



Birch bark manuscripts –significance & challenges of their conservation

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Abstract

Birch bark manuscripts are documents written on pieces of the layer of birch bark which was commonly used for writing before the advent of mass production of paper .In India oldest references to birch bark manuscripts dates back to first century AD It is believed that present day Afghanistan was the region of birch barks Various translations of the text called dharmaguptaka in Kharoshti have produced the earliest version of Buddhist texts. The abhidamma texts are copied on birch bark in Brahmi script. References to birch barks are made by Kalidasa , Sushrutha Varahamihira etc mention about birch barks as being used for manuscripts.

Keywords: manuscripts, Sushrutha, Varahamihira

Introduction: The knowledge of writing necessitated the recording on manuscripts the bark of Himalayan birch Even today there are several writing of sacred verses being copied. There have been several birch bark manuscripts in Shiva temples of Nepal . Now they are stored in clay jars in British Library Museum .A large collection of birch bark scrolls were discovered in Afghanistan during the civil war in the late 20th centuries, in Bamiyan caves. The approximately 3,000 scroll fragments are in Sanskrit or Buddhist Sanskrit, using Brāhmī script, and date to a period from the 2nd to 8th century . Birch bark manuscripts were discovered in gilgit area in present day Pakistan which dealt with Ayurvedic science. The oldest surviving Buddhist texts, preserved on long rolls of birch-tree bark, are written in Gandhari, an early

regional Indic language that is long extinct. The scrolls originate from the region known in ancient times as Gandhara, in Northwestern Pakistan. (Marjorie Shelley, "storage of works on paper," in conservation concerns 1992).

Significance

The texts were written with a reed pen and black ink on scrolls consisting of sections of birch bark, which in most cases were glued together to form long strips. In general, the texts were written continuously over the recto and verso sides of the scroll, but in a few manuscripts only the recto is inscribed. All of the texts are incomplete and have suffered from varying degrees of loss and damage, in many cases severe. (The report of the National Manuscript library 2012). This is attributable in large part to the instability of old birch



bark, which becomes extremely fragile and usually survives only in favorable conditions such as when it is placed in an airtight container. (Marjorie Shelley, "storage of works on paper," in conservation concerns). In all cases the upper parts of the scrolls have been completely lost, since this is the part that is most vulnerable to wear, being exposed on the outside when the scrolls are rolled up from the bottom.

(The report of the National Manuscript library 2012).

(Marjorie Shelley, "storage of works on paper," in conservation concerns 1992). Although it is impossible to extrapolate any precise measurements from the original lengths of the complete scrolls, it appears that the largest and best-preserved specimens, such as fragment 15, whose surviving portion is about 115 centimeters long, might represent approximately half of the original scroll. The loss of the upper portions of the scrolls is particularly troublesome because it is at the top of the scrolls that we would expect to find titles and/or colophons of the texts, at least in the case of those written continuously on both sides. (The report of the National Manuscript library 2012).

Benefits to researches

1. For researchers interested in the early history of Buddhism, these manuscripts represent a sensational find, for a number of reasons.

2. The first is their periodicity. Some of the documents date from the first century BC, making them by far the oldest examples of Indian Buddhist literature.
3. A new light on Gandhari manuscript writings can be reflected by further investigations
4. the contents which are equally fascinating reflect on the teachings of Buddha before it was fractioned as Hinayana & Mahayana sects
5. The texts provide insights into a literary tradition which was thought to have been irretrievably lost, and they help researchers to reconstruct crucial phases in the development of Buddhism in India.
6. The scrolls confirm the vital role played by the Gandhara region in the spread of Buddhism into Central Asia and China.
7. The early history of Buddhism can be researched through these manuscripts.
8. they provide oldest examples of Indian Buddhist literature
9. The knowledge of writing in western parts of India can be traced.

A large fraction of the surviving material is stored in the British Library in London. The ultimate goal of the project is to prepare a modern edition of all the Gandhari



manuscripts, thus making them available for further investigation. In addition, the researchers plan to produce a dictionary of the Gandhari language and a survey of its grammar. The proceedings of the national library 2014) The history of Buddhism in Gandhara its extent its development its decline etc can be traced. This will lead to a new understanding of the earliest phases of Buddhism in India. (Marjorie Shelley, "storage of works on paper," in conservation concerns 1992)

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