Case 5-Asia-China-W Han-TLV-Eight figures, 8 and 12 Boss



W. Han (206 BCE-8 CE), late 1st century BCE-TLV-Eight figure, 8 and 12 boss mirror, ca. 8 CE. Diameter 130  mm, thickness,  4  mm.

This TLV mirror is characterized by the four spirits in the quadrants beyond the square with an added four figures to accompany them, producing a total of eight figures. It has been reasoned that this addition of four figures to the original Four Spirits was occasioned by "design fundamentals" rather than iconography: "First, let us assume that the TLV mirror of this branch began only with Four Spirits. In such a mirror, however, the TL axes were found to be less hospitable when the figures were to be placed between their horizontal bars. Those spaces provided far less liberal quarters than the two side pockets to the left and to the right of the TL axes. When so placed the Four Spirits would experience a major constriction in their middle, whereas their heads and hind quarters could indeed move about quite freely. Second, in such an arrangement the two side pockets would contain unused space, which must have inspired a strong , additive desire in the mirror smith. As a result, he decided on nipples with their bases to fill the void, and brought in additional figures such as feathered immortals and other creatures. Third, once these figures found their way into the TLV configuration, the next logical step would have been to reduce the scale of the Four Spirits so that they could be accommodated on just one side of the TL axis, allowing the rest, now enlarged in scale, to occupy the other side. In this way the classic scheme of the octet was born" (Chou 2000:45). Conversely, the additional four figures may reflect individual preference of the bronze smith or of the patron for whom the mirror was being produced, thereby giving the mirror the stamp of an individual personality. This octet design is thought to prefigure the octet designs of later TLV mirrors (Guo 1996, pl. 62).

The Carter Collection example of this type dates to the earlier Western Han dynasty when a silver finish was applied only to the surface of the Four Spirits as confirmed by X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (Chou 2000:115). The present mirror has no such silver finish, and so it probably dates to the later Western Han dynasty toward the turn of the millennium when this mirror was produced in greater numbers. This mirror is important because it confirms the longevity of this design, which extends from the beginning of the Western Han dynasty to its end and even beyond since other examples have been found in contexts dating to 136 CE.

The inscription of this mirror is inside the central square and replicates the series of zodiacal signs子茸寅卵辰巳午未申西戌亥.



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This TLV mirror of the late Western Han period represents a building and at the same time a celestial canopy. The boss in the center corresponds to the topmost roof and the surrounding small square to the skylight. Curved brackets are indicated by the curved lines connecting the boss with this square indicating that the boss was raised above the inner square. The diagram of a lantern ceiling is enclosed in the next portion encompassed by the large outer square.

“It differs from the one in fig. 8 in having superimposed rectangles forming a star with eight points. The enclosing broad square with the double lines stands for the frame of beams on which the lantern rests. The cross in the center has disappeared but

the T-signs on the four sides of the square mark the ends of the four timber beams. Actually a round plaque (e. g. clearly to be seen in photographs of the Tomb of 'the Celestial Kings and Earthly Spirits') or a T-shaped horizontal bar is often butted-on to the end of the four beams fixed to the vault outside the lantern ceiling (figs. a). The next zone of the mirror is decorated with the signs of constellations, immortals and clouds, and this portion corresponds to the vault of the cave (fig. 9), which is also decorated with pictures of constellations, star-gods and cloud signs.

Of particular interest are the four V-signs, because they are the images of triangular-shaped wall brackets (figs. r to a and b), while

the L's correspond to L-shaped props such as can be seen in figs. to a and b in the upper part of the vault. The outer border of the mirror with its chevron pattern can be likened to the decoration of the lower parts of the vaulted tomb.

The boss in the center, which symbolizes the *rai chei, i.* e. the 'Great Ridgepole', the axis of the universe, corresponds to the central post of the building.

The twelve studs, sometimes called by the Chinese nipples or sticks (mei), are images of smaller posts which surround the square in the center of the hall, not unlike posts standing round a raised platform in temples of a later period often supporting a canopy. The eight studs in the outer portion represent posts standing like gate-posts in pairs on each side of the square.

this mirror is the image of a canopy. The squares and rectangles represent frames made of bamboo or some other light material. The interior square is connected with the rectangles by eight groups of straight lines (two on each side), each again fixed to a ledge of semi-circular shape. This proves that the rect­angular frames were suspended from the square above and supported from below by a number of curved brackets (curved lines) standing on the larger square frame. This whole structure of superimposed frames rises above the convex-shaped actual umbrella or canopy cover.

The boss in the center represents the top of the pivot of the canopy and the smaller studs the ends of umbrella stays supporting the canopy from below. In tombs of the late Chou and Han periods bronze stands of canopies and the decorated ends of umbrella stays have been discovered." The latter often end in cones, hemispherical bosses or quatre-foils closely resembling studs on some mirrors. There are some signs which show that the eight studs in the main zone imitate stays rising above the surface of the canopy cover: each cone is surrounded by a ring and the groups of lines radiating from the center again prove that the outer circle re­presents a ring, which was suspended from above by cords. Flying streamers are imitated by four lines issuing from the center of each stud demonstrating that the circle represents an open ring and not a solid disc. Each of the cones is mounted in a shallow cup. The slanting lines surrounding the main zone are heavier than on previous mirrors and ap­pear to represent bamboo splints (or straw) serving as structural basis for the various layers of the canopy.

The TLV mirrors are first and foremost an image of the sky and a reflection of the celestial order. On the other hand the earth is conceived as counterpart of the sky and for this reason the decoration of some mirrors can be interpreted in celestial as well as in terrestrial terms. The flexibility of such a scheme will be demonstrated by adopting two scales, a more limited terrestrial and a universal one. The very center of the mirror ( fig. i2) represents the pole star supposed to be the axis round which the sky revolves. Its terrestrial counterpart is the palace of the ruler, or, on the larger scale, the capital of China. The inner square corresponds to the region around the pole-star and can be interpreted as standing either for the capital or for China as a whole. The large square represents the circumpolar sky, and its terrestrial counterpart is either China or else the entire earth, which is supposed to be square. Using another terminology, it represents the cosmic mountain *IC un-lun,* a name given in the Han period to the central mountain of the universe, the Mountain of the Earth. Such an interpretation certainly appealed to the people of the Han period, who were fasc­inated by stories about the *Ke un-lun,* its famous city, its garden and its inhabitants, especially Hsi-wang-mu and the immortals. This may account for the great number of this particular type of T LV mirrors much in fashion during the last part of the Western and in the early Eastern Han periods. The large square represents the base and the inner square the top of the *Ke un-lun* mountain, the circumpolar sky. Dr. Schuyler Camman suggests that the T's stood for the screens inside the gates leading into the city. Many pictures of the Han period show a tree, post (or screen) standing between two gate-posts. The next zone, on signs in the four corners of vaulted caves. The L's stand for the four points of the compass and for the equinoxes and solstices. The V's and L's are time-space nexus signs. However, such a division of time into eight periods can be applied to all recurrent time units. This 'thinking in cycles' of recurrent natural phenomena is typical of ancient China, and the signs on the mirrors can thus be interpreted in terms of many different time units, e. g. one year, twelve years (Jupiter cycle), other astronomical cycles, or the cycle of human life and death or even world-ages.

Dr. Schuyler Camman interprets the L's as signs of movements and directions connected with the change of the seasons. In fact, the L's may be compared with the arms of the swastica-like signs representing a rotating movement. (cf. Karlgren, H. & H. Pl. 18). The complexity of possible interpretations can only be grasped, if it is understood that Chinese cosmological speculations are based on the idea of the solidarity between the universe and man: the celestial sphere has its terrestrial counterpart and heaven, earth and man are of the same substance. The order on earth must correspond with the order of the universe.

Only a few aspects of this symbolism can be given as it applies to the decoration of these mirrors. Concentric zones on T LV mirrors and on many other mirrors can be interpreted in various terms. For instance, they can represent superimposed layers of the sky, i. e. the various heavens, and be identified with periods and with sacrifice:" the innermost part with days and daily sacrifices, the second zone with months and monthly sacrifices. The large square (fig. 1 z) inscribed with the cyclical signs of the so-called 'twelve branches' encomp­asses these two periods and their respective sacrifices, each of the characters denoting a double-hour of a day and, at the same time, a constellation of the Chinese zodiac, that is, one month. There are some mirrors, on which the boss in the center is surrounded by characters for day and night, and thus refers clearly to daily sacrifices. The third zone is identified with seasons and seasonal sacrifices; and the signs of the constellations of the four seasons, e. g. fig. 12 and on many other mirror types, are the most apposite symbols. The fourth zone was identified with years and annual sacrifices and the V and L signs may refer to this. The fifth zone is connected with the Great Beginning and refers to sacrifices taking place at the beginning of a new reign, i. e. the time of enthronement or the beginning of a new cycle. This zone would then correspond to the border of the mirror.

The concentric arrangement can be interpreted alternatively in terms of the hierarchy of the social order. The center being identified with the ruler, the apex of the social pyramid, and the other zones with the other ranks in descending scale. This is based on ancient customs going back to the Shang period. According to the oracle bones it was the privilege of the king to offer daily or weekly (ten days week) sacrifices and the *Tso-chuan"* reaffirms the ancient regulations and states precisely the descending order or ranks associated with daily, monthly and seasonal sacrifices.

But the mirrors are first and foremost an image of the sky and a reflection of the celestial order. On the other hand the earth is conceived as counterpart of the sky and for this reason the decoration of some mirrors can be interpreted in celestial as well as in terrestrial terms. The flexibility of such a scheme will be demonstrated by adopting two scales, a more limited terrestrial and a universal one. The very center of the mirror ( fig. i2) represents the pole star supposed to be the axis round which the sky revolves. Its terrestrial counterpart is the palace of the ruler, or, on the larger scale, the capital of China.

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**large square** represents the

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terrestrial counterpart **China earth**, or the **cosmic mountain *Kun-lun****,* its famous city, its garden and its inhabitants, especially **Hsi-wang-mu and the immortals**. during the last part of the Western and in the early Eastern Han periods. The large square represents the base and the

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**T's stood for the screens inside the gates leading into the city**. Many pictures of the Han period show a tree, post (or screen) standing between two gate-posts. The next zone, on which we see the great constellations of the four seasons and other star symbols, represents the sky surrounding the circumpolar region.

The **four V's** **stand for the cosmic mountains at the four corners of the universe**. If we include the central mountain to make five, the most obvious terrestrial counterparts are the **Five Holy Mountains of China**, and for this reason this section can be taken as corresponding to the Middle Kingdom. On the cosmic scale it can be identified with the regions called 'the Four Seas', often mentioned in Han literature (e. g. in *Huai-nan-tzu* and in the *Shan-hai-ching).* According to the *Erh-ya* it is the name given to the countries surrounding China and inhabited by barbarians.

The **rim** of **chevrons: each single triangle again represents a mountain and each row a mountain range**. The realistically painted small mountains with trees and animals running along the lower edge of the vault in the cave in Tun-huang (Fig. 9) corroborates the identification of the zig-zag lines with mountains. While, however, in fig. 12 the outer and inner rows are simple zig-zag lines, the middle one is formed by a double line and represents two mountain ranges with a river between them. This is a conventionalized arrangement, the inverted zig-zag line always representing the mountain on the far-side of the valley." These moun­tains are those which support the base of the vault of the sky. They stand round the edge of the world and represent the *Regions Beyond the Four Seas.* The idea of mountains enclosing the universe is very old and retained in Chinese Buddhist cosmographic specula­tions. The central Mountain of the World, Meru, is sometimes said to be surrounded by as many as seven concentric circles of mountains.

The interpretation of the mirror decoration (fig. 12) in cosmological terms does not con­tradict its association with a building; on the contrary, in the Han time not only the ground plans of palaces but also the construction of single buildings were laid out as image of the universe or of the *IC un-lun.*

In cosmic terms, the central boss is the symbol of the axis of the universe round which the

circumpolar stars revolve, the twelve smaller bosses in the great square represent smaller pillars of the sky each associated with one of the earthly branches as signs of a zodiacal constellation. In terms of the *IC un-lun* they are the signs of twelve jewelled towers believed to stand on the rampart. The *IC un-lun* is the abode of the gods and thought to be guarded by the twelve spirits of these constellations, a conception still reflected in the art of the Tang period; a diagram found in Tun-huang shows the planet Jupiter in human form sit­ting in the center of a square surrounded by twelve men representing the twelve zodiacal constellations. Outside the square the Four Heavenly Kings are depicted. They guard Mt. Meru and rule over the four corners of the universe." The raised platform in the center of early Buddhist temples in Japan is the image of Mt. Meru and it is sometimes sur­rounded by twelve Guardian Generals.

The eight bosses correspond to the famous eight pillars (or mountains), of which the one called *Pu-chou* was damaged by Kung-kung. How far-reaching the implications of all these motifs can be, is reflected in contemporary cosmological speculations, e. g. according to *Huai-nan-tzu"* the eight winds issue from the eight pillars or mountains of the sky ; each rules over a period of forty-five days and is associated with a particular type of seasonal work. For example, when the wind blows from the pillar in the north-western region of the universe, the *Pu-chou* pillar, it is time for repair work to palaces and houses and the improvement of river banks and city walls.