A REMARKABLE SCYTHIAN NEPHRITE JADE BUCKLE
IN THE FORM OF THE HEAD OF A SAIGA ANTELOPE

Central Asia, 7th–6th century BC
Size: 8 × 6 × 8 cm

The saiga antelope, with its characteristic long droopy muzzle, is a native of the steppe-lands of Central Asia. Now endangered, it was once plentiful; it features frequently in the nomadic ornaments of the 1st millennium BC, and later among the luxury wares of the Soghdian court and merchants during the 1st millennium AD. Achaemenid and Sasanian craftsmen in Iran used all sorts of horned gazelles, antelopes and goats as models for their vessels and ornaments, but never the saiga, which seems not to have ventured from the steppes to the north.

The saiga have long sharply ridged horns, which have here been bent around into a graceful arabesque to perform their sartorial function. Probably for nothing more robust than a silk sash that it fastened with elegance. The precision of the carving is immaculate: the grooves of the horns are delicately striated to suggest the texture of horn. The occlusions in the jade happily suggest the markings of fur. It is pierced at the back of the head, probably so that it could also have been worn as a pendant.

*The report of the scientific examination by Striptwist Laboratory is available.*