

54.

## Bronze *Bixie* Vessel

Height: 8.3 cm. (3 1/4 in.)

Length: 9.0 cm. (3 1/2 in.)

Late Eastern Han-Three Kingdoms period

3rd century A.D.

## 銅辟邪器

東漢晚期/三國

The mythical beast is hollow cast with an upright cylindrical tube on its back opening to the hollow body. A smaller tube is mounted on the right foreleg. The beast is wide-bodied, almost square in shape, evident when viewed from above. The body is cast overall with rows of small scales while a herring-bone or feathered pattern covers its haunches and the back of the neck where it represents the mane. The haunches are bulky and the legs thin but appear strong and tensed as if the creature is about to spring from its rounded paws. Its head is sharply turned and cast with small ears and horns curved back, its mouth open with tongue protruding above a long goatee. The tail is curled above a round aperture. Overall the patina is lightly encrusted and of pale green color.

The nature of the horns of the creature on a similar example, excavated from an early post-Han period tomb in Hubei province, might have led the excavators to call the figure *yang* or ram (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> However, the type is usually identified with the winged inhabitants of a mythical realm, with aggressive feline faces and wings sometimes merely suggested by the feathery surface treatment as in the present example. The Chinese *bixie*, one who “wards off evil,” is a hybrid, bred between imported images from the West and mythological creatures inhabiting the early Chinese imagination. Chimera have long been guardians par-excellence in China, early examples being the giant stone figures strategically posted above subterranean tombs of the Eastern Han period. In contrast to these great beasts are the minuscule chimera-form seals of the late Zhou-Han period which despite their size also project great strength and aggressiveness due to the extraordinary talents of the early Chinese metalworkers responsible for their creation.

A number of small bronze *bixie* have been published and while the species is easily recognizable, sometimes the function is not entirely certain or clear. A bronze *bixie* excavated from a late 3rd century tomb in Hubei province is referred to as a holder, perhaps to hold a candle, that could be inserted in the cylindrical tube (fig. 1). Among the objects retrieved from another late 3rd century tomb in Hubei was a small bronze *bixie* with a post inserted into the larger of the two cylindrical tubes on the creature and might have served as a support and the piece thus referred to as a stand (fig. 2). The gold-inlaid bronze *bixie* in the Rietberg Museum in Zurich is referred to as a waterdropper (fig. 3), while the *bixie* with rider excavated in Anhui province, is referred to as a lamp (fig. 4). Whatever the utilitarian function, a small creature such as any of these likely brought joy to its owner, as would a feisty irascible pet.

Fig. 1: Small bronze *bixie*-form “ram” excavated from one (M105) of a group of four tombs in Echeng, Hubei province, Wu kingdom (A.D.221-263), after *Kaogu*, 1982:3, pl. VIII:4.





Fig. 2: Small bronze *bixie*-form “stand,” Three Kingdoms period, 3rd century A.D. excavated in Xiangfan, Hubei province, after *Wenwu*, 2010:9, fig. 25, p. 12.

Fig. 3: Small bronze *bixie* “waterdropper,” Eastern Han dynasty, 1st-early 3rd century A.D., after Helmut Brinker, *Chinesisches Gold und Silber*, (Catalogue of the Pierre Uldry collection in the Museum Rietberg), Zurich 1994, p. 84, p. 120.



Fig. 4: *Bixie* with rider “lamp,” Han dynasty, probably 3rd century, excavated in Hefei, Anhui, Anhui Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo diaosu shitulu*, vol. 1, Shanghai, 1983, no. 345, p. 293.