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THE ANCIENT AMULETS OF TIBET: THOGCHAGS

A collection of Miniature Masterpieces

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Foreword

Thogchags are an art form seemingly unique to Tibet. It appears to be the only place where these pieces of bronze casting are currently held in such high esteem, relics of a long past era holding a position in the present mythology and belief system of a living culture.

Clearly, some of these bronzes represent an integral component of a pan Central Asian pre-Buddhist material culture. With my interest in the pre-Buddhist origins of the Tibetan weaving tradition,

I believe it is important for students of this culture to understand the roots of the tradition, of which these bronzes are a part. Some of the animal imagery seen in rugs is present as well as other devices normally attributed to the Buddhist religion but actually pre-dating the introduction of Buddhism, ie. the "endless knot" motif. Studying these bronzes is an interesting exercise, certain to enrich our appreciation and understanding of the Tibetans as a people and, specifically, the weaving tradition.



A rare sacred Tibetan Fibula, probably used in Pre-Buddhist Bon religious rites. The top half depicts six birds flanking a sacred vase which rest on energy spirals on the outer ring. Below this are two Bon stupas and stylized motifs. The sacred vase or tsebum has its origins in ancient Bonpo long-life and fortune-bestowing rituals. A sextet of birds found in western Tibetan myths of clan origins may correspond to the birds gracing the fibula. These type of stupas have also been discovered in petroglyphs/pictographs in caves in the north of Tibet, and are related to

primitive forms of worship. The juxtaposition of these sacred elements along with the zoomorphic design of the turtle whose head points downwards, and flippers protrude on the side, suggests that this fibula was invested with cosmological symbolism. This is the earliest thogchag Fibula found in perfect condition in this size and could be 4th or 5th century.

Introduction

This catalogue of thogchags is selected from one of the finest collections in the world, and aims to show the diversity and beauty of these ancient amulets.

My heartfelt thanks to friends of the Philadelphia Meditation Center (Theravadin) for making the documentation of this rock art possible. I also wish to thank various government officials with the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China for aiding my research.

With 20 years experience, the collector of this group has established himself as one of the foremost sources of thogchags. Combing the hinterlands of Asia for these artifacts, he has managed to obtain some of the most outstanding examples of the genre. In my recent article on thogchags for Arts of Asia, I was not able to include pieces from this collection, however, I plan to incorporate them in my upcoming book on the subject.

Plate 1





1. Yak head with sun and moon above. This is a primitive symbol of the drogpas, nomadic herdsman. Pre Buddhist period.

2 . Standing Lokeshvara. This is a very fine example. Buddhist deity Thogchags of this age and quality are very rare. 12th century.

3. The bodhisattva Chanadorje. Although this deity is a popular Thogchag subject, this specimen is unusually early and crafted to the highest standard. Note the early style of dorje the deity holds in his right hand. No later than the 13th century.]

9. This unique Thogchag contains ngagpa tantric symbols and was found near Mount Kailash. It features two dorjes and the flaming jewels. The horizontal bar represents the stick of Milarepa, above the three peaks of Chenrezig, Kharig Rimpoche and Gombo. 13th century.

10. A very rare Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. The well worn patina and the size make it unique. 12th century.

11. A superb Khyung holding a dorje above the flaming jewels. 11th century.

4. A sacred Bon "Kadampa chorten", or stupa crowned by sun and moon above. 12th century.

5 This rare Chanadorje symbolizes the methods and activities that lead to enlightenment. The size and vibrancy of this specimen make it particularly desirable. early Buddhist period.

6. A four-armed Chenrezig cast in the Pala style. Note the high crown and adroitly cast second pair of arms. This noteworthy example was probably made before the 13th century.

7. An early Zipata mask with Pala influence. Note the jewels dripping from the mouth. 13th century.]

8. A trinity of Buddhist chortens, representing the Rig Som Gonpo. The three most important bodhisattvas, Chenrezig, Chanadorje and Manjushri embody compassion, skillful means and wisdom respectively. These bodhisattvas are the complete model for enlightenment. 12th century.

12. Norbus or flaming jewels, representing the triratna, or Buddhist jewels of refuge, Buddha, Sangha and Dharma. This kind of object often constituted the diadems of the crown of large bronzes. Sometimes, as here, the Buddhist jewels were also cast as Thogchags. 12th century.]

13. Three conjoined chortens with a Khyung hovering over them. This rare and dramatic specimen belongs to the Early Buddhist period.

14. A double dorje enclosed in a frame and surmounted by flaming jewels. Discovered near Mount Kailash, this highly desirable Thogchag is rare. Early Buddhist period.

15. Dorje with spiral energy whirls. These spirals portray fields of power generated by the dorje, the infinite nature of Buddhist wisdom. Early Buddhist century.

16. Three conjoined chortens rendered in a naturalistic style. This uncommon specimen dates from the Early Buddhist period.

Thogchags are Tibetan talismans made of bronze and meteoric metals dating as far back as the Bronze Age. While precise dates for the Tibetan Bronze Age have yet to be formulated, archaeological evidence from various sites around the country indicate that it started around the beginning of the Second Millennium BCE. An unbroken tradition of producing amulets extends into the Iron Age and Buddhist periods creating a cultural legacy several thousand years old.

Little archaeological research has taken place in Tibet (as excavation of ancient sites was considered taboo). Only in the last 20 years have thogchags reached international

Having studied thogchags for 11 years I appreciate how much there still is to learn. The real significance of these talismans - art and antique value aside - is that they provide a deep insight into the origins and character of Tibetan civilization and its links with contemporary cultures. Save for cave art, no other aspect of the material culture reveals the historical development of Tibet as well as thogchags.

Comparative study of artifacts from adjacent cultures and their stylistic and symbolic metallurgic analysis has permitted me to develop a chronology of thogchags. While my efforts are still in their infancy it is now

collectors, and systematic research into their materials and origins is a relatively new field.

possible to slot thogchags into certain temporal and cultural contexts.

Plate 2





1. A rare Thogchag used by the followers of Gesar of Ling, portrayed on a horse above two early double dorjes. No later than 14th century. [back]

2. Amoghasiddha, one of the five Dhyana Buddhas - or preaching Buddhas. This glowing Thogchag is one of the rarest and most valuable pieces in the collection. 14th century.[back]

3. Vajrapani. An evocative design invoking the sheer power of the deity. Early Buddhist period. [back]

4. Gesar of Ling surrounded by a circle of pearls. 14th century. [back]

5. Early rare Thogchag with a dragon motif. 13th century. [back]

6. A conch shell. One of the eight Tibetan auspicious signs, its sound brings tolerance to a raging man. 14th century. [back]

7. Khyung, also known as the 'king of the birds'. The Khyung is believed to fly higher than any other creature. 14th century.

8. An exquisite example of the Khyung, the ancient eagle deity of Tibet. The Khyung is one of Tibet's seminal symbols with links to clan origins- Mountain deities, warrior deities (dra lha), sky burial, and Buddhist and Bonpo didactic concepts.

In Tibetan Buddhism the Khyung became combined with the Indian Garuda. Khyung Thogchags range from the Bronze Age to the late Buddhist era. Early Buddhist period.

9. Plaque adorned by two khyungs. 14th century. [back]

10 .Chanadorje (skt. Vajrapani), the bodhisattva of skillful means, is a very popular Buddhist protector deity- 14th century. [back]

11. Khyung. This specimen is desirable for its unusual and adroit artwork. 14th century. [back]

12. Chanadorje, a superbly cast specimen. The execution of this high quality bronze deserves special attention. 14th century. [back]

13. Khyung, A fine example of this motif. Early Buddhist period. [back]

14. A turtle of rare patina and beauty. 14th century.

Background Information

Highly prized by Tibetans, thogchags were traditionally worn for protection and good luck. In the pre-Buddhist Bon religion rituals to dispel evil and attract good fortune were prevalent. The function of thogchags closely reflects this ancient religious preoccupation.

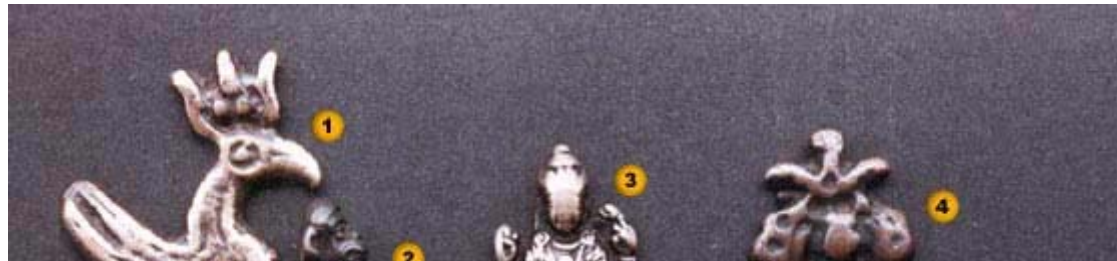
Although they were often hung around the neck or attached to clothing, thogchags were also sewn on amulet pouches or tied to religious articles. They were frequently used and displayed by healers, spirit-mediums and magicians, the so-called shamans of Tibet. These practitioners of ancient Tibetan traditions had a special affinity with the equally ancient thogchags.

These sacred objects are believed to be magically formed and not manufactured by human beings. Said to have fallen from the sky, thogchags are steeped in mystery and myth which is only now being unraveled by scholars. My ongoing archeological and ethnographic research is designed to answer some of these questions.

Thogchags are objects representing a wide range of functions, provenances and chronologies. Included among them are materials that were originally utilitarian items but which came to assume a talismanic function in subsequent centuries. Nevertheless, the bulk of thogchags were designed as amulets to be worn next to the body, or to adorn sacred objects.

Thogchags have a close association with indigenous Tibetan religious beliefs and their practitioners and form a very important part of the country's pre-Buddhist and Buddhist heritage. For instance, the frequency of animal designs recalls the sacred status of animals in Tibetan culture. Texts and oral accounts show that indigenous deities are closely associated with animals such as the yak and sheep. Among the indigenous deities that manifest as animals are yul lha (deities of specific locales, dra lha (warrior deities) and menmo (female nature spirits), Thogchags are a part of this heritage, a valuable indicator of a Tibet that is quickly disappearing.

Plate 3





1. Khyung with a prominent crown featuring the triple jewels. 14th century.

2. A monkey in attitude of prayer. This may be a

8. Palden Lhamo, one of Tibetan Buddhism's most popular and superior protectresses, riding a mule. Early Buddhist period.

manifestation of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. 14th century.

3. A superbly cast four-armed Chenrezig the bodhisattva of compassion. 14th century.

4. A rare Khyung. A parasol and vase crown the ring containing the Khyung. The tail of the bird appears to extend below the ring forming the base. Early Buddhist period.

5. A Buddha in the 'witness' aspect sewn onto a leather pouch containing sacred verses. Pouches like this are popular in Tibet; the mantras inside are believed to confer protection and good fortune on the wearer. The Thogchag adds significantly to its sanctity and rarity.

6. A four-armed Chenrezig. This well cast plaque portrays the most popular form of this deity. 14th century.

7. A chorten in style suggesting the Early Buddhist period.

9. A superb early Khyung, this squat figure radiates a raw vitality. Note the wriggling serpent it grasps in its mouth. The serpent represents the water spirits and their containment, and therefore control over waterborn diseases. 14th century.

10. A large rare Thogchag which includes two highly stylized dorjes. A more stylized version of plate 1, no. 9. 15th century.

11. Khyung, a well detailed specimen of unusual form. 14th century. .

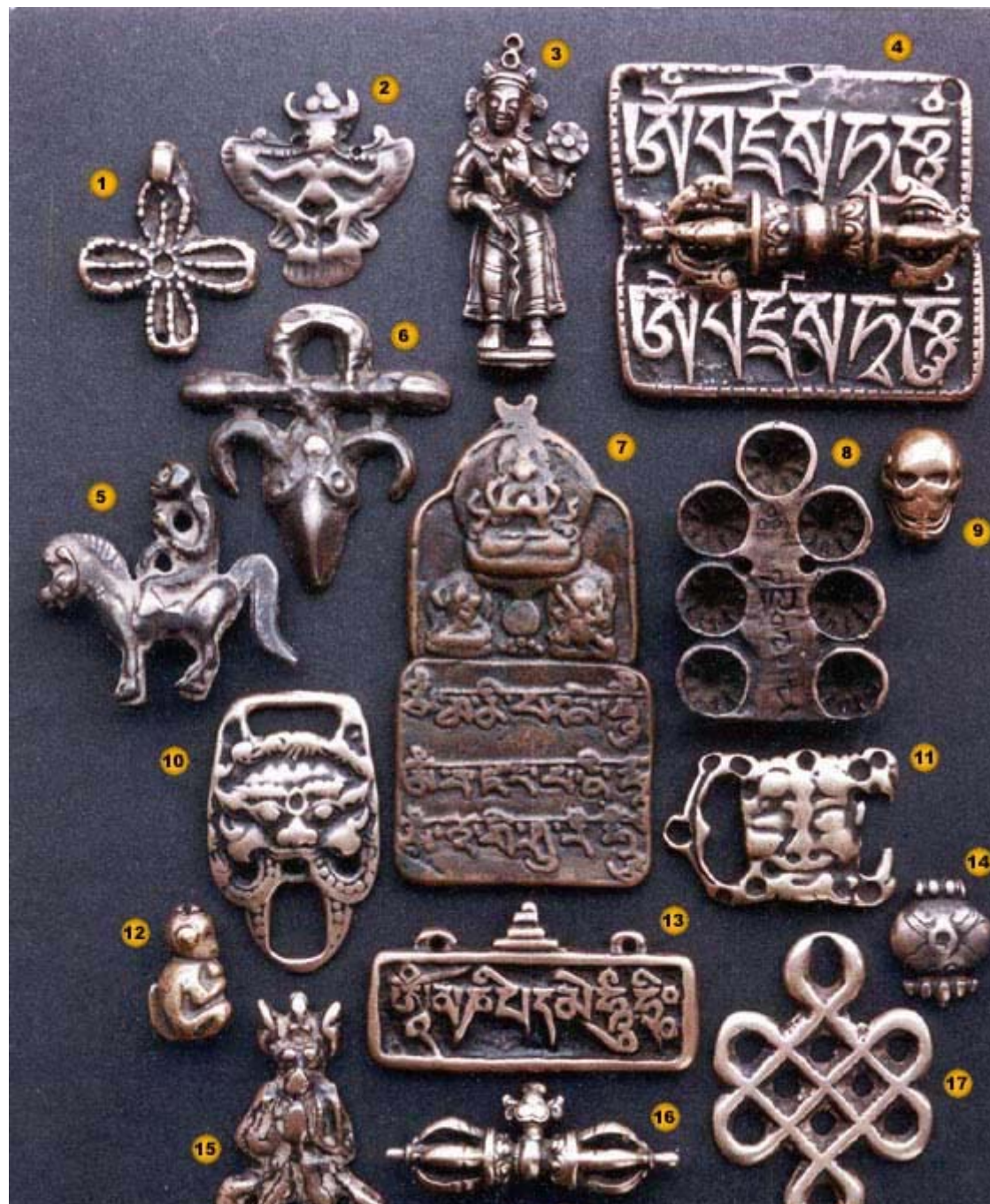
12. A cluster of chortens above the mantra "Orn mani padme hum". This mantra invokes the boundless compassion of the bodhisattva Chenrezig. This lovely example probably belongs to the Early Buddhist period

13. Khyung. A beautiful and early variety of Tibet's native eagle deity, worn down with use to an almost abstract form. Early Buddhist period

The Introduction of Buddhism beginning in the early 7th century greatly enriched thogchag design. Buddhism with its rich heritage gave rise to the production of a remarkable variety of deities, ritual thunderbolts, stupas and other forms designed to be used in close tactile contact. The integration of these powerful symbols of the new faith with earlier religious motifs is clearly seen in thogchags. Thogchags mirror the history of Buddhist iconography and design from the 7th century onwards.

Not all thogchags were produced in Tibet; some were imported from adjoining countries. Over time and the process of myth even these foreign objects came to be accepted as thogchags. The great diversity of forms and cultures represented in thogchags indicate the links that ancient Tibet forged with its neighbours. There is evidence to suggest that thogchags share cultural affinities with Inner Asian Bronze Age cultures. Although Saka-Scythian animal style bronzes of the first Millennium BCE influenced Tibetan designs, animal style thogchags constitute a separate branch of Eurasian animal art.

Plate 4





1. Dorje gyatram, double dorje made up of pearls, symbolic of the origin of the Buddhist cosmos and tantric practice, the double dorje is the ultimate symbol of vajrayana. Early Buddhist period

2. Khyung. Its horns flank the triple jewels. Early Buddhist period

3. Standing Lokeshvara. Identified by the lotus and mudra (hand position) this is one of the favourite deities of Tibet. 16th century

4. A four-pronged dorje on a bronze plaque bearing the mantra "Om ba dza satwa hum". This is the mantra of the deity of purification, Vajrasattva. 17th century

5. A monkey mounted on a horse. This is a Taoist motif absorbed by Tibet. 15th century

6. A ram's head, originally a pre-Buddhist motif associated with fertility and protection. Certain mountain gods such as Grabye Gyalpo are said to manifest as ram's heads. Buddhist period.

7. Plaque with the Rigsum Gonpo deities Chenrezig, Chenadorje and Manjushri, and the mani and vajra mantras. The iconography of the deities and Yasodharman derived script indicate that this specimen is 16th century.

8. A very rare tsha-tsha mold used to produce tormas, sacred cakes used in occult rituals. Early Buddhist period.

9. A rare skull bead. The skull in Tantric Buddhism symbolizes the emptiness of all worldly phenomena. Early Buddhist period.

10. Tsepu, the protector, graces this buckle used to bind scriptures. This is a very fine example of this style of buckle. Early Buddhist period

11. A head of Tsepu this object was originally a buckle. Early Buddhist period

12. A monkey. A Sino-Tibetan motif. This example appears to date from the pre-Buddhist period.

13. Plaque with the seven syllable mani mantra. 17th century.

14. An early rare gau shaped pendant. 17th century.

15. Khyung. This whimsical piece captures the mirthful Tibetan spirit. 17th century.

16. Dorje surmounted by triple jewels. This is a very fine example of a ritual thunderbolt. 16th century.

17. Endless knot. One of the eight auspicious signs symbolizes the universality of the Buddhist teaching, and is a popular good luck symbol. 17th century.

18. A small striding lion. Early Buddhist period.

CAPTIONS

The captions describe thogchags found in the accompanying photographs. Organized into pre-Buddhist and Buddhist sections they provide a panoramic look into Tibetan civilization. Thogchags are truly emblematic of one of the world's most enigmatic civilizations.

Note: Pre-Buddhist refers to the period before the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet in the early 7th century. Pre-Buddhist Culture continued to thrive until the late 8th century and residual pockets of pastoralists following a pre-Buddhist religion persisted in the northern plains of Tibet until the 13th Century.

Motifs that are pre-Buddhist were generally produced before the 9th century but there are notable exceptions whereby some forms carried on much later. After the 10th century Bon religious art came under heavy Buddhist influence.

Note: Buddhist refers to thogchags produced after the 7th century. The Early Buddhist period continued to the 14th or 15th Century and corresponds with objects that clearly fall into the thogchags category. The Early Buddhist period can in turn be subdivided into categories- Imperial era (7th to 9th century) and the second diffusion of Buddhism and its aftermath (10th to 15th century).

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