

A Study of Two Jade Cups of International Contention

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Abstract

The eastern area of Central Asia in what is now the Xinjiang region has a mountain range that spans its southern rim known as the Kunlun Mountains. These mountains are a rich source of fine nephrite jade. Throughout history, the area of Hetian in the northern foothills of the Kunlun Mountains (known in the Qing dynasty and before as Yutian) has been an important source of much high-quality jade. As it turns out, there emerged in the area an indigenous art of jade carving probably since the fifth century CE. However, perhaps due to the fact that the tradition of jade carving was local and did not experience continuous development, it instead relied on the needs of neighboring and stronger cultures. As a result, the peoples there produced jades that appealed to and could be sold to them instead. Apparently no records of how these locals in Central Asia viewed their jade products have survived for over a thousand years.

The white jade fluted cup from Hejiacun and the cup with a hornless-dragon handle bearing an inscription indicating its owner as Ulugh Beg are two internationally renowned jade vessels. Several scholars have already proposed in their studies where these works were made. In 2012, during my trip to Paris and London, I had a chance to personally examine these and other related works. Combined with a study of historical texts and stylistic analysis, my initial conjecture is that the two were probably made in the seventh century and fourteenth to early fifteenth century, respectively, representing fine works of Hetian jade craftsmanship.

Keywords: Central Asian jades, Hejiacun, Ulugh Beg

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