

# THE PERFORMANCE OF PAIN AND REMEMBRANCE IN LATE ANCIENT IRAN

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The ancient Iranian world, influenced by Zoroastrianism, is notorious for its obsession with the well-being of the body and the soul. However, it is peculiar that one encounters acts of self-laceration

or self-mutilation during mourning ceremonies, especially those held in honor of a god-like hero or a blameless youth. This essay focuses on communal death commemorations held in remembrance of the undeserved killing of Siavash, the Kayanid Prince, and Hussain the third Shia Imam who both suffered a tragic and undeserved and untimely death at the hands of super-villains.<sup>1</sup> Their deaths are commemorated by ceremonies that include acts of self-harm, self-mutilation, and performances of lamentation, staged in remembrance of the deceased hero's pain. This paper attempts to explain the background and the history of self-laceration and self-wounding performed as a symbol of deep grievance.

The Kayanid prince Siavash, a mythological persona who has enjoyed much popularity in the Persianate world, is one whose killing has been mourned by not only his kin but also by many generations of Iranians. Ceremonies held in his remembrance are unique in the sense that mourners indulged in acts of wailing and self-injury. The story of Siavash revolves around a young prince characterized by his high morality, heavenly looks, and chivalry. The protagonist is caught in the midst of the feud between his father (Kavus, the king of Iran) and his father-in-law (Afrasiyab, the king of Turan), who ironically is also the arch-enemy of Iran. After a dramatic series of events, Siavash is brutally and unjustly killed at the hands of Afrasiyab [Fig. 1; Color Plate VI]. Eventually, his death is avenged by the Iranian national hero Rostam.

This tragedy of Siavash and its aftermath is narrated in several Medieval Persian texts. In *Tarikh-e Bukhara*, an early tenth century historical account, we encoun-



Fig. 1. The killing of Siavash. Illustration to the *Shahnameh*, dated AH 1065/CE 1654-65. Islamic Manuscripts, Garrett no. 57G. Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Copyright © Princeton University Library, reproduced with permission.

ter a detailed depiction of an early Iranian mourning ceremony, where the author records the communal custom of remembering the untimely death of the young innocent mythical hero, Siavash. According to the text "the people of Bukhara perform/have amazing hymns/songs pertaining to the killing of Siavash and minstrels call these hymns/songs, *kin-e Siavash* (Avenging Siavash) ... Muhammad-ibn-Jaffar believes that it has been three millennia since this incident [the killing of Siavash]" (*Tarikh-e Bukhara* 1984, p. 24). Furthermore, *Tarikh-e Bukhara* reports that the burial place of Siavash is believed to be in the city of Bukhara, and that:

The magi of Bukhara honor this place and find it dear to their hearts and every year, each person sacrifices a rooster there. The people of Bukhara also mourn and grieve the death of Siavash on the day of *Nowruz*, and sing sad hymns in his commemoration. [These songs] are famous in all regions and are called *Gristan-e Moghan* or 'the weeping of Magi' by the minstrels. [*Tarikh-e Bukhara* 1984, pp. 32-33].

It can be assumed that this remembrance ceremony was accompanied by both emotional and physical self-harm that is, wailing and pulling one's own hair, which are both indeed two very unorthodox Zoroastrian practices. What makes these rituals more interesting is that they are not only practiced by common people but the Zoroastrian magi are present at the event.

According to the *Shahnameh*, the kin of Siavash did not handle the news of his passing calmly: "When the tragic news reached his kin, the palace trembled with screams and cries. His kin and servants pulled their hair, cut off their locks, and scratched their cheeks" (Ferdowsi 1990, vol. 2. p. 359). While Siavash's palace in Turan, the land of Afrasiyab, is filled with echoes of painful screams, the *Shahnameh* turns our attention to Iran. As the news of the beheading of Siavash reached the gates of the palace, the Iranian hero, "Piran fell from his throne in a faint, ripped his garments, tore at his hair, and threw heaps of dust over his head" (Ferdowsi 1990, vol 2, p. 361).<sup>2</sup>

Grieving for Siavash does not end in the medieval period and has continued until as early as the twentieth century. For example, in an early recording of this tradition Sadeq Hedayat (1955, p. 56) reports that in the mourning rituals held in many areas of Iran, such as Kohkiluyeh, "women who recite old ballads and solemn songs while they wail call this action *Susivosh* (*Sug e Siavash*)." Also in the novel by Simin Daneshvar (1969) entitled *Suvashun*,<sup>3</sup> we encounter the story (pp. 27-274) of how women in the southwestern province of Fars observed a funerary ritual, where they would cut their hair and tie it to a tree and perform

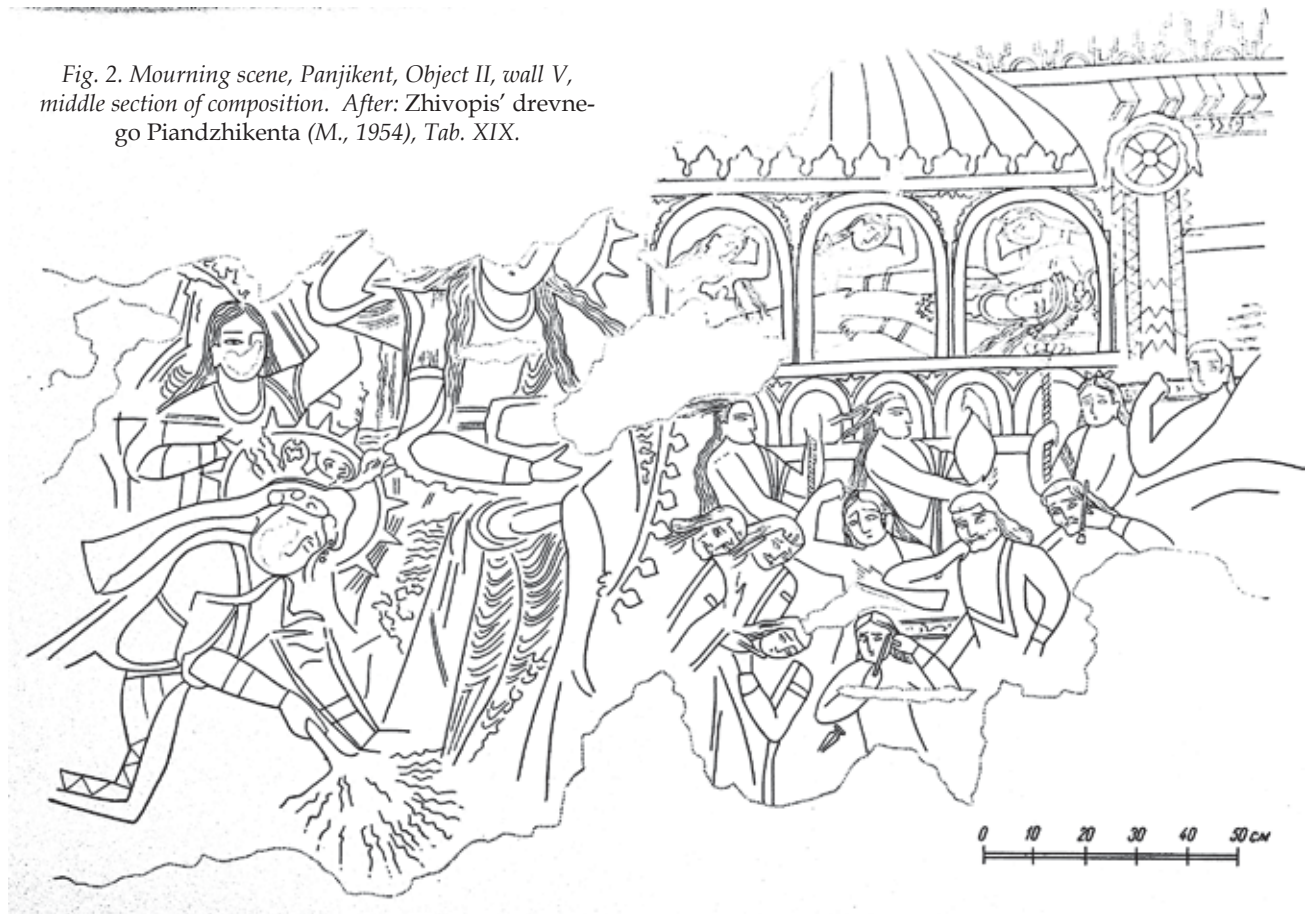
wailing and other acts of grievance which they called *Suvashun*. Ironically, the story ends with the death of Yousef, Zari's blameless husband, which reminds the reader of the death of Siavash and Imam Hussain (Daneshvar 1969, pp. 290-91)

Although it is clear that acts of self-laceration were practiced in pre-Islamic Iran (Yarshater 1979, p. 93), we cannot associate it with Zoroastrian customs and regulations promoted by the Achaemenids and the Sasanians. Zoroastrian textual evidence displays a very strict abhorrence of any and all kinds of self-injury. Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts produced in the Sasanian period indicate very clearly that the infliction of any type of emotional or physical harm on the self is strictly forbidden. For example, in the fifth question of *Menog i Xrad*, a Middle Persian text, it is stated that "the most miserable land ... is that in which people cry, wail, and pull their hair [as a sign of mourning]" (*Minooy-e Kherad* 1985, p. 19). Another Zoroastrian Middle Persian text, the *Arda Wiraz Namag*, in narrating the events of the afterlife witnessed by Arda-Wiraz during his journey to the other world, sheds light on the Zoroastrian view of lamenting the passing of a loved one. Arda-Wiraz states that: "I came to a place and I saw a big mighty river...some were crossing with great difficulty and some were crossing easily" ... and the god Adur said: "... those who are not able to cross are those for whom after their passing much lamentation, mourning, crying, and mourning was made...And tell those in the world '...do not unlawfully mourn and grieve and cry for the souls of your departed shall receive that much harm and difficulty'" (*Arda Wiraz Namag* 1986, p. 200).

In regard to the aftermath of the death of Siavash a Middle Persian poem entitled, *Abar Madan i Wahram i Warzawand* (On the Coming of the Miraculous Wahram), states "then we will bring revenge ..., in the manner which Rostam brought a hundred revenges of Siavash" (Daryaee 2012, pp.10-11). So we can see that the idea of revenge is promoted as the conclusion to the tragedy, without mention of any sort of ritualistic mourning in his remembrance, let alone engaging in physical self-harm. Thus, here in Zoroastrian orthodoxy, the death of innocent Siavash merits revenge, to equalize the harm done, but no lamentation is mentioned or permitted. Unlike in Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts, the *Shahnameh*, composed in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE in Khorasan, describes how Siavash's death is lamented and his passing mourned.

There is material evidence, especially from the eastern borders of the Persianate world beyond the Oxus, which suggests that Zoroastrian taboos regarding physical or emotional self-harm in mourning rituals were not observed. In Sogdiana, a region of what may

Fig. 2. Mourning scene, Panjikent, Object II, wall V, middle section of composition. After: Zhivopis' drevnego Piandzhikenta (M., 1954), Tab. XIX.



be called “Zoroastrian orthopraxy,” one of the cultural centers was Panjikent, where in many drawings the Sogdian *Vaghnpat* (βγνπτ) “Master of a Temple” is depicted as being in charge of the affairs of the temple (Grenet and Azarnouche 2012, p. 160). One of the best known artistic representations of a lamentation ceremony is a mural that displays a youth on his deathbed and several people gathered around him lacerating their face and body, probably as a funerary rite [Fig. 2]. A. M. Belenitskii argued that this illustration might be a depiction of Siavash’s mourning scene, citing as part of his evidence the passage from *Tarikh-e Bukhara* (Belenitskii 1954, pp. 78–82; Azarpay et al. 1981, p. 130; for a different interpretation, Grenet and Azarnouche 2012, pp. 162–63). Here women are wailing, pulling their hair and lacerating their faces in a ritualistic form in remembrance of a deceased person.

In recent years, more fascinating evidence has been found in East Asia. Of particular interest are the elaborate funerary images carved on the panels of burial couches in Sogdian Iranian tombs in China (Lerner 2005). A panel

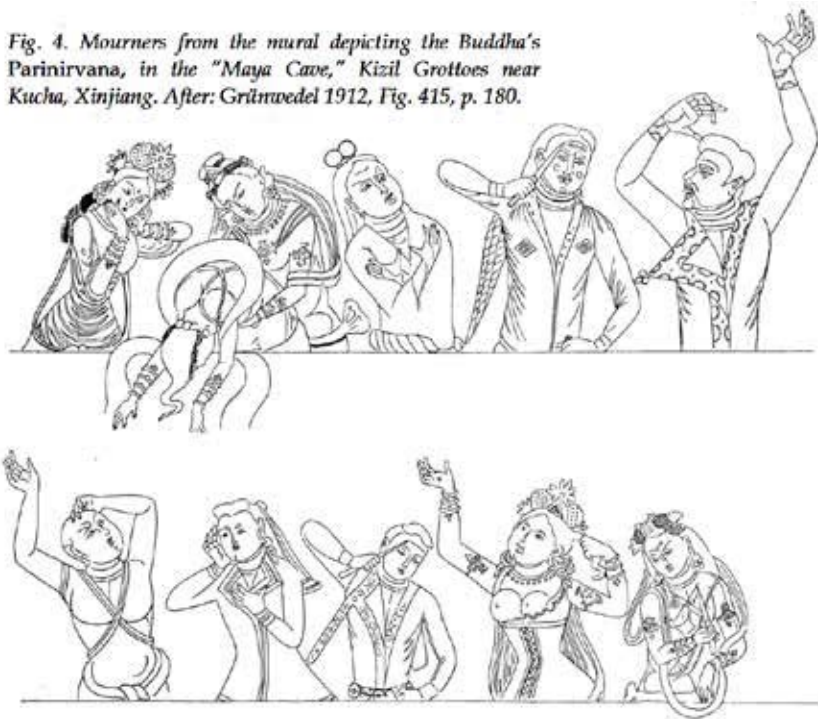
on the burial couch now housed in the Miho Museum, which probably dates from the third quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, provides us with very interesting clues (Lerner 1995, 2011; Feng 2001, p. 244). At the center of the image is a Zoroastrian priest, who can be identified by his *padam* or mask, and is tending to the sacred fire and performing a ritual [Fig. 3]. There is also a dog present at the feet of the priest is probably depicting the *Sag-did* ceremony.<sup>4</sup> In the Zoroastrian tradition, the “four-eyed dog” is believed to have had the ability to drive off demons and to decrease the infection of the corpse (Boyce 1996, p. 303). In this tomb portrait, the dog (*Sag*) is viewing the funeral, as it should do at any orthodox Zoroastrian funeral in the pre-modern times.

This scene depicts the service for death in Zoroastrianism which is called *rawanpase* “soul-service”, which is a solemn affair in orthodox Zoroastrianism.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the scene includes a noble lady



Fig. 3. Detail of panel on the Miho Museum’s Sogdian burial couch depicting the Zoroastrian *rawanpase*, “soul-service”. Source: <<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/images/death/sogdianchinvatdetail.jpg>>.

Fig. 4. Mourners from the mural depicting the Buddha's Parinirvana, in the "Maya Cave," Kizil Grottoes near Kucha, Xinjiang. After: Grtnewel 1912, Fig. 415, p. 180.



holding the deceased person's *kusti* (sacred girdle). Behind her is a group of mourners. This would be an orthodox Zoroastrian funeral, except that four of the mourners are lacerating their faces.<sup>6</sup>

More evidence is found in textual sources from Greater Khorasan. For instance, a Sogdian Manichaean text describes the way Iranian partook in a funerary ritual: "... and there take place spilling of blood, killing of horses, laceration of faces, and taking (=cutting off?) of ears (?). And the Lady Nan(a) accompanied by her women, walks on to the bridge, they smash the vessels, loud they call out, they weep, tear (their garments), pull out (their hairs), and throw themselves to the ground" (Henning 1944, p. 144; see also Russell 2004, p. 1449). This matches the funerary scene described earlier.

Buddhist cave images from along the "Silk Roads" document what can be interpreted as Central Asian mourning traditions. The examples here both depict the death of the Buddha, the *Parinirvana*, where he is being mourned by his disciples and others. The earliest of these [Fig. 4], dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, is from the Kizil Caves along the "northern Silk Road" near Kucha.<sup>7</sup> Above the flaming bier with the Buddha's body is a "balcony" with a row of figures dramatically displaying their grief. Two of them are either lacerating their faces or preparing to cut off their noses. The physiognomies of several of the individuals suggest they might be of central Asian ethnicity—in any event, different from the "Indian" appearance of the other figures.

Further to the east, at the important cross-cultural Silk Road oasis of Dunhuang, one of the most impressive of the Mogao Caves, No. 158, dating from 839 CE, is dominated by a huge statue of the Buddha reclining in *Parinirvana*.<sup>8</sup> Around him on the walls are paintings of the mourners (and all the other surfaces of the cave are painted as well with imagery drawn from Buddhist scriptures). The usual form of mourners at the time of Buddha's passing is the gesture of holding the hand by the ears to try to remember what the last words of the Buddha to his disciples were. At the feet of the Buddha in this cave are depictions of foreign emissaries (from the West), and followers of Buddha who are engaged in lacerating their face, chest, or nose [Fig. 5]. One of the mourners is even committing *hari-kiri*. The suggestion

Fig. 5. Mourners depicted on the mural behind the statue of the Buddha in Parinirvana, Mogao Cave No. 158, Dunhuang, Gansu Province. After: Dunhuang Mogaoku 1987, Pl. 65.



may be that we are dealing with Iranian or Turkic emissaries who are witnessing the passing of Buddha and mourning in their own traditional custom.

Thus, we might cautiously conclude that lacerating one's body, contrary to both Zoroastrian and Buddhist traditions was practiced in Central Asia. While the Miho couch relief very likely reflects some direct knowledge of at least "unorthodox" Zoroastrian rituals, as we would expect in a Sogdian milieu, the Buddhist paintings may or may not reflect realities familiar to the artist – they could be a kind of ethnic stereotyping or caricature, with, from the Buddhist standpoint, negative connotations.<sup>9</sup> At very least though, it is clear that these artistic depictions of mourning rituals originated in regions where there was an ethnically mixed population that included Iranian and Turkic peoples and whose cultural traditions left their mark in what we think of as "Chinese" culture.<sup>10</sup> The period of the Tang Dynasty (618–906) is considered to be one in which the presence of foreigners and a taste for foreign exotica reached a peak. However, on the Iranian Plateau, we do not have much information for laceration in any performances of pain and memory. It may be that the documentation is simply not there, or more probably Zoroastrianism did not allow such practices to take place.

In Islam, the practice self-harm and self-injury as a mourning ritual remains prevalent among Shiites. Another hero whose annual mourning ceremony involves self-laceration is Hussain ibn Ali, the youngest grandson of the prophet Muhammad. He rose against the Ummayyad Caliph, Yazid, and was defeated by the latter's army. Hussain, his sons, and his allies were brutally killed on the day of *Ashura*, the tenth day of the lunar month of *Moharram*, in 680 CE. His death subsequently was avenged by Mokhtar (Zarrinkub 1975, pp. 36–37), just as Siavash was avenged by Rostam, and his legacy as a blameless hero who preferred to die rather than give in to tyranny and suppression was carried on by Shiite Muslims.

On the day of *Ashura*, almost everywhere in the Shiite world, public mourning ceremonies commemorate this loss. Among various customs of this day, two specifically pertain to our interest. The first is *Ta'ziyeh* (mourning) (Monchi-Zadeh 1967; Yarshater 1979), a staged performance, where the battle of *Karbala* and the slaughter of Hussain and his followers is reenacted, while the audience engage in fits of grievance, hitting or pounding of the chest, and shedding of tears. The second ritual is a parade-like event called *Zanjir-zani*, where groups of men walk through the streets in an organized manner while the leader of the event chants somber hymns commemorating the suffering of Hussain. Male participants either pound their chests or slash their own backs with the *zanjir* (chain).

Slashing one's back with the *zanjir* can be done either lightly or draw blood depending on the region where the ritual is observed. For example, parts of the Shiite world such as Afghanistan witness very bloody scenes of *Zanjir-zani*. A third custom, now outlawed in Iran, is called *Qameh-zani* where participants, usually male, would stab their foreheads with the tip of a dagger (*Qameh*). This ritual takes place while mourners/participants, clad in black, walk the streets either weeping or chanting songs of grief.

Such practices of self-harm are not new. Customs and rituals found among civilizations with an enduring ancient background are usually deeply rooted and can be traced further back in history. This especially pertains to customs dealing with death and the spiritual realm. With regard to the practices of *Ashura*, in a study on the performance of *Ta'ziyeh* we find amazing drawings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE depicting scenes where men are illustrated lacerating their faces as a sign of mourning. More documents can be found in travelogues of Europeans who have visited Persia, especially in the seventeenth century, and left vivid descriptions of the performance of *Ta'ziyeh* on the day of *Ashura* (Newman 2008, p. 78). They report encountering scenes where people lacerated themselves during this day in an attempt to feel the pain of the irreproachable hero Hussain.

Although many believe that the tradition of self-laceration was promoted by the Safavids (Newman 2008, p. 36) in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> CE and is limited to the Shiite history of Persia, it appears that the custom of punishing one's body as a sign or an act of mourning for the passing of someone dearly loved or someone with a high religious, spiritual or political status has had a longer history in the Iranian world and its neighboring lands. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE, in a period which has been dubbed as the Iranian *Intermezzo*, we see the performance of pain, in what Marshall Hodgson has termed the "Perso-Islamicate world."

Among the various dynasties who ruled at the time, only the Buyids (concerning whom, see Minorsky 1932) adopted a distinct religious stance vis-à-vis the Sunni Caliph at Baghdad. The Buyids, from the Caspian region, had "national" interests, from the minting of coinage in the style of the ancient Persian kings (Madelung 1969), to leaving inscriptions at Persepolis and consulting with the Zoroastrian Magi (Frye 1993, p. 251). However, their commitment to Shi'ism was also abundantly clear, or it became clear when they became the de facto political power. While the Buyids began as Zaydis by the time they extended their power beyond the Caspian, they had become "twelver Shiites," a tradition that was elevated to official status alongside the dominant Sunni tradition of Baghdad.

It is difficult to determine when and how the first Shiite passion-play and acts of self-laceration became part of mourning rituals dedicated Imam Hussain. One of the earliest attestations is from the Buyid period. Mu'izz al-Dawla was instrumental in promoting Shiite practices and for the first time on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram in 963 CE a public mourning was performed. "The markets were closed and commerce ceased. Women, with loosened hair, blackened faces, and rent garments, marched in procession, beating (and lacerating) their faces in lamentation" (Kraemer 1992, p. 42). Historians categorize this type of mourning ritual as a Caspian region/Daylamite tradition, the region being closely connected to Khorasan both geographically and culturally (Ibid., p. 42).

What is interesting to note is that not only Zoroastrianism and Buddhism but also Islam disallow wailing and mourning.<sup>11</sup> It is in the Shiite tradition that the mourning ritual gains ground and becomes fully accepted. Because of their lamentation practices in line with those of the Greater Khorasanian or Central Asian world, the Buyids seem to have been responsible for promoting such observances or at least laying the basis for their broader dissemination. It is also interesting that the early Persian text which narrates such practices of mourning, the *Shahnameh*, is contemporaneous with the first Ashura performance/ceremony held by the Buyids in Baghdad. Possibly this marks an important step in the transmission of a ritual from Greater Khorasan across the entire Iranian plateau. Were not the Daylamite Buyids interjecting into the minds of their subjects their own rituals and those of the east as performance of pain in commemoration of blameless heroes whose life was taken unjustly? In this way the death of Siavash in Khorasan and Imam Hussain in Iraq came to be remembered in a similar fashion and their mourning rituals came together and intertwined in the larger Iranian world.

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## Notes

1. On the death of Siavash, see Meskoob 1971; Hasouri 2005. For more details on the death of Hussain and his allies during the battle of Karbala, see Ṭabarī 1990, pp. 92-178.
2. It is interesting to note here that still in some areas of Iran, funerary ceremonies, especially those held in honor of a popular person, are accompanied by participants covering their head or their whole body in dust or mud as a sign of mourning.
3. The term is most probably a shortened version of *Sug e Siavashan*.
4. For other representations of *Sag-did* in Sogdian funerary art, see Lerner 2013, p. 137.
5. Henning believes that the significance of the term "soul service" is not clear, but that "it might refer to a religious service for the souls of the departed" (Henning 1944, p. 143, n. 6).

6. A vase from Merv depicts a possibly Sogdian funerary scene with mourners, who may be weeping but are not lacerating their faces. See Compareti 2011.

7. The painting, in the so-called "Maya Cave" was removed by the German Turfan expeditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a process which, unfortunately, destroyed a good portion of the imagery of greatest interest here. What remains may be seen in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin, MIK III 8861, which indicates it has been carbon-dated 416-526 CE. See online <<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/mia/im71e.jpg>>; for a sharper, good color reproduction, *Kezi'er shiku* 1997, Pl. 224. The mourners are in a "balcony" above the bier on which the body of the Buddha was being cremated. As the caption to Grünwedel's drawing indicates (1912, Fig. 415, p. 180), the figures were painted in a single row, which he has divided into two.

8. For a description of the cave, see Whitfield 1995, Vol. 2, pp. 323-325; there are some color plates in his Vol. 1, pp. 103-104. More generally on a number of the most important Buddhist cave sites in the region, see Juliano 2001.

9. On the possibility of caricature in the Chinese depiction of foreigners, note Lerner 2013, p. 138.

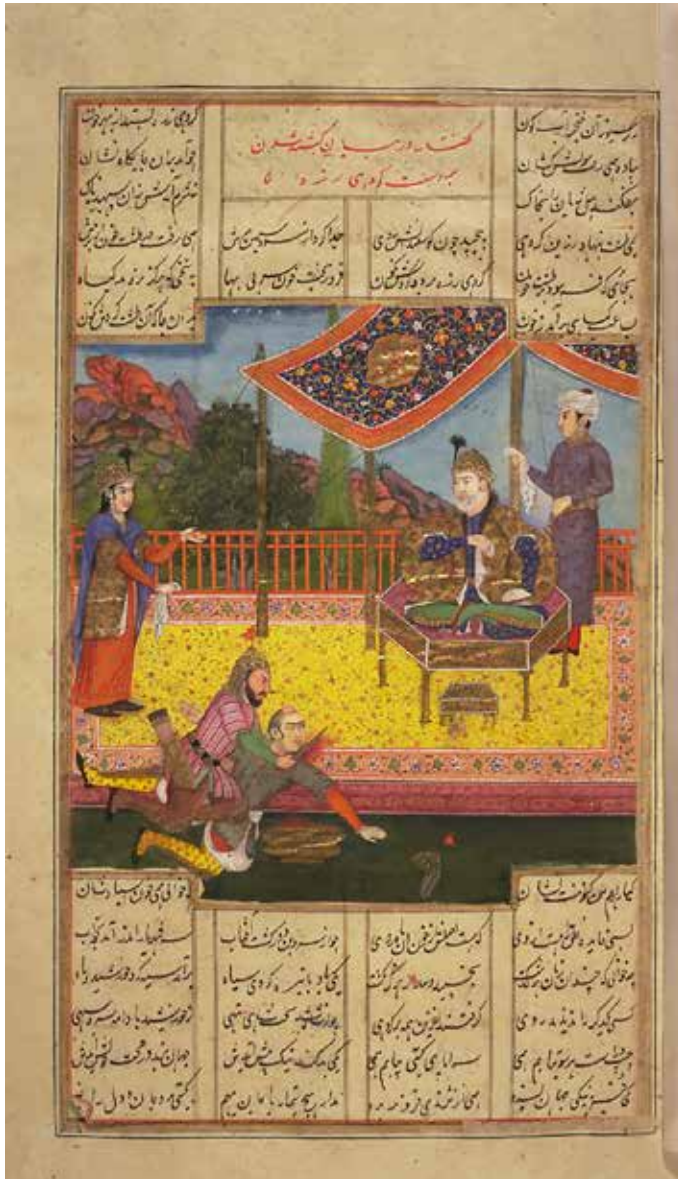
10. There is a huge literature relating to this subject. Good introductions can be found in Juliano and Lerner 2001 and the classic book on Tang exotica by Schafer 1963.

11. For the *hadith* that prohibit pulling of hair, scratching of cheeks, and wailing over the deceased in Islam see Al-Bukhari 1997, pp. 216-28.



PLATE VI

[Daryae and Malekzadeh, "Performance of Pain," p. 57]



The killing of Siavash. Illustration to the Shahnameh, dated AH 1065/CE 1654-65. Islamic Manuscripts, Garrett no. 57G. Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Copyright © Princeton University Library, reproduced with permission.