

Northern Wei Tomb No.1 at Hudong, Datong

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Keywords: Pingcheng period Datong coffin panels with lacquer painting

In August of 1986, in preparation for the railroad construction of Datong 大同 County, the Datong Municipal Institute of Archaeology, Shanxi 山西 Province, conducted an investigation of a group of Northern Wei tombs in a cemetery in the northeast section of the construction site. In September of the same year, salvage excavation of the cemetery commenced. Tomb No.1, the last to be excavated, is also the largest tomb at the cemetery. Excavation work continued until the end of November, when fragments of lacquer painted coffin panels surfaced from the top of the rear chamber. Limited by technological difficulties and the cold weather, the site was refilled with earth for protection. In May of 1987, our Institute and the archaeology section of the Chinese Historical Museum formed a joint excavation team and resumed digging of the tomb.

The cemetery lies 16 km southeast of Datong City, 1.4 km north of the Village Changshengzhuang 常胜

庄 in Datong County. It is situated 1056 m above sea level, on a slope that is elevated on the west and sloping down towards the east. In early years there was once a round 2–3 m earth mound. Based on the excavated results as a whole, one can conclude that there were originally earth mounds above ground. Tomb No.1 is situated on the western side of this cemetery.

I. Tomb Layout

Tomb No.1 had been looted and flooded, and the ceiling has collapsed and severely damaged the tomb entrance. Only the tomb walls have survived. This tomb has a long ramp with double brick chambers oriented at 270 degrees, and the entire structure comprises tomb ramp, connecting corridor, front and rear burial chambers. The entire tomb is 30 m long, lined with 5–6 cm thick narrow gray bricks with fine rope impressions on the surface. Smooth yellow clay is used as mortar between

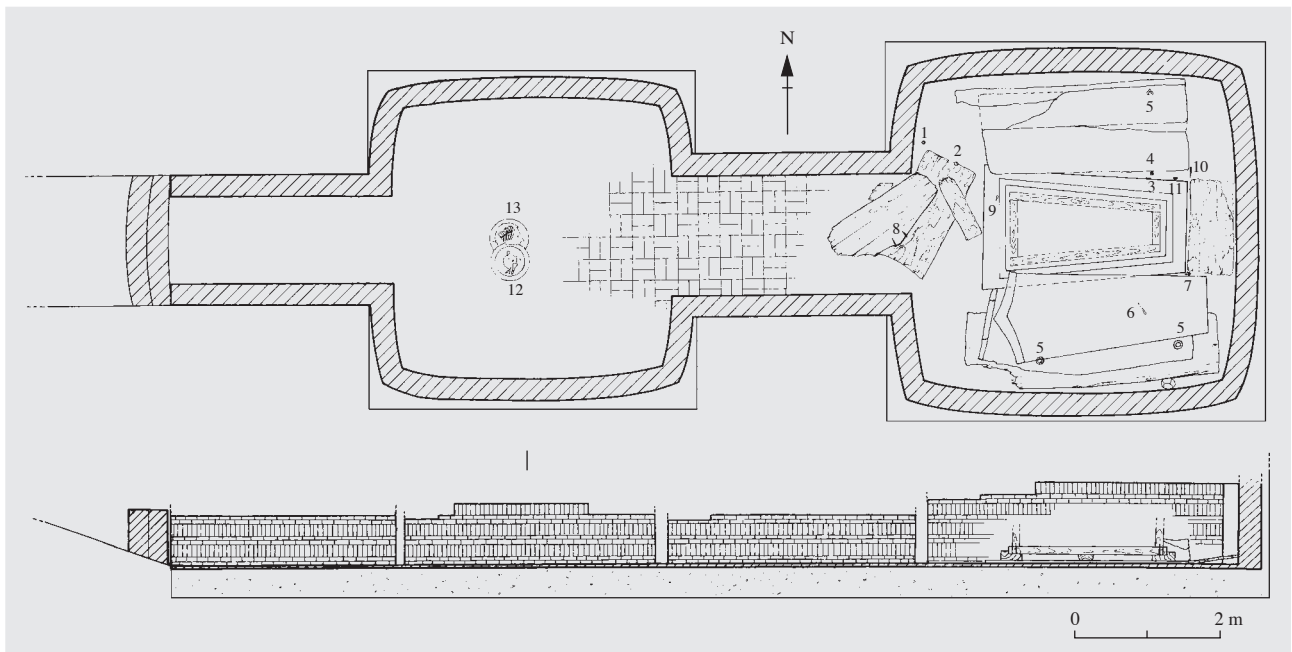


Fig. 1 Plan and cross-section of Tomb No.1



Fig. 2 Tomb No.1

bricks. Along the central axis of the tomb are two vertical dugout pits, and the sloping ramp begins in the middle of the west section; lining the walls of the tomb are narrow bricks arranged in a two-horizontal-and-one-vertical pattern. A dugout corridor connects the tomb ramp and burial chamber, with bricks lining the lateral walls and forming a corbelled ceiling. The tomb ramp at the west end of the front burial chamber has a rectangular sloping floor that is slightly narrower at the entrance, and in its ruined conditions, measures 2.5 m long and 1.7–1.8 m wide. Between the tomb ramp and front burial chamber is a brick-lined connecting corridor with a rectangular layout, 3.08 m long, 1.2 m wide, 0.7 m high. The west entrance to the corridor is sealed by a slightly bulging wall formed by two rows of bricks placed longitudinally. Both front and rear burial chambers have square layouts with convex sides, and the rear chamber is slightly larger than the front chamber. The front chamber measures 3.82 m in length and width, and in its ruinous state measures 0.82 m high, the rear chamber measures 4.2 m in length and width, 1.12 m high in its ruinous state. A corridor with a rectangular layout that is 3.3 m long, 1.64 m wide, 0.68 m high in its ruined state, connects the two chambers. The bottom of the tomb is 3.2 m deep from the surface. The bricks on

the floor of the connecting corridor and burial chambers are laid after the lateral walls are first lined with bricks. Beneath the single brick layer is a layer of fine sand 0.3 m thick, and they are arranged according to the scheme of two-horizontal-and-one-vertical pattern (Figs. 1 and 2).

II. Tomb Furnishings

In the middle of the rear burial chamber is a single coffin within an outer coffin made of pinewood. Under the coffin is a coffin couch. Disturbed by looting, the coffin panels and lid are strewn throughout the burial chamber. The inner and outer coffins are wider and higher at the head and narrower and lower at the foot. The wooden panels are held together with mortise-tenon joints and secured with additional nails. The head and foot panels are thinner than the side panels. The outer coffin is lacquered in black both inside and out, and the exterior is decorated with gilt nail caps and animal-mask door-knockers. The outer coffin measures 2.8 m long, 1.12–1.73 m high, the head panel is 1.73–1.8 wide, the foot panel is 1.25–1.32 m wide; both head and foot panels are 0.06 m thick, side panels are 0.1 m thick. Based on the width of the tomb ramp, corridor and outer coffin, the wooden outer coffin must have been assembled inside

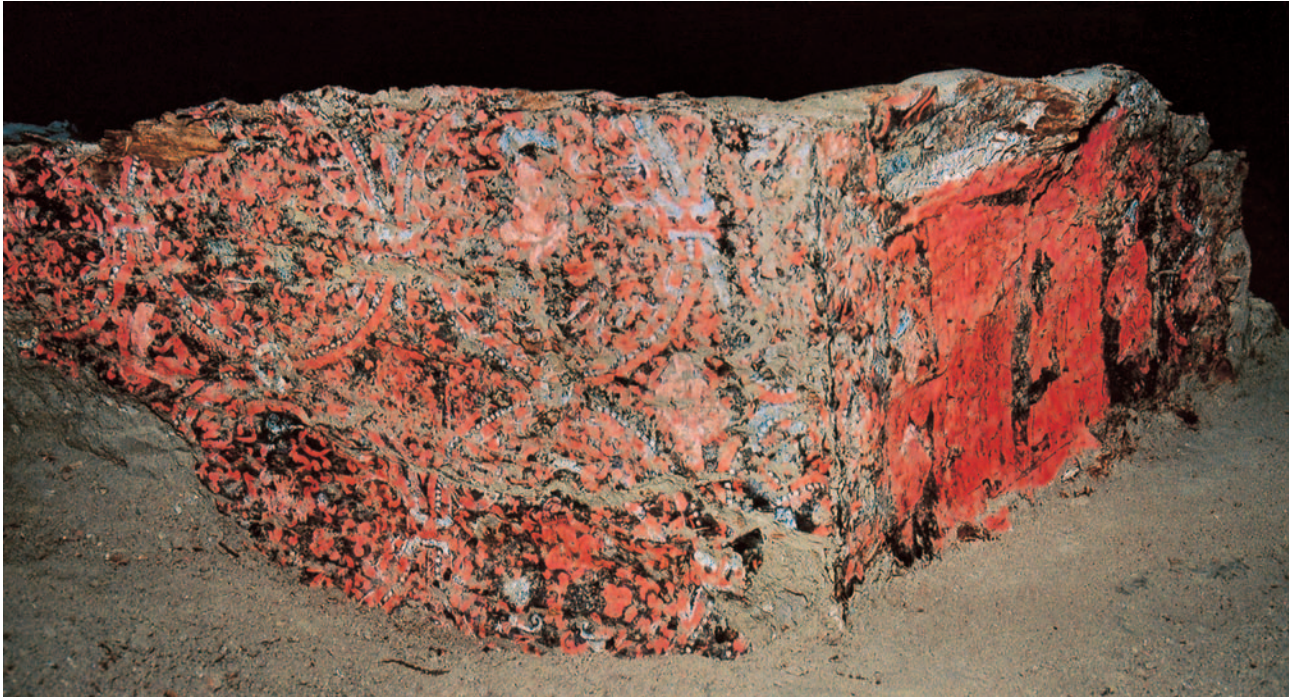


Fig. 3 The lacquer coffin of Tomb No.1

the burial chamber. Placed inside the outer coffin, the couch is underneath the coffin, measuring 2.38 m long, 0.94–1.38 m wide, 0.18 m high. Wider at the head and narrower at the foot, it has a ladder shape layout, with a cross-section like a character “𠂇”. The coffin couch is lined with powdered lime, the exterior lacquered in black and painted with a honeysuckle pattern. On the side are five iron rings. The wooden coffin resting on the coffin couch is 2.06 m long, 0.67–1.1 m wide, 0.32–0.78 m high. The head and foot back panels are 6 cm thick, the side panels are 0.1 m thick. The shape and structure are similar to that of the outer coffin. The exterior of the coffin is lacquered in black, with painted designs in red and white applied on top of the lacquer (Fig. 3). The coffin lid is curved and its top-view is like a ladder. The head panel is higher than the lid forming a *gui*-tablet shape; it is painted and trimmed with a decorative copper wire 2.9 m long, 0.78–1.24 m wide, and the panel is 10 cm thick. The exterior of the coffin, decorated with gilt bronze nail caps and plaques, looks fabulous and luxuriant. Inside the wooden coffin was originally a male skeleton, but having been disturbed, the human bones are strewn outside the coffin. It is therefore unclear how the body was originally interred.

III. Burial Objects

40 objects have been recovered from tomb No.1, most of them being ornamental appendages of the coffin and

outer coffin. They comprise bronze, lead and tin, iron, and lacquer items.

One gilt bronze plaque (M1:4) is fashioned in bronze with gilding throughout. A pair of confronting dragons linked head-to-tail forms a circle, the long tails of the dragons coiled in a lively manner. Rearing their heads and stretching their necks with their long horns erect, the dragons are opening their mouths and sticking out their tongues, their whiskers forming triangular and oval patterns. The dragons' bodies are decorated with stringed pearls, feathers and scales. Above the dragons' heads and between the two tails sits a young lad with naked torso, arms akimbo, clothed in briefs, his legs bent and his bare feet crossed. The diameter is 7–7.2 cm, 0.2 cm thick (Figs. 4:2; 5).

One bronze lotus newborn (M1:3) is fashioned in bronze with silver filling. At the center of the lotus is a newborn figure with thin eyebrows, prominent nose, both ears touching the shoulders, a cranial bump on his head, his palms joined together in front. Both nimbus and halo are represented by round discs with plain surfaces, along the edges of the haloes are concentric circular lines, and around the figure are ten double lotus petals; the outer rim is pierced with two openings that still contain traces of iron nails and signs of oxidation. This must have been an ornament originally attached to the coffin or some other objects. The diameter is 5.7 cm (Fig. 4:3; 6).

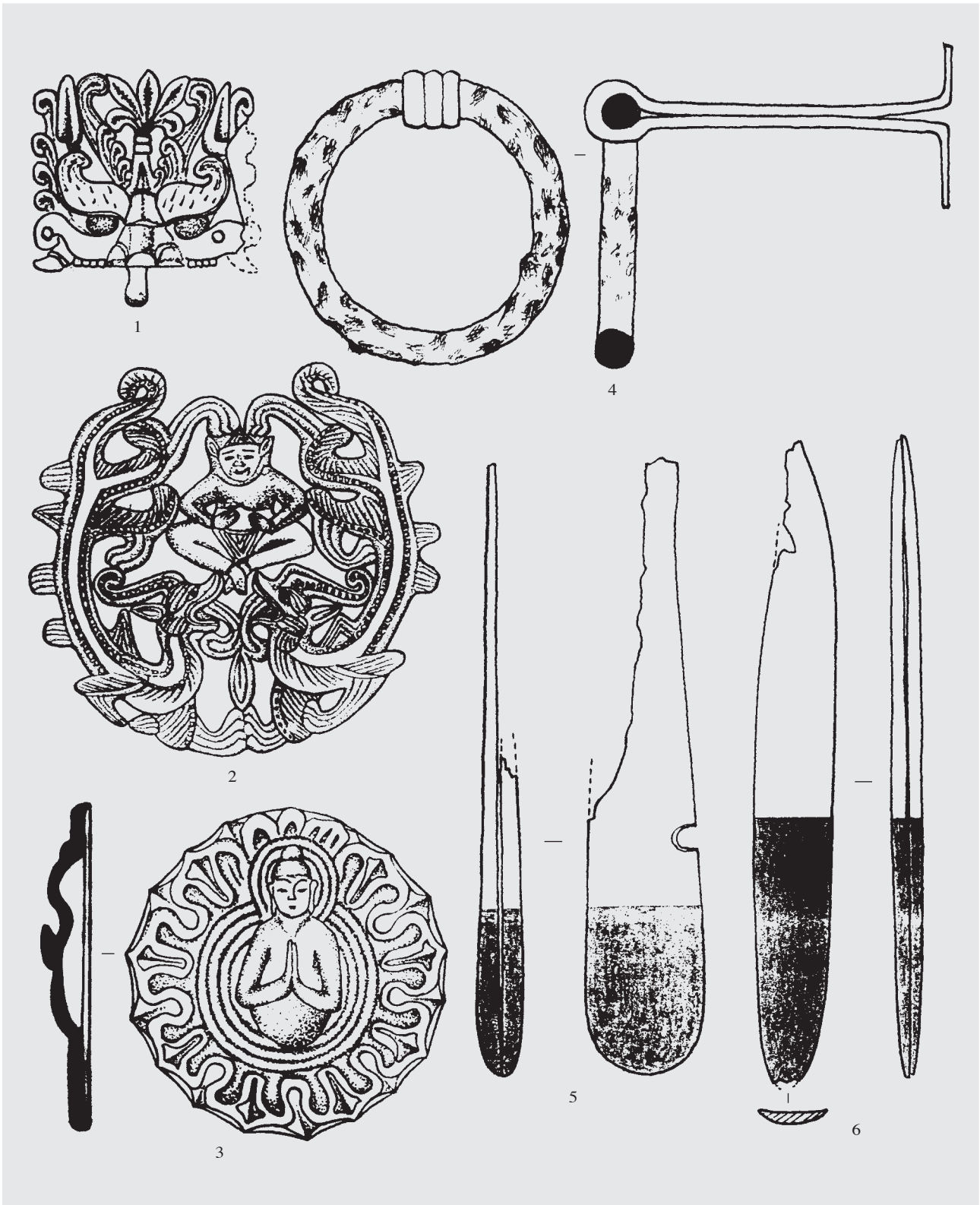


Fig. 4 Funeral objects

1. gilt bronze door-knocker (M1:11) 2. gilt bronze plaque (M1:4) 3. bronze lotus newborn (M1:3) 4. iron coffin ring (M1:5) 5, 6. bone implements of bows (M1:6, 10) (scales: 1-3. 1/1; the rest 1/2)

One gilt bronze door-knocker (M1:11) is fashioned in bronze and gilded throughout. It has the shape of an animal mask with round eyes, prominent nose, curved horns, sharp teeth, ears erect, and curly whiskers. Between the horns is a honeysuckle in frontal view, and under the nose is a molded semicircular ring, 4.1 cm high, and 3.9 cm wide (Fig. 4:1; 7).

One bronze nail cap (M1:2) is fashioned in bronze and gilded on the surface. The protruding center forms a dome with a wide rim. A round lotus is carved at the center of the dome, and around the lotus is a pearl roundel. Surrounding the roundel is a dragon joined head-to-tail encircled by a ring of double lotus petals. The diameter is 5.3 cm.

One gilt lead-and-tin alloy nail cap (M1:2), fashioned in lead-and-tin alloy, has a hemispherical shape with narrow edge, and gilded on the surface. The surface of the dome is carved with a circular dragon and pearl roundel pattern encircled by lotus petals. The center is pierced with an opening 4.8 cm in diameter.

Several bronze ornamental strips (M1:14); long, thin strips, fashioned in bronze, they are used to trim the coffin chamber. The bronze strips are secured by small bronze nails 8–12 cm apart, 1.1 cm wide, and 0.1 cm thick.

Iron objects comprising two kinds: coffin nails and coffin rings. There are over 20 coffin nails, M1:8, with round convex nail caps and four-sided awl-shaped nail posts that are 18–24 cm long. There are eight coffin rings, M1:5, circular in shape, with round cross-sections, and attached to the rings are nails 10–12 cm in diameter, 12 cm long (Fig. 4:4).

There are four bows, all broken. Made of polished bone, they are formed by laminating together two long strips with convex surfaces. There are two styles. Style I (M1:6) is round at one end, pointed at the other end, with a slit along one edge; the surface is covered with red and black paint. In its fragmented state it measures 11 cm long (Fig. 4:5). Style II (M1:10) is pointed at both ends and painted with equal amounts of red and black, measuring in its fragmented state 22.8 cm in length (Fig. 4:6).

Lacquer ware. There are two lacquer bowls, M1:13 and M1:12, similar in shape and placed in the middle of the antechamber. The round shallow bowl measures 32 cm in diameter, 2.3 cm in height. The exterior is lacquered in black, the center and sides are lacquered in red alternating with black. Inside the bowl are the tendon and bones of a sheep.



Fig. 5 Gilt bronze plaque (M1:4)



Fig. 6 Bronze lotus newborn (M1:3)



Fig. 7 Gilt bronze door-knocker (M1:11)

IV. Lacquer Painting on Coffin Panels

The lacquer paintings on the coffin panels are the most significant discoveries of this excavation. The outer coffin and coffin couch have lacquer painting on the surface. Paintings of the left side panel, foot panel, rim of the head section of the coffin lid and sections of the coffin bed have survived. They consist of honeysuckles, pearl roundels, buildings and figures. Before the application of color, the wooden panels had been treated with all lacquering procedures, including sealing the interstices with powder, adding cloth matting, applying lacquer mixed with ash, etc. A thick black lacquer was applied as the base coat, which was then buffed to a high sheen, and the details painted over the lacquer in vermilion and white. The main color scheme is red, with black and white as secondary colors.

1. The lacquer painting of the side panel has many interlocking pearl roundels, 0.3 m in diameter, forming a two-tiered complex design; only five of the pearl roundels are intact. The roundels are not only overlapping, but small circles painted in white further link the top and bottom ones together. Inside each roundel is a young musician, each with a different pose, encircled by a

honeysuckle pattern in vermilion. Two vermilion lines, one inside and the other outside the pearl roundel, form concentric circles. The young lads have their hair tied into chignons; they have oval faces, fine eyebrows and large eyes. Wearing briefs and baring their upper and lower torsos, they have bare feet; colorful sashes wrapped around their arms are billowing towards the back, and they are either crossing their legs or kneeling with legs bent. Plump in face and body, they have muscular limbs. They are all adorned with pearl necklaces painted in white, white pearl-like bracelets and anklets, a few have additional arm bracelets. The triangular-shaped spaces created by the overlapping roundels are filled with young lads or stemmed flowers, stylistically similar to those described earlier (Fig. 8). As the painting is ruined, it is difficult to identify the objects held in the hands of the youths, but the pose and action suggest that some are dancing, some are playing musical instruments such as blowing and strumming. Legible musical instruments include panpipes, flutes, etc. (Fig. 9).

2. Lacquer painting on the foot panel. The middle is painted with a traditional Chinese gate with white eaves protruding from the roof and confronting birds on the ridge of the roof. The vermilion main gate is outlined in

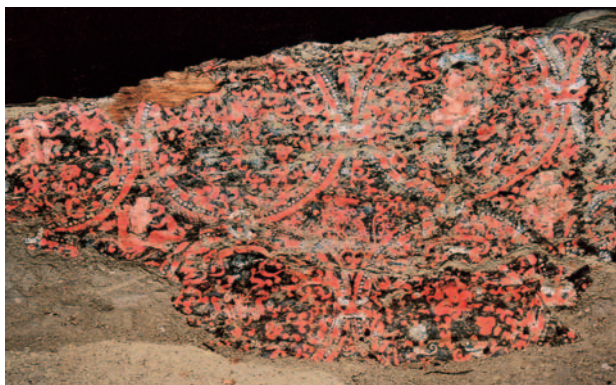


Fig. 8 Lacquer painting on the side coffin panel



Fig. 10 Lacquer painting guard on the foot panel

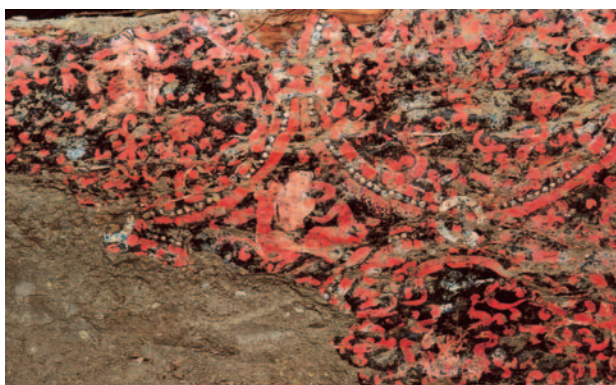


Fig. 9 Part of lacquer painting on the side coffin panel

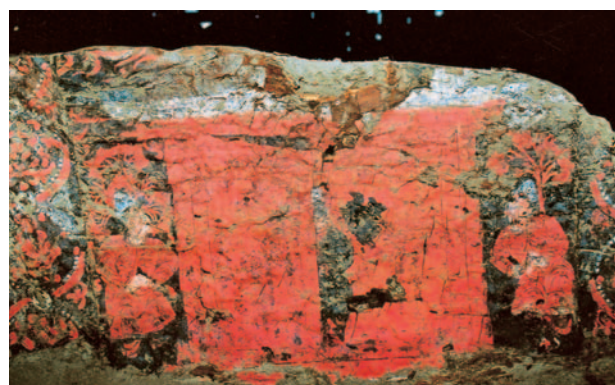


Fig. 11 Lacquer painting on the foot panel



Fig. 12 Head section of the coffin lid

thin black ink; the left door is slightly ajar, and inside the door is a figure wearing a white pointed hat with narrow brim, round-collar narrow-sleeved black tunic with belt, rearing his head and looking out. Flanking the gate is a pair of guards exchanging glances from left to right. The guards are kneeling with both hands resting on their knees drawn at chest level. They all wear white pointed hats with narrow brims, round-collar tight-sleeved red tunics with belts. Behind the guards are broad-leaf trees delineated in vermilion color (Fig. 10). On the left and right sides of the foot panel as well as on the inside of the lateral panels are vertical rows of intertwined pearl roundels. Between one roundel and another is a white connecting circle, and at the center of the roundel is either a young lad or a stemmed flower, in alternating order (Fig. 11).

3. The head section of the coffin lid with a *gui*-tablet shape is trimmed with a bronze strip and painted with nine groups of interlocking pearl roundels. They decrease in size from the center to the sides, and interlaced with the roundels are stringed pearls linked in a wavy diamond pattern. Inside the roundels are either young lads, flowers or plants. The young lads look like those described above (Fig. 12).

4. The exposed surface of the coffin platform is covered with an undulating continuous pattern of honeysuckles painted in white single lines on a black ground (Fig. 13).

V. Concluding Remarks

During the Han dynasty, Datong belonged to Pingcheng 平城 County, and in the first year of the Tianxing 天兴 reign period (398 CE) Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪, the Northern Wei Emperor Daowu 道武, moved the capital to this city. 96 years later, the capital was moved to Luoyang 洛阳 in the 18th year of the Taihe 太和 reign period under



Fig. 13 The coffin platform decorated with pattern of honeysuckles

Emperor Xiaowen 孝文 (494 CE). In recent years, archaeologists have uncovered over 300 Northern Wei tombs in the open areas east and south of Datong City. Many valuable cultural relics have been unearthed. Tomb No.1 is part of such findings; it is one of the larger Northern Wei brick tombs since the discovery of the tomb of Sima Jinlong 司马金龙. While there are no dated items, the square tomb layout with curved sides and the coffin with a higher head section and lower foot section are typical of the Northern Wei period. Among the decorations on the lacquered coffin panels, the honeysuckle pattern is commonly found in the Northern Wei rock-cut caves of Yungang 云冈. The lotus newborn images in the bronze plaques are stylistically similar to those on the lotus lintel of the gate on the south wall in Yungang Cave No.10. The musical youths are similar to those on the stone column base and coffin bed from Sima Jinlong's tomb. After the move of the capital to Luoyang, most Northern Wei tombs in the Luoyang area are brick chamber tombs. Accordingly, Tomb No.1 can be dated during the Pingcheng period before the move of the capital to Luoyang, and the latest date of burial would be during the Taihe reign period. As indicated by the tomb plan, furnishings such as the exquisitely lacquered coffin and gilt bronze ornaments, and the inclusion of front and rear chambers in the tomb structure, the deceased must have held a high position in life, and was probably a member of the nobility or the wealthy in the Pingcheng area.

Buddhist motifs are adopted in the lacquer painting and the lotus newborn bronze ornaments, indicating some impact of Buddhist culture. Most Northern Wei rulers were devout Buddhists. Specifically, "During the Taiyan 太延 reign period Liangzhou 凉州 was subdued and its population was resettled in the capital. Accordingly the ways of the clergy and Buddhist rituals were

brought to the east, thus reinforcing the teaching of images.” Since then, Liangzhou Buddhism in the northwest was transmitted to the east. Following the introduction and dissemination of cultural traditions from the western regions, motifs such as the pearl roundel pattern, a Persian artistic form, became popular. The painted pearl roundel patterns in this tomb are the earliest examples from Northern Wei tombs of this region. The

youths within the roundels suggest the cultural traits of the Xianbei 鲜卑 while the “half-open door” motif painted on the foot panel is a Chinese traditional theme since the Han dynasty. The present archaeological find adds to the material evidence on the history of Northern Wei Pingcheng, and it is a major accomplishment in the regional archaeology of Northern Wei Pingcheng.

Note: The original report, published in *Wenwu* 文物 2004.12: 26–34, with 13 illustrations including 10 photographs, is written by Gao Feng 高峰. The summary is prepared by the original author himself and English-translated by Judy C. Ho.