

Seminar in Mutidisciplinary Archaeology

Thursday 29th June 2017

14:00 – 15:30

at 50th Anniversary Hall

Conference Room (2nd Floor)



Wooden mingqi 冥器 of the eastern Han dynasty: a material characterization

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Recent literature suggested to consider the materiality of ancient Chinese tombs as "inseparable from mortuary architecture and decoration, and that all these elements interacted and supplemented each other to complete the function and symbolism of a tomb" [Wu, 2010]. Among the funerary goods, a relevant role is played by miniature tombs figurines (yong 俑), also called mingqi (冥器), representing humans, animals, models of vehicles and edifices, that are integral part of funerary rites from the early fifth century BCE onwards. Commonly, mingqi are wooden figurines or modelled and painted pottery materials, depending on location, time and quantity². In order to better understand the significance and the value of the materials employed in the tombs, a precise knowledge of the material composition is valuable.

The Museum of Oriental Art of Turin keeps some painted wooden figurines, attributable to the eastern Han period, representing an unicorn (see figure), a saddled horse and a charriot drawn by an ox with four servants. A stylistic analysis indicates that the figurines are attributable to differing intervals of the Han period, and the state of preservation is excellent, suggesting the provenance from a dry environment. Considering the lack of information about the wood species, the materials employed in the decoration and the carving technique, we decided to start a characterization of the materials, by preferring, when possible, non-destructive techniques. Our goal is to check if it can be found the employ of some specific wood species, together with specific pigments, and to develop the research to the objects preserved in other museums, with the aim to verify if the materiality of these wooden mingqi is linked to their symbolic meaning.

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