

EURASIAN STEPPE BRONZES (RE)DISCOVERED

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John Boardman. *The Relief Plaques of Eastern Eurasia and China. The 'Ordos Bronzes', Peter the Great's Treasure, and their kin.* BAR S2146. Beazley Archive Occasional Paper. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010. 91 pp. + 62 plates + 3 maps. ISBN 978-1-4073-0687-2.

Ulf Jäger, Sascha Kansteiner. *Ancient Metalwork from the Black Sea to China in the Borowski Collection.* Ruhpolding; Mainz: Franz Phillip Rutzen, 2011. 186 pp. + 230 color plates. ISBN 3-447-06496-X.

The study of metal artefacts from the Eurasian steppe belt has as long history and is connected with many different names. However, the names associated with the two publications under review here – John Boardman, Ulf Jäger and Sascha Kansteiner – are fairly new to the field. This is not surprising, as all three have a background mainly in classical and prehistoric archaeology and only Ulf Jäger (2006) has published on the subject before. Nonetheless, both books make interesting contributions to the field. With their splendidly illustrated catalogue, Ulf Jäger and Sascha Kansteiner allow the reader to discover another of the many private collections whose existence would otherwise be unknown, while John Boardman's preliminary study not only boldly addresses a problem that has been evident for a long time – the need for comprehensive studies of the known material – but also takes a first step towards a possible solution.

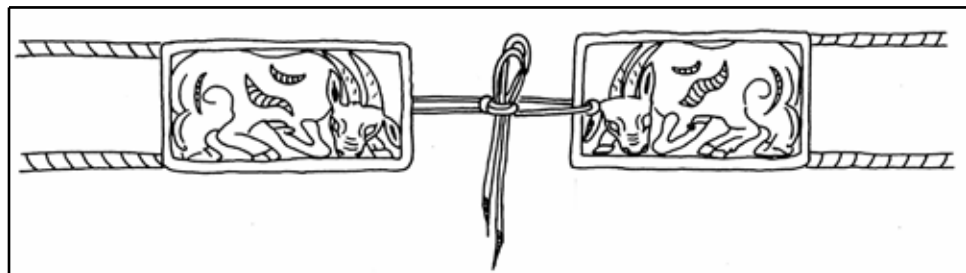
Sir John Boardman's study is written in a very dense style and seems to expect of the reader certain background knowledge of the subject. Already in the preface, Boardman presents us with a familiar problem: with private collections successively being made accessible and results of archaeological excavations being published, the number of known objects from the eastern Eurasian steppe is constantly growing. However, probably due to the vastness of the material, a systematic and comprehensive approach is still missing, or as Boardman puts it (p. 1): "Studies have been piecemeal." He is to be applauded for not merely pointing out the problem but for essaying its solution.

The main aim of the book is thus to create a corpus of material upon which more in-depth research can be based. The author focuses mainly on one group of objects – relief plaques which are commonly termed "belt plaques" or "decorative plaques" for garments, harnesses etc. (Fig. 1) These artefacts are characteristic finds throughout the eastern Eurasian steppe, and their figurative decoration has intrigued many other scholars before John Boardman. He analyzes the plaques by subject, style and form and arranges them in groups – a clearly art historical approach that may, the author hopes (p. 2) "lead more readily to conclusions of social and historical significance."

As becomes clear in the introduction though, rather than encompass a bigger corpus of material, the author focusses in the first instance on only one group of plaques, the so called "Rope-border series," which he sees as being more related to the Chinese kingdoms than to the mobile groups of the northern Chinese steppe. In Chapter 2 he describes their iconography and style in detail and orders them by type and approximate chronology, as well as by separating the solid from the openwork pieces. Each types is given a number and a letter (e. g., 1A) and is listed with reference to the corresponding image.

Fig. 1. Reconstruction illustrating one possibility of how plaques would have been attached to a belt.

Drawing © Catrin Kost



This chapter points out several useful things, for instance that the rope border, which in Boardman's opinion has roots in Chinese art, might have been inspired by chain-stitching for felt and cloth panels, or that the depiction of animals with beaked muzzles is likely to have drawn inspiration from the appearance of the Saiga, an antelope living in the Eurasian steppe. His elaboration on how the so-called *Kerbschnitt* pattern (p. 16) with which the body of many animals is decorated derives from woodwork found in Sarmatian sites is also convincing. The most striking feature of this chapter though is his drawings, in which he "explodes" the figurative decoration of the belt plaques. This is especially useful because some motifs (see, e. g., his Pl. 14) are of an extremely tight composition and thus hard to discern. So far no other scholar has made the effort to unscramble them.

In an attempt to identify the starting date for the production of the rope-border plaques, Boardman mentions the burial of Xinzhuangtou, which has been dated to the late Warring States period (i.e. the 3rd century BCE). The assumption that the two pairs of rope-border plaques found in the grave goods are amongst the earliest examples of the series is more than justified. However, on the basis of one find to question the date of the whole cemetery of Daodunzi, where several of the stylistically earlier plaques were found in graves containing Chinese Wuzhu-coins (cast from 118 BCE and thus a perfect *terminus a quo*), seems like jumping to conclusions.

Chronology remains problematic in Chapter 3, titled "Other Plaque Series." Here, the author outlines in much the same fashion as for the rope-border plaques a wealth of other material – irregularly shaped plaques ("outline plaques"), B/P-shaped plaques, plaques with a geometric decoration as well as plaques with drop, bar and plain borders. Boardman discusses style and subject, sorts, and proposes a relative chronology which is combined with thoughts on the absolute date. He also examines the possible Chinese influence on these plaques, which he sees as being more nomadic than the rope-border series and proceeds to a brief overview of the history of Peter the Great's treasure and the Chinese sites of Aluchaideng and Xichagou, both located in Inner Mongolia.

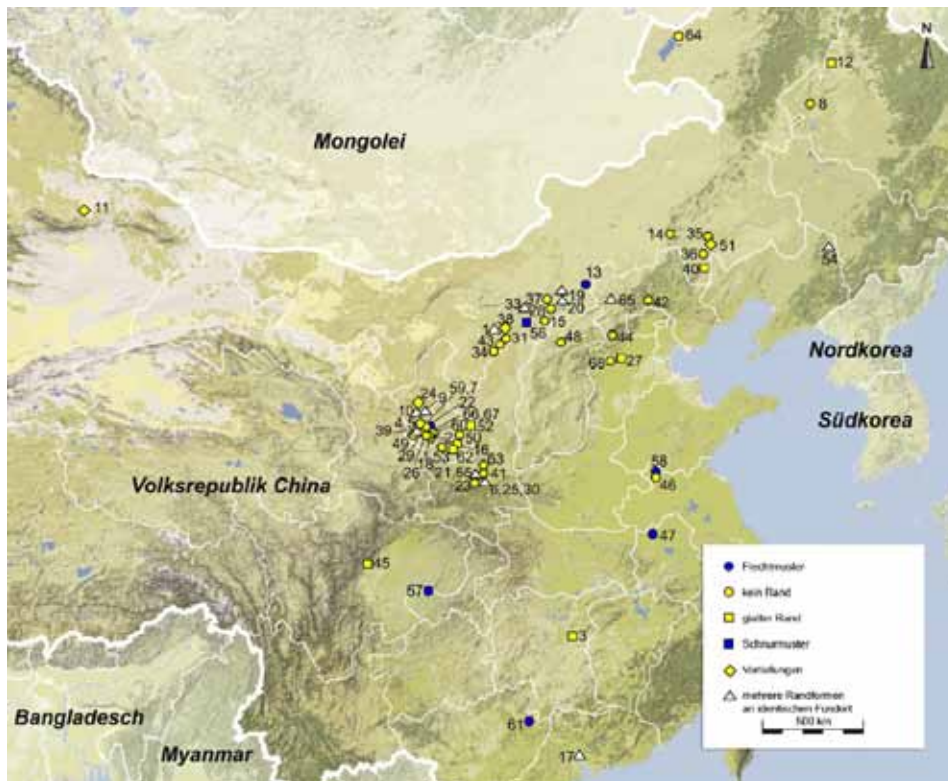
It should be stressed that, with very few reliably dated finds, chronology is a difficult topic for every scholar researching the bronzes of the eastern Eurasian steppe. Boardman himself rightly remarks that establishing a relative chronology seems to make much more sense than trying to determine the absolute date of individual finds. However, one cannot help but feeling that in Chapter 3 he treats too much material in too cursory a fashion, which in turn leads to generalizations that

are incorrect. Statements such as, "Many of the works discussed in the later part of this section must be second-century in date, some much later," are not adequate when presenting material that can, with the help of accessible literature, be dated from the Early Warring States Period (5th century BCE) to the 1st and 2nd century CE.

Boardman's conclusions start with a few general remarks on the relations between the settled Chinese and the mobile groups of the steppe as recounted in Chinese written sources. The author also stresses once more that he sees the rope-border plaques as Chinese products, while the plaques examined in Chapter 3 are more purely nomadic. But despite these labels, he admits (p. 88) that "places of manufacture are as yet impossible to determine." This, however, does not keep him from trying to put the rope-border series into a wider historical context. He does so by referring to the story of the King of the Zhao state (Zhao Wuling 趙武陵), who – according to written sources such as the *Huainanzi* (淮南子) or the Records of the Historian (*Shiji* 史記) – not only commanded his soldiers and officials to wear barbarian dress and use barbarian weapons but also did so himself. Boardman suggests that this might have been the very situation in which a Chinese belt-plaque series was born. In his view this process would have been facilitated by the fact that buckles (Chin. *xibi*; p. 89) had been a regular feature of Chinese garments for a long time. Drawing from earlier northern sources, the Chinese would have copied the form and decoration of the belt plaques, combining them with Chinese features such as the rope border. This, the author deduces, would place the starting date of the rope-border series during the reign of King Wuling of Zhao, 325–299 BCE.

The idea, of course, fits extremely well with the author's view that the rope-border belt plaques are a Chinese product. However, following his train of thought, one should be aware that in China traditionally not belt plaques but belt hooks were used to fasten garments. My own research (Kost, forthcoming) also shows that the term *xibi* 犀紕, which Boardman mentions and which occurs in written sources such as the History of the Former Han Dynasty (漢書), is one of the terms used specifically to designate "northern" belts, while other terms are used to identify the more typical Chinese belts.

A very nice aspect of Boardman's reasoning, however, is that it adds another layer to the ever present question of "Who produced the belt plaques and for whom?" (i.e. the Chinese for the nomads or the nomads for themselves) by proposing that some plaques were made by the Chinese mainly for their own use. It would have been interesting to hear his



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Fig. 2. Distribution map for different kinds of plaque borders. Blue circles and squares indicate Boardman's rope-border plaques. Further examples of these appear at sites no. 1, 9, 10, 17, 33, 54, 65. White triangles indicate several different types of borders found at one site.

thoughts on why, then, so many rope-border belt plaques appear in graves of the northern Chinese steppe (Fig. 2). But unless proven otherwise through physical evidence of workshops, his idea certainly remains valid.

Reading John Boardman's book raised a very basic question that seems important to ask. The author himself remarks – and most archaeologists will agree with him – that stylistic studies are “not much in favour these days” (p. 7), but insists that “we ignore them at our peril” (p. 7). Personally I think that they are problematic but become more convincing the more closely they are intertwined with chronological discussion. But chronology, as already mentioned, is a difficult topic when it comes to the bronzes of the eastern Eurasian steppe. What differentiates this stylistic study from others hitherto published in the field is the singling out of a so-called “relevant” series, thereby running the risk of treating the objects within a bigger group unequally. No doubt, there are belt plaques which are much more masterfully designed and cast than others – but should the archaeologist not see this as connected with the individual abilities of a craftsman and treat *all* the objects in question

pari passu, instead of automatically classifying the less splendid ones as “cheap imitations” (p. 24), “forgeries” (p. 24) or even the “sorry finale of a brilliant series” (p. 83)? My personal opinion is that we still know very little about the mobile groups of the eastern Eurasian steppe. By dismissing objects as being irrelevant, we rob ourselves of potential sources of information.

Despite the above reservations, it is important to stress that Boardman achieves the aim proclaimed in the introduction. This book is a preliminary study, born out of the fascination for a subject but also out of the realization that there is a substantial

need for a more comprehensive approach to it. Thus, his inclusion of a relatively large corpus of material not only serves as the basis for his own research but will, he hopes, also be of use to other scholars.

The publication by Ulf Jäger and Sascha Kansteiner deals with a set of objects collected by Dr. Elie Borowski. His collection forms the core of the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, which he founded together with his wife Batya in 1992. The catalogue introducing these artefacts to a wider audience certainly is visually appealing. High quality color images accompany the 245 catalogue entries for the roughly 300 objects presented. These cover a time-span of about 1000 years (5th century BCE – 5th century CE) and, as indicated in the title, they come from a very large geographical area.¹ The artefacts from Eastern and Central Asia form a slightly larger group for which the corresponding 195 catalogue entries were written by Ulf Jäger, while the 50 entries on objects from Western Asia were written by Sascha Kansteiner.

Each author chose a slightly different order for his artefacts and thus the Western Asian objects are ordered according to country of possible origin. Finds from Eastern and Central Asia are mostly grouped according to object type, although Ulf Jäger follows the idea of John Boardman (in the book reviewed above) and differentiates rope-border belt plaques (“belt plaques,” pp. 17–30) from the “other belt plaques”

(pp. 33-43) and the “outline-animal plaques” (pp. 44-47).

The catalogue entries supply all necessary information on the objects, such as descriptor, inventory number, material, place of assumed origin, proposed date, dimensions and in one case (pp. 142, 222) even information on the composition of the metal alloy. Following the basic data is a description of the individual piece, its form, decoration and the metalworking techniques involved in producing it. The descriptions are concise, easily understandable and of great help in discerning the very dense decoration of some objects. The terminology is precise and consistent, a laudatory feature not always found in catalogues. Only rarely might we ask for more of the high quality images; e. g., for artefacts such as the gold buckle (?; p. 149, No. 211) which retains its wooden core, it would have been nice to have an additional shot of the reverse.

Most readers will agree that the main aim of a catalogue introducing a collection is to present the objects. However, as demonstrated in Emma Bunker’s publication of the bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections (1997), which includes excellent essays by herself, Kathryn M. Linduff and Wu En as well as data on metal analysis carried out by W. Thomas Chase and Janet G. Douglas, a catalogue can profit enormously from additional information on the history and archaeology of a region. Apart from a short foreword by John Boardman, in which mainly the allegedly “Chinese” objects are addressed, the publication under review here does not offer any introduction into the historical and archaeological context or important sites. One can assume that this is due to the large geographical area and the long period of time covered. Although desirable, such an essay is not essential, but its lack means that this book will be useful mainly for people who have already gathered some background knowledge or for those who are interested in the objects mainly for their aesthetic quality. Less forgivable is the inadequacy of the maps. Those that are provided show modern-day borders exclusively and are thus of limited use when using historical terms such as Persia, Scythia, Lydia etc.

In thinking more about what the catalogue might have done better, one might wish for an attempt to put objects back into their historical context. For Eurasian bronzes, a goal would be to give the “archaeological orphans” (a brilliant term coined by Emma Bunker) a new home by finding similar or identical pieces from excavated contexts which might help in determining an approximate date and area of distribution. Unfortunately, especially in the first half

of this catalogue, opportunities that readily presented themselves to do this were simply not seized. While I would agree with most of the dates assigned to individual objects, their description and especially the information on the place of origin (or maybe rather the area of distribution) would really have benefited from more thorough research into recent studies of identical objects from archaeological contexts (e.g., Linduff 2008), and also newer Chinese publications (such as Wu En 2007, 2008).

To give but one example: page 35, No 32 presents a B/P- shaped (and not, as stated, a rectangular) openwork plaque depicting a scene of interaction between a horseman, two dogs and a monster (?) as well as a small two-wheeled cart. According to the author of the entry, similar images can be found on wall-hangings from the Pazyryk kurgans in the Altai mountains. Additionally, a mirror-image plaque in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is mentioned. While there are numerous identical and mirror-image examples of belt plaques of this kind in private collections, what seems more important is the fact that one mirror-image plaque was found in Inner Mongolia (Zheng 1991, pp. 12-13), while the sites of Daodunzi (Ningxia Hui Autonomous region) and Xichagou (Liaoning province) yielded absolutely identical objects. The site of Daodunzi is especially interesting (Bunker 1997, pp. 80-83; more detailed, Linduff 2008). Here the belt plaque, together with another B/P-shaped plaque depicting a recumbent horse, was excavated from the grave of a 50-55-year-old female. Both belt plaques were found at the feet of the deceased and thus not in a position suggesting she wore them when being interred. Apart from artefacts such as cowries, jewellery, beads made from different material etc. the burial contained Wuzhu coins, which were cast from 118 BCE and serve as a *terminus a quo*. The date provided in the catalogue is thus fine, but the location “North China” could have been refined by adding Ningxia, Liaoning and Inner Mongolia, and the information just mentioned would have given the reader a better idea of not only where these objects were found but also how they were used in a funerary context.

At the risk of sounding picky, in conclusion I might mention two more things. The first is a problem that one encounters frequently in western language publications using Chinese sources. At first glance, many Chinese articles do not seem to have an individual author. Instead, one or several institutions with sometimes – let us be honest – annoyingly long names are mentioned above the title of the article. An example would be the Archaeological Institute of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, 宁夏回族自治区文物考古研究所/Ningxia Huizu zizhiqu wenwu

kaogu yanjiusuo. In some, but not all cases though, the name(s) of individual contributor(s) – mostly scholar(s) affiliated with the institution whose name is cited – are mentioned at the very end of the article. Thus, to quote the work by just stating name, issue and year of the journal it was published in is simply not correct. One would never get away with citing *BMFEA* (= *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*) 4 (1932), when referencing Johan Gunnar Andersson's famous article "Hunting Magic in the Animal Style." I firmly believe that Chinese colleagues and their research deserve to be treated in the same way.

Lastly, what spoiled some of the fun in reading this publication is the high number of spelling mistakes, typos and missing punctuation and spaces. This is especially sad because the catalogue is otherwise designed and presented in a very appealing fashion. Indeed, it is clear that Borowski's is a diverse collection consisting of intriguing objects, many of which are identical with excavated artefacts. The author of this review was especially fascinated by the gold plaque in the shape of a recumbent stag (p. 145, No. 206) which shows clear parallels to the finds from the Kostromskaya, the beautiful silver repoussé vessels from Iran and the gilded belt plaques (p. 24, No. 15) and harness roundels (p. 30, No. 25; p. 31, No. 25) from the northern Chinese steppe. But since beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, each reader will have to make his or her own choice.

About the author

Catrin Kost received her PhD from Munich University in 2011. Her thesis, which she is currently preparing for publication, focussed on the mobile-pastoralist groups of the northern Chinese steppe from the 5th century BCE to the turn of the era. While (re)assessing the hitherto known finds, the main focus of research was the figurative decoration of the belt plaques and the way these objects were used. Catrin has just finished a 15-months project on the Aurel Stein Collection in the British Museum, London, and will hold the post of Assistant Professor at the Institute of East Asian Art History at Heidelberg University from autumn 2012. E-mail: <CatrinKost@web.de>.

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Note

1. Note that, contrary to the title, the catalogue presents not only metal artefacts but also contains information on some objects made of bone (pp. 133–36).