

The ‘Stranger-King’ and the Temple

The Tibetan Ruler Image Retained in Post-imperial Environments – the Example of the *lha* of Khra ’brug

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1. Introduction¹

There is a certain basic problem in the social sciences: on the one hand, one needs concepts and categorisations in order to organise and analyse the data; on the other hand, we cannot always be sure that the result will then capture the real world, or rather remain only consistent within these academical classifications. Religion is seen as such a critical category. Leading social anthropologists have taken up and further extended an old discourse about religion in recent years, which “questions the existence of religion as a discrete analytical category, one that can be expected to find and study across the whole range of human societies” (Wengrow and Graeber 2015: 597). One argues: “what we term ‘organised religion’ is a historical residue, left over from the collapse of Bronze Age states where sacred and political power were initially fused” (Wengrow and Graeber, *ibid.*). These anthropologists notice an inseparability for these “pre-religion” societies, where categorical oppositions usually associated with religion in academic applications, such as those between the natural and the supernatural, the ‘real’ and the religious, or even the holy and the profane, do not actually exist.² Both the constituents of the religious (the dealing with the metahuman beings in the widest sense) and the individuals that form the social are part of one and the same larger coherent whole, something which Maurice Bloch (2013b) proposed describing as the “transcendental social”.

For Tibet, this understanding is actually not that new: Rolf Stein’s concept of the “nameless religion” seems to point to a quite similar situation, where the religious existed as nothing separate but as something absorbed in the everyday mechanism of society-making.³ Yet this observation is not restricted to what is otherwise often termed the “folk religious tradition”, but is also immanent to core parts of the Buddhist system, most evident with protective deities. The *’go ba’i lha* here represent only one of the more prominent examples, where it is obviously insufficient to describe

¹ The present contribution is based on a paper given by the author at the seminar “The Social and the Religious in the Making of Tibetan Societies”, Vienna, Nov. 2018. The writing of this article was part of the TTT project P 30393-G25 financed by the Austrian Science Fund. (For TTT see References below.) I wish to thank Joanna Bialek, Christian Jahoda and Per K. Sørensen for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

² Cf. Bloch 2013b: 25, 29f.; cf. also much earlier Goody’s critical statements on Durkheim’s universal approach of “the sacred and the profane” dichotomy (Goody 1961: 157f.); cf. also Maddock 1998: 496-497; van der Veer 1998: 482f. and more recently the discussion in Strathern 2019: 4ff., *et passim*; see also below Chap. 6.

³ Stein 1993: 222ff.; cf. here not unlike Huber’s concept of “mundane rites” (or “rites for mundane goals”, Huber 2020, vol. 1: 14) or earlier Ramble’s “civil religion” (Ramble 2008: 11ff.).

the exchange with deities who are said to reside in the body of an individual (and in a broader sense in the body of the society) as part of religion. In Brandon Dotson's recent analysis of these deities' antecedents in Old Tibetan divination texts, we at the same time find demonstrated how an older model of human-divine interaction was transformed into a Buddhist concept – by changing its meaning, but not its range of social reference (Dotson 2017). This all opens a larger field of discussion: not only to examine the historical model that draws a line between the religious and religion (or book religion), but also to ask how and in what specific context older forms of socio-religious interactions were continued in the later period. My contribution addresses these questions through the example of ritual practices in the temple of Khra 'brug (spelled Tandruk) in Yar lung, namely those related to the deity at the centre of this cult, the *lha* Tshangs pa, which, it seems, includes significant elements of the older account of the Tibetan progenitor king. This relates to the contours of a “stranger-king” (Sahlins 2008), which we find addressed here and which we wish to present separately in the Appendix with respect to the accounts given in the Old Tibetan document PT 1038.

2. In Lower Yar lung: traces of religion and various ritual traditions in the imperial time

For imperial Tibet (7th-9th cent. CE), the source situation seems indeed to confirm the proposed distinction between the period before and after the appearance of religion, as it suggests that there was no religion designated by a specific name before the actual establishment of Buddhism.⁴ Yet this dividing rule should not be seen too strictly, as it does not necessarily mean the absence of any attempt at organising the religious in a more centralised form. Moreover, from the seventh century at the latest, components of a (book) religion formed a significant part of the intellectual history, where we find it combined with various ideas and practices related to the vision of political leadership long before the idea of a Buddhist king became reality.

⁴ There is a long discussion about this topic; see van Schaik 2013. It has been stated that designations like *bon chos*, the “Bon tradition / religion”, mentioned in Old Tibetan documents with reference to the (late) imperial period evidently came from the (critical) pen of a Buddhist author from that time. The statement in Text 84 of the *Stein Collection* Or.8210, Attached Paper recto, ll.3-4: *sngon cad mdad 'do (la) bon chos bgyis pa*, “in the former time, the funeral was practised according to the Bon religion” (SC 122-123) seems to be such an example of a commentary by a representative from the early Tibetan Buddhist milieu and thus is not to be understood necessarily as evidence for the existence of an older “Bon religion”. Cf. van Schaik 2013: 252; see also his weblog (van Schaik 2009), URL: <https://earlytibet.com/2009/08/24/buddhism-and-bon-iv> (accessed: 15.12.2020). Similarly, the Old Tibetan document Tib J 1746, which speaks of the non-Buddhist belief system(s) and their rituals as the “little religion” (*chos chu ngu*) is located in the same milieu. This is characterised somewhat dismissively but at the same time not inaccurately with the words: “Those who are attached to the little religion propitiate the deities and the sky, and if even a single good thing occurs, they say that they don't need the excellent religion (*legs pa'i chos*, i.e. Buddhism)”; van Schaik 2013: 232; bracket expression by the author, GH.

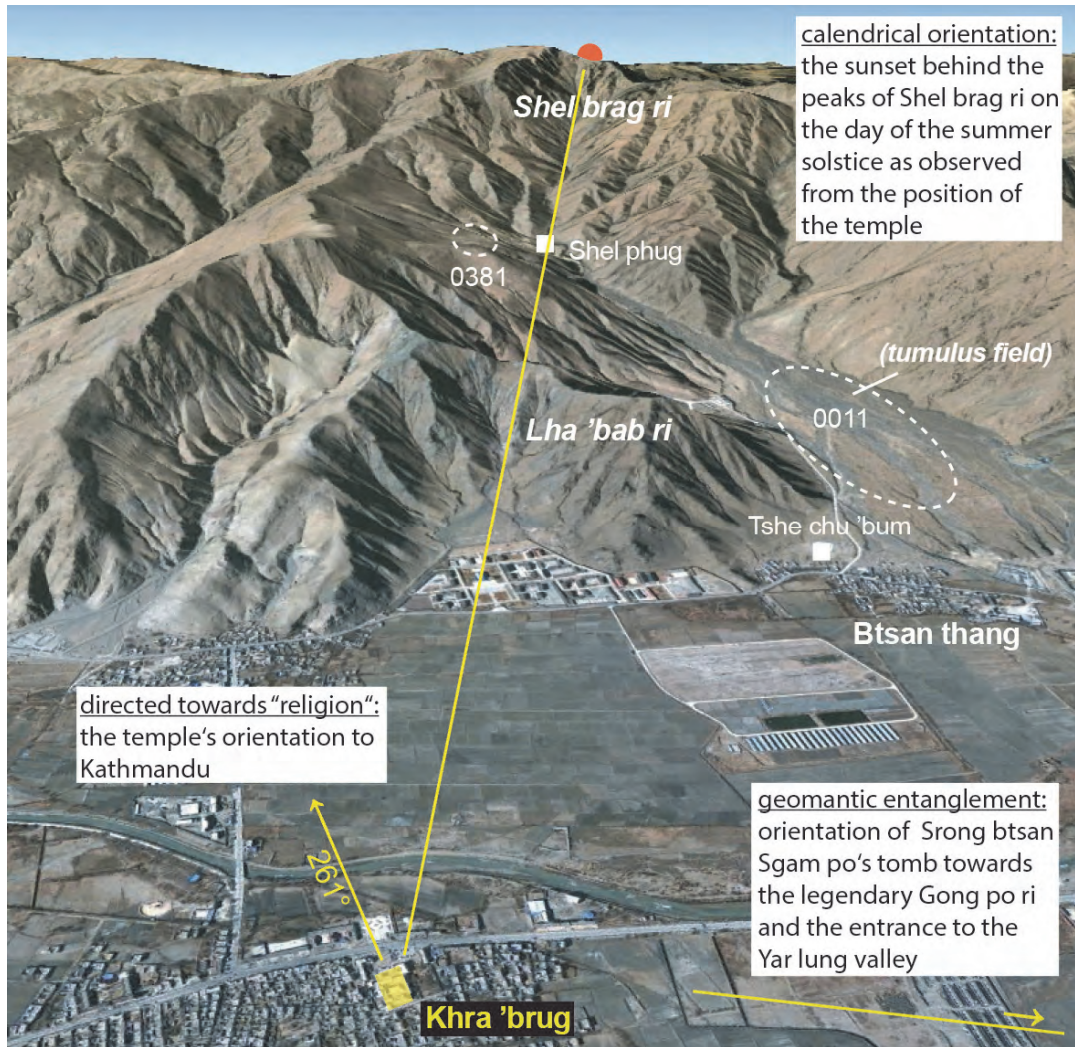


Fig. 1: In Lower Yar lung (Yar mda'): The spatial position of the Khra 'brug vihára.
(Map data: Google, Maxar Technologies 2014; modifications and additional data: G. Hazod 2018)



Fig. 1a: Ground plan of the Khra 'brug temple.
(Alexander 2008)

The illustration of Fig. 1 gives an idea of what happened in the mid-seventh century in terms of ritual practices and the political visions behind them. At the centre is the temple of Khra 'brug, which was most likely founded during Emperor Srong btsan Sgam po's second reign (in the late 640s),⁵ this means about 130 years before the founding of Bsam yas and the beginning of the monastic tradition in Tibet. There is some archaeo-astronomical evidence that relates to the temple's spatial position; this combines a complex set of different orientations, which cross each other within this small section of Lower Yar lung: the temple is precisely oriented towards Kathmandu, figuratively, towards religion.⁶ It still remains unknown how ancient astronomers and geomancers were able to make such long-distance measurements, and this across extremely difficult terrain. The same can be said of the geomantic entanglement, which a recent archaeo-astronomical study has revealed with respect to the royal tombs (Romain 2020). The grave mound commonly ascribed to Srong btsan Sgam po as well as the mounds of three successor emperors⁷ – all situated in the royal Mu ra grave field of 'Phyong rgyas – appear to be aligned almost exactly to the cave complex of the Gong po ri (Fig. 2),⁸ the famous mountain behind Khra 'brug, which in the founding story of the temple is ascribed a crucial position.⁹ This newly discovered geomantic indication still needs

⁵ Dotson 2009: 143. The temple is first mentioned in an eighth-century edict under the name Khra 'brug gi bkra shis lha yul gtsug lag khang (KG 372.11), later in the Buddhist tradition classified as Tibet's first temple; for its history see TF (Sørensen and Hazod 2005). As to the original layout of the temple, it has been pointed out that Khra 'brug was probably constructed as a multi-celled *vihāra* like the Lhasa Jo khang (Alexander 2008: 10).

⁶ This is related to the historical context, according to which Buddhism was brought to Tibet from Kathmandu, the Licchavi centre – reflected in the story of the invitation of the Nepalese princess Khri btsun (Sørensen 1994: 199ff.). The temple's orientation (261° west) refers to the view of the main statues through the entrance gate; measurements after Reinhard Herdick (FL 267). A similar orientation is ascribed to the burial mound of emperor Srong btsan Sgam po, or more precisely to the temple which was reportedly erected inside this mausoleum (Hazod 2016: 128). For further aspects concerning Khra 'brug's (western) orientation see recently Romain 2021: 51-52.

⁷ I.e. the tomb of Khri 'Dus srong (r. 686-704), no. VIII of Fig. 2, and the tomb of Empress Khri ma lod (r. 705-712), no. IX. Note that here the positions of the tombs nos. IX and XVII have been changed as opposed to earlier representations (cf. recently Hazod 2018: 73); this suggests a new reading of the relevant information in the sources, but still requires further clarification.

⁸ The plotted lines of the graves V and VII (Fig. 2) fall ca. 300m west of the peak of Gong po ri, with a distance of 27km (Romain 2020: 12-14). The situation is similar to the other two graves (VIII, IX); cf. Romain 2020: 15 (with a different numbering of the individual graves). At other tombs of Mu ra one finds further geomantic references, including the Shel brag ri, the mountain sanctuary on the west side of Lower Yar lung, which is closely associated with the legends of Padmasambhava and the beginning of the tantric tradition in Tibet in the late eighth century. The respective tombs which face the peak of this mountain are nos. XVI and XVII (Khri U'i Dum brtan and Khri 'Od srung); further entanglements include *inter alia*: Mount Yar lha Sham po (connected with no. X, Khri Lde gtsug brtsan, 35km distant) and Mount Gang pa bzang po (no. XIV, Khri Lde Srong btsan, 144km distant); Romain 2020: 20f., 28, 32; cf. also Romain 2019.

⁹ This concerns the tradition, according to which the temple's main statues, the Rgyal ba Rigs lnga, emerged naturally in a cave, i.e. the Klu 'dul Khyung gtsang phug ("cave – nest of the *khyung* bird, which overcame the *nāga*") on Mount Zo thang Mgon po ri (or Gong po ri) and were discovered there by the *dharmarāja* (Srong btsan Sgam po) during the time of the temple construction (TF 60-61). The same mountain is much

further verification; otherwise it would only confirm what is stated in classical sources, where the concept of such mantic calculation of territory is chronicled as having been introduced from China at this time.¹⁰

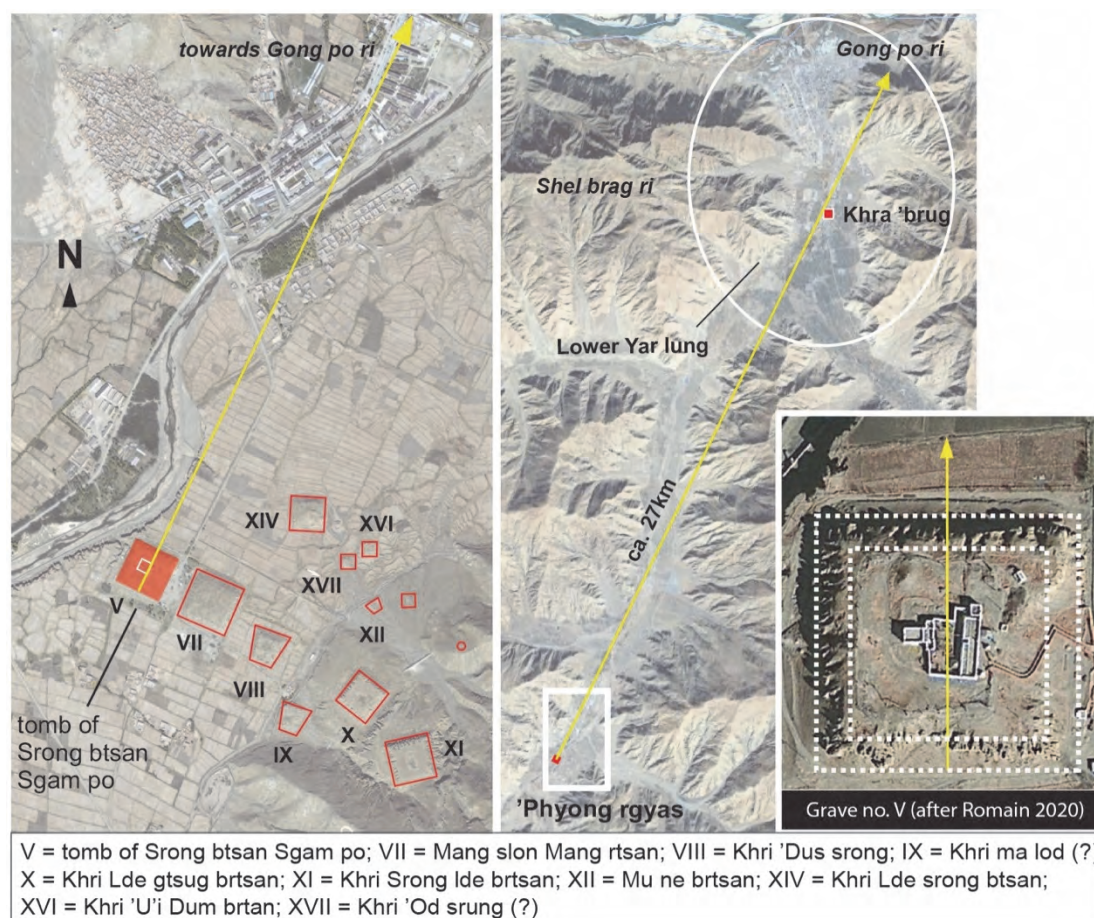


Fig. 2: The royal tombs in 'Phyong rgyas, section of the Mu ra grave field (0032 of the TTT database) and orientation of the tomb of Emperor Srong btsan Sgam po. (Map data: Google, Maxar Technologies 2014; modifications and additional data: G. Hazod 2020)

Much of what we see in this small section (Fig. 1) is also true on a larger scale: the two burial mound sites 0011 and 0381 are two of more than two dozen grave fields in the Lower Yar lüŋ (Fig. 3: red circles on the map); they are situated within the characteristic settlement pattern of relatively close proximity between the place of the living (villages, arable land) and the dead; we find this same situation across the Central Tibetan districts, which with their hundreds of tumulus fields, many of them with stately elite mounds from the imperial period, possibly represent one of

more popular as the place of the Monkey Cave (or “monkey cave of the fish skin”, Nya ko'i Spre'u phug; TF 107), i.e. the celebrated site of the Tibetan anthropogenesis (CFS 51-58), which is also included in Khra 'brug's ritual tradition (TF 257, 295).

¹⁰ For details see Sørensen 1994: 253f., 552-561; TF 171f.

the densest burial-mound landscapes in the world.¹¹ This tradition, in its own right a huge issue in terms of orientation and the ritual intersections of the social, goes back to the time before the seventh century, and thus originally had nothing to do with the idea of creating a temple for the emperor.

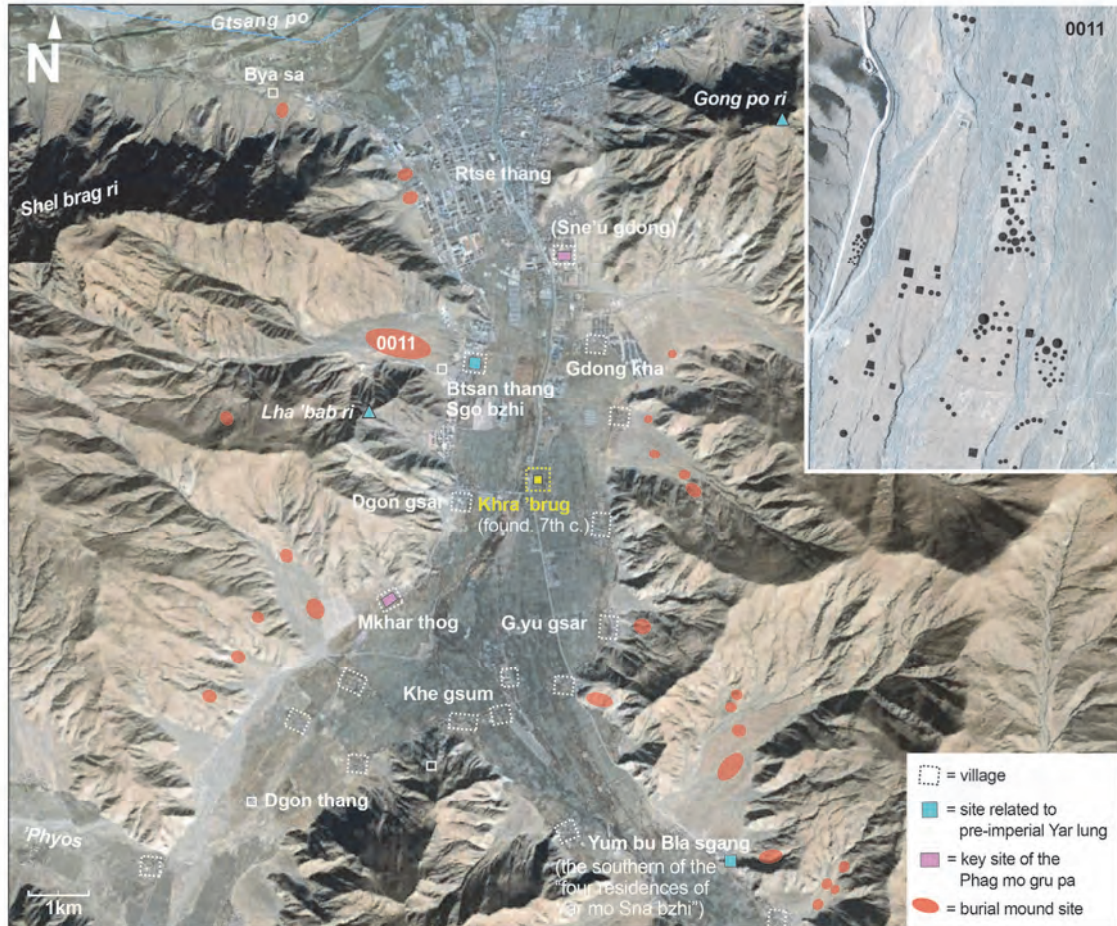


Fig. 3: The historical landscape of Lower Yarlung. (Map data: Google, Maxar Technologies 2014; modifications and additional data: G. Hazod 2018)

On the other hand, as already noted in our earlier Khra 'brug study, the position of the temple seems to consider the older ritual landscape, provided that our conclusion is correct in seeing that the line that connects the temple with the point of the sunset behind the famous Shel brag mountain on the day of the summer solstice was intended to connect the place with a calendrical orientation, perhaps one that was used locally long before the temple foundation.¹² This line crosses the “hill where the god descended” (Lha 'bab ri), a foothill of the Shel brag mountain range (fn. 8); it is to be identified

¹¹ See most recently Kriz and Hazod 2020 for the mapping of the sites' geographical position in the Horn regions of Central Tibet (current state of site numbers: 0001-0683); for details concerning the topographical setting and the issue of historical identification see Hazod 2018, 2019; see also the website of the Tibetan Tumulus project (TTT), URL: <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetanumulustradition>.

¹² Hazod 2005: 267, data after Reinhard Herdick.

with the place in Yar lung that sources describe as the spot where the ancestor of the royal family arrived after his journey to Earth. Based on further data from ethnography we indeed proposed observing a significant ritual place of the pre-imperial Yar lung behind this site.¹³ To put it figuratively, on the day of the foundation of Khra ’brug, ritualists and craftsmen practised, measured and hammered side by side to realise an evidently highly pragmatic vision of sovereignty that combined various religious and intellectual concepts.

3. The “stranger-king”

My interest here is in the god of the Lha ’bab ri. This evidently recalls the well-known legendary origin of the imperial dynasty, which says formulaically (in the opening of imperial inscriptions and in Old Tibetan documents) that the divine ancestor of the Tibetan royal family came down from the gods of heaven as lord (or king) of men. There are a few variants of this *rjer gshegs* (or “come as lord”) topos, as Nathan Hill (2013a) has summarised this legend, where the divine figure more precisely came as lord of the black-headed (*mgo nag*) and upright (‘*greng*), as well as the owner of the maned and bent (i.e. animals), or it says simply (in PT 1286): he came as the lord of all below heaven (*gnam mtha’ ’og gi rjer gshegs pa*; PT 1286, TDD 198, l.35), interestingly including the *lha*, so named in the pillar inscription at the ’Phyong rgyas bridge (*lha dang myi’i rjer gshegs te*).¹⁴

In a most inspiring essay, Joanna Bialek (2019) has analysed the specific variant given in the Dri gum account of PT 1287 (ll.52-53; ll.59-60) and in PT 1286 (l.31-32; l.42-43), which depicts the ruler as a life-giving kingly being who rules over the “patriarchs of the country” (*yul yab*), oversees the pastures and brings the rain of the “fathers of the Earth” (*dog yab*).¹⁵ Here the author identifies striking parallels to the attributions of Mithra in the *Mihr Yašt*, the fifth-century hymn of the Zoroastrian Avestas dedicated to this Iranian god.¹⁶ While it is exciting to consider not only

¹³ CFS 58-59, TF 222-223; and below Chapter 4.

¹⁴ OTI 13, ll.1-2; Richardson 1985: 38-39.

¹⁵ Cf. TDD 202, 198. In the two (almost identical) passages of PT 1286 (“catalogue of principalities”) the divine ruler is the ancestor Khri (/Lde) Nyag khri Btsan po, i.e. the Nya gri Btsan po of the Rkong po inscription, commonly known from the later chronicles as Gnya’ khri Btsan po who appeared in Yar lung, which the above-mentioned Lha ’bab ri refers to (fn. 13; and below Chap. 4). The often-quoted passage of PT 1286 (l.31-32) reads: *khri’i bdun tshigs kyI sras / khri nyag khrI btsan po’ // (32) sa dog la yul yab kyi rje / dog yab kyi char du gshegs s’o //*. Bialek (2019: 143) translates: “The son of the fourth one from among the *khris*, Khri Nyag khri Btsan po, came [down] to (lit. on) earth as a ruler over (lit. of) the patriarchs of the country, as rain [sent by] (lit. of) the protector of earth.” The last phrase *dog yab kyi char du* does not seem quite conclusive to me in this reading. I understand *dog yab* as a pendant to *yul yab*, as well as reading *rje* and *char* (PT 1287, l.59 reads *chab*) as corresponding entities: he came as lord of the *yul yab* and as rain for (lit. of) the fathers of the Earth. Cf. here similarly Hill 2013a: 169; see also Richardson 1998: 124; Haahr 1969: 312.

¹⁶ These parallels relate to Mithra as the god of contract, and related functions – protector of the country, bestower of water / rain, provider of wide pastures; Bialek 2019: 145ff. In addition, also the well-known “rider and horse” motif in the representation of the Tibetan good ruler (or “true ruler”, *rje bden*) image – the guarantor of the social contract between ruler and his subjects (or comitatus, respectively) in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* – possibly had its origin in the hymn to Mithra; Bialek, *op. cit.*, 151-152.

this specific topos but the “come as lord” motif in general as possibly being of foreign origin, the point that I see as even more significant here is the situation conveyed in the story, namely that it makes one believe that the society lacked a ruler; it was almost in a state of expecting such an overall kingly being who finally arrived from outside.¹⁷

This seems to be exemplary for a “stranger-king”, the theory originally introduced by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2008) as a framework to understand global colonialism, which means explaining why indigenous people subjugated themselves to an alien colonial power. This usually happened in a state of crisis where only such an authority from outside was conceded the ability to permanently solve problems. In a recent publication (Graeber and Sahlins 2016) this theory was further developed in seeing stranger-king formations generally as the most widespread, if not original, form of pre-modern kingship. In their self-presentation, such dynasties typically originated with a heroic figure “from a greater outside realm: near or distant, legendary or contemporary, celestial or terrestrial” (*op. cit.*, 5); the historical kings were imitations of this foreign being and in this way inherited its unrivalled authority, which explains the characteristic dual polity of ruler and subjects, with the latter having been the original owners of the country, who surrendered the rule to the “foreign king” (Graeber and Sahlins 2016: 5-7).

We find all of this embedded in the much larger concept of a “cosmic polity”, which sees the existence of sovereigns as a basic constant in human societies, even in small-scale or more egalitarian ones:

“Human societies are hierarchically encompassed [...] – in a cosmic polity populated by beings of human attributes and metahuman powers who govern the people’s fate. [...] these metapersons are endowed with far-reaching powers of human life and death, which, together with their control of the conditions of the cosmos, make them the all-round arbiters of human welfare and illfare. Even many loosely structured hunting and gathering peoples are thus subordinated to beings on the order of gods ruling over great territorial domains and the whole of the human population. *There are kingly beings in heaven even where there are no chiefs on earth.*” (Graeber and Sahlins 2016: 2 (emphasis by the author); cf. also recently the discussion in Strathern 2019: 107ff.; see also Langelaar in this volume)

Here we encounter indeed striking parallels with the situation of the Tibetan “come as lord” legend, and it is these characteristics of the cosmic polity, which also provides us with an explanation for the spontaneous acceptance of the ruling structures which, as it were, were realised within a long-known world of dependency on metahuman (*lha*-) beings.

It remains unclear when this form of sanctification of the Tibetan king was introduced, perhaps at the time when the *rjer gshegs* first appeared – in the inscriptions of the eighth and ninth centuries. This would mean that (similar to other borrowings, such as the term *’phrul gyi lha* from Chinese

¹⁷ The versions differ with regard to the composition of the group that received the lord, or also in whether the community had explicitly searched for a ruler or not. In any case, the stranger is always happily received (cf. also Ramble 2008: 313). For the various versions see Haahr 1969: 233-234, 291-293; Hill 2013a: 170-171, and Appendix below. It should be noted that this situation, according to which a regional group is looking for a ruler from outside and finally invites one, can also be found in the depictions of the later political history of Central Tibet (cf. e.g. the case of the Bug pa can pa in Yar stod, CFS 27ff.).

concepts) the “come as lord” represents a rather late addition simply to underline the unique quality of the emperor, which at the same time was used to indicate ancestry and consistently placed at the beginning of the dynasty. However, there are indications, albeit somewhat vague, that speak against this assumption: the representation of the *rjer gshegs* in the Kong po tradition combined with the story of Dri gum Btsan po’s burial there (in PT 1287, Hill 2013b) suggests that this legend was related to the beginning of the Tibetan tumulus tradition, which, as noted above, dates back somewhere to the period of pre-imperial Yar lung; and in this context I also wonder whether both the ritual specialists of the funeral, the *bon po*, who in later chronicles are described as having arrived from abroad, and the “come as lord” have their origin in the same (Iranian-influenced) Central Asian cultural milieu (Hazod 2018: 20; Hazod 2022). This would in fact rather point to a chronologically much older presence of the Tibetan “stranger-king” (see here also Appendix below).

It should be noted that the *rjer gshegs* account seems to be combined with an even greater story, according to which, with the arrival of the *lha* son, the tradition or custom of the gods (*lha’i lugs*) also came to the people. Thus it says in inscriptions, similarly stereotypically about the historical emperor, that his power was great etc., because he acted in accordance with the “custom of (his) father and forefathers” (*yab myes kyi lugs*); in parallel it also speaks of *gnam gyi chos*, with *chos* here having apparently the similar meaning of custom, the latter also specified as the “good custom of ancient principles” (*gna’i gtsug lagi chos bzang po*).¹⁸

I understand “custom” or tradition as an umbrella term for the social conventions related to the key institutions of the early Tibetan polity. From the seventh century this was the society of a typical Silk Road empire, which at its political core was based on the lifelong covenant of the lord and his entourage, summarised by Beckwith (2009) as the “ruler and his comitatus” order. If we trust the later chronicles, this entourage system was apparently already a key institution in pre-imperial Yar lung, where a selected group of six “paternal subjects” (*yab ’bangs*) took care of the body of the king, and were also buried with him, as noted in Chinese sources.¹⁹ In the same (later) chronicles this entourage appears to be directly combined with the “come as lord” account – namely in the version where the arrival of the king is located in Yar lung (see next Chap.). In older documents, we find this combination also addressed in the fragment of PT 1038, a text of which there are different readings in the literature (see Appendix).

4. The god’s arrival in Btsan thang Sgo bzhi

To come back to the “hill of the god’s descent” (*Lha ’bab ri*) in Yar lung, this place evidently

¹⁸ The examples quoted here refer to the two *rdo rings* inscriptions in ’Phyong rgyas (at the ’Phyong rgyas bridge, and at the tomb of Khri Lde srong brtsan; Richardson 1985: 38, 86) and to an entry in IOL Tib J 733, 1.20 (TDD 274), Bialek 2018, vol. 1: 585, 508, 400. See also Hazod 2014b for the contrast between “custom” and “religion”, and above fn. 4.

¹⁹ Cf. Hazod 2018: 17, 20–21, 26, 41 for references. In the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (PT 1287) they correspond to the six “clans” (named in pairs) that accompanied the lord in the “royal hunt” (Dotson 2007: 79), and in PT 1038 and parallel later sources they appear in the positions of minister (*blon po*), priests (*bon po*) and servants (*phyag tshang*). See Appendix below.

corresponds to the Lha ri Rol po (also Lha ri Yol ba) of the written accounts,²⁰ which is usually mentioned as the first arrival place of the ancestor (Gnya' khri Btsan po) in those Buddhist versions that link the origin of the Tibetan progenitor king with an Indian royal dynasty – identified with a prince (Rupati) and drawn as a typical “stranger-king” figure, who was, as it were, adapted to the Tibetan sky when he had fled to Tibet and descended to this Lha ri Rol po as Gnya' khri Btsan po before proceeding to the place called Btsan thang Sgo bzhi (situated immediately below).²¹

As is well known, in origin accounts that are commonly described as belonging to the “Bon po tradition” Yar lung is not the ancestor's first station on Earth; this was rather Mount Lha ri Gyang mtho in Kong po, from where he travelled to Yar lung over a number of stations, the so called “27 places of arrival” (all located in the southern region) – so according to the most detailed version of the *Yo ga (yi ge) lha gyes can* (one of the *Can lnga* texts, in *Lde'u-2*). There is also the short version: “First he descended to the peak of Lha ri Gyang tho, then he arrived at [the places of] Lha ri Rol po [and] Btsan thang Sgo bzhi.” (*dang por lha ri gyang tho'i rtse la bab ll lha ri rol po btsan thang sgo bzhi byon ll*; *KG* 159.15-16).

In Btsan thang Sgo bzhi (“four doors of the mighty plain”) he is welcomed by a group of 12 wise men (*shes pa mkhan mi bcu gnyis*, in some versions specified as 12 learned *bon po* or as a group of *bon po* plus the “six paternal subjects”); the classic (Buddhist) version has it that he was placed on a throne and carried on the shoulders or necks of the people, in a similar way as large statues are still carried in processions today (CFS 59; below Fig. 6).

One also finds this picture taken up in the local tradition when it says that the original families, the Btsan thang *sgo bzhi*, brought the Lord Gnya' khri Btsan po from the Lha 'bab hill to Btsan thang – to a temple that was under the care of the *sgo bzhi* and described as a forerunner of the famous Btsan thang G.yu'i lha khang, the latter classified as a branch temple of the Khra 'brug *viḥāra*.²²

It is highly feasible that this place on the west side of the valley (Fig. 3) was associated with the memory of special, historically relevant events from the earliest epoch, and may have formed the background for locating the “come as lord” legend precisely here.²³ Possibly the first version of this

²⁰ For this identification see CFS 59.

²¹ CFS 59; TF 219-223 and the references given there.

²² TF 102-103. As to the “four doors of the mighty plain”, such *sgo bzhi* toponyms are often described as crossroads for trades, related to the imports of substantial goods from the four directions (such as salt, iron; cf. Akester 2016: 49, after *Myang chos 'byung* 33; for other classifying uses of the term; cf. e.g. Karmay 2007: 222); but here, in the local context, the term is used to describe the four families originally resident at this place. It more precisely speaks of the Sgo bzhi lha khang, which was in the custody of these four families of Btsan thang; it later developed to become the Khang bgyad lha khang (“temple of the eight houses / families”) before it was renamed into Btsan thang G.yu'i lha khang (TF 103; for the temple's naming, see *KG* 145.3-6).

²³ In fact, there was apparently a residence of the early Yar lung House next to Btsan thang, listed as the oldest one in Lower Yar lung, founded still before the famous Yum bu Bla mkhar castle (cf. *KK* 84.8-11; *Dbal bzhed* 27b, in Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 98). It corresponds to the western of the four *sku mkhar* of Yar mo Sna bzhi (“four parts of Yar mo”), the latter a name for the area of Yar mda' (Lower Yar lung), where citadels were built on the four sides of the valley (FL 228-229). Other sites of the “27 places of arrival” (*gshegs rabs nyi shu rtsa bdun*) have similar associations with old ritual places, such as the Ri De'u of Gnyal (FL 220).

Yar lung arrival story already existed at the imperial time, in the immediate post-Bsam yas period, when the ritual landscape was fundamentally re-arranged, with the founding of the G.yu’i lha khang as one of these local extensions (TF 102).

Anyway, what we want to note is that this tradition conveys a certain image of community: both the *lha* in the midst of 12 wise men (or the variant, in the midst of the *sgo bzhi*) is an image of society at large. A similar model can also be found in Khra ’brug.

5. The *lha* of Khra ’brug and its invitation

The deity we are discussing here is the Conch-Crowned Tshangs pa,²⁴ a form of Brahmā (or Sita Brahmā, Tshangs pa Dkar po), who as the chief guardian of the Khra ’brug temple (*gnas srung ma*) and as *yul lha* (territorial god) of this area occupies the position of the leading *lha* within the local representation of what Buddhism classifies as the realm of the *’jig rten gyi lha*. It has been suspected that the ancient Phvya god called Tshangs pa, known from the later (11th century) *lha rabs* classification (in the *Yi ge lha gyes can*), possibly formed the model for the Tibetan naming of Brahmā, one of whose first links with the geography of the Plateau Lands seems to have been the Gnam lha Dkar po, the central mountain (and mountain god) in Nyang po district in eastern Lhokha, on the border with Khams.²⁵ The deity in fact seems to have been linked to such an older heavenly god position, namely so in the origin account of the Rlangs Lha gzig (evidently placed in Nyang po), where eight *gnam lha* brothers of the realm of Lha Tshangs pa formed the ancestral background of this family of the Rlangs Phag mo Gru pa.²⁶

²⁴ Tshangs pa Dkar po Dung thod can, or Tshangs pa Dkar po Dung gi thor tshugs can (“white Tshangs pa with the conch hair-knot”), a title which the deity reportedly received from Vajrapāṇi; cf. FL 275 and the references given there.

²⁵ Cf. FL 275-279, *et passim*, and Hazod 2009: 176 for a map of ancient eastern Lhokha (see also following note). A recent discussion on Tshangs pa is to be found in Huber 2020, vol. 1: 93-94 – in the context of the deity’s position in the *srid pa’i lha* rituals of eastern Bhutan. For some new aspects regarding the identity of Tshangs pa see also FitzHerbert 2016: 318-320.

²⁶ This is the story of the ancestral figure of the Rlangs Lha gzig, Mang ldom Stag btsan, who is said to have come to the land of the gods (*lha yi yul*) to save his endangered line. There he was accepted by the “seven *gnam lha* brothers” (*gnam lha mched bdun*) as the eighth brother, who advised him to meet the daughter of the *lha* Tshangs [pa], Sman btsun ma, and to produce offspring with her. The meeting took place in the Myang yul Gser mo region (evidently the Myang yul (Nyang yul / po) in eastern Central Tibet (with Gser mo being possibly a misspelling of Se mo, cf. parallel to the names of the old principalities of Dags yul Se mo, Rngegs yul Se mo; for *se mo* (also *se mo gru bzhi*) in this context see Bialek 2018: 582-586; Hazod 2018: 10-11) – in the area “nine passes and nine valleys” (*la dgu lung dgu*), which is probably based on the La dgu Lung dgu from Brag gsum mtsho (at the foot of the Gnam lha Dkar po), a central area of the Gesar epic, and, as we believe, probably also the area of origin of the Tshangs pa Dkar po in his function as the heavenly father of Gesar (Hazod 2006). From this connection comes the actual ancestor of the Rlangs family, who was connected to Tshangs pa not only through the mother, but also through the paternal line: although not explicitly noted, Mang ldom Stag btsan himself (as also his brothers) appears to have been a descendant of the *lha* Tshangs pa, at least he comes from the latter’s heavenly realm, indicated by the Brahmā’s mount, the “white goose with turquoise wings” (*ngang dkar g.yu gshog*) with whom the hero (in his position as *gnam lha*) was under way during his military campaigns (*Rlangs* 12.19; for the identification of the goose as the vehicle (or one of the vehicles) of Brahmā see TF 156-57; for the *ngang pa*

What made Tshangs pa Dung thod can a deity of supra-regional if not “national” importance in post-imperial Tibet was the attribution of being the *skyes lha* (birth god) of the founder king Srong btsan Sgam po, something which also seems to explain why in a later context this *lha* appears as first ranked among the oracle deities regularly consulted by the Ganden Phodrang government.²⁷



Fig. 4: Tshangs pa Dkar po Dung gi thor tshugs can kept in the Tshangs pa lcog of the Khra 'brug temple. (Photo: G. Hazod 2001)

This position of Tshangs pa as a life-giving deity was probably a fabrication from the eleventh-century milieu of the emperor's birthplace (in Rgya ma, at the Skyid chu), but this is here a secondary question.²⁸ In the self-perception of the Khra 'brug internal cultic tradition, the deity arrived at this place together with the founder king,²⁹ who is said to have been offered the place to

representation in Khra 'brug – a dough figure in the *klu khang* of the temple see below Chap. 6). It is interesting that Mang ldom Stag btsan speaks of his kinship position as being the youngest of the five elder ones of the eight *gnam lha* brothers, and the eldest of the four younger ones (*nga gnam lha mched brgyad kyi che ba lnga'i chung ba yin / chung ba bzhi'i che ba yin l*) (*Rlangs* 14.18-20; Czaja 2013: 38; Langelaar 2021). This is reminiscent of the well-known situation of the seven Yab lha Bdag drug sons, of whom the middle son (Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs) came to Earth as the ancestor of the Tibetan kings. A conscious reference to this concept of the Phyva origin of the progenitor king can be assumed here (see Appendix below), and thus also the adoption of the idea of a “stranger-king”-like origin, the latter underlined by the statement that the *Rlangs* progenitor did not look like a human descendant, but like the son of a *lha* (*mi'i bu mi 'dra lha'i sras 'dra ba*) (*Rlangs* 16.5; Czaja 2013: 38; Langelaar 2021).

²⁷ FL 236, 278, 289; Smith 2001: 141 (the latter referring to the interesting situation that oracles possessed by the same deity did not necessarily give identical answers – as in the case of inquiries in connection with the search for the Eighth Dalai Lama).

²⁸ For the presence of Tshangs pa at the Skyid chu (in La mo and in the birth story of Srong btsan Sgam po etc.) see FL 233, 235-36; see also Hazod 2014a.

²⁹ Cf. *Tshangs pa mchod bstod* 36a (= *Text F* in TF 165)

construct the temple by the local community represented by the Khra 'brug *sgo bzhi*;³⁰ the royal court (Srong btsan Sgam po, his consort and the ministers) as it were took a seat in the middle of the village community for the time of the temple's construction, to which certain symbolic representations, such as the hearth of the Kong jo refer (FL 256).

This situation also explains the involvement of the lay community in the ritual of invitation of the deity and its presentation to the public on the occasion of the great annual festivals. Above all this refers to the spectacular Flower Offering (*Me tog Mchod pa*) held on the fifteenth of the fifth



Fig. 5: The Mkhar thog pa in front of the Tshangs pa house (Tshangs pa lcog) on the roof of the temple: invitation of the *lha* Tshangs pa on the morning of the first day of the Khra 'brug *Me tog Mchod pa*. (Photo: G. Hazod 2001)

month (the time of the summer solstice), which is combined with a great public 'cham performance at which the local political leadership was traditionally present and which ended with a great offering of presents by the lay population.³¹ The festival is described in later sources as the post-imperial successor of the "Three Basket Offerings", reportedly introduced in the early ninth century at the three key *dharmacakra* sites (*chos 'khor gnas gsum*, i.e. Lhasa, Bsam yas and Khra 'brug), where

³⁰ This is according to the local founding story; see for details FL 253, *et passim*. The Khra 'brug *sgo bzhi* refer to four families of Khra 'brug village, whose ancestors are said to have lived here at the time when the temple was constructed. Their place in the village, which has more or less disappeared since the renovations in recent years, was part of the complex ritual architecture of the temple, which took its significant shape in the early days of the Lhasa Central Government (Ganden Phodrang).

³¹ See for details FL 290-294.

as part of a celebrating of the Tripitaka for the first time the lay population was also involved as the giver of certain offerings.³²

In Khra 'brug, the task of a selected group of village people known as the Mkhar thog pa was to invite the *lha* Tshangs pa to this place and then to carry the deity from his residence on the roof of the temple, the Tshangs pa lcog, down to the dancing and ritual place, the Lcang ra Smug po,³³ where the statue was placed next to the throne of the Khra 'brug oracle (Khra 'brug *chos rje*).³⁴ The way in which the great Tshangs pa Dkar po statue was transported downwards by this lay group,



Fig. 6: Carrying the god: The Mkhar thog pa in association with monks and the temple overseer (*dkon gnyer dpon*) bring the *lha* Tshangs pa from his residence on the roof of the temple down to the dancing ground (Khra 'brug *Me tog Mchod pa*, first day). (Photo: G. Hazod 2001)

through the accompaniment of religious protagonists and groups of dancers from the temple and the audience gradually increasing towards a remarkable socio-religious procession, is strongly reminiscent of the *lha 'bab* story and the portrayal of the bringing of the progenitor king to Btsan thang Sgo bzhi.³⁵

³² Cf. KG 402.22-405.2; Martin 2002; FL 290; RCP 585.

³³ More precisely: Li yul Lcang ra Smug po; on this toponym see TF 62f., 251-252; van Schaik 2016: 45.

³⁴ The position of the oracle was hereditary within a family – the Myang (or Nyang) family. There was a second oracle institution, a female oracle (*sku khog*) based in Rtse thang, which was connected to the *klus* of Khra 'brug Village and other districts of Yar mda', which reportedly also came from a Myang family (TF 274; on the old “southern” lineage of Myang see most recently Hazod 2019: 31ff.).

³⁵ The statue was mounted on a frame with a carrying device into which the aged temple overseer (*dkon gnyer dpon*) slipped as the bearer (Fig. 152 in TF 301). The Mkhar thog pa placed on the side supported the statue. The group used to be accompanied by monks (from Khra 'brug and its associated religious sites in

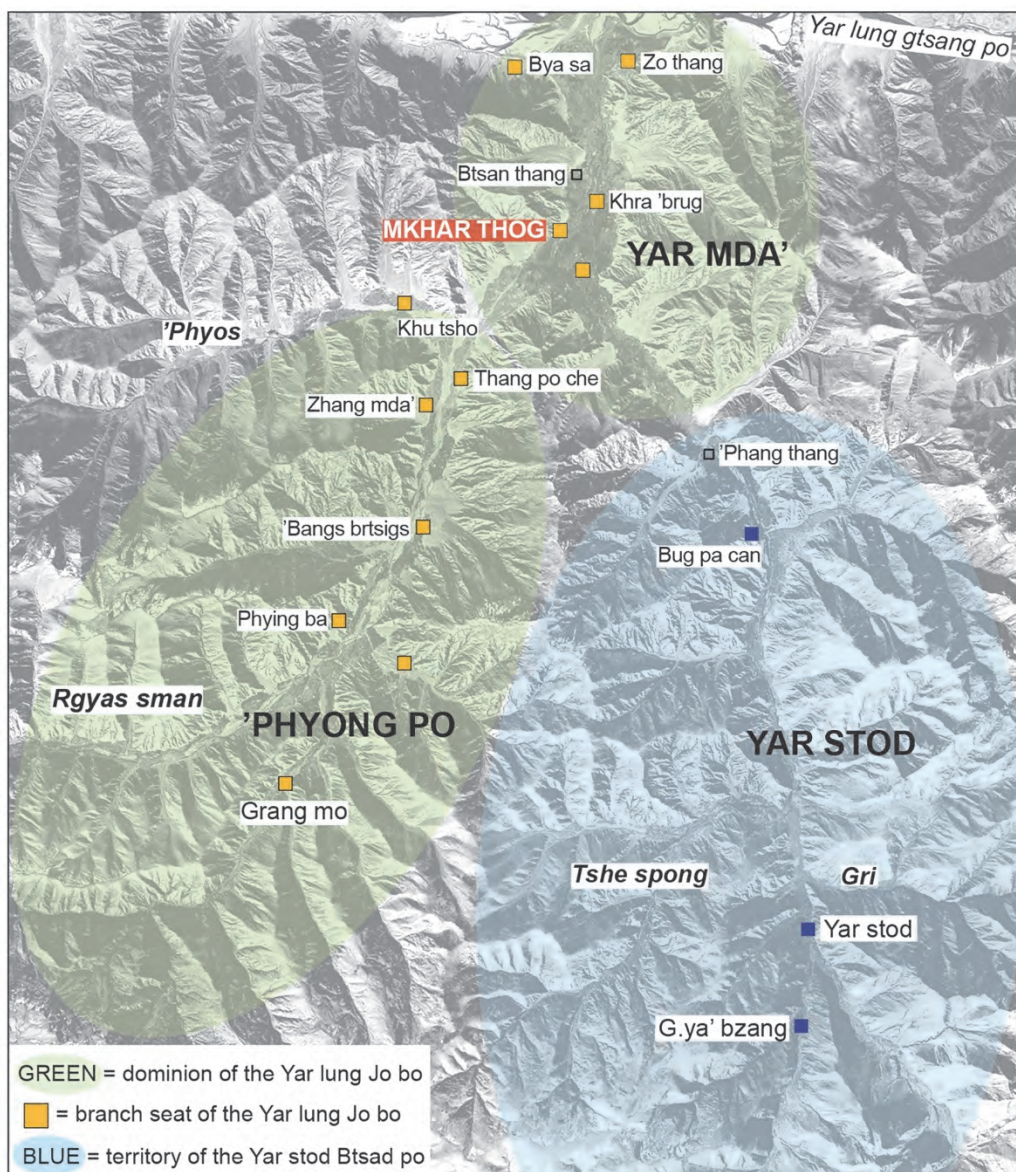


Fig. 7: Mkharr thog, the residence of the Yar mda' pa (and later of the Rlangs Gdung brgyud pa) and the dominion of the Yar lung Jo bo in the 11th / 12th century (green circle; blue circle = the territory of the Yar stod Btsad po). (G. Hazod 2018, based on satellite photograph, Corona 1970)

This group of the Mkharr thog pa traditionally consisted of four male and four female dancers and singers (*gar pa*, *gzhas ma*), whose appearance before the Tshangs pa lcog was connected to the presentation of a song in a “secret language” related to the invitation of the deity (Fig. 5).³⁶ This took place in combination with the *bskang gso* (propitiating ritual) held by monks inside the

Yar lung and 'Phyong po), as well as by dancers of the “nine *gying*” from the retinue of Tshangs pa Dkar po.

³⁶ Film and sound recordings of the song (by Tsering Gyalpo, May 2001) are on the DVD in the TF book.

Tshangs pa house, formerly also in the presence of the Khra 'brug oracle, which began its trance as soon as the deity arrived.

The Mkharr thog pa refer to the inhabitants of the village and small district of Mkharr thog on the west side of Lower Yar lung (Figs. 3 and 7). This is the area in the Khra 'brug founding story where the flood-bringing *nāga* monster was killed by a giant bird – the “thundering falcon” (*khra 'brug*), who lived in one of the caves at Mount Gong po ri (above fn. 9).³⁷ While we originally thought that the mystery ascribed to this place may have been the background for the appearance of the Mkharr thog pa in Khra 'brug, we see this in a slightly different light today.

Mkharr thog is registered as the chief residence of the so-called Yar mda' pa, one of the many branch-seats of the Yar lung Jo bo – the successor lineage of the royal dynasty that settled down in the 'Phyong po district and Lower Yar lung from the eleventh century.³⁸ (At about the same time, the Upper Yar lung became the dominion of another successor lineage (or a ruling family, who declared itself as a successor lineage) – the Yar stod ruler; CFS; Fig. 7). Eventually, probably in the fourteenth century or even a little earlier, Mkharr thog became the headquarters of the “Gdung bryud pa”, the lineage-holder of the Rlangs Phag mo Gru pa to which the religious and secular lords of this ruling family belonged.³⁹ In this light, the appearance of the Mkharr thog pa in Khra 'brug may either be related to an institution originally established to celebrate the ancestral origin of the Phag mo Gru pa or the Mkharr thog, and the *lha* Tshangs pa combination already goes back to the Yar lung Jo bo; clear evidence in this matter is still lacking.⁴⁰ In either case, it was evidently

³⁷ This happened at the confluence of the Yar lung and 'Phyong po rivers, not far east of Mkharr thog Village (Fig. 7), a legendary place that is said to be connected to a holy well in Mkharr thog Village; the well is called “*ashag*”, from which, as our informants affirmed, strange noises can regularly be heard (FL 253).

³⁸ For the genealogy of the Yar lung Jo bo see TF 314-19. The branch of the Yar mda' pa lineage of Mkharr thog represents a relatively late generation, a sideline of the Bya sa ruler that goes back to one Shag khri (Sha khri), a descendant in the ninth generation after *mnga' bdag* Khri chung, the founding figure of the Yar lung Jo bo (TF 317); this seems to correspond to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.

³⁹ TF 56-57. This headquarter is also given in the sources in the form of Mkharr thog Dgon gsar (or only Dgon gsar, the name of the neighbouring village), cf. Czaja 2013, s.v. index; the Mkharr thog *rdzong* (or Mkharr thog Dgon gsar) later became a central outpost of the Rin spungs pa in the fifteenth century (TF 57, 70; Czaja, *op. cit.*, 233, 244, 486, and following note).

⁴⁰ It should be noted that even Khra 'brug itself is listed among the dominions of the Yar lung Jo bo – i.e. the branch of the “Khra 'brug pa”, of which five generations are listed in the sources, starting with the descendant Thang la dga', fifth generation after Khri chung (TF 319); he or his successor was possibly the “lord of Khra 'brug” that Atiśa (982-1054) encountered while visiting the temple (see TF 84 for references). Otherwise nothing is known of this local ruling house and of its possible relation to the temple's cultic tradition. An important political role in the area around Khra 'brug was ascribed to the “clan” known as Dgyer pa (Sger), who (according to post-imperial sources) already resided in Yar lung during the temple's early days, and from which a branch moved to Rgya ma (on the Skyid chu) in the eleventh century to become the famous Gyer pa family of the Rgya ma pa (religious and secular lords of this district and later myriarchy); this was at a time when this family provided the *dpon gnyer* (overseer) of the Khra 'brug temple (FL 230-236, 319; RCP 707ff.). We have suggested that the religious environment of this family was probably closely involved in the cultic formation of the Srong btsan Sgam po vita in Khra 'brug and Rgya ma (Hazod 2014a: 54-55), possibly including the installation of the Tshangs pa Dkar po in these places. The same family also had a connection to Mkharr thog; this relates to the time of the early Rin

the genealogical link to the *lha* (and personal deity) of the founder king Srong btsan Sgam po that formed the point of reference for this Mkharr thog pa institution of Khra ’brug.

5.1 Another example: the *lha* of Grib and its representatives

Such a form of ritual responsibility to a central Buddhist deity (from the class of teaching and place protectors) by lay people was by no means unique and is, for example, also to be found in the *Me tog Mchod pa* festival of Tshal Gung thang, where 12 *sku tshab*, “representatives”, appear as the entourage of the god and bearers of the divine statue (Fig. 8).⁴¹ The deity concerns Grib Rdzong btsan, the powerful Lhasa protector with his seat in the Grib valley (south of the city), where the deity also used to function as the common *yul lha* of the Grib people. The 12 *sku tshab* came from 12 of the approximately 60 families of the Grib district, originally divided into three – at the time of our recordings (2000) four – *grong tsho*, villages. Similar to the Khra ’brug *sgo bzhi*, there is a tradition here that these 12 Grib families go back to the time of Srong btsan Sgam po. Rdzong btsan is seen as the Tibetan form of the Chinese god of war Guanyu (Guandi), which the Chinese Princess Wen cheng reportedly brought from China to Tibet accompanied by the great councilor (*blon chen*) Mgar, a story that is also associated with historical traces ascribed to the Mgar family in this part of the Lhasa valley.⁴² Interestingly, the stations of the spreading of the deity in Central Tibet also include the Lower Yar lung, where Rdzong btsan is worshipped as one of the protectors of Khra ’brug, based at Mount Shel brag, on the west side, behind Btsan thang Sgo bzhi and the Lha ’bab ri (RCP 574; FL 268ff.).

The 12 *sku tshab* of Grib are bound to the deity by oath; this actually refers to the observance of certain rules of purity, which – so it says – empowers them to carry the god after he became

spungs pa, when Mtsho skyes Rdo rje (1450-1510/13) seized the Phag mo Gru pa *rdzong* of Mkharr thog (TF 97; Czaja 2013: 486, *et passim*). The family behind the Rin spungs pa was a branch of the Sgyer pa, which was affinally related to the Rlangs Lha gzigs. Thus, one may see the Sgyer pa as a third candidate in the identification of the Mkharr thog pa group of the Khra ’brug *Me tog Mchod pa*, but this all remains rather uncertain. Our favourite on this issue are the Phag mo Gru pa, the power that as the Phag gru *khri dpon* in the thirteenth century replaced the territorial dominance of the Yar lung Jo bo (and partly also the Yar stod ruler) before becoming the rulers of Tibet in the post-Yuan period. Here there is the conceivable scenario in which this ideal connection to Khra ’brug and the birth god of Srong btsan Sgam po was fabricated in Mkharr thog, in the vicinity of the Phag gru Gdung brgyud pa. In this sense, the privilege of the Mkharr thog pa to invite the deity may indeed reflect this new ancestral link with the *lha* Tshangs pa as part of the Phag mo Gru pa identity. Here it should be mentioned that the specific forms of the Tshangs pa Dkar po cult were largely from the Ganden Phodrang period, created in connection with the restructuring of the religious festivals of Khra ’brug and the installation of the oracle there, so that it remains difficult to say which of the cultic representations (such as the Mkharr thog pa) were actually reshaping of older institutions.

⁴¹ For the Gung thang Flower Offering, another one of the “Three Basket Offerings” (above fn. 32), which is traditionally held on *sa ga zla ba* (middle of the fourth Tibetan lunar month) see RCP 573-593.

⁴² RCP 581-584. On Guandi in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, see most recently FitzHerbert 2020. The connection to Mgar is related to the popular legend that Wen cheng and the Great Minister were a couple, and that Mgar was exiled to Grib by the emperor upon his arrival in Lhasa – a story that forms a central element in the *Me tog Mchod pa*. The festival is said to have been introduced in the fourteenth century (RCP 585), but like the festivals in Khra ’brug or Bsam yas, it only got its significant characteristics in the Ganden Phodrang period.

“present” in the course of a longer invitation ceremony on the eve of the Gung thang Flower Offering – in a splendid outfit and riding a highly decorated horse (Fig. 9):

A device inside the horse makes it possible to carry the heavy statue and get it moving. Accompanied by drums and cymbals, a brief dance of the divinity begins before which the twelve men prostrate themselves one after another and show their reverence (RCP 585).



Fig. 8: The 12 *sku tshab* of Grib, meeting in the morning on the second day of the Flower Offering of Tshal Gung thang. (Photo: G. Hazod 2001)



Fig. 9: The god Grib Rdzong btsan in front of his *lha khang* in Grib, prostration of the statue-bearer, first day of the Gung thang Flower Offering. (Photo: G. Hazod 2001)

It is a longer journey that the group travels – from the Grib *lha khang* via several stations and accompanied by an ever-increasing crowd of spectators the Skyid chu upstream to Tshal Gung thang, where Rdzong btsan meets with his beloved, the Gung thang Lha mo, for one day and one night at the Gung thang *viḥāra* (RCP 585-87). Somewhat unclear is the classification in the local tradition of Grib, which calls the entourage group of Rdzong btsan the 13 *sku tshab* (*sku tshab bcu gsum*), which means that the statue itself is included in this group of representatives. The question is, what are they the representatives of?⁴³ Anyway, what we see in this Grib example is obviously another variant of the “stranger-king” model, where a group of lay people on behalf of a larger community carries out the invitation of the deity and, as it were, introduces it to the society.

⁴³ No. 13 apparently refers to the bearer of the statue, who changed several times during the procession; in my memory the bearers were all members of the *sku tshab* group.

6. The religious and the social: blurred boundaries

It is easy to identify such institutions in Khra 'brug and Grib / Tshal Gung thang as examples of a ritualistic staging of certain historical events, which (as demonstrated in many Western studies) often served the respective political power to introduce itself as the heir of a glorious past and accordingly to convey this image to the public.⁴⁴ Yet, as I see it, the point is that such institutions created their own reality, one that evidently revealed ancient patterns of socio-religious entanglements: in Khra 'brug, the lay group that regularly entered the stage with its god was, so it appears, formally modelled on the god's arrival in Btsan thang Sgo bzhi, itself a re-formulation of the old "come as lord" account. At the same time, this performance in the midst of the strict architecture of religion seems to be almost exemplary for a situation where the religious and the social become blurred. In this specific context the temple extracts itself from any interpretation that seeks to explain its position in society as the holy separated from the profane. A few more words may help to clarify our position on this issue.

The opposition of sacred and profane is literally understood in terms of space – *profanum* (lat.) means what lies "in front of the sacred area (*fanum*)" – and while Durkheim's generalised concept of the "division of the world into two areas" (i.e. the sacred and profane world), "which exclude each other" (Durkheim 1994 [1912]: 62, 429) is often questioned today,⁴⁵ it is clear that in major religions (beyond the fact of constructional separations) this division is always visible and is also practised ritually. The Khra 'brug *viḥāra* is no exception and the above noted bringing of the offering by the village people before the statue of the *lha* Tshangs pa at the end of the *Me tog Mchod pa* is just one of the spectacular examples of the *profanum* situation of the temple's ritual tradition. At the same time, there are aspects within the same cult, where the dissolution of this boundary is apparently deliberately sought. Perhaps even more than in the appearance of the Mkhar thog pa this becomes clear in the performance of the oracle, the position of which was occupied by a layperson (above fn. 34), and not least in the spectacular role of the butcher (*bshan pa*) in the tantrically defined cult of the identification of the *lha* Tshangs pa in the deity's demonic manifestation, performed by the *bshan pa* in one major sequence of the *Me tog Mchod pa* ritual circle (FL 291-94). The same butcher, who traditionally came from a family of Khra 'brug village, had a permanent presence in the temple: he acted as the custodian of the *klu khang*, that is the small chamber (supposedly built on the site of an older underground hiding place from the imperial time) in which representative *nāgas* of the country were kept, led by the goose (*ngang pa*) of Tshangs pa (FL 256; above fn. 26). (The sounds that were supposed to be heard from the *klu khang* at certain times of the year are ascribed to the *ngang pa* and interpreted as indication of a good harvest year).⁴⁶ One may define

⁴⁴ Cf. here most exemplary the historical contexts of the ceremonies of the Lhasa year (Richardson 1993); cf. also more generally Schwiager 2013.

⁴⁵ It has been argued that such a distinction is not known to many societies at all (cf. e.g. Goody 1961: 150); the same applies to the distinction between natural and supernatural Maddock 1998: 496).

⁴⁶ After the renovation work and the restructuring of the temple towards a museum-like institute in the past years, all of these facilities have disappeared, and also Khra 'brug Village mostly no longer exists.

the role of the butcher, who (in contrast to the oracle) acted in his everyday clothing, as religious or part of the religion present in the temple, but as in the case of the Mkhār thog pa, it seems that the cult makes visible this aspect of the inseparability of the two “worlds” – the holy and the profane.

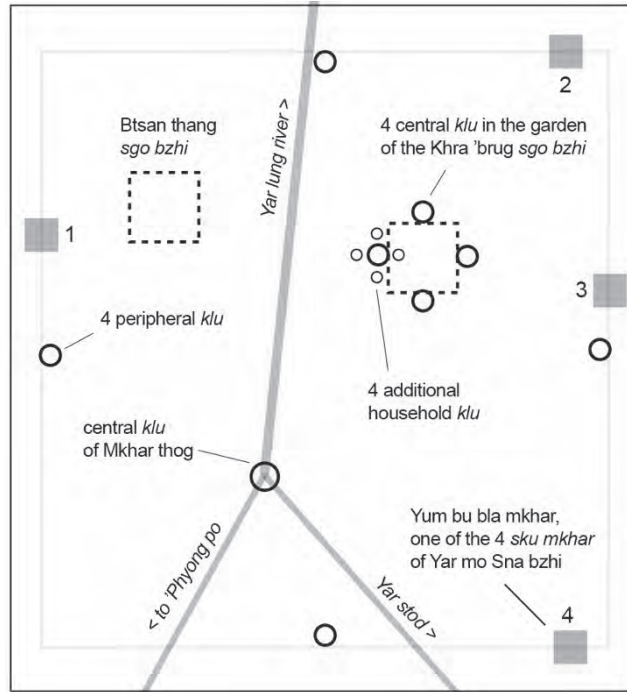


Fig. 10: The quadrangular defined *klu* (*nāga*) landscape of Lower Yar lung. (G. Hazod 2020)

This situation can easily be transferred to the outer region: in Tibetan Buddhist concepts the *viḥāra* (*gtsug lag khang*) is only the concentration of a much larger idea of spatial order, in the Lower Yar lung, in the zone of the old Yar mo Sna bzhi (above fn. 23), this was gradually established in the form of the *sgo bzhi* and other quad arrangements marked by *nāga* abodes and place gods to which the regional pilgrimage routes to the Yar lung- and 'Phyong po sanctuaries were connected (FL 268-274; Fig. 10). In such a concept of civilising the country according to Buddhist criteria, the borders of the “holy district” increasingly shifted outwards or even disappeared altogether. Western literature uses to speak of such concepts as “sacred landscape” or “religious geography”, which is not wrong as long as one makes it clear that both the sacred and the profane, or the related opposition of the religious and the social, actually are congruent levels. Everyday life illustrates this well: in his daily routine a Tibetan peasant may go past the rock or stone settings that mark the seat of a local divinity without paying them much attention. On the day of the pilgrimage (or other festive events such as the 'ong skor festival)⁴⁷ he offers up a prayer there – on this day he travels as it were through an *imagined landscape*.

⁴⁷ I.e. the auspicious festival of circumambulating the fields in spring and summer, a community festival traditionally also held in certain districts of Lower Yar lung.

In fact, the “holy” has no other boundaries than the everyday life, something which is also addressed in Bloch’s concept of the “transcendental social” and, by the way, was also not unfamiliar to Durkheim.⁴⁸ This concept, with the religious actually being part of the social which we observe here on a small scale in the Buddhist landscape of Lower Yar lung, seems – in its formal contours – to be not really distinguishable from the much older “pre-religion” world in which the arrival story of the Tibetan “stranger-king” was proclaimed.

⁴⁸ Cf. Maddock 1998: 496; Bloch 2013a; 2013b: 27.

Appendix

The “stranger-king” in PT 1038

The Old Tibetan document PT 1038 is known as the short text about the genealogical origin of the Tibetan emperors, which is explained in three versions.⁴⁹ The characteristic part of this text is that the author did not commit himself to any of the “theories” he mentions, as if he were an outsider who summarised what he had heard or seen in older recordings. It has been noted that the text or its original was evidently written at a time when Buddhism was already established in Tibet, but apparently the tradition according to which the Tibetan royal lineage originated from an Indian dynasty did not yet exist (cf. Karmay 1998: 287).

(ll.1-5) The text begins with the name of the country in which the kingship originated – the “country with strongholds”, one of these being the *yul* Bde bzhi, in which the “*lti’u rgyal po* Thod rgyal, the *btsan po* of *Spu rgyal Bon* (read: Bod) arose”. What is probably meant here is Yar lung, the historical country of origin of the Tibetan emperors, even if the forms Bde bzhi and the *lti’u rgyal po* are not clearly assignable in this context.⁵⁰ The author is unsure whether this kingship should be counted as one of the “12 minor principalities” (*rgyal phran bcu gnyis*) or not, an uncertainty that can also be found in the *rgyal phran* lists with respect to Yar lung.

The remaining lines (1.5-17) offer theories concerning the “origin of the line of the (Tibetan) emperors” (1.5); firstly, this is the origin from the *lha* Ku spyi Ser bzhi, a not really identified deity from above the heaven, described as the lord (*bdag po*) of the mountain spirits (*ma sangs*), and as

⁴⁹ TDD 33: (1) *yul dang mkhar du bcas pa’ / so so yul bde bzhi* (2) *las // spu rgyal bon (= bod) gl btsan po lti’u rgyal po thod rgyal* (3) *byun te // la la’I [m]chld nas nI rgyal phran / bcu gnyis* (4) *la gtogs shes kyang mchI // myI gtog shes kyang* (5) *mchI // btsan po ‘I gdung rab kyI khungs smos pa’ //* (6) *gnam dgung gl steng na // lha ku spyi ser bzhiIs brgyI ba’ //* (7) *ma sangs tham cad gl bdag po // srld pa kun la mnga’* (8) *mdzad pa’ // phyva’I yang phyva lags shes kyang mchI // rnam* (9) *gnyis su nI gdol par sha za’I rIgs // rgyal po gdong* (10) *dmar gyI rIgs / gangs rI byud kor gyI nI bdag po // gnod* (11) *sbyIn dza zhes bgyI ba’I rIgs lags shes kyang mchI* (12) *rnam gsum du nI gnam rIm pa bcu gsum gyI steng na /* (13) *khrl bar la bdun tshlg / shes bgyI // gnam gl lha las / sa* (14) *gdog drug du (= sa ga dog drug; Zeisler 2011: 175) // ‘greng ‘go nag gl rje myed gl rje // dud rngog chag* (15) *bla myed kyI blar / blon po lho rngogs / bon po mtshe gco / phyag* (16) *tshang sha spug // myI rje lha dang bdud / du brgyIs nas // yul bod ka* (17) *g.yag drug du byon zhes mchI // gang lags kyang myI mngon ste /* (18) *gdung spu bod dang / spu rgyal du gsol // sde yang myI bdad* (round brackets by the author, GH). Earlier discussions include Lalou 1953; Macdonald 1971: 215-218; Haarh 1969: 307f.; Karmay 1998: 285-288; and more recently Hill 2013a, Zeisler 2011: 174-176; Bialek 2018, vol. 1: 191, 572.

⁵⁰ *lti’u*, it is assumed, could be a place name (Karmay, *op. cit.*, 285); Haarh (1969: 307-308, 450) incorrectly spelled it as *lte’u* – *lte’u rgyal po*, king of the *lte’u*, where the latter he reads as *the’u* (*the’u brang*), the deity that indeed appears in one of the etiological theories as the ancestor figure of the Tibetan kings. This concerns the “ultra-secret tradition” (*yang gsang lugs*, i.e. the first of the three etiological theories in the *Lde’u* chronicle), which names *Spu bo* (*Spo yul*) as the geographic origin; *Lde’u*-2 226.9-227.4. On the other hand, Thod rgyal, the name of the progenitor king is not very clear in this context (but see Karmay, *op. cit.*, 286).

“Phyva of the Phyva”, who rules over the whole world (*srid pa kun la mnga’ mdzad pa*).⁵¹ The second “theory” describes a less exalted origin, namely either from the caste (*rigs*) of the carnivores (*sha za’i rigs*), that of the red-faced king (*rgyal po gdong dmar gyi rigs*) or of the *gnod sbyin* Dza.⁵²

Finally, the third “theory” is the much-quoted passage that describes the origin of the *spu rgyal* as that of (the god) Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs, who came to Earth from his residence above the thirteenth stage of heaven, a variant of the “come as lord” legend for which, due to the somewhat invalid text, we find at least three different readings in the literature:

1. Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs descended from the gods in heaven to Earth as the lord of the black-headed men etc., namely *together with* the three groups of two ministers, priests und servants (known from other sources as the king’s entourage; above fn. 19) as if the structural core of the society itself was of heavenly origin; and finally (and quasi corresponding to it) he came to Bod ka G.yag drug as lord of men and demons (Karmay 1998: 286; similarly Hill 2013a: 172-173; Dotson 2007: 78).
2. Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs descended from the gods of the sky as lord for the upright, the black-headed ones etc. to Sa ga Dog drug, interpreted as the “six spheres of the Libra”, where he met the entourage groups. This level is understood as a kind of intermediate stage on the way to Bod ka G.yag drug, where the lord finally arrived after the three social groups have searched for such a “lord for the men” among the gods and demons (Zeisler 2011: 174-175; 2015: 757-758).
3. A distinction is made between three actions: a) Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs came to Earth from the gods of the sky (as ruler of the black-headed ones etc.); b) he made (*bgyis*) the ministers, priests and servants – the officiators of gods and demons – the rulers of men (before he finally); c) arrived in Bod ka G.yag drug (Bialek 2018, vol. 2: 191, 572).

It is beyond my competence to comment from the linguistic side on what might be the correct reading in this obviously syntactically disturbed text passage. Compared with parallel traditions, it can be stated that there is no version where the god comes to Earth *together with* his entourage,⁵³ and also the reading that the rulers of men, the ministers, priests etc., were “made” before the final arrival of the lord to my knowledge has no parallel. Zeisler’s astronomical interpretation of *sa ga dog drug* is interesting, not least since in a different context the same author quite convincingly refers to possible astronomical relations in the representation of the kings of the mythical period (in particular related to the formulation of the seven heavenly *khri / dri*; Zeisler 2015: 758f.). But it was just as convincingly noted by Bialek that *sa ga dog* is here to be understood simply as *sa dog*

⁵¹ Karmay (1998: 395-96) identifies him (without giving more precise information) with the *lha Khu yug* Mang skyes, the name, which (the Yab lha Bdag drug son) ’Ol lde Gung rgyal is described to bear on Earth (*sa dog*) (*Lde’u-2* 230.3), or he is associated with Ku byi, the spider-riding deity from the Bon po pantheon.

⁵² See Karmay 1998: 287-288 for identifications.

⁵³ This is not entirely correct: in later representations the progenitor king (Gnya’ khri Btsan po) comes to Earth together with his priests, Mtshe mi and Gco mi; these are two of the “clans” mentioned in PT 1038 and elsewhere as part of the lord’s entourage. Cf. also Huber 2020, vol. 1: 134.

(*mo*), which is usually rendered as Earth (or narrow earth), also closer understood as an expression for the zone of the (agriculturally usable) valley (Bialek 2018, vol. 2: 572). This means that *sa ga dog drug* most likely does not describe a sky layer, but rather is on the “same level” as the last station, Bod ka G.yag (= g.yang) drug (“six precipices of Bod ka”), evidently a term for Central Tibet.⁵⁴ Thus, similar to the “classic version”, the text actually seems to say: After his arrival on Earth in Bod, the god was welcomed by a social group that had previously explicitly looked for such a ruler or not (cf. Zeisler’s note on *brgyis* (= *byis*) of line 16; Zeisler 2011: 175-176). This is exactly the central characteristic of the “stranger-king model”: the voluntary submission of a community to an external divine rulership. The three groups of two represent “society” and, as in the above-noted arrival story located in Yar lung (Chap. 4), are probably an allusion to the (historical) ruler and his entourage system, which here serves as a model for portraying the “come as lord” legend. (Parallel versions mention the *yul yab*, or the *pha dgu* (“nine fathers” related to the lords of the *rgyal phran bcu gnyis*; *Lde’u-2* 233.10), or also the *zhang gsum blon po bzhi* (plus) *yab ’bangs rus drug* (KT 435.14) who occupy this position of the recipient; cf. above Chap. 4.)

Another inconsistency concerns the protagonist Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs. Even though (in contrast to Ku spyi Ser bzhi of the first “theory”) the Phyva kinship is not explicitly mentioned here, it can be assumed that this deity means the (fourth) son of the Phyva lord Yab lha Bdag drug of the classical Phya genealogies. Yet, as we know, in the classic version of PT 1286 and parallel in later accounts it is not Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs (var. Khri Bar gyi Bdun tshigs) who comes to Earth but his son (PT 1286: *khri’i bdun btsigs kyi sras / khri* (~ *lde*) *nyag khri btsan po*; above fn. 15). An exception is Bialek’s reading of PT 1286, l.30-32, which says that all the sons of Yab lha Bdag drug

⁵⁴ In the *Dbu nag mi’u ’dra chags* (15b; Karmay 1998: 276), which describes a different context of heavenly descent, *sa ga dog drug* similarly represents the final station that the god reached after having crossed the 13 layers, which means that here and there the number 13 represents the totality of the heaven-earth vertical – indeed one of the most common representations of the sky. Note that there are (in pre-Buddhist contexts) also other numbers that speak of 5, 7 or 9 levels (often in the variants of one and the same story), and also 14, 15 or even 18 sky layers are mentioned, for example in connection with the heavenly places of the *bla na bzhugs pa bco brgyad*, “18 deities residing in the upper spheres”, listed in the *Zangs ma gzhus ral can* (Nyang ral 497: *Za bzhugs rgan rabs can*), a text reportedly written by the paternal subjects (*yab ’bangs*), and included in the *Can lnga* text group (*Lde’u-2* 243, and 228.20-21 for the identification of the gods’ residences and individual layers of the sky; cf. also Huber 2020, vol. 1: 70, 572). It is interesting to note in this context that deities of the same generation, including lateral relatives, live in different heavens, which means that the concept of sky layers (*gnam rim pa*) in the (pre-Buddhist) Tibetan adaptations apparently had nothing to do with generations of gods. It is notable that the “narrow earth” (in the form of *Dog mer*) is also listed among the heavenly residences of the *bla na bzhugs pa bco brgyad*, namely the one of Sa lha Mgon po (Sa Mgon bu) from the same generation as the Khri Bar gyi Bdun tshigs (*Lde’u-2* 233.19-20, 243.11-12). For the sake of completeness, one may add that in Old Tibetan contexts the capability of descending from the sky (or from one layer to another one) included also animals, and horses respectively, the latter related to the establishing of the Great Beyond; so in IOL Tib J 731; see Dotson’s recent analysis of the stories included in this Old Tibetan document; Dotson 2018. For the idea of layers of heavens and their meanings in Eurasian cultural contexts and beyond see Kelley and Milone 2005: 347ff.

came down from the heights of the sky, but only Nyag khri Btsan po became a ruler.⁵⁵ A rather rare variant is the Bon po text *Nyi zer sgron ma* (147a), where [Bar gyi] Bdun tshigs was appointed ruler of Tibet by his father (*yab kyis bod khams yi rje ru bskos*).⁵⁶ Otherwise, this fourth Yab lha Bdag drug (var. Ya lha Brdal drug) son is known as the Phyva god, who moved to Dmu, the country of the (classificatory) mother brother and who with the daughter of the Dmu lord begot the future progenitor king (Gnya’ khri Btsan po) – the latter accordingly described as the “descendant of the [Phyva] lha, nephew of the Rmu (Dmu)” (*lha’i gdung rmu’i tsha*).⁵⁷ In this version (in the *Yi ge lha gyes can*) the “stranger-king” motif is most detailed when it says that Central Tibetan chieftains (the *pha dgu* of the 12 *rgyal phran*) decided at an assembly to look for an extraordinary ruler with magical powers, and made a find, and, finally, with the help of Skar ma Yol sde, realised the invitation of the Gnya’ khri Btsan po etc.⁵⁸

It seems this section in PT 1038, which describes the transition from Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs to his son, was lost or otherwise neglected by the author, who himself apparently was not an insider; but it is also conceivable that this passage represents the fragment of an authentic version of the *rjer gshegs* legend and the Nyag khri Btsan po part is a later addition. This remains speculative, just as it is not entirely clear whether (and if so how) in historical times this Yab lha Bdag drug son was related to ’O lde Spu rgyal, the historically earliest evidence of a heavenly progenitor of the Tibetan royal house.⁵⁹

Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs is actually not a name, but the expression of a family position – that of the middle of seven brothers. Anne Chayet (1994) sees this term as related to an old throne regulation that saw the middle son as the ideal type for the succession to the throne. Such a regulation is described for the “mythical period”, where in the time after Spu lde Gung rgyal (the actual founder king, number eight in the genealogy of PT 1286) the wise ministers (*blon po rig pa can*) reportedly determined who within the closer agnatic kinship should be excluded as a candidate for the succession to the throne, paraphrased by the expression *thang mtshams su phab pa* (“brought

⁵⁵ Bialek 2018, vol. 2: 191. Later representations describe the seven sons (often called *lhe rje*) as gods of magic (*rdzu ’phrul gyi lha*), usually with a sister on their side, one Thang nga Lha mo (*Lde’u-2* 232.4-5), a family constellation, which much later seems to have been taken up and further varied in the fabrication of the Rlangs Phag mo Gru pa origin myth (above fn. 26).

⁵⁶ Cit. in Karmay 1998: 179.

⁵⁷ *Lde’u-2* 233.15-16, similarly *Blon po Bka’i thang yig*; *KT* 435.16. A formal parallel of this journey from Phyva to Dmu is to be found in the account of PT 0126/2, which also represents a special variant of the Tibetan ruler invitation topos (Drikung 2011: 33-41).

⁵⁸ *Lde’u-2* 233.10-235.7; Karmay 1998: 299ff.; Haahr 1969: 234-235. This Skar ma Yol sde (also known as the god born from the ribs of his (Dmu-) mother, thus called *rtsib kyi lha*) is classified as the maternal cousin of Gnya’ khri Btsan po (i.e. son of the aforementioned Sa lha Mgon bu, fn. 54). There is another Skar ma Yol sde, a name evidently related to a star or constellation(s) (cf. Haahr 1969: 141), who is registered for the earlier generations of the Phyva genealogy (*Lde’u-2* 228.7), and probably identical with the Skar ma Yol sde from the catalogue of the *bla na bzhuks pa bco brgyad*, above fn. 54), who is listed in third place – the place in *Sprin phub* (“cloud deck”).

⁵⁹ On ’O lde Spu rgyal and the question of his identification see most recently Huber 2020, vol. 1: 87-88, 578-579.

down to the border [of the] plain”), a regulation that concerned the younger and older brothers (including half-brothers) and apparently preferred the middle one as heir to the throne.⁶⁰ Such a preference is not really attested for historical times (cf. Dotson 2009: 26f.), but it may well be that this once idealised form of succession to the throne and the idea of sanctifying the Tibetan king (or *rgyal po* of Yar lung) as the manifestation of a “stranger-king”-like figure have a common history in the narrower sense.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Lde'u-l* 104-105; Hazod 2018: 31 for further references.

⁶¹ In the origin story of the Rlangs family, which seems to be based on the Khri Bar la Bdun tshigs account, the progenitor figure is similarly portrayed in the ideal position of the middle one, here the middle one of eight brothers (above fn. 26), something which to my knowledge has no equivalent in the Phag mo Gru pa history. In addition, there are also traditions related to the genealogy of the heavenly Phyva, where (in a completely different context) the youngest of the (altogether 37) sons of Ya bla Bdal drug (*so bdun pa'i chung ba*) is the hero who comes to Earth (*Dbu nag mi'u 'dra chags* 15b; in Karmay 1998: 276). It is also the younger one of the two sons in the Dri gum account who takes the throne (i.e. the *gcung* Sha khyi of the Kong po inscription; Hill 2013b), yet in the version of the later chronicles, who speaks of three sons of the Gri gum Btsan po, it is the middle one who became king.

References

Abbreviations

CFS = Gyalbo *et al.* 2000.

Dbā' bzhed = Wangdu and Diemberger 2000.

Drikung 2011 = H.H. the Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang ('Bri gung Skyabs mgon Che tshang Dkon mchog bstan 'dzin 'phrin las lhun 'grub). 2011. *A History of the Tibetan Empire: Drawn from the Dunhuang Manuscripts*. Translated by Meghan Howard with Tsultrim Nakchu (Originally published as: *Bod btsan po'i rgyal rabs: Tun hong bod kyi yig rnying las byung ba* 2010). Dehra Dun: Songtsen Library, Center for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies.

FL = Hazod 2005

KG = Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba, *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. 2 Vols. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1986.

KK = *Bka' chems Ka khol ma*. Lanzhou: Kan su mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1989.

KT = O rgyan gling pa, *Bka' thang sde lnga*, 5 books. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1986.

Lde'u-1 = Lde'u jo sras, *Chos 'byung chen mo bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan lde'u jo sras kyis mdzad pa*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang 1987.

Lde'u-2 = Mkhas pa Lde'u, *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1987.

Myang chos 'byung = Tārānātha, *Myang yul stod smad bar gsum gyi ngo mtshar gtam gyi legs bshad mkhas pa'i 'jugs ngogs*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi rigs dpe skrun khang 2002.

Nyang ral = Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang 1988.

OTI = Iwao, Kazushi, N. Hill, and T. Takeuchi (eds.). 2009. *Old Tibetan Inscriptions*. Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

PT = Pelliot tibétain; see *TDD*.

RCP = Sørensen and Hazod 2007.

Rlangs = Byang chub Rgyal mtshan, *Rlangs kyi po ti bse ru rgyas pa*. Gangs can rig mdzod 1. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang 1986.

SC = Iwao *et al.* (eds.) 2012.

TF = Sørensen and Hazod 2005.

TDD = *Tibetan Documents from Dunhuang*, see Imaeda *et al.* (eds.) 2007.

TTT = *The Tibetan Tumulus Tradition (TTT). The Burial Mounds of Central Tibet: A Historical-anthropological Study and Documentation of the Tumulus Tradition of Early Central Tibet (4th-10th century CE)*, website of the FWF research project based at the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA) and the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (project leader: Guntram Hazod).

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