

FIVE NEWLY DISCOVERED BAS-RELIEFS
OF THE HAN PERIOD

BY

BERTHOLD LAUFER.

(With Four Plates.)

Reprinted from the T'oung-Pao, Vol. XIII.



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Late **E. J. BRILL**
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To the courtesy of Mr. L. Wannieck in Paris I owe five rubbings from stone bas-reliefs of the Han period recently discovered in Shantung and, as I understand, offered for sale on the Peking market. These stones are not apt to arouse any particular interest; the representations exhibited on them present nothing new in principle, but merely well-known subjects and designs. This feature, however, lends them a certain secondary interest in that it reveals again and confirms the fact that the Han sculptors worked after fixed ready-made models, and that their productions were composed of quite typical scenes and figures of a limited range of variability. The question which remains to be solved is as to when and how these stereotyped designs came into being, whether and to what extent they were preceded by a creative period of less conventional art, and what agencies had influenced its beginnings and development. In the present state of our knowledge, we can merely raise these questions; the scanty material which has survived does not yet allow us to formulate them in a conclusive manner. It would be premature to regard the bas-reliefs known to us as falling under the best

productions of the art of the Han epoch; the term "art", at least, should not be emphasized, and it rather seems to me that they represent the output of artisans or craftsmen who catered to the every-day demands of the public and copied from more elaborate works of greater artists whose achievements are lost to us.

The scene on Plate I bears a familiar aspect. In the second zone a couple of dancers and a pair of drummers are in the centre of the action. The drum-pole is stuck into the figure of a wooden striped tiger serving as base, as on the bas-relief No. 151 or 158 in CHAVANNES' *Mission archéologique*; it closely agrees with the latter, except that the position of the drummers and dancers is exchanged, and that there is perhaps a still higher degree of conventional stiffness around these figures. The first on the left is a woman *en face*, the lower portion indicating the skirt being outlined in the shape of a rectangle with concave sides, no attempt being made to draw the feet. In the row above, six sitting men — one on the right being broken off owing to a mutilation of the slab — are forming the orchestra, the one in the centre holding the lyre which is leaning against the railing exactly in the same manner as on No. 163 of *Mission*. The two musicians on the right-hand side seem to brandish bells or castanettes in their uplifted right hands. The lower zone contains the familiar kitchen-scene: to the left two fellows kneading dough in a trough, a cook on his knees preparing a fish and another stirring with a poker the fire in a stove with one cooking-hole over which a kettle of trapezoidal form is placed. We here have again the representation of a musical and dancing entertainment accompanied by a solemn repast, — in honor of the dead.

The stone reproduced in Plate II, unfortunately much effaced, shows another variant of the motive "The Search for the Tripod Vessel", four other representations of which have become known (LAUFER, *Chinese Grave-Sculptures*, p. 24, and *Mission*, No. 122 and 148).

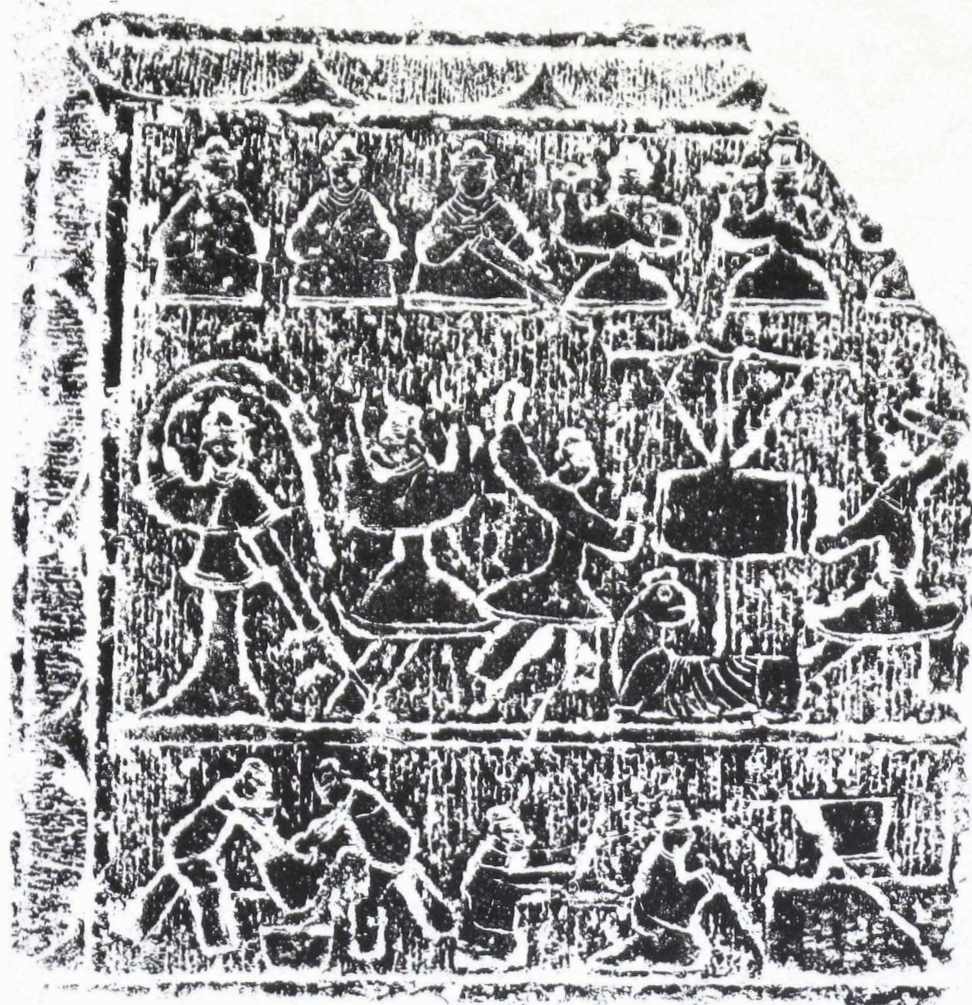


PLATE I.

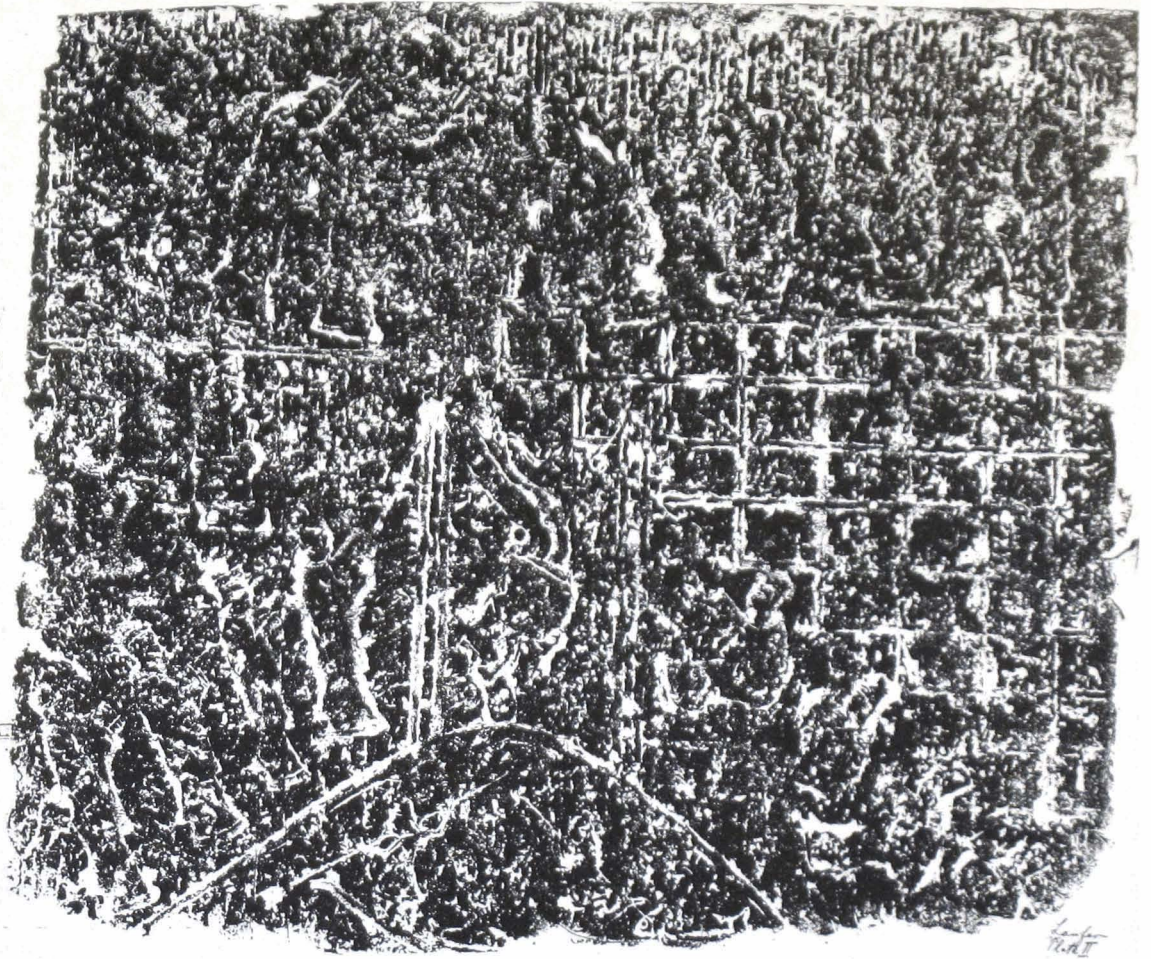


PLATE II.

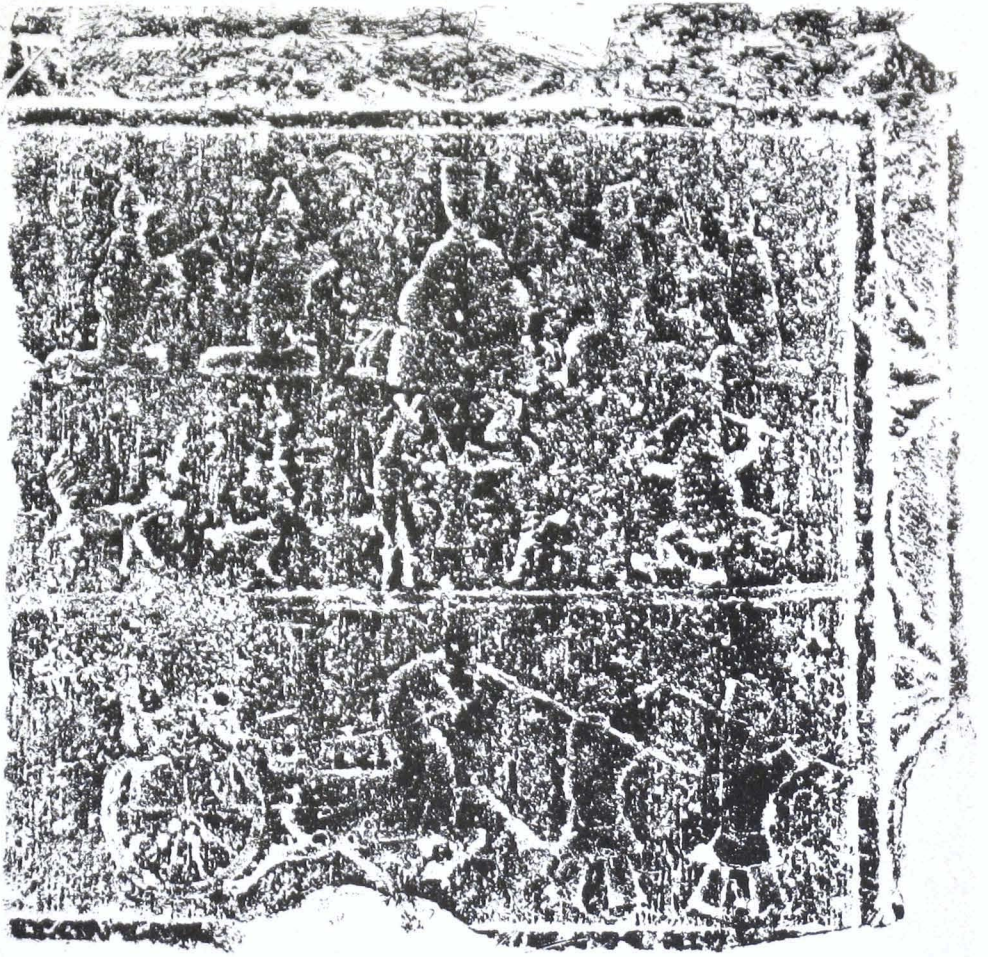


PLATE III.

The bank of the river is here walled up with rows of stones or bricks as in the corresponding subject of the Hiao-t'ang shan, and the presence of water is symbolized by the large figure of a fish and two boatmen managing a canoe with long oars. Three men on each side are hauling up the vessel by means of a pulley; the bronze is plain and undecorated here. Judging from the various repetitions, this seems to have been a favorite subject of the time.

The relief of Plate III is divided into three panels. The centre of the upper one is occupied by a sitting person of dignity seizing the handle of a hoe-shaped implement. He is surrounded by two kneeling men on either side. The second zone is filled with representations of animals, two walking quadrupeds on the left, the first with bushy tail presumably being a fox; in the middle two hares standing erect and pounding drugs in a mortar, the well-known lunar story familiar from the sculptures of the Hiao-t'ang shan; and a frog viewed from the back brandishing two objects in the front-paws. Below, a chariot holding two inmates is preceded by two footmen shouldering spears. A close parallel to the entire composition is offered by No. 162 in CHAVANNES' *Mission*, to the exclusion of the typical hunting-scene there added in the fourth zone at the lower end. The three upper ones contain the same scheme in the same succession of themes as in the present case: kneeling attendants around a conspicuous dignitary, then animals, foxes, a bird and the drug-pounding hares again (see also *Mission*, No. 161), finally chariot with equestrian and spear-bearer on foot. A more abridged version of the same composition will be found in *Mission*, No. 176.

The central part of the oblong stone slab (1.64 × 0.81 m.) shown on Plate IV is entirely damaged, but so much has survived on the two ends that the category of subjects to which this relief must have belonged may be well defined. A palace-like structure has evidently occupied the lost central portion, as visible from the

ends of the roofs and some pillars on the left-hand side, and as indicated from some human figures sitting under the roof and a pair of peacocks perching on the top of the roof, the large tail-feather of the one overshadowing an owl which occurs also on the Hiao-t'ang shan (*Mission*, No. 46, on the right-hand side of the roof). The two peacocks on the roof are a typical motive (*Mission*, No. 45, 46, 107, 129, 170; LAUFER, *l. c.*, p. 29); here, an additional peculiar feature is involved in that the two birds are holding jointly in their beaks an ornament apparently consisting of a twisted leather or metal band to which coins are attached. A curious analogy occurs on the relief No. 150 of CHAVANNES' *Mission* where likewise two peacocks are holding what seems to be an interlaced string of coins. The remains on the right-hand side of the stone in Plate IV allow us to recognize the *ho-huan* tree populated by birds, a horse standing in its shadow as in the representations of Wu Liang's tomb (*Mission*, No. 77, 107, 129, and LAUFER, *l. c.*, p. 7). It is therefore very likely that also this bas-relief is to be counted among the same class of subjects to which the late Dr. Bushell lent an individual color by defining them as "The Reception of Mu-wang by Si-wang-mu"; we may briefly style them "The Royal Reception". Opposite the horse, the outlines of a chariot may still be recognized. The style and technique of this relief comes very near to the work on Wu Liang's tomb, while the three others differ from it and approach the stones of Tsi-ning chou, Tsin yang shan and the others of *provenance inconnue* in CHAVANNES' *Mission*, though I am inclined to think that the three in question are still cruder in execution.

The fifth of the stones to be considered here is not worth reproducing, as it exhibits nothing new. A procession of four plain open chariots surmounted by an umbrella and each carrying two inmates and drawn by a single horse are followed by two horse-

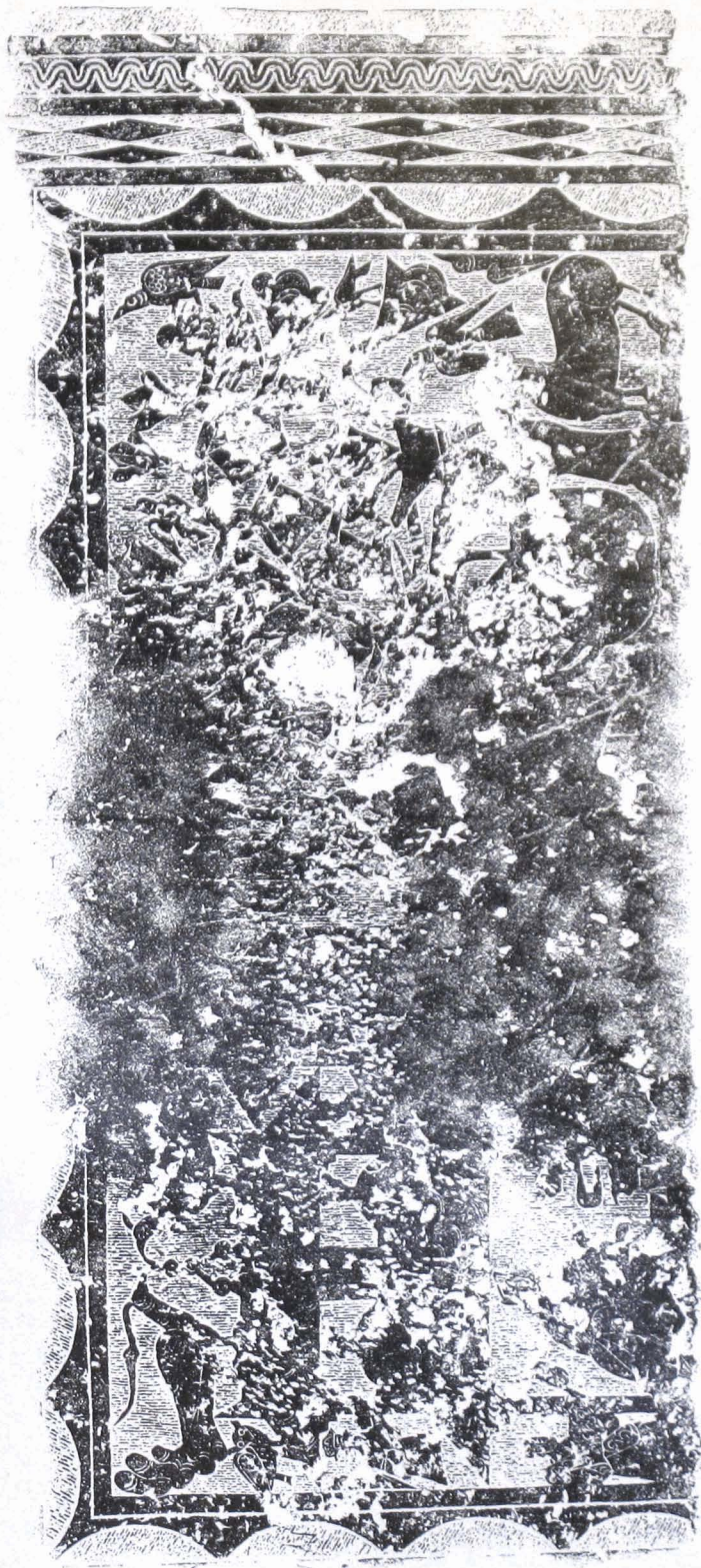


PLATE IV.

back-riders. The six horses, although not badly outlined, are all represented in the same trotting position. For the representation of horses, chariots, trees, birds, human figures in various postures etc., the Han stone-carvers certainly availed themselves, as insisted on also by Chavaunes, of a number of stereotyped patterns which turn up over and over again.

None of these five stones contains any inscriptions or explanatory labels which make the fundamental value of the Wu Liang reliefs. It seems that only for prominent men, or for those who could afford it, such more elaborate inscribed carvings were produced; and it is probable that, the lower a man was in the social scale, the plainer was the decoration of the slabs constituting his grave-chamber. But also in these designs for the people the artistic spirit which awakens with elementary force in the Han period is not entirely lacking, and the *naïveté* with which the artists sometimes seek to overcome certain difficulties is nearly touching. I here have especially in mind the design displayed on the left half of the stone No. 182 in CHAVANNES' *Mission*. The subject is a rainstorm, — a surprise to meet in the age of the Han, as it anticipates an intention of the later landscapists. The artist did not venture to express the raindrops, but employed three means to describe his inspiration: two flocks of birds are hurriedly taking refuge from two directions under the branches of a stately tree filling the centre of the picture; two women are walking along protecting themselves against the rain with open umbrellas and evidently experiencing a hard struggle against a raging storm, especially the woman in front who is leaning far back; finally, the tree is vehemently agitated by the wind, its trunk and branches being set in vivid motion, — a good achievement in "life's motion" 生動. Another peculiarity of Han art may be studied in this naïve forerunner of a landscape, and this is the curious parallelism of the bodies and motions of

the two women with the outline and motion of the trunk of the tree. In the reproduction of Chavaunes there is a line visible due to a fold in the paper rubbing. In covering up the illustration above this line, it will be noticed that the three figures are almost identical, that the two women could be supplemented into a tree and the tree into a woman. A similar parallelism of design is manifest in No. 178 where the two triangular trees in the corners are adapted in shape to the two roofed pillars of the house. This subject deserves a close examination in connection with a study of the laws underlying the art of the Han. It will be seen that there are different causes and factors leading to the conventionalization of design, that outward conditions as well as inner forces working in the mind of the artist must be equally called into account.

From this point of view, — the study of the psychological foundation of art, — the new bas-reliefs here noticed may claim their importance; they furnish us further material to decide what is typical and conventional in this art, what is individual and popular, and how popularity of certain subjects effecting a larger output tends to form a factor in the direction of conventionality.
