
Bellezza John Vincent, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet. Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*

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- 1 As indicated by the title, *Death and the Beyond* has an overarching theme (“the eschatological patterns and ritual constructs of death rites in ancient Tibet”, p. 5), but

falls into three distinct parts, defined by the three categories of documents studied by the author. Briefly stated, the documents are :

- 2 1. A manuscript, probably originally a scroll, consisting of illustrated sections, now only partially preserved, dated by Bellezza (p. 15) to the eleventh or the first half of the twelfth century A. D. The manuscript is in a private collection in New York.
- 3 2. Two manuscripts deposited in the dGa'-thang Bum-pa (stūpa) and discovered, along with other manuscripts, in 2006 and published in Lhasa the following year. The manuscripts are preserved in Lhasa.
- 4 3. Three manuscripts originating from Dunhuang, PT 1134 and PT 1194, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), and ITJ 731r, preserved in the British Library (London).
- 5 This review will only deal with the first of the above manuscripts. While in no way underestimating the importance of the other documents, the first would seem to be unique in terms of contents and, especially, its iconographic images. Moreover, Bellezza is the first scholar to study this document, thus adding to the importance of the first part of his book. It should be mentioned, however, that earlier in the same year that his work was published (2013), images of the entire manuscript were published in Deborah Klimburg-Salter, Linda Lojda & Charles Ramble (eds.), *Bön. Geister aus Butter. Kunst und Ritual des alten Tibet* (Vienna, Museum für Völkerkunde), 2013, pp. 38-45.
- 6 The present volume should be studied in relation to the overall research project of the author, especially *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet. A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland* (Vienna, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 2008, a work to which Bellezza often refers. The present review will, however, strictly limit itself to the study of the illustrated manuscript in question. A general discussion of the manuscript will be followed by comments regarding a few matters of detail.
- 7 The manuscript consists of forty sections (sometimes referred by Bellezza as 'frames'), each section showing either one or several deities in human form, one or several animals or birds, or various ritual structures, and accompanied by a short text related to the image and generally having the form of an invocation or prayer. Unfortunately the manuscript is not complete, but must originally have consisted of 104 sections. Bellezza has made a credible attempt at reconstituting the original order of the sections, which are presented and discussed one by one in that order. The work edited by Klimburg-Salter *et al.* referred to above has the advantage of showing on a single page (p. 39) the original order of the sections, clearly indicating which ones are missing. It would have been helpful if this page had been included in Bellezza's work as well.
- 8 Thirteen sections are unattached to other sections ; ten form five pairs ; twelve form strips of three. Pairs and strips form integral units. It is possible to organize the sections in vertical sequences of four (including missing sections) ; moreover, since the bottom section (in those cases where the bottom section is actually preserved) of each sequence has a numbering following the traditional Tibetan system of using the letters of the Tibetan alphabet, followed by the corresponding number written in full (*e.g. nga bzhi pa, ca lnga...*, *cha drug pa* etc.), the correct order of the sequences can be established. Moreover, since each section is doubled by an image on the reverse, the sequences of

four and the sections constituting them may be referred to as *recto* and *verso*, as the case may be.

- 9 This leads us to the question of the original physical form of the manuscript. To my mind it is reasonably clear that it originally consisted of a certain number of rectangular folios of the usual Tibetan type, each folio having four sections on either side. This assumption is strengthened by the presence of fine red circles often found in early examples of such manuscripts, a reminiscence of the Indian *pothi* prototype which later disappeared in Tibet. Small perforations in these circles may possibly indicate that the folios were originally held together by a metal pin (p. 28). Be this as it may, it is obvious that the folios were intended to be read vertically, and not horizontally, as is normally the case. I doubt whether the manuscript, or parts of it, were 'concertinaed', as Bellezza suggests (p. 6).
- 10 Thanks to a chronometric analysis carried out on a fragment of the manuscript, it can be dated to the "11th or first half of the 12th century C.E." (p. 15). "As the provenance of the text remains unknown" (p. 21), Bellezza guardedly concludes, with regard to the style of its illustrations that, "the historical and geographic source of this art will remain an open question" (p. 21).
- 11 The contents of the manuscript are related to two rituals : a ritual of conducting the consciousness principle (*bla*) of a dead person to a *post mortem* land of bliss, overcoming various demonic hindrances on the way (*recto* sections) ; and (*verso* sections) a ritual, designated as a *ste'u* ritual. Bellezza does not at the outset define *ste'u* (p. 18), but later he identifies it as "a ritual structure" or "a ritual assemblage" (p. 24). According to the text of one frame it is, "the receptacle or tabernacle (*rten*) of the deceased... The *rten* is also seen as a highly insulated environment that affords protection from the host of demons ever ready to attack the newly deceased" (*ibid.*).
- 12 Without entering into the details of the internal sequence and structure of the sections, which, in my opinion, Bellezza convincingly reconstructs, a feature of the manuscript, its images and texts, should be emphasized : the word *bon* does not appear at all, nor, for that matter, the figure of sTon-pa gShen-rab. Bellezza wisely does not refer to the manuscript as a *bon* text. There is no trace in it of 'Eternal Bön' (*g.yung-drung bon*) nor of Buddhism (p. 17) ; and the fact that certain ideas and names of deities and spirits occur which are also known from the earlier documents found at Dunhuang, in the dGa'-thang bum-pa, and in certain texts incorporated in the Eternal Bön scriptures, does not necessarily mean that this is a *bon* document. We probably have to adjust our view of the period of transition in which Buddhism gradually became the dominant religion in Tibet. Thus, Buddhism did not confront a more or less unified *bon* priesthood having coherent beliefs and ritual practices ; it would rather seem that Buddhism gradually imposed itself (a process which in a certain sense is still going on, with the ascendancy of Gelugpa monastic orthodoxy), and Eternal Bön simultaneously emerged against a background of Buddhism as well as diverse non-Buddhist beliefs and ritual practices. In this background *bon* priests were by no means the only protagonists, but it did comprise certain basic common traits throughout the Himalayan range and the Tibetan plateau. An important contribution to this understanding of the religious scene in Tibet between the 7th and, say, the 12th century A.D., is Toni Huber's article, "The Iconography of *gShen* Priests in the Ethnographic Context of the Extended Eastern Himalayas, and Reflections on the Development of Bon Religion", Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Petra Maurer (eds.), *Nepalica-Tibetica. Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, Beiträge zur

Zentralasienforschung, Band 28, 1, Andiast (International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies), 2013, pp. 263-294.

- 13 In this process of re-orientation, Bellezza's presentation and study of the illustrated manuscript is of particular importance, and will be a point of departure for much further scholarly work, perhaps, as Bellezza points out, even "a multi-generational project" (p. 254). For providing this point of departure, Bellezza deserves the gratitude of all Tibetologists interested in the study of early, non-Buddhist rituals and beliefs in Tibet. Whether his work will also have an impact on the debate — in contemporary art as well as in writing — among Tibetans themselves about what constitutes Tibetan 'identity', remains to be seen.
- 14 A few details elicit comment. This should in no way be understood as criticism of Bellezza's book, which is to be welcomed both for the material it provides and the discussion which it will hopefully inspire. Having said that, his work seems to me to exhibit an occasional tendency to speculate, e.g. "... the gods are all shown with short hair or closely shaven heads... *This lack of hair may have been a symbol of hoary age, the result of the deities having long ago taken up residence in the parallel world of the dead*" (p. 20, my italics). Another example is the statement that, "I am of the opinion that the term *do-ma* is etymologically related to another Old Tibetan word, *do* (island, headland), and to *ma* (mother or a feminizing agent). *The do-ma (probably meaning literally something to the effect of 'island mother') is the refuge or vessel in the postmortem sea*" (p. 31, n. 48, my italics).
- 15 The translation of certain passages, words, and expressions in the text will no doubt be subject to modification and improvement as research — whether undertaken by Bellezza or others — continues. Here I shall only point out an instance of a translation that perhaps could be improved : on p. 42, *smān mgon rgyal po bsrīd* is translated "there existed (*my italics*)... the *smān* defender, this king". The verb *srid*, however, has the primary sense, "to procreate, create (transitive)", as well as "be created, be born, appear (intransitive)", the latter surely being the meaning here. This sense of *srid* has been amply demonstrated by R. A. Stein in his article, "Un ensemble sémantique tibétain : créer et procréer, être et devenir, vivre, nourrir et guérir", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36, 2, 1973, pp. 412-423, which, somewhat surprisingly, is absent from Bellezza's Bibliography.
- 16 While Bellezza generally appears to me to be careful not to connect bits of information gleaned from texts from different periods without taking due precaution, he slips when he claims that, "An excellent description of Lha-yul gung-thang is found in the famous Eternal Bon guide to Mount Tise, *Ti-se'i dkar-chag*" (p. 44, n. 65). The work in question, the Tibetan text of which was published in 1989 by Namkhai Norbu and Ramon Prats (*Gaṅs Ti se'i dkar c'ag*, Serie Orientale Roma, 61, Rome-IsMEO), is not an ancient source, but dates from 1844, the author being dKar-ru grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin Rin-chen rGyal-mtshan (b. 1801) ; the author was not primarily a scholar, but rather a visionary and a mystic, as has been shown by Charles Ramble, "A Nineteenth-Century Bonpo Pilgrim in Western Tibet and Nepal : episodes from the Life of dKar ru grub dbang bsTan 'dzin rin chen", *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, 15, 2, 2008, pp. 481-501. So no matter how elaborate this particular description of Lha-yul gung-thang, the celestial realm of the gods, may be, it is not "an excellent source", but on the contrary a singularly unreliable source for the understanding of more ancient beliefs.