

Thog lcags and rlung rta

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Thog lcags and *gnam lcags* are skillful creations of people of very ancient times. They were used daily in many different ways: as supports [*rten chas*] for the Wer-ma and protector deities, as tools for eating and drinking, female and male ornaments, tools to cure diseases, amulets to repel evil spirits, ritual implements for gShen priests, tools for astrological calculations, diagnosis and divination, hunting or fighting weapons, and so on. It is difficult for us to discern the forms or fathom the way in which those implements were utilized by ancient people, on the basis of the fragments that we are given to observe now. Such objects have the appearance of antiques, because they exist from ancient times. Thus we consider them just as amazing objects, without thinking about the way in which they are related to ancient history.

Many Tibetans identify *thog lcags* objects originating with the fall of thunderbolts; and they usually consider *gnam lcags* as objects originating in space, belonging to nonhuman beings such as the lHa of the Sky, the gNyen of the Middle Sphere, the Klu of the Underworld. It is not impossible that objects belonging to nonhuman beings may fall into human hands; quite a few of such marvelous objects do exist, but for Tibetans in general these kinds of *thog lcags* are simply special objects created by people in very ancient times. Since that era began with the Stone Age, it would not be conceivable that at that time human beings could have the capacity of manufacturing *thog lcags*, because, as many histories relate, ancient peoples originated and developed from the gNyen and the Ma-sangs, and the technical knowledge of the The'u-rang, a type of Ma-sangs, was much higher and more sophisticated than those of human beings.

In ancient times, the syllable *zhung* of the word Zhang Zhung was rendered in Tibetan with *khyung*. The reason is that among the ancient populations that developed from the Six Family Lines of the Early Human Generation [*mi'u gdung drug*] those of Zhang Zhung originated from the Khyung and sBra tribal families. The most important among the Wer-ma deities, protectors of the *sgra-bla[i]* of the Zhang Zhung people, was called sGra-bla bSe'u-ru-gcig [Unicorn]. The form of this sGra-bla is like that of a khyung. The *sNang gsal sgron me* describes him as follows (sDe, 418,209,3):

Among the troops of the mighty Wer-ma, many are able to travel, but [only] a few are able to fight. [Among those who are] able to fight, there is bSe'u-ru-gcig. His skin is red, and, like that of a rhinoceros [bse], looks like a suit of armor: this is a sign that his father is gSer-sbal [Golden Frog]. Like a rhinoceros, [his body] is wrinkled [ri mo yod pa], and rays of light shine forth from [his] horn: this is a sign that his mother is mTsho-sman [Nymph of the Lake]. The mighty bSe'u Ru-gcig received charisma [dbang] [as a] gift from the king of the Klu. From the king of the Sa-bdag, he received magic powers [mthu]. The upper part of his body is formed by three superimposed Khyung. As a sign that he is a Khyung, he has bird feathers. As a sign that he is a frog, he has wave-like designs [chu ris] all over his body.

Below we can see reproductions of *thog lcags* recalling the shape of the sGra-bla Khyung-chen bSe'u, which are among the oldest of their kind found in Tibet. The characteristics, forms, and so on, show that these four artifacts are very old indeed.



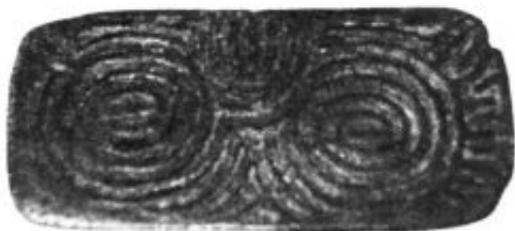
The first *thog lcags* is a khyung head with two wings connected by a wave design. I think it must have been used mostly on the crowns of kings or the headgear of high-ranking civil or military officers as a symbol of power.



The second is called “Khyung-chen 'Gying-ba” [great khyung poised with a majestic air]. It appears like a khyung with a firm stance, gazing at the sky. As the *sNang gsal sgron me* quoted above says, “there are wave-like designs [*chu ris*] all over his body”, and also a pattern indicating the uninterrupted energy of the elements.

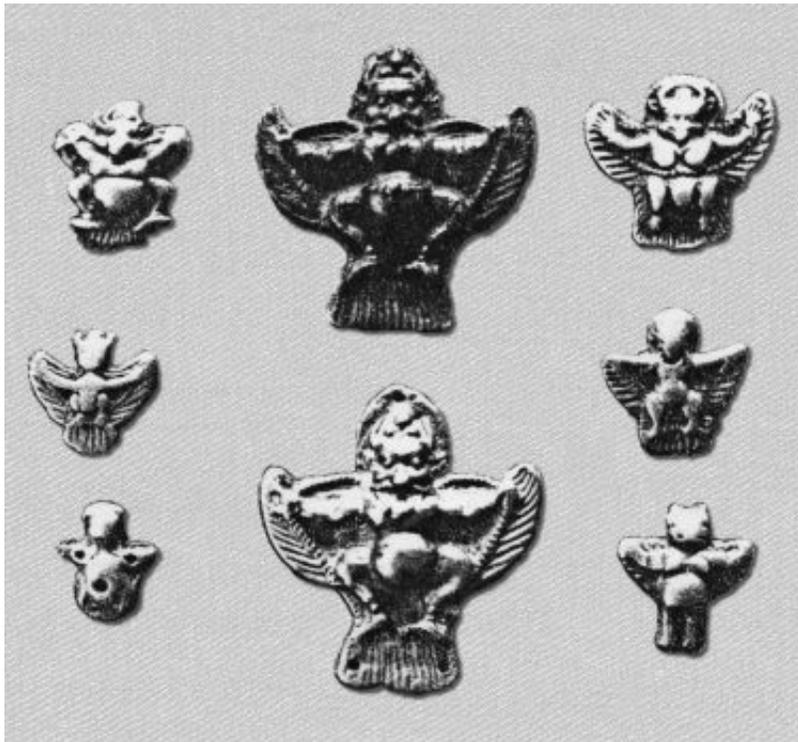


This third image clearly shows two horns pointing upwards, and two eyes and a face. The *sNang gsal sgron me* says, “Rays of light shine forth from [his] horn: this is a sign that his mother is mTsho-sman [Nymph of the Lake]”.



As in the second image, the fourth *thog lcags* shows a rippling water design all over the body; in this case the pattern indicates that the two eyes of the

Khyung can see both good and evil. I think that the last three objects could have been bodily ornaments, symbols of bravery, protection, and so on, depending on the circumstances. Also among the ancient artifacts of Peruvian Incas, who looked a bit like Tibetans, there are objects similar to these *thog lcags*. That implicitly shows the great value of this type of cultural relic, which appeared about ten thousand years ago, or even much earlier.



Above we see examples of *thog lcags* in the shape of the Khyung-chen which were created after the advent of gShen-rab Mi-bo-che. Those in the first group are precious khyung images which predate the Early Period or date back to the Early and the Intermediate Periods; they belong to the private collection of Mr. Rong-dge rNam-rgyal mGon-po, a Tibetan resident in Germany, who is greatly interested in ancient Tibetan culture.



The

thog lcags in the second group belong to my collection.

Rock Carvings

Needless to say, there are many vestiges left by people of ancient times that have emerged, or still remain unearthed, in most parts of the Zhang Zhung/Tibetan territory. When the great Western scholar and Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci [1894-1984] went to Ladakh, he discovered many rock carvings. Pictures of these carvings are now preserved at the IsMEO Museum[ii] in Rome, Italy. They show images of Buddhist stupas, of sentient beings, drawings, and phrases written in Tibetan capital letters containing quite a few names of Tibetan ministers and generals. Judging by their look and the Tibetan scripts, I think most of those images belong to the Later Period, although some among them clearly belong to the Intermediate or the Early Period. I came to the conclusion that one image in particular predates even the Early Period. The image was discovered by Tucci on a rock on the southern side of the Kanzam Pass [Kan-dzam-la, Himachal Pradesh, India], and shows a wild goat and a human figure making offerings; it is not clear to me whether the human figure is holding a wooden staff in the hand, or is mounting a horse. Professor Tucci told me that in his opinion this image, like other similar ones, did not seem at all to have been carved from a Buddhist perspective. The image is visible in Tucci's "On some bronze[iii] objects discovered in Western Tibet".[iv]

During the summer months of the Earth Male Dragon Year (3905 – 1988), with a group of Western friends, I travelled to Western Tibet in what is now known as the mNga'-ris Province, once the center of Zhang Zhung, in order both to make a pilgrimage, and to carry out historical research. One day, on a rock in the proximity of the road situated in the Zhang-zhung Ru-thog area, we found many carved images that looked very, very old.

In Australia quite a few rock drawings of that type exist, created by the Aboriginal people. Some experts have examined those rock drawings by checking them against ancient English artifacts, and have come to the conclusion that the ancient history of the indigenous populations of Australia

can be more than forty thousand years old; for that reason, its culture has been recognized as one of the oldest in the world.

It is clearly visible that also the rock drawings of Zhang-zhung Ru-thog have a distinctly ancient character; therefore, even if we cannot say whether they date back to forty thousand years ago, we can venture to affirm that they are much older than the Early Period. Judging from the style of those drawings, which depict deer, tigers, and other sentient beings, I do not think that they primarily refer to hunting scenes. If we consider that among them are also images of the Khyung-chen, and of athletes or warriors, it is quite possible that the depiction of animals, in particular, was used by ancient people to symbolize aspects of the power of nature that were better rendered through those animals and their characteristics. Why? Because in the ancient Bonpo tradition the images of certain animals were used to symbolize the specific realms of the elements: thus, the lion symbolized earth, the dragon represented water, the khyung, fire, and the tiger, wind.

That system was incorporated in several Bonpo rituals starting from the Early Period, and it not only continued to flourish during the Intermediate and the Later Period, but it also evolved into the so-called Wind Horse flags [*rlung rta*] utilized by Tibetans in modern times. At the four corners of a *rlung rta* we find the images of a tiger, a lion, a khyung, and a dragon; they indicate the realms of the elements, respectively wind, earth, fire and water. At the center of the flag, a fine, caparisoned horse carries a jewel on its back, which represents the individual endowed with the power of the elements. While the realms of the elements are symbolized by the four animals in a well-known manner, they are also directly identified with the power of each element; in that respect the ancient Bonpos distinguished between the four elements proper and their dimensions, namely, the specific vibrant energies existing within each elemental sphere.



According to the astrology of the elements [*'byung rtsi*], the realm of wind is symbolized by wood; here wood also represents wind, and since the animal that dominated forests in the Trans-Himalayan region was the tiger, the tiger came to be associated with, and to symbolize, the element wind itself. Similarly, as the intrinsic characteristics of the element earth are firmness and solidity, snowy mountain peaks have come to represent this natural aspect, while the lion, believed to inhabit those places, has come to represent the power of the element earth. The essence of fire is heat, with flames which have the capacity to burn. Since a dimension of blazing, ardent tongues of fire was considered to be the space inhabited by the deity Wer-ma Khyung-chen bSe'u, a khyung has consequently become the symbol of this element. Moisture or humidity is the characteristic of the water element, which is exemplified by the ocean; dragons, which were thought to inhabit and dominate that dimension, have consequently become the icon for water. The galloping horse at the center of the flag symbolizes the uninterrupted potential of the individual; the ornaments and the jewel indicate that the power of the individual is adorned with a plethora of favorable and positive aspects, and that all his or her aspirations can be realized when the power of each element is perfect. Of the ancient images appearing on rock surfaces some, such as those of tigers and khyung, are intrinsically related to the basic understanding of the elements of primeval Bonpos; in some cases these images of birds and animals are quite similar to those discovered by the renowned scholar Giuseppe Tucci in Ladakh and other places in Western Tibet.

[i] For the meaning of *sgra bla* see Namkhai Norbu, 1995, pp. 60-62.

[ii] Presently known as the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'G. Tucci.'

[iii] *li-ma*, bronze or bell metal.

[iv] *Artibus Asiae*, V, 1935, pp. 105-116.