

FOREWORD

One of the most chilling episodes in the Old Testament is the story of Saul raising Samuel from the dead. Saul is about to lead his army into battle against the Philistines, and wishes to call up the dead prophet in the hope that he will give a favorable prognosis about the outcome of the battle. But no one can be found to perform the divination because Saul himself has banned the practice of necromancy, on pain of death, within his kingdom. However, he assumes an appropriate disguise and is led clandestinely to his fateful meeting with the Witch of Endor, who reluctantly agrees to his request. The shade of Samuel, irked at being disturbed from his slumber, tells the king in no uncertain terms that he will lose the battle, and returns once more to his subterranean home. In his study of the biblical antecedents of the Christian Resurrection, Geza Vermes underlines the importance of this story for what it reveals about the conception of the after-death state in one of the earliest recorded phases in Judaic thought. At the very least what we learn is that the realm of the dead seems to be a uniform, undifferentiated place. Vermes reminds us that the refraction of the realm into regions of bliss or chastisement as befitted the deeds of the dead while they were in life, as well as the stratification of this domain and the addition of intermediate zones, are part of a later development.

The evidence presented by John Vincent Bellezza in this remarkable study suggests that the evolution of the Tibetan after-death world has moved in precisely the opposite direction. The phantasmagoria of the *bardo* notwithstanding, the Buddhist vision offers a monotonous landscape compared with the richness of the Tibetan realms of the dead that preceded it, with a paltry repertoire of remedial interventions confined largely to the manufacture and transfer of merit. The texts discussed in this book, by contrast, reveal an extraordinarily varied range of measures to be taken in the event of precisely-defined instances of what an anthropologist would call ‘bad death’. The untoward circumstances of premature demise, rather than the accumulation of any moral debt, consign the deceased to the clutches of soul-snatching demons in a realm of misery where they, too, assume a demonic nature. They must be liberated from their captors and guided through successive stages to an exalted condition by the ministrations of specialized priests, with the help of animals that act as bearers and guides.

The four texts, or sets of texts, that provide the substance of this book, may reasonably be described as archaic, to the extent that they belong to one of the oldest strata of Tibetan writing, or else are significantly marked by the conventions of that literature. Rolf Stein, one of the pioneers of research on the ritual texts of Dunhuang, observed that the efforts of his predecessors had “suffered badly” from a failure to consult similar materials from a later period for comparative purposes.* In the present work, the Dunhuang mortuary texts – like the funeral cycle of the Bonpos – feature in an ancillary role to two other sets: two works from a collection of manuscripts found in a stupa in southern Tibet and, most spectacularly, an incomplete illuminated manuscript from a private collection.

It has been plausibly argued by several scholars that, apart from the debt it owes to Indian Buddhism, Bon might be construed as a legacy of the Buddhist tradition of Central Asia. Perhaps so, but it is equally true that the components of the ‘nine-vehicle’ classification of Bon are diverse enough that a multiplicity of origins is a more probable explanation. In the absence of any obvious candidate for the source of the beliefs presented here, the law of parsimony supports

the likelihood that the content of these texts represents a truly indigenous tradition, albeit one with considerable local variation.

It is a matter of real regret that the complex of beliefs and rituals represented by texts such as those examined here are execrated by followers of the major Buddhist schools on the grounds that they are somehow primitive, the legacy of an embarrassing backwardness that was supplanted by a superior Buddhist eschatology. This contempt is unwarranted: in the same way that many Tibetans proudly vaunt the Darwinian implications of the monkey-and-demoness anthropogenic myth, it could equally be argued that there is something very modern about a worldview that recognizes such a close kinship and mutual dependency between humans and the natural world as we find in these funerary texts.

If the evidence of these and other texts is so heterogeneous that we cannot reasonably speak of a formal tradition, we are surely justified at least in recognizing a time-honored complex. And if the components of this complex have seemed marginal or parochial, the reason is obvious: the material is very sparse, and even when it does come to light the linguistic challenges it presents are daunting. Publications such as the present one are all too few, but they constitute crucial pieces in the identification of a half-forgotten world of supernatural beings, priests and heroes, and a literary expression of such force and beauty that would be hard to find in later writing. A thorough treatment of the material such as we find here is especially welcome, since, apart from its lucid presentation of the sources, it provides us with valuable tools for the understanding of others that might come to light. With more to compare, the comparative enterprise becomes easier. In the same way as it is possible to draw meaningful comparisons between Dunhuang Pt 1285 and the Naxi corpus (Stein), or between these two and the mythic recitations of the modern Magar (de Sales), the juxtaposition of the four textual collections analyzed here reveals a clear cultural continuity. The result is a solid bulwark from which we can reach out to other isolated examples of oral, literary or performative art and establish their place in the emerging complex. Although Buddhism is not synonymous with Tibetan culture, as an extreme view would have it, its contribution to that culture has of course been enormous; but the present study is part of an inexorably growing body of evidence of the degree to which it has also contributed to its impoverishment.

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* "...Ces textes plus modernes sont souvent plus clairs et plus explicites que ces manuscrits. Il est clair qu'il faut étudier les premiers pour comprendre les seconds. M. Lalou et F. W. Thomas ont beaucoup pâti du fait qu'ils les ont ignorés" (Stein 1971: 482).

References

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