

HSIUNG-NU CULTURAL HISTORY

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ART

Overview Examples of Hsiung-nu art come almost exclusively from archaeological excavations of Hsiung-nu burials. As a result, our knowledge of Hsiung-nu art is restricted to works produced for the Hsiung-nu elite and made from materials (metals) that can survive for centuries buried in the earth.

Objects and Stylistic Features

The vast majority of Hsiung-nu art has survived in the form of metal belt plaques, or metal appliqué ornaments; jewelry with artistic motifs has survived in more limited quantities. Hsiung-nu art shows many links with the art of other steppe peoples, and shows little variation over time, but a much greater variation between locations. Although Hsiung-nu art is quite distinctive from the art of neighboring cultures in northeast China and south-central Inner Mongolia, it appears to have originated in the Pazyryk cultural sphere of the Altai Mountains and also shows many similarities with Scythian art.

The similarities with Scythian art can be seen in both the depiction of humans and animals, but also in the iconography. Hsiung-nu art includes all the elements of the “Scythian triad” – the deer, the tiger and the head of a bird of prey – as well as some depictions of humans. Nonetheless, Hsiung-nu does have its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from Scythian works. For example, later Scythian art frequently depicts winged, horned horses but images of such horses are never found in Hsiung-nu art. Animal predation is a common image in Scythian art, but the uniquely Hsiung-nu version of this theme is that of a tiger carrying dead prey. The heads of birds of prey are frequently used images in both Scythian and Hsiung-nu art, but the Hsiung-nu bird heads have more moderately sized beaks and eyes, and have ears.

The significance of the imagery in Hsiung-nu art is uncertain, but there appear to be three distinct sets of iconography: mythical-religious, socio-political, and mythical-historical, although this last category is less certain. In this interpretation of Hsiung-nu iconography animal predation scenes that represent the triumph of life over death make up the mythical-religious category. Depictions of same-animal combat make up the socio-political category, representing struggles for power. The final category, mythical-historical consists of images of human beings, however the interpretation of these scenes combat and wrestling remains highly speculative.

Readings

Chernykh, Evgenij N. “Chapter 23 – The ‘Huns’ in the East”, *Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*. Brighton, MA, 2017; pp. 344-366.

Psarras, Sophia-Karin. “Xiongnu Culture: Identification and Dating”, *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1995), pp. 102-136.

_____. “Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (I)”, *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003), pp. 55-236.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in the interpretation of Hsiung-nu art?
2. What sources could help in deciphering the imagery of Hsiung-nu art?

RELIGION

Overview Like almost all aspects of Hsiung-nu life and culture, information on their religious beliefs and practices must be gleaned from the limited references in historical sources and from archaeological excavations. Although the information available in these written sources tends to be brief, it is possible to gain some idea of the Hsiung-nu's religious beliefs and practices from them. Hsiung-nu artwork recovered from archaeological excavations frequently uses mythological motifs and symbolism whose meaning is unknown.

Written Sources

Information on the Hsiung-nu's religion is found primarily in two sources: *The Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (pinyin Sima Qian) and finished c. 94 BCE, and *The Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) written by a court official, Ban Gu, and finished in 111 CE. From these works it is clear that the Hsiung-nu religion was shamanistic, polytheistic and included a god of war. In addition, there was some form of ancestor worship or veneration, and the sun, moon, heavens and earth were all considered divine. Both animal and human sacrifice were practiced. An agreement between the Hsiung-nu and the Han was sealed by the sacrifice of a horse whose blood was mixed with wine and then drunk by both parties from a cup fashioned from the skull of Yüeh-chih. Human sacrifices were made to the god of war.

Although not confirmed by archaeological evidence, there are references in the *Hanshu* to Hsiung-nu religious statues in human form. Taken by the Han as booty in a successful war against the Hsiung-nu, these statues apparently depicted a foreign god since the image was unfamiliar to the Chinese chroniclers. The lack of such statuary at known Hsiung-nu sites has led to speculation that the sculptures were of either Indian or Iranian origin.

In addition to the mention of Hsiung-nu religious statues in the *Hanshu*, there is also mention of a temple in China dedicated to the *ching lu shen* (pinyin *jinglu shén* 徑路神), or *ching lu* spirit. However, the exact nature of the *ching lu* temple and why this foreign temple was located in China is unclear from the text. Further complicating the issue is the fact that in the only section of the *Hanshu* that uses the term *ching lu* in conjunction with the Hsiung-nu, it is clear that the *ching lu* is a type of knife. Whether *ching lu* was the name of a Hsiung-nu divinity, or the ritual use of a *ching lu* knife made it sacred, or the knife itself was the symbol of a god (similar to the use of a sword to represent a Scythian god) is still unknown.

Art & Archaeology

Hsiung-nu art provides some clues to their religious beliefs since it frequently employs mythological motifs, many of them similar to those of other steppe cultures, the Scythians in particular. While much of the symbolism of these images remains a mystery, comparison with the imagery of Ossetian myths and legends which is believed to have preserved many Scythian traditions, allows a partial interpretation of the Hsiung-nu imagery.

Archaeological excavations of Hsiung-nu burial sites have also provided some evidence of Hsiung-nu religious beliefs, but like their art, these finds are open to interpretation. The tombs of Hsiung-nu rulers contained various grave goods, and the remains of sacrificed sheep, horses, cattle and even Chinese women. These would all appear to indicate that the Hsiung-nu believed in an afterlife and that these offerings would accompany the deceased ruler into that afterlife. While the practice of placing goods and sacrifices in rulers' tombs was common among other steppe peoples, unlike the Scythians the Hsiung-nu did not sacrifice and bury large numbers of horses with their rulers.

Readings

Chernykh, Evgenij N. "Chapter 23 – The 'Huns' in the East", *Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*. Brighton, MA, 2017; pp. 344-366.

Kao Ch'ü-Hsün. "The Ching Lu Shen Shrines of Han Sword Worship in Hsiung Nu Religion", *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1960), pp. 221-232.

Psarras, Sophia-Karin. "Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (I)", *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003), pp. 55-236.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in attempting to reconstruct the Hsiung-nu's spiritual beliefs?
2. What are the main sources of information for reconstructing Hsiung-nu religious beliefs and what are the limitations of each of these sources?