

On the Origin of Bronze Belt Plaques of Ancient Nomads in Northern China

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The bronze plaques decorated with animal, human or geometric designs were the ornaments on the leather belts of the nomadic people, such as Xiongnu (Hun) and Xianbei (Sienpi) in Northern China in the Qin and Han Dynasties. These plaques had unique regional and ethnical characteristics. There have been many different ideas on the origination of this kind of plaques. The author plans to give his own opinion hereby on this issue.

During the Qin and Han Dynasties (the end of the 3rd century BCE—the beginning of the 3rd century CE), the bronze belt plaques were mainly distributed in the Northern Frontier of China, Mongolia and the trans-Baikal Region of Russia, and some of which were discovered in Minusinsk Basin. The cases discovered in China through scientific excavations are: the 22 plaques decorated with images and patterns of double oxen, double dragons, double gazelles, tiger eating deer, struggling double horses, scabbling tortoise and dragon, lying camel, warrior bearing sword, warriors preying captives on horseback or chariot in openwork, and double horses, lying horse, monster and swirl pattern in relief unearthed from Daodunzi 倒墩子 cemetery in Tongxin 同心 County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 宁夏回族自治区; the two bronze plaques with wrestling double human figures in openwork unearthed from M140 in Keshengzhuang 客省庄 Village, Chang'an 长安 County, Shaanxi 陕西 Province; the bronze plaque with eagle fighting tiger for goat in openwork unearthed from M25 in Zaomiao 枣庙, Tongchuan 铜川 County, Shaanxi Province and the 17 bronze belt plaques decorated with mythic monster, tiger and deer images in relief unearthed from Laoheshen 老河深 cemetery in Yushu 榆树 County, Jilin 吉林 Province.

Moreover, the cases with precise locations and

dates are: the 20 or more bronze belt plaques decorated with double oxen, double camels, monsters, scrambling eagle and tiger, fighting dogs and horses, warriors preying captives on horseback or chariot, warriors on horseback and geometric images and patterns unearthed from Xichagou 西岔沟 cemetery in Xifeng 西丰 County, Liaoning 辽宁 Province; the six plaques with double deer, triple deer, twisting double dragons and geometric images and patterns in openwork unearthed from Erlanhugou 二兰虎沟 cemetery in Chakhar Right Rear 察右后 Banner, Inner Mongolia 内蒙古; the five plaques with warrior driving chariot, eagle fighting tiger for goat and twisting double dragons images in openwork unearthed from Ongnighud 翁牛特 Banner, Inner Mongolia; the belt plaque decorated with monster design in openwork unearthed from Chifeng 赤峰 County, Inner Mongolia; the eight plaques decorated with mythic monsters, horses, human figures in relief and triple deer in openwork unearthed from Jalai Nor 扎赉诺尔 cemetery in Kolon Buir 呼伦贝尔 League, Inner Mongolia; the belt plaque with double goats image in openwork unearthed from Lijiataozi 李家套子 cemetery in Tongxin County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the one decorated with wrestling double human images in openwork unearthed from Shiyi 石驿 Township, Dongliao 东辽 County, Jilin Province. Besides of these cases obtained in scientific ways, we have found some handed down objects from antiquarian records decorated with double ducks, fighting tiger and camel, scuffling tiger and leopard, grappling tiger and horse, eagle attacking deer, tiger carrying sheep on the back, tiger holding deer in the mouth and some other images in openwork (Fig. 1). A preliminary statistics shows that the bronze belt plaques unearthed from Northern China had more than 50 different designs.

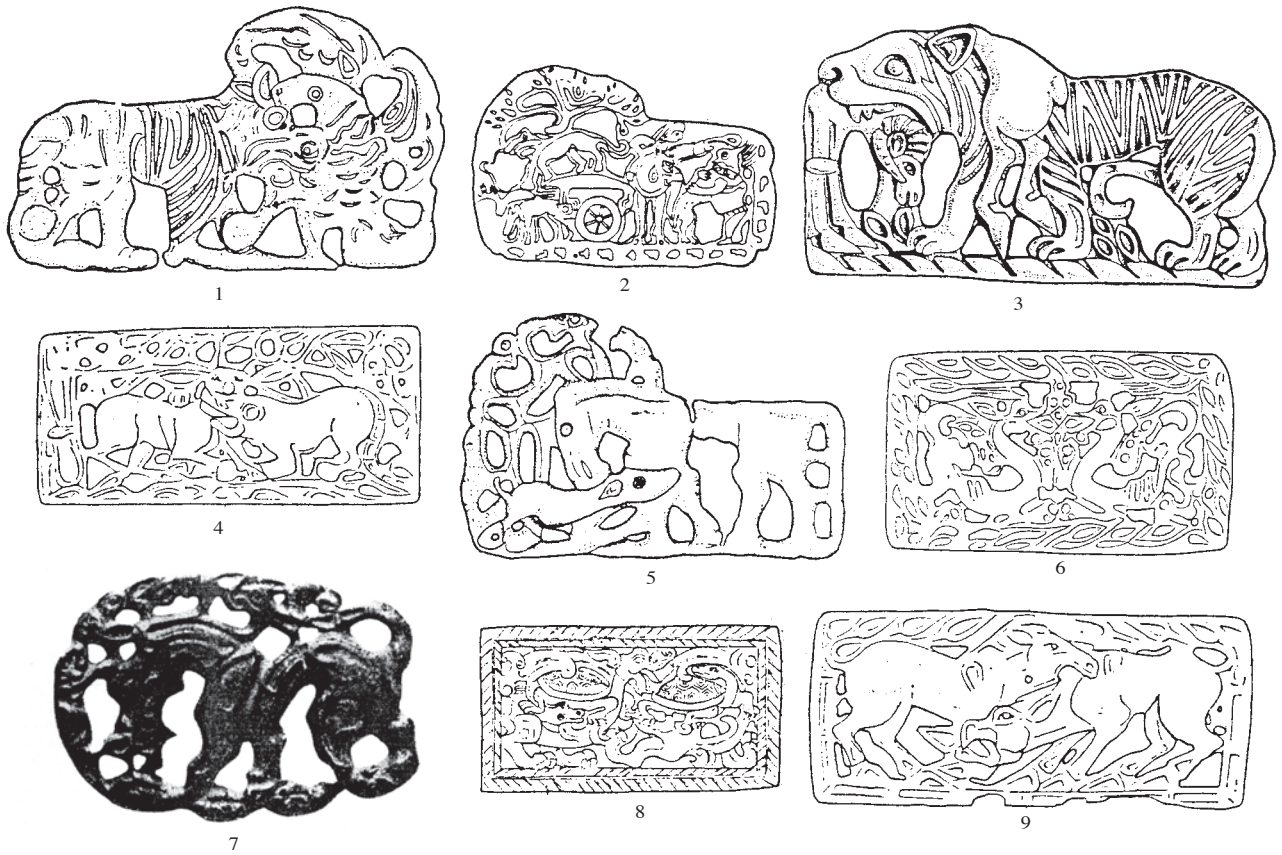


Fig. 1 Bronze belt plaques of ancient Nomads in northern China

1, 2, 5, 7. Xichagou cemetery in Xifeng County 3. collection of the Museum of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region
4, 6, 8, 9. Daodunzi cemetery in Tongxin County

The similar bronze plaques discovered in Russia through scientific excavations were: the four decorated with double horses design in openwork unearthed from Derestuy cemetery in Trans-Baikal Region; the two with dragon fighting tiger images in openwork unearthed from Ivolga cemetery in Trans-Baikal Region; the one with double oxen design in openwork unearthed from the tomb near Udinsk Lake of Kemerovo Province; the one plaque with eagle and tiger fighting for sheep design in openwork unearthed from Urbyun cemetery III; the one with double gazelles design in openwork unearthed from Vasyugan of Kulai Culture in Western Siberia; the one with a scene of a warrior resting beside a horse unearthed from Solonech cemetery in Altay Region; the more than 20 bronze belt plaques with double horses, fighting double horses, four twisting snakes images and netlike patterns in openwork unearthed from Kosogol' Hoard in Uzhur Region of Krasnoyarsk Territory (Fig. 2). Moreover, in Minusinsk Basin and its neighboring areas, dozens of bronze plaques

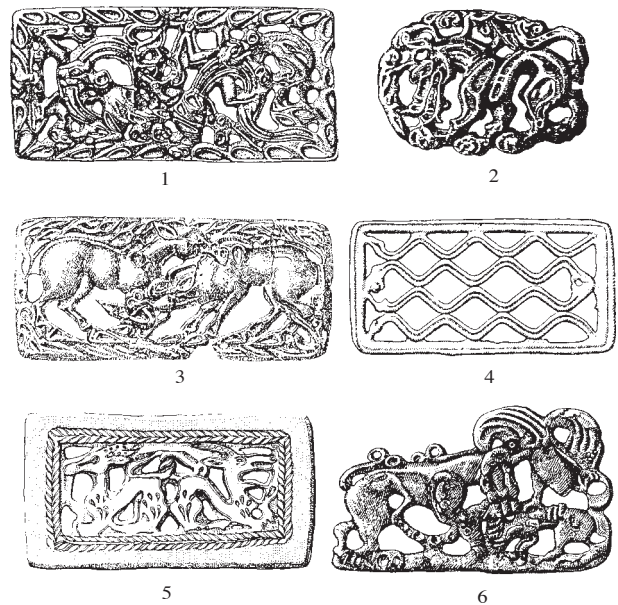


Fig. 2 Bronze belt plaques of ancient Nomads in southern Siberia
1. Ivolga cemetery 2. M100 at Derestuy cemetery 3. M102 at Derestuy cemetery 4. Ivolga city-site 5. Vasyugan of Kulai Culture 6. Derestuy cemetery

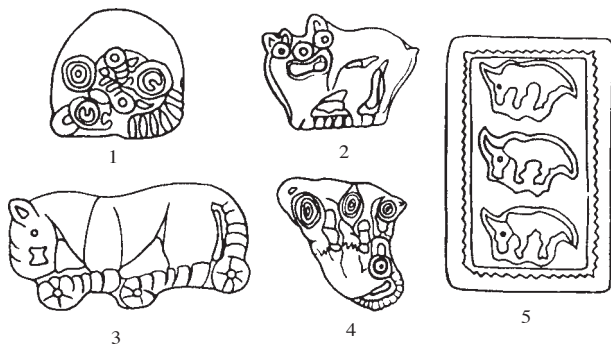


Fig. 3 Bronze belt plaques

1–5. unearthed from M8501 in Xiaoheshigou, Ningcheng County

decorated with double horses, fighting double horses and geometric designs have been discovered. In Mongolia, some similar bronze plaques are also discovered accidentally: they are usually decorated with dog fighting horse, fighting double horses and geometric patterns. Most of the bronze plaques unearthed from Russia and Mongolia have identical designs with those from Northern China. Undoubtedly, these bronze belt plaques have common origin.

However, the ideas on the origin of this kind of plaques have been far from identical, and the exact origin of them is one of the arguing issues for a long time. In general, there have been three opinions on this issue: 1. All of the designs except for dragon image were originated in Minusinsk Basin; 2. In the early ages, the “animal design” diffused from west to east, but in Xiongnu period, the animal design in openwork diffused from east to west; 3. This kind of bronze belt plaque was originated from the steppe in Northern China.

Based on the known archaeological discoveries, we believe that this kind of plaques was originated from Northern China. The strongest evidence is that the prototype of the plaque can be found from the cultural remains of the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age in Northern China. The typical case of late Bronze Age is upper stratum of Xiajiadian 夏家店 Culture, which was distributed in the valleys of Shira Muren 西喇木伦 and Laoha 老哈 rivers. It is dated as from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle stage of the Spring and Autumn Period (11th–7th c. BCE). In the flourishing period of this culture, which was from late stage of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the early stage of the Springs and Autumns period, its metallurgy was very advanced, and it was one of the most prosperous bronze cultures on the Eurasian Steppe at that time. In the abundant bronze

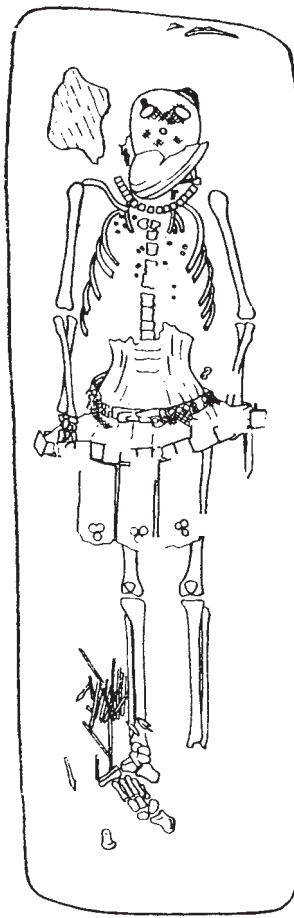


Fig. 4 Leather belt buried in M45 of Zhoujiadi

grave goods unearthed from the large-scale stone coffin tombs such as M101 of Nanshangen 南山根 and M8501 of Xiaoheshigou 小黑石沟, Ningcheng 宁城 County, there were many decorative plaques on dresses and belts, linking-pearl-shaped ornaments and double-tailed pendants. From these square or rectangular plaques, we can see triple oxen, double horses, lying tiger, coiled tiger, lying sheep, tiger preying sheep and mating deer images (Fig. 3). We can prove our opinion that these plaques were decorations on belts with facts. In the Zhoujiadi 周家地 cemetery belonging to upper stratum of Xiajiadian Culture, 54 tombs have been excavated. In M45, we found two well-preserved leather belts: the outer belt had a leather sheath attached to its left side, and nine square bronze plaques stitched on its face; the inner belt was decorated with linking-pearl-shaped ornaments (Fig. 4). From this case, we can infer that most of the square or rectangular bronze plaques of the upper stratum of Xiajiadian Culture were belt decorations.

The typical cases of the early Iron Age are Maoqinggou 毛庆沟 Culture, Taohongbala 桃红八拉

Culture and Yanglang 杨郎 Culture. Maoqinggou Culture was distributed in the Yinshan 阴山 Mountains in western part of Inner Mongolia. The cemeteries of this culture which have been scientifically excavated are Maoqinggou cemetery in Liangcheng 凉城 County and Yaozi cemetery in Guoxian 崞县 County. In Maoqinggou cemetery, 67 tombs have been excavated and 15 intact belts have been unearthed from them. The compositions of these belts can be assorted into three types: 1. Buckle and plaques with bird or double birds images; 2. Linking-pearl-shaped ornaments and or plaques with double birds images; and 3. One or two large plaques with tiger image in openwork and double birds design. The third type was the most popular one, and the best case was in M5 of Maoqinggou cemetery. In the grave of this tomb, a bronze plaque with tiger images in openwork was placed on each side of the occupant's waist; the perforations on both ends of the two plaques showed that they had been sewn to leather belt. In addition to these two plaques with tiger images, 17 bronze plaques with bird images were also found in this grave (Fig. 5). This tomb was dated to Stage I of Maoqinggou cemetery, or the middle and late stages of the Springs and Autumns Period (7th–6th c. BCE). In M55 and M74, which were dated to the early stage of the Warring States period, a plaque with tiger figure was found respectively (Fig. 6:6). In the tombs belonging to the middle and late stages of this cemetery, we found that the belts were decorated with one or two iron plaques with tiger or double birds design. It is noticeable that these plaques had no function as buckle at all but only as decorations. Similar plaques with tiger image were also discovered in other cemeteries (Fig. 6:2 and 3) and undoubtedly



Fig. 5 Location of belt plaque in M5 of Maoqinggou

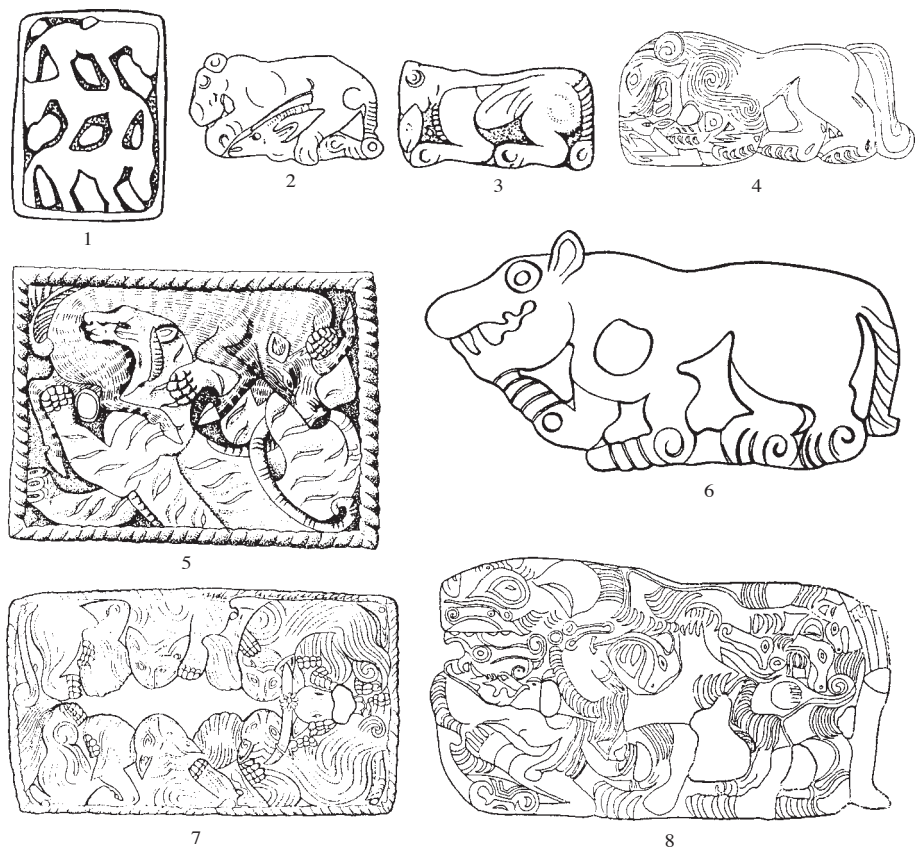


Fig. 6 Bronze belt plaques unearthed from Maoqinggou and Taohongbala cultures

1. M5 of Taohongbala cemetery in Khanggin Banner
2. M12 of Gaoxianyaozi cemetery in Liangcheng County
3. Fanjiayaozi cemetery in Helin Ghar Banner
4. Shihuigou cemetery in Yetschen Horo Banner
5. Xigoupan cemetery in Jegun Ghar Banner
6. M55 of Maoqinggou cemetery in Liangcheng County
7. Aluchaideng cemetery in Khanggin Banner
8. Nianfangqu cemetery in Dongsheng (1–3. bronze; 4. silver; others are gold)

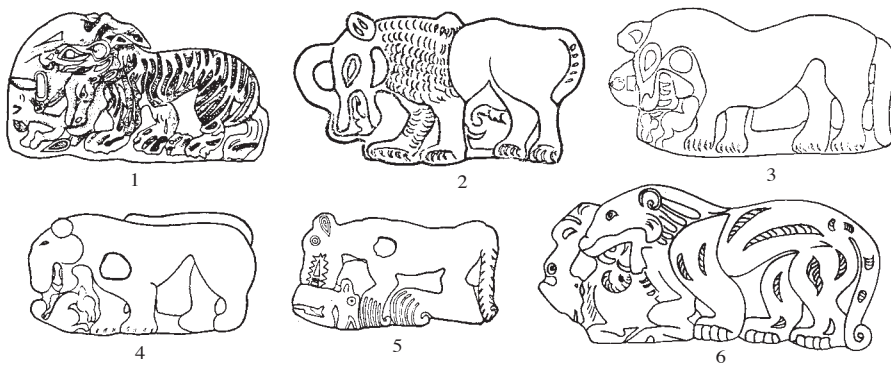


Fig. 7 Bronze plaques unearthed from Yanglang Culture

1. Yanglang, Guyuan County
2. Yaohe Village, Pengyang County
3. Mazhuang IIM4, Yanglang Township
4. Mazhuang IM1
5. Mazhuang IIM3
6. Chenyangchuan Village, Xiji County

used as belt ornaments.

Taohongbala Culture was mainly distributed in Ordos Region and neighboring areas of Inner Mongolia. The remains of this culture which have been scientifically excavated were the tombs of Taohongbala cemetery in Khanggin 杭锦 Banner, Yeke Joo 伊克昭 League. In M5 among them, a rimmed plaque with triple horses image in openwork was unearthed (Fig. 6:1). It was dated as in the late stage of the Springs and Autumns period to the early stage of the Warring States period (6th–5th c. BCE). Moreover, such plaques, including gold and silver ones with animal figures in openwork or relief were also seen in the remains of the middle and late stage of this culture. For example, the four rectangular gold plaques with tiger fighting ox scene in relief unearthed from Aluchaideng 阿鲁柴登 of Khanggin Banner, Yeke Joo League, the two bronze plaques with tiger preying boar scene in relief unearthed from Xigoupan 西沟畔, Jegun Ghar 准格尔 Banner, the one gold plaque with tiger fighting wolf scene in openwork and seven gold plaques with double dragons images in relief unearthed from Nianfangqu 碾房区, Dongsheng 东胜 City, and the one silver plaque with tiger swallowing deer scene and two other with fighting double tigers image in openwork unearthed from Shihuigou 石灰沟, Ighe Yetschen Horo 伊金霍洛 Banner (Fig. 6:4, 5, 7, 8). All of these discoveries strongly proved the idea that the metal plaques with animal figures were also popular decorations used by the people of Taohongbala Culture.

Yanglang Culture was mainly distributed in Guyuan 固原 County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Qingyang 庆阳 County, Gansu 甘肃 Province and neighboring areas. The scientifically excavated sites of this culture were cemeteries in Mazhuang 马庄, Yanglang Township and Yujiashuang 于家庄, Pengbao 彭堡 Township, Guyuan County. 77 tombs in sum have been excavated in these two cemeteries, in which abundant

bronze objects were unearthed, including belt plaques with various animal images, double-bird-shaped ornaments, S-shaped object and buckles decorated with animal images. These cases reflected the fact that the people of this culture were also very interested in decorating their belts with metal plaques decorated with animal figures. For example, in M4 of Mazhuang III cemetery, two identical bronze plaques with standing tiger image in openwork, two ring-shaped buckles and 20 S-shaped bronze plaques were found near the abdomen of the occupant, which consisted of the whole assemblage of the belt decoration. The two ring-shaped buckles were used to buckle the belt, so the two large (12 by 6.3 cm each) plaques were used only to decorate. This kind of plaques with various animal images were very popular in Yanglang Culture, and mainly decorated with tiger preying sheep, tiger preying deer, standing tiger, twisting double dragons, human figures on camels' backs, double birds and so on (Fig. 7), most of which were in openwork.

The above-mentioned facts proved that the nomadic tribes in the Northern Zone of China had a popular tradition to decorate their belts with metal plaques decorated with animal figures. This kind of belt plaques did experience a procession from simple to complex and the belt plaques in different regions also had differences, but this custom followed these nomadic tribes from the beginning to the end. It is noticeable that at the very beginning the metal plaques had two types: rimmed square or rectangular plaque with designs in openwork or relief and un-rimmed P-shaped plaque; down to the Qin and Han Dynasties, these two types were still the most popular ones. Meanwhile, the sequences of the evolutions of these two types were also very clear (Fig. 8).

It should be pointed out that the fact that we cannot find the “prototype” of the metal plaque popular in






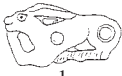



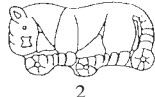




Date	Late Western Zhou to early Springs and Autumns period (9th–8th c. BCE)	Middle and late Springs and Autumns period to early Warring States period (7th–5th c. BCE)	Middle and late Warring States period (4th–3rd c. BCE)	Han period (2nd c. BCE–2nd c. CE)	
A	 1	 2	 3	 4	 5
B	 1	 3	 5	 8	
	 2	 4	 6	 9	
			 7		

Fig. 8 Periodization chart of plaques of northern China

A: 1. M8501 in Xiaoheishigou, Ningcheng 2. M5 in Taohongbala, Khanggin Banner 3. M2 in Xigoupan, Jegun Ghar Banner 4. M19 in Daodunzi, Tongxin County 5. Erlanहुगou, Chakhar Right Rear Banner

B: 1. M101 in Nanshangen, Ningcheng 2. M8501 in Xiaoheishigou, Ningcheng 3. Fanjiayaozi, Helin Ghar Banner 4. M5 in Maoqinggou, Liangcheng County 5. Mazhuang IIM4 in Yanglang Township 6. Yanglang, Guyuan 7. Yaohe Village, Pengyang County 8. Far Eastern Museum of Swede 9. Museum of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region

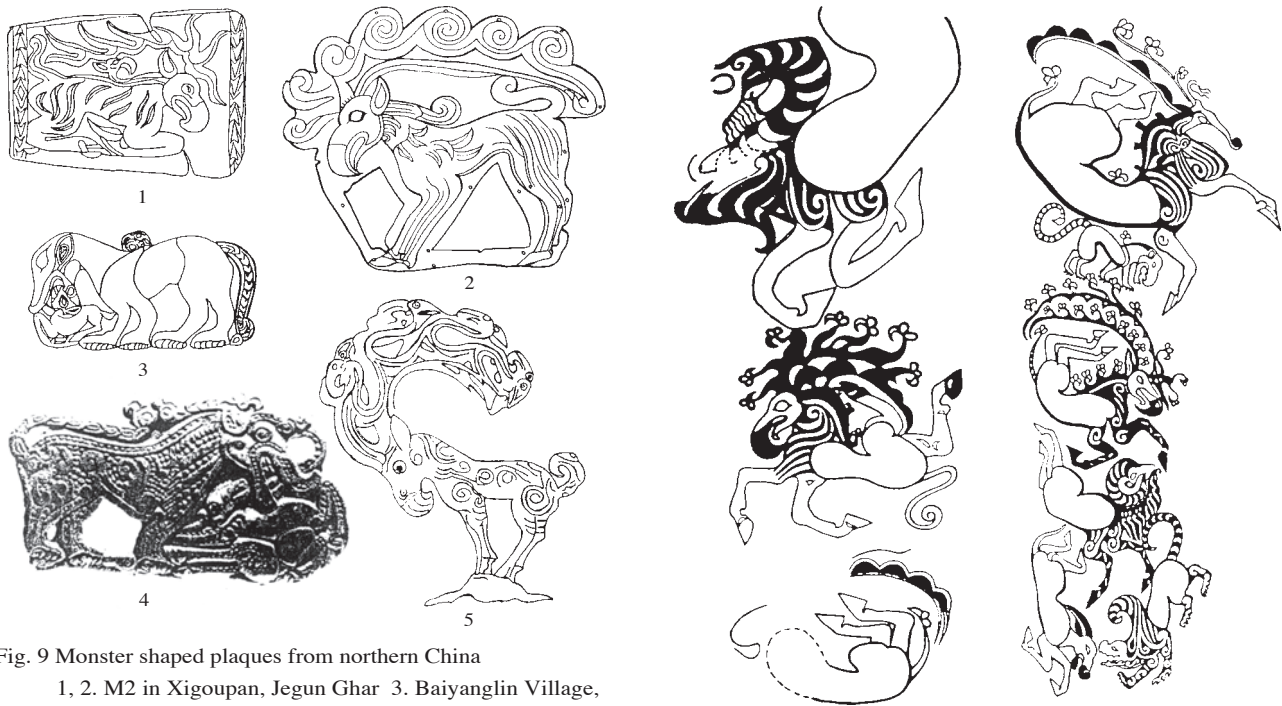


Fig. 9 Monster shaped plaques from northern China

1, 2. M2 in Xigoupan, Jegun Ghar 3. Baiyanglin Village, Pengyang County 4. Chenyangchuan Village, Xiji County 5. Nalingaotu, Shenmu County



Fig. 10 The tattoo of the occupant of No. 2 of Pazyryk barrow

northern China outside present-day China up to now is another reason why we believe this kind of plaque could not be originated outside China. Someone thought that the pictorial style of the rectangular plaques could be traced to Scythian Culture, but it could not be supported

by facts. Actually, Scythian Culture came into being in the later half of 7th century BCE, and the incipient type of the “animal figures” was rather pure, mainly consisted of lying deer with bending legs, coiled beasts, lions, and preying birds. The former two of them, lying

deer with bending legs and coiled beasts, had emerged as early as in the upper stratum of Xiajiadian Culture, which was earlier than those in Scythian Culture. Just as M.A. Devlet, a Russian scholar, pointed out, this kind of bronze plaque is not distributed as far as out of Western Siberia, and the prototype of them had not been seen in the remains of the early and middle stages of Tagar Culture. This kind of metal plaque emerged suddenly in the middle reach of Yenisei River in the last 4th century of the 1st millennium BCE, whose source had no relation with the “animal figures” of Tagar Culture and the bronze objects of Ordos art gradually became the model of the people in Eurasia steppe and Altay region to imitate and refer. Unquestionable, this opinion meets the fact.

Of course, we cannot neglect that in the middle and late stages of the Warring States period (4th–3rd c. BCE), the animal images in the northern China absorbed some styles of Altai 阿尔泰 Culture and new types such as monster, animal images with upturned rear and so on. The shapes of these monsters are mainly beasts with eagle bills, beasts with eagle heads or eagles with tail or horns of beasts. These strange styles emerged suddenly in the decorations of northern China and showed in some bronze belt plaques with animal figures and existed as late as in the Qin and Han Dynasties. Monster is one of the typical subjects of Pazyryk Culture in Altai Region. The monster figures on the gold crown ornament (Fig. 9:5) unearthed from Nalingaotu 纳林高兔 in

Shenmu 神木 County, Shaanxi Province and from M2 of Xigoupan, Jegun Ghar 准格尔 Banner, Inner Mongolia (Fig. 9:1 and 2) were surprisingly similar to that on the tattoo of the occupant of the famous No. 2 of Pazyryk Barrows (Fig. 10). Moreover, this kind of monsters could also be seen on some belt plaques of Yanglang Culture (Fig. 9:3 and 4). The images of monsters and the beasts with upturned rear emerged earlier in Pazyryk Culture than in Chinese northern steppe. This made it clear that the nomadic tribes on the Eurasia had frequent intercourses in the early years.

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