

GOKTURK ART

The surviving art of the Gök Türk is almost entirely from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire, and consists primarily of sculpture in various forms. Perhaps the best-known examples of Gök Türk art are the stelae containing the Orkhon Inscriptions. While the inscriptions in Chinese and the Old Turkic script themselves have artistic merit, both the Bilge Kaghan and Kül Tigin stelae contain sculptural elements. Both were originally erected on stone turtles and depict a twisted dragon and ibex at the top of the stela. In addition, the funerary complexes in which these monuments were originally situated included a number of smaller sculptures that are more crudely carved than the stelae. Some of these figures may depict the deceased ruler and his spouse, while others may represent those who will serve the ruler in the afterlife. One of the most finely rendered sculptures is the head of Kül Tigin, brother of Bilge Kaghan. He is shown wearing an elaborate headdress which has a bird, possibly a raven, with outspread wings on the front.

However, sculpture may not have been the only art produced by or for the Gök Türk. The Bilge Kaghan inscription states not only that the stelae were carved by Chinese artists, but also indicates that some Chinese artists were commissioned to produce paintings as well. Unfortunately for modern scholars, the text does not mention the subjects of these paintings and no Gök Türk painting appears to have survived to the present day.

The only other examples of Gök Türk artistic tastes are found in some of the grave goods that have been discovered in archaeological excavations. These consist primarily of gold and silver drinking vessels, animal figurines and jewelry. The quality of workmanship is quite high for all of these objects, but whether they were domestically produced or were imported prestige goods is not clear.

Readings

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