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Change of suspension systems of daggers and swords in eastern Eurasia: Its relation to the Hephthalite occupation of Central Asia

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on changes in the suspension systems of daggers and swords in pre-Islamic eastern Eurasia. Previous studies have shown that scabbard slides were used in the Kushan and early Sasanian periods to suspend a sword from a bearer's waist belt. This method was later replaced by a "two-point suspension system" with which a sword is suspended by two straps and two fixtures attached on its scabbard. Through an examination of daggers and swords represented in Central Asian art, I consider the possibility that the two-point suspension system became prevalent in eastern Eurasia in connection with the Hephthalite occupation of Central Asia from the second half of the fifth century through the first half of the sixth century.

KEYWORDS: Hephthalites, Sogdians, Central Asia, bladed weapons, Shōsō-in

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1. Recent studies on the Hephthalite occupation of Central Asia

Recent archaeological, linguistic, iconographic, numismatic and historical research has expanded our knowledge of the Hephthalite presence in Central Asia. J. Il'yasov attributes a group of terracotta figurines from the Surkandar'ya region (southern Uzbekistan) to "the Hephthalite period" based on their clothing and hairstyle: a caftan with a triangular collar on the right side, a crown with three crescents, a crown with wings and a unique hairstyle¹. Il'yasov further argues that figures with these features are also found in other areas such as Sogdiana, Bamiyan and Kucha, the region corresponding to the territory ruled by the Hephthalites (Fig. 1: 1–4). His observations are significant because he recognises a political and cultural unification of Central Asia by the Hephthalites behind the diffusion of identical costumes in the region, and he refuses to see the direct influence of the Sasanian Empire to the East. Inspired by Il'yasov's work, I have in previous publications discussed the possible influence of the Hephthalites on the Sogdians based on evidence from Sogdian funerary monuments found in China². S. Hiyama has re-examined the chronology of paintings from the Kizil Caves in Kucha and has convincingly demonstrated that the works of the first Indo-Iranian style (around 500 CE) were directly influenced by sculptures from Gandhara, reflecting the political unification of Bactria and Kucha by the Hephthalites³.

Except for coins and seals, few examples of Hephthalite material culture survive, and images representing the Hephthalites are rare. Recent studies, however, have discovered elements of Hephthalite culture in the language and imagery of the peoples once under their rule.

É. de la Vaissière has published an article on the nationality of the Hephthalites⁴. Through an examination of information brought by the first Hephthalite embassy to the Northern Wei, he rejects the opinion of K. Enoki that the Hephthalites were a local tribe from the western Himalaya Mountains and has argued that the Hephthalites immigrated from the Altai region to Central Asia in the Huns' massive wave of immigration in the second half of the fourth century.

¹ J. Ya. Il'yasov, "The Hephthalite terracotta", *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 7, 2001, pp. 187–200.

² E. Kageyama, "The winged crown and the triple-crescent crown in the Sogdian funerary monuments from China: their relation to the Hephthalite occupation of Central Asia", *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology* 2, 2007, pp. 11–22.

³ S. Hiyama, "Study on the first-style murals of Kucha: analysis of some motifs related to the Hephthalite's period", *Buddhism and Art in Gandhāra and Kucha* (Buddhist culture along the Silk Road: Gandhāra, Kucha, and Turfan, Section 1), 2013, Ryukoku University, pp. 125–141.

⁴ É. de la Vaissière, "Is there a "Nationality of the Hephthalites"?", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 17, 2003 [2007], pp. 119–132.

CHANGE OF SUSPENSION SYSTEMS OF DAGGERS AND SWORDS IN EASTERN EURASIA





















		Bactria	Sogdiana	Bamiyan	Kucha	China, Japan
1	Triple-crescent crown	a 	b 	c 		d 
2	Winged crown	e 	f 	g 	h 	i 
3	Triangular collar	j 	k  *from Anyang	l 	m 	n 
4	Hairstyle	o 			p 	
5	Dagger with two fixtures	q 	r 	s 	t 	

Fig. 1: Crowns, costumes, hairstyles and daggers attested in iconographical materials from Central Asia, China and Japan.

2. The suspension system of daggers and swords in pre-Islamic eastern Eurasia

In the conclusion of his book on long swords and scabbard slides in Asia published in 1975, W. Trousdale states: “During the past 2,500 years there have been only two principal

methods of suspending long fighting swords in Asia. The earlier of these methods was the scabbard slide. (...) In Asia, the scabbard slide was replaced by the more efficient two-point suspension system”⁵. Fig. 2a shows a sword suspended from a bearer’s waist by one strap and a scabbard slide (bridge-like mount), while Fig. 2b shows a sword suspended from a bearer’s waist belt by two straps—one short and one long—and two fixtures attached on its scabbard⁶. Trousdale has shown that scabbard slides were used in the Kushan and early Sasanian periods as evidenced by sculptures from Gandhara and early Sasanian silver vessels and that this method was later replaced by the two-point suspension system. The earliest example of this type of sword in Sasanian art is seen in reliefs from a monument in Taq-i Bustan, attributed to Khusro II (590–628)⁷. Significantly, Trousdale proposed the possibility of the two-point suspension system being introduced to Central Asia during the Hephthalite invasion, but he was unable to support his argument due to the absence of supporting iconographical and archaeological evidence⁸. In the following section, I would like to build upon Trousdale’s observations using materials that have become available over the past 40 years. These confirm his theory and provide additional details on the chronological and cultural contexts of the event.

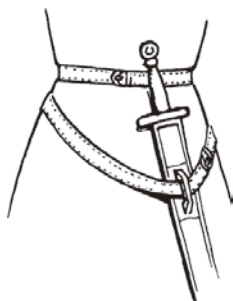


Fig. 2a: Scabbard slide.

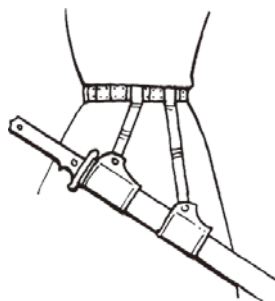


Fig. 2b: Two-point suspension system.

⁵ W. Trousdale, *The Long Sword and Scabbard Slide in Asia*, *Smithonian Contributions to Anthropology* 17, 1975, p. 118.

⁶ H. Nickel, “About the sword of the Huns and the “Urepos” of the Steppes”, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 7, 1973, pp. 131–142.

⁷ P. O. Harper and P. Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period*, Volume One: Royal Imagery, 1981, New York, p. 72.

⁸ Trousdale, 1975, p. 95: “We may assume that the double-locket device entered the old Kushan territories at about the time of the Hephthalite invasion even though its actual existence there cannot be demonstrated until sometime later”.

3. Daggers with two suspension mounts depicted in Central Asian art

Il'yasov's article references figurines wearing caftans with triangular-shaped collars on the right side. This is believed to be a style of garment that became popular in Central Asia under Hephthalite rule (Fig. 1: 3, Fig. 3). Five of these works depict daggers with two fixtures suspended either horizontally or slightly obliquely from the person's belt: no. 3 (Balalyk-tepe, southern Uzbekistan), no. 6 (Kizil Caves), no. 8 (reliquary from Kucha region), no. 9 (Dil'berzhin, northern Afghanistan) and no. 11 (the so-called "Stroganov bowl"). Other examples of this type of dagger are depicted in wall paintings from Dzhartepa, Varakhsha and Afrasiab (Uzbekistan); Pendzhikent (Tajikistan); Bamiyan (Afghanistan); Khotan and Kucha (Xinjiang, China); and in Sogdian funerary reliefs from northern China.

Although the absolute dates of these wall paintings from Central Asia remain unknown, the painting from one Pendzhikent temple representing two donors wearing daggers with dual fixtures has been dated to around 500 CE based on archaeological evidence (Fig. 4)⁹. The 'Stroganov bowl' has a Sogdian inscription attributing it to 'Dhenakk, the son of *xwn* (Hun)'¹⁰. É. de la Vaissière has shown that 'Hun' could have become a Sogdian name only after a period of fusion between the Sogdians and Kidarites in the first half of the fifth century¹¹. Following this observation, Y. Yoshida argues that this bowl was commissioned by a Sogdian nobleman when Sogdiana was already under Hephthalite rule. These materials suggest the increasing prevalence of the dagger with two fixtures in Central Asia during the Hephthalite period, and once established, its usage continued after the fall of the Hephthalite Empire in the middle of the sixth century.

4. Daggers and swords of the Hephthalite rulers

It is worth considering two images that could be representations of a Hephthalite ruler. One is a figure depicted in the reliefs of a stone sarcophagus of a Sogdian named Wirkak and his wife buried in Xi'an in 580¹². This figure appears seated in a yurt similar to Turkic rulers in other Sogdian funerary reliefs, but he has a winged crown instead of long hair. Based on these observations, Y. Yoshida identified the figure as a ruler of the Hephthalites, who came under the cultural influence of the Sasanians¹³. Unfortunately, it is impossible to

⁹ G. Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 1981, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, pp. 56–57, figs. 23–24.

¹⁰ Y. Yoshida, "When did Sogdians begin to write vertically?", *Tokyo University Linguistic Papers* 33, 2013, p. 382.

¹¹ É. de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, 2005, Leiden-Boston, pp. 81–82.

¹² *Wenwu* 2005/3, pp. 25, 29; Xi'an Institute of Archaeology and Conservation on Cultural Heritage, Yang Junkai (eds.), *Shi Jun Tomb of the Northern Zhou Dynasty*, 2014, Beijing (in Chinese), pl. 28.



Fig. 3: Figures wearing caftans with triangular-shaped collars on the right side. 1–3: Balalyk-tepe; 4–5: Bamiyan; 6–8: Kucha region; 9: Dil’berdzhin; 10: Hephthalite coin; 11: “Stroganov bowl”.

¹³ Y. Yoshida, “The Sogdian version of the new Xi’an inscription”, É. de la Vaissière, É. Trombert (eds.), *Les Sogdiens en Chine*, Paris, 2005, p. 63.



Fig. 4: Donors in a wall painting from Pendzhikent.

find a representation of a dagger carried by this Hephthalite ruler, while we can clearly see a dagger and two straps of the person sitting in front of the yurt identified with Wirkak. The other image is a seated figure represented on a seal (22.8×19.4 mm)¹⁴. According to a Bactrian inscription, his name is 'Khingila', the same as a Hephthalite ruler¹⁵. His caftan has a triangular collar on the right side, the same Hephthalite style garment mentioned above. The inscription and caftan identify him with a Hephthalite ruler, while P. Callieri attributes this seal to the Kidarite Period rather than the Hephthalite period. We can clearly see the hilt of a sword, but cannot discern its fixtures.

¹⁴ P. Callieri, "The Bactrian seal of Khingila", *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 8, 2002, pp. 121–141.

¹⁵ N. Sims-Williams, "The Bactrian inscription on the seal of Khingila", *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 8, 2002, pp. 143–148.

At the Shakh Tepe site near Qunduz in northern Afghanistan, more than 100 burial mounds were discovered, some of which were subsequently excavated¹⁶. These tombs have been confidently attributed to the Hephthalites based on the burial practices and a gold coin of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491–518) discovered in one tumulus. A dagger and scabbard fittings, as well as a gold ring decorated with cloisonné were recovered within the tombs. Unfortunately, neither photographs of these artefacts nor descriptions of their shapes were published. No direct evidence exists thus far of the Hephthalites using the two-point suspension system to carry their dagger or sword.

5. The origin and evolution of daggers with two suspension mounts

As evidenced by an *akinakes* with two mounts found in the Scythian Solokha mound tomb in Ukraine, nomadic peoples of the northern Eurasian steppe utilised the two-point suspension system as early as the third or second centuries BCE (Fig. 5)¹⁷. The origin of this suspension system should not be assigned to the Hephthalites, but they introduced this type of dagger to the settled people in Central Asia after their immigration from the northern steppe in the second half of the fourth century.

A famous dagger found in the tomb of Gyerim-ro 鷄林路 in Gyeongju 慶州, South Korea, dated to the early sixth century, has also two suspension mounts¹⁸. Its scabbard is



Fig. 5: *Akinakes* from the Solokha tomb, Ukraine.

¹⁶ D. Schlumberger, “La nécropole de Shakh Tépé près de Qunduz”, *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1964, pp. 207–211.

¹⁷ Nickel, 1973.

¹⁸ Gyeongju National Museum, *Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 of the Silla Dynasty from Gyeongju, Korea*, 2010 (in Korean with English abstract). In the abstract of this catalogue, the authors suggest the possibility that the dagger and scabbard were commissioned by a group from Central Asia whose daggers and scabbards were of similar form and that it was manufactured by a goldsmith from the Byzantium Empire, or “barbarian” Europe. See also W. Anazawa, J. Manome, “The problems on a gold dagger with cloisonné decorations from Kerim-lo no. 14 tomb, in Kyongju, Korea”, *Kobunka dansō* 7, 1980, pp. 245–278 (in Japanese with English abstract).

beautifully decorated with cloisonné and has a trapezoidal shape that widens at the end. The same dagger style is found in Kazakhstan, and similar works also appear in paintings from Pendzhikent and Kizil as well as Sogdian funerary reliefs from Anyang¹⁹. These highly decorated works may be more elaborate versions of the dagger with two suspension mounts produced under Hephthalite influence.

6. Swords with two suspension mounts

Paintings from Sogdiana and other regions in Central Asia such as Fandukistan (Afghanistan) or Khotan show that the two-point suspension system was later applied to swords²⁰. These swords were designed to be attached to a belt, suspended at a slant by two straps of different lengths. The two-point suspension system was applied to swords across a larger area and for a longer time than it was for daggers.

The earliest example of a sword with two fixtures was excavated from the tomb of Li Xian 李賢 (d. 569) in the western suburbs of Guyuan 固原, Ningxia 寧夏²¹. Similar swords are also represented in wall paintings from the tomb of Xu Xianxiu 徐顯秀 (571 CE)²² and in Sogdian funerary reliefs from Anyang²³. The sword with two fixtures must have been introduced to China as early as the middle of the sixth century.

Swords with two mounting fixtures are preserved in the Shōsō-in storehouse in Japan (Fig. 6). The presence of this sword type in Japan during the eighth century is likely due to



Fig. 6: Sword in Shōsō-in, Todaiji-temple.

¹⁹ Regarding the dagger found in Kazakhstan and those depicted in Kizil paintings, see Anazawa and Manome, 1980. Regarding those depicted in Pendzhikent paintings, see V. R. Raspopova, “Ethnos and weaponry in the murals of Afrasiab”, *Royal Naurūz in Samarkand*, 2006, p. 130, fig. 2. One panel of a Sogdian funerary couch from Anyang, now in Boston, shows a rider under a canopy with this type of dagger suspended vertically to his belt.

²⁰ Trousdale, 1975, p. 84, fig. 64; S. Whitfield (ed.), *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, 2004, p. 160, no. 59.

²¹ B. I. Marshak, “Sword in its scabbard”, in A. L. Juliano and J. A. Lerner (ed.), *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China*, New York, pp. 102–103.

²² The Institute of Archaeology of Taiyuan (ed.), *Xu Xianxiu's tomb of the Northern Qi*, 2005 (in Chinese), fig. 7.

²³ *Orientalism* 32/8, October 2001, p. 54, fig. 1.

the popularity of such weapons in the Tang Court, China. The two-point suspension system apparently became the standard way to carry a sword in Japan, as evidenced by an image of Prince Shōtoku (572–622) painted in the eighth century.

Several swords with dual suspension mounts are housed in collections in Europe, the United States and Japan, and some were allegedly discovered in northern Iran²⁴. They have scabbards in gold or silver decorated with a ‘feather’ pattern. H. Nickel mentions that this pattern and other decorative features appearing on one sword at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are found on scabbard mountings and jewellery from the late Hunnish Period in Hungary, which suggests a Hunnish origin for the sword. Further research will be necessary to know how and when this type of sword with two suspension mounts and a “feather-patterned” scabbard was introduced to Sasanian Iran²⁵.

Besides examples of dual mounted swords from Iran, Central Asia and China, it is necessary to mention daggers and swords represented on stone sculptures made by the Turks in North Asia (Altai, Tuva, Mongolia and Xinjiang). In many cases, two semicircular fixtures are clearly shown on scabbards and we can safely assume that the two-point suspension system was the standard way for Turks to carry both daggers and swords²⁶. In this context, a sword with dual suspension mounts unearthed from a Turkic burial mound in the Kosh-Agach region of Altai, Russia is especially noteworthy. The sword has a Sogdian inscription on the back side of its blade and is dated from the seventh to ninth or tenth centuries²⁷.

7. The scabbard slide in art from Sogdiana and Bamiyan

On one bone plaque found at a kurgan in Orlat, 50 km northwest of Samarkand, a scabbard slide on a sword carried by soldiers is clearly represented. In the same kurgan, a scabbard slide was found together with a sword or dagger. According to J. Ilyasov and D. Rusanov, the kurgan can be dated to the first or second century CE²⁸.

A painting of a hunting scene found in Dzhar tepa, 43 km east of Samarkand, is dated to

²⁴ *Splendeur des Sassanides*, 1993, Bruxelles, pp. 177–179, nos. 35–41.

²⁵ Nickel, 1973, pp. 135–138.

²⁶ Л. А. Евтюхова, «Каменные изваяния Южной Сибири и Монголии», *Материалы и Исследования по Археологии* 24, 1952, pp. 110–113; А. Д. Грач, *Древнетюркские изваяния Тувы по материалам исследований 1953–1960 гг.*, 1961, Москва, pp. 63–64; В. Д. Кубарев, *Древнетюркские изваяния Алтая*, Новосибирск, 1984, pp. 39–43; E. Kageyama, “The suspension system of daggers and swords used by the Sogdians and Tujue”, forthcoming.

²⁷ В. Д. Кубарев, «Палаш с согдийской надписью из древнетюркского погребения на Алтае», *Северная Азия и соседние территории в средние века*, Новосибирск, 1992, pp. 25–36.

²⁸ J. Ilyasov, D. Rusanov, “A study on the bone plates from Orlat”, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 5, 1997/98, pp. 107–159.

the fourth or fifth century and considered one of the earliest wall painting in Sogdiana. We can see an extremely long sword, the hilt of which is higher than the bearer's belt. A slide is not visible on its scabbard, but this painting may show a sword suspended from a belt by a strap and scabbard slide²⁹.

Numerous representations of scabbard slides are illustrated in paintings later than the middle of the sixth century. These examples may reflect either a coexistence of the two suspension systems, or they may relate to the method of illustrating epics intended to convey to the viewer that the depicted stories occurred in the ancient past³⁰. In the Afrasiab painting dated to the middle of the seventh century, we can see scabbard slides (Fig. 7)³¹. They are also represented in many paintings from Pendzhikent and Kala-i Kakhkakha I (Tajikistan) dated to the middle of the eighth century, most of which illustrate epics³².

The god depicted in the Eastern Buddha niche in Bamiyan carries a sword suspended from the waist by a strap and scabbard slide. Most researchers agree that the artistic activity in Bamiyan did not begin before the late sixth century, a theory recently supported by radiocarbon dating of the Eastern Buddha indicating dates in the middle of the sixth century³³. It is unclear why the painter chose the traditional suspension system for the god's sword, while donors depicted on both sides of the niche wear a crown and costume in the Hephthalite style. The previously mentioned painting of Fondukistan shows a pair of warriors, one of whom carries his sword suspended by a long strap. This must have gone through an aperture of a scabbard slide that is not visible, whereas the other warrior carries a sword with dual fixtures.

²⁹ A. Berdimuradov, M. Samibaev (avec des notes additionnelles par F. Grenet et B. Marshak), "Une nouvelle peinture murale sogdienne dans le temple de Džartepa II", *Studia Iranica* 30, 2001, pp. 45–66.

³⁰ V. R. Raspopova, 2006; I. A. Arzhantseva, O. N. Inevatkina, "Iranian people depicted in Afrasiab wall painting (7th century AD)", A. Panaino, A. Piras (eds.), *Proceedings of the 5th conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea held in Ravenna, 6–11 October 2003*, vol. 1: Ancient and Middle Iranian studies, 2006, Milano, pp. 307–318.

³¹ Л. И. Альбаум, *Живопись Афрасаба*, 1975, Ташкент, pl. 23, 27, 29, 30.

³² А. М. Беленицкий, Б. Б. Пиотровский (ред.), *Скульптура и живопись древнего Пянджикента*, 1959, Москва, pl. 8; В. М. Соколовский, *Монументальная живопись VIII – начала IX века дворцового комплекса Бунджиката, столицы средневекового государства Устргшаны*, 2009, Санкт-Петербург, figs. 21, 37, 44, 49, 55, 63, 115, 126.

³³ D. Klimburg-Salter, "Buddhist painting in the Hindu Kush ca. VIIth to Xth centuries", É. de la Vaissière (ed.), *Islamisation de l'Asie Central: Processus Locaux d'Acculturation du VIIe au XIe Siècle*, Paris, 2008, pp. 135, 140.



Fig. 7: Two men on a camel depicted in the wall painting from Afrasiab, Samarkand.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined daggers and swords with two suspension mounts depicted in Central Asian art. The examples presented here add supporting evidence of Trousdale's theory that the two-point suspension system was introduced to Central Asia during the Hephthalite invasion. This evaluation shows that a dagger with two fixtures came into fashion during the Hephthalite period together with a caftan with a unique triangular collar on the right side and a crown with three crescents (Fig. 1: 5). The two-point suspension sys-

tem was subsequently used for swords and then introduced to China. Further research will be necessary to know more precisely when and how this method was introduced into other regions of eastern Eurasia, Iran and China as well as among the Turks.

References

- Fig. 1: a, e, o: Terracotta figurines from Budrach. Sixth-seventh centuries. After Il'yasov, 2001, pls. I: 2; I: 6; IV: 3.
- b, f: Wall paintings from Pendzhikent. b: Temple II, Seventh-beginning of eighth centuries. After B. I. Marshak, "Les fouilles de Pendjikent," *Comptes Rendus, Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-lettres* 1990, pp. 296–97, fig. 9. f: Sector VI/Room 1. Ca. 740. After Azarpay, 1981, fig. 53.
- c, g, l: Wall paintings from 38-meter Buddha niche. Middle of the sixth century. Bamiyan. After Il'yasov, 2001, pls. IV: 2; II: 5; II: 4.
- d: Painting on hemp cloth. Nara period. Eighth century. Shōsō-in, Nara. After Il'yasov, 2001, pl. III: 11.
- h, m, p: Wall paintings from Kizil, h: Cave 77. Ca. 500. After R. Hayashi, "Sasanian Crown Decoration: the Significance of the Importation of Crown Decoration to the Far East", *Bijutsushi: Journal of Art History* 28, 1958, pp. 107–22 (in Japanese), fig. 9a. m: Cave 224. First half of the seventh century. After Il'yasov, 2001, pl. II: 7. p: Cave 8. First half of the seventh century. After Il'yasov, 2001, pl. II: 8.
- i: Brocade with hunting scene. Early Tang, first half of the seventh century. Hōryū-ji, Nara. After Sh. Kuwayama, "The Sasanian Crescent-shaped Ornaments in Northern Wei China", *Oriente: Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 20/1, 1977, pp. 17–35 (in Japanese), fig. 8.
- j: Terracotta figurine from Surkhandar'ya valley. Sixth-seventh century. After Il'yasov, 2001, pl. IV: 1.
- k: Panel of a funerary couch. Northern Qi. 550–577. Attributed to Anyang (Henan). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. After *Orientations* 32/8 (2001): 54, fig. 1.
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- q: Wall painting from Balalyk-tepe, After Il'yasov, 2001, pl. II: 3.
- r: Wall painting from Dzhartera, After A. Э. Берудимурадов, М. К. Самибаев, *Храм Джартепа*, 1999, Ташкент, fig. 122.
- s: Painting from Bamiyan, cave 620. After, T. Higuchi (ed.), *Bāmiyān: art and archaeological researches on the Buddhist cave temples in Afghanistan 1970~1978*, vol. 1 Plates (murals), 2001, Dohosha Media Plan (first published in 1983), pl. 107:4.

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- Fig. 3: Il'yasov, 2001, pl. 2.
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