FRANTZ GRENET

The Deydier Vase and Its Tibetan Connections: A Preliminary Note

Though Tibetan art is not my speciality, I had an opportunity to come in contact with this field in 2011, when Gérard Fussman asked my opinion on the catalogue of Tibetan metalwork in the Pritzker collection (Chicago), which my late friend Boris Marshak had nearly completed before his untimely death in 2006 and which will soon be published thanks to the efforts of David Pritzker.[1] Reading this catalogue, I came to realise how much Marshak's unrivalled expertise in Sogdian and Turkic metalwork had prepared him to disentangle the various artistic traditions, which, in combination with Tang art, eventually came together in the extraordinary court production of the Tibetan empire (*c*. 600–*c*. 850 CE). This production culminated in what Marshak called "late Baroque style", now known from a significant number of objects, some of which, possibly the majority, appear to come from tombs in Dulan (the former realm of the Tuyuhun, to the north-east of the Tibetan plateau), belonging to dignitaries allied to the Tibetan royal family. Based on a very detailed study of all possible iconographic models, he suggested attributing this set of objects to successive phases spanning the last century of the empire, between the second third of the eighth century and the political disintegration which occurred after 840.

Some time before I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the Pritzker material, Jean-François Jarrige, former director of the Guimet Museum, had communicated to me photographs of a vase kept in the Deydier commercial gallery in Paris, about which the owner was asking for specialist opinions. In 2012, after it had been restored, photographs (Figs. 1–4) and partial drawings were published in the gallery catalogue, with a note by Christian Deydier (Deydier 2012: 54–69). According to his note and to additional information kindly supplied by him, the object had belonged to two of my predecessors at the Collège de France, Paul Pelliot, then Louis Hambis. After 1960 it passed to art dealers, first Mrs Gobard, then Christian Deydier. There is no information about where and when Pelliot had acquired it. A possible guess, but no more than a guess, would be Pelliot's last journey to China in 1933 (?), when among other things he helped organise an exhibition of Chinese art which was planned in Paris; at that time Tibetan luxury objects from graves in Dulan were beginning to surface on the Chinese antique market. This vase, slightly crushed with a few gaps, did not look very attractive or saleable at the time. It also seems that for a long time its successive owners had been at a loss to explain it, because of a lack of comparative material, until the growing interest in Central Asian art prompted Christian Deydier to have it restored and publicised. At the moment it is on show abroad, so that I have not yet been able to see it.

In October 2013, at a conference organised at the Hermitage Museum in memory of Boris Marshak and Valentin Shkoda, a paper on this vase was presented by Maria Men'shikova, curator at the Hermitage, and Aleksandr Nikitin, who had both examined the object in Paris and contributed some information incorporated in the note by Deydier. The conclusions were published in the abstracts, to which I shall refer here (Men'shikova and Nikitin 2013).[2]

[1] I wish to thank my colleagues who attended my presentation at the Third International SEECHAC Colloquium in Vienna and provided me with invaluable comments and references, especially Amy Heller, Gilles Béguin, Ciro Lo Muzio, and in Paris Sylvie Hureau; also to David Pritzker and Carlo Cristi who authorised me to reproduce photographs of still unpublished objects.

[2] The full papers of the conference are due to appear in *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology* (New York), 7.

Before discussing these interpretations, I will now give a short description of the object. It is a silver gilded vase of ovoid shape, 38 centimetres high, with a flat bottom, two small handles and a wide neck. As the figured decoration appears to end quite abruptly below this neck, it is not impossible that the vase was reworked in ancient times and originally included more pieces, but caution is needed until direct examination. Both handles are flanked by the same pair of awesome guardian deities, bare-chested, standing on rocks and holding tridents; the one on the right has long curly hair and a beard, the other has a horned wolf's head and is holding a goat's head. Between them are displayed two scenes showing royal hunters with ribboned crowns, attacking lions, the royal catch. Two hunters are riding an elephant, the two other ones a furious camel; the published photographs show only the front hunter (Fig. 3). On the top register various animals are attacking each other: in the parts visible on the drawings a stag is being attacked by a lion, and a bull is ripping at a tiger. The bottom register has a frieze (Fig. 4, bottom) of four fantastic lions with various kinds of horns walking from the right to the left and exhaling smoke. There are trees, occupied by monkeys, between them and also between the hunters.

The overall compositional principle is the *horror vacui*. The figures are set in low relief, the gilding being uniformly applied between them.

Men'shikova and Nikitin suggest identifying the whole composition as an episode of Śiva's legend narrated in both the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas (see e.g. Rao 1914, vol. 1, 1: 182–88). Śiva, offended by the senior gods who forgot to invite him to take part in a sacrifice, attacks them, assisted by terrible creatures produced from his breath (*prāṇa*). These ferocious and sometimes monstrous beasts would be those depicted here, confronted by gods. Among them, only Indra the archer would possibly be recognisable as the king on the elephant (Indra's *vāhana*) holding a bow (Indra's favourite weapon), while the bull ripping at the tiger would symbolise Śiva and Indra respectively. During this quarrel, Śiva beheads his father-in-law Dakṣa. Eventually he is reconciled with him as well as with the other gods, and provides him with a goat's head. The pair of standing gods repeated twice is therefore identified as Śiva in his ferocious form Rudra, and Dakṣa holding his goat's head. As for the place and date of manufacture of the vase, Men'shikova and Nikitin suggest a workshop of expatriate Sogdian artists, possibly in Khotan, and a date in the sixth century (the Deydier catalogue indicates "fifth or sixth"). This suggestion is mainly based on some similarities with reliefs on Sino-Sogdian funerary beds of the sixth century, especially that of Yu Hong, who died in 593, on which royal hunters on elephants and camels (Figs. 5–6) wear crowns remotely derived from Sasanian royal crowns, like those on the Deydier vase (Marshak 2001: 252–7, fig. 24; *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong mu* 2005).

Ingenious as they appear, these conclusions have some weak points. In particular, why should Dakṣa have a wolf's head before obtaining a goat's head? One way of avoiding this difficulty would be to identify this character as Vīrabhadra, a destructive manifestation of Śiva who was especially in charge of Dakṣa's beheading, in which case the goat's head he holds would anticipate the subsequent head transplant. But though Vīrabhadra is described in texts as having tusks, there is no mention of him with a wolf's head. Also, the bearded and dishevelled figure on the right is difficult to recognise as any canonical form of Śiva, even in his destructive aspects. Could he be Dakṣa awaiting his tragic fate? A definitely simpler solution would be to view this pair of frightening deities as particular variations of the *dvārapāla*s, guardians of doors. Like the Shivaite gods, the *dvārapāla*s can hold tridents. A composite dragon with a wolf's head and horns of a different type appears on a late imperial Tibetan golden saddle, and such figures may have inspired that of the guardian on the left (Heller 2013: 281–82, fig. 17). If this identification is right, their presence on the sides of both handles might be accounted for by the latter's crucial role in the proper handling of the vase, which (at least in its present form) can be described as a crater.

As for the hunters on the elephant, it is clear that the main character is the one with a more elaborate crown in the front position, for in ancient Indian art the mahout is often the one fighting at the rear, contrary to modern custom (Bernard 1985: 76–79). His image might in fact owe something to Indra, but the fact that he has no third eye nor the typical rounded headgear makes it difficult to recognise him actually as this god. A closer analogy is a face stamped on a Sogdian incense-burner found in Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 7) and attributed to the late seventh or early eighth century, with a similar long wavy moustache, beaked nose, sun and moon ornament on top; this image has been variously identified as a Sogdian god or, less likely, as a king of Samarkand (both possibilities were considered by Fedorov 2001, 2006).

Sogdian art also provides a very precise parallel for the entire scene. This parallel dates from the 730s: it is the series of hunting scenes decorating the so-called "Red Hall" in the palace at Varakhsha near Bukhara (Fig. 8) (Shishkin 1963: 152–8, pls. I-XII). Here a character who is now interpreted as a symbolic image of the Bukhara king is shown riding a white elephant in successive fights with rearing tigers, panthers and winged lions. The hunter usually wears a turban, but in one instance some elements derived from Sasanian crowns are visible (a pearl diadem and possibly schematised wings). The comparison can even be drawn more precisely concerning the

elephant. In both cases what is depicted is a very peculiar elephant with the tusks coming out of the lower jaw instead of the upper one, a long range of small teeth, festooned ears, slit eyes, and altogether an unsympathetic appearance, though the one on the Deydier vase looks far more devilish. As demonstrated by Aleksander Naymark, the white Varakhsha elephant was borrowed from the white elephant of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, in Chinese Puxian, with minor variations such as the reduction of the tusks from six to two (Naymark 2003: 17). The Puxian type appears in China in the mid fifth century, according to literary sources (Soper 1959: 221–25), but it seems to have been transferred from there to Chinese Turkestan in the late seventh century at the earliest. Good early examples are a Dunhuang painted banner in the Guimet Museum attributed to the mid eighth century (Giès and Cohen 1995: no. 205, right), and the "Kinnari Cave" at Qumtura. for which dates were proposed in the late seventh-early eighth century (Hambis 1977: 218, with drawing), or more broadly in the eighth-ninth century (Härtel and Yaldiz 1987: 104).[3] Naymark suggests the possibility that this new iconography could have become known in Bukhara through the Buddhist shrine (*botkhāna*) brought in the trousseau of a princess from "Chin", i.e. China or Chinese Turkestan, but the date of this episode, if it occurred at all, is unspecified (Frye 1954: 8). It could also have travelled with transportable objects (painted rolls, silver vases, etc.). In any case the same ultimate origin and the same iconographical simplification can be assumed both for the Varakhsha elephants and for the one on the Deydier vase. Such conventional features are absent from elephants depicted on Sino-Sogdian sarcophagi from the sixth century, as well as on the Samarkand "Ambassadors Painting" from *c.* 660 (Al'baum 1975: pl. XX).

If we adopt this perspective as well as my alternate identifications for the two standing gods, it appears that the Indian iconographic component can be traced more to Mahāyāna Buddhism than to Hinduism. As in Varakhsha, too, the hunters can probably be recognised as a symbolic depiction of the king himself, in which case the wild beasts they are fighting would represent the forces of evil or more specifically enemies of the kingdom (in the case of Varakhsha, Naymark suggests a cryptic allusion to the Arabs, who at that time were the overlords of the Bukhara king). The two main hunters wearing crowns, a middle-aged one (on the elephant, the royal mount par excellence) and a young one (on the camel) (Figs. 2–3), could in this case be interpreted as dynastic propaganda. I shall in a moment consider which dynasty it might be.

Sogdian analogies are obvious but, like the Varakhsha paintings, some are definitely later than those suggested by Men'shikova and Nikitin. The two different depictions of the lion manes, one with curls and the other one with pointed tufts, can be recognised (on the lion and on the deer respectively) on a Hermitage silver dish from Perm (Fig. 4, top), executed in the Sogdian metalwork tradition and which Marshak attributes to Khurasan in the second half of the eighth century (Marshak 1986: 62, 298–304, fig. 24). This convention entered Chinese Buddhist art at that time and never left it. On the Perm dish one can also notice how the geometrical rendering of the musculature is already evolving into a vegetal pattern, an evolution fully achieved on the animal figures of the Deydier vase, and already noticeable on a silver deer of undetermined manufacture which became part of the furnishings of the grave of the eastern Turkish qaghan Bilgä (d. 734) (Fig. 9) (*Dschingis Khan und seine Erben* 2006: no. 50).

One can cite many examples of the peculiar treatment of horns topped with a small horn crescent, but the more specific analogies in detail appear in the Tibetan so-called "late Baroque style". Here I will just mention those studied by Marshak: a "Heavenly Cow" on a Pritzker belt cup which he attributed to the second third of the eighth century (Fig. 10); another one on a Pritzker high vase (Fig. 11) he dated in the late eighth to first half of the ninth century; also, even closer to the hooked variant of the Deydier vase, an applied figure also from the Pritzker collection (Fig. 12). Only one object was considered to disturb the late dating of this stylistic feature, namely a cup in the Cleveland Museum with a Tibetan inscription mentioning its owner, whose name was initially read as the Chinese wife of the emperor Srong btsan sgam po, therefore indicating a date in the mid seventh century. Marshak considered this date as stylistically impossible and suggested that the inscription had been added by a later Tibetan owner. In fact the name of this queen is no longer considered recognisable in this inscription (Heller 2013: 277–78).[4]

Another motif which has its most precise analogy on a vessel belonging to the late style, mainly a high vase in the Carlo Cristi collection (Milan), is the stylised tree which separates the horned

[3] The last epigraphic date at Qumtura, a Chinese inscription, is 816 (Hambis, *loc. cit.*).

[4] The particular horn shape, and also the delineation of some lions' heads and manes, are, however, present on a golden decanter David Pritzker inclines to attribute to the last quarter of the seventh century, for reasons more historical (a hypothesis about the identity of the royal customer) than typological. Still according to him, horned lions, originating from both Indian and Chinese art, are associated with "concepts of royalty, martial agility, and perhaps more importantly protection and guardianship", which would be perfectly befitting here; they appear only in the lower frieze, while the hunting scenes show "normal" lions. See his article in this volume.

lions from one another at the bottom of the vase (Fig. 13). Though this object is clearly the product of a different workshop (the gilding is applied on the figures instead as on the background), the general shape of the tree is similar, with the slightly contorted vertical stem, the round flower at the separation between two twigs ending in elongated buds, and the festooned leaves set symmetrically in the lower part.

All this being said, even a first glance at the Deydier vase strongly suggests that it belongs to the same cosmopolitan, crowded and exuberant style as the "Baroque style" typical of court production in the last century or so of the Tibetan empire. As is usual in this style, the gilding does not appear to be of the best quality, some small ripples and bubbles already being visible on the photographs. Borrowings from the Mahāyānic iconography, also detectable on some other objects from this period (e.g. the heavenly musicians hinting at the Amitābha Paradise on the Pritzker funerary canopy ornaments), are consistent with the growing influence of Mahāyāna among the Tibetan aristocracy, especially during the reign of Khri Srong lde brtsan (r. 742–*c*. 800), though Buddhism in its tantric form was not generally adopted in Tibet until the eleventh century. In the form they appear on the Deydier vase, such themes are probably no more than part of a general iconographic patchwork. One cannot avoid the impression that the artist, pressed to produce a lavish piece of propaganda in a short time, has drawn from everything he had in his sketchbook.

To conclude, I propose attributing the vase to an aristocratic, possibly royal, Tibetan workshop of the eighth century, probably in the second half, the main contributions coming from artists who were carriers of Sogdian traditions while also drawing inspiration from the art of contemporary Tang China, including its Mahāyānic manifestations. It can be considered one of the most spectacular, though perhaps not one of the most delicate objects of the late imperial style.

Again, it should be borne in mind that this is only a preliminary note. I have left out a careful analysis of such details as clothes, weapons and small ornamental motifs. Boris Marshak would certainly have done better. Unfortunately, he is not with us any more.

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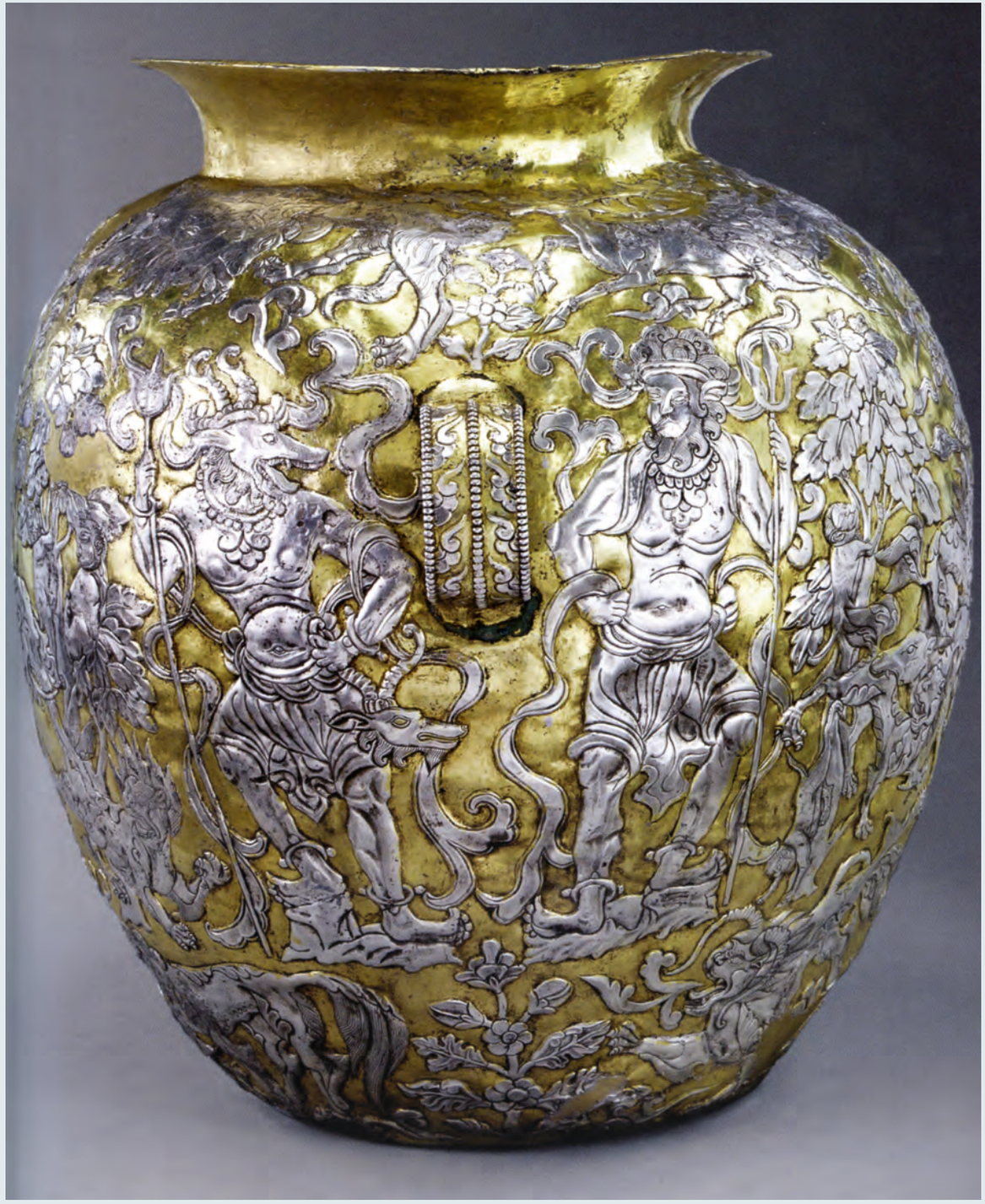
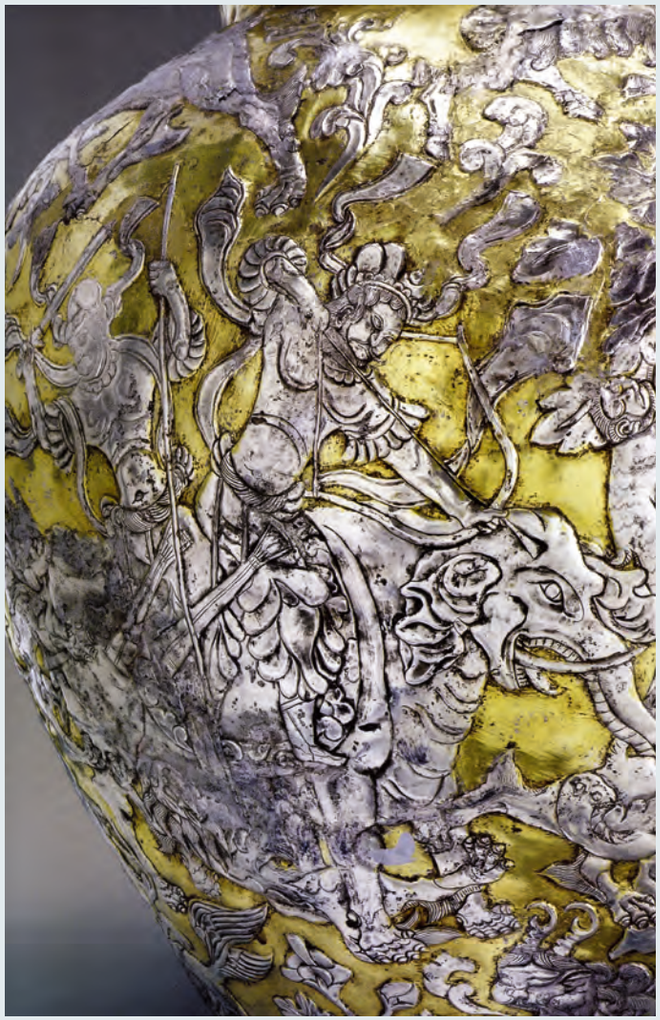


Fig. 1: Deydier vase, guardian gods.



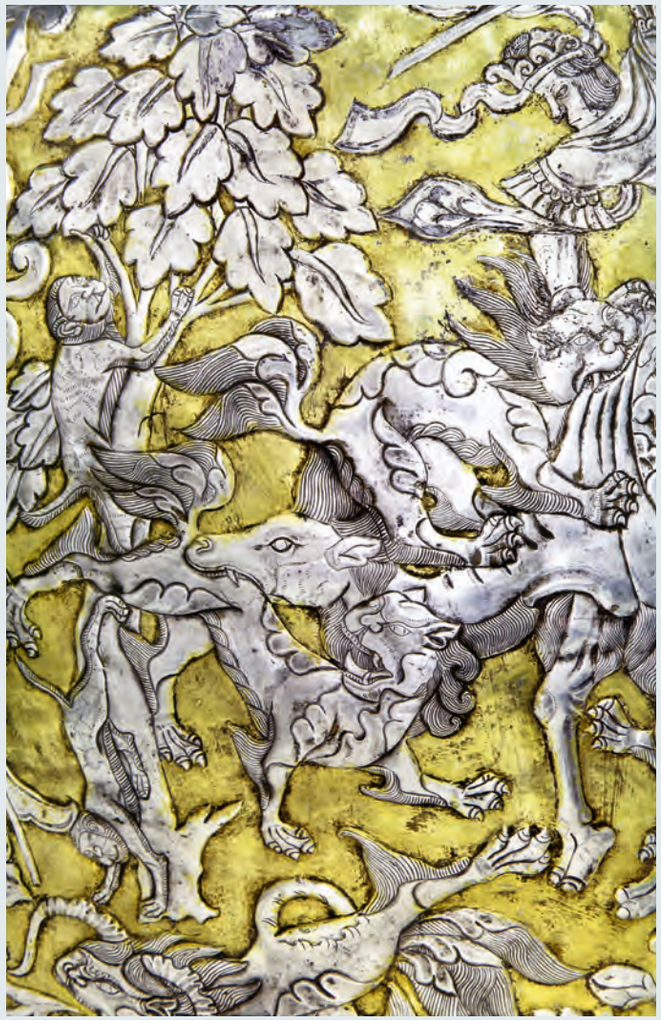


Fig. 2: Deydier vase, hunters on elephant.

Fig. 3: Deydier vase, front hunter on a camel.

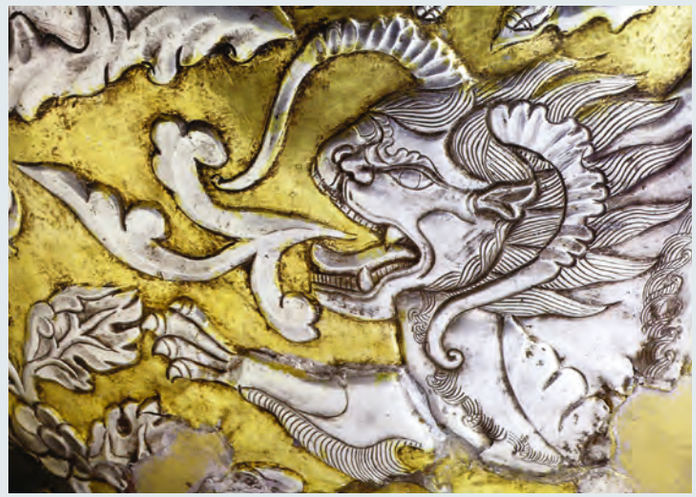


Fig. 4: Perm silver dish (Hermitage) (*top*); Deydier vase, horned lions (*bottom*).

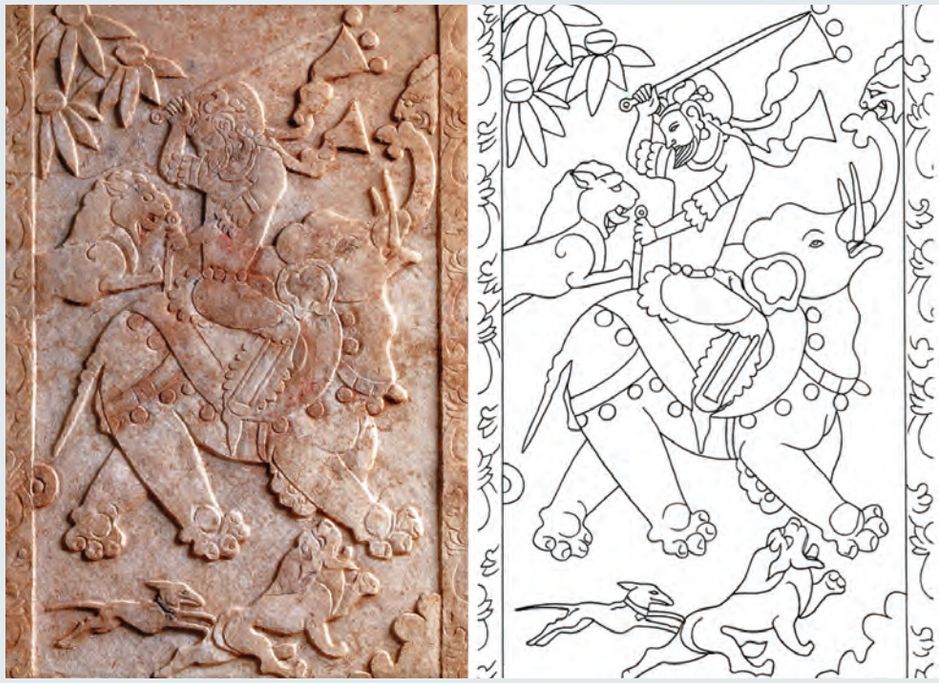


Fig. 5: Yu Hong sarcophagus, royal hunter on elephant (after *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong mu* 2005).

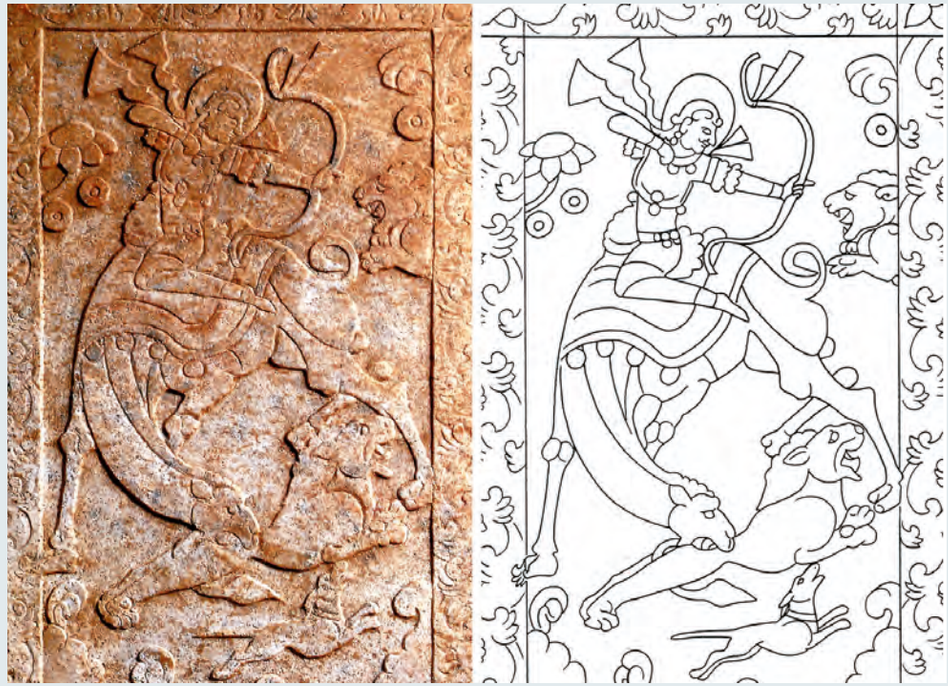


Fig. 6: Yu Hong sarcophagus, royal hunter on camel (after *Taiyuan Sui Yu Hong mu* 2005).

Fig. 7: Stamped vase from Koshoi Kurgan, Kirghizistan (after Fedorov 2001).

Fig. 8: Varakhsha palace, Red Hall, detail (after Pugachenkova 1986: 157).

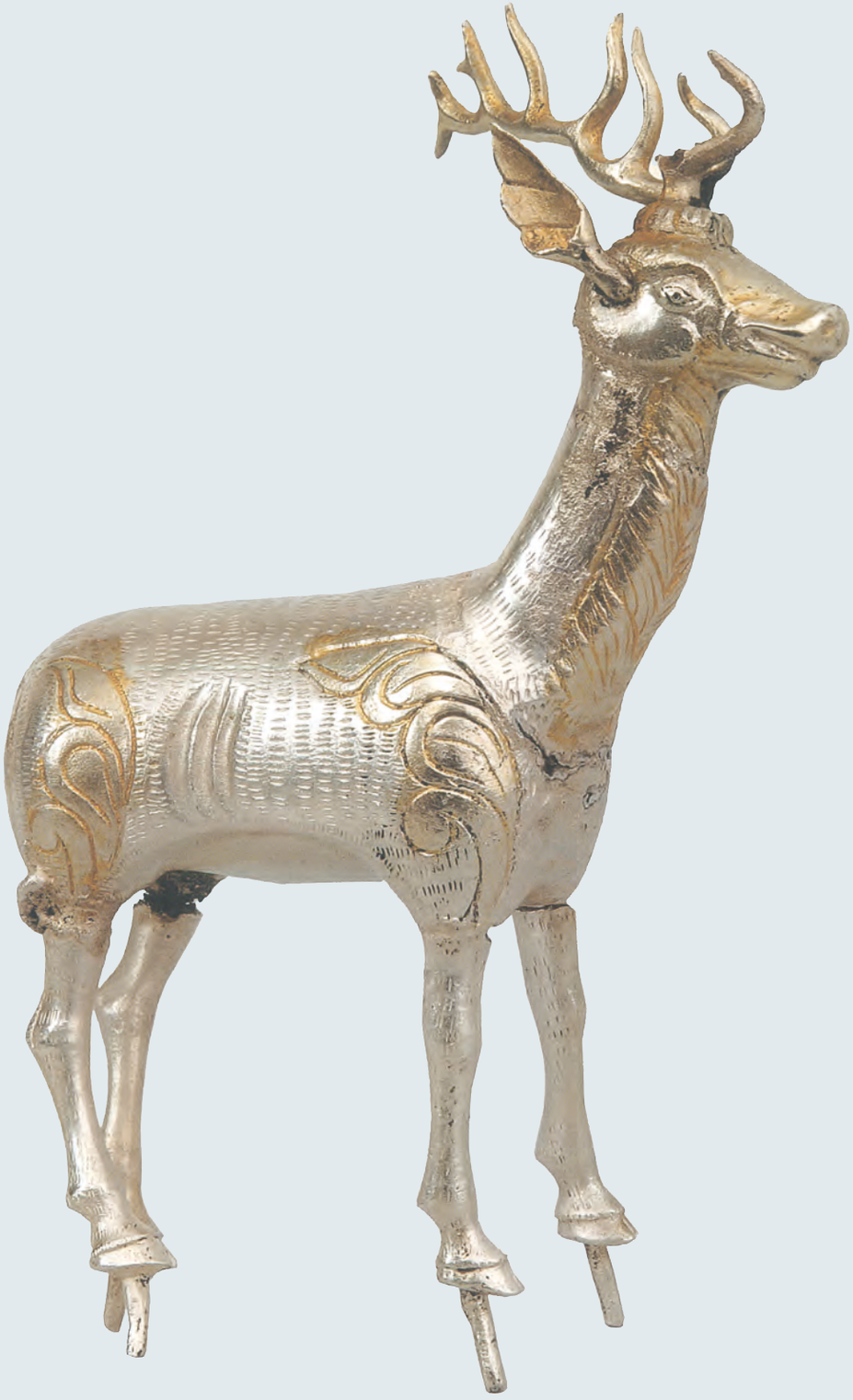


Fig. 9: Silver deer from the grave of Bilgä Qaghan (d. 734) (after *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben* 2006: 77).

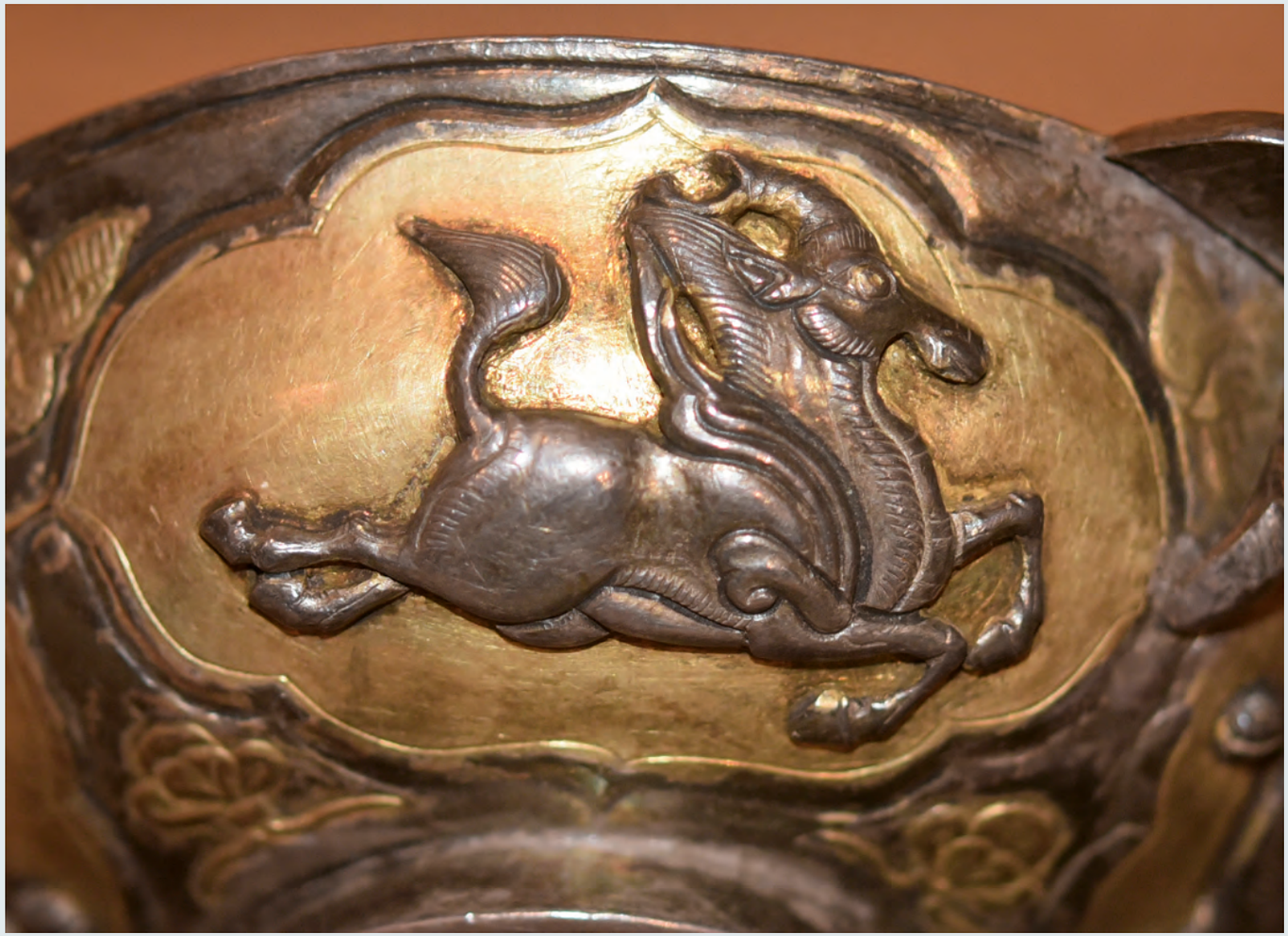


Fig. 10: Deydier vase, horned lion.

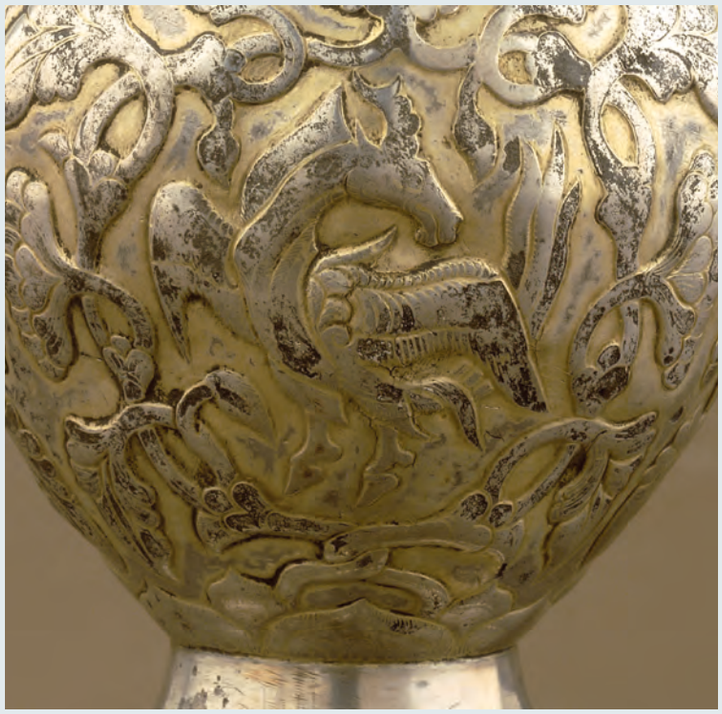


Fig. 11: "Heavenly Cow" on a Pritzker gilded vase (courtesy D. Pritzker).

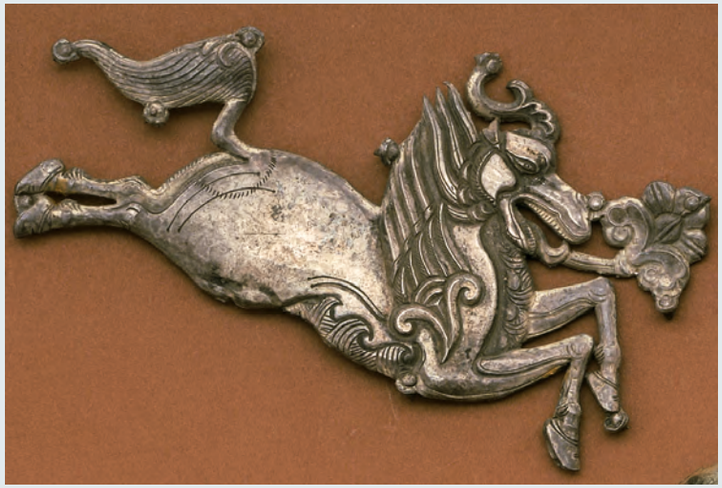


Fig. 12: Applied silver figure (courtesy D. Pritzker).

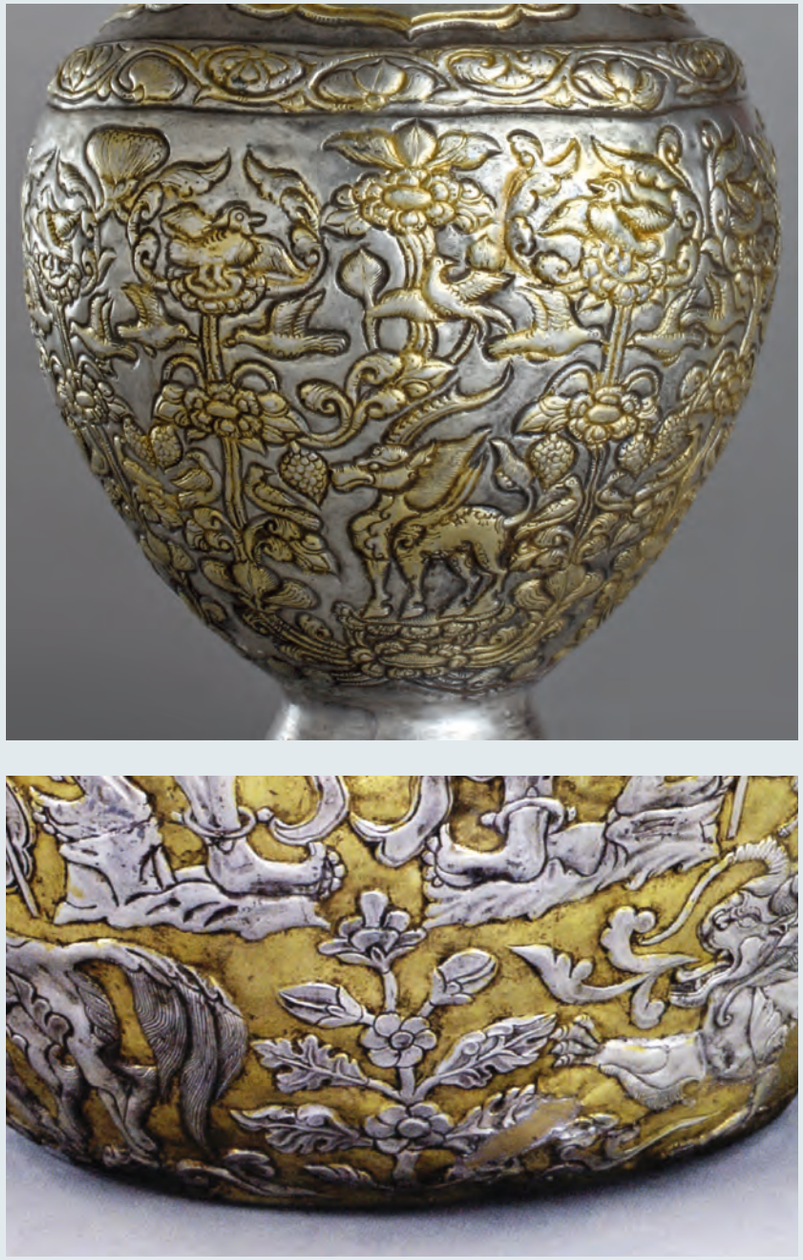


Fig. 13: Cristi gilded vase, detail (*top*); Deydier vase, detail (*bottom*).