
MUSIC IN ART

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THE ICONOGRAPHY AND DECORATION OF THE ANCIENT CHINESE QIN-ZITHER (500 BCE TO 500 CE)

BO LAWERGREN

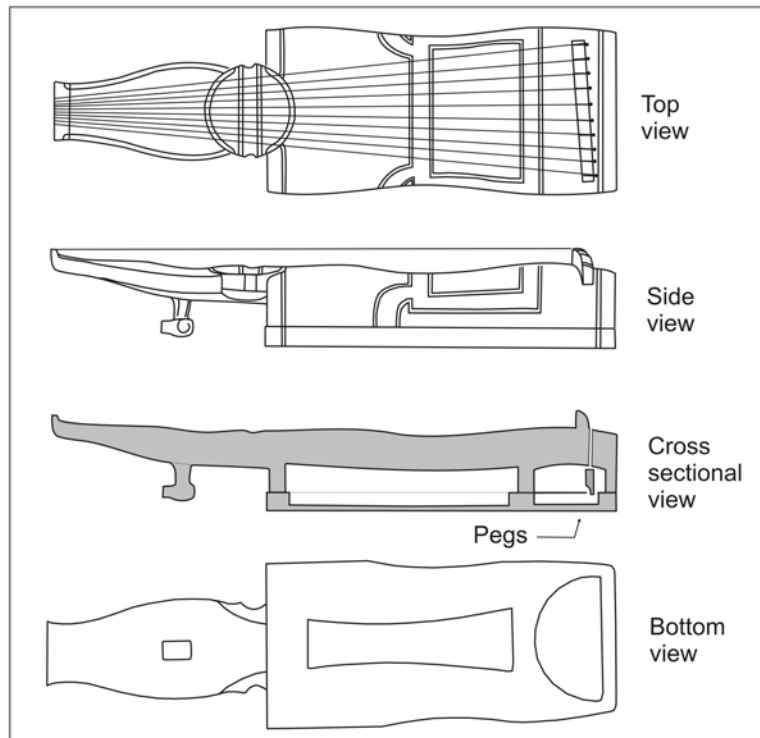
Hunter College and The Graduate Center
The City University of New York

The earliest known ancient qin, the predecessor to the classical instrument,¹ was buried 433 BCE in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng located at Suizhou, in the present-day Hubei province [fig. 1].² With this instrument are related three areas of iconographic interest: the smallest is an issue of the tuning keys, which has not yet entered the indigenous Chinese musicological literature; the larger is the body of the instrument which is better known subject; and the largest is the player and his context, which is the subject familiar to most students of general Chinese culture.

DECORATIONS ON TUNING KEYS. Why is the small instrument from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng considered to be a qin rather than a species entirely different from the classical qin which is nearly twice as large? [fig. 2] One reason is the tuning mechanism similar to the idiosyncratic peg-tuning of the classical qin. Most other zithers of the Far East lack pegs and use small movable bridges for tuning, such as those on the zheng.³ The pegs on the ancient and classical qin have similar axial channels and side-holes [fig. 3]. Both instruments have string anchors under the left end of the soundboard,⁴ and since this is a highly idiosyncratic tuning mechanism both instruments appear to be intimately related. However, the tuning mechanism on the two zithers is not exactly the same. Modern players turn the pegs with fingers, while pegs on ancient qins were spaced too closely together to accommodate fingers, and players had to use narrow and tall tuning keys originally made of bronze or silver. On one end the key had a socket that fit snugly over the peg, while the other end widened into a handle sumptuously decorated with figures of animals and humans. After the second century BCE keys began to be made from iron which tends to corrode, and these may never become well known. It is also quite possible that no tuning key was made after 100 BCE.

Figure 4 shows eighteen keys arranged approximately in a chronological sequence, but this selection does not exhaust keys known today (2007). New ones appear at a steady rate on the art market and, more importantly, in excavations.⁵ The scenes decorating the keys derive from the visual repertoire associated with the zoomorphic style that flourished in Central Asia and China's northern region during the first millennium BCE. The animals depicted were common in these sparsely populated regions, but less so on the central plains to the south. Although the keys were used for tuning ancient qins in central China, the inspiration for their decoration came from distant regions in the far north and west, and argue for extremely distant influences. Two of the keys carry a goat-men, e.g. a being with the body of a goat and the head of a man [I and J, fig. 5]. Such hybrid figures were characteristic of Achaemenid art produced in the Persian empire. Its capital Persepolis lies in present-day Iran, 5000 km to the west from central China.

Zoomorphic motifs predominate on the keys, and they were present already on the earliest surviving examples. Birds are shown in relief on the key A, made during the sixth or fifth centuries BCE [fig. 6]. On each side the image has a central vertical symmetry axis, with both sides sharing the same design, making it necessary to describe only one quarter of the images. A bird, occupying most of the surface on the right side of the



1. The qin found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, 433 BCE.

symmetry axis [fig. 6, drawing in the center], has a long curved beak, folded wings, long tail feathers, and long legs, one of which is very long. Its curved beak and prominent foot identify it as a raptor. Ferocious birds are fairly common subjects on keys (keys B, H, L), but this is the only case where it is shown without a prey. The image has a multitude of details and has undergone visual transformations. With the four-fold duplication it has become very complex, and unable to clearly convey further details. As on some earlier keys, the design of the key A incorporates birds with prominent feathers and drastically bent legs, but the mirror symmetry is an exceptional concept. The repeated pattern, given in fine detail, may indicate it was cast in Houma, Shanxi province.⁶

Keys with scenes showing animals often include a combat and ferocious fights. The most explicit battle is shown on the key B, which has on top a feline (lion or tiger) biting across the head of a massive snake that twists and coils while

it is being ripped by the sharp claws of the feline paws [fig. 7]. At the same time, the raging tiger battles a large bird covered by a mass of feathers. The bird presses up against the feline and its large beak pecks at the feline's hind quarters. It is a complex scene of triple combat, making it hard to see how it could have any bearing on the qin or its music. This same visual composition is used on the keys B and B1 which differ greatly in size. Are both keys genuine? The small key B was acquired in 1916, and such relatively early date makes it the most likely genuine. However, two nearly identical copies of the large key B1 entered collections at much later time: one at the Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, in 1947,⁷ and one at the Östasiatiska Museet, Stockholm, in 1968.⁸ At the time of the acquisitions there was no basis for judging the authenticity, but we now know the function of the objects and can give a better evaluation of them. Would both the small (B) and the large key (B1) fit tuning pegs available in the sixth to fifth century BC? Did pegs come in two sizes at that time? The few pegs we know, indicate that sizes changed markedly between the fifth and second centuries BC [fig. 8, upper area enclosed by a hatched line], but the sockets of the Copenhagen and Stockholm keys appear too large for any peg at any time. Until larger pegs are found, they must be considered suspicious.

The keys D and E, made about fifty years later than the key B, show goats striking peaceful poses [fig. 9], as do the monkey and the bear [figs. 10 & 11]. However, the raptor grabbing a small bear in the sharp talons, brings back the harsh realities of the northern steppe [H, fig. 12]. At a slightly later date was produced another violent scene of two animals in a combat: a standing bird curves back onto itself and bites the rear feathers on its own body, meanwhile a small feline clutches to the inner curve of the bird's body and tries to strangle its neck with a perpendicular bite [L, fig. 13]. Several other keys have animals with drastically curved bodies, a posture that permits the animals to bite themselves viciously [N, O, and P, figs. 14–16]. But there are also gentler moments, such as when two monkeys caress [K, fig. 17], or wrestlers engage in playful tussle [M, fig. 18]. Perhaps they are acrobats like the man on an earlier key [C, fig. 19].

All but two keys are made of bronze. The exceptions were produced at the end of the first millennium BC; one is made of solid silver inlaid with precious stones and the other is bronze inlaid with gold and precious stones [R, fig. 20]. Both are elite objects which imply an extraordinary high status for the qin.

A number of keys are decorated with a bear. At the top of the key Q there is a rectangular opening which contains a small lever [fig. 21]. When pressed down, its top surface is flush with the bear's back but, when swung up, the lever projects above the bear. Its cross-section is an isosceles triangle. When a similar key was sold at Christie's New York in 2000,⁹ the catalog suggested it was "used for plucking the strings of an instrument". I think, it is likely that the object is a knife for cutting the qin's silk strings, because if used as a plectrum, the strings would not last long.

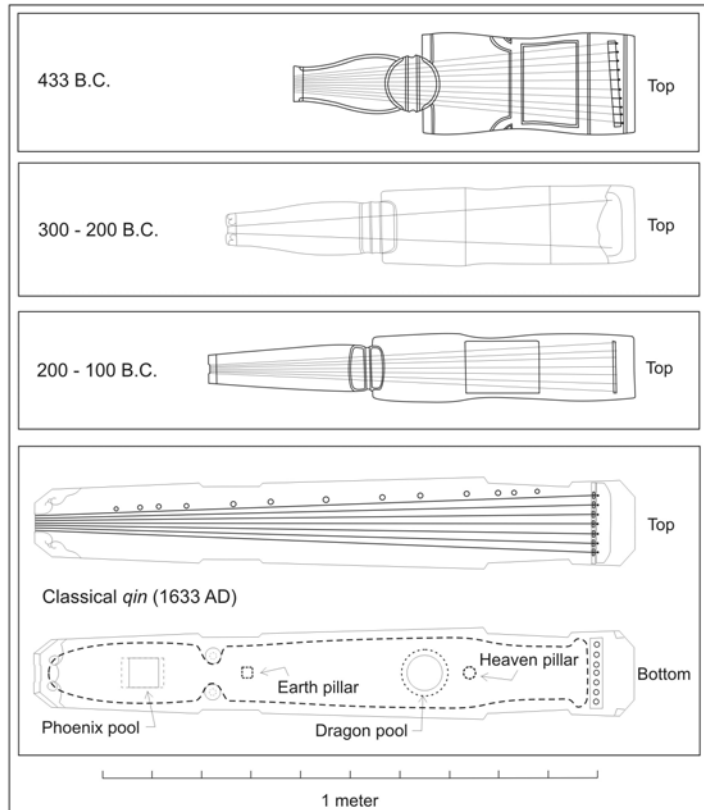
Some motifs, like the acrobat, conform to the role of music seen in other media, for example Han reliefs show acrobats at musical performances. But the majority of keys borrow motifs from the art of the steppe, which appear to have little to do with the music and the lore of the qin as conveyed by the classical literature. Instead, it points to an association of the qin and northwestern China.

DECORATION ON THE QIN BODY. Looking carefully at the ancient qin, one notices two geometrical figures inscribed on the top surface. One is nearly square, the other nearly circular. Since the pattern persists on later ancient qins [fig. 2 bottom], one suspects that the decoration had some significant role.

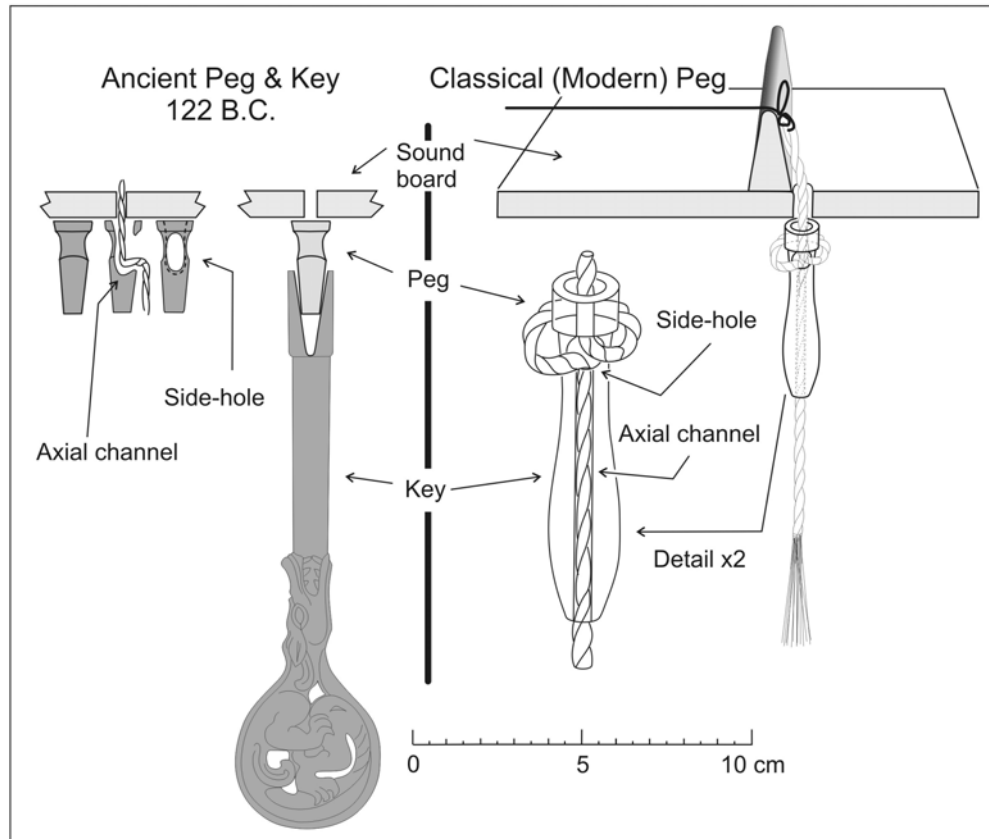
There is a legend about the creation of the qin, first documented in ca. 30 AD: the mythical emperor Shen Nong decided to make it so that "above it was circular which followed the model of Heaven; below it was square following the model of earth".¹⁰ Most likely, the square and circle has this cosmological significance. After the ancient qin had transformed into the classical version, the circle-and-square pattern no longer appeared on the top surface. But, curiously, the pattern lurks inside the body of the classical qin, hidden from view. There are two short wooden spacers inserted between the top and bottom plates. The pieces have circular and square cross sections, and their names are "Heaven pillar" and "Earth pillar", respectively.¹¹

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE QUINTESSENTIAL QIN PLAYER. In Western music iconography King David playing string instruments, such as harps, lyres and zithers, is a canonic figure of a musician, who was the subject of innumerable illustrations. Such a legendary player in China, whose influence reached far outside music, was Boya who played nothing but the qin [fig. 22]. In medieval Persia a similar position had king Bahrām Gūr (reigned 420-438 AD), who equally strongly influenced Persian imagery. Bahrām was known for his extravagant love of hunting and women. His favorite mistress was Āzādeh, a Greek slave skilled in harp playing. Their exploits were told in the Persian national epic *Šāhnāmeḥ* (شاهنامه) by Abū l-Qāsem Ferdowsī (940/41-1019 or 1025 AD), and illustrated in many sumptuous books. On this hunting expedition Bahrām pulls the string of his hunting bow, and Āzādeh plucks the strings of her harp [fig. 23].

Boya was not just a musician, but was the embodiment of a life-style that still is a vital concept in Chinese consciousness.¹² He and his companion Zhong Ziqi are first mentioned in the mid-third century BCE by Lü Buwei (Chancellor of China 251-246 BCE):



2. Top and bottom views of extant qin-zithers.



3. Tuning mechanisms of ancient and classical qin-zithers. Pegs retained similar features for, at least, 2400 years, but keys were discontinued after the end of Western Han dynasty in ca. 9 CE.

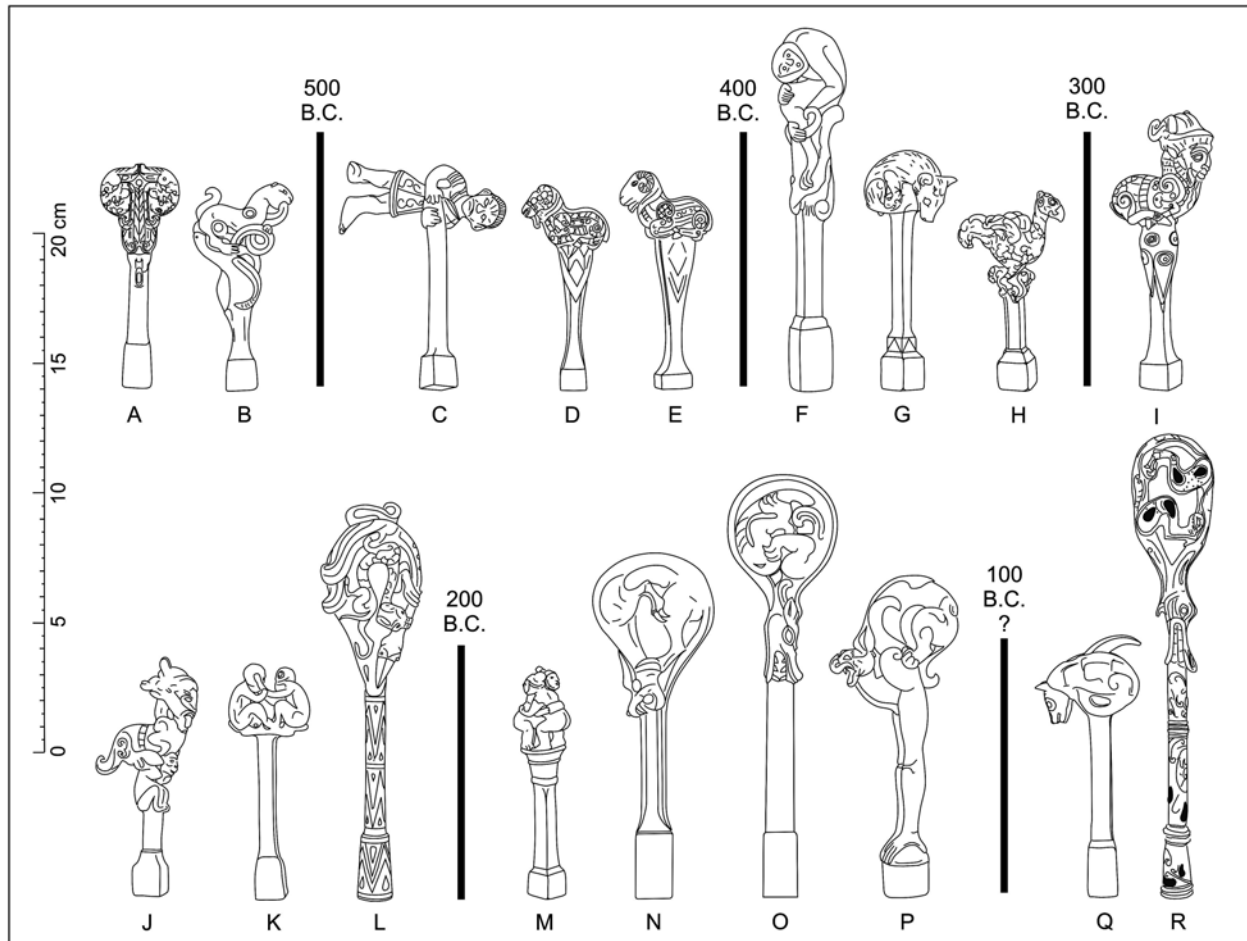
Whenever Boya played the qin, Zhong Ziqi would listen to him. Once when Boya was playing the qin, his thoughts turned to Mount Tai. Zhong Ziqi said, "How splendidly you play the qin! Lofty and majestic like Mount Tai." A short time later, when Boya's thoughts turned to rolling waters, Zhong Ziqi said, "How splendidly you play the qin! Rolling and swelling like a rushing river." When Zhong Ziqi died, Boya smashed the qin and cut its strings. To the end of his life, he never played the qin again because he felt that there was no one in the world worth playing for.¹³

The passage concerns Boya's musicianship and moral character. As a qin player he is skillful enough to make the music evoke subtle feelings and depict varied landscapes. He is also lucky enough to have a perceptive companion attuned to such nuances. The relationship is one between master and student. The story turns metaphorical when the text continues.

... he felt that there was no one in the world worth playing for. This applies not only to the lute, but to worthiness as well. Although a man is worthy, if he is not received by a ruler with due courtesy, why should he devote his full loyalty to him?

Boya's story deals with refined music and its reception, the bond between like-minded people, death and the consolations found in nature. Such are meanings associated with the Boya iconography. Illustrations of Boya are common on circle and square bronze mirrors made in the early centuries of the Christian era, which have inscriptions identifying Boya and other characters [fig. 24].¹⁴ Typically, one reads:

Boya is performing music, while the flock of deities show their faces ... May the owner have wealth, noble position, peace and quiet; may his sons and grandsons multiply and prosper. With extended years and increased longevity, his life allotment will be prolonged.¹⁵

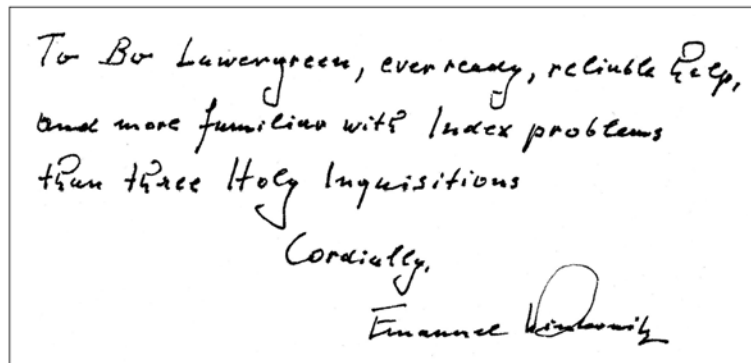


4. Tuning keys arranged chronologically from the sixth to the first century BCE. Their dating is mostly based on an art historical evaluation, with the only archaeologically secure date assigned to key O (129 BCE). It is uncertain whether or not the last chronological marker at 100 BCE is applicable in the timeline since keys P, Q, and R may belong to the second or first century BCE. All keys are drawn on the same scale. For provenance, see figs. 5-21 marked with letters that refer to this figure.

The mirrors often show two companions to Boya, one on each side [fig. 25], and it has been suggested that both are aspects of the companion, one who perceives the quietude of lofty mountains, and one who hears the roar of rushing rivers.¹⁶ However, a mirror from the early Han dynasty has Boya with only one companion [fig. 26].

The peak of popularity of the story about Boya occurred during the first three centuries of the Christian era, and after the middle of the first millennium AD, Boya and his qin largely disappeared from mirrors. Although it was due to an upswing in Daoism where Boya shared the spotlight with the Yellow Emperor and other deities, his qin was an essential part of the mirror's visual message. Even though Boya was only a symbol, his qin was touted as an essential possession of the *wenren*, the cultivated and learned gentleman. Of course, by this time tuning keys were no longer used. But shortly before, they too, had shown the great prestige of the qin. Players like Boya had raised the status of the qin to great heights; it had become worthy of the most luxurious accouterments, such as highly ornamented gold and silver tuning keys.

ICONOGRAPHIC POSTLUDE: DR EMANUEL WINTERNITZ. This paper was given at a conference honoring Emanuel Winternitz. For the last four years of his life, I considered him a marvelous companion full of smart observations on organology and iconography. His stories about musical life in New York decades before our meetings kept me amused at many dinners. Instead of roaming mountains and jumping across streams, we frequented German restaurants on East 86th Street. Winternitz was then working on his last book, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Musician*. After several years of discussion, proofreading, and index-making, I came to know small corners of Leonardo and Emanuel.¹⁷ The little note in my copy will surely bring back his Viennese smile to many of us.



NOTES

¹ Now usually called “guqin” (= old qin) in China since the word qin, which historically only referred to the zither considered here, lately has acquired a wider meaning of “string instrument”. I use qin in its historical meaning.

² Analyses of its structure and implications for Chinese music history have been discussed in Bo Lawergren, “Strings”, *Music in the Age of Confucius*. Ed. by Jenny F. So (Washington: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 65–85; and idem, “Metamorphosis of the Qin, 500 BCE–CE 500”, *Oriental Art* 34 (May 2003), 31–38.

³ The Korean *komon’go* also has tuning pegs.

⁴ The anchor on the classical qin also function as feet.

⁵ The latter were summarized in Bo Lawergren, “Western Influences on the Early Chinese Qin-Zither”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 75 (2003), 79–109, esp. 93–94.

⁶ For characteristics of Houma casts, see Robert W. Bagley, “What the Bronzes from Hunyuan Tell Us About the Foundry at Houma”, *Oriental Art* 26 (January 1995), 46–54.

⁷ When National Museum was offered the key (considered a “pole ornament”), it sought the opinions of the two well-known Swedish specialists Professor Osvald Sirén, who considered it authentic and a product of Eastern Han (25–220 AD), and Professor Bernhard Karlgren, who found it “undoubtedly genuine and of good quality” and dated it “ca. 400–300” BCE. However, Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf of Sweden (later king Gustaf VI Adolf) also inspected it. He was keenly interested in archaeology, especially Chinese, and had an outstanding collection of Chinese antiquities. He did not leave a written opinion, but reportedly found that it “stylistically belonged to the third century BC and doubtless was a forgery”.

⁸ The latter was part of The Ernest Erickson Collection donated to the museum, and the circumstances of Erickson’s purchase is no longer known.

⁹ Auction catalog, *Fine Chinese Ceramics, Paintings and Works of Art, Thursday 21 September 2000* (New York: Christie’s, 2000), lot no. 175.

¹⁰ Timotheus Pokora, *Hsin-lun (New Treatise) and Other Writings by Huan T’an (43 B.C.–28 A.D.): An Annotated Translation with Index*. Michigan papers in Chinese studies 20 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1975), 181.

¹¹ Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in the Ideology of the Ch’in*. Monumenta Nipponica (new ed., Tokyo: Sophia University; Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969), 193 and fig. 20.

¹² For an accessible account, see *ibid.*, 97–98 who uses the Wade–Giles romanization Po Ya.

¹³ John Knoblock & Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 308.

¹⁴ Two figures sit on either side of Boya. Susan Cahill has suggested they are two different versions of Zhong Ziqi. Suzanne Cahill, “Boya Plays the Zither: Two Types of Chinese Bronze Mirror in the Donald H. Graham Jr. Collection”, *Bronze Mirrors From Ancient China: Donald H. Graham Jr. Collection*. Pref. and catalogue by Toru Nakano (Honolulu: Donald H. Graham, Jr., 1994), 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

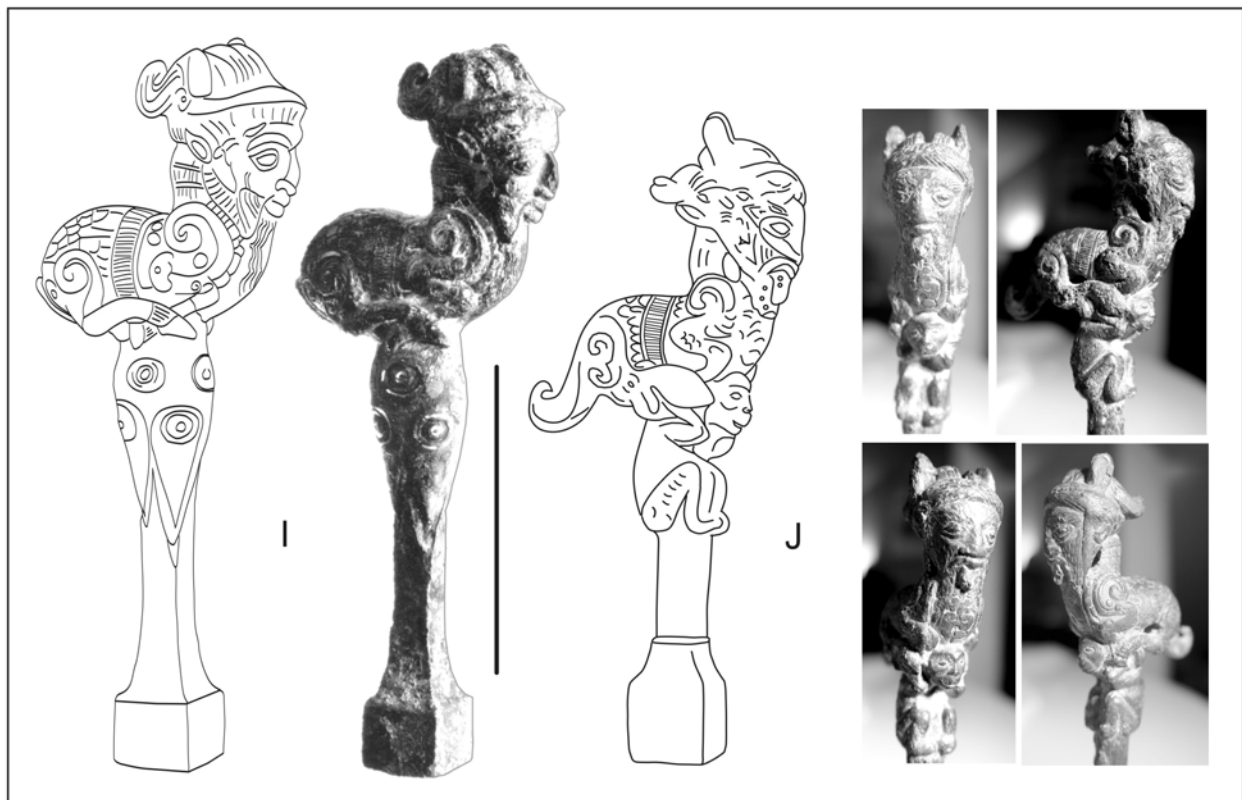
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁷ Emanuel Winternitz, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Musician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

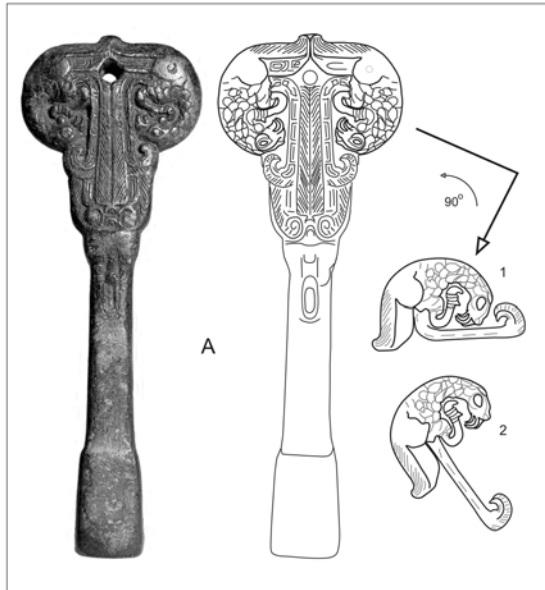
PICTURE CREDITS: **Fig. 25:** Ju-hsi Chou, *Circles of Reflection: The Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2000), no. 38 <> **Fig. 21Q:** Christie's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics, Paintings and Works of Art, Thursday 21 September 2000* (New York: Christie's, 2000), no. 175 <> **17K:** Christie's, *The Falk Collection I. Important Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art, Thursday 20 September 2001* (New York: Christie's, 2001), no. 182 <> **Fig. 19C:** J.J. Lally & Co., *Archaic Chinese Bronzes, Jades and Works of Art, June 1 to 25, 1994* (New York: J.J. Lally & Co., 1994), no. 58 <> **Fig. 15O middle key:** idem, *Arts of the Han Dynasty, March 25 to April 11, 1998* (New York: J.J. Lally & Co., 1998), no. 25 <> **Fig. 21Q:** idem, *Ancient China: Music & Ritual, March 20 to April 7, 2001* (New York: J.J. Lally & Co., 2001) <> **Fig. 9D:** Bo Lawergren, "To Tune a String: Dichotomies and Diffusions between the Near and Far East", *Ultra terminum vagari: Scritti in onore di Carl Nylander*. Ed. by Börje Magnusson, Stefania Renzetti, Paolo Viano & Sever J. Voicu (Roma: Edizioni Quasar, 1997), 175-192 <> **Figs. 5I, 7B, 9E, 11G, 12H, 13L, 14N, 15O left, 21:** idem, "Strings", *Music in the Age of Confucius*. Ed. by Jenny F. So (Washington: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; Seattle & London: University

of Washington Press, 2000), 65-85 <> **Fig. 20R:** idem, "Metamorphosis of the Qin, 500 BCE-CE 500", *Oriental Art* 34 (May 2003), 31-38 <> **Figs. 8, 10F, 18M:** idem, "Western Influences on the Early Chinese Qin-Zither," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 75 (2003), 79-109 <> **Fig. 24:** Toru Nakano, ed., *Bronze Mirrors From Ancient China: Donald H. Graham Jr. Collection* (Honolulu: Donald H. Graham, Jr., 1994), 50-59 <> **Fig. 10F, 15O right key:** Tina Pang & Emma C. Bunker, *Treasures of the Eurasian Steppes: Animal Art from 800 BC to 200 AD*. Catalogue produced in conjunction with an exhibition held at Ariadne Galleries, New York, 25 March-30 April 1998 (New York: Ariadne Galleries, 1998), F: no. 188; O: no. 191 <> **Fig. 7B1:** William Watson, *The Arts of China to A.D. 900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 73 and fig. 143 <> **Fig. 7B1:** Jan Wirgin, ed., *The Ernest Erickson Collection in Swedish Museums* (Stockholm: Östasiatiska Museet, 1989), no. 35.

Unless indicated otherwise, provenance of keys is unknown; and keys are kept in private collections.



5. Goat-men, third century BCE: I: Fantastic composite beast with human head. Height 10.9 cm. — J: Fantastic composite beast with human head held aloft by a small crouching humanoid figure. Height 9.3 cm.

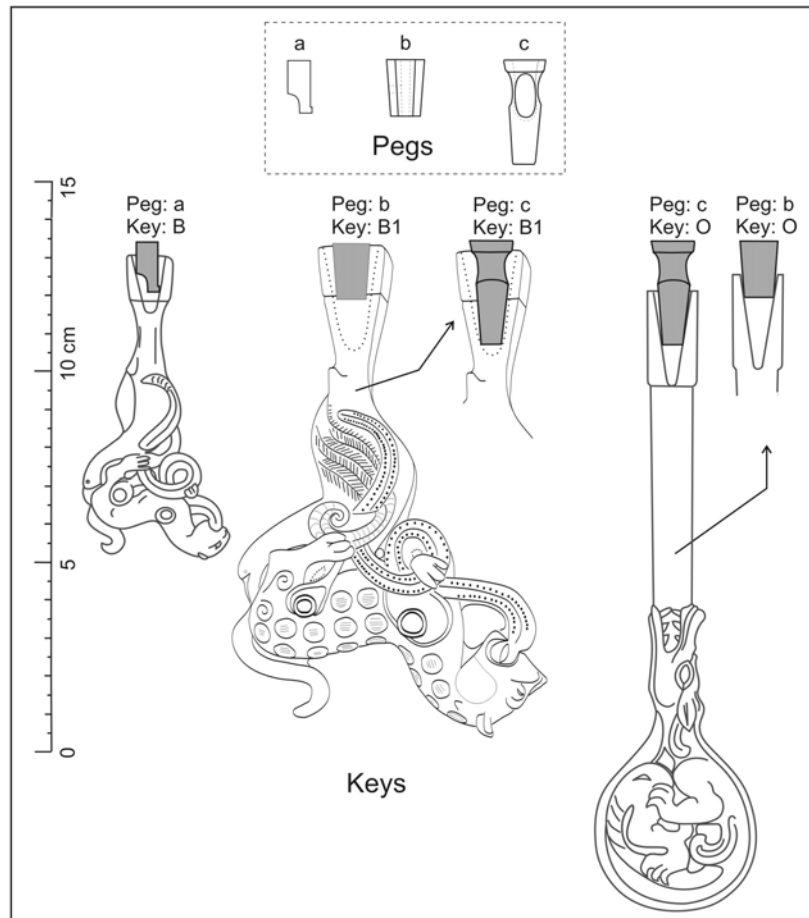


6. **A:** Two birds with beaver-like tails face each other. Sixth to fifth century BCE. Height 8.6 cm. Stockholm, Östasiatiska Museet, inv. no. K 11071.5.

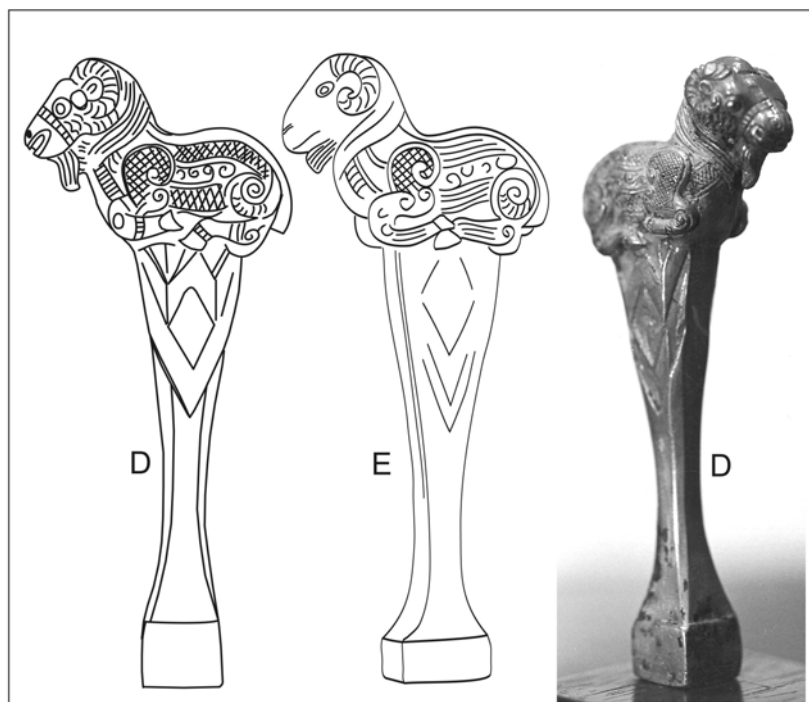
7. Bird attacking feline that bites coiled snake, sixth century BCE. **B:** Height 8.2 cm. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, inv. no. F1916.454 (acquired 1916). **B1:** Bottom left and center: Height 12.9 cm. Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet, inv. no. B.4407 (acquired 1947). **B1:** Right: Height 12.8 cm. Stockholm, Östasiatiska Museet, inv. no. E.E.S.N. (acquired 1968).

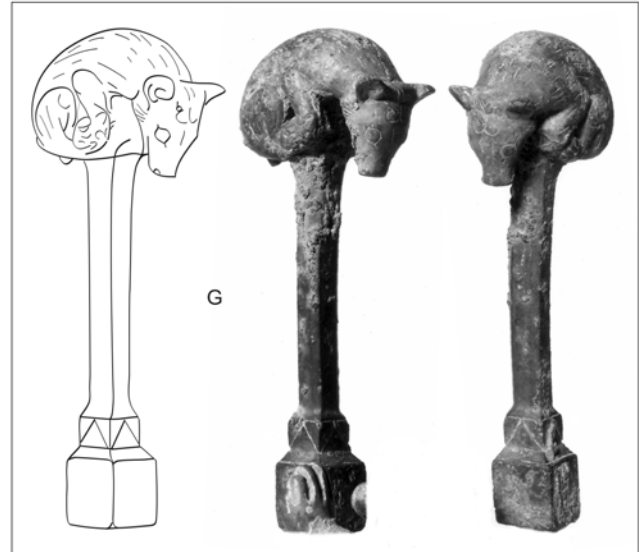
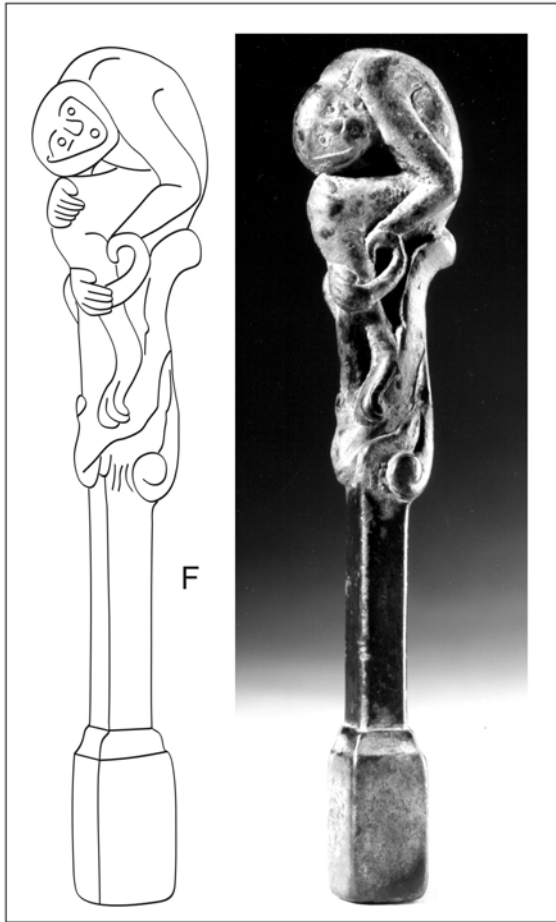


8. Pegs and keys combined. All objects are drawn on the same scale. Dates and material for the pegs enclosed by a hatched line are: (a) 433 BCE, wood; (b) 168 BCE, bone; and (c) 122 BCE, bronze. For the keys, see figs. 4, 7, and 15.



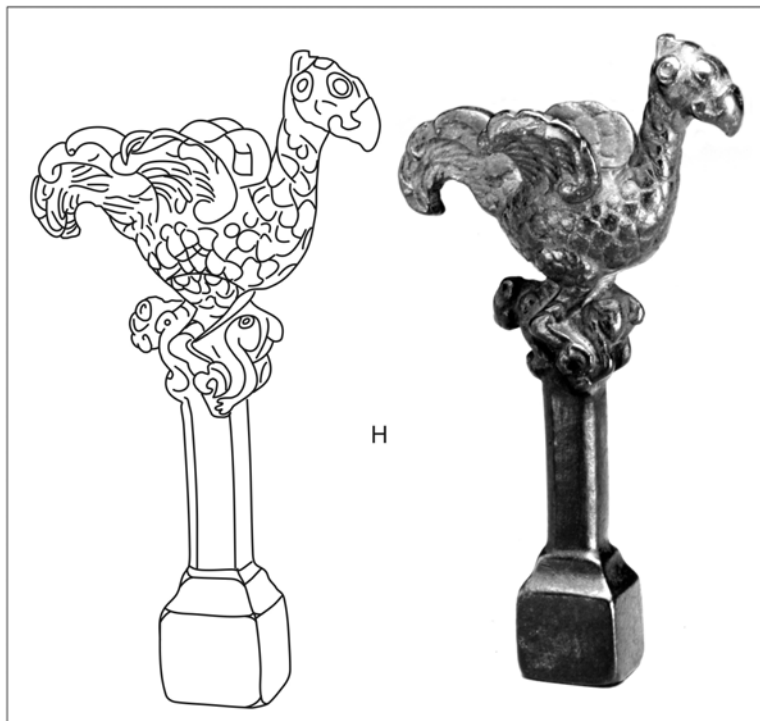
9. Seated goats. Fifth to fourth century BCE. **D**: Height 8.5 cm. — **E**: Excavated at Fenshuiling, Changzhi, Shanxi province. Dated to the fifth century BCE. Height 8.4 cm.



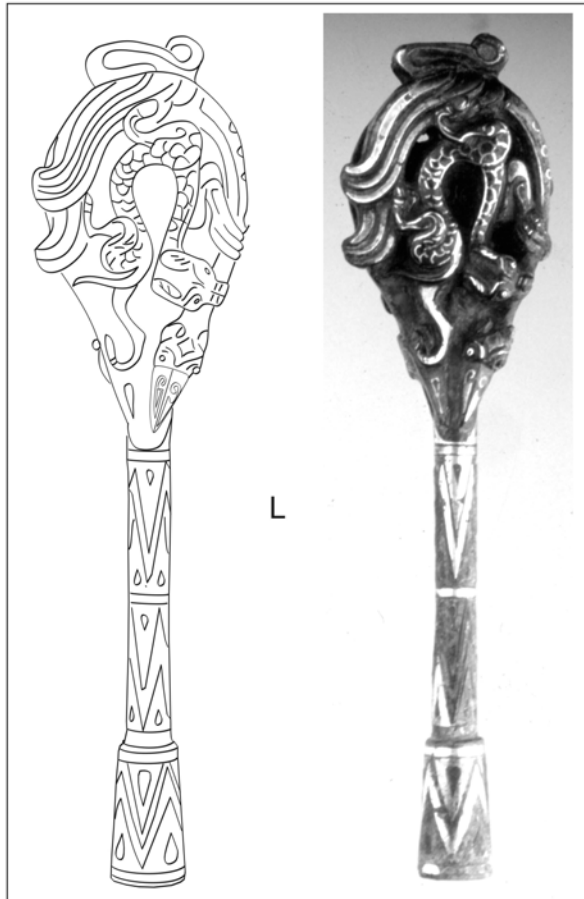


10. **F:** Seated monkey turning his head and holding his raised left leg. Height 14.0 cm. Probably fourth century BCE.

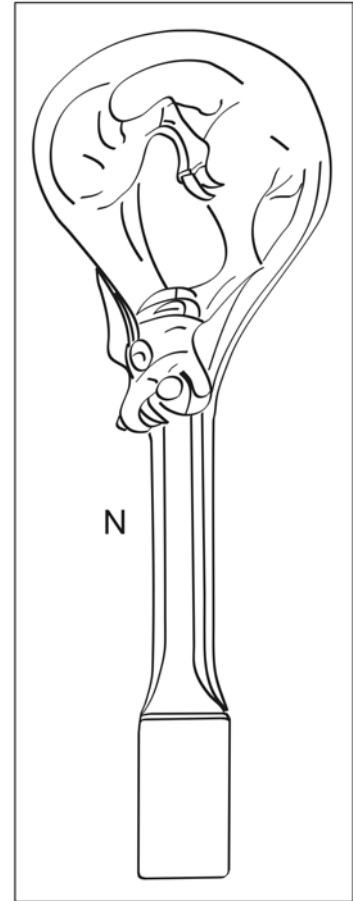
11. **G:** Crouching bear, excavated at Jincun, Luoyang, Henan province. Fourth century BCE. Height 9.2 cm.



12. **H:** Raptor holding bear cub. Fourth century BCE. Height 7.7 cm.



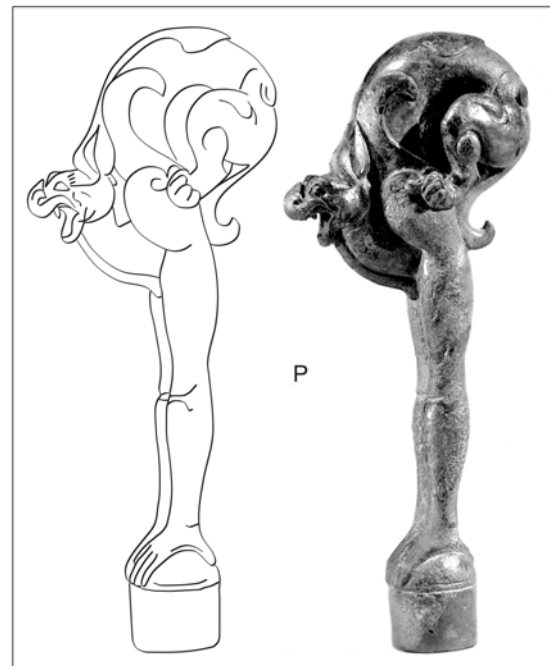
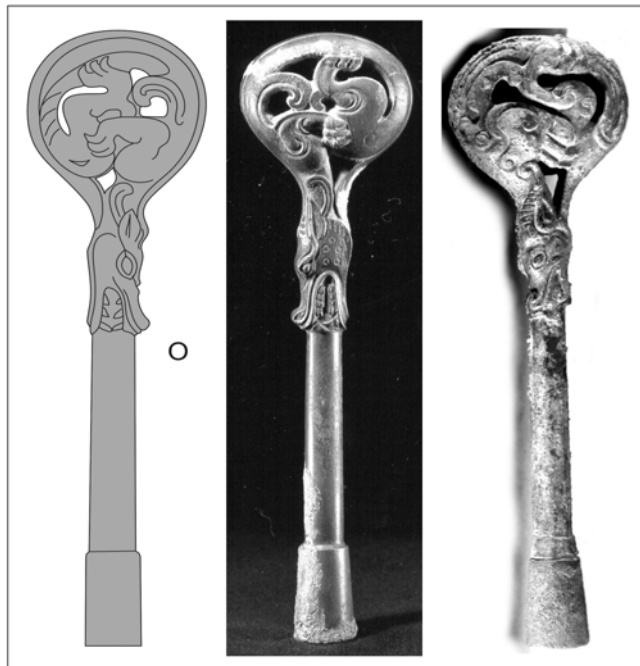
13. **L**: Large bird and feline. Third to second century BCE. Height 15.5 cm.

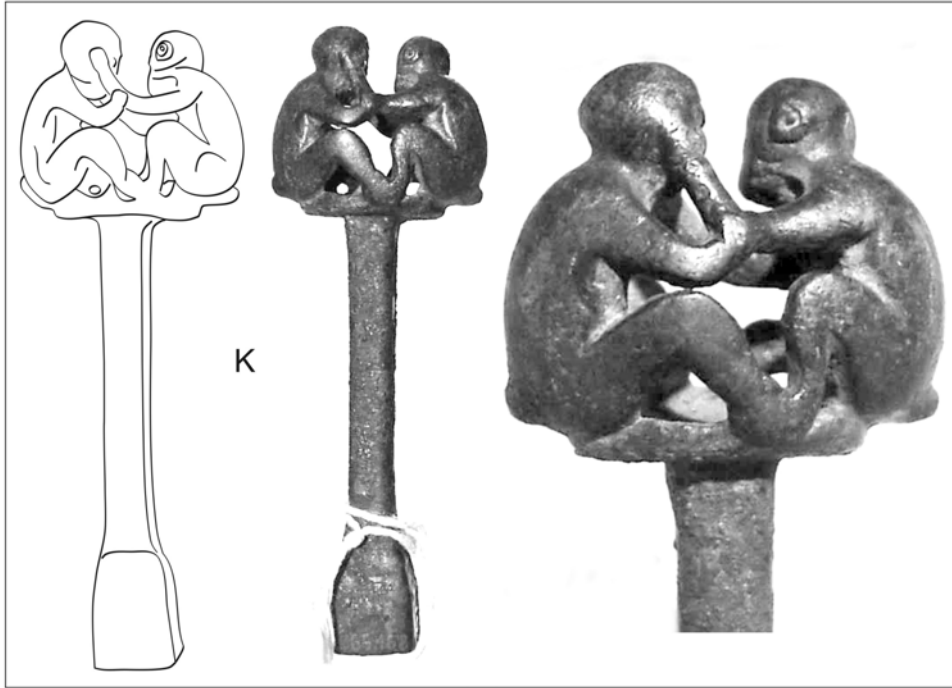


14. **N**: Crouching quadruped, excavated at Linzi, Shandong province. Second century BCE. Height 13.3 cm.

15. **O**: Coiled wolf-like animal. Second century BCE. Height 16.2 cm. Left key: excavated in the tomb of Nanyue Wang, Guangzhou, Guangdong province. Dated 122 BCE. Middle key: Lally, 1998. Right key: Ariadne Galleries, 1998.

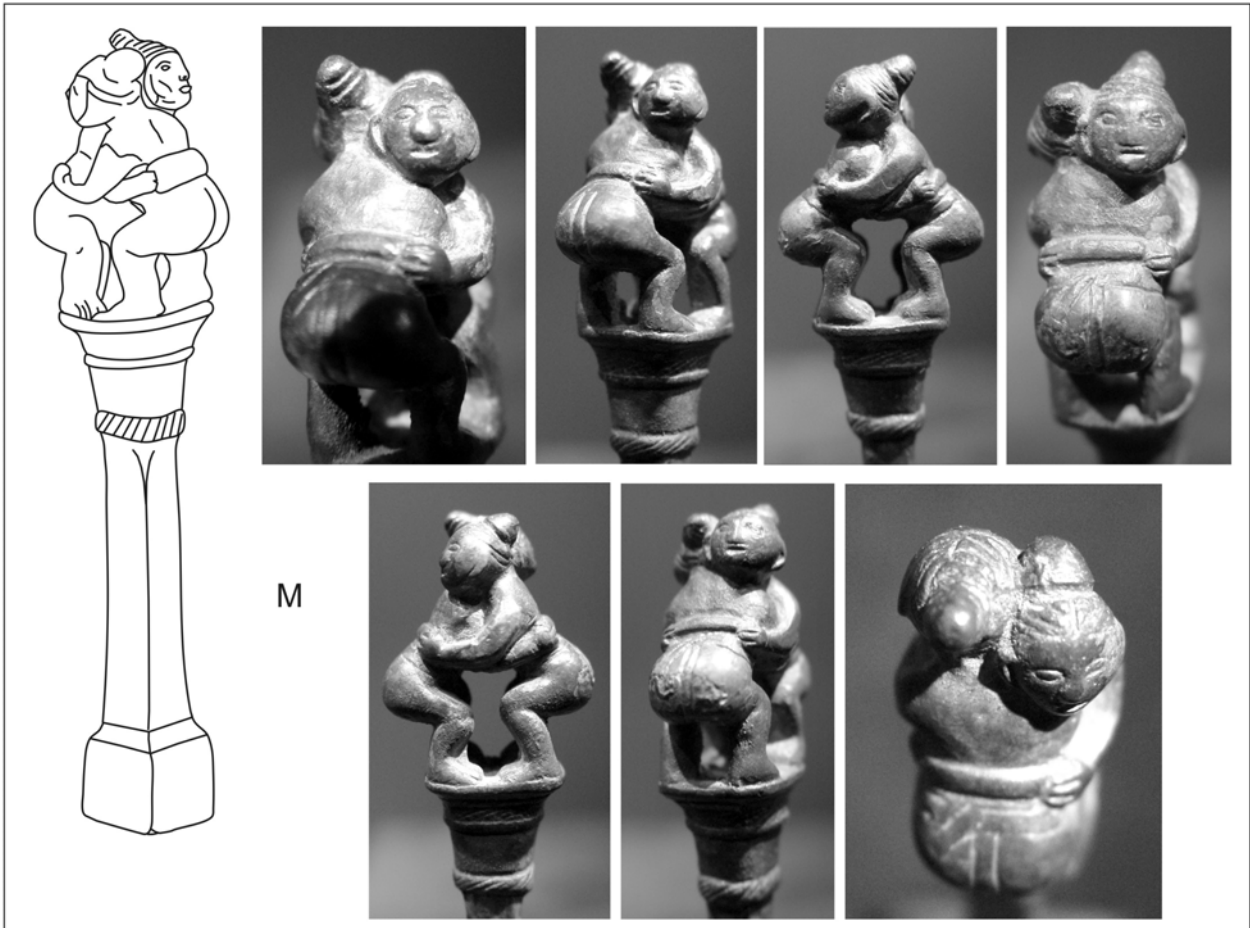
16. **P**: Fantastic beast with massive human arms gripping the base. His clawed hind legs stand on the shoulders. Second to first century BCE. Height 12.2 cm.



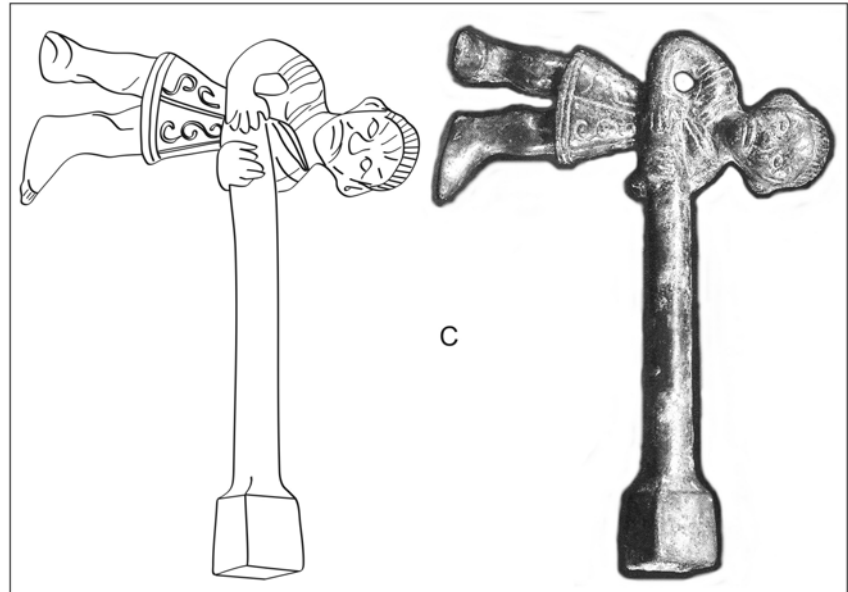


17. K: Erotic monkeys.
Third century BCE.
Height 9.0 cm.

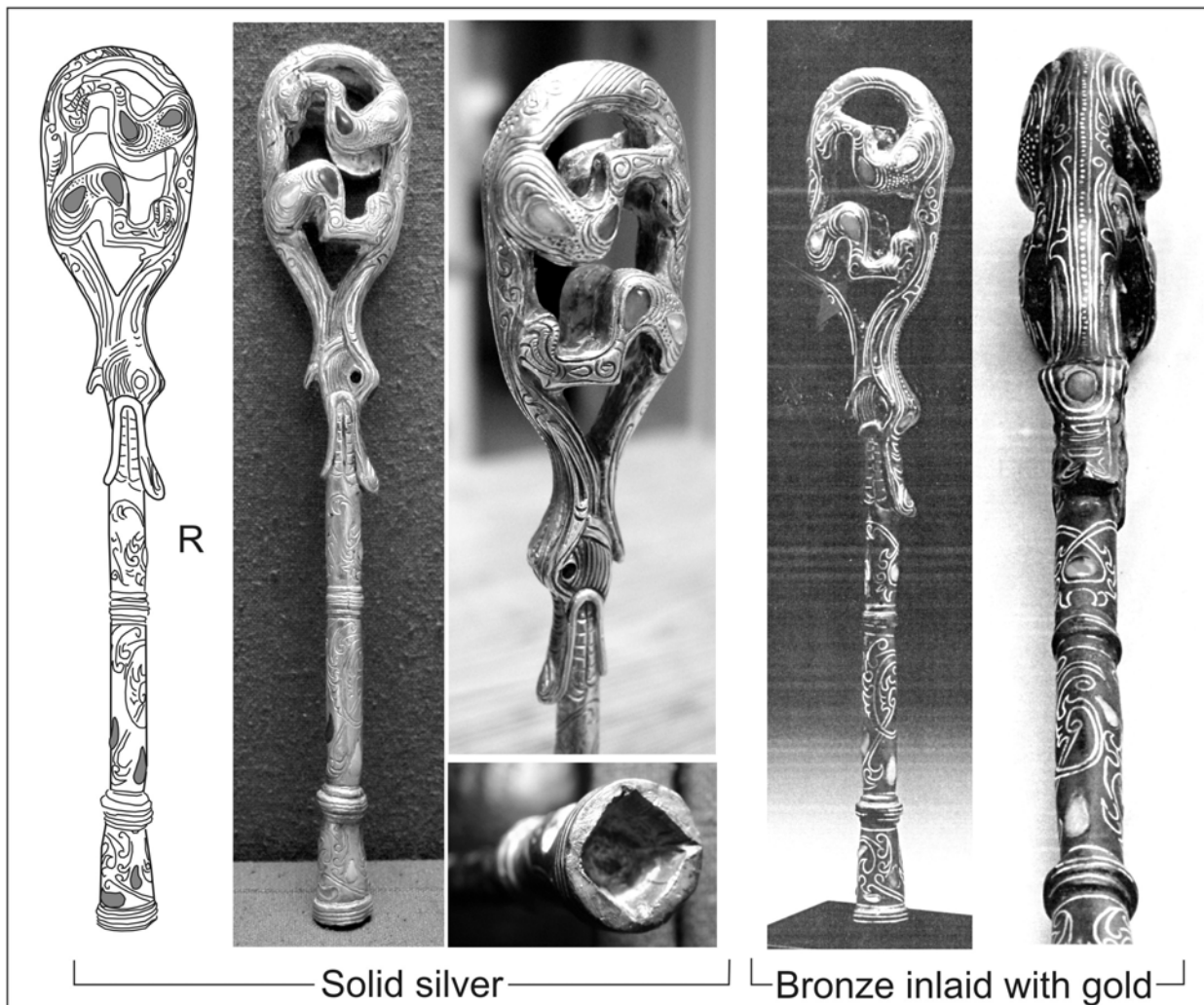
18. M: Two plump men wrestling. Ca. 200
BCE. Height 8.7 cm.

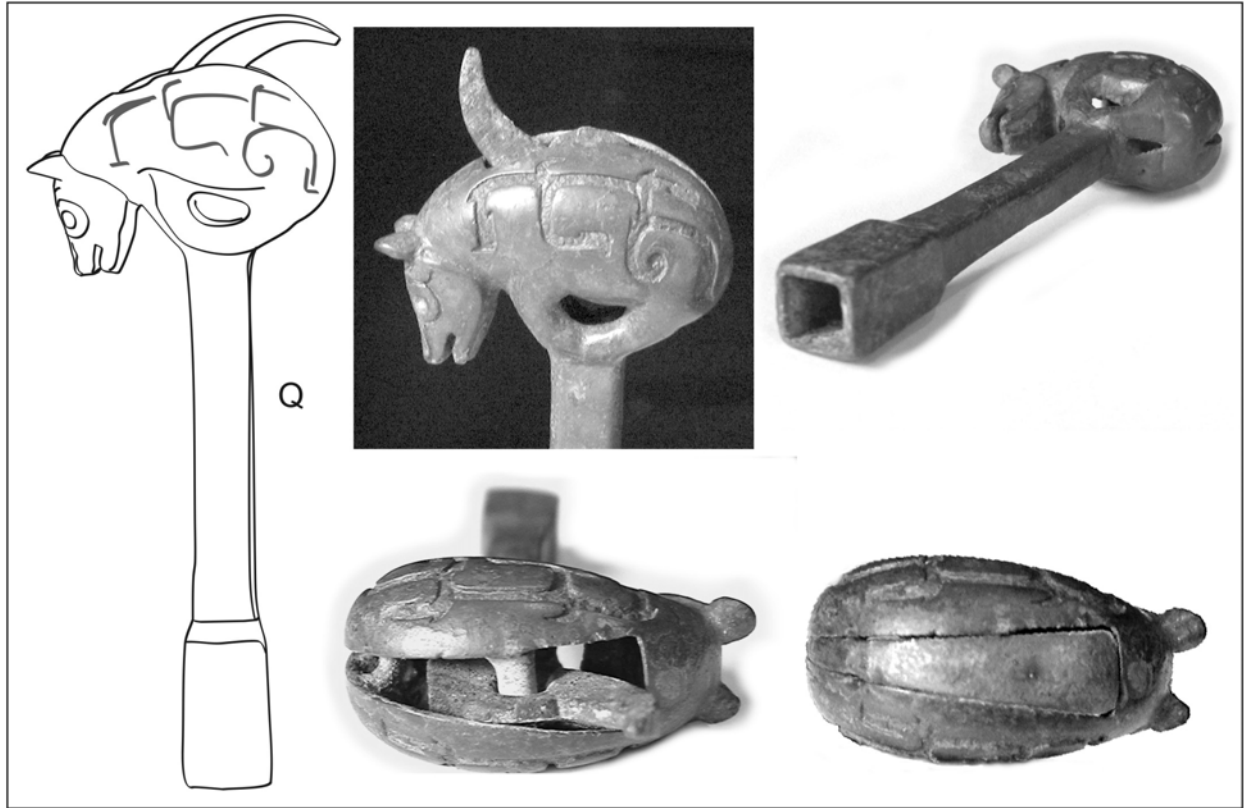


19. C: A man holding a tuning key. Fifth century BCE. Height 8.6 cm.

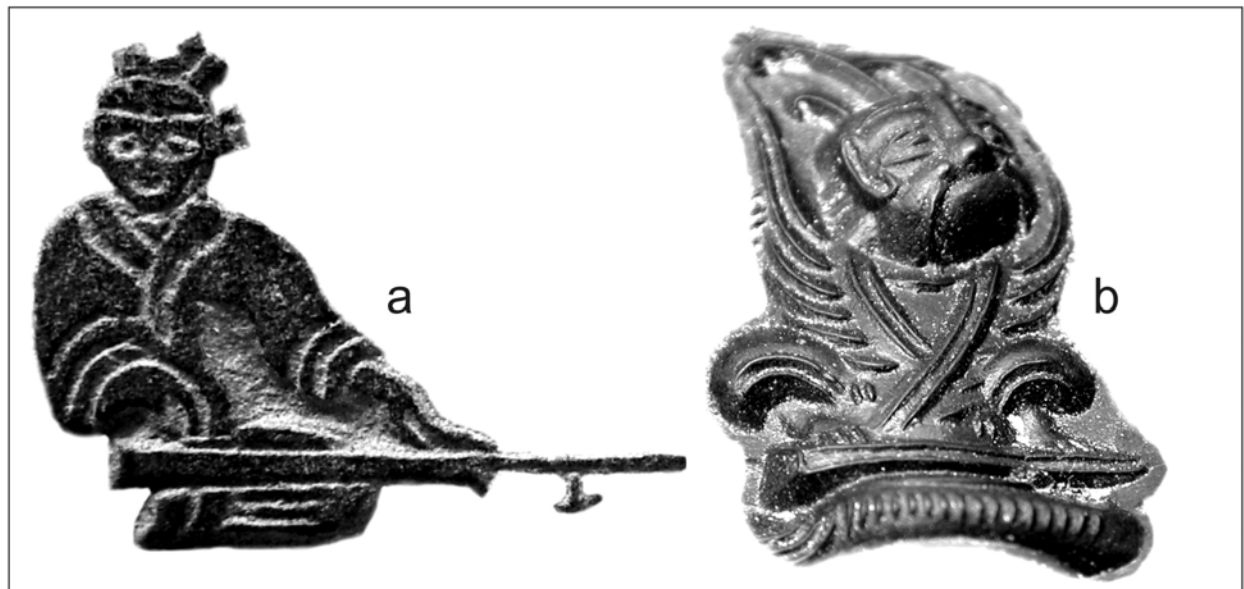


20. R: A wolf-like animal with gemstone inlay. Second to first century BCE. Height 17.5 cm. Solid silver, carnelian, white and clear agate, and turquoise. On the left is a key with similar design but made of bronze inlaid with gold.





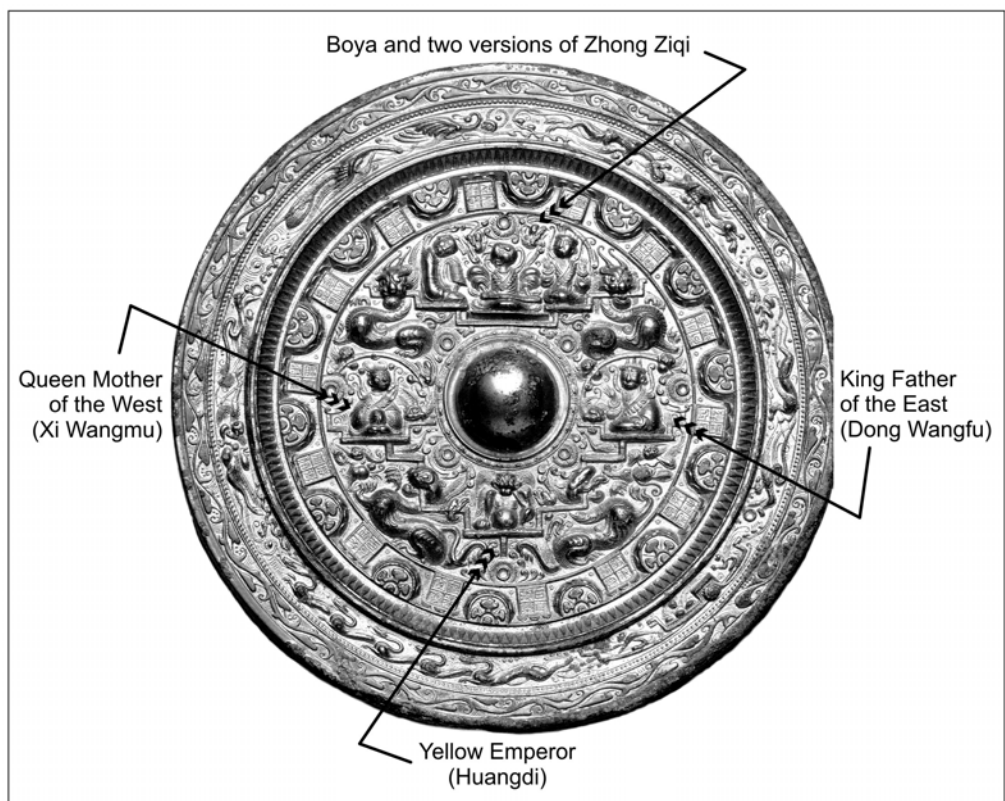
21. Q: Crouching bear. Height 8.3 cm. On the top of the animal is a flick-knife probably used to cut the silk strings. Second to first century BCE.



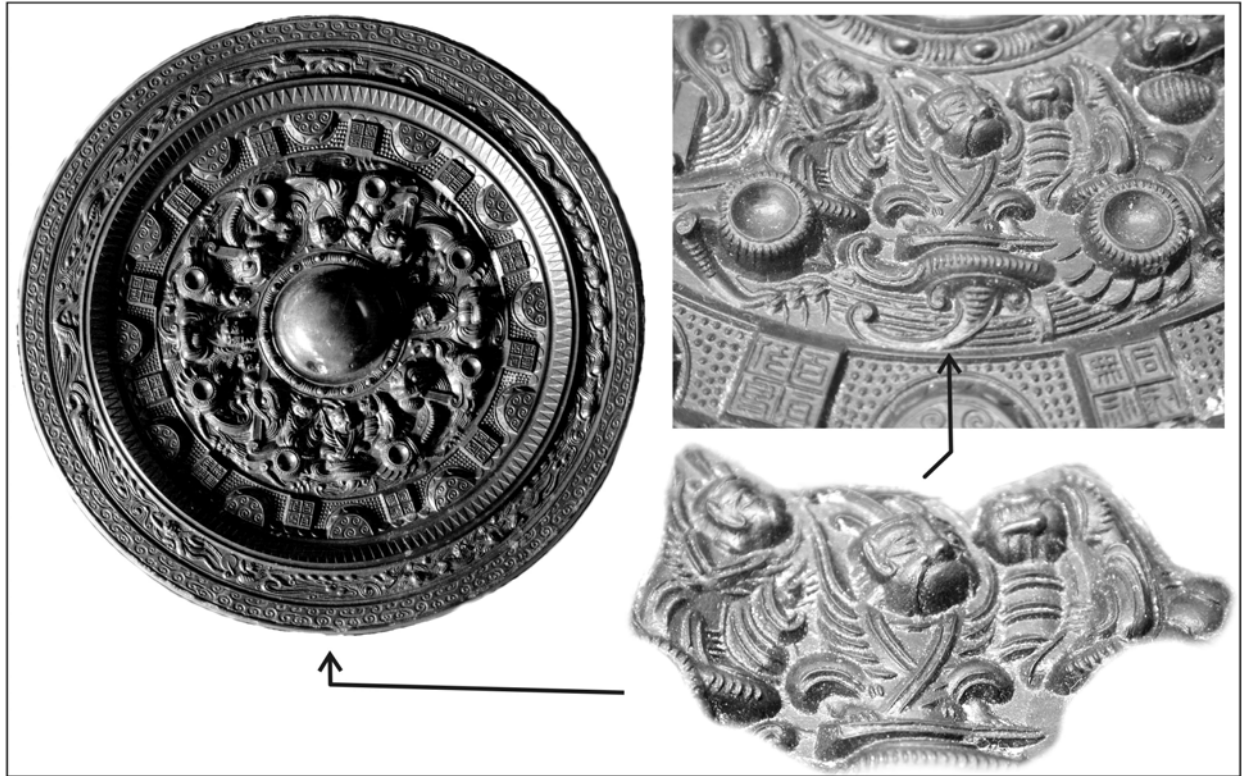
22. Boya playing the qin. (a) Detail of a bronze mirror. Western Han (202 BCE–9 CE). Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, no. F1935.13; (b) Detail of a bronze mirror. Eastern Han (25–221 CE). The Cleveland Museum of Art, no. 1995.333.



23. Bahrām Gūr and Āzādeh shown on a bowl of white pottery with polychrome decoration. Iran, 12th–13th century CE. Diameter 21.8 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 57.36.13. Rogers Fund and gift of the Schiff Foundation, 1957. Āzādeh appears twice, first sitting on the camel playing her harp, then thrown to the ground after having chastised Bahrām.



24. Bronze mirror. Eastern Han (first to third century CE). Diameter 12.8 cm. Honolulu, Academy of Fine Arts, inv. no. HAA 7502.1. Previously labeled M124.



25. Bronze mirror. Eastern Han. Diameter 15 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. no. 1995.333.



26. Boya playing the qin, with his companion Zhong Ziqi sitting on the right, apparently, applauding. A bronze mirror from the Western Han dynasty. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, inv. no. F1935.13.