Sa'-dul dgon-pa: A Temple at the Crossroads of Jumla, Dolpo and Mustang

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The last three of his fourteen Himalayan expeditions brought Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) to Nepal and its north-western districts. The expedition in the year 1954 expedition retraced the route from Pokhara to the northern part of Mustang—which Tucci had already covered in 1952—and took him afterwards to the region of Jumla. There he discovered the genealogical records of the Malla kings, once the rulers over a territory covering both the western parts of Nepal and the Tibetan regions of Purang and Guge.

On his way to Jumla, Tucci passed through the southern fringes of Dolpo and came across several religious edifices, about which he noted the following:

Before reaching Pale one sees to the left of the Tarāpkhola the bsam 'dul dgon pa

(on the map Chhandul Gompa): other small shrines are in the valley of the Bārbung khola: bDe c'en dpal ri and 'Bri gung dgon pa.'

Concerning the first site this information can be supplemented by the description of a fellow traveller, David Snellgrove, who paid a visit to the area two years later, i.e. in 1956:

Sandul Monastery (SI. Chhandul Gompa) is about five miles beyond Tarakot and stands at the junction of the Beri and the stream that descends from Tarap. Thus one has to cross the Bheri to reach the temple; the tracks lead down by crazy steps through the rocks to a tree-trunk bridge which spans a deep and narrow

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gorge. All the rocks are incised with the spell OM MANI PADME HUM and one feels as though one were to enter some hidden idyllic valley, of which Tibetans love to tell, where men and animals live in peace and harmony.\(^2\)

The general state of decay and abandonment of temples and sanctuaries in the region of Tichurong around the upper course of the Bheri River, which bears the name Barbung near to its source north of the Dhaulagiri, was some years later reconfirmed by the observations of Corneille Jest. But in the case of Sa-'dul dgon-pa (and the 'Bri-gung dgon-pa, lying further south-west, high above the Bheri), there were also signs that Buddhist traditions were being revitalized and religious shrines were being kept intact. These activities resulted from the enthusiasm of one bla-ma in particular: the so-called Shangs Rin-po-che (died 1958).\(^3\) Later the temple fell again into disrepair, and today only the inner sanctum at the rear side of the building reminds the visitor of earlier times when this site attracted pilgrims and religious dignitaries who were on their way to Jumla, Dolpo, Mustang and the regions beyond (see picture I).

As the history of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Tichurong / Barbung is still little documented and as this area lies halfway between the political and cultural centres of Jumla and Mustang, being traversed by one of the old Himalayan trade routes, I think it worthwhile to present here some recently discovered materials on Sa-'dul dgon-pa. The main historical guidelines are provided by the collection of spiritual songs of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin (1657-1737), which are structured around the principle events of his life. It was this teacher of the rNying-ma-pa school who brought Sa-'dul dgon-pa to new glory at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, and his name is still remembered among the people of Dolpo as one of their spiritual forefathers.

1. Education and travels of o-rgyan bstan-'dzin

The main teacher of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin and the one who ordained him and gave him his religious name was O-rgyan dpal-bzang (1617-1677), a native of southern Mustang and founder of the monastery sKu-tshab gter-nga near present-day Thini. His ordination took place in the year 1668, and the location where the teacher and his disciple came together was called Kun-bzang brag. This name refers to a spot near sKag-[rdzong], the settlement next to Sa-'dul dgon-pa in the eastern direction.\(^4\)

Following the advice of his teacher, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin proceeded at the age of seventeen to Central Tibet and took up his studies at the Sa-skya-pa monastery rTa-nag Thub-bstan rnam-rgyal. After visits to lhAsa and bSam-yas, his return trip led him via Ding-ri and sNya-lam to the Kathmandu Valley and also to sKyid-grong and its holy mountain Ri-bo dpal-bar. From the masters he met in the region of sKyid-grong, I would like to mention at least a certain rGyal-dbang seng-ge (born 1628); from him O-rgyan bstan-'dzin received the teachings of the treasure cycles of Rig-'dzin 'Ja'-tshon snying-po (1585-1656).\(^5\)

Returning to his homeland—during his travels O-rgyan bstan-'dzin was once called the “man from the region of Dolpo”—he continued his studies under two further teachers. The first one was Bla-ma Thub-bstan dbang-po and the second, Bla-ma dPal-'ldan rdo-rje. It is known from their respective biographies that Thub-bstan dbang-po was a
follower of the Brug-pa bKa’-brgyud-pa school who had received teachings from the 5th Brug-chen dPags-bsam dbang-po (1593-1641), and that dPal-ladan rdo-rje was a Sa-skya-pa master affiliated with the monastery of Hrab in northern Dolpo.  

Having completed this training in his twenty-fourth year (1681), O-rgyan bstan-'dzin pondered the question whether he should continue the studies of “the tantras of the system of the new [translations]” (gsar ma lugs kyi rgyud) and proceed a second time to Central Tibet, or stick to “the teaching of the old [translations]” (treying ma lugs kyi chos) in the way he was instructed before. At that time a vision of Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal occurred to him and the divine lady uttered the following words: “You, son, are you not a priest of U-rgyan Padma[sam]bhava? If you want the siddhis, [why] don’t you go to request the teaching from Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang rdo-rje?” After more visionary experiences, and in the end asking his teacher dPal-ladan rdo-rje for leave, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin set out again for the region of sKyi-dgong. After barely escaping death on a high pass because of heavy snowfall for three days, he finally reached the place called mNyam in the region of sKu-thang; and there, at “the Site of the Guru’s [= Padmasambhava’s] Spiritual Practices” (gu ru’t sgrub gnas), in a cave bearing the name Shel-phug, he met Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang rdo-rje (1640-1685) in person. The main teachings he received from the “treasure-discoverer” (gter ston) concerned the treasure-work Zab rig chos dbyings rang gsal, and there has survived a commentary which O-rgyan bstan-'dzin composed at a later time to a part of this cycle.  

Following the admonitions of the so-called mNga-ris gTer-ston to live in “solitary places (which are) hermitages” (ri khrod dhen gnas) for progress in his spiritual discipline, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin afterwards devoted his time fully to the teachings of the newly discovered treasure-cycle. The next major event in his life was the death of Thub-bstan dBang-po in his twenty-ninth year, i.e. in 1686. With the aim of getting manufactured a proper “receptacle for the relics” (glang rien) of his deceased teacher, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin directed his steps towards the valley of Kathmandu and brought back a magnificent statue of Padma-sambhava. He was able to erect a temple for housing the image on the spot where Thub-bstan dBang-po had had his living-quarters; this temple he called bDe-chen iDzong-gi lha-khang, and it served him as residence for the years to come. This temple is known still today under the name bDe-chen dpal-ri and is located to the south-east of Sa’-dul dgon-pa in the village Tangchen/Tachen, on the opposite side of the Bheri River.  

Finally, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin received teachings from Kun-bzang klong-yangs, the successor of O-rgyan dpal-bzang at sKu-tshab gTer-lnga and his senior by thirteen years. Besides the reading of the biography of their common teacher, special mention is made of the treasure-cycles of Rig-'dzin gTer-bdag gling-pa (1646-1714). Just shortly before this encounter, in 1688, Kun-bzang klong-yangs had stayed in the presence of this treasurediscoverser at sMin-grol gling in Central Tibet. He had been well received there and had spent a period of altogether eight months at sMin-grol gling.  

2. Restorations of Sa’-dul dgon-pa and their sponsors  

With the year 1690 we come finally to the temple that is the subject of the present investigation. Obviously the building and the sacred items
housed there were already at that time not well-kept:

Now, at the time of my thirty-fourth year, the Bhūpala, the ruler, the king of Jumla, Bhī-ri-sras (by name), as he had issued the strong request to renovate the vihāra of Sa-thal, I restored the three inner sanctums and erected representations (i.e. statues) of Mahāmuni, O-rgyan Rin-poche (i.e. Buddha Śākyamuni and Padmasambhava), and others. What amounted to a zho (of silver) from the king (of Jumla) himself, what amounted to a zho (of silver) from the ruler of Mustang, bSam-grub dpal-bar (by name), and further more, what all the monastic community and commoners had brought together—great things (like) horses and yakṣas, and small things (like) white-wash (?)—when it (all) had been brought together and offered, the receptacles were set up (by me).10

A closer look should now be taken at the sponsors who are highlighted in this quotation. The identification of the king of Jumla poses some problems, as the name Bhī-ri-sras is a transliteration of a vernacular and can be interpreted in different ways (and thus made to apply to different historical persons). Given the fact that Tib. sras is the phonetical rendering of Nep. sāhi—as attested in a Tibetan document dated before the conquest of Jumla by Gorkha in the year 1789—we could hypothetically identify Bhī-ri-sras as one of the fourteen Sāhi or two Sāha kings of the Kallala dynasty of Jumla, who ruled the kingdom during the period from the 15th to 18th centuries.11

The names Vikramsāhi and Vibhahadurśāhi might have served as possible candidates for the person of the Tibetan rendering Bhī-ri-sras, but their regnal years were 1602-1621 and 1635-1665 respectively, and thus they lived too early. A third candidate would be Vibhahadraśaḥi, but his reign (1665-1676) does not match the year of the renovation of Sa-thal dgon-pa either. Nevertheless, an interesting detail of his kingship is that he ruled the country from Kakakot and Tibrikot. The first toponym I take to be identical with Tib. sKag-rdzoṅ, the place in the vicinity of Sa-thal dgon-pa which had provided residence for the teachers of the rNyin-ma-pa and bKa-brgyud-pa schools.12

If we turn now to the oral traditions of local kings in Tichurung, it is the person of Vibhabhadraśaḥi—and especially his son—that are still remembered up to the present day. The name of this son is Vikram[a]śaḥ[i/a], and I take him to be the person who called for the renovation of Sa-thal dgon-pa in the year 1690. This Vikramśaḥ (Bhī-ri-sras) can easily be confused with his predecessor of the same name (and this fact might have contributed to his local fame), but it is not only the name of Vikramśaḥ that still lives on in the region; a statue of the king also keeps his memory alive. This statue is kept in the inner sanctum of Sa-thal dgon-pa and is a visible proof of the royal patronage of the site (see picture II).13

The mention of a ruler of Mustang by the name of bSam-grub dpal-bar comes as no surprise in the present context. We know from different sources that this ruler was very active in providing financial assistance to the Buddhist religion, and there exists a separate work describing his renovation of the Byams-pa lha-khang in Gho-bo sMon-thang, the capital of Mustang, in the year 1663. That the temple at the crossroads of Jumla,
Sa-'dul gdon-pa

Dolpo and Mustang was sponsored both by Vikramśāh and bSam-'grub dpal-'bar can by implication be interpreted as a visible sign of the political (and cultural) dependence that tied Mustang to Jumla in the 17th and 18th centuries. This dependence must be taken into account when we deal with the history of religious structures in an area that is something of a border region between these two kingdoms.16

Concerning the actual renovation work, the fact is perhaps worth mentioning that felled trees were brought down from rTa-ron, i.e. the gorge of the Tarap Khola, by raft, but were in the end carried away by turbulent waters. About a thousand loads of wood had therefore to be transported to the 'Plain of Sa-'dul' (sa 'dul gyi thang) by human labour. This should be sufficiently revealing of the first stage of restoring Sa-'dul dgon-pa, which obviously was initiated by royal orders.

The next years in the life of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin saw him mainly active at his residence in bTang-byon, the bDe-chen rDzong-gi lha-khang, and it was again the procuring of a further statue for this temple that made a second trip to the Kathmandu Valley necessary. There he paid a visit to the Svāyambhūnāth-stūpa, ordered a statue of the future Buddha Maitreya from the artist Abhadeva in Patan, paid his respects to the Bodhnāth-stūpa, and held a Gāñacakra-feast at the top of the mountain Ri-lo bbig-byed, i.e. Jāmāck.15

At the age of 43, in the year 1700, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin assumed the task of a further renovation of Sa-'dul dgon-pa, this time not under official orders, it seems, but on his own. The three inner sanctums are mentioned again, along with the statues of Buddha Śākyamuni and Padmasambhava, and the difficulties of working at the spot because of an avalanche. In a spiritual song following the description of the different repair works, the "benefits of the sacred site" (gnas kyi phan yon) are praised by O-rgyan bstan-'dzin; he labelled this song an "inventory" (dkar chag) of the place. We can observe it the process by which Sa-'dul dgon-pa and its wider surroundings are transformed into an idealized landscape and accorded at the same time the status of a 'hidden land' (sbes yul). In the context of different schemes and names for classifying the area at the confluence of the Tarap Khola and the Bheri Khola, the fact emerges that the temple was originally founded by a certain Chos-rje Dar-pa, a siddha of the bKa' brgyud-pa school.16 The list of patrons opens with the names of the ruler of Mustang and the king of Jumla—followed by the local benefactors and their villages—and we can thus interpret also this second restoration of the temple as a visible sign of a specific political constellation in which Mustang was one of the petty states dominated by Jumla.

3. Later years and the visit of Kah-thog rig-'dzin

It was again at his residence, the bDe-chen rDzong-gi lha-khang, that O-rgyan bstan-'dzin instructed his growing circle of disciples in the first years of the 18th century, using treasure-cycles like zab tig chos dbyings rang gsal as the basic texts. On one occasion he made the noteworthy remark that the teachings of the "Great Perfection" (rdzogs chen) had in earlier times not reached the region of Dolpo. But this gets us ahead of the course of actual events. First we have to take note of the pilgrimage to the area of Mount Kailāsa and Lake Manasarovar in 1704 which was performed in the company of a group of his disciples. This intended
"circumambulation of the snow mountain" (gangs skor) led O-rgyan bstan-'dzin first to the royal court of Jumla, where he received financial support from the kings of Jumla, including Maharaja Vikramṣāh (Bhi-ri-sras), such wording suggests that the power at the court was shared among different rulers at the time. Crossing the region of 'Om-lo lung—present-day Humla—he reached the sacred mountain and stayed at different places in the area, among them the famous cave known as rDzu-phrul phug. His return took him via another route to the region of sLe-mi—present-day Limi—to the north-west of Dolpo, and there he paid a visit to a sacred mountain of some local renown, the so-called Shel-mo gangs.17

Passing Ting-kyu in upper Dolpo, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin then visited, for the first time, the valley of rTa-rab in the southern part of Dolpo—this at the invitation of the teachers and patrons from Me-skusms dgon-pa. The name of this monastery shows up several times more in his autobiographical works covering the years to come, and it was especially from it that the local tradition of the teachings of Padmasambhava spread further in that area.18

Nevertheless O-rgyan bstan-'dzin also continued his religious activities in Tichurung after having returned there. Eventually he gave way to urgent requests to become the overseer (zhal bdag) of 'Bri-gung dgon-pa, the temple on the lower course of the Bheri Khola above Yalakot. The fact that Vikramṣāh, the local king in the line of Jumla rulers, had a special connection with 'Bri-gung dgon-pa is obvious from the two designations of the temple; it bears the name “the Jumla king’s most excellent island of liberation” (dzum lang rgyal po’i thar pa gling mchog) and—more prosaic—“monastery of king Bir” (bir rgyal dgon pa).

It should also be remembered that according to the local tradition Vikramṣāh was born in the village of Yalakot. O-rgyan bstan-'dzin thus attended to that religious edifice as well and finished his work with a proper act of consecration.

During the account of this period, the name bsTan-'dzin ras-pa (1644/46-1723) is mentioned, and we come to know that an exchange of letters took place between O-rgyan bstan-'dzin and this yogin of the 'Brug-pa bKa’-brgyud-pa school, who was a native of the Muktināth valley and the founder of Shel dgon-pa in upper Dolpo. This latter region was the destination of the next journey of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin. He met bsTan-'dzin ras-pa personally in Shel dgon-pa and performed afterwards the pilgrimage around the sacred mountain of Shel-gyi ri-bo (brug-sgra), from which the monastery derived its name. Before the leg of the journey through the western part of upper Dolpo, the eastern part was traversed, and its inhabitants received public initiations from the priest. Two places are especially noted by O-rgyan bstan-'dzin, who devoted some spiritual songs to them: gNas-mchog Gru-lung and dMar-sgom. These are sites where teachers of the Ngotr-pa subsect of the Sakya-pa school had been active from the 16th century onwards.19

Without going into more details of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin's further travels to Me-skusms dgon-pa in the valley of rTa-rab and to the villages in upper Dolpo—including a further meeting with bsTan-'dzin ras-pa—I want finally to direct attention again to the temple of Sa-'dul dgon-pa and its wider surroundings. According to the available written sources, it seems that from his sixtieth year onwards O-rgyan bstan-'dzin frequented sites to the north of Sa-'dul dgon-pa, near the village of Glang, as places conducive to the pursuit of his spiritual
endeavours. One of these sites was called "Horse Ferry" (rta gru), and it is in connection with this toponym that the person of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin remained alive in the memory of generations of priests following his tradition. Another one was known to the local people by the name "Sun-Cave, the hermitage of the land of Glang" (glang yul gyi ri khrod nnyi ma phug); this location served at the same time as residence for A-ni Chos-skyid, a female disciple of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin, remembered as well in southern Dolpo down to the present day.20

A final example of the importance Sa-'dul dgon-pa achieved in the 18th century as a temple where religious discourses were given and as an entry point to hidden sites lying beyond can be found in the biography of Kah-thog Rig-'dzin Tshed-dbang nor-bu (1698-1755). As his stay in Sa-'dul dgon-pa in the year 1730 was followed by a personal encounter with O-rgyan bstan-'dzin in rTa-gru, I shall present this episode from the perspective of both persons in an appendix.21 With this teacher from the region of Kah-thog in Eastern Tibet, we have reached also the last formative element in the spiritual life of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin: although by four decades his junior, he counted Rig-'dzin Tshed-dbang nor-bu as one of his three main teachers (the other two being O-rgyan dpal-brang and Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang rdo-rje).

After bringing a further renovation project to a successful end—this time at Skag-rdzong, in the vicinity of his old residence—and a last journey to his disciples in northern Dolpo, O-rgyans bstan-'dzin died seven years later in rTa-gru, the inner part of the hidden land he had created around the 'Plain of Sa-'dul.'

Notes

1. See Tucci (1956:37, note 1) and the attached map (reproduced at the end of this paper). This publication contains the results of Tucci's expeditions of 1952 and 1954. A popular version of the discovery of the historical records of the Malla kingdom is Tucci (1962). For an overview of the genealogy of the royal house—its last and most powerful ruler being Prithivimala (regnal years 1338-1358)—and remarks on Tucci's reconstruction of the origins of the Mallas, compare Sharma (1972:17-20 and 40-41). See also Klimgburg-Salter (1991) for the different research expeditions of Tucci in the Himalayan regions.

2. Snellgrove (1961:39). A description of the temple itself can be found ibid.(40): "There are traces of older building in some carved wooden beams, which display more expert craftsmanship, and one can see the stone foundations of other buildings behind the present temple, indicating that this site must once have been of far greater importance .... It is apparent that this temple receives little or no support nowadays."

3. See Jest (1971:75): "Ce qu'il faut souligner toute fois avec Snellgrove, c'est l'aspect d'abandon que l'on remarque dans les temples et les sanctuaires, aspect qui s'est encore accentué ces dernières années; le lama de Shang a bien essayé de redonner vie à la religion bouddhique en 1954-55...". Cf. Jest (1975:308): "Shang Rinpoche a séjourné cinq mois à Tichurong en 1951, les onzième et douzième mois à sa-'dul dgon-pa, les premier, deuxième et troisième à 'bri-guilh. Il a fait remettre en état les deux temples, redresser les chœurs en ruines, recréer et décorer les constructions élevées par le roi de Jumla. La lama de Shang avait prédit qu'il construirait ou reconstruirait quatre temp... Les deux derniers sont ceux de sa-'dul et de 'bri-guilh."

On the rebuilding of Sa-'dul dgon-pa and Bri-gung dgon-pa by Shangs Rin-po-che and his travels in Mustang, Nyi-shang and sNur, cf. also Snellgrove...
4. For general information concerning O-rgyan dpal-bzang and the founding of the monastery of sKu-tshab gter-lnga, see Snellgrove (1979:79-81). The ordination of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin occurred on O-rgyan dpal-bzang's journey to the area of Barbung preceding the actual foundation of sKu-tshab gter-lnga in 1668; compare the data in Ehrhard (in press a). A second disciple of O-rgyan dpal-bzang who had received his religious name in Kun-bzang brag was Kun-bzang klong-yangs (1644-1699). A scion of the ruling family of sKa[-rdzong] in Barbung—not to be confused with Kagbeni, at the confluence of the Kali Gandhaki and Muktinath rivers—he eventually became the successor of O-rgyan dpal-bzang at sKu-tshab gter-lnga. For a description of this teacher's visit to sKa[-rdzong] and the spot Kun-bzang brag, see his autobiography: rTogs brjod ma tig gi michun bu (= chun po) zhes pa'i gtam, fols. 16b/6-17b/3. A manuscript from sKa[-rdzong] was purchased by Tucci; see ibid. (1956:15).

5. For presenting the main events in the life of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin, I follow NYAMS-DBYANGS; for the period up to the stay in the area of sKyid-grong, see ibid., pp. 7.3-13.5. The text RNAM-THAR was written by the author in his seventieth year upon the request of his disciples to produce a condensed version of the first work; cf. ibid., pp. 5.3-19.4 for the journey just mentioned. The teacher rGyal-dbang seng-ge was one of the main disciples of Karma Blo-bzang, "resident" (gnas 'dzin pa) of the religious site Brag-dkar rta-so to the north-east of sKyid-grong. He was also in contact with O-rgyan dpal-bzang and Kun-bzang klong-yangs; see Rigs brgya dbang po'i dren mchog slob don dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa, fol. 314a/2-3, and the text mentioned in note 4, fol. 39b/2-4. In the year 1665 rGyal-dbang seng-ge wrote the biography of his father 'Od-zer rgya-mtsho (1574-1661): Bya bzang 'od zer rgya mtsho'i rnam thar.

6. For Thub-bstan dbang-po see his biography: Bla ma rin po che sbas pa'i rnal' byor pa chen po thub bstan dbang po'i rnam pa (= rnam) thar. Concerning the founding of a monastic settlement in Hrab by dPal-Ldan blo-gros (1527-1596), see Snellgrove (1967:11). A further teacher associated with this site by the name of dPal-Ldan bzang-po is known as well; see ibid. (241). For the writings of dPal-Ldan rdo-rje, see the texts mentioned in Ehrhard (in press b, note 5). This period in the life of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin can be found in NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 13.5-20.1.

7. See NYAMS-DBYANGS, p. 20.4, for the quote (bu khyod u rgyan padma'i btsun pa ma yin nam / dyugs grub 'dod na rig 'dzin gar dbang rdo rje la chos zhu ru mi 'gro'am), and ibid., pp. 23.4-26.4, for the detailed account of his stay with the treasure-discoverer. It should be mentioned that O-rgyan dpal-bzang had visited Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang rdo-rje as well in the cave Shel-phug north of the Manaslu region with the aim of inspecting some of the findings of the treasure-discoverer; see Ehrhard (in press a). Another teacher from Dolpo who had studied directly under Rig-'dzin Gar-dbang rdo-rje—in the year 1679—was Ngag-dbang ram-rgyal (born 1628) from gNam-gung; on him and the teachings received see Ehrhard (in press b). The commentary written by O-rgyan bstan-'dzin bears the title bKa' rdzogs pa chen po zab tig chos dbyings rang gsal las phyag rgya chen po gnyug mta gser nthong gi khrad.

8. See NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 34.3-35.2, for the death of Thub-bstan dbang-po and the construction of the temple. In RNAM-THAR, p. 21.5-6, these events are condensed to three lines: gdung brten (= rten) bzhengs ru (= bzheng du) bal du phyin / o rgyan sku nang gdung rnam bsugs / da lha de (= bde) chen dpal rir bsugs. The biography of Thub-
bstan dbang-po provides the information that this teacher was born in gTang-byon, on the borderline between Tibet and the gorges (bod rong gnyis kyi so (= sa) mchams). The epithet "temple of the fortress" (rdzong gi lha khang) suggests that the religious services held there were connected with the ruling family of sKag[rdzong]. I suppose that the toponyms sTeng-shog / bTang-shog are alternative spellings for gTang-byon and thus refer to the same locality. The first spelling can be found in the biography of O-rgyan dpal-bzang and refers there to the spot from where the people came who attended the teachings during his stay in rKag[rdzong]; see the text (as in note 5), fols. 315b/6-316a/1 (... steng shog lang gan gi gra (= grva) rigs thams ca'i dus nas). According to the biography of Kun-bzang klong-yangs it was from bTang-shog that Karma Blo-bzang, the "resident" of Brag-dkar rta-so, was invited to sKag[rdzong]; see the text (as in note 4), fols. 10a/6-b/1 (rim = rim) can btag shog lang bar spyan 'den zhus khyad par bdag gis (= gi) pha dang a khu 'tshos skag rdzong du spyan 'den zhu dus). Karma Blo-bzang was the founder of gNam-gung in northern Dolpo; see Ehrhard (in press a, note 10).

9. For the studies with Kun-bzang klong-yangs, see NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 38.1-42.3; cf. RNAMTHAR, pp. 22.1-3. In the biography of Kun-bzang klong-yangs (as in note 4), fols. 66a/4-67a/5, the study period is described in still greater detail; it was resumed in Kun-bzang brag near sKag[rdzong] during conditions of extreme winter cold. For the visit of Kun-bzang klong-yangs to the monastery of sMin-grol gling and his studies with Rig'dzin gTer-bdag gling-pa, see ibid., fols. 57b/3-65b/1. These data for the year 1688 are confirmed by the biography of the treasure-discoverer; see gTer chen chos kyi rgyal po'i rnam thar dad pa'i shing rta, pp. 314.6; 315.6; and 316.6. He is referred to there under the name Glo-bo bla-ma Kun-bzang klong-yangs or Glo-bo-pa Kun-bzang klong-yangs.

10. NYAMS-DBYANGS, p. 42.3-5: yang rang lo so bzhin pa'i dus su / sa skyong mi'i dbang po 'dzun lang rgyal po bhi ri sras kyi / sa 'dul gyi gsang lag khang gi zhih bsos (= gsas) byed dgos pa'i bka' nan ches pa'i btags (= btags) kyi / gsang khang gsum gyi zhih bsos (= gsas) dang / thub chen dang / o rgyan rin po che'i sku tshab sogs zhesigs pas / rgyal po rang gi zho gnyug / blo bo (= glo bo) sde pa bsam 'grub dpal 'bar gyi cho gnyug / gzhon yang skya ser kun gyi 'brel par / che ba rta dang g.yag / chung ba dkar cig (= rsi ?) gnyis kun gyi 'brel par phul nas rien zhesigs pas. The funds for gilding the statues came from a man called gTangbyon-pa Yon-bdag bKra-shis phun-tshogs; see ibid., p. 43.3-6. He had also been the sponsor for the construction of the bDe Chen rdzong gi lha-khang (see note 8).

11. For the history of the Kallala dynasty which followed the royal house of the Mallas, see Pandey (1970) and (1971); the numbering of eleven kings whose names end with the suffix rgya, followed by the names of the fourteen Sháhi and the two Sáhi kings can be found in Pandey (1970:45). The Tibetan document—a treatise between Jumla and Mustang—was edited and translated by Schuh (1994:69-78). We find there the names Big-ram-sras (= Vikramaśāhi) and Bir-bā-dla-rsras (= Virabhadrāśāhi). The treatise opens by referring to the person of Ballārāja, the founder of the Kallala dynasty (regnal years 1404-1445); see Schuh (1994:73). It might be useful to point out that this name was used by Tibetan scholars generically to designate the ruler of this dynasty up to the 18th century. See Chos kyi dbang-phug, Rig pa 'dzin pa chen po rdo rje tsho dbang nor bu'i zhabz kyi rnam par thar pa, pp. 155.2-3; "... (this region,) which is part of India, (was ruled) in former times (by) the king of Ya-tshe (i.e. the Mallā dynasty), and in his place, now, (by the ruler) called Ballārāja. He puts faith in the philosophical teachings of the Tirthikas and has brought twenty petty kingdoms under his rule. (This region) is known as Jumla..."
12. Information concerning the rulers Vikramśāhī, Virabhadṛāśāhī and Virabhadrāśāhī is given by Pandey (1971:42-44 and 45-46). Compare also the following statement on the "castles" from which they wielded their rule: "... between A.D. 1599 and 1719, we find about ten kings of the dynasty who had ruled the Jumla valley from its various castles (kots). Either due to revolution or division of the property (state) .... each prince of the family had received a town along with the hills and the villages of its neighbourhood." (note: "The towns of late-medieval period in Western Nepal would not have been bigger than a modern village of the region."); ibid.: (42 and 58).

13. For the local traditions of Tichurung concerning king Vikram[a]śāhī[a], see Fisher (1987:30): "... Bhadri Sah, who was in turn the father (by his Magar wife) of Vikram Sah, ... who is the only named historical figure generally remembered in Tichurung today. According to local legend, Vikram Sah ... was born in Yelakot ... below the Tichurung village of Gompa." On Yelakot/Yalakot as the old customs house before it was shifted downstream to Dunahi, see Führer-Haimendorf (1975:208). Compare also Jest (1971:75): "Le seul personnage historique connu des Tichurung-pa est Bikram Saha ṭhakuri, roi de Jumla, qui a été le bienfaiteur des temples des bṛigūṇ et de sa-dul dgon-pa où on conserve sa statue".

14. In Jackson (1984:150) we find the following characteristic of bSsam-grub dpal-bar: "Everywhere, both within [Lo] and without, he sponsored the making of inconceivably many sacred images, books, and stupas. Because he worshipped the [Three] Jewels with offerings, reverently served the monastic assembly, and was energetic in his meditations, he truly lived up to the name "religious king." The text on the renovation of the Byams-pa lha-khang bears the title rGyals ba'i rgyal tshab byams mgon gtsos 'kor gsum gyi sku bya 'byung la gnungs bzhugs kyi dkar chags dangos grub kun 'byung, 22 fols., NGMPP reel-no. L 143/2; for a first study of this text, cf. Gurung (1986).

The political dependency of Mustang upon Jumla in the 17th and 18th centuries has been dealt with by Schuh (1994:68-85). According to the material presented there, the sovereignty of Jumla over Mustang was firmly established by at least the reign of Virabhadrāśāhī (i.e., the 1630s) and lasted around 150 years.

15. For the mentioned detail of the renovation of 1690, see NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 43.5-44.1: yang shing chad pas rta rong nas chu log rgyugs pas / rta rong lung pa'i shing thams cad chu rud kyi (= kyi) bhyer yongs pas / sa 'dul gyi thang la shing khur stong len rgyu byang ngo. The visit to the Kathmandu Valley can be found in ibid., pp. 102.2-107.5. On the way back O-rgyan bstan-'dzin spent some time in "Od-gsal sgang, the residence of my own teacher" (rang gi bla ma'i gdam sa 'od gsal sgang); this refers to the site of sKu-tshab gter-linga in southern Mustang. There he came upon the two statues of Padmasambhava which were kept in "both the upper and lower monasteries" (dgon pa yas mas gnyis) and had been "the sacred objects" (nang rten) of Kun-bzang klong-yangs. Mention is also made of the hermitage bearing the name Zom-bu ri in Sumb-bag; this toponym refers to present day Thini. For the stay of O-rgyen bstan-'dzin in sKu-tshab gter-linga in the year 1699, see ibid., pp. 107.5-113.3.

16. The renovation work in the year 1700 is described in NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 125.5-134.4; for the difficulties to reach the spot, see ibid., p. 125.5 (chu thags chig thang la brtsegs pas dka' las shin tu che ba byung). The text of the inventory can be found in ibid., pp. 126.4-129.4. The area in question is classified into an outer, inner and secret sacred site bearing the respective names Sa-'dul dgon-pa, O-rgyen byang-chub phan and Thar-pa rite. This scheme is extended into a fivefold
17. For the remark on Dolpo see NYAMS-DHYANGS, p. 166.2 (sprang po'i bsam pa la chos rdzogs pa chen po 'di ligar (= sngar) dol phyogs su ma dar ba yin te). The description of the pilgrimage to the Kailasha area can be found in ibid., pp. 178.3-198.1, containing the short data on the royal court of Jumla, ibid., p. 181.1-2 (rgyal chen bhi ri sras sogs 'dzum lang rgyal po thams cad kyi s mthun rkyen mdzad).

Concerning the mountain Shel-mo gangs there exists a guidebook by a certain Padma dangs-grub: gNas chen shel mo gangs gi dkar chags mthong ba rang grol. For the contact of Zhab-dkar Tshogs-drug rang-grol (1781-1851) with the people from this area of Limi and the sacred mountain, cf. Ricard (1994:308, 321-328).

18. The local historical tradition concerning rituals and religious beliefs of the rNying-ma-pa school in rTa-rab is described by Jest (1975:305): "Le rituel actuel et la forme donnée aux pratiques religieuses à Tarap sont l’œuvre de lama u-rgyan bstan-jin: originaire de la vallée de la Barbung, il a été surnommé sta-bru u-rgyan bstan-jin parce qu’il a longtemps séjourné en méditation l’ermiteage de sta-bru au sud de Lang. Il appartenait à l’ordre des rjogs-chen-pa." For the relocation of Me-skysems dgon-pa to the valley of rTa-rab under Pha-rgod rTogs-Ldhan rgyal-po, see ibid.: 308. This must have happened in the 17th century as O-rgyan bstan-dzin mentions rTogs-Ldhan rgyal-po as one of his early teachers, NYAMS-DHYANGS, p. 36.4. The biography and spiritual songs of Pha-rgod rTogs-Ldhan rgyal-po were microfilmed by Klaus-Dieter Mathes and the NGMPP team during an expedition to Dolpo in the summer of 1995.

19. The activities in Bri-gung dgon-pa are related in NYAMS-DHYANGS, pp. 239.2-260.3. The term "oversee" (zhal bdag) is also used for O-rgyan bstan-dzin on the occasion of the second renovation of Sa-dul dgon-pa; ibid., p. 126.3. For information on bsTan-dzin ras-pa, his birthplace in the Muktinath valley, and his (re-)opening of the hidden valley sKyid-mo lung in the area of sKu-thang, see Ehrhard (1993a:25-26) and (in press a: note 14); cf. now Schuh (1995:42-44) for a translation of the genealogy of bsTan-dzin ras-pa’s family.

Concerning the lineage of the masters of dMar-gsom, which was founded by bSod-nams blo-gros (1516-1581), and the site of Gra-lung, the residence of rNam-grol bzang-po (born 1504), the teacher of bSod-nams blo-gros, see Ehrhard (in press b). The biographies translated by Snellgrove (1967) deal with four representatives of the sect in question. For a modern-day description of the pilgrimage around Shel-gyi ri-bo, see Jest (1985). A guidebook is also available: gNas mchog shel gyi ri bo 'brug sgrus' dkar chags mthong ba don ldan dad pa'i skyen rengs, 18 fol., NGMPP reel-no. E 2756/15.

20. For an ethnographic account of the village of Glang, see Jest (1975:70). A short résumé of the life of A-ni Chos-skyclad can be found ibid.: 306-307 (note: "A Tarap, il n’existe pas de copie de la biographie de la religieuse. Les religieux de Tarap dansent sur le thème de la vie de méditation de a-ni chos-skyclad (danse appelée chos-bro), lors des cérémonies du onzième mois à Nimaphug (à Doro) et à Mekyem." In the meantime a copy of this biography has been located in Tarap: mkHaa' ggro ma o rgyan chos skyclad gyi rnam thar bs dus pa, 51
The following statement is made by O-rgyan bstan-'dzin in praise of the spiritual qualities of rTa-gru:

"This sacred site—it is my hidden land... The door to the sacred site (is) Sa-'dul, a place for giving (offerings). The inner part of the sacred site (is) rTa-gru, a place of pristine awareness." See NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 364.3-5: gnas 'di ni nga yi sbras yul yin / ... / gnas sgo ni sa 'dul sbyin pa'i gnas / gnas nang ni rta gru ye shes gnas, and RNAM-THAR, pp. 44.6-45.4 (with a different reading of the last line: gnas nang ni lla (= rta) gru ting 'dzin gnas).

21. On the itinerary of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu before he reached Sa-'dul dgon-pa and his visits to the court of the king of Mustang and to Mukináth, see Ehrlhard (1993a). For his stay in Sa-'dul dgon-pa, the following data are provided by Chos-kyi dbang-phug (as in note 11), p. 147.2-3:

"What is called Sa-'dul, the naturally arisen cemetery, this most excellent great sacred site which was blessed by the Tathagatā Vajravarahi—for several days he stayed there and made extensive offerings (in the form) of sacrificial cakes for the Gañacakras... All the commoners and the monastic community of that region bowed down to him in reverence... (sa 'dul zhes rang byung gi dar khrod bcom ldan 'das ma rdo rje phag mo'i (= mos) byin gyis rabs pa'i gnas mchog cher zhag sbras bzhugs shing tshogs ggor gyi mchod pa rgya cher mchad /. ... yul de'i ser skya kun gyi (= gyis) gus par byud ...)."

At that time Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu also settled a military clash between "two petty states of the southern region" (mon gyi rgyal khag gnyis); see ibid., p. 147.5. This can only refer to Jumla and Parbat. For the next year, 1731, the autobiographical text of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin notes a war in which the states of Jumla, Parbat and Mustang were involved, costing many soldiers their lives; see NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 445.5-446.5.

Appendix:

The following two excerpts are taken (a.) from NYAMS-DBYANGS, pp. 423.4-425.1 (the identical passage in RNAM-THAR, pp. 53.6-56.3 is based on that) [=I], and (b.) from Chos-kyi dbang-phug: Rig pa 'dzin pa chen po rdo rje tshe dbang nor bu'i zhabs kyis rnam par thar pa, pp. 148.1-6 [=II]. Concerning the second work it should be noted that the author used as one of his sources for the life-story of Kaḥ-thog Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu the autobiographical account sNyims pa'i chu skyes. This work is written in verses and covers the main events up to the year 1730; it was set down upon the special request of O-rgyan bstan-'dzin at the time of the meeting between the two masters. See the colophon:

"Earlier, in the presence of Guru (Padmasambhava), (there was one) who was called g.Yu-sgra snying[-po], (now) his incarnation, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin by name, this Vajrācārya himself, he made continued strong exhortations, and in response to them, on the tenth day of the black moon in the iron-horse year [= the third Tibetan month of 1730], (1) Tshe-dbang nor-bu, the Vidyādhara who is known as Kaḥ-thog-pa, spoke." Ibid., p. 611.5-6 (sngon tsho gu ru'ul sphyan snga ru // g.yu sgra snying zhes rnam sprul ni // o rgyan bstan 'dzin zhes bya ba // rdo rje slob dpon de nyid kyis // yang yang na gnis bskul ngor // lcags kyi nag zla'i tshes bu // kaḥ thog pa grags pa rig pa 'dzin // tshe dbang nor bu de yi smras).

[1] "When (I) the old beggar was seventy-four, he who was the final rebirth of Nam-mkha' snying-po, from the region of Khams in the east, the one with the name
Great Vidyādhara from Kah-thog, wandered about in India and Tibet in search of the holy Dharma. In the presence of many teachers with the three good qualities, he had abandoned the partiality of philosophical tenets, (and now) for his part he would ask for many instructions for (spiritual) ripening and liberation (i.e. initiations and teachings) from the nine yānas, the four classes of tantras and so on; on the other hand, upon many teachers and many (members of the) Sangha he would confer initiations and teachings (in return). In every kingdom's realm he granted initiations for the multitude (i.e. the general public).

Having arrived then in the regions of Mustang and Dolpo, and having taken up residence at the great sacred site of Sa-dul, he conferred (spiritual) ripening and liberation upon all Tibetans and inhabitants of the gorges. To the old man from the great sacred site of rTa-gru he presented letters again and again, saying that he was in need of treasure-teachings, like Zah tig [chos dbyings rang gsal] and so on. Then the old beggar, O-rgyan-pa, said: "To you, the great teacher who has conferred initiations upon all the Indians and Tibetans, I am not about to give (further) initiations and teachings." Nevertheless, he sent requests again and again.

After that, in a spurt of energy, he went straightway to the great sacred site rTa-gru; (and) in (our) mutual encounters, many compliments and sermons were pronounced (by him). To him, I gave the five volumes of the profound treasures of the treasure-discoverer Gar-bdang [rdo-rje], and further, (treasure-cycles) like the sPrul sku snying thig: (all) the initiations, teachings and guidances of the Great Perfection etc. Upon me, he conferred the complete initiations and readings of the (treasure cycle) [Klong gsal] mkha’ ’gro snying thig.¹

Similes of the most excellent and pure harmony (between us): (we were) no different (from each other) than the sun from the sun, and (we mixed) (together) like milk in milk. In this way the prayer was made (by us) to meet again in a pure realm for all the lives of (future) rebirths.

sprang rgyan bdun don bzhi’i dus / shar phyogs kham kyi sa phyogs nas / nam mkha’i snying po’i skyes mtha’ zhit / ka (=kaḥ) thog rigs (= rig) ’dzin chen po zhes / sdam (= dam) chos ’tsol phyir rgya bod nyul / bla ma bzang gyum mang po la / sgrub (= grub) mtha’i phyogs ris spangs nas mi / tshar la theg pa rim dgu dang / rgyud sde bzhi la sogs pa yis (=yi) / smin grol gdam pa (= gdams pa) mang po zhus / phar la bla ma mang po dang /

¹ The sPrul sku snying thig is a cycle of treasure-teachings unearthed by Rig-’dzin bDud-’dul rdo-rje (1615-1672) of Kham. On the contacts between O-rgyan dpal-bzang—the first teacher of O-rgyan bstan-’dzin—and this treasure-discoverer, and the spread of his teachings in southern Mustang, see Snellgrove (1979:79-81) and Ehrhard (in press a). On the Klong gsal mkha’ ’gro snying thig cf. the following note.
Among the Siddhas, O-rgyan bstan-'dzin (by name), because of his wish for a meeting, was issued an invitation, and thus (Kah-thog Rig-'dzin) arrived in rTa-gleng.

(There) he listened to the initiations, guidances and teachings—(these) three in their entirety—of what had come forth as a treasure of Gar-dbang [rdo-rje] snying-po: Zab-tig chos dbhyings rang gsal, Thugs rje chen po rtsa gsum snying thig, rDo rje phur pa spyi gru reg gcod, (and to the cycle called) Thugs rje chen po 'gro ba kun grol or Nyon mong dyang grol (of the tradition) of the "Northern Treasures"; and further, to the expounding of guidance for (the spiritual practice of) the rainbow body of (the system of) the honorable [Stag-slam] Nus-ldan [rdo-rje] (born 1655). On the other hand, he gave the initiations, guidance and readings of what had come forth as a treasure of Padma bDe-chen gling-pa (1663-1713), (the cycle) Klom gsal mkha' 'gro snying thig. And he appointed (O-rgyan bstan-'dzin) with his own breath as master (of this teaching) of the sNying-thig (tradition). 2

Again from Sa-'dul (Kah-thog rig-'dzin) arrived by way of the rTa gorge at (the place called) Bum-pa, the great sacred site of the teacher from O-rgyan [=

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2 For information on the treasure-discoverer Padma bDe-chen gling-pa, who was one of the teachers of Kah-thog Rig-'dzin, and the unearthing of the cycle Klom gsal mkha' 'gro snying, see Ehrhard (1993b:87, note 17).
Padmasambhava] in lower rTa-rab, and stayed there for a while. From the dimension of the unmovable yoga of profound meaning, he made fall upon all striving disciples whatever stream (was necessary) for the way to complete liberation. 3

dgang lo so gsam par thun mong te lcags kyi lor mon yul gyi cha rta grur byon / der slob dpon chen po'i (= pos) g.yu sgra snying po'i sprul par lung gis zin cing / gter ston gar dbang rdo rje'i snying po'i dangos slob chos sras dam pa grab mchog o rgyan bstan 'dzin nas mjal behed pas gdan 'dren byung ba bzhin rta glar (= glang) phibs / gar dbang snying po'i gter byon zab tig chos dbyings rang gsal dang / thugs rje chen po rtsa gsam snying thig / rdo rje phur pa sgu gri reg good / byang gter thugs rje chen po 'gro ba kun grol lam / nyan mongs rang grol gyi dbang khrid lung gsam tshang ba / nas idan zhab kyi 'ja' sku'i khrid bka' yang gsan / phar la padma bde chen gling pa'i gter byon klong gsal mkha' 'gro snying thig gi dbang khrid lung bcas stsal zhing snying thig gi bdag por dbugs byung mngag' gsal bar mdzad / slar yang sa 'dul nas rta rong rgyud (= brypad) de rta rab smad o rgyan gu ru'i gnas chen 'bum par

3 The place where Kah-thog rig-'dzin stayed in lower Tarap is known today under the name Ri-bo 'bum-pa. On the legends which associate the site with Padmasambhava see Jest (1975: 43 and 298). There is also a guidebook available: no title, 10 fols., NGMPP reel-no. L 415/3. It can be dated to the 18th/19th centuries.

byon te re zhis bzhugs zab don gyi rnal 'byor g.yo ba med pa'i ngang nas gdul bya don gyner can dag la rnam grol lam gyi chu bo'i rgyun ci yang 'bev par mdzad do.

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Western Literature


Sketch map of my itineraries in Nepal.