

Colour in Context: Status Indicators and Elite Dress in Pre-Islamic Central Asia

Colour in the archaeological record is a critical yet often understudied category of inquiry. In this paper, we explore how the use of colour in monumental art can be used to analyse cultural markers of status. The primary focus of this analysis is the colour on the costume of a group of bust figures in a late first millennium BCE painted gallery at the site of Akchakhan-kala, in ancient Khorezm, Uzbekistan. Analysis reveals that the selection of colours at Akchakhan-kala was influenced both by the availability of raw materials and by broader trends of colour usage throughout the Iranian and steppe worlds. A systematic examination of colour facilitates a more informed perspective on the differentiated status of these elites in pre-Islamic Central Asia. This paper provides an initial step to building a database of contextualized colours found throughout the region, as well as a foundation for colour studies in elite costume worn in ceremonial contexts in the pre-Islamic Iranian world.