

Individual End in Zoroastrian Eschatology Four Panels from a Sogdian Tomb in Chang'an

Sonia Mirzaei¹ 

Type of Article: **Research**

Pp: 173-210

Received: 2025/01/26; Revised: 2025/03/14; Accepted: 2025/03/18

 <https://doi.org/10.61882/PJAS.1241>

Abstract

In 2003, the discovery of a Sogdian tomb in the historic city of Chang'an opened a new horizon for researchers studying cultural exchanges and Zoroastrian eschatological beliefs. This tomb, belonging to Wirkak, a leader of a trade caravan, and his wife, Wiyusi, contains eleven stone panels, four of which directly depict concepts related to individual end in Zoroastrian eschatology. These panels illustrate the fate of the soul after death, providing a pictorial interpretation of Zoroastrian teachings within a Sino-Sogdian context. Despite previous studies, the details of these panels have not been comprehensively analyzed from a Zoroastrian eschatological perspective, and some existing interpretations require reassessment. Employing a text-image analysis approach, this article examines the eighth to the eleventh panels of Wirkak's tomb and, by drawing on the Avesta and Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, seeks to elucidate the visual representations of eschatological concepts in this artwork.

Keywords: Zoroastrian Eschatology, Individual End, Fate of The Soul, Wirkak's Tomb, Chang'an.



Parseh Journal of Archaeological Studies (PJAS)

Journal of Archeology Department of
Archeology Research Institute, Cultural
Heritage and Tourism Research
Institute (RICHT), Tehran, Iran

Publisher: Cultural Heritage and
Tourism Research Institute (RICHT).

Copyright © 2025 The Authors.
Published by Cultural Heritage and
Tourism Research Institute (RICHT).
This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 4.0 International
license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). Non-commercial
uses of the work are permitted, provided
the original work is properly cited.

1. Graduate student, Asia-Africa Institute/CSMC, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany.

Email: Sonia.mirzaei@gmail.com

* The abbreviations for primary sources in this paper are as follows: Ardā Wirāz-nāmag (AWN.); Bundahišn (Bd.); Dādeštān ī dēnīg (DD.); Dēnkard (D.); Hādōxt nask (HN.); Mēnōg ī xrad (MX.); Rivāyat ī Pahlavī (RP.); Rivāyat ī Dārāb-Hormazdyār (RDH.); Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspāram (WZ.); Vendīdād (Vd.); Zand ī Wahmān Yasn (ZWY.); Yasn (Y.); Yašt (Yt.); Visperad (V.); Kerdīr's inscription (KSM); Bṛhatsamhitā (B.); Large Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras (LPS.); Mahāsaṃnipāta "Gaganagaṅjaparipṛcchā" (Ma.); Jātaka (J.)

Citations: Mirzaei, S., (2025). "Individual End in Zoroastrian Eschatology Four Panels from a Sogdian Tomb in Chang'an". *Parseh J Archaeol Stud.*, 9(31): 173-210. <https://doi.org/10.61882/PJAS.1241>

Homepage of this Article: <https://journal.richt.ir/mbp/article-1-1241-en.html>

© The Author(s)



Introduction

The belief in life after death, resurrection (MP *rišt-āxēz*), and the fate of the soul is one of the fundamental doctrines of Zoroastrianism, profoundly shaping its theological framework. In this tradition, the soul's destiny after death is significant not only from a moral perspective but also from a cosmic standpoint.

According to the Avesta, after death, ¹ each individual's soul must cross the Činwad bridge (MP *činwad* / Av. *činuuatō pərətu-*) and undergo judgment. This judgment is based on the person's good and bad deeds in earthly life, determining whether the soul ascends to paradise (MP *wahišt*) or descends into hell (MP *dušox*) (Skjærvø, 2011: 330). Furthermore, Zoroastrians believe in the concept of *Daēnā* as the personification of one's deeds, which serves as a guide for the soul in the afterlife journey (Skjærvø, 2011: 326; HN. 20-2.15). These concepts underscore the deep connection between the belief in postmortem reward and punishment and the moral order of the universe in Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrian eschatological teachings can be examined on two levels of "the end": ²

1. Individual: This includes the fate of the soul after death, the judgment of souls, the designation of the righteous (MP *ahlaw*) and sinful (MP *wināhgar*) souls, and the reception of reward (MP *pādašn*) or punishment (MP *pādifrāh*), determined by one's earthly deeds.

2. Cosmic: This encompasses the cycle of millennia, the emergence of saviors, *frašō.kərəti-* (YAv.), ³ the destruction of Ahriman (MP *ahreman*), and the restoration of creation by Ahura Mazda, marking the ultimate fate of the universe (Skjærvø, 2011: 340–1; D. 5.8/8).

This study places particular emphasis on analyzing these two levels of Zoroastrian eschatology, as the central objective of the paper is to demonstrate that four specific panels in Wirkak's tomb explicitly reference the concept of individual end. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of the religious content of these panels but also sheds light on their role in the cultural interactions between Iran and China.

The Tomb of Wirkak and Its Place in Sino-Sogdian Art

The tomb of Wirkak and his wife, discovered in 2003 in Chang'an, the ancient capital of China, is one of the most significant examples of cultural interaction between Iran, Sogdiana, and China in Late Antiquity (Fig. 1).

This tomb, belonging to Wirkak (Sogd. *wyrk'k*), also known by the titles *Sābāo* (薩保) and *Shī jūn* (史君), a leader of a trade caravan, and his wife *Wiyusi* (Sogd. *wy'wsih*, *Kāngshì* 康氏), was constructed in 580 CE. Its overall design was influenced by traditional Chinese architectural styles. Above the entrance, a bilingual (Sogdian-Chinese)⁵ inscription provides information about Wirkak's life and social status. The couple passed away in 579 CE, just one month apart,⁶ and their children⁷ built this stone tomb in their honor.

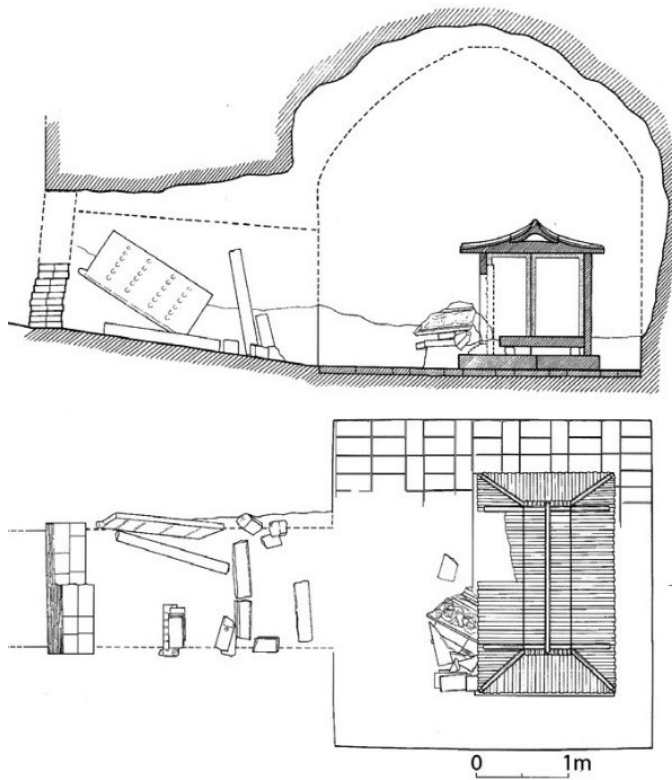
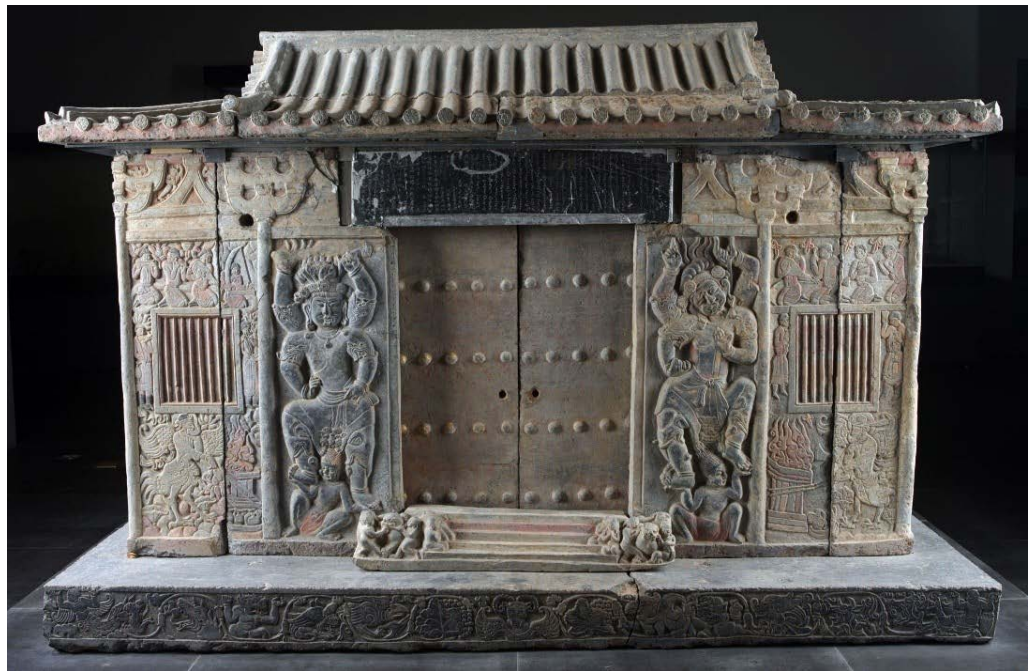


Fig. 1: The Sarcophagus of Wirkak and Wiyusi, Chang'an, 580 CE, ©Xi'an bówùyuàn 西安博物院⁴

The stone panels of this tomb narrate the life and death of Wirkak and Wiyusi, but its final four panels uniquely focus on the fate of the soul after death. These panels incorporate elements of Zoroastrian eschatology, likely reflecting Iranian religious teachings within a Sino-Sogdian cultural setting. They serve as evidence of the influence of Zoroastrian beliefs among the Sogdians who had settled in China and illustrate how these concepts were translated into the visual and symbolic language of their funerary art.

The Role of the Sogdians in China and Its Connection to Wirkak's Tomb

From the 3rd to the 8th century CE, the Sogdians played a crucial role in China's economic, cultural, and religious developments. They established extensive trade networks along the Silk Road and settled in key locations such as Chang'an, Luoyang, and Dunhuang (Wertmann, 2015: 22–5). However, their influence extended beyond commerce; as cultural intermediaries, they significantly shaped Chinese society. The Sogdian language became the lingua franca of the Silk Road, and Sogdians actively participated in translating Buddhist and Manichaean religious texts into Chinese. Additionally, they played a key role in introducing and spreading Zoroastrianism in China. Inscriptions from the Tang dynasty (唐, 618–690, 705–907 CE) refer to Zoroastrianism as Xiānjiào (祆教) or Bǎihuǒjiào (拜火教), suggesting that Sogdians were instrumental in its transmission (Ibid: 25–6).

During the Northern Dynasties (439–586 CE) and the Tang dynasty, some Sogdians even attained official government positions. In this period, the title Sàbǎo (薩保), derived from the Sogdian word Sārtapāw (s'rtp'w) and the Sanskrit Sārvavāha (सार्थवाह) (B. 4, 13), was used to designate leaders of Sogdian communities in China. In Buddhist texts, this term refers to one of the twenty-two companions of the Buddha and, in Mahāyāna Buddhism (महायान), denotes a “caravan leader” (LPS. 1, 33; Ma. 8, 114). These individuals not only managed trade caravans but also oversaw certain religious and social affairs of the Sogdian diaspora (Wertmann, 2015: 24).

Architecturally, Sogdian tombs in China especially those from the Northern Dynasties period exemplify the fusion of Iranian and Chinese architectural traditions. While they retained elements of Zoroastrian funerary practices, they also adapted to Chinese artistic and cultural influences. The stone sarcophagi used in these tombs were modeled after traditional Chinese houses, with roofs inspired by local architectural styles.

Wirkak's tomb is among the most significant examples of Sogdian funerary architecture in China, closely resembling other tombs from this period and reflecting the religious and cultural identity of the Sogdian community (Müller, 2009: 127–137).

Research Significance and Gaps in Scholarship

Scholars have previously attempted to analyze some of the concepts depicted in the panels of Wirkak's tomb within the framework of Zoroastrian beliefs, and in many cases, they have correctly identified Zoroastrian elements in these reliefs. However,

the interpretation of these images based on Zoroastrian texts requires a more precise reassessment. Some studies have linked these depictions to Manichaean beliefs, yet a fundamental question arises: how can a soul that ultimately enters the Zoroastrian paradise be expected to pass through stages derived from Manichaean doctrines? This assumption appears inconsistent with Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, particularly Chapter Sixteen of the *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*, which explicitly critiques and rejects Manichaean teachings. Therefore, a thorough analysis of these panels through the lens of Zoroastrian doctrine without incorporating Manichaean elements is essential, and this study aims to address this need.

Moreover, while Wirkak's tomb was constructed in China an aspect that undoubtedly influenced its cultural features and led to the incorporation of certain local and religious elements there is strong evidence that the four panels examined in this research directly reference Zoroastrian concepts and motifs. For this reason, the present study seeks to interpret these panels based strictly on Zoroastrian texts, ensuring that non-Zoroastrian elements do not overshadow their intended meaning.

Research Objective

This article, employing a text-image analysis approach, examines the eighth to the eleventh panels (Fig. 2) of Wirkak tomb and seeks to demonstrate how these panels visually depict the concept of individual end in Zoroastrian eschatology. To achieve this, the study focuses on analyzing these reliefs based on the Avesta and Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, aiming to provide an accurate interpretation of the represented concepts grounded in authoritative sources.

The Fate of the Soul and the Cosmic End in Zoroastrian Eschatology

The Fate of the Soul After Death

The most detailed and oldest relatively comprehensive account of the fate of the soul after death is found in the *Hādōxt Nask* (See also: MX. 1.110–198; Bd. 15). In this text, Zarathustra asks Ahura Mazda: “O Ohrmazd! When the righteous one passes away, that is, on the night his soul departs, where does it reside?” (HN. 22.1). Ahura Mazda replies: “The soul of the righteous sits near its head, clothed in a white garment” (RP. 23.2). This state continues for the first three nights, during which the soul remains in peace and experiences joy (HN. 22.2). However, at dawn on the fourth day, with the rising of the sun, the soul's fate changes (Ad. 19, 28). A fragrant breeze from paradise begins to blow, and the righteous soul feels as if it is passing through a field of flowers and sweet scents (RP. 23.6). At this moment, its *Dēn*, appearing as a beautiful maiden and the spiritual embodiment of its good deeds, manifests (HN. 2.9). The righteous soul then asks: “Who are you, the most beautiful of all maidens?” The maiden replies: “O virtuous youth, who has thought, spoken, and acted well, I am your *Dēn* the sum of your deeds”. (HN. 2.11–4).⁹

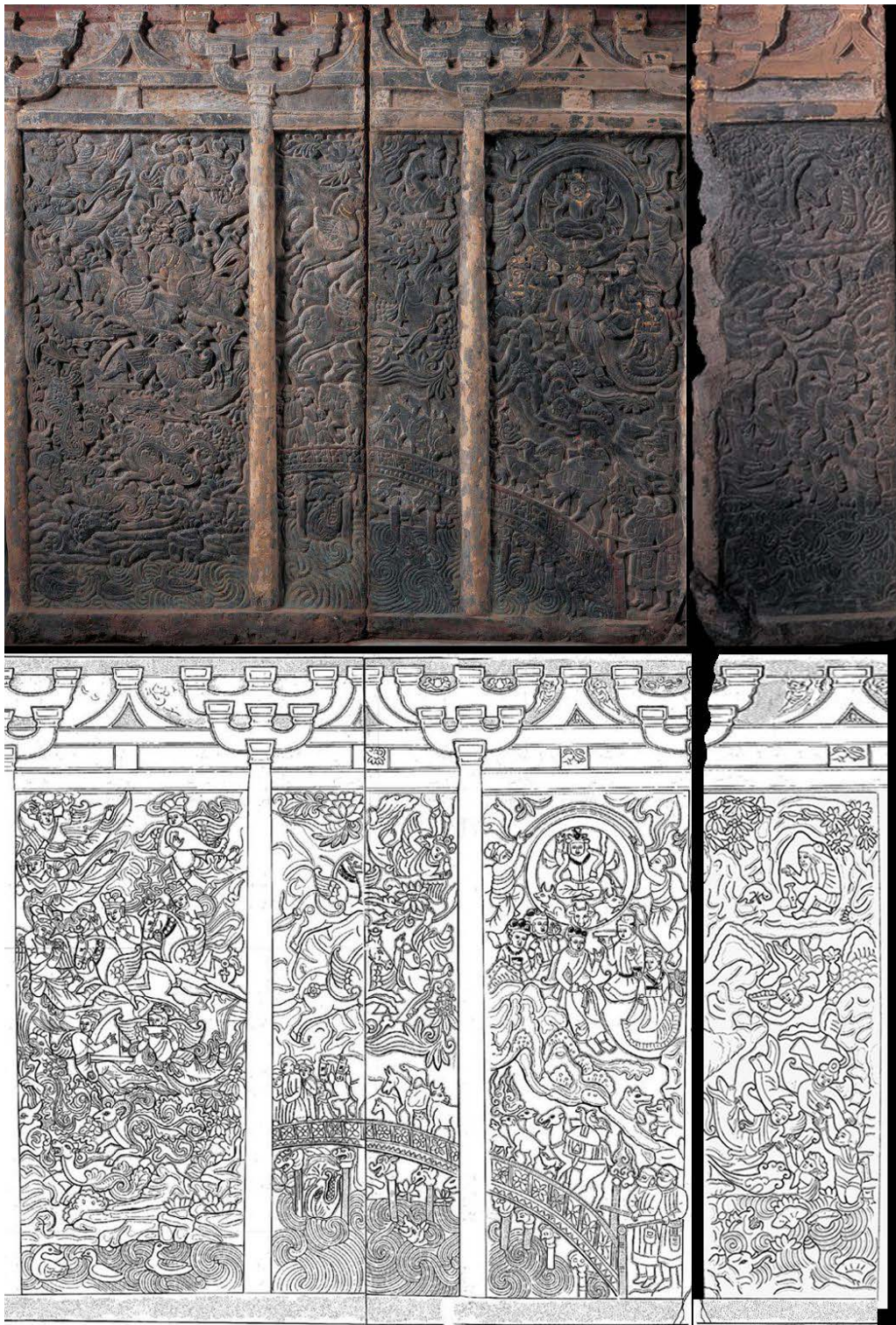


Fig. 2: Panels 8 to 11 of Wirkak and his wife's Sarcophagus⁸

In contrast, the sinful soul faces a completely opposite fate. In response to Zarathustra's inquiry about the fate of the wicked, Ahura Mazda explains: "The soul feels distress and is clothed in tattered and decayed garments". (RP. 23.19). At dawn on the fourth day, instead of a fragrant breeze, the wicked soul perceives itself wading through filth and

snow. Then, a foul, putrid wind brought forth by Ahriman from the House of Lies¹⁰ (Av. *drūjō dāmāna-*) blows upon it (RP. 23.23; HN. 23.19–26). At this moment, an ugly woman appears, and in terror, the sinful soul asks: “Who are you? Never in my life have I seen anyone uglier than you!” The woman replies: “I am your Dēn the embodiment of your deeds. What you have done in life now comes to you in this form”. (Bd. 15.202).

Spiritual Judgment and Crossing the Činwad Bridge

At dawn on the fourth day, both righteous and sinful souls reach the stage of spiritual judgment. At this point, a group of divinities (Srōš the Holy, Good Wāyu, and Mighty Wahrām) and demons (Evil Wāyu, Frazēšt, and Nizēšt) appear before the soul and accompany it to the place of judgment (MX. 1.115–116).

Rašn the Just weighs the individual’s deeds using the celestial scale (MX. 1.119–120). At this moment, the righteous soul, guided by Srōš and Ātar, successfully crosses the Činwad bridge (MX. 1.124; AWN. 5.2). In contrast, the demon Wīzarš (Av. *vīzarəša*) seizes the sinful soul and drags it to the Činwad bridge, where Rašn reveals the weight of its sins (MX. 1.161–163). Ahura Mazdā then conducts the final judgment with the aid of fire (Y. 43–4).

Crossing the bridge serves as a reward for the righteous, leading them to paradise. However, due to the burden of their sins, the wicked fall from the bridge and plunge into hell (Y. 46.10–11).

The Cosmic End: The Twelve-Thousand-Year Creation, the Coming of Saviors, and the Restoration of the Universe

In Zoroastrian belief, the universe follows a cosmic order and a divine plan spanning twelve thousand years. This system, described in Middle Persian texts such as the *Bundahišn*, is divided into four three-thousand-year periods, each marking a crucial phase in the battle between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman (Bd. 1.10; MX. 7.8.11). (Fig. 3)

In the first three thousand years, Ahriman remains powerless because Ohrmazd creates the world in a *mēnōg* state,¹¹ and Ahriman has not yet attacked. During the second three-thousand-year period, Ahriman, emerging from darkness, approaches the boundary of the world of light, preparing for his assault. In response, Ohrmazd makes a pact with him, delaying the battle for nine thousand years so that no one can alter its course (Bd. 1.5–8; MX. 7.10–16). Then, Ohrmazd recites the Ahunwar prayer (Av. *ahū vairiiō*), causing Ahriman to fall into a stunned and unconscious state, plunging back into darkness. Ohrmazd then proceeds with creation, first bringing forth Way of Long Dominion (i.e., *way ī weh*, Wāyu), then the Amahraspands (Av. *aməša spənt*), and finally, the material world.¹²

At the start of the third three-thousand-year period, Ahriman regains consciousness and attacks the heavens, initiating the state of mixture (MP *gumēzišn*), during which the forces of good and evil struggle within the material world (Bd. 5.39–42; Also see:



43–47). The fourth era begins with the revelation of Zoroastrianism, as Zarathuſtra establishes the religion of Ohrmazd.¹³

The fifth millennium belongs to Huſēdar, who appears one thousand years after Zarathuſtra to further spread the faith (Bd. 18.218; D. 7.9/55–56).¹⁴ Then, the sixth millennium marks the arrival of Huſēdarmāh,¹⁵ who, like Zarathuſtra, renews and propagates the faith (Bd. 18.219). About thirty years before the end of Huſēdarmāh’s era, Aži Dahāka (Žaḥḥāk) breaks free from his bonds, and at that time, Sōšāns,¹⁶ the son of Zarathuſtra who possesses the farr(ah) (Av. x^varənah) (Yt. 19.3/22; Yt. 14.89) manifests (Bd. 18.220). He perceives all beings with the eye of wisdom, possessing six eyes and a radiant body (D. 7.11/1; Yt. 19.15/92–95).¹⁷ During the resurrection, Sōšāns first raises the dead.¹⁸ He gathers all people, both righteous and wicked, and grants them the ability to perceive truth by sharing the radiance of the sun-half of it given to Gayōmart, the primordial man, and half to all other people. At this moment, the righteous are separated from the wicked: the virtuous ascend to paradise, while the sinners fall into hell.

In this frašegird, a river of molten metal (Y. 51.9, 32.7, 30.7) flows across the earth and into hell, sealing the chasm through which Ahriman had entered. This molten

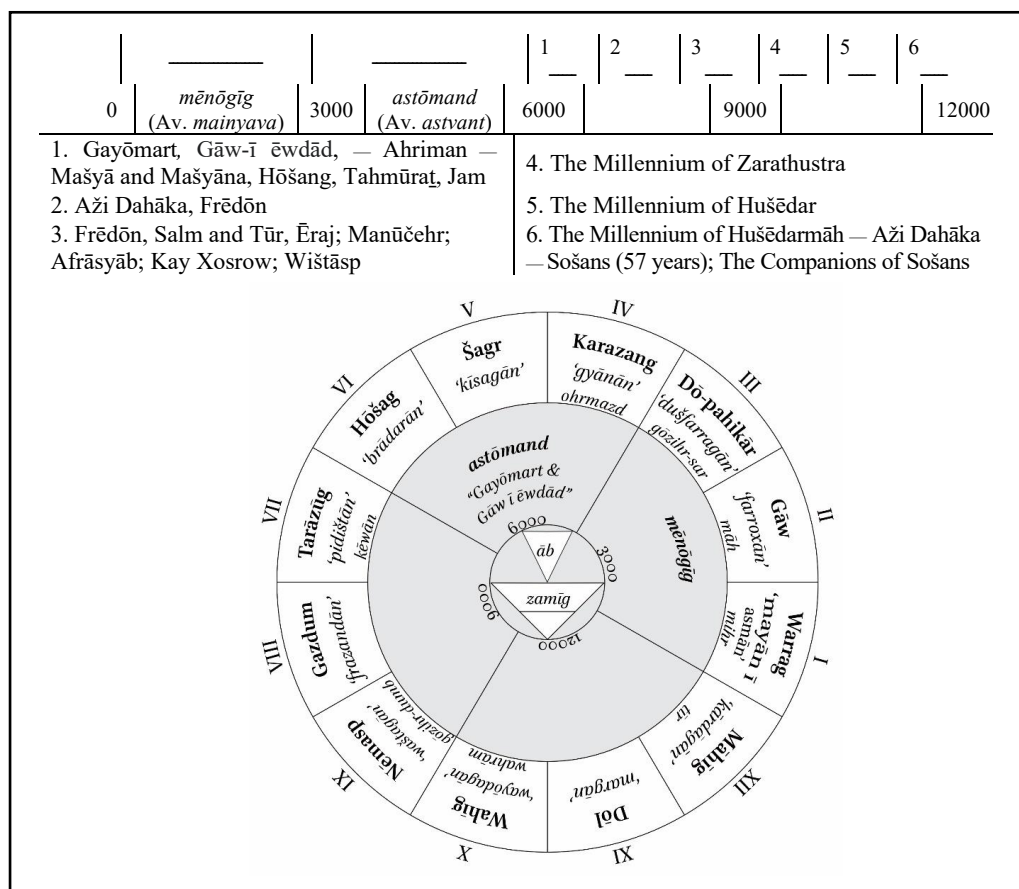


Fig. 3: The twelve-thousand-year lifespan of the world and its internal divisions from the beginning of the sixth millennium, along with the names of key figures and the classification of zodiac constellations (based on the Bundahišn).

river purifies the world, making it immortal and incorruptible. The same purifying fire cleanses humanity.¹⁹ At last, Ohrmazd, the Amahraspands, all divine beings, and humankind are united. The stars, moon, sun, and Ātar Wahrām descend to earth in the form of a mighty man, and from that moment onward, the only task of humanity will be to behold Ohrmazd (RP. 48.99–101). The ultimate beauty of existence will be that everyone will love others as they love themselves.

The Connection Between Zoroāstrian Eschatology and the Panels of Wirkak's Tomb

An analysis of Zoroāstrian texts indicates that the four panels of Wirkak's tomb explicitly depict the fate of the soul after death and align with the concept of individual end in Zoroāstrian eschatology. These panels portray the souls of Wirkak and his wife as righteous individuals who successfully cross the Činwad bridge and enter paradise. In contrast, there are no clear indications of the cosmic end or Frašō.kərəti within these panels.

This observation suggests that the primary purpose of these panels is to depict the individual fate of the soul rather than the final stage of cosmic purification. However, certain visual details may contain subtle, indirect references to the concept of the cosmic end. Yet, these allusions are so delicate that they do not explicitly narrate Frašō.kərəti. Such an approach in the design of the panels was likely influenced by prevailing Zoroāstrian beliefs regarding the soul's transition from the material world to the spiritual realm, emphasizing individual reward and punishment in the afterlife.

The Panels of the Tomb: Reflections on the Fate of the Soul

Panel 8

The eighth panel is divided into two sections (Fig. 4), and scholars have proposed various hypotheses regarding its elements: Upper Section: A man is depicted sitting at the entrance of a cave. Some researchers have interpreted this scene as Manichaean or Brahmanic, identifying the figure as Mani or Komāyaputta (de la Vaissière 2005, 362; 2015, 101–3; 2019, 71; Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2012, 17–18).

Lower Section: Scholars believe this part illustrates a scene of the Sea of Rebirth,²⁰ Makara, or resurrection. It depicts the souls of two individuals, a man and a woman,²¹ being lifted from the water, presumably Wirkak and Wiyusi. Beside them, three winged-angels are present (de la Vaissière 2005, 361; Idem 2015, 104; Grenet 2007, 476; Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2012, 10, 18–19).²²

Upper Section of Panel 8

In the upper section of this panel, a sage is depicted sitting at the entrance of a cave. Early studies identified him as Mani, but this interpretation was later refuted with supporting evidence (Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 8–10). Another hypothesis associates this figure

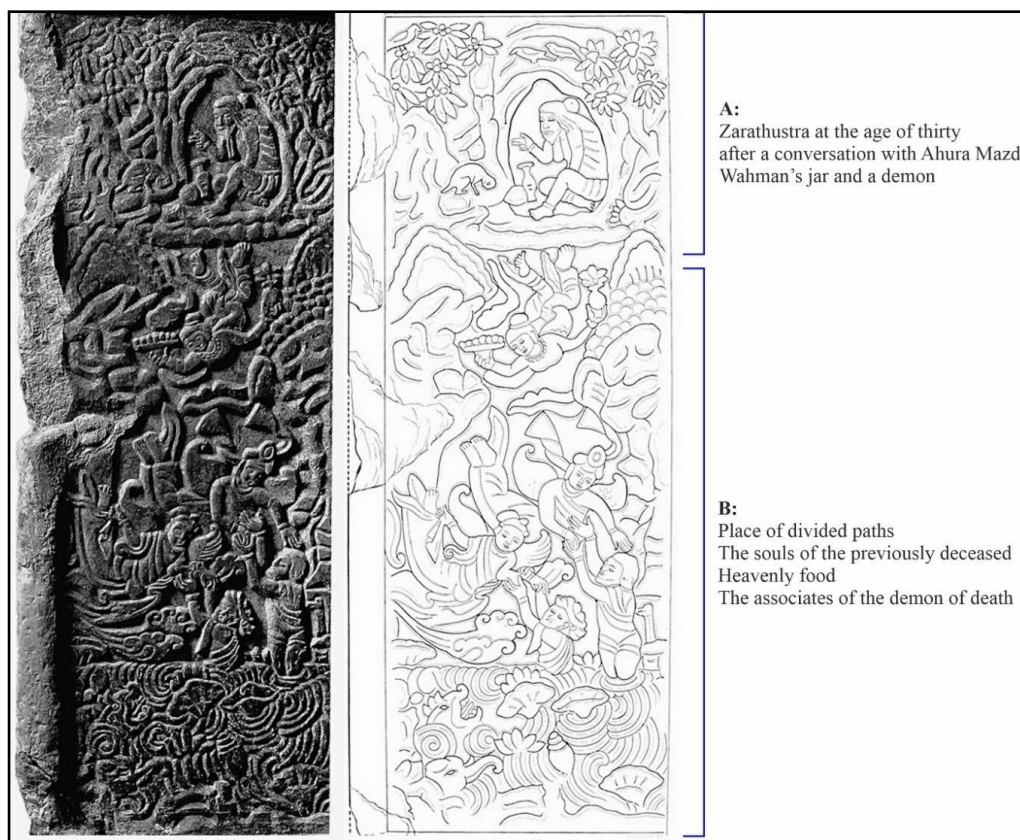


Fig. 4: Two scenes of panel 8

with Komāyaputta, a Brahmanic ascetic, in front of whom a monkey is shown bowing (Ibid: 17–18).

The story of Komāyaputta is narrated in the *Jātaka*²³ (Morris, 1885: 254–5; J. 299): Born into a Brahmanic family in Benares, Komāyaputta eventually renounced worldly life and devoted himself to asceticism and spiritual discipline in the Himalayas. Other sages in the same region also lived an austere life, foraging for fruit in the forest. Among them lived a playful monkey, whose mischievous antics often entertained the sages.²⁴ One day, while the other sages had gone in search of food, Komāyaputta was meditating in solitude when the monkey approached him and, as usual, began to play. However, this time, Komāyaputta simply pointed a finger at the monkey and said: “Since you dwell among great sages, you must act righteously, exercising self-restraint and mindfulness in thought, speech, and action”.²⁵ These words deeply affected the monkey, transforming him. When the sages returned, they noticed the monkey had ceased its playful antics. Curious about the change, they inquired about the reason, to which the monkey replied: “I have heard the wise words of Komāyaputta do not think of me as I once was, for now, my life is illuminated by wisdom”.

How Does This Story Relate to the Fate of the Soul After Death?

The key element lies in the core message of Komāyaputta’s words: “Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds”. These three principles form the foundation of

Zoroastrian teachings. Therefore, it is possible that this narrative was influenced by Zoroastrian doctrine.

If we accept that this scene refers to the story of Komāyaputta, its message can be summarized as follows: One who follows the path of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds will attain salvation. This concept aligns precisely with the Gāthās: “Through the radiance of righteousness, one attains holiness. Such a person, by their good thoughts, good words, good deeds, and faith in truth, joins the divine order. Ahura Mazdā, through the aid of Wahman, grants them the eternal abode [paradise]”. (Y. 51.21).

Alternative Hypotheses: Could This Be Zarathuṣtra?

Some scholars have suggested that the figure in the panel represents Zarathuṣtra rather than Komāyaputta. According to this interpretation, the eighth panel may depict the moment when Zarathuṣtra first embarked on his path of righteousness and the pursuit of truth when he left his home at the age of twenty to dedicate himself to a life of piety. During this period, he showed kindness to animals and helped those in need (Grenet, 2013: 3; see: WZ. 16–9).

Another possibility, based on Middle Persian texts, relates to Zarathuṣtra’s first divine revelation. According to Dēnkard VII, at the age of thirty, Zarathuṣtra received his initial vision, during which Wahman, as Ahura Mazdā’s messenger, appeared before him and led him to a conversation (MP ham-pursagīh) with Ahura Mazdā. At this time, Zarathuṣtra was a devoted but physically exhausted ascetic (D. 7.3/51–62). After accepting the religion, he returned to humanity to spread the faith (D. 7.4/1).

Ahura Mazdā, however, warned Zarathuṣtra to beware of demons and their deceptions, as they would attempt to mislead him by appearing among humans. In one such encounter, a female demon manifested before him, sitting beside a jar that Wahman had presented to Zarathuṣtra. The demon claimed, “I am Spandarmaḍ (Av. spəntā ārmaiti)”, and sought his cooperation. But Zarathuṣtra, recognizing the deception, responded: “I have seen Spandarmaḍ in the daylight; she is entirely good. If you are truly her, turn around so I may recognize you”. The demon, thinking she had deceived him, showed her back, revealing her true hideous form. At that moment, Zarathuṣtra recited the Ahunwar prayer, causing the demon to flee (Y. 27.13; D. 7/4–57–62). If this interpretation is correct, the weary figure seated at the cave entrance could represent Zarathuṣtra, and the jar before him may symbolize Wahman’s sacred offering. The creature bowing before him might then be the demon attempting to deceive him. (Fig. 5).

Zarathuṣtra’s Connection to the Souls and His Role in Frašō.kərəti

One of Zarathuṣtra’s key roles in Zoroastrian teachings is his connection to the process of Frašō.kərəti and the ultimate restoration of creation. Within this framework, Zarathuṣtra, alongside Frēdōn and Kay Xosrow, plays a crucial part in the renewal of the world

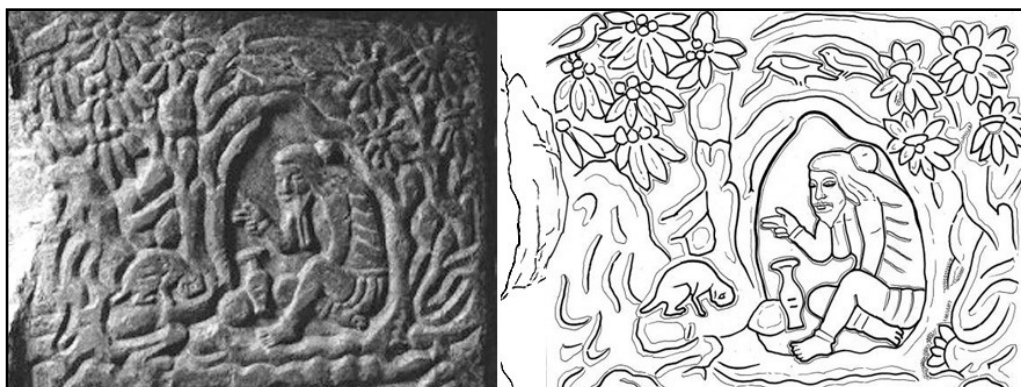


Fig. 5: Zarathuṣtra and the Wahman's jar with a deceptive demon

and its return to its original state. This connection not only reinforces Zarathuṣtra's significance in Zoroastrian eschatology but also, indirectly, highlights concepts related to the Final Body (*tan ī pasīn*).

According to Zoroastrian texts, Zarathuṣtra once wished for immortality, but Ahura Mazdā responded: "If I grant you immortality now, *Frašō.kərəti* will no longer be possible". (ZWY. 3.3). Similarly, *Frēdōn* sought to slay *Aži Dahāka*, but Ahura Mazdā forbade him, saying: "Do not kill him now, for the earth will be overrun with serpents". (D. 6, B4.B6). This delay in eliminating the forces of evil was part of the divine plan to postpone the final battle until the appointed time of *Frašō.kərəti*. On the other hand, Kay Xosrow played a crucial role in the world's final destiny by digging the shores of Lake Čēčašt. It is said that had he not done so, during the millennia of *Hušēdar*, *Hušēdarmāh*, and *Sošans*, *Ahriman* would have gained such power that resurrection and the Final Body would have become impossible (see also: Bd. 9.92; 9.125; WZ. 3.24).

Thus, Zarathuṣtra's presence in this eschatological process, beyond his association with the faith of *Wirakak* and his wife, indirectly alludes to *Frašō.kərəti* and the Final Body. This suggests that *Wirakak*'s tomb not only reflects Zoroastrian beliefs about the individual end of the soul but, on a deeper level, may also be connected to cosmic eschatology and the ultimate fate of the world.

The Lower Section of the Panel 8

In Zoroastrian doctrine, there is no concept of rebirth (reincarnation).²⁶ Furthermore, as previously discussed, resurrection²⁷ and crossing the river of molten metal²⁸ require the emergence of the Saviors and the fulfillment of the necessary conditions for *Frašō.kərəti*. How, then, can this section of the panel be interpreted as the river of molten metal (Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 18–19) if those prerequisites have not been met?

This raises a fundamental question: If the undulating space in the lower two-thirds of the eighth panel is not molten metal, what does it represent? Additionally, what is the nature of the animals within it and the three-winged-angels above?

In the lower left corner, a creature with an elongated trunk is visible, a feature that likely led scholars to identify it as *Makara* (de la Vaissière 2015, 98).²⁹ The Sanskrit

word Makara (मकर) refers to a sea dragon or aquatic monster and, in later Hindi usage, denotes a crocodile. In the Vedic tradition, Makara serves as the mount of the god Varuṇa (वरुण)³⁰ and the river goddess Gaṅgā (गंगा)³¹ (Beer, 2003: 77).

Since neither of these deities plays a role in determining the fate of souls after death, and given the distinct differences between this creature and traditional depictions of Makara which typically combines features of a crocodile, scaly skin, an elephant's head, a lion's face, lion or eagle claws, and a peacock (or occasionally fish) tail³² it is difficult to definitively identify this figure as Makara. (Fig. 6).

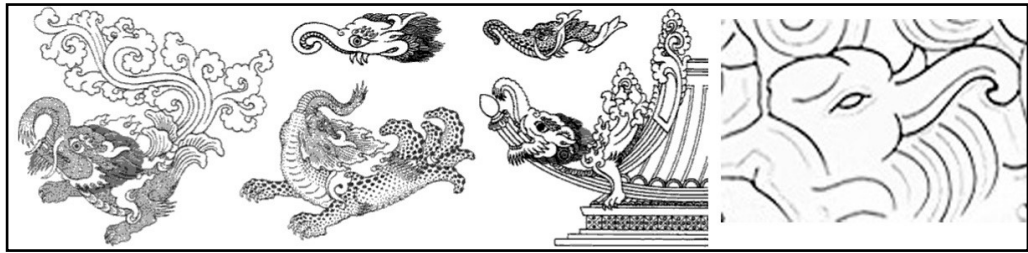


Fig. 6: Right: the creature believed to be a Makara?, Left: Makara in Various Forms (Beer, 2003: 77).

One possible hypothesis is that the creatures depicted in this section symbolically represent the associates of the demon of death. According to Mēnōg ī Xrad, at dawn on the fourth day, the soul, accompanied by Srōš the Holy, Wāyu, and Mighty Wahrām, sets out toward the Činwad bridge while confronting the death demon and his followers (MX. 1.115). This death demon, known as Ašto-vidhāt (MP aštwihād), is described as the “bone-separator”, and he is assisted by Frazēšt and Nizēšt. If this interpretation is correct, the creatures depicted in this section may symbolize these demonic forces attempting to block the soul's passage.

Reflection of Zoroastrian Beliefs on the Soul's Path After Death

In Zoroastrian belief, death involves the separation of two immaterial forces *ahu/ uštāna-* and *baodah-* from the physical body.³³ The righteous soul, in its journey toward the spiritual realm and eternal bliss, must pass through a treacherous, fearsome, and perilous path. Zoroastrian texts refer to this stage as the “path of the separation of body from consciousness” or the “place of divided paths” (*Av. paθa paiti vīcarəna*) (HN. 22.17; also: MX. 1.151; RP. 23.15).³⁴ (Fig. 7)

Thus, the undulating space in the lower two-thirds of the eighth panel is neither the river of molten metal that emerges during *Frašō.kərəti* (as previously discussed), nor can it be interpreted as the Sea of Rebirth, as such a concept does not exist in Zoroastrian teachings. Instead, this section of the relief may be an artistic representation of the perilous path the soul must traverse to reach the place of judgment and cross the Činwad bridge. In the *Hādōxt Nask*, Ahura Mazda describes this passage as a difficult crossing that the soul is compelled to endure (HN. 22.17). Depicting this space as turbulent water may have been an artistic solution to convey this concept visually, as carving such an abstract idea onto solid stone in another form would have been more challenging.

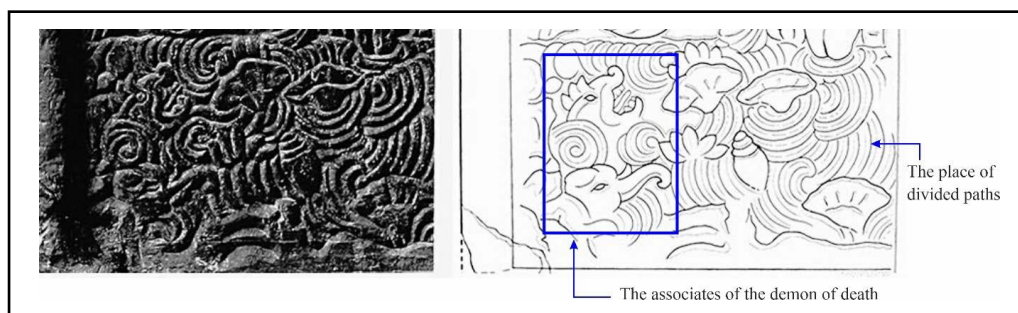


Fig. 7: Path of the separation of body from consciousness or the place of divided paths

The Three-Winged-Figures: Souls of the Previously Deceased or Guiding Divinities?

Zoroastrian texts state that Ahura Mazdā commands the souls of those who have previously passed away to bring heavenly nourishment to the newly soul, easing the suffering inflicted during the three nights of affliction by the death demon and his companions (HN. 22.16–18; MX. 1.150–153). Based on these descriptions, the three-winged-figures in this scene³⁵ may represent those earlier souls, tasked with delivering heavenly sustenance to the souls of Wirkak and his wife. What the third figure appears to hold in hand is likely the heavenly food referred to in the Zoroastrian texts as “spring oil”.³⁶

However, another interpretation has been proposed. According to the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* and *Mēnōg ī Xrad*, three major divinities *Srōš*, *Wāyu*, and *Wahrām* guide the soul through its postmortem journey. *Srōš* in particular protects the soul during the critical three days after death (DD. 27; MX. 1.115). Thus, it is also possible that the three-winged-figures represent these divine guides. Nevertheless, since Zoroastrian texts do not mention these deities’ offering sustenance to the soul, the first hypothesis that these are previously souls fulfilling their divinely assigned mission seems more consistent with the textual tradition. (Fig. 8)

Panel 9

The ninth panel is divided into two parts, with the lower section continuing into the tenth panel. The upper half of the ninth panel is itself split into two sections:

The Seated Deity Within the Moon and the Chariot of Bulls (Upper Section)

In this scene, a chariot appears flanked by two-winged-figures, with a deity seated within a crescent moon. Beneath the moon, three bulls are carved in relief. Scholars have identified this deity as *Weshparkar*/ *Wyšprkr*, one of the three principal Sogdian deities (Grenet et al., 2004: 281; Grenet, 2007: 414; Grenet 2013, 5; Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 20; Lerner, 2005: 158). This deity has been associated with Śiva Mahādeva in Hindu tradition, *Wēš* (*Oešo*) in Bactria,³⁷ and *Wāyu* in Zoroastrianism (Grenet et al., 2004: 281; Shenkar, 2014: 155; Humbach, 1975: 402–408).³⁸

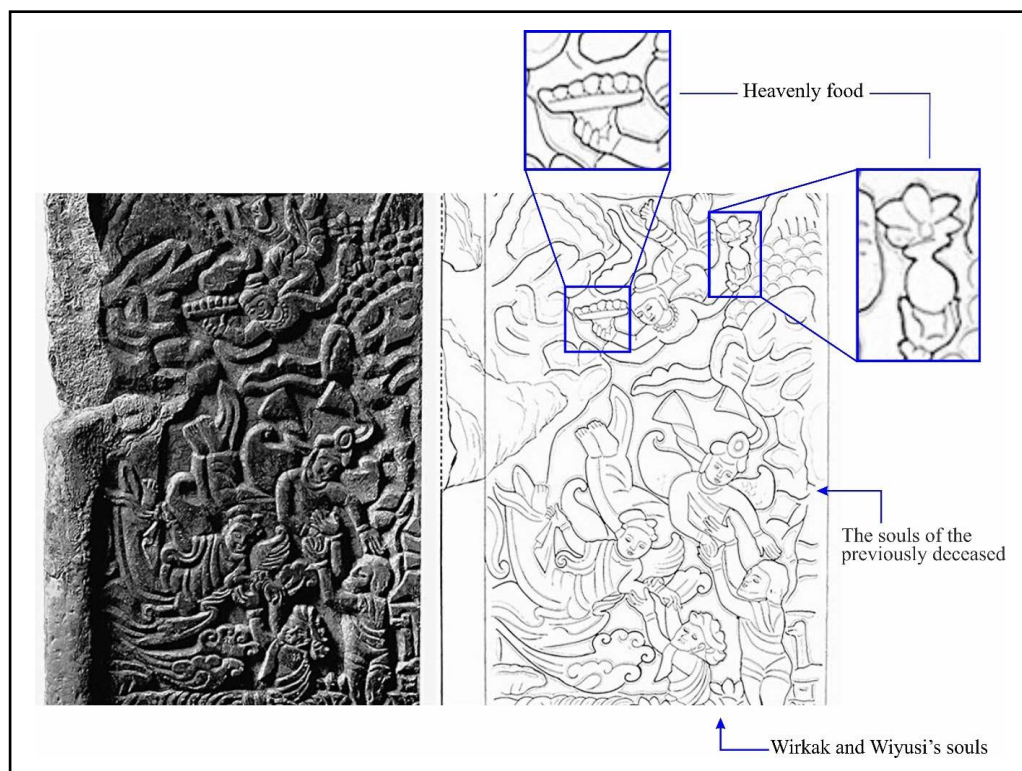


Fig. 8: The three-winged-figures as the souls of the previously deceased

Based on archaeological findings and surviving depictions, Wyšprkr is typically shown with three heads and four arms (Azarpay, 1981: 29–30; Kamakura, 1997: 29–30; Baumer and Hare 2008, 175). The name Wyšprkr is in fact the Sogdian translation of the Sanskrit term Viśvakarman (विश्वकर्मा), a compound of viśva “world” and karman “act” or “creation”, meaning “world-builder” or “cosmic architect”.

However, if the figure inside the moon-chariot were truly Wyšprkr, one would expect him to have three heads and four arms. Instead, the figure here has only one head and two arms and holds a three-pronged object in his right hand. Even if we accept, based on certain wall paintings, that Wyšprkr was portrayed like the Hindu god Śiva or the Buddhist Maheshvara, enthroned within a mandorla and riding on bulls (Baumer 2018, 145), the differences in the number of arms, and even bulls cast doubt on whether the figure in this panel is indeed Wyšprkr. (Fig. 9)

The Connection Between the Moon and the Bull

A key question arises: if the figure in the panel is neither a judge³⁹ nor Wyšprkr, then who is he? In Zoroastrian sacred texts, there is a direct and symbolic connection between the moon and the bull. According to the Avesta,⁴⁰ the moon contains the seed of the Gāw-ī ēwdād (Yt. 7.0–7). This idea is echoed in the Bundahišn, where it is stated that when the Gāw-ī ēwdād died, its seed was carried to the moon to be purified, and from that purified seed, all species of animals were later produced (Bd. 9.94). Recent studies have shown that this belief is rooted in Zoroastrian cosmology, in which the moon is considered the



Fig. 9: Right, Wyšprkr as Hindu god Śiva;⁴¹ Left, the god Wyšprkr from Panjikent⁴²

second sphere of the heavens and the custodian of the bull's seed (Hintze, 2005: 60).

The only unresolved issue is the three bulls in the relief. Zoroastrian texts do not reference this specific number in connection to the bull. The *Gāw-ī ēwdād* of which these three may be symbolic representations was created in *Ērān-wēz* and was described as white, radiant like the moon, and three *nāy* in size (Bd. 2.21). The Avestan term *māh-gaociθra*, meaning “the moon that holds the seed of the bull”, highlights the symbolic relationship between the moon and the bull both in visual resemblance (the crescent moon mirroring bull's horns) and in the moon's cosmic role in preserving the generative seed of the primordial bull (Hintze, 2005: 58–59).

Wahman and His Association with the Moon and the Bull

After the creation of Way of Long Dominion, Ahura Mazda first created Wahman (Av. *vohu manah*) from light and truth. His role in Zoroastrian cosmology is central, as he is the first emanation of Ahura Mazda, tasked with guiding all living beings and acting as a divine counselor. According to Middle Persian texts, Wahman is responsible for overseeing all of Ahura Mazda's creations and is aware of everything that will transpire until the *Frašō.kərətī* (Bd. 1.14; 4.34–5).

As one of the Amahraspands, Wahman embodies the divine aspect of Good Thought and plays a crucial role both in the material world and in the fate of souls after death. In the *Gāthās*, he is mentioned alongside Ahura Mazda and the other divine entities (Y. 28.3, 28.9–11; 33.11), and he is said to dwell with the righteous souls in the realm of Ahura Mazda (Y. 49.10). One of his defining roles is to welcome the soul at the time of crossing the *Činwad* bridge. When the *Daēnā* flanked by dogs, across the bridge, Wahman rises from his golden throne and asks: “How did you come from that perilous world to this eternal realm and arrive among us?” (Vd. 19.30–1).⁴³



Fig. 10: Wahman as the seated god in the moon-chariot with a branch of religion and peace in hand

Zoroastrian texts also emphasize Wahman's close association with cattle, especially the bull. In the Avesta, he is described as the protector and overseer of animals. The Gāthās stress the moral significance of caring for cattle (Y. 50.1; 31.10), and Middle Persian texts explicitly name him as the guardian of the five types of domestic animals (Bd. 4.35).

Moreover, the Gāw ī ēwdād, a key figure in Zoroastrian cosmogony, is directly linked to Wahman. When the bull died, its seed was carried to the moon for purification, from which all animal species emerged (Bd. 9.94). It is also said that the moon was created from Wahman in both visible and intangible form, and that the soul of the bull materialized from the moon (see Hintze, 2005: 60). Wahman also plays an important role in the Frašō.kərəti. He is consulted for final decisions at the end of time (Narten and Gignoux 1988, 488). In this context, Zoroastrian texts note that when Ahriman attacks creation, it is Wahman and Ātar who stand in resistance (Yt. 13.77). Spiritually, Wahman is portrayed with exalted attributes. He is described as pēš-karb (physically beautiful) and pēš-nīk (morally superior). His size is said to equal that of three men nine times that of Zarathuštra. He carries a white branch, symbolizing the spiritual essence of the religion and peace a sign that one must not harm others so that harmony may endure in the world (D. 7.3/51–3; WZ. 21.4).

Given all this, it is plausible to suggest that the figure seated in the moon in the ninth panel may represent Wahman. His association with cattle, particularly the bull, makes the presence of the carved bulls beneath the moon especially significant. Furthermore, the object in his right hand could be the white branch, the emblem of religion and peace.

If this image indeed reflects Zoroastrian belief, the seated figure may be Wahman portrayed within the moon as the first Amahraspands and the welcomer of righteous souls into the afterlife. Ahura Mazdā, with Wahman's assistance, grants the righteous entry into the eternal abode paradise. This interpretation also strengthens the potential thematic continuity between the upper halves of the eighth and ninth panels. In addition to his link with the moon and the bull, Wahman is also the one who led Zarathuštra to his first divine encounter with Ahura Mazdā, and his cup appears beside Zarathuštra. This connection reinforces the possibility that the two upper panels function as a

unified theological statement on Wahman's spiritual guidance and eschatological role, especially in leading souls toward judgment and salvation. (Fig. 10)

The Three Deities Seated Before the Souls of Wirkak and His Wife

Beneath the moon-chariot in the ninth panel, three deities are depicted seated, facing a man and a woman presumably representing the souls of Wirkak and his wife. The identities of these three deities have been the subject of much scholarly debate, with several theories proposed:

One hypothesis suggests that the scene is influenced by Manichaean beliefs, portraying a moment of soul judgment. It says as the Manichaean texts, angels or deities often present divine objects to the souls of the dead. In contrast, such imagery is not found in the Zoroastrian tradition. Moreover, if these figures were traditional Zoroastrian deities, one would expect to see familiar divine judges such as Srōš, Mihr, and Rašn. However, these figures are not visibly present in the relief (de la Vaissière, 2005: 362–3; 2015: 99–100, 106–8; 2019: 73–4).⁴⁴

Another interpretation associates the winged-figure with Daēnā, who, along with two accompanying deities, guides the souls of Wirkak and his wife toward paradise (Grenet, 2007: 414). A separate theory links the three deities to the Fravašis, the protective spirits of the righteous. Scholars point to the similarity in clothing and iconography between these figures and other Fravašis depictions in the tomb's panels. Based on this, it is possible that these three figures represent Fravašis. However, since only one of the three figures is winged, another possibility arises: the winged-deity may be Daēnā, accompanied by two other guiding figures (Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 20–1).⁴⁵

Another view interprets the scene as a “divine court”, with the deity at the top of the panel acting as the celestial judge. One of the three lower deities resembles the Virgin of Light in Manichaean imagery a figure that may visually correspond to the Zoroastrian Daēnā and could serve as a guide escorting the soul toward divine judgment (Azarpay, 2011: 54–6, 61–6). A further interpretation relates this scene to the Činwad bridge. According to Zoroastrian eschatology, Daēnā plays a crucial role in guiding the soul across the bridge after death. In this context, the central winged and crowned figure may be interpreted as either Daēnā or, alternatively, as the Manichaean Virgin of Light, depending on the symbolic framework (Shenkar, 2014: 95).

Analysis of the Position and Identity of the Three Deities

If we trace the soul's journey depicted across the panels and interpret the iconography in Zoroastrian terms, it becomes evident that the soul has arrived at the judgment stage. Thus, the hypothesis identifying this section of the ninth panel as a scene of divine judgment appears quite reasonable (Azarpay, 2011: 61–63).

In contrast, one theory rejects the presence of divine judges in this scene (de la Vaissière, 2019: 73–74), likely due to the absence of the celestial scale, which, in

Zoroastrian belief, is used by Rašn the Just to weigh human deeds. However, there are two key visual elements that still support a judgmental interpretation: 1. The mountain beneath the three deities, 2. The bridge, which continues into the tenth panel.

Scholars have rightly identified this as the Činwad bridge, which further supports the interpretation of this scene as a moment of judgment.⁴⁶ According to Zoroastrian texts, the divine judges are Ahura Mazdā, Wahman, Mihr, Srōš, and Rašn (DD. 30.10). The judgment takes place at the entrance to the Činwad bridge, where Mihr presides over the tribunal, with Srōš and Rašn at his side (MX. 2.118). But where exactly is this bridge? The Mihr Yašt tells us that the Činwad bridge is located at the center of the world, on the peak of Mount Alborz (Av. harā bərəzaitī), “Čagād ī dāidīg”, where Mihr resides and where Ahura Mazdā has built him a dwelling with the Amahraspands (Yt. 10.12, 50–52). Directly beneath it lies hell (AWN. 53.1; RP. 15.4–5).

Identifying the Three Deities

Given these textual references, if we identify the carved mountain-like form in this panel as Mount Alborz and the arched structure beneath it as the Činwad bridge, then it is plausible to identify the three deities as Mihr, Rašn, and Srōš. Among them, the winged-deity is most likely Mihr, as he is the presiding judge in the divine court.

This interpretation is further supported by the Dādestān ī Dēnīg and corresponds visually to the figures in the relief especially if we also identify the deity within the moon-chariot above as Wahman. In this case, the upper half of the ninth panel and the portion of the bridge in the tenth panel form a cohesive narrative sequence that illustrates the judgment of the soul. (Fig. 11)

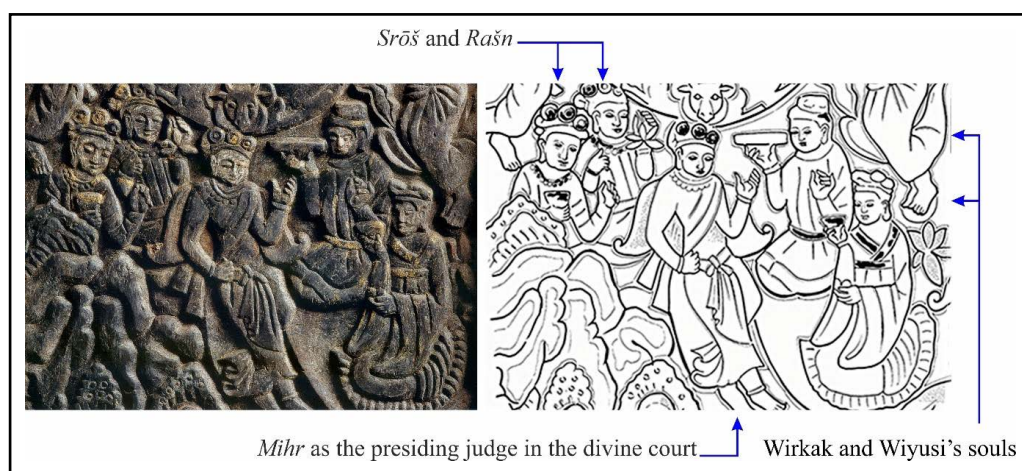


Fig. 11: Judgment scene

Panel 10

The tenth panel is divided into two sections, with the lower half continuing directly from the ninth panel. In fact, the two panels ninth and tenth are conceptually and visually interlinked: the upper sections are thematically related, and so are the lower halves.⁴⁷ In the upper section, the judgment and transformation of the soul at the dawn of the fourth

day after death is depicted. In the lower section, the scene transitions into the Činwad bridge and illustrates how the soul crosses it.

As with the other panels, Manichaean interpretations have been proposed for this scene as well. One such theory views the upper part of this panel which features a winged-deity and a falling figure as a representation of the soul's postmortem experience. According to this interpretation, the small object held in the hand of the winged-figure is identified as Wirkak's body (de la Vaissière, 2005: 364).

Who Is the Winged-Figure? (Upper Section)

Several elements suggest that the winged-figure holding a cup in the upper part of the tenth panel may be one of the key characters in the soul's postmortem journey in Zoroastrian belief. In particular, this figure is likely Daēnā, who is consistently described in the Gāthās as "Ahuric" a divine being associated with vision, conscience, and individuality. In the Avesta, Daēnā is one of the essential spiritual components of a person, denoting qualities such as axw "vital strength", baodah "perception", urvan "soul", and fravaši "the everlasting and heavenly tutelary of material beings" (Y. 26.4).⁴⁸

According to Zoroastrian texts, on the fourth day at dawn, the soul reaches the Činwad bridge and encounters its own Dēn. Depending on the person's earthly actions, Dēn appears as either a beautiful maiden (for the righteous) or an ugly woman (for the sinful) (Y. 31.20; HN. 2.9; Bd. 15.202). If the soul is virtuous, Dēn guides it toward paradise; if sinful, the corrupt Dēn drags it down to hell (KSM 35).

The sculpted relief in the upper section of the tenth panel shows a winged-figure whose visual and symbolic traits closely resemble the Zoroastrian Daēnā described in the texts. This figure, adorned and beautified through the recitation of the Gāthās, the praising of sacred waters, and reverence for the fire of Ahura Mazdā (HN. 22.13–14), comes forth to meet the soul. She is the radiant maiden, the guardian and ganjwar kirbag (DD. 23.5–6), who, accompanied by the two watchdogs of the Činwad bridge, escorts the righteous soul from Mount Alborz and across the bridge (Bd. 15.199; Vd. 13.9; Ad. 19.30). Carrying the burden of the soul's good deeds on her shoulders, she greets the righteous soul (DD. 23.5). Zoroastrian texts also mention that, with Daēnā's help, the soul enters the realm of the divine and learns the language of the spiritual world (WZ. 31.5). (Fig. 12) In the tenth panel, in addition to the richly adorned appearance of the winged-figure likely Daēnā two dogs are visible at the foot of the mountain, right at the entrance to the Činwad bridge.

Additionally, the upper section of the tenth panel features floating flowers, seemingly suspended in mid-air. These details may symbolize the heavenly breeze mentioned in Zoroastrian scripture originating from the panel that depicts Garōdmān at the end of the sequence. This imagery echoes the textual description: "A fragrant wind blows from heaven, and the righteous soul feels as if it is passing through flowers and pleasant scents". (RP. 23.6).



Fig. 12: Daēnā with a jar in hand probably filled with spring oil, mare’s milk, butterfat oil, and sweet whey

The Role of Dog in Zoroastrian Belief and Their Connection to the Činwad Bridge

In Zoroastrianism, dogs hold a sacred status, in part because they are associated with the seed of Gayōmart, the primordial human (RP. 46.21). This likely refers to the holy dog who protected the body of Gayōmart when the Amahraspands were unable to guard it. This same dog is believed to now stand vigil near the Činwad bridge.⁴⁹ A later Zoroastrian text refers to a dog named Zarrin-gōš, who may be this very sacred guardian (RDH. 256).⁵⁰ It is therefore plausible that the two dogs depicted near the bridge in the tenth panel are both Zarrin-gōš, acting as gatekeepers at the bridge and accompanying Daēnā as part of the soul’s escort. (Fig. 13)



Fig. 13: Daēnā’s dogs as guardians of the Činwad bridge

The Jar in the Hand of the Winged-Figure

A particularly intriguing feature in this panel is the jar⁵¹ held by the winged-figure, presumably Daēnā. Zoroastrian texts do not mention Daēnā offering anything to the righteous soul, although she is expected to carry signs of the soul’s good deeds. Yet in this panel, she is shown with a jar rather than a bundle or garment symbolizing good deeds.

An eastern Iranian Sasanian seal portrays a female figure standing beside two dogs, holding a jar, while two figures likely representing righteous souls stand before her (Fig. 14). This supports the possibility that the jar belongs to Daēnā in this artistic context.⁵² The jar may be filled with one of the heavenly nourishments described in Zoroastrian texts such as spring oil, mare’s milk, butterfat oil, and sweet whey which are offered to righteous souls as spiritual sustenance after death (HN. 22.18; RP. 23.17/1–2).



Fig. 14: Daēnā and the two dogs holding a jar⁵³

The Identity of the Falling Figure

Beneath Daēnā, there appears a figure in the act of falling. Scholars have offered various interpretations regarding the identity of this figure. Some have proposed that it represents either Wirkak’s body or the embodiment of Āz, being cast out from the soul during its spiritual ascent (de la Vaissière, 2005: 364; 2015, 100–102).⁵⁴ Another theory holds that the winged-figure is Daēnā, as in the previous panel, and the falling person is the “evil Dēn”. In this interpretation, the jar in Daēnā’s hand symbolizes the righteous soul’s good deeds (Grenet 2013, 7). A further hypothesis identifies the falling

figure as the demon Wīzarš, who rides upon the soul for the first three days after death and ultimately drags the souls of sinners in chains to the Činwad bridge (Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2012, 22; Vd. 19.28–29).

However, a notable issue with these interpretations lies in the appearance of the falling figure. Unlike the demonic beings depicted in the lower sections of panels eight and ten this figure looks fully human, dressed in robe, and with hair tied atop the head. This has led to another compelling interpretation: that the falling person may represent the soul of a sinner, cast down into hell due to the weight of their misdeeds. This idea is closely aligned with Zoroastrian texts, particularly the Gāthās, where it is stated: “The soul of the wicked shall fall into the hell due to the heaviness of its sins” (Y. 46.10–11).⁵⁵ (Fig. 15)



Fig. 15: The falling figure as the soul of a sinner

Panels 9 and 10 (Lower Section)

The lower halves of panels nine and ten depict the Činwad bridge and the souls' passage across it. According to Zoroastrian belief, the Činwad bridge created by Ahura Mazdā (AWN. 4.7) is the “separator” or “collector”, over which every soul must pass after death (Vd. 19.29, 19.30).⁵⁶ The bridge is described in the texts as a razor-sharp blade or a multi-edged sword (KSM 41; DD. 1.21.3). For the righteous soul, the blade turns broadside, making the passage smooth and safe (AWN. 5.1). For the wicked, however, the blade remains edge-up, sharp and unforgiving (Bd. 15.199). Zoroastrian scriptures describe the bridge becoming broad and spacious for the virtuous soul, supported by thirty-seven poles or nine lances, and crossing it is compared to walking on the soft

fur of a stoat (MP *kākom pōšt*) through a fragrant green springtime meadow (DD. 1.21.5).

Visual Features of the Činwad Bridge in the Tomb Reliefs

An analysis of the sculpted imagery in panels nine and ten reveals that some of the bridge's visual features diverge from textual descriptions. For instance: There is no visual representation of poles or lances, or stoat fur. The only element matching Zoroastrian descriptions is the number of bridge's supports, which are adorned with the heads of demon-like creatures. The number of these supports corresponds with the number nine, mentioned in Zoroastrian sources as the number of spears or structural elements beneath the bridge.

This visual symbolism suggests a selective adaptation of eschatological imagery maintaining certain theological ideas (like the perilous nature of judgment and the structure of the bridge) while translating them into a local Sino–Sogdian funerary style, likely to harmonize with broader visual languages and religious sensibilities of the time.

Identity of the Figures Crossing the Činwad Bridge

In some interpretations, the figures crossing the bridge are identified simply as Wirkak and his family. However, the possibility that the scene includes *Srōš*, given his central role as the soul's guide after death, is still strong even if his representation is not overtly marked (see: Grenet et al., 2004, 279; Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 20; de la Vaissière, 2015: 101; Grenet, 2007: 473; Lerner, 2005: 158).

According to Zoroastrian texts, after the soul is judged, the righteous soul crosses the Činwad bridge accompanied by *Srōš* and *Ātar* (MX. 1.124; AWN. 5.2). Based on this account, it is plausible to propose that the two figures shown beside Wirkak and his wife in the scene are not their sons, but rather *Srōš* and *Ātar*. (Fig. 16) This hypothesis is strengthened by the inscription of the tomb, which records that Wirkak and his wife had three sons, not two (Yoshida, 2005: 60–1). Further supporting this interpretation is the presence of fire altars at the entrance to the bridge, which may symbolize Ahura Mazda's divine judgment through fire, a theme explicitly referenced in the Avesta (Y. 43.4).

The Presence of Animals in the Bridge Scene

Another striking feature of this section is the large group of animals depicted, seemingly under the guidance of Wirkak and his wife (Lerner, 2011: 22). Scholars interpret these animals as symbolic representations of the five kinds of animals mentioned in Zoroastrian cosmology (Grenet et al., 2004: 281). According to the *Bundahišn*, animals form the fifth category of Ahura Mazda's material creations, emerging after the purification of the seed of the *gāw ī ēwdād* in the moon (Bd. 1.15; 9.92–100).

Thus, the animals carved into this panel likely represent these five archetypal animal

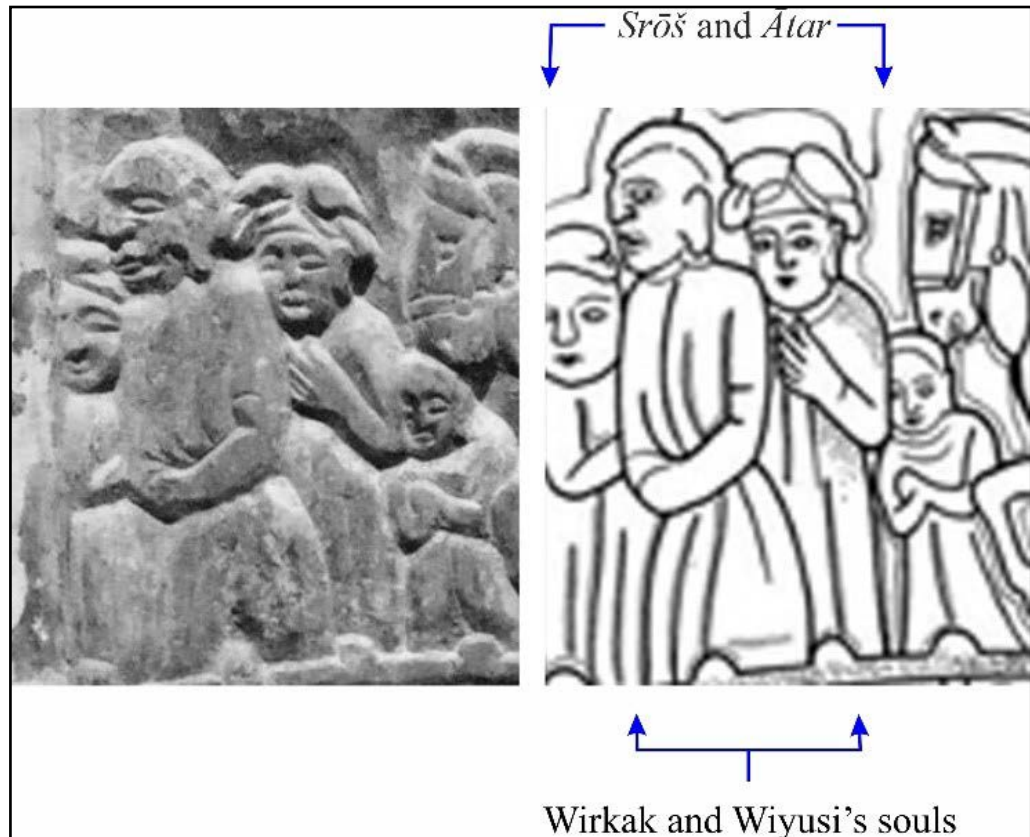


Fig. 16: Wirkak and Wiyusi's souls crosses the Činwad bridge accompanied by Srōš and Ātar

categories. Among the figures are a camel, goat, horse, dog, bird, and fish each of which may serve as an emblem of one of the key species listed in the Zoroastrian creation narrative.

Panel 11

The eleventh and final panel depicts the ultimate fate of Wirkak and Wiyusi as righteous souls who have reached heaven. In Zoroastrian eschatology, this realm is known as Garōdmān (GAv. garō.dəmāna-, YAv. garō.nmāna-) (Y. 46.10; 51.13). According to Zoroastrian teachings, the soul must ascend through four levels to reach there: Star Level – for those who practiced Good Thought (MP humat), Moon Level – for those who practiced Good Word (MP hūxt), Sun Level – for those who practiced Good Deed (MP huwaršt), Garōdmān – the highest and most sacred realm, filled with song and prayer,⁵⁷ bringing the soul its final, blissful reward (Y. 50.4; 51.15; RP. 23.13; MX. 6.9–12; DD. 30.19).

Paradise is structured in three tiers, reflecting the triad of good thought, word, and deed. Within this heavenly realm, there is no old age, no death, and no sorrow. The space is filled with the fragrance of flowers (MX. 6.13–17), once the righteous soul has entered there, it remains there in peace and joy until the time of the Frašō.kərēti (DD. 30.20).

Identifying the Eleventh Panel as Garōdmān

Scholars have correctly identified the eleventh panel as a depiction of Garōdmān (Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 22; Grenet et al., 2004: 283; Dien, 2009: 46). However, certain details within the panel still call for deeper analysis in light of Zoroastrian texts. One key aspect is the continuity between this panel and the preceding ones. It appears that panels 8 through 11 correspond closely to the four spiritual stages that the soul must ascend in order to reach Garōdmān: Star Level, Moon Level (the moon prominently appears in panel 9), Sun Level (the horses in panel 10 are symbolic of the sun),⁵⁸ Garōdmān (panel 11).

As previous scholars have noted, heaven is described in Zoroastrian tradition as the “House of Song”, and the presence of musicians in the eleventh panel clearly echoes this theological motif. But who Are the six musicians? According to Zoroastrian teachings, the soul of the righteous resides in heaven in the company of the Amahraspands (MX. 6.13–17).⁵⁹ These divine beings Wahman, Aša Vahišta, Xšaθra Vairya, Spəntā Ārmaiti, Haurvatāt, and Amərətāt must be brought into existence in order to eliminate evil from the final body (Bd. 1.13–14). Therefore, it is suggested that the musicians depicted may be symbolic representations of the Amahraspands. (Fig. 17)

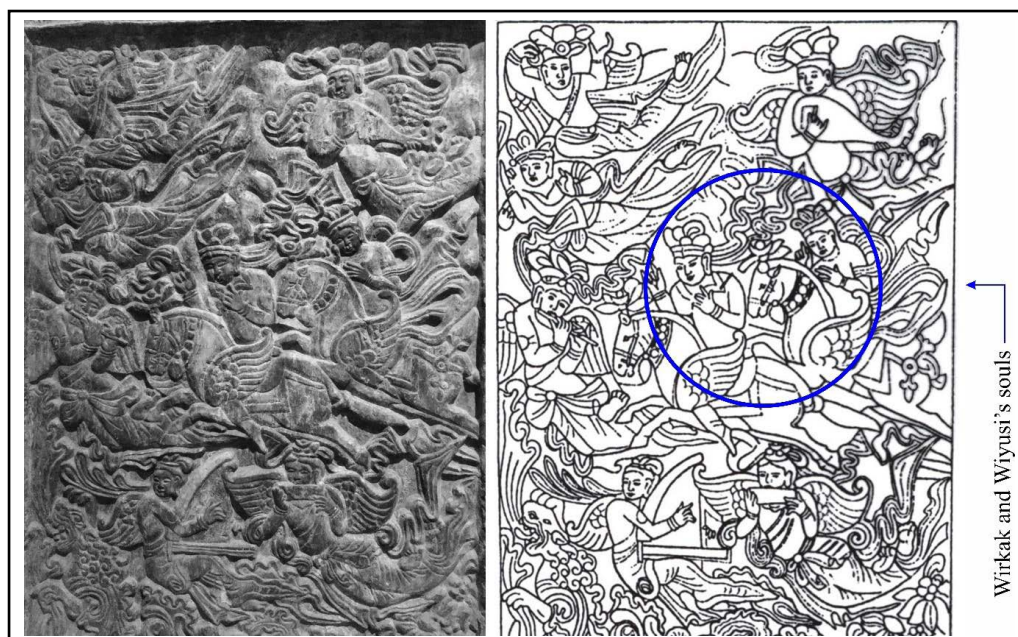


Fig. 17: Amahraspands as the musicians

The Position of Wirkak and his Wife’s Souls in the Zoroastrian Cosmic Structure

In Zoroastrian texts, the heavens are described as consisting of seven levels: the cloud-layer, the celestial sphere, the stars, heaven (where the moon resides), Garōdmān (known as the House of Light, where the sun is located), the realm of the Amahraspands, and the Endless Light, which is the abode of Ahura Mazdā (Bd. 4.33) and Ahura Mazdā is manifested in the beauty of these celestial layers (Yt. 13.81, 92). Based on this structure,

it appears that the souls of Wirkak and his wife are situated somewhere between the fifth level (Garōdmān) and the sixth level (the realm of the Amahraspands).

The Soul's Ascent to Paradise: Golden Ladder or Celestial Chariot?

In some Zoroastrian texts, the soul's ascent to Garōdmān is described as occurring via a golden ladder with three rungs, each representing a step toward Garōdmān (WZ. 35.43; Bd. 15.203; RP. 65.1). However, no such ladder appears in the carved imagery of the eleventh panel.

Nevertheless, *Dādeštān ī Dēnīg* offers another account, stating that the righteous soul ascends to Garōdmān with spiritual power, accompanied by the good spirit and aided by the spiritual merit. This spiritual motion is described as a rotating chariot (MP *rah wardyōn*) or a four-horse celestial carriage (MP *wāš ī čahārag bārag*) (DD. 30.2). Although a celestial chariot is not depicted in the eleventh panel, Wirkak and his wife are shown triumphantly riding on horseback.⁶⁰ This image may symbolically reflect the same spiritual ascent described in the Zoroastrian texts.

Conclusion

An examination of the final four panels of the tomb of Wirkak and his wife reveals that these visual compositions present a coherent, structured, and integrated depiction of Zoroastrian teachings on individual end. Each stage of the soul's journey after death from divine judgment to the crossing of the Činwad bridge and entry into Garōdmān is illustrated with remarkable precision, drawing on familiar symbolic elements found in primary Zoroastrian sources such as the Avesta and Middle Persian texts. The narrative continuity between the panels, the deliberate selection of symbols, and the carefully arranged scenes reflect the artist's clear familiarity with Zoroastrian religious concepts.

Although some scholars have attempted to associate certain elements of these panels with non-Zoroastrian traditions particularly Manichaeism such syncretism seems implausible when considering the overall narrative cohesion and the explicit references to canonical Zoroastrian texts. A fundamental question arises: how could a soul, on its path toward the Zoroastrian heaven, pass through quintessentially Zoroastrian concepts such as *Daēnā*, divine judgment, and the Činwad bridge, only to encounter Manichaean notions like rebirth along the way? Such a juxtaposition would conflict with Zoroastrian theological coherence and the internal logic of the tradition, which, as demonstrated in texts like the *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*, strongly critiques and rejects Manichaean doctrine.

Moreover, while the tomb itself was constructed in China within a Sino- Sogdian cultural milieu and undoubtedly absorbed some local cultural and artistic influences the four concluding panels analyzed in this study are directly focused on Zoroastrian doctrines. Central figures such as *Daēnā*, *Srōš*, *Mihr*, and *Rašn*, along with key concepts like the judgment of the soul, the crossing of the Činwad bridge, and the final ascent to Garōdmān, all derive their significance from within the Zoroastrian religious framework

20. Grenet and de la Vaissière have compared this scene to a banner from Dunhuang that depicts the future Buddha (de la Vaissière, 2005: 361; Grenet, 2007: 476).

21. Lerner suggests that they are swimming in the rippling water (2005: 157–8).

22. For hypotheses regarding Manichaean or Buddhist interpretations and other perspectives, see: Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 10–1; de la Vaissière, 2005: 2015. Additionally, de la Vaissière suggests that they are rescuing Wirkak and his wife from the Sea of Rebirth (de la Vaissière, 2015: 104).

23. The earliest estimated date for the Jātaka stories appears to be around 300 BCE; see: Rouse, 1895: vi.

24. Elsewhere, the monkey provided food for them (Malalasekera, 2007: 685).

25. “One who lives among sages must act righteously, conduct oneself properly, and engage in contemplation”. (J. 299).

26. Vaissière and Grenet argue that this section represents the Sea of Rebirth and is linked to Manichaeism, though its origins are fundamentally Buddhist (de la Vaissière, 2015: 98–104; 2019: 71; 2005: 361; Grenet, 2007: 476; 2013: 3). On the other hand, Grenet considers the possibility that this section might depict hell. However, given that Wirkak and his wife have not yet undergone judgment, he ultimately rejects this hypothesis (2013: 3).

27. Gulácsi and BeDuhn argue that this section of the panel 8 depicts resurrection and compare it to Semitic and Christian art (2012: 18–19).

28. Taking a closer look at Zoroastrian eschatological concepts, Gulácsi and BeDuhn (2012: 8–18) highlight an important point: the presence of molten metal. However, this element appears during Frašō.kərəti and not at a stage when souls have yet to be judged. Grenet also addresses this issue (2013: 3–4).

29. For some interpretations, see: Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2012, 11.

30. Varuṇa is manifest across the entire earth and upholds the four divisions of the sky. He rules over the seven rivers (RV. VIII/XLI, 4–10) and oversees cosmic order and the flow of waters. However, in later periods, following transformations within the Hindu tradition, he lost his exalted status, and Indra (इन्द्र) replaced him (Chandra, 2001: 355).

31. Gaṅgā, the guardian of the sacred Ganges River and a symbol of purity, is often depicted washing the uplifted foot of Vāmana (वामन), the fifth incarnation of Viṣṇu (विष्णु), alongside Brahmā (Ibid: 96).

32. Additionally, a Makara relief can be found at the Hoysaleswara Temple in Karnāṭaka, dating to the 12th century CE, where Varuṇa is depicted riding it. The creature is shown roaring with an open mouth, featuring crocodile-like teeth and tusks resembling horns (Berkson, 2000: 441). In Indian astronomy, Makara symbolizes the zodiac sign Capricornus, and its image appears on the banner of the god of love, Kāmadeva (कामदेव). It is also known by the names Asita-danshtra and Kaṅṭaka, meaning “Black-Toothed”, as well as Jala-rūpa, meaning “Water-Formed” (Dowson, 1879: 195).

33. The components that constitute a human being in Zoroastrian thought include life force (ahu-), conscience (daēnā-), consciousness (baōdah-), soul (uruuan-), and fravaši (frauuaši-) (Y. 26.4). Additionally, they encompass living body (gaēθā-), corporeal form (tanu-), material body (ašt-), visible form (kəhrp-), vital energy (uštāna-), as detailed in Y. 55.1. Since death is the work of Ahriman in Zoroastrian belief, the deceased body becomes tainted by the death demon (nas/nasuš). Reciting the names of the Amahraspands, particularly Hordād, over the dead (Yt. 4.2.3.8) and the presence of a four-eyed dog ensures purification and protection (Vd. 8.16–18).

34. Grenet comes somewhat close to the concept of the soul’s fate by addressing the soul’s condition during the first three nights after death. However, he does not mention the “place of the parting of the paths”. Furthermore, he interprets the three-winged-figures as symbolic representations of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds (2013: 4).

35. de la Vaissière suggests that the three figures are rescuing Wirkak and his wife from the Sea of Rebirth (2015: 104).

36. For the righteous soul, spiritual nourishment is provided in the form of heavenly foods, including spring oil (HN. 22.18), which is prepared in the second month of the year, when Mihr is in the constellation of Taurus (DD. 30.13). Additionally, the soul receives mare’s milk, butterfat oil, and sweet whey. However, the very first food given is spring oil, as this sustenance will serve as the soul’s nourishment until the Final Body (RP. 23.17/1–2).

37. Also see: Huang, 2021: 7–8.

38. It has also been suggested that this figure represents Manohmēd rōšn in Manichaean tradition (de la Vaissière, 2015: 107–109).

39. Azarpay believes that the seated deity is a judge (2011: 61–63).

40. For detailed discussions on the relationship between the bull and the moon, see: Hintze, 2005: 57–66.

41. Baumer, 2018: 145.

42. Azarpay, 1981: 29.

43. Cf. the proposal by Andrés Toledo, who argues that the Avestan term *spānauaiti*, traditionally interpreted as “accompanied by two dogs”, may result from a scribal or transmission error, and that its original form could have been *spānahyuuaiti*, meaning “adorned with sanctity” (Shenkar, 2015: 106, apud Andrés Toledo, 2013: 14–15). However, this issue can be further evaluated in light of Vd. 13.9.

44. The issue, however, is that these three deities are not actually offering anything to the souls. One of them simply gestures with an outstretched hand, while only the other two hold objects one appears to carry a small bowl, and the other a small, unidentified item.

45. Gulácsi and BeDuhn also suggest that the winged-deity may be Ashi Vanguhi (MP *Ahrišwang*), while the two accompanying deities are identified as Dahmān and Aštād (2012: 21).

46. de la Vaissière, 2015: 98–9; 2019: 73–5; Grenet, 2007: 413; Grenet et al., 2004: 279; Lerner, 2005: 158; Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 20; Wertmann, 2015: 67.

47. Gulácsi and BeDuhn rightly demonstrated the connection between these two panels through a detailed visual analysis (2012: 13).

48. See “Their own soul and their own inner self did vex them” (Y. 46.11). Also see: Shaki, 1994: 279–281.

49. Some scholars have linked these two dogs to the *sagdīd* ritual. However, Gulácsi and BeDuhn also point out that these dogs function as guardians of the *Činwad* bridge (Gulácsi and BeDuhn, 2012: 20; Lerner, 2011: 22).

50. This belief is also found in the *Rigvedā*, where *Yamá* is said to have two four-eyed dogs who serve as guardians of the path to heaven and watch over those who pass along it (RV. X/XIV, 10–11).

51. Gulácsi and BeDuhn identified the object as a jar (2012: 14), and upon closer examination, this interpretation indeed appears accurate.

52. Also see: Shenkar, 2015: 100–9.

53. Shenkar, 2015: 101; also see: Grenet, 2013: 8.

54. Grenet initially accepted this hypothesis, arguing that in Manichaean eschatology, *Āz* takes on a human form and falls from the heavens (2007: 475–76).

55. As the sinner approaches the judgment crossing, fear overtakes him (Y. 46.11), and it is because of his sinful life that he plunges into the dark abyss of hell. His descent unfolds in four steps: the first onto evil thought (MP *dušmat*), the second onto evil word (MP *duš-hūxt*), the third onto evil deed (MP *dušxwaršt*), and the fourth into dark hell (RP. 23.30). He is then taken before *Ahriman*, where he is tormented by the demons, and poison the “evil food” (Av. *duš.x̄ arəθəm*) is brought to him (HN. 23.36; see also: Y. 49.10–11). Parts of hell are freezing, while others are burning. It is inhabited by noxious creatures, and enshrouded in a deep darkness (*darəgəm āyu təmaṇhō*) or endless darkness (*a-sar tārikīh be dād*) (HN. 3.33). This darkness is said to be so dense that it can be physically felt (MX. 6.22–31; Bd. 12.188).

56. Also see: Tafazzoli, 1991: 594–595.

57. Another term used to refer to the abode of the righteous is “the house of good thought” (Av. *dəmāna- vaṇhəuš mananha*) (Y. 32.15). Other expressions include “the best of creations” (Av. *aṇhəuš vahišta-*) (Y. 46.10), as well as “endless light” (HN. 2.15).

58. Grenet has pointed out that the horses are likely symbolic of the sun and *Mihr* (2013: 5), although he does not cite a specific textual source. Nevertheless, based on *Yašt* 6, we know that the sun is praised as “immortal, swift-horsed” (Yt. 6.1–7).

59. The spiritual divinities reside on the Sun Level, while *Garōdmān* serves as the dwelling place of the *Amahraspands* (see: RP. 65).

60. If the soul is righteous, its reward will be to return home in the company of the gods, just as a warrior, after the battle is over, returns with his commander to the court of the prince (WZ. 30.33–34).

Reference

- Andrés Toledo, M. Á., (2013). “The Dog(s) of the Zoroastrian Afterlife”. In: *Le sort des Gâhās et autres études iraniennes in memoriam Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin*. Leuven: Peeters: 13-25.

- Azarpay, G., (1981). *Sogdian Painting, The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520333727>


- Azarpay, G., (2011). "Imagery of the Sogdian Dēn". In: *Maître pour l'éternité: Florilège offert à Philippe Gignoux pour son 80e anniversaries*. ed. R. Gyselen and Ch. Jullien (Studia Iranica, Cahier 43: 53-95.
- Bahar, M. (tr./ed.), (2011). *Bundahišn*. Tehran: Tus.
- Baumer, Ch., (2018). *History of Central Asia*. Vereinigtes Königreich: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Baumer, Ch. & Hare, J., (2008). *Traces in the Desert: Journeys of Discovery Across Central Asia*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Beer, R., (2003). *Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.
- Berkson, C., (2000). *The Life of Form in Indian Sculpture*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Chandra, S., (2001). *Encyclopædia of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- Conze, E. (tr.), (1975). *Prajna Paramita Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*. California: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520341258>
- Dalvand, H. R. (tr./ed.), (2009). *Rivāyat ī Dārāb-Hormazdyār*. Tehran: Payam Bahārestān.
- De La Vaissière, É., (2005). "Mani en China au Vie siècle". *Journal Asiatique*, 293: 375-78. <https://doi.org/10.2143/JA.293.1.2002085>
- De La Vaissière, É., (2015). "Wirkak: Manichaeism, Zoroastrian, Khurramī? On Bilingualism and Syncretism in Sogdian Funerary Art". *Studies on the Inner Asian Languages*, 30: 95-112.
- De La Vaissière, É., (2019). "The Faith of Wirkak the Dēnāwar, or Manichaeism as Seen from a Zoroastrian Point of View". *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 29: 69-78.
- Dien, A. E., (2009). "The Tomb of the Sogdian Master Shi: Insights into the Life of a Sabao". *The Silk Road*, 7: 42-50.
- Dowson, J., (1879). *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*. London: Trübner & Co.
- Gignoux, Ph., (1968). "L'inscription de Kartir à Sar Mašhad". *Journal Asiatique*, 387-418.
- Gignoux, Ph., (1984). *Le livre d'Ardā Virāz*. Paris.
- Grenet, F., (2007). "Religious Diversity among Sogdian Merchants in Sixth-Century China: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Hinduism". *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27: 463-78. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2007-017>
- Grenet, F. et al., (2004). "Zoroastrian scenes on a newly discovered Sogdian tomb in Xi'an, Northern China". *Studia Iranica*, 33: 273-284. <https://doi.org/10.2143/SI.33.2.519255>
- Grenet, F., (2013). "More Zoroastrian Scenes on the Wirkak (Shi Jun) Sarcophagus". *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 27: 1-12.

- Griffith, R. T. H. (ed./ tr.), (1897). *Rigvedā*. Benares: E.J. Lazarus.
- Gulácsi, Zs. & BeDuhn, J., (2012[2016]). “The Religion of Wirkak and Wiyusi: The Zoroastrian Iconographic Program on a Sogdian Sarcophagus from Sixth-Century Xi’an”. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 26: 1-32.
- Hintze, A., (2005 [2009]). “The Cow that Came from the Moon: The Avestan Expression māh- gaociθra-”. In: *Bulletin of the Asia Institute: Iranian and Zoroastrian Studies in Honor of Prods Oktor Skjærvø*, 19: 57-66.
- Hintze, A., (2019). “Defeating Death: Eschatology in Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity”. *Irano-Judaica*, VII: 23-79.
- Huang, B., (2021). “Deciphering the Shi Jun Sarcophagus Using Sogdian Religious Beliefs, Tales, and Hymns”. *Religions*, 12: 8-18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121060>
- Humbach, H., (1975). “Vayu, Śiva und der Spiritus Vivens im Oštiranischen Synkretismus”. In: Monumentum H.S. Nyberg, vol. 1 (AI 4), *Teheran and Liège*: 397-408. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004670990_031
- Humbach, H., (tr./ed.), (1991). *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra and the other Old Avestan Texts*. in collaboration with Josef Elfenbein and Prods O. Skjærvø, I and II, Heidelberg.
- Humbach, H. & Ichaporia, P. (tr./ed.), (1994). *Gāthās, the heritage of Zarathushtra: a new translation of his Gāthās, Helmut Humbach and Pallan Ichaporia*. Heidelberg.
- Humbach, H. & Ichaporia, P. (tr./ed.), (1997). *Dādestān ī Dēnīg 1-35*. London: University of London press.
- Humbach, H. & Ichaporia, P. (tr./ed.), (1998). *Zamyād Yasht, Yasht 19 of the younger Avesta*. Wiesbaden.
- Jaafari-Dehaghi, M., (1998). *Dādestān ī Dēnīg 1*. Indiana University, Association for the Advancement of Iranian Studies.
- Jaehee H. (tr.), (2020). *The Sky as a Mahāyāna Symbol of Emptiness and Generous Fullness, A Study and Translation of the Gaganagañjaparipṛcchā*. Volume 2: Edition and Translation. PhD dissertation, University of Oslo.
- Kamakura-shi, (1997). “Silk Road Art and Archaeology”. *Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies*. Japan.
- Kellens, J. (tr.), (1974). *Les noms-racines de l’Avesta*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag.
- Lecoq, P. (tr.), (2016). *Les Livres de l’Avesta, Les textes sacrés des Zoroastriens ou Mazdéens*. Paris.
- Lerner, J. A., (2005). “Les Sogdiens en Chine-Nouvelles découvertes historiques, archeologiques et linguistiques’ and Two Recently Discovered Sogdian Tombs in Xi’an”. *BAI*, 15: 151-162.
- Lerner, J. A., (2011). “Zoroastrian Funerary Beliefs and Practices Known from the Sino-Sogdian Tombs in China”. *The Silk Road*, 9: 18-25.

- Madan, Dh. M. (ed.), (1911). *The Complete Text of the Pahlavi Dinkard* (P. I, B. III-V). Bombay.
- Malalasekera, G. P., (2007). *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names: A-Dh*. India: Motilal Banarsidass Pub.
- Mazdapour, K., (1999). *Dāstān-i Garshāsb, Tahmūras va Jamshīd, Gulshāh va matnhā-yi dīgar: bar'rasī-i das̄nīvīs-i M.Ū*. 2. Tehran: Agah.
- Mirfakhraei, M., (1985). "Dādestān ī Dēnīg, Pursishn I-XL". *Chišta*, 24: 245-8.
- Mirfakhraei, M., (1990). "The purpose of creation according to the sixth question of the Middle Persian text Dādestān ī Dēnīg". *Culture*: 63-7.
- Mirfakhraei, M., (tr./ed.), (1992). *A study Hādōxt nask*. Tehran: Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies.
- Mirfakhraei, M., (2011). *Rivāyat ī Pahlavī*. ehan: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.
- Morris, R., (1885). "Folk-Tales of India". *The Folk-lore Journal*, 3: 242-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442524.1885.10602783>
- Müller, Sh., (2009). "Sogdier in China um 600 n. Chr. Archäologische Zeugnisse eines Lebens zwischen Assimilation und Identitätsbewahrung". In: *Zeitschrift für Kultur und Geschichte Ost- und Südostasiens*, 183/184: 177-148.
- Narten, J. & Gignoux, Ph., (1988). "Bahman". In: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III, Fasc. 4: 487-8.
- Rashed Mohasel, M. T. (tr./ed.), (1987). *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspāram*. Tehran: The Institute of Cultural and Social Studies.
- Rashed Moḥaṣṣel, M. T. (tr./ed.), (1991). *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*. Tehran: The Institute of Cultural and Social Studies.
- Rashed Moḥaṣṣel, M. T., (tr./ed.), (2010). *Dēnkard* (Book VII). Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.
- Rouse, W. H. D. (tr.), (1895). *The Jātaka*. vol. II, Cambridge University Press.
- Shaked, Sh., (1998). "Eschatology i. In Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian Influence". in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, VIII, Fasc. 6: 565-9.
- Shaked, Sh. (tr.), (1979). *The Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* (Dēnkard VI). Boulder, Colorado.
- Shaki, M., (1994). "Dēn". In: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, VII, Fasc. 3: 279-281.
- Shenkar, M., (2014). *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004281493>
- Shenkar, M., (2015). "Images of Daēnā and Mithra on two Seals from the Indo-Iranian Borderlands". *Studia Iranica*, 44: 99-177.
- Sims-Williams, N., (2021). "The Sogdian epitaph of Shi Jun and his wife". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 84: 505-513. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X21000732>

- Skjærvø, P. O., (2011). “Afterlife in Zoroastrianism”. *Jenseitsvorstellungen im Orient. Kongreßakten der 2. Tagung der RVO*, 3/4: 311-349.
- Sun, F., (2005). “Investigations on the Chinese version of the Sino-Sogdian bilingual inscription of the tomb Lors Shi”. *Les Sogdiens en Chine*: 47-56. - Tafazzolī, A., (1975). *Mēnōg ī xrad*. Tehran: Bonyad i Farhang i Iran.
- Tafazzolī, A., (1991). “Činwad Puhl”. In: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, V, Fasc. 6: 594-5.
- Tafazzolī, A. & Amouzgar, J., (tr./ed.), (2007). *Dēnkard* (Book V). Tehran: Moin.
- Wertmann, P., (2015). *Sogdians in China: Archaeological and art historical analyses of tombs and texts from the 3rd to the 10th century AD. Archaeology in China and east Asia*, vol. 5, Darmstadt: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.
- Yoshida, Y., (2005). “The Sogdian Version of the New Xi’an Inscription”. In: *Les Sogdiens en Chine, Études Thématiques*, 17, Sous la direction de Étienne De La Vaissière et Éric Trombert, École française d’Extrême-Orient Paris: 57-72.
- Shi Jun’s Sarcophagus: <https://sogdians.si.edu/shi-juns-sarcophagus/>
- Shi Jun’s tomb: <http://www.silkroads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=view&aid=10149>

پایان فردی در معادشناسی زرتشتی: چهار قاب از آرامگاهی سغدی در چانگ آن

سونیا میرزایی 

نوع مقاله: پژوهشی

صص: ۲۱۰ - ۱۷۳

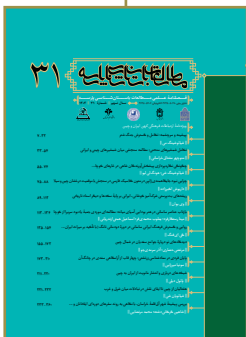
تاریخ دریافت: ۱۴۰۳/۱۱/۰۷؛ تاریخ بازنگری: ۱۴۰۳/۱۲/۲۴؛ تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۴۰۳/۱۲/۲۸

شناسه دیجیتال (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.61882/PJAS.1241>

چکیده

در سال ۲۰۰۳ م. کشف آرامگاه سنگی «ویرکاک»، رهبر کاروان سغدی، و همسرش «ویوسی» در شهر چانگ آن چین، نمونه‌ای بی‌نظیر از تلاقی باورهای زرتشتی و سنت‌های تصویری سغدی-چینی را در قالب ۱۱ قاب سنگی نمایان ساخت. این پژوهش با تمرکز ویژه بر چهار قاب پایانی، که مراحل سفر روان پس از مرگ را بازنمایی می‌کنند، نخستین تفسیر منسجم و مبتنی بر منابع اصیل زرتشتی (اوستا و متون پهلوی) از این بخش از آرامگاه را ارائه می‌دهد. تحلیل با بهره‌گیری از چارچوب نشانه‌شناسی تصویری و رویکرد تطبیقی دین‌پژوهانه انجام شده است. پژوهش حاضر مفاهیم محوری پایان فردی در معادشناسی زرتشتی شامل: دئنا، داوری مینوی، عبور از پل چینود و رسیدن به گرودمان، را با ساختاری روایی، دقیق و وفادار به متون بررسی می‌کند و نشان می‌دهد که این تصاویر، بازتاب مستقیم باورهای زرتشتی هستند. برخلاف برخی تفاسیر پیشین که حضور عناصر مانوی را مطرح کرده‌اند، این پژوهش با استناد به منطق درون‌دینی زرتشتی، تلفیق این دو سنت را مردود می‌داند. در سطحی فراگیرتر، این مطالعه نه تنها به بازشناسی سغدیان به عنوان واسطه‌های انتقال دین زرتشتی به شرق می‌پردازد، بلکه آرامگاه ویرکاک را به مثابه گواهی تصویری از چگونگی بازنمایی مفاهیم دینی ایرانی در بستر فرهنگی چین سده ششم میلادی معرفی می‌کند. این تحلیل، گامی نو در بازخوانی هنر تدفینی زرتشتی و فهم تطبیقی دین و تصویر در تاریخ فرهنگی ایران و آسیای شرقی است.

کلیدواژگان: معادشناسی زرتشتی، پایان فردی، سرگذشت روان، آرامگاه ویرکاک، چانگ آن.



فصلنامه علمی مطالعات باستان‌شناسی پارسه
نشریه پژوهشکده باستان‌شناسی، پژوهشگاه
میراث فرهنگی و گردشگری، تهران، ایران

ناشر: پژوهشگاه میراث فرهنگی و گردشگری

© حق انتشار این مستند، متعلق به نویسنده(گان) آن است. © ۱۴۰۴ ناشر این مقاله، پژوهشگاه میراث فرهنگی و گردشگری است. این مقاله تحت گواهی زیر منتشر شده و هر نوع استفاده غیرتجاری از آن مشروط بر استناد صحیح به مقاله و با رعایت شرایط مندرج در آدرس زیر مجاز است.

Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

© The Author(s)



۱. دانشجوی تحصیلات تکمیلی، موسسه آسیا-آفریقا / مرکز مطالعات نسخه، دانشگاه هامبورگ، هامبورگ، آلمان.

Email: Sonia.mirzaei@gmail.com

ارجاع به مقاله: میرزایی، سونیا، (۱۴۰۴). «پایان فردی در معادشناسی زرتشتی: چهار قاب از آرامگاهی سغدی در چانگ آن». مطالعات باستان‌شناسی پارسه، ۹ (۳۱): ۲۱۰-۱۷۳. <https://doi.org/10.61882/PJAS.1241>
صفحه اصلی مقاله در سامانه نشریه: <https://journal.richt.ir/mbp/article-1-1241-fa.html>

مقدمه

باور به زندگی پس از مرگ یکی از بنیادی‌ترین ارکان دین زرتشتی است. در این آئین، روان انسان پس از جدایی از تن، سفری معنوی و دشوار را آغاز می‌کند که طی آن با داوری مینوی، عبور از پل چینود، و درنهایت ورود به یکی از جایگاه‌های نهایی چون بهشت یا دوزخ مواجه می‌شود. این فرآیند نه تنها بُعدی فردی و اخلاقی دارد، بلکه با ساختار کیهانی جهان نیز گره خورده است. مفاهیم کلیدی‌ای چون: «دئنا»، «داوران مینوی»، «امشاسپندان»، و «پل چینود» در اوستا و متون پهلوی به تفصیل تشریح شده‌اند و منظومه‌ای معادشناسانه را شکل می‌دهند که در تاریخ اندیشه دینی ایران جایگاه ویژه‌ای دارد.

آرامگاه ویراکاک به عنوان سندی تصویری، بستری را فراهم می‌کند تا مفاهیم انتزاعی معادشناسی زرتشتی در قالب هنر تصویری بازنمایی شوند. این آرامگاه در دوره‌ای ساخته شده که تعاملات فرهنگی سغدیان، ایرانیان و چینی‌ها در اوج خود قرار داشته است. اگرچه برخی از پژوهش‌ها تأثیر فرهنگ چینی یا حتی باورهای مانوی را بر برخی عناصر این نقوش مطرح کرده‌اند، اما چهار قاب پایانی با پیوستگی روایی، انسجام مفهومی، و ارجاعات روشن به متون دینی زرتشتی، به وضوح بازتاب‌دهنده آموزه‌های پایان فردی در این دین هستند.

بحث و تحلیل

قاب هشتم، آغاز سفر روان

در این قاب، تصویر روان یک زن و مرد که از دریایی موج‌دار بیرون کشیده می‌شوند، آغازگر سفر پس از مرگ است. در ابتدا این صحنه با مفاهیم مانوی چون «دریای باززایی» تفسیر شد، اما چنین عناصری در آموزه‌های زرتشتی جایی ندارند. براساس متون زرتشتی، دریای نمادین این قاب می‌تواند همان «راه جدایی» باشد که روان برای رسیدن به داوری باید از آن عبور کند. سه پیکره بال‌دار که به استقبال روان آمده‌اند، در متونی هم‌چون هادخت‌نسک به روان‌های نیک پیشتر اشاره دارند.

نیمه بالایی قاب، مردی نشسته در ورودی غار را نشان می‌دهد. ابتدا او را «مانی» یا «کومایاپوتا» دانستند، اما روایت دقیق‌تری از متون پهلوی، این تصویر را با زرتشت مرتبط می‌داند؛ زمانی که زرتشت در ریاضت بود و با دیوی روبه‌رو شد که قصد فریب او را داشت. جامی که مقابل او قرار دارد و موجودی که در برابرش خم شده، یادآور صحنه‌ای در دینکرد است که در آن زرتشت دیو را با خواندن «اهونا ویریا» می‌راند.

قاب نهم، داوری مینوی

در بالای قاب، ایزدی درون گردونه‌ای نشسته که در ماه قرار دارد و در زیر آن، سه گاو نقش بسته‌اند. براساس شواهد متنی، این ایزد می‌تواند بهمن باشد؛ امشاسپندی که با گاو، ماه و هدایت روان پیوند دارد. در اوستا آمده که ماه محل پاک‌سازی تخمه گاو نخستین است و بهمن ایزد نگهبان گاو است.

در زیر گردونه، سه ایزد دیده می‌شوند که در برابر آن‌ها، «ویراکاک» و «ویوسی» نشسته‌اند.

برخی پژوهشگران، ایزد مرکزی و بال دار را دئنا دانسته‌اند و دو ایزد کناری را همراهان او. فرضیه‌هایی نیز مطرح شده که این صحنه می‌تواند به داوری روان در کوه البرز، در ورودی پل چینود اشاره داشته باشد؛ جایی که در متون زرتشتی، جایگاه داوران معرفی شده است. اگر ایزد مرکزی را «مهر» بدانیم و ایزد درون ماه را «بهمن»، انسجام این ساختار روایی بیشتر آشکار می‌شود.

قاب دهم، عبور از پل چینود

پل چینود در متون زرتشتی به عنوان گذرگاه اصلی روان‌ها شناخته می‌شود. روان پرهیزکار با همراهی «سروش» و «آذرایزد» از این پل می‌گذرد، درحالی‌که گناهکاران به سوی دوزخ سقوط می‌کنند. در این قاب، پل چینود با نه پایه به تصویر کشیده شده که با متون زرتشتی هم‌خوانی دارد. آتش‌هایی که در آغاز پل قرار دارند، یادآور داوری به کمک آتش هستند؛ مفهومی که در یسنای اوستانیز آمده است.

در بالای این قاب، پیکره‌ای بال دار که جامی در دست دارد، به نظر می‌رسد دئنا باشد. این دوشیزه زیبا که با روان پرهیزکار همراه می‌شود، در اوستا و متون پهلوی جایگاه والایی دارد. وجود دو سگ در کنار او نیز با توصیفات که از نگهبانان پل در متون آمده، هماهنگ است. پیکره‌ای که در حال سقوط است، ممکن است نماد دین بد، آز، یا حتی روان گناهکار باشد که از داوری مینوی عبور نکرده و به دوزخ سقوط کرده است.

قاب یازدهم، فرجام روان پرهیزکار

این قاب نمایانگر ورود روان به بهشت است. ویرکاک و همسرش سوار بر اسب، در فضایی ظاهر می‌شوند که شش نوازنده در آن حضور دارند. این موسیقی و شادمانی، یادآور توصیف متون از گرودمان است؛ جایی که خانه سرود و نیایش است و روان در آن آرامش ابدی می‌یابد. نوازندگان می‌توانند نمادی از امشاسپندان باشند؛ چراکه در متون آمده است که روان با آنان هم‌نشین خواهد شد. فضای بهشت، همراه با گل‌های معلق، شادی و نیایش، دقیقاً با توصیف متون دینی هماهنگ است.

نتیجه‌گیری

چهار قاب پایانی آرامگاه ویرکاک را می‌توان به عنوان نمایشی منظم، ساختارمند و منسجم از آموزه‌های پایان فردی در دین زرتشتی تحلیل کرد. هر قاب، مرحله‌ای از سفر مینوی روان را تصویر کرده و از عناصر نمادین آشنا در متون بهره گرفته است. دقت در چینش صحنه‌ها، انتخاب نمادها و پیوستگی روایی میان قاب‌ها، از آشنایی سازنده با مفاهیم معادشناسی زرتشتی حکایت دارد.

اگرچه برخی فرضیه‌ها وجود برخی عناصر مانوی را در تصاویر مطرح کرده‌اند، اما با در نظر گرفتن پیوستگی روایی قاب‌ها با آموزه‌های زرتشتی، و با استناد به متون اصیل مانند: گاهان، وندیداد، دینکرد، بندهشن و شکند گمانیک و یچار، چنین تلفیقی منطقی به نظر نمی‌رسد. این

نکته که روانی بتواند مسیر خود را با دُنا، داوران زرتشتی و پل چینود طی کند و در نهایت به گرودمان برسد، اما در میانه راه با مفاهیمی بیگانه مانند: باززایی یا داوری مانوی روبه‌رو شود، با منطق درون‌دینی زرتشتی در تعارض است.

از این‌رو، می‌توان گفت که این چهار قاب، نه تنها بازتابی از باورهای زرتشتی هستند، بلکه برپایه متون و آموزه‌های اصیل دین زرتشت بنا شده‌اند. این تصاویر نشان می‌دهند که حتی در بستری چون چین، در قرن ششم میلادی، باورهای ایرانی توانسته‌اند با انسجام و ساختار خود، به شکل تصویری و نمادین بازنمایی شوند و به بیننده مفاهیم پیچیده و ژرف دینی را منتقل کنند.