

# art in the archives

An occasional newsletter about art works in Special Collections at the Graduate Theological Union Library

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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RITUAL VESSELS IN THE GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION'S SACRED WORLD ART COLLECTION

In 2014, the Institute for Aesthetic Development and F. Lanier Graham donated an extensive teaching collection of sacred objects to the Graduate Theological Union. This collection of sacred world art invites the study of ritual that sheds light on our own religious past. Guided by his profound insight into the sacred, the objects Graham has collected are telling, each contributing to our understanding of our spiritual inheritance. Graham's collection is far ranging, but my observations are not, in that I consider here only ritual vessels from the Bronze Age and the first century of the Common Era.

### Part I: The Shang Bronzes

I have chosen five ritual vessels from the collection of sixteen to write about. For the Bronze Age, I have chosen, in Part I, three spectacular bronze vessels prized by the kings of the Shang

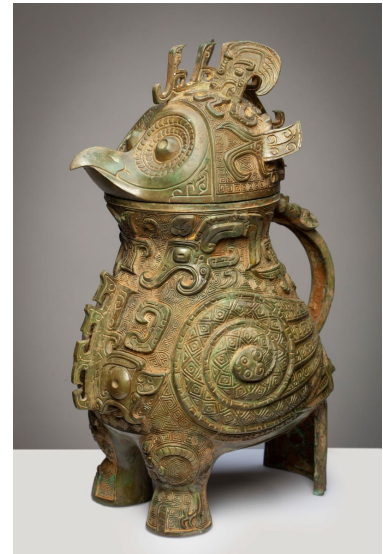


Rhinoceros *Zun*  
Bronze Vessel  
9.5 x 12 x 4.5 inches  
Replica  
No. 2015.1

Dynasty, who ruled from their capital city of Anyang in the second millennium BCE, and, in Part II, the libation vase of Lord Gudea, who three thousand miles to the west of Anyang and in the third millennium, a thousand years earlier than the Shang Dynasty, ruled the Sumerian city of Lagash. For the Common Era, two thousand years ago, I have chosen, in Part III, the omer cup depicted on the shekel, which commemorated the second year of the first Jewish revolt against Rome in 67 CE. From oracle bones we know the importance of ancestral spirits among the nature spirits and deities in Shang religion. We also know that at the heart of

Shang ritual practice was the offering of wine to the ancestral spirits from vessels like those shown here. They are two *zun*, vessels for ritual sacrifice in the form of an animal, and a *yu*, a bucket with a swing handle also in the form of an animal, that, like the *zun*, held wine for a ritual ceremony.

The Shang king, the living descendent of the ancestral spirits, had the exclusive power to communicate with them and to ask of them the favor of intervening with unpredictable nature spirits for his own benefit and for the benefit of Shang society. Even with the exclusive power to communicate with the ancestral spirits, the Shang king could not make the daunting approach to Heaven on his own.



Owl *Zun*  
Bronze Vessel  
12 x 5 x 8 inches  
Replica  
No. 2015.2



Tiger *Yu*  
Bronze vessel  
13 x 7 x 9 inches  
Replica  
No. 2015.18

The animals represented by the *zun* and *yu* were said to be *wu*, helpers that served the Shang king in his ascent from Earth to Heaven. The tiger *yu* with the small clinging human, I suggest, may represent the king helped by *wu* in approaching the ancestral spirits. The *wu* not only ensured communication between Earth and Heaven to bring about their harmony, but representations of them were instructive, showing which animals helped the living to draw close to Heaven and which animals were not helpful or were even harmful. The ritual wine sacrifice was the undoing of the bibulous Shang. Once food had been ritually offered along with wine poured from the *zun*, an invocator would announce that the spirits had been satisfied. A banquet would follow, which would all too often degenerate into intoxicated chaos, compromising the dignity of the lords and ladies of the Shang court. The abstemious Zhou invaded Anyang and toppled the

Shang Dynasty in 1046 BCE. The Zhou would conclude that the Shang kings lost the Mandate of Heaven to rule because of their drunkenness.

These Shang ritual vessels show the dramatic change between archaic and Bronze Age religion. As Graham writes in *Spirit-Matter*, archaic religion made no distinction between Heaven and Earth, regarding spirit as pervasive in the natural world, the world of matter. But in the Bronze Age, spirit and matter came apart, so that Heaven became the realm above of immortal gods and spirits and Earth became the home below of mortals beholden to them. Now, as we see in Shang religion, the offering of wine in *yu* and *zun* with the help of *wu* brought spirit and matter together once again in sacred ritual.

My observations continue in Part II, where I consider Lord Gudea's libation vase and compare its ritual use to the ritual use of *zun* and *yu*.

## FURTHER READING

The literature is replete with research into the Shang Dynasty, Shang religion, and the ritual bronze vessels. I list below a few papers from which I made my observations. By no means do they outline the issues and controversies in scholarly literature.

Chang, K. C. "The Animals in Shang and Chou Bronze Art." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 2 (Dec. 1981) 527-554.

Graham, F. Lanier. *Spirit-Matter*, vol.1 Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, in print.

Lopes, Rui Oliveira. "Securing Harmony between the High and the Low: Power Animals and Symbols of Political Authority in Ancient Chinese Jades and Bronzes." *Asian Perspectives* 53, no. 2 (2015): 195-225.

Sterckx, Roel. "Alcohol and Historiography in Early China." *Global Food History*, 1 (2015): 13-32.

## Part II: Gudea's Libation Vase

In Part I, I drew conclusions about Bronze Age spiritual practice from Shang Dynasty ritual vessels. Here, in Part II, I make observations about Gudea's libation vase, another Bronze Age ritual vessel, and compare my findings to those I made about the Shang ritual vessels.



Gudea's Libation Vase, 8.5 x 4 x 3.25 inches, No. 2014.1.69. Original circa 2100 BCE, Replica commissioned by IAD from Paul White, Australia, 2008. The inscription says, "To the god Ningiszida, his god, Gudea, Ensi (governor) of Lagash, for the prolongation of his life, has dedicated this." The original libation vase is in the Louvre: <https://bit.ly/3H2tIhD>

Gudea ruled over the independent Sumerian city of Lagash from 2144 to 2120 BCE. His likeness is known to us from the many statues of him now in museums. He was praised for his piety, the laws he reformed, and the peace and prosperity he brought to Lagash.

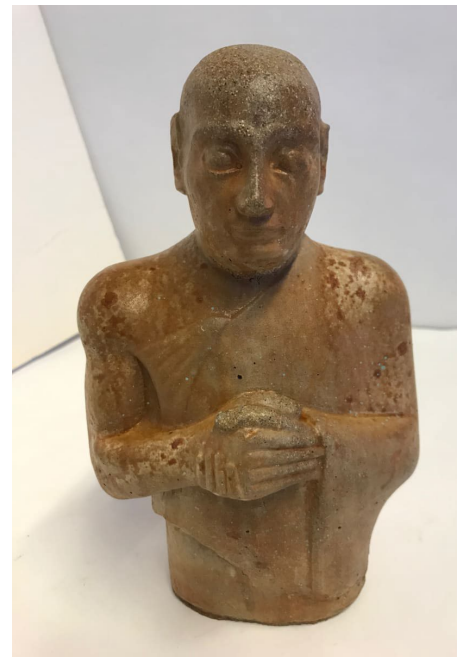
In Lagash, the gods were feared and served and given the respect they demanded. It was believed that they had created humans, so that humans with their industry and solicitude could provide them with an opulent and carefree life, leaving them unhindered to govern the earthly realm. Sacrifices to the gods were thought of as gifts for their pleasure. Gudea's libation vase was, to be sure, suitably splendid to honor the god Ningishzida to whom it was dedicated. It would contain a pleasant wine for the sacrifice.

Although kingship in Mesopotamia was always considered sacred, Gudea remained a mortal, but a mortal who had been chosen by the gods. He was the linchpin, as it were, the intermediary between Heaven and Earth who alone could communicate between the two realms.

From a dream, Gudea learned that Ningishzida would be his personal god, who would not only guarantee his success but would also be his intermediary with Ningirsu, the god of Lagash.

Ningishzida is represented in images as either a human or as the snakes carved into the libation vase. On Gudea's seal, he is shown as a human with snakes emerging from his shoulders leading Gudea by the wrist into the presence of Ningirsu. I suggest that the snakes on Gudea's libation vase perform like the Shang's *wu*, as animals helping to bring about the communication between Heaven and Earth.

Despite the vast temporal and spatial distance between the Shang king's earthly domain and Gudea's, the similarity in their wine sacrifices is striking. The objective of both rituals was to bring the mortal into the presence of the immortal—or to put it another way, to bring matter and spirit into close proximity if only for a moment. Both the Shang kings and Gudea had a unique connection to the immortal to permit their ascent to Heaven. Whereas Gudea was chosen by the gods, the Shang king inherited his relation to the ancestral spirit he petitioned. Most striking of all is that both relied on what the Chinese called *wu*, an animal helper—whether rhinoceros, owl, tiger, or snakes—to dare the approach to the divine.



Gudea of Lagash Torso  
Ceramic  
9 x 6 x 3 inches  
Replica  
No. 2021.29



After L. Delaporte, *Catalogue des cylindres, cachets et pierres gravées de style oriental*, vol. 1 (Paris: Musée du Louvre and Hachette, 1920), no. T. 108.



In Part III, I look into the ritual sacrifice represented by the omer cup on the shekel struck during the first Jewish revolt against Rome in 67–68 CE. I also draw conclusions from a comparison of the Temple sacrifice with the sacrifices made by the Shang kings and Gudea.

## FURTHER READING

The scholarly literature is replete with research into the Sumerian city of Lagash, Gudea, and Sumerian religion. I list below a only few of the papers from which I relied on to make my observations. By no means do they outline the issues and controversies in the scholarly literature.

Bottéro, Jean. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Ceccarelli, Manuel. "Bemerkungen zur vermittelnden Gottheit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der sumerischen Königshymnen." *Text and Image: Proceedings of the 61e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* 40 (June 2015) 117–129.

Suter, Claudia. "Gudea's Kingship and Divinity." In *Marbeh Hokmah: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East in Loving Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz*, edited by Shamir Yona, et al., 499–523. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015.

### Part III: The Omer Cup

In Parts I and II, I considered vessels used in sacred rituals by Shang Dynasty kings and by Gudea, ruler of Lagash, to show what they revealed about Bronze Age religion. Here, in Part III, I consider another vessel, the omer cup as depicted on the shekel struck during the first Jewish revolt against Rome, and compare its religious meaning to the religious meaning we have gathered from the Bronze Age vessels.

The heavens of the Shang kings and Gudea were populated with hierarchies of spirits and deities. For Jews at the time of the First Revolt against Rome in 66-73 CE, Heaven had become the exclusive domain of Yahweh since the return from exile in Babylon in 539 BCE. With the rebuilding of the Temple begun in 515 BCE,



Omer Cup  
Silver Shekel of Judea  
23 mm.  
Replica  
No. 2016.3

"Shekel of Israel" in Hebrew,  
omer (temple vessel) with  
pearl on each side.

daily sacrifices to Yahweh had become religious practice. They were offered in fulfillment of commandments in the Torah to atone for sins and to express thanks, gratitude, and love of Yahweh.

The Temple's golden omer cup is known to us from shekels struck from its store of silver during the First and Second Revolts. The shekel pictured here identifies itself with the words translated as "Shekel of Israel" and shows that it had been minted in the second year of the revolt, 67-68 CE. The omer cup represented both the Second Temple, where the sacrifice took place, and the sacrifice to be made on the second day of the Passover to celebrate with great pomp the first of the three harvest festivals commanded in Leviticus 23:10-11. The ceremony required the priest to present as an offering to Yahweh a sheaf of barley, which stood for the first fruits of the harvest. The offering also included a measure of the milled barley in the amount of an omer. Depicted on the reverse of the shekel is a branch with three budding pomegranates, a symbol of fertility.

Among the many symbols on Jewish coins, the omer cup appears only on the coins struck during the First Revolt and the Bar Kochba Revolt, 132–135 CE. I suggest that there were two reasons for choosing the omer cup. Although only priests could offer sacrifices at the altar in the Temple, all men were commanded in Deuteronomy 16:16 to appear to witness the grain offering, each with a grain offering of his own. The omer cup on the shekel was in this way a standard, a rallying cry, during the revolts against Rome, recognizing the presence and participation of each one of Yahweh's people engaged in the struggle. As a symbol of the Temple, the omer cup was also a reminder of the covenant and a warning against heeding Jewish Christians who proclaimed the gospel in the streets of Jerusalem.

Common to both Bronze Age ritual and the Temple cult was the perception of the profound separation between Heaven and Earth, between spirit and matter. Only a mortal with a special connection to the heavenly realm could embark on the approach to it with the help of an animal



Reverse: "Jerusalem the Holy" in Hebrew around, stem with three pomegranates.

guide represented on a ritual vessel. The Shang kings' special connection was their descent from the ancestral spirits they petitioned. Gudea's was the privileged access to the gods from his divine election. So, too, the Temple's High Priest was a Levite, a descendant of Aaron, whom Yahweh commanded in Leviticus 16:1–34 to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Unlike the Shang kings and Gudea, the High Priest made his appearance before Yahweh unaccompanied—that is, in no need of a guide—and only once a year.

As we enter the Common Era in Jerusalem, we see that the omer cup on the shekel is remarkably different from the ritual vessels of the Bronze Age considered in Parts I and II. The omer cup bears no image of a creature, prohibited in Deuteronomy 5:8. Unlike the zun, yu, and libation vase, the image of the omer cup in no way implies bridging the vast chasm between Heaven and Earth. It instead celebrates the blessings of the harvest. As I have suggested above, the image of the omer cup looks to the earthly realm and to each one who bore the sign of the covenant. I suggest that the omer cup makes a political statement during the time of revolt against Rome.

#### FURTHER READING

The literature is replete with research into the Judaism at the time of the First Revolt, the Temple cult, and the omer cup. I list below only a few of the papers from which I made my observations. By no means do they outline the issues and controversies in the scholarly literature.

Romanoff, Paul. "Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 33, no. 4 (April 1943): 435–443.

Schwartz, Jonathan. "Sacrifice without the Rabbis: Ritual and Sacrifice in the Second Temple Period according to Contemporary Sources." In *The Actuality of Sacrifice: Past and Present*, edited by Alberdinga Houtman, et al., 123–149. Boston: Brill, 2014.

Sperling, David S. "Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion." In *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, edited by Daniel C. Snell, 408–420. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005.

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#### **Gloria C. Cohen**

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### *art in the archives*

The Graduate Theological Union has taught the study of Art and Religion since its founding in 1962. Gloria Cohen participated as an intern in Fall 2021. To see more objects from the Sacred World Art collection, please visit <https://www.gtu.edu/sacred-world/> and follow the link to the Complete Catalog. For additional information, email [sacredart@gtu.edu](mailto:sacredart@gtu.edu)



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