

## A NEW LOOK AT 'WINE CARRIERS' AMONG TANG DYNASTY FIGURINES

*Paper read by Jan Chapman on 13 October 1987*

Among the huge variety of small earthenware figures that were produced in China as grave goods (*mingqi*), especially during the Tang dynasty, the first group I wish to discuss is composed of figures which usually stand between 26 and 40 cm high and depict a figure, either male or female, clasping what looks like an animal or bird in their arms. Of the seventeen figures of this type so far traced, fourteen carry what appears to be either a duck or a goose, two a lion cub, and one a parrot. The female figures are always shown sitting on a low stool with one leg drawn up, but when the figure is male, he is occasionally depicted kneeling on one knee. In nearly every case the head and neck of the figure is unglazed, whilst the remainder of the body is glazed with the usual three colours from the *sancai* series of glazes, that is, green, chestnut brown and cream. In just one example, however, the colour green is replaced by blue.<sup>1</sup>

In every instance the figure portrayed is clearly that of a foreigner. The women are what can be described as 'full-faced' and usually have their hair parted in the centre and drawn back from the brow into a tight roll at the back of the neck (Plates 1, 2 and 3). In one figure the woman in question has, in addition to the roll, two knotted peaks of hair on the crown of her head.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the older men sport beards and moustaches, the younger ones are frequently shown as having short curly hair kept tidy with a narrow band knotted at the crown (Plate 4). Where the hair is not shown, the merchants wear foreign-style felt hats (Plates 5 and 6).

It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to discuss the nationality of these figures, beyond describing them as Central or West Asian. Instead it will concentrate entirely on the object being clasped in these foreigners' arms.

Some authorities have described the seventeen figures in this primary group, which I will call Group A, as wine sellers, and the reason for this identification is not hard to find if we turn to a second smaller group of figures which I shall refer to as Group B. This second group of foreign male figures<sup>3</sup> can be represented by a piece from the Seattle Art Museum, which portrays a powerful-looking foreigner of Central Asian origin with a very hooked nose, heavy eyebrows and black beard (Plate 7). In a



1 Central Asian woman carrying a duck-shaped wine container. *Rietberg Museum, Zürich.*



2 Central Asian woman carrying a duck-shaped wine container. *The Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries.*

semi-kneeling position he balances a full leather bag against his stomach and raised right knee. With his right hand he grasps the narrow neck of the bag with a twist at ear level, whilst with his left he supports the bulging base of the skin which would, of course, have been both heavy and difficult to manoeuvre. Bags such as this, fashioned out of animal skins, have been used to hold water or wine in tropical countries since time immemorial and are still used in India today. It is the similarity in general appearance of this group to the first which I believe proves that figures in the latter group are holding wine containers.

There need be no doubt that the liquid contained in the leather bag being cradled by the bearded foreign merchant depicted in the Seattle tomb figure is wine. Wine from outside China was certainly imported prior to the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907), and in the seventh and eighth centuries Persian wine in particular was available in the numerous taverns of Changan, which was the capital city for the greater part of Tang-dynasty China. Even in the eighth century, when grapes were already being cultivated in China for wine-making, wine made from foreign grapes was still regarded as a fine, rare drink with glamorous associations. Schafer, in *Vermilion Bird*, writes that 'grape wine was an expensive addition to an important celebration, like champagne for our festivals.'<sup>4</sup>



3 Central Asian woman carrying a wine container shaped like a lion cub. *Sotheby's, London*, 19 June 1984, lot 155.



4 West Asian youth carrying a duck-shaped wine container. *Sotheby's, New York*, 12 June 1984, lot 182.

Having established that the Seattle figure is carrying a leather bag containing wine, the question now is whether the foreigners in Group A are, as some would suggest, carrying real birds and animals in their arms or whether they are carrying wine containers shaped like animals and birds.

Two factors are responsible for the belief in some quarters that the animals and birds depicted in the tomb figures in Group A represent real ones. The first is that, in the case of the figures carrying a fowl that is sometimes described as a duck, but more often as a goose, the bird is so realistically represented that even its fragile-looking legs are clearly shown (Plate 6). The second factor is that the 'funnel' down the neck of the bird is a feature to be expected when geese are being force-fed with grain to fatten them. None the less, when one studies the figures in Group A as a whole, and not just those showing ducks or geese, it is clearly nonsense to accept that the foreigners portrayed are force-feeding either lion cubs (Plates 3 and 4) or parrots.

I have shown, I hope, that the foreign merchants are not carrying real birds and animals in their arms, and the question now arises as to why a fashion arose for producing wine containers in the shape of birds and animals. I believe that the answer to this problem is that, because the huge leather bags for wine were not only extremely heavy but also exceptionally unwieldy, it was found that a practical



5 Central Asian merchant carrying a duck-shaped wine container. *Rietberg Museum, Zürich.*



6 Central Asian merchant carrying a duck-shaped wine container. *Courtesy Messrs Eskenazi Ltd.*



7 Central Asian merchant carrying a leather wineskin. *Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection.*

alternative was to make smaller wine containers of earthenware. In so doing the potter first imitated the outline of the familiar leather wine bags of the type carried by the male figures of Group B (Plate 7), and then adopted the idea of 'decorating' the surface of the earthenware containers by modelling the exterior details of ducks, geese, lions, parrots, fish, and possibly other beasts, whose contours lent themselves easily to this purpose.<sup>5</sup>

It was, however, the funnel-shaped objects found in the narrow necks of some of the leather bags, and all of the earthenware wine containers, which first aroused my interest in the wine sellers among the Tang tomb figurines. These objects in particular will dominate the remainder of this paper.

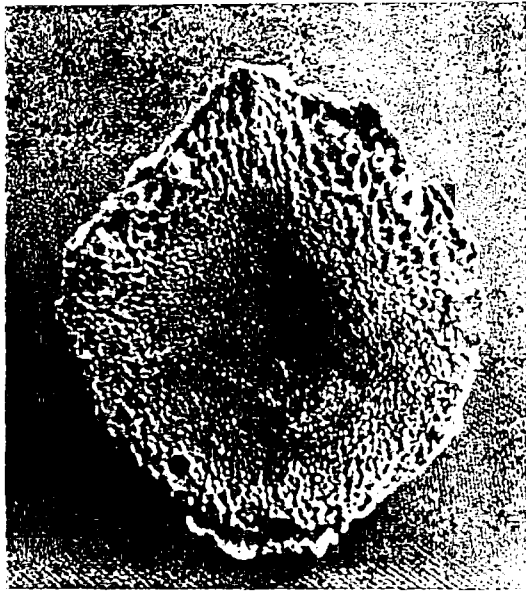
Leafing idly through the catalogue of the Rietberg Collection in Zürich some years ago, I came across two illustrations of foreign merchants described by Helmut Brinker as male and female wine merchants.<sup>6</sup> My eyes fastened immediately on the object sticking up from the beaks of the two ducks they carry – was it a funnel, was it a spout, or was it something else entirely? (Plates 1, 3 and 6)

From my first sight of the two Rietberg funnels I was convinced that I was looking at two earthenware depictions of the broad end of a rhinoceros horn. For this reason it will, I believe, be helpful to re-examine our knowledge of the rhinoceros horn and its use in Tang-dynasty China.

There are three species of rhinoceros that are known once to have roamed wild in China: the Indian, the Javan and the Sumatran. The Indian and Javan species both carry one horn and are very similar in appearance, although the Indian is larger in size. The Sumatran rhinoceros, which is entirely different in appearance and is smaller than even its Javan cousin, has two horns. These three species are described as Asian rhinoceros as opposed to the two species of African rhinoceros which, to the best of our knowledge, have never been found on the Asian mainland. It is with the horns of the three Asian species that we are concerned in this paper.

It seems strange to relate that zoologists working at the present time on the morphology of the rhinoceros have rarely looked at the horn itself, so it is not surprising to find that there exists only one paper written by a zoologist which attempts to describe how the shape of the horn varies in the different species.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, until very recently, art historians have believed not only that it is impossible to identify the species from which a particular horn once originated, but also that there is no way of identifying a horn by its shape. Neither of these assumptions is correct. In this paper I hope to show that the horns of the three Asian species do reveal characteristic differences; one particularly noticeable difference is the shape of the broad end of the horn – the part that was once attached to the animal's snout.

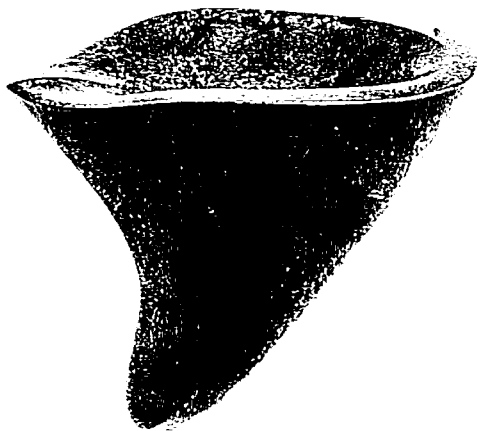
Unlike the horns of the buffalo, which are hollow for most of their length, the horns of all rhinoceros are solid except for a hollow aperture at the broad end which once fitted over a protuberance on the animal's skull. No two horns are alike, for they vary widely according to the age, sex, size and condition of the animal from which they came. Nevertheless, as a general rule it can be said that the broad ends of the horns of the Sumatran rhinoceros usually exhibit one pointed and one round side (pointed ovoid) (Plate 8); those of the Javan rhinoceros are, generally speaking, ovoid (without the distinctive point of the Sumatran species) (Plate 9); whilst those



8 Posterior horn of the Sumatran Rhinoceros *D. sumatrensis*. Bogor Zoological Museum.



9 Horn of the Javan Rhinoceros *R. sondaicus*. Bogor Zoological Museum.



10 Rhinoceros-horn cup with shaped mouth and polished surface. Eighth century. Height 8.5 cm. Courtesy of the Office of the Shōsōin Treasure House.

of the Indian species tend to be roughly oval to round. I should add here that the shape of all three rhinoceros species differs very distinctly from that of a typical water buffalo horn. The rhinoceros horn is always circular in section, whereas the horn of the water buffalo is invariably a flattened oval shape both in the stem section and at the base end.

At the present time there exists only one example of rhinoceros horn that confidently can be dated to the early part of the Tang dynasty (Plate 10). This well-known piece was once the property of the Emperor Shomu of Japan and, when he died in AD 756, this horn, together with the many other valuable Chinese objects he had treasured during his lifetime, was placed in the Imperial Repository (Shōsōin) at Nara. This horn, described by Soame Jenyns as having a 'leaf-shaped mouth',<sup>8</sup> is the horn of a Sumatran rhinoceros. Once having seen the base end of the Shōsōin horn with its typical Sumatran pointed ovoid shape, there can be little doubt that several of the so-called funnels sticking up from the wine containers carried by the figures in Group A are earthenware representations of Asian rhinoceros horns.

Used with the wine containers, the rhinoceros horn would have had two functions – firstly as a plug or stopper and secondly as a wine cup. Whether these plugs, used by foreign merchants to stop the wine spilling from their containers, were made from real horn, or whether they used cheap earthenware replicas shaped like rhinoceros horn, is impossible to answer at the present time, for there have been no rhinoceros horns discovered in any Tang tomb. Although rhinoceros horn was more plentiful in the Tang dynasty than at any time since,<sup>9</sup> it was still exceedingly expensive. For this reason I would suggest that the animal- and bird-shaped earthenware wine containers carried by foreign merchants were plugged with earthenware stoppers. These earthenware replicas would also have been used as convenient wine cups or measures.

It may be asked why rhinoceros horns were ever used as drinking cups rather than the much more easily available horns of the water buffalo. Literary references linking rhinoceros horns with wine go back to the Zhou dynasty in the sixth century BC, and indeed to the *Book of Songs* about a century earlier. One of the songs, for instance, relates how it was customary for the people of Pin (which lay in the region of modern Shaanxi province) to visit the palace of their prince in the tenth month with offerings of wine, and to 'raise the rhinoceros horn cup with wishes for long life'.<sup>10</sup> In the same anthology there is a song about a woman yearning for her husband. She takes a cup of wine poured from a rhinoceros horn in the hope that her grief will not last for ever. These and other instances seem to infer that the rhinoceros horn was used on special occasions, rather as we would use a crystal goblet in preference to an earthenware mug for drinking good wine. In the Chinese context the association of the rare and expensive rhinoceros horn drinking cup would naturally combine with the drinking of expensive grape wine brought into the country by foreign merchants from the wine-producing areas of Central and Western Asia.<sup>11</sup>

Great attention should be paid to the representations of rhinoceros horn plugs or cups that are found in all the examples of foreign wine sellers in Group A, in particular, to the modelling of the rhinoceros horn carried by the merchant in the Eskenazi figure (Plate 6). When my attention was first drawn to the two Rietberg figures, I realized that there appeared to be decoration on the exterior surface of the horns they were carrying but, unfortunately, the glazing of these pieces made the



11 Rhinoceros horn cup on a flat base.  
Possibly tenth century or later. Height 4cm.  
*Courtesy of the Office of the Shōsōin Treasure House.*

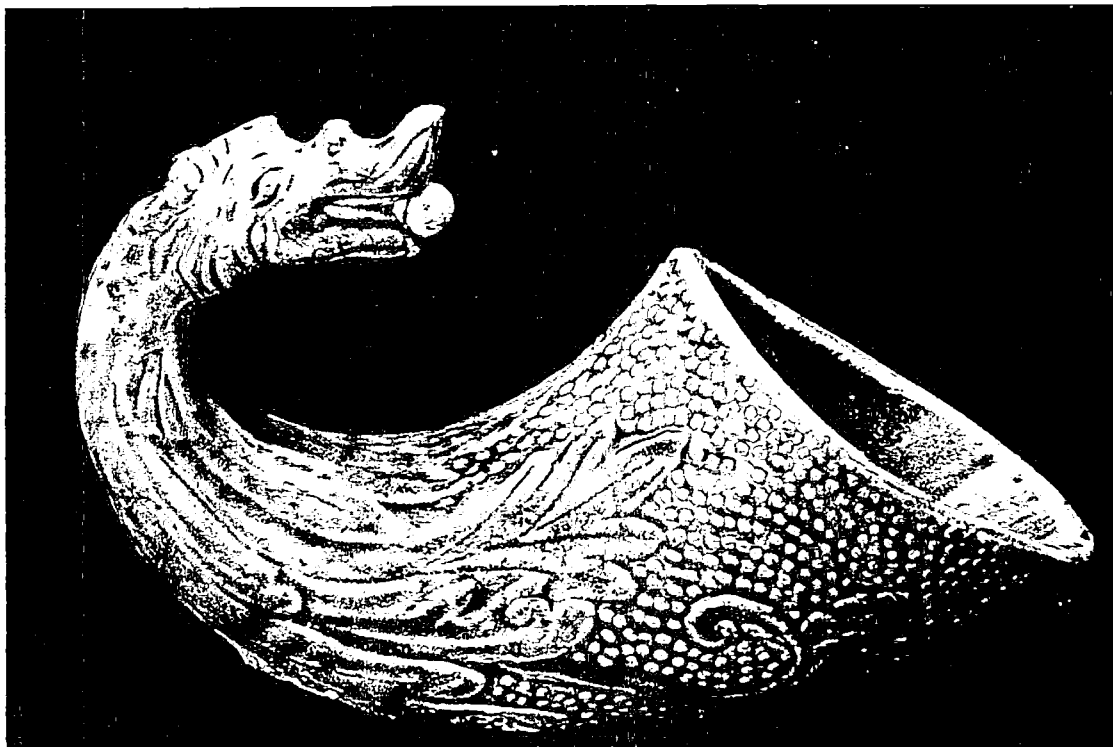


12 Rhinoceros horn cup shaped like a flower.  
Possibly of the Song dynasty or later. *Courtesy of the Office of the Shōsōin Treasure House.*



13 Rhinoceros horn cup inscribed in ink with  
a date equivalent to AD 811. Width 18cm.  
*Courtesy of the Office of the Shōsōin Treasure House.*





14 Tang dynasty green-glazed earthenware rhyton. *Sotheby's, London, 10 June 1986, lot 14.*

contours indistinct (Plate 1). It was only when I was able to examine the superb wine seller exhibited by Eskenazi (Plate 6) that the surface decoration on the horn itself was sufficiently clear to lead me to the inescapable conclusion that in the early Tang dynasty the external surfaces of rhinoceros horns were decorated.

Until now, due solely to the evidence of the four horn carvings still in store at the Shōsōin in Nara, it has been thought that although the early cups were shaped by carving and polishing, they were not decorated on their exterior surfaces (Plates 11, 12 and 13). In other words, it has been thought that any cup with claims to an early date would necessarily be undecorated. The new evidence of the earthenware wine sellers must now cast doubt on this assumption.

It is worth looking a little more closely at the type of decoration revealed by the two tomb figures in Group A that show the clearest evidence of surface decoration of the horns. Firstly, the Eskenazi horn has a band of *ruyi* or cloud scroll in low relief below the raised outer rim of the cup (Plate 6). Secondly, a raised dot pattern can be seen on the horn in the neck of the lion-shaped container carried by a woman wine seller (Plate 3). Both these decorative patterns go back to those found on ancient bronzes and jades, and were to be endlessly repeated and adapted as surface decoration throughout the history of Chinese art. Moreover, a glance at the Tang-dynasty earthenware rhyton (Plate 14) demonstrates conclusively that the raised dot pattern was used on the surface of drinking cups.

The question of when the Chinese first began to model earthenware drinking cups in the shape of the earlier rhinoceros horn prototypes is hard to answer. Just as contentious, perhaps, is the question of whether the brown-glazed object in the Eskenazi figure represents a real rhinoceros horn or an earthenware drinking cup modelled on a horn shape. Be that as it may, the answer does not change the fact that, according to the evidence of the wine seller figures, the art of carving the surface of rhinoceros horn was practised in China during the Tang dynasty or even earlier.

It may be said, and rightly, that the hypotheses put forward in this paper may never be proved. It is also true that in attempting to solve one problem, a whole series of new questions has emerged. Nevertheless, the one fact proved to my own satisfaction is that specialist knowledge in one small area of Chinese art can sometimes lead to a new insight in another different but related field – in this case Tang tomb figures.

## NOTES

- 1 Sold Sotheby's, Hong Kong, 18 May 1982, lot 54.
- 2 Sotheby's, London, 3 April 1979, lot 79, with a lion.
- 3 Foreign merchants holding leather wine bags are also to be found in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (ROM 918.21.7 and ROM 918.23.38), the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and elsewhere.
- 4 E. H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird, T'ang Images of the South*, Berkeley: Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 142–5.
- 5 There exists a group of miniature earthenware figures standing about 5 cm high which are very similar in type to Groups A and B discussed in this paper. Among this third group are some showing West Asian boys clutching huge fish. See also note 11.
- 6 H. Brinker and E. Fischer, *Treasures from the Rietberg Museum*, Asia House Gallery: New York, 1980, pp. 115–19, and Plates 42 and 43. Brinker describes the wineskin as being in the shape of a goose but makes no comment about the 'funnel'. I believe that the *sancai* model described as a duck found at Luoyang (see *Luoyang Tang Sancai*, Beijing, 1980, Plate 85) points to the correct identification of all the fowl carried by the figures in Group A as ducks rather than geese.
- 7 C. P. Groves, 'Species Characters in Rhinoceros Horns', *Zeitschrift für Säugetierkunde*, 36/4, 1971, pp. 238–52.
- 8 S. Jenyns, 'The Chinese Rhinoceros and Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Carving', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1954–55 (Vol. 29), p. 49.
- 9 E. H. Schafer, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- 10 *Shi Jing* I, XV, Ode 1. The link between the rhinoceros horn and wishes for 'long life', which is the association between rhinoceros horn drinking cups and immortality, has persisted since these early times. This belief is, in my opinion, another reason why the Tang wine sellers used rhinoceros horn plugs in preference to anything else.
- 11 In 1974 there was excavated at Luoyang an earthenware offering tray on which stood a set of seven wine cups. On the tray, standing at the same height as the cups, is the miniature figure of a West Asian boy carrying a fish-shaped wine container with the usual flared funnel. In this case the funnel is hollow. There can be no doubt whatsoever that this figure acted as a wine pourer.