

A study of the gold folding crown from Tillya-tepe as an indicator of cultural exchange and status

Sara Peterson

School of Oriental and African Studies, London University

Corsham, Wiltshire GB

Abstract

An elaborate, collapsible crown was found in the grave of a woman at Tillya-tepe, an important burial site in modern Afghanistan, in the borderlands of Bactria and the Parthian world and at a nodal point on major communication routes through Central Asia to China. The crown was among thousands of objects excavated from six richly provisioned, elite burials dating to the 1st century CE. Both its form and ornament reflect Tillya-tepe's pivotal position between different cultures.

This gold crown comprises a diadem decorated with an ensemble of five trees with birds in their upper branches and spiny beasts at their bases. This configuration of motifs relates it to headdresses from the Altai region, the Southern Urals, and the Pontic-Caspian area. However, it is uniquely covered with six-petalled rosettes, identifiable as narcissus flowers, which are more usually found in Graeco-Roman and Parthian contexts.

This paper entails an analysis of the crown's structure and associated imagery and will consider the transmission from different sources of both its shape and motifs. It may be demonstrated that these diverse iconographies converge to provide strong clues towards the status and worldview of the crown's owner. This evaluation is measured against the backdrop of the Central Asian nomadic heritage of the Tillya-tepe folk.