Bronze Ritual Scabbard

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Length: 33.0 cm. (13")
Eastern Zhou, Warring States period
5th-3rd century B.C.

長 33.0 厘米
東周 • 戰國時代

The scabbard, which is missing its back plate, is in the shape of an isosceles triangle with blunt rounded tip and straight hilt side. The raised relief and openwork design consists of snakes and geometric patterns in a bilaterally symmetrical arrangement. The center of the scabbard is defined by a row of disks descending in size from hilt to tip. The double body of a snake undulates along the outer sides of the disks, enclosing them within the tight curves of its body. The snake's flat triangular head rests at the scabbard's pointed end. A solid band forms a frame with intaglio key fret pattern on the sides and a narrow border of S-form designs on the hilt edge with crossed circles in the corners. Large snakes coil on the edge of this frame, three on each side toward the hilt, with smaller snakes stretched along the scabbard edge diminishing in size toward its tip. The bodies of the snakes and the surfaces of the disks are textured by multiple parallel rows of dense raised notches, in some areas forming a herringbone design, in others combined with tight repetitive oval shaped spirals. A thick greenish patina covers the surface.

A scabbard of similar design in the Yunnan Provincial Museum differs only in the abstractness of part of its design (fig. 1).[1] The large coiled elements extending from the sides at the hilt end are, in the absence of heads such as appear on the present example, read as purely geometric designs. However, the tiny elongated S-shaped elements clinging to the narrow portion of the scabbard are depicted on the Yunnan Provincial Museum piece with blunt triangular heads as is the double-bodied creature in the center of the scabbard. A stylistically related bronze scabbard in the Royal Ontario Museum is designed with prominent openwork flanges that are, like those of the Yunnan piece, abstract forms, and these are repeated on the body of the bronze (fig. 2). The scabbard in the Yunnan Provincial Museum was discovered in 1981 in a tomb in Qujingxian and is ascribed by the museum to the mid Warring States period, whereas the Royal Ontario Museum ascribes its example to the Western Han period. Both are products of the Dian culture which flourished during the first millennium B.C. in the area of Lake Dian in Yunnan province, home of the present blade as well. Such decorative devices as the dense notches or tiny

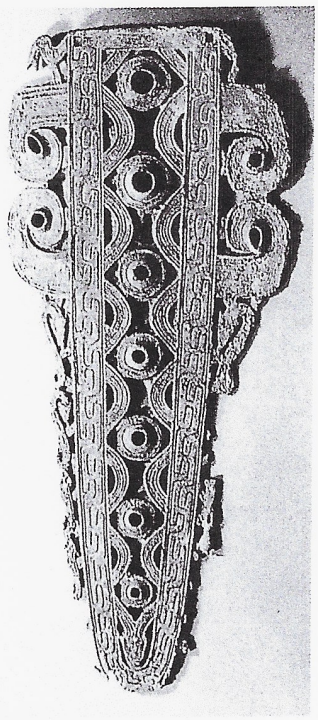

Fig. 1: Bronze scabbard, length: 34 cm., Warring States, 5th-3rd c. B.C., after *Zhongguo wenwu jinghua daquan: qingtong juan*, Hong Kong, 1994, no. 0965, p. 269.

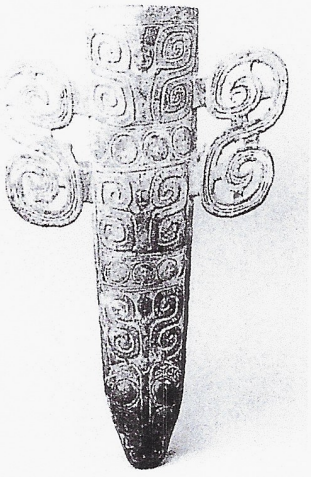

Fig. 2: Bronze scabbard, length: 23 cm.,Warring States, 5th-3rd c. B.C., after *Royal Ontario Museum: The T.T. Tsui Galleries of Chinese Art*, Toronto, 1996, no. 39.

parallel striations forming compound bands is a characteristic of bronzes produced in the southwest, where vessel and drum surfaces were decorated essentially in a single plane of relief, the dense designs appearing very graphic, as if they were literally "penciled" in. This marvel of openwork design is aggressive in appearance, and its gathering of snakes makes it appear especially ominous. However the implement was actually used in rituals and whatever the precise efficacy of the snake motifs abounding here, it allows us today some access to the spirit and culture of the Lake Dian district during ancient times.[2]

1. The Yunnan Provincial Museum scabbard is intact and is reproduced with an encased blade in *Chūgoku no Hakubutsukan*, series 2, vol. 4, (Sichuan Provincial Museum), Tōkyō, 1988, pl. 18 and p. 163.
2. The snake is a common motif in the art of the Dian culture, reflecting the southern environment but it was in no way the exclusive preserve of southern artists. See Emma Bunker, "Two Snakes and a Frog: A Warring States Period Bronze Belt Buckle from Eastern Inner Mongolia in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco," *Orientations*, January, 1987, pp. 42-45.