At the Buddhist site of Kakrak, not far from Bāmyān in Afghanistan, some paintings and a colossal statue of Buddha were found during the first half of the last century. Among the most interesting and beautiful paintings there is the so-called «Hunter-King» sitting cross-legged on a throne under a square arch supported by pillars which is reminiscent of Gandhāran architectonical frames. Every space above a capital presents the image of a white stupa embellished with ribbons and a tree appears on both sides of the sitting person (fig. 1). The size of the painting is 0.60 m. x 0.52 m. and the date most recently proposed is the end of 7th-beginning of the 8th century. Its name is due to the crown and jewels worn by the presumed king and the bow which he is holding in a strange position with two hands in front of his chest while two arrows appear sticking in the ground at his side. Finally, an open-mouthed dog comes out from the curtain which covers the throne and the heads of two white ducks (his prey?) or snakes (Nagas?) can be observed on the right upper side of the throne, just below the floating ribbon typical of Sasanian art.

The painting was kept in the Kabul Museum and in an article that recently appeared on the Internet, Z. Tarzi stated that it survived the systematic destruction of ancient Afghan monuments during the dramatic events which are still afflicting that devastated Central Asian country. The present study is, however, entirely

1 Hackin, Carl, 1933: pl. LXXII, fig. 86. For the description of the discovery, see also: Tarzi, 1977: 186-190.


4 See: A.W. Ferrooz, Z. Tarzi, «The Impact of War upon Afghanistan's
based on two photos published by M. Bussagli and B. Rowland more than thirty years ago\(^5\) and not on the original painting. So, all the hypotheses proposed here should be considered with extreme caution.

1. **History of the research**

The painting is always referred to as the «Hunter-King» (or, in French, as «personnage princier»): Roman Ghirshman did not hesitate to use that name and so did, much more recently, F. Tissot.\(^6\) Mario Bussagli too concluded that he was not a god since the triple-crescent crown typical of local kings would point to a bejewelled royal character fond of hunting, as the bow, arrows and dog suggest.\(^7\) B. Rowland did not appear particularly

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\(^7\) Bussagli, 1963: 39. For Hackin and Carl he was a princely figure too: Tarzi, 1977: 188-190. See also: Hallade, 1972: 422; Klimburg-Salter, 1993: 356.
convinced of that definition although he eventually proposed an identification with a local prince and T. Talbot Rice described him as a «deified king». An article entirely dedicated to the analysis of the «Hunter-King» was published by U. Jäger twenty years ago. Many interesting ideas have been presented by Jäger especially on the iconographical features of the princely figure which were possibly taken from the world of the nomads (Chionites or Hephtalites). The triple-crescent crown of the «Hunter-King» is, in fact, very common among Hephtalite coins which have been found in Afghanistan. According to Jäger’s interpretation, the so-called «Hunter-King» was a symbolic representation of a royal person who converted to Buddhism and abandoned hunting and violence in general.

New hypotheses which openly differ from the traditional identification have been recently presented in two articles which appeared on the Internet. Z. Tarzi was of the opinion that it is an image of «Bodhisattva Siddartha before the illumination or during an episode of the jataka». A second scholar, P. Banerjee, preferred to recognize in that painting a representation of a divine being because of the halo behind his head: he proposed Revanta who is the son of Sūrya and a hunter too. Tarzi’s idea is not supported by literary sources and it would be good to know more about the jataka that he is mentioning. Banerjee’s arguments could hardly be considered correct. They do not take into consideration many aspects of Iranian Buddhism and seem to be too concentrated on searching for Indian elements at Kakrak and Bāmiyan. Those Afghan sites were definitely Buddhist ones and, as it is well-known, Indian divinities like Indra and Brahma appear very early in scenes of the life of Buddha. Even this does not justify a reading totally based on Indian religious elements as they refer to minor divinities (like Revanta) who were not much represented in contemporary Indian art. It is also worth observing

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9 Talbot Rice, 1965: 166.
10 On the crown of the «Hunter-King» and its connection with Hephtalite rule, see: Kageyama, 2008.
that Revanta was usually represented as an archer riding a horse. Further, the halo of the so-called «Hunter-King» could hardly be considered a specific divine characteristic because, at the near-by site of Bāmyān, at least one monk and several figures identified as possible representatives of the royal (Sasanian?) family presenting gifts to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have halos as well.\textsuperscript{14}

In our opinion, Jäger’s arguments still constitute the best identification of the «Hunter-King» at Kakrak and the present paper is mainly based on his ideas.

2. \textit{Remarks on some details}

More than one detail deserves special attention for identifying that figure. Certainly the crown with crescents and the jewels point to an important person who could be identified as a sovereign although nothing allows us to think that local divinities could not have worn jewels and crowns as well. If the two animals on one upper right side of the throne should be considered Nagas as U. Jäger suggested, then they could have been associated with a royal figure like in Kucha paintings or a divine being as it can be observed very often in Buddhist art.

The context at Kakrak is definitely Buddhist and it cannot be excluded that the model for the «Hunter-King» could have been an image of Bodhisattva or one of the so-called \textit{Buddha parée},\textsuperscript{15} both of whom are characterized by precious garments and jewels. The position of the head slightly turned down, the expression of the big almond eyes and the elongated ears call to mind the face of a Bodhisattva. Statues of Bodhisattvas wearing crowns can be observed very often from Afghanistan to Xinjiang, especially in stucco.\textsuperscript{16}

One of the main elements which determined the choice of the name of the painting, namely the bow, presents some problems. In fact, it is reproduced in a realistic way and it is a weapon used for hunting and the painter did not neglect details such as the curved shape and the point where the string had to be positioned. While the arrows sticking in the ground at his side are


\textsuperscript{15} The «Buddha parée» is very common in the region of Bāmyān: Rowland, 1961.

\textsuperscript{16} Béguin, 1992: 95-121.
represented realistically and, close to the feathers, it is possible to observe the exact point where the string should have been put. Moreover, the posture of the hands shows great artistic skill in rendering a sort of reverential attitude to the archer who is represented offering the bow as a sign of his peaceful intention towards the Buddha next to him in the painting. The bow cannot harm anybody in the position in which it is held. What is really striking in the representation of such a realistic bow is its size: it seems to be too small to be useful for hunting or fighting and, if compared with the two big arrows, it appears very clearly that they do not match at all. Why should such a talented artist make such a mistake? Some scholars think it was not a mistake and those who recognize it as a royal scene (like U. Jäger) could deduce that, in this way, the painter was depicting a king who had been used to kill and now was converted to the Dharma. However, it could be considered that the bow in that painting is just a symbolic attribute, a secondary element whose presence does not affect the power of its owner who should be considered a divinity as already suggested by Tarzi and Banerjee.

If the painter really intended to reproduce a royal figure in the act of presenting his weapon to the Buddha, why did he represent the dog as if barking at the Buddha seeming to threaten him with his open mouth and pointed ears? This apparent incongruity could only be explained by studying other Central Asian paintings in which animals were depicted in the same way. Scholars suspect the existence of sketch-books for artists as has been postulated by Maršak in one of his most recent studies on Sogdian painting. The striking similarity of battle scenes in the monumental paintings at Penjikent with some early Sasanian rock reliefs led the Russian scholar to think that Sogdian painters had access to sketch-books in which a wide repertoire of useful images was found. 17 So, if the dog, partially visible behind the curtains which cover the seat of the «Hunter-King», is represented in the way that it is, it has no particular significance. The attitude of the dog could easily has been reproduced by the artist who copied the model from one of such sketch-books.

The color of the dog seems to be blue like the background although it is not possible to exclude that it could have been darker and during the centuries its original pigmentation has faded away. Unfortunately, the photos published by Bussagli and

Rowland are not very clear although on the lower part of the legs of the dog there are curved lines which possibly belong to the object behind it. That object seems to be a part of the seat, probably covered with a yellow material since there are curved elements which could be folds. The seat presents a very precise symmetry while the yellow material of the throne appears much clearer on the right side. It can be discerned better for the absence of the dog but at that point the painting is quite damaged. The bad state of preservation could give the illusion of a second dog which has almost disappeared. However, it does not seem the case since the traces of a dog would not be in scale with the dog on the left of the throne. Next to the column capital on the right there is something painted in brown which is unfortunately impossible to recognize (possibly a portion of the ribbon attached to the column?). On the left the same space is occupied by the two arrows. Therefore, the symmetry in the painting is not strictly respected.

3. Iranian parallels

In the case of a seat or throne supported by two animal-like beings, there would have been no doubts in identifying the «Hunter-King» at Kakrak with a Zoroastrian divinity according to a typical Iranian religious iconography which is well-known in Sogdian art. Several 8th century paintings from Penjikent, some ossuaries and terracotta statuettes and literary sources help us to compile a reliable list of the attributes and animals associated with Sogdian divinities. In Sanskrit the symbolic animal and vehicle of an Indian god is called vāhana and this term is preferred by scholars for Sogdian divinities too. During the 6th century, Sogdians artists started to abandon their traditional divine iconography in order to adopt Indian models. This phenomenon was particularly studied at Penjikent but it can be considered valid also for other regions of Sogdiana. The reasons for the occurrence of such a phenomenon are still a matter of debate among scholars. Investigations on this specific problem have started too recently to allow one to compile a detailed Indo-Sogdian pantheon. It should

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18 Azarpay, 1975; Škoda, 1980. Sogdian elements have been already noted at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān, not far from Bāmyān, so, very close to Kakrak: MODE, 1992.
be also admitted that the religion professed in Sogdiana is only partially known and most of the Sogdian religious texts that have been found outside Sogdiana are Buddhist or Manichaean translations. The few Sogdian divinities who can be now safely recognized are usually represented sitting on a throne supported by their allegoric animals partially covered by the usual curtains or precious material.

We know that the iconography of the throne supported by allegoric animals was adopted in Kakrak and Bāmyān as well. At the site of Dokhtar-e Nuširvān (known also as Nigār, Afghanistan) there are remains of a painting representing a haloed divinity under an arch in typical Iranian garments sitting on a throne supported by horses (?) and donors (smaller in size) on his right side (fig. 2). One of the donors is wearing a caftan embellished with pearl roundels, a typical Iranian textile decoration which became very popular during 6th-7th century. Only few fragments of the Dokhtar-e Nuširvān painting survive and so, in the last thirty-five years, scholars have attempted to identify the main figure who is sitting in the central part of the scene as Verethragna-Bahrām, or Ahura Mazdā, or Mithra or, most recently, Zun (possibly, a local form for Zurvān) on iconographical and historical bases. The study of his attributes seems to be the key for a correct identification. I will soon discuss these attributes and attempt a different identification. Here it is worth insisting on the presence in Dokhtar-e Nuširvān of a painting closer to Sogdian models than Sasanian or Indian ones.

Fig. 2. Painting at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān (Nigār, Afghanistan).
After: Klimburg-Salter, 1993: fig. 5 (the detail of the «lion head» above the crown was added by this author).

The throne at Kakrak was most likely intended to show only one dog but it is not possible to exclude the fact that its model could have been taken from the representation of a local Zoroastrian god whose seat was supported by two animals as at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān. It is worth observing once more that the context at Kakrak is definitely Buddhist and so many original elements of the presumed local model could have been lost or not represented on purpose.

In Sogdian art, the bow and arrow have been recognized as typical attributes of Tištrya, the Zoroastrian rain god identified with the star Sirius, who was often represented together with Nānā. The divine couple can be observed on a terracotta ossuary from Kaška Darya (Uzbekistan) on which, unfortunately there are no symbolic animals but donors. However, the arrow is clearly discernible in his lower pair of hands (fig. 3). Another representation in Sogdian art can be observed in an 8th century fragmentary painting from Penjikent, sector XXV, room 12 (fig. 4). The throne of Tištrya in the painting seems to be supported by winged fantastic creatures which were hypothetically reconstructed by the excavators on the few details that can be seen. Also the arrow could not be distinguished properly and its point

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22 GRENET, MARSHAK, 1998: 10-16; GRENET, MARSHAK in BERDICURADOY, SAMIBAEV, 2001: 58-63. Sirius is part of the constellation of Canis Major which is said to be one of the dogs of the constellation of the hunter Orion. In Avestan literature the arrow and, less often, the bow are described as attributes of Tištrya: GNOLI, 1963: 238-240; PANAINO, 1995: 52-54. Tištrya is also considered to be the general of the eastern part of the sky in Pahlavi texts: TAFAZZOLI, 2000: 8.

23 The iconography of Tištrya is partially based on Indian models as it is particularly evident in the Sogdian ossuary from Kaška Darya: MODE, 1991/92: fig. 11; GRENET, MARSHAK, 1998: fig. 6.
has been added, in figure 4, after a reconstruction proposed by Grenet and Marshak.\footnote{Grenet, Marshak, 1998: fig. 12.}

At Ghulbyân (Afghanistan), about 200 kilometers north-west of Bamyan, other painted images of Zoroastrian divinities in local attire have been found and tentatively identified. According to E. Grenet, the painting at Ghulbyân should be dated to 4\textsuperscript{th}-5\textsuperscript{th} century.\footnote{Lee, Grenet, 1998: 82.} The sitting god who is larger than the others has been identified with Tiśtrya because of the arrow in his right hand and a pond filled with fishes under his feet, possibly an allusion to the Vorukāša Sea (fig. 5). A pair of spread wings with a crescent on its top appears above his head possibly as part of a crown. This seems to be a characteristic of local divinities and, in fact, a very

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Fig. 4. Painting from Penjikent, sector XXV, room 12. After: Grenet, Marshak, 1998: fig. 12 (detail).
similar element can be noted at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān where, however, a pair of ram's horns and a lion head (?)\textsuperscript{26} appear above the spread wings (fig. 2). If the crescent at Ghulbyān could be considered as an astral allusion to Tīśtrya, the ram's horns could be associated to Khwarnah as it is suggested in Pahlavi sources. This divinity has been identified by some at Ghulbyān because of a horned ram head below his feet.\textsuperscript{27} There is no weapon or characteristic attribute held by Khwarnah at Ghulbyān although it could be supposed that a spear or a caduceus was an appropriate one as it can be observed in Kušān coinage.\textsuperscript{28} Only part of the animals that are supporting the throne of the god at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān are still visible and their heads too have disappeared. So it is not excluded that they could have been rams and not horses. At least two isolated figures of ibexes and a pair of ram’s horns appear on the left of the god at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān but it is not possible to hypothesize because of the fragmentary state of the painting.\textsuperscript{29} It is not even sure that the ram should be the appropriate vāhana for Khwarnah (called in Sogdian Fara) and, in fact, Grenet proposed to attribute to him a throne supported by

\textsuperscript{26} The lion or monstrous head between the ram’s horns and the spread wings are not always represented in the reconstruction of the painting at Dokhtar-e Nuširvān which were proposed by different scholars in the past. It was one of Grenet’s main argument in order to associate that god with Mithra whose halo is embellished with allegories of planets: GRENET, 1995: 116-118. If the heads of the animals around the halo could be really identified as allegories for the planets, then they could be attributed to any great god locally venerated, not only Mithra.

\textsuperscript{27} LEE, GRENET, 1998, 83.

\textsuperscript{28} CARTER, 1986.

\textsuperscript{29} KIMBURG-SALTER, 1993: fig. 362. Grenet thinks that the figures there should be considered donots: GRENET, 1995: 108.
camels or winged camels in Sogdian art. However, to Marshak the camel is the animal of Verethragna-Bahrām. At present it is not possible to be more specific. In the Suishu (Chronicle of the Sui Dynasty, composed in 636) it is clearly stated that only the king of Bukhara had a throne in the shape of a camel but no god is mentioned at all.

The painting of Tištrya at Ghulbyān seems to be based on another tradition, completely different than the figure of the god on the Kāška Darya ossuary and in 8th century Penjikent mural paintings but which is quite close to the divinities painted at Jar Tepa (Uzbekistan), another Sogdian site possibly to be dated to 4th-5th century. The sitting couple larger than the other people close to them represented in the fragmentary paintings at Jar Tepa have been identified by B. Marshak and F. Grenet as Nanā and Tištrya. Their association with hunting in Avestan literature could explain their presence at Ghulbyān and Jar Tepa where archers shooting at animals have a prominent position. It seems that the divine couple at Jar Tepa is sitting on a throne supported by lions, the usual attribute of Nanā, who should be identified with the figure wearing long garments on the right. The god sitting on the same throne with a curved object (possibly a bow?) next to her could then be identified with Tištrya (fig. 6). Both divine and animal heads are missing although the lion on the right next to Nanā seems to be higher than the animal on the left next to Tištrya. If they were two different animals, then the animal next

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Marshak, Raspopova, 1990: 137-144.


to Tištrya could be a dog which is one of the most important animals for Zoroastrians. Unfortunately, the bad condition of the paintings does not allow one to be precise. Divine couples sitting on the same throne, supported by different animals (camel and ram) are known in later Sogdian paintings. They are all found at Penjikent and should be dated to 8th century.  

The association of the dog as a possible vāhana of Tištrya is highly speculative. The only precise association between Tištrya and the dog as his allegoric animal has been proposed by F. Grenet and G.-J. Pinault in a long article on a painted scroll on paper representing the decans of the Indian and Iranian zodiac and other divinities. Some words in Tokharian appear as well in the scroll allowing one to give a precise interpretation of the subject and localize its origin in the region of Turfan around 8th-9th century. Most likely, that painted scroll was a kind of «survey of Western astrology» prepared for local astrologers or members of the royal family who used the Chinese zodiac of the twelve animals and were probably curious about other systems. In that painted scroll, Indian and Iranian astronomical-astrological allegories appear intermingled in a complicated way which have parallels in western literature of the Middle Ages mentioned in the brilliant commentary by Grenet and Pinault. Some of the divinities in the scroll appear together with their symbolic animals. In this case too the painting is very fragmentary and just few details of the image identified with Tištrya and the dog have been preserved. The divinity is represented in Indian attire wearing a dhoti and with a halo behind his head but he is holding neither arrow nor bow. The dog is clearly represented behind the divinity: its elongated snout, long ears and curly tail point to a hound (fig. 7). The absence of the bow and arrow could be due to an artist unfamiliar with the subjects that he was reproducing. In any

34 Belenitskii, Marshak, 1988: fig. 7-8; Marshak, Raspopova, 1990: fig. 16-17.  
35 In Avestan literature, Den (a personification of the Zoroastrian religion) is said to be accompanied by two dogs but she is always described as a lady. The most interesting image of Den in association with the dog was recognized in a fragmentary 9th-10th century painting on paper from Dunhuang to be possibly attributed to Sogdian immigrants who settled there: Grenet, Zhang, 1996. These ideas have been criticized in two recent studies: Silvi Antonini, 2007; Lo Muzio, 2006 [2009]: 199.  
36 The scroll is known as MIK III 520 and it is kept in the Staatliche Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin: Grenet, Pinault, 1997: 1057-1058, fig. 1.  
Fig. 7. Painted scroll MIK III 520, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin. Sketch after: Grenet, Pinault, 1997: fig. 1 (sketch).

case, bow, arrow and dog represented singularly or together are also the characteristic attributes of the personification of planet Mercury whose tutelary divinity, in Iranian astrology, is Tir, that is to say Tištšrya. 38

As it has been observed above, those divinities who belonged to one cultural milieu could have been represented in local dress in another. In some cases it is very clear that the adoption of a foreign iconography for a local god is determined by its common attributes. This is a normal phenomenon particularly true for Iranian divinities (interpretatio iranica) although it is still unknown why one iconographical system was preferred instead of another. 39 The Parthians and the Bactrians adopted the Greek iconography for some of their divinities and the Sogdians used that of India. There is then to consider the receptiveness of the Central Asian people to the Mesopotamian heritage of their divinities as is shown in the case of Nanā in Kušān and Sogdian art. All this is particularly true in the sphere of astronomy and astrology where the base was clearly Hellenistic-Mesopotamian with very important

38 Gnoli, 1963; Grenet, Pinault, 1997: 1057-1059; Grenet, Marshak, 1998: 12. There is some confusion between Tir and Tištšrya in Zoroastrian literature. The two names can point to the same divinity or two different (and opposed) ones: Malandra, 1983: 142-143.

39 The problem is discussed extensively in: Comparetti, (forthcoming). Classical authors often called foreign divinities with Greek (or Latin) names (interpretatio graeca). The choice of the names was determined in many cases because of characteristics that those divinities had in common. The most famous example is given by information on Artemis among the Achaemenids, possibly to mean Anahita, as described by Herodotus; de Jong, 1997: 268-284. According to the interpretatio graeca, Tištšrya was associated to Hermes or Apollo, and to Nabu according to the interpretatio mesopotamica: Gnoli, 1963: 242; de Jong, 1997: 297-299. According to ancient Mesopotamian tradition, Nanā was connected with Tašmetu, Nabu’s wife, so making clear why the Sogdians adopted the same association: Azarpay, 1975: 25; Potts, 2001: 24. Curiously, in Kušān coins Tir-Tištšrya is represented according to the Greek iconography of Artemis and, so, with bow and arrows: Gnoli, 1963: 240.
Egyptian elements. As several studies seem to confirm, the Iranians were extremely interested in astronomical-astrological matters and the diffusion of «Western» concepts into India, ⁴⁰ China and other regions ⁴¹ should most likely be attributed to them. Grenet and Maršak supposed that the way in which Tištrya is holding the arrow in Sogdian art is the same as that of Mercury in India (where he was called Budha). ⁴²

4. Conclusion

Several details seem to point to an identification of the so-called «Hunter-Kings» at Kakrak with a divinity and not a sovereign although the crown suggested the contrary to Bussagli and others. Not only the halo but other attributes such as the bow with arrows and the dog represented supporting the throne, would confirm this new hypothesis. However it is difficult to decide if that god should be identified with Tištrya since the dog is not reproduced symmetrically on both sides of the throne.

As already observed, Kakrak is a Buddhist site. So it is easier to assume that he is a personification of the planet Mercury. He is a curious mixture of iconographical elements: the head is that of a Bodhisattva wearing the triple-crescent crown but the throne with the dog is possibly taken from a local image of Tištrya. His sitting position reminds one of an Indian divinity but it was a typical characteristic of Sogdian religious iconography too. ⁴³

Furthermore, as the paintings at Kakrak are very fragmentary it could be supposed that other images of the personification of planets existed next to representations of Buddhas exactly as at Bāmyān where a well-known figure of the Sun God was painted above the head of the eastern colossal Buddha. Grenet always identified him as Mithra ⁴⁴, although it has been recently argued about an identification of the «Sun God» at Bāmyān with a princely figure. ⁴⁵

⁴³ In Buddhist art this is a typical attitude of the so-called «pensive Bodhisattva»: Juliano, 2006: 32–33.
⁴⁵ Tanabe, 2005.
Scholars are still discussing such paintings and it seems that a solution to their identification does not exist yet. Since all the hypothetical arguments exposed here should be considered within the cultural milieu of Iranian Buddhism, then the figures displaying important links with astronomy and astrology that were represented according to the iconography of local divinities could have been used in a different context. The reading of those paintings is extremely complicated. For this reason, at the beginning of the present paper it was said that the study of the Kakrak paintings should be done very cautiously.

In this way, U. Jäger's idea about a symbolic representation of «converted royalty» could still represent a valid alternative reading although the iconography of the so-called «Hunter-King» should be regarded as a mixture of elements belonging to a local divinity (possibly Zoroastrian) with other elements taken from the nomadic world. The same mixture of elements could be considered correct in case of an identification of the «Hunter-King» as a planetary divinity (Mercury) presenting his weapons to the Buddha as a sign of renunciation.

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THE PAINTING OF THE «HUNTER KING» AT KAKRAK

ABSTRACT
One of the paintings from the 7th-century Buddhist site of Kakrak (region of Bamiyan, Afghanistan) portrays a nimbed hunter holding a bow and sitting on a throne. A dog is placed in the lower part of the throne and two white animals partially show in the higher part of the same seat. His attributes and the triple-crescent crown intimated a royal figure fond of hunting which explains the epithet of «Hunter-King» used in the past. Among the most recent studies, U. Jäger proposed to interpret the painting as the symbolic portrait of a nobleman converted to Buddhism, in whose iconography local and nomadic royal elements are mixed. His interpretation might be correct; but the local iconographical elements are, in all likelihood, features taken from the figure of Tištrya, the Zoroastrian rain god who was confused with the planet Mercury. Another possibility is that the so-called «Hunter-King» is actually a personification of the planet Mercury in the act of submitting to the Buddha close to him in the same painting.

KEYWORDS