

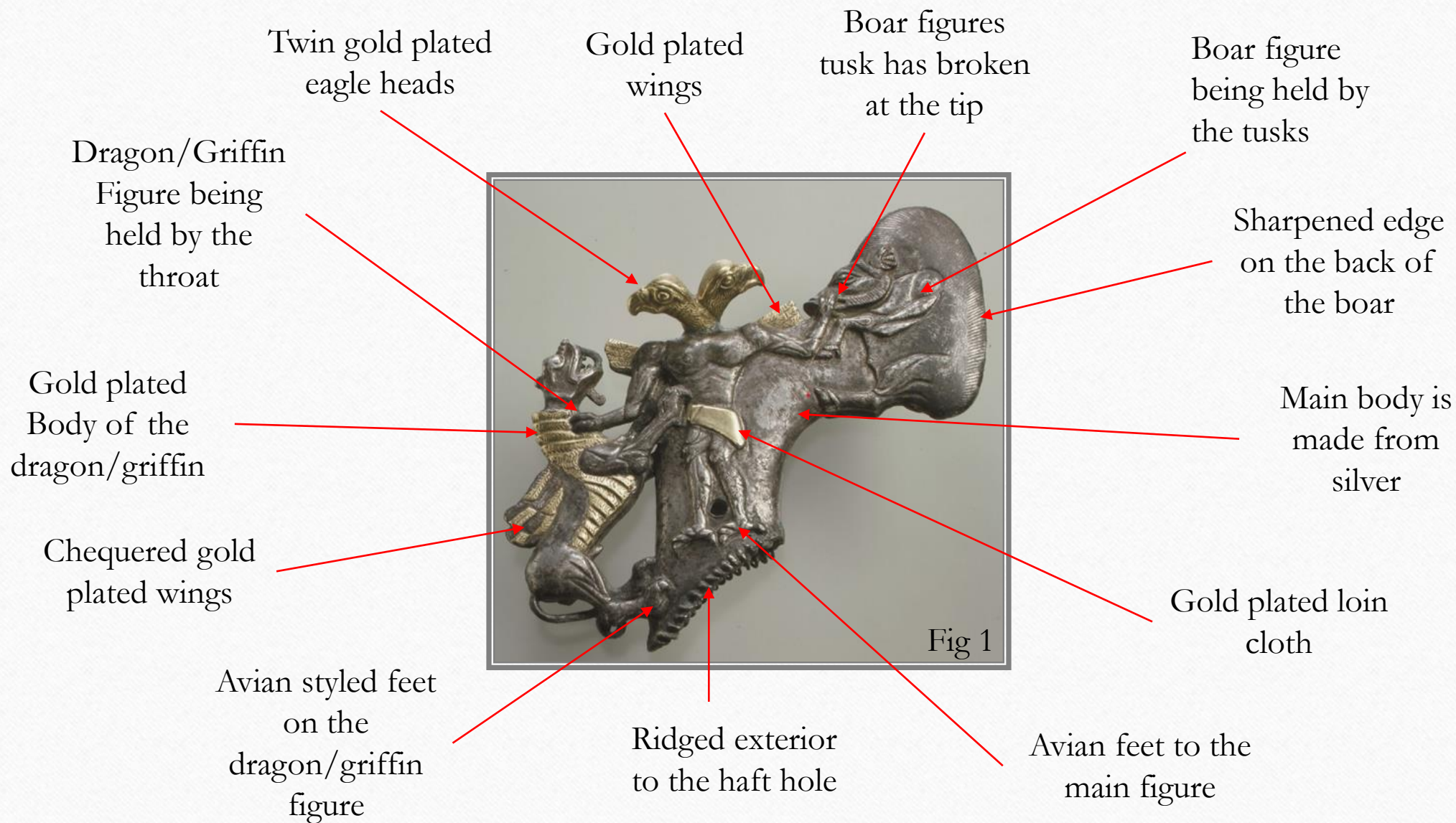
Heroic Avian Humanoid Axe Head

David-Jay Fisher



Materiality

- Object held in The Met art Museum, New York
- Accession number: 1982.5.
- Overall measurements: 15cm in length and 10.8cm in height
- Haft hole: 5.1cm in length and 1.5cm in width
- Weight 581 g
- Materials Used: gold plating and silver
- Iconography: Avian headed figure grappling a boar in the left hand and a dragon/griffin in the right hand
- The use of rare metals such as gold plating and silver indicates at a spiritual/ceremonial use
- The axe head is mirrored on both sides



Historical context

- This axe head is thought to be Bactrian to Margiana in origin (Modern day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan)
- Dating to 2200 BCE
- The axe heads iconography has been linked to 3rd and 2nd millennium iconography in what would now be western Iran (Pittman, H., 1984)
- The iconography featured has also been connected to ancient trade routes between bronze age civilisations specifically Bactria and the Indus valley (Parpola, A., 2011)
- Iconography of an avian featured humanoid as a hero figure is common in ancient Bactrian art indicating that this object has links to this civilisation (Pittman, H., 1984)
- Unfortunately, little is known of this objects origin as it was housed in a private collection prior to being purchased by the Met

Use and Practicality

- Likely to be used in ceremonial/spiritual practices
- Impractical design for labour usage
- Weaker and rarer metals used which indicates that this was not a practical tool or a weapon for combat
- Combat and practical tools in 3rd to 2nd millennium were commonly made from bronze which is far stronger than silver and gold
- It can be argued that this may not have been an axe head but instead the head of a staff (Ambos, C. and Krauskopf, I., 2008)
- The axe head itself is tactile likely meaning that it was meant to be held and felt while being used in ritual practices
- Enchantment may also play a role through the iconography present (Gell, A., 1992)
- The scene depicted on this artifact may represent power and strength

Shared Iconography: Western Iran

- Other bird headed hero figures have been found across the near east specifically relating to Bactria and the Harappans of the Indus valley (Winckelmann, S., 2000)
- Other axe heads have been discovered western Iran portraying similar iconography
- One such axe portrays a dragon head which is stylised similar to the dragon seen on the object examined – Fig 2
- Another common factor that links these axe heads is the shape of the blade edge which seems to be stylised to the region – Fig 2, Fig 3
- Similar iconography to that presented on the axe head has also appeared on Afghani beakers made from gold in the same period (Pittman, H., 1984) – Fig 4
- This beaker does not have iconography of a bird headed figure however the eagles used around the rim of the beaker are similar to the eagle heads featured on the axe head

Similar Iconography



Fig 2
Copper alloy shaft hole
dragons head axe



Fig 3
Shaft-hole axe
head



Fig 4
Beaker with
birds on the rim

Private Collections

Private Collections

- This object was once held in a private collection
- There little to no evidence of this object in archaeological record
- Objects previously held in private collections can still be identified through common iconographic and stylistic choices that can be seen on other artifacts.
- This means that there is no objective fact in discussions of objects previously held in private collections relying on common identifiable factors and speculation.
- Private collections hinder the pursuit of knowledge as they are not on display as well as limiting the types of studies possible on artifacts
- However private collections in some cases can preserve artifacts from political and social turmoil that may have destroyed artifacts



Summary

- This object is a fascinating piece of art dating to the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE
- Linked to civilisations across the near east, unfortunately there is no concrete evidence of this pieces origin and archaeological history
- As a previous item in a private collection this has hindered knowledge of this artifacts origin, creation, and purpose
- The materials used indicated that this was an implement used for a higher purpose
- Likely used in spiritual/ceremonial practices due to the iconography and materiality present.
- The shared Iconography between this axe head and the other 3 objects shown links this axe head to Bactria and Afghanistan despite the lack of archaeological record
- Enchantment presumably has a role to play in the creation and use of this artifact due to the materiality and scene of power depicted

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Fig 1: Shaft-hole axe head with bird-headed demon, boar, and dragon.

Source -

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/329076> accessed 09.05.2023

Fig 2: Copper Alloy Shaft Hole dragons head axe

Source -

Pittman, H., 1984. Art of the Bronze Age: Southeastern Iran, Western Central Asia, and the Indus Valley. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pg, 78

Fig 3: Shaft-hole axe head

Source -

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/326680> Accessed 10.05.2023

Fig 4: Beaker with birds on the rim

Source - <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/327427> Accessed 10.05.2023