

Bronze Cowry-containers of the Dian Culture

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Ever since the discovery of the Dian Culture in the 1950s, there have been discovered nearly 1260 tombs, one settlement, and 50,000 pieces/sets of artifacts. Among the defining artifacts of this culture, the bronze cowry-containers are most notable for their distinctive forms and functions.

I. Typology and Chronology of Bronze Cowry-containers

1. Typology

Up to date ninety-one bronze cowry-containers have been discovered, ninety from tombs, and one from stray find. Thirty-eight pieces of them are in the form of barrel, thirty-seven in the form of drum, eleven in the form that resembles drum, four in the form of double drums, and one in the form of tray.

The barrel-shaped type falls into three styles. Style I is constricted at waist, and equipped with three legs and two handles. The cover bears plain ornamentation and figurines of animals and humans (Fig. 1). Style II is circular at the upper part and square at the bottom, and equipped with four legs. Its cover is conical and decorated with animal figurines; it has one hole for taking cowries (Fig. 2). Style III imitates a barrel, and has a ring foot or three legs (Fig. 3).

Bronze drums themselves were used as cowry-containers. They were turned upside-down so that cowries could be dropped into them (Figs. 4 and 5). The drum-shaped containers are those that resemble drums but have a hole in the center (Fig. 6); sometimes the surface of the containers takes the form of movable cover and has human figurines (Figs. 7 and 8). Sometimes two drums were laid one upon another (Figs. 9 and 10). This occurs in two ways. In one way, both drums are placed facing up; in another way, the lower drum is placed upside-down so that while the upper drum is in normal order, the surface of the lower drum faces down. The tray is a vessel, but it



Fig. 1 Barrel-shaped cowry-container style I (M69:139, Lijiashan)



Fig. 2 Barrel-shaped cowry-container style II (M18:2, Shizhaishan)

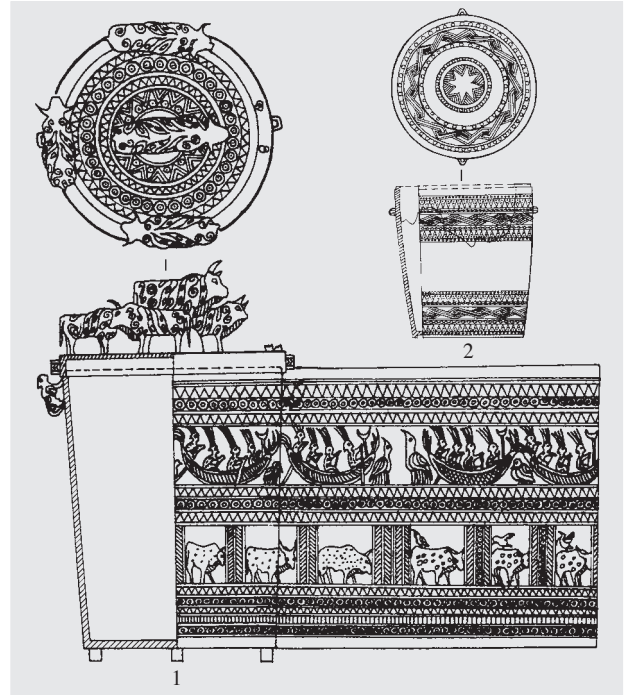


Fig. 3 Barrel-shaped cowry-container style III (Tianzimiao)
1. M41:103 2. M41:101

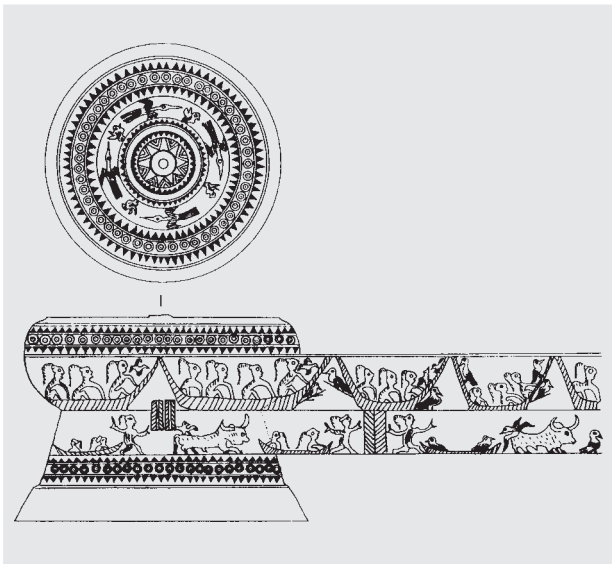


Fig. 4 Drum used as a cowry-container (M1:1, Shizhaishan)

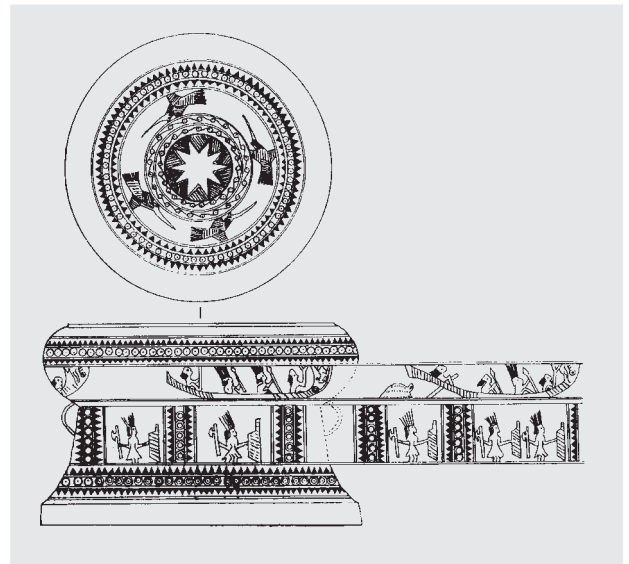


Fig. 5 Drum used as a cowry-container (M14:1, Shizhaishan)

can be used to contain cowries by adding a lid, which is decorated with a battle scene.

2. Chronology

Several tombs that yield bronze cowry-containers, M21 at Lijiashan 李家山 in Jiangchuan 江川, M41 at Tianzimiao 天子庙 in Chenggong 呈贡, M6 and M13 at Shizhaishan 石寨山 can be well dated by C¹⁴, accompanying coins and other datable artifacts. Based on these tombs, we can divide the ninety-one items into six phases

from the late Spring and Autumn period to the late Western Han.

Of the first phase, the late Spring and Autumn period to the early Warring States period, two types exist. One is the barrel-shaped, and the other drum. The barrel-shaped containers are topped with figurines of cow, tiger, and deer. These characteristics persisted into the subsequent phase, the middle Warring States, but a container from M41 at Tianzimiao 天子庙 is slightly different and



Fig. 6 Drum used as a cowry-container (M12:2, Shizhaishan)



Fig. 8 Drum used as a cowry-container (M20:1, Shizhaishan)

might have been concerted from other vessels. In the third phase, drum, drum-like, and Style I barrel containers were in use. The drum containers do not have figurines. When it came to the early Western Han, apart from the three types of the late Warring States, tray-like and double-drum containers appeared. Some items display sculptures of human activities, such as spinning, worshipping, hunting, and trading. In the fifth phase, all styles but Style III barrel-like drums co-existed. Sculptures that show human activities continued to be in vogue. The last phase, the late Western Han, saw the

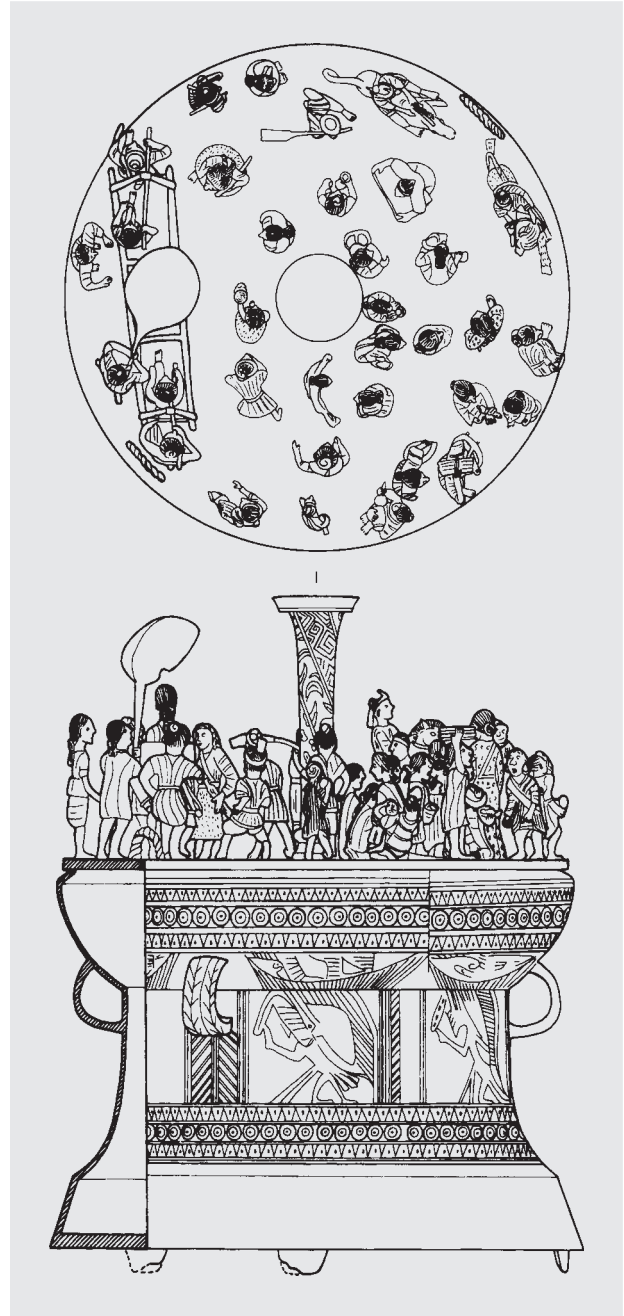


Fig. 7 Drum used as a cowry-container (M69:157, Lijiashan)

decline of cowry-containers. Only M50 at Lijiashan yields one item, but this one does not contain cowries. It appears that bronze cowry-containers appeared in the late Spring and Autumn period, and became popular in the middle Warring States period till the middle Western Han, and vanished in the late Western Han. The largest numbers of them are found in the early and middle Western Han, and the items are large in size. Ever since the late Western Han, cowry-containers fell out of use along with cowry.

Tombs that yield the cowry-containers count only

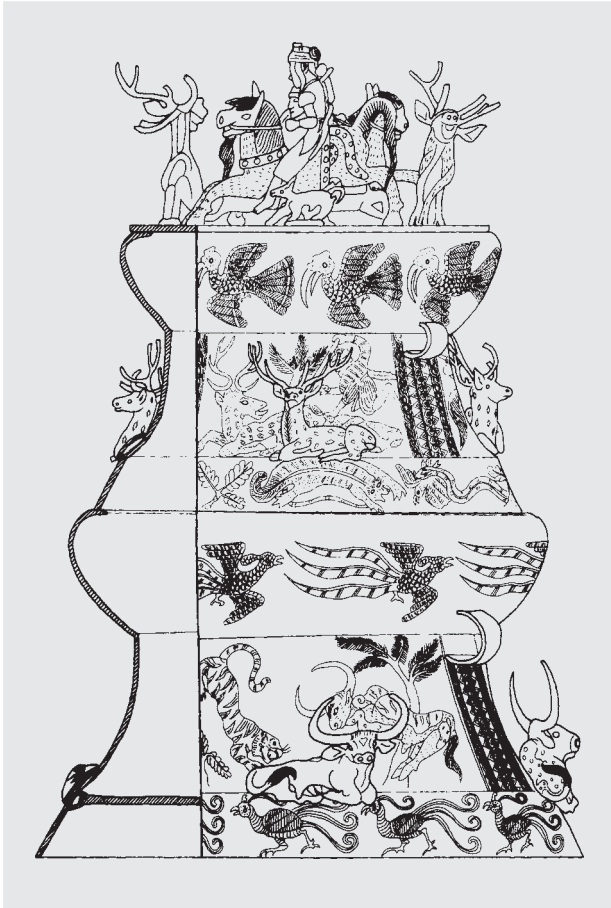


Fig. 9 Cowry-container in the shape of two drums laid one upon another (M71:141, Shizhaishan)



Fig. 10 Cowry-container in the shape of two drums laid one upon another (M6:1, Shizhaishan)

0.027% of all the discovered ones, which indicates that only the kings and elite were privileged to use cowries and cowry-containers.

II. Development of Cowry-containers and Cowries

The rise, flourishing, and decline of cowry-containers had their root in social and economic context. In the early Bronze Age in Yunnan 云南, cowry was found only in small quantity, and was used primarily as ornaments, which did not require any specialized containers. At the peak of the Bronze Age, cowry as currency appeared in great numbers, and it became a symbol of wealth, which called for the use of containers. From the middle Warring States till the middle Western Han, the Dian Culture came to its summation. A great variety of them were in vogue and they were increasingly ornate and decorated with sculptures that show human activities. But when the contact with Western Han increased and local economy developed, especially when Western Han established provinces and counties

in Yunnan, bronze coins replaced cowry. The cowry-containers hence rapidly went out of use.

Available evidence suggests that cowry-containers evolved from bronze drums. Bronze drums made their presence in the Spring and Autumn period, and they were taken to store cowries before and after specialized containers appeared. In the early and middle Western Han, some drums were converted into cowry-containers. The top surfaces of drums were transformed into covers and added sculptures of human activities. At times, two drums were put together, and were also added sculptures of human activities. In the meantime, the drum inspired the invention of the barrel-shaped containers. The early items resemble drums in having constricted waist. This type of containers did not change much till its demise. The early barrel-shaped items appeared in the late Spring and Autumn with animal sculptures. When it came to Western Han, sculptures of scenes of human activities appeared on the covers. Here I would argue that the drum-like, double-drum, and style I barrel-shaped containers were specially made for storing



Fig. 11 Designs on the drum-shaped cowry-containers (Shizhaishan)
1, 3. herding scene (M12:1 and 2) 2. dancing scene (M12:2)

cowries. Once they came into use, they persisted till the last phase. Drum and tray containers were simply converted from their original usages. Style II and Style III barrel-shaped containers are few and they are also converted from their original usages. In the late Western Han, there are isolated finds of wooden containers in some tombs, but their forms are not clear.

2. Cowries found in the Dian Culture include three types. One is *Monetaria annulu*, which is the dominant one. Another is *Monetaria moneta*, which seldom occurs. The third is *Cypraea tagris*, which claims two pieces from Lijiashan in Jiangchuan. All the three types can be obtained from Taiwan, the Hainan Island, Xisha Islands, Indian Ocean, and even Atlantic Ocean. Bronze replicas are also found at the Lijiashan cemetery, which denotes the value of cowries.

Cowries found in the Dian Culture came most likely from trade. In the Bronze Age, the southern coastal populations of Mainland China were actively trading copper and tin with their partners in Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and India. The Dian people might have traded copper and tin for cowries from those regions. Then the cowries were stored as treasures, and used to trade animals, metals, slaves, and jewelries. Although

cowries were found only in a few large tombs, they were still meant to be currency.

In the Dian Culture, there has been found coins made in North China. Although they are limited in quantity, they reveal active trading activities between the Dian people and inland people. The Dian people traded out slaves, animals, and copper to North China, and traded in silks, bronze mirrors, belt hooks, and arrow chargers.

III. Decorative Motifs and Casting Techniques

1. Decorative motifs of bronze cowry-containers of the Dian Culture include sculptures of animals and human activities. The latter motifs might have represented the real life of the Dian people and their environment. We may classify them into three types. One is of human activities, such as worshipping, agricultural work, spinning, trading, boating, battle, hunting, dancing, and herding (Fig. 11). Another is of animals, such as cow, tiger, deer, and birds. The third type is the scene of a tiger attacking a cow.

2. The bronze cowry-containers bear distinct ridges of casting. Some barrel-shaped containers have two symmetrical lines of mould joint. These facts demonstrate that they were made out of casting. The tiger-shaped handles do not have ridges of mould joint; they should have been precast before they were added onto the moulds of the vessel. The cover is cast separately; the animal and human figurines were likewise precast before they were affixed to the moulds of the cover. The animal and human figurines are lacking of trace of casting and shiny, which suggest that they were made out of lost-wax casting. Some covers had holes and the human figurines could be inserted into it. It can be argued that both multiple-mould and lost-wax casting techniques were used in the production of cowry-containers.

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Note: The original paper, published in *Kaogu* 考古 2004.1: 78–88, with three tables and 11 illustrations, is written by Xiao Minghua 肖明华. This summary is prepared by the original author and English-translated by Zhang Liangren 张良仁.