


The Strange Case of the “Buddha from Space”

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“Priceless Tibetan Buddha statue looted by Nazis,”
“Der Nazi-Buddha aus dem All” [Nazi Buddha from Space],”
“Ancient statue discovered by Nazis is made from meteorite.”

he end of September 2012 saw such reports almost daily in the international media, from *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* to *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Spiegel Online*. What had happened? The distinguished *Guardian* had this to say:

A priceless Buddha statue looted by Nazis in Tibet in the 1930s was carved from a meteorite which crashed to the Earth 15,000 years ago, according to new research. The relic bears a Buddhist swastika on its belly – an ancient symbol of luck that was later co-opted by the Nazis in Germany. Analysis has shown the statue is made from an incredibly rare form of nickel-rich iron present in falling stars. The 1,000-year-old carving, which is 24cm high and weighs 10kg, depicts the god Vaisravana, the Buddhist King of the North, and is known as the Iron Man statue. It was stolen before the Second World War during a pillage of Tibet by Hitler’s SS, who were searching for the origins of the Aryan race. It eventually made its way to a private collection and was hidden away until it was auctioned in 2007. ... Buchner’s team of researchers from Germany and Austria dated it to a specific event in astronomy history when the Chinga meteorite fell in the border region of eastern Siberia and Mongolia between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago. Tests proved the icon was made of a rare ataxite class, the rarest meteorite type found on Earth....¹

This sensational report referenced a scientific article published not long before by geoscientists Elmar Buchner, Martin Schmieder, Gero Kurat, Franz Brandstätter, Utz Kramar, Theo Ntaflos and Jörg Krösch-

¹ Matt McGrath, Sept. 27, 2012 www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-19735959; Mark Taylor, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/28/nazi-buddha-statue-carved-from-meteorite>. See also Nina Weber, Sept. 27, 2012 www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/tausend-jahre-alte-buddha-statue-ist-aus-meteorit-geschnitzt-a-858258.html, all acc. Sept. 22, 2016.

ert: “Buddha from Space—An ancient object of art made of a Chinga iron meteorite fragment.”²



Courtesy of Elmar Buchner

The abstract of the geoscientists’ article, however, was significantly more tentative in its conclusions:

The fall of meteorites has been interpreted as divine messages by multitudinous cultures since prehistoric times, and meteorites are still adored as heavenly bodies. [...] The geochemical data of the meteorite generally match the element values known from fragments of the Chinga ataxite (ungrouped iron) meteorite strewn field discovered in 1913. The provenance of the meteorite as well as of the piece of art strongly points to the border region of eastern Siberia and Mongolia, accordingly. The sculpture possibly portrays the Buddhist god Vaiśravaṇa and might originate in the Bon culture of the eleventh century. However, the ethnological and art historical de-

² Elmar Buchner *et al.* 2012. “Buddha from Space”, 1491–1501.

tails of the “iron man” sculpture, as well as the timing of the sculpturing, currently remain speculative.

The sensational claims at the very beginning of *The Guardian* article are only addressed by the geoscientists later in the article itself,

The origin and age of the ‘iron man’ meteorite is still a matter of speculation. To our knowledge, the statue was brought to Germany by a Tibet expedition in the years 1938–1939 guided by Ernst Schäfer (zoologist and ethnologist) by order of the German National Socialist government... The swastika on the cuirass of the statue is a minimum 3000-yr-old Indian sun symbol and is still used as an allegory of fortune.... One can speculate, whether the swastika symbol on the statue was a potential motivation to displace the ‘iron man’ meteorite artifact to Germany.³

This excerpt alone clearly reveals the gulf between the media’s chosen focus and that of the geoscientists; on the one hand, the cautiously expressed supposition, outside the bounds of their geoscientific expertise, of a possible provenance related to Schäfer’s Tibetan expedition, on the other the sensationalist claim that the Nazis had stolen a “priceless” Tibetan artwork of extremely rare meteorite rock while in Tibet.

Yet that passing reference to a possible connection to the Schäfer expedition sufficed to trigger such a wave of hype among the international media that the actual “sensation” itself—the incredible scientific discovery of this statue, carved from meteorite rock and unique throughout the world—was pushed completely aside.

It is noteworthy that as early as 2009, the authors had published an abstract about the find in *Meteoritics & Planetary Science*,⁴ and even the German edition of *National Geographic* published a report with a photograph in November 2009 entitled “Kosmologie: Buddha aus dem All.” Neither publication mentioned a possible connection to the Schäfer expedition, and the media took no further notice of the unique discovery by the meteorite researchers.

Scientific debate concerning the topic thus focused initially on aspects of art history and on considerations of the actual date of the statue and whom it might portray. While the geologists had made every effort to collect expert opinions prior to publishing their article, those opinions differed widely or even contradicted each other, as

³ Ibid.: 1495.

⁴ E. Buchner *et al.* 2009. “Mythological Artifacts Made of Celestial Bodies”.

Elmar Buchner explained in an interview by local newspaper *Waiblinger Kreiszeitung*.⁵

Buchner conducted in-depth research, questioned experts from an extensive range of disciplines, and actually received concrete statements. To be more precise, when he asked ten experts, he got “eleven different opinions.” One of them insisted that the meteorite material must somehow have travelled from the Chinga region to Tibet before it was worked there, because the figure is quite clearly one of the four Tibetan Gods of the North. Another concluded that the figure had been made in the region where Siberia borders Mongolia and only brought to Tibet at a later stage, as beards are not worn there. The third confidently announced the figure represented a bridge deity. No, a god of wisdom. For heaven’s sake, it’s clearly a god of war – just look at that typical posture! It isn’t a god, it’s the portrait of a local ruler, as the posture clearly shows! Or maybe a god of prosperity, a small bag full of money in his hand.⁶

The diverging opinions of the experts provided little help to the meteorite researchers. Publication of the “Buddha from Space” article was followed by countless articles on the internet in which experts, often self-styled, claimed to be able to identify Greek, Roman, and Scythian influences.⁷

In October 2012, some weeks after “Buddha from Space” was published, Achim Bayer, Buddhologist from Dongguk University in Seoul, came out with a widely acclaimed article⁸ or taking up the arguments of John Huntington from 29 September 2012.⁹ In “The Lama Wearing Trousers” Bayer examined twelve stylistic characteristics which, in his view, indicated the statue was extremely unlikely to have originated in Tibet and thus certainly could not portray the god Vaiśravaṇa. He estimated the date of the statue at somewhere between 1920–1970. In addition, he proposed “that the statue was produced in Germany either for the general antique and curio market, or even for the lucrative market of Nazi memorabilia.” Bayer, however, appears to have gone too far with this assumption; material as rare as

⁵ Buchner confirmed the content in an email from Feb. 23, 2016.

⁶ Peter Schwarz & Nils Graefe. “Der Buddha aus dem All,” *Waiblinger Kreiszeitung*, Oct. 5, 2012.

⁷ See: Florian Machl, “Gelehrtenstreit um frühbuddhistische Figur aus Meteoritenmetall. Weltweit einzigartiges Fundstück mit abenteuerlicher Fundgeschichte”. Oct. 17, 2012.
http://www.huscarl.at/fruehbuddhistische_figur_aus_meteorgestein_nazi_buddha_tibet.php, acc. Jan. 12, 2016.

⁸ Achim Bayer. 2012. “The Lama Wearing Trousers”.

⁹ See www.academia.edu/2005397/Early_China_Archaeological_Digest_Bonus_Issue_10_6_12, acc. Sept.19, 2016.

the Chinga meteorite rock, with its unusually high weight, is far too valuable¹⁰ and far too difficult to sculpt to have been used for a mere souvenir. Who, then, is this “Buddha from Space,” this “Great Unknown?”

I will disregard aspects of natural science and meteoritics in this article, as they have been expertly covered in depth by Elmar Buchner and his team of geoscientists. Instead, I will focus on: (1) questions concerning the alleged purchase, or even theft, of the statue by the Schäfer expedition in Tibet, and (2) who is actually portrayed in this obviously non-Tibetan statue.

Let me begin with the issue of the Schäfer expedition, which I have studied in depth,¹¹ Contrary to speculations mainly generated by the presence of the swastika, it is highly unlikely that the statue was acquired by the Schäfer expedition in 1939. The outstanding ethnological collection of Tibetan culture as practiced in Tibet and Sikkim, comprising a total of over two thousand items, was purchased for 12,119.80 Reichsmark—making it the second highest item on the expedition’s budget. These items are listed in their meticulous records, listing each of the purchased objects and gifts (with the names of the donor) including date, place, and price.¹² Although several small Buddhist statues were purchased in Lhasa, this meteorite statue was evidently not among them. Furthermore, the Schäfer expedition would not have had the funds for such a costly statue, since the Tibetans seem to have been aware of the rarity of meteorites.¹³

Additionally, it is doubtful that Schäfer’s enthusiasm for National Socialism was so great that he would have purchased—let alone sto-

¹⁰ It is the third largest piece of Chinga rock ever found. See mainly the inventory of the Russian Academy of Science (Akademia Nauk SSSR), according the lists in the Russian Journal *Meteoritika* 37 (1978), 206 and 39 (1980), 98.

¹¹ Ernst Schäfer. 1943. *Geheimnis Tibet*. See for example: Isrun Engelhardt (ed.). 2007. *Tibet in 1938–1939*. and 2008. “Nazis of Tibet”, 63–96.

¹² It was meticulously typed from a quite faded manuscript by Bruno Richtsfeld at the Museum Fünf Kontinente. After the vicissitudes of war and corresponding losses, the extant remains of the collection was given to Völkerkundemuseum München [Munich Ethnology Museum], recently renamed “Museum Fünf Kontinente”, and can be examined in the depot there on request. See also Bruno J. Richtsfeld and Stefanie Kleidt. 2016. “Tibetica —The Collection of the Museum Fünf Kontinente”, 16–21.

¹³ The Tibetans worship thogcha (*thog lcags*), ancient metal objects frequently worn in Tibet as amulets and often said to be made from meteorite material. They are also known as *skar rdo*, *gnam rdo*, *gnam lcags* – “star stone,” “sky stone,” “sky-iron,” “first” or “original iron,” or “thunderbolt iron.” However, no systematic materials analyses have been performed to date and no thogcha actually made from meteorite material have come to light. See John Vincent Bellezza. 1998. “Thogchags: Talismans of Tibet.” 44–64; Gudrun John. 2006. *Tibetische Amulette aus Himmelseisen*; Hans Weihreter. 2002. *Thog-lcags*.

len—a statue displaying a swastika facing in the opposite direction of the NS swastika. Furthermore, the Chinga meteorite from which the statue was chiseled was found more than 2500 kilometers from Lhasa, in a remote and inaccessible region¹⁴ near the Siberian-Mongolian border in Tannu Tuva, not far from Kyzil.

Despite this lack of any credible connection to Schäfer, blogs with titles like “Nazi-found Buddhist statue,” or “Ancient statue the Nazis stole,” or, more recently, “Nazis Stole Buddha from Space,” still dominate the web, overshadowing the findings of serious research.

The first information about the Chinga meteorite field to reach the West came from the Russian mining engineer Nikolai Mikhailovich Chernevich, who discovered it in 1912 and sent some samples to the Academy of Science at St. Petersburg. However, the scientists there doubted that it was a meteorite and thought it was a local form of iron.¹⁵ In 1923, other scientists reexamined it and concluded that it was, in fact, a meteorite.¹⁶

In the 11th century Buddhism had not yet spread to Mongolia and had not encountered the Bon religion.¹⁷ It is highly improbable that as early as the 11th century this chunk of Chinga meteorite would have been discovered, let alone recognized as a precious meteorite. It is impossible that it was carved into a Buddhist statue at a time when Buddhism did not exist in the region. In order for it to be acquired in Tibet, one would have to assume that the “stone” had been transported over a huge distance, through deserts and across high mountain passes, to be eventually chiseled into a Bon statue in Western Tibet (where there was a strong Bon presence) and then transported to Lhasa, where, some nine hundred years later, it was, acquired by the Schäfer expedition for Nazi-inspired reasons, despite the “wrong” swastika. For all these reasons, one may confidently conclude that the ‘iron man’ statue was not brought back by the expedition.

The Seller

It was initially impossible to determine the provenance of the statue; the seller who approached Buchner in 2007 seeking expert assess-

¹⁴ See the chapter “Chinge: Gold, Greed, Murder, and Dumplings”. In Roy A. Galant. 2002. *Meteorite Hunter*, 83–106.

¹⁵ O.A. Backlund – V.G. Khlopin. 1915. “Novaya nakhodka samorodnogo nikelistogo zheleza”, 891–901.

¹⁶ Gunnar Pehrman. 1923. “Über ein Nickeleisen aus Tannuola (Mongolei), 1-12.

¹⁷ Evidence of the existence of Buddhism in Tanna-Tuva from the 13th century onwards is said to exist; see Dany Savelli. 2005. “Penser le bouddhisme et la Russie”, 25.

ment had stipulated anonymity as a condition of sale. In fall 2014, however, I happened to come across a website operated by a certain Mr. Kaledin which carried exactly the photographs of the statue that Elmar Buchner had taken at the time. A first material analysis, dated 13 June 2007, by the well known expert on archeometry, Professor Ernst Pernicka had also been posted. Unfortunately the site was taken offline shortly after I discovered it, but not before I had taken screenshots.¹⁸ The seller who had wished to remain anonymous proved to be a Russian—Igor Kaledin, He was staying with a Russian friend in Stuttgart and had posted Buchner’s photographs without prior agreement. Kaledin did not speak any German, and despite claiming to live in Australia his English was sufficiently poor that his friend had to serve as interpreter. The two men attempted to pressure Buchner into purchasing the statue; if not, the statue would “go back,” not to Australia, Kaledin’s alleged country of residence, but “back to Russia.”

Kaledin and his friend had also approached Angelika Borchert, an expert in Asian arts who at the time was working at a Cologne auction house specializing in Asian arts, and again, had made unpleasant attempts to pressure her into purchasing the figure; Borchert however, rejected the statue as of non-Tibetan origin. Eventually in 2009, the statue was purchased privately by Gero Kurat, a geologist at the Natural History Museum Vienna, because it was too expensive for the museum—in the hope that the museum could purchase the statue in the future when its financial position improved. By that time Kaledin could no longer be reached at the address in Australia he had provided. An inspection of the catalogs from all art auctions held in Munich between 2005–2007 reveals that the statue was not put up for auction until spring of 2007; no auction house would have accepted it without an art expert’s opinion. These are the only verified facts that are currently available. Taken together, they pointed toward Russia

*Who does the statue portray?
Visual evidence*

Friends and colleagues provided vague hints concerning esoteric and theosophical fields. Soon the name of Nikolai Roerich popped up as a potential starting-point for further investigation.

The Russian artist Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947) is remembered primarily for his numerous and highly distinctive pictures of the

¹⁸ <http://kaledin.12see.de>, last accessed on Sept. 22, 2014.

Himalayas. Most of them were painted during his long Central Asian expedition, which he made between 1925-1928 together with his wife Elena, a Theosophist and staunch follower of the Mahatma "Master" Morya,¹⁹ and with his son, the Tibetologist George (or Yuri). This portrait, painted by his son Svetoslav in 1933 depicts Nikolai Roerich in a splendid Tibetan robe in front of Tashi Lhunpo (fig. 2).



Nicholas Roerich Museum Moscow

¹⁹ Mahatma Morya was one of the main "Masters of the Ancient Wisdom" of H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), the founder of the Theosophy and one of her main spiritual guides in establishing the Theosophical Society and belonged to the "Great White Brotherhood" residing in Tibet. Long after Blavatsky's death, in 1920 Elena Roerich claimed to have "encountered" Master Morya at Hyde Park in London. In 1921 during spiritualistic sessions in the Roerichs apartment in New York, Elena identified the spirit as Mahatma Morya, who would take control of the entire Roerich family and guide them through their further life.

A similar photograph was taken by Nikolai's secretary Shibaev (fig. 3).



ca. 1933–34, Naggur, India, NRM archive, Ref. No: 401692

When I began to examine the vast numbers of pictures painted by Roerich available online I found this study or sketch from 1926, “The Order of Rigden-Jyepo,” beyond doubt the basis for the tableau painted in 1927. (Fig. 4-6)²⁰

²⁰ Order of Rigden Jyepo Study <https://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/order-of-rigden-jyepo-study>, acc. Feb. 9, 2017. Order of Rigden Jyepo 1927, Nicholas Roerich Museum, Moscow. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/order-of-rigden-jyepo>, acc. Feb. 9, 2017.



A comparison of this sketch with the features listed by Achim Bayer immediately reveals a number of similarities:

- the trousers and the slits at the end of the trousers
- the arms clothed in tube-shaped sleeves
- the unusual single earring, although on the other ear
- the pointed helmet
- the cape with a rather thick knot
- the double halo.

The striking beard is missing, and the rigid posture of the meteorite statue also differs from that of Rigden Jyepo in the study. However, this stiff pose is strikingly similar to one that Roerich himself used to adopt, as can be seen in virtually all photographs and images of him.

The positions of the hands also correspond. The right hand makes the sign of charity (*vara-mudra*). The left hand of both the sketch and the statue seems to hold neither a mongoose nor a vase—but rather the famous radiant *cintāmaṇi* stone, the wish-fulfilling jewel coming from the sky, which Roerich painted several times. In 1923, when the Roerichs were in Paris, they received a mysterious package through dubious channels that allegedly contained this very stone, said to be a fragment of a meteorite.²¹

²¹ According to the legend of this magic stone assembled by Elena from various mythological and esoteric sources, it was a most sacred ancient relic of the East with an illustrious list of alleged former possessors including Solomon, Alexander the Great, Tamerlane and Napoleon; unluckily, while in the latter's possession, it disappeared without trace. The *cintāmaṇi* stone is also known as the Holy Grail or the 'wandering stone,' *lapis exilis*. Master Morya promised Roerich that thanks to this stone he would "be able to lead the hordes of Mongols after him." (E. Rerikh, *Listy dnevnika*, Sept. 1, 1923, (I, 325).

According to Alexandre Andreyev, “Roerich seems to have conceived the idea of possessing and carrying around a sacred stone a long time before,” and had an “unusual attraction to anything stony.” The Roerichs attributed enormous significance to this meteorite stone.²²

Rigden Jyepo, the future King of Shambhala, is often connected, or even equated, with the Buddha Maitreya, the Buddha of the future.²³

Shambhala and Rigden Jyepo

Although the Roerich Central Asian expedition was originally described as a scientific and artistic exploration, it became more and more mysterious and esoteric, eventually revealing its true purpose: the Roerichs were searching for the legendary realm of Shambhala. Since the flight of the Panchen Lama, for whom Shambhala had particular significance,²⁴ to China in 1923, Roerich had become increasingly obsessed by the idea of the impending appearance of Maitreya and the future king of Shambhala, Rigden Jyepo.

Roerich mentions that he had first heard of Northern Shambhala, the mythical Buddhist kingdom, from “a very learned Buryat lama,” presumably Agvan Dorzhiev (Dorjiev), in the course of the construction of the Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg (1909-1915).²⁵ As early as January 1924, Elena wrote to their co-workers in New York, “In all Buddhist books and ancient Hindu legends is being mentioned the legendary mount Meru and the fairy-like country Shambhala.”²⁶

The Roerichs’ imagination was particularly inspired by their stay in Darjeeling from 1924–1925 and their contact with Tibetan lamas. In his books, Nikolai Roerich mentions their frequent conversations with Tibetan lamas about Shambhala, its future ruler, Rigden Jyepo, and the imagery used to portray Tibet on Thangkas. George Roerich also presents Rigden Jyepo as the future king of Shambhala in his book on the Central Asian expedition, *Trails to Inmost Asia*:

²² See the fascinating chapter by Alexandre Andreyev, “The Apparition of the Black Stone: A Miracle or a Hoax”? In id. 2014. *The Masters Revived: The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Roerich* 124–145.

²³ Kenneth Archer. 1999. *Nicholas Roerich*, 153. However, see also the “Lama” to Roerich in N. Roerich, “Shambhala the Resplendent,” 4: “If Rigden-jyepo and the Blessed Maitreya are one and the same for you — let it be so. I have not so stated!”

²⁴ Fabienne Jagou. 2011. *The Ninth Panchen Lama (1883-1937)*, 70.

²⁵ Andreyev, 29; Nicholas Roerich. 1947. *Himalaya. Abode of Light*, 110.

²⁶ Elena’s letter from Jan. 18, 1924, NRM Ref. No.: 201661.

The Grand Lama of Tashi-lhun-po was, in his Second Incarnation, Rig-den jam-pe dak-pa (Tib. Rigs-ldan 'jam-dpal grags-pa), one of the rulers of Shambhala, who are said to govern the realm for one hundred years. In his future incarnation, His Holiness the Tashi Lama will be reborn as Rigden Jye-po,²⁷ the future ruler of Shambhala, whose destiny is to conquer the followers of evil, and establish the reign of Maitreya, the future Buddha. Several iconographical representations of Shambhala and the Kalacakra exist. The King of Shambhala, or Rig-den Jye-po, is usually represented seated on a throne covered by a cushion. With his left hand placed on his lap, he supports the Wheel of Law; his right hand makes the sign of charity (*vara-mudra*)...²⁸

Two similarities with the meteorite statue listed by George are especially striking: "In some ancient paintings, the King is seen attired in breastplate armor, and wears the pointed helmet."²⁹ However, the name of Rigden Jyepo is only used by the Roerichs. It is clearly an idiosyncratic form of Rigden dagpo (Tib. *rigs ldan drag po*),³⁰ the wrathful 25th or 32nd (depending on the counting method used) future King of Shambhala, whose troops will defeat the ruler of the unbelievers in the year 2425.

Roerich first heard about Gesar of Ling, the Hero from the North, in September 1924 from Alexandra David-Neel,³¹ whom he had met in Kurseong near Darjeeling: "The King of Shambhala is also known as Gesar Link (Khan). All Tibetans know this. He is expected to come from Siberia. According to the prophecy, all his associates have already been reborn."³²

In Tibet and Mongolia, Rigden Jyepo is frequently equated with Gesar in his role as defender of Buddhist teachings.³³ This prophecy must have fired Roerich's imagination; he amalgamated the project of a pan-Buddhist/Communist state in Central Asia with the northern

²⁷ However, interestingly George Roerich had originally given the name in the more correct form in the manuscript for his book—Rigden dagpo (*Rigs-ldan drag po*)—before adopting his father Nicholas Roerich's version 'Rigden Jyepo': single pages of a manuscript draft for his *Trails to Inmost Asia* in the New York Roerich Museum, no ref. No.

²⁸ George N. Roerich. 1931. *Trails to Inmost Asia*, 157.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁰ Or Tibetan. *'khor lo chen po*, in Sanskrit *Raudacakrin*. To avoid confusion, however, I will continue to use the Roerich's spelling of Rigden Jyepo.

³¹ Dany Savelli. 2013. "Alexandra David-Néel et Nicolas Roerich — histoire d'une rencontre autour de Gesar de Ling et de Shambhala", 150-167.

³² 24 September 1924. "Pi'sma Nikolaia Rerikha v Dalai Phobrang", 27.

³³ Rolf A. Stein. 1959. *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde*, 524-528; Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz. 2004. *Die Mythologie des Tibetischen und Mongolischen Buddhismus, Wörterbuch der Mythologie*, 1230.

country of Shambhala. The realization of this “Great Plan” would prove to determine the future thoughts and actions of the Roerich family.

On a flying visit from Darjeeling to Berlin in December 1924 to petition the Soviet Embassy for Moscow’s support for his plan, Embassy staff member Astakhov reported Roerich to have said, “Tibet is filled with prophesies about the events to take place very soon that would radically change the country... Salvation is expected to come from the North and there are even dates given, the years 1928–1931. The Tibetan Lamas and the Himalayan Mahatmas preach the identity of the communist ideas with Buddha’s teachings.”³⁴ A.E Bystrov, the Soviet consul in Urumchi, who was befriended by Roerich, commented on his meeting with Roerich in April 1926 by noting that Roerich’s aim was “To ally Buddhism and Communism and to create the Great Eastern Union of Republics” and [that he] claimed that among Tibetan and Indian Buddhists “there is a current belief that their liberation from the foreign yoke will come precisely from the Reds in Russia – the Northern Red Shambhala.”³⁵ Mahatma Morya also repeatedly expressed support in statements such as “Everything has changed – Lenin is with us,”³⁶ and “Communism is necessary for evolution.”³⁷ In the spring of 1926, Morya had already drawn up a nine-point plan for negotiations with official bodies in Moscow, including declarations that Buddha’s teachings were revolutionary and that Maitreya was the symbol of Communism.³⁸

The evolution in Roerich’s attitude was remarkably rapid. On 12 September 1919 he had launched a vehement attack on the Bolsheviks, “The Violators of Art”: “... All that the Bolsheviks boast of is simply a swindle, a false staging which is intended to deceive the various Socialistic commissions which come to investigate the Bolshevik ‘Heaven on Earth’.... Vulgarly and hypocrisy. Betrayal and bribery. The distortion of all the sacred conceptions of mankind. That is Bolshevism.”³⁹

The country of Shambhala, the “source of happiness,” was associated with an eschatological promise. Shambhala had first and foremost been a geographical utopia, which transformed into a political utopia as Tibetan Buddhism spread through Mongolia. Unlike Tibet,

³⁴ Andreyev, 200.

³⁵ Ibid.: 228.

³⁶ Morya is usually quoted by Elena Roerich in her various diaries, edited in Russian by Vladimir Rosov: Elena I. Rerikh *Listy dnevnika* I (1920–1923; II (1924–1925); III (1925–1927); IV (1927–1928). Here: May 29, 1925, (II, 318).

³⁷ E. Rerikh, Jun. 28, 1925, (II, 339).

³⁸ E. Rerikh, Mar. 18, 1926, (III, 119).

³⁹ <http://forum.roerich.info/showthread.php?t=60>, acc. on Jan. 6, 2017.

in Mongolia the perception of Shambhala shifted to a political entity from the end of the 19th century. This was due to the influence of the Buriyat monk Agvan Dorzhiev, who successfully convinced the 13th Dalai Lama that Shambhala was identical with Tsarist Russia, and the Tsar was none other than the ruler of Shambhala.⁴⁰ Other Buriyat Mongolian lamas and intellectuals such as Tsyben Zhamtsarano developed similar political schemes concerning the unification of Buddhism and Communism.⁴¹ “Thus, N. Roerich’s project was largely in line with the geopolitical thinking of his predecessors”⁴² and contemporaries. In early 1927, Elena even received a message from Mahatma Morya calling on the Roerichs “to stir up” the peoples of Asia.⁴³

In Khotan, Roerich learned further details about Shambhala and Rigden Jyepo: “The pilgrims are passing on their way bringing new messages. In Urga will be set a place for the Temple of Shambhala. When the image of Rigden-japo will reach Urga, then will flash the first light of the New Era—truth. Then will the true renaissance of Mongolia begin.”⁴⁴

Roerich’s later stay of over six months in Urga (Ulan Bator) in 1926–1927 appears to have been a particularly powerful source of inspiration for him; various Rigden Jyepo paintings were produced during this period.

Textual evidence

While searching for textual evidence that might definitively assign the statue to Roerich, I came across various Russian diaries written by the participants of the Central Asian expedition. Particularly interesting in this context was the book by Konstantin Riabinin, the expedition’s physician, who meticulously maintained the expedition’s official and voluminous diary in Tibet. This informative source documents how Roerich’s fascination with Shambhala and its future king gradually turned into an obsession. He came to style himself as the twenty-fifth and last king of Shambhala, as the following incident reveals.

The Soviet orientalist and diplomat Boris Pankratov recalled a meeting with Roerich after his Tibetan expedition, in Beijing, pre-

⁴⁰ Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz. 1992/93. “Utopian Thought in Tibetan Buddhism: A Survey of the Śambhala Concept and its Sources”, 78–96; and 2013. “Shambhala and its Visual Representation: The Prague Thangka” [In print].

⁴¹ See, for example, Vera Tolz. 2015. “Reconciling Ethnic Nationalism and Imperial Cosmopolitanism: The Lifeworlds of Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880–1942)”, 723–746.

⁴² Andreyev, 268–274, here 275.

⁴³ E. Rerikh, Jan. 7, 1927, (III, 230).

⁴⁴ N. Roerich. 1930. *Altai-Himalaya*, 168.

sumably in 1934–1935 in the house of Baron Alexander von Staël-Holstein.⁴⁵ There Roerich mentioned that he "wanted to enter Tibet as the 25th king of Shambhala, of whom people said that he would come from the North to bring salvation to mankind and would become the ruler of the world. For this occasion, he would wear a ceremonial lamaist robe."⁴⁶ Roerich and his son George had already ordered magnificent examples of these ceremonial robes in Darjeeling in 1924.

The Apotheosis of Nikolai Roerich

As a young man, Roerich regarded himself as an artist, as a remarkable personality, rising loftily above the masses: "To achieve success we must not regard ourselves as ordinary people ... with time I can rise high above them all and they themselves will offer me everything."⁴⁷ This attitude intensified when Elena began to follow her master and teacher, Mahatma Morya, who would exercise a profound influence on the couple's life in the future. As early as May 9, 1921, Morya informed them—channeling through Elena as his medium—that Nikolai Roerich was an incarnation of a seventeenth-century Dalai Lama,⁴⁸ and on January 31, 1922, he became even more specific asserting that Roerich was an incarnation of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682).⁴⁹ Zina Fosdik, a close confidante of the Roerichs, frequently repeated this claim in her diaries.⁵⁰

Allegedly monks from the Moru monastery in Lhasa, who were staying in Darjeeling in 1924 at the same time as the Roerichs, also recognized Roerich as the Fifth Dalai Lama by the pattern of the moles on his right cheek in the shape of the Great Bear constellation.⁵¹

⁴⁵ According to Andreyev, 255, this period is plausible, as subsequent conversations about the Roerich Pact continued.

⁴⁶ These words were quoted by Yu. I. Krol' in an essay devoted to B.I. Pankratov. "Zarisovka k portretu uchitel'ia," [Sketch for a Portrait of the Teacher] 1989, 90.

⁴⁷ Letter from 28 June 28, 1900, quoted in Andreyev, 16 and 145.

⁴⁸ E. Rerikh, May 9, 1921, (I, 29).

⁴⁹ E. Rerikh, Jan. 31, 1922, (I, 122). However, the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682) is said to have lived to 1732! And it is claimed that "Morya visited the Dalai Lama in 1721 [sic!] to discuss the affairs of our House."

⁵⁰ Zina G. Fosdik. 2002. *Moi Uchitel'ia. Vstrechi s Rerikhani. Po stranitsam dnevnika 1922–1934*, Jul. 29, 1922, Aug. 14 and 17, 1928, 77, 289, 325. Even before the expedition, Roerich had already shown a passion for expressions of veneration. A photograph on p. 221, probably taken in New York in 1923, shows the famous Russian-American sculptor "Gleb W. Derujinsky at work on a bust of Nicholas Roerich."

⁵¹ Andrei Znamenski. 2011. *Red Shambhala*, 177–178. This dubious claim comes from the writer Sidorov, p. 245, who, however, only writes that senior lamas have recognized Roerich, but without any proof or sources. (see Andreyev, 176), so that

Later, Master Morya further confirmed the Roerichs' exaggerated sense of self by saying, "Remember that you are already ruling the world, since no one else has the clue to the events."⁵² And in June 1927 he assured the Roerichs that they were already placed above the common people.⁵³ Hearing from his master that he was placed above the common mortals and was even a reincarnation of the Fifth Dalai Lama made it easier for Roerich to take a step further and regard himself as Rigden Jyepo.⁵⁴

The Roerichs were well aware of the near-impossibility of visiting Central Tibet, and Lhasa in particular, and they knew of many failed attempts to proceed on their journey by Western travellers including Petr Koslov, Przewalski, and Sven Hedin. They also knew that the French orientalist Alexandra David-Neel, the Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi and the American anthropologist William Montgomery McGovern had only managed to reach Lhasa in disguise. The exclu-

the claims can be discounted. Likewise, the illustration on p. 177 in Znamenski allegedly showing the lamas from Moru ling 1924 is, in fact, a photo from 1928 entered in the diary of Zina Fosdik on 7 October 1928, p. 377; it was taken in May 1928 at the end of the Central Asian expedition and showed instead, according to Roerich's hand-written note, lama Mingyur, and the sirdar, cook, servant and coolies of the expedition.

⁵² E. Rerikh, Jul. 15, 1925, (III, 17); translation Andreyev, 232. Appropriately in line with the Roerichs' tendency to raise themselves above mere mortals is the fact that they named the house where they stayed in Darjeeling Dalai Phobrang, "Palace of the [Thirteenth] Dalai Lama," because he had stayed there for a short while during his second exile in Darjeeling from 1910-1912. The house was generally known under the name of "Hill Side" as letters from George Roerich to Bailey show (unnumbered letters from George Roerichs dating from 1924 in the NRM.) The Tibetan biography of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama mentions only a *kothi*, or cottage. (Phur ldog thub bstan byams pa. 1982. "Sku phreng bcu gsum pa Thub bstan rgya mtsho'i rnam thar", vol. 7, 187.

⁵³ E. Rerikh, Jun. 3, 1927, (IV, 21-22).

⁵⁴ In addition, Roerich had also adopted a further name in 1925, clearly to serve as a pseudonym for contacts with the Soviets: Dorje or Mahatma Ak-Dorje. Although Dorje (*rdo rje*) is generally known in Tibetan as meaning *vajra* (thunderbolt), Ak-Dorje seems to be completely unknown in the language. It was presumably coined by the Roerichs with the new meaning: "the name of Ak-Dorje is the wheel of justice." Roerich also used the name to write fictitious letters about unrest in various countries eagerly waiting for the appearance of Maitreya. A fictitious article entitled "Mahatma Ak-Dorje" had allegedly been published in a Chinese newspaper in October 1925, making claims including "A new name is attracting public attention at present. The mysterious Ak-Dorje is appearing at various locations throughout Asia, representative of the unity of Asia and Communism". See Andreyev 217-221, 231; Ernst von Waldenfels. 2011. *Nikolai Roerich*, 210-214, 227-229; Vladimir A. Rosov. 2002. *Nikolai Rerikh: Vestnik Zvenigoroda*, 184. Morya provided the impetus for this on Oct. 19, 1925, E. Rerikh, (III, 48-49).

sive right to issue travel permits for Westerners was reserved by Lhasa, and they adopted a very restrictive policy.

During the months of negotiations with the Tibetan agent in Urga, Morya thus came up with a new strategy for obtaining the long-awaited permit for Tibet. Here we find the first mention of "World community. Decree of the international Buddhists"⁵⁵, calling Roerich the "Ambassador from the Council of Western Buddhists."⁵⁶ This approach enabled the Roerichs to apply for an entry permit as Buddhist pilgrims. During the procedure, Morya expressed great concern about the ineffectual behavior of the Tibetan agent and urged George Roerich in particular to apply more pressure.⁵⁷ The expedition claimed to represent an outstanding association of global significance founded by international Buddhists. Finally—one day before their planned departure—they received these papers, as Riabinin wrote: "Yesterday the Tibetan Donyer brought the papers he usually issues to pilgrims, and a special letter to the Dalai Lama."⁵⁸

How did the Roerichs succeed in convincing the Tibetan agent, who was clearly only authorized to issue pilgrim permits for Mongolians, to supply them with the coveted travel permits? Initially, this was due to the evidently good connections between the Mongolian and the Soviet authorities, and the OGPU in particular.⁵⁹ The British Political Officer for Sikkim, F.M. Bailey, gave more precise details in a hand-written draft of a report:

Roerich and his party were detained several months in Nagchuka. He and his son George in their books complain very much of this as they had a permit given them by the Tibetan agent on the Mongolian-Tsaidam border. I met this man named Lobsang in Tibet. He told me the following story almost thus: Lobsang [the agent] had a servant who was run in [arrested] by the Soviet Mongolian Authorities for having a pistol without a permit and thrown into jail. Roerich got him out in return for the permit to go to Lhasa which Lobsang gave him. Lobsang, of course, had no authority to give him such a permit, and knew that he had none. However to save himself from trouble over this he sent a secret letter by a member of the Roerich party to Lhasa warning them that Roerich was friendly with the Soviet authorities... to prove this he wrote about him getting his servant released. A man who had the power to rescue anyone from a

⁵⁵ E. Rerikh, Jan. 19, 1927, (III, 238).

⁵⁶ For example, Konstantin Riabini. 1996. *Razvenchannyi Tibet*, Oct. 8, 1927, 343.

⁵⁷ E. Rerikh, Jan. 21, 1927, (III, 238); Apr. 5, 1927, (IV,10); Apr. 7, 1927, (IV,10).

⁵⁸ Riabinin, Apr. 13, 1927, 42.

⁵⁹ Waldenfels, 301-302. [OGPU, russ. *Obyedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye* Joint State Political Directorate > secret police of the Soviet Union 1923-1934].

Soviet jail was not the sort of person who should be welcomed in Lhasa!!!⁶⁰

On 13 April 1927, the eighteen-strong expedition⁶¹ thus finally set off for Tibet from Urga, hoping to reach Lhasa, and bursting “with the most holy intention of undertaking purification of the true teachings of the Holy Sanctified Buddha under the guidance of the Tibetan Dalai Lama.”⁶² When asked about their identity by a lama, “the reply came that we are Americans travelling at the behest of Western Buddhists, and that the time of Shambhala will soon be here.”⁶³ They claimed to be the “American Western Buddhist Mission and representatives of the great country of America.”⁶⁴ During their onward journey, they tried to pass themselves off as Americans.⁶⁵

On 27 July 1927, however, Morya added a new and confusing epithet to Roerich, describing him as the “great ambassador of the Western Buddhists,” Reta Rigden.⁶⁶ A bit of information about this is found later in Riabinin, who quoted Russian translations of some Tibetan letters from October 1927 that the Roerichs had tried to send to the Tibetan officials in Nagchu and Lhasa when the expedition was halted near Nagchu and prevented from continuing their journey for five long and extremely harsh winter months. In the first note, dated 11 October 1927, Riabinin quotes, “we had dictated a letter to the Secretaries of Nagchu, which reported that the ‘Great Western Buddhist ambassador Reta-Rigden’ (Tibetan name NK) has agreed to wait another day.”⁶⁷ The next letter contains grandiose titles obviously devised by a self-confident Roerich as a way to impress the

⁶⁰ British Library, IOR Mss Eur F157/245: 1926-1948 (= F.M. Bailey Files), no pagination.

⁶¹ The group included three further theosophists: the above-mentioned Konstantin Riabinin, Nikolai Kordashevsky, and Pavel Portniagin, whose diaries were less detailed. See also: Dany Savelli. 2013. “Des théosophes sur la route de Lhasa. Les carnets de voyage au Tibet de trois membres de l’expédition Roerich (1927–1928)”, 127–158. There were thus three eye-witnesses, albeit heavily influenced by the Roerichs. Morya had recommended at a very early stage, “I advise you to talk about Shambhala every night.” (E. Rerikh, Apr. 29, 1927, (IV,14).

⁶² Riabinin, 491: Letter from Roerichs to the Governors of Nagchu dated Jan. 4, 1928.

⁶³ Ibid.: Aug. 8, 1927, 204.

⁶⁴ Ibid.: Nov. 24 1927, 421.

⁶⁵ On the issue of the Roerichs’ nationality, see Dany Savelli. 2013. “Un homme d’origine russe, à la nationalité douteuse et avec un passeport français: Nicolas Roerich entre jeux et enjeux de l’apatridie”, 223-258; and 2013. “Sous les yeux d’Occident: L’Expédition Roerich en Asie centrale vue par les Britanniques”, 623–650.

⁶⁶ E. Rerikh, Jul. 27, 1927, (IV, 49-50).

⁶⁷ Riabinin, Oct. 11, 1927, 328.

Tibetans, and is dated 21 October 1927: “I, Reta-Rigden, am the Head of the World Union of Western Buddhists which was founded in America. For the great task of the unification of Western and Eastern Buddhists under the leadership of the Dalai-Lama, I, my spouse, my son and other members of the Embassy, agreed to undertake this difficult and dangerous journey.”⁶⁸ A little later he declares, “We did not go voluntarily, and therefore are protected under international law arising in all your fault grave consequences.”⁶⁹ This “World Union of Western Buddhists” was, however, pure fiction. The supposed conference is only mentioned by the three diary writers, and the reference can probably be traced back to Roerich himself.

There are many other indications of Roerich’s self-regard. Portniagin’s diary contains an astonishing comment. He is baffled to learn that Nikolai Roerich was recognized as the king of France in Darjeeling, as the Tsar of Russia, and the US sovereign in Xinjian, and at the Tibetan border as the king of the Buddhists?⁷⁰ Roerich must actually have believed in this portrayal of himself, as indicated by a letter to his circle in New York where he expresses outrage at an article printed in the Tibetan newspaper *Melong* (*Tibet Mirror*), which was published in Kalimpong: “In the Tibetan newspaper there was an article ‘that an Italian prof. presented to the Geshe Rinpoche a costly image of the Buddha.’⁷¹ You know of course to whom this refers. ‘King of America, the King of all Buddhists, and the King of France,’ has changed into an Italian prof.”⁷² However, as articles on Roerich—some of them very detailed—had already appeared in earlier issues of the *Melong* (*Tibet Mirror*) in 1928,⁷³ and as the same issue carried another article on Roerich three pages before,⁷⁴ it may be assumed that Dorje Tharchin, the publisher of the newspaper, was able to distinguish between Guiseppe Tucci and Nikolai Roerich.

What was the meaning of the name “Reta Rigden” that Roerich adopted for the Tibetans? Riabinin’s explanation that it was Roerich’s Tibetan name⁷⁵ is not satisfactory. Even the best Tibetan experts I consulted were unable to find any explanation to solve the puzzle of “Reta”. Neither can an explanation be gleaned from Roerich’s signature—with its triple alliteration of Reta-Rigden-Roerich—on his third

⁶⁸ Ibid.: Oct. 21, 1927, 349–352.

⁶⁹ Ibid.: Oct. 29, 1927, 372.

⁷⁰ Pavel Portniagin. 1998. “Sovremennyi Tibet: Missia Nikolaia Rerikha”, 42.

⁷¹ cf. *Melong* III, 6,8, Aug. – Sept. 1928.

⁷² Letter from Roerich to co-workers in New York, November 16–19, 1928, NRM Ref. No.: 202797.

⁷³ *Melong* III, 3,3, Jun. 1928, and III, 5,4, Jul. 1928.

⁷⁴ *Melong* III, 6,5, Aug. – Sept. 1928.

⁷⁵ Riabinin, Oct. 11, 1927, 327.

letter to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, dated November 14, 1927. Written in English,⁷⁶ this letter resembled the first one, lacking the customary polite style of Tibetan letter writing, and was in fact rather impolite:

Your Holiness,

The noble purposes of our Mission have been stated in my two letters to Your Holiness, dated October 28th and November 8th, 1927.

The first letter has been detained on the way and thus delayed. The situation of the

Mission is growing critical. All members are seriously ill....

The local population is unable to furnish us with adequate supplies.

Two thirds of our animals perished. If, I knew before that we shall

be so inhumanly treated, I would never accept this mission from the

Buddhist Center in America. Such a treatment is a grave offence to the great country of America and to the Western Buddhist Center.

The news of our detainment shall thunderlike spread all over the

World. Verily there has not been a Mission with such a sacred aim

ready to bring the wealth and knowledge of the West to the feet of

the Exalted one. After forty days of arrest the members of the Mis-

sion are not even allowed to speak with the passing caravans. Our

only wish is to pass immediately the Tibetan territory to Gyangtse

and India. We have already written about this to Colonel Bailey, the

British Resident in Sikkim, personally known to us. I am asking

Your Holiness to instruct Your Government to allow us to proceed

to Gyangtse.

Chu nargan.

November 14th, 1927.

Most reverently

Reta-Rigden-Roerich.⁷⁷

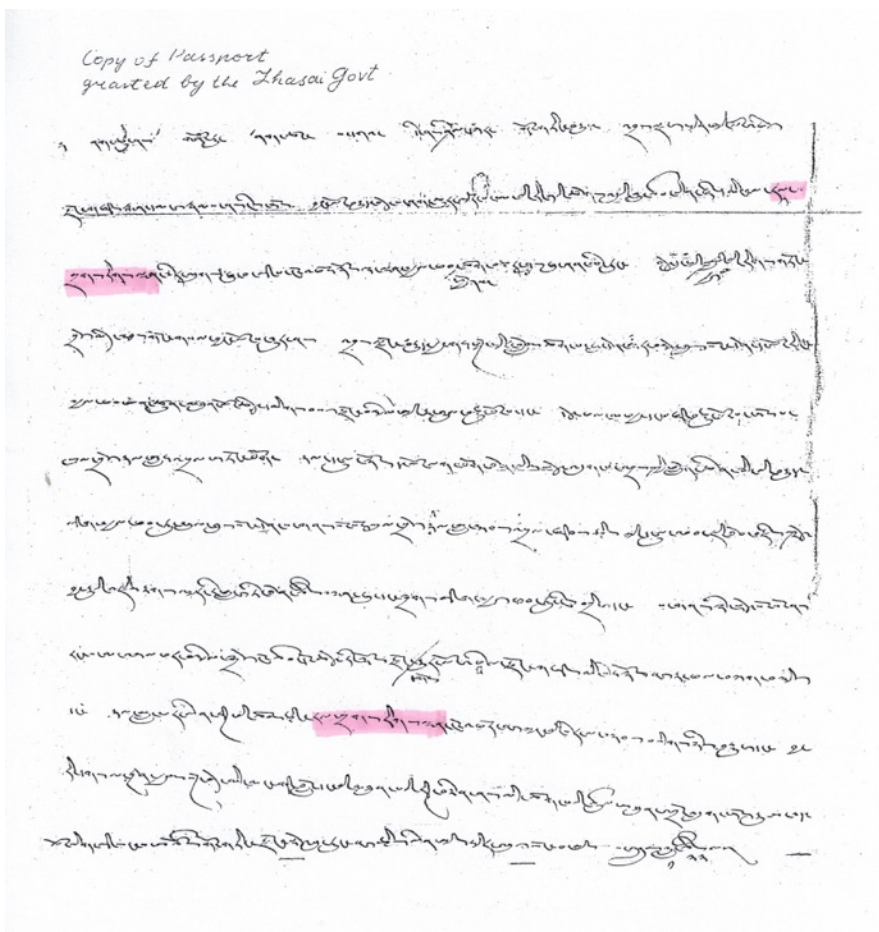
(handwritten signature).

To solve the problem of Reta Rigden, I attempted to track down the Tibetan originals of the letters cited; these have survived since the majority of the letters were clearly not delivered to their recipients but, in many cases, returned to the Roerichs. Although I was unable to find the original Tibetan letters quoted by Riabinin above, thanks to Alexandre Andreyev I came across a collection of Tibetan letters owned by George Roerich. These are letters from the Tibetan officials in Nagchu and apparent drafts of letters from George to Tibetan officials. Here, there is a clear evidence of the form of address in the

⁷⁶ According to George Roerich, 309, this letter was written on Oct. 28, 1927 in English, "for we knew that the Dalai Lama had a private secretary with a good knowledge of English who had once been a clerk in a Darjeeling bank."

⁷⁷ Facsimile in Vladimir Rosov. 2005. "La mission bouddhique de Nikolaj Roerich au Tibet", 261.

longed-for *lam yig* (passport) for the Roerichs, dated March 1928, reads: (fig. 7)



ཨ་མི་རི་ཀའི་ཚོགས་འདུའི་སྐུ་ཚབ་ཡིན་ཞེས་མིང་ལ་རྣམ་གཤགས་རིགས་ལྡན་

e me ri ka'i tshogs 'du'i sku tshab yin zhes ming Rāl grags rigs ldan
or

ཨ་མི་རི་ཀའི་སྐུ་ཚབ་ཆེན་པོ་ལྷན་རྒྱས་མཚོག་གི་འབའས་ རྣམ་གཤགས་རིགས་ལྡན་

"To the one who says he is head of the American Association, known as Rāl grags rigs ldan."

A draft letter from Roerich himself includes the formulation,

ཨ་མི་རི་ཀའི་སྐུ་ཚབ་ཆེན་པོ་རིགས་ལྡན་

"The great American representative Rigden"

Thus, "Rāl" might be the Tibetan way to pronounce some kind of short form of Roerich. "Reta Rigden" (Rāl grags rigs ldan) might therefore mean "the famous or illustrious Roerich, 25th (or the coming) King of Shambhala."⁷⁸ If Roerich had hoped to impress the Tibetans by assuming this magnificent name, he was very much mistaken. Quite the opposite, in fact; the title far exceeded the Tibetans' imagination. They would never have dreamed that a Westerner would be so presumptuous as to take such a name and style himself the King of Shambhala—they interpreted the Tibetan "Rigden" simply as a personal name.

Thus, Roerich actually only succeeded in spreading confusion; the Tibetans only gradually realized that Rigden and the Russian Roerich, against whom the Political Officer in Sikkim, Bailey, had warned them, were one and the same, as the correspondence in the India Offices shows.

Colonel Bailey on November 16, 1927: "I have heard from Lhasa (31st October 1927) from a reliable source that news has been received from Nagchuka (10 days North of Lhasa) that a party of Americans have arrived there. The party is reported to consist of a Mr. and Mrs. "Rikden," one military officer, one doctor and one Secretary."⁷⁹

Bailey to Foreign, Delhi on December 8, 1927: "Party reported as Rikden is really Roerich party. Roerich styles himself His Excellency. Please let me know if I may telegraph to Tibetan Government pointing out that this is the individual against whom they have already been warned by letter."⁸⁰

Bailey, December 23, 1927 "I telegraphed on December 10th to the Ministers at Lhasa that I had heard that Roerich's party had reached Nagchuka, and referred them to previous letter in which I had warned them against Roerich. Today I have received telegram from Ministers saying that although names do not agree (presumably referring to confusion between Roerich and Rikden) they are 'preventing admission to Tibet.'"⁸¹

And the responses of the Tibetan Government:

Ministers of Tibet to Bailey, March 15, 1928: "Received your letter on 17 February 1928, dated 5 February 1928. The American people named Rel-tag Rigden have arrived in the frontier of

⁷⁸ In the Tibetan newspaper *Melong*, one can find for example *rol rig* for Roerich (*Melong* XVII, 6,3, Mar. 1949).

⁷⁹ Confidential extract from a letter from Lieut-Col. F.M. Bailey... Dated Gangtok, 16 November 1927. National Archives of India (NAI) p. 23, (79). This source thanks to Alexander Andreyev.

⁸⁰ IOR/L/P&S/10/1145, fol. 453, Telegram P. No.1062.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: fol. 455, 2567-S Telegram Viceroy, Foreign and Political Department, etc.

Shingti. Though these people have pressed us to allow them to go to Lhasa, in accordance with your former and subsequent private letters, we have not allowed outside nationalities to go to Lhasa."⁸²

Tibetan Government to Bailey, October 19, 1928: "In your letter of last year, dated 10 November 1927, you informed us that one Russian Professor named Nicholas Roerich, an artist, intended to visit Tibet: that he was Bolshevik: that he was said to be in Urga at the time: that we were well aware of the condition of the country where Bolshevism was spread: and that you hoped that the news would reach us in plenty of time. Meanwhile we informed you that a party of Americans headed by Ral-drag had arrived on the frontier of Shangri. To this we received a reply from you, dated 5 February 1928, saying that he (Professor Roerich) stayed in America for some years and that he was a Red Russian."⁸³

The Tibetans initial confusion may have derived from the fact that the pilgrims' permits had been issued for Rigden and not for Roerich. In addition, their Tibetan Government's permits referred to them as Americans.⁸⁴

Oddly, it had apparently not occurred to Roerich that the "Great Western Buddhist ambassador" and Reta-Rigden, the future twenty-fifth King of Shambhala, were in fact contradictory—particularly given the many hints dropped by Morya, Riabinin, Kordashevsky, and Portniagin that Roerich would be the Western Dalai Lama who would allegedly be chosen in New York on November 24 at a meeting of the Buddhist Council of America. In fact, Morya had already ceremonially announced Roerich's elevation to the title of Western Dalai Lama one month earlier.⁸⁵

The failure of the Tibetan expedition had a devastating effect on Roerich and the other expedition members' perception of Tibet. Lacking any genuine knowledge of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and fully aware of the fact that his letters to the Dalai Lama had not arrived, Roerich imputed the basest motives to him. After the return of the Roerichs, this animosity reached a climax in a large-scale press campaign in the USA, launched on Roerich's orders by his co-workers at the Roerich Museum New York and resulting in the publication of numerous vehement articles against the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, against Tibetan Buddhism, and against Tibet in general.

Dany Savelli aptly remarks, "Roerich denaturated the myth of Shambhala while appropriating it to the point of considering himself

⁸² Ibid.: fol. 442.

⁸³ Ibid.: fol. 306.

⁸⁴ Ibid.: fol. 405.

⁸⁵ E. Rerikh, Oct. 24, 1927, (IV, 80–81).

king of this spiritual continent." She regards Roerich's appropriation of the myth as a clear case of cultural colonialism.⁸⁶

Roerich's portrayal of himself as the King of Shambhala from the north, carved from meteorite rock from the Siberian-Mongolian border, is clear visual proof.

Back to the statue itself

Thus, the meteorite statue in all likelihood shows Roerich as the future king of Shambhala. But where and when was the statue made? In 1926-1927, the Roerichs spent six months in Urga waiting for the permission to continue their journey to Tibet. The city was home to many metalworkers, albeit not as skillful as those in Nepal and Tibet, according to George Roerich's detailed description:

The Chinese artisans are mostly *mu-ch'ang* or carpenters, who build most of the Urga houses, and *t'ung-ch'ang* or metal workers, who conduct most of the metal industry of the city... Another large class of artisans consisted of image makers and silversmiths, who produced bronze or clay images for monasteries and private chapels, and the silver offering cups or silver ornaments. Their work is usually extremely crude and is far from being artistic. Most of these artisans come from Peking or Dolon-nor, where there are large workshops.

Besides these image makers, there are in Urga a number of shops usually called by their semi-Tibetan, semi-Chinese name *Ri-wo dze-nga-pu-tzu* (Tib. *Ri-bo rtse-lnga*), which trade in images and other religious objects manufactured at Dolon-nor or at the famous monastery of Wu-t'ai Shan. Here one can find gilded bronze images of Sakyamuni, the Buddha ... Most of the figures are of a very crude workmanship and present no interest whatsoever. The images produced by the art workshop of the Wu-t'ai Shan Monastery are a little better than those of Dolon-nor.⁸⁷

The statue could thus have been produced in Urga—the Roerichs' six-month stay there would have been long enough for the purpose. This may also explain its rather crude shape.

The timeframe, before their departure for Tibet, would provide convincing proof of Roerich's intention of visually underpinning his public appearance as Reta-Rigden or Ridgen Jyepo in Tibet.

⁸⁶ Dany Savelli. 2010, "L'expédition Roerich (1925–1928) en quête de Shambhala d'après les coupures de presse du Nicholas Roerich Museum", 808, 811; and 2009. "Shambhala de-ci, de-là: syncrétisme ou appropriation de la religion de l'Autre"? 311–351.

⁸⁷ G. Roerich, 146–147.

Both the Rigden-Jyepo sketch as well as the painting that probably served as the statue's point of origin were produced in 1926 in Urga, at a time when Roerich was particularly fascinated by the subject.

A remark made by Elmar Buchner may provide a further indication supporting Mongolia as the location of production: according to Buchner, when once in Ulan Bator a German meteorite expert showed a Mongolian colleague a photograph of the statue. This colleague exclaimed, "But that was made in our area!" Unfortunately, the name of the Mongolian expert has been lost.

Roerich was known to have a "fascination with everything stony," and with meteorites in particular, and as recounted above, he had received the famous *cintāmaṇi* stone—a piece of meteor rock—in Paris. Conceivably and as far as can be determined from the route, when on their way to Urga the Roerichs had passed Tannu Tuva (not too far from the locality where the Chinga Meteorite was found). Thus, they might somehow have come into possession of a fragment of the Chinga meteorite.

Concluding remarks

One can assume from these arguments that the meteorite statue portrays Nicholas Roerich as Rigden Jyepo or Reta Rigden, and thus the main mystery appears to have been solved. However, further research is necessary, research that would require international cooperation. As long as the Roerich institutions in Moscow, which possess many Tibetan documents, continue to block requests from foreign scholars and are open only to devotees of Roerich (Roerichites), authentic documents cannot be examined, and thus no progress can be made. Access to Roerich's original travel report of the Central Asian expedition is also denied. Because the printed version was heavily edited, especially the part dealing with Tibet, the original could well deliver some new findings.⁸⁸ Fortunately, the Roerich Museum in New York is quite different; its friendly staff members are extremely helpful, providing access to even hard-to-find and non-categorizable documents. It would also be important to find out how the statue came to be in Kaledin's possession. This could provide an indication about the former whereabouts of the statue and its former ownership.

Finally, if the statue itself would be made available for closer examination, allowing experts to determine the tools which were used

⁸⁸ Fosdik, Aug. 17, 1928, 325: "From the early morning until late (dinner), I worked with N.K. on the diary and compared and corrected the Russian and English text. He had to change everything related to Tibet – and, in later sections, Russia."

to create it, more precise conclusions could be drawn about when and where it was made—or at least when and where it definitely was not made. Unfortunately the untimely death of the geologist Gero Kurat, the private purchaser of the statue, in November 2009 prevented this unique statue from finding a home in a museum and ensuring its accessibility to the public. Today the statue is in private hands in Vienna, inaccessible to further study.

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