

Stone Reliefs of the Han Tombs in Shandong Province: Relationship Between Motifs and Composition

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Abstract—One of the important characteristics of the monumental relief art is the way of building a composition on a flat surface. In the stone reliefs of the Han Dynasty the dominant principle is a plastic-planar pictorial one (Moshkov, Kuznetsov 1994). Distribution of masses and location of the main lines of the image create visual effects that express the content of the depicted scenes. Systematization of the available data regarding the principles of composition, as well as identifying the relationship between composition and motifs allows to prove that certain methods of constructing composition correspond to certain motifs reflecting various aspects of the life of those buried, and religious ideas. The most vivid example of this is the composition of reliefs incorporating the motifs of hunting, war, travel, etc. This observation provides the basis for the subsequent identification of the features of the Shandong school of monumental art of the Han era.

Keywords—Shandong; Han Dynasty; stone reliefs; composition; motif

I. INTRODUCTION

The era of the Han Dynasty (2nd century BC – 3rd century AD) is a period of social stability and economic growth, which can rightly be called the heyday of ancient China. The basis of the ideology of this era was Confucianism. In accordance with the slogan of Emperor Wudi (140–87 BC) - “reject one hundred schools, honor only Confucianism” - the entire ideological system was built with the dominant position of Confucian thought. This philosophical trend put forward such concepts as “humane rule” (ren zheng), “ruling the country through rituals” (li zhi), and the principle of “filial piety” (xiao dao). The Han people attached special importance to serving their parents [1].

This ideological system has survived to the present day and has had a significant impact on subsequent generations. Confucius in the chapter “To exercise government” of the book “Conversations and Judgments” said: “During the life of parents, serve them according to the Rules; when they die, bury them according to the Rules; make sacrifices according to the Rules”[2]. From the reign of Emperor Wudi, the concept of creating rich burials was born: “a magnificent funeral is honor, a poor one is dishonorable.”

In addition, since the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), China has established a belief in the immortality of the soul, which later transformed into a concept of immortal celestials. These ideas, which arose on the basis of Taoism, became especially wide spread from the middle to the end of the Eastern Han (25 - 220 BC), when people gained the belief that after death you can get into the kingdom of heaven, to start the eternal life [3]. Thus, the Han people made sacrifices to their ancestors, and also created shelters for the eternal life of their souls after the death of the body - this is how the culture of magnificent burials in monumental stone tombs, which was rapidly spreading at that time, developed. An integral part of the tombs of the Han era were stone reliefs, which represent an important part of the ancestral cult and the ritual of sacrificing to them.

II. STONE RELIEFS OF THE HAN TOMBS

As a rule, stone reliefs were used on the inner and outer surfaces of the sarcophagi, directly in the burial chambers and in special rooms preceding the burial chambers intended for worship of the ancestors, as well as on the steles before the burial place. The depicted motifs were rich in content, - as the Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) noted, “the art of the Han Dynasty is full of grandeur and scope” [4]. If you put all the artwork together, you get a genuine encyclopedia of the history of the Han era.

In the early period, at the beginning of Western Han (202 BC - 8 AD), stone reliefs were made on stone sarcophagi. The forms of sarcophagi and burial equipment at that time followed the customs and traditions of the Warring States period (476/403-221 BC), when the nobility was buried in chambers under the burial mounds. But during the time of Emperor Wudi, rapidly developed funerary structures. During this period, emerged burials in multi-chamber catacomb tombs, and besides that, stone sarcophagi that replaced wooden sarcophagi became widespread [5]. In the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty, stone tombs, with stone-built temples of ancestors and stone steles imitating ground-based architectural structures became common. Consistent with the increase in the scale of burial structures and the complexity of their design, the art of stone relief has flourished. Its decline is associated with the onset of a period

of civil strife and military unrest at the end of the Eastern Han.

III. STONE RELIEFS OF THE HAN TOMBS IN SHANDONG PROVINCE

Shandong Province, located in eastern China, on the lower reaches of the Yellow River and overlooking the Yellow Sea, plays a crucial role in Chinese history. It is the birthplace of Confucianism - it was here that the ideas of Confucius (551–479 BC) and Mencius (372–289 BC) were born. During the Han Dynasty, the production of cast iron, salt and silk products reached a high level in Shandong Province. This region has become an important source of goods for the Great Silk Road, which began here in Shandong province.

Thus, the wealth of both the province and its nobility laid the economic foundation for creating magnificent burials and the origin and development of architecture and art associated with funerary cults. Therefore, the Shandong province is one of the main regions of archaeological finds of stone reliefs of the Han era and occupies the first place in regards to their number: in most cities of the province, a wide variety of items of high research value, representative of this era's art have been found [6].

IV. STONE RELIEFS OF THE HAN TOMBS IN SHANDONG PROVINCE PRINCIPLE OF COMPOSITION

Examination of a series of images of stone reliefs of the Han tombs of Shandong province showed that they are distinguished by a variety of compositional organization and compositional techniques. This fact was also noted by Chinese researcher Wang Jianzhong, who emphasized that the variety of stone reliefs of the Han era is inextricably linked with both their numerous variations and the unity of approaches and principles to their manufacture [7].

However, this array of images is currently considered mainly in regards to the represented motifs, as well as to the application techniques and features of character iconography. The matters of composition are considered only in some measure, and in some cases the focus issue is the presence or absence of a spatial perspective in the Han reliefs, and its features [8]. However considering the dominance of the plastic-planar pictorial principle, the compositional organization, which create a number of visual effects important in the perception of monumental painting and reliefs, should also be taken into account [9].

Thus, despite the apparent complexity and heterogeneity of the content of the images, in terms of the Han reliefs' composition, there are universal laws and general principles that were used to create them. Moreover, there are patterns in the use of composition to convey different motifs, that can be traced. Based on this, the purpose of this study was to identify and systematize the main compositional types of Han stone reliefs in Shandong province, as well as to identify patterns of using different types of composition to portray different motifs, found on the reliefs, in the context of their evolution.

V. COMPOSITIONAL TYPES OF HAN STONE RELIEFS IN SHANDONG PROVINCE

Compositional organization is a key aspect of creating stone relief. As noted above, modern scholars approach the study of the composition of the stone reliefs of the Han Dynasty from the perspective of three-dimensional space, while underestimating the importance of studying the two-dimensional space of the composition. Planar compositional types distinguished by significant abstractness and sense of form, reflect the art and way of thinking of Han masters in the process of structural organization of images, as well as the worldview of the ancient Chinese. Russian art critic and monumental-style artist V.M. Moshkov believed that planar composition is significantly different both from composition in space and from composition in an illusory space (with an illusory transfer of depth and volume), since it is capable of carrying the maximum emotional charge. Sometimes such "laconicism" is much more expressive and effective than a detailed description [10].

Based on the foregoing, we can distinguish a number of basic compositional types of Han stone reliefs in Shandong province in accordance with the principles of constructing a two-dimensional composition:

- nested composition: one of the earliest compositional types of Han stone reliefs in Shandong province, found on sarcophagi in the early to mid-Western Han. The composition followed the shape of the stone material and involved the embedding of several layers. It, as a rule, had a decorative character.
- symmetrical composition - one of the earliest compositional types of Han stone reliefs in Shandong province, found on stone sarcophagi in the middle of the Western Han Dynasty. Images had symmetry of the right and left parts, or lined up around the center with a symmetrical arrangement of the upper and lower, left and right parts. This type of composition created a feeling of grandeur, severity, solemnity.
- V-shaped composition: most often it was created on stone sarcophagi in the middle of the Western Han, the image was arranged in the form of a regular or inverted letter "V", therefore the composition can also be understood as a triangular one. This type can be considered the most stable compositional organization of the image.
- the scattered composition most often appeared on stone tombs and in burials of the Shandong province of the late Western Han Dynasty. This type of image organization implied the presence of many points of view and disorder, dispersal of the composition. The scattered composition had a significant impact on the compositional forms and rhythm of the art of guohua Chinese national painting [11].
- hierarchical composition - a very common compositional form found in the region of Shandong province from the early Eastern Han period. It most often appears in funeral rooms and temples of

ancestors, allows to distinguish between the contents of the image, as well as to determine the relationship of the near and distant plans. In most cases it is represented by a horizontal hierarchy of elements.

- an asymmetric composition, as a rule, appears in stone burial rooms and temples of ancestors in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty. This composition is characterized by a displacement of the center, the presence of conflict or contradiction, the visual effect of imbalance. As will be shown below, it usually serves to convey military or hunting scenes.
- the encircling composition in stone relief images of the Shandong province most often appears during the Eastern Han, especially in the burial chambers or temples of ancestors in the middle and late Eastern Han dynasty. It implies the presence of a curved line surrounding the image. As a rule, it is used in images dedicated to the cult of reproduction, as well as happy omens and the world of celestials.

VI. EVOLUTION OF COMPOSITIONAL TYPES AND THEIR USE FOR CONVEYING CERTAIN MOTIFS

When analyzing the use of various compositional types for expressing particular motifs, it should first of all be understood that compositional organization has a close relationship with architectural structures. In this regard, the shape of the stone material has a direct effect on the composition.

Stone reliefs first appeared at the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty on sarcophagi. From the reign of Emperor Wudi, a new type of funerary architecture emerged, echoing ground-based buildings: this is how burial chambers built from blocks of stone, ancestral temples where sacrifices were made, and also stone steles in front of burial places made an appearance.¹

Due to changes in stone surface on which the images were applied, the composition began to gravitate toward greater wealth and diversity. Furthermore, the origin and change of compositional types were closely related to historical development, ideology and culture, religion, social customs and many other aspects. Thus, the study of this question requires analysis from different points of view. An overview and analysis of three groups of motifs will be provided below.

A. Carriages and Horses (Processions)

Traveling by carriages and horses was an ordinary element of the daily life of the Han dynasty, as well as a

¹ In this case, it is necessary to keep in mind the possible prototypes of stone reliefs made of wood. Their presence, in addition to the connection between the forms of architectural structures, is evidenced by the planar nature of the carving, its angular shape, as well as the use of paint to emphasize details and background. It is possible that the presence of wooden prototypes is also indicated by the location of reliefs in horizontal zones - in the form of planks, from which both burial chambers and temples of ancestors were originally made. This issue requires further research.

symbol of noble people. Representation of carriages and horses in the stone relief of the Han Dynasty is clearly linked with the historical background of the era. "The Hanshu Chronicle. A Treatise on Food and Goods" mentions that in the first year of the West Han reign "the emperor did not have a carriage harnessed by four horses of the same suit, and the generals were content with carriages with oxen". Obviously, even the emperor could not afford to have horses of the same suit, and generals could only ride in carriages drawn by oxen [12]. By the time of Emperor Wudi, society and the economy had undergone significant changes, and carriages and horses became a universal means of transportation not only for members of the imperial family, but also for the nobility.

Images depicting carriages and horses in Shandong province appeared on stone sarcophagi in the late Western Han Dynasty. As a rule, they were characterized by a nested and scattered composition. The scattered composition had considerable freedom and liberty of execution, however, the carving was done on very narrow and small sarcophagi, and therefore the composition was characterized by compactness. A fine example of combining the prototypes of this composition is the stone relief from the sarcophagus of the late Western Han Dynasty portraying horses and carriages dating from about 73–33 BC stored at the Zoucheng County Museum in Jinin County ("Fig. 1"). The relief depicts two representatives of the nobility, who went on a journey in carriages. Behind them is a retinue of three people, on the other side - two characters who greet them by a polite bow [13].

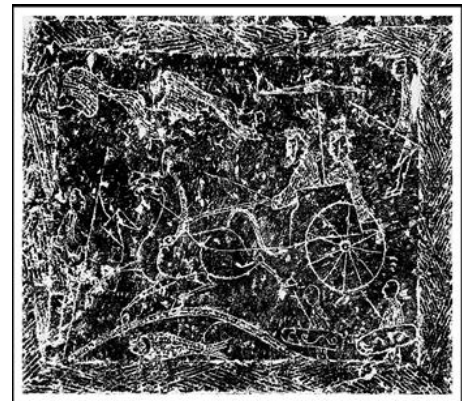


Fig. 1. Chariots and horses (processions). Late Western Han Dynasty (73–33 BC). Tomb M3 on Mount Wohu, Zoucheng County. Zoucheng Museum Collection, Jining.

Later, in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty, with the development of funerary structures' forms, the stone began to be used on a large scale, which led to the emergence of significant free spaces for creating relief images. In the early Eastern Han in the region of Shandong province, a new type of horizontal hierarchical (longline) composition began to gain popularity [14]. Wang Jianzhong notes that, "when transmitting complex multicomponent objects in the art of stone reliefs of the Han dynasty in Shandong province, the masters used the build-up of image layers" [15]. In accordance with the setup of architectural

structures, relief images of carriages and horses, as a rule, were located on horizontal blocks or transverse beams preceding the entrance to the front and middle halls of the tomb, or before entering the burial proper — in high, narrow and elongated spaces [16].

Thus, images depicting travel in carriages and on horses gradually acquired a single-level horizontal compositional

organization. For example, the Linyi Museum stores a middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty (147–220AD), portraying a trip in carriages and on horses, which has a horizontal two-tiered composition, where each tier presents a picture of travelers in carts and horses traveling from east to west ("Fig. 2") [17]. There are quite a few other reliefs with similar composition.

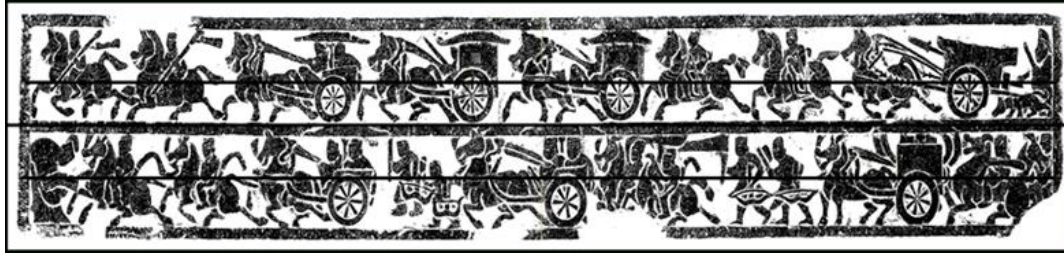


Fig. 2. Chariots and horses (processions). Middle and Late Eastern Han dynasty (147–220 AD). Tomb in Wubaizhuang, Linyi. Linyi City Museum collection, Shandong province.

Furthermore, in the late Eastern Han, in the burials we find relief images depicting travels with a symmetrical composition lined up around a bridge, which acts as the center. Such images are distinguished by thinness of carving and openness of space. An example of such a composition is Middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty the relief of the tomb

on the Lanling hill near Linyi, (147-220AD) recognized as a classic work of the era [18]. In the center of the image of the aristocratic procession of carriages and horses, a trapezoidal stone bridge is depicted, which acts as the middle of a symmetrical structure ("Fig. 3").

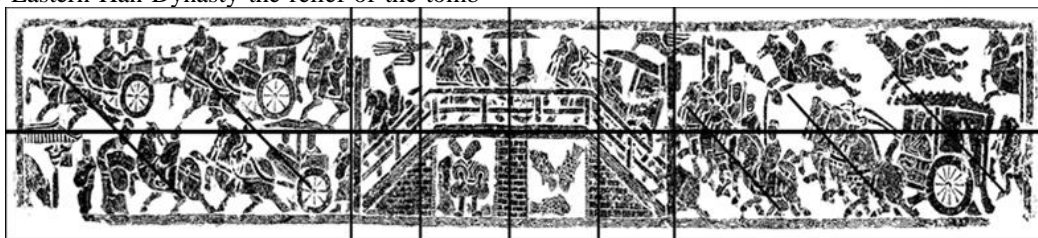


Fig. 3. Chariots and horses (processions). The of the Middle and Late Eastern Han dynasty (147–220 AD), Lanling county, Linyi city, Shandong Province. Shandong Linyi City Museum collection.

According to the author of this article, a symmetrical composition built around the bridge can be understood as a decorative form of an architectural funeral structure. A similar point of view is expressed by Li Jinshan, who outlined the relationship between the shape of bridges as the center of a symmetrical composition of Han stone reliefs and architectural structures. Conducting an analysis of such reliefs from the point of view of religion and culture, Yang Xikai notes that such bridges act as the road leading the owner of the tomb to the world of celestials, i.e. "the border of the worlds of yin and yang," "the bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead," leading to the "afterlife yin kingdom" [19]. The bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead in Chinese Taoist thought and folk mythology is the place where a person goes to reach the next incarnation. Thus, in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty, the ideas of Taoism could influence the motifs depicted on the tomb reliefs, which also led to changes in their composition.

B. Military Motifs

"The Zuo Commentary: The Thirteenth Year of Chenggong" states: "State affairs are important - these are sacrifices and wars" [20]. Since the time of the founder of the dynasty, Liu Bang and throughout the Han Dynasty, the Chinese (Han) have waged constant wars with surrounding peoples, defending the space of the Celestial Empire and expanding it in different directions. This could not but be reflected in the content of stone reliefs.

According to archaeological findings, stone reliefs with military motifs in Shandong province first appeared a little later than depictions of horses and carriages. Their appearance, most likely, occurred in the early Eastern Han, when part of the stone reliefs, portraying military events demonstrated the preservation of compositional techniques of the disordered scattered composition that developed during the Western Han. For example, in the collection of the Shandong Province Museum there is a stone relief dated to the early Eastern Han (25–88 AD), which depicts the "battle of the Hu and the Han peoples", introducing the image of a battlefield with warriors galloping on horses ("Fig. 4") [21].



Fig. 4. Hu and Han: war narratives. Early Eastern Han Dynasty (25–88 AD). Found in Mount Songshan of Jining city. Shandong Stone Carving Museum collection.

Reliefs dedicated to military events are gradually evolving. In addition to the appearance of a horizontal longline composition and the impact of architectural forms of burial sites, a number of characteristic aspects can be distinguished.

First, it is the emergence of an asymmetric composition. In the early Eastern Han, on one side of the stone reliefs of Shandong province, extended mountains in the form of "fish scales" began to be depicted. The appearance of such reliefs marked the formation of an asymmetric composition. Images of the mountains were usually carved on the same side as the troops of the Hu people, signifying that the warriors of Hu came from mountainous and wooded regions. In the poetic work of the Han dynasty period "Ancient hu do not sing" there is a line: "I look at the lands of Hu, everywhere is

danger" [22], which means that the slopes of the mountains on which the hu people lived were steep and impregnable. In the worldview of the Han people, the Hu people are barbarians who have descended from the mountains.

This motif can be executed using a balanced composition. For example, the stone relief of the early Eastern Han, discovered near the Zoucheng County Pedagogical School in the Jining City District, depicts a "clash of Han and Hu," as well as "palace architecture" [23]. An image of a mountain range resembling fish scales appears on the western side of the relief, and on the eastern side a huge building is engraved, as if contrasting the civilized world and the world of barbarians.

But the middle and late Eastern Han provides a large number of stone reliefs portraying military events, which are organized in accordance with an asymmetric composition. In such images, the center is significantly shifted to the side, which shows a strong sense of contradiction or instability and is designed to emphasize the fierce struggle. For example, the stone relief of the Han Dynasty found in the village of Gaolicun, Zoucheng County (147-189 AD), Jining City, depicts a military clash between the Han and the Hu people. The relief is divided into two levels. On its western side appear "fish scales" shaped multi-layer mountain ranges. At each mountain peak, an image of a Hu warrior in a high hat is created, which means that the Hu warriors descended from the mountains, while the soldiers of the Han army are riding horses from east to west. During the battle, the Han people defeat the Hu people and capture many prisoners ("Fig. 5"). A classic example of this type of composition is the relief found in the village of Xihukoucun in the Tengzhou city district of Zaozhuang urban district [24].

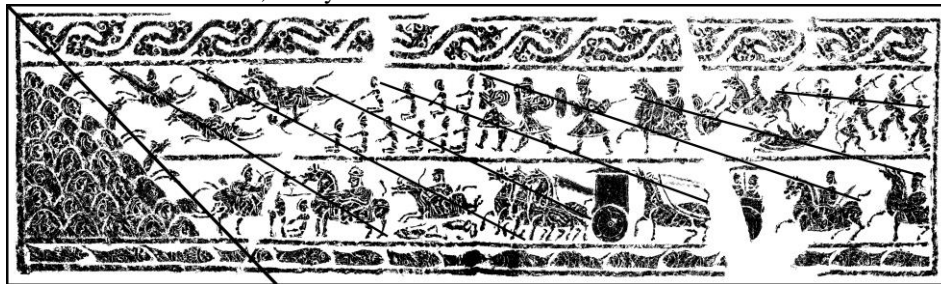


Fig. 5. Hu and Han — war narratives. Middle and Late Eastern Han Dynasty (147-189 AD). Found in Gaoli Village, Jining City. Zou Cheng City Museum collection.

Secondly, in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty in the Shandong province, also appeared many depictions of military motifs, in the center of the compositional organization of which there were bridges. This process is similar to the evolution of images of carriages and horses during the middle and late Eastern Han: reliefs with these two types of motifs had similar characteristics of the compositional structure. For example, in the Cangshan county of Linyi city, a relief, portraying battles between the Hu and and the Han, dated by the middle-late Eastern Han dynasty was discovered, and its composition is

symmetrically built around the center - the bridge (151-May 153AD)[25]. This relief depicts a scene of a military clash between two peoples, in which Han troops, led by chariots, occupied the bridge, demonstrating tremendous military power. In the hands of the Hu soldiers - bows and arrows, on their heads - high hats. The image is distinguished by its skillful execution and expressiveness of its elements ("Fig. 6").

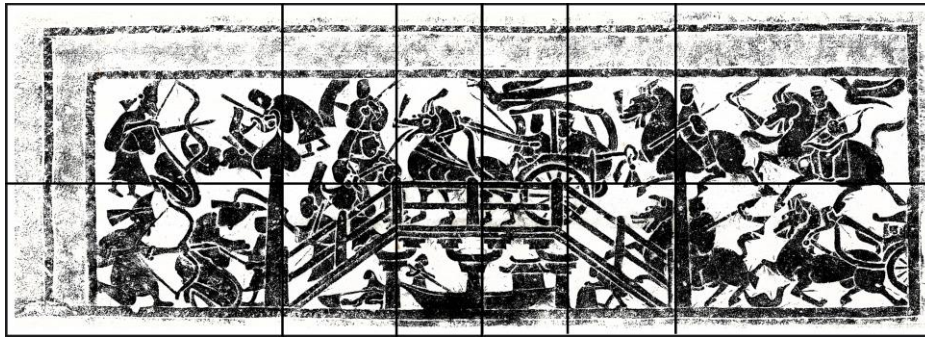


Fig. 6. Hu and Han — war narratives. The Eastern Han Dynasty (151–153 AD). Found in the Tsangshan Han tomb in Linyi city. Collection of the Antiquities Management Department of Cangshan County, Linyi.

This type of composition is characteristic of the reliefs describing the Hu and Han war found in the Wurongci Temple and Wukaimingci Temple in Jiexiang County, as well as of the image on the table at the entrance to the Yinan Beizhai tomb in the Linyi city. These works have a symmetrical composition with the center in the form of a bridge.

The scenes portraying the military motifs captured the historical merits and achievements of the owners of tombs during their lifetime, became an important manifestation of the military life of the country, as well as an artistic and decorative form of funerary architecture. Furthermore, the bridge can also be considered as a “bridge between the worlds”, leading the owner of the tomb to the afterlife, accompanied by a strong and powerful army. Thus, these motifs are indirectly related to the development of Taoist ideas.

C. Hunting Motifs

In the Han era, hunting no longer played a significant role in the state economy and became an activity combining entertainment of nobility and physical exercises. For example, during the time of Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty, the Shanglinyuan Garden was built in the suburbs of Chang'an (modern Xian) for hunting and leisure of the Emperor. According to "The Hanshu Chronicle", many species of animals, which the emperor hunted in spring and autumn, were raised in the garden [26].

Moreover, Emperor Wudi revered Confucian thought, as well as the Taoist concept of immortality and the existence of a world of celestials, which developed in the middle to late Eastern Han Dynasty. Xin Lixiang believes that depictions of hunting found in both ancestral temples and burial chambers portray “descendants killing animals to sacrifice to ancestors” [27]. Thus, the depictions of hunting not only portrayed the leisure of nobility, but also expressed the ideas of sacrifice and the divine world of the celestials. This had a significant impact on their composition.

Most of the reliefs with hunting motifs in Shandong province were found on the inner and outer walls of sarcophagi dating from the late Western Han Dynasty (about 78–40 BC). At this time, relief images dedicated to hunting were organized in accordance with the principles of disordered scattered composition. For example, in the Weishan county of the Jining city district, on the sarcophagus, a relief of the late Western Han was found depicting a hunting scene [28]. It presents images of officials who hunt on two chariots. In addition, many characters on the relief hold in their hands special hunting tools - bamboo spears "bi". The image is organized according to the scattered composition. A sarcophagus of the Western Han, on which hunting and fishing scenes were also executed in accordance to the principles of scattered composition, was discovered not far from the Higher Pedagogical Educational Institution of the Jining City District.

Following the emergence of new types of ritual architecture, for example, stone tombs, during the Eastern Han era in Shandong province hunting depictions executed with a horizontal asymmetric composition, similar to asymmetric composition of military scenes, were formed. For example, in the Linyi city district of Shandong province, a stone relief of the Eastern Han was found (25-220 AD). On its left side there is a dense mountain forest and the owner of the tomb at the head of the chariot, as well as many servants with "bi" spears, bows and arrows, following the owner of the tomb from east to west. The image was made by using realistic techniques, which induced a strong sense of dynamics and imbalance ("Fig. 7") [29].

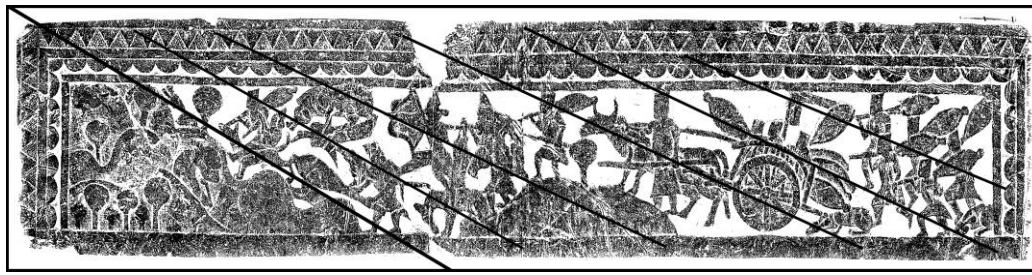


Fig. 7. Hunting scenes. Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD). Panjiatuan, Feixian county. Linyi Feixian Museum Collection.

Around the middle-late Eastern Han Dynasty, hunting motifs gradually evolved from realistic works depicting human nature to manifesting a divine nature. Significant changes also occurred in terms of composition. An example of this is the middle-to-late Eastern Han relief depicting a hunting scene, found in a small stone ancestral temple in the Songshan Mountains in Jining County [30]. Its composition is similar to the composition of the above-mentioned relief from Linyi, however, its ability to convey the dynamics of movement and the level of skill greatly exceed it. It is important to point out that this relief shows a transition from a realistic embodiment of the world of people to the image of the divine kingdom: for example, cirrus clouds appear in the western part of the image, demonstrating that the hunt began to personify a happy omen and the world of celestials.



Fig. 8. Hunting scenes. The of the Middle and Late Eastern Han dynasty (147–189 AD). Longyangdian village in Tengzhou county. Museum of Tengzhou county collection.

An even more typical example in this regard is the middle-late Eastern Han group of reliefs found in Longyangdian, in the Tengzhou county of Shandong province, depicting outlandish birds and rare animals (147–189 AD). Among the images, one can highlight a relief divided into three tiers. The upper tier shows the scene of the celestials' hunt: various outlandish birds and rare animals "circle" in space, intertwine, twist, creating a lively picture. At the bottom of the relief, four people hunt with "bi" spears in their hands, next to them are two hound dogs [31] ("Fig. 8"). Here is a clear image of outlandish birds and beasts of the celestial world, as well as people's aspiration for a better life. "The Hanshu Chronicle" states: "They say that the Han emperor Wudi caught white qilin, and the slogan of the year of rule became 'hunting'" [32]. Consequently, the hunt during the Han Dynasty had a benevolent meaning. Due to the

evolution of relief images, emerged an encircling composition, using a lot of curved lines that gave expressiveness to the reliefs. The encircling composition was one of the common composition types of the middle-to-late Eastern Han Dynasty, which was also used to portray the cult of reproduction.

VII. CONCLUSION

Summarizing all of the above, we conclude that the use of various types of composition corresponds to the way various motifs are depicted in the reliefs. On the one hand, this contributes to a greater expressive power of depictions, and on the other hand, corresponds with the expression of certain ideas related to the funeral cult, philosophical thought and religion. The patterns of use and evolution of the reliefs' compositional types are also closely related to the evolution of the architectural forms of the Han tombs. Identifying the set of characteristic composition techniques provides the basis for the subsequent analysis of the characteristic features of the Shandong school of monumental art of the Han era.

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