

THREE ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS FROM THOLING IN
THE TUCCI COLLECTION, ISIAO, ROMA,
PART III: MANUSCRIPT 1329 F

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Dedicated with esteem and friendship to Elena, whose catalogues of the Tucci manuscripts collection of ISIAO are crucial resources to expand our understanding of the civilisations of Tibet and the Himalayas.

Among the treasures collected by Professor Giuseppe Tucci during his travels in the Western Himalayas and Western Tibet (Tucci & Ghersi 1996) figure prominently three previously unpublished Tibetan Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts with illuminations (see Tucci 1949; Tucci 1989; Tucci & Ghersi 1996; De Rossi Filibeck 1996; De Rossi Filibeck 2003).¹ Tucci and later Dr. Eugenio Ghersi discovered these manuscripts and many others in caves above Tholing, formerly used by the monks as their winter residence (Tucci & Ghersi 1996: 306). These manuscripts form part of a well-known corpus produced in the context of the 10th to 11th century revival of Buddhism promoted by the royal patronage of the kings of Gu ge sPu rang. This revival occurred especially at the monasteries of Tholing in Gu ge and Khor chags in sPu rang, under the aegis of the Great Translator-cum-royal chaplain Rin chen bzang po (958-1055).² Further to my studies of the manuscripts 1329 E, and 1329 O (see Heller [in press]; Heller & Eng [in press]), the present paper discusses the third unpublished illuminated manuscript from Tholing, the manuscript 1329 F of the Tucci Tibetan Collection Archive. Its paper composition and codicology, as well as the aesthetic analysis of its illuminations, are examined here, and a hypothesis of its chronological context is proposed in the conclusion.

1 I thank Prof. Elena De Rossi Filibeck for inviting me to “La Sapienza” University in Rome as Visiting Professor (2006, 2008) to study these illuminated manuscripts of the Tucci Tibetan Collection. Dr Francesco D’Arelli, former director of the ISIAO Library, kindly authorized their photography. Michela Clemente helped Luigi Fieni accomplish the photography. I also acknowledge Lama Sushil of Poo Monastery who kindly authorized me to photograph the illuminated Poo Prajñāpāramitā volume, and Eva Allinger and Christiane Papa-Kalantari for many discussions about manuscript illuminations. I am grateful to them all.

2 See Tucci 1949; De Rossi Filibeck 2007; Harrison 2007.

This manuscript is distinctive from 1329 E and 1329 O. The opulent illuminations of the manuscripts 1329 E and 1329 O are rendered in gold and brilliant nuanced colors in an extremely refined style, which has been attributed to Kashmiri artists due to the deliberately effaced notations in Indic script beneath the frames of the illuminations (see Harrison 2007: 235). Radio-carbon analysis of a similarly illuminated *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript leaf collected by Tucci, now conserved in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.81.90.6), has yielded a date of the late 10th to early 11th century (see Heller 2016 a-b). Although written on similar beige paper and having similar dimensions, the fragmentary incomplete volume 1329 F, formerly designated TT1, is particularly daunting for art historical research, comprising no less than 400 illuminations. Furthermore, although discovered in the same caves above Tholing, these illuminations do not conform to the sophisticated style and vibrant palette of the Kashmiri illuminations of manuscripts 1329 E, 1329 O and those in the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art. Instead, the palette of the illuminations in manuscript 1329 F exhibits strong primary colors, especially yellows and reds, while gold is virtually absent. The manuscript 1329F has been briefly described by De Rossi Filibeck in her invaluable book, the *Catalogue of the Tucci Tibetan Fund in the Library of IsIAO* (2003: 437): “1329 F. Incomplete text; dbu can manuscript, Kha na-Kha ’a, 8 lines, cm. 68,50 x 26,50 (54,50 x 12). Pages: 5a-408b.” Earlier, De Rossi Filibeck had described the originality of this volume:

“One of these manuscripts, marked TT1, possesses a further significant characteristic. Each *recto* side contains an illuminated image of the Buddha Sakyamuni. Confirmation of the hypothesis of western Tibetan origin was also kindly given by Prof. Deborah Klimburg-Salter, to whom I was able to show the manuscript during her recent stay in Rome... Comparative examination with another Tucci Collection manuscript that I was able to date as about the second half of the 16th century and which also came from Western Tibet, enabled me to set a maximum post quem time limit for the TT1 since it displays characteristics that indicate that it is certainly older than the manuscript from the second half of the sixteenth century.” (De Rossi Filibeck 1996: 486).

As we will discuss below, stylistically, although a few exceptions confirm the rule, on the whole one observes great aesthetic uniformity among the illuminations, some of which relate aesthetically to hitherto documented examples conserved in Dolpo, Nepal (see Heller 2009: 83). To a lesser degree, the aesthetics also relate to a documented series among the more than 300 illuminations of the *Prajñāpāramitā* volume in Poo, Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh, India (see Allinger 2006: 6, Fig. 10). Radio-carbon analysis of the paper of these specific manuscripts, now conserved in Dolpo, indicated chronology corresponding to the second half of the 11th century, with a median date ca. 1114 AD (see Heller 2009: 82, n. 10). At the same time, local historical traditions relate that these texts accompanied the founder of the Dolpo monastery who hailed from the west, logically the west Tibetan kingdoms of Gu ge

sPu rang, in immediate proximity to what are now the Nepalese border districts of Limi and Dolpo (see Heller 2009: 83, 199-200). This chronology of the manuscripts now in Dolpo and Poo, and the incomplete 1329 F, all correspond to what De Rossi Filibeck referred to as the most favorable period of the Tholing *scriptoria*'s work, reasonably traced to the odd hundred and fifty years between the beginning of the 11th century and the middle of the 12th century, during which time there were suitable social conditions and patronage for the production of manuscripts (see De Rossi Filibeck 2007: 54-55). Also in terms of paper composition and codicology, there are further indications that the fragmentary manuscript 1329 F may date from late 11th to early 12th century.

Paper Composition and Codicological Characteristics

A small sample of the manuscript 1329 F has been analysed for composition of the paper. According to the examination of Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, ribbon-like fibre placing and very significant irregularities within the fibre length allow to identify this type as *Stellera chamaejasme* fibres, which can be clearly differentiated from *Daphne* and *Edgeworthia* despite the fact that all plants belong to the Thymelaeaceae family. The beige paper is composed of fibres of the two plants, which are native to western Tibet as well as other regions. The strength of the paper and its slightly glossy surface results from the *Daphne* or *Edgeworthia sp.* fibres, while the *Stellera* fibres are responsible for the paper's characteristic softness and absorbency (see Helman-Ważny 2014: 111-12, and figs. 61-62).³ It is noteworthy that the slightly smaller manuscript leaf 1329 E, which Tucci also collected at Tholing, has the same fibre composition of the paper, and the same smoothness of the page. While at present there is no documentation on the *scriptoria* nor on paper production in the vicinity of Tholing, the donation of volumes of manuscripts was essential at the time of the foundation of numerous monasteries and smaller temples. According to the biography of Rin chen bzang po attributed to his disciple, only in the nearby sanctuary of Radnis the library comprised all the *Prajñāpāramitā* in the full and medium length versions, as well as 18 sets of originals and copies, two copies of the *Prajñāpāramitā* version in 18,000 verses and five of the *Prajñāpāramitā* in 8,000 verses (see Snellgrove 1980: 108), as well as numerous copies donated to all the temples founded by Rin chen bzang po. The vast quantities of paper needed to produce the *Prajñāpāramitā* copies would have certainly encouraged local production of paper and manuscripts, with Tibetan scribes collaborating with the Kashmiri artists as well as, we may presume, local Tibetan artists.

The Tibetan text is written in black ink in elegantly spaced *dbu can* letters with archaisms: *da drag* and *ya biags* are frequent, the reverse *gi gu* is infrequent. There are

³ I thank Agnieszka Helman-Ważny for her analysis of the paper of the Tholing manuscript fragments 1329 E and 1329 F in the Tucci Tibetan Collection of ISIAO.

a few instances of archaic forms of superscript letters. The superabundant *'a chung* appears rarely in the text of the manuscript. Curiously, however, for every chapter heading, a narrow rectangular black frame is used for accentuation; the letters are written in gold and here the superabundant *'a chung* is always present: *shes rab kyi pha rold tu phyin pa stong phrag brgya' pa*.⁴ Most often the *siddham* are single, without ornament, but some *siddham* are double, with or without ornamentation. Each leaf consistently has two binding holes surrounded by circles in red ink (2.7 cm diameter), the margins are also drawn in red. The page has been ruled for 8 lines of script. The numbering of several leaves is idiosyncratic. The pagination has two letters on the left margin, in vertical alignment, where the first represents the volume number and the second the hundreds: *kha* (1-100), *kha na* (101-200b), *kha ma* (201-300b) and *kha 'a* to indicate the hundreds 301a-400b, rather than *kha nga* as would be expected (see De Rossi Filibeck 2007: 61). In general, the volume letter is rubricated while the letter for the hundreds is black. In addition to the system of vertical alignment, for example on Fig. 1, full leaf, there is the red *kha 'a*, indicative of vol. *kha*, 300s, and next to the *kha*, is written a horizontally positioned *nga*, also rubricated, which is theoretically extraneous. This may be simply a scribal error. At present, the reasons, if any, for the presence of this additional letter remain unknown. The page numbers are indicated *xxxx brgyad*, i.e. 408, while *kha 'a* should be 308 (i.e. written as *xxx brgyad*). There are other leaves with *kha wa* and *kha nga*, instead of *kha 'a*. To determine what is distinctive and what may be scribal errors, ideally, a systematic review of the numbering of all extant leaves should be undertaken in the future.

The Aesthetic Analysis of the Illuminations

In principle, each leaf has one miniature painting representing a seated Buddha, on the recto, although there are a few examples where there are two illuminations, i.e. a Buddha and a disciple on the same leaf. In addition, for one leaf, the illumination is on the verso, not the recto, as it is a chapter incipit. Two other leaves have illuminations on both recto and verso, again due to the beginning of a chapter on the verso. A few leaves have the double illumination with a Buddha at left margin and a Buddha at right margin. Thus while we can determine a norm, the rules are not completely compulsory. While most of the Buddha and disciples are represented in a uniform aesthetic, there are a few illuminations which are quite distinctive in coloration and modeling. This seems to suggest that several artists were active in the painting of the illuminations. One has the impression that an individual artist was responsible for a

4 This is not the case in the illuminated Tabo manuscript where one can observe the chapter heading in the *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript, catalogue no. 1.1.1.23 (see Harrison & Scherrer-Schaub 2009), folio featuring Sadāprarudita (Allinger & Papa Kalantari 2012, fig. 5, photography by Eva Allinger).

whole chapter, and in the next chapter, a different artist could be responsible, but this is a subjective conjecture.

The consistent representation of the Buddha following aesthetic models of western Tibet has been identified previously.⁵ To this it is possible to add that the salient characteristics in the principal illuminations of the manuscript 1329 F are as follows:

- ♦ Each illumination, whether positioned at center of the page or elsewhere, is uniformly square and framed with a thick red line as border on two lateral sides and on top (see Fig. 1 and 2). There are very few exceptions to this rule (see Fig. 3).
- ♦ The red line of the bottom border is not necessarily apparent, as lotus petals often cover the area at the bottom end of the square and do not respect the limit of the square – they extend beyond the square frame.

In some cases, the halo around the Buddha's head also extends to the limit of the square frame.

- ♦ The body halo *prabha* is in a horseshoe shape, perfectly oval at the apex. There is an outer rim, often in the same red line as the border of the square frame. Then, systematically, all the Buddhas are seated on lotus pedestals inside a body *prabha*, which is positioned as if to float inside a field of dark blue color, uniformly applied. This blue space must be interpreted as the field of Dharma, i.e. the sky (*chos dbyings* = sky). The *prabha* has concentric colors in succession: i.e. seven or eight concentric rings of colors inside the *prabha*. This is a rainbow halo (*'ja tshon*). The colors may vary: for example, folio 6 has the outer rim in deep red, then a medium red ring, then deep red wash over thin black outline, then medium red, then a black outline and white ring. The white ring is bordered by a thick black line which outlines the deep green area (a cushion) behind the seated Buddha.
- ♦ The head halo varies in color but the shape of the halo is consistently ovoid and there is usually a pronounced outline of contrasting dark color to the halo.
- ♦ The hairline of the Buddha: the standard is a broad forehead with almost square hairline (no widow's peak) and very low spherical *uṣṇīṣa*. The hair is systematically painted to extend over the outer earlobes rather than close to the head, as if there is an emphasis on the hair which is completely lacking in curls, swirls etc. The face is rather broad and also square.
- ♦ The body color of the Buddha varies. Most are flesh color, with no pronounced muscles and the body proportions are relatively slender with broad shoulders. Some are white, a few are bright yellow as a variant on the flesh color. *Kha ma* + 4 (f. 204a, see Fig. 4) is quite different – blue body color with pronounced

5 See Klimburg-Salter 1996; Allinger 2006; Heller 2009; Allinger & Papa Kalantari 2012.

shading in dark blue to emphasize the pectoral muscles and even the joints of the arms at the shoulder, elbow and wrist. This image is especially muscular, almost as if attempting to imitate the Kashmiri aesthetic, although it does not have an “hourglass” waist. The eyebrows and cheeks are also subject to the shading in dark blue overpainting.

- ♦ The *uṣṇīṣa*, the cranial protuberance indicating supramundane wisdom: in general the *uṣṇīṣa* are low and spherical, very similar to the manuscripts now conserved in Dolpo (see Fig. 5). Occasionally, the ornamentation of the stūpa with the sun-moon finial is apparent (see Fig. 6), which is a characteristic observed in the Poo manuscript illuminations as well as in the Tucci collection 1329 O (see Fig. 7).
- ♦ The *Mudrā*: the fingers are very often disproportionately long and hyperflexible, with the articulations of the fingers very distinct (see Fig. 8). The *mudrā* is thus emphasized. In particular, the *dharmacakramudrā* presents a large number of variants in the positions of the hands of the Buddhas. In some other cases, the hands are perfectly symmetrical. This characteristic of over-long fingers and accentuated joints is also visible in manuscripts now conserved in Bicher monastery in Dolpo (Nepal), in Tabo (Spiti) and in Poo (Kinnaur), all of which appear to be safely attributed to roughly the same period of production, the late 11th to 12th century.

Conclusion

The fragmentary manuscript 1329 F is clearly related to the tradition of manuscripts developed at the Tholing monastery and vicinity in Guge, a tradition of manuscripts which was also conserved in the Tabo and Poo monasteries further west, as well as the Khor chags monastery in sPu rang. At present, there is not sufficient historical documentation of the scribal and artistic activities in Tholing to pinpoint the years of production and potential wane of production. Although the early 11th century was a period of artistic ferment, under the immediate impetus of Rin chen bzang po’s return to Tholing accompanied by Kashmiri artists, the subtle development of the aesthetic parameters of the western Tibetan manuscript illuminations may have been a successive, or possibly co-eval, gradual evolution. It should also be remarked that the Buddhist council at Tholing in 1076 was certainly a period when Buddhist masters, scribes, translators and artists of many nationalities were present together and collaborated actively. Thus, while the precise circumstances and chronology of the manuscript fragment 1329 F, as well as the manuscripts now conserved in Dolpo and those conserved in Poo, remain to be determined, they must be situated in the period in which local production of *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts in the kingdoms of Gu ge sPu rang was encouraged. This was an exceptional period of aesthetic refinement which accompanied the royal commitment to the re-establishment of Buddhism throughout the western Himalayas.

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Fig. 1: Full leaf of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 408a, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (68.5 x 26.5 cm), IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).



Fig. 2: (detail) The Buddha of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 408a, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (9.4 x 9 cm), IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).

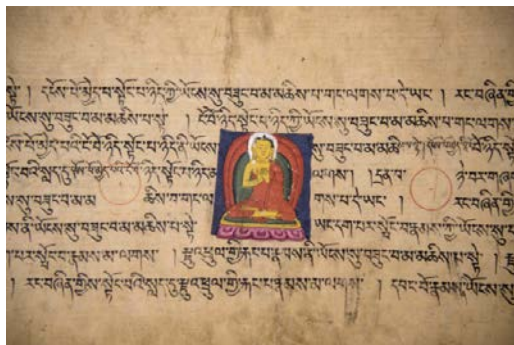


Fig. 3: (detail) The Buddha of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 353a, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (9.4 x 9 cm) IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).

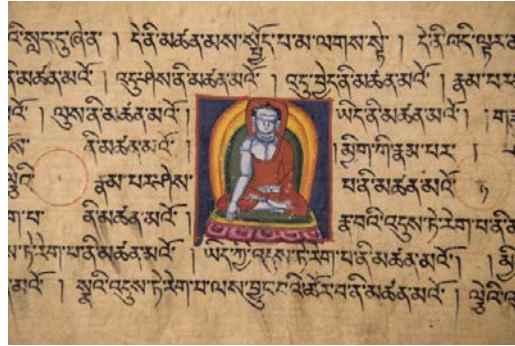


Fig. 4: (detail) The Buddha Akṣobhya of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 204a, ink and opaque watercolor and gold on paper (9.4 x 9 cm) IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni / Amy Heller).

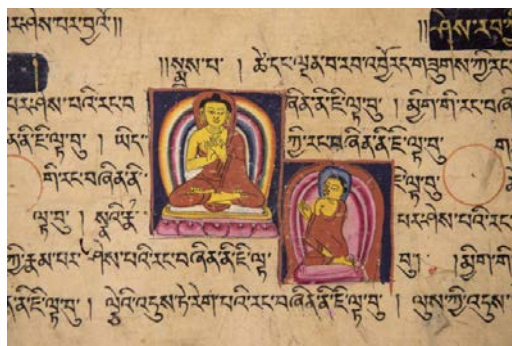
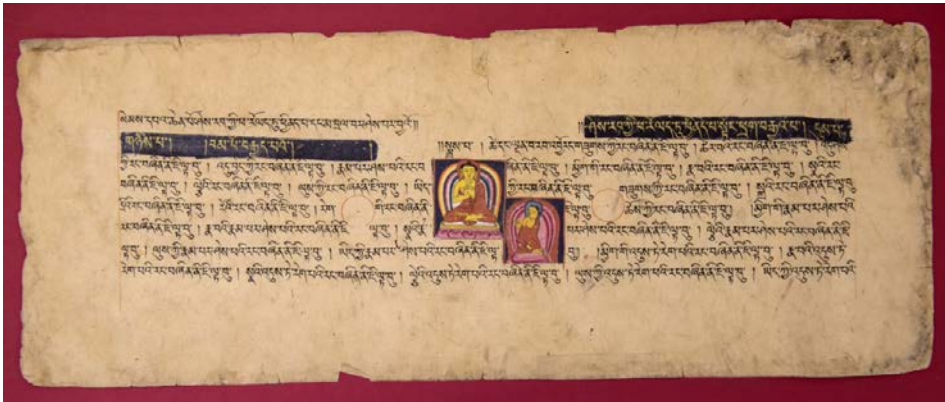


Fig. 5: (detail) The Buddha and a disciple of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 141b, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (9.4 x 9 cm) IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).



Fig. 6: (detail) The Buddha of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 F, f. 329a, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (9.4 x 9 cm) IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).



Fig. 7: (detail) The Buddha of *Satasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, manuscript 1329 O, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper (9.4 x 9 cm) IsIAO, Roma (Credits: Luigi Fieni).



Fig. 8: (detail) The Buddha and divine assembly of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, f. 1a, ink and opaque watercolor on paper (22 x 73 cm), Lotsawa Lha khang, Poo, Himachal Pradesh (Credits: Amy Heller).