

OBJECT IN FOCUS

## Head of a tomb figure of a Sogdian or Central Asian traveler



China

Tang dynasty, 7th century

Earthenware with slip and pigment

7 1/2 x 3 9/16 x 4 3/4 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler. Paul Singer Collection, RLS1997.48.1449

### Describe

This male head is made of light-gray clay and is missing the rest of his body. Fired in a low-temperature kiln, it is unglazed and covered entirely with a white clay coating called “slip.” The facial features are sculpted and enhanced through paint. Traces of pink, red, and black pigment are still visible on the face. The head seems to represent a Caucasian or Iranian man. He wears a tall Persian style cone-shaped hat. The craftsman of this head obviously enjoyed the freedom of caricaturing the figure’s foreign appearance. He has bulging eyes with large staring pupils and a prominent nose with big nostrils. It almost seems like he is making a grimace.

### Analyze

Tang dynasty (618–907) China was one of the greatest empires of the world. It possessed an international atmosphere thanks to the openness of its rulers and the Silk Road trade routes that connected China with India, Western Asia, the Mediterranean, and East Africa. In cosmopolitan cities like Chang’an and Luoyang, non-Chinese visitors came from all over the eastern hemisphere. One could pass by traders, missionaries, and visitors of many different races on the streets. This male head may be based on such a traveler from the west, most likely a Sogdian (an Iranian people who resided in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and were known for their trade along the Silk Road during the fourth to eighth centuries).



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## Interpret

For the ancient Chinese, the afterlife was as important as one's existence in the earthly world. This means tombs were considered as homes of the deceased. Since the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), the ancient Chinese were buried with miniature representations of everything they would need in the afterlife, including horses, entertainers, servants, and other human and animal subjects. This figure may have been made to represent a groom, one who attends to horses and stables. Horses were one of the key goods that Central Asians, especially the [Sogdians](#), traded in. The Sogdians were also known for their horse breeding and training skills.

## Inquire

- Research some of the other ceramic figures that have been found in Tang dynasty tombs. What was the purpose of these figures, and what do they represent about beliefs in the afterlife during the Tang dynasty in China?
- Why do you think the craftsman chose to exaggerate the facial features of the sculpture? Do you think this figure could be considered a stereotype of a foreigner? Why or why not?
- This figure is thought to represent a Sogdian man. Research [Sogdiana](#) and its relationship with China during the Tang dynasty.

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/RLS1997.48.1449/>

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

