

A WINDOW ONTO EARLY HIMALAYAN ARTISTIC AND MORTUARY PRACTICES

JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA



Fig. 1 Burial Mask with a Human Face in Repoussé, crowned by an engraved headdress; discovered in a tomb in Zone I of the Chutak cemetery, Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet; Protohistoric period (ca. 100 BCE to 600 CE), ca. 2nd or 1st century BCE; parcel-gilt silver, silk, wood; 5 5/8 × 5 1/2 in. (14.2 × 14 cm); Zhada County Cultural Relics Bureau, Ngari Prefecture, TAR; photograph by Li Linhui

GOLD BURIAL MASK WITH ENGRAVED FIGURES

Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet

Protohistoric period (ca. 2nd or 1st century BCE)

SUMMARY

Centuries before the earliest written Tibetan texts, the dead were buried in the western Himalayas with gold and silver masks. This mask is inscribed with images of wild herbivores, birds, a tree, and stepped structures. Archaeologist John Vincent Bellezza hunts for the meaning of these ancient funerary customs, comparing archaeological artifacts, rock art, and old Tibetan ritual texts to reveal the sophistication of pre-Buddhist civilization on the Tibetan Plateau.

This gold burial mask, also known as a death or funerary mask, is the most elaborate example of more than a dozen such objects discovered in western Tibet and adjacent Himalayan tracts in the last decade. The use of these masks, signifiers of high rank and status, was reserved for those who merited extravagant funerals. The pictured burial mask was unearthed in 2011 by Chinese archaeologists from a shaft tomb at Chutak (Water Mill), not far from Toling, an old capital of Guge (a region in western Tibet famous for its Buddhist monasteries and frescoes).¹ The Chutak mask is made in two parts, joined together by silk laces and reinforcing wood slats. It is fabricated from silver; the front side is coated in a fine layer of gold (parcel gilt), a technique employed in many regions of the ancient world. The rear of the object is sheathed in layers of silk material decorated with knotted lace.² The silk was fastened to the mask through a series of paired perforations along its edge. The diminutive size of the Chutak mask (most of the others are even smaller) indicates that it was not used as an actual adult face covering but rather placed in the tomb with symbolic purposes in mind.

The two slightly overlapping sheets of the Chutak mask were ornamented using different techniques. A sharp cutting tool was used to incise the figures on the bandlike crown, while the facial features were made in relief by bearing down on the reverse side of the mask with a hammer and punch, a method of metalworking known as repoussé. The lineaments of the face are difficult to read, save to say that the countenance is both delicate and dignified. The sides of the head taper inward toward a broad, rounded jaw. The elliptical eyes with wide pupils are set below a gently arching brow. The very long and narrow nose bridge terminates in bulbous nostrils, dividing much of the face into two longitudinal sections. The crescent-shaped mouth of the mask is connected to the nose by two ridges that simulate the medial cleft.

The upper half of the Chutak burial mask is adorned with a rich array of iconic figures, consisting of birds, wild herbivores, a tree, and stepped structures. The length and breadth of the crown is dominated by a trio of stepped structures, each composed of three graduated platforms surmounted by a globular upper section. The lower portion of each of the stepped structures bears an engraved standing herbivore. Their body forms and especially the short, tightly curling horns set behind the head are most reminiscent of sheep. The complement of birds on the crown hints that the herbivores may also be undomesticated animals, in which case they may represent one of two species of wild sheep native to the region, the blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*) and argali (*Ovis ammon*).³ Across the upper tier of the crown appear six engraved birds, the four birds in the middle forming two pairs. Between the pair of birds on the right is a motif resembling a tree, as also depicted in the rock art of western Tibet and Ladakh. The identity of the long-legged birds is unclear. They may possibly depict aquatic species.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MASK

Unlike other gold masks discovered in western Tibet and the Himalayan rimland that display only human faces, this mask offers an array of iconic forms that lend themselves to comparison and interpretation. The birds and herbivores of the mask's crown are zoomorphic depictions (along with the horse) that predominate in Tibetan archaic funerary rituals.⁴ Although the earliest Tibetan funerary texts were not composed before the eighth century CE, they preserve with varying degrees of fidelity a number of more ancient death themes, mortuary customs, and death rituals. The information they reveal is probably germane to archaeological evidence like that presented by the gold burial masks. It is still not very feasible, though, to correlate lore in the texts with specific objects and art; rather, they supply us with tools for a generalized understanding of the archaeological materials and processes underpinning ancient burial in Tibet.

In Tibetan archaic funerary texts dating to about the eighth to the twelfth century CE, birds and feathers are key components of harm-reducing and evocatory rites performed on behalf of the deceased. For example, it is recorded that feather headdresses symbolizing the power of flight were placed on horses called doma, which were entrusted with mystically transporting the dead

to the afterlife. Sheep known as kyibluk occur in many archaic funerary texts as guides of the departed, showing the way over the mountains and rivers of the land of death to the celestial realm of the ancestors. In a collection of early Yungdrung Bon death ritual texts entitled *Muchoi Tromdur* (The Multitude of Funerary Rituals of Mucho), trees functioned as vessels to enshrine and protect the consciousness of the dead; the tree was thus referred to in this collection of death rituals as the “soul fortress.” A soul evocation text of the *Muchoi Tromdur* describes a yellow golden visage (*zhel*) that serves as a receptacle or “soul-circle” for the deceased, in preparation for their journey to the afterlife.⁵ Samten Karmay equates the yellow golden visage with the gold burial masks of Tibet, affirming that it served as the physical support for the soul of the deceased and probably also as a likeness of the interred.⁶ The stepped structures engraved on the *Chutak* mask have actual architectural and artistic counterparts throughout western Tibet and Ladakh.⁷ According to Yungdrung Bon literature, these functioned as repositories for deities, but how this conception of their use might inform the engravings on the burial masks remains unclear.

By virtue of their placement on the gold burial mask, the herbivores, birds, tree, and stepped structures are directly relatable to traditions and beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife. However, analogous figures and symbols materializing as objects and rock art (figs. 2, 3, and 4) occur in western Tibet in the Protohistoric period (ca. 100 BCE to 600 CE), supporting their status as cultural icons with multivalent meanings and functions. A copper alloy figurine (fig. 2) of a wild herbivore (probably a sheep species) with horns that curl around the sides of the head and two pairs of legs (each pair joined by a crossbar) is one of a small group of zoomorphic figurines attributable to the Protohistoric period, reportedly found by farmers and herders in western Tibet. They have assumed talismanic value, but how they might have been worn and used originally is enigmatic.⁸ The bird pictographs (fig. 3, 5) from Lake Namtso and the petroglyph of a stepped structure from Kabren Pungri, Rutok, (fig. 4) are typical of rock art in western Tibet. Such rock paintings and rock carvings demonstrate that the iconography of the *Chutak* mask was not an isolated case; instead, these forms reoccur in various cultural and social contexts in the same era. By examining ever more examples of this art, a picture of the development of civilization in Protohistoric-period Tibet can gradually be built up.



Fig. 2 Figurine of a Wild Sheep; closely associated with western Tibet; Protohistoric period (ca. 100 BCE to 600 CE); copper alloy; 1 1/4 × 1 1/8 in. (3.2 cm by 2.8 cm); Private collection; photograph by J. V. Bellezza



Fig. 3 Rock Painting of a Bird; Che Do, Lake Namtso, Tibet; Protohistoric or Early Historic period (ca. 600–1000 CE); red ochre; length 2 3/8 in. (6 cm); photograph by J. V. Bellezza. The other two pictographs near it are attributed to the Iron Age (ca. 700–100 BCE)

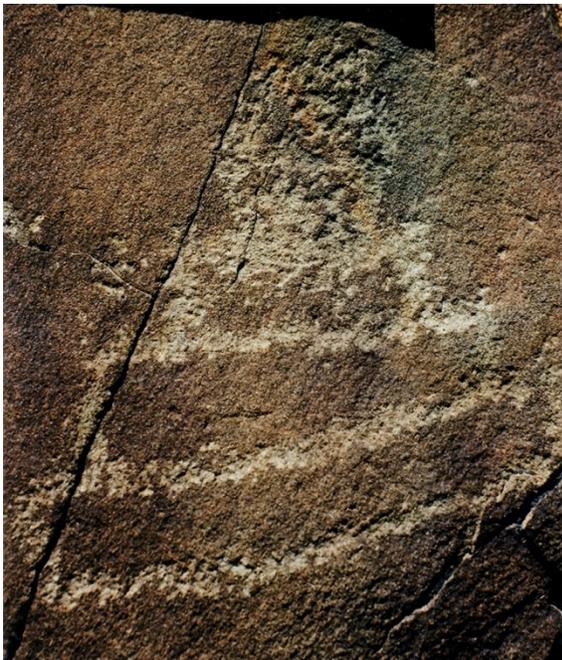


Fig. 4 Rock Carving (petroglyph) of a Ritual Stepped Structure; Kabren Pungri, Rutok, western Tibet; Protohistoric period (ca. 100–600 CE); height 5 7/8 in. (15 cm); photograph by J. V. Bellezza



Fig. 5 Eagle and Wild Herbivore; Zhamar Puk, Tashi Dochung, Lake Namtso, Tibet; Protohistoric period (ca. 100–600 CE); red ochre; photograph by J. V. Bellezza

OTHER GOLD AND SILVER BURIAL MASKS

All of the known burial masks of the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan rimland were recovered from tombs at five different ancient cemeteries excavated by archaeologists in Tibet, India, and Nepal. Initial analyses of organic materials deposited in tombs in Guge (western Tibet), Malari (Uttarakhand, India), and Mustang (Nepal) indicate that these masks were produced between about the second century BCE and the seventh century CE, spanning the entire Protohistoric period in western Tibet and adjoining Himalayan tracts. This was an era in which rock inscriptions in foreign languages were made in certain far western locales of the plateau but before the development of an indigenous system of writing in the region. Until the discovery of the gold burial masks, the Protohistoric period was best known for a line of thirty-two kings celebrated in Tibetan literature. The emergence of the masks in recent years brings an entirely new perspective on pre-Buddhist civilization concentrated in western Tibet, a territory traditionally known as Zhangzhung. These objects demonstrate the high level of ideological and material sophistication of the native cultures, putting them on a par with the achievements of other Eurasian civilizations. This observation is supported by other artifacts situated in the same tombs as these masks, which include silk and woolen fabrics, gold and silver ornaments, bronze vessels, wooden vessels and constructions, iron tools, and stone and glass beads, as well as by the extensive residential and ceremonial monuments and diverse agricultural system that existed on the western portion of the plateau during this period.



Fig. 6 Regions where archaeologists have excavated Protohistoric cemeteries.

FOOTNOTES

¹ On this mask, see John V. Bellezza, *Tibetan Silver, Gold and Bronze Objects and the Aesthetics of Animals in the Era before Empire: Cross-Cultural Reverberations on the Tibetan Plateau and Soundings from Other Parts of Eurasia*, British Archaeological Reports International Series 2984 (Oxford: BAR, 2020) 44, 45; John V. Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 454 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 157–59; John V. Bellezza, “Flight of the Khyung (Newsletters),” *Tibet Archaeology*, 2011–17, <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com>, Oct. 2011, Nov. and Dec. 2013, Nov. 2017; Tao Tong and Linhui Li, “The Himalayan Gold Masks from the Eurasian Perspective,” *Chinese Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (2016): 85–90; Lü Hongliang 吕红亮, *Kua Ximalaya de Wenhua Hudong: Xizang Xibu Shiqian Kaogu Yanjiu 跨喜马拉雅的文化互动：西藏西部史前考古研究* [Trans-Himalayan Interaction: An Archaeological Study of the Prehistory of Western Tibet] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2015), 88–93; Samten G. Karmay, Tsering Thar Tongkor, and Tsering Dawa Sharson, “The Gold Masks Found in Shang Shung and the ‘Five Supports of the Soul (Rten Lnga)’ of the Bon Funerary Tradition,” in *Ancient Civilization of Tibetan Plateau: Proceedings of the First Beijing International Conference on Shang Shung Cultural Studies*, ed. Tsering Thar Tongkor and Tsering Dawa Sharson (Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House, 2018), 330–44; Amy Heller, “Preliminary Remarks on Birds and Deer in Shang Shung and Early Tibet,” in *Ancient Civilization of Tibetan Plateau: Proceedings of the First Beijing International Conference on Shang Shung Cultural Studies*, ed. Tsering Thar Tongkor and Tsering Dawa Sharson, vol. 1 (Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House, 2018), 3–37..

² Tao Tong and Linhui Li, “The Himalayan Gold Masks from the Eurasian Perspective,” *Chinese Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (2016): 86.

³ Tao Tong and Linhui Li identify these animals as goats, “The Himalayan Gold Masks from the Eurasian Perspective,” *Chinese Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (2016): 85. Amy Heller equates them

with antelopes or deer, “Preliminary Remarks on Birds and Deer in Shang Shung and Early Tibet,” in *Ancient Civilization of Tibetan Plateau: Proceedings of the First Beijing International Conference on Shang Shung Cultural Studies*, ed. Tsering Thar Tongkor and Tsering Dawa Sharson, vol. 1 (Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House, 2018), 4. However, the horns of the figures are not indicative of goats, antelopes, or deer.

⁴ John V. Bellezza, *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet. A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland*, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 368 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), pt. 3; John V. Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 454 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), pts. 2, 3.

⁵ John V. Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 454 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 156, 157.

⁶ Samten G. Karmay, Tsering Thar Tongkor, and Tsering Dawa Sharson, “The Gold Masks Found in Shang Shung and the ‘Five Supports of the Soul (Rten lnga)’ of the Bon Funerary Tradition,” in *Ancient Civilization of Tibetan Plateau: Proceedings of the First Beijing International Conference on Shang Shung Cultural Studies*, ed. Tsering Thar Tongkor and Tsering Dawa Sharson (Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House, 2018), 336–39.

⁷ On rock art facsimiles, see John V. Bellezza, *Tibetan Silver, Gold and Bronze Objects and the Aesthetics of Animals in the Era before Empire: Cross-Cultural Reverberations on the Tibetan Plateau and Soundings from Other Parts of Eurasia*, British Archaeological Reports International Series 2984 (Oxford: BAR, 2020). For actual built examples in ancient times, see John V. Bellezza, *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung: A Comprehensive Inventory of Pre-Buddhist Sites on*

the Tibetan Upland, Residential Monuments, vol. 1, Miscellaneous Series–28 (Sarnath: Central University of Tibetan Studies, 2014), 24, 25; John V. Bellezza, *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung: A Comprehensive Inventory of Pre-Buddhist Sites on the Tibetan Upland, Ceremonial Monuments*, vol. 2, Miscellaneous Series–29 (Sarnath: Central University of Tibetan Studies, 2014), 521–27.

⁸ For another example (antelope), see Gudrun John, *Tibetische Amulette aus Himmels-Eisen* (Rahden: Verlag Marie, 2006), 131, fig. 306.

FURTHER READING

Karmay, Samten G. 2018. “The Gold Masks Found in Shang Shung and the ‘Five Supports of the Soul (*rten lnga*)’ of the Bon Funerary Tradition.” In *Ancient Civilization of Tibetan Plateau: Proceedings of the First Beijing International Conference on Shang Shung Cultural Studies*, edited by Tsering Thar Tongkor and Tsering Dawa Sharshon, 330–44. Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

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Tong, Tao, and Linhui Li. 2016. “The Himalayan Gold Masks from the Eurasian Perspective.” *Chinese Archaeology* 16, no. 1, 85–90.

CITATION

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