Exotic Style of the Silver Ewer from a Han-to-Jin Period Tomb in Shang Sunjiazhai Village in Datong, Qinghai

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Key words: Xiongnu–Burials–Shang Sunjiazhai Village (Datong County, Qinghai Province)  Han-Jin Period  Art Metalwork–China–Foreign Influences

A gilt silver ewer with a single handle was excavated in the 1970s from tomb M3 in Section B of a Han through Jin period cemetery at Shang Sunjiazhai Village in Datong County, Qinghai Province. It is 15.8cm high, with diameters at the rim, waist, and foot of 7.0cm, 12.0cm, and 5.4cm respectively. It was made by hammering a single sheet of silver into the desired shape, and then decorated with three separate bands plated with gold at its rim, shoulder, and foot (Figures 1 and 2). The band at the rim has a round of wave scroll pattern. The shoulder band has a pattern of scrolling vines with leaves. The foot has a band of downward-facing triangles called the “battlement pattern”. The decoration in all three bands is set against a background of dots produced by punching. The tomb structure and the other grave goods resemble those from the Central Plains; only this silver vessel displays a different style. Up to the present, few archaeological discoveries can be compared with this vessel. In a Han tomb 65m south of this one, archaeologists excavated a bronze seal with a camel-shaped knob, bearing

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an inscription reading “The Xiongnu Chief of the Han Submitted to Righteousness and Befriended the Han Dynasty.” This seal provides an important clue to the origin of the style of this vessel and to the user’s ethnicity. Chinese and foreign scholars have speculated about these questions without reaching firm conclusion, due to a lack of clear evidence.

Both the wave scroll pattern and the scrolling vine pattern are typical of early Greek art. The wave scroll pattern (also known as “running dog” pattern) has a long history in the Mediterranean region. It probably originated as the depiction of river currents. After the mid-8th century BCE, it appeared regularly in bands on Greek painted pottery. During the Roman period, this pattern was often used to decorate the borders of mosaic-tiled bathroom floors. The scrolling vine pattern (also known as tendril pattern) might be originated in Southern Italy and moved east during the Hellenistic period of the 4th century BCE under the influence of Alexander the Great. On a Greek red-figure bowl dated to 320–310 BCE, a band of tendril pattern and a band of wave scroll pattern surround the central design (Figure 3). The battlement pattern was a popular decoration during the Achaemenid Empire (550–331 BCE) of Iran. It resembles city wall battlements. This design is found on a bronze quiver from Lorestan dated 800–700 BCE, on the crown of King Darius dated 6th century BCE, and on a silver bowl of the 5th to 4th century BCE (Figure 4). During the Sasanian Dynasty in Persia (211–651 CE), the battlement pattern became an important part of the Persian crown decoration, clearly inherited from the tradition of Darius. And this Iranian design appeared together with the tendril pattern and the wave scrolling pattern in parallel gilt bands in decorations on metalwork produced in the Hellenized Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE).

I. A Parthian Silver Bowl

In 1981, the J. Paul Getty Museum acquired several pieces, including 24 silver bowls, all with wide mouths and rounded bases (Figures 5–8). Each was made of a single sheet of silver, and decorated inside with gilt bands. Eighteen of them had assemblages of the wave scrolling, tendril, and battlement patterns similar to those discussed above. In the centers of the inner bottoms of these bowls were foliate patterns. This composition resembles the Greek bowl described above (Figure 3). The composition and individual elements also resemble the silver ewer from Shang Sunjiazhai. Not only are the designs similar in detail, they are also produced by the same techniques; thus, we can be certain of the Western origins of the Datong silver vessel.

All these vessels came from a Swiss dealer, and their provenance is unclear. Michael Pfrommer compared the Getty bowls to two of known provenance from Lorestan, Iran (Figure 9), and to another one that probably came from Lorestan. In addition, some of the vessels bore Aramaic inscriptions, indicating that they were
Parthian products. Based on this, Pfrommer speculated that they came from western or northwestern Iran. Based on the inscriptions together with the decorative style, he also dated most of them to the 1st century BCE, with a few possibly dating to the 2nd or late 3rd century BCE.

Achaemenid Persia was deeply influenced by Greek culture, and became totally Hellenized after the Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) expanded his empire to the east. This process continued under the following Seleucid Dynasty: as a result, Greek production techniques and decoration had large impact on Persian art. After the Parthians invaded southern Iran in the 2nd century BCE, the Greek influence did not disappear, but became assimilated into Parthian tradition. As their crafts developed, their trade flourished and they participated
in international trade networks, allowing their products to spread widely.

II. Silver Vessels of the Sarmatians on the South Russian Steppes

From the 3rd to the 1st centuries BCE, the Sarmatians controlled the Eurasian steppes. In tombs identified as Sarmatian, archaeologists have found Greek-style gold and silver objects. The majority of these objects are metal disks used to decorate horse trappings. They are found in collections all over the world. The majority of the disks were made of silver with parcel-gilt decoration. Surrounding the central design, many of them have bands of wave scrolling and tendril patterns. Most of them date to the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE, and were found in the region of the lower Don River. For example, they have been unearthed near Rostov (Figure 10). More objects with the wave scrolling pattern were found near Lugansk, such as a helmet-shaped silver horse ornament (Figure 11). A silver plate was found southeast of Saratov on the Volga River, and similar objects were found at Kharkov in Ukraine. The furthest east such objects have been found is at Omsk in Siberia where archaeologists excavated a round silver disk, engraved with a Greek goddess wearing a collar decorated with the wave scrolling pattern. The silver horse trappings cited above date mostly to the 2nd century BCE.

The combination of the wave scrolling pattern with the battlement pattern also appears on objects of daily use. A tomb at Rostov produced a gilded silver jar with a handle in the shape of a tiger (Figures 12–14). The body of the vessel has two bands of the wave scrolling pattern surrounding a main design area that contains animals and mythical figures. One band of battlement pattern divides the main design area into two decorative fields. This vessel has been dated to 1st century BCE–1st century CE, later than similar vessels.

During the Scythian period, the Southern Russian steppes had already been Hellenized. In the Sarmatian period that followed, this trend continued and deepened. The region also had cultural connections to western Iran. So the combination of the three patterned bands on gilt silver objects found there shares both period and culture with the Parthian bowls described above.

III. Silver Vessels and Textiles Found in Xiongnu Tombs

Objects with similar decorations have been found in the tombs of Xiongnu Shanyu and nobles located in Outer

Figure 10. Sarmatian Silver Plate from Rostov, Russia (Late 3rd Century BCE)

Figure 11. Sarmatian Silver Horse Ornament from Saratov, Russia (First half of 2nd Century BCE)
Mongolia. Among them, the most important discovery is Tomb No. 1 at Gol Mod, excavated by the French Archaeological Team during 2000–2001. The tomb is located in Arkhangai Province of Mongolia in the Khanuy Valley. The tomb occupant was clearly of high status, perhaps even a Xiongnu Shanyu. Among the unearthed artifacts was the fragment of a silver vessel, 2.2cm long, with a gilt band engraved with the wave scrolling pattern and a dotted background (Figure 15). This piece resembles the decorated rim of the Datong silver ewer; thus, it must be the rim of a lost vessel similar to the ewer. Also among the grave goods were two bronze mirrors, 14C-dated to 20–50 CE. The dating of the plate fragment provided by the 14C data suggests that the Datong silver ewer came from the same period.

Textiles found in other Xiongnu tombs at Noin Ula also bore the wave scrolling, tendril, and battlement patterns. One tomb, named Kondrat’ev by its excavator, produced several pieces of woolen textile (Figure 16). One piece has two bands of the wave scrolling pattern, and two other pieces have a combination of the wave scrolling pattern with a floral pattern. Similar textiles were also found in Iraq and Syria. Tomb No. 6 at Noin Ula was probably the tomb of a 1st century CE Xiongnu Shanyu. A wall carpet found in the tomb was probably a product from Parthia or Asia Minor. It was decorated with the battlement pattern along its borders (Figure 17). A textile with the same pattern that archaeologists believe came from the Levant is reported to have been found earlier.

Other factors also point to connections between Southern Russia and Hellenized Parthia and Persia. Such connections reflect the vast space in which the nomads were active, and suggest that their long-distance trading continued and flourished over a long period.

IV. Conclusion

Although some of the sites discussed above yielded gilt silver vessels resembling the Datong silver ewer, there are still slight differences in details of the decorative patterns on the vessels. Such differences indicate that the Datong silver ewer is unlikely to have been made in Parthia or the Black Sea region, and more likely to be a replica from the steppe between the Black Sea and the Mongolian Plateau. The decoration and technique of the silver ewer show profound influences from imported silver products such as horse disks and household utensils; it is even possible that skilled metal workers who came
Except for the silver fragment found in the Gol Mod tomb, no silver vessel similar to the ewer has been found in Parthia or the Southern Russian steppe. Marschak noted that the ring-shaped handle was attached after the body of the vessel was made, since it damaged the already engraved gilt band of tendril. It is likely that the handle was added later for convenience. Its original shape might be a vase without handle. This form was common in pottery found in the Semirechye region of Kazakhstan (Figure 18). Archaeologists consider such pottery vessels to be cultural remains of the Wusun people. If this comparison is reasonable, then this region was probably the place where such replicas were made.

The above analysis indicates the exotic origins of the Datong silver ewer and the process by which it came to the present-day Qinghai. Gilt band decorations on silver vessels were made in the Hellenized Parthian region during the 2nd century BCE. At the same time, silver objects of the Sarmatians from the Northern Black Sea region were influenced by this style. Throughout the steppe region controlled by the Sarmatians and the Xiongnu, no later than the 1st century CE, similar techniques and decorations as well as Parthian motifs appeared on silver vessels such as those found in the Xiongnu court at Gol Mod on the Mongolian steppe and in the possession of Xiongnu nobles who had settled along the borders of present day China. The Aorsi, a tribe of the Sarmatians called Yancai by Chinese at the time, controlled the vast land between the Aral Sea and the Black Sea. Together with the Wusun people, who occupied the Semirechye region, they played an important role in diffusing Greek styles. According to Strabo’s account, a commercial route passing through this region made it possible for the two groups to trade between India and Babylon. Camel caravans
also passed through the Southern Caucasus and Armenia, close to the region where the Getty Parthian silver bowls were probably found. This trade allowed the Aorsi tribe to “wear golden ornaments.” Using the same route, Chinese merchandise also reached the Black Sea region, as demonstrated by the Western and Eastern Han bronze mirrors unearthed at Rostov and Stavropol. This shows that the discoveries of the silver fragment at Gol Mod and the silver ewer at Datong were not accidental.

The last owner of the Datong silver ewer was probably a member of the Lushui Hu, a distinct tribe of the Xiongnu, named after the Lu River originated in the Qilian Mountains south of Zhangye in Gansu Province. They lived in close proximity to the ancient Tibetans (Qiang) from the Yellow and Huang River regions. During the 1st century CE, they attacked one branch of the Qiang, and later united with them to resist the Eastern Han Dynasty. Afterwards, probably some of this united group immigrated to the Huang River valley and became Sinified. Because the silver ewer was excavated from a tomb that was built during a period when Xiongnu and Han tombs were difficult to distinguish, only the above-mentioned seal and the Parthian-derived decoration of the vessel provide a record of the Lushui Hu tribe’s former nomadic lifestyle.

References


Postscript: The original paper was published in Kaogu 考古 (Archaeology) 2009.5: 70–9. This abridged version is prepared by the original author Tong Tao 全涛 and translated into English by Suzanne Cahill and Ye Wa 叶娃.