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A Note on Foliation in Mongolian *Pothi* Manuscripts

Abstract

The present article describes several kinds of marginalia found in Mongolian *pothi* format manuscripts, such as numbers written in the right margin, letters of the Tibetan alphabet, and various graphic signs (dots, strokes, circles). The observations based on the study of multi-volume manuscripts that date back to the 17th century suggest that these marginal signs are related to foliation, and contain information on the process of the work of the scribes. The article suggests a method of using these marginalia as a codicological tool when attributing manuscript fragments.

Keywords: Mongolian manuscripts, *pothi*, Kanjur, codicology, marginalia, foliation

The most common form of a traditional Mongolian Buddhist book is *pothi* – an imitation of the Indian palm leaf manuscript. A typical *pothi* volume consists of unbound (loose) folia, often kept between two wooden boards and tied with a rope, or wrapped in a silk cloth. This format originated in India and came to Mongolia via the Uighur and Tibetan traditions as part of the Buddhist book culture.[1]

In Mongolian *pothi* manuscripts the numbers of folia are written on the *recto* side of each folio in the left margin (the same kind of foliation is used in Tibetan manuscripts). As a rule, the folio number is written in Mongolian script in the form of words, not numbers (e.g. *arban qoyar* for the number 'twelve'). The title of the work can be added to the number, often in an abbreviated form. In larger manuscripts that have two or more volumes the number of the volume is also indicated in the left margin; for this

[1] The form of Mongolian *pothi* manuscripts, the bulk of which have come down to us from the period of the 16th–early 20th centuries, copies that of the Tibetan ones. The peculiarities of the Tibetan *pothi* are described in detail by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (Helman-Ważny 2014: 49–58). For a description of Mongolian *pothi* see Kara 2005: 229.

purpose letters of the Tibetan alphabet are used, written in Tibetan or Mongolian script. As a rule, the *verso* side of a manuscript folio does not bear any indication of its number.[2]

Besides the foliation proper, there are certain kinds of marginalia on the folia of Mongolian manuscripts that bear useful information on folio numbering. In this article I share my observations on the different types of foliation-related marginalia and suggest an explanation of their nature. The main source of these observations are the fragments of two Mongolian Kanjur manuscripts preserved at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg (IOM RAS).[3] These fragments are odd folia from different sections of the Kanjur, and, although they come from two different manuscripts, they are preserved in the collection mixed together. Both manuscripts date back to the 17th century.[4] During the ongoing work on describing and attributing these fragments I took note of a great number of marginal inscriptions, most of which were left by the scribes who copied the text. I distinguish three kinds of marginal signs related to foliation.

1. Numbers written in Mongolian in the right margin

The most common kind of such marginalia are numbers written in Mongolian in the right margin outside the frame, less frequently – below the lower right corner, or above the upper right corner of the frame (Figures 1, 2).

These numbers do not coincide with the foliation given in the left margin. Yet, despite the specific character of the source (odd fragments do not allow to trace the succession of numbers on several folia in a row, as the gaps in the numeration of the extant folia are too large), a simple calculation exposes the principle that lies behind these numbers. The scheme below shows three examples (represented as three columns of numbers) that illustrate this principle. Each column demonstrates the foliation given in the left margin, and the corresponding numbers found in the right margin on the same folia. The difference between the numbers is indicated in brackets (e.g. f. 150 +16 ff. = f. 166).

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[2] Pagination on both sides of the folia occurs in blockprints: it was needed to keep track of the order of the wooden boards that were used for printing on the *recto* and *verso* sides of the folia.

[3] The fragments were brought to St. Petersburg in the 18th century after they were found in an abandoned Dzungar temple. Most of the folia are damaged in various ways. The folia come from two different Kanjur manuscripts (marked Ms1 and Ms2 in this article). Both manuscripts are written with a calamus on layered Chinese paper in black and red ink. Size of Ms1: 64×25 cm, size of Ms2: 71×25 cm. A number of fragments from the same two manuscripts were found among unlisted materials and are currently under restoration. The total number of the folia preserved at IOM RAS is 1245. The fragments (pressmarks K26–K36) are listed in the catalogue of the Mongolian collection of IOM RAS, but are not identified as belonging to two different manuscripts (Sazykin 2001: NN 2629, 2630, 2644, 2921–2928).

[4] This statement is supported by both the features of handwriting and orthography, and the fact that they were found in Siberia in the early 18th century. The fragments come from Ablai-kit, a Dzungar temple that went into decline after 1671, when the tayiji Ablai was defeated and left the site.

K26 Ms1[5] *Dandir-a* vol. *tha*		K27 Ms1 *Yum* vol. *da*		K26 Ms1 *Dandir-a* vol. *na*	
Fol. Left margin	**NN right margin**	**Fol. left margin**	**NN right margin**	**Fol. left margin**	**NN right margin**
150	13	279	8	220	20
(+16) 166	(+16) 29	(+1) 280	(+1) 9	(+32) 252	(+32) 52
(+15) 181	(+15) 44	(+22) 302	(+22) 31	(+4) 256	(+4) 56
(+6) 187	(+6) 50	(+7) 309	(+7) 38	(+5) 261	(+5) 61
		(+1) 310	(+1) 39		

The difference between the numbers in the left margin and the numbers in the right margin is the same (the column on the right shows it most explicitly, as here the numbers coincide in the tens). In other words, the folia have double numbering: a continuous numbering in the left margin (the standard foliation), and some other sort of numbering that starts occasionally "in the middle" of the volume and can go on for dozens of folia.

2. Dots and strokes along the edges

On some of the folia one finds small marks, such as dots, strokes, or circles. These marks are placed on the very edges of the folio in the left margin, above the foliation or to the left of it. One can assume that the marks were put there in the most discreet way possible, and in some cases they are rather hard to see (Figures 3, 4, 5).

A calculation similar to the one that was carried out with the numbers in the right margin showed that these marks are also a way of counting, i.e. a way of writing numbers (see the scheme below). Such strokes, dots, or circles are often grouped by five (in lines or geometric patterns), which makes it visually easier to count them.

K 29 Ms2 *Qorin tabutu* vol. *kha*		K27 Ms2 *Yum* vol. *ga*	
Fol. left margin	**Marks (circles)**	**Fol. left margin**	**Marks (dots)**
185	○○○	152	•••
(+6) 191	(+6) ○○○○ ○○○○○	(+2) 154	(+2) •••••
(+4) 195	(+4) ○○○○○ ○○○○○○○○	(+6) 160	(+6) ••••• ••••••

[5] The top line of each column contains the library pressmark number (K26, K27, etc.). The abbreviations Ms1 and Ms2 are used to distinguish between the two different Kanjur manuscripts, the fragments of which are preserved under the same pressmarks in the collection of IOM RAS.

3. Letters of the Tibetan Alphabet

A similar, but less frequently used kind of marginalia found on the Kanjur fragments from IOM RAS are letters of the Tibetan alphabet (Figure 6). The thirty letters are used for counting as well: this system is well known from the traditional way of denoting the number of the volume in multi volume works. When the number is higher than thirty, vowel signs are used to continue the numeration (e.g. *ki*, *khi*, *gi*, etc.). The table below shows the correspondence of folio numbers to Tibetan letters in the right margin. Here the difference, too, is the same.

K26 Ms1 *Dandir-a* vol. *zha*

Fol. left margin	**Letter right margin**
271	ja
(+18) 289	(+18) *ra*
(+12) 301	(+12) *ji*

Altogether, these observations add up to the following picture: on the folia of the two Kanjur manuscripts from IOM RAS there are three kinds of marginal signs: Mongolian numbers, graphic signs, and letters of the Tibetan alphabet, the function of which, beyond all doubt, is related to counting.

I suggest that these signs were used by the scribes in the process of copying the text. When a large text was copied, the work was divided between a number of scribes (which can be gathered based on the number of hands, and in some cases even different styles of handwriting that interchange in larger Mongolian manuscripts). Presumably, in a situation when several scribes copied the same text simultaneously, each scribe got his share of clear folia to write on, and his share of folia to copy. It seems plausible to assume that the folia could not be numbered in advance, as it was not possible to know how many pages the manuscript would have when the work was finished. However, the scribes had to use some sort of numbering to keep track of the folia that they were copying, and this is why they employed a kind of "working foliation", using the signs of their own choice, whether that be numbers, Tibetan letters, or small graphic symbols. In the end, when the parts copied by different scribes were put together, the final, continuous foliation was added in the left margin.

It is remarkable that in many cases the spelling of Mongolian numbers in the "working foliation" is phonetical (*dolo* instead of *dolugan*; *yisü* instead of *yisün*), which does not occur in the left margin foliation. This corroborates the hypothesis that the scribes wrote the numbers in the right margin for their own working purposes, and thus spelled them in the way they were pronounced, in defiance of the rules of orthography.

Finally, it is noteworthy that different kinds of marginalia are used to a different extent in the two Kanjur manuscripts (Ms1 and Ms2), viz. numbers in Mongolian spelling are mostly found in the right margin of the folia from Ms1, whereas the use of tiny dots, circles and strokes is characteristic of Ms2. The appearance of Ms2 is altogether more

elegant than that of Ms1: the handwriting is clearer and more uniform in style, the paper is thicker, the size of the folia is larger. It is possible that the scribes had a special concern not to put any superfluous marks on the margins, so they used the least noticeable kind and put them on the very edges of the folia.

The "working foliation" hypothesis has emerged based on the study of the two Kanjur manuscripts from IOM RAS, however, the same kinds of marginalia were found in other manuscripts as well. First of all, these are other Mongolian Kanjur manuscripts that date back to the 17th century: the "black" Kanjur preserved in Hohhot, China[6] (on some folia there are numbers written in Mongolian in the right margin), and the Kanjur from the collection of St. Petersburg State University[7] ("working foliation" in the form of dots was found in the upper part of the right margin on several folia of vol. *ga*, *Qorin tabun mingγatu* section). This suggests that in the 17th century the numbering of folia in the process of copying was a common practice among the scribes who worked on copying large collections of texts, such as the Kanjur.

Besides that, there is evidence that this system of foliation was also used in manuscripts that did not belong to a larger text collection. This evidence comes from a two-volume manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* in the Mongolian language preserved at the Royal Library, Copenhagen.[8] Here three kinds of foliation related marginalia are used. The first of them are strokes that are located in the right margin (not in the left margin, as in the case of the Kanjur fragments from IOM RAS). The second kind are numbers written in Tibetan. The third kind is most uncommon, and deserves special mention. On folia 67–71 of the first volume there are syllables written in Mongolian script under the lower left corner of the frame (see the table below).

Fol. left margin	Syllable
67	*liu*
68	*či* (*ǰi*?)
69	*ba*
70	*kiu*
71	*si*

In these syllables one can easily recognize Chinese numerals: *liù* ('six'), *qī* ('seven'), *bā* ('eight'), *jiǔ* ('nine'), and *shí* ('ten'). Why did the scribe choose to count the folia in the Chinese language? Does the choice of the Mongolian script mean that he could speak Chinese, but did not know the characters? Even if the answers to these questions are never found, this detail can prove to be valuable when attributing the manuscript, the exact age and origin of which have not been established yet.

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[6] In the Library of the Academy of Social Sciences of Inner Mongolia, China, there is a manuscript copy of the Kanjur in the Mongolian language written in black and red ink (no shelfmark). The copy is complete, but not uniform: it consists of fragments of different origin.

[7] The complete catalogue of the St. Petersburg Kanjur was published by Zoya Kasyanenko (Kasyanenko 1993).

[8] Bawden, Heissig 1971: MONG. 481, MONG. 482.

Indeed, apart from the speculation about the practice of folio numbering used by the scribes in the 17th century, the observations presented in this article have practical value, and can be employed in attributing manuscripts, and in particular – separated manuscript fragments. For instance, a number of manuscript Kanjur fragments are preserved in the State Library in Berlin[9]. The superficial features of these fragments (i.e. general appearance, size, arrangement of text, handwriting) suggest that they come from the same Kanjur manuscripts that are kept at IOM RAS. At the moment their history in the collection is unknown. A textological analysis can hardly help to prove their kinship with the St. Petersburg folia, as there are no neighbouring folia, and text collation cannot be carried out. Fortunately, several of the Berlin folia have "working foliation" in Mongolian which is indicated in the right margin, and one of these folia helped to attribute the fragments using the method of simple calculation described above. Namely, among the Berlin fragments there is a folio marked as number 189 from the section *Dandir-a*, vol. *na* in the left margin, which is also marked as number 50 in the right margin ("working foliation"). Among the St. Petersburg fragments (pressmark K26) there is a folio marked as number 154 from the section *Dandir-a*, vol. *na* in the left margin, and number 15 in the right one. Thus, according to both systems of foliation there are 35 folia between these two (189-154 = 50-15), and this "double" evidence proves unquestionably that the folia in Berlin and St. Petersburg belong to one and the same manuscript.

This instance shows that foliation-related marginalia can be successfully employed as a codicological tool in the work with Mongolian *pothi* manuscripts.

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[9] Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Shelfmark: 5:9 (Ohne Signatur).

Figure 1: f. 322r, vol. zha, *dandira* section, Ms1, K26. The number 19 (Mong. *arban yo̱su*) is written in the right margin

Figure 2: f. 220r, vol. na, *dandir-a* section, Ms1, K26. The number 20 (Mong. *qorin*) is written below the lower right corner of the frame

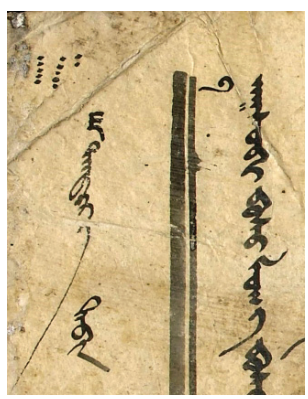

Figure 3: f. 50r, vol. ja, *dandir-a* section, Ms2, K26. Twelve dots near the upper left edge of the folio

Figure 4: f. 73r, vol. kha, *qorin tabutu* section, Ms2, K29. Five dots in the left margin grouped in a geometric pattern

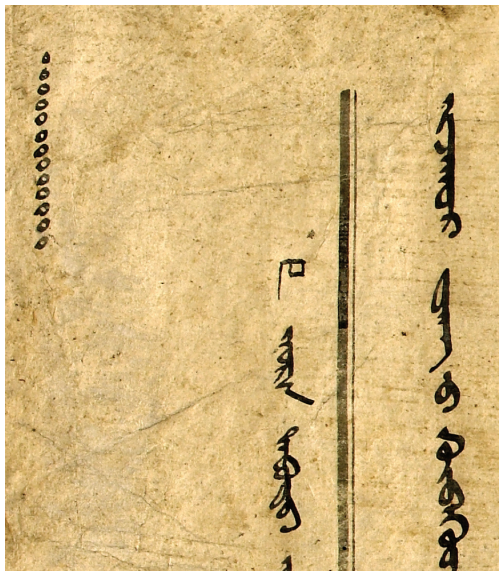

Figure 5: f. 195, vol. kha, *qorin tabutu* section, Ms2, K29. Thirteen circles near the upper left edge of the folio

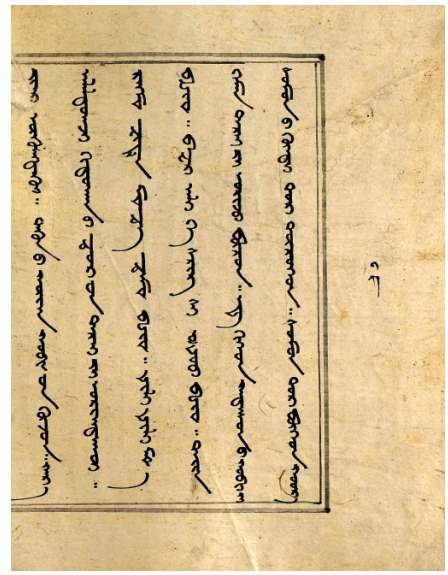

Figure 6: f. 295r, vol. zha, *dandira* section, Ms1, K26. The Tibetan syllable *ki* in the right margin