

Aesop's Fables Represented in the Mural Paintings at Panjikant

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Very evident external borrowings among the 7th-8th century Sogdian paintings at Panjikant comprise Chinese, Indian and Roman-Hellenistic elements. Such borrowings can be noted both in minor details and in the adoption of iconographical forms.

It is now very clear that Sogdian artists chose to represent some of their own divinities according to Indian iconography¹ and also the stereotyped image of the wise old man was based on the person of the Indian priest (Brahman)². Other scenes represented at Panjikant have been identified only through the study of Sogdian texts obviously based on Indian literature since the subjects of those tales were completely absorbed by local artists and contextualized in their own cultural milieu through different formulae more appropriate for a Central Asian audience: this is the case of the scenes from the *Pañcatantra* and *Mahabaratha* which are considered to be represented at Panjikant³. The people in those paintings are dressed according to Sogdian fashion and the only hint at India is represented by the figure of the Brahman or animals like the jackal and the lion. The image of the clever hare and the stupid lion at the pool has a clear parallel in Islamic book illustrations of *Kalila wa Dimna* (that is based on the *Pañcatantra* tales)⁴.

The presence of the Hellenistic elements in Sogdian art reflects exactly the same phenomenon and is the result of relationships that possibly started already during the Greco-Macedonian occupation of Central Asia⁵. Moreover, such a phenomenon is supported by written sources in Sogdian or those languages strictly connected with Sogdian. Representations of Aesop's fables can be recognized in Sogdian paintings at Panjikant and literary fragments recovered in Western China approximately one century ago clearly demonstrate the spread of Classical literary themes in Central Asia and, specifically, aesopean ones. However, it is worth remembering that typical Roman-Hellenistic subjects can be observed also among the mural paintings at other Sogdian sites: the she-wolf feeding the twins at Qala-ye Qahqaha I, room 11 (7th-8th century) is certainly the most representative one (fig. 1)⁶. Some have proposed that that scene is a representation of the origin of the ancient Turks: and, in fact, according to some written sources the Turks arose from the last survivor of their tribe and a she-wolf who saved and fed him in a cave⁷. It is not possible to state which myth was intended to be represented in the painting at Qala-ye Qahqaha although its iconography is definitely Roman with two children and not one as in the Turkish legend. The same attitude of the she-wolf with her head looking back recalls some Byzantine gold coins recovered at Panjikant⁸.

One of the painted panels from room 41, sector 6 at Panjikant and considered to be a representation of Aesop's fable 53 has as its subject a group of brothers whose father is explaining that they are exactly like a bunch of sticks: if they stay together they cannot be broken easily while each one for himself could easily be destroyed by their enemies (fig. 2). For that fable, too, B. Maršak could not decide if it was intended to be precisely a representation of an aesopean fable or of a local legend⁹. It is worth remembering, in fact, that there is a similar story about the origin of

¹ Grenet, 1994.

² Marshak, 2002: 62-67.

³ Ibid.: 127-144; *ibid.*, 2004. On the problematic identification of the *Mahabaratha* scenes at Panjikant, see: Compareti, forthcoming.

⁴ Raby, 1991.

⁵ Marshak, Raspopova, 1998; Abdullaev, 2007: 539-544.

⁶ Brentjes, 1971; Marshak, 2002: 143-145. Qala-ye Qahqaha was an important centre of Ustrušana, a region of Central Asia which adopted Sogdian language and culture.

⁷ Klyashtorny, 1999.

⁸ Raspopova, 1999.

⁹ Marshak, 2002: 86, 89.

the On Oq tribes that is to say, once more, a legend connected with the ancient Turks¹⁰. Maršak was very cautious in proposing any definitive identification: he was extremely well versed in ancient fables and tales¹¹ and, for this reason he preferred to state that stories of this kind are very common among many peoples at any time. In any case, Aesop was not the only famous narrator of fables. He was preceded by Anacarsis (who was considered to have been Scythian) and followed by Phaedrus in Rome. Possibly, many others existed of whom no traces have remained.

It is not possible to add much more to Maršak's wise attitude. It is worthy saying that the painting in question is badly damaged and it is difficult to distinguish exactly what the group of people sitting cross-legged is holding in their hands. So, it would be preferable to admit that only the discovery of other representations of that story in Sogdian art (possibly together with some inscriptions) could allow a correct identification. Certainly the Sogdians knew the Turkish myth and, most likely, Aesop's fable as well. Maršak always insisted on the existence in the Sogdiana of illustrated manuscripts and sketch books that local artists will have used for their paintings. The same rectangular shape of the panels showing Aesop's fables and other stories reproduces an enlarged version of a page of an illustrated book which, possibly, also used the same row of pearls that separates every section of the mural painting¹².

There is a second panel from room 1, sector 21 which is considered to be a representation of Aesop's probably most famous fable (number 87): the one about the goose that laid golden eggs (fig. 3). In this case the fable is represented as a series of scenes moving from right to left where it is possible to recognize the same person first in the act of checking a golden egg and later killing the animal in order to get more eggs only to understand the stupidity of his idea at the very end of the sequence.

This kind of sequence represented inside the same frame and limited by rows of pearls can be often observed in the paintings at Panjikant. It is a pattern which does not seem to be fixed and in fact it is repeated sometimes from right to left or vice-versa and, in some cases, it presents different parts of the story disposed vertically or horizontally according to an apparently chaotic scheme. Something similar appears already in the art of Gandhāra (in what specialists call "narrative art") although the paratactic representations of Greek mythological scenes on several ancient illustrated vases could be considered as belonging to the same idea of rendering a story sequentially. It can be observed, too, in Sasanian art, especially in some late reliefs such as those at Taq-i Bustan. It is not important to know how the Sogdians got acquainted with that kind of sequential representation. It is obvious that its presence implies the existence of literary texts at the base of many of the paintings at Panjikant. The problem was to render graphically those tales normally narrated in a book or recited orally by actors or people such as the Parthian minstrels (*gōsān*)¹³.

In any case, the representation of the fable of the goose that laid golden eggs seems to follow the aesopian version since, as Maršak already observed, a local version exists in contemporary Tajikistan but is slightly different in that the main character eventually becomes a king¹⁴. This happy end does not seem at all to appear in the Sogdian painting from Panjikant room 1, sector 21 although the main character is wearing a typical Central Asian dress.

There are other examples of Classical themes represented in Sogdian paintings which were not immediately recognized because the characters appear in local attire or have been executed according to a style which is completely "sogdianized". In the beginning of the nineties of the last century M. Mode recognized in the small people fighting with bows against birds in a painting from Afrāsyāb (ancient Samarkand) the pigmies of Classical literature who were thought to have

¹⁰ Dobrovits, 2004; Stark, 2006/2007.

¹¹ His uncle Samuil Yakovlevič Maršak. (1887-1964), was a famous specialist in the study and recollection of fables, mainly Russian ones.

¹² Marshak, 2002: 99.

¹³ Boyce, 1957.

¹⁴ Marshak, 2002: 137.

inhabited India (fig. 4)¹⁵. His observations are supported by Chinese written sources based on Classical legends where it is clearly reported that pigmies lived in India or some parts of Central Asia where the Turks lived and were obliged to fight continuously with giant birds that were persecuting them¹⁶. Ten years after M. Mode's observation, F. Grenet found another parallel between India and the Classical world in the same painting from Afrāsyāb: According to his identification, the scene with two people sitting frontally towards each other besides a central circular object should be recognized as a local variant of Urania teaching astronomy to Aratus through the use of an armillary sphere (fig. 5). Since that scene pertains to India, it is very likely that it should be interpreted as the transmission of astronomy from the Greeks to the Indians¹⁷.

Despite the problems of identification, those paintings from Panjikant dated to the first part of the 8th century are among the most ancient representations of Aesop's fables with the only exception of few other enigmatic images. A Greek red-figure cup dated c. 460 BC now kept in the Vatican Museum displaying a large-headed person together with a fox (fig. 6) and a so-called cosmetic-tray from Gandhāra (2nd century?) representing a fox and a crane besides a person identified with Aesop himself from a private collection (fig. 7) have been considered to be associable to Classical fables¹⁸. Other figures of animals such as the crane and the wolf or the so-called "funeral of the fox" represented very often in Medieval Italian sculptures and mosaics mainly dated to 11th-13th centuries (fig. 8) have been cautiously identified as subjects taken from Aesop's fables although it is not excluded that they might be adaptations of the *Physiologus*, a literary work probably written between 2nd-4th centuries Egypt (or Syria), or the 12th-13th centuries *Roman de Renart* that both found great popularity in the Christian world¹⁹. For many Christian tales with animals as allegoric figures, Indian borrowings (specifically Buddhist ones) have been claimed²⁰ making any attribution of figural representations extremely arduous. In the Sogdiana, the situation is rendered less complicated by the presence of fragmentary texts which can support the paintings considered here although it is worth remembering that none of them was recovered inside its ancient boundaries but outside them, in present day Western China in a Buddhist milieu.

Caption for the figures

Fig. 1. Qala-ye Qahqaha I, room 11. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 96.

Fig. 2. Panjikant room 41, sector 6. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 41.

Fig. 3. Panjikant room 1, sector 21. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 86.

Fig. 4. Afrāsyāb "Hall of the Ambassadors", eastern wall (detail). After: Compareti, de la Vaissière, 2006: pl. 6, p. 27 (reproduction F. Ory).

Fig. 5. Afrāsyāb "Hall of the Ambassadors", eastern wall (detail). After: Al'baum, 1975: fig. 27.

Fig. 6. Painted vase, Gregorian Museum, Vatican City. After: Peris, 1995: pl. I.

Fig. 7. Toilet-tray from Gandhāra, private collection. After: Peris, 1995: pl. II.

Fig. 8. Detail of a Saint Marc mosaic (11th century), Venice. After: M. Toso Borella: <http://www.isolainvisibile.it/Arte/II%20Pavimento%20Musivo%20di%20San%20Donato/IIFuneraleDellaVolpe.html>.

¹⁵ Mode, 1993: 98. Cfr. de la Vaissière, 2006: 159.

¹⁶ Schafer, 1963: 48. Cfr. Compareti, 2009: 155.

¹⁷ Grenet, 2003; *ibid.*, 2006: 47-48.

¹⁸ Peris, 1995.

¹⁹ Zambon, 1975; Battaglia, 1980.

²⁰ Peris, 1995; Wilson, 2009.

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