

Elisabetta Chiodo. *The Mongolian Manuscripts on Birch Bark from Xarboxyn Balgas in the Collection of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Part 1.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000, X, 305 pp., plus facsimiles. — Asiatische Forschungen, Bd. 137.

When perusing the catalogues and descriptions of Mongolian manuscript and xylograph collections, one constantly encounters the names of well-known Mongolian studies specialists who brought numerous collections of Mongolian written materials to dozens of currently existing repositories of Eastern manuscript and print books. From the very beginning of Mongolian studies as an academic discipline, seeking out and collecting Mongolian books was a key part of the process that allowed us to appreciate properly the diversity and breadth of the Mongolian peoples' written legacy, which took shape on the vast expanses of Mongolia over nearly eight centuries.

Apart from the archaeographic expeditions that brought to light not insignificant number of unique Mongolian literary texts, archaeological expeditions also turned up extremely valuable ancient Mongolian manuscripts and xylographs. Among the finds best known and most valuable to scholars are the fragments of fourteenth-century manuscript and print books from Turfan and Khara Khoto. More than 200 manuscript fragments from the sixteenth — seventeenth centuries were found in the wrecked *suburgan* in Olon Süme in Southern Mongolia.

The last discovery was made in 1970 by a Russian-Mongolian archaeological expedition that found a large number of manuscript texts in Mongolian and Tibetan stored in a partially destroyed *suburgan* in the village of Xarboxyn on the site of the ancient city of Xarboxyn Balgas, not far from the centre of the Dašinčilen *sum* of the Bulgan *ajmag*, 240 km north-west of Ulan-Bator. Most of the manuscripts and manuscript fragments (approximately 1,000 items) are in Mongolian; 240 of them are published by Elisabetta Chiodo in the monograph under review here.

One of the notable aspects of this collection is that all of the manuscript texts were executed on birch bark. Some other instances of the Mongols' using birch bark in place of paper are also known. The oldest such example, the so-called "Golden Horde manuscript", was discovered on the Volga in 1930; it dates to the fourteenth century. Numerous other birch-bark manuscripts dated to the first half of the seventeenth century, the period when all of the manuscripts included in the collection under review were written. Such a large number of manuscripts on birch bark appeared, of course, because of a shortage of paper, always an extremely expensive and rare commodity in the steppes. Imported Chinese paper was usually used, but often turbulent mo-

ments in Mongolian history, for example, the events of the late sixteenth — early seventeenth centuries, led to the dropping of the availability of Chinese goods, including paper. The solution to the paper shortage was to write on birch bark (the areas surrounding Xarboxyn, Elisabetta Chiodo remarks, to this day abound in birches).

The manuscripts extracted from the *suburgan* were a rather sad spectacle, consisting of birch-bark folios and fragments covered in lime, stuck together thanks to animal droppings and dirt, and partly damaged by fire. It demanded a great deal of painstaking restoration to clean and preserve the material; only then could the manuscripts be studied.

The task of enormous difficulty stood before Elisabetta Chiodo: to identify and analyse the numerous scattered folios and fragments, which required a great deal of attention and patience, not to mention a solid knowledge of Mongolian palaeography and texts. No less difficult was the attribution of the identified texts, as the published volume includes only 14 complete or "almost complete" manuscripts. All of the remaining manuscript texts were preserved in the form of fragments, sometimes miniscule.

Naturally, a significant part of the collection consists of Buddhist works, but there are, however, several manuscripts of non-Buddhist content. Among them the records of the so-called "Eighteen Steppe Laws", published in 1974 by the Mongolian historian Kh. Perlee, a participant in the expedition that discovered the treasure-trove of birch-bark books, deserve special attention. The publication of these laws is an event of great importance in Mongolian studies, since the laws were adopted at the gatherings of the Khalkha princes in the late sixteenth — early seventeenth centuries, making them the earliest known Mongol code to appear after the fall of the Yüan dynasty. The manuscript of the "Eighteen Steppe Laws" discovered was abraded and frayed from extended use and unreadable in places; some of the folios had been lost. Luckily, a few folios missing in Perlee's publication were discovered during the preparation of the monograph under review here (fols. 14b—17a). They contain the text of the so-called "Great Distribution" linked with worship of Genghis Khan.

Among manuscripts Elisabetta Chiodo discusses there are several copies of astrological and fortune-telling reference works. These include, for example, guides to the location of the soul for each day of the month (XBM 93—96) and predictions of fortuitous days for weddings (XBM 97—99). We find also collections of dream interpretations and indications of means to dispel bad dreams (XBM 100—103). Such literature was widespread among the nomad Mongols who did undertake nothing without first appealing to oracles. To meet this demand, collections were drawn up