

Stags, Tigers and Ibexes in the Mountains: The Origins and Transmission of Steppe Patterns Seen on Chariots Found at Majiayuan in Zhangjiachuan, Gansu

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Abstract

Stags, tigers, and ibexes are lively motifs in crafts that trace their origins back to the Iron Age in the Altaic region of Central Asia. They exhibit a close relationship between people and the environment, their means of existence, and as a form of cultural expression, representing facets of life that continue down to the present day. These three motifs also were an important form of animal decoration on the chariots excavated from Majiayuan in Zhangjiachuan at Tianshui, Gansu, which date to the late Warring States period. They point to the interaction of Xirong and steppe cultures, the background for which has profound implications. Therefore, this study builds on research done previously to explore and reexamine in detail the various theories about steppe elements found in remains from the Majiayuan site. Not only does the study confirm that Majiayuan inherited from the Pazyryk Culture in the Altaic region, it also makes a detailed comparison with “stag stone” monuments in Mongolia and objects excavated from the Ordos region. It is proposed that elements of Pazyryk culture came south to Majiayuan from the southern Altaic Mountains via Mongolia and Ordos. With a general comparison of the objects recovered from these regions, this study attempts to present the changes and stages in the transmission of elements from Pazyryk culture and how these features were used and reinterpreted by the nobility at Majiayuan.

Keywords: Steppe animal pattern, Majiayuan, Altai, East Eurasian cultural interaction, Iron Age

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)