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PATRICIA EICHENBAUM KARETZKY

THE ENGRAVED DESIGNS ON THE LATE SIXTH CENTURY
SARCOPHAGUS OF LI HO

An extraordinary stone sarcophagus with elaborate engraved designs of Taoist cosmological themes was found in the tomb of Li Ho dated to A.D. 582 in San Yüan County, Shensi in 1964, some 50 km north of Sian. The tomb was exposed when heavy rains caused the roof to collapse. Members of a temporary commission from the Shensi Province Cultural Association were dispatched to investigate. Their finds were reported in *Wen Wu* in 1966.¹

The tomb and its contents are interesting in a number of regards. Its unusual size, a lengthy florid epitaph and cover, and an ornately carved stone sarcophagus were all ample evidence of the importance of the resident of the tomb. Due to the presence of the epitaph the interred can be identified and the grave articles documented and dated with certainty. Historical research reveals that Li Ho, as his tomb record indicates, was an eminent member of the Northern Chou-Sui court whose family could be traced back through four generations of generals and civil administrators. He died two years after the founding of the Sui Dynasty, in 582.²

Because of the high rank of the deceased the contents of the tomb are of fine quality and furnish art historians with an excellent standard for late Chou early Sui tomb construction and funereal art in a number of media: painting, ceramics and stone engraving. In addition, the stone drawings that decorate the coffin are a useful source of information for the study of pre-T'ang Taoist beliefs, for deities and scenes of an afterlife are embodied in its designs. At the time of the excavation report the curious compositions on the sarcophagus were something of a mystery even though very common themes like guardian figures, the deities of the four directions, *Ssu shen*, Fu Hsi and Nü Kua were evident.³ These scenes offer a unique presentation of late sixth century beliefs in a Taoist afterlife – the preservation of the terrestrial body and ascension of the immortal soul. Li Ho's coffin in particular is an outstanding addition to the relatively few extant examples of Taoist art that are securely dated.

¹ *Wen Wu*, 1966, no. 1, p. 27. The coffin has been extensively analysed by K. Finsterbusch, *Zur Archäologie der Pei-Ch'i und Sui Zeit*, (Wiesbaden, 1976) where the decorative motifs such as the deities Fu Hsi and Nü Kua and the directional animals are catalogued by theme and charted in relation to the treatment of these themes in Han and Six Dynasties art.

² *Wen Wu*, *ibid.* p. 32.

³ *Ibid.* p. 33.

The Tomb

The tomb is rather elaborate, and larger than any other extant Northern Chou examples. Its form and construction prefigure the royal tombs of the early eighth century in Sian. The presence of Li Ho's tomb is indicated above ground by an earthen mound which measures around 2 meters high and 4 across. Two free-standing stone sculptures of rams measuring 0.95 meters tall and 1.1 long stood by the front of the tomb, in good condition at the time of excavation. The tomb is oriented to 5 degrees east of south. The chamber is roughly squarish, being 4 meters across its north wall, 3.6 across the side walls, and 3.75 across the front. The rear and side walls are slightly bowed outward. The ceiling is in cupola form, rising to a height of 4 meters.

Marking the entrance to the chamber is a stone door engraved with guardian figures. Outside is a ramp 37.55 meters long. Its excavated portion, adjoining the chamber, is subdivided into five sectors, the first, third, and fifth being squarish, and topped by shafts that rise funnel-shaped toward the ground; those between are longer and low-ceilinged.

All walls show the remains of roughly executed paintings. Along the ramp these take the shape of single standing male or female figures, a meter tall. In the tomb chamber the lower half of each wall is filled with red-painted panels, nine in all, showing old trees and conventional "mountains" drawn in black.

Evidence of grave robbers entering the tomb soon after interment is provided by the large circular hole through which they entered; it was bored in the ceiling of the tomb path near the first shaft. In addition the total absence of tomb articles in precious materials, the broken upper and lower planks of the coffin, and the skeletal remains which were separated from the skull and found in a mound of debris in another part of the tomb also attest to the presence of marauders. Most of the ceramic tomb articles and clay figurines were smashed and scattered. But the archaeological team succeeded in photographing and cataloguing the most completely preserved examples. In all the tomb yielded a large door, a stone epitaph with cover, a stone coffin, and ceramic figurines. The figurines number 79 and are comprised of servants, guardians, foreigners, soldiers, cavalry and animals – cows, pigs, dogs, sheep, camel, and chickens as well as every day utensils – jars, pestle, ladle, bowls, and a ceramic barn.

Tomb Door

Entrance to the tomb chamber from the ramp was through a large stone portal. The door was composed of two stone door slabs, a door frame, and upper and lower ridges (fig. 1). The front half of the door has a seated lion with front paws extended and head erect engraved on it. The center of the door slab has two fine-line carvings of guardian figures, each 1.06 meters tall. Each guardian is distinguished by age and physiognomy – one is slim and youthful, the other mature and portly with a distinctly hooked nose. Both are bearded and "round-eyed", dressed in the "northern barbarian" style with hoods, trousers, tall boots, and lacquered armor vests. They stand facing each other with one hand holding

a staff, the other resting on the hips. The elder stands flat-footed; but the younger carries his body weight on his rear foot, while the front one is flexed. Floral motifs fill the background, a style of pictorial design based on the *horror vacui* that is reminiscent of the funereal decorations of the early part of the sixth century. Engraved rinceau patterns cover the front door frame and both sides of the door ridges.

Epitaph and Cover

A well preserved, square epitaph stone, 86 cm. on a side, bears impressive witness to the tomb owner's importance. The covering block (fig. 2) centers on a field with 16 big seal characters carved in relief as "Lord Li, Pillar of the Realm under the Great Sui and Awesome Duke of Te-kuang." The title field is framed by three rich ornamental borders, two of which use the characteristic floral rinceau of the period while the third is crowded with long-drawn-out dragons and cloud scrolls. The epitaph proper (fig. 3) contains no less than 1165 characters, most of them making up a formidably difficult and stylized text. Key information is fortunately legible: at the start the owner is described as "the Duke whose personal name was Ho with the *tz'u* Ching-mu, was a native of Ti-tao in Shensi... His grandfather Yen was Generalissimo of three departments, Ch'in, Ho, and Liang, and Prince-governor of Ho-nan. His father Pien was Guardian General of the West, Governor of Ho-chou, and Duke of Shensi." Li Ho himself, just surviving the palace coup that created the Sui dynasty out of the disintegrating Northern Chou, died in his 77th year in 582 at his home.⁴ An imperial edict awarded him posthumous promotions and honors: he was made Ssu-t'u (the traditional Lord of Education), Administrator of Military Affairs in six provinces, Hsü, Yen, P'i, I, Hai, and Ssu, and Imperial Governor of Hsü-chou, and received the honorific name Su-ho. Closely similar biographies are found in the dynastic histories *Chou Shu* xxix and *Pei Shih* lxvi, which are full of the titles he accumulated during a long career. He was one of those stalwarts to whom the Northern Chou founder awarded his own "barbarian" surname, Yü-wen, as an honorary kinsman.

Stone Coffin, Front and Back End Stones

The stone coffin was found intact, along the west wall oriented to the south. Although the lid and bottom plank had been broken and thrown aside, and the coffin was filled with dirt and debris, it was in relatively good condition. At the time of the excavation decorative polychrome and gold leaf were clearly visible; such ornamentation rarely has been found still adorning the coffin. The front end of the stone (fig. 4) has two symmetrical "phoenix" birds, Red Birds of the South perching on top of a door. Their wings are outstretched revealing the patterns of their plumage. The false door is plain but for the rows of nail-head designs along the top, middle and bottom, carved to imitate actual hardware. Flanking

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 32.

the door are two guardian figures. Rather than resembling the usual guardians engraved on tomb doors, these are more like the Buddhist *dvarapalas* who trample on crouching animals. At the bottom of the front end is a frieze of four pearled roundels enclosing animal heads – a monster, and boar. At the center of the frieze is a crouching monster glaring angrily. Lively rinceau tendrils decorate the upper arch of the front stone and its vertical frames. Finally along the base is a mountainous landscape populated by deer and other animals.

Leafy tendrils similarly cover the upper arch of the rear stone (fig. 5) and a rolling landscape through which the mountain animals roam adorns its base. A snake entwining around a tortoise, the symbol of the North, the Dark Warrior, is at the center of the back end stone against a sky filled with scudding clouds; a mythical bird soars above him and a *ch'i-lin* creature accompanies him below.

Long Sides

Dominating the composition of the long sides are the Spirit creatures of the East and West. The symbol of the West, a winged White Tiger who has one leg frontally extended in stride (fig. 6), is ridden by a bearded god who holds the reins taut in one hand and an ornamental fan in the other. The rider is dressed in Six Dynasties court robes with U-necked undergarment, long-sleeved belted robe, trousers, cloud-treading slippers with up-turned toes, and a three-pronged head-dress. In the sky behind him flies an attendant *Hsien*, clad in the same style garments as the rider but holding a lotus bud in his hands (fig. 7). At the end of the composition are billowing clouds and a mountainous landscape in which a rabbit-headed bird is seen. Below the tail of the tiger is a supernatural marine creature with a large lumpish body covered by scales, and a huge open mouth baring sharp teeth. A sky monster squats under the elongated neck of the tiger, head in full profile with pointed ears, bulging eyes, elongated snout, and open mouth with sharp teeth and fangs. His body is nude to the waist and extremely muscular. At the front end of the stone (fig. 8) are four identical squat standing figures; they are shown at much larger scale than any of the other characters, reaching to the full height of the composition. Each is sparsely bearded and wears a low cloth cap, long robe, U-necked undergarment, and cloud-treading slippers. Their hands clasped before them rest on the hilts of decorated ceremonial swords. Entwined rinceau leaves in wave-like patterns enframe the composition. At the base of the stone is a continuation of the mountain landscape from the front and back end stones.

On the other side is the Green Dragon of the East (fig. 9), a scaled, winged creature with elongated neck and long curving tail; on his head are two long doubly-curved horns. He has an exaggerated upturned snout, short ears, protruding eyes, and an open mouth revealing sharp fangs (fig. 10). The Dragon's rider is dressed in Six Dynasties fashion and carries a large orb in one hand, while the other holds the reins. Placed near the Dragon's tail is a huge sky spirit diving or falling straight down, with his feet drawn far above his head (fig. 11). His leonine face is set in a toothy snarl. He wears only short breeches, revealing a thick-limbed, over-developed physique. Large comma shapes articulate his

bulging calf and arm muscles, and his spinal cord is delineated by a narrow groove along his back. From the base of his spine two long tails seem to emerge. His feet seem tiny.

Under the Dragon's neck is a second sky monster, shown as grotesquely fat, in a stylized lunging pose with one leg extended to the side and the other bent at the knee. He also wears only short breeches, and the naked remainder of his body is drawn emphatically to stress muscles or fat. The pose clearly derives from the humanoid demons of Han, when their threatening function was taken seriously; here the change seems to border on burlesque.

At the front end of the East stone are four standing columnar male demigods in court dress holding axial swords, identical in type to those on the opposite stone, with small differences in proportioning from normal to exaggeratedly heavy. Again the figure panel is enclosed by a closely set rinceau, and a sketchy mountain landscape with wild animal and tree accents continues along the base.

Top Stone-Lid

The lid of the coffin has two long narrow panels in which the half-human, half-snake/bird deities Fu Hsi and Nü Kua are portrayed (fig. 12). They wear Six Dynasties garb, but emerging from beneath their long robes are attenuated bird legs that are scaled and clawed. Their feathered serpent tails curl along the central panel; emerging from the shoulders of their robes are feathered wings (fig. 13). Each deity is accompanied by a celestial attendant who flies in his wake; Fu Hsi's holds a feathered fan; Nü Kua's is drawn in rear view and holds an orb. The background design of rosettes, plant tendrils, and cloud swirls fills the entire panel. At the bottom of the panel, separating the two deities, is a bud vase with two lotus flowers in it (fig. 14). A small fish is visible at the bottom of Fu Hsi's side and at the top of Nü Kua's is a cornucopia. In between the two panels of the gods is a double row of 19 pearl roundels enclosing face masks. On the outer perimeter of the panels is another row of pearl roundels with face masks – there are twelve per side and four at the bottom, and four flank a monster head at the top end. In all there are seventy roundels filled with a variety of face types – monsters, or heads of animals – lions, boars, elephants, horses, dogs, rhinoceri, and cocks (fig. 15).

Iconography

Evidence for burial in stone sarcophagi is rare in China. Comparatively few stone coffins have been found. The intricate design program carved on Li Ho's coffin is extremely significant in this respect. Like the themes ornamenting Han tomb interiors, bronze mirrors and such the decoration of Li Ho's coffin is cosmological in its symbolism; the representations reflect Chinese theories of the organization of the universe. As was pointed out by Schuyler Cammann in 1948, the designs on the Han TLV mirrors, like those on the Liu po board and the Ming T'ang palace plan, all draw upon a common source,

although they may not be directly drawn from one another.⁵ So too, the ornamentation of Li Ho's coffin derives from this common iconographical source, but has a unique presentation of the themes. For example, accompanying the familiar funerary themes of the spirit animals, the *Ssu shen*, and guardian figures and deities Fu Hsi and Nü Kua, are the eight male divinities standing in two rows on the long sides of the coffin as well as several dozens of pearled roundels with inscribed facial masks. Before any comprehensive iconographical program can be deciphered the individual themes must be separately considered.

Guardian Figures

Figures of guardians are extremely common in funereal monuments and tombs. Li Ho's tomb had numerous clay *ming ch'i* of guardians; warriors are engraved on both the tomb door and on the front end of the sarcophagus. Like the dogs interred in a pit beneath the deceased king in Shang times, the guardian figures are present to protect the dead from malevolent spirits; they are found both above and below ground marking the spirit path or accompanying the dead, like the large size bronze and clay *ming ch'i* found in Ch'in Shih Huang Ti's mausoleum.⁶ Here in Li Ho's tomb they are pictured as foreigners. This alteration is meant to empower the guardian with superhuman defensive powers. In the Sui Dynasty the fashioning of the guardians as foreigners also attests to the growing contact with the West which is observable in the adoption of other non-Chinese ornamental motifs, the most conspicuous of which is the pearled roundel with mask.

Spirit Animals of the Four Directions – Ssu shen

The spirit animals of the four directions – the Red Bird of the South, Green Dragon of the East, Dark Warrior of the North, and White Tiger of the West, are almost omnipresent in funereal decor from the Han on. The earliest depictions of the *Ssu shen* are the images found on early Han mirrors of the TLV cosmological design where they are placed in respective quadrants to orient the mirror in terms of space. Both dragon and bird occur on pre-Han mirrors from Loyang, but the iconographical pattern of the four deities can be found no earlier than the first century B.C.⁷ Then they appear at small scale and in rapid motion as if coursing around the circumference of the mirror, with their legs extended in stride or wings unfurled. The Dark Warrior of the North is difficult to portray in this

⁵ Schuyler Cammann, "The 'TLV' Pattern on Cosmic Mirrors of the Han Dynasty," *Journal of the Americal Oriental Society*, 1948, vol. 68, p. 162.

⁶ *Wen Wu*, 1983, no. 7, p. 17.

⁷ Examples of birds and dragons on mirrors can be found in Karlgren's D Style, Han mirrors from Loyang; B. Karlgren, "Classification System of Pre-Han Mirrors Recapitulated", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, (Stockholm) 1968, no. 40, figures D 1 – D 18 from around the fourth century B.C. On page 89 Kalgren states the TLV mirror type is first found in the first century B.C.

way without the aid of narrative details such as scudding clouds. On late Han mirrors immortals sometimes ride the creatures of the East and West.⁸ Since the Han the *Ssu shen* may be present in tomb decor not only as an indication of the four directions, although this is their most apparent and most frequently cited function. In pre-Han thought the four directions were associated with the four seasons, four elements and four primary colors. In the *Lu Shih Ch'un Ch'iu*, a work of the third century B.C., monthly commands are provided to retain harmony with the forces of nature. There the four directions, elements, and seasons are correlated: Summer with fire and the south, north with water and winter, east with spring and wood, and the west with metal and fall.⁹ Thus the *Ssu shen* are symbols of both time (the four seasons) and space (the four directions). As emblems of time and space the *Ssu shen* are rarely, if ever portrayed as being static, with the exception of the Dark Warrior. Here in Li Ho's coffin designs they are shown as usual – rapidly flying through the sky. The setting for the directional deities is clearly heavenly – celestial immortals ride the Green Dragon and White Tiger with divine attendants as escort. Sky deities in their deformed or beautiful states represent the mysterious and powerful cohabitants of their realm. In these compositions there is a bottom border of mountainous landscapes over which they fly, a setting which indicates the mundane world below.

Employment of the *Ssu shen* in tomb art reflects a concern for a kind of cosmological *Feng shui* – that is the necessity of being placed in proper relation to the four directions to enable their forces to be most effective. To be at the center of the four directions is to be in line with the favorable influences of the universe. To be at the center (of both bronze mirror inscriptions and their TLV designs) is to possess the hope of their beneficence in terms of the future – of official positions, of the possession of occult powers and of the hope of immortality.¹⁰ This concern for the proper orientation is evident not only in the placement of the tomb in the natural landscape but also in the position of the casket within the tomb and the alignment of the *Ssu shen* representations. In summation the directional symbols engraved on the coffin put the deceased in alignment with the powers of the four directions, to benefit from their propitious influences as symbols of time and space, to protect the corpse from malevolent spirits and to orient the soul for its journey to the afterlife.

The Eight Divinities

The eight standing male figures wearing long gowns, small cloth caps and cloud-treading slippers who rest their folded hands on the hilts of long ceremonial swords are a new iconographical element. It is difficult to define the figures in a specific way. They are dressed as civil officials in court robes with caps and slippers, but also possess swords. In

⁸ S. Umehara, *Shina Kodo Seika*, (Osaka, 1933) For example Pl. 96 in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, attributed to the Later Han Period; or pl 88 from the Eumorfopoulos Collection, London, ascribed to the 2–4th century A.D.

⁹ Fung Yulan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (N.Y., 1966) p. 133.

¹⁰ S. Cammann, 1948, p. 167.

contrast to the military guards engraved on the tomb portal or front end of the coffin they are not dressed in armor, and their swords are only ceremonial. Their importance in the iconographical scheme is clearly indicated by their size, number, and august presence. Since ancient times the Taoist scriptures were unclear as to the various identities of the members of the pantheon like the Great Unity – T'ai I, Heaven – T'ien or Tai Kung Wang, or Pan Ku.¹¹ Moreover very few of them received anthropomorphic form or were represented in art. Among the deities commonly portrayed are Fu Hsi, Nü Kua, Hsi Wang Mu and her consort, or the Immortals – *Hsien*. The eight divinities do not resemble the *Hsien* of Han imagery who are seen coursing through the skies over mountainous landscapes in their winged and feathered jackets and rainbow skirts, an image ultimately derived from the poetic *Songs of Ch'u*.¹² On bronze mirrors for example *Hsien* are depicted in profile view with their legs in giant strides in pin wheel position to indicate the great speed of their flight. Flight being one of the primary means of expressing divinity, the garments of the *Hsien* are therefore borne aloft by the velocity of their movement.¹³ Sometimes *Hsien* are shown kneeling in three-quarter pose; flanking the goddess Hsi Wang Mu on the mirrors of the late Han¹⁴; in post-Han art *Hsien* can be found preparing the elixir of immortality.¹⁵ It was not until the mid sixth century that Lao Tzu or T'ien Chün the Jade Emperor, was pictured in art when he was fashioned in imitation of a Buddhist deity carved in a trinity.¹⁶ Similar to the eight divinities on Li Ho's coffin, Lao Tzu is shown frontally, wearing long robes and a cloth cap; no other attributes help to define him.

The iconographical innovation present on Li Ho's coffin reflects the expansion of the Taoist pantheon during the Six Dynasties period. The vague notion of an Immortal evolves into the categorization of the various states of geniehood propounded as early as A.D. 320 in the *P'ao p'u tzu* of Ko Hung:¹⁷

The first class raises up his body and mounts into the void and is called a celestial genie. The second class wanders about famous mountains and is called a terrestrial genie. The third class dies and casts off his cocoon and is called a post-mortem genie.

In the chapter devoted to Buddhism and Taoism in the dynastic history of the Wei Dynasty, the *Wei Shu*, other types of immortals are mentioned. For example:¹⁸

There are (in the universe) three *yüans*, nine departments, and one hundred and twenty officials, all of which (positions) are in the control of the divinities.

¹¹ H. Maspero, *Taoism and the Chinese Religion*, (translated by F. Kierman, Amherst, 1981) p. 361: "It is hard to find divinities who are more than names or title during the first centuries A.D."

¹² A. Waley, *The Nine Songs*, (reprint, San Francisco, 1973) see "Lord of the East", p. 45.

¹³ Karlgren 1968, pl. D-11.

¹⁴ Umehara, 1933, for example pl. 83 from the Later Han Period.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. 96, in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, from the Late Han Period.

¹⁶ A. Pontynen, "The Dual Nature of Lao Zi" *Oriental Art*, 1980, vol XXVI, no. 3, p. 308.

¹⁷ James Ware's translation, "The Wei Shu and Sui Shu on Taoism," *Journal of The American Oriental Society*, 1933, vol. 53, p. 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

or the apparition recorded on Nov. 22, 415:¹⁹

On the *i-mao* day of the tenth month of the second year of the period Shen jui (Nov. 22, 415) lo and behold a great divinity, riding on a cloud and mounted upon a dragon, leading the hundred spirits, and waited upon and surrounded on all sides by genii and Jade Maiden, gathered on the top of the mountain.

or lastly the description of the death of the Taoist master Ch'ien-chih in 448 and the Genie Officers dispatched to welcome his soul to the afterlife:²⁰

Again, on the day of the assembly, he spread two extra mats before the seat of the Chief Master, and his disciples asked him why. Ch'ien-chih replied, "Genie Officers are coming." On the eve of his death he suddenly said, "My breathing is not regular, and I have a severe pain in my stomach", but acted as usual. The following morning he died. At that moment the breath in his mouth in the form of a cloud of smoke rose up out of the window, and, when half way to heaven, melted away. His corpse stretched and, when the disciples measured it, (they found it to be) eight feet, three inches. After three days it gradually shrunk up, and when put in the coffin it measured six inches. Then the disciples considered him to be a post-mortem genie and to have been transformed and gone to immortality.

In the Sui Dynasty dynastic history's Chapter on Taoism the Taoist gods are also recorded:²¹

As for the the Celestial Genii, there belong to the first class: T'ao-shang-lao-chün, T'ai-shang-chang-jen, and T'ien-cheng-huang-jen. The (five) celestial emperors of the five quarters and the genie officers make reports and receive orders, but men have no share in (their activity).

Thus the presence of the eight divinities is evidence of the emergence of new demi-gods whose identity is difficult to specify. Their divinity is indicated by their great stature, their importance by their number. The depictions of these figures on Li Ho's coffin is representative of the post-Han stage of evolution in Taoism when the pantheon absorbs an increasing number of celestial candidates whose specific identity and attributes are yet to be decided.

Fu Hsi and Nü Kua

Fu Hsi was a pre-Han legendary ruler who by Han times was imagined to have a serpent's body, human face, ox head and tiger's nose. Legend related that he invented the eight trigrams of the *I Ching*, and hunting and fishing nets.²² A small fish engraved on the bottom of the lid of the coffin may allude to this ancient myth. Nü Kua was a legendary goddess who is said to have established universal harmony when the four pillars of heaven (located at the four cardinal points) broke down, for she patched them together; another myth credits her with having made men as companions to women and creating the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

²² B. Karlgren, "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, (Stockholm), 1946, no. 18, p. 229.

institution of marriage.²³ She is also pictured as being part human, bird, and serpent. In the sixth century depiction Fu Hsi and Nü Kua are shown holding the orbs of the sun and moon respectively in their outstretched hands. Often in Han depictions they are portrayed surrounded by constellations, in particular the Dipper.²⁴ As will be demonstrated below, the depictions of Li Ho's coffin lid similarly place Fu Hsi and Nü Kua within the orbits of the stars.

Pearled Roundels with Inscribed Face Masks

Perhaps the most intriguing of the images adorning the coffin lid of Li Ho are the thirty-two large and thirty-eight smaller circles with pearl borders and inscribed face masks. There are three ornamental motifs combined into one – the circle, the pearl border, and the animal mask. The circle in China has always been a symbol of light as the ancient ideograph for the sun illustrates. On early Han mirrors the small hemispherical star clusters around the circumference of a larger boss indicate the constellations.²⁵ Such cinctures of circles as stars can also be found on painted silk banners that are decorated with the images of the gods Fu Hsi and Nü Kua who hold the orbs of the sun and the moon in their hands.²⁴ Pearls have been important in Taoist iconography as well: as the distilled essence of the spirit they were used in the concoction of the elixir of immortality; as powerful aids in attaining immortality they were worn during the preparation and ingestion of the elixir; and finally when buried with the dead (like other gems and mirrors) they provided light, and when placed in the mouth of the deceased prevented putrefaction of the corpse.²⁶ The pearled roundel has been found to be an indigenous decorative motif among Han Dynasty textile designs²⁷ but the pearled roundel with inscribed head is apparently of Western origin and its importation and adoption by the Chinese artist bring along with the ornamental pattern its iconographical significance.

The pearled roundel appears frequently in Sasanid art. The importance of an emblem so clearly associated with light symbolism in a culture whose religion worshipped the power of light is readily apparent. Pearl roundels are the symbol of victory given by the goddess Anahita to King Khusrav II A.D. (590–628) in the scenes of his investiture carved on the rock face at Taq-i-Bustan.²⁸ Pearl roundels are a significant part of the iconography

²³ D. Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, (Princeton, 1981) p. 62.

²⁴ Finsterbusch, 1976, pl. 16 fig. 1, 2 and 3 are silk paintings recovered from Kharakota by A. Stein shown in comparison to the Li Ho coffin lid engravings. Other seventh century examples were found by the Prince Otani expedition, *Exhibition of Central Asian Artifacts found by the Otani Expeditions Preserved in the Library of Ryukoku University* (Kyoto, 1983) pl. 1, fig. A, B, C.

²⁵ A. Bulling, *The Decoration of Mirrors of the Han Period* (Ascona, 1960), p. 32 ff.

²⁶ J. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of 320 A.D.*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1982) p. 178 or 189 for ingestion; for adornment see M. Strickmann, "On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching", *Aspects of Taoism*, ed. H. Welch and A. Seidel, (New Haven, 1979) p. 175; for interment see De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, (Leyden, 1892) Vol. II, p. 92–3.

²⁷ M. Meister, "The Pearl Roundel in Chinese Textile Design", *Ars Orientalis*, 1970, vol. VII, p. 258.

²⁸ Elsie Holmes Peck, "The Representation of Costumes in the Reliefs of Taq-i-Bustan," *Artibus Asiae*, 1969 XXXI, nos. 2–3, p. 103 and 122.

of kingship, for the Sasanid rulers have them ornamenting their crowns and halos.²⁹ But pearled roundels with inscribed heads occur only as a textile design, the most famous of which is found on the garments of the nobility and oarsman from the boar-hunt scene carved at Taq-i-Bustan during the reign of Khusrav II.²⁸

Among the excavations around the oasis cities of the Silk Route many examples of the inhabited pearled roundel have been found. For example in a cave at Kizil is a bench (which supported Buddhist icons) painted with a decorative frieze of ducks inscribed within pearled roundels, ascribed to the sixth century.³⁰ A more apt example sharing the iconographic similarities is a large pottery urn found near Khotan ascribed to the sixth century.³¹ Seven large pearled circles adorn the belly of the vessel; each circle contains the depiction of a deity, Indian gods and goddesses, and one has a single lion's head. Furthermore along the sloping lugs of the vase are three plain pearled roundels, and at the top of the handle is a female head, a design echoing an ancient Classical prototype.

The pearled roundel with its luminary symbolism was adopted by Buddhist artists. Quite a few examples of mandala paintings from Afghanistan employ the pearled roundel to emphasize the importance of the central deity of the scheme. One example from Bamiyan ascribed to the seventh-eighth century has Maitreya at the center, encircled by pearls with secondary deities radiating around him.³² From Khotcho is a bronze medallion attributed to the same period; here the pearled roundel is the basic format inside of which are a Buddha and two flanking Bodhisattvas.³³ At Tun Huang in Kansu Province the pearled medallion appears frequently among the painted decorations of the cave-chapels, but none of the examples certainly predate the tomb designs of Li Ho. There the pearled roundel is used in two different contexts – the first is from the Persian textile designs of inhabited medallions, for example the garments of the Bodhisattvas of Cave 420 and Cave 425.³⁴ Secondly pearl borders are employed as ornamental dividers around the central icons, like the mandala painting from Bamiyan. For example Cave 402 has a pearl border enclosing the niche frame of the central Buddha group³⁵; the latter mode of employment continues into the T'ang caves as well. In central China the pearled roundel can be seen among the ornamental borders of the niches from the South Cave at Hsiang T'ang Shan in Honan which has been ascribed to the late 560's.³⁶

The funerary associations of the pearled roundel with inscribed animal masks are not unique to ancient China proper. At Astana, the Turfan cemetery, pearled circles with boar's heads were found on textiles by Sir. A. Stein. The earliest archaeologically dated example of the inhabited medallion has a confrontation scene between man and beast, and

²⁹ P. Harper, *The Royal Hunter*, (Asia Society, N.Y., 1978), has for example a coin showing King Shapur II (r. 309–379) with a beaded crown, p. 35, pl. 4a, or a Sasanian King on the hunt with a beaded halo on a silver plate, p. 40.

³⁰ H. Hartel, *Along the Silk Route*, (Berlin, 1982) p. 82, pl. 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62, pl. 6.

³² B. Rowland, *The Art of Central Asia*, (N.Y., 1974) p. 100, fig. 45.

³³ Hartel, 1982, p. 165, pl. 103.

³⁴ *Tun Huang Chugoku Sekkutsu, Tonko Bakkokutsu*, (1980–1982), 5 vols., vol. III—Sui Dynasty Caves, 420 pl. 62, 63; Cave 425 pl. 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Cave 402 pl. 103; Cave 282 pl. 108; and Cave 278 pl. 118.

³⁶ A. Soper, "Imperial Cave Chapels of the Northern Dynasties," *Artibus Asiae*, 1966, vol. XXVIII, p. 267, illustration pl. 5, nos. 1, 2.

it is dated to 589; it was recently discovered at Astana.³⁷ The so-called *Fu mien*, or face cover placed over the head of the dead has textile patterns of pearl roundels with floral motifs, single or paired animals, or a boar's head placed inside the roundel.³⁸

Other examples of the motif adopted for funerary articles found in Central Asia include an ossuary ascribed to the seventh-eighth century from the site of Penzhikent, located 40 miles east of Samarkand.³⁹ The Otani casket discovered in Kucha and attributed to the sixth century has four pearl roundels with putti playing musical instruments decorating the lid of the wooden reliquary.⁴⁰ In addition to these examples are numerous objects from Central Asian sites or based on those prototypes, housed in the Japanese Imperial Repository, the Shosoin, dated to the eighth century.⁴¹ In summation, the inhabited pearl roundel is a frequent iconographical emblem in Sasanid Persia and in the art of the Silk Route. It is primarily a device symbolizing light; for the divinities inscribed within its cincture, the pearls signify their divine radiance. The importance of the symbol is reflected in the limited circumstances in which it is found – for royalty, divinity, or the dead. As a textile pattern it is found only on the garments of the nobility or Buddhist divinities (Bodhisattvas); or on the *fu mien*, face masks of the dead. In Buddhist art it is found as an element in mandalas – cosmological diagrams and finally as a decorative motif on reliquaries.

On Li Ho's coffin the inhabited roundel with its Western connotations is brought together with the indigenous theme, a circlet of pearls. The circlet of pearls from Han times indicated stars and star formations but not the stars' resident deity. Since ancient times the stars and constellations were believed to be inhabited by a god or spirit, usually zoomorphic: crocodile, dragon, badger, fox, wolf, hare, porcupine, rat, leopard, griffin, bat, pheasant, gibbon, cock, crow, horse, deer, worm, monkey, snake, stag, goat, tapir, swallow, ox, tiger or pig.⁴² So too the planets were described in the *Huai Nan Tzu* as possessing "directional correlates, its divine emperors, its assistants (viceroy) and its spirits... each planet was given a general realm of astrological authority, a mythical beast, and a pentatonic mode."⁴³ Stars were believed to be the spirits of the heroes of antiquity, of military greatness or females such as the "Supreme Consort of the Yin numen Jade Purity of the Nine Quintessences".⁴⁴ Thus, the inscribed facial masks of Li Ho's pearl roundels suggest more concretely the astral bodies with their resident deities than the undifferentiated cincture of pearls. Among the twenty-four peripheral roundels on Li Ho's coffin lid are profile views of the heads of a dog, lion, boar, cock, horse, elephant,

³⁷ K. Riboud, "Some Remarks on Face Covers (*Fu-mien*) Discovered in the Tombs of Astana", *Oriental Art*, 1977, vol. XXIII, no. 4, p. 439.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

³⁹ A. Belenitsky, *Central Asian Art*, (Geneva, 1968), pl. 54.

⁴⁰ *The Illustrated Catalogue of the Tokyo National Museum: Central Asian Objects Brought Back by the Otani Mission*, (Tokyo, 1971), cat. no. 140, p. 155.

⁴¹ *Treasures of the Shosoin*, 3 vols. (Tokyo, 1962), North Section: for example catalogue entry no. 52, a decorated container or no. 63 the inlaid back of a mirror.

⁴² E.T. Werner, *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology*, (N.Y., 1961), p. 103.

⁴³ John Major, "Astrology in the *Huai Nan Tzu* and Some Related Texts," *Society for the Study of Chinese Religion Bulletin* (Boulder, Colorado), 1980, no. 8, p. 26.

⁴⁴ E. Schafer, *Pacing the Void* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 232–3.

rhinoceros and demon; in frontal view anthropomorphic heads are most numerous, but demons also appear. Along the inner thirty-eight roundels uniformly are frontal anthropomorphic facial masks. The Taoists were the astrologers of ancient China; they named the stars which they considered the visible souls of true invisible beings.⁴⁵ They read prognostications in the movement and coloration of the heavenly bodies and the appearance of meteors, comets and planetary manifestations; they divided the sky into four areas each of which was given the name of its respective *shen* and seven of the lunar lodgings.⁴⁶ In the post-Han era the shape of the heavens was described as.⁴⁷

The shape of the heavens is lofty, and concave like the membrane of a hen's egg. Their edges meet the surface of the four seas (the rim ocean). They float on the yuan chhi (primeval vapour). It is like a bowl upside down which swims on water without sinking because it is filled with air. The sun turns round the pole, disappearing at the west and returning from the east, but neither emerges from nor goes below (lit. enters) the earth...

Among constellations the Big Dipper was of extreme importance; in particular it was believed to be the chariot of the Emperor of Heaven (T'ien Huang Ta Ti) who was the polestar, heading the group of eight.⁴⁸ Images of astral chariots drawing divinities can be seen in Han art, for example at the Wu family shrines.⁴⁹ Charts of the heavens were made in China as early as the third century, though none that ancient have survived.⁵⁰ Diagrams of the Big Dipper were used in funereal practice – wooden boards decorated with diagrams of the constellation either by painting or perforation were placed in the bottom of the coffin.⁵¹ And such boards were also employed by Taoist adepts in their quest for immortality:⁵²

The adept reposes himself at night on a diagram of the Dipper laid out on his bed, with its bowl-like canopy over its head, and his hands and feet pointed at major stars. He is to recite the names of the stars, picture them in his imagination, recite prayers, and in the end bring their sublime embryonic essences into his body where they will build up, in the course of time, an immortal body which will ascend in broad daylight.

Three-dimensional representations of the celestial spheres were also made: one from ca. 550 is recorded in the Secret Treasury of the Liang Dynasty:⁵³

It was made of wood, as round as a ball, several arm spans in circumference, and pivoted to the south and north poles, while round the body of it were shown the twenty-eight *bsiu*, the stars of (each of) the Three Masters, the ecliptic, the equator, the Milky Way, etc...

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, (Cambridge, 1975), vol. III, p. 211.

⁴⁸ Schafer, p. 48: "The Dipper is the Carriage of the Theocrat which courses round the very center looking down upon and regulating the Four Countrysides", from the *Ch'un Ch'u Wei-yüan Ming*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ E. Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, (Paris, 1909) pl. LXXVII, no. 131, rear wall, second stone of Wu Liang Tzu.

⁵⁰ Needham, *ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵¹ De Groot, p. 316.

⁵² Schafer, *ibid.*, p. 241.

⁵³ Needham, *ibid.*, p. 384.

Chien Lo-chih made a different kind of astronomical instrument:⁵⁴

In the seventeenth year of the Yuan-Chia period (400) he (Chhien) also made a small astronomical instrument (*bun thien*) taking 0.2 inch to the degree, with a diameter of 2.2 ft and a circumference of 6.6 ft. The 28 *hsiu*, and all the constellations both north and south of the equator, were indicated by pearls of three colours, white, green, and yellow, according to the three schools of astronomers. The sun, moon, and five planets were attached to the ecliptic, and the rotation of the heavens demonstrated with the earth (horizon) across the middle... The sphere and globe, made in the Yuan-Chia period, were both transported to Chhang-an in the ninth year of the Khai-Huang reign period (+589) (of the Sui dynasty) after the conquest of the Chhen.

These star maps and astronomical renditions of the celestial spheres have a counterpart among painted tomb decorations of the Han.⁵⁵ Domed ceilings in the coffin chambers were covered with representations of the sun, moon and stars; indicated on the side walls were the directional animals. This iconographical pattern was employed well into the T'ang period as observable in the tomb of Princess Yung T'ai. Coffins were treated as miniature models of the cosmic scheme articulated in the tomb decorations. Thus the side walls of the coffin carry the four directional animals and the lid reveals the sun, moon, and constellations. One example prefiguring that of Li Ho has recently been discovered in Shensi province. It is ascribed to the Northern Wei bearing no dated inscription; its lid is decorated with the sun, moon, Milky Way and Hsi Wang Mu, Queen Mother of the West and her consort, Lord of the East.⁵⁶ The function of such astral designs on tomb decoration is not entirely clear. The dead were housed in a tomb and coffin both of which were microcosms of the universe with their directional deities, vault of heaven, astral bodies and the deities of the celestial realm.

The distinct numerical sets into which the inhabited pearl roundels have been grouped on Li Ho's coffin lid suggest another iconographic connotation. Numerology is an important element in Chinese symbolic thought and the organization of the roundels into two rows of twelve and two rows of four large roundels, and a double row of nineteen small, cannot be overlooked. The two peripheral longitudinal rows of twelve for example can be associated with the twelve lunar and twelve solar months of the Chinese calendar. Since Han times each month was correlated with a particular animal – the rat/ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, goat, monkey, cock, dog and boar.⁵⁷ Mirrors of the Han and more frequently of the late Six Dynasties period feature the twelve animals of the zodiac as a decorative border around the rim and these are sometimes found in conjunction with the *Ssu shen*.⁵⁸ Like the *Ssu shen* which are measures of time (the four seasons) and space (the four directions) these roundels may also be time markers – the two inner longitudinal row of nineteen roundels can be conjoined with one of the Chinese alternate

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁵⁵ A. Bulling, "A Landscape Representation of the Western Han Period", *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XXV, 1962, pp. 316; the tomb was in Tsao Tsun in Ping Lu County, Shensi.

⁵⁶ The Gu Yuan Provincial Cultural Work Services, "A Brief Report on the Conditions of the Northern Wei Tomb in Ninghsia, Gu Yuan (Shensi), *Wen Wu*, 1984, no. 6, p. 46ff.

⁵⁷ J. Goodall, *Heaven and Earth* (reprint, Boulder, 1979), p. 28.

⁵⁸ N. Thompson, "The Evolution of the T'ang Lion and Grapevine Mirror", *Artibus Asiae*, 1967, vol. XXIX, p. 38.

calendrical systems, a resonance period known as the *Chang*.⁵⁹ The *Chang* is similar to the Metonic cycle in the West which is nineteen years in duration, it is comprised of 235 synodic months after which the new moon occurs on the same day of the year as the beginning of the cycle. The two rows of four roundels on the short ends of the lid may represent the five planets and sun and moon, which are clearly time indicators, or perhaps the Great Dipper and Pole Star which are frequently grouped together to form a set of eight stars. These constellations also indicate the passage of time for the Great Dipper marks out the four seasons as it turns around the Pole Star once a year.⁶⁰

Finally in ancient Chinese belief the human body is a microcosm of the universe. The gods who reside among the stars have counterparts among the limbs and internal organs of the human body. Although such correspondences may have been esoteric knowledge and not well known they are frequently discussed in pre-T'ang Taoist literature and were fundamental to spiritual and medical practices. One pre-T'ang text, the *Tung chen tsao-hsing tzu yuan erb-shih ssu shen ching* (*Book of Twenty-four Purple Gods who Create the Body*) has a listing of the deities of the body correlated to the solilunar months:⁶¹

Une autre collection de divinités célèbres est celle des vingt-quatre divinités qui, à la fois, régissent chacune une des parties du corps et correspondent aux vingt-quatre sections *tsie* qui dans le corps humain, (microcosme) sont vingt-quatre anneaux superposés le partageant également du sommet du crâne à la plante des pieds, et dans l'univers (macrocosme) sont les vingt-quatre demi-mois solaires entre lesquels se partage l'année, en sorte que le solstice d'été est le sommet du crâne, les équinoxes sont aux environs du nombril, et le solstice d'hiver est aux pieds.

Other texts can be cited from the pre-T'ang era that give more detailed listing of the individual gods of the internal organs and inner physiognomy of the human body.⁶² Moreover these deities are able to aid the Taoist adept in his quest for immortality:⁶³

Au ciel, il y a le Mystérieux Un dans le Grand Yang; il est appelé Perle Mouvante. C'est la porte de tout ce qui est merveilleux: qui l'obtient et le conserve obtiendra la Vie Eternelle. Dans l'homme, il y a les Trois Uns qui n'habitent pas toujours au même endroit: qui est capable de les garder deviendra roi des Immortels. L'un est dans le Grand Gouffre du Pole Nord; en avant est la Salle du Gouvernement, au-dessous est le Palais d'Ecarlate, au-dessus est encore le Dais Fleuri avec son Pavillon de Jade aux 10,000 étages.

These deities are empowered to protect the organs in which they reside and to protect the body from evil spirits.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Colin A. Roman, *The Shorter Science and Civilization in China*, (Cambridge, 1981) vol. III, p. 191 and Shigeru Nakayama and N. Sivin, *Chinese Science, Explorations of an Ancient Tradition*, (Cambridge, 1973), p. 91. Meton was known in Athens ca. 432 B.C.

⁶⁰ De Groot, 1892, p. 21.

⁶¹ H. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme*, (*Mélanges Posthumes sur les Religions et l'Histoire de la Chine*), (Paris, 1967), p. 117.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 119, from the *Ta-tung Chen-ching*: Les Poumons sont 6 dieux, les Seigneurs de Jade Simplesse, Originels Supérieurs *chang-yuan sou-yu kiun* qui gardent le Pont aux douze travées du cou, c'est-a-dire la trachée. Celle-ci a, de plus, douze Hommes-Réels, Portiers *t'ing-tchang tchen-jen*, un par travée, qui "à l'intérieur président à la montée et à la descente du souffle". Le Coeur a un dieu, le Seigneur de l'Humeur de l'Essence-Céleste *t'ien-tsing yi-kiun*; il réside à quatre pouces au-dessous de la pointe du sternum, juste au milieu de l'espace entre les deux seins, au-dessus de la fosse du cœur, et garde les ouvertures des quatre extrémités de la poitrine.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In addition to the inhabited roundels on the lid, there are four portrayed on the front end of the sarcophagus below the depiction of the Red Birds of the South and the doors over which they are perched. Like the roundels on the top end of the lid, these form a frieze flanking a crouching monster, like a T'ao-tieh. This register of protective emblems combining the monster mask and pearled roundel has a parallel on the painted tomb door leading to the coffin chamber of the tomb of Lu Ju-i at Taiyuan in Shensi of the Northern Ch'i period.⁶⁵ Here the two Birds of the South flank a monster mask above the tomb door, but below the three pearled roundels have no inscribed facial masks.

In summation the pearled roundel with facial mask is a very complex iconographical symbol. Though a Western origin can be traced from Sasanid Persia through Central Asia to China, a similar motif, the circlet of pearls, had been employed in China since the Han to designate stars. Considering the other Western elements in Li Ho's tomb – foreigners as guardians engraved beside the tomb door, on the coffin end and as *ming ch'i*, and the fact that the indigenous design did not incorporate facial masks, the Western origin of the inhabited pearl roundel seems certain. The iconographic connotation of the Western design was that of a luminary body; the inscribed themes of boar's head, ducks or figures in confrontation have not been decoded, but in Buddhist art in Central Asia and at Tun Huang the pearled symbol quite clearly was adapted to suggest the divinity of the figure inscribed within its cincture. These associations were subsumed into Chinese iconography which had employed the circle surrounded by bosses as a constellation with the magical nature of the pearl as an important substance in the search for immortality. On Li Ho's coffin the symbol was further adapted by being arranged into groups to form a cosmic diagram. In the end the inhabited pearl roundel suggests both intervals of time – the solar – lunar months and *chang* resonance period as well as the deities of the planets, constellations and sun and moon with their divine counterparts in the human body. By placing these images on the coffin, the powers of these forces are invoked.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Li Ho's coffin is a most remarkable relic from the late sixth century. From the archaeological evidence the dating of the tomb and the high rank of the deceased are ascertained. Found in its original context and complete in all parts the coffin of Li Ho can be studied for its style of decoration, its iconography and as an archaeological artifact. It is interesting to note that the recently excavated Northern Ch'i tomb of Lu Ju-i had a plain unadorned coffin but elaborate wall paintings – processions of guardians along the sloping path of the tomb and the directional deities and vault of heaven in the tomb chamber. The cost and time to engrave a stone coffin are considerably greater than the painting of the walls of a tomb, a factor which contributes to the rarity of engraved stone coffins. Lastly, in contrast to the evidence that Li Ho was a high ranking member of the court, the

⁶⁵ The Institute of Archaeology in Shansi Province and the CPAM City of Taiyuan, "The Excavation of a Northern Qi Tomb of Lou Rui at Taiyuan in Shanxi", *Wen Wu*, 1983, no. 10, p. 4, fig. 2.

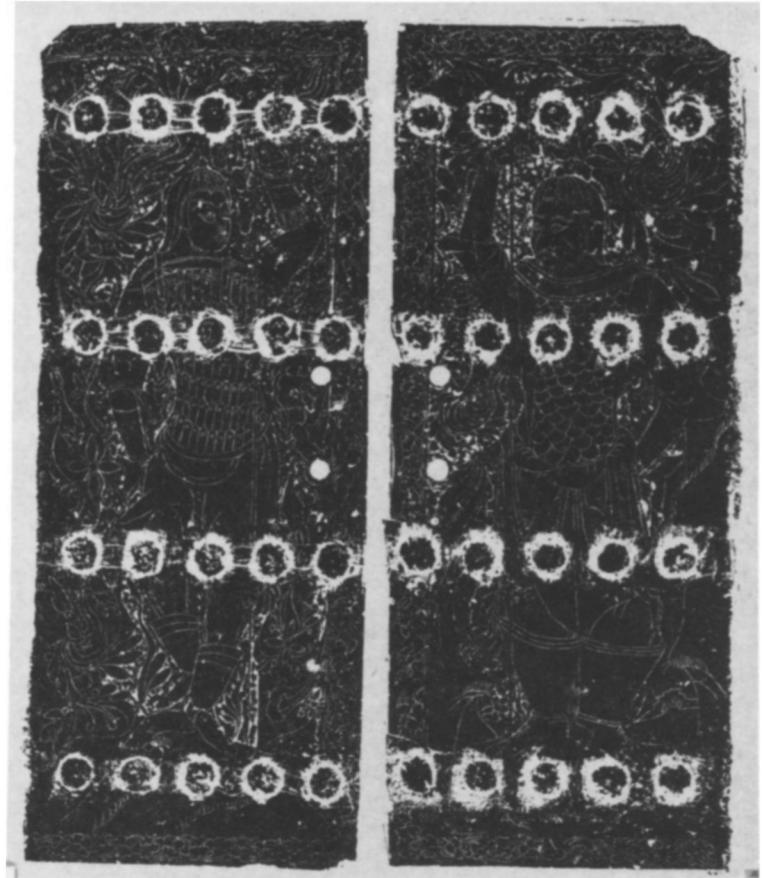


Fig. 1 Rubbing of stone false doors, tomb of Lord Li Ho,
A.D. 582, San-yüan hsien, central Shensi

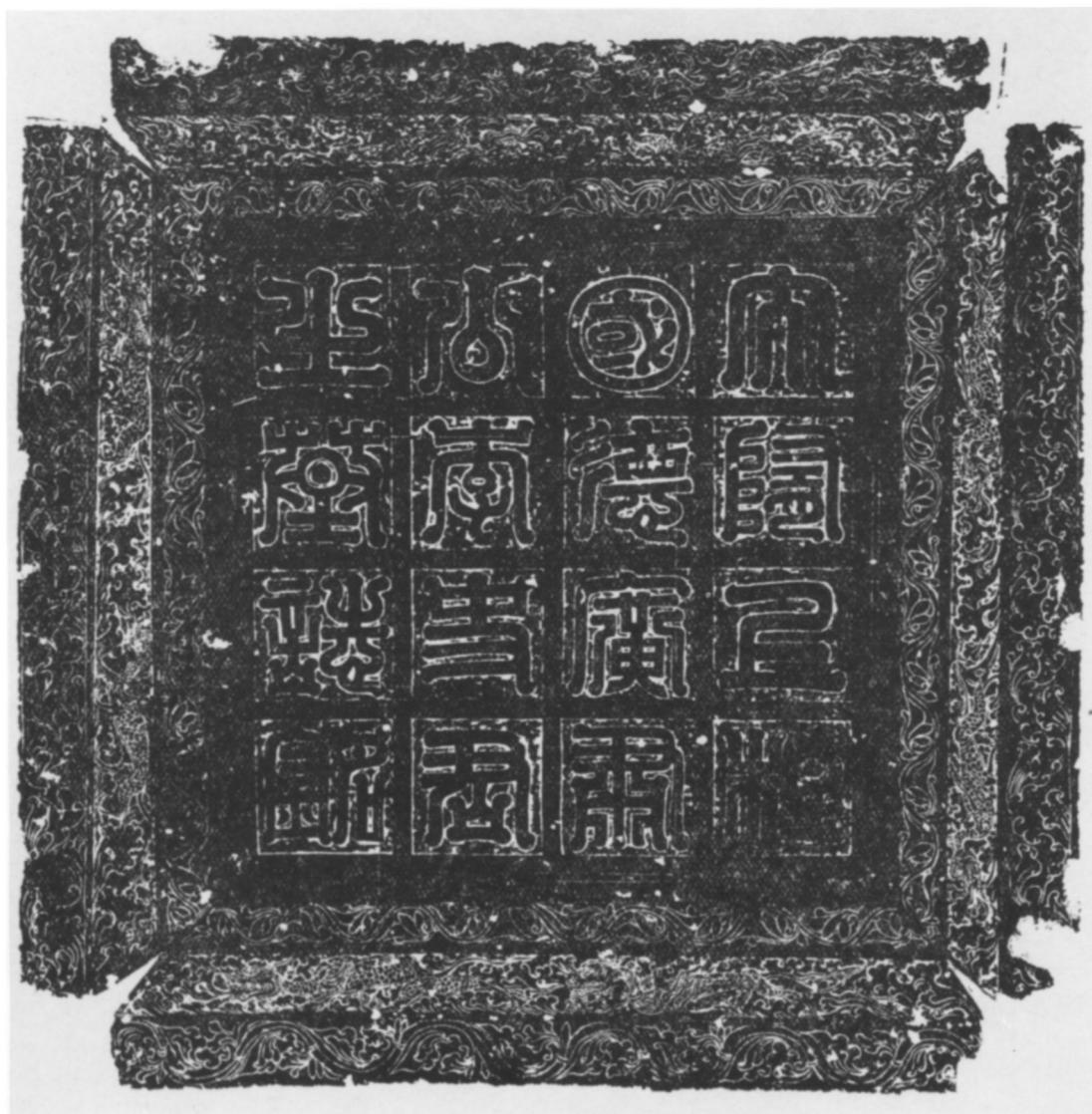


Fig. 2 Rubbing of stone epitaph lid, tomb of Li Ho

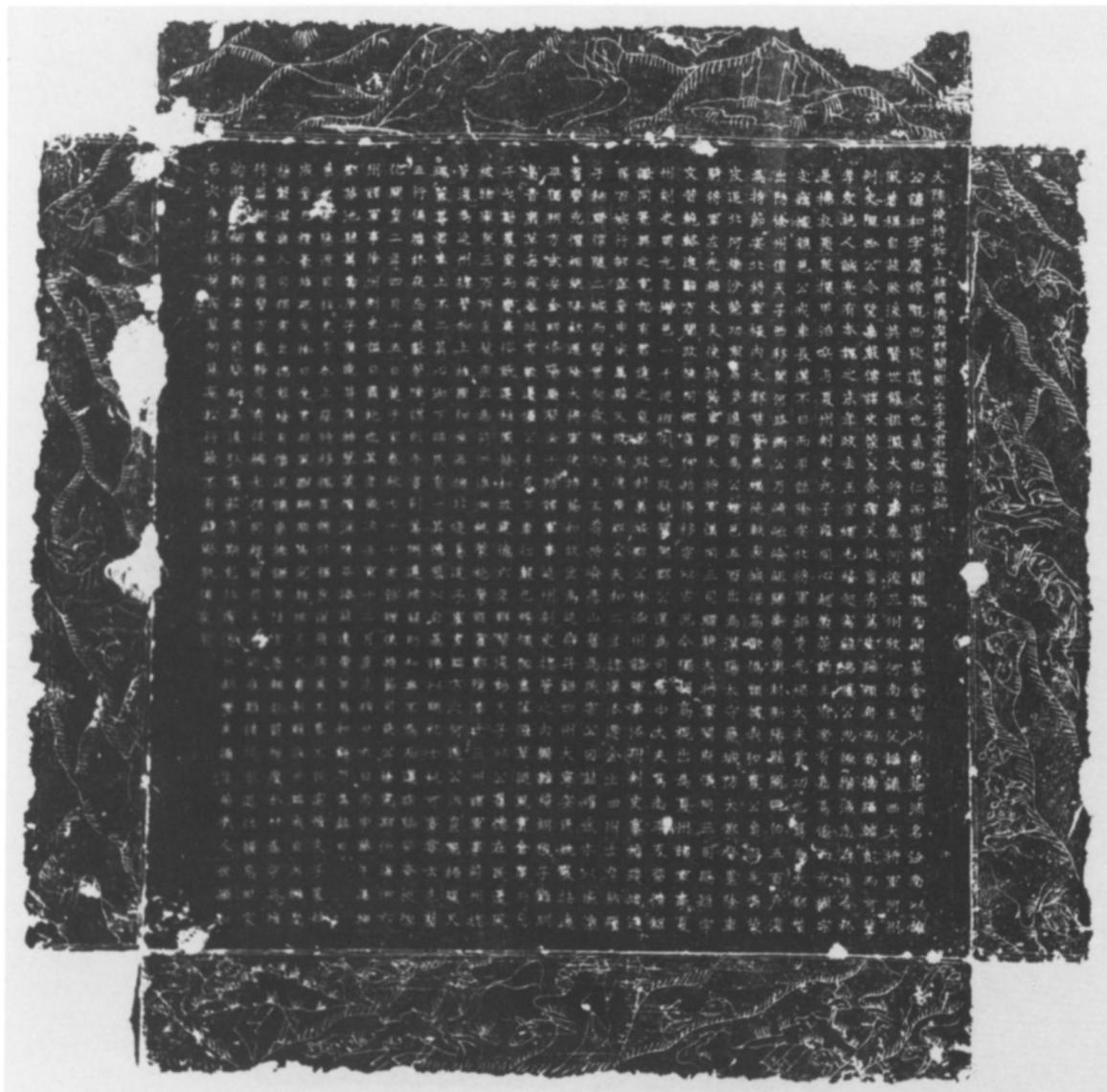


Fig. 3 Rubbing of stone epitaph block, tomb of Li Ho

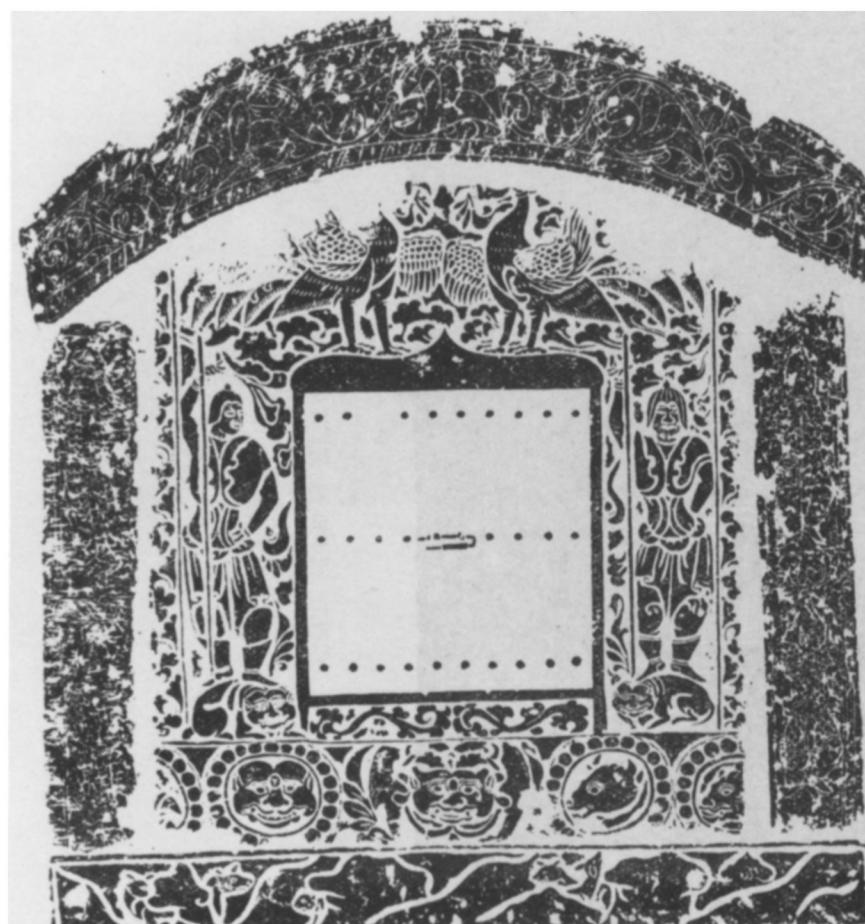


Fig. 4 Rubbing of front end of stone sarcophagus, showing Red Birds, tomb of Li Ho



Fig. 5 Rubbing of rear end of sarcophagus, showing Dark Warrior, tomb of Li Ho



Fig. 6 Rubbing of west side of stone sarcophagus of Li Ho, showing White Tiger and attendant guards

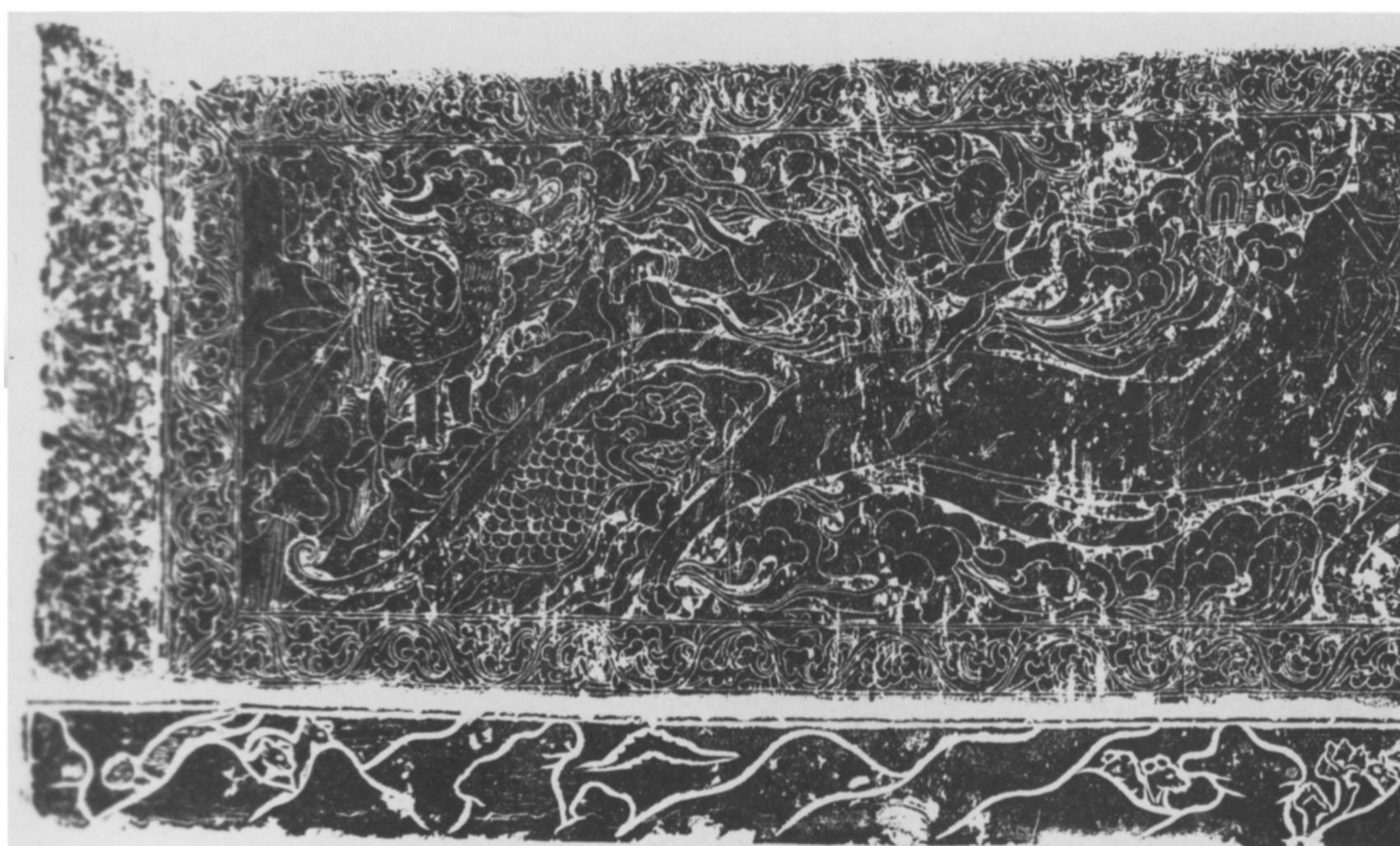


Fig. 7 Rubbing of rear end of west side of sarcophagus of Li Ho

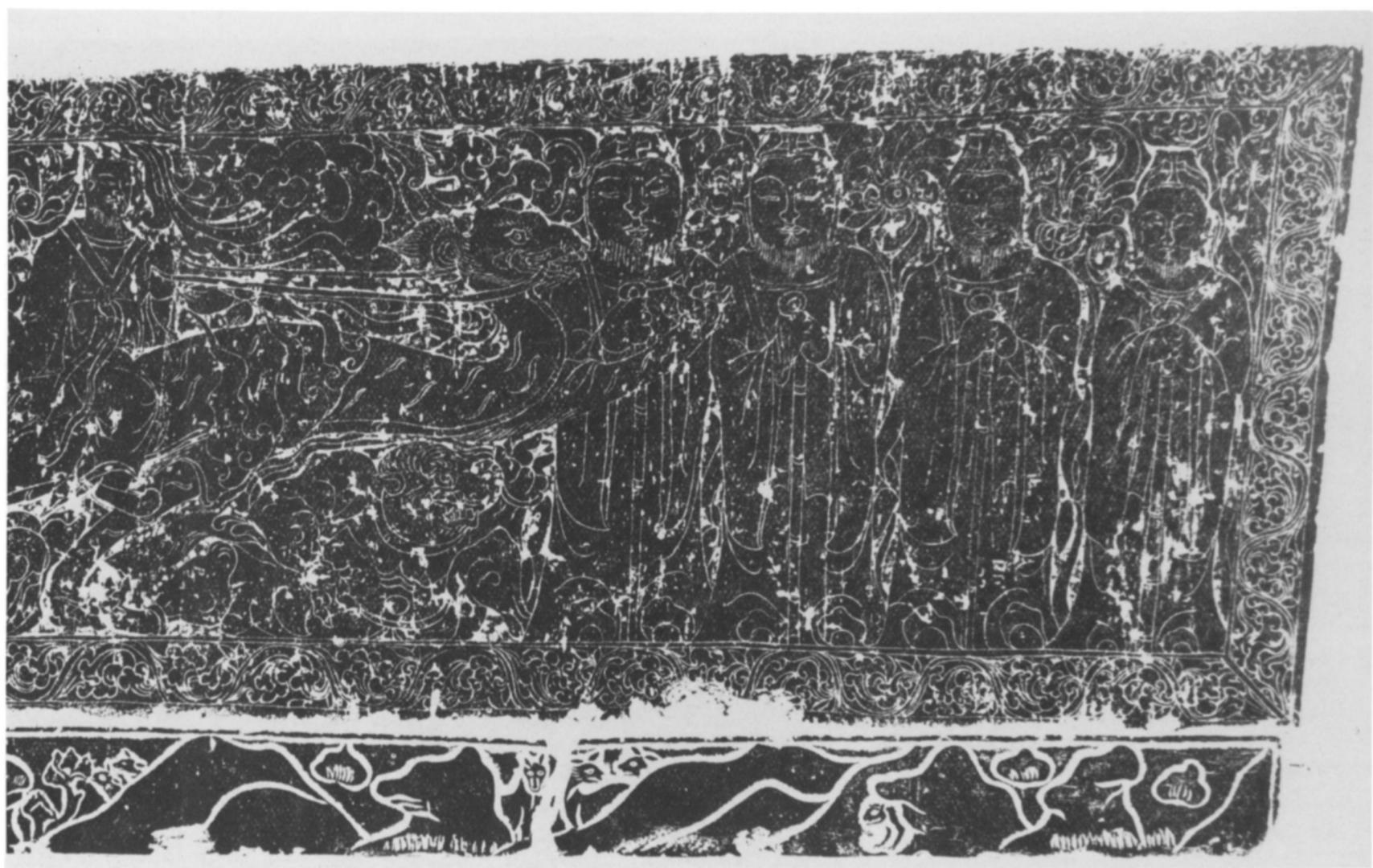


Fig. 8 Rubbing of front end of west side of sarcophagus of Li Ho

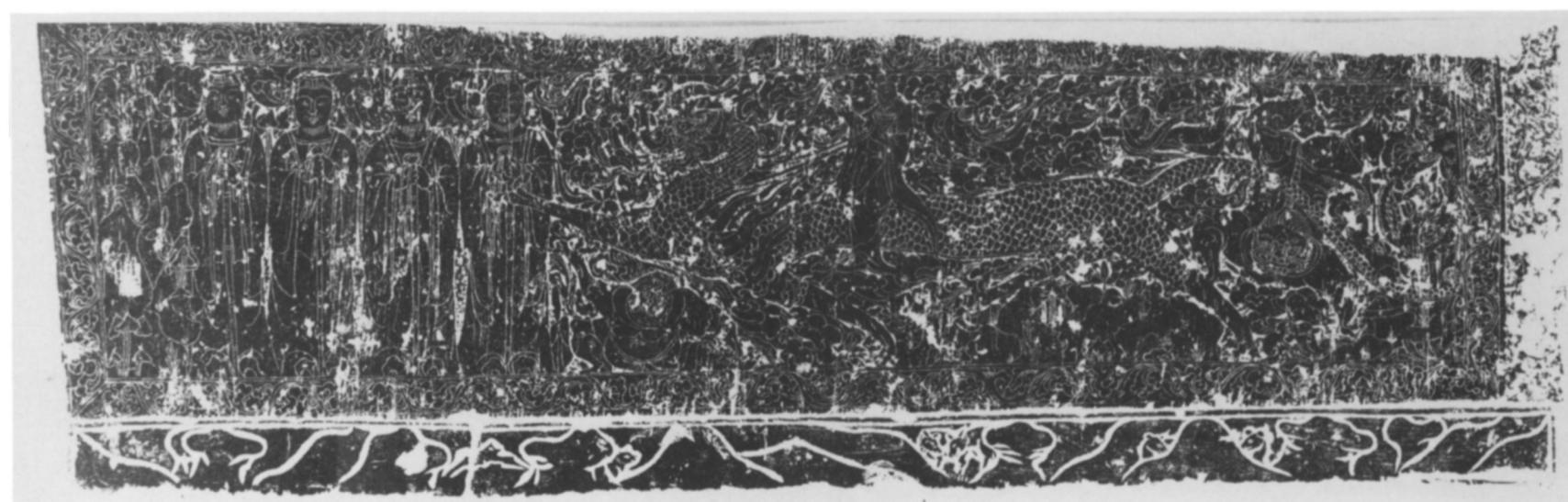


Fig. 9 Rubbing of east side of sarcophagus of Li Ho, showing Green Dragon and attendant guards

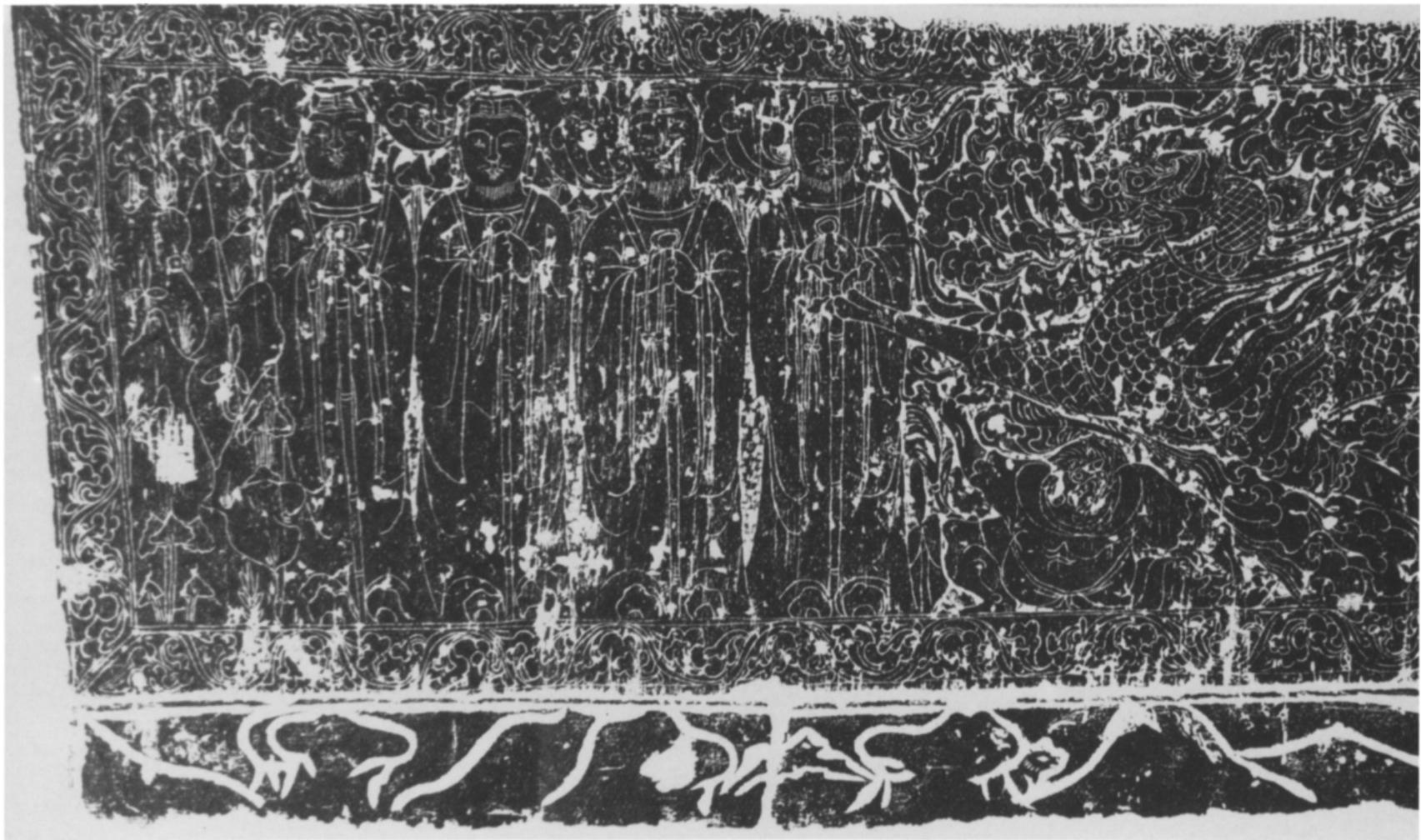


Fig. 10 Rubbing of front end of east side of sarcophagus of Li Ho

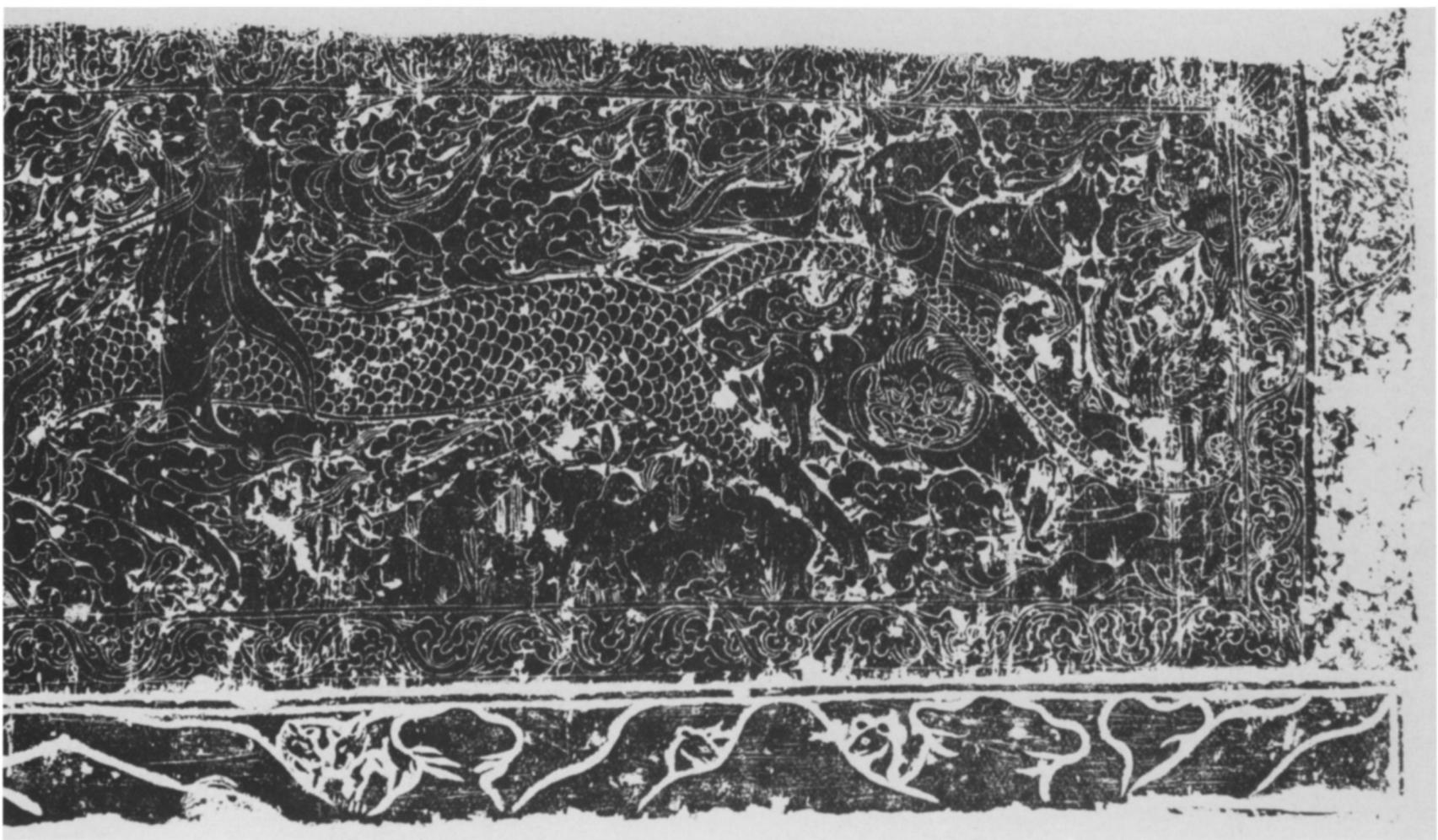


Fig. 11 Rubbing of back end of east side of sarcophagus of Li Ho



Fig. 12 Reverse print of rubbing of lid of sarcophagus, tomb of Li Ho

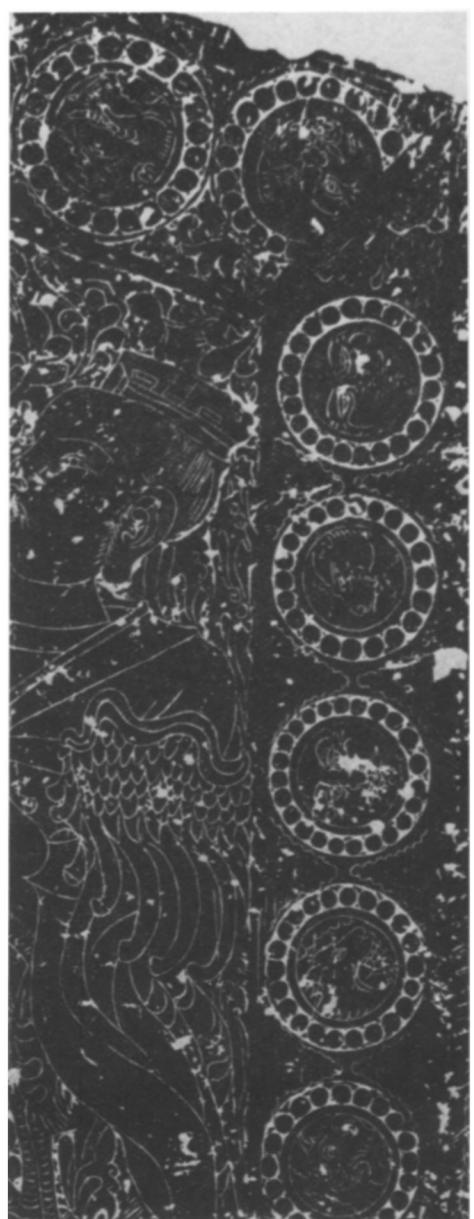


Fig. 15 Rubbing of sarcophagus lid, front detail showing pearl roundels with inscribed animal heads

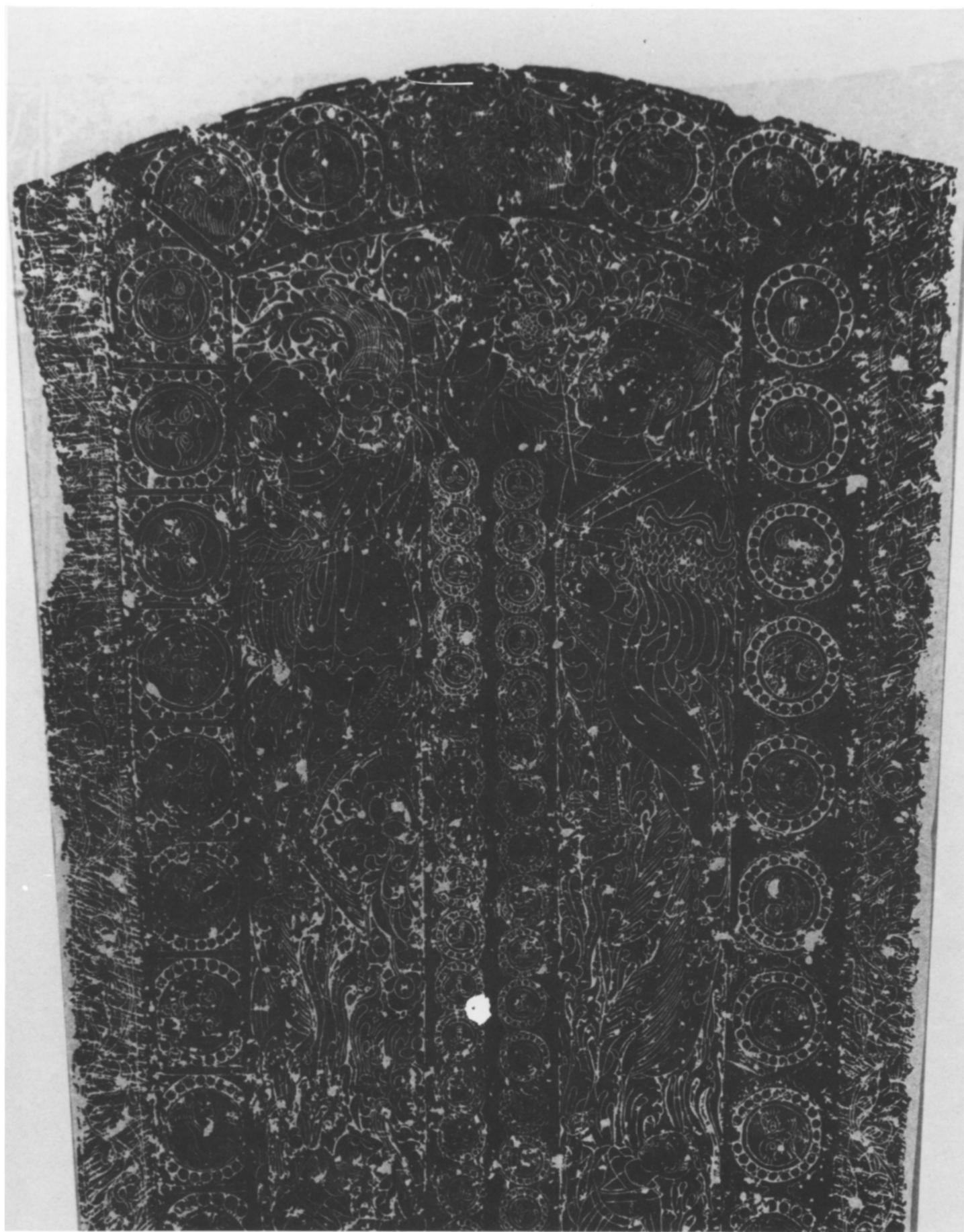


Fig. 13 Rubbing of front of lid of sarcophagus, tomb of Li Ho

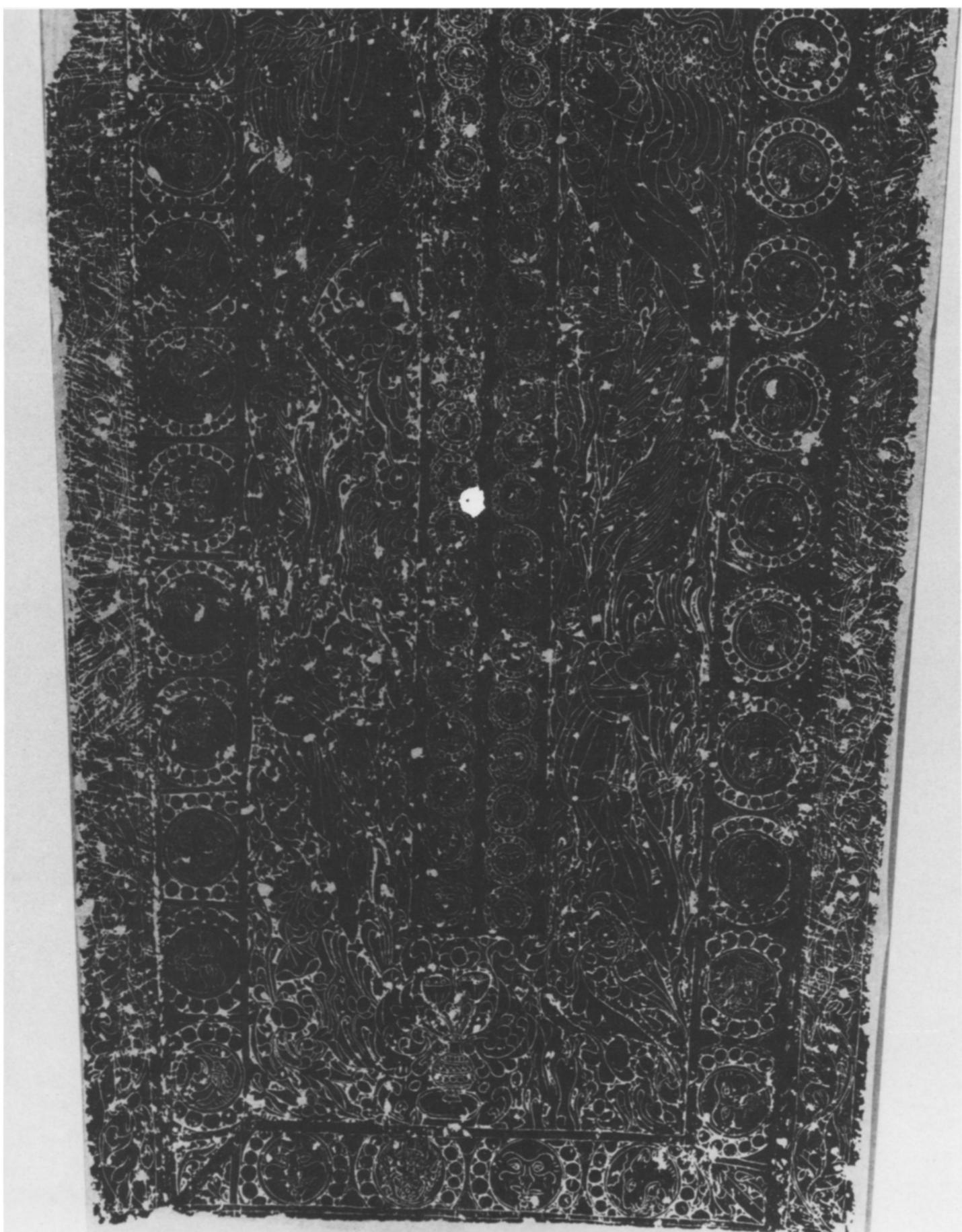


Fig. 14 Rubbing of rear of lid of sarcophagus, tomb of Li Ho

execution of the designs of the sarcophagus was not nearly as splendid as other extant coffins, in particular the early sixth century one found in Honan in 1980.⁶⁶ To what extent this crudeness and lack of finesse was obscured by the polychrome and gilt ornamentation is difficult to appraise.

Li Ho's coffin is also unusual in that Western influences are present at such an early date. Li Ho's tomb predates the International Style of art of the early T'ang by over a century. Other scattered examples of Western influences can be found in the Northern Ch'i period so that contact with the West has been surmised. Based on the visual evidence it is believed that there was by this time a heterogeneous population in North China among which the Iranians were prominent.⁶⁷ But recent archaeological evidence in the form of a Sasanid silver plate found in a Northern Wei tomb at Hua Ke Ta-t'u, at Tat'ung suggests contact with the West was made much earlier in the Six Dynasties period than believed.⁶⁸ The art of the Northern Ch'i introduces the International Style of art that reached its peak in the T'ang when documentary evidence of the presence of Westerners abounds.⁶⁹

Finally Li Ho's coffin presents a most intriguing view of the major themes of a Taoist afterlife. By comparing the treatment of the important themes of the composition to other well known examples of Taoist art, an overview of the development of theories of an afterlife can be seen. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the engravings is the primary role of the *Ssu shen*. Similar to the epitaph cover of Erh-chu Hsi dated 529, or the Boston tablet of Yüan Hui of 520, or the Loyang sarcophagus from the first quarter of the sixth century, the *Ssu shen* were never more prominent.⁷⁰ In the latter example the exquisitely detailed rendering of the immortals and their mounts identified them as Hsi Wang Mu and Tung Wang Kung. Li Ho's riders of the directional mounts are not distinguished from one another; no indication of gender is provided. The image of the deity and the symbol of the direction have merged to form a single motif. So too the doctrine of the immortals can be traced from the vague notion of *Hsien* who wander the skies and mountains in Han art, to the three categories of genies expounded in the fourth century, to the expansion of the Taoist pantheon as described in the dynastic histories of the Wei and Sui. A parallel to this development in the pictorial arts is found on the sixth century sarcophagus from Loyang where there is a clear hierarchical treatment of the immortals – there are the gods of the directional animals, Hsi Wang Mu and her consort, their divine attendants, and the Jade Maidens and celestial musicians who comprise the retinue of the tomb master. Finally the tomb of Li Ho demonstrates the new addition to the pantheon, the eight immortal official guards who are shown at extraordinarily large scale. In addition Fu Hsi and Nü

⁶⁶ P. Karetzky, "A Scene of the Taoist Afterlife on a Sixth Century Sarcophagus Discovered in Loyang, *Artibus Asiae*, 1983, vol. XLIV, p. 5.

⁶⁷ L. Sickman and A. Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China*, (Great Britain 1956), p. 56–7.

⁶⁸ Ma Yu-ji, "The Excavation of a Northern Wei Tomb at Huagedatu in Xiaozhancun, Datung", *Wen Wu*, 1983, no. 8, p. 1 ff, pl. 1.

⁶⁹ P. Karetzky, "Foreigners in T'ang and pre-T'ang Painting", *Oriental Art*, 1984, p. 160.

⁷⁰ The epitaph cover of Erh-chu Hsi dated 529 was found in Loyang and is now in the Shensi Provincial Museum; Wang Tzu-yuan, *Chung Kuo shih-k'u hua hsuan chi*, (Peking, 1957), pl. 6–8; The Boston Museum of Fine Arts has the tablet of Yüan Hui and it is reproduced and discussed by S. Bush, "Thunder Monsters and Wind Spirits in Early Sixth Century China and the Epitaph of Lady Yüan", *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, vol. LXXII, no. 367, p. 25ff.

Kua, the primogenitors of Chinese civilization, are still present in the sixth century. But they are only abstract representations of these forces and are not in any way defined as deities to whom appeals for personal salvation can be made.

Viewing the portrayal of divinities on Li Ho's sarcophagus, it is evident that Taoism had not yet developed into a religion centered upon anthropomorphic gods. Taoist deities did not receive their pictorial form as supernatural beings until the Han when stimulated by Buddhism, Taoism attempted to embody its ideals in a more concrete form. In the late sixth century Taoist art still reflects its ancient life-prolonging concerns. In contrast to the Buddhist practice of cremation, Taoists lavished great care in the preparation of the corpse for interment and much of the embellishment of the coffin is apotropaic in function – like the guardian figures or monster masks. The primary themes of ornamentation are the *Ssu shen* and astrological symbols revealing that it was the practice of *feng shui* and astrology that was the major factor in the ascension of the soul rather than dependence upon deities as in contemporary Buddhist doctrines of personal salvation. Looking back to the early sixth century coffin from Loyang, it was the ascent of the tomb master rather than a paradisical abode that was portrayed. In the final analysis the immortality of the soul in Taoist belief was still linked to the immortality of the body.

Chinese Characters

Li Ho 李柏

Ssushen 四神

Ch'i lin 麒麟

Hsien 仙

Fu Hsi 伏羲

Nü Kua 女媧

Ming Ch'i 明器

Chin Shih Huang ti 秦始皇帝

Feng Shui 風水

Wei Shu 魏書

Pao p'u tzu 抱朴子

Fu mien 覆面

Huai Nan Tzu 淮南子

Hsi Wang Mu 西王母

Chang 章