

Northern Wei Coffin Panel Paintings from Zhijiapu

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Coffin panels painted in brilliant colors have been recovered from a Northern Wei tomb in a sandy area north of Zhijiapu 智家堡 Village, 1.5 km south of Datong 大同 City. The tomb had been looted and disturbed, and the coffin panels are strewn outside the tomb chamber; human bones, iron coffin rings, ceramic shards are scattered everywhere. The ruins indicate that the tomb is a type of earth tomb with ramp facing west at 287 degrees, comprising three sections: tomb ramp, sealed gate, and tomb chamber. The tomb ramp inclines in the western section at 21 degrees, measuring 3.4 m long and 0.9–1.2 m wide in its ruined state. The sealed gate of packed earth measures 0.24 m in its ruined state. The tomb has a layout in the shape of a ladder, the flat ceiling inclines from front to back and measures 2.45 m long, 0.82–1.55 m wide, 0.84–1.4 m high. The tomb floor is level and is 4.16–4.2 m below the ground (Fig. 1). As indicated by the tomb layout, burial objects, especially the subject matter of the coffin panel paintings, the tomb is a cultural artifact of the 5th century during the period when Pingcheng was capital (389–494 CE).

I

Subjects represented in the painted coffin panels include processionalists with horses and carriages, hunting, banquets, guards, ornamental designs, etc. They provide visual evidence of the social life of the Tuoba Xianbei at the time.

1. Panel A. This is the left side panel. The two main subjects in the painting are divided by a landscape. On the left is a high-spirited processional and on the right is a hunting scene. Rippling waves are represented by ink lines and green color between the lines refers to a flowing river; shaped like a letter “S” the river meanders between hills and forests. Still intact from these scenes are at least 35 figures, three ox-carts with open cage-like

compartments, 9 horses, animals (pigs, rabbits, birds, geese, etc.), hills, water, and trees, etc. (Fig. 2:1).

Processional. On the left side of panel A, the main subject is an ostentatious procession with ox carriages. Leading the procession are honor guards, dancers, musicians, acrobats, and bringing up the rear are attendants and carriages (Figs. 3 and 4). The main carriage is bigger and sumptuously decorated. The shaft-ox is black in color, accompanied on the right by two grooms wearing hats with back flaps and jackets that overlap in front, and their foreheads and mouths are painted in red. The passenger compartment is a rectangular box, the sides covered with green curtains in front. At the head of the carriage is a seated figure wearing a hat with back flap

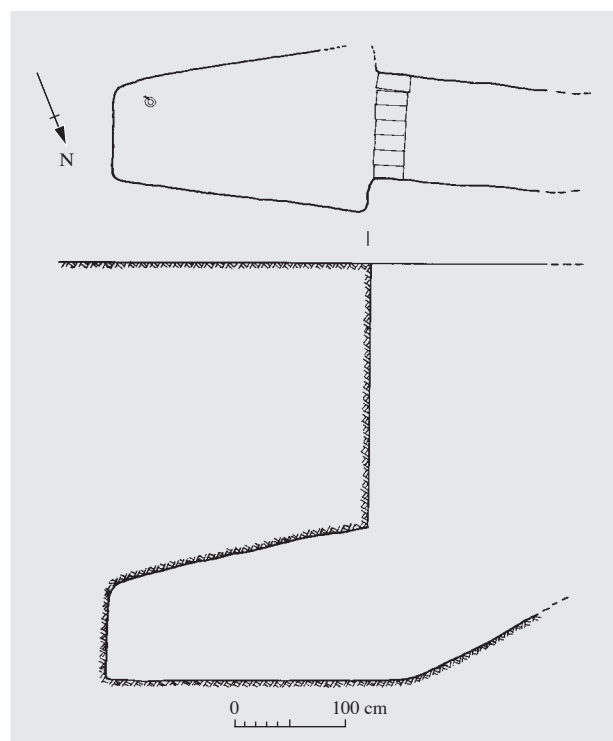


Fig. 1 Plan and cross-section of the Northern Wei tomb at Zhijiapu

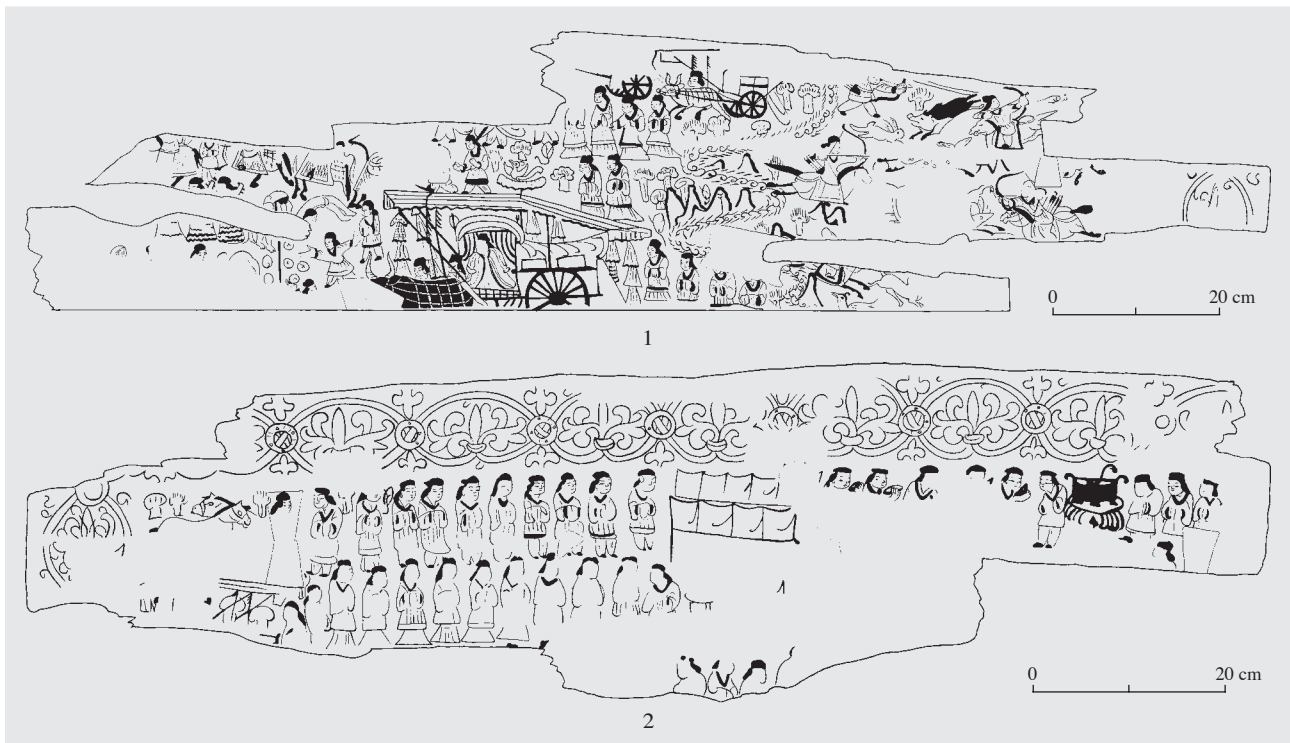


Fig. 2 Lacquer painting panels
1. panel A 2. panel B

and a magnificent patterned cape with a collar. This must be the tomb occupant. The side of the passenger compartment has two separate rectangular windows with window sills at the bottom, the carriage wheels have 16 spokes, and red drapes covering the carriage touch the ground in the back. The carriage top is tilted up in front and down in the back with a protruding center in the shape of a furred canopy, and the top is outlined in black ink. Red and green curtains are draped over the top of the canopy, flat in front and drawn up in the back. Supporting these curtains are six rods decorated with red, yellow, and blue tassels. At the apex of the canopy is a concave lotus seat on which is perched a kinnara (golden-winged bird) spreading its wings as if about to take flight. On the side of the ox is a pole with feathers delineated in ink lines. The pole has a dragon head finial.

Above is a row of carriages. The front carriage is damaged beyond recognition, but the ox behind is vividly painted with legible details such as collar, yoke, carriage shaft and web-like harness. The carriage has an oval-shaped canopy with a convex top like a tortoise shell similar to the style II ceramic carriage from the tomb of Song Shaozu 宋绍祖. These two carriages are less detailed and not as ornate as the main carriage.

Immediately in front of the main ox carriage are four horses in single file. Sitting on the red saddle of the first

horse is a warrior. The second horse is gray in color, the third is red, and over the basket-shaped mud-guards with diamond pattern are oval stirrups suspended from short straps drawn in black ink. The third horse has a harness with white ornamental discs attached to the intersections of the crisscrossing harness straps; it must have served as a mount in the cavalry. The fourth horse is a black horse serving as a beast of burden; it has a basket-like, diamond patterned mud-guard with red trim. A red cloth sack is placed on the saddle. The second and fourth horse is respectively led by a male figure in Xianbei attire.

Immediately in front of the main carriage is a performance of music, dance and acrobatics. The three female performers wear hats with back flaps, floor-length skirts with a black-and-white wavy pattern, and they are strumming musical instruments cradled in their arms. Behind them stands a tall pole and four acrobats are delivering a spectacular act. To the right of the pole are two performers in Xianbei costume playing “jumping balls and throwing swords” (Fig. 5). The game of jumping balls was known as manipulating balls in pre-Qin times, and during the Han dynasty it was called jumping balls. This is the first time that such a theme is found among the archaeological finds from the Northern Wei Pingcheng 平城 period.

Hunting. This is on the right side of panel A (Figs. 6–8). On the left side of the upper tier is a bearded hunter



Fig. 3 The main carriage in procession



Fig. 4 The accompanied carriage on the right



Fig. 5 The performance of jumping balls



Fig. 6 The hunter walking on foot



Fig. 7 Equestrian warrior shooting the boar



Fig. 8 Red-clad equestrian warrior shooting the boar

walking on foot; he wears a round-collar tunic and trousers, leather belt, feet shod in black shoes. Drawing his black bow he leans towards the right and is about to shoot the charging wild boar. Below the figure is a white hare. On the right side of the coffin panel is a mounted figure wearing a hat with back flap, a jacket that overlaps in front with narrow sleeves and black trim, red trousers, black shoes and leather belt. Charging on the galloping horse towards the left, he is directing the bow with his left hand and pulling back the string with his right hand. The tip of the arrow is rendered as an inverted triangle. Another equestrian warrior clad in red is moving towards him as if rounding up the wild animals from the opposite direction. Between these figures startled wild beasts and birds are fleeing, weaving in and out of the hills and forests. The scene is full of excitement and dynamic action, reflecting the northern Xianbei predilection for fighting and hunting.

2. Panel B. The scene is focused on the activities around the tent. On the left is a neat row of male and female attendants, horses and carriages, on the right is a kitchen scene with people bringing out platters of food. The submissive actions of male and female attendants serving their masters are depicted in vivid detail (Fig. 2:2).

Serving food. According to the ruined painting, there are at least 37 figures, one ox carriage with open cage-like compartment, and two horses. The tent is draped in the middle with a colorful material serving as a screen, outlined in ink and filled with green, red, and sky blue (Fig. 9). To the left of the tent are three rows of figures, the top row are males wearing bulbous hats with back flaps, jackets with narrow sleeves that overlap in front, trousers with red-and-white stripes, and feet shod in short black boots; their arms resting on their chests, they stand at attention with faces turned to the right. The figures in the middle row wear hats dented at the top and back flaps, jackets with narrow sleeves that overlap in front, floor-length skirts, and placing both hands in front of the chest, they stand at attention facing towards the right. Only a few individual figures are legible from the bottom row, and they are dressed like those on the top row. To the left of the figures are an ox carriage with an open cage-like compartment and two horses. To the right of the tent five figures are bringing out platters with both hands, and next to them is a round three-legged wine jar with a ladle inside, placed on a stand with bent legs (Fig. 10).

3. Panel C. This is part of the right side panel. The painting displays different carriages (Fig. 11). There are



Fig. 9 Detail of the tent during food-serving



Fig. 10 Lacquer platters and wine jar during food-serving



Fig. 11 Lacquer painting on the panel C

eight double-shaft carriages with two eight-spoke wheels; the shafts are balanced by cross-shaped stands, and the handles attached between the shafts have curved ends. To the left are three ox carriages with cage-like compartments. The only part remaining from the top row is the bottom of the carriages with red drapes dangling from the back. The carriages in the middle row have oval-shaped canopies shaped like tortoise shells with two windows on each side. The two corner posts in front

have finials in the shape of animal heads with protruding horns. The two shafts are stuck with feathers and dragon appendages, and the canopy is draped with red and gray material, flat in front and curled in the back, and dangling from the back of the carriage is a floor-length red drape. The bottom row shows a heralding cart open on all four sides, the compartment itself being a cage-like box, and only the ink outlines of the flat canopy are legible. Each of the three carriages is accompanied by a person on the

right side. The figures in the top and bottom rows are attendants wearing skirts, those in the middle row wear tunics and trousers. On the right side of the painting are five cargo carts arranged in a crisscross pattern. They all look alike, with rectangular compartments and rear shafts. Parallel lines in ink represent the vertical bars of the compartment. Behind the bars the cargo is outlined in ink and colored in red and white.

All three panels recovered from the site are painted in color and fashioned in pine wood measuring 12 cm thick. Top and bottom panels are held together with silver ingots and mortise-and-tenon joints. Before applying the painting, the coffin surface was first polished, mounted with matting to fill in the cracks, and tree knots on the panel surface were specially treated and smoothed out. The interior of the coffin was lacquered in black, the exterior painted in bright colors. Against a yellow background the images were first sketched in red outline before the final forms were outlined again in black. Coloring techniques include both shading in gradated tones as well as evenly applied single colors; pigments used are red, white, black, blue, green, gray, etc. The coffin panels are framed with a border of ribbon-like double lines spaced 10 cm apart, and between the two lines a continuous honeysuckle pattern is painted in black outline and filled in with three colors: white, red and green.

II

These coffin panel paintings display a grand processional entourage with ornate ox carriages as the focus; large groups of warriors, honor guards, male and female retainers, dancers and musicians accompany the splendidly attired tomb occupant ensconced inside the carriage. Similar themes can be found in the stone chamber tomb of Song Shaozu with brightly colored processional figures. Among them is an armored equestrian figure, “rider and horse both in armor,” as well as lightly equipped cavalry in which the war horses are without armor. These figures protect the tomb occupant whose presence is symbolized by the clay model of an ox carriage. A processional with horses and carriages is a typical theme in the mortuary art of the Northern Wei upper class, a reflection of the distinct customs of the period and region.

The painting provides a permanent record of at least three different types of carriages. The first type is the ox-drawn furled-top carriage with a canopy indented in the middle and curled up on both sides. Similar carriages can be found in the tomb of Sima Jinlong 司马金龙 and the stone chamber tomb of Zhijiapu. The second type is the

ox-drawn tortoise-shell carriage that has four posters and a domed top. Both types are draped on top, and can be considered as belonging to the larger category of ox-drawn box carriage. The third type is the cargo cart, an essential means of transportation during wartimes as well as in everyday existence. The above carriages provide valuable information concerning the means of transportation at the time.

The painting represents two types of costume in color. Males wear jackets and trousers, females wear jackets and skirts. Both male and female wear hats with back flaps, typical Xianbei hats with flaps that protect the back of the neck, and are basically similar to the costume of tomb figurines in the tomb of Song Shaozu at Yanbei Teacher's College 雁北师院, the tomb figurines in the husband-and-wife tomb of Sima Jinlong at Shijiazai 石家寨, the painting in the stone chamber tomb at Zhijiapu, coffin paintings from Northern Wei tombs north and south of the Datong 大同 area, and the costume of donor figures in the stone carvings of Yungang Caves 6, 9–11, 16, 17. Representing contemporary Xianbei 鲜卑 people, they attest to the prevalence of their indigenous attire before the move of the Northern Wei capital to Luoyang 洛阳. The founders of the Northern Wei empire — the Tuoba 拓跋 clan of Xianbei ancestry — were of northern nomadic stock. Hunting was their traditional means of production and their way of life, and this nomadic hunting custom is vividly captured in the mounted shooting scene amongst hills and forests in the coffin panel painting.

Of the three painted coffin panels recovered from this excavation, panel A organizes the images of processional, acrobatics, hunting, hills, forests and river in a unified space. In order to clarify the relative importance of primary versus secondary subject while conforming to the given space, a variety of compositional strategies are devised in order to articulate differences in proportion and changes in positioning through dramatic action. As a result, the entire composition conveys a sense of fullness and tension, with primary subjects clearly differentiated from secondary ones; it is complex without being confusing. Panels B and C arrange the figures and carriages in three rows, using a compositional device of spatial division that has been widely deployed since the Han-Jin periods. In terms of painting technique, the primary method of coloring is by applying color evenly, but the method of “gradated coloring” is adopted as well. The brushwork is succinct and daring, the lines are fluid, and the painting is an outstanding example of painting in the Northern Wei Pingcheng period. The painting sub-

jects and techniques are different from that of the lacquer screen from Sima Jinlong's tomb; unlike the paragons of filial piety and virtuous women clad in Han costume, here the subject is drawn from reality, from the daily life of the northern ethnic tribes.

Most examples of Northern Wei painting are works completed after the move of the Northern Wei court to Luoyang. Pingcheng was the capital for almost a century, with a population close to a million, and was the political, economic and cultural center of north China. With the exception of the lacquer screen from Sima Jinlong's tomb, there are few archaeological finds of painting from this period. The recovered painted panels, although damaged and incomplete, are still very precious as visual evidence for the study of the art and archaeology of the Pingcheng period of the Northern Wei; they are valuable works of art.

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Notes: The original paper, published in *Wenwu* 2004.12: 35–47, with 16 illustrations including 11 color photographs, is written by Liu Junxi 刘俊喜 and Gao Feng 高峰. The summary is prepared by the first author and English-translated by Judy C. Ho.