TWO PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE GERINI FUND OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES “L’ORIENTALE”*

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There are two photographs in the Fondo Gerini of the University of Naples Oriental Institute, “L’Orientale”, which are of particular interest. The first shows a monk meditating on a skeleton, the second a skeleton surrounded by vultures. These two images present us with meditation on the stages of decomposition of the body, the antecedents of which are to be sought in the Indian world. The originality of these two images, representing a unicum, lies in the fact that we have here two photographs taken in the late 19th-early 20th century by a foreign photographer who had the opportunity to survey the scene, usually reserved to initiates alone.

Ces deux regards, ces yeux fais pour plaisir
pensez y bien, ils perdront leur clarté
nez et sourcils, la bouche d’éloquence se pourriront
(Olivier de la Marche, cit. in Huizinga 1942, 190)

The collection donated by the heirs of Gerini (1860–1913) in the 1950s now belongs to the University of Naples “l’Orientale”. As well as a great many volumes, illuminated books, manuscripts and maps, it also includes a collection of 247 photos taken by Lenz and assembled by Gerini in three albums during his long stay in Siam (1881–1906) in the service of Rama V Chulalongkorn. Here I wish to draw your attention to two of them in particular, as far as I know representing an unicum in the photographic material.

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The first one shows a monk with a skeleton, the second a skeleton surrounded by vultures (figs. 1–2). In the first case the monk is standing, leaning against a tree with a closed umbrella behind him, the skeleton stretched out at his feet.

From the artistic point of view, an almost identical scene is offered by an image of 1788 of the Ratanakosin school; to be precise, the painting in the Pra Achan Nāk in the library of the Wat Rakang at Thonburi (Fig. 3), a *Meditation on the decomposition of bodies*, a scene that would be among the favourite subjects of the Thai artists in the first half of the 19th century (Boisselier 1976, 95, caption to pl. 67). Here, too, we have the monk to the right, under an umbrella, meditating upon the skeleton at his feet. Among the other examples, the Thai meditation handbook (no. Ms. or 13703, British Library), dating to the 19th century, with clear reference to the inevitability of death, with a monk once again meditating on a skeleton (Bechert 1984, 118, fig. 3). Finally, we may mention the door of a library cupboard of the Ratanakosin school in the Vajirayan Library of Bangkok (Boisselier 1976, 174, figs. 133–134). Dating to the second quarter of the 19th century, it shows the ten meditations on the decomposition of the body with relative inscriptions explaining their exact significance, as a support in meditation. Here, in at least four cases, the monk is depicted beneath an umbrella. Writing about this particular work, Boisselier (1976, 171–72) pointed out that the

important part played—from the end of the Ayuthya period, if not earlier—by the spectacle of the Hells and the painter’s accounts of the torments suffered there. This accounts for the exceptional popularity of the Pra Malai, which arises largely from the section describing the visit of the holy monk to the infernal regions.1

1. The paracanonical text introduces the Singhalese monk Māleyya (Maliya, Malaya) and Arya Metteya. “In the heaven of the Thirty-three, Metteya preaches a long sermon on the deliverance: he promises it to men when himself shall have attained Buddhahood. Back once more on earth after the journey he has made with the aid of his supernatural powers from the Hells to Heaven of the Thirty Three, Pra Malai recounts all that he has seen, and many conversions ensue. The Sutta was in all probability written in Chiang Mai in the sixteenth century, but seems to have been based on a Singhalese original and to have been known in Burma from the thirteenth century onwards” (Boisselier 1976, 150). On Pra Malai and the *Brah Māleyyadevatttheravatthum*, see the introduction and translation of the text by Collins (1993, 1–18; 65–96, with references), and the edition of the text by Denis (1993, 19–64).
Now, in a previous text, *The Three Worlds*, stress was placed on the benefits that accrued from meditation and that, according to Boisselier, are of help in understanding the enigmatic nature of certain Thai paintings, and in particular examples antedating the first half of the 19th century, including meditations on sickness and death, and the ten stages of decay as the body decomposes.

For the textual antecedents on the various phases of decomposition of the body it is to the Indian Subcontinent that we must look, where the paths to be followed to attain ultimate Purity are well known: *Asubhabhāvanā:* the ten forms of meditation on a corpse in its various stages of decomposition, each form terminating with the conclusion: This body of mine “too, is even so constituted, is of even such nature, has not got beyond that (fate)”, as we read in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (II: 295, cf. Rhys Davids 1902, 331). “Monks, the idea of the skeleton, if cultivated… conduces to great peace from bondage”, we read in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (V: 129, cf. Woodward 1930, 110). As pointed out by Cicuzza (2001, 373, n. 15),


3. Without, of course, excluding the textual evidence of Central Asia well documented in *The Book of Zambasta*, ch. 20 and 21 (cf. Emmerick 1968, 286–301). The work has recently been dated to the 5th century (cf. Maggi 2004). Depictions of the various stages of decomposition of the body after death are also to be seen in western transpositions, as in the three paintings in Pisa Camposanto of 1350–1360, and in various other examples cited by Baltrušaitis (1973, 236–40). In Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi dating back to about 1325 is a depiction of a standing skeleton. Cf. Baltrušaitis 1973, 239, fig. B, together with A of Qyzyl, see below, who writes (241): “The men stretched out, reduced to motionlessness and silence, bodies progressively annihilated, represent a brutal assertion of realism and the ineluctable laws of nature, while the standing skeleton, speaking and acting, breaks these laws and enter into the realm of the supernatural”. As already pointed by Huizenga (1942, 187–88), “The spirit of the mediaeval ascetics would often indulge in thoughts of dust and worms: in the ecclesial treatises on contempt for the worlds the horrors of decomposition had already been evoked. But painting of details came later — towards the end of the 14th century the figurative arts took up the theme […]. Fear of life: the negation of beauty and happiness because they are bound up with calamity and grief. There is a surprising similarity between the Indian and Buddhist expression given to this sentiment in the mediaeval Christian versions. The same revulsion of old age, sickness and death [let us recall here the three meetings of Siddhārtha], the same gruesome descriptions of putrefaction”.

4. Both in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism meditation on *asubha* is considered the primary means for accomplishing calmness of body.
Contemplations in the cremation fields need not be practised in such place, in the presence of real corpses; in fact, the monk or practising layman can picture to himself mentally — with the right exercises in visualisation — the image of decay of the physical body, and, through these visions, attain a profound understanding of the reality of impermanence.5

Such meditations were described by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century.6 In the *Visuddhimagga*, the “Path towards purification” is described with three stages: *silam* (“discipline”), *samādhi* (“concentration” or “state of being”), *puñña* (“sagacity”), in accordance with a classical structure in Buddhist teaching, but also the seven stages of “purity” as they appear in the *Rathavimitasutta*. In the part dedicated to the *samādhi*; in chapter VI (Nanamoli 1956, 185–203; Maes 2002, 211–2) we find described the ten stages of decomposition of the corpse: (1) the bloated; (2) the livid; (3) the festering; (4) the cut up; (5) the gnawed; (6) the scattered; (7) the hacked and scattered; (8) the bleeding; (9) the worm infested; (10) a skeleton.7 In describing point 5 (the gnawed), it is specified that (VI: 5, Nanamoli 1956, 185–86; Maes 2002, 211):

5. Let us recall here how in the *upasampadā*, the rite of higher ordination, the preceptor (*upādhyāyā*) repeats the *tacapañcaka*, the fivefold formula of meditation on the perishable nature of the human body: *kesā* (hair), *lomā* (bodyhairs), *nakhā* (nails), *dantā* (teeth), *taco* (skin); *taco, dantā, nakhā, lomā, kesā*. As evidenced by Strong (1994, 314, n. 314, referring to Warren 1922, 396) the same formula was used at ordination into the novitiate. Strong cites the following literary references: *Jātaka* 1: 116 (Cowell 1969, 1, 15); *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* (Commentary on *Dhammapada*) 1: 243; 2: 87, 140, 242 (Burlingame 1921, 1: 301; 2: 152–53, 185, 239). According to Strong (1994, 88), the *tacapañcaka* is a cemetery meditation. It is interesting to see the specification in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* that it is a matter of formulas “of meditation of the first five of the constituent parts of the body, by way of fixing in the mind the thought of the impurity of the body”, while in *Jātaka* 1 (Cowell 1969, 1, 37) allusion is made to the “body filled with the two-and- thirty component parts”. Thirty-one of these are known to us, e. g. from the *Dīgha Nikāya* (*sutta* 22, cf. Warren 1998, 359–60, section on Loathsomeness): “a priest considers this body upwards from the soles of the feet, and downwards from the crown of the head, enclosed by skin, and full of all manner of uncleanness, saying: “there is in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinew, bone, marrow of the bones, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, lymph, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine”.

6. Buddhaghosa does not express his personal opinion, but cites material in the canonical texts and commentaries.

7. The same ten stages are also mentioned in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* of the *Abhidamma Piṭaka* (263–264, cf. *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, s.v. Asubha-bhāvanā).
what has been chewed here and there in various ways by dogs, jackals, etc., is what is gnawed (vikkhāyita). What is gnawed is the same as ‘the gnawed’ (vikkhāyitaka). Or, alternatively, what is gnawed (vikkhāyita) is vile (kucchita) because of repulsiveness, thus it is the gnawed (vikkhāyitaka): this is a term for a corpse in that particular state.


a skeleton is described in various aspects in the way beginning as though he were looking at a corpse thrown onto a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together by sinews [...]. So he should go in the way already described to where it has been put, and noticing any stones, etc., with their surrounding signs and in relation to the object, he should characterize it by the fact of its having that particular individual essence thus 'This is a skeleton' and apprehend the sign in the eleven ways by colour and the rest. But if he looks at it, [apprehending it only] by its colour as white, it does not appear to him [with its individual essence as repulsive], but only as a variant of the white kasina. Consequently he should only look at it as 'a skeleton' in the repulsive aspect [...].


Which are the states that are good? When, that he may attain the heav-ens of Form, he cultivates the way thereto, and so, aloof from sensuous desires, aloof from evil ideas, enters into and abides in the First Jñāna, wherein, etc... and which is accompanied by the ideas of a bloated corpse... [or] a discoloured corpse... [or] of a festering corpse... [or] of a corpse with cracked skin... [or] of a corpse gnawn and mangled... [or] of a corpse cut to pieces... [or] of a corpse mutilated and cut in pieces... [or] of a bloody corpse... [or] of a corpse infested with worms... [or] of a skeleton... then the contact... the balance which arises — these... are states that are good.

Let us now look to the preceding texts. The first is the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya (sutta n. 22; II: 295–298, cf. Rhys Davids 2002, 331–33):

And moreover, bhikkhus, a brother, just as if he had seen a body abandoned in the charnel-field, dead for one, two, or three days, swollen,
turning black and blue, and decomposed, applies that perception to this very body (of his own), reflecting: “This body, too, is even so constituted, is of even such a nature, has not got beyond that (fate)”. […] And moreover, bhikkhus, a brother, just as if he had seen a body abandoned in the charnel-field pecked by crows, ravens, or vultures, gnawn by dogs or jackals or by various small creatures, applies that perception to this very body […]. And moreover, bhikkhus, a brother, just as if he had seen a body abandoned in the charnel-field [reduced to] a chain of bones hanging together by tendons, with flesh and blood yet about it, or stripped of flesh but yet spotted with blood; or cleaned of both flesh and blood; or reduced to bare bones, loosed from tendons, scattered here and there, so that the bones of a hand lie in one direction, in another the bones of a foot, in another those of a leg, in another the bones of a foot, in another the pelvis, in another the spinal vertebrae, in another the skull, applies that perception […]. And moreover, bhikkhus, a brother, just as if he had seen a body abandoned in the charnel-field, [reduced] to white bones the colour of a sea-shell… or to a mere heap of bones a year old… or to rotten powder, this perception does he apply to this very body […].


And again, monks, as a monk might see a body thrown aside in a cemetery, dead for one day or for two days or for three days, swollen, discoloured, decomposing; he focuses on this body itself, thinking: ‘This body, too, is of a similar nature, a similar constitution, it has not got past that (state of things) […]. And again, monks, a monk might see a body thrown aside in a cemetery, and being devoured by crows or ravens or vultures or wild dogs or jackals or by various small creatures; he focuses on this body […]. And again, monks, as a monk might see a body thrown aside in a cemetery, a skeleton with (some) flesh and blood, sinew-bound… or fleshless but blood-bespattered, sinew-bound… or without flesh and blood, sinew-bound; … or the bones scattered here and there, no longer held together: here a bone of the hand, there a foot-bone, here a leg-bone, there a rib, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here the skull; he focuses on this body itself […]. And again, monks, a monk might see a body thrown aside in a cemetery: the bones white and something like sea-shells, a heap of dried up bones more than a year old… the bones gone rotten and reduced to powder; he focuses on this body […].

As for the Buddhist Chinese texts, we refer to the *Guanfo sanmei hai jing*, translated by Buddhabhadra (ca. 400 A.D.), the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, translated by Kumārajīva (402–405 A.D.), and the *Dacheng yizhang*, translated by Hui Yuan (523–592).

Not only meditations on the stages of decomposition of the body, but on the skeleton only, whose representations in art we will mention here, by way of example, the famous, no longer extant Afghan painting in Cave A of Tapa-é-Shotor, with a standing skeleton (Fig. 4), and the painting from the “Seefahrerhöhle” of Qyzyl (Cave 212), No. 1 b 8401, today in the Museum für Indische Kunst (Grünwedel 1920, tav. xviii, fig. 6; Bussagli 1963, 75, fig. on p. 68, see here n. 3; Lo Muzio 2005, 487), with a monk meditating on a skull. This is not to say that in Central Asia there are no pictures showing the decomposition of bodies. Again at Qyzyl, we may mention Cave 7 (“Schakalshöhle”, cf. Grünwedel 1912: 180) where, as evidenced by Lo Muzio (2005, 489), according to Grünwedel’s description, the original painting included two scenes showing corpses devoured by jackals:

we know only part of this decoration thanks to a drawing published by the German scholar (*cit.*: fig. 420), which reveals the realistically inflated body of a dead woman lying among scattered bones (i.e. in a burial ground)

9. The cave of Tapa-é-Shotor: “était vraisemblablement un lieu de méditation où les moines venaient se recueillir sur le cycle de la vie humaine depuis la procréation jusqu’à la décomposition du cadavre pourrissant” (Tarzi 1976, 408, fig. 21). See also Miyaji 2007, 32, referring to the cave and Caves 77 and 212 of Qyzyl: “such scenes where the process by which corpses decay and become white skeletons are described in the contemporary sūtras such as the *Chan miyaofa jing*”. On cremation grounds represented in early Tibetan Maṇḍalas, see, e.g., Tucci 1989, 50, and Neumann 2002.
10. The following observation by Kanda (2005, n. 31) referring to Caves 77, 110 e 112 — with images of the contemplation of skulls — that “no image of the contemplation on a decaying corpse has been discovered, so the contemplation on the bones have been more essential from the fifth through eight centuries than the meditation on a decaying corpse” must in part be revised, also in view of the fact that Kanda does not seem to be acquainted with the Kara Tepe painting.
and a jackal tearing her flesh [...] as there are no grounds for suspecting a Zoroastrian influence in the funeral rites of the Tarim basin, the mural in the cave 7 invites to search for a suitable interpretation of the scene within the frame of Buddhism. As a matter of fact, the answer to our inquiry is offered by the Satipaṭṭhānasutta [...].

So far we have mentioned textual references and some of the artistic depictions on meditations on decomposing bodies and skeletons. Actually, there is nothing surprising about them. Suffice it to recall how Siddhārtha, before taking food after “six” years of austerity, had clothed himself in the shroud of Rādhā, the slave-woman of Sujatā, whose body had been placed in the cemetery, where it lays — as we read in the Lalitavistara (Foucaux 1884, 229). As I illustrated at the conference on South Asian Archaeology XIX held in Ravenna in 2007, we believe that the Gandharan skeletal depictions of the Buddha (e.g. Ingholt 1957, pls. 52–53) are, from the symbolic viewpoint, intended not only to represent the fasting Siddhārtha, but could also refer to meditations he may have made in this respect. Finally, let us recall that, apart from the three meetings of the future Buddha with the old man, the sick man and the dead man, Siddhārtha, on the eve of his abandonment of the palace, saw the women of the harem as corpses, at least according to the account in the Lalitavistara (Foucaux 1884, 180–81): “Exhorté par les maîtres des dieux, il examine un instant l’appartement des femmes; il le considère, et, voyant qu’elles ont un aspect repoussant: Je demeure au milieu d’un cimetière, en vérité”.

Let us now move on to the Far East. As evidenced by Chin (1998, 282):

while the symbol of the female cadaver can be traced back to early Buddhist India, there are no extant paintings or literary evidence of paintings of a female corpse in progressive stages of decay from the Indian subcontinent [...] From T’ang [...] and Five Dynasties [...] China there remain certain poems describing bodily decay found in the cave temples of Tun-huang, and there are fragments of wall painting that suggest the existence of paintings of the corpse, but this requires further investigation [...]. The decomposing cadaver is a topic of discussion in Chih-i’s (538–597) Mo-ho chih-kuan [...] (the Great Calming and Contemplation, T. 1911, 46. 121a-122b), which Genshin summarized in his Ōjōyōshū, a late tenth-century work, and used to illuminate his description of the six paths of reincarnation to inspire believers to the Pure Land.
In Japan, well-known are the representations of the nine stages of decomposition of the body by Ono no Komachi (famous poetess supposed to have lived in the 9th century) and the empress Dan-Ron, who lived in the 9th century, of which Baltrušaitis (1973, 235–36) writes:

1 stage: the face livid. Her beauty withers like that of a flower; 11 stage: the body swollen. Once so lovely, the body is now wretched; 111 stage: the body tumid. As life is transient; 1111 stage: the body in putrefaction. The skeleton of the head and breast become visible. Shall we not, despite all, undergo to fate of this body? 11111 stage: the body is a prey to animals. The belly opens. In no part will our bodies escape destruction; 111111 stage: the body has putrefied and turned green. The skeleton, still stained with blood, is bared of flesh. How can we think that our body will not be devoured by dogs? 1111111 stage: the body is now nothing more than a skeleton whose parts are still joined. Only the flesh distinguishes man from woman, the skeletons are identical; 11111111 stage: the bones of the skeleton are broken up and scattered. All that we love in contemplating a body rots and vanishes in dust; 111111111 stage: an old grave amidst luxuriant vegetation.

When we come to visit a grave on mount Toribé, do we see anything other than dewdrops on that grave?

Here we shall confine our attention to a few examples, referring you for other images of female cadavers in progressive stages of decay from the 13th to the 19th century to studies by Kanda (2005) and Chin (1998). The latter writes (279):

There are innumerable hanging scroll and hand scroll paintings and printed books depicting corpses in progressive stages of decay. Most belong to Japanese temples and are unknown beyond their temple precincts, still retaining their religious functions.

It is interesting to note that all the bodies are female. Chin (1998, 294, quoting Wilson 1996, 60, 141–79) continues:

Despising one’s own body and the bodies of women can be explained in the following manner: In Buddhism the acknowledgement of death and the realization of human ephemerality are necessary steps towards the achievement of enlightenment. Closely tied to the realization of human spiritual fragility is overcoming sexual desire, which the early Buddhists considered identical to necrophilia, because the body, especially the
female body, emits fluids and wastes that were thought to be analogous to the putrefaction of the corpse. The female cadaver was not used only by male Buddhists; women were also asked to meditate on the repulsive aspects of their own bodies.

Of the representations of Ono no Komachi we will cite the following, bearing in mind the remarks by James T. Ulak (Lee 1983, 218, no. 14):

Ono-no Komachi, acknowledged in Heian anthologies as one of the six poetic geniuses in the Japanese tradition, very soon became synonymous with beauty and its fickle transience. The body of legend surrounding her could only have been augmented by the appeal of her hauntingly romantic verse. And by the very sparseness and vagueness of biographical data. She was portrayed as a gifted woman who, attempting to parlay her beauty into the position of imperial consort rejected all other suitors but died destitute.

Kūsō Zukan Emaki (Scroll of the Nine Aspects of Decay, known also as Ono-no Komachi) of the Kamakura period, 14th century, formerly belonging to the Nakamura family (Lee 1983, 33–35, no. 14; Nihonno Bijutsu 1988, 55, no. 60, figs. 1–3; Chin 1998, 280–81, fig. 2) (Fig. 5).

Kakemono of the British Museum attributed to Iwa-sa Mata-hei, of the 16th century (Anderson 1886, 121, no. 205; Baltrušaitis 1973, 336, n. 33).

Of the empress we may mention the Kakemono, the 9th of a set of ten, on paper, of the British Museum (Anderson 1886, 87, no. 77; Baltrušaitis 1973, 336, n. 33), whose originals are said to date from the 9th century: “The figure is said to have been that of the Empress Danzin (nineth century), who was exposed in obedience to her own wish”.

Among the other representations of the decay of the body the oldest is the Jindō fūjō sōzu of Shōjuraikō-ji (Lee 1983, 222–23, pl. 19; Nihonno Bijutsu.

11. A propos of which James T. Ulak writes (Lee 1983, 218, no. 14): “The nine stages of decline (kūsō) then proceed against a stark background devoid of explanatory text. Death and dishabille, discoloration, bloating, putrefaction, infestation by maggots, and dismemberment by dogs, crows and birds of prey follow a conventionalized pattern […] that is faithful to the vigorously descriptive Chinese literary versions”.
1988, colour pl. 11, fig. 9; Chin 1988, 280, fig. 1), with nine stages of decay of the woman.12

*Kakemono* No. MG 19977 in the Musée Guimet (*Catalogue*, 128, no. 390); again with the nine aspects of decomposition of the body, an Edo period copy, where, in the last stage, we see the urn.


To return to the main subject of this paper, as we have seen, the monk, in the first of our photos and the one in the 1788 image in the Library of Wat Rakong of Thonburi are shown with an umbrella. Is this a symbol of royalty? Might not the umbrella, rather, allude to the *krot*? As pointed out by Bechert (1984, 165), on pilgrimages the monks would observe the Vinaya with greater austerity, including sleeping in the open air under a large umbrella-like shelter (*krot*) which is equipped with a mosquito-net and can be folded for carrying on their back during the day. The umbrella at the back of the monk in our photo seems to consist of two parts, the lower part being in the form of a closed “tent”. If the situation is indeed so, then we have in fact illustration of the pilgrimages the monks performed.

Finally, let me spend a few words on the second of the images we are concerned with in this paper. As we have seen, the skeleton lies stretched out, surrounded by vultures. We have also seen the passage by Buddhaghosa, where the body is devoured by dogs, jackals and other animals and, as we also evidence in the *Mahāsatpaṭṭhāna suttanta* and the *Mūlapaṇṇāsa* with

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12. Chin (1998, 280) writes: “This set was inspired by the introduction of Genshin’s (942–1017) textual compilation, the *Ōjōshū* [...]. There are nine stages of decay of the female body depicted in this work: the progression begins at the top and moves downward [...]. Just below the inscription, a fresh corpse of a woman dressed in white funerary robes is lying on a mat with last offerings at her head. To the lower left [...], the corpse bloated, then oozes blood and breaks down. A single red maple leaf lies at the head of the cadaver that is showing its bones, while white maggots grow on the body in the next scene. Finally, hawks, crows, and dogs tear at the remains of flesh until only the bones are left”. On woman’s pollution in Buddhism in general, see Young 2004, 179–89, and 2007, with references.
the mention of crows, ravens, or vultures, dogs or jackals, it is hardly surprising to find these birds in the second of our images. Outside Thailand, we find dramatic representation of the scene, for example, on the previously mentioned Japanese paintings (Fig. 5).

We might also see an iconographic antecedent in a painting in Temple C-V in Kara Tepe (Staviskji 1987, pl. 27.2; 1996, fig. 21; 1998, 33, fig. 16; Silvi Antonini 2003, 59–60, figs. 7–7a; Lo muzio 2005, 483–91, here fig. 6) where, to the far right, in front of a figure in a cave holding an object, two dogs are to be seen devouring a corpse; according to Katsumi Tanabe — and here let me thank him for the suggestion — “the scene should not represent the Zoroastrian purification Ritual by dogs (saddid = gazing by dog) but it is rather related to the gaze of the dead corpse”. In this respect Silvi Antonini (2003, 59) wrote:

The scene with the dogs and the man in the niche is not easy to interpret. Staviskij rightly observes that, on first sight, one might be tempted to associate it with a Mazdeic funerary cult; that is, to the defleshing of the body of a dead person by animals, which preceded burial of the bones. However, a different interpretation is also possible. In fact, the place does not seem to fit the purpose, and the man is not supine, as we would expect, and seems to have some connection with the monk (?) in meditation in the cave. If the object the latter is holding were in fact a skull, then we might interpret the scene as showing a wayfarer in distress over the dangers he must face, to whom Buddhist faith alone can give the answer, urging him to meditate upon death and detach himself from human passions.  

13. Staviskij limits himself to describing the scene, without interpreting it.
14. Staviskij (1987, 50, pl. XXVIII, fig. 4) had originally written, making reference to Chavannes (1903, 132–33, n. 5): in the niche painted by the corner of the west wall of Temple P-V “est assis un personnage tenant à hauteur de son ventre un objet rond qui paraît bien être un crâne, et, plus bas, une silhouette d’homme” [but, on note 16 by Grenet “à l’examen du dessin il paraît possible d’y reconnaître plutôt un cadavre de femme] apparemment allongé avec deux chiens dont l’un — dont on ne voit que la partie figuré — se trouve plus bas et plus à gauche, comme s’il était près de la jambe droite de l’homme. Il est, évidemment, tentant d’interpréter cette scène, surtout dans sa partie inférieure, en relation avec le vieux rite funéraire mazdéen et zoroastrien du décharnement du mort (on sait que les chiens spécialement dressés pouvaient être utilisés pour ce décharnement”, while later he went on to write (1988, 1400–1401): “However, the possibility cannot be excluded that the scene is an illustration to some Indian
In complete agreement with Silvi, I would even go further here: if the skull (?) held in the monk’s hand is an event allusion to death, then the presence of the dogs devouring the dead woman (see below n. 14) — why necessarily supine? — could allude to the meditations to be performed over the various stages of decomposition of the body, at least according to the Buddhist texts. In other words, I believe we have here a Buddhist representation of meditations on the decomposition of the body adopted — for a better understanding — to the local cults that see the corpse defleshed by dogs.

We might see another antecedent in the image in Cave No. 20 of Toyuk (Turfan area), lower part of the right wall, where, as evidenced by Miyaji (2007, 32):

there is an image in which a monk is contemplating a woman’s dead body that is swollen and a crow is pecking at it, i.e. the monk is contemplating Buddhist or local non-Buddhist tales bearing no relation to burial rites”. On the rite of dead bodies “devoured” by dogs, apart from Chavannes 1903, see Grenet 1984, 227.

Chavannes writes as follows (133): “En dehors de la capitale il y a, logées à l’écart, plus de deux cents familles qui ont la spécialité de s’occuper des funérailles; ces gens ont construit dans un endroit isolé une enceinte dans laquelle ils élèvent des chiens; chaque fois qu’un homme est mort, ils vont prendre son cadavre, le placent dans cette enceinte, et le font dévorer par les chiens; après cela on recueille tous les ossements qu’on enterré en leur faisant un convoi funèbre; on ne les met dans aucune cercueil”. As evidenced by Grenet (1984, 74, 220, 240) and by Lo Muzio (2005, 485) “On the history of this Zoroastrian practice in Central Asia there is a passage of Strabo’s Geography (xi, 11, 3) recording the testimony of one of Alexander’s companion, Onesicritos, according to whom the people of Bactria used the bodies of their deceased be devoured by dogs expressly bred for that purpose. This bit of information probably does not deserve the scepticism it has roused in some scholars, as a similar practice is referred to other regions of Central Asia as well, and in different epochs. On the other hand more caution should be reserved to other supposed evidence of the rite of exposure in ancient Bactria, namely the huge bone deposit in the Ai Khanum theatre and the mausoleum of Dalverzin Tepe. Moreover the finding of ossuaries seems to be extremely rare in that region. Yet, in spite of the paucity of archaeological evidence concerning the ritual of exposure in Bactria, I think it would not be reasonable to rule out the probability it was less widespread than in other areas or implied a different disposal of the bones”. Reverting to the Kara Tepe painting, here I would like to draw your attention to the following points: the presence of a fence; the defleshing done by dogs and the burial. The allusions to Zoroastrian cults are undeniable, although the text fails to specify whether the bodies were in contact with the soil, which would clash with the hypothesis of such a cult. However, here the bones are gathered up.
on a corpse. It is notable, however that on the left wall there are scenes of monks contemplating on […] aspects of the Pure Land.\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, we may also recall the yoga instruction text found in Turfan (Schlingloff 1964, 59–60):

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

We have also seen that, according to Claudio Cicuzza, contemplation in cremation fields did not necessarily need to be performed in those precise places. Without contesting Cicuzza’s observation, I would, however, like to point out that in our case — and herein lies the importance of our two

\textsuperscript{15} See also Chin 1998, 281–82, n. 11. As evidenced by Miyaji (2007, 33) “This image in Toyuk is important as it shows that the contemplation of the Pure Land was carried out at the same time as the contemplation on corpses and skeletons in Central Asia. The image of contemplation of the Pure Land in Toyuk is represented as a guide for monks and it was responsible for propagation of the tradition of the original Guan Wuliangshou jing and even in the establishment of the sūtra, where Guan Wuliangshou jing takes the form of Shakyamuni Buddha preaching on the way of the contemplation of the Pure Land to Vaidehi as a part of the tale of Ajatashatru. The image of contemplation of the Pure Land in Toyuk is thought to have had an effect on the genesis of Kangyo-hen (scene of Guan Wuliangshou jing) in the Tang period”. See also Miyaji 1995–6.
pictures — there are real records, made moreover by a westerner (almost certainly not an initiate) in the late 19th or early 20th century, photographic evidence of rites still performed at the time.

REFERENCES


Nanamoli, Bhikkhu. 1915. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhadantā Cariya Buddhaghosa.* Kandy.


4. Tapa-é-Shotor, Cave A. Photo: Courtesy Gérard Fussman. Collège de France, no. NCO 1228 AF.
