

## ***Surviving Works: context in Verre arts***

***Part Two, Chapter Five: Towards a Verre catalogue raisonnée***

### **5.5: Prestige skeuomorphs**

*Tim Chappel, Richard Fardon and Klaus Piepel*

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## 5.5 Prestige skeuomorphs

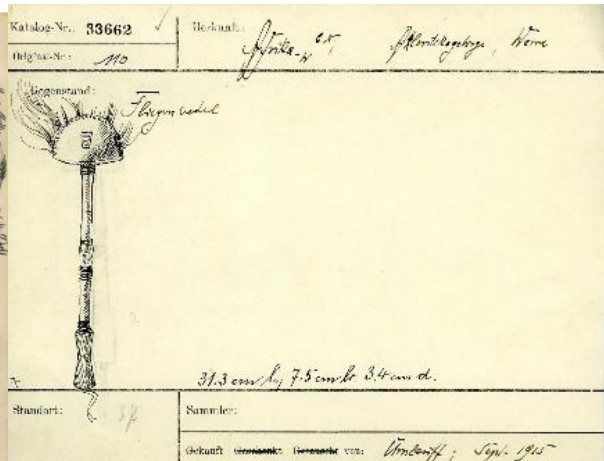
Such brasswares as bells, crooks and initiation helmets, knives and hoes seem to have been essential to Verre ritual and ceremonial, and to the gendering, seniority, and standing of the participants in these events. This becomes evident from their symbolic interconnections, as well as from the quantities in which they have been collected. Not all participants had access to the most prestigious brass versions of all these objects, but the impression is that many did, and if they did not own them, then they would seek to borrow them. Without wanting to draw a hard line, other brass skeuomorphs have a more supplementary feel to them, in the sense that they add luxury to ritual and ceremonial processes rather than being essential to these events happening with symbolic completeness. Some of these supplementary skeuomorphs seem attributable to Fulani or other wider influence, so we find brass fans and flywhisks, snuff bottles, brass amulets, brass lance heads, even a pair of brass sandals; brass versions of decorated drinking gourds should probably be added to this list given that the introduction of gourds is attributed to Fulani. Other skeuomorphs have more obvious Verre precedents: brass versions of animal horn musical instruments, water and beer pots, pot stands and pot rings, brass ritual staffs, and brass figures. These supplementary prestige skeuomorphs have been collected in noticeably smaller numbers than what we might call the core items of the Verre brass repertoire.

### *Fulani-inspired skeuomorphs*

Although provenanced examples of what are likely to be Fulani-inspired skeuomorphs have been collected from Verre, it seems plausible that they might have also been made for use by Fulani. Fans and fly whisks seem persuasive cases. The Verre term, *duma* (s), *dumit* (pl), which may be specified as brass, *duma suktunkak* (s), *dumit suktuntat* (pl), apparently covers two distinct forms. The earliest example of one of these types was collected by Frobenius and can be followed from its illustration in the Frobenius Archive to its current home in the Dresden Museum (albeit with some slippage in the accession record discussed in Chapter 2). The likelihood of Fulani connection is strengthened by specification of the fan section being of horsehair.



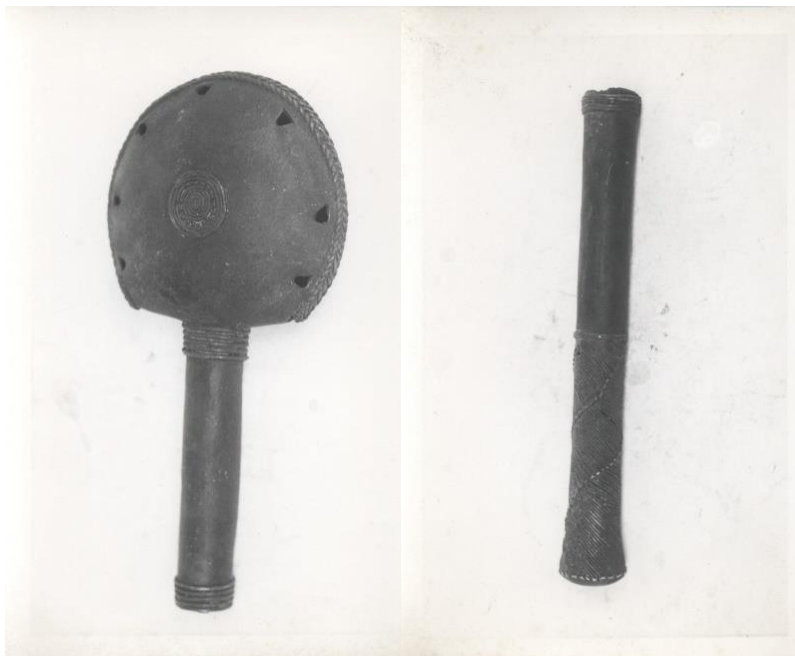
KBA 03290



Dresden 33662



Dresden 33662



567a &amp; b

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

We have illustrations of one similar fan and one fly whisk collected by Chappel. Given that a fan was made in sections, a fly whisk might simply be part of a fan.



66.J11.765



Charles Jones Gallery,  
Wilmington Indiana

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

Two further examples were accessioned in Jos under the term *duma* (555, 569) but without further specification we cannot say which of the two forms they took. Other examples are uncommon, although one, devoid of its horsehair, was offered in the Charles Jones Gallery (illustrated above) and like 567a had a circular decoration at its centre (we have illustrations of only one side of each fan, so do not know if the reverses had different or no devices).

A variety of other smaller personal accoutrements seem also to have Fulani inspiration. Verre are only one of the makers of snuff bottles in the Highland region, but there is sufficient evidence of provenance to suggest they were responsible for at least some of the flat, narrow-necked, circular containers in brass.



**SUM – Vestergaard 1967-74 (bottom left) – note, as well as bracelets (of which the upper middle and bottom right examples are not Verre), also strung crotals and pipe rings**

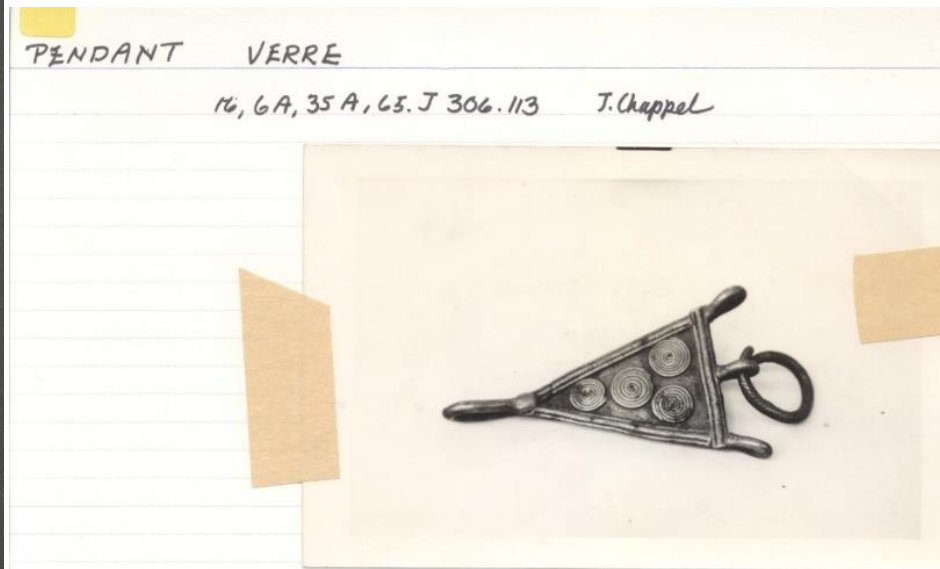
(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)

The same may be said for what appears to be a brass skeuomorph of an amulet the original or prototype for which may have consisted of inscriptions on paper tightly sewn into a leather covering (see below and Jos display cabinet 1967). The closest counterpart in Chappel's collection is described as a pendant. These seem to have been uncommon objects, not collected in large numbers from Verre, but also found elsewhere among Highland brass casters.





Dresden 24235



113

Even more unusual, is the pair of brass sandal soles collected by Chappel (494, which were displayed in the Jos display cabinet of 1967, see Interleaf).



Jos display cabinet (detail) two helmets and 'sandals' 494

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

These were attributed to the caster Yamarum who made them at Salassah Yadim at an original cost of two goats, suggesting they were cast within living memory in 1966 given the small number of casters' names recalled.<sup>1</sup>

Spears with large, leaf-shaped, blades may well be Fulani influenced, since they are more appropriate to cavalry than they are to hunters, whose spears are typically light. Ten spears

<sup>1</sup> Note another smith's name with the first syllable Ya-.

partly or wholly in brass, *tɔɔma suktunu* (s), *tɔɔma suktunkak* (pl), were collected (273, 492, 498, 507, 531, 535, 536, 545, 548 & 549 spear heads only). Several were photographed in their entirety, which makes the detail of the spear head difficult to discern (see Appendix 1, 507, 531, 535, 545). These spears cost between £1 and £1/10/-, with the sole exception of 545 at £3; this last being the only spear described as having a brass shaft, *gbala suktunkak*, apparently the same term, *gbala*, used of ritual staffs. Since only two spear heads were collected without shafts, these are likely to be those photographed by Rubin. A photograph of two spear heads in the SUM collection raises the possibility of spear heads being of composite construction with iron blades and a brass socket.



548 &amp; 549 Arnold Rubin



SUM

Decorated gourd skeuomorphs are another of the more numerous items collected (438, 447, 449, 516, 537, 546, 551, 575, 588, 620, 657, 754); we are in the fortunate position of being able to illustrate nine of the twelve accessioned (not including here examples collected from Bata).



438 (on ring 409)



449



516 (on 703)

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)





537



546 (on 703)



575 (on 605)



620



657



754

We learned from early German collections (Chapter 2) that decorated gourds attributed to Verre were collected in substantial quantities. Thanks to their fragility, these items were not only fugitive in Verre villages, where Chappel saw none in 1966, but intact examples have become rare in the German museums that held them.



Berlin III C29398



Berlin III C29390



Bremen B05442

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)



Bremen B05443



Bremen B05444



Bremen B05446

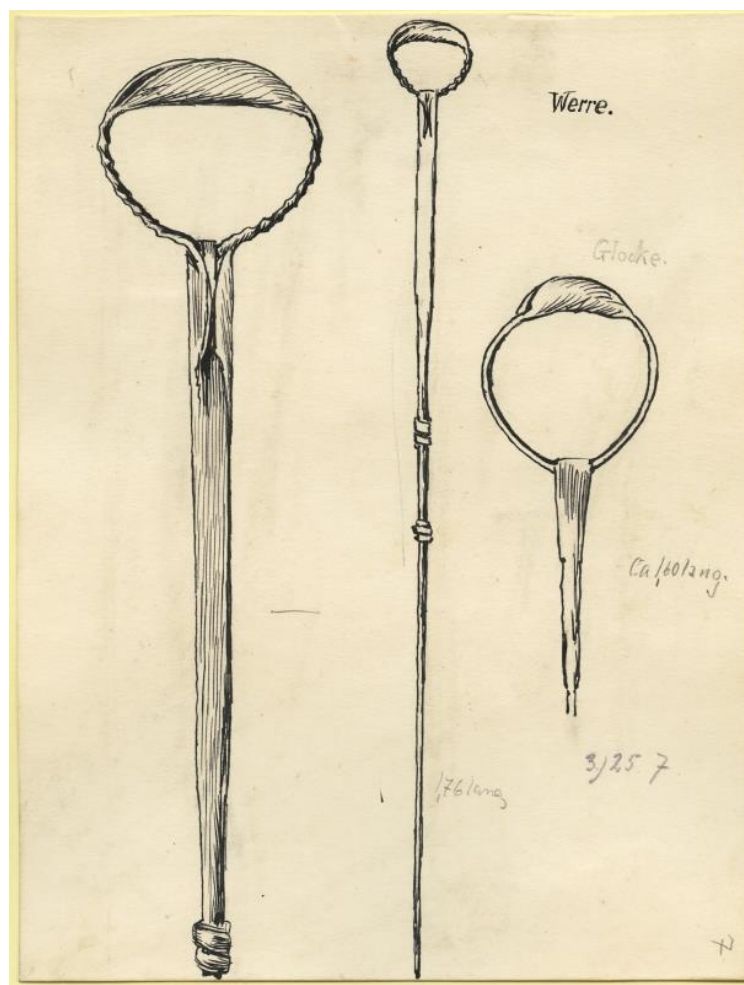
Like their decorated gourd prototypes, brass skeuomorphs have variable amounts of decoration; unlike gourds, several of them have a small ring for attachment. As four of the photographs of brass drinking gourds demonstrate they can be stabilized by placing them on pot rings. In three instances (**516**, **546**, **575**) a bracelet has been pressed into service, but there are pot rings too substantial to be worn as bracelets, such as that (accessioned as **409**) seen supporting the brass gourd **438** above. Pot rings, *kal* (s), *kara* (pl), might be made of fibres, such as are used to carry loads on the head, or else in metal: *kal suktundal* (s), *kara suktini* (pl), in brass; *kal yerki* (s), *kara yermi* (pl), in iron. The examples acquired for Jos differed widely in value, presumably on account of their material, size and workmanship. Chappel was told that the original cost of **409** would have been the livestock equivalent of £10, and at £4 it was among the most expensive of all the items he acquired. These were apparently scarce, the only other accession which we can be confident is likely to be a large brass pot ring is **493**, for which we have no illustration, while it is uncertain whether **542** is a pot ring or pot stand. Inexpensive rings (**528**, **539**, **541**) are likely to have been small, and some smaller brass rings designated as pot rings in their accession records (**621**, **698**) might also have served as bracelets. Only one example in another collection, that acquired by an SUM missionary, is almost certainly a pot ring. To judge by the photograph, it may consist of an iron ring with brass decoration.



SUM Johan Nielsen 1927-62

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

The brass pot stand is a skeuomorph with an iron intermediary. Branches with a tripod fork are a common sight planted upright in compounds throughout the region, including Verre. They serve as a stand on which to hang things, or as a support for a bowl or jar, safer than leaving it on the ground. There are contexts in which these poles may themselves become objects of symbolic importance. An iron version, called *tɔɔma gbaas* (s), *tɔɔma gba* (pl), is used in cult rituals. The term *tɔɔma* also means spear or shaft, and in this instance describes the iron shaft of the pot stand. The rest of the stand might be described as a smithing bricolage. Its top cradle may be formed from various other objects, most commonly from hoe blades. If it is additionally made from iron double spirals, then the assemblage may be specified as *tɔɔma ga-ga*. Alternatively, or additionally, the cradle may be made with elements resembling iron leg rattles, in which case the relationship between this object and an iron staff topped with a single rattle becomes apparent. These rattle top 'spears', called *tɔɔma bogurus* (s), *tɔɔma boguri* (pl), are held by figures in authority who may plant them in the ground at an important event.



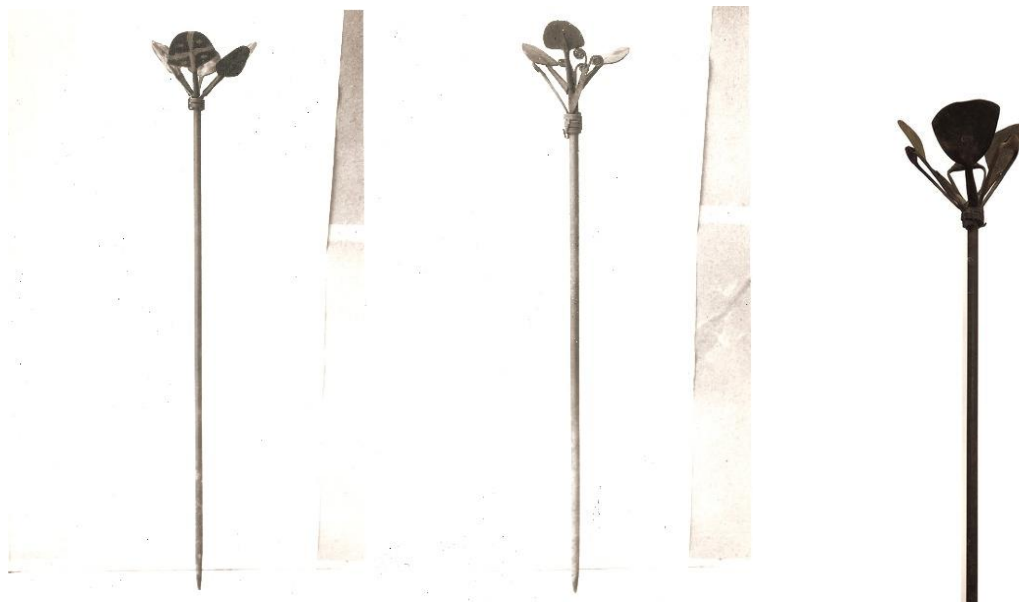
KBA 09384

(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)

Exceptionally, skeuomorphs of pot stands may be cast in brass, when the term for the metal is added to that for spear shaft, *tɔɔma suktunka* (s), *tɔɔma suktini* (pl). Even in the

absence of any profound sense of Verre symbolism, we can sense a potential conversation going on here between several objects and their skeuomorphs that would be replete with opportunities to draw analogies: spears, hoe blades, leg rattles, and double spirals, and what all of these can signify individually and relationally.

Chappel collected three iron pot stands (**428?**, **443**, **752**) of which we are able to illustrate two below (with slight uncertainty around the identity of the first image). Much more recently, an example was donated to the MQB-JC in Paris by the gallery owner Hervé Loevenbruck, and two more examples in similar style have been offered for sale by the Hamill Gallery, albeit as Fulani, which might indicate a regional market in the past (see also Ballarini 2009: 170, figure 2.67, for three examples).



**428?** - 5 hoe blades

**443** - 3 hoe blades and 3 spirals

**MQB-JC 70.2015.26.6** – 3 hoe blades and 3 spirals

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)





**Hamill Gallery (attributed to Fulani)**

**left** – 3 hoe blades and 3 spirals    **right** – 5 hoe blades, central rattle, iron ring with clappers

Brass skeuomorphs are scarcer. Chappel collected four (**446, 448, 594, 622**) but we have only a single illustration of an incomplete example.



**622 – 3 brass hoe blades, missing staff (photo inverted to show function)**

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)



Gourd skeuomorphs were not the only vessels for liquids cast in brass. Brass goblets, *telkal suktundal* (s), *tenkari suktini* (pl), were probably modelled on clay originals. Frobenius collected at least one of them, and Chappel two, which were among his more costly items. One of these, **731**, is very similar to the earlier example, and was said by the vendor, the village head of Toza, near Karlahi, to have been cast by his grandfather, which might well date it to the same period.



KBA 02894

Dresden Museum 33671



559

731

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

As well as gourds and goblets, larger containers were cast for use in *Do'os* rituals, probably supported in brass pot stands according to accounts given to Chappel, who collected four examples of miniature beer pots, *yerk suktunkak* (s), *yerm suktunmam* (pl), as well as a water pot, according to different informants either *gurme suktunu* (s), *gurmei suktini* (pl) or *dens suktunjas* (s), *denda suktini* (pl), used in women's ceremonies (**623** compare KBA 03450). One of the beer pots (**802**) was said to have been cast by Lawam of Yainde, among the handful of brass workers recalled by name. Although an impressive object that is nearly a foot tall, its casting appears to have been flawed. A sixth examples can be seen in the central panel of the 1967 Jos display cabinet (see, Interleaf). Comparison with Arriens' drawings not only confirms

a resemblance to Verre pottery, although much reduced in size, but also suggests that some pottery jars might themselves be skeuomorphs since the neck of KBA 04004 (as well as that of KBA 04003 not reproduced here) closely resembles a bottle gourd.



111



538



802



717



623

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)



KBA 03450

KBA 04002

KBA 04004

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

The impression of substantial investment in accoutrements of the cults is strengthened by one of the most unusual ritual objects. In common with their non-metal counterparts, these may be called *gbala* (s), *gbalit* (pl), which seems to be a term for clubs and staffs; specified to be in brass, this becomes *gbala suktunkak* (s), *gbalit suktuntat* (pl); while at least some ritual staffs are termed *gbala arandu* (s), *gbalit arandit* (pl). There is a potential 'original' of these objects in the phallic staffs of the neighbouring Mapeo Chamba which are the protective symbol of their cult of impotence, *jub nɔɔ*, an example of which was gifted to the Lagos Museum along with Verre metalwares collected in Mapeo by Fr Kevin Malachi Cullen (see Chapter 1). From this, and from other evidence we know that these eastern Chamba shared a local culture with communities of Verre. Several examples of brass *gbala* have come into view from other collections where they remained unexplained objects. Although Chappel may have collected as many as nine examples of *gbala*, we have photographs of none of them (**496**, **557**, **597**, **655**, **661**, **697**, **747**, **773**, **776**). Almost all these acquisitions were made for £1 each, or thereabouts; **747** uniquely is specified as iron and cost about half that going rate, 11/-, making it likely that **697** might also be iron, costing only 6/-. Two examples stand out for expense: **661**, the only staff described as *arandu*, a term we cannot gloss, cost £1/10/-; while **776** at £2/8/- must have been exceptional in some regard to cost double the going price, although described as for *Tibaai* use, it is not unique in that. Two of our illustrations come from the Sudan United Mission's collection previously in Aarhus. The proportions differ, and the first is a particularly close skeuomorph of the Mapeo Chamba wooden ritual staff with rope whipping with a length specified as 50cm. The second of these examples probably does not belong in this category at all, since the SUM description is of a flute that is 'open both ends' (see below, Berlin III C 29415). Two further examples without local provenance resemble that on the left below; the staff in the Wade collection, which to judge by the 10cm measure illustrated with it must be 50cm, resembles it closely.





SUM – Jens Hepsgaard 1967-72



SUM – Jens Hepsgaard 1967-72



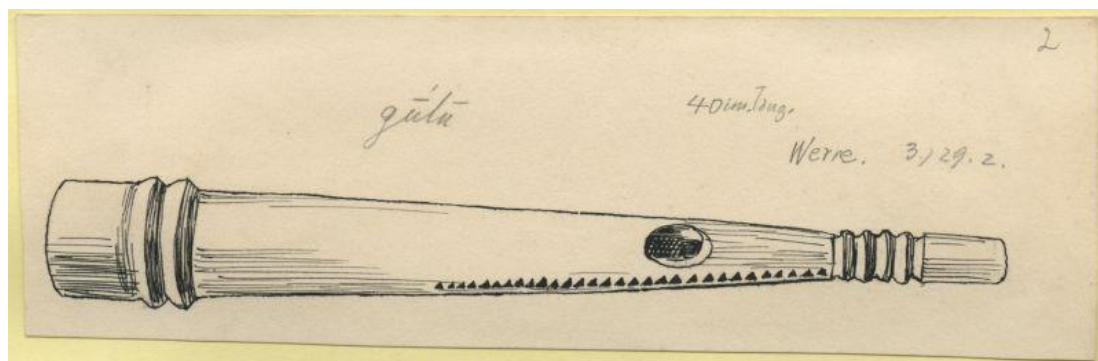
Charles Jones Gallery



James Wade Collection

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

Another class of skeuomorphs that would appear to be of Verre rather than any other inspiration are copies of wind instruments with wooden or animal horn originals; the wooden horns may themselves be skeuomorphs of animal horn originals (as seems to be the case for KBA 09176, below).



KBA 09176



Leo Frobenius, gulu, Ident. Nr.: III C 29415  
 © Foto: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin  
 Fotografin: Laura Haendel



Berlin III C 29415

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

The term for pipes made from cow horns or antlers is *gul* (s), *gura* (pl), hence their brass skeuomorphs are *gul suktunu* (s), *gura suktini* (pl); of Chappel's collection, **410** is specifically allocated to this class; costing £2, it was considerably more expensive than **491** and **530** at 10/- each, so would presumably differ from them. A fourth brass horn, with the different name *fɔra suktunkak* (s), *fɔrt suktuntat* (pl), was among the most expensive of the items Chappel acquired (£4/10/-) and on this basis must have been exceptional, perhaps corresponding to the ornate horn of Rubins' Jos photographs.





The only similarly large casting of a horn known to us is this 30cm horn with two stops in the Sudan United Mission collection.



SUM

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

The term general term for a small container seems to have been *gul* (s), *gulal* (pl); hence a snuff container is *gul taba* (s), *guri taba* (pl), literally a container for tobacco, and a medicine charm in brass of the kind worn around a child's neck is *gul suktundal* (s). A more precise transcription would establish whether there is any relationship between the terms for such containers and that for an animal horn, a possibility lent some plausibility by a horn being able to serve as a container, or as a boy's neck charm, *gura bus* (s), *gura boyii* (pl). A particularly distinctive form of medicine container, *gul gbondunal* (s), *gura gbodini* (pl), was made in phallic form to be worn on a man's right hip. Chappel collected three such, the two illustrated below which each cost 10/-, as well as **590b** (no illustration) which may not have been in brass given a price of 1s.



585



589

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

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