

# Snake-Types on certain early Chou bronzes

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# SNAKE-TYPES ON CERTAIN EARLY CHOU BRONZES

BY ALFRED SALMONY

[With 3 plates]

Early Chinese art objects, and bronze vessels in particular, were known outside of their land of origin for several decades before any attempt was made to observe and analyze their ornaments. Eventually, however, some western students developed an interest in such details because of their quest for clues to symbolic meanings which could not be discovered through the few remaining and badly purged texts of Chinese antiquity. Suddenly, scholars became aware of numerous figures which cover many early bronzes in intricate density. The pioneering publications by Hentze, especially, made people conscious of the untapped sources of information available on ancient Chinese vessels and implements<sup>1</sup>. Since then, widely-differing suggestions for significance of motives have been piled up in more recent publications. It is not my intention to list nor to criticize them, but rather to suggest a still closer scrutiny leading to incontestable evidence as a basis for agreement. I believe that inquiries of exact character should be made before the observer passes on to the hallowed realm of principles, forces and gods.

The decipherer of ancient Chinese ornaments is faced with the danger that almost anything can be read into them if he approaches his task with preconceived ideas<sup>2</sup>. No animal and no limb should be named without irrefutable verification, preferably after study of a complex of monuments. In an earlier article, I have tried to demonstrate that the ritual arts of ancient China were produced according to rigid directions

1. C. HENTZE: *Mythes et Symbols Lunaires*, Antwerp 1932; *Objets Rituels, Croyance et Dieux de la Chine Antique et de l'Amérique*, Antwerp 1936; *Frühchinesische Bronzen und Kultdarstellungen*, 2 vol., Antwerp 1937; *Die Sakralbronzen und ihre Bedeutung in den Frühchinesischen Kulturen*, 2 vol., Antwerp 1941.

2. See: PHYLLIS ACKERMAN, *Ritual Bronzes of Ancient China*, New York 1945.

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of use, extending to small details in the composition of images<sup>3</sup>. Except in cases of secular use, this is particularly true for the periods whose arts appear most strongly symbol-bound, namely for Shang and Early Chou (according to the "orthodox" chronology from 1766 to 1122 and from 1122 to about 950 B.C., respectively). A gradual lessening of conventional fetters can be observed in China only after 950 B.C.

One of the most frequent images among early Chinese symbols is the snake. Aside from collecting pertinent text-references, F. Waterbury has made some fundamental statements concerning the appearance of this reptile in Chinese Art<sup>4</sup>. She noticed that "the snake is always represented as though seen from above". She also recognized the composite character of some serpent-figures. Since these differences occur in close proximity on one and the same monument, variations in the representation of these ornaments should not be considered as accidental and insignificant but as intentional and meaningful in accordance with a ritual order.

To prove this assumption, examine the head of a bronze vessel in the form of a hollow elephant which has a faithful miniature repetition of the same animal as a knob-handle of the cover (fig. 1). The object is owned by the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington and illustrated in its admirable catalogue<sup>5</sup>. Its Chou attribution is taken over for this study with "Early" as an amplification. By supplying me with detail photographs, the Freer Gallery gave me the opportunity to limit my commentary to the ear zone of the elephant. For this courtesy, I want to express my profound gratitude.

The forehead of the elephant has two confronted coiled snakes in high relief, easily identified as such by the thin pointed nose preserved on the left one, but obliterated by patina on the other (fig. 2). Again,

3. A. SALMONY, *A Problem in the Iconography of Three Early Bird Vessels*, *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, vol. I, New York 1946.

4. F. WATERBURY, *Early Chinese Symbols and Literature: Vestiges and Speculations*, New York 1942, p. 73.

5. *A Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue of Chinese Bronzes*, Washington 1946, plate 24.

only one eye on each head at the outer edge retains the original shape of short, raised cylinders with central dots. Both bodies are covered with a narrow herring-bone pattern, flanking the raised, median spines. Henceforth, this type will be called the "simple snake". Another pair of reptiles is placed behind the ears (fig. 3). They face each other and have undulating bodies with the same herring-bone pattern, while their curled tails are placed on the backs of the elephant's ears. Although both heads are damaged, the right one at least displays the original squarish, blunt mouth with incised spirals as upper lips, while the flat and irregularly oval eyes are surrounded by incised frames. Similar heads on serpent bodies were clearly understood as feline in character by F. Waterbury who named these composite animals, "tiger-headed snakes", a designation that should be retained<sup>6</sup>.

The composite serpent actually survives in Chinese mythology. It is mentioned in connection with the Late Chou "Yüeh" culture of the south-east under the name of "Chiao"<sup>7</sup>.

The two pairs of snakes just described are not the only ones near or on the ears of the Freer elephant bronze. In addition, the insides of their front edges are followed by small bands with oblique striation, strongly suggestive of half of the complete bodies (fig. 2). The bands end at the base of the ears in broadened, rounded forms filled by line-compositions that resemble the spirals, commonly separating snake-heads from their bodies<sup>8</sup>. These similarities identify the bands within the ears as headless snakes. The same abbreviations of reptiles were found on bird legs<sup>9</sup>. In this instance, the limited space may have required the reduction of the image which makes it at the same time impossible to ascertain if it stood for the simple or for the composite type.

Having observed the head of the pachyderm, and especially its ear

6. F. WATERBURY, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

7. W. EBERHARD, *Lokalkulturen im Alten China*, part 2: *Die Lokalkulturen des Südens und Ostens*, Peking 1942, p. 401.

8. WATERBURY, *op. cit.*, pl. 14, a Ku, upper band of the foot.

9. A. SALMONY, *Archives*, I.

zone, more closely than has been the custom, we come to the conclusion that this part of the full-round animal is most susceptible to serpent decor. Its simple version takes a frontal, and consequently most conspicuous, position with the tiger-headed variation a close second in importance. Only the reduced image inside of the ear gives the impression of being a mere accessory. I refrain from using these serpent types and their position for speculations on their various symbolic meanings because I consider speculations on this to be premature. Instead, I suggest glancing at other figures of the same kind to find out if use can be made of the lesson learned through the Freer bronze.

The only other full-round elephant figure, now in the Guimet Museum and formerly of the Camondo Collection<sup>10</sup>, has no snake decor. Once only does the elephant-head appear as a sculptural part of a bronze vessel, namely, above the outlet of a Kuang in the Kano Collection<sup>11</sup>. Its profile view, unfortunately the only one available, shows an undulating, simple snake, striated like the headless ones of the Freer bronze. It moves into the ear from behind, traversing its length so that the head of the snake reaches near the triangular tip.

All other early Chinese elephants are to be found among relief decorators. They occur on the foot stands of some Ku's without snake-decor addition<sup>12</sup>. Many Kuang vessels have them on the body or cover or on both. The one in the Toronto Museum must be disregarded because its corroded surface does not permit recognition of details<sup>13</sup>. In many respects, the most instructive example is the Kuang in the Sumitomo Collection<sup>14</sup>, where the pachyderm is placed near the upper edge of the body of the vessel and repeated, though less clearly, on the back of the cover<sup>15</sup>. An identical representation is found on the cover of the

10. S. UMEHARA, *Shina Kodo Seikwa*, Osaka 1933, part I, vol. I, pl. 36.

11. S. UMEHARA, *Selected Ancient Treasures Found at Anyang, Yin Sites*, Kyoto 1940, pl. XLIII.

12. WATERBURY, *op. cit.*, pl. 51. 13. WATERBURY, *op. cit.*, pl. 34.

14. K. HAMADA, *Sen-oku Sei-sho*, pl. 94, more easily accessible in C. Hentze, *Objets Rituels, Croyances et Dieux de la Chine Antique et de l'Amérique*, fig. 101.

15. HENTZE, *Objets*, pl. V-A.



FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



*Legends*

- FIG. 1 : Bronze, Early Chou. Height,  $6\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington. Photo : courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art.
- FIG. 2 : Detail of fig. 1. Photo : courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art.
- FIG. 3 : Detail of fig. 1. Photo : courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art.
- FIG. 4 : Brundage Kuang. Height,  $9\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection, Mr. Avery Brundage, Chicago. Photo : courtesy C.T. Loo & Co.

Kuang in the Meyer Collection<sup>16</sup>. The elephants on both of these Kuang's wear a strange head ornament consisting of a double spiral in the form of the numeral "3" lying on its back, previously observed by Hentze, and above it a sickle with its curved and pointed end repeated, indicating two overlapping, identical forms (a less distinct rendering of the two sickles on fig. 4). They are spiral-decorated on the Sumitomo Kuang and plain on the others. According to Hentze<sup>17</sup>, this type of elephant has "la tête ornée de cornes". He continues: "ces cornes, vues de profil et placées sur la tête d'un éléphant, ressemblent étrangement à des défenses de mammouth". This is actually his explanation, although "on s'étonnera peut-être de voir des défenses de mammouth placées sur la tête de l'animal, au lieu de les trouver dans leur position naturelle". In the light of the evidence produced by the Freer elephant, this rather forced reading can now be corrected: the two sickles represent, in every instance, headless serpent-bodies. The 3-shaped base indicates the original juncture of the visible body and the absent head. An instance where only this double-spiral combination remains with the elephant head can be observed on the lowest decor-band of an "I" in the Pillsbury Collection<sup>18</sup>.

Sickle-like serpents occur only on pachyderms, which stand on real legs, no matter how fantastically equipped otherwise. But this is not the only ornament which can perch on the head of such animals. There are other elephants whose composite transformation also includes the legs. The bronze, on which these reliefs are best preserved, is a Kuei in the British Museum, formerly Eumorfopoulos Collection<sup>19</sup>. A drawing of the detail under discussion is given by Hentze<sup>20</sup>. Here, the forehead wears two confronted spirals in relief without any additional pattern but conspicuously placed on plain, bevelled discs. Their position cor-

16. HENTZE, *Objets*, fig. 92. 17. *Objets*, p. 76. 18. WATERBURY, *op. cit.*, pl. 11.

19. W. P. YETTS, *The George Eumorfopoulos Collection: Catalogue of the Chinese and Korean Bronzes, Sculpture, Jades, Jewelry and Miscellaneous Objects*, vol. I, pl. XIII, London 1929.

20. *Objets*, fig. 143.

responds exactly to that of the sickles. Less distinctive cases of the same figuration are to be seen on a Kuei formerly in the Parish Watson Collection<sup>21</sup> and another in the Cutting Collection<sup>22</sup>. To complete this series, I mention the central section of a Tsun in the Kano Collection<sup>23</sup>.

These spirals on discs have not escaped Hentze's attention who states: "au-dessus de la tête on aperçoit les deux volutes à enroulements opposés". Once again, this author refers them to mammoth tusks, with ibex horns as a second possibility<sup>24</sup>. Again, the interpretation should be: abbreviated snakes.

The most complex serpent decor is worn by the elephant on the upper section of the Kuang in the Brundage Collection (fig. 4). Being of the leg-supported type, the elephant has the sickle-shaped snake bodies above its head. Instead of the 3-shaped base, these rest on the confronted spirals, now without disc frames. The solution should be that, notwithstanding the extreme economy of motif-rendering, the artist succeeded in attaching four snakes to this elephant head, a record surpassed only by the Freer elephant.

By limiting the scope of this investigation to a small section of the animal, and to the variations of a single symbol, I have purposely neglected other ornaments associated with the elephant. The snake-companions of its head should be of capital importance despite the fact that they are frequently set down in a cursory fashion, sometimes going to extremes in simplification. Since all inscriptions on bronzes discussed or illustrated here (fig. 4) are datable as Early Chou by the length of their text, it can be assumed that the simplifying trend was stronger at Early Chou than at Shang time, notwithstanding the greater accumulation of images.

21. S. UMEHARA, *Shina Kodo Seikwa*, Osaka 1933, part I, vol. II, pl. 112.

22. A. PRIEST, *Chinese Bronzes*, Exhibition Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1938, No. 114.

23. *Hakuzuru Kikkishu*, Collection of Bronzes in the Hakkaku Fine Art Museum, Sumiyoshi 1934, pl. 4.

24. *Objets*, p. 82.