
Introduction

This volume brings together sixteen contributions dealing with historical monuments and materials relating to Western Tibet primarily between the late 9th and the 12th century. Depending on the authors' specialisation and expertise, they present and discuss the historical evidence from different perspectives and with different disciplinary backgrounds, such as archaeology, architecture, art history, history, and social anthropology. In one way or another, the thematic focus of all contributions in this volume is related to the establishment of monastic Buddhism in Western Tibet, in particular the foundation of Buddhist monasteries. Five papers deal specifically with the Buddhist site of Nyarma in Ladakh, two with Tabo Monastery in Spiti, both among the earliest foundations of monasteries in Western Tibet from 996. The sPyan ras gzigs / Avalokiteśvara stela in ICog ro, Purang, donated by a member of the Dro ('Bro) clan, and the stela in Kyu wang, Gu ge, ascribed to *lo chen* Rin chen bzang po, a member of the Hrukwer (Hrugs wer) clan, the topic of two separate papers, are public statements of Buddhism in 9th/10th-century and early 11th-century Western Tibet, at a time when monastic Buddhism was supported by the state, the ruler and the royal lineage as well as allied aristocratic clans. The foundation of the West Tibetan kingdom and the genealogy of its royal lineage (*Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs*) by Gu ge Paṇḍita Grags pa rgyal mtshan and the extended biography (*rnam thar rgyas pa*) of one its most prominent representatives, King Tridé Songtsuktsen (Khri lde Srong gtsug btsan) aka Songé (Srong nge) aka *lha bla ma* Ye shes 'od by the same author, a 15th-century monk-scholar of the Ngor Sakya school, who descended from a Zhang zhung clan of Western Tibet, are the subject of three contributions which make these important textual sources available in annotated editions together with information on the author and

content (Jahoda, pp. 73–87; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, pp. 89–119; Tsering Drongshar and Jahoda, pp. 121–169). In addition to a text-critical analysis of the legendary captivity and passing away of Ye shes 'od among the Gar log (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, pp. 327–342), the two final studies of an illustrated *Yum chen mo / Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript in Pooh (Kalantari, pp. 363–405) and of the Zhag cave temple in Gu ge (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po and Kalantari, pp. 407–430) analyse outstanding examples of the continuing tradition of patronage of Buddhist texts and monuments.

Despite the fact that each contribution stands for itself (reflecting the authors' freedom granted by the editors to select from their field of specific research topics and related materials according to their choice), the question of the overall scientific goals and knowledge interests of the volume may be asked.

All contributions share a strong basis in the study of monuments and materials that provide evidence for the analysis of specific architectural, art-historical, archaeological, historical, and social anthropological questions. Based on the premise that these monuments and materials are inseparable from the history to which they bear witness and from the setting in which they occur,¹ they may be considered in toto as witnesses of "a particular civilization, a significant historical development or a historic event".² In the case

¹ Adapting Article 7 of the Venice Charter (1964) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS): "A monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it occurs." See https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

² See Article 1: "The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic

of 9th–12th-century Western Tibet, these monuments and materials constitute historical sources and witnesses to an extended concept of political cosmology, in particular of an all-embracing imagination of a Buddhist kingdom that was already present at the time of the foundation of the kingdom in 907.³ The most important government positions were awarded by the new ruler in accordance with the Buddhist concept of *maṇḍala*, as described in *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* (see Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, this volume, pp. 101–102), a clear indication that governance and administration of the kingdom were based on Buddhist criteria *ab initio*. The newly formed alliance by the royal lineage with local aristocratic clans, whose members are explicitly mentioned in the context of these appointments, provided for a strong foundation and balance of political power in the West Tibetan kingdom (in contrast to the conditions before the downfall of the Tibetan Empire).

After a phase of formation and consolidation, presumably to be explained in view of the socio-political, religious, economic, and linguistic conditions which had characterised the former kingdom of Zhang zhung, the envisioned all-encompassing Buddhist transformation of society began to be put into reality on a grand scale only in 986 with the issuing of a “great edict” (*bka' shog chen mo*), in which the population was called upon to follow the Buddhist doctrine, with the publication of a “religious edict” (*chos rtsigs [gtsigs]*) in 988, which proclaimed a sort of religion-based constitution of the West Tibetan kingdom, and with the initiation of a wave of eight major foundations of Buddhist monasteries (together with other measures) by leading members of the royal West Tibetan lineage in 996.⁴

The totalising transcendental Buddhist representation of the state within the totality of the cosmic order, with the *btsan po* as the paramount figure,⁵ which had developed in the Pugyel (sPu rgyal) dynasty in the period from 779 to 841, was transferred to Western Tibet “embodied” in the imperial persona of Kyidé Nyimagön (sKyid

event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time.” (https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf).

³ See Jahoda, this volume, p. 78; for further information on the political cosmology, see also Jahoda (forthcoming).

⁴ See Vitali 1996: 54, 68, 120, 233; Jahoda 2021.

⁵ See Kapstein’s remark “that the Tibetan imperial state itself came to be constituted, through a principle of homology, as the body and *maṇḍala* of the Buddha Vairocana”, and that “the emperor himself was in some sense homologous with the cosmic Buddha, and that the ordering of the empire was therefore effectively equivalent to the generation of the *maṇḍala*.” (Kapstein 2000: 60).

Ide Nyi ma mgon) and his royal successors, later among others also in the design of Tholing Monastery, representing a built *maṇḍala* cosmology with Nampar Nangdzé (rNam par snang mdzad, Vairocana Buddha) as the central deity.⁶

These changes are also reflected in the conception of the Tibetan royal lineage. In Old Tibetan texts the origin of the imperial dynasty is essentially related in a mythic formula with reference to a divine ancestor who came from (the gods of) heaven to Earth as the lord of men (*gnam gyi lha las myi'i rjer gshegs pa*), the lord of “the polity of black-headed Tibetans” (*bod mgo nag po'i srid*)” (see Hill 2016). Similar phrases are still found from the late 10th century in early monastic Buddhist contexts in Western Tibet, such as in the Renovation Inscription at Tabo from ca. 1042, with the main difference that the earlier ruler, Srong nge / Ye shes 'od, is characterised *in addition* as belonging to a lineage of bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa'i gdung*). Around a century later, in *Yig rnying*, bKra shis mgon, the middle son of sKyid Ide Nyi ma mgon, is the first to be mentioned among the rulers of the Tibetan royal lineage as the one who belonged to a lineage of bodhisattvas and protected Buddhism like his paternal ancestors (*yab mes chos skyong ba'i rgyal po byang chub sems dpa'i spruld pa'i gdung rgyud*) (p. 34, lines 5–6). Later, in the 15th-century source *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs*, the concept of the royal (now West) Tibetan lineage and its outstanding representatives is further elevated with reference to its claimed derivation from the Indic Solar lineage, including the family lineage of the historical Gautama Buddha (see Gu ge Paṇḍita Grags pa rgyal mtshan 2011: 276 / f.48b1–4).

The creation of a transcendental holistic image of the West Tibetan kingdom according to Buddhist principles must be seen as a process that went back at least to the time of the Tibetan Empire, when under the ruler Trisong Détsen (Khri Srong lde btsan) (742–ca. 800) not only was the “religion of the Buddha” (*sangs rgyas kyi chos*) established as a state religion, culminating in 779 in the foundation of Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery in Samye (bSam yas) but also the concept of kingship and state government were adjusted accordingly, as he made all of his “vassals and councilors swearing never to persecute Buddhism, but to increasingly uphold and support it” (Dotson 2017: 4). Part of this development was the increasing inclusion of the Buddhist clergy in state affairs, which was visible, for example, in “the newly established ‘religious gathering’ [*chos 'dun sa/ma*], which was held in the presence of the emperor. (...) The situation culminated in the institution of the ‘monk minister’ [*chos blon*], who by the early

⁶ See Bloch 2008: 2058 for the concept of the transcendental social and its relationship to the state and a totalising transcendental representation.

ninth century practically headed the governmental power.” (Hazod 2014: 12).

When sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon, a descendant of the Central Tibetan sPu rgyal lineage, was invited by local aristocratic clans to take over kingship in Western Tibet in a Tiger year (most probably 906), he took the place of a king from the royal dynasty referred to in *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* as gNya'/sNya shur ruling over the kingdom of Zhang zhung (see Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, this volume, pp. 99–100; Jahoda, this volume, p. 78). According to this source, the role of five related Zhang zhung clans from Gu ge, who had formed a wedding alliance with the royal Zhang zhung lineage, was the decisive factor in this change of power relations. Gu ge Paṇḍita Grags pa rgyal mtshan, the author of this text, presents further valuable information on these clans, the royal gNya'/sNya shur lineage and the downfall of the Zhang zhung kingdom, obviously thanks to his access to earlier, possibly contemporary sources in Western Tibet, although a certain Buddhist- and clan-related bias cannot be excluded in his retrospective account due to his affiliation to the Ngor Sakya school and descent from an aristocratic West Tibetan lineage.

The contribution by Roberto Vitali opening the volume (pp. 1–23) provides an outline of macro-historical developments in Western Tibet from the 7th to the 15th century which is based largely on texts from the Bon tradition, a genealogy of the lDong clan, and contemporary Tibetan texts from Dunhuang. His account of the Zhang zhung “civilisation” not only analyses the overall historical development but provides a fresh characterisation of the political system (“forms of insular governorship”), of religious traditions (Bon and “religious practice with hermit features”), of the social organisation (“a clan system from ancestral times”), and also of economic ways of life of the populations in the territories belonging to this kingdom. He notes in particular the essential transition from a predominantly nomadic way of life during the Zhang zhung kingdom towards a more sedentary life, which appeared at the time of the foundation of the West Tibetan kingdom together with a shift of the main human settlements to lower altitudes, together with an aggregation of different groups of people.

The further sequence of articles in this volume predominantly follows chronological criteria, in terms of the time horizon represented by and in the source materials. In the case of written sources which often cover a longer period of time and are not easy to evaluate in terms of the historicity and validity of their content, they can be dated according to internal evidence (author, date and place of origin, references to other sources, etc.). On the other hand, in the case of works of art, such as the sPyan ras gzigs / Avalokiteśvara stela in lCog ro, Purang (Jahoda and Kalantari, pp. 25–60), whose exact date

of creation is difficult to establish, it can nevertheless be identified as the earliest evidence of Buddhism in Western Tibet on palaeographic and for art-historical reasons, dating from a Horse year in the 9th or early 10th century, most probably sometime between 826 and 910. It may thus represent either a late example of Buddhist patronage in Western Tibet from the time of the Tibetan Empire or the earliest, in fact until now the only material witness of Buddhist art in Western Tibet from the time before Ye shes 'od.

Buddhist activities and even the foundation of temples are mentioned for sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon and his son bKra shis mgon, who is said to have built the temple of g.Yu sbra, most probably in the Khā tse/Khartse (mKhar rtse) area of Gu ge, the home of *lo chen Rin chen bzang po's* paternal ancestors. The Great Translator's family, presumably the whole Hrugs wer clan (closely linked to the royal West Tibetan lineage from the foundation of the kingdom), seems to have been among those where Buddhism had found strong support. Rin chen bzang po's first thirteen-year sojourn in Khaché (Kha che, Kashmir) and Gyagar (rGya gar, India), which lasted from 975–987, thus predating the official introduction of Buddhism as state religion, is a clear indication of this, and also of Rin chen bzang po's key role in the subsequent dissemination of Buddhism, not only due to his functions as chief priest (*dbu'i mchod gnas*) and Tantric Teacher (*rdo rje slob dpon, vajrācārya*) and achievements as a translator of texts but also through his public activities, the participation in the foundation and inauguration of Buddhist monasteries in central sites in the kingdom. The stela ascribed to him at Kyu wang in Gu ge represents an exemplary case of a public Buddhist activity and memorial statement with a lasting presence by a member of an aristocratic clan in a smaller place and is thus, like the lCog ro stela, a witness to a tradition of Buddhist patronage independent of the royal lineage (Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, pp. 61–71). This stela can be dated on art-historical grounds to the first decades of the 11th century. Local oral tradition connects it to an incident in the life of *lo chen Rin chen bzang po* that is also recorded in his biography, the passing away of this mother which happened presumably around 1014/15.⁷

⁷ This tentative date is based on a statement in his biography immediately following events dating to 996, where it is said that he extended the life of his mother for another eighteen years (Ku ge Kyi rang pa dPal ye shes Dzñā na śrī 1977: 89–90 / f.20a5–f.20b1). In a subsequent section it is reported that “after his mother had died he went to Kyu wang and practiced three times the *sādhana* of the *dPal ngan song sbyong ba / Sarvadurgatipariśodhana maṇḍala*” (*de nas kyu wang du yum grongs nas byon te / dpal ngan song sbyong ba'i dkyil 'khor gyis zhal gsum phye; ibid.: 95 / f. 23a2-3*). A four-fold image of Kun rig rNam par snang mdzad / Sarvavid Vairocana, the deity taking a central position in this *maṇḍala* (the text of which was also translated by Rin chen bzang po),

It is also an essential goal of the volume to make research materials on historical Western Tibet accessible in a better and more comprehensive form than has so far been available. This also concerns textual sources, such as two highly important historiographical texts by Gu ge Paṇḍita Grags pa rgyal mtshan, which are published here in annotated editions and in the case of *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* for the first time with colour illustrations of the original manuscript in order to provide a sound basis for references and future translation and comparison with further sources that have come to light recently (see Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus 2012, Martin 2019: 218, n. 90). In this volume, these works are analysed primarily in terms of the chronological information on foundations of monasteries and on the genealogy of the West Tibetan royal lineage.

With the exception of these two sources, in terms of methodology, the contributions on the stelae as well as those on Nyarma (including an archival report by Joseph Gergan), Tabo, the *Yum chen mo / Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript at Pooh (sPu) and the cave temple at Zhag are in all cases based upon in-depth documentation and research by the authors *in situ*, which implies a strong contextual perspective. Wherever possible and applicable this comprises the analysis of inscriptions together with explicitly mentioned emic concepts.

The contributions on Nyarma, which deal with this important but hitherto little studied monastic site, mainly from the perspective of surface archaeology and architecture (Jahoda, pp. 171–199; Devers, pp. 201–224; Feiglstorfer, pp. 225–257), shed much new light on the variation of the built structures in terms of their function, construction and use, with a focus on their interconnections and the structural and constructive developments which took place over the course of time. Much attention is accorded to the dimension of space, both in terms of ritual use, for example in the case of circumambulation, and also in the spatial dimensions of the iconography, which is the core topic of an art-historical analysis of the Nyarma Main Temple (*gtsug lag khang*) (Kalantari, pp. 259–278). A fresh look on the foundation and founder of the earliest structure at Nyarma, which is based on a re-reading of relevant historical textual sources, is linked to the investigation of titles held by rulers and other members of the West Tibetan royal family and the elaboration of an overall coherent chronological framework of the rulers of the West Tibetan kingdom and their activities between 879 and 1042 (Jahoda, pp. 279–299) for

is represented on this stela. The function of this *maṅḍala* in funeral rites which serve to purify against an evil rebirth is well known (see, for example, Heller 2017). Also the prominent appearance of the *mchod rten* motif fits with this view and at the same time explains why this stela is known as the Translator's *mchod rten* (and not *rdō ring*).

which information is drawn mainly from Gu ge Paṇḍita Grags pa rgyal mtshan's *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs* and *lHa bla ma ye shes 'od rnam thar rgyas pa*, in addition also from *Yig rnying* found in Tholing in 2011.

Several studies in this volume, likewise based largely on newly documented materials, explore the development of specific iconographic themes, their diachronic variations and evolutionary histories through comparative art-historical studies. In a larger regional context, their aim is to reconstruct and make development processes visible that go beyond the level of case studies and are also relevant for other areas. Monuments such as the unique lCog ro stela provide crucial testimony to the spread of early Buddhist culture in Western Tibet by influential clans in the region. In addition, they are evidence of the existence of an artistic landscape that connected Western Tibet with areas in India (also via Central Tibet) and Central Asia. This trans-regional approach towards early West Tibetan art includes sites that have so far only been little studied despite being known for a long time. Many of these sites are still barely accessible and were previously almost unknown in the West, such as the Zhag cave temple and the Buddhist monuments at Khartse.

The art-historical investigations of the Nyarma *gtsug lag khang* and of paintings from the foundation phase of Tabo Monastery (Kalantari, pp. 301–325) discuss fresh evidence documented by the author which is proof of the great artistic and stylistic diversity during this period. The fact that monasteries were repositories of mobile cult objects, often of exquisite splendour, and vital artistic centres (commissioned and sponsored by the monasteries' royal founders) where master artists invited from Buddhist centres outside Western Tibet, mainly Greater Kashmir, were active, is demonstrated by additional papers (Allinger and Luczanits, pp. 342–361; Kalantari, pp. 363–405). These two studies address iconographic issues as well as stylistic and chronological reassessments in the field of manuscript illumination in the temple collections of Tabo and Pooh (H.P) that cast a new light on the artistic landscape of Western Tibet. The investigations of the manuscripts' iconography in relation to the medium of contemporary wall-painting illustrate how much these illuminated manuscripts are to be seen as part of a correlated aesthetic religious ensemble. Like the monuments and the other materials analysed in this volume, they reflect the Buddhist rulers' and their aristocratic allies' all-embracing vision of an elaborate political cosmology (consequently realised in various media), equal to "a totalizing transcendental representation" of a political system where "the transcendental social [defined as an ordered encompassing whole] and the religious are identical" (Bloch 2008: 2058).

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