

The transmission of a 'military' motif to Chorasmia and Bactria around the 1st century BCE

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Abstract

Recent excavations at the Akchakhan-Kala ceremonial complex, close to the Amu Darya river in Chorasmia (present-day Uzbekistan), have generated some remarkable discoveries. Among the most important are wall paintings depicting three monumental deities wearing costumes with complex decoration, doubtless of emblematic significance. The headwear and weaponry of two of these figures are decorated with patterns of quatrefoil rosettes. It can be demonstrated that these represent roses.

Identical rose quatrefoils featured at the burial site of Tillya-tepe further south, in Bactria (present-day Afghanistan). They appeared in the warrior's grave on his jacket, and more importantly, on his elaborately decorated knife scabbard, a parade piece which was not destined for the tumult of the battlefield but was created for display and ceremonial purposes.

The pictorial convention for this rose imagery originated in the Graeco-Roman world, where it appeared on martial paraphernalia. It featured later on fortifications at Surkh Kotal, Bactria, and in several military contexts at Dura-Europos (present-day Syria).

There is a small body of research on the transmission of warfare technologies and weapon types between the Roman and Parthian Empires and the steppes. However, the dissemination of martial iconography and potential ideas associated with it has rarely been explored. It is hoped that a study of this distinctive motif can shine a light on the nature of cultural transfer arising from military interactions and conflict.