

Verification of Ethnic Exchanges: Official Seal of Lord Fanyang and Gilded Bronze Stirrups with Wooden Core

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Fig. 1 The Official Seal of Fanyang Marquis



Fig. 2 Gilded Bronze Stirrups with Wooden Cores

Feng Sufu was an important imperial clansman and minister of the Northern Yan regime during the Sixteen Kingdoms period, and a wealth of relics have been unearthed from his tomb. The Official Seal of Lord Fanyang and the gilded bronze stirrups with wooden core stand as crucial cultural artifacts for researching the cultural integration between the Han people and the Xianbei as well as commercial exchanges along the Grassland Silk Road in the Sixteen Kingdoms era.

The Official Seal of Lord Fanyang (Figure 1) corroborates that Northern Yan inherited the official ranking system of the Central Plains established since the Wei and Jin dynasties. Cast in gold and fitted with a tortoise knob, the seal conforms to the official seal regulations of the Eastern Jin Dynasty of that time. Institutions of Han Officials records: "Marquises, prime ministers, grand commandants, the Three Dukes, and Generals of the Front, Rear, Left and Right all hold golden seals with tortoise knobs." This attests that Northern Yan adopted the political rituals of Central Plains dynasties. At the same time, however, the carved tortoise knob incorporates distinctive Xianbei artistic features. The star motifs engraved on the back of the knob match the astronomical mural painted on the ceiling of Feng Sufu's tomb chamber,

embodying the Xianbei people's enduring worship of celestial bodies and stars. This style stands in sharp contrast to the elaborate, intricate tortoise knobs on Han seals from the Central Plains. Its craft aesthetic aligns with the pictorial art on Xianbei gold and silver ornaments, bearing the unique artistic taste of northern ethnic minorities.

This artifact reflects the Northern Yan regime's political agenda: it sought to consolidate its rule and win over Han scholar-official clans by adopting the traditional nobility ranking system of the Central Plains. Historical documents record Feng Sufu's noble title and official post, yet fail to illustrate how such institutions were actually implemented in western Liaoning. This golden seal fills the gap with tangible archaeological evidence. The regime's choice to award a Han-style golden seal with tortoise knob to a prominent Han minister itself constitutes historical proof. It demonstrates that the joint governance of Han and Xianbei peoples in Northern Yan was not merely a political slogan on imperial edicts, but an institutional arrangement deeply embedded within its entire political system.

The gilded bronze stirrups with wooden core excavated from Feng Sufu's Tomb (Figure 2) are the world's earliest surviving paired stirrup relics with an exact chronological date. Representing a landmark breakthrough in the history of military technology, these stirrups embody mutual learning and harmonious coexistence between the agrarian civilization of the Central Plains and northern nomadic civilizations in military domains, serving as an exemplary case of military cultural fusion between the Han nationality and northern ethnic minorities.

After centuries of nomadic life, the Murong Xianbei refined horse harnesses by integrating carpentry and metallurgical techniques originating from the Central Plains. Constructed with three layers of materials: a mulberry wood core wrapped in hammered bronze sheets covered with an outer gilded coating; each component corresponds to an independent technical tradition. The selection of mulberry timber and the structural design of the horse gear derive from the Xianbei equestrian and archery culture, while bronze forging and gilded decorative craftsmanship belong to the age-old metalworking heritage of the Central Plains. Metallurgy and woodworking technologies from the Central Plains supplied the manufacturing techniques required to produce stirrups, and the Xianbei's nomadic experience laid the practical foundation for this technological innovation.

The military system of Northern Yan preserved the long-standing cavalry traditions of the Xianbei while absorbing military institutions and technologies from the Central Plains. These gilded bronze stirrups with wooden core serve as material evidence of technological fusion throughout the Sixteen Kingdoms period. They document a concrete collaborative model of two distinct technical systems working together to craft a single artifact - a dynamic nowhere directly recorded in any surviving written historical sources.

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