

19. Set of Jade Belt Plaques

Dimensions:

Elongated tab end: 9.0 x 3.5 cm.

Rectangular: three long: 7.8 x 3.6 cm.

four medium: 5.7- 6.2 x 3.6 cm

four small: 3.6 x 1.8 -1.4 cm.

Teardrop: six pieces: 3.6 x 3.2 cm.

Yuan dynasty

14th century A.D.

All but the four smallest rectangular-shaped plaques are carved with jocular male figures and frolicsome lions against openwork lattice grounds. On the larger plaques either a single lion placed stage center is flanked by two humans or a human is in the center with a lion on each side. A single lion and its human counterpart each occupy the smaller rectangular plaques, as well as the plaque with one curved end. Of the six teardrop-shaped plaques, four are decorated with a single lion each and two by male figures. These male figures wear pantaloons or garments with flaring skirts, tall boots, and wide-brimmed hats, some rather tall with streamers attached. Lively and engaging, they gesticulate wildly and strike exaggerated postures like circus performers. The lions, with giant heads, elaborate manes, and flowing foliate tails, full of animation and playfulness, pull at the sashes or ropes, turn and twist, bound this way and that, becoming contortionists themselves, one even balancing straight upright on its front paws. The sashes are caught in the melee, wrapping themselves around the lions or meandering into decorative cloud-like scrolls while the triangular outcroppings at ground level represent earthy mounds or rocks. The four smallest plaques are carved with snippets of these ribbons and rocks against the lattice ground. The facial features of man and beast alike, the clothing and fur, the hands and limbs, are rendered in minute detail. Figures, ribbons and rocks give the impression of being carved almost completely in the round. They are, in fact, fully articulated only on the front surface while the sides are cut almost straight back to the pierced lattice ground behind. They project high from the background and thus appear to be in front of openwork screens or latticed windows, or even silhouetted against a cloudy sky. The lattice-work is extremely delicate and consists of series of cross-shapes stretched horizontally and repeated in irregular rows and groupings. Each of the jade plaques has a raised edge the same depth as the figures, providing a frame for the scenes. The pieces are cut from jade that ranges from pale green, to gray, and to white.



"Girdles for the loins have existed since times of old, all used to wear them; but these were leather belts throughout. Gaozu (A.D. 618-670) of the Tang dynasty was the first to institute regulations for the girdles: all princes and nobles, lords, ministers of state and generals above the second rank were allowed to wear jade girdles. The one of the Son of Heaven consisted of twenty-four plaques, all others of thirteen plaques with two additional plaques at the ends. There were two kinds, ornamented and plain ones, the former only for the use of the Son of Heaven, while the princes and ministers could wear the girdles with dragon-designs only in case that they were bestowed on them."¹ By quoting a Tang period text, the compilers of the catalogue of the ancient jades in the collection of the first emperor of the Southern Song introduced the illustrations of such belts within the imperial collection (fig. 1). During the Tang dynasty lion motifs on jade belts are believed to have symbolized revered teachers since the word *shi*, "lion," is pronounced almost like *shi*, "teacher" (fig. 2). During the Yuan period such configurations were reserved for the girdles or belts of military officers of highest rank² and a number of individual plaques survive from the period with lions in the decor. Among

these are pieces very similar to those in the present set (fig. 3), while others are embellished with such additional elements as pine trees (fig. 4). Some were produced without the openwork ground and others are decorated with only a single figure of a lion and thus correspond more directly to the Tang prototype (fig. 5). The plaques would have been attached to leather, as shown in a set from a 10th-century A.D. tomb, (fig. 6). The figures painted on the walls of a 13th-century A.D. tomb of the Jin dynasty, excavated in Jiaozuo, Henan province, show how such belts were worn (fig. 7), while even heavenly deities are so garbed in the Yuan-period paintings on the walls of a Daoist monastery, the Yonglegong, in Shanxi province (fig. 8).

The tomb at Jiaozuo in Henan is particularly important in regard to the present jade plaques. The general appearance and demeanor, and specific details of expression and dress of the male figures shown on the jade plaques here are similar to the figures of musicians and dancers carved on the large bricks decorating the tomb (fig. 9),³ while the various lattice patterns on the bricks of this lavishly ornamented tomb provide parallels to the present lattice design (fig. 10). The lattice of the jade plaques further compares with the rich openwork designs appearing on contemporaneous Yuan dynasty *yingqing* ceramic wares, particularly the type of pillows in which the headrest portion is in fact the roof of a structure housing dramatic performances enacted on high decorative stages with elaborate openwork curtains and windows (fig. 11). At the same time the lattice filled and enlivened the background of the scenes depicted in the jade plaques in a manner similar to the diaper patterns on pictorially carved lacquer wares from the Song dynasty onwards (fig. 12). The lions too have their counterparts in a variety of Yuan media, including *yingqing* ceramics, where creatures with fabulous tails also gambol with ribbons floating round them⁴ all contributing to the very secure dating of this unusually large set of jade plaques.

1. Berthold Laufer, *Jade: Its History and Symbolism in China*, New York, 1989, p. 286.

2. Zhou Nanquan, *Zhongguo guyu duandai yu bianwei*, vol. 2: *Guwu dongwu yu shenqi shou juan*, Taipei, 1993, p. 217.

3. See "Henan Jiaozuo mu qutu," *Wenwu*, 1978:8, pp. 1-16. Three of the figures were exhibited in *The Quest for Eternity*, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, 1987.

4. See Sherman Lee and Waikam Ho, *Chinese Art Under the Mongols*, Cleveland, 1968, no. 105 a and b.



Detail a.



Detail b.

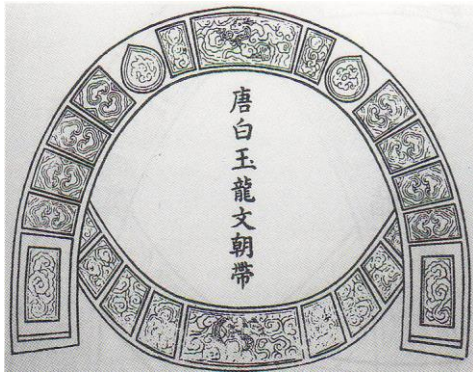


Fig. 1: Drawing of a Tang-dynasty white jade court girdle with dragon design, from the *Guyu tupu*, "Illustrated Description of Ancient Jade," preface dated A.D. 1176, after Berthold Laufer, *Jade: Its History and Symbolism in China*, New York, 1989, fig. 190.

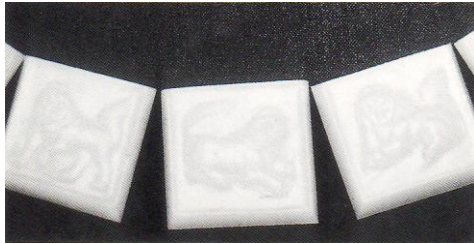


Fig. 2: Plaques from a lion-decorated jade belt, Tang dynasty, after Zhou Nanquan, *Zhongguo guyu duan dai yu bianwei*, vol. 2: *Guyu dongwu yu shenji shou juan*, Taipei, 1993, fig. 355, p. 218.

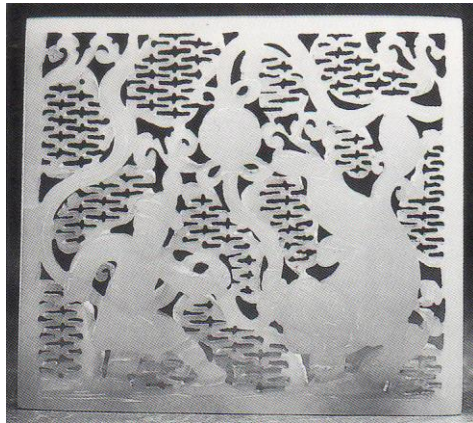


Fig. 3: Jade belt plaque, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-early 14th century A.D., after Zhong Ling, *Ruyi*, Taipei, 1994, no. 21, p. 48.

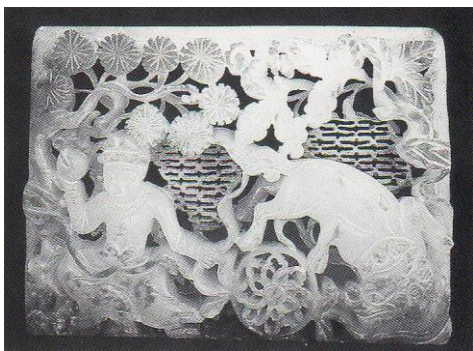


Fig. 4: Jade belt plaque, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-early 14th century A.D., Palace Museum Beijing, after *Gugong bowuyuancang wenwu zhenpin quanji: yuqi*, vol. II, Hong Kong, 1995, pl. 143.



Fig. 5: Jade belt plaque with lion, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-early 14th century A.D., after *Gugong bowuyuancang wenwu zhenpin quanji: yuqi*, vol. II, Hong Kong, 1995, pl. 141. *zhenpin quanji: yuqi*, vol. II, Hong Kong, 1995, pl. 141.



Fig. 6: Jade belt with modern leather backing from a 10th-century A.D. tomb in Chengdu, Sichuan province, after *Chugoku no Hakubutsukan*, series 2, vol. 4 (Sichuan Provincial Museum), Tokyo, 1988, pl. 183.



Fig. 7: Wall painting from Jin dynasty tomb in Jiaozuo, Henan, 13th century A.D., after *Wenwu*, 1979:8, pl. II: 1.



Fig. 8: Wall painting from a Yuan dynasty monastery, Shanxi, Yuan dynasty, late 13th-early 14th century A.D., after *The Yongle Gong Palace Murals*, Beijing, 1985, p. 56.



Fig. 9: Figure from Jin dynasty tomb in Jiaozuo, Henan, 13th century A.D., after *Chugoku no Hakubutsukan*, vol. 7 (Henan Provincial Museum), Tokyo, 1983, p1. 169.

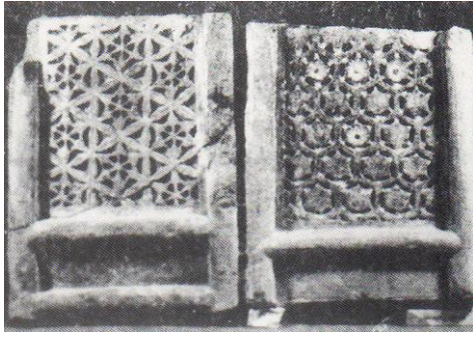


Fig. 10: Carved bricks from Jin dynasty tomb in Jiaozuo, Henan, 13th century A.D., after *Wenwu*, 1979:8, fig. 26, p. 13.

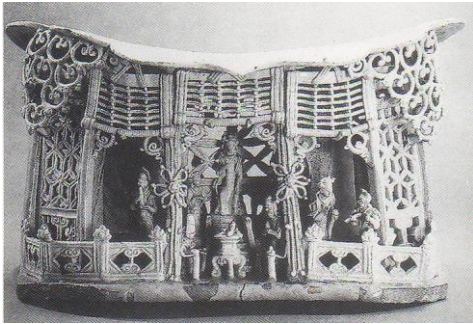


Fig. 11: *Yingqing* pillow, early Yuan dynasty, late 13th century A.D., Anhui Provincial Museum, after Liu Liang-yu, *A Survey of Chinese Ceramics: Liao, Xixia, Jin and Yuan Wares*, Taipei, 1992, p. 286.



Fig. 12: Small lacquer box from the mid-14th century A.D., Yuan dynasty tomb of the Ren family, after Derek Clifford, *Chinese Carved Lacquer*, London, 1992, pl. 27b, p. 45.