

A Study on the "Auspicious Beasts" Depicted on the Lintel of the West Wall in the Rear Chamber of the Eastern Han Dynasty Murals Tomb at Qushuhao, Jingbian, Shaanxi

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Abstract: Following the 2015 excavation of the Eastern Han mural tomb at Qushuhao in Jingbian, Shaanxi, academic attention has largely focused on its astronomical diagrams and themes of ascension to immortality, while the "auspicious beast" depicted on the western wall of the rear chamber has long been overlooked in specialist literature. According to the Excavation "Bulletin", the description of this image is brief and raises four points of contention: (1) the description of its form—"a dragon's head with ram's horns, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail"—is inconsistent with the logic of Han-dynasty dragon depictions; (2) there are contradictions in the text and image annotations (the image is labeled "auspicious beast," yet the caption identifies it as a "White Tiger"); (3) key elements identifying the Vermilion Bird are missing; and (4) the presence of only a serpent's tail without a tortoise form contradicts the typical morphology of the Black Tortoise, which combines a tortoise and a serpent. This article aims to address the aforementioned issues and examine the true appearance and symbolic significance of this "auspicious beast."

1. Introduction

On the western wall of the rear chamber of the Eastern Han-dynasty mural tomb at Qushuhao (Yangqiaopan Town, Jingbian County, Shaanxi) is a well-preserved painting depicting an "auspicious beast," rendered with vivid colors (Figure 1).[1] Existing scholarship on this tomb has mainly concentrated on the astronomical diagram on the vaulted ceiling and the murals in the front chamber, whereas studies of the overall tomb layout—and particularly the rear chamber—remain scarce. The rear chamber lacks any murals or decorative flooring on its four walls; the only notable feature is a uniquely shaped "auspicious beast" painted above the lintel of the west wall. This article aims to rectify the misinterpretation of this particular beast image.

2. The Misconception of "Dragon's Head and Goat's Horns"

The "Bulletin" describes it as follows: "The auspicious beast has a dragon's head and goat's

horns, a tiger's body and a serpent's tail; it has white eyes with black pupils, its mouth open and tongue protruding, appearing to be running at full speed. The area surrounding the beast and both sides are adorned with bands of cloud patterns in alternating black, white, and green. The painting measures 170 centimeters in width and 50 centimeters in height." [2] The characters "Western" are vertically inscribed below it. The "Bulletin" refers to it as an "auspicious beast," yet labels it as the "White Tiger mural on the western wall of the rear chamber" beneath the accompanying illustration. The description and accompanying text in the "Bulletin" likely contain errors.

Mr. Wu Hong has correctly pointed out that to understand the ideology behind the selection of images, one must examine the entirety of the pictorial representations in the tomb chamber or ancestral hall. [3] The celestial map on the vaulted ceiling, which has attracted widespread scholarly attention, depicts the Four Divine Beasts alongside other celestial officials, collectively forming the "Heavenly Realm"—the highest realm in the ancient Chinese conception of the universe. The physical characteristics of the "auspicious beast" described in the "Bulletin"—namely, "a dragon's head, a sheep's horns, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail"—are highly contradictory to the image of the White Tiger. The description of "a dragon's head and a sheep's horns" is problematic.

A "dragon's head" inherently includes "dragon horns." As stated in "The Songs of Chu: Heavenly Questions": Heavenly Questions: "One with horns is called a dragon; one without horns is called a qíú" [4] The "Commentary on the Waterways" records a yellow dragon: "A yellow dragon appeared at Gaogang Pavilion in Jiuli Valley; its horns were three chi long, with a girth of ten spans, and its tail extended over ten zhang." [5] There are also numerous records of the "Nine Resemblances" describing the overall characteristics of a dragon's appearance. For example, the "Erya Yi" explains the dragon as follows: "Its horns resemble those of a deer, its head that of a camel, its eyes those of a rabbit, its neck that of a snake, its belly that of a conch, its scales those of a fish, its claws those of an eagle, its paws those of a tiger, and its ears those of an ox." The "Collection of Lofty Aspirations from Forests and Springs" records: "The 'Nine Resemblances' are: the head resembles that of an ox, the mouth that of a donkey, the eyes those of a shrimp, the horns those of a deer, the ears those of an elephant, the scales those of a fish, the hair that of a human, the belly that of a snake, and the feet those of a phoenix; these are called the 'Nine Resemblances.'" [6] Records of this "Nine Resemblances" are very common in ancient texts; they appear in "Compendium of Materia Medica: Insects," "Shuoyuan," "A Study of Birds, Beasts, and Plants in the Book of Odes," and "A Comprehensive Survey of Names and Objects in the Commentaries on the Book of Odes."

The constellation Jiao symbolizes the dragon's horns. "Dazi Zengbu Shili Tongbian" states: "Jiao is the head of the Azure Dragon." Wang Xiaodun [7] points out: Dragons are generally divided into two categories: first, the hornless coiled dragon that dwells in water among fish and turtles; second, the horned flying dragon that ascends to the heavens among clouds and rainbows. Later generations deified the dragon, endowing it with horns—or "chi mu"—to represent a new divine nature, thereby transforming it into a celestial deity. Although "hornless dragons" do exist in Chinese mythology, their typical contexts are mostly associated with water and marshes. In contrast, the "auspicious beast" depicted on the lintel of the western wall in the rear chamber of the Eastern Han mural tomb at Qushuhao exhibits a visual context markedly different from that of the "hornless dragon": the dragon-headed "auspicious beast" is, in fact, a horned dragon. The cloud-patterned motifs above it are celestial symbols denoting "communication with heaven" and "ascension to immortality," which contradict the aquatic attributes of coiled dragons and jiao dragons that "dwell in water"; furthermore, the Seven Stars of the Azure Dragon and the Jiao Star in the tomb's celestial map explicitly point to the celestial image of a horned dragon, consistent with the celestial model in this tomb's cosmology and unrelated to the aquatic context of the hornless dragon. Based on this, it can be concluded that the dragon's head depicted here represents a horned dragon of the celestial realm,

rather than a coiled dragon or a jiao dragon of the aquatic realm.

Descriptions in ancient texts of the dragon's "nine resemblances"—such as "horns like those of a deer"—do not actually stem from real-world observations, as the dragon is, by definition, a fictional creature. Such accounts were mostly copied from one text to another across successive dynasties; their prevalence stems, first, from the fact that breaking them down into parts of common animals—such as deer and camels—made them easier to understand; and second, from the fact that once established in early classics (possibly traceable to the "Erya"), they became an authoritative traditional paradigm, which later generations continued to follow and cite. The horns of "auspicious beasts" do not match the depictions of deer antlers found in textual records, as they lack the characteristic crisscrossing lateral branches typical of deer antlers; this may be why archaeologists have classified them as sheep horns rather than dragon horns. Xing Yitian correctly pointed out: "One should not rely too heavily on extant texts to interpret excavated images; in particular, one must not force a one-to-one correspondence or make arbitrary comparisons. Excavated images and extant texts are distinct sources; while some certainly refer to the same events (such as Jing Ke's assassination attempt on Emperor Qin), others, though seemingly similar, have different origins and may carry distinct meanings and interpretations." [8]

There are numerous instances in lacquerware paintings, murals, and pictorial bricks (and stones) that do not align with the "Nine Resemblances" described in the texts. The most typical examples are the decorative patterns on the lid of the red-ground polychrome lacquer coffin unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tomb (Figure 2) and the T-shaped silk paintings (Figures 3 and 4), in which the dragon's horns clearly do not resemble the "deer antlers" described in some texts. Apart from the curvature of the horns, the former bears a striking resemblance to the horns of the auspicious beasts found in the Han tomb at Qushuhao. As for the latter, the horns of the four dragons can be said to be entirely identical to those of the auspicious beasts. Additionally, in the "Feast of the Queen Mother of the West" (Figure 5), unearthed from Tomb M1 at Haotan in Dingbian County, Shaanxi, and in the "Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality" scene unearthed from another Eastern Han tomb at Yangqiaopan in Jingbian County, the dragon horns are shaped like sheep's horns (Figure 6). Other examples include the "Yinglong" carved on the tomb door of the Eastern Han relief stone tomb at Dongguan in Fangcheng County, Nanyang (Figure 7), and the "Intertwined Dragons" at the Wu Clan Ancestral Hall in Jiaxiang, Shandong (Figure 8). In Bai ethnic folklore and mythology, there is even a term known as the "sheep-horned dragon", and Xizang's depictions of dragon deities also feature forms with the head of a sheep and the body of a human. Previously, some scholars have suggested that during the Pre-Qin period, the deer or qilin may have served as the symbol of the Northern Palace rather than the Black Tortoise. [9] If this argument holds, then it can be inferred that, in the early Four Spirits totems, the form of the "dragon's horns" was not that of "deer antlers" in order to avoid repetitive symbolic expressions. [10] In summary, the characteristic of dragon horns "resembling those of a deer" is not absolute; their stylistic evolution has in fact undergone a lengthy historical process, which warrants a separate, dedicated discussion.



Figure 1 Depiction of the Four Auspicious Beasts on the transom of the western wall in the rear chamber of the Eastern Han Dynasty mural tomb at Qushuhao, Jingbian, Shaanxi



Figure 2 Part of the painted lacquer coffin with red ground from the Han tomb at Mawangdui



Figure 3 Part 1 of the T-shaped silk painting from the Han tomb at Mawangdui



Figure 4 Part 2 of the T-shaped silk painting from the Han tomb at Mawangdui



Figure 5 A part of the Hsi Wang Mu (Queen Mother of the West) Feast and Music Painting from M1 tomb chamber in Haotan, Dingbian County



Figure 6 "The Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality" (Part 2)



Figure 7 A part of the tomb door of the Eastern Han Dynasty stone relief tomb in Dongguan, Fangcheng County, Nanyang



Figure 8 Part of the Qinglong and Fushou statues at the north gate of Chengdu

3. The Overlooked “Wings of the Vermilion Bird”

A wing is depicted on the front left leg of the auspicious beast, but this is not recorded in the "Bulletin". There are two possible reasons for this: first, the recorders prioritized the overall image over details; second, since "winged white tigers" were common in the Han Dynasty, archaeologists may have regarded this as a standard feature and thus failed to note it.

In the depiction of the white tiger from the Eastern Han tomb in Baizi Village, Xunyi County, Shaanxi, a wing can be seen on the tiger's left front leg (Figure 9). The "Complete Collection of Unearthed Murals in China" describes it as follows: "The white tiger has wings and appears to be

running; its head is raised, its limbs are as sharp as knives, and its body is marked with spots." [11] There are numerous examples of winged white tigers in Han Dynasty paintings (such as those at Haotan in Dingbian, Yangyicun in Jingbian, and Zaoyuan in Pinglu, Figures 10-12), but their wing designs differ from that of this auspicious beast. Archaeologists identified it as a White Tiger because the auspicious beast was painted white and the inscription "Western" was inscribed on the lintel; however, "Western" is merely a directional marker, analogous to "North" and "South." If the West were represented by the White Tiger, then the North and South would logically correspond to the Black Tortoise and the Vermilion Bird, respectively. Furthermore, the "Bulletin" describes the Figures as having "goat horns, a dragon's head, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail," yet labels it as the "White Tiger," which is self-contradictory.



Figure 9 A part of the White Tiger painting from Baizi Village, Xunyi County



Figure 10 A part of the "Immortal Riding a Tiger" mural in Gongding, Haotan Township, Dingbian County



Figure 11 A part of the "Tiger Cart Ascending to Heaven" painting from Yangyi Village, Yangqiao Bank, Jingbian



Figure 12 A part of the White Tiger painting unearthed in Zaoyuan Village, Pinglu

Upon closer inspection, this auspicious beast has seven white spots on its wings (three on the left and four on the right), whereas in Han dynasty paintings, the wings of the White Tiger and most winged mythical beasts are typically outlined with ink lines and have few or sparse spots, making the characteristics of the two vastly different.

For example, the "Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality" painting (Figure 13) found in the Eastern Han tomb at Yangyi Village, Yangqiaopan, Jingbian, Shaanxi, in 2005—which appears in the same composition as the "Tiger Chariot Ascending to Immortality" painting mentioned above—the second "Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality" painting in the upper section of the rear chamber's west wall (Figure 14), the "Deer Chariot Ascending to Immortality" painting starting from the south in the upper section of the rear chamber's east wall (Figure 15), the seventh "Rabbit Chariot Ascending to Immortality" painting (Figure 16), and the fourth "Immortals Riding Cranes" painting at the southern end of the upper section of the rear chamber's east wall (Figure 17), among others; the "Figures and Flying Birds" (Figure 18), "Celestial Horses and Figures" (Figure 19), "Immortals" (Figure 20), and "Figures with Exotic Birds and Auspicious Beasts" (Figure 21) unearthed from the Han-dynasty tomb at Changcun, Wangcun Township, Xingyang, Henan; the

"Sheep and Wine" painting (Figure 22) and the "Muntjac" painting (Figure 23) excavated from Han Tomb No. 1 in Wangdu County, Hebei; and the "Figures with Chickens and Dogs" painting (Figure 24) excavated from Tomb No. 1 of the Pingxian County Material Bureau in Shandong. The examples are too numerous to list exhaustively.



Figure 13 Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality (I)



Figure 14 Dragon Chariot Ascending to Immortality (II)



Figure 15 Deer Chariot Ascending to Immortality



Figure 16 Hare Chariot Ascending to Immortality

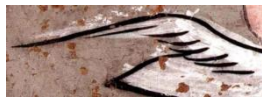


Figure 17 Immortal Riding a Crane



Figure 18 Figures and Flying Birds



Figure 19 Heavenly Horse



Figure 20 Immortal Figure

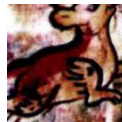


Figure 21 Strange Birds and Auspicious Beasts



Figure 22 Sheep and Wine



Figure 23 River Deer



Figure 24 Figures, Chickens, and Dogs

This characteristic of being densely covered with spots may be related to the origin of the image of the Vermilion Bird, which may have been modeled after the quail or the three-toed quail. Shen Kuo wrote in "Dream Brook Essays": "The ancients did not necessarily draw their symbols from large creatures. The 'Vermilion Bird' in astronomy is modeled after the quail. Hence, the seven constellations of the Vermilion Bird in the southern sky are named Quail's Head, Quail's Fire, and Quail's Tail." [12] "Astronomical Records of the Han Dynasty": "The constellation Liu represents the bird's beak, Xing its neck, Zhang its crop, and Yi its wings." Someone asked, "Why is the Vermilion Bird specifically modeled after a quail?" I replied: "The image of the Vermilion Bird ends at the Wing constellation and makes no mention of a tail. It resembles a quail, hence the name." However, regarding the name 'Quail's Tail,' I once heard Master Yuancheng say: 'It is because the Wing constellation is taken as the tail. Hence, the "Gan Family's Star Atlas" states, "When a bird fights, it raises its tail; when a quail fights, it raises its wing." This is how we know it.'" [13] In texts from the Song Dynasty onward, the terms "Vermilion Bird" (Zhuque), "Vermilion Bird" (Zhuniǎo), and "Phoenix" (Fengniao) were used interchangeably; therefore, the "Vermilion Bird" referred to here by Shen Kuo actually denotes the "Vermilion Bird" (Zhuque), which represents the southern constellation. [14] Yu Lan and Zhang Xiaoxia argue that after the Han Dynasty, the terms "Zhu Niao," "Zhuque," "Chi Niao," and even "Dan Feng" were indeed associated with the "quail" or the "bird of the Quail Fire constellation." [15] Wang Xiaodun, however, points out that the so-called "quail" strictly refers to the three-toed quail with "yellow and black mottled plumage" and "no tail"; the fact that the seven stars of the Vermilion Bird constellation lack tails is determined by the ethnic characteristics of early concepts of the Vermilion Bird—namely, the worship of short-tailed birds of the East. [16] The three-toed quail has pale yellow wings speckled with black spots, and its chest is also densely covered with black spots on both sides. The common quail exhibits similar characteristics. Zhao Zhengjie points out that quails typically have a pale yellowish-red upper breast with prominent black spots, a yellowish-brown back with distinct pale yellowish-white feather shaft streaks and broad black transverse bars. The summer plumage of the female Japanese quail resembles the winter plumage of the male; the sides of the neck are pale grayish-yellow with black terminal spots, and the upper breast is yellowish-brown, also featuring longitudinal streaks or black markings. The female's winter plumage resembles the male's summer plumage, but the feathers on the chin and above the throat are longer and more pointed, pale yellow in color; the back is richer in yellowish-brown tones and darker; the spots on the upper breast are blackish-brown tinged with chestnut; the sides of the breast and flanks are also more yellowish-brown, with broad white shaft streaks. [17]

The "Four Deities and Clouds" painting unearthed from the Han-dynasty tomb at Shiyuan on Mount Mangdang in Yongcheng County, Henan, and the "Feathered Man and Vermilion Bird" painting unearthed from the Han-dynasty tomb at Qianjingtou on the western outskirts of Luoyang both depict the Vermilion Bird with wings densely covered in spots (Figures 25 and 26). The Vermilion Bird image unearthed from the tomb of Xi Bu Qianqiu in Shaogou Village, Luoyang (Figure 27) also exhibits this characteristic: "an eagle's head and a phoenix's tail, a tall crown on its head, the entire body painted red, with purple and black spots on both wings" [18]. A close examination of this image reveals that the Vermilion Bird's wings also feature three spots on the left and four on the right in vertical columns, for a total of seven black spots. Furthermore, in some Vermilion Bird pictorial bricks, the spots are distributed across the entire body and appear at a higher density. A batch of hollow bricks decorated with the Four Symbols was unearthed during the excavation of a Han-dynasty tomb in Xianyang in 1980; the bodies of the Vermilion Birds depicted on these bricks were covered with spots (see Figures 28 and 29), which the archaeological report described as "nipple-like patterns." [19] The appearance of this "nipple-like" pattern likely stemmed from an emphasis on the distinctive features of the Vermilion Bird. At a time when the images of

the Vermilion Bird and the Phoenix had not yet become conflated, the phoenixes depicted on the same batch of hollow bricks, however, lack this characteristic. Furthermore, the Vermilion Bird relief stones in the collection of the Suide County Museum in Shaanxi (see Figures 30 and 31), those in the Han Relief Stone Museum in Yulin City, Shaanxi (see Figures 32 and 33), and those in the Nanyang Han Painting Museum in Henan (Figure 34), the Vermilion Bird relief stone in the collection of the Xiao County Museum in Anhui (see Figures 35, 36, 37)—all further corroborate the inference presented in this paper: the wings of the "auspicious beast" in the Eastern Han mural tomb at Qushuhao are also densely covered with spots, and the arrangement and density of these spots differ significantly from those typically seen on wings in Han-era paintings, yet bear a striking resemblance to the wings of the Vermilion Bird.

Furthermore, based on the imagery, it can be roughly determined that the auspicious beast's wings are yellowish-brown or orange-yellow. This suggests that these wings are not merely an "afterthought" added to the mythical beast, as seen in the examples cited earlier, but are most likely the wings of a Vermilion Bird that required special highlighting. This is because, in the numerous examples of mythical beasts mentioned earlier, all wings are white or colorless (i.e., unpainted and matching the background color). Only the wings of this "auspicious beast" in the Qushuhao mural tomb differ in color from the rest. This distinctive coloring aligns with numerous Han-era depictions of the Vermilion Bird and even corresponds to the morphological characteristics of the quail, the Vermilion Bird's real-world prototype. Traditional depictions of wings, on the other hand, were likely modeled after birds such as the wild goose.

From an iconographic perspective, an element within an image that is painted a distinct color must hold special significance. There is reason to infer that the source of inspiration for the wings of the "auspicious beast" in the Qushuhao Han tomb differs from that of the wings of mythical beasts in typical Han-era paintings. Ancient texts offer numerous descriptions of the Vermilion Bird's symbolism: "Guan Xiang Wan Zhan" states: "The constellation Zhang consists of six stars, known as Tianfu, Yufu, or Tianchang; it is in fact the crop of the Vermilion Bird, representing the planet Mars." [20] "The Book of Rites: Monthly Ordinances" states: "In the first month of summer, the sun is in the constellation Bi; at dusk, it is in the center of Yi; at dawn, it is in the center of Wunü." [21] "Lun Heng" states: "The south corresponds to fire; its star is the Vermilion Bird." [22] "Dream Brook Essays", Volume 7: "The four directions are symbolized by the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermilion Bird, and the Tortoise and Snake. Only the Vermilion Bird's true nature remains unknown; it is simply regarded as a red bird—a member of the feathered clan with crimson plumage that soars upward and always perches on trees—which embodies the symbol of fire." The Vermilion Bird is not merely a deity representing the southern direction and constellations; it also holds symbolic significance in the worship of fire and the sun. The color of its wings also perfectly aligns with the Vermilion Bird's symbolism of flame, heat, the sun, and summer.

In short, the wing on the beast's front left leg is the defining feature of the Vermilion Bird. The seven white spots on it (three on the left, four on the right) and its warm color palette are markedly different from the ink-line depictions and sparse-spotted characteristics of the winged White Tiger commonly found in Han Dynasty paintings. When considered in conjunction with the Four Spirits constellation diagram on the vault's apex, this beast is in fact a composite embodiment fusing the Four Spirits. The "Bulletin" mistakenly identified the creature as a White Tiger based on the characters "Western" inscribed on the lintel; however, while the caption labeled it as such, the description described it as having a dragon's head, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail—a contradiction that led to a misinterpretation. Upon reexamining its image, it should be correctly named the "Four Spirits Auspicious Beast" and accurately described as having "a dragon's head, a Vermilion Bird's wings, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail," in accordance with the context of the

Four Spirits belief system.



Figure 25 The Wings of the Vermilion Bird in the "Four Symbols Cloud Formation" Painting



Figure 26 Detail of the "Feathered Man and Vermilion Bird" Painting Unearthed from the Han Dynasty Tomb at Qianjingtou on the Western Outskirts of Luoyang



Figure 27 The wings of the Zhuque (vermilion bird) depicted in the tomb of Bu Qianqiu in Shaogou Village, Luoyang



Figure 28 Rubbing of the Hollow Vermilion Bird Motif (I)



Figure 29 Rubbing of the Hollow Vermilion Bird Motif(II)



Figure 30 Vermilion Bird from the Suide Museum(I)



Figure 31 Vermilion Bird from the Suide Museum(II)



Figure 32 Vermilion Bird from the Yulin Han Dynasty Stone Relief Museum(I)



Figure 33 Vermilion Bird from the Yulin Han Dynasty Stone Relief Museum(II)



Figure 34 Vermilion Bird from the Nanyang Han Dynasty Stone Carving Museum



Figure 35 Vermilion Bird from the Xiaoxian Museum(I)



Figure 36 Vermilion Bird from the Xiaoxian Museum(II)



Figure 37 Vermilion Bird from the Xiaoxian Museum(III)

4. The “Turtle” Element That Did Not Appear

Furthermore, the tortoise—a key component of the Northern Xuanwu, which is generally believed to consist of a tortoise and a snake—does not appear among the depictions of these four auspicious beasts; only the snake's tail is present as a symbol. Moreover, in the celestial map on the vaulted ceiling, the tortoise and the snake do not intertwine to form the image of Xuanwu widely recognized in later generations. This is because the image of Xuanwu had not yet been established before the Han Dynasty.

"The Songs of Chu": "Regretting the Oath": "I send the Vermilion Bird to lead the way, driving the celestial chariot of the Supreme One. The Azure Dragon coils and twists as the left-hand steed, while the White Tiger gallops as the right-hand steed." The Vermilion Bird, Azure Dragon, and White Tiger all appear in the text, but Xuanwu is notably absent, having been replaced by "the

symbol of Taiyi."

Scholars such as Xiong Dian have also pointed out that the early symbol of the Northern Palace may have been a deer or a qilin. The "Four Symbols and Cloud Patterns" mural in the tomb of King Liang Xiao of the Western Han Dynasty, located on Mount Mangdang in Henan Province, contains no depictions of the tortoise or the snake; the main content of the mural consists of patterns formed by dragons, the White Tiger, the Vermilion Bird, mythical beasts, lingzhi mushrooms, and cloud patterns.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the polychrome wooden coffin from Mawangdui Han Tomb No. 1. The archaeological report states: "The images on this vermilion-ground, polychrome coffin include dragons, tigers, the Vermilion Bird, and deer, but none of the Black Tortoise. This is likely because the intention here was to depict 'auspicious omens' rather than to represent the four cardinal directions." [23]

The absence or variation of the Xuanwu motif in tomb imagery from the late Western Han to the early Eastern Han periods is not an isolated case. In the astronomical diagram from a late Western Han mural tomb at Xi'an Jiaotong University, the constellations Xu and Wei are depicted solely as a snake, with no turtle form visible; in contrast, the Eastern Han tomb at Yangqiaopan in Jingbian, though also depicting Xu and Wei, has added a turtle to the composition, forming a complete Xuanwu. A comparison of the two clearly reveals the transitional traces in the standardization of the Xuanwu's form.

Similar phenomena are frequently observed in the mid-to-late Western Han period: in the "Four Divine Beings Amid Clouds" mural from the Tomb of the Prince of Liang at Shiyuan, Yongcheng, Henan, the dragon, tiger, and bird are all present, but the Black Tortoise is absent, replaced by a large fish—which some scholars suggest may represent the "Fish Woman," a precursor to the Black Tortoise; the ridge-top mural in the Bu Qianqiu Tomb in Luoyang also depicts the Three Divine Beings, with the Black Tortoise omitted and replaced by winged beasts on either side; on the openwork painted bricks from Tomb No. 61 at Shaogou in Luoyang, the Great Deity is flanked by a dragon and a tiger, with the Vermilion Bird above its head; the image at its feet is blurred, but it is clearly not the Black Tortoise; furthermore, many late Western Han-era painted pottery jars unearthed in Luoyang are adorned with a ring of divine beasts, often featuring only the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, and the Vermilion Bird, with the missing position frequently filled by another Vermilion Bird or a phoenix.

These examples indicate that during the transition between the Western Han and Eastern Han dynasties, the image of the Xuanwu—a composite of a tortoise and a snake—had not yet become a fixed configuration. The fact that it was replaced by other images, such as fish, winged beasts, and the Vermilion Bird, serves as evidence that its form had not yet been standardized and that the system of the Four Symbols was still in the process of being established.

Therefore, the image of the Black Tortoise—composed of a tortoise and a snake—must have undergone a complex and lengthy evolutionary process prior to the Han Dynasty; it is thus not surprising that the characteristics of the tortoise did not appear among the "auspicious beasts."

5. Conclusions

The "auspicious beast" depicted on the western wall of the rear chamber of the Eastern Han mural tomb at Qushuhao is not, in fact, the "White Tiger" as identified in the "Bulletin", but should correctly be named the "Four Auspicious Beasts"; its appearance can be described as "a dragon's head, a sparrow's wings, a tiger's body, and a serpent's tail." The "Bulletin" mistakenly identified the dragon's horns as "goat horns," overlooking the various variations of dragon horns in Han Dynasty art (such as the examples from Mawangdui and Haotan in Dingbian); it also failed to note

the wing on the front left leg, which features seven white spots (three on the left, four on the right) and a warm color tone—a stark contrast to the ink-line depictions of the White Tiger commonly found in Han Dynasty paintings, which typically lack spots—and is instead consistent with the characteristics of the Vermilion Bird's wings. As for the serpent's tail lacking a tortoise form, this is a reasonable phenomenon, as the Xuanwu's composite form of tortoise and serpent had not yet been standardized; it does not affect the attributes of the Four Symbols' convergence.

In terms of the tomb's layout, this "auspicious beast" is situated on the lintel of the western wall of the rear chamber, echoing the celestial diagram of the Four Symbols on the vaulted ceiling, thereby forming a symbolic cosmic system encompassing the celestial realm, the immortal realm, and the human realm. This embodies the Han Dynasty's funerary concept of integrating cosmic order and unifying the cardinal directions of the Four Symbols. On the level of belief, the "Four Auspicious Beasts" serve multiple functions, including bestowing auspicious blessings, warding off evil and disasters, and guiding the soul, reflecting the concept of treating the deceased as if they were still alive—a belief in ascension to immortality.

Based on this, this article offers a critical examination of the records in the "Bulletin", revises the identification of the imagery, and attempts to reveal the religious and cultural implications behind it. Due to limitations in available materials and scholarly knowledge, this discussion remains incomplete; it is hoped that future research will further deepen the analysis through new discoveries and interdisciplinary approaches. This paper is offered as a preliminary discussion to stimulate further inquiry, and the author humbly requests corrections and guidance from experts in the field.

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