

A CLAY COFFIN OF THE T'ANG DYNASTY

A RECENT FIND IN THE PRECINCTS OF THE TEMPLE OF HEAVEN AT PEKING

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On April 8th, 1942 Japanese soldiers when digging ground for building a water tower, excavated a coffin made of burned clay, on the compound of the temple of heaven at Peking, in the precincts of the former office for ceremonial music (神樂署), south-west of the exterior altar (外壇). From May 2nd, 1942 on, this coffin was exhibited for study in the hall west of Ch'i-nien-tien (祈年殿). Then experts were asked to write down their opinion as to the age of the coffin, in a book lying ready in the exhibition hall. The following is a description of the find; two drawings of ours approximately show its appearance.

The material of the coffin is of fire clay. Its brown color, however, must be attributed to the long time during which the coffin lay buried in the ground. At close sight one will notice that the material is dark, grey-brown, almost black. The coffin proper rests upon a base inseparably attached to it. The cover is loosely laid on; there are no signs, such as pegs or nails to suggest that the cover has been firmly connected with the coffin. The measures are as follows: the length of the coffin measured at the base 79 cm, the width also measured at the base 47 cm, the base is 12,5 cm high. The front of the coffin is higher than its rear; the former including the base and the cover is 36 cm high, the rear is 26 cm high. An upward pointing bulge may be seen on the front and rear edge of the coffin. Measured in the center this bulge is 10 cm high in front and 3,5 cm in the rear. On both ends the cover protrudes over the coffin about 5 cm.

The base shows plastic ornamentation on all sides, the coffin itself only in front. There we can see a small door with two wings formed in the clay, each wing with 12 button-like knobs. The small door is 18 cm high. Furthermore, there are a number of small knobs fixed on the right and left front border of the coffin, 7 on the right side and 8 on the left. The front bulge of the cover of the coffin is also furnished with such knobs, 15 in number. Besides, a line indented in the bulge of the cover runs parallel to its border.

It seems that a part of the coffin was painted. In any case, white color may be discovered on the cover under a crust of clay, on the front and base of the coffin; red color can be seen on the upper posts of the small sham door and on its right and left columns.

The base is furnished with many decorations. The four sides are divided into squares by small columns. On the front- and backends two such squares are framed by small columns, on the two sides are three squares. In all, there are 10 such small columns on the base, each column consisting of three torus-like parts. Two hounds galloping towards each other are represented in the two front squares. In the outer squares of the two sides we see the ornamental hounds too, not facing each other, but headed for the front of the coffin. In the center square of the sides and in the two squares of the rear we notice only one circle each, instead of the hounds. It cannot be ascertained if a symbolic decoration had been placed there originally.

On May 8th, 1942 the Peking daily paper Ch'en Pao (晨報) published an article about this coffin, written by the outstanding archaeologist Chou Chao-hsiang (周肇祥) who is known to the archaeologists of Europe by reason of his work on ceramics of the Chou dynasty, published in the Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities No. 1 (1929) under the title of: Pottery of the Chou dynasty (edited by B. Karlgren with some notes by J. G. Andersson. 9 pages, 7 plates and 20 rubbings). Judging by the type of the coffin Mr. Chou fixes its date to the end of the T'ang dynasty and holds the opinion that the coffin was used for keeping the remains of cremation. According to Mr. Chou the little door on the frontend of the coffin agrees with that on the stone coffins of the Northern dynasties (421-581) and with that on brick-pagodas of the T'ang dynasty.

We do not know if and what kind of objects were found in the coffin when it was opened for the first time, nor do we know if a stone slab with inscriptions was excavated with the coffin. Said publication in the paper informs us that sacrificial vessels placed before the coffin, had been found; but, we are left ignorant as to their present whereabouts.

Six bricks, two damaged bowls and the lower part of a vase have been excavated together with the coffin, and placed for exhibition. The broad side of the bricks shows a harrow-teeth pattern which according to Mr. Chou Chao-hsiang is a common pattern on bricks of the T'ang dynasty. Both bowls are whiteish-grey and made of very hard material. Mr. Chou tells us that bowls of the same form have been found in graves of the T'ang dynasty at Pei-mang (北邙) near Loyang. The outside of the bottom, the whole foot and the other part of the vases are glazed. The measures are as follows: a) width at the top 19 cm, at the bottom 8 cm, height 7 cm; b) width at the top 18,5 cm, at the bottom 8 cm, height 5 cm.

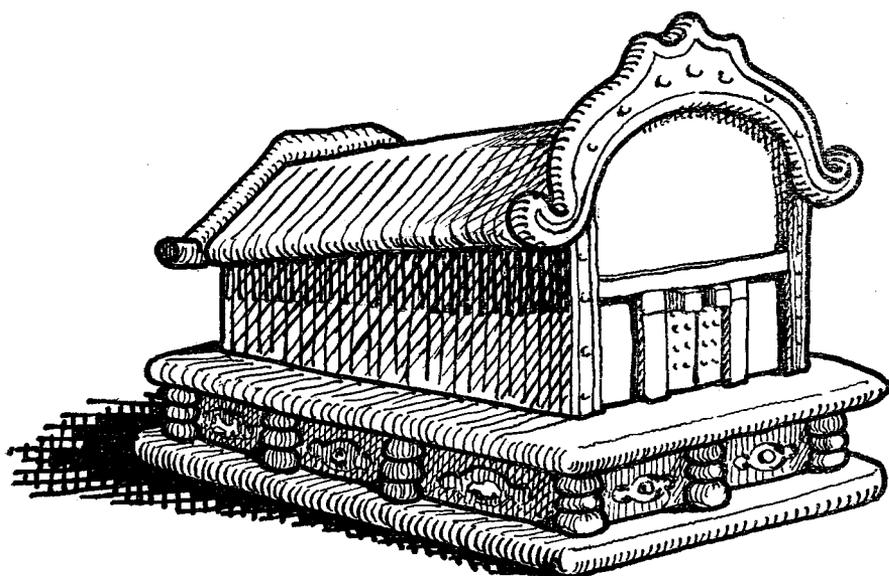


Fig. 1, front side

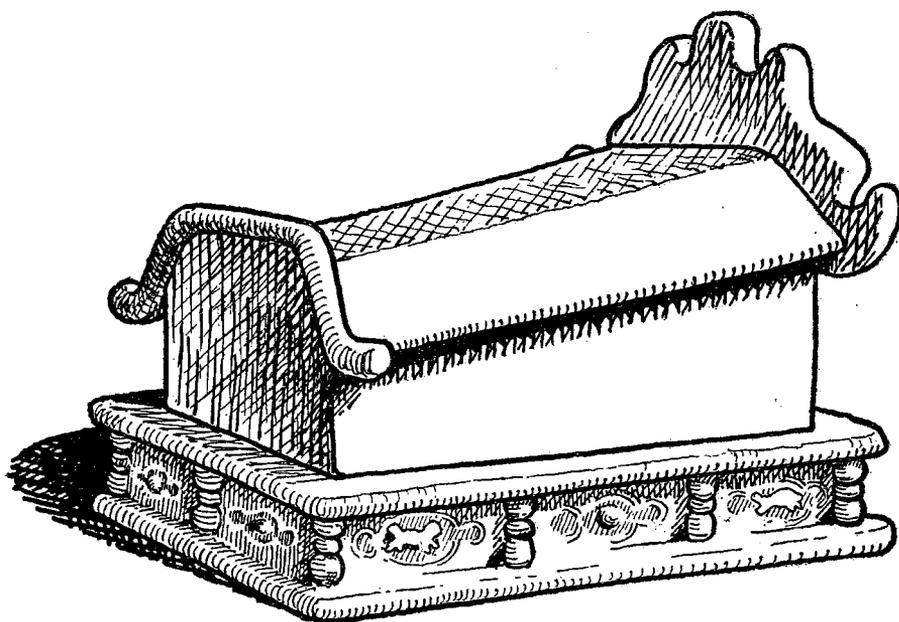


Fig. 2, rear side