

OBSERVATIONS ON AN 11TH CENTURY
TIBETAN INSCRIPTION ON A STATUE OF AVALOKITEŚVARA*

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This paper will review a dedication inscription first studied by Rahul Sanskritayana in 1957, more recently by Per Kvaerne and Laxman Thakur¹. The inscription is on the base of an Avalokiteśvara statue from Kamru (Kinnaur, India). Thanks to comparative photographs, here I present a new reading and interpretation of this inscription, which sheds light on the identification of the officiant of the consecration ceremony, thus establishing the chronological context of this statue c. mid-11th century. To my knowledge, this inscription is one of the most complete Tibetan consecration inscriptions of the early *phyi 'dar* period because it comprises the name of the subject of the statue, the donors, the officiant and the circumstances of the creation of this image.

Sanskritayana discovered the statue in the village temple of Kamru, Kinnaur in 1948, and published his observations. Unaware of Sanskritayana's study, in 1991, A. K. Singh and M. Chaturvedi rediscovered it there and brought photographs of the inscription and the statue to the 1992 IATS seminar where P. Kvaerne, C. Luczanits and I studied the inscription. According to Singh, Kamru is a small, ancient settlement lying along the trade route linking Kulu and Chamba with Tholing, about 4 to 5 days walk via Chitkul. The village of Kamru, called Mone in Kinnauri tradition, was the former capital of Kinnaur. Singh noted a local tradition that the village deities of Kamru (Kinnaur), Badrinath (Garhwal) and Tholing (Guge) are brothers and that they used to visit each other in former times.² Furthermore, local ritual songs narrate that the deity of Kamru first came from Tholing monastery.³ The statue was stolen in 1992, recovered in 1993, whereupon L. Thakur examined it in 1994 and visited the Kamru sanctuary. According to Thakur, an inscription in this temple dated 1974 records the name as A hra rang Mone lha khang.⁴ Thakur further stated that the temple was founded during the 11th century along with those of Ropa, Tasarang and Thangi.⁵

* Dedicated with esteem and friendship to Samten whose commitment to excellence in Tibetan studies has been an inspiration since more than thirty years!

¹ See R. Sanskritayana, *Kinner-deśa*, second edition, Allahabad, 1957, pp. 234-49; P. Kvaerne's reading is published in A. K. Singh, "An Inscribed Bronze Padmapāṇi from Kinnaur" *Acta Orientalia* 1994: 55: 106-110; L. Thakur, "A Magnificent Bronze Statue of Avalokiteśvara from Kamru and its Himalayan Legacy" *Oriental Art* 1998: 44/3: 57-61.

² A.K.Singh, *ibid*: 106.

³ A.K. Singh, *ibid*:108.

⁴ L. Thakur, *op. cit.* : 57.

⁵ L. Thakur, *ibid*: 61. Ropa is mentioned among the 21 smaller places where Rin chen bzang po is said to have founded a temple, Tibetan spelling Ro dpag, in the

The statue is exceptional for its large size (78 cm), skilled modeling of the body and jewelry, and fine craftsmanship of the brass alloy with inlay of silver and pitch (Figure 1), reflecting Kashmiri esthetic tendencies as known in western Tibet in the 11th century.⁶ The statue represents a crowned male Bodhisattva standing in slight *déhançement* inside a mandorla of stylized flames. The figure has a robust torso yet very narrow waist. His thighs are hefty but the lower legs are slender; the body is smoothly modeled revealing no muscular exertion. His four arms flank his torso. The arms are joined at the elbows: the upper left hand holds prayer beads, the lower left hand forms the *varada mudrā* of boon bestowing/generosity; the upper right hand holds a book in *dpe cha* format, the lower right hand clasps the stem of a lotus which is in full bloom above the right shoulder. This lotus is one factor for iconographic identification as a form of Avalokiteśvara. The most salient factor is the seated Buddha Amitābha in the central panel of the triple point crown. At present, to my knowledge, no *sādhana* in Tibetan or Sanskrit language describes this precise aspect of Avalokiteśvara.⁷ There are however two *sādhana* which describe peaceful aspects of six-armed Avalokiteśvara whose attributes include prayer beads, the book, and the lotus; a statue in this iconography, attributed to Kashmir, late 10th to early 11th century, is now conserved in the collections of the Musée Guimet (Figure 2); it bears the Tibetan inscription *na ga*, referential to the name of the early 11th century Guge prince Nagaradza (see note 6).⁸ It is therefore presumed that this iconography of Avalokiteśvara with four arms may represent a transient form of Avalokiteśvara popular in India and/or Kashmir, whence it was introduced to Tibet during the early *phyi dar*.

biography of Rin chen bzang po attributed to his immediate disciple. See discussion on this chronology for Ropa in C. Luczanits, *Buddhist Sculptures in Clay*, 2004: 57. Luczanits does not include Mone/Kamru among the 21 temples, according to the biography of Rin chen bzang po. The name Mo ne lha khang may perhaps be indicated by the temple Mo nang near Ro pa, according to *Mnga' ris rgyal rabs* (Vitali 1996: 110, 268-269).

⁶ As a contemporary example of this Kashmiri esthetic in western Tibet, compare the standing Buddha (98.1 cm) inscribed lha btsun na ga ra dza'i thugs dam ("personal image of lHa btsun Nagaradza"), who was a prince and monk of the Guge royal family, historically identified by Heather Karmay, 1975: 29-30 (Cleveland Museum of Art accession no. 66.30). This Buddha is Sakyamuni and has no jewelry. For similar crown and earrings in an Avalokiteśvara sculpture, said to have been imported to Guge by Rin chen bzang po, see D. Pritzker, "The Treasures of Par and Kha-tse", 2000: fig. 11; Tucci 1932/1988: 66 discussed this statue.

⁷ See M.-T. de Mallmann, Introduction à l'iconographie du bouddhisme tantrique, 1986: 109. In the two *sādhana* reviewed here for the white four-armed Avalokiteśvara, the principal pair of hands are joined in either *samadhi mudrā* or *anjali mudrā*, the attributes are a strand of prayer beads and the ubiquitous lotus; the bodhisattva is seated. In contrast, the Kamru statue is standing, has the book as attribute, and the principal hands are not joined.

⁸ See M.-T. de Mallmann, *ibid*: 110. The Musée Guimet Avalokiteśvara (MG 5493) is illustrated in A. Heller, *Tibetan Art*, 2000: plate 33 and p. 62.

Sanskritayana's transcription of the two line inscription is as follows⁹:

1. *lan bit ya ba das phyag len mdzad/ smon blon che klu mgon mched yum sras kyis yon bdag bgyis che 'das pa smon blon che shes*
2. *bcan gyis bsod nas su rigs gsum gyis ku bzhengsu bsol pas/ che 'das la dang mar yas pa'i sems can thand cad sgrab pa pyad bar gyurd cig/*

Sanskritayana published in Hindi, and his remarks have been summarized thus by Thakur, " He observed that a high minister of Mone named Nāganātha and his family members set up the Trijātika statues for the merits of a high minister named Jñānī or Prajñāvāna."

Kvaerne observed that the script and spelling of the inscription reveal specific archaic features (e.g. gyurd cig for gyur cig), stating that undoubtedly the inscription was co-eval with the creation of the statue (see Figure 3, photograph of the inscription by A. K. Singh). Kvaerne's translation corresponds to a large degree with Sanskritayana, but differs especially for the transcription of the first words and the name of the family line which he does not associate with any geographic locality:

1. *man bi ta byi dya (?) ba dras phyag len mdzad/ sMer blon che Klu mgon mched yum sras kyis yon bdag bgyis nas/ tshe 'das pa sMer blon che Shes*
2. *stsan gyi bsod nams su/ rigs gsum gyi sku bzhengs su gsol bas/ tshe 'das pa dang mtha yas pa'i sems can thams cad sgrib pa byang bar gyurd cig/*

Kvaerne translated thus:

Man-bi-ta-byi-dya-ba-dra applying the artisanal dexterity, and Klu-mgon, the great minister of the Smer-clan, together with his brothers, wife and sons acting as lay patrons, a request was made for the production of statues of the (Lords of the) Three Families for the good destiny of Shes-stsan, the late great minister of the sMer-clan; may the sin of the deceased and of living beings without number be removed thereby!

Thakur published additional photographs of the statue and the inscription.¹⁰ Thakur's reading of the inscription mainly corresponds with that by Kvaerne, but again the first few words differ¹¹:

⁹ Sanskritayana 1957: 234-49, cited by Thakur 1998: 61.

¹⁰ I thank Laxman Thakur for kindly sending me his article in 2006. It was his insistence that the first letter was pa which lead me to review the inscription.

¹¹ Thakur 1998: 57. Thakur does not cite Singh's publication with Kvaerne's translation of which he was apparently unaware. Thakur's translation, " Successfully gained admiration or glorious invocation: The Chief Minister of sMer, brother Klu-mgon, mother and son offered alms for the merits of the expired Chief Minister of sMer Shes-tsan, and after offering prayers, set up the statues of

1. *pana ba ti bye rya (tra?) ba cas phyag len mdzad/ smer blon che klu mgon
mched yum sras kyis yon bdag bgyis nas/ tshe 'das pa smer blon che shes*

2. *tsan gyi bsod nams su/ rigs gsum gyi sku bzhengsu gsol bas/ tshe 'das pa
dang ma' (>mtha') yas pa'i sems can thams cad sgrib pa byang par gyurd
cig//://*

Thakur remarked that the inscription is absolutely clear with the exception of the first line; the gist of his translation otherwise concurs with Kvaerne. Thakur further noted that sMer occurs in several petroglyphs in the Ladakh region recorded by Denwood and Orofino, although the precise individuals named in the statue's inscription are otherwise unknown.¹²

Due to the exceptional esthetic qualities of this statue, which relate to early 11th century sculptures of Kashmir and Guge, I have long been intrigued by the history of the statue and its ancient inscription, and its possible relation to an early family line documented specifically in the vicinity of Alchi, as the petroglyphs have been attributed to the period of the end of the Tibetan empire or early *phyi 'dar*. Comparison of the previous readings and photographs lead me to understand the first phrase quite differently, as follows:

*pan bi (>di) ta byi rya ba dras phyag len mdzad/*¹³

which, in view of the adaptation into Tibetan letters of Sanskrit names, I understand as "Paṇḍita Vīryabhadra performed the ritual practice".

The full inscription reading is thus:

Paṇḍita Vīryabhadra made the ritual practice,

Trigotrānātha or Trijātika (i.e. Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi) for purifying the mental and moral defilements of a departed soul (i.e. Shes-tsan) and all infinite sentient beings".

¹² Among the 14 rock inscriptions discussed, see rock inscription 1(b) in P. Denwood, "Temple and Rock Inscriptions at Alchi" in D. Snellgrove and T. Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, vol.2: 118-163. See rock inscription Fig. 40 (Dep. 6014/36) in G. Orofino "A note on some Tibetan Petroglyphs of the Ladakh Area" in *East and West*, 1990: 173-200. Subsequently Tsuguhito Takeuchi has recovered some one hundred inscriptions among the rocks on the Alchi road (in press: *Old Tibetan Rock Inscriptions near Alchi*). I am grateful to Tsuguhito Takeuchi for informing me in 1992 that he had discovered several more inscriptions there notably mentioning sMer blon. I presented this data in 1995 at the IATS seminar, Graz, in the art history panel "The Middle Asian International Style, 11th-14th Century".

¹³ Long ago Kvaerne, Luczanits and I all read Man bi ta but it actually is pan bi ta: in fact the scribe missed the da due to a slip of the hand, adding an extra vertical stroke on the right, thus forming the letter ba. Kvaerne and I had read byi dya(?) but in the light of the photograph by Thakur, it is apparent that the superscribed letter is ra, not da.

/ ' ' / Pan bi ta (sic: paṇḍita) byi rya ba dras (>sic: bha dra) phyag len mdzad,

The great Smer minister Klu mgon, his brother(s), his wife and children acted as donors,

Smer blon che Klu mgon mched yum sras kyis yon bdag bgyis nas

For the merit of the deceased great minister Smer Shes (shes rab?) stsan it was requested to make the statues of the Three great (Protectors),

Tshe 'das pa sMer blon che Shes stsan gyi bsod nams su

Rigs gsum (mgon) gyi sku bzhengs su gsol bas

May the sins of the deceased and all sentient beings without limits be purified!

Tshe 'das pa dang ma' (mtha') yas pa'i sems can thams cad sgrib pa byang bar gyurd cig!://

An additional remark about the punctuation: after the siddham, the initial punctuation mark between two *shad* / ' ' / is similar to the scribe's marks at the beginning of manuscripts rediscovered in Tabo and Tholing¹⁴. Tucci listed the Paṇḍita Vīryabhadra as a translator who worked with Rin chen bzang po.¹⁵ There are 3 texts attributed to their translation preserved in the bstan 'gyur: the Samantabhadravṛtti (Cordier 1.149), the Guhyasamājamaṇḍalavidhīkā (Cordier 1.150) and the Suviśiṣṭasādhanopāyikā (Cordier 1. 154). In addition to his work with Rin chen bzang po, Vīryabhadra was the author of the Pañcakramapañjikāprabhāsārtha text included in the Tibetan canon, and translated Kṣemendra's text Bodhisattvāvadāna-kalpalatā.¹⁶ This means that the date of the statue can be inferred to be ca. 1025-50, roughly mid-11th century, due to the period of Vīryabhadra's translation activities in Tibet.

The chronological context of this sculpture is significant in regard to the production of art, painting and sculpture, in Guge by Kashmiri artists or their Tibetan students. In comparison to dated Kashmiri sculptures of the 10th to 11th century, which are fully finished in the round, the sculptures made in Guge adopting the Kashmiri esthetic idiom are often only partially finished in the back, which is indeed the

¹⁴ See C. Scherrer Schaub and G. Bonani, "Establishing a typology of the old Tibetan manuscripts: a multi-disciplinary approach" 2002: 191 and fig. 20.5; A. Heller (in press): "Three Ancient Illuminated Manuscripts from the Tucci Collection, IsIAO".

¹⁵ G. Tucci, Indo-Tibetica vol. 2: Rin chen bzang po e la rinascita del Buddhismo nel Tibet intorno al mille. 1931/ 1988 reprint: 45-48.

¹⁶ Naudou, Les Bouddhistes Kashmiriens, 1968: 200-202. I am grateful to Dan Martin for the data on Vīryabhadra (Brtson 'grus bzang po) as follows: Chimpa, THBI, p. 305; Biographical information in M. Mejer, Kṣemendra's Bodhisattvāvadāna-kalpalatā: Studies and Materials, Studia Philologica Buddhica, Monograph Series no. 7, International Institute for Buddhist Studies (Tokyo 1992), p. 3, n. 3. Contemporary of Atiśa, Kṣemendra and Rin chen bzang po. Re: Pañcakramapañjikāprabhāsārtha (Rim pa lnga pa'i dka' 'grel don gsal ba). Tōh. no. 1830. Derge Tanjur, vol. CI, folios 142v.7-180v.3. Its translation is attributed to Shes rab brtson 'grus in Gangs can mkhas grub, p. 171; Black Hat Tanjur, p. 428. Tr. by 'Bro Shes rab brtson 'grus.

case of the Kamru Avalokiteśvara. In their renditions of multiple arm deities, one may note the Kashmiri penchant for multiple arm deities where their arms are joined at the elbow, i.e. the multiple forearms extend from one elbow. In the Tibetan manuscripts re-discovered at Tholing by Tucci and Huo Wei, the illuminations of the goddess Prajñāpāramitā conform to this model; these paintings have long been believed to be the work of Kashmiri artists.¹⁷ The Kamru Avalokiteśvara statue also has the arms joined in this manner. The crown with three isosceles triangular panels is very similar to that of the life-size brass alloy statue of Avalokiteśvara now conserved near Tholing in Kha tse village, which Rin chen bzang po is believed to have commissioned in Kashmir as a funerary homage to his father. It is also similar to the crown of the inscribed Avalokiteśvara of the Musée Guimet. Although the crown of the Kamru Avalokiteśvara has lost the inset stones over time, these are still present in the Kha tse Avalokiteśvara which allows better appreciation of the successive layers of the crown, starting from the inset central stone, now red coral, in the Kha tse Avalokiteśvara.

We may recall the local legend in Kamru that the Kamru deity originally came from Tholing. The identification of Viryabhadra who worked with Rin chen bzang po, presumably at Tholing, as the officiant who performed the ritual consecration of the statue tends to corroborate the local legend. Where were the ministers of the sMer lineage then living — near Alchi, or Tholing or elsewhere? For now, we cannot say. The migration of clans and family lineages from one locality to another is a well known phenomenon, as is the migration of statues, of which this particular statue of Avalokiteśvara, now conserved in Kamru, may well be a pertinent example.

¹⁷ P. Harrison indicates concrete proof of Kashmiri artists upon magnified inspection of the manuscripts due to Indic script beneath the frames of the illuminations of the Tholing Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts collected by Giuseppe Tucci c. 1933 (“West Tibetan manuscript folios in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art”, 2007: 235). In 2002, Huo Wei discovered illuminated Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts in Kha tse, near Tholing (Huo Wei, Xizang Ali Zhada-xian Paerzong yizhi tanchengku de chubu diaocha” Wenwu 2003/9:60-73).



Figure 1. Avalokiteśvara, Kamru, photograph by A. K. Singh.

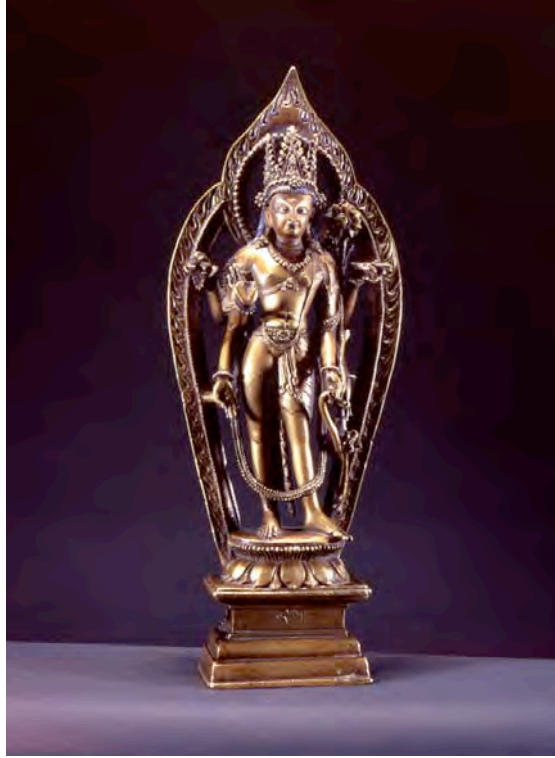


Figure 2. Avalokitesvara, Musée Guimet, photograph by H. Dubois.



Figure 3. Inscription on Avalokitesvara, Kamru, photograph by A.K. Singh.

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