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# Of Crowns and Diadems: New Pictorial Evidence from Akchakhan-kala

by MICHELE MINARDI, ALISON BETTS, AYSULU ISKANDEROVA

*Persicos odi, puer, adparatus,  
displicent nexae philyra coronae,  
mitte sectari, rosa quo locorum  
sera moretur.*  
(Hor. Carm. I. 38)

Negli ultimi anni, gli scavi della *Karakalpak-Australian Archaeological Expedition* ad Akchakhan-kala, nell'Antica Corasmia, hanno portato alla luce parte di un vasto corpus di pitture murali che un tempo decoravano l'interno del monumento principale del sito, l'Edificio Centrale del Complesso Cerimoniale. Questo materiale pittorico, databile intorno al I secolo EC, ha l'eccezionale qualità di appartenere a un ambito religioso zoroastriano specificamente pre-sasanide. Questo articolo presenta una descrizione preliminare, l'esame e la discussione di alcuni nuovi frammenti di pitture murali attualmente in attesa di trattamento conservativo. I nuovi frammenti, recanti rappresentazioni di busti visti di profilo, fanno parte di quella che generalmente viene considerata una galleria degli antenati della famiglia reale, anche se questa – come si è cercato di argomentare qui e in precedenti articoli – è lungi dall'essere la loro unica possibile interpretazione. Dato il contesto, la serie di quaranta o più "ritratti" della "galleria" potrebbe infatti essere, più specificamente, una rappresentazione collettiva delle *fravaši*. I frammenti sono anche di grande significato rispetto al complesso tema della trasmissione degli elementi formali e delle iconografie nel mondo antico: sul capo, le figure altrimenti stereotipate, portano vari tipi di diademi, che in alcuni casi appaiono come vere e proprie corone, tra le più antiche rappresentate nella pittura centroasiatica preislamica pervenute fino a noi.

## INTRODUCTION

Not many more or less intact groups of ancient wall paintings are known to have survived the vicissitudes of the past in Central Asia and Iran. One that has survived, and which is also among the most important and ancient collections, dating to the beginning of the Common Era, was discovered at Akchakhan-kala, an Ancient Chorasmian royal centre,<sup>1</sup> during excavations by our joint Karakalpak-Australian archaeological mission (KAE).<sup>2</sup> The collection bears witness to a complex and organic

<sup>1</sup> Khorezm is the designation of a modern district of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The region of Ancient Chorasmia approximately corresponded to the territories of this district, plus Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan and the district of Daşoguz in Turkmenistan.

<sup>2</sup> The Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia is a joint project of the University of Sydney and the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Karakalpak branch, co-directed by A.V.G. Betts and, since 2022, by A. Iskanderova. Self-reference in this paper is unavoidable, as this article is part of a series of publications on the archaeological material found during the authors' work at Akchakhan-kala that started with Betts et al. 2015; 2016, i.e. with the publication of the discovery of the colossal anthropomorphic Avestan gods at the site.

visual programme. It contains hundreds of fragments of wall painting, mainly found in the debris and mud-wash layers of one of Akchakhan-kala's major structures, the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex. These remnants of mural art, that once covered the white-plastered mud brick walls of the complex, were discovered on the surfaces of thin fragments of fallen plaster of varying size, shape, and state of preservation. Their documentation, re-composition, study, and conservation have been ongoing for some time, in particular since 2016.<sup>3</sup> The preliminary results of the process are still being evaluated and recorded.

It was only in 2014 that the “cornerstone” of these discoveries came to light, which allowed us to better evaluate the religious message and meaning of Akchakhan-kala's painted imagery. This crucial element consisted of three colossal painted anthropomorphic figures (originally about 7 m in height) that once covered the surface of the end-wall of the main hypostyle hall of the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex.<sup>4</sup> Two of these figures, undoubtedly tall standing deities, have been recognised: one, holding a starry canopy of heaven, has been tentatively identified as either the Avestan *yazata* Tishtrya (M. Minardi), or a depiction of the Fravashi (F. Grenet).<sup>5</sup> The other wears a mural crown and has the clear Zoroastrian symbol of the “bird-priest” adorning his tunic; the latter symbol (in association with other features) has allowed his identification as the *yazata* Sraosha.<sup>6</sup> The extraordinary religious nature of these representations has also been assessed and some more general deductions have been proposed: at Akchakhan-kala the artists working under royal patronage in about the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE were certainly guided to some extent by members of the Avestan (or early Zoroastrian, or pre-Sasanian Zoroastrian) clergy (Minardi 2018; Grenet 2018). Also, certain important data seem to indicate that, besides artists native to Chorasmia, others might have been foreigners (and/or Chorasmians who trained abroad; we will probably never know which) and may have come to Chorasmia for a variety of reasons, the principal one being local royal patronage and the demand for skilled labour.<sup>7</sup>

Iconographically speaking, it has been noted that the majority of the formal elements adopted by the painters in their depictions of Akchakhan-kala's deities were clearly based on ancient models, although contemporary inputs, stimuli, and influences are also seen.<sup>8</sup> This local archaism, which may have been connected with the conser-

<sup>3</sup> Research and fieldwork in Karakalpakstan during the years 2016-2019 were supported by the Australian Research Council DP170101770 grant.

<sup>4</sup> On the architecture, see Minardi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov 2017. On the deities and their last graphic reconstruction, see interim work by Minardi in Grenet, Minardi 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Detailed discussion in Grenet, Minardi 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Betts et al. 2015; 2016. Further data sustaining this identification are presented in Grenet, Minardi 2021. On the iconography of the “bird-priest,” see Minardi 2021a; on the meaning and significance of this religious figure, Panaino 2015.

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in Minardi 2018: 140-141. The case of the modelled and painted *ketos* made of unbaked clay is emblematic of this argument (Minardi 2016), as well as the Eastern-Hellenistic carved ivory prop of a fire altar (Sinisi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov 2018) almost certainly imported into the polity, or carved from imported raw material in loco by a specialist who was probably not local but may have been Bactrian (see Minardi 2018). On this topic, see also Kidd 2011, who proposed in particular a connection with Parthia and with the world of the steppes (on this, see also Kidd, Betts 2010).

<sup>8</sup> There is a stark contrast between the hieratic iconography of the deities and the tapestry-like *paradeisos* (KAE forthcoming) likewise painted on one of the walls of the hypostyle hall. Cf. also the “crowd

vative nature of religious art, was possibly rooted in conventions going back to the Achaemenid domination of Asia; they might have been traditional in Chorasmia at the time, but not exclusively in that area.<sup>9</sup> More data are needed (1) to fully grasp this iconographic and artistic legacy, which contrasts starkly with other Eastern Hellenistic features attested in the corpus (additional evidence *infra*), and (2) to draw decisive conclusions about its modes of transmission through time until the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE. The fact remains that the nature of the Achaemenid “echoes” in the religious art of Chorasmia show up beautifully in the Akchakhan wall paintings. The origins of these processes of assimilation and transmission have yet to be investigated through field archaeology; this is needed to fill a great gap in our knowledge of Chorasmian and Central Asian visual arts, especially from the Achaemenid to Seleucid periods, and the art of the following epochs. In this regard, it is also important to note that Chorasmia was never conquered by Alexander, nor was it ever part of the Seleucid empire. The formal elements that originated in the West and featured in the Chorasmian art of Akchakhan-kala seem in this context to be exotic; they may have been adopted and adapted from that “Eastern Hellenistic” world South of the polity that was associated with the ruling elite of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, the framework from which the Chorasmian art of the beginning of our era emerged was a complex one. It may have included an original, and thus artistic, elaboration (e.g. the “bird-priest”?) that certainly developed from a local substratum and had been artistically kindled by an exogenous element; this process might be seen against the background of the broader context of post-Alexandrian Asia, continuing up to the dawn of Kushan power. This is just a reconstruction based on evidence; it is a working hypothesis, as we shall see, that seems to be corroborated by the characteristics of the new so-called portraits from Akchakhan-kala presented here.

### *The “Portrait Gallery”*

The fragments belonging to the so-called portrait gallery of Akchakhan-kala were first found in the Northern section of the Western corridor of the Central Building.<sup>11</sup>

scene” from the Altar Area of the same building (Kidd 2011: 244, figs 2-3; Minardi 2018: 110, fig. 9). We are not implying that the Chorasmian Avestan deities had iconographic forerunners that were exactly the same, since due to the shortage of evidence it is extremely difficult to make more precise judgments, but we suggest that their images were created utilizing older iconographies and formal elements in ways that need further inquiry.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. the general articulation of the figures, Sraosha’s *akinakes* and scabbard with its very precise belt system, or the lions’ heads with stylized manes that decorate Tishtrya’s *kandys*. For further details, see Minardi 2018; 2020b. On the archaeological and documentary evidence relative to the Persian domination over Chorasmia, see Minardi 2021b; on the debated issue of the possible Achaemenid presence in Northeastern Central Asia, see the point of view expressed in Minardi 2023, with references.

<sup>10</sup> Such as Tishtrya’s *velificatio* or Sraosha’s *corona muralis* (not a crenelated crown, see Minardi 2018; although the crown also shows an interesting dichromatism comparable to much older depictions, see Minardi 2020b). This willingness of the Chorasmian elite to partake of the symbols of power and status (evident especially in their arts and crafts) of their Southern peers is even clearer later at Toprak-kala, the Chorasmian royal seat following Akchakhan-kala founded in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (for further details, Minardi 2020a).

<sup>11</sup> Yagodin et al. 2009; Kidd, Betts 2010; Kidd 2011: 264-265; Kidd, Brite 2015. The “portraits” should be about forty (Kidd 2011: 230). To this figure should be added the new fragments here presented.



They were a group of stereotyped painted busts, quite possibly female,<sup>12</sup> wearing regalia such as earrings and torques with *ketos*-head finials (*infra*). They are characterized by a white complexion (i.e. the faces are only outlined in black on the usual white plaster background), solid black-coloured short hair reaching the nape of the neck, solid red-coloured lips and ears, and wide-open eyes outlined in black.<sup>13</sup> They are flat two-dimensional figures seen in profile and framed by contiguous rectangular panels.<sup>14</sup> They differ from one another only in their headdresses (or lack of thereof), which are sometimes decorated with what appears to be a bird protome or with a seated feline figure (but not a crouching gryphon, see *infra*), and in their clothing. Clusters of busts often look in opposite directions. We have interpreted them as either a display of idealized royal ancestors (Betts et al. 2016), or a depiction of the multitude of the Fravashis (which is a feeble distinction in such a specific Zoroastrian religious context).<sup>15</sup> This latter view was proposed in the light of a different discovery, again made in the perimeter corridor of the Central Building, but this time in its Northern wing. The very same characters of the “portraits” (i.e. once more typecast and displaying the exact same regalia) were found; but this time rather than busts they are full-height standing figures accompanied by horses and possibly wearing protective clothing. This visual transfiguration, along with other evidence, reminded us of the text in the *GdD* 38.12 ff. describing the “famous dramatic passage of the ‘Decision of the Fravartin’,” when the Fravashis decided to descend to earth as allies of Ohrmazd (Bailey 1943: 108); we then thought that this visual transfiguration may evoke celebration of the *Frawardīgān*, in connection with the New Year festival, when the king’s and the king’s family’s Fravashis came to earth. It was eventually argued that such a large group of kindred characters, which used to cover the walls (and possibly the ceilings) of a specific portion of the corridor of the Central Building, would have indeed been part of a larger display of a processional event connected with the Nowruz, or with another seasonal sacred event related to kingship.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As argued in Minardi 2018, and reiterated in Minardi et al. 2020: 86-95. For further arguments, *infra* and following note. Alternatively, we may see the painted busts as young men: they might have been those celebrated during the Mihragān, but this is unlikely considering all the factors involved.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Yt.* XIII. 29; *infra* on some additional possible correspondences between the imagery and passages of the Fravashis’s Avestan hymn. We note also that solid red-coloured painted ears are a very distinctive characteristic known only in much earlier depictions of exclusively female figures in mural paintings in Bronze Age Aegean art, which, according to scholars (Earle 2012), had a cultic significance. As far as I know, only one other fragmentary painting from Aktepe in ancient Lydia, although somewhat re-painted by looters, displays a female head wearing a tiara and has what is evidently a red-coloured ear (Özgen, Öztürk 1996: 71, cat. n. 7).

<sup>14</sup> The grid layout of the busts made Minardi (2018: 114) consider their arrangement as having been derived from an Eastern-Hellenistic milieu: “Even the framed ‘portraits’ disposed in rows and columns are, in my opinion, a local elaboration of the figured panels of Western origin that we can still appreciate, for instance, in the early Gandhāran sculpture of Butkara I and that, according to Anna Filigenzi [2006], are an echo of a lost pictorial interior decorative fashion.” The Chorasmian busts do not emerge directly from their frames but are instead characterized by a further black line on their lower portions. This element seems to separate them from numismatic portraiture.

<sup>15</sup> For the particular pattern of belief that underlay the Fravashis, see Gnoli 1990; Pirart 2012: 181-214; Kellens 2016: 137-149 with references. Context, figures and their possible meaning are discussed in detail in Minardi et al. 2020: 61-101 with references.

<sup>16</sup> As alluded to in Grenet 2010 and examined in Minardi et al. 2020 (for a plan of the Central building and the location of the Northern corridor, *ibidem* p. 62, fig. 1).

It is in exactly the same place of discovery as the full figures with horses, that is in the Western section of the Northern corridor, that the six new fragments of wall paintings that are the focus of this paper were found. They are part of the “portraits” cluster, but they display an array of new headdresses that are discussed in the following paragraphs, together with their historical implications.

MM, AB, AI

#### A NEW SET OF DATA FROM THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR

At Akchakhan-kala we can neither identify an “exhibition of works of art” (i.e. a gallery), nor interpret our series of painted busts as actual “portraits” because they lack the essential traits that define portraiture. Nonetheless, both the terms “gallery” and “portrait” will be employed here because they are convenient and provide clarity.<sup>17</sup> Current interpretations (which are interim ones, *supra*) allow us to label the Chorasmian “portraits” as the “idealized images of royal ancestors” or more simply, considering the context, as Fravashis, more specifically those possibly of the ruling elite, although perhaps not exclusively (*infra*).

There are six new wall-painting fragments, KY2014 nos 27, 31, 34, 35, 40, and 45, which for convenience are referred to here as corresponding to fragments nos 1 to 6. They were unearthed in 2014.<sup>18</sup> Most of the pieces include parts of several framed busts; these are numbered in alphanumeric order according to the clockwise quadrants from A to D, starting from the upper left (for example KY2014 nos 45 A to D are fragments 6A to 6D). The total number of “portraits,” regardless of their state of preservation, is thirteen. The different types of diadems (i.e. crowns fastened by a fillet knotted at the back, symbols of royalty)<sup>19</sup> in our sample appear to be seven in number (although some of the specimens are not fully legible). These headdresses are accordingly labelled as Type 1 to Type 7.

The “portraits” all have certain characteristics in common (although these are not always preserved), which are the colour palette used by the artists; the fact that the figures wear a torque and earrings; the customary solid red ears and lips, and the large, wide-open black eyes; and the fact that the features of the dress on their always frontal busts vary (e.g. the garment is red or white, and is shown with or without drapery). These have already been discussed at length in other publications;<sup>20</sup> here they are not examined in each case if an analysis is not deemed necessary for making additional observations pertinent to the general argument.

<sup>17</sup> Our “portraits” are formulaic figures; in addition, we now are aware that their grouping does not constitute a stand-alone feature (i.e. a “gallery;” they were in fact the central part of a much wider visual programme starting with a procession of horses and grooms, and finishing with the same royalty-related figures accompanying horses).

<sup>18</sup> Only some preliminary cleaning and consolidation work has been done on these fragments (by Vadim V. Yagodin). For those fragments which are not readily comprehensible from photographs, we publish 1:1 tracings of them (made by conservator Mélodie Bonnat).

<sup>19</sup> “Corona. – Nel significato originario e generale di *διαδέω* sono compresi anche altri emblemi, bende o oggetti di oreficeria che circondano il capo, specialmente quello femminile (Cato, Orig., 120; Isid., Orig., XIX, 31, 1) e in questa accezione il termine d.[diadema] è stato ripreso nella lingua odierna” (Krug 1994).

<sup>20</sup> *Supra* fn. 11.



Fig. 1 - Fragment no. 1, 1:1 preliminary tracing.  
©KAE.

Fragment no. 1 (Fig. 1): the fragment measures approximately 28×13 cm maximum and preserves on its white surface parts of the occipital and parietal portions of the head of one of the female figures, who is facing right. The upper part of the usual uniformly red-coloured ear seen on the busts is also partially preserved. The figure wears an intricately designed crown that has a white circlet with above two high pearl-topped scrolls, or pearl-topped finials, in the shape of a “fleur-de-lis,” outlined in red. This is a rather original motif derived from the schematic Egyptian and Near Eastern “lotus” (*infra* Type 1). The spaces between the two “fleurs-de-lis” and the shorter vertical element at the back of the headdress are occupied by what seems to be an additional vertically pointed leaf-shaped ornament. The crown scrolls seem to slope toward the front of the figure’s head, but this distortion might have occurred after the collapse of the plaster fragment. The bulging solid-black element inside the crown is certainly part of the personage’s hair (Fig. 2).

Fragment no. 2 (Fig. 3): the fragment measures approximately 92×34 cm maximum and displays the remaining portions of three busts facing right: 2A, 2C, and 2D. The black-lined framing is partially preserved, showing that originally at least four busts were present in this section of the corridor’s decoration.

While 2C is almost completely lost and 2A is acephalous (with only the chest and lower part of the torque worn around the neck preserved), 2D shows the face of one of the busts with its headgear. The headdress worn by 2D, possibly a metal coronet, is characterized by a band, or crown ring, coloured red and decorated by a series of discs in which the white background shows through; only one these is clearly visible. On its back part, above the figure’s



Fig. 2 - Overlay of fragment no. 1 (with part of fragment KY06 P001). ©KAE.

red ear, the diadem displays two additional black parallel vertical lines that were certainly part of another, unpreserved, feature. Most prominently, on the front of the diadem, rising from the figure's forehead, there is a long-stemmed flower, which seems to be a rosebud with leaves (*infra* Type 2).

Fragment no. 3 (Fig. 4): this fragment, which measure approximately 53×27 cm maximum, features an almost complete painted bust facing left. The tracing of the fragment is not yet available, so we must base our observations on the photograph of the uncleaned piece: the figure's white face, black hair and red ear are distinguishable. The headdress seems to be a solid red painted band with supplementary rising features, at present too unclear to be completely understood, outlined in the same colour. The most prominent of these is a frontal downward curled element (*infra* Type 3). The crown, perhaps in this case a soft diadem, is (as usual) open at the top, and it is possible to see the curve of the figure's skullcap and the black colour of its covering hair.

Fragment no. 4 (Figs 5-6): fragment 4, measuring approximately 60×54 cm maximum, displays the remnant of two busts, 4A and 4B, one of which is certainly facing



Fig. 3 - Fragment no. 2, 1:1 preliminary tracing.  
©KAE.



Fig. 4 - Fragment no. 3, photo of the fragment before restoration (contrast and saturation enhancement). ©KAE.

left. Again, what survives of the compositional frame indicates that this was a cluster of at least four juxtaposed specimens. Only traces of 4B are preserved, while 4A is preserved well enough to be discussed. Bust 4A wears a white crown outlined in red with five triangular elements topped by large pearls (*infra* Type 4). It is a spiked, or rather radiate, crown.

Fragment no. 5 (Figs 7-9): this fragment, measuring approximately 120×75 cm maximum, preserves three images: 5A, 5B, and 5C. 5B and 5C face right, in the opposite direction to 5A (and perhaps of the lost 5D, as the customary black frame indicates room for a fourth, unpreserved, personage). Bust 5C, like 4A, wears a radiate crown (*infra* Type 4), although unlike 4A, this specimen has a red-coloured circlet below the white uprights. Thanks to the preservation of the occipital part of the head of 5C, it may be seen that this radiate crown was closed by a fillet (i.e. that it was a knotted diadem—like, for instance,

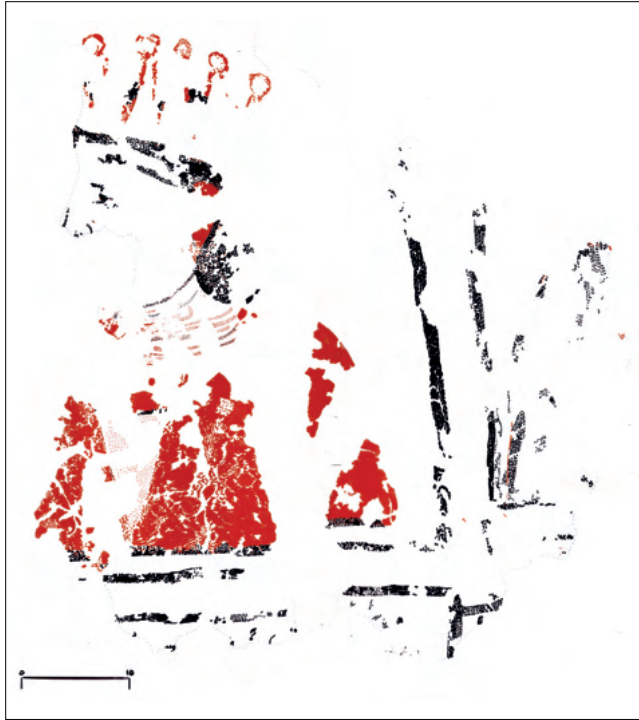


Fig. 5 - Fragment no. 4, 1:1 preliminary tracing. ©KAE.



Fig. 6 - Fragment no. 4, photograph of the fragment before restoration. ©KAE.



Fig. 7 - Fragment no. 5, 1:1 preliminary tracing. ©KAE.

those of Roman specimens, *infra*). The upward pointing loops of the knot and the ribbons of the fillet are coloured red, with black outlines. The presence of this element has been already noted and appropriately used, in association with the other regalia, to support the argument that the busts at Akchakhan-kala have show royal features. It is moreover safe to assume that each of the diademed busts had a closing fillet knotted at the back.

Bust 5A is the most fragmentary of all, and at this stage it is impossible to say anything of interest about it; the preserved red traces of its coronet show that this might have been a floral one with a red band (Type 2?).

Lastly, 5B is another quite well preserved figure (Fig. 10). This part of fragment 5 has an almost complete black frame (60×40 cm) containing a bust wearing a diadem with a white band decorated with three applied/sewn blossoming flowers outlined in red (*infra* Type 5). Two of the flowers are shown frontally with exposed corolla and calyx, while the third one over the figure's forehead is painted in a profile



Fig. 8 - Fragment no. 5, photograph of the fragment before restoration. ©KAE.

view. The diadem appears knotted at the back with strings outlined by broad black lines. What may be traces of a painted epigraph are seen over the figure's head within the same frame.

Fragment no. 6 (Figs 11-12): this fragment, measuring approximately 116×63 cm maximum, again bears four framed figures, placed in the usual quadrants by crossed double black lines. Like fragment no. 5, the busts are organized in vertical pairs facing one another. Bust 6A wears another radiate crown (cf. 4A and 5D), of which only two of its upright elements topped with pearls are preserved, while 6B, likewise very fragmentary, displays a different type of coronet with a solid red crown ring characterized by a red-decorated feature that may be a pointed leaf (although the shape of this “element” could have been caused by the fragmentation of the piece; *infra* Type 7). Nothing can be said about 6C, which has been almost completely lost. Bust 6D, although better preserved than 6C, has lost most of its head-





Fig. 9 - Fragment no. 5, photograph at the time of discovery. ©KAE.

gear: the traces left are a solid red circling, plus a small red frontal curl with a round finial/pearl located in a rather high position compared to that of the figure's eye (*infra* Type 6).

#### CROWN TYPES AND COMPARANDA

Type 1 (“fleurs-de-lis” alternating with vertical pointed leaves)

With regard to the iconographic origins (as we are discussing a painting) of such a rare type of crown,<sup>21</sup> the earliest example that comes to mind is the coronet worn by the kore *Phrasiklèia*, sculpted in about 550-530 BCE by Aristion of Paros (Mastrokostas 1972). The “lotus frieze” decorating the diadem of this archaic Greek artwork, featuring alternating semi-open lotus blossoms (with three petals, one to the front) and closed, pointed, lotus buds, is similar in form to the Chorasmian “fleurs,”

<sup>21</sup> Relative to the Iranian oikumene in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. *Infra* for Persian crowns.



Fig. 10 - Detail of fragment no. 5 (bust 5D).  
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in which the spaces between the uprights of the crown are filled with vertically placed “leaves.” Generally speaking, the floral pattern/frieze of the *Phrasiklèia*’s diadem certainly took its inspiration from outside of Greece; original contributions in Egypt and, later, Assyria,<sup>22</sup> possibly through the mediation of Cyprus and the Phoenician world, are evident and well known to scholars. The same stylized lotus bud was also widely employed in Achaemenid art and crafts, among other types.<sup>23</sup> However, the Persians did not use such elements as uprights to decorate their royal

<sup>22</sup> E.g. a Neo-Assyrian doorsill from Nineveh (British Museum no. 118913); wall paintings from the palace of Til Barsip (e.g. Louvre no. AO 25068—also with a pomegranate frieze with a calyx characterized by a tripartite lanceolate pattern).

<sup>23</sup> The bud type, not that in flower. Cf. e.g. Perrot 2013: fig. 326; also common in metalwork decoration (especially of *phialai*; e.g. *ibid.*: fig. 392), but without strict standardization.

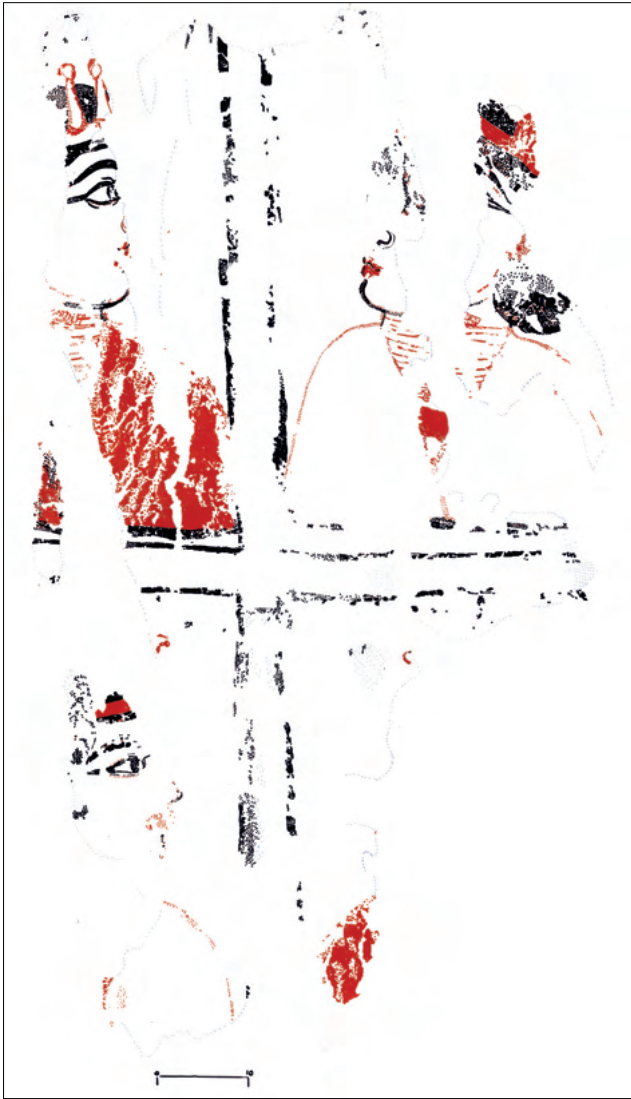


Fig. 11 - Fragment no. 6, 1:1 preliminary tracing. ©KAE.

diadems.<sup>24</sup> It is likely that precisely this ancient semi-blooming type of lotus later developed into what we observe in Chorasmia, and also into the iconic “fleur-de-lis” commonly used in modern crowns and other objects. In Judea, during the Persian dominion (c. 375-333 BCE), the first depiction of the “lily flower” as a stand-alone symbol was used on coins.<sup>25</sup> The lily still appeared on bronze coins of

<sup>24</sup> Most of the Achaemenid crowns were crenelated (not mural—cf. *infra* note 36). See surveys in: Tilia 1978: 58-66; Roaf 1983: 131-133. Darius’s diadem at Bisotun has a circlet decorated with stars and double reverse lotuses.

<sup>25</sup> Rosebuds shaped like spearhead “lilies” also appear on the obverse of coins of Rhodes during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE either as an accessory to the main rose or as the main subject. On the possible iconographic link between Rhodes and Judea, see Jacobson 2013.



Fig. 12 - Fragment no. 6, photograph of the fragment before restoration. ©KAE.

the Judean kingdom during the rule of Antiochus VII Sidetes (135/134-129 BCE), later on coins minted by Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BCE), and eventually on a coin type used during the Roman prefectorial administration of Judaea (Valerius Gratus, 16/17 CE).<sup>26</sup> In early Hellenistic times, in ancient Macedonia, we find the same lanceolate “lily”—in other words, a lotus that underwent further standardization to become another type—in the vegetal frieze on the golden larnax of Philip II (Galanakis 2011: fig. 169), and in the painted frieze in the antechamber of queen Eurydice’s tomb (*ibid.*: fig. 40). Even the thunderbolts that appeared on coins in Greece from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (De Angelo Laky 2018), and then in Hellenistic

<sup>26</sup> Jacobson 2013: 16-17. The lily/lotus also appeared on coins struck at Acmonia (see e.g. British Museum no. 1839.0919.476).

numismatics,<sup>27</sup> shared a form quite similar to that of the “lily.” This also matches the shape of the double “lily” on coins of the “Western Satraps” of India during the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.<sup>28</sup> Some antefixes (*à bulbe*) from the palace and the monumental Propylaea of Ai Khanoum, as well as some decorative elements on pillar capitals again from the palace, resemble the shape of the later Chorasmian uprights.<sup>29</sup> The only antefixes so far known found in Southern Chorasmia, which were discovered at Kaladzhik-tepe (2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), bear a schematic variation of the “lily” motif.<sup>30</sup>

The Chorasmian painted specimen from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE is iconographically closer to the later forms of lotus as a “lily” due to its curved sides and its elongated pearl-topped central element. Its presence on a crown with vertically placed leaves in the intervening spaces (cf. *infra* Type 7) is at present unique: this might have derived from the ancient “lotus frieze,” although it is impossible to precisely ascertain the context from which the Chorasmian artists took inspiration and when this occurred. Later, in the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century CE, a similar crown was depicted on the head of a Sogdian noble on his seal.<sup>31</sup>

#### Type 2 (with frontal rosebud? raised on a stem)

This crown is characterized by a raised frontal phytomorphic element that is in all likelihood a rosebud. The impression here is of a much more naturalistically styled flower, arising from a delicate stem, compared to the “calyx rosettes” of fragment 5B (*infra*). Its assessment is more difficult due to the lack of significant sources and comparanda: within the corpus its originality is without doubt unparalleled. Without pushing for a search of antecedents, we may observe that a similarly raised frontal feature is attested as part of the headdress of an enthroned young Nero crowned by a Fortuna/Agrippina on a cameo kept in Cologne.<sup>32</sup> In this case, contemporary to Akchakhan-kala, the particular bulging feature is not a flower but a rayed sun-disc (together with other Hellenistic signs of power, including a wreath/diadem); however, this iconographic parallel is the closest one found so far. Nero certainly took inspiration from the imagery of the Dioscuri of the Republican period, when, for instance on coins, the heads of heavenly twins are shown wearing laureate *pilei* surmounted by a star, often fixed by a stem to their foreheads.<sup>33</sup>

#### Type 3 (with spiral-shaped frontal feature)

For this type we can only make conjectures based on its only definite feature: a downward curl associated with an open crown. This element might be compared, only

<sup>27</sup> E.g. coins of Alexander I Epirus, British Museum nos BNK, G. 1037 and 1866,1201.1540.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. a specimen issued by Nahapana, British Museum no. 1907,0102.2.

<sup>29</sup> Antefixes: Bernard 1973: pl. 102, a; Guillame 1983: 40 with pl. 12, c; pillars: Bernard 1973: pl. 80, a; 1968: figs 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Zav'yalov 1996: 309, fig. 11; commented on in Minardi 2015: 92-93. This feature seems to be a hybrid with a palmette.

<sup>31</sup> Bulla from Kanka illustrated and discussed in Livshits 2000: fig. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Smith 2021: fig. 39. Cf. also a head of Helios with stylized radiate crown with frontal element arranged in the fashion of an ancient Egyptian uraeus (?) of the Roman Imperial period, possibly from a Hellenistic original (Hoffmann 1963: 121, fig. 15).

<sup>33</sup> E.g. British Museum no. 1901,0407.342 (Fonteius, 108-107 BCE); no. 2002,0102.4570 (Cordius Rufus, 46 BCE).

in terms of its positioning, with an Egyptian uraeus and, in terms of its shape, with a Roman *lituus*, or a simplified *aphlaston* (both symbols are far from being headdresses or their components). It is much more likely that this curl was inspired by the bent-over apex of a Phrygian cap,<sup>34</sup> which might have been modified in Chorasmia to become a prominent feature of such a peculiar type of crown. As mentioned above, some other vertical features of this crown, located on the back of the figure's head, increase the complexity of this headgear and are currently difficult to understand. The Chorasmian painters once again seem to have wished to portray a specific variation in headgear as they designed the crowns of the Fravashis. They did this by combining various secondary elements that came from a complex and stratified visual patrimony. This variation, alongside the colour patterns of such elements as the caftans (and crowns), was very likely intended to create a pictorial effect.

#### Type 4 (radiate crown topped by pearls)

In the cluster under analysis this type of crown occurs three times, worn by figures 4A, 5C and 6A. In two of the three cases (4A and 6A), the crown is entirely white (i.e. outlined in red) and has uprights (or rays) on each of which a pearl is set. In the remaining specimen (5C), the same vertical rays are also only outlined in red, but solid red has been chosen for the circlet. The colour palette used by the artists working at Akchakhan-kala was limited, and the chromatic alternative adopted in these figures was probably chosen for the sake of variation; it is unlikely that it had a specific symbolic meaning.<sup>35</sup> The rays seem to join the crown's headband as if they were fixed to it externally, and the artist may have been suggesting that they were made of metal. Furthermore, fragment 5C preserves the loops and ribbons of the crown/diadem, and thus we may assume that the same features were also part of the other two specimens. This plain type of Chorasmian crown (i.e. it lacks jewels) was clearly modelled on a radiate crown tied at the back with a closure fillet of Western inspiration, with the addition of top pearl finials. The evidence for this is straightforward. The four- or five-pointed crowns of the Achaemenids, used for both male and female members of the elite as mainly attested by coins and seals,<sup>36</sup> cannot be considered radiate diadems, but are rather stylizations of a crenelated decoration. On the contrary, the radiate or "solar" crowns, as well as beribboned diadems,<sup>37</sup> in Asia had a Hellenistic filiation.

<sup>34</sup> Cfs. e.g. a "Parthian" helmet kept in the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, accession no. 1979.41; Midas's numismatic portraits, with Phrygian cap, on mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE coins minted in Prynnessus (e.g. British Museum coin no. 1920,0805.1622). Another unpublished "portrait" from the Western corridor seems to wear an actual Phrygian cap (KAE).

<sup>35</sup> As already argued in Minardi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov et al. 2020: 68, 75. The specific case of the ears is different; they are always visible and highlighted in red, and mouths are likewise red-coloured (*ibid.*; *supra* fn. 13).

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Callieri 1997: cat. nos 4.1 (female figure holding a diadem/wreath?) and 4.4 (female figure standing in front of a lion whose mane had the same stylization). Cf. Achaemenid noblewomen wearing crowns on a textile from Pazyryk and on a seal kept in the Louvre (Rubinson 1990: figs 11-12). Cf. also engraving on finger rings from the "Oxus Treasure" (winged bull, British Museum no. 124006).

<sup>37</sup> The *diadema* as a band was Alexander's royal emblem in Asia (on its origin and original significance, see Fredricksmeyer 1997). Antigonus I Monophthalmus was the first to assume the diadem as *symbol* of royalty among his successors (Bosworth 2002: 246). The diadem as a band was also worn, associated with a tiara, by the Persian nobles (see Piras 2000; Olbrycht 2014 with references). The kore *Phrasikleia* (*supra*) has her hair bound by a hair-band decorated with a meander and tied in a knot with ends hanging

Solar rays, originally in Greece an attribute of Helios,<sup>38</sup> were apparently first employed in a crown by Alexander's successors (in association with the diadem as a band) by the Ptolemaic dynasts, as shown in a renowned gold octadrachm bearing the portrait of Ptolemy III.<sup>39</sup> In the Seleucid kingdom, this was done for the first time sometime later by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE).<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, in the first quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, the Indo-Greek rulers Amyntas and Hermaios used solar rays, along with a Phrygian hat, as headgear for a divine effigy, possibly of Mithra, on some of their monetary issues.<sup>41</sup> In Rome, depictions of Augustus as a *divus* wearing a radiate crown fastened at the back by long strings, a regalia that was later very popular for living emperors from Nero, are well known.<sup>42</sup> The radiate crown type is also already acknowledged in relation to a small number of numismatic Parthian and Sasanian portraits of rulers: that of Osroes I (c. 120 CE),<sup>43</sup> and later of Bahrām I (with korymbos and earflaps; 273-276 CE; the crown also attested by his Bishāpūr investiture relief). In Central Asia there are some comparable examples of crowns with rays, and these are even closer to the Chorasmian specimens for they are topped with pearl finials, but they belong to a much later chronological horizon.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that finials in the shape of pearls topping a triangular "ray" appeared in Ptolemaic numismatic portraits, although not on crowns; they were at the ends of the flapping strings of royal diadems, both fastened around rulers' heads or bound to the double or single cornucopia often present on the obverse of Hellenistic Egyptian coins. The same feature was already used to characterize the end of the calyx of pomegranates, for example, in staters struck in Pamphylia at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Indo-Greek "god-like queen" (*theotropos*) Agathokleia (c. 130-125 BCE), had in her nu-

down at the back. In this case the fillet is separated from the coronet. Earlier, Egyptian golden crowns were already equipped with embossed fillets, i.e. they were tied at the back (e.g. Aldred 1971, fig. 83).

<sup>38</sup> E.g. pre-Hellenistic coins of Caria (Ashton 1990). See also Hoffmann 1963, who also discusses the influence of Alexander's portraiture on the Hellenistic, and Romano-Hellenistic, version of this god.

<sup>39</sup> Struck (245-244 BCE) during the rule of Ptolemy III (Smith 1988: 42) or that of his successor Ptolemy IV and bearing the effigy of his deified father (c. 221-204 BCE; as argued in Picón, Hemingway 2016: 211, no. 135 with references). For further details, see Johnson 1999.

<sup>40</sup> For interpretations and meaning, see Wright 2005.

<sup>41</sup> For further details, see Callieri 1990; Grenet 2001. E.g. British Museum nos 1922,0424.2906; 1888,1208.404 and 1888,1208.405. In addition, but less pertinent to the present discussion, the Graeco-Bactrians struck several coin types with the effigy of Helios haloed by solar rays (cf. *supra* fn. 32).

<sup>42</sup> E.g. the "Cologne cameo" (Smith 2021: fig. 8), or the bronze as issued by Tiberius (22-30 CE).

<sup>43</sup> Bronze coins minted in Seleucia (e.g. British Museum no. OR.8793; Sellwood 1980: 260). I would like to thank Fabrizio Sinisi for having brought this to my attention.

<sup>44</sup> *Infra* note 80. A rather peculiar, and unique, gold coin kept in a private collection and said to have been found in Mathura, published in an exhibition catalogue in 2003 (Bopearachchi, Landes, Sachs 2003: no. 178), shows a king wearing a radiate crown surmounted and adorned by pearls. In Asia, the only pre-Hellenistic headdress with uprights topped by pearls (formally dissimilar to the radiate Chorasmian crowns) appears on coins believed to have been struck in about 380 BCE by Tiribazos, Persian satrap of Lydia, where a jewelled coronet adorns the bearded head of a god, possibly Ahura-Mazda (see Minardi in Betts et al. 2016 with references). Incidentally, in Hellenized Etruria a series of 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE plaquettes, plausibly from a single workshop, are shaped in the form of *korai* wearing crowns with vertical leaves topped by pearls (Cristofani, Martelli 1983: 190-191; as well as on earrings, *ibid.*, 165). Also, in some Greek painted vase depictions of Dionysos, the god's crown is actually made of vertical triangular (ivy) leaves topped by pearls (see e.g. the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE oinochoe kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 25.190).

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. the drachm published and discussed in Glenn 2014: figs 9-10.

mismatic portraits a braid with the same kind of finials, which may have been meant as a substitute for an otherwise missing diadem.<sup>45</sup>

This brief excursus with diachronic examples confirms what the crown itself already obviously expresses: formal elements and decorative features with a relation to Hellenistic royalty are also found in Chorasmia, in conformation with patterns of taste and behaviour of the upper class around the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (*infra* conclusions).

#### Type 5 (with blossomed flowers)

This crown decorated with a single row of large “rosettes” is suggestive of *coronae sutiles*:<sup>46</sup> it is ornamented with flowers, either real or manufactured, as seen in the painter’s mind and according to the painter’s intention. Crowns or diadems with real or precious artificial flowers have a long history and a wide diffusion throughout antiquity. We know such coronets mainly through their sculptural depictions; more rarely, excavated specimens have revealed crafted versions made with precious metal and stones. Examples of metal crowns decorated with “rosettes” were already used in Egypt as early as the Dynastic Period,<sup>47</sup> and, at least in sculpture, we still find them employed in the country under Roman rule.<sup>48</sup> In Assyria the discovery of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Tomb II of Nimrud brought to light a gold crown made of a single band of metal with ninety-six rosettes organized in three rows.<sup>49</sup> Such crowns were also quite popular in Cyprus, where Pharaonic art was a great source of inspiration during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (i.e. in the Achaemenid period), as shown by statuary.<sup>50</sup> Moving East, in the Scythian area, the “Litoi” burial mound (Kirovgrad, Ukraine) contained an assemblage that included a diadem “consisting of three interwoven chains fastened together with nine rosettes” of “Urartian or Syrian origin” (Tunkina 2007). The Hermitage holds a gold diadem decorated with rosettes and a frontal gryphon protome that came from the Third Kelermes barrow and is also assumed to be of Caucasian manufacture.<sup>51</sup> A gold diadem with “gold-leaf floral plaques on a gold band” was also found at the Maikop barrow and assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>52</sup>

These examples showed that the basic type of crown with flowers applied to a band, with variants in the number and disposition of floral elements, was already widespread in the Mediterranean, Egyptian, and Near Eastern areas before Hellenistic

<sup>46</sup> Made of real leaves and flowers. On the classical sources on crowns, see Peck 1898; Breglia 1959.

<sup>47</sup> Dunham 1946; Aldred 1971, e.g. pls 39 and 61, and in particular see pl. 131, which illustrates the coronet of queen Tausret/Twosre, last ruler of the XIX Dynasty, made of a circle of a thick gold sheet attached to ornaments in the form of flowers; it is kept in the Cairo Museum. This type of coronet with gold flowers is also attested in Nubia centuries later (Napatan Period, reign of Talakhmani 435-431 BCE), as illustrated by the specimen kept in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, accession number 20.314.

<sup>48</sup> E.g. the basalt head of a man with a rosette diadem kept in the Brooklyn Museum (Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 55.120) dated 30 BCE to 14 CE.

<sup>49</sup> Hussein 2016: 14, pl. 37. The crown discovered in Tomb III has similar features with added complexity (*ibid.*, pl. 129-132). Cf. Assyrian ivories depicting female heads wearing a diadem with a single row of rosettes and other lost inlaid features (e.g. British Museum nos 118234 and 118233).

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Hermary, Mertens 2015 cat. nos 32, 36, 38, 94, 106 and 198.

<sup>51</sup> Alekseev 2012: 102-105. Cf. wall paintings from the Painted House of Gordion (c. 500 BCE) with two female figures wearing crowns with a series of griffin heads (Dusinberre 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Penn Museum object no. 30-33-6.



times. Later, the diffusion of another and more fashionable type of diadem, the wreath, took place. As in the case of the “myrtle wreath” of queen Meda from Vergina, this was again decorated with flowers (and leaves) although characterized by a design of greater complexity (Galanakis 2011: fig. 129). However, simpler crowns/diadems, often adorned with applied flowers, continued to be used at the same time in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE.<sup>53</sup> In Central Asia, the gold crown of a noble woman buried in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in Site 6 of Tillya Tepe may be included in our typology of “floral diadems.” Its headband, from which the upright elements of the crown (i.e. trees and flowers with some supplementary zoomorphic features) depart, is basically one gold headband decorated with a row of applied flowers with the addition of pendants.<sup>54</sup> At Kuh-e Kwaja in Sistan, the remains of a well-known wall painting depicting a royal couple, of debated chronology spanning from the Arsacid to the Sasanian periods,<sup>55</sup> feature a female figure with headgear prominently decorated by a frontal, central flower with four blue coloured petals.

With regard to the Chorasmian painted floral diadem from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, if we look at the two slightly different frontally-depicted blossoms, we immediately notice that these elements are comparable to, and derived from, the motif of the tiered calyces, with or without flowers, with lanceolate foliage of Hellenistic origin although simplified in their design.<sup>56</sup> This iconographic resemblance has already been noticed and explained with respect to another wall painting fragment from Akchakhan-kala, that may represent a horse phalera and has similar ornamentation (Minardi, Betts, Khozhaniyazov 2020: 85, fig. 20). In this latter case, the painting may have depicted an almost two-dimensional metal part of a horse’s harness (we may imagine that it was inspired by a repoussé object). However, the flowers of the Fravashi’s crown would have been, or at least intended to be, three-dimensional, although they have ended up being flat. The painter’s inspiration was more conceptual and based on formal artistic elements than visually naturalistic: in his repertoire he had models that he

<sup>53</sup> E.g. the “hieratic” diadem of Phillip II (Galanakis 2011: fig. 33). Diadems with flowers continued to be manufactured alongside wreaths (e.g. c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE possibly Etruscan diadems; De Puma 2013: 257); some Etruscan Hellenistic wreaths, attesting a great variety of types, are characterized by the presence of a main frontal floral feature (e.g. *ibidem*; in this case, due to their fragility, they might have been funerary items; see also the series of 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Etruscan crowns published in Cristofani, Martelli 1983: 217-221 and 206, which are hybrids of proper crowns and Hellenistic wreaths). Cf. a coin of Thasos with bearded head of Dionysos (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) wearing an ivy-wreath prominently featuring a frontal flower. See also the laureate head of the emperor Claudius kept in the Louvre (inventory no. MNC 1275/Ma 1226), and the diadem with flowers worn by a Julio-Claudian archaizing marble head of Athena kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Picón et al. 2007: no. 408).

<sup>54</sup> “Twenty hand-cut six-petaled gold rosettes:” Sarianidi 1985: figs 13-15; p. 254. The loops on the back of the crown show that it was fastened around the head by a fillet.

<sup>55</sup> Spanning from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE; on this issue, see the recent Callieri 2021 with references.

<sup>56</sup> Regarding Hellenistic rosettes, pentafoliate blossoms and leaf calyx medallions and their precursors in painting, see Pfrommer 1993: 31-35 and 40-43 with references; *ibidem* see, e.g., flower type 46. For an early Hellenistic example in a mosaic from Aegae (Vergina), see Galanakis 2011: 164, fig. 182. Such decorative elements were often used in precious metal bowls and plates (*ibidem, passim*). A Hellenistic silver bowl with a Parthian inscription and decorated with a leaf calyx medallion was found, together with two other silver specimens inscribed in Chorasmian, at Isakovka, Perm, in a 3<sup>rd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE burial (Livshits 2003 with references). Similar rosettes have also been found in Central Asia, for instance at Tillya Tepe (Sarianidi 1985: pl. 19). Such shapes were commonly used as lotuses in the art of the Gandharan area (see typology in Faccenna, Filigenzi 2007).

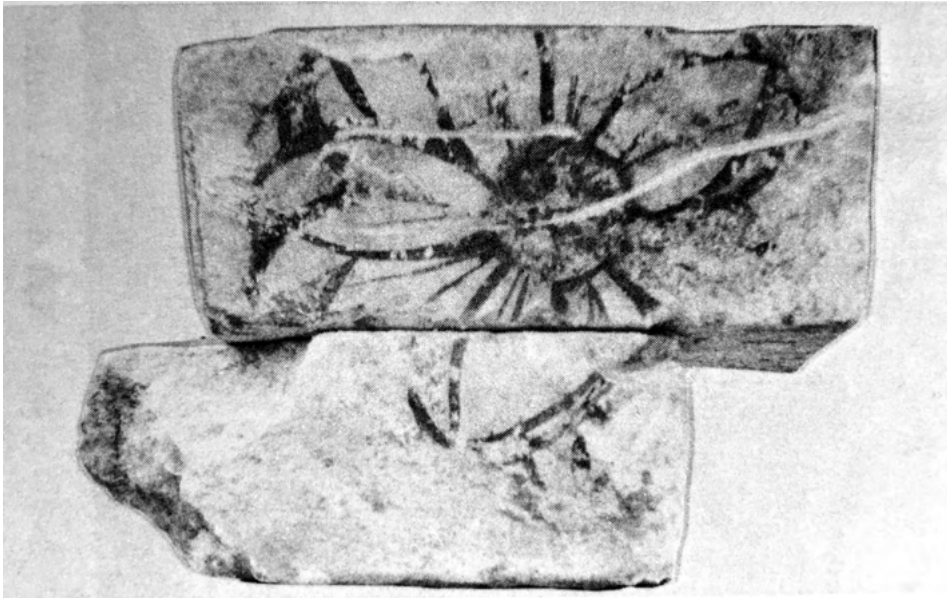


Fig. 13 - Surkh Kotal. Painted flower. After Schlumberger et al. 1983: pl. 13, fig. 32.

quickly applied as he saw fit.<sup>57</sup> A painted “rosette,” quite similar to the asymmetrical left one of the two Chorasmian open flowers, was used at Surkh Kotal to decorate the platform of Temple A (Fig. 13). The fact that the artist based his work on a repertoire is likewise suggested by the floral specimen located on the front of the figure’s head depicted in profile: it is safe to assume that it was intended as a lateral rendering of the same flowers in bloom attached to the crown; instead, owing to its schematic partition lines, it looks rather unusual. Its structure is more like a calyx with an emerging floral bud—comparable to some lotuses of Gandhara and also of Surkh Kotal<sup>58</sup>—than that of an open blossom.

The type of flower seen on this currently unique crown might have been intended as a lotus, or a narcissus, or even a sunflower, but it is not likely that it was meant to be a rose. This becomes more evident if we compare it, first, with the rosebud of crown Type 2 and, second, with a proper rosette in the same corpus of wall

<sup>57</sup> The calyces of the two frontally depicted flowers are cursively distinguished from the flower petals themselves: in one case, on the right, a circle delimits the first tier of elements, while in the other, the circle is absent and the tiered petals are less symmetrically arranged. This might indicate that the painter quickly added these elements to complete a previously prepared framework. This is also indicated by the preparation lines (a kind of “sinopia”) not only attested in this Fravashi (visible in the relative figures) but also in other paintings at the site: it is evident that at Akchakhan-akala a number of artists worked under supervision in teams with specific tasks (already noticed and argued in Minardi 2018: 108-113).

<sup>58</sup> Similar but not matching examples may be observed in the merlon with (intertwined) floral buds (Schlumberger, Le Berre, Fussman 1983: pl. 58, fig. 178). Sculpted in bas-relief in the merlons of Surkh Kotal are an array of phytomorphic ornamentations (*ibid.*: pl. 56, figs 164-166; pl. 57, figs 174-175; the latter is typologically close to the Chorasmian paintings; pl. 58, figs 177-178 and 181, that include palmettes still absent at Akchakhan-kala). For the Gandharan types, see Faccenna, Filigenzi 2007.

paintings of Akchakhan-kala, which is quite similar to Western models.<sup>59</sup> Its stylization does not allow further assumptions. What is clear is that, while the typology of the floral crown itself is ancient, this feature may be added to the Eastern Hellenistic-derived elements that were in the repertoire of the artists working in Chorasmia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and had apparently been developed earlier in Central Asia.

#### Type 6 (with small frontal curl)

The type is attested on a very partially preserved wall painting fragment and not much can be said about it. The crown of 6D had a solid-red coloured headband and some additional features above it, of which remain merely a small curl (or filament with pearl) with traces of another red surmounting part. It could have been a flower.

#### Type 7 (with vertical leaf-shaped feature on the side)

This was possibly a crown made up of a headband topped by vertically positioned red elements. Unfortunately, the frontal top part of the figure's head is completely missing and only one of these red elements remains: it might be a lanceolate leaf. In this case, the crown might be compared with Classical and Hellenistic coronets and wreaths with vertically-placed leaves, although it does not exactly match them visually.<sup>60</sup> In Central Asia, in Hellenised Bactriana, a similar type characterized by a more highly developed ivy wreath is attested by some coins struck under Agathocles (c. 190-180 BCE).<sup>61</sup> This is just an example that highlights the iconographic diffusion of similar formal elements in Asia in the Seleucid and Graeco-Bactrian periods (in this case, numismatics helps to supply visual elements in the dearth of archaeological data).

#### Addendum (diadem with seated feline)

The “crouched griffin” type of painted headdress, already published from Akchakhan-kala, is worthy of brief reconsideration.<sup>62</sup> This type of diadem consists of a circlet decorated by roundels (jewels), fastened around the head by either a red or a

<sup>59</sup> Kidd, Betts 2010: fig. 13. Cf. pebble mosaic with central rosette discovered in the Palace of Ai Khanoum, bath of Block IV (Bernard 1976: fig. 4). The Akchakhan-kala eight-petal rosette is painted with tones of red: on the use of this technique and its meaning, see Minardi 2018: 110-115.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. a red-figure fragment kept in the San Antonio Museum of Art (86.134.187); Athena in the “owls” coin series has a helmet also decorated with vertical olive tree leaves, and this series circulated and was imitated in Bactriana (Bopearachchi 1996); young Dionysos in Greek numismatic emissions (as for instance in the numismatics issue of Metapontum, 5<sup>th</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century BCE: meander diadem with vertical pattern of ivy leaves; Pantikapaion, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE: ivy-wreath with central flower, British Museum no. 1896,0601.30; Thasos, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE: plain diadem and ivy wreath, British Museum no. 1898,0602.121). See also the eleven gold rhomboid appliquéés found in the Kocherinovo Tumulus (Mazarov 1998: 113, no. 29), which were possibly pieces of a burial wreath, “the base of which was made of a material that has decomposed.”

<sup>61</sup> E.g. British Museum no. 10C.15. Cf. *supra* fn. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Kidd, Betts 2010: 660-666, fig. 9; Betts et al. 2015: fig. 7. Two fragments (a third fragmentary bust wearing the same headdress is still unpublished: KY06 1004 28) only preserves the animal's white body; the third one preserves part of the same type of body with the addition of the head (here Fig. 14).



Fig. 14 - Akchakhan-kala. Detail of the feline's head from the headgear of a "portrait" (fragment KY06 001). ©KAE.

white fillet (when preserved), surmounted by a white animal figure. The beast on the top, whose head sticks out like a protome from the headdress, has a body placed perfectly within the contours of the red-coloured, triangular-shaped upper part of the diadem. The silhouette of its white body with tail actually corresponds to the curvilinear upper part of the open crown it surmounts. The animal, seated on its hind paws, apparently without horns or any other elements that would allow us to define it as a griffin, is slender, bears evident whiskers, and has an elongated neck, short neck fur, a long slim tail, and a round "bald" head (Fig. 14). Iconographically speaking, it is formally closer to a Hellenistic panther than anything else;<sup>63</sup> this is shown, for instance, by the feline depicted on a Bactrian (Yuezhi)<sup>64</sup> fabric discovered at Noin Ula (Fig. 15), and by feline figures depicted on a bronze plaque excavated at Takht-i Sangin.<sup>65</sup> The simulacrum of a "panther" from Yuezhi Bactriana clearly had a high symbolic association with royalty: it stands over a basement shaped like an altar topping a wine filter used in a royal ceremony that is additionally wreathed (even the cup from which the main figure in front of it is drinking has a diadem).<sup>66</sup> In this case, the connection with Dionysiac cults, that may have originated from the possible identification of the ceremonial drink as wine and from the presence of a "panther," remains

<sup>63</sup> Cf. e.g. the Pella mosaic with Dionysos riding the panther. On the depictions of Dionysos' "panthers" and their taxonomy, see Manassero 2005: 103; Bottos 2018 with references.

<sup>64</sup> As argued by Yatsenko 2012; on the interpretation of such fabrics and relevant literature see also Sinisi 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Polos'mak 2015 (figs 6 and 13 reproduced here in Fig. 15); Litvinskij, Pićikjan 1992. Not to mention the similarity of these examples with the seated lions on capitals of the Mauryan period and with Gandharan lions (see, for instance, the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE lions of Saidu Sharif I specimens published in Oliveri 2022: figs 47-49).

<sup>66</sup> The wreath was designed as seen from above for maximum legibility while it was clearly meant to crown both the filter and the simulacrum.



Fig. 15 - Noin Ula. Details of embroidery with panther simulacrum. After Polos'mak 2015: figs 6, left; and 13, right.

speculative. Even if this is so, in this context, it would be in any case an element to be placed semantically in relation with royalty. In this regard, an association of the Chorasmian “panther” with Dionysos, or of the radiate crown with Helios or Mithra, would be even less justified.<sup>67</sup> It is equally as speculative, but nonetheless as suggestive, to consider the radiate crown as a sign of the Fravashis’ “splendour” (cf. *Yt.* XIII, 45: “who fight in battles surrounded by light”),<sup>68</sup> or to consider it to be a reference to the *xwarnah* that they are said to bestow (*Yt.* XIII, 24; 41): there are only a few “solar” crowns at Akchakhan-kala and this seems not to be one. What is certain is that the Akchakhan-kala diadems are all symbols of nobility, or of royal power, and this was quite probably the only consideration taken into account by the artists who deployed their iconographic knowledge and skills to include various regalia as subjects in their wall paintings.

<sup>67</sup> The fact that the iconography chosen was that of a Hellenistic panther does not mean that this was actually a *Panthera pardus*. Felines are not auspicious Zoroastrian animals, but they were a symbol of royalty: cf. the lions’ heads on Tishtrya’s *kandys* (which are stylistically different, as for instance in the shape of the eyes, teeth, gums and other features, because they represent a stylized decoration of Achaemenid derivation and not an actual animal; see Minardi 2020b).

<sup>68</sup> English translation by Malandra 2018; cf. Darmesteter 1833: “who struggle in the fights for victory in garments of light.” See also a different translation offered in French by Lecoq (2016: 491-492): “qui combattent pour les victoires auréolées de lumières,” who considers the epithet relative to the victories, and who comments: “les fravašis ne semblent pas particulièrement liées à l’élément lumineux.”

OTHER ELEMENTS THAT COULD BE USED FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE BUSTS  
AS FRAVASHIS

We may be able to propose some additions in favour of the argument that sees the framed busts in profile, which are an organic part of the early-Zoroastrian sacred imagery of the royal centre of Akchakhan-kala, as the multitude of the Fravashis. Apart from the elements already discussed in other papers, and briefly mentioned in the introduction above (i.e. their number, which is literally a multitude; their being apparently all female characters; their perhaps wearing armour; their matching characteristics of red-coloured ears and mouth and big eyes, which differ from the other known anthropomorphic images at the site and which find a parallel in *Yt.* XIII, 29;<sup>69</sup> and their explicit transfiguration visualized in painting, that occurred only after the delivery of horses), we would like to add that their being lined up in rows on the walls of the narrow corridor of the Central Building, which is at least 6 m high, evokes another passage of *Yt.* XIII.73 that Lecoq (2016: 499) translated and commented on as follows: “‘Elles sont disposées’: ou ‘elles se préparent, elles sont prêtes’; ‘tranquillement assises’: lorsqu’elles sont immobiles, au repos, dans l’attente d’un sacrifice.”<sup>70</sup> This may be related to the fact that the Chorasmian busts are concretely displayed as coming to earth at the end of a section of a pertinent visual program that showed them after a ceremonial procession with horses and grooms, and before their own transfiguration and materialization as fully developed standing figures (with horses). Also, again in their Avestan hymn (*Yt.* XIII.147 and 156), the Fravashis are invited to sojourn in the supplicant’s house, where they are said to be welcomed and invited to “move freely.”

Furthermore, the Akchakhan-kala personages, although always displaying torques, red-coloured ears, earrings etc., do not always wear diadems (Yagodin et al. 2009: figs 6-8). In the Avesta the Fravashis, because they mirror society, are said to be differentiated in classes (e.g. *Yt.* XIII, 21; 66).<sup>71</sup> Could this lack of diadems on some of their heads signify this awareness? In this case our painted busts ought then to be understood as the Fravashis of all of the Chorasmian people (priests, cattle-breeders, artisans etc.), and not solely of the royal house (warriors). We note that the only full-figure personages “descended on earth” currently discovered in the Northern corridor wear only the most prominent type of headgear with bird “protomai” (for an example, cf. Fig. 2, background layer).

In their Avestan hymn, the Fravashis are held responsible for the setting off of three great natural cycles: those of the waters, the vegetation, and the various heavenly

<sup>69</sup> The Fravashis are said to be “les puissantes qui demeurent silencieuses, aux beaux yeux, au regard énergétique, à l’ouïe fine” (French translation by Lecoq 2016); cf. English translation by Malandra 2018: “[who] are powerful, abide in silence, have good eyes, are keen-eyed, attentive, are very patient (...).”

<sup>70</sup> Cf. English translation by Malandra 2018: “They are prepared for that and they are prepared for even more, sitting quietly the good, strong, beneficent Frawaršis of the righteous (...).” On this passage see also Kellens 2001; 2016: 148 (“Dire que les Frauuaši “se sont tenues droites” équivaut à dire qu’elles ont officié rituellement (...).”

<sup>71</sup> Lecoq 2016: 195-205. See also Pirart 2012: 206-207 (“la relation entretenue avec les individus dont elles sont les âmes ne se fait que de façon sociale: nul homme n’invoque sa propre Fravrti, mais chacun s’adresse à leur troupe, mêmes si celles des ancêtres illustres de la communauté sont énumérées une à une avec soin”).

bodies (Kellens 2001). Besides being emblems of power or status, crowns with animals and plant features may also indicate a connection with the animal and plant worlds. With this logic in mind, the radiate crown might be connected with astral bodies in general. On the other hand, the distinctive connection of the Fravashis with the waters seems more explicit: their torques are *all* characterized by a finial shaped like the head of a *ketos* (a marine dragon borrowed from Greek art). Considering the ecosystem of the region, and its agriculture based on canalisation works, this visually significant element might indicate a specific local connection with the life-giving water of the River Amu/Oxus.<sup>72</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

A variety of crowns (especially in the form of wreaths or chaplets) with specific symbolic values were consistently used in the Greek and Graeco-Roman worlds: by priests during cultic activities, in rites of passage, in funerary rituals (and the cult of the dead), as votive offerings, as attributes of divinities, as civic and military decorations, as status symbols (also bestowed on rulers), and as agonistic rewards.<sup>73</sup> Crowns, in other words, were tokens of honour that became, in association with status, royalty, legitimacy, and thus the ancestors' cult, a symbol of power.<sup>74</sup> In Achaemenid Persia, the king of kings used to wear, and to be depicted as wearing, a crenelated crown, and sources described his tiara, the *kyrbasia*, as being fastened by a fillet. Very likely the same fillet then became the diadem par excellence in the Hellenistic world; it was adopted by Alexander and later was emblematic of royalty among his generals and successors, and it also carried this significance among the Hellenised elites of Asia (so characteristic that it was even used as an “ethnic” attribute for the Yavanas in the arts of India, as shown in the reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi).

Hence, crowns always had a ceremonial, religious, and symbolic value. This is truer for Akchakhan-kala when we take into account the fact that the depiction of one of its colossal Avestan deities, Srōsh/Sraosha, displays a prominent, and thus significant, dichromatic mural crown.<sup>75</sup> In the case of this *yazata*, it has been already argued that this mural crown, fashioned after Western models, was used to establish an immediate semantic connection between the god and his function as “protector,” as guardian of the last tier of the night, and/or to symbolize a relationship with his

<sup>72</sup> “In the dearth of written sources that afflict the region, we find the mention in Bīrūnī’s Chronology of the Wakhsh-angām, the festival to Wakhsh ‘the angel who has to watch over the water and especially over the river Jayhūn (i.e., the Wakhsh-Oxus, the Amu-darya)’, solemnized on day 10, i.e., *Ābān* (‘Waters’), of the month Spandarmad, which is the last month of the Zoroastrian year” (Grenet and Minardi 2022: 210). On the Fravashis and rain waters: *ibidem* with literature. According to Kellens (2001: 473) in the Avesta, the Fravashis “conformément au plan agencé d’Ahura Mazda, elles ont montré aux eaux, leur lit – leur ‘chemin’ (paṅtā-/paṅθ-) – ou leur bassin – leur ‘emplacement’ (yaona-) – respectif, les ont dotées de leur débit saisonnier et ont mis leur flot en mouvement.” On the Hellenistic modelled clay sculpture of *ketos* from the site and its place among the site imagery: Minardi 2016 with references; 2018.

<sup>73</sup> As summarized in Breglia 1959.

<sup>74</sup> On the Graeco-Roman symbology of crowns, see Bergmann 1998.

<sup>75</sup> Not a crenelated crown, but a proper *corona muralis* with battlements. This element is discussed in detail by Minardi in Betts et al. 2016: 132-133; Minardi 2018; 2020.

role of psychopomp,<sup>76</sup> or in reference to the “high abode endowed with its own light” that Srōsh is supposed to possess in heaven, according to the Avesta (Grenet, Minardi 2021).

At Akchakhan-kala we still have relatively few depictions of kings: currently only a royal crown has survived among the fragments belonging to the decoration of a second colossal god’s dress. There, on the central band of the deity’s vest illustrating scenes from an Avestan ritual, an enthroned king (or a series of kings) wears a diadem that is quite different from all those worn by other heavenly personages at the site, and that we found later on some rare Chorasmian coins.<sup>77</sup> The deity himself wears what looks like a bejewelled tiara, perhaps of Parthian tradition (at the moment, this is the sole diadem of the corpus that might be labelled as “Parthian”). Kings, as far as we have seen to date in the exploration of Akchakhan-kala, seem not to have been central to the painted representations of the Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex. Was their power manifested through their religious beliefs? It is clear that the preliminary designation given to the “Ceremonial Complex,” that is rather than “palace,” could indeed be the correct one.

At present, not one the Akchakhan-kala Fravashis wears a mural crown, nor the above-mentioned royal diadem or bejewelled tiara. It may be that in its imagery, a fine distinction was made in the employment of crowns between symbolism and realism: were the Fravashis wearing “fantastic crowns,” that had been imagined, composed, and modelled after exotic specimens for specific representational purposes? Srōsh’s mural crown might fall into this category.<sup>78</sup> Be that as it may, it is surprising to witness the great variety of diadems with bands/crowns fastened by fillets worn by the framed figures painted on the walls of the corridor of the Central Building. The seven types of headdresses described above constitute an addition to the zoomorphic diadems discovered and published before 2015, which had already been examined with a particular focus on their possible steppe or Western Asiatic (allegedly Parthian) legacy (Kidd, Betts 2010: 657-666), and to a cluster of other busts without any diadems (Yagodin et al. 2009). In 2018 I argued that, because of Chorasmia’s unique history, the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE art of Akchakhan-kala bears witness to a local artistic legacy. This legacy had already been formed in terms of iconography, style, and techniques, thanks to an original ancient Persian contribution and to the inputs of more recent, post-Achaemenid, ideas, but it was still receiving fresh external stimuli from the Eastern-Hellenistic milieu contemporary to it, in an ongoing process of adoption and assimilation that ultimately led to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE “Kushan” art of Toprak-kala.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Minardi 2018: 101-102, with note 56 (a topic that will be further explored in a forthcoming paper).

<sup>77</sup> On this Chorasmian royal crown, and the probable Parthian influence on this insignia of power, see Sinisi 2018; Minardi 2018. On the Avestan ritual depicted, see Grenet, Minardi 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Oddly, considering the contacts with, and the iconographies borrowed from, the Eastern-Hellenistic koine reworked at Akchakhan-kala, there are still no traces of wreaths or, for chronological reasons, of halos. We found halos only a century later in the imagery of the ensuing, ex-novo-built royal centre of Toprak-kala (as already remarked in Minardi 2018 with references). We note that wreaths seem also to be absent in the imagery of Khalchayan (while, for instance, modelled and painted festoons with *putti* are employed), but a “royal diadem” that looks like a wreath is seen in a fabric from Noin Ula (*supra*). Huvishka added a wreath to his diadems on numismatic portraits; otherwise, he wore only a double-crossed wreath with a central medallion.

<sup>79</sup> Or better: “the art of Bactriana under Kushan rule.” Argument developed in Minardi 2018; 2020a; 2020b.



This seems to have been confirmed by the typology of crowns presented here, whose iconography, although original in variation and displaying some artistic inventiveness, was for the most part already acknowledged and employed in Hellenistic and Eastern-Hellenistic environments, or in areas affected by this artistic culture. Their symbolic meaning and origin have hopefully been clarified. Furthermore, we have to note that often the Chorasmian diadems find their match in several crowns illustrated centuries later, in archaeological material from Sogdiana and Bactriana for instance; they are formally closer to those late specimens than to some of their models and forerunners.<sup>80</sup> Why is this? An irradiation of motifs from the Oxus delta spreading through Central Asia and India since Kushan times is obviously very unlikely. More logically, such formal elements (and the objects from which they drew their inspiration) must have also existed elsewhere. The observable results of this phenomenon of iconographic transmission actually enhance the argument that the issue is not that the data do not exist but rather that we are missing evidence: this is essentially due to a kindred artistic background; such transmission was based, and not only in Chorasmia, on some shared heritage that had received and stratified inputs from the elites and cultures of past conquerors, as well thanks to exchanges between cultures, commerce and so on. We are still ignorant of much regarding the processes behind this issue because we lack data, especially in terms of paintings.

The artists at work at Akchakhan-kala must have had forerunners. They were certainly artistically knowledgeable, in communication with their neighbours, and chose their motifs as they saw fit from the iconographic patrimony of which they were aware. This included iconographic features stratified in different cultural horizons and facies. For instance, the image of the Chorasmian Parōdarsh (the most ancient depiction known so far of a Zoroastrian “bird-priest”) was derived—through a process of transmission and adoption that is yet to be fully understood—from that of a “Western” symbol, the siren/harpy, and had a certain degree of consciousness of its quite ancient iconographic association with the rooster. Thus, this significant exotic figure was used, through adoption and adaptation, to represent something that may have been original and which was required locally and had characteristics dictated by religious tenets. Crowns, likewise, which already had a meaningful array of symbolic values before the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, were chosen by the Akchakhan-kala artists to characterize most of the figures that we think were meant to represent the multitude of the Fravashis. Crowns were not only a symbol of royal power but, especially in the West, were also meaningful in terms of the process of the “parificazione dei morti ad esseri soprannaturali come gli eroi” that transferred their usage to funerary cults.<sup>81</sup> A concept that

<sup>80</sup> As for instance in the case of the radiate crown topped with pearls: cf. e.g. the crown of the terracotta “Herakles” from Kara-Pichok (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE; Grenet 2002: pl. 3); the crown worn by a noble in a wall painting from Dilberjin (see Kruglikova 1977: fig. 10); the radiate crown worn by a queen on a 4<sup>th</sup> century CE seal bezel (British Museum no. 119999); a crowned noble on a ring stone of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE (Callieri 1997: cat. U.7 43); and some others worn by monarchs on Kidarite copper coins (e.g. <https://data1.geo.univie.ac.at/projects/dasantlitzdesfremden/coins/coin65%3Flanguage=en.html>; see also copper coins issued by the Kushanshah Peroz V – Schindel 2016: pl. 1). Cf. also the Bactrian seal of Kinghila with “lilies” crown (Callieri 2002), and the impression of the seal of Kadir (Göbl 1967: pl. 86). The same might be pondered for the “peaked tiaras” with fluttering strings of the kings of Pāradān (c. 125-300 CE; Tandon 2012), which are not dissimilar to one of the headgears of choice of king Kanishka (Tandon 2010: fig. 1a).

<sup>81</sup> Breglia 1959. The radiate crown of Augustus was a posthumous honour bestowed on him as *divus*.

hints at the use of crowns for battle honours and in rites of passage, that could have been known by the artists working at Akchakhan-kala and embraced for their Fravas-his because of a convergence of concepts. The more we study the paintings of Akchakhan-kala, the more it becomes clear that it was the theatre of operations of a well-organized and well-directed workshop in which artists and others worked under royal patronage, collaborating with the clergy. In our opinion, at Akchakhan-kala there is a deep meaning even in symbolic choices that may appear to be secondary or merely decorative.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> This is shown not only by art-historical and archaeological considerations but also by the clear use of “sinopias,” moulds, and cartoons (for details, see Minardi et al. 2018; Minardi 2018).

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