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The Challenges of Preserving Evidence of Chinese Lacquerware in Xiongnu Graves

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This brief communication may serve as an appendix to the report by David Purcell and Kimberly Spurr on the *Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu* excavation in 2005. My goal is not to provide a scholarly analysis of the abundant evidence we uncovered of Chinese lacquerware — I lack the expertise to do that — but mainly to document it and to highlight the challenges which must be addressed if such evidence from future excavations is to be properly preserved and studied.

One is struck by the frequency with which lacquerware (or at least traces of its existence) is reported in excavations of Xiongnu graves and also the apparent lack of its serious analysis. The term can, of course, encompass a variety of objects of different composition, ranging from those merely decorated with a resin-based paint to objects made of layers of wood, clay and/or cloth impregnated with lacquer and then covered with additional layers of paint. With notable exceptions, the evidence from Xiongnu graves is of surviving paint layers or fragments, not intact objects on which the paint was applied. As was the case in our Tamir excavations, such survivals may end up being 'preserved' primarily in the photographic record, although this should not always have to be the case.

The best known examples of re-

sonably well preserved Chinese lacquerware in Xiongnu tombs are the 'eared cups' (Fig. 1), painted table legs, chopsticks and an animal-shaped pouring vessel found in the excavations at Noin Ula in northern Mongolia. Indeed, the inventories of the Noin Ula graves are full of references to lacquered objects (Rudenko 1962, pp. 117 ff.; pls. VI, XLVIII; Trever 1932, pls. 27, 29-31). As is well known, the circumstance of the graves having been flooded there resulted in remarkably good preservation of organic material, including carpets, clothing, a wide variety of wooden objects, and much more. The eared cups at Noin Ula are of particular interest here: at least one of them had both bronze handles and an inscription dated 2 BCE indicating its manufacture in Sichuan, the major location of Han lacquer production (*Dschingis Khan*, nos. 16, 17, pp. 50-51).

At Tamir 1, evidence of lacquer was found in at least four of the five excavated graves, in all cases the designs being in red (or orangish red) and black. Where possible, it was photographed in situ, but with one exception, none



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Fig. 1. Lacquerware eared cups excavated at Noin Ula. Collection of the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



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Fig. 2. A box of lacquer fragments from Feature 201, Tamir 1 site.

of what we might term 'reasonably intact' lacquer objects could be preserved. Once exposed to the air, the paint layers begin to dry and curl. Given their fragility, some means of immediately sealing them and enclosing them in appropriately shaped packing would be required. Thus, absent such means, the surviving lacquer ended up further fragmented in a jumbled collection in a box (Fig. 2). Most of the larger fragments, especially those with painted designs, were then photographed and packed, but whether they

preserved, with some large fragments that retained the layers



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Fig. 4. Remains of lacquer vessel at SE corner of coffin, Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.



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Fig. 3. Fragment of lacquer object (after removal) from SE end of Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.

might subsequently be flattened and pieced together remains to be seen. Should the designs be of any value for identification, at least a visual record has been preserved.

Here is a brief summary of the lacquerware finds at Tamir 1:

Feature 97. The grave contained at least four lacquerware objects:

in the SE end, near the head of the deceased (fig. 3); in the SE corner, probably an eared cup (fig. 4); midway along the S side of the coffin, another bowl or cup (fig. 5); on top of the array including pots and a cauldron, a bowl with a gilded brass rim (figs. 6, 7). The latter was best



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Fig. 7. Detail of preceding.



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Fig. 8. Inner side of a fragment of the metal-rimmed lacquer bowl from Feature 97.

of cloth and clay (Fig. 8). A Chinese inscription (wishing good fortune) was found on what was probably the interior bottom of the bowl (for analogous examples on eared cups, see *Zhongguo* 1993-1998, pp. 44, 52-53). David Purcell has drawn a reconstruction of the bowl, based partly on the photographs (Fig. 9, next page).

Feature 109. The most striking lacquered object found here was the iron knife with a lacquered wooden handle depicted above (Fig. 12, p. 26). Unfortunately, by the time it was photographed in situ, the paint fragments had already dried and curled. The knife was at a level above



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Fig. 5. Remains of lacquer vessel, middle of S side of grave. Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.



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Fig. 6. Remains of lacquer bowl with gilded brass rim. Feature 97, Tamir 1 site.

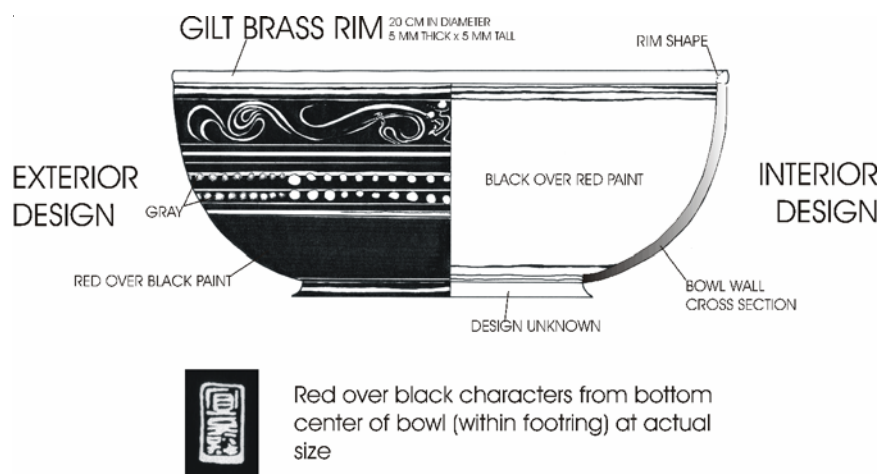


Fig. 9. Lacquerware bowl discovered with Feature 97 grave goods, shown at 36.7 percent of actual size. The rim band was recovered (Bag 65), but the bowl disintegrated within hours of exposure. The drawing was prepared directly from the vessel fragments and from high resolution digital photographs taken by Dan Waugh. Original drawing and illustration by David Purcell.

that of the actual burial and near the NW end of the grave, suggesting it might have been displaced and dropped there when the grave was looted. At least one red lacquerware vessel (Fig. 10) seems to have been located in the NW end of the grave below the knife but above the level where one of the bronze mirror fragments was found and in an area where there was a collection of various animal bones (the position is analogous to that of the bowl with gilded rim in Feature 97). Some additional fragments were found in what would have been the location of the waist of the corpse.



Fig. 11. Lacquer fragment that had been wrapped around large pot in NE corner of Feature 201 grave.



Fig. 10. Lacquer fragment from near NW end of grave in Feature 109, Tamir 1 site.

Feature 201. The remains of a lacquerware vessel were wrapped partly around the large, intact jar in the NE corner of the grave,



Fig. 12. Remains of a lacquerware eared cup with a metal handle (at top), photographed in situ. Feature 201, Tamir 1 site.

alongside where the head of the corpse would have been located (Fig. 11). The most substantial find was that of an eared cup, where one bronze handle with its lacquer inset was preserved along with a sizeable piece of the paint layer for the bowl (Fig. 12; also Fig. 19, p. 27 above). Its exact location in the grave is not clear to me but presumably was recorded. The design on the lacquer inset of the handle is somewhat similar to that on the dated cup found at Noin Ula. In approximately the center of the grave, there was what appears to have been a lacquered wooden box in which the small string of *wushu* coins was found. It is worth noting that pieces of a lacquered box were also found at Noin Ula. Lastly, I would note what seemed to have been the dark "shadow" left by a lacquered object approximately in the location where the head of the corpse would have been at the SE end of the grave.

Feature 160. There was at least one lacquered vessel at the SE corner of the grave, inside the coffin (Fig. 13, next page). A reasonably large portion of the paint had been preserved. With the approval of Prof. Wang Binghua, we used a hastily improvised technique of trying to remove it intact, by laying cardboard down on the top and



Fig. 13. Remains of lacquerware bowl (s) SE corner of coffin. Feature 160, Tamir 1 site.

then slicing under it with a trowel and inserting another piece of cardboard to create a 'sandwich' that encompassed all that remained of the cup. When this was done, the object had already begun to deteriorate from the drying and curling of the paint layer. There was also substantial other evidence of lacquer in the grave, notably in the center of the SE end near the bulkhead that separated the compartment with the pots, and in the pelvic area at the center of the grave, where there were both part of what appeared to be the bottom disk of a bowl and paint layers intermixed with the bronze mirror and spinning weight (Fig. 14). It seems quite certain that at least

lacquerware bowl, the locations in the first instance being either at the head of the grave (at Tamir 1, this means the SE end), in the pelvic area either directly on or next to the corpse, and in the grave goods piled to the north of the feet (the NW end of the coffin). While eared cups appear to have been common enough, the bowl with the gilded rim and the remains of the lacquer-handled knife are unusual finds (for the bowl cf. *Zhongguo* 1993-1998, p. 174).

More systematic photography and measurement would help considerably in documenting the lacquerware. I was able to undertake that primarily in Features 97, 109 and 160 but was absent at the point where the metal-rimmed bowl in Feature 97 was emptied of the dirt in it and its surviving fragments removed. While some of the best-preserved fragments of that bowl (which would have helped in analyzing its structure) were those

this latter location was that of a lacquered vessel.

While it is difficult to know with any certainty the original location and substance of most objects which left fragments of lacquer in the graves, we have enough evidence to suggest that Chinese lacquerware was both a readily available and a valued commodity among the Xiongnu buried at Tamir 1. It seems likely that each grave contained more than one

still lodged in the underside of its rim, by the time it was brought back to camp, most had fallen out. It is conceivable that careful emptying of the bowl (spoonful-by-spoonful, grain-by-grain) would have revealed more of the body intact, but we now have no visual record of what was there. Presumably there are methods for preservation which could be applied at the time such lacquer is first uncovered. Even short of sophisticated technical means (such as a transparent resin or moldable foam), a technique similar to that used in Feature 160 might be adopted to preserve those pieces which have been flattened and can be isolated from other finds. This rather crude approach would not have worked, of course, for the bowl in Feature 97, since it preserved in situ much of its original curvature.

By the time excavation of the graves had been completed and the objects found in them laid out for a final drawing that then served as a documentary "map" of their contents, what lacquer there was had been further fragmented, if preserved at all, and any traces of where it had been eliminated when the floor of the pit was scraped down. Laying back in place fragments of lacquer (as opposed to bones, metal objects, etc.) was not part of the process of the final mapping of the grave (and in the circumstances *could* not have been).

While the location of the lacquer might help flesh out our knowledge of burial ritual, the odds in fact are good that most lacquer fragments in Xiongnu tombs would be useless for analysis, unless a technique exists or can be devised to pinpoint origin or date from their chemical composition. We would certainly wish to know what can be learned from the painted designs on the lacquer, something that perhaps could be accomplished if the huge corpus of Han-era lacquer is systematized. Whether that will reveal anything about the date of



Fig. 14. Lacquer fragments (indicated by arrows) with bronze mirror (left) and spinning weight (right). Feature 160, Tamir 1 site.

our Xiongnu graves or the particular external connections of those who occupy them is hard to know.

The challenges of preservation which we faced and were not equipped to solve were certainly not unique. Dr. Miniaev has recorded many instances of fragments of red lacquer in his excavations of the Dyrestui Cemetery (Miniaev 1998). He has mentioned in correspondence that one of the most pressing priorities in preserving the important finds at Tsaraam on which he reports in this issue is to conserve the lacquerware, which there includes a wooden staff of interesting design. There is a good reason for the lack of systematic analysis of the lacquerware in Xiongnu tombs, for the majority of the evidence simply disappears; it is only the relatively intact pieces which have a chance of surviving.

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Daniel Waugh is a retired professor of history at the University of Washington, where he taught pre-modern Russia and courses on Central Asia, including a survey of the Silk Road. He has participated in Silkroad Foundation summer institutes in Dunhuang and the Tamir excavation in Mongolia and edits the Foundation's journal. One of his principal tasks in retirement will be to maintain the Silk Road Seattle website <<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad>>, a project for which he is the founding director.

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Fig. 1. The bronze mirror from Feature 100, Tamir 1 site.