THREE MONSTERS AT TILLYA TEPE

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The golden hoard from the 1st century AD graves at Tillya Tepe has been known to scholars for nearly twenty years now, thanks to Victor Sarianidi’s fine publication.¹ There has been much further comment on the iconography of the finds and of their cultural associations.² The evidence is in the objects themselves and not any texts, and the objects are not all that easy to see and therefore understand, even in the excellent enlarged photographs which have been published. Drawing may help towards understanding, despite the obvious danger of wrong interpretation en route, but it does offer the possibility of conflation of versions of subjects whose state of preservation may differ in details, and it avoids the distractions of colour and reflected light, and of confusion with adjacent ornament and figures. It also facilitates comparisons. This paper explores three subjects only out of many, some of which I shall deal with elsewhere, based especially on the drawing of several of the objects, and on as wide as possible a search for kin and comparanda, from Greece to China. They will be found to lead us in several different directions.

At least three of the monsters shown on the Tillya Tepe gold seem to me capable of closer identification which could prove important in making other judgements about the finds. I should start by saying that, following recent research into the apparent latest dates of objects in the tombs,³ I regard them all as being demonstrably no earlier than the middle of the 1st century AD, possibly no little later and certainly within the period of the establishment of the Kushan dynasty. They are very probably all of one date, in the light of the useful suggestion that they might be the simultaneous burials of a king and his five consorts.⁴

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¹ For western readers, in various translations, of which the one I use is Sarianidi 1985.
² Notably Pfrommer 1996, which also includes drawings; Pugachenkova and Rempel 1991; Schiltz 1994, 320-328, gives an account with pictures.
³ Zeymal 1999.
I start with the monster fighting griffins on a lobed sheath for a short sword (Fig. 1). Sarianidi describes it carefully and calls it generically a ‘dragon.’\(^5\) I find that its very close similarity to Chinese dragons of the Han dynasty requires us to devote further consideration to its identity and origins. A simple comparison with the head from a Han chariot pole terminal (Fig. 2),\(^6\) and the dragon from a brick (Fig. 3)\(^7\) makes the point without words, but a few details may need stressing beyond the obvious common forms of the muzzle, nostrils and lip, horns, and very long sinuous body; the only additive at Tillya Tepe is a small wing, which is not usual on the Chinese creatures, though they may have stiff back fins. There is the short backward-swept chin-beard, which had become also a feature on many of the other leonine monsters on the Tillya Tepe gold. This virtually acanthoid feature is shared by a number of Greek sea creatures, notably the *ketos* sea-monster, but is no less clear on many of the Chinese heads where it is more like reptilian gills. A similar leafy feature serves to terminate its tail. The barely sketched zigzag ‘mane’ recalls that of any Greek griffin or *ketos*, for which it was devised early in the 5th century BC, and is also used for leonine monsters at Tillya Tepe, but is also a reptilian feature (lizards). Finally, the hindquarters are twisted so that they are seen from above and the legs thereby splayed out. This is not a feature of Animal Style nomad art, but was commonplace for the Chinese dragon and remained so long into later dynasties. It is a pose more suited to a reptile like a lizard than to a lion or wolf, being viewed from above rather than alongside, and as a result a dragon has no bottom like a mammal. The same creature, little simplified, is seen also on a small plaque from Tillya Tepe (Fig. 4), its wing spiky rather than feathered.\(^8\)

The Chinese dragon, the *long*, was a monster of early literature, and early representations do little more than display a serpentine body and predatory head. As with the Greeks, seeking an image with which to define their Sphinx or Siren or Griffin, the Chinese artists sought a model to adjust or copy. And just as the Greeks turned to the arts of the Near East to find models for their monsters, the Chinese turned to the arts of their western neighbours, away, for a while,

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\(^5\) Sarianidi 1985, figs. 157-161, burial 4.8. The monster on the hilt is not of the same genus, as Sarianidi suggests.

\(^6\) Eskenazi 2000, no. 10, with references.

\(^7\) On the origins of the Chinese dragon, Rawson 1984, 93-99, a useful summary, and for the brick illustrated here, her fig. 73 (from the tomb of the emperor Wu-ti). The upturned upper lip is too widespread to be particularly diagnostic; it was used for the Babylonian dragon, on versions of the Greek *ketos*, and for various Animal Style creatures, leonine or vulpine.

\(^8\) Sarianidi 1985, fig. 98, top; burial 4.34.