

The Degraded Emperor: Theoretical Reflections on the Upstaging of a Bodhisattva King

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Introduction

Tibet's imperial period (c. 600–850) holds a central position in many traditional Tibetan histories, especially the depiction of how the emperors of that time established Buddhism in “the land of snows” by inviting Dharma practitioners from surrounding states. These narratives less often emphasise the mundane aspects of the empire, the conquests and international diplomacy that made Tibet at this time a dominating force in Central Asia. Even the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, despite receiving a thorough monastic education in religious history, did not learn about Tibetan imperial achievements when young. Then, in 1954, he visited Xi'an, which was once the ancient western Chinese capital of Chang'an:

The mayor of Xi'an and the deputy minister of Gansu province suggested that we go outside the city. Outside there are walls from the Tang Dynasty more than one thousand years old. We were on the walls, which are quite high and thick, and the sun was about to set. Sitting there, the mayor told me that the Tibetan army reached up to these walls and the emperor of China, living then in Xi'an, had to run away. I thought that in an airplane I could have flown from there to Lhasa in a one-hour flight. And I thought 'Oh the Tibetan army, in order to create such a panic in the capital of the Tang...at least tens of thousands of soldiers must have been there, must have come to China on foot.'¹

Chinese historians had passed on records of the Tibetan military campaign for the intervening twelve hundred years. Tibetan histories, in contrast, omitted this victory and all other conquests from their accounts of Khri Srong lde brtsan's reign. Generally speaking, Tibetan Buddhist tradition favoured religious history over royal history.

¹ HH Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, quoted in Laird (2006: 43).

Peter Schwieger has shown how Buddhism gradually became the dominant source of ethical values in Tibetan historiography by the 14th century.² He states that Tibetan histories, which narrativise the remembered past, play a mythic role inasmuch as they confer constructed meaning on Tibetan culture, determine cultural self-interpretation to some extent and provide a source of normative claims concerning sociocultural interrelationships that hold true in the histories' "present."³ This article complements his analysis of the shift from a royal to a religious centre of society,⁴ by bringing theoretical insights from the field of narratology to bear on Tibetan historiography's depiction of the emperors and their introduction of Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau.

According to Matthew T. Kapstein, land during the dGa' ldan Pho brang period of Tibetan history (mid-17th to mid-20th century) "was the property of the ruler, and in those regions under the sway of Lhasa, this meant the Dalai Lama."⁵ Land could also be held by a noble or a monastery, in other words one of the three major classes of landlords (*mnga' bdag chen po gsum*), and revenue gained from those of lower status who worked the land (or made some other more specialised contribution to the economy) would in part be expended for the representatives of the religious establishment, which means monks, nuns and various types of lama (*bla ma*).⁶ As Kapstein notes, this system was not timeless or immutable, though it was sometimes assumed to be. Moreover, the "ecclesiastical hierarchy was clearly the dominant class," which "amounted to a broad disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy."⁷

The gradual establishment of ecclesiastical power over the land of the Tibetan plateau erased the memory of the complex power dynamics of the imperial period's Yar lung (/klung) Dynasty, who directly or indirectly ruled over an even greater territory than that which most scholars describe as "cultural Tibet" today. From this position of ultimate power and land ownership (at least from a rhetorical perspective), the image of the emperor as standing at the zenith of imperial Tibetan society largely disappeared from view. Although narratives of these rulers continue to idealise them, tending to emphasise their religious rather than martial characteristics, emperors such as Khri Srong lde brtsan (r. 756–c.800) and Khri gTsug lde brtsan AKA Ral pa can (r. 815–841) are increasingly described as

² See Schwieger (2000; 2013).

³ Schwieger (2000: 947; 2013: 65–66).

⁴ Schwieger (2000: 947–949 and 962–964; 2013: 66–67 and 72–74).

⁵ Kapstein (2006a: 176).

⁶ *ibid.*: 176–178.

⁷ *ibid.*: 180. The same is affirmed by Travers (2013: 142, n. 2).

taking an inferior position to religious masters at their courts.

This article will address the (earlier) historiographical and (later) biographical sources on the first of these two emperors, Khri Srong lde brtsan, in order to offer some insights into the *changing* values of Tibetan society from the imperial period into the time of the “second dissemination” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism. It begins with the self-representation of the Yar lung Dynasty during the Tibetan imperial period (c.600–850), in which the Tibetan emperor is both the *primus inter pares* and also pinnacle of society. It then moves on to the early post-imperial idealisation of the emperors as Buddhist rulers or bodhisattvas, before describing how from around the 11th or 12th century the rulers began to be upstaged in narratives on imperial-period Buddhism by religious masters: South Asians such as Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava but also Tibetans including dBa’ gSal snang.

Such examples of early Tibetan Buddhist literature often contain narratives of (almost exclusively male) characters being either abandoned in the wilderness as children or being exiled from a kingdom (or renouncing it) in youth or early adulthood. By identifying some similarities between these abandonment/ exile/ renunciation *topoi* (literary motifs) in these texts, I shall show how these markers signify the power of the victim over the perpetrator of these acts. Investigating the Central Eurasian theme of exile and return to power in state formation mythology, as well as Indic narratives of renouncing the throne in favour of the spiritual life, will help to clarify the processes involved in the introduction of both of these important *topoi* into early Tibetan biographies. Understanding the divergences between the Central Eurasian and Indic heritage of these Tibetan tales will allow for a preliminary discussion of the changing relation between religious and royal figures in early Tibetan biographical narratives. Grounding these changes in theoretical discussions of types of fiction, mythology and historiography will uncover some of the narrative mechanisms which enabled a shift from status based upon kinship, military endeavour and fealty to the emperor as the highest member of Tibet to religious status drawing on Indic social structures. Such a shift opened up the possibility that a subject of the emperor (at least rhetorically) could outshine an instantiation of indigenous divine kingship. A Buddhist cleric could be superior to royalty.

The emperor

The geographical extent of what constituted “Tibet” (Bod) varied considerably as the Tibetan empire expanded and contracted at its

various borders between the 7th and 9th centuries, and then collapsed to leave a power vacuum and even more uncertain borders. The empire of the Yar lung Dynasty, the hereditary rulership originating in and based around the Yar lung valley on the Central Tibetan plateau, expanded from this power base in all directions (except much to the direct south, due in part to the Himalayas). The land that Arabic sources of this period refer to as Tubbat was situated west of China, north of India, south of the Uyghur Turks and east of the eastern marches of the Khurasan.⁸

The expansion of the Tibetan empire meant gradually taking control of other kingdoms, city states and regions (by alliance or force) and ruling them as an empire with an emperor (*btsan po*) at its head. The term *btsan po* is difficult to translate but may be akin to the term “emperor” used of the previous rulers of China or Japan.⁹ In other words, it is an indigenous term for the sole ruler of the Tibetan state. From the 7th century onwards, though, the Yar lung rulers were also “emperors” in the more literal sense of the term, “ones who rule over an empire,” and Tang China referred to them as either *btsan po* or words meaning “emperor” from this period onwards.¹⁰ Tibetan, Chinese and Arabic histories all claim that the Yar lung rulers conquered the “kings of the four directions and forced them to pay tribute.”¹¹

Fealty to the emperor paid by regions incorporated into the empire appears in some cases at least to have been mutually beneficial. For example, in the middle of the 7th century the Tibetan empire expanded northeast and conquered the Turkic kingdom of 'A zha (Ch. Tuyuhun), who were based to the west of Qinghai Lake and the south-eastern Tarim Basin.¹² Yet the 'A zha were seemingly not simply swallowed up in the process. After 663, the 'A zha became a vassal state (*rgyal phran*) of Tibet, as evidenced by their performance of a yearly *sku bla* rite of fealty to the emperor,¹³ and this status allowed the 'A zha some autonomy within the Tibetan empire.¹⁴ This area was famed for its horses, and the Yar lung Dynasty's military was strengthened by means of an expanded cavalry in return.¹⁵ Thus, recognition of the superior status of Tibetan emperor in some regions allowed both that vassal state some autonomy and also the empire to

⁸ Beckwith (1987: 163, n. 127).

⁹ See Doney (2013).

¹⁰ Beckwith (1987: 20).

¹¹ Beckwith (1980: 30).

¹² See Beckwith (1987: 17–19).

¹³ Hill (2015).

¹⁴ Dotson (2009: 40–41).

¹⁵ Tong (2013: 19).

continue to grow.

On a local level, the emperors maintained a somewhat nomadic base of operations, travelling around Central Tibet. However, they tended to gravitate towards the ancestral home of their dynasty in the Yar lung valley. It was from this base that, at the close of the 6th century, the Yar lung or sPu rgyal dynasty, took over what they called “rTsang Bod,” probably southern Central Tibet.¹⁶ Each generation enthroned a male to act as head of the Yar lung Dynasty and a *primus inter pares* ruler of an empire consisting of a number of conquered kingdoms. Loyal ministers, drawn from both the families who had first supported the Yar lung house and also principalities newly encompassed by the empire, did service to these rulers and their sons. These ministers and their families benefited thereby with land taken from the disloyal or rival rulers. The words that Kapstein uses to describe land ownership in later centuries appears to be as true during the imperial period: “Though aristocratic estates were usually hereditary, the nobles held their estates as grants, not as personal property, and the government could and did resume them when circumstances were perceived to warrant this.”¹⁷ Such concerns are expressed, for example, in the so-called Zhol Inscription.¹⁸ The centrality of the emperor to even geographic and temporal reckoning in Tibet is reflected in imperial literature, for example the dating formula of the *Old Tibetan Annals* is based upon these travels around the lands of loyal Tibetan subjects. As Brandon Dotson comments: “In this way, time itself was centralised by the figure of the Tibetan emperor.”¹⁹

As Weber has noted of the Indian social system, “the caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordinate.”²⁰ Something similar took place in imperial society, both between ethnic groups like the Central Tibetans and ‘A zha and between the Yar lung family, now a dynasty, and the other clans in Central Tibet. The emperor thus sat at both the centre and zenith of imperial Tibetan society, at least according to the imperial self-representation of court documents (which is almost our only source of written information for this period). From the official perspective of the court, the Yar lung Dynasty held a position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan plateau.

¹⁶ Beckwith (1987: 8).

¹⁷ Kapstein (2006a: 180).

¹⁸ Doney (2013: 65–69).

¹⁹ Dotson (2009: 11).

²⁰ Weber ([1948] 1991: 189).

In practice however, the *primus inter pares* form of rulership seems to have been deeply unstable,²¹ needing to be constantly reinforced as the emperor moved his mobile court of administrators, judiciary, priests and guards in semi-nomadic fashion around the lands of his loyal aristocracy.²² In fact, the entire duration of the imperial period, like its beginnings, was marked by internal power struggles, marital alliances and territorial disputes among and within the Yar lung Dynasty and other local polities and major families of Central Tibet.²³ The emperors did not always hold meaningful power (which sometimes resided with their queens), and the mGar group maintained a brief ministerial “shogunate” in the late 7th century.²⁴ Yet when the system was most stable, and acquiescence to it ensured by the spoils of continued expansion of the empire, the Tibetan aristocracy with the emperors at their head benefitted from periods of great wealth and cosmopolitanism.

The Tibetan empire reached its greatest extent during the reign of Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan. In the northwest, it threatened the territory of the fourth and fifth Abbasid caliphs, Al-Mansur (714–775) and Harun al-Rashid (763/766–809), on the banks of the Oxus; in the east, as mentioned above, the Tibetan army even briefly sacked the Chinese capital Chang’an in 763.²⁵ This emperor also presided over the growing institutionalisation of Buddhism in Tibet, as a state religion. This patronage was epitomised by his construction of bSam yas Monastery, which shows signs of influence from the older Buddhist cultures surrounding the empire at this time—most notably South Asia and China.

The ascendancy of the empire allowed Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan to confer high status, patronage and support on the *samgha* of monks. In the famous bSam yas Inscription that still stands outside the monastery of bSam yas in Central Tibet, he proclaims that such patronage “shall never be abandoned or destroyed,” as well as provide the wealth that makes the “provision of the necessary accoutrements” possible.²⁶ The recipient is not a specific person or clan as in some other imperial inscriptions, but rather monastic followers of Buddhism. The bSam yas Inscription draws on certain rhetorical devices used in earlier secular proclamations, for instance the Zhol Inscription, in order to evoke both imperial expansion and

²¹ Ramble (2006: 129–133).

²² Dotson (2009: 43–46); Hazod (2009).

²³ Hazod (2012: 49–55).

²⁴ See Dotson (2009: 18–19).

²⁵ See Beckwith (1987: 143–157).

²⁶ See Richardson (1985: 26–29); Li and Coblin (1987: 186–192); Doney (2013: 69–72).

stability. It uses these *topoi* to lend authority to Buddhism. Reciprocally, the ministers who swore to protect this newly established state religion also thereby pledged their continued loyalty to the Yar lung Dynasty, and the imperially-sponsored construction of large temple structures centralised the generally itinerant power base of the empire around the two “capitals,” Ra sa (later to be named Lhasa) and Brag dmar (further southeast where bSam yas stands). The circular *maṇḍala* symbolism inherent in the design of bSam yas Monastery reflects the ideal empire, with the emperor identified with the powerful cosmic buddha (Vairocana) at its centre—as at other imperially sponsored Buddhist sites in East Asia more generally during this period.²⁷ Ironically, the metonymic identification of Vairocana Buddha with Khri Srong lde btsan will play a special part in his later upstaging in narratives discussed below.

The emperor invited Buddhist masters to court during his reign, including the Indic monk Śāntarakṣita, who became his spiritual preceptor and head of bSam yas Monastery.²⁸ Such invitees may also have included the shadowy tantric master Padmasambhava, who will become a central figure in the latter half of this article. Michael Walter suggests that Khri Srong lde brtsan invited Padmasambhava from Oḍḍiyāna in today’s Swat Valley, at that time a part of the Tibetan Empire.²⁹ However, although Padmasambhava’s birth-place was considered to be Oḍḍiyāna/ Uḍḍiyāna (O rgyan/ U rgyan) from a relatively early period, even in these sources there is confusion about whether Oḍḍiyāna corresponds to the Swat Valley or was perhaps in or to the south of India instead,³⁰ and even whether the Swat Valley was part of the Tibetan Empire at all.³¹ Moreover, other scholars have questioned the historicity of his traditionally-attributed presence at the Tibetan court.³² Nevertheless, Walter’s observation is interesting because it most likely reflects the true status of religious figures at the court of Khri Srong lde brtsan:

Assuming the historicity of this event, the political reality of the situation was that [...] Padmasambhava appeared before him as one of his subjects. If his fame was as great as later tradition maintains, he was likely commanded to appear, or physically brought to court, at

²⁷ See Doney (2013: 71) on Ra sa and Brag dmar. On the identification of Vairocana with the Tibetan emperor, see Kapstein (2000: 60–65; 2006a: 71–72; 2009: 53).

²⁸ See footnote 89.

²⁹ Walter (2009: 13 and 50–51, n. 26).

³⁰ See Doney (2014: 5 and 29, n. 24); see also Aciri (2016: 9, n. 25).

³¹ See Zeisler (2010) for further discussion.

³² See Kapstein (2000); Cantwell and Mayer (2016).

the Btsan-po's order.³³

We can thus add religious masters to the list of groups who are amenable to Weber's analysis given above. The "vertical social system of super- and subordinative elements" probably also included indigenous priests and augurs, as well as foreign abbots and lay tantric adepts (and their converts at the Tibetan court), who tended to lack land but offered services to society, the state, or the emperor himself.³⁴ It is fair to assume that such groups engaged in different discourses of superiority or inferiority that tended to stand in tension historically rather than be a synchronic fact accepted by all groups,³⁵ but that they all equally (if not all successfully) vied for the favour of the emperor at the top of society. We shall see below that the relationship between the religious and the royal figures in this social system are depicted very differently in later narratives.

As mentioned above, the status of the emperor as *primus inter pares* led to increased instability at the court. The new ways of stratifying society and the ruler-minister bond, caused by either Buddhism³⁶ or economic bankruptcy following the end of the expansionist period,³⁷ or both, led to the collapse of this important binding force and the eventual implosion of the sPu rgyal Dynasty of Yar lung. Many on either side of this debate maintain that Buddhism in Central Tibet was exclusively a religion centred around the emperor at his court and not shared by all, whereas others dispute this view.³⁸ All serious scholars are now in agreement that there is certainly no evidence that Buddhism in Central Tibet or any outlying parts of the empire suffered from the mythical anti-Buddhist purge by Khri 'U'i dum brtan (also known as Glang Dar ma; r. 841–842) that once held a firm place in the historical imagination of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and Tibetan Studies. The evidence instead suggests that the emperors stayed at least publicly Buddhist to the end.³⁹ It seems that the idea of the court's power to spread Buddhism throughout the empire, whether it was rhetorical or real, was disseminated as much for the positive way in which it reflected the Yar lung Dynasty as for Buddhism itself. This supported the dynasty's self-presentation of its position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan plateau, discussed above.

³³ Walter (2009: 50–51, n. 26).

³⁴ Weber ([1948] 1991: 182).

³⁵ *ibid.*: 193.

³⁶ Hazod (2012: 48); Ramble (2006: 133).

³⁷ Beckwith (2011: 233).

³⁸ van Schaik (2016a: 62).

³⁹ *ibid.*: 63.

When 'U'i Dum brtan was violently killed in 842, his assassination meant the beginning of the end of the Tibetan empire. Hazod suggests that this incident happened at the site of the 821/822 Treaty Inscription, "in the same side valley of the Skyid chu [in Central Tibet] where the kingdom had been founded 250 years earlier."⁴⁰ He retells the classic story (evidenced from the 12th century onwards) of the assassination of the "sinful king" (*sdig pa'i rgyal po*) Glang Dar ma by the virtuous monk lHa lung dPal gyi rdo rje and notes some evidence of the historicity of the latter man (if not the narrative).⁴¹ The status of the religious figure rather than the ruler as the hero of this narrative is expressive of the same processes that this article addresses.

Towards the very end of the imperial period, Yar lung dynastic power became split between two rival factions and then disintegrated into what later histories call the "time of fragmentation" (*sil bu'i dus*).⁴² Although Tibet's glory days of empire were behind it, their wake continued to be felt and some later kingdoms and Buddhist traditions continued to chart their lineage back to the golden age of the Yar lung Dynasty and its bodhisattva kings.⁴³

Narrativising the right to rule

The legitimacy of the Yar lung dynasty was presented in numerous different ways in early Tibetan historiography. The authentically Old Tibetan "texts" available to us use certain words and phrases specifically for each emperor and no-one else. The inscriptions describe the emperors as possessing characteristics of divine power and wisdom corresponding to their pre-eminent status,⁴⁴ and some documents relate how the first rulers came down from heaven to rule over their "black-headed" subjects.⁴⁵ Such *topoi* continued to be used later Buddhist narratives too, as recounted by Samten Karmay.⁴⁶ The early, equivocal description of three alternatives in the perhaps 10th-century document Pelliot tibétain 1038, preserved in Mogao Cave 17 near Dunhuang on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan empire,⁴⁷ seems to make way for other, longer and similarly tripartite

⁴⁰ Hazod (2014: 77).

⁴¹ *ibid.*: 45–48.

⁴² See Kapstein (2006a: 81–85).

⁴³ Doney (2015: 44–47).

⁴⁴ Doney (2013: 72–78).

⁴⁵ Hill (2016).

⁴⁶ See Karmay (1998).

⁴⁷ *ibid.*: 285–286. On Dunhuang and the treasure-trove of ancient documents found nearby, see van Schaik (2011: 28–29).

categorisations of narratives surrounding the origin of the first Tibetan king,⁴⁸ for example as found in the 13th-century *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung* by mKhas pa lDe'u.⁴⁹ The first is the "Ultra Secret" Tradition:

According to the ultra secret tradition, the king descends from the *the'u brang* spirit. In the country of sPu-bo, there are nine brothers in the clan Mo-btsun, the youngest being Ma-snya u-be-ra. His tongue is so big that it could cover his face and the space [*sic*] between his fingers are joined together (i.e. a webbed hand). He has a hard character and is magically powerful which is the cause of his exile. Bonpos and Buddhists(!) proficient in rituals perform the rite of *The'u brang skyas 'degs* ("Sending away the *the'u brang* spirit with departing gifts") and he is finally banished from sPu-bo. He comes across people who are looking for someone who could be made their king. They ask him: "Where do you come from?" "I come from sPu-bo," he replies. "You have a strange tongue and hands! Do you possess any magical power?" [...] "I am banished because of being magically too powerful." "Let us make you our king," they said. Carrying him on their necks, they proclaimed him as their king called gNya'-khri btsan-po, the "Nape-enthroned king."⁵⁰

Here, the youngest of the brothers is physically different and distasteful to his countrymen. He is banished as a result, but these distasteful traits endear him to the Tibetans who are searching for a ruler. The magical power that puts Ma snya u be ra beyond the pale of one society is the same that leads to his enthronement and renaming as gNya' khri btsan po. A similar narrative *topos* will be seen when we turn to the 12th-century *Zangs gling ma* account of Padmasambhava, where his renaming makes it clear that his dangerous personality and power are exactly what raise him above the status of mundane or secular figures, even kings.

The second tradition on gNya' khri btsan po is from the "Secret Tradition." It describes his father (Bar gyi bdun tshigs) as a Phyva god, who "is exiled to the dMu heaven, because he dislikes his father and the three elder brothers above him and dislikes his mother and the three younger brothers below him."⁵¹ His father gives him a number of presents in order to persuade him to leave for dMu, where he sires a son, gNya' khri btsan po (so called for being born out of the

⁴⁸ *ibid.*: 294–307.

⁴⁹ Martin (1997: 43–44, no. 54).

⁵⁰ Karmay 1998: 294–295 (parentheses Karmay's, square brackets mine). On the traditional etymology of *gnya' khri*, see Dotson (2015: 20–21). For an alternative one based on *nya*, "fish," see Ramble (2013: 81–83).

⁵¹ Karmay (1998: 298).

nape of his mother's neck). The Tibetans then send an emissary to invite him to be their ruler.⁵² It therefore appears that a movement in a story such as leaving a heaven is either motivated by exile, by a wish to leave, or by invitation.

The third origin narrative is from the "Renowned Buddhist" version, which relates that gNya' khri btsan po descended from the Buddha's Śākya clan.⁵³ Two brothers in this line are feuding in India, and the son of one of the brothers kills 98 of the 99 sons of the other. The surviving child, Ru pa skyes, "is banished, put into a box, and thrown into the river Ganges." The boy is found by a herdsman and protected by King Bimbisāra, since he recognises the child as an emanation of a bodhisattva, Mahākaruṇa Avalokiteśvara. When his uncle's family arrives, Ru pa skyes then becomes scared and escapes. He flees to Tibet, whose inhabitants mistake Ru pa skyes for a god descended from heaven and enthrone him on their napes (*gnya'*).

These stories float in time somewhat within early Tibetan historiography, so the date of their "original" creation remains unclear. Importantly though, they all seem to draw on wider Central Eurasian narrative traditions of exile and return to power in state formation mythology, as well as Indic narratives of renouncing the throne in favour of the spiritual life. The heroes here are almost always male (though the example of Vimalaprabhā in footnote 69 below provides a rare exception), and their strange births and difficult childhoods give them a special status in society that strengthens their claims to re-join and rule the societies they left or found new societies of which they are the (sometimes spiritual) exemplars. Christopher I. Beckwith schematises the general features of this "state formation" mythology, which he also calls "state foundation" mythology or the "First Story," into the following list of elements (here numbered 1–12):⁵⁴

1. A maiden is impregnated by a heavenly spirit or god
2. A rightful king is deposed unjustly
3. The maiden gives birth to a marvellous baby boy
4. The unjust king orders the baby to be exposed to the elements
5. Wild beasts nurture the baby and so he survives
6. The baby is discovered in the wilderness and saved
7. This boy grows up to be a skilled horseman and archer
8. He is brought to court but put in a subservient position
9. He is in danger of being put to death but escapes

⁵² *ibid.*: 298–299.

⁵³ *ibid.*: 303–305.

⁵⁴ Beckwith (2009: 12).

10. The boy becomes a man and acquires a following of oath-sworn warriors
11. He overthrows the tyrant and re-establishes justice in the kingdom
12. He founds a new city or dynasty

As Beckwith notes in the same place, these elements may appear in a different order, and they resemble the parts of a folktale in some respects. He also gives a short précis of the state formation myths of a number of Central Eurasian cultures.⁵⁵ The above "Renowned Buddhist" narrative on gNya' khri btsan po shares certain similarities with these myths, including the (today potentially shocking) topic of attempted infanticide, which is not a theme that is necessarily avoided in traditional Tibetan Buddhist literature. In fact, this *topos* is found in narratives told far away from Tibet, such as the famous stories of Romulus and Remus, baby Moses in the bulrushes and the sea-exile of Orgy, whose son and later husband Telephos is raised in the wild according to the frieze in the Pergamon Altar.

Especially prominent in the first Tibetan ruler's life-story are elements 1, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9. Yet, we should not assume that the Tibetans only borrowed these narratives from wider Central Eurasian myths, at some time after the fall of empire. The narratives probably have their more proximate source in Indic narratives or the Tibetans' own imperial legends. For instance, Brandon Dotson, who himself noted Beckwith's "state formation" schema applicability to Old Tibetan mythology, connects the *topos* of being cast adrift on the waters not only with the important myth of another early Tibetan ruler, Gri gum btsan po/ Dri gum btsan po in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, but also with the Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁵⁶ It should be noted that this method of exile is also found in the Khotanese version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁵⁷ Other imperial narratives display *topoi* such as the hero's mastery over wild animals indicating the power that he has acquired in his wilderness period preceding regaining the throne.⁵⁸ For example, in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* Emperor Khri 'Dus srong (r. 686–704) displays these traits as a child and goes on in later life to

⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 1–11.

⁵⁶ Dotson (2011: 90, n. 25); see also de Jong (1989: A 65–73 and A 73–83); Kapstein (2003: 760). Dotson (2011: 95 and n. 43) indicates that Beckwith's "First Story" schema could guide future readings of the narrative of another character in the Gri gum btsan po myth, Ngar la skyes, connecting it to wider Central Eurasian narrative going back to Proto-Indo-European mythology as Beckwith (2009: 12) suggests.

⁵⁷ Bailey (1940: 564).

⁵⁸ As discussed in Heesterman (1985: 118–127).

regain power of Central Tibet from the powerful mGar clan.⁵⁹

Importantly, gNya' khri btsan po in the myths above does not return to overthrow his uncle or any unjust ruler and become king, but rather is enthroned as the ruler of another land. These narratives thus contain a more nomadic element, also present in other Central Eurasian versions of state formation. In the same way, the myth of the Scythians founding their city describes them discovering a new home in exile rather than winning (back) territory through conquering their enemy.⁶⁰

Similar *topoi* of founding a new home occur in a Buddhist context on the Silk Road, for example describing how the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan was founded, as translated into Tibetan and preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. Khotan was first conquered by the Tibetans around 670,⁶¹ and monks from Khotan, perhaps even indigenous Khotanese, appear to have settled in Central Tibet by the 8th century at least.⁶² Khotanese Buddhism no doubt exerted some influence on the form of Dharma adopted at the Tibetan court.⁶³ This encounter with an already established cosmopolitan Silk Road centre may have also formed part of their inspiration to create a Buddhist society of trade, wealth and luxury in Central Tibet.

The Khotanese state formation myth is found in a number of early sources in both Tibetan and Chinese,⁶⁴ and here I rely on the Tibetan *Annals of Khotan*.⁶⁵ This work states that the chief consort of the Indian Buddhist emperor, Aśoka (3rd century BCE), became pregnant through beholding the divine king of the north, Vaiśravaṇa (element 1, above). Aśoka summons diviners, who tell him that the child displays miraculous bodily marks and will become king before his father's death (3). Becoming jealous, Aśoka orders that the child be cast away, quarrelling with his consort until she agrees out of fear that he will kill her baby (4). The child does not die but is rather suckled by a breast arising from the earth (5), for which he gains the name Earth-Breast (*sa nu*, Kustana) which resembles the Indic name for Khotan (Gostana).⁶⁶

⁵⁹ See Dotson (2013: 78–79).

⁶⁰ Myth retold in Beckwith (2009: 4).

⁶¹ Beckwith (1987: 30–34); Denwood (2008: 7); Dotson (2009: 18).

⁶² van Schaik (2016b: 54).

⁶³ Tong (2013: 21–22).

⁶⁴ Skjaervo (1987: 783–784).

⁶⁵ Thomas (1935: 97–102). The *Annals of Khotan* forms the second part of the *Prophecy of Khotan* (*Li yul lung bstan pa*), which is included in the *Bka' 'gyur* (P.5699). See van Schaik (2016b: 62–63) for more details.

⁶⁶ Skjaervo (1987: 784) explains the relationship between Kustana and the name of Khotan; see also Thomas (1935: 99, n. 7). This motif of the (re)naming of an exiled

Vaiśravaṇa takes the boy from the Indian wilderness to China, to act as the prayed-for thousandth son of the bodhisattva-king (6).⁶⁷ His stepbrothers ridicule him as no true son of the king (8), so he fights with his father, assembles a force of ten thousand and heads west.

Back in India, a minister of Aśoka named Yaśa(ḥ) falls out of favour with the king and leaves with seven thousand followers. Eventually heading east, they meet two men from Earth-Breast's company, who are led to the same spot by a group of calving cows.⁶⁸ Yaśa sends a message proposing that they unite as king and counsellor. Earth-Breast does not agree and so the two sides wage war over the territory. Finally, Vaiśravaṇa and the goddess Śrī Devī appear and forbid them to fighting. Henceforth the two groups live together, with Earth-Breast becoming prince of the new city and Yaśa his minister (12).

Clearly, not all of the elements of wider Central Eurasian state formation mythology are explicit here. The narrative omits any mention of Earth-Breast's skill as a horseman and archer (7), or fear for his life and escape (9). Perhaps the most important omissions are numbers 2 and 11, which are contradicted by the plotment of the piece. There is no unjust king apart from Aśoka, who appears to play the roles of both the pious Dharmarāja and the jealous killer of "his" child. Earth-Breast, rather than return to conquer him, fights and finally attains a superior position to the minister Yaśa (who we could

figure before his return to power reappears in Tibetan narratives such as the *Zangs gling ma*, described in the latter half of this article.

⁶⁷ The *topoi* of abandonment, a thousand sons, and nurturing with breast-milk are found in a different configuration in an Indian narrative related by the Chinese travellers Faxian (337–c.422) and Xuanzang (c.602–664; see Deeg [2004: 122–124]). In this version, a king's consort/wife gives birth to a lump of meat or lotus flower, which she throws away but that then transforms into a thousand sons brought up by someone else. Eventually they recognise their mother when she feeds all of them with a thousand streams of milk from her breasts. This narrative does not directly correspond to the Khotanese version of state formation, but perhaps draws on the *Mahābhārata*'s description of Gandhārī's one hundred sons, the Kauravas, and one daughter, Duḥśalā. Much more could be said about the exile of the *Pāṇḍavas* and Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata*, but hopefully this is sufficient to show the wider resonance of these images in (Buddhist) Asia during the first millennium.

⁶⁸ This *topos* in state formation mythology is also found in the story of Cadmus discovering and founding Thebes, as well as in some Tibetan narratives. For example, in a text translated in Erhrhard (2004: 237–238), a cow refuses to give milk but instead offers it to a sandalwood tree in a nearby forest—alerting locals to the appearance of statues of the four Mahākaruṇa brothers (*thugs rje chen po mched bzhi*). Animals leading people from the wilderness or towards places of state or religious value may count as a variant on element 5 of the above list.

perhaps identify as Aśoka's substitute). Lastly, an important dichotomy in the emplotment of the *Annals of Khotan* narrative, not present in the above schema of state formation mythology, is also worth highlighting here: forced exile *vs* self-exile. Earth-Breast is forced into the wilderness as a child, but then leaves China willingly as a young man. Also, Yaśa is exiled as an adult (in a senior position) rather than as a child, because his smell displeases the king! The physically unpleasant or deformed appearance of the exiled protagonist is a *topos* that appears in such tales as that of gNya' khri btsan po, above.

Tibet plays no part in this narrative,⁶⁹ though it is to be wondered whether any part of the story was redacted to suit local sensibilities when it was translated into Tibetan or included in the *Bka' 'gyur*.⁷⁰ Whatever the ultimate relationship is between the above descriptions of the first ruler of Tibet and the original imperial mythology or influence from Khotanese (Buddhist) historiography, it is clear that post-imperial and later narratives included elements of an exile from an original divine or royal homeland that form part of the legitimisation of the right to rule Tibet.⁷¹ I shall move on now to show

⁶⁹ Another Khotanese narrative containing similar *topoi* of exile and return is also found in the Tibetan canon. This is the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā* (P.835: *Dri ma med pa'i 'od kyis zhus pa*), most recently studied in van Schaik (2016b: 48–52). Here the protagonists are different, so that this time Tibet and not Aśoka is responsible for the exile. Vimalaprabhā incarnates as the daughter of King Vijayakīrti of Khotan, *Praniyata (*rab nges*), one of the few females to play the role of the exiled protagonist. When the Tibetans and Supīya (*sum pa*) attack, the king is killed, and his daughter forced to flee. She travels with her husband to Suvarṇagotra, a land of gold where she faces many hardships in her attempt to raise the money to pay off the Tibetans. In this tale, Tibet is one of the aggressors causing the protagonist to flee from her homeland. Eva Dargyay (1988: 109–111) also compares the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā* to Tibetan narratives describing the empire, though she focuses mainly on the fact that Vimalaprabhā is a bodhisattva seeking to instill Buddhist values in the country into which she incarnates.

⁷⁰ Xuanzang mentions some of the elements of this tale, including Earth-Breast, at a later point in the narrative after the city is founded (see Beal [1884: 309–311]).

⁷¹ Similar *topoi* could be identified throughout later Tibetan Buddhist and Bon biography and history, or folktale traditions such as that of King Ge sar. This royal hero is not only divinely born, from an egg rather than the womb, but in some versions his “human” parents are also semi-divine (a god and a *nāga* serpent; Miller [2000: 72]; FitzHerbert [2007: 113–131]). Dean Miller comments on Ge sar in his monograph on the subject of epic heroes, saying that his “supernatural adventures easily escape the familiar boundaries of our usual Eurocentric or Indo-Eurocentric focus” (Miller 2000: 266). His point is valid, and also applies to the lack of strong correspondence between the Tibetan narratives covered in this article and Beckwith's model of Central Eurasian state formation mythology. The “rightful king” (i.e. the hero's human father) is never deposed unjustly (element 2) in our narratives; nor does the hero acquire a following of

how such *topoi* are deployed in other historiographical sources to lend weight to the right of religious masters to claim superior status over the Tibetan rulers.

Buddhist Tibetans leaving the court

The beginnings of the shift towards Buddhist values and norms can be identified even in imperial sources. For instance, time and space are described in some of the Old Tibetan inscriptions according to Buddhist ideas rather than being grounded in the body of the emperor (as in the *Old Tibetan Annals* described above).⁷² In early post-imperial sources, Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan is depicted only positively, even becoming increasingly idealised for his work on behalf of Buddhism. However, he is *himself* recast according to Buddhist values, rather than being represented purely in imperial terms. His martial acts, valorised in the inscriptions for instance, are underplayed or ignored in these documents,⁷³ corresponding to Peter Schwieger's analysis of the growing emphasis on Buddhist ethics rather than imperial values.⁷⁴ Generally, Khri Srong lde brtsan is still the main focus of the documents that describe him, though sometimes this focus is shared with other Tibetan rulers, again remembered primarily as Buddhist emperors. Gradually though, religious masters begin to take centre stage and then to upstage the emperor (who is increasingly called a king, *rgyal po*, perhaps under the influence of Indic literature on Buddhist kingship). Here I wish to

oath-sworn "warriors" or even a band of disciples on his way back to his realm (10). Such variation in the Tibetan narratives from wider examples of the story may be explained by Buddhism's influence. Miller sees this influence in certain Tibetan variants to the heroic narrative, such as the emphasis on the non-human and so undefiled conception and birth of the hero. Miller (2000: 72) remarks on the Ge sar epic:

Generative anomaly is extraordinarily dominant in this Tibetan narrative, and in a Buddhist context it has to be so. The idea of the unavoidable contamination involved in the normative plan of heroic generation, through the power of a divinity, is secondary to the accepted Buddhist belief that the processes of profane life are all profoundly contaminating in themselves, and incarnation in this case a tremendous and unlooked-for sacrifice for any divinity. Thus Gezar is an *exemplum* who does not easily fit into the world of the Western, human hero [...] in the Greek myths such tales occur in the overmyths describing the conception and birth of the gods.

There is undoubtedly more at play in the representation of Ge sar's birth narrative than an acquiescence to "Buddhist belief." Nonetheless, a further disentangling of the *topoi* in such narratives (following FitzHerbert [2007]) would perhaps shed light on its relationship with wider Buddhist narrative traditions in surrounding states.

⁷² See Doney (2015: 37–39).

⁷³ *ibid.*: 39–46.

⁷⁴ Schwieger (2000; 2013).

highlight one of the mechanisms by which the superior spiritual status and later social status of the religious master was expressed in historical and biographical narratives (and partially thereby effected in society): renunciation of, or exile from, the centre of royal power.

Is to be in exile a negative state? In the law it is, since it is used as a punishment. For the person who undergoes it, this state is also a hardship and so is felt as negative. We may recall *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, scene 3), in which the hero, on learning of his punishment by exile, cries: "Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say 'death'; for exile hath more terror in his look, much more than death." During the Tibetan imperial period, banishment is a lesser punishment than execution and comprises various sorts. For example, possible punishments in *The Law of Theft* (Dunhuang documents IOL Tib J 753 and Pelliot tibétain 1075) include execution and three types of banishment:

They are divided into three degrees of increasing severity: one is banished to a nearby area, to a distant area, or to a remote area (*shul nye bar spyug; lan 'bring por spyug; shul ring por spyug*). There is also a distinction or qualification in that one can be banished together with one's family, or alone, that is "as a bachelor" (*pho reng du spyug*).⁷⁵

Why, then, does it play a re-occurring role in religious biographies? It is not necessarily because these exiles actually occurred in the lives of the protagonists of such biographies. This is not to say that they necessarily did not, but to argue that the historicity of the exile is not so important as its effect on the audience. The exile event in a character's life-story may be designed to inspire those facing banishment or other straightened circumstances themselves, but this is not the whole of the reason either. The biographical narratives of the post-imperial period contain exiles that to our eyes today may appear to paint the banished protagonists in less than flattering lights. I wish instead to argue that these narrated events indicate narrative *topoi* incorporated or adapted into Tibetan biographical writing from older narrative traditions (also) found outside Tibet in surrounding lands. The reason for this incorporation appears to be that the act of being banished, forced to flee, exposed to death in the wilderness or set adrift on a river has some positive connotations that attach to the victims of these acts of exile. In later works, such banishment is explained, suggesting that exile's meaning has been lost (its purpose perhaps having been served) and it is now felt necessary to apologise for the narratives. But in the 8th to 12th centuries that concern us in this article, the exiled protagonist *topos*

⁷⁵ Dotson (2015: 478).

still seems to be very potent (even if its meaning is not always understood).

Post-imperial documents

Much of Buddhist biographical literature mimics the life-story of the Buddha. Although the Buddha is born miraculously from an immaculate conception, he is not abandoned or exiled as a child. His exit from the court, against the wishes of his father, is classed as renunciation rather than banishment.⁷⁶ Of the narratives discussed above, it most closely resembles Earth-Breast's renunciation of the Chinese court in the Khotanese myth—Khotan's Buddhist culture may be in part responsible for this *topos* appearing there. In the case of the Buddha and the narratives and ceremonies influenced by his life-story, this renunciation leads to a wilderness period wherein the protagonist harnesses the power of nature to gain the skills, knowledge or wisdom necessary to rejuvenate both himself and society. J.C. Heesterman describes the importance of such a *topos* in South Asian *royal* narratives and ritual, wherein survival in the wilderness is considered a proof of one's right to rule.⁷⁷ In the Buddha narrative, the main character does not usually return to conquer an unjust king, but rather overcomes the ultimate enemy, Māra or *samsāra*. However, the Buddha *does* have to prove his spiritual status to his father—the latter does not understand that his son was already enlightened but rather feels superior in status due to his being the elder, until the Buddha displays his new status by performing the famous "twin miracles" (as he performed at Śrāvastī).⁷⁸

⁷⁶ See e.g. the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa; Johnston ([1936] 1992: 59–61).

⁷⁷ Heesterman (1985: 29–44).

⁷⁸ See Johnston (1937: 85–90).

In contrast, Chapter 5 of the Khotanese *Book of Zambasta* recounts that the Buddha returned home after gaining enlightenment in order to teach his father and was immediately welcomed and identified as a spiritual superior (Emmerick 1968: 97–117; Martini 2014). The latter thinks: 'You have done well, most beloved son, who have utterly given up sovereignty. You have obtained the kingdom of the Law.' He then kisses his son's feet in happy acknowledgement of his superiority (*ibid.*: 102–105). This narrative is perhaps more expressive of how visiting masters were treated in new cities (see van Schaik [2011: 57–58] on Atiśa's invitations to reside and teach at the courts of Kathmandu and Gu ge; Scherrer-Schaub [2014: 151, n. 84] on Amoghavajra's warm royal welcome in Sri Lanka according to his biographical tradition). It also accords with the pious ceremonies performed to transport images from the main monasteries on cars into Khotan, which, as witnessed by Faxian, included a moment when "[o]utside the city gate each car was met by the king, who having put off his crown came barefooted to offer homage with flowers and incense" (Stein [1907: 169]). This in itself expresses a

In Tibet, the narrative of renunciation as a prelude to (and sign of) increased spiritual status also appears to draw inspiration from younger Indic Buddhist texts than the above *Buddhacarita* life-story of the Buddha, though works likewise mining the same “enlightenment journey” vein—for instance the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.⁷⁹ The 10th-century Dunhuang document Pelliot tibétain 149 contains a brief précis of some variant version of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, in which the protagonist Sudhana leaves his life as a merchant’s son in search of the famous *Ārya-bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna* prayer.⁸⁰ The scene then shifts focus to dBa’ dPal byams (*sic*), the “commitment-holder” (*thugs dam ba’*) or state preceptor of the pious Buddhist emperor, Khri Srong lde brtsan. dPal byams recites the same *Ārya-bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna* as Sudhana did, but then contemplates that in order to properly recite the prayer he should leave his post as abbot of bSam yas Monastery and find a secluded place to practise.⁸¹

Both of the tales contained in Pelliot tibétain 149 depict willing renunciations of home and privileged status, in favour of peregrination in the first tale and seclusion in the second. Both protagonists thereby achieve their Buddhist goals: Sudhana reaches the first bodhisattva-stage (*bhūmi*), “utter joy,” and dBa’ dPal byams departs for the paradisaical land of Sukhāvati. This important theme of self-exile into a life of wandering or wilderness will be discussed again in reference to the *Dbā’ bzhed* and *Zangs gling ma*, below. The merchant father of Sudhana is not named, nor is the Tibetan emperor the main focus of the narrative. The latter is instead a rather passive, though pious, secondary character.

The emperor’s relegation to a secondary character here resonates with the state formation narrative above, except with a religious rather than royal figure in the main role. For example, the Khotanese version depicts the great Buddhist king Aśoka as a secondary character and the Chinese bodhisattva-king is not mentioned by name. However, in that tale, Earth-Breast was the (adopted) son of two royal figures and his divine parent was also a “king,” Vaiśravaṇa. In contrast, neither Sudhana nor dBa’ dPal byams in Pelliot tibétain 149 are in any way kings or princes, so the text

classic model of Buddhist kingship, “illustrated in the *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, of a king ‘who goes and meets his invitee, the *dharmabhāṇaka*’” (Scherrer-Schaub [2014: 50]). Scherrer-Schaub argues that the historical actions of Khri Srong lde brtsan also reflected this ideal, but as I argue below the literal obeisance of the emperor before religious masters may be no more than a literary *topos*.

⁷⁹ Steinkellner (1995); Imaeda (2007).

⁸⁰ van Schaik and Doney (2007).

⁸¹ *ibid.*: 205–206.

specifically glorifies non-royal figures as renunciates in the mould of Śākyamuni. Although the emperor is not cast as inferior to his state preceptor, the shift in focus towards religious protagonists constitutes the first step in this direction. This is also a feature of the life-story of another dBa' clan member, known to tradition as dBa' gSal snang or Ye shes dbang po, in the important early Tibetan history named with reference to him as the *Dbā' bzhed*.

The Dbā' bzhed

The *Dbā' bzhed* represents a collage of narratives that probably took on its recognisable shape around the 11th century.⁸² It would be misleading to view the contents of the manuscript as a homogeneous story indicative of the intention of an "author." Some Tibetans over the centuries may have read this text as a single work (just as it is translated as a single piece into English), but it was surely created through a process of compilation and annotation over a number of centuries. The text therefore contains numerous strata of narrative, wherein the *topos* of a character leaving the royal centre takes a number of different forms. One is exile, being forced to leave one's own home or land. Another is banishment back to one's own homeland. A third is renunciation for spiritual retreat. The Tibetan emperors have final responsibility for exiling or banishing religious figures from the Tibetan court and are never exiled themselves. Therefore, the court is always the centre from which only non-royals, whether Tibetan, Indic or Chinese, are banished. However, the emperors do not play the role of protagonist in every vignette from which the *Dbā' bzhed* is compiled and, in the case of Minister dBa' gSas snang (*sic*), renouncing the royal court appears to lend him spiritual status above Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan (*sic*).

The *Dbā' bzhed* (1b–4a) begins by recounting the acts that early Buddhist emperors of Tibet performed on behalf of the religion. Chief among these is Khri Srong btsan (sgam po; d. 649), who establishes Buddhist laws in Tibet and shows himself to be an emanation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.⁸³ Khri Srong btsan goes into retreat in his palace for four years before codifying these laws (2a), perhaps in order to learn reading and writing.⁸⁴ When he returns to the public view, he announces the laws to his subjects (2b). He thereby allays their fears that he had abandoned them and earns himself the title

⁸² The manuscript containing this work is reproduced and translated in Wangdu and Diemberger (2000).

⁸³ See Uray (1972); Dotson (2007); Pirie (2018).

⁸⁴ See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 27–28, n. 28).

“wise” (*bsgam po*; 2b2). Some of these narrative elements, such as retreat (this time self-enclosure) and the renaming of the returned hero, bear some resemblance to the journey of the son of Dri gum btsan po, Sha khyi, through the land of Pyi in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.⁸⁵ Banishment is one of the punishments sanctioned by the emperor in these new law codes, as witnessed by two Khotanese monks who arrive in Tibet at this time (3a–3b). They have heard that Khri Srong btsan is the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, but these punishments cause them to doubt this—until he shows them incontrovertible signs (3b–4a). Banishment is considered a punishment and has wholly negative connotations to the Khotanese monks, who consider it antithetical to the compassionate characteristics of Avalokiteśvara.

The main focus of the *Dbā' bzhed*, though, is the establishment of Buddhism during the life-time of Khri Srong lde btsan. He is depicted as a bodhisattva, like his ancestor (e.g. 9b), but faces difficulties early in his reign when Buddhism is vilified at court. At this time, a Chinese Buddhist monk (*hwa shang*) is dismissed from court and sent back to China (4b) and practising the Dharma is made punishable by banishment alone/ to the hinterland (*pho reng*).⁸⁶ The statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, one of Tibet's chief palladia, is turned out of the temple (4a),⁸⁷ which it resists by growing too heavy to transport.⁸⁸ The removal and “exile” of this palladium, as well as its survival in the wilderness, seem to be considered part of another form of banishment. Eventually, the non-Buddhists responsible are killed (4b) and the palladium returns in triumph to protect Tibet again (6b–7a). Note that the punishment for the anti-Buddhists in the *Dbā' bzhed* is death, not exile (4a). Here it is possible to see some of the many ways that exile is included in this multi-layered narrative, not all of which can be covered here.

The description of dBa' gSas snang, the central protagonist of much of the *Dbā' bzhed*, is itself rich in the use of these *topoi*. Despite

⁸⁵ See Dotson (2011: 88–89).

⁸⁶ *Dbā' bzhed* 4b5: *brgya la chos byed pa cig yod na pho reng du gtan spyug go*. Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 37) mistranslate this sentence, justifying their amendment of *brgya la chos byed pa cig yod na* (“suppose there is one who practises the Dharma”) to *rgya'i chos la byed pa cig yod na* (“If someone practises the doctrine of China”) with reference to later versions of the same narrative (*ibid.*: 37, n. 72). They translate *pho reng du gtan spyug go* (“he will be permanently exiled alone”) as “he will be condemned to an unmarried life.” See the discussion on banishment during the imperial period above, following Dotson (2015: 278).

⁸⁷ Sørensen (1994: 347, n. 1094; 591–96, n. 1094); Warner (2011).

⁸⁸ For a humorous modern version of the same narrative, see Beyer ([1973] 1988: 240).

being under threat of banishment by the non-Buddhists, he first goes in search of the Dharma to the south of Tibet and to India—where he performs offerings at the Mahābodhi Temple and Nalanda Monastery (5b)—even though he describes the experience of being away from court as “similar to exile” (6a). The danger from the non-Buddhists then necessitates that he retreats into hiding in his village (6b). Here, the threat of exile is unjustly applied to practitioners of the Dharma, so our hero perseveres despite this possible punishment.

In time, dBa' gSas snang is able to return to the court where the emperor instructs him to invite to Central Tibet the Indian abbot (*mkhan po*), Śāntaraḥṣita (7a), and eventually the tantric master Padmasambhava (11a). The accounts of their sojourns in Tibet also contain the *topos* of the necessary abandonment of the Tibetan court (see below), but this need not concern us here. After their narratives are recounted, the focus returns to dBa' gSas snang. He is re-named, like many heroes before him, specifically with the ordained name of Ye shes dbang po (17a), and this coincides with his becoming possessed of the faculty of clairvoyance and being lauded by Khri Srong lde btsan as spiritually superior to himself and equal only to the Buddha (17b). He is elevated to the position of the ruler's spiritual preceptor, but finally enters retreat (18b). Ye shes dbang po is thus a renunciate, similar to dBa' dPal byams in Pelliot tibétain 149 above, and perhaps importantly he passes on his high-status role at court to this same person in the process.⁸⁹ There he shows his mastery over nature by tying up a tiger to deter visitors. This minister-turned-cleric thus displays a similar power in the wilderness that was reserved for a Tibetan emperor, Khri 'Dus srong, in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (above). The emperor is at this time faced with the famous bSam yas Debate between the gradualists and simultaneists (18b–24b). He summons Ye shes dbang po back to offer advice, the latter criticises Khri Srong lde btsan for shortening not only his own life but also that of the emperor by cutting short the former's secluded meditations (19a). Yet he also explains to him the gradualist view that eventually succeeds in the Debate (19b).

⁸⁹ van Schaik and Doney (2007: 191–192) showed the importance of the succession of religious heads (called “spiritual friends,” *dge ba'i bshes gnyen*) of bSam yas and Ra sa 'Phrul snang temples to the Pelliot tibétain 149 narrative. The Dunhuang document listing the succession (IOL Tib J 689/2) describes the post passing from Śāntaraḥṣita to Ye shes dbang po and then dBa' dPal dbyangs (this spelling being the more common one of dBa' dPal byams given in Pelliot tibétain 149). The events in the *Dbā' bzhed* 18b thus comprise a narrated version of a true succession. Perhaps this *topos* of retreat into seclusion was applied to a number of the figures in the early abbatial succession, unless eventual abdication was an actual stipulation or practically a part of the role.

Note that, when they are defeated, the Chinese simultaneists are not banished from Tibet (nor are the Tibetan non-Buddhists ever sent into exile). No characters leave the Tibetan court during the reign of Khri Srong lde btsan without it reflecting positively on them as Buddhist religious figures, including the Buddha statue. dBa' gSas snang, AKA Ye shes dbang po, even stands in a position to criticise the emperor who is at the centre of this court and thus the Tibetan world. In heroic narratives, being renamed usually marks the moment of recognition, *anagnorisis* (ἀναγνώρισις), where the characters around him recognise not only the identity of the hero but also of what he stands for, for example realising and acknowledging his right to rule. This seems to be the case with Khri Srong btsan being renamed “sgam po” in the *Dbā' bzhed*, as discussed above, as well as in Karmay's gNya' khri btsan po myths recounted in the section of this article titled “Narrativising the Right to Rule.” *Anagnorisis* will also prove an important term later on in this contribution. Here, the renaming of dBa' gSas snang apparently signals the transformation of his status from an inferior to superior position with regard to Khri Srong lde btsan (at least from a religious perspective). This minister-cleric first leaves the court in order to travel to India, which he describes as similar to exile, then (*after* his renaming) renounces the court in order to go into retreat, which then allows him to be able to criticise Khri Srong lde btsan when the latter calls on him for help. The *Dbā' bzhed* relies on the Yar lung Dynasty's self-representation in painting the emperor as at the zenith of Tibetan society and responsible for the overall establishment of Buddhism throughout “Tibet,” but this multi-valent work is also one of the earliest to show that he is capable of being wrong and so rightly criticised by a subject, due to the latter's religious status.

Indic Buddhist masters in Tibet

In the *Dbā' bzhed*, Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava are non-Tibetans, but are also asked to leave the Tibetan court and are in a position to show their spiritual superiority to Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan. Abbot Śāntarakṣita, described as a son of the king of Sahor (Za hor; 6a; 7a; 25a), acts as the first state preceptor and spiritual superior to Khri Srong lde btsan—as he probably did in reality.⁹⁰ He faces hostility from the non-Buddhist factions in Tibet, causing Khri Srong lde btsan to offer him gifts and ask him to return to Nepal for a short while (8b). The *Dbā' bzhed* makes it clear that no stigma is attached to the Indian master on this account: later in the narrative he is still

⁹⁰ See Doney (2017: 313–314).

quoted as a source of authority and prophecy concerning Tibet (19b). Like dBa' gSas snang, his abandonment of the court is depicted as due to the evil intent of the Tibetan "black" (non-Buddhist) religionists there. This reflects badly on them, not on the Buddhists who are banished or forced to flee. To the contrary, Śāntarakṣita shows his high status (and superhuman powers) in the narrative by revealing his knowledge of past lives spent performing Buddhist acts with dBa' gSas snang and Khri Srong lde btsan, which determined their present lives together (6a and 8a).⁹¹

The invitation of Padmasambhava to Tibet to tame the autochthonous deities, *nāga* serpents and evil spirits causes even more antagonism among the non-Buddhists at court. Attempting to wash the emperor's hair with what they refer to as "mad Mon-water" and trying to make the barren Tibetan land fertile raise their ire, so they report to Khri Srong lde btsan who then becomes suspicious himself (13a).⁹² The emperor asks Padmasambhava to

⁹¹ *ibid.*: 315–317.

⁹² An annotation to the text makes their speech calumnious, with them asserting that Padmasambhava would use his magical power to take control of Tibet. It is possible that this is a gloss on the main text, reducing the emperor's portion of blame for Padmasambhava's dismissal. Yet, Padmasambhava in his speech to Khri Srong lde btsan also mentions the accusation of seizing political power. Perhaps an implicit connection between his power over the fertility of the land, the ceremony of washing hair, and control over Tibet lies in the link that they all share with kingship. Heesterman (1957: 212–215) describes the importance of the hair-cutting festival (*keśapanīyah*), after a wild period of growing nails and hair and without washing, in the Vedic ritual of the *rājasūya*. He notes the festival's likely origin in the fully-fledged royal consecration ritual (*rājābhiṣeka*; *ibid.*: 219) and the wide-spread importance of hair shown by taboos, rites and legends (such as that of Samson) surrounding it: "The ethnological facts concerning hair can be summarised by the statement that the hair is considered the seat of the soul substance [...] The Vedic ritual also shows the hair's close association with the vital forces and fertility, as can be seen in the hair-cutting mantras quoted above" (*ibid.*: 215). Regarding fertility, he states later: "The hair-cutting symbolises the yearly process by which the earth is shorn of its vegetation in order to produce new vegetation." The Indic Padmasambhava (as he exists in the *Dba' bzhed*) is separated from the Vedas by religious identity and centuries of intervening maturation of Indic rituals, yet still retains this connection in the consecratory nature of his hair-washing ritual and the *mantras* that he utters while performing it (see Davidson [2002: 113–168] on the continuation of royal imagery into tantric Buddhist ritual more generally). The power of the hair-washing rite that he attempts to perform for Khri Srong lde btsan may have held extra resonance in readers' minds when combined with the mythology of the *dmu* cord that are said to have connected the early Tibetan kings to heaven (van Schaik [2011: 3]). The power that Padmasambhava gains for himself (or rather the narrator bestows on him) thereby, as almost a king-maker but also a foreigner, makes it understandable that someone added to the narrative the ministers' fears for the safety of the kingdom. This ritual, like that of the hair-washing, is followed by his

return to India, not for the master's own safety (as he did with Śāntarakṣita) but because he has fulfilled his purpose. Both masters agree to leave, but Padmasambhava disparages the emperor over his dismissal from Tibet. Khri Srong lde btsan offers both masters gifts while asking them to leave, which is reminiscent of those used to banish the first Tibetan king from sPu bo or persuade his father to leave dMu, according to the two variant traditions described above. However, Padmasambhava only takes a handful in order to please the emperor, while he magically turns a sleeve-full of sand into gold dust to signify wealth's lack of attraction for him (13b). Finally, while leaving Tibet, Padmasambhava shows *his* spiritual status and supernatural powers by correctly prophesying that his dismissal (while the deities, *nāgas* and evil spirits of Tibet remain to be tamed twice more) will cause the decline of the Dharma in a great fight (14a). This future schism, it transpires, is the famous bSam yas Debate itself (19b). Banishing the Indian master thus reflects badly, not on him, but on the banisher (as with the non-Buddhists' punishments of Dharma practitioners)—despite the fact that this banisher is Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan, who throughout the *Dbā' bzhed* shows himself to be a pious Buddhist ruler.

Travel seems to signify or at least correspond to high status in the narrative(s)— whether it be Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava who travel to Tibet or dBa' gSas snang who journeys to India. Yet so does banishment or being asked to leave the court, which is more counter-intuitive. However, the use of *topoi* of both exile and renunciation found in the wider and earlier set of narratives discussed above appear to have established a connection between a period of distance from the ruler's power centre and a hero's time in the wilderness before a return to claim his right to rule. In the *Dbā' bzhed*, the Buddhist masters whose narratives contain such *topoi* become the Buddhist emperor's state preceptors and/ or spiritual goads, and it seems right that they do so. The renunciation of the court by the state preceptor dBa' dPal byams/ dbyangs is not recounted in the *Dbā' bzhed* but confers similar status on him in Pelliot tibétain 149. The *Dbā' bzhed* differs from this text in showing the first signs of the religious masters' superiority to the emperor.

efforts to bring fertility back to Tibet, which hints at the symbolic importance of this attempted rejuvenation of Khri Srong lde btsan's royal/imperial power (as well as to increase his life-span).

The Zangs gling ma

Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's (1124–1192) *Zangs gling ma* biography, the earliest extant full-length life-story of Padmasambhava (Doney 2014), contains many narratives on the early contributors to the spread of the Dharma in Tibet.⁹³ Most of the religious figures are deferential to the Tibetan “king” (*rgyal po*) Khri Srong lde btsan. In contrast, both Padmasambhava and an Indian abbot named Vimalamitra on different occasions set fire to the king's robes, causing him to prostrate to them. Whereas one could understand such outrageous behaviour from Padmasambhava, whose biography this is, it is more of a puzzle in the case of Vimalamitra. Looking into their life-stories in the *Zangs gling ma* uncovers structural similarities in their earlier lives before coming to Tibet, that in narrative terms may act as a precedent that affords them the status to treat the Tibetan king with disdain. Both masters are identified as emanations of a form of Avalokiteśvara, bodhisattva of compassion and patron deity of Tibet. At a very young age both Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra spend time in the wilderness but are then brought up as part of a royal family. Eventually, they both renounce their roles as princes in order to follow the Dharma. Then, when they arrive in Tibet, they disparage the status of the Tibetan ruler before relegating him to the subordinate but important position of a disciple.

As should be evident from the literature discussed already, there exist a number of different sorts of Tibetan historiography, even in the early period. The processes and philosophies that lie behind such creations are still unclear, but one rough distinction in narrative style can be made between more standard histories (such as the *Dbā' bzhed*) and the less familiar “treasure text” (*gter* or *gter ma*) genre that proved especially popular in Tibet. The former is written from a third-person perspective of the “present” narrating past events, and pious alterations are even present in the text itself—in the form of interlinear notes, glosses and corrections to the main text—not to mention the later tradition of its expansion.⁹⁴ This tradition purports to be authored by one of the agents of the events themselves (usually Padmasambhava), and so written shortly after the events they

⁹³ I quote here from the *Zangs gling ma* exemplar ZLh (Doney [2014: 101–223]), since it is one of the most complete and error-free exemplars of the earliest attested recension of the *Zangs gling ma*. The version of the *Zangs gling ma* contained in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* and translated in Kunsang (1999) appears to represent a later recension, including a number of interpolated episodes. For more details, see Doney (2014: 23–42). The basic narrative of the *Zangs gling ma* can still be followed in the Kunsang translation.

⁹⁴ See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 1–14).

describe, then buried like treasure to be discovered by a reincarnation of a disciple of the “author.” Nyang ral was one of the first and most famous “treasure discoverers” (*gter ston*), who retrieved not only ritual works, prayers, holy relics and objects bestowed on him in his previous incarnation as Khri Srong lde btsan, the royal disciple of Padmasambhava, but also the master’s biography itself.⁹⁵ He thus did not claim to have written the *Zangs gling ma*, but to have been present at the events described in it. The colophon of the *Zangs gling ma* itself states that it was written by the Tibetan tantric consort of Padmasambhava, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and buried in the early 9th century to be discovered by Nyang ral in the 12th century. Furthermore, the text includes prophecies of Padmasambhava that make the identification of his intended recipient for this biography clear. This new form of revelation enabled Nyang ral to place himself in the history of Tibet at a pivotal moment in the introduction of Buddhism there. Furthermore, Padmasambhava lends his seal of authority to Nyang ral’s credentials as a Buddhist master and legitimises his 12th-century ritual corpus by practising it in India and transmitting it to Tibet in the 8th century. The processes that this new form of revelation involved and the power it entailed in 12th-century southern Tibetan society has yet to be fully unpacked, but its benefits should have been evident to Nyang ral.

Padmasambhava

The *Zangs gling ma* biography describes Padmasambhava very differently from the *Dbu’ bzhed*. The latter only introduces him within the context of his arrival in Tibet and from the perspective of his superior in Tibetan society, Khri Srong lde btsan. The *Zangs gling ma* in contrast begins with King Indrabhūti, who finds Padmasambhava seated on a lotus on an island in the middle of the ocean (ZLh 5a3–4). He is a child-incarnation of Amitābha (Padmasambhava is identified as such in ZLh 1b1 *et passim*), therefore neither born of a mother impregnated by a deity nor abandoned to die either by her or his father—since he has no parents.⁹⁶ Yet the state formation *topoi* of non-human origins (element 1) and of the marvellous child (3) are still evident, with perhaps an even stronger sense of being unsullied by

⁹⁵ See Doney (2014: 10–19).

⁹⁶ When questioned about his provenance at the time, Padmasambhava states that his father is “self-cognisant wisdom” (*rang rig pa’i ye shes*) and his mother Samantabhadri (*kun tu bzang mo*), the feminine aspect of the Primordial Buddha (ZLh 5b1–2). Though this latter parental attribution is probably not meant literally, narratologically it suggests that, *if anything*, his parentage is divine rather than human.

the natural processes of sex and birth. The king realises this child is an emanation (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*; Tib. *sprul sku*), names him Padma Vajra and adopts him as heir to his throne in Uḍḍiyāṇa (ZLh 6a3).

Themes of exile and the wilderness arise slightly later, when the young prince arranges his own banishment from the kingdom because he considers that ruling will not benefit sentient beings (ZLh 7a5–8a3). Specifically, he kills a minister's son in an "accident," and the ministers ask the king to execute capital punishment in compliance with the law of the realm. However, Indrabhūti says he does not know if his adopted son is a non-human or an emanation (*sprul sku*), and for this reason commutes his sentence to banishment (*spyug*). Padmasambhava goes on to practise higher tantric yoga in charnel grounds all over India. He is thus simultaneously a Buddha's incarnation and a king's son; but he lives the life of a *siddha* (accomplished religious adept) in the wilds outside of urban society. Padmasambhava has exiled himself from courtly social mores and has become a master of both spiritual and wrathful powers, rejecting and thus transcending social status. We may recall Weber's notion of the stratified society discussed above and note how he describes the new status group as showing off their status in apparel, accoutrements etc., taking up certain activities, or refraining from other activities or payment for services such as purifying of sin.⁹⁷ Indeed, the narrative choice to have Padmasambhava (self-)exiled as punishment for killing a minister's son (rather than simply renouncing the court) also serves to underscore his dangerous characteristics. In this role, similar to the Hocartian dynamic of kingship in which rituals that act to segregate the king from society magically rejuvenate the kingdom he controls,⁹⁸ Padmasambhava becomes similar to a "magician-king," separate from society but possessing the power to control and unify it. Furthermore, he also undergoes trials on the journey towards enlightenment and submits himself to disciplining by other powerful religious masters. As he attains each new stage on this path, he is renamed—some of these forming the basis of his famous "eight names" (*mtshan brgyad*).⁹⁹ Though he is exiled from courtly society, these stages and the corresponding names that are bestowed upon him also mark a raise in his status within the specific society of the Indic religious adepts. Padmasambhava's status as a *siddha* thus gives him power over three

⁹⁷ Weber ([1948] 1991: 190–191).

⁹⁸ Scubla (2005: 50).

⁹⁹ Doney (2014: 95, col. i). My thanks go to Brandon Dotson for suggesting the connections between Padmasambhava's various names and the wider mythic importance of renaming.

characters who are born kings, i.e. his father Indrabhūti in Uḍḍiyāṇa, the king of Sahor named gTsong lag 'dzin, and Khri Srong lde btsan in Tibet.

First, Padmasambhava performs tantric practices in an isolated cave with his Indic spiritual consort, Princess Mandāravā of Sahor. They then travel to her homeland to convert its inhabitants to Buddhism, but the people accuse Padmasambhava of defiling the royal caste by carrying off the king's daughter and then attempt to immolate the pair on a sandalwood pyre (ZLh 13a2–14b5).

When others were burned, the smoke would cease after seven days, but [now] after nine days the smoke did not stop. Then the fire blazed outward, even burning the entire royal palace. The oil had pooled into a lake, in which grew lotus flowers. Upon one lotus stalk, the pair were seen sitting cool and fresh in tantric union, so the king and his ministers were amazed and praised [Padmasambhava].¹⁰⁰

In an act of *anagnorisis*, the members of the Sahor court thus realise his true tantric nature and rename Padmasambhava “Padma Vajra,” “Pad ma saṃ bha ba” and “Padma 'byung gnas” (seemingly in recognition of his superior status but also containing the word “lotus,” *padma*, which evokes the natural world and wilderness more than the urban environment of a court); he then causes the whole country of Sahor to embrace the Dharma and establishes everyone on the bodhisattva-stage of “non-return” (ZLh 14a4–14b4).

In a classic repetition of the mythic event (or “function”) familiar to readers of Vladimir Propp among others,¹⁰¹ Padmasambhava then returns to his own home in Uḍḍiyāṇa with Mandāravā, where both survive immolation at the hands of King Indrabhūti. This tantric feat astounds his royal father:

The king placed the foot of Master Padma above his head and requested him to become the supreme object of veneration at the court, but the master replied:

“To take birth in the three realms of *saṃsāra* is a dungeon of misery.

Even birth as a Dharma-protecting king is a place of bustle and distraction.

¹⁰⁰ Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 46). ZLh 14a4–14b1 reads: *gzhan bsregs pa zhag bdun nas du ba 'chad pa yin pa la / zhag dgu ru du ba ma chad nas / me thams cad phyir la 'bar nas / rgyal po'i pho brang thams cad kyang tshig / til mar rgya mtshor khyil nas / nang thams cad padmar chags ste / padma'i gdong po (=sdong po) cig gi kha na / yab yum gnyis sku grang grang ser ser ltar 'dug pas / rgyal po la sogs pa ya mtshan skyes nas bstod pa /*

¹⁰¹ Propp ([1928] 1968: 74–75).

If you do not know that your mind is the unborn Dharma Body
 (*dharmakāya*),
 Rebirth in *samsāra* does not end and you circle unceasingly.
 Great king, look into your empty and cognisant nature!
 Then you shall soon attain the perfect enlightenment.”
 In the same moment that he spoke, the king realised his mind to be
 the Dharma Body.¹⁰²

Padmasambhava's miraculous powers, gained as a *siddha* during his self-orchestrated exile in the wild charnel grounds of India, enable him to convert the courts of both Sahor and Uḍḍiyāna. As Dean Miller remarks of the returning hero in the Indo-European epics, “it is from ‘out there’ that he comes back to whatever center, and its controlling authority, sent him forth, or to other centers of enclosed rigid, restricting, old, and impacted power.”¹⁰³ Indrabhūti then sings a song of praise to Padmasambhava, prostrating to him and renaming him Lotus King in the process.¹⁰⁴ Remember that renaming the hero is often an important part of his ascension to power at the end of a narrative, coupled with *anagnorisis*.¹⁰⁵ Padmasambhava is renamed a number of times in the early part of the *Zangs gling ma*, but perhaps the royal element of his name here is important. Padmasambhava is thereby marked out as not only royal, but also standing in a superior position to his adoptee father, the king of Uḍḍiyāna who exiled him for killing a minister's son and then tried to kill him on his return home.

Both of these episodes appear to borrow Indic Buddhist vignettes and apply them to Padmasambhava, thereby partaking in a wider genre of “comedic” narrative to useful effect. As John Strong first

¹⁰² Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 47–48). ZLh 16a1–5 reads: *rgyal pos zhabs spyi bor blangs nas mchod gnas su zhus pas / slob dpon gyis gsung pa / kham gsum 'khor bar skyes pa sdug bsngal gtson dong yin / chos skyong rgyal por skyes kyang 'dus 'dzin g.yengs pa'i gnas / rang sems skye me[d] chos skur ma shes na / 'khor ba'i skye nas mi chod rgyud mar 'khor / rgyal po chen po'i sems nyid stong gsal ltos / phyi[n] mar rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas thob par 'gyur zhes gsungs pas / rgyal po nyid dus de sems chos bskur (=skur) mthong*

¹⁰³ Miller (2000: 134).

¹⁰⁴ ZLh 16a5–16b1. Cantwell and Mayer (2012: 93) identify a similar verse of praise in the Dunhuang text of the *'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa Padma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa*, IOL Tib J 321 folio 84a. It appears, therefore, that an older eulogy to Padmasambhava is incorporated in the *Zangs gling ma* in order to show the superiority of the Indian master to his adoptee father. In an annotation to these lines in IOL Tib J 321, attributes the lines of homage to Master Śāntigarbha (on whom, see Cantwell and Mayer [2012: 95])

¹⁰⁵ Padmasambhava is at the same time renamed “Lotus with a Garland of Skulls” (*padma thod 'phreng*, ZLh 16b2), perhaps a reference to his time in the wilderness (see footnote 118 below on the double renaming of dGa' rab rdo rje).

noted, either the *Zangs gling ma* or the *Padma-vita* tradition preceding it probably inherited these repetitions of the same narrative *topos* from the *Aśokāvadāna*.¹⁰⁶ There, Emperor Aśoka becomes a disciple of Samudra, a fatherless child and Buddhist mendicant wandering throughout the land, after failing to execute him.¹⁰⁷ In the *Zangs gling ma*, Padmasambhava converts his consort's land and his own adoptive father to the Dharma in similar circumstances.

Like the Buddha in his *Buddhacarita* life-story (above), who must use his magical abilities in order to show his high spiritual status to his unbelieving father, Padmasambhava and his consort are both times met with paternal resistance and our hero has to prove his spiritual attainments by the display (and the people's recognition) of his miraculous powers. Such tales of overcoming recall the literary analyst Northrop Frye's description of the "comic" or "comedic" narrative genres (as distinct from say the "tragic").¹⁰⁸ Frye states:

In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognises that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallise around the hero, and the moment when this crystallisation occurs is the point of resolution in the act, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognito*.¹⁰⁹

Frye goes on to note that in general, "tragedy" refers to narratives in

¹⁰⁶ Strong (1983: 74).

¹⁰⁷ Translated in Strong (1983: 214–219). Aśoka in this narrative is neither abandoned nor exiled as a child, though he is born with bad skin, "rough and unpleasant to the touch, and he was not at all liked by his father" (*ibid.*: 206). It is tempting to see this as a parallel of the Khotanese narrative's description of Yaśa, who is later in a subordinate position to Earth-Breast. However, we have also seen in the Tibetan myths retold by Karmay that a strange appearance can mark one off as special and a later ruler. The *Aśokāvadāna* is a complex narrative that I cannot do justice to here; though it contains many interesting *topoi* of kingship also found in the life-stories of Khri Srong lde btsan, which I hope to address in the future.

¹⁰⁸ I say "comedic" as distinct from "tragic" rather than as opposed to it. Although the tragic and the comic do tend to stand at two ends of a spectrum, it should be clear that there are many more types of narrative than these two. As Frye ([1957] 1971: 13) himself points out:

The very word "genre" sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is. [...] Thanks to the Greeks, we can distinguish tragedy from comedy in drama, and so we still tend to assume that each is the half of drama that is not the other half. When we come to deal with such forms as the masque, opera, movie, ballet, puppet-play, mystery-play, morality, commedia dell'arte, and Zauberspiel, we find ourselves in the position of the Renaissance doctors who refused to treat syphilis because Galen said nothing about it.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*: 163.

which the hero becomes isolated from his society, and “comedy” to ones in which she is incorporated into it.¹¹⁰ From this perspective, we can see this part of Padmasambhava’s biography as one in which his search for tantric accomplishments (*vidyādhāras*) outside of his home and society leads him back to return home with a changed status. He has changed from a boy into a man and returns together with Mandāravā his consort (as a quasi-romantic heroine) and overcomes obstructions to their (tantric) union. Moreover, he has gained accomplishments by trials in the wilderness of India (each step marked by a new renaming, see above) and reached the heights of enlightenment.¹¹¹ These accomplishments give him the power to overcome his society (religiously), renew it and redirect it towards tantric Buddhism. In this way, Padmasambhava takes on the role of a state founder but his new state and status is religious in nature.

The doubling of the upstaging of the royal father should alert us to a coming third similar event, following the Proppian notion of the trebling of functions or groups of functions.¹¹² And sure enough, Padmasambhava’s conversion of the land of Sahor (including its king gTsong lag ’dzin) and King Indrabhūti in Uḍḍiyāna prefigures his display of superiority to Khri Srong lde btsan in Tibet. In this narrative, Khri Srong lde btsan is the personification of Tibet, drawing on earlier imperial representations, but Tibet no longer an empire but instead a kingdom. King Khri Srong lde btsan is also an emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjuśrī, but he incarnates through his parents’ sexual union and is born naturally—albeit with signs that mark him out as a marvellous child. He is not abandoned or exiled but ascends to power at the death of his father (ZLh 19b3–21b3). Thus, he is not set up as the hero of this narrative, but rather his conversion to tantric Buddhism is meant to symbolise the conversion of Tibet. However, neither is he portrayed as the classic villain. For example, he has not had any dealings with Padmasambhava before they meet in Central Tibet, and so is not responsible for any unjust actions towards him, unlike Padmasambhava’s exile at the order of Indrabhūti.

Śāntarakṣita (who plays an important but “supporting” role in this

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*: 35.

¹¹¹ Among his five modes of comedy, Frye’s mythic form (rather than the romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, or ironic) appears most suitable to this narrative. He describes it as “Apollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods. In Classical literature the theme of acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury, and other deities who had a probation to go through, and in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation” (*ibid.*: 43).

¹¹² Propp ([1928] 1968: 74–75).

biography) recommends that Khri Srong lde btsan invite Padmasambhava, at this time practising further accomplishments in another isolated cave on the modern India-Nepal border (ZLh 24a4–24b2). The ruler orders his messengers to guide him to Tibet (including dBa' gSal snang, ZLh 24b4, who plays no other role in the *Zangs gling ma*). When he meets Khri Srong lde btsan, Padmasambhava again shows his disdain for a king's worldly status.¹¹³ Whereas in the *Dbā' bzhed* he prostrates to the emperor, in the *Zangs gling ma* Padmasambhava humbles Khri Srong lde btsan in a humorous way. He bows to his robes of office and sets them on fire and the king then prostrates contritely to his spiritual superior (ZLh 30b1–2). This work gives no hint that the ruler of Tibet may have a right to social superiority, since religious values are paramount in this portrayal. Moreover, from this Buddhist perspective the king is found wanting due to his perceived social status *itself*. Although he is an emanation of Mañjuśrī, in this incarnation Khri Srong lde btsan is deluded by his position as ruler of Tibet. Padmasambhava, as fully enlightened, realises this and upstages him by setting light to the symbol of his royalty—using the magical abilities by which he proved his higher status to the other two kings, including his own father. Later on, Padmasambhava also displays another supernatural gift when he prophesies that Khri Srong lde btsan will meet obstacles in a future life, due to his failings as a Buddhist in expelling several Tibetan Buddhist masters (ZLh 83a3–5).¹¹⁴ This again has the effect of shaming the king, who from his first meeting with Padmasambhava onwards has his status relegated from Tibetan king to tantric disciple. This apparently less than flattering portrayal can be seen as a positive move within the soteriology of Tibetan Buddhism but has important consequences for the emperor's representation in later histories. It breaks with the trajectory of the growing aggrandizement of Khri Srong lde btsan evident from the imperial inscriptions and early post-imperial documents discussed above. In this way, it goes a step further than the *Dbā' bzhed*, since both portray a more fallible ruler but the *Zangs gling ma* is far more explicit in depicting this weakness.

The master-disciple relationship between Padmasambhava and Khri Srong lde btsan is long and fruitful in the *Zangs gling ma*. Padmasambhava's arrival in Tibet is followed by a long round of

¹¹³ On this interchange see Doney (2015: 318).

¹¹⁴ This has to do with the banishment of Pa sgor Vairocana and gNub Nam mkha'i snying po, whose exile I hope to address in the future. However, their depictions in the *Zangs gling ma* do not share the same structural similarities as the stories of Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra, and do not result in these masters showing anything but deference to Khri Srong lde btsan. I have therefore omitted them from my current analysis.

textual translations and journeys by translators to transmit the Dharma from its homeland in the Indian subcontinent. Then Khri Srong lde btsan dies, but the *Zangs gling ma* does not narrate his death directly. Instead it places the first mention of the king's death in the mouth of Padmasambhava as he leaves Tibet (ZLh 89b5–91b1). Perhaps narrating the death of a major character would not suit the more positive tenor of the narrative of the successful establishment of the Dharma in Tibet. The tradition of life-stories devoted to another emperor, Khri Srong brtsan (sgam po; d. 649), transform *that* Buddhist ruler's death into a re-absorption into the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, whose incarnation he is. This innovation was perhaps not widely known when the Padmasambhava narrative was being formulated before Nyang ral, or for whatever reason it was not chosen for application to Khri Srong lde btsan as an emanation of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Another possibility is that it might simply detract from the more important narrative of Padmasambhava's leaving Tibet (which follows shortly afterwards). Whatever the case, Padmasambhava outlives Khri Srong lde btsan in the *Zangs gling ma*. This goes against the usual lineage tradition, where the disciple lives to become a master to a future generation of pupils. Such proximate transmission is unnecessary, since the king will be reborn over 17 future lifetimes and spread the Dharma then. From another, literary, perspective, Khri Srong lde btsan could be said to predecease Padmasambhava in order that the "son" outlive his "father" and become the head of his domain.¹¹⁵

Vimalamitra

The above narrative makes it clear that Padmasambhava is superior to Khri Srong lde btsan, which makes sense because this is Padmasambhava's biography. However, the subsequent sojourn in Tibet of the Indian abbot, Vimalamitra, demonstrates the superiority

¹¹⁵ Robert Paul (1982) analyses the narrative traditions that the Sherpa people of the Himalayas maintain surrounding Padmasambhava. He notes that Padmasambhava "is called upon to perform the most 'symbolic' work" in Sherpa religion (*ibid.*: 151), which he conceives around Hocartian and (with *caveats*) Levi-Straussian models of social symbolism. He says that "political and sacred authority (which I take to mean aspects of the same thing, the 'center' of society) are always accompanied by Oedipal symbolism, which is itself concerned directly with the problem of the succession of generations" (*ibid.*: 7, parentheses Paul's). This updated Freudian analysis of myth is only one partial perspective on the rich symbolism of the Padmasambhava biographical tradition and may not be a perspective that scholars find particularly enlightening any more. However, Paul's early attempt to conceptualise the symbolism in this important *vita* may still offer some insights.

of another foreign Buddhist master over the king. It does this by displaying his power over the Buddha Vairocana statue in bSam yas Monastery, which like the king's robe appears to metonymically represent Khri Srong lde btsan.

Vimalamitra's early life, as recounted in the *Zangs gling ma*, is far simpler and conforms more faithfully to the state formation mythology discussed at the beginning of this article. Chapter 16 begins:

Then, the lord, King [Khri Srong lde btsan] thought: "Now, to make the excellent Dharma [shine] like the rising sun, I need to invite from India Master Vimalamitra, who is [the most] skilled among 500 *paṇḍitas*." He set his heart on this. That Master Vimala was also an emanation of Mahākaraṇa (Avalokiteśvara): an extremely handsome white man appeared in a dream to the daughter of Aśo[ka], Princess D[h]armabodhi, who was extremely beautiful like the daughter of a god. He poured ambrosia from a completely full vase so that it went down through the top of her head and she dreamed that she was filled with bodily bliss. There she gave birth uncomfortably/unhealthily to a boy. Ashamed at the boy, since she did not have a husband, [Dharmabodhi] cast him out into the dust/ in the midst of the desert. When he awoke, eyes wide open, she received him again and nurtured him. As the days and months went by, he turned out to be one who grew up faster than others. By the age of five he was trained in the five sciences and so especially skilled in the Dharma, and he was named Vi[ma]lamitra (Friend of the Immaculate [Dharma?]).¹¹⁶

As is evident, this potted life-story of Vimalamitra contains variants of a number of the elements of state formation mythology discussed above, beginning with divine impregnation (1).¹¹⁷ Also present is the

¹¹⁶ Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 105). ZLh 60b4–61b1 reads: *de nas mnga' bdag rgyal po'i thugs la / da ni dam pa'i chos nyi ma shar ba 'dra ba cig byed pa la / rgya gar yul nas pandi ta lnga brgya'i nang nas mkhas pa / slob dpon bi ma la mi tra spyan drangs dgos snyam nas / thugs kyi dgong[s] so / slob dpon bi ma la de yang thugs rje chen po'i sprul pa yin ste / rgyal po a sho bya ba'i sras mo lha lcam dar ma bo dhi bya ba / shin tu mdzes pa lha'i bu mo 'dra ba cig yod pa la / gnyid log pa'i rmi lam na / mi dkar po shin tu mdzes pa cig byung nas / bdud rtsi bum pa gang bzhas nas blug pas / tshang pa'i bu ga nas mar song pas / lus gi [bde] bas gang ba cig rmis nas / der lus ma bde nas / bu cig btsas so / khyo med pas bu ngo tsha nas / bye ma'i seb du bor pas / mig bkra hri ge 'dug nas / yang blangs nas bsos pas / zhag log zla log gzhan pas skied che ba cig byung nas / lo lnga lon nas rig pa'i gnas lnga la sbyangs pas / lhag par chos la la (sic) mkhas par gyur te / bi [ma] la mi tra zhes bya 'o /*

¹¹⁷ Such elements are omitted from another popular and perhaps early Tibetan narration of Vimalamitra's life-story, which is contained in the *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo* (translated in Valby [1983: 28–60]; on this text see Martin [1997: 28 no. 12]). There, for instance, Vimalamitra is born naturally of

child's exposure (4), though this time by the mother since there is no father (and in fact this is given as the reason for abandoning him).¹¹⁸ In an interesting reversal, the survival of Vimalamitra in the desert/ among the dust (5) leads to him being received again and nurtured by his mother (6), rather than by animals. He grows up to be unusually skilled (7), though importantly here not in archery and horsemanship but in the sciences and especially Buddhism, which is the reason that Khri Srong lde btsan invites him to Tibet. Since he is, at this time, the abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery rather than a king or prince, we can perhaps identify one movement in the narrative as implied rather than stated: Vimalamitra's rejection of his royal title in favour of ordination (and renaming with a moniker suited to his

two non-royal parents, "the householder bDe-ldan-'khor lo and his wife bDag-nyid-gsal-ma" (*ibid.*: 28). However earlier in the same history, a birth narrative similar to Vimalamitra's in the *Zangs gling ma* is told for the Indian Buddhist master, dGa' rab rdo rje (*Prahevajra; *ibid.*: 10–17 and see also the translation in Reynolds [1996: 179–189]). He is also born to a Princess Kudharma, who was impregnated by a white man with a vase initiation (element 1). He is born miraculously from her side (3); but Kudharma (out of shame) hides the child in an ash pit (4), where he survives for three days (5). Kudharma retrieves him, declaring him to be an emanation (6), and he grows up prodigiously wise in the Dharma (7). At seven years of age he arrives at court, successfully debates with 500 *paṇḍitas* and declares himself to his grandfather, King Uparāja, as his spiritual superior. The king delightedly renames him "Master Vajra of Supreme Delight" (*slob dpon dga' rab rdo rje*). This renaming seems to confirm his superiority to the king (as with dBa' gSas snang in the *Dbā' bzhed* and Padmasambhava in the *Zangs gling ma*, above). His mother then names him "Great Master Ash-coloured Zombie" (*slob dpon chen po ro langts thal mdog*) because of his miraculous survival of being exposed in the ash pit (this renaming being more redolent of the name Earth-Breast). dGa' rab rdo rje escapes being killed by a heretical king (9), instead converting him to the Dharma through his miraculous display of escape (11?). The history then moves on to other feats achieved by this Indian master, but this narrative of his early life contains many of the elements of Vimalamitra's life-story in the *Zangs gling ma*. dGa' rab rdo rje's relationships to his grandfather and another heretic king also share elements with the duplication of the conversion *topos* in Padmasambhava's story. It is perhaps possible to see, in the life-story of this Indian master, the basis for parts of the narratives concerning both Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in the *Zangs gling ma*.

¹¹⁸ The absence of a father is, in itself, quite a widespread element of the heroic birth story, and fits within the more general theme of abandonment. Miller (2000: 73) sees either as possible outcomes of the double parentage of the hero, divine and human:

[A] god may be Father but he will never be Papa, or indeed any sort of paterfamilias. The latter role may be taken up by a mortal, or not; the incredible apparition of the hero is naturally most dramatic when no human father is apparent, so that the secular world may see the hero as illegitimate.

The result, as he later quotes Alwyn and Brinley Rees (1961: 232) as saying, is the same: "the advent of the hero is invariably an embarrassment to someone or other, and an attempt is made to get rid of him" (Miller 2000: 90)—though this sometimes takes the form of attempted infanticide.

being a “friend of the stainless” Buddhism [*vimalamitra*]). His passive abandonment is followed by active renunciation, which constitutes the same series of moves that the Khotanese narrative of Earth-Breast made. Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that Padmasambhava likewise follows the same pattern: that he was found miraculously alive in the wilderness (on his lotus flower) and then renounced his royal home (this time an adoptee home like Earth-Breast’s at the Chinese court) in favour of another life, when he orchestrated his own exile from Uḍḍiyāna?

It may be argued that too much can be read into the potted life-story of a character in a work like the *Zangs gling ma*. Perhaps the life-story of Vimalamitra was unknown and so the compiler of the work (Nyang ral, or the compiler of a source he used to recount Vimalamitra’s story) “filled in the blanks” without intending (consciously) to legitimise his spiritual status thereby. Yet, even if this is the case, it is still important *what* narrative was used as filler, since whatever seemed an appropriate childhood to provide for Vimalamitra sheds light on the milieu in which the narratives were compiled and received. The wider mythic connotations contained in Vimalamitra’s potted biography set the reader up to perceive him as a heroic type of character with an elevated status. This is borne out in his manifest superiority to the Tibetan ruler later in the narrative. The ways that this “back-story” effects this, by drawing on pre-existing heroic mythology, uncovers something of the society in which it was told. In this context, it is interesting that his grandfather is Emperor Aśoka, who has already appeared in a number of the narratives recounted above. Wherever the tale was sourced from, it was incorporated here and thereby invested the hero Vimalamitra with a power that the tellers themselves perhaps did not fully comprehend.

Once in Tibet, Vimalamitra acts in a similar way to Padmasambhava in not bowing to the king, but uniquely also refuses to prostrate before the statues of Buddhist deities at bSam yas Monastery (ZLh 63a3–5). Padmasambhava has already shown his power over the statues of the king’s monastery, including Vairocana of the Bodhi temple, when he causes them to float out into the sky at the consecration of bSam yas (ZLh 35b3–5).¹¹⁹ Yet this is a more straightforwardly positive form of metonymy, suggesting a

¹¹⁹ Another possible metonymic symbol of Khri Srong lde btsan is the stele (*rdo rings*) on which he inscribed the famous bSam yas Inscription. Padmasambhava also magically manipulates this by making the four bronze dogs on top of it (or perhaps them, thus suggesting the existence of four stelae) come alive, jump and bark in the four directions (ZLh 35b3–36a1).

consecration of the king himself as a Buddhist ruler.¹²⁰ In contrast, when Vimalamitra finally bows to Buddha Vairocana, the statue cracks in half from head to foot (ZLh 63b4–5). The king thinks the Indian master must be a heretic (*rgyal po'i thugs la mu stegs pa yin par 'dug snyam*; ZLh 63b5–64a1), but then Vimalamitra criticises the king for his lack of faith, prostrates again and the image returns to a state more beautiful than before and lights shine upon the central temple of bSam yas (ZLh 64a1–4). A similar narrative *topos* is found in the life-story of Virūpa, one of the 84 *Mahāsiddhas*, a popular version of whose biographies was perhaps translated into Tibetan in the early 12th century,¹²¹ hence before the *Zangs gling ma* was compiled.¹²² It appears that a number of narrative elements among these biographies were adapted, attributed to new masters, and included in the *Zangs gling ma*, but this particular vignette may also be a stable element of Vimalamitra's *vita*.¹²³ It may reflect a wish to imbue Vimalamitra with the status of a wild Indic *siddha* (like Padmasambhava), despite his more established position as abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery. Finally, he bows to the king (against the latter's now contrite wishes), causing Khri Srong lde btsan's robes to

¹²⁰ An interesting parallel tradition from Myanmar displays similar *topoi* (as well as motifs from the Aśoka-Samudra narrative that also influenced Tibet) in its description of the conversion of the Bago/Pegu (Mon) Kingdom to Buddhism at some time after the 5th century:

A king of Pago, Tissa by name, had abandoned the worship of the Buddha and instead practised Brahmanical worship. He persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed Buddha images or cast them into ditches. A pious Buddhist girl, the daughter of a merchant, restored the images, then washed and worshipped them. The king could not tolerate such defiance, of course, and had the girl dragged before him. He tried to have her executed in several ways, but she seemed impossible to kill. Elephants would not trample her, while the fire of her pyre would not burn her. Eventually the king, intrigued by these events, asked the girl to perform a miracle. He stated that, if she was able to make a Buddha image produce seven new images and then make all eight statues fly into heaven, she would be set free. The girl spoke an act of truth, and the eight Buddha statues flew up into the sky. The king was then converted to Buddhism and elevated the girl to the position of chief queen (Bischoff 1995: 39–40).

¹²¹ Kapstein (2006b: 52).

¹²² However, the vignette concerning Virūpa and the statue is markedly different from that of Vimalamitra (at least according to the version translated in Robinson [1979: 29–30]). Virūpa at first refuses to bow to a *non-Buddhist* statue, that of Mahādeva, and then destroys it by chanting homage to the Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha at it. He then restores the deity but with an image of Mahākaruṇa Avalokiteśvara on top of it, instructing the frightened king that the former will only remain whole as long as the latter is not removed. This display causes another yogi, rather than the king, to convert to Buddhism and become his disciple.

¹²³ The *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo* also includes this event in the story of Vimalamitra in Tibet (translated in Valby [1983: 56]), though in this case Khri Srong lde btsan only hears about it through his translators.

catch fire once again; the king prostrates before Vimalamitra and places him with great ceremony on a high throne (ZLh 64a5–64b4).¹²⁴

This is, of course, similar to Padmasambhava's meeting with Khri Srong lde btsan, but unlike that of any other master in the *Zangs gling ma*. In narrative terms, they also share similar early lives in Indic regions, both of which are marked by claiming divine and royal parentage, abandonment/exile by the human parent and then return to that world from the wilderness. Perhaps, having also both been the sons of kings, Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra look at the king of another country as an equal. Alternatively, their new spiritual status, acquired outside the realm of mundane kingship, gives them the authority to disparage the status of the Tibetan ruler. Yet it is interesting that these two back-stories are attached to these two Indic emanations.

In telling such stories about the Buddhist masters who brought the Dharma to Tibet, the *Zangs gling ma* draws on a deep, even mythic, narrative tradition of depicting "victimised heroes,"¹²⁵ overcoming their early abandonment/exile by an unjust usurper to regain their rightful place at the head of the realm. However, the logic of this narrative, which once invested a royal-born hero with a power and destiny that allowed him to become king again, in this Buddhist context leads to casting the religious masters in the narrative as superior to royal figures, which is unprecedented in early Tibetan historiography and its depiction of its imperium. In this Buddhist context, the *topos* of the abandoned/exiled hero has also become mixed with that of renunciation, perhaps ultimately in emulation of the Buddha. This serves to add higher status to the Buddhist master, at once victimised by and renouncing the world, in contrast to the king who symbolises society and mundane power.

¹²⁴ This is not included in the *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo*. Instead, Khri Srong lde btsan is so impressed when he hears about the destruction and rejuvenation of the Vairocana statue that, when they meet the next day, he bows to Vimalamitra immediately (see Valby [1983: 56]). The scene is somewhat oddly represented in the *Zangs gling ma*, which has the king say that he is not worthy of being prostrated to before Vimalamitra then bows regardless. It is tempting to see the inclusion of this vignette here as related to the inclusion of his "heroic" birth narrative earlier in the *Zangs gling ma*, namely as marking Vimalamitra out as special (and similar to Padmasambhava).

¹²⁵ Propp ([1928] 1968: 36). Propp's proposed 31 functions of the folktale do not correspond so neatly to the abandonment/exile narratives discussed here, though some of the elements of state formation mythology are found among the Proppian functions, and the schema could be incorporated into a wider discussion of Tibetan literary *topoi* at a later date.

The degraded emperor

In this narrative, does Khri Srong lde btsan play the role of the unjust king who is rightly overthrown? Since Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra are religious masters (though with somewhat different royal pasts), rather than archetypal just kings overcoming an unjust monarch, the logic of the narrative dictates a religious figure proving his superiority to a royal figure. Khri Srong lde btsan is undoubtedly a representative of the Tibetan society that Padmasambhava is entering and wishing to convert to Buddhism. However, he does not seem to fit closely the stereotype of Miller's "controlling authority" or act purely as a representative of "centers of enclosed rigid, restricting, old, and impacted power," which the returning hero overthrows in order to rejuvenate society.¹²⁶ Nor is he immediately obvious as one of Frye's "obstructing characters," whom the audience would recognise as "usurpers." Frye perceptively notes that all characters tend to be redeemed in the comic narrative.¹²⁷ Yet Khri Srong lde btsan appears to play a more pivotal and positive role in the *Zangs gling ma* than Frye's representation suggests, which indicates a problem of mixed messages in the narrative.

In order to find a solution, perhaps we should pay more attention to the objects involved and their metonymic relation to the king.¹²⁸ It seems that the *Zangs gling ma* holds the power of the king to reside metonymically in a) his royal robe, the regalia of his preeminent social status, and b) the palladium Vairocana statue, symbolising Buddhist monarch reigning over the *maṇḍala* of Tibet. The miraculous control shown over each of these by religious masters—Padmasambhava when he sets fire to the king's robe and Vimalamitra when he destroys the statue—equate to their control over Khri Srong lde btsan. These Buddhist masters not only temporarily wrest control of Khri Srong lde btsan's power from him, but also then return it to the Tibetan ruler. His continued royal

¹²⁶ Miller (2000: 134).

¹²⁷ Frye's statement on the resolution of the newly transformed, comic "society" runs as follows:

The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking [i.e. obstructing] characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy. ([1957] 1971: 166; square brackets are mine)

¹²⁸ In this, I am following Stanley Tambiah, who criticises Max Weber for his emphasis on the charismatic leader and "blindness to the 'objectification of charisma in talismans, charms, regalia, palladia and so forth'" (Tambiah [1984: 335], quoted in Gentry [2017: 21]).

control over Tibet is shown by the fact that, after being upstaged by Padmasambhava, he brings the four horns of Tibet under his control and instigates a Buddhist law throughout the country (albeit one that privileges religious practitioners; ZLh 55b4–60b4). His continued identification with Buddhism is suggested by the fact that the Buddha Vairocana is a Buddhist deity and is not only destroyed but also magically reconstructed. The narrative thus takes place within the Buddhist cosmos, where these two acts of controlling the king could be argued to bring about the purification rather than annihilation of the king's charisma. From this perspective, Khri Srong lde btsan is not the antagonist, but is himself in some way a protagonist who undergoes degradation (at the hand of Buddhist masters acting as helpers) as part of his own heroic journey and the conversion or purifying of Tibet as a Buddhist land. In this sense, Vimalamitra's destruction and reconstitution of the Vairocana Buddha statue and Padmasambhava's control of the same statue at the completion ceremony for bSam yas Monastery are not opposed at all, but rather similar "consecration" rituals. Frye himself has noted the use of ritual humiliation in Central Eurasian royal ceremonies:

Even when those kings were strong and successful, they would have to go through certain ritual ceremonies in which they assumed the opposite role. We are told that in Babylon at the time of the New Year festival, a king, such as Nebuchadnezzar, would go through a ceremony of ritual humiliation, have his face slapped by the priest and that sort of thing, and then his title would be renewed for another year. Nebuchadnezzar was a strong and successful monarch; but if this ceremony were omitted, it might provoke the jealousy of his tutelary deity.¹²⁹

In the *Zangs gling ma*, the jealousy of the deity Vairocana is less important than the king-turned-disciple keeping his tantric vows to his Buddhist masters, who act as the primary points of reference. Yet the ruler is a secondary type of hero rather than merely their antagonist. The degradation of Khri Srong lde btsan (in a similar way to Nebuchadnezzar) and his relegation in mundane status from the supreme ruler into a tantric disciple, transforms Tibet into a Buddhist country and rejuvenates the kingdom and Khri Srong lde btsan himself.

Nonetheless, his depiction as an inferior ruler of Tibet upstaged by religious masters stands in contrast to the early descriptions of the

¹²⁹ Frye ([1982] 2013). Frye goes on to talk of King David's necessary humiliation at his greatest moment, the time when he was brought that great palladium, the Ark of the Covenant.

Tibetan emperors. The documents surviving from the 8th to 10th centuries depict Khri Srong lde btsan as the pinnacle of imperial and then also religious greatness.¹³⁰ In the *Dbā' bzhed*, he is held responsible for the decline of the Dharma. Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita are therein banished from Tibet in their adulthood, meaning that the dynamic is different from the renunciation of an Indic royal home by Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in the *Zangs gling ma*. Yet both plots reflect positively on the religious protagonists to the detriment of the royal characters. In the *Dbā' bzhed*, Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita are asked to leave Tibet before they have completed their respective tasks in establishing Buddhism there. However, this dismissal does not reflect badly on them. Instead, their treatment highlights the ambivalence of Tibetans towards Buddhism, which the *Dbā' bzhed* claims will cause the decline of the Dharma.¹³¹ In the *Zangs gling ma*, Khri Srong lde btsan is shown up and his royal status specifically made comic by the burning his robes of office. Neither Padmasambhava nor Vimalamitra become kings of Tibet, but these Buddhist masters have instead displaced the king as the central protagonists or heroes, worthy of being given a birth story that retains the formal elements of older mythic hero narratives from Central Eurasia and elsewhere. This act of upstaging, degradation or humiliation of Khri Srong lde btsan aligns him with a new Buddhist trajectory, allowing him to construct bSam yas Monastery, pass Buddhist laws, invite other masters, find his tutelary deity (one of the tantric *bKa' brgyad* deities), take initiation in it and eventually be reborn and enlightened (and find the tantric *bKa' brgyad* corpus again) as Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer.¹³² Thus, the humiliation is real, the superior position of Padmasambhava is real and the later lesser importance of Khri Srong lde btsan is real. Yet *at the time*, in the *Zangs gling ma*, Khri Srong lde btsan is not the antagonist or unjust king, but takes on some of that role as necessary for his conversion. Despite the internal logic of this narrative turn, in the wider history of representing kings in Tibetan biographical literature, Emperor Khri

¹³⁰ See van Schaik and Doney (2007) on these early documents and their varied but wholly positive images of Khri Srong lde btsan.

¹³¹ The influence of the End of the Dharma narrative in Tibetan historiography, especially following the *Dbā' bzhed*, may also have played a part in making Khri Srong lde btsan into a more fallible figure. I hope to expand on this theme in a future publication.

¹³² See Doney (2014) for more on these aspects of the *Zangs gling ma*. One of the longer recensions of the *Zangs gling ma* also includes the "hair-washing" scene, discussed above as it appears in the *Dbā' bzhed*, in chapter 18 (and thus after the invitations of Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra; see Doney [2014: 26 and 31, n. 28]). This appears natural, given the consecratory nature of other parts of the uninterpolated *Zangs gling ma* described here.

Srong lde brtsan of the Yar lung Dynasty has been relegated in status below Padmasambhava (and Vimalamitra) ever since.

Conclusion

In the Central Eurasian and Indic narratives covered at the start of this article, the abandoned/exiled protagonist is born into the royal family and ends up enthroned once more at the finale.¹³³ During the Tibetan imperial period, all the religious figures appear to act like loyal priests to Khri Srong lde btsan and the other emperors. This role is continued narratively in later histories on imperial-period Buddhism. The religious characters remove the emperor's impurity by ritually dying in his place—being exiled or eating his food when he is ill—so that the king can cleanse the country but does not have to die himself. However, the growing popularity of Buddhism among Tibetans seems to have necessitated a literary overthrow of the old order and symbolic destruction of the emperor and the pre-Buddhist impurity he carried with him. As representatives of the incoming religion, Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava thus perform two conflicting roles in the *Dba' bzhed*: both supporting and criticising the ruler of Tibet. They both obediently leave at the command of the emperor, but like dBa' gSas snag they also upstage and upbraid Khri Srong lde btsan in subtle ways. In the 12th-century *Zangs gling ma*, Śāntarakṣita continues in this role but Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra are more explicitly narrated as bringing “comedic” transformation to Tibetan society. Both are semi-royal emanations who give up their kingdoms, in order to become a wandering *siddha* and abbot of Vikramaśīla monastery respectively, and eventually act as spiritual goads to King Khri Srong lde btsan. The above process marks the rise in status of the Buddhist master in Tibetan literature, a process that Peter Schwieger has already well described in society at large.¹³⁴

¹³³ This is, of course, not to claim that all older hero narratives necessarily concern kings. In fact, the application of some of the heroic *topoi* covered in this article to religious figures such as Moses and Jesus (in Rank [1932] 1959: 15–18 and 50–56 respectively) may be a fruitful source of comparison with a process that I argue for in this paragraph (this is also suggested in Dotson [2011: 95–96, n. 43]). Specifically, these two great founders of Abrahamic religions suffer abandonment and exile respectively, under the same threat of death by mass-infanticide, but eventually prove themselves to be superior to their royal antagonists, the Pharaohs and Herod.

¹³⁴ See Schwieger (2000; 2013).

As indicated above, the Indic religious rhetoric of superior religious groups, which Weber sees as belied by reality,¹³⁵ became something else in Tibet. Tibetans perhaps took on the Indic rhetoric of Brahmanical and *siddha* superiority that may not have been real and put it into practice, thereby supplanting the imperial hierarchy that placed the emperor at the top with a new social structure that gave religious figures pre-eminence. If so, they were no doubt helped by the fact that the fall of the empire had led to a power vacuum in central Tibet. This transformation was expressed, or even brought about, by narratives of separate, special, otherworldly religious figures who disregard social mores, criticise society and as a result show their superiority to kings (and thereby their usefulness to the rejuvenation of the power of kings too). These religious figures and their lineages/ institutions attained high status in Tibet; gradually they also gained property that, although rhetorically disparaged, acted as proof of their status and the stability of the system that privileged them—think of Weber's remark: "Property as such is not always recognised as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity."¹³⁶ However, this process was not to be a leading factor in the changes that large-scale monasticism wrought in Tibetan society. In the introduction to this article, I quoted Kapstein's remarks on the dominance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the consequential disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy. He goes on:

At the same time the subjection of the nobles to church rule was mitigated to the extent that the sons of aristocratic families became ranking hierarchs or monk-officials, and thus shared in church power. [...] Within the broader ruling class, therefore, there was a marked degree of concurrence among its lay and monastic facets. The church, however, was generally chary of lay interference and so more or less systematically limited the opportunities of noble households to exercise any appreciable degree of control over it.¹³⁷

This limiting of lay power was probably a process beginning during the lifetime of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, the creator of the *Zangs gling ma*, entailing the overreach of monastic power which he evidently considered a threat to his position.¹³⁸ That being said, Schwieger rightly points out that Tibetan culture was not in general plagued by social upheaval or a wider threat to the Buddhist

¹³⁵ Weber ([1948] 1991: 193).

¹³⁶ *ibid.*: 187.

¹³⁷ Kapstein (2006a: 181).

¹³⁸ See Doney (2014: 8–15).

worldview—what Weber calls “[the] technological repercussion and economic transformation [that] threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground.”¹³⁹ Therefore, although different religious groups held power, the status of religious figures in general did not change much, once established, until the 20th century.

Perhaps this overthrow of the previous value and status of the emperor had been forgotten already in the 16th century. A prominent religious historian of that century, dPa’ bo gTsug lag phreng ba (1504–1566), argues against the *Dbā’ bzhed* that no Indian religious figure would bow to a Tibetan king—a symbol of merely mundane power.¹⁴⁰ To borrow the terminology of Max Weber, the pre-eminent status of the Tibetan emperor, which was conveyed in the Old Tibetan manuscripts and imperial inscriptions, is no longer “distinctly recognisable,” whereas the superior status of religious figures is taken as “an absolutely given fact to be accepted” within his society.¹⁴¹ This reversal of earlier historical representations of Khri Srong lde btsan and Padmasambhava also influenced interaction between living religious figures and those in mundane authority in Tibet,¹⁴² and so was not merely confined to the pages of Tibetan literature. These are just some of the effects on Tibetan notions of social status brought about by the growing power of Buddhism and Buddhist masters, whose narratives drew so successfully on older state formation mythology and the *topoi* of exile and abandonment to valorise their protagonists.

Bibliography

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Dbā’ bzhed.

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¹³⁹ Weber ([1948] 1991: 194)

¹⁴⁰ See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 54, n. 152).

¹⁴¹ Weber as quoted in Gerth and Mills ([1948] 1991: 184).

¹⁴² See Doney (2017: 318).

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