

8. A Pair of Painted Earthenware *Lokopala*

Heights: 71.0 & 69.0 cm. (28 & 27 1/8 in.)

Tang dynasty

8th century A.D.

Each robust figure stands with one leg resting on the head of a recumbent animal, one on a bullock and the other on a deer, each raised on an oval rockwork base. The figures both wear variations of fantastic phoenix helmets high on their heads. The bearded figure's helmet has a phoenix with wings spread and tail painted with overlapping feathers, the sides tightly furled, with elaborately painted feather borders on the brim. Although tight lipped, the guardian's beet-red face looks as if ready to burst, his eyes bulge as he prepares to stare down any intruders. The thick beard is neatly combed and curled, fanning out under his jutting chin. His high-ranking armor has a tabbed breastplate decorated with a brocade diaper pattern and intricately modeled dragon-head epaulets with projecting pearl-shaped wings on the shoulders. A reddish-brown rope with loops and fringed ties rides low on the waist above light blue pleats, all over a silken underskirt that appears to blow in the wind and is decorated with gamboling lions in front and a phoenix on the back. The companion guard wears more delicately painted armor. His phoenix helmet is close fitting with chain mail painted on the sides and flared flaps shading his muscular face. His teeth are bared in contrast to his tightlipped companion and the eyebrows, mustache and wispy beard are delineated by black, fine-line brushstrokes. The upper body armor is painted with faint floral motifs on a cream ground with fanged dragon-mask epaulets. A bright red-knotted cord further defines the breastplate. Tied low on the belly a thick brown rope loops at the hips above chain mail and neatly arranged green pleats. The silk underskirt falls in folds and is painted in front with a lion amid clouds and on the back a heraldic lion raised on its hind legs. Each figure wears pointed boots that appear soft and pliant below the floral-patterned leggings. The animals are well-modeled and quite naturalistic with some white spots remaining on the hide of the deer.



Tang tomb furnishings and entourages were fashioned for the elite to provide for resplendent funerals, ensure a sumptuous and safe afterlife, and maintain guardianship over the tomb. While the majority of paraphernalia was mundane in character, reflecting or replicating the props of the actual life that had been lost, images with an origin and underpinning in religious belief were also of significance. The efficacy of such Buddhist-inspired icons as the present figures was well-appreciated. The militant beings were enrolled as protectors against external evils as well as maliciousness from within the tomb; these extraordinary super-human beings, called *lokopala* or *tianwangyong*, shared with another distinctive pair, the pseudo-feline warriors known as *zhenmushou*, the hallowed role as protectors of the tomb.

The present type of figure is known by a foreign as well as Chinese name due to its non-Chinese origin. *Lokopala* is the Sanskrit term to designate the guardians of the four cardinal points of Buddhist belief. On his deathbed the Buddha is said to have summoned "...Indra and the Four *Lokapalas* to His couch, and enjoining on each a special share in the defense of the Church, in the evil times to come."¹ Often these figures, whom Alexander Soper described as the most widely-known supernatural figures in Buddhist legend, are presented in the act of subduing repulsive demons underfoot (figs. 1-4), a nod to the *naga* or snake demons of their Indian sources. Deer and bull, as present here, despite their docility and feeling of domesticity, reveal their true hearts and power by easily supporting the hefty figures dressed in flamboyant military garb, and the essential goodness of the deer and bull is expressed by their obliviousness to what sallies forth above them (figs. 5-6). The bull is also the vehicle of Manjusri, the god of wisdom in the Buddhist pantheon, and is a well-known sacred beast in India, while the deer has multiple associations for the Chinese both through Buddhism (the deer were present at Gautama's First Sermon at Bodhgaya) and Daoism (as mascots of immortals and foragers for

the sacred fungus of immortality), and the synonymy of the Chinese words for wealth and deer was also significant. Thus, while the guardians are fearsome to behold, their orientation on the side of good is revealed by these mounts.²

By the early Tang free-standing figures of *lokopala* guardians had become significant tomb requirements. They derived from sculpture of the pre-Tang period, reflected the fashion of military dress of their time, and manifested a quick progression from staid to more flamboyant moods and postures. A pair of guardians from a tomb dated to 668 indicates that the type had been well formulated already during the early Tang period and the deer and bull mounts in use (fig. 7), while the High Tang style, as exemplified in figures from dated tombs and collections, shows that a progression had occurred from the more purely military dress of prior figures to extravagantly embellished costumes extraneous to their martial duty. Nevertheless, the various paraphernalia not only added a wild and fashionable flair to the figures but also served as medals or badges of courage and insured that these figures would be the most dramatic of the funerary entourage. Their production also engaged decorators on a different level than that of the colorful *sancai*-glazed pottery figures that are more blatantly gorgeous. Here the subtlety of the painted designs on the clothing and the carefully brushed details even in areas hard to see by the casual observer reveal not only a level of quite advanced artistry but also how seriously such images were regarded, how real the spirit world and the afterlife were to the people of the Tang.

1. Alexander C. Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China, Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum XIX, New York, 1959, p. 233.

2. For the identification of these guardians as Dangkuan and Dangye see Wu Hung in Angela Howard, Li Song, Wu Hung, and Yang Hong, *Chinese Sculpture*, Yale University and the Foreign Language Press, New Haven and Beijing, 2006, p. 130.



Fig. 1: Painted earthenware *lokopala* on a demon, h. 68 cm., Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, after *Daily Life of Aristocrats in Tang China*, Hong Kong and Shaanxi, 1993, pl. 59a, p. 88.



Fig. 2: Detail of figure 1.



Fig. 3: Painted earthenware *lokopala* on a demon, h. 92 cm., Tang dynasty, from the tomb of Madame Song (d. A.D. 745), excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Xi'an, after Angela Howard, Li Song, Wu Hung, and Yang Hong, *Chinese Sculpture*, Yale University and the Foreign Language Press, New Haven and Beijing, 2006, no. 2.31, p. 132.



Fig. 4: Detail of figure 3.

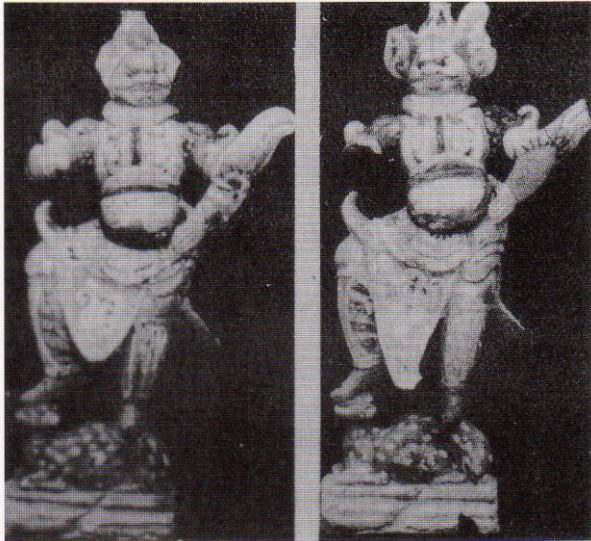


Fig. 5: Painted earthenware *lokopala* on deer mounts, h. 48 cm., early Tang dynasty, late 7th century A.D. , after *Kaogu yu wenwu*, 1990:1, fig. 2: 10-11, p. 67.



Fig. 6: Painted earthenware *lokopala* on bull mount, mid-Tang dynasty, early 8th century A.D., British Museum, after Margaret Medley, *Tang Pottery and Porcelain*, London, 1981, p. 61.



Fig. 7: Pair of earthenware *lokopala* on deer and bull mounts, early Tang dynasty, late 7th century A.D., from the tomb of Li Shuang (d. A.D. 668), after Mary Fong, "Antecedents of Sui-Tang Burial Practices in Shaanxi," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. LI, 3/4, 1991, fig. 36:A-B.