

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Base of a funerary couch



China, Henan province

Period of Division, Northern Qi dynasty,
550–577

Grey marble with traces of pigment

23 3/4 x 92 1/8 x 9 1/4 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1915.110

Describe

This stone slab is the front of a funerary platform that supported a coffin in a tomb. It is carved from a single piece of stone. An image of an elaborate incense burner topped by a bird is shown in the center. Four heavenly beings surround it, each standing on a lotus, a Buddhist emblem of purity. In the two oval openings, pairs of heavenly beings holding flaming jewels in their hands kneel on either side of a pillar. A guardian armed with a trident appears at each end of the relief. They stand on animals such as a lion and ram. Above the oval openings is a row of round medallions surrounded by a pearl-like circle of dots. Each medallion contains a musician or a dancer wearing non-Chinese clothing including boots, tight pants, and belted jackets. Double lotus petals form a continuous band across the top of the relief.

Analyze

The designs on this base show an unusual combination of Buddhist and secular themes, as well as Chinese and Central Asian elements. The incense burner flanked by heavenly beings is a typical Chinese Buddhist image. The musicians and dancers represent secular Central Asian entertainers depicted in a Persian style (such as the round frames with “pearls” enclosed in squares, floral designs in the triangular corners, pointed-down toes of the figures, etc.). It thus provides an interesting model of cultural interactions between China and Central Asia during the Period of Division (220–589).

Interpret

Stone funerary couches represent a rare type of burial furniture for the deceased. They were popular for nobles in northern China in the fifth to seventh centuries. At least nine stone slabs with similar carvings would have formed the funerary couch that this frontal base belonged to. Three parts are at the Freer, five are in other museums, and one part is lost. The stone slab has two notches on the top. Short projections from the upper slabs would have fit into these notches. Together, the parts formed the bed on which the deceased was respectfully placed.



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Inquire

- How does this sixth-century funerary couch from northern China compare to the objects found in Chinese tombs from other periods? How were the deceased honored during the Shang, Qing, Tang, or Qin dynasties, and what is similar or different about these funerary traditions?
- The workmen who created this piece of ceremonial furniture employed symmetry in creating the design, meaning that if you drew a line down the center, the two sides would be mirror images. There are also several repeating patterns visible, such as the medallions and the band at the top of the relief. What visual effects do symmetry and repetition create, and why would they be used in this piece? Where can you find other examples of symmetry and repetition in Chinese art and artifacts?
- Use the website [The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silkroads](#) to find out more about the people who created this funerary couch. What kinds of goods and ideas did they exchange, and can you find any visual evidence of those in this piece?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1915.110/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>





