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## Han Lacquerware and the Wine Cups of Noin Ula

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Lacquer work is today recognized as one of the centrally distinctive components of Han material culture (206 BCE–220 CE). What's more, the Former Han period (206 BCE–8 CE) has come to be celebrated as the apogee of Chinese lacquer art (see Wang 1982, 80–99; Prüch 1997; Fuzhou 1998; Barbieri-Low 2001; and Li 2004 for further reading on Han lacquer). These insights are relatively recent and entirely the result of archaeological discoveries. Precisely a century has passed since the first archaeological discovery and identification of a lacquer vessel from Han China. In the spring of 1907, while surveying the Han border fortifications north of Dunhuang — and just weeks before coming upon the sensational medieval library at the Mogao Caves — Aurel Stein dryly

recorded his historic find, a wooden ear cup with scroll ornament from the ruins of a Han command center (Stein 1921, Vol. 2, 645; Vol. 4, pl. LII). Since Stein's discovery, and especially over the past forty years, archaeologists have unearthed thousands of Han and even pre-Han lacquer artifacts, several hundred of which are fortunately still in fine condition.

We now know that the use of lacquer as a protective, water-proof coating made from the sap of the lacquer tree (*rhus verniciflua*) goes back to Neolithic times in China. But as an artistically emancipated craft, lacquering came into its own only in the late fifth century BCE in the state of Chu in southern China. From that time on it was the preferred means of decoration for

all types of wood-based artifacts, whether vessels, boxes, furniture, musical instruments, arms, chariots, or coffins. By the Qin (220–206 BCE) and early Han eras, lacquering had become so prominent a craft that certain vessels were even produced as 'pure' lacquer artifacts without a wood substrate, using instead lacquer-drenched ramie fabric to build a core.

As a commodity, lacquer work was in many respects akin to woven silk during the Han era. Both had relatively little intrinsic material value. Made from renewable resources, silk and lacquer products, unlike artifacts made of jade and gold, were valued primarily on the basis of their design and manufacture. This meant that they could be made to cater to a relatively broad spectrum of the population. Plain silk fabric and utensils simply varnished in raw brown lacquer were widely available and essential commodities. But patterned silks with complex weave structures and glossy, colored lacquers with artfully painted red and black decoration



*Fig. 1. Wine cup, dated 2 BCE, from Noin Ula tomb 6. Seen from the side. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (photograph © 2005 Daniel C. Waugh).*

or even gold and silver inlays could be very expensive and functioned above all as means of social distinction. The quality of lacquer work found in archaeological contexts can thus explain much about the wealth and social position of its last owner; it can even illuminate his or her relationship to the Han imperial court.

While the discovery of Han lacquer ware in a military station from the ancient Han frontier may not be as spectacular as the finds from aristocratic tombs near big towns, it is by no means unusual or surprising. Lacquered artifacts were available everywhere in the Han Empire, even though the majority was made in the lacquering workshops of central and southern China where lacquer trees grew abundantly. Han lacquers have even been found in areas far beyond the ancient Han frontier, as far north as Lake Baikal and as far west as Begram in Afghanistan (for the Begram finds see Hackin 1954, 295-297, figs. 243-249; Mehendale 2005, 1.4.3).

The lacquer artifacts from such distant sites are still poorly understood, despite the fact that many of them were already found in the 1920s and 1930s. Although widely discussed early on, they have received little attention since the major discoveries in the People's Republic of China took center stage. Now, however, in light of recent insights on Han lacquer and in view of new



*Fig. 2. Wine cup, dated 2 BCE, from Noin Ula tomb 6. Seen from the bottom without handles. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (photograph after Umehara 1960, pl. 59).*

discoveries in Mongolia and Buryatia, it is worth taking a fresh look at some of the early finds.

Most recently, Han lacquer artifacts have been reported from a number of Xiongnu cemeteries. While some evidence was discovered in tombs in the Tamir River Valley in eastern Arkhangai, some 300 kilometers west of Ulaanbaatar (Waugh 2006), the majority of finds come from the mountains between Ulaanbaatar and Lake Baikal north of it (Miniaev 1998; Torbat et al. 2003). Of these recent finds a lacquered Han chariot is certainly the most extraordinary (Miniaev and Sakharovskaia 2006). The most significant early discoveries, however, remain the wine cups discovered in the mid-1920s in the Noin Ula

Mountains, about 100 kilometers north of Ulaanbaatar.

Four relatively well-preserved lacquer cups from Noin Ula have been adequately published [Figs. 1-5]; a few more have been reported though not illustrated in the main surveys. Unfortunately, no proper excavation report of the tombs was ever prepared, as its potential authors had fallen victim to Stalinist terror (Maenchen-Helfen 1965). And the Japanese



*Fig. 3. Wine cup from Noin Ula tomb 23. Mid-first century CE. National Museum of Mongolian History, Ulaanbaatar (photograph courtesy of Thierry Ollivier).*





Fig. 4. Wine cup from Noin Ula tomb 23. Mid-first century CE. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (photograph after Umehara 1960, pl. 63).

archaeologist Umehara Sueji (1893–1983), who was able to study the lacquers extensively soon after their discovery and planned on publishing a major analysis of the site, lost most of his research materials during the 1945 napalm bombing of Tokyo and had to reconstruct his book manuscript after the war. Finally, there has been some confusion due to the dividing of the Noin Ula finds between the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Museum of Mongolian History in Ulaanbaatar.

Umehara explains that the four Han lacquer cups come from three

different tombs, a fact that appears to have escaped several later authors (Umehara 1960, 28–32, pls. 59–62). The Russian expedition of 1924–25 led by Petr K. Kozlov, according to Umehara, found an inscribed and dated cup of 2 BCE in the large *kurgan* 6 [Figs. 1, 2] and two un-inscribed cups in *kurgan* 23, about 100 meters west of *kurgan* 6 (Figs. 3, 4). Sergei I. Rudenko later mentions in his inventories of the Kozlov expedition, published in 1962, that tomb 23 actually contained four lacquer cups, one of which [Fig. 3] had been returned to Mongolia (Rudenko

1969, 112). The fourth cup was not discovered by Kozlov, but by Mongolian scholars who investigated the tombs in summer 1927. This cup, found in four fragments, is also inscribed and dated to the year 2 BCE [Fig. 5], but was discovered in tomb 5, which lay in the vicinity of tomb 6. It has always been kept in Ulaanbaatar (Umehara 1944, 16; Umehara 1960, 29). The two cups now in Ulaanbaatar have recently been shown in two traveling exhibitions in Europe (Paris 2000, 147; Bonn 2005, 51), where they were both assigned to tomb 6, without any mention of Umehara's account of the 1927 investigations or the reports that the un-inscribed cup [Fig. 3] was found in the inner burial chamber of tomb 23, north of the coffin (cf. Trever 1932, 47, pl. 29, 1; Rudenko 1969, pl. 48). These discrepancies are likely the result of oversights by the catalogue authors. The catalogues, especially the one from Paris, do, however, have the virtue of providing outstanding color illustrations of Noin Ula lacquers.

The two cups from tombs 5 and 6 [figs. 1, 2 and 5] carry important inscriptions that identify them as official products manufactured in government workshops for the imperial court. Both share the same basic design of facing birds and spirals, yet they show very different styles: one bold the other tender and fragile. These stylistic differences have been recognized as typical for two distinct regional styles — those from Sichuan and Shaanxi, respectively. As Anthony Barbieri-Low has illuminated in his excellent recent dissertation, the cup from tomb 5 [Fig. 5] is a typical example of the thousands of mass-produced vessels from the two imperial luxury workshops in Shu and Guanghan; fifty lacquer vessels from these Sichuan workshops are still known today (Barbieri-Low 2001, 421–422). The cup is of beautiful quality, despite being mass-produced, and is explicitly designated in its inscription as 'fit for use by the emperor (*chengyu*).'



Fig. 5. Wine cup, dated 2 BCE, from Noin Ula tomb 5. National Museum of Mongolian History, Ulaanbaatar (photo courtesy of Thierry Ollivier).

In contrast, the cup painted with fine lines from *kurgan* 6 [Figs. 1, 2] is unique in the archaeological record. It was produced in a palace workshop in the capital Chang'an in Shaanxi by the master artisan Wang Tanjing and design painter Hu. On the bottom, separate from the incised inscription made by the manufacturing office, the cup bears the two additional large characters 'Shanglin,' which refer to the imperial park in Chang'an. This reference led Barbieri-Low to speculate that the lacquer workshop might actually have been located in the imperial park. It is, however, much more likely that the inscription was simply part of the palace inventory system that designated the cup for use in the one of the imperial palaces in Shanglin Park.

There is indeed good reason to think that this cup was used in Shanglin Park in the year 1 BCE to host the chief Xiongnu leader, Shanyu Wuzhuliuruoti (r. 8 BCE–13 CE). According to Ban Gu (32–92 CE), this *shanyu* had requested an audience at the capital as early as the year 3 BCE. But the Han court extend the formal invitation only after months of deliberations centering on the vast expense and the bad luck occasioned by visits from the Xiongnu leaders. A subsequent illness of the *shanyu* further delayed the visit. When the *shanyu* finally arrived, he came in the company of five hundred men, more than in any delegation before, and all of them eager to experience the Han court's wealth and generosity. The emperor, who for astrological reasons had decided it best to 'reside in the Grapevine Palace (Putao Gong) in Shanglin Park and to treat his guest with additional honors,' invited the *shanyu* to stay at Shanglin Park as well — a privilege regular courtiers could only dream of. 'The *shanyu*, appreciative of this favor, was also regaled with 370 robes, thirty thousand bolts of various patterned silk fabrics, and thirty thousand pounds of raw

silk, in addition to the same gifts as had been given in the year 25 BCE [to his predecessor]' (*Hanshu* 94B.3817).

Ever since the Xiongnu and the Han court had reached a peace accord in 53 BCE, diplomatic exchange between the two had intensified. By the end of the first century BCE there was a well established system of tributary trade between the two rulers, according to which the emperor provided huge gifts to the *shanyu*, who in turn acted nominally submissive, promising to keep the peace and enable mutual trade. Before Wuzhuliuruoti's visit in the year 1 BCE, there were four instances of a Xiongnu *shanyu* attending an audience at the Han court, each more generously rewarded than the one before (Barfield 1989, 63–67). Back in his own country, as Thomas Barfield has pointed out, the *shanyu* was obliged to distribute among his nobility the wealth he had obtained through this tributary trade (Barfield 1981). Such gift distribution among the Xiongnu nobility offers one explanation as to why the two imperial lacquer cups were reportedly found in different tombs. It is of course also possible that the occupants of tombs 5 and 6 were both at the Chinese court in 1 BCE. Indeed it has often been suggested that *kurgan* 6 is the tomb of Wuzhuliuruoti Shanyu himself (Paris 2000, 146).

The two cups made in the year 2 BCE, undoubtedly in anticipation of the expected Xiongnu visit, are the earliest lacquer cups from Noin Ula. The ear cups found in tomb 23 belong to an altogether different category. They are of noticeably lower quality than the vessels made in the government workshops, have no official inscriptions, differ in style, and may be as much as seven decades younger than the cups dated to 2 BCE (cf. a vessel from the tomb of Wang Xu [d. after 69 CE] in Pyongyang; Harada 1930, pl. 61). The symmetric and yet organic

cloud and scroll ornament with interspersed animals that was omnipresent during the Former Han period [Figs. 1, 2 and 4], faded away over the course of the first century CE. In the 40s, after two decades of civil war following the murder of Wang Meng (r. 9–23 CE), the aristocracy of the Later Han dynasty (25–220) abandoned the old luxuriant ornamental style in favor of a frugal one, and the imperial lacquer workshops henceforth produced only undecorated vessels, red on the inside, black on the outside, before finally shutting down for lack of funds early in the second century. With the trendsetting imperial elite forfeiting luxurious display, the Han lacquer industry becomes fiercely commercial, and the old ornamental style survives only in an increasingly simplified, downgraded form. The two cups from tomb 23 represent this commercial type of ware typical of lacquer production in the first century CE. Most likely these cups reached the Xiongnu not as official imperial gifts but through trade. We can view them as evidence for free forms of private trade between the Han and Xiongnu states, conducted both at Han frontier markets, by the countless members of the embassies that went to and fro, and by the military stationed along the borders. Yü Ying-shih has adeptly described this kind of frontier trade in his classic study (Yü 1967, 93–132).

Because lacquerwares were made in only some regions in China, they were among the frequently traded goods in the Han Empire. And because lacquers were unique Chinese products with excellent qualities, it seems reasonable to assume that they figured prominently in international trade — like bronze mirrors or silks (Maenchen-Helfen 1973 for an overview of bronze mirrors in Xiongnu contexts). Early Chinese sources are full of proud references to the infatuation of Han's neighbors with Chinese



goods, yet the sources virtually never mention lacquer specifically as an export good. Lacquer evidently did not fit the Han rhetoric of wealth in the same way gold, jade, and silk did. When the Han court provided wine cups to their tributary delegations, they handed them out as party favors after the main banquet rather than as serious gifts worth entering into the national records. Nevertheless, some recipients of such tokens of imperial grandeur — Chinese officials perhaps more so than others — treasured them, sometimes over generations, and rarely ever used them.

Not surprisingly, imitations of the imperial wares were also available on the market. Some, as Barbieri-Low has uncovered, were deceptively similar to authentic official wares, complete with fake official inscriptions (Barbieri-Low 2001). The majority, however, were of lesser quality and emphasized either the bold red line perceived as typical of the imperial Sichuan style or the fine red lines typical of the metropolitan style of the Former Han capital, Chang'an. The fragments of lacquer vessels recently discovered in Xiongnu tombs in the Tamir Valley represent such commercial categories from around the mid-first century CE (Waugh 2006). The bronze-mounted handle of an ear cup found in Feature 201 [Fig. 6], for instance, continues the characteristic design of diagonal



Fig. 7. Han lacquer bowl fragment, first century CE, found at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu, Feature 97, Arkhangai aimag, in 2005 (photograph © 2005 Daniel C. Waugh).

lines seen on ear cup handles made for the court earlier on [cf. Fig. 5]. The bowl found in Feature 97 [Fig. 7], on the other hand, combines on its black exterior a striking pattern of sketchy red lines and dots — a faded continuation of the old imperial Sichuan-style — with a design of delicate scrolls painted in red, gray, and yellow. Such multi-colored painted ornament was typical for the commercial products of the early Eastern Han era (25-220 CE) and hinted at the earlier tradition of expensive gold and silver inlays. Like many Eastern Han artifacts for personal use, such as bronze mirrors, silks, or jewelry, this lacquer bowl was magically charged to enhance



Fig. 8. Inscription on Han lacquer bowl, first century CE, found at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu, Feature 97, Arkhangai aimag, in 2005 (photograph © 2005 Daniel C. Waugh).

fertility through its auspicious inscription *yi zi sun*, 'may it bring you sons and grandsons' [Fig. 8].

The regularity with which remains of Han lacquers are found in Xiongnu tombs of the late first century BCE and the first century CE suggests that the Xiongnu elite recognized fine Han lacquers as prestigious and useful possessions, if not for their association with the Chinese court, then for their appeal as exotic commodities and their connection to the Xiongnu ruling family, whose policies resulted in the availability of Chinese artifacts. A more precise picture of Xiongnu perceptions and uses of fine Chinese commodities such as the perishable lacquers, however, awaits further research.



Fig. 6. Bronze-mounted handle of ear cup found at Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu, Arkhangai aimag, Feature 201, in 2005 (photograph © 2005 Daniel C. Waugh).

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