

# Old Tibetan Scapulimancy

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**S**capulimancy, a divination method that uses animals' shoulder blades, may be among the most ancient methods of fortune telling. It persisted in Mongolia, Siberia, Yun nan, and many other places until very recently, and possibly until today.<sup>1</sup> In Tibet, we find a literary record of this divination method attributed to Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788),<sup>2</sup> in which several shoulder blades are explained with illustrations and each blade is divided into several symbolic parts corresponding to the person whom the omen concerns. By consulting the pattern of cracks, caused by heating, on an appropriate part of the blade, the auspicious or inauspicious omen concerning health, travel, business etc. is deduced. Although the pioneering studies state that scapulimancy is one of the oldest divination methods among Tibetans, as well as among "many other, especially nomadic, peoples of Central Asia and North America,"<sup>3</sup> detailed examples from the time of ancient Tibet have so far not been presented.

In this article, I shall discuss Tibetan scapulimancy using a collection of ancient materials excavated from Central Asia. This collection comprises two main categories of objects: one is an inscribed bone and the other are related woodslips from eastern Turkestan.

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<sup>1</sup> Details about scaplimancy in general have already been published elsewhere, for example, Bawden's work on scapulimancy practice in Mongolia (Bawden 1958), and Flad's work in ancient China (Flad 2008); here I limit myself to discussing Tibetan scapulimancy exclusively.

<sup>2</sup> *O'u rod phyogs su dar ba'i lug gi sog pa la blta ba'i mo phyva: sgyu ma'i lung ston* (Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975). Note that since Sum pa mkhan po, an important Buddhist master and the great author of a history of Buddhism, lived in the eighteenth century, this literary record dates from nearly 1000 years after the Central Asian materials that I discuss below.

<sup>3</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993: 455–56. He also states that scapulimancy had been "practiced by Bon sorcerers already in ancient times." Ekvall reports that scapulimancy practice is often performed by hunters during the butchering season in late fall (Ekvall 1964: 263–64). Waddell states it is one of the simple divination methods practiced by the poorer class who cannot afford the expense of spiritual horoscopes (Waddell 1895: 464–65).

A single shoulder blade with an inscription in Tibetan script, which I discuss below, was found along with numerous broken blades presumably used in divination practices. After investigating the shoulder blade in question at an exhibition held in Japan in 2002, I revised Wang and Chen's transliteration and translation of its inscription.<sup>4</sup> Here, for the interest of readers, I permit myself first to recall briefly what I have clarified in my previous work and explain the general outline of scapulimancy practices in early Tibet by providing some new sources. Then I focus on presenting more concrete information, such as for what purpose and by whom this divination method was performed.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Oracle Bones

The single oracle bone with an inscription in Tibetan script,<sup>6</sup> 73 RMF 25:16, lies among many other uninscribed oracle bones that were excavated by the archeological survey of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum in 1973. The inscribed bone is 17.5 cm long and 2.3–10.7 cm wide. It is most likely the shoulder blade of a sheep. Five lines of Tibetan text are inscribed along the length of the bone's ridged side. On restoration, it remains basically intact, though with a chip just to the right of its centre.<sup>7</sup> Considering its origin, that

<sup>4</sup> See Wang and Chen 1986: 73 and no. 437; Takeuchi and Nishida 2004.

<sup>5</sup> I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Tsuguhito Takeuchi for generously giving me the information on woodslips that I shall discuss below. They will be included in his forthcoming catalogue of the Old Tibetan woodslips from eastern Turkestan kept at the British Library. I should also note that this paper stems from a preliminary study on the Old Tibetan oracle bone co-authored by Prof. Takeuchi and myself (Takeuchi and Nishida 2004).

<sup>6</sup> According to the field report of archeological investigation carried out along the Qinghai-Tibet railway in Tibet Autonomous Region, two oracle shoulder blades were excavated from the site called "site of sacrifice offering of Chaxiutang" in Lho ma township in Naqu (Nag chu) country of Tibet. These shoulder blades were unearthed together with a number of skulls of yaks, horses, and dogs which are considered to be used for the rites (to suppress the demons?). Tibetan texts are found on some of these skulls. Likewise, it is reported that Tibetan text was written in black ink on both sides of one of these shoulder blades (See the Bureau of Cultural Relics of Tibet Autonomous Region *et al.* 2005 and Huowei 2007). Unfortunately, details for these Tibetan texts are still unknown.

<sup>7</sup> A black and white photograph, plate 11 in Wang and Chen 1986, represents the condition before restoration and plate 294 in 新疆古代民族文物 *Cultural Relics of Ancient Xinjiang* (新疆维吾尔自治区社会科学院考古研究所 The Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Academy of Social Sciences ed. 1985) and plate 151 in シルクロード 絹と黄金の道 特別展図録 *Catalogue of the Brocade and Gold from the Silk road* (Tokyo National Museum, NHK and NHK promotions eds. 2002: 159) give its restored form.

is Mīrān site I, a Tibetan imperial military fort,<sup>8</sup> we can be sure that these oracle bones date from the time of Tibet's occupation of Mīrān, namely the late-8<sup>th</sup> to the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century.

Unfortunately, details on Tibetan scapulimancy procedure during the imperial period do not exist. However, generally speaking, the procedure is roughly identical throughout the world. Auspicious or inauspicious omens are usually judged by the appearance of cracks on the bone, more precisely by the cracks' lengths, shapes, and positions resulting from heating the bone after shaving off all of the flesh. In order to create these cracks, in some cases the bone is directly placed into a fire and in other cases burning material such as charcoal, grass, or a wooden or iron stick is placed on it. For instance, oracle bones from the Wuwei ruins in China show several scorch marks at their centre, attributed to the placement of a heated stick onto bones.<sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning that an Old Tibetan oracle bone with no inscription, presented together with 73 RMF 25:16 in Wang and Chen's publication, shows similar burning traces at its centre.<sup>10</sup> We can presume that the centre part of 73 RMF 25:16 was broken during the heating process.

In what follows, I first present a transliteration and then an annotated translation of 73 RMF 25:16. I basically follow the transliteration system of the Old Tibetan Documents Online (OTDO), but employ the following *signes critiques* found in Takeuchi 1995 as appropriate.<sup>11</sup>

### Transliteration

<i> abc</i>	Beginning of line lost through damage.
<i>abc </i>	End of line lost through damage.
<i>[abc]</i>	Suggested reading of difficult to read text.
<i>***</i>	Blank spaces left by copyists.

### Translation

<i>[abc]</i>	Supplements by the translator.
<i>[...]</i>	Illegible or missing.
<i>(abc)</i>	Translator's note.

<sup>8</sup> More precisely, it is said to be brought from the northern chamber of this fort; unfortunately it does not bear a detailed site number corresponding to Stein's. See Wang and Chen 1986: 5 for an account of the discovery of the Tibetan woodslips from Mīrān site I; see also Stein 1921.

<sup>9</sup> The Wuwei ruins can be dated to the Neolithic era, see 甘肃省博物館 The Kansu Provincial Museum 1960: 53–71, 143–48.

<sup>10</sup> Wang and Chen 1986: plate 11.

<sup>11</sup> See Imaeda *et al.* 2007: xxxi–xxxiii; Takeuchi 1995: 137–38.

## 73 RMF 25:16

1. \$ /:/ sogspa 'dl la mo bzang na nI lha sgo n[i] phye
2. shlg 'dre sgo nI [---]<sup>12</sup> bgyld pa'I
3. \*\*\* tshe la ni mo [bzang bar]
4. shogs shl mo ngan na nI sogspa khyod pa
5. na ni mre ni srog

- 1–2. On this shoulder blade, if the divination (/ prognostication) appears good, [you] should open a gate of *lha*.<sup>13</sup>
- 2–4. As for a gate of 'dre, [you] should make the divination (/ prognostication) good,<sup>14</sup> while you are making (/ doing) [...]
- 4–5. If the divination (/ prognostication) appears bad, you should burn [this] shoulder blade.<sup>15</sup>

I take this description to be a request or a petition to a divinity *lha*, asking it to open a gate of *lha*, or completely burn up this shoulder blade, probably as a divine sign of inauspiciousness; hence the entity being supplicated is considered a divinity *lha* who possibly takes credit for this scapulimancy.

According to the studies of ancient Chinese hieroglyphic characters left on bones and tortoise carapaces, most of which are dated to the Yin dynasty, the following five main contents were generally engraved: the date and the name of executor or petitioner; questions addressed to a divine entity; the interpretation of cracks by the king (answers to the questions); justice of the prognostication (justice of the king's interpretation); and the month and place where the divination was practiced. They can be summed up as a report recording the entire divination procedure. Unlike ancient Chinese examples, the Tibetan inscriptions relate a mere petition or a request addressed to a certain divinity, *lha*, instead of substantial information such as names or dates; rather they seem to limit themselves to enhancing the divination effect.

<sup>12</sup> [---]: *sogspa*?

<sup>13</sup> *phye*: I regard this as an imperative form of transitive verb 'byed *pa*.

<sup>14</sup> *shogs shl*: *shogs*, an imperative form of 'ong *ba*, suggests the possibility of *shl* being the imperative particle *shig*. Therefore it can literally be understood as "come out!" but in this context I interpret it as "make!"

<sup>15</sup> *mre*: This is supposed to be a variant spelling of *me* (fire) with *r* (locative).  
*srog*: Although *srog* usually means "life," this is not satisfactory here, and thus I regard it as a variant spelling or a misspelling of the imperative form of verb *sreg pa*, "to burn, to destroy with fire," which can be supposed by the fact that imperative forms often include the vowel *o*.

## 2. Woodslips

I have hitherto found seven woodslips relating to scapulimancy. Five of these record questions toward a certain divinity, while the other two record answers, as well as questions. Let us now look at the examples of the former group.

Text 1: IOL Tib N 58 (M.I.i.14)<sup>16</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. ] *g.yang la ma snyin bzhin bzangs gchig gis gsol*  
 A2. ] [*lag dgra*] *la zhal bzhen [ta]m ma bzhen / [sog]*  
 B1. ] *la / khiyi lo'i ston nob cu ngu lo g.yang ['babs]*  
 B2. ] *myi 'bab /*

[translation]

- A1. To [the divinity] *g.yang*, a person such as Ma snyin bzhin bzangs makes a petition;  
 A2. [Shall we] lift [our] faces against the *lag dgra* or not?<sup>17</sup>  
 B1–2. To [the cracks] of the shoulder blade, [I ask,] will the blessing of the year (/harvest)<sup>18</sup> of Little Nob (= Mīrān) come down [to us] in the autumn of the Dog year or not?

Text 2: IOL Tib N 137 (M.I.iii.7)<sup>19</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. ] [*dang?*] [*rtse*] *smān dang g.yang la lu*  
 A2. ] *dgra la zhal bzhen taM ma bzhen /*  
 A3. *mkhar nob chu ngu [yul] [risu] / slad nang* [  
 B1. *myi mchi / lo g.yang 'babs saM myi* [  
 B2. ] *chi 'aM myi mchi ///* \*\*\*

<sup>16</sup> Transliterations given here are basically adopted from Thomas's readings and my own investigations of the digitised images of woodslips on the International Dunhuang Project website (<http://idp.bl.uk/>). I am also grateful for Prof. Takeuchi's helpful information on these woodslips, but all errors naturally are my own responsibility.

<sup>17</sup> I have no appropriate interpretation for either *lag dgra* or *zhal bzhen* yet, and follow Thomas's rendering which however is still not satisfactory.

<sup>18</sup> *lo g.yang*: I follow Thomas's rendering "year (sc. harvest)-blessing" (Thomas 1951: 399–400).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas 1951: 399, no. 99; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 441.

[translation]

- A1. To [...] and [the divinity] *rtse sman* and *g.yang*, [a person such as Lug bzhin? makes a petition;]<sup>20</sup>  
 A2. [Shall we] lift [our] faces against the [*lag*] *dgra* or not?  
 A3. [...] later, to the boundary of the city<sup>21</sup> of Little Nob (=Mīrān) fort [...] or not?  
 B1–2. Will the blessing of the year (/harvest) come down [to us or not?] [...] exist or not?

Text 3: IOL Tib N 161 (M.I.iv.3)<sup>22</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. ] *sman la / bshan lug bzhin*  
 A2. ] [*g*] *is gsol te / lag dgra la zhal*  
 A3. ] [*zhe*] *n / sogs g.yon dang /*  
 B1. ] *nob chu ngu na phyi dgra mchi* ['am]  
 B2. ] / \*\*\* *dang dgra*  
 B3. ] *n [sa myi rmin?] [*

[translation]

- A1–2. To [the divinity] [...] *sman*, [a person such as] Bshan lug bzhin makes a petition;  
 A2. [Shall we lift our] faces against the *lag dgra* [or not?]  
 A3. [To the cracks on] the left side of the shoulder blade, [I ask,] and [...]  
 B1–3. In Little Nob (=Mīrān) is there a foreign enemy or [not?] [...] and enemy [...]

Text 4: IOL Tib N 266 (M.I.iv.138)<sup>23</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. \$ // *nob cu ngu 'i rtse bla dang rtse sman la // yos bu lo'i*  
 A2. *spyid sla ra ba la // sku bla'i bres / snying bzhIn bzangs*  
 B1. ] *gsol te / lag dgra dang / sogs mcin la*  
 B2. *sman bris pa'i gnyer 'sus // \*\*\**

[translation]

- A1–B1. To [the divinity] *rtse bla* and *rtse sman* of Little Nob (=Mīrān), in the first spring month of the Hare year, [a person such as Ma] snying bzhIn bzangs offers *bres* (=rice or fruit?) of (/for) *sku bla* and makes a petition;<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In the following text the petitioner appears as Bshan lug bzhin. See Text 3.  
<sup>21</sup> *yul ris*: country boundary (Thomas 1951: 399–400).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas 1951: 400–401, no. 102; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 442.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas 1951: 152, no. 45; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 427.

- B1–2. [As to the question relating to] the *lag dgra*, [we] welcome the cracks drawn by [the divinity] *sman* at the centre of the shoulder blade.<sup>25</sup>

Text 5: IOL Tib N 744 (M.I.xv.0016)<sup>26</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. \$ // *yul sman la ma snying bzhin bzangs gchig*  
 A2. *gis gsol ste lag dgra la zhal bzhen taM m[a]*  
 A3. *bzhen sogs [chin? la? yo]s bu*  
 B1. *lo 'i ston / dkar gnag [gi rgyan?]*  
 B2. *'congs sam [myi] [*

[translation]

- A1–2. To [the divinity] *yul sman*, a person such as Ma snying bzhin bzangs makes a petition;  
 A2–3. [Shall we] lift [our] faces against *lag dgra* or not?  
 A3–B2. To [the cracks at] the centre of the shoulder blade, [I ask,] in the autumn of the Hare year, [will we] have any kinds of wheat ears or not?<sup>27</sup>

The conventional descriptions of this group may be summarised as petitioners making petitions, asking several questions addressed to a single divinity or several divinities, for which it was often necessary to consult the cracks on certain areas of the shoulder blade. Their stereotyped expressions are schematised as follows:

(1) divinity *la* petitioner *gsol te*

<sup>24</sup> *bres*: Although *sku bla'i bres* can be regarded as in apposition to the subsequent *snying bzhin bzangs*, yet I prefer to translate it as “[Ma] snying bzhin bzangs offers *bres* of (/for) *sku bla*” by taking *bres* as an offering object. *bres* usually means “manger” or “spread” in Old Tibetan but it doesn’t seem to fit the context here, rather it might be interpreted as the misspelling for *'bras* (=rice?) or *'bras bu* (=fruit). Among the various objects being dedicated to *sku bla*, probably in the course of the ceremony of *sku bla*, *'bras* is enumerated as well as wheat (*khar* and *gnag*) (M.I.xxxiii.2; see Thomas 1951: 386, no. 79). Likewise some fruits and vegetables (= *'bras bu*) such as a kind of persimmon (*sta dka' = star ka*) and radishes (*lha phug = la phug*) appear as offerings to entertain *sku bla* (M.I.ix.4, see Thomas 1951: 387, no. 81; Wang and Chen 1986, no. 426).

<sup>25</sup> *sogs mcin* (*jmchin*): *mchin* means “midriff” or “liver” and here I regard it as designating the centre ridge part of the shoulder blade.  
*lag dgra dang*: I interpret it as *lag dgra la* instead of *dang*, since *dang* (=and) does not seem to be intelligible here.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas 1951: 399, no. 98; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 438.

<sup>27</sup> *dkar gnag* [*gi rgyan?*]: According to Thomas, *dkar* and *gnag* are used for the distinction between different kinds of wheat. *rgyan* refers “ornament, decoration,” and here it is likely to mean “ears” of wheat (Thomas 1951: 325–26).

(2) a certain area of the shoulder blade *la* questions (*mchi am myi mchi*)

I would like to make some comments on each category found in these stereotyped expressions, such as divinities, petitioners, areas of the shoulder blade, and questions.

### Divinity

Thomas postulated that *rtse bla dang rtse sman* was a title of a person, translating it as “head-lama (?) and head physician” to whom applications for a medical prescription are made.<sup>28</sup> However, *g.yang*, *rtse sman*, *rtse bla*, and *yul sman* can be identified with entities to whom several questions are directed here and should be considered as the localised divinities in the Mīrān region, as Stein has rightly suggested.<sup>29</sup> I agree with Stein’s statement that *sman* is a popular deity or spirit in Old Tibetan divination texts. Among the dice divination texts, we actually find several types of *sman*: *mtsho sman*, *gnam sman*, *g.yu sman*, *brag sman*, *byang sman*, *klu sman*, *mu sman*, *se sman*, *sman be kog*, *sman bkra gnyan*, *sman cung ngun*, *sman rgod da chen*, *sman rgod shele*, and *sman rgod spangs she le*. They seem to function as key terms that trigger divination results (auspicious or inauspicious). In other words, the results of divination are adjudged and assured by their existence. In the woodslips found in eastern Turkestan, these divinities are consistently mentioned in connection with scapulimancy or other rituals. In contrast, the *sku bla* found in Text 4 does not appear to be a divinity to whom questions are addressed. The term *sku bla*, as studied in detail by Ariane Macdonald-Spanien,<sup>30</sup> probably refers to divinities derived from the ancestors of kings or rulers, who protect their descendants and are often in rapport with the sacred mountains.<sup>31</sup> Yet it is worth noting that in the Mīrān region, scapulimancy was performed with the help of local divinities,

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas 1951: 152, no. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Stein 1983: 201.

<sup>30</sup> Macdonald-Spanien 1971: 272–81 and 295–309.

<sup>31</sup> Ishikawa suggests that the *sku bla* found among the Mīrān woodslips could originally have been a Chinese local divinity or divinities in Mīrān, maintained from the period of Chinese control. After Tibetan control, Chinese local divinities in Mīrān were incorporated into the Tibetan *sku bla* cult but, if his suggestion is correct, *sku bla* in Mīrān was originally unrelated to Tibetan ancestors (Ishikawa 2008: 176–177). However, I think that *sku bla* needs to be discussed separately from local divinities, and I would suggest that *sku bla* in Mīrān was rooted not in a Chinese divinity but in a Tibetan one, even if local divinities in Mīrān reflect or coincide with those existing during the Chinese period.



such as *g.yang*, *rtse sman*, *rtse bla*, and *yul sman*, rather than *sku bla*, ancestor deities.

### Petitioner

Into the category of petitioners fall two confusing names: Ma snying bzhin bzangs and Bshan lug bzhin. These are quite strange names and are probably not intended as personal names. Instead, I assume them to be the kind of names that suggest epithetical or anonymous traits, designating figures engaged in this specific task.<sup>32</sup> The bearers of these names repeatedly play the role of making a petition toward local divinities in the course of performing scapulimancy, and are sometimes associated with such honorific modifiers as *sman gyi mnga thang* or *lha'i mnga' tang*, which I prefer to regard as “an expert in taking charge of *sman* or *lha*” or “a representative of *sman* or *lha*, who is a divinely authorised person.”<sup>33</sup> These two facts suggest that they have a close connection with local divinities and, furthermore, that these roles are possibly vocational for them.

Nevertheless, three other woodslips describe the absence of these figures in a kind of rituals relating to the supplication of such local divinities as *rtse bla*, *rtse sman*, *g.yang*, *yul lha yul bdag* (or *yul lha* and

<sup>32</sup> Thomas interpreted these words as adjective expressions and rendered them as “one kind as a mother’s heart” and “one mild as a sheep” (Thomas 1951: 398, no. 97 and 399, nos. 98 and 99).

<sup>33</sup> In IOL Tib N 17 (=M.I.0018), Ma snying bzhin [bzangs] is called *yu sman gyi mnga thang*. He/she is enumerated together with several objects such as flour, oil, *gchangs?*, *sug rgod* (a wild wood?) with silken tie, *gzha* (flesh?), barley, and *co ga* beverage (probably for libation). They can be specified as the objects offered to the divinity *yu sman*, probably dedicated by Ma snying bzhin [bzangs]. For this interpretation, I supplemented the text with an added *gis gsol* after *bzhin gcig*, as presented in the above mentioned scapulimancy woodslips IOL Tib N 58 etc. The text is as follows:

\$ /: / *yu sman gyi mnga thang ma snying bzhin gcig / phye [do] mar sran[g] phyed / gchangs (gtshang) rdzu'u gang / sug rgod dar sni chan gci[g] gzha nas khy[ol]r gang / cog skyem rdzu'u gang 'bring sky[ol]g lnga.*

(Thomas 1951: 398, no. 97; Wang and Chen 1986, no. 432)

A similar content recurs in IOL Tib N 1095 (=M.I.lviii.007), though the person called “an expert on *lha*” (*lha'i mnga' tang*) here is not Ma snying bzhin bzangs but Ra skyes bzhin bzangs. Nonetheless, almost the same offering objects seen in IOL Tib N 17 are enumerated again: beverage, *co ga* beverage, flour, oil, wood and an arrow with a silken string. The text is as follows:

\$ / / [je'u?] *lha 'i mnga' tang ra skyes bzhin bzangs gcig / skyem[s] rdze 'u gang co ga skyems rdze 'u gang phye bre gang mar sran gci[g] shing ris gcig mda' dar sna can gcig.*

(Thomas 1951: 441–42; Wang and Chen 1986, no. 425)

*yul bdag*), and *sman*.<sup>34</sup> These are considered to be tablets of appointment, assigning appropriate figures to certain ritual officiants, namely *zhal ta pa*, *sku gshen*, *lha bon pa*,<sup>35</sup> *mgon pa*, and *sug gzung*, most of which are still unfamiliar to us. As van Schaik shows, two figures appointed to *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen* (*blon* Mang gzugs and *blon* Mdo bzang) are “identified with the official rank of *blon*” and “seem to have been active in the region, as we see the same names in other manuscripts from Mīrān and Mazār Tāgh.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike in these tablets for appointments, within the records of actual events of scapulimancy or offering rituals the petitioners or caretakers of divinities consistently have ambiguous names. What has yet to be answered clearly is who they were and what these odd names meant. I would like to limit myself to speculating that these names are used for showing modesty and humility, or rather merely as the conventional phrases expressing humility and lowliness, with respect to the great local divinities under whom (or in devotion to whom) scapulimancy and rituals were carried out.

### Areas of the Shoulder Blade and Questions

After the initial routine phrase, the area of the shoulder blade is specified: “on the left side of the blade” (*sog g.yon la*) or “at the centre of the blade” (*sog mchin la*). As appears always to be the case with scapulimancy practices in general, in early Tibet it seems that each question required a consultation of the corresponding cracks made on a certain area of the shoulder blade.

As shown in all five texts above, among those questions usually bearing the alternative form *mchi am myi mchi*, “*lag dgra la zhal bzhen tam ma bzhen*” is the most popular matter of concern, yet its meaning still remains obscure. The harvest (*lo g.yang* in text 1, 2 and *dkar gang gi rgyan* in text 5) and a foreign enemy (*phyi dgra* in text 3) are proposed as the items of concern. Both of these topics are supposed to be official and formal matter of concern relating to the

<sup>34</sup> IOL Tib N 210 (=M.I.iv.60); IOL Tib N 255 (=M.I.iv.121); IOL Tib N 873 (=M.I.xxvii.15). Note that two of these are four-sided sticks with one end sharpened to a point. See van Schaik 2013: 245–46.

<sup>35</sup> According to Prof. Takeuchi’s investigation into the original woodslips, the text should be read as *lha bon pa*, rather than *lha bon po* (=“Divine Bon man”) as presented by Thomas (Thomas 1951: 394, no. 92).

<sup>36</sup> Van Schaik 2013: 247–48, and n. 44. He notes that the fact that two figures have the title *blon* in their names “suggests that the roles of *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen* ... need not have been vocational, but rather roles that could be adopted when appropriate in order to carry out specific rituals,” while supposing that they might be the patrons of rituals, rather than the officiants.

administration of Mīrān, rather than private topics of individual concern.

I shall now briefly introduce two woodslips of the other group, which include the answers to the preceding questions.

Text 6: IOL Tib N 189 (M.I.iv.35)<sup>37</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. \$ //sogs pa g.yas la // gshIn dra ma brtsan  
 A2. gchags dang bral lam ma bral // gdon gchags  
 B1. tsha che /

[translation]

- A1. To [the cracks on] the right side of the shoulder blade, [I ask,]  
 A1–A2. were [the signs of] a cluster of the dead<sup>38</sup> parted from the cracks<sup>39</sup> of the demon (*brtsan*) or not?  
 A2–B1. On the cracks of the demon (*gdon*), great heat.

Text 7: IOL Tib N 225 (M.I.iv.79)<sup>40</sup>

[transliteration]

- A1. \$ //sogs pa g.yas la //(text shaved away)  
 A2. na chu srid yod dam myed sha cad 'ong 'am my[i] '[o]ng  
 B1. mchin pa la srid pya // srid mchis bzang / so(po) phyogs  
 B2. nas [r]mang srI dang / [snyun?] srin gi ngo che /

[translation]

- A1. To [the cracks on] the right side of the shoulder blade, [I ask,]  
 A2. [...] is there water extension (/flow)<sup>41</sup> or not? Is the

<sup>37</sup> Thomas 1951: 400, no. 101; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 440.

<sup>38</sup> *gshIn dra ma*: Thomas regards *gshIn dra* as “the noose of death” (*gshin dra ba*) or “ghost” (*gshin 'dre*) and *ma* as the negative applied to the adjective *brtsan*. However, Uray (1962) demonstrated, through the analysis of *dra ma drangs* in the Old Tibetan (whence dictionaries give the following interpretations; (1) “grate, net, net-work,” (2) “experienced, learned”), that *dra ma* can be used to refer to an “army or troop sent on an enterprise or campaign, expeditionary army.” Here I adopt Uray’s statement and read *gshIn dra ma* as “a group of the dead, a cluster of the dead.”

<sup>39</sup> *gchags*: Thomas renders this as “attached, possession” (*chags pa*). Yet, because *gchags* is supposed to be the derivative form of *gcog pa*, “to break, to crack,” here I regard it as denoting the cracks produced on the shoulder blade.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas 1951: 400, no. 100; Wang and Chen 1986: no. 439.

<sup>41</sup> *chu srid*: This could be regarded as having the same meaning as *chab srid* “rule, territory, power,” but here it would be more reasonable to take it as “the

- shortage (/exhaustion) of flesh coming or not?
- B1. [Consulting the cracks] at the centre [of the shoulder blade], as for the prognostication of the extension,<sup>42</sup> there exists the [water] extension and good.
- B1–2. From the boundary (/ edge),<sup>43</sup> signs of the evil spirits (*srI*) of the horse (/ the dead)<sup>44</sup> and the evil spirits (*srin*) of disease are great.

Names of either the divinity or the petitioner are absent from these two woodslips. Questions are listed after the area of the shoulder blade, “on the right side of the shoulder blade” (*sogs pa g.yas la*) or “at the centre” (*mchin la*). Each question is much more ambiguous than those of the above mentioned five texts, but they can be summarised as relating to water (*chu srid*), flesh (*sha cad*), and the dead (*gshIn dra ma*). While the answer in text 6 is devoid of any explanation, simply stating “on the cracks of the demon (*gdon*), great heat,” text 7 displays more comprehensive answers: “there exists the [water] extension and good (*srId mchis bzang*),” which should undoubtedly be auspicious, and “signs of evil spirits are great ([*r*]mang *srI dang* / [*snyun?*] *srin gi ngo che*),” which is inauspicious. In any case, the main purpose of these two woodslips seems to record the answers along with their corresponding questions; thus other information such as the divinity and petitioner are left out. This clearly points to demons and evil spirits as exerting great influence on the divination results, namely on the daily life at Mīrān. According to this view, these woodslips have a different significance from the other five.

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extension or the flow of water,” fitting with the following question related to *sha cad*, “the shortage or exhaustion of flesh.”

<sup>42</sup> *srId*: Although I have read *srId* before as “the extension of the cracks which spread from the heating point of the shoulder blade” (Takeuchi and Nishida 2004: 11), here I am inclined to modify the reading to “[water] extension,” which is more likely to accord with the previously asked question.

<sup>43</sup> *so(/po) phyogs*: This may refer to the edge of the shoulder blade, namely “[consulting on the cracks on] the edge [of the shoulder blade].”

<sup>44</sup> *rmang sri*: While I have translated this before as “a demon of horse” (Takeuchi and Nishida 2004: 11), I would like to present another possibility here as “evil spirits of the dead” by providing an example from the dice divination texts (Pt. 1046B: ll. 14–16, and IOL Tib J 740: ll. 151–53):

*rmang ba las phan bar 'ong ngo dbul ba las phyug por 'ong ngo // nyon mos*  
 (/nyong mongspa) shing sdug bsngal ba las ni skyid par 'ongste mo bzang rab  
 bo // .

According to this example, *rmang ba* (= *rmong ba*) may designate “the state of unconsciousness” or “the state of death,” in contrast to *phan ba* “to make a person revive.” The latter, *phan ba*, occurs in Old Tibetan funeral rituals (see Imaeda 1981). This assumption is consistent with the meaning given for *rmang ba* (= *rmong ba*) “to be obscured, obscurity.”

### 3. Conclusion

Woodslips from the Tibetan imperial military fort at Mīrān show that scapulimancy was performed with the help of local divinities such as *rtse bla*, *rtse sman*, *g.yang*, and *yul sman*. The person who takes charge of these divinities addresses several questions related to enemies, harvest, water, food, and the dead. All of these are considered to be significant for the maintenance of the daily life at Mīrān, a military settlement, rather than being mere personal matters. Presumably, a few specific people fulfilled the roles of asking the local divinities about daily life matters through scapulimancy, as well as propitiating them by offering various objects. What is striking here is the anonymity implied by their names, such as Ma snying bzhin bzangs, Bshan lug bzhin, and possibly Ra skyes bzhin bzangs. What do their anonymous names mean? Did they belong to the non-Tibetan ethnic groups or were they required to remain anonymous or under a pseudonym in the presence of the local divinities? To answer these questions, we must collect many more examples of names of specialists engaged in ritual directed toward the local divinities, as well as identify personal names among the non-Tibetan ethnic groups. Thus, for the time being, their identities remain an unsolved problem.

Based on the above evidence, I consider scapulimancy procedure in early Tibet to be as follows: first, questions were addressed to certain local divinities by a petitioner who probably served as their caretaker. These questions were simultaneously recorded on a woodslip (such as Texts 1 to 5). After producing cracks on a sheep's shoulder blade using a heated stick, answers were brought forth by interpreting the cracks on the shoulder blade's designated area. They were likewise written down on a woodslip (such as Texts 6 and 7), together with the corresponding questions. Usually, nothing was recorded on the shoulder blade itself, except for words that strengthened or enhanced the divination's effect.

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