

# THE AFRASIAB MURALS: A PICTORIAL NARRATIVE RECONSIDERED

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The Sogdian murals discovered in 1965 in a structure identified as Hall 1, also known as “the Hall of the Ambassadors,” at Afrasiab, ancient Samarkand, have inspired much scholarly exchange and speculation about their date and meaning [Fig. 1].<sup>1</sup> The present paper reviews the events celebrated in the Hall’s pictorial narrative within their historical context, and explains the reason for the notable absence in that narrative of divine and religious imagery that is elsewhere prevalent in Sogdian art.

## *Hall 1 and the Pictorial Narrative of Its Murals*

Hall 1 is a square room 11 m<sup>2</sup>, with its only entrance in the East wall facing the principal West wall. The

Hall’s walls are decorated with murals placed above a continuous wall-bench with a slight projection on the West wall [Fig. 2, next page].<sup>2</sup> Two superimposed friezes of figures were partially preserved up to a height of 1.5 m in murals on the lower half of the walls, the upper parts of which were destroyed when the ceiling collapsed causing the room to be sealed up in the tenth century.<sup>3</sup> The East wall mural in Hall 1 is excluded from this study due to its poor state of preservation.

## *The West Wall Mural*

Geopolitical considerations appear to have played a role in the distribution of the subject matter of Hall 1.

The principal West wall mural depicts a celebratory event, generally identified with the Sogdian Nowrūz, or New Year’s festival, now placed around 660 CE.<sup>4</sup> But which Nowrūz festival in Samarkand is celebrated around 660 CE in this mural? Is it the Zoroastrian Nowrūz, traditionally celebrated in the Iranian world on the first day of spring, or does it refer to Nowrūz as the “opening

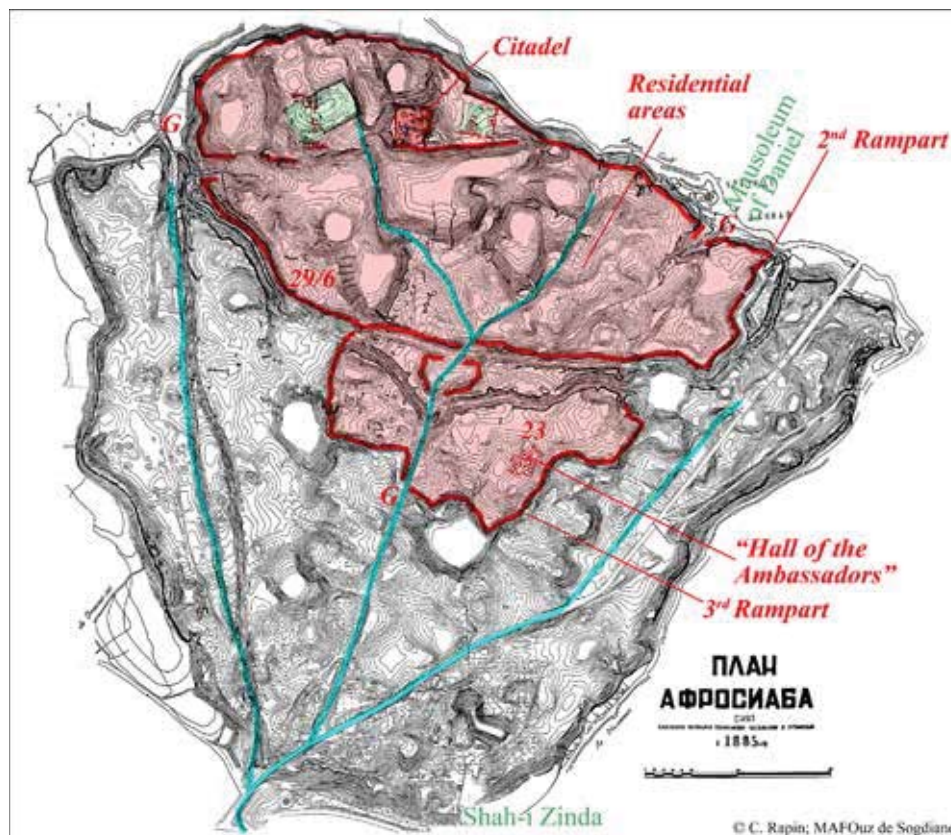


Fig.1. The plan of Samarkand (Afrasiab) with Hall 1, “Hall of the Ambassadors”, situated in the city’s third rampart. Originally drawn in 1885, by the Topographical Survey of the Russian army, the plan was redrawn in the 1990’s during the French Archaeological Mission in Uzbekistan. I wish to thank Claude Rapin of MAFOuz de Sogdiane, for permission to publish this plan.



Fig. 2. The Interior of Hall 1 at Afrasiab, showing the South wall mural in situ, in 1968, prior to removal of the murals to the nearby museum where they remain today. Photograph by author.

day of taxation,” observed in late Sasanian and early Islamic Iran?

The calendrical anomaly in late Sasanian and early Islamic Iran in the seventh century had led to the postponement of Nowrūz from the first day of spring, the time of the vernal equinox, to the ninth month, Ādur, the summer solstice, in the Iranian calendar (de Blois 1996, pp. 40, 47, 50, n.14; Abdollahy 2000). A significant conjunction of the summer solstice at Nowrūz is its coincidence in seventh-century Iran with the official date of the “opening day of taxation.” There, the observance of Nowrūz in the month of Ādur, after the harvesting of crops, was the state date for “the opening of taxation” in the Islamic *kharājī* calendar that was presumably based on an earlier Sasanian *kharājī* calendar.<sup>5</sup> The coincidence, in seventh-century Iran, of the Nowrūz festival with the official date of the “opening day of taxation” would not have been lost on Sogdian rulers of the seventh century, nor on their overlords

Fig. 3. Outline drawing of preserved images in the West wall mural, of Hall 1, numbered by Al’baum 1975, tracing by A. Barbet and drawn by F. Ory, Royal Naurūz 2006, p. 26, Pl. 3.



who are honored in the North and West wall murals.<sup>6</sup>

The focal composition in the pictorial program in Hall 1 is that of the West wall mural [Fig. 3]. Here, the destroyed upper section of the composition was originally devoted to the towering image of one or possibly two principal personages. In the preserved lower section of this mural, three superimposed files of regional and foreign gift-bearers converge from left and right to join a central file of ascending figures below the lost image in the uppermost center of the wall.<sup>7</sup> At the bottom left of the composition, are images of the Sogdian king, Varkhuman, and other regional gift-bearing dignitaries [Fig. 4, next page].<sup>8</sup> In the bottom right row are shown foreign dignitaries from Korea, China, and China’s dependencies. Notable here are images of long-haired Turks who, instead of native Sogdians, serve as guards that usher gift-bearers from the lowermost friezes towards the central file of ascending figures.<sup>9</sup> Foremost among regional dignitaries is the ambassador from Chaghanian, in Tokharestan, to the south of Sogdiana, in the second frieze of figures, on the left [Fig. 3, no. 27]. The latter addresses the Sogdian king, Varkhuman, in a welcoming speech, written on the ambassador’s robe, in Sogdian and Bactrian cursive script (Livšić 2006, pp. 59–65). The remaining fully preserved images in the second and third friezes in this mural represent Turks with long hair, many grouped in camps, where they sit cross-legged with their backs to the viewer, below the destroyed image of the personage above them. The proprietorial presence of Turks that circulate in the gift-giving ceremony in this mural is explained by the following historical realities in Sogdiana of the seventh century.

Sogdiana, which had been a subject of the Turks in the sixth century, continued its tributary obligations even after the defeat of the Qaghanate of the Western Turks by the Tang Emperor, Gaozong (649–83), in 658–59 CE. The West wall mural, which postdates China’s defeat of the Qaghanate, corresponds to the time of Gaozong’s appointment of Mishe and Buzhen, earlier Qaghanate leaders, as China’s Protectors-general. The latter were now charged with the expansion of China’s influence across Central Asia through Transoxiana to the borders of Persia (De la Vaissière 2006, pp. 156–57; Grenet 2006, pp. 52–53; Azarpay 2013, p.



Fig. 4. Copy of figures numbered 2, 3 and 4, from the West wall mural, Hall 1. The name 'Varkhuman,' was inscribed on the neck of the figure number 4, on the right, Al'baum 1975, Pl. 6.

310; Golden 2011, p. 42). In the years between 658 and 661 the Tang administration established over a hundred area commands and prefectures that extended into Central Asia (Pan 1997, p. 196). If the date of the completion of the Afrasiab murals is placed around 660 CE when one or both *qaghans* of the Western Turks, Mishe and Buzhen, served as China's Protectors-general in Sogdiana, then the West wall mural surely honors the Turks, identified with regions to the West of Sogdiana (De la Vaissière 2006, pp. 156-57; Azarpay 2013, p. 310; Golden 2011, p. 42).

Fig. 5. Outline drawing of preserved images on the North wall mural based on drawings in Al'baum 1975, with Albaum's numerical order of figures, reproduced in Royal Naurüz 2006, p. 27, Pl. 5.



#### The North Wall Mural

The theme of the North wall mural in Hall 1, as established by Compareti and Cristoforetti, is the celebration of the Duanwujie, or the "Dragon-Boat" festival in China [Fig. 5] (Compareti and Cristoforetti 2005; Compareti 2006). Like the Sogdian and Persian Nowrüz, the Chinese Duanwujie also coincided with the summer solstice in the seventh century. In this mural, China's royal couple is shown fully engaged in activities related to the celebration of the "Dragon-Boat" festival in China, on the very day of the Sogdian Nowrüz festival. Hence, it is surely not an image of Gaozong, the Chinese Emperor in person, who receives taxes and gifts in the distant land of the golden peaches, in the damaged upper section of the West wall mural, discussed above, but rather his trusted deputy, China's regional Protector-general of Sogdiana.



Fig. 6. Outline drawing of preserved images on the South wall mural, Hall 1, based on drawings in Al'baum 1975, with Al'baum's numerical order of figures, reproduced in Royal Naurüz 2006, p. 26, Pl. 4.

*The South Wall Mural*

The South wall mural, perhaps the most striking among the wall paintings from Hall 1, is distinguished by its brilliant colors, rich ornamental details, and extraordinary subject matter.<sup>10</sup> Here the complex perspective effects of the West and North walls murals are replaced by a horizontal flow of figures from left to right, reminiscent of compositions of pictorial narratives in other Sogdian murals, such as the Rostam cycle from Panjikent (Azarpay et al. 1981, *passim*). The South wall mural depicts an extraordinary caravan of gift-bearers, in two superimposed files, against an intense lapis lazuli-colored background [Figs. 6, 7].<sup>11</sup> The procession is led by riders on a small white elephant, followed by four richly dressed women on horseback, two male Chaghanian dignitaries, shown riding side-saddle as they prepare to descend from their camels, and a pair of male and a female pedestrians who lead

a trained horse and two pairs of white geese [Figs. 8, 9, next page] (Azarpay 2013, pp. 314–16). The figures move from the viewer's right towards a small, guarded structure, their ultimate destination, at the extreme left of the procession [Fig. 6]. At the rear of the procession, to the viewer's right, an outsized image of the Sogdian king, Varkhuman, on horseback, followed by his equestrian troops, welcomes the neighboring Chaghanian emissaries after their long journey from territories to the south of Sogdiana and escorts them to Samarkand's South Gate [Fig. 6].<sup>12</sup>

*The Avoidance of Divine Imagery in the Afrasiab Murals*

The Hall 1 murals at Afrasiab are exceptional in Sogdian painting for their avoidance of divine, demonic, and supernatural symbols and images. It is only as decorative and repetitive textile patterns that mythical motifs are encountered in these murals.

Fig. 7. The central section of the procession of figures depicted in the South wall mural, Hall 1. Photograph of the original mural in its present state of preservation courtesy Étienne De la Vaissière.





Fig. 8. The head of a Chaghanian emissary, before the degradation of its colors, from the South wall mural, Hall 1. Photograph by author, 1968.

Notable among them is the 'dog-bird' or *senmuro*, which is repeated on the garment of the Sogdian ruler, Varkhuman, whose name is inscribed on his neck [Fig. 10; Color Plate V].<sup>13</sup> The use of the *senmuro* motif on Varkhuman's courtly robe is seemingly a wishful statement of the wearer's rank and prestige, modeled after Sasanian prototypes, attested in depictions of

*senmuro*-patterned royal garments of Sasanian kings.<sup>14</sup> As noted by Vladimir Livšic, despite Manichaean, Christian, and Buddhist missionary activities in seventh century Sogdiana, native Sogdians largely retained their Zoroastrian faith (Livšic 2006, p. 62). Hence they were doubtless fully cognizant of the association of the *senmuro* motif with the Zoroastrian Dēn, or religion, in Persian art. The colossal, equestrian statue of Khusro II, in the large grotto at Taq-i-Bustan, portrays the helmeted ruler in protective chain-mail armor worn above *senmuro*-patterned trousers [Fig. 11, next page]. Here, with shield and a raised spear, the king postures as a quintessential champion of his realm, fortified by impenetrable armor and his Dēn, the Zoroastrian religion.<sup>15</sup>

Fig. 9. Outline drawing of a caparisoned, trained horse, from a detail of the South wall mural, Hall 1, Al'baum 1975, Fig. 12.



Fig. 10. The *senmuro* motif used as a textile pattern on the robe of the Sogdian king, Varkhuman, in the North wall mural, Hall 1. Recently photographed detail, courtesy Matteo Compagni.





Fig. 11. The *senmurv* motif on the coat and trousers of the colossal, equestrian image of the late Sasanian king, Khusro II, in the lower level of the large grotto at Taq-i Bustan, Iran. Photographs courtesy Daniel C. Waugh.

Finally, the avoidance of divine imagery in the Afrasiab murals may be attributed to the secular function of the Nowrūz festival portrayed in the West wall mural at Afrasiab. Nowrūz, which in the years around 660 CE coincided with the official date of the “opening day of taxation” in Iran, would have served as an operable model for the collection of revenue by superpowers to meet regional expenses. In the wake of the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire a generation earlier, and on the eve of the Islamic conquest of Transoxiana, Sogdiana’s hope for survival lay in its alliance with China and its surrogates, a hope that is vividly and eloquently expressed in the pictorial narrative of the murals from the Hall of the Ambassadors.

#### About the author

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## Notes

1. I wish to thank Frantz Grenet for information on the source of the plan of Afrasiab, published here as Fig. 1. The plan of Afrasiab was originally drawn in 1885 by the Topographical Survey of the Russian army, and redrawn in the 1990s by two draftsmen from the French Archaeological Mission in Uzbekistan, the MAFOuz de Sogdiane. Claude

Rapin, of the MAFOuz de Sogdiane, the source of the plan, has kindly provided me with the following information and has permitted me to publish his revised version of the plan in the present article. According to Claude Rapin, this plan shows the reduced limits of the town (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ramparts) on the eve of the Arab invasion. However, several buildings, such as those to the east and west of the citadel date to the early Islamic period. The external boundary of the site coincides with the city limits datable to the Achaemenid period. The urban area, shown in the plan, was reduced in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but reached its maximum dimensions in the Islamic era. Whereas the location of the South Gate of the Early Medieval city is certain, the precise locations of the North and East Gates remain conjectural. Based on recent publications of archaeological explorations in this area, Claude Rapin has added to his plan the locations of Hall 1, "Hall of the Ambassadors," (Area 23), but has omitted details of area 29/6 where excavations are in progress.

2. For the plan of Hall 1, by François Ory, see *Royal Naurūz in Samarkand* 2006, p. 25, Fig. 2. Hall 1, also referred to as Palace 23, is situated within the third and last fortification wall that surrounded the city before the Arab conquest of Samarkand. Hall 1 was situated far from the citadel within the first rampart and was separated from the residential area within the second rampart. Construction of Hall 1 evidently began before the building of the third rampart that surrounds it. I wish to thank Claude Rapin for the foregoing information. In light of the conclusions reached in the present paper, it may be proposed that Hall 1 was not a royal palace but rather a functionary's residence and reception area, reserved for special occasions such as that depicted in the mural of the hall's West wall.

3. For a clear distinction between original and reconstructed images in the Afrasiab murals, see Al'baum 1975; Ory 2006, pp. 87–90, Figs. 1–3, 5b, 8; De la Vaissière 2006, pp. 24–25.

4. De la Vaissière 2006, pp. 156–57. See below for arguments in support of the date of the West wall mural. See below for arguments in support of this date proposed for the West wall mural. For the earliest identification the Nowrūz festival as the theme of the Afrasiab murals, see Silvi Antonini 1989.

5. The earlier Sasanian *kharājī* calendar began in the year 611 CE, during the reign of the Sasanian king Khusro II (591–629 CE) (Azarpay et al. 2007, pp. 20–21; Weber 2013, p. 172).

6. Although Compareti and Cristoforetti refer to the Muslim practice of starting the fiscal year with the summer solstice, they fail to connect this event with the "gift-giving" procession depicted in the West wall mural at Afrasiab (Compareti and Cristoforetti 2005, p. 217; Compareti 2009).

7. For differing speculations on the identity of the personage depicted in the destroyed upper section of this mural, see Grenet 2006, pp. 48–49, and *Royal Naurūz* 2006, passim.

The perspective strategy used in this composition, perhaps a Chinese import, is unusual for Sogdian painting. For the modular layout of the West wall composition, compared by Markus Mode to a unit of measure, the 'bu', in Tang China, see Mode 2006, pp. 117–18. On Chinese artistic elements in the North wall mural from Afrasiab, see Kageyama 2006 and Compareti 2009.

8. Varkhuman's name was written in Sogdian cursive on the neck of this figure by a visitor to the hall sometime after the original dwellers had vacated the building (Livšić 2006, pp. 60, 71).

9. The role of ushers, played here by Turks, is aptly compared by De la Vaissière (2006, p. 149) to that of Persians and Medes who, as host and ushers, direct gift-bearing foreign delegations into the presence of the enthroned king, depicted on reliefs of the Apadana at Persepolis a millennium earlier.

10. For a detailed and accurate description of ornaments and realia in the Afrasiab murals, see Yatsenko 2004.

11. On techniques of execution and pigments used in the Afrasiab murals, see Barbet 2006. Of the upper register of figures in the South wall mural, only multiple horses' hooves and fragmentary details of stirrups have been preserved (*Royal Naurūz* 2006, p. 27, Pl. 5).

12. According to Chinese sources that date to 650 and 658, Varkhuman, mentioned twice in inscriptions written on the West wall murals at Afrasiab, had been king of Samarkand, and was appointed by the Chinese as governor of Sogdiana in 658, shortly before completion of the mural at Afrasiab around 660 (De la Vaissière 2006, p. 155). In support of this date, see Azarpay 2013, pp. 310–11; against it, Mode 2006, pp. 112–13.

13. Livšić 2006, pp. 66, 71. This Sogdian inscription was evidently written by a visitor after the building's original dwellers had left the site, and thus belongs to a second series of Sogdian labels written on the murals. The earliest inscriptions, written in Sogdian and Bactrian cursive, served as explanatory comments written on the murals upon their completion, see Livšić 2006, pp. 59, 65–66.

14. The use of the *senmurov* pattern is notable in Sasanian rock sculpture and reliefs at Taq-e Bostan where it decorates the garment of the colossal equestrian image of Khusro II, carved in three-quarters view, inside the large grotto, see Fukai and Horiuchi 1969–1971, Vol. 2, Pls. 34, 44–48. The *senmurov* motif is repeated on the coat and trousers of images of the hunter king in reliefs on the left wall of the same grotto (Fukai and Horiuchi, Vol. 1, Pls. 60–64). For other examples of *senmurov*-patterned textile, see Jeroussalimskaja 1993.

15. On the symbolism of the *senmurov* motif as a reference to the supernatural pair of winged dogs that accompany the Dēn at the Cinwad Bridge and guard the perilous passage of the soul across that bridge, see Azarpay 2011, p. 60.



PLATE V

[Azarpay, "The Afrasiab Murals," p. 53]



*The senmurv motif used as a textile pattern on the robe of the Sogdian king, Varkhuman, in the North wall mural, Hall 1, at Afrasiab. Recently photographed detail, courtesy Matteo Compareti.*