

## Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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# Flying over Boundaries

## Auspicious Birds in Sino-Sogdian Funerary Art

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**Abstract** The focus is on the representation of auspicious birds in Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments. These birds can be portrayed with a halo behind the head and ribbons attached to their neck. Special emphasis is given to their connection with the mythical Iranian bird, the *Simurgh*, and the concept of Farr ('glory, charisma'). In particular, an attempt is made to shed some light on the possible association between the *Simurgh*, the 'Western' Phoenix, and the Chinese *Fenghuang*.

**Keywords** Fenghuang. *Simurgh*. Phoenix. Sino-Sogdian art.

Over the last twenty years, our knowledge of Late Antique Sogdian art and culture has grown enormously. This is mainly to be attributed, on the one hand, to continuous archaeological activity in those ex-Soviet republics where the Sogdian civilization flourished (central Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan) until the Arab invasion and the Islamisation of Central Asia beginning in the eighth century; on the other hand, important archaeological discoveries concerning Sogdian immigrants have been made in China in more recent times.

Highly mobile Sogdian tradesmen had begun to settle in different parts of Central Asia and China since at least the early fourth century. Epigraphic traces of the Middle Iranian language that they spoke have been found scattered over a wide area, from Sugdaia, in Crimea, to Japan. In fact, this Iranian people travelled everywhere in ancient times without insurmountable difficulties (de La Vaissière 2005). However, the Sogdians were perfectly aware of the so-called 'division of the world' according to the directions of the compass and the kingdoms that controlled a specific territory. The division of the world according to the Sogdians can be observed in the seventh-century paintings of the Hall of the Ambassadors at Afrasyab, where the northern wall was associated with China, the eastern one with India (and, possibly, the Turks), while the two remaining walls were devoted to Sogdiana itself. Chinese written sources reflect almost precisely such a division (Compareti 2009).

The same division of the world can be detected on Sino-Sogdian funerary

monuments that have been excavated in central China (mainly in Shaanxi Province). One of these funerary monuments that was unfortunately non-scientifically excavated – the Miho Museum couch – displays several panels embellished with the neighbours of the Sogdians during the mid-sixth century. In fact, at least two panels are dedicated to the Turks, two more to the Alchon Huns and some others to the Sogdians themselves. This division of the world does not correspond exactly to the one at Afrasyab or to Sogdian literary sources but it responds to a scheme that is well attested in Late Antique Iranian lands. Islamic written sources recorded the same division among the Persians during the Sasanian period (224-651) (Grenet 2005, pp. 129-130; Compareti 2009, pp. 68-70).

From the mid-sixth century, Sogdians had become subjects of western Turks, who controlled a wide territory. Sogdians could offer to the Turkish overlords their experience and infrastructures along the Silk Road network. Luxury goods and artistic forms could circulate relatively easily and even beyond ‘national borders’. For example, a Turk-Sogdian commercial embassy visited the Sasanian court in the second half of the sixth century and was treated in a bad way by the Persians. The Sasanian sovereign, in fact, bought the entire caravan of precious silk and burnt it in the public square in order to let the Sogdians and the Turks understand that the Persians were going to protect their commercial interests mainly directed to Constantinople (de La Vaissière 2005, p. 228).

Despite the hostility of the Sasanians, typically Sogdian textile motifs and other details of high status Persian nobles can be observed on a very controversial Sasanian rock relief at Taq-i Bustan. Most scholars agree that Taq-i Bustan is an unusual late Sasanian monument and the king there represented should be identified with a sovereign reigning between Khosrow II (590-628) and Yazdegard III (632-651) (Tanabe 2006; Mode 2006; Cristoforetti, Scarcia 2013). The fashion of the garments themselves, some of the weapons, and other details such as specific belts would point to a borrowing from the steppe peoples. For this reason, it is highly probable that also the decorative motifs that embellish those garments are actually an importation and not the result of the taste of Sasanian court weavers. In fact, no other Sasanian rock relief nor seals and sealings or luxury objects of possible late Sasanian origin have been decorated according to stylistic standards observed at Taq-i Bustan (Compareti 2005; Canepa 2014).

Undoubtedly some decorative motifs in Sogdian art represent an interesting case of adoption and adaptation of Hellenistic forms that reappeared over a very long time span in Central Asia, also during the fifth/sixth-century ‘classical revival’. The most important phases of this process are well distinguishable such as the phenomenon of adaptation to typically Iranian concepts and, subsequently, their return from east to west according to dynamics seemingly unsuspected (Compareti 2013a).

For some reasons, investigations in the history of art of the Sasanian

period have been affected by prejudices and uncritical attributions in the past that just resulted in a worsening of the problems in the field of Iranian studies. The present paper, on the contrary, does not dislike to be possibly affected by that 'revisionist' trend that is simply critic of prejudicial theories concerning adoption and adaptation. Approximately ten years ago, for example, Ciro Lo Muzio proposed reconsidering the old theory of the 'Parthian shot' with very good evidence. According to his arguments, this motif would have been introduced into Sasanian Persia (and the Far East) from the Central Asian steppes and not the opposite (Lo Muzio 2003, pp. 529-533). I think that the case of the so-called *Simurgh* of Taq-i Bustan presents similar problems.

Some scholars of mythological studies consider the decorative element I would like to consider in this paper, namely the *Fenghuang* of Chinese literature, to be the 'Western' Phoenix. However, someone else had understood long ago that such a superimposition was not to be regarded as automatic but just conventional. In his ground-breaking study on Tang exoticism, Edward Schafer proposed associating the *Luan*, the second most important fantastic bird of Chinese literature after the *Fenghuang*, with the *Simurgh* of Iranian mythology. Schafer (as many other scholars) was perfectly aware that the *Fenghuang* did not correspond precisely with the Phoenix just as the *Luan* bird was not the *Simurgh*; nevertheless, in his opinion, all these identifications could be maintained because they had become popular among Western scholars (Schafer 1963, p. 288; Willets 1965, pp. 151-154; Rawson 1984, pp. 99-107; Diény 1989-1990; Alabisio 1994; Salviati 1994).

A 'superimposition' of fantastic creatures belonging to different cultural milieu such as the one proposed by Schafer presents a series of problems. First of all, it does not consider the possibility of a direct relation between the Phoenix and the *Simurgh*. Then it must be kept in mind that the situation was not the same among Iranians (Persians and Sogdians) during the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods just as it was different in China during the Sui-Tang and the Song-Yuan dynasties. When Persia, Central Asia, and China were unified under the Mongols between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries, some cultural traits began to be facilitated in being accepted everywhere in the empire. The representations of both the *Fenghuang* and the *Simurgh* were standardised in the sphere of visual arts only in the Mongol period, and the Chinese model decoded by the post-Tang (most likely Song) artists was to be accepted also in Persian Islamic book illustrations. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to trace the iconography of the *Simurgh* in the Iranian world during the pre-Mongol period, while something useful can be traced in Sogdian art. Moreover, the very iconographic characteristics of single birds in specific contexts are not easily determined and are sometimes confused with those of other similar creatures from the same cultural milieu, such as happened with the *Fenghuang* and the *Luan*.

These are just some of the points that will be considered in this study with the support, whenever possible, of written sources.

In the first instance, it is important to determine the basic relationship possibly existing between the *Fenghuang*, the *Simurgh*, and the Phoenix. As has already been mentioned above, the *Fenghuang* was confused by the Chinese with the *Luan* and another bird that was very often represented in funerary art from the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) to the Tang (618-906) dynasties, namely the *Zhuniao* or 'Red Bird of the South', also called by other names such as *Zhuque* and *Chiniao*.<sup>1</sup> While for the *Fenghuang* and the *Luan* we have only literary descriptions, the *Zhuniao* can be identified without major problems in Chinese funerary paintings especially from the Tang period because it is usually (but not always) represented on the wall facing south in traditionally organized graves.

The *Zhuniao* was one of the *Siling* 'Four Divine Creatures' or *Sishen* 'Four Divine Gods' of Chinese culture, together with the *Baihu* 'White Tiger' symbolizing the West, the *Qinglong* (or *Canglong*) 'Green Dragon' for the East, and the *Xuanwu* 'Dark Warrior' of the North.<sup>2</sup> These same types of Chinese graves where each cardinal point was symbolized by a fantastic creature or animal were later exported to Korea and Japan as well (Berthier 2001; Jeon 2005, pp. 170-171). In Han engraved and painted tombs, several fantastic and apotropaic creatures are accompanied by their own names, usually written in a cartouche above the head. However, curiously enough, the bird that has been commonly identified with the *Fenghuang* rarely appears together with its name, despite some controversial information that has been reported in the past (Diény 1989-1990, p. 4). *Zhuniao* birds present inscriptions sometimes (Erickson 2011, p. 10), but their identification is easier to be determined because of their funerary functions. One low relief image of a *Zhuniao* bird from a second-century tomb

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1 Fantastic birds appeared in Chinese funerary art long before the Han dynasty, although their relationship with the *Fenghuang* and the *Zhuniao* is not completely clear (Diény 1989-1990; Salviati 1994).

2 Substitutes for these four combinations could also have been: the *Lin* of the West, the *Feng* of the South, the *Gui* of the North and the *Long* of the East (Wong Pui Yin 2006). *Feng* is just another name for *Fenghuang* and *Gui* is the Turtle. *Lin* is another name for *Qilin*, a fantastic creature of Chinese mythology usually rendered in English as 'Unicorn'. However, this superimposition presents the same problems as for the *Fenghuang* and the Phoenix; the same could be said with respect to the *Long*, usually translated as 'Dragon'. As is the case with *Fenghuang*/Phoenix, also *Lin*/Unicorn and *Long*/Dragon should be regarded as conventional and not precise translations. At any rate, it is worth observing that in Iranian culture too every direction of the compass is symbolized by the same specific colour which is to be found in the Chinese tradition (Scarcia 1985). According to some Muslim authors, not only colours but animals too could point at the kings of different parts of the Sasanian Empire. For some specific references about the kings of east Caucasian regions who were invested by Khosrow I with titles, gifts, and robes embellished with specific images of animals, see Gadjiev 2006, pp. 204-205.

in Quxian (Sichuan Province) presents already the typical characteristics of the *Fenghuang* of the Tang artists (Pirazzoli-t' Serstevens 1982, pp. 167-170, fig. 109). On one clay tiles from the fifth-sixth century well-known site of Dengxian (south-western Henan) at present kept in the National Museum in Beijing, there is also one typical *Zhuniaio* bird. On other tiles from the same site there are also the remaining directional creatures and several other subjects. Curiously enough, however, two Chinese characters appears on the right of the bird undoubtedly identifying it as a *Fenghuang* (Juliano 1980, pp. 38-40, fig. 16). It is then clear that some confusion already exists about the identification of fantastic birds during the Southern Dynasty period. Also these points deserve some further investigation.

Among the most interesting Chinese texts where the *Fenghuang* is mentioned, the *Shanhai Jing* or *Classic of Mountains and Seas* stands apart. This is a text about every kind of exoticism and fantastic creatures according to Chinese imagery that has been preserved in its second/first-century BCE Han redaction. Later interpolations can be recognized and only in more recent times, around the beginning of the seventeenth century, illustrated versions began to appear. The description of the *Fenghuang* in the *Shanhai Jing* and Chinese literature in general is not detailed. It is described as an auspicious creature associated with music and Taoist immortals and, for this reason, it was especially indicated to be represented on graves. The tree where the *Fenghuang* lived was located on top of a mountain that, according to Chinese traditions, was the place where immortals lived.<sup>3</sup> Its association with the colour red and fire is probably recorded because of the confusion with the *Zhuniaio*. Some characteristics of the *Fenghuang* do not seem to belong to the original 'religious' background of that fantastic bird but, most likely, to the sphere of legends and tales that, as always happens in these cases, started to develop at a popular level. In the *Shanhai Jing* it is specifically reported that auspicious Chinese characters were scattered on its body.<sup>4</sup> Although it is not always possible to establish how ancient and accurate all these descriptions are, it is at least clear why the *Fenghuang* has been associated with the Phoenix. The *Fenghuang* and the Phoenix are not only described both as fantastic birds, but they also share a series of supernatural characteristics. For all these reasons, the first Western literati who began to approach the study of Chinese culture could have chosen a name for the *Fenghuang* as much evocative as possible, and the Phoenix should have appeared as the most appropriate.

3 The association mountain-*Fenghuang* is not completely clear. A very interesting seventh/eighth-century CE textile fragment excavated at the cemetery of Astana (Turfan, Xinjinag Province) shows a typical Tang *Fenghuang* on top of a mountain with plants, birds, and clouds in Chinese style surrounding it (Turfan Museum 1992, fig. 182).

4 For a translation into Italian, see Fracasso 1996, pp. 14-15. The *Shanhai Jing* has been translated into English too (Birrell 1999). Both publications have been reviewed (Company 2000).

Not many studies have been devoted to the association *Fenghuang*-Phoenix, but a very interesting paper on this topic was published by Jean-Pierre Diény some years ago (1989-1990). Diény especially focused on the similarities between these two fantastic birds. He concluded that, even if there are some common features, these are only superficial traits and, when considered in detail, they also present discrepancies.

Every ancient culture had its own cosmic bird that shared common characteristics, the most important ones being the giant size and longevity. They are usually mysterious creatures and very vague descriptions are given in ancient literary texts. Just to mention some of these fantastic birds that had called the attention of scholars because of their possible association with the Phoenix, here are some specimens: the ancient Egyptians had the *Benu*; the Arabs the *'Anqa* or the *Rukh*; the Jews the *Ziz*; the Yezidi *Melek Ta'us*; the Indians *Garudha*; the Tibetans *Khyun*; the Hungarians *Torul*, etc. The ancient Slavs represent a specific case in this list because one of the deities of their pre-Christian pantheon was named *Simar'gl*. Its aspect is not completely clear but, according to some scholars, this deity was represented as a bird. Moreover, it is not excluded that *Simar'gl* was an Iranian borrowing specifically rooted in the figure of the Iranian *Simurgh*, although not every scholar agrees on this point (Compareti 2006, pp. 190-191; Compareti, Cristoforetti 2012; Álvarez-Pedrosa 2014, pp. 66-67). Associations between birds belonging to different cultural milieu were only normal and could have been advanced not only by contemporary scholars but also by ancient observers. For instance, it would be worth noting that in modern Armenian the word for peacock is *siramarg*, with very small dialectal variants. This term too seems to be a clear Iranian borrowing from *Simurgh*<sup>5</sup> because of the tight relationships between Armenia and Persia both in pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.

In the Iranian world, a fantastic bird traditionally associated by some scholars with the Phoenix and (in part) the *Fenghuang* is the *Simurgh*. Also for this bird there has been much speculation among scholars; therefore, a short summary would be useful. All the following information can be found in a fundamental article on the *Simurgh* by Schmidt that, however, presents major methodological problems and, in the light of some more recent publications, should be considered with great caution.<sup>6</sup>

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5 The main study on Iranian and specifically Zoroastrian elements in Armenian is Russell 1987, pp. 308-309. For some interesting considerations about Iranian elements in Armenian art, specifically for the representation of hybrid creatures, see Curatola 1978.

6 After his first paper, Schmidt (1980a) published a second study that presents the same methodological problems (Schmidt 1980b). His problematic approach to the *Simurgh* in Persian literature and visual art has been uncritically embraced until very recent times (Grossato 2004).

The name above all: already in Avestan language a fantastic bird called *Marego Saeno* is mentioned; during the Sasanian period, it would have become *Senmurv* in Middle Persian (or Pahlavi), while *Simurgh* is the Neo-Persian (or Farsi) name: quite obviously, both the Middle Persian and the Neo-Persian forms point to the same fantastic bird. It is very important to clarify this point because, in recent times, some scholars added some more confusion to the problem in regarding the *Senmurv* and *Simurgh* as two distinct creatures (Charritat 2001; Leclerc 2001).<sup>7</sup> Islamic texts such as the national epic of the Persians (the *Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*) and some Zoroastrian texts (that, in any case, have all been written down only after the Islamisation of Iranian lands) give some descriptions of the *Simurgh*: this is a giant bird that lived in a tree on top of a mountain in the middle of a sea. It was associated with time, fire, and music. Its connection with the pre-Islamic Iranian god of time Zurvan offers a clear parallel with the association between the Phoenix and the god Aion, the Greco-Roman counterpart of Zurvan (Scarcia 2003; Compareti, Scarcia 2012, pp. 224-226, 241; Grosserez 2013, pp. 37-45).

The most important story about the *Simurgh* is featured in the *Shahnameh*: the *Simurgh* 'kidnapped' and suckled the hero Zal, abandoned as a baby because of his albinism, which is family regarded as a demonic.<sup>8</sup> Once Zal grew up strong and healthy with the help of the *Simurgh*, he joined his contrite father and ruled in eastern Iran, precisely in the region of Zabulistan, between modern eastern Iran and western Afghanistan. Both Zal and his son Rustam were protected by the *Simurgh* and they were able to summon it in case of need just by burning one of its feathers.

In the famous mystical poem *Mantiq al-Tayr* (The Conference of the Birds) by Attar (ca. 1145-1221), the author plays on the similarity between the name *Simurgh* and the Persian word for 'thirty birds'. A large group of the world's birds, who represent different human qualities, set off in search of the king of the birds (*Simurgh*). Many of them drop out along the way. When the surviving thirty birds (*si murgh*) arrive in the land of the *Simurgh*, they learn that their journey has been about seeing themselves for who they are. Clearly Attar did not write a poem on the *Simurgh sensu strictu* but just used it as a pretext to discuss human self-awareness;

7 This assertion is clearly indebted to the hypothesis formulated by Camilla Trever that will be discussed below, and reminds us of the «two fantastic animals *senmurv* and *simurgh*, iconographically different but sharing the same etymology» (Curatola 1989, p. 51; cf. p. 43 on the Islamic iconography [i.e. the *Simurgh*] «turned away from the universal prototype of the hippocampus» [i.e. the *Senmurv*]). On the same line «the term *sēnmurv*, literally meaning dog-bird» [Gyselen 2010, p. 228]).

8 The fact that the *Simurgh* was able to nurse Zal has been possibly at the origin of the mammal features that have been attributed to this fantastic bird (Cristoforetti, Scarcia 2013, pp. 340-341).

nevertheless, it is worth noting that he knew that the *Simurgh* was a bird and not something else.

But let us come to the representation of the *Simurgh* in Iranian art following the risky identification by Camilla Trever.<sup>9</sup> In her opinion, the *Senmurv* (and the *Simurgh* too!) would have been a winged composite creature with the head and paws of a dog and a peacock's tail. Despite several doubts raised by some scholars (including Schmidt) that somehow criticized Trever's identification, her theory persisted for a very long time. Only recently her identification has been proved incorrect and new ideas on the real iconography of the *Simurgh* have been produced. In brief, the *Simurgh* has always been represented as a fantastic bird, and the hybrid creature with wings, a dog-face, and peacock's tail should be rather regarded as a representation of *Farr*, that is, 'glory' or 'fortune' (the problem is discussed in Compareti 2006).

Exactly as occurred with the *Fenghuang* and the Phoenix, the *Simurgh* too was probably confused by ancient authors with other fantastic birds that can be found in Persian myths. Without entering too deeply into the question, one can consider briefly another aspect of the *Simurgh*, that is, its connection with the concept of *Farr(eh)* (Middle Persian *Xwarrah*, Avestan *Xwarenah*), which could be translated as 'glory', 'fortune' or 'charisma' and was essential for every Iranian king in order to rule. Both in Zoroastrian and Islamic Persian literature, this Iranian charisma can take several forms, and, among these, also the shape of a bird.<sup>10</sup> In the Avestan myth, the *Xwarenah* turned away Yima in the form of the *Vareghna* bird, which has been identified with a falcon because of some representations on ancient coins (Grenet 2012). Another important bird in Zoroastrian religion that was associated with Yima as well is the *Karshiptar*. We know of it as the propagator of Zoroastrian religion only from written sources and it has never been identified in visual arts (Redard 2012). Possibly, the

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9 Her paper, originally written in Russian (1938), was published in English ten years ago (Trever 2005).

10 For an updated discussion about the iconography of Zoroastrian deities and specifically on this point, see Shenkar 2014, p. 132. According to Schmidt the *Farr* can be symbolized in the *Shahname* by the ram, the *Simurgh*, the peacock, and, possibly, even the onager. He was not convinced by these descriptions and, in the end, he represented the *Farr* as a mountain sheep with the wings of a *Simurgh* and the tail of a peacock (Schmidt 1980b, p. 169). Other scholars have since then proved that his description should be corrected, since in the *Shahname* the *Farr* appears to be a composite creature named as *Ghurm*: a mysterious animal with the wings of the *Simurgh*, a peacock's tail and head, and ears and hooves like those of *Rakhsh* (Rustam's horse), red in colour and as swift as the wind. The description is quite obscure but, at least in this case, it is clear that the *Farr* is not represented as a *Simurgh* nor as a peacock. And such a description excludes that it is a ram, although *ghurm* can literally mean 'male mountain goat' in Persian (Cristoforetti, Scarcia 2013, p. 342). According to Middle Persian epic literature, *Farr* in the shape of an eagle saved the first Sasanian king (Boyce 1983).



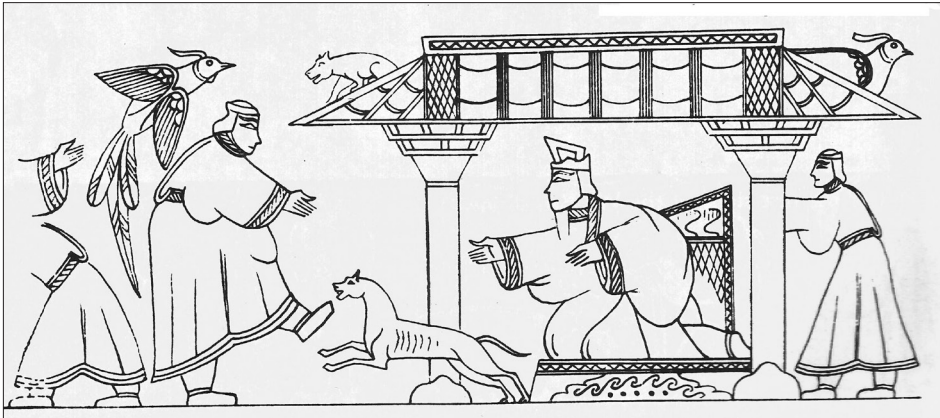


Figure 1. Line drawing from the Wu Ban shrine (145 CE), Shandong Province (Liu, Yue 1991, p. 87)

only companion of the *Simurgh* explicitly mentioned in Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts is the *Chamrush* bird, whose main function is to peck the enemies of Iran as if they were grains (Boyce 1975, p. 43). Also in this case, its large size is implicit because it is represented as a bird of prey. One last bird attested in Persian literature is the *Homa*, whose name is clearly connected with kingship; yet, even if it also could remind of the Phoenix, its ornithological identification is doubtful (Curatola 1989, p. 51). There are no specific studies devoted to this important bird, described in the *Shahnameh* as «the bird of royal fortune (= *Farr*)» or «whose feathers symbolize *Farr*». Clearly the descriptions of all these birds are generic in nature and only the *Simurgh* is portrayed in Islamic book illustrations. However, the iconography of the *Simurgh* also present some problems.

Another aspect should be considered from the iconographic point of view. Diény already called attention to the representation of the *Fenghuang* and the Phoenix as legendary and symbolic creatures. Even if they are described in written sources as composed of parts of existing birds, they cannot be expected to have a model in nature, despite all the efforts that some scholars made in order to find a convincing real counterpart (peacocks and pheasants were usually indicated). As already observed above, the *Fenghuang* and *Zhuniaio* shared many characteristics and, for this reason, it is impossible to distinguish between them. A bird usually represented with spread wings, an element above its head, and a long



Figure 2. Reproduction of the Zhuniaio from the tomb of Gao Yuangui (d. 756) (Zhang 1995, fig. 194)

tail appears quite often in Han funerary art (fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> This bird could be at the basis for the image of the standardised representation of the *Zhuniaio* as it can be observed in eighth and ninth-century Tang funerary paintings (fig. 2) (Zhang 1995, figs. 190, 194, 209); nevertheless, as already observed above, a very similar funerary iconography already existed in

**11** One of the most interesting Chinese funerary monuments of the eastern Han period is represented by the Wu family shrines, a group of above-ground graves embellished with magnificent reliefs (Wu 1989). Among the numerous narrative scenes of the Wu family shrines there are also auspicious birds. These creatures are not just portrayed as usual above buildings or doors but among people as much often in the open air as well as inside enclosed rooms. Very often they look as if they are pointing at the person who should be regarded as the most important in a group of people. The long tail and the feathers on the head are reminiscent of the representation of the *Fenghuang/Zhuniaio* (Liu, Yue 1991, pp. 61, 70, 86-87, 91-93). It should not be excluded that, if a sixth-century Chinese observer with some knowledge of traditional Han motifs had the occasion to see the decorative birds in Sino-Sogdian monuments, a parallel with auspicious birds in Chinese art could have appeared nothing but natural in his mind. Fantastic birds started to appear more frequently in Han art during the second century CE when in Hellenized Bactria a bird resembling the Classical Phoenix can be sometimes observed (Hackin 1939, fig. 92).



Figure 3. Fenghuang/Zhuniao from a tomb in Dengxian (5th-6th century), Henan Province (Juliano 1980, fig. 16)

second-century Han art such as at Quxian.<sup>12</sup> However, the most interesting representation of a fantastic bird among the funerary directional animals of Chinese culture (and certainly identifiable with the Fenghuang because of an inscription) appears on a clay tile in the fifth-sixth century Dengxian grave (fig. 3) (Juliano 1980, fig. 16). Luxury Chinese goods destined for export and embellished with representations of a bird identified as the *Fenghuang* show exactly this iconography. It is this standardized *Fenghuang* that can be observed on some tenth and eleventh-century Byzantine objects of art possibly produced in Constantinople itself. Byzantines probably accepted this model, deeply rooted in Chinese art of the Tang period, because of their identification of that bird with the Phoenix. Moreover, its exotic traits emphasised the provenance of the Phoenix, which was considered to live in distant lands (Walker 2008; Walker 2012, pp. 53-56, 71-77).

<sup>12</sup> This is not the only problem about fantastic birds in Han art, because the sun was traditionally represented as a disc with a dark bird inside, while the moon had the toad or the rabbit as its symbolic animals. As it is recorded in written sources (and also in the above mentioned *Shanghai Jing*), this solar bird was considered to be a crow (sometimes three-legged) and it was also portrayed like a crow in Han art, the most famous specimen being the painted silk banner from *Mawangdui* tomb 1, Changsha (Hunan Province, 168 BCE) (Loewe 1979, pp. 50-53, 127-133; Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1982, fig. 23). The traditional Chinese solar bird would have been iconographically transformed into a typical *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* most likely during the (late?) Tang period. This is particularly evident in Buddhist paintings, such as in the late ninth-early tenth-century painted book cover from Dunhuang Cave 17 at present preserved in the British Museum (OA 1919.1-1.0207; Whitfield, Farner 1990, fig. 78).

One exhaustive study on the Phoenix exists, including also a description of this creature in art forms (Van den Broek 1972). Fortunately, following Classical traditions, inscriptions are added to some representations of this fantastic bird. One early third-century Syriac inscribed mosaic from Edessa (modern Urfa, in southern Turkey) is particularly interesting because the Phoenix is clearly identified by an inscription and, at the same time, does not present typical fantastic traits but looks more like a peacock (fig. 4; Van den Broek 1972, pl. XIII). More ancient inscribed representations of the Phoenix are known in Greco-Roman paintings such as in the first-century C. Euxinus' inn in Pompei (Archaeological Deposits inv. 41761; cf. Zambon 2004, p. 19), although the inscription in the specimen from Edessa is much clearly pointing at the fantastic bird on the altar. The Phoenix was as much equally important during the pagan and the Christian periods. It was represented very often on sarcophagi and apsidal mosaics in churches because of its connection with immortality (Amad 1988; Dulaey 2013). Usually, it was standing on an altar or a palm tree: there was an obvious connection between the fantastic bird of immortality and this tree, which in Greek was just called *phoinix*, just as the eastern land where the nest of the Phoenix was located, Phoenicia.<sup>13</sup> Actually, there was some confusion about its place of provenance, because it was said to come from India, Ethiopia, South Arabia, etc. The mountain where the tree with the Phoenix nest was traditionally located has been identified as the Mount Casius, in modern Syria (Van den Broek 1972, pp. 63-65).

In any case, the bird identified with the Phoenix in Greco-Roman art looks more like an ibis, a heron, or a peacock, with a decorative element resembling a feather on the top of its head, long legs and, usually, a halo. Many of these iconographic traits have been borrowed from Egyptian art. In fact, as Herodotus recorded (II, 73), the Phoenix was originally the bird of the city of Heliopolis, in Lower Egypt. It is not excluded that the Phoenix could have been confused in Greco-Roman religion with a series of divine hypostases in the form of birds. Although there are several pagan gods who were accompanied or symbolized by a fantastic bird, it is the eagle of Zeus that appears to be the most interesting. Zeus could manifest himself as an eagle or could send his giant bird as a messenger or as a raptor like in the myth of Ganymede. Moreover, the association between the eagle and the lightning of Zeus could be another point in common with the Phoenix and fire. There is another epithet that should not be neglected: according to

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**13** Most likely it is the reddish colour of the date to be at the base of such an association, and Phoenicia was the place of production of an animal pigment (purple) used in ancient times to dye precious clothes. Curiously enough, the same name *phoinix* can be referred in Greek to a horse (or even a bull) whose colour is reddish. It can be found in the *Iliad* (23, 454) as referred to a reddish horse with a white sign on its forehead «round as a (full) moon» that was the leader of a group of horses «flying in the plain and moving the dust».

some ancient authors, the eagle that was sent to torment Prometheus was also called the 'dog of Zeus' (Compareti, Scarcia 2012, p. 240). It is not necessary to discuss all these unusual instances of Classical mythology in detail. For the moment, it is enough to consider that some connection between the eagle of Zeus and the Phoenix probably existed. It is also worth noting that, unlike the Phoenix, the *Fenghuang* is never connected to an idea of rapacity. On the contrary, rapacity is a peculiarity of the *Simurgh*.

Even if the connection between the Phoenix and rapacity is not completely clear, it is interesting to observe that in Arabic the Phoenix and the *Simurgh* are both translated as '*Anqa*, that was also a raptor (Zakharria 2002). Another fantastic bird of Arab legends that was a raptor is the *Rukh* (Bivar 2009). In the Islamic period, the Phoenix was translated also with a specific term in Arabic and Persian: *Samandar*, clearly from 'salamander'. As it is well-known, this animal was commonly associated in alchemy with the element fire. Also in Medieval Europe the salamander was considered to be the only animal that could enter fire without any damage.<sup>14</sup> No doubt, the identification *Samandar*/Phoenix became popular during the Islamic period because of the association of both creatures with fire (Miquel 1980, pp. 363-364). Something more should be observed. In fact, *Samand* in Persian means 'horse' or, better, 'steed'. This is another element that contributed to generate confusion in the representation of the Phoenix, which began to be described as a horse. But why a winged horse? According to one Islamic legend, the Prophet Muhammad himself saw a pillow belonging to his wife that was decorated with winged horses and hysterically began to laugh to the point that he was going to die (Noja 1983). This could clarify the genesis of both the wings of the horse and the Islamic topos of a terror causing such an irrepressible laughter to be the cause of death: the re-reading of the both tragic and 'phallic' myth of the Gorgon Medusa/Baubo (Vernant 2013, pp. 40-41) who gave birth to Pegasus from her 'vaginal' beheaded neck. In fact, Medusa did not only petrify people but she could provoke such a strong laughter in whoever looked at her monstrous face (vagina) to cause his death. Hence the Islamic odd Pegasus renamed *Samand* as horse and *Samanda-salar*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Medieval legends were in general rooted in Greco-Roman traditions. It is worth noting that in the first century CE Pliny the Elder mentioned the salamander several times, yet it seems that he didn't believe in the association of this animal with the element fire. In one passage (XXIX, 23), Pliny explicitly (and curiously) says that the Magi transmitted the information about the salamander and its capacity to extinguish fire. This point also deserves further investigation.

<sup>15</sup> *Samanda-salar* is G. Scarcia's reading, as opposed to *Samand-i Aslar*, *salar* being a bird not identified but recorded in Dozy.

as winged horse not only appears as *Samandar*, that is Phoenix,<sup>16</sup> but also superimposes its own image to the functions of the *Simurgh* in a text studied by Irène Melikoff (1962, p. 39). This odd creature could even kill itself with laughter just looking at its image into a mirror (another echo of the Greek myth of Medusa).<sup>17</sup> Something similar occurred in the history of the construction of the lighthouse of Alexandria that was constantly boycotted by aquatic monsters and demons. Alexander the Great was able to get rid of them by submerging a portrait of those demons into the water, thus causing their flight (Miquel 1988, pp. 99-101).

Superimposition of images belonging to different cultural milieu seems to be a normal phenomenon that could easily supersede borders and inimical neighbours during Late Antiquity. However, the mechanism is much more complicated. Several aspects should be considered despite the lack of written sources and numerous gaps to be filled in. For example, if the Arabs identified the *Simurgh* with the *'Anqa* that, for its part, was confused with the *Samandar* (or winged horse) this does not mean that the *Samandar* could be automatically regarded as the *Simurgh*. As already observed, the identification of the *Simurgh* as a hybrid creature is an error that has caused several problems to art historians. In fact, the *Simurgh* should always be considered to be a bird.

Representations of the *Simurgh* in Persian art appear only in book illustrations accompanied by texts that began to be copied during the Islamic period. There are unfortunately no illustrated *Shahnameh* or other texts that can be dated to the period before the Mongol conquest of Persia and the institution of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256-1353). It could be stated that the art of book illustration in Persia developed greatly after the coming of the Mongols and it is precisely because of the unification of China, Central Asia, and Persia that many elements typical of Chinese art were adopted by Ilkhanid artists (Grube 1978).

The *Simurgh* is an emblematic figure because its image began to be represented in Persian painting according to the standardised representation of the *Fenghuang* at the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279). The most an-

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16 The identification is extremely clear in the definition of *Semenda* pertaining to the «extreme borders of India» as reported by Niccolò de' Conti (1395-1469): that Far East where the Phoenix/*Semenda* is inextricably connected with both the winged horse and music (Scarcia, Vercellin 1970, p. 45). For some further information on music, once more in connection with the myth of Medusa, see Cristoforetti (unpubl.).

17 There are at least two Turkish book illustrations reproducing a hybrid human-headed snake looking into the mirror that a man is holding in front of it. One of them is dated ca. 1582 (M.788, f. 89v) and it is at present kept in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (Schmitz 1997, p. 83, fig. 120). The second illustration (suppl. turque 242, f. 90v) is dated to the same period and it is kept in the Bibliothèque National de France, Paris (Stchoukine 1966, pl. 46). The subject is discussed in Scarcia 2003, pp. 16, 19-20; Compareti, Scarcia 2012, p. 240.

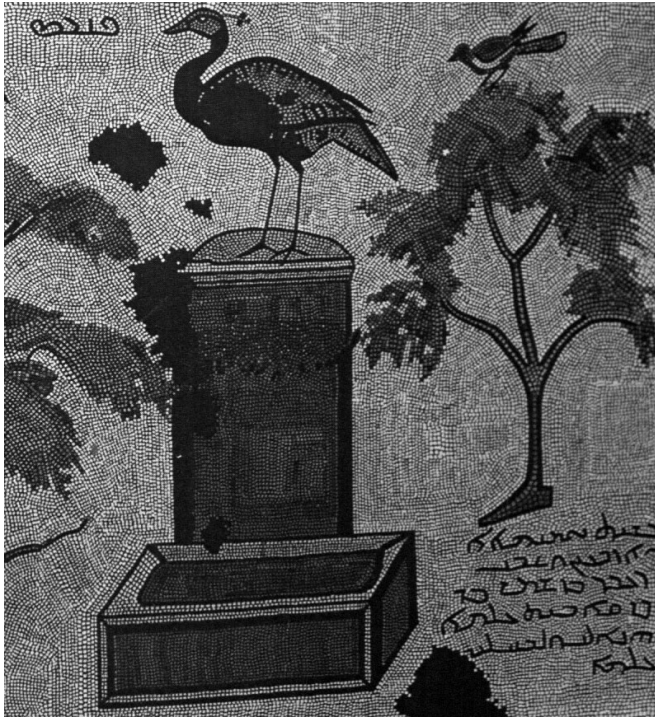


Figure 4. Phoenix with Syriac inscription from a tomb in Edessa (235-236) (Van den Broek 1972, pl. XIII)

cient representation of a *Simurgh/Anqa* in a Persian book illustration aiming at a Chinese style was copied in Maraghe around 1297-1300 (M.500, f. 55). The book is not a copy of the *Shahnameh* but a translation from Arabic, the *Manafi'-i hayavan* (*The Benefits of Animals*) by Ibn Bakhtishu' (fig. 5) (Schmitz 1997, p. 21, fig. 26). The model for this *Simurgh* is definitely not the Tang *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* but something different that followed the development of Chinese art of the post-Tang period. Its tail, wings, and the long legs are all stylistically close to the iconography of the *Fenghuang* under the Song, although the Chinese bird is expected to be represented flying in the air. On the body of this *Simurgh/Anqa* some flames that could be confused with feathers appear: is this an allusion to the element fire? It is not excluded that this 'flaming feathers' are at the basis of the typical representation of the Persian *Simurgh* following Chinese style, that is to say, with such an elaborated tail. It is solely this Chinese iconography that would have become common for the representations of the *Simurgh* in Persian painting until very recent times.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> One other Phoenix is reproduced in another illustration in the same manuscript (M.500, f. 84v). The fantastic bird is flying in front of Salomon who, according to the legend, was able to speak the language of animals. However, the Phoenix paying homage to Salomon is



Figure 5. Simurgh/ 'Anqa from a copy of the *Manafi'-i hayavan* (M.500, f. 55), The Pierpont Morgan Library (1297-1300) (Schmitz 1997, p. 21, fig. 26)



Figure 6. Sam, Zal and the Simurgh. Folio from a *Shahname* copied in Shiraz (1333). St. Petersburg, State Public Library, (ex-Dorn 329) (Swietochowski, Carboni 1994, fig. 25)



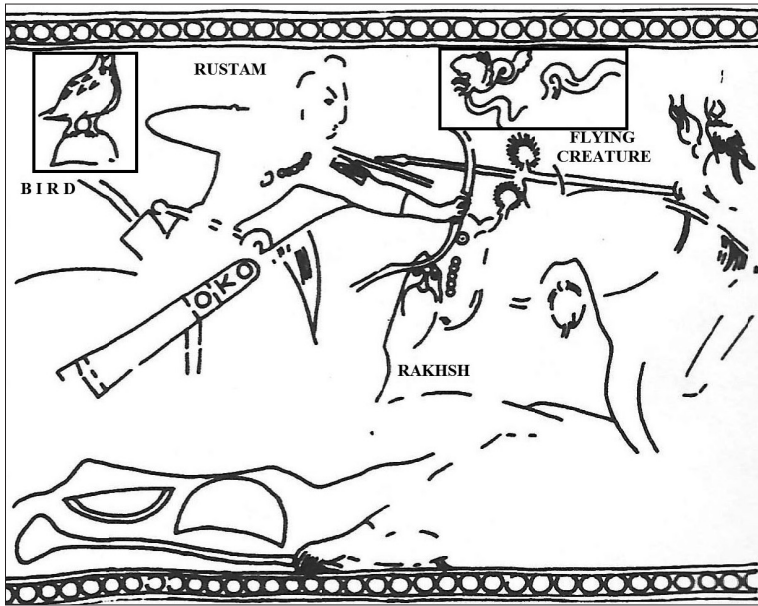


Figure 7. Line drawing of the 'Rustam painted program', south-eastern corner, from Penjikent, room 41 sector VI. (ca. 740 CE) (Marshak 2002, fig. 16)

Just one small group of Persian book illustrations from the Fars province or Isfahan and dated to the Injuid period (ca. 1325-1353) does not follow the Chinese style. The 'Injuid *Simurgh*' is portrayed standing and not flying, with a long tail - yet different from the Chinese model -, and some elements on its head resembling feathers or little horns. In general terms, that *Simurgh* looks more like an owl or, in some cases, a rooster (fig. 6).<sup>19</sup>

The only point of comparison for this kind of *Simurgh* is to be found among the mid-eighth-century Sogdian paintings from the Blue Room at Penjikent (fig. 7) (Azarpay 1981, pp. 95-125; Marshak 2002, pp. 25-52, fig. 16). The entire room (41 sector VI) is covered with a painted programme depicting Rustam's trials. However, I think that the *Simurgh* - that

much different from the elaborated one appearing in the illustration described above. In fact, several paintings of this manuscript could be attributed to different artists, possibly a master and his disciples (Grube 1978, p. 5, fig. 1).

**19** One of the most interesting specimens has been published some time ago in Swietochowski, Carboni 1994, fig. 25 (Saint Petersburg, State Public Library, ex-Dorn 329). The figure of the rooster and its association with Persia should not be underestimated. In fact, several Classical authors recorded its importance for the Persians to the point that the rooster was described as the 'Persian bird' par excellence (Tuplin, 1992; Compareti, Scarcia 2012, pp. 238-239, 243).



Figure 8. Line drawing of a panel from the 'Vahid Kooros' funerary couch (second half of the 6th century) (Riboud 2004, fig. 12)



Figure 9. Line drawing of a panel from the 'Vahid Kooros' funerary couch (second half of the 6th century) (Riboud 2004, fig. 28)

is the most obvious companion of Rustam together with his horse *Rakhsh* – should not to be identified as the winged composite creature flying in front of the hero but as a standing bird resembling an owl appearing only once in the entire painted programme. In my opinion, this specific scene could be a very important moment in the sequence about Rustam's trials, when the hero is in particular need of the protection of the *Simurgh*. It is worth observing that only here Rustam is fighting his opponent with a bow. In the legend of Rustam as recorded in the *Shahname*, the hero uses the bow to fight Isfandyar. It is only because of the intervention of the *Simurgh* that Rustam is able to make an efficient arrow to be shot in the eyes of Isfandyar. In this way, two elements of the story of Rustam and Isfandyar could be present in the painting: the bow and, most importantly,

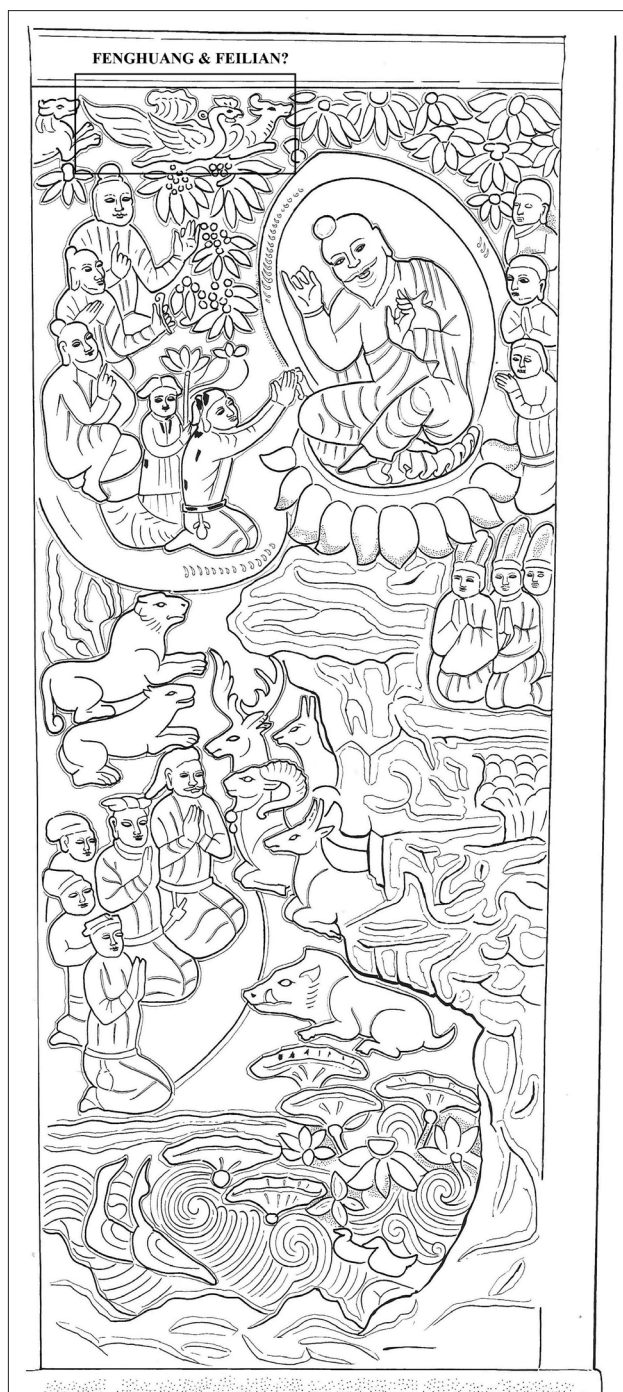


Figure 10. Line drawing of a panel from the Shi Jun sarcophagus (580) (Yang 2014, fig. 104)

the *Simurgh* that is on the contrary absent from the other scenes.<sup>20</sup> Once more, there would be enough evidence to confirm that, in Iranian art, the *Simurgh* has always been a bird, while the *Farr* (Sogdian *Farn*) has been represented in different ways, including various composite winged creatures (Compareti 2013b, pp. 25-28; Compareti 2015; Compareti forthcoming). Despite their chronological distance, my supposed 'Simurgh' from Penjikent strictly resembles the undeniable *Simurgh* represented in Inj'uid book illustrations that do not follow the Chinese style.

These observations could suggest a local Central Asia iconography for at least one kind of fantastic bird that existed independently of the Chinese *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* before the Islamisation of Iranian lands. Of course, it would be very interesting to find other traces of fantastic birds in Iranian art and consider which relations could exist between them and Chinese fantastic birds.

During the pre-Sui/Tang period, when China was fragmented in several dynasties ruling over small territories for short periods, many hybrid creatures were represented quite often in Chinese funerary art. In the Tang period they were going to be entirely substituted by the *Siling* or *Sishen* and, later, only the *Fenghuang* and the *Long* (usually translated as 'Dragon') were given great importance in Chinese art and culture. One of the sixth-century composite flying creatures is a bird with the hooves and head of a deer, although sometimes it looks like a dog, a horned horse, or other animal specimens. According to Chinese scholars, the name of this winged creature is *Feilian* and it should be associated with winged Iranian monsters such as the *Farr* (or pseudo-*Simurgh*).<sup>21</sup> In my opinion there is not enough evidence to decide on the matter. However, it is interesting to observe that a very similar flying hybrid animal is portrayed on one panel of the non-excavated Sino-Sogdian 'Vahid Kooros' funerary couch (fig. 8).<sup>22</sup>

As already noted above, Sino-Sogdian mortuary couches and sarcophagi represent a small group of unique funerary monuments executed by local artists for those high-ranking Sogdians who migrated into China in the

20 That of Isfandiyar's trial is another very problematic story from the *Shahname*. In fact, Isfandiyar was even able to kill the *Simurgh* with a trick. This image is often represented in Islamic book illustrations and it suggested to scholars that two *Simurgh* existed: a good one, i.e. the companion of Zal and Rustam, and a bad one that was killed by Isfandiyar. Some other scholars prefer to consider the *Simurgh* to be ambivalent (Schmidt 1980a, pp. 18-19).

21 For the usual identification among Chinese scholars, see Sun 1996, pp. 164-175. According to other scholars, this fantastic creature is a *Qilin* (Girmond 1993, fig. 4-32, kat. 57).

22 The fantastic animal under examination here is described in the catalogue of the exhibition that followed the restoration of this funerary couch as an «Iranian *Senmurv*-like hybrid creature» (Riboud 2004, p. 20; see also Compareti 2007, fig. 1). Flying composite creatures, albeit not exactly like the one on the Vahid Kooros couch, can be observed on two more Sino-Sogdian monuments: the Yidu couch and the Shi Jun sarcophagus (Lerner 2013, fig. 7; Yang 2014, figs. 103-105; see fig. 10 in the present study).

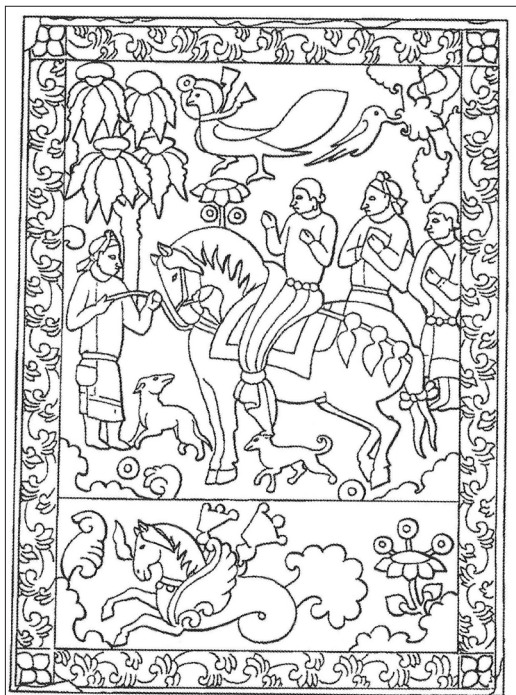


Figure 11. Detail of a panel from the Kang Ye funerary couch (ca. 571). The Xi'an Museum (Xi'an Municipal Institute of Archaeology and Preservation of Cultural Relics 2008, fig. 20)

Figure 12. Line drawing of a panel from Yu Hong sarcophagus (592 or 598). (Marshak 2001, 22b)

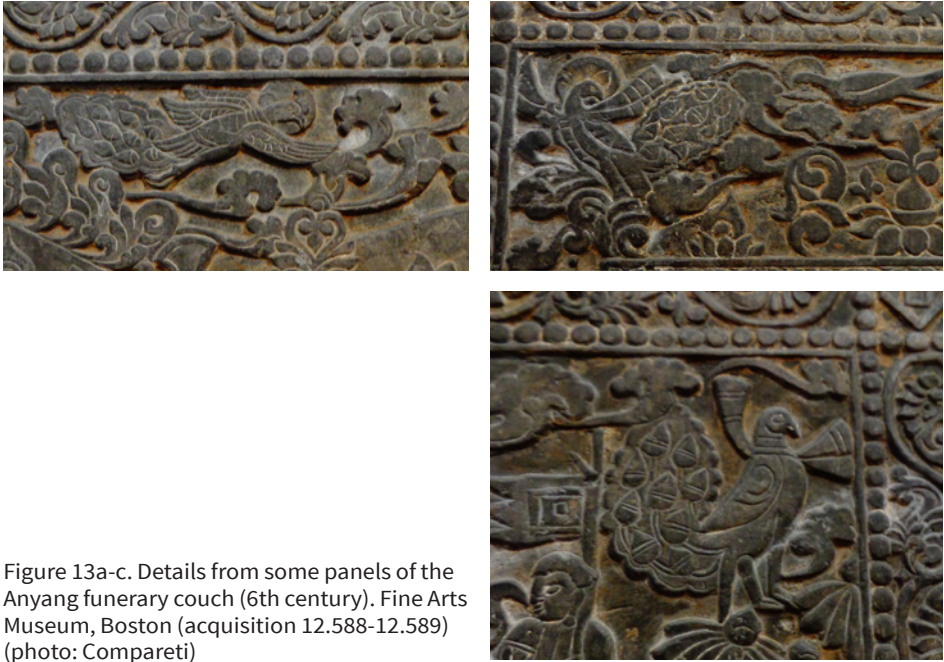


Figure 13a-c. Details from some panels of the Anyang funerary couch (6th century). Fine Arts Museum, Boston (acquisition 12.588-12.589) (photo: Compareti)

sixth century. Flying creatures like the *Feilian* are very enigmatic and it is very difficult to trace their origins. They were popular in a period of intense exchanges with Central Asia, India, and Persia but it is more probable that they are a Chinese creation since they do not appear anywhere else but inside the borders of modern China.<sup>23</sup>

In Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments many kind of birds are often represented. Sometimes they can be considered ordinary birds but, in most cases, they are portrayed with a halo, a necklace, and ribbons attached to their neck and with something in the beak. These are all characteristics of heavenly creatures in Iranian art; yet these birds could be regarded as animals of the royal park that, in any case, was a real paradise on earth for

<sup>23</sup> Astronomical-astrological connections have been expressed by some authors for Chinese creatures connected with funeral art and directional animals: Juliano 1980, pp. 35-36. One tenth-eleventh century painting on silk copied from an original attributed to Zhang Sengyou (c. 490-540) and at present kept in the Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts represent the five planets and, among them, also Venus (*Taibai xing*) as a woman riding a *Fenghuang*: Masterpieces of Chinese Paintings 2013, 146. Sasanian seals and sealings present a vast range of hybrid creatures as decorative motifs but they do not exactly resemble the Chinese winged monster under examination. These Sasanian winged animals with horns probably have some astronomical-astrological connection, but it is only during the Islamic period that they had some diffusion in the arts (Compareti 2009-2010, pp. 30-31; Compareti 2014, pp. 23-25).



Figure 14. Detail of an early third century CE Roman capital reused in the church of Santi Felice e Regolo (founded in the 11th century), Pisa (photo: Compareti)



Figure 15. Details of the Sasanian rock reliefs Bishapur II (left) and Bishapur III (right) attributed to the time of Shapur I (240-272). Fars Province, Iran (photo: courtesy of Rudy Favaro)



Figure 16. Detail of a Sogdian painting from Penjikent, room 1 sector XXIV (ca. 740). St. Petersburg, the State Hermitage (photo: Compareti)

the king. In three cases, a bird is definitely a *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* according to the iconography of pre-Song art: on one panel of the Vahid Kooros couch (fig. 9);<sup>24</sup> on a panel in the Shi Jun sarcophagus (fig. 10) (Yang 2014, figs. 103-105); on the pedestal of the Kang Ye couch (fig. 11) (Xi'an Municipal Institute of Archaeology and Preservation of Cultural Relics 2008, fig. 20). Among the nine panels that embellish the sarcophagus of Yu Hong, only one does not display beribboned birds. Sometimes these birds hold something in the beak resembling a vegetal element. However, the most interesting bird of the Yu Hong sarcophagus is a beribboned peacock with a halo around its head: it is not really flying but, most precisely, floating in the air above a riderless horse (fig. 12).<sup>25</sup> It is worth observing that also in the non-excavated Anyang panels (today divided between three museums in France, Germany and USA), among the beribboned birds represented in several scenes, a sort of peacock too is portrayed at least three times: two with a halo and once without it (fig. 13) (Scaglia 1958, fig. 4).

Some other interesting composite creatures appear on the Yu Hong sarcophagus (and in other Sino-Sogdian monuments) showing clear bor-

24 In the catalogue of the Vahid Kooros couch, the fantastic bird is called 'Phoenix', while the other birds are considered to be connected with the Iranian concept of *Farr* (Riboud 2004, pp. 26, 31).

25 Marshak 2001, fig. 22.b. In his epitaph, Yu Hong does not present a name that in Chinese sources is usually associated with Sogdian family names. However, according to Yutaka Yoshida, his personal name, preserved only in Chinese, could be reconstructed as *Makh-farn* (glory of the god Makh, the Moon) in Sogdian (Kageyama 2007, p. 13 fn. 1).





Figure 17. Central part of the door from the tomb of Li Shou (d. 630). Shaanxi History Museum. (Asim 1993, p. 183)

rowings from Greco-Roman art, but they are not the focus of this study.<sup>26</sup> Also in the Yidu funerary monument almost every panel is embellished with a beribboned bird flying in the clouds, although none of them resembles the peacock-type observed in the Yu Hong and Anyang panels.

The peacock-type beribboned bird of those Sino-Sogdian funerary monuments had already called the attention of scholars. Marshak (2001, p. 254), for example, did not hesitate to identify that bird with the *Farr* or 'glory-charisma'.<sup>27</sup> In this way, a typical Iranian concept would have found its place among this group of monuments executed, in all probability, by Chinese artists. Some other typical Chinese elements had also been accepted by the Sogdians to be represented on their funerary monuments: not just the shape of the couch or sarcophagus but also the underground grave and some decorative elements (such as the riderless horse and the ox chariot) would point to a borrowing from Chinese traditions (Rawson 2001; Riboud 2003). How is it then possible to lay down a precise line of demarcation between what should be considered Iranian, Chinese, or, in some instances, Greco-Roman?

As it has been observed long ago, in Chinese funerary art fantastic birds appear quite often, especially during the Han period. In some scenes, these birds seem to fly in proximity of people who probably deserved special attention (fig. 1). In ancient Greek art something very similar can be observed as well: birds holding a beribboned ring or a simple disc in their beak approach people surely in order to exalt them. The Nike (Victory) that is usually represented as a small winged lady holding a laurel crown or other symbols of glory in the vicinity of a person should be considered in the same light (fig. 14).<sup>28</sup> A similar phenomenon can be observed also

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26 Identifications of these creatures can be found in Marshak 2001, pp. 252-259. Strangely enough, on the pedestal of the northern side of Shi Jun sarcophagus, a mixture of Chinese and Iranian *Siling* can be observed while moving in the direction of a multi-armed central deity. Two symbolic creatures can be definitely identified as the *Baihu* (White Tiger) of the West and the *Qinglong* (Green Dragon) of the East. However, the two remaining ones have been substituted by an elephant on the left and a curious winged horse with a fishy coiled tail on the right. While the elephant could be associated to India and the South, the other hybrid creature can just be intended to represent a substitute for the *Xuanwu* (Dark Warrior) of the North (Yang 2014, figs. 120, 172-181). The iconography of the latter hybrid is definitely rooted in the image of the *Hippocampus* or *Ketos* of Greco-Roman art, although a typically Sasanian crescent on the head and ribbons have been added. This hybrid reminds another beribboned winged horse with a fishy tail observed twice in the panels of the Yu Hong sarcophagus (Marshak 2001, figs. 22.b-23; see fig. 12 in the present study). On some of the 'eastern' components of originally 'Western' fantastic creatures that would have been later accepted also in Iranian lands. See Favaro 2008; Scarzia 2008.

27 Another scholar made the same identification independently of Marshak (Zheng 2001, pp. 86-90).

28 The image that I have chosen to present in this study has been published several times. It is an early third-century Roman capital reused in the eleventh-century church of Santi

in pre-Islamic Iranian art of Persia and Central Asia. In a couple of Sasanian rock reliefs (Bishapur II and Bishapur III) and in some metal work (cautiously) considered to be Sasanian, a flying putto offers a diadem to the victorious king (fig. 15) (Vanden Berghe 1983, pp. 73-74, pls. 23-24) exactly like in Sogdian art angels, winged composite animals, and even a flying hand holding a beribboned ring can be represented in front of the person that should be exalted (fig. 16) (Azarpay 1975).

In the case of a Sogdian immigrant who was requesting a Chinese artist to create an appropriate tomb for him and his family, the image of a bird like a peacock embellished with ribbons and a halo could have satisfied both audiences, Iranian as well as Chinese. In the tomb of Li Shou, who died in 630, there is also a reproduction of a stone door embellished with a very interesting motif (Asim 1993, p. 183): two typical Tang (or, in any case, pre-Song) *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* are facing each other above the figures of two birds that could be easily identified as peacocks (fig. 17).<sup>29</sup> Despite the obvious Chinese identity of the tomb occupant, this early Tang grave displays several other elements imported from Iranian lands and the steppes in the funerary paintings such as the 'Parthian shot', the hunting scene, and the foreign attire of some individuals (Zhang 1995, figs. 1, 5). Some of the friezes show processions of women holding precious metal works; one of them – a rhyton – is definitely Iranian (Asim 1993, fig. 6-28, kat. 73.2).

So, which identification should be proposed for those fantastic birds? *Fenghuang/Zhuniao* or *Simurgh* or *Farr*? It is not easy to give a precise answer to this question. As I have tried to prove in another study, the presence of a fantastic bird in a typical Iranian work of art such as the sixth-century Merv painted vase could offer a very interesting term of comparison for many scenes of Sino-Sogdian monuments (Compareti 2011). However, it is extremely difficult to decide on a precise identification for that specific bird that could very easily be the *Simurgh* or just a manifestation of the *Farr* or even the *Homa*, 'the bird of royal glory'. Since the *Simurgh* was represented only as a bird and the *Farr* could be *also* a bird (especially in Central Asia), some confusion at an iconographic level could also have affected the most acculturated Iranian observer. From the point

Felice e Regolo, Pisa. It features a unique decoration of Olympian deities with a Nike flying next to them and presenting a ring as symbol of glory (Tedeschi Grisanti 1992). Elements like the glorifying bird with a ring in the beak or the winged Nike were borrowed by other peoples in contact with Greek art and culture. Not just the Romans, who were the direct heirs of the Greek experience, but also other Iranian Hellenized people such as the Parthians knew these symbols very well and adopted them in their coinage (Sinisi 2008; Vardanyan 2001, figs. 3.11-12, 11.2, 4, 6, 14.9). A not well-preserved Nike can be observed also in a first-century BCE Parthian rock relief at Bisutun (Vanden Berghe 1983, p. 45, fig. 3).

<sup>29</sup> A very similar scene with a yellow Phoenix identified by an inscription and two peacocks facing one another appears in the already mentioned Euxinus' inn painting (Archaeological Deposits inv. 41761) (see Zambon 2004, p. 19).

of view of a Sogdian high rank official who wanted to appear as much sinicized as possible, the presence of one or more (Iranian) fantastic birds among the decorations of his funerary monument could have been easily understood as an auspicious symbol also in the sphere of Chinese art and culture of that period (6th century).

Despite the problem of 'Western' (that is to say Greco-Roman) iconographic borrowings that can be detected in Sasanian and Sogdian art, it is clear that all these flying (or, sometimes, floating) creatures are just a way to represent auspicious symbols of divine protection or approval that should be considered universal and easy to understand in every cultural milieu. In the case of the fantastic bird such a mechanism of adoption and adaptation could have moved very easily from one cultural milieu to another, since everywhere there was a cosmic bird associated with good fortune, immortality, and funerary rituals. It is normal to expect also iconographic exchanges, especially in the period between the sixth and the seventh centuries, when all the regions interested in the caravan trade (from the Mediterranean Sea to China, passing through Persia and Central Asia) were experiencing an exceptionally favourable period of receptivity and search for every kind of exoticism and luxury objects.

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