



Intoxicated Barbarian King

by Alessandro Bianchi

Gigaku Mask [No. 47] of *Suiko-ō* ["Intoxicated Barbarian King"]

Japan, 8th century CE

Carved Paulownia wood, with white undercoating, polychrome pigments, gold leaf, and ink drawing; adhered horse hair

H. 37.0 × W. 22.6 × D. 29.4 cm

Imperial Household Agency, Shōsōin Repository, South Section 1, Nara, Japan

Photograph © Shosin Repository.



The histrionic character represented in this 8th-century mask is identified as *Suiko-ō* 酔胡王, or an “intoxicated (*sui* 酔) barbarian (*ko* 胡) king (*ō* 王).” The word *barbarian* is used here to translate the meaning of the logogram 胡 (Chinese *hu*, Japanese *ko*). In Chinese this was used to identify different ethnic groups—including the Sogdians—coming from territories to the west of China, in what is now Central Asia, or even farther west, to Iran.

Made of Paulownia wood, this mask is decorated with polychrome pigments, and horse hair serves in a realistic rendering of the beard and mustache. The perforations corresponding to the positions of eyes and mouth indicate that this mask was not merely a decorative object. In all likelihood, it was a prop used in a kind of performance known as *gigaku* 伎楽, an early form of masked dance-theater believed to have been brought to Japan from China in the seventh century. During *gigaku* performances, actors playing different roles wore an array of different masks, many of which survive today in Japan.

Although little is known about the performance, in a passage from a 13th-century work on music, *Kyōkunshō* 教訓抄 [Annotated Teaching], there is a specific mention of a *gigaku* piece entitled *Suiko* 酔胡 [“Drunken Barbarians”], which features the title characters performing an inebriated dance.



FIG. 1 Funerary Figure of a Sogdian Horsegroom. Xi'an, China, Tang dynasty (618-907). Lead-glazed earthenware. National Museum of China, Beijing.

Photograph © National Museum of China.

The foreign origins of the *Suiko-ō* are here implied by his exaggerated facial features. These include an aquiline nose, elongated earlobes, prominent cheekbones, and deep-set eyes surmounted by lashed eyebrows. Furthermore, pierced earlobes were not a customary fashion in Japan, and it has been suggested that the shape of the ornate cap worn by the *Suiko-ō* shows similarities to headgears traditional in Central Asia or the Near East; **FIG. 1**.

Alessandro Bianchi. (Accessed Oct. 14, 2022). Intoxicated Barbarian King, The Sogdians, Influencers on the Silk Road. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Sackler. Reproduced for educational purposes only. Fair Use relied upon. Source: <https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/>]

Freer | Sackler
Smithsonian Institution



Smithsonian Institution

by Alessandro Bianchi

Explore other Sogdian objects



[Camel with Musicians](#)

[Camel with Musicians](#)

Alessandro Bianchi. (Accessed Oct. 14, 2022). Intoxicated Barbarian King, The Sogdians, Influencers on the Silk Road. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Sackler. Reproduced for educational purposes only. Fair Use relied upon. Source: <https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/>]

Freer | Sackler
Smithsonian Institution



Smithsonian Institution



[Xiudingsi Tile](https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/)

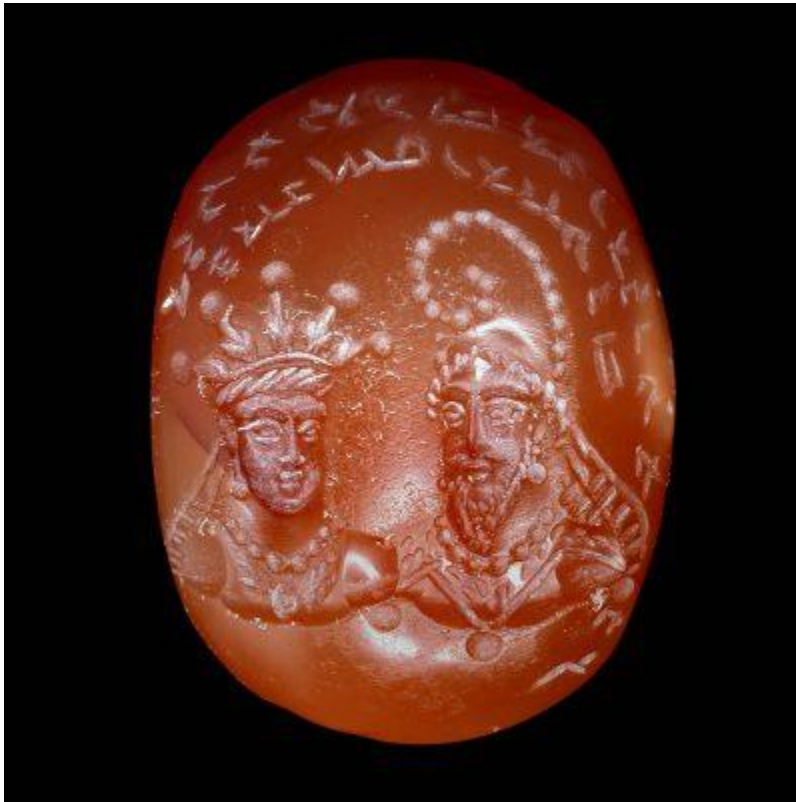
[Xiudingsi Tile](https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/)

Alessandro Bianchi. (Accessed Oct. 14, 2022). Intoxicated Barbarian King, The Sogdians, Influencers on the Silk Road. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Sackler. Reproduced for educational purposes only. Fair Use relied upon. Source: <https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/>]

Freer | Sackler
Smithsonian Institution



Smithsonian Institution



[Seal and Its Impression](https://sogdians.si.edu/suiko-o/)