

An Investigation of Central Asian Jades in History

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Abstract

China has a very long history of jade carving. From the Neolithic Age to the end of the Eastern Jin dynasty (ca. 6200 BCE to 420 CE), an era spanning more than six millennia, the Chinese have used jades for conducting sacrifices to their ancestors and as ritual implements to seek divine protection from deities. Even when jades were carved as objects for daily use, their surfaces were often engraved with designs having special significance. This points to the mysterious aura that fills the jade culture that developed in China proper. Starting from the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the culture of jade took on a new aspect, as most jades were made mostly for daily life. This major shift reveals foreign cultural influence. Scholars in the past had already noted this but few sought to make a follow-up assessment in general history of this observation.

This study examines textual records, archaeological finds, and authenticated objects in the collections of major museums to conduct such a comprehensive analysis. In particular, Central Asian jades from the period between 3000 BCE to 1820 CE can generally be divided into four stages, during which time two peaks in the art of jade carving occurred in Central Asia. The first peak was from the sixth to tenth centuries CE, when rulers of the Khotan region led the exchange in jade culture. The second was during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Timurid Empire led the trend.

In addition to the unique features of the jade culture that arose in these two periods, in other eras the jade carvers of Central Asia produced simple and unadorned utilitarian objects from jade. However, after 1759, the Qing dynasty court subjugated the area of Xinjiang, and it was attracted to and absorbed large quantities of jades with carved flower and leaf decoration that represented the eastward spread of Islamic jades, the trend in jades in imitation developing in the eastern part of Central Asia at that time.

Keywords: Central Asia, jade carving, Khotan, Timurid Empire, Islamic jades

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