

THE RNAL 'BYOR CHEN PO BSGOM PA'I DON MANUSCRIPT
OF THE 'GONDHLA KANJUR'

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Nowadays Gondhla is an inconspicuous little village in Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh, some ten km east of the confluence of the rivers Chandra and Bhaga. In the old days, however, its importance as the centre of the principality of Ti nan must have been much greater; the partly ruined, but still impressive tower of the Thakur's castle is now the only obvious remainder of those better days. Another such remainder—but not as easily seen—is the manuscript collection in the possession of the Thakur, a set of 35 partly illuminated volumes. An additional volume, containing works such as the *Lalitavistara* and the *mahāsūtra Māyājāla*,¹ was viewed and partly photographed by D. Klimburg-Salter and Ch. Luczanits in 1991, but it cannot be traced anymore.

Although no Tibetan Buddhist would hesitate to call this collection a Kanjur, technically speaking it is not, in the sense of an homogenous body with, e.g. running volume-numbering; such numbering is found only within the sets of the *Ratnakūṭa* (six vols.), the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* (originally four vols., one missing) and the *Mahā-parinirvāṇasūtra* (two vols.). The Gondhla collection also seems to pre-date the compilation of the Tibetan canon at Narthang/Zhalu at the beginning of 14th century.² Nevertheless, although it was not necessarily produced as one set in its totality, it appears to form a unit, with all the volumes being very much alike with regard to size (67–69 x 19–21 cm, 10–11 lines), palaeography, orthography, and the style of

¹ See Skilling 1997a: 198f.

² Without any inclination to contribute to the ongoing discussion about whether and to what extent or in which context it might or might not be justified to speak of a Tibetan 'canon', I use the term in the general sense of "a 'normative collection of texts' which should not be subject to alteration" (Eimer 2002: 7) and refer it to both Kanjur and Tanjur.

The discussion mentioned above and the present state of Kanjur research is reflected, e.g., in the papers collected in Eimer 1997 (s. in particular Skilling 1997b) and Eimer and Germano 2002.

the miniatures. 34 of these 35 volumes contain in *mdo mangs*-style units the greater part of all texts commonly recorded in the *mdo* sections of the various Tibetan Kanjur editions, a few texts that are included in the *rgyud* section of Peking and Derge, four texts (*Lokaprajñāpti*, *Kāraṇaprajñāpti*, *Kuṅālāvadāna*, *Li'i yul lung bstan pa*) that occur in the Tanjurs of Peking and Derge as well as in some editions of the Kanjur (e.g. Stok Palace and Ulan Bator), and one non-canonical text (*Rnal 'byor chen po bsgom pa'i don*), with ten texts still to be identified: 277 titles in total, 24 of them duplicated or even triplicated. One volume contains 101 *dhāraṇīs*. All the texts are complete or almost complete; quite a number of folios, however, were replaced in later times, probably the 19th or even the 20th century. There is, however, not a single *sher phyin* text. Local rumours have it that the extant collection at Gondhla is only half of the original one, and that the other part, probably containing *sher phyin* and *rgyud* texts, is kept in Phukthar monastery in Zanskar.³

If this local information is based on fact, this collection could quite appropriately be called a 'Proto-Kanjur', representing a pre-canonical attempt to gather all of the words of the Buddha, that is, a rather extensive form of the smaller collections of texts which all Kanjurs ultimately go back to.⁴ As such, it could be either the copy of a similar 'Proto-Kanjur' or an original attempt towards such a compilation, which made use of existing *mdo mangs* volumes. Corruptions within some of the volumes make clear that the arrangement of the texts within them was taken over from older models: some of the texts have been separated into several parts, interrupted by passages from other texts that merge into each other without any indication; in some cases the beginning of the text appears more than 100 folios after its end. The only plausible explanation for this is that the volume was copied with its folios in disorder. Some of these mix-ups were detected by some later reader, and indicated as 'error in the texts' (or similar) in *dbu med* script; unfortunately but naturally without any reference to the correct text.

³ Personal communication of Tshering Dorje, Keylong.

⁴ See Eimer 2002: 4. For such attempts at pre-canonical collections of manuscripts see, e.g., Tucci 1988: 69f., and the short statement in Rin chen bzang po's biography, reporting that he equipped even his smaller foundations with three volumes/copies (?) each of *mdo mang(s)* and seven volumes/copies (?) of '*Bum*' (Tucci 1988: 115, fol. 13a7–b1).