

Two Sogdian(?) Tombs from Gansu: a Preliminary Note

ÉTIENNE DE LA VAISSIÈRE

In September 2012, with the help of the Dunhuang Academy, my colleague, Éric Trombert, and I were able to travel in Gansu and Inner Mongolia to survey archaeological sites and museums.¹ Among the numerous tombs we were shown, we saw two with paintings that might depict Sogdians. Both have been published in Chinese archaeological journals, one of them being identified as “Sogdian.” However, these tombs and their publication are unknown in Western journals. The aim of this short note is simply to provide some information and images for them.

1. JIUQUAN (酒泉)

Ten kilometers northwest of Jiuquan (Gansu province), on the very border of the gravel and sand zone separating the Jiuquan and Jiayuguan oases (39° 49' 4.01" N, 98° 27' 19.47" E), Guoyuan (果园) district, north of Xigou (西沟) village, are two tombs adjacent to each other, and a third one nearby (Map). Two of the tombs were excavated in 1992.² Although both tombs were looted, the excavators dated them to the late Tang based on stylistic elements of the tombs' construction. The first tomb is richer than the second and is decorated with molded bricks, displaying musicians, guards, horsemen and the twelve zodiac animals. However, it is the second tomb that is of interest for Central Asian studies: its molded bricks are painted but are much less varied, depicting only horsemen and the twelve zodiac animals.

The bricks with the horsemen are of two types, repeated all over the walls of the tomb. One type shows two horsemen, each with a spear, a quiver and a leather bow case galloping in the same direction (Fig. 1a and b); the other shows one of the armed horseman turning back toward his companion, as if engaged in discussion while at pace on their horses (Fig. 2a and b). Most striking about this tomb and its images—until now unnoticed—are three elements that point to an Iranian background: the headgear of the first horseman, the fittings of his horse, and a name written on the wall of the tomb:

- The *headgear* is clearly a nomadic fabric cap with lateral bands resting on the shoulders that protect the ears. It is known across a wide area among riders from Iran to the nomadic Xianbei. In contrast, the headgear of the second horseman is clearly the standard Chinese black head covering.
- Certain *features of the first horse* are purely Iranian: crenelated, clipped mane (Trousdale 1968), in contrast to the natural mane of the second horse; full mail (“fish scale”) armor, which is lacking on the second one; and, most particularly, the bobble hanging below the horse's chin; this last feature, however, appears on both horses.³
- On the right wall of the tomb, very close to the back wall where the corpse would have been, was written *the name*, *An Zhangyi* 安長宜. “An” is considered to be the family name given by the Chinese to those Sogdian émigrés from Bukhara who settled in China.

Each of these elements points to the tomb owner identifying himself as, first, *non-Chinese* —and, more precisely, as *nomadic*; second, as *Iranian*; and third, even more precisely, *Sogdian*. Taken in isolation, each of these elements would not be enough to identify the owner of the tomb as a Sogdian: for instance, full horse armor is well known in China from the middle of the fourth century CE to the early Tang⁴; moreover, there existed under the Tang a strong vogue for “things Iranian.” Similarly, depictions of crenelated manes appear in ancient China (Maenchen-Helfen 1957). Bobbles, however, are more specific, and it is this combination of crenellated mane and bobbles that strongly suggests that this tomb belonged to a foreigner, settled in Gansu, who was keen to show himself as an accomplished Central Asian rider—in contrast to his servant in Chinese garb who follows him. That this Central Asian might have belonged to a family settled for many generations in Gansu—as suggested by the Chinese architecture of his tomb—does not change the fact that he wished to be displayed as an Iranian rider. This, combined with the name on the wall and the large Sogdian presence in Gansu, strongly suggests a Sogdian background for this

tomb owner. The date of the tomb, however, is disputable as the fittings of the horse are better suited to a fifth-through sixth-century date, based on dated iconographic parallels, especially from the West—although an early Tang date is not impossible.

2. GAOTAI (高台)

The second possibly Sogdian tomb was excavated in 2007, along with four other tombs. The excavation report was published in *Wenwu*, although it did not describe this particular tomb, M4 (*Gansu* 2008). These five tombs were situated at Digengpo (地埂坡), Gaotai (高台) county, approximately at 39° 41'N 99° 30' E, a few kilometers south of the Great Wall, and east of the Heihe river (Map). The region is now desert, but it was well irrigated in the Wei-Jin period, as testified by the remains of large walled towns (Shengou cheng 深沟城), 4 km east of the site. I was told by the museum staff that the tomb was reburied after the excavations to preserve its paintings. However, many photographs of them were displayed in the Gaotai Museum, and several articles have been published in Chinese journals, showing the images, even though the coverage remains incomplete.⁵ For most of those on display, I could not tell where the paintings were originally placed on the walls or how they related to each another. Among the paintings are two depictions of a Sogdian: in both we note his full beard and recognize his high hat—white with a thin black vertical band and a red border at the base—as Sogdian (Fig. 3a and b). There are numerous direct iconographic parallels for this type of hat, always in relation to Sogdian traders or Sogdian festivals, as on the reliefs from Anyang (now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Musée Guimet, Paris), or in Panjikent.⁶ In addition to their hats and caftans, these two Sogdians wear black boots and are seated cross-legged; one of them holds something in his hand. We do not know if these two figures were originally together on the same wall; nonetheless, it seems to be a clear image of one or two Sogdians in Gansu, and the oldest depiction of Sogdians in China.

A complete scene from this tomb is known, however, placed above the passageway to the tomb⁷ (Figure 4a) in which two musicians beating a drum (Fig. 4b) walk near two dancers. One of the dancers, a youth, wears a sheer caftan (Fig. 4c: his genitals have been suppressed in the Chinese publications). The other is wearing a red caftan (Fig. 4d). All four are shown

with braids, in leggings and with bare feet. The youth strongly reminds us of Tang-period texts and erotic poems describing young dancers, male and female, from Chāch (present-day Tashkent area; Schafer 1963, p. 55-56).⁸ On the same wall, below the young dancers, are two peasants: one, clearly Chinese, leading oxen, the other, a ploughman (Fig. 4e and f). Another painting shows two Chinese magistrates (?) dining together, a bowl and a spoon between them, along with some prepared dishes (Fig. 5a). This particular subject is well-represented in the extensive corpus of painted bricks from Gansu of the Wei-Jin period. Another one is more difficult to understand (Fig. 5b): I would be most willing to see two Indians, with long moustaches and turban-like headgear, but headgear found on the Wei-Jin painted bricks of Gansu are sometimes of a quite similar, vaguely ovoid shape, so that the scene is more probably one of daily life in fourth-century Gansu. The left figure holds with his left hand what appear to be Roman scales, while in his right hand a long knife, painted grey to indicate metal. Something red (meat?) can be seen on the floor between them.

Also included in the tomb are paintings of dragons and mythical animals, along with standing Chinese attendants (Fig. 6).

CONCLUSION

Even if it is possible that the Jiuquan tomb is Sogdian, we cannot be at all certain that the Gaotai tomb is, because we do not know where the paintings were placed in the tomb. Although, in my opinion, they are certainly the oldest images of Sogdians in China, the two may have occupied a marginal position within the composition. It should be noted, however, that Zheng Yinan (Lanzhou University), the author of the main articles on this tomb does not hesitate to characterize it as Sogdian (Zheng 2010), based on these paintings as well as the several golden objects, such as rings, flowers and hair-pins also found in the tomb. If he is correct, the main interest of these two tombs is that they are examples of “middle-level” provincial Sogdian tombs, much less *nouveau riche* than the sixth-century *sabao* tombs from the main cities of the East, Chang’an and Taiyuan.

References

Belenizki 1980

Aleksandr M. Belenizki, *Mittelasiien. Kunst der Sogden* (Leipzig: VEB E. A. Seemann, 1980).

Callieri 2006

Pierfrancesco Callieri, "At the Roots of the Sasanian Royal Imagery: the Persepolis Graffiti," in *Eran ud Aneran. Studies Presented to Boris Il'ič Maršak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Matteo Compareti, Paola Raffetta, and Gianroberto Scarcia (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2006), pp. 129-48.

E, Zheng and Gao 2009

E Jun 俄军, Zheng Binglin 郑炳林, and Gao Guoxiang 高国祥 (ed.). *Gansu Chutu Wei Jin Tang Mu Bihua* 甘肃出土魏晋唐墓壁画 [Wall paintings from the Wei, Jin, and Tang period discovered in Gansu] (Lanzhou: Lanzhou Daxue Chubanshe, 2009).

Gansu 2008

Gansu Gaotai Digengpo Jin Mu Fajue Jianbao 甘肃高台地埂坡晋墓发掘简报 [A brief report on the excavations of the Jin-period tombs of Digengpo, Gaotai, Gansu], *Wenwu* 文物 (2008/9): 29-39.

Kageyama 2005

Etsuko Kageyama, "Sogdians in Kucha," in *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, ed. Étienne de La Vaissière and Éric Trombert (Paris: EFEO, 2005), pp. 363-75.

Maenchen-Helfen 1957

Otto Maenchen-Helfen, "Crenelated Mane and Scabbard Slide," *Central Asiatic Journal* 3-2 (1957): 85-138.

Schafer 1963

Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1963).

Trousdale 1968

William Trousdale, "The Crenelated Mane. Survival of an Ancient Tradition in Afghanistan," *East and West* 18/1-2 (March-June 1968): 169-77.

Wu, Wang and Mao 2012

Wu Hong 吴荭, Wang Ce 王策, Mao Ruilin 毛瑞林, 河西墓葬中的鲜卑因素 [Xianbei elements in the graves of Hexi] 考古与文物 *Kaogu yu Wenwu* (2012/4): 75-82.

Yang 2012

Yang Zhishui 扬之水, 掏鼓考 兼论龟兹舍利盒乐舞图的含义 [On the hand-drum. hypothesis on the Kucha Buddhist reliquary with images of dances], in *Gaotai Wei Jin Mu yu Hexi Lishi Wenhua Yanjiu* 高台魏晋墓与河西历史文化研究 (Lanzhou: Gansu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2012): 3-19

Zhang and Feng 2009

Zhang Guorong 张国荣 and Feng Lijuan 冯丽娟. 甘肃高台魏晋墓壁画与壁画砖的艺术特色, [Mural Paintings from a Tomb in Gaotai (Gansu) of the Wei-Jin Period and the Characteristics of the Painted Bricks] 美术 *Meishu* (2009/08): 97-100.

Zhang 2005

Zhang Qingjie. "Hutengwu and Huxuanwu Sogdian dances in the Northern, Sui and Tang Dynasties," in *Les Sogdiens en Chine* ed. Étienne de la Vaissière and Éric Trombert (Paris: EFEO, 2005): 93-106.

Zheng 2010

Zheng Yinan 郑怡楠, 河西高台县墓葬壁画祥瑞图研究. 河西高台县地埂坡 M4墓葬壁画研究之一/二 [Study of the wall paintings of auspicious images from the grave a tomb of in Gaotai county, Hexi — Wall paintings of the from tomb M4 of Digengpo, Gaotai county, Hexi, parts one/two], *Dunhuang xue ji kan* 敦煌学辑刊 (2010/1): 110-26; (2010/2): 117-34.

Notes

1. This survey was funded by a generous grant of the Centre de Recherches sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale (CNRS-EPHE-Paris Diderot).

2. An analysis of these two tombs and color plates can be found in E, Zheng and Gao 2009, vol. 3, p. 881-88.

3. The earliest known images of horses with such bobbles are in the proto-Sasanian graffiti at Persepolis (Callieri 2006, p. 146, figs. 5 and 6).

4. My sincere thanks to David Graff for answering my questions on this point.

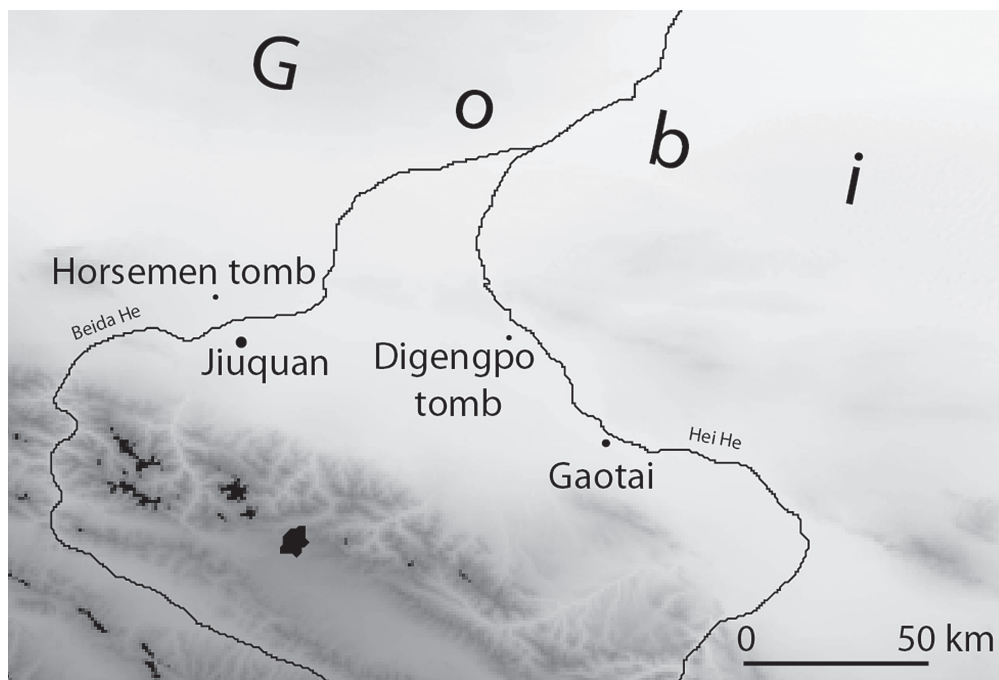
5. See, for instance, Zheng 2010 who identifies the tomb as Sogdian. Wu, Wang, and Mao (2012) want to see it as Xianbei, but

the texts they quote, from the Wuwan (Wuhuan 乌丸) chapter of the *Sanguo Zhi* (三國志), have no link whatsoever with Gansu or male musicians and dancers—only with the shaving of heads among the Wuhuan in the steppe, and a vague attempt to link them to the Xianbei. My sincere thanks to Patrick Wertmann for some of these references.

6. The most striking parallel is from Panjikent, sector XXIV/1 (Belenizki 1980, pl. 510). See also Kageyama 2005, p. 364-65.

7. Picture of the wall in Yang 2012, p. 3.

8. See also several examples in Zhang 2005, esp. p. 97, 101, and pl. 15.



Map. Author's drawing.



Fig. 1a. *Jiuquan tomb*. Pair of horsemen. Molded and painted brick (After E, Zheng and Gao 2009, p. 881).



Fig. 1b. *Jiuquan tomb*. Pair of horsemen. Molded and painted brick (After E, Zheng and Gao 2009, p. 882).



Fig. 2a. *Jiuquan tomb*. Pair of horsemen. Molded and painted brick (After E, Zheng and Gao 2009, p. 888).



Fig. 2b. *Jiuquan tomb*. Pair of horsemen. Molded and painted brick (After E, Zheng and Gao 2009, p. 887).



Fig. 3a and b. *Digengpo, Tomb M4, Gaotai*. Paintings of Sogdians on tomb wall. (Author's photographs from photographs in the Gaotai Museum) (See Color Plate 1).

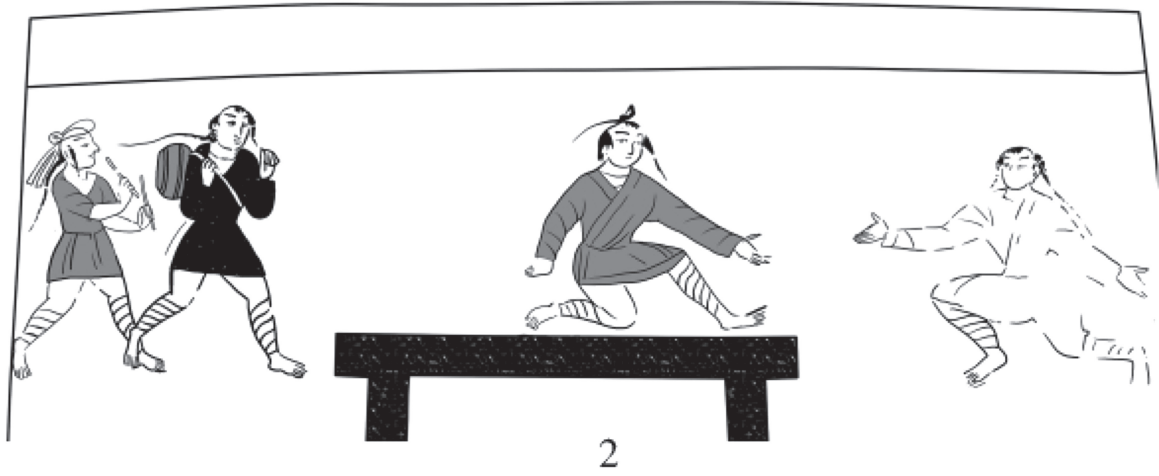


Fig. 4a. Drawing of paintings in the tomb passageway. (After Wu Hong, Wang Ce, Mao Ruilin, 2012, p. 80).



Fig. 4b. Detail, two musicians with a drum. (Author's photograph).

Fig. 4a-b. *Digengpo Tomb, M4, Gaotai* (See Color Plate 2a & b).

Fig. 4c. Detail: dancer in sheer caftan. (Author's drawing).



Fig. 4d. Detail: dancer in red caftan. (Author's photograph)



Fig. 4c-d. *Digengpo Tomb, M4, Gaotai* (See Color Plate 2c & d).



Fig. 5a. *Digengpo Tomb, M4, Gaotai*. Detail: peasant with oxen. (Author's drawing from photographs in the Gaotai Museum)



Fig. 5b. *Digengpo Tomb, M4, Gaotai*. Detail: ploughman with an ox. (Drawing by author from photograph in the Gaotai Museum).



Fig. 6a. *Digengpo Tomb M4, Gaotai*. Two magistrates (?) dining. (Author's drawing from photographs in the Gaotai Museum)



Fig. 6b. *Digengpo Tomb M4, Gaotai*. Two men, one with scales, the other with a knife (?). (Author's drawing from photographs in the Gaotai Museum)



Fig. 7. *Digengpo Tomb M4, Gaotai*. Doorway with mythical animals and standing Chinese attendants. (After Zhang and Feng 2009, p. 97) (See Color Plate 3).