

## THE NEWAR GOLDSMITH'S TROUGH

### By François Pannier

Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach<sup>1</sup> mentions and illustrates two terracotta goldsmith's troughs in the 1954 catalogue of the Nepalese ethnographic collection of the Musée d'Ethnographie de la Ville de Genève.

Called *Lapa* in the Newari language, troughs of this kind are used to hold water needed to chill gold while it is being worked. One of the two objects in the museum was acquired in Kathmandu<sup>2</sup> and the other in Banepa.<sup>3</sup>

They were placed on the ground by the entrance to a goldsmith's workshop with the most elaborately decorated side of a trough facing the street.

(Photos 1 and 2)

A third piece, the example that we analyze here, is also made of terracotta, but is much more elaborately decorated and displays an iconography with an unusual wealth of symbols. Wood, fire and water are indeed all among its iconographic elements (Photo 3).

The two lateral surfaces of this piece feature horses and the wheels of the chariot of Surya, the divinity that represents the sun, and by extension, gold (Photo 4).

Moving up the piece towards the extremity with the pouring spout, we see the head of a ram, the vehicle of Agni, the god of fire, and the face of a makara, the vehicle of Varuna, the divinity of the waters and the Ganges, the sacred river.

The trough ends with a pouring spout that is again the representation of a makara (Photo 5).

A small figure is observed crouching beneath this motif (Photo 6). It is not spectacular but it must probably be associated with Shiva if one is to believe Marguerite Lobsinger-Dellenbach. She indeed mentions that on the trough acquired in Banepa, the eye of Shiva constitutes a protection against the evil spirits and robbers.

This type of protection would obviously not be useless to have in a goldsmith's workshop.

There is however a problem with this interpretation. Placed on the ground and at the entrance to a workshop, with Nepalese streets being as muddy and full of waste as they are (even if cow

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<sup>1</sup> Nepal: Catalogue of the Nepalese Ethnographic Collection of the Musée d'Ethnographie de la Ville de Genève, Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach, Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, plate VI, object 158, note page 35.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, plate VI, object 159.

dung cannot be considered as such in a Hindu context), this trough would expose the divinity to all manner of impurities and splatter. When one understands the sensitivity of the Indian gods to signs of disrespect, and is aware of the terrible reprisals that such transgressions might incur, this attribution seems unlikely.

Would it not be more probable in this case that this figure was the representation of one of his assistants - a Gana for example? These servants of Shiva are represented as deformed beings and as dwarves, and this figure's squat appearance would be fitting.

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The top edge of the trough is crenellated. Placed as they are on the sides of the trough, these crenellations might appear to suggest waves. In truth, their function might be entirely utilitarian, but the two possibilities do not exclude one another.

Already in 1954, the author of the Geneva catalog mentions that the goldsmith of Kathmandu had very little interest in this kind of object, and that he hurried to replace it with an aluminum trough as soon as that was feasible...

This image is of a goldsmiths' workshop at the time (Photo 7).

And below we see what it can look like today, and what kinds of objects the smiths use in it (Photo 8).

As we consider this piece, we find ourselves again confronted with the eternal problem of dating Himalayan objects.

Although its iconography and its patina suggest it could be very old, a thermo-luminescence test performed by Olivier Langevin of QED Laboratory indicates a recent date for the firing, which is estimated to have taken place between twenty and fifty years ago.

This is moreover not unusual. Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach states that when she collected the troughs she acquired, they were placed at the entrances to the workshops. They were thus especially prone to being bumped into, and exposed to all manner of accidental damage. They needed to be replaced frequently for that reason.

It is nonetheless interesting to note that when Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach purchased this trough, the goldsmith she got it from replaced it with an aluminum one, even though at around the same time, the goldsmith who had commissioned the piece being considered here had addressed himself to a potter in order to commission a traditional example from him.

Particularly in light of its elaborate iconography and decoration, we are thus inclined to consider this piece as earlier than the Geneva pieces, and by a couple of decades according to the scientific analysis mentioned above.

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