

The Byzantine Element in the Turkic Gold Cup with the Tiger Handle Excavated at Boma, Xinjiang

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In 1997, a hoard with assorted exquisite gold and silver vessels was found by the local farmers in Boma, Yili (Ili) county, Xinjiang [Fig. 1]. The new finds were soon sent to the Yili County Museum. An Yingxin, the director of the

museum, first reported the treasure and published a preliminary study in *Wenwu* (An 1999). After comparing the new finds with other artifacts unearthed in its vicinity, he dated these precious metal works to the sixth or seventh century CE, that is, the late Northern Dynasty to early Tang period. Concerning the owner of the treasure he wrote:

"During the sixth century, the Tekesi River basin was the political center of the Western Turks. The court of the qaghan was situated there. The discovery of these high-quality gold and silver objects will no doubt be helpful for locating the court of the qaghan and answering other related questions."

A gold cup with a tiger handle is especially eye-catching among these treasures that most likely belonged to a Turkic chieftain or even the qaghan himself. It is 16 cm high, 10.5 cm in body diameter and weighs 725 g. The rhombus (lozenge) pattern is mold-pressed on the whole body of the cup, and oval red agate is inlaid in each rhombus. A tiger sculpture is riveted to the upper body of the work as a handle. The tiger has a wide, round head, two erect ears, and a long and narrow body. The stripes that identify the tiger are etched over the whole body of the animal [Figs. 2, 3].

The Turks were fond of drinking wine. Two of the ten titles of their leading officials were derived from the words for wine and a drinking vessel (Cai 1998, pp. 190–91). The gold cup from Boma resembles the drinking vessels carved on certain of the Turkic period stone images (balbals) found Tuva, southern Siberia (Sun 1996, p. 262, Fig. 31). It is very likely that such cups were used for wine.

The combination of drinking cup and tiger handle reminds us of the close relationship between the tiger (also the leopard) and



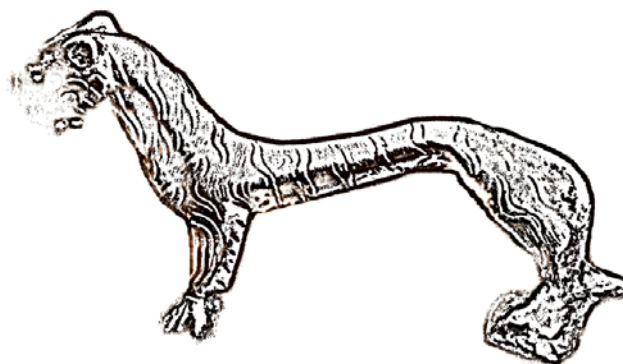
Fig. 1. The location of Boma.



Fig. 2 (left). The Boma Cup.

Fig. 3 (below). The handle of the Boma cup. All drawings copyright © 2008 Lin Ying.

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Dionysus. In Greek myth, Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele, once wandered around Egypt and India, accompanied by his teacher Silenus and a group of satyrs and maenads (Cary et al. 1979, pp. 478–82). After that, he was worshipped by Greeks as the god of wine. The personal mount of Dionysus was a tiger or leopard. Therefore, the two animals constituted a key element in Greek and Roman depictions of Dionysus. Frequently, they were portrayed as lying prone on the wine vessel and drinking the wine eagerly. Sculptures of the animals are usually similar in body shape, but they can be distinguished by the pattern on the bodies. The tiger is striped, while the leopard is identified by roundels.

The theme of Dionysus and his tiger was also adopted by craftsman in the Parthian Empire (247 BCE – 226 CE). For example, there is a Parthian drinking vessel with a tiger handle [Fig. 4]. Gradually the tiger image came to be employed for a specific type of handle not even connected with wine or Dionysus, as can be seen in Sasanian and then Islamic

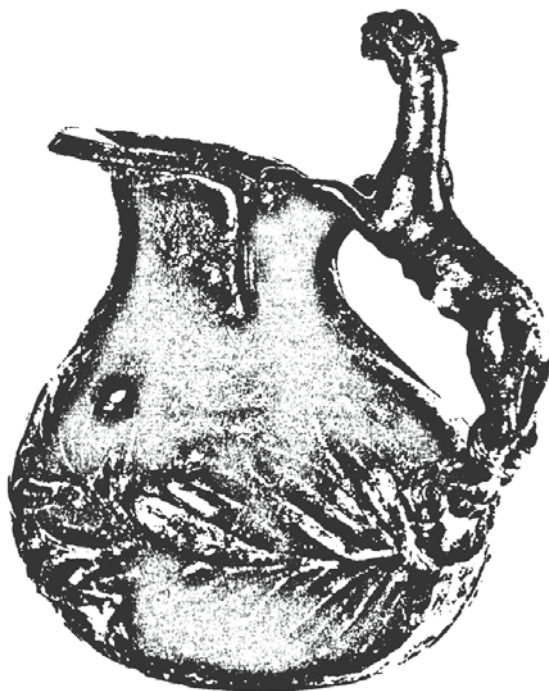


Fig. 4. Bronze jug with feline handle, Parthian, 2nd century BCE, Cincinnati Art Museum. After Ettinghausen 1972, Fig. 27.

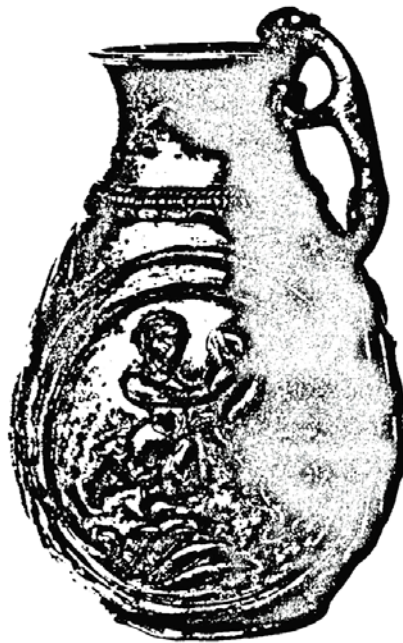


Fig. 5. Sasanian silver jug, partially gilt, with a tiger handle, Iran, 5th century CE. The Cleveland Museum of Art. After Ettinghausen 1972, Fig. 28.

tableware [Figs. 5, 6] (Ettinghausen 1972, pp. 2–8, Fig. 5).

There are some similarities between the tiger sculpture on the Boma cup and the tiger handle of the Sasanian vessel: for instance, the thin body, the pattern of stripe, and the rough treatment of the tiger's feet. Was

the Boma gold cup an import from Sasanian Iran? This seems unlikely. First, the rhomboid pattern is rare in Sasanian gold and silver works. On the other hand, it is closer that found on Byzantine silverware unearthed from an Avar tomb in Albania [Fig. 7, next page] (Daim et al. 1996, p. 435, no. 5.502). In addition, the red stone inlay is typical decoration for the jewelry and metal work in the steppe in pre-Islamic times. Most gold objects in the Boma hoard are inset with red stones. Therefore we believe that the Boma gold cup was produced by a local Turkic craftsman. The tiger handle similarly is not likely to be an imitation of Sasanian silver work. The tiger was riveted to the upper body of the vessel where it seems to be out of proportion with the size of the cup. In contrast, the Sasanian tiger handle is proportionate in size to the body of the vessel, and the head and front claws of the tiger are located on the rim of the vessel, as if the animal is eager to drink the wine. Thus we may conclude that the

Fig. 6. (left) Bronze ewer with feline handle, Iran, 8th century CE ; (right) Bronze juglike lamp inlaid with silver and copper, Seljuq period, late 12th century CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. After Ettinghausen 1972, Figs. 30, 31.

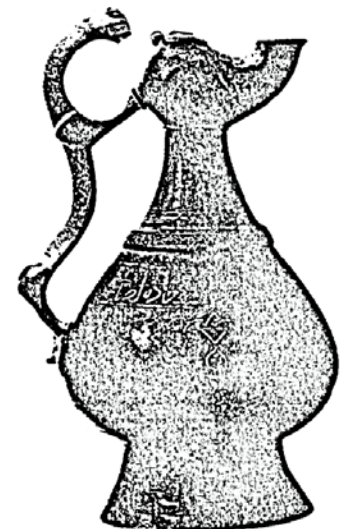




Fig. 7. Byzantine silver vessel, Varp, Albania. After Daim et al. 1996, no. 5.502.

tiger handle of the Boma cup most likely had been produced as a sculpture before it was attached to the cup rather than being made specifically as a handle to match the vessel.



Fig. 8. Gold bracelet, Egypt (?), 7th century CE. After Ross 1962-1972, Vol. 2, Pl. XXXVIII.

When we examine the development of sculptures depicting tigers or leopards in Byzantium from the fourth century to the sixth century, we find that the tiger handle of Boma has a closer relationship to the Byzantine works than to the Sasanian example. Small sculptures of tigers or leopards appeared as early as the era of the Roman Empire. By Late Antiquity, Christianity had replaced traditional worship and become the state religion. As pagan customs, the festival and ceremonies for Dionysus were finally eliminated. It is possibly against this background that the sculptures of tigers

and leopards lost their connection with wine and Dionysus began to appear more widely on other objects [Figs. 8, 9].

In the meantime, gold and silver drinking vessels with tiger or leopard handles continued to be made in the territory of the Byzantine Empire. Nevertheless, contemporaries seemed to like to collect the handles as precious objects. Two small silver sculptures of a tiger and a leopard were discovered in the Traprain Hoard in Scotland between 1914 and 1919 [Fig. 10, facing page] (Curle 1923, pp. 1-5, 79-80). They are of the same size, but differ in the pattern of body decoration.



Fig. 9. Silver lamp, Egypt, 7th century CE. After Ross 1962-1972, Vol. 2, Pl. XXIX.

Those who have studied this hoard believe that they were originally a pair of handles for a ewer. In 1992, another small silver tiger was found in the Hoxne Hoard in England [Fig. 11, facing page] (Bland and Johns 1993, p. 24). The Hoxne tiger sculpture was more exquisitely sculpted than were the feline handles found at Traprain. The body of the tiger was engraved with stripes and inlaid with niello. In this case, as at Traprain, the sculpture depicted a female tiger; most likely, paired with a sculpture of a male tiger, the two would have been used as handles for a large silver vessel. The Hoxne Hoard, which was buried in the beginning of the fifth century, included over 200 gold and silver objects and 14,000 gold and silver Roman coins. The good condition of these treasures indicates that they were well preserved in their day and later placed in the hoard after careful planning. This is further testimony that people liked to collect these small tiger or leopard handles as

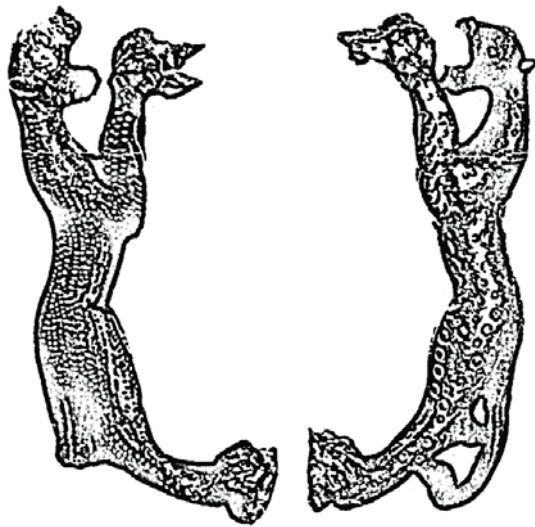


Fig. 10. Silver handles of leopards, 5th century CE, Traprain, Scotland. After Curle 1923, Pl. XXXI.



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Fig. 11. (right) Silver sculpture of a tiger, 5th century CE, Hoxne Hoard, Britain.

separate sculptures in daily life.

The sixth century saw the rise of the Western Turk Empire. Sizabul (Ishtemi – Shi-dian-mi 室点密 in Chinese sources), the first qaghan of the Western Turks, sent envoys to Constantinople and established diplomatic relations with the Byzantine Empire. From 568 to 576, at least five Byzantine envoys visited his court. When Valentinus, the last Byzantine envoy, set out from Constantinople for the territory of the Western Turks, he was accompanied by 106 Turks who had followed the previous Roman envoys back to Constantinople and now joined the delegation to return their homeland (Blockley 1986, pp. 171–79). In the same period, the Western Turks extended their military power to the eastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire, aiming to punish the Avars, their old enemies. When Valentinus arrived at the court of the qaghan, the Western Turk soldiers were undertaking an expedition west and invaded the Crimea (Ibid.). In this situation, the Byzantine silver objects were mostly likely carried into the Western Turk Empire as diplomatic gifts or spoils of war.

There is additional archaeological evidence for the present argument. The Seuso Treasure, which became known to the public in 1990, consists of 14 pieces of Roman silver tableware. The inscription on a silver plate indicates that they were once owned by Seuso, possibly a Roman general of Celtic origin who lived in Pannonia, the Roman province south of the frontier on the Danube. The plate, together with other vessels, was produced around the early fifth century (Painter 1990; Mango 1990; Mango and Bennett 1994, pp. 195, 205–6, 238–39; for the date, see also Nagy and Tóth 1990). A big silver drinking vessel (The Hippolytus Jug) of the Seuso Treasure [Fig.12a, b] has two handles in the shape of leopards, whose style and technique of sculpting resemble those of the



Fig. 12a, b. Silver amphora and its leopard handles, 4th-5th centuries CE (?), Seuso Treasure. After Mango and Bennett 1994, Figs. 5-1, 5-50.

feline handles in the Traprain and Hoxne Hoards. Prior to their being re-attached before the auction at Sotheby's, the handles of the Seuso vessel had been separated from its body. According to the studies by Marlia Mango and Kenneth Painter, at least two Roman silver vessels are similar to the Seuso amphora. One, from Concesti, Romania, is in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum in Russia (Matzulewitsch 1929, pp. 131–32; Kent and Painter 1977, p. 297). The shape of the Concesti amphora is the same as that of the Seuso one. However, the two handles, which had already been separated from the body of the vessel, are sculptures of centaurs instead of a tiger or leopard [Fig. 13]. The



Fig. 13. Late Roman silver ewer, Concesti, Romania. After Matzulewitsch 1929, Tafel 30.

other example is some fragments of a silver amphora unearthed at Tauteni-Bihor, Romania [Dumitrascu 1973, pp. 116–18]. What survives of the reliefs from the side of the vessel suggests that it is most likely of the same type. This type of amphora came from the eastern Mediterranean region, especially from the workshops in Constantinople.

We do not know the owner and source of Seuso Treasure. Nevertheless, the inscription on the silver plate illustrates that Pannonia was once a station in the long journey of the treasure. Pannonia, the Roman province on the Danube frontier, was first conquered by Attila, the leader of Huns, and then became a part of Ostrogothic Kingdom. The owners of the two amphorae found in Romania were most likely chieftains of the Huns or Alans, who played important roles in the middle and lower reaches of the Danube in the fifth century.

Priscus of Panium, the Roman envoy who went to the court of Attila in 449 CE, mentioned that the Romans gave the Huns many gifts for both men and women, including silver amphorae. Possibly, Roman silver ewers with tiger or leopard handles were sent into the steppe as diplomatic gifts. In this process, the Roman habit of collecting the tiger handle as an independent sculpture might have been adopted by the nomads. A gold necklace unearthed from Simleu Silvanici, Romania, provides additional evidence about the interest in objects embodying the tiger or leopard sculptures [Fig. 14a, b] (Florescu and Miclea 1979, pp. 92–95). The center pendant of the necklace is a large bead, enclosed by two crossed rings. Two gold leopards, their front paws on the knot connecting the chain and the pendant, face each other. Although the leopards are much smaller than the handles of Roman silver vessels, in their shape and creative concept they are similar. The hoard at Simleu Silvanici dates from the fifth century. Its owner was some barbarian chieftain connected with the Huns who had probably immigrated to the Danube valley. These barbarian tribes ruled the

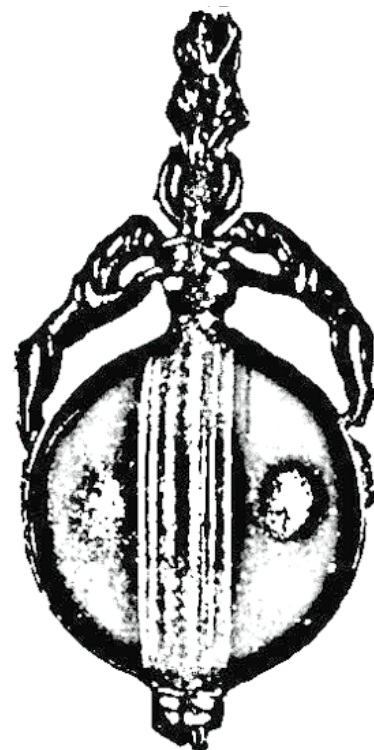


Fig. 14a, b. Gold necklace with leopard decoration, Simleu Silvanici, Romania. After Florescu and Miclea 1979, Figs. 80, 81.

local Dacians as the military vassals of Byzantine Empire.

The Xiongnu 匈奴 (the ancestors of the Huns) had a tradition of respecting the tiger and leopard as symbols of the heroic spirit. The gold and silver works excavated from the Xiongnu tombs in north China show that the image of the tiger was highly valued. Chinese sources assert that the Turks were descended from the Xiongnu. For

instance, the account of the Tujue 突厥 (Turks) in the *Beishi* 北史 (the standard history of the Northern Dynasty, composed by Li Yanshou 李延寿 in the seventh century) states: "The ancestor of the Turks lived in the west of Xihai (the West Sea) as an independent tribe. They were originally a minor tribe of Xiongnu." The Kül Tegin stele from the Orkhon Valley which was erected in 732 CE mentions a chieftain named *Bars bäg*, who married the sister of the qaghan and was granted the title Qaghan (Rui 2001, p. 251, n. 26). "Bars" was an old loan word from Iranian, referring to a leopard. In Turkic, its meaning also embraced the tiger and other large felines. That a member of the Turkic elite was named after a tiger or leopard indicates that the worship of these fierce animals continued in Turkic society. Possibly it was this cultural tradition which explains why the qaghans accepted the tiger or leopard handles from the Roman metal vessels and then had them attached to their own precious objects.

The Turks had developed the technique of producing high quality gold and silver work. A Turfan document from the Astana graveyard recorded that *Jinshi* 金师 (master of gold) Mo-pan-tuo 莫畔陀 was sent by the qaghan to the Gaochang Kingdom. According to the Turfan documents, the food provided for foreign guests in Gaochang was classified into three categories. The master of gold was supplied with the first-class food, indicating his high status in Turkic society. Clearly the craft of gold and silver manufacture was highly valued by the Turks. In 678 CE (the first year of the Shengli period in the reign of Wu Zetian 武则天), Mo-ch'o 默啜 (Qapaghan), Qaghan of the Turks, complained that the gold and silver wares sent by Empress Wu Zetian were "all counterfeit instead of qualified products" (cf. Yu 1996, pp. 206-7). The high connoisseurship of Turkic aristocrats for the gold and silver objects further illustrates that the Turkic craftsman were

able to imitate the tiger handles of Roman tableware.

In conclusion, the tiger handle of the Boma gold cup was very possibly made in imitation of the tiger sculptures of some Roman silverware. When the worship of Dionysus had gradually disappeared in Christian Byzantium, the tiger sculpture came to be connected again with wine in a new cultural context. The Turkic Empire connected the Byzantine, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. The Turks not only transmitted the material and cultural achievements between East and West, but also combined in their own distinct culture the elements of different civilizations. Even if the influence of this new creation was not long-lived, it was through the Turks that foreign cultures penetrated into Eurasia more profoundly. The Boma gold cup reveals the unique achievement of the early Turks in the cultural exchange between East and West.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to Qu Junxiong 瞿俊雄 and Jiang Zehuan 江泽欢 in Hope Workshop, School of Chemistry, Zhongshan University, who kindly made the drawings for my article. My special thank goes to Professor Daniel Waugh for all his help, patience and painstaking work to prepare this publication.

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Lin Ying is Associate Professor in the Department of History, Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) University, at Guangzhou, China. Her dissertation examines how Byzantine culture flowed into the Tang Empire through nomadic people and Central Asian merchants along the Silk Road [Lin Ying, *Tangdai Fulin congshuo* 唐代拂菻丛说 (*Fulin*, the Ruler of Treasure Country: Byzantium and China in the Tang Period), Beijing, 2006]. She is now working on the economic and cultural contacts

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The gold mask found at Boma along with the gold cup.