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# Pre-Print

# IRANICA

## An Illustration of the *āb-zōbr* and of Some Avestan Formulas on a Wall Painting at Akchakhan-kala (Chorasmia, Early 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD)

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### I. Introduction

Akchakhan-kala is the oldest capital of “right bank” Chorasmia (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) so far revealed by the archaeological excavations of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia (KAE).

The KAE commenced its archaeological operations at the site in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> The initial focus of this joint Australian-Uzbek expedition was to study the fortifications of its upper enclosure.<sup>2</sup> At this time the team also explored other sites, such as the site of Tash-k’irman-tepe.<sup>3</sup> In 2004, minor sondages at Akchakhan-kala concerned the western limits of the Central Building of the site’s Ceremonial Complex (the palace), and larger, but still limited, excavations were carried out in its southwest corner. These latter efforts exposed parts of the southern section of the perimetral corridor that encircles the Central Building and led to the discovery of the first fragments of Akchakhan-kala’s wall paintings (the so-called gallery of portraits). In 2005, the excavations were pursued outside the monument in the area west of the palace, that is, the zone between the Central Building and the upper enclosure. Here important data were collected and a built-up sector, of still uncertain function, was brought to light.<sup>4</sup> Only in 2007 the excavations were expanded to an extended area in the interior of the Central Building. That year a large hypostyle hall<sup>5</sup> was discovered, along with the remains of a fire altar chamber crammed with fragments of painted, unbaked-clay, modelled sculptures

1 The project was initially directed by Alison Betts (University of Sydney) and Vadim N. Yagodin (Research Institute for the Humanities, Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Karakalpak branch, Nukus) and until recently by A. Betts and Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov (Nukus). F. Grenet is a collaborator of the project, and M. Minardi has been its Field Director since 2010.

2 BETTS *et al.* 2009.

3 A rescue excavation. BETTS *et al.* 2018.

4 MINARDI *et al.* 2018.

5 MINARDI *et al.* 2017.

(including the first modelled high-relief of a Greek-style *ketos* of Asia)<sup>6</sup> and the remains of the fire altar itself, quite possibly the altar of the regnal fire of the king of Akchakhan-kala.<sup>7</sup> Several hundreds of fragments of wall paintings were detected within the debris of the columned hall. Hence, priority has been given since to the excavation of this space and to the accurate and delicate recovery of its fragmented mural imagery. Since 2010, work in the columned hall has been carried out on an ampler scale, and in 2014, cleaning and analysing in the restoration laboratory of the KAE the wall painting fragments collected in the previous years, we managed to identify deities from the Avestan pantheon of Chorasmia.

This paper deals with such findings: the wall paintings that once adorned the southern wall of the hypostyle hall of the Central Building illustrating colossal gods.<sup>8</sup> According to abundant radiocarbon data, they were executed in the third and last building stage (Stage 3) of the Central Building, starting between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, most likely in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The paintings are still in the process of being cleaned, reassembled, and studied. They have been the subject of several recent articles that included detailed descriptions of their context and historical background, and we find it unnecessary to repeat that information here.<sup>9</sup>

The current reconstruction of the large composition shows three standing deities, over six meters tall (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> Looking at these colossal depictions upon entering into the columned hall from the north (Fig. 2), on the left we first would have seen a god who is now safely identified as Sraosha, the overseer of ritual activity and chief fighter against demons. The main evidence comes from the repeated motif on the central vertical band of his tunic: it shows, duplicated face to face, pairs of composite creatures (Fig. 3) with the body of a rooster and the head and hands of a man, a “bird-priest” with *padām* (mouth cover) and tight cap, holding the *barsom* (the bundle of ritual twigs). This figure is clearly a visual rendering of Parōdarsh, the rooster-priest whom *Vendīdād* 18.14–23 (cf. also Westergaard Fragment 10.41) associates with Ātar and Sraosha, but more directly with the latter. During the last part of the night, Ātar, the god of Fire, requests fuel from Sraosha; Sraosha wakes up the bird Parōdarsh (which means “seeing forwards”), “which those who speak wrongly call cock-a-doodle-doo” and which, acting as his *sraōšāunuarəza* (assistant priest looking after the proper order of the ritual), wakes up the faithful with his cockcrow. An additional argument for the association between the icon of the rooster-priest, the function of *sraōšāunuarəza*, and Sraosha was discovered three years

6 MINARDI 2016. This marine monster is in this context very possibly semantically linked to a cult of the waters.

7 SINISI *et al.* 2018. Due to conservation issues it was decided not to pursue the investigation of the altar area.

8 The rest of the hall, including the surface of its plastered column shafts, was decorated with the lavish imagery of a *paradeisos*. This additional finding endorses the royal and Zoroastrian context of the Akchakhan-kala’s deities (KAE [forthcoming]).

9 BETTS *et al.* 2015; 2016; GRENET 2018; MINARDI 2018; 2020; [forthcomingb].

10 They might have been originally four. This question is under study.

ago. When we were discussing together the findings we realized that in the lowest panel, Parōdarsh holds not the usual *barsoms* but a short whip (Fig. 4), in Avestan *sraošō.caranā*, that is, “Sraosha’s instrument” which is specifically associated with the function of *sraošāuuarəza* in the Iranian Zoroastrian ritual observed by MARY BOYCE in the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> The icon of Parōdarsh is again attested in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE at Bāmiyān, in Sogdiana, and among the Sogdian communities in China, always in Mithraic or funerary contexts where a symbol of Sraosha is expected.

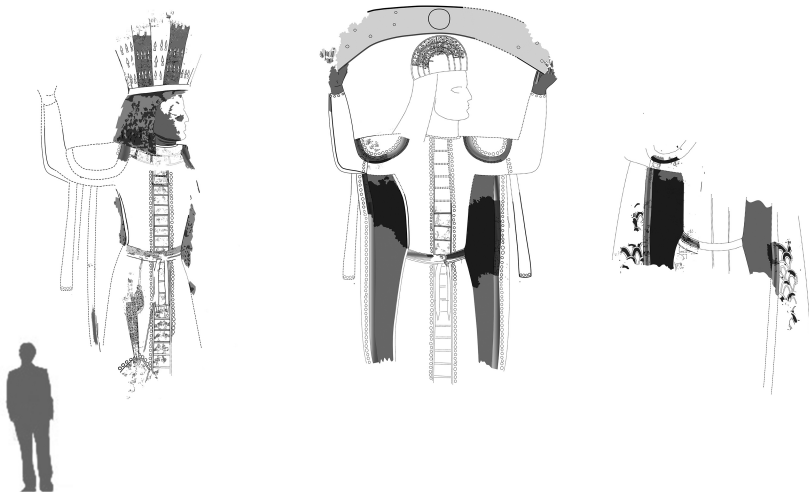


Fig. 1. Akchakhan-kala, the Avestan deities. 1:1 tracing of the recomposed fragments (interim reconstruction, ©KAE). From left to right: Sraosha, Tishtrya or Fravashi and possibly Zam Spenta Ārmaiti.

The deity standing next to Sraosha on the right (Fig. 1, at the centre) is more problematic, although it is unquestionably related to the vault of the sky embedded with stars, which he or she upholds with both hands.<sup>12</sup> Sev-

11 GRENET/MINARDI 2021. In this article we also examine a therianthropic image analogous to the Chorasmian Parōdarsh, on the reverse of a series of coins from the Bukhara region probably initiated in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE by a ruler named Hyrkōdes. In this case, the icon is meant to symbolize Ātar, identified by the Greek legend as ΟΡΔΗΘΡΟΣ (or ΟΡΔΙΗΘΡΟΣ), probably \**rtahya-āθr-* “Fire of Asha”. There are, however, significant differences, as on this figure the sacerdotal attributes (*padām*, *barsoms*) are replaced by symbols directly evocative of the Fire (flames rising behind the shoulders and on top of a staff).

12 The central bigger disk is not the sun as previously supposed (BETTS *et al.* 2015) but another important astral body (a bigger star, Sirius, according to MINARDI 2018). As the sky upheld by the god is the night sky, whatever the identity of the deity, we expect this astral body to be Sirius or the Moon.

eral Iranian deities have an explicit link with the sky: Ahura Mazdā, Asman, Anāhitā, the Fravashis, and also astral deities, especially those such as Mithra and Tishtrya. F. GRENET suggests that this image, like that of Parōdarsh, directly illustrates the Avestan formula: “they uphold the sky from below” (*upa. dāraiiān asmanəm*), which is found only in the Frawardīn Yasht (Yt.13.29).<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, the figure could be an individual personification of the Fravashis, or the specific Fravashi of Chorasmia. M. MINARDI, for his part, favours the identity of this deity as Tishtrya, god of the star Sirius (depicted, according to him, at the centre of the celestial vault uphold by the god) and of the rain, who initiates the whole process of the circulation of the waters from earth to sky, and vice versa.<sup>14</sup>

The last deity visible on the right in the current re-composition of the imagery, is the most fragmentary. The only motifs recognizable on his or her dress are a gazelle and a heavy coat with a decorative pattern symbolizing tree-bark or mountains. Its identification with Zam Spenta Ārmaiti, goddess of the Earth, is no more than a possibility.

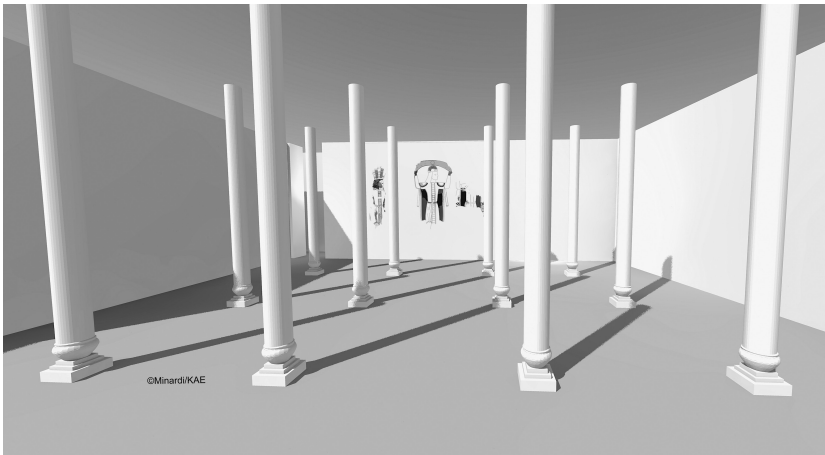


Fig. 2. Akchakhan-kala, volumetric reconstruction of the columned hall of the Central Building with position of the Avestan deities (view from the north, ©Minardi)

13 GRENET in BETTS *et al.* 2015, p. 1392.

14 MINARDI 2018; MINARDI *et al.* 2020. The distribution of the rain-giving functions is aptly summarized by KELLENS 2016, p. 162: “*L’intervention des Frauuāšis se situe au bout d’un processus complexe. Il a fallu que l’étoile Tištriia entame son périple au firmament, échappe au réseau des étoiles filantes et s’assure la maîtrise du réservoir céleste des eaux, que l’étoile Satauuāēsa pousse vers la terre les brumes exhalées du réservoir, que le vent ébranle les nuages dans le ciel et que les forces présentes dans les eaux, Apqm Napāt et le x<sup>o</sup> arənah, les répartissent dans les diverses régions. Alors les Frauuāšis font tomber la pluie.*”



Fig. 3. Two of the pairs of assistant priests of Sraosha with *barsoms* (Panels 13 and 14 after restoration, ©KAE)



Fig. 4. Pair of assistant priests of Sraosha with “Sraosha’s instrument” (restoration in progress, background digitally removed for readability, ©KAE)

## II. The Ritual Scenes Represented on the Tunic of the Second Deity

As we shall see, the question of the precise identification of the second deity as a Fravashi or as Tishtrya bears no relevant consequences for the interpretation we are now going to propose about the repeated scenes to be found on the central band of the deity’s tunic (Fig. 5). This is due to the fact that, first, both Tishtrya and the Fravashis somehow connect heaven and earth and, second, that the images centrally located on the figure, likewise Parōdarsh for Sraosha, have to be directly related to the deity’s functions, here, as we shall see, linked with water.

Similar to the motif of Parōdarsh on Sraosha’s tunic, the drawings on the four panels depicted on the second god are not coloured but only drawn with red outlines.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the repeated pattern of the heraldic Parōdarsh, here the scenes on each panel are slightly different from each other. In our previous brief discussion of the panels<sup>16</sup>

15 For the different techniques employed in the mural art of the site and on their historical value, see MINARDI 2018 with references.

16 In BETTS *et al.* 2015, see esp. pp. 1376–1378, figs. 5–7; also pp. 1392–1393 (GRENET).



Fig. 5. Drawing with partial reconstruction of the central band decorating the tunic of Tishtrya or the Fravashi with its four surviving panels illustrating a ritual (©KAE)



we had identified the smaller character as a Zoroastrian priest with *padām*, tight cap, and, at least on the third panel (from the top), a hand passed behind his *kustīg* (ritual belt); we had also compared the larger enthroned character with beard and beribboned diadem with portraits of Chorasmian kings on coins attributed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, but in addition the character wears the *padām* (Fig. 6).<sup>17</sup> The slightly curved lines linking his palm and the platform in front of the priest, visible in the second, third and fourth panels, were viewed as tongues of fire rising toward the hand. Consequently, F. GRENET tentatively proposed to recognize a series of ritual homages paid to the Fravashis of various kings of the past, such as those addressed to the Fravashis of Pishdādian and Kayānian rulers in Yt. 13.130–132 (from Yima to Kavi Haosravah; also, Kavi Vishtāspa in 13.99–100). M. MINARDI instead saw in these “tongues” a stylized representation of running water, as in a stream, in a metaphorical representation modelled after a “*lustratio*”. In his opinion, the king was depicted as a distributor/controller of the waters, as an agent of the divine.<sup>18</sup> Now we would like to propose what we hope will be an improved description and interpretation of this imagery.



Fig. 6. Chorasmian royal figures compared: left, numismatic representation; right, detail of an enthroned character painted on the tunic of the central Chorasmian deity (after MINARDI 2018, Fig. 16)

### 1. Description of the Panels, from Top to Bottom

First panel (Fig. 7; with the priest seated on the left of the scene): the priest is seated (or rather sitting cross-legged on the ground) looking to the right behind a low table; the right and central parts of the scene are missing. Judging from

17 On this comparison, see GRENET 2018; MINARDI 2018; for further numismatic aspects and chronology, see SINISI 2018.

18 MINARDI 2018, pp. 126–128.

the position of his right arm, which is horizontal to his body, he is very possibly holding an object (not preserved) in the palm of his right hand.



Fig. 7. Panel 1 of the central band decorating the tunic of Tishtrya or the Fravashi (©KAE)

Second panel (Fig. 9; with the priest standing on the right of the scene): the priest extends his right hand; what he is doing with his left hand is unclear, but a small vessel seems to be positioned on the platform below; the hanging ends of his *kustīg* are clearly visible (compare with the priests on the Mullakurgan ossuary, Samarkand region, ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century AD; Fig. 8). The royal character, enthroned and apparently with a rounded headgear (visible in the lower part of Fig. 7)<sup>19</sup> also extends his right hand toward a low piece of furniture (a platform? It has no supports)<sup>20</sup> positioned between himself and the priest (who is

19 This is due to the fact that the two fragments pertinent to Panels 2 and 3 were photographed separated as found. They are not yet reassembled and are under the process of restoration.

20 The platform depicted at Akchakhan-kala between king and priest is probably a solid support for the libation vases, the prototype of the *urvīs / âlat gāh* of the Parsis. Cf. the inclined platform in the well-known Achaemenid relief from Daskyleion showing two priests with *barsoms* and wearing *kandyys* (discussed in BOYCE 1982, pp. 117–118; 146–147).

behind this feature). From his hand something springs down toward the platform/table. The platform is asymmetrical in section, rising on the royal figure's side. On the table stands the vessel, possibly a bowl. The trilobate finials of the royal figure's belt are clearly visible.



Fig. 8. Detail of a Sogdian ossuary from Mullakurgan with Zoroastrian priests  
(©Telling the Sogdian Story: A Freer Sackler Digital Exhibition Project).

Third panel (Fig. 10; with the priest seated on the left of the scene): the priest, clearly has his left hand behind the *kustīg*. The royal personage, seated on a throne, extends his right arm. From the open upturned palm of his hand it looks as if a stream of curved lines is starting to descend, and they reach a bowl placed on an asymmetrical platform similar to the one in panel two. Contrary to the standing priest of the second panel, his homologue is here squatting onto the ground, like the figure in the first panel, behind the platform.

Fourth panel (Fig. 11; with the priest standing on the right of the scene): the priest is holding in his left hand, or possibly in both hands, a small object that seems to be an open, round-bottomed vessel shaped like an alabastron (or an unguentarium); the ends of the *kustīg* are again visible. The royal character extends his right arm, and, again, distinct curved lines stream from his hand (although this is not preserved), reaching a vessel (the usual bowl? Fig. 12) apparently placed on the ground (this part of the painting presents a large lacuna).

Such a shape was possibly used to drain the fluids involved in the rituals as also indicated by a small recess partially visible on the platform of Panel 3, just behind the bowl (Fig. 10).

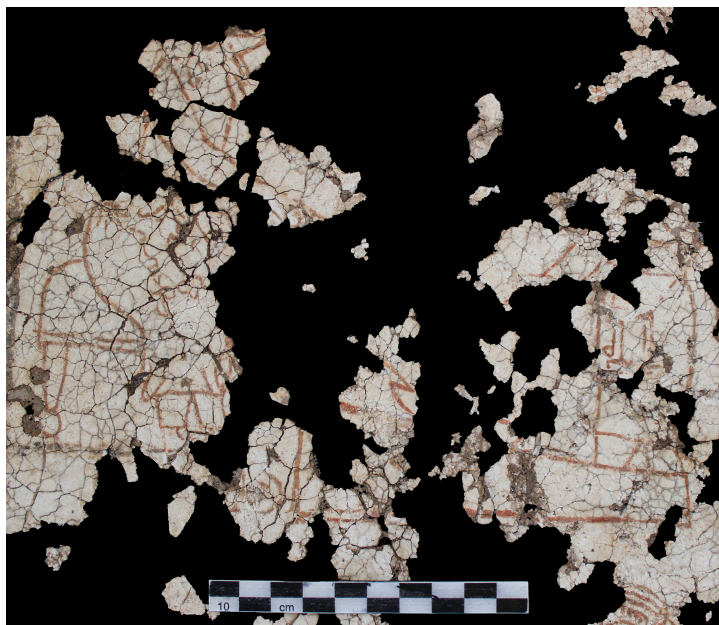


Fig. 9. Panel 2 of the central band decorating the tunic of Tishtrya or the Fravashi (©KAE)

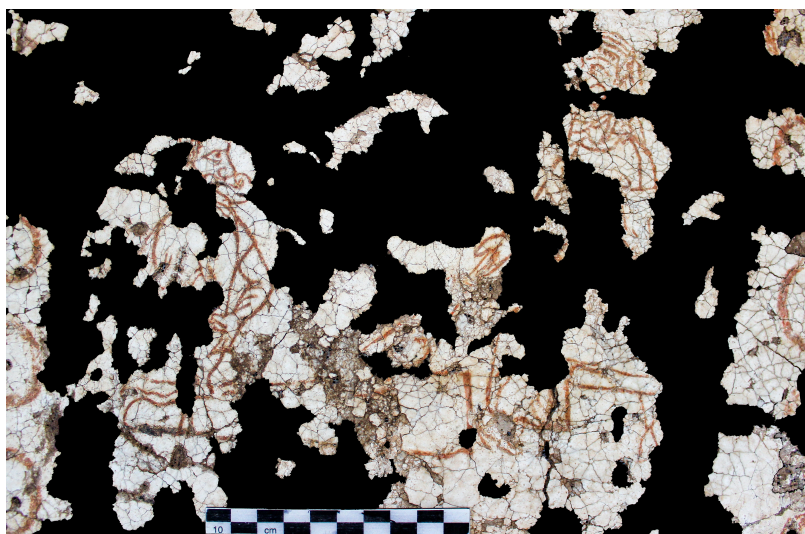


Fig. 10. Panel 3 of the central band decorating the tunic of Tishtrya or the Fravashi (©KAE)

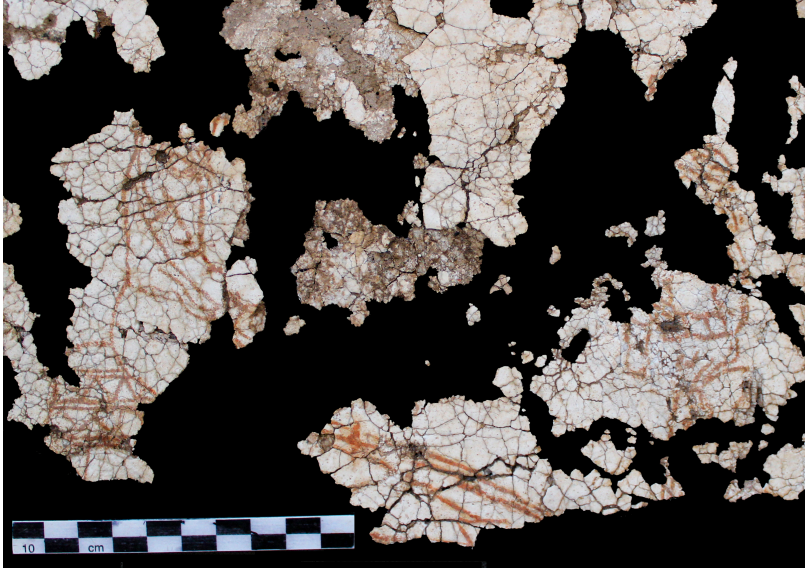


Fig. 11. Panel 4 of the central band decorating the tunic of Tishtrya or the Fravashi (©KAE)

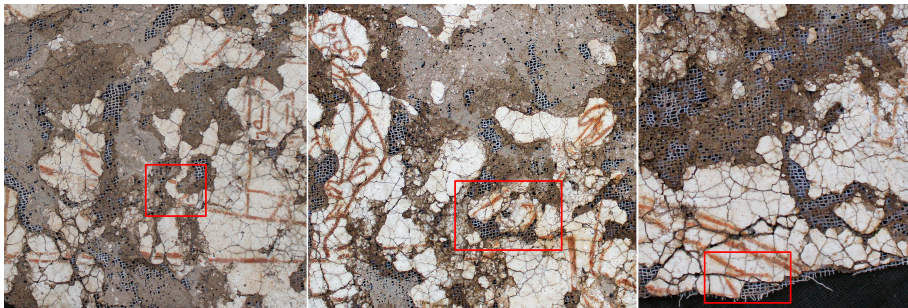


Fig. 12. Details of Panels 2-4: the bowls placed on the low table are highlighted by the red frames (original background during restoration ©KAE).

## 2. Commentary

First of all, we have to note that the royal thrones have characteristic details. For instance, contrary to those in the second and third panels, the throne in the fourth panel has a pattern with triangles on the rear of the cushion. Another example is seen in the difference between the supports of the second and third thrones. The two preserved headgears/royal tiaras of panels two and three (the

latter being oddly similar to a later kingly numismatic portrait of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) seem also to be different. Thus, the royal figures, although somewhat stereotyped in their appearance, seem to be distinguished from each other.

We now agree that the idea of rising tongues of fire is unlikely, for there is no parallel in any ancient iconography, and the very concept of fire actually reaching the deity is alien to the Zoroastrian sacrifice: what ascends is only the pleasant smell of the sacrificed meat and perfumed offerings. The “tongues” then, can just as well be interpreted as flowing water, as suggested by MINARDI in 2018. Streams of life-giving water issuing from a deity are depicted in Mesopotamia (from Enki) and India (from Buddha performing the miracle at Sravasti). They flow from Enki’s shoulders (or they overflow from vases held by the god) and from Buddha’s feet, not from the figures’ hands, but in all cases, water emanates directly from a significant part of the body.

One possible interpretation of this repeated motif on the costume of the sky-holding deity at Akchakhan-kala would be the arrival and distribution of the heavenly waters. This brings to mind a passage in *Frawardīn Yasht* (Yt. 13.65-68):<sup>21</sup>

“(65) And when the waters flow forth from the Vourukasha Sea, and the Ahura-created Khwarenah, numerously the strong Fravashis of the righteous come forth by the many hundreds, by the many thousands, numerously by the many ten-thousands, (66) searching for water each for her own family, for her own clan, for her own tribe, for her own country, saying thus: ‘May our own country not be in distress and dry up!’. They fight in battles in their own place and dwelling (...) (68) And then, those of them who are victorious bring away the water, each for her own family, for her own settlement, for her own clan, for her own country.”

In such a context, the motifs on the panels could be an evocation of the waters issuing from the Vourukasha Sea, then gathered in the sky by Tishtrya, and sent in the rain by the Fravashis (one or the other may be depicted by the main figure); then they are distributed by the enthroned Fravashi of Chorasmia (or the Fravashi of the king of Chorasmia, or the Fravashis of the various districts of Chorasmia) in response to a libation to the Waters (*āb-zōhr*) performed by a priest.

Such an interpretation is certainly attractive, but some objections can be raised. Firstly, there is no compelling reason to assume that the Fravashi of a king, or of his country, has the appearance of the king himself. The Avestan word *fravaaši-* has female gender, including in contexts where they are attached to a male person. On the two definite existing images (Fig. 13), both of which are at Pendjikent and date from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, they are female (in the painting from Pendjikent 6/III they are protecting warriors in battle).<sup>22</sup> The deity whose tunic is adorned by the figurative panels under consideration, even if it is actually a Fravashi (as assumed by F. GRENET), cannot further this discussion for the face is missing. Finally, M. MINARDI proposes to identify the figures belonging to the

21 Translation based on MALANDRA 2018, pp. 97–98, modified according to KELLENS 2016, p. 147.

22 MARSHAK 1990, pp. 297–298, Fig. 9; MARSHAK 2002, p. 188, Fig. 68.

Akchakhan-kala “portrait gallery” as the Fravashis of members of the royal clan of Chorasmia, past and present, and in all instances, they are, according to him, female, in any case beardless, contrary to the enthroned character(s) here.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 13. Pendjikent, Sogdiana: a depiction of the Fravashis (drawing, after MARSHAK 1990, Fig. 9).

A second possible objection comes from the existence of an Avestan formula that describes exactly the gesture of the enthroned character, as visible especially on the third panel, “to the overflowing hollow palm”, with reference to the worshipper performing a liquid libation. Significantly enough, one of the contexts in which this formula occurs is the *Ābān Yasht*, the Yasht to Anāhitā and the waters. It is just at the end (Yt. 5.132):<sup>24</sup>

“On account of this sacrifice (*yasna*), on account of this praise, on account of this demand, descend, O Ardwī Sūrā Anāhitā, from those stars to this earth set in place by the Ahura, to the sacrificing libation-giver (*auui zaotārəm yazəmnəm*),

23 MINARDI 2018, pp. 122–126; further sustained in MINARDI *et al.* 2020.

24 MALANDRA 1983, p. 130, modified according to KELLENS 2016, p. 134.

to the overflowing hollow palm (*aoi pārənəm vīyžāraieintīm*), for help, you who bring success to the one who demands it by bringing libations and sacrificing with competence (*zaoθrō.barāi aradrāi yazamnāi*).<sup>25</sup>

The same formula, *aoi pārənəm vīyžāraieintīm*, or minor variants, occurs also in the Yashts to Rashnu (Yt. 12. 3, 5), in *Vendīdād* 19.40 (in a praise to Sraosha) and in *Vendīdād* 22.5. The repetitive sequence in Yt. 15, describing how heroes of the past (including the Pishdadians Haoshyanha, Takhma Urupi, Yima and Thraētaona) sacrificed to Vayu, brings us even closer to our image, notwithstanding the absence of the *barsoms*:<sup>25</sup>

“On a golden throne, on a golden cushion, on a golden rug, on the spread *barsom*, with flowing hollow palms (*zaranaēne paiti gātuuō zaranaēne paiti fraspāiti zaranaēne paiti upastərətāt paiti barəsmən pārənəbiiō paiti yžāraiiq̄thiō*).”

All matters considered, we propose to recognize here a king performing a libation (*zaoθrā*) to the water descended from the sky, in order to purify it and to ensure a good supply. This is the *āb-zōhr* of the Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts, which has modestly survived in the modern ritual.<sup>26</sup> Here the libation is depicted as streams of water, unrealistically and symbolically but in accordance with the meaning of Avestan *vīyžāraieintīm* “overflowing”. The king operates in front of a priest who is markedly differentiated by his size and costume and is preparing his libation in a less exalted, more realistic manner; in Panel 4 he is simply holding a small elongated vessel.<sup>27</sup> The enthroned royal character could be a repeated image of the Chorasmian king, perhaps shown in successive stages of the ritual. Alternatively, we might have here a selection of royal ancestors, modelled upon the past sacrificer-heroes celebrated in the Yashts. Clearly, passages like those just quoted from Yt. 15 show that the *zootars* mentioned

25 MALANDRA 1983, p. 98, slightly modified according to KELLENS 2016, p. 124.

26 BOYCE 1966, pp. 110–118.

27 In the modern Iranian ritual observed at Sharifabad by Mary Boyce, the libation poured in the running water is usually milk, or milk mixed with water and wine, in which case it can be performed by any man “in a state of ritual purity”. When part of the Yasna ceremony it consists of *parahōm*, i.e. crushed *haoma* (ephedra) twigs mixed with milk, water, and pomegranate juice. The *parahōm* is not necessarily poured from the stone mortar; a vessel in any material considered “clean” (silver, copper, glass) can be used. Alabastra have been found in the Treasury of Persepolis (SCHMIDT 1957, pls. 47, 51, 65), and one specimen (with an inscription of Xerxes) was allegedly discovered in Bactriana (SCHMITT 2001). An alabastron was found at Afrasiab (ancient Samarkand) under the mosque, in a sector that probably had included the main city temple (unpublished). Alabastra (in the Greek world usually perfume containers) were also found during the excavations of Ai Khanoum in the Treasury of the Hellenistic Palace and in the Heroon of Kineas (RAPIN 1992, p. 107 with note 246, pp. 157–159, and illustrated in pl. 72; note that the inscribed specimens from the Heroon probably contained cinnamon, *ibidem*). Such vessels were also made of glass (and a small Roman/Alexandrine glass *flask* has been discovered in the “Begram hoard”).



with “overflowing hollow palms” were not necessarily priests, although this term is sometimes introduced in modern translations.<sup>28</sup>

Such a precise correspondence between the painting and some Avestan passages confirms what we had deduced from the invention of the hybrid image of Parōdarsh, the rooster-priest associated with Sraosha in *Vendīdād* 18.14–23: the priests attached to the Chorasmian court had precise knowledge of the Avesta, and the decoration of the palace was executed in close consultation with them.<sup>29</sup>

One may wonder why the *padām* is worn by the royal figures and not only by the priests. In principle, the mouth cover is required only in the presence of the ritual fire, which is absent from the *āb-zōhr* ceremony except when it is part of a Yasna. In this case, the *āb-zōhr* follows the *ātaš-zōhr*, which most probably in this period still included an animal sacrifice. That part of the ceremony was not shown directly in our painting, or perhaps it was in the missing part of the first panel (here the priest is squatting, a stance that occurs mainly when one is reciting the *Gāthās* during the *ātaš-zōhr*), or in one of the other lost panels that completed the decoration of the band (cf. Sraosha’s complete series).

An annual animal sacrifice to the waters of the Khiva khanate was described by the ethnographer Gleb Snesev, from testimonies gathered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the old rural culture of Uzbek Khorezm was still largely intact. On the day the irrigation channels were opened after the spring cleaning, a bull was sacrificed and thrown in the water in the presence of the civil servants of the khan of Khiva (although not the khan himself), religious elders, and *mirābs* (supervisors of the water distribution). This sacrifice was expected to guarantee plenty of water during the year.<sup>30</sup> It was probably the remote successor of the Wakhsh-angām mentioned in *Bīrūnī’s Chronology*, the festival to Wakhsh “the angel who has to watch over the water and especially over the river Jayhūn (i.e. the Wakhsh-Oxus, the Amu-darya)”, solemnized on day 10, i.e. *Ābān* (“Waters”), of the month Spandarmad, which is the last month of the Zoroastrian year.<sup>31</sup> In Bīrūnī’s time, owing to the movement of the calendar, this month fell in February–March, at the same time as the later Khiva festival. In the period to which the paintings at Akchakhan-kala are attributed, the Spandarmad month fell in about October–November, but possi-

28 See e.g. SKJAERVØ 2011, p. 63, Yt. 5.132, *auui zaotārəm yazəmnməm* translated “to the sacrificing priest”; differently MALANDRA 1983 (“to the worshipping zaotar”) and KELLENS 2016 (“vers le libateur qui sacrifie”). One could argue that the Kavis of the Younger Avesta are not kings in the sense they will become in later Iranian literature and may have kept sacral functions that seem associated with this name in the Old Avesta. Pāurva, however, who is not a Kavi but a boatman, promises to bring to Anāhitā, in the river Ranhā, “one thousand *zao9ra* mixed with *haoma* and milk”, a technically perfect designation of the *āb-zōhr* (Yt. 5.63).

29 As already noted in MINARDI 2020. On other evidence for a possible influence of the Zoroastrian clergy on the funerary customs of Chorasmia, MINARDI [forthcominga].

30 SNESAREV 1960, p. 198.

31 Transl. SACHAU 1879, p. 225.

ably the festival was then celebrated, or duplicated, on the *Ābān* day of a month close to the spring equinox. Be that as it may, the royal ritual illustrated on our panels might well have been part of it.

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