

TOWARDS THE DRAGON AND THE MYTHICAL BIRD

Tracing Possible Antecedents for Some Elements of Khitan Iconography

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Christine Choy, Prof. Dr Claus-Peter Haase and Prof. Roderick Whitfield are thanked for their help and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Unless otherwise indicated, all photography is by the author

THE FALL OF THE TANG dynasty and the destruction of the Uighur empire created a political opportunity which was seized, in 907 AD, by the semi-nomadic Khitan (Qidan). In 916 AD, their kagan, Yelü Abaoji, declared himself emperor and founded a dynastic state. For over two hundred years the Khitan ruled a vast empire of diverse peoples which at the time of its greatest territorial expansion covered the major part of modern Manchuria, Inner and Outer Mongolia, and the northeastern corner of China proper. In 926 AD they expanded their empire even further with the conquest of Bohai (Parhae), a kingdom which extended across the provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin as well as into parts of Korea.

The Khitan tribal confederacy belonged to the Altaic linguistic family, although it is still a matter of scholarly debate whether they were affiliated to a predominantly Turkic, Mongol or Tungus group of languages. To some extent this probably reflects the heterogeneous multi-ethnic formation of their warrior tribal confederacy which is likely to have comprised several linguistic elements. After 947 AD the Khitan significantly chose the name of the river “Liao” as their dynastic name.

Even after coming to power the Khitan, ordinary people as well as the aristocracy, continued to pursue their traditional pastoral way of life and consciously maintained their nomadic identity. The emperor and his “court”, a huge city of tents, grazed their herds, went on hunting and fishing expeditions, and transited between seasonal tent camps, *nabo*.¹ It is of note that although the Khitan adopted many Chinese ceremonies, the great agricultural rites, traditionally performed by the Chinese emperors to ensure bountiful harvests for their subjects, were conspicuously absent from the ceremonial calendar of the Khitan-Liao.²

The Khitan-Liao created a dual form of rule, which was implemented to avoid civil administration by subordinates: a southern government which ruled over the Chinese, or central, parts of the empire, i.e. the sedentary population, and a northern government for the Khitan and other nomads as well as the emperor’s personal retinue in continuation of the Khitan tribal tradition. The Khitan clearly endeavoured as rulers to preserve their own particular ethnic and cultural identity and customs and to create their own forms of artistic expression. They chose not to use the Chinese language in order to avoid being integrated into the cultural structures of the Chi-

nese. Instead, they developed their own script for their mother tongue. Thus by maintaining a clear distinction (which later inevitably became blurred) between the steppe culture and the sedentary civilisation, they could preserve their own particular identity and were initially able even under the cultural influence of China, i.e., the Central Plain, to create a continuum of their own semantic expression within the vast eastern Eurasian “international style”.

How did it happen then that the Khitan-Liao, a semi-nomadic pastoral people, depicted the dragon and the mythical bird—Chinese symbols par excellence—so prominently and in such a wide variety of ways?³

In the following, the ancestral ties and historical development of the pre-dynastic Khitan are considered, along with their interaction with tribes of comparable ethnic composition, social organisation, geographic region and economic situation, in the context of their identity both as warrior herdsmen on the periphery of the eastern Eurasian steppes and as vassals of the sedentary world in the vicinity of China.

The aim here, by tracing the presence of the dragon and the mythical bird within the iconography of this semi-nomadic realm, is to uncover the semantics of this visual topos embedded in the religio-cultural system of the pastoral Khitan, manifested mainly in the artistic expression of the aristocratic Liao.

On the basis of Chinese sources the development of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal confederacies can

¹ Wittfogel, Karl August and Fêng, Chia-Sheng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907–1125)*, Philadelphia, 1949, pp. 131ff.

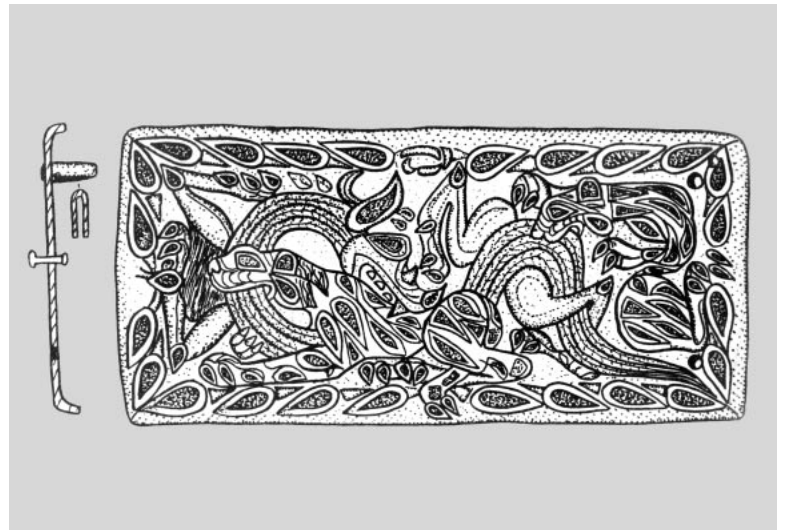
² Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 225; Stein, Rolf, “Leao Tche”, translated and annotated, *Toung-pao*, 35, 1939/1940, p. 130.

³ As exemplified in the finds of excavated dated royal tombs of the Khitan-Liao: i.e., the tomb, dated 941 AD, of Yelü Yuzhi, a cousin of the dynastic founder Yelü Abaoji, situated on the southern slope of Chaoketushan, Aluke'erqin Banner, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; the tomb (tomb 1), dated 959 AD, of the joint burial of the prince consort Xiao Shagu, the brother of Empress Yingtian, and his wife Zhigu, the daughter of the first Khitan Emperor, Yelü Abaoji, on the southern slope of the Kuijia hill, Dayingzi, Jiangjiayingzi Township, Goushan District, Chifeng County, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; or, the tomb (grave 3), dated 1018, housing the joint burial of the granddaughter of Emperor Jingzong (reigned 969–982 AD) and niece of the Emperor Shengzong (reigned 982–1031 AD), together with her prince consort Xiao Shaoju, located in the Chen kingdom, near Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner region, Zhelimu League, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.



1 Solid cast inlaid gold belt plaques (one of a pair)

3rd century BC. Excavated at Szidorovka, near Omsk, western Siberia. After Bunker, Emma, with contributions by Watt, James C.Y. and Zhixin Sun, *Nomadic Art of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes: The Eugene V. Thaw and Other New York Collections*, New York, New Haven and London, 2002, p. 31, fig. 45



2 Line drawing of inlaid gold belt plaque

Matiushchenko, V. I., and Tatauro, L. V., with contributions by Konikov, B. A., *Mogil'nik Sidorovka v Omskom Priirtysh'e*, Novosibirsk, Nauka, 1997, p. 148, fig. 27

roughly be outlined as follows: the Xiongnu who are first mentioned in the 5th century BC, established the first, extremely mighty Eurasian steppe empire by unifying many nomadic tribes and controlling agricultural territories by the late 3rd century BC. This empire stretched across Mongolia and probably also Eastern Turkestan. It presented an immense challenge for China and resulted in her overall tributary dependency in conjunction with bridal exchange during most of the Former Han period (206–9 BC). At the turn of the 2nd century AD, the Xiongnu empire on the steppe and the centralised state power in China proper declined. With the collapse of the central order both in China and on the steppe, the Xianbei tribal confederacies, from whose eastern branch the Khitan most probably descended, were able to rise to power. They gradually migrated southward and westward, and finally occupied the Mongolian steppe and Manchuria, henceforth neighbouring China proper. In later centuries, many of the Xianbei and other non-Chinese tribes lived along the Chinese borderland and mixed with frontier Chinese people. The interactions—by way of trade, raids, gifts or tribute—between the semi-nomadic empires and native dynasties in China undoubtedly were two-directional and thus also had an impact on Chinese material culture. The history of Central Asia was thus early on closely interwoven with that of China and gradually developed into a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship.⁴

The question of artistic “directions of transmission”, often perceived as a one-way exchange from China to the steppes and beyond, also encompasses the uncertain antecedents of the iconography and iconology of the dragon motif, which is generally considered to originate in China—being the paramount Chinese emblem. It is however tempting to think, as has been pointed out by the eminent Russian archaeologist Sergei Rudenko, that the lupine dragons with bodies of serpents or lizards which appeared for centuries in the art of the steppes “might have served as prototypes to the Chinese dragon”.⁵ Such lupine dragons appeared in the artistic repertoire of the Eastern Zhou (770–256 BC) and thereafter in the Han period (206 BC–220 AD), when the iconography of the dragon was coined

in Chinese art and the dragon was depicted with bulging forehead, elongated muzzle and the upper lip terminating in an inward curled tip. The identity of the semi-nomadic confederacies which introduced the lupine serpent-dragon into the art traditions of northern China remains unclear, however it has been suggested that its iconography was associated with pastoral tribes with an Indo-European heritage from Central Asia and southern Siberia.⁶

In addition, although the visual language of the different tribes must have had distinguishing characteristics, one may presume that among the semi-nomadic people of the vast Eurasian steppe who played a part in the variable history of northern China, certain mythologies and their artistic expression eventually became part of a shared and mutually understood cultural and intellectual property.⁷

A prototypical example of the lupine dragon is represented on a pair of solid cast gold belt plaques of rectangular outline found in Szidorovka, near Omsk, western Siberia, and dated 3rd century BC (1, 2). The plaques feature a fiercely interlaced animal combat between a sinuous winged ophidian quadruped dragon with prominent lupine head and two feline quadrupeds. The dragon's gaping jaws reveal a row of sharp teeth, the upturned snout tip ends in a prominent inlaid cusp, and the large almond-shaped eyes gaze attentively at the prey while large cusped ears project to the top with fine curled horns swept to the back. The beast's elongated body is crested at the neck and enlivened with long parallel grooves. The plaques are sumptuously inlaid with turquoise and glass paste and framed with teardrop-shaped motifs that are similarly encrusted. The same lupine beast depicted on belt buckles and other accoutrements was part of the artistic repertoire of the Xiongnu confederacies. Reportedly large political and religious gatherings of Xiongnu were held at the sanctuary Longcheng or dragon city, located probably southwest of Ulaan Baatar in present-day Mongolia, where the supreme chieftain of the Xiongnu also performed the sacrifices to their ancestors, Heaven and Earth and to their deities.⁸

The reptilian character of the serpent dragon is clearly depicted on a pair of gold openwork belt plaques of rect-



3 Gold openwork belt plaques (one of a pair)

2nd to 1st century BC. Height 6.4 cm, length 14.4 cm, thickness 0.65 cm. Excavated at Kurgan 3 ("Khapry") in Tchal'tyr, Miasnikovski district, Rostov province, southern Russia, 1988. Museum of Azov, inv. no. KP-24444/1 and 2. After Schiltz, Véronique, ed., *L'or des Amazones: Peuples nomads entre Asie et Europe, VI siècle av. J.-C. - IV siècle apr. J.-C.*, Paris, 2001, pp. 178f, cat. no. 198

angular outline which were excavated at a tumulus, Kurgan 3 ("Khapry") in Tchal'tyr, Miasnikovski district, a region bordering Kuban in Rostov province, near the Sea of Azov in southern Russia. It is noteworthy that the southern Russian steppes are now considered by many archaeologists as the ancestral homeland of the Indo-Iranian tribes.⁹ The near bilaterally symmetrical plaques, dated 2nd to 1st century BC (3), are inlaid with pink coral, green and blue glass and feature an affronted pair of entwined lupine horned serpent-dragons, each in combat with a smaller griffon situated near the lower outer corners. The dragons' sinuous serpentine bodies are imbricated with scales, the heads, which are closely related to their Xiongnu counterparts (1), are crowned by large ears terminating in a small twist at the tip, the upturned snouts end in a small curl and the muzzles are arranged in neat folds, while the large eyes gaze attentively at the viewer. The closely related iconographies and near-identical rendering of the dragonhead in the Xiongnu and the Tchal'tyr-Azov belt plaques speak of a history of closely linked interrelations of the pastoral tribes resulting in a shared and presumably mutually understood visual language.

The heraldic symbolism of the mythical bird is to be found in the majestic small gold eagle with movable head and neck carved in turquoise that is perched atop the gold headdress set, or crown, of a royal burial, possibly of a Xiongnu chief.¹⁰ The set is composed of four pieces: a skullcap and three headbands (4). The terminals of the headbands are decorated in bas relief with recumbent mythical wolves as well as a recumbent ram and a recumbent horse. The headdress, which dates to the late Warring States period (475–221 BC), was found together with 218 items of gold and silver objects in 1972 in Aluchaideng, Amenqirige village, forty kilometres southeast of Hangjin Banner, Yiketsao League in the Ordos. Crowns made of precious metals as powerful insignia of high status were later fully utilised by the Khitan, and have so far only been found in the nomadic and semi-nomadic cultural sphere of northeastern China and Korea.¹¹ The headdress was found together with twelve lavishly en-



4 Gold and turquoise headdress with bird finial

Late Warring States, 3rd century BC. Height 7.1 cm, diameter 16.5 cm. Excavated at Aluchaideng, Yiketsao League, Ordos, 1972. Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Genghis Khan: Ancient Nomadic Culture of the Northern China*, Beijing, 2004, pp. 70f

⁴ Rawson, Jessica and Bunker, Emma, *Ancient Chinese and Ordos Bronzes*, Hong Kong, 1990, pp. 303ff.

⁵ Rudenko, Sergei I., "The Mythological Eagle, the Gryphon, the Winged Lion and the Wolf in the Art of the Northern Nomads", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, 1958, p. 121.

⁶ Cf. Bunker, C. Emma, "Significant Changes in Iconography and Technology among Ancient China's Northwestern Pastoral Neighbors from the Fourth to the First Century B.C.," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, Vol. 6, 1992, pp. 111f. The Xiongnu are thought to have adopted these iconographies from the Euro-poid Rouzhi (Yuezhi) confederacies whose vassals they were until the expulsion of the Rouzhi in ca. 160 BC. The latter were culturally linked to the Skythian, Sarmation and Saka tribes further west. While much of this remains a subject of future investigations, the excavation of the gold belt plaques (3), discussed below, at a tumulus associated with the Sarmations in Tchal'tyr, Miasnikovki district, Rostov province, may further substantiate this suggestion.

⁷ Scharlipp, Wolfgang E., *Die frühen Türken in Zentralasien: Eine Einführung in ihre Geschichte und Kultur*, Darmstadt, 1992, p. 51.

⁸ *Shiji* 110, 2892, quoted in Di Cosmo, Nicola, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 189f; see also Eberhard, Wolfram, "Die Kultur der Alten Zentral- und westasiatischen Völker", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 73, 1941, p. 46, and Eberhard, Wolfram, *Kultur und Siedlung der Randvölker Chinas*, T'oung Pao, supplement to Vol. XXXVI, Leiden, 1979, p. 47.

⁹ Cf. Khazanov, Anatoly M., *Nomads and the Outside World*, second edition, Madison, Wisconsin, 1994, p. 93.

¹⁰ The site was identified as burial place of the nomadic Loufan people, who were conquered by the Xiongnu. Cf. Tien Kuanchi and Kuo Suxin, "Nci mengku Aluchaiteng faxien te Xiongnu yiwu", *Kaogu* 1980.4, pp. 333–338, 364, 368, quoted in Di Cosmo, 2002, p. 85, n. 119.

¹¹ Uldry, Pierre, foreword by Brinker, Helmut, and Louis, François, *Chinesisches Gold und Silber: Die Sammlung Pierre Uldry*, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, 1994, p. 29.



6 Gilded copper alloy belt fitting with mythical bird from a group of eleven belt ornaments

Western Jin (265–316 AD). Mengdiexuan Collection, Hong Kong, inv. no. BP-017.1-11. After White, Julia M. and Bunker, Emma C., with contributions by Chen Peifen, *Adornment for Eternity: Status and Rank in Chinese Ornament*, Denver, 1994, cat. no. 50



7 Gold loop-in-loop chain necklace with pendants and dragon terminals

Western Jin (265–316 AD). Length 128 cm, weight 213.8 g. Excavated at Xihezicun, Da'erhan Maoming'an United Banner, Ulanqab League, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1981. Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After Watt, James C. Y. et al., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 AD*, New Haven and London, 2004, p. 133, cat. no. 43



5 Gilded copper alloy belt fitting with dragon from a group of eleven belt ornaments

Western Jin (265–316 AD). Mengdiexuan Collection, Hong Kong, inv. no. BP-017.1-11. After White, Julia M. and Bunker, Emma C., with contributions by Chen Peifen, *Adornment for Eternity: Status and Rank in Chinese Ornament*, Denver, 1994, cat. no. 50

crusted gold belt fittings featuring the same couchant mythical wolf crowned by majestic antlers, with the tines and tail tip terminating in rapacious birdheads.¹²

The Xianbei culture, which also absorbed a large number of Xiongnu after the break-up of their empire, perpetuated the inherent semantics of the lupine dragon. During the turbulent period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (308–439 AD), small semi-nomadic dynasties, mainly founded by descendants of the tribal confederacies, ruled over north China. Following the tradition of the Xiongnu rulers, in 341 AD the Murong Xianbei ruler and founder of the Former Yan (337–370 AD), Murong Huang, also named his capital Longcheng or dragon city, located near present-day Chaoyang. The capital lay south (or west) of Longshan or dragon mountain, situated in Jehol, a region which from ancient times constituted the sacred ancestral pasture lands of the Xiongnu.¹³ In the twelfth year of his reign a pair of dragons, one white and one black, are said to have appeared to the Xianbei ruler on the summit of

Longshan. The antithetical colours of the dragons would recur in Khitan religious rites many centuries later. Murong Huang offered generous sacrifices to the dragons whereupon they entwined their necks, rose into the sky, shed their horns and disappeared. Joyfully the ruler thus erected the “Palace of the Cordial Understanding with the Dragons” and also dedicated a temple to them in the mountain.¹⁴ Albeit probably designed to substantiate the ruler’s status, the story also shows that dragons were worshipped and probably performed a function in the ruler’s mediation with the gods.

Dragons and mythical birds feature on the gilded copper alloy belt fittings cut in fine openwork, now in the Mengdiexuan Collection, dated to the Western Jin period (265–316 AD) (5, 6). The importance accorded to both creatures in the life of the pastoral nomads is shown by their depiction on such accessories. Representing the owner’s status, clan and tribe, belts carried a clearly identifiable emblematic message in nomadic attire. Other accoutrements relating to an equestrian lifestyle were equally valued as can be seen on saddle plates discovered in 1988 in the tomb of a noble Murong-Xianbei in Longcheng (Chaoyang), Shi’ertai cemetery, Liaoning, who was interred with complete battle attire, weapons and horse harness accoutrements; the tomb, excavated in 1988, is dated to the Former Yan.¹⁵ Craftsmen of the nomadic peoples of the various Yan states, especially the Former Yan polity of Murong-Xianbei ethnicity, were instrumental in developing horse equipage items. The latter were often covered with lavish decoration which reached high levels of artistry, as exemplified on the gilded copper alloy saddle plates fabricated in openwork that feature closely related motifs to those on the Mengdiexuan belt fittings. Along with other fantastic creatures, dragons and mythical birds amidst undulating foliage are set within a finely



8 Detail of a Bodhisattva, probably Maitreya, in bluish-grey schist. Probably 2nd century AD. Height 243 cm. Sahri-Bahlol, District Mardan, Northwest Frontier. Lahore Museum.



9 Gold dragonhead terminal with garnet and mother-of-pearl inlays. Late 4th to early 5th century AD. Length 8.9 cm. Excavated at Tatarka village, Stavropol Region, Russia. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

delineated hexagonal, pentagonal and quadrilateral shaped lattice framework. The creatures' graceful meanders already foreshadowed the numerous depictions of dragons and mythical birds on the walls of the Tuoba-Wei Yungang cave shrines constructed about one hundred years later. The same tomb also yielded gilded copper alloy quiver fittings exemplifying the martial spirit of the equestrian nomads who rode across China's northern steppe. These depictions were similarly fashioned in openwork featuring a coiled dragon at the bottom centre flanked on either side by interlaced motifs of a dragon and a mythical bird.¹⁶

A gold loop-in-loop chain necklace of the same period bears seven turquoise inlaid pendants depicting martial emblems, which comprise two shields, two halberds and one battle axe as well as two combs, with terminals in the form of dragonheads (7). It was excavated in 1981 from Xihezicun in Da'erhan Maoming'an United Banner, Ulanqab League in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. It is of note that Bactro-Gandharan bodhisattvas of the 1st to 4th century AD were frequently adorned with such pectoral ornaments terminating in dragonheads (8).¹⁷ This is an iconography which was disseminated throughout the western Central Asian world, extending from the Swat valley in northern Pakistan to Miran in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, from where it was transmitted further eastwards.¹⁸ While the Inner Mongolian dragonhead terminals do not reflect the forceful alacrity of their distant Bactro-Gandharan forebears, the necklace still speaks of the mobility of insignia that acquired special significance as attributes of sovereignty and divinity over a long period of time and vast distances. The dragonhead motif was incorporated metaphorically into political and religious thought in accordance with conceptualisations of universal order. A near-identical loop-in-loop chain, dated 3rd to

5th century AD, was unearthed in the necropolis of Kyzyl-Kainar Tobe in Kazakhstan.¹⁹ The long-distance transmission of such insignia is evidenced by a distantly related, yet less refined, gold dragonhead terminal with garnet and mother-of-pearl inlays, dated late 4th to early 5th century AD, found in Tatarka village, in the Stavropol region in Russia at the foothills of northwestern Caucasia (9).²⁰

The relevance of the dragon figure is further demonstrated in an event that was recorded of the Later Zhao (328–351 AD) of the Sixteen Kingdoms period established by the nomadic Jie people, who probably were a member tribe of the Xiongnu confederacy, in the Shanxi

¹² Bunker, Emma, with Kawami, Trudy, Linduff, Kathryn M., and Wu En, *Ancient Bronzes of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections*, New York, 1997, p. 50, fig. A55.

¹³ Stein, 1939/1940, p. 152, n. 1.

¹⁴ Stein, 1939/1940, pp. 152f, n. 1.

¹⁵ Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. Sixteen Kingdoms, Former Yan, 337–370 AD. Front plate width 45 cm, and back plate width 59 cm, Ma Zi Shu, ed., *Zhongguo bianjiang minzudiqu wenwujicui* [Collection of Cultural Relics of Peoples on the Borderlands of China], Shanghai, 1999, p. 100; Watt, James C. Y., et al., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 AD*, New Haven and London, 2004, pp. 124–125, cat. nos. 25a and b.

¹⁶ Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. Sixteen Kingdoms, Former Yan, 337–370 AD. Height 22.3 cm. Ma Zi Shu, 1999, p. 100, bottom right.

¹⁷ The dragonhead motif is also found on jewelled headdresses of the Bactro-Gandharan period that were important insignia in religious rituals.

¹⁸ This is evidenced in the pectoral ornaments terminating in dragonheads featured on two gilded copper alloy figures of a standing bodhisattva, probably Maitreya, dated circa late 3rd century AD, one now in the Fujii Yûrinkan, Kyoto, height 33.3 cm, probably from Shaanxi, and the other now in The Palace Museum, Beijing, of unknown provenance, dated mid-4th century AD. While the dragonhead motif is rather well depicted on the necklace of the Fujii Yûrinkan figure, it is rendered in a very simplified and stylised form on The Palace Museum figure. Cf. Rhie, Marilyn, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia: The Eastern Chin and Sixteen Kingdoms Period in China and Turshuk, Kucha and Karashahr in Central Asia*, Vol. 2-Plates, Leiden, 2002, figs. 2.15, 2.16.

¹⁹ Akishev, K., ed., *The Ancient Gold of Kazakhstan*, Alma Ata, 1983, p. 183.

²⁰ A more stylised version in inlaid silver was discovered in the necropolis of the Kara-Agach valley in Kazakhstan dated 3rd to 5th century AD. Akishev, 1983, pp. 186–187.



10 Copper alloy vessel
Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439 AD).
Height 20 cm, depth 12.5 cm. Northern
China. Private collection, Belgium



11 Gilded copper alloy dragonhead finial
Northern Yan (407–436 AD), circa 415 AD.
Height 17.5 cm. Excavated from the tomb
of Feng Sufu at Xiguanxingzi in Beipiao
County, Western Liaoning, 1965. Liaoning
Provincial Museum. After Xu Bingkuan and
Xun Shaodao, *Dong Bei Wenhua—Bai Shan
Hei Shui Zhongde Nongmu Wenming* [North-
eastern Culture—Agricultural Civilisation in
the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang],
Hong Kong, 1995, p. 143, cat. no. 171



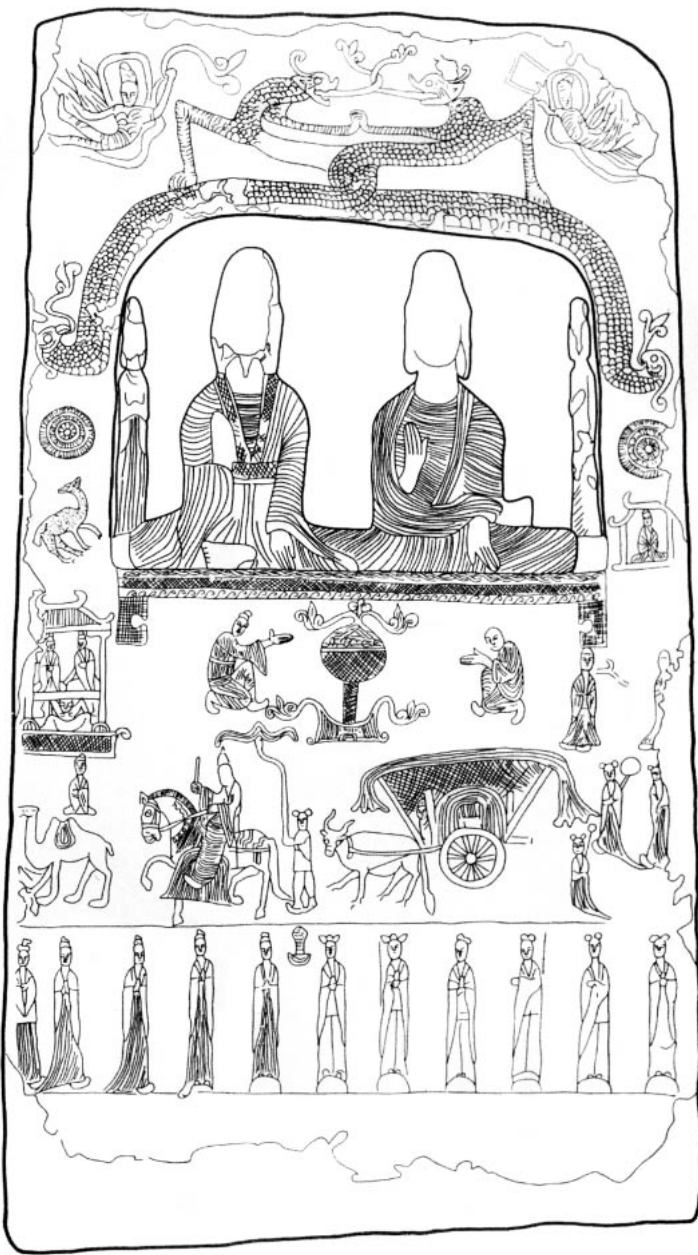
12 Gilded copper alloy dragonhead finials
Northern Wei (386–534 AD), circa 529
AD. Height 13 cm. Excavated from the
tomb of Wang Zhenbao at Zhangjiachuan
Autonomous County, Gansu, 1972.
Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou.
After Juliano, Annette L. and Lerner,
Judith A., *Monks and Merchants: Silk
Road Treasures from Northwest China,
Gansu and Ningxia, 4th to 7th Century*,
New York, 2001, p. 96, cat. no. 29

Hebei region of northern China. The Later Zhao ruler Shih Hu (reigned 335–349 AD) pragmatically supported Buddhism on the basis that the ruler and the people of the Later Zhao were foreign (or “barbarian”) in origin before they entered China and likewise the Buddha was also a foreign (or “barbarian”) deity introduced from Central Asia.²¹ Reportedly Shih Hu ordered an extremely large procession cart for the festival of the Buddha’s birthday. When the cart was moved, water from the mouths of nine dragons is said to have gushed forth onto the figure of a golden Buddha.²²

The dragon is also found on objects characteristic of the semi-nomadic environment of the Murong Xianbei. In Xiguanxingzi in Beipiao county, western Liaoning, a tomb was discovered in 1965 which housed the remains of Feng Sufu (died 415 AD), the brother of the ruler of the state of Northern Yan (407–436 AD), whose lifestyle and cultural affinity clearly belonged to the nomadic realm. It yielded gilded copper alloy vessels with curved handles, the terminals of which were fashioned in the form of dragonheads.²³ The jaws of the dragons hold large loop-in-loop chains

that were attached to the shoulders of the vessels, while the tip of the curved handle was topped by a twisted loop for suspension over a fire. The vessels were probably intended for ritual feasting. The smaller one was possibly used to heat wine and the set was complemented by a wine cup and plate.²⁴ A near-identical vessel, now in a Belgian private collection, is adorned with additional decorative features: a pair of animatedly portrayed dragon protomes rise from the shoulders of the vessel, their front legs set apart on the side walls as if in motion, climbing up the vessel’s neck, their open jaws clutching the chains that are suspended from the dragonhead terminals of the curved handle; a finely engraved band circumscribing the shoulder is enlivened with cartouches enclosing mythical birds and dragons *passant* in profile, framed at top and bottom by bands of contiguous cusped petals (10). The beasts show a close resemblance to the ones depicted on the Mengdiexuan belt fittings and the Longcheng saddle plates.

Feng Sufu’s vessels were discovered together with a gilded copper alloy finial, which was probably part of ceremonial paraphernalia. It terminates in a dragonhead with



13 The Wei Wenlang Buddhist-Taoist Stone Stele

Northern Wei (386–534 AD), circa 424 AD. Height 131 cm, width 66–72 cm. Excavated at Chiho, Yaoxian, Shaanxi, 1934. Yaowang Shan Museum, Yaoxian, Shaanxi. After Rhie, Marylin, *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia: The Eastern Chin and Sixteen Kingdoms Period in China and Tumshuk, Kucha and Karashahr in Central Asia*, Vol. 2-Plates, Leiden, 2002, fig. 2.83. Drawing published originally by Shaaxisheng Yaoxian Yaowangshan Bowuguan, et al, *Beichao Fo-Dao zaoxiangbei jingxuan* [Northern Dynasties Buddhist-Taoist Image Stele Selection], with commentary by Zhang Yan and Zhao Chao, Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 1996, pl. 6

elongated muzzle holding a loop for insertion of a suspension cord, possibly to hold a banner (11). Ten such artefacts were unearthed in this tomb but none of the finials were identical, varying in the degree to which they were curved. It can be assumed that they played a role in Murong-Xianbei ceremonies,²⁵ possibly in burial ceremonies.²⁶ Many of these iconographic characteristics were transmitted to the Northern Wei (386–534 AD) after their conquest of the Northern Yan. This is evidenced by a pair of closely related copper alloy finials also adorned with dragonheads, found in the tomb of Wang Zhenbao in Qingshui, Zhangjiachuan Hui Autonomous County, Gansu (12).

The earliest records relating to the Khitan tribal con-

federacy in Chinese historical sources can be traced back to the beginning of the Northern Wei, when they are mentioned as vassals of the Tuoba (Tabgaç) Xianbei who founded the Northern Wei dynasty. The Tuoba unified all of northern China, most of Mongolia, and the lands west of it, and chose Pingcheng (present-day Datong) as their first capital. From the end of the 4th century until the mid-5th century AD, the Tuoba transferred large numbers of artisans from occupied territories. These comprised Murong Xianbei after the capture of Longcheng,²⁷ and Central Asian and Central Plain Chinese artisans following the conquest of Liangzhou (central Gansu, occupied by the Liang kingdoms) and part of Turkestan, notably the Buddhist kingdom of Qiuci (Kucha),²⁸ as well as Hebei and southern Manchuria.²⁹ The multi-ethnic composition of the artisan workforce accounts for the unique artistic synthesis created during this period. Many of the artisans were employed in imperial workshops for the construction of palaces and temples.³⁰ Before a gradual sinicisation process took place in the later period of Tuoba-Wei rule, some ancient nomadic customs seem to have prevailed. It is said that in his palace the emperor sat cross-legged on layers of carpets surrounded by walls that were decorated with entwined dragons executed in the magic colour black,³¹ possibly an apotropaic measure. The association of the dragon with black would resurface centuries later in Khitan ceremonies.

The highly interesting and complex iconography on a stone stele, named Wei Wenlang after the name of the Buddhist disciple (or follower) mentioned in the dedicatory inscription, also comprises a prominently depicted dragon arch niche (13).³² The stele, which was excavated

²¹ Ch'en, Kenneth K. S., *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, Princeton, 1964, pp. 45, 80.

²² Soper, Alexander Coburn, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China*, Supplementum XIX, *Artibus Asiae*, 1959, pp. 84–85, and *Wei Shou: Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism* (from the *Wei-shu*), English trans. by Hurvitz, Leon, in Mizuno, Seiichi, and Nagahiro, Toshio, *Yun-kang*, 16 Vols, Kyoto, 1952–1956, Vol. 16 (Supplement), 1956, Appendix II, p. 56, n. 2, quoted in Rhie, 2002, Vol. 1-Text, p. 252, n. 24.

²³ Six gilded copper alloy finials were found in tomb 1 (*Wenwu*, 1979.3, p. 24, fig. 6:5), a further four in tomb 2 (*Wenwu*, 1973.3, p. 20, fig. 21). Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, *Dong Bei Wenhua—Bai Shan Hei Shui Zhongde Nongmu Wenming* [Northeastern Culture—Agricultural Civilization in the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang], Hong Kong, 1995, pp. 143f, cat. nos. 172 (height 13.3 cm), 174 (height 19.4 cm).

²⁴ Liaoning Museum, Shenyang. Sixteen Kingdoms, Northern Yan, 407–436 AD. Height 7.5 cm. Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, 1995, p. 143, cat. no. 172.

²⁵ Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, 1995, p. 143, cat. no. 171.

²⁶ Juliano, Annette L. and Lerner, Judith A., *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th to 7th Century*, New York, 2001, p. 96, cat. no. 29, n. 3.

²⁷ Eberhard, Wolfram, *Das Toba-Reich Nord-Chinas: Eine soziologische Untersuchung*, Leiden, 1949, p. 201.

²⁸ Eberhard, 1949, p. 201, n. 1i.

²⁹ Eberhard, 1949, pp. 201, n. 1f and 240.

³⁰ Eberhard, 1949, p. 201, n. 1i.

³¹ Eberhard, 1949, p. 359.

³² For a comprehensive examination of the stele, see Rhie, 2002, Vol. 1-Text, pp. 460–472.



14 Entwined dragons at the inner arch of the lintel of the door leading to a dome-shaped cave shrine
Northern Wei (386–534 AD), 460s AD.
Yungang cave shrines, Datong, Shanxi province



15 Mythical bird as lintel terminal at rear wall in cave 6
Northern Wei (386–534 AD), 470s AD.
Yungang cave shrines, Datong, Shanxi province



16 Dragon as lintel terminal at rear wall in cave 6
Northern Wei (386–534 AD), 470s AD.
Yungang cave shrines, Datong, Shanxi province



17 Carved stone base
Northern Wei (386–534 AD).
Huayan Monastery Museum, Datong, Shanxi province



18 Dragon as lintel terminal at cave 125
Northern Wei (386–534 AD).
Binglingsi, Gansu province



19 Earthenware rhyton

Northern Wei (386–534 AD). Excavated from Yongningsi at Luoyang, Henan province, 1979–1994. Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. After Li Zhengang, ed., *Longmen Museum*, Luoyang, 2005, cat. no. 136

in 1934 in Chiho, Yaoxian, Shaanxi, bears a Northern Wei date, 424 AD, and is generally considered an early Northern Wei work.³³ The imagery combines syncretic Taoist and Buddhist elements, probably in an effort to accommodate both religions, featuring on the front face a double figure, possibly representing cross-legged seated Taoist and Buddha images. At the apex the scaled bodies of the paired dragons entwine, their sinuous protomes facing each other, the tips of one of the clawed feet of their forelegs touching at the centre while the other foreleg balances the weight by being angled on the lower bodies that curve around the arch. Their elongated tongues also interlace and terminate in a trefoil. The tail-ends curl outwards and terminate in birdheads bearing similar stemmed trefoils in their beaks. The back of the stele is engraved with a more simplified version of the dragon arch, featuring only the arch-shaped serpentine body terminating on either end in dragonheads that curl upwards, their jaws each emitting a curved band of contiguous pearls that entwine at the top and then end in cusped trefoils. A pair of confronted cock-like birds in profile perch on either side of the beaded band.

After some initial persecution of Buddhists during the latter years of the reign of Emperor Taiwudi (reigned 424–452 AD), the first Wei emperors were favourably disposed towards the foreign religion, which to an extent was merged with the indigenous religion of the northern steppe people and steeped in tribal lore. On the instructions of Emperor Wencheng (reigned 452–465 AD), construction at the Buddhist grottoes at Yungang, west of the capital, began around 460 AD. It has been suggested that the Tuoba myth of a sacred ancestral cave had become identified with Buddhist practice, since the cave shrines became a site of ancestral worship, regularly visited by the emperor.³⁴

The visual splendour of the cave shrines reflects the international composition of the workshops, displaying influences from southern and Central Asian regions with Chinese elements. Entwined horned dragons, one of their

clawed feet touching the open jaws, while the other seemingly supporting the curved necks (extant only on the left side), are featured at the inner arch of the lintel of the door leading to a dome-shaped cave shrine, which during the first phase of construction was otherwise sparsely decorated (14). Caves of the second phase (after 470 AD) are sumptuously covered with high relief wall decoration in which the dragon and mythical bird motifs, mostly grouped in opposing pairs, are ubiquitous, notably on and above the lintels of niches, as in cave 6 where they appear in the ritual passageways carved in the rear wall (15, 16). Of note here are the prominent floppy ears swept to the back of both dragon and bird depictions. Both beasts often hold vegetal ornaments in their mouths. The dragon, albeit less skilfully rendered and now quite worn, is similarly depicted on lintel terminals above Śākyamuni and Prabhutaratna (from chapter 11 of the *Lotus Sutra*), in cave 125 of the Tuoba-Wei period at the remote Binglingsi located in the deep ravines along the Yellow River in Gansu (18).

Late 5th century sites in Pingcheng also yielded locally manufactured stone pieces featuring distinct steppe and Central Asian influences such as a stone pedestal decorated with a procession of dragons, their open jaws emitting foliate scrolls (17). The latter sometimes terminate in a lotus blossom, a flower implicitly associated with the fructifying waters out of which this aquatic plant grows.

In 1979 excavations of the base of the nine-storey pagoda of Yongningsi at Luoyang, the second capital of the Tuoba-Wei, yielded rich finds among which were several artefacts depicting the dragon. One of these was an earthenware rhyton of broad flaring form, the tip of which extends into the sinuously curved protome of a crested dragon, the lower jaw barely touching the side of the rhyton (19). It is of note that the dragonhead is depicted here on a drinking horn which was clearly inspired by prototypes from further west. Presumably used for ritual banquets, it must have served as a metaphor, visually blessing and guarding the liquid contents of the vessel. Favoured as ceremonial libation vessels in the Ancient Near East and Persia from the second millennium BC onwards, horn-shaped rhyta also prominently featured on Scythian artefacts depicting cultic drinking scenes. Initially fashioned from hollow animal horns, they were essential utensils in the world of the Eurasian pastoral nomads.

While keeping overall tribute-bestowal relations with the successive Chinese dynasties, the Khitan tribes were also vassals of the neighbouring nomadic empires of the Turks (551–744 AD) and later the Uighurs (745–840 AD). Under the suzerainty of the powerful confederacies, the Khitan witnessed the artistic evolution of these semi-nomadic empires, whose territories they themselves partially ruled after 925 AD.³⁵ At its prime the Turkic kaganate extended from Manchuria to Byzantium.

A group of princely ornaments, now in a Belgian private collection, is attributed to the civilisation of the

³³ Rhie, 2002, Vol. 1-Text, p. 460.

³⁴ Eberhard, 1949, p. 232.

³⁵ Sinor, Denis, "The Uighurs in Mongolia and the Kyrgyz", Part One, *History of Civilisations of Central Asia*, Vol. IV, Part One, Delhi, 1999, p. 200.



20 Inlaid gold headdress

Turkic civilisation, 6th to 8th century AD. Private collection, Belgium. After *L'Asie des steppes d'Alexandre le Grand à Gengis Khân*, Paris, 2000, p. 164, cat. no. 153



21 Gold torque

Turkic civilisation, 6th to 8th century AD. Private collection, Belgium. After *L'Asie des steppes d'Alexandre le Grand à Gengis Khân*, Paris, 2000, p. 164, cat. no. 153



22 Memorial stele of Köl Tegin

Eastern Turkish Empire, 8th century AD, circa 732 AD. Height 333 cm, width 132 cm, thickness 46 cm. Chöšöö Cajdam, Archangajin province, Mongolia

Turks and dated 6th to 8th century AD (20, 21).³⁶ The bonnet-shaped gold headdress is enlivened with glass inlay and worked in repoussé. The ornamentation of stylised mythical birds and horned dragons with foliate arabesques sprouting from their mouths, amidst undulating tendrils bearing buds and fruit, is stylistically closely related to the visual language of the Tuoba-Wei, as exemplified in the wall decoration of the Yungang cave shrines. The accoutrements bear witness to the efforts of the Turkic aristocracy to create handicraft and architectural sectors in their society, thereby encouraging large Sogdian colonies which engaged in these activities into their territory.³⁷

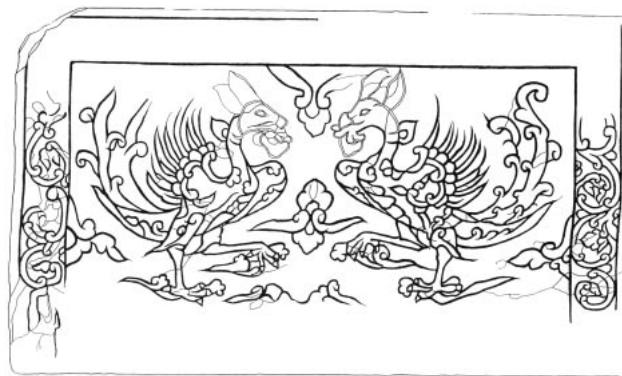
The memorial complex of the Turkic commander-in-chief Köl Tegin was built in 732 AD in Chöšöö Cajdam in Archangajin province in Mongolia. Due to his good relations with the Turkic kaganate the Chinese emperor had sent palace artists to help to construct the memorial.³⁸ One may surmise that the Chinese artists worked under Turkic instruction, and that the iconographies featured in the memorial were intended, in accordance with Turkic cosmogonic and cosmological beliefs, to smooth the way of the revered deceased into the afterlife.³⁹ At the funeral

of the great Turkic commander-in-chief Khitan tribal delegations were also represented.⁴⁰ It is safe to assume that the Khitan, whose position of relative power in the tribal world was by then well established, could also play a role in cultural transmission.

The free-standing memorial stele of Köl Tegin is prominently crowned by a pair of entwined dragons forming the arch-shaped top (22). The stele was originally erected on the back of a pedestal in the form of a turtle, which was found nearby. The front of the stele oriented towards sunrise bears an inscription in runic Turkic script, while the back of the monument is inscribed in Chinese characters with the condolences sent by the Tang emperor. The dragon images at the apex of the stele are thought to symbolise the sky, the inscriptions at the centre signify the human world and the turtle pedestal represents the soil.⁴¹ The memorial was later vandalised and ransacked—probably after the conquest of the steppe by the Uighurs in 745 AD. The head of the white marble statue of Köl Tegin (died 731 AD) was discovered in one pit and the broken fragment of the tall five-pronged crown with the frontal relief of a heraldic bird in another pit (23). Fragments were retrieved of a similar but smaller tiara that

24 Drawing of eastern side of symbolic stone sarcophagus discovered near memorial stele of Köl Tegin

Eastern Turkish Empire, 8th century AD. Excavated at Chöšöö Cajdam, Archangajin province, Mongolia, 2000. After Çal, Halit, and Görür, Muhammet, "Year 2000 Excavation at Anonymous IV Symbolic Tomb (Trench JL 230)", *Moğolistan'daki Türk Anıtları Projesi 2000 Yılı Çalışmaları*, Ankara, 2002, pp. 58, figs. 9, 14 and 63 (Drawing by Özlem Çal, August 7th, 2000)



23 Marble head of Köl Tegin

Eastern Turkish Empire, 8th century AD, circa 732 AD. Height 42 cm, width 21 cm. Excavated at Chöšöö Cajdam, Archangajin province, Mongolia, 1958. Mongolian Academy of Science, Ulaan Baatar, inv. no. T-005. After *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben. Das Weltreich der Mongolen*, Munich, 2005, p. 74, cat. no. 44



25 Gold diadem from the Bilgä Kagan treasure

Eastern Turkish Empire, 8th century AD. Height 9.8 cm, length 25.7 cm. Excavated at Chöšöö Cajdam, Archangajin province, Mongolia, 2001. National Museum for Mongolian History, Ulaan Baatar, inv. no. U 2003-4-46. After *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben. Das Weltreich der Mongolen*, Munich, 2005, p. 75, cat. no. 45

probably crowned the statue of the wife of Köl Tegin.⁴²

The sides of a symbolic anonymous sarcophagus unearthed one hundred metres south of the Köl Tegin monument were also decorated in relief with large confronted mythical birds bearing vegetal motifs in their beaks (24).⁴³ The pair of elongated floppy ears crowning each bird is of note, apparently a continuation of the iconographic repertoire of the Tuoba-Wei, a feature by then no longer part of the standard Tang representation of the phoenix but preserved here in the Turkic realm.

A treasure of circa 3000 artefacts in gold, silver, precious stones and copper alloy was unearthed at the memorial site of Mogilyan, who bore the title Bilgä Kagans (died 734 AD), and was the older brother of Köl Tegin; among it was a five-pronged gold diadem which demonstrates the renowned metalworking skills of the Turks.⁴⁴ Frontally the majestic figure of a bird projects, rendered *en face* with prominently spread wings and fanned tail, holding a ruby suspended on gold thread in its beak (25).

The near one-hundred-year steppe empire of the Uighurs in Mongolia (744–840 AD) was more or less a continuation of the Turkic kaganate. The Khitan resumed vassal-

³⁶ *L'Asie des steppes d'Alexandre le Grand à Gengis Khân*, Paris, 2000, p. 164, cat. no. 153.

³⁷ Pulleyblank, Edwin G., "A Sogdian Colony in Inner Mongolia", *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XLI, no. 4, Leiden, 1952, pp. 317–356.

³⁸ Excavated in 1958 by the Tchechoslovak-Mongol expedition under the direction of the Czechoslovakian archaeologist Lumir Jisl. See Jisl, Lumir, "Vorbericht über die archäologische Erforschung des Kül-Tegin-Denkmal durch die tschechoslovakisch-mongolische Expedition des Jahres 1958", *Ural-altaische Jahrbücher* 32, 1960, pp. 65–77.

³⁹ Scharlipp, 1992, p. 51. Excavations of the Köl Tegin memorial complex revealed that its gates were oriented towards the east, the direction held sacred in Turkic belief as source of the sun, and hence life; a concept which is not adhered to in Chinese architecture. Cf. Hersek, Can, "General Status of Artifacts within the Region of Orkhun Monuments", *Moğolistan'daki Türk Anıtları Projesi 2000 Yılı Çalışmaları*, Ankara, 2002, pp. 152, 156.

⁴⁰ Sinor, 1999, p. 230.

⁴¹ Bayar, Dovdoi, "Gedenkstätten und Steinskulpturen der Altürkischen Zeit", *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben. Das Weltreich der Mongolen*, Munich, 2005, p. 72.

⁴² Jisl, 1960, p. 71.

⁴³ Clearly visible on the well-preserved eastern and southern sides.

⁴⁴ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 526, n. 286.



26 Monumental stone fragment in form of a dragon
Uighur Empire, 744–840 AD, probably after 761 AD.
Karabalghasun, Ötükän Region, northern Central Mongolia

tribute relations with the Uighurs. Later on the Liao dynasty (907–1125 AD) retained certain elements of the Turkic imperial tradition, mainly due to Uighur influence, to which the Khitan consort clan, the Xiao, the dominant power in the northern part of the Liao empire, was closely linked.⁴⁵ The Uighur capital, Karabalghasun (Ordu Baliq), founded in 761 AD, was situated near the banks of the Orkhon River in the Ötükän Region of northern Central Mongolia. Near the ruins of the citadel of Karabalghasun lies a monumental stone fragment carved in relief with a curved dragon (26). The dragon-head is rendered with foreshortened snout ending in a tightly curled tip, holding a pearl in the open jaws and enlivened by a thick curly beard at the lower jaw, extending into a prominently protruding forehead with bulging eyes and large cusped ears swept to the back. The latter touch upon an X-shaped motif enlivened with small roundels in the interstitial areas that embellish the dragon's neck, while the scaled muscular body is slightly awkwardly arranged with large projecting extremities terminating in unsheathed claws. The fragment probably formed the left side of an entwined pair of dragons that once crowned a colossal memorial stele.

In 840 AD the empire of the Uighurs was destroyed by the Kirghiz from the northern margins of the steppe, which brought about the dissolution of the Uighurs. One group of the vanquished tribes fled westward into the region of Xinjiang and occupied Shazhou, the fertile Turfan basin, and Kucha, where they ultimately founded two kingdoms. One of these lay in Beiting (Biš Baliq) and the other in Kara Xočo (Chotscho), which the Chinese called Gaochang (Karakhoja, present-day Turfan).

Aspects of the prevalent cosmic *Weltanschauung* of the cultures of these kingdoms are reflected in a mural painting from temple 19 in Bezeklik in Xočo, probably dated 9th to 11th century AD. It features a pair of axially symmetric confronted snarling dragons in upright position ascending from a water pool. Their tail-ends are entwined and with the dramatic gesture of their raised raptor-like



27

27 Wall painting at temple 19

Probably 9th to 11th century AD. Bezeklik, Xočo (Turfan), Xinjiang. After von Le Coq, Albert, *Chotcho, Ergebnisse der kgl. preussischen Turfan-Expeditionen*, Berlin, 1913, pl. 32



28

28 Drawing of wall painting

Probably 9th to 11th century AD. Bezeklik, Xočo (Turfan), Xinjiang. After Grünwedel, Albert, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan: Bericht über archäologische Arbeiten von 1906 bis 1907 bei Kuča, Qarašahr und in der Oase Turfan*, Berlin, 1912, fig. 590

legs with unsheathed talons they guard the treasure in their midst. The latter springs from the lotus throne and floats over the motif of the flaming pearl, from which sprout the formidable, abundantly reticulated branches of a tree. Its luxuriant vegetation is nourished by fructifying waters in which small dragons cavort (27).⁴⁶ The tree clearly retained the connotations that ancient civilisations customarily associated with the Tree of Life, an emblem of the fertility cult. As symbol of life and fertility, it also formed part of Chinese mythology from at least the Han period onwards. In the Bezeklik mural painting the tree represents the cosmos, its roots anchored in the earth and in the primordial waters while its branches rise towards the sky, aligned through the supporting axis of the central trunk.

A related depiction from another cave in Bezeklik displays a fusion with Buddhist elements. A pair of superimposed vegetal stems each terminating in a blossom grows here out of a water pool. At the point of juncture, paired dragons project horizontally, their hind limbs entwined to form a heart-shaped knot, while the upper blossom forms the seat of Padmapani, the Bodhisattva of Compassion



29 Copper alloy mirror with coiled dragon

Diameter 28 cm. Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 941 AD. Excavated from the tomb of Yelü Yuzhi, Chaoketushan, Alike'erqin Banner, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1992. Archaeological Research Institute of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Treasures on Grasslands: Archaeological Finds from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, 2000, p. 153



30 Wall painting with mythical bird in flight

Liao (907–1125 AD). On ceiling of the passageway of a Khitan tomb in Gongtaigou, Halahada township, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. After Tang Cailan, ed., *The Museum of Liao Shangjing: Quintessence of the Historical Relic*, Hohhot, 2005, p. 163

(28),⁴⁷ who replaces here the figure of a bird which customarily perches atop the vegetal composition.

This brief—and necessarily tentative—account of vestiges of the iconographic evolution of the dragon and the mythical bird motif, both in the realm of the steppe cultures and at the borders of the Middle Kingdom, shows that their iconographies would not only have been well known but would presumably have been firmly enshrined in Khitan mythological concepts and religious beliefs and probably have formed an integral part of their artistic repertoire already before the onset of their dynastic period.

Already more than one hundred and fifty years prior to their rule, the Khitan had begun to specialise in tribal “industries”, such as iron smelting, tool making, weaving and cloth making, and to partially engage in agriculture.⁴⁸ The *Liaoshi*, the “History of the Liao”, reports that after their conquest—in the manner of previous (non-Central Plain) regimes that ruled over parts of China—the Khitan-Liao moreover relocated many artisans, among them blacksmiths, metalworkers, ceramicists, printers and weavers, to the northern regions and set up specialised workshops. These comprised Chinese prisoners of war, specially selected for their skills, and defectors from South China,⁴⁹ who were well treated and referred to by the sobriquet *shushan* or “precious as coral”,⁵⁰ together with members of other semi-nomadic tribes and ethnic Khitan.⁵¹ Centuries later, the Mongols and later on the Timurids in the Islamic world would similarly generate outstanding achievements through the large scale movement of artisans. Specialised craftsmen drawn from diverse conquered countries staffed their workshops, transforming them into fertile ground for the creation of a range of syncretic artistic expressions. Similarly, the aristocratic Khitan-Liao

patrons commissioned works according to their preferences, thus creating their own distinct styles. It may be assumed that most artefacts discovered in a Khitan funerary context were intentionally executed in accordance with Khitan orders. Moreover, it is to be noted that, as observed in the case of earlier pastoral tribes, motifs taken out of their native, i.e., Central Plain Chinese, semantic system and applied to notions of a different, i.e., Khitan, culture acquire new values.⁵²

Doubtless inspired by the close relation of the nomads to the natural world, the animal nature of the creatures represented is more vividly expressed in the art of the Khitan-Liao. This is evidenced by a truly majestic dragon depicted on a gilded copper alloy mirror unearthed in 1992 from the tomb of Yelü Yuzhi (died 941 AD), a cousin of the dynastic founder Yelü Abaoji, situated on

⁴⁵ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 224, n. 478.

⁴⁶ Unfortunately this mural painting, which was taken to Berlin by the German expedition, is presumed to have been destroyed during the bombing of World War Two.

⁴⁷ Recorded only as a drawing by the German archaeologist Albert Grünwedel during the third German expedition to Chinese Turkestan in 1906–1907.

⁴⁸ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, pp. 142, 526, n. 287.

⁴⁹ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 143.

⁵⁰ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 143.

⁵¹ Various nomadic peoples that were conquered by the Khitan-Liao, such as the neighbouring Shiwei and Xi, who were ethnically related with the Khitan, were well-known for their skills as iron, silver and goldsmiths and for making carts. Cf. Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, pp. 142f.

⁵² Kuz'mina, Y. Y., “O ‘prochtenii teksta’ izobrazitel'nykh pamyatnikov iskusstva Evraziyskikh stepey skifskogo vremeni” [“The interpretation of Scythian Representational Art of the Eurasian Steppes”], *Vestnik Drevney Istorii* [Bulletin of ancient history] 1, 1983, p. 98, quoted in Usdinova, Yulia, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosphoran Kingdom: Celestial Aphrodite & the Most High God*, Leiden, 1999, p. 22.



31 Gilded copper alloy horse harness accoutrement: T-shaped fitting

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 959 AD. Length 9.2 cm, width 5.9 cm. Excavated from tomb 1 of Xiao Quli and his wife Zhigu, Kuijia hill, Dayingzi village, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1954. Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After China History Museum and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Museum, eds., *The Khitan Dynasty: Unearthed Treasures from Liao Dynasty Inner Mongolia*, 2002, p. 102



32 Gilded copper alloy horse harness accoutrement: rectangular fitting

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 959 AD. Length 4.5 cm, width 2.6 cm. Excavated from tomb 1 of Xiao Quli and his wife Zhigu, Kuijia hill, Dayingzi village, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1954. Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot

the southern slope of Chaoketushan, Aluke'erqin Banner in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (29). This dragon's dangerous reptilian character, full of strength and vitality, is vividly conveyed, the result bearing only a superficial resemblance to the Tang-style dragon with its extended snout, curled up maws and undulating tail tucked under one of the hind legs—features that appear to have developed as distinct characteristics of the art of eastern Central Asia and Tang period China.⁵³ The massive muscular body is densely covered with large scales and the formidable paws with unsheathed sharp talons are ready to attack. Crowned by fine antlers the dragon's head is portrayed with an elongated snout characterised by drawn-back lips and wide-open jaws that reveal the deep parallel grooves on the roof of the mouth. The beast snaps at the central knob of the mirror representing the flaming pearl.

Mythical birds are also shown with distinctive and prominently curved beaks that have an unmistakable raptor character, a recurring feature of Khitan representations of birds that probably reflects the Khitan predilection for hunting with birds of prey such as the eagle and the falcon. Such a bird in flight with spread wings with its head turned towards the sun is depicted on a wall painting on the ceiling of the passageway of a Khitan tomb situated in Gongtaigou, Halahada township in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (30).

In 1005 AD the Khitan-Liao Emperor Shengzong (Yelü Longxu) dispatched birthday presents to the Song emperor. Most of the gifts were products that reflected the priorities of a pastoral people. Among these were belts adorned with gold or silver fittings enlivened with dragons, saddles embellished with gold and silver and decorated with dragon and phoenix motifs, together with imperial accoutrements embroidered with clouds and dragons.⁵⁴ The conscious choice of these symbols for diplomatic gifts shows the paramount importance of these motifs for the Khitan-Liao. The horse harness accoutre-

ments sent as royal presents may have resembled the splendid set decorated with antlered dragons which were unearthed from tomb 1, excavated in 1954, situated on the southern slope of the Kuijia hill, Dayingzi, Jiangjiayingzi township, Goushan district, Chifeng county in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The fittings were among the over two thousand grave goods comprising a large number of complete sets of horse equipment, helmet and armour, swords, spears and arrowheads. Dated 959 AD, the tomb housed the bodily remains of the prince consort Xiao Shagu (known in *The Khitan State Annals* as Xiao Qulie), the son of Shulü Lushu, brother of Empress Shulü Ping (Yingtian), and his wife Zhigu, the daughter of the first Khitan emperor, Yelü Abaoji. Part of the harness set are reticulated box-constructed T-shape gilded silver strap fittings, featuring expressive dragons that curl on the arms of the T, their heads oriented towards the domical centre around which another dragon coils, chasing after a large central flaming pearl (31, 32). With their thick manes wafting towards their backs and one of their frontal talons lifted in a heraldic posture, the dragons project an innocuous, almost frolicking nature, in spite of the fact that their elongated wide-open snouts reveal large projecting fangs and elongated curving tongues in a gesture commonly perceived as threatening. Their twisted bodies are covered with large plumage-like scales.

In contrast to the more sophisticated, yet more uniformly portrayed and often rather “tame-looking” Central Plain Chinese depictions of dragons and phoenixes, some of which appear to have suffered from copybook perfection, many of these Khitan-Liao representations retain an immediacy and innate animal nature, imbued with the vigour and lively spirit of the wild beasts.

The Khitan worshipped gods of nature such as the sun, the cosmic principles of heaven and earth, and the god of Mount Muye, attributing a divine presence to trees, rivers and mountains. The cosmogonic myth of the Khitan handed down from antiquity relates that a divine man riding a white horse floated along the Tu River (modern Laoha River), and a heavenly maiden riding a cart drawn by a grey⁵⁵ ox floated down the Huang River (modern Shira Muren River).⁵⁶ At the foothill of the sacred black Mount Muye where the two rivers joined courses, they

met,⁵⁷ and became man and wife. They had eight sons from whom the eight tribes of the Khitan are said to have descended.⁵⁸ This procreation may also be interpreted as a result of the confluence of the two rivers. Rivers were considered as mythical ancestors of the Khitan,⁵⁹ hence their choice of the Liao River as dynastic name.

The dynastic founder Yelü Abaoji and his father are said to have been born on Mount Muye,⁶⁰ whose spirit protected the tribal ancestors and cared for the souls of the people.⁶¹ However the location of Abaoji's bodily remains, supposed to have been placed in a temple, is still unknown, although his tomb is reportedly situated in Zuling northwest of Zuzhou (literally "ancestral prefecture") in Chifeng county, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The site is located on the ancestral pasture lands of the Khitan, the Shira Muren region, and is characterised by two huge mountains flanking a valley, a natural gateway which the Khitan-Liao called "Black Dragon Gate".⁶²

The Khitan also venerated the sacred mountain of the white horse, which has its counterpart in the sacred black mountain of the ox,⁶³ underlining their predilection for dualism. Many of these rituals show close parallels to ancient Xiongnu ceremonies, which were comparable to the indigenous ceremonies the Tuoba-Wei continued to observe even after the introduction of traditional Chinese sacrifices to the sky.⁶⁴ The Khitan demonstrated a tenacious adherence to their tradition. Twice a year and before each military undertaking and to supplicate the favourable disposition of their tribal ancestors, the Khitan sacrificed a white horse and a grey ox—generally near a freestanding tree—and likewise, after a victory, they thanked Heaven and Earth by sacrificing a white and a black sheep.⁶⁵

It is recorded in the *Liaoshi* that during special tribal rites the image of the dragon was invoked. For many ceremonies a platform with a central altar was raised and covered with a large felt carpet. On this the ancestral tablets of the seven temples were placed on square cushions decorated with dragon motifs.⁶⁶ Since worship of the tribal ancestors was of fundamental importance for the Khitan-Liao, the association of dragon symbolism with the cult gives an indication of its importance in Khitan iconography.

Khitan religious ceremonial was intimately connected with the tree cult. During a special annual ceremony of worship held for the sacred black Mount Muye a tree was centrally planted and surrounded by a group of trees arranged in the manner of attendants at court. Two trees flanked the central tree like a gate of heaven. A white stallion, a dark ox and a reddish-white ram were sacrificed and suspended from the central tree. After the arrival of the emperor and the empress on horseback, followed by courtiers from the south and court ladies from the north, ritual libations were offered to the central tree and the other trees. The emperor, the empress and all other participants processed around the pair of trees that symbolised the heavenly gate. Thereafter the emperor and the empress ascended a platform and sat on square cushions adorned with dragon motifs.⁶⁷

Every twelve years, the sacred rebirth ceremony and subsequent investiture ceremony of the emperor would take place to consolidate his power. At the end of the ceremony the emperor ascended the carpeted platform de-



33 Wall painting of a wedding procession with chariot

Liao (907–1125 AD). From the west wall of a sloping corridor leading to the antechamber of the burial chamber of tomb 3 at Hanjiawopu, Gaojiawopu township in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. After Shao Guotian, ed., *Aohan Wenwu Jinghua* [The Finest Antiquities from Aohan], 2004, p. 242

scribed earlier, and made obeisance to the sun, the tribal ancestors and the god of Mount Muye. Ministers and courtiers then raised the carpet on which the emperor stood and praised him, an ancient Central Asian custom recorded also in connection with Tuoba-Wei accession ceremonies.⁶⁸ Significantly, after the ceremony the reconsecrated emperor would go to the "Black Dragon Hall" to receive congratulations.⁶⁹ As recorded during the period

⁵³ Watt, James C. Y. and Wardwell, Anne E., with an essay by Morris Rossabi, *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles*, New York, 1997, p. 64.

⁵⁴ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, pp. 147f.

⁵⁵ Often translated as "dark" or "blackish"; Stein, 1939/1940, pp. 152f; Eberhard, 1979, p. 40.

⁵⁶ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 272.

⁵⁷ Stein, 1939/1940, p. 152.

⁵⁸ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 272.

⁵⁹ Stein, 1939/1940, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Steinhardt, Nancy, *Liao Architecture*, Honolulu, 1997, p. 250.

⁶¹ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 204, n. 192.

⁶² Ceramic tiles, pillar bases, a large undeciphered stele and a torso of monumental size believed to belong to a funerary structure have been excavated from this site. Cf. Steinhardt, 1997, pp. 243–252, p. 252, fig. 233.

⁶³ Stein, 1939/1940, pp. 152f.

⁶⁴ Eberhard, 1949, p. 357.

⁶⁵ Stein, 1939/1940, pp. 92f.

⁶⁶ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 274.

⁶⁷ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 273.

⁶⁸ Recorded for the Tuoba Wei as late as 532 AD, the colour of the felt rug was reported to have been black. Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 223, n. 472; Eberhard, 1949, p. 357.

⁶⁹ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 274, n. 188; Stein, 1939/1940, p. 74.

of the Tuoba-Wei, the dragon was generally associated with the colour black.

The general importance accorded to the colour black by Central Asian people has been noted. It has been suggested that it is based on its being the colour of the dark sky, a leading concept in the religious belief of Central Asia.⁷⁰ Omeljan Pritsak suggested that the adjective Kara, which is generally translated as “black”, stands at the same time for the direction “north”, the place of origin of the Altaic tribes and hence a prestigious direction.⁷¹ Pritsak further noted that Kara, “black”, is often employed in the denomination of different Turkish tribes⁷² pointing hereby out that sometimes it denotes one part of the tribe, while the other part is referred to by another colour such as white or yellow.⁷³

At the ceremony of the imperial wedding the princess received, as wedding present, two chariots drawn by camels. The upper part of each chariot was crowned by a pair of silver decorated dragonheads.⁷⁴ A wall painting of what appears to be a wedding procession features a chariot which closely resembles the one described in the *Liaoshi*. It is depicted on the western wall of the sloping passageway leading to the antechamber of the burial chamber of tomb 3 at Hanjiawopu, Gaojiawopu township in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (30). The unhitched camels kneel in front of the canopied carriage and the draw-bar rests on a tripod. The shaft finials at the front are adorned with unhorned immature dragonheads, *chi*, which were stylistically more closely linked to the Uighur Karabalghasun dragonhead with its short snout terminating in a tightly curled tip (26). Such a wedding ceremony with a similar high-wheeled vehicle is also featured on a mural of the southern wall of the sloping passageway leading to the antechamber of the burial chamber of tomb 1, dated to the reign of Emperor Daozong (reigned 1055–1101 AD), excavated in 1972 at the necropolis near the village of Kulun Banner in Zhelimu in Inner Mongolia not far from the border with Jilin.⁷⁵ Smaller versions of the dragonheads also decorate here the canopy which extends out in front over the shafts. Emperors also appear to have used dragon-adorned chariots.⁷⁶

It is of note that at the wedding, the princess was also presented with the chariot that was destined for her funeral procession. This chariot was drawn by an ox, chosen perhaps on account of its dark colour. The inside was covered with brocade, embellished with silver decorated dragonheads, pendant bells and a long piece of felt suspended at the rear, and carried a white “sacrificial lamb” together with the complete ceremonial accoutrements for the corpse.⁷⁷ The dragon thus symbolically guided the chariot that was intended to transport the deceased to the realm of the afterlife. The bridegroom also received his funerary bier at the wedding.⁷⁸

In the interior of the burial chamber of a late 10th or early 11th century tomb a wooden burial structure entombing a carved marble sarcophagus was discovered, which housed the body of an elderly woman believed to be related to the Xiao clan of Liao aristocracy.⁷⁹ Situated on the southern slope of a hill, tomb 7 was unearthed in 1974 at Yemaotai necropolis in Faku county, Liaoning. The wooden structure of rectangular plan, topped by a combination hip-gable roof, with its ridges terminating in



34 Stone sarcophagus with raised ridge terminating in dragon heads

Liao (907–1125 AD). Height 70 cm, width 73 cm, length 90 cm. Excavated from a tomb at Xidian, Hadayingge township, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. After Tang Cailan, ed., *The Museum of Liao Shangjing: Quintessence of the Historical Relic*, 2005, p. 159



35 Stone sarcophagus carved with the Daoist animals of the four cardinal points

Liao (907–1125 AD). Height 45 cm, length 188.8 cm. Excavated from the tomb of Li Jin in Xiaoxibianmen, Shenyang, Liaoning. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. After Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, *Dong Bei Wen Hua—Bai Shan Hei Shui Zhongde Nongmu Wenming* [Northeastern Culture—Agricultural Civilisation in the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang River], Hong Kong, 1995, p. 167, cat. no. 200

ten carved projecting dragonheads of the same type as depicted on the mural painting of tomb 3 near Beisanjia, was believed to have been used as the hearse.⁸⁰ Another gabled stone sarcophagus was discovered at Xidian, Hadayingge township, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (34). The gabled cover is likewise enlivened by raised ridges with more stylised horned dragonhead terminals projecting at the corners, their foreshortened snouts terminating in a tight curl holding large “pearls”, which again seem related to the Uighur Karabalghasun-type dragonhead.⁸¹



36 Carved wooden sarcophagus fitting in form of the Vermilion Bird

Liao (907–1125 AD). Length circa 30 cm. Excavated at Baomotugcha, Chaogewendusum, Ongniut Banner, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1992. Ongniut Banner Museum. After China History Museum and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Museum, eds. *The Khitan Dynasty: Unearthed Treasures from Liao Dynasty Inner Mongolia*, 2002, pp. 60–63



37 Lacquered wooden spoon

Liao (907–1125 AD). Overall length 17.4 cm. Excavated from tomb 7, Yemaotai necropolis, Faku County, Liaoning Province. After Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, *Dong Bei Wen Hua—Bai Shan Hei Shui Zhongde Nongmu Wenming* [Northeastern Culture—Agricultural Civilisation in the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang], Hong Kong, 1995, p. 177, cat. no. 218

In spite of the chronological hiatus, it is noteworthy that on a much earlier wall painting in the cave monastery complex at Kizil, cave 224, near Kucha, which has been Carbon 14 dated to 416–526 AD, a dragonhead is similarly shown to project from a funerary structure.⁸² The painting portrays the scene of Śākyamuni's cremation, flames raging from the coffin that contains the wrapped body of the Buddha, which is untouched by the flames. The head and tail of a dragon project at the front and back of the gabled lid. As guardian of Śākyamuni's coffin, the dragon's chthonic aspect and also his protective qualities are exemplified. Executed in an independent style, the Kuchean cave paintings are evidence of a much earlier tradition, which may have been preserved in Khitan funerary customs.

On the stone sarcophagus unearthed from the tomb of Li Jin in Xiaoxibianmen, Shenyang, Liaoning, the Daoist animals of the four cardinal points are carved in high relief (35). Notions of Daoism, Buddhism and to a lesser extent Confucianism seem to have flourished alongside Khitan tribal religious concepts. Daoist and Buddhist emblems were represented in Khitan art, albeit, as in the case of this sarcophagus, in ways that did not necessarily conform to the traditional Chinese prototypes of the mythical creatures. The body of the Green Dragon of the East, depicted snarling and with a spiky crest along its spine, purposefully striding on what appears to be rippling water, is rather naturalistically modelled, while the Vermilion Bird of the South, stylistically often corresponding to the phoenix, is depicted in the form of what appears to be an owl in a heraldic pose portrayed *en face* with spread wings, and perched on a lotus pedestal. The inner side of the carved and painted stone sarcophagus discovered in the wooden structure in tomb 7 at Yemaotai also features a closely related plump bird with wings outstretched in heraldic pose, perched above a door as if guarding the entrance to the otherworld.⁸³ Carved wooden ornamental sarcophagus fittings depicting the animals of the four cardinal points

were excavated in 1992 at Baomotugcha, Chaogewendusum, Ongniut Banner in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The wooden fitting of the Vermilion Bird is again rendered as a crested owl-like bird featured frontally, its wings prominently spread with neatly delineated plumage

⁷⁰ Chen Shu, "Hala Qidan shuo" [On the name of the Qara Khitai], *Lishi yanjiu*, 1956/2, pp. 72–74, quoted by Biran, Michal, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 217.

⁷¹ Pritsak, Omeljan, "Qara: Studie zur türkischen Rechtssymbolik", *Žeki Velidi Togan'a Armağan: Symbolae in Honorem Ž.V. Togan*, Istanbul 1950–1955, pp. 258f.

⁷² Kara is also used in the onomastic of the Turkish tribes (i.e., the 8th century seasonal camp of the Eastern Turks, Kara Kum, the Uighur capital from 744 to 840, Karabalghasun, or, the Uighur capital after 840, Kara Xočo) and as epithet to the names of Xiongnu and Turkic rulers. Cf. Pritsak, 1950–1955, pp. 244–245, 255. It is further of note that after the fall of the Liao Empire, about 100,000 to 300,000 Khitans migrated westward into Central Asia and founded a dynasty called Kara Khitai (the Black Khitans) who ruled over nearly the whole of Central Asia from the Oxus to the Altai Mountains until 1175. The adjective Kara is here evidently also an eminent one as is apparent in Liao and Kara Khitai denominations. Cf. Biran, 2005, pp. 216f.

⁷³ Pritsak, 1950–1955, pp. 245–248.

⁷⁴ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, pp. 167, 277.

⁷⁵ Johnson, Linda Cooke, "The Wedding Ceremony for an Imperial Liao Princess", *Artibus Asiae* 44, 2/3, 1983, p. 124, n. 40, figs. 15, 16.

⁷⁶ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 409.

⁷⁷ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, pp. 167, 277.

⁷⁸ Johnson, 1983, p. 128, cites *Liaoshi* 52:9a.

⁷⁹ Johnson, 1983, p. 127, n. 53.

⁸⁰ Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. Length 228.5 cm. Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, 1995, pp. 164f, cat. no. 196.

⁸¹ Tang Cailan, ed., *The Museum of Liao Shangjing: Quintessence of the Historical Relic*, Hohhot, 2005, p. 159.

⁸² Yaldiz, Marianne, ed., *Magische Götterwelten: Werke aus dem Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin*, Berlin, 2000, p. 213, cat. no. 309.

⁸³ Steinhardt, 1997, p. 328, fig. 300.

at the plump breast, fanned wings and tail (36). The prominence of representations of owls suggests that this nocturnal bird of prey had a special status for the Khitan. The *Liaoshi* reports that Empress Qitian (died 1032 AD), wife of Shengzong, owned a nine-dragon carriage as well as a gilded carriage, which was decorated with a dragon-head and the tail of an owl.⁸⁴

The owl played an important role in Siberian shamanism.⁸⁵ Moreover it is well known that the Mongol head-dress of later centuries was adorned with owl feathers.⁸⁶ Following ancient custom, Kazakhs today still associate the owl with protection: owl claws serve as amulets and owl feathers are hung over the cradles of infants.⁸⁷ They further believe that an eagle owl can kill an eagle, and hence attach feathers of eagle owls onto the wing-tips of their hunting eagles, an apotropaic measure, but arguably also intended to increase the strength of the eagle.

Such protective precautions can also be observed on objects of daily life of the Khitan-Liao. The tip of the handle of a lacquered wooden spoon also found in tomb 7 in Yemaotai necropolis, Faku, Liaoning, was adorned with a dragonhead with foreshortened snout and curled tip holding a pearl in its open jaws (37). Its decorative value conveyed its immanent talismanic qualities, which were probably intended to avert evil such as poisoning.

One of the best preserved Khitan-Liao tombs discovered to date is the joint burial of the eighteen-year-old granddaughter of Emperor Jingzong (reigned 969–982 AD) and niece of the Emperor Shengzong (reigned 982–1031 AD), together with her thirty-year-old prince consort Xiao Shaoju, the brother of Shengzong's wife, Empress Qitian. Their tomb, identified as grave 3, was unearthed in 1986, and is located in the Chen kingdom, at a Liao family necropolis in the low hills north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner region, Zhelimu League of southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.⁸⁸ The princess (died 1018 AD) and her husband (died 1016 AD) were laid to rest on a wooden funerary bed which, significantly, was covered with pieces of cypress. A long sloping passageway led to the burial chamber via an antechamber, which was flanked on either side by small subsidiary chambers that were filled with mortuary offerings.

A large number of the 3227 items of grave goods found in this treasure trove⁸⁹ were decorated with phoenix and dragon motifs, highlighting the significance the Khitan attached to these symbols. The grave goods comprised not only copious artefacts made of gold and silver but also included ornaments fashioned from jade, amber, rock crystal, pearls and agate.⁹⁰ The deceased were furnished with everything that was necessary for their passage into the realm of the dead. The sacrificial offerings and the wall paintings in the tombs show that the Khitan conceived of an afterlife similar to their earthly existence and expected to continue to lead a pastoral life even after death. Doubtlessly, this ideology was extremely important in the religious beliefs of the Khitan, whose preoccupation with the next world is manifest in the luxury of their burial goods.

The emperor had already presented most of the grave goods and also the mortuary accoutrements to the noble deceased at the time of their wedding. The heads of the deceased rested on gilded silver pillows and they wore similarly fabricated gilded silver boots, both pairs of which



38 Gilded silver crown lined by a fur hat

Liao (907–1125 AD). Overall height 25.5 cm, width at back 30.5 cm. Excavated from tomb 7 in Yingfenggou, Xindixiang, Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. After Shao Guotian, ed., *Aohan Wenwu Jinghua* [The Finest Antiquities from Aohan], 2004, p. 117

were decorated with phoenix motifs. Such mortuary practices were however reserved for noble Khitans who, in addition, were preserved through embalming procedures before burial—a practice which may link the Khitan to branches of North Asian semi-nomadic confederacies of the last millennium BC.

The *Liaoshi* reports that Khitan commoners did not bury their deceased but laid them to rest in the branches of a tree in the mountains where the body would be devoured by birds of prey.⁹¹ After three years the bones were collected and burned whilst the Khitan performed ritual libations, probably to ensure the fertility of their herds, and prayed for a successful hunt⁹²—an outcome that mirrored their own act in offering the flesh of the deceased to wild animals. This custom of entombing the deceased atop a tree or in the trunk of a tree and thereby symbolically returning them to the source of life, i.e., the tree, an icon of the fertility cult, was also practised by Siberian tribes.⁹³ The Turkic tribes of southern Siberia and the Nanais buried infants in hollowed out tree trunks, thereby symbolically returning the child to its mother's womb and thus preparing it for a new life.⁹⁴ From the period of the Tuoba-Wei many deceased Khitan were cremated, possibly under the intensified influence of Buddhism; however this was a practice almost non-existent in the pre-Liao period among the Chinese population part of whom adhered to the Buddhist faith.⁹⁵ However, even in Khitan cremations it was found that the ashes contained an admixture of birch bark ash and were covered with several strips of birch bark⁹⁶—which may have been possible remnants of tree burial rites.

In nomadic iconography, birds were generally believed to embody the essence of life and were related to access to the spirit world.⁹⁷ In the Siberian system of belief the soul takes the shape of a bird,⁹⁸ and in the Turkic kaganate it was held that the soul of the deceased was transformed into a falcon and flew away.⁹⁹ The Khitan seem to have



39 Gilded silver crown of the Princess of Chen

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1018 AD. Height 26 cm, width 4.3–4.8 cm. Excavated from tomb 3, north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Zhelimu League, southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1974. Archaeological Research Institute of Inner Mongolia/Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Chine, la gloire des empereurs*, Paris, 2000, p. 386, cat. no. 155

shared these ideas for it is reported that at the funeral of Emperor Shengzong in 1031 AD eagles and falcons were released.¹⁰⁰ Although such ceremonies also tallied with Buddhist rituals, their original motivation might have had its source in more ancient customs. In Kazakh tradition, birds continue to be associated with fertility and protection.¹⁰¹

A bird of prey holding a ring in its beak perches at the apex of a crown composed of multiple overlapping gilded silver sections in the form of cloud-collar motifs decorated in openwork. The crown was unearthed from tomb 7 in Yingfenggou, Xindixiang, Aohan Bunner in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (38). Its front is decorated with a crown-shaped tree, enlivened on each of its two levels with phoenixes in flight amidst clouds. The back of the crown, too, is divided into two levels, with each piece being decorated with a flying phoenix set against a ground of dragons' claws. The inner lining of the crown was a fur hat.

The prince and princess of Chen also wore elaborate crowns made of openwork sheets of gilded silver. That belonging to the princess is composed of a domical cap flanked by a pair of tall arch-shaped panels, enlivened at the front and the projecting sides by chased confronted phoenixes perched on foliate tendrils. However, instead of the figure of a bird, the small figure of Yuanshi Tian-

zun, the Daoist Celestial Venerable of the Primordial Beginning surmounts her crown (39).

A gilded copper alloy death mask surmounted by a gilded copper alloy headdress in openwork decoration, now in the Musée Cernuschi in Paris, has a very composed expression with closed eyes in contrast to the wide-open eyes of some other Khitan death masks. Earrings in the form of a seated dragon (only one earring is extant) suspended from the earlobes flank the mask, which is surmounted by a high crown decorated with long-tailed phoenixes in flight (40). Earrings existed also in the form of phoenixes and were often worn by Khitan men and

⁸⁴ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 153.

⁸⁵ Brentjes, Burchard, "‘Animal Style’ and Shamanism: Problems of Pictorial Tradition in Northern in Central Asia", *Kurgans, Ritual Sites, and Settlements: Eurasian Bronze and Iron Age*, eds. Jeannine Davis-Kimball, Eileen M. Murphy, Ludmila Koryakova and Leonid T. Yablonsky, Oxford, 2000, p. 259.

⁸⁶ The Khitan adorned themselves with the feathers of geese after the ritual hunt; Stein, 1939/1940, pp. 96f.

⁸⁷ Davis-Kimball, Jeannine, with Mona Behan, *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines*, New York, 2003, p. 92.

⁸⁸ Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, eds., *Chenguo Gongzhu Mu [Archaeological Report on the Tomb of the Princess of the Chen State]*, Beijing, 1993.

⁸⁹ Xiaoneng Yang, "Unearthing Liao Elite Art and Culture: An Empire in Northern China from the 10th to the 12th Century", *Orientalism*, 35/7, October 2004, p. 69.

⁹⁰ Cf. Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, eds., 1993.

⁹¹ Stein, 1939/1940, p. 45.

⁹² Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 204; Stein 1939/1940, p. 45; Eberhard, 1979, p. 40; texts compiled in the early Tang period report this practice of the Donghu, of whom the Khitan are one group, cf. Steinhardt, 1997, p. 241.

⁹³ Polosmak, Natalya V., "The Burial of a Noble Pazyryk Woman", *Ancient Civilizations From Scythia to Siberia: An International Journal of Comparative Studies in History and Archaeology*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Leiden, 1998, pp. 130f.

⁹⁴ Polosmak, 1998, pp. 130f.

⁹⁵ Jing Ai, "Liao-Jin shidai de huozangmu", [Liao-Jin period cremation burials], *Dongbei kaogu yu lishi* 1, 1982, pp. 109, 114, quoted in Steinhardt, 1997, p. 313. Cremation of the deceased together with his horse and personal belongings are recorded of the Ancient Turkic period until at least the 7th century AD. Cf. Bayar, Dovdoi, "Gedenkstätten und Steinskulpturen der Alttürkischen Zeit", *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben: Das Weltreich der Mongolen*, Munich, 2005, p. 73. It is also of note that "some Eurasian people cremated their dead based on the belief that fire cleansed impurity", Ibn Rustah, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥīsa*, p. 142 (l. 18) quoted in Frenkel, Yehoshua, "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes", *Mongols, Turks and Others*, eds. Amitai, Reuven, and Biran, Michal, p. 221, n. 115.

⁹⁶ Tian Guanglin and Zhang Jianhua, "Qidan zangsu yanjiu [The Research of Qidan Burial Practices]", *Beifang minzu wenhua* [The Journal of the Culture of the Northern Nationalities], 1992, supplementary issue (published by the Zhaowuda League Mongolian Teachers College), quoted in Kessler, Adam T., ed., *Empires Beyond the Great Wall: The Heritage of Chenghis Khan*, Los Angeles, 1993, p. 105.

⁹⁷ Davis-Kimball, 2003, pp. 75 and 238.

⁹⁸ Harva, Uno, "Der Baum des Lebens", *Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksia*, Annales Academiæ Scientiarum Fennicæ, ser. B, XVI, Helsinki, 1922–1923, p. 274.

⁹⁹ *Dschingis Khan*, 2005, p. 75.

¹⁰⁰ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 278, n. 199.

¹⁰¹ Davis-Kimball, 2003, p. 92.



40 Gilded copper alloy headdress surmounting a gilded copper death mask with earring in the form of a seated dragon

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1100–1125 AD. Mask height 23 cm, width 21.1 cm, headdress height 30.3 cm, width 24.4 cm. Musée Cernuschi, Paris, inv. nos. MC 2001-5 and MC 2001-6. Gift of Yves and Lotus Mahé in memory of Mrs Jacqueline Simon Mahé. After Chollet, Hélène, "Treasures from the Liao Period in the Musée Cernuschi," *Orientations*, 36/5, June 2005, p. 41, fig. 3



women, a custom abhorred by the Chinese as barbaric. The seated dragon pendant of the earring corresponds to a pair of confronted seated dragons executed in repoussé which are depicted on a gilded silver crown of the penannular type, unearthed in 1956 from a tomb at Wuqintulu near Zhangjiayingzi, Jianping (Yebaishou) county in west Liaoning (41). Like the dragon on the Yelü Yuzhi mirror (29), these dragons are imbued with great power, their gaping jaws revealing the sharp teeth and elongated sinuous tongue, their vigorous bodies resting on prominent raptor legs with unsheathed talons. The frontal section of the crown is decorated with a flaming *cintamani* pearl motif



41 Gilded copper alloy crown of penannular type

Liao (907–1125 AD). Height 19 cm. Excavated from a tomb at Wuqintulu near Zhangjiayingzi, Jianping (Yebaishou) County in west Liaoning, 1956. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. After Xu Bingkuan and Xun Shaodao, *Dong Bei Wen Hua—Bai Shan Hei Shui Zhongde Nongmu Wenming* [Northeastern Culture—Agricultural Civilisation in the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang], Hong Kong, 1995, p. 169, cat. nos. 202–203

resting on a *lingzhi* cloud motif as central axis, flanked on either side by the same motifs that are set against a ground of densely applied undulating vegetal tendrils. Daoist symbolism is hereby depicted along with cosmological notions of the Khitan.

Mythical birds also often flank a central axis. Reticulated box-constructed T-shaped gilded copper alloy harness fittings executed in repoussé feature birds with prominent raptor beaks in each of the arms. The birds flanking the domical centre are rendered in profile while the bird in the vertical extension is portrayed in three-quarter view. The domical centre is decorated with paired confronted birds in profile flanking a central vegetal form. Rectangular fittings belonging to the same harness show the same birds in profile displaying their elaborate tail feathers. The birds are portrayed in animated fashion with one raised leg, characteristic outsized curved beaks, large eyes and their heads are crowned with a sinuous horn-like crest. Of note are also the conspicuous cusped ears of the birds, characteristic features of mythical bird depictions of earlier civilisations of the nomadic realm such as the Turks and Tuoba-Wei. The birds flank a central tree, probably a palm tree, which suggests influences from the western Central Asian world. Here the fruit-bearing palm tree clearly reflects the ancient concept of the Tree of Life. These fittings are mounted on leather straps partially covered with fabric, and belong to the same harness, now in a private collection (42, 43).

An unusual choice for the central axis is the symbolism of a mountain. On two arch-shaped hammered gilded silver saddle mounts executed in repoussé, now in the Mengdiexuan Collection, five layers of stacked up *lingzhi* fungus motifs, symbol of longevity, form a pyramidal mountain which is framed in axial symmetry by a pair of



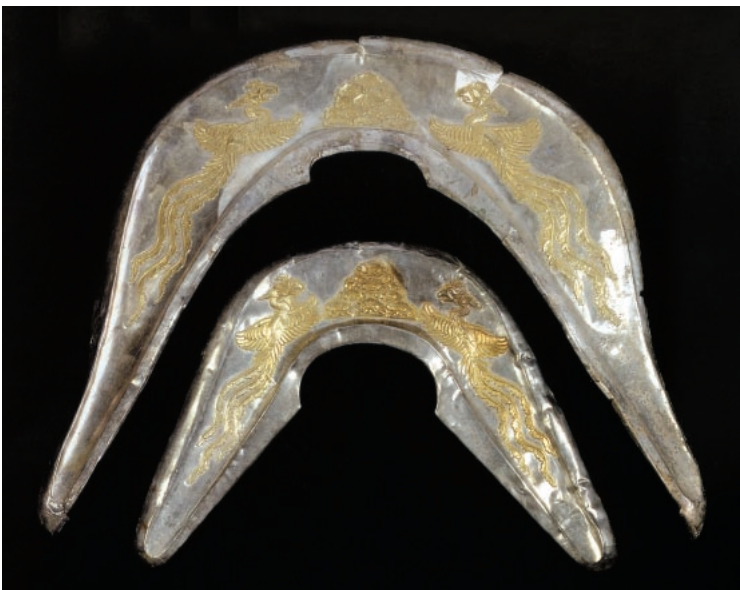
42 Gilded copper alloy horse harness accoutrement: T-shaped fitting

Liao (907–1125 AD). Length 7.9 cm, width 5.6 cm. Private collection, Belgium



43 Gilded copper alloy horse harness accoutrement: rectangular fitting

Liao (907–1125 AD). Length 3.6 cm, width 2.4 cm. Private collection, Belgium



44 Gilded silver saddle mounts

Liao (907–1125 AD). Height 43 cm, width 27 cm. Mengdiexuan Collection, Hong Kong. After So, J. F., *Noble Riders from Pines and Deserts. The Artistic Legacy of the Qidan*, Hong Kong, 2004, pp. 276–277, cat. no. VI:2



45 Pair of gold bracelets of the Princess of Chen

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1018 AD. Diameter 5.5–7.7 cm. Excavated from tomb 3, north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Zhelimu League, southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1974. Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Treasures on Grasslands: Archaeological Finds from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, 2000, p. 208

phoenixes in flight (44). The Daoist motif of the divine mushroom of longevity, which was believed to grow in the abode of the immortals, is rendered here in the unusual form of a mountain.

Both the prince and princess of Chen were bedecked with further jewellery, a large part of which was copiously decorated with additional dragon and bird motifs, neither of which seem to have been gender-specific in their associations. Two pairs of gold bracelets adorned the wrists of the princess. One pair of gold bracelets was decorated with foliate scrolls, the other pair was fabricated in the form of paired confronted dragons with projecting horned dragonhead terminals with elongated upturned muzzles, the latter featured as rounded protuberances which are prominently ribbed at the bottom (45). The innately reptilian characters of the dragons are clearly expressed in the intertwined and finely imbricated serpentine bodies.

The princess was further adorned with temple hangings in the form of a pair of recumbent dragons carved in am-

ber and connected by multi-stranded gold thread strung with pearls. The strings of foliate gold pendants that are suspended from the dragons recall vegetal forms, possibly referring to the Tree of Life motif (46). While amber had hitherto hardly been found in a Chinese context, it was accorded exceptional prestige by the Khitan. In each hand both the prince and the princess clutched a large amber amulet, one carved in relief with a pair of perched phoenixes and the other with a recumbent dragon, fastened with a gold chain to the back of their hands (47, 48).¹⁰² The dragon and mythical bird thus played a central role in this rite of passage and were chosen as highly potent icons, probably reserved for high-ranking individuals. The amulets must have been deliberate expressions of

¹⁰² Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, eds, *Chenguo Gongzhu Mu [Archaeological Report on the Tomb of the Princess of the Chen State]*, Beijing, 1993, pl. XXX, figs. 1 and 2.



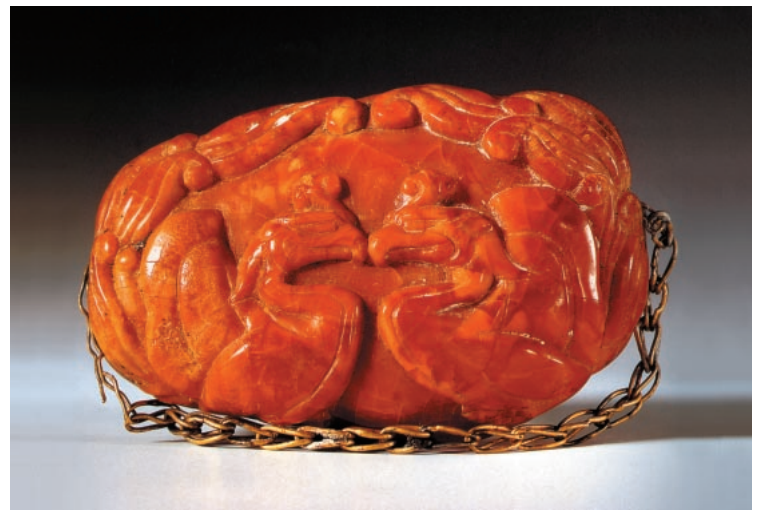
46 Temple pendants of the Princess of Chen

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1018 AD. Height 26 cm, width 4.3–4.8 cm, length 30 cm. Excavated from tomb 3, north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Zhelimu League, southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1974. Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Genghis Khan—Ancient Nomadic Culture of the Northern China*, Beijing, 2004, p. 202



47 Carved amber amulet in form of a pair of confronted phoenixes of the Princess of Chen

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1018 AD. Length 3–4.8 cm. Excavated from tomb 3, north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Zhelimu League, southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1974. Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Treasures on Grasslands: Archaeological Finds from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, 2000, pp. 218–219



48 Carved amber amulet in form of a dragon of the Princess of Chen

Liao (907–1125 AD), circa 1018 AD. Length 3–4.8 cm. Excavated from tomb 3, north of Shugetu village, Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, Zhelimu League, southeastern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 1974. Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Zhelimu League Museum, Museum of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot. After *Treasures on Grasslands: Archaeological Finds from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, 2000, p. 219

mythological concepts resulting from an intrinsic development of Khitan tradition. Such concepts, while subject to Chinese influence, are particular to Khitan culture, revealing important aspects of their mythology and religious belief. The amulets featuring phoenixes and dragons may have been endowed with a forceful emblematic and apo-

tropaic function, invoked to ensure safe passage for the noble deceased on their final journey, and to serve them in the next world. They speak of the profound meaning these motifs must have transmitted and their continued importance in the hereafter and possibly at the onset of a life as ancestral spirit.