

The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History, With an Annotated Cartographical Documentation by Guntram Hazod

by Brandon Dotson

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Before the opening of the sealed cave library in Dunhuang at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were no contemporary Tibetan sources for the Tibetan imperial period (from the early seventh to mid-ninth centuries). Those attempting to reconstruct the history of early Tibet had to make do with the Chinese royal annals and later Tibetan religious histories. Thus the discovery that the manuscripts found in the cave library included the royal annals of the Tibetan imperium entailed a paradigm shift in the study of Tibet.

The importance of what have come to be known as the *Old Tibetan Annals*, along with other sources like the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (a rather less reliable narrative drawing on traditional songs and tales) was soon realized. The *Annals* were the contemporary records of the Tibetan imperial court, taken year by year. The annual records begin in the year 641-2 with the arrival of arrival of the Chinese princess bride Kong-co and end in the year 763-4 with the Tibetan conquest of the Chinese capital city Chang'an. There is a lacuna of seven years between 748 and 755 that happens to coincide with a period when the Tibetan court was shaken by a rebellion that nearly ended the line of the Tibetan emperors. The Tibetan court continued to keep annual records after the year 763-4, but unfortunately these are no longer extant.

The manuscripts comprising the *Old Tibetan Annals* were acquired by the British Museum and India Office Library in London (now incorporated into the British Library) and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. The first edition and translation (in both French and English) of the text appeared in 1940.¹ Though groundbreaking in its time, seven decades

1 Bacot, Jacques, F.W. Thomas and Charles Toussaint. 1940. *Documents de Touen-Houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet* (Annales du Musée Guimet 51). Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul

later this publication leaves much to be desired. Thus the appearance of Brandon Dotson's new edition and English translation of the *Annals* is an exciting event for those interested in Tibet's early history. It is immediately clear that this is a significant advance on what has come before. Dotson's translation (Part II of the book) is elegant and clear, and extensively annotated. The text of the *Annals* is often terse, and Dotson has largely let this stand in his translation, while adding some elided name elements and other clarifications in brackets. Difficult passages, and parallels with contemporary Chinese historical sources are discussed in footnotes with reference to previous studies by the likes of Geza Uray, Christopher Beckwith, Tsuguhito Takeuchi and Rong Xinjiang.

The extensive introduction (in Part I) is almost as valuable as the translation. Here Dotson argues convincingly that the *Annals* were a product of the Tibetan emperors' court. While this may seem self-evident from their content, there is a school of thought that holds that none of the imperial-period Tibetan material recovered from Central Asia should be used to reconstruct the events of Central Tibet because of its geographical distance from the centre. Or as Dotson puts it, 'What happens in Dunhuang, stays in Dunhuang.' In the case of the *Annals*, this is clearly false. Although the surviving manuscripts of the *Annals* were certainly copied at or near Dunhuang, the original documents are primarily records of the movements and activities of the emperor's court. On the other hand, as Dotson also points out, it is clear that the redactors of the royal annals could be selective. Of the two extant (and fragmentary) versions of the *Annals*, Version I (found in the manuscripts Pelliot tibétain 1288 and IOL Tib J 750) is focused primarily on civil and administrative matters, and has been dubbed the 'civil version'. On the other hand, Version II (found in the manuscript Or.8212/187) is concerned primarily with military matters, and Dotson accordingly refers to it as the 'military version'.

Following this introduction to the manuscripts themselves, Dotson presents a series of brief essays on various social, political, administrative, geographical and historical issues that are raised and sometimes clarified by the text of the *Annals*. The issues discussed include the succession and marriage in the Tibetan royal line, the structure and extent of the Tibetan

Geuthner. Here Version I of the *Annals* is translated into French, and Version II into English. The book also includes a French translation of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.

empire, the administration of Tibet, and the hierarchies of social class and rank. Here Dotson draws together previous scholarship, as well as his own work on these materials, into a coherent and thoughtful discussion. The essays make this volume now the best single historical survey of the Tibetan imperial period. Added to this we have the Appendices, which include the royal succession, with the names and dates of the historically attested Tibetan emperors; the succession of ministers, and the names of ministers recorded in three imperial edicts; and a useful collection of Tibetan sources on the Tibetan conquest of the Chinese capital Chang'an in 763.

Finally, Part III of the book contains what is essentially a brief monograph by Guntram Hazod on the key sites and administrative subdivisions of the Tibetan Empire. Hazod is well known to Tibetologists from the recent volumes he has written in collaboration with Per Sørensen and Tsering Gyalbo, and his work here is in the same vein. This section is based on a series of maps with explanatory essays, which are truly groundbreaking in mapping the terrain of the Tibetan empire. The boundaries of the districts at the centre of the empire, the 'four horns' (dbu-ru, g.yos-ru, g.yas-ru and ru-lag) are described. Hazod also lists the 'thousand districts' and other administrative subdivisions within the four horns. Later additions to the empire, including the horns of Zhang-zhung and Sum-pa in the west, and Mdo-smad, Mdo-khams and Bde-khams in the east, are also described.

Hazod also maps the minor principalities (rgyal-phran) that are mentioned in a number of Dunhuang manuscripts and may represent, as he suggests, local polities that were absorbed into the Tibetan Empire, emerging again as centres of power in the post-imperial period. This discussion is enhanced by archaeological evidence of tomb sites associated with minor dynasties in Central Tibet. Aerial and on-site photographs accompany an extensive analysis of these tombs. Finally, Hazod provides several maps of the place-names mentioned in the *Annals* themselves. This whole cartographical section of the book draws upon a wide variety of sources apart from the *Annals* themselves, including other Dunhuang manuscripts and later Tibetan Buddhist histories. The only drawback of this approach is that this section lacks the rest of the book's focus on sources that are demonstrably from the imperial period.

The book concludes with a very useful glossary, and indices of place and personal names. Both refer to the year entries in the *Annals*, rather than page numbers in the book, and while this helps in the consultation

of the *Annals*, it seems a pity that we have no index to Dotson's excellent introduction or Hazod's geographical discussions. In any case, the publication of this volume is a landmark in the study of Tibetan history. It is an elegant summation of previous scholarship, a significant step forward in the analysis of the *Annals*, and a basis, one hopes, for a wider appreciation of the role played by the Tibetan Empire in the history of Asia.