

Tibetan Manuscript on Birchbark from the Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts RAS

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A sing birchbark as a writing material is not extraordinary but quite unusual for Tibetan manuscript culture. Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, the author of the most comprehensive up to date study on Tibetan codicology, gives only one example of a manuscript on birchbark. However, the item she mentions is, in fact, not written in Tibetan but in the Sanskrit Śāradā script.¹ The Berlin Turfan-Collection² and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences³ hold several Tibetan birchbark manuscripts. When my colleague Kirill Bogdanov drew my attention to the text that became the subject of the present article, I realized that I had never seen anything like it before. There was a multitude of fragile slips, so thin that they resembled onionskin, covered with red and silver writing that was barely legible without a magnifying glass (Fig. 1). The *res accessoria* and the archives told a compelling story, but unfortunately, some pieces to the puzzle are still missing.



Fig. 1 — Manuscript SI 6618. Sample of a folio (recto and verso).

Other folios are written using either silver or red ink, but here two types of ink are used at the same time.

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¹ Helman-Ważny 2014: 63–67 and Kawasaki 2004. Another monograph written by A. Helman-Ważny in collaboration with Brandon Dotson deals with the same topic and is dedicated to early Tibetan documents, however, it does not mention birchbark as a writing material (Dotson & Helman-Ważny 2016).

² Taube 1980: 93–101. Texte Nr. 37–43.

³ Chiodo 2000: IX.

1. Provenance

The notes enclosed in the manuscript and the box in which it was kept were inscribed with the name of Nikolai Petrovich Likhachev (1862–1936). He was a prominent historian as well as a passionate collector whose interests lay beyond the scope of the Russian documents he used in his academic work. He also had an eye for any valuable and interesting written works, including the ones in Asian languages.⁴ The above-mentioned Kirill Bogdanov, a researcher at the Department of Manuscripts and Documents of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOM RAS), prepared a short overview of all items that had previously been part of Likhachev's collection.⁵ During the preparation process, Bogdanov discovered that some of these texts, including the ones in Tibetan, were still not listed in the inventory, so he later presented me with the birchbark manuscript.

The slips (*folia*) of the birchbark manuscript were divided into two sets. I will conventionally refer to them as **Set 1** and **Set 2**. **Set 1** was wrapped into a pre-revolutionary advertising brochure, while **Set 2** was kept inside the blue folders characteristic of Likhachev's collection.

I discovered the reason for this division in the former owner's records⁶ and found notes in pencil about his acquisitions.⁷ One of the notes reads:

Thin Tibetan leaflets [**Set 1**] bought in Leningrad shortly before the [World] War [I] from one traveler, who brought them [maybe] from Mongolia and [who] was related to the Academy of Sciences [...]. A folder with similar folios [**Set 2**] was bought in 1914 from N. M. Berezovsky (what it is—[nobody] knows), [he was] not an antiquarian, [just a] traveler, it seems [that he] brought the items himself.

There was another note written in two different handwritings attached

⁴ For the detailed biography of N. P. Likhachev and information on his works and collected treasures, please refer to the exhibition catalogue "*Zvuchat lish' pis'mena...*" ("*In Written Words Alone...*") that was compiled in 2012 to commemorate his 150th birthday.

⁵ Bogdanov 2012.

⁶ St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Collection No. 246 (N. P. Likhachev), inventory No. 2, item No. 136: Information on the Provenance, Contents and Defining of the Items from the Likhachev's collection. See 132b, 133a.

⁷ I suppose that the gradual decline of Likhachev's position in the academia after the World War I and the October Revolution of 1917 hindered him to put this information into a more accessible form. Apparently, the notes were made already after 1924, because the city (formerly, St. Petersburg) is called Leningrad there.

to **Set 1** (Fig. 2). The first inscription (most likely belonging to the Tibetologist Andrei I. Vostrikov)⁸ says: "A Sanskrit text, written on birchbark (*bhūrja*) in Tibetan script (cursive), related to the Buddhist work *Mahāyāna-tantra*. Found at Khara-Khoto (Chinese Turkestan)."⁹ The second handwriting rather unexpectedly belongs to the prominent Arabist Ignaty Yu. Kratchkovsky. It reads: "Acquired by I. Yu. Kratchkovsky in 1943 in Moscow from the citizen Yu. M. Walther." How could these strange circumstances be explained?

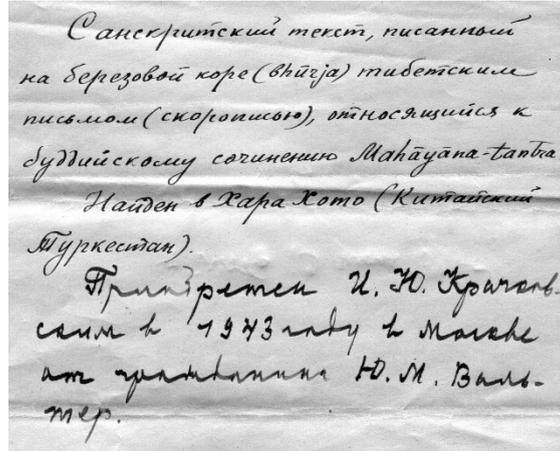


Fig. 2 — Note attached to the manuscript SI 6618. The handwriting of the unidentified person resembles that of A. I. Vostrikov (upper part) and I. Yu. Kratchkovsky (lower part).
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We should travel back in time to the year 1925 when the house of Likhachev's family in St. Petersburg, also used as a storage for his immense library, was turned into the Museum of Paleography. In 1930, Likhachev was arrested and sent into exile, and the Museum and its holdings were moved to the Library of the Academy. The Museum of Paleography was renamed into "The Museum of Books, Documents, and Writings," and was later transformed into an "Institute" in 1931. After Likhachev's death in 1936 and the dissolution of the Institute, Likhachev's collection was distributed among different museums, institutes, and individuals.

I. Yu. Kratchkovsky used to work with the Likhachev's Arabic acquisitions since pre-revolutionary times. Being familiar with the

⁸ This identification is based on the comparison of samples of A. I. Vostrikov's handwriting preserved at the Archives of the Orientalists at IOM RAS.

⁹ Khara-Khoto, the "dead city," that once was an outpost of the Xi Xia Empire (11th–13th centuries), is located on the territory of Inner Mongolia (and not exactly in Chinese Turkestan).

contents of the collection, he, much later in 1943, could identify the Tibetan items and acquire it for the Institute of Oriental Studies.¹⁰ The bargain with someone described as a “citizen Yu. M. Walther” took place in Moscow.¹¹

Yury M. Walther was a famous bibliophile mentioned several times in the memoirs of his peers, for instance: “I knew Yu. M. Walther (1919–1987) for about 15 years [...]. For many years, he worked in a sanatorium as the chief executive doctor. In the book world, he is known as one of the most eminent bibliophiles of the last decades.”¹² Ultimately, we might never be able to trace the path of the Tibetan birchbark manuscript and how it fell into the hands of the Moscow bibliophile after the dissolution of the Likhachev’s collection in 1936, and how I. Yu. Kratchkovsky managed to obtain it. Also, Anna Dolinina (1923–2017), a devout disciple of Kratchkovsky and the author of his biography entitled *Nevol’nik dolga* (“Captive of the Debt”), assured me that she had never encountered any mentions about Tibetan manuscripts in his papers.

The origin story of **Set 2** is more detailed: it was received from N. M. Berezovsky, as stated in Likhachev’s notes, and as it is verified by the visiting card of Berezovsky,¹³ which is kept together with **Set 2**. Nikolai Berezovsky (1879–1941), an architect,¹⁴ accompanied his cousin, Mikhail Berezovsky, during the expedition to the city of Kucha in East Turkestan in 1905–1908.¹⁵ After the dissolution of the Likhachev collection, **Set 2** (unlike **Set 1** that virtually ended up on the black market) was directly passed over to the Institute of Oriental

¹⁰ The Institute of Oriental Studies (IOS), the successor of the Asiatic Museum, was established in Leningrad in 1930. The Institute was moved to Moscow in 1951. However, the Department of Oriental Manuscripts (including all archives of the IOS) remained in Leningrad and in February 1956, it was reorganized into the Leningrad Branch of the IOS. On June 19, 2007, the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences ordered to transform the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies into the independent Institute of Oriental Manuscripts.

¹¹ During the siege of Leningrad in the World War II, Kratchkovsky took charge of the Institute of Oriental Studies and refused to be evacuated. Because of his deteriorating health he finally had to leave Leningrad in July 1942, and stayed in Moscow until 1944.

¹² Markov 2004: 312.

¹³ The card has Likhachev’s inscription: “Bought from him in October 1913.” This must be closer to the truth than the pencil notes made much later, which state that the bargain was made in 1914. I suppose that the inscription on the card was made at the times when the acquiring took place.

¹⁴ In 1909, Nikolai Berezovsky, in collaboration with Gavriil V. Baranovsky, created the architectural design of *Kun brtse chos gnas grwa tsang*, commonly known as Datsan, the Buddhist temple officially consecrated and opened in St. Petersburg in 1915.

¹⁵ Vorobyeva-Desyatovskaya 2008.

Studies in 1938.¹⁶

Both sets of the manuscript's folios made a rather complicated journey before they ended up at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Fig. 3). In 2018, the manuscript was finally given the call number SI 6618 and since then it is part of the Institute's Serindian collection.¹⁷

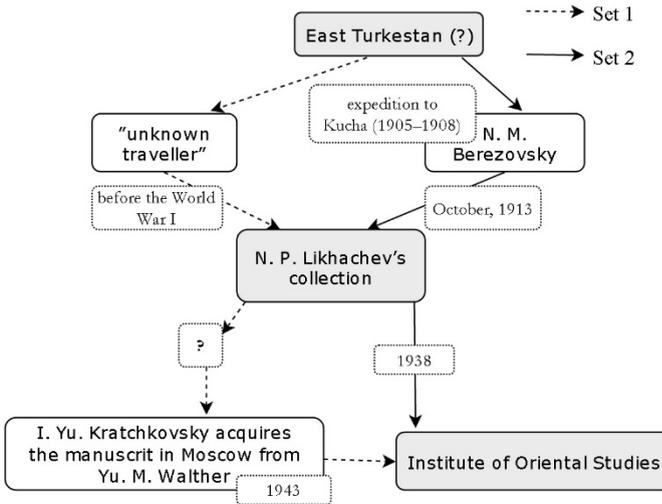


Fig. 3 — Provenance scheme

2. General Description

Both sets contain exactly 42 folios, adding up to 84 folios in total, all in the *pothi* format.¹⁸ Their length varies from 13 to 26 cm, the width is from 1 to 2 cm. Most of the pages contain three lines of text, but there are also some that consist of one, two, and five lines. The maximum line-height does not exceed 4 mm.

54 folios are written in silver ink, 29 in red ink, and one folio in both

¹⁶ "The List of Manuscripts and Documents Passed to the Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, from the Institute of Book, Document and Writing," was compiled in 1938. St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Collection No. 152, inventory No. 1a, item No. 604, folio 76. At present, the Collection No. 152 is temporarily stored at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts.

¹⁷ Tibetan items kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts are distributed among several units: the Collection of Tibetan Manuscripts and Blockprints, the Collection of Tibetan Texts from Khara-Khoto, the Collection of Tibetan Texts from Dunhuang. Wooden tablets, as well as some other items brought from the Serindian region, belong to the respective collection.

¹⁸ This fact made me think that someone divided the manuscript intentionally.

(Fig. 1).

Typically for the Tibetan manuscript culture, a pen (most likely a reed or bamboo pen) was used as the writing implement. Despite the overall neatness of the writing, split edges can be seen at the ends of the strokes.

Birchbark material is extremely thin and fragile. The structure of the bark naturally forms the difference of colors: one side of the folio is always darker than the other, to the point that the lenticels characteristic of the birchbark texture are not visible.

The manuscript is written in elegant *dbu med* style the accuracy of which varies in different parts. According to Sam van Schaik, this writing style developed in Tibet in the post-imperial period (after the 9th century CE) and gradually changed over time.¹⁹ The style of this particular manuscript has many similarities with the headless styles of Buddhist texts from Dunhuang (10th century) and Khara-Khoto (12th–13th centuries). However, without sufficient evidence, drawing any comparison is very tricky since the different variations of this style were used until recent times.

The manuscript is divided into different parts: each section may contain one or several texts and has its own foliation. The foliation consists of digits (Fig. 4) and letters (Fig. 5).

¹⁹ van Schaik 2012.



Fig. 4 — Manuscript SI 6618: Verses from the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra*.
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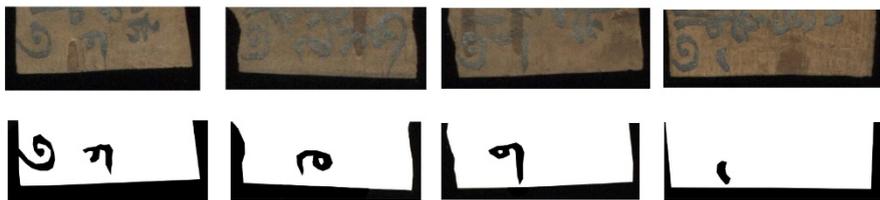


Fig. 5 — Manuscript SI 6618: Foliation using Tibetan letters

3. Contents

The passage from the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* occupies two folios of the manuscript, the remaining 82 folios contain a variety of *dhāraṇīs* and mantras.

The *Prātimokṣa* verses start on the third line of the recto side of the first folio.²⁰ They are preceded by *Pratītyasamutpādahṛdaya* or *Rten 'brel snying po* (“The Heart[-mantra] of Dependent Origination”) and other formulae.

The verses are quoted below in its entirety to give a full picture of the features of the manuscript’s particular rendering of Tibetan.²¹ Significant variations from the corresponding canonical version²² are provided in the footnotes.

(1r3) bzod pa dka' thub bzod pa dam ni/²³
 mya ngan 'das pa mchog ces sangs rgyas gsung/
 rab tu (1v1) byung ba gzhan la gnod pa dang/
 gzhan la 'tshe bas dges sbyong ma yin no/
 myig ldan 'gro bar 'dod²⁴ pa yis/
 nyam nga bdag 'dzin ji bzhin du/²⁵
 (1v2) mkhas pas 'tsho ba'i 'jig rten 'dir/

²⁰ Folio number (Tibetan digit) is found on the left side of the recto page.

²¹ The transliteration used here differs from the Extended Wylie Transliteration Scheme in the following way: 1. Plus sign (+) is used when there's no *tsheg* separating syllables, e.g., *ba+dzra*. 2. International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) is used when necessary, e.g., *rnams*.

²² Sde dge edition of *So sor thar pa'i mdo* (D2): 20a4–20b2.

²³ In the canonical version this line has nine syllables: *bzod pa dka' thub dam pa bzod pa ni*. It is interesting that the very same variation can be found in the inscription on the back of the image of Tārā dated ca. second half of the 11th century kept at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Kossak & Singer 1998: 59).

²⁴ D2: 'gro ba yod.

²⁵ D2: nyam nga ba dag ji bzhin du.

sdig pa dag ni yong+su spong/
 skur pa mi gdab gnod myi bya/
 so sor thar pa'ang bsdam par bya/²⁶
 lhag pa'i sems la (1v3) yang dag sbyor/
 'di ni sa+ngyas bstan pa yin/
 ji ltar bung bas me tog las/
 kha dog dri las mi gnod par/
 khu [ba] zhibs nas 'phur ba ltar/
 (2r1) de bzhin thub pa grong du rgyu/
 bdag gi rigs dang mi rigs la/
 brtag par bya ste gzhan rnaṃs kyi/
 myi mthun pa dang gzhan dag gi/
 byas dang (2r2) ma byas rnam[s] la myin/
 lhag pa'i sems la bgya(! =bag) bya ste/
 thub pa'i thub gzhi rnaṃs la bslab/
 nyer zhi rtag tu dran ldan pa'i/
 skyob pa mya ngan med pa yin/
 (2r3) sbyin pas bsod naṃs rab tu 'phal(='phel)/
 legs bsdam dgra bsogs mi 'gyur ro/
 dges dang ldan pas sdig pa spong/
 nyon mongs zad pas mya ngan (2v1) 'das/
 sdig pa ci yang²⁷ myi bya ste/
 dges(!) ba phun sum tshogs par spyad/
 rang gi sems ni yongs su gdul/
 'di ni sangs rgyas bstan pa yin/
 lus (2v2) kyi sdom pa legs pa ste/
 ngag gi sdom pa legs pa yin/
 yid kyi sdom pa legs pa ste/
 tham-[ca]d du ni sdom pa legs/
 kun du bsdam pa'i dges(!) (2v3) slong ni/
 sdugs bsngal kun las rab tu grol/
 ngag rnaṃs bsrung zhing yid kyis rab bsdams ste/

²⁶ The following two lines are missing: *zas kyi tshod kyang rig par byal bas mtha'i gnas su gnas par byal.*

²⁷ D2: *thams cad* instead of *ci yang*.

lus kyis mi dge ba dag myi byed cing/²⁸

The text shows no signs of the old Tibetan orthography that was gradually disappearing after the standardization of the language in the 9th century, such as the reversed *gi gu*, the “strong *da*” (*da drag*) and the “supporting ‘a’” (*‘a rten*). The only feature of the old orthography is the inconsistent palatalization of the consonant *m* that occurs with *gi gu* and should appear along with *‘geng bu* as well. In this case, we have *myin*, *myi*, but at the same time, *mi* and *med*.

This particular fragment of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra*, the so-called “patience creed” (since it starts with the word *bzod pa*), was widely used for inscriptions in the shape of Buddhist stūpas on the back of *thangkas*.²⁹ This made me think about the function of the birchbark manuscript that was elegantly written, yet so inconvenient to read at the same time. The usage of silver and red ink suggests that the manuscript was created for merit accumulation and for keeping it in a holy place.

As I have mentioned above, except for the passage from the *Prātimokṣa*, the birchbark manuscript consists only of *dhāraṇīs* and mantras. It is possible to give neither a proper description of them in the present article, nor even a complete list of the *dhāraṇīs*—some lines, especially the ones on the darker side of the folio, are difficult to read, some folios have bent edges that hide fragments of the text, some are partially lost.

Among the texts presented in this manuscript, one can find popular ones, such as the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā* and *Sitātapatrā-dhāraṇī*, and less common ones, such as the *Maitrī-pratijñā-dhāraṇī*. The *Uṣṇīṣavijayā* and *Pratītyasamutpādaḥrdaya* (that preceded the *Prātimokṣa* verses and repeated other parts of the manuscript) belong to the “five classes of great *dhāraṇīs*” (*gzungs chen sde lngā*) recommended for depositing into stupas by Tibetan scholars.³⁰ Yale Bentor provides a helpful quotation from the canonical work *Vajrāvalī* by Abhayākara Gupta that concerns birchbark in the context of a stupa consecration: “Whenever you wish to make a special homage to relics (*sku gdung*) of the Tathāgata, you should at the time of making [an image or stupa] leave the head or back of an image or the center of the stūpa hollow. When completed, you should write on birch bark with saffron or bezoar: *namo bhagavate* [...]; and also, special *dhāraṇīs*...”³¹

²⁸ For translation, see Prebish 1996: 111–112.

²⁹ Kossak & Singer 1998: 59; Martin 2001: 50; Heller 2005; Quintman 2013: 482.

³⁰ Bentor 1995: 256 and Bentor 2003: 24, 32.

³¹ Bentor 1995: 255.

4. Conclusions

While preparing this publication, I pursued two purposes. Firstly, it is meant as a humble tribute to N. P. Likhachev, whose collection was so diverse that “it had been only the irreplaceable personality of the founder himself which had given it [its] unity.”³²

Secondly, I considered it important to introduce a manuscript written on a relatively rare material. Despite some archaic features and its stated provenance from East Turkestan (or even Khara-Khoto), the manuscript seems to be somewhat modern, definitely not belonging to the Khara-Khoto period (i.e., until 14th century). There are no sufficient clues to date it with at least relative precision. The repertoire of texts (that I hope will be studied in detail by those interested in consecration rituals), as well as their external appearance, allow me to conclude that we are dealing with Dharma relics—sacred textual objects that were meant to be inserted inside a stupa.

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³² Kratchkovsky 1953: 157.

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