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Literary Evidence for the Identification of Some Common Scenes in Han Funerary Art

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Reliefs and paintings representing processions of chariots and riders are very often observed in Chinese funerary art of the Han period (206 BC-220 AD). In some cases the tombs are decorated not merely with simple processions, but also with dynamic hunting scenes or battles taking place on a bridge while other people, including women, are peacefully fishing in the water below. The latter group of funerary reliefs is particularly concentrated in Shandong Province, and its enigmatic character has attracted the attention of students of Chinese art. In the present paper I will propose an identification based on observation of the same scenes in several Chinese monuments and on the study of some texts dated, similarly, to the Han period. These sources are not chronicles but very interesting poetical compositions collected by Xiao Tong (501-531) in a larger work known as "Selections of Refined Literature" (*Wen Xuan*).¹

The stone relief from the offering chambers of the Wuliang Ci tomb at Jiexiang (fig. 1)² has been the best-documented well-known monument since it has been discovered in the beginning of the last century. The bridge of the Wuliang Ci tomb relief is reproduced quite simply with few essential lines in a trapezoid form. The battle scenes are disposed in parallel lines and a certain dynamicity can be observed below the bridge where the people are represented fishing or fighting. A figure larger in size is fighting with a sword from his chariot on the top of the bridge, and, exactly below him, another large figure occupies the central position of the aquatic scene. In consideration of the normal formulae in Chinese art, the two larger figures can be considered the portraits of relevant people. Their garments are definitely

¹ Knechtges 1982, Knechtges 1987, Knechtges 1996. I owe to Victor Mair the suggestion that I consult these annotated translations, in which I found much very useful information.

² Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1982, fig. 56 ; and E. Chavannes, *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale* (Paris, 1909-15), vol. I, pl. III, n. 109 (*non vidi*).

Chinese, as are the clothes and the weapons of the other warriors. The chariots with the canopies also can be recognized as typically Chinese. It is not clear whether or not the enemies fought by the Chinese people in the relief at Jiexiang belong to a specific population (most likely a "barbarian" one). A scene very similar to the one found at Jiexiang is represented by the lintel relief on the façade of the tomb at Yi'nan (fig. 2).³ Here the people engaged in the battle against the Chinese army are definitely barbarians who can be identified by their clothes and headgear. The larger size of the person on the only chariot points to his rank, as does the group of four riders who are disposed around him according to a defensive scheme. These riders are probably bodyguards, armed with spears to the top of which are attached ribbons.

Battle scenes similar – but not identical – to the ones just considered can be observed in the tombs recovered at Dongwan (fig. 3)⁴ and at Feicheng (fig. 4)⁵ in Shandong, at Suining in Jiangsu⁶ and at Nanyang in Henan Province.⁷ In a painting from a rich tomb found at Helingol (Inner Mongolia), there is also a representation of a procession of chariots and riders on a bridge, while a lady is racing a boat in the water with the help of two servants (fig. 5).⁸ Finally, a Northern Wei painted wooden coffin from a tomb excavated at Zhijiabao (Shanxi Province) that exhibits the reproduction of a procession, hunt scenes, and acrobats dated to the fifth century could be added to this group of representations. Traces of an object that could be recognized as a boat can be observed in a part of the painting where the coffin is particularly deteriorated (fig. 6).⁹

The scene represented in one relief from the west wall of the main chamber of the tomb recovered at Cangshan appears particularly interesting for this investigation, because it is accompanied by an inscription which describes what is actually happening (fig. 7).¹⁰ In this panel a noble procession of chariots and riders is crossing a bridge, while, beneath, two ladies are on a boat in the middle of a fishing crew, exactly like those reported in some Chinese sources, to be considered below. The scene appears peaceful, but a rider dressed as a barbarian in the higher left corner turns himself in the act of the so-called "Parthian shot" in the direction of the main

³ Shih 1959, fig. 5; Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1982, fig. 96.

⁴ Liu 2005.

⁵ Shih 1959: 298-299.

⁶ Shih 1959: 292-293.

⁷ Blanchon 1999, fig. 46.

⁸ Blanchon 1999, fig. 68.

⁹ Liu and Gao 2004, pls. 5, 8.

¹⁰ Wu 1995: 244-246; Wu 1998: 22.

parade. We cannot exclude the possibility that the barbarian is shooting at a spot that is almost indiscernible in the relief, which could be a bird. In any case, the inscription does not leave the impression that he has an unfriendly attitude toward the group.

After noting this brief list of Han funerary works of art, it will be interesting to consider some passages found in the Chinese texts mentioned above. In a poetic composition written by Zhang Heng (78-139), commonly known as the "Western Metropolis Rhapsody" (*Xixuan fu*), it is clearly reported that during the celebration of a winter festivity the emperor had to perform an elaborate ritual that included a hunt.¹¹ The imperial hunt took place in a specific part of the park enclosed within a barricade, prepared so as to prevent the animals from escaping. The "Plume Hunt Rhapsody" (*Yulie fu*) – also known as the "Barricade Hunt Rhapsody" (*Jialie fu*) – is another source compiled by Yang Xiong (53 BC-18 AD), a Chinese poet whose talent was very highly esteemed at court, to the point that the same Emperor Chengdi (32-7 BC) commissioned him to celebrate in a poem an imperial hunt that actually was performed by the Han emperor together with some barbarian (*hu*) guests at the Shanglin Park in the winter of 10 BC (most likely in January¹²). The accomplishment of a winter imperial hunt very similar to the one celebrated in Zhang Heng's rhapsody already had been described by the famous author Ban Gu (32-92) in the "Western Capital Rhapsody" (*Xijing Fu*),¹³ but even before that, Sima Zhangqing (179-117 BC) did the same in his poem "Rhapsody on the Imperial Park" (*Shanglin fu*).¹⁴

According to the rhapsodies mentioned above, the hunt took place in a part of the Shanglin Imperial Park (not far from Chang'an) enclosed within special barricades (fig. 8).¹⁵ The emperor was hunting from his chariot embellished with banners, but riders also accompanied him, certainly high-ranking aristocrats or military figures. The weapons described in the poems are bows and spears, although other kinds of arms cannot be excluded. After the hunt, the emperor and his entourage stopped at the Kunming pond, where ladies played music and sang. People also hunted the animals of the pond, while professional swimmers dove in the water in search of aquatic animals such as fish, birds, and several kinds of reptiles and amphibians. Acrobatics and other kinds of games and processions were performed for the pleasure of the noble spectators during this phase of the sacrifice. In descriptions of the processions, fantastic

¹¹ Knechtges 1982: 181-241.

¹² Knechtges 1976: 63; Knechtges 1987: 119-245. On the barricade hunt see also: Schafer 1968.

¹³ Knechtges 1982: 98-144.

¹⁴ Knechtges 1987: 73-113.

¹⁵ Knechtges 1987: 72.

creatures were also mentioned, and it is highly probable that actors wearing special costumes personified the monsters. This part of the celebration also comprises the consumption of food and intoxicating beverages. The emperor himself decided when it was enough and, in a sort of culpable feeling for the great slaughter of animals, he ordered his retinue to retire to the palace and allowed the peasants to continue with their field work on the portion of the park prepared for the hunt and so closed to the common people during the festivity.

In an important work on Chinese festivals, the famous sinologist Derk Bodde had no doubt in seeing an association of the imperial hunt of the "Western Metropolis Rhapsody" with the Chinese New Year festivity. His main point was that the fabulous creature *hanli* (or *sheli*) appeared during the procession of acrobats and fantastic creatures at the end of the great hunt, an identification made clear because the same monster had been reported in another second-century source, the "Administrative Ceremonials of Han Officialdom Selected for Use" (*Hanguan dianzhi yishi xuanyong*), specifically that on the New Year celebration.¹⁶ It should be mentioned that in the same record, on the first day of the first month (implicitly, of the Chinese calendar), the Son of Heaven received tribute from the "surrounding barbarian tribes."¹⁷ David Knechtges criticized some of the conclusions deduced by Bodde, among them the identification of the dragon and fish procession (in which the *hanli/sheli* also appears) in association with the Chinese New Year celebrations in the Western Metropolis Rhapsody.¹⁸ There is also some confusion in Chinese sources collected in the Later Han History (*Hou Hanshu*) about another great celebration accomplished as an imperial hunt. It is possible to say generally that during the Han period, in the beginning of autumn, the emperor performed a sacrifice called *Quliu* in an enclosed part of a park east of the capital. He participated with his entourage and shot from his chariot deer and a kind of wildcat. After the hunt, the meat was presented at the temples of the ancestors or at the Imperial Tombs.¹⁹ The Tang author Jian Gongyan (about 627-656), in his commentary on the Institutions of Zhou (*Zhou li*), wrote expressly that in Han times the *Quliu* took place in the Imperial Park, and the prey was a kind of wildcat.²⁰ The indecision of Jian

¹⁶ Bodde 1975: 161.

¹⁷ Bodde 1975: 152.

¹⁸ Knechtges 1982: 232. Actually, the detail regarding the Chinese New Year celebration probably connected with such images is extremely important. For a parallel between the Chinese sources and the funerary reliefs of the Han period just mentioned and a painting recovered at Afrasyab (ancient Samarkand) where, most likely, the Sogdian Nawruz (the Iranian New Year festival) is celebrated, see: Compareti, forthcoming.

¹⁹ Knechtges 1982: 139 L. 390.

²⁰ Bodde 1975: 327-339.

Gongyan about the nature of the feline shows that he was unaware of the sacrifice, probably because such rites were no longer performed during the Tang period. However, a work by another Tang writer states that in Northern China some kind of sacrificial hunting was still performed during the seventh century.²¹

The information obtained from these poems can (in my opinion) definitely shed light on the interpretation of the Han funerary reliefs. The commentators on these scenes represented in the reliefs incorporating battle and fishing scenes could not explain the apparent incongruence between the violence of the representation on the bridge and the relaxed atmosphere of the aquatic scenes.²² In fact, it is highly probable that the scenes of fighting against the barbarians were actually just enactments that took place during imperial hunts, and for this reason the people in the water below the bridge are not disturbed by the violence of the battle scenes above and around them. As has already been observed, the rhapsodies mentioned above record that the barbarians participated in the hunts. Also, during periods of peace, the Chinese army was expected to exercise and to take part in the "great winter hunt."²³ The Emperor Wendi (180-157 BC) is expressly reported to have trained himself and his guards in the Shanglin Park in order to prepare for a war against the Xiongnu, but it is not stated anywhere whether some barbarian army participated in the maneuver.²⁴ Moreover, the inscriptions found in the Cangshan tomb also mention the name of the river crossed by the military parade: Wei.²⁵ It is worth remembering that the Wei River is also the name of the river that flows in the northern edges of the Shanglin Park, where the imperial hunt takes place.²⁶

Some scholars who have commented on these reliefs considered them generic funerary processions, and this is in part correct because, as already observed, in Han China, at the conclusion of the imperial hunts, the sacrificial meat was presented at the ancestors' temples or tombs. However, in consideration of the Chinese rhapsodies referring to the rituals of the Han court, it is now possible to connect the scenes of some reliefs with specific celebrations. These

²¹ Bodde 1975: 334.

²² Shih 1959: 292-293. More recent authors have failed to give a clear interpretation of such scenes according to the celebration of a specific ritual: Wu 1995: 248; Wu 1998; Xin 2000.

²³ Wechsler 1979: 208.

²⁴ Yü 1986: 389. It could be argued that some sections of this same Chinese army wore barbaric dress, to be more realistic.

²⁵ Wu 1998: 22.

²⁶ See, for example, the Western Capital Rhapsody and in the Western Metropolis Rhapsody: Knechtges 1982: 99, 183, 185. See also the map of fig. 8 in the present article.

same scholars wondered if the occupants of these tomb had official positions at court, considering that in some reliefs they are represented together with very high-ranking Han figures.²⁷ This is not impossible, but such scenes in the reliefs and paintings might instead have been considered an important funerary symbolic representation, which every Chinese gentlemen of the Han period had to have reproduced in his tomb.

Most likely, at a certain point such representations were abandoned. As already noted, the same Chinese authors of the Tang epoch created some confusion when they described the celebrations of the Han period, because most likely they were no longer aware of their own very ancient customs. We can conclude that in the Tang period the imperial hunts and parades were no longer performed, even if some memory of them was still alive. If the identification with an imperial hunt (so common in Chinese funerary sphere) is proved to be correct – as well as the proposal of identification given in this paper for the painting from Zhijiabao – then the fifth century could be considered the period with the latest evidence for the celebration of such festivity in the Middle Kingdom. In the first century AD, Emperor Guangwudi (25-57) had already abolished the office of waterways and parks, which was to be reestablished only once a year for an autumn festival. Furthermore, a new official was established for another hunting park given the same name (Shanglin) in Luoyang.²⁸ It is possible that in the second phase of the Han Dynasty (the Later – or Eastern – Han, 25-220) some of the old customs already were being abandoned. It is worth noting that in some Tang funerary paintings from the tomb of Li Shou (died 630) there are hunting scenes represented according to a taste external to China, whose roots can be recognized in Iranian art, most likely with Sasanian and Sogdian origins (fig. 9).²⁹ In fact, a seventh-century Sogdian painting from Afrasyab (ancient Samarkand), which has a representation of a scene of the Tang court in which it is possible to recognize the emperor hunting and the empress on a boat in the water, probably reproduces the phases of a ritual connected both with the New Year celebration and with Chinese funerary customs (fig. 10).³⁰ It would seem that during the Tang period someone either observed such hunts and aquatic scenes or copied them from more ancient Han scrolls. Unfortunately, it is yet not possible to advance a

²⁷ Wu 1995: 248.

²⁸ Bielenstein 1979: 505.

²⁹ Zhang 1995, fig. 1. The paintings are not accompanied by any inscription, so it is not possible to be more specific on their nature. In Chinese art a similar motif probably existed long before the first contacts with Iranian formulae: Takeuchi, 2004: 38.

³⁰ Compareti, forthcoming; Compareti and Cristoforetti, forthcoming.

definitive interpretation for this painting. The research in this direction is just the beginning, and only future investigations into Chinese art and sources will give a solution to the problem.

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Figures cited in the text



Fig. 1. Han stone relief from the offering chambers of the Wuliang Ci tomb, Jiaxiang (Shandong). After: Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1982, fig. 56.

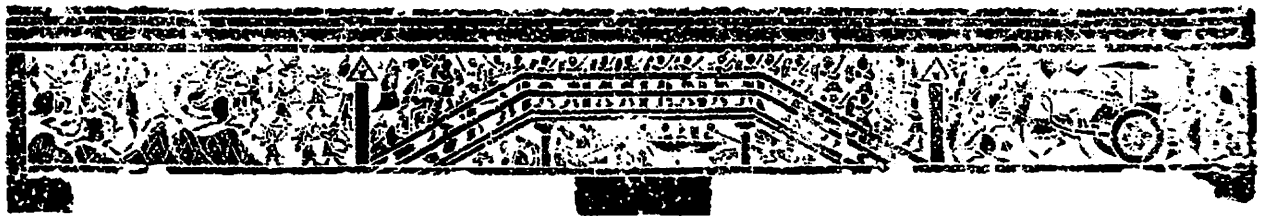


Fig. 2. Han lintel relief on the façade of the tomb at Yi'nan (Shandong). After: Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1982, fig. 96.

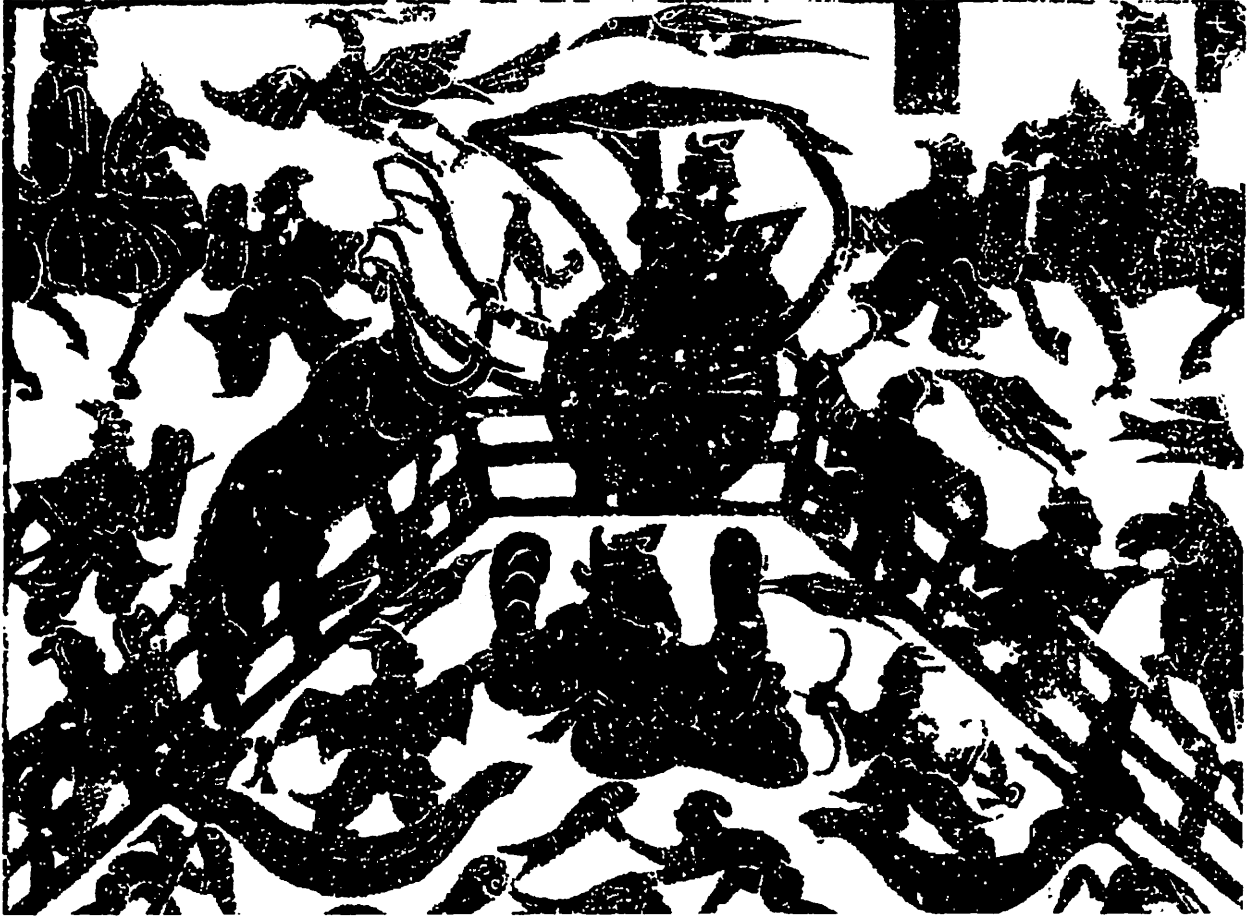


Fig. 3. Han funerary relief from Dongwan (Shandong). After: Liu 2005, fig. 7.

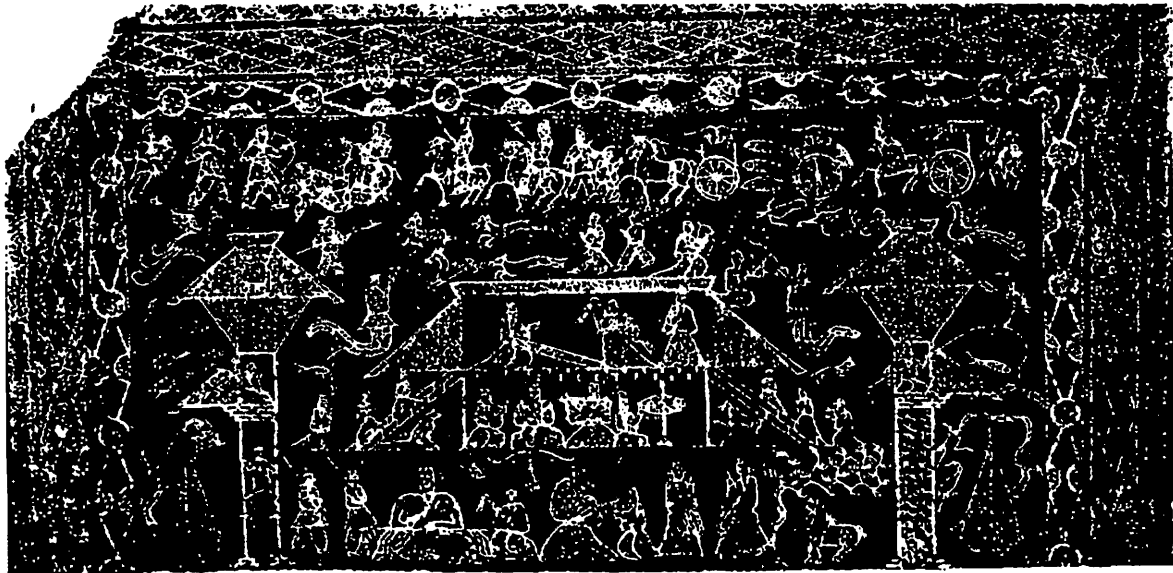


Fig. 4. Han funerary relief from Feicheng (Shandong). After: Shih 1959, fig. 8.



Fig. 5. Han funerary painting from Helingol (Inner Mongolia). After: Blanchon 1999, fig. 68.

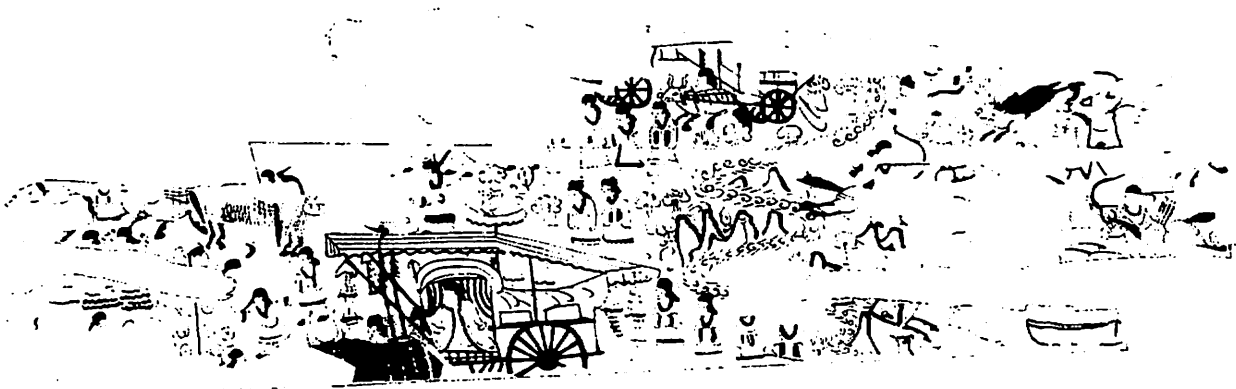


Fig. 6. Northern Wei painted wooden coffin from Zhijiabao (Shanxi). After: Liu Gao 2004, pls. 5, 8.

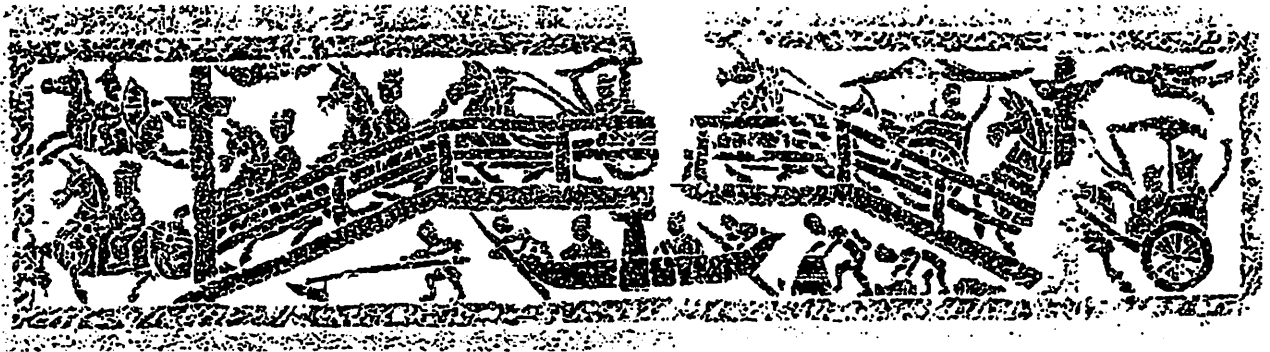


Fig. 7. Han funerary relief from the west wall of the main chamber at Cangshan. After: Wu 1998, fig. 1.

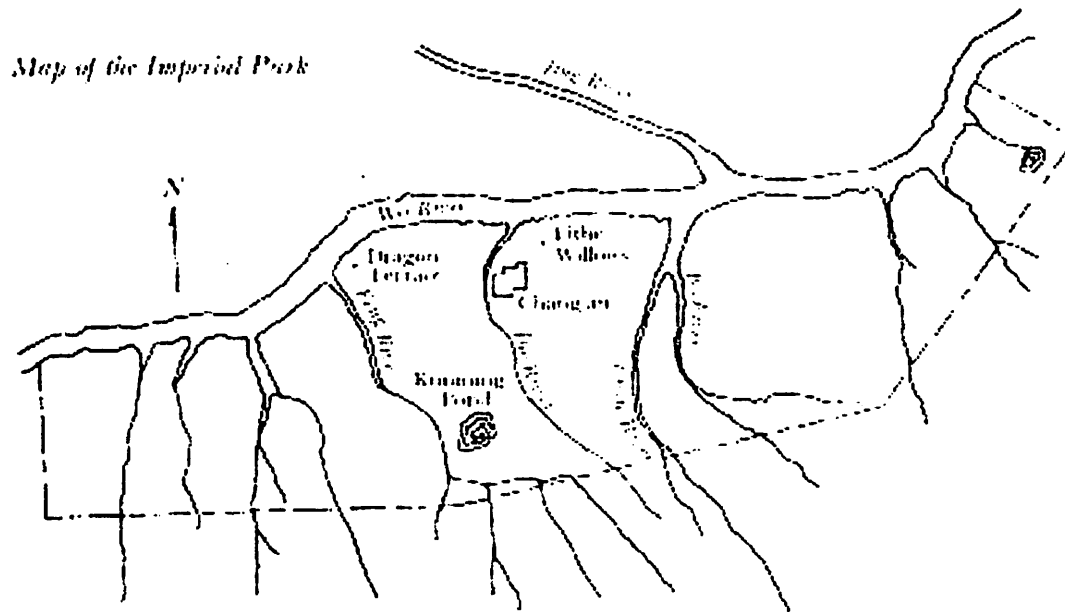


Fig. 8. Map of Shanglin Imperial Park. After: Knechtges 1987: 72.



Fig. 9. Funerary paintings from the tomb of Li Shou (died 630). After: Zhang 1995, fig. 1.





Fig. 10. Reconstruction by F. Ory and F. Grenet of the Northern Wall of the "Wall of the Ambassadors" at Afrasyab (old Samarkand), around 660.

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