

CATALOGUING THE BRITISH LIBRARY'S TIBETAN MANUSCRIPTS

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<http://idp.bl.uk>

DUNHUANG AND IDP - A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Dunhuang collection of manuscripts was sealed in a small cave in the Dunhuang complex at some time in the eleventh century AD. In 1900 a monk, Wang Yuanlu, who was working on the restoration of some of the statues in the caves, discovered a hidden cave full of ancient manuscripts. In 1907 Aurel Stein visited Dunhuang and purchased many of the manuscripts from Wang. Shortly afterwards, Paul Pelliot, Sergei Oldenburg and other explorers visited Dunhuang and brought manuscripts away with them.

These manuscripts, along with other manuscripts from Central Asia, are now kept in institutions all over the world, such as The British Library, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the National Library of China. These manuscripts, most of which date from the 5th to the 11th centuries, are very important for our understanding of the early history of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as forms of Buddhism which no longer exist, such as Khotanese and Uighur Buddhism.

The aspiration of the International Dunhuang Project is to foster a co-operation between these institutions which will allow all of the manuscripts to be accessible on the world wide web, in the form of high-quality digital images and online scholarly catalogues. Because the project has bases at the British Library and the National Library of China, these two collections are currently being brought together in this way.

Until recently the focus of IDP has been the Chinese manuscripts, and certain smaller language groups like Tocharian and Gandhari. Now, thanks to a three-year grant, we are

creating images and catalogue entries for the Tibetan manuscripts as well. This coincides with the conversion of our catalogues to XML, and the relaunch of the database in November to include a title search for Buddhist texts. First I will look at the British Library's Tibetan Dunhuang collection and then the technology we are using to make it available.

THE STEIN TIBETAN COLLECTION

The Tibetan Dunhuang collection at the British Library is also known as the Stein Tibetan collection, after the explorer who brought the manuscripts to Britain. It consists of over 3000 documents, most of which are thought to date from the time of the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, although some may be of a later date, up to the sealing of the cave in the eleventh century.

These documents, along with the other substantial collection at the Bibliothèque nationale, are of huge importance for the study of Tibetan Buddhism during the period of Tibet's early kings. In spite of this importance, and the fact that it has been available in the British Library for most of the twentieth century, the Stein collection has not been the focus of a great deal of research. This is no doubt due partly to the heterogeneous nature of the collection. When Stein first examined the manuscripts from the library cave, they were tied up in bundles, folios of Tibetan mixed in with Khotanese and Sanskrit. Soon after they had been brought to Britain, they were separated into language groups. Then the French scholar Louis de la Vallée Poussin and the English scholar FW Thomas took on the task of reassembling the Tibetan texts in their original form, not unlike reshuffling a pack of cards. They did a pretty good job - the Stein Tibetan collection now comprises a series of discrete texts, many of which are complete.

The next stage was the cataloguing of collection. FW Thomas produced a work on the non-Buddhist material, and de la Vallée Poussin worked on the Buddhist material. De la Vallée Poussin did this work during the first world war, and at the end of the war he put

the task aside. Unfortunately he never completed it. Eventually, his original work was published without revision, in 1960. Despite its age, it's still a great catalogue - de la Vallée Poussin managed to identify many of the texts. However, in the early twentieth there was little knowledge in the West of Tibetan tantric literature, especially the tantric literature of the early period of translations.

This tantric literature is the focus of a the IDP cataloguing and digitization initiative. In recent decades there has been a great deal of research into the tantric literature of the early period, and the semi-canonical collections of this material known as the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*. In this, David Germano and his team at Virginia have let the way with their excellent web resource.

Myself and Jacob Dalton, a cataloguer employed by the School of Oriental and African Studies, will be working on the catalogue. The early indications are that there is relatively few actual tantras in the collection. By far the most abundant kind of text is that which is directly related to practice - prayers, lists of mantras for certain situations, descriptions of physical postures, instructions on creating mandalas, and so on. There are also several treatises which deal with the general theoretical basis for these practices. Perhaps the collection represents - rather than a proto-canonical group - a representation of the kinds of texts which practitioners were making use of at this time. Another interesting area for enquiry is whether we can distinguish which texts were copied in Dunhuang and which were brought from central Tibetan regions, based on external information like paper and ink types, and internal information like the names of scribes.

XML & THE MASTER DTD FOR MANUSCRIPT DESCRIPTION

For the last five years IDP has maintained its information on the manuscripts in a relational database. With the Tibetan catalogue we are moving to XML, which offers much more flexibility to the cataloguer. It enables us to make much more intelligent uses of transcription, marking up textual elements such as the names of people, places and

deities. To make sure that our use of this technology doesn't leave us isolated, we have used the standard Document Type Definition for marking up manuscripts, the Master DTD.

As well as creating new catalogue entries in XML, we will import existing catalogues into this format. XML will give us the opportunity to develop powerful searches of the catalogues via the IDP website. It will also allow us to explore sophisticated links with other web resources - from Dunhuang texts to canonical versions, or from authors and place-names to biographies, maps, and so on.

THE IMAGES – A HUGE ADVANCE ON MICROFILM

The catalogue entries will be accompanied by high-quality images of the manuscripts. IDP already has a digitization studio with six full-time staff, funded by the Mellon foundation. On the basis of the extremely efficient and professional operation of this studio, we will produce archival-quality colour images of the Tibetan manuscripts - all of which will be accessible from the IDP website.

At present, those with access to certain major libraries and universities can view microfilms of the Stein Tibetan collection, and microfilm has been very important in opening up access to difficult-to-access manuscripts. However, microfilms are at their best with manuscripts which are clearly written in an ink which stands out from the paper. Unfortunately, some of the most interesting Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang are written in very poor handwriting, in paper brown and crumbling from use. Others, much clearer, are partly written in red ink, which simply disappears on microfilm. Others include commentary between the main lines of text so tiny that one needs a magnifying-glass to read it from the original manuscript. These problems can usually be solved with high-quality digital photography.

Prior to photography, all of the manuscripts pass through the conservation studio, where they are removed from the paper backings and repairs which were added to them in the early twentieth century. In many cases, these early repairs obscure the text, and modern techniques of storage using clear Melinex sheets have allowed us to see more than has been visible for many decades. Another advance that is allowing us to see more of the manuscripts is infra-red photography.

New images are appearing on the website all the time. Visit us at <http://idp.bl.uk>. to see these and other new developments.