Decoding Animal Bronzes: Onagers and Oxen

A Closer Look at the Mayer Collection

**Bronze Plaque with Onager or Wild Ass**

Northern China, 8th–5th centuries BCE, H. 4.95 cm
Mayer Collection, PM object 41-37-22

On this openwork garment plaque, the forequarters of two pairs of onagers are enclosed in a rectangular frame, with heads turned back, ears perforated, and slight depressions to mark the eyes, nostrils, and mouth. The reverse of the plaque is slightly concave and without attachment devices. Examination by XRF shows this plaque is made of leaded bronze.

Several similar objects were excavated at Ganzibao cemetery in Huailai county, Hebei province, China. Unfortunately, the archaeological context of these objects was disturbed by looting. However, we still know that objects of this type date to the 8th through 5th centuries BCE. Four other plaques embellished with the same animal are included in the Mayer Collection, one of them divided in half by a vertical line in the middle.

**Copper Belt Buckle with Ox**

Northern China, 3rd century BCE–1st century CE, H. 4.1 cm
Mayer Collection, PM object 41-37-8

This belt buckle depicts a standing ox within a rope-patterned frame, showing all four legs of the beast, with its head towards the viewer and tail curving between its legs. On the reverse are two vertical attachment loops. XRF reveals that this object is unalloyed copper with a gilt front side.

Belt buckles of this kind usually appear in pairs to be fastened together. This example is the left member of such a pair. The right counterpart would normally have had a bulging curved ring used to fasten them together. Similar objects have been excavated in Northern China, dated to the 3rd century BCE to 1st century CE.
Decoding Animal Bronzes: Horses and Birds

A Closer Look at the Mayer Collection

**Bronze spoon with Horse and Bird**

Northern China, 13th–11th centuries BCE, L. 10.5 cm
Mayer Collection, PM object 41-37-230

- The spoon handle terminates in a horse’s head (see top and right images) and pendants are attached to several loops, perhaps to make a jingling sound with the moving of the spoon. If the spoon is turned on its side, a bird sits on the end of the handle (see circle inset above). XRF analysis shows this object is made of leaded bronze.

- Three similar objects were excavated in the Lüliang and Linfen area of Southern Shanxi, China. One of them was found at the waist of a human burial dated around the 13th to 11th centuries BCE.
Decoding Animal Bronzes: Horses

A Closer Look at the Mayer Collection

**Bronze Plaque with Two Horses**

Northern China, 3rd–5th centuries CE, H. 2.6 cm
Mayer Collection, PM object 41-37-38

- This openwork garment plaque bears the highly distinctive motif of a small horse on the back of a larger horse, each with a fan-shaped forelock. XRF analysis confirms this object is leaded bronze.

- Similar objects can be found in the Arthur M. Sackler Collection and have been unearthed in Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Hebei, and Qinghai. On the basis of the archeological evidence, it is likely that these objects belonged to the Xianbei people, and should be dated between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE.

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**Bronze Plaque with Two Horses**

Southern Siberia, 2nd–1st centuries BCE, H. 4.4 cm
Mayer Collection, PM object 41-37-3

- The pattern on the rectangular openwork plaque is a pair of grazing or confronting horses with the frame decorated by sunken rectangular cells. The back of the plaque is slightly concave.

- XRF examination shows this object is leaded bronze with traces of arsenic. A similar example was found in southern Siberia and is dated between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE.
Decoding Animal Bronzes: Stags

A Closer Look at the Mayer Collection

Bronze and Gold Plaques with Stags

- Bronze ornaments for clothing or horse tack, in the form of stags. Northern China, 8th–5th centuries BCE, Mayer Collection. Center: Gold plaque with similar stag form, with birds’ heads among its antlers from the Maikop Treasure. Kuban, Russia, 5th century BCE.

- Clockwise from top right: PM objects 41-37-57 (H. 3.3 cm), 41-37-71 (H. 3.8 cm), 41-37-69 (H. 2.6 cm), 41-37-70 (H. 2.1 cm), 41-37-72 (H. 3.7 cm), and 41-37-33 (L. 4.4 cm). Center: PM object 30-33-1.1 (H. 3 cm).