



Lokapala figure

Date

c. 618-907 C.E.

Primary Maker

Unknown artist, Chinese

Medium

Red clay with remnants of pigment

Description

This figure depicts a Lokapala (Sanskrit for “Protector of the World”) or Tianwang, one of the Four Buddhist Heavenly Kings who are associated with the four cardinal directions. The figure displayed here is most likely to be Vaisravana, known as Kubera in Hinduism and Jambhala in Tibetan Buddhism. He is associated with the north, the protection of Buddhist law, and is the god of wealth. He is shown with a lion at his base, and would likely originally have held a mace, purse, or stupa (a mound-like Buddhist architectural form used for sacred purposes). Lokapalas came to China via the Silk Road from India, whose Buddhist traditions combined with Taoist burial practices leading to the production of figurines such as this for inclusion in tombs during the prosperous Tang dynasty. These figures of the Heavenly Kings protected the cardinal points of temples and burial sites, kept spirits in place, and warded off evil. Depictions of these guardians in ornate armor were found primarily in Central and Eastern Asia, while Indian and South Asian depictions usually

portrayed lokapalas as pacifist nature spirits. The figure’s avian headdress is a symbol of Vaisravana’s power, and highlights the ancient significance of the bird as a symbol of divinity, sunlight, and authority across Persian, Indian, and Chinese cultures during this period.

Dimensions

Overall: 22 1/2 × 7 1/2 × 4 in. (57.2 × 19.1 × 10.2 cm)