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Greek Influences on the Pazyryk-style Wrestling Motif of the Keshengzhuang Bronze Buckles

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The site of Keshengzhuang (*Keshengzhuang yizhi* 客省庄遗址) is situated at about ten kilometers west of Xi'an City, near the ancient capital of the first emperor of the Qin (Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇, 260–210 BC). In 1955 archaeologists found bronze belt buckles (or horse harnesses) at this site with decorations that represent two wrestlers (Fig. 1–5). Dating from the middle to the end of the Warring States period (475–221 BC), it is the oldest representation of wrestling in China.

These buckles are of Western Scythian origin, according to Emma C. Bunker, a metallurgy specialist on ancient China. In earlier publications, these wrestlers have, it appears, been wrongly associated with the Xiongnu of Mongolia (Di Cosmo 2002, Wu 1995, Lin 1994, Shao 1986).

The Keshengzhuang buckles exhibit two tall, elegant horses (not of the shorter Takhi or Mongolian type) in harnesses of a Scythian style, showing also two trees with their leaves turned upward and a flying swan or goose holding an object (perhaps an egg or a weight) that seems to be pinning the two wrestlers together. The swan is represented as having a human hand (Fig. 1–2) that holds an object. The two wrestlers look similar, like twins, with long wavy hair, and both are wearing Scythian-style loose trousers.

The two wrestlers are holding each other tightly, each man's head on the other's shoulder, the left wrestler holding the waist of his opponent with his right hand, and catching the back of the other's knee with his left hand, in a tackling pose. The right wrestler holds his opponent with his right arm around the other's neck, right hand grasping his opponent's right shoulder, while his left hand is grasping the underside of his opponent's right thigh, trying to defend against the tackle.

I have proposed earlier in two articles (Christopoulos 2010, 2012) that these two wrestlers represent the Dioscuri in the act of wrestling. According to Greek mythology, Leda, the queen of Sparta, was impregnated by Zeus, who took the form of a swan to seduce her. Leda produced two eggs

from this union, from which hatched two sets of twins; the Dioscuri (Castor and Polydeuces) and Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. In Sparta, the pear tree was associated with the Dioscuri, and images of the two twin gods were hung in its branches. Polydeuces was also one of the principal legendary creators of boxing: he supposedly taught the art to the Bebryces tribe, of the Black Sea region (Philostr. *Gymn* 9; Theocr. *Idyll* 22).

During Hellenistic times, the Dioscuri were highly revered as patrons of athletic contests among the Scythians of the area of the Black Sea; they were represented on the coins of the Scythian kings of northern Thrace between 250 and 100 BC (Adraspos, Akrosandros and Charaspos) as athletic victors, each with long wavy hair, wearing crowns of laurel (Fig. 7). The Scythian custom of wrestling had earlier spread beyond the Greek colonies of the Black Sea, as Thucydides mentions in 431 BC (*Pel. Wars* 1.5 5–6). Because wrestling is a natural way of competing in games of strength, and thus frequently found throughout human populations, training for wrestling was not unique to the Greek *palaestra* (wrestling hall). But professional athleticism was, and it was recognized as such in historical records from ancient Rome to Babylon, Suza and China (Christopoulos 2010, 2012, 2013b), at a time contemporaneous with the period of the Olympic Games.

The colonization of Asia by Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), followed by the Greek-style social organization that arrived in the newly built cities, spread athletic games widely through the East (Launey 1950). This mixture of Greek professional athleticism and religiosity in the *palaestras* of Central Asian cities, carried out by the local Hellenized people, became especially notable during the period of the Seleucid empire, i.e., the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, and by the Kushana empire that followed it.

With the founding of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom around 250 BC, the Hellenistic royal lineage of the Dioscuri came to be emphasized by King Eucratides (175–145 BC), a cousin of Antiochos IV Epiphanes (Tarn 1951). The reverse side of many of the coins issued under his reign shows the Dioscuri on horseback, holding spears and palm leaves (Fig. 8). It is evident as well that the combat sports practiced by the Central Asian Scythians were by this time strongly influenced by the Greeks resident in Bactria and by the presence of the *palaestra* built in each new city (Bernard 1987).

A pair of electrum buckles made in the Scythian style has been found at Pazyryk (Ukok, Plateau, southern Siberia), and the two buckles exhibit a motif similar to that of the Keshengzhuang buckles (Fig. 9).

Pazyryk was a region inhabited by a federation of nomads and merchants of Scythian origin who were fierce warriors as well. Even Alexander and his armies were unable to vanquish them during their conquest of Bactria and Sogdiana. Later, these Scythian tribal federations would be known as the "Sacae" in Greco-Roman records, and they would eventually destroy the Greco-Bactrian kingdom.

The Pazyryk nomads established burial sites known as "Kurgans," and these date mostly from 600 to 200 BC. Horses were generally buried together with their dead riders; the more important the individual, the more horses were buried. Kurgan religious traditions were closely connected to horses and the cycles of nature, emphasized all the more because summers are short in the steppes of Siberia. Because the Kurgans had interactions with the Greeks in the northern part of the Black Sea region, some of their representations were influenced by Greek art.

The electrum buckles of Pazyryk (Fig. 9) exhibit the motif of a tree heavy with fruit, or, alternatively, as dying — symbolizing respectively the end of autumn and the beginning of winter. They also show two horses standing together, and two figures sitting under the tree, with a third, smaller man who is dead or dying. He is supine and appears to be holding the hand of the figure sitting to his right, as if he were a family member. The sitting figure on the right has a tall hat that seems connected to the tree, but this object appears to be a woman, perhaps of divine origin. This figure is sitting under the tree and may be seen as the symbol of the resurrection of nature, perhaps like Demeter (or Leda, the mother of the Dioscuri?). It is possible though less likely that the three figures engraved here are the brothers present at the origin of the Scythian tribes (Herodotus IV. 5–7), that is, Lipoxais (King of the Mountain), Arpoxais (King of the Deep) and Colaxais (King of the Sun). If Colaxais were the younger of the three brothers, he could be represented here as dying, with the coming of winter, but then there should be three horses, not two. Regardless of specific iconographic meaning, the finely worked motif on the electrum buckle symbolizes the cycle of life and death and the changing of the seasons. Tuplin (2004, 74) makes the case for associating these Scythian representations and their horses with the Dioscuri of Sparta:

The Laconian Dioscuri, who take turns to live in the kingdom of the Dead and on Olympus and who thus symbolize the eternal periodic succession of life and death, are worshipped as horse-tamers, and protectors of horsemen.

Examining the motif on the bronze buckle of Keshengzhuang, we see a very detailed representation of two men who are engaged in wrestling, for which we can perhaps find a relationship with Greek art. A *stater* coin found in the city of Aspendos in Pamphylia (today's Antalya), dated to around 394–380 BC, has a motif showing a similar wrestling technique, representing two twin-like wrestlers as well, probably the Dioscuri (Fig. 6). Aspendos was a Greek colony built by migrants from Argos around 1000 BC. It is also important to note that Sacae horsemen formed part of the armies of Xerxes I when he launched his attack against Greece between 480 and 479 BC. So the Sacae had not only had contact with the Greek colonies of the Black Sea — they had even come to Greece itself.

Concerning the motifs of the Pazyryk art, according to Kawami (1999), the Greek connections at Pazyryk are usually overshadowed by the exotic nature of the artifacts. She argues that they were made by local artists using Greek images, but not by Greeks themselves. Gaebel (2004, 52), however, claims that the fine golden works of Pazyryk might perhaps have been made by real Greek artists, and that the buckles were also used as harnesses for horses. Scythian saddles, contemporary with Classical Greece, have been found in the Pazyryk tombs. These comprised two jointed cushions, four wooden bows (one either side, front and rear), occasional wooden spacers between the cushions, and girth, breast and copper straps. Rudenko (1970) noted differences between horse-riding equipment used by the Greeks and by men of the Scythian steppe.

It is very important to understand that there are connections between Greek art and some of the Pazyryk motifs, and accordingly between the wrestling motifs found in Keshengzhuang, because they share the same cultural origin. In contrast to the Pazyryk electrum buckle with its decorations representing death, the wrestlers of Keshengzhuang symbolize rebirth. The wrestling games and festivities among the Scythians of Siberia took place during the short spring or summer season, because the rest of the year did not allow for wrestling contests. They were organized as a celebration of the rebirth of nature and man, and we can find parallels with the athletic games held in the sacred sanctuaries of ancient Greece (Gardiner 1971).

At Olympia, Pelops (Πέλοψ), the "dark-faced" and ancient king of Pisa (Olympia), worshipped since Mycenaean times, represented for that region darkness and death: a black ram was sacrificed to him at night, in a pit (*bothros*). By contrast, the day-time sacrifices for Zeus were made up of a multitude of oxen on an altar (*bomos*) ten meters high. Winners in the Games were crowned by branches taken from an olive tree, symbolizing rebirth into life from the world of the dead. In Sparta, the two Dioscuri are shown, similar to the motif of Keshengzhuang. They have the pear-tree as their attribute, such trees being sacred to the moon because of their white blossoms. They are also the symbol of the death-goddess in ancient Mycenae and in Boeotia. At the sanctuary of Delphi, the Games celebrated the coming to light from darkness, because Apollo had killed the Python from the Deep, and accordingly the laurel tree was the symbol of the resurrection of the arts, beauty and light. At the sacred temple of Nemea, the figure that appeared was the little child Opiheltes, who had been killed by the bite of a viper while he was lying on a leaf of the celery plant (*Aptum graeolens*), so the winners were crowned by leaves from the same plant, symbolizing Opiheltes's rebirth from the world of the Dead. In Isthmia, the games celebrated the dead child Melicertes, who had been drawn into the sea but brought back to shore near a stone pine tree by a dolphin, and thus the athletic victors were crowned with branches from the stone pine tree. Thus we see that the religious signification of the athletic games in Greece contained exactly the same symbolism as the Keshengzhuang and Pazyryk buckle motifs, and at the same period.

According to Kawami, the influence of Greek art at Pazyryk not only proves the presence of Western influence, but also indicates a date for that influence. The scallop-crested griffin motifs influenced by Greek art date to as early as the mid-fifth century BC, and tombs 1 and 2 date probably from the fourth century BC. This artistic influence occurred mainly along the steppes between the Altai region and the Black Sea. However, during the time of the Seleucids and the Greco-Bactrian empire (still according to Kawami), Hellenistic art disappeared from the site of Pazyryk. This may well have occurred for political reasons, as the nomads of Pazyryk were in conflict over territory and the gold trade with the Seleucids and the Greco-Bactrian empire. These were situated at the southern part of their borders and were exploiting their rich mines of gold and silver.

The bronze buckles of Keshengzhuang must date to around the fourth century BC, at the end of the Warring States period in China and the opening of the Qin dynasty. They are not necessarily

associated with the Greco-Bactrian expansion to the east (Christopoulos 2012), which happened later, and which came from the Tarim Basin. These Scythian horsemen were coming directly from the steppes of southern Siberia, and they may be related to the "Black Horse armies" (Lirong 騾戎) that had attacked the Qin kingdom since the early Zhou period. As the Keshengzhuang horse motif shows, these tall and elegant horses (perhaps of the "Tarpan" type), found as well in the Pazyryk tombs — unlike the shorter Mongolian type — are dark chestnut, dun, bay or black, but never gray, roan or piebald, and they are without any white marks at all.

The "wrestling" element could definitively be linked to the ancient Pan-Hellenic Games, as it was a custom known to the Scythians and one that had been practiced in the Greek colonies since their foundation. Every four years, Greek citizens only were called from these colonies in order to participate in the Pan-Hellenic Games in the major religious centers like Delphi or Olympia. The Greeks had a tradition of holding athletic games in everyday life, celebrating them at every religious festival and for such events as victories and commemorations.

The Greeks included the Scythians among those they called "barbarians," that is, people who did not know Greek ways (particularly the customs of athletic games, pederasty and philosophy). Anacharsis, the Scythian who apparently went to Athens around 589 BC and became one of the "Seven Sages of Greece," was killed by his fellow Scythians when he returned home, because he brought back "Greek ways" with him (Herodotus, IV. 76; Diog. Laert., I. 102). As far as it concerns the motifs on the Keshengzhuang buckles, the wrestling style does not show any similarity with the steppe belt-wrestling as it was known in the Central and Eastern Asian iconography (Christopoulos 2013a). Most northern China and Central Asian wrestling imagery of late antiquity and the early medieval period shows two opponents wrestling by grasping their opponent's belts, not their legs. On the contrary, the wrestling style represented on the Keshengzhuang buckles is much closer to ancient Greek Olympic wrestling (*pale pállē*), and similar as well to the first paintings of Chinese wrestling (*Juedi-Jueli* 角抵, 角力) appearing during the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) (Christopoulos 2010).

The Keshengzhuang motif provides powerful evidence that religious-athletic games occurred among the Scythians before the conquest of Alexander the Great and his implementation of the gymnasium as a state institution around 330-329 BC in Bactria and in Sogdiana. From 500 to 400 BC, religious-athletic contests among the Scythians of Southern Siberia and Shaanxi were connected with

Hellenic sanctuaries, both in their religious signification and in their technical representation, initiated mainly from the Greco-Scythian colonies of the Black Sea. The correspondence of symbolism in these instances of Greek and Scythian art demonstrates that the two are linked, and therefore that the Scythians of Southern Siberia and Shaanxi appear to have constituted a vital historical link between Hellenic and Chinese athletics in antiquity.

Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

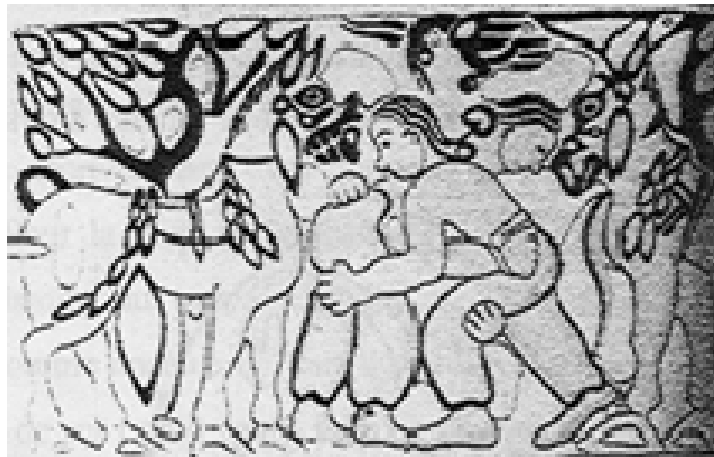


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

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