An Old Tibetan Variant for the Word "Fox"

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In his comparative study, Sino-Tibetan: a Consp ectus, P. K. Benedict reconstructs for Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) a form *gwa “fox” (1972:34). In Written Tibetan (WT) this proto-form yields the word wa “fox.” Benedict observes that in medial position his PTB *-wa- regularly gives Tibetan -o-. It would therefore seem that it is only where *wa appears in absolute initial position in Tibetan that it essentially retains its PTB form. In principle this formulation is reasonable, though one wonders on general phonological grounds why rounding should have failed to take place here.¹

The word wa “fox” is well-attested in WT texts and dictionaries. In the modern Lhasa dialect it survives in the forms wa- or wɔ- [low-short tone] (Goldstein 1978:961). In Amdo Sherpa we find wa [H] (Nagano 1980:155). In the Ngari dialects we find a form a in various tones (Qu and Tan 1983:292-3). In Amdo Ndzoorge we have ké (Sun 1986:204). And in Amchog we get Ra (Wu 1982:114). All of these modern reflexes point to an earlier form having an unrounded vowel and therefore agree well with the WT form.

I am aware of at least one occurrence of the free form wa “fox” in an Old Tibetan (OT) text (i.e. Pelliot tibétain [P.T.] 2099, Spanien and Imaeda 1978-79: plate 617, line 18, spelled wa’). And I know of two certain occurrences of it in compounds. The first of these appears in a Dunhuang Tibetan manuscript, P.T. 990 (Spanien and Imaeda, plates 297-304). It is found in the damaged though clearly legible second line of the text in the compound wa-phyug (= WT wa-phyug) “fox cub.” The second example is in P.T. 1072 (Spanien and Imaeda, plates 403-413). This document is a legal text dealing with the penalties and liabilities incurred by those held responsible for hunting accidents. Wa is found in the compound wa-dom, which denotes a badge of disgrace to be attached (btags) to someone who through cowardice has failed to rescue another from falling beneath a yak (lines 91 and 95). The word dom is known from WT dictionaries where it is defined as a tassel or hanging ornament. There is also a reduplicative compound dom-dom, meaning an ornamental fringe hung from a horse’s neck. The word wa-dom therefore apparently means “fox-pendant” or “fox-tassel.” In Chinese sources there is independent

¹ A close analogy with Lahu suggests itself. The PLB rhyme *-wa > Lh. -u (e.g. ‘cattle’ PLB *nowa’ > Lh. nû, ‘span’ PLB *twa’ > Lh. thu, but PLB wa’ ‘bamboo’ > Lh. wâ. [Ed.]
corroboration for this. The Jiù Tangshu 草唐書 account of Tibet contains the following comment (Bona ed.):

196A:2a 臨陣敗北者懸狐尾於其首表其似狐之怯

Pelliot (1961:3): "Quand quelqu’un est défaite en combattant et s’enfuit, on lui attache sur la tête une queue de renard pour montrer qu’il a la couardise du renard.”

The corresponding Xin Tangshu 新唐書 entry similarly says:

216A:2a 敗憤者垂狐尾於首示辱不得列于人


In conclusion, the existence of the syllable wa “fox” in OT seems firmly established. But what is more interesting to us here is that, in addition to P.T. 1072, there exists another parallel and very similar juridical text dealing with the laws of the hunt. This manuscript, P.T. 1071, has been studied by Chen and Wang (1983:12-56) and Richardson (1990:5-27); and in it the badge of dishonor is called not wa-dom but ‘o-dom, where it is generally agreed (Chen and Wang, p. 55, note 28; Richardson, pp. 18 and 20) that ‘o- is equivalent to wa “fox.” Now from a diachronic standpoint this is quite interesting. One might suppose that an earlier *wa should yield later wo, but in fact no such syllable exists in WT except as an artificial numerical cypher. In OT texts there are examples of wo in transcriptions of Chinese words, but in native texts there is only one occurrence known to me. It appears in the Old Tibetan Chronicle (Spanien and Imaeda, plate 573, line 416) and has been misread there by Bacot as ‘ob (1940-6:127, n. 9). What it really means seems uncertain. But in any case, the usual development of Benedict’s earlier *-wa- is not to Tibetan -wo- but rather to -o-. And in initial position, this vowel would have to be written in Tibetan as ‘o-. What we may suppose, then, is that ‘o- in ‘o-dom is actually the expected “regular” reflex of earlier *wa (< *gua ?). This ‘o may already have been a marginal variant form in OT times; and it was presumably completely replaced by competing wa at a very early date, since it is wa which is represented in WT and in most if not all of the modern dialects.
REFERENCES


Bacot, Jacques; F.W. Thomas; and Ch. Toussaint. 1940-46. *Documents de Touen-houang relatifs à l'histoire du Tibet*. Paris


