

## Foreword

Since the spectacular discovery of the polyglot cache of ancient manuscripts by A. Stein and P. Pelliot at the famous sealed-up Library Cave (no. 17) of the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang (in present-day Gansu Province of China) at the turn of the twentieth century, few were aware that the study of many hitherto unknown aspects of Asian, not least Buddhist culture was about to break new ground. And now more than one hundred years after their discovery almost to the day, the manuscripts are still keeping a host of scholars engaged while attempting to unveil many of their secrets. Among the most precious findings, the varied bundles of Tibetan manuscripts and scrolls alone should prove to revolutionize our knowledge of early religious thought and of Buddhism in Tibet, but in particular alter for good the historical study of imperial Tibet. From among the most invaluable palaeographic *trouvailles* detected in the cache, it not least was the subsequent publication and initial translation in 1940–46 by Bacot, Thomas, and Toussaint, of the most unique Tibetan scrolls – the *Old Tibetan Annals* and the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* – that prompted the study of early history of Tibet to gain momentum and experience something of a true quantum leap. These early documents must be regarded – in particular so what concerns the *Annals* – as the first and single most important documents available on early Tibetan history. For the history of early Tibet, the general dearth of reliable contemporary sources had remained deplorably tangible and frustrating. Indeed, bereft of these rare Tibetan-language Dunhuang scrolls along with the detection of other minor text fragments in Tibetan unearthed in Central Asian oases, our knowledge of imperial Tibet not only would have been distressingly meagre, but also persistently inconsistent, replete with numerous yawning gaps both what concern the name, title, and identity of major historical figures, but also banning us from numerous details and from establishing a basic, reliable chronology of consecutive state affairs and historical events of the emergent imperial power of Tibet. The same holds true for our knowledge of the basic administrative structure of the empire, as well as the identity, distribution, and expansion of territories held or conquered by the powerful Tibetan dynasty for that matter. The scrolls soon came to be viewed as quite indispensable sources, ideally supplementing (sometimes paralleling, but most often vastly emulating) the information culled from the Chinese *Tang Annals*. Our sparing knowledge of imperial Tibet prior to this point had been hinged upon a few monolithic, epigraphic inscriptions, or stray quotations of similar imperial edicts traced in later medieval, historiographical sources.

The fortuitous, but timely discovery at Dunhuang carries abundant witness of an enduring cultural impact that must have been exerted by China on early Tibetan statecraft and administrative procedures (or Tibetan imitations thereof). By the early eighth century, these practices must have followed in the trail of the introduction or initial distribution into Tibet of a number of Chinese literary classics that served as vehicles and purveyors of age-old civilisatory attainments and techniques. This development evidently had gone hand in hand with the training and apprenticeship of a number of Tibetans at Chinese imperial academies. Confronted with samples of imperial bureaucratic and archival procedures, the Tibetans must have been compelled to improve both style and bureaucratic conventions and mobilise resources to introduce similar norms, however inchoately and piecemeal. Indeed, the *Old Tibetan Annals (OTA)*, more than anything else, demonstrably testifies to the enduring bureaucratic fillip exerted by Chinese administrative conventions and archival standards. Of small surprise, the *OTA* – originally executed by royal Tibetan historiographers and only surviving in this sole and incomplete exemplar that evidently represents no more than a local apograph – is from the viewpoint of genre an annalistic, chronographic work which carries strong reminiscences of the basic Chinese formulaic and annalistic *benji* and *biannian ti* style and idiom mixed with elements of the *nianbiao* format.

Whereas the initial, far from unflawed translation conducted in 1940 – deeming the considerable amount of still unsolved philological pitfalls involved and the level of knowledge at that point – must be regarded as a pioneering effort, the historical study of imperial Tibet since then has made great strides and our

knowledge today rests on a much firmer footing. A renewed translation of the philologically challenging *OTA* long had been overdue, but a path-breaker had to wait until Brandon Dotson took upon himself the ambitious undertaking in his usually dauntless way. The new, now complete and appropriately annotated translation of the *Old Tibetan Annals* presented in this book, is nothing less than sensational. The translation, paying due heed to the orthographical peculiarities of Old Tibetan with its archaic diction, is philologically precise, remaining faithful to its annalistic format yet elegant to the extent the original text allows it with its overtly formulaic and bureaucratic structure. Equally impressive is his competent treatment of the genre and its background, locating the document precisely within its proper historical and cultural context. Dotson no doubt benefitted from the initial translation of the *OTA*. He moreover paid adequate heed to a large number of research papers published since then related to the unravelling of a number of complicated issues characteristic of the Dunhuang documents published by a row of specialists. He also took into account recent relevant scholarship, whether in Western scholarship or Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese contributions. The absorbing study breaks new ground. Our knowledge of the imperial period is vastly improved by this publication. Dotson argues passionately and sober, and writes with gusto and enthusiasm. The overviews and analyses provided by him are all invariably perspicacious, well-argued, constantly marshalling a good body of evidence for his arguments. It is moreover elegantly written, his style is rewardingly concise and inordinately precise.

The book is divided into several incisive parts consisting of a number of brief contextualising essays and introductions, all instructive for a better appreciation of the key document itself: the actual annotated translation of the *OTA*. Spurred by its content, both its civil and military versions, Dotson has included additional chapters, *inter alia* on imperial marriages and international relations, on historical geography and the emperor's court and the empire's political sites, as well as chapters on administration and administrators, on class and rank, ennoblement and ministerial aristocracy, etc. The book comprises five additional appendices that as essays take up individual issues of particular historical relevance gleaned from the *Old Tibetan Annals* and the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, such as stray annalistic entries in other documents, delicate questions surrounding the royal succession, the celebrated sack of the Chinese Tang capital, the succession of chief ministers, as well as the regimes of three major emperors. These appendices, all scientific highlights of innovative insights, allow us better to appreciate the enduring success of the empire with its hegemonic imperative and its coercive nature of rule. *In toto*, they enable us for the first time to acquire a proper understanding of the *OTA* – Tibet's First History – as it is now appropriately dubbed.

Of incredible value is the elaborate and annotated cartographical documentation of the geographical-territorial division and distribution of imperial central Tibet by Guntram Hazod, who by now has emerged as a leading expert on Tibetan imperial-era toponyms and geography. He admirably and ingeniously succeeds in identifying an appreciable amount of otherwise little-known imperial toponyms, won from his years of text-reading as well as from his countless travels and in-depth inquiries and investigations in Tibet. His new findings and identity of hitherto unknown imperial burial grounds and tumuli turns a new page in Tibetan historiography. The numerous maps and charts are a feast for the eyes and an astonishing achievement, for the first time the reader is equipped with a visual tool that documents the empire's actual territorial structure and expansive growth. It is a masterful contribution in its own right and vastly enriches and ideally supplements Dotson's text and documentation.

The masterful treatment by Dotson (and the excellent documentation by Hazod), remains a landmark study on imperial Tibet, a standard reference work unsurpassed for years to come. We now eagerly await his forthcoming translation of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, the earliest known narrative epic dedicated to a heroic retelling of the feats of Tibet's emperors and ministers – a true wonder of early epic literature of immense beauty, with its inimitable, arcane poetic diction and unique archaic lore.

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