

Mirror with cosmological decoration and inscription

Tang dynasty, dated to 758

Bronze

Diam. 21.0 cm

The circular mirror has a raised rim and is decorated in shallow relief with the four mythical directional animals, the Eight Trigrams, and an inscription (see also p. 197, fig. 1). The knob is in the shape of a tortoise. The mirror is somewhat corroded and broken in two halves, with a splinter near the edge missing (see also pp. 106–107). But despite its fragmentary condition, it is easily the most significant discovery among the Belitung mirrors, for its inscription designates it as one of the celebrated *Jiangxin* mirrors – the most famous and desirable mirrors of the Tang period, made in Yangzhou during cosmologically significant festivals. To this author's knowledge such mirrors have so far been known only from references in literature, but no extant example had ever been positively identified. The inscription may be translated as: 'Made on the twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month of the first year *wuxu* of the Qianyuan reign of Tang [23 December 758] in Yangzhou at the heart of the Yangzi River [from bronze which was] smelted a hundred times'. This unusual mirror is discussed extensively above (pp. 196–198).



No 22

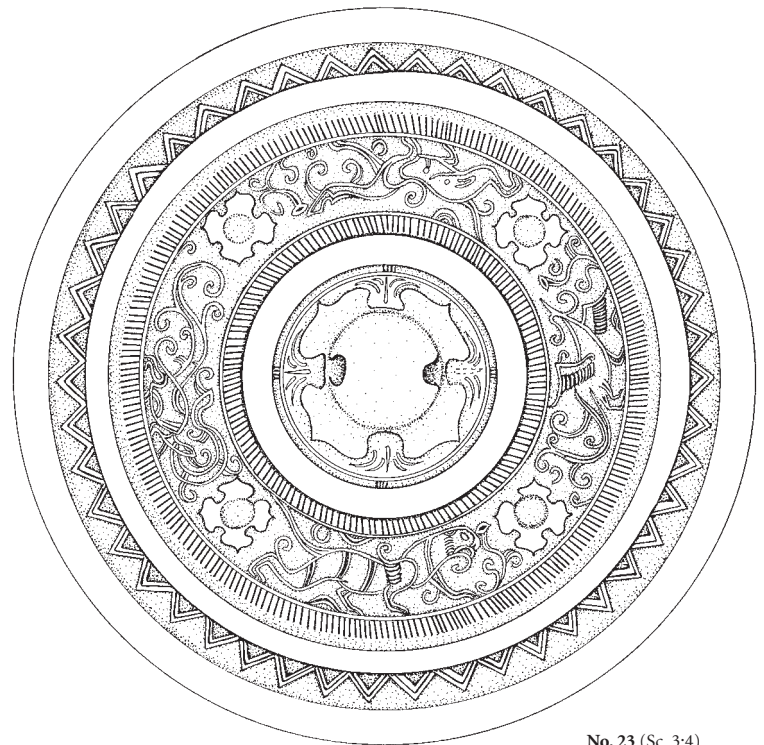
Mirror with four nipples and the four directional animals

Probably Han period, 1st century BC–AD 1st century
Bronze
Diam. 13.0 cm

The circular mirror has a dome-shaped knob and is decorated in concentric bands of various heights. The knob and the four nipples are surrounded by four petals. The small nipples define the corners of an imaginary square around a raised ring. They also divide the main decorative zone of the mirror into four equal sections which depict the four mythical directional animals in fine line relief: the Azure Dragon of the East, the Red Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Black Warrior of the North. There is a small crack near the centre.

The presence of such a mirror on a Tang ship heading abroad is most extraordinary, for mirrors of this kind are usually considered to date from the middle of the Han period.¹ Although we know that the Han dynasty provided crucial philosophical, ritual, and ideological models for the Tang rulers, there is very little evidence that Tang designers also emulated Han material culture. On the contrary, Tang material culture was rather distinct and catered to tastes very different from those of nine centuries earlier. Nevertheless, there exist a few Tang mirrors made in an archaic style, though hardly anything is known about their purpose.² In the case of the Belitung mirror, however, there is little evidence to suggest that it is a Tang imitation of an old Han mirror. Although some of the thin scrolls appear somewhat unusual in their sinuous flow, the mirror's design is essentially consistent with that of mirrors dating from the first century BC and the first

century AD.³ The same is true for its relatively low weight (315 g); Tang mirrors of this size tend to weigh nearly twice as much.⁴ Finally, an X-ray inspection showed an even thickness, which indicates that the mirror was cast in a horizontally placed mould, a technique typical for the Han but not for the Tang period.⁵



No. 23 (Sc. 3:4)

¹ Chou Ju-hsi 2000, 40f.

² For a purported Tang forgery of a Han mirror, excavated in Luoyang, see Su Jian 1987. For a Tang mirror type that alludes to Eastern Zhou decorative language see Farley 1940; Luoyang bowuguan 1988, no. 93; Rawson and Bunker 1990, no. 191; Chou Ju-hsi 2000, no. 73.

³ E.g. Bulling and Drew 1972, pl. IVb; Chou Ju-hsi 2000, 40–41.

⁴ Bulling and Drew 1972, 50.

⁵ Ibid., 40ff.



No. 23

Mirror with mythical animals and inscription

Tang, 7th or 8th century

Bronze

Diam. 14.2 cm

The mirror has a dome-shaped knob surrounded by four fierce-looking animals. A moulded rim with a saw-tooth pattern encloses the central design area. A saw-tooth pattern also decorates the outer rim of the mirror. This is an archaistic feature that originated in the Later Han period and was still popular in the seventh century. In between the decorative bands runs a twenty-character poem. In several places the characters are corroded and no longer legible. There exist, however, comparable mirrors whose inscriptions are almost identical to the recognizable characters of this example.¹ Those inscriptions typically begin with the characters *yuxia*, and hence such mirrors are sometimes classified as *yuxia* mirrors. The *yuxia* poems are intended to heighten critical self-awareness when looking at one's reflection and serve as metaphorical reminders to pursue one's ideals:

'Open your casket and look at the mirror, wipe off
quickly the light dust so that, bright like a disc of
water, its reflection portrays your other self.'

Although mirrors of this type are generally dated to the seventh or early eighth century, the date of this mirror is difficult to determine precisely. Comparable mirrors have been excavated from ninth-century tombs, such as the one of Li Yu in Yanshi, Henan, who died in 841.²

¹ Zhao Ming and Hong Hai 1997, 126; *Gugong tongjing* 1986, 148, pl. 71.

² Xu Diankui 1994, 302–303.



No. 24

25 a–c

Circular mirrors

Tang dynasty, 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

No. 25 a: Diam. 10.5 cm

No. 25 b: Diam. 15.0 cm

No. 25 c: Diam. 10.3 cm

The mirrors in this group are all decorated with concentric rings. Mirror 25a (weight 253 g) is adorned with a number of raised concentric ridges. A comparable but larger mirror was excavated near Mangshan in Luoyang.¹

The four mirrors catalogued as 25b (weight 250.7 g) all have a simple rounded knob and a raised rim. Heavy corrosion has eaten away most of their relief decoration, which consisted of floral sprigs. They are cast unusually thinly. A much heavier mirror of similar basic design but without floral ornament (diam. 18.4 cm, weight 1,734 g) has been excavated near Luoyang in a tomb dated to 801.²

The examples like no. 25c (weight 377.3 g) with a high rim are decorated with a boldly raised, rounded concentric ring. While they are lacking pictorial decoration, their shape is the same as that of the massive lion and grapevine mirrors (nos 26, 27).



No. 25 a



No. 25 c

¹ Luoyang bowuguan 1988, no. 108.

² Ibid., no. 107.



No. 25 b

26, 27

Two mirrors with lion and grapevine design

Tang dynasty, 7th or early 8th century

Bronze

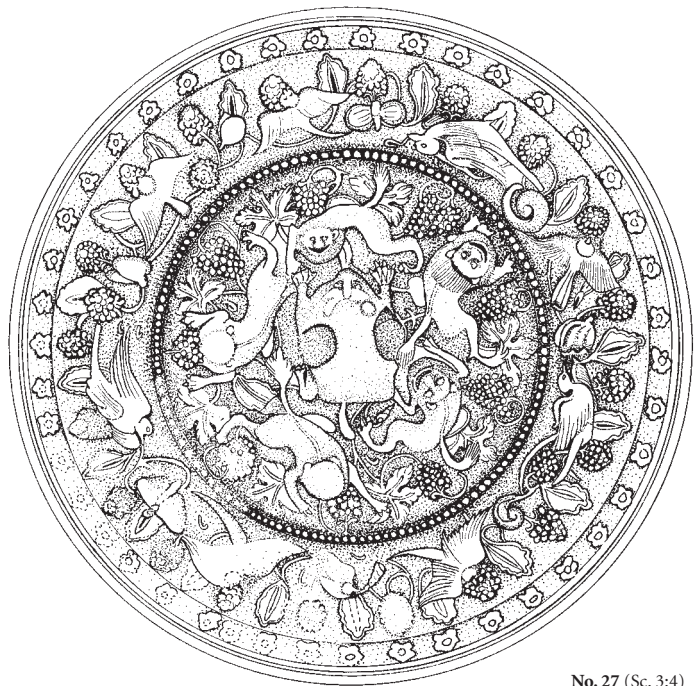
No. 26: Diam. 9.5 cm

No. 27: Diam. 12.3 cm

The Belitung wreck yielded two groups of circular mirrors with the lion and grapevine design. Each group consists of three pieces. The smaller type (no. 26) has a knob in the shape of a crouching *qilin*, an auspicious mythical animal. It is surrounded by four gaily frolicking creatures of similar but more slender appearance. These animals are conventionally identified as lions, although their species is not determined for certain.¹ Interspersed between these auspicious animals are grapevines, a motif which also appears along the outer decorative zone, where it scrolls symmetrically around various kinds of songbirds. The group of larger mirrors (no. 27) retains the same design, but the size allowed the designer to surround the knob with five animals instead of only four. There are other pictorial differences; the larger mirrors, for instance, show leaves which more closely resemble those of actual grapevines.

Lion and grapevine mirrors are sumptuous in design and material, being the heaviest type of all Tang mirrors. If bronze mirrors in the Tang period had any status connotations, this type certainly must have been at the top of the list for those buyers eager to make a showy statement. Lion and grapevine mirrors have long been prized as collectibles. As early as the Song period (960–1279) they were eagerly collected and copied, for antiquarians at the time considered them to be relics from the Han dynasty.² Around 1900 Japanese scholars challenged this misconception and proposed that the design originated in the sixth century.³ Today, archaeological

evidence suggests that these mirrors were first devised under the Tang dynasty in the seventh century. According to Xu Diankui's survey of mirrors from dated tombs they were most popular between 650 and 750.⁴ The six examples from the Belitung site resemble pieces found in eighth-century tombs, such as the mirror from the tomb of Miss Lu in Xingyuan, Yanshi, Henan, dated to 722.⁵



No. 27 (Sc. 3:4)

¹ Soper 1967, 55–66.

² Thompson 1967, 25; Bulling and Drew 1972, 36f.; Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 146f.

³ Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 147f.

⁴ Xu Diankui 1994, 306ff., 339f.

⁵ Ibid., 305; compare also two examples in the Carter collection, Chou Ju-hsi 2000, nos 53, 55.



No. 26



No. 27

Lobed mirror with garden scene

Tang, 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

Diam. 18.7 cm

This large, eight-lobed mirror shows a garden scene in low relief. In the upper left corner a musician, seated next to a bamboo grove on a leopard skin, is plucking the *qin*. To the left a phoenix is dancing, and in front of the musician stands a low table with what appears to be two scrolls, an ink-stone, and perhaps a brush with brush rest. In the foreground lies a pond with four bizarre rocks and a lotus leaf that grows far out of the water and serves as a resting place for a turtle which is at the same time the mirror's knob. Above the turtle and below the sun, which rises amidst the clouds, is a square frame with a four-character inscription reading *zhenzi feishuang*.

The inscription provides the name for this type of mirror. Yet, the meaning of these characters, which may be translated as 'true gentleman, flying frost', is still an enigma. Most interpreters believe it refers to the zither player. *Zhenzi* would thus relate in some form to the name of the zither player and 'flying frost' might allude to the tune or possibly to the name of the instrument.¹ In this interpretation the four words are understood as a literary parallel to the garden imagery. The idyllic scene incorporates a number of classical topoi of self-cultivation, reclusion, and longevity. The zither player in the bamboo grove recalls the famous and tragic musician Boya, a model cultivated gentleman with divine musical gifts, who renounced playing upon the death of his congenial listener-friend Zhong Ziqi.² In the paradisiacal garden on these mirrors the listener is a fabulous *fenghuang* or *luan* bird. Its appreciative dancing indicates the unearthly beauty

of the zither music and recalls various classical instances of famous musicians whose art was sublime enough to make birds dance.³ The tortoise resting on the lotus leaf evokes ideas of paradise and long life, as does the flying crane, which frequently appears on a compositional variant of this mirror type, where it replaces the inscription (cf. no. 29). One mirror of each of these types has been discovered in the Belitung wreck.



No. 28 (Sc. 1:2)

¹ Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 160–161.

² Harada Yoshito 1969, 1–6; Cahill 1994, 33–36.

³ Sterckx 2000, 23–26.



No. 28

Lobed mirror with garden scene

Tang, 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

Diam. 15.7 cm

The design of this mirror is very similar to that of the previous example (no. 28). The main difference lies in the replacement of the inscription with a flying crane, a traditional image of longevity and, like the phoenix, paradisiacal bliss. The crane may thus signify the upcoming flight of the accomplished recluse to an immortal's paradise, sailing over the morning frost that covers the peaceful garden. The notion that the decoration of these mirrors represents not a single scene from a narrative but instead alludes to a variety of ideals is confirmed by an example excavated in Zhejiang province. That piece has a poem inscribed along the rim, which evokes ideas of beauty, ethereal unity, and eternal bliss.¹ Mirrors of this type were also popular in eighth- and ninth-century Japan, where their message of cultivated reclusion was well understood.²

¹ Xu Diankui 1994, 320.

² Harada Yoshito 1969, 1–6.



No. 29

30

Lobed mirror with flying birds and floral sprigs

Tang, 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

Diam. 11.9 cm

The eight-lobed mirror is decorated with four birds, two ducks and two songbirds, flying in a clockwise direction around the central knob. Winding around the birds is a floral sprig. Such rotational designs and lobed shapes became popular during the eighth century. A raised ring separates the central design area from the lobes, which each contain a small flower. The wide rim is raised and prominent.



No. 30

31, 32

Lobed mirrors with flying birds

Tang dynasty, 8th century

Bronze

No. 31: Diam. 10.8 cm

No. 32: Diam. 11.4 cm

The mirror no. 31 is well preserved and has developed a smooth black patina, *heiqigu*, of a type which Chinese collectors have been appreciating and even been trying to imitate for centuries.¹ Under the patina we see relief decoration of flowers and bird pairs in the centre, and flowers alternating with butterflies along the rim. The mirror's shape – a stylized lotus flower with eight petals – was most popular between the mid-seventh and the mid-eighth century. Bird pairs opposed in mirror-reverse, however, became fashionable only in the course of the eighth century, so that a date to the first half of the eighth century is proposed here for this mirror. A very similar mirror was discovered in the tomb of Zheng Xiu (d. 750) in Xianyuan, Yanshi, Henan.²

Although essentially of the same type as mirror no. 31, the example no. 32 offers a number of design variations. As it is slightly larger and displays more pronounced lobes than mirror no. 31 its individual design elements are well arranged and do not have to contend for space. Instead of a pair of mandarin ducks and floral sprigs this mirror shows a pair of parrots and more sinuous foliage typical of the early eighth century.

¹ Zhao Ming and Hong Hai 1997, 20.

² Xu Diankui 1994, 312.



No. 31



No. 32

33, 34

Lobed mirrors with flying birds

Tang dynasty, 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

No. 33: Diam. 12.4 cm

No. 34: Diam. 9.6 cm

The eight-lobed mirror no. 33 shows four flying birds, two ducks and two cranes, surrounded by floral sprigs. The birds hold knotted ribbons in their beaks and thus create a rebus. *Shouniao*, 'birds with ribbons', can also be understood as "longevity birds". The same longevity symbolism is traditionally assigned to the crane, which was considered to have the ability to take Daoist adepts to the paradises of immortality. In China, a mirror with this type of decoration would have made a most appropriate birthday gift for an older person.

The small mirror no. 34 is heavily corroded. It shows three concentric decorative zones with symmetrically arranged scrolls and interspersed birds.



No. 33



No. 34

35, 36

Two square mirrors with auspicious animals and flowers

Tang dynasty, late 8th or first half of 9th century

Bronze

No. 35: L./w. 14.7 cm

No. 36: L./w. 14.5 cm

The two mirrors are heavily corroded, but their basic relief decoration is still visible. Flowers and auspicious frolicking animals were among the most popular designs on Tang mirrors. Square mirrors, however, are not very common. They were first manufactured in the eighth century but never seem to have caught the fancy of rich consumers to the same extent as did the lobed varieties, which were introduced around the same time.



No. 35



No. 36

37 a, b

Two square mirrors with rounded corners

Tang dynasty, late 8th or early 9th century

Bronze

No. 37a: L./w. 7.8 cm

No. 37b: L./w. 15.1 cm

The two mirrors illustrated have a wide raised rim but are otherwise undecorated. Probably, they originally had a lacquer-inlaid decoration of gold, silver, or mother-of-pearl.¹ Their square shape with the rounded edges is comparable to those of metal and ceramic dishes popular since the early ninth century (cf. nos 3, 4, 133, 134). Two further examples of this type have been recovered from the Belitung wreck, one measuring 17.3 cm, the other 16.9 cm in length and width. A mirror of similar shape, decorated with relief flower medallions, was found in the tomb of Wei Youzhi, who died in 833 and was buried in Yanshi, Henan.²

¹ An intact example of the same shape with gold and silver inlay is preserved in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., see Freer Gallery of Art 1972, pl. 26.

² Xu Diankui 1994, 325, 327.



No. 37 a



No. 37 b