

## ANOTHER NOTE ON OLD TIBETAN *RJE-BLAS*

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In his 1991 article, “Notes on Old Tibetan *rje-blas*,” W. South Coblin investigated the expression **rje-blas** which occurs in Old Tibetan (OT) documents, but which has apparently not survived in Written Tibetan (WT) and modern dialects. The meaning and etymology has been much debated. From Coblin’s discussions emerges the meaning ‘service owed and rendered to one’s superiors’. In his view it can in all known passages be translated as ‘service’ and/or ‘duty’.

Etymologically, the first syllable **rje** is likely to be the common word for ‘lord, master, ruler’. The element **-blas**, however, could not be satisfactorily explained. It seems, however, that **blas** is an old variant of **las** ‘work’.

Dictionaries give a compound word WT **dka’-las**, literally ‘difficult work’, with the meaning ‘toil, hard work; difficulty, problems, hardship’ (Goldstein 1994:48), pronounced in Lhasa [qā-le̞] according to Goldstein’s transcription. Jaeschke (1881:9) glosses this word similarly as ‘troublesome work; trouble, distress’. Das (1902:50) provides the expressions **dka’-las che-ba** ‘very difficult’, **dka’-las med-pa** ‘free from difficulty, easy’. Interestingly, this word **dka’-las** is pronounced in Ngari dialects as [kap-le] (both high tone; Qu and Tan 1983), and Read (1934:94) reports Balti **khaphlas** ‘difficult’ (the aspiration after the [p] is unexplained). To my knowledge, **dka’** has no variant with final labial (i.e., **dkab**); the final **-p** in these dialects was therefore the earlier pre-initial of the following syllable, i.e., a **\*b-**. Hence, these forms seem derivable from an earlier **\*ka-blas**, i.e., WT **dka’-blas**. Such a form is indeed encountered in an OT text (Thomas 1951:149 according to Coblin 1991:67); although the text is said to be “damaged and the passage difficult to construe” (Coblin 1991:67), it is possible that we do indeed have here an occurrence of this variant form for WT **dka’-las**.

Therefore, in our view, OT **rje-blas** would mean literally ‘the lord’s work, work for the lord’ > ‘service, duty to the lord’, where the second element **blas** is an ancient variant of the WT word **las** ‘work’. This agrees with the opinion of Tibetan scholars in Lhasa who had advised Richardson (Coblin 1991:64). And now that the etymology of **rje-blas** is understood, it turns out that Jaeschke (p. 180) knows this word after all as a Western Tibetan dialect item spelled **rjib-las** ‘service, done in socage, compulsory service . . .’.

The case of **rje-blas** shows once again that modern dialects have sometimes preserved features that are more archaic than Tibetan written forms. The best-known example of this kind of archaism is WT **mig** ‘eye’ where all dialects point to \***C-mik** (or rather \***dmik**); or take WT **smin** ‘eyebrow’: a variant with the original TB final \***-l** seems to survive in some Ngari dialects as **mil<sup>H</sup>-wa** ‘eyelashes’.

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