

# Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet

BY

BERTHOLD LAUFER  
Curator of Anthropology

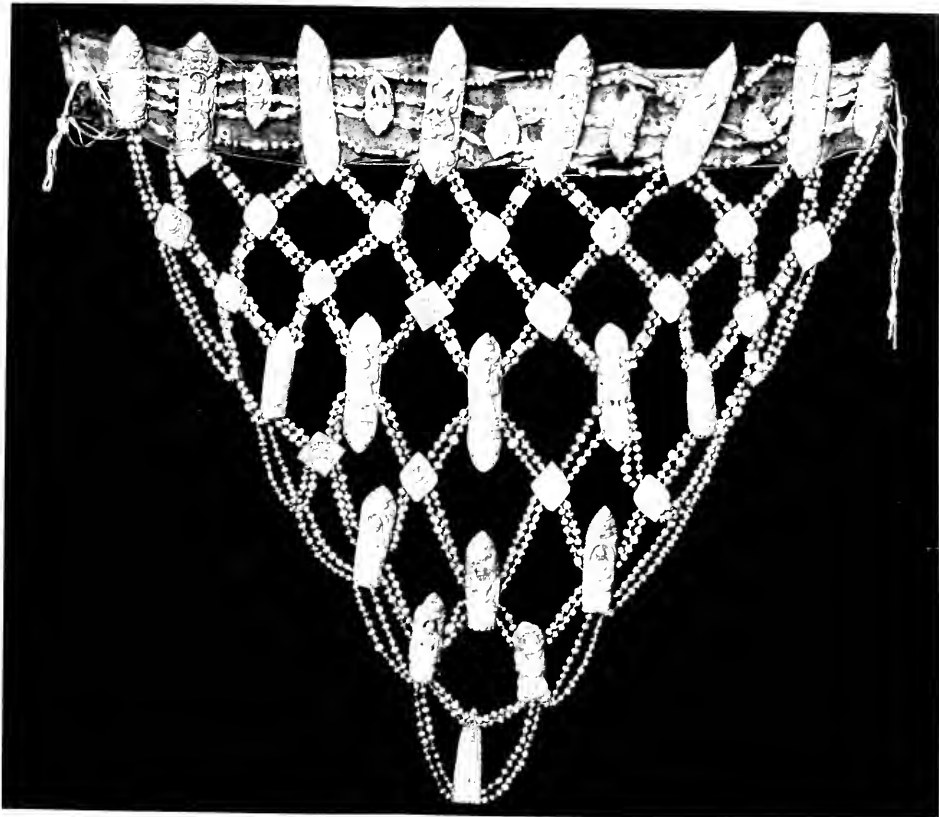


FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

CHICAGO

1923





CEREMONIAL BONE APRON, TIBET.  
GIFT OF ARTHUR B. JONES, 1922.

1875

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

CHICAGO, 1923

LEAFLET

NUMBER 10

## Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet

Among the many customs of Tibet none has attracted wider attention than the use of human skulls and other bones both for practical purposes and in religious ceremonies. Weird stories to this effect were brought to the notice of the occidental world by mediæval travellers who visited Cathay or the court of the Great Khan during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the Tibetan collections (Hall 32, West Gallery) obtained by the Blackstone Expedition in 1908-10 may be viewed (Case 70) bowls consisting of a human cranium, from which libations of liquor in honor of the gods are poured out on the altars of the Lama temples. Some of these skull-bowls are elaborately mounted and decorated, lined with brass or gilded copper and covered with a convex, oval lid that is finely chased and surmounted by a knob in the shape of a thunderbolt (Sanskrit *vajra*, Tibetan *dorje*), the symbol of Indra which is in constant use in nearly all Lamaist ceremonies. The skull itself rests on a triangular stand, cut out with a design of flames, at each corner of which is a human head. These settings are frequently very costly, being in gold or silver, and studded with turquoise and coral.

In the case (68) showing musical instruments which are used for worship in the Lama temples are on view small tambourines made of two human skull-caps cemented together by means of a wooden disk.

These drums are shaken while reciting prayers, to mark the intervals between different incantations. There are trumpets made of human thigh-bones, the bones of criminals or those who have died a violent death being preferred for this purpose. These trumpets are consecrated by the priests with elaborate incantations and ceremonies. In the course of this ritual the officiating priest bites off a portion of the bone-skin; otherwise the blast of the trumpet would not be sufficiently powerful to summon, or to terrify the demons. On one side the trumpet has two apertures styled "nostrils of the horse." This is a mythical horse believed to carry the faithful after their death into Paradise; and the sound of this trumpet reminds the people of the neighing of this horse.

A most interesting addition was recently made to this group of objects by the exhibition (in Case 74) of a very valuable bone apron composed of forty-one large plaques exquisitely carved from supposedly human femora and connected by double chains of round or square bone beads. Such aprons are used by magicians in the Lama temples during the performance of mystic, sacred ceremonies accompanied by shamanistic dances, chiefly for the purpose of propitiating evil spirits and exorcising devils. The plaques are decorated with figures of Çivaitic and Tantric deities, some of which are represented in dancing postures.

At the outset, these relics of an age of savagery and a barbarous cult leave no small surprise in a land whose faith is avowedly Buddhistic, and whose people have made such signal advances in literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, and art industries. Buddha was an apostle of peace and universal love, averse to bloodshed, and forbidding the taking of human and animal life. He repudiated all outward ceremonies and offerings, preaching salvation through the efforts of the

mind and the perfection of the heart. But there is room for many extremes in both nations and individuals.

Friar Odoric of Pordenone, who travelled from 1316 to 1330, dwells at some length on the burial customs of the Tibetans, and tells the story of how the corpses are cut to pieces by the priests and devoured by eagles and vultures coming down from the mountains; then all the company shout aloud, saying, "Behold, the man is a saint! For the angels of God come and carry him to Paradise." And in this way the son deems himself to be honored in no small degree, seeing that his father is borne off in this creditable manner by the angels. And so he takes his father's head, and straightway cooks it and eats it; and of the skull he makes a goblet, from which he and all of the family always drink devoutly to the memory of the deceased father. And they say that by acting in this way they show their great respect for their father. It must be added, however, that this account is not based on personal observation, but on hearsay. William of Rubruk, a Flemish Franciscan, who visited the court of the Mongol Khan in 1253, mentions the same Tibetan practice and admits that he received his information from an eye-witness. The peculiar burial customs were a characteristic trait of the Tibetans by which their neighbors were deeply struck, and the story of this ceremonial freely circulated among the Mongols who were doubtless inclined to exaggerate also some of its features.

This Tibetan custom reveals a striking parallel to a record of Herodotus. In his account of Scythia, Herodotus (IV, 23) speaks among many other nations also of the Issedonians, who are located east of the Bald-Heads and were the farthest nation of which the Greek historian had any knowledge. "The Issedon-

ians," Herodotus relates, "have the following customs. When a man's father dies, all the near relatives bring sheep to the house; these are sacrificed, and their flesh cut into pieces, while at the same time the deceased man's body undergoes the like treatment. The two kinds of flesh are mixed together, and the whole is served at a banquet. The head of the dead man is dealt with in another way; it is stripped bare, cleansed, and set in gold. It then becomes an ornament on which they pride themselves, and is brought out year by year at the great festival which is observed by sons in honor of their father's death. In other respects the Issedonians are reputed to be observers of justice, and their women have equal authority with the men." Some scholars have assumed that the Issedonians represent a tribe akin to the present-day Tibetans or could even be their ancestors. Be this as it may, the coincidence of the fact of skull-worship among the two tribes would not constitute sufficient evidence for this theory, as the same or similar practice is encountered among widely different peoples.

The preceding case presents a peculiar form of ancestral worship, the son being intent on preserving the most enduring part of his father's body as a constant reminder, and drinking from his skull in his memory on the day of his anniversary. This, without any doubt, has been an indigenous practice in Tibet of considerable antiquity. Aside from this we meet in that country the use of human bones for purposes which move along an entirely diverse line of thought.

The Jesuit Father Andrada, who visited western Tibet in 1625, observed that the Lamas, when engaged in prayer, were in the habit of sounding trumpets made of metal or the bones of the dead, and that the bones of human legs and arms served for making



these instruments. "They also have rosaries consisting of beads made from human skulls," he writes. "When I inquired why they employed bones for such purposes, the Lama who was a brother of the king, replied, "The people, at the hearing of such trumpets, cannot fail to be mindful of death. For the same reason we avail ourselves of the bones of the dead for rosary beads. Finally, in order to be still more imbued with this melancholy and sad remembrance, we drink from a cranium." According to the same Lama, the idea of death, no less than prayers, contributes to restrain our passions and to regulate our conduct. "These cups of the dead," he remarked, "prevent the people from becoming too much addicted to worldly pleasures, which are uncertain and fugitive, so that the drink develops into a spiritual antidote for passions and vices." This manner of reasoning is not Tibetan, but is decidedly Buddhistic and, as everything else pertaining to Buddhism, has filtered into Tibetan thought from India.

At the present time, as far as observations reach, it is not known that Tibetans preserve the skulls of deceased relatives as drinking vessels, although it may still happen that bones of relatives are kept in houses from motives of religious piety. There are ascetics, however, who make use of human skulls as eating bowls, in the same manner as they make beads for rosaries out of bits of bones. But this custom bears no relation to the ancient family cult of skulls which, as we have seen, presents a form of ancestral worship. The leaning of the Buddhist hermit toward skulls moves along quite a different line, and is prompted by customs adopted by the Tibetans with the Çivaitic worship from India. In this debased form of religion we find in Tibet numerous terrifying deities who wear wreaths of human skulls as necklaces, are clad with

human skins, or hold a bowl consisting of a cranium filled with blood. Such a bowl, for instance, is seen in the hand of Padmasambhava, who is still worshipped as the founder of Buddhism in Tibet (eighth century A.D.), and who besides the doctrine of Buddha introduced a system of wild magic and devil-dances connected with incantations and exorcisms (see image of Padmasambhava in Case 71, second shelf, east end).

In India, skulls were chiefly used by the Aghori or Augar, a Çivaitic sect of Fakirs and religious mendicants, which has now dwindled down to a very few members. They used human calvaria as bowls for eating and drinking. This was done as a part of their practice of self-abasement, and was associated with the cannibalistic habits permitted and encouraged by those ascetics.

The Chinese pilgrim Hsüan Tsang, who visited India in the seventh century, mentions "naked ascetics and others who cover themselves with ashes, and some who make chaplets of bone which they wear as crowns on their heads."

Amitābha, the Buddha of Endless Light (also called Amitāyus, "Endless Life"), who presides over the Paradise in the west (Sukhāvati), where every one of his devout adherents yearns to be reborn, was originally a deity of purely Buddhist character, being represented with a bowl holding a sort of nectar which confers immortality upon his devotees. In course of time, this bowl was replaced by a cranium, and it became customary to offer the god a cranium with an invocation of divine blessing for the donor; thus, another custom came into vogue, to utilize human crania as receptacles for the wine or other liquid offered to the temple-statues of the gods. For the purpose of selecting proper skulls, the Lamas have developed a system of craniology which imparts in-

struction as to the distinctive symptoms of good and bad skulls and the way to obtain prosperity when once the characteristics of a skull have been determined. It is essential that a skull designed for an offering to the gods should be that of a person known to have been profoundly religious, or to have possessed other high qualifications, such as rank, nobility, wisdom, or learning. Failing such a skull, others may serve as substitutes, and elaborate rules have been laid down to determine those suitable for sacrificial bowls or as offerings to the gods. Skulls of women and children born out of wedlock are unsuitable for sacred purposes. Among the very best are skulls of a clear white color like a brilliant shell, or of a glistening yellow like gold, or like a jewel without unevenness, or of equal thickness and of small cubic capacity, or with a sharp ridge stretching far into the interior like a bird's beak or a tiger's claw, or hard and heavy as stone, or smooth to the touch and polished, or with no line on it save clearly defined sutures. These and similar instructions are contained in a small Tibetan book, which teaches the method of discriminating between good and bad skulls and how, by offering a skull (Sanskrit *kapāla*) to Amitābha, prosperity and worldly goods may be secured. This lore is not Tibetan, but has emanated from mediæval India. The background of the treatise in question is Indian: the Indian caste-system is in evidence, for the skulls of Kshatriyas, Brahmans, and Vaiçyas are good, while those of common people and Chandālas are bad. There are indications from which a good skull may be told in a live person: if he has soft and smooth hair of lustrous black, if his forehead is broad and his eyebrows thick, if on his forehead there is a mark, if he has most teeth in his upper jaw, if the tip of his tongue can touch his nose (this is a peculiarity

possessed in even a greater degree by all Buddhas), if his voice is high-pitched and his complexion as fresh as that of a youth, if in walking he throws his left hand and left foot out first.

The ceremony of offering a skull to Amitābha is a complex and elaborate procedure, accompanied by a fixed ritual and many offerings of food arranged on the altar in a prescribed order. A thunderbolt wrapped around with strings of various colors is placed inside of the skull, the underlying idea being that a colored light will radiate from the heart of the officiating Lama, and conducted by the strings binding the thunderbolt will penetrate into the light emanating from the heart of the Buddha of Endless Light (Amitābha) whose statue is assumed to be alive. Through this optical contact and spiritual union, the god's soul will be aroused and communicate to the Lama innumerable blessings. From their united hearts will proceed a light which will remove the sorrows of the poor and fulfill all their wishes, and from the extreme end of this light will pour down a rain of jewels which will replenish all the regions of the world and the devotee's own abode. Holding the strings wrapped around the thunderbolt and raising the skull with both hands to his head, the officiating Lama proceeds to recite a prayer, the beginning of which is thus: "Descending from the wide expanse of heaven, Amitābha who art wise, who art the lord of wealth, whose body is as voluminous as the sun, who art full of precious sayings, thou with ornaments and garments of jewels, grant me thy blessing! Mighty one, grant me might! Bless me, thou powerful one! Thou glorious one, grant me blessings! Lord of life, give me life! Lord of riches, give me wealth, confer on me in endless amount all desirable worldly blessings!" Having thus implored the divine blessings, the

countenances of the gods in the temple-hall will show their pleasure by melting into light, which reaches to the heart of Amitābha and to the skull to be offered. The Lama then realizes that all his wishes have been fulfilled, and after an offering to the guardian and local deities, will wrap up the skull in silk coverings and hide it away in the store-house of the temple. The skull must be carefully concealed, and no one must be allowed to touch it; for in this case it would lose some of the qualities which it possesses, and the owner's luck would be impaired or perhaps even utterly destroyed.

A peculiar case has been recorded by the late W. W. Rockhill (*Land of the Lamas*, p. 273). In an uprising instigated by the Lamas in 1887 against the Catholic missionaries along the borders of eastern Tibet, the bones of Father Brioux killed in 1881 were taken from his grave, and his skull was made into a drinking-cup.

Whereas the use of enemies' skulls is extinct in Tibet, the idea itself is slumbering in the pictures and statues of Lamaist deities. A special class of these have been singled out to act as defenders of the faith and to destroy all enemies of the Buddhist religion. The main attribute of these militant demons is a wreath of human skulls surmounted by a thunderbolt. These skulls are naturally supposed to have been captured from enemies; they accordingly represent trophies and simultaneously convey a warning to others to avoid the same fate. Numerous examples of this kind may be seen in Tibetan paintings and statuary (cf. also the masks employed in the Tibetan mystery-plays, Hall I). In Case 80, at the north end of Hall 32, are on view several Tibetan sculptures on stone slabs. One of these, carved in black slate, represents a *Dākini*, a female sprite akin to our witches,

who holds in her left hand a skull-bowl filled with human blood; she has lifted the cover from the bowl, which she carries in her right hand. Her necklace consists of a row of human skulls.

In the Vinaya, the ancient code of monastic discipline of the Buddhists, monks are forbidden using skulls as alms-bowls, as was then customary among devil-worshipping sects.

The customs of a people may be better understood and evaluated by checking and correlating them with similar or identical usages of other nations.

The typical skull-bowl drinkers in times of antiquity were the ancient Scythians, Iranian tribes of roaming horsemen inhabiting southern Russia. Like the Malayans and other peoples, the equestrian Scythians, as described by Herodotus (IV, 64), were head-hunters. The Scythian soldier drank the blood of the first man he overcame in battle. The heads of all slain enemies were cut off and triumphantly carried to the king; in this case only was he entitled to a share of the booty, whereas he forfeited all claim, did he not produce a head. The scalps were likewise captured and suspended from the horse's bridle; the more scalps a man was able to show, the more highly he was esteemed. Cloaks were made by many from a number of scalps sewed together. The skulls of their most hated enemies were turned into drinking-cups, the outside being covered with leather, the inside being lined with gold by the rich. They did the same with the skulls of their own kith and kin if they had been at feud with them and vanquished them in the king's presence. When strangers of any account came to visit them, they handed these skulls around, the host telling how these were his relations who made war upon him, and how he defeated them; all this was regarded as proof of bravery. The practice of

the Scythians in capturing and preserving the skulls of slain enemies was doubtless inspired by the widely prevalent belief in the transference of the powers of the deceased to the victor, who, in accordance with this conception, was enabled to add the skill, prowess and courage of his dead enemy to his own.

Livy relates that the Boii, a Celtic tribe in upper Italy, in 216 B.C., carried the head of the Roman consul Lucius Posthumius into their most venerated sanctuary and, according to their custom, adorned the cranium with gold; it was used as a sacred vessel in offering libations on the occasion of festivals, and served as a drinking-cup to the priest and overseers of the temple.

Paulus Diaconus, in his History of the Langobards, writes that Albion, king of the Langobards, used the skull of Kunimund, king of the Gepids, as a drinking-cup, after defeating him in battle in A.D. 566 and taking his daughter, Rosmunda, for his wife. On the occasion of a merry banquet at Verona he ordered wine to be served to the queen in this bowl and enjoined her to drink gleefully with her father. This brutal act led to the king's assassination in 573 by an agent of his wife. In the mediæval poetry of the Germanic peoples (Edda) there are several allusions to the use of cranial drinking-cups.

Krumus, prince of the Bulgars, defeated in three campaigns the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros, who was slain in A.D. 811. The Bulgar had a fine, silver-lined drinking-cup made from his enemy's cranium. In A.D. 972 the Russian grand-duke, Svatoslav, succumbed in a battle against a Turkish tribe, the Pecheneg. It is recorded in the Russian chronicle of Nestor that Kurya, the ruler of the Pecheneg, had Svatoslav's skull prepared as a goblet trimmed with gold.

The fact that this was an ancient Turkish usage becomes evident also from the Chinese annals which have the following incident on record. When the ruler of the Hiung-nu (Huns), Lao-shang, who reigned from 175 to 160 B.C., had defeated the king of the Ta Yüe-chi (Indo-Scythians), he made a drinking-cup out of the latter's cranium. At a somewhat later date, when two Chinese envoys were sent to the Hiung-nu to conclude a treaty, they drank blood with the Turkish chiefs out of the same skull-bowl, in order to solemnize their vows. The sacrificial animal in this case was a white horse. Blood, as is well known, was of great significance with many peoples in affirming sacred agreements and keeping faith. According to the philosopher Huai-nan-tse, the ancient Chinese in such cases rubbed their lips with blood, while the inhabitants of Yüe (in southern China) made an incision in their arms.

The ceremonial use of human crania, consequently, must have been widely diffused in ancient times among Tibetan, Turkish, Scythian (that is, Iranian), Slavic, Celtic, and Germanic tribes. The custom is not restricted to the Old World, however; there are examples to be found among the natives of America as well.

Oviedo relates in his "Historia General y Natural de las Indias" that the Inca king Atabalida possessed a precious drinking-vessel made from his brother's skull. Along its edge it was mounted with gold, the skin with the smooth and black hair having been retained. The king would drink from this bowl on the occasion of festivals, and it was regarded as one of his greatest treasures and most highly esteemed. Why it was just the skull of his brother is not explained by the Spanish chronicler; nor is, as far as I know, any other instance of such a practice on record from ancient



Peru. Molina, in his "Historia de Chile" (1795), states with reference to the Araucanians that, after torturing their captives to death, they made war flutes out of their bones and used the skulls for drinking-vessels.

M. Dobrizhoffer, who worked as a missionary among the Abipones of Paraguay in the eighteenth century, gives the following account: "As soon as the Abipones see any one fall in battle under their hands, their first care is to cut off the head of the dying man, which they perform with such celerity that they would win the palm from the most experienced anatomists. They lay the knife not to the throat, but to the back of the neck, with a sure and speedy blow. When they were destitute of iron, a shell, the jaw of the palometa, a split reed, or a stone carefully sharpened, served them for a knife. Now with a very small knife they can lop off a man's head, like that of a poppy, more dexterously than European executioners can with an axe. Long use and daily practice give the savages this dexterity. For they cut off the heads of all the enemies they kill, and bring them home tied to their saddles or girths by the hair. When apprehension of approaching hostilities obliges them to remove to places of greater security, they strip the heads of the skin, cutting it from ear to ear beneath the nose, and dexterously pulling it off along with the hair. The skin thus drawn from the skull, and stuffed with grass, after being dried a little in the air, looks like a wig and is preserved as a trophy. That Abipon who has most of these skins at home, excels the rest in military renown. The skull too is sometimes kept to be used as a cup at their festive drinking-parties. Though you cannot fail to execrate the barbarity of the Abipones, in cutting off and flaying the heads of their enemies,

yet I think you will judge these ignorant savages worthy of a little excuse, on reflecting that they do it from the example of their ancestors, and that of very many nations throughout the world, which, whenever they have an opportunity of venting their rage upon their enemies, seem to cast away all sense of humanity, and to think that the victors have a right to practice any outrage upon the vanquished. Innumerable are the forms of cruelty which the other savages throughout America exercise towards their slain and captive enemies."

G. F. Angas (*Savage Life and Scenes in Australia*, London, 1847) writes that the natives around Lake Albert and the adjoining portions of the Coorong in Australia used the skulls of their friends as drinking-vessels. After detaching the lower jaw, they fastened a bundle of bulrush fibre to them, and carried them, whenever they travelled, filled with water; always putting in a twist of dry grass to prevent the contents from upsetting. In another passage of his book he speaks of a girl who carried a human skull in her hand; it was her mother's skull, and from it she drank her daily draught of water.

It is assumed by some archæologists also that skulls were used as drinking-bowls by prehistoric man during the palæolithic and neolithic periods of Europe, merely for practical purposes. There was a time when primitive man did not yet understand how to fashion clay into pots and to bake clay into a hardened mass. Wherever nature offered gourds or calabashes or shells, he took advantage of such means; or vessels for holding and carrying water were made, as, for instance, by the aborigines of Australia, of the gnarls of trees, the bark covering the gnarls, or of a portion of the limb of a tree, or finally of animal-skins. Certain it seems that prehistoric man availed himself of

human crania for scooping and drinking water. Such brain-pans wrought symmetrically by means of stone chisels have been discovered in the pile-dwellings of Switzerland, as well as in the Magdalenian and Solutrean stations of the French palæolithicon.

It would be erroneous to believe that this "barbarous" practice was limited to prehistoric times and the "savage" tribes of ancient Europe, Asia, America, and Australia. Like so many other pagan customs, it has persisted until recently among Christian, civilized nations. Even within the pale of Christianity, the skulls of saints have been preserved and worshipped. The village of Ebersberg east of Munich, Bavaria, for instance, boasts of possessing for a thousand years the skull of St. Sebastian. It is kept in a special chapel erected in 1670; there, a silver bust of the saint which hides the relic is placed on an altar. On his name-day, the 20th of January, pilgrimages were made to this chapel, and the pilgrims received consecrated wine from the saint's skull, believing they would be cured from any disease. This is but one example out of many; it was an ancient usage of the church to have the faithful drink out of bowls which formerly were in the possession of saints, and particularly out of their skulls. The same ancient belief in the magical power of bones is seen in the veneration of bodily relics of martyrs and saints. One of the earliest and best known examples is that of Lucilla of Carthage, who habitually kissed a martyr's bone before partaking of the Eucharist.

In Buddhism the worship of relics plays alike a conspicuous role. Particularly the teeth of the Buddha and an excrescence or protuberance of his skull-bone are prominent as objects of adoration among its devotees. The high skull-bone was regarded as one of the characteristic signs of beauty of a Bud-

dha, and a relic of this kind is described as early as the fifth century by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien on his visit to the city Hidda in north-western India. It was kept in a shrine covered with gold-leaf and the seven precious jewels, and was jealously guarded by eight prominent men. The king made offerings of flowers and incense to the bone. Such bones were also shown in other temples, e. g., in a temple at Fuchow, China. Hüan Tsang even mentions Buddha's skull as being kept in a temple of India and enclosed in a precious casket; he says it was in shape like a lotus-leaf and yellowish-white in color.

Finally, there is a visible survival of the ancient custom still preserved in our language. German *kopf* ("head") corresponds to English *cup* (Anglo-Saxon *cuppe*), both being derived from Latin *cuppa* ("cup"). In Italian, *coppa* means a "cup;" but in Provençal, the same word in the form *cobs* means a "skull." Latin *testa* refers to a pottery vessel or sherd, as well as to the brain-pan and head. In Provençal, *testa* signifies a "nut-shell;" in Spanish, *testa* denotes "head" and "bottom of a barrel." In Sanskrit, *kapāla* means both a "skull" and a "bowl." This correlation is still extant in many other Indo-European languages.

B. LAUFER.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- ANDREE, R.—Menschenschädel als Trinkgefässe. *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, Vol. XXII, 1912, pp. 1-33.
- BALFOUR, H.—Life History of an Aghori Fakir. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol. XXVI, 1897, pp. 340-357, 2 plates.
- BREUIL, H. and OBERMAIER, H.—Cranes paléolithiques façonnés en coupe. *L'Anthropologie*, Vol. XX, 1909, pp. 523-530.
- ROCKHILL, W. W.—On the Use of Skulls in Lamaist Ceremonies. *Proceedings of the American Oriental Society*, 1888, pp. XXIV-XXXI.



