
Title of Object

Bi Disk

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: China (Han Dynasty)

Date of Object: 206 BCE – 220 CE

Country: China

Accession Number: 50.46.315

File Created: 5/23/2016

Material/Medium: Grey-green mottled nephrite (jade)

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Tour Topics

Group 4 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, fashion/dress, funerary/afterlife, mythology, nature, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Questions:

1. What do you notice about the color, shape and ornamentation of this and other bi disks in the Neolithic jade case?
2. How might this and other bi disks have been used?
3. Do you recall seeing or hearing any stories about bi disks from the 2008 Olympics in Beijing?

Activities:

Compare bi disks to compact discs.

Show pictures of medals from the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1. Bi Disks are ceremonial jade rings that resemble compact discs (CD's) in shape and name Bi (pronounced Bee) Disks.
2. Bi Disks are made of jade, which is a material so strong that artisans of Neolithic times would not have been able to split it or cut it, even if knives had been available to them. Since jade cannot be carved, it must be worked with hard, abrasive sand. In Neolithic times, it was commonly abraded with sand ground from quartz or corundum (emery).
3. The two types of jade are nephrite and jadeite. The jade found in China and in Mia's Neolithic jade collection is nephrite, which is naturally white in color. Exposure to other minerals such as copper, chromium, and especially iron, can turn nephrite gray, green, yellow, red, brown and even black. Calcification in the tomb can also result in discoloration. Nephrite for bi disks was found in boulders that were deposited at the foot of mountains and in riverbeds after the mineral broke away from metamorphic mountain rock.
4. Some of the Neolithic bi disks in Mia's collection are more than 5,000 years old (3400-2250 BCE). The earliest bi disks were generally undecorated, but show remarkable craftsmanship in form and finish since no metal tools were available at the time. Later bi disks were ornately adorned with raised bosses in low relief and incised or carved phoenixes and dragons.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. In Han tombs (206 BCE-220 CE), bi disks, which symbolized heaven, were placed above the head, below the feet and on the chest of deceased persons of high status. At times more than twenty other bi disks, often of inferior workmanship or coarser stone, were also scattered around the body. On painted burial shrouds from the 2nd century CE, a pair of dragons was depicted moving through the center of the bi disk, going from the netherworld to the celestial realm, perhaps suggesting that the hole in the disk was considered a portal between heaven and earth. This implies that jade disks were intended to help the soul of the deceased in its journey to heaven.
2. Although the bi disk may be the oldest symbolic motif in Chinese art, it is not known if the disks were symbolic of heaven or if they held a similar significance in early Neolithic times. We do know that they were important funerary objects, routinely placed on the stomachs and chests of deceased persons of high status in tombs for over 5,000 years. In one Liangzhu site dated between 2700 and 2200 BCE, 25 bi disks ranging from 5-10 inches in diameter were found. Although no written records exist to indicate what the bi disks of early Neolithic times symbolized, their presence in tombs indicates an early belief in the afterlife.
3. Jade is considered a very important stone in China, symbolizing nobility, perfection, constancy, and immortality. There is a Chinese saying that "Gold is valuable, but jade is invaluable."
4. The jade bi disk is an enduring symbol in China. Medals from the 2008 Olympics in Beijing were inlaid with jade bi disks on the obverse side.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Originating in the Neolithic Period around 500 BCE, the bi, a perfect disk emblematic of heaven, is possibly the oldest symbolic motif in Chinese art. Throughout the Shang and Zhou dynasties, jade objects played an abiding role in ritual ceremonies. During Eastern Zhou (770-475 BCE) however, ritualistic jades became increasingly secularized with complex decorative designs and lustrous surfaces reflecting an exceptionally high standard of workmanship and a heightened concern for aesthetic impact.

While jade disks have been retrieved from several Han burials, they tend to be more elaborate than their Neolithic predecessors appearing more as an archaistic object with little of its original ceremonial purpose. This large disk is extremely thin. It is divided into two decor zones, one with raised bosses in low relief, and the outer zone carved in openwork curvilinear designs of pairs of dragons and phoenixes. Both sides are identical.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Hunan Provincial Museum, jade:

<http://www.hnmuseum.com/hnmuseum/eng/collection/collectionContent.jsp?inoid=01330209e5984028848332ebc2a00645>

Article from Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bi_\(jade\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bi_(jade))

Article on jade cong and bi from Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/british-museum/asia1/british-museum-china/a/jade-cong-and-bi>

Another bi disk from the Metropolitan Museum: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1986.112/>