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В НОМЕРЕ:

ПУБЛИКАЦИИ

ИСТОРИЯ, ФИЛОСОФИЯ, ФИЛОЛОГИЯ

- Peter ZIEME.* Maitreya and the Religious Situation according to Two Old Uighur Poems of Yuan Dynasty. Edition of SI 4485 and SI 4958 **5**
- Simone-Christiane RASCHMANN.* New Traces of Old Uighur Vinaya Literature **17**
- Т.А. ПАН.* Маньчжурско-китайский диплом *гаоми* 誥命 из коллекции Н.П. Лихачева **25**

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

ИСТОРИЯ, ФИЛОСОФИЯ, ФИЛОЛОГИЯ

- Nicholas SIMS-WILLIAMS.* A Buddhist Technical Term in Christian Sogdian **32**
- Dai MATSUI.* Two Remarks on the Toyoq Caves and *Abita Qur* “Abita Cave” **37**
- Tokio TAKATA.* Sound Changes to Avoid Using Taboo Characters **51**
- ДУ Цзяньлу.* Об эволюции экономических форм в тангутском обществе (на кит. яз.) **58**
- Shintaro ARAKAWA.* On the Tangut Prefix ²da:- **64**
- А.И. КОЛЕСНИКОВ.* К семантике астральной метафоры в средневековых персидских текстах **74**
- Е.П. ОСТРОВСКАЯ.* Обучение Дхарме: нравственные качества ученика **87**

ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯ И ИСТОЧНИКОВЕДЕНИЕ

ТЕКСТОЛОГИЯ, КОДИКОЛОГИЯ, ПАЛЕОГРАФИЯ, АРХЕОГРАФИЯ

- NIE Hongyin.* Chinese Stories of Filial Piety in Tangut Literature **95**
- RONG Xinjiang.* The Earliest Extant Example of Woodblock Printing: the Precept Certificate of the 29th Year of Kaiyuan (741 A.D.) **118**
- CHING Chao-jung, Frantz GRENET.* The Golden *Poluo* in Sogdiana: An In-depth Analysis of the *Suishu* and *Tongdian* Passages **127**
- OGIHARA Hirotoshi.* Miscellany on the Tumshuqese Documents: Part II **148**
- ЛЮ Жомэй.* Исследование списков цинской рукописи «История государства Российского», хранящихся в России (на кит. яз.) **160**
- С.М. ПРОЗОРОВ.* Неатрибутированный сборник шиитских преданий (*хадисов*) в собрании арабских рукописей ИВР РАН **172**

КОЛЛЕКЦИИ И АРХИВЫ

- В.М. АЛПАТОВ.* Е.Д. Поливанов о китайском и японском языках **179**
- Hartmut WALRAVENS.* Preface to the Indexes to the Great Chinese Botany *Zhiwu Mingshi Tukai* 植物名實圖考 of Wu Qijun 吳其濬 **187**
- О.В. ВАСИЛЬЕВА.* Китайский альбом из Парижа в Российской национальной библиотеке **207**
- К.М. БОГДАНОВ.* К истории описания Тангутского фонда ИВР РАН **221**

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IN THIS ISSUE:

PUBLICATIONS

HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, PHILOLOGY

- Peter ZIEME*. Maitreya and the Religious Situation according to Two Old Uighur Poems of Yuan Dynasty. Edition of SI 4485 and SI 4958 **5**
- Simone-Christiane RASCHMANN*. New Traces of Old Uighur Vinaya Literature **17**
- Tatiana A. PANG*. The Manchu-Chinese Diploma *Gaoming* 誥命 from the Collection of Nikolai P. Likhachev **25**

RESEARCH WORKS

HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, PHILOLOGY

- Nicholas SIMS-WILLIAMS*. A Buddhist Technical Term in Christian Sogdian **32**
- Dai MATSUI*. Two Remarks on the Toyoq Caves and *Abita Qur* "Abita Cave" **37**
- Tokio TAKATA*. Sound Changes to Avoid Using Taboo Characters **51**
- DU Jianlu*. On the Evolution of the Economic Form of Xixia Society (in Chinese) **58**
- Shintaro ARAKAWA*. On the Tangut Prefix ²da:- **64**
- Aliy I. KOLESNIKOV*. To Semantics of an Astral Metaphor in the Persian Medieval Texts **74**
- Helena P. OSTROVSKAIA*. Studying the Dharma: Moral Qualities of a Disciple **87**

HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

TEXTOLOGY, CODICOLOGY, PALEOGRAPHY, ARCHEOGRAPHY

- NIE Hongyin*. Chinese Stories of Filial Piety in Tangut Literature **95**
- RONG Xinjiang*. The Earliest Extant Example of Woodblock Printing: the Precept Certificate of the 29th Year of Kaiyuan (741 A.D.) **118**
- CHING Chao-jung, Frantz GRENET*. The Golden *Poluo* in Sogdiana: An In-depth Analysis of the *Suishu* and *Tongdian* Passages **127**
- OGIHARA Hirotoshi*. Miscellany on the Tumshuqese Documents: Part II **148**
- LIU Ruomei*. The Study on the Qing Manuscript Copies of the "History of the Russian State" Kept in Russia (in Chinese) **160**
- Stanislav M. PROZOROV*. An Unattributed Miscellanea of Shi'a Traditions (*hadith*) in the Collection of Arabic Manuscripts of IOM RAS **172**

COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES

- Vladimir M. ALPATOV*. E.D. Polivanov on Chinese and Japanese **179**
- Hartmut WALRAVENS*. Preface to the Indexes to the Great Chinese Botany *Zhiwu Mingshi Tukao* 植物名實圖考 of Wu Qijun 吳其濬 **187**
- Olga V. VASILYEVA*. Chinese Album from Paris in the National Library of Russia **207**
- Kirill M. BOGDANOV*. IOM RAS Tangut Fund History: Hypotheses Based on Some New Facts **221**

Back cover:

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A Buddhist Technical Term in Christian Sogdian

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Abstract: A Buddhist technical term in Christian Sogdian. This article surveys the Indian (Sanskrit and Prakrit) loanwords used in the Christian literature in Sogdian, including some which have not been noticed previously. In particular, it discusses a possible borrowing of the Buddhist Sanskrit technical term *citta-saṃtāna-*, used in a Christian Sogdian text in the sense “train of thought”. Finally, it raises the question whether *snks’r*, the Buddhist Sogdian equivalent of Sanskrit *saṃsāra-* “cycle of existence”, may result from a confusion between this term and *saṃskāra-* “conditioned state”.

Key words: Christian Sogdian, Buddhist Sanskrit, loanwords, *citta-saṃtāna-*, *saṃsāra-*, *saṃskāra-*.

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The texts extant in Sogdian include a considerable number belonging to the literature of three major religions: Buddhism, Manicheism and Christianity. Although the Buddhist texts were mostly translated from Chinese, they contain a substantial Indian (Sanskrit and Prakrit) vocabulary, including both everyday words and Buddhist technical terms. The Manichean texts too employ a considerable number of Indian and Buddhist loanwords, which is not surprising in view of the attempt of the Manichean missionaries to present their religion in a Buddhist guise in order to attract converts in Central Asia and China.

The Indian vocabulary found in the Christian texts is naturally much less in quantity. In a survey published many years ago I noted ten such words (Sims-Williams 1983: 140): *'q'c* “sky”, *fcmbd* “world”¹, *qrm* “evil action”, *qwtr* “family”, *mx'q'r* “Mahākāla”, *rtn-* “jewel”, *smbtsr* “astrologer”, *smwtr-* “sea”, *wyn'* “harp” and *yqš-* “*yakṣa*, fiend”. A few

¹ The old idea that this word is an adaptation of *jambudvīpa-* (Sims-Williams 1983: 136 with references in fn. 35) must be given up. However, if *fcmbd* is a compound of Sogdian *'βt-* “seven” and **žanpad <* Sanskrit *janapada-* “nation, empire, inhabited country” (Humbach 1972: 45–6; Sims-Williams 2014: 44–5) it still has at least a partially Indian etymology.

further items can now be added to the list: [γ]wrđq “pill” < *guṭikā-*, *rwq* “disease” < *roga-*², *mwdy* “price” < *mūlya-* (Sims-Williams 2015: 19), *pr'ny* “insect” < *prāṇaka-* (Sims-Williams 2015: 39). Yet another, apparently unrecognized so far, is *d'wsy*, *dwsy* “neighbour”, which probably derives from Sanskrit *adhivāsa-*.

Almost all of these words are also attested in Buddhist and Manichean Sogdian texts. One of them, the word for “price”, is already attested in the form *mwōdy* in the Sogdian “Ancient Letters” of the early 4th century, and others, such as 'q'c “sky” (probably borrowed via Parthian), *fembd* “world”, *qwtr* “family”, *smwtr-* “sea”, no doubt belonged to the Sogdian core vocabulary. As I wrote in 1983: “In general... Indian words which occur in the Christian Sogdian literature may be assumed to be fully naturalized and to belong to the oldest stratum of Indian loanwords in Sogdian. The only probable exceptions to this generalization are those words which are used in Christian Sogdian in polemical contexts: *qrm* ‘evil action, evil fate’ in an anti-Manichean tract; *mx'q'r* ‘Mahākāla’, which serves as translation of the name of the heathen deity Apollo; *yqšyšt* ‘fiends’, used as an epithet of the persecuting Zoroastrians. Such words as these may have been taken over from Manichean and Buddhist usage” (Sims-Williams 1983: 136). The recently discovered medical terms such as [γ]wrđq “pill” and *rwq* “disease” may form a second group of exceptions, being adopted into Sogdian, possibly at a quite late date, as part of the prestigious Ayurvedic medical tradition.

It is notable that the Indian words collected above do not include any which could be described as Buddhist technical terms. In this respect the Indian vocabulary of the Christian Sogdian texts is very different not only from that of the Buddhist texts but also that of the Manichean texts, which make use of terms such as *bwt-* “Buddha”, *βwsndyy* “fast” (Buddhist Sanskrit *upośadha-*), *cxš'pδ* “commandment, moral precept” (*śikṣāpada-*, another word transmitted via Parthian), *δrm* “law” (*dharma-*), *pwrny'ny* “meritorious act” (*punya-*, with suffix influenced by the antonym *'krt'nyh* “sin”). The absence from the Christian texts of such Buddhist terminology is not surprising, given that the two religions have little in common. All the more interesting, therefore, is the possible borrowing of a Buddhist technical term to be proposed here.

Recently I published a series of excerpts from the writings of the seventh-century Christian ascetic Isaac of Nineveh in Sogdian translation. One of these excerpts contains the previously unknown word *smt'n* in the following context:³

p't mbysty šm'r' qt prym(nt) [...] šnqt 't n'-pcm'rcyq 'yct . w'n' by'nyq (š)[m'r'] zntysqn
pr m'x. 't ms pryzyd smt'n šm'(r)[' b'd] b'd pr fθys snymsqn m'x qw wny zprecyq
[mbnt] s'

“For constant thinking about these... little and inconsiderable things engenders in us that [thought] of God. And also, by means of this *smt'n* thought, [from time] to time we ascend in a vision to holy [intimacy] with Him...”

Here the phrase *smt'n šm'(r)[']* “*smt'n* thought” corresponds to *rny' šhym'* “ordinary (or: commonplace) thought” in the Syriac original. When editing this text I assumed that *smt'n*

² These two terms occur, along with some less certain Indian terms, in a pharmacological fragment, see Sims-Williams/Maue in (Sims-Williams 2019: 89–94).

³ E28/14, R8–12, in (Sims-Williams 2017: 20–21). As noted in my edition, the identification of the text is due to Adrian Pirtea.

is an adjective synonymous with *śhym* ‘ordinary’ and described it as “a previously unknown word without any obvious etymology” (Sims-Williams 2017: 34). It now seems to me likely that it the phrase *smt’n śm’(r)[’]* is part loanword, part translation of Buddhist Sanskrit *citta-saṃtāna-*. This expression is translated by Edgerton as “mental disposition, mentality” (Edgerton 1953: 555), but Jonathan Silk, who kindly advised me on this point, defines it as “stream of thought moments”. He explains: “Nothing continues through time, everything is momentary (*kṣaṇika*) ...everything that is part of existence (*saṃsāra*) in so far as it exists, exists moment to moment only. However, there is a continuity between these moments, and that is the *saṃtāna*, the flow or stream”. Amongst the Chinese equivalents of this Sanskrit expression, and of the synonymous *citta-saṃtati-*, are *xin xiangxu* 心相續 or *xiangxu xin* 相續心 (Soothill–Hodous 1937: 310).

It is not to be expected that the Christian translator who made use of the phrase *smt’n śm’(r)[’]* intended or even understood it in such a technical sense. He may rather have used it in a sense such as “train of thought”, i.e. a sequence of thoughts each leading to the next. In that case, although *smt’n* is not a literal translation of *śhym* ‘ordinary’, the translator’s paraphrase represents the meaning of the text quite accurately. Isaac is arguing for the value of “small actions” or “small observances”, which, he says, lead to greater things: “What we discover by means of these small observances is as greatly exalted and glorious as fire is greater than the flint and iron from which it issues... *Continuous reflection* on these tiny and insignificant things gives birth in us to reflection on him [i.e. on God], and by means of this *ordinary reflection* on occasion we imagine that we are in luminous converse with him...”⁴. The phrase “ordinary reflection” is effectively an abbreviated version of the preceding words “continuous reflection on these tiny and insignificant things”. The “reflection” to which Isaac refers is defined by two features. It is “ordinary”, that is, it concerns “tiny and insignificant things”, and it is “continuous”. In using the phrase “ordinary reflection” the Syriac original leaves “continuous” to be understood from the context, whereas the translator alludes to the “continuity” of thought by means of the term *smt’n* but leaves “ordinary” to be understood from the context.

One possible objection to the interpretation proposed here might be that the representation of *ṃ* by *m* is somewhat unexpected. However, there is a close parallel in Parthian, where Sanskrit *saṃsāra-* appears as *sms’r*. As Wilma Heston once pointed out to me, the form *saṃsār* is also attested in some modern Indian languages such as Urdu. Possibly such forms result from the reintroduction of the etymological [m] in place of the nasalized vowel or homorganic nasal indicated by *ṃ*. A different, but equally unexpected, adaptation is found in the Sogdian form of *saṃsāra-*, which is written *snks’r*, apparently [saṃsār], [saṃgsār] or [saṃksār]. In theory this spelling could be explained as due to adaptation to the unrelated Sogdian word attested in Christian Sogdian as *sngs’r* “stoned, put to death by stoning”, but the meaning seems too distant for such a folk-etymological adaptation to be plausible. Once again I am grateful to Jonathan Silk for the ingenious suggestion that the Sogdian form might result from a confusion between the Buddhist terms *saṃsāra-* “cycle of existence” and *saṃskāra-* “conditioned state”. The confusion of these two terms seems to be quite well-attested. Prof. Silk refers me to a Sanskrit folio of the *Ratnarāśi* (see F.W. Thomas in Hoernle 1916: 119 with n. 10, 121) where *saṃskāra-pakṣānukūlam* must stand for “well-disposed towards the partisans of *saṃsāra*”, as shown both by the context and by the Tibetan translation. Similarly, in the Khotanese translation of the *Saṃghāṭasūtra*

⁴ Translation taken from Brock 1997: 19–20 (my emphasis).

(§ 253.73 in the edition of Canevascini 1993: 110, 158 n. 13), the phrase *ṣkaugyānu gamjse* “faults of conditioned states” implies a Sanskrit text with **saṃskāra-doṣāṇi* rather than the transmitted text *saṃsāra-doṣāṇi* “faults of *saṃsāra*”. The converse, that is, *saṃskāra* translated as if it were *saṃsāra*, is quite common in early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts, including those by An Shigao, Lokakṣema and Dharmarakṣa, all of whom employ the phrase 生死 “birth and death” for *saṃskāra* as well as for *saṃsāra*. According to some scholars (e.g. Deleanu 2003: 79–80 n. 30) such translations result from a confusion of the two terms in some Prakrit, but others (e.g. Vetter & Harrison 1998: 213, notes 7–8) take the opposite view⁵.

A derivation of the Sogdian term *snks'r* from *saṃskāra* would of course imply a metathesis of [sk] to [ks]. Although the reason for such a metathesis is not self-evident, it may be easier to accept than a Sogdian [ŋ] as a replacement or realization of Sanskrit *m*.

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⁵ For these references I am grateful to Michael Radich.

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Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются заимствования из индийских языков (санскрита и праkritа), употребляемые в христианской литературе на согдийском языке (часть из которых ранее не разбиралась). Автор предполагает, что «технический» термин *citta-saṃtāna-*, заимствованный из буддийского санскрита, в христианском согдийском тексте используется в значении «поезд мысли».

Ключевые слова: христианский согдийский, буддийский санскрит, заимствования.

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