

Old Tibetan Studies Dedicated to the Memory of R.E. Emmerick

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Scribes, Texts and Rituals in Early Tibet and Dunhuang

edited by Brandon Dotson, Kazushi Iwao and Tsuguhito Takeuchi. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag. 2013, 156 pp., 19 colour plates, ISBN 978-38-95-00938-9. € 98.

Reviewed by George FitzHerbert

Old Tibetan Studies refers to the study of the textual and archaeological evidence concerning Tibetan civilization prior to the 11th century, and particularly between the 7th and 10th centuries. It is a discrete field within Tibetan studies because of the linguistic and referential peculiarity and obscurity of much of the written evidence from this period (most notably the ‘Dunhuang documents’ and the extant inscriptions), which is in contrast to the writings from the 11th century onwards. Works from the 11th century are much more accessible to the scholar of ‘classical’ literary Tibetan, and it was from this time that the familiar mythology of Tibet’s conversion to Buddhism appears to have become entrenched in Tibetan literary and popular imaginations.

Old Tibetan Studies occupies a hallowed place in the study of Tibetan culture and religion, since for textual historical scholarship – and particularly for the allied field of philological enquiry – many questions concerning Tibetan terms, beliefs and cultural notions, inevitably lead the scholar back to this formative period when Tibetan first started to be written down and when Tibet’s momentous ‘assimilation of Buddhism’ began. It was also of course the period of Tibet’s greatest geopolitical presence in Asia in which the militaristic Yarlung Pugyal (Yar-[k]lung spu[r]-rgyal) Dynasty united the entirety of the Tibetan Plateau under its dominion between the 7th and 9th centuries CE, and exercised intermittent dominance over the Inner Asian ‘silk routes’ linking China to the west and its supply of horses. It is a period that no Tibetanist can ignore. Fittingly, it is a field that continues to attract the attention of many fine Tibetanist scholars.

The two volumes under review here are both proceedings of the Old Tibetan panel of the Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS) – of the 2003 (Oxford) and 2010 (Vancouver) seminars respectively.

The former volume is dedicated to the memory of the pioneering scholar of Khotanese Ronald Emmerick, and among its most useful contents is a full bibliography of Emmerick's extensive published works, found on pages 11-20.

Although there is little by way of thematic thread to the articles, there are many useful contributions in this volume for political and religious historians, and for philologists.

The editor Scherrer-Schaub's contribution, 'An Archaeology of the Written', centres on the much-debated question concerning the origins of the Tibetan scripts. After an erudite survey of the scholarly debate on this question since the 19th century, the author edges towards a conclusion favouring intermediate Brahmi- derived scripts in use in the Gilgit region in the 7th century, as the source of the Tibetan script. She also provides a reflective excursus on the judicial significance of the introduction of script during the Tibetan imperial period: The 'power of the written to organize and control the world'. Palaeography of the extant documentation from this period, she argues, reveals a sophisticated imperial chancery at work. There are documents oriented towards structuring society (civil and penal codes); for regulating evil influences (rites of protection, divination, thaumaturgy, medicine etc); for exerting political authority and conducting foreign affairs (decrees etc); and for administering the state (trade, mail service etc). Each kind of transaction, she suggests, 'produces a *particular type* of document, makes use of particular *formulaic expressions*, is displayed according to *precise rules*, and in some cases, is written on specific material support'. The prodigious quantity of the extant documents from this period allows us to see 'the complexity of the state machine laid down at an epoch when Tibet was at the pinnacle of its political and military glory'. Her own contribution (in this article) is a brief examination of Imperial judicial procedure concerning rights of succession, based on the analysis of a passage from the Old Tibetan Chronicle (PT1287), and supported by similar patterns evidenced in the Old Tibetan Inscription on the Zhol pillar at Lhasa.

In keeping with the volume's dedication to Ronald Emmerick, an

article by Bielmeier provides a footnote to Emmerick's large body of work exposing the cultural and historical contacts between Khotan and Tibet. The article is a philological examination of the various words for 'ginger' used in Old Tibetan and in modern Tibetan dialects. The author observes that the Khotanese word for ginger, *ttumgare*, which was borrowed into Old Tibetan as *dong gra*, is a term still in use today in the Purik-Tibetan dialects spoken in Lower Ladakh between Leh and Kargil, and that the same term that was also borrowed from Khotanese into Tocharian.

Helga Uebach's piece on Tibetan officials in the south-eastern part of the Tibetan empire (today's Yunnan province) in the 8th century provides evidence of Tibetan rule in a part of the Tibetan empire which has hitherto remained quite obscure. Kazushi Iwao provides clarifications concerning the organisational structures and nomenclature of Tibetan rule in Dunhuang, particularly over the city's Chinese inhabitants. Yoshiro Imaeda offers a re-examination of the Imperial-era inscription of lDan-ma-brag in eastern Tibet, first published in Tibetan in 1988. The inscription relates to the elevation of the monk-official Bran-ka Yon-tan – later assassinated in the coup which would spell the end of the dynasty – to the High Council, an event which Imaeda dates to 804.

Not all the contributions relate to the Tibetan imperial period itself. Several also address the post-dynastic period, when it is known that Tibetan language and script continued to be used in the oasis city of Dunhuang by non-Tibetans for some decades after the demise of centralized Tibetan dominion. Tsuguhito Takeuchi offers a useful survey of those old Tibetan texts housed in the British Library which he says, on palaeographic grounds, should be dated to the post-Imperial period. Bianca Horlemann continues her excellent research on the history of north-eastern Tibet (A-mdo) with a survey of extant Buddhist sites from the 8th to 14th centuries in this region.

For those with a broad interest in early Tibetan cultural history probably the most engaging article in this volume is that by Brandon Dotson, concerning how the unification of regional principalities under the Tibetan empire was symbolised in an early post-dynastic source called the *Lo-rgyus chen-mo* (a text no longer extant but cited by several prominent post-dynastic historians including lDe'u Jo-sras, Mkhas-pa lDe'u and later dPa'-bo gTsug-lag phreng-ba). The alliance of the principalities is there presented as an alliance of mountain deities rallying

around the mountain deity of the Yarlung kings. And the re-fragmentation of the empire with the outbreak of the Revolt in 904 is symbolized as a devolution into regional powers again at the behest of the mountain. Dotson's article adds further confirmation to the work of Karmay (e.g., Karmay 1998) and others in suggesting that in old Tibetan political theory, (in Dotson's words) 'political territory was delimited as the domain of a mountain deity'. His article is based on post-imperial historiography, but he makes a plausible attempt to reconstruct the probable archaic core shared between these sources, and his article is interesting not only for its reconstruction of a hypothetical political geography of the early post-imperial period (including tables of 'regional principalities') but also for its reflections on the problematic nature of disentangling political history from formulaic poetic constructions.

In other articles, Amy Heller looks at aspects of economic and material culture in Old Tibet – an area of enquiry obscured by the preponderance of research materials for this period coming from the Inner Asian oases of Dunhuang and Turfan, rather than from central Tibet. The contribution by Siglinde Dietz presents a palaeographical and philological analysis of an Old Tibetan manuscript of the *bShes-pa phrin-yig* (Skt: *Suḥṛllekha*) by the great Mādhyamika philosopher Nāgārjuna.

The second volume, *Scribes Texts and Rituals in Early Tibetan and Dunhuang*, is a slim but very handsomely bound volume which compares favourably to the shiny mustard yellow of the former volume.

The highlight of this second volume is again the article by Brandon Dotson, by now well established as a leading voice among the new generation of Old Tibetan scholars. His article here, 'The Princess and the Yak: the Hunt as a Narrative Trope, and Historical Reality in Early Tibet', deserves to be widely read. In it the author revisits the famous story from the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* in which the Tibetan emperor Srong-btsan's sister Sad-mar-kar, who is unhappily wed to the king of Zhang-zhung, plots with her brother for her husband's overthrow, thus bringing the Zhang-zhung kingdom – the fabled home of the Tibetan Bon religion – within the Tibetan imperium. What Dotson brings to the analysis of this story is a reflection on its nature as oral-traditional poetry. This is particularly pertinent, for although the story of princess Sad-mar-kar is no longer part of common Tibetan folklore and is only familiar to scholars, the narrative trope it embodies – namely the rival king being overthrown due to the treachery

of the wife who favours the Tibetan hero – is one of the core constitutive narrative tropes of the wildly popular Tibetan Gesar Epic which remains very much part of Tibetan popular folklore. Dotson's analysis looks particularly at the theme of the wild-yak hunt within the narrative, and explores it not just as a literary trope, but also as a reflection of the historic importance of the imperial 'enclosure hunt' (*lings*) to Tibetan court life. The article showcases Dotson's artful combination of literary, philological, archaeological and historical methodologies to illuminate the content embedded in the Old Tibetan manuscript corpus.

But Dotson's is not the only treat included in this volume. Amy Heller's article on the painted coffin panels recently excavated in Qinghai notably expands the archaeological and art-historical evidence for the early Tibetan period, depicting a hunt among other things. The paintings are reproduced in high-quality colour photographic plates at the back of the volume. It is to be lamented that so many of these important new excavation sites on the Tibetan plateau continue to be looted, with their findings making their way into the international art market.

Cantwell and Mayer's contribution on the Bon *Black Pillar Tantra* (*Ka-ba nag-po man-ngag rtsa-ba'i rgyud*) offers a brief comparison between this Bon *phur pa* tantra (said to have been revealed by Khu-tsha zla-'od in the 11th-12th century) and the early Tibetan Buddhist *phur pa* tantra texts found at Dunhuang. They observe a high degree of similarity between the two systems, but the complete absence of *verbatim* replication. The rival traditions thus constitute independent self-sufficient tantric traditions which nevertheless display complete doctrinal convergence. Also in this volume one also finds a range of contributions on the administrative history of the Tibetan empire: Gertraud Taenzer's analysis of the taxation system imposed by the Tibetan empire on the region of 'A-zha during the 8th and 9th century; Zhu Lisheng's survey of administrative divisions of Tibetan-ruled Khotan; and Takeuchi's exploration and analysis of the material culture of books, paper and writing boards among Chinese scribes employed in Tibetan-ruled Dunhuang. There is also a short contribution by Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim on the foreign names of *material medica* in the early Tibetan medical texts from Dunhuang, suggestive of central Asian influences on the early evolution of the tradition. There is also a very useful contribution by Sam van Schaik proposing a Palaeographic Method for Dating Early Tibetan Manuscripts. The method is based on the distinct

'writing styles' observed in the manuscripts which may be grouped into six distinct imperial-period styles (which reflect the different functions of texts – monastic and administrative for example) and two post-imperial writing styles. The system he proposes will be of use to many as a point of reference and as a tool for pedagogy.

References

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