

Biography and Hierarchy: The Tibetan Ruling House of Phag-mo-gru and the *Singular Volume of the Rlangs* (*Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru*)

Reinier Langelaar*

This article details how the Tibetan ruling house of Phag-mo-gru employed biography within a 14th-century genealogical work as well as how its later representatives would reflect on and adapt the work in its reading tradition. Addressing the genealogy's dating, structure and the various influences at play within its pages, the author argues that the work's initial composition involved a mash-up of contemporary political and cultural sensibilities, archaic material and also traditions drawn from the ruling house's ancestral homelands in the eastern region of Khams. A critical look at individual biographies within the work illustrates how these life stories provided a canvas on which respectable ancestry could be painted, with the creator(s) not shying away from including anachronistic and fantastic content. The article concludes with a broader theoretical look at how this work's biographical collection, and similar compilations in general, may serve to affirm social hierarchies by rephrasing them in a language of long-standing moral relations.

Keywords: biography, genealogy, hagiography, clans, ancestry, bKa'-brgyud Buddhism, gter-ma

Introduction

In all likelihood composed in the late 14th century, the *Singular Volume of the Rlangs [Clan] (Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru)*¹ is a renowned genealogical work that is associated with the Phag-mo-gru ruling house, which rose to hegemony over large swathes of the central Tibetan Plateau in the 1350s. Institutionally grounded in a fortress in the Yar-lung valley as well as in influential Buddhist monasteries of the *bKa'-brgyud* school, their ascendancy constitutes a key period in the plateau's political history. In a pivotal development, the house's expansion

* Correspondence details: IKGA, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstraße 11-13, 1020 Vienna, Austria; reinier.langelaar@oeaw.ac.at.

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1 Parts of this work are available in English translations-cum-summaries in Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, c. 1. A detailed study and near-complete translation can now also be found in Langelaar, *Bones and Thrones*. There is also a complete translation of the text into Chinese in Zan la a wang and She Wan zhi, *Lang shi jia zu shi*, 1-65. Concerning the work's title, incidentally, the *bse-ru* translates literally as »rhinoceros« or »rhinoceros horn«. Because the Indian species has but a single horn and is considered an admirably solitary creature, the term is occasionally used to convey singularity.

during the reign of Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan (1302-64) sounded the death knell for the political dominance of the prelates of Sa-skya monastery, who had risen under the aegis of Kubilai Khan's (r. 1260-94) Mongol empire and had continued their administration under the succeeding Mongol-led Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). The scions of Phag-mo-gru, once at the helm, were to retain at least a nominal degree of power into the latter half of the 17th century, when their authority finally met with its permanent, legal end. Their initial dominance had however already abated after severe internal discord in 1434 and waned yet further after 1480, when a ministerial house rose to eclipse them.²

The house's arcane genealogy, a motley record of their ancient pedigree and their ancestors' biographical milestones, played a pivotal role in constructing their literary image. Claiming to be of ancient date and tracing the house's lineage back to the old and divinity-descended clan of the Rlangs³ and beyond, the work was readily used by Phag-mo-gru dignitaries of the early 15th century as a source for their new literary creations.⁴ It was also cited, albeit almost always indirectly, by several important subsequent historians. As such, it developed into a key literary piece for buttressing and remembering the Phag-mo-gru-pa and their rule. The work's colourful and often difficult contents, moreover, have a bearing on a variety of matters of scholarly interest besides political authority and life-writing, and range from literary and cultural history to epic studies and ethnography. It therefore constitutes a source of ample significance.⁵

In the context of this volume, however, questions of particular relevance concern the nature and provenance of the materials selected by this ruling house to portray itself. What types of lives were depicted in the *Singular Volume* and why? Where were the selected narrations drawn from? How were these templates subsequently handled and used by members of the house? These issues also constitute an important touchstone for the nature of Tibetan genealogical life-writing in general, whose exact social and cultural origins have often gone under-scrutinised. Consequently, these works have often been treated as documents of rather straight-forward historical value, only shrouded by a layer of mythologisation.⁶ In exploring these issues at the interface of community and text, the current article contextualises this complex work in a bid to demonstrate how biography was employed by this important house and how its legacy of life-writing was handled by subsequent generations.

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- 2 For an admirably encyclopaedic study of the history of the Phag-mo-gru-pa, see Czaja, *Medieval Rule*.
 - 3 I use the term ›clan‹ in this paper to reflect the source text's emic ideal of a deep-rooted descent group, defined by shared patrilineal descent from a common apical ancestor, whose exogamy is implied, though not made explicit. I apply the term ›lineage‹ to the similarly constituted but smaller subgroup (lHa-gzigs) within the overarching clan. In ethnographic reality, it seems to have been the lHa-gzigs that constituted the actual clan of the ruling house in their homelands in the eastern region of Khams; their affiliation with the better-known Rlangs (var. Rlang, Glangs, Glang, etc.) was almost certainly a convenient fiction (see Langelaar, *Bones and Thrones*, 105-128).
 - 4 bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, Mig-'byed-'od-stong, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fols. 483-504; Wang-Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan, Chig-rgyud, ed. Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs.
 - 5 For a more extensive study of the work, see Langelaar, *Bones and Thrones*.
 - 6 In the case of the work under consideration, note Rudolf Kaschewsky and Pema Tsering's argument for accepting the text as a partially ancient composition and the main protagonist as a historical figure (Historizität des Helden Gesar, 392-398), the suggestion that this ›ancient genealog[y]‹ could, with due care, be employed for study of 10th- and 11th-century Khams (Vitali, Monograph, 144-145), or the confusion of the ancient Rlangs with the ruling house itself, evident in the argument that one of the text's ›semi-mythical‹ biographical accounts ›impl[ies] that the Phag mo gru rulers once asserted their authority over parts of Central Bhutan‹; Ardussi, Preliminary Investigation, 14, n. 26.

Dating

Unique among the works discussed in this volume, the *Singular Volume* is asserted to be a recovered ancient document, being presented as a so-called »treasure« text (*gter-ma*). It allegedly stems, at least in part, from Tibetan imperial times (7th-9th century),⁷ the golden age of later Tibetan historiography, during which divine emperors oversaw the introduction of Buddhism to the plateau. Despite the work's own claims and the inclusion of some archaic phrases and imperial figures, its status as a work of considerable antiquity must be rejected, as Rolf Stein already illustrated. Nevertheless, the latter's findings have not met with unanimous scholarly acceptance, and some lack of clarity continues to linger in the literature as to the work's dating, a matter that consequently must first command our attention.

Initially, based on related texts and the work's political features, Stein estimated that the work's material was largely redacted between 1350 and 1450, during the height of Phag-mo-gru power⁸ – an assessment that was followed and elaborated upon by several scholars.⁹ Others, however, have argued for earlier dates for parts of the work or its historical core, sometimes even accepting the text's own claims of archaic authorship.¹⁰ More recently, Olaf Czaja suggested that pre-existing materials, which may even contain »authentic data of the 10th century«, were updated with politically charged revisions during the house's political apex.¹¹ Complicating matters further, Stein himself later changed his dating, summarily suggesting that the work's final redaction took place around 1500 instead – albeit that parts of the work could antedate this moment by a century.¹² In sum, uncertainty surrounding the work's dating has persisted.

Fortunately, a clear *terminus post quem* for the work as reflected in our extant witnesses¹³ is provided by the inclusion of the mid-14th-century ruler Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan in the pedigree section of the text, which refers to him by a title (*ta'i-si-tu*)¹⁴ that he only received in 1358.¹⁵ This dating latch-pin has too been drawn into doubt, however, by the observation

7 The opening passage of the first part, for instance, asserts that the *Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru* was uttered during the consecration ceremony of the first Tibetan monastery, bSam-yas, in the 8th century; PSI: fols. 98.3-99.3; PSII: fols. 2.2-3.1; PSIII: 1; PSIV: 2.11-3.1. This claim gives rise to many text-internal contradictions, however, not least because its second part elaborately depicts the life of an early post-imperial ancestor.

8 Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 99-101.

9 Uray, *Vom römischen Kaiser*, 532; Sørensen, *Rare Texts*, 16, n. 10.

10 Tsering, *Historische, epische und ikonographische Aspekte*, 164-166; Kaschewsky et al., *Historizität des Helden Gesar*, 392-398. Various other publications have also suggested such pre-Phag-mo-gru-pa dates for the work (e.g. Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, *rTsom-pa-po'i-lo-rgyus-rags-bsdus*, 1; Martin, *Tibetan Histories*, 24, lemma 2).

11 Although Czaja does not provide a consolidated discussion of the text's origins and dating, his stance can be gleaned from the notes in *Medieval Rule*, 27, 29-30, 52, 64. A reviewer of Czaja adopts a similar position to him (Vitali, *Monograph*, 144-145).

12 Stein, *Introduction*, 11. The later date is, it seems, largely based in Stein's mistaken identification of related but later texts as intrinsic parts of the *Singular Volume* itself.

13 At least eight witnesses are extant, of which I have been able to consult six in full. These six display many scribal but no substantial editorial variants, and none of the eight pre-date 1948. The textual evidence can be divided into two main lines of transmission. One of these may stem in its entirety from a manuscript from the 'Bras-spungs library. Witnesses of this line include PSI, PSV and a copy of PSV in the possession of Per Sørensen (PSVI), which he had made in the 1970s and kindly placed at my disposal. These three all appear to go back to a single witness, a photocopy of which is still held at the Toyo Bunko (Yamaguchi, *Catalogue*, 172), but which I was not able to consult. Though less closely related to this (South Asian) cluster of witnesses, PSIV is also part of its broader line of transmission.

14 PSII, fol. 52.1; PSIII, 25.6-7.

15 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 158, n. 154.

that the passage is missing from one witness. On this basis, Czaja identified the section as a politically inspired »elaboration« and thus concluded that the *Singular Volume* was »revised at the end of the 14th century« rather than newly composed.¹⁶ Yet this section's absence from the witness in question in fact reflects a later haplographical error, in which two key lines were demonstrably omitted by a scribe.¹⁷ As we will see below, the inclusion of a chain of prophecies that predict the house's hegemony as well as the appearance of several would-be anachronisms all confirm that the work indeed dates to the mid-14th century or afterwards.

Additionally, it is possible to derive a sturdy latest possible date for the composition of the work from the rather extensive summaries of the text found in the *Thousand Lights that Open the Eyes (Mig-'byed-'od-stong)*, a religious history composed in the year 1418.¹⁸ Furthermore, the fact that an influential Phag-mo-gru hegemon, Grag-pa-rgyal-mtshan (1374-1432, r. 1385-1432), does not appear in the genealogy and was thus forced to pen an addendum in order to attach himself and his father to the work's pedigree suggests that the text in its current redaction was completed before he took office, or at least before he was old enough to actively affect the house's literary representation.¹⁹ Consequently, the work was likely composed in the latter part of the 14th century, perhaps to fortify the house's stature and memorialise Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan²⁰ in the wake of his death in 1364. To be sure, the period of the house's hegemony was characterised by its extensive cultural and textual production, a constellation into which the *Singular Volume* neatly fits.²¹

The Structure of the Work

The work contains two separate chapters with quite different content. The first and shorter one is a genealogy of immense depth that documents the house's ultimately divine origins and is titled the *Pedigree of the Rlangs [Clan] of Divine Stock (lHa-rigs-rlangs-kyi-skye-brgyud)*. It covers a total of 44 generations²² and includes some collateral branching as well as narrative portions. The second and longer part, referred to as the *Records of the Greatnesses and Virtues of the Rlangs of Divine Stock (lHa-rigs-rlangs-kyi-che-dge-yig-tshang)*, henceforth

16 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 30. This discrepancy between the witnesses was also noted by van der Kuijp, *On the Life*, 317.

17 In PSI, the genitive particle that follows the omitted passage still reflects its old phonetic context, where *gi* would correctly follow not *dpon-khro-bo-phan* (fol. 153.1), but *gnyan-thog*, the name with which the absent passage ended (PSII, fol. 51.4-52.2 and PSVII, fol. 20a4-b1). The closely related PSV, as well as PSIV, neither of which Czaja had access to, hypercorrect the spelling of the particle to *gyi* (PSIV: 33.14, PSV: 25.8); this inadvertently formed sentence, however, remains awkward in meaning.

18 bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, *Mig-'byed-'od-stong*, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fols. 483.2-494.6; Sørensen, *Rare Texts*: 10; Sernesi, *Manual*, 142, n. 37.

19 Wang-Grag-pa-rgyal-mtshan, *Chig-brgyud*, 101. Note that some authors have argued that this appendix suggests that the work was redacted during, rather than before, Grag-pa-rgyal-mtshan's rule; Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 100-101; Sørensen, *Rare Texts*, 16, n. 10; Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 30.

20 As Stein concluded, and as we will see below, the work was written for the greater glory of this important hegemon; Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 87.

21 Sernesi, *Manual*, esp. 141-143. On the house's art production, see Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, c. 8.

22 In its summary of the *Pedigree*, the *Mig-'byed-'od-stong* (f. 484.6) inserts a generational representative, dPal-lha, who is missing from the *Singular Volume's* extant witnesses (PSI: fol. 111.4-5; PSII: fol. 13.4-5; PSIII: 6; PSIV: 10.6-7). If correctly reflective of an older witness, this would bring the pedigree's original number of generations to 45.

the *Records*, is wholly narrative in nature. It documents 54 mainly brief stories that detail the marvellous feats of various mythical scions – all male – of the house's ancestral Rlangs clan as well as of one of its sub-branches, the lHa-gzigs lineage, from which the house members hailed. It is this second chapter that constitutes the biographical collection which forms the central subject of this article.

As already noted, the *Singular Volume* as a whole professes to be an ancient work. Such »treasure« texts, an established genre in Tibetan literature, are supposed to have been hidden in bygone days by figures of authority, only to be revealed again by a worthy saint of later generations. This choice of genre is intimately tied to claims that the work is more than mere writing. Sustained by associations with revered cultural figures such as the deified 8th-century Buddhist missionary Padmasambhava and the coeval Emperor Khri-srong-lde-btsan, the work contains several self-laudatory passages that detail the text's great potential, where it is described as both a secretive »special teaching« (*khyad-chos*) as well as a central object for religious practice (*yi-dam*) for the house's ancestral clan.²³ The purported benefits accruing from using and revering it include the stamping out of human and livestock diseases, general auspiciousness²⁴ and, more sweepingly, the ability to »accomplish anything«.²⁵ In keeping with treasure-text genre conventions, the work ends with an attempt to boost its own trustworthiness by documenting its transmission history.²⁶

The biographical collection itself, then, is arranged into two broad thematic sections, most aptly described as covering »worldly« and »salvific morals«. The first segment is presented as »the great base« (*gzhi-che-ba*) and consists of 24 ancestral narratives that conform to the »human code« of conduct (*mi-chos*). These stories mainly relate successful martial endeavours – in some cases featuring episodes of extreme violence – and the obtainment of special spoils of war. They however also include references to the settling of new soil, historical leadership roles, wealth, patronage and even beauty. The second segment is presented as »the noble ornament« (*rgyan-dam-pa*) to the preceding foundation and depicts 30 ancestors who followed the »divine (or noble) code« (*lha-chos*), i.e. salvational traditions. This term predominantly denotes Buddhism, although a dash of the Bon religion is also included, a non-Buddhist tradition that despite large doctrinal and ritual overlaps with Tibetan Buddhism looks back to a different foundational figure and claims more ancient roots.²⁷ Although this second series of salvific life stories has a similar amount of biographies as the first mundane set, it eclipses it in sheer length, chiefly due to the inclusion of one disproportionately long biography.

23 For example, PSI, fols. 105.5-106.1, 337.1-4; PSII, fols. 8.3-8.4, 211.4-212.1; PSIII, 4.2-4, 99.9-13; PSIV, 6.17-19, 125.4-10. Interestingly, the work contains several references to written materials functioning as a *yi-dam*, a term that usually denotes a tutelary meditational deity: see also PSI, fols. 217.4-5 & 334.5-335.3; PSII, fols. 109.4 & 210.1-3; PSIII, 54.10-11 & 98.15-19; PSIV, 68.18-19 & 124.7-11. Note that prior to the relevant phrase *yi-dam-gyis*, PSI: fol. 337.4 & PSIV: 125.9 confusingly hyper-correct the coordinative particle *la* to *lha*.

24 PSI, fol. 329.3-330.1; PSII, fol. 205.4-206.1; PSIII: 96.15-19; PSIV: 121.18-122.4.

25 PSI, fol. 105.5-106.3; PSII, fol. 8.3-8.5; PSIII, 4.2-6; PSIV, 6.17-7.3.

26 PSI, fols. 334.2-337.1; PSII, fols. 209.2-211.4; PSIII, 98.9-99.8; PSIV: 124.1-125.4. On the legitimisation strategies used in this genre, see Gyatso, *Logic of Legitimation*. For an important reorientation of focus from the genre's innovative aspects towards its more conservative modular nature, see Mayer, *gTer ston* and Tradent.

27 On the Bon religion, its history and especially its treasure-text tradition, see Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*.

Indeed, most of the recorded tales are quite unembellished in regard to biographical details and as such constitute brief profiles or vignettes more than they do strict ›biographies‹. The large majority relate only a single landmark episode and do not contain any references to life processes such as birth, death or aging. Access to the protagonists' mental worlds, by way of either direct speech or thought, is also but rarely offered. The decisive exception to this cursory style is the biography of a key forefather of the Phag-mo-gru-pa, the apical ancestor of the narrower lHa-gzigs lineage, named Byang-chub-'dre-bkol. This biography reports not only on the protagonist's life and death but also on his extensive travels, religious activities and adventures, interactions and procreation. Through its inclusion of substantial versified portions, it also deviates in literary form.

An additional interesting formal feature of this set of biographies is that they are presented in an isolated and unlinked fashion, largely divorced from a chronological, historical or genealogical framework. When we compare the *Singular Volume* with genealogical sources of other Tibetan ruling houses, with religious histories or indeed with genealogies from other cultures, this disjointed structure is striking.²⁸ Generally, lineages provide a framework of generational strings onto which representatives' accomplishments are woven directly, but the *Singular Volume* almost completely severs the genealogy (the *Pedigree*) from its members' feats (the *Records*). Although many of these figures can in fact be found in the preceding genealogical chapter, the *Records* presents them as actors in a vague and largely unspecified past, which we can partly, though certainly not exclusively, understand as the period of the Tibetan empire.²⁹

The clearest literary device to create coherence between these lives, then, is not generational change or narrative development but simply the repetitive and incessant reference to the protagonists' clan affiliation. Virtually all stories begin with the name of the protagonist, which in Tibetan is preceded by the clan name Rlangs. Similarly, the tales uniformly conclude with formulaic endings that briefly recapitulate the ancestor's greatness and then fold him back again into the greater ancestral descent group, reiterating the name of the clan. Beginning and ending nearly each biography, the clan name is thus in a quite literal sense the alpha and omega of these individual narratives.

Biography in the Service of Phag-mo-gru

In line with the work's period of composition, its life stories reflect the preoccupations of the newly hegemonic dynasty as well as some broader cultural aspects of 14th- or early 15th-century life on the Tibetan Plateau. Most strikingly, as alluded to above and already noted in the literature, the biographies incorporate a series of politically charged prophecies that teleologically foreshadow the house's supremacy.³⁰ The first such prophecy in the *Records* occurs in the life story of one of the most well-known Rlangs figures, dPal-gyi-seng-ge. Already associated with the widely revered missionary Padmasambhava centuries before the

28 See, for instance, Roesler, *Operas*, 123-127, and Spiegel, *Genealogy*, 103-107.

29 Some biographies include references that unambiguously set them in the imperial period (e.g. PSI, fols. 176.4-5, 184.1; PSII, fols. 73.4, 80.2-3; PSIII, 37.4-5, 40.5-6; PSIV, 46.16-17, 50.17-18; see also bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, Mig-'byed-'od-stong, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 494.4-5), whereas some others clearly play out in later times.

30 Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 87ff., Kaschewsky *et al.*, *Historizität des Helden Gesar*, 394-395.

Singular Volume was written, this biography again closely associates the two by noting that it was the Rlangs scion who had invited the missionary to the plateau in the 8th century.³¹ This amicable affiliation allows the work to enlist Padmasambhava to first bless the entire Rlangs clan and to then prophesy that an emanation and »spiritual son« of his, called »Byang and Chub«, would appear in his pupil's descent group in the future.³²

This prophetic statement, as the work clarifies later on, presages Byang-chub-'dre-bkol, the ancestor of the narrower lHa-gzigs lineage from which the Phag-mo-gru hegemony hailed.³³ His extensive life story is included later in the work and, besides detailing his grand acts, reiterates his spiritual unity with Padmasambhava multiple times to firmly secure his standing.³⁴ Now thoroughly imbued with the saint's aura, powerful spiritual beings known as *ḍākinīs* also foretell that his descendants shall become »masters of the kingdom of Bod«³⁵ – the plateau's historical heartlands. Extending this chain of prophecies yet further, the lineage ancestor himself goes on to convey similar forecasts to his offspring, adding additional detail. His testament, for one, proclaimed that in the 13th descending generation a scion would appear who would resemble him and »place the kingdom at [his] feet.«³⁶ Unsurprisingly, we find that Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, the luminary under whom the house actually rose to such dominance in the mid-14th century, actively identified as a descendant of this figure.³⁷ The clout provided by these prophecies was, furthermore, readily mobilised by subsequent literature, which repeatedly cited them in bids to shore up the house's legitimacy.³⁸

Naturally, there are more subtle indications as well for the text's association with the Phag-mo-gru-pa's concerns and pursuits. We encounter, for instance, an ancestor named rGod-lding, a »lord of the Rlangs« (*rlangs-rje*), who built a lavish temple replete with a Tibetan Buddhist canon (*bka'-gyur*), and who is described as having been »the earliest of [the plateau's Buddhist] patrons« (*yon-bdag-gi-snga-ba*).³⁹ Several other forefathers, too, are reported to have sponsored or written such sets of Buddhist scripture in golden ink.⁴⁰ These

31 This figure appears in various earlier sources, such as PT307 (Dalton, Early Development) – where he appears side by side with Padmasambhava (who had not yet risen to his later stature) – and Nyang-ral-Nyi-ma-'od-zer, *Chos-'byung*, ed. Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs and Ma-grong-Mi-'gyur-rdo rje, 310-13.

32 »slob-dpon-padma'i-zhal-na-re/ khyod-lha-rigs-rlangs-kyi-mi-brgyud-de/ mi-brgyud-lha-las-grol-ba-yin/ theg-pa-yar-la-'dzeg-pa-yin/ khyod-rlangs-kyi-mi-brgyud-skal-ldan-la/ nga-yis-thugs-rjes-khyab-par-byed/ khyod-ni-skyes-bu-skal-ldan-yin/ khyod-lha-rigs-rlangs-kyi-mi-brgyud-la/ byang-dang-chub-zhes-bya-ba-yi/ mi-brgyud-khyad-du-'phags-pa-yong-/ de-ni-nga-yi-thugs-kyi-sras/ gsungs-nas ...«; PSI, fol. 184.2-5; PSII, 80.4-81.1; PSIII, 40.8-13; PSIV, 51.1-7. All Tibetan citations given in this article are eclectic readings based on PSI, PSII and PSIV, with quirks in the spelling and grammar respected as long as these do not hinder comprehension.

33 Cf. Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 87, 105, n. 27.

34 For example, PSI, fols. 191.1-2, 210.4-212.1, 230.5-231.2; PSII, fols. 86.5, 103.4-104.5, 120.1-2; PSIII, 43.11-12, 51.14-52.5, 59.14-16; PSIV, 54.14-15, 65.7-66.1, 75.6-9.

35 »bod-kyi-rgyal-khams-bdag-po-byed/«; PSI, fols. 230.5-231.3; PSII, fol. 120.1-3; PSIII, 59.14-18; PSIV, 75.6-11.

36 »nga-nas-mi-rabs-bcu-gsum-na/ nga-yi-brgyud-pa-nga-'dra-yong-/ des-ni-rgyal-khams-zhabs-su-tshud/ gsungs-pa'i-zhal-chems-yang-byung-/«; PSI, fols. 328.5-329.2; PSII, fol. 205.2-3; PSIII, 96.12-3; PSIV, 121.15-16.

37 Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, *gSol-'debs-thung-ba*, ed. Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 388.1-8.

38 For example, *bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan*, *Mig-'byed-'od-stong*, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 490.4-7, which was copied by rTa-tshag-tshe-dbang-rgyal, *lHo-rong-chos-'byung*, 352.6-11. Also see Anon., *Dri-lan-nyer-gcig*, ed. Khedup Gyatso, fols. 347.4-348.1, 349.3-350.2, rGyal-dbang-lnga-pa-chen-po, *dPyid-kyi-rgyal-mo'i-glu-dbyangs*, 119.22-120.5, 121.7-10, 122.20-123.1.

39 PSI, fols. 174.2-175.3; PSII, fol. 71.3-72.2; PSIII, 36.2-11; PSIV, 45.9-46.1.

40 PSI, fols. 179.4-5, 266.2-3; PSII, fols. 76.2-3, 150.2-3; PSIII, 38.11-12, 73.2-3; PSIV, 48.11-12, 92.9-11.

large canonised collections, however, arose only in the early 1300s and grew increasingly popular in subsequent centuries.⁴¹ This renders the claims found in the *Records*, which transplant these canons into a deep ancestral past, decidedly anachronistic. Yet these accounts do mirror activities reported for Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan and also reverberate with the sumptuous religious patronage furnished by subsequent Phag-mo-gru dignitaries such as Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan.⁴²

In like manner, reports that Rlangs-dPal-gyi-seng-ge »erected a multitude [of statues of] *bKa'-brgyud* lamas«⁴³ deepens the Phag-mo-gru-pa's warm historical association with this school of Buddhism, so central to their religious identity. Yet this forebear's aforementioned ties with Padmasambhava betray that he must have been active in the latter half of the 8th century, hundreds of years before the Buddhist school he supposedly championed even came into being as a self-conscious tradition. Accordingly, this claim too is anachronistic and was surely included to drive home the intimate ties between the Phag-mo-gru rulers, their lineage and their favoured Buddhist school. Evidently, then, these life stories do not reflect pre-existing historical traditions but provided a useful surface on which contemporary cultural and political preoccupations could be projected back into a consciously constructed, deep biographical past.

Along similar lines, we find an additional interesting claim that too may have been intended to boost the sectarian religious clout of the Phag-mo-gru-pa's ancestral lineage. The lHa-gzigs ancestor is said to have received extensive land donations from a minister of the Khasa kingdom,⁴⁴ a polity centred around present-day western Nepal that flourished in the first centuries of the second millennium. This biographical reference evokes Khasa's historical role as patron of gDan-sa-mthil, the central monastery of the Phag-mo-gru-pa. Historically, this royal sponsorship had been initiated at an important affiliated bKa'-brgyud monastery under a religious prelate (Jig-rten-mgon-po, 1143-1217) who was unrelated to the later Phag-mo-gru-pa hegemony.⁴⁵ With this history in mind, the *Records'* biographical assertion – set in a still deeper past – may have been an attempt to subtly inscribe this important relationship's incipience onto the early history of the ruling house's biological lineage, or to at least intimately associate the two.

Yet another contemporary political and literary aspect of the work may come to the fore through a brief look at another treasure text with a very similar background, the *Padma-bka'-thang*. This famous work was retrieved in 1352, the very period in which the Phag-mo-gru-pa were on the ascent and briefly before the composition of the *Singular Volume*. The site of its alleged find, furthermore, was located in the mountains directly west of the Phag-mo-gru fortress of sNe-gdong, in the very heartland of their authority. Moreover, this work also mobilised Padmasambhava to channel politically charged prophecies which touched on the rise of the Phag-mo-gru-pa. Thematically, too, the two texts display overlaps in content.⁴⁶

41 Eimer, *Ein Jahrzehnt Studien*, xiii-xiv.

42 bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, Mig-'byed-'od-stong, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 496.2, rTa-tshag-tshe-dbang-rgyal, *lHo-rong-chos-'byung*, 372. Also see Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, bKa'-chems, ed. Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 179.6-8.

43 PSI, fols. 179.4, 182.3; PSII, fols. 76.2, 78.5-79.1; PSIII, 38.10-11, 39.14; PSIV, 48.10-11, 50.1.

44 PSI, fol. 267.2-3; PSII, fol. 151.2; PSIII, 73.10-11; PSIV, 93.1-2.

45 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 90-91.

46 Stein, *Une source ancienne*, 91.

Indeed, historiographical sources of far later date, though perhaps relying on older sources, even go so far as to suggest that the *Padma-bka'-thang's* discoverer, O-rgyan-gling-pa, ran into trouble with the Phag-mo-gru ruler,⁴⁷ allegedly due to »a prophecy which contained an insinuation«⁴⁸ included in the text.⁴⁹ The historicity of their clash remains quite uncertain, and the prophecy in question certainly need not have been intended as a straightforward slight of the Phag-mo-gru-pa.⁵⁰ Yet both this prophecy's phrasing and its placement in a patterned series of predictions would certainly have left something to be desired on the part of the hegemon. To wit, the house's rise was included in a list of almost exclusively negative and even catastrophic events – disease, famine, rains of blood, the decline of the *dharma* – that foretold the rise of individual treasure revealers. The appearance of O-rgyan-gling-pa himself would be signalled by the emergence of a king in the Yar-lung valley, the rather crude image of »pigs« (Tib. *phag*, short for Phag-mo-gru) uprooting the »earth« (*sa*, short for Sa-skya) and the ominous-sounding rise of 108 bulwarks.⁵¹ Especially when taking this passage's broader context into consideration, a more flattering prophecy could be imagined. The *Singular Volume*, to be sure, presented the reader with a less bellicose, unequivocally positive and authorised alternative.

In another parallel, it is noteworthy that the *Padma-bka'-thang* paints a decidedly unfavourable picture of the Rlangs ancestor dPal-gyi-seng-ge, further aggravating his already unflattering depiction in the earliest recension of a 12th-century text that this work built upon.⁵² In this mid-14th-century work, he not only miserably fails at his royally assigned task of bringing the Buddhist teachings to Tibet but also ends up being stubbornly disobedient, dishonourably killed off and possibly in hell, while his failure to return to court is used as a pretext by evil imperial ministers to banish his more virtuous companions who did survive

47 Kong-sprul-Karma-ngag-dbang-yon-tan-rgya-mtsho, *gTer-dang-gter-ston*, 87.

48 Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School*, vol. 1, 777.

49 Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School*, vol. 2, n. 1035 (note that the author's original Tibetan does not add any details on what specific prophecy is supposed to be at play). Kapstein deems these later traditions of O-rgyan-gling-pa's persecution plausible; Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 166.

50 For one, O-rgyan-gling-pa seems to have welcomed the fading of Mongol influence associated with the Phag-mo-gru-pa's ascendancy. He described Mongol-Sa-skya law as »dark on the inside, white on the outside« (*nang-gnag-phyi-dkar*) and linked their hegemony to a steep decline in »the karmic merit of Tibet« (*bod-kyi-bsod-nams*) (462.18-463.1). In contrast, the rise of the Phag-mo-gru-pa is accompanied by the appearance of »an emanation of Vajrapāṇi in the Yar-lung valley« in another passage, likely a reference to Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan (*yar-klungs-nang-nas-phyag-rdor-sprul-pa-byung:*) (445.3-4). In addition, the prophecy under scrutiny was later even cited, albeit stripped from its larger context, by the fifth Dalai Lama to buttress the authority of the house; rGyal-dbang-lnga-pa-chen-po, dPyid-kyi-rgyal-mo'i-glu-dbyangs, 128.1-4.

51 »yar-klungs-mthil-nas-rnam-smin-bskyed-rgyal-'byung: phag-gis-sa-slog-dbus-khams-sa-hor-za: btsan-rdzong-brgya-dang-rtsa-brgyad-phyogs-su-'byung: shel-gyi-brag-phug-sbas-pa'i-gter-ka-'di: mi-bzhag-'don-pa'i-rtags-der-[read: de-]bstan-nas-byung: gter-ston-u-rgyan-gling-pa-zhes-bya-ba-'byung:«; U-rgyan-gling-pa, *Padma-bka'-thang*, ed. dByangs-can, 466.18-467.03, cf. Toussaint, *Le dict de Padma*, 385.

52 Doney, *Zangs Gling ma*, 145-146, ZLh fols. 45a.3-46a.1. Also see Nyang-ral-Nyi-ma-'od-zer, *Chos-'byung*, ed. Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs and Ma-grong-Mi-'gyur-rdo rje, 310-13. Cf. Gu-ru-U-rgyan-gling-pa, rGyal-po-bka'i-thang-yig, 131-2, 203-4.

their Indian mission.⁵³ This inimical image is offset in the *Singular Volume*, which pits him as a successful missionary, military hero, builder of temples and the person responsible for inviting Padmasambhava.⁵⁴ All in all, then, it is quite conceivable that the *Singular Volume* was partially inspired by this mid-14th-century text, with which it shared many structural features but whose depictions of the Phag-mo-gru and their ancestor could have been deemed to be in need of a substantial soft-power touch-up.

Rewriting Ancestry and the Work's Heterogeneous Origins

Although the *Singular Volume* certainly painted an agreeable picture of the house's forebears, we nevertheless encounter a number of small but interesting discrepancies when we compare the work with somewhat later sources directly attributable to agents of the ruling house. Within decades of the work's appearance, these authors already displayed a distinct unease with parts of the material that documented their own ancestry and attempted to rid their pedigree of any elements and figures apparently perceived as heterodox. This incongruity raises important questions regarding the origins of these different attitudes. Were they rooted in natural, gradually evolving notions of what house members believed to constitute respectable ancestry? Or, alternatively, is it possible that these discrepancies reveal a pre-existing disconnect between Phag-mo-gru dignitaries and the traditions contained in their genealogy? And if this were so, where could these traditions have been drawn from?

One subtle example of such Buddhist rewriting is encountered in the way in which the *Thousand Lights* of 1418, a *bKa'-brgyud* Buddhist history written by a Phag-mo-gru prelate at the behest of the house's administrator, also his brother, presents a string of forebears engaged in salvific traditions. The author was instructed to include information on the house's pedigree⁵⁵ and accordingly gave quite some detail from the *Singular Volume*, listing, for one, twelve of the *Records'* first fourteen religious figures along with their feats.⁵⁶ Yet in doing so, he notably omitted the alleged introduction of Bon to Tibet by a Rlangs scion.⁵⁷ Although this was a cultural milestone by any standard, it was apparently not one he wished to broadcast in a partisan history of a Buddhist school with which the Phag-mo-gru-pa were so closely aligned. This editorial omission, incidentally, successfully rippled through in the author's legacy, as most of these ancestors were later also copied into one of his own biographies with the Bon reference still missing.⁵⁸ The audience of these slightly later texts, therefore, was presented with an ancestry of the house that had been successfully purged of this non-Buddhist ancestor, even when the *Singular Volume* itself had included multiple references to ancestral Bon practitioners.

53 U-rgyan-gling-pa, *Padma-bka'-thang*, ed. dByangs-can, 374-79.

54 PSI, fols. 177.3-186.1; PSII, fols. 74.2-82.2, PSIII, 37.12-41.3, PSIV, 47.5-52.1. Interestingly, Padmasambhava's invitation had in fact also been attributed to one dPal-gyi-seng-ge in the *Padma-bka'-thang*, but that namesake hailed from a different clan, by the name of Shud-pu; U-rgyan-gling-pa, *Padma-bka'-thang*, ed. dByangs-can, 292-293.

55 Sørensen, *Rare Texts*, 15-16.

56 bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, Mig-'byed-'od-stong, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 493.1-494.4.

57 PSI, fols. 176.5-177.1; PSII, fol. 73.4-5; PSIII, 37.5-8; PSIV, 46.17-47.1.

58 Kun-dga'-rgyal-mtshan, bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan-gyi-rnam-thar, fols. 187.5-189.4. On this biography, see Sernesi, *Manual*, 129-130.

Along very similar lines, we find further features of both chapters of the *Singular Volume* that were found to be unsatisfactory and subjected to reinterpretation, omission or elaboration. One example is the *Pedigree's* cosmogonic and genealogical beginning, which was associated with non-Buddhist traditions. Given that it claims that the first human ancestor appeared from an egg that had itself arisen from elemental materials,⁵⁹ its inclusion was quite striking for a house so intimately associated with scholastic Buddhist institutions. Such narratives, to be sure, had been castigated as non-Buddhist by some Tibetan Buddhist authors as far back as the 12th century.⁶⁰ Indeed, soon after the house first embraced the *Singular Volume*, we find members altering or ignoring this passage. The *Thousand Lights* explicitly styles it a »Bon tradition« (*bon-lugs*) and presents a somewhat tweaked Buddhist version (*chos-lugs*) instead.⁶¹

Similarly, the latter work also muzzled a tradition of the Tibetans' ethnic origins that is predominantly associated with non-Buddhist traditions.⁶² The powerful Phag-mo-gru ruler Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan (1374-1432) himself, in an overview of his ancestry, wholly dropped both contested sections by simply omitting the entire first portion of the work's pedigree.⁶³ Although the remaining section certainly was a source of pride that deserved repeating, the first part, to all appearances, was not. The *Singular Volume's* heterodox associations, moreover, continued to perturb parts of its audience, as indicated by a text from the early 1570s that was forced to respond to charges that the text displayed distinct Bon influences.⁶⁴

Simultaneously, the *Singular Volume* had notably failed to include a biographical tradition found in other contemporary Buddhist sources, which held that there was a Rlangs ancestor – sometimes known as Khams-pa-go-cha – among the first seven Buddhist monks ordained on the Tibetan Plateau.⁶⁵ Although the *Records* does contain a brief, generic line on this ancestor's role in bringing the Buddhist teachings to the region,⁶⁶ the specific cultural capital associated with presenting him as one of the very first monks is not laid claim to.⁶⁷ The terseness of this biographical vignette is surprising when we consider the almost encyclopaedic nature of the work, and it only grows more striking when we see that from at least the mid-14th century onward key Phag-mo-gru figures were very much aware of this forebear and proactively mentioned him in writing. In fact, they seem to have treasured him over any other imperial ancestor. Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan repeatedly mentioned him in the 14th century,

59 PSI, fol. 107.3-108.1; PSII, fol. 9.5-10.3; PSIII, 4.17-5.1; PSIV, 7.15-8.3.

60 Karmay, *Black-Headed Man*, 248-249.

61 bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, *Mig-'byed-'od-stong*, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 483.3-6.

62 Langelaar, *Chasing the Colours*, 344-345.

63 Wang-Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan, *Chig-rgyud*, ed. Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 100.11ff.

64 Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 31, n. 18. The dating of this work is based on its abbatial lineage of gDan-sa-mthil, which halts after the later *spyang-snga* Grags-pa-'byung-gnas (Anon., *Dri-lan-nyer-gcig*, ed. Khedup Gyatso, fol. 359.3-4), whose tenure ended in 1570 and was followed by a brief hiatus; Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 459, appendix 1.

65 van der Kuijp, *Remarks*, 177-184.

66 PSI, fols. 176.4-177.1; PSII, fol. 73.4-74.1; PSIII, 37.04-8; PSIV, 46.16-47.02.

67 As already noted in van der Kuijp, *Remarks*, 178-179.

and the Thousand Lights readily added the assertion that he was among the first monks to its summary of the *Singular Volume*'s biographies.⁶⁸ The *Singular Volume* itself, on the contrary, had showered far more attention on another imperial ancestor, dPal-gyi-seng-ge, which may well be a function of the work's rNying-ma Buddhist influences.⁶⁹ This discrepancy may constitute further evidence of a disconnect between the composition of the work and the traditions current among the ruling house's contemporaneous high-ranking members.

Indeed, the work displays multiple additional features – toponymic, cultural and linguistic – that point away from the Phag-mo-gru-pa's heartland on the central stretches of the Tibetan Plateau. First of all, the text's narratives display a far higher toponymic density on certain swathes of the eastern plateau, located some 400-odd km northeast of the Yar-lung valley as the crow flies – some three to four weeks of travel distance in the pre-modern period.⁷⁰ Indeed, the *Singular Volume* locates the incipience of the house's lHa-gzigs lineage in this region of Upper Khams. The detail of individual toponyms provided for distinct plains, sites and temples located there – whether in the rTa-shod and Sog-shod Valleys or along the River lCi-chu – make for a stark contrast with the work's generic references to other regions. A sizeable number of these small-scale toponyms, moreover, are still in use today,⁷¹ and their inclusion demonstrates the authorial voice's rather intimate familiarity with the topography of these eastern Tibetan areas.

Certain cultural aspects, too, seem to point in an easterly direction. Take the appearance of King Ge-sar of Gling in the *Records*, the protagonist of what was to become a grand epic tradition centred on the eastern plateau.⁷² In contemporaneous sources from the plateau's heartland, such as the *bKa'-thang-sde-lnga*⁷³ or the *Padma-bka'-thang*, as well as in a legal document associated with the Phag-mo-gru house, the name Ge-sar still appeared solely as a vague king or polity, often encountered in a centuries-old political scheme of the four cardinal directions.⁷⁴ The *Records*, in contrast, is the earliest surviving source to remove the name Ge-sar from abstraction and involve him in face-to-face interactions on the plateau. This personalised Ge-sar, furthermore, already seems to have been an established figure in the milieu of the *Records*. He makes several appearances as an important benefactor; unearths treasures for Byang-chub-'dre-bkol; has an entourage whose names we recognise as

68 Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan invoked his memory during political negotiations, alluding to an episode where both he and a Sa-skya ancestor were among the first seven monks; van der Kuijp, *Remarks*, 178; Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, *bKa'-chems*, ed. Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 205.17-20. He also mentioned him – and no other imperial ancestor (!) – in a brief overview of his forebears; Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, *gSol-'debs-thung-ba*, ed. Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 388.1-2. In the *Mig-'byed-'od-stong*, Khams-pa-go-cha is discussed on fol. 493.2-4, which gives more detail than the *Singular Volume*. Also see rJe-thams-cad-mkhyen-pa-Tsong-kha-pa-chen-po, *sPyan-snga*, 224-225.

69 Besides repeatedly mentioning the »old« (*rnying-ma*) mantras and translations, this treasure text looks back to (the circles of) Padmasambhava, a general feature of works of a *rNying-ma*, not *bKa'-brgyud*, Buddhist bent. On treasures in the *bKa'-brgyud* context, see Ducher, *bKa' brgyud Treasure*.

70 Ryavec, *Historical Atlas*, 18-19, map 6.

71 Some examples are lHa-khang-thang in rTa-shod, in Khyung-po (in Dengqen, Qamdo, TAR, PRC), or Ra-dzar-dzong along the river lCi-chu, in Nang-chen (Nangqen, Yushu, Qinghai).

72 On some of the links between the epic and this text, see Stein, *Une source ancienne*, and *idem*, *Introduction*. For a recent overview of the scholarship on the epic, see FitzHerbert, *Ge sar of Gling*.

73 Stein, *Introduction*, 13.

74 Toussaint, *Le dict de Padma*, 164, 176, 410, 415 (the latter passage is wrongly translated, cf. U-rgyan-gling-pa, *Padma-bka'-thang*, ed. dByangs-can, 500.8); Anon., *Khrims-yig-zhal-lce-bco-lnga*, ed. bSod-nams-tshe-ring, 142.10-11.

supporting characters from later epic traditions; and is even identified as an incarnation of an imperial *dharma* king⁷⁵ – an unlikely claim for a figure without cultural resonance. It is therefore doubtful that this character would have had his roots in written literature from the central regions, where, so it appears, he remained but a shadow for a long time to come.⁷⁶

Connections to the east may also extend to the level of literal phrases, tropes and linguistic features. For instance, what may strike one as a singularly peculiar passage, which features a Rlangs ancestor preventing a snow mountain from crumbling with the crown of his head, we actually find mirrored in a mythological work that has been connected to Khams.⁷⁷ The same holds for another abstruse line on Ge-sar bringing a horse of some description to China.⁷⁸ Similarly, the aforementioned ethnic genealogy – which details the shared origins of the Tibetans, Chinese and Mongols – is attested predominantly in works from the east.⁷⁹ A recurring grammatical peculiarity, in which the particle *na-* is used as an allative case marker, is considered incorrect in standard Classical Literary Tibetan,⁸⁰ yet is attested in multiple sources from western Khams.⁸¹ Certain anomalous choices in vocabulary, lastly, may also be tied in with such an origin.⁸²

It is certainly relevant to point out that the ruling house's lHa-gzigs lineage originally hailed from Upper Khams.⁸³ Accordingly, we should allow for the possibility that some traditions current in their native regions may have found their way into the work. The exact channel through which such an eastern influx may have occurred, however, remains unclear.

75 PSI, fols. 195.5-266.4; PSII, fols. 91.1-150.4; PSIII, 45.11-73.3-5; PSIV, 57.8-92.13.

76 Stein noted that even in the east, from which all subsequent early written attestations stem, »no trace of the epic (as we have it now) can be found before ca. 1550 (or eventually 1500 A.D.).« (Stein, Introduction, 11).

77 Anon., dBu-nag, ed. Karmay and Nagano, 110.7; PSI, fol. 165.3 (added in margin); PSII, fol. 63.3; PSIII, 31.17-18; PSIV, 40.12.

78 Anon., dBu-nag, ed. Karmay and Nagano, 108.20-109.1; the line also occurs in ritual manuals of ancestor cults from the east (e.g. 'Gyur-med-rnam-rgyal, *lHa-thog-rgyal-rabs*, 45); PSI, fol. 197.3-4; PSII, fol. 92.4; PSIII, 46.5-6; PSIV, 58.7-8.

79 Langelaar, *Colours of the Rainbow*, 357, n. 114.

80 For example, Tournadre, *Classical Tibetan Cases*, 98.

81 PSI, fols. 243.4-5, 278.2, 279.5, 335.4-5; PSII, fols. 130.4, 161.1, 162.3-4, 210.4; PSIII, 64.11, 77.11, 78.4, 98.21-99.1; PSIV: 81.15-16, 98.4-5, 99.2-3, 124.14. This feature also appears in Anon., dBu-nag, ed. Karmay and Nagano, fols. 17a.1-2, 19b.1, rTa-tshag-tshe-dbang-rgyal, *lHo-rong-chos-'byung*, 352.19, 407.19-20, 802.7-8, etc., an unpublished biography on bSod-nams-dpal-'dren from Upper Khams (e.g. »khyod-skyid-pa-[read: sa-]cig-na-mi-'gro-nas/sdug-sa-gcig-na-'gro-bas-dga'-ba-e-yin-shus-[read: zhus-]pas/«, Suzanne Bessenger, personal communication, my emendations) and other works from the region.

82 Perhaps most fascinating is the hardly attested term *rus-mkhar*, literally »bone (or clan) fortress«; PSI, fol. 170.1; PSII, fol. 67.4; PSIV, 43.4, PSV, 33.2. Emended to *jus-mkhar* in PSIII: 34.1, it has been translated simply as »stronghold« (Ch. *yao sai*) or »fortress«; Zan la a wang and She Wan zhi, *Lang shi jia zu shi*, 24.11; Czaja, *Medieval Rule*, 54; Everding, *Herrschaft*, 18. Yet the term *rus-mkhar* is actually attested in texts from Upper Khams, where it refers to ritually buried ossuaries used in a heretofore undocumented ancestor cult (Langelaar, *Clan Castles*, 84).

83 The early lHa-gzigs figures Gags-pa-'byung-gnas and mKhan-chen-phu-ba, for instance, were both born in the lCi (var. sPyi) Valley (bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, Mig-'byed-'od-stong, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, fol. 456.2-6; rTa-tshag-tshe-dbang-rgyal, *lHo-rong-chos-'byung*, 795.18-19), an area largely in contemporary southern Nang-chen. Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, too, pinpointed his apical ancestor to this area; Byang-chub-rgyal-mtshan, gSol-'debs-thung-ba, ed. Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs, 388.2-8. For more on the geography of the lHa-gzigs lineage and the *Singular Volume*, see Langelaar, *Bones and Thrones*, especially 130-160.

It is possible that such traditions, perhaps indeed in the form of older written documents,⁸⁴ had been held by the house itself and were refashioned in the late 14th century for inclusion in the work. Alternatively, the *Singular Volume* may have been an outside creation by an unidentified adulator that, in spite of its imperfections, had willingly been adopted by the Phag-mo-gru-pa for its archaic flair and political potency. The latter scenario would perhaps offer a better explanation for the continued presence of certain cultural quirks in the work. Yet, either way, judging by the work's variegated contents – which display 14th- and 15th-century Central Tibetan political sensibilities, apparently eastern traditions and archaic phrases – it is beyond doubt that the genealogy's composer(s) drew inspiration from multiple sources and social fields.

Given this heterogeneity, it is not at all surprising that the content of the Phag-mo-gru-pa's genealogy soon presented those house members actually invested in the work with a number of small yet thorny issues. Subsequent reflections on the *Singular Volume* accordingly remodelled and updated both biographical and genealogical elements that no longer, or perhaps never had, quite fitted the social and political niches the work was to address. Indeed, this reading tradition of the *Singular Volume* elegantly demonstrates that such collections of lives lead a life of their own too.

Biography and Hierarchy: Forging a Political Community

Genealogy, as David Jackson has shown, has long been an important domain of oratory in Tibetic-language-speaking areas, where pedigrees of rulers would often be recited at a variety of formal and festive occasions they attended. Written works, furthermore, could serve as inspiration for such addresses.⁸⁵ It takes but little imagination to suppose that the biographies of the *Singular Volume*, too, would have been put to such use. It is certainly relevant here to point out that much of the text's content, including boasts of the clan's grandeur, are, in fact, presented as oral addresses. Moreover, citations-cum-paraphrases from the work found in later Phag-mo-gru sources, which maintain the passages' verse form but change their phrasing, may indicate that these passages were reassembled from memory and had been pro-actively studied.⁸⁶ In any case, active usage of the work would certainly have helped spread its politically charged message while simultaneously consolidating the house members' self-understanding as proud scions of ancient and elevated stock.

At this point in our conclusion, then, it is instructive to take another, broader conceptual look at the work's biographies. The wide-ranging nature of the activities reported in the life stories of the clan members, both on a geographic and conceptual level, should be read as yet another sign of the work's concern with the house's political standing. The scenery for these ancestral acts includes territory in contemporary India (Bodhgayā), Nepal (Svayambhūnāth),

84 It is, moreover, conceivable that material was sourced from oral traditions. The *Singular Volume* contains several supposedly oral addresses set in front of assemblies, and genealogy has long been a staple of formal oral performances (see n. 85). Many references in the text, moreover, seem to presuppose rather specific cultural background knowledge. Also note that the *dBu-nag-mi'u-'dra-chags*, with which the *Singular Volume* has several overlaps, is presented as consisting of »songs«; Karmay, *Black-Headed Man*, 263.

85 See the examples cited by David Jackson from various periods and regions; *Mollas*, 24-25, 58-62, 63-64, 79-80, 83-90.

86 For example, Anon., *Dri-lan-nyer-gcig*, ed. Khedup Gyatso, fols. 347.5-348.1 and cf. PSI, fol. 121.2-3; PSII, fol. 22.3-4; PSIII, 10.15-17; PSIV, 15.16-16.1. Anon., *Dri-lan-nyer-gcig*, ed. Khedup Gyatso, fols. 348.5-350.1 is a hodgepodge of phrases found throughout the *Singular Volume* (e.g. PSI, fols. 328.5-329.2; PSII, fol. 205.2-3; PSIII, 96.12-13; PSIV, 121.15-16). Also consider, for instance, bSod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, *Mig-'byed-'od-stong*, ed. A-mgon-rin-po-che, f. 487.1-2 and cf. PSI, fol. 135.2-4; PSII, fol. 35.2-4; PSIII, 16.8-11; PSIV, 13.13-18.

entire swathes of the Tibetan Plateau and regions beyond, such as China and Oḍḍiyāna. One ancestor's meditation site at western Mt. Kailash is over 3000 km away from Chinese Mt. Wutaishan, where another forefather had a vision of a revered *bodhisattva*.⁸⁷ On a cultural and historical level, too, the ancestors' achievements were monumental. They turned back invading Chinese armies, sparked the light of Buddhism and, for good measure, that of the Bon religion too. They were among the very first sponsors of the most revered Buddha statue of the plateau as well as of a renowned pilgrimage site in the Kathmandu Valley. One of their scions tamed the esteemed deity Mahākāla, and yet others rendered multiple areas safe from roaming evil spirits and bandits, thus not only saving countless lives but also making these regions fit for human habitation and travel.

In staking out such major claims, the *Singular Volume* catalogues how the house's ancestors were not merely important but rather fundamental to the macro-region's current constellation, carving out a place in history as an enduring social agent to whom the Tibetan Plateau's populations would forever be obliged. Such a sense of biographically manufactured obligation, actively instilled in audiences that read or heard the great acts of a ruler's ancestors, has understandably been described as a sense of »indebtedness«. ⁸⁸ This economically connoted term, however, does not quite fit the bill. Debts, after all, can be repaid and the associated obligation undone. These grand acts of yore, in contrast, did not take place on an everyday plane of reciprocity or exchange, fit to counter favours or recompense. Instead, they were constitutive of the very social and cultural fabric of the plateau. Accordingly, to borrow the late David Graeber's phrase, one cannot »even conceive of a squaring of accounts« between the protagonists and their surrounding populations. ⁸⁹ The balance is forever skewed and calls a lasting hierarchy into life.

This conceptual dynamic operates in the background of many Classical Tibetan genealogies and, indeed, biographical collections at large. The notion that such great deeds can never truly be squared, for one, is voiced explicitly in one of the genealogies of the Sa-skyā houses. This work notes that the protagonists' »benevolence«, which included reviving Buddhism from a precipitous decline, »cannot [ever] be repaid«. The only option the author and the audience are left with, consequently, is to »join palms and reverently prostrate« to the house's scions. ⁹⁰ The term translated here as »benevolence« (*bka'-drin*) already carries strong connotations of hierarchical asymmetry, as it is associated mainly with benign rulers, saintly figures and selfless parents. In the *Singular Volume*, for instance, this top-down benevolence describes the relation between the helpless »blind men of Tibet« and an accomplished missionary of the Rlangs, who opened their eyes by converting them to Buddhism. ⁹¹

87 PSI, fols. 320.1-4, 196.4-5; PSII, fols. 197.5-198.2, 91.5-92.1; PSIII, 93.8-12, 45.19-20; PSIV, 117.15-19, 57.18-19.

88 Jackson, *Mollas*, 89.

89 Graeber, *Debt*, 112.

90 »... de-lta'i-bka'-drin-gzhal-du-ma-mchis-pa'i// sngags-'chang-bla-ma-kun-dga'-rin-chen-dang// gang-de'i-thugs-sras-'jam-dbyangs-sku-mched-la// snying-nas-thal-sbyar-gus-pas-phyag-'tshal-lo//« (Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-bsod-nams, *Sa-skyā'i-gdung-rabs*, vol. 1, p. 38).

91 »bod-dmus-long-thams-cad-chos-la-btsud-nas-bka'-drin-che-bas/ bka'-drin-che-ba'i-grub-thob-dpal-gyi-seng-ge-de-yang-/ rlangs-kyi-grub-thob-chen-po-yin//«; PSI, fol. 185.5-186.1; PSII, fol. 82.1-2; PSIII, 41.1-3; PSIV, 51.18-52.1.

In depicting such deeds, therefore, the *Singular Volume* did not seek to inspire mere indebtedness – an unstable inequality after all – but rather to engender a sense of a deep-rooted social hierarchy.⁹² In doing so, the biographical collection comes full circle. Prefacing the series of biographies, an oral address by the house's lineage ancestor directed at members of the greater clan had sketched out the descent group's social universe. With religious leaders occupying an eminent position, »the people of the kingdom« were firmly situated »below« the clan.⁹³ The life stories that follow this oratory both reaffirm and justify this vision of society. They establish the ideal of a political community in which the Phag-mo-gru-pa, heirs to the infinite store of grace that their Rlangs ancestors had bestowed upon the Tibetan Plateau, would forever enjoy pre-eminence. The work's biographical collection, in sum, naturalised reigning socio-political relations by recasting the ruling house's political dominance in a language of long-pedigreed moral relations.

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92 Here I follow the line of thought in Graeber, *Debt*, 109-110, 120-121.

93 »lar-nga-lha-rigs-'phan-po-che-rlangs-kyi-mi-brgyud-la/ gong-na-yod-pa-bla-ma-dkon-mchog bla-mchod-bdag-gi-'dren-pa-yin/ 'og-na-yod-pa-rgyal-khams-kyi-mi-yin/«; PSI, fol. 161.5-162.1; PSII, fol. 60.2-3; PSIII, 30.6-8; PSIV, 38.11-13.

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Abbreviated titles in footnotes

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- PSII = Rlangs po ti bse ru, in: T. Tsepel Taikhang (ed.), *lHa rigs rlañs kyi rnam thar: A Detailed Account of the Rlañs Lineage of Phag-mo-gru-pa Rulers of Tibet: Incorporating Versions of the »Rlañs po ti bse ru« and the »Si tu'i bka' chems« of Si-tu Byan-chub-rgyal-mtshan* (New Delhi, 1974) fols. 2-212.
- PSIII = lHa-rigs-rlangs-kyi-skye-rgyud & Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru-che-dge-yig-tshang-dang-mi-rgyud-grol-thabs, in: Chab-spel-Tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs (ed.), *Rlangs-kyi-po-ti-bse-ru-rgyas-pa* (Lhasa, 1986) 1-99.
- PSIV = *lHa-gzigs-rlangs-kyi-gdungs-[sic!]rabs-po-ti-bse-ru-bzhugs* (Lhasa, 1982).
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