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A CHINESE TOMB FIND

THERE used to be in the collection of the Hermitage in Petrograd most interesting Scythian gold ornaments.

The Scyths were nomad tribes which seem originally to have come from Mongolia; it was in protection against them that the Chinese built the Great Wall during the T'sin Dynasty (255-209 B. C.), which stopped effectually their invasions, but long before that they had spread in a westerly direction. In the eighth century B. C. they are recorded to have driven the Cimmerians from the shores of the Black Sea and to have founded there the nomadic kingdom known as Scythia. But they went farther still and the famous Vetttersfelde fish found in the province of Brandenburg, Prussia, shows how far they penetrated into Europe.

The little we know about their history and wanderings comes through the writings of Herodotus and Strabo; what we know of their personal habits and art comes from their often very elaborate and rich tombs. These tombs were found in great numbers in Southern Russia and also in Western Siberia in the plains of the Obi, they contained quantities of gold ornaments. The Scythians, nomads from the Steppes, had comparatively little use for precious metals and a plentiful supply from the Ural and the Western Siberian mountains. This proved the undoing of their graves. They buried with their dead not only the wives and retainers but quantities of horses, all fully dressed and equipped; the amount of gold ornaments of every kind was enormous in the case of important persons. Naturally the tombs

have been robbed even in very early times, and a great many of the pieces found have disappeared because they were of precious metal. When tombs are found now, they invariably have been ransacked and disturbed while only bronze or silver pieces are left. Thanks to Peter the Great, whose attention was drawn to the artistic and archaeological value of numerous gold ornaments found in

grave hills by the Siberian population in the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, a number were saved and brought together in the imperial collection. Unfortunately the rough diggers kept no account of the localities where the pieces were found or of the construction and disposition of the tombs; all we know is that they came from the plains of Western Siberia and that Chinese coins of the Han period (206 B. C.-220 A. D.) were found with them.

The Scythian tomb finds can be divided into two kinds: those found in Southern Russia, showing strong classic influence or made in Greece for Scythian customers; and the pieces of purely Scythian style, which show all the characteristics of jewelry belonging to nomad tribes, who decorated their horse trappings with heavy gold ornaments. The latter kind interests us more especially at this moment. These ornaments are very often oblong plaques found in pairs, fitted behind with metal loops by means of which they were fastened to the leather straps.

The design consists generally of animal forms, bears, eagles, or griffins attacking horses or peaceful deer, hunting scenes, etc. They are mostly cast in heavy gold, at least those kept in the Hermitage



FIG. 1

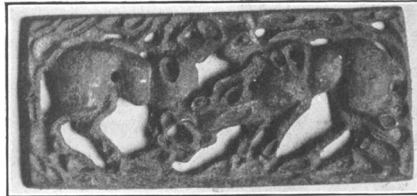


FIG. 2

are; one kind had colored stones inserted in three-cornered settings, another kind is plain. A very typical feature is the extraordinary contortion of the animals at-



FIG. 3

tacked; horses in the agony of death struggling with bears or vultures are pawing the soil with their fore feet and kicking in the air with their hind legs. Another peculiar-



FIG. 4

ity is the way open spaces are filled with bird-like ornaments and even sometimes antlers and tails turn into animal designs.

The Museum has acquired a collection



FIG. 5

of thirteen pieces found together in a Chinese tomb said to be on the Mongolian border, close to the big wall, near a place called Yulin in the most northern part of Shenzi province. They are of different materials: bronze, silver, bone, and jade, and amongst them are seven pieces very similar to the Scytho-Siberian gold orna-

ments in the Petrograd Museum. Two large oblong plaques ( $5\frac{1}{2} \times 3$  in.; fig. 1) cast in bronze with many traces of adhering cloth and square loops behind, show a horse attacked by two bears, or a bear and another animal; the horse is twisted in the peculiar way described above and the empty corners are filled with a regular design of birds' heads.

These finely cast pieces are related in design to the Scythian bronzes but in technique to the Chinese. Not so two other

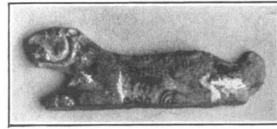


FIG. 6

openworked plaques ( $4\frac{7}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  in.; fig. 2) of less heavy bronze with two deer grazing; they show plainly the three-cornered spaces intended for the inlay of colored stones, though it seems as if these pieces never actually had inlay but were cast after traditional patterns. Another openworked



FIG. 7

plaque (5 x 2 in.; fig. 5), of silver with traces of gilding, represents a horse in the peculiar kicking movement with its spine curving right round, though there is no attacking animal. This piece is of the plain kind without insertion of stones and with the ornament turning into birds' heads; it has three loop handles and an undecipherable mark. An openworked bronze plaque ( $4 \times 1\frac{3}{4}$  in.; fig. 3), very archaic in style, shows a deer attacked by a bear or maybe a lion because of the long tail. It is particularly interesting from an artistic point of view. Four pieces are openworked and except the two with grazing deer have

loops to fasten them with. The seventh piece is a small bone, openworked ornament representing a bear licking its paw (fig. 4). The similarity of these seven pieces with the Scytho-Siberian ornaments is unmistakable.

The two bronze lions' or bears' heads, broadly designed and simply kept, have affinities with both the Scytho-Siberian and the Chinese types, but the four remaining pieces from this tomb find are purely Chinese in character. Two charmingly worked lions' heads of thin silver (fig. 7) are of the most refined and delightful workmanship, evidently intended for applied ornaments of the usual type of lion masks holding rings, but of a very early period and somewhat suggesting Sassanian art. Then one half of a bronze gilt tally with inscription in early Chinese letters (fig. 6). The two halves of these tigers fitted exactly together; one half was given as credential to imperial messengers. Last of all, a very curious jade ornament of Han type (fig. 8), well known from reproductions in Chinese books on jades. This piece of black and gray jade shows a curious demon-like human figure amongst scrolls, which is most unusual.

The Han jade, the tally tiger, and the two silver lion masks are sufficient proof that the tomb must date from Han times or little later. The Siberian gold ornaments in Petrograd found together with Han coins are ascribed to the same period.

It remains to be seen if the Siberian ornaments originated from Chinese in-

fluence or if on the contrary the Shenzi tomb find came in part from Siberia. The distance from Yulin across Mongolia is great, some sixteen hundred miles, but trade during the end of the Han period was firmly established between China and Western Asia. Perhaps some day excavations in Mongolia, which is considered the place where the Scythians originally came from, may throw more light on the subject; at present it is evident that the first-mentioned plaques show a certain amount of Chinese influence, the four next illustrated are purely Scythian in style, and the remaining ones are purely Chinese. Certain undoubtedly Chinese pieces exhibited with this tomb find in Gallery E 9 show great similarity with the pieces under discussion and prove the relation between these two early civilizations. A pottery mould for a bronze plaque is of the same period but of unknown though Chinese provenance; it represents a horse struggling to get up. A small gilt bronze plaque decorated with a bull is also very much in the Scytho-Siberian style, including the coiled border which appears on numerous pieces in the Petrograd Museum.

It will be interesting to compare, as bearing on this subject, the magnificent Chou bronze sacrificial vessel lent by Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Meyer, Jr., and exhibited in the same room. Here every detail is worked out in animal forms and fishes, dragons, phoenixes, and human figures very much as on the Scythian ornaments and notably on the Vetersfelde fish.

S. C. B. R.

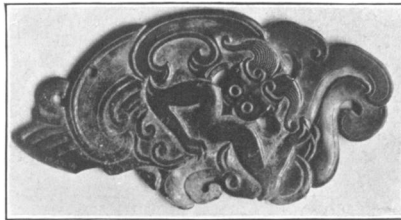


FIG. 8