

# THE FIFTH SEAL

CALLIGRAPHIC-ICONS / KALLIGRAPHIKONS

Paintings by Rolf A. Klunter

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## The Rañjanā Script

Written by Prof. Dr. Jens-Uwe Hartmann

Translated from the German by Prof. Dr. Ursula Heise

Indian writing has repeatedly gone through phases of rapid development. Over the centuries, multiple new types of writing, some of which differ considerably from each other, have evolved from the early forms of Brāhmī. The script called *Rañja* or *Rañjanā* (“pleasant, delightful”) originated in Northern India relatively late and therefore presupposes a long prior development of writing. In its final shape, it belongs to the most beautiful examples of Indian calligraphy. Its characteristic features are horizontal bars that begin as fine, pointed lines and then broaden out, as well as very fine downstrokes at the lower end of the letters that point downwards and to the right and are created by means of a quick rotation of the quill at the end of broad vertical strokes. Individual letters are rectangular and composed of clear strokes; they are highly ornamental without lapsing into excessive mannerism. Their particular appeal is due to the interplay of the severe, even geometrical arrangement of lines with the sophisticated alternation of fine and broad strokes. It is difficult for the observer to resist the sense of harmonious balance in individual letters as well as in the shape of the script as a whole, and this impression is quite independent of the observer’s ability to actually decipher the writing. Rañjanā, therefore, lends itself like no other script in Indian culture to detachment from its original function and deployment in other artistic contexts.

The script originated in Bengal toward the end of the first millennium A.D. It was used during the Pāla dynasty, under whose reign Buddhism in North-East India flourished for the last time, and spread from there to Magadha and Nepal. Since Rañjanā was one of the scripts used for Buddhist manuscripts, it accompanied both Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism not only to Tibet but also to Central Asia. Under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, it was used for Buddhist inscriptions even in China and Korea as early as the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1280-1367). Well-known instances are the bronze temple bell in Gae-seong, Korea, with an inscription of the Uṣṇīṣavijayādhāraṇī from 1346 (the easternmost example of Rañjanā), and the famous inscription in six

languages on the Quyongguan, a gate at the Great Wall not far from Beijing, which is also from 1346 and includes the same dhāraṇī (among others) in Rañjanā.

Rañjanā's relatively late emergence implies that it could not, as sometimes previously believed, have served as a model for Tibetan writing, which already existed in the 7th century A.D. Although later Tibetan historians referred to the Indian model for Tibetan writing as *Lan-tsa* or *Lan-tsha*, a phonetic imitation of the short form Rañja, this is nevertheless inaccurate; Rañjanā actually only came to Tibet considerably later. The same is true of a closely related form, the script called *Wartu* (from Sanskrit *vartula*, "round") in Tibet, which differs from Rañjanā especially in its rounded horizontal bars. Tibetans have traditionally considered *Wartu* the model for their cursive script, whereas the printed script was thought to be derived from Rañjanā.

In Nepal, Rañjanā was relatively quickly replaced by other scripts, but underwent a renaissance in the 16th century. This may have been principally due to its calligraphic nature, but certainly also because of its preferred use for ornamental inscriptions of mantras and bījas ("root syllables"). Rañjanā has been used for this purpose in Nepal up until today, and this is also its main function in the entire Tibetan cultural domain, where it is the only Indian script still in use to a certain extent. The well-known mantra *Om maṇi padme hūm*, for example, is usually written in Rañjanā on innumerable prayer-wheels of all sizes, and in many Tibetan temples between Ladakh and Mongolia, the colorful ceiling beams are decorated with gold-lettered mantras in the same script. Since the Tibetans translated Buddhist literature into their own language, they no longer used Rañjanā for copying Sanskrit manuscripts. However, in addition to mantras and dhāraṇīs, it continues to serve today for artistic Indian titles, which are sometimes added to Tibetan block prints of native Buddhist works to give them a particularly sacred appearance.

Rañjanā letters serve as the basis for a kind of monogram script whose letters are referred to as *Kūṭākṣara* (probably "heap syllables"). In this script, syllables are superimposed upon each other in such a way that the essential characteristics of the individual letters remain by and large intact, but coalesce into a single syllable on the model of ligatures in Indian scripts, without, however, dropping the vowels of the original syllables. Such complex figures can only be deciphered by the specialist or the initiate, and that may have helped their development, since they serve exclusively as a kind of shorthand for mantras and dhāraṇīs, which are esoteric

by their very nature and therefore encourage the creation of symbols that are not immediately accessible to everyone. The best-known example is the mantra of Kālacakra, called Namchu Wangden (rNam-bcu-dbangldan, literally “the powerful ten-part”) in Tibetan, which contains in compressed form the seven root syllables *ha, kṣa, ma, la, va, ra, yaṃ* and the three parts of the nasalization sign. These ten characters represent man and the universe, microcosm and macrocosm in complex symbolic form, and the individual elements can in this case even be differentiated by color so as to convey an additional level of symbolism.