig. 1). His name is clearly legible in Bactrian alphabet (derived from Greek) as OAD0/Vado although sometimes it is clearly written ANEMOC/Anemos (Shenkar, 2014. P. 153).

This phenomenon interested other Bactrian deities such as Helios/Mithra and Selene/Mah although, in some other cases, both name and iconography completely reflected those of Greek gods. The demi-god HPAKIAO/Heracles who appeared on Kushan coins is an eloquent occurrence (Abdullaev, 2007. P. 548-549). The situation is actually more complicated because Kushan artists adopted the iconography of Artemis to represent the Avestan rain god Tishtrya (Bactrian TEIPO) and depicted the Zoroastrian goddess protector of animals APOOACΠO/Druvaspa as a bearded man wearing Greek garments (Shenkar, 2014. P. 96-97, 149). In Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian coins prevailed a problematic repre-



Fig. 1. The Bactrian wind god Anemos on a Kushan coin of Kanishka (the British Museum). Sketch by author
Бактрийский бог ветра Анемос на кушанской монете Канишки (Британский музей). Рисунок автора

sentation of the wind deity (called OEPH/Vesho) whose iconography was the same of Shiva holding a trident and accompanied by the bull (*Taasob*, 2020).

As it is well known, wind deities with re-adapted Greek elements appeared in Buddhist art along the so-called Silk Road. Kyzyl painted Buddhist caves probably represent the most interesting example (*Zhu*, 2006. P. 698-704). Li Sifei recently argued in an interesting forthcoming article that the wind god of Chinese traditional religion was sometimes represented as a human being blowing the wind from an instrument that looked like a bugle. His name was Fengbo and he appeared quite often on Han funerary reliefs (Fig. 2). When Sogdian immigrants started to settle down in China in big number during the sixth century CE, they introduced (or, possibly, re-introduced) their own wind deity Weshparkar whose iconography maybe called the attention of Chinese artists. Weshparkar preserved some Greek characteristics such as the drape blown by the wind and the wind horn (*Li*, 2023). Sogdian artists possibly adopted both elements through Kushan coinage. Moreover, they could have hypothetically mixed some elements of the iconography of Fengbo such as the bugle with the horn of the Sogdian wind god Weshparkar.



Fig. 2. The Chinese wind god Fengbo on a Han funerary relief. After: *Zhu*, 2006. Fig. 20
Китайский бог ветра Фенгбо на ханьском погребальном рельефе (*Zhu*, 2006. Fig. 20)

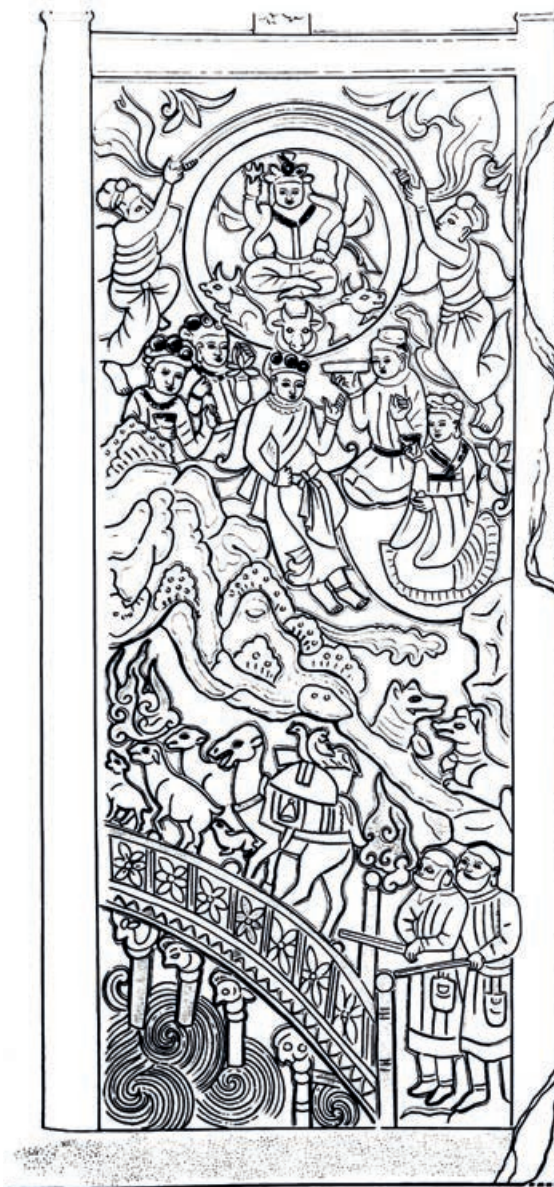


Fig. 3. The Sogdian wind god Weshparkar on the Shi Jun/Wirkak funerary monument (Shaanxi History Museum. Xi'an). After: *Grenet et al.*, 2004. Fig. 3
Согдийский бог ветра Вешпаркар из гробницы Ши Цзюня (Виркака) (Музей истории Шэньси, Сиань) (*Grenet et al.*, 2004. Fig. 3)

Li Sifei focused specifically on the reliefs embellishing the "sarcophagus" that belonged to Shi Jun/Wirkak, a powerful Sogdian official who died in 580 in the region of the ancient capital Chang'an (modern Xi'an). The Chinese scholar identified two representations of Weshparkar on that funerary monument: a quite explicit image that experts had already recognized because of the Shivaite-rooted iconography of the Sogdian wind god (Fig. 3) (*Grenet et al.*, 2004. P. 281-282) and another one previously unnoticed among the reliefs on the lintel of the door just before the funerary chamber. In this second occurrence, the figure hypothetically identified by Li Sifei as Weshparkar presents a halo behind his head and a horn in one hand (Fig. 4). This object does not look like a music instrument nor a drinking horn (rhyton) but an attribute of that deity whose torso appears



Fig. 4. The Sogdian wind god Weshparkar on the Shi Jun/Wirkak funerary monument (Shaanxi History Museum. Xi'an). After: *Yang*, 2004. Fig. 205
Согдийский бог ветра Вешпаркар из гробницы Ши Цзюня (Виркака) (Музей истории Шэньси, Сиань) (*Yang*, 2004. Fig. 205)

among vegetal elements as opposed to a small group of demonic creatures on the other side of the relief (*Yang*, 2014. Fig. 192, 193, 205).

No inscription appeared together with deities on funerary monuments of important Sogdians found in China (also called "Sino-Sogdian" monuments). On the contrary, divine names appeared in very few cases on Sogdian paintings. One eighth century painting from Penjikent room 1/sector XXII presents an image of three-headed and multi-armed Shiva that is certainly identifiable with Weshparkar because of the Sogdian inscription *wšpr(kr)* on his leg. Also in this painting, among Weshparkar's attributes, there is a horn that he is approaching to his left head in order to blow the wind through it (Fig. 5) (*Belenitskii, Marshak*, 1981. P. 29-30). According to M. Shenkar (2014. P. 157), that attribute could also be a war horn. As Markus Mode kindly pointed at me in a private communication, it is very probable that also the right head of Weshparkar had a horn close



Fig. 5. The Sogdian wind god Weshparkar on a painting from Penjikent room 1/sector XXII (the State Hermitage Museum). After: *Belenitskii, Marshak*, 1981. Fig. 5
Согдийский бог ветра Вешпаркар на росписях из помещения 1/сектор XXII в Пенджикенте (Государственный Эрмитаж) (*Belenitskii, Marshak*, 1981. Fig. 5)



Fig. 6. A haloed figure of a man holding a drape with his right hand, Varakhasha, Bukhara (Tashkent History Museum). After: *Shishkin*, 1963. Fig. 108
Фигура человека, окруженного ореолом, держащего драпировку из ткани в правой руке, Варахша, Бухара (Ташкентский исторический музей) (*Shishkin*, 1963. Fig. 108)

to the mouth. Unfortunately, that part of the painting is very fragmentary but it is clear that there was probably an elongated white object. The wind horn did not appear in the iconography of Bactrian Vado, Anemos nor Vesho but got popularity in Sogdian motherland and the Sogdian colonies in China. It is not an easy task to establish how and when Sogdian artists decided to include a wind horn in the iconography of Weshparkar although one could imagine that Classical elements already adopted in Greco-Bactrian or Gandharan art played a relevant role in this process.

Some other representations of Weshparkar in Sogdian art can be found in terracotta figurines and at least one seal impression from Kafir Kala (*Compareti*, 2013. P. 128-134). Non-epigraphic terracotta images are all identifiable because of the representation of that deity with three heads and a trident in one of his hands (*Raspopova, Shishkina*, 1999. Pl. 30.19). One fragmentary stucco from the royal residence at Varakhsha (Bukhara) presents a deity with a rayed halo and a drape above his head not perfectly preserved (*Shishkin*, 1963. P. 184-185). It is however clear that he was holding that drape with his right hand (Fig. 6). If the identification of the Zoroastrian wind god as a person holding a drape above his head in the Varakhsha stuccoes could be considered a convincing one, there could be then the possibility that other representations of Central Asian divinities included also Vayu possibly with only one head and without any wind horn.

Recent archaeological excavations at the Chorasmian site of Akchakhan Kala (Karakalpakistan Autonomous Region, Uzbekistan) gave as a result the finding of very interesting but fragmentary paintings that include three colossal deities. At least one of them is holding a drape above his head exactly like in the case of Greek wind deities (Fig. 7). It should not be ruled out the possibility that the attitude of that colossal deity represents a re-elaboration of Classical themes originally used to point at wind gods. Experts of Iranian religious iconographies preferred to identify the colossal figures in Chorasmian paintings with other Avestan deities (*Grenet*, 2015).

Sogdian artists continued to appreciate Classical elements until the early Islamic period. As T. Mktrichev

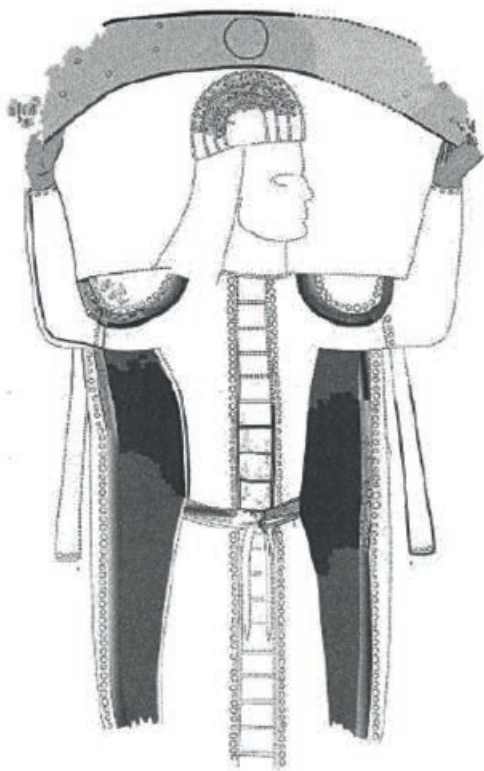


Fig. 7. A deity holding a drape above his head from the Chorasmian site of Akchakhan Kala, Uzbekistan. After: Grenet, 2015. Fig. 5

Божество, держащее над головой драпировку из ткани из хорезмийского городища Акчахан-Кала, Узбекистан (Grenet, 2015. Fig. 5)

and A. Naymark argued, Sogdians imported Byzantine caskets in ivory or silver embellished with representations of Christian saints or even pagan deities under arches and reproduced them on their terracotta ossuaries after substituting those personages with their own deities (Mkrtichev, Naymark, 1991). Possibly, Sogdians not only imported but also exported this kind of objects (ivories, silver vessels, and textiles) or favored their transportation into the Byzantine Empire. Trade of luxury goods between Constantinople and Sogdiana along the so-called “Silk Road” network continued even after the Arab invasion and Islamization of Central Asia (Compareti, 2004). This phenomenon could explain the presence of typical Chinese motifs such as the fenghuang bird (sometimes translated as phoenix) on ninth–tenth century Byzantine luxury objects (Walker, 2008).

Scholars have been arguing about the identification of local deities on Sogdian ossuaries since the end of the last century (Grenet, 1986; Mkrtichev, Naymark, 1991). There are unfortunately no images of a deity blowing a horn that could be identified with Weshparkar on Sogdian terracotta ossuaries. Pagan gods and mythological scenes appeared quite frequently in early Christian art and during the so-called “Classical revival” that invested the Christian world in the sixth century CE. Symbolic images of the months and seasonal labors represented a very popular subject to be found among the sculptural or painted decorations of European medieval churches, buildings, and illustrated manuscripts. This kind of im-



Fig. 8. Early twelfth century floor mosaic from San Savino church, Piacenza, Italy. After: Pressouyre, 1965. Fig. 403
Напольная мозаика начала XII в. из церкви Сан Савино, Пьяченца, Италия (Pressouyre, 1965. Fig. 403)

ages appeared very often together with the zodiac and symbolic representations of the planets in the frame of Christian culture and concepts (Castiñeiras González, 1997). As it is obvious to expect, astronomical–astrological figures presented sometimes elements that were rooted in Classical art. In fact, Roman artists had represented quite often the personifications of months as symbolic human figures or farmers working in the fields according to specific months or seasons (Ábad Casal, 1990). Christians accepted many pagan elements such as in the case of the so-called “planetary week”. As it is well known, this system associated to every day of the week the name of a Classical deity (Seznec, 1953. P. 43).

Among the symbolic representations of the months in some parts of medieval Europe, the personification of March stands apart. The name of this month is clearly connected with the Roman god of war Mars who was assimilated to Greek Ares. For this reason, artists usually represented him as a warrior. This is the common iconography for March in some of the most ancient medieval representations of the months that are concentrated in northern Italy, France, and Spain. It is unfortunately not possible to reconstruct every phase of the iconographical evolution of the figures of the months in Italian medieval art and especially the one related to March. In two early twelfth century floor mosaics from the Italian churches of San Savino in Piacenza (Fig. 8) and San Michele Maggiore in Pavia (Fig. 9), March was symbolically depicted as a man in medieval garb with one or two horns that he is approaching to his mouth. This kind of image is usually called in Latin *Marcius Cornator* (Pressouyre, 1965). In later representations, March was usually dressed as a warrior with disheveled hair. Scholars had some problems to explain the horn or the double horns of March. Most likely, this object is a wind horn typical of Boreas that medieval artists decided to attribute to March because this is a windy month as his disheveled hair seems to suggest.

The Classical iconography of Mars included sometimes an armor and weapons but no wind horns (Ábad



Fig. 9. Early twelfth century floor mosaic from San Michele Maggiore church, Pavia, Italy.
After: *Pressouyre*, 1965. Fig. 405

Напольная мозаика начала XII в. из церкви Сан-Микеле Маджоре, Павия, Италия (*Pressouyre*, 1965. Fig. 405)

Casal, 1990). This could be therefore considered a detail that medieval artists borrowed from the iconography of Classical wind deities. Byzantine artists continued to represent the personifications of the winds as human figures blowing into horns according to formulae rooted in Classical art (Fig. 10) (*Ainalov*, 1961. P. 276-277). Such wind horns do not seem to be connected to typical subjects of Jewish art either (shofar or ram's horn) as observed in floor mosaics of Byzantine period Israeli/Palestinian synagogues (*Ovadia R., Ovadia A.*, 1987. P. 33, 63, 72-73, 101). Byzantine miniatures had a strong influence on Islamic book illustrations that are quite rare before the Ilkhanid period (1256-1335). Since

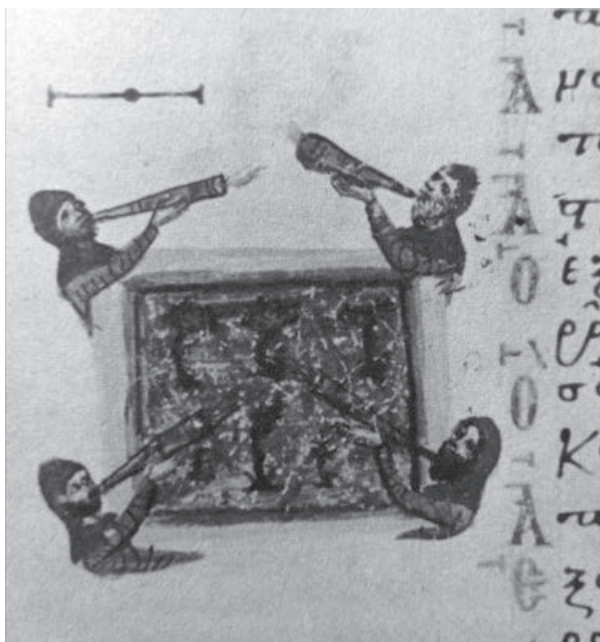


Fig. 10. Byzantine book illustration, Barberini Psalter no. 372.
After: *Ainalov*, 1961. Fig. 126
Византийская книжная иллюстрация, Псалтирь Барберини № 372 (*Ainalov*, 1961. Fig. 126)



Fig. 11. Early Ilkhanid bronze candlestick (Топкапи Museum, Istanbul, n. 2628).
After: *Rice*, 1954. Pl. 18-b

Бронзовый подсвечник эпохи ранних Ильханидов (Музей Топкапи, Стамбул, №2628) (*Rice*, 1954. Pl. 18-b)

Marcus Cornator did not appear in Byzantine illustrated texts, it seems obvious to look at Islamic art in order to find some more evidence.

Astronomical-astrological treaties had always intrigued the European sovereigns in the West as well as the Caliphs in the East. It is not by chance that the most ancient illustrated Islamic manuscript is the early eleventh century Suwar al-Kawakib al-Thabitah "Book of the Fixed Stars" by 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Umar al-Sufi (*Wellesz*, 1959). This manuscript presents several Classical deities and heroes connected to the constellations. There are however no personifications of the months. Representations of the zodiac signs, seasonal labors, planets, etc. appeared on Islamic metal objects that are now part of museum and private collections around the world. On an early Ilkhanid bronze candlestick in the Topkapi Museum, Istanbul (n. 2628), the image of a person riding an animal looking like a gazelle or zebu appears while approaching a horn to his mouth inside a circular frame (Fig. 11). It is not completely clear who this person is although at least one scholar associated him to the personifications of the months in Islamic art (*Rice*, 1954. P. 35). Representations of important people drinking from a cup or even a rhyton was very common in Islamic arts although it seems very strange that somebody could drink while riding an animal. An identification with a music instrument or a tool similar to a wind horn should not be then excluded.

It is not possible to propose any clear origin for this kind of representations. Christian and Muslim artists definitely knew each other's work and, possibly, they all had some memories about more ancient Classical iconographies. Muslims could have inherited some elements from Central Asian traditions as Anna Caiozzo has proposed for a unique Persian astrological manuscript kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Supplément Persan 332) whose illustrations do not seem rooted in Persian nor Indian art (Caiozzo, 2003).

The horn of the Sogdian wind god Weshparkar was just a modification of the attribute of Greek wind deities that Alexander the Great imported after the invasion of the Persian Empire several centuries earlier. Sogdian artists possibly knew Fengbo's ancient iconography and they could have hypothetically integrated it when they represented Weshparkar on Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments. Muslims had probably the opportunity to observe eighth century specimens of Sogdian paintings that included also representations of local deities.

There was no horn among the attributes of the Sogdian god of war and victory Washaghñ who corresponded to Avestan Verethraghna and Greco-Roman Ares/Mars. Archaeologist identified some images of this god but they are all very fragmentary. There could have been a change of iconography for this god in Sogdian art. In fact, around the fifth-sixth century Washaghñ appeared as standing man with a severed human head in one of his hands (Marshak, Raspopova, 1994. P. 194-195). This kind of iconography is quite common in Islamic book illustrations depicting the planet Mars (Carboni, 1997. P. 17). According to B. Marshak, Washaghñ started to appear as a man sitting on a camel in some early eighth century paintings and in terracotta statuettes from Penjikent (Marshak, 2000). The god sitting on the camel usually held a fire altar or a dish with a small image of a camel in one of his hands and he appeared very often together with a goddess sitting on a throne shaped as a ram (Fig. 12). Scholars did not find a definitive identification for the divine couple sitting on a camel and a ram. Some useful elements could be found in ancient Near Eastern art.

Syro-Mesopotamian elements were very influential in pre-Islamic Sogdian art. It is obvious to consider Persia as the more probable intermediary in this phenomenon of iconographic transfer between Mesopotamia and Central Asia. One scholar studied Sasanian seals embellished with a camel that belonged to Zoroastrian priests. In his opinion, the camel should be associated to the god of war and victory Bahram, Avestan Verethraghna (Jakubiak, 2011). Even though it is not clear which role the Parthian Arsacids and the Sasanians had in this process of iconographical transfer, it is worth observing that other kingdoms that had very tight relations with pre-Islamic Persia kept in high esteem astrology-astronomy and worshiped deities that corresponded to Greco-Roman gods. The god who corresponded to Ares in Palmyra was called Arsu. He was represented as a warrior riding a dromedary or camel. Arsu was equated to Ares at a popular level because their names were very similar. However, Arsu could be identified with Mercury as well (Linant de Bellefonds, 1984). In any case, it is worth observing that a Palmyrean god who could be

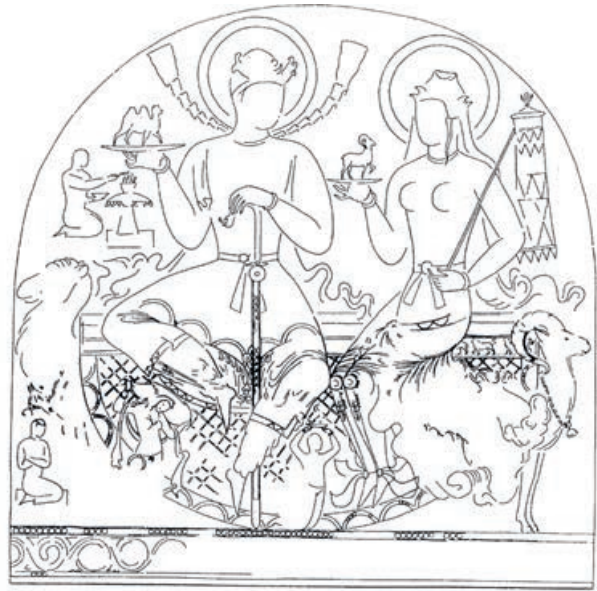


Fig. 12. Divine couple from a Sogdian painting in Penjikent room 28, sector XXV, southern wall (the State Hermitage Museum). After: Shenkar, 2014. Fig. 130

Божественная пара с согдийской росписи в Пенджикенте, помещение 28, сектор XXV, южная стена (Государственный Эрмитаж) (Shenkar, 2014. Fig. 130)

associated with Ares and, possibly, the planet Mars had as a symbolic animal the camel. Unfortunately, Persian pre-Islamic astronomical-astrological texts did not survive. It is worth observing that, in the text called *Picatrix* (actually an early eleventh century translation of the Arab treatise *Ghayat al'hakim*), in the chapter on the parts of the planets which are present in plants, animals, and metals, there is some interesting reference to camels. In fact, the Muslim author wrote that Mars had some influence on "red camels and all the animals with big, red teeth" (Rossi, 1999, P. 124).

If the identification of the god on the camel with Washaghñ is correct then the goddess sitting on a ram could be Anahita. She, in fact, corresponded to the planet Venus in the Zoroastrian tradition. As it is well known, Aphrodite/Venus formed a couple with Ares/Mars in Classical mythology. Aphrodite/Venus had the swan or dove as her symbolic animal although, as Aphrodite Pandemos she could be represented as a woman riding a ram or goat (Simon, 1969. P. 251-253). Actually, more than one goddess whose symbolic animal was the goat/ram existed in the Near Eastern/Mesopotamian region. The Bible too mentioned a goddess called Asherah in a depreciative way. Her name was etymologically connected to Babylonian Ishtar and Phoenician Astarte/Ashtoreth. Ancient Greeks identified these Semitic deities with Aphrodite (Budin, 2004). Asherah was possibly worshipped in the ancient Syro-Palestinian region in the shape of a lion, tree, ram, or even a combination of these symbolic elements. Some eighth century BC ancient Hebrew inscriptions on terracotta shards from the excavations of Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinai, Egypt) mentioned Asherah together with Yahweh and images of a tree, a lion and confronted rams (Scham, 2002; Stuckey, 2002; Shanks, 2012).

The only association between the Zoroastrian god of war and winds occurred in an Armenian written source. The Christian author Movses Khorenac'i described in his "History of Armenia" [III.8] that Khosrow Kotak (ca. 330–339) decided to move the Armenian capital and its court from Artashat to Dvin. The population of Artashat did not complain much because "the sun was in conjunction with Ares [Mars] and winds transported burning, polluted and fetid air". Such an information is not very clear and it could be considered one of the first references about astronomy–astrology in an Armenian text (*Mahé*, 1993. P. 256, 389). The connection between winds and Mars is probably because Mars actually is a windy month. Armenian nobles had accepted Christianity just few years before the reign of Khosrow Kotak so it should not be ruled out that Movses Khorenac'i was still referring to pre-Christian beliefs. That same Armenian author had described the local god of war Vahagn (Avestan Vere-thraghna) as a young man with burning hair and beard whose eyes were suns [I.31]. Only the connection with fire seems to be clear.

For sure, every iconographical tradition (Classical, Christian, Islamic, Zoroastrian, and traditional Chinese) included an attribute looking like a horn for wind deities. There was therefore nothing strange even for hypothetical Arab observers who had the occasion to visit Sogdian houses or temples embellished with the image of Weshparkar since, in all probability, they could have been used to this kind of Classical iconography in pre-Islamic Arabia before the invasion of Persia and Central Asia.

For this reason, the bronze basin of the Topkapi Museum could have included in its repertoire even the image of a man blowing a wind horn according to more general iconographic formulae to represent symbolically a windy month. Metal objects like this or illustrated manuscripts could have arrived in medieval Europe and facilitated the appearance of iconographical elements that, in any case, had Greco-Roman roots. There is however a big gap between their representations in Classical art and their reappearance in European Middle Ages. Most likely, the symbolic representations of the months and seasonal labors re-emerged in medieval Europe because Muslim artists continued to depict them according to different traditions that, in any case, included an originally unusual wind horn for the pre-Christian and pre-Islamic god of war.

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