CHAPTER 17

Between Written Texts, Oral Performances and Mural Paintings

Illustrated Scrolls in Pre-Islamic Central Asia

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The genre of belles-lettres is scantily represented in what has survived from the written records of Central Asia.1 Buddhist tales form a rich repertoire, but the Buddhist texts found in Central Asia were either transmitted in languages foreign to the region (Sanskrit, Middle Indian, Chinese, Tibetan), or translated from them into local Iranian languages (Khotanese and Sogdian). No example of a Bactrian Buddhist tale has come down to us, but several are known in Sogdian. Only one of these, the Vessantara Jātaka (Benveniste 1946), can be considered as an original composition, as shown for example by the names and descriptions of some gods who are syncretized with Zoroastrian gods of the Sogdians. All the other Buddhist Sogdian texts, except for a handful of magical spells, were translated from Chinese. Manichaean and Christian Sogdian literature also includes parables and edifying stories, taken from the general stock of both religions.

But Sogdian literature also contains pieces of a distinctly narrative character and with various degrees of originality. Most of them were transmitted in Manichean manuscripts found in Turfan; all were published by Walter Bruno Henning in his masterly article ‘Sogdian Tales’ (Henning 1945). These manuscripts are on the whole datable to the ninth and tenth centuries, therefore post-dating the Islamic conquest of Sogdiana itself, and some texts actually show the influence of the Pahlavi language, but in general they obviously reflect far older models. As shown by Henning, these tales were freely reworked from extremely varied sources: most of them are based on the Pañcatantra (either on variants of the Indian original, or on Burzōy’s Pahlavi rendering Kalīlag ud Dimnag known to us through its Arabic translation by Ibn al-Muqaffa’), others

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come from Aesop; one is from the Bible, one from an unidentified Buddhist source, one from the Zoroastrian story of the journey to Paradise and the encounter with the maiden who embodies the religious conscience of the wandering soul. One burlesque tale, ‘The Caesar and the Thieves,’ is entirely original, and as I have tried to show in a recent article (Grenet 2009: 289–91), it embroiders one episode of Manichaean missionary history: the approach to the ‘Caesar’ Odeinath, master of Palmyra, and his diplomatic contacts with Shāpūr I.

The Sogdian Rustam Text and Its Illustration at Panjikent

One long fragment in Sogdian stands apart, namely the episode of Rustam fighting against the demons of Māzandarān (text given in the Appendix). It belongs to the epic genre and was transmitted not in a Manichean manuscript but in a Zoroastrian one, also from the ninth or tenth centuries (Sims-Williams 1976: 54–61). The same episode is told in Firdausī’s Shāh-nāma but with important variations (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1988–2008: II, 12–45). The story is also documented in Sogdian painting and will be considered in detail below. At the present stage of the argument it is important to note that the Sogdian literate class had access to an abundant and diversified written literature of fiction.

However, were written records the only channel of access to these compositions and to others of a similar character? The answer is clearly no, as demonstrated by the paintings which decorated the rich houses of Panjikent, a middle-sized Sogdian city sixty kilometers to the east of Samarkand. The narrative paintings in Panjikent begin in the sixth century, but most of them date from the first half of the eighth century. Subsequently the town turned to Islam and such subjects fell from favour. All these paintings have been splendidly described and commented upon in his last book by Boris Marshak (Marshak 2002), who died in 2006 on his excavations at Panjikent.

The two genres attested in narrative Sogdian literature are present in the Panjikent murals: on one side the epic, on the other – popular tales. They are also clearly hierarchized by their location on the walls (Fig. 17.1): scenes belonging to epic stories are stretched in long bands all along the back and side

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2 For an improved edition of one of the Aesopian fables (‘The monkey and the fox’), see Sims-Williams 2010. Fragments from other tales in the Berlin collection, including the Aesopian ‘The wild cat and the bird,’ have been published by Morano 2009.

3 All illustrations showing Panjikent paintings have been adapted by François Ory from documents kindly supplied by Boris Marshak.