

The Himalayan gold masks from the Eurasian perspective

Tao Tong^{1,*} and Linhui Li²

1. Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100710.

2. Cultural Relics Conservation Institute of Tibet Autonomous Region, Lhasa, Tibet 850015.

* Corresponding author, email: tongtao66@yahoo.com.

Keywords: Burial customs–Tibet–history; cultural communications–Eurasian Continent; face masks–Himalaya Region.

Abstract

To date, five gold masks have been found in the middle and western Himalayan region, from the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County and the Gurugyam Cemetery in Gar County in Tibet, China, the Samdzong Cemetery in Mustang, Nepal and the Malari Cemetery in Uttar Pradesh, India. The dates of these gold masks are all around the 1st–2nd centuries CE; they are different in size but all made with the repoussé technique and sewn to textiles. Most of the facial features of the masks are of the Mongoloid race. This burial custom has deep root in the Eurasian Continent; the funeral masks in different areas might have independent origins and developing paths, but mutual influence and exchange among neighboring areas are also apparent.

Discoveries of gold masks

The western section of the Himalayas centered by the western Tibet has been thought to be a geographic niche that is secluded from surrounding civilizations. Since the beginning of this century, however, a series of archaeological excavation has led scholars to realize that in the vast desolate region there have been sizable settlements and distinguished cultures in the valleys cutting through the Himalayas before the Middle Age, and that the region was intimately interacting with surrounding cultures of the time. As a testimony, the gold masks discovered in the region bear out intimate connection with the broader Eurasian continent.

To date, five gold masks have been found in the middle and western sections of the Himalayas, including two items from the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County, one item from the Gurugyam Cemetery in Gar County, both in Tibet, China, one item from the Samdzong Cemetery in Mustang, Nepal, and one item from the Malari Cemetery in Uttar Pradesh, India.

1. One item from Gurugyam Cemetery. The item was discovered in 2012 in tomb M1 of the Gurugyam

Cemetery. Square in shape, it is 4.5cm long, 4.3cm wide, and 0.1cm thick. Made of a gold sheet, it is painted with red, black, and white pigments on the obverse to depict a human face. The two eyes are rendered in black, the contour and the facial features in red, and the white teeth in the mouth were outlined with black color. The chin is painted with three whiskers. Eight holes are evenly punctuated along the edge; they must have been used for stitching the mask to the backing. The reverse side displays the imprint of pressing. Based on radiocarbon dating of human bone samples, the tomb can be dated to the 2nd century CE (Figure 1).

2. One Item from Zone I of the Chuvthag Cemetery. The item was discovered in tomb M1 in Zone I of the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County. 14.2cm long, 14cm wide, and 0.01cm thick, it is comprised of a crown piece and a face piece, which are stitched together. The crown piece, rectangular in shape, is decorated with three battlements with three tiers and a dome-shaped top and three pairs of birds; except for one, the birds turn their backs to the tiers; between the second and third tiers at the left side a wheat ear-like objects appears between the two birds. In the middle of the three tiers are three goats, all facing to the left and having their horns curling. The face piece, which is trapezoid, is partially overlapped by the crown and stitched to the latter with silk threads. Details of the brows, eyes, noses, and mouth are carefully depicted; even the philtrum and nasolabial folds are shown. The incised lines on the crown and face are



Figure 1 The gold mask unearthed at Gurugyam Cemetery in Gar County, Tibet.

outlined with red pigment. The holes along the contour of the mask are punctuated in pair; the back of the mask retain layers of silk textile and knotted lace. Apart from the silk textile, the crown piece is further reinforced with thin wooden sheets, which are bound to the silk textile with lace. Based on the radiocarbon dates of animal bones, the tomb can be dated to the 2nd-1st centuries BCE (Figures 2 and 3).

3. One Item from Zone II of the Chuvthag Cemetery. The item was unearthed in 2013 at Zone II of the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County. Oval in shape, it is 5.5cm long, 4.1cm wide and 0.01cm thick. The contour of the face and the brow, eyes, mouth, and nose are

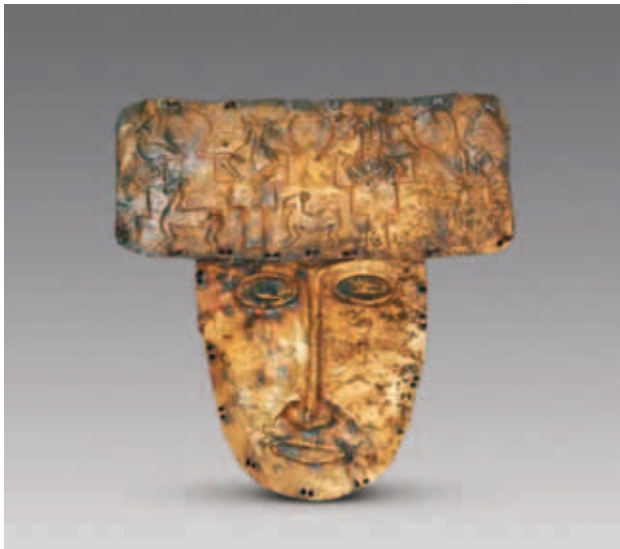


Figure 2 The gold mask unearthed at Zone I of the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County, Tibet (obverse).

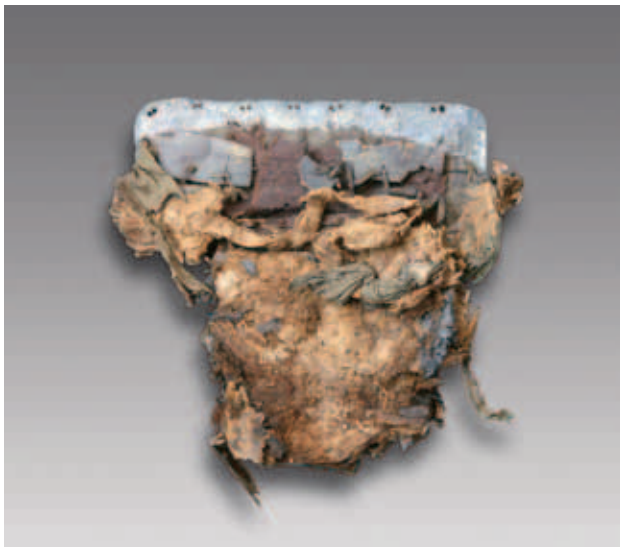


Figure 3 The gold mask unearthed at Zone I of the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County, Tibet (reverse).

impressed out. The chin is pointed, the eyes in the shape of almond, the nose long, and the mouth small. The rim is bent backward. The five organs are further highlighted with red pigments. The date of this item is close to that item from Zone I mentioned above (Figure 4).

4. One item from the Malari Cemetery. It was discovered in 1986–1987 by Indian archaeologists at the Malari Cemetery in the Himalayas in Uttar Pradesh, India. Trapezoid in shape, it is 8cm long, 4.5–7cm wide, 0.09mm thick. The mask has a long and thick nose, a closed mouth, and ten holes at the rim. The tomb is dated to the 1st century BCE (Figure 5).

5. One item from the Samdzong Cemetery. It was



Figure 4 The gold mask unearthed at Zone II of the Chuvthag Cemetery in Zanda County, Tibet.

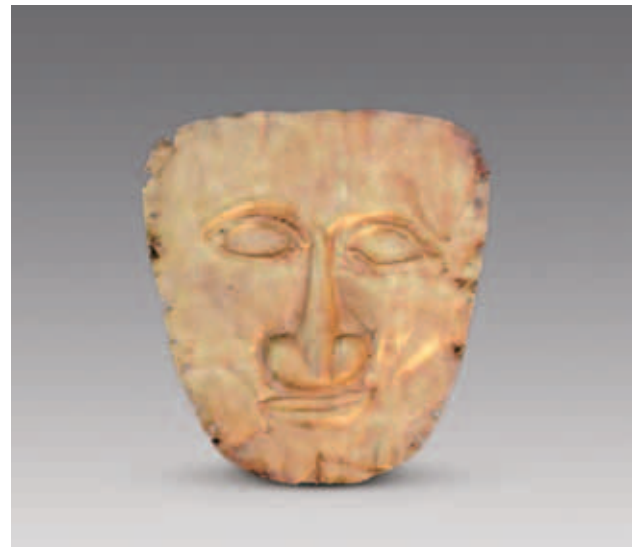


Figure 5 Gold mask unearthed at the Malari Cemetery in Uttar Pradesh, India (Courtesy of Prof. R. C. Bhatt from Department of History and Archaeology, HNB Garwhal University, India).

discovered in 2011 by American archaeologists in tomb no. 5 at the Samdzong Cemetery in Mustang, Nepal. Trapezoidal in shape, this mask is 15.1cm long, 12.8cm wide maximum, 0.01cm thick. On the mask the eye sockets, nose, teeth, mustache, and eye wrinkle are all drawn out with red pigment, and the brows and eyeballs with black pigment. Holes are densely punctuated along the rim. In overall shape, the item is similar to the item from the Gurugyam Cemetery (Figure 6). According to the excavators, the item is decorated with rows of color glass beads in the forehead area. It is dated to the 4th–5th centuries CE.

All the masks have been discovered in the southern and northern foothills of the western Himalayas. Most of them are dated to around the 1st–2nd centuries CE; only the Samdzong item is dated to the 4th–5th centuries CE. They share many characteristics. They are made of gold sheet of various sizes; two of them are life size, whereas the other three are miniatures, about 4–5cm long. The five organs are made with repoussé method, and they are highlighted with cinnabar or ochre; sometimes the mustache, eyebrows, and teeth are drawn out with black or white pigments. It is notable that most masks have holes along the rim so that they can be stitched to the backing materials with threads. The excavation data suggest that they have been attached to textiles, some of which are preserved. The miniatures would need the backing textiles to cover the human face, and the masks themselves become symbolic. Apart from size, the masks differ mainly in facial features. Most masks are of the Mongoloid stock, but the Malari one has a big nose, which is characteristic of the Indo-European stock.

Archaeological culture embodied by the gold masks

The gold masks have been discovered in the upper reach of Langqên Zangbo of the middle and western Himalayas and from two types of tombs: square cave ones with ramps and shaft earthen pit ones with stone chamber. The former type of tombs is common in the Ngari area, whereas the latter type is rare. The two types occur in different natural environments and do not lend themselves to naming archaeological cultures.

After analyzing intact tombs, we find that the tombs yielding the gold masks and associating grave goods share common traits. They are mostly secondary burials; the occupants are laid on one side in flexed position. They are accompanied with a good number of sacrificial animals, and box-like wooden coffins. Associating grave goods, which are comprised of lacquer, bronze, iron, and pottery wares, textile, weaving tools, and faience beads, are unique yet similar in form and assemblage. The common forms of the pottery wares, in particular, entitle us to unite the cemeteries into one archaeological culture. The culture as such is distributed in the southern and northern foothills of the western Himalayas, encompassing the southwest of Ngari area, the Mustang area of Nepal,



Figure 6 Gold mask unearthed at the Samdzong Cemetery in Mustang, Nepal (Photograph by Prof. Mark Aldenderfer, University of California, Merced).

the Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh of India. Considering other archaeological discoveries, it may even encompass the Ladakh area of India, although gold mask has not been discovered there. It lasts from the 1st century BCE through the 5th–6th centuries CE.

According to Chinese and Tibet historical texts, the only polity active in the western Tibet in this period was Zhang Zhung. In geography, the upper reach of Langqên Zangbo was the core of the Zhang Zhung Kingdom. The kingdom first appears in Chinese text only after the Tang Dynasty as “羊同 (Yangtong).” The *Tang Huiyao* (Collected statutes of the Tang Dynasty), *Tongdian* (Comprehensive institutions), and *Zizhi Tongjian* (Comprehensive mirror to aid in government) describe the territory and customs of the former Yangtong Kingdom after Tubo’s annexation. They mention that the chiefs of the Yangtong Kingdom were offered “gold noses and silver teeth,” which could well have been gold masks, after death.

The Himalayan gold masks from the Eurasian perspective

The fact that the archaeological cultures of the western Tibet have a good deal of commonalities with those of the southern Xinjiang during the Han-Jin period indicates that the two regions had been in close contact since the early Iron Age. The common cultural traits of the two regions, which are a part of the Silk Road, provide ground for us to compare the Himalayan gold masks with analogous artifacts from Xinjiang and neighboring regions and examine them in the broader context of the Eurasian cultural movements.

In the Eurasian continent, the gold masks were first discovered in North Africa and West Asia. Ancient kings

and elite of Mesopotamia and eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, Mycenae, Kosovo, Thrace, Ur, and northeastern Saudi Arabia, used to wear gold masks, eye covers, and mouth covers after death. Such mortuary customs appeared in the 3rd millennium BCE and lasted through the second half of the 1st millennium BCE. Around the turn of the 1st century CE, it was used and propagated by the Parthians to the border of the Persian Empire. In the Mediterranean area the gold masks were stitched to textiles, but secured to the face of the deceased through four holes in the corners, which was carried on by the Parthians (Figure 7). The joint eye covers, a simplified form of the gold mask, emerged in use first in Caucasus, but spread quickly to the northern Black Sea and the Crimean Peninsula. In the first half of the 1st millennium BCE they were brought along the Silk Road to Central Asia, and further to Xinjiang. Metal masks, eye covers, and mouth covers from Persia were combined with silk face covers from the Central Plains in Xinjiang to produce a new form of mask. The silk face cover was originally used to wrap the heads or cover the faces in the Central Plains before the Qin and Han Dynasties. At the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the masks or eye covers or mouth covers began to be placed upon or stitched onto silk cover, which bear ornaments of Persian style, in nomads' tombs in Central Asia. Sometimes, the silk covers were cut into the shape of the eye covers, possibly due to the lack of metal or for the sake of convenience of manufacturing. In the second half of the 1st millennium BCE, in western and southeastern Siberia, Urals, and Ukraine steppe, and Carpathian Basin, such eye covers, mouth covers, and masks were also stitched onto silk covers, as in Central Asia, abandoning the old method of being secured to the heads of the deceased with threads.



Figure 7 Parthian gold mask unearthened at Nineveh in northern Iraq (Photo credit: The Trustees of the British Museum).

These materials suggest that this method of fixing mask came from Central Asia to Siberia and East Europe, rather than directly from northern Black Sea and Caucasus.

In eastern Eurasia, funeral mask were widely used from the turn of the 1st century through the 6th century CE. Its emergence, diffusion, and spread might have been connected with Parthian and Sasanian Persia. Central Asia, including Xinjiang, appears to be the concentration areas of gold masks. In the Turpan area, it is common to find silver or copper eye covers stitched upon silk covers, which are wrapped around the heads of the deceased. The silk covers are usually colorful and decorated with Persian style motifs, such as pearl roundels, ribbon-holding birds, confronting horses, pig heads, etc. In Kyrgyzstan, two gold masks have been discovered from the Shamshi (4–5th century CE, Figure 8) and Džallak Džebe (3rd–5th century CE). In Xinjiang, two items have also been discovered, including one made of gold from a tomb at Poma (1st–5th century CE, Figure 9) in Zhaosu (Mongolküre) and one of gilt iron from Turpan. A rectangular gold foil stitched upon a white hemp cover from the Yingpan Cemetery in Yuli (Lopnur) County (2nd century CE, Figure 10) may be considered as a variation of the gold masks. The head of the deceased was wrapped with silk and cotton in addition to the mask.

In the Minusinsk Basin, hundreds of clay and plaster masks, molded out of the faces of the deceased, have been discovered in tombs (Вадецкая 2009). This funeral custom appeared in the 1st–2nd centuries, became widely used in the 3rd century, and lasted through the 5–6th centuries, which parallel the history of masks in Xinjiang and the Himalayas. The white hemp cover with gold foil from Yingpan might have been the transitional format from the clay mask of Minusinsk to the gold mask of Himalaya.



Figure 8 Gold mask unearthened at Shamshi Cemetery in Chui Province, Kyrgyzstan (Courtesy of Dr. Christoph Baumer. Photo credit: National Historical Museum of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek).

In sum, from the turn of the 1st through the 5–6th centuries mask was widely used to cover the face of the deceased in Central Asia, Siberia and the Himalayas. The masks are mostly attached onto silk backing, which ingeniously conflates the metal mask tradition originated in the West and the silk cover originated in the East. The gold masks from the Himalayas, Xinjiang and neighboring areas must have been the products out of a common funeral tradition; because of the Silk Road it was possible to spread to different ethnic groups.

Functions of gold masks

The use of gold masks was widespread in space and time; they might have had starkly different functions in different areas and different times; it would be futile to attribute them to a single origin or ascribe a single function to them. But some function is common in any area or time. Gold is taken by all peoples to be a precious metal, and the users of the gold masks must have been high in social status and had better access to it; the gold masks therefore become the symbols of social identity and status. Gold is also an inert metal, thus having the functions of preserving and decorating the bodies, and perpetuating the functions. It is believed to immortalize the bodies of the users and provide an abode for the souls of them.

The early gold masks of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and eastern Mediterranean are believed to have these functions. They are thought to protect the mummies or bodies of the deceased; they are used to replace the injured, decayed or lost heads so as to ensure the unification of souls and the corpses, which may settle down in a different world. The archaeological discoveries in southern Siberia tell us that the masks are mostly made by non-gold materials, such as clay, plaster, and for this reason they are widely used. Their practical and religious values therefore belittle their social values. All these masks are associated with the secondary burial: the deceased were first placed in the open air or in a temporary tomb; after complete decomposition their bones were displaced into permanent tombs, which find manifestation in Chinese and Greek written records of Turkish mortuary rites. Few intact skeletons have been found; skulls are often missing, and masks are put in their place. The fact that some skulls are cut and other bones show signs of scraping indicates that the bodies are not left to the natural process of decomposition; rather, they are manually cleaned before interment. After the soft tissue of skulls is cleaned, all the hollows are filled with clay, and mask takes form. The most common mask is made of stucco, but sometimes it is coated with white plaster. Ethnographic data suggest that the mask symbolizes death, and it is made to separate the deceased from the living so as not to harm the latter; it is also believed to be the abode of the souls of the deceased.

The gold masks of the Himalayas might have had the same function. The written records describing the “Yangtong Kingdom” mentioned above do not provide



Figure 9 Gold mask unearthed at the Poma Cemetery in Zhaosu County, Ili Prefecture, Xinjiang (Photo credit: Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum).



Figure 10 Hemp cloth face cover with gold foil sewn unearthed at Yingpan Cemetery in Yuli County, Bayin'gholin Prefecture, Xinjiang (Photo credit: National Museum of Chinese History and Cultural Relics Bureau of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region).

any explanation for “gold nose and silver teeth,” but offer an important clue. The chiefs are subject to a series of post-mortem treatment, including “the removal of the brain” and “the cutting of the five viscera,” to which attest

the archaeological data of the Gurugyam and Samdzong Cemeteries. At the Samdzong Cemetery, 76% of the skeletons bear indubitable trace of scraping, which was done apparently after death. Such trace does not come from random hacking or intense hacking; rather, it comes from flesh removing and dismembering after death. At the Gurugyam Cemetery, no such trace is visible on human bones, but it is evident that the bodies were left decomposed before interment. Most joint burials are secondary ones, and the bones have experienced a natural process of decay.

In northern China, a number of gold and silver masks have been discovered in tombs of the Liao Dynasty elite. It is opined that such custom is inspired by the funeral customs of the “Hu-barbarians of the Western Regions.” It is impossible to ascertain yet that these gold and silver masks have any connection with the masks of Central Asia and Siberia before the 5th century, but they do show some common traits in funeral customs: the use of the masks come with the intentional cutting of the bodies.

It appears that the cultures of the users of the masks made of gold or other materials pay much attention to the treatment of bodies: they either remove the brain and innards to make mummies, or dismember the bodies, or leave the bodies to the natural process of decay, during which the natural forces (wind drying, animal biting) get rid of the flesh; the bodies are therefore no longer integrate. The masks are then used to decorate the face before the bodies are interred to restore the integrity of the bodies. The red pigment that highlights the five facial organs make the bodies look alive; the precious metal and silk backing not only maintain the dignity of the deceased, but also display the wealth and social status of them. In the meantime, the quality of gold suggests that the users wish to extend the perpetuity of the materials to the bodies of the deceased so that they may come back to life or live as immortals in another world.

The religious concept behind the funeral custom may vary from region to region, but this has to be substantiated with data. In the Himalayas, the historical records of the ancient Zhang Zhong Kingdom and the quantitative animal sacrifice suggest that the gold masks be related to the aboriginal Bön religion. The Bön religion, as Shamanism in northern Asia, is animism, and connected with it. Even today in the northern steppe it is still common to see masks in rural areas; and this must have had connection with Shamanism and have special ways of expression.

Conclusion

The gold masks, silk, and other utensils discovered at the Gurugyam Cemetery manifest the depth and width of connection of the Tibetan Plateau with surrounding regions in the early Iron Age. Our analysis of the gold masks reveals a united cultural system in the Himalayas in the early Iron Age. The cultural system is intimately connected with Xinjiang and the South Asian

subcontinent, and through Xinjiang with the Central Plains, Central Asia, and the Eurasian steppe; one may say that Xinjiang links up the Himalayas with the Central Plains and Central Asia. The appearance and diffusion of the gold masks is a product of the opening of the Silk Road. The funeral use of the gold masks takes place in the context of the Eurasian cultural movement. Although mask develops in different ways in different regions, there is obvious connection with each other, especially among Central Asia, Xinjiang, and the Himalayas. As an important indicator of the connectivity of the pan-Eurasian continent, the gold masks embody the funeral concept, religious belief, and worldview, especially the treatment of the bodies, the ideas of immortality and renunciation, and the symbolic value of social status of the elite.

References

- Aldenderfer, Mark. 2013. Variation in mortuary practice on the early Tibetan plateau and the high Himalayas. *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1(Inaugural issue):293–318.
- Bellezza, John Vincent. 2014. *Visages of the past: the golden burial masks of Upper Tibet, the Himalaya and northwestern Xinjiang*. <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/november-2013/>. Accessed on 2014-01-23.
- Benkő, Mihály. 1992–1993. Burial masks of Eurasian mounted nomad peoples in the migration period. *Acta orientalia academiae scientiarum Hungaricae* 46 (2/3):113–31.
- Bhatt, R. C., Kenneth L. Kvamme, Vinod Nautiyal et al. 2008–2009. Archaeological and geophysical investigations of high mountain cave burials in Uttarakhand Himalaya, India. *Indo-Kōko-Kenkyū* インド考古研究 (Studies in South Asian art and archaeology) 30:1–16.
- Finkel, Michael and Cory Richards. 2012. Sky caves of Nepal. *National geographic* 222(4):114–35.
- Institute of Archaeology, CASS and Cultural Relics Conservation Institute of Tibet Autonomous Region. 2014. 西藏阿里地区噶尔县故如甲木墓地 2012 年发掘报告 (The excavation of the Gurugyam Cemetery in Gar County, Ngari Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region in 2012). *Kaogu xuebao* 考古学报 (*Acta archaeologica Sinica*) 4:563–87.
- Naddeo, Michelangelo. 2014. *The Hungarian death mask*. <http://www.michelangelo.cn>. Accessed on 2014-01-23.
- Вадецкая, Эльга Б. 2009. *Древние маски Енисея* (The ancient Yenisei masks from Siberia). Санкт-Петербург - Красноярск: Версо.

Postscript

The original paper published in *Kaogu* 考古 (Archaeology) 2015:2:92–102 with 12 illustrations was authored by Tao Tong 全涛 and Linhui Li 李林辉. This abridged version is prepared by Tao Tong and translated into English by Liangren Zhang 张良仁.