

Entry for 2006.170.53

By Anke Hein

齊家文化 人足形陶罐

**Jar with Anthropomorphic Feet**

Chinese, Qijia culture, c. 2300-1500 BCE

Earthenware with appliqué and cord-impressed decoration

H. 15.9 x Diam. 11.6 cm (6 1/4 x 4 9/16 in.)

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Partial gift of the Walter C. Sedgwick Foundation and partial purchase through the Ernest B. and Helen Pratt Dane Fund for the Acquisition of Oriental Art 2006.170.53

This is a rare example of a vessel with anthropomorphic feet attributed to the Qijia Culture—an early Bronze Age culture with wide distribution in northwest China that was once believed to pre-date the Neolithic Yangshao culture (c. 5000–3000 BCE)<sup>1</sup>. The vessel is made of reddish earthenware with fine sand temper. It has a globular body, slightly constricted neck, slightly outward-flaring high rim, two broad short band handles bridging between rim and shoulder and carries a fine cord-marked décor on both body and handles. Anthropomorphic vessels are not uncommon in northwest China for both Neolithic and Bronze Age grave assemblages. The best-known examples are painted jars with geometric décor and a cover in form of a human head from Majiayao culture (c. 3300–2000 BCE) sites,<sup>2</sup> and painted vessels in the form of human bodies from Yangshao sites in Gansu and Shaanxi.<sup>3</sup> All of these prominent examples date to the Neolithic period and are associated with high-quality painted pottery, whereas this vessel is of a coarser make, as is the other anthropomorphic vessel in the Sedgwick collection that may be of Qijia date ([2006.170.52](#)). As a miniature jar with a tall, attached cover in the form of a stylized human head, this latter vessel is reminiscent of the anthropomorphic Majiayao jars mentioned above, though it is much smaller and simpler in execution, lacking any painted designs and having a somewhat flattened head rather than the fully modeled heads on the Majiayao vessels.

Other examples of jars with two human feet rather than human heads attributed to Qijia are known from museum collections in China and abroad<sup>4</sup> and more importantly also from excavated Qijia graves at Mogou,<sup>5</sup> Gansu Province, Linze County, though the latter still await publication. For both Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in Northwest China, anthropomorphic vessels seem to be rare and confined to a small number of graves while so far none have been found in settlement sites. On the whole, Bronze Age period examples of anthropomorphic vessels like this one are even more rare and, furthermore, are considerably less well-executed than the Neolithic period examples, made of

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the discovery of Qijia culture, see Li Liu and Xingcan Chen, *The Archaeology of China: From the Late Paleolithic to the Early Bronze Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 322-323.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance 2006.170.28.A-B in the present collection and similar vessels in the collection of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (Myrdal, Eva. *Kina före Kina: Exposition au Östasiatiska Museet*, (Stockholm: Östasiatiska Museet, 2004), p. 113) and at the Burrell Collection, Glasgow (Chung Yuping and Stephanie de Roemer, “Shedding Light on Chinese Neolithic Pottery from the Burrell Collection,” paper presented at the European Association of Asian Studies 2018 meeting, Glasgow, 29 August – 1 September 2018).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, at Dadiwan and Yangganzhai (Xiaoneng Yang, ed. *The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art), no. 3, p. 61).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, human-foot shaped terracotta jar, Gansu Provincial Museum; jar on two human feet, Permanent Loan, Meiyintang Foundation, Inv. MYT 2095, Rietberg Museum, Zurich.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication by Dr. Andrew Womack, who has conducted excavations at the Qijia cemetery at Mogou, Lintong County, Gansu Province.

a coarse, low-fired gray-brown body and with unrefined features. There are too few examples of either the Neolithic or Bronze Age specimens – and most of them from collections rather than scientific excavations – to speculate about their function or meaning. It is noteworthy, though, that anthropomorphic vessels are a world-wide phenomenon, especially during the Neolithic and to a lesser extent throughout later periods, mostly in burial contexts but also at feasts and for use in various rituals surrounding life, death, and fertility.<sup>6</sup>

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By Anke Hein

辛店文化 彩陶雙耳罐

Double-Handled Jar

Xindian culture, c. 1600-600 BCE

Earthenware with slip-painted decoration

Probably from southeast Gansu province

H. 34.2 x W. (across handles) 35.6 x Diam. 29.5 cm (13 7/16 x 14 x 11 5/8 in.)

Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Partial gift of the Walter C. Sedgwick Foundation and partial purchase through the Alpheus Hyatt Purchasing Fund

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This style of wide-shouldered, double-handled, high-necked jar with black or black-and-red painted geometric designs is typical for the early Bronze Age Xindian culture as first defined by Swedish archaeologist Johan Gunnar Andersson based on his excavations in Northwest China conducted in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> There is some debate about the internal division of the Xindian material,<sup>8</sup> but most scholars agree on three regional types: Shanjiatou, Zhangjiazui, and Jijiachuan. These three groups follow chronologically one after the other and are distributed in different regions of

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<sup>6</sup> For archeological evidence see Malin Aasbøe, "Norwegian Face-Urns: Local Context and Interregional Contacts," in F. Fahlander and T. Oestigaard, ed. *The Materiality of Death. Bodies, Burials, Beliefs*, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 105-113. Berenice Jones, "Anthropomorphic Vessels at the Feast: Evidence for Dress or Ornament?" in L. A. Hitchcock, R. Laffineur and J. L. Crowley, ed. *Dais. The Aegean Feast. Proceedings of the 12th International Aegean Conference / 12e Rencontre égéenne internationale, University of Melbourne, Centre for Classics and Archaeology, 25-29 March 2008* (Liege, Belgium: Universite de Liege, 2008), 39-46. Goce Naumov, "The vessel as a human body: Neolithic anthropomorphic vessels and their reflection in later periods," in I. Berg, ed. *Breaking the mould: challenging the past through pottery* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 93-104. Karel Nel, "Anthropomorphic vessels: containers of sexuality and a life," *de arte* 31/54 (September 1996) :52-55.

For ethnographic examples, see Marla C. Berns, "Containing Power: Ceramics and Ritual Practice in Northeastern Nigeria," in C. D. Roy, ed. *Clay and Fire: Pottery in Africa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Johan Gunnar Andersson, "Researches into the Prehistory of the Chinese," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 15 (1943): 1-300.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see: An Zhimin, "The Bronze Age in Eastern Parts of Central Asia," in A.H. Dani and V. M. Masson, ed. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1999), 319-336; Ren Ruibo, "Xibei diqu caitao wenhua yanjiu" [Research on the painted pottery cultures of the northwest], PhD dissertation, Jilin University, 2016; Shui Tao, *Zhongguo xibei diqu qingtong shidai kaogu lunji* [Collected studies on Bronze Age archaeology in northwest China] (Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2001); Yan Wenming, "Gansu caitao de yuanliu" [The origins of painted pottery in Gansu], in Yan Wenming, ed., *Yangshao wenhua yanjiu* [Studies on Yangshao culture] (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1978), 309-327.

the upper Yellow River valley in modern-day central Gansu and eastern Qinghai provinces. The Jijiachuan type is most widespread and this vessel, which has cord impressions on its concave base, is a characteristic example of its most common type of ware.

Painted wares such as this one are typical in Xindian culture, but they differ markedly in quality from the earlier Neolithic painted wares of northwest China famed for their relatively thin walls, fine clays, and exuberant painted decor. Xindian painted wares are coarsely tempered, thick-walled, often slipped, and show a decorative repertoire simpler than that of other cultural contexts in the same region.<sup>9</sup> The ceramic forms are likewise distinctive.

The majority of Xindian ceramics excavated thus far comes from graves and consists mostly of high-necked jars like this, with or without handles. Closed-form bowls are also fairly common; cups and open-form bowls have been found but are relatively rare. Plain vessels lacking painted decoration, sometimes with impressed cord-marks and/or appliqué bands are also known, but they differ in quality from the painted wares. Surprisingly, the unpainted ceramics have thinner walls and are tempered with fine sand rather than the coarse gravel used for most of the painted wares. These unpainted wares are significantly more common in Xindian settlement sites than in graves, but the painted wares were not made specifically for burial either but the same types of wares appear in both contexts.

The high-necked jars characteristic of Xindian culture can vary in form: some are elongated, others are squat; mouths may be straight or flaring; bases may be rounded or flat. The jars usually have two band handles and bear black and occasionally red painted designs arranged in horizontal bands above the shoulder and a few vertical lines on the lower part of the body. The decorative motifs are mostly geometric (e.g., lines, zigzag, crosses, triangles), often including a meander band around the neck and two double-hook designs on either side of the shoulder. Additionally, some vessels have small drawings above these double-hook designs showing pictorial décor, such as suns, humans, dogs, or other four-legged animals. Famed Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren interpreted these drawings as fecundity symbols<sup>10</sup> but there is no clear evidence for this. Other scholars have suggested that the double-hook design signifies ram's horns,<sup>11</sup> but the additional hooks and lines that are part of most of these designs (as seen in this example) make this interpretation questionable. Nevertheless, faunal remains at Xindian settlement sites are dominated by sheep and goats, revealing the importance of these animals in the Xindian subsistence system which was possibly pastoralist in nature.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Yitzchak Jaffe, Anke Hein, Andrew Womack, Katherine Brunson, Jade d'Alpoim Guedes, Zhou Jing, Jada Ko, Wu Xiaohong, Wang Hui, Li Shuicheng, and Rowan Flad, "Complex pathways towards emergent pastoral settlements – New research on the Bronze Age Xindian culture of Northwest China", forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard Karlgren, "Some fecundity symbols in ancient China," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 2 (1930): 1-66.

<sup>11</sup> Yan 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Jaffe et al., under review.