

Preliminary Remarks on a Collection of Prajñāpāramitā Manuscripts from 'On Ke ru Temple

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ABSTRACT During the summer of 2002 I had the opportunity to visit briefly the Temple of 'On Keru in Lhokha (Shannan), TAR, under the kind auspices of the Tibet Academy of Social Science and in collaboration with the Tibet Himalayan Digital Library project based at the University of Virginia. It was rumored, at the time, that 'On Keru—which is supposed to have been founded during the reign of the Btsan po Khri Lde gtsug btsan in the early 8th century—preserved a collection of very old manuscripts dating back to the period of the Tibetan kings of the 8th-9th centuries. Although the short time available to me was not sufficient to permit a detailed inspection of the collection—it was not possible to confirm, for example, the presence of Old Tibetan manuscripts—I was nevertheless able to identify parts of a Prajñāpāramitā collection of the 12th century. As this material is of considerable interest for the history of the Tibetan book, in terms of its material aspects including paper, ink and illumination, I will present here the information I was able to assemble. However, the manuscripts in question require more detailed study. It is my hope that this brief presentation will inspire an effort to investigate thoroughly the 'On Keru collection.

During the summer of 2002 I had the opportunity to visit briefly the Temple of 'On Keru, located near the left back of the Tsangpo in Lhokha (Shannan), TAR, under the kind auspices of the Tibet Academy of Social Science and in collaboration with the Tibetan

Himalayan Digital Library project based at the University of Virginia.¹ It was rumored at the time that 'On Ke ru—which was supposed to have been founded during the reign of the Btsan po Khri Lde gtsug btsan (r. 712-755) in the early 8th century—preserved a collection of very old manuscripts dating back to the period of the Tibetan kings of the 8th-9th centuries. Although the short time available to me was not sufficient to permit a detailed inspection of the collection—it was not possible to confirm, for example, the presence of Old Tibetan manuscripts—I was nevertheless able to identify parts of a Prajñāpāramitā collection of the 12th century. As this material is of considerable interest for the history of the Tibetan book, in terms of its material aspects including paper, ink, and illumination, I will present here the information about this that I was able to assemble. However, the manuscripts in question require more detailed study. It is my hope that this brief discussion will encourage efforts to investigate thoroughly the entire 'On Ke ru collection.

The temple of 'On Ke ru presents an austere and sober façade, to all intents and purposes unadorned (fig. 1). The interior shrine is famed for its massive statue of the Buddha Śākyamuni, said to date from the period of the temple's foundation (fig. 2). Local tradition, which maintains that the temple was constructed under the patronage of the Tang princess Jincheng (d. 739), considers the princess to be depicted among the series of wooden sculptures of bodhisattvas surrounding the shrine.² (One of these sculptures is seen in part at the extreme left of fig. 2.) Although Vitali followed traditional lore in identifying 'On Ke ru with the temple of Brag dmar Kwa chu founded by Khri Lde gtsug btsan,³ his interpretation has been more recently questioned by Prof. Pasang Wangdu of the Tibet Academy of Social Science, who argues that 'On Ke ru should be identified with 'On Khra sna, perhaps built by Mu tig btsan po during the early 9th century and visited by Atiśa in the 11th.⁴ The age of the statuary obviously needs to be reconsidered with Prof. Pasang Wangdu's hypothesis in

1 Besides the institutional sponsors just mentioned, I wish also to express my gratitude in particular to Tsering Gyelpo (TASS) and David Germano (UVA) for their key roles in organizing the documentary program on Central Tibetan historical sites during the summer of 2002, in the course of which we visited 'On Ke ru. I thank, too, David Newman (then a graduate student at UVA), for photographing the manuscript pages reproduced here in color. (These images bear the copyright of the Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library (www.thlib.org) and are reproduced here with permission. The two black and white photographs (figures 1 and 2), however, are my own.) I am also grateful to Amy Heller for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of the present essay.

2 See Vitali 1990, plate 8b.

3 Refer to Vitali 1990, chapter 1.

4 Pasang Wangdu 2007 includes valuable indications concerning the manuscripts of 'On Ke ru complementing the discussion here. He attributes two volumes (p. 47 and plates 1-2) from the collection to the 9th century. Although I did not see these volumes during my visit, Pasang Wangdu's estimate seems reasonable in the light of the evidence he presents. Given his hypothesis that the temple is to be identified not with Brag dmar Kwa chu but with the Khra sna'i lha khang established by Mu tig btsan po in the early ninth century, these volumes would have to date to the period of the temple's foundation, though nothing so far demonstrates that this is where they were originally housed.

mind. While the statues preserved today therefore probably cannot be ascribed to so early a date as the 8th century, the precise period of their fabrication has not so far been determined. No evidence of which I am aware, however, would firmly exclude their attribution to the 9th century, or the century or two that followed.



fig. 1. The temple of 'On Ke ru (© Matthew T. Kapstein)

Among the notable treasures preserved at 'On Ke ru, its collection of canonical manuscripts merits particular attention. As mentioned above, it has been rumored that these include texts from the period of the Tibetan kings, and Pasang Wangdu has confirmed this in part. Nevertheless, it is clear that the large majority of the collection is later, though still quite old. As Pasang Wangdu once again suggests, substantial parts of the collection may date to as early as the 11th century. However, the pages I was able to examine on site appeared to me to derive from a slightly later period, perhaps the 12th or 13th centuries. A notable example is fig. 3 (a part of which may also be seen in Pasang Wangdu's plates 7a and 8, illustrating "10th/13th century illuminated manuscripts").



fig. 2. The massive Jowo Śākyamuni of 'On Ke ru, with the profile of a bodhisattva statue seen at the extreme left (© Matthew T. Kapstein)

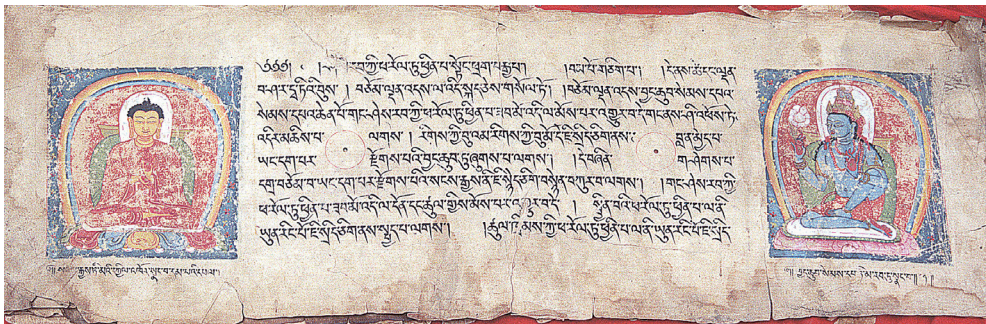


fig. 3. Prajñāpāramitā page (© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

Despite the somewhat degraded condition of this folio, it is at once evident that it belongs to a very carefully, indeed beautifully, produced manuscript. Consider the two illustrations:



fig. 4. Sūryamaṇḍalapratibhāsottamaśrī
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)



fig. 5. Sūryapratibhāsa
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

Represented here are a Buddha (fig. 4) — Nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor snang ba dam pa'i dpal, or Sūryamaṇḍalapratibhāsottamaśrī in Sanskrit — and a bodhisattva (fig. 5): Nyi ma rab tu snang ba, or Sūryapratibhāsa in Sanskrit.⁵ These are figures mentioned, so far as I am aware, only in the Prajñāpāramitāsūtra in 100,000 lines, the '*Bum*' as it is most commonly known in Tibetan, and their appearance here raises an immediate question for historians of Buddhist iconography: did these and the many other Buddhas and bodhisattvas briefly mentioned in the '*Bum*' have standard iconographical forms, and, if these can be identified, when and where did they originate? How was knowledge of this iconography transmitted? Perhaps the close study of other illustrated volumes of the Prajñāpāramitā will permit us eventually to learn the answers.⁶

We may note, too, that the design of these illuminations is quite elegant: the draughtsmanship is precise and graceful. The production of a complete Prajñāpāramitā of the quality that is evident here must have involved considerable expense and effort. This impression is confirmed by a number of additional illustrated pages that I was able

⁵ The Sanskrit names are given here after Edgerton 1970: 605, who follows Ghoṣa 1902-13: 45.3 and 45.6.

⁶ The published illuminations of Tibetan Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts that have come to my attention so far do not depict the two figures discussed here. Relevant works include: Pal 1990 [1983]: 123-126 on twelve folios in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Harrison 2007 for further considerations concerning the same twelve folios; Pal and Meech-Pekarik 1988, chapter 4, which introduces examples from several collections; Heller 2009, chapter 4, presenting many splendid examples from Dolpo; and Klimberg-Salter 1994. Of course, there are limitations to what iconography, without explicit labels, can tell us: Sūryamaṇḍalapratibhāsottamaśrī, for instance, appears to all intents and purposes as a "standard issue" buddha in *dharmaśāstramudrā*.

to examine. Some further examples (figs. 6 & 7) will suffice to demonstrate the tasteful execution we find throughout the *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts in question. Note particularly the realization of the arhat's posture in fig. 7, a graceful pose that is delicately depicted in this miniature, lending an air of poise and refinement to the figure of the saint.⁷



fig. 6. Buddha in *bhūmiśparśa-mudrā*
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)



fig. 7. The arhat Mahākatyāyanaputra
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

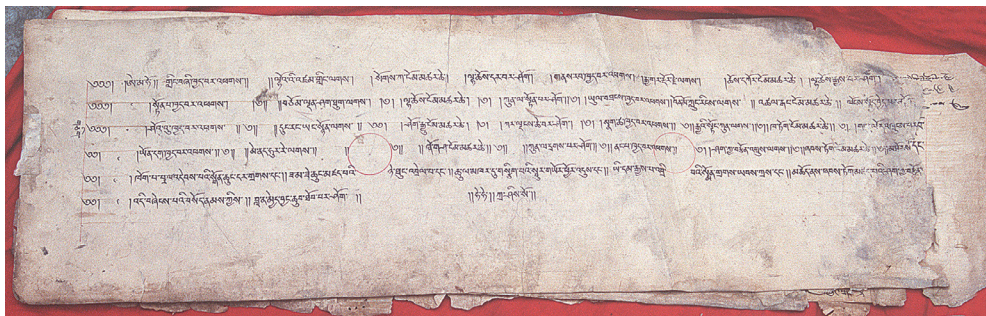


fig. 8. Verse colophon of the 'On Ke ru 'Bum (© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

In the case of the particular *Prajñāpāramitā* I am considering, I was also able to find some specifics in regard to the production of the manuscript, for we find therein a colophon, that is in fact repeated on several occasions, in prose and verse variations. This folio (fig. 8), unfortunately torn, gives the verse version of the dedication, which may be translated as follows:

⁷ Compare Heller 2009: 86, fig. 57, depicting the arhat Ānanda.

1) E ma ho!

Among the four continents most sublime
Is Jambudvīpa in the south.
What an amazing scalpula[-shape]!
May the divine Dharma spread [there]!

Among holy places most sublime
Is Vajra[-āsana] in India.
What amazing Dharma-wealth!⁸
May the divine Dharma increase [there]!

2) Among teachers most sublime
Is Bhagavat Śākyamuni.
How amazing [his] Dharma divine!
May it be taught to everyone!

Among fine countries most sublime
Is the long valley of 'On mo.
Its groves and highlands most amazing!
May they produce rich enjoyments!

3) Among papers most sublime
Is this that rivals even conch-shell.
How amazing the paper support!
May it be greatly white and brilliant!

Among inks most sublime
Is that of Stong-kun in China.
Its colour is most amazing!
May it flow forth continuously!⁹

4) Among patrons most sublime
Is Me-nad-hur-re.

⁸ *dkor* often refers to the material property of the saṅgha, and so I am taking it here. It is possible, however, that the phrase in fact intended is *chos 'khor*, i.e. *dharmacakra*, the "wheel of the dharma."

⁹ In fact, this is purely a guess. The first syllable of *gzhu lor* is quite indistinct and, even if the reading is correct, the precise meaning remains uncertain.

His revenues¹⁰ are most amazing!
May they be gathered¹¹ for all!

Among insiders most amazing
Is Shākya Brtson-'grus.
Most amazing his service!¹²
[May] heaven [be attained]!¹³

5) Sgon chung dar grags who *khog pa par la 'debs pa*,¹⁴ Nye thung 'brel ba who prepared food and snacks,¹⁵ Sbur g.yor phyor 'dus who built a castle in the river, Smon grags and his son who drew the extensive tutelary deities, and Shākya Brtson 'grus who performed the worship and service [of the deities]—

6) by the merit of [their] edifying this [scripture], may [they and all beings] attain unsurpassed enlightenment! Hey, hey! It's auspicious!

A similar formula of dedication, but in prose, is found elsewhere among the 'On Ke ru Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts. Unfortunately, the photographs available to me include only the complete text of the version given here. However, my notes on the prose text clarify two details of much interest: first, the paper is specified as having been manufactured in the region of Rkong po; and, most important for context and dating, "Shākya Brtson 'grus" is unambiguously identified as none other than the renowned Zhang g.yu brag pa Brtson 'grus

10 *zho gsha* is evidently an orthographic variant of *zho sha*, in the present context no doubt referring to the revenues from agricultural estates (= *dpya khral*).

11 *drags pa* is recorded as an archaic verb meaning *sdom pa*, "to bind, bundle together." How best to construe this with *kun la* at the beginning of the line eludes me; the interpretation of the line as a whole remains speculative.

12 *zhabs tog*. This probably refers to services that he rendered on behalf of the Teaching, though it may also refer to services that he received. In the light of the reference in line 5 to his performing "worship and service," however, it would seem that the first interpretation is to be preferred.

13 Only the opening two syllables of this stanza—*mtho ras* (read: *ris*)—are preserved. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that the complete line was *mtho ris grub par shog* or closely similar.

14 I have not found a satisfactory interpretation of *khog pa par la 'debs pa*. The phrase *par la 'debs pa* typically refers to printing, but this is certainly anachronistic here. In some contexts, it may also refer to moulding or casting objects, e.g., *zan par*, moulded images made of dough. Perhaps this usage was current prior to the application of the expression to printing. However, even then I am at a loss to explain the sense that *khog pa*, "stomach, innards, the mind," might have here.

15 The lexical definitions of *ze*, the "mane" of a horse or ass, make no sense here. I am positing that *ze*, according to context, must be a diminutive of *za*, *zas*, etc. The only regular use of *ze* in connection with alimentation appears to be *ze tshwa*, designating a particular type of salt.

grags (1123-1193), the eccentric and notorious founder of the Tshal pa Bka' brgyud order.¹⁶ In view of what we otherwise know of his career, we may suppose that he dedicated the 'On Ke ru Prajñāpāramitā within about a decade, before or after, of 1175. This date comports well, I think, with the style of the paintings too.

The knowledge that the paper was produced in Rkong po provides us with a rare and valuable piece of information in regard to the development of the Tibetan paper industry, which began perhaps as early as the 8th century.¹⁷ If we accept the testimony of the *Sba bzhed*, for example, we find that villagers assigned to support the monks at Bsam yas were obliged to supply an annual donation of paper.¹⁸ The relative proximity of Bsam yas to 'On Ke ru is of course suggestive in this regard, and it would be not a matter of great surprise to learn that the southern districts of Tibet, including modern Shannan (Lho kha), Lho brag, and Rkong po, emerged as early centers of Tibetan paper-making. (All of this, of course, remains a topic for future research.) In any event, if samples from the 'On Ke ru Prajñāpāramitā can be subject to proper scientific analysis, the evidence may aid in the identification of other old manuscripts made from Rkong po paper.

Significant, too, is the knowledge that the ink was imported from Stong kun, China. Fine ink always seems to have been a commodity that was expensive and difficult to produce in Tibet. Although it is most often manufactured from lamp-black, it is not the case that any variety of common soot is suitable to produce a high quality ink. In the village regions in which I lived in Eastern Nepal, peasants were regularly commissioned by the monasteries to burn a specific variety of resinous conifer throughout the winter in order to collect the fine and still slightly resin-laden soot that was produced, the product being considered far superior for ink-manufacture than other available forms of carbon. In Tibet itself, such woods were quite rare, and the coarse fuel that was typically burned for cooking, or other sources of lamp-black, could not be used to produce inks of very high quality. Chinese ink was therefore most valued. This is an element in the long-standing

16 The abbreviated form of the name given in the verse dedication, Shākya Brtson 'grus, is not among the variants of Bla ma Zhang's names documented in Yamamoto 2012: 1, n.1. Besides the confirmation of his identity provided by the prose dedication, the eccentric, folksy poetic style—on which see Martin 1996—seems altogether characteristic of this remarkable figure. Although I have so far not found any explicit reference to Bla ma Zhang's having been active in 'On, it is at least suggestive that one of his teachers, Ngam shod Rdo rje seng ge, was a native of that region. Refer to Sørensen, Hazod and Gyalpo 2007: vol. 1, p. 84, n. 55.

17 Helman-Ważny and van Schaik 2013, focusing on Dunhuang manuscripts, begins to examine the question of the provenance of paper in relation to existing manuscripts. To advance such research, however, far more historical material than we presently have at our disposal concerning the centers of Tibetan paper production will be required. Evidence such as we find in the 'On Ke ru manuscripts is rare, but one may hope that more data of this type will be forthcoming.

18 Kapstein 2006: 68.

trade between Tibet and central China that has yet to be carefully documented and studied.¹⁹ In any case, the precise location(s) designated by Tibetan use of the toponym Stong kun during the Song dynasty has yet to be satisfactorily determined. It may be a reference to the "eastern capital" (Dongjing), i.e. Kaifeng, itself, though some believe that the linguistic evidence better accords with Dongjun, the "Eastern Ruler," i.e. the Emperor of China, or the "Eastern Commandery," covering a very large territory to Kaifeng's northeast.²⁰

Although it is therefore clear that a part of the 'On Ke ru collection dates to the late-12th century, making use of Rkong po paper and Chinese ink, and consecrated by none other than the renowned teacher and political leader Zhang Brtson 'grus grags, the collection as a whole certainly includes both earlier and later materials, whose background in most cases remains to be established. The two following two illustrations, for instance, of Buddha Śākyamuni (fig. 9) and the goddess Prajñāpāramitā (fig. 10), seem to me to be not quite so refined as the illuminations we examined earlier. Perhaps they are later, though I cannot exclude the possibility that they belong to the same group of Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts and are merely the work of less capable artists. Moreover, as Pasang Wangdu has shown plausibly that some of the manuscripts are of the 11th century, we must accept the possibility that some of the material we find here is earlier, perhaps by as much as a century, than the period of the activity of Bla ma Zhang.

We note, too, the presence of some manuscripts that seem no less refined than the

19 Refer to Jackson and Jackson 1984: 83-85, where we find this comment: "[A] considerable amount of good ink was also imported into Tibet from central China, and among Tibetan painters such Chinese ink (*rgya snag*) still remains a highly favored pigment." On Tibetan ink manufacture, see, too, Cuppers 1989.

20 The proper identification of Stong/Tong-kun, often referred to in Tibetan works from about the 10th century on, remains a vexed question, for a thorough review of which, refer to van Schaik 2013. Although I am partial to his conclusion that it designates the Eastern Capital, Dongjing 东京, i.e. Kaifeng 开封 during the Song dynasty, phonological considerations, as van Schaik recognizes, favor the reading Dongjun. Van Schaik considers this possibility in respect to the corresponding title 东君, "ruler of the East," i.e. the Chinese Emperor. Professor Weldon South Coblin, however, in correspondence dated 14 February 2010, has interestingly suggested that a solution may be found in the toponym 东郡, the "Eastern Commandery," and remarks: "This name dates from Sui times, when China was administratively divided into commanderies 郡, i.e., areas that were smaller than the later provinces but rather larger than later counties. Dōngjùn lay just east northeast of modern Kaifeng, though Kaifeng was not actually within the administrative borders of Dōngjùn itself. Sometimes administrative terms of this type tended to be long-lived and hang on for considerable periods, well after they were no longer legally valid." I am grateful to Professor South Coblin for sharing these observations with me. A further point that merits consideration in connection with the phonological questions raised here is the well-known tendency of certain Tibetan dialects to "front" the vowel —u— preceding a final dental consonant. Thus, in Lhasa dialect, *kun* is pronounced roughly *kɣ̃ɣ̃*. In some parts of eastern Tibet, this tendency is carried quite far, so that in Nyag-rong, for instance, *lus* is heard as *li'*. If something similar had obtained in some dialects in earlier times, it might explain the otherwise perplexing transcription of Ch. *jing* as Tib. *kun*.



fig. 9. Buddha Śākyamuni
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)



fig. 10. Goddess Prajñāpāramitā
(© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

Prajñāpāramitā discussed above, though we have not been able to confirm whether or not they should be assigned to the same group. This beautiful black-paper manuscript of the *Dharmasaṃgatīsūtra* (figs. 11 & 12), an obscure scripture that remains unstudied (and apparently not to be identified with the better-known *Dharmasaṃgītisūtra*), is a case in point:

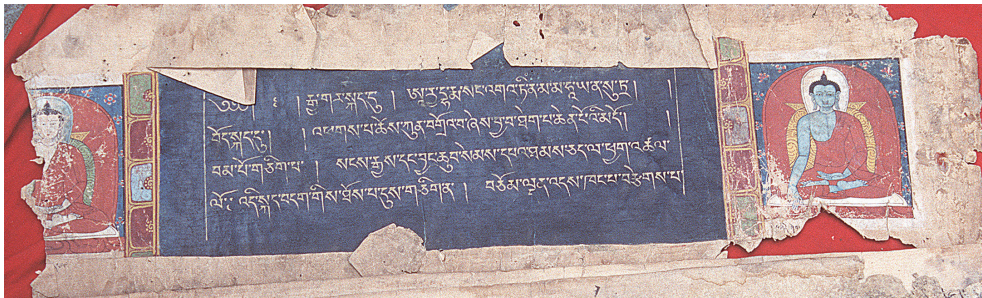


fig. 11. First folio of the *Dharmasaṃgatīsūtra* (© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)



fig. 12. First folio of the *Dharmasamgatīsūtra*, detail (© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

Finally, I should add that, besides damage to the collection due to fire, water, and over 800 years of wear and tear, the folios I was able to examine showed considerable evidence of the use of blank margins for writing exercises and other miscellaneous notes and jottings that appear to have nothing to do with the texts themselves, as in the example in fig. 13. Only thorough study will allow us to determine precisely what value these notations may have for Tibetological research.

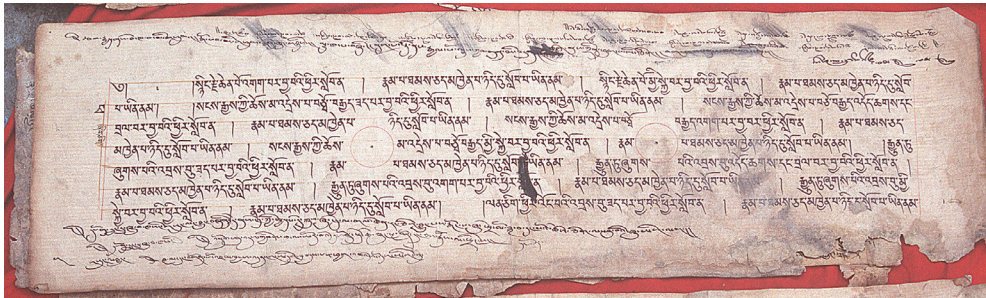


fig. 13. Folio with marginal notes (© Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library)

In sum, the manuscript collection of the 'On Ke ru temple provides a precious witness of Tibetan canonical book production during the early second millennium, the early *phyi dar* period following Tibetan historiographical conventions. Given my limited access to the collection, my remarks here offer no more than preliminary observations, supplementing to

some degree to investigations already undertaken by Pasang Wangdu. It is to be hoped that future research will accord to this collection the thorough attention that it merits.

Appendix: The Text of the Verse Dedication

- [illegible]

Sigla

c = a small mark resembling a cursive *tsheg*, apparently used as a place marker following the *mgo yig*.

"" = torn portion of text at extreme right

(?) = uncertain reading of preceding syllable (s)

[] = posited reading of illegible syllable (s)

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