

# Documents from the National Library of France related to the first Tibetan manuscripts in Europe and early Russian-French academic relations<sup>1</sup>

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The beginning of Tibetan studies in Europe is associated with the first Tibetan manuscripts found in abandoned Oirat monasteries in Siberia. The manuscripts were delivered to St. Petersburg, where no one could read or translate them. One of the Tibetan folios was published in *Acta eruditorum* (Mencke 1722) and subsequently, on the orders of Peter the Great, transferred to Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon (1662–1743), a member of the French Academy of Sciences and royal librarian, to identify the language and translate the text.<sup>2</sup> Bignon had to find scholars with the proper qualifications to carry out this assignment, and this task was eventually undertaken by Étienne and Michel Fourmont,<sup>3</sup> who only had the concise Latin-Tibetan dictionary compiled by Domenico da Fano at their disposal. The result of their work turned out to be nonsensical, though the fact of this translation gave impetus to Tibetology.

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<sup>2</sup> The decision of the Russian emperor is explained by the already established academic relations with France (see Fig. 1). During his second trip to Europe, which lasted from January 27 (February 7), 1716 to October 9 (20), 1717, Peter I visited France and Paris. He stayed in Paris for 43 days, from April 26 (May 7) to June 9 (20), 1717. On May 17 (28), the Tsar visited the Royal Library (now the National Library of France; Bibliothèque nationale de France), and the day before he departed from Paris, on June 8 (19), he attended the meeting of the Royal Academy of Sciences (Académie royale des sciences), where he met Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon, its president that year.

<sup>3</sup> For Étienne Fourmont's contribution to Oriental studies, see Leung-Hang-King 1993.

Recently, a team of scholars from Russia and France<sup>4</sup> has turned to this episode in the history of Tibetology within the project “Exploring the Origins of Tibetology: A Russian-French Collaborative Study of the First Tibetan Manuscripts in Europe”. The results of their work were published, along with this edition of *RET*, in two volumes of collected papers, *Tibetology in St. Petersburg* (Issue 2, 2021) and *The Oirats and Tibet: Historical Heritage and Modern Perspectives* (2022).

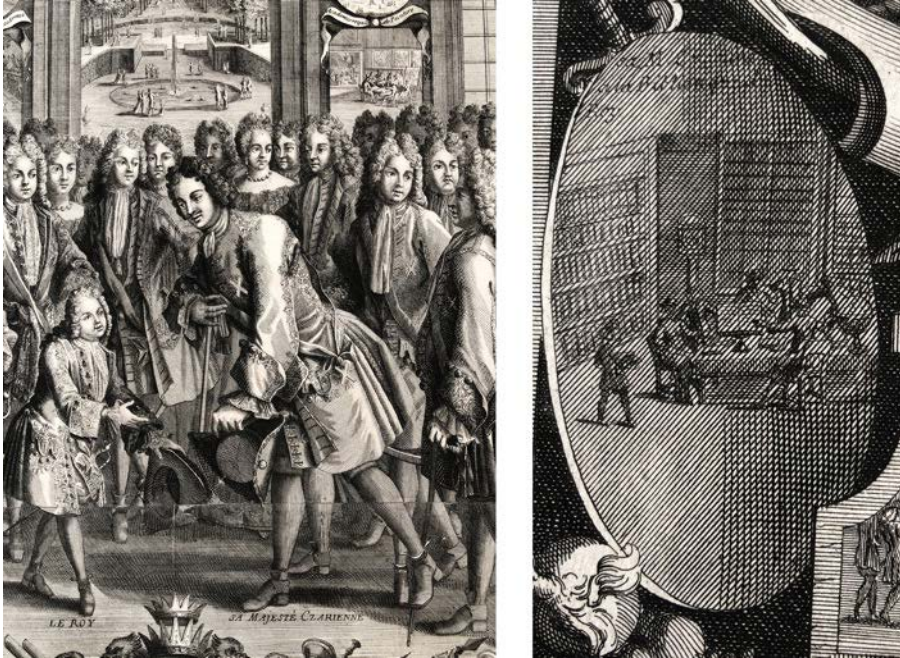


Fig. 1. Fragments of the Almanach for the year 1718 (Almanach pour l'année MDCC XVIII). On the left: The reception of the Tsar by the young king Louis XV. On the right: The visit of the Tsar to the Library

BnF, Dept. Estampes et photographies, Hennin, n° 7699.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr © BnF

The documents published in this article are associated with the two historical figures who played important roles in this story: Abbé Bignon and Johann Daniel Schumacher.

Bignon's memoir gives an exposition of the fate of the Tibetan folio in Paris, the circumstances of its translation and subsequent

<sup>4</sup> Besides the authors of this paper, Dr. Alexander Zorin (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Dr. Anna Turanskaya (Institute of China and Contemporary Asia, RAS), Viacheslav Zaytsev (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS), Prof. Charles Ramble and Prof. Marta Sernesi (École Pratique des Hautes Études) were involved in the project.

discussions. The text refers to Bignon in the third person, which suggests that he either wrote his memoirs in that style, or that the text is a summary of events based on his words, recorded by someone else. The memoir can be dated roughly to the beginning of January 1729: it was given to the addressee (presumably Bignon's secretary) on January 30, and it mentions that Michel Fourmont was at that time in Constantinople (his mission reached its destination on 4 December 1728).

Johann Daniel Schumacher (1690–1761), the Tsar's librarian, travelled in Europe in 1721–1722 performing various errands assigned to him. He was also the intermediary responsible for delivering the Tibetan folio into Bignon's possession. In addition to the letter accompanying the folio (dated June 18, 1722), two more were found among Bignon's papers. In one (dated March 2, 1723), Schumacher thanks Bignon for his kind reception in Paris, and in the last (dated February 8, 1725), he reports on the Emperor's death with expressions of condolence to all enlightened people, including, of course, the addressee.

Within the framework of the research project, we considered it necessary to draw attention to the importance of these documents for the history of Tibetology and present them again<sup>5</sup> with commentaries and a partial facsimile.

*Mémoire sur des fragments de livres thibétains  
envoyés à l'abbé Bignon par le czar Pierre le Grand  
[Memoir on some fragments of the Tibetan books  
sent to Abbé Bignon by the Tsar Peter the Great]*  
BnF, Français 22225, f. 48–53.

*Original text:*

<sup>48 recto</sup> Ce mémoire m'a été remis par M. l'abbé Bignon le 30 janvier 1729.

Pendant les guerres d'entre la Perse et la Moscovie, l'Armée de Sa Majesté Czarienne Pierre le Grand estant [campée]<sup>6</sup> vers Astracan, au nord-est de La mer Caspienne, quelques soldats s'avancèrent dans les terres vers le païs des Kalmouks, et dans les débris d'un veux chasteau, trouvèrent une espèce de bibliothèque.

<sup>5</sup> Bignon's memoir and one of the letters (the first letter dated June 18, 1722) were already published by Jean Porcher in a rare and hard-to-find edition containing a number of errors (Bavantola for Barantola, Chaparam for Csaparang, genre for génie etc.).

<sup>6</sup> Ink spots.

Les livres leur parurent d'une figure bizarre. La plupart estoient imprimez sur des papiers, plus longs que larges d'une écriture blanche sur un fond noir, et de plus d'un caractère absolument inconnu.

Les habitants de ces lieux, ou ne voulurent ou ne purent leur donner la dessus aucun éclaircissement, ils en prirent donc et en dépécèrent plusieurs feuilles, que l'on porta à Moscou par rareté.

Sa Majesté Czarienne, le Prince le plus curieux qui fut jamais <sup>48 verso</sup> consulta d'abord sur cette écriture les savans de Moscou et de Pétersbourg, mais inutilement, aucun n'en avoit vëu de semblable.

Ensuite elle crut devoir en faire part aux différentes universitez du Nord mais quoy qu'elles soient remplies de personnes illustres pour la connoissance des langues, il ne s'y en trouva non plus aucune qui connaît ce caractère.

Enfin une de ces feuilles fut adressée par le Czar luy même à Mr l'abbé Bignon. Tout le monde sçait qu'estant venu en France et à Paris quelques années auparavant, un de ses premiers soins avoit été de visiter la Bibliothèque du Roy, de se faire instruire du nouvel établissement qui venoit d'y estre fait d'Interprètes dans les différentes langues tant anciennes que vulgaires, et surtout d'y converser avec Mr l'abbé Bignon <luy-même> <sup>7</sup>, dont il avoit veu la réputation si répandüe dans les diverses parties de l'Europe ou il avoit voyagé <sup>49 recto</sup> autrefois l'Instituteur(?) alors et presque toujours le président des deux académies des Belles-lettres et des sciences.

Il jugea donc que c'estoit là ou nulle part qu'il trouveroit des savans qui le satisferoient au moins sur le caractère et la langue de ces feuilles si on ne luy en donnoit pas la traduction. Mr l'abbé Bignon receut ses depesches le 1-er aoust 1722. Il les montra à Mgr le Duc d'Orléans Régent le 3 et le jour suivant la feuille fut apportée à l'Académie par M. de Boze, s'estant trouvé à Versailles par hazard. Cette feuille lui fut remise pour estre rendue à Mr Fourmont, avec une lettre.

Mr l'abbé Bignon l'exhortoit, s'il en connoissoit les caractères a les deschiffrer le plutost qu'il luy seroit possible. Le Czar ne s'estoit point trompé dans l'idée qu'il avoit eue et des Interprètes de la Bibliothèque Royale et des Mrs de l'Académie des Belles-Lettres.

A l'inspection de la feuille Mr Fréret et Mr Fourmont <sup>49 verso</sup> reconnurent l'écriture thibethienne telle qu'elle se trouve encore aujourd'hui à Lassa, à Barantola, à Csaparang et en un mot le grand et le petit Thibeth.

Bien plus, un missionnaire revenu du Thibeth, avoit autrefois donné à Mr Fréret un Dictionnaire Italien-thibethien et sur ce Dictionnaire que Mr Fréret avoit prêté à Mr Fourmont avec quelques notes

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<sup>7</sup> Insertion.

grammaticales du même Missionnaire, Mr Fourmont s'estoit mis au fait des Principes de la langue Thibethienne comme de toutes celles qui sont voisines de la langue chinoise mais pour se servir de ce même Dictionnaire dans l'interprétation de cette feuille on estait dans l'obligation d'en changer l'ordre et de mettre le thibethien le 1-er.

A ce travail Mr Fourmont associa son frère l'abbé Fourmont, aujourd'hui à Constantinople ensuite il procéda à la traduction de la feuille dont voicy l'idée.

En général, cette feuille ne fait point un discours complet, elle avoit été détachée d'un livre dont elle avoit fait partie.

<sup>50 recto</sup> Mais pour le sens qu'elle présente c'est un morceau d'oraison funèbre; elle est tout a fait dans le génie Tartare et à l'orientale, il y a des répétitions presque semblables à nos refrains ou plutost a celles des prédications musulmanes, il y est fort parlé de la vie future.

L'auteur est persuadé de l'immortalité de l'âme et il en donne a ses auditeurs des preuves assez métaphysiques, par exemple il prétend que la Réminiscence du passé et l'appréhension du futur forment un argument égal, l'une pour l'existence passée l'autre pour l'existence future.

Les comparaisons qu'il employe sont la plupart prises du cheval qui est l'animal que les Tartares estiment le plus, et dont ils font le plus d'usage, etc.

Mr Fourmont, pour en donner une version plus juste, fit 4 choses: d'abord il transcrivit cette feuille avec les caractères Thibethiens,

en 2 lieu, comme le latin par la différence de ses inflexions se plie et s'ajuste facilement à toutes les autres langues, sous le Thibethien double, c'est-à-dire en caractères <sup>50 verso</sup> du Thibet et en lettres latines, il mit une traduction latine interlinaire et mot à mot.

3èmement en marge et à costé par une version plus ample et plus libre il fit entendre ce que le tour et le génie tartare pouvait rendre un peu obscur.

4èmement. A cette même version Mr Fourmont ajouta des notes soit sur le tems dans lequel il croyoit que cette oraison funèbre avoit esté composée, soit sur la langue et les caractères Thibethiens, soit enfin sur certaines phrases communes au Thibethien et au Chinois.

Cette version et ces notes furent faites en François parce qu'elles dévoient estre lues a Sa Majesté.

A Versailles, Mr l'abbé Bignon mena d'abord Mr Fourmont à Mr le Duc d'Orléans, Son Altesse Royale qui les attendoit ne voulut cependant voir cette Traduction qu'après que Sa Majesté en auroit entendu la lecture, elle fut faite à Sa Majesté dans son cabinet.

Mr Fourmont l'aîné, introduit par Mr l'abbé Bignon <sup>51 recto</sup> en présence de Mr le Duc de Charost, gouverneur du Roy, et de quantité d'autres seigneurs de la cour, eut cet honneur.

Sa Majesté écouta avec plaisir et la traduction et ce qui luy fut lu des notes c'est-a-dire l'historique, elle fit même et à Mr l'abbé Bignon et au S. Fourmont l'aisné plusieurs questions très spirituelles sur la Géographie du Thibeth, sur le reste de la Tartarie et le voisinage des Chinois, Mr le Duc de Chârost avec une politesse infinie représenta à Sa Majesté le Bonheur de la France de posséder des savans du I-er ordre, et combien le règne de Sa Majesté seroit glorieux si elle les honnoroit de Sa protection, il ajouta même que quoique le règne de Louis 14 son Bisayeul eut esté magnifique en tout, Sa Majesté voyoit dès ses Ières années une chose que le Roy Louis 14 n'avoit point veüe, c'est qu'au lieu que le Roy Défunt avoit envoyé lui même chercher des savans dans les pays étrangers on envoyoit aujourd'huy de l'Extrémité de l'Europe consulter ceux de Sa Majesté comme les plus habiles qui fussent au monde.

Le Roy répondit a toutes ces honnestetés avec une sagesse admirable, dit que c'estoit bien Son Dessein et congédia l'Assemblée de l'air le plus gracieux.

<sup>51 verso</sup> Mr l'abbé Bignon et Mr Fourmont rentrèrent dans l'appartement de Mr le Duc d'Orléans. Ce Prince en savant et avec cette familiarité qui luy devoit tous les gens de lettres prit la feuille Thibethienne, en considéra attentivement les caractères, fit sur leurs figures plusieurs raisonnemens philosophiques, examina la manière dont Mr Fourmont avoit rangé ses différentes traductions, voulut lire luy même la dernière et une partie des notes qui l'accompagnoient; on avoit porté à Versailles le dictionnaire Thibethien pour faire voir à son Altesse Royale qu'obligez de le retourner, Mr Fourmont n'avoient pu luy apporter cette traduction plutost et comme son Altesse Royale estoit très au fait du Chinois on s'entretint pendant quelque tems avec elle du Thibethien, du Chinois et de la langue des Tartares de Niu che, dont on luy dit qu'on avoit à la Bibliothèque du Roy les livres les plus superbes, enfin, comme dans ces notes il estoit fait mention des Descendans de Ginguiskan qui avoient subjugué depuis le Thibet jusqu'à la Pologne et sous lesquels par conséquent ces livres Thibethiens <sup>52 recto</sup> avoient esté ou apportez ou composez dans le pays des Calmouks, la conversation passa donc de Ginguiskan et ses enfans a Tamerlan, dont les descendans régnent encore aujourd'hui au Mogol et à l'occasion des uns et des autres on cita différens manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Royale qui contiennent leur histoire. Mr le Duc d'Orléans sentait mieux qu'aucun autre la difficulté d'une telle traduction et Mr Fourmont l'aîné, en philosophe, luy indiqua luy même les endroits qui luy faisoient encore quelque peine. Ce fut aussy dans le même goust que Mr l'abbé Bignon en écrivit à sa Majesté Czarienne.

Après avoir fait transcrire toute cette pièce, en Thibethien, en latin et en françois par le Sr Sohier, un des interprètes de la bibliothèque du Roy pour le Moscovite, l'avoir fait traduire en Moscovite même par le Sr Goussein, autre interprète, il accompagna ce paquet d'une lettre adressée à Pierre le Grand, Empereur de Russie, et pour répondre à celle qu'il avoit receue de luy le 1er jour d'Aoust 1722, il luy faisoit en peu de mots le récit de tout ce que l'on vient de lire et pour la traduction il luy <sup>52 verso</sup> marquoit que quoique les Interprètes du Roy eussent fort souhaité donner à un grand empereur comme luy toute la satisfaction possible sur une curiosité de cette nature cependant ils n'osoient se flatter d'avoir réussi partout. Le Dictionnaire qu'ils avoient de la langue du Thibeth n'estant pas fort abondant et la feuille thibéthienne ne contenant pas assez de termes pour faire de l'un à l'autre les comparaisons nécessaires, qu'à l'égard du caractère, Sa Majesté pouvoit estre sure que c'estoit celui du Thibeth, que comme ce pais n'estoit pas loin de ses états elle estoit plus à portée que personne d'en faire venir des livres, que c'estoit même une chose à faire parce que le Thibeth passoit pour un pais lettré et que les missionaires nous en avoient parlé d'une manière <sup>53 recto</sup> assez avantageuse, voila en substance ce que lui écrivoit Mr l'abbé Bignon.

*English translation:*

<sup>48 recto</sup> This memoir was given to me by Mr. Abbé Bignon on January 30, 1729.

During the wars between Persia and Muscovy, the army of His Tsarian Majesty Peter the Great was encamped near Astrakhan, in the North-East of the Caspian Sea; some soldiers advanced inland towards the land of the Kalmyks and in the remains of an old castle found a sort of library.<sup>8</sup>

The books seemed to them oddly shaped. Most were printed on paper longer than it was wide, with white writing on a black background and, moreover, in absolutely unknown characters.

The inhabitants of these places were either unwilling or unable to give them any explanation on the matter, therefore they [the soldiers] took out several folios, which they brought to Moscow as a rarity.

His Tsarian Majesty, the most curious prince there ever was, <sup>48 verso</sup> first consulted scholars in Moscow and Petersburg about this script, but in vain, since none had seen anything like it.

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<sup>8</sup> An aberrant reference to the finds made at the abandoned Oirat Buddhist monasteries (Ablai-kit and Sem Palat) in South Siberia; see Zorin 2015.

Then His Majesty thought he had to share it with the various universities of the North, but although they were filled with illustrious people knowledgeable in languages, none understood this script either.

Eventually, one of these folios was sent by the Tsar himself to Mr. Abbé Bignon. Everyone knows that when he came to France and Paris a few years before, one of his first cares was to visit the Royal Library, to be informed of the new institution which had just been made there of Interpreters in different languages, both ancient and ordinary, and above all to converse with Abbé Bignon himself, the then lecturer and almost always the president of the two academies of Belles-lettres and Sciences <sup>49 recto</sup> in the past.<sup>9</sup>

He, therefore, judged that it was there or nowhere else that he would find scholars who would satisfy him at least on the script and language of these folios if nobody could provide him with the translation. Abbé Bignon received his dispatches on August 1, 1722. He showed them to the Duke of Orléans, Regent [of France], on [August] 3, and in the following days, the folio was brought to the academy by Mr. de Boze, who had by chance found himself in Versailles.<sup>10</sup> This folio was given to him to be handed over to Mr. [Étienne] Fourmont with a letter.

Abbé Bignon urged him, if he had recognized the script, to decipher it as soon as possible.

The Tsar was not mistaken in the idea that he had of both the interpreters of the Royal Library and the *Messieurs* of the Academy of Belles-Lettres.

Upon inspection of the folio Mr. Fréret and Mr. Fourmont <sup>49 verso</sup> recognized it as being Tibetan script as it is still found today in Lassa [Lhasa], in Barantola, in Csaparang [Tsaparang], in a word, in Great and Little Tibet.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bignon was elected as a member of the Académie Française in 1693. He served as the president of the Académie des Sciences for most years between 1699 and 1721, and again in 1732 and 1734. However, he never held the presidency of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, which was led by a perpetual secretary ("secrétaire perpétuel"), not a president. In this latter academy, he was in a tutorship role ("une tutelle"), as noted in his biography (Fossier 2018a: 49). He held this position, under the authority of his cousin Jérôme de Pontchartrain, from 1691 (Fossier 2018b: 21).

<sup>10</sup> Claude Gros de Boze, keeper of medals at the Royal Library, friend and secretary of Abbé Bignon from 1706 to 1742. He was also the secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and member of the French Academy.

<sup>11</sup> The historian and orientalist Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749); he became the perpetual secretary of the French Academy upon the death of Gros de Boze in 1742. Barantola was a name both for Lhasa and Tibet used by early travelers. Csaparang [Tsaparang] is the capital of the ancient kingdom of Guge.



Moreover, a missionary returned from Tibet had previously given Mr. Fréret an Italian-Tibetan Dictionary<sup>12</sup> and Mr. Fréret had lent this Dictionary to Mr. Fourmont with some grammatical notes by the same missionary; Mr. Fourmont became acquainted with the principles of the Tibetan language, as of all those close to the Chinese language. However, to use this same Dictionary to interpret the folio, one had to reverse the order and put the Tibetan first.

Mr. [Étienne] Fourmont also involved his brother, Abbé [Michel] Fourmont, now in Constantinople,<sup>13</sup> in this work; then he proceeded with the translation of the folio of which [we] provide [here] the idea.

In general, this folio is not a complete whole, it had been taken out of a book of which it had been a part.

<sup>50 recto</sup> But, for the meaning that it presents, it is a piece from a funeral oration. It is completely in accordance with the Tartar genius and Eastern fashion, and there are repetitions almost similar to our refrains or rather to those of the Muslims; there is much talk of the future life.

The author is convinced of the immortality of the soul and gives his audience very metaphysical proofs of this, for example, he claims that the reminiscence of the past and the presentiment of the future all equally testify, the former for a past existence, the latter for a future existence.

The comparisons he employs are made, for the most part, with the horse, the animal that the Tartars esteem the most, and of which they make the most use, etc.

Mr. Fourmont, in order to give a more accurate version, did four things:

First, he copied this folio in the Tibetan characters and transcribed it.

Second, as Latin by the difference in its inflections easily bends and adjusts to all other languages, under double Tibetan, that is to say under <sup>50 verso</sup> Tibetan script and Latin transcription, he provided an interlinear word for word translation.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, a Latin-Tibetan dictionary. The missionary of the Capuchin Catholic Mission in Tibet, Domenico da Fano, worked in Lhasa in 1709–1711 and completed the compilation of the Latin-Tibetan dictionary, begun by previous missionaries. In 1711, he went to Rome to report on the affairs of the Mission. Upon his arrival in the autumn of 1713, he brought the manuscript of the dictionary with him. Here, at the request of N. Fréret, he made an abridged version of it. Passing through Paris on his return journey to Tibet (in December 1714 or January 1715), Da Fano handed it over to the scholar. The manuscript consists of two parts: the first, called “Alfabetto Thibettano”, explains the Tibetan alphabet, and the second, called “Vocabulario Thibettiano”, contains the Latin-Tibetan vocabulary. The dictionary is now kept in the National Library of France [BnF, Tibétain 542], along with a copy produced by Fourmont [BnF, Tibétain 486].

<sup>13</sup> About Michel Fourmont and his voyage to Constantinople in 1729–1730 see Gengler 2020.

Third, he separately provided a fuller and freer version to make accessible what was somewhat obscure due to the Tartar turn of phrase and genius. Fourth, to this same version Mr. Fourmont added notes, on the time in which he believed that this funeral oration had been composed, on the Tibetan language and script, and, finally, on certain phrases common to Tibetan and Chinese.<sup>14</sup>

This version and these notes were made in French since they were supposed to be read to His Majesty.

At Versailles, Abbé Bignon first took Mr. Fourmont to the Duke of Orleans; however, his Royal Highness, who was waiting for them, did not want to see this translation until after his Majesty had heard it. It was performed for his Majesty in his study.

Mr. Fourmont the Elder, introduced by Mr. Abbé Bignon <sup>51 recto</sup> in the presence of the Duke of Charost,<sup>15</sup> Governor of the King, and a number of other lords of the court, had this honor.

His Majesty listened with pleasure to the translation and what was read from the notes, that is to say, the history; finally [His Majesty] even asked Abbé Bignon and Fourmont the Elder some very sharp-witted questions on the geography of Tibet, on the rest of Tartary and the vicinity of China. The Duke of Charost with infinite politeness represented to his Majesty the happiness of France in possessing scholars of the first order, and how glorious the reign of his Majesty would be, if he honored them with his protection. He even added that although the reign of Louis XIV, his great-grandfather, was magnificent in everything, his Majesty saw from his earliest years one thing that King Louis XIV had not seen: while the late King had sent missives in search of scholars in foreign countries, today people were being sent from the extremities of Europe to consult [scholars] of his Majesty as the most skillful in the world.

The King replied to all these compliments with admirable wisdom, saying that this was indeed His Design, and dismissed the Assembly with the most gracious air.

<sup>51 verso</sup> Abbé Bignon and Mr. Fourmont entered the apartment of the Duke of Orleans. This Prince, being knowledgeable and with the familiarity that endeared him to all men of letters, took the Tibetan folio, carefully examined its characters, engaged in several

<sup>14</sup> While Fourmont's notes have not yet been found, the word-by-word and "coherent" translations were published in (Bayer 1730: 108–124) and partly analyzed in (Sizova 2021) with the use of Da Fano's dictionary. As we found out, the Tibetan script was misinterpreted by the translators in almost all cases, leading to errors even in literal translation. The absence of any information about the grammar and syntax of the Tibetan language made the prospect of a meaningful translation completely impossible.

<sup>15</sup> Armand II de Béthune-Charost (1663–1747).

philosophical reasonings based on their forms, scrutinized the way in which Mr. Fourmont had arranged his various translations, and desired to read for himself the latest one and a portion of the accompanying notes. The Tibetan dictionary had been brought to Versailles to show to His Royal Highness that, since he was obliged to return it, Mr Fourmont had not been able to provide him with this translation earlier. As his Royal Highness was very knowledgeable about Chinese, he had a conversation with him for some time about Tibetan, Chinese, and the language of the Niuche<sup>16</sup> Tartars, and they told him that the Royal Library possessed the most magnificent books. Finally, as those notes mentioned the descendants of Genghis Khan who had conquered from Tibet to Poland, and under whom, consequently, these Tibetan books <sup>52 recto</sup> had been brought or composed in the land of the Kalmyks, the conversation then shifted from Genghis Khan and his children to Tamerlane, whose descendants still reign today in Mogol [The Mughal Empire]. On the occasion of these and other facts various manuscripts from the Royal Library were cited that contain their history.

The Duke of Orleans understood better than any other the difficulty of such a translation and Mr. Fourmont the Elder, a philosopher himself, pointed out to him the passages which were still giving him some trouble. It was also in the same manner that Abbé Bignon wrote about it to his Tsarian Majesty.

After having had this whole piece copied in Tibetan, Latin and French by Sieur [Jean] Sohier,<sup>17</sup> one of the the Royal Library's interpreters for the "Muscovite" [Russian language], it was translated into "Muscovite" by Mr. Goussein,<sup>18</sup> another interpreter. He [Abbé Bignon] accompanied this package with a letter addressed to Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia, in reply to the one he had received from him on August 1, 1722.<sup>19</sup> He told His Majesty in a few words about everything that we have just read and for the translation, he <sup>52 verso</sup> pointed out that although the King's interpreters had wished very much to provide a great emperor like him with all possible satisfaction on a curiosity of this nature, however, they dared not flatter themselves that they had succeeded. The dictionary of the Tibetan language they had was not very voluminous, and the Tibetan folio did not contain enough terms to make the necessary comparisons between them. That with regard to the script, His Majesty could be sure that it was that of Tibet, as this country was not far from his lands, it was

<sup>16</sup> 女真 Nǚzhēn, or Jurchen.

<sup>17</sup> Translator from Slavonic, Russian and Polish at the Royal Library, author of "Grammaire et Méthode Russes et Françaises" (1724).

<sup>18</sup> Georges-Louis de Goussin (also: Gousin, Gouzin, Goussein), d. 1724/25.

<sup>19</sup> Bignon's letter was published in (Porcher 1938) and (Zaytsev 2021).

more within reach than any other to bring books from there, that it was even a thing to do because Tibet is considered a literate country and the missionaries had told us about it in a <sup>53</sup>recto quite advantageous way. This is in substance what Mr. Abbé Bignon wrote to him.

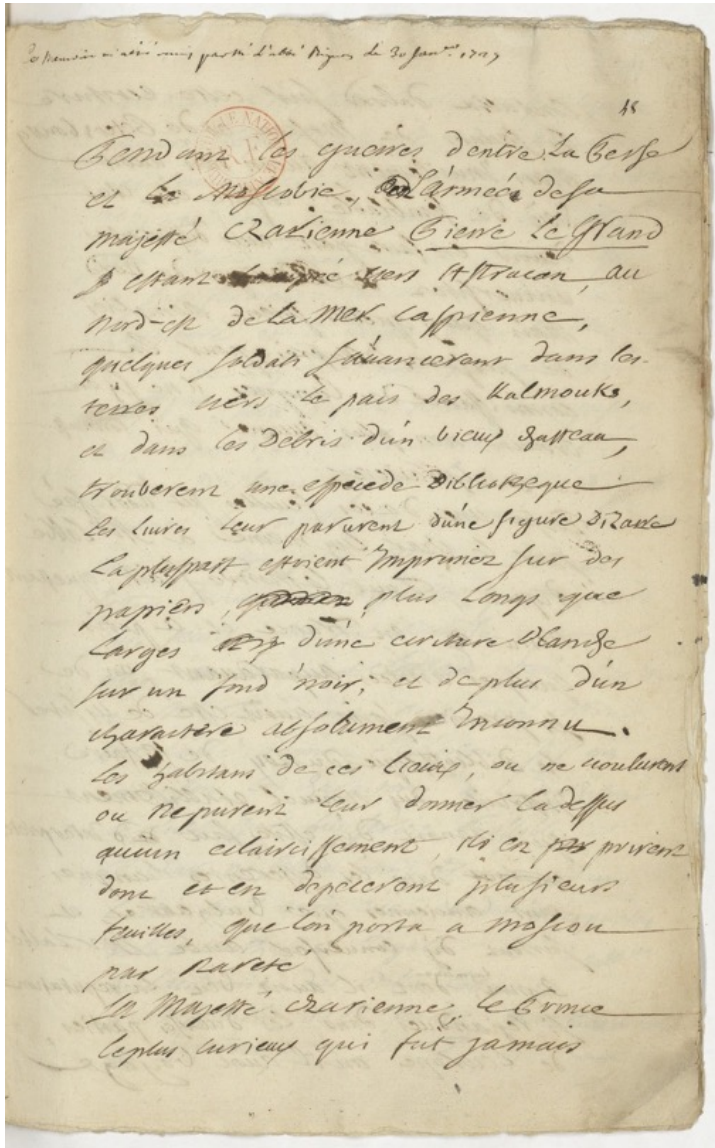


Fig. 2. Mémoire sur des fragments de livres thibétains envoyés à l'abbé Bignon par le czar Pierre le Grand. BnF, Français 22225, f. 48.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr © BnF

Three letters from Johann Daniel Schumacher  
to Mr. Abbé Bignon

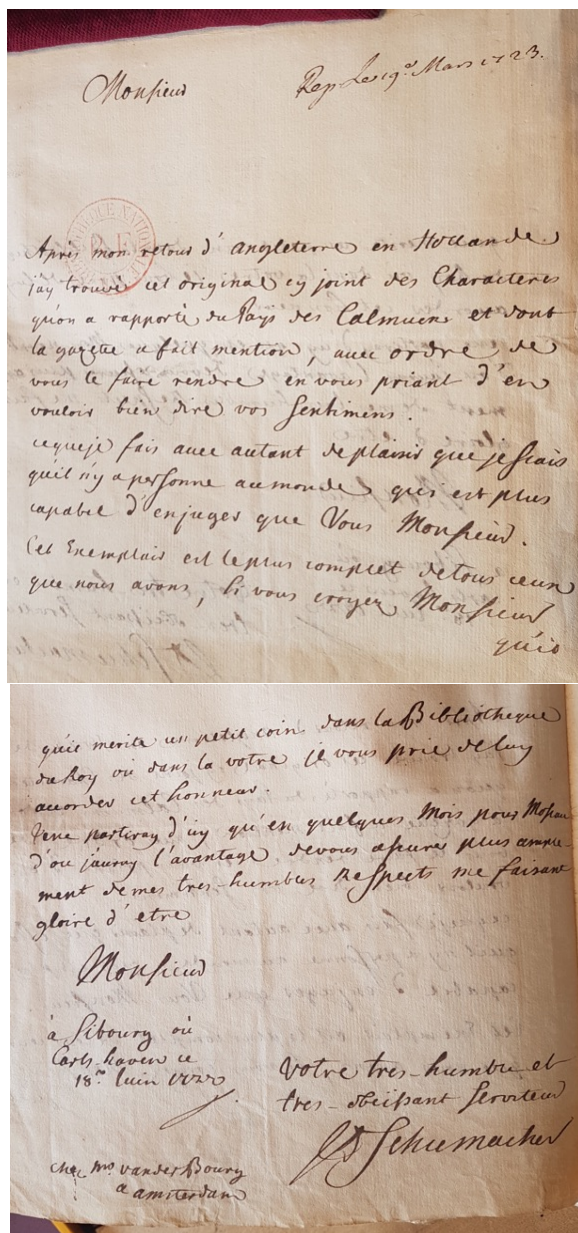


Fig. 3. The first letter from Johann Daniel Schumacher to Mr. Abbé Bignon.

BnF, Français 22233, f. 169, 170

Source: E. Garatti © BnF

*The first letter:*

<sup>169</sup> Monsieur,  
Rep[ertorié] le 19 Mars 1723

Après mon retour d'Angleterre en Hollande j'ay trouvé cet original cy joint des Caracteres qu'on a rapporté du Pays des Calmucks et dont la gazette a fait mention, avec ordre de vous le faire rendre en vous priant d'en vouloir bien dire vos Sentiments.

Ce que je fais avec autant de plaisir que je Scais qu'il n'y a personne au monde qui est plus capable d'en juger que Vous Monsieur.

Cet exemplaire est le plus complet de tous ceux que nous avons, Si vous croyez Monsieur qu'il <sup>170</sup> qu'il mérite un petit coin dans la Bibliotheque du Roy ou dans la votre je vous prie de luy accorder cet honneur.

Je ne partiray d'icy qu'en quelques mois pour Moscou d'où j'auray l'avantage de vous assurer plus amplement de mes tres humbles respects me faisant gloire d'etre

Monsieur

A Sibourg où Carls-haven le 18 juin 1722

Votre tres-humble et tres-obeissant Serviteur JD Schumacher

Chez Mr. Van der Bourg à Amsterdam

*English translation:*

<sup>169</sup> Sir,  
Listed on March 19, 1723

After my return from England to Holland, I found this original here attached with the characters that have been brought from the Land of Kalmyks and mentioned in the Gazette<sup>20</sup> with the orders to send it to you and ask you to share your thoughts.

<sup>20</sup> Gazette No. 42, Du 4 Octobre 1721. N° 42. A Paris: du Bureau d'Adresse, aux Galleries du Louvre, devant la rue S. Thomas, le 4 Octobre 1721. P. 485-496; Gazette No. 44, Du 18 Octobre 1721. N° 44. A Paris: du Bureau d'Adresse, aux Galleries du Louvre, devant la rue S. Thomas, le 18 Octobre 1721. P. 509-520. The first note states that, after returning to St. Petersburg, the people responsible for compiling a new map of the Caspian Sea for the Tsar reported the discovery, in the lands lying 150 leagues northeast of the sea, of 30 large stone buildings half-covered with sand. Inside, they found cabinets made of solid black wood containing more than three thousand books, bound in large volumes *in quarto*, written on a blue background in white letters. When they wanted to take away this library, the superstitious inhabitants of those places opposed this because they revered the building as a shrine and believed that taking the books away would



I do this with particular pleasure because I know there is no one in the world who is more capable than you, Sir, to judge [the matter].

Among all, this copy is the most complete we have. If you, Sir, believe that it<sup>170</sup> deserves a small place in the Royal Library or in yours, I ask you to give it this honor. I will only be leaving in a few months for Moscow from where I will be able to ensure you my humble respects.

Sir,

In Sibourg or Carls Haven,<sup>21</sup> June 18, 1722

Your very humble and particularly obedient servant Schumacher.

At Mr. Van der Bourg [Burgh]<sup>22</sup> in Amsterdam

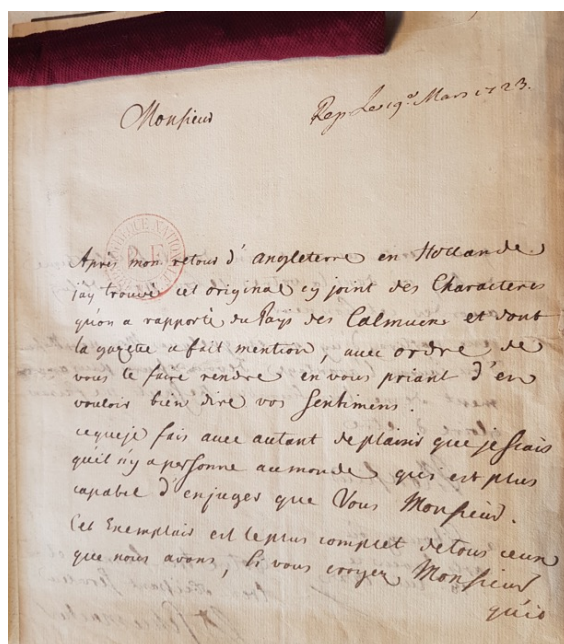


Fig. 4. The second letter from Johann Daniel Schumacher to Mr. Abbé Bignon.  
BnF, Français 22233, f. 167  
Source: E. Garatti © BnF

desecrate it. Russian travellers nevertheless found a way to steal three volumes. However, there was no one who could read these letters, and the Tsar ordered that the first pages of these books be copied and that these copies be sent to scholars in France and England. A second note, published two weeks later, provides more detailed information about the manuscripts and mentions other finds.

<sup>21</sup> At present, the German city of Bad Karlshafen. Schumacher visited Sibourg to discuss the perpetual motion machine with Johann Ernst Elias Bessler (Orffyreus) (Zaytsev 2021: 94).

<sup>22</sup> Johannes van den Burgh (ca. 1670–1731), a commercial adviser and agent of Peter I in Amsterdam.

*The second letter:*

<sup>167</sup> Souffrez Monsieur que j'ajoute ou plutôt reitere l'action des graces que je vous dois pour tant d'honnetetez que vous m'avez bien voulu faire pendant mon sejour de Paris. Je souhaitrais de pouvoir en temoigner ma reconnoissance par quelque petit service agreable dans ce pays-cy. Il n'y a que trois jours que soupire icy sous les travaux, jetois pour la pluspart parmy les tartares. Sa Maj. Imp. a ordonné d'en rendre compte à l'academie de ce que nous en avons apporté. Mr Blumentroot était encore tout <sup>168</sup> tout à fait dérangé des fatigues de son voyage fera ses remerciements à l'academie pour la lettre qu'elle m'a donné en reponse.

Pour moy, je n'ay rien de plus à vous prier que de vouloir m'accorder l'honneur de votre bon souvenir, de m'honorer de vos ordres et de croire qu'il n'y a personne icy qui les exécutera avec plus de plaisir et de rectitude que celui qui est avec ses respects les plus profonds

Monsieur

A S. Pétersbourg le 2<sup>e</sup> de Mars 1723

Votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur JD Schumacher

*English translation:*

<sup>167</sup> Accept Sir that I append or rather reiterate the gratitude I owe you for all the honor that you were kind enough to bestow upon me during my stay in Paris. I wish I could express my appreciation by [doing] some small services in this country. It has been only three days that I have been burdened here with work, and for the most part among the Tartars. His Majesty the Emperor gave orders to report back to the Academy what we have brought from [the trip]. Mr. Blumentrost<sup>23</sup> was still <sup>168</sup> particularly disturbed by the fatigue of the journey. He will thank the Academy for the letter provided as a reply.

For my part, I have nothing more to ask of you than to grant me the honor of your good memory, to honor me with your orders, and to believe that there is no one here who will carry them out with more pleasure and rectitude than the one who is [here] with his deepest respects

Sir,

In Saint Petersburg, March 2, 1723

Your truly humble and most obedient servant JD Schumacher

<sup>23</sup> Laurentius Blumentrost (1692–1755), the personal physician of Peter the Great, founder and first president of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (1725–1733).



*The third letter:*

<sup>171</sup>Monsieur,  
Rep. le 8<sup>er</sup> fe 12 avril

La perte que nous avons fait par la mort de l'Empereur de glor[ieuse] Mem[oire] nous devient de jour en jour plus sensible. Plus qu'on y songe, plus on en aperçoit la grandeur. Je plains le sort des gens de lettres qui y ont plus perdu que ceux de tout autre Etat. Quelle bonté n'a t-il pas toujours témoigné envers eux ! Et comme il avait une Estime toute particulière pour Votre Excellence, il est aisé a croire qu'Elle en fut plus sensiblement touchée qu'aucun de ces collègues. Dans nos malheurs cependant nous nous consolons que l'Impératrice a pris les renes du gouvernement. Elle fera tous les efforts pour la perfection des desseins que son antecesseur a tracé, surtout ce qui regarde les sciences. Sa Maj[esté] a écrit là-dessus une lettre tres-gracieuse à son ambassadeur le <sup>172</sup> le Prince de Kourakin a la Cour du Roy, et a ordonné à son Premier Medecin Mr. de Blumentrost d'en informer l'academie Royale.

On fait etat de faire icy les ceremonies des funerailles le 10 ou 12 de Mars. J'auray l'honneur de ramasser tous les papiers qui paroîtront dans cette occasion et de les envoyer à Votre Excellence. Au reste je suis avec beaucoup de respect

Monsieur  
De votre Excellence  
A St Pétersbourg ce 8r févr. 1725  
Le très-humble et très-obéissant serviteur  
JD Schumacher

*English translation:*

<sup>171</sup> Sir,  
Listed on April 12

The loss that we have endured by the passing of the Emperor of Glorious Memory becomes day by day more noticeable. The more we think about it, the more we can appreciate his greatness. I pity the fate of men of letters who have lost more than everybody else. What kindness he has always shown to them! And since he had a very particular esteem for Your Excellency, it is reasonable to believe that You have been particularly touched, more than Your colleagues. In our misfortune, however, we console ourselves that the Empress has taken the reins of the government. She will make all the necessary efforts in order to accomplish all the projects that her predecessor has traced, in

particular concerning the sciences. Her Majesty has written, concerning this matter, a very gracious letter to<sup>172</sup> Prince Kurakin, Her ambassador at the Royal court, and has ordered her First Physician, Mr. Blumentrost, to inform the Royal Academy.

The funeral ceremonies are reported to be held on the 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> of March. I shall have the honor of collecting all the papers which will appear on this occasion and of sending them to Your Excellency. The rest I do with great respect

Sir

For your Excellency

In Saint Petersburg,

February 8, 1725

Your very humble and obedient servant

JD Schumacher

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In conclusion, the article presents documents related to a pivotal episode in the history of Tibetan studies in Europe and the early Russian-French academic relations. The involvement of Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon and Johann Daniel Schumacher played a crucial role in solving the mystery of the Tibetan folios.

This historical episode underscores the importance of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations in advancing knowledge. The translation and study of these Tibetan manuscripts not only expanded the field of Tibetology but also nurtured diplomatic and intellectual connections between Russia and France. As this research continues, it reaffirms the enduring significance of these early academic endeavors in shaping our comprehension of Tibetan culture, language, and history within the context of European scholarship.

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