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AN EXPORT CAULDRON OF THE HAN PERIOD

GUSTAV ECKE

HONOLULU

Figure A illustrates a rather curious type of bronze cauldron, not quite Chinese in shape and ornament (fig. D), yet inscribed as having been made at 'P'ing-yang' (fig. B), according to Dr. Noel Barnard the modern Liu-fen in Shansi Province. The bronze is dated 123 B.C. (fig. C), i. e. into the Anterior Han Period. The piece is incomplete, the lower part of its stem support is missing, but can be reconstructed after a closely related stem cauldron at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris (fig. E). The latter is devoid of ornament, and of primitive make. It is listed as having been found in the Ordos region, for untold ages the meeting place of China and the Steppe. In it we may see the model for the more elaborate Shansi bronze. We here remember the 'hunting knives' of Siberian origin,¹ disputed by Gunnar Andersson, Max Loehr and the writer of this article. They are likely to be the descendants of a Magdalenian bone scratcher, interpreted in bronze as knives in the Altai region towards the middle of the second millennium B.C. They were reproduced, with the animal naturalism of their pommel intact and enhanced, during the Anyang period (ca. 1300–1028 B.C.) of Shang, for barter with the nomad tribes who had established the type. The Chinese, of course, were craftsmen and artists in one, and in addition born traders. Some of these Anyang knives were veritable works of art, perhaps of ritual significance, while the Shansi cauldron, likewise of Hunnish type, was a cooking vessel, made up, commercially, for the Hsiung-nu taste and 'beautified' accordingly. It was cast at a time when the Chinese had the upper hand in the eternal clashes between the Steppe and the settled land.

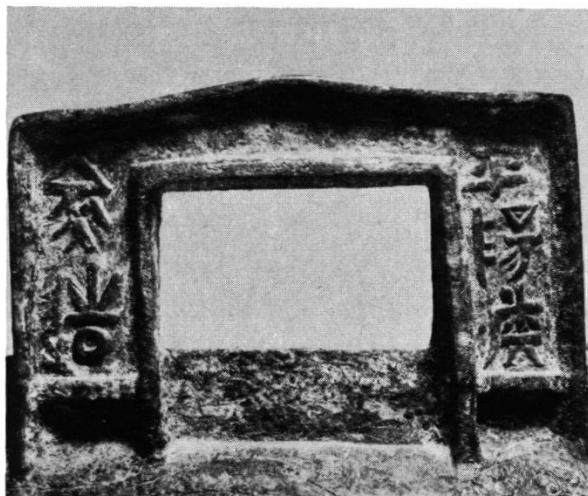
1. G. Ecke, *Über einige Messer aus An-yang*, Sinologische Arbeiten, Peking 1943. – B. Karl-gren, *Some Weapons and Tools of the Yin Dynasty*, Bulletin No. 17, The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm 1945, Figs. 179, 181.

The body proper of the Shansi cauldron is covered with a flat, rectangular, net-like design, enriched with an archaic diamond motif. It is a space-filling ornament, of no particular meaning, neither of symbolic nor aesthetic significance. The separate band around the shoulder (fig. D) is embellished with a repetitious, upwards-downwards fish ornament, slightly formalized with its undulating curves and archaizing eyes, the latter perhaps intended to recall the jade fish, a fisherman's charm, of the Shang and Early Chou period. Our fish motif, rather unimaginative, is set upon a background of tiny, space-filling circular elements. There is no trace here of a Late Chou tradition, lingering on with its elegant and powerful 'heraldry' into the early Han style, nor of a true animal naturalism in the Ordos way. The whole manner of decorating this export bronze has something intentional about it, something commercial, as if meant to appeal to the mentality of an unsophisticated, if not barbarous clientele. It was a time when the victorious Han-jen had every reason to look down on the Hsiung-nu fiend, yet not on his merchandise. Thus, for the Hsiung-nu taste the stem cauldron (fig. A) was cast, embellished, yet not improved upon the original Hsiung-nu prototype (fig. E) which has an uncouth beauty of its own.

The pedigree of this Ordos stem-cauldron (fig. E) is a problem in its own right. A ceramic prototype seems probable, a stem-container of primitive make, as it may have served the roaming tribes of the Steppe before they became acquainted with bronze around the middle of the second millennium B.C. That such an early nomad stem vessel is related to ceramic stem-containers of proto-Chinese type, as they occur within the Ma-ch'ang ware of the upper Yellow River region, seems unlikely, and even less likely is it related to the stem-containers of Lung-shan, i. e., the 'Black Pottery' type. Recent finds of late Neolithic ceramic stem-containers, allegedly similar to the Ordos cauldron but of central Chinese provenance I know as yet merely from hearsay. In any case, to raise a food container above the ground, a precautionary measure, it naturally needs a supporting stem, and the existence of such a stem alone, whether



A



B

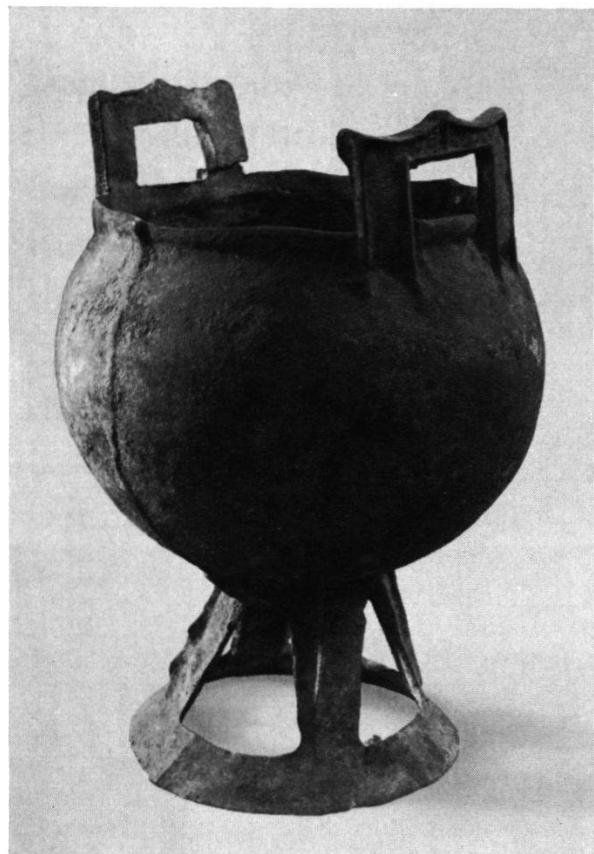


C



D

Fig. A-D. Cooking vessel in the Hsiung-nu taste, bronze, inscribed. Made at P'ing-yang (fig. B), the modern Liu-fen, Shansi Province in 123 B.C. (fig. C). The stem, now partly lost, corresponded to that of fig. E. Actual height 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Honolulu Academy of Arts.



E

Fig. E. Ordos Cooking vessel, bronze, height 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Courtesy Musée Cernuschi, Paris. Photo Giraudon.



F

Fig. F. Hun cooking vessel from Simbirsk, Russia. Eremitage Museum, Leningrad.

open, with triangular cutouts, or closed, as in the case of the Ma-ch'ang and Lung-shan examples, does not yet prove a pedigree. 'To establish the possibility of a comparison between vessel types of different cultural provinces' – in our case China and the Steppe – 'it is a necessity that these types agree in the principal features of their formation. Coincidence in only one, or in a few characteristics, does not constitute a relationship,' so Berthold Laufer.²

This obvious rule applies likewise to attempts made to connect the Hsiung-nu type of the Ordos vessel with the *Ting*, the *Li-ting* and *Hsien* classes of Shang ritual bronze, even to the *Tou* type which does have a regular round stem support. The existence of this stem alone 'does not constitute a relationship,' to speak once more with Laufer. The Shansi cauldron (fig. A), though made in China, is of Hsiung-nu/Hunnish type, its model being the earlier Ordos cauldron (fig. E) which itself derives from a still uncertain ceramic Hsiung-nu prototype.

It was Professor Zoltan von Takacs of Budapest, today the Nestor of Hun (i. e. of Hsiung-nu) research who, fifty years ago, at a time preceding our present wide knowledge of early Chinese bronze, wrote on what he then believed to be the existence of a 'Chinese art with the Huns.'³ His examples, as far as our problems are concerned, were two closely related versions of one and the same type of bronze, or copper, stem-container, found over wide areas of Eastern Europe, including Hungary, Silesia and Russia. These Takacs claims to be of late Hunnish, eventually Chinese, not of Scythian origin, in itself already an achievement proving this scholar's keen intuition. Today, half a century later, we would rather trace the type of the Hun cauldron (fig. F) back to the Ordos-Shansi examples (figs. E, A), both, as we now understand, of Hsiung-nu –

2. B. Laufer, *Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty*, Leiden 1909, p. 224.

3. Z. v. Takacs, 'Chinesische Kunst bei den Hunnen,' *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* IV, Berlin 1915/16, pp. 174–188. – Forty years later the same author illustrated an additional example of the variety found in Hungary, this time with the stem-support preserved, yet without any further discussion, cf. 'Denkmäler der Hunnen in Ungarn,' *Acta Orientalia*, tom. IX, fasc. One, Budapest 1959, pp. 85–95, fig. 1.

i. e. of 'Hunnish' – type themselves, and not Chinese in the proper sense of the word, although the cauldron (fig. A) had actually been made in China.

Of the two closely related cauldron versions adduced by Takacs (loc. cit. figs. 1 and 5), we refer to the one which came to light at Simbirsk in Russia (fig. F), as its pronounced simplicity of the handle treatment lets it appear better fit for comparison. The decor of the Simbirsk bronze, so we hold, seems late and has little if anything to do with early bronzes of the Far East. What the example from Russia and the Ordos example do have in common is the very idea of a stem-container in general, no matter which variety of stem, and what variety of cauldron shape, globular in the Ordos example and its Shansi imitation (figs. E, A), straight-walled in the piece from Russia (fig. F). If we take into account the five hundred years likely to have separated the Simbirsk bronze from those found in the Ordos, and the long separation of the Western Huns from their Siberian homeland, the changes a cauldron type might undergo are plausible – telling instances of a long formal development. And yet Laufer's – any archaeologist's – warning not to arrive at hasty conclusions might hold true in this case, after all, were it not for the pair of rectangular handles. In case of the globular body (figs. A, E) they are rooted on the shoulders and attached to the perpendicular rim proper, while attached to the straight upper zone in the Simbirsk piece (fig. F). Back through five hundred years, from Attila and his Huns, throughout half of Europe and Asia, these handles lead us straight back to the Ordos type of stem-cauldron. It is these handles alone, a propos, which perhaps represent an early loan from Chinese bronze kettles, only slightly adjusted, as in the wave motif of the upper handle bar, however, without a change in their possible 'Chinese' character.

If we are right, if these stem-cauldrons found at Simbirsk, in Silesia and Hungary are descendants of the Ordos cauldron, they would in their modest way contribute to testify to the weird genius of the Steppe – tokens, even these cooking vessels, of the cosmic furor that haunted those mounted tribes who, as Edward Gibbon has it, 'shook the globe from China to Poland and Greece.'