

Jade  
(Nephrite)

42.6

Chinese, 12th century B.C.

Shang dynasty, late, 12th-11th century B.C.

Implement:

A pointed implement for loosening knots. Somewhat translucent pale gray-green nephrite with pale tan mottling, carved in silhouette and counter-sunk linear relief. Perforated for suspension.

.106 over all. (4-3/16")

Neg.Nos.  
S6871AA  
S6923A

1. Bought from Spink & Son, Ltd., London. For price, see Freer Gallery of Art Purchase List after 1920.

2. (J.E.L., 1942). This is a sort of hand-fid or marline-spike, of which there appear to have been two standard sizes known respectively as the 大觶 ta hsi "large spike" and 小 hsiao hsi "small spike". In the 禮記 Li chi, or "Book of Rites", it is said (see Legge, The Li Ki, Book X, pp. 449-50) that young men and young women of good family carried a small spike suspended from the left side of the girdle, a large spike from the right. Earlier, in the 詩經 Shih Ching (Legge, The Chinese Classics, Vol. IV, Pt. 1, p. 103), the finger of mild scorn is pointed at a mere boy (童子), certainly less than nineteen years old, who swaggers along with such grown-up appurtenances as a spike and an archer's thumb-ring hung at his girdle. Drawings of jade spikes of both

sizes are reproduced by 吳大澂 Wu Ta-ch'êng (Ku yü t'u k'ao, pp.106-107), and four others, --- more fanciful, perhaps, and all of about the same shape and size, --- are illustrated in Ku yü t'u p'u (Chap. LVI, pp.5-12). Wu does not date his examples; one of those in Ku yü t'u p'u is dated 秦 Ch'in, one "pre-Han", and two Han, --- why, is not obvious; but our present example must be earlier than any of them, although in general form it more nearly resembles the Ku yü t'u p'u examples than the broader, tusk-shaped implements illustrated by Wu. Similar to it in form are two jade objects, --- one large, one small, --- reproduced by 黃濬 Huang Chün in his Ku yü t'u lu ch'u chi (Vol. III, p. 26 verso); these are probably knot-looseners, but like everything else in this publication they are left unidentified by the compiler. In Archaic Chinese Jades, a catalogue published by The University Museum (Philadelphia, 1940), a considerable number of jade objects identified as "knot-openers", --- sometimes mistakenly, I think, --- have been very inadequately reproduced (see, e.g., Pls. I, II, V, VI, XI, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI); and in Carved Jades of Ancient China (Pls. XII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV), Salmony has reproduced five examples as well as (Pl. LXIV, 4) an object classified as a "pendant" which may be, however, a large specimen of the type of hsi illustrated by Wu. Pelliot, in Jades Archaïques de Chine (Pl. XL, 9) has reproduced one example, and there may well be further examples in other publications; but those to which reference has already been made are enough to show the variety of forms. The sources quoted by Wu (loc.cit.) say that "the small hsi was used to loosen small knots, the large hsi to loosen large knots", and that these implements were made of ivory, bone, horn or jade; but I have never seen an ancient one made of any material other than jade.

The long-haired human figure which constitutes the handle of our present example is to be seen also on one of our early bronze weapons (34.4) and perhaps on another (34.3); Huang Chün (op.cit. Vol. III, p. 36), Salmony (op.cit. Pls. X, 1 and XXIX), Pelliot (op.cit. Pl. XXIX, 1) and Laufer (Archaic Chinese Jades, Pl. XXVI, 11) each reproduce one or more jade carvings of this strange being; but who he is or what he symbolizes is not known. The traces of cinnabar adhering to our present example indicate that it was excavated from a human burial.

3. Sp. G. is 2.981. Nephrite.
4. (A.G.W., 1946) Shang dynasty.
5. (W.B.Trousdale, 1964) Shang dynasty. The identification as a knot opener is unconfirmed.