

Article

# A Micro-Case Study of Artistic Design and Human-Society Interaction: The Bronze Shell-Storage Vessel of the Dian Kingdom as an Example

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**Abstract:** The sociocultural characteristics of creative and design artifacts have attracted a lot of scholarly interest since the 20th century. The study of Shell-Storage Vessel and their relationship to Dian society is very important since they are iconic bronze artworks of the Dian state. This study uses the storage vessels' planar ornamentation, three-dimensional adornment, and overall artistic effect to analyze their stylistic qualities and evolutionary logic. It delves more on how these stylistic changes interact with Dian culture. In the end, the study comes to the conclusion that, as Dian society's power systems deepened, the storage containers' artistic style changed from early simplicity and elegance to later complexity and secularism.

**Keywords:** Shell-storage vessel; Bronze art; Art anthropology

## 1. Introduction

Since the twentieth century, the multifaceted cultural significance of artworks has gained increasing recognition and importance across society. The public now appreciates the distinct value embodied in the cultural meanings art conveys rather than limiting it to its singular aesthetic qualities. In addition to having a strong connection to everyday life, art is essential in unique situations with religious, political, or personal biographical significance (DeMarrais, 2013). Examining the role of art in social conflicts, pressures, and discrimination is therefore necessary (David, 2004). Through extraordinary ingenuity, the early Dian people living around Dianchi Lake and its environs developed a magnificent bronze civilization around the fourth century BCE. Bronze drums and shell-storage vessels are prime examples of their bronze art, which is a cultural gem of the southwestern frontier. In addition to showcasing exceptional casting skills, these artifacts blend the distinctive natural sceneries and ethnic life scenarios of the Dian region into their design concepts and decorative patterns. Their deep cultural past and rustic yet dynamic artistic style still have a strong visual effect and cultural relevance. The bronze art of the Dian Kingdom and its sociocultural fabric are inextricably linked. These artifacts, which ranged from ornamental systems to vessel forms and functional designations, defied the conventional paradigms of Central Plains bronze culture and created a distinctive creative style infused with ethnic and regional traits. As a result, they became essential

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resources for researching the history and culture of prehistoric frontier ethnic groups in the Southwest. As vessels symbolising wealth and power within Dian society, these shell-storage vessels themselves constitute the core carriers of Dian culture.

They have garnered a lot of interest from archaeologists, historians, and art designers since their discovery. Broad generalizations are common in Chinese scholarship on shell-storage boats. Pieces like Zhang Zengqi's *The Dian Kingdom and Dian Culture* and *The Bronze Art of the Dian Kingdom*, alongside Jiang Zhilong's *Exploring the Dian Kingdom: New Discoveries of the Shizhaishan Culture*, provide overviews of various bronze artefacts from the ancient Dian period but lack in-depth analysis of individual shell-storage vessels. Japanese researcher Kajiya Masaru pioneered typological studies on shell-storage vessels in 1982. Even though his recent research interprets these vessels as representations of ancient Dian society and power, he has been unable to disclose the intricate social information contained in the vessels' graphic symbols due to his reliance on analogical reasoning from archaeological and historical knowledge (Kaji, 2019). Researchers have mostly concentrated on examining the aesthetic and regenerative significance of the forms and patterns of shell-storage vessels in artistic design studies. This may originate from the Dian Kingdom's absence of written records and anthropological materials, yet that precisely constitutes the difficulty this research tries to overcome. The main research subject of this work is the ornamental artistic information of shell-storage vessels. It aims to provide a glimpse of the complex social environment of ancient Dian by using historical and archeological information of Dian society and culture as reference material and sociology and art-anthropological theories as auxiliary tools. It also seeks to expand future directions for Dian art study by investigating the connection between the artistic qualities of shell-storage vessels and social change.

## **2. Literature Review**

Academic circles generally recognize that Dian society can be divided into three historical periods: the Early Dian period, the King Zhuang period, and the Han-Dian joint governance period. The Early Dian period is commonly understood as the social history of the region prior to King Zhuangqiao's conquest of Dian. According to Huang Yilu's reconstruction, around 276 BCE, a Yue commander from the state of Chu led approximately 20,000 soldiers to establish the Dian Kingdom in the Dianchi Lake region (Huang, 2012). The *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of the Southwestern Barbarians* records that in 109 BCE, Emperor Wu of Han dispatched troops to the Dian Kingdom. King Changqiang of Dian surrendered and submitted to the Han Dynasty, ushering in a period of dual governance by Dian and Han until the Han Dynasty completely abolished the Dian Kingdom. Large tombs from the Early Dian period containing shell storage vessels were unearthed at the Jiangchuan Lijiashan M21, M22, M17, M18, and M24 burial sites, as well as the Chenggong Tianzhimiao M41 and M33 burial sites (Xiao, 2004). Large tombs dating from Zhuang Qiao's establishment of the Dian Kingdom to the Han Dynasty's implementation of the commandery-county system are concentrated at Shizhaishan in Jinning. These include Tombs M12, M3, M13, M71, and M6. In 1991, the Yunnan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology conducted a second survey and excavation of the Lijiashan Ancient Tomb Cluster in Jiangchuan, publishing the report *Second Excavation of the Lijiashan Ancient Tomb Cluster in Jiangchuan County, Yunnan Province*. The report documented that Tombs M47, M51, and M69 were all large tombs yielding shell storage vessels, all dating to after the establishment of the commandery-county system in Yunnan. Based on an examination of the artistic styles of shell-storage vessels unearthed from tombs across these

three historical phases, this study further traces their evolutionary trajectory (Zhang, 2001). Given the substantial quantity of shell-storage vessels from these tombs and the absence of some pictorial documentation, the subsequent analysis will focus on representative examples (Table 1).

Table 1 Infographic of Large Tombs Yielding Shell-Storage Containers from Three Historical Periods Image.

Large tombs yielding shell-storage vessels						
Early <u>Dian</u> Period	<u>Li Jiashan</u>	M21	M22	M17	M18	M24
	<u>Tianzi Temple</u>	M41	M33			
The Reign of King <u>Zhuang</u>	<u>Shizhaishan</u>	M12	M3	M13	M71	M6
The Period of Two Systems in <u>Dian</u> and Han	<u>Li Jiashan</u>	M47	M51	M69		

## 2.1 The Transition from Simple to Complex Ornamental Techniques

During three different socio-historical periods—the Early Dian period, the reign of King Zhuangqiao of Dian, and the dual Dian-Han administrative system period—the ornamental techniques of shell-storage vessels underwent a clear progression from simplicity to complexity and from roughness to refinement. The fluidity of lines, the spatial interaction between lines, and the logical arrangement of ornamental patterns are the three main dimensions where this evolution is most noticeable.

Geometric designs on shell-storage vessels from the Early Dian period combined graceful curves with consistently straight lines, resulting in comparatively loose and flowing lines. This feature was especially noticeable in vessels that inherited typical bronze drum motifs, like the Five-Ox Shell-Storage Vessel discovered in Tomb M41 at Tianzi Temple in Chenggong. The straight lines are upright and well-organized, while the triangle patterns, whirlpool designs, and feathered creatures rowing boats are depicted with elegant, organic curves. A pleasant and well-balanced aesthetic pleasure is visibly conveyed because there are neither unnecessary strokes nor sudden breaks. However, this phase's animal motif line techniques are less fluid and organic, giving them a somewhat awkward aspect. For example, the waterfowl and oxen motifs on the Five-Ox Shell-Containing Vessel depict their basic shapes, but their dynamic vitality is not fully conveyed by the lines' lack of fluidity and some contours' slight distortion.

A new advancement in shell-storage vessel decoration was made during the reign of King Zhuang. Two vessels with scenes of grain storage and herding that were discovered in Tomb M12 at Shizhaishan are iconic representations of this era. Both the fluidity of the lines and the complex interaction of overlapping and interlacing patterns show a mature, effortless mastery in the ornamentation on these vessels. Beyond the earlier, more rigid quality of non-geometric linework, a sophisticated sense of spatial depth and pictorial perspective is achieved through variations in line thickness and the deliberate placement of dense and sparse elements.

Moreover, innovations in decorative composition showed a considerable advancement in technique. The majority of early Dian patterns used continuous, repeated layouts that emphasized uniformity and decoration. By a later time, designs had moved into pictorial narrative compositions, creating whole scenarios from everyday life. This revolutionary change

lifted decorating above simple ornamentation to communicate narrative meaning, a development that is thoroughly examined in the section that follows.

## 2.2 The Transition from Patterns to Pictorial Motifs

Flat-surface decorations on shell-storage vessels discovered from important tombs at Lijiashan in Jiangchuan and Tianzi Temple in Chenggong show clear early artistic traits from the Early Dian period (Figure 1.). Simple geometric motifs like triangle patterns, double spiral designs, cord patterns, and rayed motifs are the most common decorations from this phase. Despite capturing essential formative traits, animal and human motifs stuck to the geometric abstraction paradigm. For example, the human figures on the tiger-deer-ox shell-storage vessel from Tomb No. 22 at Lijiashan, Jiangchuan, were reduced to symbolic combinations of head, torso, and limbs, with facial features hardly depicted; the deer and bird figures were distinguished mainly by their basic outlines, with their bodies adorned in patterns resembling simple geometric designs (Figure 2.). These motifs usually created continuous decorative bands that ran in parallel, single-motif patterns around the central section of the vessel body or around the rim of the shell container lid. Rather than focusing on narrative expression, the overall style was austere and succinct, emphasizing ornamental function and symbolic meaning.

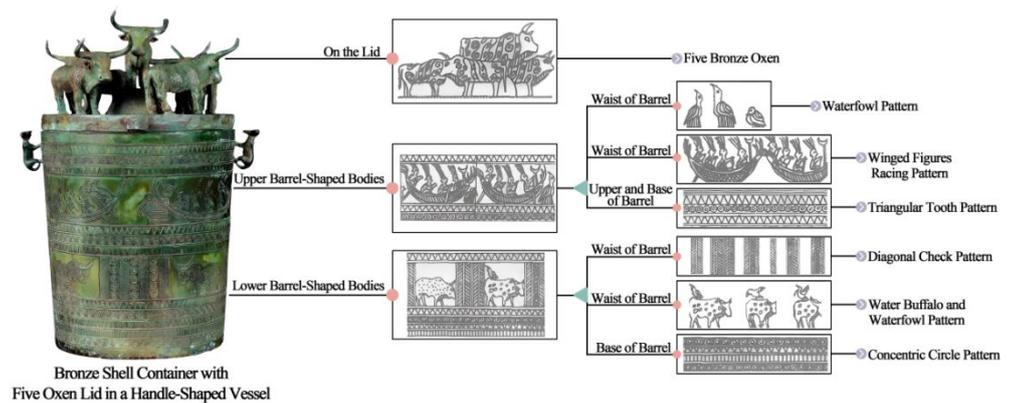


Figure 1. M41:I03. Decorative detail drawing of Five-Bull Covered Copper Bucket-Shaped Shell Storage Vessel by the author. Adapted from the book *Epic in the Bronzes: The Dian Kingdom in History* by Chen Hao and Xing Yi, p 81.



Figure 2. Scene of the upper compartment of a shell storage vessel unearthed from Tomb M12 at Shizhaishan.

Image source: Author adapted from *Tracing the Dian Kingdom: An Epic Cast in Bronze*

The shell-storage vessels discovered from the Shizhaishan burial complex made a significant advancement in decorative artistry as the Dian Kingdom era began. The limitations of early monotonous geometric designs were entirely overcome by flat patterns, which gave rise to scene-based imagery like the previously mentioned granary and pastoral scenes. Using the granary scene as an example, the composition as a whole depicts daily life and labor in the Dian Kingdom in an orderly and clearly divided manner. Granaries and grain enclosures flank the

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figures that form a circle around the vessel's body. Grain is collected from the enclosures by one group and transported to the granaries by another, while grain is stored in the granaries and then collected from the enclosures by another group. This cycle never ends. Through the interaction of figures, animals, and artifacts, these narrative motifs not only produce a grand spatial narrative but also display ever-more-complex detailing. Simple single-line outlines are no longer used to depict the granaries, the inverted baskets, the pouches on the heads of the figures, and the finer details of their clothing. Rather, a sense of layering and realism is conveyed through the interaction of thick and thin lines as well as the combination of curves and straight lines.

The embellishments on Shizhaishan's shell-storage vessels represent a significant change from abstract motifs to figurative imagery when compared to patterns from the early Dian period. This progression serves as important tangible evidence for researching the social life and artistic development of the Dian Kingdom, reflecting both the Dian people's growing aesthetic sensibility and increasingly skilled craftsmanship.

### **3. Developmental Trajectory of Relief Decoration**

Dian Kingdom shell-storage vessels' most inventive and culturally significant artistic characteristic is its three-dimensional decoration, which has long garnered substantial scholarly interest. During the process of organizing and summarizing the artistic style of these storage vessels, this study has identified two main trajectories of change in their three-dimensional ornamentation during the social development of the Dian Kingdom: first, a change from static scenes with single counter-clockwise circular arrangements to dynamic scenes with clockwise circular arrangements and concentric circular patterns; second, a change from single animal sculptures to human sculptures, and finally to combined human-animal sculptures within contextual scenes. These two transformative processes are thoroughly examined in the sections that follow.

#### ***3.1 The Shift from Animal to Human Imagery***

From the Early Dian period to the period after King Zhuangqiao of Dian, the most notable change in the decorative art of Dian Kingdom shell containers was the shift from an animal-dominated decorative system to an art form focused on human figures. This shift reflected significant changes in the Dian Kingdom's social structure and cultural ideology in addition to an innovation in craftsmanship. Early shell-storage vessels used natural animals as the focal point of their decorative logic. Although there were sporadic human-related visual components, they were mostly depicted as stylized human motifs with feathers. Feathers were frequently used as primary identifiers in these patterns, which had simplified lines and strong symbolic elements. They did not evolve into tangible representations of specific individuals or social scenes; instead, they served mainly totemic or ritualistic purposes. While there were some three-dimensional sculptures on storage vessel lids at this time, animal shapes like oxen and deer predominated, with oxen sculptures being especially common. This suggests the cultural origins of primal nature worship while also reflecting the Dian Kingdom's reliance on cattle as a civilization fusing agriculture and nomadic lifestyles. This pattern was totally upset by shell-storage vessels discovered in the Shizhaishan tombs of Dian after King Zhuangqiao conquered Dian. On vessel lids, figurative sculptures first appeared in scaled, scene-based compositions. As an illustration, consider the human sacrifice shell storage vessel that was discovered in Tomb M12 at Shizhaishan. Its lid has 127 human sculptures, which is a record for the quantity of people portrayed on such vessels from the same era. These figures are not just repetitions; rather, they have unique qualities that are mainly visible in their physical attributes and body language, suggesting the exquisite craftsmanship of the Dian artisans. This stylistic

change from animal to human themes essentially represented a significant shift in Dian society's cultural emphasis. The cultural core of Dian gradually shifted from reverence and worship of natural phenomena to documenting and emphasizing human social order, power structures, and ritual activities as productive forces developed, class differentiation grew, and external cultural influences increased. The prevalence of human sculptures signifies the development of Dian self-awareness as well as the expansion of artistic subjects, indicating the society's transition from primitive tribal forms to a more developed civilization.

### 3.2 The Shift from Static to Dynamic Scenes

Compared to the aforementioned flat themes, the three-dimensional sculptural ornamentation on shell-storage vessels from the Early Dian period show a significantly more accurate and skillful representation of animal forms. The creatures' muscularity, skeletal structure, and expressive features are all depicted with amazing liveliness. On the other hand, the animals' limbs move very little; they usually remain motionless on the vessel lids, their eyes displaying a calm serenity. A calm and solemn ornamental environment is produced by the general absence of dynamic stress. On the other hand, moving figures are primarily depicted in the three-dimensional designs on the lids of shell containers discovered in the Shizhaishan tombs and the Li Jiashan M69 tomb. These include the aforementioned scenes of textile production and sacrificial killings, as well as more dramatic portrayals of combat, hunting, and the conflict between an ox and a tiger. Through the interaction of figures with animals, animals with animals, and figures with other figures, these scenes create whole dynamic narratives. With their limbs twisted and their robes billowing, soldiers engage in fierce combat with their weapons in battle scenes. In hunting scenes, hounds leap and run, each movement pulsating with energy, while riders chase prey on horseback (Figure 3.) . The water buffalo and tiger are entwined in the bull-tiger combat scenes, their expressions fierce and ferocious, perfectly capturing the tension of this struggle for survival. In addition to showcasing the growing maturity of the artisans' abilities, this dynamic artistic expression elevates sculptural decoration above simple aesthetic purpose, turning it into an essential tool for documenting social life and communicating cultural significance.

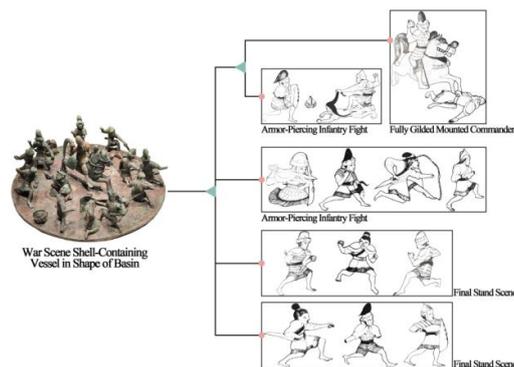


Figure 3. M13:356. Decorative detail drawing of War Scene Shell-Containing Vessel in Shape of Basin by the author. Adapted from the book *Epic in the Bronzes: The Dian Kingdom in History* by Chen Hao and Xing Yi, p56.

## 4. The Transformation of Artistic Expression

Through careful examination of the flat and three-dimensional decorative arts on shell-storage jars, the preceding sections have demonstrated their development from early symbolic representation to a sophisticated, realistic style. "Restoring the outward appearance of objects and drawing closer to the daily lives of the Dian people" was the fundamental tendency

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that this progression continuously adhered to. Both the improvement in detail representation from simplicity to refinement and the change in human forms from abstract feathered-man motifs to figurative scene sculptures represented an accurate depiction of real life. However, "excessive realism" in artistic production frequently sparks debate. Such expressions are often considered to deviate from the essence of things, lack spiritual substance, and represent lowbrow taste because they are unduly preoccupied with outward appearances. This central paradox will be the subject of the next section, which will examine the aesthetic change and internal conflict in Dian Kingdom shell-storage vessel art during its realist development in two dimensions: the decorative style's progression "from subtle implication to direct observation" and its transition "from elegant solemnity to popular directness."

#### ***4.1. From Implied Meaning to Direct Representation***

Early Dian period shell-storage vessels' symbolic motifs, which mostly featured natural animals and symbolic geometric patterns, collectively communicated an understated aesthetic sensibility. Even the animal sculptures on vessel lids, despite their propensity for realism, primarily conveyed a silent, intuitive quality through their body language and mannerisms. Rather than recording particular scenes of everyday life, it could be argued that the primary goal of these early shell-storage vessel motifs was to communicate the Dian society's shared spiritual realm and collective beliefs. This restrained form of expression purposefully maintained interpretive space and artistic ambiguity. Viewers had to progressively understand the deeper significance through associative interpretation of the symbols and consideration of the cultural context; they were unable to immediately grasp the full underlying meaning. Early Dian shell containers have a higher aesthetic value because of this elusive character, which is something that can be understood instinctively but cannot be expressed. They become creative vessels that represent spiritual values and artistic endeavors, going beyond just functional ornamentation.

By the time of the Dian Kingdom, some shell containers discovered in the tombs of the Shizhaishan broke sharply with this tradition of nuanced expression, moving toward an extreme realistic artistic style. They aimed to convey scenes through a simple, pictorial narrative similar to text and illustration, primarily through the vivid recreation of body gestures, facial expressions, and sartorial details. The vessels became three-dimensional tapestries documenting Dian life as a result of this intense attention to detail, but the intrinsic subtlety and negative space necessary for art were also lost. The imaginative space within the aesthetic experience was significantly reduced because viewers could understand the scenes' meanings without much interpretation. As a result, the artistic complexity and sophistication of the pieces were greatly reduced.

#### ***4.2 The Transition from the Sublime to the Popular***

The sensuous is spiritualized in art, while the spiritual is revealed through sensuousness, as Hegel notes in his *Aesthetics* (Georg, 1979). The aesthetic development of the decorative art on Dian Kingdom shell-storage vessels is clearly explained by this viewpoint, which also highlights the aesthetic foundation of their early, restrained style. Early Dian storage vessels had ornamental designs that deviated from accurate representations of actual objects. Rather, they presented an early classical aesthetic quality marked by solemnity and elegance by infusing the spiritual beliefs and inner aspirations of the Dian people into sensory symbols. Through a subtle, reflective approach, this aesthetic style avoided overt expression in favor of expressing reverence for the divine, respect for the natural world, and adherence to the community's spiritual order. As a result, the vessels were elevated above their practical use and became spiritual conduits that connected people to both the natural world and the divine. As a result, the decorative art of shell-storage jars can emphasize the holiness and gravity of belief by using

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an elegant and solemn design rather than catering to secular interests. Each symbol and design has deep cultural meaning and should be reverently considered by the observer. This artistic expression has a higher aesthetic quality by nature because it is inextricably linked to spiritual beliefs.

However, the Dian people's emphasis gradually moved from the spiritual to the material world as their society evolved and their power structures became established. The role of artistic creation partially changed as people started to concentrate on maintaining social order, displaying power, and documenting everyday life. The decorative style of the shell-storage vessels found in the Shizhaishan tombs is characterized by realistic scenes and simple expressions, portraying farming, rituals, warfare, and other facets of life. They become more colloquial and straightforward, losing the previous grace and solemnity. Artistic aesthetics evolved from "spiritualized elegance" to "secularized simplicity," achieving a dual transition in both function and style. This transformation essentially reflected the Dian people's shift in focus from spiritual pursuits to practical concerns.

Overall, an increasingly intricate social structure is revealed by the beauty of shell-storage jars discovered from these tombs. Shell-storage pots with erect oxen on their lids were found in early burial sites; the vessels themselves had repeated motifs of human and animal figurines or basic geometric designs. Scenes that portrayed real-life events in two or three dimensions then started to emerge. These contained intricate, multi-figured, three-dimensional portrayals of sacrificial deaths as well as representations of everyday tasks like grain storage in granaries and livestock herding. Images of tribute-bearing rituals and many combat scenarios were found in later tombs. Human artistic expression inevitably reflects certain societal circumstances, life experiences, existential perspectives, and survival understandings. These shell-storage vessels' clear narrative imagery provides a more accurate representation of the Dian people's modern way of life. However, the symbolic meanings that underlie these patterns convey their perspectives and experiences of life and survival in a more subdued manner.

## **5. Visual Symbolism of Social Structure and Hierarchical Order**

From the standpoint of artistic development, the decorative artistry on shell-storage vessels stays within Hegel's identified first stage of art, which is the objectification of worldviews. However, in contrast to strictly religious art, its ornamental purpose goes beyond the symbolic externalization of natural deities to include the representation of power structures and the documentation of social realities. M12:26 Shizhaishan The shell-storage vessel's lid shows a scene of sacrifice and murder. The chief sacrificial noble, the sacrificers, and common clan members are among the figures of varying status whose behavioral postures are depicted using a realistic style. It makes evident the power dynamics within religious rituals and the class hierarchy within the Dian Kingdom through differences in clothing and the division of labor among the figures. M12:1 M13:356 and M6:1 show equestrian warfare on the vessel lids, while the pastoral themes on the shell-storage vessel's body show herders driving animals, suggesting aristocratic possession of land and pastoral resources. Weapons-wielding, armored warriors fight fiercely, capturing or killing the defeated. In addition to recording battles between the Dian Kingdom and nearby tribes, these paintings also hide the kings' extravagant display of military power. In addition to providing a clear depiction of the production, class, and religion systems of Dian society, these themes also show the sense of superiority and desire for ostentation that results from rulers' mastery of nature and establishment of social power structures. Through the use of shell-storage vessels, they artistically replicated what they considered to be most impressive and powerful, turning them into visual symbols that demonstrated status and cemented power.

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The rise of witchcraft is considered a major source when tracing the origins of power in human societies. According to anthropologist James, the central tenet of witchcraft in early human societies was "being able to control natural forces for the benefit of the group"(James, 1998). The community held its practitioners in high regard due to their alleged control over supernatural abilities. According to scholar Li Yujie, this witchcraft-based authority progressively developed into early society power by incorporating public duties like overseeing rituals, handling communal affairs, and responding to emergencies (Li, 2024). This suggests that shamans were originally the embodiment of authority in early communities. They won the faith of the public due to their miraculous capacity to connect with deities, which allowed them to monopolize society's valuable resources and establish themselves as the main leaders of their communities. Similar to the Shizhaishan bronze drums, which were used by shamans to converse with deities and solidify their heavenly mandate, artifacts from this era frequently had symbolic connotations inherently connected to divine authority.

A new power structure within the Dian state was heralded by the appearance of shell-storage vessels. Shamans with divine power were no longer the only rulers; secular nobility with enormous wealth, human resources, and even military resources were also in charge. This power structure closely resembles the features of chiefdom societies described by anthropologist Elman Service: in chiefdoms, the priest, who represents religious authority, and the chief, who represents secular authority, serve as authoritative "twins," frequently passed down through generations within the same clan or even held by the same person, creating a governance model where "divine and secular power are united" (Elman, 1962). Emerging interest groups would create new social identities and legitimize power through the creation and use of pictorial symbols during the disintegration of old social structures and the formation of new orders, much like the San people across time and space (David, 2004). Yi Zhongtian referred to this human need for self-affirmation as the "primordial impetus" that gave rise to art (Yi, 2020). A media that embodied both sacred and secular qualities was desperately needed by the newly differentiated secular power within the Dian state in order to justify its standing in the eyes of the public. Thus, the shell-storage containers appeared in this setting. In addition to exhibiting wealth and military might through the storage of seashells and the portrayal of secular themes, they inherited the divine motifs of bronze drums to ensure the acceptance of divine authority. These vessels became the primary means of bridging the gap between supernatural and secular authority by incorporating rational power goals into artistic ornamentation.

A closer look at the development of shell-storage vessel decoration shows that secular power motifs have gradually become more prominent. This change is a profound reflection of the Dian state society's cognitive transformation and developmental trajectory. Early shell storage vessels were primarily decorated with images of ritual scenes and deities. For example, some older standing ox vessels emphasized reverence for natural spirits by focusing only on deified bovine sculptures as their main decoration. Artistic expression was dominated by theocracy at this point. However, there is a noticeable change in the decorative scenes from the shell containers found in Shizhaishan Tombs M3 to M6: tributary processions show tribal chieftains carrying offerings to honor the King of Dian. The political hegemony and hierarchical order of the Dian state are demonstrated through the figures' clothing, the variety of tributes, and the well-organized procession; recurrent portrayals of mounted combat demonstrated the bravery and military discipline of warriors, acting as overt displays of secular power. This change in style was a reflection of the Dian people's deep cognitive evolution, which saw them prioritize material gains through social interaction and military conquest over their earlier reliance on divine protection.

This change was a necessary result of the evolution of Dian society rather than an accident. Dian's productive forces were greatly enlarged, wealth accumulation was hastened, and class

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differentiation was accentuated by advances in agricultural practices, the expansion of handicrafts, and increased external exchanges. By dominating military prowess and producing resources, secular nobility solidified their position of power, reducing their reliance on supernatural authority while placing more emphasis on the expression of their secular authority through tangible artistic forms. Thus, the decoration of shell-storage jars became a testimony to this development of power: from the supremacy of divine authority to the coexistence of secular and divine power, and ultimately to the slow rise of secular authority. Every change in ornamental motifs matched modifications to the Dian state's power hierarchy and social organization.

## 6. Conclusions

The decorative artistry of shell-storage vessels is methodically investigated in this study, which analyzes their development from three angles: the evolution of artistic expression, the development of relief carving, and the trajectory of planar ornamentation. It shows a trend in these vessels toward increasingly intricate yet approachable artistic styles. Additionally, the study investigates the relationship between the social structure of the Dian state and the ornamental designs of shell-storage vessels. The combined results show that these vessels' artistic quality goes beyond simply externalizing naturalistic religious motifs. Their primary purpose is to act as visual representations of the social hierarchy and structure of the Dian state. They combined the practicality of worldly power with the holiness of the supernatural, emerging in a chiefdom society where secular and divine authority coexisted. They document the progression of the Dian state's power structure and social progress through the evolution of their decoration. In addition to reflecting artistic enrichment, the change in ornamental motifs from ritual scenes to tributary sacrifices and battle documents the Dian people's cognitive progression from awe for nature to mastery over reality, together with the steady rise of secular authority. The power logic and hierarchical structure of Dian society are essentially decoded by interpreting the ornamental art of shell-storage jars, which offers crucial visual cues for reconstructing the social environment of the ancient Dian world. Finally, the study calls on future scholars researching local ethnic arts to not only focus on mastering the distinctive characteristics of their artistic styles, but also to pay attention to investigating the underlying local social structures and cultures behind these artistic styles.

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