

Body Exposure and Embalming in the Tibetan Empire and Beyond: A Study of the *btol* Rite

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ABSTRACT

The paper puts forward a new interpretation of the problematic word *btol* that is sparsely attested in Old Tibetan sources. The philological analysis is supported by a lexicological survey of potential cognates; taken together these allow us to sketch the word family of *btol*, and thus to better understand the underlying semantics of the word. It is argued that the term denoted a rite within a funeral ceremony; to be specific, the rite of exposure of the deceased's body before it was interred. In order to contextualise the rite and to assess its cultural significance, this paper also discusses certain funeral customs of later periods.

KEYWORDS

Tibetan Empire, funeral rites, embalming, body exposure, *Old Tibetan Annals*, PT 1042, ITN 283, ITN 299

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INTRODUCTION

In Old Literary Tibetan (OLT)¹ *btol* was a technical term that appears to be primarily used in the context of funeral ceremonies. Since the lexeme is only scarcely attested in later lexicographical works, it has acquired divergent interpretations from scholars who have been studying records composed in OLT. These interpretations are collected in the Appendix. Our knowledge and understanding of the culture of the Tibetan Empire is still very limited and archaeological excavations are virtually non-existent, therefore we have to look for specific cultural patterns that recur in the history of Tibetan cultures of later periods in order to reveal the meaning of acts and rites referred to in obscure terms. I assume that *btol* can be explained if one considers the cultural context, in which the word functioned, but also the persistence of particular rites across centuries. Accordingly, the paper attempts to contextualise the obscure word *btol* by juxtaposing our scanty knowledge of imperial Tibetan funeral ceremonies with rites recorded in historiographical and ethnographic works on societies living on the Tibetan Plateau and its margins in post-imperial times.

The study begins with a philological examination of *btol* in OT texts; its occurrences as a verb and noun are analysed separately in order to cast light on the grammatical and semantic features of each form. Subsequently, potential cognates are introduced and the word family, including reconstructed meanings of its members, is sketched. In the core part of the paper I reconstruct the cultural context in which *btol* was used. To this end, other passages are quoted and a plausible connection to rites performed in post-imperial times is established. The paper concludes with the hypothesis that certain funeral rites continued to be practised in almost identical constellation even after the disintegration of the Tibetan Empire. Moreover, they were integrated into new cultural and political context, acquiring adequate interpretation which supported the preservation of the rites despite changing historical circumstances.

¹ 'Old Literary Tibetan' (OLT) refers to the language of non-translatory documents composed roughly within the period of the Tibetan Empire (ca. 630s–850s). OLT should be distinguished, on the one hand, from Classical Tibetan (CT) and, on the other hand, from Old Tibetan (OT). The latter was a spoken language dated approximately to 640s–800 (see Bialek 2018b). The phrase 'Old Tibetan documents/texts/sources' refers to non-translatory records composed during the Tibetan Empire.

In the paper, the Tibetan script is transliterated according to the principles put forward in Bialek 2020b. Tibetan proper names are hyphenated in order to enhance their readability in the text flow. If not otherwise stated, passages quoted from OT sources have been transliterated by myself on the basis of scans made available on the IDP and Gallica. The OT orthography is strictly followed. The 'reversed *gi gu*' is transliterated as *i*. No distinction is made between a single and a double *cheg* in the transliteration. The passages from Tibetan texts have also been translated by myself. Tibetan transliterations cited from other works have been adapted to the system followed in the paper.

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THE VERB *BTOL* IN OLT

In OLT the verb *btol* is a *dis legomenon* attested only in the *Old Tibetan Annals* (OTA):²

bcan pho ñen kar na bźugs śiñ / yab btol (IT) 750: 73)

‘While the *bcan po* was abiding in Ñen-kar, [one] *btol*-ed the father [Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan].’

phyi btol (IT) 750: 187)

‘[One] *btol*-ed the grandmother [Khri-ma-lod].’

The verb denoted an action directed towards the deceased *bcan po* Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan and his wife Khri-ma-lod, the grandmother (*phyi*) of Khri Lde-gcug-rcan. The action was also one of several in a cycle of rites performed around the deceased. Table 1 presents the posthumous rites reported in the OTA for the two royals.³

Table 1. Posthumous rites of Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan and Khri-ma-lod

Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan		Khri-ma-lod	
Year	Event	Year	Event
676 W	DEATH <i>khri mañ slon dguñ du gśegs</i>	712 W	DEATH <i>pyi khri ma lod noñs</i>
677	ENCLOSURE <i>yab gyi spur ba lam na mkhyid čin bźugste</i>		
678 S	ENCLOSURE <i>yab gyi riñ ba lam na mkhyid čin bźugste</i>		
678 W	BTOL <i>yab btol</i>		BTOL <i>phyi btol</i>
679	FUNERAL <i>bcan pho yab gyi mdad btañ</i>	713 W	FUNERAL <i>phyi khri ma lod gyi mdad btañ</i>

The body (*spur*, *riñ*) of Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan had remained in Ba-lam for two years before the *btol* was performed for him (*yab*). The same procedure of remaining in a mortuary (*riñ khañ*) is reported for Khri Sroñ-rcan (PT 1288: 17–8) and Khri ʏdus-sroñ (ITJ 750: 153 & 156).⁴ For

² The *Old Tibetan Annals* is a collective title used for texts preserved in manuscripts with the shelf-marks Pel-liot tibétain (hereafter: PT) 1288, IOL Tib J (hereafter: ITJ) 750 (OTA-I), Or.8212/187 (OTA-II), and Dx 12851v (OTA-III).

³ Information on all funerals reported in the OTA is presented in a tabular form in Bialek (2018a.2: 93f.). A detailed analysis of the funerals’ temporal framework will be supplied in Bialek 2021 (Forthcoming).

⁴ Though the etymological meaning of *riñ khañ* was ‘a chamber for a dead body’ (see OTD), the lexeme might have actually denoted the room in which the body was kept during the embalming, or maybe even the very construction in which the body was embalmed (see below). Compare in this context the analogously formed compound *spur khañ* ‘cremation ground, funeral pyre’ (CDTD: 4926), glossed also as ‘a jointly owned (by a *pha spun* group – JB) furnace for the cremation of their dead’ (Brauen 1980: 5; cf. also Brauen 1982: 319, fn. 4). A picture of a *pur khañ* as sketched by an anonymous lama in 1857 in Lahoul can be seen in Horne (1873, Pl. 3, no. 21 and p. 33). The casual word for *pur khañ* is *ro khañ* ‘place for burning or burying the dead’ (Jä: 536a, s.v. *ro*; see also



these two, however, no *btol* is recorded. Instead, two years after their death a funeral ceremony (*mdayd*) was organised. Regarding Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan and Khri-ma-lod, their funeral ceremonies were performed in the year following the *btol*-year. In the OTA the verb phrase *mdad btañ* is commonly used for funeral ceremonies of the members of the royal family.⁵ There is an important grammatical difference between *btol* and the phrase *mdad btañ*; the direct object of the verb *btañ* is *mdad* ‘funeral ceremony’, whereas that of *btol* is a kinterm (*yab, phyi*), indicating the kind of relationship between the deceased and the currently ruling *bcan po*.⁶ Similarly, there is a difference between *btol* and *mkhyid/mkhyud*; the latter is only said of the body (*spur, riñ*) of the deceased. Now, we can reconstruct the following order of events focused on the deceased: 1. a person died; 2. his/her body was enclosed⁷ and remained in a mortuary; 3. one *btol*-ed the person; and 4. one performed a funeral ceremony (*mdad*) for the person.

THE NOUN *BTOL* IN OLT

Surprisingly, in OLT *btol* is used more frequently as a noun than as a verb. I was able to trace the following occurrences:

thugs glud lu gu dkar po gčig / (99) gla sgañ bču gsum / mday rgyud che than {bču gsum} lascogs te // yul lha yul bdag tañ (read: dañ) / yab myes yum phyi / (100) dañ yogs che than ste // btol ched po bas śas res bskyed // (PT 1042)

‘The ransom being one white lamb, thirteen [blades of the medicinal grass] *gla sgañ*, [and] thirteen [pieces of] the *mday rgyud* plant, among others; local deities, local protectors, father and grandfathers, mother and grandmothers, as well as *yogs*, being [already] impressive, were made (lit. produced) with each part greater than the great *btol*.’

g.yag gi čho ga ni btol čhen po dañ ydra bar mjado // (PT 1042: 109)
‘Regarding the yak-rite, [it] has been prepared like the great *btol*.’

(r1) § /: / *dro chos phan čad / btol gyi myi ydus gī lčam skyo la (r2) thug pa [ch]un čhad {c} hus pa dpon g.yog gīs ydren payi // (ITN 283)*

‘[Objects] of foodstuff (from cooked food to vegetable paste for (lit. of) the gathering of people for (lit. of) *btol*) that servants of the head are bringing.’

(r1) § // *btol gyi myi ydu[s] [-] (v1) dañ rjeyu bañ / (ITN 299)*
‘Gathering of people for (lit. of) *btol* [-]; [-] and a store-pipkin.’

CDTD: 8120). Similarly to *spur khañ*, *ro khañ* actually denotes a cremation furnace (Skorupski 1982: 363). Thus, by analogy with the modern *ro khañ* and *spur khañ*, the OLT *riñ khañ* might have had a more specific meaning of ‘*embalming room’. In a later text on embalming translated by Uebach (see below), the container in which the body rests during the process is called *pur sgam* (Uebach 1981: 76, l. 1).

⁵ See PT 1288: 20; ITJ 750: 74, 85, 159, 162, 170, 191, 229, 264, 288, 302. The etymological meaning of *mda(y)d* might have been ‘*repast for the deceased’ (see OTD & Bialek In Preparation a), but in OLT the term was a synonym of *śid* ‘funeral’ (see Bialek 2018a.2: 191ff.).

⁶ For details on the use of kinterms in the OTA, see Bialek 2021.

⁷ For the meaning of *mkhyud* see OTD and Bialek (In Preparation a).



It appears that *btol* denoted a rite for which people were gathering (*myi ydus* in ITN 283 & ITN 299). It must have been part of funeral proceedings for PT 1042 provides a detailed description of such a ceremony. In this text the rite is called *btol čhen po*, most probably by analogy with the phrase *mdad č(h)en po* applied in PT 1042: 81 & 97 to a funeral of an elite member. ITN 283 and ITN 299 contain lists of products and objects that were procured for a funeral ceremony.⁸ This very scanty information is all that can be retrieved from these enigmatic passages.

THE WORD FAMILY⁹

Thomas reconstructed the verb conjugation of *btol* as: v1 *ythol*, v2 *btol*, v3 *gthol* (Thomas 1935–55/3: 143a, s.v. *ythol*). In OLT the form *gt(h)ol* is attested exclusively in the synonymous phrases *gt(h)ol myed* and *gt(h)ol ma mčhis*. From ITJ 738: 3v34–5 we can infer that these were also synonymous with *ča ma mčhis* and *ma phye*. CDSN glosses *gtol med* as *ča med* and *thabs med* (p. 495b). The phrases *gtol med* and *ča med* are known in lexicographical sources on CT. For example, in Jäschke we find the following explanation s.v. *gtol*: ‘only in *gtol med* = *ča med*, not known, dubious’ (p. 210a). This meaning can be likewise ascribed to *gthol ma mčhis* in OLT:

[–] *nin ji yčhi gthol ma mčhis pas* (M.I.xix.002: r1; trslr. *apud* Thomas 1935–55/2: 389)¹⁰
 ‘Because the day when [one] dies is not known [–].’

The same meaning of *gthol ma mčhis* and *gthol myed* is attested in fragmentarily preserved OT versions of the *Rāmāyana* (IT 737-1: 165, 194, 213, 357, 424; see de Jong 1989).

All the phrases quoted above have one more feature in common: they contain negations. We can literally translate them as:

gt(h)ol myed/ma mčhis ‘there is no *gt(h)ol*’
ča med/ma mčhis ‘there is no thing’
thabs med ‘there is no means’
ma phye ‘not opened’¹¹

⁸ The texts are analysed in detail in Bialek (In Preparation b).

⁹ In lexicological studies, the term ‘word family’ refers to a group of cognate lexemes that can be demonstrated to have been derived from a common etymon by means of derivational processes productive in a historically attested language. The concept of the lexicon being divided into smaller units like word families helps to organise inherited vocabulary of a given language and to reconstruct meanings of lexemes that are less-commonly attested or even barely known as is often the case with extinct languages such as Old Tibetan. Thus, in lexicology ‘word family’ is an organisational rather than explanatory concept. In this paper, I attempt to sketch the word family, to which *btol* might have belonged, in order to investigate the possible scope of its denotation. Following the lexicological tradition, I restrict the use of the term ‘word family’ to the inherited vocabulary of one particular language, in my case: Old Literary Tibetan. A different approach, namely the application of the concept of ‘word family’ to comparative reconstruction in historical linguistics, has recently been criticised by Fellner and Hill (2019a & 2019b). The present paper does not provide the proper context for going into detail on the validity of the critique or its lack thereof (cf. Handel 2019, Schuessler 2019, Thurgood 2019), therefore I shall only emphasise the language-internal usage of the concept here.

¹⁰ I was not able to identify the wood slip with the site number M.I.xix.002 in the database of the IDP and therefore to confirm Thomas’ transliteration by comparing it with a modern scan. The site number given by Thomas agrees with Stein’s description of the document as a one mentioning *nob čhe čhuñ* ‘Great and Little Nob’ (1921.1: 468). This information is confirmed by Thomas’ transliteration (Thomas 1935–55/2: 389, no.82: A2).

¹¹ We can also add CT *gtol bral* ‘without resource’ (DS: 528b) to the list.



One can paraphrase them with Eng. *to have no idea*; Schmidt translated *gtol med* as ‘rathlos, mittellos’ (Schmidt 1841: 208b, s.v. *gtol ba*). Due to its verbal character the last phrase from the list is of special interest for our purposes; *phye* is a v2-stem of the transitive verb *ybyed* ‘to open.’ A very similar meaning is documented for *gtol/btol*: *btol ba* ‘durchbohren etc.’; S[iehe] *gtol ba*’ (Schmidt 1841: 209b); *gtol ba* ‘durchbohren, durchdringen; entdecken, aufschliessen’ (ibid., p. 208b; emphasis added). The latter two meanings call to mind the CT *ythol’ mi sbed pa* or *bsags pa* revealing, giving out, confessing; same as *mthol ba* ‘confession’ (DS: 609b). The sense of revealing is also confirmed for *btol* in the following CT passage:

γdi ltar de bzin gśeḡs payi ye śes kyi myod du khyed (H: *khyad*)¹² *γgyur ro źes ma btol* (C: *gtol*; D, U: *brtol*) *ma bstan te* (Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* (SP); CT *Dam payi čhos pad ma dkar po źes bya ba theg pa čhen poyi mdo*: D 113, *mdo sde*, ja 43r4; Q 781, *mdo*, čhu 49v4; N 101, *mdo sde*, ja 63v3–4; C 754, *mdo mañ*, ja 51r3; H 116, *mdo sde*, ja 67r7; J 46, *padma dkar po*, ja 48v4; U 113, *mdo sde*, ja 43r4; *apud* BDRC & RKTS)¹³
 ‘In this way you will reach the treasury of the Tathāgata’s wisdom.’ Thus [the Victorious One] did neither reveal nor explain [to us].¹⁴

The reading *btol* (in Q, N, H, and J) is apparently the *lectio difficilior* as against the variants *brtol* (v1 *rtol*) attested in D and U and *gtol* of C.¹⁵ The variant reading *brtol* was chosen to replace the already obsolete *btol* even though in none of its attested meanings (see Jā: 215a–b; WTS.26: 108a–b, s.v. *rtol*; WTS.27: 183b–4a, s.v. *brtol*) can the simple verb *rtol* be reasonably used in apposition with the verb *ston* ‘to explain.’ On the other hand, WTS glosses *brtol śes* as ‘spontane Erkenntnis’ (27: 184a), which seems to be a *hapax legomenon* thus far known only from Tāranātha’s *Rgya gar čhos ybyuñ*. Since the verb *brtol* does not otherwise denote actions related to mental processes, I assume that *brtol śes* is an educated written form of the etymological **btol śes*. The latter reading is in fact provided in an undated block print (Tāranātha, Sde-dge 120v4) and in a modern edition of the work (Tāranātha 2008.33: 247, l. 6), although another modern edition instead reads *brtol śes* (Tāranātha 2019: 213, l. 13). Whatever the sense of the internal quotation in the above

¹² The reading *khyed* is supported by Skt. *yuṣmākaṃ* 2PL.GEN ‘yours’ (SP: 109, l. 7; Watanabe 1975.2: 47, l. 2).

¹³ Chapter IV, from which the passage comes, has not been preserved in any of the thus far identified Old Tibetan manuscripts of SP; see Simonsson 1957: 16ff.

¹⁴ The passage has been variously translated, depending on the language of the original (Sanskrit, Tibetan, or Chinese): ‘[De là vient que Bhagavat] ne s’associe pas avec nous, qu’il ne nous dit pas: Le trésor de la science du Tathāgata, ce trésor même vous appartiendra aussi’ (Burnouf 1852: 69); ‘[The Lord] does not mix with us, nor tell us that this treasure of the Tathāgata’s knowledge shall belong to us’ (Kern 1901: 107); ‘[The World-Honored One] does not specify to us, “You are all to have a portion in the treasure house of the Thus Come One’s knowledge and insight!”’ (Hurvitz 1976: 89); ‘[N]ot trying to explain to us by saying, “You will come to possess the insight of the Thus Come One, your portion of the store of treasures!”’ (Watson 1993: 86); ‘[Der Weltverehrte] erklärte uns nicht: „Ihr werdet einst die Einsicht des Tathāgata besitzen, euren Anteil haben an der Schatzkammer“’ (Deeg 2007: 106); ‘[H]e did not explain that we were to have a portion of the treasure house of the Tathāgata’s wisdom and insight’ (Kubo & Yuyama 2007: 84); ‘You did not tell us that we had the treasure-store, that is, the insight of the Tathāgata’ (Murano 2012: 95); ‘[Der von aller Welt Verehrte ließ es zu und] unterschied nicht für uns (das Große vom Kleinen Gesetz), indem er sagte: „Ihr sollt ein Verständnis des Wissens des Tathāgata und des kostbaren Korbes haben“’ (von Borsich 2013: 128); ‘You did not explain by telling us, “You will have your share of the treasure of the knowledge and perception of the ones who arrive at reality”’ (Cleary 2016); ‘[The Bhagavān tolerated us and] did not say to us, “This is the Tathāgata’s treasure of wisdom, which will be yours”’ (Roberts 2018: 4.27).

¹⁵ The canonical commentary *Dam payi čhos puṇḍa ri kayi γgrel pa* by Pṛthivībandhu does not comment on the verb (see D 4017, *mdo γgrel*, di 175v1–302r7; accessed via BCRD).



passage from the SP, it is apparent that *ma btol* and *ma bstan* convey the same meaning of not exposing, not making overt or explicit. Both verbs are negated, therefore I think that the primary meaning of *ythol/btol/gtol* was *‘to expose, to reveal, to uncover; to make visible/open’. In the passage, *ma btol* renders Skt. *na sambhinatti*¹⁶ (< sam+√bhid ‘zerspalten, zerbrechen, durchbohren; ²zusammenbringen, in Berührung bringen, verbinden, vermengen’, PW.5: 287a), on which Edgerton (1953/2: 580a) remarked: ‘it is a strange use of sam-bhid, but I have been unable, despite much study, to find a more likely m[eanin]g’. In lexicographical sources one finds the following equivalents of other derivatives of sam+√bhid:

sambheda = *dbye ba* (Mvy: 5187)
sambhinna = *rab phye ba* (Chandra 2007: 680c)

On the other hand, forms of *rab (tu) ybyed* are glossed as:

rab tu phye ba = *prabhāvanā* (Mvy: 6885) ‘das Entfalten, Aussprechen’ (PW.4: 1041a)
rab tu ybyed pa = *pravacaya* (Chandra 1959: 743b; Negi 1993.14: 6271a) ‘Untersuchung’ (PW.4: 1077a)
 = *unmeṣa* (Negi 1993.14: 6271b) ‘¹das Aufschlagen der Augen; ²das Aufblühen; ³das Erwachen, zu-Tage-Kommen’ (PW.1: 940b)

Evidently, the verb sam+√bhid could acquire figurative meaning ‘to reveal’ (< ‘to open’) that concurs with the disclosed meaning of *btol*.¹⁷ Here one can also recall the above discussed phrase *ma phye*, which is considered synonymous with *gt(h)ol myed/ma mčhis*.

Instead of *ythol*, CT knows two other verbs that seem to have accommodated two specialised meanings of the original *ythol*: *mthol/ythol* ‘to confess, to avow’ (Jä: 243a) and *rtol/brtol/brtol* ‘to bore, to pierce; to perforate; to open; to make an incision’ (Jä: 215a–b). That the meaning ‘to pierce’ primarily developed for *ythol/btol/gtol* is indicated by the Balti form *xtol* (LT *gtol*) ‘to pierce (holes)’ (CDTD.V: 502; see also Sprigg 2002: 8 & 71);¹⁸ the remaining WAT dialects possess a verb that reflects the LT *rtol* (see CDTD.V: 520). The semantic development of √tol can be sketched as: ‘to expose’ > ‘to make open’ > ‘to pierce’. The latter specialised meaning was later reserved for the derivative with the ‘directive’ prefix *r-*: √tol *‘to reveal; to make open’ > *r+√tol* *‘to make an opening in (*r-*) sth.’ > ‘to bore, to perforate’.¹⁹

The above analysis allows a connection between the hitherto discussed lexemes and yet another cognate: *rdol* ‘¹to come out, to break forth from, to gush forth, to issue from; to come up, to sprout, to shoot; ²to leak, to be not tight, to have holes; ³to rave, to deliriate’ (Jä: 288b). The semantic

¹⁶ Ejima 1985: 1061. Kashgar manuscript reads *na sambhindati* (SP: 109, l. 6), whereas Gilgit manuscripts collated by Watanabe attest to the reading *na sambhinatti* (1975.2: 47, l. 1). *ma bstan* corresponds to Skt. *nācaṣṭe* (< *na+ā-√cakṣ); in the Tibetan version of SP, Skt. verb ā-√cakṣ is frequently rendered with LT *ston* (Ejima 1985: 140, s.v. ā-√cakṣ). Kumārajīva’s translation into Chinese renders both Sanskrit verbs as *bù wéi fēnbīe* 不為分別 (Ejima 1985: 1061; http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T09n0262_002, accessed 22.07.2021). This is reflected in the western translations of the Chinese version of the text (see fn. 14) which have only one verb: ‘to explain’ or ‘to specify’, sometimes modified by the gerund ‘by telling/saying’.

¹⁷ Roberts (2018) translated *ma btol* as ‘tolerated’, remarking in note 233: ‘The Sanskrit has in addition *na sambhinatti* that Burnouf translated as “did not mix with us” and Kern translates similarly, although “did not abandon us” is also a possible meaning.’ Roberts’ translation is purely contextual and is supported neither by Sanskrit nor Tibetan lexicographical works.

¹⁸ Balti *xt-* is a regular reflex of LT *gt-* (cf. CDTD.V: 490–502).

¹⁹ In OLT the derivational prefix *r-* was still productive. It coded information about an action as directed towards a patient. A detailed analysis of the prefix will be presented in Bialek (In Preparation a).



thread connecting *rdol* to *rtol* is the sense of becoming visible either by itself (*rdol*) or by a causer (*rtol*). I deem *rdol* to have been formed by analogy with *rtol* from the original *ydol*. The latter is still preserved in Balti *ydol* nCA ‘to break up (boils, ulcer), to come up (plants); with *mik* to get holes’ (CDTD.V: 672) and in certain CT compounds: *ydol žiñ* ‘fruchtbares Feld, fruchtbarer Acker’ (WTS.38: 458a); and *ydol sa* ‘fruchtbares Feld, fruchtbarer Acker’ (WTS.38: 458b). On this basis, one can now reconstruct a pair of related etymons: TR $\sqrt{\text{tol}}$ ‘to reveal sth.’ ~ INTR $\sqrt{\text{dol}}$ ‘to reveal oneself’.

In Bialek (2020a, esp. 312ff.), I put forward the hypothesis that v3-stems of mixed transitive conjugations (e.g., v1 *ygums*, v2 *bkum*, v3 *dgum*, v4 *khums*) came into being from the roots of the corresponding intransitive conjugations (e.g., TR $\sqrt{\text{kum}}$ ~ INTR $\sqrt{\text{gum}}$) by means of the nominalising prefix *g-, a reflex of the Proto-Trans-Himalayan (PTH) nominalising *gV-.²⁰ Afterwards certain derived forms in g- have been included as passive v3-stems into transitive conjugations; however, forms are also found that apparently have not been included into any conjugation. I assume a lexeme based on such a form is LT *gdol pa* ‘Skt. *caṇḍāla*, an outcast’ (Jä: 268a; < *g+ $\sqrt{\text{dol}}$), for which compare also the meanings of the following lexemes: *rdol čhos* ‘grobe Umgangsformen, vulgäres Verhalten’ (WTS.38: 506a); *rdol thabs smra ba* ‘unsinniges, zusammenhangloses Geschwätz’ (WTS.38: 506a); and the above quoted meaning of *rdol*²³ ‘to rave, to deliriate’ (Jä: 288b).²¹

The above analysis has revealed that the nouns *btol* and *gt(h)ol* must have been deverbals. In the light of their origins, *btol* must have been a *nomen actionis*,²² whereas *gt(h)ol* must have had a patient-oriented meaning.²³ Accordingly, they can be literally translated as ‘revealing, disclosing, uncovering’ and ‘exposition’, respectively. The phrases *gt(h)ol myed* and *gt(h)ol ma mčhis* can be now literally rendered as ‘there is no exposition’, i.e. ‘it is incomprehensible’.

Figure 1 presents the word family of $\sqrt{\text{tol}}$ and $\sqrt{\text{dol}}$ and their derivatives. The graphics summarises the morphological and semantic relationships between the discussed lexemes. The dashed line from $r+\sqrt{\text{tol}}$ to *rdol* indicates that the form *rdol* has been influenced by *r-* in *rtol*.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

This paper began with the examination of the lexeme *btol* in OT texts concerned with funerary rites. However, the ensuing analysis has revealed that the lexeme must have had a more general meaning reconstructed as *‘to expose, to reveal, to uncover; to make visible/open’.²⁴ This provokes the question: how do these meanings fit into the context of funeral ceremonies?

²⁰ On PTH nominalising *gV-, see Konnerth (2016).

²¹ In these formations, *rdol* might have replaced the original *gdol* as the former became more popular and the latter came out of use. The LT *gdol pa* renders Skt. *caṇḍāla* but also *mātāṅgaḥ* (Mvy: 3863). The latter term is glossed as ‘^{1a}Elephant’ and ‘^{1e}ein Kāṇḍāla, ein Mann niedrigsten Standes, eine Art Kirāta’ (PW.5: 698), among others, and derived from *matam-ga* (MONIER-WILLIAMS 1899: 806c) ‘going wilfully’ or ‘roaming at will, an elephant’ (MONIER-WILLIAMS 1899: 783a–b). This etymology might have inspired Tibetans to render *mātāṅgaḥ/caṇḍāla* with *gdol*.

²² Nouns derived from v2-stems can also have agent-oriented meaning, but this is certainly not the case in the above OT passages.

²³ For nominal derivations from v2- and v3-stems, see Bialek 2020a: 291f. and 297.

²⁴ A similar meaning was suggested by Gñay-goñ Dkon-mčhog Ches-brtan (1995: 80, n. 3) who paraphrased *yab btol ba* as ‘yab kyi spur mkhyud pa las btol paḥi don’. Bcan-lha Nāg-dbañ Chul-khrims glossed *btol ba* as ‘²gsaṅ ba brol ba’ (1997: 249b). It is not clear whether the glosses are purely contextual or based on some other (unnamed)



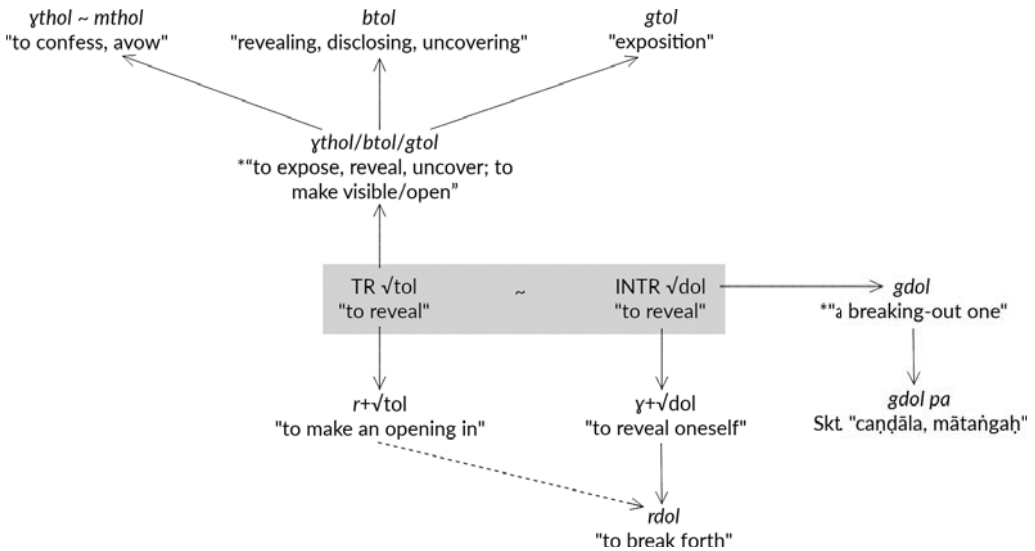


Figure 1. The word family of $\sqrt{\text{tol}}$ and $\sqrt{\text{dol}}$

BODY EXPOSURE IN THE TIBETAN EMPIRE

The sequence of imperial funerary rites reported in the OTA included keeping the enclosed (*mkhyud*) body of the deceased in a mortuary (*riñ khañ*), doing *bθol* to the deceased, and then performing the final funeral rites (see Table 1). It is obvious that the body must have been taken out from the mortuary in order to be buried. From Table 1 one can gather that about one year has passed between *bθol* and the funeral of a royal person. Regarding Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan, the *bθol* was undertaken in the late winter of 678 while his body was still in Ba-lam (ITJ 750: 71–3), but the funeral ceremony of 679 took place in Phyiñ-ba (ITJ 750: 74). It follows that the body must have been transported from Ba-lam in a side valley of the Skyi-čhu river²⁵ to Phyiñ-ba. The body of Khri Sroñ-rcan rested in a mortuary of Phyiñ-ba (PT 1288: 17), but that of Khri Ṽdus-sroñ in Mer-ke (ITJ 750: 153; 30°17'17' N, 91°08'13' E, *apud* TTT). Thus, Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan and Khri Ṽdus-sroñ must have been posthumously transported from Ba-lam and Mer-ke in order to be buried in Phyiñ-ba.²⁶ The transportation of the bodies to the royal cemetery at Phyiñ-ba presupposed their retrieval from mortuaries and was most probably accompanied by an official procession. On the other hand, ITN 283 and ITN 299 suggest that *bθol* was part of the fu-

sources. I leave them untranslated since, owing to their brevity, an adequate interpretation of single terms used therein is impossible.

²⁵ See Map 6b in Hazod 2009: 202. According to Hazod, Ba-lam is a 'district east of Lhasa, described in post-dynastic sources as the eastern entrance to the Lha-sa Maṇḍala zone' (*ibid.*, p. 204). The coordinates for the valley entrance are 29°39'16.93"N, 91°22'39.19"E; see also Fig. 1 Map of Ba-lam, TTT: site 0148 (<https://www.oew.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition/sites-by-id/0148/>; 05.01.2021).

²⁶ The case of Khri-ma-lod is less clear. Her last reported whereabouts was in Dron in the summer of 712/3. She died the same year in winter but the place is not specified. The following year she was buried in Phyiñ-ba (ITJ 750: 191).



neral ceremony for which people gathered (*myi ydus*) and a feast was prepared. The discrepancy between the information provided by the OTA and that of ITN 283/ITN 299 most probably results from the status of the deceased and his/her family. For a member of the royal family *btol* (in PT 1042 called *btol chen po*) could extend to one year, whereas for those members of society who could afford a funeral ceremony (still a small minority), *btol* formed part of the ceremony itself.

I think the decisive link between the reconstructed meaning of *btol* and the actual ritual performance is provided in a passage from PT 1287:

nam nam za žar / bcan po rje {stañs}²⁷ dbyal žig noñs na / thor to yphren (46) mo ni bčiñs / ño la mchal gyis byugs / lus la ni bžags / bcan po yi spur la nī ychog / myi la yphrog (47) [rl]om / zas la nī za ythuñ /
 'Forever and ever when a *bcan po*, husband and wife, dies, having *cut off* a leaning top-knot, smeared [his] face with vermilion, [and] made incisions on [his] body, [one] assembles around *bcan po*'s body, boasts about deprival towards people, [and] feasts (lit. eats and drinks) on victuals.'²⁸

This famous OT description of an imperial funeral ritual is presented in the text as having set the precedent for the funeral ceremonies of *bcan pos* but it rather depicts rites contemporary with the text composition. The part relevant to our investigation is: *bcan po yi spur la nī ychog*, lit. 'concerning the body of a *bcan po*, [one] assembles around [it]'. This concise clause confirms two rites that have been addressed in the preceding analysis: gathering of people and the fact that the body of the deceased (here: *bcan po*) must have been made somehow accessible to the funeral attendants so that they could assemble around it. ITN 283 and ITN 299 explicitly mention gathering of people (*myi ydus*) for *btol*.

All things considered, *btol* seems to have denoted the rite of revealing or exposing the body of the deceased before it was buried. This might have been done within a sumptuous funeral procession to the place of interment such as the one minutely described in PT 1042.²⁹ Prior to that the body of a member of the royal family rested for a while in a mortuary, where it might have undergone some special treatment (possibly embalming, see below) in preparation for the final burial ceremony.

The sequence of rites sketched above is confirmed in descriptions of imperial funeral rites transmitted in later historiographical works. Exposure of the body of Khri Sroñ-rcan (CT Sroñ-bcan Sgam-po) is described in the following passage from *Mkhas pa yi dgay ston*:

dar sman dañ sa sbyin la rgyal po yab yum gsum gyi sku bčos na bzay gsol te sku ybag stag pags kyi steñ du bžag nas šiñ rta la gdan drañs/ (KhG 1.288, ll. 16–8)

²⁷ For this amendment, see Bialek 2018a.2: 64ff..

²⁸ Most recently this passage was analysed by Bialek (2018a.2: 70ff.). For previous interpretations see Haahr 1969: 405, van Schaik 2008, Zeisler 2011: 107 & 158ff., and Dotson 2013: 269.

²⁹ Van Schaik (2008) suggested that there might be a parallel between the funeral rite of Tibetans and that of some nomadic peoples of Central Asia. He pointed that among the Scythians, Ossetians, and the Mongols the body of the deceased ruler was brought to all the tribes in a procession before it could be buried. From PT 1042 one can read that a procession to the burial ground was an important element of a funeral ceremony of the elites. However, for the time being there is no information on the kind of procession suggested by van Schaik, during which the body would have been presented to local rulers or petty kings.



‘When [one] had set (lit. prepared) the bodies of the three, the king and [his two] queens on [a mixture of] alum and a portion (lit. gift) of earth, having donned [them], [one] placed the masked ones on a tiger-hide. Thereupon, [one] put (lit. invited) [them] on a cart’

The corresponding passage from *Rgyal po bkayī thañ yig* relates:

rgyal brgyud rnam kyis yar kluñs smug ri ru // bañ so brcigs nas yab yum gsum gyi pur // gser gyis byugs nas dñul gyi gayur bčug / bañ soyi reyu mig dbus mar khri la bžugs // (Qo-rgyan Gliñ-pa 1997: 146, ll. 1–4)

‘Royal relations built a tomb in Smug-ri [of] Yar-kluñs. Then, [one] covered (lit. smeared) the body of the three, the father [and the two] mothers, with gold and placed [them] in a silver chest. [They] were sitting on a throne in the middle square of the tomb.’

Descriptions of deceased royal interred within a chest or on a throne can be found in other works as well.³⁰ They could be based on witnesses of those who opened and plundered the tombs after the fall of the Tibetan Empire. Whatever their historical value might be, the narrations concur with each other in the fact that the bodies were preserved: that is, they must have been deliberately treated with utmost care, including embalming.

BODY EXPOSURE AND EMBALMING IN POST-IMPERIAL TIBET

Now I shall consider the above preliminary remarks about funeral rites in the Tibetan Empire against the backdrop of certain customs as reported in historiographical sources and ethnographic studies. In one of the most important ethnographic works devoted to Tibetan funeral practice, Per Kværne (1985) argued that elements of earlier imperial rites have survived integrated into Buddhist or Bon religious framework. The following discussion is assumed to deliver substantial support to this claim. However, before I continue, an important qualification should be made: the evaluation of the available sources has yielded no significant distinctions in the character of funeral rites based on confession; Buddhists and Bon-pos share a great deal of their funeral rites although their symbolic interpretations may of course differ.³¹ Instead, the major factors influencing the character and scope of the applied rites are: cause of the death, age, wealth, political/social/religious status, and less commonly, sex of the deceased. Not dissimilar to imperial and also for post-imperial times, it is advised first of all to distinguish between elite and non-elite funerals.

It appears that reflexes of the ritual sequence ‘enclosing (*mkhyud*)–exposing (*btol*)–feasting (*mdad*)’ can be detected in the embalming of high lamas and the accompanying rites. Uebach’s pioneering study of a short but very informative treatise about embalming practice in Tibet authored by Pha-boñ-kha-pa (1878–1941; Uebach 1981) provided us with the first insights into

³⁰ See, e.g., Qo-rgyan Gliñ-pa 1997: 155f. on the body of ṽbroñ-gñan-lde-ru.

³¹ By Bon I mean the organised religion ‘of books’ that is witnessed on the Tibetan Plateau from about the 11th century, frequently using the term *gyuñ druñ bon* self-referentially (Kværne 1985: 3–4; Samuel 2013: 80).



the technical aspects of the procedure.³² More recently, two doctoral theses have been devoted to the embalming practice in modern Tibet (Owen 2009; Kunsel 2018) albeit they preponderantly focus on socio-religious aspects of the worship of whole-body relics. The studies demonstrate that embalming has remained a vivid tradition, at least among Tibetan Buddhists. In this religious tradition, the most important manual in use today is *Rdo rje sems dpayi sgo nas gañ zag khyad par čan gyi sku gduñ mčhod čin sbyañ bayi čho ga rin čen sgron me* by Thuḡu-kan Blo-bzañ Čhos-kyi-ñi-ma (Kunsel 2018: 139ff.).

Bodies of high lamas can be embalmed and either exposed to the public or concealed in *mčhod rten*.³³ The exposure takes place first after the process of embalming has been completed³⁴ and the body adorned. A presentation of the embalmed body of the 8th Pan-čhen Bla-ma is briefly narrated in Das (1902: 214). In modern times, embalmed bodies that are to be enshrined are likewise displayed to the public for a short time, usually three to seven days (Kunsel 2018: 115 & 151, fn. 291). The preparation of the body for the exposure is briefly addressed in Thuḡu-kan's manual:

khriyu čhuñ dra mig čan gyi steñ du bžugs su gsol / [...] khri zur bžir gduñ mi ŷgyel bayi čhed du rten gyi ka ba bži bcugs/ [...] (Thuḡu-kan, Rdo rje sems dpayi sgo nas gañ zag khyad par čan gyi sku gduñ mčhod čin sbyañ bayi čho ga rin čen sgron ma 2003: 106; trslr. apud Kunsel 2018: 151, fn. 292 & 294)

‘[One] let the body sit on a small throne with a net [-like seat]. [...] [One] erected four poles at four corners of the throne so that the body would not fall down.’³⁵

Skuyi gdoñs pa rjogs pa is a comprehensive description of the funeral rites of the 12th Dalai Lama Ḳphrin-las Rgya-mcho (1856–75) included in his biography *Lhar bčas srid ži gcug rgyan rgyal mčhog űur smrig ŷčhañ ba bču gñis pa čhen poyi rnam par thar pa rgya mcho lta bu las mdo cam brjod pa dwañs šel me loñ* by the 3rd Phur-lčog Byams-pa Rgya-mcho (2012: 805–99). It also con-

³² The text studied by Uebach alludes to a class of manuals called *pur čhog*, lit. ‘dead body ritual’, (see also Uebach 1981: 74, n. 21) that seem to have focused on the embalming process. One such text is now available on BDRC: *Pur čhog gi lag len phan bdeyi gtam sñan* (W29227) by Ye-šes Dpal-ŷbyor (1704–88). Unfortunately, the quality of the scan is very low, significantly hampering its study.

³³ Horne 1873: 34; Rockhill 1891: 288, fn. 2; Waddell 1895: 253, 268, 271; Das 1902: 256; Kawaguchi 1909: 393f.; Bell 1928: 295f.; Uebach 1981: 69; Rinchen Losel 1991: 175; Owen 2009: 71 & 147. A picture of an exposed mummy of the ‘Precious Lama of Shang’ (*šañ rin po čhe*, Snellgrove 1961: 37) in Tr’a-gyam (LT prob. Brag-gyam or Phred-rgyam; Snellgrove 1967.1: 52, fn. 1) monastery in Namgung (LT Gnam-guñ; *ibid.*, p. 2, fn. 3), Dolpo, Nepal, is reproduced in Snellgrove (1967.1, pl. 25). Waddell documented yet another custom: the embalmed remains of the abbesses of Bsam-lđiñ, Bsam-lđiñ Rdo-rje Phag-mo, which have been kept in a specially prepared chamber of the monastery (1895: 275f.).

³⁴ The purification of the body required a period of one year according to Pha-boñ-kha-pa, but three to four months for an adult according to Wylie (1964: 233). The period of three months was confirmed by Kawaguchi (1909: 393) and Yetts (1911: 725). The embalming of the Twelfth Dalai Lama took less than two months, from the 23rd of the second month to the second half (the exact day is not provided) of the fourth month (Kunsel 2018: 157ff.), whereas that of the Tenth Pan-čhen Bla-ma was close to four months (Kunsel 2018: 165). An extreme case has been documented by Owen (2009: 135f.); the desiccation of the body of Thub-bstan Luñ-rtogs Bstan-ŷjin Ḳphrin-las who died in 1983 took one year and seven or eight months. However, the whole process, including the treatment of the mummy after the desiccation (‘sculpting’, painting, and adorning), lasted four years (Owen 2009: 124 & 139). The length of the desiccation process might have been forced by different climatic conditions prevailing in India where his body was mummified.

³⁵ This strikingly resembles rites of exposure documented by Ramble in a Bon-po community from Lubra (see below).



tains important details concerning the exposure of the body after the embalment. The following summary of the respective passages is quoted from Kunsel:

[(After about two months of embalment – JB) mid-the fourth month to the 30th of the fourth month:] “Inviting” (*gdan ydren*) the body from the [embalment – JB] casket, it was brought to the throne in the Great Sunshine Chamber (*gzim čhuñ ñi yod čhen mo*); people from all levels of society came to pay homage to the precious body-relic (*sku dguñ* (read *gduñ* – JB) *rin po čhe*) of the Dalai Lama. [The 30th of the fourth month:] ‘Inviting’ the body to the empowerment chapel (*dbañ khañ*); it was decided to place the body there until the completion of the funeral stupa.’ (Kunsel 2018: 160)

When the stupa was finished the body was once more exposed publicly:

[The 6th of the first month of the following year:] ‘The ceremony of “inviting the body of the Dalai Lama to the funerary stupa” in the Potala Palace, attended by all the monks from Namgyal College as well as government officials.’ (Kunsel 2018: 160)

The body of Thub-bstan Luñ-rtogs Bstan-yjin Yphrin-las (1903–1983), after approximately four years of preparations, was presented publicly for the consecration ceremony and remained in public for five years (Sofman 2002: 60f.), after which time it was placed in Dalai Lama’s chapel in MacLeod, India (Owen 2009: 124).

It seems more than probable that the embalming of religious hierarchs is a vestige of the tradition practised already in imperial times. According to Bell (1928: 295), in his days embalming was also practised for ‘the members of the two or three noble families that can trace their descent for a thousand years and more right back to the days of these early kings’. One can find mentions of early Buddhist embalming practice in the *Blue Annals* of Gzön-nu-dpal with reference to Klu-mes (10th c.; Roerich 1949: 75), Yčhus-pa-gaň-po (11th–12th c.; *ibid.*, p. 905), Phag-mo Gru-pa (1110–70; *ibid.*, p. 563), Žig-po Bdud-rci (1149–99; *ibid.*, p. 141), Ten-ne (1127–1217; *ibid.*, p. 938), and Grags-pa Seň-ge (1283–1349; *ibid.*, p. 531). Khyuñ-po Rnal-ybyor (978/990–1127 (sic)) wished that his body would be preserved after his death, but it was cremated instead (*ibid.*, p. 733). Furthermore, the remains of Dkon-mčhog Rgyal-po (1034–1102) and Ykhon Yjam-dbyaňs Bsod-nams Dbaň-po (1559–1621) are called *dmar gduñ* (Wylie 1964: 236) which is a technical term for mummy (Uebach 1981: 71; Owen 2009: 7f.).³⁶ We see therefore the oldest embalming practice for Buddhist teachers confirmed as early as in the 10th and 11th centuries.³⁷

Embalmed Bon-po lamas are less frequently mentioned in the sources. Ramble (1982: 347f.) reported one historical case from Lubra: Yaň-ston Ybum-rje, the elder brother of Yaň-ston Bkra-śis Rgyal-mchan who founded Lubra in the 12th century. The case of Yaň-ston Ybum-rje attests to a deep history of embalming among Bon-pos too.

In imperial Tibet, the presentation of the embalmed and adorned body of the *bcan po* to the public must have been the climax of the embalment. I have argued that in OLT this rite of

³⁶ Some notes on the use of the term *dmar gduñ* (and its synonyms) in modern context can be found in Owen (2009: 7f.) and Kunsel (2018: 8f.), although the etymologies provided there do not seem to be correct.

³⁷ Other examples of early embalment are quoted in Owen 2009: 73ff. and Kunsel 2018: 61ff. In later times embalming has gained in popularity especially in the large Buddhist monasteries of Central Tibet. Mummies of highly venerated lamas have customarily been enshrined within *mčhod rtens*.



presentation was referred to as *btol* ‘revealing, disclosing, uncovering’. But *btol* was apparently performed for non-royal deceased as well (see ITN 283 and ITN 299) even though these were certainly not embalmed. I think that the nature of *btol* in non-elite funerals can be inferred from certain customs documented by ethnographers and travellers of the 19th and 20th centuries. To wit, it has been repeatedly reported that upon the death the body remained in the house for approximately three days during which diverse rites were performed.³⁸ After this period the body in a sitting position³⁹ was carried out from the house and accompanied in a procession to a place where it was disposed of. The body could be carried on a sedan-chair,⁴⁰ litter,⁴¹ or a bier,⁴² in a box or basket,⁴³ or on the back of a relative⁴⁴ or a hired man.⁴⁵ If the deceased was a high-ranking monk, his body was accompanied by a lavish procession;⁴⁶ otherwise the procession consisted of several priests and sometimes relatives or helpers.⁴⁷ Ramble has documented an interesting custom in the Bon-po community in Lubra, Southern Mustang:

‘On the appointed day, a bier (*ro bčug sa*) is constructed out of four crossed birch poles and the corpse is set in the centre. A framework of four short upright poles is erected around the corpse, with a fifth bound horizontally across the shoulders to represent the arms, and this is covered in clothing appropriate to the deceased’s sex as an effigy (*sob*, a term usually applied to stuffed animals) of that person. The head is formed from a large ball of wool and it is covered with a white scarf (*kha btags*) or any piece of white cloth. The face is represented by a sheet of paper on which features are roughly sketched in black ink. [...] the *sob* is further adorned with headwear indicative of the sex. In the case of a man, the crown-like ritual headdress consisting of five painted wooden leaves (*rigs lña*) is worn, while a woman is distinguished by the “shule”, a strip of thick cloth set with turquoises, coral and gold attached at the centre of the hairline and worn over the head and down the back.’ (Ramble 1982: 336)

When the deceased was an honourable lama, ‘[n]o *sob* is constructed, and the body is carried **exposed** but dressed in fine clothing, to the pyre’ (*ibid.*, p. 346; bold font added). The decoration of the deceased for the ‘procession’ from the house to the place of disposal recalls the adorning of embalmed high priests discussed above.

³⁸ See Cunningham 1854: 308f.; Waddell 1895: 488 & 490; Das 1902: 252; Hedin 1909–13.1: 369; Tafel 1914.2: 236; Fűrér-Haimendorf 1964: 228; Wylie 1964: 237; Brauen 1982: 321; Kværne 1985: 12f.; Rinchen Losel 1991: *passim*.

³⁹ For lamas or persons of higher social status a cross-legged meditative position was arranged (Wylie 1964: 235 & fn. 21). In contrast, the body of any other individual was usually forced into a hunched or ‘foetal’ position ‘with the feet together and the knees drawn up’ (Ramble 1982: 335 & 346; Martin 1996: 358). Less frequently, and apparently only for certain kinds of interment, the body was arranged in a position of a lying Buddha (Rinchen Losel 1991: 161).

⁴⁰ Brauen 1982: 324.

⁴¹ Das 1902: 254; Waddell 1895: 494.

⁴² Hedin 1909–13.1: 370; Kawaguchi 1909: 388; Singh 1933: 142; Ramble 1982: 336.

⁴³ Tafel 1914.2: 237; Skorupski 1982: 364; Rinchen Losel 1991: *passim*.

⁴⁴ Brauen 1982: 324.

⁴⁵ Horne 1873: 31; Bell 1928: 290; Fűrér-Haimendorf 1964: 230.

⁴⁶ Rockhill 1891: 287; Brauen 1982: 324.

⁴⁷ Waddell 1895: 494; Das 1902: 254; Tafel 1914.2: 237; Bell 1928: 291; Singh 1933: 142; Fűrér-Haimendorf 1964: 230; Brauen 1982: 324; Ramble 1982: 336f.; Rinchen Losel 1991: 164 & 172. Gouin (2012: 37ff.) provides an overview of ethnographic data on various forms of procession practised by Buddhist communities on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas.



In the Tibetan Empire, the burial of a royal person was finalised by a lavish feast originally referred to as *mdad* that followed after *btol* and was performed at the royal necropolis of Phyiñ-ba.⁴⁸ Thus, in the case of the members of the royal family the uncovering (*btol*) of the embalmed body was accompanied by a feast after which the body was interred. But funeral ceremonies of non-royals were likewise accompanied by a meal, as confirmed by ITN 283 and ITN 299 which are themselves registers of foodstuff delivered for a funeral repast.⁴⁹ Despite their brevity the texts leave no doubt that people gathered for the purpose of collective feasting, i.e. for the funeral repast. The very same scenario is depicted by Das (1902: 254):

‘At the time of its removal the relations make profound salutations to it. Two men carrying wine or tea, together with a dishful of *tsamba*, follow the bier. The family priest, or lama, of the deceased throws a *khatag* on the litter and walks behind at a slow pace, holding a corner of another scarf tied to it.’

An analogous sequence of rites has been reported by Filchner (1933: 402f.), Ribbach (1940: 230f.), and Brauen (1982: 325).

The data quoted in this section comes from historiographical and ethnographic sources that relate the custom of embalment from different regions on the Tibetan Plateau and its fringes. This material confirms how widespread the practice was in Tibetan-speaking societies. Apart from the Tibetan language of the societies which historically connects these to each other, two factors suggest one historical source for the embalment as presented above: 1. the technical intricacies of the procedure common to all treatments whenever a more detailed account is supplied; and 2. the ritual context of the embalment within a fixed set of funerary rites.

COMPARATIVE NOTES

By way of a summary, *Table 2* juxtaposes elements of imperial and post-imperial funeral ceremonies.⁵⁰

Table 2. Funeral rites of imperial and post-imperial times

Elite funerals		Non-elite funerals	
Imperial	Post-imperial	Imperial	Post-imperial
keeping the enclosed body in a mortuary	embalming		keeping the body in the house
exposing (<i>btol</i>)	exposing	exposing	exposing
procession	procession		procession
funeral repast (<i>mdad</i>)	funeral repast	funeral repast	funeral repast

⁴⁸ One such feast is documented in PT 1042.

⁴⁹ Brauen reported so-called ‘connection-lists’ (*ybrel tho*) which were prepared for members of a *pha spun*. These members helped to supply the household of the deceased with goods necessary for the funeral ceremony (1982: 323, fn. 12 and pp. 330f.). *ybrel tho* are records of goods the mourning family received and is obliged to give in return to the donor once a funeral ceremony is being prepared in his/her own household. The character of ITN 283 and ITN 299 as food registers for a funeral ceremony necessitates the question whether these could not have had a function analogous to the Ladakhi *ybrel tho*.

⁵⁰ Empty cells indicate the lack of data for the respective rite.



The patterns of rites uncovered in this study demonstrate the persistence and coherence of the ritual practice related to funerals across centuries. One is struck especially by the analogy between the first rites. Deceased royals remained enclosed in a mortuary (*riñ khan*) for reasons that are not particularised in the texts but can be inferred from the treatment of elite members of the society in later times. The embalment as a long-lasting process required separation of the body from the public and its ‘concealment’ in a distinct receptacle that had to be prepared each time anew (Uebach 1981: 76, ll. 1–2).⁵¹ According to the OTA, members of the royal family were interred one to three years after their death (see Bialek Forthcoming a). This time was certainly required to prepare the burial, including building the tomb, but it would also be sufficient for the body to be successfully embalmed. Among the royals, the preparations for the funerals of *bcan pos* took longer, two to three years, most probably because their embalment was carried out more carefully and with greatest precision.⁵² We recall that whereas Pha-boñ-kha-pa recommended one year of treatment, others spoke of three to four months. The difference is too significant to be accidental; it apparently reflects distinct degrees of accuracy in treatment, most probably related to the social status of the embalmed deceased. Embalming itself was available only to the most honourable personalities whereas any other member of the society had to resort to other means of body treatment for his or her deceased relative. It is therefore astonishing that the rite of keeping the body of the deceased at home for at least three days enjoyed such popularity. On this occasion the body was also treated in a special way: it was brought into a sitting position, swathed, and put into a kind of receptacle or in other way separated from the rest of the room.⁵³ These actions demonstrate conspicuous structural similarity to the treatment of the body during embalment.

Exposing the body (*btol*) was primarily related to the rites following the embalment when the body was adorned and presented to the public, to which aim it must have been raised on a kind of sedan-chair. The post-imperial reminiscences of this are apparent in the treatment of embalmed bodies that were exposed to the public even if soon afterwards they would have been concealed within a *mčhod rten*. This rite likewise recurs in non-elite funerals, in which the deceased, if not carried on the back in indigent families, is placed on a kind of bier in order to be brought out of the house and transported to the place of disposal.

No doubt, a body has to be transported to its place of disposal. A remarkable trait of all the ritual descriptions discussed above is that the transportation took the form of a ceremonial procession, in which the body was literally led by ritual specialists. A lavish procession of imperial times is documented in PT 1042 but post-imperial processions of religious personalities could be no less spectacular. The surveyed sources confirm that procession led by at least several ritual specialists seems to have been an indispensable element of any funeral disregarding the social standing of the deceased.

The last of the examined rites, the funeral repast, likewise recurs in all discussed types of funeral. There is however a certain amount of incertitude regarding its ordering within the temporal frame of the ceremonies. The imperial sources suggest either it formed part of or was closely

⁵¹ Yetts (1911: 725) mentions the use of ‘metal chests’ for embalming, but the source of this information is not provided.

⁵² It should be stressed, however, that none of the thus far discovered OT texts explicitly mentions embalment. Van Schaik’s suggestion that Or.8210/S.12243 could be concerned with embalming (2013: 252) results from a misinterpretation of some of the technical terms used in the text.

⁵³ A wooden receptacle can be clearly seen on Plate V in Kværne 1985.



related to the rite of exposing the body. On the basis of PT 1042 we may also surmise that not only one but several repasts were served between the exposure of the body and its final disposal. The same can be assumed for the exposition of embalmed lamas in post-imperial times. Reports on non-elite funerals of later times are less consistent on this point: some relate a funeral repast (or a series thereof) while the body was still in the house; some allude to a ceremonial repast just before the body was brought out of the house; and still others order it after the disposal. In general, however, the information on the funeral repast is rather scanty and inconclusive.

The persistence of the embalming tradition from the 10th century onwards confirms its significance and entrenchment in the religious landscape on the Tibetan Plateau, supporting the hypothesis of its early provenance. Importantly, embalming is not restricted to Buddhism but seems to have been adopted by Bon too, although the scarcity of ethnographic sources impedes the assessment of the extent to which it was practised in the latter religion. The lasting co-existence of embalming among religious (Buddhist and Bon) and secular elites speaks against the hypothesis that embalming might have been first introduced to Tibet with Buddhism. More significantly, if my reconstruction of the meaning of *btol* is accepted along with the interpretation of the passages from the OTA, then imperial embalment must be deemed attested as early as in 678 (Khri Mañ-slon-mañ-rcan) and 712 (Khri-ma-lod), but can also be reasonably assumed for Khri Sroñ-rcan in 650. Buddhist provenance of embalment would presuppose a profound impact of the religion on Tibetan funerary customs in a very early period for which assumption no independent support can be provided. On the contrary, texts composed in Buddhist circles in or around Dunhuang in the late 8th and 9th century, which concern funerary customs of the Tibetan elites, leave no doubt about the non-Buddhist character of the rites.⁵⁴ Moreover, funerary rites belong among the most conservative rituals in every culture so that pre-Buddhist roots of embalming on the Tibetan Plateau seem a reasonable hypothesis that, of course, still has to be falsified by archaeological excavations.

Embalming has been practiced by Buddhists in some other regions as well (China, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Japan, and Mongolia)⁵⁵ but there are no indications for its existence in ancient India.⁵⁶ It is not before the mid-Tang era that post-mortem application of chemical substances

⁵⁴ These texts will be translated in a study devoted to Old Tibetan funerary rites (see Bialek In Preparation b).

⁵⁵ Ritzinger & Bingenheimer 2006: 53.

⁵⁶ Demiéville 1965: 147. Ritzinger & Bingenheimer 2006: 37 also note the absence of the tradition in Sri Lanka. Their paper is one among a series of works published in the last decades and devoted to the treatment of whole-body relics, i.e. ‘mummified remains of a religious practitioner’ (ibid.), in various Buddhist traditions (see also Sakurai et al. 1998; Owen 2009; Kunsel 2018). Ritzinger & Bingenheimer concentrate on the examination of whole-body relics in China and conclude that the origin of the practice must be sought in Buddhist circles of Central Asia (ibid., p. 54f.). Although according to Chinese sources *cremation* was the prevailing mode of body disposal in Buddhist oases of Kucha, Qarasheher, and Khotan and, as far as we know, only the king of Khotan was buried in a coffin (Mallory & Mair 2000: 77 & 79). Ritzinger & Bingenheimer fail to consider the possibility of mummification and/or embalment as an indigenous practice of body preservation in Central Asia which might have predated Buddhism in this region. The so-called Tarim Basin mummies (roughly dated to ca. 2000 BCE to 700 CE) are the oldest known examples of mummification in the region. Although in their case the mummification is usually assumed to have occurred spontaneously due to favourable climatic and geophysical conditions (Mallory & Mair 2000: 81–4, 176ff., and Table on p. 132), we cannot exclude the possibility that the bodies were deliberately buried in environment that supported mummification, i.e. that they were intended to be preserved (I owe this perceptive remark to Cecilia dal Zovo; pr. com. 27.07.2021). Even though a considerable number of mummies have already been excavated in the region, it is beyond doubt that they represent only a small part of the communities that once inhabited the area. It might well be that the mummies represent the social groups that were treated in a special manner, whereas the bodies of the majority of people were disposed of in another way, for instance, by exposure.



in order to preserve the body is attested in Chinese sources but even then embalming seems to have remained restricted to religious personalities.⁵⁷ Parallel to the artificially induced embalmment of Buddhist hierarchs,⁵⁸ cases of mummification of laymen's bodies are documented from the Song and Ming dynasties.⁵⁹ Here chemical substances were not directly applied to the bodies but the coffins were covered with 'sticky rice paste/soup', a mixture of lime, yellow clay soil, sand, and sticky rice water that sealed the coffins (densely packed with clothing) and allowed the mummification. This treatment apparently enjoyed a long tradition since three mummies from the Warring States and Western Han periods discovered on the territory of the ancient Chu kingdom in East China were buried in coffins sealed with charcoal and kaolin clay, which, it is speculated, likewise facilitated mummification of the bodies in this oxygen-poor environment.⁶⁰ We see therefore that distinct techniques were applied in China for religious hierarchs and laymen but their technical details diverge from those documented for Tibetan-speaking societies (Ritzinger & Bingenheimer 2006: 41) to the extent that any influence can be excluded in favour of the hypothesis of two independent traditions, at least for historical times.

The problem of the origin of embalmment in Tibetan-speaking societies certainly deserves a separate study. For now we can only speculate that the elaborate treatment of the dead among the elites might have originally developed out of the wish to prevent rapid decomposition of the corpse if death occurred during warmer months of the year. Due to seasonal migrations, the prehistorical (semi-)pastoral communities spent the summer in higher altitudes whereas burial grounds were usually located in the valleys, in the vicinity of winter settlements. Elaborate techniques were therefore applied in order to preserve the body until it could be buried in the official cemetery of the community.⁶¹ The custom of mummification continued in the Tibetan Empire where it was apparently not related to seasonal migration anymore. This can be gleaned from the OTA which states that the dead from the royal family were preserved even if they passed away in the winter (Bialek 2021 Forthcoming).⁶² PT 1042: 82–7 prescribes that the burial should be organised within ten days between the 23rd day of the last autumn month and the 3rd day of the first

On the other hand, indubitably intentional post-mortem processing and mummification of the dead have been documented for the later Scythian period (7th–2nd c. BCE) in Southern Siberia (Murphy 2000). Closer to the Tibetan-speaking areas, Chinese historical sources report post-mortem removal of the brain and the five viscera from the bodies of Yangtong's rulers (Yángtóng 羊同, identified with the OLT Žaň-zuň; Beckwith 2011: 165ff.), suggesting intentional mummification (Tong 2016: 89). Our knowledge of these local practices is still very limited and it would be premature to conclude that they were historically related to or influenced each other. However, they attest to the existence of intentional mummification as a form of burial that must have predated Buddhism in the respective areas. It is conceivable that upon encountering the local traditions of embalmment Buddhists incorporated them into their own rites of Buddha veneration and subsequently developed towards a distinct tradition of whole-body relics.

⁵⁷ Ritzinger & Bingenheimer 2006: 69.

⁵⁸ Ritzinger & Bingenheimer (2006: 70, 84f.) mention some of the attested artificial treatments used in China, none of which is known on the Tibetan Plateau.

⁵⁹ Shin et al. 2018: 6ff.

⁶⁰ Shin et al. 2018: 10; Sakurai et al. 1998: 328ff. A similar technique of sealing outer coffins with mud is reported for several burials of the Ördök's necropolis in Tarim Basin, dated approximately to the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE (Mair 2006: 289).

⁶¹ This explanation has been proposed by Murphy (2000: 283f.) for the mummification practices of Scythian societies in Southern Siberia.

⁶² Seasonal migrations between summer and winter pastures of course continued in imperial times (as they do today) but, we may assume, hierarchisation of the society prevented the elites from personally partaking in the pastoral works.



winter-month (Bialek 2021 Forthcoming). This temporal framing might have originated in the times of seasonal migrations of the elites, confirming that burials were organised on the return to the winter settlement but before the soil has frozen. This scenario presupposes that the dead, at least among the elites, received social recognition that made them worth of being preserved. Eventually, preservation of the bodies was motivated by cultural values ascribed to certain deceased rather than by precaution of diseases or control measures for threatening interventions by the spirit of the deceased. For now I conclude that there is no evidence for Buddhist provenance of embalmment in Tibetan-speaking societies apart from the observation that whole-body relics have enjoyed a continuing popularity in other Buddhist societies of the region as well.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have sought to explain the semantics of the OLT *btol* by relating it to other presumably cognate lexemes and by exploring the cultural context in which it might have meaningfully functioned. I have reconstructed the primary meanings of *btol* as *‘to expose, to reveal, to uncover; to make visible/open’. From what has been said it appears that the lexeme underwent metonymy in ritual context. In the Tibetan Empire embalming seems to have been practised with regard to the members of the royal family. The final act of the embalming process consisted of revealing (*btol*) the embalmed and adorned body of the deceased to the public, possibly as an initial act of a funeral procession. Since in the case of royal persons the body exposure preceded a procession to the burial ground, the lexeme underwent semantic broadening to include the procession during which the body remained more or less visible to observers. In this sense the word was then applied to the rite of removing of the body from the house (= exposure to the public) and carrying it to the place of disposal (= procession) in non-elite funerals.

By quoting historiographical sources and ethnographic data I have sought to contextualise the term *btol* and to demonstrate that its semantic interpretation is not formulated in a cultural vacuum but receives substantial support from actual funerary customs practised by Tibetan-speaking societies to the present day. This is not to say that the practice of embalmment has remained unchanged or that no innovations or borrowings have taken place. The latter problems, undoubtedly worth being investigated, are beyond the scope of the present paper as they would require a more differentiated treatment of local variations. I hope to engage with this topic in a forthcoming study on imperial Tibetan funeral ceremonies (see Bialek In Preparation b).

ABBREVIATIONS

√	reconstructed verb root
<	‘developed from’
>	‘evolved into’
{ <i>ma</i> }	Tibetan text corrected to <i>ma</i>
[<i>b</i>]	Tibetan text reconstructed
[-]	paper damage or letters illegible
C	Čo-ne edition
CT	Classical Tibetan



D	Sde-dge edition
Eng.	English
GEN	genitive
H	Lha-sa edition
INTR	intransitive
ITJ	IOL Tib J
ITN	IOL Tib N
J	Li-thañ edition
LT	Literary Tibetan
N	Snar-thañ edition
ncA	non-controllable/absolute
OLT	Old Literary Tibetan
OT	Old Tibetan
OTA	Old Tibetan Annals
PL	plural
prob.	probably
PT	Pelliot tibétain
PTH	Proto-Trans-Himalayan
Q	Peking edition
S	summer
Skt.	Sanskrit
TR	transitive
trslr.	transliteration
U	U-rga edition
V	vowel
v1, v2, v3, v4	verb stems
W	winter
WAT	Western Archaic Tibetan



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APPENDIX: PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF *BTOL* ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY

Bacot, Thomas and Toussaint 1940: 34: ensevelit.

Thomas 1935–55/3: 143a: *ythol*, *btol*, *gthol* dig, bury.

Hoffmann 1950: 13: begraben; [v]ielleicht liegt dem Worte die primäre Bedeutung ‘bedecken’ zugrunde.

Lalou 1952: 356: l'enterrement.

Chang 1959: 125: to be buried.

Haarh 1969: 361: The vocable *btol* may be regarded as related to *gtol* and *rtol*, all derived from **tol*. From *rtol* derives *brtol* mentioned by H. Hoffmann in a sense identical with *phug-pa*, Höhle or Grotte. The principal significance of *gtol* or *rtol* is that of *placing* or *forcing one object into another one*, hence the verbal meaning of to pierce, bore, incise, etc. In *btol-ba*, as applied to the royal corpses, we may give two different interpretations, viz. an incision in the corpse in the sense of dismemberment or quartering of it, or the disposal of it within the particular *zañs* or *gayu* which served as a permanent receptacle for it, when finally it was placed in the tomb. The former alternative is not particularly far-fetched on the background of the obvious dissection of the corpse of the Nü-wang, which was placed together with gold-dust in a vase or vessel, just as the corpses of the Tibetan kings were placed together with vermilion in a *zañs* or *gayu*. The latter case does not necessarily provide a dismemberment of the body, but merely the necessary measures to bring the body into a condition suitable for its disposal in the *zañs*. Moreover the latter case agrees perfectly with the general meaning of the vocable. We are therefore inclined to regard *btol-ba* as a term comprising *the whole procedure connected with the disposal of the corpse in its final receptacle*.

Richardson 1998 [1978]: 87: [T]here is abundant evidence in the Annals that the bodies of royal persons were kept in a *riñ-khañ* (? mortuary chamber) for one or two years before the final burial ceremony called *mdad*. The word *btol*, perhaps referring to the taking out of the body after some process of preservation, is found as part of a general funeral ceremony in another Tun-huang manuscript [...].

Chu 1991: 110: corpse examiner; p. 22, n. 47: *btol* should be related to *rtol*, the basic meaning of which is to pierce, to penetrate, to cut open. *btol* in the Annals of Dun-Huang should refer to the ritual dissection of the corpse in the funeral, here (in PT 1042 – JB) *btol chen po* refers to the man whose specific duty was to preside over this ritual; p. 111: corpse dissection.

Cutler 1991: 45: After a suitable waiting period of about a year, the body is incised in some way (*gtol/rtol ba*, derived from the root *tol*, ‘to force one thing into another’ therefore, ‘to pierce, incise’), probably to allow it to be placed into the final receptacle, *zañs* or *gayu*.

Walter 1998: 67, n. 12: the basic meanings of the probably related *gtol* and *rtol* are: to open; to pierce; to perforate.

van Schaik 2008: to pierce.

Dotson 2009: 92: arrived (?) [at the end of the lying-in/embalming state]; fn. 174: The verb *gtol* means ‘to pierce,’ ‘to perforate,’ and ‘to open,’ but also ‘to find solutions or methods’ (Walter 1998: 67, n. 12). This latter meaning is found in the ‘Dialogue between Two Brothers’ (PT 1283 (1), ll. 149, 330, 463), where the meaning is closer to ‘ascertain’ or ‘know.’ In an Old Tibetan funeral rite, *btol* is found as a noun: *btol chen po* (PT 1042, ll. 100, 109) [...]. In the *Annals*, the *btol* occurs after the corpse – first as *spur* in 677–678, then as *riñ* ‘presence’ in 678–679, has been in enclosed or concealed *mkhyud*, indicating probably a lying in state and perhaps also referring to the embalming period. The *btol* is followed by the *mdad* in the next year, which I have translated with ‘funeral.’ The verb *btol* also appears in the entry for 712–713 following Khri-ma-lod’s death. Her funeral is held in the next year. One can only suppose from the context that verb *gtol* indicates the completion of the lying in or embalming period.

