

## Lions Travelling East

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Ill. 1. Architectural lion, Persepolis, Iran, 6th BC<sup>1</sup>

Ill. 2. Eastern Han 25 –221 AD life-sized stone *bixie* (winged lion) 293 cm l.  
Found in Henan Province. Luoyang Museum<sup>2</sup>

Between the sixth century BC and the first AD, lion iconography travelled eastward along the Silk Roads, reaching China by the Eastern Han period (25-221 AD), a time which also saw the first live lions presented to the Chinese Emperor by Central Asian

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<sup>1</sup> *Iranmania Travels and Tours*

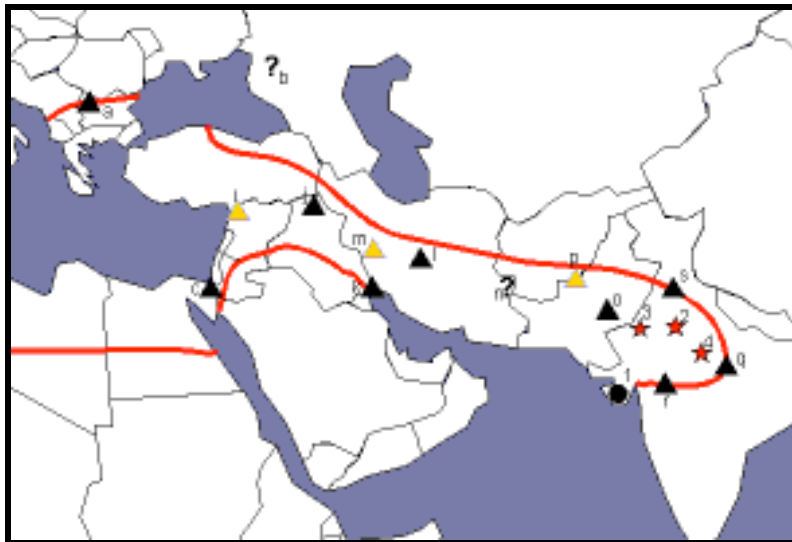
[http://www.iranmania.com/travel/tours/The\\_Great\\_Culture\\_tour.asp](http://www.iranmania.com/travel/tours/The_Great_Culture_tour.asp) Accessed 30.5.2005

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*

[http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se\\_event.asp?OccurrenceId={8DC7B584-ACB9-4D15-ABCB-2B0CE09C6652}&HomePageLink=special\\_c2b](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={8DC7B584-ACB9-4D15-ABCB-2B0CE09C6652}&HomePageLink=special_c2b) Accessed 7.11.2004

ambassadors<sup>3</sup>. The imagery followed a number of different routes, and by the time it reached China, had absorbed a range of religious, stylistic and political associations, including Achaemenid Persian, Nomad, Hellenistic Greek and North Indian Buddhist elements, though all were strongly influenced by the Persian lion.

Superimpose a map of the original distribution of the Asiatic lion over a map of the Persian Empire under Alexander (C4th BC) and the correspondence becomes immediate and obvious. With a few exceptions<sup>4</sup> the realm of the lions and the rule of the Greeks and Persians overlap; incorporating most of the early cultures where lion beliefs and imagery evolved.



Ill. 3. Map of the Asiatic lion's historical distribution<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu Chapter on the Western Regions. Hou Hanshu 88, Second Edition* (Extensively revised with additional notes and appendices) Translated by John E. Hill  
[http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou\\_han\\_shu.ht](http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.ht) Accessed: 5.8.2003

<sup>4</sup> The Central Asian satrapies of Margiana, Chorasmia, and Sogdiana, those areas which today correspond with much of Uzbekistan, are outside the lions' historic range, and some areas of north India were never part of the Persian empire.

<sup>5</sup> Asiatic Lion Information Centre <http://www.asiatic-lion.org/> Accessed 5.9.2003

### The Persians

By the sixth century BC, the lion had become associated with power and kingship in the Achaemenid world, an empire that comprised much of Western Central Asia, including Bactria, probably the original home of the Persian and Median tribes and of the Zoroastrian religion. The Persians largely inherited their lion iconography from the various peoples that made up their empire.



Ill. 4. Achaemenid gold lion rhyton C5th BC<sup>6</sup>

Virtually all the cultures of the Near East, Greece, Iran and Anatolia used imagery that associated the lion with the local version of the *Great Mother* goddess (Allat, Inana, Kubaba/Cybele, Ishtar,

Sekhmet, Selene and others) a connection the Persians developed in the cult of Anahita. Lion gates, tomb guardians and other monumental forms also enshrined the lion as guardian of thresholds, a motif particularly favoured by the Indo-European Hittites of Anatolia . From the myths of heroes such as Gilgamesh and Heracles the Assyrians developed the concept of the king as lion-slayer, acquiring the potency and status of the lion in the act of spearing or shooting it, to the point where captive lions were released as ritual prey for kings. The Lydians were already using lion imagery on their coinage by the time they were incorporated into the Persian empire, while throughout the region the constellation of Leo had become both the calendrical marker for

<sup>6</sup> 7000 Jahre Persische Kunst [http://kultur.orf.at/orfon/kultur/001120-4521/4527txt\\_story.html](http://kultur.orf.at/orfon/kultur/001120-4521/4527txt_story.html) Accessed 10.5.2005

Summer and a key element in astronavigation<sup>7</sup>. Persian use of lion imagery from the monumental architectural elements of Persepolis to rhytons, jewellery and textiles, associated the lion with fire, power, status and Zoroastrian divinity.

Great administrators, the Achaemenids developed the qanat irrigation system (which, by bringing water in largely underground channels from the mountains to the oasis regions of Central Asia greatly increased the fertility and population capacity of that region), the roadworks essential to their highly efficient imperial courier network, and the record-keeping, often in Aramaic script; linking the empire through waystations at carefully determined intervals, so news and government edicts could travel with surprising rapidity. This network also enabled regional leaders and traders to access cities such as Persepolis.

Their eastern empire was religiously as well as politically important to the Achaemenids; Zoroastrianism, evolved in Bactria and incorporated elements common to early Indian beliefs in a fusion of dualist monotheism and philosophical underpinnings, contrasting light and truth (Ahura Mazda) with darkness and the lie (Angra Mainyu). Fire was particularly sacred, equated with both the sun and the lion, and the ruler, the Shahanshah, was seen as god's shadow on earth. Zoroastrianism and its iconography was celebrated in Central Asia along with other beliefs such as Hinduism and Buddhism<sup>8</sup>. Although lions were not native to Sogdiana, and their presence in northern Bactria is contested, they were common to northern India, and both Sogdian and Bactrian cultures incorporated Iranian and Indian lion imagery in their religious and architectural arts. The Persians satraps even established a royal game reserve, complete with lions, in Sogdiana.<sup>9</sup>

In the West, the Greek city states, including the Black Sea colonies, were also developing a complex lion iconography, mostly associated with the demi-god, Heracles, with the Phrygian goddess, Cybele, with death (as the ultimate threshold), and with astronomy.

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<sup>7</sup> P Whitfield (1995) *The Mapping of the Heavens*

<sup>8</sup> R Foltz (1999) *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*

<sup>9</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus *Life of Alexander the Great* Loeb Ch. VIII i 13-17

While there were trading and other contacts with Persia, the memory of the failed Ionian uprising and the Persian Wars remained bitter though the idea of a counter-invasion was considered neither politic nor feasible. In any event the Peloponnesian Wars kept the Greeks at each other's throats from 431 to 371 BC, and judicious bribery by the Persian Great Kings kept intercity dissension alive until Philip of Macedon forced a coalition on the Greeks in 338 BC.

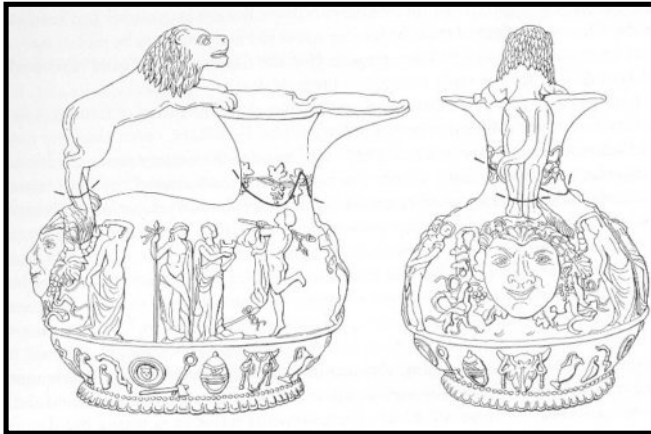
His son Alexander inherited the kingdom at the age of nineteen and continued his father's conquests. Eight campaigns, two major battles and four sieges later, the Persian Empire from North Africa to Bactria was in his hands, and he had engineered an incursion into the Indian Punjab. During his life, he established many cities (some fifteen of them called Alexandria) from Egypt through to Central Asia, the easternmost of which, now known as Ai Khanoum, is in eastern Afghanistan. He encouraged his officers and soldiers to intermarry with the local populations and settled them throughout the empire, usually establishing centres at former staging posts along the Achaemenid imperial roads. Following his death 323 BC his generals, the Diadochi, fought over the empire, eventually establishing a series of Hellenistic kingdoms which would last until the first century BC, including the Ptolemys in Egypt (323-39 BC) and the Seleucids in Iran (321-96 BC), a realm stretching from Macedonia to the Hindu Kush. Their empire split when, in 250 BC, the Seleucids lost control of most of Central Asian.

Bactria, which was separated from the Persian empire by the growing incursions of the Parthians, became an independent Hellenic kingdom under Diodotus I in 256 BC. Split off from the Hellenic world, the Bactrian rulers turned towards North India, where the Maurya Dynasty, which had effectively stopped the earlier Greek advance, was now in decline. Hellenistic Bactria would last until the invasion of the Kushans (a branch of the nomadic Yüexi) in 55 BC. During this period Buddhism increased in importance in the religions of the region, and the lion, which had retained its Philhellene popularity, became associated with Buddhist temple iconography.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> W Zwalf (1996) *Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*

## Hellenism



Ill. 5. Clay aksos  
C2nd-3rd BC,  
Termez,  
Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>

Pattern of  
Greek settlement  
and intermarriage  
in Central Asia  
resulted in a  
marked increase  
in population and

utilisation of oasis resources<sup>12</sup> and the introduction of Greek architecture including citadel defensive systems, some associated with growing towns, others commanding rural farmsteads<sup>13</sup>

These new centres, as well as the old satrapy cities of Sogdiana, Margiana and Ferghana and the new Hellenic cities of Bactria and Gandhara, initially part of the Seleucid Empire, were effectively isolated from the mainstream Graeco-Iranian world from the C3rd BC. The northern regions under their Sogdian rulers established an independent, trade-based localised culture with strong Zoroastrian elements, while Bactria and Gandhara continued to define themselves as *philhellene* (lovers of things Greek) and in cities such as Bactra (Balkh), Termez and Ai Khanoum, continued to use the Greek alphabet, build amphitheatres and agoras, incorporate Greek myths and gods into their pantheons and produce Greek-style coinage with realistic portrait busts of their rulers.

<sup>11</sup> J Boardman (1994) *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*

<sup>12</sup> J Hamatta ed (1994) *History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Vol. II: The Development of Sedentary and Nomadic Civilizations: 700 BC to AD 250.*

<sup>13</sup> *Chorasmia*

<http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/archaeology/CentralAsia/chorasmia.htm>

Accessed 30.4.2005

Heracles was particularly popular (he would later inspire generations of Buddhist guardian figures) and Graeco-Iranian lions joined their Indian counterparts as throne-supports, Buddhist guardians, Hellenistic tomb monuments and architectural ornaments<sup>14</sup>.

Ill. 6. Bactria (Modern Afghanistan) C5th-3<sup>rd</sup> BCE, gilt silver situla in the form of a lion's head<sup>15</sup>.



Alexandria in Egypt remained a powerful influence on Bactrian style. The Library of Alexandria drew scholars from as far as Merv, Bactria and India, many with an interest in religions. The movement was reciprocal, and Alexandrian scholars are

recorded in the *Mahavamsa*, the Great Chronicle of Ceylon, as attending the Buddhist council held by King Duttha Gamani (108-77 BC).<sup>16</sup> Alexandrian gods, fusing Greek and Egyptian elements, particularly Isis and Heracles/Serapis, have been found in Bactrian excavations<sup>17</sup>.

By the time of the Mauryan Indian Emperor, Ashoka (d.232 BC) lions had also become associated with Buddhist iconography. Ashoka's world shared boundaries with the Hellenistic kingdoms of Gandhara and Bactria, where Greek sculptural style blended with Iranian elements, and acted as an influence on the Mauryan style.

<sup>14</sup> The Huntington Archive <http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/> Accessed 5.9.2003

<sup>15</sup> A Hori et al (2002) *Treasures of Ancient Bactria*

<sup>16</sup> *Buddhism and its spread along the Silk Road*. Silkroad Foundation <http://www.silk-road.com/toc/index.html> Accessed 30.3.2005

<sup>17</sup> op cit The Huntington Archive

Ashoka's use of lions as a recurrent motif in the stupa architecture and dedicatory columns he erected helped spread the Buddhist lion motif and also reinforced the association of lions with political power.

### **The Silk Road**

It was during this period that China under the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 221 AD) emperor Han Wudi (141-87 BC) first expanded into Central Asia. China had long experienced problems with the nomads on her borders, trading with them for horses and small luxury items from the west, but constantly subjected to raids and incursions. At the beginning of the second century BC the Xiongnu nomads under their paramount ruler, Maodun (201-178), subdued all the territories between the Great Wall, Tibet and the Altai, occupying the Ordos in 177 BC and driving another large and important group, the Yuexi away from the Western Chinese border. The Yuexi then migrated to the Oxus valley (Chorasmia). Han Wudi sent his ambassador Zhang Qian to re-establish contact with the Yuexi and in 128 BC began the annexation of eastern Central Asian. Improved military techniques and equipment, including horses from Ferghana, aided in military campaigns against the Xiongnu nomads on the western Chinese border. Following a tribal split, many Xiongnu followed the Yuexi westward around 101 BC. The Chinese annexation of the *26 kingdoms* (small, independent oasis states of what is now Xinjiang) brought the Silk Road, the long-established network of routes carrying trade between China, India and the West, into formal, government-controlled trade, connecting China via North India with Parthian Persia and the West. It also introduced the first live lions along with Graeco-Indian lion imagery into China.

Both Zoroastrianism (associated with the mercantile cultures of Central Asia) and Buddhism were influential in the eastward spread of lion imagery, but were by no means the only mechanisms for its introduction during the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 221 AD). Rather a range of beliefs, routes, cultures and systems of exchange were involved, including the culture of Steppe nomads, Graeco-Iranian status and religious iconography, often associated with luxury trade goods and the practical application of astronomy to navigation. All



of this led to the development of a specifically Chinese lion imagery.



Ill. 7. Life-sized ceramic *bixie* (winged lion) spirit guardian, Eastern Han (25-221 AD) Shanghai Museum<sup>18</sup>

The cultures associated with the Persians were already involved in complex trading relationships long before that empire emerged in the 6th BC, indeed the evidence of silk and Afghani lapis lazuli in Egyptian tombs and the use of jade (imported from Khotan or Siberia) in Chinese burials as early as the Shang Dynasty<sup>19</sup> (17th – 11th BC), show that valued

goods could be and were exchanged over vast distances (usually a short stretch at a time).

It is even probable that the Chinese knew of lions before Zhang Qian's mission to Central Asia in 139 BC. The earliest recorded Chinese words for 'lion' is not *shizi*, but *suanni*, a word whose etymology is still much debated<sup>20</sup>. This knowledge may have come to China through the long-standing traditional system of exchanging 'tribute' and 'gifts' (normally silk for horses, furs and precious stones such as jade) with the nomad peoples on the north-west frontiers. The nomadic Pazyryk burials in the Altai region, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, included not only Chinese silks, but

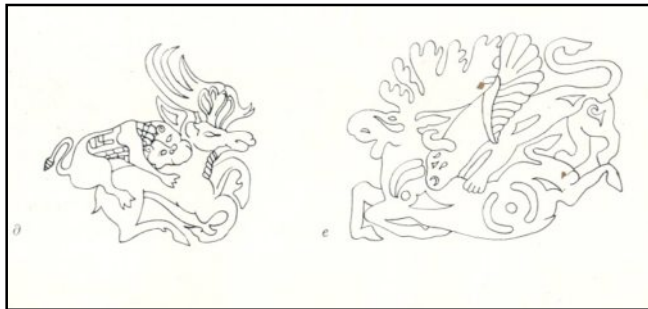
<sup>18</sup> *One Potter's Tour of China* <http://www.studiopotter.org/articles/?art=art0010>  
Accessed 10.9.2004

<sup>19</sup> *Chinaknowledge: Jade and other stones* <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/>  
Accessed 21.12.2004

<sup>20</sup> W Behr (1998) *Hinc Sunt Leones – two ancient Eurasian migratory terms in China revisited*, unpublished ms of a talk presented at ICSTLL-31, Lund.

also Iranian textiles woven with borders of lions and gold lion jewellery from the same source, as well as Greek-style gold objects, probably from the Black Sea region and locally produced felt and leather lion-motif appliqués and even pile carpets<sup>21</sup>.

### The Nomads



III.8 C5th BC  
Pazyryk felt  
designs of lions  
(one winged and  
horned) attacking  
reindeer<sup>22</sup>.

The ongoing  
border trade  
with nomadic

tribes may well have brought Chinese merchants and their customers into contact with such goods. Later records show that the Chinese prized imported carpets and textiles as much as the furs, horses, jades and corals they could buy with their silks.<sup>23</sup> The lion may first have appeared in China as nomad exotica<sup>24</sup>, and is found sporadically in fourth and third century BC sites in Xinjiang<sup>25</sup>. It may also have influenced some of the early versions of the *bixie* (winged lion) tomb figures of the Warring States period such as that

<sup>21</sup> S Rudenko (1968) *The World's Oldest Carpets and Textiles from the Altai Mountain Kurgans*

<sup>22</sup> *op cit*

<sup>23</sup> *A piece of Chinese plain silk can be exchanged with the Xiongnu for articles worth several pieces of gold and thereby reduce the resources of our enemy. Mules, donkeys and camels enter the frontier in unbroken lines; horses, dapples and bays and prancing mounts, come into our possession. The furs of sables, martins, foxes and badgers, coloured rugs and decorated carpets fill the imperial treasury while jade and auspicious stones, corals and crystals become national treasures.* Ascribed to the Lord Grand Secretary of the Han Council in 81 BC and quoted in J Tucker (2003) *The Silk Road Art and History*

<sup>24</sup> J Rawson (1998) in *Strange Creatures* argues that the changes in funerary practice in Western Han can be attributed to nomad influences, and identifies lion stone carvings among the funerary goods of the C2nd BC kingdom of Chu.

<sup>25</sup> E Dittrich (1992) *The Spread of the Lion Motif in Ancient Asia* in *Papers of the International Conference of Archaeological Cultures of the Northern Chinese Ancient Nations*

found in the tomb of King Cuo of Xhongshan which have strong similarities to the Pazyryk felts, but differ from both tigers and wingless Chinese dragons, to both of which they bear some resemblance, in having wings and what appears to be tail tufts.

Ill. 9 Silver-inlaid bronze *bixie*  
China, Warring States period (441-206 BC)<sup>26</sup>



Tigers, of course, are native to areas of China, and were well established as a religious, cultural and aesthetic motif by the Shang Dynasty (1750-1124 BC). Since the geographical distribution of lion and tiger never overlapped, early Chinese versions of lions are fantasy figures, votary objects intended to benefit the dead. While they share elements with both dragons and tigers, they are a distinct breed which gradually becomes more lion-like during the Han dynasty (202 BC – 221 AD) By the first century AD, a period that saw Imperial gifts of live lions reach China from Silk Road kingdoms, moderately realistic images, often near life-sized, occur. The common Chinese term for ‘lion’, *shizi*, probably deriving from the Persian *shir* first appears in the *Hanshu* (compiled in 92 AD). The *shizi* is described as *similar to the tiger, pure yellow, with a long mane, and a tuft on its tail which is as big as a bushel*<sup>27</sup>.

Tribes such as the Yuexi and the Xiongnu of the Chinese border were closely related culturally to the nomads of the Western steppes, the Sakas in Central Asia, and the Scythians in Kazakhstan and the Ukraine where their territories had once acted as a buffer between Greek and Persian worlds.

<sup>26</sup> T Akiyama et al (1968) *Arts of China: Neolithic to the T'ang Dynasty: Recent Discoveries*

<sup>27</sup> A Wylie trans. 1874 *The Han Shu. Silkroad Seattle*  
<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/hantxt1.html> Accessed 28.3.2005

Saka-Scythian interactions with the Greeks and Persians, dating back to the C7th BC, had resulted in a complex and sophisticated version of the traditional Central Asian animal style which added to its themes of conflict and metamorphosis, elements of Greek

realism and Iranian formalism to create objects of remarkable power and beauty<sup>28</sup>.



Ill. 10. Detail of the handle terminal of a C5th BC Scythian bronze hydra from the Black Sea region<sup>29</sup>

While earlier art forms, including C9th BC petroglyphs from Kazakhstan and gold shield bosses from Tuva in Central Asia, the Ukraine and the Caucasus tend to feature leopards, the

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<sup>28</sup> T Rice (1961) *The Scythians*

<sup>29</sup> E Reeder & E Jacobsen (1999) *Scythian Gold: Treasures from Ancient Ukraine*

dominant steppes big cat, this symbol is increasingly replaced in Steppes metalwork, initially in the art of tribes associated with Black Sea Greek communities, by that of the lion. From the C5th BC Greek and Iranian themes such as the association of the lion with the eagle, (including their metamorphosis into the gryphons and leogryphs)<sup>30</sup> are all found in the gold and silver-work of the Saka-Scythian and related Central Asian nomadic people from the Black Sea to the Altai, and to a lesser extent in the very similar Ordos style of the Chinese border.



Ill. 11. Siberian gold torque with winged and horned lion in the Achaemenid Persian style. C4th-5<sup>th</sup> BC<sup>31</sup>

Trade, tribute and inter-tribal conflict carried the images across the Steppes; both conventional and the winged and sometimes horned lion of Achaemenid Iran are found in the Pazyryk tombs of the Altai dating to 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, appearing on imported woollen textiles, cut-work leathers and even tattoos. Highlighting the centrality of the Altai to nomad culture, embroidered Chinese silks of the equivalent Warring States period (475-221 BC)<sup>32</sup> are also found at Pazyryk.

Leaders of loose confederacies of nomadic tribes maintained their position by gifting the minor chieftains who followed them with the kinds of luxury goods found in the *kurgans* (funerary

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed analysis of the themes and images of Scythian goldwork, see E Reeder and E Jacobsen op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Rudenko op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Rudenko, op. cit.

barrows) of the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Altai and the Ordos<sup>33</sup>. Principal among them were portable treasures such as gold jewellery and textile ornaments, often in Greek or Persian styles, such as those found in the C2nd BC – C1st AD Tillya Tepe necropolis in Afghanistan<sup>34</sup>, exotic fabrics such as Persian wools and Chinese and Indian silks, bronze belt plaques, felts and carpets. Some of these were acquired in exchange for horses and other goods, others came as tribute<sup>35</sup>.

The principle item of exchange for the nomads was the horse, and the Chinese often complained, at times quite bitterly, about the poor quality of the beasts for which they were expected to pay with bolts of silk<sup>36</sup>. (Silk was not only regarded as a luxury fabric in its own right, but was also valued as a protection in warfare. An arrowhead penetrating through a silk undergarment would drag the silk into the wound with it, making it easier to withdraw the arrowhead while, at the same time, preventing dirt and tetanus and other germs from entering the wound). The nomads also traded furs, precious stones such as jade, coral and lapis and rugs (possibly

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<sup>33</sup> S Minyaev *Archaeology of the Hsiung-Nu in Russia* <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/minyaev1.shtml> Accessed 30.3.2005

<sup>34</sup> *Archaic Proto-Bactria* [http://www.hp.uab.edu/image\\_archive/ucd/](http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/ucd/) Accessed 28.3.2005

<sup>35</sup> ....important as sources of tribute were the oasis city states of Kansu and Sinkiang. The Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu) appointed a special 'Commandant of Slaves' based in Karashahr, who extracted large tributes from the city states, mainly in the form of horses, livestock and textiles....By the middle of the second century, the Hsiung-nu even exacted tribute from parts of Central Asia such as Ferghana....The Hsiung-nu engaged directly in trade, sending many of the goods they received in Chinese tribute through Zungaria to Central Asia, from where some goods travelled on to the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. First-century BCE tombs from the later Hsiung-nu capital of Noin-ula on the Tola river, suggest the extent of Hsiung-nu control over these trades. They contain wool fabrics, tapestries and embroideries brought to north Mongolia from Sogdiana, Greek Bactria and Syria. From the Han empire to the south a huge quantity of various kinds of silk cloth, embroideries, quilted silk and lacquerware, and bronze jewellery came to their headquarters D. Christian (1998) *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Volume 1 Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire*

<sup>36</sup> Ascribed to the Lord Grand Secretary of the Han Council in 81 BC and quoted in Tucker, Jonathan.(2003) *The Silk Road Art and History*



of their own manufacture). Some of these items could have been locally acquired or produced, others imply a complex network of exchanges. Major items were often buried with their owners, including textiles and jewellery, requiring a continuing new supply.

The need for an on-going supply of such goods made it imperative that the nomads establish patterns of trade and, where that failed, warfare and raiding, and it is noticeable that when a civilization such as China imposed limits on nomad trade, as occurred during the early Han dynasty when border trade with the Xiongnu came under an embargo, the nomads retaliated with violent raids and even open warfare.



Ill. 12. Achaemenid Persian woollen textile from a frozen Pazyryk tomb<sup>37</sup>

Herodotus wrote of the Scythian custom of preserving their dead prior to a trip of many weeks to sacred burial grounds. Presumably these were the *kurgans* found in the Black Sea region, whose bodies are long since decayed. However the tombs at Pazyryk, excavated by Rudenko,<sup>38</sup> revealed ice-preserved mummies of Indo-European nomads, whose elaborately tattooed bodies had been gutted and filled with preservatives as detailed by Herodotus. Other Central Asian tombs, such as that of the *Golden Warrior of Kazakhstan* found at Issyk near Almaty in 1969 (who is almost certainly female)

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<sup>37</sup> Rudenko. Op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Rudenko. Op. cit.

and the *Ice Maiden* of the Ukok Plateau<sup>39</sup> in the Altai show many of the same characteristics, not to mention grave goods, as do those of the European Steppes.

Any consideration of the wealth of material related to the various Central Asian nomad tribes such as the Scythians, the Saka and the Xiongnu reveals a startling uniformity of culture, design and motif. Descriptions of the life-style, beliefs and ceremonies of the Scythians by the Greek historian, Herodotus are paralleled by descriptions of the Xiongnu by the Chinese historian, Sima Qian; bronze belt buckles excavated in the Kurgans of the Ukraine are very similar in style to those excavated in the Ordos on the borders of China, in the frozen tombs of Pazyryk in the Altai and in Kazakhstan. Moreover recent excavations by Russian archaeologists of both Scythian and Xiongnu sites have uncovered, well outside the borders between Scythians and Greeks, Xiongnu and Chinese, proto-towns where craftsmen and agriculturalists lived forming a supply base for the tribes.



Ill. 13. Xiongnu gold belt buckle with horned deer and big cat motif, excavated at Ivolga in the Trans-Baikal, 1995<sup>40</sup>

But whether in the Ordos or around the Black Sea, the seasonal confrontation of the big cat (lion, tiger, leopard) with the horned animal (bull, deer, ibex) is a constant theme of nomad art. It is found on the *gorytus* (bow case), horse ornaments, belt buckles and jewellery, gold cups and textile ornaments from the Ukraine to the

<sup>39</sup> *Index to Archaeological Finds on the Samartian, Scythian and Kurgan Peoples*  
Available at

[http://members.aol.com/ht\\_a/tammuz69/home/Index/History/Ice\\_Man.html](http://members.aol.com/ht_a/tammuz69/home/Index/History/Ice_Man.html)

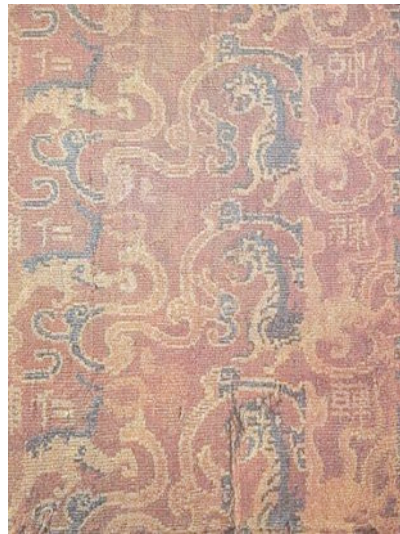
accessed 13.04.04

<sup>40</sup> Op cit.



Trans-Baikal.<sup>41</sup> In the regions closest to the Greek and Iranian worlds, lions are sometimes replaced by leopards as the feline protagonist, while in the Ordos tigers are usually the significant big cat. In the Xiongnu burials at Noin Ula, however, horned lions attack yaks and gryphons attack elk around the borders of a magnificent felt hanging, while in Pazyryk lions decorate the textiles, and tigers the coffins.

The traditional Central Asian animal style was often admired and sometimes imitated by Chinese craftsmen. Both the leopard and the tiger were well established in Chinese arts as motif, status-symbol and legendary beast, and during the later Han Dynasty, reproductions of these in Ordos nomadic style were joined by the Graeco-Scythian image of the lion, which gradually took over many of the functions of the leopard as it had done in the Black Sea region three centuries earlier. This style is particularly noticeable in Chinese textiles, but also appears as belt buckles and sword furnishings.



From the fourth to the first centuries BC the fashion for nomad-style hybrids resulted in the creation of Chinese versions of gryphons and chimeras such as the *Bixie*, tomb guardians against evil influences. In these, evidence of the Central Asian nomadic animal style is evident, and a stylistic ancestry can be traced across the various realms of the steppe nomads to Greek and Persian originals.

Ill. 14. Eastern Han (1st AD) silk textile with nomad-style felines, discovered in Xinjiang by Marc Aurel Stein<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> ED Phillips (1965) *The Royal Hordes; Nomad Peoples of the Steppes*

<sup>42</sup> In the Central Asian collection of the National Museum, New Delhi

### Tomb Lions and Spirit Roads: C1st – C8th AD

Following the Chinese expansion into Central Asia under the Han emperor Wu Di (157-87 BC) Han Dynasty culture (202 BC – 221 AD) became deeply fascinated by all things strange and exotic.

*... The reports regarding the celestial horses and grapes led to the opening up of communication with Fergana and Parthia. From this time carbuncles, tortoise-shell, white heart rhinoceros horn, plumagery and, such rarities were found in profusion in the after palace; foreign palfreys, dragon-figured, fish-eyed, and blood-perspiring horses thronged the imperial gates; while a menagerie of great elephants, lions, savage dogs, and large birds fed in the park outside; and strange objects arrived from foreign lands in every direction<sup>43</sup>*



Ill. 15 Eastern Han 25 –221 AD life-sized stone bixie (spirit road winged lion) 293 cm l. Found in Henan Province. Luoyang Museum<sup>44</sup>

Exotic animals such as lions, elephants and ostriches

were usually acquired as major diplomatic gifts, following the

<sup>43</sup> Pan Koo **Reflections on Zhang Qian's Mission to the West** from the Han Shu, trans A. Wylie (1878-82) *Silkroad Seattle Historical texts* <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/texts.html> Accessed 12.10.2004

<sup>44</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art: China: *Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD* [http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se\\_event.asp?OccurrenceId={8DC7B584-ACB9-4D15-ABCB-2B0CE09C6652}&HomePageLink=special\\_c2b](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={8DC7B584-ACB9-4D15-ABCB-2B0CE09C6652}&HomePageLink=special_c2b) Accessed 7.11.2004

Achaemenid Persian custom with which the rulers of Central Asian and Iranian kingdoms and satrapies were familiar. Lions in particular were prized as a symbol of kingship, and Chinese records mention them as arriving from Parthia in 87 and 101 AD and from Kashgar in 133<sup>45</sup> (The occasional presentation of lions continued until the Tang Dynasty. The Arab conquests of Central Asia in the early C8th, led to the Sogdian kings cementing a treaty with the Chinese in 719, with gifts which included pairs of lions and antelopes.<sup>46</sup>)



Ill. 16 Eastern Han bronze winged lion base for a funerary lamp<sup>47</sup>

It became the custom to set up stone pillars and gates to tombs of emperors and notables, and to create imposing figures of humans and animals, usually

sculpted in stone<sup>48</sup>, in pairs delineating a 'spirit road' leading to the tomb. Exotic animals from the Silk Road regions regularly feature in these avenues. In this the Chinese sculptors were following in a tradition of creating figures which so encapsulated the essential

<sup>45</sup> Recorded in the Hou Hanshu, the record of the Eastern Han Dynasty, written in the C5th AD

<sup>46</sup> From the *Chiu-t'ang-shu* ch. 198 (written mid-10th Century C.E.), for 618-906 C.E.: East Asian History Sourcebook: *Chinese Accounts of Rome, Byzantium and the Middle East*, c. 91 B.C.E. - 1643 C.E.

<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/romchin1.html> Accessed 2.7.2004

<sup>47</sup> *Bronze Chimera:*

<http://www.eskenazi.co.uk/Exhibition/Stoclet/cat10stoclet.html> Accessed 7.11.2004

<sup>48</sup> See Saburo Matsubara *Monumental Animal Sculpture* T Akiyama et al. (1968) *Arts of China: Neolithic to the T'ang Dynasty. Recent Discoveries*. Vols. I and II.

‘spirit’ of the original real or fantastic being that the image had an actual ‘spirit’ life in the world of the dead. So pervasive was this belief, that one aristocrat of the Han dynasty was accused of plotting rebellion in the next world because of the range and number of military burial figures which he had acquired.

These monumental figures contrasted with the smaller, carefully observed funerary ceramics and bronzes with which they were associated, in their essential severity and sense of massive dignity.

Unlike the often humorously observed ceramic funerary figures, and the lively bronzes, the spirit road sculptures are imposing, almost abstract, powerful and massive, suited to their role of guardians of imperial tombs.

To date the discovered figures are from the Eastern Han period (25 – 221 AD), coinciding with the development of the Imperial park-like gardens surrounding the Han palaces where exotic imported animals roamed free. Among the spirit road figures are the earliest monumental representations of lions in China, the massive pairs of stone lions from the Wu shrine (147 AD) the Kao Yi tomb lions (209 AD) and the stone winged lion excavated at Yichuan County, Henan Province. Most of these and the ensuing 3 Kingdoms (221-280 AD) and 6 Dynasties (280-589AD) lions are winged and relatively maneless, with a few striking exceptions; a wonderfully lively, life-sized Han lion, striding confidently along, its head slightly cocked and turned to the left and an extraordinary cast iron crouching lion, its head with a heavy, stylised mane resting on its forepaws, its feathery tail curled around its hindquarters like a cat’s. Inscription-dated to 502 AD, it is the earliest known example of cast iron statuary,<sup>49</sup> though by no means the largest. That honour is held by another Chinese lion, the monumental and very stately creature erected by the Later Jou (951-960) Emperor in 954 to commemorate a campaign against the Liao.<sup>50</sup>

At the same period a rather more fantastic leonine creature was being produced as tomb furnishings, and even occasionally as dress

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<sup>49</sup> J Needham (1956) *The Development of Iron and Steel Technology in China: Second Biennial Dickinson Memorial Lecture to the Newcomen Society 1956 The Newcomen Society for the study of the history of engineering and technology*

<sup>50</sup> The use of the lion to commemorate a battle, while commonplace in the West, is extremely rare in China.

items and desk accessories. Bronze and jade figures of winged and often horned feline creatures, frequently with sockets designed as lamp bases (reflecting a Zoroastrian connection between the lion and the light of the sun) are regularly found in Eastern Han tombs. Earlier examples from the Warring States period are far more chimerical<sup>51</sup>, and less recognizably lion-like.

The Eastern Han creatures, which rarely exceed 30 cm. in length, are characterised by a sinuous, well-muscled, feline body, with large, solid paws, ruffs of fur at the chest and thighs, a bearded chin and a longish, tufted tail distinguishing them from the equally common tigers. In type they resemble Achaemenid lion and are very different from the wingless, relatively natural lions of late first and second century Mathura and Gandhara Buddhism, though their larger, monumental brothers are not unlike the winged lions found carved on the gates of the Sanchi Great Stupa (c3rd-1<sup>st</sup> BC) – though these, too, may well owe their iconography to Iran.

These delightful little beasties continued to be produced in both Northern and Southern China, gradually developing into the one-horned *Qilin* (unicorn) and the hornless *bixie*, and even occasionally turning up in female versions complete with cubs.



Although funerary ceramics continued to play an important part in rituals from the Qin (221-205 BC) through to the mid Tang dynasty (c.750 AD), dynasty (c.750 AD), ceramic funerary lions are extremely rare during this period (they do occur) and their guardian role is mostly filled by fantastic metamorphic creatures.

Ill. 17. Tang dynasty 'egg and spinach' glazed ceramic funerary figure of a lion<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Guolong Lai (2002) *Lighting the Way in the Afterlife: Bronze Lamps in Warring States Tombs. Orientations*

<sup>52</sup> *Orientations* Vol. 35 no. 2 (Hong Kong March 2004) p. 78

However there are some early celadon lion-shaped water jars, including at least one example of a lion ridden by an Iranian male figure. In later periods ceramic lions would become commonplace, both as architectural ornaments, usually on the ends of roof ridges and gables, and as decorative finials on pots. Funerary lions do exist; one delightful green and yellow glazed example, with all the insouciant non-conformity of a cat, sits on its rump cleaning a hind paw.

Spirit Road lions continued to be produced during the centuries when China was divided into nomad-ruled Northern and Han Southern dynasties. This period of warfare, invasion and disunion saw a massive migration of ethnic Chinese to the Southern regions of China, taking Han traditions with them and developing a style somewhat different from that of the north. Generally the Southern



lions, like the spectacular Nanjing pair dating to c. 526, are huge; up to three metres tall, three to four metres in length, and weighing up to 15 tons. Designed to exorcise evil spirits and fend off disaster, they are highly stylised, emphasising strength, ferocity and aggression. The Northern dynasty lions are slightly smaller and more realistic, though both northern and southern do look rather like tamed-up tigers.

Ill. 18. Northern Wei dynasty (386-533 AD) life-sized stone *bixie*<sup>53</sup>

Silk Road trade continued to expand during this period, largely in response to the growing power of the Sassanian Persian empire

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.137



(226 – 642 AD) which once again included much of Central Asia; and the equally important Buddhist Kushan kingdom of North India (C2nd BC – C3rd AD). Buddhism became a popular belief among the merchants of the Silk Road, and Buddhist monks frequently made pilgrimages and missionary journeys along the route. In the C4th AD the painted Buddhist cave-temple complex of Mogao at Dunhuang was founded, and the community of monks included many Sogdian and Bactrian translators<sup>54</sup>. Images of lions are a commonplace, mostly relatively realistic and following both Persian and Gandhara stylistic conventions. Buddhist lion imagery, based on the realism of North Indian sculptural style (in turn influenced by observation of actual lions) travelled with the Gandhara style to Northern China, undoubtedly influencing the realism of the northern spirit road lions while Southern lions, divorced from the occasional gift of live lions, and from the influence of Buddhist realist style, developed a more fantastic image.



Ill. 19. Stone *bixie* C6th AD  
Nanjing<sup>55</sup>

Monumental spirit road animals continued in production in the first centuries of the Tang Dynasty. Perhaps the finest examples are the lions sculpted for the tomb of the Empress Wu (684-705AD), whose dignity, ferocity, powerful muscles, flattened ears and tightly curled manes both echo the original Iranian lions and prefigure the

<sup>54</sup> A Juliano and J Lerner (2001) *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China. Gansu and Ningxia, 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> Century*

<sup>55</sup> E Bühner and M Giacometti (1985) *A Journey Through Ancient China*

standard lion image found wherever there are Chinese communities today.

### Sogdians and Bactrians

Of all the cultures bringing lions to China, Sogdian merchants were the most enterprising and rapidly saw the advantages of trading with China. This put them in a unique position as the easternmost satrapy of the Persian Empire, to link Bactria and India to the South with China to the East and the rest of the Persian Empire to the West. An Indo-Iranian culture, speaking its own language (which is thought to be ancestral to Tajik), they also had connections with the Saka-Scythians to the west and, by the Han

Dynasty, with the Yuexi.



Ill. 20. The Sogdian goddess, Nanai, shown seated on a lion with the sun in one hand and the moon in the other. Afrasiab (modern Samarkand) C7th AD<sup>56</sup>

The Yuexi became a powerful force in the region. From about 130 BC one branch, the Kushans, would dominate the region, invading Bactria and establishing their own empire which, under their greatest king,

Kanishka<sup>57</sup> in the second century AD, included Bactria, Gandhara, much of North India and (nominally) Sogdiana, Chorasmia and Ferghana. The Kushans created a distinctive culture combining

<sup>56</sup> G Pugachenkova and A Khakimov (1988) *The Art of Central Asia*

<sup>57</sup> *Kushans* <http://www.afghanan.net/afghanistan/sites/kushans.htm> Accessed 30.3.2005



Greek, Indian, Iranian and Central Asian elements. With the increase in trade with China, India and Iran, a second period of intensive urban development began in Central Asia. The conversion of the Kushans to Buddhism, and the spread of Kushan-style Buddhism along the Silk Road to China, provided a new route for Graeco-Bactrian art and its lions to follow to the Far East<sup>58</sup>.

Trade was often controlled by the merchants of Sogdiana. Letters found in a watchtower on the borders of China, dating from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, show Sogdian business communities already well-established in China by this time<sup>59</sup>. While the consensus is that they were Zoroastrian, and there are certainly many fire temple ruins in areas such as Chorasmia, they seem to have been unusually tolerant of religions, accommodating Greek mythology, Hindu deities, Buddhism and later Nestorian Christianity and Manicheism with equal ease<sup>60</sup>. The Sogdian goddess Nana, for instance, has elements of both Iranian Anahita and Hindu Durga and is usually depicted riding a lion, often in a Hellenistic style. Sogdians built walled fortresses in the Greek style, altars in the Iranian style, and wrote in at least three scripts, including Prakrit and Kharosthi<sup>61</sup>. They were also and necessarily highly accomplished linguists, responsible for the translation of many Buddhist texts into Chinese working in major centres such as Dunhuang. Although Sogdiana is outside the Asiatic lion's range, they not only used lions as images, but they also traded in live lions, procuring them for the Chinese courts.<sup>62</sup>

The presentation of live lions to Emperors is well attested in Achaemenid Iran. The Procession of the 26 nations, carved on the Apadama staircase at Persepolis (c.500 BC) shows ambassadors, including the Elamites with a lion cub and the ambassadors of Susa

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<sup>58</sup> Boardman. Op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> N Sims-Williams *The Sogdian Ancient Letters* Silkroad Seattle <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/sogdlet.html> Accessed 2.3.2005

<sup>60</sup> R Foltz (1961) *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*

<sup>61</sup> S Whitfield ed (2004) *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*

<sup>62</sup> H Schafer (1963) *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand, a Study of Tang Exotics*

with a lioness. As the procession includes representatives of the Sogdians, Bactrians (with their camels) and Scythians with armlets like those of the Oxus Treasury, the importance of lions, live or symbolic, as a major indicator of power and prestige must have been indelibly impressed on even the most distant communities.

Ill. 21. The Elamite ambassador with a lion cub. Detail of the bas relief on the Apadama staircase, Persepolis, c.500 BC<sup>63</sup>

Either Iran or North India, could have provided the animals. The *Hou Hanshu*<sup>64</sup> mentions gifts of live lions from the Kingdom of Anxi (believed to be Parthia) and in 133 AD from the newly installed King of Kashgar, Chen Pan, who had lived among the Kushans in Northern India. Carrying them from either source across Central Asia to China must have been a horrific task, despite the fact, attested to by many circus people<sup>65</sup> as well as naturalists that lions will spend most of their time sleeping given the chance. The lions were usually kept in the Imperial parklands:



*For five generations the empire was prosperous and wealthy; riches and strength were superabundant ... foreign palfreys, dragon-figured, fish-eyed, and blood-perspiring horses thronged the imperial gates; while a menagerie of great elephants, lions,*

<sup>63</sup> Persepolis [www.detail.nl/iran/iran1.htm](http://www.detail.nl/iran/iran1.htm) Accessed 1.3.2005

<sup>64</sup> J Hill trans. (2003) *The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu The Xiyu juan Chapter on the Western Regions* from Hou Hanshu 88 Second Edition

<sup>65</sup> An interview with Ella Lotah, of *The Flying Lotahs*, a multi-generation Australian circus family of aerialists intermarried with lion tamers, detailed the close relationship of lions and keepers, and the fairly sedentary nature of the lions.

*savage dogs, and large birds fed in the park outside; and strange objects arrived from foreign lands in every direction*<sup>66</sup>

Ill. 22. Eastern Han gold belt buckle (25-220 AD) with winged lion reflecting the description in the *Yuefu Shiji* “Small was the golden lion on his girdle, fiercely glaring the unicorn embroidered on his garment”.<sup>67</sup>



By the Eastern Han (25-220 AD) a number of lions had reached China, but few people outside the imperial palaces had ever seen one. The majority of artist had to rely on imagination, imported images and written and oral descriptions to create guardian lions for tombs or smaller, desk-top lions for scholars and belt buckles for the nobility.

It is also probable that the lion dance made its first appearance in China at this time. A reference in the *Hanshu Treatise on Etiquette and Music*<sup>68</sup> to ‘animal imitators’ was explained by the scholar Meng Kang (fl c. 250 AD) as *like those dancers who act as frogs, fish or lions today*. References from the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) associate the dance with Silk Road cities such as Khotan<sup>69</sup>, while Chinese travellers describe the Sogdians as great dancers and musicians

The Sogdians became a major channel for the transmission of Hellenistic imagery from local, Iranian and Parthian and North Indian Buddhist areas to China. A good example of the range of objects traded on the Silk Road by the third century is the large silver plate featuring Dionysos riding a lion excavated in Gansu.

<sup>66</sup> Pan Koo *Reflections on the Hanshu: Hou Han Shu* (op. cit.)

<sup>67</sup> T Rice (1965) *Ancient Arts of Central Asia*

<sup>68</sup> Behr: op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> R Hayashi (1975) *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in*

Possibly Sassanian Persian in origin, a very similar piece featuring Anahita on a lion was found in Nizhne Shakhrovka<sup>70</sup>

It is thought that the Gansu example may be provincial work, perhaps produced in Bactria in the C2nd-3<sup>rd</sup> AD. The back is inscribed in Bactrian with the owner's name, dating from the C3rd/4<sup>th</sup> AD. However Harper and Meyer (1981) argue that several of the known examples of Sassanian plates were actually commissioned by wealthy Central Asians.<sup>71</sup>



Ill. 23. Detail of the central image of the Dionysos plate found in Gansu<sup>72</sup>

From the third to the ninth centuries AD, Sogdiana was home to all the major religious groups; Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus, Nestorian and other Christians<sup>73</sup>; and with Sogdian trade settlements in Dunhuang, Changan and even Nara in Japan, these beliefs and the arts associated with them travelled widely. The Shoso-in depository in Nara holds well over a thousand objects from all points along the Silk Road from Byzantium to China, the bequest of the Emperor Shomu in 756 AD. Among them are lion textiles from Iran, Syria and China, images of lion hunts, and a lion mask for the Buddhist lion dance. There is also a beautiful cushion cover, probably from Syria, which shows

<sup>70</sup> P Harper and P Meyers (1981) *Silver Vessels of the Sassanian Period. Vol 1. Royal Imagery*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*

<sup>72</sup> A Barbieri-Low (2001) *Roman themes in a Group of Eastern Han Lacquer Vessels. Orientations* Vol 32 No 5

<sup>73</sup> Folz, *op. cit.*

two men dressed in Greek-style robes, holding rearing lions on leashes to either side of a palm-like tree of life.<sup>74</sup>

Ill. 24. Lion hunt silk textile from Astana, C7th AD<sup>75</sup>

Very similar textiles, many featuring lions, have been found in the Tocharian necropolis of Xinjiang, notably the tombs of Astana, Niya and Yinpang, which also yielded a superb woollen lion rug dating from the C3rd. AD. Expatriate Sogdians also utilised Zoroastrian imagery, including lion thrones, guardian lions and the lion hunt on the various funerary couches



dating between the fourth century and the sixth found in Gansu and Shaanxi.<sup>76</sup> At least two of these couches were designed for local *sabao*, designated leaders of the expatriate merchant communities. The figures are all dressed in typical Central Asian style with a long caftan decorated with rondels, while the iconography is Zoroastrian, with scenes of priests officiating at fire altars. Most include lion-hunting images like those on Sassanian silver. The hunting scenes feature a range of recognizable Central Asians including Sogdians, Hephthalites and Turks, and many wear the fluttering ribbons of Imperial Sassanian art at the back of their headdresses.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ryoichi Hayashi (1975) *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art* vol 6.

<sup>75</sup> Ma Chengyuan and Yue Feng. Ed. (1998) *Archaeological Treasures of the Silk Road in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region*

<sup>76</sup> Rong Xinjiang (2003) *The Illustrative Sequence on An Jia's Screen: A Depiction of the Daily Life of a Sabao. Orientations* Vol. 34 No. 2

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed analysis of Sogdian funerary couches see A Juliano and J Lerner, *The Miho couch Revisited in Light of Recent Discoveries* (2002) *Orientations*, Vol 32 No 8





Ill. 25. Detail of the base of a Sogdian funerary couch believed to be from Tianshui, China. Mid C6th AD<sup>78</sup>

The association of the lion with prosperity and good fortune may also have reached China by way of the Sogdians. An inscribed seal stone found in the tomb of Shi Hedan and his wife, Lady Zhang in Ningxia and dating to the Sassanian period (C4th-6<sup>th</sup> AD) shows a reclining lion, its head turned to face outward, in front of a three-branched flowering tree. The inscription, written in a variant of the Iranian Pahlavi, has been tentatively translated as ‘generosity, generosity, generosity’.<sup>79</sup>

### Buddhist lions

Other Sogdians and most Bactrians were Buddhists. The Kushan empire of Bactria had expanded under king Kanishka (53? – 123 AD), whose realm extended from modern Bukhara in Uzbekistan in to Patna in the Ganges valley and from the Pamirs to central India. While Kanishka later became seen as a paradigm of the earlier Indian king, Ashoka, for his patronising of Buddhism, the reality was far bloodier. His people are said to have rejoiced at his death, and toppled and beheaded his statue<sup>80</sup>.

However during his reign, the court poet Asvaghosa produced an epic Life of Buddha, the fourth Buddhist council was held, marking the inauguration of Mahayana Buddhism which would become the

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* p. 58

<sup>79</sup> Juliano & Lerner *Monks & Merchants* op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> *Kanishka* <http://www.afghan-network.net/Rulers/kanishka.html> Accessed 30.3.2005

dominant form travelling the Silk Road to China, and Buddhism began to develop a new iconography whose earliest forms are found in Mathura, Bactria and in Gandhara, which became the great centre of Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist pilgrimage<sup>81</sup>.

Ill. 26. Gandharan stucco lion C3rd-4<sup>th</sup> AD. The protruding tongue is a common stylistic feature.<sup>82</sup>



Monasteries were built in spectacular locations, utilising skilled architects, sculptors and masons, since their abbots often held the rather cynical view that the better the stupa the better the donations.<sup>83</sup> Pilgrims followed the story of Buddha's life, (the aniconic phase was long over) circling round massive stupas and 'reading' the bas-reliefs rather like a comic strip. Lions were a common architectural feature appearing at key points such as the lintels of entrances. They also featured in a number of the story-telling drum panels of the stupas. One in the British Museum shows the Buddha as a baby, travelling with his mother in a covered chariot drawn by lions,<sup>84</sup> another has the Buddha standing beside a large lion who sits lapping from a bowl held by a Graeco-Roman *amorino*<sup>85</sup> while a third, illustrating the *Visvamtara jataka*, positions an admonitory lion between Visvamtara and his wife<sup>86</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> M Hallade (1968) *The Gandhara Style and the Evolution of Buddhist Art*

<sup>82</sup> Gandhara Gallery [www.gandhara.com.au/gandhara1.html](http://www.gandhara.com.au/gandhara1.html) Accessed 3.3.2005

<sup>83</sup> M Alom (2005) *Life of Buddha Through Gandharan Art*. Arts of Asia lecture at the Art Gallery of NSW

<sup>84</sup> W Zwalf (1996) *A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum*

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

As well as the narrative panels, there were also free-standing sculptures of the Buddha in a distinctive style that blended Iranian, Greek and Indian elements. The 'Gandhara style' is found throughout the old kingdom of Bactria. The Buddhist pilgrim of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, seeking enlightenment or, in some cases, copies of the 'true' scriptures, traditionally visited the stupas and monasteries of Bactria, returning home to places such as Bezeklik, Khocho, Dunhuang or Loyan with renewed faith, a new aesthetic, and the almost obligatory Buddhist lions.<sup>87</sup>

### Chinese Buddhist Lions



Ill. 27. Buddhist lions from a relief panel, probably from Sth Xiangtangshan, Henan Province Northern Qi period (550-577 CE)<sup>88</sup>

*What do you do when the stone lion roars?*

Traditional Zen Buddhist koan.

The answer, at least according to the Chinese Buddhist monk and traveller Faxian<sup>89</sup> (c.400 AD), is that you rejoice that your existence has been justified. According to his 'Travels', a group of monks living near the Sarnath Ashoka pillar in India were challenged by another sect who questioned their right to live there. At that moment one of the four stone lions on the pillar roared loudly in their defence, and the challengers departed shamefaced.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup>S Whitfield ed (2004) *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*

<sup>88</sup>A Howard (2001) *Reconstructing the Original Location of a Group of Sculptures in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Orientations* Vol 32 No. 2

<sup>89</sup>*The Journey of Faxian to India Silkroad Seattle*  
<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/faxian.html> Accessed 2.5.2005

<sup>90</sup>*Lions, in Buddhist Symbolism*  
[http://www.khandro.net/mysterious\\_vyali\\_mukha.htm](http://www.khandro.net/mysterious_vyali_mukha.htm). Accessed 17.4.2004



Travelling with missionaries along the Silk Road to China, or returning as authoritative texts and relics with monks like Faxian, Buddhism spread from North India to China. By the time of the fall of the Han in the early C3rd AD, Buddhism had split into several conflicting sects, and any number of different textual interpretations and religious practices<sup>91</sup>. Generally the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, with its helpful Bodhisattvas and its openness to ecumenical beliefs and practices, was the most successful of those travelling the Silk Road<sup>92</sup>.

The first clear reference to Buddhism in China occurs in the *Hou Hanshu* as a tolerant comment on a provincial king who appears to be performing both Daoist and Buddhist rites<sup>93</sup>. The first missionary<sup>94</sup> actually named in Chinese sources is An Shihkiao, a Parthian monk who arrived in Loyang in 148 AD and established a centre for the translation of Buddhist texts, though his chief importance to the Emperor may have been his knowledge of Western astronomy (as with the Jesuit missionaries in later Chinese courts). Other skilled translators later worked in Loyang, including the Kushan monk Lokaksema who translated the earliest Mahayana texts into Chinese, helping to popularise Buddhism by making it accessible to the literate<sup>95</sup>. Records show no one source of translator monks; they came from Parthia, Sogdiana, Merv, India and Kucha and they brought texts in Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit and other languages<sup>96</sup>. Given that texts were transmitted originally by word of mouth, and even in China were transcribed from oral readings by often Parthian monks, the desire for authoritative texts is hardly surprising, especially as by the fourth century translators were attempting to interpret Buddhist texts through matching meanings with traditional Chinese, frequently Daoist texts<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> C Foltz (1999) *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*

<sup>92</sup> A Juliano and J Lerner, Judith A. *Monks and Merchants* op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> Foltz. Op cit

<sup>94</sup> ibid

<sup>95</sup> ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Juliano, Annette L and Lerner, Judith A. op. cit.

<sup>97</sup> ibid

Despite the establishment of a Buddhist centre in the capital, Buddhism did not become a major religious force in China until after the fall of the Han Dynasty in 221 AD. In Northern China a succession of nomad regimes fought to establish their own dynasties, while ethnic Han peoples fled south in their hundreds of thousands. Despite the turmoil, the Silk Road trade, established during the Han dynasty continued to flourish, as the new would-be rulers of northern China and the rulers of the largely independent Xinjiang oasis cities, created a market for imported luxuries, or acted as middlemen to send raw and woven silks and other Chinese goods westward to the markets of Persia and Rome. The 350 years of warfare and fragmentation that followed the fall of Han also saw

a severe decline in popular faith in the traditional Confucian social and political order, and with it a increased interest in the Buddhist view which promised a better life next time around and a philosophy of tranquil acceptance of the stresses of this one.<sup>98</sup>



Ill. 28. Northern Wei (386-535 AD) Buddhist stele. Note the paired lions<sup>99</sup>

The spread of Buddhism in the centuries between the fall of Han and the Sui reunification of China in 581 AD saw a very different style of lion imagery emerge in the north. Buddhist cave complexes, complete with carved or painted guardian lions, developed in several major

Chinese sites such as Dunhuang and Loyang. Many, though not all,

<sup>98</sup> R and S Whitfield and N Agnew (2000) *Cave Temples of Mogao: Art and History on the Silk Road*

<sup>99</sup> Zhang Qingjie (2002) *New Archaeological and Art Discoveries from the Han to the Tang Period in Shanxi Province. Orientations* Vol 33 No 5

were established by ruling pastoralist dynasties such as the Toba (ruling as the Wei dynasty 386-534) and the Juan-juan (Northern Liang and Zhou 350-555). They reflected the Silk Road practice of Mahayana Buddhism which had acquired and integrated elements of other Central Asia religions in its progress through the region, including pastoralist Tengric shamanist elements.

Lion iconography was a significant part of Mahayana. The roar of the lion was said to symbolise the word of the Buddha throughout the universe, while its golden coat was the radiance of Buddha's love, and its presence at the sides of thrones or on the base of statues symbolised the universality of Buddha's message – divine apsaras flying above, earthly lions quietly seated below.

Dunhuang a city on the Great Wall in Gansu and the gateway to the Silk Road was both a major trading centre, home to an international community of merchants and officials, but also, from the late fourth century a major and growing centre of Buddhist scholarship and art, centred on the Mogao grottoes some 25 k from the city. The cave temples, which continued to be excavated and decorated from their inception in 366 AD to the Mongol invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century document not only the changing styles of Silk Road and Chinese art, but also the life of the communities that supported the complex. For instance the cloak of the cosmic Buddha in Mogao's cave 428 features a bowman about to shooting a blue-maned lion, and there is at least one other depiction of men hunting lions on horseback, a recurrent theme in Persian art and on imported textiles.



Ill. 29. Detail of a Dunhuang fresco, Mogao, Sui Dynasty 581-618 AD<sup>100</sup>

Dunhuang also has a full complement

of carved stucco and painted fresco lions, their roles expanding with

<sup>100</sup> ibid

the centuries from companion and guardian of Buddha to pet of the judges of the underworld to ambulant throne of the Vajrayana Buddha, Manjusri; they are also found in scrolls and drawings on paper.

Even the very rare printed Diamond Sutra of 868 AD features a frontispiece with the Buddha surrounded by saints, attendants, flying apsaras and attended by a pair of small, cosily domestic and rather fluffy lions. Zhu Guorong of the China Daily claims northern lions *do not look as powerful and militant as the southern ones. Instead they are like faithful Buddhists safeguarding the Buddhist principles and doctrines. Some seem even mild and meek.*<sup>101</sup>



Ill. 30. Frontispiece of the Diamond Sutra printed in Dunhuang 11 May 868 AD<sup>102</sup>

From the fourth century on, lions are found wherever Buddhism has a stronghold, sometimes as little more than an addendum to a single Buddha, more usually in pairs to each side or at the base of a throne or pedestal, or as part of a standing group.

Occasionally they have a more substantial presence as part of an overall motif, as at the Lashosi mountain caves in Wushan, but they are still quite small, differing from the Spirit Road *bixie* in being both relatively naturalistic and rarely if ever winged.

The search for textural authenticity had become increasingly essential to Buddhist practice, the ecumenical tendencies of Silk Road cultures like the Sogdians had happily incorporated so many apparently diverse religions into their culture that one Chinese text offered the following advice:

<sup>101</sup> Zhu Guorong *Chinese Lion has its own Roar*. China Daily.  
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndydb/1998/02/d9-198.b27html> Accessed  
 1.12.2000

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*

*Talking about accepting Buddha, one should think of which Buddha one is converting to; not to the Mani Buddha, not to Nestorian Buddha, nor Zoroastrian Buddha, but to Saykamuni Buddha<sup>103</sup> (and most, if not all, came complete with lions!)*

The great Buddhist monk and traveller, Xuanzang who travelled from China to India (629-645 AD) in search of accurate sutras, linked lions, Buddhism and China through the myth of Mount Sumeru and its four rivers,

*From the north side of the lake, through the mouth of a crystal lion, proceeds the river- Sita (Si- to), and encircling the lake once, it falls into the north-eastern sea. They also say that the streams of this river Sita, entering the earth, flow out beneath the Tsih rock mountain, and give rise to the river of the middle country (China)<sup>104</sup> (an image later enshrined at the great reservoir at Angkor)*

With the Sui reunification in 589, and the expansionist internationalism of the Tang (618-906) Buddhism flourished in China. Although after 750 foreign religions would lose ground to a renewed emphasis on Confucian and Daoist beliefs, leading to the imperial persecutions of the C9th, Buddhism continued to be one of the three principle value and belief systems in China, with new schools, notably Chan with its emphasis on meditation and Tibetan Vajrayana providing new sources of inspiration.

While some early Chinese lions are already appearing in male-female pairings (as on the Wang Lingwei stele of 573),<sup>105</sup> Buddhist lions usually appear to be paired males and accompany Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as guardians, or support their thrones much as Near Eastern lions do. An interesting example in the Xian museum has two upright guardian lions seated at the front of a standing Buddha while two more lions at the back are relaxing – one dozing, the other scratching behind its ear like a big cat.

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in C Foltz op. cit

<sup>104</sup> Silkroad Seattle *Xuanzang*

<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/xuanzang.html> Accessed 2.4.2005

<sup>105</sup> Juliano and Lerner. Op cit

It was probably during the period of the North and South dynasties (419 – 589 AD) that the lion dance became associated with Buddhism. As far back as the fourth century, a ritual procession, the *hsing-hsiang* was held annually to celebrate the birth of Buddha. A lion-masked dancer was always at the head of the parade, together with the *chih-tao* or guide, a long-nosed, red-faced mask possibly representing a Persian. The Tang dynasty poet Bo Juyi (772-846) described them:

*Skilled dancers from Xiliang,  
Persian masks and lion masks.  
The heads are carved of wood,  
The tails are woven with thread.  
Pupils are flecked with gold  
And teeth capped with silver.  
They wave fur costumes  
And flap their ears  
As if from across the drifting sands  
Ten thousand miles away<sup>106</sup>*

By the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD), when China re-emerged as a united and powerful empire, once again moving to incorporate the Xinjiang region of Central Asia within its hegemony, the lion and indeed the lion dance had become old and familiar symbols. The lions had come from many sources; as objects of barter for silks, with astronomer-monks from Parthia, as Persian symbols of kingship and status, associated with Indian and Sogdian deities, as companions to the Buddha even, occasionally, as live animals travelling the Silk Road from India or Iran. Now they were incorporated into the Chinese view of the world along with the dragon and the phoenix, and would eventually become a key symbol of Chinese identity, found either as paired monumental sculptures, or as dancing lions, wherever Chinese communities flourished.

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<sup>106</sup> Ryoichi Hayashi (1975) *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in. Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art* vol 6.



Ill. 33. One of the stone lions from the Spirit Road of the Empress Wu, China c. 705 AD<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> E Capon (1989) *Tang China, Vision and Splendour of a Golden Age*



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