

THE ANCIENT MONASTIC COMPLEXES OF  
**THOLING, NYARMA AND TABO**

BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS – VOL.3

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Graz University of Technology – Faculty of Architecture  
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*Carmen Auer & Holger Neuwirth*

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*Carmen Auer*

## **BASGO**

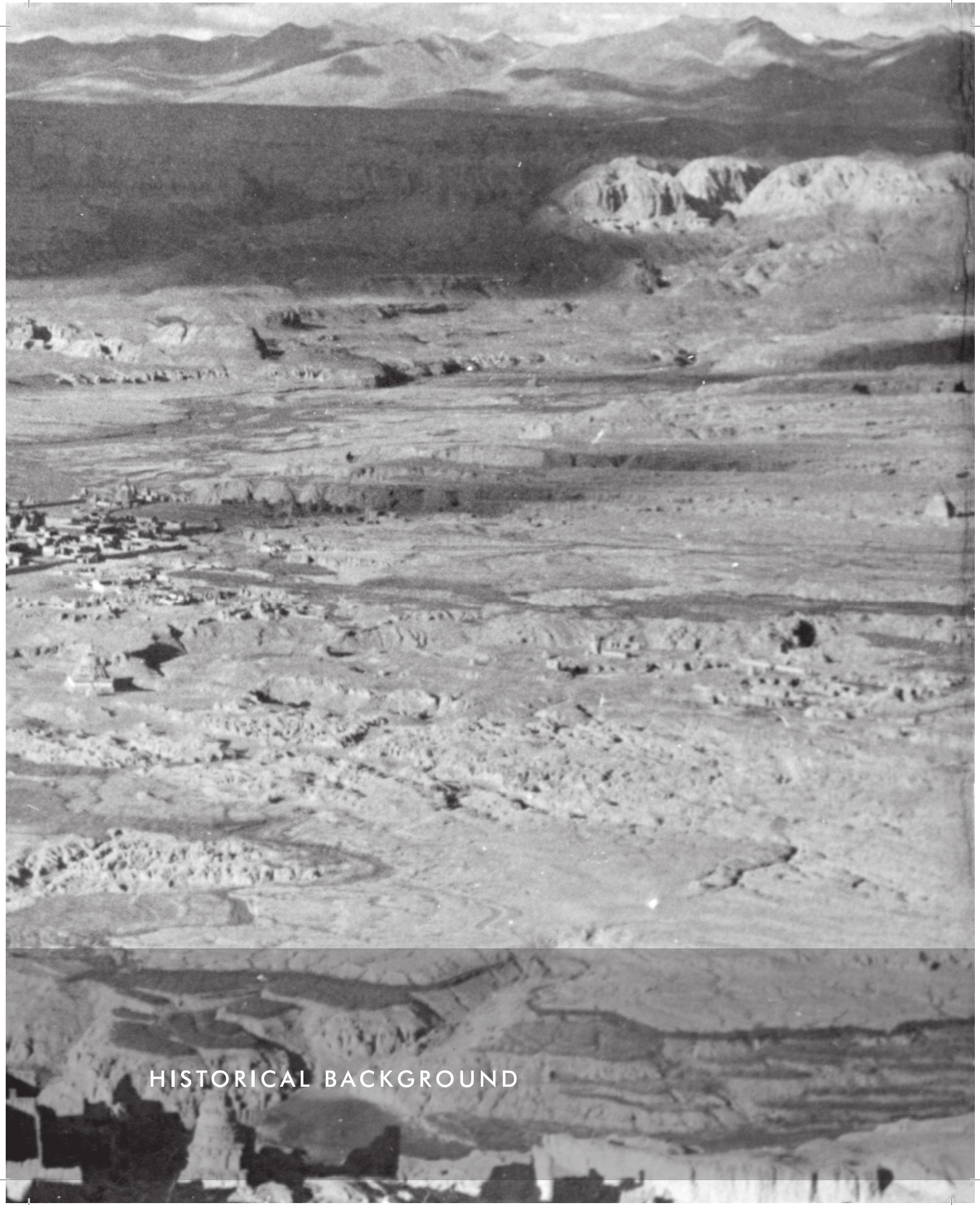
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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Fig. 05 Portrait of the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, Khardzong Cave, West Tibet (Ngari Prefecture, PRC). Courtesy of the Pritzker Art Collaborative, Chicago, 2012.





# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Yannick Laurent (EPHE, Paris)

## IN THE TIME OF THE GREAT TRANSLATOR RINCHEN ZANGPO

### THE FOUNDATION PERIOD OF THOLING, NYARMA AND TABO MONASTERIES

*“The river bed is here a scorching waste of rocks and dust about a mile wide. Fantastic precipices bound the view on all sides. The monastery of Toling stands opposite, on a shelf overlooking the Satej. Its long crimson walls, set off by a few brilliant poplars in full leaf, its rows of white pure chortens, and high above, its gold roof sparkling in the haze, struck just that crowning note of unreality which the whole scene demanded. On the plateau I had had the sensation, common in Tibet, of wandering in another world. At Toling I thought that I was dreaming as well; and if Rinchen [Zangpo] himself, in black and yellow satin, had appeared then and there, grappling with his dragon on the bank of the river, I doubt whether I, or any of us, for that matter, would have been surprised.”*

George Malcolm Young (1912)<sup>10</sup>

Around the turn of the first millennium, the Indo-Tibetan regions of the Western Himalayas experienced an unprecedented cultural development and societal transformation. This movement, which would impact the people and their environment for many centuries to come, translated into the establishment of major religious sites across the land. One man in particular was to be involved in the process and would upstage the many actors who strived to transform Western Tibet into a flourishing Buddhist kingdom. Rinchen Wangchuk, better known as the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo (*Lochen*), was born in 958 at a time when Tibet is often said to have been shrouded in darkness (Fig. 05). Less than half a century later, however, this situation would change when a dynasty of devout rulers, Tibetan translators, and Indian pundits engineered what became known as ‘the later dissemination of Buddhism’ among Tibetan historians. Many prominent scholars, such as Tucci and Davidson, have hailed this period as a Tibetan renaissance for its dissemination of ideas, spectacular artistic flowering, and the socio-political transformations that resulted, anchoring key societal and cultural components more broadly and permanently within Tibetan and Himalayan societies.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> YOUNG 2007: 108.

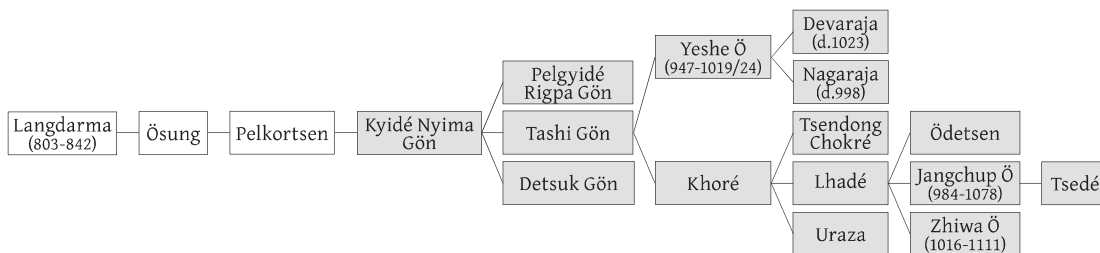
<sup>11</sup> TUCCI 1988a; DAVIDSON 2005.

Fig. 06 Patriline of Western Tibetan Dynasty (Kingdom of the Three Dominions of Upper Tibet, 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries). Laurent 2020.

In the process, Rinchen Zangpo became the emblematic figure of this Buddhist revival. The Tibetan literary tradition has it that Rinchen Zangpo founded religious edifices on one hundred and eight sites across the Western Himalayas; a suspiciously high yet saintly number in the eyes of the Buddhist world. According to an early hagiographical narrative titled *A Chain of Crystal Pearls*, the earliest temples attributed to Rinchen Zangpo were founded under the aegis of Western Tibetan royalty.<sup>12</sup> The story recalls that King Lhadé requested Rinchen Zangpo to establish the main temple of Khorchak in Purang, while the royal monk Yeshe Ö enjoined him to found the Twelve Subdivisions Temple of Tholing in Guge, and the site of Nyarma in Ladakh. The text asserts that the foundations of all three monuments were laid in a single day, sometime in the year 996. Significantly, this particular year also coincided with the founding date of Tabo Monastery in Spiti, another monumental project which would be credited, rightly or wrongly, to the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo in the course of time. The third volume of this series is thus dedicated to the Buddhist architecture in the Western Himalayas and presents architectural and artistic documentation of all major temples founded at Tholing, Nyarma and Tabo. The establishment of these Buddhist monasteries in the last years of the tenth century and subsequent architectural development help illustrate one of the most glorious periods of Tibetan history.

In 842, the last ruler of a once mighty Tibetan Empire was murdered in retribution for his prior withdrawal of state patronage from Buddhist institutions and the subsequent dismantlement of monastic communities. Following the assassination of Langdarma (803–842), the empire collapsed and Tibet sank into chaos. However, this period of social and political fragmentation did not spur the complete extinction of Buddhism, which survived in the western and eastern borderlands of the Tibetan plateau.

12 SNELLGROVE AND SKORUPSKI 1980: 83–116.



A new religious impetus soon came from Western Tibet where descendants of the old Tibetan monarchy had sought asylum. Around 910, Kyidé Nyima Gön established a small but rapidly growing polity. He conquered the regions of Guge, Purang, and Ladakh within a couple of years resulting in the creation of the Kingdom of the Three Dominions of Upper Tibet (Fig. 04). After the king's death, the kingdom was divided between his three sons in the second quarter of the tenth century. As far as we know from extant sources, it is commonly held that Pelgyidé Rigpa Gön inherited Ladakh; Tashi Gön received Guge and Purang; and Detsuk Gön took Spiti, Kinnaur, Lahaul, and Zaskar (Fig. 06). By the third quarter of the tenth century, Tashi Gön's elder son, Yeshe Ö (947–1019/24), had reunited most of the former territories upon his ascension to the throne, setting the stage for a revitalization of Buddhism.

It was around this time that the young Rinchen Wangchuk was ordained, taking the name in religion Rinchen Zangpo (Fig. 07). In 975, at the age of seventeen and on his own initiative, Rinchen Zangpo set out for India in order to learn Sanskrit and study Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> After seven years spent in Kashmir, he then continued his journey to Eastern India where he acquired and translated a large body of Buddhist literature. Sometime before Rinchen Zangpo's return to Tibet in 987, King Yeshe Ö issued a grand decree exhorting the people of the kingdom to embrace Buddhism. In many ways, the issuance of his decree can be considered to mark the beginning of the later dissemination of Buddhism. It was rapidly followed by his *Religious Declaration* that gave precedence to religion over secularism. The new decree instructed the people to espouse Buddhist ethics and prioritise adherence to the new tantras.

13 GANGNEGI 1998: 45.



Fig. 07 'Bird-faced son of Ngari' aka Rinchen Zangpo, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, h. 45cm, Khartse Monastery, West Tibet (Ngari Prefecture, PRC). Courtesy of the Pritzker Art Collaborative, Chicago, 1999.

Reflecting on that period, a fifteenth-century chronicle titled the *Royal Succession of Ngari* describes a changing society. A passage asserts that all laymen and clerics were asked to protect the stability of the Buddhist doctrine.<sup>14</sup> With this goal in mind, the people of the kingdom had to show deference to Buddhist teachings and written commentaries, and respect all ordained monks and scholars. Vernacular knowledge such as medicine, hippology, and military know-how was to be imported from abroad. Furthermore, men were requested to be able to use a bow and arrow, to run, jump, exercise, swim, ride a horse, and to learn how to write, read, count. To guard against foreign incursions, people were exhorted to display strength and courage in the defence of their homeland.

From this time onwards, the rulers of West Tibet not only became avid patrons but also religious monarchs. In 989, Yeshe Ö abdicated the throne in favour of his brother Khoré and became a monk. Combining political legitimacy and religious piety, the cult of divine kingship was perfected by Western Tibetan rulers who, from then onwards, were known as divine lords (*lhatsun*) and/or monks of royal descent (*lha lama*). Thus “for the first time in Tibetan history”, remarked Snellgrove, “an aristocratic family appears in the dual role of head of state and religious head, sharing these functions between them”.<sup>15</sup>

Amongst Yeshe Ö's policy measures was also a *Refutation of Unorthodox Tantras* decree. This ordinance was an attempt to curtail misconceived religious activities.<sup>16</sup> Judging from the corrective actions promulgated in this document, some tantric rituals and practices performed in Central and West Tibet were deemed disruptive to social order for their promotion of the so-called ‘liberation rites’ for ritual murder – possibly including human sacrifices – and by encouraging sexual practices among different social strata as a means of salvation. A year before his death in 1024, Yeshe Ö issued yet another edict ordering two hundred bright young men from the regions of Guge, Purang, Ladakh, and Spiti to take holy orders and become the torchbearers of his missionary project.

14 VITALI 1996: 55, 110–111.

15 SNELLGROVE 1987: 472.

16 KARMAY 1998a.

As mentioned, Rinchen Zangpo returned to West Tibet aged twenty-nine in 987. He then spent the following years continuing the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist works into Tibetan. Meanwhile the monk-king Yeshe Ö moved the capital of the kingdom to the Luminous Plain of Tholing. Within a few decades, the site of Tholing had assumed the role of religious capital and cultural centre of the region. Texts composed in the seventeenth century report a prophetic tale, according to which a Tibetan king whose name ends in Ö and a bird-faced cleric were predestined to identify the site for the construction of a brand-new religious edifice.<sup>17</sup> The *modus operandi* of the foundation act was intriguing to say the least: it was believed that King Yeshe Ö and the bird-faced monk Rinchen Zangpo had determined the location of the new temple by throwing a wooden *gandi* high (*tho*) into the sky. The projectile glided (*ding*) through the air for a while before landing on the exact location at Tholing (*Thoding*) where the new temple had to be erected. A *gandi* beam is a percussion instrument used in Tibetan Buddhism to summon monks to prayers and atonement liturgies conducted indoors, akin to the semantron of the Orthodox church (Fig. 08).<sup>18</sup> In form, the *gandi* is usually a thick, octagonal piece of wood, slightly longer than an arm span. In flying to the site of Tholing, it symbolically ‘calls’ the king and his monks to worship. The narrative thus harks back to the reinstatement of religious orthodoxy and monastic life by Yeshe Ö and Rinchen Zangpo.

17 VITALI 2012: 116; VAN DER KUIJP 2015.

18 SOBKOYAK 2015.

Fig. 08 Detail of a wall-painting showing a monk striking a *gandi* beam on the roof of a red temple (Tholing?), Maitreya Temple, Tabo Monastery, Spiti (H.P., India). Widorn 2004, WHAV (VW32,31).



Fig. 09 The Twelve Subdivisions Temple also known as the Glorious Matchless Self-Perfected Temple. Spatial representation: Neuwirth & Auer, TU Graz 2020.

Originally comprised of eighty monks, the ordained residents of Tholing Monastery were expected to adhere to strict sets of rules and monastic regulations. With Rinchen Zangpo assuming the positions of head abbot, tantric master, and court chaplain, Yeshe Ö for his part laid down the economic provisions to support the monks. According to *The Royal Succession of Ngari*, the intended provisions of the community, the donation practices, the monks' attire, and the basic amenities were placed under the supervision of Tholing Monastery. In this context, one thousand loads and ten measures of seeds, salt, and other rations would be set aside from fields, pasture, and newly established ecclesiastical estates for the benefit and enjoyment of the monastic community. These regulatory dispositions, which entailed a form of feudal serfdom system, were laid down as irrevocable "for as long as the sun and the moon would preserve their course".<sup>19</sup> Established in the year 996, the main temple at Tholing was known under two different names, namely the Twelve Subdivisions Temple or the Glorious Matchless Self-Perfected Temple (Fig. 09). It was completed in 1028 during the reign of King Lhadé, Yeshe Ö's nephew. From this time onward, the new monastic complex was to remain one of the most prestigious monasteries in Tibet. It would be compared to the Indian learning centre of Nalanda and described as the 'Bodhgaya of Tibet' in late Tibetan sources.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout this period, Western Tibetan rulers ensured the sustainability of their dominions through deft exploitation of pastoral activities and economic resources, most notably gold mining and panning, without which a revival of Buddhist activities and cultural patronage would have been next to impossible. Numerous literary accounts tell how the precious metal

19 VITALI 1996: 56, 111.

20 VITALI 2012: 96–101, 114–27.



flowed from the Himalayas towards the Indo-Gangetic plain through the hands of Tibetan disciples and pilgrims. Gold was lavishly offered to the Buddhist shrines of India, while gold donations were made to Buddhist masters in exchange for teachings and tantric empowerments. The proverbial appetite for this precious metal by Indian masters was soon matched by some of their Tibetan counterparts. Drokmi Shakya Yeshe (992?– 1043/72), for example, was one of the most expensive Tibetan teachers in the eleventh century. He was reputed to demand a fortune in gold in order for him to bestow esoteric teachings obtained in India. Likewise, his disciple Marpa the Translator (1012?–1097) travelled back and forth between Tibet, the Kathmandu valley, and North-Eastern India thanks to the large quantities of gold offered by his followers and patrons. Indeed, the precious metal played an exceptional role in the transmission of esoteric literature into Tibet, with devout Tibetan disciples often willing to pay cash on the nail. An apocryphal tale, which inadvertently confuses the royal monk Yeshe Ö with his nephew King Lhadé, narrates how the king of Guge was being held captive by Muslim Qarakhanid Turks until a ransom equivalent to his weight in gold was paid. The legend has it that the Tibetan monarch urged his heirs to refuse to pay the ransom – and thus Yeshe Ö would have allegedly died by the hands of his captors – instead advising them to use the gold in order to invite the famous Bengali scholar Atisha (982–1055?) to Tibet. The authenticity of this tale is challenged by a relatively early text stating that Yeshe Ö lived out his days in Tholing where he eventually died of old age.<sup>21</sup>

The advantageous position of Western Tibet at the crossroads of Inner Asia proved to be vital to the success of this period. The Kingdom of the Three Dominions of Upper Tibet was part of an important nexus of trade routes connecting the Indian subcontinent to the city-states of the Silk Roads in the north. Monastic complexes established along these routes ensured the safe journey of merchants, craftsmen, and missionary monks. They provided safe havens for long distance caravans against marauding brigands, offering basic amenities, clerical assistance, and banking facilities to travellers. As was often the case in Asia, the growth of trade was co-emergent with the strategic location of monasteries. As a result, the establishment of religious complexes and translation centres across the kingdom not only enabled the dissemination of Buddhism but also contributed to the economic development and pacification of the region.

21 VITALI 1996: 113; GANGNEGI 1998: 41.

Fig. 10 The Golden Temple of Tholing. Spatial representation: Neuwirth & Auer, TU Graz 2020.

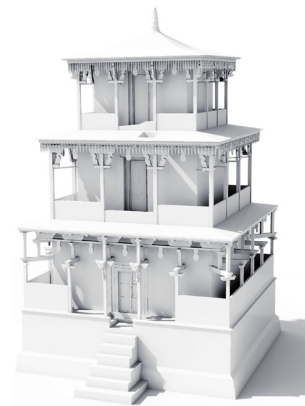


Fig. 11 Detail of a column capital showing a seated bodhisattva inside a lotus medallion, late 10<sup>th</sup> - early 11<sup>th</sup> century, Shelkar, Upper Kinnaur (H.P., India). Laurent 2016.

From around the end of the first millennium onwards, the expansion of Islam and the progressive decline of Indian Buddhist institutions must also account for the transmission of ideas and renewed interest in esoteric Buddhism. After the fall of the Indian Pala and Sena dynasties, the Ghurids from Central Afghanistan began their conquest of India in 1175. Buddhist religious centres such as Nalanda and Odantapuri, which had already suffered from a decline of patronage, were eventually devastated by Sultan Mu'izz-ud-din Muhammad (1149–1206) and his lieutenant Muhammad Khalji (d.1206); the latter even contemplated invading Tibet before he died in 1206. The iconoclastic suppression of Buddhist monasteries in North-Eastern India was carried on until 1235, and only the Kashmir region managed to retain its Buddhist milieu until the end of fourteenth century.

During this period, Tibet maintained close cultural links with India until at least the beginning of the fourteenth century. Tibetan masters and pilgrims were frequently drawn towards the Buddhist sites of northern India. Several of them sojourned in Bodhgaya to receive teachings despite the recurring threat of Islamic raids. Devout Tibetan monks financed renovation work of the holy seat and occasionally assumed the abbotship of the Mahabodhi Temple.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile on the Tibetan plateau, Buddhist literati grew increasingly convinced that they were the Buddha Shakyamuni's designated heirs. The intensive literary production carried out in their homeland also favoured the emergence of cosmological narratives in which the Land of Snows was unexpectedly recast as a Buddhist repository and promised land.

<sup>22</sup> HUBER 2008; VITALI 2010.





In so doing, the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism in the seventh century was revisited by Tibetan authors, now promoting the glorification of the old Tibetan monarchy and the restoration of a golden age.<sup>23</sup>

As is well known, the later dissemination of Buddhism also prompted an unprecedented artistic efflorescence. Tenuous archaeological evidence shows that Buddhism had already been introduced in the Western Himalayas prior to the formation of the Kingdom of the Three Dominions in the tenth century.<sup>24</sup> Large monastic centres and religious buildings established under royal patronage were now influenced by a new visual grammar. The surviving monuments from this period display a profusion of woodcarvings, murals, clay sculptures, and painted ceilings (Fig. 11). A variety of iconographical themes and images began to reflect the ubiquitous influence of esoteric Buddhism, apparent despite the suspicions of the ruling elite regarding the abuses and excesses of antinomian forms of Tantra. In this respect, Kashmir, which had been a repository for Shaivism and esoteric Buddhism since the eighth century, served as a conduit for the transmission of both tantric literature and art into Western Tibet.

As it turned out Rinchen Zangpo departed for Kashmir soon after the establishment of the new monastic complex of Tholing only to return in 1001. He was then accompanied by thirty-two Kashmiri artists and craftsmen who had been summoned to work at the newly founded temples of the kingdom. The name of at least one of them is preserved in the literary tradition, in which it is recounted that the Indian artist Bhidhaka was commissioned to make a statue of Avalokiteshvara the size of Rinchen Zangpo's father (Fig. 12).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, *The Royal Succession of Ngari* maintains that two hundred and twenty-three artists were involved in the construction of the Golden Temple at Tholing (Fig. 10). The passage reports that the provenance of its main icon was India.<sup>26</sup> The chronicle does not specify whether Indian artists created the altar image *in situ*, nor does it tell if the sculpture had been brought all the way from the workshops of the Gangetic plain. This account, however, would seem to suggest that the impact of Indian aesthetics went beyond the obvious influence of Kashmir alone.<sup>27</sup>

Fig. 12 Avalokiteshvara, Kashmir, late 10<sup>th</sup> century, h. 180 cm, Khatse Monastery, West Tibet (Ngari Prefecture, PRC). Courtesy of the Pritzker Art Collaborative, Chicago, 1999.



23 DAVIDSON 2004.

24 LUCZANITS 2004: 25–27.

25 PRITZKER 2000.

26 VITALI 1999: 30–31.

27 HELLER 2001.

Fig. 13 An 8<sup>th</sup>-century Buddha statue from Gilgit, northern Pakistan, bearing the name of the royal monk and translator Zhiwa Ö (1016–1111) in Tibetan script, Dangkhar, Spiti (H.P., India). Laurent 2010.



With the transplantation of Indo-Kashmiri imagery into Tibet, Buddhist artworks produced by foreign artists were held in high regard. Within an aesthetic of devotion, portable metal statuary in particular was much sought after by the royal house of the kingdom. Acting as devout patrons and agents of cultural development, several members of the royal family began to collect Buddhist sculptures from Kashmir and neighbouring regions, including antiques (Fig. 13).<sup>28</sup> These sacred objects were carefully engraved with epigraphs bearing the name of their Tibetan owners, among which are included Yeshe Ö's son, prince Nagaraja (d.1026), King Jangchup Ö (984–1078), the royal monk Zhiwa Ö (1016–1111), and his nephew King Tsedé. A biographical account of Yeshe Ö's life composed in the fifteenth century even goes as far as saying that the future king had studied the sciences of manufacture aged ten, reaching the highest degree of perfection in the making of sacred Buddhist images.<sup>29</sup> On a more concrete level, the text goes on to provide a glimpse into the economy in the crafts industry. Insisting on the scrupulous observance of iconometry, a passage details how much painters and sculptors were remunerated for their work. For instance, a painter who carried out his work with due diligence would receive his wage on the fifteenth day of the month at the time of the esoteric consecration of the paintings. Should he be careless, one third of the wage would be deducted and go towards religious services. Likewise, metal and clay sculptors responsible for sloppy workmanship would see a fourth of their wages levied for the sake of the church.

28 LAURENT 2013; LINROTHE 2014.

29 GRAGS PA RGYAL MTSHAN 2013: 6.

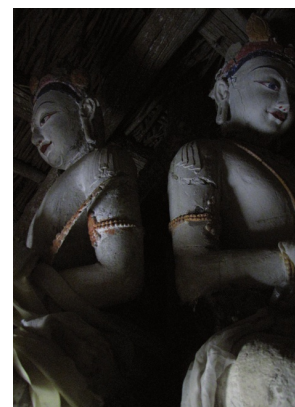
However, the payment of wages was also established on basis of artistic and technical difficulties. A sculptor would get three times his normal wage for a gilded portrait wearing full monastic robes. Bedecked statues and multi-armed deities, on the other hand, would bring him six and twelve times his wage respectively. Centuries later, the monastery of Tholing was still praised as an important centre for the production of portable metal images, which were by then referred to as ‘Tholingma’.

Paralleling the transmission of texts based on Yogatantra teachings, the monuments erected during this pivotal period were focused to a great extent on representations of Buddha Vairocana as their main devotional image. Three different forms of this cosmic Buddha are found in the early Tibetan Buddhist art of the Western Himalayas; namely Vairocana in a meditative poise, Mahavairocana, and four-fold depictions of Vajradhatu Vairocana (Fig. 14).<sup>30</sup> These artistic preferences were not just dictated by the diffusion of related texts but may also have reflected concerns about political legitimacy. In effect, the artistic programme of these early temples often appeared congruent with the divine status of Western Tibetan rulers. In accordance with the artistic representations of Vairocana in vogue at the time, Rinchen Zangpo translated several commentaries on the *Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha*, a seventh century Indian Buddhist text which played an essential role in the diffusion of esoteric literature in South-East Asia and Tibet.<sup>31</sup> In 1006, the Great Translator received his full ordination at the age of forty-eight, after which most sources suggest he remained in Guge until the end of his life – although a few mention a third journey to India. Among his many translations and editorial activities, he is credited with the introduction of the Chakrasamvara Tantra to Tibet and also actively promoted the esoteric teachings of the Yogatantra and Niruttarayoga traditions. The intellectual enterprise carried out at centres such as Tholing and Tabo involved the close collaboration of Indian scholars, Tibetan translators, and copyists, who would often travel back and forth between Kashmir, Bengal, and West Tibet. Rather than starting from a clean slate, the literary movement engineered by Rinchen Zangpo and his disciples also included the revision of existing scriptures and earlier translations which had reached Tibet during the previous centuries.

<sup>30</sup> LUCZANITS 2004: 201–209.

<sup>31</sup> WEINBERGER 2003.

Fig. 14 A monumental four-fold image of Vajradhatu Vairocana plunged in semi-darkness, 11<sup>th</sup> century, Lhalung, Spiti (H.P., India). Laurent 2010.



Rinchen Zangpo was eighty-four years old when Atisha Dipamkarashrijnana set foot in the capital of the kingdom in 1042 at the behest of King Jangchup Ö (984–1078) (Fig. 15). The contribution of Atisha, the legendary Buddhist scholar from Bengal, to the cultural history of the period soon came to epitomize the later dissemination of Buddhism.<sup>32</sup> The collaboration between Atisha and Rinchen Zangpo, as depicted in the Tibetan literary tradition, was one of master and disciple, and further occasionally portrays the old Tibetan translator as mildly provincial. Initially impressed with his hosts, Atisha soon realized that his zealous Tibetan disciples were practicing numerous tantric rituals without realizing the essence of a single one of them. While revising esoteric literature with local translators on the one hand, Atisha was simultaneously requested to propagate traditional Mahayana views. He thus composed his famous *Lamp for the Path to Awakening*, accompanied by its own commentary. The text quickly achieved a high degree of success, enabling the emergence of a soteriological literary genre called the *Graded Path (Lamrim)*. For this reason, the later Kadampa and Gelukpa schools of Tibetan Buddhism will often tend to overstress the role played by the Indian pundit. Yet Atisha's vaunted status within Tibet is not a matter of unanimous consensus. As a matter of fact, Davidson notes that "the early textual record actually depicts Atiśa as something of a pawn in the hands of Tibetan teachers".<sup>33</sup> In 1045, Atisha requested that Rinchen Zangpo accompany him to Central Tibet, but the Great Translator declined due to his age. During his travels, the Indian master and his supporters were not always received with all due honours, and their safety and livelihood depended much on the support of local rulers. The Bengali scholar sometimes encountered scepticism, if not hostility, and was even prevented from teaching a section on monastic discipline by his own Tibetan disciples, who at the time followed a different textual tradition.<sup>34</sup>

The adoption and adaptation of esoteric Buddhism in the late tenth century was thus a vast intellectual and religious enterprise which continued during much of the eleventh and twelve centuries. In 1076, a religious council was held in Tholing for more than a year, involving the participation of foreign scholars, Tibetan masters and translators. Among the latter group, some one hundred and twenty-one participants were not even natives of West Tibet. Yet, doctrinal standardisation was never completely achieved.

32 EIMER 1978; EIMER 1979; ROESLER 2019: 1145–1158.

33 DAVIDSON 2005: 111.

34 DAVIDSON 2005: 110.

In 1092, the royal monk and translator Zhiwa Ö (1016–1111) made public a list of seventy-two works, both old and new, which were being regarded as apocryphal and corrupted. Most of the proscribed texts were largely concerned with aspects of the now old tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (*Nyingma*). In the footsteps of Yeshe Ö's previous ordinance proscribing certain religious practices, the decree was issued "out of kindness to the Buddhists and Vajrayana practitioners of the kingdom of Tibet".<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding the pious and altruistic motivations of its Western Tibetan patrons, the search for religious legitimacy, doctrinal consistency and orthopraxis would soon result in a proliferation of religious figures and schools. Zhiwa Ö's decree significantly concluded that the Tibetans had produced too many tantric rituals; a situation that could only lead to evil rebirths and more sufferings. These lines, addressed by the royal monk to the new Buddhist communities of Tibet, would seem to capture this particular moment where the need for political legitimacy and the search for religious orthodoxy coalesced in a form of sectarianism that can arguably be viewed as the foundation of Tibetan Buddhism.

In this brief introduction, I have merely sketched in broad strokes nearly two centuries of intensive religious, artistic and political activities. In this narrative, the Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo was a pioneer, whose own inspirations coincided with the establishment of a kingdom ruled by a lineage of devout rulers and royal monks. His association with some of the key figures of the time, such as the monk-king Yeshe Ö and the Indian scholar Atisha, should not obscure the fact that most of Rinchen Zangpo's life was spent in a solitary pursuit of knowledge and spiritual realisation. As an industrious translator, relentless disciple and teacher, Rinchen Zangpo embodies the grit and audacious spirit of the mountain people. When Atisha left Tholing, the Great Translator soon retired at Khatse where he spent the last years of his life in seclusion until he died in 1055, aged ninety-seven. While traditional Tibetan historians would take hold of his life and embellish his achievements with tales of his magical prowess and the construction of a myriad of religious edifices, in reality, Rinchen Zangpo's contributions to the history of Tibetan Buddhism were nothing short of miraculous.

<sup>35</sup> KARMAY 1998b: 38.

Fig. 15 The long-lasting influence of Atisha Dipamkarashrijnana (982–1054) in Tibet is evidenced by this 18<sup>th</sup>-century portrait of the Indian pundit, Dangkhar, Spiti (H.P., India). Laurent 2010.

