

# Inscriptions in Areas of Historical Western Tibet (*mNga' ris skor gsum*) in their Contexts: A Brief Overview with Selected Examples<sup>1</sup>

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The area of the 10th-11th-century West Tibetan kingdom and its successor kingdoms Purang, Guge and Ladakh is today mainly divided between China and India, with a small part belonging to Nepal. Tibetan inscriptions constitute an important part of the extensive Buddhist heritage and vital cultural traditions in areas all over historical Western Tibet. This paper seeks to present an overview on these inscriptions in key areas of historical Western Tibet, such as Purang and Guge (including Spiti and Upper Kinnaur), based on selected examples, all of which were documented *in situ* during the past two decades by taking into account their various contexts. In the first part, after a brief introduction on the research history, the geographical-historical setting and spatial and functional contexts of inscriptions are discussed, which are mainly characterized by Tibetan Buddhism. Then, the dominating emic concept of religious purpose (merit) and Tibetan terminology related to inscriptions, technical and material realities are briefly given attention before highlighting relevant administrative and ritual practices as well as visual aspects. Finally, structured mainly on the material support on which inscriptions are found (correlating to some degree with the chronological distribution), a number of inscriptions on stone, mineral building materials, metal, clay and cloth are analysed and also presented through illustrations, partly also in transliteration and in translation, in order to demonstrate the various different types of inscriptions, their content, materiality, functions and contexts.

*Keywords: historical Western Tibet; Tibetan Buddhism; inscriptions: Tibetan terminology; merit; material support; inscriptions on stone; inscriptions on mineral building materials; inscriptions on cloth; inscriptions on clay.*

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1 The transliteration of written Tibetan follows a slightly modified form of the »Wylie system«. Tibetan words are rendered in italics without hyphens. In the case of names, the spelling is in Roman and the root letter (in Tibetan *ming gzhi*) is capitalized. As a rule, on the first mention of a name the spelling corresponding to the academic transliteration is given in brackets.

### Introduction

The first collection of old (pre-9th-century) Tibetan inscriptions was compiled by the Tibetan monk scholar Katok Rindzin Tsewang Norbu<sup>2</sup> (1698-1755) as early as the 18th century. The scientific study of inscriptions in Tibet began in the late 1940s with Hugh E. Richardson (1905-2000)<sup>3</sup> and Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984).<sup>4</sup> For a long time thereafter it mainly focused on early (c. mid-8th-mid-9th-century) inscriptions on stone pillars or stelae (*rdo ring*), erected with the purpose of making manifest or visible sworn edicts and undertakings, primarily political and/or juridical decisions by the Tibetan emperor (*btsan po*). Most of these inscriptions (including a few on metal bells) are associated with a religious, mainly Buddhist context, in particular Buddhist temples and monasteries.<sup>5</sup> Some early inscriptions which are found at burial mound sites and on rocks deal with the divine status and cult of the emperor.

In the second half of the 20th century, »the corpus of Tibetan inscriptions has been essentially studied from the point of view of its content«.<sup>6</sup> In recent decades this was to some degree also done in connection with the (re-)study and (re-)edition of historiographic texts, such as the »Old Tibetan Annals«<sup>7</sup> and other early (pre-10th-century) written materials found at Dunhuang and other Central Asian sites,<sup>8</sup> partly also with a focus on palaeography and linguistics.<sup>9</sup>

Until now, the study of inscriptions together with the investigation of their immediate and further spatial, societal, narrative, performative and other contexts was carried out in Tibet only in individual cases, partly in combination with historical, social anthropological or archaeological research.<sup>10</sup>

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- 2 In written Tibetan *Kaḥ thog Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu*.
  - 3 Between 1949 and 1978 Richardson published many articles on old inscriptions from Central Tibet. His most widely known publication in this regard is the book *A Corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions* (1985).
  - 4 See, for example, Tucci, *Tombs*.
  - 5 The first traces of Buddhism appeared in Tibet in the 7th century. The earliest Buddhist temples in Tibet, the Jokhang (Jo khang) and Tradruk temples (in Tibetan Khra 'brug, literally »Thundering Falcon«), most probably date from the late 630s (see Sørensen and Hazod, in cooperation with Tsering Gyalbo, *Thundering Falcon*, 15). Initiated by the inauguration (in 779) of the first Buddhist monastery in Samye (bSam yas) (founded with royal support), from the late 8th century onward Buddhism increasingly gained influence, even allowing us to speak of a state religion (see Hazod, *Anti-Buddhist Law*), although until the end of the Tibetan Empire (c. 866) it did not represent an exclusive ideology (Hazod, *Religious conversion*).
  - 6 Scherrer-Schaub, *Tibetan inscriptions*, 139. A major example for such a study is the work by Li and Coblin, *Old Tibetan Inscriptions*.
  - 7 See Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*. This text consists of two fragmentary untitled manuscripts – designated as Pelliot Tibétain/PT 1288 (kept in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris) and IOL Tib J 750 (kept in the British Library, London) which were found in the early 20th century in a »hidden library« in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang in present-day Gansu Province, China.
  - 8 See, for example, Panglung, Grabmäler; Scherrer-Schaub, *Towards a methodology*; Scherrer-Schaub and Bonani, *Typology*.
  - 9 See, for example, Hill, *Rkong po inscription*, and Dotson and Helman-Ważny, *Codicology, Paleography and Orthography*. Additional information on the history of research on Tibetan inscriptions is provided by Tropper, *Epigraphy*.
  - 10 See, for example, Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus (Pasang Wangdu), *Bod kyi rdo brkos yi ge*; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, *lHa khang gi mtshan byang*; Hazod, *Sino-Tibetan Treaty pillar*; Sha bo mkha' byams (Shawo Khacham), *rDo brkos yig rnying*.

Studies of inscriptions in areas of historical Western Tibet were carried out mostly within the framework of research on early (10th-12th-century) West Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and temples as well as rock engravings (dating largely from pre-historic periods, to a small degree from the period between c. the 9th and 15th centuries). Essential pioneering work was carried out by August Hermann Francke (1870-1930) and Yo seb dGe rgan (bSod nams Tshe brtan, better known as Joseph Gergan) (c. 1877-1946) between c. 1900 and 1930, followed in the 1930s by Giuseppe Tucci.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1990s studies of inscriptions (as well as related investigations of manuscripts, including palaeography) by Christian Luczanits, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, Ernst Steinkellner, Helmut Tauscher and Kurt Tropper within the framework of transdisciplinary research on the founding phase (996-997) of Tabo Monastery in the Spiti valley brought a substantial increase in insights in terms of content and methodology,<sup>12</sup> all of which was also relevant for concurrent and subsequent historical, art-historical, architectural and social anthropological studies.<sup>13</sup> Crucial factors in this process were, on the one hand, the detailed investigation of inscriptions *in situ*, on the other, the continuously improved method of documentation and the extension of surveys of inscriptions to sites with comparable contexts (predominantly Buddhist monuments) in further areas all over historical Western Tibet.<sup>14</sup>

So far inscriptions in areas of historical Western Tibet were, with only a few exceptions, studied from a perspective including their various contexts. It is only during the past decade that research on inscriptions together with their historical, visual, spatial, performative and other contexts was begun. Such investigations were carried out, among others, at Khartse and Tholing in Tsamda District, at Khorchag and Chokro (lCog ro) in Purang District (all in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China), again at Tabo in Spiti, most recently again also in Alchi in Ladakh (in the Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir states of India, respectively).<sup>15</sup>

This brief overview with selected examples comprises a wide chronological frame (from the 9th century to the present) and also looks at spatial, political, ritual and other contexts of inscriptions. In addition, the materiality or material support of inscriptions, movability, function, location and further classificatory criteria are included (thereby following suggestions by Scherrer-Schaub in her quest for a descriptive and comprehensive catalogue of Tibetan inscriptions).<sup>16</sup>

11 See, for example, Francke, *First Collection*; Francke, *Second Collection*; dGe rgan, *Bla dwags rgyal rabs*; Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica I*; Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica II*; Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica III*, Parte I; Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica III*, Parte II.

12 See Luczanits, *Minor Inscriptions*; Steinkellner and Luczanits, *Renovation inscription*; Scherrer-Schaub, *Towards a methodology*; Tauscher, *Admonitory inscription*; Tropper, *New evidence*.

13 See Klimburg-Salter *et al.*, *Tabo*; Luczanits, *Clay sculptures*; Petech, *Western Tibet*; Feiglstorfer, *Buddhistische Sakralarchitektur*; Jahoda, *Socio-Economic Organisation*; Heller, *Maṇḍala Temple*; Kalantari, *Hārītī and Pāñcika*.

14 See in particular Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po (Guge Tsering Gyalpo), *mNga' ris chos 'byung*; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, *Wa chen phug pa'i ldebs ris*; Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, *lHa khang gi mtshan byang*; Tropper, *Dgung 'phur Monastery*; Tropper, *Pang gra phug*; Tropper, *Dung dkar*; Tropper, *Lha khang chen mo*.

15 See, for example, Tshe ring rgyal po and Papa-Kalantari, in cooperation with Jahoda, *Buddhist Monuments*; Jahoda and Kalantari, *Eine frühe buddhistische Steinstele*; Heller, *Donor inscriptions*; Tsering Gyalpo *et al.*, འཁོར་ཆུ་མཚན་གྱི་མཚན་ལོ་རྒྱུ་ / *Khorchag / 廓迦寺文史大观*; Jahoda and Kalantari, *Kingship*; Heller, *Inscribing*; Luczanits, *Pearl Garland Composition*.

16 See Scherrer-Schaub, *Tibetan inscriptions*, 140-141.

### *Geographical and Historical Setting*

Historical Western Tibet refers to the territory of the West Tibetan kingdom and its successor kingdoms Purang, Guge and Ladakh.<sup>17</sup> With the exception of Ladakh and the adjacent regions of Zanskar and Ruthok,<sup>18</sup> this overview covers inscriptions in a number of key areas of historical Western Tibet today belonging to China, such as Guge and Purang,<sup>19</sup> as well as areas such as Spiti and Upper Kinnaur in India.<sup>20</sup> The reason for focusing on inscriptions and their contexts in these areas is due to the author's close personal acquaintance with them, based on in-depth field research in situ, in the case of Khartse by way of an exceptionally detailed documentation made by the late Guge Tsering Gyalpo.<sup>21</sup>

The earliest (in contrast to the highland inscriptions documented by Bellezza<sup>22</sup> and those in Alchi, Ladakh, studied by Takeuchi<sup>23</sup> which can be dated with a higher degree of reliability) inscription is from the second quarter of the 9th century or slightly later, that is, from the time of the Tibetan Empire (c. 608-866 CE).<sup>24</sup> This inscription thus predates not only the foundation of the West Tibetan kingdom (around 932) but also the introduction of Buddhism as a state religion in historical Western Tibet which can be dated to 986 (corresponding to a Fire Male Dog year of the Tibetan calendar).<sup>25</sup>

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17 The West Tibetan kingdom was founded in the early 930s by Kyide Nyimagön (sKyid lde Nyi ma mgon), a descendant of the royal Central Tibetan Purgyal (sPu rgyal) dynasty, and lasted until the late 11th century. The realm of this kingdom which became known among other things as Ngari Khorsum (mNga' ris skor gsum, literally »the three circles of the upper [western] subject territories«) encompassed the countries of Purang (sPu rang, also sPu hrengs, etc.), Guge (Gu ge) and Maryül (Mar yul) (to some extent congruent with Ladakh [La dwags]), which, together with lesser regions, such as Zanskar (Zangs dkar), Spiti (sPyi ti), Upper Kinnaur (Khu nu), developed from the 12th century onward into regional successor kingdoms. See Jahoda, *Socio-Economic Organisation*, 50-51.

18 In written Tibetan Ru thog.

19 Guge and Purang correspond more or less to the Tsamda (rTsa' mda'), Gar (sGar), and Purang Districts in the West of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.

20 These areas (bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region) are nowadays part of the Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur Districts in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

21 To include inscriptions from Ladakh and adjacent regions would have exceeded the space available for this contribution. While it is impossible to mention all relevant research works in these areas which deal with inscriptions, attention should be drawn at least to the site of Alchi. Around one hundred short Tibetan rock inscriptions together with drawings of Buddhist *stūpas* were found there which can most probably be dated to c. the 9th-11th centuries and are particularly relevant on account of a combination of (mainly military) titles, clan and given names appearing in these inscriptions (Takeuchi, *Old Tibetan rock inscriptions*, 52-54). These names can be related to other sites and allow the identification of different wider contexts, such as the settlement and influence areas of clans, etc. In the case of the monastic complex at Alchi, with a number of Buddhist monuments, temples and *mchod rten* (the earliest being datable from before the 13th century) which feature important Buddhist art, such as wood carvings, sculptures and paintings, and a considerable number of inscriptions, the latter are of great relevance in ongoing debates regarding the dating of these monuments (see, for example, Heller and Shawo Khacham, *Tibetan inscriptions at Alchi, and Luczanits, Pearl Garland Composition*).

22 See Bellezza, *Written in Stone*.

23 See Takeuchi, *Old Tibetan rock inscriptions*.

24 Date according to Dotson, *Naming the king*, 8.

25 See Jahoda and Kalantari, *Kingship*, 79, 84.

### *Spatial and Functional Contexts*

With a few exceptions, more or less all inscriptions from the sample sites are of a religious nature, in particular characterized by Tibetan Buddhism, that is, different »schools« of Tibetan Buddhism, predominantly those distinguished by a form of monastic organization.<sup>26</sup> Many inscriptions, in particular those of greater length, are therefore found in monastic Buddhist contexts, also in temples (including a number of cave temples).

They are often related to the foundation of these monuments (sometimes also to a renovation or extension) and mostly occur together with (in fact usually in close spatial connection to) wall paintings, additionally also on a variety of more or less movable religious objects which are commonly kept in Buddhist monasteries and temples, such as paintings on cloth (including *thangkas*, Tib. *thang ka*), sculptures and other ritual objects. The inscriptions' material supports in these cases are usually of durable quality, such as mineral building materials, metal, stone, and wood (of specific quality). In the case of clay and cloth, the surface is specifically treated or coated.

In a smaller number of cases the material support consists of wood, paper and clay with no particular (or specifically enhanced) quality. The objects bearing inscriptions belonging to this category, too, are characterized by a strong relationship to Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast to the other category, they are used for short-term or everyday purpose and function. The function and use (as well as accessibility) of both categories of inscriptions (together with related material supports) is subject to respective religious (Buddhist) criteria, that is, various different rules, regulations and conventions obtaining for monks, nuns, lay (or-dained) people, men/women, etc.

The costs for the production of inscriptions (together with the paintings, etc.), also in terms of time and effort (for the procurement of raw material, stone-cutters, scribes, etc.) manifest a clear relevance of socio-economic and religio-political criteria. Wall inscriptions in Buddhist monasteries were one important medium (besides individual scroll documents, Tib. *dril*) for recording the founder and foundation of a monument. Such inscriptions (subsequently also quotes or paraphrases contained in historiographic texts) often also refer to the resources spent for the founding of a monastery.<sup>27</sup> The same is true for the production of exquisite Buddhist scroll paintings (many of which make use of gold, also for inscriptions),

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26 A similar result was reached by John Bellezza with regard to his survey of 77 sites in the sparsely populated highlands of Upper Tibet (averaging around 4,600 m). Forty-one sites in the Changthang (Byang thang) and Tö (sTod) areas were found to contain rock inscriptions, altogether more than 550 epigraphs. The inscriptions, most of which »concern religious matters«, were dated by him to the period between 630 and 1300 CE (Bellezza, *Written in Stone*, 5). In contrast to the examples treated in this paper (from sites between c. 3,800 and 4,200 m), the body of religious inscriptions found by him comprises not only Buddhist mantras, prayers, dedications and memorials but also some of a non-Buddhist nature, »archaic religious [...] and localized religious cults«, either belonging to one form of the Bön (Tib. Bon) religion or »a pan-regional Tibetan religious movement of that time« (*ibid.*). A few »non-religious inscriptions include proper names of people, clans and places, partial alphabets, and labels identifying rock art.« (*ibid.*).

27 These costs were quite enormous. They consisted, first of all, in the donation of land and human power for the construction of a monument, in addition for its decoration through the financing of artisans and their materials, its maintenance through the recruitment of monks from local communities and the allocation (and levying) of dues in kind and labour services from peasant and/or nomadic families. To this can be added the donation of funds for financing an increasing demand for religious rituals and festivals as well as for the financing of repair works and for additional construction works (see Jahoda, Foundations).

but also for metal sculptures (with inscriptions) or stone stelae (which were usually made by order of members of the ruling royal family, the aristocracy or leading Buddhist clergy, during the 10th-12th centuries mostly members of the royal family or one of the leading aristocratic families allied with them).<sup>28</sup> Conversely, inscribed objects and items without specific durability or quality which typically date from more recent periods (19th century onward) are related primarily to the religious practices of (non-aristocratic) communities with sedentary, semi-sedentary and nomadic subjects.

#### *Concept of Religious Purpose: Merit*

The founding of Buddhist monuments as well as the creation and production of religious objects (as part of the decoration of a monastery, etc. or independent of this), therefore also all inscriptions appearing in connection with these buildings, paintings or objects or independent of these, are in all cases motivated by basically the same religious purpose, that is, the accumulation of merit (*bsod nams*, Sanskrit *punya*), which is of paramount importance in a Buddhist context in order to contribute to a better rebirth and ultimately reach nirvana (*myang 'das*, literally »[a state of having] passed beyond [any] experience«, Skt. *nirvāṇa*), in other words liberation from being reborn or leaving the repeating cycle of birth, life and death. For this reason (in order to relate the merit to the person/s), the names of those who performed such virtuous deeds<sup>29</sup> and asked for the production of such objects (or for whom such objects were ordered to be made), or those who contributed to their making (by way of donations) or those who were responsible for their consecration (Tib. *rab gnas* or *dbang skur*, the latter meaning literally empowerment) – sometimes identical with the person/s just mentioned – are almost always part of the inscription.

Thus, for historical, religious and social anthropological studies of such Buddhist monuments as well as of single objects, the analysis of related inscriptions together with explicitly mentioned emic concepts is an extremely relevant if not necessary element of research with a strong *in situ* and contextual perspective.

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28 High or elite social status as well as the resources to afford the costs and access to artists for the creation of floor mosaics with inscriptions as well as related sacrificial rituals in the private context of a *villa rustica* manifest the clear relevance of socio-economic and religio-political criteria in third-century-AD Greece. See the contribution by Rathmayr and Scheibelreiter-Gail, this issue.

29 The corresponding Tibetan expression *dge ba'i las* consists of *dge ba*, literally virtue (partly used synonymously with *bsod nams*) and *las* (literally deed, action; Sanskrit *karma*), thus often referred to in translations as »good karma«. A Tibetan author from the 14th century listed the erection of stelae with inscriptions or the engraving of inscriptional texts on stelae as one of »four gates of good royal practice« (Scherrer-Schaub, Tibetan inscriptions, 143). The presence of religious formulas on *tsha tsha* (stamped clay images) is also credited as »especially increasing merit« and »providing multiple benefits such as increasing a person's life span, protecting them from premature death, guaranteeing rebirth in pure lands, purifying past misdeeds and obscurations« (Namgyal Lama, *Tsha tsha* inscriptions, 25).

*Terminology: History, Techniques, Materials and Objects*

The introduction of the Tibetan script (which is based on an Indic script) seems to date to the decade(s) prior to the mid-7th century. The earliest period covered by the *Old Tibetan Annals* is the early to mid-650s.<sup>30</sup> According to post-dynastic Tibetan sources, »legal and administrative practices were first *inscribed* on wooden slips, and then later transferred to paper« [my emphasis, CJ].<sup>31</sup> These wooden slips or tablets seem to have been referred to as *byang bu*. They were given up for the recording of censuses (*pha los*) in 743/744.<sup>32</sup> The use of »notched pieces of wood<sup>33</sup> and knotted strings in covenants« in Tibet at the time when there were »no written characters« is mentioned by the *Old Tang Annals* (in Chinese *Jiu Tangshu*).<sup>34</sup> A particular sort of early »wooden document« is referred to in the entries of the *Old Tibetan Annals* for the late seventh and early eighth century (that is, for a time when a script and writing had already been introduced) as »red tally« (*khram dmar po*). »Red tallies« (most probably so called because of the use of a red colour, in some cases apparently blood)<sup>35</sup> appear to have been connected with administrative practices of a greater dimension decided by the emperor. They were exchanged for/substituted by/transferred to yellow paper by order of the emperor in 744/745.<sup>36</sup>

In general, tally-sticks (only some of which were coated with red paint) were used for registering administrative information (such as taxes, debts and other data). They were, for example, »employed to relay messages and to keep records and accounts by a system akin to double-entry book-keeping whereby the tally stick was divided into two identical halves.«<sup>37</sup> Many specimens of such sticks (mostly of Tamarisk wood) were found in Central Asian sites such as Miran (which were controlled by the Tibetan army from the late 8th to the mid-9th centuries). They are of sizes up to 40 cm in length and 2 cm in width on the sides and contain

30 Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 10.

31 Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 10-11. The corresponding Tibetan word in the sources quoted by Dotson is *rtsis*. The principal meaning of this word is »to count, calculate, enumerate«, which in early Tibetan dynastic sources with respect to related administrative practices (the recording of authoritative information on pieces of wood) seems to have implied also the meaning of »to incise« (see Róna-Tas, Tally-stick, 169-170; Uebach, Red tally, 60), according to Luciano Petech's theory the initial meaning of the term and related to record-keeping on tally sticks (see Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 55).

32 See Uebach, Red tally, 60; Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 123; van Schaik, Tibetan invention of writing, 55. This word designates a piece of square, oblong wood, cloth, paper, etc. (*Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, vol. II [*bar cha*], 1873). Its root – *byang* – is contained in *mtshan byang* (honorific for *ming byang*, literally »name panel«), in the present a common word relating to (mostly rectangular) captions accompanying and identifying depictions of deities and historical persons in wall paintings (see, for example, Tropper, Epigraphic evidence [in the corresponding Tibetan version of his paper epigraphy is also rendered as *mtshan byang*], and Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, lHa khang gi mts-han byang) and also for inscriptions carved on rocks (see Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, Brag brkos snang brnyan).

33 The corresponding Tibetan word is not rendered but there are reasons to suspect that it may have been *khram shing*, *khram* meaning »tally«, lit. »notch«, »incision« or »indentation« in wood« (Uebach, Red tally, 57).

34 See Bushell, Early history, 440; Pelliot, *Histoire ancienne du Tibet*, 1; Lee, *Early Relations*, 3. Uebach holds tallies (also known in great variety in Tang dynasty China) to have been widespread in early Tibetan state organisation and administration (Uebach, Red tally, 57).

35 Uebach, Red tally, 62.

36 Róna-Tas, Tally-stick, 166; Uebach, Red tally, 61; Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 124. See also Bialek, *Old Tibetan*, 122-131, for a comprehensive discussion of the archaeological evidence, linguistic aspects and historical context of red and plain, unpainted tallies (*khram skya*).

37 Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 52.

writing, often only a few words, and incisions (notches),<sup>38</sup> the short ones being used either to record numerical data (for example, an amount of grain) and the long ones to serve for later match-up or identification.<sup>39</sup>

The conclusions to be drawn from this with regard to the Tibetan terminology used for inscription/s are:

Before the time of the introduction of a script (around the 630s), the word *rtsis*, used in general for the calculating and recording of numerical data and information, perhaps with an original meaning of »to incise«, implied the making of notches and indentations on wooden slips and tablets (*byang bu*) and wooden sticks (*khram shing*). Whether such calculations and enumerations by way of the technique of incision were made exclusively (or primarily) on wood is difficult to tell on account of missing archaeological evidence and written sources.

Beside a description in a contemporary Chinese source, information on this practice is contained in an early post-dynastic account: »The one who arranged the administration [...] was Mgar Stong-btsan [mGar sTong btsan]. He had six *mdzo*-loads of paper [*shog bu*] brought, and wrote down what had been previously arranged [*rtsis*] using pebbles [*rde'u*] and wooden slips (*shing-bu*).«<sup>40</sup> mGar sTong btsan was a leading administrative official from the early 640s onward and served as chief minister (*blon che*, lit. »great minister«) from c. 652-667/668.<sup>41</sup> The entry for the year 655/656 in the *Old Tibetan Annals* mentions that he »wrote the texts of the laws« (*grims [khrims] gyi yi ge bris*) in this year.<sup>42</sup> The Tibetan words *bris* (to write) and *yi ge* (meaning letter, character, text, written language) clearly indicate that in these instances the technique of writing (*bris*) a text on paper was used (implying the use of ink and a writing utensil),<sup>43</sup> in contrast to the earlier technique of incising (*rtsis*) wooden slips (*shing bu* or *byang bu*) with the help of small stones (*rde'u*).

In view of the fact that as early as the year 655/656, the writing of texts (*yi ge bris*) is recorded, it seems not to be improbable that textual recordings in the sense of inscriptions were made in the form of letters/words either incised or written with ink on wooden tablets, slips or sticks not long after the introduction of a script (from around the 630s onward).

The techniques (incising, writing), material (wood, paper), object (*shing bu*, *byang bu*, in particular *khram shing*, notched pieces of wood, and, *shog dril*, scrolls of paper)<sup>44</sup> and the kind of data (numerical, textual) recorded are clearly differentiated in the respective phrases. However, no specific word for inscription *per se* existed or was developed over the course of time.<sup>45</sup>

38 See Róna-Tas, Tally-stick, 166-167, 179.

39 Takeuchi, Military administration, 44-48.

40 Dotson, *Administration and Law*, 351.

41 See also Hazod, Graves of the chief ministers, 48-53.

42 Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 85.

43 As reported in the contemporary *Tang Annals* (see van Schaik, Tibetan invention of writing, 56).

44 The two extant versions of the *Old Tibetan Annals* are written on such scrolls, the bigger one measuring 25.8 x 434 cm. As in the case of legal and administrative practices, which were first inscribed on wooden slips according to post-dynastic sources, it is assumed that the early entries in these annals were also initially written on wooden slips (also suggested by their brief and laconic nature) (Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 10-11).

45 This is similar to ἐπιγραφή (from *epigraphēin*, to write upon, incise) in ancient Greek and *inscriptio* in Latin, corresponding to the German word *Beschriftung* which, like the Greek and Latin (but, until now, in contrast to the Tibetan), found use in the various definitions of epigraphy as a delimited academic discipline or field of study. See, for example, Kloos, *Epigraphik*, 2, and Rhoby, Byzantine epigraphy, 17-29.



As in the self-referential use found in the earliest inscriptions,<sup>46</sup> the usual way to describe and classify inscriptions was by phrases which stated that letters/a text (*yi ge*) was written (*bris*) on, engraved and carved (*brkos*), impressed or stamped (by way of a seal or stamp, *mu dra* or *phyag rgya btab*, incised with a text) into, or painted (*bris*)<sup>47</sup> onto a certain material such as stone (*rdo*), etc., as well as its place and location. This was also applied in the earliest catalogue of Tibetan inscriptions established in the 18th century by Katok Rindzin Tsewang Norbu<sup>48</sup> and is still observed in modern collections, partly with some additional differentiation and information, for example, whether texts of inscriptions were found on processed stone (for example, on stone-pillars/stelae, *rdo ring*) or unprocessed stone (rock, *brag*), often together with the technique, such as carved (*brkos*).<sup>49</sup> In Tibetan sources from the 13th-19th centuries prescriptions for the use of certain inks, with distinct qualities in terms of base of colour (for example, vermilion [*mtshal*], musk [*gla rtsi*], etc.) and also scent (*dri bzang po*), can also be found in connection with handwritten inscriptions in or on certain clay objects (*tsha tsha*).<sup>50</sup>

### *Context: Historical, Administrative, Ritual and Visual Aspects*

Quite clear descriptions also exist with regard to the context of recording practices which can be identified for the pre-writing phase with the calculation and recording of numerical data for administrative practices, while from the 650s onward (soon after the introduction of a script) the legislation of law and political order into a standardized body of catalogues of royal law (based on various earlier legal and bureaucratic manuals) was begun.

46 A sort of model phrase is found, for example, in the (north face) inscription on the Shöl (Zhol) stela in Lhasa from c. 764: *gtsigs gnang ba'i mdo rdo rings la yi ger* [according to an earlier reading *yig gru*] *bris* – »a summary of the edict was put into writing [square letters were inscribed] on a stone-pillar«. See Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus, *Bod kyi rdo brkos yi ge*, 8, and Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 16, for the Tibetan text. On the Shöl stela and its date, see also Dotson, *Administration and Law*, 372, Dotson, *Old Tibetan Annals*, 19, and Hazod (Wandernde Wahrzeichen, 1), who states that the inscriptions on the three sides of this monument can be identified »as the oldest known Tibetan stone inscriptions and earliest extant documentation of Tibetan writing« (Hazod, *Wandering monuments*, 31). Another example for such a standard phrase is found on the stela at Chongye ('Phyong rgyas) from c. 800 dedicated to the emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan sometime after his passing away: *sku yon tan yongs kyis brjod pa'i yi ge / nam zhig rdo rings la bris* – »the [written] words (*yi ge*) which comprehensively express His [the emperor's] virtues have been written for all time on a stone-pillar«. See Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus, *Bod kyi rdo brkos yi ge*, 32, Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 38, and Li and Coblin, *Old Tibetan Inscriptions*, 229, for the Tibetan text and Doney, *Khri Srong lde brtsan*, 109-110, for a full translation of the inscription.

47 From 'bri, which, in addition to »to write« (and in combination with other words), also carries the meaning of to draw, paint, delineate, compose.

48 Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 36, 72.

49 See Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus, *Bod kyi rdo brkos yi ge*, 1-2. Some chapter titles in this book follow closely the earlier 18th century practice: 'phyong rgyas stag rtse zam sna'i rdo ring yi ge (*ibid.*: 29-34): text (*yi ge*, »inscription«) [on] the stone stela (*rdo ring*) at the head of the bridge (*zam sna*) in 'Phyong rgyas stag rtse; *rgyal sde skar chung lha khang gi rdo ring yi ge* (*ibid.*: 42-55): text (*yi ge*, »inscription«) [on] the stone stela (*rdo ring*) at the temple (*lha khang*) of rGyal sde skar chung; *lho brag brag brkos yi ge* (*ibid.*: 126-132): text (*yi ge*, »inscription«) carved (*brkos*) [on] a rock (*brag*) in lHo brag; *Khri lde srong btsan bang so'i rdo ring yi ge* (*ibid.*: 133-146): text (*yi ge*, »inscription«) [on] the stone stela (*rdo ring*) of the grave mound (*bang so*) of [the emperor] Khri lde srong btsan.

50 See Namgyal Lama, *Tsha tsha* inscriptions, 19.

Available textual and archaeological evidence together with the analysis of the historical political context makes evident that while, on the one hand, new techniques of recording information (use of script) and new materials related to this (paper) were introduced or used (stone, metal) leading in various ways to a greater differentiation, it was also a gradual process in which earlier material and technical realities were continued over a longer period, partly side by side with new ones, partly by way of adapting the previously used materials and objects (such as wooden slips) to new techniques (writing, carving), and partly also by applying new forms of information (textual, also visual) and – related to this – also new techniques (for example, stone-cutting) – to (for this context) new materials (stone, metal).

Important elements related to these technical, material and other realities are ritual and performative as well as symbolic aspects which should not be overlooked as they constitute an essential part of these practices.

First of all, the swearing of oaths was a strongly established ritual practice in early Tibetan history. There is ample evidence in historical sources that the idea of »binding words« (together with related rituals) was perhaps the most important aspect for the legitimation of all kinds of contracts and contractual relationships, particularly those in which the ruler was involved.<sup>51</sup> In a number of cases the combination of oath-swearing with animal sacrifice and blood rituals is also manifest, which continued to be practised into the early 9th century in connection with the erection of stone stelae with inscriptions and the simultaneous production of paper copies.<sup>52</sup> The use of blood, which seems to have been closely associated with these practices before the introduction of writing, as well as the more general symbolism of the colour red, such as was applied in the case of the red tally and possibly also in the design of the imperial stone stelae during the second half of the 8th and first half of the 9th century,<sup>53</sup> are further relevant visual elements associated with concepts of royal power (later also carried over into the field of Buddhist authority).

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- 51 »The clan leaders were bound to the *tsempo* [emperor], and each other, by the most solemn of oaths, sworn beneath the heavenly bodies, before the great mountains, and in the presence of the divine beings of the earth. The oath was carved in stone and sealed with a sacrifice.« (van Schaik, *Tibet*, 4). Also, the use of stones on which are carved sun and moon symbols or swastikas, over which oaths were sworn, is mentioned (see Walter, *Buddhism and Empire*, 50).
- 52 This was, for example, also the case for the treaty of 821/822 concluded between China and Tibet on the occasion of which »oath-taking was accompanied by the sacrifice of animals, and, according to the T'ang Annals, all the participants [...] smeared their lips with the blood. That was a regular part of Tibetan ceremonial on such occasions – e.g. at the annual oath of loyalty to the *btsan-po* [emperor].« (Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 107). Oath-taking and the sacrifice of animals was also recorded in the inscription on the monumental stone-stela (*rdo ring*) set up in Lhasa subsequently: »the sun and moon, planets and stars have been invoked as witnesses; its purport has been expounded in solemn words; the oath has been sworn with the sacrifice of animals; and the agreement has been solemnized. [...] Thus the rulers and ministers of both Tibet and China declared, and swore the oath [*mnga*]; and the text having been written in detail it was sealed with the seals of both great kings. It was inscribed [*lag yig du bris*] with the signatures of those ministers who took part in the agreement and the text [*yi ge*] of the agreement was deposited in the archives of each party.« (Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 127). On the rituals accompanying treaties concluded between China and Tibet in the 8th and 9th centuries, see also Imaeda, *Rituel des traités*.
- 53 Indications for this exist with the 8th-century stone stela at Samye (bSam yas) in Central Tibet (Richardson, *Early Tibetan Inscriptions*, 26) and the early 9th-century stela at Chokro (lCog ro) in western Tibet (on which see below). See also Schuh, *Stein- und Felsinschriften*.

### *Selected Examples*

The following selection is structured mainly according to the material support on which the inscriptions are found. This allows us to some degree at the same time to follow the chronological distribution of the given evidence in each category, starting with inscriptions on stone, followed by inscriptions on mineral building materials (from monastic sites) and finally those on metal, clay, and cloth (mainly related to movable objects).

### *Inscriptions on Stone*

The oldest extant example for an inscription on stone in historical Western Tibet is found on a stela (*rdo ring*) located in a raised position on the right bank of the Peacock (*rMa bya*) river in a small farming settlement called Chokro (*lCog ro*) near the town of Purang in the eponymous district in the far west of the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.



*Fig. 1(a-b): Stela with Chenrézik (sPyan ras gzigs, Skt. Avalokiteśvara) image on front (east) side and inscriptions on south (left) and north sides (right); Chokro (lCog ro) village, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Christian Jahoda, 2007).*

This stela (h. 185 cm, average width on front and rear sides 50 cm, on the other sides c. 18 cm) features a relief portrayal of a standing image of 'Phags pa sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug (in Sanskrit Ārya-Avalokiteśvara) facing east<sup>54</sup> and a two-part, religiously motivated inscription on the south- and north-facing sides.

54 The preferred direction for the orientation of Buddhist monuments is towards the east. The main door (as well as the main cult image) often faces eastward. The orientation of figurative representations as well as of inscriptions towards room entrances (that is, in relation to the person/s entering the room/s) is similarly relevant in other contexts. See the contribution by Rathmayr and Scheibelreiter-Gail, this issue.



*Fig. 2: Upper front view of stela with butter marks; Chokro (lCog ro) village, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2010).*



Fig. 3: Detail of inscription on stela facing south; Chokro (*lCog ro*) village, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2004).

The inscription can be translated thus:

In the first half of the first autumn month in the Year of the Horse, Khri brtsan sgra mGon po rgyal of the 'Bro,<sup>55</sup> *seng ge* (lion)<sup>56</sup> and great *zhang*,<sup>57</sup> dedicating equally among all the numberless sentient beings [the merit therefrom accruing], requested that a relief made of stone with an image of Ārya-Avalokiteśvara ('Phags pa sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug) be set up.<sup>58</sup> This root of virtuousness shall be dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings without exception!

55 An aristocratic clan which was allied with the ruling royal family of imperial Tibet and later also highly influential in the West Tibetan kingdom.

56 A great honorary title, presumably one specifically related to the 'Bro clan.

57 Literally, »maternal uncle«, expressing a relationship to the ruler on the mother's side or from the clan of the [classificatory] mother's brother (such as the 'Bro), who, in the time of the monarchy, exercised functions as a minister or another high-ranking official (see also Dotson, Note on *zai*). The changing »systems« of names and titles manifest in inscriptions and historiographical sources dating from different periods is an important aspect for studies of the related societal context, in particular of socio-political and religious hierarchies. See also below (inscriptions on mineral building materials) and the contribution by Rathmayr and Scheibelreiter-Gail, this issue.

58 The expression *gsol pa* in the inscription also seems to permit an interpretation in the sense of *gsol mchod*, so that the request by 'Bro Khri brtsan sgra mGon po rgyal for the erection of the stela can also be seen as being connected with a sacrificial ritual in which the divinity (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*) who lives in and rules the area is asked for permission or blessing for the erection.

Praise! In the presence of Ārya-Avalokiteśvara ('Phags pa sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug) I confess to all [my] misdeeds. There is a joy over and above all merit (*bsod nams*). As far as the obstacle of the afflictions (*nyon mongs pa'i sgrib pa*, Skt. *kleśāvaraṇa*) and the obstacle of the knowable (*shes bya'i sgrib pa*, Skt. *jñeyāvaraṇa*), these two things, are concerned, they will be removed. As far as the great accumulation of merit (*bsod nams*) and wisdom (*ye shes*), these two things, is concerned, it will be brought to perfect completion, and then I, *zhang 'Bro Khri brtsan sgra mGon po rgyal*, and all the numberless sentient beings shall one day attain unsurpassable Buddhahood!

Detailed comparative analysis of the evidence contained in the text of the inscription together with an assessment of the art-historical and palaeographic features permits a tentative dating of the stela and its inscription to the 9th century, most probably around (Fire Horse year) 826 or (Earth Horse year) 838 or in one of the following Horse years (perhaps even as late as the early 10th century).<sup>59</sup>

The inscribed stela seems to be in the tradition of the *rdo ring* from the royal period in Central Tibet, in terms of its calligraphic features and design (including the use of the colour red) as well as through its relationship to an individual of obviously socio-politically elevated status, in this case the member of a high-ranking aristocratic clan. The depicted motif, an image of Avalokiteśvara, the cult of which was introduced, according to later sources, as early as the 7th century (reportedly in relation to this bodhisattva's function as protector of kingship), is a new element (which, at least, cannot be found on contemporary stone stelae from Central Tibet). Also the visual and aesthetic language of the carved image was usually associated with other media and objects (of this time) than stelae made of stone.

What is highly remarkable in the case of the stela is the explicit public Buddhist (self-) confession (and self-fashioning) of a high-ranking person, in this case through the worship of Avalokiteśvara, in a region and at a time where/when Buddhism seems not to have been present at all.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, it can be assumed that the intended function consisted not only in a religious motif (related to the individual concerned and his clan), it must have also had a political significance (corresponding to the rank and area of power of the person who commissioned it). One aspect of this may have been that Buddhism, which »was the dominant «high culture« paradigm [...] in the four directions immediately around Tibet«<sup>61</sup> during much of the time of the Tibetan Empire, must have also served for the purpose of empire-building in a border area like Western Tibet (as earlier in Central Asia). In addition, uninscribed

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59 See Jahoda and Kalantari, *Eine frühe buddhistische Steinstele*, and Papa-Kalantari and Jahoda, *A New Perspective*, for initial reports and discussions of this stela (based on a documentation *in situ* in 2007), and Jahoda and Kalantari, *Power and religion*, for a comprehensive account of relevant historical, artistic and religious contexts (early 9th-century Tibet and Central Asia, reliefs in stone in early Tibetan art, cult of Avalokiteśvara). This account (based on comprehensive documentation *in situ* in 2010) also provides very detailed photography of the inscription and allows revision of some minor editorial flaws in earlier works (such as Tshe ring chos rgyal and Zla ba tshe ring, sPyan ras gzigs kyi rdo ring, and Iwao *et al.*, *Old Tibetan Inscriptions*).

60 There is no archaeological or written evidence for any presence of Buddhism anywhere in historical Western Tibet – with the exception of this stela – before the late 10th century.

61 Beckwith, *Central Eurasian culture complex*, 230.

stone pillars (in considerable number) were part of the cultural practices in this area, most probably related to the worship of ancestors, so that the erection of this stela could be seen to represent a new »high culture« variant of older local stelae related to a non-Tibetan population (*mon rdo*).<sup>62</sup>

As is often the case with monuments of this kind, the Chokro stela also still has a living function within the village community. Joint ceremonial circumambulations (*skor ba*) and butter offerings (on the bodhisattva relief) in the course of main village festivals are ongoing worship practices in the present which might be relevant to further research and should therefore not be ignored.<sup>63</sup>

Inscriptions on stone dating from more recent periods, usually dating to times after the 16th century, are also found on stone slabs which are inscribed with Buddhist mantras such as *om maṇi padme hūṃ* (in Tibetan characters), which is specifically used to call the bodhisattva Chenrézik (sPyan ras gzigs, Skt. Avalokiteśvara). Sometimes stone slabs with such inscriptions are found in huge numbers and erected to form consolidated standing structures which are referred to accordingly as *maṇi* walls. In various areas of historical Western Tibet canonical texts were carved onto a series of stone slabs dedicated to family members »after their death in order to gather merit and to thus contribute to his or her favourable rebirth«. <sup>64</sup>

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62 Further finds of stone stelae in historical Western Tibet already belonging to the period of the West Tibetan kingdom were made at Pooh (sPu) in Upper Kinnaur (from the 11th century, associated with a leading member of the royal family, with representations of a bodhisattva figure in shallow relief on one side and a *mchod rten* [Sanskrit *stūpa*], a type of commemorative Buddhist monument, on the other) and at Kyuwang (Kyu wang) in the Tsamda District of West Tibet. This stela (without inscription) which features images recalling a four-faced image of Nampar Nangdzé (rNam par snang mdzad, Sanskrit Vairocana) and also *mchod rten* is associated with the Great Translator (*lo chen*) Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po) (958-1055). These two examples seem to have had a similar religio-political function as the earlier one at Chokro although on a much more regional and limited scale.

63 The same is true for local oral accounts which have it that in the early 10th century Chokro was the residence area of a minister (*blon po*) of the founder of the West Tibetan dynasty Kyide Nyimagön called Lekdra Lhalek (Legs sgra lha legs) from the aristocratic Chokro (lCog ro) clan. It is also said of the stela that it was originally brought from Central Tibet (dBus gTsang) by this clan. The moving of an inscribed stone stela is discussed by Hazod in the case of the famous Shöl stela in Lhasa (Sørensen and Hazod, in cooperation with Tsering Gyalbo, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain*, 602-603).

64 Tropper, *Epigraphy*, 1015.



*Fig. 4: Inscribed stone slabs, near Sher village, Tsamda (rTsa' mda') District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).*



*Fig. 5: Stone slabs featuring inscriptions of Buddhist mantras such as omṃ maṇi padme hūṃ in Tibetan »headed« script (dbu can) and in Landza (la nydza, a calligraphic script of Indic origin which was adopted in Tibet for the rendering of Sanskrit mantras); near Sher village, Tsamda (rTsa' mda') District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).*





*Fig. 6: Buddhist site with temple (11th-century foundation) and maṇi walls with inscribed stone slabs, Mang nang (Mang nang) Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Christian Jahoda, 2007).*

#### *Inscriptions on Mineral Building Materials*

A large number of inscriptions are found in the earliest West Tibetan foundations of Buddhist monasteries and temples from the late 10th-early 11th century as well as from the consecutive periods. The related material supports of wall inscriptions (many of which are, at least to some degree, well preserved to date) can be identified as masonry covered with plaster (consisting of gypsum, quartz, clay, etc.) on which a preparation layer called the »ground« and a »size«, an organic coating, are applied.<sup>65</sup>

These inscriptions of varying length (from short captions to longish quotes from canonical sources) appear in association with wall paintings which depict, for example, specific historical figures and events, such as the foundation, consecration and renovation of temples (or parts of them), or, in a few cases, also in monuments commemorating a deceased person, such as donor inscriptions in an early 11th-century commemorative Buddhist monument (*mchod rten*) in Tholing. Inscriptions also serve to explain narrative religious paintings, the content of the scenes and activities depicted as well as their ideological meaning.

Early examples of such inscriptions which are also well preserved were found at the monastery of Tabo. In the monastery's entry hall (*sgo khang*), the lower south and north walls are covered with friezes of images representing the royal and monastic elite on the occasion of a public ceremony, most probably connected with the foundation or consecration of the

65 See Bayerová, *Painting materials and techniques*, 237.

monastery. The depictions of these figures, identified through accompanying captions,<sup>66</sup> are executed on both walls in the form of a strict grid-system illustrating an elite assembly expressing a strong hierarchical order. On the south wall are depicted ordained monks, nuns and ordained lay persons, all of them members of the royal family or one of the aristocratic clans. In the centre of the uppermost register, at the position of highest status, the founder of the monastery, Yeshe Ö (Ye shes 'od), is depicted flanked by his sons.<sup>67</sup>



*Fig 7(a): Wall painting of ordained monks, nuns and ordained lay persons identified by inscriptions in captions placed next to them; entrance hall (sgo khang), wall facing south, Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), late 10th century (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).*

66 See Luczanits, *Minor inscriptions*, 103-117, for an edition of these captions.

67 Yeshe Ö was perhaps *the* most important and influential person in the early history of Western Tibet, who, according to all relevant sources, was responsible for the Buddhist transformation of Western Tibet in the late 10th/early 11th century. He is named as Tri Désong Tsuhtsen (Khri Lde srong Gtsug btsan), also as Tri Désongtsen (Khri Lde srong btsan) and Tri Désongtsuk (Khri Lde srong gtsug) but became much better known through his ordination name as the Buddhist monk Yeshé Ö in 989.



*Fig. 7(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Yeshe Ö (Ye shes 'od), the founder of Tabo Monastery, flanked by his sons Devarāja and Nāgarāja identified through inscriptions; from left to right: (1) lha sras na ga ra dza (ordained [lay practitioner] Prince Nāgarāja), (2) dge slong [uncertain reading] chen po ye shes 'od («Great Monk» Jñānaprabha), (3) lha btsun pa de ba ra dza («Royal Monk» Devarāja); entrance hall (sgo khang), Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India) (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).*

On the north wall, lay figures are depicted, according to the identifying captions also of royal status but without mention of having taken a religious vow.



*Fig. 8(a): Wall painting of royal and aristocratic lay figures identified by inscriptions in captions placed next to them; entrance hall (sgo khang), wall facing north, Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), late 10th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2009).*



*Fig. 8(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Prince Jigten Gön (lha sras 'jig rten mgon) and Princess Ö Tro (lha lcam 'od 'phro) identified through inscriptions; entrance hall (sgo khang), wall facing north, Tabo monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), late 10th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2009).*

The distinction between these two wall paintings is obviously first of all based on religious criteria, in addition also taking account of political status and descent, gender and age.<sup>68</sup> Sumptuous robes, baldachins and luxury textiles function as symbols of royal descent and markers of high status for the purpose of the self-fashioning of a religio-political elite.

In the same monastery's assembly hall (*'du khang*), an inscription from 1042 records the partial renovation of the temple by Jangchub Ö (Byang chub 'od) forty-six years after the original foundation by his grand-uncle Yeshe Ö.<sup>69</sup> This inscription is contained in a panel located immediately below a painting of an assembly consisting of the religious and lay elite, with the enthroned Jangchub Ö – entitled as »*dharma* king (and) lord monk« (*chos rgyal rje btsun*) and »royal monk« (*rje rgyal lha btsun*) in the inscription – in the centre.<sup>70</sup>



*Fig. 9: Wall painting depicting Jangchub Ö (Byang chub 'od), responsible for the renovation of Tabo Monastery according to the inscription underneath, amidst an assembly of the religious and lay elite; assembly hall ('du khang), wall leading to the sanctum (dri gtsang khang), Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), c. 1042 (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).*

68 See Jahoda and Kalantari, *Kingship*, 89-98, for a detailed analysis of these paintings.

69 See Steinkellner and Luczanits, *Renovation inscription*, for an edition of this inscription.

70 These titles not only agree with the double functions he held between 1037 and 1057 according to historiographical sources, giving him supremacy in religious affairs and worldly power, but also with the depicted combination of monastic garb and emblems of worldly royal power.

The whole content of the inscription (together with a few captions within the related painting) expresses a strictly Buddhist notion of kingship, with the religio-political sovereign at the centre of his domain (hierarchically structured predominantly along religious criteria), with different religious, political and social status being illustrated through costumes, head-dresses, jewellery and other markers of status and social belonging.<sup>71</sup>

Comparable to this is the depiction of historical figures in a *mchod rten* at Tholing Monastery datable to c. 1019 (or 1025) (*fig. 10*) showing, in addition to a figure in royal dress, men and women from one prominent aristocratic clan, all individually identified through short captions, in order to record their reverential presence at an important ritual occasion and their function as donors (associated with the accumulation of merit) (*fig. 11*).



*Fig. 10: Wall painting depicting in the lower registers historical figures identified by inscriptions in captions placed next to them; mchod rten, Tholing (mTho gling) Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 1019 or 1025 (photo: Zhang Jianlin, c. 1997).*

71 See Jahoda and Kalantari, *Kingship*, 98-101, for a more comprehensive discussion of the various visual elements of this painting.



Fig. 11: Detail of wall painting depicting members of the aristocratic Rugs wer (also Hrugs wer) clan (identified through inscriptions; from left to right: rugs wer skyid 'ar ma; rugs wer khri dog rje; rugs wer srid gsum mkhar; rugs wer tsol) at the time of participating at a commemorative religious ritual, presumably related to the passing away of Yeshe Ö; mchod rten, Tholing (*mTho gling*) Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 1019 or 1025 (photo: Zhang Jianlin, c. 1997).

Similar captions are found in many Buddhist monasteries and temples all over historical Western Tibet dating from various different periods. In some of these sites, like in one of the cave temples in Khartse (dating from the 14th/15th century), the most prominent politico-religious figures of the 10th and 11th centuries, such as Yeshe Ö (947-1019 or 1024), Jangchub Ö (984-1078), Zhiwa Ö (Zhi ba 'od, 1016-1111) and the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055) are honoured through portraits accompanied by short identifying captions. Interestingly these paintings in the interstices between mandalas (*dkyil 'khor*, Sanskrit *maṇḍala*) show them as eminent spiritual teachers (*bla ma*, Sanskrit *guru*) (with respective gestures), without any reference to worldly contexts. This predominantly religious mode of representation agrees with their titles in the inscriptions, where they are revered through titles as elevated *bla mas* and in the case of Jangchub Ö as *pho [b]rang btsun pa* (literally »monk from the palace«), a title reserved for those who were in charge of protecting the Buddhist teachings (*bstan pa skyong ba*).



Fig. 12(a): Wall painting featuring a double portrait of Butön Rinchendrup (*Bu ston Rin chen grub*, 1290–1363) and mandalas; cave temple (*mKhar rdzong lha khang*), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).



Fig. 12(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Yeshe Ö (*Ye shes 'od*) according to the inscription (»Homage to the ›Royal Lama‹ Yeshe Ö«, *lha bla ma ye shes 'od la na mo*); cave temple (*mKhar rdzong lha khang*), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).





Fig. 12(c): Detail of wall painting depicting Rinchen Zangpo (*Rin chen bzang po*) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Great Translator« Rinchen Zangpo«, *lo chen rin chen bzang po la na mo*); cave temple (*mKhar rdzong lha khang*), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

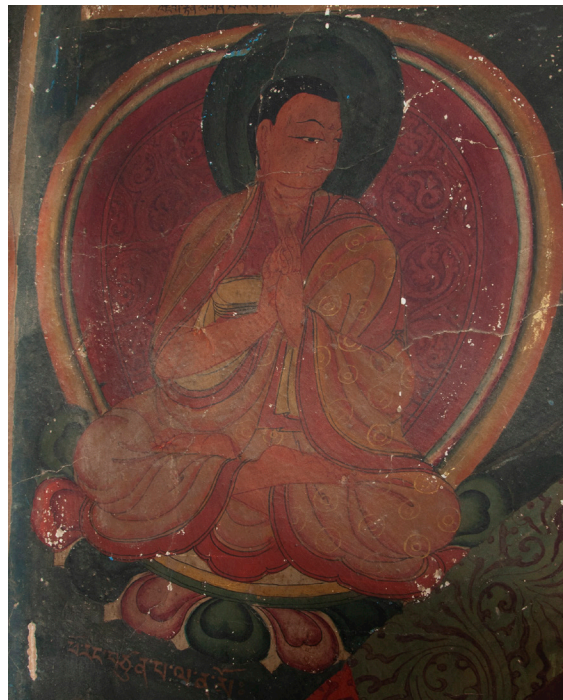


Fig. 13(a): Detail of wall painting depicting Jangchub Ö (*Byang chub 'od*) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Monk from the Palace« [*Jangchub Ö*]«, *pho [b]rang btsun pa la na mo*); cave temple (*mKhar rdzong lha khang*), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).



Fig. 13(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Zhiwa Ö (Zhi ba 'od) according to the inscription («Homage to the »Royal Lord Lama« Zhiwa Ö», lha rje bla ma zhi ba 'od la na mo); cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

Another function of inscriptions, not only in early Buddhist monasteries such as Tabo, is to accompany certain categories of narrative paintings, such as the Life of the Buddha, or stories about the earlier lives (*skye rabs*, Sanskrit *jātaka*) of the Buddha. These are a characteristic genre in the decorative programmes of early western Tibetan temples in various media (wall paintings and also wood carvings on portals) which aimed at promoting the (for the early 11th century new) Buddhist life ideal in the region and served as models of virtuous behaviour of every human being desiring to follow the Buddha's path to liberation.



*Fig. 14: Wall paintings (with inscribed panels) featuring the story of Nor bzang/s (Sanskrit Sudhana) in his pious quest for supreme enlightenment in the lower register; assembly hall (’du khang), wall facing south, Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), c. 1042 (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).*



*Fig. 15: Wall painting (with inscribed panels) featuring the Life of the Buddha (birth scene); Cave 1, wall facing west, Dungkar (Dung dkar), Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. mid-12th century (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2007).*

Another category of inscription is that which serves to consecrate different types of religious supports (with depictions of Buddhist deities). Such consecratory inscriptions<sup>72</sup> are often specific sacred words (*sngags*, Sanskrit *mantra*) or beneficial formulas (*gzungs*, Sanskrit *dhāraṇī*) which appear not only on inscribed clay images (*tsha tsha*) and scroll paintings (*thang ka*) (on which see further below) but also on wall paintings, such as in the cave temple at Zhag dating from the 12th century.

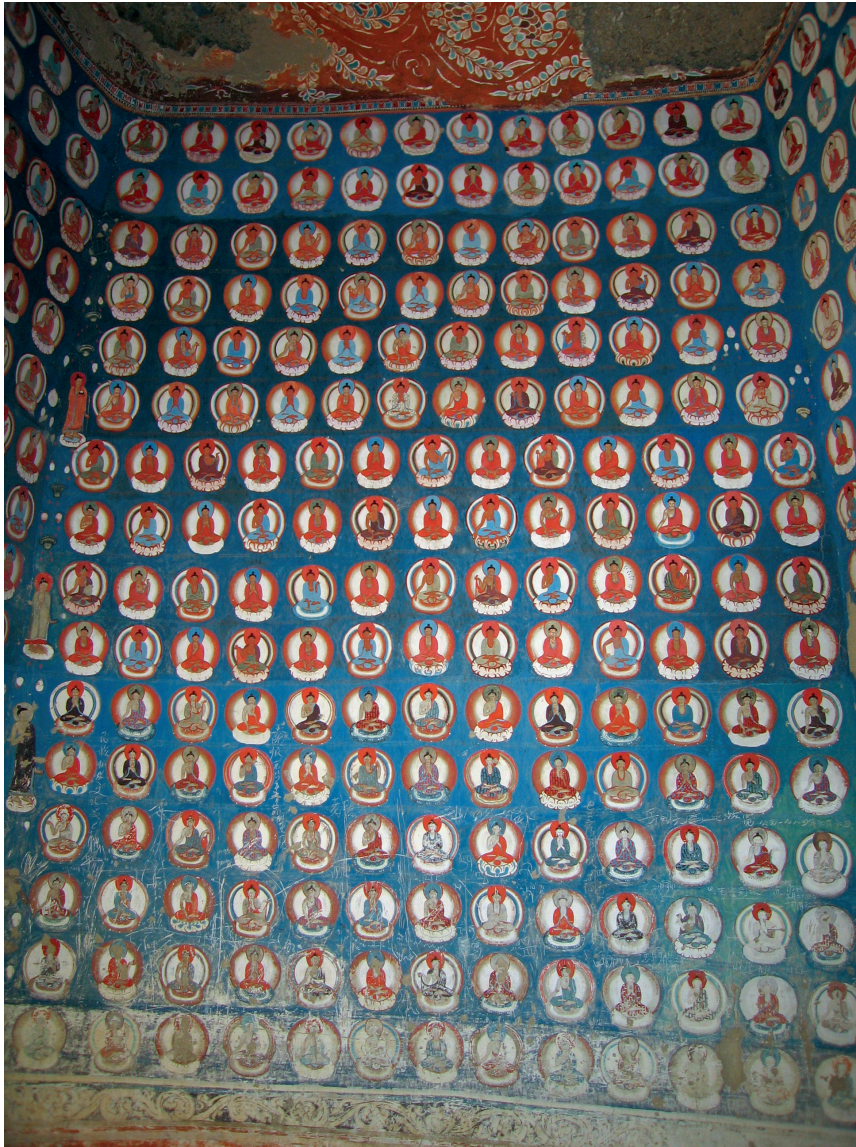


Fig. 16: Wall painting depicting One Thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon (*sKal pa bzang po*, Sanskrit *Bhadrakalpa*) motif; cave temple, Zhag (Zhak), Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).

72 See also Namgyal Lama, *Tsha tsha* inscriptions, 15-16.



*Fig. 17: Detail of wall painting, One Thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon, with related Tibetan inscription: de bzhin gshegs pa nor bu'i zhabs / ye dha rma he tu pra bha ba he tun te shan ta tha' ga to hya ba dad te shan tsa yo ni ro dha e bam ba ti ma ha' shra ma ṇa (rendering the Sanskrit ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgaḥ hyavadat teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha ebaṃ vādi mahāśramaṇaḥ), »Tathāgata [Buddha] Ratnapada, All things originate from causes of which the Tathāgatas [Buddhas] have taught the causes, and that which is the cessation of the causes is also proclaimed by the Great Sage,« 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).*



*Fig. 18: Inscription reading: slob dpon dran pa rgyal mtshan gyi zha snga nas / dpal zhu'i gnas yul zhag gi dben gnas dpal gzhal yas gtsug lag khang 'dir skald pa bzang po'i sangs rgyas stong gi gzhal yas bzhengs pa'i bka' rtsis las sangs rgyas rgu brgya' bzhi bcu bdag gis bris / / drug bcu tham [a few syllables are no longer extant]s kyis ma sol / / (transliteration: Tsering Gyalpo, Christian Jahoda), »In the presence of the teacher (slob dpon, Sanskrit ācarya) Drenpa Gyeltsen (Dran pa rgyal mtshan) were painted by me [the painter] in this magnificent immeasurable temple (gtsug lag khang) of the hermitage in the glorious sacred place of Zhag 940 Buddhas instead of the prescribed immeasurable 1,000 Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon (skald pa bzang po, Sanskrit Bhadrakalpa). [...] 60 were not effected,« 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).*

In the latter case the »verse of interdependent origination« (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i tshigs su bcad pa*, Sanskrit *pratīyasamutpādagāthā*) is written next to the respective deities (in the case of the Zhag cave, instead of the prescribed immeasurable 1,000 Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon [*skald pa bzang po*, Sanskrit Bhadrakalpa] only 940 were painted according to the inscription set in a text cartouche).

In Buddhist monasteries and sites such as Tabo (with a history of over 1,000 years since its foundation in 996) many extensions and renovations took place over the course of time. While until the 16th century inscriptions relating to donations, in particular additions and renovations to the building, were usually written or painted on walls and panels designed or reserved for this purpose, in more recent times, in the case of lesser renovations, this sometimes also happened by way of inscriptions written on a piece of paper which was then affixed to the wall, without destroying any sacred painting underneath but by recording, in particular also for the purpose of merit, which pious activities were done by whom.<sup>73</sup> The same holds true for minor donations which are recorded in the present along the circumambulation path outside the monastery of Tabo on wood beneath »prayer wheels« (*ma ṅi 'khor lo*).

73 See De Rossi Filibeck, Later inscriptions.



Fig. 19(a): Mani Khorlo (ma ñi 'khor lo, »prayer wheels« made of brass), with inscriptions in Landza, along circumambulation path; Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India) (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).



Fig. 19(b): Inscription on wood beneath Mani Khorlo (ma ñi 'khor lo, »prayer wheel«) recording a minor donation given to Tabo Monastery: la ri kun bzang chos sgrogs nas sgor 500.-, »From Künzang Chödrok (Kun bzang chos grogs) from Lari [La ri, a village close to Tabo] [were given] 500 [Rupees]«, early 21st century (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).

Of a more ephemeral nature is imagery consisting of a combination of auspicious letters and signs belonging to a popular Buddhist belief system. This is also found on wood, usually not in a monastic environment but in households, for example on doors, fulfilling an auspicious function.



*Fig. 20: Auspicious motifs on the door of the village house during time of Tibetan New Year (lo gsar) celebrations; from bottom to top: lotus blossom; g.yung drung (Sanskrit svastika); sun and moon; om̐ (holy syllable, also short for the Buddhist mantra om̐ maṇi padme hūṃ) (photo: Christian Jahoda, 2000).*

### *Inscriptions on Metal*

As usual in the case of Buddhist objects of worship, including in the case of the creation of metal sculptures of Buddhas, Buddhist deities and eminent historical religious figures, inscriptions are found which mention the circumstances and motivation of creation, often including the date and the donor responsible. Such statues can vary in size, ranging from very small (below 10 cm) to several metres tall. The latter are usually found placed as central cult objects in temples or chapels dedicated to them, such as the Buddha of the Future (Byams pa, Sanskrit Maitreya) at Khorchag Monastery in Purang.





*Fig. 21: Brass sculpture of Gyelwa Jampa (rGyal ba Byams pa, literally »Victorious Loving One«), Buddha of the Future (Byams pa, Sanskrit Maitreya), Khorchag Monastery, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 2010-2011 (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).*



Fig. 22: Donor inscription on the lotus base of Gyelwa Jampa (*rGyal ba Byams pa*, literally »Victorious Loving One«), Buddha of the Future, Khorchag Monastery, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 2010-2011 (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).

Others, in particular those of great historical or religious value, are not infrequently hidden among the most sacred treasures of a monastery, usually locked up in boxes in special store rooms. Different metals (including gold, silver, copper, etc.) and alloys, such as brass, etc., were used for the creation of such metal sculptures. The metal sculptures extant in historical Western Tibet are either in the possession of Buddhist monasteries and temples or private owners, also households, where they are found in altar rooms (*mchod khang*, literally »offering room«) dedicated to the worship of Buddhist deities and protective divinities.

The oldest metal sculptures kept in areas of historical Western Tibet date from even before the time of the West Tibetan kingdom and the introduction of Buddhism. One example of this is a twenty-six centimetre-tall bronze with extensive silver and copper inlays from Dangkhar (Brang mkhar, etc.) in Spiti which has an original dedicatory inscription in Sanskrit in proto-*sāradā* script (dating from 712 or 812) and another one in Tibetan (in *dbu can*, literally »headed«, script) reading *lha bla ma zhi ba 'od*, »the royal lama Zhiwa Ö (Zhi ba 'od)«, thus most probably identifying him as its owner at some time (as evident from similar instances).<sup>74</sup>

74 Quite a number of such precious objects, likewise from the Kashmir-Gilgit region, dating to the time before the West Tibetan kingdom, came into the possession of members of the royal West Tibetan family whose names were inscribed on them (see Laurent, Eighth century bronze, 204). Beside the name of Zhiwa Ö also that of Na ga ra dza/ Nāgarāja (988-1026) – his religious name as ordained lay practitioner (*dge snyen*, Sanskrit *upāsaka*) – is found written on many objects still kept in sanctuaries of historical western Tibet. Both are mentioned in later (15th century) historiographical sources as founders of religious monuments and responsible for their decoration with statues, etc., thus as pious patrons of Buddhism.

Another metal sculpture made mainly from brass which is kept in Khartse Monastery most probably dates from the 15th century. In the case of this sculpture, which features the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo in a teaching gesture (*chos kyi 'khor lo'i phyag rgya*, Sanskrit *dharmacakramudrā*), the text of the inscription which is engraved in six lines running along the base at the rear side also mentions the master-sculptor (*lha bzo mkhas pa*) who made this object, according to local oral tradition in the year/s after the passing away of the Great Translator, whereas the inscription indicates a much later time.



Fig. 23(a-b): Brass sculpture of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (lo chen Rin chen bzang po, 958-1055), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).



Fig. 24: Detail of inscription on the base, brass sculpture of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (lo chen Rin chen bzang po, 958-1055), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

### Inscriptions on Clay

Inscriptions on clay are associated mainly with sacral objects, usually in the form of stamped clay images (*tsha tsha*), which are either baked or (more often) sun-dried. They are usually produced »from a mould depicting, in relief or moulded in the round, miniature *stūpas*, deities, historical figures and inscriptions.«<sup>75</sup> Such objects were manufactured in large numbers all over historical Western Tibet (as in other areas of Tibet) »for religious purposes associated with the accumulation of merit.«<sup>76</sup> They are »placed at the heart of shrines, inside *stūpas* or special edifices built to house them [...], inside portable shrines [...], or deposited in large quantities around sacred sites, in holy caves,« etc. These practices were reportedly introduced into Western Tibet by the Indian *paṇḍita* Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna Atiśa (982-1054) who stayed there between 1042 and 1045 following an invitation by Jangchub Ö. In areas of historical Western Tibet *tsha tsha* making and offering thus represent a Buddhist practice with a long history which is on the one hand connected to ritual and iconographic (as well as textual) developments (associated with religious experts), on the other hand, with worship carried out mainly by lay people.

The specific design of such clay images appears to have been closely associated with certain sacred sites where, depending on school affiliation, religious tradition and other criteria, a predilection for particular favourite deities, motifs and iconography is found. This aspect certainly constituted an important factor which, together with pilgrimage, contributed to the creation and furthering of distinguished sacred sites over long periods, as, for example, in the case of the Buddhist monuments of the Khartse valley between the 11th and 19th centuries.<sup>77</sup>

75 Namgyal Lama, *Tsha tsha* inscriptions, 1.

76 Namgyal Lama, *Tsha tsha* inscriptions, 1.

77 This is also indicated in the inscription on the brass sculpture of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo kept in Khartse Monastery where this place is referred to as »excellent holy sanctuary and monastic seat« (*gnas chen khyad 'phags gdan sa*).



*Fig. 25: Stamped clay images (tsha tsha) and moulds featuring inscriptions, Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).*



*Fig. 26: Stamped clay images (tsha tsha) featuring inscriptions, Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 11th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).*

### *Inscriptions on Cloth*

Inscriptions on cloth usually appear on scroll paintings or thangkas (*thang ka*), on the front side identifying deities and historical figures – Fig. 27 (a-c) and 28 (a-b) – or in order to explain narrative scenes, on the rear side in the form of mantras not only serving to realize the presence (and specific powers) of one or more deities through incantation but specifically as written evidence for the consecration of this type of religious support.



Fig. 27(a): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (*thang ka*) depicting a Buddha in teaching gesture at the centre, flanked by two bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa'*), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 13th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

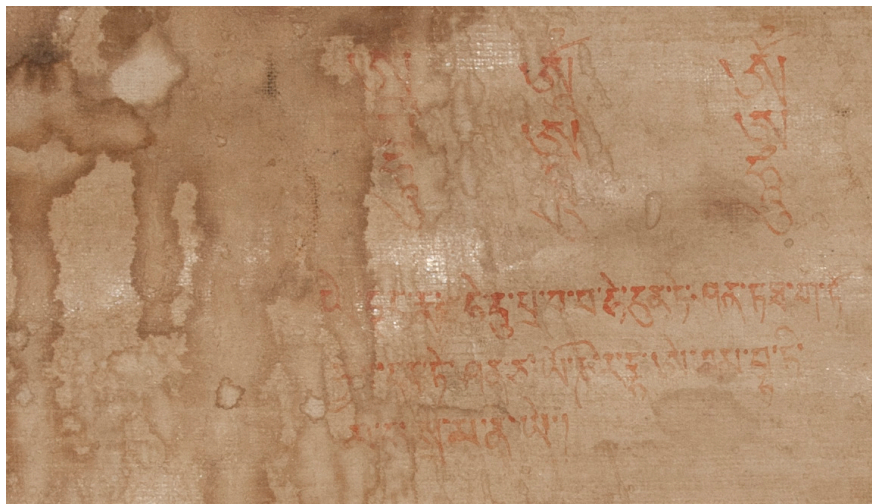
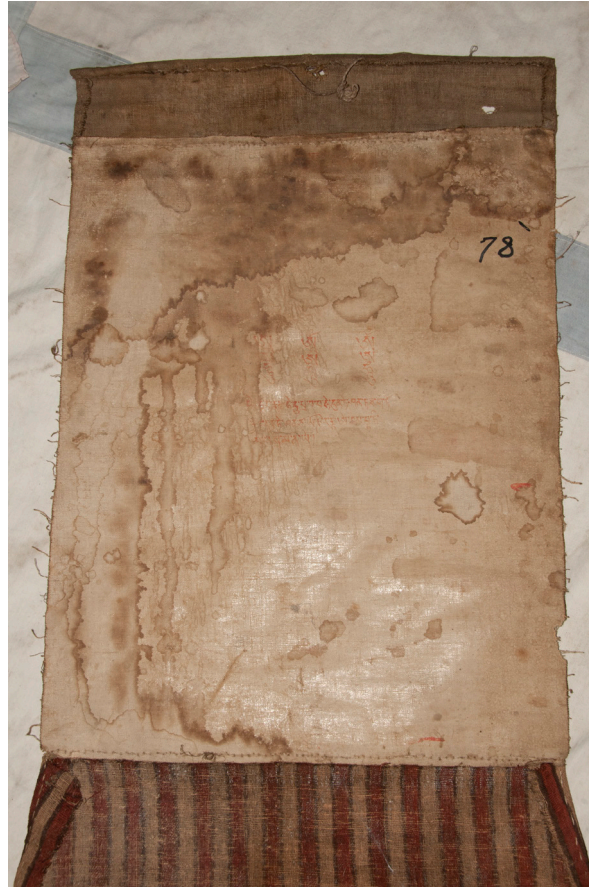


Fig. 27(b-c): Rear side of scroll painting on cloth (thang ka) with inscriptions featuring the mantra (sngags)  $om\ aḥ\ hūṃ$  (the «three seed syllables» representing the body, speech and mind of deities/Buddhas) and the «verse of interdependent origination» (rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i tshigs su bcad pa, Sanskrit *pratīyasamutpādagāthā*), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 13th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

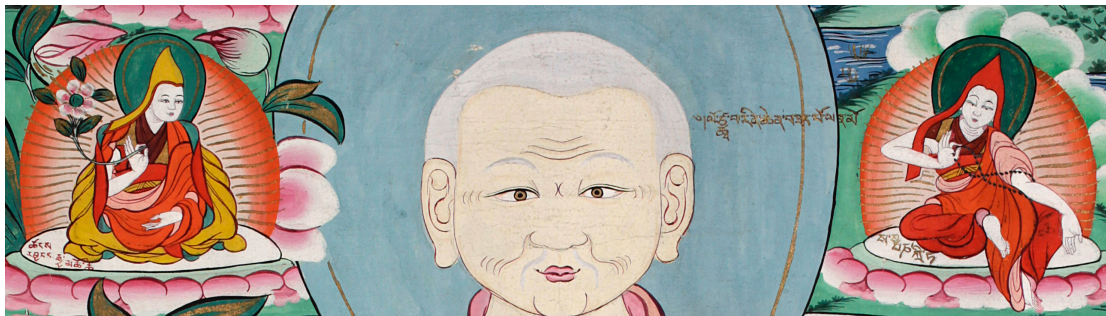


Fig. 28(a-b): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (thang ka) depicting the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055), with an identifying reverential inscription: lo tsthwa ba rin chen bzang po la na mo, »Homage to the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo«; further inscriptions identify Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) (sa skya paṅ kri ta) and the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1683-1706) (tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho che), Spiti valley, early 20th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2015).



Such thangkas are mainly used for ritual and meditational practice by monks and ordained lay people. Their making and use in historical Western Tibet goes back to the 11th century and continues into the present, sometimes changing the technique (from painting to printing, in the present even to digital printing) and material (from cloth to synthetic material). Thangkas made long ago are usually regarded as counting among the most precious treasures of monasteries which are never shown to outsiders. In the past, many of these thangkas were only taken out of store-rooms and used within the monastery on the occasion of a religious ritual specifically related to a depicted Buddhist deity or cycle of deities (perhaps only once a year or even every few years).

Scroll paintings with narrative scenes depicting particular religious stories can be seen as the annotated visual rendering of related literary texts as well as of day-long performances of such stories in a kind of theatrical form (known as *lha mo* or *rnam thar*, literally »complete liberation« [from the cycle of birth, life and death]) in areas of western Tibet.



Fig. 29(a-b): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (thang ka) depicting scenes from the Drowa Zangmo ('Gro ba bzang mo) liberation story (also play); the inscriptions serve to identify individual figures and activities, for example, rje btsun sgrol ma, »Noble Tārā«, the main deity or female bodhisattva at the centre of the scroll painting, and (below this) 'gro ba bzang mo rta pho nag po rting dkar la chibs, »Drowa Zangmo riding on a black stallion with white fetlocks«, Spiti valley, 20th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2014).

These stories and related religious practices seem to have originally spread from areas of Central Tibet in the 14th/15th century onward and may have reached the area of historical western Tibet not long after this. In the present, these traditions continue to flourish, in particular in Pin Valley in Spiti. In other areas of historical western Tibet (such as Purang) they are more or less limited to local performance traditions, while textual and, in particular, related visual materials seem to have largely disappeared.

### *Brief Conclusion*

Given the various different spatial, political, ritual and visual contexts, considering aspects such as the materiality or material support of inscriptions, their location, function, movability, and the long chronological frame (from the 9th century into the present) and being aware that inscriptions often play an important role in dating certain historical events or objects, it is advisable, in particular from a strong contextual and *in situ* perspective, to keep the conclusions within the limitations set by the quality of the respective documentation and the range of coherent samples. Therefore, due to the nature of this contribution – an overview on inscriptions in historical Western Tibet in their contexts with selected examples – the conclusion is also necessarily of a preliminary and general nature.

Almost all inscriptions in historical Western Tibet, at least those which are known to the author and discussed in scientific literature, are related to a Buddhist context. This relationship is expressed either through the naming of Buddhist deities and concepts (in particular the concept of merit and the mention of a donor/donors) and/or through the related depiction (painting, engraving) of objects, buildings, symbols and other visual aspects clearly relatable to a Buddhist meaning and context.

The quality and durability of the material support of inscriptions as well as of the inscriptions themselves indicate a correlation between high social status and high quality, to some degree also high durability, and, conversely, also a correlation between lower status and lower quality and durability. The notion of materiality is highly important in Buddhist scriptures, in particular in ritual texts, where quite elaborate concepts are found. In addition, it also occurs significantly with a less Buddhist focus in cycles of songs performed at wedding ceremonies, the written versions of which are seemingly of some antiquity. How these correlations developed and played out over the course of time still needs to be inspected and studied.

In terms of the quantitative spatial distribution of inscriptions, the density is very high in and around Buddhist monasteries. This is true in particular of those religious centres established during the 10th-12th centuries. An explanation for this may be seen in the contemporary religio-political concept in force during the formative phase of the West Tibetan Buddhist kingdom (986 - mid-11th century) with the foundation of key Buddhist monasteries in the main constituent regions of the kingdom. Following the increase in religious authority and power (also reflected in the increase of religious hierarchies) and a (retrospective) spiritualization of rulers across all of historical western Tibet from the 13th through the 15th centuries, starting from the 14th and 15th centuries a strong trend towards popularization of Buddhist worship practices seems to be reflected in the appearance and increasing production of stone slabs inscribed with Buddhist mantras and of stamped clay images at pilgrimage sites.

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- Fig. 8(a): Wall painting of royal and aristocratic lay figures identified by inscriptions in captions placed next to them; entrance hall (*sgo khang*), wall facing north, Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), late 10th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2009).
- Fig. 8(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Prince Jigten Gön (*lha sras 'jig rten mgon*) and Princess Ö Tro (*lha lcam 'od 'phro*) identified through inscriptions; entrance hall (*sgo khang*), wall facing north, Tabo monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), late 10th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2009).
- Fig. 9: Wall painting depicting Jangchub Ö (Byang chub 'od), responsible for the renovation of Tabo Monastery according to the inscription underneath, amidst an assembly of the religious and lay elite; assembly hall (*'du khang*), wall leading to the sanctum (*dri gtsang khang*), Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), c. 1042 (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).
- Fig. 10: Wall painting depicting in the lower registers historical figures identified by inscriptions in captions placed next to them; *mchod rten*, Tholing (mTho gling) Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 1019 or 1025 (photo: Zhang Jianlin, c. 1997).

- Fig. 11: Detail of wall painting depicting members of the aristocratic Rugs wer (also Hrugs wer) clan (identified through inscriptions; from left to right: *rugs wer skyid 'ar ma*; *rugs wer khri dog rje*; *rugs wer srid gsum mkhar*; *rugs wer tsol*) at the time of participating at a commemorative religious ritual, presumably related to the passing away of Yeshe Ö; *mchod rten*, Tholing (mTho gling) Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 1019 or 1025 (photo: Zhang Jianlin, c. 1997).
- Fig. 12(a): Wall painting featuring a double portrait of Butön Rinchendrup (Bu ston Rin chen grub, 1290–1363) and mandalas; cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).
- Fig. 12(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Yeshe Ö (Ye shes 'od) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Royal Lama« Yeshe Ö«, *lha bla ma ye shes 'od la na mo*); cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).
- Fig. 12(c): Detail of wall painting depicting Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Great Translator« Rinchen Zangpo«, *lo chen rin chen bzang po la na mo*); cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).
- Fig. 13(a): Detail of wall painting depicting Jangchub Ö (Byang chub 'od) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Monk from the Palace« [Jangchub Ö]«, *pho [b]rang btsun pa la na mo*); cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).
- Fig. 13(b): Detail of wall painting depicting Zhiwa Ö (Zhi ba 'od) according to the inscription (»Homage to the »Royal Lord Lama« Zhiwa Ö«, *lha rje bla ma zhi ba 'od la na mo*); cave temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang), wall facing north, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. 14th/15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).
- Fig. 14: Wall paintings (with inscribed panels) featuring the story of Nor bzang/s (Sanskrit Sudhana) in his pious quest for supreme enlightenment in the lower register; assembly hall (*'du khang*), wall facing south, Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India), c. 1042 (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).
- Fig. 15: Wall painting (with inscribed panels) featuring the Life of the Buddha (birth scene); Cave 1, wall facing west, Dungkar (Dung dkar), Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, c. mid-12th century (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2007).
- Fig. 16: Wall painting depicting One Thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon (sKal pa bzang po, Sanskrit Bhadrakalpa) motif; cave temple, Zhag (Zhak), Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).
- Fig. 17: Detail of wall painting, One Thousand Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon, with related Tibetan inscription: *de bzhin gshes pa nor bu'i zhabs / ye dha rma he tu pra bha ba he tun te shan ta tha' ga tohya ba dad te shan tsa yo ni ro dha e bam ba ti ma ha' shra ma na* (rendering the Sanskrit *ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgaḥ hyavadat teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha ebaṃ vādī mahāśramaṇaḥ*), »Tathāgata [Buddha] Ratnapada, All things originate from causes of which the Tathāgatas [Buddhas] have taught the causes, and that which is the cessation of the causes is also proclaimed by the Great Sage,« 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).

Fig. 18: Inscription reading: *slob dpon dran pa rgyal mtshan gyi zha snga nas / dpal zhu'i gnas yul zhag gi dben gnas dpal gzhal yas gtsug lag khang 'dir skald pa bzang po'i sangs rgyas stong gi gzhal yas bzhengs pa'i bka' rtsis las sangs rgyas rgu brgya' bzhi bcu bdag gis bris / / drug bcu tham* [a few syllables are no longer extant]s *kyis ma sol / /* (transliteration: Tsering Gyalpo, Christian Jahoda), »In the presence of the teacher (*slob dpon*, Sanskrit *ācārya*) Drenpa Gyeltsen (Dran pa rgyal mtshan) were painted by me [the painter] in this magnificent immeasurable temple (*gtsug lag khang*) of the hermitage in the glorious sacred place of Zhag 940 Buddhas instead of the prescribed immeasurable 1,000 Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon (*skald pa bzang po*, Sanskrit Bhadrakalpa). [...] 60 were not effected«, 12th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).

Fig. 19(a): Mani Khorlo (*ma ni 'khor lo*, »prayer wheels« made of brass), with inscriptions in Landza, along circumambulation path; Tabo Monastery (Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh, India) (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).

Fig. 19(b): Inscription on wood beneath Mani Khorlo (*ma ni 'khor lo*, »prayer wheel«) recording a minor donation given to Tabo Monastery: *la ri kun bzang chos sgrogs nas sgor 500.-*, »From Künzang Chödrol (Kun bzang chos grogs) from Lari [La ri, a village close to Tabo] [were given] 500 [Rupees]«, early 21st century (photo: Christiane Kalantari, 2009).

Fig. 20: Auspicious motifs on the door of a village house during time of Tibetan New Year (*lo gsar*) celebrations; from bottom to top: lotus blossom; *g.yung drung* (Sanskrit *svastika*); sun and moon; *om* (holy syllable, also short for the Buddhist mantra *om maṇi padme hūṃ*) (photo: Christian Jahoda, 2000).

Fig. 21: Brass sculpture of Gyelwa Jampa (rGyal ba Byams pa, literally »Victorious Loving One«), Buddha of the Future (Byams pa, Sanskrit Maitreya), Khorchag Monastery, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 2010-2011 (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).

Fig. 22: Donor inscription on the lotus base of Gyelwa Jampa (rGyal ba Byams pa, literally »Victorious Loving One«), Buddha of the Future, Khorchag Monastery, Purang District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 2010-2011 (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2011).

Fig. 23(a-b): Brass sculpture of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (*lo chen Rin chen bzang po*, 958-1055), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

Fig. 24: Detail of inscription on the base, brass sculpture of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (*lo chen Rin chen bzang po*, 958-1055), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 15th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

Fig. 25: Stamped clay images (*tsha tsha*) and moulds featuring inscriptions, Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 11th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).

Fig. 26: Stamped clay images (*tsha tsha*) featuring inscriptions, Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2009).

Fig. 27(a): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (*thang ka*) depicting a Buddha in teaching gesture at the centre, flanked by two bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa'*), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 13th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

Fig. 27(b-c): Rear side of scroll painting on cloth (*thang ka*) with inscriptions featuring the

mantra (*sngags*) *om aḥ hūṃ* (the »three seed syllables« representing the body, speech and mind of deities/Buddhas) and the »verse of interdependent origination« (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i tshigs su bcad pa*, Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpādagāthā*), Khartse Monastery, Tsamda District, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, 13th century (photo: Tsering Gyalpo, 2010).

Fig. 28(a-b): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (*thang ka*) depicting the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055), with an identifying reverential inscription: *lo tshswa ba rin chen bzang po la na mo*, »Homage to the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo«; further inscriptions identify Sakya Pandita (1182-1251) (*sa skya paṇ kri ta*) and the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1683-1706) (*tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho che*), Spiti valley, early 20th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2015).

Fig. 29(a-b): Front side of scroll painting on cloth (*thang ka*) depicting scenes from the Drowa Zangmo ('Gro ba bzang mo) liberation story (also play); the inscriptions serve to identify individual figures and activities, for example, *rje btsun sgröl ma*, »Noble Tārā«, the main deity or female bodhisattva at the centre of the scroll painting, and (below this) *'gro ba bzang mo rta pho nag po rting dkar la chibs*, »Drowa Zangmo riding on a black stallion with white fetlocks«, Spiti valley, 20th century (photo: Patrick Sutherland, 2014).