

Politics and Religion: A Comparative Study of the Portrait of Roger II and Mogao Cave Mural

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Abstract: This paper explores the interplay between politics and religion in medieval art through a comparative study of the Portrait of Roger II and the Rebound Pipa Feitian mural from Dunhuang's Mogao Caves. The mosaic of Roger II, housed in the Church of St. Mary of the Admiral in Palermo, Italy, employs Byzantine iconography to depict the king's divine coronation, reinforcing his legitimacy through Christian theological symbolism. In contrast, the Feitian mural from Cave 112 at Dunhuang Mogao Cave reflects the integration of Buddhist cosmology with political authority, reflecting the Tang Dynasty's endorsement of cultural diversity as a means of consolidating power. Despite their distinct cultural contexts, both artworks demonstrate the pervasive function of religious imagery in affirming rulership and shaping collective identity. By exploring the artistic, spiritual, and political dimensions of these masterpieces, this paper underscores the universal significance of sacred visual culture as a tool for governance and cultural cohesion across civilizations.

Keywords: Buddhist art, Byzantine, Dunhuang, theocracy

1. Introduction

Art has long served as a medium for legitimizing political power, intertwining religious iconography with the assertion of authority. The Portrait of Roger II and the Rebound Pipa Feitian mural from Dunhuang's Mogao Caves exemplify this relationship, offering insights into how rulers utilized visual culture to reinforce their sovereignty. While the Norman king Roger II employed Byzantine artistic traditions to assert divine kingship, the Feitian murals reflect the Tang Dynasty's strategy of cultural synthesis to consolidate political and religious influence along the Silk Road. By comparing these two artworks, this study examines the intersections of art, politics, and religion in distinct historical and geographical contexts.

2. Case Study: Portrait of Roger II

The Portrait of Roger II is a mosaic work that depicts the scene of Roger II accepting his crown from Christ in his coronation (fig. 1). The mosaic dates back to the year of 1163 and it is currently in the Church of St. Mary of the Admiral in Palermo, Italy.

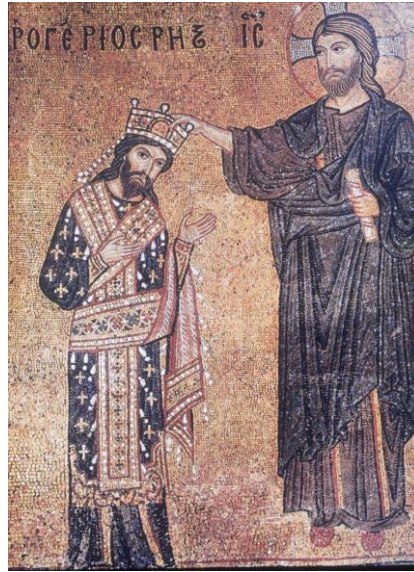


Figure 1: Palermo: Santa Maria Dell' Ammiraglio: Cupola Mosaic: Det.: Christ Crowning King Roger II. c.1140-1150. [1]

2.1. Artistic Features: Symbolism and Composition

The mosaic portrays a hierarchical encounter between Christ and Roger II. Christ, positioned on the left, is shown crowning the king with his right hand, while holding an open gospel in his left, inscribed with the Greek text, “Εγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου” (“I am the light of the world,” John 8:12). Roger, on the right, stands in a three-quarter profile, clad in Byzantine imperial regalia: a jeweled *loros* (ceremonial sash), a golden *chlamys* (cloak), and scarlet-red shoes (*campagia*). The figures are framed against a gold background, a hallmark of Byzantine mosaics, symbolizing the celestial realm.

In this mosaic, the hieratic scale is very obvious and plays an important role in the composition. The use of hieratic scale—Christ’s figure is larger than Roger’s—visually subordinates the king to divine authority. This compositional choice underscores the theological premise that earthly power derives from God. Christ’s gesture of coronation is deliberate and solemn, while Roger’s posture combines humility and receptivity: his hands are covered in white cloth (a sign of purity), one raised in prayer and the other clasping a scepter, blending supplication with regal assertion. The underlying notion of divine sovereignty transcends earthly realms in the composition’s hierarchical structure, where Christ looms larger than Roger II. This graphic allegory not only emphasizes the supreme might of God, but it also places Roger II in the larger context of Christian kingship, which holds that earthly rulers are justified by divine approval. As a result, the scene of Roger II’s coronation is elevated from a mere historical occurrence to a cosmic confirmation of his position in the holy hierarchy of kingship, which is established by divine decree and dedicated by coronation rites.

The Portrait of Roger II, as depicted in its iconography, unfolds as a multifaceted combination of symbolism and formal intricacies. Central to this portrayal is the elaborate *loros*, a regal robe imbued with imperial connotations, cascading over Roger II, enveloping him in the aura of authority and power befitting his status as ruler [2]. This ornate garment not only serves as a visual emblem of his temporal dominion but also carries with it deeper metaphors derived from Byzantine tradition. Within the folds of the *loros* lie echoes of the Byzantine emperor, whose attire symbolized not just earthly sovereignty but also a divine mandate, aligning the wearer with the august lineage of imperial rulers favored by celestial forces. This gem-encrusted silk sash, adorned with medallions and pearls, is a direct appropriation of Byzantine imperial costume. Originating from the Roman *trabea triumphalis*, the *loros* symbolized the emperor’s role as God’s vicar on Earth. By donning it, Roger aligns himself

with Byzantine emperors like Justinian, whose mosaics in Ravenna's San Vitale (6th century) similarly feature the *loros*. Complementing the symbolism of the *loros*, the inclusion of red shoes further underscores Roger II's regal legitimacy, evoking ancient associations of sovereignty and divine endorsement. Such imagery draws parallels to biblical motifs, where the donning of crimson footwear by figures of authority signifies a sacred calling and divine sanction. In this context, Roger II's coronation is not merely a secular event but a sacred rite, enshrining him as a chosen leader ordained by both earthly and heavenly powers.

The scarlet footwear, a privilege reserved for Byzantine emperors, evoked ancient Roman traditions where red (murex dye) denoted senatorial rank. In Christian typology, red shoes also recalled Isaiah 63:1–3, where the Messiah treads the winepress of divine judgment, linking Roger's rule to eschatological righteousness.

The mosaic employs glass and gold tesserae, materials that shimmer under light to create a transcendent aura. This technique parallels contemporaneous Byzantine works, such as the Deesis mosaic in Hagia Sophia (13th century), where luminosity symbolized divine presence. The precision of the tesserae arrangement—particularly in rendering the delicate folds of the *loros* and Christ's serene visage—reflects the expertise of Byzantine artisans, likely imported to Sicily under Norman patronage.

2.2. Religious Significance: Kingship Under Christ

This mosaic serves as an illustration of the divine Sovereignty and justified the sacral kingship. The mosaic encapsulates the medieval Christian doctrine of divine right monarchy, wherein rulers derive authority directly from God. By depicting Christ as the active agent in Roger's coronation, the image rejects the notion of papal or feudal intermediation, a bold statement in an era of Investiture Controversy. The scene echoes Old Testament precedents—such as Samuel anointing David (1 Samuel 16:13)—but elevates Roger's legitimacy by positioning Christ as his immediate benefactor.

The depiction of Christ as Pantokrator ("Ruler of All") in the mosaic is rooted in Byzantine theological and artistic traditions that emphasize His dual role as cosmic judge and divine sovereign. In Byzantine church architecture, the Pantokrator typically occupies the central dome or apse, visually dominating the sacred space to remind worshippers of Christ's omnipresence and authority over creation. This iconography often shows Christ holding a gospel book—as seen here—inscribed with a verse affirming His divinity (e.g., John 8:12). The open gospel symbolizes the Logos (Word) made flesh, while the gesture of coronation merges the act of benediction with imperial investiture. By framing Roger's coronation as a direct interaction with the Pantokrator, the mosaic elevates the king's authority beyond mere political legitimacy to a sacramental act, akin to Old Testament anointings by prophets.

Roger's identification with the Davidic king typology is equally deliberate. In medieval Christian political theology, David—the shepherd-king anointed by God (1 Samuel 16:13)—embodied the ideal of a ruler whose power was both pastoral and divinely ordained. Like David, Roger is portrayed as a mediator between God and his people, entrusted with shepherding his kingdom toward righteousness. The white cloth covering his hands (a Byzantine liturgical detail) signifies ritual purity, while his clasped scepter echoes the *labarum* (military standard) of Constantine the Great, blending spiritual humility with martial authority. This duality reflects the Norman king's pragmatic rule over a religiously diverse Sicily, where he balanced Latin Christian, Greek Orthodox, and Muslim subjects. The mosaic thus positions Roger not merely as a secular monarch but as a *rex sacerdos* (priest-king), a concept later theorized by medieval jurists like John of Salisbury.

The mosaic's placement in the cupola of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio is deeply symbolic. In Byzantine church design, the dome represents the vault of heaven, and figures within it are understood to inhabit a timeless, celestial realm. The gold tesserae background—reminiscent of Byzantine

chrysography (gold-leaf illumination)—evokes the radiance of the Heavenly Jerusalem described in Revelation 21:18–21, where the streets are “pure gold, like transparent glass.” By situating Roger’s coronation within this ethereal setting, the mosaic transcends historical specificity, framing his reign as part of God’s eternal plan. This eschatological framing resonated liturgically: during Mass, the congregation would gaze upward at the image, witnessing Roger’s coronation as a sacred event paralleling the Eucharistic sacrifice—both acts of divine grace made manifest on Earth.

The integration of imperial imagery into liturgical spaces was a hallmark of Byzantine political theology. Emperors like Justinian I were frequently depicted in church mosaics (e.g., San Vitale, Ravenna) to underscore their role as God’s vicegerents. Roger’s mosaic adapts this tradition but innovates by showing direct physical contact between Christ and the king—a rare compositional choice in Byzantine art, where emperors typically received authority indirectly through intermediaries like saints or angels. This direct coronation implies a unique covenant between Roger and Christ, bypassing traditional mediators such as the pope or patriarch. Theologically, this aligns with Roger’s efforts to centralize power in Sicily, asserting autonomy from both papal Rome and Byzantine Constantinople. Moreover, the mosaic’s luminosity—achieved through glass and gold tesserae—would have been animated by candlelight during evening liturgies, creating a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. This transformed the static image into a living tableau, reinforcing the idea that Roger’s reign was perpetually sustained by divine illumination. In this way, the mosaic functioned as both a devotional focus and a political manifesto, embedding Norman rule within a sacred cosmology that legitimized Roger’s authority to his multicultural subjects.

2.3. Political Significance: Byzantine Legacies and Norman Ambitions

Roger II’s adoption of Byzantine iconography was a deliberate political strategy aimed at consolidating his authority over a diverse and contested realm. Sicily, historically a Byzantine province until the 9th century, retained a significant Greek-speaking population with strong cultural and religious ties to Constantinople. By integrating Byzantine imperial imagery into his representations, Roger positioned himself as the legitimate successor to both the Roman imperium and Christian universalism, thereby justifying his territorial expansions in southern Italy and North Africa. The Greek inscriptions in the mosaic reinforce this message, functioning as both an appeal to his Greek-speaking subjects and a statement of rivalry with the Byzantine emperor. Roger’s strategic use of Byzantine visual language thus served to challenge the political and religious dominance of Constantinople while reinforcing Sicily’s emergent status as a sovereign power in the Mediterranean.

Mosaics in the Byzantine Empire functioned as significant political instruments, reinforcing the divine legitimacy of the emperor and his rule. From the reign of Justinian to that of Basil I, rulers employed monumental mosaics in ecclesiastical settings to communicate their sovereignty and divine mandate. The apse mosaics of Hagia Sophia, for instance, depict an emperor closely aligned with Christ, emphasizing his God-given right to rule. Roger’s mosaic aligns with this tradition, employing similar visual conventions to assert his parity with Byzantine rulers. Additionally, the commissioning of such an elaborate work signaled the wealth and cultural sophistication of his court. The use of gold tesserae, imported materials, and highly skilled artisans underscored the economic strength of his kingdom. Rather than serving purely decorative purposes, the mosaic functioned as a calculated political statement, reinforcing Roger’s claims to imperial legitimacy and authority.

The mosaic not only reflects Roger’s political ambitions but also embodies the distinctive artistic synthesis characteristic of his Palermo court, where Norman, Arab, and Byzantine influences converged. While the figures and overall composition adhere to Byzantine artistic conventions, elements such as the intricate floral patterns in the border tesserae indicate the presence of Islamic artistic influences. This hybrid aesthetic resulted from Roger’s patronage of multicultural workshops, which included Greek, Arab, and Latin artisans. The deliberate incorporation of Byzantine artistic

elements also served a broader diplomatic function. By aligning with Eastern Christian visual traditions, Roger sought to cultivate favorable relations with Byzantine factions while distinguishing his court from the Latin West, particularly the Holy Roman Empire and the papal states. His patronage of this distinctive artistic synthesis positioned Sicily as a sophisticated and autonomous political entity within the Mediterranean.

The 12th-century Mediterranean was characterized by complex power struggles among the Holy Roman Empire, Byzantium, and various Islamic states. Roger's mosaic positions Sicily as a central actor in this geopolitical context, asserting its role as an independent Christian empire. The depiction of Christ crowning Roger is particularly significant, as it challenges the established authority of both the papacy and the Byzantine emperor. In medieval Christendom, the right to crown emperors was traditionally reserved for the pope, while the Byzantine emperor claimed an exclusive status as God's anointed ruler on earth. By commissioning a mosaic in which Christ directly confers the crown upon him, Roger visually contests both papal and Byzantine claims to supremacy. This imagery presents a direct response to the *translatio imperii* doctrine—the medieval belief in the sequential transfer of imperial authority from Rome to Byzantium and later to the Holy Roman Empire—by proposing Sicily as a new and independent seat of Christian rule. Through this work, Roger reinforces his own legitimacy while asserting his kingdom's sovereignty within the broader political landscape of the medieval Mediterranean.

2.4. Concluding the Case Study

The Portrait of Roger II is a multilayered artifact of medieval kingship, synthesizing art, theology, and politics. Its artistic brilliance lies in its meticulous craftsmanship and symbolic depth, while its religious messaging sanctifies Roger's rule as a divine ordinance. Politically, it appropriates Byzantine traditions to position Sicily as a Mediterranean power. Far from being a static depiction of coronation, the mosaic operates as a dynamic assertion of legitimacy, bridging earthly and heavenly realms and testifying to the enduring power of art in shaping imperial identity. Additionally, it underscores the fluidity of political symbolism in the medieval Mediterranean, where rulers strategically adopted and adapted artistic traditions to reinforce their authority. Roger's mosaic, therefore, stands not only as an assertion of his reign but also as a testament to the complex cultural exchanges that defined Sicily's unique place in medieval geopolitics. Through this visual language, Roger II crafted a legacy that extended beyond his reign, cementing his position within the broader narrative of medieval imperial ambition and artistic patronage.

3. Case Study: Rebound Pipa *Feitian* in Cave 112

Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, one of the most significant treasures of Chinese ancient art, holds an esteemed place in the global history of Buddhist art. Founded in 366 CE, the caves flourished over a millennium, with their murals and sculptures serving as a testament to the cultural fusion and development of Central Asian, Indian, Buddhist, and traditional Chinese influences. Among the prominent figures depicted within these caves are the flying deities, known as *Feitian*, whose graceful, ethereal postures have become a unique symbol of Buddhist art. These figures are commonly found surrounding Buddhist statues or adorning temple murals, representing celestial beings of the Buddhist pantheon or messengers of the Dharma. More than merely artistic creations, *Feitian* figures convey profound religious and political implications.

The *Feitian* image in Cave 112 will be detailed analyzed here. This cave is famous for its Rebound Pipa Flying *Feitian* murals, which is a significant component of the depiction of the “Western Pure Land Transformation” in Cave 112 [3]. This cave's artwork belongs to the transitional works from the prosperous Tang Dynasty to the rule of Tubo. This case study on the *Feitian* imagery in the Mogao

Cave will specifically explore the artistic techniques employed in the representation of the figures, examining their distinctive role as the leading and most famous icon for the Dunhuang Mogao Caves. Furthermore, it will analyze how these figures, through their religious and political symbolism, convey deeper meanings related to divinity, power, and the integration of diverse cultural influences.

3.1. Artistic Analysis

The artistic analysis of the Rebound Pipa *Feitian* in the Cave 112 shows a harmonious blend of dynamic movement, symbolic color choices, and traditional proportions, all of which serve to elevate these celestial beings as representations of divine transcendence and Buddhist spiritual ideals.

The dynamic representation of the *Feitian* in the Dunhuang Mogao Caves is characterized by fluid poses and expressive gestures, which convey an ethereal, otherworldly quality that transcends earthly limitations (fig. 2). With a calm face, this figure is shown clutching the pipa behind their neck with their left hand and plucking the strings with their right hand as they move elegantly in their flowing clothing. The figure has a light, flowing posture and a well-proportioned body. The figure appears to be ready to dance in the next second because of their right leg being up and their torso leaning to the right. This careful use of color in the depiction of clothing further underscores the dynamic relationship between materiality and transcendence, paving the way for a more detailed exploration of how these garments contribute to the overall artistic and symbolic composition of the *Feitian*.



Figure 2: Cave 112 at Dunhuang. pigment, 8th century. [4]

The choice of vibrant colors in the rebound pipa *Feitian* in the mural of Cave 112 at Dunhuang plays a pivotal role in conveying symbolic meanings associated with purity, divine power, and the celestial realm, while simultaneously enhancing the figure's ethereal and transcendent presence. The carefully curated palette of white, green, brown, and bright gold dominates the visual narrative of the mural, with each color fulfilling distinct and deliberate artistic and symbolic functions. The foundational tones of white and brown establish an atmosphere of inclusivity and gentleness, shaping the *Feitian* as a figure embodying feminine grace and serene spirituality. These muted hues not only harmonize with the overall composition but also create a visual softness that invites contemplation and underscores the figure's meditative qualities. In contrast, the addition of green and bright gold introduces dynamic vibrancy to the image. These colors serve to accentuate the *Feitian*'s divine and

celestial attributes, with gold, in particular, symbolizing divine radiance and heavenly light. Together, these tones elevate the mural's visual impact, rendering the *Feitian* simultaneously grounded in spiritual tranquility and illuminated by celestial brilliance. The functional deployment of these colors further enhances the interpretive depth of the artwork. White is prominently used for the nude bodies of the *Feitian* and other human figures depicted within the mural, aligning with traditional representations of purity, sanctity, and transcendence in Buddhist art. In contrast, the garments of the figures are adorned with brown, green, and gold, providing a striking visual contrast that emphasizes the fluidity and motion of the *Feitian*'s dance. Brown conveys warmth and earthiness, anchoring the figure within the broader composition, while green evokes vitality and renewal, linking the divine realm with nature. The use of gold, often associated with divine light and celestial authority, adds a luminous quality that draws the viewer's gaze and underscores the figure's spiritual significance.

This strategic interplay of colors not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the mural but also deepens its symbolic and narrative significance, particularly through their integration with the *Feitian*'s clothing. The garments, painted in rich tones of brown, green, and gold, provide a striking contrast to the white used for the nude body, emphasizing the flowing movement and ethereal grace of the figure.

The headdress worn by the *Feitian* is a prominent feature, often depicted with elaborate patterns and adorned with jewels or floral motifs. Its intricate design not only enhances the visual complexity of the figure but also serves as a symbol of divine authority and spiritual enlightenment. The headdress is a marker of celestial identity, aligning the *Feitian* with Buddhist iconography that frequently employs head ornaments to signify wisdom, sanctity, and cosmic power. The meticulous rendering of this element highlights the importance of ornamental details in conveying the *Feitian*'s elevated status within the mural's narrative framework. Equally significant are the ribbon-like streamers that flow gracefully around the *Feitian*. These ribbons, painted with dynamic curves and vibrant colors, contribute to the sense of movement and ethereality that defines the figure. Their fluidity, achieved through masterful use of line and shading, creates the illusion of weightlessness, as if the *Feitian* is dancing effortlessly through the air. These ribbons not only frame the figure but also establish a visual connection between the *Feitian* and the surrounding elements of the mural, such as clouds or other celestial motifs. Symbolically, the ribbons may represent the binding of spiritual energy or the transmission of divine blessings, further integrating the *Feitian* into the cosmological narrative of the mural. The *Feitian*'s garments themselves reflect a synthesis of stylistic influences, blending traditional Chinese aesthetics with elements of Central Asian and Indian design. This cultural hybridity is evident in the flowing silhouettes, intricate embroidery, and exotic patterns that adorn the clothing. The choice of fabrics and the rendering of texture—through delicate brushwork and subtle gradients of color—convey both material richness and spiritual transcendence.

3.2. *Feitian* as a Religious Symbol

The *Feitian* figures in the Mogao Caves are not merely artistic creations but serve as profound religious symbols that encapsulate core aspects of Buddhist cosmology, divine hierarchy, and spiritual practice.

Within the framework of Buddhist cosmology, *Feitian* epitomize the divine attributes of purity, harmony, and transcendence that define the heavenly realms. Image is one of a carrier of the Chinese buddhist's beliefs and a way for them to access the divine [5]. The figure of *Feitian*, with its celestial and ethereal nature, is put into the context of Buddhist cosmology where the divine world is marked by serenity and enlightenment. They embody the aspirational qualities of the Buddhist path: purity, achieved through moral discipline; harmony, reflected in the alignment of body, mind, and spirit; and transcendence, which signifies the liberation from samsara. The veneration of such images connects the devotee to the higher realms and divine beings, helping them transcend the material world and

approach spiritual enlightenment. These divine figures are seen as bodhisattvas or celestial attendants, acting as intermediaries between the mortal realm and the pure, enlightened state of the Buddha.

The image of *Feitian* is depicted in such a way that their very form is imbued with the essence of Buddhist teachings. Their wings suggest movement and transcendence, symbolizing the journey from the mundane to the sacred, while their serene expressions and graceful postures reflect the inner peace and equanimity that comes with achieving spiritual enlightenment. The act of flying, often depicted in a naturalistic yet divine manner, represents a departure from the limitations of earthly existence and an entrance into the boundless freedom of the Buddha's dharma. The *Feitian*'s wings and flowing attire are emblematic of the transcendental qualities central to Buddhist teachings. They are not confined to earthly space, but instead, their celestial ascent symbolizes the Buddhist pursuit of liberation—the release from samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) and the attainment of nirvana. In this way, the Feitian act as metaphors for the soul's journey from mundane existence to spiritual transcendence.

The *Feitian* further symbolize the transcultural nature of Buddhist art, reflecting the convergence of Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese traditions along the Silk Road. Benefiting from the prosperous economy, puissant national strength, and high level of trade and cultural exchanges of the Tang Dynasty, the golden age of the Silk Road on land followed. During this period, Dunhuang emerged as a thriving cultural and religious center, significantly shaped by the eastward transmission of Buddhism. This dynamic cultural environment brought the Dunhuang murals into their heyday, with a remarkable 122 caves featuring musical-dance images from the Tang Dynasty alone [6]. These murals, which include the iconic *Feitian*, reflect not only artistic brilliance but also the deep religious fervor and devotional practices of the time. Drawing upon Indian apsaras, Persian motifs, and Chinese stylistic sensibilities, the murals demonstrate the transcultural nature of Buddhist art in Dunhuang. The Tang Dynasty's openness to external influences allowed these diverse elements to blend seamlessly, resulting in the creation of Feitian figures that resonate with universal themes of devotion and transcendence while remaining distinctly Chinese in character.

3.3. Political Discussion

The dynamic dancing postures of Dunhuang's figures underscore a profound cultural blend. In Cave 112, the murals were painted to depict the pure land in buddhism, while some exotic elements are integrated. Under the Tang Dynasty's diplomatic policy of promoting trade along the Silk Road, cultural exchange flourished and was encouraged. The artistic choices in *feitian* show the cultural and political strategies employed by the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties to solidify their rule and foster unity within their diverse empires.

The Northern Wei Dynasty faced unique challenges in establishing its authority. As a regime of Xianbei origin, it lacked a predecessor through which it could establish a valid dynastic lineage, necessitating the construction of legitimacy from scratch [7]. In order to address this, the Northern Wei adopted policies of ethnic fusion, incorporating Han Chinese administrative practices, Confucian rituals, and cultural traditions into their governance. This blending of traditions not only legitimize their rule but also set the stage for subsequent dynasties, such as the Tang, to build on this foundation of inclusivity. The murals in the Mogao Cave with their intricate depictions of Feitian and other celestial beings, reflect the enduring influence of these integrationist policies. Over time, the *Feitian* costumes adopted features unique to Chinese artistic sensibilities. For instance, the scarves and ribbons began to resemble the *shendai* (long flowing sashes) commonly seen in Chinese court dress, and the overall silhouette became more structured, aligning with Tang Dynasty preferences for elegance and symmetry. This adaptation reflects Northern Wei's strategy of integrating Xianbei and Han Chinese traditions to legitimize their rule. By incorporating elements of Chinese court attire into the depiction of Feitian, the Northern Wei embraced Han cultural practices, demonstrating their

commitment to cultural fusion and creating a shared identity that resonated with their diverse population. This artistic localization of foreign Buddhist motifs into distinctly Chinese forms underscores the dynasty's broader policies of cultural and ethnic amalgamation.

3.4. Concluding the Case Study

The Northern Wei Dynasty (386–535 CE), as a precursor to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), laid the groundwork for the cultural and political synthesis that defined later eras. Under the Tang's cosmopolitan rule, the *Feitian* evolved into even more dynamic and transcultural symbols, reflecting the height of cultural exchange along the Silk Road. The *Feitian* figures in these murals serve not only as artistic expressions of Buddhist cosmology but also as political symbols of the Tang Dynasty's vision of a unified empire. By embracing the legacy of Northern Wei's goal to promote the fusion of ethnicities and expanding it through sustained cultural exchange, the Tang established themselves as heirs to a tradition of integration and inclusivity.

4. Conclusion

The mosaic of Roger II exemplifies the Byzantine concept of divine kingship, where religious iconography serves to assert royal authority and legitimacy. Central to the composition is the image of Christ crowning Roger II, emphasizing the theological idea that earthly rule is ordained by divine will. The regal *loros* and red shoes further symbolize Roger's divinely sanctioned power, aligning him with the traditions of Byzantine emperors. The hierarchical structure of the mosaic, with Christ portrayed as larger than the king, reinforces the supremacy of divine authority over temporal power. By elevating Roger II's coronation beyond a political event and embedding it within a sacred theological framework, the mosaic intertwines Christian kingship with Byzantine artistic traditions. This work encapsulates how Byzantine rulers relied on religion to justify and solidify their authority, merging faith and politics into a unified and enduring framework.

The Rebound Pipa *Feitian* mural in Dunhuang's Mogao Caves illustrates the profound interplay between Buddhist cosmology and political authority during the Tang Dynasty. These celestial figures, characterized by their graceful poses, fluid movement, and vibrant colors, embody ideals of transcendence, harmony, and enlightenment central to Buddhist teachings. Their flowing garments, adorned with hues of gold and green, symbolize divine radiance, renewal, and the ethereal nature of the celestial realm. Positioned within the cultural and religious crossroads of the Silk Road, the *Feitian* were not merely artistic representations but also served as tools of political propaganda. By associating their rule with the divine harmony symbolized by these celestial beings, Tang rulers reinforced their legitimacy and projected an image of stability and unity in a diverse empire. The stylistic blending of Central Asian, Indian, and Chinese influences in the *Feitian* further underscores the transcultural nature of Buddhist art in this period, reflecting the cosmopolitan environment fostered by Tang governance. These murals not only celebrate spiritual ideals but also demonstrate how Tang rulers strategically used religious iconography to merge faith and politics into a cohesive narrative, asserting their authority through divine association and cultural synthesis.

Together, these two works reveal the universal dynamics of religion, politics, and art in shaping societal structures. The Byzantine mosaic emphasizes divine kingship and theocratic governance, while the Dunhuang *Feitian* reflects cultural integration and political strategies in a frontier context. Despite their differences, both artworks demonstrate how religion served as a crucial force in legitimizing and consolidating political authority. Religious art, as both a spiritual medium and a political instrument, transcends time and geography, highlighting its profound role in shaping and stabilizing political regimes. By examining the Byzantine mosaics and Dunhuang cave paintings, this study underscores the intricate and enduring relationship between political power and religious

ideology. These artistic traditions, emerging from distinct cultural and historical contexts, showcase how art reflects and reinforces societal and ideological frameworks, offering deeper insights into the universal impact of the interplay between politics and religion on artistic production.

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