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The So-Called “*Fravašis*” and the “Heaven and Hell” Paintings, and the Cult of Nana in Panjikent¹

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the well-known painting from the outer courtyard of Temple II in Panjikent, which has been unanimously identified as depicting a group of *fravašis*. It argues that the painting should rather be interpreted as a ritual procession of high-ranking Sogdian women carrying symbols and attributes of Nana, the supreme goddess of Panjikent, who was worshipped in this temple. In addition, it suggests that the two structures from the painting from Area XXV, Room 12 in Panjikent are not a unique depiction of the gates of Heaven and Hell, as they have been interpreted since publication, but are rather a schematic representation of two Sogdian temples, dedicated to Nana and her guardian, Vrēšman.

KEYWORDS

Sogdian art; Nana; Central Asia; Panjikent; *fravaši*

The fragment of painting (1 × 1 m) on a blue background found in 1980 in the south-eastern corner of the outer courtyard of Temple II in Panjikent, is one of the most aesthetically refined and often reproduced examples of Sogdian art.² It depicts a group of women in richly decorated garments carrying banners and oblong objects with zoomorphic finials (Figures 1 and 2).³ According to Boris Marshak, there were at least seven such figures.⁴ In the final publication of the Panjikent temples, Valentin Shkoda speaks about “no less than six” characters.⁵ On the fragment currently exhibited at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, four relatively well-preserved figures and parts of two additional characters on either side can be seen. Since all preserved figures face one direction (left), it seems that they were part of a procession, which probably included additional figures that were not preserved. The painting is dated to the end of the seventh-beginning of the eighth century CE.

This group of women was identified as *fravašis* by the excavators, and this interpretation has since been unanimously accepted by specialists.⁶ In what follows, I shall attempt to show that this identification is untenable and suggest that this group should rather be interpreted as a ritual procession of high-ranking Sogdian women carrying symbols of Nana, the supreme goddess and the “Lady” of Panjikent, who was worshipped in Temple II in the city. In addition, I shall discuss the so-called

“Heaven and Hell” painting from Area XXV, Room 12, in Panjikent and propose that instead of being a unique depiction of the gates of Heaven and Hell, as it has been interpreted since publication, it is rather a schematic representation of two Sogdian temples, dedicated to Nana and her guardian, Vrēšman.

The “*Fravašis*” Painting from Temple II

The identification of this group of women as *fravašis* is based on several considerations: 1) the perception of the *fravašis* in the Zoroastrian texts as flying, female guardian-warriors; 2) the reliance on Yt. 13.37, where the *fravašis* are described as “a numerous army, girded with weapons, with upraised banners”;⁷ 3) the interpretation of the zoomorphic oblong objects as “maces”, i.e. actual weapons. I shall discuss all these points, starting with the elements of the painting itself.

All the women on the painting seem to have similar jewellery and hairstyle. Boris Marshak has correctly observed that they do not carry any individual attributes typical of gods in Sogdian art.⁸ They are also entirely devoid of such essential divine Sogdian attributes as a halo, diadems with streaming ends and tongues of flame rising from the shoulders. However, despite Marshak’s description of the women wearing “crowns”,⁹ in fact only two of them do. The first figure from the left



Figure 1. The painting from the south-eastern corner of the outer courtyard of Temple II in Panjikent. After Marshak, *Iskusstvo Sogda*, 24.



Figure 2. The painting from the south-eastern corner of the outer courtyard of Temple II in Panjikent (detail). Photo by Andrei Omel'chenko.

has the most sumptuous headdress, made of two solid golden bands, and a string of pearls above, topped with three symmetrically placed crescent moons. The next woman, second from the left, seems to wear a simple double headband without any additional decorations or elements. The third woman, with her head depicted in profile, has a bun secured with two gilded bands, also without any additional elements. Only part of the face and a small fragment of the headdress is preserved in the last, fourth figure. Fortunately, it is enough to distinguish a golden band and an edge of a crescent moon. It appears beyond doubt that this woman also wore a triple crescent crown, like the first woman from the left. Such a triple-crescent “crown” is first attested on the coins of the Alkhan Huns in Tokhāristān and Gandhara in the fifth century.¹⁰ It is also found on terracotta figurines from northern Tokhāristān attributed by Jangar Il’yasov to the Hephtalites, in Buddhist art between the fifth and seventh centuries (e.g. Bamian), on the reliefs of the Sino-Sogdian tombs and in Buddhist art of China.¹¹ In Sogdiana, an identical crown with three crescents is attested on the coins of Chach in the seventh-eighth centuries.¹² A crown with three crescents, but with a sun-disk inside them, is worn by one of the female dancers depicted on the lid of the Mulla Kurgan ossuary.¹³ These dancers carry branches and sceptres (but not zoomorphic ones) and are engaged in what is most probably a ritual dance. It seems, therefore, that the triple-crescent type of crown was introduced to Sogdiana in the Hephtalite period from the south,¹⁴ but evidence for its employment by Sogdian rulers is rather limited, and in Panjikent it is never found with royal or divine images. Typical Sogdian royal or divine crowns usually include stylised wings and are tall and composite. Based on the “*fravašis* painting” and on the Mulla Kurgan ossuary, we may suggest that such triple-crescent headdresses could have been used by high-ranking women from the ruling elites of the Sogdian civic communities,¹⁵ perhaps especially in cultic contexts. The symbolism of the crescent moon will be discussed below in relation to the banners.

In their left hands, all the women hold banners with different finials. These are, from left to right, 1) a bird; 2) a crescent moon; 3) three pellets topped by a crescent; 4) another bird with a pearl in its beak. That these are cultic and not battle standards is beyond doubt, since they correspond to the banners usually held by gods in Panjikent paintings or set up vertically next to buildings or divine thrones.¹⁶ Battle standards are of an essentially different shape and are attached to the spears of mounted warriors, as can be clearly seen, for example, in the banners carried by the retinue of Rostam from

the “Blue Hall” or on the silver plate from Bol’shaya Anikova.¹⁷ It is, however, important to note that such cultic standards are not an exclusively divine attribute in Sogdian art. For example, we encounter similar banners on paintings from Panjikent XXVI/3, which depict a procession of characters dressed in animal costumes, dancers and musicians.¹⁸ Although the preservation of these paintings is fragmentary and allows for more than one reconstruction variant, it is possible that at least one banner is carried in the procession by an ordinary participant.¹⁹ Based on the fact that some participants also carry a golden divine statue in a special litter,²⁰ it seems that this is a cultic procession. The use of such banners in ritual processions provides a first important clue for the interpretation of the “*fravašis*” painting.

Cultic standards in the form of a pole topped with a divine symbol (sometimes astral or zoomorphic) are known in the ancient Near East from the third millennium BCE.²¹ They are attested in northern Mesopotamia and Syria as late as the Parthian period, particularly in Hatra, where they functioned as cultic objects in their own right,²² and were also often depicted next to a deity.²³ Because they were portable, cultic standards were often exhibited outside the temples as divine symbols,²⁴ and as such were particularly suitable for cultic processions. Albert De Jong has also drawn attention to the importance of banners in the cult of the Mandaeans and mountainous Georgians, convincingly suggesting that it is derived from a similar ancient Iranian custom.²⁵ Banners were apparently also one of the divine attributes in Sasanian Iran, since the first god (“prince”) that Kartir’s double encounters during his journey to Heaven holds a banner.²⁶

Two out of four preserved banner-finials depict birds. The left bird resembles a dove or a gull, and the second bird is perhaps a duck. A very similar standard (but consisting only of a pole, without a banner) with a dove is held by Nana on the eastern wall of the “Small Hall” at Shahrīstan (Figure 3).²⁷ A pole topped with a bird is depicted in Nana’s right, lower hand on the Khirmantepa ossuary, too.²⁸ Therefore, we can safely assume that the bird standard in Sogdiana was associated with the goddess Nana.²⁹ The same is true also for the crescent moon, which has been an attribute of Nana in Central Asia since the Kushan period, when she was depicted wearing a diadem topped with a crescent (Figure 4).³⁰ In Sogdian art Nana is always represented holding the sun disk and the crescent moon.³¹

Also noteworthy are three pellets in the form of a triangle immediately below the crescent moon on the third banner from the left. This symbol is found on the coins



Figure 3. The goddess Nana from the eastern wall of the “Small Hall” at Shahristan. After Sokolovskij, *Monumental'naya zhivopis'*, Figure 92.

of Pars before the rise of the Sasanians and features prominently on the coins of the Sasanians themselves, depicted both on the obverse and on the reverse and sometimes decorating the royal garments and the *korymbos*. On late Sasanian coins, the pendant, or an earring on the royal bust on the obverse, are often depicted as three pellets.³² This motif also decorates the garment of Ohrmazd on the investiture relief in the Large Grotto at Tāq-i Bustān. In Central Asia, the three pellets are occasionally found on Kushan coins. As a distinctive divine attribute, they are held by the god MANAO-BATO on one coin type of Huvishka, and the same Kushan god is also depicted with an earring in the form of three pellets.³³ More important for our discussion is that the goddess Nana is often represented on Kushan coins with such earrings (Figure 4). The sceptre that Nana holds on Chorasmian silver vessels ends with triple pellets, and they are also incorporated in her crown (Figure 5).³⁴ Finally, Nana of Shahristan has two triangles formed of three pellets in her crown (Figure 3).³⁵ Therefore, we may suggest that in Sogdiana, too, this symbol, especially when combined with the crescent moon, was related to Nana. Its meaning and symbolism in various ancient Iranian cultures deserve a special study, although, given its frequent iconographic association with the star and the crescent moon (especially on coins), we can assume that the three pellets probably also had astral connotations. It is worth mentioning here a note by Martha Carter that these could be three stars related to the planet Venus,³⁶ and a recent study by Harry Falk linking the Kushan Nana with Venus.³⁷



Figure 4. Nana on a Kushan coin. Nomos AG - Auction 12, Lot 129.

In their left hands, all the women on the painting hold oblong, gilded objects ending with zoomorphic finials. These objects also exhibit important individual nuances. They have fish-like bodies, but three of them appear rather short, while the third object from the left has an additional, long, and narrow shaft attached to it. From left to right, their precise appearance is as follows: 1) a body covered with scales and the head of a snake or a turtle; 2) a body that looks like it is wrapped in strips of fabric and whose head resembles a canine, with a large ear; 3) a body covered with scales and the



Figure 5. Nana on a Chorasmian bowl from the British Museum (© Trustees of the British Museum).

head of a dog; 4) no scales, but the head is probably that of a fish.

Boris Marshak and Valentin Shkoda labelled these objects “sceptre-maces”.³⁸ However, as was correctly observed by Valentina Raspopova, these are ritual and not functional, battle maces,³⁹ or better simply “sceptres”. In addition to the “*fravašis*” painting, such sceptres are attested at least four times in Sogdian iconography. Two richly dressed male characters riding camels on the southern wall of the Afrasyab paintings hold zoomorphic sceptres, which according to Al’baum end with the head of an animal “resembling a crocodile” (Figure 6).⁴⁰ Their shape is identical to the short sceptres from the “*fravašis*” painting. A closer examination of the published drawings and of the paintings themselves kept at the Afrasyab Museum at Samarkand shows that these indeed seem to be dragon-like creatures with a pearl in their open mouths. The characters that carry them are probably high-ranking civic officials of the community of Samarkand, performing a ritual role in the ceremonial procession depicted on this wall. This is supported by the fact, that immediately behind them, two priests-magistrates are shown leading sacrificial animals.⁴¹ Coming back to Panjikent, sceptres with zoomorphic finials are also held by winged and crowned women standing on either side of the right structure from the so-called “Heaven and Hell” painting from XXV/12, which will be discussed in detail below.

All other certain depictions of zoomorphic sceptres in Sogdian iconography are related to the goddess Nana. She holds a golden sceptre with a finial in form of a winged lion on the eastern wall of the “Small Hall” at Shahrīstan (Figure 3).⁴² Another zoomorphic sceptre is carried by her on the recently discovered wooden panel from Kafir-Kala (Figure 7).⁴³ A short, massive object that Nana holds in her left, lower hand on the ossuary from Khirmantepa also closely resembles the abovementioned sceptres in shape, but it is impossible to distinguish its details.⁴⁴ Another possible depiction of such a zoomorphic sceptre is found on a terracotta plaque originating from Afrasyab and currently kept at the State Hermitage Museum.⁴⁵ It depicts an enthroned goddess flanked by two worshippers. In her raised right hand, the goddess holds an object that was recently described by Frantz Grenet as a “fish”.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the preservation of the terracotta and the poor quality of the original mould does not allow certain identification of this object.⁴⁷ The identity of the goddess is also not clear. She lacks the usual attributes of Nana. Putting this last, problematic example aside, it seems that zoomorphic sceptres were also associated with the goddess Nana, as already insightfully

suggested by Frantz Grenet in relation to the Kafir-Kala panel.⁴⁸

Let us now examine whether these female characters correspond to the description of the *fravašis* in the Zoroastrian texts. I shall not dwell here again on the methodological hazards of interpreting Sogdian iconography based on the preserved Zoroastrian texts in Avestan and Middle Persian, or on the question whether the cults practiced in Sogdiana in the first millennium CE can be described as “Zoroastrianism”.⁴⁹ I shall just compare the information contained in these texts with what appears on the painting.

Fravaši (Avestan *frauuāš-i-*, Middle Persian *frawahr*) is a pre-existing part (“pre-soul”) of an individual that came to be related to the veneration of the dead and ancestral spirits in the Zoroastrian tradition.⁵⁰ The Avestan word is grammatically female, but apart from that there are no indications in the Avestan or Middle Persian texts that *fravašis* were conceived of as women.⁵¹ They are never explicitly referred to as such in the texts. Their most basic characteristics in the Avesta are their warlike character and that they form a numerous army.⁵² They are described as wearing “bronze helmets, bronze weapons, and bronze breastplates as they fight in victorious battles on horses with shining saddle-gear, carrying drawn, lead-pointed arrows (?) for the striking of a thousand evil gods” (Yt. 13.45).⁵³ In the Middle Persian texts they are also described as guarding the sky as horsemen armed with spears (*Bundahišn* 6A.3).⁵⁴ In contrast, the women on the painting from Temple II are unarmed, unmounted and unarmoured. In the Avesta, *fravašis* are described not only as a numerous army with weapons, but also “with upraised banners” (Av. *uzgərəptō.drafsa-*, Yt.13.37). However, this attribute is not exclusive to the *fravašis* in the Avestan and Middle Persian texts, but is typical of the general description of armies ready for battle. Moreover, in most cases, the “raised” or “uplifted” banners are even associated with evil forces and especially with the apocalyptic enemies of Iran.⁵⁵ In any case, as was discussed above, the women on the painting carry cultic and not battle standards. Therefore, we may safely conclude that the Zoroastrian texts, even taken at face value, do not support the identification of the group of women from the outer courtyard of Temple II as *fravašis*.

The “Heaven and Hell” Painting from XXV/12

Let us now examine the only other example of a painting from Panjikent where zoomorphic sceptres appear. This painting was excavated in Room 12 of Area XXV between 1975 and 1978 (Figure 8).⁵⁶ This square



Figure 6. Two characters riding camels on the southern wall of the Afrasyab paintings. Colour copy. After Pugachenkova and Rempel', *Ocherki iskusstva*, 117.

(5.9 × 5.9 m) room is dated to 740–750 CE.⁵⁷ This is one of the most complex paintings in Sogdian religious iconography that contains several divine images, which, apart from the goddess Nana who dominates the composition, are not easily recognised. This painting,



Figure 7. Nana on a wooden panel from Kafir-Kala. Drawing by Munira Sultanova. After Grenet, “The Wooden Panels”, *Figure 11*.

labelled “Heaven and Hell”, deserves a separate, thorough study, and at present I shall limit myself to the discussion only of the two buildings in the lower register and the characters associated with them (*Figure 9*). Both structures, schematically represented as gateways, stand on a high, shared platform. The right structure, which according to the excavators represents “Heaven” is adorned with jewellery and precious fabrics and flanked by two banners, probably similar to those held by the women on the “*fravašis*” painting (*Figure 10*). Inside the vault of the gateway, the excavators reconstructed a crowned female bust, wearing two splendid necklaces (to which we shall return). According to the same reconstruction, a similar bust was also depicted in the upper part of the vault. Inside the vault, there was also an inner frame divided into small rectangles. The best-preserved rectangle in the right, lower part, shows a female bust in three-quarter looking inside the building. This woman wears an elaborate crown and has tongues of flames rising from her shoulders. Similar characters were probably also depicted in other rectangular “windows” of the frame. The excavators were also able to identify the depiction of a bell and a standard with a grape-vine, but they do not clarify their exact position on the painting.⁵⁸ The building is attended by two winged female figures holding animal-headed sceptres. In the published drawing, the animals seem canine or dragon-like. The female characters wear elaborate crowns topped by oval elements with borders of pearls, which correspond to the crown worn by a woman in the rectangular window

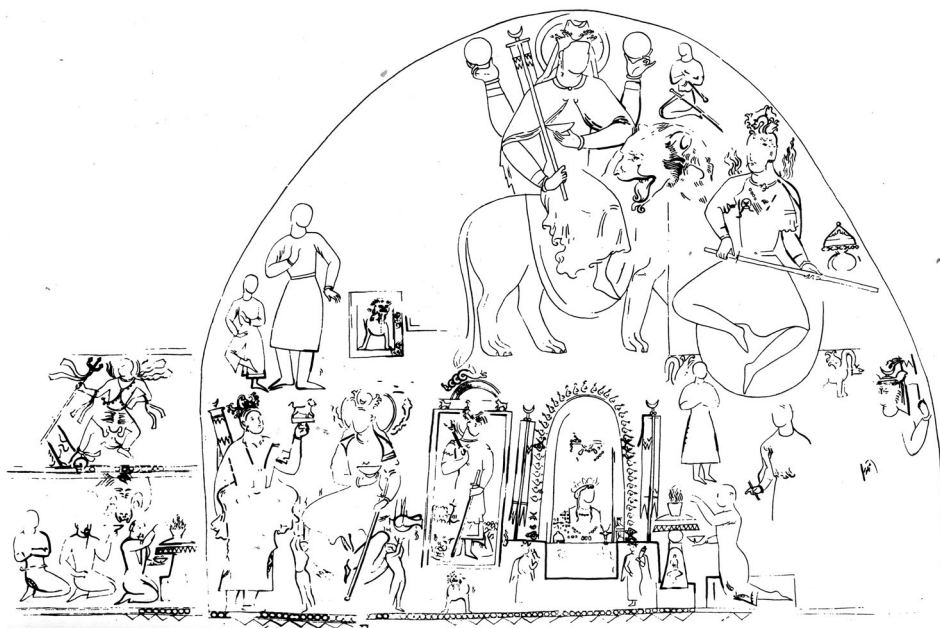


Figure 8. The “Heaven and Hell” painting from XXV/12, Panjikent. After Maršak and Raspopova, “Cultes communautes”, Figure 3.

inside the building. In contrast with the women from the “*fravašis*” painting, wings and crowns unambiguously denote their transcendental nature and place them in the realm of the divine. The women from the XXV/12 painting too were identified as *fravašis*.⁵⁹ The absence of arms and armour and the ill-founded perception of the *fravašis* as female was already discussed above. However, it seems that the evidence for *fravašis* having wings in the Avesta is also indirect at best. They seem to dwell in the summit of the sky (Yt. 13.42). They “swoop down... like an eagle” (Yt. 13.70). They are said to “fly” (e.g. Yt.10.100; Yt. 13.49), but this does not necessarily imply wings in the Avesta, since many Avestan gods and entities are also described as “flying”, for example Sraoša and Rašnu in the same Yt.10.100, and even “waters” and “plants” fly with them. It seems that such descriptions are metaphorical and reflect the belief of the ancient Iranians that their gods dwell in Heaven. It is important to note that *fravašis* are never explicitly described as having wings in the surviving texts.

Having said that, female figures often appear as appliques on Sogdian ossuaries and some of them, like one example from Afrasyab, has a sumptuous headdress and wings.⁶⁰ The funerary context makes it possible that they can represent *fravaši*, as indeed they are usually identified.⁶¹

The name of the *fravaši* is possibly attested only once in Sogdian personal names,⁶² and Bīrūnī seems to report the existence of the *Frawardīgān* festival in Sogdiana when the Sogdians mourned their ancestors.⁶³ Based

on this, I would not exclude the prospect that the winged guardians from XXV/12 may represent *fravašis*, but this is by no means the only possible interpretation of these characters.

The second structure, interpreted as “Hell”, is a rectangular gateway topped with an arch and flanked with tongues of rising flames (Figure 11). The preserved, lower part of the gate opening is filled with a scale-like pattern that depicts mountains in Sogdian art.⁶⁴ The entire gate is occupied by a standing male figure armed with a long sword and holding a battle-mace in his right hand.⁶⁵ He is nimbate, wears a typical Sogdian royal/divine crown with winged elements, and tongues of flames are rising from his shoulders. On the ground behind his legs, a recumbent, half-naked small figure is visible, which is apparently writhing in pain. Additional elements that were identified from this painting include a fragment uncovered from the fill, but originally belonging to the upper decoration of this arch, that shows a serpentine tale coiled in three loops,⁶⁶ and a head of a feline (cat) that according to the reconstruction was located in the upper part of the vault (Figure 12). A freeze of marching lions is reconstructed above the “Hell” gate and a lion is standing frontally in the pose of a guardian below the gate and in front of the platform. All these elements were understood by the excavators as being related to the demonic forces, and thus the interpretation of the building as “Hell”. Although they themselves admitted that the painting does not correspond to the descriptions of the Zoroastrian Heaven and Hell in the Middle Persian

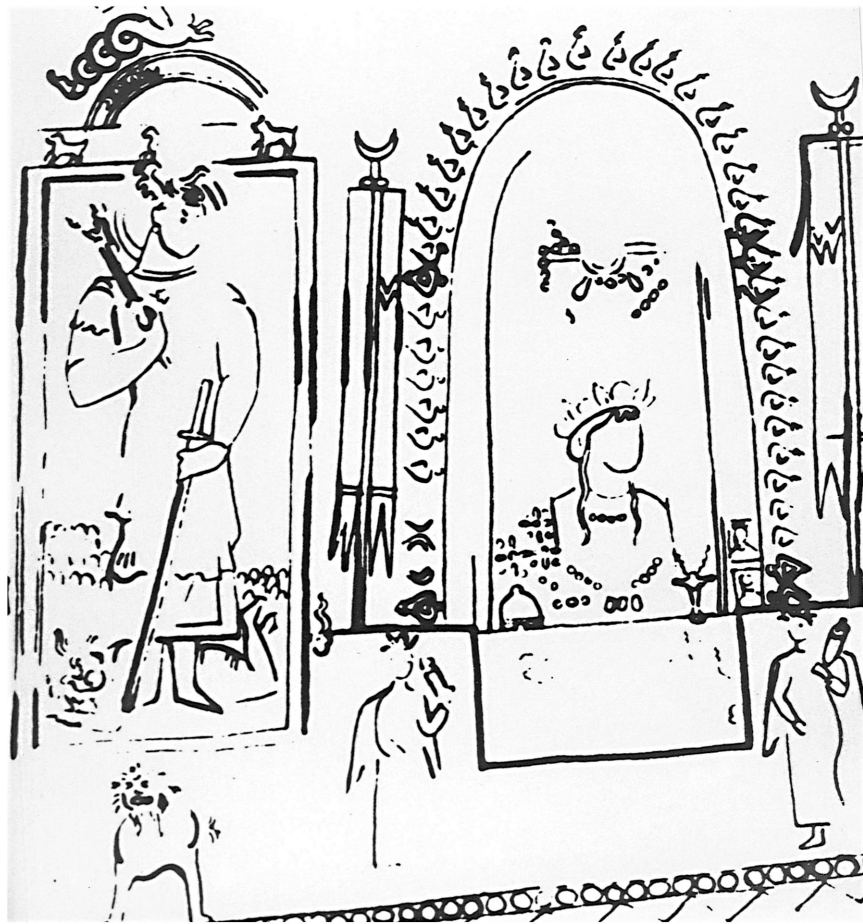


Figure 9. The "Heaven and Hell" painting, a detail. After Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", Figure 3.



Figure 10. The "Heaven" structure. After Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", Figure 6.

texts,⁶⁷ the interpretation of these two structures has been universally accepted.⁶⁸

There are a few depictions of Paradise in Sogdian art, on ossuaries (Sivaz, Yumalaktepa) and in Sino-Sogdian art (Wirkak sarcophagus). They are always characterised by the presence of musicians, which does not seem to be the case of the “Heaven” structure from XXV/12. It is also difficult to understand why the Sogdian painter would depict Paradise in the lower register and not in the upper part of the paintings, where it should belong. Moreover, in fact the vault of the niche already contained a representation of the “inhabitants of Heaven” according to these well-established Sogdian perceptions of Paradise – musicians, dancers and chariots (supposedly of astral deities).⁶⁹

The demonic interpretation of the extant characters and elements inside the “Hell” building also cannot be maintained. Tongues of flames are one of the common divine attributes in Sogdian paintings, and although demonic figures can also be depicted with them, they



Figure 11. The “Hell” structure. After Maršak and Raspopova, “Cultes communautes”, Figure 5.

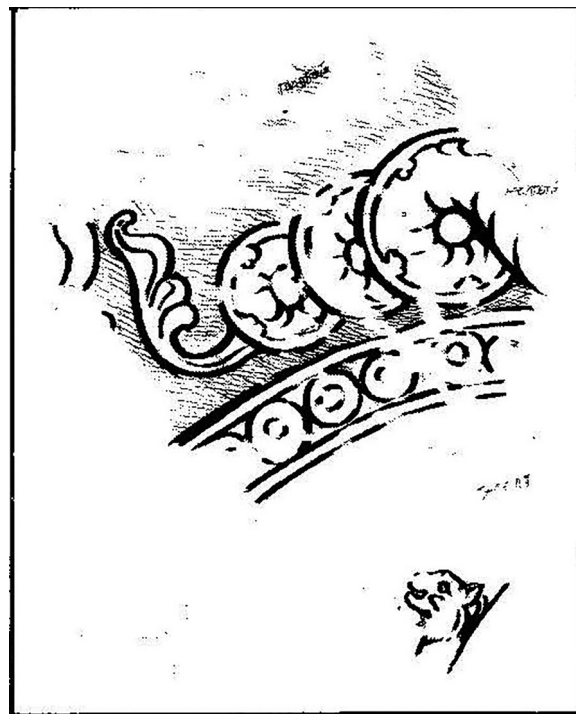


Figure 12. The serpentine tale from the upper part of the “Hell” structure. After Maršak and Raspopova, “Cultes communautes”, Figure 4.

bear no exclusively negative connotations. The serpentine, partially preserved creature was identified by the excavators as a “dragon”, apparently endowing it with an evil meaning, suitable for “Hell”. However, this snake-like body most probably belongs to a *ketos* or another tailed aquatic composite creature, like a Triton, for example. The *ketos* originated in the Greek art of the fifth century BCE, and became very popular in Central Asia and Gandhara.⁷⁰ Images of these sea-serpent creatures were often incorporated into architectural elements. One impressive example comes from the Peshawar Valley and is dated to the first-second centuries CE. It depicts an ichthyocentaur inscribed into a triangular panel, which perhaps originally decorated the side of a staircase.⁷¹ It is noteworthy that images of tritons were found in both Panjikent temples, in room 21 of Temple I and in the central *ayvān* in the western part of the outer courtyard of Temple II.⁷² Therefore, this aquatic creature has no relation to the demonic realm, but its possible associations with the two Panjikent temples are important, as we shall see below.

The lion in front of the platform was also interpreted as a demonic animal, suitable for the role of the guardian of “Hell”. In the Zoroastrian scriptures, the lion was indeed considered the animal of the Evil Spirit. However, outside of the priestly textual tradition the relation between lions and the demonic in ancient

Iranian culture is difficult to trace. Even in Sasanian Iran, besides being often depicted in the royal hunt the lion was, for example, the most popular animal represented on seals.⁷³ In Sogdiana, the lion was undoubtedly first of all the animal of Nana, the most venerated deity of the Sogdian pantheon. There seems to be only one example in Sogdian art that can point to an association between a lion and demonic powers, i.e. a lion-headed monster that Rostam defeats in the “Blue Hall”.⁷⁴ In fact, it suffices to turn our attention to some elements of the XXV/12 painting itself to see that the connection between the lion and demonic powers there cannot be maintained. In addition to the lion-guardian of “Hell”, lions appear in this painting at least four times; 1) a very similar lion in the same frontal posture is painted inside a gate or window in the upper register, too, to the left of Nana, 2) Nana herself, of course, is mounted on a lion, 3) a lesser god, depicted on the far left in the lower register, holds a plate with a small figure of a lion, 4) a frieze of marching lions above the “Hell” gate. It is beyond doubt that at least in the second and third cases, the lion cannot have any demonic connotations, and it is difficult to imagine that the lion would be depicted both as a benevolent animal of Nana and as a demonic beast in the same painting. Therefore, I think that the leonine representations in this painting are related to the great Sogdian goddess.

So, if the buildings from XXV/12 are not Heaven and Hell, what are they? To answer this question, I would like to draw attention to another painting excavated in 1998 in Temple II in Panjikent. This painting was partially reconstructed from numerous fragments originally belonging to the northern wall of the outer courtyard of the Temple (where the “*fravašis*” painting was also found) (Figure 13).⁷⁵ In fact, it has a very similar composition, being arranged according to the same principles as the painting from XXV/12. Both paintings are divided into two registers (although with no border separating between them). In both cases, the upper register is dominated by the goddess Nana on her lion. Next to her on the right, a lesser deity (XXV/12) or two lesser deities (Temple II) of the same proportions (1/2 compared to Nana) are depicted. The scene to the left of the goddess in both cases includes a figure of a lion. Similarities between the two paintings are also apparent in the lower register. In both cases, the left part seems to include standing lesser deities (although the painting from Temple II in this area is mainly reconstructed) and an enthroned (XXV/12) or reclining (Temple II) character. What is more important for our enquiry, is that in the right part of the lower register, on the painting from Temple II, in the part where XXV/

12 has the two structures of “Heaven” and “Hell”, Boris Marshak reconstructs a similar structure on a high podium depicted as a vaulted gateway flanked by staffed objects consisting of circles and placed on a stand, exactly like the “Heaven” from XXV/12, which is flanked by two banners. If this reconstruction is correct, we have a depiction of a single structure and not of two.⁷⁶ This has significant bearing on the interpretation of the two structures from XXV/12, since the excavators suggested that they represent Heaven and Hell not least based on the alleged “explicit juxtaposition” between the two buildings.⁷⁷

There is another element in the XXV/12 painting that contradicts the idea that the buildings were set against each other. Both structures share one high podium, unequivocally indicating that they are part of the same complex. Two structures, standing side by side on a platform, immediately evoke an association with the two Panjikent temples which were built in the fifth century CE and existed side by side, sharing the same compound, until the Arab conquest of the city in 722.⁷⁸ Moreover, it seems that such duality was not characteristic only of Panjikent, since two sanctuaries standing side by side also existed in other Sogdian cities, such as Erkurgan and Paykand.⁷⁹ As shown by Valentin Shkoda, the depictions of rectangular or oval arches on some Sogdian ossuaries with figures inside them are schematic representations of temple niches and thus, of the Sogdian temples (Figure 14).⁸⁰ The similarity between these “niches” on ossuaries and the structures on the discussed paintings is striking and therefore, I would like to suggest that both paintings indeed depict temples. This is supported by the fact that the figures of the warrior and of the recumbent demon inside the “Hell” gateway are painted in yellow, which conventionally represents gold in Sogdian paintings, and therefore these are not pictorial representations of Sogdian deities, but of actual golden statues,⁸¹ standing inside a temple.

The depiction of Nana in the abovementioned painting from Temple II, and particularly her jewellery, deserves special attention, since it possibly provides a clue for the interpretation of the “Heaven” temple from XXV/12. On the painting from Temple II Nana wears a peculiar crown decorated with almond-shaped projections. On her neck, we see a torque with a central round element and three suspended pendants in a teardrop shape. Immediately below, there is a necklace of roundels (pearls?) with three spade-shaped pendants. This is important, since on a small fragment preserved from the central female bust inside the gateway of “Heaven” (the rest is reconstructed), the torque and the necklace composed of roundels below it are clearly visible.



Figure 13. The painting from Temple II, Panjikent. After Marshak, Raspopova and Shkoda, *Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1998 godu*, Figure 70.

Both the torque and the necklace also have three pendants each, exactly like the jewellery of the goddess Nana from Temple II, although here the pendants are of slightly different shape. It is noteworthy that Nana as depicted on the eastern wall of the “Small Hall” in Shahrستان also wears a necklace of pearls with three pendants of similar shape and earrings with the same pendants, also three in number (Figure 3).⁸² Very similar, leaf-like pendants are attached to the folds of Nana’s garment on the partially preserved painting from Room 14 at Temple II.⁸³ Such necklaces with trefoil pendants are also sometimes carried by flying personifications of *farn* in Panjikent paintings.⁸⁴ It seems that this particular necklace with three pendants was associated with royalty in Byzantium and Sasanian Iran,⁸⁵ and as such was perhaps adopted in Panjikent for the supreme goddess, the “Lady” of the city, Nana. In addition, the spade-shaped elements topped with three dots that framed the vault of the “Heaven” bear resemblance to the elements of Nana’s crown on the painting from Temple II and it is tempting to speculate that they too were intended to refer to the goddess. The similarity

between the jewellery on the paintings is striking and I would like to suggest that it is the bust(s) of Nana that were in fact depicted inside the “Heaven” building.

Therefore, I suggest that the “Heaven” structure is in fact the temple of Nana, perhaps even more specifically Temple II in Panjikent, which was dedicated to the goddess. If this suggestion is sound, the “Hell” structure would be Temple I in Panjikent and was probably dedicated to the god with a mace whose statue is depicted inside the “Hell” building. In Panjikent this god is a companion of Nana and is depicted standing next to her on at least three occasions.⁸⁶ It is true that Nana is sometimes accompanied also by other deities,⁸⁷ as appropriate for the head of the pantheon, but this god with the mace standing before a demonic figure never appears without the goddess, which also further supports the interpretation of the “Heaven” building as the temple of Nana. It should be noted, however, that there are no finds from Temple I itself related to this god and the link between the sanctuaries in the painting and the Panjikent temples must for the moment remain speculative.⁸⁸



Figure 14. Ossuary fragment from Afrasyab. After Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, Figure 129.

Frantz Grenet has suggested identifying the armoured god with a mace as Vaiśravaṇa,⁸⁹ who was originally related to the Indian god of wealth Kubera, but achieved great popularity in Buddhism in the first millennium CE as the guardian of the northern direction and the leader of the Four Heavenly Kings (*lokapālas*). Vaiśravaṇa is attested in Sogdian Buddhist texts as Vrēšman (*br'yšmn*), where he is described as a god who wears armour.⁹⁰ Grenet admitted that Vaiśravaṇa never occupies the position of a guardian of Hell in any known work of art,⁹¹ and suggested linking him with Indo-Iranian Yama, who is associated with the realm of the dead.⁹² However, once the interpretation of the painting from XXV/12 as “Heaven and Hell” is refuted and the connection between Vaiśravaṇa and Hell is removed, the link with Yama also becomes irrelevant. Vaiśravaṇa and other *lokapālas* reside on the mount Sumeru. The representation of mountains inside the temple gate behind the god seems to indicate that the Sogdian Vrēšman kept this association in Sogdiana.

The abovementioned texts make it clear that Vrēšman was worshipped by the Sogdians without any additional identification with an Iranian deity. We should note, however, the position of Boris Marshak, who accepted that the iconography of this god “is akin to that of Buddhist Vaishravana”,⁹³ but still preferred to identify him as Zoroastrian Sraoša.⁹⁴ In Khotan, home to a large Sogdian community, Vaiśravaṇa was venerated as the protector of the state and the ancestor deity of the royal dynasty, and was sometimes depicted standing on a demon or dwarf.⁹⁵ This is the most

important iconographic link with the Panjikent god, which makes the identification put forward by Grenet convincing.⁹⁶ The worship of Vaiśravaṇa is recorded also in neighbouring Tokhāristān. The famous Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang mentions in the first half of the seventh century that the statue of Vaiśravaṇa as a guardian stood in the “Naw Bahār” Buddhist monastery of Balkh.⁹⁷ His presence in Panjikent, alongside the supreme goddess of the city Nana, demonstrates his popularity among the non-Buddhist Sogdians as does also the fact that Vrēšman is attested in Sogdian names, outside the Buddhist context.⁹⁸

Conclusions

I have attempted to show that the female characters in the painting from the outer courtyard of Temple II in Panjikent, who are usually interpreted as *fravašis*, are in fact a group of high-ranking Sogdian women carrying symbols and attributes of the goddess Nana in what appears to be a cultic procession.⁹⁹ Temple II was dedicated to the goddess Nana,¹⁰⁰ and the preserved paintings from the northern wall of the same outer courtyard depicted the goddess. Therefore, it is only natural that this painting, too, like many other examples of art from Temple II, is related to the cult of the goddess celebrated there.

I also suggest that the two structures depicted together in the lower register on the painting from XXV/12 in Panjikent are not Heaven and Hell, but are rather schematic renderings of temples. The right

temple was a sanctuary of Nana and the left one was dedicated to Vrēšman, who was associated with the great goddess. It is tempting to suggest that these two temples even specifically refer to the two Panjikent sanctuaries. If this suggestion is correct, the god worshipped in Temple I in Panjikent, whose identity remained unknown until now, was Vrēšman. In Panjikent, Nana was the most venerated deity, and at the beginning of the eighth century the city, exceptionally, even minted coins with a legend naming the goddess as the “Lady of Panjikent”.¹⁰¹ If Nana was the Lady and the embodiment of the city, veneration of Vrēšman as her guardian and thus the protector of the city, like in Khotan, makes perfect sense.¹⁰² This is probably how we should understand Vrēšman’s placement next to her (both in works of art and in the temple itself in Panjikent), fully armed and in a posture of battle alertness with his mace, ready to protect the goddess and her city.

Although the veneration of Nana in Panjikent was particularly pronounced, it seems that she was the major goddess of the entirety of Samarkand Sogdiana.¹⁰³ If the association of the zoomorphic sceptres with Nana is correct, it is possible to add another suggestion, i.e. that the structure toward which the ritual procession on the southern wall of the Afrasyab paintings is heading is in fact the temple of Nana, which existed in the city.¹⁰⁴ From the preserved fragments, the structure on the Afrasyab painting seems to correspond to the schematic depiction of Sogdian temples from Panjikent as a gateway on a high podium. Moreover, Matteo Compareti has already proposed that a partially preserved armoured figure standing next to the temple might represent Vrēšman.¹⁰⁵ These suggestions provide new evidence and advance our understanding of the cult of the goddess Nana, and further emphasise the primary place she occupied in the religious life of Panjikent and the Samarkand region.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Frantz Grenet and Pavel Lurje for their comments on the draft of this paper and Andrei Omel’chenko for sending me additional detailed pictures of the painting. All remaining errors are my own.
2. For example, it decorates the covers of Boris Marshak’s posthumous booklet, *Iskusstvo Sogda*, and of Valentin Shkoda’s final publication of the Panjikent temples, both published in 2009 by the State Hermitage Museum. The most important bibliography on this painting is Belenitskij, Marshak and Raspopova, “Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1980 g”, 260-262, Fig. 2; Zejmal’, *Drevnosti Tadzhikistana*, no. 566; Marshak, “Les fouilles de Pendjikent”, 297, Fig. 9; Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, 78-79.

3. This group was depicted in the lower register. Only bare feet have survived from the characters in the upper register.
4. Belenitskij, Marshak and Raspopova, “Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1980 g”, 261; Zejmal’, *Drevnosti Tadzhikistana*, no. 566.
5. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, 78-79.
6. For example, Compareti, “The Representation of Zoroastrian Divinities”, 146, no. 30; Grenet, “The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala”, 24.
7. Malandra, *The Frawardin Yašt*, 90.
8. Marshak, “Sogd V–VIII vv.”, 183.
9. For example, Zejmal’, *Drevnosti Tadzhikistana*, no. 566.
10. Vondrovec, *Coinage of the Iranian Huns*, 162.
11. See Il’yasov, “The Hephthalite Terracotta”; Kageyama, “The Winged Crown”.
12. Shagalov and Kuznetsov, *Katalog monet Chacha*, Group 6, Type 12; Group 7, Type 1.II,III.s.
13. <https://sogdians.si.edu/mulla-kurgan-ossuary/>
14. Kageyama, “The Winged Crown”, 11.
15. On the Sogdian civic communities, see Shenkar, “The Origin of the Sogdian Civic Communities”, and Grenet, “The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala”, 27-28.
16. Marshak and Raspopova, *Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 2000 godu*, 38.
17. Marshak, *Istoriya vostochnoj torevtiki*, Figs. 209-210.
18. Marshak and Raspopova, *Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 2000 godu*, 37-41.
19. *Ibid.*, Fig. 83.
20. Marshak and Raspopova, *Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 2002 godu*, 49-51.
21. See Dirven, “ΣΗΜΗΙΟΝ. SMY”, SIGNUM”.
22. *Ibid.*, 128.
23. *Ibid.*, 130.
24. *Ibid.*, 131.
25. De Jong, “Vexillologica Sacra”.
26. Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 183.
27. Sokolovskij, *Monumental’naya zhivopis’*, 51, Fig. 92.
28. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 125.
29. Images of birds were often incorporated into Achaemenian *fratarakā* and Kushan banners (but not Sasanian ones). See Shahbazi, “Deravš”. However, these were always raptors (perhaps a rooster in one case), and in Sogdian art bird standards were associated only with Nana.
30. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 119-121.
31. *Ibid.*, 121-126.
32. Alram and Gyselen, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum*, 259-260.
33. Sinisi, “On the Iconography and Identity”, Figs. 8.1; 8.3. It is noteworthy that this god is also depicted with a large crescent moon behind his shoulders. MANAO-BAFO is usually identified with the Zoroastrian Vohu Manah (Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 163-165; Sinisi, “On the Iconography and Identity”), but these attributes suggest that he was perhaps related to Nana.
34. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, Figs. 115–117.
35. Sokolovskij, *Monumental’naya zhivopis’*, 51, Fig. 92.
36. Carter, “An Indo-Iranian Silver Rhyton”, 316.

37. Falk, "Kushan Rule Granted by Nana".
38. Zejmal', *Drevnosti Tadzhikistana*, no. 566; Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, p. 79.
39. Raspopova, "Ethnos and Weaponry", 131.
40. Al'baum, *Zhivopis' Afrasiaba*, 52.
41. It is usually assumed that these sceptres were intended for killing sacrificial animals. For example, Compareti, *Samarkand*, 132; Grenet, "The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala", 24. Based on their yellow colour, the sceptres were gilded and therefore, they were ceremonial objects, exactly like the sceptres on the Panjikent painting, as observed by Raspopova (see n. 39).
42. Sokolovskij, *Monumental'naya zhivopis'*, 51, Fig. 92.
43. Grenet, "The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala", Fig. 11. On the drawing of the Kafir-Kala panel, which includes elements of reconstruction, a sceptre has a finial in the form of a fish's head with a pearl in its mouth. I had the opportunity to examine the Kafir-Kala panels in 2018 and in 2019, and I was unable to distinguish any details of the sceptre's finial. Nevertheless, given its shape, the identification of this object as a zoomorphic sceptre, similar to those carried by the women on the paintings, seems secure. I would like to thank Marina Reutova, the Director of the Restoration Laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, Samarkand, for allowing me to examine the panels.
44. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 125.
45. Kiy, Lurje and Samosyuk, *Expedition Silk Road*, no. 157.
46. Grenet, "The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala", 23.
47. Another exemplar of this terracotta from the Samarkand Museum is broken in this place, but Veronika Meshkeris describes the object that the goddess holds in her right hand as a fruit or a flower. Meshkeris, *Sogdijskaya terrakota*, 166-168.
48. Grenet, "The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala", 24
49. For discussions of this, see Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 6-9; Shenkar, "The Religion and the Pantheon".
50. On the *fravaši*, see Boyce, "Fravaši"; Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy*, 171-177; Malandra, *The Frawardīn Yašt*, 15-35.
51. Boyce, "The Absorption of the Fravašis", 32.
52. Malandra, *The Frawardīn Yašt*, 20-21.
53. Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 66.
54. Agostini and Thrope, "The Bundahišn", 45.
55. De Jong, "Vexillologica Sacra", 194; Shapira, "Banners, Spears, Black Raiders".
56. Belenitskij et al., "Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1977 g.", 197-204; Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", 189; Marshak, "Sogd V-VIII vv.", 183-184; Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 123-124.
57. For the plan of this household and of room 12, see Raspopova, *Zhilishcha Pendzhikenta*, Fig. 55; Abdulloev, *Srednyaya Aziya v VII-XIII vekakh*, 30-31.
58. Belenitskij et al., "Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1977 g.", 202.
59. Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", 195.
60. Pugachenkova, "The Form and Style", Fig. 9.
61. Ibid., 237. Another flying character in Sogdian art that might represent *fravaši* is depicted at Shahrīstan, in the second register of the northern wall (Sokolovskij, *Monumental'naya zhivopis'*, 42, Fig. 59). The figure, including the face, is only partially preserved, but based on the hairstyle, it appears to be female, and it is certainly winged. A figure of a barefoot archer shown behind the mounted warriors on the battle scene from Panjikent III/6 was also interpreted as *fravaši* by Boris Marshak. See Marshak, *Legends, Tales, and Fables*, 118, Fig. 68. Due to its poor preservation, it is impossible to establish whether it had wings. This interpretation is seemingly based on the fact that this archer (perhaps there were more than one, since there is another foot visible in the drawing) appears to be female, based on the short skirt, and flies above the warriors. It is however not certain that this figure belongs to the same scene, or whether in fact it might belong to the painting's second register, as in Panjikent there is often no border between them.
62. Lurje, "Panteon sogdijsev", 129.
63. Sal'e, *Aburejkhān Biruni*, 255.
64. This is clear from the representation of the mountainous landscape on paintings from Temple I depicting a chariot drawn by boars. See Belenitskij and Marshak, "Nastennye rospisi", Fig. 3; Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, p. 72. Additional examples are found on the northern wall in the "Small Hall" of Shahrīstan palace, on the wooden tympanum from the same site, and in the framing of the wooden arch recently discovered at Kafir-Kala, which depicts the goddess Nana surrounded by worshippers bringing offerings. Grenet, "The Wooden Panels from Kafir-kala", Figs. 2-3.
65. Note the clear difference between this mace and the ceremonial zoomorphic sceptres discussed above.
66. Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", Fig. 4.
67. Ibid., 194.
68. For example, Grenet, "Yima en Bactriane", 88-89.
69. Maršak and Raspopova, "Cultes communautaires", 194.
70. Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, 150-153. For depictions of *ketos* in Central Asia, see also Minardi, "The Hellenistic Chorasmian *ketos*".
71. Errington, Cribb and Claringbull, *The Crossroads of Asia*, no. 128.
72. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, Figs. 34, 116, p. 85.
73. Poinot, *Les animaux de la Perse*, 188.
74. Marshak, *Legends, Tales, and Fables*, Fig. 48. The only other possible example I can think of is the depiction of the combat between two lions and two men in the lower part of the central panel from the tomb of Yu Hong (592 CE) in China. Since the upper scene on the same panel seems to depict a banquet in Paradise, it was suggested that the lions represent Hell. See Marshak, "La thématique sogdienne", 254. However, the lower registers of all other panels from the same tomb have no thematic relation to the upper parts, and therefore, this suggestion is not convincing. It is noteworthy that in the famous fragment of the Sogdian Rostam text, demons are described as riding various creatures, elephants, pigs, snakes, lizards, foxes, even dogs (!), but not lions. See the translation of the fragment by

- Nicholas Sims-Williams in Grenet, “Between Written Texts”, 444.
75. Marshak, Raspopova and Shkoda, *Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1998 godu*, 40–42; Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, 79; Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 122–123.
 76. The surviving fragments are small, and the scene is admittedly heavily reconstructed, but in any case, there is no place on the wall for two such structures.
 77. Belenitskij et al., “Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1977 g.”, 202.
 78. For the publication of the temples, see Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*. However, we should note that each of the Panjikent temples stood on its own platform. By depicting them as sharing the same podium, the Sogdian painter perhaps strove to convey the idea of a single sacred compound.
 79. Shenkar, “The Religion and the Pantheon”, 206.
 80. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, 83–84. On one ossuary from Afrasyab, lions are depicted in a guardian position (squatting and in profile) next to the niches. Inside the niches the figure of a god holding a mask is depicted. Shkoda, *ibid.*, Fig. 130. I would like to thank Pavel Lurje for drawing my attention to this detail.
 81. This fact is noted by the excavators who, however, do not draw any conclusions from it: Belenitskij et al., “Raskopki drevnego Pendzhikenta v 1977 g.”, 201.
 82. Sokolovskij, *Monumental'naya zhivopis'*, Figs. 92, 95. On the partially preserved painting of Nana from VI/26, the goddess wears earrings with one pendant of similar shape. Kiy, Lurje and Samosyuk, *Expedition Silk Road*, no. 119.
 83. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, Fig. 121.2.
 84. Goldman, “The Imperial Jewel”, 836.
 85. *Ibid.*
 86. Temple II, room 14; XXVI/2; XXV/28. See Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”, 280; Marshak and Raspopova, “Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 2002 godu”, Fig. 106.
 87. Most notably on the XXV/12 painting itself where a god associated with a long-necked dragon is depicted to her left.
 88. Very few finds from Temple I survived the fire of 722. The only important evidence that pertains to the cult in the sanctuary is the *ātešgāh* with the constantly sustained sacred fire.
 89. Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”. Repeated in his several consequent publications. For example, Grenet, “Yima en Bactriane”, 88–90. See also recent discussion in Lurje, “The Semitic Lord of Heaven”.
 90. Lurje, “The Semitic Lord of Heaven”, 460.
 91. Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”, 283.
 92. Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”, 283–284.
 93. Marshak, “On the Iconography of Ossuaries”, 307.
 94. Marshak and Raspopova, “Otchet o raskopkakh gorodishcha drevnego Pendzhikenta v 2002 godu”, 48. On the iconography of Sraoša, see Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images*, 144–149.
 95. Forte, “On a Wall Painting from Toplukdong”, 215.
 96. Although it must be noted that in contrast with the Buddhist Vaiśravaṇa, the Sogdian god does not trample the dwarfish figure, but stands before it. Grenet suggests that this conveys an idea borrowed from Yama, who functions as a “barrier between this world and the demons surging from the underworld”. Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”, 284. However, the small figure on the painting is already crushed and it is not clear why it is necessary to “block” him. The depiction of the Buddhist Vaiśravaṇa trampling the “demon” also successfully conveys graphically the idea of preventing him from surging from the underworld. The Sogdians might have misunderstood the Buddhist iconography, as happened for example, with the image of Buddha from painting XXV/28 (Marshak and Raspopova, “Wall Paintings”, 150–153), especially taking into account examples such as a sixth-seventh century *lokapāla* figurine from Turfan, which tramples the lying demon only with his right leg, the left leg standing on the ground. See Baker, “Vaiśravaṇa and the *lokapālas*”, Pl.1. Given the fact that the Khotanese Vaiśravaṇa has also different attributes – a spear (or a trident) and a small *stūpa* (Forte, “On a Wall Painting from Toplukdong”, 215) – this could also be a peculiar Sogdian adaptation, whose meaning eludes us.
 97. Rongxi, *The Great Tang*, 28.
 98. Lurje, “The Semitic Lord of Heaven”, 461.
 99. The fact that Sogdian women indeed took part in such activities should not be doubted. On the southern wall of the Afrasyab paintings, a group of mounted female characters are even depicted leading the procession.
 100. Shenkar, “The Religion and the Pantheon”, 198.
 101. *Ibid.*, 198.
 102. Grenet has already suggested that Vrēšman is associated with Nana because both are “protectors of the State”. See Grenet, “Vaiśravaṇa in Sogdiana”, 283.
 103. Shenkar, “The Religion and the Pantheon”, 198.
 104. Grenet, “Étude de documents sogdiens”, 215–216. For the discussion, see Compareti, *Samarkand*, 139–149.
 105. Compareti, *Samarkand*, 144.

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