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Thog-lcags

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## Notes:

### *Thog-lcags*

John V. Bellezza

*Thog-lcags* are a heterogeneous class of metallic charms worn throughout the Tibetan cultural world, and especially by the pastoralists, the dropkpa. *Thog-lcags* literally translated means 'thunder iron.' They are also called *gNam-lcags*, 'sky iron' or 'sky metal.' There are several legends associated with the existence of *Thog-lcags*. The simplest and most common tale explaining the origins of *Thog-lcags* is that they fell from the sky, a gift to humans from the celestial realm. A related but more elaborate tale in Tibetan folkloric currency explains *Thog-lcags* in terms of lightning strikes. When lightning hits the ground, the heat generated transforms soil and water into *Thog-lcags*, not unlike the effect of a seed germinating in the ground. Another tale ascribes *Thog-lcags* to rivalries between *sNgags-pa*, the practitioners of magic rituals. Feuding *sNgags-pa* would resort to sending hail stones across the skies to attack one another. As a defensive measure the *sNgags-pa* being attacked would deflect the hailstones into another object with his magical implements. In the process of deflecting the hailstones they changed into *Thog-lcags*.

The common thread in each of these folktales is that *thog-clags* are *Rang-byung*, self-formed objects and not manufactured by smiths or other artisans. These kinds of beliefs were reinforced by the fact that *Thog-lcags* were periodically unearthed from farmers' fields. The naturalistic designs of *Thog-lcags* also lends credence to the idea that they are self-formed. The mysterious origins of *Thog-lcags* as in Tibetan folklore help explain the power and mystique attributed to these charms.

*Thog-lcags* are often made of *Li-ma*, various kinds of bronzes. *Li-khra*, one type of *Li-ma*, is based on the Indian tradition of ashta-dhatu alloys. *Li-ma* contains upwards of 8 metals including traces of gold and silver. *Li-ma* was used in Tibet to produce religious figures and paraphernalia, and less commonly for household items. Tibetans also believe that *Thog-lcags* were made of meteoric metals. A physical examination of *Thog-lcags* reveals that they differ widely in colour, texture, and density. Colours range from silvery and

greyish white to various shades of red and yellow. The ones attributed to meteoric alloys are blackish in colour. How much of this blackish colour is due to oxidation is unclear. A comparative metallurgical analysis of *Thog-lcags* might determine their precise contents of metals and isotopes.

*Thog-lcags* are charms and amulets worn around the neck, on the fingers or attached to clothing, accessories, or medicine bags. They seem to fulfill one or more of the following functions:

1. TALISMANIC

To increase one's luck and to ward off evil. The talismanic function manifests itself in the commonly held belief that *Thog-lcags* prevent a person from being struck by lightning.

2. RELIGIOUS

Worn as a kind of badge of one's religious beliefs, sentiments and affiliations.

3. POWER & MAGIC

To increase one's mastery over mundane and supernatural worlds, as an object which attracts different types of energy which can be exploited by the wearer. This may explain why *sNgags-pa*, *Lha-pa(s)*, *dPa'-ba(s)* and *Maṅi-pa(s)* often wear *Thog-lcags*.

4. ADORNMENT

Worn for their attractive and esthetic qualities. A type of sacred jewelry.

5. IDENTITY

Perhaps in the past they were used as heralds or totems of various cults, clans, and other social groups. In the contemporary period they function as a symbol of familial continuity, as they are handed down from mother to daughter and from father to son. In this way they foster family identity.

6. CULTURAL

Functions as a symbol of Tibetan culture. *Thog-lcags* are not worn in adjacent China, Turkestan, or in the Indo-Aryan regions of the Himalaya. In this day and age they are very particular to the Tibetan cultural milieu.

Chronologically and stylistically *Thog-lcags* are an extremely diverse group of objects. Dating *Thog-lcags* is problematic as there is not yet a scientific test to date metals. Ideally an in situ archaeological analysis and survey of *Thog-lcags* found in excavations would provide the best chronological information. However there is a dearth of archaeological research in the Himalaya and on the Tibetan plateau. One of the earliest sources of archaeological information comes from J.N. Roerich. In the 1920's Roerich's expedition discovered bronze arrowheads in stone graves in *Nag-chu*, *Hor*, and *gNam-ru* in Northern Tibet. He was not able to date the graves but notes that they are similar to ones in Northern Mongolia from the Scytho-Siberian period 2500-2700 years ago. He also records that the bronze arrowheads are worn as amulets and considered by nomads to be made of petrified lightning and are associated with Ling Ge-sar.<sup>1</sup>

The next best method to date *Thog-lcags* would be a metallurgical analysis. To date, none has been undertaken to my knowledge. This leaves us with a comparative stylistic study of *Thog-lcags*.

From a stylistic analysis, some of the oldest *Thog-lcags* appear to be Ordos bronzes from East Mongolia dating from 2200-2700 years ago. It is speculated that some may even be older and date from the bronze age. A *Thog-lcags* might have been worn by successive generations for upwards of 4000 years! *Thog-lcags* with *Kushan* designs and Indo-Bactrian motifs are found. An unmistakably Scythian lion motif is quite common. While certain *Thog-lcags* may date from periods characterized by these motifs (2400-1700 years ago), it is more likely that the designs were copied and faithfully produced by successive generations of Tibetan artisans. The same must be true for the cross-shaped *Thog-lcags* which Professor Tucci referred to as "Nestorian crosses."<sup>2</sup> It is plausible due to the design variations that most of them date to a later period than the Nestorian migrations to Central Asia. This is not to say that certain cruciform *Thog-lcags* are not Nestorian. They may well be. However, the *rDo-rje thog-lcags* originated in Buddhist north India. Again, while some exude great age, it is likely that a significant portion of *rDo-rje thog-lcags* are more recent in appearance.

Stylistically, *Thog-lcags* were borrowed or originated from a wide range of civilizations. These seem to include Gandhara, Bactria, Scythia, Palla, Nepal, Kashmir, China, Iran, Mongol, Shang Shung,

Kushana, Mon, Khotan, and Ching. It is not possible to conclusively state where *Thog-lcags* designs originated from until a thorough comparative study is made. The study of *Thog-lcags* may open up a fascinating window into the civilizations that Tibet came into contact with. It may also help to decipher the multitude of threads from which Tibetan civilization is composed. A central unanswered question is, which *Thog-lcags* are indigenous in design and which are borrowed? Again, an in-depth comparative study is imperative.

*Thog-lcags* come in a dazzling spectrum of designs reflecting the great variations in their provenance and chronology. They range in size from 10 mm to over 150 mm in length. Were the major metal working centres such as *sDe-dge* active in their manufacture? This remains to be answered. Zoo morphic types include: lions, birds, garudas, turtles, scorpions, horses, dragons, and Tsepu. Anthropomorphic designs include: Buddhas, Mañjushri, Kubera and *Phyag-na rDo-rje*. Bon and Buddhist symbology figure importantly in the *Thog-lcags* designs. Sun and Moon, *rDo-rje*, double *rDo-rjes*, dharma wheels, *mChod-rten*, lotus, *Phur-pa(s)*, *Nor-bu(s)*, stars and swastikas are represented. Other designs in this multifarious group of objects include 'lock and key,' arrowheads, *Dre* (minor class of Tibetan deities), finger rings, medicine spoons, flowers, shields, swords, *sGa-'u* and disk *Thog-lcags*. Some *Thog-lcags* are unidentifiable or nondescript in appearance. To complicate matters, ancient pieces of armour, buckles, and closures for sacred books are sometimes called *Thog-lcags*. There is almost an endless variety of *Thog-lcags* and Tibetan definitions of what objects are or are not *Thog-lcags*. It is common for Tibetans not to agree on what constitutes a *Thog-lcags*.

Traditionally *Thog-lcags* were common in Tibet. Even the poorest of people possessed them. During the Cultural Revolution *Thog-lcags* were frequently overlooked by the marauding Red Guards because they were considered worthless. For this reason many survived into the contemporary period. However, in the last ten years considerable interest in *Thog-lcags* has been generated in the international antique markets. Now foreign dealers and collectors hunt the markets of Tibet looking for *Thog-lcags*. Tibetan dealers act as middlemen, but nearly all the *Thog-lcags* in the market place are destined for foreign collections. They are especially popular in the U.S.A., Taiwan and Hong Kong, but interest is growing in other

countries as well. By virtue of this foreign demand, *Thog-lcags* are disappearing quickly in Tibet. Ignorance and poverty impell Tibetans to sell them at a pittance. I have watched Tibetan pilgrims in Lhasa and Shigatse (*gZhis-ka-rtse*) sell them to dealers for enough money to feed their families for a day or two. Though prices are rising in the Shigatse (*gZhis-ka-rtse*) and Lhasa markets, the potential profits made by international dealers is staggering. The long term loss to the culture and heritage of Tibet is unquantifiable.

#### Notes

1. Roerich, George. *Trails to Inmost Asia: Five Years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition*, London, Oxford University Press, 1931.
2. Tucci, Giuseppe. *The Ancient Civilizations of Transhimalaya*, Trans: James Hograth, *Archaeologia Mundi Series*, London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1973.