

Paintings of Archers at Dunhuang in the Five Dynasties Period

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1. Restoring the narrative content of the painting

The “Painting of Archers” discussed here is the lost mural painting in Cave 346 (actually on the south wall of the antechamber of Cave 345). The male figures in the painting are dressed in nomadic military garb. They are kneeling on one knee and they are pulling on the strings of bows, preparing to shoot arrows.

Around the archers there are partial figures of Heavenly Kings and *yakshas*. From these it is discernible that the scene of archery is part of a composition with Heavenly Kings.

Then, what are the archers shooting at? This is the question that most captured the author’s curiosity at first. An initial examination of paintings of Heavenly Kings and related figures at Dunhuang in the Tang and Song periods reveals several examples with archers, in the antechambers of Caves 31, 53, 100, 428. According to these depictions, it is clear that the target of the arches is mythical bird resembling a flying *rakshasa*.

However, this does not completely answer the question.

2. The origin of the exorcising motifs

In the silk painting of *Heavenly Kings on the Way* from Dunhuang and the eight-layered relics-container, we see also scenes of shooting the flying *rakshasa*. In the Gaochang region, however, there are similar examples. According to the report of the German expedition team, there are seven cases in total. (Including Bezeklik Grottoes No. 4, 7, 9, 26; Grotto E from Architectural Complex 3; Temple a from the Ancient City of Gaochang; a little temple from the northern section of the Sengim-agiz Valley) More striking, the Gaochang imagery bears strong narrativeness, positioning the scene of shooting and catching the flying *rakshasa* at the center of the composition. Despite the studies by Albert von Le Coq, Albert Grünwedel and Matsumoto Eiichi, the motif of subjugating *rakshasa* still has not been well explained. I spent much time searching for textual evidence. My initial opinion is that this motif might have connections with the Tantric canons. If this is the case, our understanding of the Guardian images in the Tang and Song periods will be bettered.

3. The identity of the shooter

Back to the shooter image, who is the shooter? To what ethnicity does he belong? (1) Matsumoto Eiichi believes that the shooter in the silk painting of *Heavenly Kings on the Way* should be identified as the eldest son of *Vaisramana* named Dujian. This conclusion cannot be applied to the wall painting, be it correct or wrong. It is because all the shooters in mural caves including Cave 346 are unrelated to *Vaisramana*. So it can only be generally concluded that they should be *Yaksa* Generals under the Heavenly kings.

(2) There are three theories of Turkish, Qidan and Tubo in terms of the ethnicity of the shooter, all with problems. The Turkish custom is to loosen their hair instead of shaving the head; The Qidan shave their hair and do not wear a headband; The Tubo wear a headband instead of shaving their hair. I notice that there are images of four male patrons sitting under the Buddha image in Temple Z (in Russian number). Their costume closely resembles that of the shooters from the Five Dynasties period at Dunhuang. Le Coq considers them as Uigurs and this opinion is followed by Monique Maillard. If Le Coq is right, the shooter from Cave 346 should be a Uigur warrior.

(3) It is interesting to use Uigur warrior as representation of *Yaksa* and this paper will also further discuss this phenomenon.