

Continuation of Zoroastrianism in Sogdia and China after the Arab conquest of Iran

Dr. Kersey Antia

May 24, 2018; Updated July 27, 2018

Frantz Grenet and Zhang Guangla have found pictorial evidence for the Mazdean religion in the ninth and tenth century Dunhuang in China (“The Last Refuge of the Sogdian Religion: Dunhuang in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,” *The Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, Volume 10, 1996, pp. 175-186). They interpret their findings in terms of the Sogdian variant of Zoroastrianism. It is difficult to explain their findings without presenting their pictorial representations, but, suffice to say, they invoke “all the thirty deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon who are invoked together at the time of the Saixian, Xian meaning Zoroastrian gods and Sai meaning “to requite a godsend,” which they explain, “would perfectly correspond to the Zoroastrian ceremony of the Afringan “thanksgiving.” They also found allotment of alcohol for various Zoroastrian ceremonies or processions, five bushels of flour are given for the cult to the “heavenly God” which “is still another designation of Ohrmazd” whom the Sogdians called Adhvagh, “Supreme God,” which is so very reminiscent of the PFT (Persepolis Fortification Tablets) of the Achaemenians assigning rations to various deities and officials, as mentioned by me elsewhere. “From these texts,” posits the authors, “it appears that there existed in Turfan an official board in charge of the affairs of the “heavenly religion” and of the distribution of offerings to its ceremonies.” These texts “demonstrate the variety of cults practiced in the region together with Buddhism. These various cults and traditions could only influence one another,” as detailed by me elsewhere.

The goddess shown in the picture is associated with a dog and the only deity associated with the dog in the Avesta is Den, the personification of the Zoroastrian religion and of one’s own conscience. Vendidad (19.30) describes Den as meeting the Ruwan (soul) of the departed one at the Chinvat Bridge with her two dogs. Den is depicted as wearing the Kustig, the sacred card worn by Zoroastrians which too symbolizes the religion represented by Den. The authors compare it with the Kustig worn by Zoroastrian priests on some Sogdian ossuaries. To sum up, the authors firmly establish the figure in the picture as Den on the basis of various evidence from the Avesta and Pahlavi texts.