Shoulder Blades, Nomads and Lamas: Adaptations of Scapulimancy on the Tibetan Plateau

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Scapulimancy involves examination of the shoulder blade or scapula bone of an animal for signs thought to provide information on questions of importance. To date, this practice remains the least known among the many forms of divination employed upon the Tibetan Plateau. Herein I compare four different sets of information which, according to my current knowledge, constitute the most comprehensive records of scapulimancy so far available from Tibetan Plateau populations: ethnographic documentation of scapulimancy as I observed it used by pastoralist communities in the northwestern Byang thang region during 2002-2003; an eighteenth century Classical Tibetan manual for scapulimancy authored by an Oirat Mongol lama from the Kokonor (mTsho sngon po) region of northeastern A mdo; indigenous ethnographic records published in 2009 of scapulimancy as recently practiced by Mongol-descended and Mongol-affiliated [1] pastoralist communities in southern A mdo (mDo smad); a late twentieth century Classical Tibetan manual for scapulimancy authored by a well-known Tibetan exile lama of the g.Yung drung Bon religion. These four sources are presented in the order just mentioned in parts 3-6 to follow. By way of introduction, part 1 provides an evidence-based survey of both general characteristics and certain particularities of scapulimancy in the Tibetan Plateau context, while part 2 offers a brief summary of morphological terminology relevant to the sheep's scapula as orientation for my subsequent discussions and translations.

1. Scapulimancy in the Tibetan Plateau context

Most citations about scapulimancy across the Tibetosphere are brief, vague, repeat indigenous mythology, advance bogus colonial-era

[1] These designations are used instead of the common "Tibetanized Mongols" so as to be more neutral, accurate and respectful in line with discussions by Wallenböck 2017 and Roche 2015.

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prejudices, and are even fictionalised.[2] The few short discussions of the phenomenon so far by scholars, although transmitting some useful information, are decontextualised, superficial and thus often heavily supplemented by data from other regions of Asia, or are focused upon a single textual source.[3] It is thus well to begin by defining what scapulimancy on the Tibetan Plateau actually does and does not involve according to all reliable evidence so far available, including the four sources discussed in sections to follow.

Among the wide variety of divination techniques known from the Tibetosphere, 'scapula divination' (*sog mo* and *sog pa'i mo*)[4] employing a 'shoulder blade/scapula bone' (*sog pa*,[5] *sog rus*) clearly falls within a class of "techniques which interpret patterns using a particular object."[6] While many different variations upon scapulimancy are demonstrated in the global archaeological, historical and ethnographic record,[7] the only form so far evident in the Tibetan Plateau context is pyromantic or pyro-scapulimancy: an animal scapula is initially burnt in a fire or by applying a burning object (e.g., a hot coal), with subsequent reading of various signs from the bone in relation to the random physical effects caused by heat, including cracking, breakages, scorching, sounds, and discharge of fluid matter. It is also noteworthy that, in all records from the past millennium, there is no evidence of inscribing scapulae as a part of scapulimancy practice upon the Tibetan Plateau, nor is there any evidence for the ritual deposit of

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2 For examples, see Das 1881: 198, Waddell 1894: 330, Waddell 1895: 465, Hoffmann 1961: 105, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 455-456, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a: 154, Ekvall 1963: 35, Ekvall 1964: 263-264, Walter 1996: 111-113, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag 2005: 240. The semi-fictionalised description in Ribbach 1940: 142 outlines a technique deviating so strongly from all known sources it should be regarded as dubious unless reliably corroborated. Aris 1995: 65 cited Simon Digby's unpublished translation of a seventeenth century Kashmiri poem written in Persian that briefly describes Tibetan scapulimancy (*Mathnawiyyât-i Fânî Kashmîri*, ed. S.A.H. Abidi, Srinagar, 1964, p. 433), which hopefully will appear soon in a forthcoming volume of *The Life and Works of Simon Digby* (edited by David Lunn, Delhi: Primus Books).

3 Hoffmann 1950: 193-195, 330, 416, Walter 1998: 126-127, Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po 2005a: 178-180. See note 49 below for comments on presentations of *Sum pa 1* by Dorjee Tseten 1995 and Eric Mortensen 2001.

4 Cf. the apparent neologism *sog dpyad*, the only records of which I know are in modern lexicons; e.g., the 1985 *BGT*: 2961, and Goldstein, *et al.* 2001: 1135 where it is repeated from *BGT* in lieu of a separate *sog mo* or *sog pa'i mo* entry for 'scapulimancy.'

5 Rarely also *sogs pa*, cf. also *sog ma* 'blade, stalk' (e.g., *sog 'bru* 'green corn that begins to sprout'; Jäschke 1881: 579), *sog le* 'saw' (i.e., bladed cutting tool). The form(s) *sog*[*s*] *k*[*h*]*a*, sometimes mistranslated as 'scapula,' means 'scapula-shaped.'

6 Maurer 2019: ix.

7 See Andrée 1906, Eisenberger 1938, Sayers 1992, Flad 2008.

scapulae that have been used for divination.[8] Furthermore, according to all recent records scapulimancy represents one of various forms of divination regularly undertaken by non-literate lay persons unaided by any specialist, although reports frequently indicate professional diviners or ritual specialists also performing scapulimancy.[9]

All currently known Tibetan Plateau records exclusively describe ovine scapulimancy, namely, employing scapulae from domestic sheep (*Ovis aries*).[10] By comparison, in adjacent regions of Asia the scapulae of bovines, pigs, deer, bear, camels and certain other domestic and wild animals have also been used. While the symbolic and material culture significance of sheep in Tibetan systems of ritual and religious life has been noted often enough,[11] there are certainly other considerations as to why the sheep is the exclusive animal associated with Tibetan Plateau scapulimancy. One practical reason is availability of bones. Both premodern and modern pastoralists living at higher altitudes on the Plateau have maintained large herds of sheep within their total livestock holdings due to the animal's overall versatility and tolerance of marginal conditions, while semi-

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8 Inscribed scapulae used for scapulimancy must be carefully distinguished from other completely separate ritual practices occurring in Tibetan salvation religions. Scapulae and other remains (e.g., skulls and horns) of dead domestic animals, such as bovines, horses and sheep, are inscribed with Buddhist or g.Yung drung Bon *mantra* formulas and deposited at holy places (e.g., *mani* walls, pilgrimage paths, shrines, temples, pass cairns, etc.) as memorials in the hope the animals attain better future rebirths; see Lenuck 2005 on Tibet, cf. Birtalan 2003: 56 on Mongolia. This practice has often been confused with scapulimancy in Tibetan Plateau areas; see Filchner cited in Hoffmann 1950: 194, and Baumer 1999: 102, and his plate on p. 101 described as "zu Orakelzwecken verwendete Schafschulterblätter" which actually depicts a bovine or equine scapula inscribed with *mantra*. Furthermore, rites requiring inscription of spells upon scapulae of various domestic and wild animals are cited in Buddhist texts within the *rNying rgyud* (*sNga 'gyur rgyud 'bum*); see, for example, *Srog bdag gser gyi rta pa'i rgyud*, f .41b, 1-2 (text Gpb052.006 in Gpb snga 'gyur rgyud 'bum phyogs bsgrigs, vol. zi, sec. 1, fol. 41b, http://www.rkts.org/images. php?id=3%7CGpb%7CMW1KG14783%7CI1KG21657%7C1%7C41b), accessed 30 July 2025.

9 Examples in Rockhill 1891: 166; Hoffmann 1950: 330, 416; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 456; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a: 154; Nishida 2016: 274. Cf. Walter 1996: 112 n. 13 and bsTan 'dzin rnam dag 2005: 240 citing Tibetan sources that are evidently mythical.

10 Compared with every other source, some of which insist goat scapulae (*ra sog*) cannot be used (e.g., dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009: 34), the modern (1985) lexicographers' description *ra lug gi sog pa la brten pa'i mo phywa* in *BGT*: 2961 appears ill-informed.

11 As examples, see Lalou 1953, Stein 1970 and Stein 1971 who recognised early on the role of sheep as psychopomps in Old Tibetan documents, Karmay 1998 [1975]: 142-143 on sheep in g.Yung dung Bon origin narratives, Ramble 2009: 212-213, 220 on sheep legs in soul-retrieval rites, Berounský 2014 on sheep as bearers of *g.yang*, and Huber 2020, I: chapt. 6 on sheep's wool in the ritual headgear of *bon* priests.

pastoralists and farmers also keep sheep. Unlike larger bovines that are usually kept in smaller numbers, and which are killed for meat only during autumn and winter when they are in peak condition, sheep are often slaughtered throughout the year on the basis of need. Thus, their scapulae are always more frequently and abundantly available. In many pastoralist tentholds I visited on the northwestern Byang thang, scapulae from any suitable sheep that had been slaughtered, cooked and eaten were cleaned after meals, and stored away carefully on the men's side of the tent for later use in divination.[12] A second practical reason stated directly by some of my Byang thang consultants is that the sheep's scapula is a thin bone very easily transformed by cracking, breaking and scorching when burnt; this is not the case with much larger bovine or equine scapulae.[13] Beyond these reasonable explanations, and as scholarly observers such as Helmut Hoffmann and Michael Walter have brought to our attention, it is highly significant that the ovine pyro-scapulimancy used exclusively across the Tibetan Plateau belongs to a much wider, areal pattern: Mongol scapulimancy has been exclusively sheep-based since at least the mid-thirteenth century, and remains so today.[14] Sheep scapulae are also the principal device used in later Buryat, Kalmuk, Kyrgyz, Naxi, Sindhi and Baluch scapulimancy—and this is by no means an exhaustive list—while sheep scapulae as oracle bones feature strongly in the archaeological record of the Xiongnu-Xianbei-Rouran period (first half of the 1st millennium CE) in the Altai region.[15]

Another notable feature of Tibetan Plateau scapulimancy is that because it requires burning of a fresh bone it always involves the breach of a fundamental and near universal cultural taboo evident

[12] Cf. the same observation in Rockhill 1891: 80 describing habits of Tibetan and Mongol-descended and Mongol-affiliated populations in the western mTsho sngon po (Kokonor) region of the northeastern Plateau during the 1890s.

[13] This modern observation is supported by archaeological data from adjacent regions of Asia; Flad 2008: 411-412.

[14] See Andrée 1906: 146-147, Bawden 1958, Birtalan 1993, also Sneath 2009: 79 who notes "the Mongolian art of scapulimancy called *dalaar mergeleh* (divination by means of the *dal*) or just *dal tavih* (placing *dal*). *Dal* is the word for the shoulder blade of a sheep"; cf. Lessing *et al*. 1960: 226-227 *dalu*, *daluci*, *dalucila-*. In the Buryat term for scapulimancy, *dala tulge, dala* means 'scapula' and *tulge* has the double meaning 'divination' and 'a sheep over the second year of life'; Michalczewski, Borodovskiy, and Oleszczak 2023: 290-291.

[15] On Buryat, see Michalczewski, Borodovskiy, and Oleszczak 2023; on Buryat, Kalmuk, Kyrgyz, Sindhi and Baluch, see Andrée 1906: 145-154; on Naxi, see Rock and Oppitz 1998: 175, 181, Jackson and Pan Anshi 1998: 251, Yang Fuquan 1998: 198, Oppitz and Mu Chen 1997: 84, Jackson 1979: 107, 163, Rock 1963, I: 343, 367, 378, Rock 1952, I: 189 n. 294, 199 n. 303 *et passim*, Rock 1948: 19 n. 20, Rock 1936: plate opp. p. 39. Note the Moso, close neighbours of the Naxi, also commonly use scapulimancy, but "always use goat shoulder blades" according to Mathieu 1998: 218, 233 n. 25, cf. Mathieu and Ho 2011: 110.

across the region: never to directly roast fresh meat, fat, blood, bone and even hoof over a fire for fear the smoke and fumes of singed animal matter will pollute and offend sensitive deities of the hearth, dwelling and local environment.[16] Furthermore, obtaining a supply of suitable scapulae for divination also violates the fundamental moral prescription common to both Buddhism and g.Yung drung Bon not to intentionally take life, and it does so in a manner that leaves no room for the common forms of Tibetan religious casuistry to excuse it. As we will see in the various cases to be investigated below, methods of scapulimancy often explicitly require scapulae from sheep that have been slaughtered—as opposed to other types of deaths—as well as from selected animals of an ideal age, gender and colouring.

A scapula employed for divination in Tibetan Plateau lands may be regarded—or is taken for granted—as a "cosmological object" by those who use it.[17] As a cosmological representation of sorts, the mostly flattish, roughly deltoid form of an actual sheep's scapula has long been associated in Classical Tibetan scholarly texts with the shape of the southern cosmic continent of Jambudvīpa described as the specific abode of ordinary human beings within the universe. Apparently inspired in part by both representations occurring in Indic Buddhist *Abhidharmakośa* transmissions and an "ancient, Central Asian, pastoral nomadic-based cosmography," not only Jambudvīpa but also even its denizens became represented as being trapezoid or deltoid in form, and assimilated to scapula morphology.[18] One mid-eighteenth century

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16 For examples, see Jäschke 1881: 229 *thab* 1, *BGT*: 1147 *thab gzhob*, 2139 *dmar thab,* Ekvall 1968: 61, Tucci 1980: 173, Norbu Chophel 1983: 22, Karmay 1998: 385 *thab mkhon*, Ramble 2009: 210, Huber 2020, I: 135-136, 362-363, II: 178; and Huber 1997: 258-261 for the *dmar thab shor ba'i rkyen* incident in the fifteenth century redaction of Mi la ras pa's life story.

17 Cf. the *pāśaka* divination dice as a cosmological object; Dotson, Cook, and Zhao Lu 2021: 260-261.

18 See especially Walter 1996 and Walter 1998: 126-127, 130-133 for Tibetan sources associating Jambudvīpa with the scapula and dating back to the twelfth century and possibly even earlier, also Sørensen 1994: 47 n. 23, Aris 1995: 65 n. 10. Similar statements can be found in a range of undated texts of g.Yung-drung Bon, e.g., the *Srid pa mdzod phugs kyi gzhung*, f. 18b, 3 @ *Bkz bon gyi bka' brten* (http://www.rkts.org/images.php?id=5%7CBkz%7CMW4CZ58532%7CI4CZ58537%7Cka%7C18b), accessed 30 July 2025, and *Mdo sde khod po bskal bzang*, f. 79b, 4 @ *Bkz bon gyi bka' brten* (http://www.rkts. org/images.php?id=5|Bkz|MW4CZ58532|I4CZ58541|ka|79b), accessed 30 July 2025; see also Martin 1991: 266, and Kværne and Martin 2023: 93-94. Variants of the Old Tibetan toponym (for a *yul* category) Yar khyim sogs (IOL Tib J 734: 8r321), Yar lung sogs dkar or Yar lung scogs gar (PT 1285: r27, r79, r188-r189) appear to have undergone a folk etymological transformation in early Classical Tibetan sources, with variants such as Yar khyim sogs kha, [Yar] lungs sogs ka (Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus and Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring 2007: 19, 110; 49, 160) or Yar khyim sog ka (Martin 2022: 463) and Yar lung sog[s] k[h]a[r] (Kværne and Martin 2023: 399, 410) appearing, and with the second bisyllabic later

Classical Tibetan manual for scapulimancy by a scholarly Buddhist lama to be discussed in part 4 offered this interesting origin account of the practice which references the scapula's cosmological associations:

> Animals [such as] bears killed wild herbivores, weasels and marmots[19] and divined with their scapulae, seeing and hearing signs that appeared true to them. Furthermore, because Jambudvīpa is scapula-shaped, and the form of the bodies and faces of the people of this [cosmic] continent resemble a scapula,[20] later on the arising of [signs indicating] good and bad occurrences on the mirror of the scapula was understood [by humans].[21]

It is noteworthy this explicit connection being drawn between the cosmological Jambudvīpa (and its denizens) and the origins and efficacy of scapulimancy is, to my present knowledge, unique in the available data concerning actual practice of the divination. This does not rule out the possibility that such conceptions may sit in the back of people's minds as part of the associations they make with the scapula bone as a divinatory object. A second, far more compelling reason for considering the scapula as a cosmological object during divination is the bone's customary division into a number of divinatory fields or 'areas' (*sa*). We might think of these fields as ontological zones because they refer to categories of being, and as a whole they reflect a cosmogram of sorts. As both the ethnographic and historical examples below demonstrate, every scapulimancer projects a bounded, two-dimensional cosmogram onto the scapulae they use, which defines an ontological distribution across the world space. The scapula's different areas and parts comprising the total divinatory field are always allocated to categories of being, such as 'self' and 'other' variously defined, as well as 'enemies', 'gods' and non-human spirit beings, both

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interpreted as meaning 'scapula-shaped' (*sog kha*), possibly in line with early cosmological statements. This is not surprising given how strongly early Classical Tibetan historiography mythologised the Yar lung region; cf. Tsering Gyalbo, Hazod and Sørensen 2000: 206-208 who argue the second bisyllabic has a different origin and meaning in *so kha* for 'watchtower' or 'defence tower.'

19 Here *'phyi ba* 'marmot' (*Marmota sp.*) for *byi* 'mouse/rat' makes more sense due to the size of that animal and its scapula bone, and the fact that marmots are the prey of bears; a second, less likely possibility for *byi* is 'pika' (*Ochotona sp.*), likewise the prey of bears, albeit also with tiny scapulae.

20 On the scapula shape of humans in Tibetan sources, see Walter 1996: 112-113.

21 *Dud 'gro dred kyis ri dwags dang // sre mong byi bsad sogs pa'i mo // blta ba mthong thos bden bar snang // de yang 'dzam gling sog dbyibs dang // gling 'di'i mi'i gdong lus dbyibs sog // 'dra bas sog pa'i me long du // phyis 'byung legs nyes 'char rigs so //*; *Sum pa 1*: f. 1b, 3-4, *Sum pa 2*: f. 2a, 5-2b, 2. Note that, here and elsewhere, for the sake of readability I render this author's original verse layout into prose translation.

domestic and wild animals, and so forth (see Figures 2-7).[22] Thus, this mundane and easily available bone is understood as a portable, hand-held map or 'mirror'—and *me long* is indeed the Tibetan term for its major surface area—of the external world, with a divinatory field divided into ontological zones or focal points relevant to a diviner or their clients.

The distribution of scapulimancy's use across Tibetan Plateau lands remains a matter for speculation due to the paucity of accurate records, although that paucity itself may be regarded as negative evidence of a more limited occurrence. Several patterns do, however, stand out in the available sources. As the data presented in parts 3-6 below strongly demonstrate, all of our most substantial accounts of scapulimancy come directly or indirectly from communities of nomadic pastoralists. A second point is that available records are clustered in far eastern and northern regions of the Plateau. Even clear outliers from this pattern, such as a unique report of scapulimancy among the Sherpas of highland Nepal,[23] must take into account that Sherpa ancestors were originally migrants from the far east of the Plateau.[24] Both the far eastern and northern Plateau regions from which we have certain and comprehensive records of scapulimancy all border directly upon the domains of long-established sheep-herding populations who also commonly divine using ovine pyro-scapulimancy, namely, the Naxi and the Mongols, with both those populations having experienced intensive cultural contacts with neighbouring inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau over centuries.

Finally, both Tibetan and non-Tibetan authors frequently describe the use of scapulimancy upon the Tibetan Plateau as being "ancient." However, based upon the reliable evidence currently available—and discounting vague, undated and philologically problematic mythological citations—we have no idea of the time-depth for use of this form of divination upon the Plateau. While some interesting Old Tibetan language materials on scapulimancy exist,[25] there are good reasons to

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[22] Allocation of such divinatory fields upon the scapula commonly occurs in other systems of scapulimancy; on Arab and Baltic methods, see Sayers 1992: 59-60, on Mongolian data see below. One can compare similar fields in the ninefold divination grid used for pebble divination or *lde'u 'phrul* on the Tibetan Plateau; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 26-27, Smith 2021: 83-87.

[23] Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a: 154.

[24] See Oppitz 1968.

[25] See Nishida 2016, who writes of "Tibetan scapulimancy" and the practice "in early Tibet," and Thomas 1951: 399-401 on an inscribed scapula and wooden slips from sites such as Mīrān in east Turkestan. Nishida 2016: 263 n. 6 cited excavation of inscribed scapulae in Nag chu, southern Byang thang, which she described without evidence as being "oracle shoulder blades," and with no confirmation of Old Tibetan inscriptions on the bones or what type of rite(s) they were used for; see my note 8 above.

remain rather cautious about what they might actually represent. Firstly, that evidence is not from the Tibetan Plateau; it is limited to peripheral colonial outposts of the *btsan po*-ruled empire in eastern Turkestan along the cosmopolitan southern Silk Road. That environment is now well-known for the complex transcultural and adaptive nature of the divination systems in use there during the period of Tibetan imperial colonisation,[26] and also as one in which various non-Tibetan Plateau populations employed the Tibetan script during the same era. A second concern is the nearly millennium-long historical gap between Old Tibetan evidence from eastern Turkestan and the first credible Classical Tibetan documentary records of scapulimancy actually being practiced upon the Plateau proper.

2. The sheep's scapula: Morphology and terminology

To understand the practice of divination using a domestic sheep's scapula, one needs to be familiar with the bone's morphological features and their Tibetan identifications. Figure 1 illustrates the lateral or outward facing side of an ovine scapula from an animal's right shoulder since that is what scapulimancers employ, while the orientation has been rotated 90 degrees clockwise to reflect ethnographic realities.[27] The scapula of an adult sheep is not a large bone, being approximately the size of an average human hand, if not often smaller. The bone's broad, flattish and roughly deltoid rear end—i.e., pointed away from the animal's head within the skeleton—is ca. 15-20 cm max. in length and 10-15 cm max. in width. The entirety of this deltoid area is generally termed the 'mirror of the scapula' (*sog pa'i me long*) in Tibetan. The narrower, tubular process (the collum scapulae) extending at the bone's front end is termed the 'handle' (*yu ba*, also *sog yu*). The handle terminates in a shallow cavity (the glenoid) for attachment to the animal's shoulder joint, and this glenoid cavity is called the 'mouth' (*kha*) in Tibetan, but is known as the 'pan' (*sla nga*) or 'pan of the handle' (*yu ba'i sla nga*) in texts by Mongol-descended authors (see parts 4-5).

[26] See Dotson, Cook, and Zhao Lu 2021 on dice divination, Nishida 2011 on coin divination, also Nishida 2016 on Old Tibetan scapulimancy inscriptions to record the practice and its results upon scapulae and other materials, which are techniques highly typical of neighbouring Chinese scapulimancy dating back to the late Shang period; Flad 2008.

[27] Illustrations I provide herein (Figures 1-5, 7) all represent the orientation I observed scapulae being held by Byang thang scapulimancers while divining with the bone.

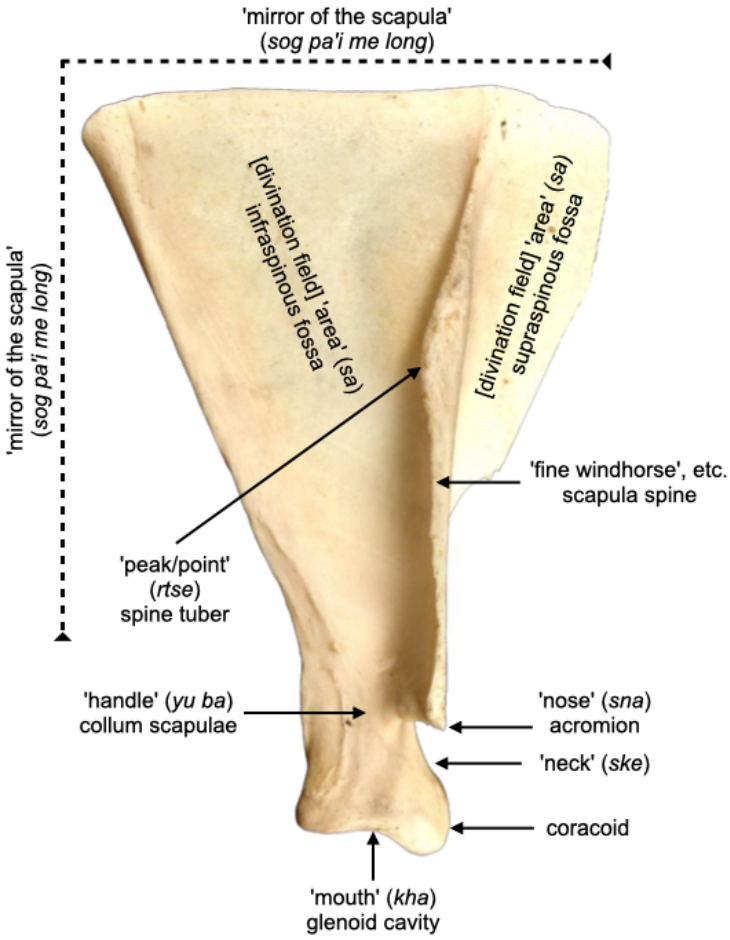


Fig. 1 – Morphology of a sheep's right scapula (lateral side) and Tibetan identifications (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

The scapula bone has two distinct sides or surfaces: the medial (or costal/proximal) surface, positioned towards the interior of the animal's body and resting against the front of the ribcage, is flat and more or less featureless; the lateral (or posterior/distal) surface, facing outwards from the animal's body, features a long, ridged process (the scapula spine or spina scapulae) that stands almost perpendicular to the flat surface of the 'mirror,' rising gradually from the broad, rear end of the bone, then extending as a slightly domed ridge as far as the area of the 'handle.' Near the ridge's mid-section, there is a slight bulge (the spine tuber) which is a site of divinatory significance, and while my Byang thang consultants gave it no specific name it is designated

'peak/point' (*rtse*) in one account by Mongol-descended authors (see part 5). The spine ridge bisects the whole lateral surface into two unequal areas (Figure 1). In virtually all archaeological, historical and ethnographic examples currently known to me from the Tibetosphere, it is exclusively this naturally bisected, lateral side of the bone, together with all of its features, which is examined for signs during scapulimancy.[28] The only exception is that Mongol-descended and -affiliated populations settled on the Plateau may occasionally divine using the featureless medial side. The lateral side's smaller, upper area (i.e., anatomically above the scapula spine as it sits within the skeleton) is the supraspinous fossa, while the larger, lower area is the infraspinous fossa. These two unequal surfaces are distinguished to create a fundamental division for reading signs. Universally, the smaller supraspinous fossa is the divinatory field relevant to the diviner, their clients and close family or kin group, while the larger infraspinous fossa serves as the field for 'others' of all types. The raised spine process running between and dividing these areas is also a divinatory field, one known by different positive names in Tibetan, such as 'fine wind-horse' (*rlung rta legs po*), and 'great path' (*lam chen*), depending upon the source consulted.

Other individually named features of divinatory significance are distributed around the periphery of the bone. When viewing the lateral face, another smaller process (the coracoid) extends out laterally a short distance from the scapula's 'handle,' and the short section of the handle's edge leading to this is known in Tibetan as the scapula's 'neck' (*ske*). The terminal tip of the scapula spine itself forms a small process (the acromion) which protrudes above the surface of the bone, and is sometimes referred to as the 'nose' (*sna*). Alternative terms do exist for the aforementioned features, and other sections of the bone not so far mentioned can have special names during divination, but these are all specific to individual diviners or communities, and are cited where relevant in the case studies to follow.

3. Modern Byang thang scapulimancers and their practice

During 2002, 2003 and 2010, I observed and recorded multiple instances of scapulimancy as practiced at the time by Tibetan-speaking pastoralists living in communities within the northwestern Byang thang region (see Acknowledgements). All of my fifteen male consultants either had previously divined with or were still divining

[28] This is also true of the "single oracle bone with an inscription in [Old] Tibetan script" from eastern Turkestan as reported by Nishida 2016: 263 cf. 268, n. 25.

using sheep scapulae. Their uniform experience and memory was that they and their ancestors only acquired skill in scapulimancy via colloquial oral and experiential transmission from male elders within their own and associated tentholds.[29] None of the consultants were professional diviners with clients; they only performed divinations for their own purposes, or occasionally for close family or kin group members. Their primary motivation for use of scapulimancy was optimising potential success in the hunting of wild animals by themselves or by members of their tentholds, and to a lesser extent for other mundane purposes, such as locating lost livestock or concerns about theft of grazing animals. Moreover, when I undertook my original research during 2002-2003, all of my consultants were middle aged to elderly (41-77 years), with very few other persons in the same communities having a working knowledge of scapulimancy. While the technique was already fast becoming redundant then, it was hardly to be found at all when I revisited most of the original research sites during 2010. By that time, local pastoralist communities had been resettled in government sedentarisation villages alongside roads, lived under a strict prohibition on hunting enforced by the authorities, and could also access other types of divination from travelling monks or lamas, as well as via mobile phones or in internet cafes at county towns.

The majority of my Byang thang consultants lived within or directly adjacent to sGer rtse County. Most identified themselves as belonging to the 'Brong pa byang ma and sGer rtse communities, both of which are defined as either *rus* or *tsho ba* depending upon whom one asks. Both groups have historically inhabited the southern transverse valley system running from east to west through sGer rtse County, and used areas to the north as pasture and hunting grounds. Written and oral histories, together with linguistic evidence, clearly demonstrate the 'Brong pa byang ma and sGer rtse are descendants of immigrants who arrived several centuries ago in a series of migration waves from the far eastern Byang thang,[30] and low levels of migration into the region from the far east had continued into the twentieth century (e.g., see the case of Bu chung tshe dbang below). Since scapulimancy is rather more common in and around sGer rtse County compared with other areas

[29] Linguistic evidence of these narrow, situated, colloquial transmissions over a wide geographical area is reflected in the oral descriptions given by the different consultants who all spoke common or closely related Tibetan dialects. For example, exactly the same feature on the burnt scapula that would be described as a 'fine crack' in English was variously referred to by different speakers as *gas* or [']*gas pa, chag* or [']*chag pa*, *zhig*, *lam*, *ser ka*, and *srub*.

[30] See Karma tshul khrims 2003: 1-3, 21-23; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po 2005b; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po 2006: 392-95; Trotter 1915: 165.

of the northwest Byang thang, it could be significant that 'Brong pa byang ma and sGer rtse ancestors originally came from far eastern areas of the Tibetan Plateau where our richest records of scapulimancy occur (cf. parts 4-6 to follow).

Here I record the methods and results for scapulimancy used by two Byang thang pastoralist-hunters I observed during 2002-2003, and which are generally typical of the practice used by all fifteen of my consultants. Because heated scapulae often become discoloured, soot-blackened, distorted and broken, with some fine cracking being barely visible, Figures 2-4 are intended for clarity. They also represent a synthesis of all cracks and features that each consultant knew how to recognise and interpret at the time of recording, and facilitate a degree of comparison with records in the written manuals and figures in sections to follow. Crossed lines indicate a crack that can spread in any direction in the particular location.

Padma nor bu

Padma nor bu was aged 67 at the time I observed him divining on 24-25 August 2002. He had lived most of his life in pastoralist tentholds around the area of Brag phug *shang*.[31] That area, at an altitude of ca. 5,000 m, is situated along the northern boundary of permanent human settlement in sGer rtse County, and is marginal for pastoralism due to its sparse grazing, lack of fresh water sources, and bitterly cold winters.[32] Padma nor bu considered that his family and their neighbours were all poor throughout their lives, with never enough livestock to survive off, let alone develop in any way. To get by each year, local tentholds had to supplement their annual food reserves by hunting large game, such as wild yak (*Bos grunniens*), Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsoni*), Argali (*Ovis ammon*), and Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*). From young adulthood into his early 60s, Padma nor bu had been engaged in such seasonal subsistence hunting. Along with several other divination techniques, he learned scapulimancy already as a young adult by observing his senior male family members and clansmen when they divined using sheep scapulae, and gaining tips from them about what certain indications meant. Scapulimancy was one of the more popular divination techniques among the men of Brag phug *shang*, especially when going hunting.

The night before a hunt was planned, Padma nor bu would obtain a fresh sheep's scapula if he had none stored away at the time. He

[31] A *shang* is a rural administrative unit of the Chinese state in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

[32] On pastoralism and hunting in the communities of sGer rtse and neighbouring areas, see Huber 2005, Huber 2012, and Huber 2021.

always sought right side scapulae from two-year-old animals with a white fleece; those with dark wool or even a few dark patches could never be used. The bone is gained by boiling a leg of mutton, after which all organic matter is removed from its surface, followed by washing it in clean water. The divination is performed sitting at the hearth within Padma nor bu's tent.[33] He had two methods for heating the scapula. For the method we can call 'full burning', he placed the bone directly into the hearth fire, then waited for it to heat up and turn totally white or greyish white, and perhaps make soft snapping noises. Removing it with the fire tongs, he let it cool and then inspected the cracks that had formed on it. Holding the scapula's 'handle' in his right hand, he carefully scrutinised the bisected lateral face of the 'mirror' in order to see what cracks formed on his 'own side' (*rang sa*) to the right of the spine and on the 'side of others' (*gzhan sa*) to the left. Generally, if 'own side' cracks appeared it indicated positive outcomes and he called such cracks 'friendly' (*grogs po*), while cracks on the 'side of others' were more negative. While reading the cracks, Padma nor bu held in mind the main questions he wished to gain indications about from the divination, first among which was always whether the chosen following day was a good one to set out hunting on. He did not appear to read the cracks in any particular order. When divination was completed, any burnt scapulae were disposed of as domestic rubbish. Padma nor bu's detailed readings of all the cracks and signs around the entire scapula using this full burning method are numbered on Figure 2 with a key to their indications.

Key for Figure 2, Divinations from Padma nor bu's full burning method:

1. Positive, can kill game animals.
2. A long crack here, negative, cannot kill game animals.
3. Negative, cannot kill game animals.
4. The crack moving towards *gzhan sa*, positive, can kill game animals.
5. The crack moving towards *rang sa*, positive, can kill game animals.
6. The crack moving towards *gzhan sa*, positive, can kill game animals.
7. Negative, cannot kill game animals.
8. One will hurt game animals, but they will run away.
9. The crack moving inwards, positive, can kill game animals.
10. Marrow and blood exuding from the mouth, positive in all ways.

[33] Note several consultants never undertook scapulimancy for hunting inside the tent, only outside at some distance, as it was related to intentional taking of life and thus considered too negative in Buddhist terms, as well as potentially dangerous as a magical technique.

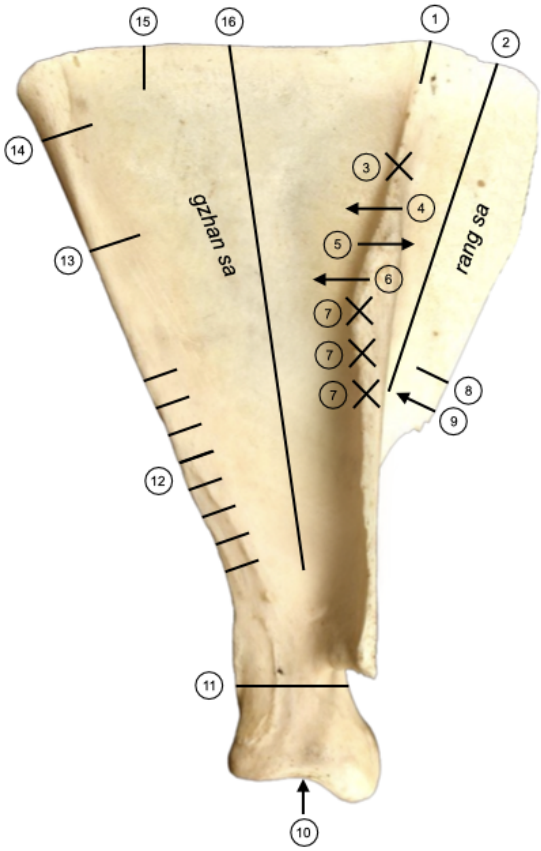


Fig. 2 – Divinations from Padma nor bu's full burning method (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

11. 'Cutting the throat', the handle gets a transverse crack, negative in all ways.
12. Small cracks along this part of the side are positive in all ways.
13. The 'son and cousin edge', negative when cracked.
14. The 'edge of the Bon lama', negative when cracked.
15. Negative, cannot kill game animals.
16. A long crack here, one can go a long way.

Padma nor bu's second, more specific method we can call 'hot coal'. He sat at the hearth fire holding the freshly cleaned scapula horizontally by the handle, such that the lateral face or mirror was turned upwards. He drew a hot coal out of the fire with the tongs and carefully placed it directly onto the middle of the 'side of others' to the left of the scapula spine. He then waited until the coal heated up that

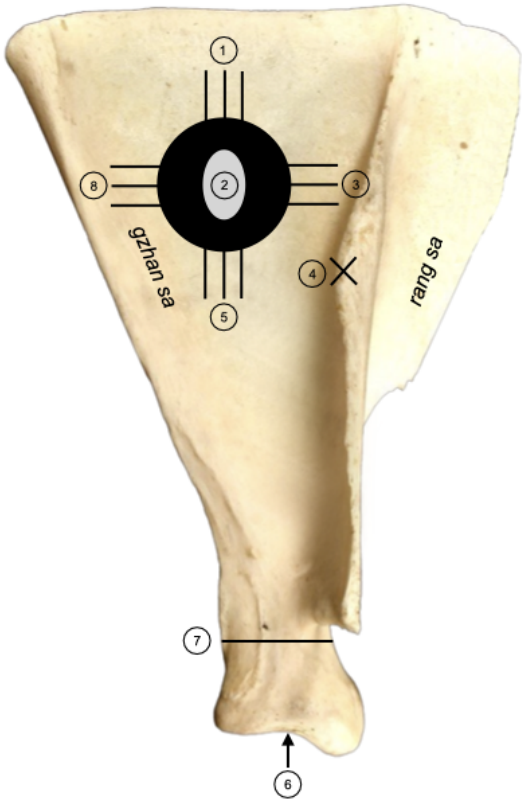


Fig. 3 – Divinations from Padma nor bu's hot coal method (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

part of the bone and caused it to crack. The number of cracks generated by this method is always more limited, and fewer indications are gained (see Figure 3 and its key).

Key for Figure 3, Divinations from Padma nor bu's hot coal method:

1. Vertical cracks above the burnt spot, negative, cannot kill game animals.
2. A hole is burnt through the surface, rain will fall.
3. Horizontal cracks right of the burnt spot, positive, can kill game animals.
4. A crack on the spine near the burnt spot, positive, can kill game animals.
5. Vertical cracks below the burnt spot, positive, can kill game animals.
6. Marrow and blood exuding from the mouth, positive in all ways.

7. 'Cutting the throat', the handle gets a transverse crack, positive, can kill game animals.
8. One will hurt game animals, but they will run away.

Bu chung tshe dbang

Bu chung tshe dbang, aged 77 when I met him on 14-16 August 2002, was born at a camp ground in Zla ba mtsho along the far northern boundary of mTsho chen County next to sGer rtse County. His parents had originally been poor semi-pastoralists (*sa ma 'brog*) from sDe dge in Khams,[34] but were forced by poverty to migrate northwest onto the Byang thang plateau looking for new opportunities. The family survived mainly by hunting wild animals for food, as well as working as butchers and seasonal shepherds for local pastoralists. They were so poor they even hunted Tibetan wild ass (*Equus kiang*), although there was a strong regional taboo among Byang thang pastoralists against killing and eating these animals, being acts considered very sinful (*sdig che*).[35] Already as a young teenager, Bu chung tshe dbang learned to hunt game animals using several different foot trapping systems, and to perform various types of divination. Most of his knowledge was gained from local pastoralists around northern mTsho chen and southernmost sGer rtse. In 1960, Bu chung tshe dbang was chosen to become a county leader by the Chinese Communists, a post he held for thirty years.[36] While he ceased hunting during the 1980s, he continued performing divinations including scapulimancy when needed up until the time of our meeting. He was considered somewhat of a local expert on divination explanations and aphorisms (*mo bshad*).

Bu chung tshe dbang stated that while scapulimancy can be used for divinations about one's food, clothing, economic affairs, as well as all sorts of specific domestic issues, reading the scapula generally informs one about three main dimensions of life: hostile threats, present life conditions, and future prospects. When he was young, scapu-

[34] On premodern *sa ma 'brog* in the sDe dge kingdom, see Rinzin Thargyal and Huber 2007.

[35] There is a common Byang thang saying, 'Wild ass meat is not for the gods' (*rkyang sha lha la mi 'gro*), meaning the local gods who protect the family and household will become polluted (*sgrib*), ensuring negative consequences for everybody. Some pastoralists use a Buddhist explanation, stating it is due to the wild ass's perceived closeness to domestic horses, and associate both species with the powerful tantric tutelary deity rTa mgrin (Hayagrīva). Another Byang thang saying captures this idea: 'The wild ass has attained the empowerment of rTa mgrin' (*rkyang la rta mgrin gyi dbang thob pa*), meaning there is danger for those who kill such animals.

[36] During the start of the Chinese occupation and formation of the commune system in Byang thang areas, it was typical for Communist officials to appoint able persons from the very poorest families to political and administrative positions.

limancy was often used in relation to conflicts of any sort among pastoralists, such as disputes about grazing areas, or accusations of livestock theft. Hunters like himself normally performed scapulimancy right before going hunting, although he stressed the technique could be used at any time one wishes.

Bu chung tshe dbang only ever used scapulae from the right hand shoulders of white sheep. He first prepared the cleaned bone by winding a thread of black wool and a thread of white wool around the scapula's handle, then spread some butter up the face to the apex. If this step was not done, no divination could be performed. The bone was then placed on the hearth fire—a fire outside the tent could also be used—and when burnt he removed it and allowed it to cool. He then took hold of the scapula by its handle in his right hand, waved it back and forth three times, and afterwards chanted these lines:

> Divination thread, divination thread, the divination thread of lHa Sog dkar po [lHa White Scapula].
> Examination technique, examination technique, the examination technique of bTsan Sog dmar mo [bTsan Red Scapula].
> The prospect of good, the prospect of good, the good fortune of Klu Sog sngon mo [Klu Blue Scapula].[37]

After this he inspected where cracks and other indicators had formed around the bone, and his interpretation process commenced. Bu chung tshe dbang also stated that, when he was in a hurry, he used the method—described by Padma nor bu above—of placing a burning coal from the fire onto the scapula's face and reading the cracks that formed around the burnt area.

Generally, Bu chung tshe dbang considered cracks in the interior surface of the scapula to indicate positive outcomes, while those at the edges, or that pass right through the bone, are more negative. He always began by reading the cracks and signs around the base of the handle, and then moved upwards in a specific sequence (reflected in the numbering on Figure 4). He divided the divinatory field into four distinct areas for indications: i. the 'area of enemies' (*dgra sa*) to the left of the spine is for any enemy (*dgra bo*) or hostile force, while for hunters it represents the game animals one wishes to kill; ii. the 'friendly area' (*grogs sa*) to the right of the spine is 'one's own area' (*rang sa*) representing one's self and close family; iii. the socket at the very end of the handle is also 'friendly' (*grogs*), and represents the fullness of one's wealth (*bang mdzod nor gyi khengs*, lit. 'the storeroom filled with

[37] *Mo thig mo thig lha sog dkar po'i mo thig / jus rgyugs jus rgyugs btsan sog dmar mo'i jus rgyugs / bzang ngo bzang ngo klu sog sngon mo'i skal ba bzang.*

property'); iv. the edges of the handle's shaft represent one's poverty (*mu ge srog thag bcad*, lit. 'famine cutting the life cord'). When all divination was completed, any burnt scapulae were disposed of as domestic rubbish.

Key for Figure 4, Divinations from Bu chung tshe dbang's method:

1. Marrow and blood bubble out from the *grogs* socket at the handle's base when still in the fire, one's storehouse will be full of wealth in the future; for hunting, one will kill game animals.
2. The handle cracks horizontally from edge to edge, one will become very poor in the future; when hunting, one cannot kill any game animals.
3. The top part of the *grogs sa* area cracks vertically out to the edge, one's life will not be long; when hunting, one will kill game animals.
4. The central left-hand margin of the *dgra sa* area cracks out to the edge, one's enemy will lose or be defeated; when hunting, one cannot kill any game animals.
5. The central right-hand margin of the *grogs sa* area cracks out to the edge, it means unhappiness and failure for oneself; when hunting, one cannot kill any game animals.
6. The top part of the *dgra sa* area cracks vertically out to the edge, when hunting one will encounter game animals, but they will escape.
7. Cracks around the centre of the *dgra sa* area, the enemy's main camp will be destroyed; when hunting, one will kill game animals.
8. Cracks around the centre of the *grogs sa* area, one cannot be successful in whatever undertaking; for hunting, if these run outward from spine to edge game animals can be killed, and if they run in towards the spine they cannot be killed.
9. The top right-hand corner of the *grogs sa* area cracks, it means bad luck, obstacles will arise, one will lose; for hunting, one cannot kill any game animals.
10. The spine of the scapula cracks right in the middle, one will obtain success very soon; for hunting, one will kill a game animal very quickly.
11. The *dgra sa* area cracks vertically up from the middle of the handle to somewhere below, but not directly up to, the top edge, one's enemy will be defeated; for hunting, one has a general chance to kill game animals.
12. The *grogs sa* area cracks vertically up from the middle of the handle to somewhere below, but not directly up to, the top edge; for hunting,

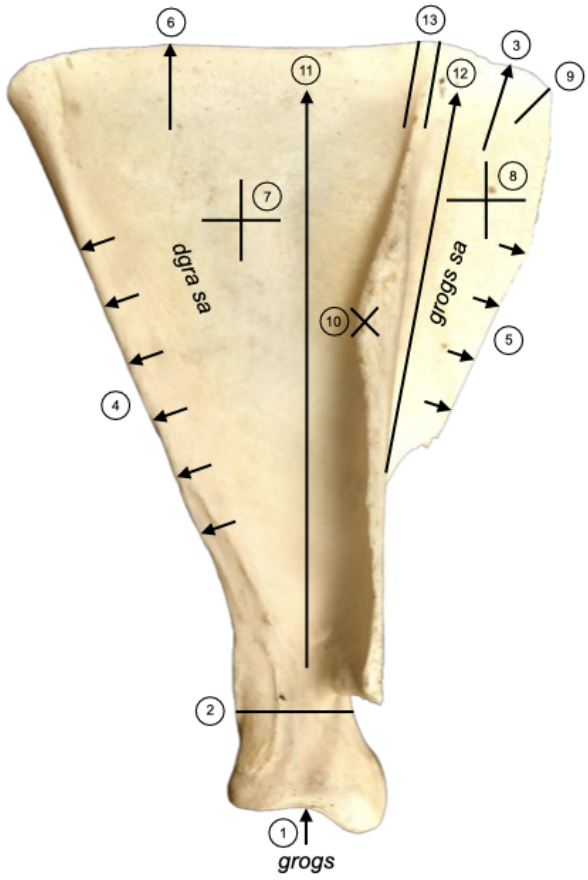


Fig. 4 – Divinations from Bu chung tshe dbang's method (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

one will only get a kill if it is made fast, otherwise nothing. If the crack runs right up to the edge, then one fails or is defeated.
13. Cracks in the centre line of the upper part of the scapula (between *grogs* and *dgra sa*), for hunting one will kill game animals.

In summary, the data from these two Byang thang scapulimancers mostly reflect what was true of the total sample from all fifteen of my consultants during 2002-2003. On the one hand, they share a core of common conceptions and patterns of practice, such as selection and preparation of scapulae, division of the divinatory field, types of indications yielding informative signs, topics of inquiry considered most appropriate to the method, and so forth. On the other hand, individually they exhibit variety in detail, especially in terms of interpreting different or contradictory signs from the same cracks or

indicators, and so on. My parallel research into divination using pellets (*ril bu mo*)[38] and rosaries (*'phreng ba mo*) among northwestern Byang thang pastoralists yielded the same overall results, since the number values mechanically generated by both latter methods are coupled with oral interpretive verses (*mo bshad*) which can vary greatly between individual diviners. Yet, both differ from scapulimancy in being more easily repeatable—the same question can immediately be addressed multiple times—and yield only a single result for each casting. Moreover, scapulimancers must take account—often with difficulty—of additional variables so as to arrive at a prognostic: interpreting crack positions relative to perceived boundaries between and within divination areas and bone features; deciding origin point and direction of development of cracking; seeing very fine cracks on strongly discoloured or distorted bone, etc. These particularities appear to emphasise trust in a diviner's personal skill over other explanations of efficacy and/or agency (see below). Here I will draw attention to only two aspects of my data on Byang thang scapulimancy, namely, differentiation of the divination field and notions of efficacy/agency, since these are both of wider comparative interest for studies of prognostication in general.

Every consultant created a similar divination field upon the lateral face of the scapula, each with some variation of the division into 'one's own area' (*rang sa*) as opposed to an 'area of enemies' (*dgra sa*) or 'area of others' (*gzhan sa*). This fundamental opposition in the divination field and prognostics between 'one's own' (*rang*) and 'enemies' (*dgra*) already occurs in various ancient divination systems recorded in Old Tibetan language,[39] and has continued in both written and colloquial Tibetan sources over centuries.[40] It is also expressed in various ways throughout all the ethnographic and historical data discussed in parts 4-6 to follow. My Byang thang consultants regarded this clear *rang* versus *dgra*/*gzhan* division of the field as the basis for why a scapula was indeed the most appropriate divination object to address their three primary and historically enduring concerns and vulnerabilities: food security, conflict, and crime. The pastoralists' low density population settled in small, scattered tentholds across a vast and geographically remote region where human subsistence is ecologically marginal

[38] *Ril bu* used by Byang thang pastoralist diviners are usually dried black pellets (*ril nag*) of sheep and goat dung, or small round stones.

[39] For Old Tibetan examples invoking *dgra*, *dgra phy[w]a/bya* and *rang* and *dgra*, see Nishida 2011 on coin divination, Nishida 2016 on scapulimancy, and Dotson, Cook, and Zhao Lu 2021 on dice divination.

[40] For historical examples of the recurring categories *dgra phywa* and *dgra sa* in Classical Tibetan dice and pebble divination manuals, see 'Bri gung lama dKon mchog 'phrin las bzang po 1992, Namkhai Norbu 1995: 27, Smith 2021: 132, 135, 149.

experienced these three concerns through the need for subsistence hunting,[41] disputes that escalated into violence, and occurrence of thieves or bandits. A unique regional feature of the time-honoured *rang* versus *dgra/gzhan* division is that the principal large wild animal species hunted by northwestern Byang thang pastoralists are frequently conceptually equated with, and sometimes referred to as 'enemies.'[42] Thus, alongside those human opponents one might feud with, or who might come to steal one's livestock, wild game fits neatly into the opposite 'enemy' side of the twofold division. When dealing with enemies, just as when going hunting, access to information is always crucial: ideally, one needs to be able to locate those to be opposed in advance, assess when and how best to engage with them, and gain indications of whether one will prevail against them. This functional allocation of scapulimancy to the three primary concerns also informs the gendered division of prognostication techniques. The topics of hunting, conflict, and theft for which scapula divination is deemed so efficacious are exclusively the domain of male pastoralists in Byang thang societies since each involves—at least potentially in the case of theft—use of weapons, organised violence, and ultimately bloodshed and death, a domain women are normally strictly excluded from participating in. It is no surprise that, to date, there are no records known to me from the Tibetan Plateau of women divining with a scapula.[43]

Another noteworthy result in my data was how local scapulimancers attributed meaningfulness to the divination process and its random elements. With the single exception of Bu chung tshe dbang's simple preparatory 'rites' and invocation of non-human beings as a possible—albeit vague—source of support for his divination process, the remaining fourteen diviners performed no rites of any kind—and here I am assuming selection criteria and cleaning procedure for the appropriate bone merely represent non-redundant, customary technical steps to ensure consistency. Likewise, none among those fourteen referred to gods and spirits in any way during their practice, even when specifically questioned on this point. This deviates significantly from the vast majority of Tibetan divinatory practices reported both ethnographically and from indigenous historical documents, which almost invariably assign agency to non-human beings, to the 'will' of

[41] Cf. Ekvall 1964: 264, who lived nearly a decade among pastoralists of the northeastern Tibetan Plateau and spoke their dialect fluently: "The use of this form of divination [i.e., scapulimancy] is much practiced by hunters and is frequently resorted to during the butchering season in the late fall."

[42] Huber 2012: 210-211.

[43] Cf. Gerke 2012: 28, 100-104, 208-213 for ethnographic examples of the high prevalence of women diviners using other divination methods in a Tibetan community.

gods and spirits, whether those be identified as purely local entities or high-ranking Buddhist tantric tutelaries.[44] My consultants accepted the existence of many intangible gods and spirits dwelling in the world all around them, and could articulately invoke them in certain other contexts, including when going hunting, and all of them self-identified as Buddhist. Like the only other observer who has recorded such an exception in Tibetan divination practice, I am unable to explain it directly from the data.[45] I will note in passing that, in the face of centuries of precarity, the pastoralists' ethos has become one of strong self-reliance, and trust in the skills handed down from one's ancestors. Moreover, we know they placed trust in the skillful execution of other randomising systems that likewise assign no agency to gods and spirits.[46]

4. Historical scapulimancy among Mongol-descended pastoralists of A mdo

Ethnolinguistic traces of the centuries-long presence of Mongol settlers and their descendants across the Tibetan Plateau are by no means uncommon,[47] including several traditions of scapulimancy. A short, undated and uniquely illustrated manual composed in Classical Tibetan verse describes scapulimancy among Mongol-descended populations on the northeastern Tibetan Plateau during the mid-eighteenth century.[48] This text—which I refer to for convenience as *The Oirat Manual*—has been previously discussed,[49] however it is worth

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[44] For diverse examples, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: chapt. 23, dKon mchog 'phrin las bzang po 1992, Dorjee Tseten 1995, Gerke 2012: 210, Dotson, Cook, and Zhao Lu 2021, while Nishida 2016 shows that scapulimancy as preserved in Old Tibetan inscriptions was strongly oriented around local gods and spirits.

[45] See the discussion and questions in Ramble 1993: 296-298.

[46] See Huber 2019: 11-14 on a randomised system for sharing game meat following a successful hunt.

[47] For different examples, see LaRocca 2006, lDan lhun Tshe ring g.yang 'dzom 2007, sKal bzang dar rgyas 2007, and Huber 2019: 8-10, 17.

[48] *O'u rod phyogs su dar ba'i lug gi sog pa la blta ba'i mo phywa sgyu ma'i lung ston bzhugs so*. The partially illegible xylograph *Sum pa 1*, with illustrations but no final author attribution, is the eleventh (Da) text (labelled *mo* on the left margin) in volume 7 (Ja) of Sum pa mkhan po's *gSung 'bum*. The fully legible manuscript *Sum pa 2*, lacking illustrations but with the final wording *sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor bas sbyar ba'o* (f. 4b, 2-3), occurs as the sixteenth separate text in a larger collection of unrelated, miscellaneous works on Tibetan Buddhist ritual, most likely hand-copied in Mongolia from the original Tibetan *gSung 'bum*.

[49] Dorjee Tseten 1995 included an unacknowledged paraphrase of sections from *Sum pa 1*, and defined it as a "Tibetan" form of divination rather than the Oirat Mongol practice that *Sum pa 1* explicitly stated it records (see my note 50). At the time of writing, I have not seen Eric Mortensen's 2001 research on *Sum pa 1* which was

presenting it once again here in a more complete and accessible context, and to serve as a comparative reference for the following two sources analysed in parts 5 and 6.

The Oirat Manual was authored by the reincarnate lama and clerical scholar Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704-1788), who is commonly known as Sum pa mkhan po. The title wording and internal content of the work, as well as Sum pa mkhan po's own genealogy, leave no doubt he intentionally recorded the method of scapulimancy used during his lifetime by descendants of the Oirat tribal confederation of western Mongols who had settled as pastoralists on the A mdo grasslands of the northeast Tibetan Plateau.[50] Sum pa mkhan po was himself born into a princely Oirat family whose ancestors arrived in the Kokonor (mTsho sNgon po) region of A mdo during the mid-seventeenth century. His father was an Oirat from the Batud clan among the descendants of Gushri Khan, while his mother belonged to the Dzungar,[51] which was another major component of the Oirat confederation. As a young child he entered the Tibetan Buddhist monastic system of the dGe lugs pa school, and within which he spent the remainder of his life as a high-ranking cleric and respected scholar.

Sum pa mkhan po's scapulimancy manual stands out as a small oddity among the more than 65 individual texts comprising his substantial *Collected Works* (*gSung 'bum*), the vast majority of which cover topics typical of Tibetan Buddhist clerical scholars of his era.[52] Why did he compose *The Oirat Manual*, especially investing in drawing scapulae and inscribing over one hundred specific signs upon them? One obvious reason is that it reflected his native Oirat Mongol identity and his personal investment in it.[53] It may also have been the case that he was reacting against earlier campaigns by zealous Buddhist lamas in Mongol lands to the north who attempted to demonise and prohibit indigenous non-Buddhist ritual specialists and their practices which

published in Chinese as reported by Erdenibayar 2007: 312: "Zangxue Buzhan: zhanbu de bijiao yanjiu", *Zhongguo Zangxue*, 3, pp. 26-33.

50 The title page of *Sum pa 1*: f. 1a describes the divination as that "spread in the Oirat region" (*O'u rod phyogs su dar ba'i*), while f. 1b, 3 cites it as "scapulimancy of the Oirat Mongol method" (*sog po O'u rod lugs sog mo*).

51 See Garri, Yumzhana Zhabon, Hortsang Jigme 2024: 257-258, cf. also de Jong 1967, Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 3-10, and Kim 2013 on his life and works.

52 Garri, Yumzhana Zhabon, and Hortsang Jigme 2024: 266, 268 most recently claimed the blocks for the *gSung 'bum* were originally carved at the monastery of "Chugo Serpo" or "Chumig Serpo" in A mdo, while earlier writers identified the site as either dGon lung (e.g., Erdenibayar 2007: 308), Bla brang or Wu su to; de Jong 1967: 210-211.

53 According to Garri, Yumzhana Zhabon and Hortsang Jigme 2024: 270, he was "a devoted follower of the Geluk school and a representative of the Oirat-Mongolian community," while Erdenibayar 2007: 310 described him as "very interested in the customs of his people, the Oirat Mongols."

included scapulimancy.[54] However, of most significance is the fact that the structure and content of the text strongly suggest Sum pa mkhan po was himself a professional—and perhaps the first—'Tibetan Buddhist scapulimancer' serving lay clients and their mundane concerns. Tibetan lamas, but especially reincarnations who are often perceived to have attained certain powers due to their status as embodiments of enlightened beings, have for centuries been called upon by the laity and fellow clerics alike to provide divinations. By the time of Sum pa mkhan po's era, various lamas had also written practical divination manuals describing different techniques. We know Sum pa mkhan po wrote at least five works on medicine, and that he is reported to have been a practicing physician.[55] Since *The Oirat Manual* does include two illustrations of burnt and cracked scapulae with inscribed interpretations that are titled 'divinations of illness' (see below), it is very likely he used scapulimancy among his methods of medical diagnosis. One can well imagine that his Mongol-descended followers living in Tibetan Plateau regions and other clients from Mongol lands he visited to the north, whose popular cultural background already featured a very long history of scapulimancy, might have expected him to be a skilled exponent of that form of divination who could provide them with efficacious information or diagnoses, and even requested it.

The Oirat Manual begins with a few Buddhist-oriented verses and introductory remarks, plus a note on origins (translated above in part 1), and ends with general qualifications concerning uses of scapulimancy. Here I will only deal with the actual methodology section forming the central body of the work. The brevity of the text in parts gives it the character of an aide-memoire, even implying it be used with an oral commentary. This, and other features of the two surviving versions, mean precise translation is often elusive, and my rendition of sections to follow should be regarded as preliminary only.

The first point of Sum pa mkhan po's method defined the appropriate scapula for divination:

> Concerning the sheep's scapula which is to be examined like that: it cannot be one [from an animal] that died due to misfortune [i.e., accident/illness], or one killed by carnivores; pure and good ones [are from slaughtered animals]. It needs to

[54] Heissig 1953: esp. p. 508.

[55] His medical and astrological works were included in volume 7 of his *gSung 'bum* together with *Sum pa 1*. On his medical knowledge and practice, see Erdenibayar 2007: 309-310.

> be completely fresh, and it must not be smeared with clotted blood and grease, and without a lot of fat.[56]

The text goes on to describe the five types of colourings of a donor sheep's fleece, with a white one (*dkar po lug mdog*) being considered the ideal to obtain scapulae from. It also indexes the shapes of scapulae to herds of different sizes that an animal's owner may possess, with bones of broad form (*yangs rgyas*) being the best.[57] Here Sum pa mkhan po never mentions from which side of the sheep's body an ideal divination scapula must be obtained. However, it is obvious from his eight scapula illustrations at the end of the text that bones from both the right and left shoulders could be used, albeit that only the lateral sides featuring the long spine are read for signs.[58]

Then follows the preparation of the bone itself:

> In order to examine [the scapula], wash it with milk and hot water. Take hold of it with the right hand. The mirror is brought in contact with the mouth. The *Ye dharma* [i.e., *Pratītyasamutpāda-dhāraṇī*] is recited seven times so as not to erase the truth of whatever meaning clearly appears. Burn [the scapula] in the fire. Newly [arrived] persons are to be kept away.[59]

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[56] *De lta'i lta bya''i lug gi sog pa ni // god shi gcan zan gyis bsad min gtsang bzang // gsar ba tshad ma dgos shing de la yang // smug la snum can dgang la snum cher med //*; *Sum pa 1*: f. 1b, 4, *Sum pa 2*; f. 2b, 2-4, and see my note 57.

[57] See *Sum pa 1*: f. 1b, 4-5, *Sum pa 2*; f. 2b, 4-5-3a, 1. A series of obscure marginalia in this section violate the author's otherwise strict nine syllable metre used throughout the main methodology section, while their intended points of insertion are unclear on both the xylograph *Sum pa 1* and manuscript *Sum pa 2*. They appear to be additions by a later editor, thus I do not attempt to translate these lines although their general content is clear.

[58] See *Sum pa 1*: f. 2b-4a. The first pair (*Sum pa 1*: f. 2b) of the eight illustrations appear to be the only anatomically realistic ones, horizontally depicting the lateral sides of right-hand scapulae, with both the acromion and coracoid processes at the top and the glenoid cavity to the far right (e.g., see Figure 6). The second pair (*Sum pa 1*: f. 3a) are confusing because their acromions and coracoids point in opposite directions, which I can only understand as left hand scapulae depicted upside down with a distortion in perspective added to better display the supraspinous fossa as an open surface. The third and fourth pairs (*Sum pa 1*: f. 3b-4a) apparently show left hand scapulae depicted upside down displaying the infraspinous fossa.

[59] *De la blta ched chu dkar gyis bkrus bdug / lag g.yas kyis bzung me long kha la sbyar // ye dharma bdun bzlas don gang gsal 'char ba'i // bden bdar du med mer bsreg mi gsar 'gog /*; *Sum pa 1*: f. 1b, 5-6, *Sum pa 2*: f. 3a, 1-3. My reading of *mi gsar 'gog* depends upon parallel instructions in Bawden 1958: 19 and dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 33 (see note 91 below).

Sum pa mkhan po made it clear that, immediately upon the scapula being burnt, manifestations of the first signs could begin to appear. In addition to formation of cracks, the initial listing of indications and their meanings concern a whole range of physical transformations of the burnt bone:

> At the time it is [burnt], a rumbling sound being emitted indicates demons and their retinue. A crackling sound [indicates] danger will arise for family members and quarrels will be likely. If the nose of the outer face [i.e., the acromiun] immediately falls off, become freed [from troubles] by means of a rite. If one's own area protrudes [lit. is 'high'] it is positive, if collapsed then examine the hearth for pollution. If the shoulder [i.e., the coricoid?] of one's own side breaks, one's own power will be weakened in that year. If the upper part of the handle of the enemy side breaks, the enemy will decline, it is positive. [If] the neck of one's own side breaks, mistakes and regrets will arise in that year. [If] the neck of the outsider's side breaks, one will be unharmed by enemies and demons. [If] the mouth of the pan of the handle [i.e., the glenoid cavity] is hollow, one's wealth will dissipate. If it is bulging[60] from boiling, one's food and livestock will increase. If white in colour, it is positive. If what flows out from the mouth is ash-grey, it is negative. When blue or red, the wind will rise. If black, it will rain. If yellow, it will be warm.[61]

By invoking 'one's own area/side' (*rang sa, rang phyogs, rang ngos*) and the 'enemy side' (*dgra ngo*) here, Sum pa mkhan po already begun defining the ontological distribution of the lateral surface of the scapula. In the next section, he extended that differentiation to every part of the surface (see Figures 5-6), provided broad interpretations of the cracks formed in those areas, and especially recommends a range of remedial rites typical of Tibetan Buddhist ritual culture to address the most negative of the signs:

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[60] Presumably referring to blood and marrow being forced out of the bone when heated; *gang* lit. 'full', but also 'heaped' (Jäschke 1881: 66 *gang ba* 2.).

[61] *De'i tshe chem chem sgra byung gdon 'khor ltas // tsag tsag nang mir 'tshe 'ong kha mchu'i ngo // sna gdong phyir lhung myur na rim gros grol // rang sa mtho bzang rdib na thab mnol brtag / rang phyogs dpung chag lo der rang stobs dman // dgra ngo'i yu stod chag na dgra nyams legs // rang ngos ske chag lo der nongs 'gyod 'ong // phyi ngos ske chag dgra gdon gyis mi tshugs // yu ba'i sla nga'i kha zho* [read: *zhong*] *nor rdzas 'chor // khol nas gang na zas nor rgyas 'gyur ro // kha dog dkar legs kha 'bab thal skya ngan //sngo dmar rlung ldang nag char ser na dro //*; *Sum pa 1*: f. 1b, 6-2a, 2, *Sum pa 2*: f. 3a, 3-3b, 1.

Now, the many systems of explanation for the patterns which are to be examined [on the heated bone] create an experience of confusion. If the main points are summarised, [they are these]: The central cleft[62] [i.e., scapula spine] is called the 'great path.' The sides of the face [above and below][63] are called [respectively] the 'warm, inner area of home' [i.e., the supraspinous fossa], and the 'cold, outer area beyond [home]' [i.e., the infraspinous fossa]. On these there are five areas, called [as follows]: the tip of the face [i.e., the acromion] is the 'area of protection'; straight ahead [of that] the edge of the face is the 'area of *lha*'; the right and left tips [of the scapula's broad end] are [respectively] the 'area of *klu*', and the 'area of enemies'; the tip of the handle [i.e., the coricoid] is the 'area of the deceased.' The centre is [the area of] the polity, in which are five sections in sequence from top to bottom, divided into the area of the king, the lords, the ministers, one's own area and that of the servants. These five are appropriately connected with the [life stages]—old, middle aged, and young—of those in one's own household. In general, in whatever area there is a white line, that is positive. A black one is negative. A white one is good fortune. A white and black one is ambiguous, of middling [fortune]. [As for] the different sections, a white line in the area of protection [means] highest protection by the guardian deities. A black one [means] perform ablutions for the *lha*, and please them by offering butter lamps. In the same way, whichever of those particular areas [e.g., of *lha, klu*, enemies, deceased] has white [lines], then things are faultless. Black ones [mean] it is necessary to perform rites appropriate to one's own [circumstances], and a black one in the [area] of *lha* [requires] fulfilment and confession [rites], fumigation offerings, and the hoisting of prayer flags. A black one in the [area] of *klu* [requires] offerings to springs and lakes, and dispatch of a scattered offering for *klu*. A black one in the [area] of enemies [requires] multiple *gDugs dkar* and *Shes rab snying po* repulsion rites,[64] and suppression of quarrels. A black line in the area of the deceased [means] devoting oneself to rites for increasing

[62] Rather than literally 'crack,' I assume *gas* here refers to the line of the scapula spine which forms the 'cleft' or 'split' between the bone's main right hand and left hand surfaces mentioned in the following sentence.

[63] 'Above and below' indicates respectively the smaller and larger surfaces either side of the scapula spine in the horizontal depiction of scapulae in the eight illustrations; see my note 58.

[64] Representing two from a collective of three Tibetan Buddhist rites of repulsion (*bzlog pa*) based upon the deities gDugs dkar, Shes rab snying po, and mKha' 'gro ma Seng ge'i gdong pa can; see *BGT*: 1346.



Fig. 5 – The scapula's divinatory field according to Sum pa mkhan po (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

life and averting death. When one examines the [five] areas of the king, the lords, and so forth, and connects them with one's own family, whatever the consideration, white patterns are positive, while black [means] obstructive demons. A transverse split [across these areas means] impending illness, and a vertical [split means] the likelihood of thieves and bandits. If a split obstructs [any] line, whatever purpose one has will be greatly delayed in the future.[65]

[65] *De nas ri mo lta bar bya ba la // bshad lugs mang rnyog myong grub mdor dril na // gzhung gas lam chen zhes grags gdong gi ngos // gnyen phyogs nang dro phar phyogs phyi grang grags // de la sa lnga gdong gi sne skyabs sa // kha khyer gdong thad lha sa g.yas g.yon sne // klu sa dgra sa yu sne gshin sa zer // dbus gzhung cha lngar rim par stod nas mar // rgyal dpon blon po rang sa bran sa 'byed // de lnga rang nang che 'bring chung sbyar rung // spyir na gang sar lam dkar legs // nag ngan dkar shis dkar nag mi mngon 'bring // bye brag skyabs sa'i lam dkar mgon skyabs mtho // nag na lha khrus snyan zhal sgron mes mchod //*

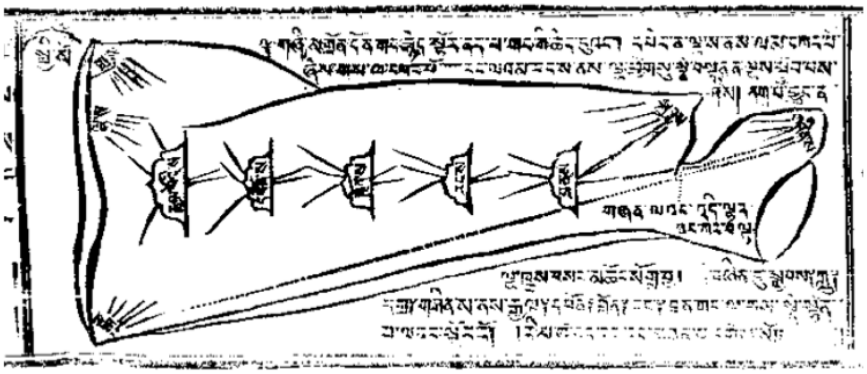


Fig. 6 – Original xylograph of the scapula's divinatory field according to Sum pa mkhan po (source: Sum pa 1*: f. 2b).*

At this point in the text the section on actual methodology and general interpretation of cracks and changes in scapulae comes to a close. One can note that, more than any other source, this author frequently applies terminology from the body (e.g., face, nose, mouth, neck, shoulder) and mundane sphere (e.g., home, polity) to designate specific features of the scapula. Following the text's final words, we find Sum pa mkhan po's eight inscribed drawings of heated and cracked scapulae. These are printed two per folio side within bordered panels. The first pair are titled 'general divinations' (*spyi mo*), the initial panel of which lays out his differentiation of the divinatory field across the entire bone (Figures 5-6). The second pair are titled 'divinations about guests/ travellers' (*mgron mo*), the third 'divinations of illness' (*nad mo*), and fourth 'divinations for specific purposes' (*don ched mo*). Together, these eight illustrations provide over one hundred precise divinatory readings of specific cracks forming various patterns, or running in different directions, across all surfaces and parts of the lateral scapula. To give some examples: on the first of the paired drawings representing 'divinations of illness', a single straight crack at a point near the bottom of the scapula spine on one's own side (i.e., depicted as the upper part of the lateral surface), and running parallel to the spine, has the inscription "if you search for a physician, you are going to find one; improvement [in the condition];"[66] and on the first drawing representing

de bzhin gang dkar de de'i phyogs skyon bral // nag na rang mthun rim 'gro sgrub dgos te // lha'i nag bskang bshags gsang mchod dar cog 'phyar // klu'i nag chu mig mtsho mchod klu gtor gtong // dgra'i nag gdugs sher bzlog mang kha mchu gnon // gshin sa'i lam nag tshe sgrub 'chi blur 'bad // rgyal dpon sogs sa rang nang sbyar lta ba'i // gang thad ri mo dkar legs nag bgegs gdon // phred gas nad 'ong thad ka rkun jag ngo // lam bkag gas na don gang phyi dal che //; Sum pa 1: f. 2a, 2-6; *Sum pa 2*: f. 3b, 1-4a, 4.

[66] *sMan pa 'tshol na rnyed 'ong phan /; Sum pa 1*: f. 3b (left-hand panel).

'divinations for specific purposes', two cracks diverge 45 degrees from each other in exactly the same place as the aforementioned example, with the inscription for the upper crack reading "other people act as helpful friends", while that for the lower crack reads "one's own people act as helpful friends."[67] Unfortunately, the only surviving, illustrated xylograph of *The Oirat Manual* is a very poor quality printing. The texts of many inscriptions upon the drawings within the eight panels are either completely illegible or difficult to decipher with certainty, and cannot yet be dealt with in full in this preliminary study.

Several other contemporary and later sources recording the practice of scapulimancy among both Mongol-descended communities in A mdo and western Mongol communities of the Altai generally accord with much content in the text and drawings of *The Oirat Manual*. During an extensive tour of western A mdo in 1889, the American diplomat William Rockhill (1854-1914) recorded scapulimancy as practiced by pastoralists with Mongolian ancestors who spoke both Mongol and Tibetan, and who kept sheep, camels and horses.[68] For example, Rockhill described his travel guide and main informant Dowé—who was the steward of a tribal chief, the "Tsa'idam Dsassak"—seated at the fire after an evening meal:

> [T]he Mongol Dowé pulled out of his saddle-bag a sheep's shoulder blade, and, after reciting a short prayer over it, put it in the embers. Here it remained till thoroughly charred, when it was carefully removed, and we all crowed around to hear what was in store for us on the morrow. He examined closely the cracks made in the bone by the fire: the longitudinal ones represented our journey, the transversal ones what was to befall us; one side of the bone was reserved for our animals, one for ourselves. Then by the colour of the bone, he foretold the weather.[69]

The German traveller Albert Tafel (1876-1935) witnessed identical use of scapulimancy in the same region during 1906.[70] Rockhill, whom we know was a methodical and reliable observer with a good knowledge of spoken Tibetan,[71] also compared what he had learnt in the field in A mdo with an earlier illustrated text detailing western Mongol pyro-scapulimancy using sheep scapulae as practiced in the Altai Moun-

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[67] *gZhan mas mthun grogs byed* /; *rang mis mthun grogs byed* /; *Sum pa 1*: f. 4a (left-hand panel).
[68] See Rockhill 1891: 80, 166, 176 n. 2, 177, 341-344.
[69] Rockhill 1891: 176.
[70] Tafel 1914, I: 284, 287.
[71] See especially Rockhill 1895, cf. Wimmel 2003.

tains. That earlier documentation had been made by the Prussian naturalist Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811) during his expedition of 1772. His report *Sammlungen historischer Nachrichten über die mongolischen Völkerschaften* (1776-1801) included his notes from observing and questioning an experienced scapulimancer, as well as a series of drawings of the cracked scapulae used, together with an indexed listing of the related interpretations and the (Oirat?) Mongol expressions for them.[72] It is significant that we can find equivalents—minus any references to Buddhism—for nearly all of those interpretations recorded by Pallas among the many Tibetan inscriptions upon Sum pa mkhan po's own drawings of divination scapulae. There is, however, a notable exception: while the Altai divinations mention an interpretation for hunting game animals that matches some in the Byang thang data I collected, that topic was completely avoided by Sum pa mkhan po, no doubt because hunting involves an intentional taking of life that contradicts formal Buddhist moral precepts. Rockhill's comparison with the Altai data from Pallas led him to conclude that [my emphasis added]:

> Pallas's "Nachrichten," II, p. 350, *agrees exactly with what information I have been able to obtain on the subject*, it being only necessary to remark that the interpretation of the cracks in the bone varies according to the object in view or the undertaking in hand, and is not confined to the words given in the text.[73]

We also know that a close translation of *The Oirat Manual* into Mongolian script continued to be used as a guide for scapulimancy by other regional Mongol populations living just north of the Tibetan Plateau well into the mid-twentieth century.[74] That later textual descendant of Sum pa mkhan po's manual also maintained and expanded upon the Buddhist contextualisation he had uniquely bequeathed to scapulimancy.

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72 See Pallas 1776-1801, II: 350-354, and "Platte 20" at the beginning of the volume.

73 Rockhill 1891: 341.

74 One of two illustrated Mongol manuals for scapulimancy from the Grønbech Collection (Copenhagen) which were used by diviners in Inner Mongolia during the 1930s, and studied by Bawden 1958, is closely derived from Sum pa mkhan po's text *Sum pa 1*. Its colophon states: "I have written this "Examination of the Sheep's Shoulder-blade" taking the compositions of Sumba Gambo as the core, and have made clear that which had to be added in"; Bawden 1958: 30, who was unaware of the Classical Tibetan source at the time.

5. Scapulimancy among Southern A mdo pastoralists

Later descendants of Sum pa mkhan po's original Oirat Mongol ancestors spread south of the Kokonor region and settled as pastoralists on the grasslands within and to the east of the big bend of the rMa Chu or Yellow River in southern A mdo, in the region known historically as sDo smad and later as rMa lho.[75] Depending upon the period and source one consults, over time these settlers have recognised themselves variously as 'banner divisions' (*mda'*)[76] which relates to Mongol social organisation, and as *tsho ba*, a more common A mdo Tibetan unit of social organisation.[77] The Mongol-descended groups maintained aspects of their ancestor's social and cultural features, as well as some Mongol dialects or at least vocabulary, but also selectively assimilated themselves into their Tibetan surroundings, while some of their Tibetan neighbours became politically and socially aligned with them as well.[78] Scapulimancy was one ancestral cultural practice that persisted into recent times among Mongol-descended or -aligned pastoralists in rMa lho, and we know that some of their immediate Tibetan pastoralist neighbours also commonly divined with scapula during the twentieth century.[79]

An account of scapulimancy as recently practiced by the Mongol-descended mDa' tshan ho zhod pastoralists of rMa lho was recorded by members of that community around 2005, and published in Tibetan language during 2009.[80] The text is based upon a colloquial oral narration, including some Mongolian vocabulary, and presents certain

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[75] On migration and resettlement of A mdo lineages descended from Gushri Khan (1592-1654), see lCe nag tshang Hum chen 2007: 240-241, Ricard 1994: 565-568, Table 3, Rock 1956: 47-58, cf. Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 27, 53 on descendants of the lineage settled "on the right side of the rMa chu" in the 1780s.

[76] Tibetan *mda'* translates Mongolian *sumun* ('arrow') referring to the administrative divisions within a Banner under the authority of a hereditary chief; see Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 96 n. 259.

[77] See the six-volume compendium by dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, which deals with the social and cultural history of six Mongol-descended or politically affiliated *tsho ba* of rMa lho successively: Su rug che chung (vol. 1), Be si che chung (2), Kha gsum tsho hor (3), gTsang A rig (4), mDa' tshan ho zhod (5), Thu med thor god (6). See Langelaar 2017 on the difficulty of translating *tsho ba*, and the wisdom of understanding A mdo *tsho ba* "membership as processual and performative in nature."

[78] See, for example, Wallenböck 2017 on the gTsang A rig.

[79] See Ekvall 1964: 264 on scapulimancy among the pastoralists around sTag tshang lha mo further east, and Clark 1955: 188 on its use by "lamas" at a mGo log camp north of A mnye rma chen further west.

[80] See *Sog mo dang gu shir rgyug mo* in dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, vol. 5: 30-34. The account of *sog mo* is ordered into 8 short sections across which related information is sometimes scattered, and which I translate and paraphrase here in the order of my own choosing.

obscure usages. Thus, my translations and paraphrases below are to be regarded as preliminary only. The details the account contains are intrinsically valuable for comparison with the methods used by modern Byang thang pastoralists and in *The Oirat Manual* of Sum pa mkhan po. However, of most interest is that the entirely quotidian scapulimancy used by such Mongol-descended rMa lho pastoralists recently became appropriated for a newly invented g.Yung drung Bon form of scapulimancy to be discussed in part 6.

The mDa' tshan ho zhod account begins: "Until now, the people of this area frequently performed scapulimancy for all sorts of matters, including trade, occurrences of theft, serious illness, and loss of things." [81] In addition, the fortunes of one's livestock—specifically horses and sheep—and the relative happiness (*dga' ngo*) or hostile challenges (*nag lang*) that one's own community may experience are the recurrent concerns in the actual interpretations that are cited. The account details a pragmatic lay person's practice among the mDa' tshan ho zhod, with no specialist diviners required, and no ritual procedures involved. There is only one minor exception to the latter point; an initial invocation in colloquial speech simply acknowledging the agency behind the apparently random cracks produced by burning a scapula:

> In general, following the burning of the scapula, concerning those patterns which manifest upon the scapula's top surface, it is explained they are written by the wisdom deities. When they make those symbols, one says: "Because I, a black-headed [human], am ignorant, this is an inquiry for you, wisdom deities. Please, reveal things clearly to me![82]

There is repeated emphasis in the text that one's own practical experience, and even inner feelings, are essential aspects to be relied upon for analysing and interpreting signs from the burnt scapula's three zones of significance, namely, the so-called 'idea/plan' (*blo*) which is the broad blade end of the scapula, the 'way [to proceed]/course [of events]' (*lam*) which is the long side edge of the larger surface (infraspinous fossa), and the '[focal-]point' (*rtse*) along

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81 *sNgon chad sa 'di'i mi rnams kyis dus rgyun tshong las dang / rku byed pa / nad pa ljid mo / bor stor sogs phyogs gang thad la sog mo 'debs kyi yod*; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 30.

82 *sPyir sog pa bsreg rjes sog pa'i steng du bkra ba'i ri mo de dag ni lha ye shes pa rnams kyis bris par bshad de / kho tshos brdar ba byed skabs / nga mgo nag mi shes pa yin pas / lha ye shes khyod la dris pa yin / khyod kyis bdag la gsal bor ston rogs*; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 32.

the apex in the middle area of the spine (see Figure 7).[83] These three zones and the cracks interpreted within them define three dimensions of the overall divination.

As for the ideal bone, "It is not an adult goat's scapula. It is not a goat kid's scapula. It is the right side scapula of a ewe that has lambed."[84] An examination of the sheep scapula's 'raw' qualities prior to burning generally indicates where to look across the divination field for signs about certain concerns and potential outcomes (see Figure 7):

> The white part of the scapula's larger side [i.e., the infraspinous fossa] is examined for [matters related to] the sheep pen. If very bright white, there is increase in sheep heads [i.e., herd size].[85] The smaller side [i.e., the supraspinous fossa] is examined for the area of horses. If the scapula surface for the area of horses has a long edge section, that is explained [as meaning] the best horse will be born. If the finger feels an obstruction on the scapula's edge, the top of which is the [spine's] point, examine there for [matters related to] trade goods. If there is a pointed part at the scapula [spine's] tip [i.e., the acromion] which is further along from that, one will have protection[86] of goods, thus it is positive for trade. If there is a ridge on the cheek of the larger side of [the area for] protection of goods, examine there for the protection of people. This is called 'the handle[87] at the foot of the protection of goods.' Above the handle, straight ahead [to the extent of] a thumb, there is an area set aside called 'having the choice of the best lifespan.'[88] As for the interval a fingernail's measure downwards from the head of the smaller side, it is the area of people, and the interval a thumb's measure [further downwards] is the area of horses.[89]

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83 E.g., dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 32, *sog par dpyad skabs blo lam rtse gsum la dpyad cing gtso bo sog bsreg rang gi lag len las byung ba'i dpyad stangs ni shin tu gal che bar grags*, and p. 33 *mo phug blo phug ldan dgos / blo phug rang la gyes se 'khor na / mo bzang po'i rten 'brel gyi brtag sa zer*.

84 *Ra sog min / re'u sog min / ma mo jo mo'i g.yas sog yin*; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 34.

85 Speculative interpretation, reading *'bud* in the positive senses of *'byin pa* and *'don pa*, see *BGT*: 1970 *'bud pa* 1., and *CDTD 2*: 380 *bud* AT 'to become; to grow; to come out.'

86 *O mag* transcribes Mongol *ømyg* 'guard, protection, shelter'; Lessing *et al*. 1960: 635.

87 *Ba yo* transcribes Mongol *bariul* 'handle'; Lessing *et al*. 1960: 86.

88 Speculative; *zhi li* apparently transcribes Mongol *sili* 'to choose, select or pick out the best'; Lessing *et al*. 1960: 707.

89 *Sog pa'i che phyogs kyi dkar cha de lug lhas la dpyad / dkar gsal che na lug mgor 'bud / chung phyogs rta sa la dpyad / rta sa'i sog 'dabs kyi zur kha ring na rta rab skye bar bshad / rtse yi gong gi sog pa'i zur kha la 'dzub mo thogs na zong zog la dpyad / de'i yan chad kyi sog sne la rtse kha yod na zog gi O mag yod pas zog la bzang / zog gi O mag gi che*

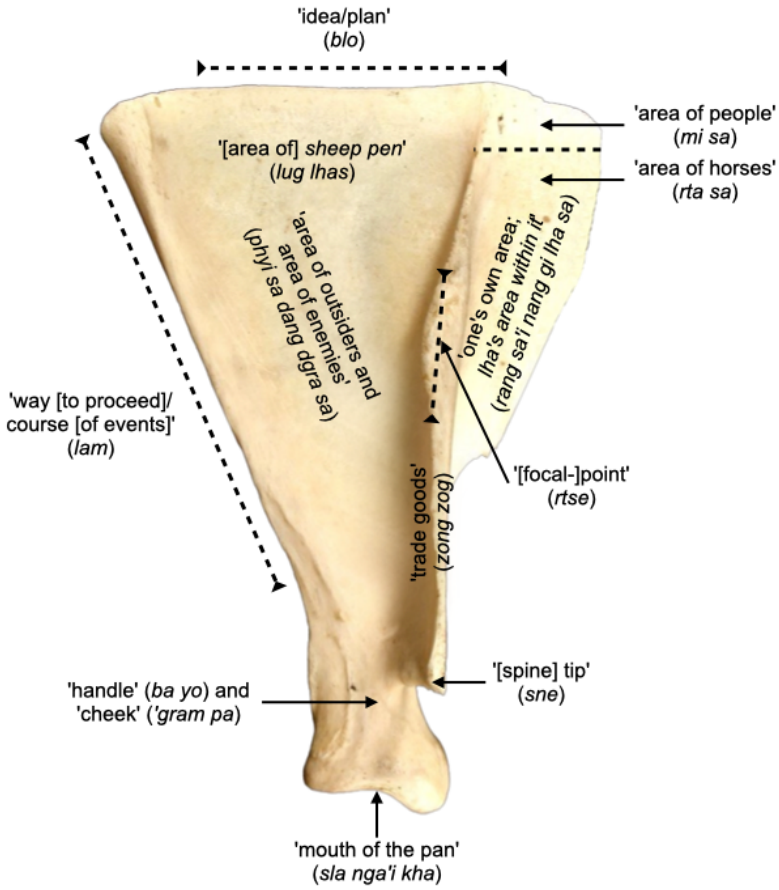


Fig. 7 – The scapula's divinatory field according to mDa' tshan ho zhod (drawing: T. Huber, 2025).

Measurement of different areas across the divination field using finger and thumb units is common throughout the account. Another particularity of mDa' tshan ho zhod scapulimancy is the frequent use of poetic names for specific cracks and interpretations. For example,

> If it cracks once downwards through to the mouth of the pan which is beneath the scapula, it is called the 'twig of gold.' If it cracks twice [there], it is called the 'golden chopsticks side by side.' If it cracks through the smaller side which is the space

phyogs kyi 'gram par sgang yod na mi yi O mag la dpyad / zog gi O mag gi zhabs la ba yo zer / ba yo'i steng du mthe bong thad du 'jog sa yod tshe zhi li yod zer / chung phyogs kyi klad nas thur la sen mo gang gi mtshams ni mi sa dang / mtheb gang gi mtshams ni rta sa yin /; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 31.

> coming out to the point of one's own area, it is called 'golden fish tied together.'[90]

I will refrain from detailing specific interpretations here for they are merely the same types of terse evaluations with occasional prescriptions already given as examples in my parts 3 and 4 above.

It is clear that the divination field defined by the mDa' tshan ho zhod is much closer in terms of its overall complexity to the older Mongol divination field in *The Oirat Manual* than to the basic binary field used by Byang thang pastoralists. While there are various differences in detail between the schemes of both the mDa' tshan ho zhod and *The Oirat Manual*, a range of reference points, such as the areas for protection located at the spine's tip and on the handle, the significance of the axis directly up from the handle for lifespan and life-stages, and the general proximity and overlap of people's and *lha*'s areas, are identical or closely cognate. There are other overlaps between the two never found in Tibetan data. For example, both favour terminology from the body and mundane sphere to designate specific features and areas of the scapula, with common use of specific terms such as 'pan' (*sla nga*) for the glenoid cavity, while both pay attention to sounds made by the burnt scapula, as well as prescribe one part of the method to be undertaken without other people from the community being present.[91] Thus, there is no doubt the mDa' tshan ho zhod have inherited and preserved an originally western Mongol form of scapulimancy from their ancestors.

6. The modern invention of g.Yung drung Bon scapulimancy

A modern manual for scapulimancy titled *The Bright Silver Mirror: Explanation of Scapulimancy Within the Teachings on Divination According to the Bon Portal of the gShen of Prediction Vehicle*[92] (hereafter *The Bright*

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[90] *Sog pa'i kha 'og gi sla nga'i kha nas thur la gcig gas na gser gyi gdab bu zer / gnyis gas na gser gyi thur ma nyis gshib zer / rang sa'i rtser 'bud sa'i chung phyogs nas gas na gser nya sna sbrel zer /*; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 30. Fernand Meyer suggested *thur ma* here may also refer to "styluses, fine surgical instruments used for cataract operations" (email of 20 January 2026), cf. *BGT*: 1177. On the interpretation of *'bud* see my note 85 above.

[91] For example, dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 32 section 5 "How to listen to scapula" (*Sog nyan byed tshul*) states: "after the scapula has been burnt, one needs to ensure that nobody from the neighbouring dwellings and from the encampment knows what you are doing, then position the scapula at the entrance to your ear, which is called 'listening'" (*sog pa bsreg rjes khyim mtshes g.yas g.yon dang ru skor du sus kyang ma tshor ba byas nas song ste / sog pa rna sgor bzhag nas nyan pa la zer /*).

[92] *Phywa gshen theg pa'i bon sgo las bstan pa mo pra'i nang tshan sog mo'i rnam bshad dngul dkar me long*; hereafter *dNgul dkar me long* in notes, referring to the 19 folio *dbu med*

Silver Mirror) was composed by the well-known g.Yung drung Bon teacher bsTan 'dzin rnam dag (1925-2025) sometime before 1985. The 19 folio text is remarkable for a number of reasons discussed below, although here we can note especially that *The Bright Silver Mirror* represents by far the longest and most complex set of recorded instructions for scapula divination known to me from any source across Asia. bsTan 'dzin rnam bdag's colophon for the text clearly outlined the two main aspects of his composition.[93] Firstly, he explained that his description of the actual method of burning and reading cracks on scapulae represented that used by several adjacent populations of pastoralists in the mDo smad or southern A mdo region, especially the Sog po mda' bcu gcig, the dNgul ra lha sde, and the dBal nag khag gsum. He stated his work was compiled to preserve a custom that, during a time of change, while continuing, was becoming rarer, and one for which he had never seen a written manual. He thus gathered oral traditions from persons who actually performed scapulimancy in the aforementioned communities. Prior to his 1985 publication of *The Bright Silver Mirror*, there is no record of bsTan 'dzin rnam dag ever having visited the territories of the specific Sog po, dNgul ra and dBal nag communities he cited as oral sources.[94] We must thus assume that the adult author met and interviewed enough qualified informants—who were, like himself, probably also refugees

manuscript version included in the so-called *bKa' brten* collection published in Lhasa in 1998 by Sog sde sprul sku bsTan pa'i nyi ma. I downloaded and worked with that version catalogued as rKTs-B6872 and Bkt204.7 @ *Bkt Bon gyi bka' brten* (http://www.rkts.org), accessed 10 August 2025; see also *bKa' brten Catalogue*: 1200 for vol. 204, text 7, pp.451-488. The earliest recorded publication date of the text is 1985 in *Collected writings of Slob-dpon Bstan-'dzin-nam-dag on various topics of Bonpo theory & practice* (Dolanji, Distt. Solan, H.P.: Tshultrim Tashi) as the seventh work in the volume. A computer typeset *dbu can* version, with less accurate illustrations and certain emendations, was published during 2005 in *sMan ri'i yongs 'dzin slob dpon bstan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che'i gsung 'bum (The Collected Works of Menri Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche)*, vol. 5 *bZo rig pa'i skor*. Kathmandu: Triten Norbutse Library, pp. 216-234.

93 The colophon reads: *ces pa'i sog mo 'di nyid mdo smad kyi zhing sog po mda' bcu gcig dngul ra lha sde / dbal nag khag gsum sogs su dar khyab ji che yod pa yin yang / 'di lta'i dus kyi 'gyur ba byung tshe 'di'i yig cha mthong yul med cing ming rgyun tsam ma gtogs lag len gyi rgyun yang je dkon du 'gyur ba la yid ma rangs nas ngag rgyun gyis 'di la lag len byed mi rnams nas ngag bgros bsdu bsags gang 'gab byas / spyi khog phywa gshen theg pa'i mdo dang / zhang zhung ju thig sogs kyis phub nas nyung ngu zhig bstan rnam pas bsgrigs pa'o //*; *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 19a, 2-19b, 1 (= pp. 487-488).

94 In 1933, aged 7, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag entered monastic life in his natal area of Khyung po dkar ru in Khams (ca. 700 km from the Sog po, dNgul ra and dBal nag territories), spent the years 1941-1960 in Central Tibet, Nepal, and western Tibet studying, in retreat, on pilgrimage, and teaching, and in 1961 became a refugee in South Asia. He only returned to Tibet once, during 1986, thus after writing and publishing *The Bright Silver Mirror*; bsTan 'dzin rnam dag 2005: i-xi, cf. Ramble 2021.

in South Asia—elsewhere at some point during his life before he composed the text. Secondly, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag tells us he drew upon references from g.Yung drung Bon textual sources, primarily those concerning the Phywa gshen theg pa—as stated in the work's title wording—and the *Zhang zhung ju thig*. I will have more to say on the Phywa gshen theg pa below, while the cited *Zhang zhung ju thig* describes a form of divination using coloured threads or cords (*thig*), and likely refers to the title of a text the author consulted.[95]

Curiously, if one were to read the undated original manuscript of *The Bright Silver Mirror* without its colophon, and did not know the identity of its modern author—who simply signed himself bsTan rnam pa—one could easily mistake the work for a premodern divination manual from some centuries earlier, describing an older g.Yung drung Bon tradition of scapulimancy. However, nothing could be further from the truth in this case.

The main text of *The Bright Silver Mirror* consists of four different sections. Overall, these four sections form a text best described as a somewhat disjointed pastiche. It is a pastiche since the whole is clearly an imitation of older, preexisting g.Yung drung Bon ritual texts, and it is disjointed because bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's attempt to invent a tradition of g.Yung drung Bon scapulimancy had to rely upon combining rather disparate materials. The four sections are as follows:

- Section 1 (7 folio sides): Opening verses and a religious tract on divination strongly based upon citations from g.Yung drung Bon teachings on the Phywa gshen theg pa, without any mention of scapulimancy.

- Section 2 (12 folio sides): Detailed descriptions of a series of standard components for rites (i.e., *rten bca'*, *bgegs bskrad*, *dug phyung*, *tshan khrus*, *bsang bya*, *smrang gyer*, *spyan 'dren, sngags bzla*) typically used for g.Yung drung Bon divinations and other ritual procedures belonging to the Phywa gshen theg pa and sNang gshen theg pa. None of these rite components are specific to scapulimancy, although two minor adaptations were added as preparatory steps for the divination. The first occurs in the 'arranging the support' (*rten bca'*) section, where among the various required materials "the right side scapula of a light

[95] See *bKa' brten Catalogue*: 616, the undated text 068-4 with the margin title of *Zhang zhung ju thig* and with a colophon description of the author as *mdo smad kyi thos chung snyom las pa nam mkha' rgyal mtshan*. The identification by Smith 2021: 67 of this author with the twelfth- to thirteenth century gShen Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, whom Martin 2001: 74-77 describes as being from and active in Central Tibet, appears to contradict the just cited colophon. Over 60 works in the same *bKa' brten* collection are attributed to the common name Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, and their colophons clearly indicate they are not all the same person, with some obviously being modern persons; *bKa' brten Index*: 278.

grey ewe"[96] is listed, although the bone itself does not function as the actual support (*rten*). The second occurs in the 'removal of poison' (*dug phyung*) section, when the nine 'poison [removing] substances' (*dug gi rdzas*) are assembled and "these are placed for a moment atop the *dgra sa* of the scapula,"[97] then, reverting to regular practice, the substances are removed, burnt and dispersed. Somewhat incongruously, throughout the work—and especially in section 3 on methodology—bsTan 'dzin rnam dag never used the term *dgra sa* again, and never explained what specific part of the scapula or divination field it refers to. The term *dgra sa* would certainly have been common knowledge to the author since it occurs often in other g.Yung drung Bon divination systems he was familiar with,[98] and this anomaly resulted because elsewhere he adopted wholesale the definitions of the divination field used by his Mongol-descended informants (see Section 3 below). A wide variety of deities are also invoked here in section 2, but all are those found commonly invoked in other g.Yung drung Bon divination systems, especially in the *ju thig* practice, and none are specific to scapulimancy.[99]

- Section 3 (10 folio sides): A non-religious, illustrated account of a specific method for pyromantic divination with scapulae, including 2 diagrams for orientation and 29 diagrams of burnt scapulae with cracks and distortions, together with their interpretations related to mundane concerns. With but a single obscure exception to be discussed below, for the entirety of his section 3 bsTan 'dzin rnam dag simply repeated the customary method we know of from the Mongol-descended and Mongol-affiliated pastoralists of rMa lho, such as the mDa' tshan ho zhod, some of whom he had once met prior to 1985. There are many examples illustrating this. He used the particular threefold division of *blo, lam* and *rtse* aspects for interpreting divina-

[96] *Lug ma mo gro mo'i sog pa g.yas pa*; *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 5a, 5 (= p. 459).

[97] *'Di rnams sog pa'i dgra sa'i thog tu dal cig bzhag*; *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 6b, 2 (= 462).

[98] E.g., see the Tibetan text of a g.Yung drung Bon *lde'u 'phrul* manual in Smith 2021: 149, and pp. 71-72 on bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's personal familiarity with the tradition; cf. Namkhai Norbu 1995: 27.

[99] There is passing reference here (*dNgul dkar me long*: f. 8b, 3 = p. 466) to the deity Phywa'u [or: Phywa bu] g.yang dkar—commonly invoked in a range of g.Yung drung Bon divination systems and origin myths—and his association with the scapulae/shoulders of his mythical mount the divine sheep lHa ba bal chen; cf. Karmay 1998 [1975]: 142-143, Smith 2021: 144 n. 6. His riding upon the sheep's shoulders, and hence also atop its scapulae, explains the rare g.Yung drung Bon term *sog bal* 'shoulder blade wool' occurring in ritual and mythical texts. Note scapulimancers in Mongol-descended communities in rMa lho use the same narrative motif to explain why the sheep's scapula is used for divination, but substitute a Chinese astrologer as the mythical rider of the sheep; dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, vol. 5: 34.

tions unique to rMa lho diviners like the mDa' tshan ho zhod.[100] Unlike Tibetan scapulimancy, the Mongol-descended practice employs many poetic names for particular signs and interpretations, and bsTan 'dzin rnam dag repeated an array of them here, including some, such as 'hit the saddle head-on' (*sga ru thod thug*), that are the same as those used by the mDa' tshan ho zhod.[101] The rMa lho pastoralists also employ finger and thumb measurements to finely differentiate the divination field, together with life stage or age-indexed signs, neither of which are found in Tibetan scapulimancy, although both are repeated in *The Bright Silver Mirror*.[102] bsTan 'dzin rnam dag also reported signs from the flat, medial/costal side of a scapula,[103] although the medial side is never used for divinations by Tibetans, while we know the rMa lho pastoralists' western Mongol ancestors did use it.[104] Additionally, use of the right side scapula of a ewe prescribed by bsTan 'dzin rnam dag in his section 2 on rites is also, as we saw above, a specific requirement among the mDa' tshan ho zhod, whereas Tibetans scapulimancers do not select scapulae based upon animal gender.

- Section 4 (6 folio sides): A final religious tract consisting almost entirely of quotes from g.Yung drung Bon canonical texts, and closing verses, without any mention of scapulimancy, and lacking any articulation with the previous methodology section.

Any reader with a comprehensive knowledge of Tibetan Plateau scapulimancy is compelled to ask why bsTan 'dzin rnam dag chose to turn modern ethnographic reports of a customary practice used by lay persons for achieving mundane goals into a complex and formal g.Yung drung Bon rite along orthodox lines? The number and degree of mismatches involved in his undertaking cannot be underestimated. For one, all the actual content on scapulimancy in bsTan 'dzin rnam

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[100] For what he termed the *sog mo'i brtag gzhi*, see *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 11a, 5-11b, 3 (= pp. 471-472) and the illustration.

[101] Compare his reading 28: "From there, a crack manifests with two tips: this is called 'hit the saddle head-on'" (*'di nas gas shing sne gnyis lang / 'di la sga ru thod thug zer /*) and his illustration showing a crack in the spine between its 'point' (*rtse*) area and 'tip' (*sne*) (*dNgul dkar me long*: f. 14b, 4-5 = p. 478), with the same indication in dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, 5: 30, *sog pa'i rtse la 'bud sa'i sor gsum gyi mtshams yin na rtse la dpyad / rtser 'bud sa'i man gyi sor gsum gyi mtshams nas bud na snga ri tho* [read: *sga ru thod*] *thug la dpyad /*.

[102] Compare his reading 24: *sne nas mtheb gang yar 'jal ba / mi'i sa yin de la yang / srid pa gsum gyi rgan rabs dang / gzhon pa byis pa'i yin* [...] *de'i steng mtheb gang mdo ba rta'i / sa yin* (*dNgul dkar me long*: f. 14a, 2-4 = p. 477), with the text quoted in my note 89 above.

[103] See "31 [illustration 31 here of the flat, medial side]: If a piece from the rear [side] falls off, this divination is extremely negative" (*so gcig / rgyab nas dum gcig lhung*[*s*] *pa na / mo ni shin tu ngan pa yin /*); *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 15b, 5 = p. 480).

[104] See Rockhill 1891: 341-343, fig, 2, Pallas 1776-1801, II: 350-354, and "Platte 20" at the beginning of the volume.

dag's section 3 concerning methodology has no relationship to anything known from the g.Yung drung Bon religion, while also being specific to the practice known only from ethnographic and historical Mongol-descended or Mongol-affiliated communities in one particular part of eastern Tibet, and is not found in other Tibetan Plateau areas, such as the Byang thang. Those Mongol-descended scapulimancers, such as the mDa' tshan ho zhod, also emphasise the importance of relying upon one's own practical experience and inner feelings while performing this type of divination. That is the absolute antithesis of what bsTan 'dzin rnam dag made out of their method: elaborate religious theories and a pantheon of deities framing a plethora of fixed ritual steps that only a literate g.Yung drung Bon specialist could fully comprehend and accomplish. Another unusual aspect of bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's choice of adapting material from the three rMa lho communities he cited as sources is that since their historical settlement in rMa lho these pastoralists have always been purely Tibetan Buddhist in their religious orientation.[105] Indeed, there are absolutely no recorded traces of g.Yung drung Bon ever having been present across their territories.[106] In the face of these profound mismatches, I can only assume that bsTan 'dzin rnam dag must have been

[105] We know that since the eighteenth century, immediately in the wake of spread and settlement by the Mongol-descended pastoral populations there, the wider region of southern A mdo encompassing the Sog po, dNgul ra and dBal nag territories was subject to extensive missionary activity and monastic foundation by dGe lugs pa lamas, with the main parent monasteries beyond their territories being Bla brang and Rong bo. The vast majority of the pastoralist population were and still are Buddhist followers of the dGe lugs pa, with a minority rNying ma pa presence. For historical citations, see the *Deb ther rgya mtsho* compiled by dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas (1801-1866) over 30 years and completed in 1865: on Sog po mda' bcu gcig pp. 452, 480; on dNgul r[w]a pp. 239, 443, 450, 453, 498; on dBal shul pp. 238-239, 480, 617; cf. *Ming mdzod*: 792 on visits to dBal shul and Sog po mda' bcu gcig during the 1840s by Thar shul dKon mchog rgya mtsho (1790-1858). Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol (1781-1851) was a regular visitor to both Sog po and sBra nag khag gsum at least up until the 1830s; Ricard 1994: xxii, 43, 46 n. 3, 209-210, 479, 487, 491, 504, 506, 536 n. 7. See the modern 6 volume compendium by dKon mchog skyabs, rDo rje tshe brtan, *et al*. 2009, each of which has a section on their purely Buddhist religious history.

[106] Non-Tibetan travelers' accounts never mention any form of Bon present in the region inhabited by the Sog po, dNgul ra and dBal nag, see for examples: d'Ollone 1912: 257-279, who made particular note of "Pon-bo" religious presence in other parts of mDo smad (p. 212); Karmay and Sagant 1998: 230-231, 234, 245 reporting on Sharwa adherents of g.Yung drung Bon passing through the area but not mentioning their religion found anywhere there; also Rock 1956: 47-58, 132, plates XX-XXI, maps 1-2, 4. A comprehensive survey of g.Yung drung Bon across A mdo revealed the territories of the Sog po, dNgul ra and dBal nag had no historical or contemporary presence of monasteries, hermitages, village temples or even lay communities belonging to g.Yung drung Bon; see *Bonpo Monasteries*: 22, 315-317, the nearest being a tiny village temple in rTse khog county.

deeply convinced that what he once heard about scapulimancy from his rMa lho informants represented some continuation of practices from an 'ancient' Tibetan world in which g.Yung drung Bon was the religion to which scapulimancy 'originally' belonged. He certainly wrote *The Bright Silver Mirror* with missionary intent,[107] and there is further evidence in the text and in his other works, not to mention the religious milieu he circulated within, suggesting he did indeed hold such a conviction about scapulimancy.

In order to appreciate what I assume was bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's strong conviction about the existence of an 'ancient' g.Yung drung Bon scapulimancy that could justify his attempt at somehow preserving or 'renewing' it in *The Bright Silver Mirror*, we need to briefly consider the nature of his cited textual authorities, as well as the actual standing of divination using scapulae in g.Yung drung Bon literature and related sources. Let us begin with the single passage of g.Yung drung Bon textual authority directly related to the practice of scapulimancy which is recorded in *The Bright Silver Mirror*. It must first be noted that a reader of *The Bright Silver Mirror* finds no citation of this single passage's original source within the work itself. One only comes across its origins if one happens to be familiar with the entire contents of the voluminous *gZi brjid* hagiography of the g.Yung drung Bon founder gShen rab mi bo, or, with less certainty, by reading bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's detailed commentarial essay titled *Phywa gshen theg pa'i rnam bshad gsal byed me long* (*The Mirror that Clarifies: Explanation of the gShen of Prediction Vehicle*).[108] In section 3 of *The Bright Silver Mirror*, among the 31 illustrated scapulae with written interpretations of cracks and distortions, we find that number 30 forms a glaring exception for several reasons. While most other such inscriptions consist of a few terse sentences, or merely a line or two of text at the most, number 30 is by far the longest, covering 8 lines of literary text. Moreover, rather than describe actual cracks or breaks in a scapula as all the other entries do, the divinatory indicator here is "30: In this manner [referring to the illustration] there are nine spots [upon the scapula]"[109] (see Figure 8). The long interpretation that then follows, and which shares no similarities with any other in the work, is actually a passage quoted verbatim from a story illustrating teachings on karmic cause and effect,

[107] *'Di lta'i mnog chung yig ger 'bri ba la / brnyas yul min te bstan pa'i cha shas phyir / zhing 'dir nub med yun du gnas pa'i ched*; *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 18b, 4-5 (= p. 486).

[108] See bsTan 'dzin rnam dag 2005: 240, where he partly quotes, partly paraphrases a sentence on scapulimancy from the story of king Khri 'od in chapter Thirty of the *gZi brjid* (*sTon pa'i chab srid 'dzin pa'i mdo*) discussed below, albeit incorrectly attributing it to chapter 29 (*Thabs shes sras sprul gyi mdo*) of that work.

[109] *Sum cu 'di ltar* [illustration 30 here] *thig le dgu 'dug pa /*; *dNgul dkar me long*: f. 15a, 2 (= p. 479). *Thig le* can refer to 'sphere', while 'spot' or 'dot' seems most appropriate in context.

and found embedded within chapter Thirty of the *gZi brjid*, which is titled "The *sūtra* of the teacher's assumption of royal power" (*sTon pa'i chab srid 'dzin pa'i mdo*).

For context, here is a brief recapitulation of that story from chapter Thirty of the *gZi brjid*:[110] South of the holy land of 'Ol mo lung ring, there is another land named Khri thang 'byam pa'i gling, and to the west of that is yet another principality named sDe drug gi gling, the king of which is named Khri 'od.[111] This king and his wife dMu 'dza la ma have a child, prince Khri shang, who is seized by a bodily illness for which there is no proper diagnosis or cure, in spite of the divinations (*mo*), rites (*bon*), and medical treatments (*sman dpyad*) performed by various specialists. Then, from among the peoples of the

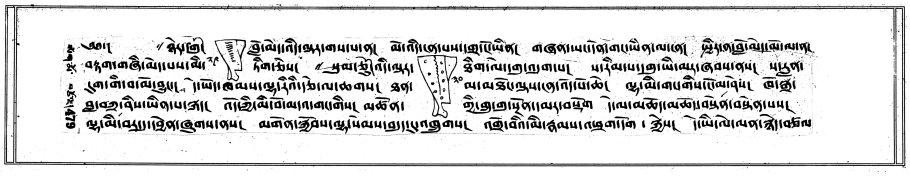


Fig. 8 – bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's illustrated interpretation no. 30 (source: dNgul dkar me long*: f. 15a).*

frontier, a diviner (*mo ma*) named lDing nga lding lom[112] appears, goes before king Khri 'od and performs a divination for the prince's illness, the method for which is described as: "On visual examination of the lHa ba bal chen[113] sheep's scapula, there were nine red spots on the white [bone], and they were analysed by the diviner."[114] Immediately following this, the long prognostic quoted as reading 30 in *The Bright*

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[110] See the *'Dus pa rin po che'i rgyud dri ma med pa gzi brjid rab tu 'bar ba'i mdo las chabs srid 'dzin pa khab kyi dam pa bzhes pa'i mdo @ Bkz bon gyi bka' brten* (http://www.rkts.org/images.php?id=5|Bkz|MW4CZ58532|I4CZ58555|ja2|15a), accessed 18 August 2025.

[111] Apparently here referring to the land of Pra/Khra mo khri 'od reckoned as being to the west of 'Ol mo lung ring by g.Yung drung Bon authorities, and described in line with the *gZi brjid* tale of king Khri 'od cited here as a place "where nine persons who had committed great sins were converted by Lord Shenrab"; see Martin 1999: 271 "Map B", 275, 294, n. 83.

[112] Cf. the *mo ma* lDing nga lding cung in another Bon-identified text; Huber 2020, I: 133.

[113] See my note 99 above on the lHa ba bal chen sheep.

[114] *Lug lha ba bal chen gyi sog pa la / mthong bltas pas / dkar la dmar gyi thig le dgu 'dug ste / de la mo bas dpyad*; note the wording here follows that in *Bkz bon gyi bka' brten* (http://www.rkts.org/images.php?id=5|Bkz|MW4CZ58532|I4CZ58555|ja2|15a), however different editions of the *gZi brjid* contain variant readings of the story, e.g., the preliminary clause *g.yang mo lug gi sog pa la mthong lta zhig byung nas* found in the *Bkz bon gyi bka' brten* edition is missing from several other editions published in India and China.

Silver Mirror is expounded in the *gZi brjid* story, after which it is said of the diviner that he was "unable to differentiate the admixture of virtuous and evil actions and their causal outcomes." Ultimately, gShen rab mi bo is asked to explain the karmic consequences for each of the nine main persons in the story, and he proclaims that the diviner lDing nga lding lom is reborn in the Hell realm where one experiences dying and being revived back to life over and over again.

While devout g.Yung drung Bon followers regard the *gZi brjid* as a true and sacred account of gShen rab mi bo's life and times, it is hard to imagine a more obscure and negative precedent than this vignette from the story of king Khri 'od for justifying scapulimancy as an 'ancient' practice of the g.Yung drung Bon religion. The location of events in the story is on the outermost margins of the holy land of origins, while the benighted 'foreign' diviner comes from the very frontier between barbarism and civilisation itself, and ends up damned to suffer terribly in Hell for performing his scapula divination. Even more striking, the method described is not the pyromantic scapulimancy we know of from the ethnographic, historical and archaeological evidence across Asia, and in which there is no mention of a series of coloured spots as a divinatory indicator upon scapulae—burnt or otherwise. One assumes that bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, being the erudite scholar he was, would have added more g.Yung drung Bon canonical or even extra-canonical materials citing scapulimancy to justify his composition of *The Bright Silver Mirror*. However, such materials appear not to exist, for not only bsTan 'dzin rnam dag, but also his scholarly contemporaries who are deeply versed in the Phywa gshen theg pa and g.Yung drung Bon divination systems, such as Nam mkha'i nor bu (1938-2018), have had no further supporting materials to add on scapulimancy in any of their works. When one consults texts concerning the Phywa gshen theg pa as defined in the *gZi brjid*, as well as the bulk of related premodern g.Yung drung Bon narratives on the origins and classifications of divination forms in the religion, one finds no mention of scapulimancy.[115] When scapulimancy is cited a few times in the premodern g.Yung drung Bon literature, it is merely in single sentence references of peripheral significance, often with a negative connotation, and represented—in line with the *gZi brjid* story—as a technique employed by 'foreigners' from beyond the great g.Yung drung Bon holy places of 'Ol mo lung ring or Zhang zhung.[116]

[115] See Snellgrove 1967: 24-41, Kapstein 2009: 114-115, and especially Smith 2021: chapter 2; cf. Martin 2001: 217-218 for different g.Yung drung Bon sources on *theg pa* schemes.

[116] For example, the undated *Mo khog chen 'phrul gyi rgyal po bshad byang gzhung don mdel mig dang bcas*, f. 3a has gShen rab mi bo assigning different divination types

Moreover, at least one key term occurring in those few citations, namely, *sog[s] dmar*, that has been taken to refer to 'scapulimancy,' remains lexically problematic and of uncertain meaning. However, it may well be that the history of this rare and obscure *sog[s] dmar* term could have reinforced bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's conviction of an 'ancient' g.Yung drung Bon scapulimancy existing in the past.

The earliest known occurrence of the rare term *sogs dmar* is in the Buddhist polemical description of so-called *'khyar bon* in a 'Vajra Statement' attributed to 'Bri gung 'Jig rten mgon po (1143-1217), but probably reflecting wording by a recorder or later commentator writing sometime between 1226-ca. 1267.[117] Dan Martin, whose study of this material is extremely thorough, read—correctly in my view—the original *sogs dmar* as *srog dmar* and translated it as "blood sacrifices" (literally 'red life-force').[118] In the text, *sogs dmar* refers to one among several forms of divination performed by 'non-Tibetan' *bon po* from Kha che, Bru sha and Zhang zhung. Their divinations are described in Martin's translation—and as befits the polemical purpose of the text—as "erroneous bad tenets of peasants" which "finally result in suffering [...] because of their adherence to impure causes." At least according to the ethnographic record, we know many populations along the Himalayan highlands and upon the Tibetan Plateau do indeed perform divinations using the body parts of animals that have been sacrificed.[119] This evidence not only adds support to Martin's *srog dmar* reading, but also fits with the original context well. This 'Bri gung citation of *sogs dmar* predates the claimed—but yet to be historically confirmed—period when the *gZi brjid* is said to have been revealed in a vision to a figure thought to have lived between 1360 and ca. 1385 according to g.Yung drung Bon traditions.[120] Although the *gZi brjid* does not contain the exact term *sogs dmar*, one wonders about the origin of wording in the description of the unusual divination

to different lands, with l. 2 stating: *me nyag yul du sog mo gtan la pab /*; *Bkz bon gyi bka' brten, vol. 68, sec. 4, fol. 3a. (http://www.rkts.org/images.php?id=5|Bkz|MW4CZ58532|I4CZ58603|4|3a*), accessed 30 July 2025, cf. also a version by Smith 2021: 75-76 who reads *ye nyag* for *me nyag*, and dates that version as possibly nineteenth century (p. 71). A minor, sarcastic reference to scapulimancy occurs in an undated hagiographic sketch of dNgos grub rgyal mtshan ring mo, a sMad lugs lineage holder of the Zhang zhung snyan rgyud; translated in Karmay 1998a: 69, cf. Blezer 2011: 235-236 on dNgos grub rgyal mtshan ring mo. On the *Srid pa rgyud kyi kha byang* see below.

117 See Martin 2001: chapts. 13-14 on the passage and its history.

118 See Martin 2001: 191, n. 22.

119 For examples, see Tob Tarin Tara 2005: 77 on divination with the livers of sacrificed pigs and chickens by the Nyishi community in the Arunachal Pradesh highlands, Mumford 1989: 67 on use of a sacrificed deer's heart by Gurung in the Nepal Himalaya, and Ekvall 1964: 265-266 on Tibetan *sha mo*.

120 Snellgrove 1967: 3, n. 2.

performed by the foreign diviner in the story of king Khri 'od, which in Tibetan reads: *sog pa la / mthong bltas pas / dkar la dmar gyi thig le dgu 'dug*? The term with the spelling *sog dmar* occurs in another as yet undated—but possibly fourteenth or fifteenth century—g.Yung drung Bon work titled *Srid pa rgyud kyi kha byang*. There its use also echoes the older 'Bri gung narrative, simply referring to a divination used by *bon po* from the border regions (or their populations) named lDong and Me nyag, who are said to perform "visual examination/diagnosis by means of *sog dmar*" (*sog dmar gyis lta ba dpyad*), with, once again, no indication of exactly what technique is actually being referred to.[121]

The early 'Bri gung use of *sogs dmar* was later recycled into the section on Bon in the well-known early nineteenth century *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long* (*The Crystal Mirror of Tenet Systems*) by the Buddhist author Thu'u bkwan III, Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737-1802). The Thu'u bkwan borrowed heavily from the old 'Bri gung source for his description of *'khyar bon*, with his wording *sog dmar la sogs pa mo btab* not only amending the spelling in the 'Bri gung original but also clearly treating *sog dmar* to mean one among several forms of divination, yet once again with no indication of exactly what technique *sog dmar* actually referred to.[122] Thu'u bkwan's text soon became the source through which discussion of "Tibetan scapulimancy" entered modern Tibetan Studies discourse. Only 80 years after its completion, the *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long* was edited and translated into English by Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917). The translation by Das of the passage containing the term *sog dmar* reads "deciphering mystic symbols on the fresh human shoulder-bone and thereby divining good and evil,"[123] in which he inserted the bogus and sensational claim on use of human scapulae which is nowhere reflected in the original Tibetan wording. In his 1950 study *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion* (based upon his 1945 doctoral dissertation), Helmut Hoffmann (1912-1992) also edited and translated this same passage. Following the 1881 reading by Das—but avoiding his bogus claim about human scapulae—Hoffmann literally translated *sog dmar* with "roten Schulterblättern" ('red shoulder blades') referring to a "Schulterblatt-Orakel" (lit. 'shoulder blade oracle', a German expres-

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[121] *lDong dang mi* [read: *me*?] *nyag gyis bon po lugs la mnga' che ste / sog dmar gyis lta ba dpyad / spra* [read: *pra*?] *sog gis snang yi byar ra byed /*; *Richardson Ms*: f. 9b, 5-10a, 1.

[122] See *Grub mtha'*: 381; cf. text editions in Das 1881: 190 and Hoffmann 1950: 416. It is possible that Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma amended the original *sogs* spelling to *sog* due to his personal knowledge of Mongol scapulimancy; he was born into a Mongol-descended family and educated at dGon lung in northern A mdo, was ordained by Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor who wrote the manual on Oirat scapulimancy, and he travelled extensively in Mongolia during his later years.

[123] Das 1881: 198.

sion for scapulimancy) and, following the interpretation by Das of the *dmar* syllable, he explained that it meant "blutigen, noch unbenutzen" ('bloody, still unused').[124] Hoffmann's commentary on this source was the first modern interpretation to explicitly claim that scapulimancy had been a practice of ancient "Bon-Priester" and the "Bon-Religion" in Tibet.[125] His significant further innovation was equating this ostensible Tibetan Bon practice with the records of pyromantic scapulimancy cited in a rich secondary literature that demonstrates this form of divination was an areal phenomenon known from adjacent central and northern Asia.[126] A few years later, in his well-known work *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* (1956), René Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1912-1959) began his chapter dedicated to divination by first discussing scapulimancy. Following Hoffmann, he translated *sog dmar* as "scapulimancy," but combined the latter's 1950 assessment with the earlier bogus claim by Das: "The scapulimancy is one of the oldest Tibetan divination methods, having been practiced by Bon sorcerers already in ancient times; in some special cases the Bonpos are alleged to have used the shoulder-blades of men instead of the shoulder-blades of sheep."[127]

In summary, here we find yet another example of what is already familiar to historians and philologists studying societies that use written texts: that elaborate cultural developments can pivot upon interpretations of a single word or term from the distant past. The obscure term *sogs dmar*, first known from a mid-thirteenth century Buddhist polemical text in which it was very likely originally intended to describe a form of divination related to blood sacrifice, then copied but never explained in premodern g.Yung drung Bon and Buddhist sources, eventually became equated in modern Tibetan Studies discourse with ethnographic Asian pyromantic scapulimancy, and then defined as a divination technique belonging to an 'ancient' Tibetan Bon religion. Even quite recently, Tibetologists have continued their ever more imaginative attempts to interpretively align *sog[s] dmar*

[124] Hoffmann 1950: 194, 330, n. 8, 416, noting the original German formulations are not always correct.

[125] Hoffmann's understanding of the antiquity of the practice (1950: 194) was partly informed by Old Tibetan materials related to scapulimancy from East Turkestan originally published by Thomas in 1934 (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*); see now Thomas 1951: 399-401.

[126] Curiously, an article stressing the same Asian areal spread of scapulimancy in relation to Tibet by Walter 1998 failed to cite Hoffmann's 1950 discussion, although the former gained his doctoral degree (1980) in the same department of Indiana University (Bloomington) in which the latter taught (1969-1980).

[127] Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 455-456.

with the pyromantic form of scapulimancy.[128] It is highly likely this modern Tibetan Studies concoction of an ancient tradition of Bon pyromantic scapulimancy as just described gained some currency among modern Tibetan religious scholars of g.Yung drung Bon living and working in exile. I am not claiming that bsTan 'dzin rnam dag was solely inspired by such a concoction, rather that it probably reinforced his own convictions and existing knowledge of the very meagre and obscure references to scapulimancy he was familiar with from premodern Tibetan literature. Since the 1960s, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag certainly circulated and worked for decades within a milieu of modern non-Tibetan scholars of Tibetan Studies—initially with David Snellgrove (1920-2016), and then with Helmut Hoffmann himself—whom he often closely collaborated with, as well as non-Tibetan followers of Tibetan salvation religions who became his students, especially those associated with the International Dzogchen Community of his friend and contemporary Nam mkha'i nor bu. Within exactly this milieu of scholars and devotees who were familiar with the works of Das, Hoffmann and Nebesky-Wojkowitz, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's own *The Bright Silver Mirror* was itself used to reinforce both scholarly and popular claims that an ancient Bon scapulimancy existed during the distant Tibetan past. No better example of this can be found than in the major writings of his contemporary Nam mkha'i nor bu, and the translation of the latter's works into European languages.

Nam mkha'i nor bu's work *sGrung lde'u bon gsum gyi gtam* (*A Discourse on the Three — Drung, Deu and Bon*), written in 1982, and thus prior to initial publication of bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *The Bright Silver Mirror*, dealt extensively with materials that are grouped within the Phywa gshen theg pa. He thus explained multiple methods of g.Yung drung Bon divination in some detail, although he never once even mentioned scapulimancy. While Nam mkha'i nor bu had simply repeated the obscure term *sogs dmar* unchanged and without comment when providing his own accurate Tibetan quotation of the Vajra Statement on *'khyar bon* attributed to 'Jig rten mgon po, this eventually became identified with bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's modern interpretation of an ancient Bon scapulimancy, and in fact in part by way of the latter's own agency. During the late 1980s, *sGrung lde'u bon gsum gyi gtam* was translated, with additional annotations, into Italian by Adriano Clemente, one of Nam mkha'i nor bu's main translators for both Italian and English. He did so with the assistance of bsTan 'dzin rnam dag who, Clemente reported, "clarified aspects and characteristics of the

[128] See Walter 1998: 130 n. 13 "scapulamancy [*sic*] (*sog dmar*—the 'red' (*dmar*) refers to the fire in which the scapula is placed)."

ancient ritual traditions for me."[129] One of the lama's clarifications concerned scapulimancy, albeit that this topic was never mentioned in Nam mkha'i nor bu's original Tibetan text. Thus, in the Italian and subsequent English translations of the work, the mid-thirteenth century term *sogs dmar* simply quoted by Nam mkha'i nor bu was translated as scapulimancy and footnoted with an explanation to readers that "scapulimancy (*sog dmar*) had been practiced in Tibet since the most ancient times."[130] The authorities cited in the footnote to support this statement were bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *The Bright Silver Mirror* and Nebesky-Wojkowitz's *Oracles and Demons*. Following this thoroughly modern advancement of the status of scapulimancy in the European language translations of *sGrung lde'u bon gsum gyi gtam*, Nam mkha'i nor bu went on to expand upon the topic of scapulimancy in his final and most up to date account of what he considered to be the history and ancient cultural life of Zhang zhung and Tibet, namely, his lengthy *Zhang bod kyi lo rgyus ti se'i 'od* (*Light of [Mount] Tise: The Annals of Zhangzhung and Tibet*) written in 1996.[131]

Nam mkha'i nor bu's 1996 section on scapulimancy claimed that it was a form of divination present already as an aspect of Zhang zhung's ancient culture during the lifetime of g.Yung drung Bon founder gShen rab mi bo. The time scale for his claim is mind-boggling: He calculated gShen rab mi bo first introduced his religious teachings to Tibet ca. 3,900 years BP. This places his claim back in the period between the late Neolithic-Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age periods in east and central Asia, when pyromantic scapulimancy only just begins to appear in the Asian archaeological record.[132] His sole evidence for the claim was bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *The Bright Silver Mirror*, as well as the same *gZi brjid* story of king Khri 'od that the latter had referred to only obscurely, but also more directly in his commentary on the Phywa gshen theg pa. Highly likely due to the colophon in *The Bright Silver Mirror*, in which bsTan 'dzin rnam dag mentioned he collected his information on methodology from the Sog

[129] See his Preface to Namkhai Norbu 1995: xiv.

[130] The later English translation of the Italian by Andrew Lukianowicz has "scapulamancy [*sic*]" and "*sogmar* divinations" in the main text, and "scapulimancy (*sog dmar*)" in the footnote; Namkhai Norbu 1995: 40, 237, cf. 290 work no. 62.

[131] Nam mkha'i nor bu 2015 [1996]: 127-129; cf. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu 2013: 200-201, in which the English version of the section on scapulimancy is more an abbreviated paraphrase than a translation. The latter source also contains fundamental misreadings of the method for scapulimancy cited from bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *The Bright Silver Mirror*, for example, the crucial *rtse* section of the scapula inspected for divinations is wrongly equated with the smaller *rang sa* area (i.e., supraspinous fossa) rather than located at the peak of the lateral spine.

[132] Flad 2008: 405-411.

po mda' bcu gcig, Nam mkha'i nor bu added this explanation following his own paraphrase of the *gZi brjid* story of king Khri 'od:

> The diviner lDing nga lding lo [*sic*] dwelt on the frontier of Zhang zhung, thus we are able to know the complete history of that way of casting a scapula divination. Concerning this scapulimancy, we know from experience that it occurs as a rather widespread practice in the land of Hor sog. Regarding this witness, generally that said designation [of the diviner in the *gZi brjid*] as a 'person of the frontier' appears to be one that ought to be understood as a person who was near to the land of Hor sog on the eastern frontier of Zhang zhung.[133]

There are a host of problematic aspects to Nam mkha'i nor bu's general framing of scapulimancy in his *Zhang bod kyi lo rgyus ti se'i 'od*, as well as with specific claims he makes about origins. While I cannot examine every one of those problems here, it will suffice to briefly mention his geographical claims attempting to connect the 'original' foreign scapulimancer in the *gZi brjid* story with Zhang zhung. I begin with a major research conclusion by Dan Martin who, more than any other modern scholar, has systematically studied geographical conceptions found in g.Yung drung Bon literature: "We must emphasize, since there are many who would wish otherwise, that the Bon sources always place 'Ol-mo-lung-ring well outside of the boundaries of Tibet (and well outside the area of western Tibet, or Zhang zhung, which includes Mt. Ti-se)."[134] The *gZi brjid* story located the action southwest of 'Ol mo lung ring, and the foreign scapulimancer is merely a 'person of the frontier' presumably referring to the remote southwestern frontiers of 'Ol mo lung ring indicated in the story. It remains unclear to me precisely where Nam mkha'i nor bu locates both 'Ol mo lung ring and Zhang zhung, and how they stand in relation to each other in his aforementioned comment. His original explanation of the story that "The diviner lDing nga lding lo dwelt on the frontier of Zhang zhung" seems to either equate 'Ol mo lung ring with Zhang zhung, or imply that the latter was southwest of the former. His further explanation that this diviner "ought to be understood as a person who was near to the land of Hor sog on the eastern frontier of Zhang

[133] *Zhang zhung mtha' mtshams su gnas pa'i mo ma lding nga lding los sog mo ji ltar btab pa'i lo rgyus cha tshang ba de gas shes thub pa yin / sog mo 'di ni hor sog gi yul du dar srol tshe tsam byung myong yod pa 'di la gzhigs na / mtha' mtshams kyi mi'i tha snyad byas pa de phal cher zhang zhung shar phyogs kyi mtha' hor sog gi yul dang nye ba'i mi zhig la go dgos pa zhig tu snang*; Nam mkha'i nor bu 2015 [1996]: 128; cf. the abbreviated English paraphrase in Chögyal Namkhai Norbu 2013: 200-201.

[134] Martin 1999: 278.

zhung" is also confusing. For example, ca. twelfth century g.Yung drung Bon geographical schemes in the *Grags pa glings grags* and *mDo 'dus* locate Hor [yul] and Sog po to the north of Tibet and far to the east of 'Ol mo lung ring.[135] Anyone familiar with key texts of g.Yung drung Bon historiography and hagiography will be left confused by the geographical contortions in Nam mkha'i nor bu's further attempt to somehow anchor scapulimancy within ancient Zhang zhung and thus the origins of g.Yung drung Bon religion.

Conclusions

For nomadic pastoralists of the modern era on the Tibetan Plateau, be they Tibetan speakers of the northwest Byang thang or Mongol-descended groups of A mdo in the east, pyromantic scapulimancy based upon the ovine shoulder blade was and is one among a range of prosaic, practical techniques believed to yield otherwise unavailable information on the obscure or hidden, aid informed decision-making, as well as indicate possible outcomes in matters of importance.[136] A do-it-yourself skill acquired via colloquial transmission of knowledge, and undertaken with precious little or mostly no pomp and ceremony, this divination merely requires the fire present in every tent or winter house, and a humble bone otherwise treated as refuse following consumption of a leg of mutton. Simplicity and accessibility have probably ensured the endurance of this particular form of scapulimancy over the thousands of years archaeology demonstrates its use in those regions surrounding the Tibetan Plateau where sheep pastoralism was economically significant. We have no sure indication of when and how this truly areal phenomenon arrived on the Tibetan Plateau. It is, however, certain the large-scale settlement of Oirat Mongols in A mdo over three centuries ago will have reinforced its use and popularity among those Plateau dwellers grazing herds of sheep on the grasslands. The Oirat Mongols also ensured the first known embrace of scapulimancy by Tibetan salvation religions.

Sum pa mkhan po's short work *The Oirat Manual* appears to represent a unique moment when scapulimancy became incorporated into one of the all-encompassing frameworks deployed for at least a millennium by the agents of historical Tibetan salvation religions. Such

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[135] Martin 1999: 261-264.

[136] Note that the clear priority placed upon information availability and decision-making, and the absence of terminology such as *phy*[*w*]*a*, in all recorded pastoralist discourse concerning scapulimancy contrasts markedly with the recent emphasis upon 'fortune' in scholarly discussions of Tibetan divination; e.g., see Sobisch 2021, Dotson, Cook, Zhao Lu 2021.

frameworks allowed for simple customary practices used by laypersons to become part of the ever-expanding, monopolistic domain of the Tibetan lama acting as ritual specialist. Once written down and associated with Sum pa mkhan po's authority and ethno-religious status, his words and drawings in *The Oirat Manual* became frozen relics to be inherited by future agents, and thus continued to be recycled into other written manuals used by diviners into the twentieth century. One could conclude much the same about bsTan 'dzin rnam dag's *The Bright Silver Mirror*, albeit that his mission appears to have been inspired by a strong urge to preserve what he considered to be all dimensions of his g.Yung drung Bon religion, a religion already historically marginalised in his own homeland, and then confronted with even greater threats due to modern social upheaval and cultural destruction. With such a mission, and a conviction informed by centuries of transmission of obscure terminology and stories, also meetings with pastoralist scapulimancers, as well as interpretations by modern commentators, bsTan 'dzin rnam dag invented the most elaborate form of scapulimancy so far known from any Asian records. On his invention he bequeathed what Henk Blezer called the "forever old" status that has rhetorically served the followers of g.Yung drung Bon so well for so long.[137] With this new, hyper-elaborated religious scapulimancy having thus been given the required imprimatur, there was nothing to stop it from being embraced as an integral and 'ancient' part of g.Yung drung Bon, just as Nam mkha'i nor bu and others began doing already during the 1990s.[138] It is indeed a revealing example of religion in the making.

Acknowledgements

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[137] Blezer 2011: 210-213 listed "historiographical strategies that Bon po writers employ in order to bridge the vacuum of data relating to the origins of their tradition", the first of which he described as "Archaisation" or "origins [...] projected back into an archaic past" (p. 214).

[138] The present study demonstrates the enduring validity of Dan Martin's observation on the character of g.Yung drung Bon, that while "Buddhism possessed a formal mechanism for the inclusion of a local this-worldly stratum [...] Bon preserved this formal mechanism for later generations (especially in the Phya Gshen Vehicle [...]), while the other Tibetan Buddhist schools let it slide into oblivion"; Martin 2001: 218-219.

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