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Neolithic Chinese Jades in the Freer Gallery of Art

Julia K. Murray

Towards the end of his life the American collector Charles Lang Freer (1856-1919) purchased a large number of archaic Chinese jades, most of them from dealers in Shanghai and New York. The dates attributed to the jades ranged from the Xia to the Han dynasty, and some of the pieces were said to have been found in Zhejiang province. After the opening of the Freer Gallery of Art in 1923, most of the original attributions were questioned and many of them changed by sceptical curators. The 'Xia' jades in particular were reassigned to much later periods, one reason being that most people did not believe in the existence of the Xia dynasty.

The study of jades has been a highly idiosyncratic affair. Because few archaic jades were inscribed, documentary evidence concerning individual specimens is generally unavailable. To compound the difficulty of assigning dates to jades, ceremonial pieces frequently bear no surface ornament, and a given shape may persist for hundreds of years. Moreover, the names and functions traditionally ascribed to ancient jades are based on late Zhou and Han texts. These sources are compiled many centuries later than the types of jades they purport to explain, and their reconstructions of the names and uses of ancient jade are unreliable.



17.79

3

(Fig. 1) *Bi* disk
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, diameter 21.7 cm 16,380

(Fig. 2) *Bi* disk
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, diameter 16.1 cm 18,25

(Fig. 3) *Bi* disk with incised emblem
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, diameter 31.8 cm 17.79

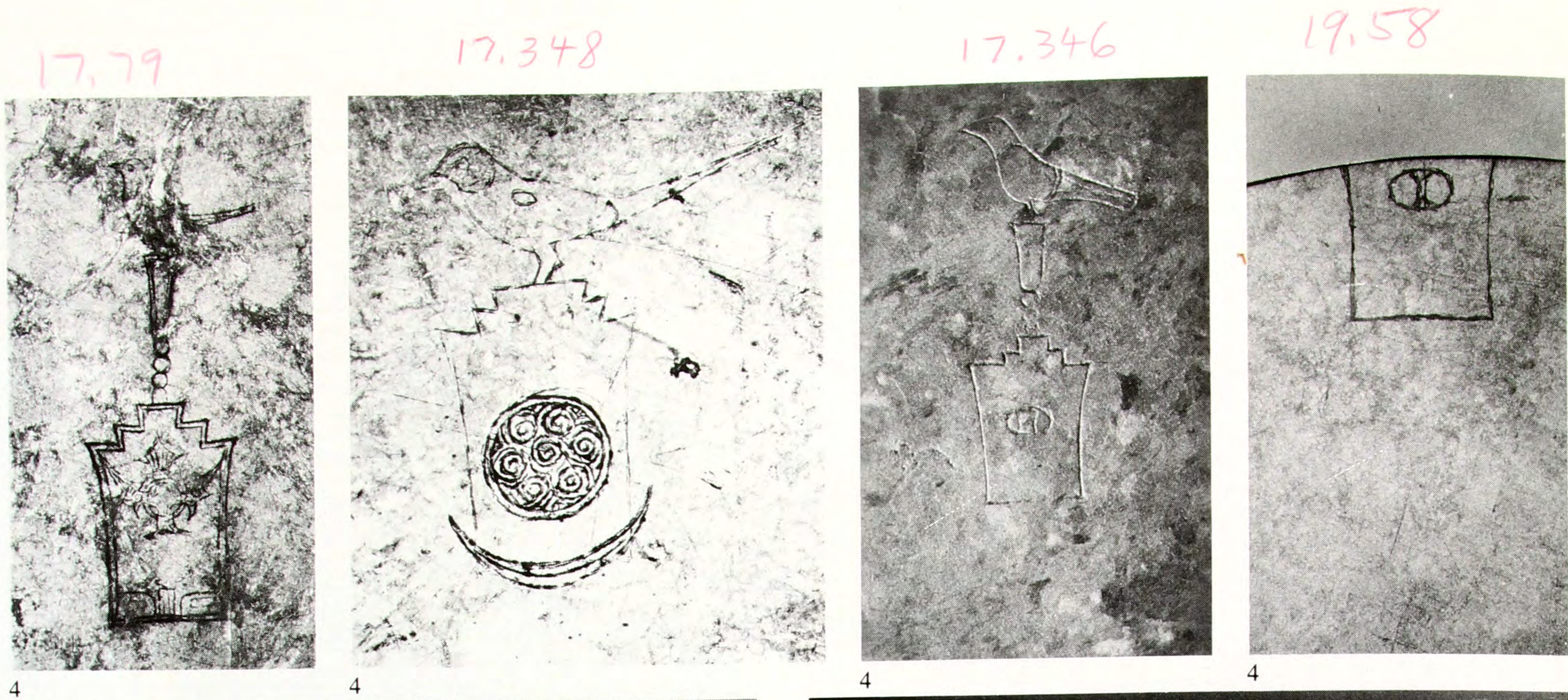


18,25

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In recent years it has been possible to approach the dating of early jades by making comparisons with objects recovered through scientific archaeology. Paul Pelliot in 1925 recognised the need for reliable information about the contexts from which jades were excavated when he published a catalogue of jades owned by C.T. Loo. Since Loo's agents had obtained the jades in various locales from grave-robbers and other unscientific excavators, information regarding their provenance was at best third-hand and sometimes deliberately falsified.

In his introduction to *Chinese Jade Carving*, published in 1950, S. Howard Hansford reiterated the need for first-



(Fig. 4) Emblems incised on the surfaces of four Neolithic *bi* disks



(Fig. 5) Motifs incised along the rim of a Neolithic *bi* disk
(Left) Fish
(Right) Bird and meander

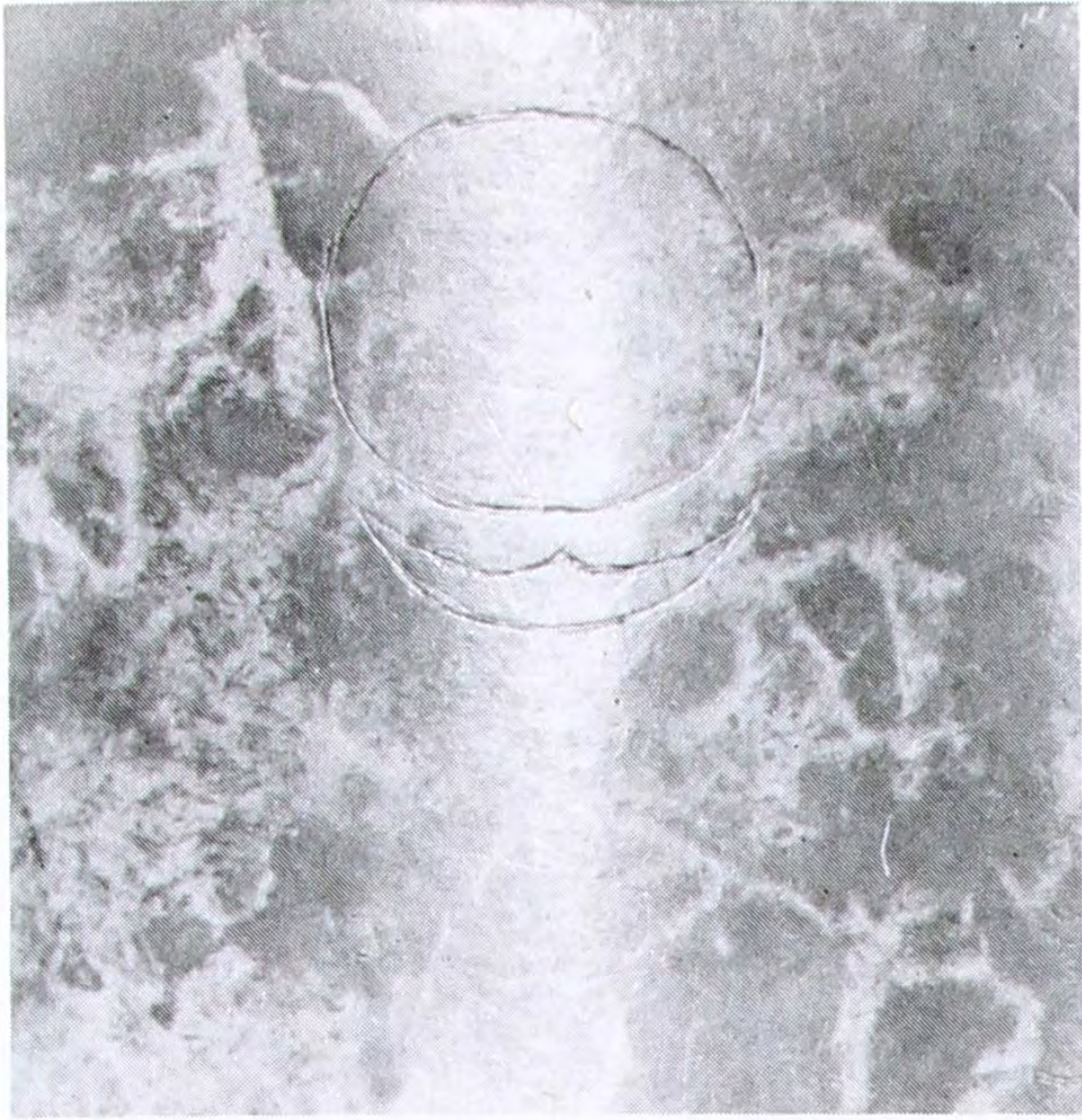
hand documentation and controlled excavations to aid in the dating of jades. His 1968 publication, *Chinese Carved Jades*, surveyed the jades found in excavations before and after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, presenting a chronology based largely on jades from known contexts. A methodology using these archaeologically recovered pieces to date other jades was subsequently applied by Jessica Rawson in a 1975 catalogue of jades from collections throughout the world. This comparative method is now widely accepted as a useful approach to the study of archaic jades.

Jades have now been excavated from early tombs and other remains in many regions of China, and a considerable number of pre-Shang examples have been found in east coastal China. In the wake of recent discoveries in China, museums abroad have been re-examining their collections with renewed interest. At the Freer Gallery of Art comparison with excavated jades has suggested that many of the jades bought by Charles Lang Freer actually date to the Neolithic period. Some of the jades re-attributed to the Neolithic period are currently on display in the Gallery's 60th anniversary exhibition, which was organised around the theme of 'Studies in Connoisseurship', demonstrating the ways in which the understanding of works of art has changed with continuing scholarly investigation.

Unornamented disks called *bi* form the largest group within the Freer collection of Neolithic jades, comprising several dozen examples. The *bi* are of various sizes and proportions; likewise they differ in workmanship and polish. Most of the *bi* are made from samples of nephrite whose mottled colours and conspicuous veins would in later periods have caused the stone to be rejected as unsuitable for fine working (Fig. 1). Possibly this kind of nephrite was found locally, as opposed to the highly prized white nephrite that was imported over an immense distance from Khotan during the Han dynasty.

Many of the *bi* disks are of additional interest because they bear arc-shaped scars and gouges from the tools used to work the stone in antiquity (Fig. 2). Several *bi* in the Freer collection were among the evidence cited by Max Loehr in his 1975 catalogue for the use of a wheel-saw or swing-saw in Neolithic times. Traces of the process used to create the central perforation on these Neolithic *bi* are also visible on most examples. Because of the extreme hardness of jade and the difficulty of working it, holes were typically drilled from both sides of a *bi*. Around the inside wall of a Neolithic disk a jagged ridge of material often remains where the two drill-holes met.

In addition to the plain *bi* disks, the Freer has four extraordinary examples on which a small enigmatic emblem is



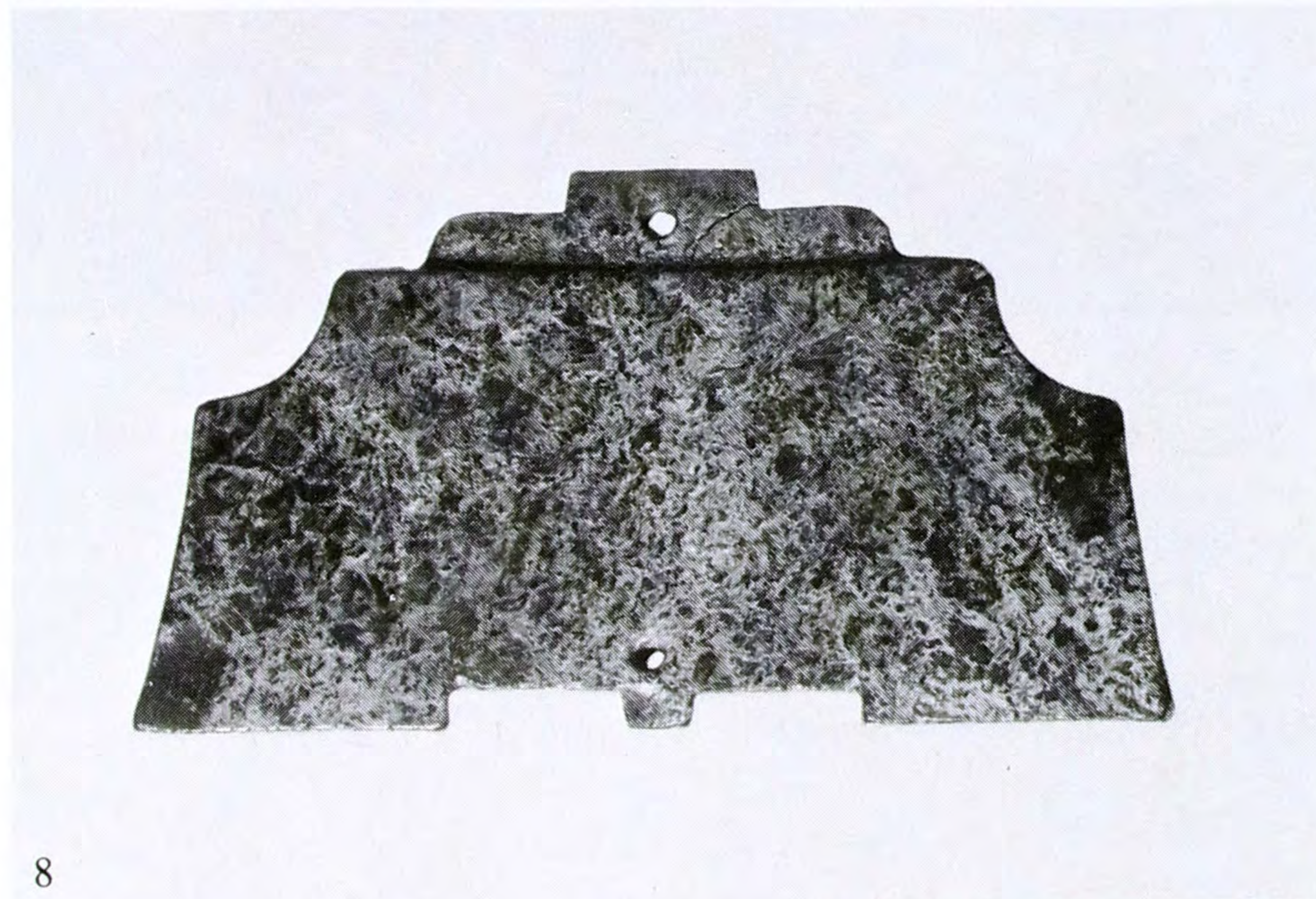
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7



6



8



9

(Figs 6 and 7) Tall ring with incised emblems
of (top) sun-moon and (bottom) wing motif
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, height 6.4 cm, diameter 3.9 cm

17.385

(Figs 8 and 9) Angular plaques
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, 6.5 cm x 3.5 cm and 7.9 cm x 3.4 cm

16.628

17.382

lightly incised (Figs 3 and 4). While no two are identical, each emblem contains an angular, crenellated motif surmounted by a bird in profile on three disks (the fourth emblem is truncated at this point). Differing in detail, the emblems share a similar structure and linear character. One of the *bi* is also incised on the narrow surface of its slightly concave rim (Fig. 5). The rim design is organised in quadrants, with a flying bird seen from above and a fish skeleton alternating at the head of each quadrant. The space between the four emblems contains a loose meander pattern resembling elongated *leiwen*.

Two other emblems stylistically and conceptually related to those on the *bi* are incised 180° apart on the outer wall of a tall ring or cuff that is also in the Freer collection (Fig. 6). One of these designs, a motif suggesting the sun above a crescent moon lying on its back (Fig. 7a), also appears on a ceremonial wine pot found at a Dawenkou site in Shandong (late third millennium BC), as pointed out by the Japanese scholar Hayashi Minao. The design on the opposite side of the ring (Fig. 7b) resembles outstretched wings, a shape related by Hayashi to angular plaques of the Liangzhu culture in Jiangsu and Zhejiang (third millennium BC) and traced by him to distant origins in wooden ornaments of the Hemudu culture in Zhejiang province (c. 5000 BC). Two angular plaques of the Liangzhu type are also in the Freer collection (Figs 8 and 9).



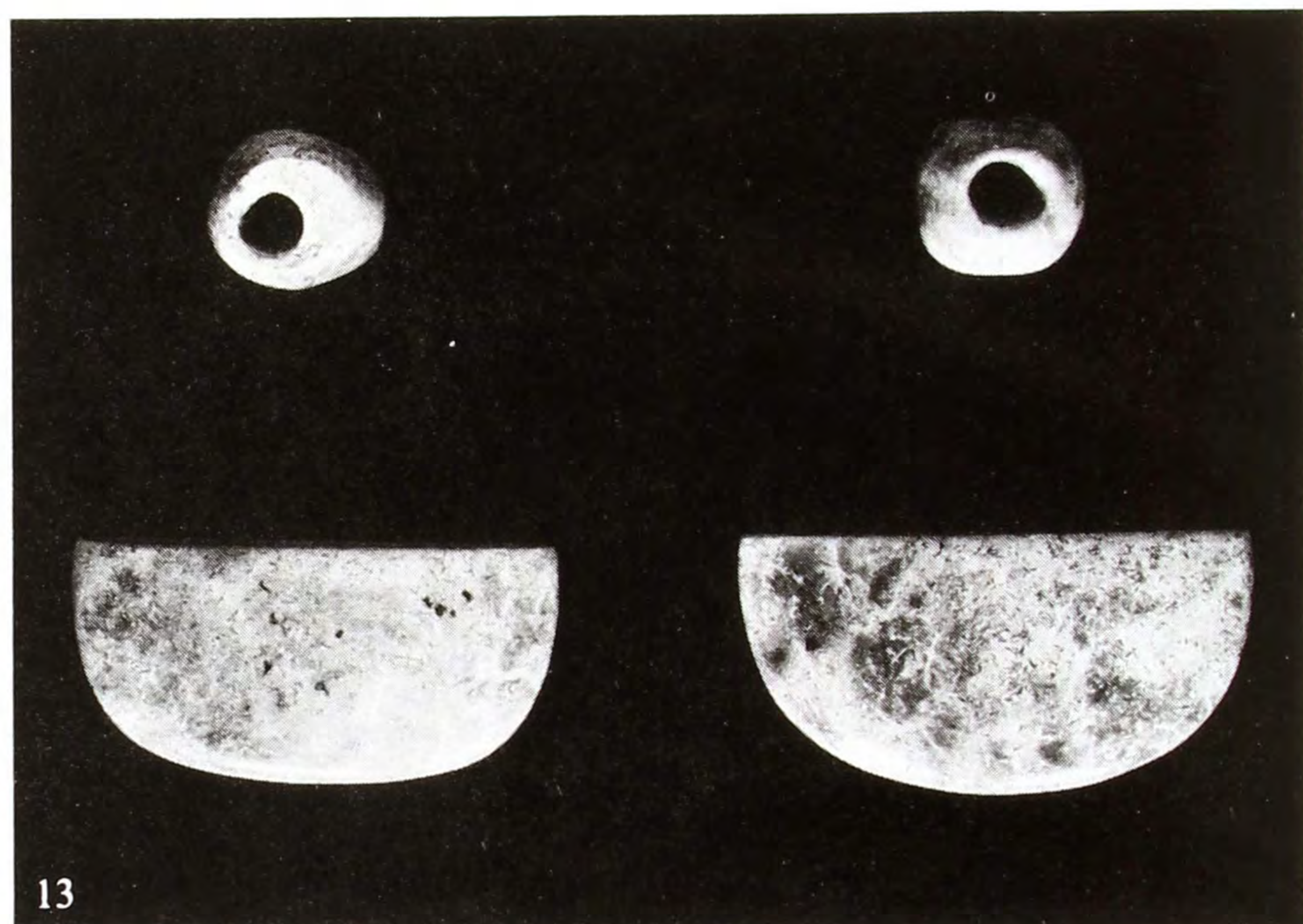
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11



12



13

(Fig. 10) Plaque with mask motif
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, 8.1 cm x 6.9 cm

16.511

(Fig. 11) Back of plaque in Figure 10

(Fig. 12) Plaque with mask motif
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, 6.6 cm x 5.5 cm

17.380

(Fig. 13) Set of two plaques and two beads
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, plaques 6 cm x 3 cm,
beads height 1.7 cm, diameter 2.1 cm

17.378a-d

(Fig. 14) Ring with corner masks
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, height 3.5 cm, diameter 7.1 cm

17.384 →

Motifs resembling demonic faces, perhaps a forerunner of the *taotie* motif on Shang dynasty bronzes, are also found in the Liangzhu culture, and the Freer collection includes jades bearing this type of ornamentation. A pair of large oval eyes and a bar-like nose and mouth are worked in low relief on the slightly convex surface of a plaque with rounded corners, another shape found in the repertory of Liangzhu jade plaques (Fig. 10). Facial details and the body of a large-clawed creature are suggested by a network of lines roughly incised on and around the raised contours. The back of the plaque displays three tunnelled perforations for stringing the plaque or attaching it to another surface (Fig. 11). The Freer also has three smaller plaques perforated in like manner on the back; the front surface of one displays a simpler version of the oval-eyed face (Fig. 12), while the other two are undecorated and belong to an ensemble of two plaques and two beads (Fig. 13).

A similar oval-eyed mask also appears on a Neolithic

ring (Fig. 14) and a *zong* (Fig. 15) in the Freer collection. The ring (Fig. 14) is actually a proto-*zong* because of the slight corners that are recessed from its cylindrical top and bottom. The mask is worked in low relief over these corners. The *zong* (Fig. 15) is a small, well-polished piece, and the finely articulated mask that overlaps its four corners may represent a later stage in the treatment of the motif. *Zong* with oval-eyed masks have been excavated from Liangzhu sites, most notably at Caoxieshan in Wuxian, Jiangsu province.

The mask motifs are sometimes found in various stages of simplification on Neolithic *zong*, particularly on those whose ornamentation appears in more than one horizontal band. A two-register *zong* in the Freer collection shows the mask reduced to raised bands, two long and one short, and a pair of incised eyes (Fig. 16). The surface of the short band is covered with a finely incised meander pattern, and the two long bands are incised with parallel lines. Because



16



14



15

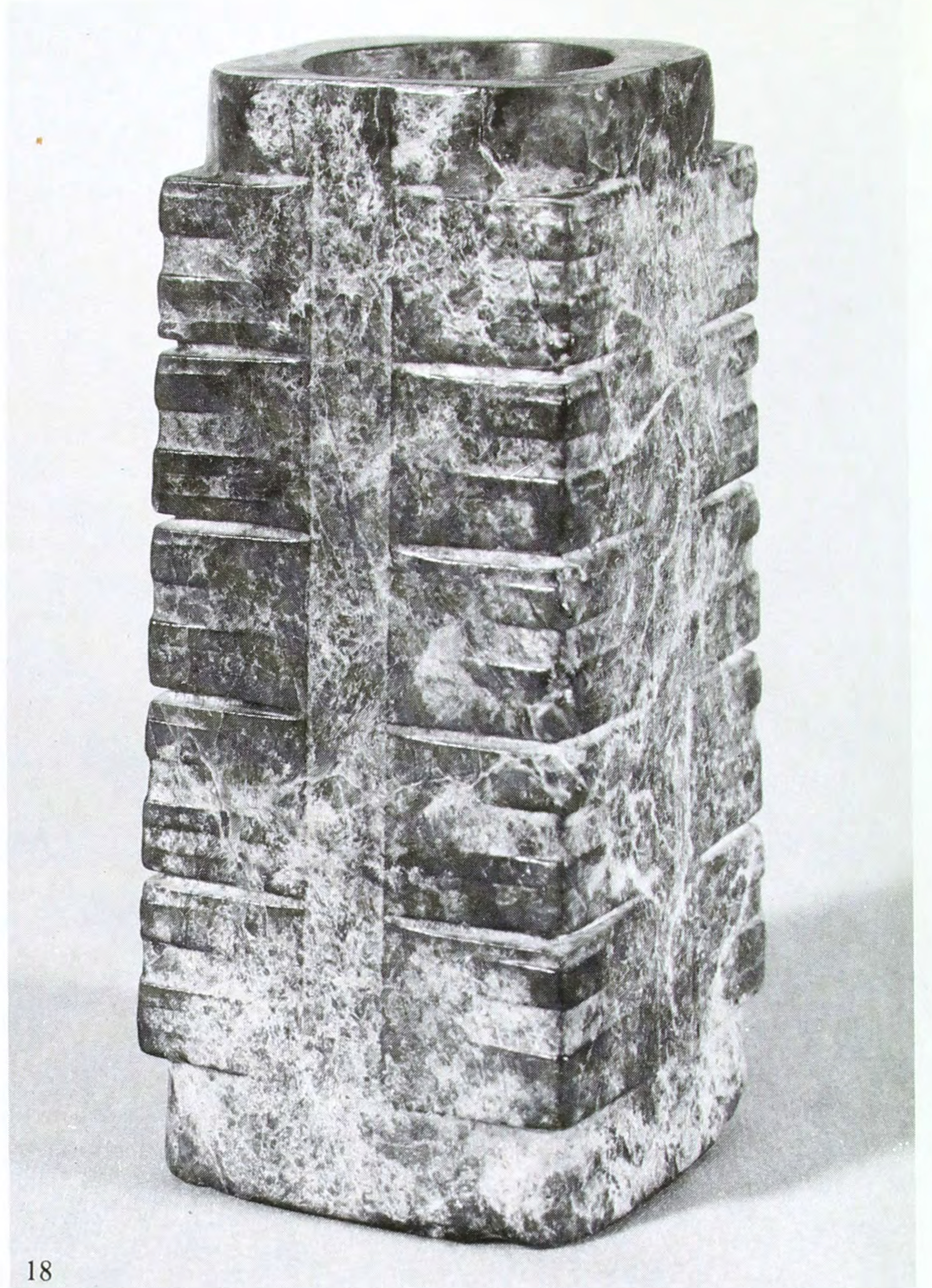
(Fig. 15) *Zong* with mask motifs
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, height 4.5 cm ~~16.499~~ 68.36

(Fig. 16) *Zong* with simplified mask
(Comparison of the ornamentations on the *zong* in Figures 16, 17 and 18 with that on Figures 14 and 15 suggests that the former should be oriented standing on the narrower of their two ends)
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, height 6.5 cm 16.118

we now recognise the motif as having developed from the more fully naturalistic mask motif (Figs 14 and 15), it is apparent that the simplified design is properly oriented when the two long bars are on top and the short bar is below. This arrangement requires that the *zong* stand on the narrower of its two ends instead of on the more stable wider end.

Reduced further to a completely abstract pattern of plain bands and circles, the motif often occupies the multiple registers of taller *zong* (Figs 17 and 18). Tall *zong* were once thought to date no earlier than the Western Zhou period, and some scholars even suspected them of being archaic creations of the Ming or Qing dynasties. Recent excavations have now established that tall *zong* with abstract decoration are artefacts of the late Neolithic period. Examples have been found not only in Liangzhu sites at Caoxieshan and Wujin in Jiangsu, but also in the later Neolithic remains at Shixia in Qujiang, Guangdong province.

Fig 15 = 16.499 68.36



18

17.63
 (Figs 17 and 18) *Zong* with abstract band-and-circle pattern
 (Comparison of the ornamentations on the *zong* in Figures 16, 17 and 18 with that on Figures 14 and 15 suggests that the former should be oriented standing on the narrower of their two ends)
 Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
 Nephrite, heights 28.5 cm and 17.5 cm

Perhaps the earliest jade in the Freer collection is an arc-shaped pendant, called *huang*, which has a tiny perforation of biconical profile at each end (Fig. 19). Ornaments of this type are associated with the Songze culture of east coastal China, which has produced radiocarbon dates in the fifth and fourth millennia BC. Other *huang* have been found further inland among remains of the Daxi culture in Sichuan, indicating the widespread use of this type of ornament. Apparently worn as chest ornaments, *huang* have been found lying on the chests of the deceased in graves.

Other Neolithic ornaments include convex bangles and straight-sided rings, both of which are also represented in the Freer collection. In addition to the ring with two incised motifs (Fig. 6) there is another tall, slightly concave ring in the Freer collection whose exterior is covered with elaborate designs executed in a combination of shallow incised and relief lines (Fig. 20). Bordered above and below by lozenge-shaped plaited patterns, the main design is an

17

20

16.410



19



20



21



22

(Fig. 19) *Huang* 17.383
Chinese, Neolithic, 4th millennium BC
Nephrite, length 9.4 cm

(Fig. 21) Convex ring 19.48
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, diameter 8.4 cm

(Fig. 20) Tall ring with surface ornament
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, height 5 cm, diameter 7.3 cm

(Fig. 22) Straight-sided ring 17.143
Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
Nephrite, diameter 8.6 cm

abstract, irregular meander with occasional 'eyes'. Among the unornamented rings and bangles in the Freer collection are several whose subtle colours are enhanced by contours of appealing irregularity (Figs 21 and 22).

Ceremonial blades in the Neolithic period frequently followed the shapes of ordinary tools made of stone, bone and pottery. Neolithic sites are particularly abundant in axes made of jade or other fine hardstones. In Neolithic burials such axes were often placed on top of the body of the deceased, perhaps as offerings. Several Neolithic axes are in the Freer collection, including one made of finely polished grey quartz, a stone of even greater hardness than jade (Fig. 23). Quartz axes whose blade is distinctly rounded are associated with the Qingliangang and Songze cultures in Jiangsu and Zhejiang and date to the fourth millennium BC.

Two jade axes in the Freer collection retain a distinct rounding of the blade but have proportions that are

characteristic of the later Neolithic. The long sides of one axe are gracefully curved inward, balancing the outward curve of the blade (Fig. 24). The non-utilitarian character of the second axe is unmistakable because of its unusually large size and remarkable thinness (Fig. 25). The moss-coloured surface has been carefully polished to a smooth gloss.

In the past twenty-five years the Freer Technical Laboratory has performed tests for hardness and specific gravity on all of the jades in the collection. Selected pieces have also been subjected to an X-ray diffraction test. Most of the Neolithic jades tested have been identified as nephrite, even when surface colour or condition suggested other identifications to earlier connoisseurs.

As the spades of Chinese archaeologists continue to unearth ancient material, which forms the basis of comparison with objects in museums and private collections, we may be able to retrieve additional jades from the later periods to which they may have been incorrectly assign-



(Fig. 23) Axe 19.39
 Chinese, Neolithic, 4th millennium BC
 Quartz, 17.7 cm x 13.3 cm

(Fig. 24) Axe 16.498
 Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
 Nephrite, 16.2 cm x 11.9 cm

(Fig. 25) Axe 17.78
 Chinese, Neolithic, 3rd millennium BC
 Nephrite, 22.6 cm x 15.7 cm

ed. Furthermore, as scientifically excavated jades continue to increase in number, they may provide us with a basis for establishing typological sequences for long-enduring shapes such as *bi* and *zong*. Perhaps mineralogical analyses performed on excavated jades will also provide information that will aid us in pinpointing the origins of different types of stone used in various periods. Research on Neolithic jades may be expected to see great advances in the coming years.

Suggested further reading

- S. Howard Hansford, *Chinese Jade Carving*. Lund Humphries & Co. Ltd, London, 1950.
- S. Howard Hansford, *Chinese Carved Jades*. Faber & Faber, London, 1968.
- Max Loehr, *Ancient Chinese Jades*. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975.
- Hayashi Minao, 'Jade of the Liangzhu Culture', *Museum*, no. 360, (March 1981), pp. 22-33 (in Japanese).
- Jessica Rawson, *Ancient China: Art and Archaeology*, Chapter 1. British Museum Publications Ltd, London, 1980.
- Jessica Rawson and John Ayers, *Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages*. Oriental Ceramic Society, London, 1975.