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The Image of the Zoroastrian God Srōsh

New Elements

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Abstract

This paper presents new and decisive evidence relative to the identification of one of the colossal depictions of deities discovered by the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE) at Akchakhan-kala with the Avestan *yazata* Sraosha. Besides the therianthropic *Sraošāvarez*, the explicit Zoroastrian symbol that decorates the tunic of this god, new iconographic details are seen. One is the *sraošō.caranā*, which is a whip, "the instrument of Srōsh", held in the hands of one of these "bird-priests" instead of the customary *barsom*. The symbols are presented and discussed in their historical context.

Keywords

Akchakhan-kala – Āthar – Avesta – Early Zoroastrianism – Srōsh – Parōdarsh – *Sraosāvarəz* – Toprak-kala

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FIGURE 1
"The Angel Surush Rescues Khusrau Parviz from a Cul-de-sac", Folio 708v from the Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp (*ca.* 1530–1535), detail
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In the *Shāhnāma*, the 11th century poem by Ferdowsi celebrating the glory of pre-Islamic Iran, Zoroastrian gods are almost never mentioned by their real names. Except for a single passage in which a prayer said by Rostam enumerates the Amahraspands ("Bounteous Immortals"),[1] the only exception is Srōsh, in Avestan Sraosha. Srōsh is the patron of prayer and ritual activity who shares with the chief demon Ahriman the honour of being named. In contrast, Ahura Mazdah, the supreme god, is cautiously named only as *khodā*, *khodāvand*, "the Lord", whereas *Mihr*, Mithra, is just the name of the Sun. In the *Shāhnāma* Sorush, who is named "angel" (*fereshta*) in order not to upset Islamic monotheism, still plays an important role as the winged messenger of God (fig. 1).[2]

This remarkable survival of Srōsh well into the Islamic period is clearly a consequence of his past importance in Zoroastrian devotional life. Still today, among the contemporary Zoroastrian communities of Iran and India, many prayers are addressed to Srōsh and major services are solemnized in his honour at the New Year. Two modern historians of Zoroastrianism who devoted special work to Srōsh, Mary Boyce and Philip Kreyenbroek, theorized that his

1 Ghazanfari 2011, 79 (reference of the passage: Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1988–2008, III, 359).
2 Ghazanfari 2011, 82–92.

FIGURE 2
Sogdian ossuary from Samarkand, *ca.* 7th century AD
PHOTO: F. GRENET

position had increased progressively during the Parthian and Sasanian periods, in relation to the growing power of the priestly class, which identified him as its chief protector.[3] Today, however, we shall see how recent discoveries testify to his extreme importance in a much earlier period, both in Chorasmia and Sogdiana.

Bearing in mind the prominence of Srōsh within Zoroastrianism, we would expect him to be well represented in the monumental and figurative arts. But this is not the case, or more accurately, it was not the case until 2014, when his earliest colossal image was discovered at Akchakhan-kala.[4] In Iran, in fact, Srōsh has no imagery, and in Central Asia, for a long time, his only obvious depiction has been that attested by the decoration of an ossuary from Samarkand presently held in the Tashkent Historical Museum and dating probably to the 7th century AD (fig. 2). On this Sogdian ossuary, Srōsh is shown in his role as guide of the deceased toward the Chinwad Bridge, the place where the merits and demerits of the departed soul will be weighed by Rashn. In this case, Srōsh seems to wear a crenelated crown while presenting an incense burner to Rashn. The incense burner is clearly here a symbol of the piety of the defunct, whose hand the god is holding (unfortunately, the human figure representing the soul is missing).

More recently, two other Sogdian images of Srōsh, also belonging to the 7th and 8th centuries, have been plausibly identified. On an ossuary from Yumalaktepa, near Shahr-i Sabz (fig. 3)[5], the god seems again to preside over the weighing of the soul; he does not display any attribute, but he has two

3 Boyce 1982, 253; Kreyenbroek 1985, 179 (as already noted in Minardi forthcoming 2021a).
4 Betts *et alii* 2015; 2016.
5 Berdimuradov *et alii* 2008.

FIGURE 3 Fragment of a Sogdian ossuary from Shahr-i Sabz, 7th/8th century AD
PHOTO: F. GRENET

attendants at his sides carrying fly swatters, tools that could allude to his function of repeller of demons (in this case the demon of the fly of the corpses). Another image, a painting from Pendzhikent (fig. 4),[6] shows the golden statue of a god carried in procession; the deity is represented holding an incense burner (similarly to the above-mentioned Samarkand ossuary), and a mace, the weapon that is mentioned in Srōsh's Avestan hymns as the instrument he uses against the demons. The most original feature of this image is the book from which the statue seems to emerge. This is most probably an illustration of one of the epithets of Srōsh, *tanu.manthra*, which means "having the Sacred Word for body". If so, the book would be the earliest material evidence for the existence of the Avesta, the sacred book of the Zoroastrians.

Certainly, it is quite surprising not to find a representation of Srōsh in the very rich gallery of Iranian gods who are depicted and precisely named on coins of the Kushan dynasty. An attractive solution to this anomaly would be to consider the possibility that Srōsh was not actually portrayed with his own name, rather than thinking that he was not attested at all. This circumstance seems to be indicated by the inscription found in the dynastic temple of Rabatak (in modern Afghanistan) that lists the divine protectors of the Kushan

6 De la Vaissière *et alii* 2003; Grenet 2015, 137–138.

FIGURE 4
Drawing of a wall painting fragment from Pendzhikent (F. Grenet, adapted from Shenkar 2014, fig. 141)

dynasty. In the Rabatak inscription, it is explicitly stated that Srōsh "is (also) called Mahāsena".[7] Mahāsena is an Indian warrior god, sometimes considered a son of Shiva. Iconographically speaking, Mahāsena is portrayed on the coins of King Huvishka as an Iranian god (fig. 5); his attributes are a sword and a staff surmounted by a rooster, a bird closely associated with both Srōsh and Mahāsena, albeit for different reasons: in the case of Mahāsena, the rooster symbolizes the agitation of young warriors, and in the case of Srōsh, the rooster wakens the faithful and calls them to the morning prayer. The Kushan image most probably played on the double meaning of the symbol.[8]

In 2004, a new element was added to the complex situation of Srōsh's iconography: the so-called bird-priest. This peculiar Zoroastrian motif had puzzled specialists for some years. All the images of "bird-priests" known up to then had been found on monuments and objects dating from the second half of the 6th century AD. They included a few ossuaries from Samarkand, a monumental painting at Bāmiyān showing Mithra's chariot rising over his mountain abode at dawn,[9] and several funerary reliefs of Sogdian merchants who lived

7 Sims-Williams 2004.
8 Shenkar 2014, 146.
9 Grenet 1993; 2003; 2016.

FIGURE 5
Gold dinar issued by Huvishka depicting on its reverse the god Mahāsena
©NUMISBIDS, LOT 29162

and died in China. These "bird-priests" combine the body of a rooster (characterized by its spurs and tail) and the head, arms and bust of a Zoroastrian priest solemnizing a service.[10] Their mouths are, in fact, covered by the *padām*, the ritual mouth covering meant to preserve the purity of the fire while the prayer is being uttered, and the priests' hands hold the *barsom*, the bundle of twigs manipulated during the service. Several specimens also wear a tight soft cap used to avoid any accidental pollution of the fire. All of these elements still today characterize Zoroastrian priests. Very often the "bird-priests" are seen in pairs, and on the Zoroastrian reliefs from China, a pair of "bird-priests" always flanks a fire altar.

So, what could have been the meaning of these human-rooster hybrids? A decisive step in determining this was reached in 2004, when our Harvard colleague Oktor Skjaervø drew attention to a passage of the *Vendīdād*, the book of the Avesta concerned with the fight against the demons.[11] Here (*Vd*. 18.22–23) it is said that during the last part of the night, the time when the fire is most threatened by the powers of darkness, Ātar, the fire god, calls to help Srōsh to prompt the faithful to bring him wood; Srōsh wakens the bird Parōdarsh, "the one who sees forward", "whom those who speak badly call cock-a-doodle-do (*kahrkatās*)", which will call for the prayer. It is also said that when doing so, Parōdarsh assimilates himself to the *sraošāvarez* of Srōsh, his assistant priest. This is the key to the understanding of the hybrid iconography of the "bird-priest", or more precisely the rooster-priest, and his frequent association with a fire altar. Also it explains why this figure most often appears in funerary

10 On the genesis of this iconography, Minardi forthcoming 2021b.
11 Skjaervø *apud* Grenet, Riboud & Yang Junkai 2004, 278–279.

contexts: Srōsh, of whom Parōdarsh is the main helper, accompanies the soul during the three nights between death and judgement, and a special office for the sake of the soul, the *chahārom*, is solemnized on the fourth morning under the direct protection of Parōdarsh. At Bāmiyān, also, the scene depicted takes place at dawn.

Six years ago, this was the state-of-the art situation relative to this unique Zoroastrian imagery. Then, a discovery made during the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE) excavations at Akchakhan-kala dramatically changed the whole picture: at this site, Srōsh and Parōdarsh were brought to light together from a 1st century BC/1st century AD archaeological context, pre-dating the Kushan image of Srōsh-Mahāsena and also pre-dating by more than five centuries all the images of Parōdarsh and all the explicit images of Srōsh so far known. This discovery is a 6-meter-high painting that was part of a broader composition adorning the rear wall of the throne hall of Akchakhan-kala (fig. 6). The scene showed two other deities, as well (fig. 7).[12]

Leaving aside the possible identity of the other deities, we are going to discuss the best-preserved figure of the lot, which shows a young male god with long hair. He is armed, so that at his belt we can observe an Achaemenid type, or "Median", sheathed dagger (*akinakes*). Moreover, his trousers are decorated with images of bustards, birds that can be associated with and symbolise swiftness. All of these attributes correspond to known explicit epithets of Srōsh, although, it is true, they can also belong to other gods. The real key for the identification of this sacred image with Srōsh was the presence of a repeated image of pairs of therianthropic Parōdarsh located all along the central band of his tunic, clearly central to the composition and indicating the important relevance of this motif for the understanding of the whole figure. Another recurrent ornamental motif of a boat with men decorated the neckband of the deity. It could allude to the protection given by Srōsh for one navigating a river (see his hymn, *Yt.* 11.4) and, perhaps, considering the context of Akchakhan-kala, more precisely the protection given by the god during the transportation of corpses toward the Tower of Silence at Chil'pÿk,[13] a *dakhma* that was collectively used in Ancient Chorasmia and located near the right bank of the Oxus.[14] Additionally, on the god's head we can see a mural crown with fiery embrasures and horned battlements that could be an image of the "high abode endowed with its own light" that Srōsh is supposed to possess in

12 Betts *et alii* 2015; 2017; Minardi 2018. The columned hall was also decorated with a painted depiction of *paradeisos* (unpublished).

13 Minardi 2018, 101 with note 56.

14 Minardi & Amirov 2017, 31–32 with references; Minardi forthcoming 2021a.

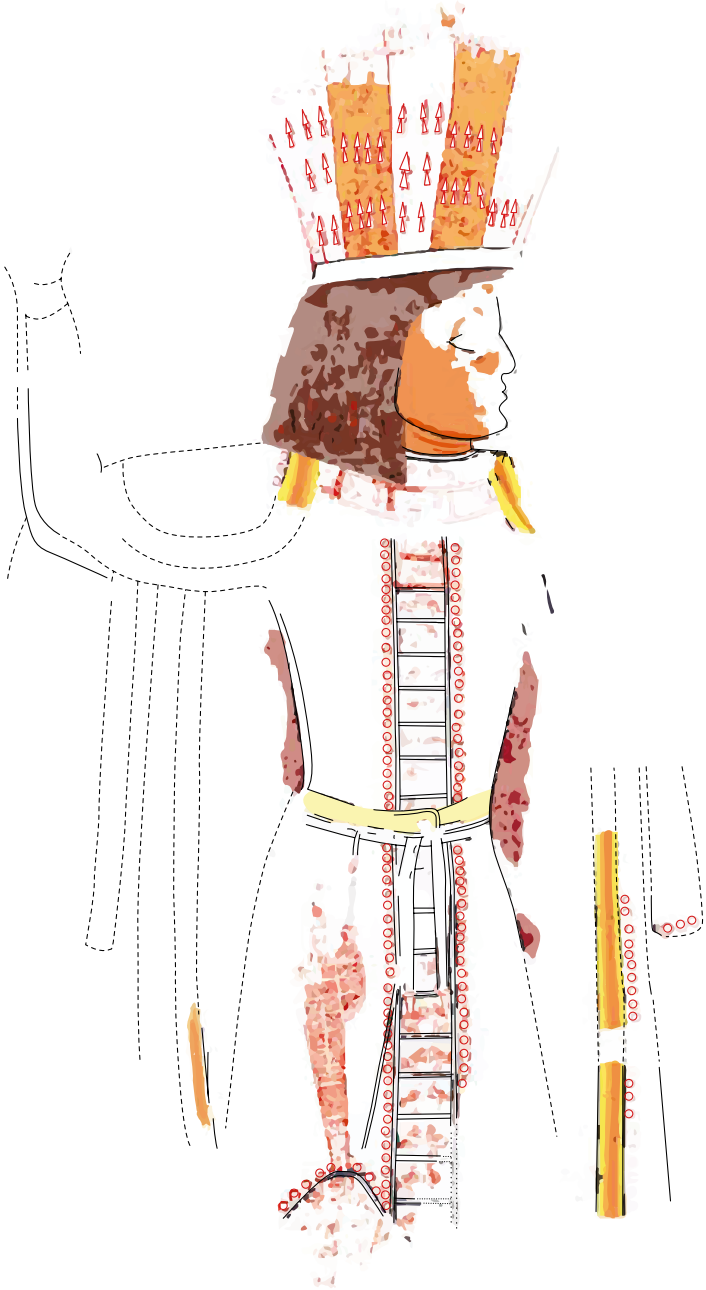

FIGURE 6 Interim reconstruction of the Akchakhan-kala wall painting portraying Srōsh
TRACING WITH PARTIAL RECONSTRUCTION, ©KAE

FIGURE 7 Akchakhan-kala, the main columned hall (throne room) of the Ceremonial Complex. Interim 3D reconstruction
©M. MINARDI

heaven (see his second hymn, *Y.* 57.21).[15] Unfortunately, the god's arms are completely missing. Because they nowhere overlap his body, one can assume that they were perhaps displaying some attributes. These attributes might have been a mace or an incense burner, or both, as is seen in later Sogdian iconography; alternatively, the god possibly could have held a staff, in accordance with the Kushan image of Srōsh-Mahāsena (fig. 6).

Now, turning back to the repeated duos of Parōdarsh figures, we have seen that our Chorasmian pairs are quite similar to the later Sogdian type of "bird-priest" displaying a soft cap, wearing a *padām* and holding *barsoms*. But something new that we would like today to present has also emerged in the last year: in the lower part of the central band that decorates Srōsh's garment we have noticed one exception to the standard scheme of the *barsom* holders (fig. 8). Here one "bird-priest" (and probably the one facing him) does not hold these sacred twigs but does hold another, quite different, object that can be recognized as a short whip with three hanging lashes (fig. 9). A 16th century painting from Venice shows exactly the same type of whip used also in a ritual context, the festival of the *Lupercalia* of ancient Rome (fig. 10). In the *Vendīdād*, this tool is called *sraošō.caranā*, "the instrument of Srōsh", and it was used to spank those who during services did not observe the ritual carefully. It is different from the *aspa.aštrā*, "the horse driver", another whip also mentioned in the

15 Or the representation of a *dakhma* (Minardi 2018, 101–102 with note 56).

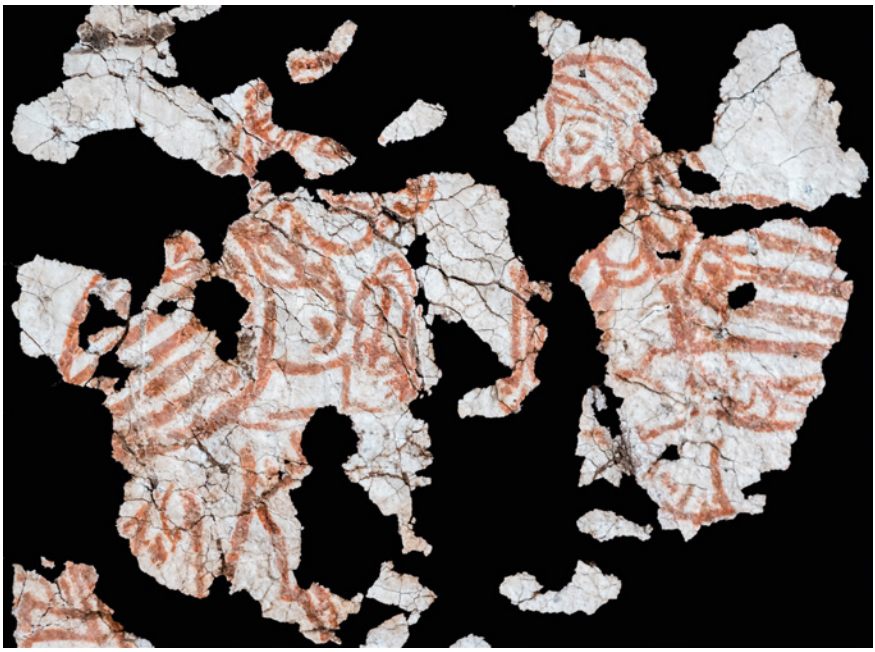

FIGURE 8 Detail of the decoration of the tunic of the god Srōsh with depiction of "bird-priests" holding a martinet
©KAE

Avesta, which consisted of a long lash that was more harmful to people when used, as it was, to punish slaves or criminals.[16] Interestingly enough, in the 1960's at Sharifabad near Yazd, the *sraošō.caranā* was still used against unruly boys specifically by the *sraošāvarez*, that category of assistant priests of which Parōdarsh is the symbolic representative when in association with Srōsh.[17] We believe that this new discovery definitively settles the question of the identification of the Akchakhan-kala colossal god with a mural crown as being Srōsh.

We have mentioned that we do not have evidence relative to the imagery of Parōdarsh between the early example from the 1st century BC/1st century AD in Akchakhan-kala and those later attested in Sogdiana, Bāmiyān and China from the 6th century AD. Or do we have? In the light of the Akchakhan-kala's recent data, one might perhaps reconsider some fragments of clay statues found at Toprak-kala, the later capital of Chorasmia in the second and third centuries AD.[18] A particularly interesting find is the so-called warriors seemingly play-

16 For further details, see Minardi forthcoming 2021b with references.
17 Boyce 1977, 43.
18 Toprak-kala follows Akchakhan-kala (Minardi 2018, 129–139; 2020 with literature).

FIGURE 9 Detail of the previous figure: the martinet or *sraošō.caranā*
©KAE

FIGURE 10 Venice, Galleria dell'Accademia, detail of a 16th century painting with representation of the *Lupercalia*
PHOTO: F. GRENET

ing a wind instrument, of which the fragments were found in two rooms of the "High Palace" of Toprak-kala. When a description of this modelled material was published by Yury Rapoport, the possibility that the object covering the mouths of these figures was not a simple mouth-piece for a flute but a *padām* was briefly contemplated.[19] However, Rapoport did not focus on this idea for long.[20] Now that we have the Akchakhan-kala's "bird-priests" series, it seems very possible that the Toprak-kala sculptures could have depicted the same creatures. In the case of the clay fragment from the "Hall of Warriors" of the palace, the individual portrayed has his arms crossed on the chest, a clear gesture of deference. In another case (that of "Room 8"), a human bust wearing

19 Rapoport & Nerazik 1984, see in particular the conclusions, 287–301.
20 Elaborated in Grenet 2018.

what is described as a scale armour might well be in reality a bird-priest characterized by feathers on his chest.[21]

Finally, we should consider the anthropomorphic figure and the accompanying legend present on a coin series that has, for a long time, remained puzzling. The coins were minted by a ruler who had an Iranian name, "Hyrkōdes". Aleksandr Naymark has recently focused his attention on and re-assessed this material.[22] Naymark firmly considers the Hyrkōdes series to belong to the kingdom developed in the Bukhara oasis immediately to the southeast of Chorasmia, upstream from the Amu-darya. He also considers the series to have been issued between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD. An initial date in the first century AD, perhaps in its second half, seems to us the more plausible.[23] The image depicted on the reverse of the earliest and best-quality specimens of this coin emission shows what now appears to

21 Grenet 2018, 82, fig. 10.

22 *E.g.*, presentation at the "B.D. Kochnev Memorial Seminar in Central Asian and Middle Eastern Numismatics Ninth Meeting, March 18, 2017 Hofstra University". For further references on the various dating of the series, see Minardi forthcoming 2021b, note 121.

23 The god on the reverse, whom we eventually identify as Āthar (see below), is depicted on the coins of the Hyrkōdes series as a therianthropic being. This iconography is original, and might well be a Central Asian creation, but it has certainly been derived from a Hellenistic scheme (different from that used for the Parōdarsh of Akchakhan-kala and analysed in Minardi forthcoming 2021b). The fire god is, in fact, standing in a three-quarters right position (to note his legs and his left visible ear), with his left-hand resting on his hip, posing as a (Hellenistic) "Kushan deity". This iconography is uncommon before the Kushans. It is, however, already characteristics of the imagery of Herakles leaning on his club in the emissions of Hermaios and its imitation by Kujula Kadphises, which might be the model at the origin of the "godly pose" typical of several deities of the Kushan pantheon (an image also later reused by Huvishka but without leonte). The "Hermaios Herakles" might have also been the model used by Hyrkōdes for the representations of the hybrid Āthar: besides the pose, the fire god is, like Herakles, "muscular" (to note the small patches in relief on his human breast, which were probably, although sketchily, intended to be pectoral muscles), and he is holding a fire staff but not in the way in which the Kushan (as well as the Guptas and Sasanians) deities/kings hold theirs in numismatic imagery (the arm is not raised, and the hand does not grasp the spear in a typical Hellenistic pose). The god's hand holds the spear as straightforwardly as Herakles holds his club. Also, the leonte could have been used for modelling/positioning Āthar's sickle feathers: both attributes occupy the same area of the composition. Finally, it is known that the "flaming shoulders" are a Kushan iconographic innovation (as is the nimbus for living kings) and this attribute afterwards is transmitted in images of the Buddha. On the palaeographic side, the Greek letter *rho* in the illustrated coin legend is corrupted in the same way as it appears in some of the coins of the "Heraios" series (as noted by Cribb 1993, who proposes do date this series *c.* 50–90 AD as being issued by Kujula Kadphises: the *rho* does not seem like a "P" but rather like an "l" with protruding rounded ends). Moreover, it seems that between the letter *delta* and the letter *eta* of the Āthar legend (ΟΡΔ[Ι]ΗΘΡΟΥ) there is an *iota* (?): an *iota* (in this case corrupt from *rho*?) also appears between *eta* and *alpha* exactly in the same fashion, as "attached" to the alpha, in ΗΙΑΟΥ

FIGURE 11 Outline of the reverse of a coin issued by "Hyrkōdes" with therianthropic being
DRAWING: M. MINARDI FROM A PHOTO BY O. BOPEARACHCHI

be a variation of our image of Parōdarsh: the anthropomorphic figure is actually represented with rooster's thin legs (the spurs are evident) and with three very distinct bird toes. He also has a rooster tail (fig. 11). The above-mentioned typical priestly features are, however, absent: the character has no *padām*, and instead of the *barsoms* he holds a spear, which calls to mind the later Kushan type of Srōsh-Mahāsena. In the case of this coin, the staff ends with what seems to be a flame, and flames are also rising on top of his shoulders.[24] The tall, and oddly-shaped cap that he wears could perhaps be the priestly hat, although it does not look like the Sogdian versions that we know.[25]

in some of the Heraios numismatic legends. Rosenfield, already in 1967 (17) had seen in Hyrkōdes a contemporary or immediate predecessor of Heraios.

24 As it seems, a Kushan iconographic innovation (*cf. supra* note 22)

25 Difficult to discriminate in its details, the headgear might also be a mural crown (with three merlons/battlements), surmounted by a large spheroid.

The Greek legend of the reverse, written in the genitive case, as usual for the king in his capacity of issuer of the coin, reads ΜΑΚΑΡΟΥ ΟΡΔΗΘΡΟΥ (ΟΡΔΙΗΘΡΟΥ?). There are several possible ways to interpret it, as suggested to us by Anca Dan and Nicholas Sims-Williams, whom we have consulted. Because it is in the genitive case, like the name of the king on the obverse, the straightforward solution would be to consider it an epithet of the king and to translate it as "having the fortune of Ordēthros" / "sharing in the fortune of Ordēthros". It could, however, also identify specifically the divine figure in whose name, together with that of the king, the coin was issued; if so, one should translate it as "fortunate Ordēthros". Ordēthros is obviously the deity depicted, but who might this deity be? The most probable Iranian etymology for Ordēthros (Ordiēthros?) is **ṛtaḫüa.āϑṛ-*, meaning "the fire of Asha". Although this is not directly attested to in the Avesta or in later Iranian languages, this combination of terms makes very good sense because of the constant association between the fire and Asha Vahishta (Middle Persian Ardwahišt), the Zoroastrian high god responsible for the ritual order and the fire element. In the Gāthas, the oldest and most sacred part of the Avesta, we find such formulas as *āϑrō ašā. aojaŋhō*, "the fire having the strength of Asha" (*Y.* 43.4, *cf. Y.* 34.4). In Sogdian, *āϑṛ-*, the name of the fire god, is rendered *āš*, but the name written on our coin could reflect an archaic syntagm or, perhaps, follow the phonetics of an early Bukharian language, which did not exactly correspond to later standard Sogdian. As for ΜΑΚΑΡΟΣ (more often attested as ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ) "fortunate, blessed", one could speculate that it is a Greek equivalent of a word cognate with the Avestan *xᵛarənahuuant-*, Sogdian *farnkhund*, Middle Persian *farrokh*, which has the same meaning and which is associated with the fire god in ritual formulas. Some Sasanian personal names offer combinations of name elements that are consistent with our interpretations: Ādur-Ardag, Ādur-Ardāy and Ādur-Farrokh.[26]

Whatever possibility we may contemplate for interpreting the coin legend, it is clear that the character depicted is Ātar / Āthar, the fire god. The flames on the staff and the flaming shoulders are manifest symbolic features that emphasizes the essence of this divine figure. At the same time, this god shares many features with the hybrid Parōdarsh, that is, his helper through the mediation of Srōsh. On later Kushan coins, Ātar receives a more specific and entirely anthropomorphic iconography, eventually borrowed from the Greek Hephaistos (fig. 12, *A* & *B*).

It seems that the association of the fire god with majestic birds had left some lasting traces. A copper coin issued in the 3rd century AD by the first

26 Gignoux 1986, Nos. 30, 32 and 58.

FIGURE 12 Kushan gold dinars with depiction of Āthar. A: Kanishka; B: Huvishka ©COININDIA; ©CNG 105 – LOT 545

Kushano-Sasanian ruler (name illegible) shows him pouring a libation on a bird, probably an eagle;[27] at Surkh Kotal, the best known of the "dynastic" Kushan sanctuaries, a fire altar added during the Sasanian occupation has its platform surrounded by eagles.[28] Additionally, an unfinished relief from the upper citadel of the sanctuary, discovered as re-employed in a stone bench inside Tower XIII of the peribolos, bears the depiction of two birds, a peacock (?) and a cockerel, standing on what we reckon is an altar.[29] A gold coin issued

27 Jongeward & Cribb 2015, 203, pl. 54, No. 2142.

28 Schlumberger *et alii* 1983, 38–46, 100–102, and 142–143; plans XXXVI–XXXIX, pls. 25–27.

29 Schlumberger *et alii* 1983, 111; pl. 55, no. 161. The stone block of the unfinished relief measures 35 × 26 × 12 cm as preserved. Both birds are represented on the acanthus-decorated altar but, while the peacock appears in the background, the cockerel is instead in the foreground of the scene. In addition to this altar with birds, the relief continues with the partially carved image of a Kushan noble looking to the right, on the opposite side of the birds, and holding a wreath/diadem symbol of investiture. Thus, the scene continued

FIGURE 13 Reverse of a Kushano-Sasanian gold coin issued in Balkh, 4th century AD ©J. CRIBB

in Balkh in the 4th century AD by the later Kushano-Sasanian Hormizd II shows the king pouring a libation in front of a statue of Anāhitā, identified by its legend (fig. 13); instead of a fire altar, again, a bird, unfortunately difficult to classify (a peacock?) receives the libation.[30] In the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr* (X.7), the Middle Persian romance on the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, a red rooster rescues the king in a dangerous circumstance: it is explicitly identified

at least to the right, and the relief was conceived to be part of a secondary frieze of which we do not have further data. We may only speculate about its original (or likely just intended) collocation, perhaps related to the main Kushan Temple A. What appears clear, however, is the fact that in the scene there is certainly a visual semantic connection of the elements: "altar – peacock and cock – Kushan noble", as both birds are looking toward the bowing man who is receiving the diadem, and perhaps some other object, in deference.

30 Cribb 1990, 151–193, pls. I–VIII.

as the Ādur Farrbay, the main cult fire of Sasanian Iran.

At this point, it is difficult to decide where Srōsh's iconography and that of his "circle" first took shape. If one accepts the early dating of coins of Hyrkōdes, the close association between rooster and fire can perhaps be attributed to Bukhara. If, on the contrary, we consider that these coins followed the iconographic program at Akchakhan-kala, the prize of invention should be given to Chorasmia and to its artists, and to the priests who obviously inspired their work, all belonging to the royal entourage. The main point is that iconographic invention took place and was very productive in the Zoroastrian milieu of Chorasmia and western Sogdiana around the turn of our era. This totally unexpected conclusion is due to the recent work of numismatists and archaeologists, and mainly to the discoveries of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia.

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