

14. THE ORIGIN OF THE HEADLESS SCRIPT

(*DBU MED*) IN TIBET

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INTRODUCTION¹

Writing is an important aspect of Tibetan culture, which has placed a high value on the mastery of calligraphic skills. Tibetan writing comes in a great variety of styles, which are often specific to particular social functions, but there is a fundamental distinction between two scripts. On the one hand there is a script with horizontal lines along the tops of many letters, like the serifs of the Latin script, known as *dbu can*, or ‘headed’, and second there is a script without these lines, known as *dbu med*, or ‘headless’. In the latter there are numerous different styles including a simple style for teaching children, ornamental styles for official edicts, and a very cursive style for handwriting.²

My purpose in this paper is to look for the origin of Tibet’s *dbu med* script. Theories on the origin of *dbu med* fall into two camps. The first is that it was invented, along with the *dbu can* script, based on models from different Indian alphabets. The second is that the *dbu med* script evolved over time as the *dbu can* script was written quickly.³ That is to say, it is a classic cursive script, according to the definition of ‘cursive’ in the current *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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² Styles of *dbu med* include the *hbru tsha*, the *dpe tshugs* (‘book form’), and the *khyug yig* (‘running script’), and variations on these known as *tshugs rin* (‘long form’), *tshugs thui* (‘short form’) and *tshugs chui* (‘small form’). These styles are explained in numerous Tibetan calligraphy manuals, such as Bkras Lhun dgon (2003) and Śes rab ñi ma (n.d.) The classic study of Tibetan writing, from which most later accounts are drawn, is the *White Beryl* of Sañs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705). For a brief account, in English, of modern Tibetan writing styles and their functions in an official context, see French (1995: 155–158).

³ One of the first people to put this theory in writing was the maverick Tibetan scholar Dge ḥdun chos ḥphel in a newspaper article and his posthumously published *White Annals*. See Dge ḥdun chos ḥphel (1994: Volume III: 269–271) and the reproduction of the newspaper article in (Narkyid 1983).

Written with a running hand, so that the characters are rapidly formed without raising the pen, and in consequence have their angles rounded, and separate strokes joined, and at length become slanted.⁴

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that analysis of the earliest sources of Tibetan writing according to the principles developed in European paleography makes it quite clear that *dbu med* was originally a cursive script that developed out of *dbu can*. We can show that this early *dbu med* was in use throughout the Tibetan empire, and that it was mainly taught to official scribes. We will also show how a variety of calligraphic *dbu med* styles developed after the fall of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century. In these calligraphic forms of *dbu med* we begin to see the forerunners of the *dbu med* styles that are known today.

ORIGINS: THE SOURCES OF THE TIBETAN SCRIPT

According to the Tibetan historical tradition, Tibetan writing was invented when the emperor sent a minister, Thon mi Sambhota, to India to find a model on which to base the Tibetan alphabet. With gold given to him by the emperor, he was able to procure the services an Indian scholar, a Brahmin called Li byin.⁵ According to one of the earliest versions of this story, from *The Pillar Testament*, Thon mi studied twenty different scripts with the Brahmin.⁶ Having learned these scripts, Thon mi returned to Tibet, and formulated a Tibetan alphabet from the Indian scripts, having found almost all of the letter forms he needed for a Tibetan alphabet in them.

⁴ From *OED Online* (<http://dictionary.oed.com>).

⁵ Some Tibetan historians reconstructed from this Tibetan name as the Sanskrit name *Lipikara*, which is actually a genuine Indic term for a scribe dating back to the Aśokan period. While *The Pillar Testament* gives the Brāhmin's name as *Li byin ti ka*, other versions shorten this to *Li byin*. A more recent attempt to Sanskritize the name makes it *Kaṁśadatta (Sørensen 1994: 168, note 463). Some sources replace Li byin with a different teacher, called *Lha rig paḥi seṅ ge* (Skt. *Devavidyāsīmha). The earliest appearance of this alternative teacher, as far as I am aware of, is the *Ma ṅi bkaḥ ḥbum* (102a.4). Hypothetically, this could be the personal name of the teacher, whereas *Lipikara* (if that is indeed the name behind *Li byin*) is a profession, rather than a personal name.

⁶ *The Pillar Testament* (A): 105.10–106.5: *thon mi sam bho ṭas rgya gar lho phyogs su phyin nam bram ze li byin ti ka bya baḥi yig mkhan cig dañ mjal nas/ bram ze de la khyed kyis ṅa la yi ge slob dañ ces źus nas gser deḥi phyed phul bas/ bram ze na re/ ṅas yi geḥi lugs mi ḥdra ba ṅi śu tham pa śes pas/ bod phrug khyod yi geḥi lugs gañ la slob zer te bram zes bod phrug khrid nas rgya ḥtshoḥi ḥgram na rdo riṅs cig la yi geḥi lugs mi ḥdra ba ṅi śu tham pa bkra lam me ba bris brkos yod pa de bstan pas/*

According to *The Testament of Ba*, the Brahmin accompanied Thon mi back to Tibet and helped him formulate the Tibetan alphabet.

These early versions of the Thon mi story do not specify any one Indic script as the basis for the Tibetan alphabet; nor do they distinguish between the *dbu can* and *dbu med* scripts. However, many later versions of the story state that Thon mi used two Indic scripts, Lañtsa and Vartula, with the former being the basis of *dbu can* and the latter the basis of *dbu med*. The *Ma ñi bkaḥ ḥbum* seems to be the first place this statement appears.⁷ The Lañtsa and Vartula scripts certainly were known in Tibet, but not until long after the imperial period. They are scripts in the Siddhamāṭṛkā family which were adopted by Tibetans no earlier than the eleventh century, probably from Nepal, as calligraphic alphabets for rendering Sanskrit titles on the title pages of Buddhist scriptures.

Since Lañtsa and Vartula were the Indic scripts that Tibetans were most familiar with by the time of the compilation of the *Ma ñi bkaḥ ḥbum*, it is not surprising that they came to be taken as the ancestors of the Tibetan script. However, the Indic writing style known as *Gupta script*, as seen in Indic inscriptions from the fifth or sixth century, is a very much better model for Tibetan writing. With a few exceptions, every Tibetan letter traditionally said to have been derived from Indian scripts can be traced to the so-called Late Gupta style found in the inscriptions of North India throughout the sixth century and in Nepal into the early seventh century.⁸ The question of the geographic origin of the Tibetan script excited considerable interest, and disagreement, among Indologists and Tibetologists in the first half of the twentieth century. Some argued for a Central Asian

⁷ See *Ma ñi bkaḥ ḥbum* (102a.5). The second version of the tale in the *Ma ñi bkaḥ ḥbum* replaces Lañtsa with Nagari (186b.5).

⁸ The Gupta style was well defined by Bühler (1904: 65–71). For Bühler the Gupta style was more or less identical with what he termed the *northern alphabets* during the fourth and fifth centuries. Bühler employed the chronological classification of Gupta —> Siddhamāṭṛkā —> Nāgāri used here. Bühler identifies Siddhamāṭṛkā inscriptions as early as the sixth century and Nāgāri as early as the seventh, but their appearance as coherent styles should be dated to the seventh century for Siddhamāṭṛkā and ninth at the earliest for Nāgāri. Lore Sander (1968) subdivides the Gupta alphabet into Gupta A (third–fourth century), Gupta B (fourth–fifth century) and Late Gupta (6th century); it is the latter that forms the basis for most Tibetan letter forms. A. H. Dani (1963) identified many regional sub-classes of Bühler’s northern alphabets. His regional classifications, which include Nepal and the Northwest, are very useful, though sometimes the dividing lines among the regional styles are not as clear as they might be. For a summary of these developments see Salomon (1998: 38–40). The most useful single volume of late Gupta inscriptions is Fleet (1888).

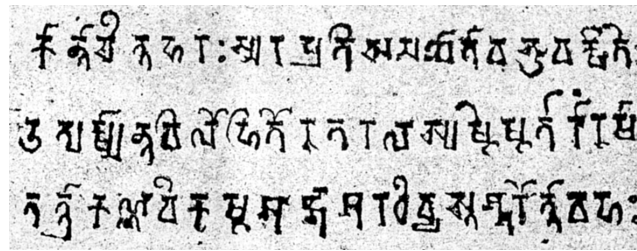


Figure 14.1: Detail from the Barābar Hill Cave inscription
(Fleet 1888, pl.xxxB).

source, others for Kashmir, others for Northern India and Nepal.⁹ In my own recent studies, I have observed that the epigraphical sources from Northern India and Nepal provide the closest models for the Tibetan letter forms, especially when compared with the earliest examples of Tibetan epigraphic writing.¹⁰ This paleographical observation is reinforced when we take into account Tibetan contact with North Indian and Nepalese cultures in the early seventh century. A route to India via Nepal was used by Chinese envoys and pilgrims, and during the early seventh century Tibetans too were involved in Chinese diplomatic and military expeditions to Northern India.¹¹ It is likely that the Nepalese king Narendradeva and his court were resident in exile at the Tibetan court in the 630s, and the Nepalese architectural features seen in early Tibetan temples are evidence of the cultural interaction between Tibet and Nepal during this period.¹²

⁹ For example, A. H. Francke (1911) argued for a Khotanese source of the Tibetan script. This was strongly contested by Berthold Laufer (1918). F. W. Thomas (1951) was inclined to favour Nepal as the most likely source. Shōju Inaba (1954) argued that a single inscription from Gopālpur, near the current Indian-Nepalese border offered the best model for the Tibetan script.

¹⁰ In particular, the inscriptions from Central Asia, Kashmir and Pakistan lack the looped *na* and *ma*, and the distinctive form of *tha* found in the Tibetan alphabet. Furthermore, the ‘acute-angled script’ that is seen in the North Indian inscriptions of the late sixth and early seventh century is not found with any regularity in the inscriptions from Central Asia, Kashmir and Pakistan. For a detailed discussion see van Schaik (2011).

¹¹ A route from Tibet through Nepal to India in the seventh century is indicated by several accounts of Chinese envoys and monks travelling to India via Tibet in the years 643-4 and 648. The existence of one such route was confirmed by an inscription discovered in 1990 in Kyirong, near the border between Tibet and Nepal. It was written during the Chinese envoy 王玄策 Wáng Xuáncè’s mission to India in 658 (see Sen 2001: 25–26).

¹² This historical connection between Narendradeva and Tibet may be indicated the statement in the *Old Tibetan Annals* (Pelliot tibétain 1288, l.10) that a *Na ri ba ba* was returned to the throne in Nepal in 641. The Chinese *Old Tang Annals* (chapter 21) state that the king was a vassal of Tibet in the year 647. The evidence for this reading of history is

What we appear to have in the earliest Tibetan inscriptions is a style based on the simple and elegant Gupta letters of the fifth and sixth century, with some alterations based on an early precursor of the Siddhamāṭṛkā style that is sometimes known as the ‘acute-angled script’. However, the Tibetan alphabet shows no trace of influence from the fully-developed Siddhamāṭṛkā script of the latter half of the seventh century. So the formulation of the Tibetan script would appear to be placed between the first appearance of the ‘acute-angled script’ in the mid-sixth century, and the evolution of various letter forms that changed the script into the form known as Siddhamāṭṛkā by the mid-seventh century.¹³ This is a surprisingly narrow span of time, and perhaps not so surprisingly, it accords exactly with traditional Tibetan account that the Tibetan script was invented in the reign of Sroñ brtsan sgam po (629–c.649).¹⁴

Of course, we should compare these Indic sources with the earliest known examples of Tibetan writing. These are the pillar inscriptions from Central Tibet and the manuscripts dating from the Tibetan occupation of Central Asia. The pillar inscriptions provide us with the earliest dated source of Tibetan writing: the Zol pillar in Lhasa, dated to the 760s, approximately a century after the first appearance of writing in Tibet. Analysis of the writing on this and other pillars shows that it accords well with the Indic sources, and is closer to them in some respects than later forms of *dbu can*. Thus, despite the hundred-year gap between the first recorded instance of Tibetan writing and the earliest surviving examples of such writing, a close comparison of sixth and early seventh century inscriptions from Northern India and Nepal with the Tibetan pillar inscriptions leaves little room for doubt that Indian inscriptions such as these were the main source for the Tibetan *dbu can* script.

discussed in Vitali (1990: 71–72).

¹³ Many Siddhamāṭṛkā letter forms, including the *ma*, *ya* and *sa*, are very different from the Gupta forms, and could not have served as a model for the corresponding Tibetan letters.

¹⁴ The first instance of writing mentioned in the *Old Tibetan Annals* is dated to the year 655, a record of the results of a census of the previous year. This strongly indicates that a script was formulated some years before this event, so that at least the beginning of the process must have occurred during the reign of Khri Sroñ brtsan. In the citation below the opening curl is marked with @ and the reverse *gi gu* sign is marked with a capital I.

Pelliot tibétain 1288, ll.26–29: @/: /stagI lo la bab ste/ bstan pho mer khe naḥ bžugs shlii/ blon che stoñ rtsen gyis/ moñ pu sral ḥdzoñ duḥ bsduste/ rgod g.yuñ dbye žing/ mkho sham chen pho bgyi baḥi rtsis mgo bgyI bar lo gžig/ @/: /yos buḥI lo la bab steḥ/ /btsan po mer khe na bžugs shiñ/ blon che stoñ rtsan gyls/ /ḥgor tir/ bkaḥ/ grims gyI yi ge brls phar lo gchig/

On the other hand I have found no Indic manuscripts or inscriptions that bear close comparison with early Tibetan *dbu med*, and certainly nothing that could be identified as a source for the *dbu med* script. It might be thought that the rounded letter forms found in South Indian inscriptions are a likely source. Paleographers of Indic writing usually explain these rounded letters as derivations from manuscript writing, showing the effects of writing with a stylus—this ‘cursivization process’ will be discussed later in relation to the Tibetan script. More recently however, such changes have been interpreted as calligraphic elaborations, similar to those seen in Northern Indian scripts of the same period (Salomon 1998: 39).

In the fifth to seventh century inscriptions of the Kadambas and Cālukyas, in a script usually called *Grantha*, there are rounded letter forms, but they are not a convincing source for the Tibetan *dbu med* (Burnell 1968: 33–40 and Plates II and III). Many letter forms in these inscriptions differ radically from Tibetan forms—whether *dbu can* or *dbu med*.¹⁵

The very rounded style known as *Vaṭṭeluttu*, ‘rounded writing,’ an early form of the Tamil alphabet, may initially seem to be another possible source for *dbu med*. However, once again we find far too many letter forms—including *ta*, *na*, *ma* and *ra*—that differ radically from any Tibetan writing style. The rounded *pa*, *ba*, *ya* and *la* might appear somewhat similar to *dbu med* forms, but even these letters differ in their proportions from any *dbu med* writing. We may compare, by contrast, the very close match between the proportions of the letters found in North Indian inscriptions of the sixth and early seventh centuries and the early *dbu can* inscriptions in Tibet (See Burnell 1968: 47–52 and Plate XVII).

Therefore, the theory that *dbu med* developed out of *dbu can*—rather than being invented at the same time based on a different Indic script—is supported by a lack of exemplars in the Indic manuscript and epigraphic sources. But is there any positive evidence for *dbu med* as a development out of *dbu can*? Recently, some attempts have been made to show how *dbu med* might have developed out of *dbu can*.¹⁶ However, these have been hampered by two problems: first, they have lacked a methodology such as those that have been developed in the field of Latin paleography; and

¹⁵ These differences include: *na*: which does not appear in a looped form; *pa* and *ba*: which have a characteristic ‘bulge’ at the lower left; *ma*: which is a closed loop; *ra*: in which the lower stroke is a leftward curl which later forms a closed loop; *la*: in which the right leg first curls above the letter and later forms a closed loop; *śa*: a very different letter form.

¹⁶ In particular, see Narkyid (1983).

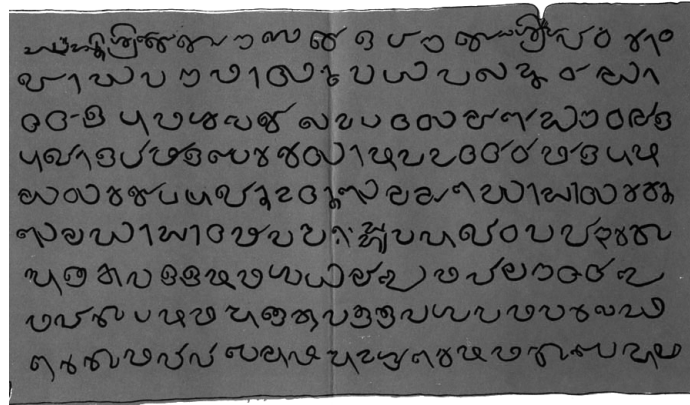


Figure 14.2: Example of the Vartteluttu script (Burnell 1968: pl.XXXIIa).

second, they have been based on contemporary forms of the letters, rather than the earliest known forms.

METHODOLOGY: THE PALEOGRAPHIC APPROACH

In our analysis of the development of the Tibetan script, we would be remiss to ignore the work that has already been done by paleographers in other areas. The field of Roman paleography, for example, can provide us with models and examples of how to proceed. The paleography of Roman writing is of particular interest here because the earliest examples of Roman writing include both the large, angular writing style known as *Roman Capitals*, and the smaller, more curved letters known as *Roman Cursive*.

Studies of Roman paleography have shown how Roman Capitals developed over time into Roman Cursive, and how Old Roman Cursive, an early form of the cursive script, developed into New Roman Cursive. Central to this analysis has been the concept of *ductus*, that is, the number, direction and sequence of the strokes which the scribe uses to write a letter.¹⁷ Breaking up the letter forms into strokes, and assessing the ease or difficulty of writing each stroke is central to the analysis of script development, and will be very helpful to us in examining early Tibetan writing.

Let us stay with Roman paleography for a moment longer. In the 1950s Giorgio Cencetti examined the early examples of Roman Capitals and Cursive. He noted that both styles appeared as early as the fourth century BC, already evolved and formed (Cencetti 1956: 63–66). Then he set out to

¹⁷ Jean Mallon defined this use of the term ‘ductus’ in his 1951 work *Paleografie Romaine*. Mallon was particularly concerned to show how the ductus of individual letter forms was preserved in the transition from Old Roman Cursive to New Roman Cursive.

show how the cursive forms could have evolved from the capitals, asking the reader to consider what would happen to the capital letters if they were written frequently, repeatedly, and at speed. Cencetti estimated that this ‘cursivization’ process resulting in the two kinds of writing happened within the period 500–375BC, a similar span of time to the period elapsing between the probable creation of the Tibetan script and our earliest examples of *dbu can* and *dbu med*.

Among the specific changes caused by ‘cursivization’ in Roman writing identified by Cencetti the most important are the changes in the direction of strokes, and the combining of multiple strokes into a single movement—known as a *ligature*. Another influential paleographer of the 1950s, Bernhard Bischoff, identified these effects of cursive writing, and added several others to the list:

The principle consequences that follow from this kind of writing with more rapid, lighter strokes could be described as follows: because they are simplified, the flourishes drop out. As a result of this more rapid writing, the script is, when space allows, elongated by end-strokes up or down. Individual strokes that are contiguous to one another or that can be brought together in relative positions are joined. Angles are rounded off, and difficult curves are smoothed out.¹⁸

Such descriptions assume that the same ductus—that is, the order and direction of strokes—can often be observed in the cursive forms of letters. However, as recent paleographers have shown, a more radical development sometimes occurs in which the ductus itself changes. Here the ductus of the original letter form mutates into the new ductus of the cursive form, which is then written with a ductus that is more comfortable and/or quicker to execute, but retains sufficient resemblance to the form of the letter as it is commonly recognised at that moment in history.¹⁹

Somewhat closer to Tibet, the derivation of a cursive script from non-cursive styles has also been noted in Chinese writing. Though there are many named styles writing Chinese, the cursive style has been shown to derive from earlier styles through certain basic principles, much like those identified by paleographers of Latin writing.

Briefly speaking, the term Chinese Cursive Script is applied to *Lishū*, *Kǎishū*, and *Jyǎndǎ [Jiǎnzǐ]* when the strokes are executed with rapidity. In general

¹⁸ Bischoff (1990: 52). I have omitted his examples from Latin letters in this passage.

¹⁹ This process is described in Gilissen (1973). Delorez, in his study of Gothic cursive, states that “the simplified ductus is the essential feature of cursive script” (Delorez 2003: 126).

there are two ways through which the characters in Cursive Script are formed: (1) the characters are written with an attempt to lift the tip of the writing instrument from the paper as few times as possible; (2) the characters are written in a simplified form with certain strokes omitted or a complex element being substituted by a simpler one. (Wang 1958: xxv)

In more recent, comparative studies, paleographers have surveyed a range of world scripts, and noted the presence of similar principles of ‘cursivization’ where there have been similarities in writing implements, the writing surface, and of course the universal similarity of the human body. Thus, Albertine Gaur, in her wide-ranging study of the history of writing, notes the principles we have discussed above across very different and geographically separated writing groups; for example, of the Aramaic script she writes:

The outward appearance of the oldest Aramaic letter-signs differed little at first from those of the Phoenician script, but gradually special characteristics began to emerge: the tops of certain letters such as b, d, and r (originally closed) became open; a tendency to reduce the numbers of separate strokes in certain letters appeared; and finally angles became more rounded, and ligatures were introduced—in other words, the whole script became slightly more cursive. (Gaur 1987: 92.)

As we will see, all of the features mentioned here can also be observed in early *dbu med*.²⁰ One of the most thorough attempts to define the principles that inform the development of writing is found in the work of Peter van Sommers. The graphetic principles defined by van Sommers are based on empirical studies as well as the analysis of historical scripts, and address issues like “how and where the hand approaches the writing surface, the manner in which the hand and arm work as a stroke is made, how writers and drawers anchor one stroke to another, and so on.”²¹

²⁰ When Gaur writes, “the tops of certain letters...became open,” she is observing a similar process to the omission of the ‘heads’ of many letters in *dbu med*. The tops of the Phoenician letters in question are generally horizontal strokes that were not necessary for the recognition of their forms.

²¹ van Sommers (1991: 4). Eight principles are illustrated by van Sommers. To summarize, the principles (as applied to right-handed writers, writing from right to left) are preferences for: (i) drawing lines in the directions of two, five and seven o'clock; (ii) anchoring lines to a fixed point; (iii) keeping close control by minimizing the stroke area; (iv) starting at the top left; (v) drawing circles anticlockwise; (vi) progressing from one stroke to an adjacent one; (vii) completing similar strokes together; (viii) keeping paper contact.

Though these graphetic principles are intended to apply to all writing, and not cursive writing alone, some of them clearly affect the cursivization process, since the greater the ease, the greater the speed of writing. In particular, van Sommers sees the graphetic principle of maintaining paper contact as the fundamental principle operating in the development of cursive writing. He writes:

Let us turn to another constraint: it makes sense for writers and drawers using instruments that leave scratches or residues (inscribing in wax, using pens, pencils or brushes, for example) to maintain contact with the writing surface as they move from stroke to stroke. This tendency is accentuated, according to my studies, as the figure size gets smaller and writing speed gets faster... Once a writer has started to move continuously around angles, there will be a tendency for the angles to be changed into curves. (van Sommers 1991: 13.)

Drawing from the above studies, we can identify these main principles governing the development of cursive scripts:

- (i) Non-essential strokes—especially the heads of letters—are dropped.²²
- (ii) Adjacent strokes are joined in ligatures.²³
- (iii) Angles become curves.²⁴
- (iv) Stroke direction follows the line of easiest articulation.²⁵
- (v) End-strokes are lengthened and may curl in the direction of writing.²⁶

²² This principle is seen in Bischoff's account of the effects of cursive writing quoted above, in which he refers to these non-essential elements, such as the finials in capital letters, as "flourishes." It is also comparable to the opening of the tops of certain letters in the Aramaic script as described in the above quotation from Albertine Gaur.

²³ Ligatures between different letters are a common feature of cursive writing, but are not found in early *dbu med* (nor indeed many of later *dbu med* styles either). This may be due in part to the need in written Tibetan to lift the pen frequently to write the syllable-dividing *tsheg*—either a dot or a short downward stroke.

²⁴ A point that is implicit in the studies quote above, but not stated outright, is that a sharp angle in writing requires the pen to come to a complete stop—however momentary that stop may be—whereas in a curve the pen is always in constant motion.

²⁵ As shown by van Sommers, and mentioned above, these are the directions of two, five and seven o'clock (for right handed writers).

²⁶ Though the lengthening of such strokes is mentioned by Bischoff in the passage quoted above, the curl in the direction of the next letter is not mentioned in the studies of writing I have consulted. However, it is clearly one effect of fast writing, where the hand has begun to travel towards the next letter before the pen has entirely left the writing surface. This curl could be seen as an incomplete ligature towards the next letter.

The next step is to see whether these principles can be shown to apply to the development of *dbu med* in Tibetan writing. Before we do that, however, we must identify the appropriate sources for the study of early *dbu med*.

SOURCES: THE EARLIEST EXAMPLES OF *DBU MED* WRITING

The manuscripts recovered from Central Asia by Western explorers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries include the earliest examples of Tibetan writing on paper—many of them dating to the period of the Tibetan occupation of this area in the first half of the ninth century. While the epigraphic material mentioned earlier is relatively limited in extent, there are thousands of these Tibetan manuscripts, and they contain a vast array of writing styles. It must be remembered that the terms *dbu can* and *dbu med* are themselves a later classification, and are not found in any of the pillar inscriptions or Dūnhuáng manuscripts.

In gathering paleographical evidence for early *dbu med*, my first step was to consider only those manuscripts that could be dated to the period of the Tibetan empire. Many of the Tibetan manuscripts from Central Asia derive from the ‘library cave’ at Dūnhuáng, and these manuscripts may date from as late as the beginning of the eleventh century, when the cave was closed. On the other hand, those manuscripts that can be shown to date from the Tibetan occupation of Dūnhuáng have a *terminus ad quem* of 848, when the town was taken back by the Chinese.

I will suggest here a preliminary definition of five basic groups of handwriting seen in the Dūnhuáng manuscripts from this period. These are very broad characterizations, yet, as we shall see, they accord well with particular types and functions of the texts themselves.

(i) A style that emulates the proportions of the epigraphic writing from Central Tibet, mainly found in historical, legal and divinatory texts that may have been circulated from Central Tibet. We may classify this style as *dbu can*, and since the proportions of these letters tend to be more square than other styles, I will refer to it as ‘square style *dbu can*’.

(ii) A style that maintains the ductus of the square style, but is adapted for faster writing. It is characterized by longer lines at the end of strokes, particularly noticeable in the vertical descenders of certain letters and the horizontal strokes of the vowel signs. As there is little change to the ductus

of the letters, we may classify this style as *dbu can* as well.²⁷ It is best represented in the mass-produced copies of sūtras and other Buddhist texts, and thus appears to be the style that was taught to the scribes (many of whom were Chinese) recruited to produce these sūtras. I will refer to it as ‘sūtra style *dbu can*’.

(iii) A hastily written style found in brief military communications from the Tibetan forts in Central Asia, and certain official documents from Dūnhuáng.²⁸ It is often referred to as “cursive *dbu can*” by F. W. Thomas and others. There is much variation among these documents, and the style comprises mainly inconsistent alterations to the basic forms of the letters, apparently deriving from the quick writing of one of the above taught styles. Although I am reluctant to classify these hands as a ‘style’ per se I will refer to them as ‘military style *dbu can*’.

(iv) A somewhat cursive style found in several official manuscripts from Dūnhuáng (e.g. Pelliot tibétain 999), the Bde kham area (e.g. Pelliot tibétain 1089, pictured here), and indeed two Dūnhuáng manuscripts from Central Tibet (IOL Tib J 1459 and Pelliot tibétain 1085). The heads of the letters are retained, but the ductus may be changed to facilitate writing quickly. This style maintains consistent letter forms, and appears to be a taught handwriting style. I will refer to it as ‘official style *dbu can*’.

(v) A truly cursive style characterized by rounded lines (avoiding pen-lifts) and the lack of ‘heads’ in many letter-forms. This style, mainly found in official documents, I will refer to as ‘early *dbu med*’. As we will see below, it appears to be a distinctive taught script.

In all of the above styles the basic forms of the letters found in the epigraphic sources are altered to some extent. This is inevitable when the medium and writing tools—pen and paper rather than stone and chisel—differ so much. Thus, even the documents that closely mimic the style of the pillar inscriptions contain forms of some letters altered for ease of writing, in accordance with the graphetic principles mentioned in the pre-

²⁷ The triangular *ba* is a feature that distinguishes this style from the ‘square’ style.

²⁸ Examples of the style can be seen throughout the wooden slips and paper fragments collected by Aurel Stein from the Tibetan fort sites of Mirān and Mazār Tāgh, catalogued under the British Library pressmarks IOL Tib N (for the wooden slips) and Or. 15000 (for the paper manuscripts).

vious section.²⁹ In the sūtra and official style *dbu can*, we see some changes in the ductus that facilitate quick writing, and I think that this is one good reason to suspect that they may be taught styles (the other good reason being the many documents written in a similar style).

With the fifth style, which I am calling ‘early *dbu med*’, there is a crucial difference from all of the others in the consistent omission of the heads of the letters. There are over thirty manuscripts written in this style (for a list see the Appendix). This group of manuscripts is also surprisingly consistent in its subject matter: generally official issues of a local nature. All of the dateable manuscripts in this group are from the Tibetan imperial period, usually from the last decades of the occupation of Dūnhuáng—that is, the 830s and 840s. The texts are generally of local interest; most of the manuscripts were written in Dūnhuáng itself, though some originated elsewhere in Bde khams, the large administrative district that included Tibet’s territories in Eastern Central Asia: two are from the office of the *bde blon*, the minister governing Bde khams, and one from a government office in Tsoñ ka.³⁰ We also have some evidence that this early *dbu med* style was not limited to Tibet’s Central Asian territories. A letter from the palace (*pho brañ*) of Ḥon cañ do, one of the headquarters of the Central Tibetan government, shows both the official *dbu can* and early *dbu med* writing, evidently from the hand of a single scribe.³¹ Though the right side of the manuscript is missing, and hence there is no official seal, the oblique lines that mark the blank part of the document and are unlikely to be found in a copy, are present. Thus, it is likely that this is the original letter, originating from Central Tibet.³²

²⁹ The *Old Tibetan Annals* (version 1) found in IOL Tib J 750 and Pelliot tibétain 1288, is perhaps the manuscript most closely based on the epigraphic style. Nevertheless, there are differences from the pillar inscriptions, including a triangular—rather than square—head on the letter *ga*. This change can be explained by one of the van Sommers’ graphetic principles: that there is a preference for anchoring lines to a fixed point (see van Sommers 1991).

³⁰ The extent of the province of the *bde blon* is unknown. It seems to have been created to include Tibet’s northeastern territories, and then expanded with further conquests. Hugh Richardson (1990) addressed the question in some detail. He pointed out that several Dūnhuáng documents (including the *dbu med* manuscripts IOL Tib J 1126 and Pelliot tibétain 1111) mention a place called *Ža*, where the assembly of the *bde blon* was held, but the location of *Ža* is still unknown.

³¹ The other manuscript that is thought to originate from Central Tibet is the letter from the Lhan kar palace (Pelliot tibétain 1085). The writing style in this letter is similar to the official *dbu can* in the Dūnhuáng manuscripts.

³² This is further indicated by preliminary fibre analysis carried out by Agnieszka

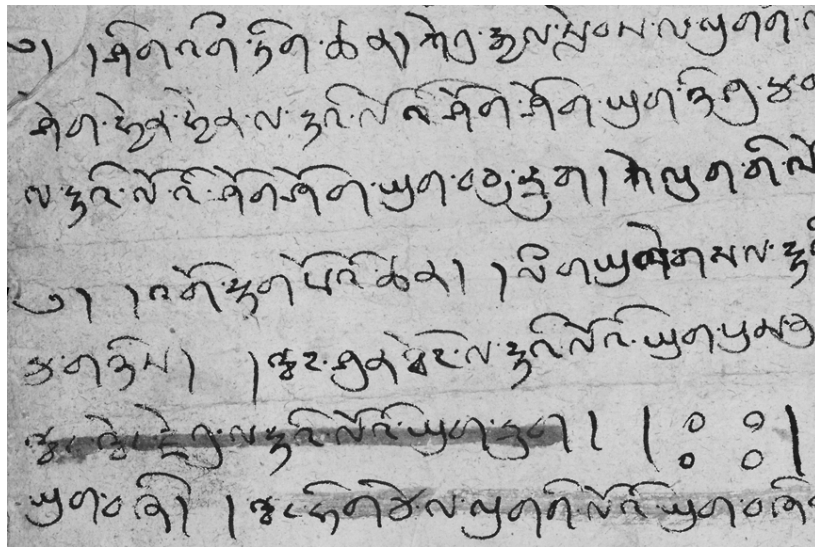


Figure 14.3: IOL Tib J 1359(B): Register of scribes.
Reproduced by kind permission of The British Library.

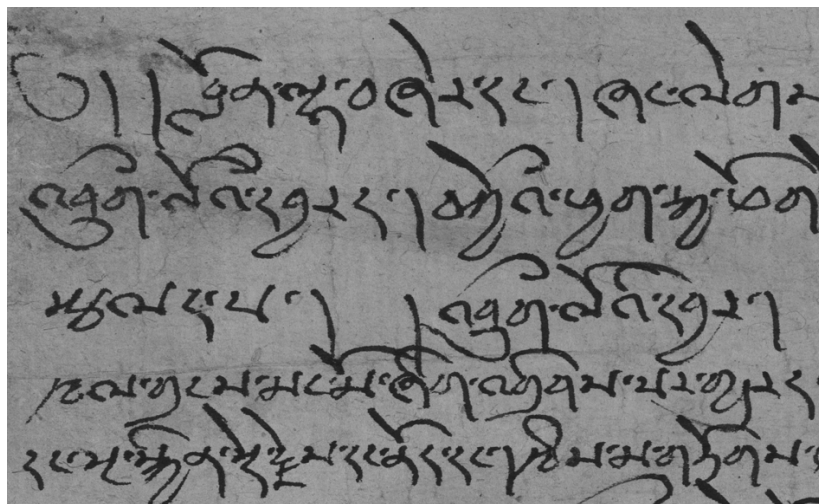


Figure 14.4: IOL Tib J 1126: Letter from the office of the *bde blon*.
Reproduced by kind permission of The British Library.

Even further away from Dūnhuáng, at the western limits of the Tibetan empire, there are a number of scratched inscriptions on stone, sgraffito left by the Tibetan occupiers of the region. The greatest concentration of these are found along the banks of the Indus River at Alchi, northwest of Leh in

Helman-Wazny. IOL Tib J 1459 is composed of *Thymelaeaceae* (*Daphne*) fibres, the most common fibre used to make Tibetan paper. Among the manuscripts analysed so far, none of the manuscripts locally produced in Dūnhuáng during the Tibetan period is composed of these fibres.

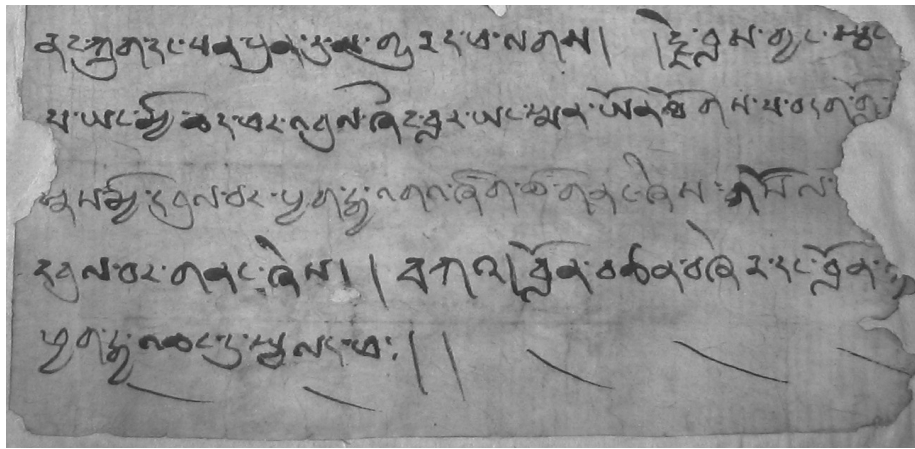


Figure 14.5: IOL Tib J 1459: Letter from the palace (*pho brañ*) of Ḥon cañ do. Reproduced by kind permission of The British Library.

modern Ladakh. Here there is a ruined fort and bridge that were once of some strategic significance to the Tibetan empire. Many of the inscriptions are Buddhist dedications written next to crude pictures of stūpas, giving the name of the person who dedicated the ‘stūpa’. Some of the inscribed names include official titles like *blon* and *ston dpon*, and so appear to have been written by officials and higher-ranking military personnel.³³

The Ladakh area, known in the Tibetan records as Mar(d) yul was under the control of the Tibetans by 719, when an official census was held there, and it was used as the base for the conquest of neighbouring Bru źa. Various references to Bru źa in the inscriptions and other sources indicate that the region remained under Tibetan control for most of the eighth century, and possibly well into the ninth. Phillip Denwood, who photographed and translated many of these inscriptions, estimates that they date from the period between the Tibetan occupation of the area in the mid-eighth century to the collapse of the empire in the mid-ninth century. Tsuguhito Takeuchi, on the other hand, has suggested that they may date from after the fall of the empire, when a local Tibetan kingdom was established in the area.³⁴ Both Denwood and Takeuchi agree that the orthography

³³ Most of the names are followed by the instrumental particle and the verb *bris*, “written/inscribed by...” The pictures of the stūpas appear to have been considered religious offerings. Another such rock-inscribed stūpa discovered by Stein in the Darkōt pass (between Yarkand and Kashgar) has the message: *rmehor ħirni dor kyi yon*. The last syllable was read by A. H. Francke as *om*, but the reading of *yon*, which is quite clear from Stein’s photograph, provides the much better sense that the inscribed stūpa is the religious gift (*yon*) of the person named here. See Stein (1928: I.45 and II.1050–1051 Appendix L).

³⁴ For Denwood’s view, see Denwood (2007: 50, 52), and Snellgrove and Skorupski



Figure 14.6: Sgraffito on rock at Saspol, Ladakh.

Photograph courtesy of B.R. Mani, Archeological Survey of India.

of these sgraffiti matches that of the Dūnhuáng documents from the Tibetan imperial period. I would agree with this assessment, and note in addition that both *dbu can* and *dbu med* styles are represented in these sgraffiti. The *dbu med* style is seen in Denwood's inscriptions 2 and 7, and is also found in other recent photographs from the same site.³⁵ The sgraffiti are too brief to allow us to compare them in detail with the Dūnhuáng *dbu med* documents, but we can note the appearance of *na* and *ma* without heads, and more particularly, the completely rounded *ba*, the u-shaped *pa* and the three-stroke *sa*—all letter-forms found in the Dūnhuáng *dbu med* documents. Despite the inconclusive nature of these sgraffiti, they offer further evidence that this *dbu med* style may have been taught throughout the Tibetan imperial area.³⁶ We now turn to the analysis of the specific features of the early *dbu med* style in the Dūnhuáng documents, and its relationship to early *dbu can* writing.

(1980: 163). For Takeuchi's see Takeuchi (forthcoming (b)).

³⁵ I was able to see these photographs thanks to Dr. B. R. Mani, Director of the Archeological Survey of India.

³⁶ The sgraffiti that appears to share the characteristics of the Dūnhuáng *dbu med* manuscripts is as follows: (i) Denwood's Plate 84(B): *ston pon rtsa*; (ii) Denwood's Plate 84(F): *ston pon khrom*; (iii) Archeological Survey of India photograph (Saspol bridge): *smar dba'i po bda'i bza'i*.

ANALYSIS: THE LETTER *KA*

The traditional method of paleography is to analyse and compare the forms of key letters, and we will follow that method here, using the letter *ka* to show the variety of styles and the specific features of the *dbu med* style. I will begin with the pillar inscriptions because the development of the letter forms can be much better understood when these are taken as the original model.

In the pillar inscriptions, the letter *ka* is composed of four lines: (i) a horizontal ‘head’ (*mgo*), and then from left to right, three vertical lines descending from the head, (ii) a stroke angled or turning to the left known in later Tibetan calligraphy as the ‘tooth’ (*mche ba*), (iii) a straight line known as the ‘central arm’ (*dbus lag*) and a slightly longer straight line forming the right side of the letter, known as the ‘leg’ (*rkañ ba*).

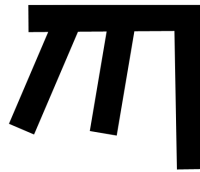
Epigraphic writing

Figure 14.7: *Žol* pillar, 767(?).

In the earliest example of the letter *ka* here, from the *Žol* pillar, the three vertical lines are almost the same length. The ‘leg’ is only very slightly longer than the other two strokes, and is exactly the same length as the ‘head’. This gives the letter a very square appearance, an appearance that is characteristic of all the letter forms on this pillar.³⁷ Both the ‘tooth’ and the ‘central arm’ are angled toward the left.

³⁷ It should be noted however that because the *Žol* pillar is very high, letter images taken from photos may be subject to foreshortening.

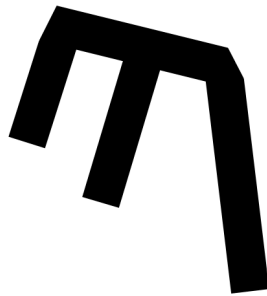


Figure 14.8: Lhasa Treaty Pillar, 822.

By the time of the Lhasa Treaty Pillar, some half a century later, the leg is much longer than the other vertical strokes, and longer than the head as well. This may be an effect of non-epigraphic writing on an epigraphic inscription, both the length and the angle of the ‘leg’ being features of a stroke written with pen and ink.

(i) *Square style*

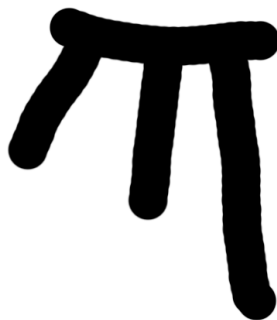


Figure 14.9: Old Tibetan Annals
(IOL Tib J 750), early to mid ninth c.

The *Old Tibetan Annals* manuscript presents us with a style of *dbu can* that closely follows the epigraphic style, yet we see certain divergences from the styles of the pillar inscriptions, due to the effects of writing with pen and ink on paper.

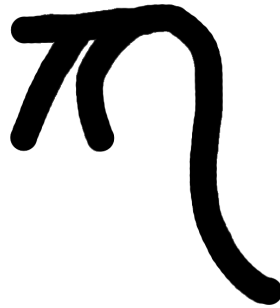
(ii) *Sūtra style*

Figure 14.10: *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra* (IOL Tib J 310.1210),
early to mid ninth c.

This style shows even more clearly the effects of pen-and-ink writing on the proportions of the letters. The ‘leg’ becomes even longer, and both the ‘tooth’ and ‘central arm’ now point to 7 o’clock (one of the three easiest directions for writing according to van Sommers’ graphetic principles). Small ticks appear at the end of some strokes as the hand moves on to the next stroke before the pen lifts away. It seems that the ductus of the letter may have been altered here so that the ‘central arm’ and the ‘leg’ are completed in a single stroke, with two more strokes for the ‘head’ and ‘tooth’, reducing the number of strokes from four to three.

(iii) *Military style*

Figure 14.11: Military communique (Or. 8212/1852),
Mazār Tāgh, early to mid ninth c.

The rather awkward style of this military communique shows the same basic letter form somewhat distorted by the swift movement of the writer’s hand. However, the ductus of the letter seems to be unchanged.

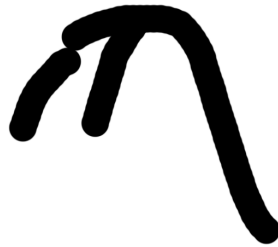
(iv) *Official style (dbu can)*

Figure 14.12: Official despatch from the *bde blon* (Pelliot tibétain 1089), mid ninth c.

Here it is even more clear than in the *sūtra* style that while the head of the letter has been retained, the ductus has been changed to facilitate writing quickly. The number of strokes taken to write the letter has been reduced to three.

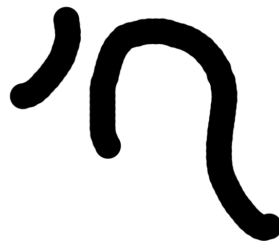
(v) *Early dbu med*

Figure 14.13: Official despatch from the *bde blon* (IOL Tib J 1126), mid ninth c.

This form of the letter shows further changes in the ductus, reducing the number of strokes to two. It is clear that, as above, the ‘central arm’ and the ‘leg’ are completed in a single stroke, with the ‘tooth’ completed along with a now vestigial ‘head’. Since there is no true ‘head’—no separate vertical stroke—we can identify this as an *dbu med* letter form. Other accidental features of fast writing are also observable, such as the tick on the end of the ‘leg’ seen in this example.


epigraphic	square	sūtra	military	official	dbu med
					

Figure 14.14: The letter ‘ba’, taken from the same sources.

The general development of the letter *ka* seen in these manuscripts can be described according to the ductus. The simple manuscript *dbu can* style represented in the square style above requires four individual strokes. The *sūtra* style and official style appear to allow a form in which two adjacent strokes are combined into one, allowing for a faster execution of the letter with three strokes rather than four. In the early *dbu med* manuscripts, two more adjacent strokes are combined, resulting in a *ka* that can be completed in just two strokes. Other letters show a similar development. The letter *ba* is a good example. Here we can see how the epigraphic letters are closest to the Indic inscriptions that were their models, and how these letter forms were then modified in the development of written styles.

These analyses show us that all of the manuscript styles can be analysed to some extent as transformations of the epigraphic style along the lines of the basic graphetic principles looked at earlier. Such transformations are least evident in the styles that closely follow the epigraphic style, and are most fully realized in our early *dbu med* documents. There is something of a sliding scale here: the ‘*sūtra*’ and ‘official’ *dbu can* styles can be called *dbu can* in that they preserve the heads of the letters, yet in terms of ductus they are sometimes closer to the *dbu med* style (the letters *ka* and *ba* both being a good examples of this). We may still feel confident in setting the *dbu med* style apart in that (a) it represents the fullest development of the cursivization process and (b) it is the only style that consistently omits the ‘heads’ of letters. Its general features may be listed as follows:

- (i) Pen-lifts and stops are avoided whenever possible—resulting in more curved lines and fewer sharp angles.
- (ii) Features of letters not necessary for recognition are dropped—in particular, the heads of many letters.
- (iii) Straight descenders (like the *śad*) curve away to the left or right, or in an ‘S’ shape.
- (iv) End-strokes (like the *gi gu* and *na ro* vowel signs) are lengthened.

CONTEXT: THE SCRIBES

Is it possible that this early *dbu med* was taught as a distinct style, rather than being an accidental effect of scribes writing quickly? I believe there are good reasons to think that it was. The first reason is the consistency of the ductus of this style across the early *dbu med* manuscripts, which are from different locations and in the handwritings of different scribes. The second reason is that the early *dbu med* manuscripts have a remarkable consistency of subject-matter. As the list in the Appendix shows, they are all official or semi-official documents. The early *dbu med* group of manuscripts is composed mainly of official registers of land and people, contracts for sales and loans, and letters to or from local officials. Many of these manuscripts contain seals, either the square official seals, the small round personal seals or the so-called ‘finger seals’.³⁸ Those without such seals should probably be considered to be copies or drafts.

Apart from these, the only other examples of early *dbu med* are the various notes written by the editors of the large-scale project to produce multiple copies of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, which was done at the command of the Tibetan emperor and overseen by the local government at Dūnhuáng. These editors may have been of minor official rank, unlike the scribes, who were generally ordinary householders or monks.³⁹ Though the scribes of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* sometimes signed their names in a cursive style, in all of the examples I have seen, it is not the true early *dbu med*, but rather a cursive form of the ‘sūtra-style’ *dbu can*, retaining the ductus, and often the heads of the *dbu can* forms. These hands seem more comparable to the military documents, in which the *dbu can* letters are altered in an *ad hoc* fashion as an effect of the scribe’s writing quickly.⁴⁰ It seems reasonable to conjecture that the ordinary people conscripted to copy these sūtras need not have been taught more than the single *dbu can* style required for the task. The editors, on the other hand, may have held an official position and been trained in clerical writing styles.

³⁸ On the Tibetan seals see, Takeuchi (1995: 107–115).

³⁹ The status and regulation of the scribes in Dūnhuáng is demonstrated by IOL Tib J 1359. See the translation and discussion in Takeuchi (1994).

⁴⁰ Compare for example Pelliot tibétain 1005, a list of missing pages from sūtras, written by an editor, with Pelliot tibétain 1127, a scribe’s scrap paper (*glegs mtshas*) showing examples of his or her cursive writing.



Figure 14.15: IOL Tib N 398: Wooden slip from Mīrān with Tibetan alphabet, early ninth c. Reproduced by kind permission of The British Library.

This brings us to another issue. In later Tibetan culture, as *dbu can* became primarily the script for printed books, *dbu med* became the script used for handwritten documents, and for teaching the alphabet to children. This, it seems, was not the case during the imperial period. At this time, some centuries before the advent of woodblock printing for Tibetan, some form of the *dbu can* script was used for the majority of handwritten documents, as we have seen, whereas the early *dbu med* script appears in relatively few documents from this period, within a specific genre of official and semi-official manuscripts.

That the *dbu can* script was the basic writing style for learning the Tibetan alphabet is borne out by the military documents in which the writers are clearly writing at speed, yet do not have the early *dbu med* forms at their disposal; instead they rather haphazardly alter the *dbu can* forms. Further support for this supposition is found in the numerous writing exercises among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts, in which the Tibetan alphabet, or a standard line of text, is written one or more times. Invariably, these are in the *dbu can* script.

In functional terms we might compare the early *dbu med* style with the cursive chancery styles of Europe. It was taught to a specific class of scribes, and used for a specific class of documents. The social context of the early *dbu med* documents is the official milieu of Dūnhuáng and the surrounding area of Tibetan administration. Since the *dbu med* script derives from the principles of ease in writing, it lends itself to fast writing. The usefulness of this in an official scribe can easily be imagined. Taking down letters and other documents from dictation, for example, would require a quick hand, and we do indeed have some evidence that dictation was used in the writing of official documents in Bde khams.⁴¹

⁴¹ We find the verb *spad* (or *hpad*) in the colophons of Pelliot tibétain 1071, 1089 and 1113. This is the action done by the first person in the colophon, while the second person is described as writing (*hbris*) the document. This has been translated by Yamaguchi (1980: 43 n.105), Scherrer-Schaub (2007: 303 n.159) and Iwao (forthcoming) as “dictated.” As Iwao points out, Pelliot tibétain 1071v contains the colophon “Dictated by Ji Rom ga. Written by Mo Hgom mye cha.” (*ji rom gas koñ gyis hpad / mo hgoñ mye cha gyls bris*). Here it is clear that the scribe is distinct from the person composing the document.

It is likely that the early *dbu med* script was one of the writing styles imported into the area of Bde khams when the Tibetan administration was established there. Our documents must be the work either of Tibetans stationed in the area, or local Chinese (and other non-Tibetans) trained in this particular writing style in order to write local official documents. We might speculate that the larger administrative offices, like that of the *bde blon*, had dedicated clerical scribes, such as were found in later Tibetan institutions, while at less important centres like Dūnhuáng, officials may have had to draft their own documents.

These scribes may well have been trained in other styles as well. They certainly at least had the command of an *dbu can* style. This is indicated by the manuscripts written in the style I have called ‘official *dbu can*’. These manuscripts are functionally very similar to those written in early *dbu med*. For example, of two despatches from the office of the *bde blon*, one is written in official *dbu can* (Pelliot tibétain 1089), the other in early *dbu med* (IOL Tib J 1129). We also find a number of manuscripts that seem to be written by a single scribe who alternates between an *dbu can* and an *dbu med* style. We saw one example of this in the letter from Hon cañ do (IOL Tib J 1459) pictured above. There are other examples as well. In an edict from the minister at Loñ cu, forbidding abductions of Chinese women and children in Dūnhuáng by Tibetan officials (Pelliot tibétain 1083), we find just the final line written in *dbu med*. In another letter (this time probably a copy of a letter) found in IOL Tib J 856, the scribe shifts from an *dbu can* style halfway through the letter to an *dbu med* style. In each case, since the *dbu med* writing occurs towards the end of the letter, it appears that the scribe switched (perhaps not intentionally) to this script as he or she attempted to finish the copy more quickly towards the end.

So it seems that the early *dbu med* style, under the Tibetan empire, was mainly used for drawing up official documents—registers, contracts and letters—of a local nature. We can say with some confidence that this was the case in Dūnhuáng and the administrative area of Bde khams in general. We have some evidence that the early *dbu med* style was also used for this purpose in Central Tibet, perhaps also in the far western territories of the Tibetan empire; more epigraphic and manuscript evidence from these areas might help us to determine whether the early *dbu med* style was in fact taught and written throughout the Tibetan empire by the first half of the ninth century. But such conclusions must wait.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT: CALLIGRAPHIC ELABORATION

The next step in the study of the development of *dbu med* is to trace its further development, but this is a formidable task. The style that I refer to in this paper as ‘early *dbu med*’ occurs in manuscripts dating to the Tibetan imperial period, most of them from a rather short span of time between the 820s and 840s. As we have seen, most of these manuscripts have a similar social function, and were probably written by a specific class of scribes. Unsurprisingly then, we find the *dbu med* style in these manuscripts quite consistent in its basic features.

By contrast, the Dūnhuáng *dbu med* manuscripts dating from the post-Tibetan period, that is, from the late ninth century and tenth centuries, testify to the emergence of a number of divergent *dbu med* styles. This accords with certain traditional accounts of the development of *dbu med*. It is said that there were two basic styles, the “tradition of Li” (*li lugs*) and the “tradition of Ldan” (*ldan lugs*).⁴² The Li tradition is thought to have died out while the Ldan tradition survived, but unfortunately we have no examples that might help us to attach these two traditions to specific styles of *dbu med*. In any case, a recent version of this traditional account states “Later, there was no universally accepted script because the master scribes [each] adopted their individual style of writing” (Ribur Ngawang Gyatso 1984: 29.) This situation is said to have continued until a standardization attributed to the prince of Gyantse, Rab brtan Kun bzañ hphags pa (1389–1442).⁴³ His work is said to form the basis of the models described by Sañs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705) in his *White Beryl*, which became a basic textbook for Tibetan calligraphy.

The post-imperial Tibetan Dūnhuáng manuscripts would date to well before this trend toward standardization. The description of a situation in which each scribal master develops his own style does seem to fit the tenth-century Dūnhuáng manuscripts rather well. The main difficulty in discussing the development of *dbu med* after the fall of the Tibetan empire is trying to establish whether a group of manuscripts in one style of *dbu med* represents an established style, or just the peculiarities of a particular scribe’s handwriting. I have argued elsewhere that we can sometimes identify a group of manuscripts as being in the hand of one particular scribe

⁴² An influential well-known Tibetan account of these traditions can be found in *The White Beryl*: 17–34.

⁴³ This prince is better known as the sponsor of the Them spañs ma edition of the *bkañ hgyur* (see Ribur Ngawang Gyatso 1984: 29–30 and Harrison 1996).

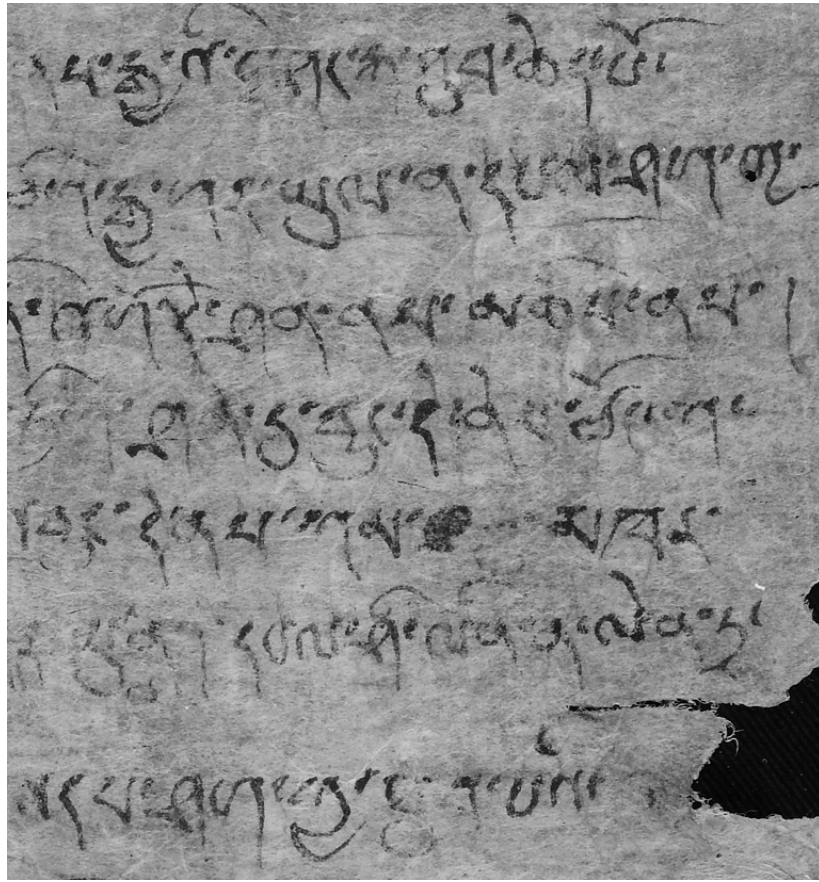


Figure 14.16: Letter, 960s. IOL Tib J 754(a), letter 3.

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(cf. Dalton, Davis and van Schaik 2007). In this context, however, I would like to make some fairly general observations about the *dbu med* manuscripts from the post-Imperial period.

We have a number of letters written in *dbu med* in the post-Tibetan period (Takeuchi 1990). In these letters we can detect a difference, a development in the *dbu med* style. A good example in Pelliot tibétain 1129: the calligraphic elements that appear in this later *dbu med* letter include a distinction between light and heavy lines, longer flourished strokes for the vowels, and a return to sharper angles in some letters, such as *da* and *ra*. Since these developments often increase the number of strokes required, it seems that the desire for calligraphic effect had some impact on the further development of some *dbu med* styles, along with the need to write at speed.

If we look at the ductus of individual letter forms, we can see that some letters now require more pen strokes than the early *dbu med* forms. This is the case with *ka*, which is often written in later *dbu med* with three strokes

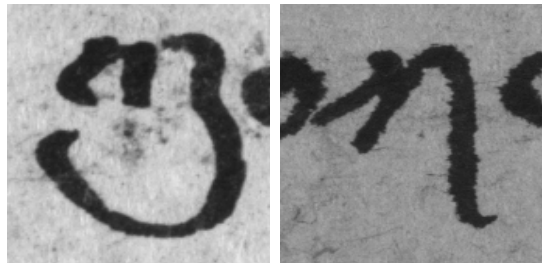


Figure 14.17: IOL Tib J 321 showing the later *dbu med* ‘ka’ with the early *dbu med* ‘ka’ for comparison (IOL Tib J 1126).
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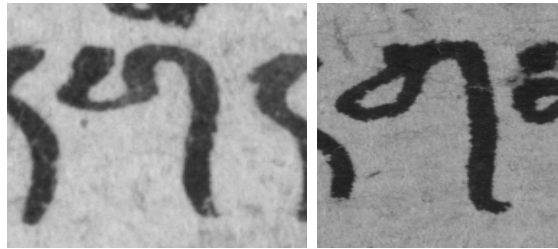


Figure 14.18: IOL Tib J 321 showing the later *dbu med* ‘ga’ with the early *dbu med* ‘ga’ for comparison (IOL Tib J 1126).
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rather than the two of early *dbu med*.⁴⁴ Another letter form that is very common in later *dbu med* manuscripts is the open-topped *ga*, although the early form of *ga* with a looped head also continues to appear, sometimes in the same manuscript as the open-topped form.

In one special case we can also see a development toward the letter-writing style of later, and contemporary Tibet known as *khyug yig* (‘running script’). This is one of the letters of passage contained in the manuscript IOL Tib J 754, probably from Tsoñ kha but written by a Tibetan called Smar khams Rin chen rdo rje. Though this is by no means equivalent to the fully-formed *khyug yig*, his handwriting displays a fluidity and the very long flourishes for vowel signs that characterize the *khyug* style.⁴⁵

Another important change in the post-imperial period is the content of the manuscripts written in *dbu med*. In this later period, many of them are

⁴⁴ These manuscripts are too numerous to list here in full, but here is a sample: IOL Tib J 321, 331, 594, 647, Pelliot tibétain 149, 322, 626

⁴⁵ On the dating and social context of this manuscript, see van Schaik and Galambos (2011). For models of *khyug* and *tshugs thui* scripts, see Bkra lhun dgon (2003).

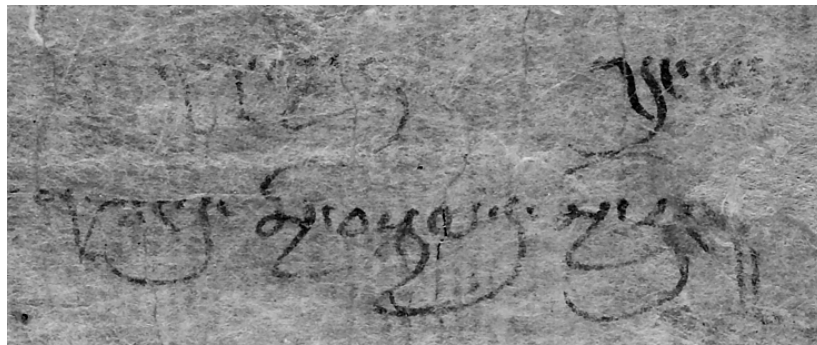


Figure 14.19: Letter, 960s. IOL Tib J 754(a), letter 2.
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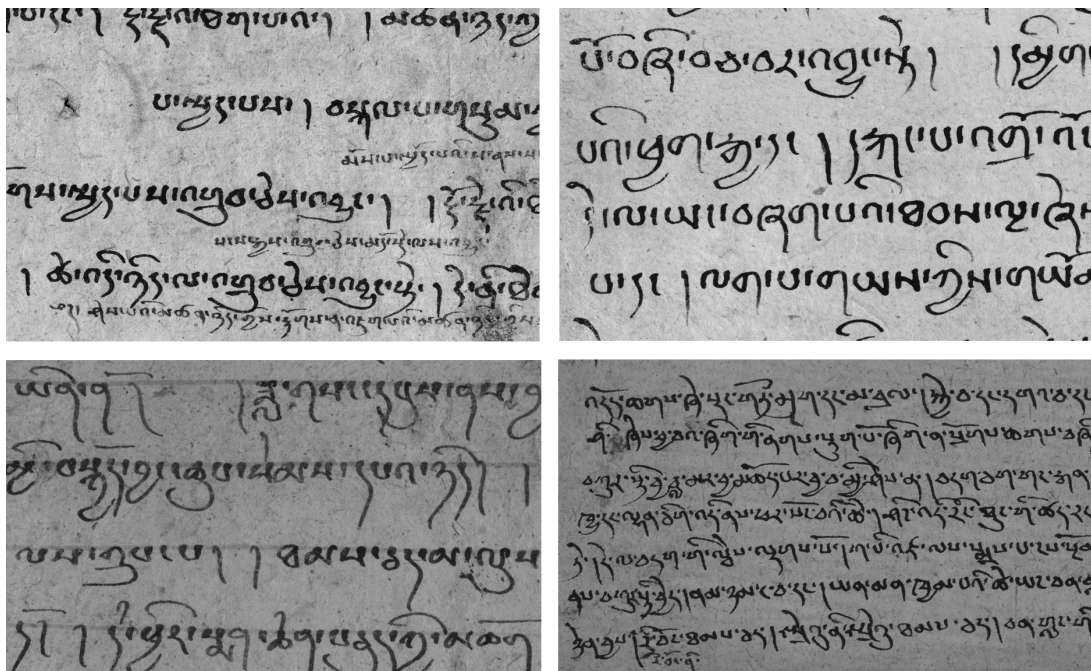


Figure 14.20: Examples of *dbu med* in Buddhist manuscripts from the post-imperial period,
 clockwise from top left: IOL Tib J 321, 552, 437, 1.

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Buddhist texts, rather than secular documents. Thus, along with the increasingly calligraphic nature of the *dbu med* script, there seems to have been a change in its status, allowing it to represent Buddhist texts, even the scriptures containing the Buddha’s word. This change of status is accompanied by a change in the character of the writing. The calligraphic nature of the script is particularly evident in the Buddhist texts, some of which are written in a very formalized *dbu med*. Here, some features deriving from the action of quick writing that are found inconsistently in early *dbu med*

(like the ‘s’ shaped bend and right turning ticks at descenders) are formalized in the script itself. In these Buddhist *dbu med* manuscripts, the need to write quickly seems to be less significant than the need to create an attractive script.

It is in these manuscripts that we can also begin to see the forerunners of different classifications of *dbu med* in the later tradition. The style seen in manuscripts like IOL Tib J 321 above, that almost seems a hybrid between *dbu can* and *dbu med*, is comparable with the style called *hbru tsha*, a form of which is still current in Bhutan. We have a few examples of a style that looks like a forerunner of the ‘book form’ (*dpe tshugs*) or ‘book script’ (*dpe yig*) that became the most popular script for Buddhist manuscripts (as against printed texts, which were in the *dbu can* script) in Tibet in later centuries.⁴⁶

In general then, we can say that the early *dbu med* appears to have been developed principally to provide letters that can be written as quickly as possible while retaining sufficient differences between each letter to allow them to be legible. After the end of the Tibetan empire, a trend towards increasing the calligraphic features in *dbu med* tended to obscure the original impetus for its development. This movement between cursive and calligraphic styles is not unique to Tibetan writing, and has been observed in the development of European scripts as well. The paleographer Albert Derolez describes this very process in the evolution of the ‘documentary script’ in Europe, and concludes:

Seen in this way, the history of script might be described as an alternation of increasing cursivity, on the one hand, and consolidation and calligraphy, on the other.⁴⁷

I have attempted here merely a brief sketch of the development of *dbu med* after the Tibetan imperial period, based on the Dūnhuáng manuscripts. Further study is needed to trace the evolution of different *dbu med* styles, ideally creating a genealogy of writing styles that bridges the gap between

⁴⁶ Takeuchi (forthcoming(a)) identifies IOL Tib J 358 as similar to *dpe yig*. IOL Tib J 82 seems even more similar to the ‘book form’ in its alternation of heavy vertical and light horizontal strokes.

⁴⁷ Derolez (2003: 5). Elsewhere Derolez attempts a detailed description of “the various ways of introducing greater formality in an informal cursive script” (Derolez 2003: 128–130). These include (i) a reduction in the number of ligatures, (ii) a move back to a more complicated ductus (i.e. more strokes), (iii) a move toward shading (the calligraphic alternation of wide and narrow strokes) where a broad-nibbed pen is used, and (iv) an increasing angularity.

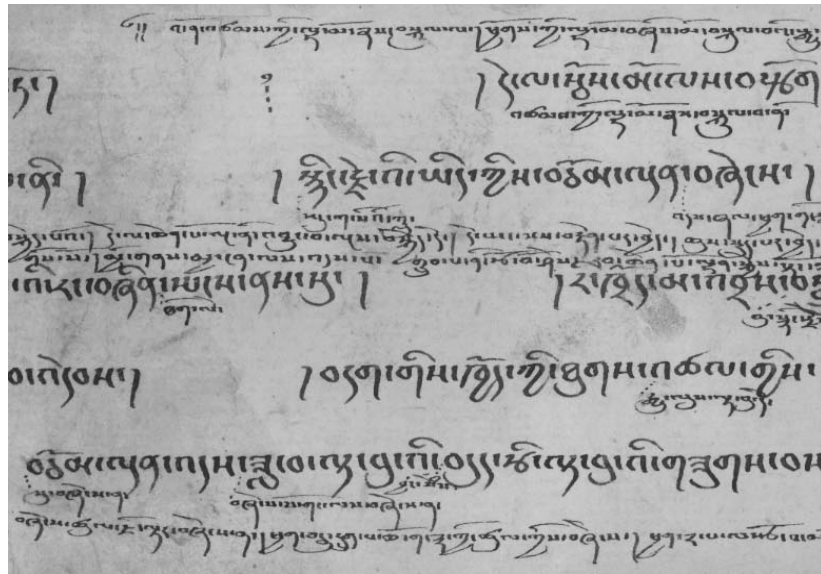


Figure 14.21: IOL Tib M 50: Manuscript from Khara Khoto, 12th–13th century?

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the Dūnhuáng manuscripts the later manuscript material from Tibet proper. In this, Tibetan manuscript collections from the eleventh century onwards, such as the Khara Khoto and Tabo collections will play an important part.⁴⁸

The manuscripts from the Tangut city of Khara Khoto, probably dating from the twelfth century, have barely been studied, but they can certainly help us to trace the development of *dbu med* further. These manuscripts show that the developments seen at Dūnhuáng continued along a similar route. The calligraphic features of the later Dūnhuáng *dbu med* styles are further formalized, so that heavy and light pen strokes, and the angle and curvature of letter forms becomes very consistent, and the style very attractive. Examples among these, each showing a different style of *dbu med*, include IOL Tib M 50, 54 and 55.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize the conclusions reached here: the origins of *dbu med* seem to be in the official bureaucracy of the Tibetan Empire. The script developed over a century or so from the original letter forms of the Tibetan script, the angular *dbu can*. When scribes wrote official documents quickly,

⁴⁸ For some examples of the Tabo manuscripts see the plates in Scherrer-Schaub and Steinkellner (1999).

the principles of ease and speed that can be observed in scripts all over the world changed the forms of the letters they wrote. Individual strokes were joined in ligatures, angles became curves, and strokes that were not required for the recognition of letters were dropped. This latter effect meant that the ‘heads’ of the letters were no longer part of this script, leading to its later being called ‘headless’ (*dbu med*).

By the early ninth century, if not earlier, this cursive and headless style was quite distinct from the angular letters with heads. As the scribe had to employ a quite different method to write most of these *dbu med* letters, the script must have been taught independently of the *dbu can* styles. The scribes who were taught this *dbu med* style were those who wrote official correspondence. Whether they were officials themselves, or professional scribes working in an official capacity, they had at their command two distinct writing styles: not only the basic *dbu can* script, but also the *dbu med* script for situations where quick writing was required.

After the fall of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century, there was a profusion of different forms of *dbu med* writing. The large-scale government of the imperial period had allowed the same style of writing to be taught to official scribes everywhere. With the fragmentation of the empire, this regularization was no longer possible. Different calligraphic forms of *dbu med* developed. The function of the script became more varied as well, and was now to be seen in religious manuscripts as well as secular documents. One aspect of this development was that characteristics of the *dbu med* letter forms that in the imperial period had developed out of the principles of ease became encoded into the new calligraphic styles as ornamental features.

For many years, scholars working with the Dūnhuáng manuscripts have noticed differences in writing styles and speculated that these may be a way to date the manuscripts.⁴⁹ While this may never be possible to the accuracy that we would like, I have tried to demonstrate that it is possible to identify benchmarks that will help us to distinguish manuscripts written during the Tibetan imperial period from those written in the later ninth and tenth centuries. The detailed analysis of specific letter forms is the key to moving from a connoisseur’s personal sense of different writing styles to a definition that is explicable to all. I hope that the analysis contained here, preliminary and incomplete though it is, has made a convincing case for the development of *dbu med* out of an early form of *dbu can* in the Tibetan

⁴⁹ See Scherrer-Schaub and Bonami (2000) and Takeuchi (forthcoming(a)) for important preliminary suggestions toward this end.

imperial period, and also shown how we might continue to trace the development of *dbu med* styles after the fall of the empire.

APPENDIX: MANUSCRIPTS IN THE EARLY *DBU MED* STYLE

Manuscripts marked with an asterisk may be dated with some confidence to the Tibetan imperial period (usually to the last decades of that period: the 820s to 840s). Manuscripts marked with an obelisk begin in *dbu can*. The OTC numbers listed after some manuscripts refer to the numbers in Takeuchi (1995).

Letters

- Or.8210/S.2228: letter/petition concerning the estate (*lha ris*) of an unnamed temple*
- IOL Tib J 856(A&B): letter copy to the monks of Shāzhōu asking for protection†
- IOL Tib J 897: letter
- IOL Tib J 1126: letter from the *bde blon* concerning a shortfall of grain (with square seal)*
- Pelliot tibétain 1077: a series of petitions*†
- Pelliot tibétain 1080: letter to Dañ za Žañ ceḥu
- Pelliot tibétain 1083: letter from the Blon chen po at Loñ cu (with square seal)*†
- Pelliot tibétain 1200, 1201, 1202: three letters to Hongbian*
- Pelliot tibétain 1217: letter from the Žañ blon chen po at Tsoñ ka (with square seal)*

Contracts and other local legal matters

- Or.8212/194(a): contract for hiring a man (OTC40)
- IOL Tib J 1374: contract for the sale of a woman (OTC7)
- IOL Tib J 914, 1379: receipts for the repayment of wheat (OTC34,35)
- Pelliot tibétain 1084: document regarding a dispute over the sale of cattle
- Pelliot tibétain 1087: promissory letter to attend an assembly (for judgment)*
- Pelliot tibétain 1088: scribal practice including two contracts (OTC3)*
- Pelliot tibétain 1094: contract for the sale of an ox (OTC1)*
- Pelliot tibétain 1096: judicial document on the case of a lost horse

Pelliot tibétain 1104, 1203: ledgers for the loan of grain by a temple
(OTC27,28)*

Kozlov 4, Pelliot tibétain 1297/1, IOL Tib J 1018, Pelliot tibétain 1088/2,
Pelliot tibétain 1115, Or.8210/S.7133: contracts for the loan of grain
(OTC18–22, 25)*

Official registers

IOL Tib J 508, 1404 & 1486: land register*

IOL Tib J 839: official register*

IOL Tib J 1359: rules for scribes and register of names*†

Pelliot tibétain 1000,1001,1002,Or.8210/S.10828: register of texts
memorized(?) by monks and nuns

Pelliot tibétain 1111: official accounts of two granaries in Dūnhuáng*

Editing of officially sponsored sūtras

Pelliot tibétain 1005, 1012, 1013, 1020, 1024: editors' lists of missing
pages of sūtras*

Pelliot tibétain 1006, 1008, 1009, 1011, 1014, 1015: editors' manuscript
tags*

Other

Pelliot tibétain 230: copy of a prayer for the Buddhist activities of Khri ḥod
sruñ*

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