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Museum #: 91.002 / 91.001.006

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3 June, 1998

The world we live in is filled with surprises and dangers. Human existence is still plagued by violence, illness and natural disaster, forces which act upon us of which we have little knowledge or control. Throughout history, civilizations have developed methods for navigating through the world and coping with life's perils. This handscroll illustrates Tibetan systems for evaluating relationships between the elements and the heavenly bodies in order to map out their combined effects on everyday life.

Tibetan astrology evolved from both Chinese, Nagtsi, and Indian, Kartsi, systems. It is practiced similarly by practitioners of both the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Bon religions of Tibet. Scrolls like this one would be carried by trained prognosticators, such as local priests or high-ranking *lamas*, and used to help calculate horoscopes, predict auspicious times for future events and rituals, practice divination and position the one's self within the world.

Sitting at the top center of the scroll wielding a sword and presiding over all of the astrological and elemental systems is the Bodhisattva Manjushri. Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom and progenitor of the arts of astrology and geomancy. He is believed to have revealed astrological knowledge to help reduce the suffering of beings in the world.

Flanking Manjushri are nine total squares each divided into nine parts. These may be a form of *mewa*, a numerological system often called a "magic square." Each of the nine divisions contains a number one through nine, and is filled with the color associated to that particular number. In these squares, the number five, represented in gold remains in the center of each diagram as the other numbers alternate positions around it.

Below the row of squares and Manjushri are two rows of 30 boxes, creating a total of sixty boxes. A symbol is depicted in each box, and most appear to be unique. It is not known what they represent exactly, but the number sixty suggests that they relate to the Chinese calendar system. In the Chinese calendar, each the twelve animals of the lunar zodiac passes through a rotation where they are paired with each of the five elements: wood, water, earth, fire and metal. This creates a cycle of sixty years, each of which has a specific designation such as wood horse or fire dragon. In this system, each of these years has a specific characteristics, for example, the year of the Earth Tiger in Tibetan is Drmangpo, literally "much grain." Titles of other years, such as Karpo, "white", are harder to interpret (Cornu, Phillippe "Tibetan Astrology", 80-81). Perhaps these sixty symbols relate to the Tibetan identifications of the sixty years.

Below the two rows of thirty symbols is a long horizontal diagram which represents a complete

mewa-animal-element cycle. This chart has sixty divisions across and is five rows in height. The top row depicts the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac: the rat, cow, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, bird, dog, and pig, which are repeated five times in sequence. The color of the animals alternates in pairs through the five colors symbolizing the five elements.

Below the animals are three rows of alternating numbers, one through nine. These three cycles of *mewa* squares represent three levels of interpretation for each year. It takes 180 years, three times sixty years, to move through every possible combination in this sequence. The three levels of cycles alternate identity during the 180 year sequence as being the: Natal *mewas*, the number designated to each year, the *mewas* of power, and the *mewas* of vitality. The three levels numerically indicate levels of power and life force to be expected in a particular year (Cornu, 106-107).

Below the three levels of *mewas*, there is a row which repeats the cycle of five sets of the twelve animals of the zodiac and a final row with some numbers. The interesting feature about this series of animals is that it does not begin with the Wood Rat, as seen above, which is consistent with the start of the cycle in the Chinese calendar, but skips three zodiac signs and begins with the hare. This is a very important occurrence, and reveals proof of the influence of Indian astrology on this primarily Chinese system of elements, *mewas*, and zodiac. The astrological system of the "Kalachakra" was adopted in Tibet in 1027 C.E. (Cornu, 77-78). In 1027, Tibet was already over three years into a new rotation of the Chinese cycle. To avoid confusion, the Kalachakra system was designated to begin with the Fire Hare in 1027, to match the year of the Fire Hare in fourth year of the Chinese system (Cornu, 77-78). This chart may be one of the few visual documents of this combination of symbols, and it suggests that prognosticators were likely well versed in both Chinese and Indian systems.

On the left side of the scroll, below the *mewa*-animal-element cycle is another chart which depicts four rows of the animals of the zodiac, fourteen across for a total of fifty-two animals. The colors of the elements work through the animals of the chart in pairs, as in the sixty year cycles. Since there are only fifty-two instead of sixty animals, it is possible that these symbols correspond to the weeks in a solar, Indic year, rather than to the Chinese year cycle.

To the right of the chart of fifty-two animals is the standard set of nine *mewas*. They are arranged so that the placement of numbers in the center square becomes the model for the position of numbers in the center of the other eight squares. For example, the top left square of the center box is dark, suppositively green, and contains the number four. Four then becomes the center of the top left "mewa". The top center of the center mewa is a red nine, red nine thus becomes the center for the top center box, and so on. This organization not only applies to the yearly cycles, but also to the directions. The bottom square represents the north, the bottom right the northwest, all around the cardinal and corner directions of a compass. Use of this system combines the numbers, years and elements with Chinese interest in the directions, and helps define auspicious directions for particular years and events (Cornu, 104-5).

The center of the diagram depicts a standard *mewa* with a gold five in the center. two rows out from the center in each direction is a *parkha*. The *parkha* is a trigram made from a combination of three lines, either whole or broken. The eight possible trigrams are equivalent to the trigrams used in forecasting in the "I Ching", and are of Chinese origin. These *parkha* indicate direction, just like the nine *mewas* next to it. Surrounding the center and the *parkha* are three rows of boxes with words

designating good or bad characteristics. For example, the top row of boxes from left to right 1-7 translate as: "hand" ("message of luck?" Cornu, 124), "prosperity," "evil spirit", "prosperity", (unreadable,) "body" ("corporal punishment?" Cornu, 124) "evil spirit". (translated by Tom Suchan, spring 1998) This chart creates a geomantic compass, to calculate auspicious and inauspicious dates and directions in a patron's future. The turtle is flanked on all sides by symbols which indicate the elements: water, to the bottom, wood, to the left, fire, to the top, and metal, to the right. The element earth, its color gold, is symbolized in the center of the central *mewa* of the diagram.

To the right of the Cosmic Turtle diagram is a chart of numbered and un-numbered squares of alternating colors. These are presently undetermined in exact function, although they are likely used in a similar manner as the other *mewas*.

To the right of that chart is a circular diagram. This diagram, at first looks like an astrological calculator common to Western and Indic traditions. The presence of the eight *parkhas*, or trigrams, suggests that it is East Asian in conception. Circular charts which use the eight trigrams to indicate direction are used in the Chinese geomantic science of Feng Sui. Feng Sui involves the evaluation of directions and natural features. These evaluations are used to determine auspicious locations and alignments for architectural constructions and organizations of space. Like the Chinese, Tibetans were also very concerned with auspicious alignments of geographic features. This chart is visually quite similar to a Feng Sui compass, and may have been used for that purpose.

The bottom center diagram is one of the most common and most interesting systems in the chart. This is a depiction of the eight geomantic houses, diagramed atop the belly of a cosmic turtle. According to mythology, Manjushri evoked a turtle to rise up from the cosmic ocean. He then stabbed the turtle with a golden arrow, so it rolled on to its back and sank into the water. All of the elements of the universe were formed from the fluids and defilement which flowed from its wound. Manjushri wrote "all of the secrets of the times to come" on the turtle's belly, which is represented in the chart on this scroll (Cornu, 31).

Finally, that leaves the large block of illustrations to the right of the diagram. These are a very unusual inclusion to this scroll. These divide into two halves, top and bottom, of four rows across, marked by a different trigram, and four columns of scenes below each. The scenes vary, but many of them include architecture, perhaps heavenly bodies, a figure wrapped in cloth lying in different positions, and occasionally, an attending priest.

These may be related to the "astrology of the dead". This involves a special chart which includes the personal chart of the deceased and the moment of death. This chart would be used to indicate the length of the funerary rights and the type of disposal chosen for the body. The elements were correlated to the type of funeral, Air=sky burial, Fire=cremation, Earth=burial, and Water=immersion. It is not know at this time if this final chart depicts the "astrology of the dead", but this would explain the unusual imagery it contains (Cornu, 16-17).

This scroll offers a rare and valuable glimpse into the Tibetan traditions of forecasting, geomancy and divination. It illustrates the complexity of these practices, and reveals a thorough knowledge of Chinese and Indian astrological and elemental systems. This prognosticator's scroll stands in contrast to many of the paintings of abstract deities and esoteric traditions represented in the SAMA Tibetan

collection. Rather than philosophic in nature, this scroll is concerned with the every-day needs of the lay Tibetan, guiding them through this life, and beyond.

References:

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Updated November 2004

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