Torma in Early Tibetan Buddhist Rituals

Sam van Schaik

(The British Library)

The moulded food offerings known as torma *(gtor ma)* are ubiquitous in Tibetan ritual practice. Torma are used across a wide spectrum of ritual, from magical practices to bring good fortune and destroy obstacles, to spiritual practices aimed at liberation from samsara. Usually constructed and demolished for specific ritual contexts, torma are ephemeral objects; by their nature they cannot be kept indefinitely and have not usually been collected and preserved in museum collections. Studies of torma in Tibetan Buddhism thus far have been mainly from an anthropological approach, even though there are many texts in Tibetan literature dedicated to torma rituals.

It is generally accepted that these Tibetan traditions developed from Indic *bali* rituals, which are first seen in the Vedic period, and were later adopted into Indic Buddhist ritual practice. Yet there are many questions about how much of the fully developed Tibetan torma traditions derived from these Indic rituals, and how much they changed further in Tibet. The Dunhuang manuscripts, dating from the 9th and 10th centuries, represent an early stage in the Tibetan assimilation of Indic (and to a lesser extent Chinese and Central Asian) Buddhist practices to Tibet. Therefore, these sources offer us an important insight into an early period in the formation of a Tibetan tradition of torma practice.

1. Types of torma

The Tibetan word torma *(gtor ma)* refers to a variety of edible offerings, usually based on moulded barley flour and butter, with a variety of other ingredients depending on function. The usual shape of a torma is a cone, which is often ornamented with spherical buttons and discs, moulded from the same materials. In some cases, more permanent reusable materials are also added to the torma, which can be made of wood, paper or silk, representing decorative ribbons, canopies, and

Sam van Schaik, "Torma in Early Tibetan Buddhist Rituals", in *Recent Research on Tibet: A Festschrift for Guntram Hazod on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, Per K. Sørensen and Christian Jahoda (eds), Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2026, pp. 487-504.
https://doi.org/10.1553/978OEAW50671s487

images of symbolic implements and deities. There are many types of torma found in Tibetan ritual literature, and several different classification systems for torma in recent scholarship. One of the simplest sets out three types of torma, as relayed by Stephen Beyer's informants for his *Cult of Tārā*:

> Thus there are said to be three aspects of a torma: as an *offering* it is presented to the deity; as an *evocation* the deity is generated within it; and the power thereof may be transmitted to a recipient through physical contact; and as a *substance of magical attainment* it may be eaten by the participants at the end of a ritual, to absorb the empowerment it contains.[1]

Robert Beer's *Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* gives a different threefold classification of torma:

> The first is the offering torma that is employed in mundane rituals, such as pacifying, increasing, and eliminating obstructions. The second is the conical food torma (Tib. *tshogs-gtor*), which is broken up, distributed and eaten by the participants after a ritual as a spiritual blessing. The third and largest category of tormas is the deity torma, which is individually modelled to represent the symbolic form, mandala, or 'tastes' of a particular deity.[2]

A much more extensive classifications of torma appears in Claudia Bütler's article "Torma—the Tibetan Ritual Cake".[3] In this useful survey, Bütler lists 24 types of torma, including 'enduring torma', 'regular torma', 'torma for the worldly guests', 'torma for the hindering forces', and so on. However, some of these categories, such as 'feast offering' *(tshogs)* are better considered as ritual contexts, and some categories overlap with each other.[4] One of the most detailed anthropological accounts of torma in ritual practice is Richard Kohn's *Lord of the Dance*, a study of the Mani Rimdu festival. Kohn identifies 22 different types of torma used in this major ritual, with two of these, the tormas for the 'protectors' and the 'followers' further subdivided into 10 and 15 individual tormas. A separate classification system, explained to Kohn by his informant Trulshik Rinpoche, refers to the

---

1 Beyer 1973: 377.

2 Beer 2015: 212.

3 Bütler 1996. My thanks to Dan Martin for drawing my attention to this publication.

4 There also seem to be some mistakes in Bütler's list. The Tibetan equivalent for 'torma for the main deity' is given as *gtor bzlog*, which is actually 'torma for excorcism'.



Fig. 1 – An instructional manuscript on making torma from Orgyen Choling monastery, Bhutan, 18th-19th century (EAP105/2/1/151).

durability of the tormas as physical objects: 'eternal torma' *(rtag gtor)*, 'durable torma' *(rten gtor)*, and 'session torma' *(thun gtor)*.[5]

So far there has not been an attempt to explain why we see this wide range of torma types and the practices associated with them. The history of torma, their development over time, is yet to be explored. As a start, in this article I will look at how torma were being made and used in the 9th and 10th centuries, based on the Dunhuang manuscript sources. In these manuscripts, we already see quite a range of torma appearing in different ritual contexts. The following list indicates the main classifications of torma found in various ritual manuals from Dunhuang; rather than a classification system for torma, this is simply an enumeration of every different name for torma that appears in the manuscripts:

- *mchod sbyin gi gtor ma* – sacrificial torma
- *mchod gi gtor ma* – offering torma

[5] Kohn 2001: 119–134. See also the online essay in the *Bhutan Cultural Library* series by Karma Phuntsho: "Torma: Ritual Offerings"; https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/text/torma-ritual-offerings (accessed 9 February 2025).

- *gtsang gtor* – pure torma
- *smye gtor* – burnt torma
- *bgegs gtor* – torma against obstructive forces
- *glud gtor* – ransom torma
- *chu gtor* / *chab gtor* – water torma
- *drag po'i gtor ma* – wrathful torma
- *dbang gi gtor ma* – overpowering torma
- *rgyas pa'i gtor ma* – increasing torma
- *zhi ba'i gtor ma* – pacifying torma
- *spyi gtor* – general torma
- *bsnyen gtor* – service torma

While there is some overlap between these types, especially the first three, they all appear in the Dunhuang manuscripts with clear ritual purposes. The sacrificial and offering tormas are dedicated to the deities, symbolic replacements to the earlier Indic animal sacrifices made to the gods. Similarly, the pure torma is offered to the gods and other higher beings. On the other hand, the burnt torma, the torma against obstructive forces, and the ransom torma are found in practices to avert unwanted forces or events, often in a funerary context. The general torma cuts across these categories and is an offering to all of the guests at the ritual. Again in funerary contexts we often see the water torma, associated with the pacification of hungry ghosts and similar spirits. The wrathful, overpowering, increasing and pacifying tormas are for the magical activities of the same names found in many tantras. Finally, the general and service tormas are found in practices involving deity yoga. We will look at some of these categories in more detail below.

2. Origins of torma

The origins of torma are in India, and go back to Vedic times, even earlier than the advent of Buddhism. The Tibetan word is a translation of the Sanskrit *bali*, which referred to offerings of food, as distinct from burnt offerings (Skt. *caru*) and the giving of alms (Skt. *sattra*). As Michael Willis has summarised the early sources: "the basic idea is that *bali* is a portion of food that is presented to whomsoever it is due, be it

a king, a god, or some other deserving creature."[6] Willis also quotes from a ritual text of offerings to Nārāyaṇa, a form of Viṣṇu, which mentions a "*bali* of boiled rice," as well as offerings made from grains mixed with fruit, curd, molasses and ghee.[7] It is possible that the rice was shaped into flat cakes or balls; other Indic sources also indicate that *bali* were often made from a mixture of rice flour and binding substances including curd and ghee, making it possible that these were moulded into shapes that might have been an ancestor of the Tibetan conical torma.

In the Buddhist context, perhaps the earliest references to torma are in the Vinaya. In both the *Vinayavastu* and *Vinayavibhaṅga* of the Mūlasarvāstivādins in Tibetan translation we see multiple references to torma (translating the Sanskrit *bali*). These are usually in the role of one of the classic offerings to the gods, alongside dance, song, music and flower garlands. There are also many references to torma being eaten by crows. Indeed the consumption of the torma by crows is often given equal importance to their role as an offering to the deity. In the *Vinayavastu* we find the rhetorical question, "Due to attachment to the requisites, if one is not to take pleasure in giving the torma to the crows, what more needs to be said about giving to monks and brahmins?"[8] A repeated phrase in the *Vinayavibhaṅga* refers to misers "who do not even give torma to the crows."[9] While torma do not seem to have a specific Buddhist role at this point, these passing references give a convincing, if very general impression of torma as both being an offering for the deities and food for crows, a dual role that continues today.

References to torma as part of Buddhist ritual practice are found in rituals described in Indic Buddhist scriptural texts, translated in the Tibetan canonical collections of translated scripture *(bka' 'gyur)*. They are mentioned in some of the earliest *dhāraṇī sūtras*, dating to around the middle of the first millennium.[10] While we don't know what these looked like, there are some clues. In a Buddhist *dhāraṇī sūtra* dedicated to rainmaking, an effigy representing a *nāga* is created:

> Having made an image of dough, the body of a nine-headed Nāga measuring eight aṅgulas should be coloured by vermilion. Ribbons

6 Willis 2009: 102-103.

7 Willis 2009: 109-110.

8 *Vinayavastu*, D.1, 148a5: *yo byad la zhen pas khwa la gtor ma sbyin pa'i spro ba yang med na/ dge sbyong dang bram ze rnams la sbyin pa lta smos kyang ci dgos te*.

9 *Vinayavibhaṅga*, D.3, 45a4, 47b2, 55a4, 55a6: *mig phra ba/ bya rog la yang gtor ma mi ster ba*.

10 See the example in Cohen 2012: 39. See also the many references to *bali* in the rituals in Hidas 2019.

> should be bound around the neck. A square *maṇḍalaka* should be prepared. Flowers should be scattered. A Nāga image should be made in the middle.[11]

This effigy, made from wheat or barley flour, coloured with vermillion, and decorated with ribbons, reads like an early instance of the kinds of torma we see in Tibet. It also holds the image of the *nāga*, in the same way that we see torma in Tibet with small illustrated cards representing deities attached to tormas.

There are also many discussions of torma in the Tibetan canonical collections of translated literature *(bstan 'gyur)*.[12] One of the more interesting examples is a text attributed to the sixth-century scholar Sthiramati, titled *On the Classification and Arrangement of Various Precious Ornaments,* with a series of ritual instructions and mantras in the yoga tantra genre.[13] Here there are peaceful tormas intended to counter wrathful forces, which are made with milk *('o ma)*, and a reference to torma made from mashed grains *(sbang ma)*. Instructions on the arrangement of the shrine suggest that the torma was ornamented with ribbons and a *tsakali*, as we see in the Tibetan tradition today:

> To depict the wisdom of the buddhas of the three times, prepare the precious basis, and ornament [the tormas] with ceremonial ribbons and an auspicious *tsakali* painted with the sun, moon and lotus, and principal deities. Then arrange the offering water, incense, scented water, flowers and offering cakes for the deity. Then take all the liquid ingredients for the tormas, including milk, honey, molasses, clarified butter and arrange them alongside the foodstuffs.[14]

---

11 Hidas 2019: 73.

12 There are at least 80 texts in the *bstan 'gyur* on the topic of torma, and these are overwhelmingly ritual manuals. Some are dedicated to deities or specific ritual purposes; many are simply called *Torma Ritual* (*Gtor ma'i cho ga*; Skt. *Balividhi*). Judging by the names of authors and translators in the colophons, the vast majority of these were transmitted during the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet from the eleventh century onwards; the most represented author is Atiśa, who is listed as the author of eight torma ritual texts and the translator of one.

13 Sthiramati's name is given as the author of seventeen philosophical works and seven tantric texts in the Tanjur. Whether the sixth-century Sthiramati was the author of the tantric texts has been questioned by scholars; see Kramer 2016: 49. Note however that this sceptical view is based solely on the difference in genre, and further investigation might be needed (personal communication from Jowita Kramer, June 2021).

14 *Rgyan dam pa sna tshogs pa rim par phye ba bkod pa*; D.2661, 319b-320a: *dus gsum sangs rgyas thams cad kyi//thugs kyi ye shes mtshon pa'i phyir//mkhas par rin chen la sogs pas//sa gzhi snying po can du bya//'phan phran nyid la skal bzang dang//bkra shis tsa ka lis brgyan pa//nyi zla pad+mas mtshon pa yang//gtso bo dag la dbyangs pa'o//yon chab*

This text, like the scriptural texts offers some information about the ingredients of tormas, and an intriguing glimpse into how they were ornamented and arranged on a shrine.

3. Forms of torma

There is a frustrating gap in our knowledge between the fairly terse descriptions of torma in the translated Indic texts and the Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang on the one hand, and the vast array of shapes and sizes that we see in the contemporary Tibetan tradition.[15] However there are a few Dunhuang manuscripts dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, that also give visual clues to what torma looked like at this early stage. The booklet Pelliot tibétain 245 contains a long tantric ritual, written in Tibetan, which features torma, and ends with a visualisation of the torma offerings being burned by fire, drenched by water and scattered by the wind. After this conclusion to the ritual, the image below is drawn on the booklet's back cover.



Fig. 2 – The back cover of the booklet Pelliot tibétain 245.

The image shows a bowl containing three or four spherical objects, which is sitting on a lotus, with flames around the top, and the swirling flow of lines that may be water at the bottom. There is also a square divided up by horizontal lines at the top left of the page. There is no writing to indicate what this depicts, but coming straight after the

bdug spos dri chab bre//me tog mar me khal dag dang//lha bshos khur ba lha grangs so//'o ma sbrang rtsi bu ram mar//bre re btung ba bca' ba'i tshogs//gtor ma'i rgyu cha sna tshogs dang// 'byung bo'i kha zas bsog par bya//.

15 See Beer 2015: 212–213 for a general summary of the shapes and sizes of torma.

torma visualisation, it may be meant to show the torma, and the elements described in the visualisation at the end of the ritual. The lotus base, clouds and flames are also common decorative elements in the later Tibetan torma tradition. The same design appears as ornamentation in IOL Tib J 189, which contains the *Śālistambaka-ṭīkā* (Tib. *Sa lu ljang pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa*).

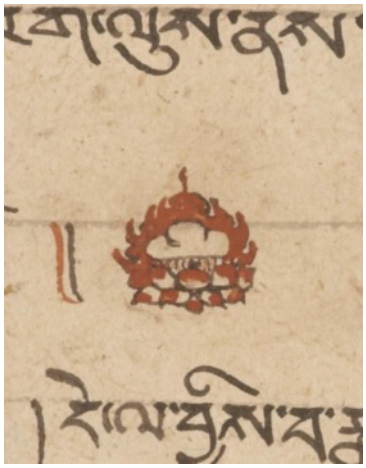


Fig. 3 – Decoration in the pothi manuscript IOL Tib J 189.

Images like this are found in the Dunhuang manuscripts, and in later Tibetan Buddhist art, where they are usually identified as wish-fulfilling jewels *(cintāmaṇi)*; we should consider whether they could also, or alternatively, represent the offering of torma. The later Tibetan tradition does indeed present this as one of the shapes in which torma are moulded. For example, a set of twelve torma appears in an illustrated manuscript on torma from Bhutan, dating from the nineteenth century, dedicated to torma practices in the Longchen Nyingtig *(Klong chen snying thig)* tradition. This manuscript, available in digital form on the website of the Endangered Archives Programme, provides detailed illustrations for each type of torma.[16] Here the classification is entirely based on the ritual from the Longchen Nyingtig for which the torma is intended. The torma for the rituals of the deity of long life, Tsheringma, is depicted in a similar way to these illustrations from Dunhuang.

[16] https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP105-2-1-91 (last accessed 1 February 2026).



Fig. 4 – Detail from a manuscript on torma in the Longchen Nyingtig tradition, from Orgyen Choling monastery, Bhutan, 18th-19th century (EAP105/2/1/91).

It is possible that the images of three globes surmounted by fire seen in the Dunhuang manuscripts could represent torma offerings and the wish-fulfilling jewel both within a single symbol, or that their interpretation could depend on the context in which the image appears.

Another intriguing image of what might be a torma appears in a mandala diagram in the scroll Pelliot chinois 2012. In this diagram a tripod with offerings appears at the four gates and four corners of the mandala (though the top right corner is missing this detail). All these offerings are depicted as one cone-shaped object along with balls or flat objects. It is possible that all of these objects are torma, with the cone-shaped object being reminiscent of the proportions of a 'standard' torma in the later Tibetan torma traditions.[17]

[17] My thanks to Mélodie Doumy for pointing out to me the potential relevance of the gate offerings in this mandala sketch to the torma texts. Richard Kohn (2001: 121) has discussed a similar shape depicted in India: "the fifth-century Buddhist caves at Ajanta, India house an image of a man holding a dun-colored pear-shaped object that looks suspiciously like a modern feast torma."



Fig. 5 – Detail from a mandala illustration in scroll Pelliot chinois 2012.

While the visual evidence from Dunhuang is scarce, this does give us some sense of what the shape of the tormas mentioned in the Tibetan tantric manuscripts from Dunhuang might have been: moulded spheres and conical constructions, similar to what is seen in the later Tibetan tradition, although perhaps not yet as complex.

4. Uses of torma

Torma feature in many Tibetan tantric ritual manuals, with a variety of ritual contexts, in the Dunhuang collections. In their role in purification and exorcism, torma may be associated with funerary rituals, as we see in manuscripts such as IOL Tib J 420, in which a practice to ensure good rebirths is followed by a torma ritual to exorcise obstructive forces. There is also a set of instructions (Pelliot tibétain 350) on placing written *dhāraṇī* spells into a stupa. The texts, written on paper *(shog shog la bri)* are to be put inside the stupa, along with the relics. The three spells are the *dhāraṇī* of awakening, the essence mantra of the stainless *uṣṇīṣa*, and the spell of dependent arising. Afterwards an offering is made with two types of torma, though only one is mentioned, so the text may be incomplete. This is "the torma of the mantra of making offerings" *(gdab pa'i sngags gtor ma gcig).*

The funerary use of torma probably entered into the ritual practices at Dunhuang through the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana tantra,* which was a key influence on the funerary tradition represented in the Dunhuang manuscripts. In the longer versions of the tantra preserved in Tibetan, tormas feature in the rites for the dead.[18] The booklet containing two

[18] See the Tibetan texts in Skorupski 1983: 271, 314–15, 320, 331, 358.

funerary rituals (IOL Tib J 420) begins with a text called *Overcoming the Three Poisons* which draws on the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*.[19] The second text in the booklet is dedicated to a funerary ritual centred on torma. The ritual is for dealing with negative forces around the time of death, and involves a ransom torma *(glud gtor)*. The following passage comes in the part of the ritual involving the ransom torma:

> Recite the mantra and touch the mudra to the torma. Any harmful and obstructing spirits that are there will be drawn [to the torma]. Visualise that they are caught in nooses, bound by iron chains, oppressed and terrified by bells. Recite the mantras and form the mudras given earlier, and touch the ransom torma.[20]

Here the role of the ransom torma accords with what we see in the later Tibetan tradition; the torma serves as a substitute for the person, drawing in all negative forces, where they can be safely neutralised. Another important text for the funerary tradition in both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism was the *Dhāraṇī Sūtra for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghosts*, which sets out a funerary ritual practice involving torma. Among the Dunhuang manuscripts, this text appears in several Chinese manuscripts, and only one Tibetan manuscript.[21] However there are several Tibetan ritual manuals dealing with this same practice. Here, the offering is called *chu gtor* (sometimes *chab gtor*), meaning 'water torma'.[22] The water torma is composed of fragrant ingredients that are infused in water. The ingredients and instruction for making the *chu gtor* appear in a brief text found on a single folio IOL Tib J 342:

> The list of fragrant medicines: camphor, sandalwood, saffron, fenugreek. The list of names of sweet things: sugarcane, *bu ngam*, coarse sugar, milk. The list of names of medicine: orchid root, wild millet root,[23] sweet flag, myrobalan root. Chop these finely and sift them. For

---

19 This text, *Gdug gsum 'dul ba*, is discussed in Imaeda 1979.

20 IOL Tib J 420, 12v: *gtor ma la phyag rgya gtugs pas // gdon bgegs gang lags pa / bkug ste // zhags pa bcing / lcags sgrog tu bcug / dril bus mnang cing bred bar bsams nas // gtor ma'i phyag rgya dang sngags gong mas 'byung ba bzhin // bzla dang glud gtor la gtug te //*.

21 The *Dhāraṇī Sūtra for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghosts* (救拔焰口餓鬼陀羅尼經 *Fo shuo qiuba yankou egui tuoloni jing*, Skt. *Pretamukhāgnivālāyaśarakāra-dhāraṇī*), T.1313, can be found in the following Chinese manuscripts: Pelliot chinois 2575, 3022, 3920; Or.8210/S.1397, S.1896, S.4119, S.6323; BD7767, BD8285, BD15383-1. The single extant Tibetan copy is found in IOL Tib J 349.

22 See the related group of *chu gtor* manuscripts IOL Tib J 340–344, 377; see also Pelliot tibétain 1189, which is titled *Chab gtor gi rgyud*.

23 Reading *grus* as *drus*.

> the torma of three aspects, cast them away individually. For the water torma, mix them together and then cast them away.[24]

In the later tradition, the torma of three aspects mentioned here is intended for the directional protectors *(phyogs skyong)*, obstructors *(bgegs pa)* and ghosts *('byung po)*. The *chu gtor*, as just mentioned, is intended for the hungry ghosts, or more generally, those who have passed away and are occupying the lower realms of existence.

The pure and burnt tormas, which are intended for worldly beings in the upper and lower realms of existence, are discussed in a text found in the manuscript Pelliot tibétain 325, which contains a fire ritual featuring a variety of torma:[25]

> The pure torma comprising the three white foodstuffs is dedicated to those residing at the [heaven of] the thirty-three above through to the eighteen hells below. The burnt torma is for the ghosts (*'byung po*, Skt. *bhūta*), the male and female flesh eaters (*sha za*, Skt. piśāca) and the male and female scent-eaters (*'dri za*, Skt. *gandharva*). For them we perform the ritual of the burnt torma. The torma is composed of various foodstuffs, as well as meat and fish.[26]

The 'pure torma' *(gtsang gtor)* mentioned first in this passage seems to be roughly equivalent to the sacrificial and offering tormas. The ritual manual Pelliot tibétain 309 begins with this torma, which is given as an offering to protectors of the teachings including the god Indra and the kings of the four directions. On the other hand, the burnt torma (*smye gtor*) is intended for the less elevated beings. Here both forms of torma are clearly conceptualised as food for nourishing these beings.

Another important early tantric source on the varieties and composition of tormas is the Mahāyoga tantra *Noose of Methods (Thabs kyi zhags pa'i rgyud)* which survived in a complete manuscript from Dunhuang, IOL Tib J 321. In this tantra, the role of torma is primarily for the four magical ritual activities: wrathful, overpowering, increasing and pacifying. Four of the tantras chapters are dedicated to

---

[24] IOL Tib J 342: *dri'i sman grangs la/ /shel ka pur/ ca 'dan / kur kum / spyi ka ta / mngar gyi mying grangs la / spang rtsi / bu ngam / kha ra / ngar / 'o ma / / / sman gyi mying grangs la / dbang po lag / grus rgod kyi rtsa ba / / shu dag / / a ru ra / rtsa' / / 'di rnams zhib tu btags na btsags nas / / gtor ma 'cha gsum la 'di rnams / so sor gtang / chu gtor la ni 'di rnams bsre nas gtang / /.*

[25] The manuscript IOL Tib J 406 is part of the same original manuscript.

[26] Pelliot tibétain 325, f.2: *gtsang gtor ni la zhal zas dkar gsum gsum bcu rtsa gsum gyi gnad man cad dang / dmyal khams bco brgyad yan cad du bsngo // smye gtor la 'byung po dang 'byung mo dang sha za pho dang sha za mo dri za' pho dang dri za' mo dang / 'di rnams la ni smye gtor gyi cho gar bya ste / zhal zas sna tshogs dang sha dang nya las bstsogs pa' / sna tshogs kyi gtor /.*

each specific torma, and include their components. These include – for the wrathful torma, iron filings, poison and gravel, mixed with blood and mashed beans or black grains; for the overpowering torma, copper filings, molasses, mashed red rice and other red grains; for the increasing torma, gold dust, mashed yellow rice grains, milk and honey; and for the pacifying torma, silver and mashed white rice grains, mixed with milk.[27] Here, as in many of the ritual manuals found in the Dunhuang manuscripts, the ingredients that make up the torma are essential to its success in the particular ritual category that it is intended for.

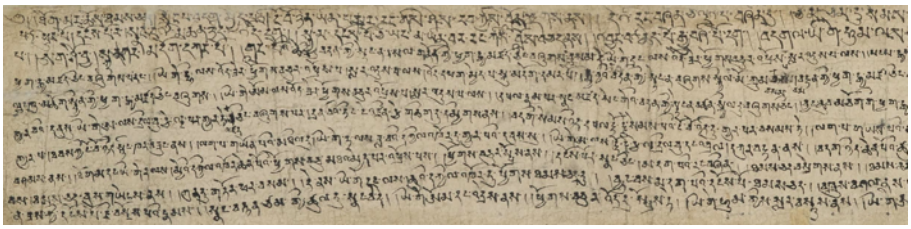


Fig. 6 – Detail from the single-folio manuscript IOL Tib J 473.

In the *sādhana* literature from Dunhuang, which mainly contains deity yoga practices, the composition of the tormas becomes less important, while on the other hand the ritual practices around them become more involved. This can be seen in a brief torma *sādhana* written in small, cramped handwriting on both sides of is a single folio, IOL Tib J 473. The manuscript was probably written in this way for personal, practical use. The ritual begins as a deity yoga in the genre of Mahāyoga, through a visualisation of each of the five main buddhas in turn, followed by self-visualisation as Vajrasattva. After this the text moves on to the main part of the ritual, featuring torma as the basis for further visualisations:

> Now make the offering torma *(mchod gtor)* and the general torma *(spyi gtor)*, and arrange them in their containers. At the top [of the tormas], the syllable *ra* emits limitless light to the ten corners of the fire mandala, and projects light to the ten directions, burning up all substantial things and everything that is impure. Visualise everything burning. Then from the syllable *yang*, the wind mandala appears everywhere, blowing away the stale air and scattering everything into the distance. Then from the syllable *dang* the water mandala emerges in every direction, cleansing and washing away all substances composed of the impure elements. Visualise that everything is thoroughly purified. Then through the syllable *lang*, the earth mandala appears; on top of it are

[27] Cantwell and Mayer 2012: 78-79.

> whatever edible substances have been dedicated, appearing like reflections in a mirror. They merge with a syllable *om* which radiates light in the ten directions, which is then absorbed into a syllable *hum*.[28]

These purificatory visualisations involving the four elements set the stage for the climax of the ritual, in which visualised nectar (*bdud rtsi*, Skt. *amṛta*) and food (*kha zas*) is provided to all sentient beings:

> From that comes a syllable *ang* surrounded by dancing lights, from which comes nectar, the food of the goods, along with all kinds of provision. Visualise that these become food to bring joy to all sentient beings of the four modes of birth. Then visualise that from the syllable *khang* in the sky above, multicoloured lights shine out. These become clouds of light spreading and filling the sky. From them, nectar the colour of milk streams down, thoroughly satisfying and fulfilling all the hopes of sentient beings of the four modes of birth and the nine ways of being.[29]

The sentient beings' own dedications of merit are then gathered up with the recitation of mantras. In the last part of the *sādhana* the torma itself becomes the sacred bond (*dam tshig*, Skt. *samaya*) of the body, speech and mind of all participants in the ritual:

> This torma becomes the *samaya* of body, speech and mind. Having been transformed by these true syllables, if you transgress the *samaya*, you will be tormented by these true syllables of the noble ones: *om ta ki ra tsa ha na ha na hum sar rba byi khri nan hum hum ho ho bang*.[30]

---

[28] IOL Tib J 473, r.7ff: *mc[h]od gtor dang spyi gtor bgyi'o / 'tshal snod gyI nang du bshams nas / thog ma dang yi ger las / mye'i dkyIl 'khor chen po'i phyogs bcu mtha' myed par 'phros pas / / phyogs bcur spros nas / / dngos por snang cIng / / ma dag pa'i rang bzhin / / thams cad bsregs nas / / thams cad tshig par bsam / / de nas yi ge yang las / / rlung gi dkyil 'khor du gyur pa'i steng bas / thams cad bus g.yengs nas / / kun tu gtor phar bsam / / de nas yi ge dang las / / chu'i dkyil 'khor du phyogs thams cad du / / byung bas ma dag pa'i dngos po thams cad / bkhrus bshal nas / / yongs su dag par bsam / / de nas yi ge lang gyis sa gyi dkyil 'khor du gyur pa'i steng na zas kyi dngos po ji bsngos pa'i rnams / / snang brnyan tsam gyi tshul du snang ba de / / yi ge om dang 'dres nas / / phyogs bcur 'od du spros te / / yi ge hum gyis slar bsdus nas / / .*

[29] IOL Tib J 473, r.10ff: *yi ge ang 'od zer dgar po dang bcas pa / / de nyid las bdud rtsi lha'i zhal zas / / bro co ma cho dgu dang ldan cing / / skye ba gnas bzhi'i sems can / / ji ltar dga' ba'i kha zas cho ma cho dgur gyur bar bsam nas / / steng gi nas ka las / / yi ge khang las 'od zer sna tshogs su spros nas / / 'od zer gyi sprin pung 'byam klas par gyur pa / / de las bdud ci chu rgyun 'o ma kha dog dang 'dra bas / / skye ba gnas bzhi dang lam rgyu drug tu bsdu ba'i sems can thams cad re ba yongsu skong cing / thams cad tshim par 'gyur bar bsam / /*

[30] IOL Tib J 473, v.5ff: *gtor ma 'dis lus dang ngag yid gsum dam tshigs chen por gyur nas / / bden tshigs 'di las gyur nas / / dam tshigs 'di las 'gal bar byas na / / 'phags pai bden tshigs gyis gzir ba 'di ste / / om ti ka ra tsa ha na ha na hum / sar rba byi khri na na / hum hum ho bang / /.*

Here we see the fullest inclusion of the torma into a tantric ritual, as the embodiment of the concept of *samaya*, which represents the deity's enlightened mind, as well as the commitment the ritual participant enters into when identifying with the deity.[31] In this tantric *sādhana* context, the torma invokes the idea of food and nourishment, but unlike the pure and burnt tormas, its physical form transcends this role, becoming an emblem of enlightenment itself.

Thus while we have listed numerous types of torma found in the Dunhuang manuscripts, we should also see that a single torma may take on various roles through the course of a ritual. This actually reflects the observation made by Richard Kohn in his observations of the contemporary Mani Rimdu festivals:

> At first, during the rituals of the Lord of the Dance *Manual*, it is perceived as something to be offered (*mchod rdzas du shes pa*). Then, during the public empowerment, it is perceived as the god (*lha ru shes pa*). After the empowerment, it is perceived as the very substance of true achievement, of siddhi (*dngos grub du shes pa or dngos grub kyi rdzas su shes pa*).[32]

Such similarities are not entirely surprising; the rituals described by Kohn are based on ritual manuals in the Nyingma lineage, in which we often see continuations of ritual traditions seen in the Dunhuang manuscripts.[33]

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Dunhuang manuscripts provide several insights into the early development of torma practices in the Tibetan cultural sphere. These manuscripts offer a wide range of ritual manuals, sādhana, and at least one tantra, in which torma play an important role. Reading these texts reveals a diversity of torma types, from sacrificial and offering tormas (e.g. *mchod gtor)* to those used in funerary rites (e.g. *glud gtor)* and magical activities (e.g. *drag po'i gtor ma)*. While the physical forms of torma in this period are still not entirely clear, visual clues from the manuscripts suggest they were shaped into spheres, cones, and flat cakes, ancestors of the elaborate constructions of later centuries.

---

31 Dalton 2023: 121–126.

32 Kohn 2001: 126.

33 For an overview of the Mahāyoga ritual practices in the Dunhuang manuscripts, see van Schaik 2008. The specific continuity of the *Thabs kyi zhags pa'i rgyud* is explored in Cantwell and Mayer 2012.

The Dunhuang ritual texts also show us that, from this early stage, torma were not static objects but dynamic participants in ritual, with symbolic roles shifting even within a single ceremony, from offerings to deities, to vessels for divine presence, to embodiments of enlightenment itself. This fluidity continued through to later Tibetan traditions, such as the Mani Rimdu festival, where torma are seen to transform in meaning across ritual stages.

In this article I have made a first attempt to trace the historical development of torma. Many gaps remain in our knowledge of this history, in the Indic traditions of offering *bali*, which evolved over centuries before they were introduced to Tibet, and the further Tibetan development of construction and ritual practice of torma. The Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang offer an opportunity to fill in the details at one key phase in this process. While limited by their specific historical and geographical context, the Dunhuang manuscripts provide a unique window into the adaptation of ritual and material cultures, as Buddhism took root in Tibet.

Appendix: An overview of Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts featuring torma

British Library

IOL Tib J 149 – *smye gtor* in section 3
IOL Tib J 321 – *Thabs kyi zhags pa'i rgyud* with chapters on torma for the four activities
IOL Tib J 340 – *chu gtor* ritual
IOL Tib J 341 – *chu gtor* ritual
IOL Tib 342 – *chu gtor* ingredients
IOL Tib 343 – treatise on *chu gtor*
IOL Tib J 344 – treatise on *chu gtor*
IOL Tib J 377 –treatise on *chu gtor*
IOL Tib J 384 – three-part torma ritual in section 1
IOL Tib J 401 – grimoire with torma employed in the rituals for insanity and rainmaking
IOL Tib J 406 – torma for the four ritual activities
IOL Tib J 419 & Pelliot tibétain 36 – *sādhana* with torma in section 2
IOL Tib J 420 – funerary ritual with *bgegs gtor* and *glud gtor* in second section
IOL Tib J 423 – fire ritual with torma
IOL Tib J 447 – *smye gtor* in a *sādhana* of Vajrasattva in section 2
IOL Tib J 473 – *mchod gtor* and *spyi gtor* in a sādhana of Vajrasattva
IOL Tib J 565 – torma in a *sādhana* of Vajrajnanasattva
IOL Tib J 567 – *gtsang gtor* ritual
IOL Tib J 568 – *chu gtor* in a *sādhana* of Vajrasattva

IOL Tib J 569 – *gtor ma* ritual for long life and blessings
IOL Tib J 570 – funerary ritual with *bgegs gtor*
IOL Tib J 571 – *gtor sbyin phun sum tshogs*
IOL Tib J 572 – ritual with *glud gtor*
IOL Tib J 573 – ritual with *spyi gtor*
IOL Tib J 726 – torma in a ritual for controlling *nāgas*

Bibliothèque nationale de France
Pelliot tibétain 4 – torma at the beginning of rituals in sections 1 and 5
Pelliot tibétain 69 – torma mentioned at beginning of ritual
Pelliot tibétain 180 – torma mentioned at beginning of ritual
Pelliot tibétain 245 & Pelliot tibétain 251 – brief text on torma visualisation
Pelliot tibétain 246 – Fragment of a torma ritual
Pelliot tibétain 250 – ritual for offering torma (*gtor ma dbul ba'i cho ga*)
Pelliot tibétain 290 – *bgegs gyi gtor ma*
Pelliot tibétain 296 – *sādhana* with torma
Pelliot tibétain 283 – *gaṇacakra* with torma
Pelliot tibetan 304 – ritual with mention of torma
Pelliot tibetan 307 – *sādhana* with torma
Pelliot tibetan 309 – *nāga* ritual with torma
Pelliot tibétain 325 – fire ritual with *gtsang gtor* and *smye gtor*
Pelliot tibétain 350 – sealing ritual for a stupa, with two types of torma
Pelliot tibétain 1189 – *Chab gtor gi rgyud*
Pelliot tibétain 1240 – torma in section 5

Bibliography

Beer, Robert. 2015. *Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Boston: Shambhala.

Beyer, Stephen. 1973. *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet.* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Bütler, Claudia. 1996. "Torma—The Tibetan Ritual Cake." *Chö Yang: The Voice of Tibetan Ritual and Culture* 7: 38–105.

Cantwell, Cathy, and Robert Mayer. 2012. *A Noble Noose of Methods, The Lotus Garland Synopsis: A Mahāyoga Tantra and its Commentary*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.

Cohen, Richard S. 2012. *The Splendid Vision: Reading a Buddhist Sūtra*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dalton, Jacob P. 2023. *Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hidas, Gergely. 2019. *A Buddhist Ritual Manual on Agriculture: Vajratuṇḍasamayakalparāja – Critical Edition*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Imaeda, Yoshiro. 1979. "Note préliminiare sur la formule *Oṃ maṇi padme hūm* dans les manuscrits tibétains de Touen-houang." In *Contributions aux Études sur Touen-houang*. *Hautes Etudes Orientales 10*. Genéve-Paris, 71-76.

Kohn, Richard J. 2001. *The Lord of the Dance: The Mani Rimdu Festival in Tibet and Nepal*. New York: State University of New York.

Kramer, Jowita. 2016. "Some Remarks on Sthiramati and his Putative Authorship of the *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā*, the **Sūtrālaṃkāra-vṛttibhāṣya* and the *Triṃśikāvijñaptibhāṣya*." *Buddhist Studies Review* 33.1-2: 47-63.

van Schaik, Sam. 2008. "A Definition of Mahāyoga: Sources from the Dunhuang Manuscripts." *Tantric Studies* 1: 45-88.

Skorupski, Tadeusz. 1983. The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*: *Elimination of All Evil Destinies*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Willis, Michael. 2009. *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

