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Illustration du dos : Ai Khanoum, moulage en plâtre d'un cheval (H.-P. FRANCFORT *et al.*, *Il y a 50 ans... la découverte d'Ai Khanoum*, Paris, 2014, p. 75).

SOMMAIRE

Fascicule 1

Sommaire	5-7
Index des auteurs	9-10

Études

P. ARNAUD, «Le “Cheïrismos de Néapolis”. Un lieu, une institution, des armateurs, un rouage du processus annonaire»	11-59
M. MINARDI, A.V.G. BETTS, G. KHOZHANIYAZOV, «Recently discovered painted imagery of horses with “grooms” at Akchakhan-Kala. Observations on their art, symbolic meaning and context»	61-101

Chroniques

P. BRIANT, «Alexandre aux présents», à propos de J. Boardman, <i>Alexander the Great, from his death to the present day</i> (2019); C. T. Djurslev, <i>Alexander the Great in the early Christian Tradition</i> (2020); J. Peltonen, <i>Alexander the Great in the Roman Empire</i> (2019); S. F. Ng, <i>Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia</i> (2019)	103-120
J. ZURBACH, «Une nouvelle vision de l’esclavage antique», à propos de D.M. Lewis, <i>Greek slave systems c. 800-146 B.C. in their Eastern Mediterranean Context</i> (2018)	121-131

Comptes rendus

Thématiques transversales

A. SCHNAPP, J.C. Scott, <i>Homo domesticus, une histoire profonde des premiers États</i> (2019)	133-141
B. VAN OPPEN, G. Adornato, G. Cirucci et W. Cupperi (éds), <i>Beyond “Art Collections”: Owning and Accumulating Objects</i> (2020)	143-149
B. VAN OPPEN, D. Boschung et Fr. Queyrel (éds), <i>Porträt als Massenphänomen/ Le portrait comme phénomène de masse</i> (2019)	151-166
R. NOUET, V. Gaggadis-Robin et N. de Larquier (dir.), <i>La sculpture et ses emplois</i> (2019)	167-172
P. GUIJARRO RUANO, A. Alonso Déniz, L. Dubois, Cl. Le Feuvre et S. Minon (éds), <i>La suffixation des anthroponymes grecs antiques</i> (2017)	173-179
J. CLÉMENT, B. Redon, D. Agut-Labordère (éds), <i>Les vaisseaux des déserts et des steppes. Les camélidés dans l’Antiquité</i> (2020)	181-185

A. BOUYSSY, G. Tallet et Th. Seuzeau (éds), <i>Mer et désert de l'Antiquité à nos jours: Approches croisées</i> (2018)	187-191
<i>Méditerranée mycénienne, archaïque et gréco-romaine</i>	
F. LEROUXEL, J. Manning, <i>The Open Sea: the Economic Life of the Ancient Mediterranean World</i> (2018)	193-203
Chr. CONSTANTAKOPOULOU, G. Ekroth et I. Nilsson (éds), <i>Round Trip to Hades in the Eastern Mediterranean Tradition</i> (2018)	205-211
J. ZURBACH, G.D. Middleton, <i>Collapse and transformation. The Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age in the Aegean</i> (2020)	213-215
H. DRIDI, J. Quinn, <i>In Search of the Phoenicians</i> (2018)	217-229
H. LE MEAUX, S.R. Martin, <i>The Art of Contact. Comparative Approaches to Greek and Phoenician Art</i> (2017)	231-234
P.-O. LEROY, M. Coltelloni-Trannoy et S. Morlet (éds), <i>Histoire et géographie chez les auteurs grecs du I^{er} s. av. J.-C. au V^{er} s. apr. J.-C.</i> (2018)	235-238
R. DESCAT, M. Hinsch, <i>Ökonomik und Hauswirtschaft im klassischen Griechenland</i> (2021)	239-244
J. FAGUER, N. Dietrich, J. Fouquet et C. Reinhardt, <i>Schreiben auf statuarischen Monumenten</i> (2020)	245-249
S. FOURRIER, M. Grawehr, C. Leypold, M. Mohr, E. Thiermann (éds), <i>Klassik Kunst der Könige</i> (2020)	251-252
S. ANEZIRI, E. Csapo, P. Wilson, <i>A Social and Economic History of the Theatre to 300 BC, II, Theatre beyond Athens</i> (2020)	253-256
G. BIARD, K. Seaman, <i>Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art</i> (2020)	257-260
B. VAN OPPEN, A. Pangerl (éd.), <i>400 Jahre hellenistische Portraits</i> (2020)	261-274
R. ÉTIENNE, A. Erskine, L. Llewellyn-Jones, S. Wallace, <i>The Hellenistic Court Monarchic Power and Elite Society from Alexander to Cleopatra</i> (2017)	275-277
J. ZURBACH, Cl. Moatti et Chr. Müller (éds), <i>Statuts personnels et espaces sociaux Questions grecques et romaines</i> (2018)	279-287
A. VLAMOS, M. Dana, I. Savalli Lestrade (éds), <i>La cité interconnectée dans le monde gréco-romain (IV^e siècle a.C.-IV^e siècle p.C.)</i> (2019)	289-299
J. MA, J.-L. Ferrary, <i>Rome et le monde grec. Choix d'écrits</i> (2017)	301-303
B. HOLTZMANN, M. Meyer, <i>Athena, Göttin von Athen</i> (2017)	305-321
G. EKROTH, M.A. Liston, S.I. Rotroff, L.M. Snyder, <i>The Agora Bone Well, Hesperia Suppl. 50</i> (2018)	323-327
G. BIARD, S. Leone, <i>Polis, Platz und Porträt. Die Bildnisstatuen auf der Agora von Athen</i> (2020)	329-331
Th. LUCAS, J.M. FOSSEY, <i>Boiotia in Ancient Times</i> (2019)	333-340
J. MA, P. Hamon, <i>Corpus des inscriptions de Thasos. Documents publics du quatrième siècle et de l'époque hellénistique</i> (2019)	341-343
J. DES COURTILS, M. Zimmermann (éd.), <i>Das Xanthostal Lykiens in archaisch-klassischer Zeit</i> (2020)	345-355
S. LEBRETON, H. Roelens-Flouneau, <i>Dans les pas des voyageurs antiques. Circuler en Asie Mineure à l'époque hellénistique</i> (2019)	357-359

Fascicule 2

Sommaire	365-366
Comptes rendus	
Monde romain	
L. BORAU, A.O. Koloski-Ostrow, <i>The Archaeology of Sanitation in Roman Italy</i> (2015)	367-370
Th. GIRARD, H. Dessales, <i>Recueils de William Gell. Pompéi publiée et inédite (1801-1829)</i> (2020)	371-373
P. KARVONIS, J. Schoevaert, <i>Les boutiques d'Ostie. L'économie urbaine au quotidien. 1^{er} s. av. J.-C. – 1^{re} s. apr. J.-C.</i> (2018)	375-383
Chypre	
S. FOURRIER, P. Steele, <i>Writing and society in ancient Cyprus</i> (2019)	385-390
A. CANNAVÓ, A. Karnava, M. Perna, <i>Inscriptiones Cypri I, Inscriptiones Cypri syllabicae 1, Inscriptiones Amathuntis Curii Marii</i> (2020)	391-401
S. FOURRIER, Chr. Körner, <i>Die zyprischen Königtümer im Schatten der Grossreiche des Vorderen Orients</i> (2017)	403-407
N. KOUROU, A. Cannavó et L. Thely (éds), <i>Les royaumes de Chypre à l'épreuve de l'histoire</i> (2019)	409-414
S. FOURRIER, D. Leibundgut Wieland, V. Tatton-Brown, <i>Nordost-Tor und persische Belagerungsrampe in Alt-Paphos IV</i> (2019)	415-422
Orient ancien	
P. LOMBARD, S.T. Laursen, <i>The Royal Mounds of A'ali in Bahrain. The Emergence of Kingship in Early Dilmun</i> (2017)	423-435
B. COUTURAUD, Fr. Alpi, Z. Bradosty, J. Giraud, J. MacGinnis & R. Mattila (éds), <i>Arbela Antiqua</i> (2020)	437-447
B. COUTURAUD, R. Koliński, <i>Catalogue of Archaeological Sites. Navkūr Plain Al-Hāzīr River Basin</i> (2019)	449-454
Fr. JOANNÈS, Fr. Reynolds, <i>A Babylon Calendar Treatise</i> (2019)	455-457
Orient hellénistique	
F. HOLT, S. Glenn, <i>Money and Power in Hellenistic Bactria</i> (2020)	459-462
Ch. LEROUGE, R. Hämmerling, <i>Zwischen dynastischem Selbstbild und literarischem Stereotyp. Königinnen der Seleukiden und der Mittelmächte Kleinasiens</i> (2019)	463-466

A. SAVALLI-LESTRADE, P.J. Kosmin, <i>Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire</i> (2019)	467-477
L. MARTINEZ-SÈVE, D. Engels, <i>Benefactors, Kings, Rulers. Studies on the Seleucid Empire between East and West</i> (2017)	479-488
Proche-Orient romain	
C. SALIOU, D.-M. Cabaret, <i>La topographie de la Jérusalem antique</i> (2020)	489-494
M. SARTRE, J. Rohmer, <i>Hauran VI. D'Aram à Rome</i> (2020)	495-501
A. SARTRE-FAURIAT, M. Sommer (éd.), <i>Inter duo imperia. Palmyra between East and West</i> (2020)	503-508
L. GREGORATTI, H. Cameron, <i>Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland</i> (2019)	509-512
M. GAWLIKOWSKI, J. Borchhardt, <i>Das Mithräum in Antiocheia am Orontes</i> (2020)	513-514
C. SALIOU, Choricios de Gaza, éd. Ch. Telesca, trad. N. Sauterel, <i>Discours et fragments II</i> , 3 ^e partie (2018)	515-523
Péninsule arabique	
R. EICHMANN, Chr. Darles, <i>Fouilles de Shabwa 5, Les fortifications</i> (2020)	525-527
Orient médiéval	
D. BRAMOULLÉ, D.A. Agius, <i>The Life of the Red Sea Dhow</i> (2019)	529-531
B. DUMONT, J. Tannous, <i>The Making of the Medieval Middle East. Religion, Society, and Simple Believers</i> (2018)	533-540
Égypte	
M. CHAUVEAU, <i>Egyptian language in Greek sources. Scripta Onomastica of Jan Quaegebeur</i> (2019)	541-545
R. BAGNALL, A. Bowman and Ch. Crowther (éds), <i>The Epigraphy of Ptolemaic Egypt</i> (2020)	547-552
N. LEROUX, R. Birk, <i>Türöffner des Himmels</i> (2020)	553-565
J. OLIVIER, C. Lorber, <i>Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire, I, Ptolemy I through Ptolemy IV</i> (2018)	567-573
L. BRICAULT, S. Nagel, <i>Isis im Römischen Reich</i> , 2 vol. (2019)	575-579
D. THOMPSON, C. Römer, <i>The Fayum Survey Project: The Themistou Meris A</i> (2019); D.M. Bailey, <i>The Fayum Survey Project: The Themistou Meris B</i> (2019)	581-590
D. THOMPSON, M. Langellotti, <i>Village Life in Roman Egypt: Tebtunis in the First Century AD</i> (2020)	591-597
J. GASCOU, S.R. Huebner et al. (éds), <i>Living the End of Antiquity</i> (2020)	599-604
É. MAZY, E. Garel, <i>Héritage et transmission dans le monachisme égyptien</i> (2020)	605-609
Asie centrale, Océan indien et Extrême-Orient	
M. COBB, Ph. Beaujard, <i>The Worlds of The Indian Ocean: A Global History</i> (2019)	611-617
L. MARTINEZ-SÈVE, C. Baumer, M. Novák (éds), <i>Urban Cultures of Central Asia from the Bronze Age to the Karakhanids</i> (2019)	619-628
O. COLORU, R. Stoneman, <i>The Greek Experience of India</i> (2019)	629-639
O. BORDEAUX, N. Sims-Williams & Fr. de Blois, <i>Studies in the Chronology of the Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan</i> (2018)	641-645
A. DE SAXCÉ, M.A. Cobb, <i>Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade</i> (2018)	647-653
J.-C. DUCÈNE, E.A. Lambourn, <i>Abraham's Luggage. A social life of things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World</i> (2018)	655-657

Index des auteurs

<i>Auteurs de contributions dans cette livraison</i>			
S. Aneziri	253	P.-O. Leroy	235
P. Arnaud	9	P. Lombard	423
R. Bagnall	547	Th. Lucas	333
A.V.G. Betts	61	J. Ma	301, 341
G. Biard	257, 329	L. Martinez-Sève	479, 619
L. Borau	367	É. Mazy	605
O. Bordeaux	641	M. Minardi	61
M. Bouyssy	187	R. Nouet	167
D. Bramoullé	529	J. Olivier	567
P. Briant	103	C. Saliou	489, 515
L. Bricault	575	M. Sartre	495
A. Cannavó	391	A. Sartre-Fauriat	503
M. Chauveau	541	I. Savalli-Lestrade	467
J. Clément	181	A. de Saxcé	647
M. Cobb	611	A. Schnapp	133
O. Coloru	629	D. Thompson	581, 591
Chr. Constantakopoulou	205	B. Van Oppen	143, 151, 261
B. Couturaud	437, 449	A. Vlamos	289
R. Descat	239	J. Zurbach	121, 213, 279
J. Des Courtils	345		
H. Dridi	217	<i>Auteurs et éditeurs recensés dans cette livraison</i>	
J.-Ch. Ducène	655	G. Adornato	143
B. Dumont	533	D.A. Agius	529
R. Eichmann	525	D. Agut-Labordère	181
G. Ekroth	323	A. Alonso Déniz	173
R. Étienne	275	Fr. Alpi	437
J. Faguer	245	D.M. Bailey	581
S. Fourrier	251, 385, 403, 415	C. Baumer	619
J. Gascou	599	Ph. Beaujard	611
M. Gawlikowski	513	R. Birk	553
Th. Girard	371	Fr. de Blois	641
L. Gregoratti	509	J. Boardman	103
P. Guijarro Ruano	173	J. Borchhardt	513
F. Holt	459	D. Boschung	151
B. Holtzmann	305	A. Bowman	547
Fr. Joannès	455	Z. Bradosty	437
P. Karvonis	375	D.-M. Cabaret	489
G. Khozhaniyazov	61	H. Cameron	509
N. Kourou	409	A. Cannavó	403
S. Lebreton	357	G. Cirucci	143
H. Le Meaux	231	M.A. Cobb	647
Ch. Lerouge	463	M. Coltenolli-Trannoy	235
N. Leroux	553	Ch. Crowther	547
Fr. Lerouxel	193		

E. Csapo	253	M. Meyer	305
W. Cupperi	143	G.D. Middleton	213
M. Dana	289	S. Minon	173
Chr. Darles	525	Cl. Moatti	279
H. Dessales	371	M. Mohr	251
N. Dietrich	245	S. Morlet	235
C.T. Djurslev	103	Chr. Müller	279
L. Dubois	173	S. Nagel	575
G. Ekroth	205	S.F. Ng	103
D. Engels	479	I. Nilsson	205
A. Erskine	275	M. Novák	619
J.-L. Ferrary	301	A. Pangerl	261
J.M. Fossey	333	M. Perna	391
J. Fouquet	245	J. Peltonen	103
V. Gagadis-Robin	167	J. Quaegebeur	541
E. Garel	605	Fr. Queyrel	151
J. Giraud	437	J. Quinn	217
S. Glenn	459	B. Redon	181
M. Grawehr	251	C. Reinhardt	245
R. Hämmerling	463	Fr. Reynolds	455
P. Hamon	341	H. Roelens-Flouneau	357
M. Hinsch	239	C. Römer	581
S.R. Huebner	599	J. Rohmer	495
A. Karnava	391	S.I. Rotroff	323
R. Kóliniski	449	N. Sauterel	515
A.O. Koloski-Ostrow	367	Th. Sauzeau	187
Chr. Körner	403	I. Savalli Lestrade	289
P.J. Kosmin	467	J.C. Scott	133
E.A. Lambourn	655	K. Seaman	257
M. Langellotti	591	J. Schoevaert	375
N. de Larquier	167	N. Sims-Williams	641
S.T. Laursen	423	M.L. Snyder	323
Cl. Le Feuvre	173	M. Sommer	503
D. Leibundgut Wieland	415	P. Steele	385
S. Leone	329	R. Stoneman	629
D.M. Lewis	121	G. Tallet	187
C. Leybold	251	J. Tannous	533
M.A. Liston	323	V. Tatton-Brown	415
L. Llewellyn-Jones	275	Ch. Telesca	515
C. Lorber	567	L. Thély	403
J. MacGinnis	437	E. Thiermann	251
J. Manning	193	S. Wallace	275
S.R. Martin	231	P. Wilson	253
R. Mattila	437	M. Zimmermann	345

RECENTLY DISCOVERED PAINTED IMAGERY OF HORSES WITH “GROOMS” AT AKCHAKHAN-KALA

Observations on their art, symbolic meaning and context

The murals of Akchakhan-kala: one of the major and most ancient corpora of wall paintings of pre-Islamic Asia

The four fragments of wall painting in this study constitute an important addition to the already remarkably extensive corpus of murals discovered by the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia (KAE) at the site of Akchakhan-kala. These new pieces share a common imagery, displaying horses, which in three cases are associated with images of human figures, or “grooms”, standing beside them. Only the upper portions of these images are preserved. The fragments also share their context, since they once belonged to a larger mural composition that decorated the interiors of the perimetral corridor of the Central Building of Akchakhan-kala’s Ceremonial Complex (*Fig. 1*). The imagery of the corridor was part, in its turn, of the greater visual programme of the site. The Central Building is the most outstanding archaeological feature of this Ancient Chorasmian royal seat. The monument, as customary for the region, was entirely constructed in mud-brick and rammed clay blocks (*pakhsa*), with the exception of its stone column bases, (plastered) wooden column shafts, timber roof and framing. The interior of its walls was plastered in white and profusely painted with complex imagery. These murals, conceived around the 1st century BC – 1st century AD and experienced up to the 2nd century AD, were chosen by the Chorasmian king(s) of Akchakhan-kala to deliver a multi-faceted ideological message. To this point, the corpus has been dealt with in several papers (most recently in

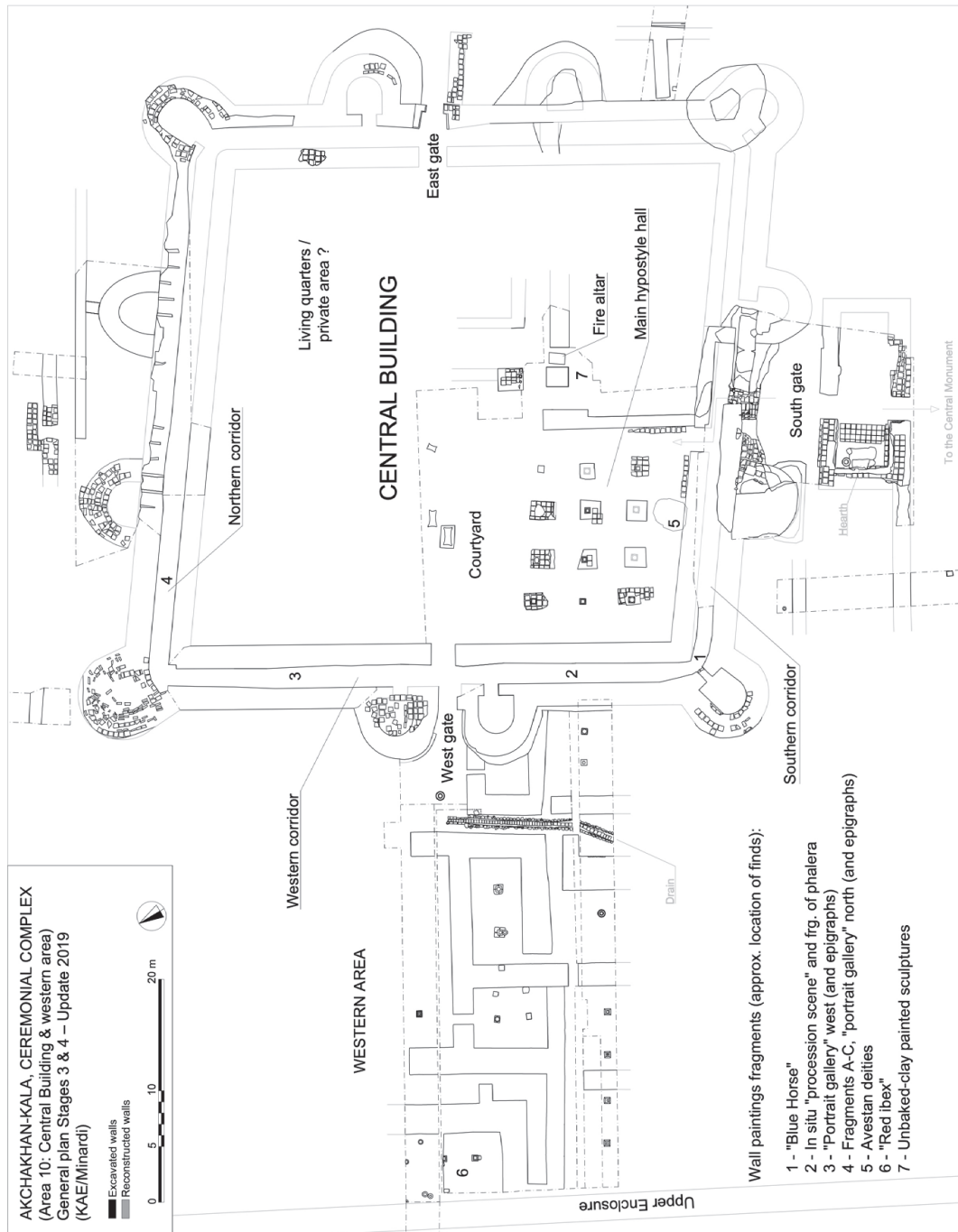


Fig. 1 – Akchakhan-kala, Ceremonial Complex: approximate find spots of the wall paintings fragments cited in the text (©KAE).

the years 2015-2018)¹ in particular after the exceptional discovery, in the large hypostyle hall of the Central Building,² of the most ancient visual representations of anthropomorphic Avestan deities so far known. This discovery allowed us to present specific interpretations regarding the religious qualities and meanings of the corpus, and it gave final validation to the previously only implicit (early/pre-Sassanian) Zoroastrianism of the Chorasmians. The finding, moreover, confirmed the Zoroastrian significance of the Akchakhan-kala architectonic ensemble, adding tangible support to the reconstruction of the faith of the Chorasmian elites.

Akchakhan-kala certainly was one of the most significant sites of the polity of Chorasmia in its Early Antique 3 period (*ca.* mid-1st century BC – early 3rd century AD). This royal seat was founded around the 2nd century BC and abandoned in the 2nd century AD. During its main stage (Stage 3, which begins around the 1st century BC – 1st century AD, coinciding with the start of the Antique 3 period) the Ceremonial Complex underwent a thorough transformation of its architecture and decoration. At the end of Stage 3, Akchakhan-kala was abandoned, then despoiled and robbed of most of its construction elements (e.g. the wooden features of its architecture) and of its valuable material, probably mostly to be reemployed in the subsequent royal seat of Toprak-kala, which was founded afresh nearby, either by a new lord of the Akchakhan-kala ruling dynasty or by a new local dynast.³ Notwithstanding its spoliation, the archaeological investigation of Akchakhan-kala is constantly delivering proof of its former splendour.⁴ The profusely painted interiors of its main buildings were unsurprisingly left in place when the site was deserted. The pictorial evidence from the site confirms, on a whole new scale, that a tradition of mural art had flourished in Chorasmia prior to the 2nd century AD,⁵ as the findings at Toprak-kala had previously suggested.⁶ The Chorasmian artistic tradition witnessed at Akchakhan-kala, with its array of techniques and specialized craftsmanship, also shows important traces of “external” contributions

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1. BETTS *et al.* 2015; 2016; MINARDI *et al.* 2018; MINARDI 2018; GRENET 2018; GRENET and MINARDI 2021; see also YAGODIN *et al.* 2009; KIDD 2012.
 2. MINARDI *et al.* 2017.
 3. The material culture of the first stage of Toprak-kala does not mark a *caesura* with that witnessed at Akchakhan-kala; and the Chorasmian Era, first attested in documents from Toprak-kala, seems to have started much earlier. For further details, see Minardi 2016b; 2018 with references; 2020b; on the abandonment of Akchakhan-kala, see also DODSON *et al.* 2015. However, the art of Toprak-kala delivers a new “Eastern-Hellenistic” aesthetic (MINARDI 2020b with references).
 4. KIDD and BETTS 2010; MINARDI 2016a; 2016c.
 5. MINARDI 2018 with literature.
 6. RAPOPORT and NERAZIK 1984; RAPOPORT 1994 with references to previous Russian-language literature.

with their new inputs to the local arts, as well as echoes of a past belonging to an artistic background of which not much is yet known: besides a clear Achaemenid iconographic *echo* that has been detected in certain elements of Akchakhan-kala's most sacred imagery,⁷ selected Eastern Hellenistic formal elements, probably introduced by foreigner artisans and artists working for the local elite, also contributed to the development of an original Chorasmian Zoroastrian art.⁸ This "Achaemenid legacy" seems to be a characteristic expressed by the Chorasmian culture. In sum, Akchakhan-kala's mural fragments, constituting one of the greatest bodies of wall paintings of the Central Asian region in the "pre/early-Kushan period", are filling a void in the research that could have been mistaken for an archaeological "mirage".⁹

Besides contributing on a broader level to a new understanding of the iconography and early use of mural art in Asia, the Chorasmian material is also helping to reassess old and superseded notions relative to the particular history and chronology of this polity.¹⁰ It is also contributing to the construction of a new perspective on the religious history of pre-Islamic Central Asia, especially with regard to pre-Sassanian Zoroastrianism, thanks to the discovery of early colossal anthropomorphic depictions of Avestan gods, in association with the remains of a regnal fire altar.¹¹

7. MINARDI *et al.* 2018; MINARDI 2020a.

8. On the Hellenistic features of the Chorasmian material culture before Akchakhan-kala Stage 3, see MINARDI 2015, p. 87-95; on the painting and clay modelling techniques: *idem*, p. 103-113; 2016a; 2018. On the concept of Zoroastrian art, see GRENET 2018.

9. There is no evidence of a direct Kushan domination on Chorasmia. On the "mirage" (with specific reference to Gandhāra), see for instance LO MUZIO 2012, p. 319: "What I suggest is that we have reasons enough to give up regretting the loss of Gandharan murals dating to the first centuries of the current era [...]. It is perhaps time to take into serious consideration that there is no archaeological ground for assuming that the thriving production of Buddhist stone reliefs was paralleled by a no less rich tradition of mural painting, now completely lost. [...] My impression [is] that the influence of a so far undocumented tradition has affected our understanding of Central Asian art as well."; 2014, p. 132: "As for Gandhāra, we should perhaps let material evidence show us the way; and what material evidence tells us is that, during the reign of the Kushans, wall painting probably had a minor part in the artistic programme of Gandharan Buddhist monasteries, whereas it gained wider popularity from the fourth century onward". This point has been already remarked in MINARDI 2018, p. 106 (with reference to FILIGENZI 2006).

10. Started with MINARDI 2015.

11. SINISI *et al.* 2018.

1. The new fragments

The new fragments were all found in the perimetral/circumambulatory corridor of the Central Building (*Fig. 1*). They partially display four distinct composite images belonging to two different murals: on the three discovered in the northern section of the perimetral corridor (northern corridor), there are a white, and two predominantly red horses, accompanied by “grooms” (*Figs. 2-4*). On the fourth fragment (*Figs. 5-7*), found in the western end of the southern section of the corridor (southern corridor), there is instead a single horse with a characteristic blue coat (henceforth “blue horse”). The “blue horse” (as well as another unpublished fragment that is probably part of another yellow equid with phalera – *infra*), almost certainly forms part of a previously discovered painting scene, published in 2012, and labelled as “procession scene” (KIDD 2012). The “procession scene”, showing men on foot preceded by horses, was found still partially in situ in the southern section of the western part of the perimetral corridor (western corridor), preserved only in its lower part much below the waist of the men depicted on it (*Fig. 8*).

While the full restoration of the “blue horse” was completed in 2019, the fragments from the northern corridor are still undergoing conservation.¹² These pieces were discovered either in situ, on the wall, or, in the debris of the corridor walls with their painting layer facing upwards, circumstances that allowed their accurate 1:1 scale preliminary tracings. Since full cleaning of these images has still to be undertaken, their discussion should be considered as an interim one.¹³

The “blue horse” from the southern corridor (AK13 WP8)

The “blue horse” from the southern corridor displays the head and the neck of a bridled horse viewed in profile (*Figs. 5-6*). The maximum length and width of the fragment are respectively 0.7 m and 0.5 m, corresponding to a preserved painted area of *ca.* 0.25 sq. m. Although the part of the image that should display the bit is unfortunately lost, the presence of the partially preserved reins, and the comparison with the specimens of the “procession scene” (*infra*), shows that it did not wear a halter. The rather disproportionate head is less than life-size. It is small and elongated in relation to the strong neck, measuring *ca.* 23 cm from the mid eye level to the mouth.¹⁴ The colour of the coat is rendered in a blue-grey paint

12. Excavated in 2014 and 2017.

13. The cleaning and consolidation of their surfaces will certainly lead to the discovery of more fine details, and to the revision of others discussed here. But the current state of visibility of the figures is more than sufficient for an interim analysis.

14. From poll to (supposed) mouth corner is about 45 cm. Speculations on the relation between this painted image and the breed of the horse depicted based on proportions are avoided here.

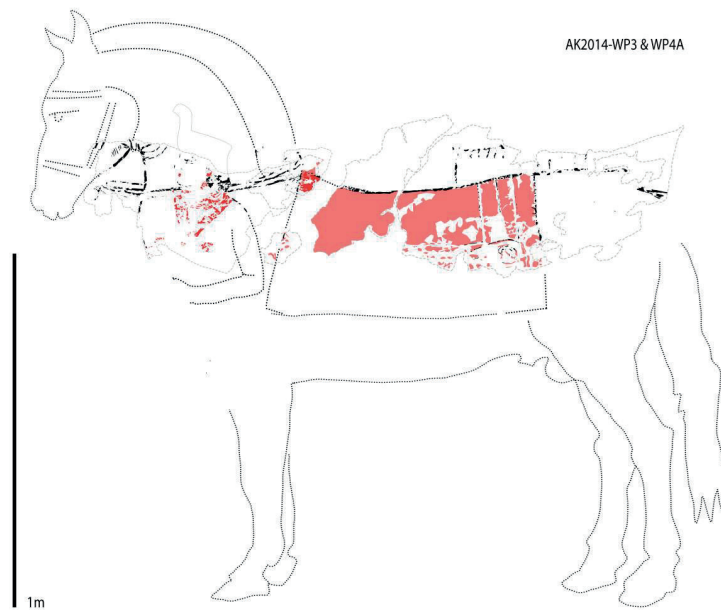


Fig. 2– Akchakhan-kala, preliminary 1:1 tracing of wall painting fragments AK14 WP3 and WP4A with partial reconstruction (“Fragment A”, ©KAE).

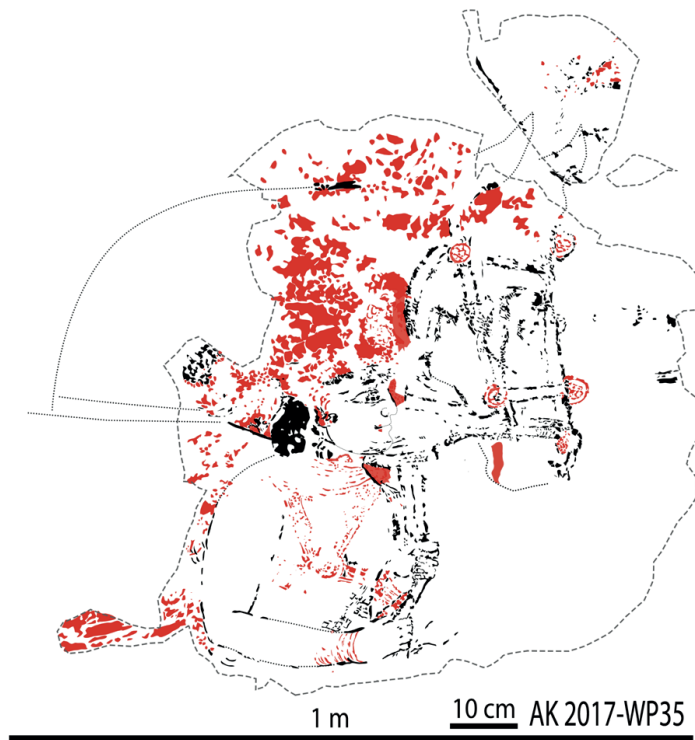


Fig. 3– Akchakhan-kala, preliminary 1:1 tracing of wall painting fragment AK17 WP35 with partial reconstruction (“Fragment B”, ©KAE).



Fig. 4– Akchakhan-kala, preliminary 1:1 tracing of wall painting fragment AK17 WP46 with partial reconstruction (“Fragment C”, ©KAE).

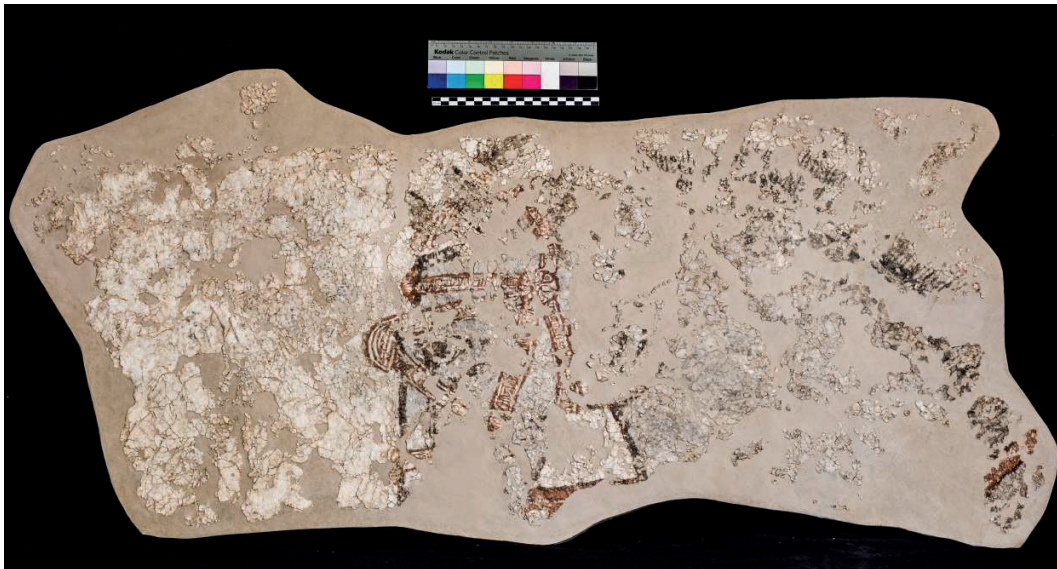


Fig. 5– Akchakhan-kala, photograph of wall painting fragment AK13 WP08 after restoration (the “blue horse”, ©KAE).



Fig. 6– Final 1:1 tracing of the “blue horse” (©KAE).

(“false blue” colour)¹⁵, with a black hogged mane. The outline and ornamental details on the bridle are painted red, leaving the body of the harness the colour of the white background plaster. The solid-coloured reins are also red, delimited by black contour lines. A black contour line delimits the whole figure. Other features are also presented by black lines, including the eye and some details of the skin, such as the folds on the curvature of the neck, the facial crest with the infraorbital region (given by a simple thick black line) and some other lesser preserved details on the chin. A red-coloured preparatory drawing – a kind of “sinopia”¹⁶ – is clearly apparent in some parts of the mane, the neck, and on the horse’s ears where the black paint is missing or was not overpainted. The image was drawn and painted on a white plaster background with an “*a secco*” technique, which is usual for the site with a few exceptions.¹⁷

The horse’s bridle is elaborately ornamented with a band of geometric elements. These red-rendered elements, distinguished from one another by a line, consist of two rectangles lying over each other while sharing a side, thus creating friezes of “doors” (a pattern also employed in Persepolis).¹⁸ As already noted in previous publications,¹⁹ the colour red was possibly used in the paintings of Akchakhan-kala to represent gold or gilded ornaments (and/or jewels, but not exclusively, as for instance shown by the garments of the colossal gods). Thus, considering existing cases of ancient horses’ bridles decorated with gold elements, along with this possible association of red with fine decoration in the wall paintings of the site, we may suppose that the headstall of the painted horse was intended as a precious one.²⁰

Almost all the elements that constitute, even today, the basic set of straps of a horse’s bridle – the snaffle bridle – are attested in this Chorasmian depiction: crownpiece, browband (i.e., the strap that goes across the forehead), throatlatch, cheekpiece and nose band²¹ (*Fig. 7*). As the lower part of the horse’s muzzle is

15. On the use of this colour in the wall paintings of Akchakhan-kala, see YAGODIN *et al.* 2009, p. 9.

16. MINARDI 2018, p. 108-113 with references.

17. MINARDI *et al.* 2018; MINARDI 2018, p. 110-112 with references.

18. This is a very ancient and simple non-Hellenistic pattern, recurrent, for instance, in some chlorite artefacts from Jiroft (Kerman area). It is also found as decorative pattern on the garments of several individual represented in the Apadana reliefs (see e.g. TILIA 1972, figs. 8, 139-141, and 147).

19. BETTS *et al.* 2016, p. 128, 133.

20. Cf. e.g. Sarmatian horse harness held in the Azov Museum (SCHILTZ 2001, p. 206-207, no. 232). Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* I. III, 3 (“horse with gold studded bridle”).

21. The Chorasmian nose band does not seem to be a *psalion*.

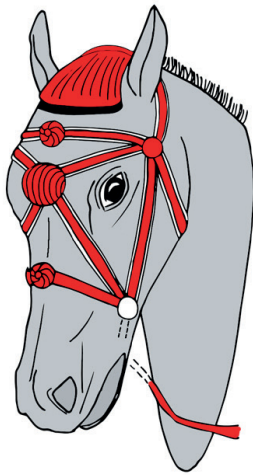


Fig. 7– Reconstructive sketch of the bridle gear of the Akchakhan-kala’s “blue horse” (Minardi).

lost, we have lost information regarding the bit and its attachment to the bridle and the reins. The reins partially survive in two portions of the fragment. It does not seem that this Chorasmian horse wears a chin piece, a practice instead customary, for instance, for the Greeks.²² The arrangement of the headstall of the “blue horse” also differs from the one employed centuries earlier by the Achaemenids, which very often also lacked the browband.²³ However, trappings not dissimilar to those of the Akchakhan-kala example are illustrated in some Persepolitan bas-reliefs of the Apadana depicting horses lead by some western delegations (no. 6 and also nos. 19 and 22).²⁴ On the other hand, the “Sogdian delegation” (no. 17) has horses with trappings quite similar to those employed by the Achaemenids (without browband), while the horses of the delegation of the *Sakā tigraxaudā* have trappings matching those of the Persian royal horses.

The element that most differentiates this specimen of Chorasmian bridle from all the above examples is the thick circular *prometopidion* (forehead ornament) attached to straps running diagonally across the horse’s head below the browband. These two crossing straps, and their *prometopidion*, are the most prominent element of the headstall of the “blue horse”. Two other roundels, smaller than the *prometopidion* and likewise viewed in profile, additionally decor the upper forehead and the frontal part of the animal’s nose, as they are attached respectively to its browband and noseband. A third roundel, a fully visible flower rosette, is fastened to the harness cross straps (at the junction between crownpiece, throatlatch, browband, cheekpiece with one of the straps that crosses on the animal’s forehead). It is plausible that the design of this latter cross-like rosette, composed of four petals and four rays, was repeated on the two roundels on the browband and noseband which are of similar size. This design is similar to that of the “floral elements within squares” that decorates the precious *akinakes* on

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22. Cf. e.g. the horse head on tetradrachms of Seleucus from Western Asia Minor (PANAGIOTIS and LORBER 2010, fig. 7).
23. E.g. the king’s horses represented in the Apadana of Persepolis (SCHMIDT 1953, pl. 52). Some of the Persian horses in the Alexander Mosaic of the House of the Faun at Pompeii have no chin piece, but all of them (the non-harnessed ones) have brow bands which indicates the perspective of the original artist and his ichnographic repertoire (as noted in BERNARD and INAGAKI 2000, p. 1409-1410).
24. SCHMIDT 1953, Syrians, pl. 32; Skudrians/Thracians, pl. 45 b; Libyans, pl. 48 b; Cf. GROPP 2009, respectively: Lydians, Thracians and Libyans.

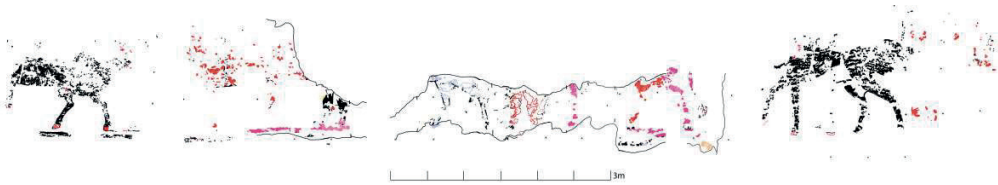


Fig. 8– Field 1:1 tracing of the in situ “procession scene” with partial reconstruction as documented in 2005 (©KAE).



Fig. 9– Detail of a Achaemenid style silver rhyton from the Erebuni Hoard (after TREISTER 2015, fig. 16-1).



Fig. 10– Thracian silver gilt harness ornament from Ravnogor, Bulgaria (after MAZAROV *et al.* 1998, fig. 10).

one (Srōsh/Sraosha), and the domed hat of another, of the colossal Avestan deities of Akchakhan-kala, although without red-painted areas as in the gods.²⁵ Another probably matching rosette, now lost, should have been located at the junction of noseband and cheekpiece.²⁶

25. BETTS *et al.* 2016, pl. 7 (sword); 2015, fig. 5 (hat); *idem* for exhaustive discussion of the motif.

26. Cf. 1st century BC bronze equestrian statuette of Alexander from Herculaneum. Alexander’s steed wears a bridle ornamented with rosettes and a very prominent flower-like *prometopidion*. But this latter is not associated with a “cross system” (see the recent SIANO *et al.* 2017, fig. 44 1b). Similar bulging, albeit plain, *prometopidia*

To this very specific “strap system” with *prometopidion*, we should add the red-rendered element visible in place of the horse’s forelock. Due to its colour, it is not completely clear whether this should be interpreted as the clipped forelock itself – cf. the forelock of two Achaemenid *rhyta* with of horse and horse-and-rider protome from Erebuni (*Fig. 9*)²⁷ – or as a further metal piece attached to the bridle and covering the nuchal crest of the horse. However, just below this red feature there is a series of short vertical black traits which may well be hair. Considering the indication of the horse hair, and the fact that some somewhat earlier Thracian harnesses testify the existence of quite similar ornaments in precious metal (*Fig. 10*),²⁸ the “blue horse” red “cap” may very well represent another component of its headstall. This possible metal *frontail*, together with the cross straps to which is attached the remarkable *prometopidion*, makes the horse iconographically speaking rather unusual: although straps crossing on horses’ noses are not exceptional in Asia, they are quite uncommon and alien to the proper (western) Hellenistic world²⁹ – and their association with a *frontail* is exceptional.³⁰

Similar, albeit not equivalent, strap systems with a crossing on the horses’ foreheads are first attested in the context of the Eurasian steppes: examples comes from Arzhan in Tuva (9th – 7th centuries BC),³¹ in modern Southern Russia in former Scythian territories (5th century BC),³² and perhaps from Greek territories

are also visible on the foreheads of the horses incised on an ivory panel with hunting scene found at Takht-i Sangin (LITVINSKIY and PICHIKIYAN 1981, pl. VII).

27. Both published and analysed in TREISTER 2015.
28. MAZAROV *et al.* 1998, p.132-133 (2nd or 1st century BC). This specimen, here *Fig. 10*, was found with some horse hair still inside its upper part.
29. As already noted by Pfrommer in BOTHMER 1990, p. 191 (although this is clearly not exclusively “a nomadic feature”).
30. See MINCHEV 1983. Also, a small gold applique of unknown provenience (but Hellenistic in style) held in the Miho Museum (<http://www.miho.or.jp/booth/html/artcon/00003461e.htm>), is decorated with an embossed horse promote wearing a headstall with a similar metal *frontail*. This element is additionally associated with cross straps directly attached to it (cf. *infra* note 34). The harness of this toreutic specimen, albeit schematic and uncomplete, is comparable, although somehow different, to the Chorasmian one.
31. BOKOVENKO 2000 with references; according to Bokovenko’s reconstructions (*idem*, figs. 3 and 4) these early examples lack both noseband and browband. On the chronology of Arzhan 1 and 2 barrows, ZAITSEVA *et al.* 2007.
32. MELYUKOVA 1989, p.96-97; see also, MINCHEV 1983, p.317, fig. 11 for a “Scythian” specimen from Ukraine.



Fig. 11 – Bas-relief from the reemployed decoration of a Roman Late Republican tomb (*via Flaminia*, Fossombrone, Italy) depicting a bridle with cross straps (after LUNI 2003, fig. 165, p. 313).



Fig. 12 – Fragment of a Roman Imperial equestrian monument from Suasa, Italy (©The Walters Art Museums).

but certainly from Thrace (late 4th – 3rd century BC).³³ Rare examples (which are typologically closer to the Chorasmian specimen) come also from Central Asia (items from the Oxus Treasure, a plaster cast from Ai Khanoum, and a possibly Bactrian silver rhyton – discussed *infra*). In the Roman world, since at least the late Republican period, we have also comparable horse headstalls with cross straps (Figs. 11-12).³⁴ These diachronic examples, from different contexts, suggest it is unlikely that this way of fashioning the bridle was closely related to technological advancements³⁵ in horse harnessing and that, although the “cross system” might have originated in the steppes, it was thenceforth adopted and re-elaborated in

33. MINCHEV 1983. The authors would like to express their gratitude to A. Minchev for having shared his work with them. Besides the Thracian specimens of actual bridles, examples of cross-straps (but without *prometopidia*) can be seen represented in two toreutic items of Greek craftsmanship found in Thracian territory and published in MAZAROV *et al.* 1998 (nos. 61, Pegasus rhyton; 116, Greek kylix). These examples may actually attest the (rare) adoption of the “cross system” by the Greeks already between the 5th and the 4th century BC.

34. In the Roman examples crossstraps are directly attached to browbands.

35. With perhaps the sole exception of the mentioned very early steppic examples.

different cultural horizons. When cross straps on horses’ foreheads appear in Roman, Thracian and Eastern Hellenistic contexts, they are used in parallel with other and more widely adopted systems, confirming that their implementation was mainly a matter of aesthetics.³⁶ Even within the Chorasmian material culture, the cross straps of the Akchakhan-kala “blue horse” are, so far, an *unicum*³⁷; the other recently discovered painting of horses from Akchakhan-kala differ, as they do not attest such system (*infra*). The same argument is valid for prominent forehead ornaments: well-known early examples come from the *Sakā* world (such as those from the barrows of Pazyryk, of which we have several divergent versions),³⁸ but we have also diachronic cases from Assyria to the Roman west. Hence, considering that the various elements of the horse trappings were quite variable in the 1st century BC – 1st century AD, it is difficult to ascertain whether this very specific horse bridle was chosen to be represented as a matter of aesthetics (a real headstall of such fashion inspired the painter, or the painter wanted to vary its composition to give it “individuality”) or, but it is more difficult to prove, taking into account the prominence of the thick *prometopidion*, for symbolic reasons (*infra*). One may also infer that such specificity in the representation of horse trappings at Akchakhan-kala could have been intended to indicate a specific cultural/regional provenience for the animal – but at the present stage this seems highly conjectural.

The closest, and almost matching, Central Asian *comparandum* for the bridle system of the “blue horse” comes from the excavation of Ai Khanoum: a fragment of plaster casting discovered in the “House of the south-west neighbour” by the *DAFA*, shows a bridled horse viewed in profile (*Fig. 13*).³⁹ The low-relief plaster figure, in a different medium and from a different context, so less flat and more realistic compared to the Chorasmian wall painting, clearly shows the same arrangement of the bridle of the Akchakhan-kala horse: in both cases a browband with additional cross straps passes on the animals’ foreheads, and the bridle rosettes and the *prometopidia* of both specimens are in same position. The difference between these headstalls lies in the decoration of the straps and in the bridle rosettes: in the Ai Khanoum case, the straps are decorated with short

36. And of no chronological significance (PFROMMER 1993, p. 15). As noted by Pfrommer (*ibidem*, with note 94) these trappings were also used (in India) for elephants, as attested by the decoration of some ivory Indian pieces of furniture hoarded in Begram (e.g. HACKIN 1954, fig. 101, also conveniently published in TISSOT 2006, p. 203).

37. In Chorasmia surviving representations of horses in different media are rare. Some wall painting fragments relative to representation of small bridled horses were found at Toprak-kala in the North-west bastion of the “High Palace” (RAPOPORT and NERAZIK 1984, p. 198-199; no images available).

38. E.g. RUDENKO 1970, fig. 114 (second riding outfit from Barrow 5 with *prometopidion* attached to the browband).

39. BERNARD 1971, p. 433-435; LECUYOT *et al.* 2013, p. 69-70, pl. XIV, no. 1040.



Fig. 13– Ai Khanoum, plaster casting of a horse from the “House of the south-west neighbour” (after FRANCFORT *et al.* 2014, p. 75).

parallel lines and the roundels are simply plain disks. The bits and forelocks of the two horses cannot be compared because they are not preserved in either specimen. The Chorasmian horse certainly differs from the Graeco-Bactrian one in its more prominent *prometopidion* and the lack of the additional strap, which in the Bactrian specimen seems to form a vertical link between browband and noseband. Other two objects representing horses wearing similar trappings are: a gold statuette from the Oxus Treasure, with cross straps and a large diamond-shaped forehead ornament (Fig. 14),⁴⁰ and a *rhyton* with horse protome (considered “Parthian” but very likely Graeco-Bactrian) represented with partial trappings including cross straps and forehead ornament.⁴¹ Both objects display more schematic headstalls compared to the Graeco-Bactrian stucco, due to stylistic constraints and differences in media.

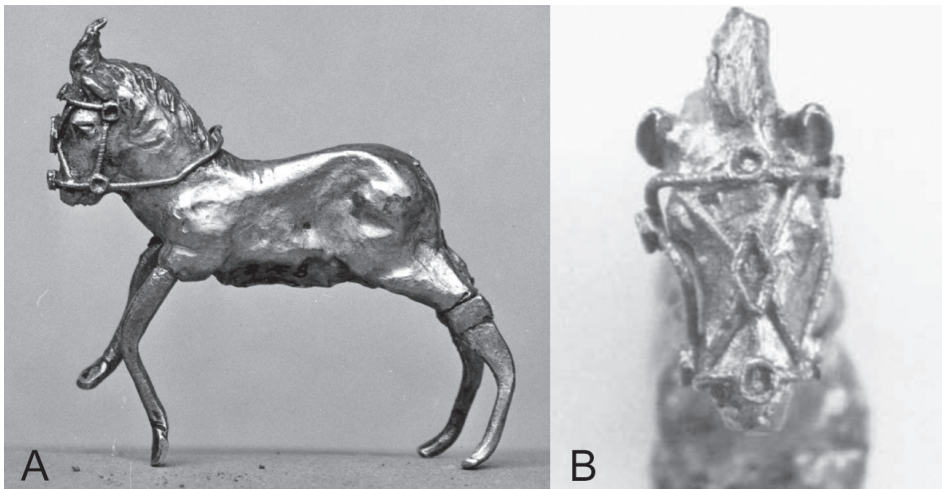


Fig. 14– “Oxus Treasure”, gold statuette of a bridled horse (A: after PFROMMER 1993, fig. 8; B: ©British Museum, acc. no. 123909).

40. In the case of this statuette, the headstall is made of gold wires. The cross straps join the browband, as in the above-mentioned Roman specimens.

41. Pfrommer in BOTHMER 1990, p. 190-191.

The “blue horse” fragment from the western end of the southern corridor was almost certainly part of a complete image of a steed. It was probably also part of a more complex representation which spatially preceded, or was even part of, the “procession scene” of men and horses partially found in situ on the east facade of the southern portion of the western corridor. Although only the lower part of the “procession scene” was preserved at discovery (*Fig. 8*)⁴² it is possible to ascertain that the proportions of the bodies of its horses (the best preserved one, the last of the series, has a height of 1.2 m) match with those of the horses on the new fragments. Thus, the “blue horse’s” head, with a large blank space in front of it, and without traces of a standing rider on its side, very likely belonged to a specimen of another segment of the “procession scene” that, starting from the southern access to the complex, continued round to its western gate – but not beyond because there we find the “portrait gallery” (*Fig. 1*).

The in situ “procession scene”, advancing northward, preserves the clear depiction of three men in trousers going on foot and the five horses with girths which they are guiding, possibly leading (*Fig. 8*).⁴³ In this section of the corridor, we may then suppose the existence of at least five pairs of men/horses. The dismounted riders (or grooms, it is impossible to establish with certitude) do not stand beside the animals, as in the cases of the northern corridor specimens, but they are advancing in front of them. The horses’ colours follow the sequence: black – red – “blue” – red – black, which, in our view, was chosen to create a chromatic contrast and to enhance the decorative effect of the composition at a glance, instead of being a way to enforce, at least in in this case, a symbolic association to colour.⁴⁴ The newly discovered “blue horse’s” head matches the grey-blue colour of the specimen at the centre of the “procession scene” as it is preserved.

The three horses (A, B and C) with “grooms” from the northern corridor

Besides the “procession scene” of the western corridor of the Central Building, and the “blue horse” from the southern one, both probably belonging to a long visual display of horses preceded by grooms, three other new depictions of

42. KIDD 2012 fig. 2 locates the procession erroneously in the norther part of the corridor.

43. This is now certain (cf. KIDD 2012, 72). Likewise, it is almost certain that all the animals depicted were horses (*pace* KIDD 2012, p. 74).

44. *Pace* KIDD 2012, p.81 (cf. e.g. multi-coloured horses in the Assyrian paintings of Til-Barsip or in the painting decoration of the tomb chamber of Tatarli – cf. SUMMERER 2010, p. 158-159, fig. 21 where the horses are blue, black red and white). In the Avesta (*Yt.* VIII. 18-22) Tištrya in the form of a white horse (with golden, shining harness – PANAINO 1990) fights the deva Apaoša, in his turn in the form of a horse but this time black. At Akchakhan-kala this colour dichotomy is absent. Cf. Old Nisa (LIPPOLIS 2011) where colour in architecture (besides perhaps the colour red) did not express any particular symbolism.

equids equally accompanied by “grooms”, were discovered during the excavations of the norther corridor. Unlikely the others, these horses were not shown following their “grooms”, but in an intimate association with them: the “grooms” are standing beside the horses, quite close to their heads. These three pieces will be discussed as: fragment A (AK14 WPs 3 and 4: white horse with red saddle-cloth and “groom”, *Fig. 2*); fragment B (AK17 WP35: white-faced horse with red body and best preserved “groom”, *Fig. 3*); and fragment C (AK17 WP46: red-faced horse with very partially preserved “groom”, *Fig. 4*).

The horses’ heads preserved on fragments A, B and C have the same proportions as the “blue horse”, with a mid-eye level – mouth measure of about 27 cm. Unlike the “procession scene” and the “blue horse”, the figures on B and C are looking in the opposite direction to those of fragment A. Fragment A was found still in situ, attached to the inner (south) wall of the initial (western) part of the northern corridor, so that its horse and “groom” looked eastward. As a result, we know that fragment A represents the start of the decoration of the southern wall of the northern corridor when entered from the western one. Moreover, as with the “blue horse” and the “procession scene”, its images followed a clock-wise route departing from the south gate of the building (while the “portraits” do not seem to indicate direction). Consequently, excluding for the moment an improbable but not impossible juxtaposition of images on the same (south) wall, the imagery displayed on B and C, should have originally been on the opposite wall (north) of the passage, mirroring that of A, and sharing with it the same direction toward the east. As some framed depictions of anthropomorphic busts with heads in profile – unpublished additions to the “portrait gallery” of the northern section of the western corridor – come from the same excavation area of fragments A-C (i.e. the northern corridor), the existence of an upper register with “portraits” above the horses seems also very possible.

Fragment A (reconstructed from two pieces) is the largest of the three (*ca.* 1.7 m in maximum length).⁴⁵ It shows the upper portion of the body of a white horse from tail to throat, with a “groom” standing in line with its breast. Although the head of this horse is the poorest preserved of the three, on the other hand, the fragment is the only one showing the upper body of a Chorasman steed with associated gear. Like the “blue horse”, horse A is bridled. A segment of its pair of reins (one rein is leading to the invisible side of the animal), outlined in black against the plain white plaster background, together with part of the cheekpiece of the bridle, also black outline on white, are clearly visible. Nothing further can be seen of the headstall, but that it seems that the “groom” is not holding the horse by the reins. Most remarkably, the painting shows a red saddle cloth covering the back of the horse. Considering that the horses of the western corridor “procession scene” have girths, and that horse A has a bridle and reins, this cloth might be a saddle with saddle cover. The saddle cover is painted in a solid deep

45. In consequence, from nose to tail the horse length should be about 1.85 m.

red colour (cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII. 3. 12) and is decorated with vertical stripes and a spiral-shaped feature in its lowest preserved portion. This decorative element is unfortunately barely readable, but we may assume that it was intended to depict embroideries and perhaps suggest that the saddle cover was made of felt. This confirms that the horses of the northern corridor were riderless, and so that the “grooms”, for their position, might very well be their unmounted riders. A Chorasmio-Aramaic painted epigraph runs above the saddle (not yet deciphered). As with the “blue horse”, the lower part of the cheek of horse A is covered with hair (rendered by short black traits), and as the head is flexed forward, the folds of the neck are prominent and thus clearly shown in the image by its painter. A circular feature visible below the reins may be a part of the unfortunately missing bit.

In fragment B the bit is preserved. Fragment B shows a white-faced red horse (the cheek clearly discriminates between the white face and the red body), with red lower lip and nostril. The ears and forehead, which are not very clearly visible in the current pre-restoration state of the fragment, seem also to be painted in solid red.⁴⁶ This fragment is the richest in details, and is the only one in which the horse’s muzzle and mouth are preserved as well as its bit. The headstall has white straps outlined in black, decorated with red roundels/rosettes. Unlike the bridle of the “blue horse” with its characteristic cross-straps, horse B has a more common snaffle bridle, also without a chin piece. Horse B also lacks the prominent *prometopidion* of the “blue horse”. Its bit, as far as it is possible to describe, is shown in black (so, apparently, not made of precious metal). It seems to be characterised by an elongated symmetrically dovetail-shaped cheek-piece(s) connected to the horse headgear by two diagonal stripes (one visible – thus we may assume departing from two loops in the cheekpiece). A black round element, partially visible below the cheekpiece, should be the mouthpiece (visible because the horse has an open mouth?). How the reins (and apparently the bearing reins or a martingale – see *infra*) were connected to this bit is, at this stage, unclear. We may evidently suppose the presence (but not yet ascertainable) of rein rings (a fragment of one is visible in horse A). The “groom” of horse B is the best preserved of all three (*infra*). Traces of a painted Chorasmian epigraph in Aramaic script, emerging from a painting layer overlaid by the horse, are visible from the horse’s cheek to the limit of the fragment to the right (*Fig. 3*).

Fragment C shows the head of a seemingly fully red-coloured horse with a red hogged (?) mane. Possibly only the horse’s head was rendered in red, whilst its body was in white, but this is difficult to determine at present. The tips of the horse’s ears are visible, and its eye is partially preserved. Although most of

46. This horse is thus bi-colour. It might be possible that the artists wanted to depict a specimen with the specific marking of a white face horse, adding to the variety of the horses of Akchakhan-kala, which are blue, red, black, white or yellow. Otherwise we might speculate that the body was artificially coloured with purple, but this seems unlikely as the other two horses from the same area are entirely white, and apparently entirely red, and without an obvious inner hierarchy.



Fig. 15– Heraios, silver tetradrachm
(©CNG 90 Lot-879).



Fig. 16– Neo-Assyrian relief from Nineveh,
detail of fragment
(©MET Acc. no. 32.143.18).

the muzzle is not preserved, the animal seems to wear a snaffle bridle similar to that of horse B, with white straps outlined in black and roundels decorated with red rosettes. The “groom” is very poorly preserved, only recognizable due to the presence of the feathers of the bird protome on his/her headgear. As with fragment B, again traces of a painted epigraph visible in front of the horse belong to an under-layer of painting.

The three anthropomorphic figures displayed in A-C, up to now referred as to “grooms”, are evidently closely associated with their mounts. They are standing alongside the animals and, as shown by the better-preserved one of the group, B, they are holding them from some straps that might not be reins. In fragment A, a pair of reins are evidently discernible as passing around the neck of the white horse, and judging from fragment B, where the “groom” is visibly grasping with both hands an additional strap running vertically, departing from the reins (but oddly not from the bit and in front of his/her body), the “grooms” seem not to hold their steeds by the reins, but from an additional element of their harness. This additional element could be a martingale (also known as *tiedown*). However, the reins visible in fragment A, and the red reins on the “blue horse” – which seem short and taut⁴⁷ – might instead be bearing reins (or checkreins), sharing their purpose with that of a martingale. If this was the case, the “grooms” would then hold the horse by the reins. Only the full restoration of the fragments would help to answer to this question and to give us more precise indications of the device chosen. It is, however, clear that these Chorasmian horses were forced to lower their necks and to carry their heads tucked in through a device such as a martingale or a bearing rein.⁴⁸

47. But this might also be due to a non-naturalistic representation.

48. And the many folds on their necks seem to confirm this. A black-glazed ceramic rhyton with horse protome from the eastern Chorasmia site of Kalalāy-gūr 2, wearing

H.-P. Francfort recently discussed these particular elements of the horse harness.⁴⁹ He believes that such devices had originated among the horse riders of the steppes and that afterwards spread into Bactriana and Gandhāra thanks to the arrival of Yuezhi and Sakās (*Fig. 15*). According to Francfort, these devices were required by their type of warfare. The martingale and the *fausse martingale* were then widely adopted by horsemen in the Eastern Hellenistic milieu, while there is no evidence relative to Parthia and Mesopotamia.⁵⁰ Yet, the Neo-Assyrians already used a kind of bearing rein (*Fig. 16*).⁵¹ As noted by Francfort, horses (but also other animals) controlled by martingales and bearing reins are recurrent in the iconography of Gandhāra (*Fig. 17*).⁵² The vicinity of Chorasmia to the steppes might explain the origin of the use of the martingale and/or the bearing rein at Akchakhan-kala (if we consider the depictions of this gear on the wall paintings as “descriptive”).

It is at this point important to observe that the “grooms” in fragments A, B and C are almost exact replicas of the series of busts seen in profile, also known as the “portraits”, discovered in the northern section of the western corridor⁵³ and in the same northern one. These figures, with their black, neck-length, bulging hair, large elongated black eyes, solid-red ears and lips, are undoubtedly, and remarkably, the same characters. The only difference, apart from the non-negligible fact that they have now, so to speak, left their frames to be fully developed figures, is that they are somewhat smaller and livelier and no more strictly bi-dimensional. They are still wearing the characteristic over-developed red torques with zoomorphic terminals, with the addition of what seem to be womanly spiral armlets on their wrists.⁵⁴ They are even sporting the very specific headgear decorated with bird *protomai* found in some of the “portraits” (*Fig. 18*). Only the presence or absence of earrings is yet uncertain. However, the torques worn on their necks, unlike those

full, albeit schematic, trappings, might also bear a martingale (or a similar device as discussed – VAÏNBERG 2004, pl. 10 a). The horse protome is preserved only in its upper part but it still shows additional straps besides the reins. This specimen is probably an import from the Greek world (as observed in MINARDI 2015, p. 95 and fig. 31 A). Considering the possible depiction of this particular element, the rhyton may have come to Chorasmia from an Eastern Hellenistic milieu.

49. FRANCFORT 2011, p. 309-316.

50. FRANCFORT 2011, p. 316.

51. Or proto-martingale?

52. See examples illustrated in FACCENNA and FILIGENZI 2007, p. 269-270.

53. YAGODIN *et al.* 2009 (location of fragments detailed at p. 30, fig. 4).

54. Cf. wall painting fragment from Toprak-kala depicting a female character wearing a red spiral armlet (TOLSTOV 1948, fig. 51, colour drawing). For a detail of one of the finals of these torques, see MINARDI 2016, p. 176, fig. 6.

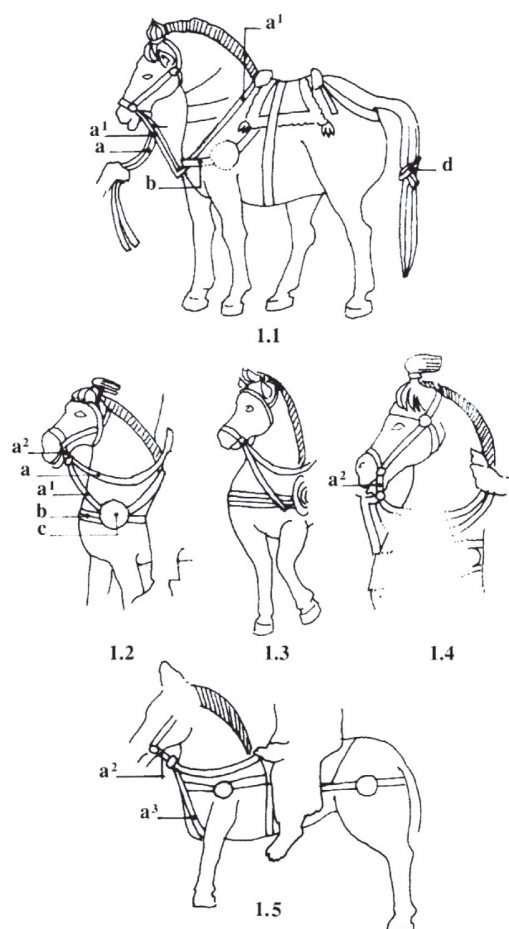


Fig. 17— Examples of depictions of reins (a), checkreins (a1) and martingales (a3) in Gandhāran reliefs (detail after FACCENNA and FILIGENZI 2007, p. 270, pl. 203).

in all the “portraits”, are not partly covered by their soft clothes. In the case of B, and very likely in that of A, the “grooms” are not wearing the usual caftan worn by the figures in the “portraits”, but what seems to be armour, albeit apparently not the heavy one of a cataphract. This is suggested by the red circle (i.e., a breast disk) at the centre of the four red straps worn by “groom” B, which are associated with a series of black square-shaped scales.⁵⁵ The scales (or small plates?) are preserved on the body of the figure, between his two hands, while the arms seem unprotected; unfortunately the lower part of the figure is missing. This type of armour finds its closest *comparanda* with those represented in several contemporary reliefs of Gandhāra (Fig. 19).⁵⁶

Ultimately, we are now able to specify that the beardless “grooms” of the northern corridor were painted with the intention of representing warriors, very likely dismounted horsemen. Some elements of their representation,

55. Although further cleaning of the piece is necessary, the breast-disk with four straps is evident, and cannot be mistaken for a mantle or a coat closed by a disk-shaped fibula (cf. e.g. ROSENFELD 1967, fig. 23, Kushan specimen from Mathura). It is also unclear if this supposedly mail-coat with small scales (?) is worn above some other garment.
56. See examples in FACCENNA and FILIGENZI 2007, p. 171 (no. 1), 219 (nos. 1 and 4), p. 220 (no. 2) – all drawings. For pictures of the specimens from Saidu Sharif I, dating to the mid-1st century AD, see FACCENNA 2001, tabs. 36, 55 (d), 114; see also CALLIERI and FILIGENZI 2002, No. 115, p. 129 (pl. VIII). A 3rd/4th century AD fragment of stone relief found in Kara-tepe, Termez, now held at the Institute of Archaeology of Samarkand, similarly depicts a human figure (headless and limbless) wearing a scale armour with breast disk and its four straps (ABDULLAEV 2014, p. 109, fig. 101). A similar breast disk is also part of the protective gear that Ardašīr I wears in his triumphal relief at Fīrūzābād (about 224 AD). Unlike from his father, Šāpur, in the well-known cameo of the *Cabinet des Médailles*, wears it without a coat of mail or armour (this is the “apezak”, with the lower straps horizontally placed around the chest, also sported by the Sassanid kings as “royal hunters”).



Fig. 18– Akchakhan-kala, photograph of a wall painting fragment part of the “portrait gallery” of the western corridor of the Central Building (©KAE).



Fig. 19– Two fragments of mid-1st century AD Gandhāran relief from the main stupa of Saidu Sharif I depicting warriors (A: after FACCENNA 2001, tab. 36; B: *idem*, tab. 114, b).

[erratum: B: from Butkara I, second half of the 1st – 2nd cent. AD]

such as the martingale, or checkrein, of their horses, and the type of armour worn by them, find their closest affinities with the iconography or gear from the Hellenised south, in the specific case of the martingale with a supposed “*Sakā*” origin. The presence of these elements in the imagery of Akchakhan-kala, so far unique in Chorasmia, might very well have been caused by the artistic language used by the artists at work at the site, but unlikely those who worked at the horses were foreigners (*infra*). It is, for the moment, rather difficult instead to track them back to a common “steppic background” between Chorasmians and Indo-Sakās.

2. The spatial and semantic relation between the parades and the royal “portraits” of the perimetral corridor of the Central Building

It is worth repeating that Akchakhan-kala was the seat of a king with dynastic ambitions. This is indicated, among other evidence, by painted epigraphs, some of

them apparently contemporary with the “portraits”, which were discovered in the northern and western corridors (at the two extremities of the latter), mentioning a king and a partial royal genealogy.⁵⁷ A new datum, which still need to be evaluated, is that painting fragments B and C from the northern corridor overlay some of these epigraphs, part of which, then, might belong to a previous sub-stage of the complex.

As we have seen, the individuals accompanying the white, red and white, and red horses of the northern corridor were not portrayed as walking in front of the animals: unlike those of the “procession scene” they were standing (or walking) alongside them. Further, they visually match the characteristics of the “portraits” while the grooms of the “procession scene” (who apparently wore trousers and boots) are only preserved in their lower parts. The “portraits”, i.e. supposedly busts of gender-neutral (?) characters wearing diadems and other regalia, have been already interpreted as idealized representations of royal ancestors⁵⁸ or/and as female representation of the multitude of the *Fravašis/Frauuāšis*.⁵⁹ As the “procession” appears in the southern part of the western corridor, the gallery of “ancestors”, which was displayed on the walls of the northern section of the western corridor (and in the northern one), spatially separated two different clusters of imagery. Certainly, this separation ought to have been also ideological, as the imagery of these spaces constituted a coherent visual programme of high significance, intertwined with concepts such as kingship and religion.

Visual and formal elements

The mural art of Akchakhan-kala about the beginning of our era was original, with unique traits such as its “archaizing” iconographic elements—possibly, but this is hard to prove, coming from its foundational past⁶⁰ – with the addition of some contributions from the Eastern Hellenistic milieu of Asia, including a developed painting technique.⁶¹ These Eastern Hellenistic stimuli can be easily distinguished within the Chorasmian material culture due to the fact that the polity remained outside the sphere of influence of the Greeks in the east (from Alexander to the Seleucids and the Graeco-Bactrians) thus entering the Eastern Hellenistic

57. BETTS *et al.* 2016, p. 136-137.

58. BETTS *et al.* 2016.

59. MINARDI 2018, p. 122-126. While, very unlikely, they are “attendants, similar to the staircase figures on the Persepolis Apadana” (KIDD 2012, p. 83).

60. For further details, see MINARDI 2020a. Perhaps implemented, because traditional, only on sacred and sacred-related imagery.

61. MINARDI 2016a; 2016c; 2018.

milieu of Asia in only the 2nd century AD, in parallel with the firm establishment of Kushan power.⁶²

The style of the new Akchakhan-kala fragments is quite original and, certainly, what has been already written about the “portraits” applies also to the new “grooms”. We may now add, that the artists at work on the extensive visual programme of the site, clearly following strict directives and a pre-arranged plan,⁶³ took out from their frames some of the “portraits” giving them life in association with magnificent and assorted horses (or perhaps, vice-versa, they framed the walking figures). Generally speaking, the two Akchakhan-kala displays of horses and men have not much of a Hellenistic flavour (especially the in situ fragment with grooms wearing trousers and, perhaps, boots). For this reason, always bearing in mind the historical and religious context of the paintings, and considering the lack of mounted personages and cavalrymen, Persepolis comes naturally to mind as a possible generic iconographic comparison. But the imagery of the fragments, unlike other pieces of mural painting unearthed at Akchakhan-kala, such as the colossal Avestan gods or the red ibex from the western area (*Fig. 1*), lack those reminiscences of much earlier Achaemenid archetypes. While the Chorasmian figures of the two parades are bi-dimensional, lacking both of any trace of Hellenistic naturalism and of that Greek “manneristic” style found in the *ketos* high-relief from the Altar Area,⁶⁴ they, however, respect, in a lesser-than-real scale, real proportions, which is a datum that can be related to an Eastern Hellenistic input.⁶⁵ The horses’ plain ears, where visible, both represented bowed toward the front, in contrast with the rest of the animals’ heads, which are viewed fully in profile, display a “pointed horn” design which can be compared with some numismatic representations of horses in contemporary early-Kushan/

62. MINARDI 2018; 2020b.

63. MINARDI 2018.

64. It is sufficient to compare the Chorasmian steed with the approximately contemporary modelled and painted horses from the early-Kushan site of Khalchayan to notice it (PUGACHENKOVA 1971, p. 69, see in particular the first horse with tuft forelock and thin muzzle). The Chorasmian “blue horse” lacks any of those clearly Greek formal elements found in some contemporary material from the site, such as the clay high-relief of a *ketos* (MINARDI 2016a). It is, however, interesting to notice that the mane of the Chorasmian horses seem trimmed as that of some of the horses depicted in the relief of Persepolis (although these have an upright forelock) and as Heraios’ steed on his numismatic portrait (here, *Fig. 15*).

65. This does not occur in Persepolis, as recently remarked by FRANCFORT and LEPETZ 2010. The Chorasmian horses are, however, big specimens, considering the animal/man ratio of the paintings under consideration.

Kushan coinage.⁶⁶ Yet, the flatness of the horses contrasts with the painter's timid effort to give some depth to the body of horseman B: his/her right arm and right shoulder are completely visible, whereas, of the left side, only the hand and the wrist can be seen. And while the rider's body is viewed almost in a three-quarter position, his/her head is seen in full profile looking upward. Other elements that might be related to the influence of an Eastern-Hellenistic environment are the type of bit used for horse B (seemingly different from Achaemenid, *Sakā* and early Hellenistic specimens), the metal bridle frontlet worn by the "blue horse" (as far as we know, to be found, possibly through archaeological accident, only in Thracia), and perhaps its whole cross-strap system with its closest parallel found in Ai Khanoum (but our sample is not large enough). In the in situ "procession" the horses were represented advancing with a raised front leg. Iconographically speaking, this does not appear in the arts of pre-Hellenistic Asia and so this is a *stilema* coming from a Hellenized environment.⁶⁷ Finally, the armour worn by the rider of fragment B (and likely A) confirms that, even if the parades of the Apadana might be used as iconographic comparison/archetype, in Chorasmia we are witnessing something entirely different: there are no warriors wearing armour at Persepolis, and judging from the remains at our disposal, no offerings were brought forward in the Chorasmian paintings, but only the horses by their grooms and by some dismounted riders.

An additional unpublished fragment of wall painting, very possibly depicting another element of the Chorasmian horse harness, which may belong to one of the animals of the western corridor parade, also seems to be a western-originated formal element (*Fig. 20*). This fragment was found in the southern portion of the western corridor in collapse from the wall illustrating the procession (*Fig. 1*). It displays a red, white and black-decorated roundel attached to white straps bordered by black on a yellow background. It is, in all probability, the representation of a *phalera* located at the shoulder junction of the breast and shoulder straps of a yellow horse.⁶⁸ The *phalera* is decorated with an elaborate motive of pointed and

66. Cf. "Heraios" type (when clearly visible), mid/late 1st century BC; cf. Lohrasp's horse on Kanishka's gold dinars. Cf. also a fragment of wall painting from the "Parthian Palace" of Assur (ANDRAE and LENZEN 1933, tab. 61c).

67. As noted in KIDD 2012, p. 76, 82. Minardi (2018) doubts the "links already identified with the Parthian world" and the fact that the style of the Chorasmian paintings from Akchakhan-kala can be merely described as "syncretic". On the historical background and on the relation of Chorasmia with Hellenistic Central Asia highlighted by the Akchakhan-kala's evidence, see MINARDI 2018 with literature; see also MINARDI *et al.* 2018.

68. Such *phalerae* are attested within the Chorasmian material culture: two "pilgrim flasks" (VAINBERG 2004, p. 229-230, figs. 7/14 and 7/15) and a carved horn (*idem*, p. 186, fig. 5/24) from the east Chorasmia site of Kalalāy-gūr 2 display horses with plain/schematic *phalerae* at their shoulder junctions. Also, at Koī-krŷlgan-kala (TOLSTOV and VAINBERG 1967, p. 203, fig. 75, no. 6) another fragment of such ceramic



Fig. 20– Akchakhan-kala, wall painting fragment with horse *phalera* and straps (©KAE).

ribbed leaves, alternating with other plain foliage and encompassed by a spirally wrapped red band, i.e. it consists of a clear local re-interpretation of a Hellenistic leaf calyx composition.⁶⁹

We may additionally infer that, at this stage of development of Chorasmian mural art, some of the artists operating at the site were still experimenting with naturalistic observation.⁷⁰ If, for instance, we look at the Akchakhan-kala horses' eyes, we can see the difference between the large odd-shaped one of the “blue horse” and the others: this is certainly due to the difficulty of representing the unique cross-straps on its forehead. The headstalls of the other horses, less complex (and perhaps more common in real life), did not create any such issue.

canteens displays a charging rider wearing a pointed hat on a horse with a *tamga* in the place of a *phalera*.

69. Cf. e.g. PFROMMER 1993, p. 124, no. 8 (1st century BC); CARTER 2015, p. 71, cat. 6 (late 3rd to early 2nd century BC); p. 184, cat. 42 (1st century BC) and p. 188, cat. 44 (2nd century BC). All datings according to authors.

70. Besides the fact that different hands using different techniques were employed in the decoration of the monument. These craftsmen might have been locals, as argued in MINARDI 2018.

Actually, the whole head of the “blue horse” is peculiar; less veristic than the others. In sum, it seems possible to affirm that, unlike other painted works from Akchakhan-kala that largely or completely borrowed – such is the case of the *ketos* – from other cultural horizons, or that show iconographic echoes from the past transmitted through models (*i.e.*, the ibex), its horses and grooms are quite original in style and somehow in their iconography: they are stiff and hieratic, characterized by the absence of “archaizing” formal elements but attesting several Eastern Hellenistic inputs.

The horses, along with their grooms and dismounted riders/warriors, were clearly the dominant figures of the western half (the only fully excavated part) of the circumambulation pathway of the Central Building, in connection with the many “portraits”. The horsemen of the northern corridor are also intimately associated with these “portraits”. Considering that the function of Akchakhan-kala as a royal and (pre-Sasanian) Zoroastrian local, royal ceremonial centre is proven, it is in this precise context that the procession scenes with riderless and groomed horses, and that with dismounted warriors wearing *regalia* and bringing forth their animals, must have had a very specific meaning. Unlike, for instance, the much earlier representations of Persepolis (where the similarly non-narrative delegations are continuous although divided in sections, and mostly composed by men, sometimes accompanied by different animals, guards etc.), at Akchakhan-kala we currently have two series of horses and men, which are part of the same visual programme notwithstanding their being spatially, but not semantically disconnected. These two groups are interrupted by the space reserved for the “portrait gallery”, which is also surprisingly attested in the northern corridor in spatial association with fragments A-C. These data may lead to the dismissal of the idea of the corridor parade(s) of horses and men as a representation of offerings by foreign delegations/inner Chorasmian vassals to the king of Akchakhan-kala, unless we would consider the horses themselves as the sole royal gifts as in an exchange within the elite, leaving without explanation the *caesura* given by the royal “portraits” of dead ancestors and their presence in the northern corridor.⁷¹

3. Discussion and implications

Before the discovery of fragments A-C, the closest iconographic parallel for the very partially preserved “procession scene” was with a seven/eight-hundred-

71. Cf. Xenophon, *Anabasis* I.2, 27: the gift-package bestowed by Persian kings consists in a horse with a gold-mounted bridle, a gold necklace and bracelets, a gold *akinakes* and a Persian robe. All these elements are now present at Akchakhan-kala – *i.e.* those elements are represented in the depictions of the gods, the “portraits” and the horse parade but without an official representation of their bestowal as in Persepolis. As already noted, offerings, besides horses (if this was the case) are currently unattested within the complex scene from the corridor of the Central Building.

year more recent painting found in an aristocratic residence in Sector XXIV/2 of the city of Pendjikent, Sogdiana. There, on the walls of the eastern vestibule/access corridor of the building, paintings illustrated a series of horses presented by grooms moving toward a main seated figure. This Late Antique Sogdian parade does not seem to be representing a sacrifice-connected procession, but a secular one.⁷²

Could the two groups of horses and men of Akchakhan-kala similarly be seen as the representation of the king’s private stud of horses⁷³ and/or as a symbolic representation of his prowess in warfare? If that was the case, the men walking in front of the horses of the “procession scene” could be the king’s aides (so that the horses might be a representation of the wealth of the monarch – or even war booty?), and the dismounted cavalymen of the northern corridor might be (peculiarly young and beardless) knights in a military roster prelude to battle. But, as already remarked, these beardless warriors are equivalent to the royal figures of the “portraits”, which additionally break the continuum of the two different displays. Further, the case of the Pendjikent building seems too secular to be directly compared with a ceremonial setting such as that of the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala, where royal legitimization, propaganda and religion were intertwined notions. Likewise, interpreting this display as that of an extensive funerary procession within the Central Building, it would be rather out of context: there is no evidence, and actually no reason, to relate this Chorasmian monument in a (non-Hellenized) Zoroastrian setting to any such rituals. Finally, considering that the “riderless horse” theme seems to be the focus of the visual programme of this sector of the Central Building, even though associated with the “portraits”, it might be more plausible to link this imagery to animal sacrifice.⁷⁴ But other solutions may also be considered.

It is well-known that sacrificial horses, sumptuously bridled and riderless such as those of Akchakhan-kala, are recurrently represented in later Sogdian imagery from Central Asia and China.⁷⁵ This imagery has been related to sacrifice in honour of the dead, and more specifically, in some cases, in honour of the royal ancestors through Mithra.⁷⁶ We also know that sacrificial horses voted to Mithra

72. BELENITSKI 1980, p. 120 (as already noted in KIDD 2012, p. 80).

73. Cf. e.g. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII. 3. 16 “Next-came Cyrus’s private stud of horses, about two hundred in all, led along with gold-mounted bridles and covered over with embroidered housings”.

74. On this hypothesis, already KIDD 2012 with references.

75. MARSHAK 1994; GRENET and BOPEARACHCHI 1999, p. 76-78; see also RIBOUD 2003.

76. GRENET and BOPEARACHCHI 1999, p. 77-78.

existed at the time of Cyrus the Younger, that they were paraded by the prince⁷⁷ and that, to honour the memory of Cyrus the Great, a horse was sacrificed yearly at Pasargadae by the magi.⁷⁸ Horses were also slain in honour of water divinities.⁷⁹ If sacrificial horses are represented at Akchakhan-kala, their numbers, compared to these examples, would be remarkable (albeit not unmanageable in a funerary context).⁸⁰ In the Avesta only two *Yashts* (V. 21; IX. 3) mention the sacrifice of one hundred horses – along with a thousand cattle and ten thousand sheep – performed by a legendary king in offering to *Anāhitā* and to *Druvāspā*.

If we consider Akchakhan-kala as a whole, and excluding its implausible relation to the funerary sphere, the presence of the Central Monument of the site might help in the reading of its imagery. The Central Monument, standing high at the centre of the Upper Enclosure of the site, was certainly used for specific public outdoors ceremonies, and it was a monumental structure spatially and ideologically connected with the Ceremonial Complex.⁸¹ Thus, the parades painted on the corridors of the Central Building may very well be related to Zoroastrian seasonal festivals, which occurred in this architectonic context, such as the *Nowrūz* and the *Mihragān* or the *Frawardīgān*, immediately preceding the *Nowrūz*.⁸² We would expect a richer illustration of the complexity of any of such festivals,⁸³ but

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77. As already noted in GRENET and BOPEARACHCHI 1998, p. 77. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII. 3. 12: “Next after the bulls came horses, a sacrifice for the Sun; and after them came a chariot sacred to Zeus; it was drawn by white horses and with a yoke of gold and wreathed with garlands; and next, for the Sun, a chariot drawn by white horses and wreathed with garlands like the other. After that came a third chariot with horses covered with purple trappings, and behind it followed men carrying fire on a great altar”. Several small gold ex voto (figurines, gold sheet cut-outs and plaques) depicting horses are part of the Oxus Treasure where they are seldom standing-alone depictions as more often related to models/representations of chariots, riders etc.
78. BOYCE 1982, p. 70-71 with references.
79. In Ancient Chorasmia the deified river Oxus seems to have been object of worship (MINARDI 2016a with references). Among the Sogdians, the Oxus itself could have been represented in his horse manifestation (RIBOUD 2003, p. 153-154; GRENET 2007, p. 470 – if the same relief does not show instead a horse sacrifice to the river, cf. Herodotus VII, 113).
80. E.g. in Berel’ (Altai) thirteen horses were sacrificed for a single tomb (LEPETZ 2013).
81. MINARDI and KHOZHANIYAZOV 2015; MINARDI 2016b.
82. As noted by GRENET 2010. The *prometopidion* of the horse, created by concentric circles, may be linked in with solar symbolism. On the six *gāhānbār* of the Chorasmians, Bīrunī XI, 30-44 (Sachau 1879, p. 15).
83. Unless our “parades” were meant to illustrate only a sequence or single key episodes, such as a great sacrifice (or even a horse competition: in Parthian Iran a horse race was performed during *Nowrūz*, as noted in BOYCE 1999).

we should keep in mind that ancient representations of these events are virtually non-existent⁸⁴, and that only less than a half of the perimetral corridor of the Central Building has been excavated. Only further work will positively enrich the complexity of its imagery and help us to understand it more in detail.

For the moment, however, the available evidence allows us to formulate some more specific hypotheses. If the “portraits” of the western and northern corridors – the multitude of framed beardless human busts wearing regalia such as diadems and tiaras or coronets – were intended to represent the clan/royal ancestors of the ruling dynasty of Akchakhan-kala, we could accordingly postulate a relation between the equids and sacrifices in their honour, especially considering that the dismounted warriors of the northern corridor are the same beardless characters, wearing the same exact paraphernalia. Would, in this case, the royal ancestors be represented in the act of “accepting” a sacrifice? On the other hand, if we accept M. Minardi’s more specific working hypothesis on the identifications of these figures with the multitude of the Fravašis⁸⁵ – i.e. the collective souls of the ancestors, and part of every men pre-existing soul, characterized by a heroic and warrior like aspect related to an ancient Iranian cult of the ancestors as heroes⁸⁶ – another scenario might be also contemplated. In *Yt.* XIII. 29 the Fravašis are said to be “[...] *les puissantes qui demeurent silencieuses, aux beaux yeux, au regard énergique, à l’ouïe fine* [...]”⁸⁷ and these are features that match with the characteristic red mouths, peculiar solid-red coloured ears and big eyes of the Chorasmian “portraits” otherwise, until now, left unexplained.⁸⁸

84. If not for the 7th century AD Sogdian imagery from Afrāsiāb’s “Hall of the Ambassadors” (on the debated interpretation of this mural, conveniently see COMPARETI 2011 with references).

85. MINARDI 2018, p. 123-126. Minardi proposes a different interpretation relative to the second colossal god from the columned hall of the building depicted as sustaining the heavens (*idem*, p. 126-127). In his hypothesis, this deity might be seen as Tīštrya instead of a collective representation of the Fravašis (cf. BETTS *et al.* 2015, p. 1392).

86. GNOLI 1990; BOYCE 2000a; GIGNOUX 2001, p. 16-18; see also KELLENS 2016, p. 137-149 with references.

87. LECOQ 2016; Cf. MALANDRA 2018: “[...] who are powerful, abide in silence, have good eyes, are keen-eyed, attentive [...]”.

88. About the peculiar red-coloured ears of the “portraits”, it might be objected that there are not many elements of comparison for this feature even within the same corpus of wall paintings from Akchakhan-kala. Thus, it might be possible that this unique characteristic was, more in general, a sign of distinction among the elite. On the other hand, the image of the god Srōsh, as well as those of the “bird-priests” on his garment, and the representations of enthroned kings on the dress of the second colossal god (as well as the numismatic portraits of Chorasmian kings), do not even display ears which then, we may assume, were not a feature always necessary to highlight or an essential sign of status.

Beside the fact that (pre-Sassanian) Zoroastrianism was the faith followed by the kings of Akchakhan-kala, we are certain about the worship of the Fravašis in Chorasmia. First of all, they received a sacrifice in form of libations and food as prescribed in the Avesta.⁸⁹ Bīrunī, introducing the festivals and the calendar of the Chorasmians, generically records that they used to celebrate “the deeds of their ancestors”.⁹⁰ The Khwarezmian scholar, in this passage of his *Chronology*, might have made a reference to the cult of the Fravašis who, however, are explicitly mentioned later at the end of the same chapter: “in the five last days of *Ispandārmajī* and the following five *Epagomenoe* they [the Chorasmians] do the same which the Persians do in *Farwardajān*, i.e. they lay out food in the temples [naus] for the spirits of the dead.”⁹¹ Furthermore, the local name used in Late Antique Chorasmia for the building (called in the archaeological literature “*naus*”, after the word used in Arab sources) that was used to store ossuaries, was *prwrtyk* (*frawartīk*), “house of the Fravašis”.⁹²

It is well-known that in the Avesta, the Fravašis are powerful warriors, wearing, among other pieces of equipment, “armours of iron” (*Yt.* XIII. 45)⁹³. They are invoked in relation to combat (e.g. *Yt.* XIII, 23): they are those “[...] who are to be invoked at blood-baths, who are to be invoked at battles, who are to be invoked at fights”, and (XIII, 24) who give victory to their invoker.⁹⁴ A ritual prelude to battle is certain at *Yt.* XIII, 26-27: the Fravašis “[...] should be indeed

89. Cf. *Yt.* XIII, 50 (with commentary by LECOQ 2016, p. 493).

90. SACHAU 1879, p. 223.

91. SACHAU 1879, p. 226; the term *naus* is translated erroneously with “temple” (Fr. Grenet, pers. comm.); this month is also attested by the “Isakovka bowl” bearing an ancient Chorasmian inscription incised on an Achaemenid-style silver phiale (LIVSHITS 2003).

92. LIVSHITS/GUDKOVA 1967, p. 14; GRENET 1984, p. 252-253, with note 23; 2013, p. 20; 2015b, p. 143.

93. LECOQ 2016: “aux armures de fer”. But Malandra (2018) translates the same passage with “metal shields”. Cf. *Vd.* XIV, 9: the defensive armour of the warrior in the Avesta is composed by cuirass (our breast-disk?), neck guard (the torque?), coat of mail, helmet, belt and greaves (LECOQ 2016: “septième la cuirasse, en huitième le protège-cou, en neuvième la cotte, en dixième le casque [also translated as “headdress”, *coiffe*], en onzième la ceinture, en douzième les jambières”).

94. MALANDRA 2018: “who give victory to those who invoke (them)”; cf. LECOQ 2016: “Elles qui apportent d’abondance, qui s’enlacent avec force, qui s’élancent d’elles-mêmes, qui s’élancent avec énergie, qui s’élancent avec bravoure, qui s’élancent à l’appel, à l’appel dans les bains de sang, à l’appel dans les victoires, à l’appel dans les batailles. (XIII, 24) Elles, les dispensatrices des victoires (...)”. A magico-religious character of their worship is given in stanza 20: to obtain the Fravašis’ help at times of peril, it is useful to learn their invocation by heart (as noted in BOYCE 2000b).

invoked at the strewn *barsman*, they at the battles, they at the fights, they here when brave men fight in the battles”.⁹⁵

Considering these data in light of the fact that the Chorasmian “portraits” and the individuals in armours with horses match, and that the distinction between the worship of royal ancestors and the Fravašis in this context would be rather weak, at Akchakhan-kala we may have the representation of these celestial beings in a military roster prior to battle or, more generally, images of their arrival/departure from the Central Building of the site. To this, we should consider the fact that all the “portraits” and horsemen look the same, indeed as females (if we exclude their being epebes, eunuchs or just completely gender-free in such Iranian context).⁹⁶ On a wall painting discovered in Pendjikent’s Temple II A, a series of female goddesses (six are partially preserved) was considered, with reason, by Boris Marshak as a representation of the Fravašis (*Fig. 21*).⁹⁷ These Late Antique clearly female Sogdian Fravašis (Marshak backed their definition as the “Valkyries of Zoroastrianism”)⁹⁸ actually have no armours, but bear symbolic weapons – animal-shaped maces with zoomorphic *protomai* – while they uplift different banners (cf. *Yt.* XIII, 37).⁹⁹ At Akchakhan-kala, earlier in time but within a closely-related Zoroastrian context, we do not have raised banners but a multitude of female figures, some of them in armour, wearing royal and variable headgear with (and without) similar animal *protomai*.

But what would be, in this context, the specific meaning of this representation of Fravašis at Akchakhan-kala? It is possible in our opinion to contemplate two scenarios, both unfortunately supported only by scant sources, which may involve parades of horses: the first is evoked in *Yt.* XIII, 49-51, the second is recorded again by Bīrunī.

95. MALANDRA 2018.

96. Cf. e.g. fragment of a Neo-Assyrian relief from Khorsabad held in the Metropolitan Museum of New York (Acc. No. 33.16.2) representing a beardless man, probably a eunuch. Cf. *supra* note 54 – the horsemen/portraits seem to wear *armillae* as the women represented in the wall painting of Toprak-kala. See also MINARDI 2018, p. 122-126 and the cf. with Khalchayan. On the other hand, it would be rather difficult to explain why idealized royal ancestors were represented as young men/ephebes. As suggested to the authors by Fr. Grenet (pers. comm.) if the individual “portraits” are commemorative of the ancestors, this could be linked with the Zoroastrian idea that all the inhabitants of Paradise are in the prime of their life.

97. MARSHAK 1990.

98. MARSHAK 1990, p. 297 (originally by DUMÉZIL 1953).

99. These are weapons, albeit symbolical. On the Afrāsiāb paintings two riders taking part in the procession carry similar clubs, used in this case to knock the sacrificial animals (Fr. Grenet pers. comm.).



Fig. 21 – The Fravašis of Pendjikent, Sogdiana (after MARSHAK 1990 fig. 9).

In *Yt.* XIII, 49 the Fravašis are said to leave the *village*¹⁰⁰ for ten days at the *Hamaspāθmaēdaya* which originally was, in the opinion of M. Boyce, a late autumn festival of All Souls, the ancient name of the *Frawardīgān* which was celebrated (in Chorasmia as well, as recorded by Bīrunī *supra*) at the end of the year before Nowruz.¹⁰¹ According to A. Hintze, in her review of the Avestan evidence for the Old Iranian calendar, *Hamaspāθmaēdaya-ratu-* should be translated with “the time belonging to the middle of the path of summer” thus actually denoting an important feast at the spring equinox.¹⁰² According to J. Kellens this was the period of the year in which an annual call-up of troops was done by the community, in order to put these under the special protection of the Fravašis of the clans during the festivity.¹⁰³

100. LECOQ 2016, p.493, note 49: “l’espace géographique du clan ou le clan lui-même, mais le sens n’est pas clair dans ce contexte”; Hintze (2009) translates the stanzas as “We worship the good, strong, bounteous choices of the truthful (men and women), who, at the time of the mid-point of the (sun’s) summer path, fly to the dwelling”.

101. BOYCE 1999; 2005.

102. HINTZE 2009; cf. LECOQ 2016, p.93 “Son nom [Hamaspāθmaēdaya] contient peut-être le mot spāda « armée » et ce serait l’époque où les activités guerrières, et agricoles, sont suspendues.”

103. KELLENS 2016, p. 147 (with reference to KELLENS 1972).

During their period of absence, the Fravašis need, and ask to the faithful, to be worshipped in exchanges of blessings. It would be very suggestive to consider the representation of Akchakhan-kala as symbolic of this seasonal event, i.e. the departure and/or return back home after the ten-day period of the Fravašis: richly bridled horses are conveyed by grooms toward the “portraits”, who then become visually (and symbolically) associated with the animals. These “amazons” might then be related to the king’s and the king’s family Fravašis coming on earth during the *Frawardīgān* in connection with the New Year festival.¹⁰⁴

Bīrunī, on the other hand, records that the first day of the sixth month *Ikhsharēwarī* (Chorasmian *’xštry[wr]*; MP *Šahrēwar*)¹⁰⁵ which, according to the scholar, was once called “*Faghrubah*, i.e. the exitus of the Shāh”, the kings of Chorasmia used to “march out” going to “winter quarters outside their residence” to drive away foes “from their frontiers” and to defend the territory of their realm against their raids.¹⁰⁶ This occurred, always according to Bīrunī, more specifically when “the heat was decreasing and the cold was drawing near”, thus toward the end of summer, when the harvest was secured and when it was evidently possible to muster in an army and leave the central places/summer quarters – i.e. the strongholds attested in the disperse rural settlement of Chorasmia¹⁰⁷ – to secure the frontiers of the polity. The campaign was then undertaken after the harvest season, we may assume in order to be able to deploy able men whose need in agriculture temporarily ceased, and the foes were the semi-nomadic inhabitants of the steppes raiding before the coming of winter. Hence, in Bīrunī we have the record of a local seasonal event involving the king in his role as army commander. This seasonal campaign was certainly performed during Late Antiquity seemingly independently from the ritual calendar.¹⁰⁸ In this light, it is plausible to hypothesize that some propitiatory ritual may have occurred before these military campaigns and the moving of the king’s army toward its winter quarters. If at Akchakhan-kala we have a depiction of the multitude of the Fravašis, we may well have the depiction of their (figurative) invocation for victory, as they are said to be

104. The Fravašis are not individual “guardian angels” but they are invoked, if not in their entirety, as those of specific groups such as family, clan, tribe, nation as their “*génies tutélaires*” (KELLENS 2016, p. 143-144 and 148 with references).

105. LIVSHITS 1968, p. 444.

106. Bīrunī *Chronology* (transl. by SACHAU 1879, p. 224). Cf. Bīrunī, *Astrology* 318 (trans. by WRIGHT 1934, p. 185): “Faghburiyah is the first day of their sixth month and on it is the expedition of the Shah to the frontier”.

107. See discussion and literature in MINARDI and AMIROV 2017.

108. Bīrunī (SACHAU 1879, p. 124) refers in the specific to the Western Turks, hence before their domination started in the country about the mid 6th century AD (for further references, see MINARDI 2013). It is highly probable that the tradition was more ancient than that, but this is impossible to prove through literary sources.

invoked in the Avesta. This seasonal prelude to battle, which was due to a local defensive need rather than to conquest, was possibly done under the protection of the Fravašis, and their “descending” from the heavens and taking arms in support of the king, could have been symbolized by the representation under examination. The Fravašis in the *GBd* 38.12 ff. are said to have decided to take a physical form in order to fight against evil.¹⁰⁹ In this context again, the represented Fravašis might be seen as those of the king and his family, able to aid their descendants within a ruling class warrior ethic.¹¹⁰

As far their symbolic association with horses can be elucidated (besides the apparent association horses/knights) in their description in the Avesta (*Yt.* XIII, 29) the Fravašis are said to “snore like horses” (*rauuō.fraoθmanō*).¹¹¹ According to Philippe Swennen this is to be seen in connection to their role of distributor of the waters and not just as a poetic image: “*Il s’agit [...] d’une évocation explicite du contexte de la saison des pluies. Le drame cosmogonique narré en Yt 13.29 se renouvelle chaque année : les forces démoniaques, responsables de la sécheresse, sont vaincues par le retour des pluies qui perpétueront l’abondance et la vie. Les frauuāši se trouvent alors auprès des réservoirs d’eau céleste. Chaque année, lorsque les pluies approchent, elles s’efforcent d’en obtenir la meilleure part possible pour leur tribu terrestre. Pour ce faire, elles attendent que les eaux soient libérées par la conquête qu’en fait Tištrya, l’étoile Sirius, sous l’apparence d’un bel étalon blanc vainqueur du démon Apaoša, un laid canasson noir.*”¹¹²

Albeit we cannot be yet certain about the reading of the still too fragmentary Akchakhan-kala’s corridor imagery, for the moment attesting two distinct processions/parades and framed “portraits”, we may confidently assume that we

109. As remarked by GNOLI 1990 with reference to BAILEY 1943, p. 108.

110. The elite’s cult of the ancestors as heroes was not original to Zoroastrianism but it was integrated into it at a later time, preserving its martial and heroic elements (BOYCE 2005); GNOLI 1990: “*L’ambiente sociale e religioso in cui lo zoroastrismo sarebbe nato doveva essere verisimilmente quello di una società guerriera, politicamente frammentata, dominata da un’aristocrazia militare e dalle sue bande armate, sorretta da una morale bellicosa, devota a divinità aggressive e combattive. Costumi e istituzioni di questa società, lungi dal venir cancellati dallo zoroastrismo e dai nuovi valori etici del mazdeismo, sopravvissero nella storia iranica e, come ha brillantemente dimostrato il Widengren, furono alla base di successivi sviluppi sociali e politici, oltre che del permanere di un’etica militare caratteristica della nobiltà iranica.*”

111. SWENNEN 2004, p. XII and 96-107; 2007, p. 123-126; KELLENS 2010: “*s’ébrouant dans l’espace*”. But the translation of this adjective is debated: cf. MALANDRA 2018: “whose breathing is fast”; cf. LECOQ 2016: “*qui s’ébrouent*” but rendered as “*au vol rapide*” (choice discussed on p. 385, note 2). *Yasht* XIII is a multi-layered non-homogenous text (KELLENS 2016, p. 138).

112. SWENNEN 2007, p. 123-124. On the complex association between the Fravašis and the cosmic rain waters, see KELLENS 2001.

are dealing with the illustration of a ceremonial event, certainly occurring (or only sublimated through a visual evocation) in a specific Zoroastrian and royal context. These paintings may be related to a major Zoroastrian festivity or, but always within the semantics of this religion, to local traditions more obscure to us yet related to kingship, and certainly intended to convey a precise message to a small part of the Chorasmian population, i.e. its elite. The narrow perimetral corridor of the Central Building of Akchakhan-kala in fact, due to the presence of several direct accesses to the core of the monument, which could have been easily use to bypass some sections of it, indicates that it might have been fully traversed only in particular circumstances (such as festivities) and by a selected audience.

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