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1. A Chinese Bronze with Scythian Affinities.

Author(s): C. Hercules Read

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FIG. 1.

FIG. 2.

A CHINESE BRONZE WITH SCYTHIAN AFFINITIES.

MAN

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ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

With Plate A.

China: Art.

Read.

A Chinese Bronze with Scythian Affinities. By Sir C. Hercules 1
Read.

The affinities and chronology of ancient Chinese bronzes present so many difficulties for the Western student that progress in knowledge of the subject is slow. The Chinese are themselves such fervent admirers of antiquity that their reproductions of classical periods are not only popular among the educated classes, but are so accurately copied from their prototypes as to deceive even the elect. These reproductions are as a rule all that we in the West can expect to obtain, but they possess many valuable qualities for study, inasmuch as they present to us a facsimile of the original bronze, and we thus get the type, the style of art and the symbolism of the period on which they are founded. In this way, the bronze I have ventured to bring before the readers of MAN possesses qualities of design and function that in some directions carry the mind back to the Bronze Age, at whatever period the actual vessel may have been made. I found the piece in the collection of Mr. Harry Oppenheim, a keen collector of old Chinese works of art; he had bought it from a dealer, and of course it had no history. The unusual character of the design attracted me, and Mr. Oppenheim allowed me to bring it away for more detailed study.

The figures in Plate A show its general character and the greater part of the details. The lower stage is oblong, conceived on somewhat architectural lines, the four feet being human figures, over the head of each being a moulding suggesting the capital of a pilaster. The upper stage is oval, the design being in openwork, the bottom of the vessel is open, gridiron fashion. At one end is a curved handle,

[1]

and there are signs of a similar handle having existed at the other end. All the features of the design of the body are unusual, but what especially riveted my attention was the openwork frieze of animals on the upper stage.

In Fig. 1 is seen a monstrous creature, a mammalian quadruped, winged, with long neck and a feline head, who seems to be struggling with a snakelike form, portions of which are seen in front and above the middle of the back. Fig. 2 has an animal (no doubt intended for a tiger, from the wavy stripes on the body), who again is attacking a snake, the body of which fills up the spaces in the design. The creatures at the two ends are similar one to the other, and represent a bird with large raptorial claws, but with a head more like a goat, a resemblance further strengthened by the presence of two horn-like adjuncts to the head. An obvious suggestion is that they represent the Phoenix in a somewhat archaic form, and this is rather borne out by a figure in the Chinese work presently to be mentioned.

It will be seen that all these details differ widely from those usually found in Chinese art, even of an early date, and it would seem that in this vessel we have possibly a survival of a symbolism perhaps even pre-Chinese. The Chinese appear to our Western eyes as always eager to discover or invent some novel monstrous creature. But if their decorative ideas of more recent periods may be safely compared with the earlier, this should not be the true explanation. As is well known, almost every detail of the decorative scheme, even of a commonplace Chinese vase, has, or originally had, a meaning and a purpose appropriate to the object or to its use. It is hardly possible to conceive a Chinese artist finding himself in a difficulty either as to the nature of a design or as to how it should be carried out. If this be so now, and was so in early times in China, as seems likely, then we should expect to find stereotyped forms repeated constantly, thoroughly crystallized in an artistic atmosphere where the futurist innovation found no place and no sympathy or understanding. In point of fact, this is exactly what does happen.

The surface decoration and all details of, *e.g.*, Chinese bronzes of early date (and of course their imitations), are more notable for a monotony of motive than those of any other country.

Therefore, if one applies this theory to the vessel before us, there should not only be a meaning and purpose in the selection of the animals found upon it—but prototypes should exist from which they sprang. For the former we are at present far too ignorant to have much chance of success, but the prototype should have a physical existence, and thus our fortune may be better.

I have had the good luck to find in Chinese works figures of two vessels that are comparable with that now in question. One is in the *Po ku t'u* (20th part), and is an oblong vase pierced at bottom and on all sides, standing in a tray. It might serve the same purpose as our specimen, having all its essential characters. It is described in the text as a T'ang ice vessel, and is evidently thought to have been used as a refrigerator, the food being placed on the top and the ice in the body of the vessel, and thus in touch with the air on all sides. The other example is to be found in the *Kao ku t'u*, Part X, p. 14 (Fig. 3). It resembles our figure much more nearly; the upper half is rounded, having on the sides a phoenix, tiger, tortoise and (according to the text) a dragon, the latter not shown in the figure: the base is square, covered with horizontal lines, and supported by four squat figures; it has also a straight handle on one side. It is said in the text to be a brazier for heating water or wine, and to be of Han dynasty type (206 B.C.—220 A.D.). The animals around are stated to be from the "twenty-eight heavenly mansions," and the four supporting figures to be those of Tartars. The general character and similarity in detail make it practically certain that Mr. Oppenheim's bronze is for the same purpose as the brazier figured by the Chinese author. The practical identity

of the Tartar figures and the surrounding animals would further suggest that if one be of a Han dynasty type the other is also. In any case the suggestion helps my theory as to the affinities of the Oppenheim bronze, viz., that in some respects it has clear connection with the later Bronze Age in the Far East. The architectural treatment of the base is quite un-Chinese, and at the present moment I can think of nothing nearer than Gandhara with which to compare it. Ten years ago such a suggestion would have been thought fantastic, but Sir Aurel Stein's discoveries have reduced it to a commonplace. The animal frieze again differs from normal Chinese. The winged monster quadruped in Fig. 1 is not the Chinese dragon, though he may be a prototype; the tiger in Fig. 2 is equally un-Chinese. But both one and the other can easily be recognized in the Scythian metal reliefs in Mr. Minns' invaluable work on *Scythians and Greeks*. The head of the tiger is to be found almost exactly reproduced in his Fig. 198 (Fig. 4), a gold plate from Siberia showing the griffin attacking a horse, and the quadruped and snake motive is found in Fig. 195. If, as would seem likely, the date of the Oppenheim bronze is many centuries later

FIG. 3.

than these Scythian reliefs, it is not a little singular how in the bronze certain details of treatment have survived in complete identity. The tiger's head and the peculiar style of drawing in which his grip of the victim is shown, are identical with the same features in the Siberian bronze, and in fact is to be seen throughout Mr. Minns' book. If this be so, and to my eyes there can be no doubt about it, it can only indicate an unbroken thread of traditional treatment from three or four hundred years B.C. up to the date of Mr. Oppenheim's bronze, which can only claim to belong to medieval times, at the earliest. Sir Aurel Stein's discoveries have demonstrated inter-relation and interchange of products and art motives from China to

FIG. 4.

India in the early centuries of our era. Mr. Oppenheim's bronze would seem to indicate that for centuries before the Christian era the same borrowing went on, and enriched the Chinese art with which we are familiar with Siberian motives of the late Bronze Age.

C. HERCULES READ.