

INFORMATION SHEET NO.19TIBETAN MINTS

By

N.G. RHODESINTRODUCTION

Although it has long been recognised that several mints operated in Tibet at times during the last two centuries, the only attempt made so far to identify them has been the commendable effort by Fred Kempf (1). This article expands on Kempf's work, and attempts to correct his errors. The mints discussed are limited to official mints sponsored by the Tibetan Government but, during the 19th century a number of unofficial mints did operate, sometimes in monasteries, striking coins of various types, most of which are usually regarded as forgeries. Some pieces, such as Craig.27, are of a distinctive design and circulated freely alongside the Government issues. Nothing is known about these mints, and the suggestion in Krause & Mishler (2) that C.27 was struck in Shigatse is pure speculation. A total of ten different official mints are referred to in the historical sources or in statements made to the author although those at Norbu Tsoki and Takpo were intended to produce only coin blanks. The following notes suggest their period of operation and the coins produced at each.

I. DODPAL (c1791 - c1896)

In a dictionary published in 1881, "Dodpal" (pronounced Do-Pay) is referred to as a "large hard-ware manufactory and mint at the foot of the Potala in Lhasa" (3). The building was in the Shö village and is Kempf's "Shol" mint. Dodpal was probably the only official Tibetan mint in Lhasa until about 1896, when coins began to be struck at the Tip Arsenal (4). It is possible that a few coins were struck at Dodpal after 1896, but this seems unlikely. After coins ceased to be struck at Dodpal, coin dies were still made there until at least 1927 (5). Sir Charles Bell visited Dodpal in August 1920, when he described it as a Government factory producing all sorts of metal objects in gold, silver and copper, although he made no mention of it having been a mint (6).

The first coins struck in Tibet were the "Kong-par" tangkas (Craig 60) and these were probably struck at Dodpal. The Gaden-tangkas of types A & B (7) were also probably struck there. The mint operated sporadically over the period with the main period of activity being 1791-3 when C.60.1 and C.60.2 were struck and c1880-1896 for Gaden-tangka type B. There were short periods of operation during the 1820's for C.60.3 and about 1840 for Gaden-tangka type A with C.60.4 probably struck during the 1860's.

II GIAMDA (1890 - 1891)

In his 1907 article (8), E.H.C. Walsh stated that the "Kong-par" tangkas (C.60 and Y.13a) were struck at Giamda in the Kong-po province, about 60 miles due east of Lhasa. Walsh spent about 2 years on the Tibetan border as Assistant Commissioner for Tibetan Affairs and then visited Lhasa with the Younghusband Expedition in 1904, so he was well informed about Tibet and his information is mainly reliable. Giamda was the only Tibetan mint ever to strike coins away from the environs of Lhasa, and it is hard to believe that all the "Kong-par" tangkas were struck there, as it was a small, insignificant place. The name "Kong-par" clearly refers to the place of minting, i.e. Kong-po, but that name may not have been used before the turn of the century. Rockhill, in 1892, refers to this type of coin as the "Bo-gi Gyalpa-gi Tangka" (The King of Tibet's tangka)(9), so the change of name could indicate that only the latest coins of this type were struck in Kong-po province.

Traditionally silver came to Tibet from China but in the mid 19th century, trade with Bengal increased and, for each of the 10 years between 1876 and 1886 Bengal had a trade deficit with Tibet amounting to over 1.5 million rupees (10) and presumably balanced by the export of silver rupees to Tibet. Many of the rupees passed through Tibet to China to pay for the import of tea and were either melted down at Tachienlu on the China-Tibet border for onward transmission to China proper, or remained in the Sino-Tibet border area, where they were accepted as currency (11). Some of the rupees, however, remained in Lhasa and were used to provide the silver for the Tibetan coinage. Between 1886 and 1890, however, due to a border dispute, the Tibetan exports to Bengal reduced, and there was a small trade surplus for Bengal. After any initial stockpile had been used up, Tibet would have looked to China to provide silver for the coinage. As fuel was scarce in Lhasa and Giamda was in a wooded area on the route from the Chinese border it would have been reasonable to open a mint there and to take advantage of the availability of fuel. By 1891-2, however, the border dispute was over, and the trade balance changed dramatically, with a surplus for Tibet of over half a million rupees in under two years. With silver now coming from India again the mint at Giamda would no longer have served any useful purpose.

The "Kong-par tangkas" of the Y.A13 type are dated 15-24 and 15-25 (1890 & 1891 A.D.), and it is very likely that coins of this type were struck at Giamda, the old design being used to differentiate the issues of the provincial mint from the Gaden-tangkas which were being struck about the same time in Lhasa. The coins dated 15-24 are very common, and must have been struck in large numbers, but those dated 15-25 are less common, suggesting that the mint closed during 1891, when silver again became available from Bengal.

### III. TIP ARSENAL (c1896 - c1907)

In about 1895 an arsenal was built at Tip, about 2 miles south east of Lhasa, on the south bank of the river Kyi-Chu (12). At about this date the design of the Gaden-tangkas was significantly changed, and it seems probable that the change in design coincided with the opening of a new mint. The mint would not have been first priority in constructing the new arsenal, so coins were probably first struck there in about 1896. About 1900 a machine was installed, and a few tangkas were machine struck with a collar (13). These machine-struck pieces are rare, and the machine cannot have been used for long. The Tip Arsenal was visited by L.A. Waddell in 1904, but at this time the mint had none of its appliances visible and was temporarily closed during the British invasion, (14); the arsenal itself remained operational until it was closed down by the Chinese in April 1910 (15). Kempf did not mention Tip as a mint, but the evidence of the two authors above, together with verbal confirmation from H. Richardson, who was resident in Lhasa from 1935 until 1950, gives conclusive proof that the arsenal was used as a mint.

It seems likely that Gaden-Tangkas of Types C, D and E were struck at Tip. If type C was struck in 1896, and if changes in design took place at yearly intervals thereafter, Type E would have finished in 1905 or 1906. This date fits in well with Kempf's date of 1907 for the opening of Dode mint, as the Tip mint probably ceased striking coins as soon as the Dode mint opened, and the change in type of the Gaden-Tangkas to Type F probably coincided with the change in mint.

IV. DODE (c1907 - 1930)

The mint at Dode was situated north east of Lhasa, about 6 miles up the Dode valley. The mint buildings were completed by August 1904 when they were visited by Major Ottley (16), but no machinery had been installed by then. Kempf thought that the mint opened in 1907, which fits in with the internal numismatic evidence, but cannot be confirmed from other sources. In April 1910 the mint was closed by the Chinese (17), but it reopened about 1912 when the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa from his exile in India.

The mint was divided into two sections, Upper Dode and Lower Dode, in separate buildings, but in the same enclosure. In 1921, when Sir Charles Bell visited it, there were a total of about 80 or 100 men and women employed and there were about 30 or 40 machines, all of which had been made locally. They were all hand operated except for two, which were harnessed to a 12ft water wheel (18). In 1923 the Tibetan Government brought a new coin press from Taylor & Challen Ltd., of Birmingham, (19) together with a quantity of material with which to build a hydro-electric plant at Dode. The plant took five years to complete, but in 1928 the electricity was used to work the new coin-press and fine machine-struck 5 sho coins were produced (Y.32 and A32). Few coins were minted after 1928 and the mint closed in 1930 when the striking of coins was suspended due to the high inflation and economic instability.

The first coins struck at Dode were Gaden-tangkas of Type F, which were struck continuously from 1907 until 1922, except between 1910 and 1911, when it was closed during the Chinese occupation. In 1908 or early 1909 machine-struck silver and copper coins (YA7-9) were produced with the name of the Emperor of China. In 1908 the Dalai Lama had visited Peking, and this new coinage was presumably inspired by the western-style coins being struck in China by that time. In 1909 the Tibetan Government became disenchanted with the Chinese, and a new issue of silver and copper coins was produced with traditional Tibetan designs omitting any reference to China (Y10 - Y,12). These machine-struck pieces were presumably made using the two machines which were harnessed to the water wheel. From 1913, dated coins were struck at Dode, alongside the undated Gaden-tangkas. Until 1918 the Dode coins could be distinguished by the fine style and the lion looking upwards, as in No. 6 on the plate. Copper coins of 2½ and 5 Karma were produced up to 1918, silver 5 shos until 1916 and a silver 1 srang coin was struck in 1914.

In 1918 the weight standard of the copper coins was reduced to a quarter and 1 Sho coins were struck at roughly the same weight as the old 2½ Karma, with subdivisions of 7½, 5 and 2½ Karma. Only a few 1 Sho copper coins were produced in 1918, with the same fine style and upwards-looking lion, (Coin No.10) before this denomination was discontinued at Dode (20). A few of the other light denominations were struck and then the style suddenly changed and became much coarser. The 1 srang and 5 sho coins struck late in 1918 have a different lion looking backwards (Coin No.7), and a similar change in style may be observed on the Gaden-Tangkas. This change is most likely due to the Dode engraver, clearly the most talented in Tibet, being transferred to the gold mint to prepare dies for the new gold coinage, first struck in 1918. Between 1918 and 1922 large numbers of coins were minted at Dode, most of which were Gaden-Tangkas, and 7½ and 5 Karmas with a very few silver 1 srang and 5 sho and copper 2½ karma pieces.

It seems likely that the productions of the two branches of the mint at Dode would have distinguished their products, since they were in the charge of two different monk officials. As different denominations were probably struck in different parts of the mint there would normally have been no problem. Kempf, however, suggested that the pellet over the denomination of some 5 karma coins dated 1922, distinguished those struck in Upper Dode and he is probably correct. The only other denomination struck in quantities needing both branches

of the mint was the Gaden-Tangka, or Tangka-Ghabo as it was known by this time. The 5 pellets by the fishes (Y13F. 11-17) may well indicate one part of the mint, with the hook (Y13F. 7-10) for the other part. Each type is found in both fine and coarse styles, indicating that this method of distinguishing between the parts of the mints began before 1918. The five pellet coins are commoner than the hook coins and may well have virtually monopolised one part of the mint, (probably Upper Dode if that only began striking 5 karma coins in 1921), whereas the hook coins were probably struck alongside the copper denominations in Lower Dode. Late in 1922 the production of copper  $7\frac{1}{2}$ , 5 and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  karma coins was discontinued, and at about the same time the striking of Gaden-Tangkas ceased. Madam David-Neel, who visited Lhasa in early 1923, mentioned that at the time of her visit, silver coins were virtually unobtainable (21) which could hardly have been the case if silver tangkas were still being struck. In place of the old denominations, 1 sho coins were now struck at Dode using a new type with the denomination in two lines (Coin No.11) which has the familiar lion looking upwards, as found on the early Dode coins, but now in a rather coarser style. Coins of this type continued to be minted until the first days of 1929, when the production of all copper coins was suspended. It is interesting that half way through 1927 a pellet appears under the "b" of "Rab" at the top of the reverse, perhaps indicating a change of mint from Lower to Upper Dode.

No dated silver coins were minted at Dode between late 1922 and late in 1924, when a few 5 sho pieces were struck. Similar 5 sho coins are known for the two following years, but they are rare. The same upward-looking lion distinguishes the issues of Dode, but the workmanship is very crude. It is possible that some Gaden-Tangkas were struck at the same time, probably Y13F.2, as this was a coarse style, and is hence a post-1918 type. It does not fit into the period 1918-1922 at Dode, and is either from a different mint or else post 1922 Dode; c1925 Dode seems the most likely (22). In 1928 the new electric coin press was operational but struck very few coins. A few fine silver 5 sho pieces were struck between 1928 and 1930; a 1 srang coin was apparently minted in 1929 and some Gaden-Tangkas of Type H (Coin No. 9) between 1929 and 1930. In 1930 all coin production was suspended, and the mint closed.

#### V. MEKYI (c1914 - 1929)

Mekyi, an abbreviation for "Metokidze" or Flower Garden, was the name given to the arsenal and mint in the residence of the Chinese Amban in Lhasa. It was also, in later years, called "Sotra Kang" (23) or "Mint House" and was located near the south-west corner of the city.

It is possible that the Sino-Tibetan coins struck between 1792 and 1836, and again in 1910, were produced in this building, but that is far from certain. In 1913, after the overthrow of the Manchu Emperor in China, the Chinese Amban departed from Lhasa never to return, and Mekyi, his former residence, was taken over by the Tibetan Government for use as an arsenal. This was operational later that same year and the mint began to operate during 1914. This was the first branch mint to be set up in Lhasa, and a special permit was granted by the Dalai Lama permitting coins to be struck there. The profit from the minting operations was used to provide some of the finance needed to operate the arsenal (24). In 1916 about 250 or 300 workmen were employed in the whole building with in addition about 300 coolies to work the machinery, no water power being available. The minting operations were kept as simple as possible, with no more than two denominations in production at any one time.

In 1914 copper 5 and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  Karma coins were struck with a lion looking backwards (Y.16.3 & 17.3), but in the following year the  $2\frac{1}{2}$  Karma was replaced by a silver 5 Sho. After the first year the lion adopted a crouching pose (Coins 12 and 13 on the plate), a posture he was to retain for all subsequent Mekyi issues. When the size of the copper coins was changed in 1918, Mekyi began striking 1 Sho coins, instead of 5 Karmas, using the type shown as Coin No.13 on the plate.

Kempf thought that the type with the denomination in 2 lines came from Mekyi, but that is very unlikely as Kennedy, who visited Mekyi on 1st December 1920 (25), records that at the time only 1 Sho coins were being struck there, whereas the two line type did not start until nearly two years later.

As at Dode, a very few silver sho pieces were produced after 1922, and in the first days of 1929 the minting of copper coins was suspended. The mint never again struck coins and the arsenal was closed down soon after, when the new Tapchi arsenal was opened in 1932.

#### VI. SER-KHANG (1918 - 1929)

The Ser-Khang, literally "Gold House" Mint was located south west of Lhasa, at the Dalai Lama's summer residence at Norbhu Lingka. The mint was run by Tserong Shape, who reaped some of the profit. He was granted the unique privilege of a private mint by the Dalai Lama as a reward for his heroism during the flight to India in 1910. As its name implies, all the Tibetan gold coins were produced in this mint, but Bell confirms that when he visited the mint on 5th October, 1921, silver and copper coins were being struck there also (26). Most of the machinery was run from a water wheel, some having been imported from England. (27)

The distinguishing mark of the Ser-khang mint was the form of the letter "rna" which can be seen in the left-hand petal of the coins illustrated. Only one type of silver coin, the Gaden-Tangka of type G (Coin No. 14) has this letter form, and was presumably the silver coin being struck in 1921. It is interesting that the style of this coin is very similar to that of the pre-1918 coins struck at Dode. Presumably the die engraver moved in that year from Dode to Ser-Khang mint to concentrate of the new and important gold coinage, and stayed on at Ser-khang even after gold coinage had ceased during 1921. In 1920 copper coins were first struck at Ser-Khang with the denomination in one line, and can be distinguished, apart from the distinctive letter form, by a dot in the arabesque on the reverse. In 1921 the minting of gold coins was discontinued and from then until the closure of the mint in the first days of 1929 only copper 1 Sho coins were struck there.

#### VII. NORBU TSOKI (1923 - 1928)

Because most of the copper for the coinage came from India, and because fuel was scarce in Lhasa, the Tibetan Government decided, in 1923, to set up a branch mint in the Chumbi valley on the route from India. Trees were plentiful here for use as fuel, and it was decided that this branch mint would only produce copper blanks, to be struck into coins in one or other of the three mints in Lhasa (28). Copper blanks were produced here, using an enormous hand-operated lever stamp, until the end of 1928, when the official in charge fled to India after being accused of adding to his income by producing finished coins as well as copper blanks. The closure of the mint was intended to be temporary, but it was never used again and in December 1942 the machinery was finally transported to Lhasa and the building was put to another use.

#### VIII. TAKPO (c 1925)

Mr. R.W. Shakabpa, the former Finance Minister of Tibet, recorded that copper blanks were also manufactured in the province of Takpo, a wooded area about 100 miles to the south east of Lhasa. This branch mint was apparently operating during the 1920's, but no confirmation of this has been possible from other sources. It is interesting to note that the paper for Tibetan bank-notes came from this area. It was produced from a special kind of tree-bark called "Shog-ping" which grew in the Kemdong District (29), of Takpo Province and the branch may have been located at Kemdong Dzong.

## IX. TAPCHI

Tapchi was originally the parade-ground for the Tibetan troops, but in 1930 it was decided to build an arsenal and mint there. The new workshops were situated at one side of the walled enclosure, which was about 300 yards square. All the machinery was in one large pillared hall and in this one room coins were struck, banknotes printed, and rifles and cartridges made. Most of the machinery worked by electricity, brought by a transmission line from the hydro-electric plant at Dode (30). The new mint and arsenal were officially opened on 9th June 1932, and initially only copper coins were produced, but silver 3 srangs and 1½ srangs were struck soon after. In 1938 coinage operations ceased for the duration of the 2nd world war, but from 1946 coins were struck continuously until the mint was finally closed down by the Chinese in 1953. All Tibetan coins were struck here after 1932, with the single exception of Y.30.

## X. DOGU

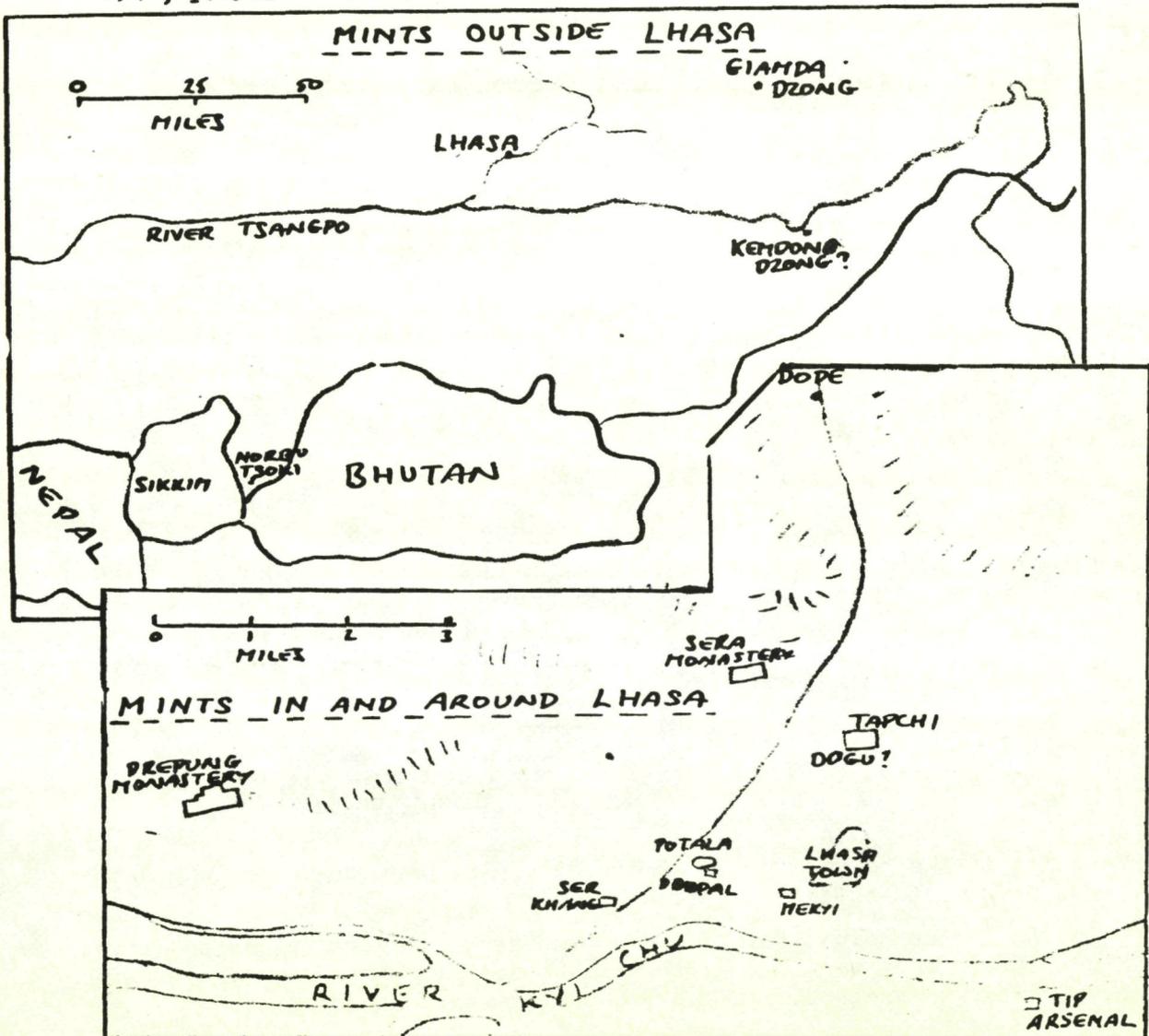
Mr. T.W. Shakabpa also reports that in 1950 a mint was set up in the new military department near Tapchi. The coins struck here were the 10 srang pieces of the Y.30 type, and were used to pay the soldiers in the Tibetan Army. The inscription on the reverse of these pieces indicates that they were issues by the office of "Deki-Dogu", literally "Wished-for happiness", which must have been the term used for this new Military Department. The Department and the mint were closed down following the Sino-Tibetan agreement of May 1951.

## NOTES

1. Fred Kempf, "Native Tibetan Coins", 1969.
2. Standard Catalog of World Coins, 4th edition, p.303.
3. H.A. Jäschke, "Tibetan-English Dictionary", London 1881, p.281.
4. W.Rockhill, in his notes on pages 53 and 228 of "Journey to Lhasa & Central Tibet" by S.C. Das, stated that the Gaden-tangka was struck at the "Castle of Gadan". This statement is, however based on a misinterpretation of the inscription and should not be regarded as reliable.
5. Information given by Tsering Nawang Tenzin, Assistant to the Finance Minister of Tibet, at the coin forgery trial in Calcutta in August 1927. c.f. Laden La papers in the possession of the author.
6. Bell diary in the British Museum.
7. See the author's classification of Types of the Gaden-Tangka, later known as the Tangka Ghabo, and followed by Scott Semans in his "Information Sheet No. 11".
8. E.H.C. Walsh, "The Coinage of Tibet" in Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol.II No. 2.
9. W.W. Rockhill, "Diary of a Journey through Mongolia and Tibet in 1891 and 1892", Washington 1894, p.259.
10. A. Lamb, "Britain and Chinese Central Asia", London 1960, p.342.
11. W.W. Rockhill, "The Land of the Lamas", New York 1891, confirms that the flow of rupees had ceased in 1889.
12. A. Lamb, op.cit. p. 228.
13. E.H.C. Walsh, op.cit. p.14. Walsh obtained his specimen in 1902, and it has now passed to the author's collection.
14. L.A. Waddell, "Lhasa and its Mysteries", 3rd ed. London 1906, p.427.
15. "Further Papers Relating to Tibet", Cd.5240, HMSO 1910. p.217, quoting a telegram from the Viceroy dated 21st April, 1910.
16. Brevet-Major W.J. Ottley, "With Mounted Infantry in Tibet", London 1906, p.230.
17. Cd. 5240 above, p.217.
18. The mint is described in some detail by Sir C. Bell in his diary entry for 9.1.1921.

NOTES (Continued)

19. Taylor & Challen Ltd., have kindly confirmed that the machine supplied was a Type 581 Coining Press without automatic finger unit.
20. Bell, in his diary entry of 9.1.21. records those denominations being struck at Dode at the time; the 1 Sho is conspicuously absent.
21. A. David-Neel, "My Journey to Lhasa", London 1924, p.268.
22. Silver, to the value of Rs.1,117,600, was sent to Lhasa from India during the year ended March 1925. The 5 sho coins of this period were only struck in very limited numbers, so it is likely that some of this silver was used for Gaden Tangkas.
23. Information given by Tsering Ngawang Tenzin in 1927, c.f. Laden La papers.
24. Gyantse Trade Agency Report 8.8.1916, which specifically mentions that silver and copper coins were struck at Mekyi.
25. Lt. Col. R. Kennedy's diary, in the British Museum.
26. The mint is described by Sir Charles Bell in his diary entry for 5.10.1921.
27. The British Machinery arrived in 1921 and cost Rs.6800/-., but it is not recorded what sort of machines they were, and there is no clear improvement in workmanship in 1921. Bell diary entry for 23.7.1921.
28. This mint is mentioned by J. Easton, "An Unfrequented Highway", London 1928 p.66 & 83, who saw the start of the building of the mint in April, 1923, and Capt. J.B.L. Noel, "Through Tibet to Everest", London 1927, p.126, who saw it in operation in April 1924.
29. Laden La papers.
30. The mint is described by F. Spencer Chapman, "Lhasa the Holy City", London 1940, p.238.



TABLECOINS STRUCK IN TIBETMINT

DATE IN TIBETAN

DEMININATION

ERA (15-43 = 1909 AD etc.)

DODPAL

AR Tangka Undated, up to c1893 A.D.

GIANDA

AR Tangka Dated 15-24 &amp; 15-25 (= 1890/1 A.D.)

TIP

AR Tangka Undated, c1894 - c1906 A.D.

DODE

AR 1 Sang ca 15/42, 43, 48, 52, 53, & ca 16/3  
 5 Sho ca 15/42, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 58, 59, 60, ca 16/2 or 3, & 16/4  
 2 Tangka ca 15/46  
 1 Tangka at intervals from 15/42 to 16/4  
 AE 1 Sho 15/52, 15/56 to 16/2  
 7½ Skar 15/43, 15/52 to 15/56  
 5 Skar 15/43, 15/47 to 15/56  
 2½ Skar 15/43, 15/47 to 15/53 and 15/55  
 4 Sho ca 15/42  
 ½ Sho ca 15/42

MEKYI

AR 5 Sho 15/49 to 15/53, 15/56 and 15/59 to 16/1  
 2 Sho ca 15/44  
 1 Sho ca 15/44  
 AE 1 Sho 15/52 to 16/2  
 5 Skar 15/48 to 15/52  
 2½ Skar 15/48  
 1 Skar ca 15/44  
 ½ Skar ca 15/44

MINTTAPCHI

AR 10 Sang 16/22 to 16/26  
 3 Sang 16/7 to 16/12 and 16/20  
 1½ Sang 16/10 to 16/12 and 16/20  
 1 Tangka ca 16/22 - 23  
 AE 5 Sho 16/21 to 16/27  
 3 Sho 16/20  
 1 Sho 16/6 to 16/12

SER-KHANG

N 20 Sang 15/52 to 15/55  
 AR 1 Tangka ca 15/55  
 AE 1 Sho 15/54 to 16/2

DOGU

AR 10 Sang 16/24 to 16/25

NORBU-TSOKI

AE 1 Sho (Blanks only) ca 15/57 to 16/2

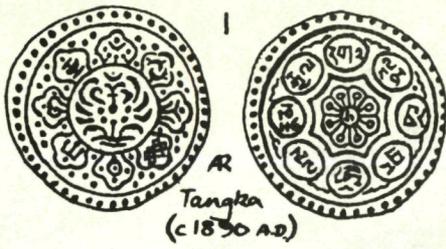
TAKPO

AE 1 Sho (Blanks only) ?

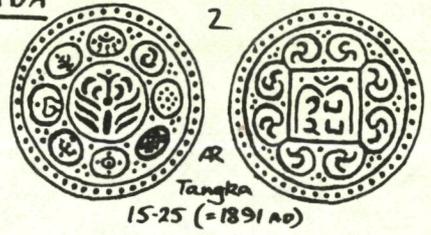
NOTES:

1. The coins in the column for 15/42 are dated 1st year of Hsuan Tung which corresponds to this Tibetan year.
2. The coins in the column for 15/44 are undated, but were authorised in August 1910. They were struck to the Chinese "Ku Ping" standard; a much heavier weight standard than the Tibetan standard of the time.

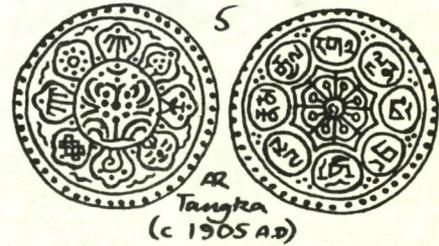
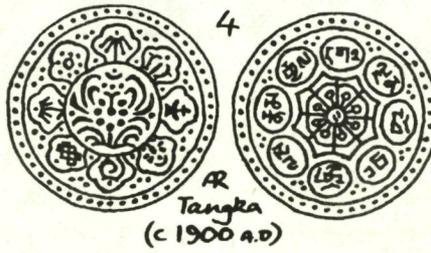
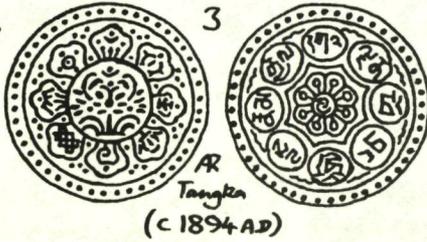
DODPAL



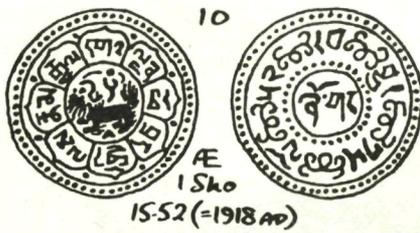
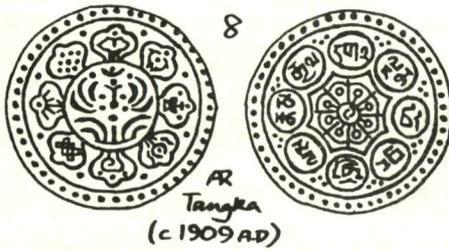
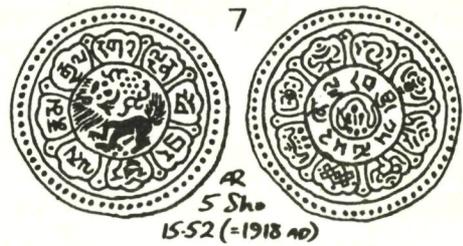
GIAMDA



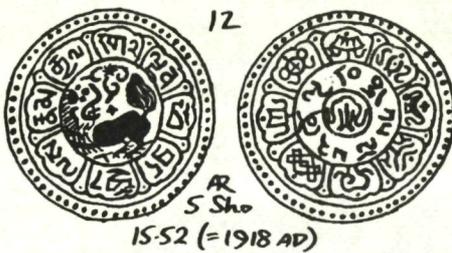
TIP



DODE



MEKYI



SER KANG

