HOW OLD WAS SRONG BRTSAN SGAM PO ?

—H. E. RICHARDSON

The tradition perpetuated by Tibetan religious historians from Sa-Skya Graps-pa Rgyal-Mtshan onwards, that Srong Brtsan Sgam Po died at the age of 82 is probably not now accepted by any western scholar. It is explained by Professor Roerich in his introduction to *The Blue Annals* as due to the interpretation of the Manjusrimulatantra as a reference to Srong Brtsan. Other explanations might be suggested but it is my intention here only to outline broadly the salient points in the evidence before the XIIIth century—and the age of the religious historians—which militate against the traditional view of Srong Brtsan's age.

The date of Srong Brtsan Sgam Po's death is clearly determined The Tibetan Tun Huang Annals and the Chinese T'ang Annals agree in putting it in a year which by western calculations is 650 A.D. The argument of Professor Hisashi Sato in favour of 649 is not conclusive and, in any event, it makes small difference whether the death occured at the end of 649 or the beginning of 650 (the date which I prefer). The point is that, given this clear date for the king's death, it would, on the traditional view, be necessary to put his birth c 568. Against that, Roerich following Schmidt, favours the year 617 which is derived from an interpretation of Ssanang Ssetsen; but Ssanang himself depends on traditional sources and if 617 should prove so nearly right it would be more of an inspired guess than a calculation substantiated by early evidence.

The key date for Tibetan history of the time is contained in the T'ang Annals which record that in the 8th year of Cheng Kuan, which corresponds with 634 A.D., the Tsan p'u K'i Lung Tsan—who must be Srong Brtsan Sgam Po—sent envoys to the Emperor. Lung Tsan is said to have been a minor when he came to the throne. The Emperor returned his embassy and in a further Tibetan mission the king asked for a Chinese princess in marriage. When this was refused, the Tibetan king attacked first the namad tribes on the Chinese border and then China itself with the result that in 640 a Chinese princess was granted as his bride. This date agrees with the earliest Tibetan record, the Tun Huang Annals. If the traditional story is to be accepted, it would mean that when Srong Brtsan conducted his campaign against China and acquired his Chinese bride he was between 66 and 70. This does not appear very probable and there is a hint in the later tradition that this was not so; for some

of the accounts imply that the minister Mgar was acting on behalf of a young king when he conducted the marriage negotiations at the Chinese court.

There is at the beginning of the MSS of the Tun Huang Annals a damaged passage which the editors of the transcription and translation in *Documents de Tuen Houang Relitifs a l'Hitoire du Tibet* have not reproduced. I intend to deal with this passage in detail elsewhere and all that need be said here is that the MSS of which through the kindness af the Bibliotheque Nationale of France I have secured a photo copy, carries the dating contained in the Annals quite clearly back to the year 634 and beyond. The passage of the Annals with which the published edition opens contains a summary of events before 650 from which date the record provides a short account of the events of each year. The summary as published refers briefly to two groups of events three and six years respectively before 650. The division into multiples of three appears to be significant and systematic. The summary shows that six years before the death of Srong Brtsan Sgam Po *i. e.* c 644, there was a revolt of Zhang Zhung; and that three years before that, there was trouble in Nepal and the Chinese princess arrived in Lhasa—viz 641. From here the unpublished passage, which is continuous with what follows it, takes the historical summary back for a further considerable period. It shows that an uncertain number of years before the arrival of the princess in 641 (the part of the MSS which contained the exact figure is damaged) a younger brother of Srong Brtsan Sgam Po died in suspicious circumstances. If a three year period was used, the date would be c 639. Then another uncertain number of years earlier it is recorded that Srong Brtsan Sgam Po undertook a military expedition against China. This must be the campaign which led to the grant of a princess ; and from the Chinese record it can be dated c 635/636 – another three year interval. Then, a further uncertain period earlier came the disgrace and death of the minister Myang Mang Po Rje Zhang Snang. Allowing for another three year interval this would be c 632/633. There is a reference to these events in a different part of the Tun Huang documents also, where they are put after the expedition. The more careful version of the Annals is to be preferred ; but in any case, it is clear that the death of Myang was comparatively close in time to the expedition. One further paragraph—the first of the damaged passage—appears to relate to the deeds of Myang when he was acting as minister on behalf of the young king after his accession. In this case an interval of three years appears too short. From both Tibetan and Chinese records it is

seen that Srong Brtsan was a minor when he came to the throne; it is not suggested that he was an infant. It is known that on his death he was succeeded by an infant grandson and so it is necessary in calculating the date of his accession to make reasonable allowance for two generations. Taking a further three years interval before 632/633, giving c 629 for his accession, and assuming his age then to have been say 13 to 16 would not give enough time for the birth of a son and grandson. If a six year interval is assumed, on the analogy of the later part of the summary, we should have the year c 627 for his accession.

If the later tradition were to be accepted, the accession of the king (at the conjectural age of 13 to 16) would have to be put c 583/586. This would mean that the interval between the paragraph about Myang which can be dated c 632 and the paragraph dealing with events after the accession would cover a period of nearly 50 years. On the analogy of the rest of the summary, which be it noted, is continuous and homogeneous, that is not acceptable.

The impossibilita of the traditional story is underlined by what is known about the minister Myang Zhang Snang. Other parts the Tun Huang documents in Chronicle form show that Myang was active during the reign of Srong Brtsan's father. He was clearly older than Srong Brtsan and, as he died c 632 at the earliest, he would have been, on the traditional theory, at least 75 when the expedition took place. Similar evidence applies also to another famous minister Khyung po Zu Tse, who was responsible for the fall of Myang; he, too, served Srong Brtsan's father. It is hardly possible that Chinese sources would not have remarked on this regime of an old king and ancient ministers; on the cotrary, the clear impression is given that when Srong Brtsan first came in contact with the Chinese court c 634 he was a young man. But the exact age at which he came to the throne and the exact date of his birth remain uncertain.

The traditional year of Srong Brtan's birth is an Ox year (traditions which attribute an animal+element dating at this period of Tibetan history can not be treated as realistic); and it is on the basis of an Ox year that Schmidt calculates the date of the king's birth as 617. Since he died in 650 this would mean that Srong Brtsan fathered a son when he was only 16 years old and that his son did the same. This is certainly not usual in present day Tibet and cannot be regarded as probable. There is no evidence before the XIIIth century that Srong Brtsan was born in an Ox year but if the tradition be considered acceptable, the Ox year

605 would seem more reasonable. From the earliest records—both Chinese and Tibetan—this seems a little too early and a date which would make the king somewhat younger at the time of his first contact with China seems preferable. It is not improbable that the dismissal of the hitherto dominant minister Myang and the expedition against China were the first acts of Srong Brtsan Sgam Po after he had reached years of maturity and decision; and my own preference is to treat the exact year of his birth as still debatable with the probability lying somewhere between the years 609 and 613, which would make him about 24 to 28 at the time of his campaign against China and 37 to 41 when he died in 650.

[Mr Richardson prefers SRONG BRTSAN to SRONG BTSAN since BRTSAN is the oldest recorded form. For the usage BRTSAN in the nomenclature of the kings as in epigraphs reference may be made to this author's *Ancient Historical Edicts at Lhasa* (London 1952). BTSAN is a modern usage. BRTSAN and BTSAN have similar if not identical meaning. A twentieth century Mongol scholar, Geshe Choda, notes in his dictionary under the entry thus (Lhasa xylograph Vol. 2; also Peking edition Page 686). —NCS]