

9. A Monumental White-Ware Box with Incised Dragon Design

Diameter: 30.5 cm. (12 in.)

Height: 22.0 cm. (8 5/8 in.)

Liao dynasty

11th century A.D.

The massive receptacle and its lid were thrown from a dense, smooth, white stoneware clay, the voluminous receptacle with rounded interior supported on a sturdy ring foot around a recessed base and a lid with straight sides and compressed dome-shaped top. The outer wall of the box slants outward above the foot and is vertical from the waist to the mouth, the mouth rim providing a wide sturdy shelf with high flange for supporting and steadying the lid. Framed by a deep double groove, the copula of the lid is sufficiently flattened to provide a perfect enclosure for an enormous dragon whose scaly body coils around a flaming pearl, one front leg extended and almost touching the outstretched hind leg, while the three sharp claws of the other back leg are visible just behind the encircling body. The wide open mouth reveals large fangs and tongue beneath a flattened upturned and pointed snout, elongated eyes, and long horns pointed rearward over the flowing mane. Four *myi*-shaped cloud heads trailing long scrolling vapors are evenly spaced in the curved register below the double groove, enhancing the heavenly nature of the realm above, while four clusters of multi-lobed plump leaves and petals are incised over the lid and box uniting them decoratively and visually. A white slip carefully applied to the exterior of the lid and upper walls of the receptacle forms a suitable ground for the design, incised with vigor and spontaneity with the cutting tool held perpendicular to the surface. Slip was applied more casually to the interior of box and lid and roughly around the foot where grit from firing remains. The glaze evenly covers the cream-colored slip and is clear and quite bright especially on the domed part of the lid. The unglazed base is flat and sunken in on one side.



The two white stoneware boxes found in the tomb of the Liao Princess Chen (d. A.D. 1018) are similar in form although not as large in size as the present example (fig. 1). One comparable in size and massiveness, however, was found in a tomb, interestingly, in Jiangsu province where the occupant was buried in A.D. 943; the group of white wares found in the tomb had apparently been imported from the north (fig. 2). The use of ceramics of such stupendous size is reflected in the pictorial arts of the north, for example, from the tomb of Wang Chuzhi, a minister of the Liang dynasty, who died in A.D. 923 in territory that would not much later be disputed by the Liao and Song (figs. 3-4), as well as from a Northern Song dynasty tomb at Baisha, in Henan province (fig. 5). The Ding kilns in southern Hebei produced such ceramic boxes during the post-Tang period as demonstrated by kiln-site finds (fig. 6), these articles having evolved from the Tang period products of the Xing kilns, also in Hebei, exemplified here by a large box from the Idemitsu collection (fig. 7) and one from the Charles B. Hoyt collection in Boston (fig. 8).

The dragon on the lid of the present box descends from such Tang-dynasty predecessors as decorate bronze mirrors whose circular formats are reflected in the flattened domed-shaped lids of the ceramic boxes (fig. 9). The form of the dragon here is also closely related to Song period carved and molded dishes produced at the Ding kilns (fig. 10).¹ The dragon was a major protector not only of the Chinese emperor but of the Liao ruling entourage as well. Among its many manifestations—painted on wood or incorporated into the decoration of crowns produced within the Liao kingdom for example—is that on the lid of a gilt-silver box also from the Chen tomb of A.D. 1018 (figs. 11-12). The presence of dragons on boxes in any material whatsoever is rare outside the boundaries of Liao taste. The excavated silver box

provides some confirmation of the Liao pedigree of the ceramic box here and the presence of the dragon suggests, along with its impressive size, that it was created for a person of high status.

Various ceramic production centers beyond the Great Wall within territory ruled by the Liao are known to have produced white ware, for example, those near Liaoyang in Liaoning province, at Shangjing near Lindong and at Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, while, at the same time, kilns in Hebei province which were the home of the Xing and Ding kilns traditionally associated with the Tang and Song dynasties, were also for a time under Liao rule. The problem in attributing white wares to specific kilns is best expressed by William Watson who states: "Since the period of Liao rule for the most part overlaps with Song government in China it might be thought appropriate to treat Liao pottery as a provincial manifestation of Song methods and styles, but in essential respects, the local production shows the survival through the Liao period of types and techniques which prolong Tang-dynasty standards rather than attempt to copy those of the potters of Northern Song. Thus the pots found grouped in a Liao tomb may often indicate various independent origins and traditions: Tang style and its local imitation, vessels imported from Song China representing the product of southern as well as northern kilns; in part local imitations of these; and—not the least important—pieces invented by Liao potters which, at their best, reveal a distinct and original art."²

A white-ware ewer in the Liaoning Provincial Museum is a good example of the difficulty in ascribing pieces to one ruling house or the other: it is published as a Northern Song product (fig. 13) in one book and as a Liao product in another (fig. 14), both volumes from the same series devoted to Chinese ceramics. While the carving on the lid of the present box is in the tradition of Chinese potters working at Dingzhou of the Northern Song period, there are a small number of differences, for example, the scales on the bodies of the carved Ding ware dragons are more dense than on the present and the Ding ware designs include the use of combing whereas the present does not. It is also noteworthy that a slip-coating was used under the glaze and that the incising of the floral motifs on the sides of the box is more akin in technique to works which, in Watson's words, "reveal a distinct and original art," as exemplified in a bag-shaped ewer of undisputed Liao origin (fig. 15).

1. For closely related carved dragon designs see two Ding ware dishes of approximately the same diameter as the present box, one in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, illustrated in *China at the Inception of the Second Millennium: Art and Culture of the Sung Dynasty, 960-1279*, Taipei, 2000, no. IV-51 and the other in the Percival David Foundation, London, illustrated in "The Arts of the Sung Dynasty," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, London, 1959-1960, pl. 14, no. 17.

2. William Watson, *Tang and Liao Ceramics*, New York, 1984, p. 218.

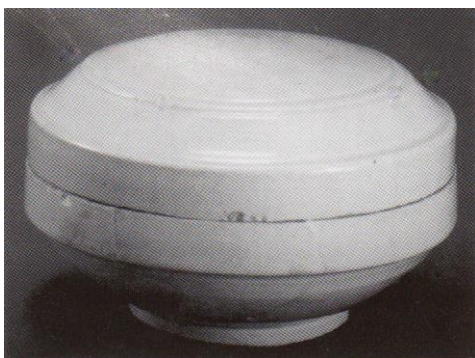


Fig. 1: White-ware box from the tomb of the Liao Princess Chen (d. A.D. 1018) and her husband in Inner Mongolia, d. 12.6 cm., after *Liao Chenguo gongzhumu*, Beijing, 1993, pl. XII:2.

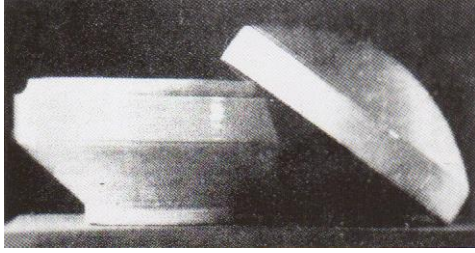


Fig. 2: White-ware box, d. 23.5 cm., Five Dynasties period, 10th century A.D., from a tomb in Jiangsu province dated to A.D. 943, after *Wenmu*, 1957:3, fig. 7, p. 71.

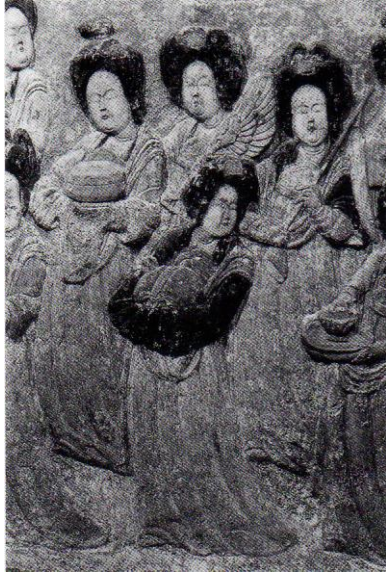


Fig. 3: Lady carrying a fashionable box, 10th century A.D., marble relief from the tomb of Wang Chuzhi (d. A.D., 923), Quyangxian, Hebei province, after *Wudai Wang Chuzhi mu*, Beijing, 1998, color pl. 40-41 (detail).



Fig. 4: Detail of figure 3.



Fig. 5: After a wall painting from a Northern Song tomb at Baisha, Henan province, 11th-12th century A.D., after *Baisha Songmu*, Beijing, 1957, pl. XXXVI:II (detail).

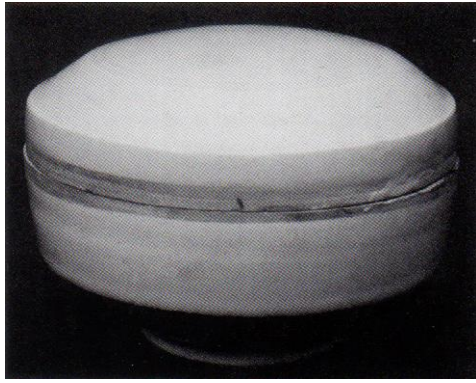


Fig. 6: Ding-ware box, d. 14.1 cm., Northern Song period, 11th-12th century A.D., Dingxian Museum, Hebei province, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol: 9: *Dingyao*, Shanghai and Tokyo, 1981, pl. 31.

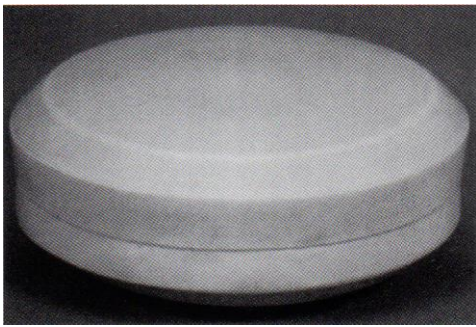


Fig. 7: Large Xing-ware box, d. 18.8 cm., Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., Idemitsu Museum of Arts, after *Treasures Along the Silk Road*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, 2001, pl. 174, p. 93.

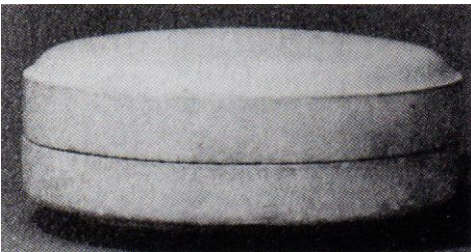


Fig. 8: Large white-ware box, Tang dynasty, d. 24.9 cm., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, after *The Charles B. Hoyt Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, Boston 1952, no. 138, p. 35.



Fig. 9: A silvered-bronze mirror with dragon decoration, Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., National Museum of Chinese History, Taipei, after *The Beauty of Dragons*, Taipei, 2000, p. 182.



Fig. 10: Ding-ware dish with molded dragon design, Northern Song period, 11th-12th century A.D., after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 9: *Dingyao*, Shanghai and Tokyo, 1981, pl. 69.

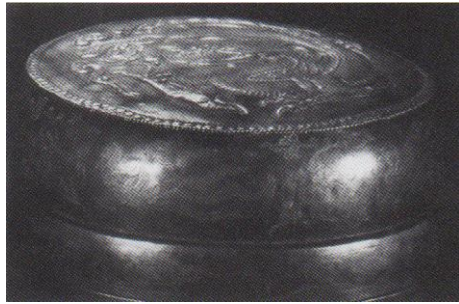


Fig. 11: A gilt-silver box with dragon decor, from the tomb of the Liao Princess Chen (d. A.D. 1018) and her husband in Inner Mongolia, d. 12.6 cm., after *Liao Chenguo gongzhumu*, Beijing, 1993, pl. XI.



Fig. 12: Drawing of box and lid in figure 11, after *Liao Chenguo gongzhumu*, Beijing, 1993, fig. 24:1 (left), p. 41.

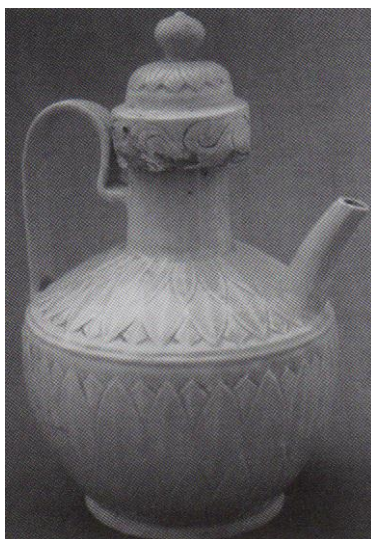


Fig. 13: White-ware ewer, "Northern Song period," Liaoning Provincial Museum after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 9: *Dingyao*, Shanghai and Tokyo, 1981, pl. 37.

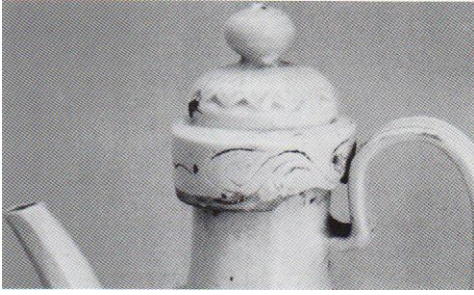


Fig. 14: Detail of a white-ware ewer, "Liao," Liaoning Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 17: *Liaodai taoci*, Shanghai and Tokyo, 1986, pl. 150.

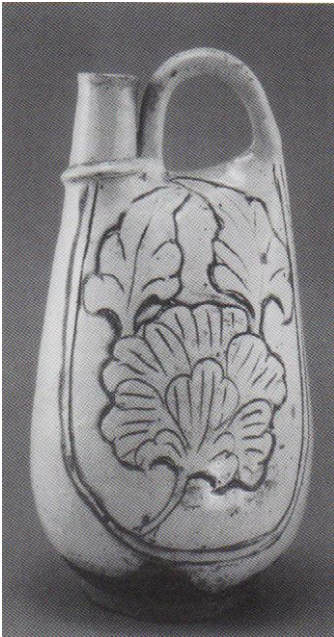


Fig. 15: Ewer with incised floral decor Liao dynasty, 11th-12th century A.D., Liaoning Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo wenwu jinghua daquan, taoci juan*, Hong Kong, 1993, no. 487, p. 314.