



Figure of a crouching deer

On display

Title/Description: Figure of a crouching deer

Born: 0400 c. BC - 0200 c. BC

Measurements: l. 105 mm

Accession Number: 1096

Historic Period: 4th century BC

Small sculptures of this kind were made by the non-Chinese peoples living on the northern and north-western borders of China's main centres. Such pieces are sometimes referred to as Ordos bronzes because examples have been found in Inner Mongolia, on the Ordos plateau within the large bend of the Yellow River as it turns through the southern part of the Gobi Desert. However, other pieces have also been excavated from many places on the northern periphery of China, in areas of the present-day provinces of Shaanxi, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia and Liaoning (*Wenwu*, 1983.12: 22-30, pl. 5:4). The figures were cast by nomadic peoples whose lifestyle is vividly described by the Chinese court historian Sima Qian, writing in the first century bc (Watson, 1961:11:155-92). At that period the dominant peoples were the Xiongnu, who have sometimes been linked with the peoples known as the Huns who attacked Western Europe. Whether this is true or not, the Xiongnu were only one of a number of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples active on the Chinese borders for over a thousand years (Prusek, 1971).

The harness ornaments of these peoples represented realistic animal subjects, a concern shared with other much more western peoples, including the inhabitants of the Altai (Rudenko, 1970) and the Scythians. Such art goes by the general name of 'animal-style' art (Bunker *et al.*, 1970). Wu En (1981: 45-57), in his chronological survey of animal-style art on the northern periphery of China, dates small castings similar to the present examples to the latter part of the Eastern Zhou period: fourth-third century bc. These bronzes, cast by the *cireperdue* process, often represent creatures which these people hunted or herded, and they were made to decorate carts and horse harnesses. Those shown here are probably from carts, and are in the form of crouching deer (see Bunker *et al.*, 1970: 123,142; no. 99, where a deer similar to no. 133 is illustrated, but with a different head position; see also *Erduosi*, 1986: pls. 11-14; *Kaogu*, 1990.5:403-18, pl. 6:3). The larger piece (no. 133) is more finely cast and more naturalistically rendered than the smaller (no. 134). Both are hollow and have minor casting flaws and damages.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997.)
