

# X P L O R A

COSMOS | LIFE ON EARTH | CULTURE,

Arni Brownstone



BRIAN BOYLE, ROM HD 5621

## A Whip is Just a Whip...

*Except when summoning demons to a feast*

**F**OR MANY YEARS the object above sat uncomfortably in storage, an anomaly in the tray of northern Plains Indian horse whips. Typically, whips, or quirts, from the plains feature an elkhorn or wooden handle, a short, double lash made of harness leather, and a wrist strap. But the handle of this object is fashioned from a human thighbone. The knee end is partly encased in leather of a kind not used by Plains Indians, and the braided lash is too long for horse riding. Perhaps most puzzling is the absence of a wrist strap. Plains Indians spent much of their time on horseback, and while the whip was essential at times to

spur on their mounts, they often needed the whip-hand free for hunting buffalo, caring for babies, or handling baggage on the trail.

Despite its aberrant qualities, the item remained with the whips, partly because documentation suggested that it had been collected from the Blackfoot tribe, and partly because there was no alternative explanation of its origins. None, that is, until I happened to view an exhibition on Tibetan culture at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. There in a showcase devoted to musical instruments were some half dozen "thighbone trumpets" identical to the handle of the doubtful whip. There remained

only one problem: the lash. Neither the Tibetan trumpets in the ROM's own Far Eastern collection nor those in the Field Museum have lashes. In researching the item for the ROM Foundation's annual *Fact? or Fiction?* quiz, curator Alison Easson came across the answer. She discovered an illustration of a thighbone trumpet with a lash attached.

After confounding curators for years, the artifact was at last confirmed to be a "koongling." It was used to summon demons to a feast in the ritual dance and liturgical recitation called "chod," a traditional part of the religious training for Tibetan lamas.

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