Aesop’s Fables Represented in the Mural Paintings at Panjikant

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

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

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

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

6 Brentjes, 1971; Marshak, 2002: 143-145. Qala-ye Qahqaha was an important centre of Ustrušana, a region of Central Asia which adopted Sogdian language and culture.
7 Klyashtorny, 1999.
8 Raspopova, 1999.
9 Marshak, 2002: 86, 89.
the On Oq tribes that is to say, once more, a legend connected with the ancient Turks. Maršak was
very cautious in proposing any definitive identification: he was extremely well versed in ancient
fables and tales and, for this reason he preferred to state that stories of this kind are very common
among many peoples at any time. In any case, Aesop was not the only famous narrator of fables. He
was preceded by Anacarsis (who was considered to have been Scythian) and followed by Phaedrus
in Rome. Possibly, many others existed of whom no traces have remained.

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

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

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

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

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

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11 His uncle Samuil Yakovlevič Maršak, (1887-1964), was a famous specialist in the study and recollection of fables, mainly Russian ones.
13 Boyce, 1957.
14 Maršak, 2002: 137.
inhabited India (fig. 4). His observations are supported by Chinese written sources based on Classical legends were it is clearly reported that pigmies lived in India or some parts of Central Asia where the Turks lived and were obliged to fight continuously with giant birds that were persecuting them. Ten years after M. Mode’s observation, F. Grenet found another parallel between India and the Classical world in the same painting from Afrāsīyāb. According to his identification, the scene with two people sitting frontally towards each other besides a central circular object should be recognized as a local variant of Urania teaching astronomy to Aratus through the use of an armillary sphere (fig. 5). Since that scene pertains to India, it is very likely that it should be interpreted as the transmission of astronomy from the Greeks to the Indians.

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

**Caption for the figures**

Fig. 1. Qala-ye Qahqaha I, room 11. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 96.
Fig. 2. Panjikant room 41, sector 6. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 41.
Fig. 3. Panjikant room 1, sector 21. After: Marshak, 2002: fig. 86.
Fig. 4. Afrāsīyāb “Hall of the Ambassadors’, eastern wall (detail). After: Compareti, de la Vaissière, 2006: pl. 6, p. 27 (reproduction F. Ory).
Fig. 5. Afrāsīyāb “Hall of the Ambassadors’, eastern wall (detail). After: Al’baum, 1975: fig. 27.
Fig. 6. Painted vase, Gregorian Museum, Vatican City. After: Peris, 1995: pl. I.
Fig. 7. Toilet-tray from Gandhāra, private collection. After: Peris, 1995: pl. II.

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18 Peris, 1995.
19 Zambon, 1975; Battaglia, 1980.
20 Peris, 1995; Wilson, 2009.
Literature

S. Battaglia, Il romanzo della volpe (Italian tr. of Roman de Renard), Palermo, 1980.
-., “What was the Afrasyab painting About?”, in: Compareti, de la Vaissière, 2006: 43-58.
Representations of Aesop’s fables can be recognized in Sogdian paintings at Panjikant and literary fragments recovered in Western China approximately one century ago clearly demonstrate the spread of Classical literary themes in Central Asia and, specifically, aesopean ones. However, it is worth remembering that typical Roman-Hellenistic subjects can be observed also among the mural paintings at other Sogdian sites: the she-wolf feeding the twins at Qala-ye Qahqaha I, room 11 (7th-8th century) is certainly the most representative one (fig. 1). Some have proposed that that scene is a representation of the Fable of Aesops in which the she-wolf feeds the twins, a short but real narrative; it will seek, like the Parable, to convey a hidden meaning, and that not so much by the use of language, as by the skilful introduction of fictitious characters as its high prerogative, and inseparable attribute, the great purpose of instruction, and will necessarily seek to inculcate some moral maxim, social duty, or political truth. List Aesop’s Fables. Aesop's Fables contain a narrative that seeks to illustrate a hidden message. An illustrated book titled Some of Aesop’s Fables with Modern Instances Shewn in Designs by Alfred and Randolph Caldecott has been added. There are only 20 fables in this book but it is well illustrated. The book may be found in the Project Gutenberg archives among other places. A few fables have been added from the 1819 French book Fables de La Fontaine. Only those fables with illustrations are included here and they are in the original French. I’ve included them more for the illustrations than the French translation. You can see the whole book at the Internet Archive.