

# FASTENING THE BUCKLE: A STRAND OF XIONGNU-ERA NARRATIVE IN A RECENT KIRGHIZ EPIC POEM

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This interdisciplinary exercise in comparative mythology has two subjects: a bronze belt buckle plaque bearing a figural scene, from a Xiongnu-era grave (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) in south or southeast Siberia,<sup>1</sup> and *Joloy Khan*, a Kirghiz epic poem written down in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century CE from the performance of an oral bard in the Tian Shan mountain region of Central Asia. The thematic content shared by these two works of art suggests some sort of narrative continuity across the two thousand years and two thousand miles that separate them. To find evidence of a connection of this kind is rare. My first encounter was with the complicated plot and mythic themes of the *Joloy Khan* epic; later, when the plaque came to my attention, it seemed to illustrate the poem's strange finale. The buckle plaque is among the objects recently acquired by the Miami University Art Museum in a gift from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation (see the accompanying article in this volume of *The Silk Road*).

A well-known type of the so-called "Ordos Bronzes" are the belt buckle plaques of the Iron Age and Xiongnu era (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) from present-day northern China, Inner Mongolia, the Mongolian Republic, and southern Siberia (Kost 2014; Brosseder 2011).<sup>2</sup> Belt plaques were a special type of object, made for a culture built on exchange and marked with heightened meaning by their form, materials, and use in burials (Linduff 2012; Linduff 2009). The buckle plaques such as the one examined here normally were produced and worn as pairs, with mirror images on each side of the belt's opening. Stylized animals and groups of animals were common subjects. A special category are what have been called "anecdotal" or "narrative" plaques of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE. They seem to represent tableaux of specific action, as if alluding to stories told by ancient steppe pastoralists – referred to as "oral epic traditions" – the texts of which are unknown (Bunker 1978; Bunker 1997, p. 275).<sup>3</sup> The human figures seen on these anecdotal or narrative plaques are a rare feature in steppe art.

The B-shaped buckle plaque under examination here [Fig. 1] is a "narrative" plaque, its scene belonging to a group of possibly related images depicting people, carts drawn by animals, and other creatures (cf. Kost



Fig. 1. Buckle plaque. Bronze, eastern or southern Siberia, 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, W: 13.3 cm; H: 7 cm. Miami University Art Museum accession number 2015.2.32. Photo © Daniel Prior.

2014, pls. 81-84). In the following discussion, certain thematic elements will be set in italics for the purpose of comparing the epic with the buckle plaque. The plaque depicts a male *warrior* clad in a thigh-length sleeved jacket, wide jodhpur-style trousers and boots, holding a *sword* in his left hand and grasping with his right a branch of a luxuriantly twining *tree* that also forms a part of the border of the plaque. He looks to his left, watching three harnessed horses, one of them with a *bird of prey* perched on its croup, drawing a two-wheeled spoked *cart* with canopy. The heads of *two passengers* are visible above the rim of the cart. The scene has two additional animal elements. In front of the warrior's chest are what appear to be the arched necks of two confronted *waterfowl*, forming a heart shape, as if the warrior were cradling the birds in his bosom. On the right side of the scene is a crouching canid (a *dog?*), positioned vertically to fit on the border of the plaque, nose-down, with its paws "resting" on the right-hand edge.

Following its acquisition by C. T. Loo from an unknown source in China in the 1920s, a number of authors have analyzed the plaque from art-historical and archaeological perspectives.<sup>4</sup> It exists in two similar exemplars: a close analogue of the Sackler/Miami plaque was excavated in the disturbed cemetery at Xichagou 西岔溝, Liaoning province in northeast China (Manchuria), in the 1950s (Tian and Guo 1986, pp. 96-97). That comparand as well as metallurgical analyses help to localize these plaques' manufacture somewhere in southeastern or southern Siberia, not far from the core zone of the Xiongnu Empire. Associated coins date the comparand to a *terminus post quem* "in the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC or in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC" (Brosseder 2011, p. 383). The best iconographic analyses of the Sackler/Miami plaque to date are by Emma C. Bunker (1978; 1997), who notes the image's evident connection to some lost narrative. As I shall demonstrate, the epic *Joloy Khan* contains elements of that narrative.

The chronology and mapping of the spread of motifs are problems that art history, archaeology, folkloristics and comparative mythology as disciplines have all attempted to resolve. Material culture and expressive culture have different specialized tools of analysis; coordinating them is further complicated by the fact that few sources in the languages of Inner Asian nomadic pastoralists have survived from before the middle of the first millennium CE. Nevertheless, occasionally cases are found in Inner Asian steppe cultures where analyses of specific motifs in texts and artifacts yield conclusions that illuminate both; the materials compared are usually close in date (e.g. Drompp 2011). Among Inner Asian steppe nomadic cultures, the oral traditions that were recorded

ethnographically in the last two centuries are seen as especially important sources for illuminating the culture and history of earlier times. Epics in particular have been viewed as layer cakes consisting of themes, motifs, characters and incidents that have survived in one way or another from past historical circumstances, the dating and location of which are often matters of debate. It is widely recognized, however, that motifs can be quite durable and can move widely across cultures and even languages, a phenomenon that is easy to observe in the special environmental-economic-cultural zone of interaction in the interior of Asia. Among the nomads, the Kirghiz (Kyrgyz, Qırğız) are renowned for possessing an unusually rich and developed epic tradition. Highly skilled, non-literate bards composed the epics in the act of oral performance by drawing on an inherited but adaptable store of formulas and themes; these epics have been the centerpiece of Kirghiz cultural life since long before they were first written down in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The texts we possess thus represent nodes in a long-term flow of changing narratives, from which older elements can sometimes be picked up and given approximate dates. The normal techniques used in historical analyses of this kind are comparative, though comparisons of recent epics and ancient artifacts are seldom possible.

*Joloy Khan*, a unique and puzzling document in the Kirghiz epic tradition, is less well known than the famous epics about the supreme hero Manas. The German-born Russian Turcologist Wilhelm Radloff (Vasilii V. Radlov) wrote down the text of *Joloy Khan* in 1869 while collecting Kirghiz oral materials from non-literate singers in the Chu River valley in what is today northern Kyrgyzstan. He published the text (5,322 verse lines) in the original Kirghiz language, as well as his German translation (*Joloy Khan* 1885).<sup>5</sup>

In his own epic, *Joloy*, a figure known from the main Kirghiz oral epics as a gigantic heathen and an enemy of Manas, is not an enemy but an anti-hero and a parody of himself. As in the *Manas* epics, he is a fantastic glutton who has the habit of walking, a perverse trait among those born equestrians, the Kirghiz. He attacks his kinsmen and roasts and eats their horses when they ride to him to ask for help. He acquires two wives as spoils of a husband-killing and a rape; yet he exudes irresistible sexual power over women and girls, even when incapacitated by alcohol. He can also be a formidable warrior, so long as his friends manage to trick or shame him out of his natural laziness. His final campaign ends in disaster for himself, his family, and his realm. The first part of the epic (2,463 lines) concludes after numerous misadventures with *Joloy* lying unconscious in a pit where he has been imprisoned by his enemy. Yet we

sense that the epic audience, like the maiden who has fallen in love with him as he lies helpless in captivity, was firmly on his side for the duration. Arthur Hatto calls this transgressive hero “Rabelaisian” and the text “in part mock-epic” (Hatto 1977, p. 90; Hatto 1980, p. 302).

Our direct concern, however, is not with Joloy. The latter part (2,859 lines) of the sprawling plot of *Joloy Khan*, more than half the text, focuses on Joloy’s son Bolot. The picaresque episodes of the Joloy half of the epic are notably loose. Bolot, on the other hand, is a more spiritually weighty if enigmatic figure, and in his half of the epic a more discernible plot arc is present. At the center of odd relationships that nevertheless give him the support he needs, Bolot puts right the problems that Joloy’s chaotic career has created. In the Bolot-centered part of the epic, the main characters are Joloy; Joloy’s wives Sayqal and Aq Qanish; Joloy and Sayqal’s son Bolot whom Sayqal raises jointly with Aq Qanish; Köchpös Bay and his wife Baybichä, who live in a distant Underworld-like land and adopt the young Bolot as their son; and Qarachach, a hawk-spirit-maiden and Bolot’s ally and protector who first appears disguised as a lowly shepherdess.

As Joloy lies in captivity in a distant land, his two wives Sayqal and Aq Qanish are captured and enslaved by the enemy who has usurped his realm. Sayqal (who believes Joloy dead) gives birth to Joloy’s son, Bolot (whose name means ‘Steel’, ‘Sword’), and immediately attempts to drown him in a lake, but Aq Qanish dives under the water to rescue him, and the two women then nurture him as co-mothers. Sayqal sends Bolot away with Aq Qanish through a deep cave (essentially an Underworld passage) to hide him from the enemy. After a long journey they arrive in the land of Köchpös Bay, whose name means ‘Non-migrating Rich Man’, and whose senior wife Baybichä adopts Bolot in a ritual re-“birth.” When Bolot has grown to the age of thirteen, old enough to fight, Bolot and Aq Qanish return home; Joloy’s realm is restored, and he is freed from captivity. Meanwhile, Köchpös Bay’s realm has been reduced by enemies, and he and his wife pine for their foster/ritual son, Bolot. An enslaved shepherdess (actually a disguised spirit-maiden with shaman-like shape-shifting power) engineers Bolot’s return, which Baybichä foresees in a dream where a sprouting poplar tree symbolizes Bolot. Upon Bolot’s return, the shape-shifting girl, in reality the beautiful Qarachach, announces that she can now leave Köchpös Bay’s service. She changes into her hawk-form and flies away. Bolot chases after her, but an enemy army suddenly attacks. Bolot is killed, is revived by Qarachach’s spells and prayers, utters a last testament, dies again, and is revived finally a second time with milk from Baybichä’s

breast. Bolot decides to return to his home. Köchpös Bay and Qarachach effect a scheme to put off Bolot’s departure, in which Qarachach flies over the earth in hawk-form seeking a suitable mate for Bolot to marry. The search is inconclusive; Bolot remains single. Qarachach constructs a cart and flies off uttering a blessing. Köchpös Bay and Baybichä ride away in the cart, arrive at Joloy’s realm, and unite with Joloy and his family. They live on (“knowing neither sunrise nor nightfall, they played at hazards”), and Köchpös Bay rules the land. We may infer, though it is not stated (perhaps due to the bard’s fatigue at the end of a long performance), that Bolot accompanied Köchpös Bay and Baybichä on the journey to Joloy’s realm, effecting by his return the conclusion of the long story.

The penultimate scene in the epic thus consists of Bolot (‘Sword’), a strongly integrative hero who has appeared in his foster-mother’s dream as the symbolic tree of life; a cart bearing two passengers, his foster-parents; and a hawk-spirit-maiden, Bolot’s ally, who has provided the cart. It is this scene that is nearly identical with the image on the buckle plaque. Images of two different animals on the buckle are less clearly related to Bolot in the epic, though there are correspondences that may reflect a past relationship between their underlying narratives. The standing hero holds two long-necked birds in his arms, evidently swans or geese. In the epic, Bolot’s origin is connected with water and waterfowl. At the moment of Bolot’s conception, as Joloy rapes the maid Sayqal on the shores of a lake, flocks of geese and swans are startled into flight by the sound of her cries (*Joloy Khan*, lines 874-922). Then Sayqal throws her newborn son into a lake and Aq Qanish rescues him (*Joloy Khan*, lines 2785-2819). Either or both of these details could be fragmentary remnants of themes relating the hero’s watery nature with the waterfowl in the warrior’s arms on the buckle plaque.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the warrior on the buckle holds a pair of birds even tallies with his paired mothers in the epic, who raise him jointly and whom the narrative circumstances associate with water.

The canid depicted on the right-hand edge of the buckle has only tenuous reflexes in the epic. Joloy utters an enigmatic curse on Bolot at the inception of Bolot’s career as a warrior, which includes the words, “You have become a dog!” (*Joloy Khan*, line 4344). Near the end of the epic, when Bolot decides to return home, Köchpös Bay asks the hawk-spirit-maiden Qarachach if there is any way to convince him to remain, and she replies, “Is the offspring of a wolf a dog? Is the offspring of a man a nation?” (*Joloy Khan*, lines 5182-5185), thus seemingly confirming that Bolot like his father is a hero among men, and intimating that the answer to the question Köchpös asked is

“no” – though her placement of wolf/father/Joloy in rhetorical opposition to dog/son/Bolot muddles the suggested dog-association.<sup>7</sup>

The Bolot half of the story contains elements that transcend the perverse and parodic aspects of the Joloy half. Where Bolot’s heroism is more straightforward than his father’s, not all the narrative underpinnings of his origin and life story are common in Inner Asian epics. Table 1 lists the thematic correspondences between buckle plaque and epic as a basis for further discussion.

**Table 1.** Thematic comparison of the Kirghiz epic hero Bolot and the Xiongnu-era bronze buckle plaque

<u>Bolot</u>	<u>Buckle</u>
hero	warrior
watery conception/ birth (mother has swan maiden attributes?)	waterfowl
name = ‘steel’/‘sword’	carries sword
ally = hawk-spirit-maiden	hawk accompanies
dream of tree = his power	trees
transports foster parents in cart ...	two people in horse-drawn cart
... to land of everlasting happiness	trees (= tree of life?)
dog association?	dog

When a comprehensive thematic comparison yields a cluster of varied, highly specific similarities, the results can be termed *exquisite correspondences*, which by their nature tend to preclude an explanation based on chance coincidence. Our task, then, is to seek some explanation of the exquisite correspondences between *Joloy Khan* and the buckle plaque that illuminates a real historical relationship or tradition.

Besides the details summarized in the table, the bronze buckle plaque and the oral epic have something else in common: both were significant in their respective cultures. The plaque (so far as we are able to infer from its form and the funerary context of the analogous, excavated example) was probably a valued possession of the individual with whom it was buried, and highly significant to his survivors (Kost 2014, pp. 149-60). The image corresponds to a crucial

moment in a story about an important hero. In the *Joloy Khan* narrative, Bolot is surrounded with signs of power and efficacy, from which we can discern a deep structure of serious symbolism. The image on the plaque helps to confirm this symbolism. Where the buckle helps to bring the Bolot figure into focus, the epic allows us to say something definite about the content of a Xiongnu-era narrative of the eastern steppe region. The link between the two affords us the ability to trace a possible route that the story traveled.

Scholars have developed two main supra-regional historical frames for understanding the nomadic Xiongnu in Inner Asia, one emphasizing east to west influences and movement, and the other, west to east.<sup>8</sup> The first of these, which has dominated historical studies, relies on the written evidence in Chinese annals. From their base in Mongolia and southern Siberia starting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Xiongnu confederation established a powerful empire that expanded to the west and southwest on the steppes and from there directly challenged the security of the Han’s western territories and interests. The Xiongnu pushed their nomadic neighbors the Yuezhi and Wusun south-westward into the Tarim Basin and Central Asia. The Han bought security at extortionate expense from the Xiongnu *chanyu* (rulers); this made possible the beginning of the “Silk Roads” (Yü 1990; Barfield 1989; Di Cosmo 2002, 2011). In this interpretive framework, one can posit the Central Asian Kirghiz as ultimate continuators of an ancient Xiongnu-era tradition that traveled westward from Mongolia or southern Siberia after the collapse of the Xiongnu polity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. This tradition would have passed through many stages along the way, including possibly Yuezhi, Wusun or eventually Yenisei Kirghiz oral repertoires.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative frame – based on linguistic, archaeological and genetic evidence – reaches back earlier in time and points to a western origin of some (culturally, linguistically, demographically) significant portions of the group we call “Xiongnu,” including probably its ruling elite. Whatever linguistic affiliation the Xiongnu aristocracy may have had, their culture was clearly influenced by peoples to the west, on the steppes. As Peter Golden has noted, “If they were not themselves Indo-Europeans, it seems very likely that elements of Hsiung-nu [Xiongnu] equestrian culture, came from the Inner Asian Indo-Europeans. Iranians or Yüeh-chih [Yuezhi] may have served as the transmitters of this horse culture coming from the western steppes. This may also have entailed elements of political culture as well” (Golden 1992, p. 59; cf. Psarras 1995, pp. 110, 112). Recent interpretations of historical and archaeological sources stress the western connections that brought

prestige goods eastward to Bronze Age and Iron Age steppe elites and bolstered the early political development of the Xiongnu (Honeychurch 2015; cf. Brosseder 2015). Extensive evidence from physical anthropology suggests “[i]t is possible that the western frontier of the Xiongnu empire was more permeable than the eastern frontier” (Lee and Zhang 2011, p. 200). Preliminary results of mitochondrial DNA haplogroup frequencies sequenced from more than 40 Xiongnu-period individuals in central Mongolia show significant similarity between them and the Bronze Age Mongolian gene pool, and between Bronze Age Mongolians and populations farther west; and no significant similarity between the Xiongnu-era or Bronze Age Mongolians on the one hand and contemporary populations surrounding the eastern steppe zone on the other (Leland Rogers, personal communication; Rogers et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2010; cf. Haak et al. 2015).

This second interpretive framework then suggests a model of narrative transmission whereby the Xiongnu-era buckle plaque may reflect the continuation of a traditional story that arrived from the west. Older themes underlying the Kirghiz epic *Joloy Khan* in Central Asia could be antecedent to, or offshoots of an antecedent to the Xiongnu story as attested by the buckle plaque in southern Siberia. The east-to-west model of transmission has the advantage of parsimony— that is, it conforms to the chronology of the evidence. The west-to-east model requires us to posit an additional, unattested and reconstructed stage of the tradition that eventually gave rise to both the buckle plaque and, two millennia later, the epic. Nevertheless, the west-to-east path appears likely. Recent genetic evidence increasingly points to connections between “Xiongnu” human remains and populations in the Minusinsk Basin of southern

Siberia and the Altai mountains, and through them with populations of the western steppes (Rogers, personal communication); these connections implicate archaeological cultures (Afanasioev and Yamnaya) theorized to have been bearers of ancient, unattested Indo-European languages. The Bronze Age looks less remote in time and Indo-European associations less exotic for resolving the issue at hand in the light of preliminary research suggesting that a number of themes and motifs in the text of *Joloy Khan* reflect elements of Indo-European myths (Prior 2012; cf. Miniaev 2000, p. 297).

The two theoretical directions of transmission are not necessarily exclusive of one another. It is possible that the narrative themes in some form traveled first in the direction of the Xiongnu homeland with western Eurasian migrants in the Eneolithic or Bronze Age, and later were carried in changed form by peoples defeated by or broken off from the Xiongnu in the centuries just before or after the turn of the Common Era. In any case, the vast time interval separating the *Joloy Khan* epic from the bronze plaque allows for the arrival on stage of other necessary players of whom there is no direct evidence in our reconstructed scenario, such as speakers of Turkic languages. The empty centuries also serve as a reminder of the innumerable generations in the relevant tradition or traditions of which we have no knowledge at all.

Comparative analysis of the buckle plaque and the epic raises a number of issues that require more research. The narrative context of the plaque may help to illuminate similar motifs found in related objects. Four swans decorate a rectangular bronze Xiongnu-type belt plaque flanked by two standing warriors dressed in clothing almost identical to our plaque’s hero [Fig. 2]. The swans have been thought to suggest “a remote Altaic ancestry” but may also relate the two

warriors to the fragmentary narrative motif of Joloy’s watery begetting of Bolot, mentioned above, and to the waterfowl that our plaque’s hero cradles in his arms.<sup>10</sup> A bronze openwork plaque depicting a jacketed and trousered man on foot leading a horse-drawn, covered, two-wheeled cart

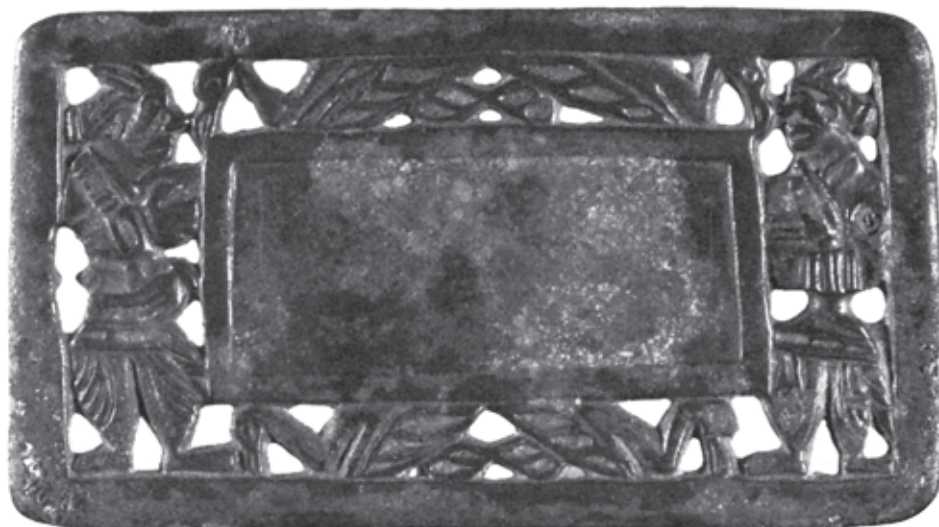


Fig. 2. Buckle plaque with two standing warriors and four swans. Bronze, 2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, W: 11.1 cm; H: 6.2 cm (Kost 2014, pl. 87.3; cf. Bunker 1981, p. 168; Bunker 1978, pp. 124f., pl. 4a). After: Kost 2014, pl. 87.3; reproduced with permission.

Fig. 3. Buckle plaque with man leading horse-drawn, covered cart and passengers through trees. Bronze, 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, W: 11.1 cm; H: 5.7 cm (Kost 2014, pl. 83.3, [main text] p. 126); cf. Bunker 1981, p. 168; Bunker 1978, p. 125, pl. 5b; Miniaev and Smolarski 2002, pp. 84ff.). After: Kost 2014, pl. 83.3; reproduced with permission.

with passengers through a stand of trees, known in several examples, presents clear thematic parallels with the Sackler/Miami buckle plaque [Fig. 3]. Could the scene's reference to two-wheeled transport have been specifically related to and in discursive interaction with the mythic themes reflected in the Sackler/Miami plaque? On the other hand, other representational motifs which appear in similar Xiongnu-era buckle plaques but which are not in the *Joloy Khan* story underscore the uniqueness of the exquisite correspondences noted above. What are we to make of the convergent motifs—trees, cart, man with sword, dog—in the several known examples of a 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE bronze buckle plaque depicting a singular scene where “a mounted warrior grabs the hair of a pot-bellied demon that is wrestling with a dog. A second dog points at a bird hidden in the trees while standing on the canopy of a cart pulled by two reindeer [...] The warrior brandishes a short sword in his raised hand” (Bunker et al. 2002, p. 111)? [Fig. 4]. The scene may be connected to a Xiongnu-era narrative milieu that relates in some way to the *Joloy Khan* epic, though the exact narrative references are unknown.

Themes of death, Underworld, afterlife and spirit-beings in the Bolot story harmonize with the buckle image in ways that may illuminate both. Such harmonies may then help to clarify the thought-context in which the buckle plaque was acquired, used and treasured. At the moment of his birth Bolot becomes the victim of an attempted infanticide, but is saved (*Joloy Khan*, lines 2785-2825). Twice he makes



the passage to and from the mysterious realm of Köchpös Bay, whose name ‘non-migrating’ may be an ironic kenning for ‘dead’ to the nomadic Kirghiz. A Köchpös Bay figure also appears in a version of the shamanic Underworld epic of the Kirghiz, *Er Töshtük* (Kaiypov 1990, p. 5, n. 5). The cart that the hawk-spirit-maiden Qarachach makes for the final trek in *Joloy Khan* is ‘six-footed’ (*Joloy Khan*, line 5307: Kirghiz *altı buttü*), an echo of the six-legged/seven-legged (*alt’ayaqtü, jet’ayaqtü*) steed that Er Töshtük rides on his spirit-world errands ‘having hobbled its four legs with velvet’. The latter formula clearly reflects the preparation of a horse for ritual sacrifice as bearer of the dead to the Underworld, an ancient and widely-attested funerary practice on the steppes (*Er Töshtük* 1885, lines 189-194; cf. Kaiypov 1990, pp. 299ff. *et passim*). The six-leggedness/seven-leggedness of the horse in *Er Töshtük* and the cart in *Joloy Khan* also chimes with a curious detail of the buckle image. Though a team of three horses is implied by the number of heads represented, the sculptor has shown exactly seven of

Fig. 4. Buckle plaques. Bronze, North China, 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, each, W: 11.1 cm; H: 7.3 cm (Kost 2014, pl. 82.1-2, [main text] p. 125; cf. Bunker et al. 2002, pp. 111-12 [animal on cart = “dog”]; Bunker 1978, p. 124 [animal on cart = “feline”], pl. 3a). After: Kost 2014, plate 82.1-2; reproduced with permission.



their legs in tight rows. (Interestingly, the cart's wheel has seven spokes.) In a battle in Köchpös Bay's realm in *Joloy Khan*, Bolot dies, is revived by the spiritual ministrations of Qarachach, lives long enough to utter his last testament, dies again, and is revived finally by Baybichä (*Joloy Khan*, lines 5056-5168). Among the instructions in his testament, Bolot commands that his heirloom steed Ach-budan be saddled with tied-back stirrups and sent home to Joloy (*Joloy Khan*, lines 5116-5133). In this connection the riderless horse, a funerary motif known even today, seems to have a complementary expression in the dismounted warrior on our buckle plaque, all the more significantly if we allow the rich atmosphere of the afterlife at the end of the Bolot story to inform our view of the plaque.

Our discussion of the significance of wheeled vehicles in Xiongnu ideas about death must include wheeled vehicles buried in ordinary graves and aristocratic tombs associated with the Xiongnu. There is clear evidence of a widespread Xiongnu-era practice of burying ordinary people in graves with pieces of simple carts, a custom which may have given rise to the use of imported Chinese chariots in the more elaborate tomb burials of elite individuals.<sup>11</sup> A two-wheeled, covered chariot rigged for three horses (essentially the same type as on the buckle plaque) was found inside the large central barrow at the Xiongnu royal tomb complex at Tsaraam in Transbaikalia. Clearly the elite of Xiongnu society imagined a place for wheeled transport in the afterlife of the tomb's occupants. Chinese historical sources such as the *Hanshu* mention chariots among luxurious gifts from the Han emperor to his Xiongnu counterpart, the chanyu. There is also mention of a specifically death-related instance of such a gift: at the demand of the Xiongnu, the Han court sent the bodies of executed Xiongnu hostages back to their homeland "laid into chariots" for transport. This occurred during the reign of Wang Mang (9-23 CE), the approximate period from which the Tsaraam Barrow 7 dates (Miniaev and Sakharovskaia 2007, pp. 49, 54; Miniaev and Sakharovskaia 2006). Our buckle plaque was made probably a century or so before the Tsaraam Barrow 7 burial and the hostage incident and was owned by someone below the elite level of society attested in the elaborate burial and the *Hanshu*. Yet in light of what the Bolot story reveals about the background of the plaque's image, the demand that the Xiongnu dead be returned in chariots can be placed in a more definite cultural setting, one that may even evoke the elite's view concerning traffic with a more prosaic Otherworld of "non-migrating rich men": China.

Linguists, geneticists, archaeologists and folklorists all deal with widespread empirical connections across Eurasia. Only very rarely do researchers in the last two

fields have opportunities to sift together fine-grained analyses of each other's materials. I know of only one other proposal of a specific, substantial thematic connection between representational art of ancient steppe pastoralists and recorded Inner Asian oral epic poetry (Haskins 1961). Data such as those examined here are not likely in the future to be found any more commonly than they have been in the past. On its own, the argument in this paper has little power to advance historical reasoning about any movements of specific peoples; in particular, the suspected Indo-European mythic themes in *Joloy Khan* await full explication. But this exercise does support general trends in recent thinking that lend definition and focus to the tapestry of "vastly complicated cultural admixture" that formerly lay across Eurasia (Bunker 1978, p. 129). The analysis here is an attempt to fasten back together two long-separated ends of a single strand of tradition, rendering a two-dimensional bronze image in unusual depth, and giving the weightless words of an oral singer of tales the solidity and permanency of a piece of treasure that can be grasped and carried great distances.

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#### NOTES

1. I attempt here to follow Ursula Brosseder's (2011, p. 349, n. 1) example of caution to avoid as much as possible uncritical extensions of the historical term "Xiongnu" from the usage of ancient Chinese political chroniclers to the modern identification of an archaeological culture or cultures, to say nothing of an ethnic group or a scantily-attested language.

2. On the "Ordos Bronzes" see note 3 (p. 178) in the accompanying article, "A Gift of Steppe Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation to the Miami University Art Museum."

3. For earlier interpretations of narrative features of such images see Haskins 1961 (involving analysis of a recent Kazakh epic), and further references in his nn. 6-7 on p. 154.

4. Including Rostovtsev 1929, pp. 23f., 44 (where it is noted that the plaque was "recently" obtained in China by Loo) and plate 11.56; Tsunoda et al. 1954, p. 42 and figure 13.4 facing p. 41; Samolin and Drew 1965, plate 9B; Maenchen-Helfen 1973, p. 217 and figure 4; Bunker 1978, pp. 124f. and plate 3b; Bunker 1997, pp. 275f. (cat. no. 243), where references are given to additional works not seen by the present writer; Brosseder 2011, pp. 383, 423; Kost 2014, [main text] p. 128, [catalog] p. 246, plate 88.3.

5. Other treatments of the text are available (English plot précis based on Radloff's German: Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969, pp. 38-40, 104f.; English prose summary of the Kirghiz original: Prior 2002, pp. 271-94; French translation of Radloff's German: Corsi and Karro 1999, pp. 103-206). On the text see also Prior 2002, pp. 180-87; Hatto 1990, pp. 524f.

6. Cf. the archaic Eurasian story of the swan maiden and her husband and offspring (Hatto 1961/1980).

7. The creature on the buckle plaque [Fig. 1] seems more dog than wolf to this writer; iconographic expertise is needed.

8. The well-known frame of correlation that posits a connection between the Xiongnu of Asia and the Huns of late antique Europe is not discussed here (Sinor 1990, pp. 177ff.).

9. On theories of ethnogenesis of the Central Asian Kirghiz, see Prior 2013, pp. 23-26.

10. On the breadth of swan imagery in northern Eurasia beyond "Altaic," see Hatto 1961/1980; Barber 1999.

11. On wheeled vehicles in ancient Inner Asian burials and conceptions of death, see Rudenko 1970, pp. 189-93, pls. 129, 131; Yun and Chang 2011, pp. 265-67; Miller 2012; Jacobson-Tepfer 2012; Kost 2014, pl. 106; Jacobson-Tepfer 2015, pp. 191-201. Excavations of Xiongnu elite tombs continue to uncover Chinese chariots interred with the deceased. For a recent example, with remarkably well preserved remains, see Polos'mak et al. 2011, esp. Ch. 3, pp. 77-89. Excavations carried out by the Hermitage Museum in 2016, reported by Nikolai Nikolaev and Sergei Miniaev in a separate article in this volume of *The Silk Road*, pp. 166-67, provide yet another example.