

SCAPULA COSMOGRAPHY AND DIVINATION IN TIBET

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The purpose of this article is to discuss a motif in Tibetan cosmography, and its development, both through textual transmission and cultural interpretation. It is a matter here of what Tibetans have considered to be the shape of Jambudvîpa, our southern world continent, as presented in various Buddhist and Bon cosmographies over time.

It would seem to be a straightforward matter that, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, connected – at least in Western scholarship – with a statement in the *Mahāgovindasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*,¹ the shape of the southern world-continent, Jambudvîpa, is represented as a trapezoid.

In terms of its dimensions, as found in Abhidharma literature, it should be seen as a **sharply-tapering** trapezoid, looking like an isosceles triangle with just its tip excised.² However, this concept of a trapezoidal figure certainly didn't seem to inspire Buddhist thinkers. Two more figurative comparisons

¹ The former states that our Jambudvîpa is *śakatakr̥ti* (the shape of a cart/chariot), cited in Louis de la Vallée Poussin and Étienne Lamotte, *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, Bruxelles, 1971, vol. 1, p. 139; the reference to the *Mahāgovindasutta* is cited there as 'Dīgha, ii. 235'. The latter, however, as will be noted below in fn. 3, really says that only the tip of Jambudvîpa resembles the front of a chariot.

² Akitra Sadakata's *Buddhist Cosmology*, Tokyo, 1997, p. 27 and 33.

arose, one in India and one in Tibet: Jambudvîpa as having a chariot, or cart, shape, and Jambudvîpa as having a scapula shape. These figurations present an interesting interplay in the relationship between literature and culture in Tibet.

To begin with, let us approach the chariot/cart simile. The *Mahāgovindasutta* didn't intend that readers should think the trapezoid as a whole should be considered a charot; it speaks of Jambudvîpa habing a **front** part (southern or tip of the trapezoid) like a chariot/cart (*sakaṭamukha*).³ (This certainly fits the Abhidharmic dimensions of Jambudvîpa more closely). Three Mahāyāna sutras, the *Adbhutadharmaparyaya*, the *Kūṭāgara* and the *Mahāraṇa*, also describe the southern tip of Jambudvîpa to be cart-shaped.⁴

This lack of consistency in Indic traditions is matched by an alternation in Tibetan interpretations of the shape of Jambudvîpa, which has been seen by some to result in both the 'chariot' and 'scapula' representations just mentioned.

Abhidharma materials in Tibetan - the *Kośa* (translated already in the eighth century) along with the *Kośabhāṣya*, of Vasubandhu, Mchims 'Jam-pa'i Dbyangs' commentary, etc. - are consistent in rendering *śakata* by *shing rta*. However, in other materials, beginning at least as early as the tenth century, a different Indic tradition is found, exemplified in document PT849, the Indic-Tibetan 'formulary' studied by Hackin. Already here *trikoṇa*, triangle, is glossed four times by *sogs ka* (rather than the literal *zur gsum*), in describing the shape of Jambudvîpa.⁵ For *sogs ka* we may also read *sog kha*, which either means 'triangle' (*sog kha* = *zur gsum*) or 'scapula', one word obviously derived from the other, or both going back to a common root.⁶ In either case, no reference to chariot (*shing rta*) is made here, and we thus have early evidence of, 1) The use of 'triangle' in an Indic source, allowing likewise a different Tibetan interpretation of the shape of Jambudvîpa from that presented in

³ § 308, on p.172 of vol. 2 of *Suttapitaka (Suttapitake Dīghanikāyo [dutiyo bhāgo, Mahāvaggapāli], Iḡatapurī, 1993) : i m a ṁ mahāpathaviṁ uttarena āyatam dakkhiṇena sakaṭamukham...*

⁴ See Yael Bentor, 'On the Indian origins of the Tibetan practice of depositing relics and *dhāraṇīs* in stūpas and images', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115, 1995, p. 249.

⁵ Joseph Hackin, *Formulaire Sanscrit-tibétain du X^e siècle*, Paris, 1924, p. 9.

⁶ Related words include the *sog* in *sog ma*, 'blade', 'straw stalk' and *sog le*, 'saw'.

Abhidharmic materials; this immediately led, as well, perhaps to 2) The idea that Jambudvīpa is scapula-shaped, inasmuch as the term *sog[s] ka/kha* means either 'triangle' or 'scapula', and that the context here admits of such a reading or extended interpretation.

Now, it has recently been maintained⁷ that the vacillation in Tibetan sources between the 'cart/chariot' and 'scapula' concepts is because *sog[s] ka/kha* is some nonstandard rendering of Skt. *śakata*, and that 'cart/chariot' was misunderstood as 'scapula' by Tibetans. However, no form which could explain a connection between these words can be found, and **soka[t]a*, etc. cannot be reconstructed (as it is against rules of sound change from Sanskrit for both MIA in general, and literary Prakrits; *saada* and *śaala*⁸ are, however, found, for example). Therefore, we must find some other explanation for the alternation between 'chariot' and 'scapula', and trace these concepts as they developed in Tibet.

However early the idea of a chariot/ cart-shaped Jambudvīpa entered through the Abhidharma tradition, it doesn't seem to have spread quickly. According to the Fifth Dalai Lama, 'Brom Ston-pa (1004-1065) sent letters to Tibetan scholars asking if they knew of the tradition of Jambudvīpa being shaped like a chariot (*shing rta*), as if the concept were unknown to him, or

⁷ On this point, see Per Soerensen's *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (Wiesbaen, 1994), an excellent translation and study of the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*, and Michael Aris' '*Jigs-med-gling-pa's 'Discourse on India' of 1789*' (Tokyo, 1995), an annotated translation of the *Lho phyogs Rgya-gar gyi glam Brtag pa brgyad kyi me long*.

On p. 47 (n. 23) of the former, and on pp. 64-65 of the latter, arguments are made to derive *sog kha*, *so kha* etc., from *śakata*, and to explain the alternation between 'scapula' and 'chariot' as the result of a misunderstanding arising from that derivation. For reasons I addressed in detail in 'Areal religious phenomena in Tibet and Central Eurasia' (to appear in *Toronto Studies in Central and East Asia*, 3, fn. 15), I must disagree with the arguments on this point put forward by Aris, which arguments also support the assertions of Soerensen. The further reconstruction of the development of cosmographic concepts about Jambudvīpa in this article reinforces the viewpoint that these different traditions arose first from a variation in Indic sources, and that - as we'll see here - this allowed the entry of a practice with a Tibetan world-view which, over time, was synthesized with one of these traditions.

⁸ Alfred Woolner, *Introduction to Prakrit*, Delhi, 1975, p. 14.

represented a novel idea, i.e., a recent Indian import (perhaps mentioned by Atisha).⁹

Shortly thereafter, a movement toward a scapula-shaped Jambudvîpa is attested in a Bon 'Abhidharma' work, the *Mdzod phug*, dated to ('rediscovery') ca. 1108. In this work, the world-continent is described as triangular (*ngos gsum ste*), but the auto-commentary only says that, when one looks it up and down, it's like a sheep's scapula thrown on a plate.¹⁰

Another interpretation, which perhaps represents an attempt to reconcile the triangle/ scapula with the chariot/ cart concepts, is found in the *Rgyal rabs Gsal ba 'i me long* (compiled 1368) of Bsod Nams Rgyal Mtshan (1312-1375). In this work, the triangle- or scapula- shaped Jambudvîpa (*dbyibs sog khar yod*) is presented first; later, a special subdivision of Jambudvîpa - comprised of Ratnadvîpa, Sogdiana (Sog-po'i yul) and Khotan - is described by itself as having the shape of a chariot (*shing rta'i dbyibs 'dra*).¹¹

⁹ *Bod kyi deb ther Dpyid kyi Rgyal-mo'i glu dbyangs*, 1988 Peking edn., p. 84.

¹⁰ *Mdzod phug: basic verses and commentary*, by Dran-pa Nam Mkha', Delhi, 1966, root verse, p. 24 and autocommentary, p. 108: *phan tshun du bltas na lug sogs sder du skyur ba dang 'dra'o*. The tradition, even within the Bon 'Abhidharma' tradition, to view it as only a simile, continued as a standard view; see, e. g., the fourteenth-century Tshul' Khriims Rgyal Mtshan' s *Kun las btus pa'i srid pa'i gzhung* (Kalimpong, n.d.).

¹¹ See Per Soerensen, *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography: The mirror illuminating the royal genealogies*, Wiesbaden, 1994, p. 32 (date of composition) and p. 47f; the text on p. 4f of *Rgyal rabs Gsal ba'i me long* (Peking, 1981 edn.). *Dbyibs sog khar yod do* I here understand not to be referring to a cart or scapula, as Soerensen does (see also his fn. 23), but explicitly to a scapula or triangle. It may also only be because Bsod Nams Rgyal Mtshan and the author of the *Spo-bo' i chos 'byung* (who might have taken this model from Bsod Nams Rgyal Mtshan) understood *sog kha* explicitly to be a scapula that these authors felt it necessary to add a further reference to the chariot-shaped geographic entities mentioned above, which are not found, e.g., in Abhidharma materials.

(I'm not sure what to make of Soerensen's speculation that 'this continent is usually depicted in the form of a handle of a scapula? ... or better of a chariot ...' (fn. 23). We have, at least in available sources, nothing which works at variance with the illustration Aris made in his discussion of scapula-Jambudvîpa. Perhaps the earliest extant illustration is found in Sde Srid Sangs

In the above examples, as well as parallel passages in other early historical sources, such as those mentioned by Soerensen (in his fn. 23 as cited here in note 7) show, we can see a clear pattern, wherein *sog kha* (and variants) represents either a triangle or a scapula, but not a chariot/cart. Nevertheless, the figuration of Jambudvîpa as a chariot/ cart (*shing rta*) also is unambiguously mentioned from time to time.¹² This indicates a continuation of the tradition exemplified by Abhidharma material and the *Mahāgovindasutta*, choosing the former interpretation over the latter, i.e., that the entire continent was chariot-shaped, not only the tip or lower part.

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An added dimension to what is otherwise an excursus on a detail of Abhidharma and Buddhist cosmography is that, in Tibet, the development of the concept of a scapula-shaped world was not an accident. It was, rather, part of a larger, probably older, cosmographic tradition which Tibet shared with the Turks, Mongols, and perhaps other pastoral peoples of the Eurasian steppe. It is an areal religious feature dealing with the religious significance of the sheep's scapula.

We have seen, in the earliest *Mdzod phug* commentary (ca. 1108), that the statement 'Jambudvîpa is like a scapula' is clearly a simile. Eventually - exactly how long we don't know - this ceased to be a comparison, and became a statement of reality; perhaps it had been so in some circles even when the *Mdzod phug* was composed. The venue for this change was the practice of scapulimancy, the divining of present or future conditions by casting a scapula in a fire and then 'reading' the cracks that appear in it.

Sangs Rgyas Rgya Mtsho (1653-1705), in the section on scapula cosmography and scapulimancy in his *Bai dūr g.ya' sel*, quotes in particular two works which unite the concepts of cosmography and scapulimancy. These

Rgyas Rgya mtsho's *Bai dur g.ya' sel*; see *The 18th century Sde-dge redaction of the Sde-srid Sans-rgyas-rgya-mtsho's Vai dūrya g.ya' sel ...*, Dehra Dun, 1976, vol. 1, column 96. In this work Sde Srid makes reference to an earlier, probably illustrated, text, the *Rab 'byed dgu'i 'grel pa*. See my article, fn. 7 above, note 15.)

¹² One example would be the *Yar Lung chos 'byung* (composed 1376), where the trapezoidal shape, 'like the shape of a chariot', is clearly described, along with its Abhidharmic dimensions; as stated above, these would hardly describe a functional chariot shape!

are writings of Yang Dgon-pa Rgyal Mtshan Dpal (1213-1258) and Ratna Gling-pa (1403-1479).¹³ These authors take it for granted that, in this world continent, geomancy (*sa dpyad*) operates effectively because this world is a scapula, to be read - in conjunction with qualities of a blue sky, which has a meaning yet to be studied - to divine the correct auspices (*rten 'brel*) of a situation; further, that we humans can operate in conjunction with this system because we, also, are scapula shaped; and, finally, that the character and attainments of the peoples living in Jambudvīpa are due to their position on this scapula.¹⁴

This represents quite a development from a simple simile about the shape of our world continent. Inasmuch as scapulimancy in Tibet and Mongolia reflects the worldview of pastoral nomads,¹⁵ this shift from metaphorical to practical use combines a shift from a trapezoidal to a triangular or scapula shape, synthesized with elements from Tibet's more ancient steppe tradition.

At about the same time as this association of scapulimancy with cosmography occurs, and in many of the same sources (Yang Dgon-pa, Ratna Gling-pa, then reported in Sangs Rgyas Rgya Mtsho, and again later in Sum-pa Mkhan-po, on which see below), there arises the further development that the thirty-six outlying, non-Buddhist (*mtha' 'khob*) countries are arranged along with Tibet, India, China, etc. in particular spots (along the margins) on

¹³ For full references to the writings of the authors cited in this paragraph, with a quotation from Ratna Gling-pa, see my article cited in fn. 7.

The earliest scapulimantic texts may date to the eighth century; see F.W. Thomas' *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents Concerning Chinese Turkestan*, Part 2, London, 1951, p. 400. In the *Srid pa rgyud kyī kha byang chen mo* (rediscovered in 1301), on column 46 of the 1976 Dolanji edition is a reference to its use by Bon-po from Ldong-po and Me-nyag, in a list of powers of Bon-po from various regions.

¹⁴ 'Dzam bu gling gi dbyibs so khar yod pa dang / nam mkha'i kha dog sngon por yod pa'i rten 'brel gyis / gling de na yod pa'i mi rnams kyī byad gzugs kyī dbyibs so khar yod pa dang / kha dog sngon por yod pa yin, p. 4 of the *Ri chos Yon tan kun byung gi lhan thabs*, the opening work of volume 2 of *The collected works (gsun 'bum) of Yan-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal*, Gangtok, 1976.

¹⁵ For an overview of literature and concepts of the scapulimantic traditions of Tibet and Mongolia, see the remarks and bibliography in my 'Areal religious phenomena in Tibet and Central Asia', cited in fn. 7, above.

this scapula. The characters of peoples are explained as according with their location on the scapula, perhaps playing on a previous, mantic tradition of interpreting the features and cracks on the scapula. I repeat here a selection from Yang Dgon-pa, which is very similar to a passage in Ratna Gling-pa:

Tibetans, being on the flat portion of the scapula, are poor, but honest, and their thinking is clear. Because India, Kashir, and Stag Gzig are on the handle of the scapula, minds are weak and intellects are shallow, [but] they are wealthy. Because China, the Hor, and the 'Jang are on the open mouth (i.e., half-way down the right hand side) they are great in extent, their interiors are spacious, their intellects are sharp, [and they are] complete in enjoyments.

As we trace cosmographic materials up to the present day, various Tibetan scholars have incorporated one or more of the above elements in discussing the 'scapula-shaped Jambudvīpa', or in describing scapulimancy. Elements of the two together can be found, for example, in the Mongol writer Sum-pa Mkhān-po (1702-1775), whose work on scapulimancy combines directions for reading scapulae with prefaced statements about their effectiveness based on the physical similarity of the bodies and faces of people in Jambudvīpa with its shape.¹⁶

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In conclusion, this study has shown that, when authors such as Sum-pa Mkhān-po, in his *Dpag bsam ljon bzang*, or 'Jigs-med Gling-pa, in his *Lho phyogs Rgya-gar gyi gtam Brtag pa brgyad kyī me long* (1789), relate the shape of Jambudvīpa to be *shing rta' am sog dbyibs*, or so *kha'am shing rta*, they are not displaying confusion or relating two terms for a cart or chariot, as some have maintained. Rather, they are acknowledging that two traditions of long standing in Tibet concerning the shape of Jambudvīpa have been preserved,

¹⁶ *O'u-rod phyogs su dar ba'i lug gi sog pa la blta ba'i mo phya Sgyu ma'i lung ston*, in vol. 7 of the *Collected Works of Sum-pa-mkhan-po* (Delhi, 1975), p. 718: '*Dzam gling sog dbyibs dang / gling 'di'i mi'i gdong lus dbyibs sog*. Nothing like this is found in Bstan 'Dzin Rnam Dag's contemporary description of scapulimancy - the most detailed found so far - but the point of the latter author is to show how scapulimancy fits into Bon ritual and divination, where it becomes, to a certain extent, 'uncultural' through ritualisation.

one passing through Chos-pa (and Bon-po!) Abhidharma materials, the other through traditions which are acquainted with, or practise, scapulimancy.¹⁷

What has yet to be answered clearly is whether the latter tradition also originally contained the teaching of a correspondence between the shape of the scapula and the shape of the world, by which is explained why scapulimancy works. An answer to this question is made more difficult by the fact that there are no overall, internally consistent traditions of interpretation of scapulae in the Tibetan, Mongolian, and Turkic traditions, not to mention among them. Thus, it is difficult to locate patterns by comparing them, or comparing data within each tradition.

¹⁷ Is it a coincidence that the first equations of Jambudvîpa with a scapula were found in the writings of *yogis*, who were probably acquainted with rites based on this identity?