Bronze Mask with Ring Handle

銅環耳面

Height: 27.4 cm. (10 3/4 in.)
Width: 17 cm. (6 5/8 in.)
Northern Wei dynasty
4th-5th century

高 **27.4** 厘米
寬 **17** 厘米
北魏

The large bronze escutcheon is in the form of a mask with prominent eyes dominating the lower part and an elaborate openwork crest above framed by a knobbed border and with a human figure at its center. The bulging eyes of the mask are painted with black pupils contained within the fluid outlines of the flame-shaped sockets, the narrow upturned corners merging with the thick brows curling above. A mustache below mirrors the brows in its downward curl and frames the wedge-shaped nose protruding above a wide loop suspending the flat, hollow-backed, and faceted ring. A pair of adorsed dragons, each with an attenuated body and spindly limbs, rises above the mask, a hind leg of each creature balanced on the eyebrow of the mask while the other rear leg is positioned further back to anchor the intertwined tails that curl from above to provide a perch for the squatting figure. The heads of the dragons are turned sharply backward to face the figure while their limbs stretch to hold him steady. The bare-chested figure wears a *dhoti* skirt and a long scarf pulled around his shoulders and billowing about his head where a high cap gives additional height to the figure. Stretching both arms, he grasps the horned dragons and appears lithe and limber, balanced on flexed knees and pointed toes. The bronze is a dark charcoal gray with some patches of gilding intact and three of the holes in the four corners still retain portions of the iron pegs used to secure the mask to a stone or wooden surface.

Such openwork mask plaques found as decorative embellishments for tomb furnishings were based on actual functional pulls used in worldly contexts. The forms originated with the *taotie*-mask handles of Bronze Age and Han China, developed through the present Six Dynasties period form, and evolved into the lion masks of the Tang era. The decorative flourishes and flamboyance of the present example strike us as would some resplendent mask worn by a reveler during Mardi Gras, a shocking visage with its own compelling beauty.

An interesting feature of the present escutcheon is the presence of the figure in the center grasping with great confidence the heads of the dragons. Similar figures with the same slender body and high headdress as the present are shown in standing postures (figs. 1-2) while others with demon-like faces are shown with the legs flexed in the same manner (figs. 3-4). One example also appears to have a halo represented behind the head (fig. 5). Various features of these escutcheon bring to mind

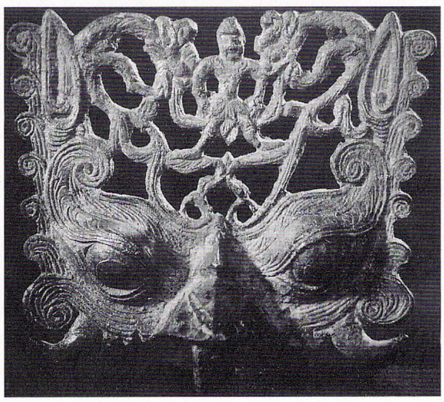

Fig. 1: Bronze mask for ring-handle, Northern Wei dynasty, 5th century, after Wu Hung, "Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.), *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XLVII, 3/4, 1986, fig. 11.

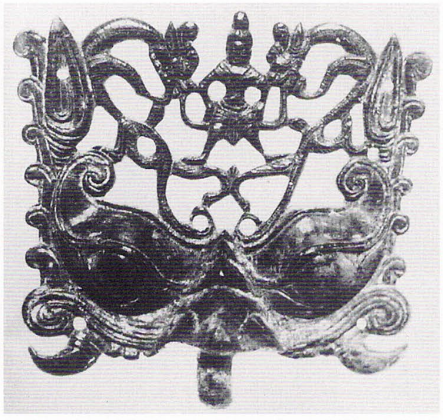

Fig. 2: Bronze mask for ring-handle, Northern Wei dynasty, 5th century, from Guyuan, Ningxia, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji, diaosu bian*, vol.3: *Wei Jin Nanbeizhao diaosu*, Beijing, 1988, pl. 89, p. 108.

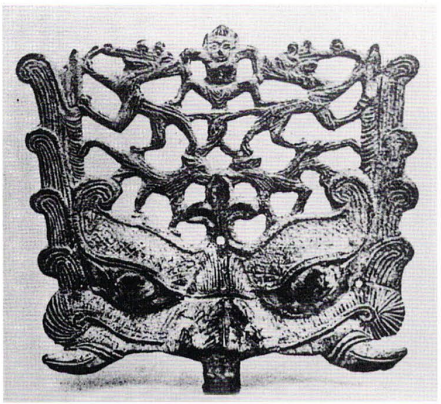

Fig. 3: Bronze mask for ring handle, Northern Wei dynasty, 4th-early 5th century, after Wu Hung, "Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.), *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XLVII, 3/4, 1986, fig. 12.

Fig. 4: Bronze mask for ring-handle, Northern Wei dynasty, 5th century, after *Ancient Chinese Arts in the Idemitsu Collection*, Tokyo, 1989, fig. 261.

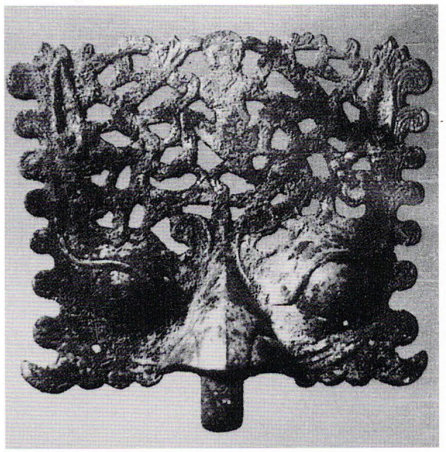

Fig. 5: Bronze mask for ring-handle, Northern Wei dynasty, 5th century, excavated in Datong, Shanxi province, after *Kaogu*, 1983:11, pl. 5:3.

Buddhist art of the period and its Indian sources, for example, the bird-like faces of the masks recall the Indian *garuda* bird while the palmettes were a part of the flora introduced to Chinese art with the importation of Buddhism, a small one seen here from a cave at Yungang with two native Chinese dragons (fig. 6). The demon strong-men are not unlike the atlantean figures often seen in Buddhist contexts and the flexed-leg posture, slender body, and high headdress of the figure here are characteristics of typical Northern Wei images of the Buddha and *bodhisattva* (figs. 7-8).

The high headgear, given all evidence from ceramic and stone sculpture and painting, was also characteristic of Northern Wei military and civil official dress, as seen in the lacquer decoration on the lid of a casket from the same Northern Wei

burial at Guyuan that produced the mask in figure 1 above (figs. 9-10).[1] The deceased is shown drinking from a cup and sitting in a posture quite un-Chinese in character but related to that of the present figure. The casket is also decorated with the Chinese deities Xiwangmu, "Queen Mother of the West," and Dongwangfu, "King Father of the East," both identified in the inscriptions on the casket, and in addition is painted on the sides with traditional Han Chinese paragons of filial piety, all elements that reflect the sinification of the Xianbei invaders.[2]

The central figure here posed between the two dragons might also be from early Chinese lore. As was suggested by Wu Hung concerning the images here in figures 1 and 3, " In the upper part of this work [*i.e.* our fig. 1], a deity who has a high protrusion or a chignon on top of his head and who is dressed like a Bodhisattva, holds dragons' harnesses in each hand. This composition combines the Bodhisattva image with that of Huan Long Shi, the dragon tamer, a famous character in a traditional Chinese legend...[our fig. 3]."[3] Wu Hung goes on to note that Huan Long Shi was

Fig. 6: Relief with intertwined dragons and palmette, Northern Wei period, second half 5th century, Yungang, Shanxi province, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji, diasu bian*, vol. 10: *Yungang shiku diaoke*, Beijing, 1988, fig. 126, p. 131.

Fig. 7: *Bodhisattva* with high topknot and flexed legs, Northern Wei period, second half 5th century, Yungang, Shanxi province, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji, diasu bian*, vol. 10: *Yungang shiku diaoke*, Beijing, 1988, fig. 119, p. 124.

Fig. 8: Stone *bodhisattva* with high topknot and flexed legs, Northern Wei period, 5th century, from Xiudesi, Quyang, Hebei province, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji, diasubian*, vol. 3: *Wei Jin Nanbeizhao diaosu*, Beijing, 1988, no. 78, p. 89.

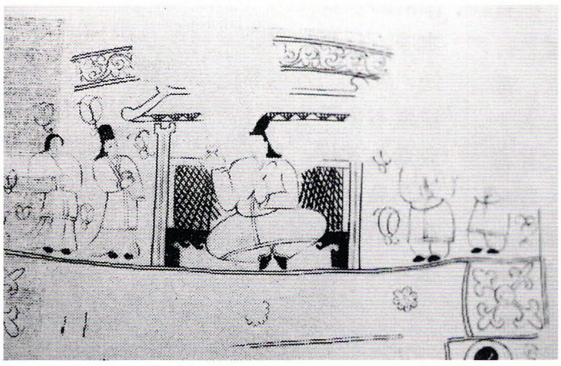

Fig. 9: Drawing from a lacquer painted coffin, Northern Wei dynasty, 5th century, Guyuan, Ningxia, after *Wenwu*, 1984:6, fig. 9, p. 49.

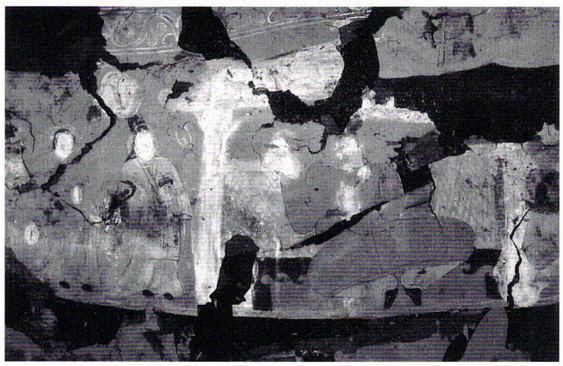

Fig. 10: Detail from the lacquer coffin in figure 9, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji, huihua bian*, vol. 1: *Yuanzhi shehui zhi nanbeizhao huihua*, Beijing, 1986, no. 101.

a legendary figure who raised dragons for the Emperor Shun.[4]

It is fascinating enough that the slim figure facing us so forthrightly on the present bronze plaque might represent a dragon tamer of Chinese lore, but we may take it one step further and suggest the obvious: that the dragon-tamer in Xianbei dress and his quarry were meant to express the political reality of the time, with the dragons representing China and the dragon-tamer in Xianbei garb the almighty conqueror.

1. Albert Dien refers to the "distinctive Xianbei headgear" in "A New Look at the Xianbei and Their Impact on Chinese Culture," in *Ancient Mortuary Traditions of China*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1991, p. 46.
2. For the excavation report of the tomb at Guyuan, which contained Persian coins dating between 459 and 484 AD, see *Wénwu*, 1984:6, pp. 46-56.
3. Wu Hung, "Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art (2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D.), *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XLVII, 3/4, 1986, p. 270.
4. The author refers to a passage in the *Zuo Zhuan*, a commentary on the Confucian Classic, the "Annals of the Spring and Autumn Period," for the 29th year of King Zhou of the Zhou dynasty. James Legge translates the pertinent passage in *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, Shanghai, 1935, p. 731.