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## Territory and Trends in Land Control: The Byang thang “Heartland” and the mNga’ ris “Periphery”\*

There could hardly be a better conveyed message about the hardship of life in Zhang zhung than the proverbial disparaging words about her new country, sent by Sad mar kar to her brother Srong btsan sgam po.<sup>1</sup> The

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\* Having been asked, owing to circumstances, to write a piece at the last moment—I express my gratitude to Christian Jahoda for inviting me to join—the theme I have chosen reflects the fact that several topics were already touched by the other contributors.

I thought it possible to jot down a short work on the macro-history of the lands composing mNga’ ris in view of the progress that the knowledge of the regions in the west has made steadily throughout the years. Needing a holistic underlying concept, I opted for the idea of territory. Land occupation marks the history of every people, and mNga’ ris is no exception.

<sup>1</sup> Sad mar kar’s negative assessment of her life in Zhang zhung reads as follows (*Tun-huang Chronicles*, Chapter VIII: 408–412; see *Tun-huang Chronicles* 1992: 58): “The locality assigned [to me] is Khyung lung rngul (spelled so) mkhar. Other people from the surroundings say: “Seen from the outside it is erosions and rocks, but seen from the inside it is gold and jewels”. [Having this castle] in front of me, is not this existence atrocious? There are fissures everywhere in these arid surroundings. The share of servants [assigned to me] is Gu ge rKang pran. Are not these servants atrocious? Gu ge deceives and detests us. As for the share of food [assigned to] me, this is fish and wheat. Is not this food atrocious? Fish and wheat are hard to chew. As for the share of cattle [assigned to me], these are deers and *rkyang*-s. Are not these herds atrocious? Deers and *rkyang*-s are non-responsive and wild”.

The prevailing understanding of the Sad mar kar’s episode in the *Tun-huang Chronicles* is that she informed her brother Srong btsan sgam po through sPug Gyim brtsan rmang cung, the sPu rgyal Bod emissary, about the right circumstances to attack the Zhang zhung king. This implies that a plan to crush and finish off the Zhang zhung ruler, of which she was part, had already been conceived by Srong btsan sgam po and that she gave, with her lead, a major contribution to implement it in the most promising tactical manner.

The Sad mar kar episode shows that queens were allocated territories, including their inhabitants, as their share of power. This was common practice in the dynastic period. A classic is the confrontation between the wives of Glang dar ma,

Zhang zhung core area she talks about was, as is common domain, well inside the highlands of western Byang thang. Besides the capital of the kingdom at Khyung lung dngul mkhar,<sup>2</sup> the other major centre of Zhang

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Tshe spongs bza’ g.Yor mo yum chen bTsan mo phan (for one, *lDe’u Jo sras chos ’byung* 1987: 141,6–7) and ‘Ban bza’ ‘Phan rgyal (*ibid.*: 141,11), mothers of ‘Od srung and Yum brtan respectively, in different tracts of the lands later known as dBus (the former in dBu ru’i byang ngos: *ibid.*: 141,18-19; the latter in g.Yo ru and parts of dBu ru).

According to *Bon ma nub pa’i gtsan tshigs* (1968: 261,3–263,2) Gu rub za sNang sgron legs mo, the junior queen of the Zhang zhung king, was cunningly offered two thirds of the territory of sPu rgyal Bod in order to betray the Lig myi rhya king and to be ambushed by the Central Tibetans.

<sup>2</sup> In his outline of the masters of Bon po ‘*Dul ba (Ti se’i dkar chag* 1973: 574,1–578,5), dKar ru Bru chen bsTan ‘dzin rin chen associates these religious exponents with *bya ru can* rulers and the seats from where the latter exercised their functions. ‘*Dul ba* masters, *bya ru can* kings and their castles can be summarised as follows:

1. drang srong Khri lde ‘od po from the land of sTag gzig was active during the rule of Zhang zhung srid pa’i rgyal po Khri wer La rje gser gyi bya ru can who resided at Gar ljang g.Yu lo rdzong mkhar, i.e. rGyang grags, in front of Gangs ri chen po;

2. Khri lde ‘od po’s disciple, drang srong Dang ba yid ring, was active during the rule of sPung rgyung gyer gyi rgyal po ‘od kyi bya ru can who resided at sTag chen rngam pa’i yongs rdzogs mkhar in the land of Pu mar hring;

3. Dang ba yid ring’s disciple, drang srong Gung rum gtsug phud, was active during the rule of Gu wer nor gyi rgyal po ga ljang ‘od kyi bya ru can who resided at Dum pa tshal gser gyi mkhar of Zhang zhung Tsi na’i shod;

4. Gung rum gtsug phud’s disciple, drang srong rDzu ‘phrul ye shes, was active during the rule of sTag sna gzi brjid rgyal po Khri ldem lcags kyi bya ru can who resided at sTag sna dBal gyi rdzong mkhar in the centre of the town sTag sna gling [note: known as Bon ri sTag sna rong] at the foot of sPos ri ngad ldan in the land of Zhang zhung Tsi na;

5. rDzu ‘phrul ye shes’s disciple, drang srong Ye shes tshul khirms, was active during the rule of Sad hri gyer gyi rgyal po utpala ‘od kyi bya ru can who resided at Mu rdzong chen po khro chu’i mkhar in the land of Zhang zhung Kha yug;

6. Ye shes tshul khirms’s disciple, drang srong g.Yung drung tshul khirms,

zhung according to T'ang sources was north of Gangs Ti se at Ru thog, the ancient Suvarnabhūmi of the Indian tradition and Hsüang-tsang and its people the Suvarnagōtra,<sup>3</sup> still within the immense Byang thang plateau.

was active during the rule of Slas kra Gu ge'i rgyal po rin chen 'od kyi bya ru can who resided at dNgul mkhar dkar po khro chu'i rmengs rdo can ("with foundation stones in molten metal");

7. g.Yung drung tshul khriims's disciple, drang srong gTsug phud rgyal ba, was active during the rule of Mu mar thog rgod rgyal po enda 'od kyi bya ru can who resided at Zhang zhung Ru thog gNam rdzong mkhar;

8. gTsug phud rgyal ba's disciple, drang srong Ye shes rgyal ba, was active during the rule of sTag sna gzi brjid rgyal po Khri ldem lcas kyi bya ru can [residing] at sTag sna dBal gyi rdzong mkhar in the centre of the town sTag gling at the foot of sPos ri ngad ldan in the land of Zhang zhung Tsi na.

The way dKar ru Bru chen bsTan 'dzin rin chen introduces the masters in the transmission line of Bon po 'Dul ba has it that eight generations of rulers would have been involved in the support of these practitioners. If read in chronological sequence, this would mean that the earliest was the *bya ru can* king ruling from Gangs Ti se and the last the *bya ru can* king whose seat was Ru thog. However, the fact that each of these Bon po masters was the disciple of the previous one does not establish a chronological sequence of eight successive generations, for they could have been contemporaries in some cases. Therefore, it is not ascertained that six generations separated the king residing at the palace in front of Gangs Ti se from the one residing at Ru thog. In other words, no prove exists that the royal seat was transferred from place to place during these unprecised lapses of time or else that there were regional centres of power, as it is more likely but not sure.

bsTan 'dzin nram dag's compactment of the four *dbus kyi mkhar* of Zhang zhung shows that three of the four *dbus kyi mkhar* of Zhang zhung correspond to castles inhabited by *bya ru can* kings (Gangs Ti se g.Yu lo mkhar, Khyung lung and sPos ri ngad ldan). See *g.Yung drung Bon gyi bstan pa'i byung khungs nyung bsdus* (620,6–621,6): "The four central (p. 621) castles were Khyung lung ngul mo mkhar on a peak in eastern Gu ge; Pu hreng sTag la mkhar in the centre of Pu hreng; Ma pang sPos mo mkhar to the east of [mtsho] Ma pang; and La shang g.yu lo mkhar to the north of Gangs ri [Ti se]. Some people include Gad kyi Byi ba mkhar in the enumeration, which is on the border of the upper side of Gro shod. The six regional forts were Dwang ra Khyung chen rdzong in Byang [thang] smad; Ra bzhi Seng ge rdzong in Byang [thang] stod, corresponding with the land north of Ru thog; Mang yul sTag mo rdzong [note: sPyi rong, sic for sKyid rong] in lHo smad; Se rib 'Brug mo rdzong in lHo stod, [situated] in upper Glo Dol po; rBal te rTa mchog rdzong in the west; and Gyim ngul Glang chen rdzong in the east".

<sup>3</sup> A crucial clue to associate Suvarnabhūmi (the "Land of Gold") with Ru thog is the note added in 650 to the entry concerning this kingdom in the second edition of Hsüang-tsang's travelogue, four years after its first publication. The note says that Suvarnabhūmi is not within the borders of India. It is called the Kingdom of Greater Yang-t'ung, the centre of which is Ru thog. This became the Zhang zhung stod of the *stong sde* system, a pillar of the state organisation of sPu rgyal Bod.

The way Hsüang-tsang locates Suvarnabhūmi is remarkably neat, for he adds that its western frontier bordered on Mo-lo-so/Mard. This indicates that Suvarnabhūmi, adjoining the latter territory to the east of Mo-lo-so/Mar yul, was located on the upper reaches of the Indus river, the area of Ru thog (see Beal 1981: 199). The antiquity of Ru thog is thus documented for the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century or environs but it seemingly goes back to a deeper past. This was the region, where deposits of a "superior sort of gold" are located.

Especially during the sPu rgyal Bod period, holding sway over Byang thang was the bone of contention between antagonist powers. Due to the location of both rTsang stod—its southeastern territory bordering on Ru lag—and the vast tract of land known as Byang gi Zhang zhung—east of the kingdom's core area—their control affected the political status of the time. Indeed the takeover of Byang gi Zhang zhung, conquered by Khyung po Pung/sPung sad zu tse on behalf of Srong btsan sgam po,<sup>4</sup> created the conditions for

In terms of physical geography, Ru thog belongs to the "heartland" but was culturally part of the world of the Indian North-west. The endurance of the culturally developed but militarily weak Land of Gold is shown by the fact that it was still existing in the time of the famous Chinese pilgrims, visitors of India, but without a clear indication of its political status. It may mean that it floated in a condition of semi-independence.

Ru thog came to be part of the Byang thang "heartland" politically at a later stage when Srong btsan sgam po took over Zhang zhung and brought it into sPu rgyal Bod dynasty's fold, thus rescinding the traditional ties the area had with the cultures in its west. Finally, the Korean pilgrim Yue-ch'ao states that it was under the sPu rgyal Bod dynasty in the second quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Fuchs 1938: 443).

Cross evidence provided by *The Inquiry of Vimalaprabhā*, Hsüang-tsang and the Korean pilgrim Yue-ch'ao helps to get a fair image of Suvarnabhūmi's population, the Suvarnagōtra (the "Race of Gold").

*The Inquiry of Vimalaprabhā* (in Thomas 1935: 191–248) mentions close cultural and kinship ties between Khotan, the Gold Race Country and Baltistan. These ties suggest a common ethnic and cultural extraction of Indo-Iranic matrix. It cannot be ruled out that Zhang zhung and its rMu/dMu ancestral tribe (see any *rus mdzod*, where this association is invariably mentioned), which existed before the distinctive Tibetan race took shape, were the joining point of the nomadic way of life of Tibet's northern belt with Indo-Iranic values coming from Khotan, other oases of Central Asia and North-west India.

The rMu/dMu and the other *mi'u rigs*—the ancestral tribes of proto Tibetans populating the northern belt of lands of the plateau—mingled to form the Tibetan race during a presumably protracted span of time.

<sup>4</sup> I.O. 716, ii, is the text which mentions Khyung po Pung/sPung sad zu tse's takeover of Byang gi Zhang zhung that took place sometime after 638 (the execution of Myang Zhang snang) and before 644 (the conquest of Khyung lung). The text (I.O. 716, ii,3–5; *Tun hong nas thon pa'i Bod kyi lo rgyus yig cha* 1992: 70–71) reads as follows: "To yo chas la'i rje bo Bor yon tse brlags ste/ To yo chas la latsogs te Byang gi Zhang zhung thabs cad/ Khri srong rtsan gyi phyag tu phul te/ Zu tse slo ba nye'o/ btsan po'i blon po nang na/ sPung sad zu tse las slo ba (p. 71) nye ba sngan chad kyang ma byung ngo//"; "[Khyung po Pung/sPung sad zu tse] destroyed Bor Yon tse, the lord of the To yo chas la. He offered the whole of Byang gi Zhang zhung, including the To yo chas la, to Khri Srong rtsan [sgam po]. Zu tse was loyal and in favour. Among the ministers of the *btsan po*, there was no one closer to him than Pung sad".

lHo yo, so transcribed in the Gangs can rig mdzod edition of *mkhas pa lDe'u chos 'byung* for an original To yo—the similarity between *ta* and *lha* in any kind of Tibetan script is remarkable—was one of the *stong sde* of g.Yas ru according to this source (*ibid.*: 258,11). *lDe'u Jo sras chos 'byung* (110,20) writes it sTong yong; *Blon po bka' thang* (438,10) spells it sTod yongs, while *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* (187,17–19) does not mention it in its classification of the g.Yas ru *stong sde-s*. *rGod ldem can gyi nam thar* (73,4 and 86,4) says that the area of Tho yor nag po should be traced to the north of Ri bo bkra bzang, itself due east of

sPu rgyal Bod to inflict a deadly blow to the throne of the Lig myi rhya dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

Byang thang has been, since time immemorial, a most difficult territory for survival. Human habitat in high altitude Zhang zhung implied a way of life and cultural expressions that influenced the spread of civilisation in earlier times and in the successive periods. ‘Brog pa existence and uncompromising living conditions occurred in a vastness marked by loneliness and empty spaces.

Yet, Zhang zhung was more than a Byang thang nation. Besides ‘brog pa customs, sedentary life was popular in the lower altitude areas of the Zhang zhung kingdom, where the local conditions made existence more viable.

Due to this reason, Zhang zhung stands out among the other kingdoms in the history of Central Asia. Most commonly, nomadic lands did not forge kingdoms. Zhang zhung was an *ante litteram* model of state in the history of High and Central Asia, a political entity which anticipated of many centuries the creation of nations where sedentary life and nomadism were present at the same time. It was long after Srong btsan sgam po’s destruction of Zhang zhung in 644–649 that a nomadic population, the Liao dynasty of the Khitan (947–1125) founded a kingdom which ruled over a mix of nomads and sedentary people (Drompp 1989: 146).

### Zhang zhung, the “Heartland” and the “Periphery”

This leads me to examine where the old Zhang zhung civilisation developed before its destruction and where, therefore, Bon was spread anciently. To identify the lands that formed Zhang zhung according to the Bon po sources, I use a synopsis of Kyabs ston

Zang zang. One g.Yas ru yul dpon tshan was assigned to Zang zang (*mkhas pa lDe’u chos ‘byung* 257,7–8).

The correspondence between To yo chas la and Tho yor nag po is likely, the latter being a name unaccounted for in the ancient literature, whereas the territory was known by the former name in older (Tun-huang) documents.

The incorporation of the Byang gi Zhang zhung territory To yo chas la into sPu rgyal Bod led to a change of denomination, for it became known as Tho yor nag po when it was included into *stong sde-s* ruled by the *lha sras btsan po-s*.

<sup>5</sup> The sPu rgyal Bod’s conquest of Byang gi Zhang zhung was propedeutic to the definitive annihilation of the kingdom of the Lig myi rhya dynasty, for it brought the Central Tibetans closer to the capital Khyung lung. sPu rgyal Bod and Zhang zhung had conflictual relations on and off, marginally documented in the *Tun-huang Chronicles* (for one case see Chapter VI, 299–300, *Tun hong nas thon pa’i Bod kyi lo rgyus yig cha* p. 51). Srong btsan sgam po, through the services of his Khyung po minister from Zhang zhung, steered the balance of power to his favour and was able to unify the huge expanse of lands in the west under his rule.

Rin chen ‘od zer’s 14<sup>th</sup> century *sPyi spungs khro ‘grel*.<sup>6</sup> This text also helps to identify territories, part of the Byang thang “heartland” and outside it, that were Zhang zhung once.

This synopsis is found in *sNga rabs Bod kyi byung ba brjod pa’i ‘bel gtam lung gi snying po* (1997: 24,1–8) by *slob dpon* bsTan ‘dzin rnam dag (also see a compactment of the lands of Zhang zhung in dPal Idan tshul khriims’s *bsTan ‘byung skal bzang mgul rgyan* [1988: 33,12–18]).

skyabs ston’s *sPyi spungs khro ‘grel* offers evidence conducive to a classification of the lands of Zhang zhung into six sectors:

- the eastern sector (Sum yul), an integral part of Zhang zhung according to the Bon po tradition. It was composed by Mar pa, sTag lo, Gu rib (not to be confused with the one in southern Byang thang), Khyung byid, Khyung po and ‘U sang;
- the western sector (from sBal ti/La dwags down to Khu nu), composed by (from north to south): sBal ti, rKang phran, La dwags, Zangs dkar, Gar zha, Nyung ti, sPi ti and Khu nu;
- the southern sector—the Himalayan range from Uttarkand to Mustang—which included (from west to east): Drug nyi, Nyi ti, Kyo nam, Sha khog, mGar yang, Tshang ro, Ti dkar, Sle mi, ‘Om blo, Dol po, Mustang, Se rib and Krug skyes up to Mang yul;
- the central sector (Gu ge, Pu hrang and Ru thog) plus the contiguous lands of Kha yug, Kha skyor and Kha rag;
- the south-western Byang thang sector, consisting (from west to east) of Ci sang, Ci na in Gro shod, Gu rib, and Tshog cu; and finally
- the central Byang thang sector inclusive of Ra sang, Nag tshang and Shang gyer.

This classification does not reflect the actual territorial composition of the Zhang zhung kingdom, for it is more extended than what history tells. I think, instead, that this is a synchronic reading of the diachronic history of Bon. It compacts the extension of Zhang zhung before its downfall with the subsequent migrations of people related to Bon from the west to the east, who went to occupy lands in Khams, and to the south of Byang thang. This is also proved by the use of place names from later periods.

Leaving aside the lands of the eastern division of Sum yul, Kyabs ston’s assessment of other sectors of Zhang zhung shows

<sup>6</sup> Karmay (1977: 22) thinks it may have been written in 1391, while *bsTan rtsis bskal idan dang ‘dren* (47, see Kvaerne 1990: 159), dates it to a long time afterwards, for it holds that it was completed in 1509.

well enough that its lands comprised a number of lower altitude areas along the Himalayan range, situated around a core region well within the territorial expanse of the Tibetan plateau.

In view of this consideration, I think it is legitimate to distinguish the expanse of territories that composed Zhang zhung between a “heartland” and a “periphery”, in line with the classification found in Kyabs ston Rin chen ‘od zer’s *sPyi spungs khro ‘grel*.

These lands crown the great open area of Byang thang which functions as their landmark in that it connects them in a sort of regional and cultural unity. Hence, it seems that people were inclined to settle in higher altitude areas with harsher weather but also in valleys and areas where a different range of activities was possible. The cave colonies in territories, such as those of Gu ge and Glo bo, are signs of this pattern of human habitat (see below the section “Changes induced by the sPu rgyal Bod takeover”). These people’s lifestyle changed, favouring sedentary life side by side pastoralism rather than exclusive pastoralism, as in Byang thang.

### The Mackinder Theory

In some cases, theories work for their simplicity, especially when they are so obvious that they are hardly deniable. The theory—not my own—I introduce here is simple in its generalisation. It goes back to quite a few decades ago and was conceived to assess inhabitation in Central Asia.

The concept of an Inner Asian “heartland” by Halford Mackinder in his 1904 article “The geographical pivot of history” considers territorial morphology, which is a constant rather than human presence, and concludes that people had been settling where geographical conditions were most favourable to their life style. In his article Mackinder then launches himself in his own assessment of the Central Asian people’s territorial patterns of occupation and says that nomadism was the cultural “heartland” of Central Asia.

The T’ang emperor Wu-tsung was fully acquainted with the idea that geographic morphology, marked by the divide between pasture lands and cultivated fields, often was a political barrier to be recognised with. He said:

“How could we dare to disregard the natural boundaries established by Heaven and Earth?” (Drompp 1989: 141).

A natural boundary theory forged Chinese foreign policy, conceived along a dichotomy between the pastoralist and agricultural worlds that is one of the backbones of Tibetan culture.

Mackinder’s theory of Inner Asia and its nomadic core that bordered on the sedentary kingdoms, such as China, is a geo-historical vision which can be transferred to Byang thang—another

heartland”—and the territories crowning it,<sup>7</sup> some of them bordering on or being part of the Himalayan range. Hardly anywhere else in the lands of the Tibetans, the division between Byang thang and mNga’ ris exemplifies this basic concept of the local way of life. The ancient Zhang zhung civilisation also had major centres in areas, such as Gu ge, situated at a lower altitude and with warmer conditions that enabled the running of an economy not reserved to pastoralism.

Byang thang or, better, southern Byang thang—the sector closest to the areas I examine—played a crucial role as an economical and territorial reference, but people ended up running life in the lands enumerated by sKyabs ston, where the concentration of population, at least after the sPu rgyal Bod period, was higher owing to a warmer climate.

Nomadism was the “heartland” of Mackinder’s theory, a suggestive way of reading the history of Central Asia by means of one all-comprehensive concept. Nomadism was the “heartland” of Upper West Tibet, too, which is consequent to the wild nature of Byang thang. The pivotal role of Byang thang also found expression inasmuch as it favoured the centrifugal choice of various groups. They settled in the lands/valleys that crown the highlands and gave birth to the adjoining sedentary cultures.

Hence, I see Mackinder’s theory to be more suited to Byang thang and mNga’ ris than to Central Asia, for it more markedly concerns geography and consequent specific living conditions.

### Changes Induced by the sPu rgyal Bod Takeover

The archaic occupation of the western side of the Tibetan plateau underwent a drastic reform under sPu rgyal Bod. There was a general desertion of Zhang zhung both in terms of people and civilisation, induced by the new rulers, who substituted the old model with a new governorship.<sup>8</sup> With the change of the political system following

<sup>7</sup> Mackinder stresses the point that the Inner Central Asian “heartland” has no physical outlet, i.e. rivers that cross it and leave its borders. Except the Ma pham g.yu mtsho region and its four great rivers, which have their sources in the “heartland” but eventually cross into India, the core of Byang thang has no physical outlet, too.

<sup>8</sup> *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* (185,11–17): “On the basis of the earliest [law known as] *Khri rtse ‘bum bzher*, the *srid pa* and *khos ston pa* (the “taking care of the secular affairs and the *khos*”) tasks were assigned by the king to the various ministers by means of their authority. The *khos dpon* of Bod was mGar sTong btsan yul bzung; the *khos dpon* of Zhang zhung was Khyung po Bun zung (spelled so for sPung sad); the *khos dpon* of the Sum pa was Hor Bya zhu ring po (“[wearing] a long hat [with] bird [feathers]”?); the *khos dpon* of horses was dBang btsan bzang dpal legs; the *khos dpon* of the mThong khyab was Cog ro rGyal mtshan g.yang gong. They were those who were appointed. sKyid shod Sho ma ra [for Bod], Khyung lung rngul mkhar (i.e. spelled the way in which it appears in Sad mar kar’s song) [for Zhang zhung], Nam ra Zha don (spelled so) Gram pa tshal



the annihilation of Zhang zhung by the Central Tibetans, the ground realities in Byang thang changed in the intervening period. The annihilation of the Zhang zhung kingdom—however thorough in its devastation it was—did not mean the desertification of the “heartland”.

sPu rgyal Bod substituted the culture it had destroyed with its system of governance that had applied to the regions on the plateau in the east of Byang thang. Erstwhile Zhang zhung did not become a sPu rgyal cradle but a strategic trampoline for the extension of the *lha sras btsan po*'s kingdom into Central Asia. The western front in their campaigns for the empire was open at the expense of the Western Turks, previous allies, and the Chinese.

After it was blown away, what remained of the Zhang zhung kingdom on the western side of the Byang thang steppes, where the kingdom had had its centre, were a clan system from ancestral time, doubtful forms of insular governorship,<sup>9</sup> and religious practice with hermit features.

Hence, the perception that derives from Byang thang in the days just before the end of its autochthonous kingdom is of a land with inhospitable areas where the ancient Zhang zhung civilisation had developed in conditions widely unknown. Extreme hermit life continued to prosper subsequently, owing to religious masters of immaculate determination.

This is elucidated in a significant manner by the life example and personality of the Bon po master Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po, who owes its celebrity to one text in particular, entitled *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs*, which deals with him. This work is found in the collection of texts that are the literary heritage of *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.

Gyer spungs negotiated an agreement with Khri srong lde btsan so that Bon, although defeated, was not destroyed by the sPu rgyal king. The account claims that, following the annihilation of the Zhang zhung kingdom, he threatened Khri srong lde btsan with personal dire consequences if the sPu rgyal king would not consent to the survival of Bon. For this reason, his behaviour is acknowledged by the Bon po literature as having being crucial for the preservation of its religious tradition.

My concern for Gyer spungs regards another phase in his life,

one that predates his activity in protection of Bon. Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po is less well known for the years he spent in seclusion in Byang thang to practise *rDzogs chen* Bon po style, the philosophical basis of *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*. His activity is meaningful to assess the lifestyle of the Zhang zhung people of the post-monarchic period and their religious practice.

Soon before the Khri srong lde btsan accident, and thus around the mid-eighth century, his teacher Tshe spungs Zla ba rgyal mtshan took Gyer spungs to the island of Da rog mtsho, the lake in the Byang thang area of Gu rib, northeast of Pu hrang, where they performed extreme penance.<sup>10</sup> What followed is an extraordinary case of

<sup>10</sup> Gyer spungs's mystic endeavour at Da rog is a story of enlightenment and abject privation, worth telling here (*Zhang zhung snyan rgyud bla ma'i rnam thar* 27,6–29,5): “Aged forty-seven, when he freed himself from all bondage, [Gyer spungs] gave [his teacher] Tshe spungs Zla ba rgyal mtshan (p. 28) an offer of much wealth. In the midst of Brag rong dkar po to the west of Ma mig, having been given the *sngo prod lnga* (the “fivefold direct instructions”), Gyer spungs promised not to give these [teachings] to anyone at all. The *bla ma* said: “You can give them even to one hundred men if they are worthy recipients”. Thirdly, as for the extraordinary locality where he received the teachings, this was the area of Da rog. Men do not gather at its mTsho sman (“medicinal lake”). The way he practised penance at this place is as follows. For one year, the teacher and disciple, altogether two, stayed on the island in the lake with provisions for survival. Every meal, Gyer spungs used to save one morcel of *zan* (*rtsam pa*). Then the lake froze. The teacher and disciple, altogether two, having softened the pieces of *zan* that had been put aside, ate them. They put each leftover of the broth on the rocks serving as cushions. The lake froze again (i.e. this was the second winter of penance). They poured water over the leftovers of the broth, scratched the rocks, and ate them. The disciple thought: “Is it how we, the teacher and disciple, altogether two, are going to die? Supposing we should die, I wish to die jumping in the lake first before him”. [The teacher] asked him: “rGyer spungs *lags*, are you in such a mental state of desperation that you are thinking to die?”. He replied: “I am in such a state”. He said: “If so, make a tour of this island and look about”. He went and said that there was the corpse of a *rkyang*. The teacher told him: “[You] are a son of a pure family, so it is not good that you eat it”. Somedays later, [Gyer spungs] went around [the island again], and reported that there was the corpse of a woman with the goitre upside down. (p. 29) [The teacher] said: “It is not good to eat flesh left on the path. Let us go to the community of the lake”. Gyer spungs wondered what [Tshe spungs Zla ba rgyal mtshan] wanted to do. He was scared because he thought that there was no path [to the shore where they had] previously crossed (i.e. because it was not winter and ice had melted). [The teacher] said: “Gyer spungs! Hold on me and shut your eyes!”. While having gone on for a long time, he thought he had forgotten his flint and, having opened his eyes, he looked back. There was a woman, with [beautiful] ornaments and dress, coming after them and rolling up a bundle of white cloth and, upon looking in front, a woman, like the one before, stretching a white cloth on which they, the teacher and disciple, were walking. He hardly had the time to look [again] that the cloth was taken away and disappeared. They instantly left the waters at the shore. They were then surrounded by many householders of each [place in] Byang (i.e. southern Byang thang). At the site of the *ru [ba]* (“nomadic settlement”), he said: “I am Gyer spungs”, but being skinny and with a long beard, they did not recognise him. They exclaimed: “It is many years that Gyer spungs died, he is not him”.

[for Sum yul], and Ri bo g.Ya' dmar [for the cavalry and the mThong khyab? Or for the cavalry alone?] were [respectively] chosen [as seats of the *khos dpon-s*].”

<sup>9</sup> See Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan's *Legs bshad rin po che'i mdzod* for alleged rulers of Zhang zhung from the Khyung po clan in Karmay (1972, Tibetan text; *ibid.*: 206,32–207,8; translation *ibid.*: 12–13), which is a partial translation of Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan's work.

spiritual abnegation and human resolve, typical of the meditative discipline of this tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Da rog mtsho was familiar to the early Bon po masters, for areas of southern Byang thang in the Zhang zhung kingdom were both the scene of their predecessors' activity since time immemorial and a major centre of secular rule. One only needs to think of the seats of the *bya ru can* rulers of Zhang zhung to notice the centrality of the land.<sup>12</sup>

A sedentary way of life was already practised during proto-historical times, for the massive and numerous cave colonies in territories such as Gu ge and Glo bo seem to be signs of ancient occupation. A major point that needs to be ascertained through archaeological investigation concerns the phases of cave inhabitation. Should the cave colonies be associated with trogloditic existence? Or were they a habitat solution adopted in hermit communities to hold their practice in relative isolation during the historical period of Zhang zhung? A subsequent use was that some caves were occupied

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After they were told the accounts [of his endeavours], they believed him. They immediately brought water, then they brought white goat and white 'bri milk. After some days, he was given [normal] food, and recovered his shape".

<sup>11</sup> Here follows a list of *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* masters, all belonging to the proto-historical period of these teachings, who devoted their life to hermit life, and the caves where they meditated (*sNga rabs Bod kyi byung ba brjod pa'i 'bel gtam lung gi snying po* 37,1–38,18):

Zla ba rgyal mtshan meditated at Brag dmar chad gshig,  
 Ra sangs Klu rgyal at sPo dmar,  
 Ta pi hri tsa at sTag thabs seng ge'i brag,  
 Ra sangs Ku ma ra at Ne rings,  
 Gu rib Lha sbyin at Bya tshang gi gnas,  
 Zhang zhung Sad ne ga'u at Dwang ra g.Yu bum and  
 Gu rib dPal bzang at sGro tsa can gyi brag. These are places in the Byang thang region to the east of Gangs Ti se.  
 Khyung po bKra shis rgyal mtshan meditated at Sa ti phug of Zhang zhung,  
 Khyung po Legs sgom at mTsho ri do,  
 Ma hor sTag gzig at Gangs Ti se,  
 Tshe spungs Zla ba rgyal mtshan at Brag rong dkar po to the west of yul Ma mig,  
 Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po at Do brag sha ba can of Dwa rog mtsho gling and at Sha ba brag of sGo mang ru ba to the west of Byang gNam mtsho,  
 Pha wa rGyal gzig gsas chung at Me rgyung dkar nag,  
 dMu shod Tram chen po at Shod tram phug of rTa sgo,  
 dMu rGyal ba blo gros at Dwa rog lcags phug and Zang zang lHa brag and, finally,  
 dpon chen bTsan po at Dwa rog brag.

<sup>12</sup> These *bya ru can* kings of Da rog are found in a second list of dKar ru Bru chen bsTan 'dzin rin chen's *Ti se'i dkar chag* (600,3–4), one that classifies these kings on the basis of the territory they ruled and reckons a larger amount of them. The kings were bDud 'dul dbal gyi rgyal po wearing a *bya ru* with a radiant solar disc in crystal and Li wer gyer gyi rgyal po wearing a *bya ru* with a radiant moon disc in crystal.

by religious practitioners when Buddhism became popular in mNga' ris with *bstan pa phyi dar*. They were sites for meditation but some were also transformed into veritable temples.

### From the "Heartland" to the "Periphery": the Preliminaries to the Creation of mNga' ris skor gsum

Centuries later, after a long interregnum hardly covered by historical memory, one finds in the lands of Upper West Tibet a new politico-territorial reality. When mNga' ris stod reappears in the records of Tibetan history, one is brought to acknowledge the presence of ethnic groups that were settled, as for their main seats in areas at the "periphery", where a different socio-economic lifestyle was pursued, or else they had withdrawn, in some cases, from the empty spaces of the Byang thang solitude.

This eco-geopolitical reality was marked by a profound diversity. The central core, despite its isolation and hard living conditions, remained the Byang thang "heartland" where the Zhang zhung kingdom and its civilisation had disappeared under the blows of sPu rgyal Bod.

The main human settlements, organised in principalities across the centuries, established themselves at lower altitude areas. These settlements crowned the Byang thang "heartland" and connected it, owing to their location, with Mon yul and the provinces of India. This organisation, which still used the Byang thang "heartland" as the great basin from where important economic resources were drawn, created the conditions that linked altitude pastoralism, its way of life and products, with the world of the lowlands and its completely different living arrangements and commodities.

The inversion of trend consisted in the fact that the "periphery" came to exercise control over the "heartland", the reverse of the power structure that existed during the Zhang zhung kingdom's period.

It was not so much the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in the lower valleys at the "periphery" that led to switch focus towards them away from the highlands, after Bon in the Zhang zhung kingdom must have forged the way of life through its practice in areas at an altitude.<sup>13</sup> It was the transition towards a more sedentary life solution

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<sup>13</sup> *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* (Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 51,16–19, translation *ibid.*: 108) outlines the customs prevailing in mNga' ris stod before the advent of Nyi ma mgon's dynasty. They amounted to practices that had little to do with Buddhism although the religion may have had an influx owing to his wide diffusion in the Indian North-west. The *gtsug lag*—a term that needs a thorough discussion also from the viewpoint of the culture of Upper West Tibet, an attempt I cannot do in a limited space—was Bon. The funerary rites were black (which I suppose were non-Buddhist) inasmuch as cemeteries were used

that brought people towards the valleys surrounding Byang thang.

The role that the adoption of Tibetan Buddhism exercised was to promote aggregation between different groups of people inhabiting lower altitude areas after political entities were formed locally. Besides bringing civilising elements to his kingdom, Ye shes ’od’s promotion of Buddhism was a factor of unity. Buddhism preexisted his reign in Gu ge marginally and on a larger scale in La dwags than elsewhere in his kingdom—unless the signs of pre-Nyi ma mgon Buddhism have mostly disappeared from the other areas of mNga’ ris skor gsum—owing to the influence irradiated from the Indian northwest. lHa bla ma’s taking care of the education of groups of individuals from the regions of his kingdoms was in syntony with the aspirations of the local intelligentsia. The case of young Rin chen bzang po is enlightening in this respect.

The transfer that marked the passage from a high-altitude kingdom to the various lower valleys of the “periphery” around the Byang thang “heartland” did not occur in synchronicity. The history of these lands records remarkable time fluctuations between one occupation and another. The ways and causes of these population reshufflings that determined these events is dissimilar in most cases.

The birth/consolidation of sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon’s mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom was achieved through clan alliance. This was the strategic basis of sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon’s conquest of the lands in Upper West Tibet. His starting point was the ties he established with the ’Bro, a non-indigenous clan, who had gone to occupy Pu hrang by migrating into it, possibly during the sPu rgyal period.<sup>14</sup>

to dispose of the bodies, as documented for sPu rgyal Bod. The people followed a heretical religion (which one?). I wonder whether the passage echoes the conditions of the teachings in Central Tibet and is derived from there, with the exception of Bon that is stereotypically associated with the west of the plateau.

<sup>14</sup> The presence of the ’Bro clan in Pu hrang is documented on both the inscribed faces of the *rdo rings* bearing a relief of sPyan ras gzigs and standing in a field between Zhi sde in the east and Cog ro in the west (Tshe ring chos rgyal and Zla ba tshe ring 1994: 4–20, text of the inscriptions *ibid.*: 4–6). Also see Vitali (1996: 168–169, n. 231).

The two epigraphs record the name of the ’Bro chieftain, Khri brtsan sgra mGon po rgyal, who was the sponsor of the *rdo rings*. This is a proof that the ’Bro were devotees of sPyan ras gzigs and therefore their profession of the Buddhist religion was a point that made them empathic towards sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon. The founder of the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom descended from a line of rulers, i.e. gNam lde ’Od srung and dPal ’khor btsan, who promoted Buddhism. Khri brtsan sgra mGon po rgyal also says in the inscription that he was a *zhang*, a sign that he belonged to the old sPu rgyal Bod order. This was one more point that made the ’Bro close to sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon.

The ’Bro chieftain of the inscription also associates himself to the name Seng ge, typical of his clan, also borne by Nyi ma mgon’s ’Bro wife, Seng dkar ma. Her’s is not a proper name but a title deriving from a symbol of rank peculiar to the ’Bro heroes (the *seng ge dkar mo’i gong slag*, i.e. “the white lioness fur

Another non-indigenous group of people settled in Upper West Tibet was the prominent Cog ro clan, one of the divisions of the lDong tribe from Mi nyag. They held a tract of land in Pu hrang that was eventually assigned to *lo chung* Legs pa’i shes rab, a Cog ro ba himself, by means of a *bka’ shog*, the text of which is integrally (?) recorded in *Rin chen bzang po’i rnam thar ’bring po*.<sup>15</sup> This authenticates the assertion in the *Hermanns Manuscript*—which I rather like to call *lDong rus mdzod*.<sup>16</sup> A line says:

“The Bu rang (spelled so for Pu rang) *rgyal po* is one lDong”  
(*lDong rus mdzod* f.13a = Hermanns 1948: 197,32).

*Lo chen* Rin chen bzang po’s mother was a Cog ro,<sup>17</sup> which shows that his paternal clan, the Hrugs wer of Zhang chung pa origin did not refrain from intermarriage with people originally from outside mNga’ ris stod, and it is probable that the intermarriage was not the first occasion of this occurrence. All this shows that the Cog ro had

collar”), which some clan members wore as a sign of greatness (*mkhas pa lDe’u chos ’byung* p. 265,17). The title was also used by the ’Bro of sTod.

<sup>15</sup> The ordinance that allotted land to the Cog ro in Pu hrang smad reads in *Rin chen bzang po’i rnam thar ’bring po* (106,5–107,2) as follows: “Due to his kindness in rendering service to him, by means of his body and speech, even at the risk of his life, [the land of] Cog re (sic for Cog ro) up to Ku shu in Go ge (sic for Gu ge) on the upper side; the three lower [areas of] the Ti ma la (“pass”) including the river flowing from the snows and glacier (or the Kha dar river?) [the borders being marked by] Te thang in the east; the snow range in the south; sNga ma myong (“not being there before”) in the west; and the river (*gtsang po*) in the north, including the fertile (*gzang* sic for *bzang*) fields, groves and pastures of the localities were granted by a sealed order (*bka’ rtags*) of lHa bla ma me (sic for *mes*) dbon (“lHa bla ma and his successors”) and the personal seal (*phyag rtags*) of the *lo tsa ba*, to lo chung (p. 107) Legs pa’i shes rab. No small or large community whatsoever can come to reclaim (*bzhes thang*) them. No petition can be filed (*kha mi rgyab*). [This] seal (*rgya*) cannot be obliterated (*tib* spelled so for *gtib*, lit. “to cover, obscure”).”

<sup>16</sup> *lDong rus mdzod* (198,1–5): “The lDong has eighteen great clans (*ru chen* sic for *rus*): Cog ro, Cog khri and Kha rang, altogether three; sBas, sBa rje and dBu dkar, altogether three; mDa min, mDa tshal and mDa ’jon, altogether three; sNyan, Yag snyen and Theg bzang, altogether three; Yal ra, lHom gring and Yag pa, altogether three; Zi na, Sum pa and Sum bu, altogether three, which makes eighteen”.

The manuscript’s title page is lost and I prefer to call it *lDong rus mdzod* rather than the *Hermanns Manuscript* because the text mainly deals with the genealogies of this ancestral tribe. Hermanns had no part in writing it but only in finding the copy that is known to us. To give his name to this text was an exercise in eurocentric colonialism that was not uncommon in the time he lived.

<sup>17</sup> *Rin chen bzang po’i rnam thar ’bring po* (58,4–5): “The name [Lo chen]’s mother was Cog ro za Kun bzang shes rab bstan”.

*Rin chen bzang po’i rnam thar bsdus pa* (234,3): “The name of [Lo chen]’s father was ban chen po gZhon nu dbang phyug. His mother’s name was Cog ros (i.e. Cog ro) Kun bzang shes rab bstan ma”.

One wonders whether Rin chen bzang po’s father was a practising monk.

moved to the erstwhile Zhang zhung dominions, settled there and intermingled with the local people.

While Pu hrang was occupied by people from outside, Gu ge, at the time of Nyi ma mgon's conquest, was still populated by indigenous people—the Mang wer, Mol wer, sKyin wer, Hrugs wer and Rum wer.<sup>18</sup> The Khyung po, who antagonised Nyi ma mgon's takeover of their land, occupied ministerial roles in Zhang zhung in great antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

Traces remain of the presence of Nyi ma mgon's 'Bro loyalists in the handling of La dwags (see Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 119–150 for the inscriptions inside A lci 'Du khang and gSum brtsegs, collected and translated by P. Denwood), once the region was subtracted from the hands of its Dardic rulers. It cannot be ruled out that the 'Bro participated in Nyi ma mgon's takeover of both Gu ge and La dwags.

The status of La dwags prior to Nyi ma mgon's takeover is an indication that, after the downfall of the sPu rgyal Bod empire, the land has slipped away from the hands of the Zhang zhung pa and ended up in the control of the Dard, people deployed along the mountain ranges of the Indian Northwest.<sup>20</sup>

The 'Gar, who are found in Ya rtse according to literary evidence,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* (429,4–6) defines them the Zhang zhung *mched* lnga. They were the Mang wer Od tshang swa ged tsha (spelled so), the Mol wer, the sKyin wer Srong kyed tsha, the Hrugs wer g.yung drung gZher sto ged tsha and the Rum wer Sha zher rtse, altogether five.

<sup>19</sup> The opening lines of P.T. 1287 (67,1–68,7) reads: "There is a *rgyal bran* (spelled so) in each land. Minor castles are located in each of them. The main [personalities] among those who rule the *rgyal bran*-s and those who serve as *blon po*-s are as follows. [In] Zhang zhung, there were Dar pa'i rjo bo Lig snya shur, *blon po* Khyung po Ra sangs rje and sTong Lom ma tse, altogether two". Follows a record of rulers and ministers for each minor kingdom.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Stein (reprint 1979) for the earliest reference to the Dārada in Kalhaṇa's work that appears in the text during the reign of the Ephthalite king Mihirakula who ruled in Kashmir in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*: *Taranga* I, n. 289). A. Stein (*ibid.*: *Taranga* I, n. 312 and nos. 312–316) says that lands included in the Dardic confederation were Citral, the Yasin Basin, the valleys along the course of the Indus such as Gilgit, Chilas, Bunji up to the Kisangangā valley to the north of Kashmir, to which La dwags gsham should be added. The Dardic people—it seems—held them loosely since the time of Herodotus.

<sup>21</sup> *Yar lung jo bo chos 'byung* has two assessments of the Ya rtse ruling class. One sees them as descendants of the 'Gar clan (72,6–9), which refers to an early time: "The royal line of Ya tse descends from the Bod kyi chos blon (sic: he was a famous warrior), 'Gar Srong btsan (sic for sTong btsan). It is believed that Se ru dGe ba'i blo gros, who mastered the two sciences, after having investigated [the matter] with gSer thog pa Rin do rje, put [this statement] into written form". The other one refers to the Ya rtse genealogy as a branch of the Pu hrang rulers during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. See Vitali (1996: n. 777).

The outline of the rulers in Ya rtse before Naga lde, found in the Dullu inscription, is marred by various lacunae (for its text see Tucci 1956: 46–49). The

may have been a splinter group additional to the four great divisions of this clan, none of which is associated with Upper West Tibet, unless it should be considered as a branch of their '*phrul rgyud*.<sup>22</sup>

Given the Khyung po's major role in old Zhang zhung, it should not be inconceivable that a local 'Gar group, fellow members of the Se Khyung dBra tribe, had come to settle in the lands where the sun sets.

The 'Gar of sTod must have come into contact with unspecified local inhabitants, defined as sKal Mon. As to the Ya rtse dynasties (see the Dullu inscription in Tucci 1956: 46–49), the royal line established by Na ga lde/Nagaraja, of possible Indo-Iranic origin, was followed by a branch of the Pu hrang royalty. They ruled in alternance with genealogical segments from Ya rtse.

Overall, history tells that, owing to compulsions that destabilised their status, a scion of dPal 'khor btsan left his seat in gTsang, most likely rGyal rtse before the Shar kha pa established the town as their capital,<sup>23</sup> and migrated west, focusing on the "periphery" rather than the "heartland" as his new territory.

The itinerary followed by Nyi ma mgon to move west from rTsang highlights another peculiarity of Byang thang, which served as the quintessential transfer route for the traffic between dBus gTsang and mNga' ris stod. Byang thang's rather flat morphology made it a preferred way of travelling rather than the Himalayan range or the valleys that fell subsequently under Nepal, much more difficult to negotiate. The ancient and principal route crossed southern Byang thang from Gung thang to Pu hrang stod via Sa dga', Glo bo, Pra dum, Bar yang and the Mar yum la. Another route—a late transit—was to

last kings whose names are still readable in the part of concern are Mahipala, succeeded by a ruler whose name is defaced but which ends in "dhi", and by Jakakhya (lines 14–27), who may have not belonged to the same dynasty. The conquest of Naga lde, the Nagaraja of the inscription, followed. For the list of the fourteen Pala kings see Tucci (*ibid.*: 49–50).

<sup>22</sup> *Chos sdings pa'i rnam thar* (415,2–3): "There are four lineages in the 'Gar [clan]: the *chos rgyud* (the "lineage of religion") of lHa rje dPal byams; the '*phrul rgyud* (the "lineage of miracles") of Sungs btsan yul bzung (i.e. Srong btsan yul bzung); the *dpa' rgyud* (the "lineage of heroes") of bTsan pa Dred po; and the *kal rgyud* (sic for *skal?* the "lineage of fortune"?) of Nye rang Pha mdzug. They are altogether four. The '*phrul rgyud* came to exist (*byung*) in dBus rTsang, [and] Mon until Dol po. The *dpa' rgyud* [came to exist] from rGya 'Jang in Sa mda' and elsewhere (*rnam su*). The *kal rgyud* came to exist from Brag ra Gling chen, Mu nyag (spelled so for Mi nyag) stod smad, all of those. The *chos rgyud* originated from Yangs pa can, [and] from Dol zor to Li yul, all of those".

<sup>23</sup> The Shar kha pa prince 'Phags pa dpal built a fort at rGya grong/rGyal grong and erected a building on rGyal rtse's higher peak, where the late sPu rgyal dynasty king dPal 'khor btsan had a kingly palace. For this reason, he called it rGyal mkhar rtse ("the peak of the royal castle") (see *Rab brtan kun bzang 'phags kyi rnam thar* 12,8–14).



the north of it, that connected gTsang via mTsho chen and farther north to dGe rgyas and dGe rtse. Less frequented but ancient was another route farther north, which crossed the area of the Nag tshang lakes from gNam mtsho all the way towards dGe rgyas and Ru thog.

sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon’s plan to move west and forge his kingdom had vague similarities with the policy adopted by the *lha sras btsan po*-s. The purpose of his journey was to gain control of territories that had belonged to the ancestors sitting on the sPu rgyal throne. However, there was no point to duplicate the ancient conquest of Zhang zhung achieved by Srong btsan sgam po. His plan to replicate the Central Tibetans’ control of several lands of the erstwhile Zhang zhung kingdom came to terms with the reality he found locally. For one, the ‘Bro loyalists were already in control of Pu hrang.

### **mNga’ ris skor gsum: Emphasis on the “Periphery”**

Nyi ma mgon knew that there was no empire to forge and rule. His choice was not to reign over the lands on the upper side from a centre of power far away in dBus gTsang, like the *lha sras btsan po*-s did. His choice was local but, in the beginning, he followed the old sPu rgyal Bod’s pattern to settle and rule from the locality chosen as the capital of old. That was Khyung lung, but then he was inspired by a change of perspective about the lands he was planning to control. It was no more the centrality of the “heartland”. It was the centrality of the “periphery”. His campaigns aimed at conquering the areas of the “periphery”, which he newly planned to make the core of his kingdom, using the support of lower altitude power structures, such as the ‘Bro in Pu hrang, to consolidate his presence and prepare his conquest of the *skor gsum*.

Unlike the *lha sras btan po*-s, he aimed at taking Gu ge not to make it the centre of a distant governance anymore and La dwags not to make it a trampoline for conquests in Western Central Asia.

Despite his changes from the way sPu rgyal Bod had controlled the territories in the west, Nyi ma mgon somewhat retained tracts of the old *lha sras btsan po*-s policy. His sons, the sTod kyi mgon gsum—children of local mothers—brought the embryonic policy of their father to fruition. The criterion adopted was to divide the dominions among the aspirants to the throne. Splitting the unity of the kingdom was typical of a conspicuous number of states. It was meant to guarantee a succession without rivalries.

None of the sTod kyi mgon gsum accepted to rule from the capital of their father. They chose to elect their three capitals in lower altitude valleys of the “periphery”.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Jo bo dngul sku mched gsum gyi dkar chag* (f.6b,4–5): “Hence, the king’s eldest son dPal lde Rig pa mgon, having been assigned the castle g.Yu gong sPe

In order to assert their self standing, the sTod kyi mgon gsum did not choose to stay at a higher altitude castle but decided to transfer their seat to valleys of mNga’ ris stod at the “periphery” of the old Byang thang “heartland” to privilege another way of life that prospered locally. A combination of factors—the choice of the “periphery” and the need to have individual governance—resulted in the new status of the kingdom as three divisions.

The passage of mNga’ ris skor gsum into the hands of the sTod kyi mgon gsum marked the abandonment of the higher altitude land. This was where Nyi ma mgon had initially elected his residence to the north of mtsho Ma pham (*Nyang ral chos ’byung* 457,20), and then had built *sku mkhar* Nyi bzung at Ti se after bringing the *skor gsum* under his sway (*ibid.*: 458,14).<sup>25</sup>

Nyi ma mgon’s selection of his capital was a sign that his kingdom was planned to encompass a huge territorial expanse not too dissimilar from the lands of Zhang zhung in the west. Choosing the capital at Gangs Ti se stressed the territorial unity of the kingdom beyond the limits of its land components. But Nyi ma mgon’s campaigns are an indication that the ancient capital of Zhang zhung in the period of the *bya ru can* rulers was not going to be the permanent centre of his dominions.

Territorial lines of diffusion were at the basis of the moves towards the “periphery”. Besides the political reasons that induced Nyi ma mgon to take over the various areas of his kingdom by means of different tactics, they were dictated by the morphology of Upper

mo che, said: “I am not going to stay here. That cloud is moving towards Mar yul. That is where I will go”. He went to Mar yul La thags (spelled so). La thags, Zangs dkar, Gar zha and ‘Brog Chu shod, the upper and lower lands, were given to him to rule”.

*Ibid.* (f.6b,6–7): “The middle son bKra shis lde mgon, having been assigned g.Yu gong sPe mo che mkhar, said: “I will not stay here. That cloud is in Pu rang. That is where I will go”. Pu rang, Brad, Ya rtse, Glo bo, Dol po, ‘Brog Gro shod, rGya Nyi ma, Bar ka [which are the] *byang skor*, were given to this son to rule”.

*Ibid.* (f.6b,1–2): “The youngest son lDe gtsug mgon, having been assigned the castle g.Yu gong sPe mo che, said: “I will not stay here. That cloud is in Gug ge. That is where I will go”. mNga’ ris Gug ge, Pi ti Pi sKyog, which constitute one *khri skor*; ‘Brog Mur la mtsho skyes, Phun rtse, g.Yu gong and gSer kha gSur ngur rin chen ‘byung gnas were given to him”.

The assignment of the lands to the sTod kyi mgon gsum varies according to the sources.

<sup>25</sup> The foundation of *sku mkhar* Nyi bzung is commonly attributed to sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon but one voice out of the chorus is Padma ‘phrin las’s *Jam dbyangs rin cen* (spelled so) *rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar* (in *bKa’ ma bla ma rgyud pa’i rnam thar* p. 272,6), which says: “The middle of the sons born to rGod lde (i.e Nyi ma mgon) conquered Bal po. He founded *sku mkhar* Nyi bzung in sPu rang”.

bKra shis mgon’s conquest of the Kathmandu valley is no less controversial. No cross referential evidence is found anywhere else that the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom controlled the Kathmandu valley even temporarily.

West Tibet. The three *skor* of mNga' ris echo the configuration of the land admirably. They were divided on the basis of a geographical criterion. Gu ge Pu hrang formed the southern block, compact in morphology and having the Mountain and the Lakes as the "heartland". The *skor* of La dwags composed by two parallel valleys separated by a mountain range stretched on the south-east north-west axis. The northern valley had its eastern limit in the region of Ru thog and Pang gong mtsho, its "heartland". It extended to Drang rtse, Nub ra, Kha pa lu and Shi gar. The southern valley, too, had its eastern limit in the region of Ru thog and Pang gong mtsho. It comprised La dwags stod and gsham, Pu rig, all the way to sBal ti at the other extremity. The *skor* on the western side of the Himalayan range united Pi ti and Khu nu to Zangs dkar.

The tactical decision was to keep Zangs dkar separated from La dwags and Pi ti from Gu ge in order to obtain the third *skor*. This was the division superseded with the death of IDe gtsug mgon.<sup>26</sup>

The choice to settle in Pu hrang by the 'Bro clan members may have been induced by its favourable climatic conditions that allowed them to embrace agriculture as in their ancestral land in rTsang and by the vicinity to the *axis mundi*. The choice of Gu ge as the centre of the other *skor* reflected a historical legacy from the days of the Zhang zhung kingdom. The choice of La dwags stod as the capital area of this *skor* rather than Ru thog "heartland" as in the days of the Zhang zhung kingdom was probably due to multiple reasons, besides moving to the "periphery". It is likely that it was meant to keep the belligerent Dardic population under control and to bring the region under the *bstan pa phyi dar stod lugs* fold.

Nyi ma mgon's takeover of the lands that eventually formed the *skor* assigned to IDe gtsug mgon, is not dealt with in the sources. His location was more peripheral to India, and Nyi ma mgon may have had to contend the regions composing it with Mon pa political realities. The reason for the absence of a historical record in the Tibetan literature is nowhere found. It is possible that Pi ti and Khu nu were somewhat attached to Gu ge and the conquest of the latter may have brought the consequence that these regions passed under Nyi ma mgon. The same case may be made for Zangs dkar, which may have followed the fate of La dwags. But, if this was the case, all these regions were dismembered from their previous political positions in order to form a big enough share of dominions to be ruled by one of the sTod kyi mgon gsum. Whereas the literature is clear enough in identifying in Tho ling the capital of the *skor* of Gu

<sup>26</sup> See Vitali (1996: 284–285, n. 432) for the reference to IDe gtsug mgon as gShegs lde, or the "dead king" in *Zangs (dkar) bZang la'i rgyal brgyud kyi dka chags* (Dargyay 1987: 23).

ge Pu hrang, and Shel/Nyar ma as the capital of the *skor* of La dwags, no trace is preserved concerning the capital of IDe gtsug mgon's division.

Again, no clues are given on the relations between the three *skor*, only the state of the art of their secular and religious conditions in limited cases.

Meant to give a share of power to each of Nyi ma mgon's sons, events led eventually to the opposite: their reunification under the *skor* of Gu ge Pu hrang.<sup>27</sup> Most sources classify the territories originally allotted to IDe gtsug mgon's *skor* as part of bKra shis mgon's dominions, which indicates that they were incorporated into the division of Gu ge Pu hrang. Also, the royal line of Gu ge ended up ruling in La dwags (see above n. 28), which led to the actual control of the three *skor* under a single governance.

The inevitable reunion of the three *skor* brought as consequence the adoption of another system of rulership, characterised by the division of tasks and power among members of the same branch of the royal family, who engaged in handling different aspects of rulership side by side (on the code of laws promulgated by Ye shes 'od see Vitali 1996: 209–231). Within the hierarchy at court, the division of power among members of the royal family, established by Ye shes 'od, attributed to him a superior status over his kins.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *La dwags rgyal rabs* (43,3–9) is vague in its treatment of the royal lineage stemmed from dPal gyi mgon, for it does not do more than giving names to its rulers which are titles and thus not useful for an identification. Other sources point towards the control of the region by the successive members of the Gu ge Pu hrang royal house until the Dardic resurgence under Utpala (see below n. 35). The activities of the Gu ge Pu hrang dynasty that associated them with rulership in La dwags can be summarised as follows:

- it was Ye shes 'od who founded Nyar ma *gtsug lag khang* (*Rin chen bzang po'i rnam thar 'bring po* 89,1–2), rather than any of the La dwags rulers mentioned in *La dwags rgyal rabs*.
- Nyar ma was made the centre of the mNga' ris skor gsum dynasty in La dwags.
- lHa lde built his *sku mkhar* and a temple at Shel (*mNga' ris rgyal rabs*; Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 61,13–14, translation *ibid.*: 115).
- 'Od lde founded dPe thub (*mNga' ris rgyal rabs* Tibetan text *ibid.*: 61,18–19, translation *ibid.*: 115).
- rTse lde was the mNga' ris skor gsum ruler who suppressed a Dardic attempt to sever links with the other *skor*-s of the kingdom (*mNga' ris rgyal rabs* Tibetan text *ibid.*: 72,13–73,12, translation *ibid.*: 123–124).
- dBang lde is mentioned in an A lci inscription as the king exercising control of La dwags with the support of ministers of the 'Bro clan, the old-time loyalists of the mNga' ris skor gsum royal house.
- Probably dBang lde's son bSod nams rtse, too, controlled La dwags.

<sup>28</sup> That Ye shes 'od stood supreme in the hierarchy of the royal family he himself had delegated to have a share of power transpires from *mNga' ris rgyal rabs*, *lHa bla ma Ye shes 'od kyi rnam thar* and *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* *passim*.

An aspect never clarified in the literary material on the mNga' ris skor gsum dynasty is why none of the two sons of Ye shes 'od, De ba ra dza and Naga

The sTod kyi mgon gsum’s move towards the “periphery” terminated the grand plan of their father, who did not aim at resuscitating the erstwhile Zhang zhung state, but at recreating the living conditions that he had left behind in dBus gTsang when he moved west to forge his kingdom.

Internal dissent among the three skor, which might have been a cause for the merging of the three divisions, is not mentioned in the historical documents until the coup that assassinated rTse lde and overthrew his legitimate succession (see below at the end of this section).

Whereas Zhang zhung was a case of coexistence of nomadic and sedentary customs, mNga’ ris skor gsum was a kingdom which focused on a sedentary economy and way of life. It is symptomatic that Gangs Ti se, the great core of Zhang zhung on the “heartland”, was not chosen as the supreme capital over the three regional ones of mNga’ ris skor gsum. Equally significant is that the mountain and the lakes on the higher altitude plateau hardly were the theatre of religious practice during *bstan pa phyi dar stod lugs*. This was not the case in the following periods, for, from rje btsun Mid la and Pa tshab lo tsa ba onwards, Ti se and the lakes regained centrality, but only in religious terms.<sup>29</sup>

A marked difference exists between the role of Buddhism in *lha sras btsan po*’s Tibet and the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom. Buddhism in sPu rgyal Bod was not a pacification factor that unified the various forces at play. On the contrary, it provoked bitter enmity and, at the end, the antagonism with the older order was a major reason for the implosion of the sPu rgyal Bod state.

Buddhism in mNga’ ris skor gsum was the factor that unified the people of the kingdom to the extent that no signs are preserved of internal dissent until, eventually, at court towards the end of the

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ra dza, was made *lha bla ma*. An educated guess could be that they, unlike their father and Byang chub ’od, did not involve themselves in both the Noble Religion and duties of secular nature, but focused on Buddhism exclusively.

<sup>29</sup> rJe btsun Mid la’s visit to Gangs Ti se is traditionally said to have occurred in 1093 (*bsTan rtsis kun las btus pa* 165), but a different record of his presence at Gangs Ti se holds that it took place at an unspecified date after 1094. For such an assessment see, for instance, *lHo rong chos ’byung* (92,12–13) which says that rje btsun Mid la was accompanied on his journey to Ti se by Ras chung pa rDo rje grags pa (1084–1161). They met first in that year.

Pa tshab Nyi ma grags was at the mountain *axis mundi* in earth tiger 1098. He left for Kha che in 1076, the year of the Tho ling *chos ’khor*, because his disciple lha rje Zla ba’i ’od zer (b. 1063), who wished to accompany him, was a boy aged fourteen at the time (*Deb ther sngon.po* 283,5–12). Pa tshab lo tsa ba returned to Tibet and stayed in Pu hrang to translate *mDzod kyi ’grel bshad* by Gang ba spel twenty-three years thereafter (i.e. in 1098) (*ibid.*: 416,3–7). Its colophon documents that the work was indeed undertaken at Gangs Ti se (see Suzuki ed., *The Tibetan Tripitaka*, vol. 118: 94–4 = f. 391a).

11<sup>th</sup> century. But it is probable that in the eulogistic vision that is communicated in the literature such episodes have been omitted, except traces of religious discord (e.g. Bon and Sangs rgyas skar rgyal. On the latter see *Rin chen bzang po’i rnam thar ’bring po* 86,5–87,4).

Another factor of aggregation in the mNga’ ris skor gsum state was the protection of the kingdom from aggressive neighbours who professed an antagonist religion and had a deeply different culture.

However, ethnic lines were a factor of disgregation in the unity of mNga’ ris. The assimilation of the indigenous groups into Gu ge was less dramatic than in La dwags. This was due to a more focused presence of the sPu rgyal Bod administration during its existence than in La dwags. In the days of Nyi ma mgon, the La dwags Dard were less assimilated to the Tibetan culture than the Gu ge Zhang zhung pa.

Strife among kins, a typical feature of the handling of power in a number of Central Asian kingdoms and common to the *lha sras btsan po*’s governance too, did not occur within the borders of the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom for most of the time. But when discord took place on the occasion of rTse lde’s assassination, it marked the end of the period of the kingdom’s splendour.

The centralisation of power was not antagonised. No signs exist that the loss of the skor of lDe gtsug mgon and eventually the one of dPal gyi mgon were imputable to internal clashes. The one case of infighting between Nyi ma mgon and a relative of his was the conflict with his brother Khri bKra shis brTsegs pa dpal.<sup>30</sup> The reason for the enmity is nowhere given in the sources, but it probably was the definition of the frontiers between the two brothers’ possessions.

Another episode of fratricide warfare was the advance of an army sent by Kho re, Ye shes ’od’s brother who succeeded him on the secular throne of the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom, as far as Tshong ’dus mgrur mo.<sup>31</sup> Given the old strife between Nyi ma mgon and bKra

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<sup>30</sup> The battle field in the war between sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon and Khri bKra shis brTsegs pa dpal was the area of Nyang smad where Zhwa lu is also situated. This fact proves that the mNga’ ris skor gsum ruler, after accomplishing the conquest of his dominions, intruded deep in his brother’s territory. The outcome of the war is nowhere mentioned and, given the absence of a trace of annexation of gTsang into mNga’ ris skor gsum, it is probable that Nyi ma mgon’s troops did not accomplish a steady takeover. However, it is likely that the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom held a right of extracting tribute from areas of Central Tibet (see below n. 33).

*Zhwa lu lo rgyus* (18,11–14) reads: “Since this one (i.e. lCe sTag gi rgyal mtshan) fought like a tiger against the troops of the people from Gu ge and Cog la, who had attacked rgyal po bKra shis [brtsegs pa] dpal, the descendant of mnga’ bdag Ral [pa can], and painted a tiger on his horse flag, he became known as lCe sTag gi rgyal mtshan (the “[one who bears] the tiger banner”).”

<sup>31</sup> *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs* (Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 61,1–2; translation *ibid.*: 114):

shis brTsegs pa dpal that mobilised members of the lCe clan in the region of Zhwa lu, it seems that there was a recrudescence in the fratricide animosity between the two royal houses in the sensitive area of Nyang smad.

The collection of gold from dBus gTsang dating to over a century after the conflict between Nyi ma mgon and bKra shis brTsegs pa dpal may be a sign that the sTod mNga' ris skor gsum kingdom was having some rights over Central Tibet in the days of Byang chub 'od.<sup>32</sup> It reads as a historical adaptation to the legend of Ye shes 'od's captivity in the hands of the Gar log, a fact dismissed by the most reliable sources on the history of Upper West Tibet, but the intrinsic reliability of a tax collection remains intact. According to this account, several areas of Central Tibet were subject to pay taxes to mNga' ris skor gsum.

Prosperity in the mNga' ris skor gsum kingdom was put at the

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"[Khor re] subjugated [territories] from gTsang Tshong 'dus mgur mo as far as the 'Khor lo la".

The delta of years, during which Khor re took over lands as far as the vicinity of Zhwa lu, where Tshong 'dus mgur mo is located, fell between 986 that marks his ascension to the secular throne left to him by Ye shes 'od, and 996 when, in his turn, he entered the religious fold, stepping down in favour of his son lHa lde.

<sup>32</sup> *mkhas pa lDe'u chos 'byung* has a controversial account concerning Byang chub 'od's quest for gold in dBus gTsang, which I read as a collection of taxes in the precious metal (*ibid.*: 392,17–21): "When the men of dBus gTsang went upwards (to Central Tibet), there were no main and branch communities, districts, divisions or separate traditions. When *btsad po lha bla ma* (Byang chub 'od) came from sPu rangs to collect gold, the various taxation areas and districts were partitioned. 'Dre tsho ("the 'Dre division") was established [with its centre at] Tag nag Bye tshang. Tshong tsho was established [with its centre at] Myang ro 'Dre brdas. Lo tsho was established [with its centre at] rGyan gong Ri phug. rBa tsho was established [with its centre at] dBu rag. Rag tsho was created [with its centre at] dGe rgyal. The Klu mes [division] was established [with its centre at] Kho chu (Khwa chu?). The Sum pa [and] Klu mes [division] was established later [than the others]. Their division was known as 'Bring".

The chronology of the creation of these six or seven *tsho*, associated with lHa bla ma's levy and canonically attributed to the men of dBus gTsang after their return from A mdo or their disciples, needs to be double checked.

The same episode of Byang chub 'od's quest for gold is recounted in a prophecy of *Padma bka' thang* (chapter 92.: 563,15–564,3) but with no reference to the creation of any *tsho*: "sPu rangs rgyal pos dBus la gser 'dod 'byung/ sde gyes shing gnas gzhir thob bsha' byed/ Grom pa rGyang (p. 564) la sbas pa'i gter ka 'di/ mi bzha'g 'don pa'i rtags der bstan nas byung/ gter ston dpon gsas Khyung thog ces bya 'byung//"; "After [Śākyamuni]'s *nirvāṇa*, the king of sPu rangs will come to dBus in search of gold. The leaders of the communities will be established and power divided in four localities. Signs will indicate without fail that it is time to rediscover the treasure hidden at Grom pa rGyang. gTer ston dPon gsas Khyung thog will appear [for the purpose]".

Defining Byang chub 'od as the king of Pu hrang is appropriate because he sat on both the religious and secular throne of mNga' ris skor gsum at the same time.

service of the master plan of its royal house which left a major mark on the history of Tibet. This was achieved by means of a combination of factors:

- suitable living conditions,
- trade,
- taxes on the products of both the higher and lower land that transited across the "periphery",
- agriculture as the most suited economic resource given the morphology of the territories, and
- gold.

Like the end of the legitimate sPu rgyal dynasty, Central Asian empires and many states around the world and at all times, the great period of the mNga' ris skor gsum kingdom reached a terminal point owing to its implosion. The 1080s internicine struggle that resulted in the assassination of rTse lde and the coup to the mNga' ris skor gsum throne marked its decadence. The situation of instability precipitated further after dBang lde, an illegitimate ruler who was a member of the royal family, sat on the throne. A vendetta eliminated the usurper and, in retaliation, further capital punishments were meted out to rTse lde's loyalists. The feud sealed the fate of one of the most brilliant phases in the history of Tibet.<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, a minimum of thriving continued for a short while due to some contributions to religion by dBang lde's son, bSod nams rtse, but away from the centre of the kingdom. *bsTan pa phyi dar stod lugs* was over.

### 'Brog pa Fluid Control: a Moderate Return of the "Heartland"

Following the reduction in importance of the mNga' ris skor gsum kingdom, the old stability of the region was weakened by the resurgence of assertive non-Tibetan tribal groups and by warfare. Ethnic ambitions went hand in hand with personal ambitions to rule and the wish to control trade and resources. A change in the political situation of mNga' ris stod took place during the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century with the Dard Utpala from La dwags.<sup>34</sup> Significantly, it did not occur in

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<sup>33</sup> On this event and the subsequent developments see *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* (Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 74,9–75,11, translation *ibid.*: 125–126). For an assesment of the coup and the dynastic consequences that brought to the end of the golden period in mNga' ris skor gsum see Vitali (*ibid.*: 335–345).

<sup>34</sup> Departing from his power base of La dwags stod and gsham, Utpala embarked upon the conquest of a large number of regions in Upper West Tibet from sBal ti and Nyung ti (on the north south axis) and as far in the east as Pu hrang and Glo bo. *La dwags rgyal rabs* (33,10–19) reads: "His son (i.e. successor) was lha chen Ut pa la. During his reign, this king gathered the troops of La



the wake of a second Qarakhanid invasion after the first one that affected mNga’ ris skor gsum some one hundred years before, in 1037.<sup>35</sup> The invasion by these Muslim people from Kashgar had devastating effects but did not alter the new reality of the regions in the west.

The subsequent split of Gu ge into lHo stod and Byang ngos, run by separate rulers, was another sign of protracted divisionism that resulted in a new strife at court, which, however, did not affect the smooth balance of things within the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom. It was characterised by peaceful coexistence like in the glorious days of mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom, during which the three divisions were under a single power. Gu ge lHo stod and Byang ngos had separate governance but no inimical relations. They amounted to rivalries between two queens who expected separate rule.<sup>36</sup>

dwags stod gsham, altogether two, and invaded Nyung ti. The king of Nyung ti had to pay tribute that included *mdzo*-s and iron for as long as Ti se and Ma pham exist, [which] is still paid to this day. Also, he brought under his dominion [the territories] from Glo bo and Pu hrang to Bre srang gi yul [and] Chu la me ‘bar in the south; as far as Ra gan ‘geng shing and sTag [and] Khu tshur in the west; [and] as far as Ka Zhus in the north. They gave tribute every year and [their representatives] came to pay homage”.

With the more stable sovereignty over Nyung ti (i.e. Kulu) as the exception, Utpala’s standing outside La dwags was rather more that of a conqueror than a fully-fledged ruler. Given the huge expanse of lands he subdued, his dominions were made up by lands with drastically different territorial nature, localisation and culture, and populated by people of remarkably different ethnicity. Indeed, no sign exists of a continuity of his sway. I tend to read the fact that he extracted tribute “every year” as a statement valid for a limited amount of time. He did not establish a dynasty over the lands he overran outside the borders of his original kingdom.

<sup>35</sup> Similar to the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom which had passed its prime, the Gar log invaders of Upper West Tibet during the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century were the Qarakhanid whose power was weakening in those years. Despite being enfeebled, for they had conceded sovereignty to the Seljuk, they were still able to defeat the Qarakhitay who had come to exercise pressure upon their dominions (see Pritsak 1953–1954: 42; Bosworth 1971: 1116).

Possibly owing to the difficult conditions in Southern Turkestan, the Qarakhanid moved once again into mNga’ ris stod, the land of a weak neighbour. The factional conditions of mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom, due to dBang Ide’s coup which led to Pu hrang separating genealogically from Gu ge and La dwags, precipitated with the death of the latter’s son bSod nams rtse. The three sons of bSod nams rtse, ruling each one in a territory of the erstwhile mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom (*mNga’ ris rgyal rabs*; Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 75,14–17, translation *ibid.*: 126), had to suffer at the hands of the Qarakhanid. Of bSod nams rtse’s sons, bKra shis rtse was killed while ‘Od ‘bar rtse was taken to the land of the Gar log in captivity. Jo bo rGyal po ensured the continuity of the lineage by temporarily occupying the throne of Gu ge (Tibetan text *ibid.*: 75,17–76,3, translation *ibid.*: 127).

<sup>36</sup> The division of Gu ge into the kingdoms of Byang ngos and lHo stod took place around the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century after the death of bSod nams rtse’s grandson rTse ‘bar btsan.

The strife is well described in *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs* (Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 76,11–15, translation *ibid.*: 127), which suggests that the enmity had roots of

Besides the decline of the mNga’ ris skor gsum kingdom following the coup d’état at the court of Gu ge, the events in the “heartland” and the “periphery” that marked the period were:

- a regained centrality of Byang thang, which took place in the southern stretches of the “heartland”, owing to
- the influx of the Men Zhang ‘*brog pa*-s, who went to settle in the territories of Pra dum and Bar yang.

The relocation engendered a switch in the political balance. Preeminence was lost to mNga’ ris stod, for the Men Zhang brought the centre stage of the political scene to mNga’ ris bar.<sup>37</sup> The spread of Men Zhang pa activity extended from Pra dum and Bar yang into the adjoining valleys at the “periphery”.<sup>38</sup>

old that went back to dBang Ide’s coup: “Later, as a grand funeral ceremony was held at Tho gling (spelled so) for their father rTse ‘bar btsan who had died, *chang* had not even been served that a quarrel broke out between some Byang ngos monks and some men of lHo phyogs. Owing to the enmity between the two queens, rgyal mo lHa rgyan and Blo ldan rgyal mo, a struggle [for the throne] broke out. The kingdom, which was a single noble example, was divided into two antagonistic territories”.

lHa rgyan originated the Byang ngos lineage. From Blo ldan rgyal mo stemmed the line of lHo stod.

<sup>37</sup> The history of the Men Zhang and their gTso tsho ba kins was characterised by an itinerant phase that forged their destiny. Originally nomads of Gu ge, they were *phyi ‘brog*, a term that defines them as groups of pastoralists from the area external to the core of this region, and thus towards sGar dbyang sa/sGar dgun sa. The name *Phyi ‘brog* to address the pastoralists from this area was still in use centuries later during the dGe lugs pa period. One finds a reference to the *phyi ‘brog*, who are not the Men Zhang in this case, as late as in *sTag tshang ras pa’i rnam thar* (f.32a4) completed in 1663. The biography mentions the *phyi ‘brog* of Gu ge when it deals with the circumstances surrounding the La dwags king Seng ge rnam rgyal’s military campaign which laid siege to rTsa hrang and seized it.

The Men Zhang and gTso tsho ba’s migration to the east that occurred towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century reminds one rather more of Central Asian nomads than Tibetan pastoralists. Repulsed from La stod lHo smad, the point of their maximum advance, they settled, in the best nomadic tradition, in the contiguous, successive valleys of the “periphery” from mNga’ ris smad to mNga’ ris bar, but they did neither come to inhabit their ancestral land Gu ge nor Pu hrang. Hence, they did not push their return westwards all the way to mNga’ ris stod. The rationale behind their widespread territorial distribution is the Men Zhang and gTso tsho ba’s tribal complexity, composed of several groups under the authority of numerous chieftains, a structure that required land for all these subdivisions.

<sup>38</sup> The Men Zhang took over the area of ‘Brong pa in southern Byang thang, where Srong btsan sgam po built Pra dum *lha khang* as one of the temples of the *srin mo* scheme. After its establishment in ‘Brong pa, one Men Zhang division moved further westwards to Gro shod. At that time, it split into two branches. The elder branch held sway over western Gro shod inclusive of Bar yang, while the younger ruled over eastern Gro shod (*Chos legs kyi rnam thar* f.9a2 and f.9a6). The western limit of Gro shod is at the sources of the Brahmaputra. Central Gro shod or Gro shod gzhung is the Bar yang area, also called Gru gsum kha.

Nomadic life style gave the Men Zhang conditions of mobility absent in the agricultural world of the mNga' ris "periphery" and enabled them to roam and occupy lands within their reach. The location of their settlements in southern Byang thang gave them the chance to spread into the "peripheral" valleys. In different stages during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, they went to occupy the territorial arc at the "periphery", composed by Glo bo, where they played a prominent role, and Dol po (mNga' ris bar). Splinters of the clan were located farther west towards Sle mi (*Chos legs kyi rnam thar* f.30a,5–f.30b,1). They also settled in areas of Mang yul Gung thang (mNga' ris smad),<sup>39</sup> thus recreating on a small scale the 'brog pa-s/agriculturists blend of the erstwhile Zhang chung kingdom. The other major event of the period was:

- an influx from Byang thang into mNga' ris bar, but with a different transfer pattern and a circumscribed destination in the mNga' ris bar "periphery".

The Ya ngal family moved from gTsang stod into Glo bo perhaps slightly before the Men Zhang's migration and concentrated first on Mustang (early 12<sup>th</sup> century) and then contiguous Dol po (13<sup>th</sup> century);<sup>40</sup>

One more historical phenomenon during the period should not be neglected:

- a renewed occupation phase of holy sites in the wider expanse of the mNga' ris region was engendered from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century by bKa' brgyud hermits.

Long after Gyer spungs Nang bzher lod po's penance, the bKa' brgyud pa school undertook the diffusion of hermit practice in the footsteps of rje btsun Mid la.

<sup>39</sup> The association of the Men Zhang with Gung thang led them to become one of the four principal communities (*mi sde sgo bzhi*) of the area, which formed the ethnic and territorial basis of mNga' ris smad. The *mi sde sgo bzhi* (*Chos legs kyi rnam thar* f.9a2–3) were Gungthang, Nub ri, Mang yul sKyid grong and the Men Zhang rGya tshang pa, the root communities of the *brgya tsho bcu gsum* (*Gung thang gdung rabs* 99,15–17). The territory of the *mi sde sgo bzhi* was also known as lHo Nub Gung gsum (*Chos legs kyi rnam thar* f.9a3), composed by Mang yul (lHo), Nub ris and the 'brog pa lands in Byang (Nub) and Gung thang (Gung).

<sup>40</sup> See *Ya ngal gdung rabs* (f.34a3–f.34b1 and f.35a1–2). The Ya ngal clan's propagation of Bon had religious repercussions, for it brought a reinvigorated practice of Bon according to a reformed *Zhang chung snyan rgyud* discipline. The tradition passed from keeping its older hermit features to novel monastic connotations in lower Glo bo, and in Dol po subsequently.

The foundation of bSam gling by Yang ston rGyal mtshan rin chen marked the Ya ngal clan's religious takeover of Dol po in the name of *Zhang chung snyan rgyud* (*Zhang chung snyan rgyud bla ma'i rnam thar* 91,4–93,3).

Although the pattern of territorial diffusion adopted by the bKa' brgyud pa somewhat echoed the ways that transpire from Bon po sources about the hermits of ancient Zhang chung, their frequentation of secluded retreats occurred in a different manner. The bKa' brgyud *ri pa-s* went for the hardship of solitary practice during the better seasons of the year. Owing to the harshness of weather, many of them spent winters in the more bearable conditions of the lower altitude valleys.

During these interludes, they did not disdain from ingratiating the local potentates. Hence, in addition to religious practice, the bKa' brgyud pa in mNga' ris established influential diplomatic ties with the local headmen but did not attempt to exercise a direct control over the lands in the "heartland" and the "periphery". However, new significant political ties introduced a novel state of affairs in the wider region (see the next section).

### Religious Influence Superseded: The Foreign Hegemony in mNga' ris

- 'Bri gung's secularism

Support to the school, negotiated by the 'Bri gung pa in a meeting with Jing gir rgyal po's Mongols, sealed their territorial control over mNga' ris stod.<sup>41</sup> The event was a turning point in Tibetan history, inasmuch as, from then on and throughout the centuries, religious schools surged to play a direct role over secular affairs. The political patronage ensuing from this agreement introduced a new secularism in the highlands, which, in the long run, enforced religious schools to a position of authority that impinged on the management of political matters at large.

The 'Bri gung pa's covenant with the Mongols was established a few decades before the Hor princes—each one of them—accorded their famous "protection" to noble families of Tibet and the religious schools, supported by these aristocrats, to which they belonged.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> On 'Bri gung gling pa's mission to the border of the "ocean of sand" (the Tarim Basin) in order to meet Jing gir's Mongols who had just taken over South Turkestan see '*Bri gung gling Shes rab 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar* (23,3–24,2) and Vitali (1996: 414–416 and n. 687). Shes rab 'byung gnas was the earliest Tibetan recorded in the sources to have come into contact with the sTod Hor. His meeting with them led to the earliest case of Mongol patronage of a Tibetan temple, Kha char *lha khang*, originally founded in the year of the monkey 996 by Khor re and lHa lde with different degrees of personal involvement.

Benefitting of the support of the sTod Hor, the 'Bri gung pa exercised authority over secular matters, too, for more than half a century (ca. 1219 to 1290) until the catastrophe of the sack of 'Bri gung in the latter year.

<sup>42</sup> With Mo 'gor rgyal po's 1250 reform, each one of the Tibetan aristocratic families traditionally controlling areas and estates in Central Tibet were forced to pay tribute to one or another Mongol prince in exchange for protection and favours, including that of living life at court, a burden and a privilege at the

Hor pa patronage described in the sources as a Bodhisatvic preoccupation was, rather, a form of control over the most influential people of Tibet. The Mongol headmen availed themselves of the Tibetan aristocrats’ appanages, mainly in terms of tribute coming from their estates, in exchange of empowerment in favour of the noble families.

In the time of their meeting with Jing gir rgyal po’s representatives and during the successive quarters of the 13<sup>th</sup> century until around 1280, the ‘Bri gung pa were especially strong in Pu hrang.<sup>43</sup> Their presence for hermit purposes in the area of the great Mountain and the Lakes (Pu hrang stod),<sup>44</sup> and at the local court (Pu hrang smad), where they were active, favoured a transfer of land control beyond the limits of the region. The salient historical event marking the

same time. It was protection at a price, the reward for paying heavy taxes to the Mongol princes being the recognition of these aristocratic families’ authority over the lands from which this taxation came.

Sa pan’s famous letter to the Tibetan chieftains contains a number of caveats, recommendations and orders of a secular nature and no religious advice (see A myes zhabs, *Sa skya pandi ta’i rnam thar*: 135,11–140,7). The way it is formulated indeed gives the impression that he is writing from a Mongol perspective so much so that one wonders whether it was actually drafted by him or whether he was passing on the orders and recommendations of his overlords.

In the letter Sa pan urges Tibetans to pay taxes to the Mongols. This is a direct sign that, rather than protection to the main families of the Snowland, it was a matter of Mongol exploitation of their subjects, but the association with a Mongol prince was at the same time a guarantee of control over their estates.

<sup>43</sup> The support that the ‘Bri gung pa received from the local potentates (those of Gu ge, Pu hrang and Ya rtse) had already steered them to a position of great standing in the region during the years 1191–1219 that fell before the covenant with Jingir’s Mongols.

The establishment of the ‘Bri gung *ri pa-s* at Ti se on stable bases from 1191 onwards that reached an institutional peak with the appointment of a *rdor ‘dzin* in 1215 allowed the ‘Bri gung pa to go a step forward. It set the precondition to find powerful interlocutors which had prominently come on the forefront of those Asian lands, of which Upper West Tibet was part. ‘Bri gung gling pa’s 1219 expedition would have not been possible without the decades of ties that his school had been able to establish with Gu ge, Pu hrang and Ya rtse.

<sup>44</sup> The ‘Bri gung grub thob chen po Seng ge ye shes meditated for three years at Ti se Shel ‘dra and met rGod tshang pa at that time. Seng ge ye shes was given bSam gtan gling and Pu hrang rGod khung by the Pu hrang kings sTag tsha and A tig. Afterwards, he dwelled for three years at ICags ye Ye shes rdzong (‘Bri gung *Ti se lo rgyus* f.30b6–f.31a1). He then went to Dol po and founded Shes dgon pa, well known to western visitors.

‘Bri gung gling pa, despite the claims in his biography that he was an ardent meditator, went beyond strict spiritual concerns emphasised in his biography. He was the ambassador of ‘Bri gung, the man with the task of strengthening the existing links with local powers and creating new ones, and also easing the relations Ghu ya sgang pa, the *rdor ‘dzin* head of the school’s *ri pa-s*, entertained locally.

Seng ge ye shes had a hermit disposition, although he did not disdain to care for the secular side, too. He was an dBus pa, but was bound to remain in sTod, if not definitively, at least semi-permanently.

escalation of the ‘Bri gung pa’s political influence was that sTag tsha Khri bar’s son, dNgos grub mgon, became the ruler of La dwags after he had held the same position in Pu hrang during the years of his father’s rule.<sup>45</sup> They all were ‘Bri gung pa loyalists.

▪ The key dominions of the Yuan/Sa skya alliance in the “heartland” and the “periphery”

The axis of power was switched from the rest of mNga’ ris to mNga’ ris smad soon before the Sa skya pa’s deadly blow inflicted upon the ‘Bri gung pa with the 1290 *gling log*. The ‘Bri gung pa and their Phag mo gru pa allies lost mNga’ ris stod. It was taken over by the Sa skya pa by treachery,<sup>46</sup> and authority over the mNga’ ris “periphery” at large was entrusted to their feudatories, among them the Gung thang Khab pa.

The Yuan/Sa skya pa dominance of Tibet brought about a new state of political affairs in the valleys of the mNga’ ris “periphery”. This was a single dominance of a vast tract of the valleys opening towards the Himalayan range. The locations of the *glang gi las thabs bcu gsum*, established during the late 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Gung thang Khab pa are indicative of the politically sensitive areas where the Yuan/Sa skya authority felt it necessary to exercise strict control. The Gung thang ruler, ‘Bum lde mgon, built these forts or took hold of them,<sup>47</sup> collectively known under that name, after formal delegation

<sup>45</sup> *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs* (Tibetan text in Vitali 1996: 69,13–18 and 70,12, translation *ibid.*: 121 and 122) provides evidence that sTag tsha left the throne to his elder son dNgos grub mgon in the years between 1208 and 1215. The latter had already been coopted to the throne by 1208, for *gNyos lHa nang pa’i rnam thar* (94,18–95,4) has a reference to more than one Pu hrang *ra dza* in that year. dNgos grub mgon left the Pu hrang throne to his younger brother rNam lde mgon (aka A tig or A tig sman) at an unspecified time between 1208 and 1215, for ‘Bri gung *Ti se lo rgyus* holds that rNam lde mgon was the Pu hrang *jo bo* in the latter year.

*La dwags rgyal rabs* (44,8–13) says that a king of Mar yul who patronized the ‘Bri gung pa in the same period was dNgos grub.

‘Bri gung *Ti se lo rgyus* (f.27b6–f.28a2) also mentions dNgos grub mgon as the king of Mar yul. The text adds that he supported the ‘Bri gung *ri pa-s* at Ti se in wood pig 1215 together with the Pu hrang *jo bo-s*, sTag tsha Khri ‘bar and gNam lde mgon. Hence, by 1215 dNgos grub mgon’s enthronement on the La dwags throne had already taken place.

<sup>46</sup> Sometime after 1276 the governor of mNga’ ris stod (namely the *gnam sa dpa’ shi*) was assassinated by order of ‘gro mgon ‘Phags pa in order to transfer the control of Upper West Tibet from the ‘Bri gung pa/Phag mo gru pa alliance to the Sa skya pa (*Si tu bka’ chems* in *Rlangs Po ti bse ru* 114,1–8).

<sup>47</sup> Records of the foundation of most castles included in the *glang gi las thabs bcu gsum* are not available, so that this state of the matters does not allow to ascertain whether they were built during the reign of ‘Bum lde mgon. At least one of them dates back to centuries before, which shows that ‘Bum lde mgon’s was a takeover of preexisting structures and probably an edification phase, too. *Kho char dkar chag* (f.5b = p. 41,1–2) reads: “Hence, the king (i.e.

by his cousin 'gro mgon 'Phags pa over the territories where they stood.<sup>48</sup> Of the *glang gi las thabs bcu gsum* (*Gung thang gdung rabs* 108,8–109,1),<sup>49</sup> ten were in mNga' ris. This is indicative of the the

Kho re), having followed the advice previously [given to him by his *bla ma*], built the upper and lower castle at dKar dung along with the *gtsug lag khang* known as gSer mkhar". These events took place in the year of the monkey 996, the construction date of Kha char.

Bal po rdzong, too, predates the reign of 'Bum lde mgon.

<sup>48</sup> The forts are collectively called *glang gi las stabs bcu gsum* ("thirteen districts established by the campaigns of the ox") in *Chos legs kyi rnam thar* (f.9a,5–6). As is well known, the origin of the name derives from the fact that young 'Bum lde mgon witnessed at Sa skya the parade of 'Phags pa's horses while he was on an ox. His association with the ox was maintained in the name given to the lands, where he held sway, by means of the network of forts.

*Gung thang gdung rabs* (108,8–109,2) says:

"To subdue the territory of Gu ge Pu rong ['Bum lde mgon] built dKar gdum Nam gyi khyung rdzong;

to subdue the territory of the Phyi 'brog Men Zhang, he built Bya rtsi rnam rgyal thar po and in Glo stod near mTsho dbar [he built] Ni ri g.Ya rdzong dkar po;

to subdue the territory of Glo bo mtsho (spelled so for tsho) bzhi, he built gTsang rong Bya pho'i ze ba;

to subdue the territory of the Ta mang Se mon, he built Kun srin rdzong in Glo smad;

to subdue the territory of Dol po, he built Dol po'i Yi ge drug ma;

to subdue the territory of La stod Byang, he built La ru'i Gad rdzong dkar po;

to subdue the territory of La stod lHo, he built Khun tsho Gad rdzong dkar po;

at sKyid grong sgo bzhi kan 'dzim kha he built Rag mar gyad non thar po;

at sKyid grong mthil he built Seng ge rdzong and Glang mkhar gsal ba'i yang rtse;

to subdue the territory of both rGya and Bal, he built Bal po rdzong dmar;

to subdue the territory of sNyi shong rong, he built Bang rdzong gnam gyi ka ba;

to subdue the territory of Nub ri mtha' 'khob kha, he built Rod (*ibid.*: 109) kyi brag rdzong nag po.

[in addition], at the fortification of Phyang pa pha bzhi, he built Chu dbar rdzong chung 'dzom shor".

The concept behind the definition *glang gi las thabs bcu gsum* needs a closer scrutiny. Thirteen were the lands in which 'Bum lde mgon established his control by an equal number of forts, but *Gung thang gdung rabs* adds another land and another fort at Chu dbar, the great bKa' brgyud hermitage of Mid la ras pa's fame, north of the present-day Nepal border.

<sup>49</sup> The process that led to the constitution of the *glang gi las thabs bcu gsum* was completed in a span of more than ten years from 1267 to ca. 1280. Some Men Zhang groups were coopted into Gung thang's *brgya mtsho bcu gsum* which date to 1267–1268 (*Gung thang gdung rabs* 99,15–100,1).

The creation of the mNga' ris smad *khri skor* formed by Gung thang, Glo bo and Dol po in 1267 (hence before the establishment of the dBus gTsang *khri skor bcu gsum*) is another sign that the nucleus of 'Bum lde mgon's possessions is to be assigned to the late 1260s. On the mNga' ris smad *khri skor* see *rGya Bod yig tshang* (277,18–278,1).

It was after 1276 that the control of Gu ge Pu hrang from the 'Bri gung pa/Phag mo gru pa alliance was transferred to the Sa skya pa with the assassination of the *gnam sa dpa' shi* governor of mNga' ris stod. The event gave way to 'Bum lde mgon's control of the region from the fort dKar dum (*Si tu bka' chems* in *Rlangs Po ti bse ru* 113,11–114,8).

territorial structure the Sa skya pa/Yuan domination imposed upon the lands in the west.

The location of the forts of mNga' ris was as follows:

- one in Gu ge Pu hrang,
- one in the land of the Men Zhang in southern Byang thang,
- three in Mustang: one each in Glo stod (to control the Men Zhang), Glo bar and Glo smad (to control the Ta mang),
- one in Dol po,
- two in central and one in peripheral Mang yul, and
- one in sNyi shang (i.e. Ma nang).

The arc in the mNga' ris "periphery" that was under the dominion of Gung thang extended from next door in the south (Mang yul) farther west to Gu ge Pu hrang, these two regions combined together under the single control of the dKar dum fort. The presence of three forts in Glo bo, plus one each in the nearby territories, the land of the Men Zhang in southern Byang thang, and Dol po,<sup>50</sup> vis-à-vis only one for both Gu ge Pu hrang is an indication of the areas considered sensitive by the Gung thang pa feudatories of Sa skya.

No fort was built in La dwags and no evidence is provided in the historical literature about who was in charge of the latter region (see Vitali 2005). It may have been that the Sa skya pa kept a direct control of the land. Guru *lha khang*, built at the end of the period of their dominance, celebrates the direct line of masters of Sa skya pa school including Sa skya pandi ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251) and down to Bla ma dam pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan (1312–1375) rather than any line of their feudatories.

La dwags during the time of the Yuan dynasty was the theatre of military activity, for it was another front opened in the war between the Chagatai and the Delhi Sultanate besides the main battlefield which was Khurāsān.

Given that La dwags was the region used as a new launch pad by the Chagatai, the Yuan's arch rivals, to gain military success, I would consider the possibility that the Sa skya pa directly handled La dwags. This hypothesis finds some credit in view of the threat posed by the Chagatai and a Muslim advance from Delhi into the Himalayan region (the Qarāchīl expedition). During those years, indeed, some rulers of La dwags were foreigners (on all this see Vitali 2005).

<sup>50</sup> The construction of a fort in Dol po may have been induced by the strategical reason to keep control over the Ya rtse inimical neighbour but also by the fact that, owing to its harsh terrain, it would have made a Gung thang pa prompt intervention difficult in case of military necessity.



### mNga’ ris bar’s Surge to Predominance

Economic control out of Byang thang and into the valleys around it, which favoured exchanges of goods with the lower lands in the south, was a main cause for discord between principalities occupying valleys at the “periphery”. Profit from commerce and the charge of tolls on transiting merchandise triggered these disputes for the control over trade routes to Mon yul and the Indian provinces.

Tibet’s relations between the Byang thang “heartland” and the valleys of mNga’ ris “periphery” was a reverse case from Inner Central Asia. In the latter region, nomads resorted, more commonly than not, to looting and extortions of sedentary populations. In Tibet, the Byang thang pa hardly had recourse to similar acts, with the exception of the internicine warfare between the Men Zhang kins from southern Byang thang and Mustang, a status of belligerence induced by the Glo pa turned sedentary rather than the nomads.<sup>51</sup>

In line with what has been said above, fratricide warfare between the nomads of southern Byang thang and Glo bo, who were close kins, was not so much for the control of the steppe land but of the commercial tracks. The route in Mustang gave the easiest access to trade from the north with the lowlands in the south. The Mustang dynasty went all out to eliminate its ‘brog pa kins from southern Byang thang and other relatives settled within the boundaries of the area they inhabited, to arrogate to themselves unconditional control of the resources of Byang thang and the trade towards India.

Hardly any principalities settled in the mNga’ ris “periphery” attempted to control areas of Byang thang, being more content to make war to other principalities, and not so much to administer the nomadic products but their trade.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> The campaigns waged against groups of their nomads’ kins by the kings of Mustang who succeeded one another on its throne and led the kingdom to unsurpassed splendour (A ma dpal, A mgon bzang po and bKra shis mgon) are listed here in chronological order:

- takeover of the control of the passes leading to India from Dol po, Gu ge and Pu hrang (before 1427);
- takeover of communities of southern Byang thang away from Mar yul (1435);
- takeover of areas in Se rib and unspecified localities in Dol po (?);
- defeat of the ‘Phred mkhar ba (1437);
- eviction of an army of the Byang pa from Wa (1437);
- relocation of the sKye skya sgang ba to Glo smad along the frontier with the lowlands (1437);
- destruction of the last vestiges of the Glo bo Zhang pa sNa tshags pa (1441);
- defeated of the Hor, called by the Glo pa against the gTso tsho ba (1444);
- betrayal and assassination of the gTso tsho ba chieftains (1445).

Earlier on, A ma dpal’s grandfather Shes rab bla ma removed the power of another ‘brog pa group, the Shi sa ba, and opened the way for the foundation of the Mustang kingdom (mid 1350s).

<sup>52</sup> In the trade between the Byang thang “heartland” and the lowlands giving way to the Gangetic plain, the biggest revenues were from the taxes levied

Contrary to the historical trends of the Inner Asia nomads, internal antagonism, a feature typical of the nomadic world and less common to sedentary cultures, was a strategy pursued by the ‘brog pa-s who had turned sedentary. Rarely it affected groups of the Men Zhang and the gTso tsho ba, but factionalism was not all the time absent in the relations between these two groups of nomads that led to search for alliances with members of their respective antagonist camps.<sup>53</sup>

Cohesion became improbable when the Glo pa, after the adoption of a more sedentary way of life, showed an assertiveness comparable to the fierce nomads of Inner Central Asia.<sup>54</sup> Their militaristic inclination brought them to a collision route against their Men Zhang and gTso tsho ba relatives, hardly keen to be submitted by anyone.

on salt along the route from Mustang to Mu khum (rDzong and Mukhtinath) (*Chos legs kyi mam thar* f.18b,2–4). Trade on the route that passed from Dol po to rDzong dkar (Jomsom) gave lower revenues. To this income one should add the earnings gained by those controlling trade in the opposite direction. They amounted to bartering salt for rice and various grains sold by them in the highlands for a profit. Hence, among all lands inhabited by the Men Zhang clans, control of Mustang, the easiest land to cross, was most valued.

<sup>53</sup> The striking instance of internal antagonism among the southern Byang thang nomads was the 1375 revolt of the gTso tsho ba against the Men Zhang after the latter’s coup that led them to usurp the throne of Gung thang temporarily.

Due to the enfeeblement of their Sa skya pa overlords after ta’i si tu Byang byub rgyal mtshan’s takeover of Sa skya and the downfall of the Yuan dynasty, the Gung thang Khab pa were unable to avoid the coup and were saved by the intervention of the gTso tsho ba. The coup turned out to be the occasion for a fight for predominance among the clans of southern Byang thang.

The gTso tsho ba saw in their Men Zhang sNa tshags pa kins’ placing the infant bSod nams lde on the Gung thang throne the ultimate act of illegality, which caused their rebellion against them (*Chos legs kyi mam thar* f.13b5–14a,5).

The gTso tsho ba defeated the Men Zhang, and the Sa skya pa heir apparent to the Gung thang throne was reinstated. The Men Zhang, despite the defeat, continued to exercise a prominent role in mNga’ ris bar and mNga’ ris smad.

The opportunity that motivated the Men Zhang to go for the coup and take the Gung thang throne was that a princess of the Men Zhang sNa tshags pa married the Gung thang king Phun tshogs lde (r. from 1365). In 1370, she bore the Men Zhang child, bSod nams lde. He was second in line of succession to the throne and could bypass his elder step-brother mChog grub lde, son of the senior queen and Sa skya pa heir apparent. In 1371 a revolt ensued, Phun tshogs lde was assassinated and the throne was usurped, after which the Men Zhang ruled Gung thang for five years (*Gung thang gdung rabs* 117,18–118,1).

<sup>54</sup> Warfare between Glo bo and other lands of the mNga’ ris “periphery”:

- takeover of the control of the passes leading to India from Dol po, Gu ge and Pu hrang;
- dispossession of territories from the control of Gu ge;
- A mgon bzang po’s troops blocked in their advance to Sle mi due to Pu hrang’s protection extended to some gTso tsho ba fleeing;
- the passage of Pu hrang again under the jurisdiction of Mustang (temporary);
- Glo bo defeated by Gung thang;
- Pu hrang invaded and annexed by Glo bo.

Aware of the mobility of 'brog pa reactions, the Glo pa realised that one way to grant stability to their kingdom was to suppress their Men Zhang and gTso tsho kins, which they achieved with ruthless cruelty.<sup>55</sup>

The 'brog pa-s, given their less regimented social life and kinship structure were less respectful of the established power and readier to topple the headmen in charge. This was understood by Glo bo's royal family, which accomplished to eliminate every possible competition by their kins, mindful of the coup staged by the Men Zhang to the Gung thang throne around the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (see above n. 54).

Glo pa antagonism towards its rivals was brought to a wider stage. Mustang fought against principalities outside the mNga' ris region. They engaged opponents from Mon pa lands in the south and other rivals from farther away, such as La stod lHo and Byang.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> The confrontation between Glo bo and groups of 'brog pa-s of southern Byang thang escalated to one of its last bloody acts in 1445. Playing the card of treason, Mustang betrayed the gTso tsho ba, killing and torturing their chieftains on a single circumstance.

*Chos legs kyi rnam thar* (f.27a6–f.28a3): "On that occasion, Gung thang was unable to use its strength, so it was decided to opt for a peaceful settlement. The troops of Glo bo withdrew. When (f.27b) people of the gTso tsho ba settlements intruded into Gro shod during early summer, drung chen A mgon and his brother thought: "Earlier the Khab pa and the gTso tsho ba, the chiefs and their servants, created much trouble together. If we do not negotiate with them, no one can tell what will happen in the future". They decided to negotiate with the gTso tsho ba. They told the gTso tsho ba: "There are many reasons why we and [you] gTso tsho ba must hold talks. Come with [your] headmen [to discuss them]," and accordingly [gTso tsho] Rig 'dzin 'bum led [the delegation of] about ten headmen together with their assistants and went to Glo bo. At that time drung chen A mgon remained behind because he went to see the *dmag dpon* (i.e. A mo gha). [His] *tsha bo* (A mgon's maternal nephew), who was not far [from the gathering place], went down [to the meeting]. He said: "Is Byi wa mkhar's rotten smell still around?". Realising that nothing good would ensue, [Rig 'dzin 'bum] became like a frog in a pot. No way-out was left. Then, not many days after, many butchers were each given a task. Rig 'dzin 'bum and his brother; Ar dpon, a chief from my own (i.e. Chos legs's) household; one called *dpon rGyal*; five notables; and Rig 'dzin 'bum's minister (f.28a) *dge bsnyen dPal zis* (spelled so) were murdered. Moreover, the eyes of five or six chieftains were taken out. Concomitantly, the Glo [pa] troops killed a younger brother of Rig 'dzin 'bum, who came to rescue them from outside [the meeting]. The eyes of a *phu bo* ("elder brother", i.e. a cousin of Chos legs) from my *phyi tshang* (lit. "external nest", i.e. "the maternal line of the family") and two or three other people were taken out. They took away all these men's horses that were there. The [various] communities, the gNyer pa tsho lnga and each of the most valiant chiefs of Glo bo shared *rkyang* meat".

<sup>56</sup> Warfare between Glo bo and lands beyond mNga' ris:

- inroad into the Kathmandu valley;
- military success at gNya nam;
- defeat of La stod lHo troops;
- campaign against unspecified localities in Mon yul and Ko phang;
- warfare against unidentified Mon pa;
- strife between Mustang and the people called gTsang Nyang rdzong pa;

As for mNga' ris, Glo bo's militaristic dominance brought the kingdom to clash in the valleys at the "periphery" both in the east and the west.<sup>57</sup> In the east, the long-term conditions of belligerence against Gung thang did not modify the political equilibrium between the two power houses of the period. In the west, on the contrary, Glo pa campaigns managed to sever the old ties that linked Pu hrang to Gu ge.<sup>58</sup> The consequence was that Pu hrang was ever since in the religious sphere of the Ngor pa school,<sup>59</sup> which had its basis in

- war between Glo bo and La stod lHo;
- invasion of Glo bo by troops of La stod lHo and Byang.

<sup>57</sup> Signs of confrontation between the various principalities during the 15<sup>th</sup> century were the non-infrequent marriage alliances, a testimony of tense relations that were counteracted, in most cases with little success, with giving out their princesses to the rivals.

Especially the repercussions of matrimonial alliances in mNga' ris during the period of Glo bo's maximum splendour were not always of mutual benefit. Regional powers fought despite being related by marriage. That of A mgon bzang po is a case in point. Close to the age at which the *lha sras btsan po-s* used to wed, A mgon bzang po was given the sister of Phun tshogs lde, the king of Gu ge, as consort (*Blo bo rgyal rabs mu thi li'i 'phreng mdzes* 15,9). Matrimonial bonds between the royal families of inimical Gu ge and Glo bo were renewed when a princess from the former kingdom married the Glo bo king A seng rDo rje brtan pa in the third quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (rGod tshang ras pa sNa tshogs rang grol, *gTsang smyon gyi rnam thar* 153,6). These ties did not prevent the countries to keep entertaining a mutual antagonist policy.

If a comparison is made with the past, no trace of land appanage to the queens appears in the documents describing these diplomatic activities, unlike the custom of allotting lands to these ladies that existed in the time of sPu rgyal Bod (see above n. 2).

<sup>58</sup> In order to obtain fundamental advancements to the fortunes of Glo bo, A ma dpal went on a collision route with Gu ge and was able to break the century old ties that linked the latter land to Pu hrang. *Ngor chen gyi rnam thar* (537,3) is apologetical in celebrating A ma dpal's lucrative trade with the neighbouring countries by means of setting up barter marts in Dol po, Gu ge and Pu hrang. But the biography omits that he made these achievements with ruthless persecution of anyone trying to obstacle his plans.

*Blo bo rgyal rabs mu thi li'i 'phreng mdzes* (13,1–2) is cruder in its assertions that A ma dpal wiped out all possible opposition, for he carried out purges in Gu ge, Pu hrang and Mar yul.

<sup>59</sup> Breaking his stay in Mustang, Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456) paid a visit to Pu hrang in late 1436 and the beginning of the following year (Vitali 1996: 391 and n. 631). Here he gave extensive teachings to the local *bla ma-s* and people, and made offerings at the ancient temple of Kho char.

Since then, Kho char, which had entered Sa skya's orbit during the Sa skya pa period when it was under the rule of the Pu hrang jo bo bSod nams lde—a disciple of Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290–1364) and Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361)—was tended by the Mustang royalty.

*Glo bo mkhan chen gyi rang rnam* and Sangs rgyas phun tshogs's *Ngor chen gyi rnam thar* concur in saying that, following Ngor chen's activity in Pu hrang and the support extended to him by the local dignitaries and the king of Gu ge, the Ngor school became prominent in Pu hrang. It would seem then that Pu hrang was not under Glo bo at the time.

Glo bo's inveterate hostility towards Gu ge Pu hrang went through frequent

Mustang, while Gu ge became the stronghold of the dGe lugs pa in the west.

### **An Advance into the Valleys of mNga’ ris from the Outside World**

A reversal of tendency slipped, slowly but inescapably, into the mNga’ ris “periphery”. Down the centuries from after *bstan pa phyi dar* onwards, mNga’ ris from sKyid grong to La dwags and sBal ti witnessed, in different periods, a territorial contraction owing to the advance of the cultures popular in the lands to the south and west, their trade partners. The people of these countries, who practised different religions, saw in the lands of mNga’ ris the extreme limit where they could spread. It was, therefore, both a religious and ethnic advance, a cultural enrichment that, on the other hand, created difficulties to the fragile equilibrium of the mNga’ ris world. The exception to this state of affairs was Ya rtse, an enclave with the distinctive mark that the Tibetan world and its practice of Buddhism coexisted for centuries with the Hinduism of the high Himalayan valleys, but, in the long run, the latter took the upper hand.

In the days of Glo bo’s predominance, La dwags and neighbouring territories were becoming a new mNga’ ris “periphery”. Islam had focused attention on the Himalayan valleys to the east of Kashmir. La dwags and contiguous lands were witnessing a Muslim influx. Little they could do against ravaging Muslim campaigns—mainly by rulers and adventurers from the Northwest but also from beyond—with the purpose of looting.<sup>60</sup> Although sometimes these armies were stationed locally for a while, some of them did not aim at perpetual land control, so that they did not leave long lasting

reversals of fortune (see Vitali 1996 passim between p. 471 and p. 537).

It was only sometime after 1450 that Pu hrang again passed under the jurisdiction of Mustang (Vitali 1996: 520–523). There is evidence that, up to that year, the region had not yet been retaken by Glo bo.

The outcome of Glo bo’s invasion of Pu hrang of the years 1496–1498 under the command of the Mustang king bDe legs rgya mtsho (see *ibid.*: 536–537) was that the region returned under the control of Mustang in a more continuative manner.

<sup>60</sup> Military campaigns waged by Muslim conquerors during the period were those of:

- Sultan Shahabuddin, the son of the Kashmiri king Shah Mirza (*Tārīkh-i-Kashmir*);
- Rai Madri, the lieutenant of Sikandar Khan (1394–1416), who headed a campaign against sBal ti but advanced as far as La dwags proper (*Tārīkh-i-Hassan*); and
- Zain ul-Abidin (r. 1420–1470) (*Dvitiya Rājataranginī* and *La dwags rgyal rabs*).  
Moreover:
  - Muslim troops were in La dwags in 1444;
  - Gu ge had to endure a Hor pa offensive from Mar yul in the years 1447–1448;
  - unidentified Hor were still in Mar yul at the time of a visit of Thang stong rgyal po to La dwags in 1459.

marks on the local way of life, but others entailed drastic political change.<sup>61</sup>

Sufi mystics and Muslim converts from neighbouring regions came to travel in the Himalayan valleys of the western mNga’ ris “periphery”. The purpose of these endeavours could have not been more different from plunder. The mystics came to preach Islam.<sup>62</sup>

Sent by their teacher, Tsong kha pa’s disciples returned to their native lands with the important task of spreading the new and vibrant tenets of his doctrine. In line with the capillary policy established by him on the plateau almost ubiquitously, his disciples travelled back to the valleys of the mNga’ ris “periphery”, from where they had gone to Central Tibet for studies.

The presence of those pioneers attracted consent inasmuch as the local potentates in Gu ge, Zangs dkar and La dwags accorded their favours to Tsong kha pa’s disciples. The dignitaries of these lands were keen to welcome back their children who brought to their lands the most advanced doctrine of those days. The acceptance of Tsong kha pa’s creed had a secular side, for it kept the advance of Sufism at bay, restricted, as it was, to fringe areas.

The capillary diffusion of the dGe lugs pa teachings in valleys of the mNga’ ris “periphery” provided the embryonic potential for the school to walk the extra step and become, in the long run, the dominant secular power on the plateau. The mNga’ ris “periphery” was one early laboratory for the promotion of the political and religious system that became the dGa’ ldan pho brang theocracy centuries thereafter.

<sup>61</sup> *La dwags rgyal rabs* (in Francke 1992 [1926]: 37,3–7 and 37,12–14) includes Bha ra and Bha gan among the kings ruling in La dwags.

<sup>62</sup> The history of the advance of Sufism into the valleys of the Western Himalaya is shrouded in a veil of obscurity. Historical records hardly mention the names of the masters involved in this activity of proselytism and the dates of these events (see Rovillé 1990: 117–119; Sheikh 2010: 81–84; and Zain-ul-Abedin 2009: 7–14). It seems that these teachings, coming from Kashmir, initially found fertile ground in the more outlying territories of the Himalaya and to La dwags.

A first phase of historically documented diffusion concerned sBal ti and possibly Pu rig, and the Sufi teachers who spearheaded it seem to have been Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani and his disciples (*ibid.*: 9). Princes from Su ru mKhar rtse, who had migrated to Kashmir and converted to Islam, are said to have built Kha che Masjid in Mul be (*ibid.*: 4).

As for La dwags, the predominant view among scholars is that the earliest masters, who would have reached it roughly at the same time as the diffusion in sBal ti and Pu rig, were the disciples of Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani (d. 1382).

Presumably later in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, another wave of Sufi masters reached sBal ti (and perhaps Pu rig). They were disciples of Sayyid Muhammad Nirsbakhsh, who had adopted the precepts of Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani. Indeed, the La dwags Muslims see in his tradition—that of the Nirsbakhshi—the most important one in the region. This activity generated a religious fervour: Islam became an accepted religion in the region of the Indus River, with centres in La dwags and the areas to its north-west.

### A Last Word

The very nature of the Byang thang “heartland” had centrifugal features that favoured a cultural expansion towards the mNga’ ris “periphery”. It was the geographic, cultural and geopolitical conditions of the “heartland” that led to the decentraliation of its core and permitted the occupation of the valleys at a lower altitude. The regions of the mNga’ ris “periphery” prospered to the extent that the economic, political and religious balance was shifted from the higher to the lower lands. By taking centre stage, the valleys at the “periphery” ended up bearing conflictual relations for supremacy.

The centrifugal conditions that led people—either temporarily and on a small scale (e.g. the bKa’ bgyud hermits) or in a definitive manner and with the migration of entire ethnic groups (e.g. the Ya ngal clan)—were, in any event, significant enough to create ripples in the history of the “heartland” and the “periphery”. The existential nuances between a “heartland” and a “periphery” were so intertwined that they never cracked the intrinsic unity of the two worlds.

This is also proved by the morphological tracts in areas of the West Tibetan world. Although civilisation developed in the ravines of the land,<sup>63</sup> Gu ge is a peculiar valley of the “periphery” which is also a “heartland”. The table lands, at the flanks of which the Gu ge ravines took shape in formations that an imaginary geological architect invented in the most visionary way, are the continuation of the Byang thang highlands. The ‘brog-s of Gu ge are located on these table lands and no human settlement or temple has been established there. These territorial conditions favoured a combination of ‘brog pa and zhing pa lives altogether. Gu ge in its peculiar manner is the essence of the lands of the plateau in the west.

From the viewpoint of trends in land control, the territory of mNga’ ris experienced only a single unitary phase in the course of the centuries after the collapse of sPu rgyal Bod until the advent of dGa’ ldan pho brang. It is common place both with Tibetan historians of old and Tibetologists to see sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon’s mNga’ ris skor gsum as a regional kingdom inasmuch as it did not control the entire Tibetan territory. In a simile referring to *bstan pa phyi dar*, the kingdoms of mNga’ ris skor gsum and Tsong kha are decribed, respectively, as the “hat” and the “boots” of the plateau (*mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* 433,11–14). dBus gTsang in the middle was loose with a number of principalities owing to the fact that Khri strong lde btsan

<sup>63</sup> The ravines of Gu ge, where the Zhang chung pa and then the mNga’ ri stod people have been responsible for one of the greatest civilisations in Tibetan history, are associated with a myth that found some credit in colonial India. The legend says that the geological sediments hide and preserve in the ravines of Gu ge relics going by the name ‘brug rus or “bones of the dragons” (Strachey 2007 [1853]: 48). Could these be underground vestiges of ancient Zhang chung?

did not tighten his belt properly. This prompted Guru Rin po che to come out with that prophecy on the future status of Tibet (*mDo smad chos ‘byung* 27,23–27), a beautiful way to represent the political conditions of Tibet in the late 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century, which, nonetheless, does not take into account the actual weight of the mNga’ ris skor gsum state.

sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon’s was a kingdom that included in its dominions a huge territorial mass to the point that it could hardly be defined as regional. The extension of Zhang chung did not surpass the one of mNga’ ris skor gsum by much. The Bon po literature includes Sum pa Glang gi gyim shod (i.e. western Khams) in Zhang chung, but one should investigate whether this land attracted Bon and its clans during or after its downfall of the kingdom and whether they established a dominion locally.

mNga’ ris skor gsum extended from Bru sha and the other territories on the western side of the Himalayan range up to mNga’ ris bar (Glo bo and Nyi shang included) and controlled Gung thang (mNga’ ris smad) for an unsprcified amount of time (*bsTan ‘dzin ras pa’i rnam thar* f.2b2-3). Its cultural world extended to dBus—and lHa sa in particular—all the way to Khams and to gTsang as far as the border of Nyang stod with the lowlands of India, where *bstan pa phyi dar stod lugs* had its strongholds.

The end of the mNga’ ris skor gsum apogee engendered territorial regionalism. Since the death of rTse lde and across the centuries, Gu ge and Pu hrang kept having different dynastic lines with very limited exceptions, but close ties. Gu ge itself became divided and the other regions of erstwhile mNga’ ris skor gsum had separate rulership. Not even the Yuan/Sa skya pa supremacy brought back unity inasmuch as Sa skya assigned to different feudatories the control of separate lands of mNga’ ris and seemingly kept direct control in one case. Glo bo’s assertive military policy led the kingdom to be *a primus inter pares* but not to have steady control of lands that surpassed regional divisions. The rule of the priest-king chain of rebirths—dGa’ ldan pho brang—achieved to restore an overall unity in mNga’ ris under its authority that was exercised from far away and with a centralised vision.

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