

REVIEW ARTICLE:

ANCIENT ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY FROM CENTRAL ASIA

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In the general context of ancient art and archaeology, Central Asia remains a relatively understudied region, especially as far as sources in the Western languages are concerned. Access to fresh primary material on the region was long a privilege of Russian and Soviet scholars. Many fruits of the Russian tradition of scholarship still remain to be enjoyed by the international academic community, as has most recently been pointed out by Bryan Hanks.¹ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of Mongolia and China, a certain diversification of scholarship has begun to take place, and new monographs and compilations on Central Asia are now being published in various countries.

The current trend of increasing diversification is exemplified by the degree of activity coming out of the Northeast Asian History Foundation (*Dongbuga Yeoksa Jaedan*) in South Korea. This government-funded organization was originally established in 2006 in response to what was seen as a Chinese attempt to monopolize the history and archaeology of Manchuria. Subsequently, maritime border issues and “historical reconciliation” with Japan have also become topics of special interest. Apart from its political agenda, however, the Foundation is financing archaeological excavations in several parts of Central and Northeast Asia, as well as the publication of research of scholars from neighbouring countries such as Russia, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan.

The list of major publications by the Northeast Asian History Foundation is already extensive, comprising works on many areas of ancient art and archaeology. One topic that has been covered at length is rock art. The Foundation has published several large pictorial volumes that provide documentation of the petroglyphs preserved *in situ* in Mongolia, the Minusinsk region, and other parts of Central Asia. The most recent volume in this series deals with the petroglyphs of Kazakhstan. The result of collaboration between four archaeologists (from

¹ Bryan Hanks, Archaeology of the Eurasian Steppes and Mongolia, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 2010: 469–486.

Korea, Russia, and Kazakhstan), the volume is fully bilingual in Korean and Russian, and also includes a summary in Kazakh and English:

Zainolla Samashev, Jang Seokho [Chzhan So Kho], Nikolai Bokorenko & Sagynbai Murbagaev, *Kasaheuseutan ui bawi geurim. Naskal'noe iskusstvo Kazaxstana. Rock Art of Kazakhstan*. Seoul: Northeast Asian History Foundation & Astaninskii filial Instituta arxeologii im. A.X. Margulana Komiteta nauki MON RK, 2011. 464 pp. ISBN 978-89-6187-236-2 93910 (hardcover).

Following a general introduction to the archaeological context of the corpus of petroglyphs, the volume presents field data from actual sites located in the mountainous parts of Eastern and Southern Kazakhstan. Dated mainly by stylistic and semantic analysis, the material represents a time span of several thousand years, ranging from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages. While most petroglyphs in Kazakhstan are engravings on a flat stone surface, there are also examples of paintings with ochre. Standing statues and steles, including deer stones from the Scythian (Sakan) period, are depicted and discussed only in passing.

With several maps, sketches, rubbings, black-and-white drawings, as well as a large number of high-quality colour photographs (466 in total), the technical and visual standards of the volume are considerably superior to the numerous Russian publications of petroglyphs produced during the Soviet period by archaeologists such as O.P. Okladnikov. There is no doubt that the documentation project initiated by the Northeast Asian History Foundation will provide a database that can also be used for more advanced studies on the cultural history of Central Asia.

Nevertheless, Russian research in the field of Central Asian archaeology still remains qualitatively unsurpassed. This fact is illustrated by the two-volume monograph on Scythian bronze mirrors by T.M. Kuznecova (Russian Academy of Sciences). This work is in Russian (with an English subtitle); it contains summaries in English, German, Italian, and French:

T.M. Kuznecova [Kuznetsowa], *Zerkala Skifii VI–III veka do n.è. Mirrors of Scythia of VI–III Centuries BC*. Vol. I. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Indrik", 2002. 351 pp. ISBN 4-85759-241-0 (hardcover). Vol. II. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Taus", 2010. 426 pp. ISBN 978-5-903011-62-9 (hardcover).

Bronze mirrors belong to a very specific genre of archaeological objects, somewhat related to coins and medals. Although almost universally round in shape, other characteristics of bronze mirrors (including size, ornamentation, metal composition, presence or absence of a handle, and so forth) allow for a fairly reliable

regional and chronological taxonomy. Most probably, mirrors were first made in the Southern Urals in the early Bronze Age (late 3rd millennium BC). The innovation spread rapidly both to the west and the east, reaching the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China (as well as Greece, Etruria, and Rome later on).

Kuznecova has a record of publications on mirrors extending over a period of thirty years. The present monograph summarizes her previous work on the subject and offers a comprehensive documentation of the currently known corpus of “Scythian” mirrors. The bulk of the corpus comes from the Pontic Steppes (north of the Black Sea), but related material is also cited from the west (the Balkans) and the east (Kazakhstan and Southern Siberia). The period covered by the monograph corresponds to the Golden Age of the historical Scythians.

Kuznecova’s work is exemplary in its clarity and thoroughness, and it is also typographically well conceptualized. The corpus includes approximately 700 specimens of mirrors, illustrated with over 250 full-page drawings and/or photographs (some in colour), as well as a large number of smaller pictures, sketches, and maps. The work is supplemented by extensive indices and bibliographies. Apart from discussing the typology and chronology of the mirrors, Kuznecova also treats the relevant literary and pictorial information, as well as the archaeological evidence concerning the actual use of the mirrors.

In the context of studies on bronze mirrors, Kuznecova’s work fills an important gap. To date, no comparable treatise on Scythian mirrors has been available. However, it also shows the need for similar works on other regions. The mirrors of China, as well as those of Greece and Rome, have been documented in a large number of catalogues and specialized monographs, yet comparably detailed and competent studies do not exist for many parts of Central Asia. One of the most obvious lacunae concerns the Iranian mirrors from Persia and Central Asia: a comprehensive study of their typology and distribution in relationship to archaeological evidence is an important topic for future research. Quite possibly, competent research on the subject could only come from Russia.

A rather different perspective on Central Asian bronzes is provided by the publication of the private collection of Elie Borowski:

Ulf Jäger & Sascha Kansteiner, *Ancient Metalwork from the Black Sea to China in the Borowski Collection*. Ruppolding und Mainz: Verlag Franz Philipp Rutzen, 2011. 186 pp. ISBN 3-447-06496-X (hardcover).

Elie Borowski (1913–2003) was a Jewish scholar and collector, born in Poland but later active as an antiquities dealer in Switzerland (and ultimately a resident of Israel). In 1992 he founded the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, with a

focus on the archaeology of the Near East. The museum was originally based on his private collections, comprised by a variety of object types and materials with a distinct focus on minor items made of bronze, silver, and glass.

Borowski's collections of glassware, gems, and Graeco-Roman bronzes have been published previously. The collection made available here covers the Central Asian steppe zone. Ulf Jäger is the author dealing with the eastern part of the region, while Sascha Kansteiner assumes responsibility for the western part. Altogether 245 objects (or sets of objects) are depicted, all in colour. The bulk of the objects (nos 1 to 195) come from North China, Inner Mongolia, or Ordos, although there are also items from (Outer) Mongolia, Southern Siberia, Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, Northern Pakistan, and Afghanistan (Bactria). The objects representing the western part of the region (nos 196 to 245) come from Iran, Luristan, Anatolia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and South Arabia.

Almost all of the objects in the collection are bronzes, although there are also a few pieces of silver, gold, and bone. Most objects date from the Scythian period, broadly-defined (1st millennium BC), but some items are younger or considerably older. The material is dominated by the "Scythian animal style", as represented by numerous plaques, buckles, pendants, finials, roundels, belt hooks, knives, daggers, and statuettes. There are also mirrors, vessels, seals, and diverse other objects. While many items have parallels in other collections, some are unique and represent challenges to research.

The value of the Borowski collection, like that of similar private collections elsewhere, is that it brings together in a concentrated context a selection of thematically coherent and aesthetically representative pieces. The lack of information concerning the provenance of the objects makes dating and authentication difficult in many cases, however. In light of Borowski's expertise in the field, we may assume that his collection is more or less free of fakes (which can be very common, especially as far as Chinese bronzes are concerned); even so, many of the less stereotypical pieces remain problematic without information on their archaeological context.

An interesting example of controversy concerns the cross-shaped seals of Ordos. In Chinese museums and publications, these seals are invariably dated to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and attributed to the local Nestorian Christians. From a larger context, however, they would appear to belong to the considerably earlier tradition of the so-called compartmented seals of Bactria (2nd millennium BC), as has been demonstrated by Susanne Baghestani.² Jäger does not provide

² Susanne Baghestani 1997. *Metallene Compartimentsiegel aus Ost-Iran, Zentralasien und Nord-China*, Band 1. Archäologie in Iran und Turan. Rahden/Westf.: Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH.

a conclusive opinion, but suggests that the cross-shaped seals might indeed be local to Ordos, representing a combination of Nestorian and Buddhist influence from a period preceding the historical Mongols (AD 4th to 5th centuries). The problem is that, from an archaeological point of view, none of these seals have been properly excavated. The dispute surrounding the objects also shows the extent to which the technical methods for the dating of bronzes by other than stylistic criteria still remain undeveloped.

In general, Jäger and Kansteiner have done careful research on the individual objects. Additional validation comes with a foreword by John Boardman, a leading expert on Greek and Mediterranean art and archaeology, but also recently the author of a monograph on the “relief plaques” of China and adjacent regions.³ A certain lack of attention to detail is suggested by many mistakes in the Romanization of the non-Western (Russian, Chinese, Japanese) references, as well as by the choice of maps, some of which contain antiquated or non-English (German) spellings and obsolete political borders (from the Soviet period).

As it is, the role of private collectors as a resource (especially of the “minor arts”) should not be underestimated. At the same time, professional excavations are needed in order to provide a larger context for dating and authentication. Given the advances in the technical methods of archaeology, it also makes sense to return to old excavation sites. This is exemplified by the joint Mongolian-German project on Karakorum, which has now published its first volume:

Mongolian-German Karakorum Expedition, vol. I. Excavations in the Craftsmen Quarter at the Main Road. Ed. Jan Bemmman, Ulambayar Erdenebat & Ernst Pohl. *Forschungen zur Archäologie Außereuropäischer Kulturen*, Band 8. Bonn (Contributions to Asian Archaeology 2) Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2010. 337 pp., 5 supplement planches for stratigraphy and architecture. ISBN 978-3-89500-697-5 (hardcover).

The ruins of Karakorum, the Mongol capital in early imperial times (1220–1260) and also later, were first excavated by Soviet archaeologists in the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, the State Hermitage Museum possesses an important collection of objects obtained during the expedition of S.V. Kiselev (1948–1949). Additional minor excavations were carried out during the Soviet period, but a new era began with the joint Mongolian-German project – actually a set of parallel projects (KAR-1 and KAR-2) ongoing since 1999.

³ John Boardman, 2011. *The Relief Plaques of Eastern Eurasia and China: The ‘Ordos Bronzes’, Peter the Great’s Treasure, and Their Kin*. Oxford: Beazley Archive Occasional Publications.

Several factors lie behind Mongolian-German cooperation in the field of archaeology. The ties between the two countries (with East Germany on the German side) became relatively intimate in the context of Socialist brotherhood. Furthermore, many ethnic German archaeologists in the Soviet Union are now living in Germany; they are able to make use of their connections in Russia and Mongolia. Finally, Germany (including West Germany) has a venerable academic tradition of Mongolian studies. It is interesting to note that while this tradition is otherwise in decline, with positions being closed and chairs being lost, in archaeology it is flourishing.

The volume published here consists of a collection of specialized chapters by a total of 22 authors (including the three editors) from Germany, Mongolia, and Russia. The chapters cover a wide range of topics and represent many different disciplines, including stratigraphy, chemistry, zoology, anthropology, botany, palynology, architecture, and history, as well as various types of material and artefact studies. Many chapters take a cross-disciplinary approach. The material is well illustrated by photographs, drawings, maps, and tables. The volume also provides a general background of the geography and geology of the region surrounding Karakorum, which today is listed as a World Heritage Site (“Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape”).

To provide an example of the contents of the volume, the Mongolian archaeologist Gonchigsüren Nomguunsüren has contributed a chapter named “Preliminary Study of Cart Wheel-Bushings from Karakorum, Mongolia” (pp. 173–211). Wheel-bushings – that is, circular metal objects that separate the hub of a wheel from the axle – were widely used in carts by the mediaeval Mongols; the database on them is large enough to allow a rather detailed typology to be established. Some wheel-bushings may have been used in so-called “ger-carts”, very large carts used to carry movable dwellings of the yurt type (*ger*). Nomguunsüren examines the relevant material from Karakorum in light of a wide range of comparative evidence coming not only from excavations, but also from petroglyphs, texts, and other historical sources. He also gives a list of more than a hundred Mongolian terms related to cart technology. Importantly, the terms are quoted also in their Written Mongol shapes.

When Khubilai Khan became emperor in 1260, he moved the Mongol capital from Karakorum to Shangdu (Xanadu) and Dadu (Peking). Both of these capitals have been objects of intensive study by Chinese archaeologists. The material heritage of the Yuan dynasty is much larger, as it comprises all of the artefacts remaining from the Mongol period of Chinese history. A selection of this heritage was recently presented as a major exhibition at the Metropolitan

Museum of Art. While the exhibition closed in early 2011, the accompanying catalogue by James C.Y. Watt in collaboration with other specialists remains a permanent tribute to the Yuan dynasty:

James C.Y. Watt, *The World of Khubilai Khan. Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty*. With essays by Maxwell K. Hearn, Denise Patry Leidy, Zhixin Jason Sun, John Guy, Joyce Denney, Birgitta Augustin & Nancy S. Steinhardt. New Haven: YUP, 2010. xviii+342 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-16656-9 (hardcover).

The objects in the exhibition, now depicted in the catalogue together with comparative material from various collections, came from several dozen central and provincial museums in China, Taiwan, Japan, Russia, Germany, Britain, Canada, and the US. The focus was clearly on high-quality museum pieces, as well as luxury art: golden bowls, jade ornaments, hanging scrolls made of silk, imperial porcelain, original paintings and works of calligraphy by famous artists and historical persons. One rare piece in particular was a Chinese mat with Islamic decorative motifs, dated to the twelfth century and well preserved in a Japanese collection. In general, the exhibition seems to have been biased towards the “major arts”, especially paintings, many of which came from the two Palace Museums (in Peking and Taipei).

The catalogue is divided into four topics: “Daily Life”, “Religion”, “Painting and Calligraphy”, and “Textiles and Decorative Arts”. Each topic is dealt with in chapters written by museum professionals. Some chapters also treat larger related topics, such as architecture and urban planning. One particularly interesting topic concerns the reconstruction of Mongol dress of the Yuan period (Joyce Denney, pp. 75–83). In the tradition of the Metropolitan Museum, the general quality of production is high. The texts are supported by carefully prepared photos and maps, as well as by an extensive general bibliography – with no apparent mistakes in the transcriptions, and with Chinese and Japanese names and titles in their original script.

The Yuan dynasty was one of the most international periods of Chinese history. This internationalism, reflecting strong influence from Western and Central Asia, was perhaps nowhere as obvious as in the field of religion. Although the catalogue gives the most attention to Buddhism (especially its Tibetan form), it also includes pieces that illustrate the presence of Islam, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity in the Mongol empire. Not surprisingly, one also finds many syncretic developments. Among the curiosities in the catalogue, there is a Manichaean scroll which has been preserved in Japan; painted in the Buddhist style, it shows Jesus with a Chinese face sitting on a lotus throne and holding a Nestorian cross (p. 123).

In his introduction to the volume, Watt discusses the issue of the cross-shaped compartmented seals. Without problematizing the issue, he dates them to the Yuan period and considers them to be of a Nestorian origin (p. 31). The matter cannot be regarded as concluded, however, as long as unambiguous archaeological evidence is missing. Also, it remains a question how “Nestorian” the formal language of these seals really is: although their general shape resembles that of a Nestorian cross, they also contain other elements, including swastikas and geometric figures of unknown meaning. It seems that none of these seals have any inscriptions that would give a basis for exact attribution.

In general, one might say that Central Asian influences on Chinese culture reached a peak during the Yuan dynasty. After the subsequent separation of the Chinese and Mongolian states, and especially during the latter part of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), China became increasingly “Chinese”, while Central Asia continued developing along its own lines. Even today, the two cultural spheres meet in regions like East Turkestan, and the future will tell if a synthesis can be reached without open conflict.