

# Khitan Empire

916 - 1115 CE



**SILK ROAD**  
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

## THE EXHIBITION

Khitan originally meant "iron", which symbolized the Khitan people's tenacious spirit. In 628 CE, Khitan submitted to the Tang Dynasty, paying them tribute and taxes, but relations were always uneasy. In 916 CE, Yelu Abaoji unified the Khitan tribes and in 947 AD, the country was renamed Liao.

There are two rooms as part of this exhibition. Room One exhibits 26 mural paintings selected from 12 different Khitan mural tombs. Room Two shows the Princess of Chen tomb, displaying beautiful gold, jade and amber pieces. This is a sample of the 3,227 objects that were found in the tomb.

The Khitan Empire (called the Liao dynasty by the Chinese) was founded in 916CE when the northern Steppe nomads were united under the leadership of the Yula clan. They first turned their attention to wars of conquest against neighbouring states, either absorbing them into their growing empire or reducing them to vassal status.

There were also repeated conflicts with the Chinese to the South, leading to further territorial expansion that finally ended in 1004CE, when the Song dynasty sued for peace and were subject to crushing annual tributes.

Closer contact with the Chinese meant that elite also began to absorb some of their culture, for example for drinking tea. They also adopted the practice of tomb burial, in underground chambers, often decorated with murals. Although many of these tombs were subsequently looted of their 'treasures', the surviving murals offer a unique insight into their daily lives.

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## FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



### PLAYING POLO

Detail from a Tomb Mural in Liao Tomb No. 1 in Pijianggou, Fengshuishan Village, Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia

For a nomadic tribe, reliant for its military success on its skill in horseriding, polo was an idea recreational passtime for both horse and rider. It is interesting to see them using 'hocket sticks' rather than the mallet used in the moden game. For the rest, it looks the same.

### HIDE-AND-SEEK

Details for tomb mural in the Xuanhua Liao Tombs

This utterly enchanting scene shows children playing hide-and-seek amid every-day preparations in the kitchen. Note that the central parts of their heads is shaven – a typical Khitan hairstyle.



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## NO-RISKS INSURANCE FOR THE AFTER-LIFE

Detail from mural in Dongfengli Neighbourhood Tomb, Datong City, Shanxi, China

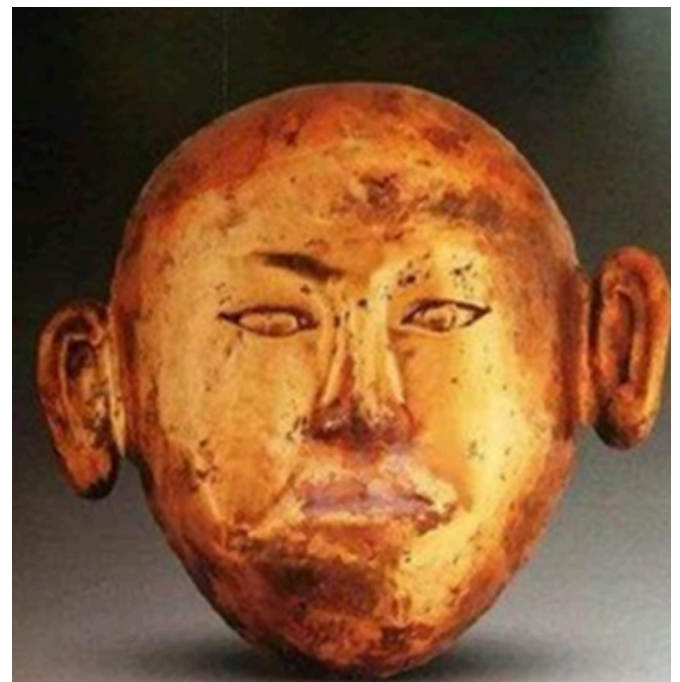
Behind the five attendants, the deceased has an interesting collection of auspicious items are depicted, including a deer, a crane with a red crown, a crawling yellow turtle, flowering peonies, and an axe standing on an orange lotus flower-shaped base, that is being carried by a green snake.

## GOLDEN FACE MASK OF THE PRINCESS OF CHEN

Inner Mongolia Museum, Hohhot, China.

Death masks are not a feature of Chinese burials and no gold Khitan death mask has ever been discovered. The ancients were very taboo about dying with eyes open, and the Khitan masks all have their eyes closed.

Yet the Princess and her consort have them open – why?



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## THREE GLASS OIL LAMPS

Inner Mongolia Museum, Hohhot, China.

Glass was extremely precious for the Khitan elites. These exquisite three glass oil lamps would have come all the way from Iran/Persia either directly or through 'tribute trade' with vassal states to the West, showing the vast extent of silk road exchange.



## FLOODING IN THE TOMB OF THE PRINCESS OF CHEN

In 12 August 2017, heavy rains started in the mountains above the tomb of the Princess of Chen and, ten days later, they poured through the buckled iron door protecting the tomb itself. The burial chamber was completely submerged under the water.

A reporter arriving that day saw workmen digging a trench to divert the water. Pumps had reduced the water-level inside the tomb to one metre. The local authorities have since established a high-level committee to ensure that nothing similar happens again.

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