

The four known examples of receptacles in animal form, with removable heads, have often been illustrated (21). When reproducing this bird, the artist gives it characteristics that make it easily recognizable. The head big and round; the beak curved, slightly notched at the end of the lower mandible; the large eyes circled with feathers, and the eye-balls protruding; legs usually with feathers down to the feet and hind-toes that can turn (22). This description agrees very well with the four birds on a covered receptacle in the Loo collection (Pl. II, Nos. 1 and 2). There are different names for this type ("I" and "Tsun"). The way in which the surface is entirely covered with ornamentation reminds us of the beginning of the Chou period. With the exception of the vertical ridges in the middle and on the edge, only the eyes and beaks are in relief. The preference for engraved ornamentation is already found in the bronzes from An-yang, but chiefly in what was their model, the engraved bones from the same site. This statement corresponds with the date chosen here.

An owl covers each half of the receptacle and each half of the lid. The characteristics of this species which we have enumerated here, perfectly agree with the typical stylization of archaic Chinese art. That the bird has some special signification, there can be no doubt. According to the texts, Granet has connected it with drum, casting, thunder and lightning (23). He also remarks that an owl used to be sacrificed to Huang-Ti, first mythological sovereign of China. Now arises the question whether the owl on this bronze could have served as a totem, an ancestor and protector in animal form. Opinions differ on the existence of totemism in China (24). At first one is not inclined to search among the agricultural Chinese for any belief held by hunters, that is totemism. This connection is reasonable, however, if one will bear in mind the association and intermarriage of the Chinese with the barbarians. Our chief reason for believing that the owl was derived from northern countries is that there it was of extraordinary importance.

It may be found in nearly all parts of the eastern Steppes, chiefly in the valley of the Minussinsk. There are also examples from western Siberia (25). Bronze buttons have their surfaces covered with the owl's head. Reports on Siberian schamanism help us to understand the reason for finding representations of this night bird on such accessories. Nioradse writes that the "grand duke", a species of owl, persecutes and devours evil spirits (26). "A schamane having the body of a grand duke on his head is in this way protected from demons". A representation of a sorcerer thus attired comes from the Ischimka river near Krasnojarsk (27). It has been possible to date this discovery through finding at the same place Chinese mirrors of the second half of the I millennium of our era. Here a man, primitively stylised, is flanked by two birds seen in profile, one of which is broken. He has an owl-head as head-dress, the eyes of which show it to be a definite type of bird and quite different from those which are at each side.