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The Shamanism Magazine

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Sacred Hoop is an independent magazine about Shamanism and Animistic Spirituality.

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

the lore of Iron

Use iron,
whether from the
sky or the earth to

- keep away fairies and spirits,
- keep the dead in their place
- protect doorways & entrances

Iron is considered a sacred material in many places in the world, and is regarded as lucky and of having strong magical protective qualities. These magical qualities are probably connected with the origin of the blacksmith, who is often considered a powerful magician, as only magic was thought to be able to transform stone ore to metal.

In Siberian shamanism the smith is considered the 'cousin' of the shaman, and traces of this reverence and awe remain in European culture too, for instance at Weyland's Smithy, an ancient burial chamber near Oxford in England. Weyland is a magical smith figure found all over Northern Europe, especially in Britain, Scandinavia and Germany. The burial chamber by Oxford was named by the Saxons when they came to Britain, and

there is a legend that a horse will be shod overnight by Weyland, if it is left outside the smithy, together with a small silver coin as payment.

Another magical smith figure is that of the pre-Buddhist shamanic Tibetan protector Dorje Legpa, who rides upon a snow lion, and is bound by oath to Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) to protect the Buddhist teachings.

Iron, often called 'cold iron' is very much a part of European folklore. The most obvious trace of this is the horseshoe, often now a shiny silver plastic representation stuck to a wedding card or put on a cake. Horseshoes are thought to bring good luck and protection in many cultures across the world.

In Europe, the use of horseshoes for protection and luck above doorways stretches back to before the Romans. There has always been a lore that spirits of all kinds (including fairies) are repelled by iron, so old horseshoes, as an easy source of iron, were put above entrances to houses and sacred buildings to stop the spirits coming in.

Christianity continued this idea of iron being a scourge for spirits. Saint Dunstan, the C10th Archbishop of Canterbury was formally a blacksmith, and there is a story that the devil asked him to reshoe his horse; but instead, Dunstan nailed a horseshoe to the Devil's hoof, which caused the Devil great pain. Dunstan only



*Top: Weyland Smithy, England
Left: Tibetan blacksmith
protector Dorje Legpa*

*Below; a smith at work with
a red-hot horseshoe.*

*Inset: the magical horseshoe
has been reduced to a mere
plastic decoration*



agreed to remove the shoe after the Devil promised never to enter a place where a horseshoe was hung over the door. This is a Christian appropriation of the much older custom.

Other old European uses of iron include iron fences being put around cemeteries to contain the souls of the dead and stop them disturbing the living, and iron knives being buried under the entrance to houses to keep witches from entering.

Many people throughout time have worn amulets made of iron, because of their protective qualities. In Celtic Europe, twisted bands of metal called *torques* were worn around the neck and arms. Finely made ones of gold and silver are also found, but the simple iron ones were popular and would have had a protective as well as decorative function. Similar torques are still found in Some parts of Africa, India and Central and Southern Asia.

In Tibet, ancient amulets, called *thogchags* are highly prized. Generally these are made of iron, and sometimes they would be made from meteoric iron, or 'sky metal.' The word *thogchag* means 'heavenly iron'. Most meteors are formed out of stone, but ones of iron are not that rare and can easily be mixed with terrestrial iron when smelting the metal.



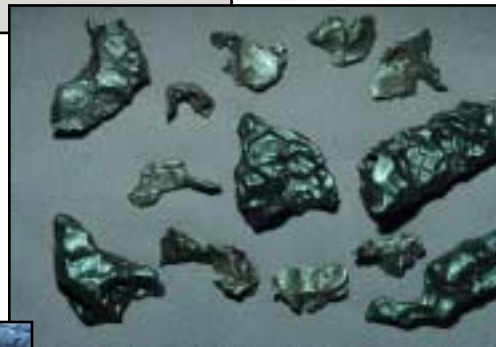
The use of *thogchags* is far older than Buddhism in Tibet, being several thousand years old, and has much in common with the use of iron amulets found on shaman's costumes in Siberia and other places in central Asia.

Shaman's ritual coats will often have considerable amounts of iron attached to them in the form of amulets for protection and power, as well as fetishes and spirit houses for the shaman's helper spirits. Throughout their life shamans would gain new amulets as gifts, or through being told to have them made by their spirits, the clothes getting heavier all the time.

It would seem that for us, just as for our ancestors, whether from this world or from 'off world,' iron not only helps make a good wedding day but also keeps the fairies at bay.



Top: iron torque from North Africa



Right: pieces of 'sky metal' - meteoric iron



Above: iron birds and Tibetan thogchag on a Siberian shaman's ritual costume

Left: Tibetan thogchag

Below and right: metal fetishes, bells and amulets on Siberian shamans' costumes

