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Images of the Riderless Horse as a Symbol of the Deceased in Sino-Sogdian Tombs

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ABSTRACT

Images of the riderless horse are found extensively in the Sino-Sogdian tombs of the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and Sui dynasties. Some scholars argue that the images depict the same god, while others suggest they represent the divine sacrifice of the tomb owner, destined for another world. This study examines sources from ancient China, Iran, India, and Sogdiana to establish the employment and background of this motif appearing in ancient China in Sino-Sogdian tombs. Results indicate that the images represent the deceased tomb owner and bear the same meaning in ancient China. In addition, this study explains the reasons the tomb owners chose this representation and considers implications for future research on iconography and symbolism associated with Sino-Sogdian tombs.

Keywords: Sino-Sogdian, Stone bed with panels, Riderless horse, Symbol of the deceased, Tištriya, Mithra, Ancient Iran

INTRODUCTION¹

At present, a total of 134 Sogdian tombs and funerary furniture pieces are known in China, of which 125 tombs have been formally excavated, and nine funerary furniture pieces have been collected for display in Chinese and other national museums without formal excavation. Fifteen pieces of funerary furniture from the Sogdians are known, of which six were discovered in the 125 tombs.

The funerary furniture consists of twelve stone beds with panels (石床屏風 Shichuang pingfeng) and three stone horse-shaped sarcophagi (石堂 Shitang).² The Di Yu (翟育)³ stone beds with panels date to the Eastern Wei (534–550 AD). Anyang (安阳),⁴ Qingzhou (青州),⁵ Miho,⁶ New York,⁷ and London⁸ account for five funerary furniture pieces dated to the Northern Qi (550–577 AD). Kang Ye (康業),⁹ An Jia (安伽),¹⁰ Di Caoming (翟曹明),¹¹ Shi Jun (史君),¹² and the National Museum (國博)¹³ also

¹ This is one of a series of papers on the propagation of Zoroastrianism deity iconography along the Silk Road (supported by the National Foundation for Social Science in China, no. 16CZS072) and on the image of the deceased and the aesthetic concept in Sino-Sogdian tombs (supported by the Shaanxi Provincial Education Department, no. 18JK0426). The author thanks Associate Professor Wan Xiang 萬翔 (Northwest University, China) for his invaluable insights regarding an earlier draft of this paper.

² Including Qingzhou, Shi Jun, and Yu Hong.

³ Zhao et al., *Yongyuan de Beichao*, 114–120, 140–165, pl. 7–9, 15–18; Zhao, “Jieshao Huke Di Mensheng.”

⁴ Scaglia, “Central Asians.”

⁵ Qingzhou, *Shandong Qingzhou*.

⁶ Juliano et al., “Eleven Panels.”

⁷ Carter, “Funerary Bed Bases.”

⁸ Kageyama, “Quelques Remarques.”

⁹ Xi'an, “Xi'an Beizhou Kang Ye.”

¹⁰ Shaanxi, *Xi'an Beizhou An Jia*.

¹¹ Luo et al., “Beizhou Xiguo.”

¹² Yang, *Beizhou Shi Jun*.

¹³ Ge, “Beichao Suterren.”

account for five pieces dated to the Northern Zhou (551–581 AD). An Bei (安备),¹⁴ Yu Hong (虞弘),¹⁵ Tianshui (天水),¹⁶ and Guimet¹⁷ account for four pieces, dated to the Sui dynasty (581–619 AD). These funerary furniture relics embody artistic characteristics, including diverse motifs, fine carving, and luxurious decorations, which provide vivid original materials that reveal the history of the Sogdians in China within the Northern and Sui dynasties.

Images of the Sino-Sogdian tombs attracted the attention of scholars and initiated much scholarly discussion. In addition to the examination of images from one single tomb, additional comprehensive studies have been conducted on images from all tombs known to the authors at the completion of their work.¹⁸ Because of differences in professional experience, material resources, research methods, and other factors, scholars have arrived at different interpretations of some subjects depicted in the tomb imagery. The riderless horse is a prominent example.

Images of horses are prevalent in the funerary beds and sarcophagi of Sogdian tombs in northern China, particularly those of the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and Sui dynasties. The horse motifs can be divided into two categories. One is "rider's mount," in which the horse is depicted with a rider. Another is the riderless horse, which includes both the saddled horse and the unsaddled horse, often used to symbolize the deceased (absent) rider. When the riderless horse is used as a symbol of the deceased, it generally exhibits a variety of elements, including the saddle, absence of a rider, raised mane, tassels, and umbrella, as well as attendants in front of and/or beside the horse.

Scholars have proposed different interpretations of the theme of the riderless horse as a funerary image. For instance, while Marshak viewed the motifs of the riderless horse on the gateposts of Anyang and Miho as sacrifices related to Mithra, Riboud interpreted the images as denoting the gods Tištriya and Mithra. According to Reboud, the image of the fish under the riderless horse on panel B of

¹⁴ Ge, "Xianjiao shenghuo"; Ge, "Sui An Bei."

¹⁵ Shanxi, *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong*.

¹⁶ Tianshui, "Tianshuishi faxian."

¹⁷ Guimet, *Lit de pierre*; Delacour et al., "Bali Jimei."

¹⁸ Marshak, "La thématique Sogdienne"; Jiang, *Zhongguo Xianjiao*; Lerner, *Aspects of Assimilation*; Rong, *Zhongguo Zhongguo*; Sun, *Ruhua Suterren*; Li, "Tombs of Hu People"; Shen, *Zhongguo Zhongguo*.

Miho denotes Tištriya and the river god Oxus in the Iranian (Sogdian) tradition, whereas the riderless horse on the right side of the gate of the Yu Hong sarcophagus denotes Tištriya and Mithra.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Lerner argues that the riderless horse “may have a double meaning: a reference to these foreigners’ high rank in a Chinese context and an acknowledgment of their Central Asian or Sogdian religious and cultural heritage.”²⁰ Expanding on themes of sacrifice and dual meaning, Grenet argues,

The riderless saddled horse in China [is] a symbol of the social status of the deceased, but in Central Asian Zoroastrianism [it is] a sacrificial animal consecrated to the god Mithra, judge of the dead. It appears as such in Sogdiana itself on the Sivaz ossuary, and also in the “Ambassadors painting” at Samarkand as an element of the New Year procession to the mausoleum of the royal ancestors. It probably has the same meaning in the funerary cortege shown on the long sides of the Anyang and Miho gates, while on the reliefs of the sarcophagus of Yu Hong, Mithra himself appears to welcome the sacrificial horse.²¹

Shen claims that motifs of saddled but riderless horses in Sogdian tombs are intended for the deceased to ride as they enter the afterworld.²²

This study identifies four flaws in the above-mentioned scholarly interpretations of the riderless horse in the Sino-Sogdian tombs. The first flaw is the inconsistency between imagery and textual information. Scholars identify the riderless horse from Sogdian art and Sino-Sogdian tombs as the god Mithra, by providing evidence of Mithra’s relevance to horses in ancient Iranian Zoroastrian documents. However, according to material from other references, images of the riderless horse from ancient Iran cannot be determined to be Mithra. The second flaw is the inappropriate manner in which the divisions of the earlier and later periods are determined. On the one hand, the meaning of the riderless horse

¹⁹ Riboud, “Le cheval sans cavalier.”

²⁰ Lerner, *Aspects of Assimilation*, 18.

²¹ Grenet, “Zoroastrian Funerary Practices,” 23.

²² Shen, “Neiya youmu,” 258–261.

image is determined by the images at the Sino-Sogdian tomb from Sogdiana. On the other hand, judging from the historical date, the Sogdian material exists historically later than the Sino-Sogdian tomb, potentially implying that the latter influences the former. The third flaw is the failure to systematically sort the images of the riderless horse from the Sino-Sogdian tomb, to reach an objective conclusion. The fourth flaw is the suggestion that the riderless horse may have two or more distinct meanings simultaneously, which is certainly not characteristic of Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments.

This study systematically compares and carefully classifies the images of riderless horses from Sino-Sogdian tombs in Northern and Sui dynasties. It also examines the meaning of written and material references to the riderless horses from the same and slightly earlier periods, in ancient China, Iran, India, and Sogdiana, demonstrating how the riderless horse of the Sino-Sogdian tombs has served to symbolize the deceased and why tomb owners have chosen this motif.

IMAGES OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE IN CHINA'S SOGDIAN TOMBS

Images of the riderless horse appear in several Sino-Sogdian funeral stones, including the Anyang, Miho, and Qingzhou of the Northern Qi dynasty; Kang Ye and Shi Jun of the Northern Zhou dynasty; and Guimet and Yu Hong of the Sui dynasty. The image also appears in a Sogdian sarcophagus from the Northern dynasty held by the National Museum of China since 2012. These images of the riderless horse can be roughly divided into four types: a figure respectfully kneeling or standing in front of the riderless horse, riderless horses waiting for the host, the riderless horse and an oxcart, and the riderless horse as part of a ceremonial procession. This section explores these categories in greater detail.

1. A FIGURE RESPECTFULLY KNEELING OR STANDING IN FRONT OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE

Panel B of Miho (Figure 1) comprises three parts: the upper part depicts two horse riders facing to the right; the middle part consists of a left-facing riderless horse, a human figure kneeling and offering up a cup, four attendants standing to one side of the horse, and an attendant holding an umbrella; the lower part depicts a river, with three fish swimming toward the left. Marshak initially identified the riderless horse as the god Mithra, but later accepted Grenet's identification of the image as denoting the god

Tištīriya.²³ Later, both scholars accepted Skjærvø's interpretation of the image as the god Vakhš.²⁴ However, scholars like Jiang, Rong, and Zhang believed that it depicted Tištīriya,²⁵ while Inagaki maintained Marshak's original interpretation of the image as a sacrifice for Mithra.²⁶ Meanwhile, Raspopova argues that panel B is "trying to present a group of spectators watching some ritual of divine horse,"²⁷ overlooking the remaining images.

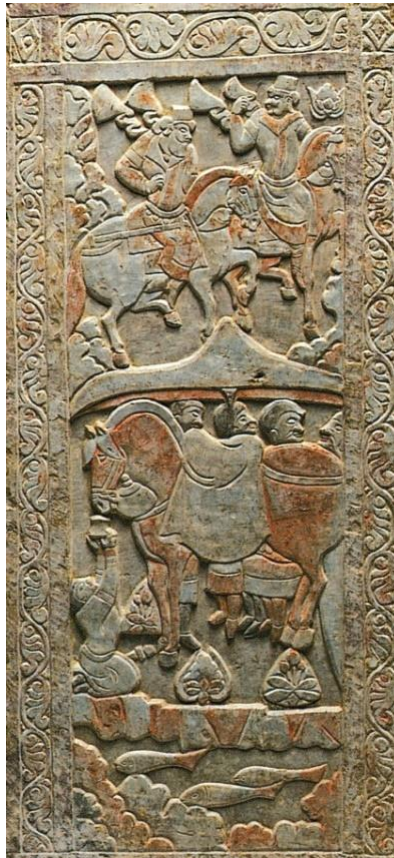


Figure 1. Panel B of Miho. After: Juliano/Lerner, 1997, 250, panel B.

²³ Grenet, "Preliminary Remarks."

²⁴ Marshak, "Miho Couch," 21.

²⁵ Rong, "Miho meishuguan."

²⁶ Inagaki, "Chūgoku Hokuchō," 116.

²⁷ Raspopova, "Life and Artistic Conventions," 52.

However, these arguments cannot be verified for a number of reasons. First, due to the dearth of archaeological data, scholars are unable to comprehensively examine and compare similar images in Sino-Sogdian tombs — the resulting absence of a referential framework resulting in too wide a scope for the interpretation of individual images. Second, Grenet's identification of the god Tištriya is untenable because there are only two minor similarities — namely, the water and the fish — between panel B and the Kushano-Sasanian painting at Ghulbiyan, Afghanistan, dated to the fourth or fifth century. The Ghulbiyan painting depicts the image of the god sitting in a chair over a large fishbowl with four fish swimming around its mouth. In contrast, the lower part of panel B depicts a river with flowers and grass along the banks and three fish swimming to the left. I believe this to present the natural landscape of mountains and rivers, with no deeper meaning. Nonetheless, the primary difference between the Ghulbiyan painting and panel B is that the former depicts a sitting god and the latter a riderless horse. The identification of Tištriya thus lacks persuasiveness as a result of its underplaying difference while overemphasizing a minor similarity. Third, the god Vakhš is the god of the Oxus, namely, Amu Darya. In other words, this was a god worshipped by those along the Amu Darya Valley, not only on the Vakhš River, the right tributary of the Amu Darya. Indeed, Vakhš is one of the local gods worshipped across the Amu Darya, including Bactria, Sogdiana, and Chorasnia, where temples dedicated to Vakhš were typically built near the riverbanks of the Amu Darya. More importantly, as Shenkar notes, a definitive image of Vakhš in Sogdian art has yet to be identified.²⁸ Accordingly, it seems unlikely that, located beyond this geographical area, Sino-Sogdians would have depicted Vakhš in their tombs.

In regard to sarcophagi, two of the eleven panels of the Qingzhou sarcophagus (Figure 2) depict a similar composition of three human figures and a horse facing toward the right.²⁹ More specifically, the third panel on the front depicts the tomb owner riding a horse and an attendant behind the horse holding a fan. In contrast, the first panel on the right side represents a riderless horse with one attendant standing behind the horse holding an umbrella, one standing beside the horse, and one in front of the horse holding its reins.

²⁸ Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 129.

²⁹ For the restoration and combination of the sarcophagus, see Sun, *Ruhua Suterren*, 42–45.

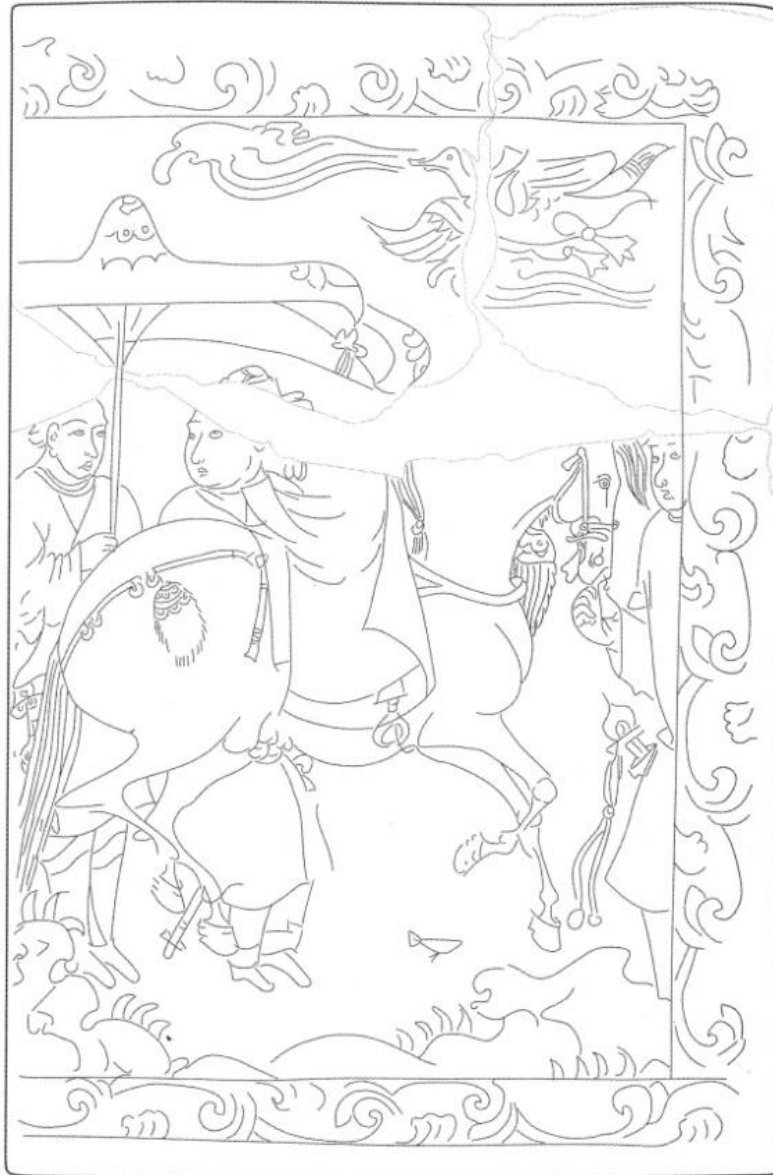


Figure 2. First panel on the right side of Qingzhou. After: Qingzhou 2014, 31.

Meanwhile, the upper part of the second panel of the west wall of the Shi Jun sarcophagus (Figure 3) illustrates a couple embracing a baby under the dome; lower down, the panel shows a riderless horse facing left, with an open-mouthed dog lying in front of the building. In regard to the riderless horse, the panel shows a human figure kneeling in front of the horse and an attendant holding an umbrella with a curved handle beside the horse. It is worth noting that the umbrella motif appears three times on the Shi Jun sarcophagus, with the other two motifs located on the third panel of the

northern wall and depicting the tomb owners' trip on horseback. The umbrella of the male tomb owner is square or curved, with a straight handle, while that of the female tomb owner is round with a curved handle. Accordingly, the shape of the umbrella and its various decorative styles indicate that the owner of the second panel of the west wall is likely female. Thus, we can conclude that the baby embraced by the couple is Shi Jun, and the riderless horse symbolizes his wife.



Figure 3. Second panel of the West Wall of Shi Jun. After: Yang, 2014, 105, Figure 108.

The Yu Hong sarcophagus has three panels with horse motifs. Two of the three panels are located to the left and right of the outer gate, while the remaining panel is located on the left wall inside the sarcophagus. The tomb owner, Yu Hong, appears as a riderless horse on the right panel of the sarcophagus gate and as a man on horseback on the other two panels.³⁰ On the right panel is depicted a red riderless horse facing left; an attendant standing in front of the horse; three human figures to the right of the horse, two of whom hold a mattress under their left arms, and two dogs running in front of the horse (Figure 4).

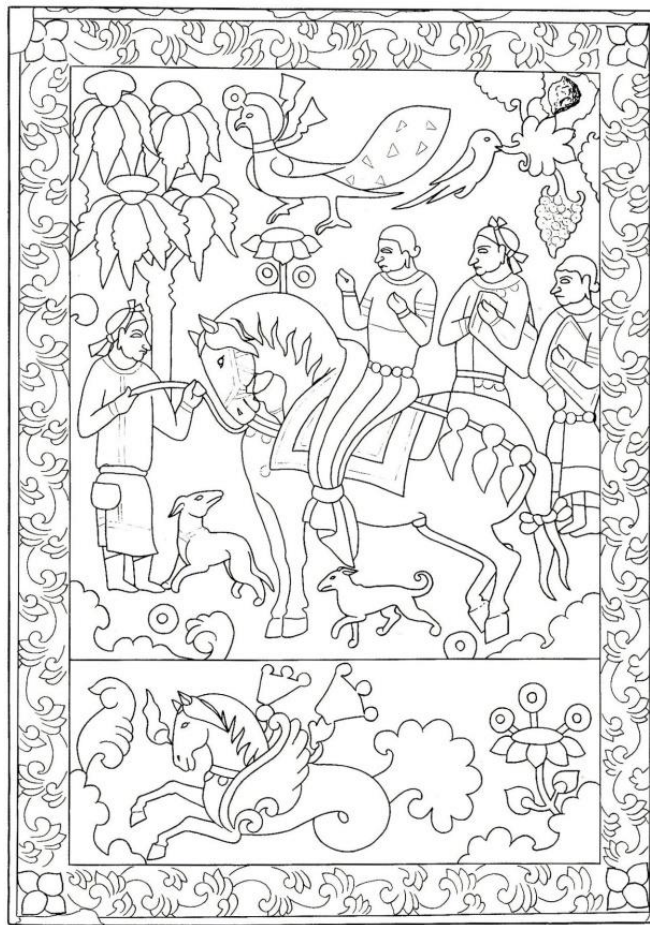


Figure 4. Right panel of the Gate of Yu Hong. After: Shanxi, 2005, 98, Figure 136.

³⁰ For the induction and classification of the main figure of the nine panels of the Yu Hong sarcophagus, see Zhang, “Yu Hong mu,” 488–491; Sun, *Ruhua Suterren*, 90–91; Shanxi, *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong*, 116–117, figs. 154, 156; *ibid.*, 112–123, figs. 150, 152.

Marshak proposed two alternative interpretations for the panels on the left and right of the gate: the horse depicting Yu Hong, and Yu Hong himself, or the horse depicting Mithra, and the god Mithra. Marshak preferred the latter interpretation.³¹ While Grenet, Jiang, and Riboud accepted this interpretation, it is worth noting that Riboud and Zhang raised the possibility of the motif's depicting Tištriya,³² suggesting that the god was depicted as the hybrid figure comprising a horse head, two wings, and a fishtail under the riderless horse. Riboud believed that this image reflected Tištriya's characteristics: soaring and diving.³³ However, this hybrid also appears in the lower part of a Yu Hong sarcophagus panel; entitled "wine brew," this panel depicts an open-mouthed lion rushing toward the hybrid figure. While I prefer Marshak's first suggestion, I believe that the riderless horse is a symbol of the deceased Yu Hong, rather than a sacrifice dedicated to his soul. As Juliano posits, the riderless horse (right panel) and the royal rider (left panel) "may symbolize the death of the deceased in the earthly realm and his successful transition to the afterlife as a king."³⁴

2. RIDERLESS HORSES WAITING FOR THE HOST

Of the six panels on the front of the Anyang stone bed, the third and sixth depict riderless horses. More specifically, the upper two-thirds of the third and sixth panels depict the tomb owner hosting a banquet for guests in his house, while the lower third depicts attendants and riderless horses. The lower third of two panels share a similar composition, including two riderless horses facing toward the left, an attendant in front of the horse, an attendant holding an umbrella next to the horse, and other attendants (Figure 5).

³¹ Marshak, "Miho Couch," 28.

³² Zhang, "Xianshen Mitela," 31–33.

³³ Riboud, "Le cheval sans cavalier," 159.

³⁴ Juliano, "Converging Traditions," 34.



Figure 5. Lower Part of Third Panel on the Front of Anyang. After: Scaglia, 1958, 12, Figure 4.

The procession on the right wall of the National Museum of China sarcophagus comprises ten mounted horses; ridden by the tomb owner, the largest horse has a standing mane. There five riderless horses on two panels on the right side of the back wall of the National Museum of China sarcophagus; it is clear that the riderless horse in front of them is the same horse as that ridden by the tomb owner on the right wall (Figure 6).

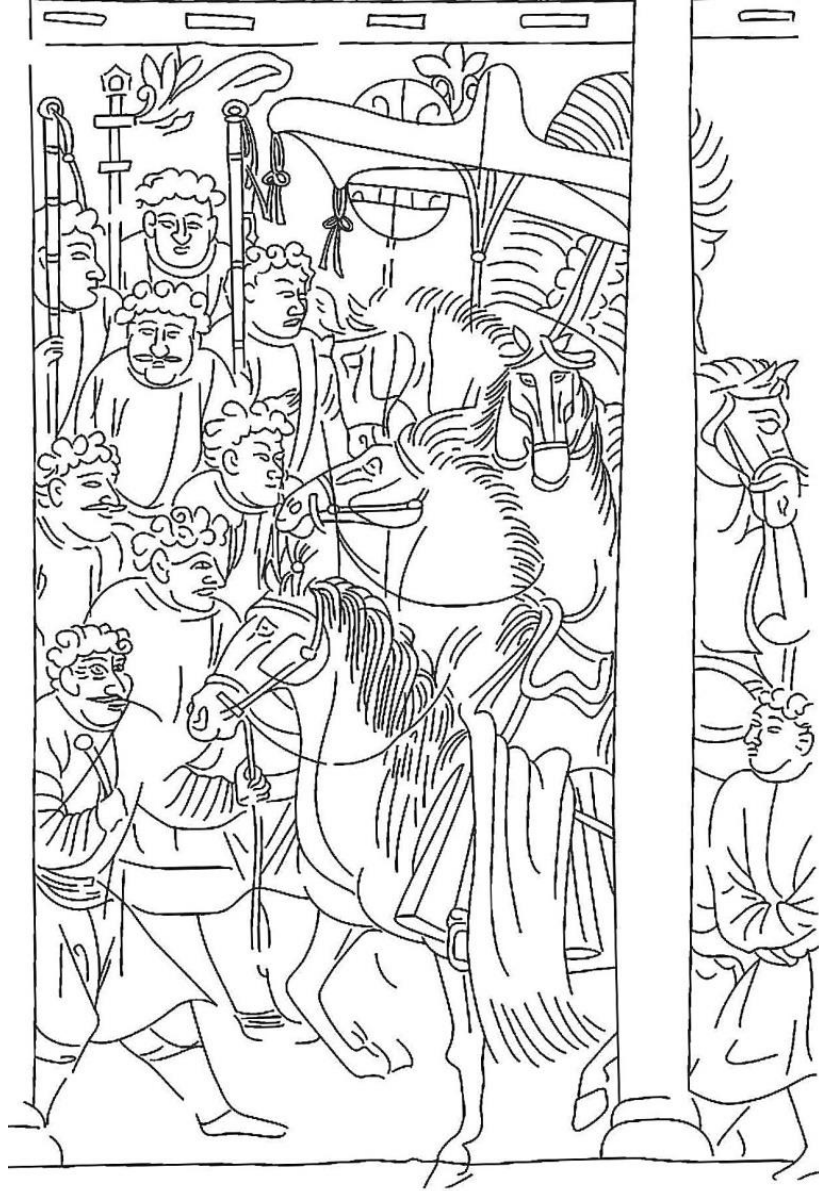


Figure 6. Two panels of the right side of Back Wall of National Museum. After: Ge, 2016, 78, Figure 11.

3. THE RIDERLESS HORSE AND AN OXCART

Of the three panels on the right-hand side of the front of the Kang Ye stone bed, the middle panel depicts the standard image of the tomb owner; the panel to the left depicts an oxcart, while the panel to the right depicts a riderless horse, respectively (Figure 7). Meanwhile, the outermost panel of the left wall of the Guimet stone bed depicts a riderless horse, while the outermost panel of the right wall depicts

an oxcart (Figure 8). The lower part of panel depicting the riderless horse comprises a left-facing riderless horse and five human figures. At the front of the procession, a youthful figure holds a censer and guides the procession, followed by an attendant holding the reins of the horse, while a dog sits on the ground. Three attendants stand to the right side of the horse; two attendants are shown facing each other and appear to be talking, while the third holds an umbrella. The upper part of the panel displays a peculiar scene, including a crane flying with leaf in mouth, a flying human figure holding a lotus, as well as birds and clouds. As Delacour and Riboud argue, in these panels, the riderless horse symbolizes the deceased.³⁵

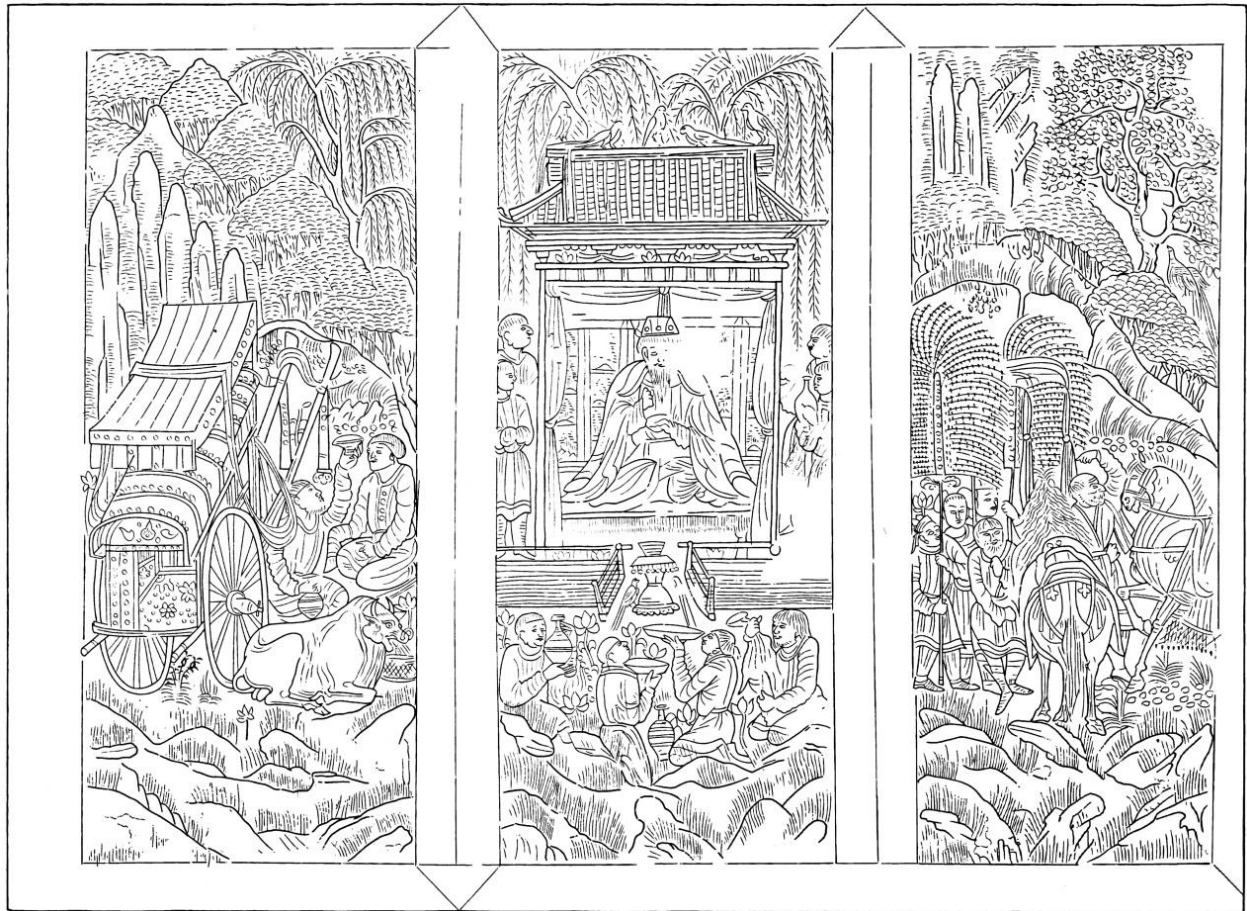
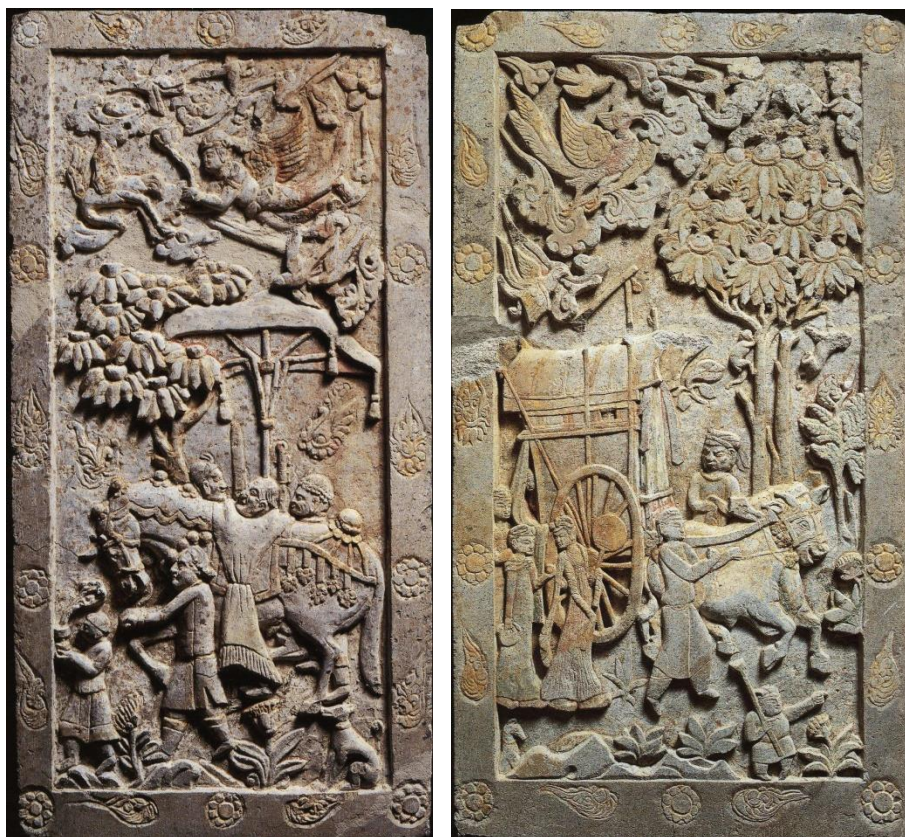


Figure 7. Three panels on the right side of Kang Ye. After: Xi'an, 2008, 31, Figure 29.

³⁵ Delacour et al., "Bali Jimei," 109–110; Delacour, "Une version tardive," 76.



Figures 8a and 8b. Outermost panels of the left wall and the right wall of Guimet. After: Gumiet 2004, 16, Figure 10; 27, Figure 29.

4. THE RIDERLESS HORSE AS PART OF A CEREMONIAL PROCESSION.

Of all Sino-Sogdian tombs, only Anyang and Miho stone tombs have gateposts, the images on each depicting a ceremonial procession. On the left and right gateposts of Anyang, the procession comprises more than ten human figures followed by two riderless horses. On the left and right gateposts of Miho, the procession comprises four human figures trailed by a riderless horse (Figure 9). Marshak,³⁶ Lerner,³⁷ and Grenet treated the front and sides of the gatepost as a whole, interpreting the motif as reflecting the Sogdian New Year (*Nōrūz*). In this respect, they understood the ceremonial procession depicted on the front of the gatepost as commemorating the sacred fire or the tomb owner on the side of the

³⁶ Marshak, "La thématique sogdienne" 229; Marshak, "Miho Couch," 17.

³⁷ Lerner, *Aspects of Assimilation*, 18.

gatepost. Grenet further suggested that the riderless horse is the sacrifice in this scenario.³⁸ However, I tend to agree with Riboud, who treated the front and the side of the gatepost separately. As in the widespread tradition of the Chinese tombs in the Northern and Sui dynasties, the ceremonial procession, which included the riderless horse, serves as a symbolic expression of the status of the tomb owner.



Figure 9a and 9b. Left Gatepost and Right Gatepost of Miho. After: Juliano/Lerner 1997, 248–249, gatepost 1–2.

In addition to Anyang and Miho, eight stone beds with gateposts have been attributed to the Northern dynasties; six dated to the Northern Wei (386–534 AD) and two to the Eastern Wei. Those of the Northern Wei are held in separate museums or private collections around the world: namely, Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Japan;³⁹ Tian Ashe's stone bed owned by a private museum in Taiwan;⁴⁰ the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which owns a bed discovered in Luoyang;⁴¹ Capital Museum, China;⁴²

³⁸ Grenet, "Zoroastrian Funerary Practices," 23.

³⁹ Lin, *Tuxiang yu zhuangshi*, 248–249, fig. 5–25.

⁴⁰ Teng, "Yijian haiwai huiliu," fig. 13.1.

⁴¹ Xu, "Bosidun meishuguan," fig. 1.

⁴² Teng, "Yijian haiwai huiliu," figs. 3, 4.

Virginia's Museum of Fine Arts;⁴³ while a fragment of a gatepost is held by Kawabata Yasunari.⁴⁴ Of the two Eastern Wei stone beds, one belongs to Di Yu and is held by the Shenzhen Museum in China,⁴⁵ while the other belongs to Xie Shi and Feng Senghui, discovered in Gu'an, Anyang, Henan.⁴⁶ Geographically speaking, these stone beds with gateposts were discovered in Luoyang, the capital city of the late Northern Wei, and Yecheng (now Anyang), the capital city of the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi. It is worth noting that some gateposts have no images, whereas others do. These images differ from one bed to another. For instance, the gateposts held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, depicts sixteen human figures in a ceremonial procession, while that held by China's Capital Museum depicts and six figures. Meanwhile, the fragment in Kawabata Yasunari's collection shows an attendant in front of a riderless horse.

In summary, although there are some differences between the four types of riderless horse imagery in Sino-Sogdian tombs, they are all symbolic expressions of the tomb owners — that is, of the deceased. In the first type, the riderless horse is the most unusual, particularly in terms of the depiction of humans in postures denoting respect, items like umbrellas, as well as animals like magical birds and dogs. In the second type, the riderless horse belonging to the tomb owner is bigger and characteristically styled with standing mane. In this scenario, the riderless horse symbolizes the tomb owner rather than a horse itself. The third and fourth types of riderless horse imagery are prevalent in the Chinese tombs of the Northern and Sui dynasties, serving to symbolize the male tomb owner or highlight his status.

THE EVOLUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE (RIDERLESS) HORSE BEFORE THE TANG DYNASTY

According to archaeological data, the use of real horses as sacrifices can be traced back to the Yin–Shang period (1300–1046 BC) in ancient China. The practice was later substituted by the sculptural form in the

⁴³ Lerner, *Aspects of Assimilation*, pl. 9a.

⁴⁴ Lin, *Tuxiang yu zhuangshi*, 249–50, fig. 5–26.

⁴⁵ Zhao et al., *Yongyuan de Beichao*, 114, pl. 7.

⁴⁶ Henan, "Henan Anyang Gu'an," pl. 19-1.

middle of the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), with sculptural horses continuing to be used in sacrificial practices after the Qin (221–207 BC) and Han (202 BC–220 AD) dynasties.⁴⁷ The sculptural form was later replaced by the medium of paint, which became popular between the Shang (1600–1046 BC) and Tang (618–907 AD) dynasties. In the context of tombs, the use of real horses transitioning into the use of horse sculptures during the late Warring States Period. In addition to horse sculpture, new forms of horse imagery were created, including tomb chamber painting during the Western Han dynasty (202 BC–8 AD) and tomb stone painting during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 AD). As such, both sculpture and painting were used to depict horses in tombs from the Western Han to Tang dynasties.

Travel by carriage and horse is the most common theme in the wall, stone, and brick painting of Han dynasty tombs, indicating that the soul of the tomb owner travel from the underground world to the cemetery shrine to receive sacrifices.⁴⁸ From the middle to late Eastern Han dynasty, “the carriage was still used in high-level aristocracy, but the oxcart became popular and gradually became the main form of vehicle for use.”⁴⁹ At the southwest corner of the Western Jin dynasty (266–316 AD) tomb, located in Chundu Road, Luoyang, Henan Province, the riderless horse and oxcart are exhibited simultaneously (Figure 10). According to Qi, the oxcart is often accompanied by a female attendant while the riderless horse is often accompanied by a male attendant — the mode of transport prepared for the female and male tomb owner, respectively.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, on the paper painting comprising six small paintings excavated from Tomb No. 13 of the Sixteen Barbarian States (304–439 AD) in Astana, Turfan, Xinjiang, the male tomb owner sits on a wooden bed under a tent with tassels in the middle of painting, with a riderless horse and attendant are located on the left (Figure 11). It is worth noting that there is an umbrella over the horse’s back, indicating the function of the riderless horse as a symbol of the tomb owner.

⁴⁷ Zhao, *Dongzhou Qin-Han*, 160.

⁴⁸ Xin, “Handai huaxiang.”

⁴⁹ Zhao, *Dongzhou Qin-Han*, 160.

⁵⁰ Qi, “Zhongguo gudai,” 358, n. 1.



Figure 10. The riderless horse and the oxcart of the Tomb of Chundu Road. After: Luoyang, 2000, 31, Figure 9.



Figure 11. Paper painting of Tomb 13 of Astana. After: Guojia, 2014, 205.

According to extant archaeological data, the earliest painting of the riderless horse and an oxcart appearing simultaneously on both sides of the tomb is the Goguryeo mural tomb at Dexingli, dated to 409 AD (Figure 12). Painted on the northern wall of the back room is the first name of the male

tomb owner, Zhen, and the family name, Murong; the tomb owner may have been the Liaodong Governor (太守 Taishou) of the Former Qin (351–394 AD) or Former Yan (352–370 AD) dynasties. The earliest painting of the riderless horse and oxcart appear simultaneously on the front (southern) wall inside the stone sarcophagus is from Zhijiabu Village in Datong, Shanxi Province, in the Northern Wei. The back of the gate in the front (southern) wall of the sarcophagus depicts two attendants, while the couple who own the tomb are shown sitting in bed in the middle part of the back (northern) wall inside the sarcophagus.⁵¹ The simultaneous appearance of the riderless horse and oxcart was widespread in the late Northern Wei, including the stone bed held by the Luoyang Ancient Art Museum, the stone bed of the Qinyang, the stone bed held in a New York collection, and the stone sarcophagus of Ning Mao.⁵²

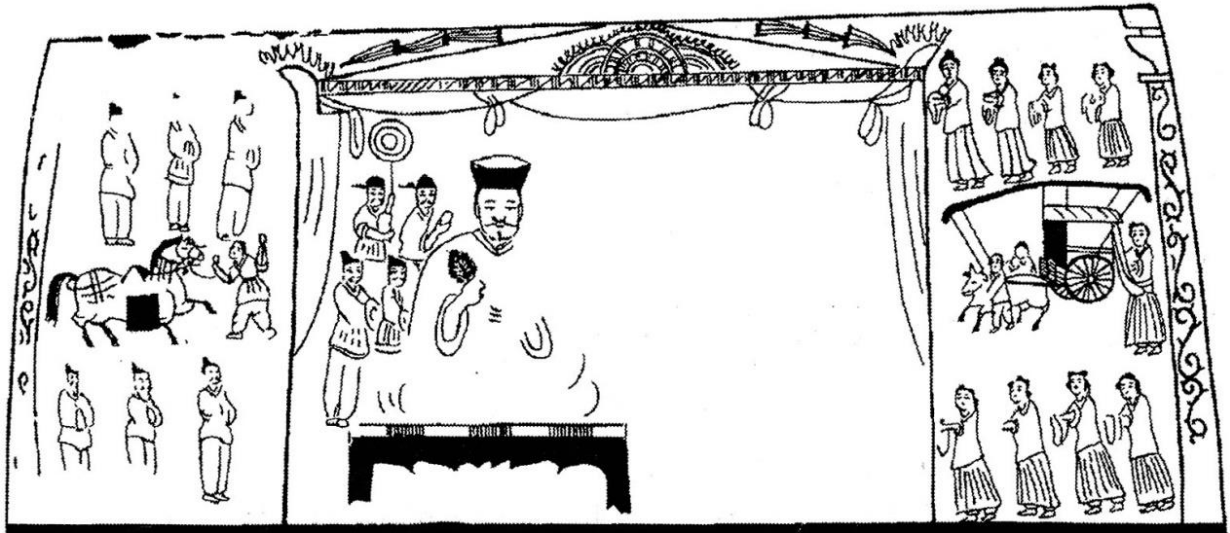


Figure 12. North wall of the back room of the Tomb of Goguryeo. After: Ni, 2017, 156, Figure 3–15: 6.

To date, eight tombs possessing painted images of the oxcart and riderless horse have been attributed to the Northern Qi and Sui dynasties. More specifically, seven belong to the Northern Qi, while the other — namely, the Xu Minxing tomb in Jiexiang, Shandong — is attributed to the Sui

⁵¹ Wang et al., “Datong Zhijiabu,” 42–47.

⁵² Zou, “Tuxiang chongzu,” 110–111.

dynasty.⁵³ The relatively well-preserved painted murals in these tombs evidence a new painting model: the main (northern) wall depicts the couple who own the tomb sitting at a banquet, arranged with the male tomb owner on the left (east) and the female tomb owner on the right; the eastern and western walls depict the riderless horse or oxcart. Four of the tombs — namely, Xu Xianxiu tomb (Figure 13) in Taiyuan, Shanxi; tomb of unknown owner in No. 1 thermal power plant, Taiyuan;⁵⁴ Gao Run tomb in Cixian, Hebei;⁵⁵ and Xu Minxing tomb — the oxcart is presented on the eastern wall and the riderless horse on the western wall. In contrast, the four other tombs — Lou Rui tomb in Taiyuan;⁵⁶ Han Zunian tomb in Taiyuan;⁵⁷ tomb of an unknown owner (Figure 14) in Shuiquanliang, Shuozhou;⁵⁸ and Dao Gui tomb in Jinan, Shandong⁵⁹ — the oxcart is presented on the western wall and the riderless horse on the eastern wall. All eight murals depict the male servants following the riderless horse and female servants following the oxcart, indicating that the horse is intended for the male tomb owner and the oxcart for the female tomb owner.

⁵³ Shandong, "Shandong Jiaxiang," 29–30, figs. 4, 5; pl. 2-1.

⁵⁴ Shanxi et al., "Taiyuan nanjiao," figs. 4, 5.

⁵⁵ Cixian, "Hebei Cixian," 235–236.

⁵⁶ Shanxi et al., *Beiqi dong'anwang Lou Rui*, pls. 66, 67.

⁵⁷ Taiyuan, *Taiyuan Beiqi Han Nianzu mu*, pls. 4, 6.

⁵⁸ Shanxi et al., "Shanxi Shuozhou Shuiquanliang."

⁵⁹ Jinan, "Jinanshi Majiazhuang," 45, fig. 8.



Figure 13. Three walls of Xu Xianxiu tomb. After: Wu, 2015, pl. 1.



Figure 14. Three walls of tomb in Shuiquanliang. After: Shanxi et al. 2019, 144–145.

However, two aspects seem to contradict this conclusion. First, the riderless horse is not always located on the side of the male tomb owner — that is, the east wall. Second, with the exception of Xu Minxing's tomb, which belongs to a couple, the other seven tombs have a single tomb owner. Zhang sought to resolve these contradictions based on the development of the riderless horse and oxcart, arguing that, these motifs were initially intended as the means by which the tomb owner travelled to the afterlife, and later became an institutional norm.⁶⁰ I argue that the use of these motifs should be explained from two aspects: the concept of death and artistic tradition. Regarding the concept of death, it is worth noting that the married couple was painted on the northern wall of the tomb despite the tomb being the burial site of one person: the male tomb owner. In this respect, the theme of the riderless horse and oxcart reflects the desires of both the tomb owners and their descendants that the deceased

⁶⁰ Zhang, "Lüelun Beichao," 244.

will find success and happiness in the afterworld. In regard to the artistic tradition, the theme of the riderless horse and oxcart symbolizes the higher status of the tomb owner. When this became a fixed and stylized theme,⁶¹ people no longer needed to investigate whether the mural content actually corresponded to the gender and number of deceased buried in the tomb. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that only one human corpse was discovered in the coffin bed of the tomb in No. 1 thermal power plant, despite three female figures being painted on the northern wall of the tomb; in this respect, the middle figure is understood to be the tomb owner.⁶²

THE IMAGE OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE AND ITS MEANING IN ANCIENT IRAN

Some scholars have argued the riderless horses of Sino-Sogdian tombs embody one god, i.e., Mithra, Tištriya, or the river god Oxus, while others suggest that they represent the divine sacrifice of the tomb owner, destined to another world. These arguments are based on brief narratives by scholars and references from Ancient Iran and Sogdiana. To verify whether these scholars' arguments are accurate, this study accessed the original written and material sources referencing horses and riderless horses to summarize what information is available to researchers.

1. ANCIENT IRANIAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE

On the basis of written sources, ancient Iranians categorized the riderless horse into four types based on function: the horse as a mount, incarnation, sacrifice, and symbol of honor. First, the horse could function as the mount of god. Indeed, there are several references to the gods driving horse-drawn chariots in the Avesta, including Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā, the great goddess of the waters, "whom four horses carry, all white, of one and the same color, of the same blood, tall, crushing down the hates of all haters" (*Yašt* 5.13).⁶³ Mithra, the god of heavenly light and truth, is described as "the warrior of the white

⁶¹ Zheng, *Weijin Nanbeichao*, 172–173, 177.

⁶² Shanxi et al., "Taiyuan nanjiao," 10, pl. 1.1.

⁶³ Darmesteter, *Sîrôzahs, Yašts, and Nyâyiš*, 57.

horse, of the sharp spear, the long spear, the quick arrows; foreseeing and clever” and “for whom white stallions, yoked to his chariot, draw it, on one golden wheel, with a full shining axle” (*Yašt* 10.102, 10.136).⁶⁴ In another verse, Mithra’s chariot is embraced by the great Ashi Vanguhi, the goddess of fortune and wealth (*Yašt* 10.68).⁶⁵ Sraoša, the god of obedience, “is drawn by four white, radiant, transparent, bounteous, knowing steeds, casting no shadow, belonging to the spiritual realm” (*Yasna* 57.27).⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the god who “keeps horses in health,” it is Drvāspa “who yokes teams of horses, who makes her chariot turn and its wheels sound, fat and glistening, strong, tall-formed, weal-possessing, health-giving, powerful to stand and powerful to turn for assistance to the faithful” (*Yašt* 9.2).⁶⁷ According to ancient Greek and Roman historians, the chariots drawn by Nisaeen horses were driven by both Ahura Mazda and Mithra and the Achaemenid kings (*Histories* 7.40).⁶⁸

Second, the horse was thought to function as the incarnation of god. According to the Avesta, the god of rain and Sirius, “the bright *x’arənah*-endowed Tištrya mixes (his) shape flying among the lights (of the sky) with the shape of a white, a beautiful one with golden ears (and) with golden bridle” (*Yašt* 8.18).⁶⁹ Additionally, Bahrām (Verethraghna), the god of victory, “made by Ahura, came to him (Zarathuštra) the third time, running in the shape of a white, beautiful horse, with yellow ears and a golden caparison (*Yašt* 14.9).”⁷⁰

Third, the horse functioned as a sacrifice for gods and the deceased. For instance, the Avesta refers to horses as sacrifices to Anahita: “Ashavazdah, the son of Pourudhākhšti, and Ashavazdah and Thrita, the sons of Sāyuzdri, offer up a sacrifice, with a hundred horses, a thousand oxen, ten thousand lambs (*Yašt* 5.72).”⁷¹ Ancient Greek historians believed that horses were used as sacrifices to the god of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 145, 155.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁶⁶ Kreyenbroek, *Sraoša in Zoroastrian Tradition*, 53.

⁶⁷ Darmesteter, *Sîrôzahs, Yašts, and Nyâyiš*, 110–111.

⁶⁸ Godley, *Herodotus*, 3: 355–357.

⁶⁹ Panaino, *Avestan Hymn to Sirius*, 44.

⁷⁰ Darmesteter, *Sîrôzahs, Yašts, and Nyâyiš*, 233.

⁷¹ Ibid., 70–71.

the Sun (Mithra),⁷² Ahura Mazda, and the god of rivers in the Achaemenid dynasty. According to Xenophon,

Next after the bulls came horses, a sacrifice for the Sun; and after them came a chariot sacred to Zeus; it was drawn by white horses with a yoke of gold and wreathed with garlands; and next, for the Sun, a chariot drawn by white horses and wreathed with garlands like the other (*Cyropaedia* 8.3.12).⁷³

Similarly, Herodotus wrote, "by that water (Strymon) the Magi slew white horses, offering thus sacrifice for good omens" (*Histories* 7.113).⁷⁴ Another Greco-Roman historian, Philostratus, believed that horses were sacrificed to the god of the sun during the Parthian dynasty, claiming that when the Parthian king invited Apollonius to perform a sacrifice with him, Apollonius "was on the point of sacrificing to the Sun as a victim a horse of the true Nisaeon breed, which he had adorned with trappings as if for a triumphal procession" (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.31).⁷⁵ Ancient Greek historians also recorded the horse as sacrifice for the deceased, notably in the case of Cyrus. The guardians of Cyrus's mausoleum, the Magians, were "given from the King a sheep a day, an allowance of meal and wine, and a horse each month, to sacrifice to Cyrus" (*Anabasis of Alexander* 6.29).⁷⁶ Describing such practices in the Achaemenid dynasty, Strabo wrote:

With earnest prayer they offer sacrifice in a purified place, presenting the victim crowned; and when the Magus, who directs the sacrifice, has divided the meat the people go away with their shares, without setting apart a portion for the gods, for they

⁷² Jones, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 2: 127.

⁷³ Miller, *Xenophon, Cyropaedia*, 2:355.

⁷⁴ Godley, *Herodotus*, 3: 417.

⁷⁵ Conybeare, *Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana*, 1: 89.

⁷⁶ Robson, *Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander*, 2: 197.

say that the god requires only the soul of the victim and nothing else; but still, according to some writers, they place a small portion of the caul upon the fire (*Geography* 15.3.13).⁷⁷

Fourth, the horse functioned as a participant in its owner's funeral, often as gift. According to Herodotus, "when the cavalry returned to the camp, Mardonius and all the army made very great mourning for Masistius, cutting their own hair and the hair of their horses and beasts of burden, and lamenting loud and long" (*Histories* 9.24).⁷⁸ Shahbazi argues that the horse thus played a role in the ceremonies held for heroes as a friend of the hero. Indeed, when someone notable died, their steed, with its mane shaven off, was part of the procession of the mourners.⁷⁹ As noted, horses were also used as gifts; for instance, as a token of honor, Cyrus gifted Syennesis "a horse with a gold-mounted bridle" (*Anabasis* 1.2.27).⁸⁰ This indicates that the horse was one of a range of gifts that only the Persian king could reward.

2. ICONOGRAPHY OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE IN ANCIENT IRAN

(1) *Achaemenid*

In the Achaemenid dynasty, the image of the riderless horse was frequently used on stamp and cylinder seals, royal palace reliefs, and stone monuments. In most cases, stamp seals depicted horses without saddles; for instance, the seal depicting a riderless horse striding to the left with a running groom is unique (Figure 15). Given the absence of inscriptions, scholars have been unable to identify the names and functions of horses on stamp seals. Regarding cylinder seals, for example, one riderless horse, No. ANE 89144, on display at the British Museum is clearly depicted as the mount of a hunter.⁸¹ Bivar connects the boar on this seal with the god Verethragna because the god typically appeared in this form and functioned as the guardian of the oath and punisher of perjury — a role especially appropriate for

⁷⁷ Jones, *Geography of Strabo*, 7: 175.

⁷⁸ Godley, *Herodotus*, 4: 185.

⁷⁹ Shahbazi, "ASB i."

⁸⁰ Brownson, *Xenophon, Anabasis*, 23–25.

⁸¹ Pope, *Survey of Persian Art*, vol. 7, pl. 123, fig. R; Curtis et al., *Forgotten Empire*, cat. no. 417.

a seal.⁸² As this seal may have been limited to official use, its promotion of religious ideas seems more appropriate. A particularly large cylinder seal, No. PFS 2899 depicts combat between two armed warriors; three dead enemies lie along the bottom of the composition, while a horse stands behind each of the combatants.⁸³ In this composition, the horses are clearly the warriors' mounts.



Figure 15. Achaemenid stamp seal. After: Mitchell/Searight, 2008, 180, no. 578.

In the Apadana reliefs of Persepolis, the riderless horses in the procession on the eastern stairway are the tribute of conquered territories to the emperor of Achaemenid, while those in the preceding scene on the upper register of the north wing of the eastern stairway are the king's mounts.⁸⁴ Currently held by the Musée Guimet, a Memphis stone monument dated to 400 BC depicts a deceased individual lying on a bed while a riderless horse walks to the right, accompanied by a figure in the upper

⁸² Bivar, *Stamp Seals*, vol. 2, *Sassanian*, 29.

⁸³ Garrison, *Ritual Landscape at Persepolis*, 100.

⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Persepolis*, vol. 1, pls. 29B, 35B, 37B, 42B, 43B, 45B, 52.

left corner (Figure 16). According to Shahbazi, this riderless horse was participating in the funeral ceremony of its master, as mentioned by Herodotus (*Histories* 9.24).⁸⁵ The image on the Memphis monument possesses cultural characteristics from both Egypt and the Achaemenids. The former is mainly embodied in the monument's shape, the posture of the deceased, and the "Ba" expressing the soul of the deceased. The latter is embodied in the depiction of riderless horses and human figures who participated in the funeral ceremony, as evidenced in the records of ancient Greek historians about the Achaemenids.

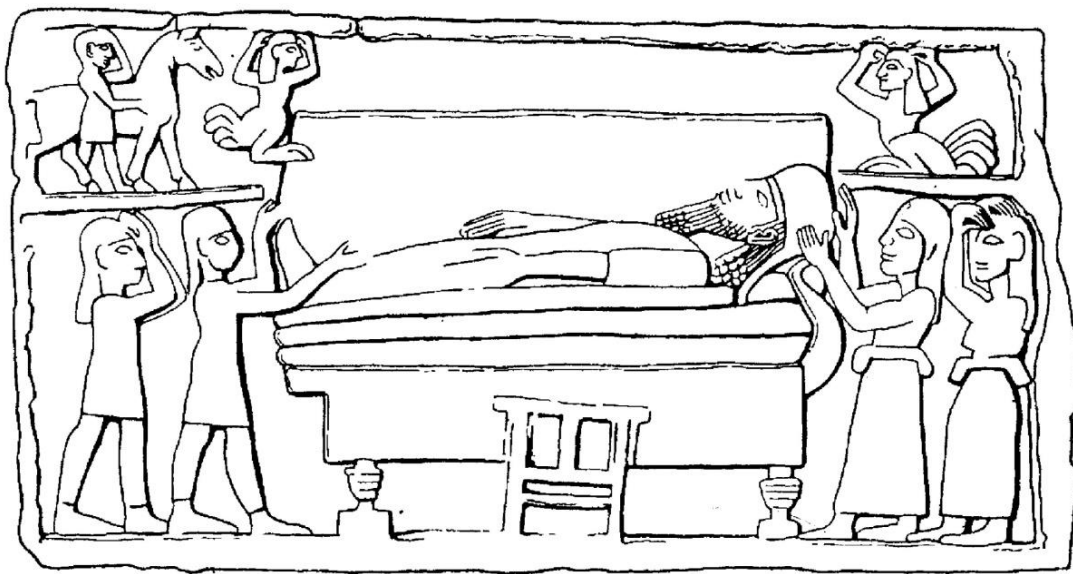


Figure 16. Achaemenid stone monument from Memphis. After: Kuhrt, 2010, 864,
Figure 17.8.

(2) Parthian

Two silver plates attributed to the Parthian dynasty feature similar compositions. Both plates display a horse facing left and standing in front of a fire or sacrificial altar. The first plate, discovered at Armazi, is dated to the second century and depicts a scene interpreted by scholars as a horse being sacrificed to Mithra, during the sacred fire ritual.⁸⁶ Historical manuscripts apparently confirm this interpretation.

⁸⁵ Shahbazi, "ASB i."

⁸⁶ Yarshater, *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3 (1), 535, fig. 3.

The second plate, obtained by Smirnov from Bori in the Sharopansko region of Kutais Province in 1902, is engraved with an Aramaic inscription, although it does not appear to have successfully interpreted. Nonetheless, Smirnov believed the motif to be Persian, but produced by the Greeks (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Parthian Silver Plate from Bori. After: Smirnov, 1909, Figure 121, no. 305.

(3) Sassanid

The appearance of the riderless horse on stamp seals from the Sassanid dynasty can be classified into two types: those with and those without wings. Regarding the wingless horse, images typically show horses involved in various scenes, including hunting and the killing of dragons. Seals typically depict individual horses; in rare cases, two horses appear together. While most of these seals lack inscriptions, identifiable inscriptions in Pahlavi include “belief in god” (‘pst’n (‘L) yzd’n),⁸⁷ “perfect righteousness” (l’styhy phlwmy),⁸⁸ and “Vīr-bōz-Ādur, the son of Nābān” (wylbwc ‘twly ZY n’b’n’n).⁸⁹ One stamp seal depicts a carving of a single horse, standing to the right; the horse is saddled, its mane erect and tail streaming, with its front left hoof raised in the air. The horse’s back contains the inscription “prnbg” — that is, Farrbay, the god of Farr (Figure 18). In regard to winged horses, most seals depict a single winged

⁸⁷ Gignoux et al., *Sceaux Sasanides*, 46, no. 10.42.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 58, no. 14.1.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 52, no. 11.9.

horse; in rare cases, two winged horses or one human figure and one winged horse appear simultaneously. Compared with seals depicting ordinary horses, the Pahlavi inscriptions on the stamp seals with winged horses are more diverse. In addition to “belief in god” and “perfect righteousness,” they possess inscriptions like “Medyōmāh” (Mytwm'hy),⁹⁰ “Gušnasp Ohrmazd the mage, the son of A” (gwšnsp 'wḥrmzd ZY mgw ZY 'tpl't'n),⁹¹ “protection” (pn'hy), “Ādurān-Gušnasp” ('t(w)r'ngwšnspey), “Ādur-Ohrmazd” ('twr'wḥrmzd), “Mihr-Ādur-Farrbay” (mtl'tlwplnb<g>), “Mihr-Vahrām” (mtr'wlhl'n), and “Farrbay-Gušnasp” (prnbggwšnspey).⁹²



Figure 18. Sassanid stamp seal. After: Gignoux/Gyselen, 1982, 93, pl. 14, Figure 30.27.

Riderless horse imagery in the stamp seals of the Sassanid dynasty reflects two features: large quantity and wide propagation. Stamp seals were used for both official documents and civilian commercial transactions, which means that the content of the inscriptions typically reflected the owner's name or religious greetings.⁹³ According to Brunner, the bull, horse, and ram were the most

⁹⁰ Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals*, 82, 144, no. 152.

⁹¹ Several patronymic variations are possible. See Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals*, 82, 146, no. 166.

⁹² Gignoux et al., *Sceaux Sasanides*, 128–131.

⁹³ According to el-Mas'udi, the Sassan king Khrosrow I Anoushirvan (r. 531–579 AD) used four inscribed jade seals for land

important animals on seals, particularly insofar as they were "linked with major divinities: the bull with Māh, the moon; the horse with Xwar, the sun; the ram with Xwarrah, Fortune."⁹⁴ However, this argument cannot be verified on the basis of the consistency of the inscription and image used on a single seal. Gyselen points out that, in some cases, the iconographic motif comprising two winged horses suggests a direct relationship with the impression "aspbed" — that is, "leader of the horses" or "cavalry." In contrast, the personal seal of the "spāhbed" Wahrām bears a lion, while that of Čihr-Burzēn is decorated with a monogram.⁹⁵ Essentially, riderless horse imagery depicted in the stamp seals of the Sassanid dynasty is not associated with one determinate god.

As such, the use of a riderless horse motif in ancient Iranian seals, reliefs, and metalwork did not communicate the same meaning. Excluding use of the motif where the meaning remains unclear, there are at least three possible meanings or roles of the riderless horse in the Achaemenid period: the horse as the mount of an individual, the horse as a tribute, and the horse as a participant of a funeral procession. Meanwhile, while the (riderless) horse was used as a sacrifice to the Sun god Mithra in the Parthian period, it appears to have been purely decorative in the Sassanid period.

taxes ("just"), manors ("agriculture"), taxes ("waiting for opportunity"), and outliers ("Loyalty"); however, there is no record of these seals or their corresponding images. Khrosrow II Parvez (r. 590–628 AD) used nine jade seals, including one for communication between post houses; this seal depicted a soldier on the back of running horse and the inscription "fast." See el-Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold*, 313, 324. Similarly, Bivar notes, "At present, however, little can be established with certainty regarding the relationship between the subject and the function of Sassanian seals, royal or private. Such indications as there are suggest that the selection of subjects, from amongst the limited range offered by the seal-engravers, was largely arbitrary." See Bivar, *Stamp Seals*, Vol. 2, *Sassanian*, 29. According to the Sasanian lawbook, Macuch distinguished between three categories of Sasanian seals: the seals of "private" individuals, the "personal" seals of state officials, and anonymous "administrative" seals. See Macuch, "Use of Seals," 79–80. For discussion of the uses and terminology of Sasanian seals, see Lerner, "Glyptic Art," 21–22.

⁹⁴ Brunner, "Sasanian Seals," 34–35.

⁹⁵ Gyselen, "Primary Sources," 167.

THE IMAGES OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE AND ITS MEANING IN ANCIENT INDIA AND SOGDIANA

1. ANCIENT INDIA

It is worth investigating whether there is any link between the imagery of the riderless horse in ancient India and Sino-Sogdian tombs. The riderless horse appears to have had three different meanings in ancient India. First, the horse is one of the seven jewels of Cakravartin, as shown in the lower left corner of the Relief of Cakravartin discovered in Jaggayyapeta and displayed in the Madras Government Museum,⁹⁶ as well as a relief from the Amaravati area displayed by the Musée Guimet in Paris.⁹⁷ Second, the horse is Kanthaka, the mount of Gautama Siddhartha, and thus a symbol of the Buddha. The most striking example of this meaning is the relief of the riderless horse on the back of the uppermost beam of the South Gateway of the great stūpa of Sanchi. In this relief, Kanthaka is passing through the gates of the Kapilavastu; the horse's mane is erect, symbolizing that it is a royal steed. An umbrella is shown above the horse's back. The groom, Chandaka, carries a kettle in front of the horse and guides the Siddhartha out of the capital.⁹⁸ According to Foucher, "To the list of conventional representations of the Buddha by a throne of stone, the imprint of two feet, a wheel or some other emblem, we must now add the no less strange representation of the Bodhisattva by a horse without a rider under an honorific parasol."⁹⁹ Third, the horse as a sacrifice in the Asvamedha ceremony.¹⁰⁰ While the meaning of the riderless horse in ancient India clearly differs from that in Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments, they share two aspects: the decorative details of the riderless horse and the riderless horse as a symbol of the horse rider.

⁹⁶ Wang, *Yindu yishu*, 141–142.

⁹⁷ Lefèvre, *Portraiture in Early India*, 157, fig. 47.

⁹⁸ Linxu et al., *Yindu*, 83–84.

⁹⁹ Foucher, "Eastern Gate," 75.

¹⁰⁰ Compareti, *Samarkand*, 199–207.

2. SOGDIANA

There are two records related to the horse and the gods of Sogdiana in Chinese historical sources. The first claims that ten horses were one of the three kinds of daily sacrifice to the god Dexi (得悉神, Txs'yc)¹⁰¹ of Caoguo (曹國, Ustrushana) in the Sui dynasty; the other two types were five camels and one hundred sheep. The source also refers to Dexi as Jinren (金人, Golden Man),¹⁰² indicating that Dexi was represented by a humanoid statue with a golden exterior. Accordingly, Dexi has no particular relation to horses. Found in the *Youyang zazhu*, written during the Tang dynasty, the second record mentions the bronze and golden horses of Judejian guo (俱德建國, Kobadian): the former was located in the Zoroastrianism temple along the Oxus River, while the latter rose from the Oxus River on New Year's Day (*Nowruz*). According to *Youyang zazhu*:

銅馬：俱德建國烏滸河中，灘派〔流〕中有火祆祠。相傳祆神本自波斯國乘神通來此，常見靈異，因立祆祠。內無象，於大屋下置大小爐，舍簷向西，人向東禮。有一銅馬，大如次馬，國人言自天下，屈前腳在空中而對神立，後腳入土。自古數有穿視者，深數十丈，竟不及其蹄。西域以五月爲歲，每歲日，烏滸河中有馬出，其色金，與此銅馬嘶相應，俄復入水。近有大食王不信，入祆祠將壞之，忽有火燒其兵，遂不敢毀。¹⁰³

Bronze horse: there is one [god's] temple of Zoroastrianism on the bank of the Oxus River in Judejianguo. It is said that the god of Zoroastrianism originated from Persia, spread and came to this country through magical power, and founded this [god's] temple of Zoroastrianism because strange things were seen frequently. There is no [god's] image inside the temple. Two fire altars, one large and one small, are under the large house. Its gate opens to the west, and is worshiped by people facing to the east.

¹⁰¹ Déxi (Txs'yc) of Sogdiana is equivalent to the Persian god Tištriya. See Zhang, "Caoguo 'Dexishen'."

¹⁰² Wei, *Suishu*, 6: 1855.

¹⁰³ Duan, *Youyang zazhu*, 777–779.

There is a bronze horse as big as a second level horse. The people of the country said that [the bronze horse] came from the heaven, and it stood and faced to the god, with its fore-hoofs bending in the air and back-hoofs extending into the ground. Since ancient times, there have been many people who have dug hundreds of feet deep, but could not find the back-hoofs [of the bronze horse]. Since the fifth month was the first month of year in the Western Region, on every New Year Festival, one horse in gold color floated from the Oxus River, neighed with the bronze horse in short time and then reentered the river. Recently, one [local] Arab king who did not believe this legend, entered the temple and wanted to destroy [the bronze horse]; his soldiers suddenly caught fire, and he then dared not destroyed it.

Dated to the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, a statuette representing the god of the river Oxus in the form of the satyr Marsyas playing the double flute was discovered in the temple of Oxus at Takht-i Sangin, near Kobadian. The statuette bears the following inscription: “Atrosokes dedicated his votive present to Oxos.”¹⁰⁴ After the fall of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, Kobadian and its surrounding lands fell under the successive rule of the Kushans, Hephthalites, Türks. Accordingly, the tale recorded by Duan likely originated between the sixth and eighth centuries. As the entry regarding the bronze horse appears in a chapter titled “Wuyi” (物異, anomalous thing), it is difficult to identify the gods after which the bronze and gold horses were named. In view of local Kobadian gods and worship traditions, it is likely that the golden horse represented the god of the Oxus River.

Images of the riderless horse can be found on the outer relief of ossuaries and painted on the walls of palaces and temples. For instance, two ossuaries located in the vicinity of Shahr-i Sabz in Uzbekistan — namely, the Sivas ossuary (discovered in 1976) and the Yumalaktepa ossuary (discovered in 2012) — have the same composition. Their compositions can be divided into two parts: an upper and a lower register. The upper register includes a god in a seated posture, gods judging the soul of the deceased, and musical accompaniment. The lower register shows a sacrificial ceremony: a square altar

¹⁰⁴ Harmatta, *Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 2, 116, 407. Francfort believed that an Ai Khanoum temple with indented niches was also dedicated to the Oxus (Vaxšu) deity; see Francfort, “Ai Khanoum.”

and priest are depicted in the center of the image, with two goats on the left and a riderless horse on the right. However, where the Sivaz ossuary (Figure 19) depicts a circular fire altar in front of the riderless horse, the Yumalaktepa ossuary (Figure 20) has a female figure kneeling to the left of a square altar. According to Marshak, the larger figure raising the forefinger of their right hand and holding a scepter in their left hand on the right side of the upper register of the Sivaz (Kashka-darya valley) ossuary is the god Mithra, and the riderless horse is "dedicated to Mithra, a judge of the dead is placed in the scene of a funerary ceremony."¹⁰⁵ While Marshak's argument seems convincing insofar as the registers depict the judgement of souls, it does not stand up to scrutiny for three reasons. First, the identification of Mithra is untenable insofar as few scholars support the notion that Mithra appeared as the riderless horse form in Sogdiana.¹⁰⁶ Second, the linking of Mithra in text and image is dubious because Mithra's hosting of the judgment of souls in texts does not equate to the god's appearance in images of adjudgment scene. Third, as previously noted, in regard to ancient Iran, the horse as a sacrifice is not only an offering to Mithra as there is no unique link between the horse and Mithra. In short, the riderless horse and two goats are likely the sacrifices to the deceased in the judgment of their soul — the deceased presented in the form of small naked figure on a scale or strip.

¹⁰⁵ Marshak, "Miho Couch," 28.

¹⁰⁶ Grenet, "Mithra dieu Iranien"; Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 102–114, fig. 64–90; Zhang, "Xianshen Mitela."

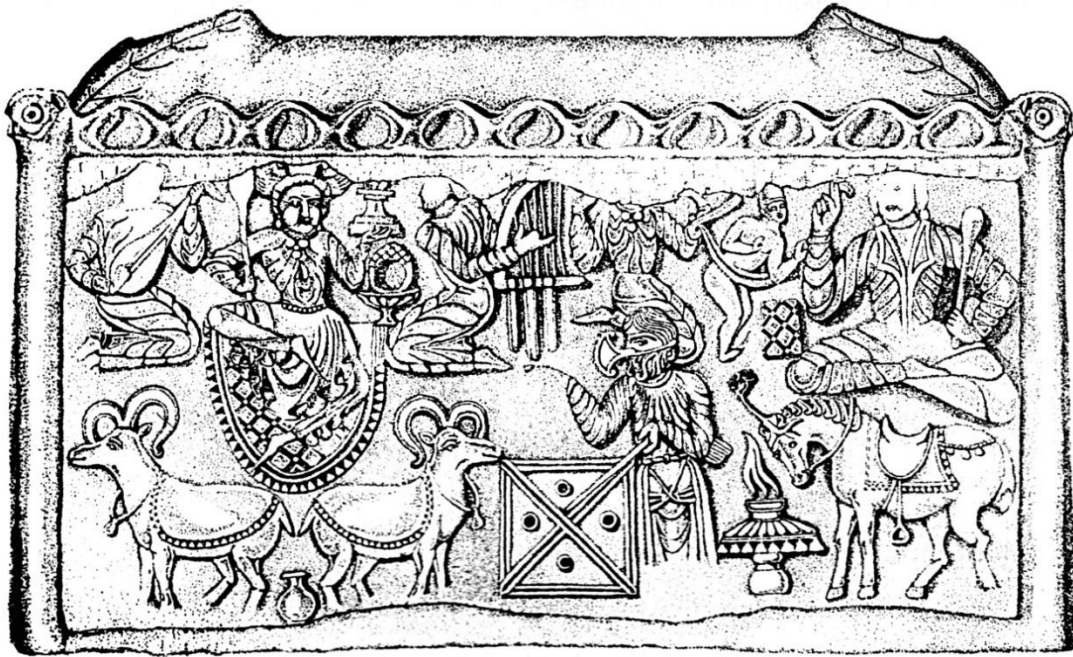


Figure 19. Sivaz Ossuary. After: Krashennikova, 1993, pl. 4, Figure 6.



Figure 20. Yumalaktepa Ossuary. After: Berdimuradov et al. 2012, pl. 1.

The images of the riderless horse painted on the walls of the "Hall of the Ambassadors" at Afrasiab in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and temple at Panjikent, Tajikistan, have received academic attention. The southern wall of the "Hall of the Ambassadors" depicts Varkhuman, king of Sogdiana, participating in and directing a great procession involving funerary rites in honor of his ancestors during the *Nowruz* festival. In the central part of the procession are four geese and a riderless horse guided by two priests wearing *padām* (Figure 21). Al'baum considered the ostriches (geese) and horse gifts dedicated to Varkhuman by Chaganian emissaries, while Antonini proposed that the horse "may well be intended as a royal sacrifice"¹⁰⁷ — an argument with which most scholars agree.¹⁰⁸



Figure 21. South Wall of "Hall of the Ambassadors" at Afrasiab. After: Al'baum 1975, 47, Figure 12.

¹⁰⁷ Antonini, "Paintings in Afrasiab (Samarkand)," 113, 129.

¹⁰⁸ Compareti et al., *Royal Naurūz in Samarkand*.

The riderless horse appears in the painting on the southern wall of the tetrastyle hall in Temple No. 2 at Panjikent. The left side of the southern wall possesses the famous “mourning scene,” while the remains of the right side depicts a red riderless horse with an erect mane, a groom holding the horse’s reins, and part of several figures in the procession.¹⁰⁹ There are four or five gods above the red horse; one god is wearing armor. The bottom of the rightmost corner of the southern wall depicts two rows of small figures falling or being dumped from the city wall or bridge.¹¹⁰ Yakubovsky argues that these figures are Zoroastrian sinners falling from the *Chinvat* Bridge, while the riderless horse on the northern wall belongs to Siyāvush.¹¹¹ To date, scholars have provided four possible identities for the deceased figure in the “mourning scene”: namely, Siyāvush, Furōd (the son of Siyāvush), a woman,¹¹² or Tammuz.¹¹³ Supported by Tolstov, Rapoport, and D’yakonov, the first interpretation seems most likely, particularly insofar as Siyāvush was the god of death and the revival of vegetation, and all of the dead were honored collectively in the form of Siyāvush. Accompanied by sacrifices, the commemoration of Siyāvush, was closely linked to the cult of the dead, as well as to hopes of obtaining prosperity in both during and after death.¹¹⁴ In contrast, the scene on the southern wall of the tetrastyle hall in Temple II depicts a riderless horse in the context of a hero struggling against his demonic adversary and as the mount of the hero in the painting of Room 50 in Sector 23 of Panjikent (Figure 22). As Marshak notes, the interpretation of the riderless horse in the Panjikent painting, “Hall of the Ambassadors,” Sivaz ossuary, and gateposts of Anyang should be linked to the sacrifice of the deceased.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ D’yakonov, “Rospisi Pendzhikenta,” 112–113.

¹¹⁰ Grenet, “Le Mythe de Nana,” 9. Grenet and Marshak were the first to publish this mural; however, it is worth noting that fig. 3 in their paper is upside down.

¹¹¹ Yakubovskiy, “Drevniy Pandzhikand,” 256–257.

¹¹² Azarpay et al., *Sogdian Painting*, 128–130.

¹¹³ Grenet, “Le mythe de Nana.”

¹¹⁴ Litvinsky, *Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 3, 227.

¹¹⁵ Marshak, “Le Programme Iconographique,” 11–12.

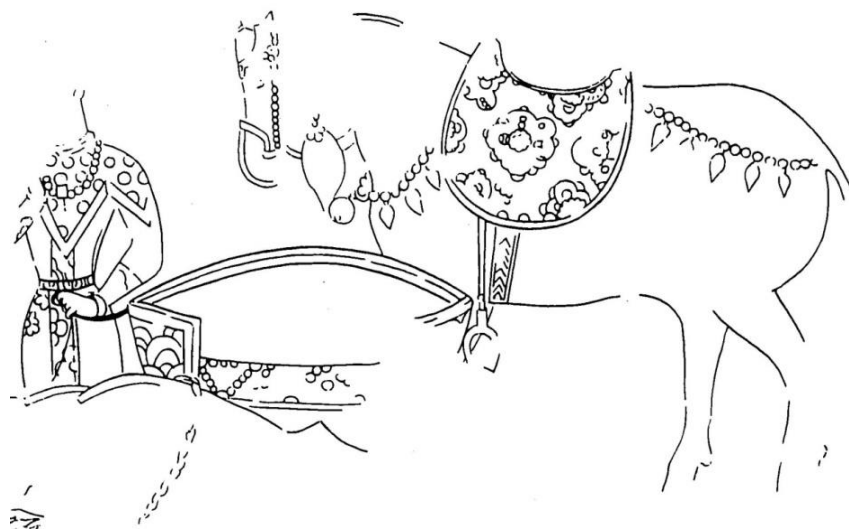


Figure 22. West Wall of Room 50 Sector 23 at Panjikent. After: Marshak, 2002, 111, Figure 58.

It is worth noting that the homologous records of the worshipping of ancestors and Siyāvush of Sogdiana exist in Chinese historical sources from the Sui dynasty, including ossuaries and paintings. For instance, the Kangguo (康國, Samarkand) “builds an ancestral temple, and sacrifices in the sixth month, and the subjugated countries all come to participate in the sacrifice.”¹¹⁶

〔石國〕國城之東南立屋，置座于中，正月六日、七月十五日以王父母燒余之骨，金甕盛之，置于牀上，巡遶而行，散以花香雜果，王率臣下設祭焉。

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[The State of the Shi] (Tashkend) builds a house [ancestral temple] in the southeast of the capital, and places a seat inside the house. On the sixth day of the first month, and on the fifteenth day of the seventh month [of every year], its King leads the minister to offer sacrifices to his dead parents. [During the sacrificial ceremony], the gold ossuary

116 Wei et al., *Suishu* 6: 1849.

117 Ibid., 1850.

containing the burned remains of the King's parents is placed on a bed and carried by the procession, as flowers and fruit are scattered.

Written during the Sui dynasty, the *Xīfān Jì* refers to Kāngguó as a seven-day festival held during the seventh month to celebrate the Shen Er (神兒, the son of God) or Tian Er (天兒, the son of Heaven).¹¹⁸ Most scholars agree that this may have been Siyāvush. As such, Chinese sources indicate that celebrations of Siyāvush and the ancestors were likely held at the same time. Nonetheless, there are no Chinese records of horses as sacrifices.

Cai identifies three general differences between the Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran and the Mazdaism of Sogdiana: namely, pantheon, image, and burial.¹¹⁹ Cai's argument is not convincing for the following reasons. First, the Sogdian pantheon had at least two local or non-Zoroastrian deities — namely, the Oxus river god and the goddess Nana¹²⁰ — who did not exist in the Sasanian pantheon. Additionally, Ahura Mazda occupied a lower position in Sogdiana than in Sasanian Persia. Second, according archaeological records — such as investiture reliefs of the Sasanian emperor by Ahura Mazda, Anahita, or Mithra — were classified as reflecting Sasanian Zoroastrianism or Sogdian Mazdaism on the basis of whether they depicted a deity. As Gignoux argues, “The cult of images was not, in eastern Iran, subject to the iconoclastic taboo of Sasanian Zoroastrianism.”¹²¹ However, scholars have recently rejected the basis of Gignoux's argument — that is, the “Sasanian Iconoclasm” proposed by Boyce.¹²² Third, Sasanian Persian and Sogdian funerary customs share both similarities and distinct differences. According to archeological and written records, both involve the exposure of the dead on the *dakhma*. However, they differ in terms of the disposal of bones, with Sasanian customs possessing greater variety

¹¹⁸ This reference from the *Xīfān Jì* (西蕃記, Records of Western Countries by Wéi Jié, 韋節) is cited in Chapter 193 of the *Tongdian*, which was written during the Tang dynasty. See Du, *Tongdian*, 5: 5256.

¹¹⁹ Cai, “Suteren zai zhongguo,” 32.

¹²⁰ Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 191; Grenet, “Iranian Gods.”

¹²¹ Litvinsky, *Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 3, 410.

¹²² Boyce, “Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians”; Shenkar, “Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm”; Farridnejad, *Die Sprache der Bilder*, 89–99.

than the Sogdiana, which primarily used the necropolis or *naus*.¹²³ Customs also differ in terms of the quantity, material, and imagery used in ossuaries. Sasanian ossuaries are few in number, mostly composed of stone, and contain little in the way of imagery.¹²⁴ In contrast, Sogdian ossuaries are large in number, mostly ceramic, and rich in imagery.¹²⁵ Indeed, the wealth of Sogdian ossuaries and tombs in China provide the most direct original form and image data of Sogdian Zoroastrian beliefs and funerary customs.¹²⁶

CONCLUSION

The image of the riderless horse in Sino-Sogdian tombs is primarily found in the cultural tradition of Chinese tombs, and its relationship with similar images outside China can be explained as follows. First, in ancient India, the use of the riderless horse as a symbol of Buddha or Bodhisattva before and after the Christian era was limited to Buddhism and before the appearance of the humanoid Buddha statue. In terms of religious background, the meaning of this imagery was entirely different from that given it by the Sogdians who followed Zoroastrianism in China. However, two similarities bear further scrutiny. There is a consistency in the riderless horse imagery, including highly detailed decoration, standing manes, and the presence of an umbrella above the horse's back. They also share a similar development in the artistic expression of the riderless horse, which transformed from the mount to the symbol of the horse rider. Second, in written sources of and on ancient Iran, the image of the riderless horse had two uses: religious and secular. In regard to the former, the riderless horse represented the mount or incarnation of the gods, as well as a sacrifice to the gods. In terms of its secular usage, the image of the

¹²³ There are four kinds of Sasanian subterranean burials: plain earth burials, stone four walled graves, pithoi and torpedo jar burials, and stone ossuaries and burial repositories. Ten kinds of above ground burials have been identified: rock cut niches, rock cut chambers, rock cut cists, rock cut platforms, pillar ossuaries, pillar pits, unknown types of ossuaries, monumental ossuaries, tower tombs, and the rock cut structures of Kuh-e Hossein. See Farjamirad, *Mortuary Practice*, 251–376. Regarding Sogdian practices, see Grenet, *Les pratiques funéraires*, 157–186.

¹²⁴ Simpson et al., "Old Bones Overturned."

¹²⁵ Pavchinskaia, "Sogdian Ossuaries"; Pugachenkova, "Form and Style"; Pavchinskaia, *Rannesrednevekovyye ossuarii Sogda*.

¹²⁶ Grenet, "Zoroastrian Funerary Practices"; Grenet, "Zoroastrianism in Central Asia."

riderless horse served various functions, including tribute to the conquering country, a gift bestowed by a king, and a sacrifice to a deceased king. Additionally, images of the (riderless) horse in ancient Iran were accompanied with either no inscription or various appellations, making it difficult to identify the image as representative of any particular god. As noted, the only similarity between the uses of riderless horse imagery is its employment in ancient Iranian and Sino-Sogdian tombs — that is, in the context of the deceased. Third, in Sogdiana, the image of the riderless horse in ossuaries and paintings is primarily related to the theme of death. The riderless horse is clearly a sacrifice to the deceased ossuary owner in the case of ossuaries, and to the ancestor of the king in the case of paintings on temple walls.

This paper covers riderless horse imagery over several periods and areas: namely, ancient China (first–fifth century), the Parthian (second century), the Sino-Sogdian (fifth–sixth century), and the Sogdiana (sixth–eighth century). The possibility that the latter period was influenced by the three preceding it cannot be ruled out. Nonetheless, there does not appear to be any relationship between Sogdian and Sasanian riderless horse imagery. Indeed, the orientation of the riderless horse reflects the concept of respect and humility. In the Sino-Sogdian tombs (excluding the Qinqzhou tomb), as well as those in ancient China, Parthian, and Sogdiana, the left-facing riderless horse symbolizes respect. In contrast, images of the riderless horse from the Sasanian era are all right-facing.¹²⁷ Generally, the closest comparison between image of riderless horse in Sino-Sogdian tombs are the ossuaries of Sogdiana, which share four similarities: image representation, image carrier (funeral), thematic background (ritual ceremony), and ethnic identity (Sogdian).

Various animals feature in China's Sogdian tombs, prompting the question of why the riderless horse was chosen as a symbol of the deceased tomb owner. Adopting a broader global perspective, this paper suggests the following reasons. First, the horse had significant practical value in everyday life, playing a prominent role in the economy,¹²⁸ military, and politics, particularly given its attributes of physical strength and speed.¹²⁹ Second, kings and heroes are always linked to a famous type of horse

¹²⁷ According to Liu, in Persia, “it is generally considered that the right signifies the respect and the left signifies the humble.” See Liu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 16: 5312.

¹²⁸ Panaino, “Proto-Iranian Myth about Horses,” 31.

¹²⁹ There are few images of oxcart in Sogdian tombs in China, possibly because oxcarts were relatively rare in Sogdiana.

known as "sweaty blood horses," such as the Nisaeen breed favored by the kings of ancient Iran, the Xiji (西極, Western Pole), and Tianma (天馬, Heavenly horse) favored by the emperors of ancient China.¹³⁰ As nobility (mostly *s'rtip'w*, 薩保, Sabao), the tomb owners naturally embraced the opportunity to display their high status. Third, the horse as a sacrifice appeared in funeral rites and in the ritual ceremony dedicated to the ancestors during every *Nowruz* festival. Conducted by the descendants, this practice served to memorialize the deceased or ancestors, positioned as enjoying their freedom in Heaven, but also to ensure blessing for themselves. Finally, the horse was understood as a means of communication between the two circles of Yang (陽, life) and Yin (陰, death); as a mode of transport, the horse transferred the tomb owner from the living world to the afterlife.

This study argues that researchers should not observe images and texts in isolation when interpreting their meanings. Alternately, scholars should vigilantly consider the historical periods, regions, and cultural contexts surrounding images and texts, to discern the validity and authenticity of their interpretations. A conclusion for this research remains undeclared, pending further collection and analysis of greater quantities of original data. An insufficient collection of new data and materials would lead to a failure of this conclusion. Furthermore, caution must be exercised regarding a direct association between future discoveries from iconographical studies of the Sino-Sogdian tombs to those of other periods and regions.

According to Ouyang, "among these countries [i.e. those in Sogdiana], only this country [Huoxun 火尋] has oxcart sat by the merchants traveling through these countries." See Ouyang, *Xin Tangshu*, 20: 6247.

¹³⁰ Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 58–70.

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