

Tracing the exotica: Sasanian glassware in Inner Mongolia

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From 2010 to 2014, a group of burials dated to the late fifth and early sixth centuries were excavated at Yihe-Nur, Inner Mongolia. This excavation yielded a number of exotic objects, including a sapphire blue glass bowl from Tomb 1 and a gilded necklet inlaid with pieces of glass from Tomb 3. Our compositional analysis using a non-invasive XRF analyzer shows that these glass objects are Sasanian plant-ash glass. This new discovery, together with the findings of the Sasanian plant-ash glassware from Datong (China) and Gyeongju (South Korea) provided crucial evidence to map out the spread of Sasanian glass along the Silk Road during the early medieval period.

In 2010, five burials dating to the Northern Wei period (386-534 CE) were discovered at Yihe-Nur, Zhengxiangbai Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia.¹ Despite tomb robberies, the archaeological team managed to retrieve some magnificent burial goods, including a sapphire blue glass bowl and a gilded necklet inlaid with glass shards (fig.1) among other luxury items. In January 2017, we collaborated with the Xilingol Museum to conduct a compositional analysis of the excavated glass products

using the non-invasive Thermal Scientific Niton XL3t GOLDD+XRF Analyzer. The three samples we analyzed were the sapphire blue glass bowl from M1 and two light blue glass shards on the necklet from M3. The test showed that the proportion of potassium oxide (K₂O) ranges from 2.39-2.88% in the blue-glass bowl, and is about 2% in the light blue glass shards of the gilded necklet. According to the study by Robert H. Brill at the Corning Glass Museum, ancient glass that contains potassium oxide between 2% and 4% belongs to Sasanian plant-ash glass.² The three samples we tested all fall into this category.

Sasanian plant-ash glassware was also found in Pingcheng, the Northern Wei capital and modern-day city of Datong, Shanxi Province. The blue glass bottle with a bulbous cap (fig.2), excavated from Qilicun M20 Tomb, contains a proportion of 3.26% potassium oxide, suggesting it is Sasanian plant-ash glass.³ In addition to archaeological findings from China, the Korean Peninsula unearthed Sasanian plant-ash glass as well. The glass bowl and ewer (fig.3) recovered from the fifth century Hwangnam Daechong Mausoleum located in the city of Gyeongju (Gyeongsangbuk-do,

South Korea) have long been identified as either Roman glassware or local production due to stylistic features. But the recent compositional analysis by Korean scholars revealed that both the glass bowl and the ewer are Sasanian plant-ash glass, since they contain 3.9% K₂O.⁴

The discoveries of Sasanian plant-ash glass in Northern China and Korea is likely related to commercial and diplomatic exchanges during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Wei Shu, the dynastic history of the Northern Wei, mentions that merchants from Yuezhi brought glassware and the technique of making glass to Pingcheng. In the middle of the 5th century, the Goguryeo kingdom sent envoys to the Northern Wei court for the first time followed by more frequent tributary missions. It is possible that Sasanian glassware discovered in China and Korea was brought by Central Asian merchants to the Northern Wei court at Pingcheng and then transmitted to Inner Mongolia and the Korean peninsula.

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Fig.1: Glass bowl from the M1 Tomb (e), gilded necklet (f) and its inlaid glass sherds (a, b, c, d) from the M3 Tomb, Yihe-Nur Cemetery, Zhengxiangbai Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia, China. Fig.2: Glass bottle and its bulbous cap, Qilicun M20 Tomb, Datong, Shanxi, China. Fig.3: Glass ewer and glass bowl, Hwangnam Daechong Mausoleum, Gyeongju, Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea.

Notes

- 1 Chen Yongzhi et al. 2016. 'The Results of the Excavation of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery in Zhengxiangbai Banner (2012-2014)', *The Silk Road* 14:42-57.
- 2 Brill, R.H. 2005. 'Chemical Analyses of Some Sasanian Glass from Iraq', in Whitehouse, D. (ed.) *Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Glass in The Corning Museum of Glass*, Appendix 2, pp.65-96.
- 3 An Jiayao & Liu Junxi. 2015. 'Northern Wei Glassware in the Datong Region 大同地区的北魏玻璃器', in Yungang Research Institute (ed.) *Pingcheng Silu 平城丝路*. Qingdao: Qingdao chubanshe, pp.352-353.
- 4 Min Jeong Koh et al. 2012. 'Comparison in Characteristics of Chemical Composition of Glass Vessels Excavated from Neungsalli Temple in Buyeo, Korea, from Baekje Period', *Bulletin Korean Chemical Society* 33(12):4157, Table 2.

Making the sacred: relics and reliquaries in medieval China

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Buddhist relics (*sāriṃ*) are believed to be the physical remains of Buddha's body after his death [*Parinirvāṇa*] and cremation. Reliquaries, containers of relics, to a certain extent signify the existence of relics and act as the physical embodiment of relics that are hidden inside. The practice of venerating Buddhist relics has been commonly observed across Asia in history. This essay focuses on Buddhist reliquaries and practices of relic veneration in medieval China. Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach that combines art history, Buddhism, and history, my research hopes to shed more light on how reliquaries and relic veneration rituals were tied to the viewers, the political power, and the city space in medieval China.

The practice of venerating Buddhist relics first appeared in India, and later spread to Central Asia, and then to China. Our current understanding of the relic veneration ritual, by and large, depends on



Fig. 1: Stone reliquary, Lantian County, Shaanxi Province. After Taipei Lishi bowuguan bianji Weiguanhui. 2010. *Shengshi huangchao milbao: Famen di gong yu dating wenwu tezhan 盛世皇朝秘寶：法門寺地宮與大唐文物特展*. Taipei: Taipei lishi bowuguan, p.198.

the archaeological discovery of reliquaries. Relic containers found in India, mainly made of stone or crystal, usually consist of a round bowl and a cover with a knot. Their decoration is relatively simple, featuring several circles

of rings around the body. Reliquaries from the Gandharan region are larger in number and more diversified in shape compared to the Indian reliquaries. One type of Gandharan reliquary that had a cylindrical body decorated with rings around the body later entered into China proper. But it did not take long before this style was replaced by the 'square-body and mansard roof-cover' form, which first appeared during the fifth century and was regarded as indigenous Chinese style. When Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty (r.581-604) distributed relics nationwide in the years 601 to 604, he also preferred the 'square-body and mansard roof-cover' as the standard form of reliquary. This form persisted into the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) and was visible in the visual representation of relic distribution. The decoration of the reliquaries developed into a more complex scheme, such as the stone reliquary uncovered in Lantian County, Shaanxi Province (fig.1). While the form of the Lantian reliquary follows the Chinese tradition, its decoration speaks about connections with early Indian legends and Gandharan Buddhist art. Details of the images carved on four sides represent scenes not just from the Buddhist canon, but also inspired by Buddhist encyclopedia.

The relic veneration ritual reveals the interaction between Central Asia and China as well. In the year 403, Monk Faxian observed a ritual ceremony of displaying relics when he visited the city of Hidda (醯羅城),

in modern-day Afghanistan. He recorded that the king held a ceremony involving the display of Buddhist relics in a glass case, and the stupa that hosted the reliquary was opened regularly. The practice of exhibiting the relics on a regular base was also observable in Tang China, where relics were taken out from monasteries to be displayed every 30 years. On the Lantern Festival of 704, relics hosted at the Famen Temple were taken from the pagoda's underground palace to Tang's East Capital Luoyang. The Famen relics were juxtaposed with the Nine Tripods (*jiuding* 九鼎, the symbol of heavenly mandate) in the Bright Hall (*mingtang* 明堂, the symbolic supreme shrine). In this way, the Buddhist relics and reliquaries were staged and shown as a statement of the political power, which was comparable to the Nine Tripods. The ceremony of displaying relics at Tang's Western capital Chang'an engaged more with the general public. We can conclude that displaying the Buddhist relics was of paramount significance since it invoked religious enthusiasm among worshippers, built a close connection linking the sacred relics and the urban space, and created a visual tie between the religious power and the political supremacy.

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