

Hand gestures in Sogdian iconography, their origins, and their significance

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Abstract

One of the peculiar features of Sogdian pictorial art (wall paintings, ossuaries, sculptures, etc.) is depiction of personages and scenes inspired by ancient Indo-Iranian mythical and epic motifs as well as illustration of banquet and battle scenes. Although many aspects of these scenes have been exhaustively scrutinised by scholars in the past decades, yet no sufficient study has been done on the gestures made by characters of these scenes, their origins, and their meanings in the Sogdian culture. Among these gestures are different finger gestures and arm-folding gesture (*dastkaš*). On the one hand, similar gestures can be found in Sasanian and Bactrian iconography (e.g. rock reliefs, coins, silverware, and paintings), which might have shared the same usages and meanings with the Sogdian ones. On the other hand, however, some Sogdian finger gestures are comparable to certain Buddhist mudras, which may show the influence of Buddhist culture in Sogdiana.

The aim of this paper is to collect and categorise the divergent hand gestures appearing in Sogdian iconography, and to identify their origins in a comparative study with the gestures attested in the iconographic evidence from neighbouring cultures. Also, the hitherto proposed interpretations of these gestures and their significance will be revisited in the light of the scarce, but remarkably informative evidence of certain literary sources, which have often been neglected in modern archaeological and art historical scholarship.