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Traces of the Story of King Śibi in Old Uyghur

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1. Introduction

Recently, Zemire Gulcalı published a book in which she presented her preliminary edition of a manuscript, which bears the title *mʾtyrčyt nom* on some of the extant fragments (Gulcalı 2023). A list of the fragments pertaining to this book had been previously compiled by Peter Zieme (2019: 333–334). All except for one leaf in the Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy in St. Petersburg (SI 1242 = Kr II 26/2) are housed in the Turfan Collection, Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Following Peter Zieme's (2019: 333) interpretation, Gulcalı transcribes this title throughout her publication as *matirčet* because she thinks that this obvious loan from Sanskrit would correspond to the name of the famous Buddhist author Mātṛceṭa. In my concise dictionary of Old Uyghur, I have accepted this attractive explanation (Wilkens 2021: 471a).

The poet is well-known for his hymns (Sanskrit *stotra*), especially the *Varṇārhavarṇastotra* ("The Praise of the Praiseworthy") and the *Śatapañcāśatka* ("[Praise] in 150 verses"). Peter Zieme was able to identify a fragment of the latter poem, which appears to be a translation made directly from the Sanskrit (Zieme 2019). This piece is housed in the Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy (SI 3859). There is evidence for Mātṛceta's famous poem *Varṇārhavarṇastotra* in Old Uyghur. The bilingual manuscript (Sanskrit-Old Uyghur) in Brāhmī script was first edited by Annemarie von Gabain (1954: 69–70) and later identified and reedited with better readings by Hartmann and Maue (1991). A few years later, Maue (2002) edited a further bilingual fragment (Sanskrit-Old Uyghur) of the *Varṇārhavarṇastotra*.

In the *Maitrisimit nom bitig*, Mātṛceṭa's name appears in the expected form *matarčete* in the version from Hami (Geng & Klimkeit 1988, 1: 52, line 575) or in the Sengim manuscript as *matračete*, respectively (Tekin 1980b, 1: 33 v. 21). Both variants reflect Tocharian A *mātraceṣe* (Carling & Pinault 2023: 339a).

Now, with the complete edition being accessible, the manuscript edited by Gulcalı seems to be unrelated to Mātṛceta. I would therefore opt for another solution to interpret the title of the work in question. My suggestion is to transcribe the title as *matirčit* and view it as reflecting Sanskrit *maitracitta* 'benevolence, kindness' (SWTF III, 385b). The manuscript contains several stories in a very fragmentary state of preservation, but the Buddhist concept of *maitrī* is apparently the reason to include the narratives in the collection. Rendering Sanskrit *maitra*° with *matir*° is, nevertheless, somewhat unexpected. We can perhaps assume that the Uyghur translator/compiler thought of the Sanskrit term *maitrīcitta*, which is also attested. Cf.

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Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa* (verse 10).[1] However, the problem of why only the vowel *a* appears in the first syllable instead of the diphthong remains unresolved.

2. The story of King Śibi

One of these narratives revolving around the idea of benevolence can now be identified as belonging to the Jātaka of King Śibi, who offered his own flesh to a falcon or hawk in order to ransom a pigeon that had taken refuge with the king. At first glance, the story gives the impression of being crafted as a typical Buddhist account of self-sacrifice, but Jain and Hindu versions are also known,[2] and even an Arabian retelling is extant (Gaál 2016: 1). Based on the basic meaning of *dharma* ('law, justice') still preserved in the *Mahābhārata* and which he considers to be central to the narrative, Gaál (2016: 29, 31) has argued that the Buddhist versions must be posterior to one of the tales in the great epic of India.[3]

Pictorial representations in wall paintings and sculptures are widespread in India, Central Asia, Tibet, Southern China, and Southeast Asia (Tanabe 2019),[4] among which the depictions of Ajaṇṭā, Gandhāra, Kizil, and Dunhuang are perhaps the most widely known. The narrative spread over many different languages and cultures, sometimes with the addition of further motifs.[5] Gaál, who identified the legend also in classical Greek literature,[6] has given an accurate summary of the tale as it is told in most of the versions known to us:

> "Once a king, named in most of the versions Śibi, was sitting in the open air when a dove chased by a hawk flew into his lap,[7] seeking refuge with the king. When safety was given to the dove, the hawk arrived in pursuit of its prey and claimed it back from the king on the ground that otherwise it would

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1 Cited according to the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL), SUB Göttingen (URL: https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_atiza-bodhipathapradIpa.htm; retrieved June 26 2025).

2 Meisig (1995: 3) mentions five Hindu works containing this tale. In the *Mahābhārata*, three different versions are known. On Jain renditions, see the detailed study by Oberlies (2009).

3 Meisig (1995: 3) holds the same opinion concerning the version translated by her on pp. 2–7. Tanabe (2019: 360) has arrived at a similar conclusion.

4 Tanabe also gives a useful overview of the philological and art-historical research devoted to the Śibi Jātaka and a translation of the Chinese Buddhist tales relevant to the study of the iconography.

5 Meisig (1995: 2) has correctly shown that the motif of Śibi donating his eyes, as found in some versions, is a secondary addition.

6 Gaál also presents examples from Latin literature regarding the motif of a bird chased by a bird of prey seeking refuge in the lap of a human being.

7 In some versions the pigeon takes refuge in the king's armpit (Meisig 1995: 116; Tanabe 2019: 359). The motif of taking refuge in the armpit is found in the Old Uyghur collection of stories *Daśakarmapathāvadānamālā* (Wilkens 2016, 2: 272, line 01286), although in an unrelated tale. That this motif is found outside the tradition of the Śibi story makes Meisig's (1995: 115) judgment that we are dealing with a mistake in the Chinese versions of the Śibi Jātaka unlikely ("Die Angabe 腋下 ih^4 hia^4 ist damit so auffällig, daß man hier von einem Fehler reden möchte, den die genannten chinesischen Fassungen aus seiner Quelle gedankenlos übernahmen").

> die of famine together with its family. The righteous king, not willing to give up the suppliant by any means, first offered some other meat to the hawk in place of the dove, but he was refused on the ground that only fresh meat will do, still dripping with warm blood. Wishing not to harm any creature for the sake of the meat, the king then offered to cut his own flesh, even agreeing to put it on a scale lest the flesh fall short in weight of the dove. Despite all objections of his court against such an act, the king took a knife and started cutting pieces of flesh out of his thigh. The weight of the pieces of flesh, however, would in no way be equal with that of the dove, and the king was to cut more and more flesh from his body. After slicing all the flesh from his limbs down to the bones, the king, in his unchanged resolution not to give up the suppliant dove, mounted the scale with his whole body, now turned into a skeleton. In this crucial moment, the hawk and the dove changed their outward appearances into what they were in reality, Indra and his divine mate, Agni or Viśvakarman or Dharma according to the different versions, to let the king know that they had come down to earth to put him to the test in his virtues of righteousness, steadfastness and willingness to give his own body. As a reward for his self-denying deed, the gods made the king's body intact again and promised him great renown in this world and eternal happiness in the next." (Gaál 2016: 2)

Meisig (1995: 47–153) analyzed seven Buddhist versions in Chinese but concentrated on four accounts that she considered more or less independent.

In Old Uyghur, the tale is mentioned in a short sentence in a text edited in 1971 by György Hazai and Peter Zieme:

> lačın ačı üzä bälinläp öz ätin bıčturdı (Hazai & Zieme 1971: 33, lines 61–62)
>
> "Being concerned about the falcon's hunger, [the king] let his own flesh be cut off."

The name of the king is not mentioned here, but every learned person would have understood the reference to the story of King Śibi.[8]

The second fragment edited below (shelf mark: U 5546e) provides the clue for the identification of the story about King Śibi. Because another fragment (shelf mark: U 5412) of the same manuscript mentions a pigeon, it probably belongs to the same Jātaka. Not a single sentence is preserved in its entirety, but the context of the second page would fit this identification. It is probably the introduction to the story. Page 2 would then be the verso side. I assume that page 1 belongs to the story, too. In the translation, I therefore supplied additional information for the damaged line 06.

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8 The *Maitrisimit nom bitig* refers to a similar scene, but here the pigeon takes refuge in the shadow of Śāriputra from a pursuing bird of prey. The terrified bird only calms down when taking cover in the shadow of the Buddha (Tekin 1980b, 2: 37–38).



Fig. 1: U 5412 (page 1)

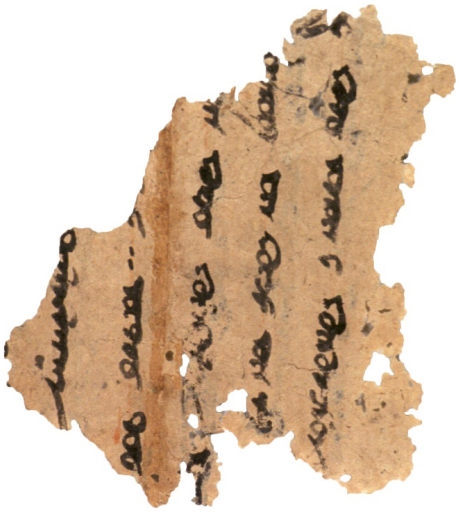


Fig. 2: U 5412 (page 2)

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3. Edition

a) U 5412

Page 1

01 01 …]/ ’[…

02 02 …] *kö*ŋülüg el[tindi …

03 03 …]KL’RK’ todundı <:> ǫ’//[…

04 04 … elig bä]*g* ogulı[9] ärti <:> k(ä)ntü ätözintä […

05 05 … isig öz]in ulaṭı unatı <:> savıš […

06 06 …] inčip nom üčün k(ä)ntü ätö[zin …

Page 2

07 01 …]/[…

08 02 …] *tı*nl(ı)glarka […

09 03 …]/[ ]Y : ötrü tüü [törlüg …

10 04 …] *öz* k(ä)ntü köŋül*in* ’/[…

11 05 …] *t*urup öz küči öz ät[özi …

12 06 …]DY <:> k(ä)ntü ätözi kögürčgün […

9 Added later to the manuscript.

Comments:

02 *kögülüg el[tindi]*: The reading follows Gulcalı (2023: 186, line 287; and her comment). However, in the transcription she gives *el[indi]* with a question mark. This is probably only a typo. The reference to *eltin-* governing the accusative of *kögül* in Arat (1965: 150, line 20) speaks in favor of her restoration of the damaged word.

03 *todundı*: Gulcalı (2023: 186, line 288) assumes a confusion of dentals and reads *tuṭundı*.

04 It is impossible to restore the lacuna before *ogulı*. In the 大智度論 *Da zhi du lun* (Sanskrit **Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra;* T no. 1509, vol. 25, p. 88a12), god Viśvakarman mentions King Śibi being a descendant of Uśīna[ra] (Chinese 優尸那 *yu shi na*; cf. Meisig 1995: 74). In the *Mahābhārata*, Uśīnara is the name of the virtuous king.

05 *unatı*: So far only one example of the verb *una-* without negation was known (Özertural 2023: 177). The construction is nevertheless unusual. Perhaps the scribe left out the supine *bergäli*. Alternatively, we could assume a clumsy notation of *uktı*.

savıš: Because the word is known as meaning 'magic formula, spell', we can probably compare the description of the king's virtues in the 大智度論 *Da zhi du lun* (Sanskrit **Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra;* T no. 1509, vol. 25, p. 88a1): 是王得歸命救護陀羅尼, translated by Meisig (1995: 72) as follows: "Dieser König besaß das Mandat Zuflucht zu gewähren, [die Fähigkeit] zu schützen und eine Zauberformel (*dhāraṇī*)".

12 *kögürčgün*: This corresponds to Kāšġarī's form (Clauson 1972: 713b) and the spelling in the *Maitrisimit nom bitig* (Tekin 1980b, 2: 60a) and the *Daśakarmapathāvadānamālā* (Wilkens 2016, 3: 996a). The late St. Petersburg manuscript of the *Altun Yaruk Sudur*, the *Story of Sadāprarudita and Dharmodgata*, and a late medical text have *kögürčgän* (Kaya 2021: 778b; Tekin 1980a: 193, line 100; Rachmati 1930: 454, line 40). Interestingly, Berlin copies of the *Altun Yaruk Sudur* have the rounded vowel (Mainz 843 v. 8; U 878 v. 2). It is therefore safe to assume that *kögürčgün* is the older variant. See also the remark in Erdal 1991: 87: "The difficult thing about this lexeme is the fact that its last vowel is rounded in Maitr 5 r26 and DLT fol. 626 (spelled with *wāw*) and that this vowel is /ā/ in all of Middle and modern Turkic." This statement must now be modified because Boeschoten's (2023: 170b) dictionary of early Middle Turkic records some forms with a rounded vowel in the last syllable. Işık (2021: 348) has collected modern cognates. As Hans Nugteren has pointed out to me, the rounded vowel *-ö-* in Kyrgyz goes back to *-ä-*.

By reading the damaged text of U 5546e (page 1) carefully (lines 725–734 in Gulcalı 2023), it becomes apparent that we are dealing with a typical 'act of truth' (Sanskrit *satyakriyā*) or 'truth-formula' (Sanskrit *satyavacana*). It is clearly King Śibi speaking. The 'act of truth' always marks the end of a story. We can therefore infer that page 1 corresponds to the verso side of the fragment. The act of truth is part of some Buddhist versions of the tale. For instance, the 大智度論 *Da zhi du lun* (T no. 1509, vol. 25, p. 88c 21–23) and the 大莊嚴論經 *Da zhuang yan lun jing* (*Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*, T no. 201, vol. 4, p. 323b 1–5) both contain this motif (translation in Meisig 1995: 93–94). The act of truth is also part of the 賢愚經 *Xian yu jing* (T no. 202, vol. 4, p. 352b 4–7; translation in Meisig 1995: 139).

b) U 5546e

Recto

13 01 …]/ […

14 02 …]/ tüzgä[r]mäd[in …

15 03 … ätö]zi bütün*i* […

16 04 … elig] *b*[ä]g täŋ t(i)razug *ü*[zä]

17 05 …]Y sakıntı <:> inčip anıŋ a[ra]-

18 06 [sınta … ö]z ätözin erdi yarsıdı [:]

19 07 … inčä te]p tedi <:> ilkisizd[ä bärü u]k*u*p

20 08 … busu]š ämgäk ’/[ ]//[ ]

21 09 …] särmädi <:> amtı kata[g]

22 10 [köŋül …] ol sım*t*[ag]

Verso

23 01 [ ]/Y /[…

24 02 [ ] *k*atag YWL’/[…[10]

25 03 [ ]/// *ät*im*in* […

26 04 [kata]*g*[11] biligim agmadı tä[gšilmädi[12] …

27 05 *ö*künm*ä*dim ärsär amtı T’///[…

28 06 *ä*tözümtäki ätim kanım tol*p*[13] […

29 07 ö*ŋr*[äki]d[ä] adınsızrak […

30 08 [ ] //// *bäg*niŋ […

31 09 barča tükäl *b*[oltı …

32 10 [ ] //////[…

Comments:

14 *tüzgä[r]mäd[in]*: Gulcalı 2023: 216, line 796: *tüzgä[r]mäk*.

15 *[ätö]zi*: The reading of the last letter is certain. There is a space before this character, so the preceding letter must be a <z>. It is also possible to restore … *ö]zi*.

16 *[elig] b[äg]*: Reading not certain. Only the right part of the first partly preserved letter is visible. This could also be the letter <k>.

---

10 The scribe has corrected the second letter of the partly preserved second word in this line.

11 Possibly to be thus restored.

12 The restoration of the lacuna is certain. There are three instances of the biverb *ag- tägšil-* in the *Kšanti kılguluk nom bitig* (see Wilkens 2007, 1: 74, lines 0348, 0362, 84, line 0514).

13 *tolu* would be another possible reading.



Fig. 3: U 5546e (recto)



Fig. 4: U 5546e (verso)

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täŋ t(i)razug: The same combination of *täŋ* and *t(i)razug* is found in a Buddhist confession text (Müller 1910: 77, line 25).

ü[zä]: Restoration not certain. In a Manichaean text a similar sentence runs as follows: … *t(i)razug ičintä olgurtur* "[the Righteous Judge] places [the departed soul] on the scales" (Le Coq 1919: 12 r. 8–9). In the Buddhist text, the reading *i[čintä]* is not possible. I assume that in our story the scene is evoked where the king wants to mount the scales after having cut off all his flesh to the bare bones.

17–18 *anıŋ a[rasınta]*: Restoration tentative.

18 *[ö]z*: The first legible letter of this line is either <z> or <r>.

yarsıdı: Gulcalı (2023: 216, line 800) reads *y(e)rtürdi* with a question mark.

19 *tedi*: The first <y> and the following <d> are not connected.

[u]kup: This is the most likely reading here.

21–22 *kata[g köŋül]*: According to line 26, we can possibly restore *kata[g bilig]* here. Several versions mention the steadfastness or firm character of the protagonist. See, for example, leaf *206 r. 5 of the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikādṛṣṭāntapaṅkti* from Kizil: *b[o]dhisatva iti jñeyaḥ sthirasatvaḥ sa tādṛśaḥ* "Als Bodhisattva ist zu erkennen ein solcher, der einen festen Charakter hat." (Meisig 1995: 109).

22 *sımt[ag]*: This reading is quite certain. It is possible that the privative suffix followed at the beginning of the next line.

24 *katag*: Reading not certain.

29 *öŋr[äki]d[ä]*: Restoration tentative.

adınsızrak: This is the first attestation of the word. Gulcalı (2023: 213, line 731) emended it to **adınsıgrak*, perhaps because entries for *adınsız* and *adınsızrak* are lacking in the *Uigurisches Wörterbuch*

(Röhrborn 2015). However, there is further evidence that the reading of the manuscript might be correct. The first confirmation comes from a slightly damaged gloss *adın[s]ı[z]* in Brāhmī script corresponding to Sanskrit *ananya* 'not having a second' (Maue 2010: 331 no. 19). The second instance provides the manuscript SI 5594 (Kr IV 267) from the St. Petersburg collection. In line v. 13, *adınsız* appears in the context of further attributes: … *öŋlüg mäŋizlig adınsız čerlig äŋinčig* … (Zieme 2020: 651). All instances of *äŋinčig* have a positive connotation (Röhrborn 2017: 212). Unfortunately, the following word is damaged in this line. The context suggests that these apparently positive attributes[14] are lacking because line 13 is part of a description of the hideous impact of old age. It seems that *adınsız* can be translated as 'exquisite,' the comparative *adınsızrak* accordingly as 'more exquisite.' If the restoration at the beginning of the line is correct, *öŋr[äki]d[ä] adınsızrak* can be compared to one version of the Śibi tale that contains the motif that the king's body is restored at the end of the story, even more beautiful than before (Meisig 1995: 139). Other renderings relate that Śibi's body is restored to its former state (e.g., Meisig 1995: 94). In the *Story of Sadāprarudita and Dharmodgata*, Indra (Śakra) offers to make the bodhisattva's wounded body even healthier than before. The bodhisattva answers that he himself would be able to achieve this by a truth formula. However, it is Indra's wish to restore the protagonist's body to its former state, and the bodhisattva agrees (translation in Tekin 1980a: 255–256).

30–31 These lines apparently describe the final scene when the king's body is completely restored.

4. Translation

(01–02) […] he possessed a [kind?] heart. (02–03) He was satiated by […]. (03–04) He was the son of [king]$_2$ […]. (04–05) From his own body [he cut off chunks of flesh] and he consented (to give?) his [lif]e etc. (05–06) Although [he knew?] a spell [he donated] his own body for the sake of the dharma.

[…]

(01–03) […] for all living beings he […]. (09–12) The var[ious …] his own heart […] arose and his own strength and his own bo[dy …]. (12) His own body [he used to ransom?] a pigeon […].

[…]

(13–17) […] without fathoming […], he contemplated to [mount] on the scales$_2$ [with] his [bod]y, the whole of […]. (17–18) Nevertheless, he im[mediately] felt contempt$_2$ towards his [ow]n body […].

[…]

(19) [The …] said [as follows]:[15] (19–21) "[For] ages he had [com]prehended [… grie]f and suffering […] he could not stand. (21– 22) Now, stead[fastness …] this negli[gent …]."

[…]

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14 It is not certain whether *čerlig*–with a closed *e*–is the same word as *čärlig* 'with weak sight' in Kāšġarī (Clauson 1972: 429b).

15 Perhaps a god is speaking here.

(23–28) [King Śibi said solemnly: "…] steadfast […] my flesh […] my [stea]dfastness never wavered$_2$. (27–29) If I have not regretted [my deed], now […] the flesh on my body and my blood all [… my body shall be restored,] even more exquisite than the one bef[ore …]." (30–31) [Flesh and blood] of the king [Śibi], everything b[ecame] whole [once more]. (31–32) […]

5. Conclusion

The two fragments edited in this paper confirm the supposition that the story of the benevolent and generous King Śibi was known among the Uyghurs. Due to the poor state of preservation, it is impossible to identify a specific work that might have been used as a source by the compiler of the manuscript or by the author of its "Vorlage" (source text), if we are dealing with a translation. In the complete versions of the tale, we find a pair of gods transforming themselves into a dove and a hawk or falcon, respectively, in order to test the king's moral qualities. None of this is preserved in the fragments edited in this paper.

Abbreviations and conventions

/	illegible letter
< >	punctuation marks not in the manuscript but added here for convenience
[ ]	restored letters
( )	vowels added in defective spellings
ch.	chapter
italics	damaged letter(s)
small capitals	transliterated letters in damaged words not to be restored
ms	manuscript
pl.	Plate
r.	recto
SWTF	Waldschmidt, Ernst et al. (eds.) 1973–2018. *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
T	Junjirō Takakusu & Kaikyōku Watanabe et al. (eds.) 1924–1934. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (*Buddhist Canon Newly Compiled during the Taishō Era [1912–1926]*). 100 vols. Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai. Digitized in CBETA
v.	verso

A subscript number 2 in the translation denotes a hendiadys.

Acknowledgments

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