

ORIGIN OF THE "CHIEF'S COPPER" OR "TINNEH"¹

by

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The *chief's copper* or *tinneh* is a shield-shaped object roughly a yard long, two feet wide at one end and a foot wide at the other. The metal in it is from $\frac{1}{16}$ " to $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick, sometimes hammered to a slightly greater thickness on the edges. Smaller replicas, generally under 10" in length were made of thinner plate. These were sewed on ceremonial robes and were known as "blanket tinnehs." Small holes drilled along their edges attest to this usage. Some tinnehs bear designs that have been scratched in a black coating said to have been derived in some instances at least from smoking in a spruce gum fire. Others were painted black, the paint outlining the design which appears in burnished copper. Some had engraved designs mostly in the conventional Northwest Coast style and some ignored the style. In all cases, without exception, the tinnehs bore an elevated "T" cross, the vertical portion of which the Indians refer to as the "backbone" along the sides of which some bear conventionalized rib symbols.

The tinneh was first brought to the attention of the world by Capt. Urey Lisiansky who, in Sitka in 1804, described one as follows, "Mr. Baranoff brought with him also two other curiosities: one of which was a thin plate, made of virgin copper, found on the Copper River, to the north of Sitca (sic) (Plate I, Fig. f): it was three feet in length, and twenty-two inches in breadth at one end, and eleven inches at the other, and on one side various figures were painted. These plates are only possessed by the rich, who give for one of them from twenty to thirty sea otter skins. They are carried by the servants before their master on different occasions of ceremony, and are beaten upon, so as to serve as a musical instrument. The value of the plate depends, it seems, in its being of virgin copper: for the common ones do not bear a higher price than a single skin. . . ." (Lisiansky, 1814:150)

In any attempt to establish the origin of the tinneh, Lisiansky's description is most valuable. In the first place, since it was a curiosity to Baranof who had established himself at Old Sitka in 1799, it eliminates the Russians as the originators and also as counterfeiters at least to 1804. It would seem to eliminate the Sitka Tlingit also, since they were trading 20 to 30 sea-otter pelts for one. Only European traders were avidly collecting sea-otter pelts and for 30 years prior to the establishment of the Russians at New Archangel the Northwest Coast seasonally swarmed with traders from Mexico, Spain, England, Bengal, France, and the infant United States.

¹ This paper was read at the 13th Alaskan Science Conference, Juneau, August 25, 1962.



Plate I. Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History.

On their own testimony, one can eliminate most of these traders as the manufacturers of the chief's copper, although several no doubt had a hand in its transition from the prototype to its later standardized form. LaPerouse, in discussing iron daggers seen in the hands of the Tlingit at Lituya Bay in 1786 said, "Some of them were also made of copper but they did not appear to prefer them to others. This last metal is common enough among them, they more particularly use it for collars, bracelets and different other ornaments; they also tip the points of their arrows with it. . . ." (LaPerouse, 1798).

Had he seen tinnehs there at that time which was 18 years before Lisiansky



Plate II. Denver Art Museum.



Plate III. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

had been shown one as a curiosity at Sitka, he surely would have mentioned it. However, he obviously saw none and traded none although his own trade goods included "sheets of copper" (*Ibid.*:).

Capt. John Meares on the *Felice* out of Bengal, with a crew of 50 men comprising artificers, Chinese smiths, and carpenters as well as European artisans (Begg, 1894:28) claimed to have bought Friendly Cove from Maquilla (sic) in 1788 for eight or 10 sheets of copper and some trifling articles. (*Ibid.*:56). He had wintered the year before (1787) in Prince William Sound and reported seeing no copper there. But at Nootka he said: "The pure, malleable lumps of copper ore seen in the possession of the natives convince us that there are mines of the metal in the vicinity of this part of the Western Coast. We once saw a piece of it, which appeared to weigh a pound, through which a hole had been perforated sufficiently large for a handle to pass, in order to make a kind of hammer. On enquiring of the man in whose possession it was, from whence he procured it, he made us understand that he received it in barter from some of the native peoples who lived more to the Northward. . ." (*Ibid.*:33).

Here, again, we have a trader interested in the presence of native copper, who was trading in sheet copper and had Chinese smiths and other artisans aboard, who makes no mention of chief's coppers. These must have been in use before his time judging from the great demand there was for sheet copper for which there seems to have been no other use among the natives.

Cecil Jane in his translation of Espinosa's account of Galiano and Valdes in their journey on the *Sutil* and *Mexicana* in 1792 states "The rate of barter which we were able to arrange was a sheet of copper of 14# for two skins, one good and the other moderate (Jane, 1930:83)." He adds (*Ibid.*:90) "we were unable to satisfy our curiosity concerning the use to which they proposed to put the great quantities of copper which they were acquiring; they used little of it for purposes of personal adornment while they received a great deal in exchange for skins from the ships which engage in this trade."

Galiano and Valdes were not actually trading, being rather on an exploring mission and were well aware that had they wanted sea otter skins they could get them much cheaper in San Francisco Bay. They purchased merely what the natives brought to them unsolicited in order to please them and thereby maintain peaceful relations. But in what trade they did engage in they demonstrated that as early as 1792 the market for sheet copper was becoming glutted and the price at Nootka had already fallen drastically.

According to Phillips in *The Fur Trade* (Vol. II, 1961:51), Capt. Gray of the American frigate *Columbia* was sent back to the Northwest Coast in 1790 with a cargo selected with a knowledge of what the Indians wanted. It included 143 sheets of copper. While Galiano and Valdes were at Nootka word came that a ship had attacked an Indian village nearby killing seven men and wounding others and robbing the rest of their sea otter skins. Strong evidence pointed to Capt. Gray and the *Columbia*. When he arrived at the



Plate IV. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.



Plate V. University Museum, Philadelphia.



Plate VI. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

village to trade he found the Indians had raised the price on their furs where he stood to lose heavily on his cargo of sheet copper, hence the attack and robbery.

From these accounts and others we can assume that while great quantities of sheet copper were traded on the entire Northwest Coast from 1774 to 1792 the trade was already falling off near the end of that period. From the evidence at hand it seems reasonable to assume also that none of these early traders and explorers manufactured chief's coppers that early and there is no record that any of them ever saw one. One may also be fairly safe in assuming that none of the Indians contacted by these traders had any tinnehs either until after they had acquired commercial sheet copper. If this is so, then there should not be a single chief's copper in any of the museum collections of the world today that is made of native copper.

To test this theory a poll was made recently of some 25 of the great museums of Europe and America known to have Northwest Coast collections. Collectively these museums were found to have a total of some 135 coppers, large and small, none of which were presently claimed to be of virgin copper. However, very few have been tested chemically but tests are continuing. At the National Museum of Canada, which incidentally has the greatest collection of coppers known, tests have been going on for the past year (1962). To date, no copper in their collection of some 50 has been found to be made of native copper and none examined appear to have been hammered. In the 1960 report of the Provincial Museum at Victoria, Wilson Duff says, "We do not know directly of any existing copper which was made of the natural metal."

Opinions and testimony of various writers in the last century are interesting and varied but one thing they have in common is the belief that the chief's copper was made of the virgin copper until counterfeits took their place. John Dunn, in his *History of the Oregon Territory*, 1844, says this on page 288: "A little to the northward of this there is a tribe called the Chilkasts (sic). In their country great quantities of virgin copper are found. Some of it is worked by the natives into a kind of shield, about two feet and a half long, and one foot broad, with figures of men and animals engraved upon it. The labour and ingenuity expended in working one of these shields, give them great value. One of them is estimated as worth nine slaves; and is transmitted as a precious heir-loom from father to son." It is interesting to note that the value of sheet copper and chief's coppers up to Lisiansky's time was computed in sea otter pelts; now they are computed in slaves. George Dawson (1880:135B) has this to say of them "Another article of purely conventional value and serving as money, is the 'copper'. This is a price of native metal beaten out into a flat sheet, and made to take the form illustrated in the margin. These are not made by the Haidas—nor indeed is the native metal known to exist in the islands—but are imported as articles of great worth from the Chilkat country, north of Sitka. Much attention is paid to the size and make of the copper, which should be of uniform but not too great thickness, and give forth a good sound when



Plate VII. The Royal Ontario Museum, Canada.



Plate VIII. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.



Plate IX. University Museum, Philadelphia.

struck with the hand. At the present time spurious coppers have come into circulation, and though these are easily detected by an expert, the value of the copper has become somewhat reduced, and is often more nominal than real. Formerly ten slaves were paid for a good copper, as a usual price, now they are valued at from forty to eighty blankets." Here again we note that in the changing times coppers first computed in sea otter pelts and then in slaves are now computed in standard \$2.00 blankets, a value carried into modern times.

A few years later (1885), Aurel Krause said this (Krause, 1956:148):

"... on the other hand, they understood the art of working copper which, according to Veniaminof, a woman among the Chilkat discovered. On account of her skill she was called *Schukas-saka* which means half man. More probably the Chilkat obtained this art, which, according to Holmberg, was kept a secret in certain families, from the inhabitants of the Copper River, the Ahtena, with whom they had contact through the Yakutat.

"We have only meager information about the way these copper articles were made. Ismailof said that the inhabitants of Yakutat Bay made their daggers themselves (whether of iron or copper is not stated) on a stone anvil.

"Erman, who gives more information on the question, is of the opinion that the Ahtena who found blocks and lumps of native copper in the Copper River worked them without any smelting through mechanical means and that iron was used in the same way, patience replacing technical knowledge.

"As long as the use of iron was not widely known, copper was used for ornamentation of utensils and carvings and also for daggers, lances and arrow points. Considered as especially costly pieces were the copper plates or shields of a special shape which according to Lisiansky who gives an illustration of one, are carried in front of masters and beaten by slaves on ceremonial occasions. These shields came by trade to the Haida who, according to Dawson, paid ten slaves for one of them. One which Dawson pictures is about two feet tall and is almost an exact duplicate of the one shown by Lisiansky."

In discussing the use of dentalium as currency by the Tlingit and other tribes, Krause (1956:211) noted that it was not highly regarded by the Haida. He said, "In contrast, slaves served as a unit of value, but even higher value was assigned to the native copper which came from the north, probably from the Copper River and which was processed by them into plates of special shape and size, about one-half a meter long and one-fourth a meter wide; ten slaves are supposed to have been paid for such a valuable piece. Now, however, the value of these coppers has fallen because imitations made of ordinary copper have come into circulation, but still they carry a value of forty to eighty woollen blankets."



Plate X. Ehem. Staatl. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

We see that Krause who credits the Haida with manufacturing the plates from raw copper received from the north is in direct opposition to Dawson who states flatly that they were not made by the Haida.

Another five years elapses then Niblack (1888:335-6) says this: "Throughout the Northwest Coast copper plates or 'coppers' of a conventional pattern are valued as emblems or tokens of wealth, and have been handed down for generations. They originally came from the Chilkat country, where virgin copper is found in considerable quantities, and are made in the form of a shield from $2\frac{1}{2}'$ to $3\frac{1}{2}'$ in length, 12 to 25 inches in width, and one-sixteenth to one-eighth of an inch in thickness. They have a groove running vertically in the lower half and transversely across the middle at the narrow part, forming a figure like the letter T. They are sometimes painted, but more commonly etched on the outer surface with the design of the crest or totem of the owner. If they ever served as shields in battle such use has long since disappeared, and now they have only a ceremonial or emblematic significance. To be of great value these plates must be large, of virgin copper, worked by hand, of native manufacture, of uniform thickness, except at the edges, where they should be thicker than elsewhere; and, finally, when struck should give forth a dull sound and not ring. Totemic etching on the outer surface also adds value to them. Modern 'coppers' of European manufacture are not very highly prized, as compared to the ancient ones." Niblack then goes on to quote Lisiansky whom we have quoted earlier as saying they came from the Copper River and served as a musical instrument.

Up to this point none of the records has carried the word "tinneh" in describing the chief's copper. They have used the term "copper" or "coppers," copper plates and "shields." Apparently "tinneh" came into use after Swanton's "Tlingit Myths and Texts" were published in 1909.

Before going into Swanton, I would like to quote from two letters written by George T. Emmons. In a letter which he wrote to William L. Paul on June 18, 1941 he said, in part, "Now one more question about the old copper shield (Tinnah or Denah) what does this name mean. Copper in Tlingit is 'Eek'. The ones made of native copper from the White and Copper rivers were pounded out of copper nuggets of small size probably 3 to 6 to ten pounds—pounded into thin plates which were rivetted together to make the tinneh shape for they could not have hammered out a larger nugget to shape. I have seen smaller ones one or two feet in height of thin rivetted plates but never a really large one. When the early explorers saw the great value far beyond size or weight of metal placed on these, they had made all sizes and flooded the coast with them—heavy commercial copper that would ring when struck while the native copper ones gave only a dead sound. But these commercial coppers were engraved in animal crest figures and can be had today. Do you know of any really old native made pieces?"

On Feb. 8, 1942, at the age of 90, Emmons wrote the following, in part, in answer to an enquiry I had directed to him; "I have never seen an identified

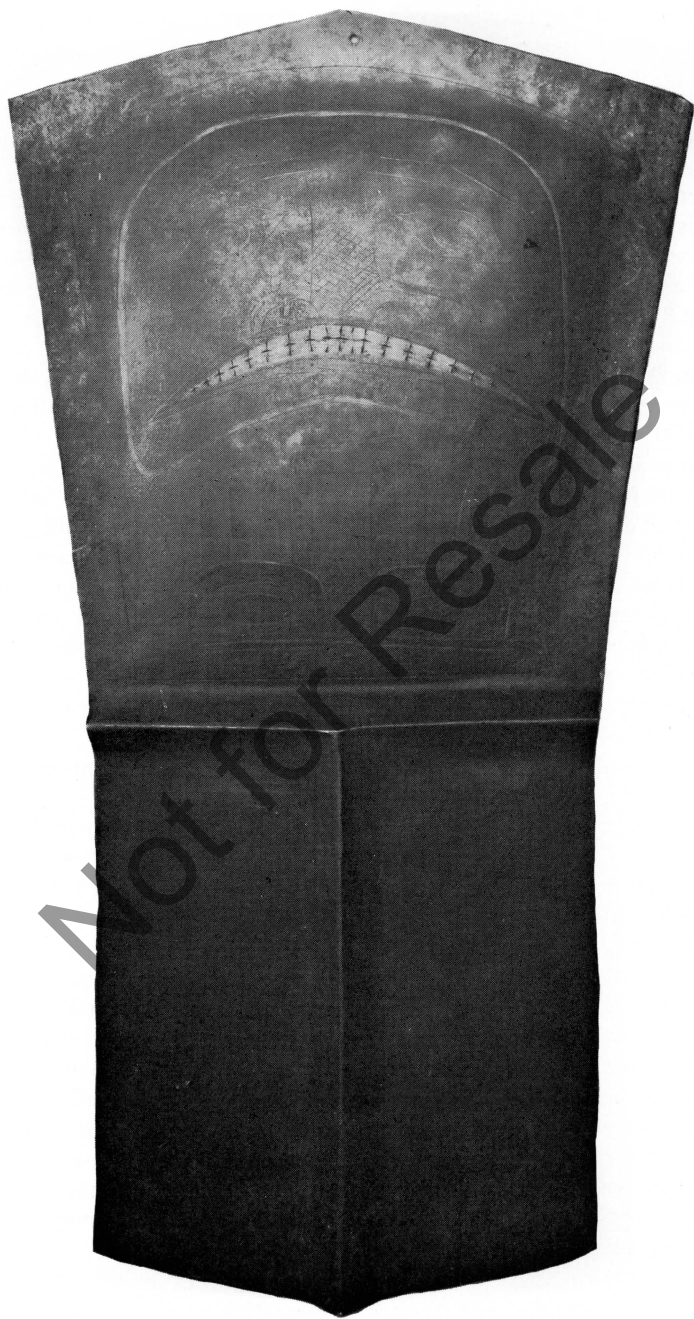


Plate XI. The Chase Manhattan Bank Museum of Moneys of the World, New York.

native copper 'tinnēh'. I have seen smaller ones 15 or 20 inches long of very thin copper, some another looking much like ship's sheathing, others more uneven that might have been hammered out, and one or two of plates riveted as the larger older ones must have been made. But all of the larger ones must have been so made of thin plates riveted together for it would seem impossible to have hammered one out with stone boulders from a single nugget. If you will refer to page 347 'Tlingit Myths' by Dr. Swanton, Bulletin No. 33, Bureau of American Ethnology, Story of Kacke Goan you will find the story of the first 'tinnēh'. When I first went to Alaska in 1882 I never saw any large coppers at Chilkat, Hoonah, Sitka among the Northern Tlingit, but south among the Haida at Kasaan there were many, but all of them commercial coppers brought by European traders, when they saw the value the natives placed on such objects. And they were possibly still more abundant among the Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island and B. C. Coast. Their coppers were often beautifully incised or carved in animal designs, some in deep incised figures, others wider, more scraped figures. Generally the surface was blackened or smoked with spruce gum or covered with a black mixture through which the design was scraped in broader lines. What became of the primitive native coppers I do not know. The ceremonial use of the copper was more a feature with the Tsimshian, Haida, Kwakiutl and possibly the Southern Tlingit (this simply my belief). Old coppers were nailed on totem poles and graves by the Haida. . . . Now, we *really* know practically nothing about the origin of the tinnēh in its Interior home even the name itself whether Interior or Coast. Now the Coast people, particularly the Tlingit, were and are very adaptable people and readily accepted what things the early whites brought. Copper as their only metal they valued highly. If when a particular copper object from the copper people was so greatly valued for its shape, they accepted it as a symbol of great value far beyond its mere copper content and the chiefs at once placed it far beyond the hands of the common people, and in its use upon ceremonial occasions, the amount expended at a potlatch where it was shown was added to its original value and so it became an article of prestige, an indication of standing of the whole clan and held its place until the early traders flooded the country with spurious commercial coppers. . . . The thing I want greatly to find out from some native source in the Interior, are any of these shields to be found today. . . ."

Going back now to the tale of Kacke Goan referred to earlier in Emmons' letter as the story of the first "tinnēh" we find that the Tlingit informant, Kadishan, of Wrangell, used the terms "eek" and "tinnēh" interchangeably. In this story the term *yutinna* meaning "a copper" is used three times and the term *yu-eq'* (a copper) five times for the object collected on a branch of the Copper River that it took six men to carry. Obviously, it was a copper nugget such as are often found in that area today and are on display at Anchorage, Chitina, Whitehorse, and perhaps other places today. They have been recorded as weighing up to 6 tons.



Plate XII. The University Museum, Philadelphia.

It has been suggested that the Tlingit name for copper, "eek" came from the name "Eyak," a people living near the mouth of the Copper River from whom they might have gotten their first specimens of this metal. It has also been suggested that the chief's copper or "tinneh" received its name from the Athapascan peoples of the Copper River country variously known as "Tinne'," "Ahtena," "Dene," "Kenai" throughout their range. But the Tlingit did not call them "Tinne'." Their name for the adjacent Athapascans was "Gó-nana." The question then arises: why did the Tlingit call the chief's copper a "tinneh"? The answer is probably found in the same story and further verified in still another. On page 360 is a passage concerning a young Athapascan hunter who killed more things than his brothers. The passage reads, "He always took around bow and arrows with him. They are called dína'." Applying this name to the copper point alone we may have discovered the prototype of the entire production of chief's coppers produced after the introduction of commercial copper plate. The story of Kakeqte (page 155) concerns a Hoonah man who crossed the glaciers to the Interior and was discovered by the Go'nana while roasting fish on sticks. He escaped, the Go'nana ate his fish but left copper-tipped arrows where each roasting stick had been. The incident ends with this statement, "This was the first time a Tlingit had seen copper."

A stone charm in the State Museum collection in the form of a tinneh is significant in that the hole bored for suspension is in one side rather than at either end which would be the case in suspending a copper tinneh. Suspended by a string through this hole, the charm lies horizontally like an aimed arrow. Being somewhat pointed rather than rounded at the top, this tinneh-like charm suggests an arrowhead that might have been hammered from a piece of native copper. If this is what was intended, then the T-cross takes on some significance. The upright or stem part may symbolize the shaft or a groove made to receive it while the horizontal portion would symbolize the lashing or again, the groove intended to receive it.

Since the bow and arrow played only a minor role with the Tlingit whose arrows were usually tipped with shell, a copper arrowhead from the Interior might well have been used as a charm or talisman of tremendous importance. Even the Haida name for the tinneh which is *Tau* signifies "property above all else."

Contemporary with the evolution of the "tinneh" great changes in the cultural life of the Indians of the Northwest Coast were taking place. The sea otter trade had made men wealthy for the first time in history and ways to flaunt this new opulence took on curious forms. Inconspicuous ceremonial aprons were expanded into fringed robes to be worn on the shoulders of the noble class and come to be known as Chilkat blankets; carved and painted treasure chests became the inspiration for carved and painted heraldic screens and house fronts; the shaman's soul catcher grew into a medicine box and chief's staffs became totem poles decorated their entire length with carvings

depicting myths and heraldic legends. It seems reasonable to suppose that some Indian chief, the possessor of a treasured copper arrowpoint or "dena," had a skilled craftsman duplicate his treasure in commercial copper plate received from a trader in a greatly expanded form. This apparently caught on as the status symbol of the time which continued, although its origin was forgotten, until manufactured replicas flooded the Coast and its prestige value was lost and new symbols had to be sought.

In conclusion, I hope that I have presented acceptable evidence that the chief's copper as we know it was never made of native copper and appeared after 1774 when commercial copper plate became available to the Indians of the Northwest Coast; that it was a "blow-up" of a treasured copper arrowhead from the Interior; that the first of them were made either by native craftsmen who were already in possession of European tools and techniques or custom-made by ship's armorers and imported craftsmen; that later on, completed chief's coppers manufactured elsewhere flooded the coast, destroying its value as a prestige piece by making it commonplace and available to almost anyone.

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